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In Interview with

MR. JOHN JAMES HALL, JR.

April 13, 1977

Interviewed by

Roberta Miller

Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
and the
Washington County Library System
Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

This is Roberta Miller an Oral Interviewer with the Washington County Library System. I am interviewing Mr. John J. Hall, Jr. of ^{Bourbon} Tribbett, Mississippi. This is April 13, 1977.

HALL: Now, do you want me to start off? About my name?

MILLER: Just tell me who you are.

HALL: My name is John J. Hall, Jr. and I was born in Greenville, Mississippi. During the Yellow Fever when the whole town was quarantined, they wouldn't let anybody in and nobody out. I came in on September 23, 1905 and I was one of the few that came in because they really had it quarantined. Now, --

MILLER: Do you remember any other stories about the yellow fever epidemic?

HALL: No, except those that were told to me because at the tender age of three days or four days old I don't remember many things, not very many. The only thing I do remember was when I was crawling around on the floor and my mother was cooking fig preserves and I crawled into the kitchen and I smelled those fig preserves and, of course, I still couldn't talk and I thought if I ever can talk I am going to ask my mama to give me some of those fig preserves and I did that when I got where I could talk.

MILLER: Where did you go to school, John?

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HALL: I went to school right around the corner from my home on Main Street, which was Starling School, from the first to the sixth grade and after the sixth grade I went out to the Greenville Military Academy and went into the eighth grade and went four years to the Greenville Military Academy, and after the Greenville Military Academy at the tender age of less than ^{sixteen} ~~fifteen~~ years old I went to the University of Mississippi for one year to see if I could make the football team, not to get an education. I was already smart enough, I thought, you know, and I did make the football team and played two games before I was sixteen years old, and I came out of that and went into the Greenville Compress delivering samples in an old Dodge truck. Sometimes it had brakes and sometimes it didn't have brakes and I was going down the street one day to deliver those samples and Mr. George Wheatley was crossing the street. I put my brakes on and he turned around and looked right square at me then jumped up on the hood of the car. I was able to stop after he was on the hood, and I didn't hurt the old man. Thank goodness, for that. That lasted for a season. From there I went to the Dennis-Shields Ice Cream Company and started to eating ice cream and gaining weight and that wasn't anything but a season job either, so I went out to the Goyer Company and got me a job at the service station. I worked at the service station some three or four years. I went to Leland every morning and ran that service station, after Joe Bell Harbison had run it a long time and quit, and I came back to the Greenville service station

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and the main man in that service station had quit and gone to the Akron Tire Company and I ran that service station, with the help of Mr. Bill Taylor, the owner, for about two years. After the two years was up I went with the Corn Products Refining Company selling Karo syrup and Argo starch and traveling anywhere they wanted me to travel. Then the flood came. I was in Yazoo City and I had a little Ford Roadster. I rode in water from Yazoo City almost to Belzoni, there were just stakes on the side of the road, to come home that week end and after I got home I started back Monday morning and the water was so high around the Bogue that I did not leave town, I came back to Greenville and volunteered at the Levee Board office to do anything that I could. They put me on the telephones and put me on dispatching sacks and materials and this, that and the other for fighting the water, and I was on the 'phone when the message came to Greenville in the morning at five o'clock telling that the levee had broken at Scott, and old man Allen, Seguire Allen, Chief Engineer of the Levee Board, was in the office and I took him the message and the old man just sat there and cried, because he didn't think it possible that the levee could not hold, but it was impossible because the water was running over the top of the levee. Everybody knew that, but it was a whole day passed before the water ever came anywhere around Greenville and that night about twelve or one o'clock they tied down every whistle in Greenville to let us know that the water had hit the protection levee and the next morning it was trickling down the

streets and the next afternoon it had covered Washington Avenue, almost covered Main Street, right next to the levee up there it hadn't gotten all over Main Street, and it never did get very deep right at the foot of the levee on the first block of Main Street. It got all over Washington Avenue and finally got about three feet deep. It was a harum-scarum time really and people were leaving by droves, and a lot of them got out and a lot of them had to stay. Of course I wasn't thinking about getting out. I was on those telephones, trying to get boats to come and trying to get everything - talking all over the United States for boats and we finally got boats into Greenville. It was pretty bad for a long time, and there were some wore out people. The night before that thing broke though I dispatched gravel and sacks and there might have been a few supplies other than that but I had Joe Virden to volunteer to go up to Scott to take this material and when that thing broke the next morning at that hour I thought sure Joe was caught in it because I didn't see Joe for two weeks, and I was certainly glad to see him when I did see him because I had sent him up there myself but it was bad, really bad, and people were caught in the country in their houses and I can remember that during the flood is when I found out what a rumor was, because there was a negro up on top of his house and he was waving frantically when a motor boat was passing and the motor boat went up there to pick him up and he got in the boat, and they asked him how long he had been up there and he said ever since the water had come up. The time he

