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An Interview With

JERE B. NASH

May 31, 1977

Interviewed by

Roberta Miller

Mississippi

Department of Archives and History

and the

Washington County Library System

Oral History Project:  
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Interviewee: Jere Nash  
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by Roberta Miller

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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.

MILLER: This is Roberta Miller in an oral interview for the Washington County Library System, interviewing Mr. Jere B. Nash, Chairman of the Board of the Delta Implement Company, of Greenville, Mississippi.

Mr. Nash, when did you come to Greenville and the Delta?

NASH: In January, 1924.

MILLER: How old were you then?

NASH: Twenty-four.

MILLER: And how did you happen to come here?

NASH: After seven years of farming with tenants and mules at West Point, Mississippi, raising cotton and alfalfa hay; the year of 1923 it rained there as well as here in the Delta. We survived the 1920 crash. A shortage of labor prompted me to discontinue farming at the Bank's desire. The banks wouldn't continue any further. It had always been my ambition to work in the implement field, as my father bought a two-row mule check-row planter in 1912. On leaving West Point, I went to Memphis and applied for a position with International Harvester Company. They had no dealers in the Delta since 1918, as they had lost worlds of money during the 1920 crash in the Delta. They sent me to the Delta. For a while, I worked in and around Clarksdale, later coming to Greenville in March of 1924. This area had more problems, as the boll weevil and Johnson grass were prevalent, and had less labor than the northern part of the

Delta, or, I might say, north of the C & G Railroad.

MILLER: What do you think was the reason for less labor in this country - in the Delta?

NASH: The boll weevils were more prevalent, as well as other insects and Johnson grass, and a lot of the labor had moved to the north part of the Delta, particularly after the 1922 back-water that covered most of the southern part of the Delta as far north as Nitta Yuma, Mississippi.

MILLER: The price of cotton was low during that time, too, wasn't it?

NASH: The price of cotton dropped to around twenty cents a pound. As a rule, a thousand acres of cultivated land would necessitate having forty to fifty families, depending on size, and from forty to fifty mules to properly cultivate the crops.

About half of the labor by 1924 had moved north, or had moved into the northern part of the Delta, or had gone to the industrial cities - Gary, Indiana - Detroit - Chicago - and other cities in the north, as they could find it more profitable than trying to share-crop.

MILLER: So it really was a disastrous time for the farmer? So you came down to the Delta, and how did you go about setting up this business?

NASH: In traveling through the Delta from Greenville to Vicksburg, approximately thirty-five to seventy-five percent of the alluvial soil was idle, particularly in the South Delta, where from sixty to seventy-five percent was idle. The labor left this area after the 1922 backwater and World War I.

MILLER: And, then, about a third of the cultivated land had to be in hay and feed, didn't it, to feed the mules?

NASH: Yes.

MILLER: So they used up some of their good land for hay and feed at that time?.

NASH: Right. They never did raise enough to feed the mules. They had to buy corn and hay and oats. In 1924 the Harvester Company built the Farm-all Tractor. Prior to that time, two other tractor manufacturers had attempted to build a cultivating tractor.

MILLER: Was one of those the Oliver?

NASH: No, it was the Happy Tractor Company and Moline Tractor Company. "The Farm-all Tractor was to

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cotton," former Governor George Sheldon said, "what the Reaper that Cyrus McCormack invented in 1830 was to wheat."

MILLER: That was Governor George Sheldon, who had formerly been Governor of Nebraska?

NASH: He had been Governor of Nebraska, and was a Representative from Washington County, Mississippi. He lived on a plantation near Avon, Mississippi.

MILLER: He was a Republican?

NASH: Yes.

MILLER: And he was active in the Republican Party. So here was a country that needed a tractor real bad, didn't it?

NASH: Our problem was to educate the Delta planter to cultivate cotton and corn with a tractor. First, there was the two-row, then the four-row, and now the eight-row cultivator. The revolution in tractor use came when tire companies built a rubber tire to fit the Farm-all Tractors. This greatly improved the efficiency of the tractor. Joe Aldridge had used the first rubber-tired tractors during the early years.

MILLER: Now, his place was over near Leland?

NASH: Yes, south of Leland. The use of farm mechanization in the Twenties was difficult, mainly for lack of education. When the Depression came in 1930,

cotton dropped to approximately seven cents a pound, and rose to fifteen cents in 1936. With the four-row equipment, farmers increased their mechanization in the South Delta. Complete mechanization of all crops enabled plantation owners to clear many acres of woodland and put in cotton, beans, rice, and corn. Heretofore, they didn't have the labor or the proper heavy equipment to handle the situation.

MILLER: Now, in the Depression, people were just beginning to become educated to tractor farming. How did you all manage to sell tractors at that time to farmers who had very little cash capital to operate a farm?

NASH: Of course, first was demonstration, or education, for the farmer; and low down-payments with two and three years equal payments in the Fall. However, the President of International Harvester Company had a meeting with his dealers and advised them to sell equipment with no cash payment other than the freight, if the dealer had to have the freight to survive. This enabled many of our farmer friends to purchase tractors, cultivators, discs, and middle busters.

MILLER: They probably couldn't have survived the

Depression with mules and plows.

NASH: At the time of the Depression, from the C & G Railroad south, 50% to 75% of the labor had gone, 75% in the lower Delta after the 1927 Flood, and in 1928-1929 we had water from Nitta Yuma south, caused by the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers.

MILLER: So that mechanization was almost a necessity?