sat down he said, "You know, I hear tales there's fifteen hundred negroes got drowned in this flood." They said, "Well, we thought you had been on that housetop ever since the water came up." He said, "Oh, I is, that's just a rumor--" That's where the rumor came from, right there, I think. But, after a while, after several weeks, the water went down. My car, which was parked back of the Levee Board, it was a T-Model Ford, and I took the front end spring out, which was a spring that was just like a buggy spring - jacked the whole front end up so the motor couldn't get wet - drove out to our home on South Washington Avenue, got all of my clothes and I had an automobile trunk and I got that and I went up to the levee took the jacking up two by fours out, put my springs back in, and the Uncle Oliver steamboat came in and I out talked the Captain to take my T-Model Ford to Vicksburg so I could go back to work for the people that were paying me. George Griffin, who was in the cotton business, and lived on South Broadway, he was going because he was in the cotton classing business and was going to stop in Greenwood and I was going to take him from Vicksburg to Greenwood, we could go through the hills and get there. We got to Vicksburg at twelve o'clock at night and I drove the next morning and put George out and went to Clarksdale and Mrs. Wilzin (the former Laura Eustis) was in Greenwood and at that time very much of a sweetheart of mine and the next night when I got in at the Alcazar Hotel I had a call, to call room so and so, and I called and it was Laura Eustis and her

mother. They were going back to Greenville and I drove them down to Benoit and they caught a gasoline launch that crossed the break and they caught a bus or taxi from there into Greenville, Mississippi. One time during that time I came back to Greenville and I had to cross that break, which was a quarter of a mile or more, and all that levee was gone. They had a ferry boat and we crossed that thing, Bill Reynolds and myself, Bill Reynolds was traveling for the Lucky Strike Tobacco people and he had a girl - Laura Alexander was his girl - and I was going home to see Laura Eustis and we crossed that thing and we spent the week end and it started to raining while we were there and we had to come all the way from Greenville to the break on the levee to get back to Clarksdale on the week end and that was a harum-scarum trip but we made it, but right before I left Greenville, after that flood started to receding, the Levee Board people had to pay off for work that was done on the levee and there were camps of colored people all up and down that levee and they gave Ignace Loyacono and myself a gun that didn't have a firing pin in it and \$25,000 to go down that levee and pay off. We made that trip in an old T-Model sedan, all the way from the back of the Levee Board office to Leota and it took all day from early morning, just when the sun got up, until the sun went down to get to Leota Landing. We stopped all along the way and, of course, we had to call names out - of course we had to get the names of all of them first and then we looked them up in our list to see if any of them were on our

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list to pay off, but if we had started to call names everybody would be that name and all the money would have gone at the first camp. We knew that.

MILLER: These were the men that were working on the levee during the flood who were employed by the Levee Board?

HALL: Yes, working on the levee. That's right, with tote sacks, the colored folks that were toting the sacks.

MILLER: Wheel barrows?

HALL: Dirt. Hauling dirt in sacks to fight the high water, and we paid off all the way down there and came back the next day. And, it took us all day to get back. That was the only way but it was a funny thing --

MILLER: How far was it to Leota on the levee?

HALL: The Lord knows. There wasn't any speedometer on a T-Model, you know, but I was amazed to find out when we got to Warfield Landing we got off on dry land, where they were working cotton, and when we got down to Leota it was dry land down there where they were making cotton. There were two dry places we know right in Washington County where they were making cotton during the 1927 flood.

MILLER: That was high ground.

HALL: High ground, right here in Washington County, two places where they were making cotton, but somehow or another after all the thing was over the Delta did come back. After coming back I was still with the Corn Products Company and the Red Cross was buying nearly about everything that all

the people that didn't have anything were having to go to the Red Cross to get something to eat even - I called on the Red Cross because I had a price that was worth looking at and I sold so much Karo syrup that I knew that there was no way for me to match it again and that is the reason I had to quit, because I knew that if I didn't come up to my standard after that I'd probably be fired anyway so I quit and went into the coal and feed business.

MILLER: What was the coal and feed business?

HALL: Well, the coal business was the Mosby Coal Company and after being in the Mosby Coal Company for a couple of years they started putting natural gas towards Greenville and I knew that wasn't going to be too good for the coal business so we went into the Purina Feed Business along with the coal and the Purina Feed business turned out to be a real good business. Mr. C. L. Mosby was the owner of that company and he gave me an interest in it to manage it and work it and try to sell stuff. He was working for the Greenville Compress and we made a real good business out of it and then I decided I was going to farm because my mother had this farm out at Bourbon, Mississippi and the houses were all sitting on the ground and there was not any labor on the place so I thought that would be a good thing for me to do to get hold of that place and buy the place from her which she agreed to do and I started to farming.

MILLER: How big was the place, John ?

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HALL: The place was 210 acres of land, of course, I never got any bigger than that until I bought 40 acres from Mr. Clyde McGee and that made we 250, and I nearly had to do all the work myself. Of course, I had labor on the place and I had mules but that was coming to an end, coming to a close fast - the mule business. However, we farmed like that from 1927 to about 1937 and then when the war came, the Second World War came, there wasn't any more mules. We couldn't get anybody to drive them because all the negroes were going to the army and some of them moving north and we had to start farming with tractors but in the first instance when I started to farming with tractors I bought one of the first Farmall tractors that Jere Nash sold in Greenville, Mississippi, and started to farming with an old regular tractor but I was just doing it to break up ground and get it ready and then turn it over to the negroes and the mules, but then when this time came, and the Second World War came, I had to go to tractors altogether and that's when I did a whole lot of tractor driving. We made a success of the 250 acres. We were able to live on it and make a living or an existence, whatever you want to call it, and finally, I rented a place in Sunflower County owned by Mr. Vivian Johnson, which was a section of land in a terrible piece of buckshot, but we finally got that thing in shape and made money from then on and sometimes we referred, never did name the place really, to my place as "Seldom Seen" and that other one we named "Hard to Find", because it was.

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MILLER: Did you have tenants on your place?

HALL: We had labor.

MILLER: Didn't have the tenant system.

HALL: We didn't have a tenant system, except for the first ten years. We had a half-hand system for the first ten years but I never did like that. I always had some kind of a day crop on my place but after the tractors came in it wasn't any more tenants at all, none. We had day labor altogether. We didn't have very many. We had about five men that worked the whole thing and that was really a good thing for me because I never did know a mule from a jackass anyway. I never could pick one. If I picked one, one of them would work and one of them wouldn't. I never did have a real good pair of mules the whole time I farmed because I just didn't know one from another.

MILLER: How many mules did it take to farm your acreage?

HALL: We had fourteen mules on the place and that should have been too many but my mules needed spares because I didn't know anything about them.

MILLER: So then you went to tractors. How many tractors did it take to run your place?

HALL: Well, finally, we got up to six tractors, that is six good ones. We did skip-row cotton and almost got up to three bales of cotton to the acre average on my own place and better than two on that buckshot place. For the last six or eight years that I farmed I was making that kind of a crop.

MILLER: Were you troubled by boll weevil early, in the beginning?

HALL: Oh, yes, right at the start we were and we used to sit up all night and poison with mules going up and down the rows with a stick across the saddle that had poison tied in a croaker sack on the ends of the sticks hanging over the rows and as we rode down the rows we'd hit the stick on the saddle and the poison would fall on the cotton. That was the first poison machine, but one of the best farm jobs I ever did was right before the flood. That was when I was farming just a little bit with a good friend of mine, John Dobree Adams, of the First National Bank and we had land down at Swiftwater just before the flood came. We planted 20 acres of onions and it must have been a million and a half plants. We had 40 negroes setting those plants out and we set them out in a little over a day. We had one mule that weighed about 600 pounds and a negro that lived on the place and the flood came along and it washed all the onions (where we said we shipped them to New Orleans, freight paid by water, but nobody ever saw the onions, didn't anybody ever receive them, and nobody sent us a check), so we were out of luck and we had to plant cotton. After we planted that cotton the June rise came back after the flood and it killed seven acres of cotton, and when July 4th came you could stand up on the ground but you just could. John Dobree and myself had the first two-row planter than ever was in this Delta. We took off all of our clothes, except our shorts, got barefooted,

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and we planted a row apiece going down the field by hand and had this negro smear it in with a hoe and we were planting two rows at a time, he and myself, by hand and that was the first two-row planter in the whole Delta. But, the cotton came up immediately in three days and that cotton made almost three-quarters of a bale of cotton to the acre. Incidentally, we didn't lose a penny. We came out all right, but the next year John Dobree wanted to get real big and I didn't want to get big so I came out to Bourbon and started farming and John started to farming right there at Swiftwater. It wasn't long though before he quit and went up somewhere else, so then after that I think he went on up into Kentucky. He's still farming now.

MILLER: What about the poisoning with those machines that they ran at night, generally, didn't they - to poison for the boll weevil?

HALL: Always.

MILLER: And then later didn't you get into the cotton dusting, did you poison by plane?

HALL: Only when I had to. I never did poison by airplane unless I had to.

MILLER: You could deal with it -- ?

HALL: I had ground machines and my cotton was planted four and four and I could poison eight rows at a time and I thought I got a very much better job because the poison machine wasn't over a foot over the cotton and there was no airplane could fly a foot over the cotton and put it right where I

wanted to poison and I attribute that to the big yield that I had. I don't think that an airplane can really poison cotton, I never have thought so.

MILLER: Right.

HALL: We had to do all kind of things, you know, after labor got scarce and after paying labor by the hour then we had to do an entirely different job because we couldn't afford to chop cotton, paying by the hour, that wasn't just something that we thought we could do. We didn't think we could do it at all and they had this herbicide● that we thought would control the stuff -- well, we had to try them whether we thought so or not, and we had to put down a pre-emergent and then we had to put down a post-emergent and we had to learn this from scratch. We had good results and I think that it was a blessing to have had to do this thing because we could have never, to save our lives, been able to pick cotton by hand from the time we quit doing it until now. There never would have been a way to have made a crop and picked it by hand because people have gotten to where they can't do that kind of work. They are just not made for it, and I don't believe that you could get anybody in this country now to pick 400 pounds of cotton in one day, but we had plenty of them back in the old days.

MILLER: Now, when you started farming you had no tenants. Well, you did have tenants right at first -- how did you get your labor to pick your cotton and chop it, where did it come from?

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HALL: Well, each man had his own crop, his family had his crop of 10 acres, 12 acres or 15 acres or 20 acres, according to the size of the family, and he could, if you gave him time, pick his cotton crop out, if he didn't make over a bale of cotton to the acre and that's about all he could make. You know, back in my first days of farming, right after the flood, a half a bale of cotton to the acre was a good crop and any family could pick a half a bale of cotton to the acre, but then it got up to where we were making a bale of cotton to the acre. I can remember when a man said he made a bale of cotton to the acre, and he would be on the street with two or three of us and when he would leave and everybody would call him a liar, because they didn't believe he could do it, but it got common place to make a bale of cotton to the acre before we got rid of labor and half-hand way of working. In that day and time an industrious family could pick fifteen or twenty bales of cotton in a fall. It wasn't anything for them to pick a bale per week. Sometimes a family would get together and pick two bales a week and when they picked two bales of cotton a week there wasn't much chance of him not getting his crop out. We hired very little labor.

MILLER: Now, how much did you have to pay for picking and chopping, say in that first ten years and how much did you get for cotton along in there? Was there a big difference in the price of cotton, say from 1927 to 1937?

HALL: Yes, it was. Right after the 1927 flood we were getting around twenty-nine or thirty-two cents a pound for cotton

and the chopping price was around a dollar and a half a day. We had a thing going, I don't know, it was nutty, but we had a thing going that we'd pay a man a dollar a day and a woman seventy-five cents a day and children seventy-five cents a day, and that lasted up until depression times in 1930 and I can remember that we were paying men seventy-five cents a day and women fifty cents a day. We picked cotton during the depression for fifty cents a hundred, which was outlandish but we couldn't do any better. Cotton was down around seven to eight cents a pound and that's not but forty dollars a bale and you consider making it, even with that kind of labor, you wasn't making any money to amount to anything. They were tickled to death to get seventy-five cents a day.

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HALL: After the 1927 flood we were paying seventy-five cents to a dollar a hundred at the beginning of the season. They got up to a dollar and a half for picking cotton when the cotton got lighter and drier during the mid-season, sometimes it was two dollars, until the depression hit. Now the chopping price in that time was a dollar to a dollar and a half a day for chopping. That was including children, women and men and we had trucks that were owned by colored truckers that would get these crowds up, thirty and forty of them to come to the field, he got fifty cents per head for everyone that he brought. In most instances he furnished his own water boy that toted water down the row to them while they were chopping so they wouldn't

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have to leave the field and he also had a man with him that he paid that filed the hoes so that they wouldn't have a dull hoe to try to get the weeds out of your cotton. That price went on until the depression came in 1930 and when the depression came in 1930 it got down to fifty cents a day for chopping cotton and fifty cents per hundred for picking cotton, and everybody had to stick to it because you couldn't get anything at all for your seed. I have taken cotton to the gin and I owed the gin seventy-five cents for ginning my cotton after they took my seed. I had to pay the gin seventy-five cents on top of my seed for ginning a bale of cotton and got seven and eight cents a pound for the cotton. And, when you paid out fifty cents a hundred for picking it, and then paid for shaking out the sacks, toting the sacks out of the field, you were doing doggone good to pay your debts. Then after that depression got over in 1936, we had one more little dip in 1937 and then things started changing altogether. Chopping got up to where it was two dollars, sometimes it got up to five dollars a day and that was before this big inflationary time, because since the inflationary time come on, it's all been by the hour, but when we were paying by the day it got up to five and six dollars a day for chopping and the price of picking in the fall would be three dollars and fifty cents to the truck driver for bringing them out, and then you would have to pay for men to go out in the field and pick up the sacks and bring them to the trailer to be emptied, and you had to have a couple of men to be emptying the sacks and tromping

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the trailers and you were paying them about five to six dollars a day to do that, so it wasn't a cheap operation at all, and that made everyone think about having to go to cotton pickers and as soon as the cotton pickers came out the people started buying them and testing them and a lot of people, after testing the cotton picker, took the thing and sold it to his neighbor because he didn't think it could do the business. That's right. It didn't get to be wholesale until around 1961 and in 1960 I imagine half of the cotton in the delta was picked with cotton pickers. In 1965 I'd say ninety percent of it was picked with a cotton picker, and if we hadn't gotten to the cotton picker I don't know how we'd ever have made it, we wouldn't have made it. All of it is picked with cotton pickers now unless it's a family owned place like an F.H.A. place that I know of that farmed up until this last year, they picked their cotton entirely by hand but they never did make over twenty-five bales of cotton but they had about sixteen folks to pick it, so they didn't have any trouble getting their cotton out, but it sure was unusual to see it, anybody out in the field picking cotton. This country would have been flat broke had it not gotten the cotton picker. It never could have existed, wouldn't have been any way for it to do, and it never would have existed if we hadn't gotten the machines to work the fields.

MILLER: Now, about chemicals and pesticides? What do you think about them as far as affecting the earth and affecting us, the people who live here? I know we don't know

too much about it.

HALL: Well, we don't know anything about it but I say that this past year, and I'm crazy, I know I'm crazy, but I think that this bad crop and this little bitty short stalk of cotton this year was absolutely partly caused by herbicides that went on our ground for the last ten years. It's got to be, because in 1930 we had a terrific downpour of rain for twelve days, I think we had eighteen inches of rain in twelve days in May, and that rain stopped around the twentieth or twenty-fifth of May or somewhere along there, I can't be exactly certain because I didn't put it down, but it didn't rain any more then until after Christmas. It was in 1930 and the stalk of cotton was about up to your hip, and, of course, we picked it all by hand but there was a half a bale of cotton to the acre out there. I didn't see much cotton that was less than a half a bale of cotton to the acre and this year I've seen cotton that didn't make a bale to ten or fifteen acres, because the cotton wasn't over nine or ten inches tall and I believe those herbicides had something to do with it, I just can't help but believe it. They say it hadn't. If you ask the know-alls they say it hasn't affected it, but I can't help but believe it has affected it. Anything that will kill grass will hurt cotton. It's bound to do it.

MILLER: And how about you, what do you think about it hurting us?

HALL: I don't know whether it would hurt us or not, but

I do know this that when I'm eating where an airplane has flown around the vicinity with poison, poisoning cotton, I don't feel too good, and I'm just wondering when it is going to take effect, because I believe it will take effect sooner or later. I just can't help but believe it. I don't really believe that a man in his right sense ought to even think about planting anything where an airplane is going to fly and put it on what he's going to eat. We do it and we've called the chemical company and the chemist and they'll tell you if you ain't going to eat it bring it to me and I will. Well, that makes you feel like a chimp, you know, but he may be just joking, just to see if it'll kill you, I don't know. It does make you have a bad feeling to think about what you are doing to the land and doing to ourselves. I think it's bound to be something. I don't see how it can help but be with all this poison and stuff that we have gotten and are throwing on this stuff. It looks like to me that it would even affect the cottonseed, I don't know. They've got certain laws on these herbicides where they've got - what is it they've got? They've got, I can't think of the poison, but there are poisons that you can't put on cotton after it starts blooming for fear that it will get in the seed and affect shortening and oils and all that kind of stuff in food, but you know, I've seen farmers that didn't pay that a bit more attention than if they hadn't written the law, and as long as the farmers are scattered all over the face of the earth, there's no way in the world to

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police them and really find out if they are really living to the letter of the law by putting these things down, with arsenic in it for instance. There's some of them that's got arsenic in it. You get it down after the cotton starts to blooming it has a chance of carrying on into the seed and I've seen a lot of farmers use it after the cotton started to blooming.

MILLER: That's one great danger. Now another great danger is the chemicals and pesticides that drain from the land into the lakes.

HALL: Well, that's true, too. It won't melt right where it is altogether, I don't think, and even if it does you can go out in your fields and you say, "Well, it's going to melt right there." Well, you can go out in your fields, your dirt is going to melt the clods right there but you can see that the water is just as muddy as it can be and that ain't anything but dirt and if it'll carry dirt it will "sho" carry poison and every time it rains it's carrying some of your dirt somewhere else. You may be getting some dirt from somewhere too, to put back in a way of dust and in a way of carrying it by water but it's bound to move it on into the stream, there's no two ways about it.

MILLER: And we've had a good many fish kills?

HALL: Yes, we got a lot of them killed.

MILLER: And nobody feels happy about eating fish out of any of our local lakes now.

HALL: No, don't feel like eating them at all, really

MILLER: True, you really don't.

What did you think about Anhydrous Ammonia?

HALL: At first, I thought it was pretty good but it was under pressure - 200 pounds of pressure, and you had people that you couldn't teach how to be careful with it and it scared me every time I used it because it was really dangerous. You could get burned by it, it was more of a freeze than it was a burn, and invariably somebody got hit by it and we took them to a doctor they treated for a burn when they should have been treated for a freeze, and it was some bad results, but I used it for about three years, Bert, and after three years of using that stuff on my land, it looked like to me that the stalks were getting smaller all the time, and I finally thought that what the Anhydrous Ammonia was doing was killing all my worms, and I believed we had to have the worms, so I just quit it and went to solid fertilizer and, of course, it turned out that I did the right thing because it certainly made a difference in my crops right away but there are still people that use it.

MILLER: People are still using it.

HALL: They use it. It's a cheap source of fertilizer, that's the reason they use it because it's the cheapest fertilizer of all of them, but I just couldn't have any success with it at all and the particular kind of land that I've got it was hard to get it into it. A sandy land man can use it because he can always get it in the sandy land deep enough to

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where it won't come right straight back out, you know. This would cut a streak in the land and you could see the fertilizer coming out as fast as you'd put it in - smoking, you know, coming out, so I didn't think it was too good for this country but there are people who use it.

MILLER: Who invented this Anhydrous Ammonia?

HALL: I don't know who invented it but I know that they had it, and they couldn't use it, and they knew it was fertilizer, and they give Mr. W. B. Andrews, Professor W. B. Andrews, credit for having harnessed it with a tank that could stand over 200 pounds of pressure and he'd put it on a mule rig with a wheel on it, over at Mississippi State College, with a knife and they plowed it in the ground and from that people went on to try to make different applicators to put it in the ground with, and finally it got to be a booming business, with fertilizer distributors, that we were using, but they always had to have that tank. That tank had to have strength enough to hold over 200 pounds of pressure because it was under that pressure. They tell me that they've got something now in a way of distributor that will put that stuff down and relieve it of the pressure and it will go in the ground just perfectly, just like a liquid fertilizer, and if they have, they've got a cheap source of fertilizer, but I don't know who invented it or anything else, but I know that I didn't like it and I know that a lot of farmers up and down this road that didn't like it, especially where you didn't have anything but a cultivator ---

because the people that didn't have anything but a cultivator to put it down with they were scared to death of it, and I couldn't blame them, because a valve could pop off or a hose could fly off - you couldn't breathe to save your life around it, you know. You know how ammonia will do you, just take a whif of it and you can't catch your breath. It's way more powerful than that. I've had to run from them myself and get out of the way of that fume. I didn't like it. Didn't anybody around here like it, except Mr. Andrews, he liked it. He kept putting it down.

MILLER: Mr. Andrews that had this place over here by you was kin to this man --

HALL: Brother.

MILLER: Brother.

HALL: In fact, they owned that place together.

MILLER: John, I'm going to move back to ask you a couple of questions. I heard you mention that you were known as a water-furrow man. What do you mean by water-furrow?

HALL: I mean by water-furrow -- You have your main drainage ditches to carry all of your water off finally to a river. This canal ditch to carry it to a river or lake and then to a river, but you've got to get it into a canal ditch and you've got to do it with water-furrows across your fields in the low places and any man in the delta of Mississippi that don't run his water-furrows in the dry weather, ain't going to make much crop but he will always have a good supply

of mud and you can't make cotton in mud.

MILLER: Now, let's see, you started farming in 1927 and you stopped when?

HALL: In 1973.

MILLER: In 1973. That's a pretty long period. In all those years of farming, particularly in the early years, when you had much, much more hand labor than you had at any other time, and everybody in the country did too, and I know some of the farms around here used to have the tenant system, were you aware of any instances of say brutality on the farm on the part of plantation owners or plantation managers?

HALL: Well, I would have to say that it would be hearsay altogether. I think that there was some, but as a general rule, Bert, like I told you before, I don't think it happened very often. Now, I know before I ever started to farming I've heard my daddy tell about making labor stack logs with two men on each end of a log with a stick under the log and make them walk up a pile of logs fifteen feet high (that could roll from under them) and put them up there. Now, that is real brutality and I have also heard him say that he had seen those men slip with a log and get a terrific whipping by their boss right there on the spot. He's seen it happen, himself, I've never seen anything like that, I don't know anything like that except hearsay. Now, I've heard of some instances where it wasn't any more than a white man knowing that he had the upper hand, they would knock the mischief out

NOTICE

of somebody that was working for him, and dare him to get up and he wouldn't get up. I've known of instances like that but very seldom, and even in those cases I would have to say that the men that did things like that, they were still mighty, mighty good to them, because they loaned them money and they took care of them, they never let them get hungry and I think, by George, as a whole, that the colored labor in the delta of Mississippi was pretty much well taken care of. Some men were just as mean and evil as they could possibly be but there was so many more that were good to them than there were mean to them I'd have to say it was on the side of the good ones rather than the bad ones, by a whole lot.

MILLER: When you look back over the years to where there were tenant farmers, where they could sometimes make money and sometimes couldn't, I know back in the years when they had commissaries and they had to buy groceries from commissaries, that on certain plantations they never could make any money.

HALL: Well, the commissaries a lot of times, Bert, would overcharge them. I've heard my daddy say that when he was traveling he'd sell certain men a case of soap, Lennox soap, and it was a hundred bars to a case and it was three cents a bar because it was three dollars a case, and he'd say, "Yes, give me a couple of cases of that, that would be nice twenty cent sellers." Well, that's pretty high profit for a cake of soap, twenty cents that didn't cost you but three, and I'm sure

that a good deal of that went on and I'm sure that a good deal of the people, quite a few people, didn't pay what they could get for the cotton, I'm sure of that. They thought they had to make their money that way and, of course, a lot of that money was given back to the labor in the way of things you couldn't put your finger on. I mean by that, that he certainly had to take a good chance on getting his money back when he lent it out, and a lot of times he didn't get it back at all, because the labor wouldn't pay it back and I know that I have called debts off completely and started anew whenever we had a bad year, just forget the debt and start over, but they were taken advantage of in a lot of places.

MILLER: Yes. The black people who worked on the plantation all through the years, what would be the percentage of those who were able to make enough money to live a decent life?

HALL: Half-hands?

MILLER: Under any circumstances, after they got to be tractor drivers, cotton picker drivers, before that when they were half-hands?

HALL: Well, I don't speak of the other man's business because I never kept the other man's books, but I do know that I had hands on this place that could get along pretty good, because when they didn't have anything to do I gave them something to do whether they had something to do or not. If it wasn't anything but just moving this to over yonder and then

moving it back. I gave them work every week that I could possibly give them work, and a lot of times I gave them money when they wasn't working and never charged it to them, and I am sure that there were other people that did the same thing and on this place here, oh, I think I could bear witness to it just to let you talk to the only two that I still got living on the place to ask them how they got along under my regime and they'd tell you, "Mighty good", and that speaks for itself. Now, I don't know, some places give them a big bonus at the end of the year now and then, it looked like to me under \$2.20 an hour, if he gets any work he ought to be doing pretty good, don't it to you?

MILLER: Possible, but with the high price of living?

HALL: But the price of living takes every bit of it any way you go.

MILLER: Yes.

HALL: When it comes right down to it, when they were making 75¢ a day they were just as well off as they are today, because they could buy a whole sack of flour for 75¢ when they were making 75¢ a day. Now, by George, I don't think any of them ever bought a whole sack of flour in the last twenty years, they buy it in bread, at 55¢ a loaf.

MILLER: With nothing of any value in the bread.

HALL: That's right, not a thing. You can't make a day on that kind of bread, and the bread they made way back there it wouldn't take but about four biscuits and you had a

NOTICE

load. That's right.

MILLER: Do you remember anything about the Ku Klux Klan, John? In the twenties I know you were young but in the early 1920s, and in 1923?

HALL: Oh, yes. I remember who was the Grand Cyclops, Ray Toombs, and I can remember that Mr. LeRoy Percy was absolutely an anti-Ku Klux and had a tremendous meeting at the Grand Theatre on Main Street in Greenville, and he had that theatre plumb full of folks that were on his side, and of course, my daddy, he was never a man who wanted to put a sheet over his head and go anywhere, because he liked to fight anyway, and he wanted to see where he was when he was doing his fighting and, so, I was raised knowing that the Ku Klux Klan was the wrong thing, it had its place when the South was beaten to its knees, I think it had its place, and I think it did a lot of good, but in these modern times I think that it was the worst thing that ever started to happen to this country for people to get into that thing and try to stir up a mess because that's all they could have done, stirred up a mess, and everybody was quick to realize that I think, at least the majority of people were, and it just fell by the wayside. That's all I can remember about it, there was a lot of talk for six months or eight months, ten months, maybe a year, but after that you couldn't hear anything else. It was all quiet on the front.

MILLER: Do you think that the Ku Klux Klan disbanded at that time, or just gave up, or do you think they might have

operated under ground?

HALL: I don't think that they went under ground in Greenville. I don't think there were enough of them left to go under ground, because I think that most of the Ku Klux Klan membership during that time finally saw the light and saw that they were wrong and got out of it. That is my supposition on it now, I don't -- Ray Toombs might have died a Ku Klux because he was the Grand Cyclops but I don't know, I just believe they just disbanded. I don't believe they ever had a meeting after that little flurry they had along in 1921, I believe it was.

MILLER: 1923, I believe it was.

HALL: 1923. I knew it was somewhere along there but after that little flurry I don't believe they ever had another meeting. I never did hear any more about them, I'll say that.

MILLER: The Ku Klux Klan was against Jewish people, against Catholics, against Italians, Lebanese and black people, isn't that correct? And, I've even heard that they were against people of German descent.

HALL: Well, you know, I never could find out who they were against, myself, because I imagine all that was stipulated in the Ku Klux Klan membership. I never could find out who they were against, they were just against, and wherever they thought they could go out and scare somebody else and shake him up and do something to him, why that's who they picked on. That's what I believe, I don't know. I really don't know

NOTICE

what the Ku Klux Klan was all about, except you did know they were against the Jews and against black folks now, the rest of the people, I don't know maybe some of them --

MILLER: And Catholics? You know they were against Catholics.

HALL: Well, against Catholics, yes, they were against Catholics and the rest of the people they say they were against I believe maybe that some of them were in it even.

MILLER: I think that's very possible. Well, at any rate we know that the Ku Klux Klan was not operating, openly operating, after 1923 and we didn't have any organizations like that until, I believe it was in the early 1960s, when the Citizens' Council was formed.

HALL: That's right.

MILLER: All right. Do you know what reason the Citizens' Council was formed for, what reason and how it was formed?

HALL: I think the reason the Citizens' Council was formed was on account of the ruling that was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1957 and the people thought that they had to do something to counteract that, and they had big meetings and big talks and big membership drives. I even joined myself. I didn't stay in it. I got out of it because I didn't see where they were doing anything but stirring up a mess and I didn't want to be a part of that mess, but it was sort of Ku Kluxism in a way. Now they tried to separate themselves from that,

they said they were not that at all, they didn't want to be that, and they were formed as a peaceful organization but you had people in there that shouldn't be in there that weren't going to let it be a peaceful organization, if they ever had any sure 'nuf action at all. They didn't want to be peaceful. I remember one meeting that we had and one of the main ones in that thing jumped up at the meeting and said, "How many in this meeting that's got a thirty-eight or better?" Of course, that astounded me and not only me, it astounded about three-fourths of them there. He was getting ready to go to war. He thought the thing was for war. When we've got people and things, they think it's for violence, you haven't got anything and they had numbers of them that really thought of this Citizens' Council as being a violent organization. It wasn't formed to be that, really. They started out to try to be something good, but they got over enthusiastic and got too many members that were not in that humor to be that kind and they were not of that makeup to be that kind. You can't form a violent organization. That's just like some of that guerilla stuff they form in these other countries, you know, a guerilla organization and that's what that man thought it was. He thought he was going to be a big guerilla. Everybody wanted a thirty-eight or better, but it finally ---

MILLER: So, it never functioned?

HALL: No, it never did because it couldn't. The people never did really see the purpose.

MILLER: And they never really had anything to do.

HALL: Well, they didn't have much to do. I think maybe that started the momentum to form the private schools. I think that the Citizens' Council started that momentum to form the private schools, now I think that's the only thing they ever did do.

MILLER: I think that's entirely possible.

HALL: I think that was all they ever did.

MILLER: Now, I know that your place is how many miles south of Leland?

HALL: Nine miles.

MILLER: And from Greenville?

HALL: Twenty.

MILLER: We didn't have an awful lot of Civil Rights activity in this area. We never did. Greenville was never chosen to be one of the places for --

HALL: Well, we had a hot spot out here for a while.

MILLER: How was that?

HALL: And that was on account of these people coming from the North - I don't know who they were. We termed them as "cckos", now what they were I don't know, but anyway, they were a bunch of thuggy-looking people that came down here to stir up a mess and they fairly well stirred it up and they got all the labor off of Mr. A. L. Andrews' and Mr. W. B. Andrews' place to strike against him. He didn't have a soul to drive a tractor, to go to the field or anything. They got them all up

NOTICE

there on the Bogue Phalia on a piece of land, I don't know who it belonged to. He didn't have a soul to drive a tractor, to go to the field or anything. They got them all up there on the Bogue Phalia on a piece of land, I don't know who it belonged to, but it belonged to some colored person, and they called it "Tent City" and they had a great big tent up there and they had big meetings up there and they tried to stir up a lot of stink between the colored and the white folks on this particular run, right out here. Personally, I was exempt from it. I never did have them to stop a tractor driver, or to come on this place. I never did have them to stop anybody and never did have them to go into my fields that I know of, but, of course, I wasn't in my fields every minute but I was in them enough to know that they never did do it.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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9/18-77

INDEX
OF JOHN JAMES HALL
BY SHERILYN D. ALLEN

Adams, John Dobree, 11, 12
Akron Tire Company, 3
Alcazar Hotel, 5
Alexander, Laura, 6
Allen, Seguine, Chief Engineer, Levee Board, 3
Andrews, A. L., 32
Andrews, W. B. (Professor), 22, 23, 32
Anhydrous Ammonia, 21-23
Argo, starch, 3
Belzoni (Miss.), mentioned, 3
Benoit (Miss.), mentioned, 6
Bogue (Phalia), the, 3, 33
Boll Weevil, 11, 12
Bourbon, Mississippi, 1, 8, 12
Broadway (Street), mentioned, 5
Christmas, mentioned, 18
Citizens' Council, formation of, 30-32
Civil Rights, activity, 32
Clarksdale (Miss.), 5, 6
Commissaries, 25
Corn Products Refining Company, 3, 7
Cotton Picker, 17

Delta, the, 11, 12, 17, 23, 25
Dennis-Shields Ice Cream Company, 2
Depression, 15, 16
Dodge, truck, mentioned, 2
Eustis, Laura, 5, 6. See also Mrs. Wilzin
Farmall, tractor, 9
Ferry Boat, 6
First National Bank, 11
Flood (of 1927), 3-7, 11, 14, 15
Ford Roadster, automobile, 3
Goyer Company, 2
Grand Cyclops (KKK), 28
Grand Theatre, 28
Greenville Compress, 2, 8
Greenville Military Academy, 2
Greenwood (Miss.), mentioned, 5
Griffin, George, cotton classer, 5
Hall, John J. Jr: born Greenville, Mississippi, 1; schooling,
Starling School, 2; Greenville Military Academy, 2;
University of Mississippi, 2; deliverer, Greenville
Compress, 2; employee, Dennis-Shields Ice Cream Company,
2; service station attendant, Goyer Company, 2, 3;
salesman, Corn Products Refining Company, 3, 7; volun-
teer service during the flood, 3-7; association, coal
and feed business, Mosby Coal Company, 8; manager,

Hall, John J. Jr.: (continued)

Purina Feed Business, 8; farmer, 8-19, 24, 26, 27;
views on plantation treatment of laborers, 24-27; views
on the KKK, 28-30; ex-member, Citizens Council, 30, 31

Harbison, Joe Bell, 2

"Hard to Find", 9

Johnson, Vivian (Mr.), 9

Karo, syrup, 3, 8

Ku Klux Klan (KKK), 28-30

Leland (Miss.), 2, 32

Lennox, soap, mentioned, 25

Leota Landing, 6, 7

Levee, the, 3, 5-7

Levee Board, 3, 5-7

Loyacono, Ignace, 6

Lucky Strike Tobacco, mentioned, 6

Main Street, 2, 4, 28

McGee, Clyde, 9

Mississippi State College, 22

Mosby, C. L., owner, Purina Feed Business, 8

Mosby Coal Company, 8

Nash, Jere, 9

New Orleans (Louisiana), 11

Percy, LeRoy, anti-KKK, 28

Purina Feed Business, 8

Red Cross, 7, 8
Reynolds, Bill, 6
Scott (Miss.), 3
"Seldom Seen", 9
Starling School, 2
Sunflower County, 9
Swiftwater, 11, 12
T-Model Ford, automobile, 5-7
Taylor, Bill, service station owner, 3
Tenent System, 10, 13, 14, 24
"Tent City", 33
Toombs, Ray, Grand Cyclops, KKK, 28
Uncle Oliver, steamboat, 5
United States, mentioned, 4
University of Mississippi, 2
Vicksburg (miss.), 5
Virden, Joe, 4
Warfield Landing, 7
Washington Avenue, 4, 5
Washington County, 7
Water-furrow, 23
Wheatley, George, 2
Wilzin, _____ Mrs. (formerly Laura Eustis), 5
World War II (Second World War), 9
Yazoo City (Miss.), 3
Yellow Fever, quarantine, 1