NASH: Yes, of course, it was not only educating the farmer. The farmers had difficulty in obtaining funds to operate, as the financing agencies were not sold on mechanization, strictly mules and tenants.

MILLER: They had to be educated just like the farmer. During the Depression, the Federal Land Bank was a big help in saving farms, wasn't it?

NASH: They helped some. The Government had a Seed Loan to farmers, which supplied about a fourth of the necessary farms to operate. The oil mills, cotton factors, and banks provided the rest.

MILLER: So everybody was really helping the farmer during the Depression to survive. Now, cotton started going up a little bit about 1937 or 1938, didn't it?

NASH: Cotton went from five cents a pound to fifteen cents a pound in 1936. In 1937, it went back down to eight and one-half cents a pound, largely because of the wet Fall and the grade of the cotton. Most of it went in

the Government Loan.

MILLER: Did they have a large carry-over of cotton during that time?

NASH: Yes. The Government formed the Commodity Credit Corporation that owned most of the surplus cotton.\*

MILLER: Now, along about the end of the Depression, the International Harvester Company was improving the tractors, and they were adding attachments at that time, weren't they?

NASH: Yes, the four-row cultivators and planters were improved, to mechanize cotton to maturity, yet the cotton-picker was not developed.

MILLER: But they had been working on it for a long time, hadn't they?

NASH: The Harvester Company had been working on the cotton-picker from 1901.

MILLER: Now, when the cotton picker became available to the Delta, that was when?

NASH: You might say the carry-over when the world-wide economic depression began in 1925, the consumption of cotton failed disastrously. There was an increase in domestic carry-over from Five Million bales to Thirteen Million bales between 1929 and 1930, and 1932 and 1933, and

\* Mr. Oscar Johnston, President of the Delta & Pine Land Company, at Scott, Miss., was instrumental in forming the Commodity Credit Corporation.

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the five-year period after 1928. The total farm returns from cotton and cotton seed fell by 70 per cent, making the average gross income of farm families about \$216.00, a drop from \$731.00 in 1928.

MILLER: Yes. That's hard to believe now, isn't it? It was not until World War II that the Picker became available. Is that correct?

NASH: In 1941, the International Harvester released the first Mechanical Cotton Picker for commercial sale. Twelve machines were made in 1941 and 1942 on a laboratory production basis. In 1943, fifteen more were made.

MILLER: That was for the whole country?

NASH: The whole cotton belt. In 1944, twenty-five machines were built. After that, 75 One-row Pickers were built in the next three years; and, brought to a halt during the war, the production of mechanical pickers gained rapidly afterward. It was estimated that approximately 3000 of these machines were available for use in 1949.

MILLER: And, of course, you've been selling them ever since, because they are an absolute necessity.

NASH: For complete mechanization, the cotton picker was necessary. Before that, it was costing \$50.00

to \$60.00 a bale to pick. This lowered the income of the plantation owner during the years prior to the development of the picker in 1941 and 1942. After the War, the veterans who were farmers had the first priority to buy a Cotton Picker.

MILLER: What did the Delta Implement Company and International Harvester Company do during World War II? Were the factories used for making tractors for farm use, or were they turning to other things?

NASH: The Harvester Company supplied the larger production of their tractor units and trucks to the Armed Forces during the War.

MILLER: So the Delta Implement Company really didn't have very much machinery to sell during that time?

NASH: If I remember correctly, Greenville was allotted 17 tractors. However, other locations were allotted from four to eight tractors.

MILLER: Was that per year?

NASH: Per year. During the war years, we built, out of parts, 51 tractors in Greenville. Our men would get complete parts for a tractor, and our mechanic would put this tractor together in twelve hours. We sold them at the the same price we sold the new ones, \$2,250.00 each. Our

other operations built several tractors.

MILLER: And, of course, you had to do a lot of repair work on existing equipment that people had, because that was all they had to use.

NASH: That was one of our biggest problems, to supply parts. To cope with this required the services of an experienced welder and builder who could make parts that needed making; also, it was necessary to buy equipment to do this work in the shop to keep the machines operating.

MILLER: Now, during this time that the Delta Implement Company was operating in Greenville, you had some sister companies that were formed around the Delta, in Mississippi. Are any of those companies in existence now?

NASH: During the Depression, the dealers at Yazoo City and Indianola and Blytheville, Arkansas, and Vicksburg, went out of business or went broke. The Harvester Company prevailed on us to take these companies over, which we did. Then we joined hands with the man who owned the Cleveland operation, to help him over the hill. He was Mr. J. L. McClain, who was Manager and Partner in the business until his death.

MILLER: I believe you have one in Vicksburg now, too, do you not?

NASH: Yes.

MILLER: Selling the tractor, too?

NASH: The same as the tractor, cultivator and other equipment for the mechanization of cotton.

MILLER: This means that so much more land is in cultivation now than ever before. Now, around 1924, I believe you said, 25 percent to 75 percent of the land around Greenville was idle, going toward Vicksburg?

NASH: From Greenville to Vicksburg, down 61 and No. 1.

MILLER: How much land do you think is under cultivation today, in 1977? I mean percentage-wise, as compared with what it was in 1924?

NASH: I would have to get that from the County Agent.

MILLER: But most land is in cultivation, except for woodland, isn't it?

NASH: Oh, yes. As I said before, the use of heavy equipment enabled the farmer to clear his wooded land.

MILLER: And much faster than it would have

been otherwise.

NASH: Yes. Sixty to seventy-five percent of the land was idle, you might say, from Greenville south; in many areas, thirty-five per cent of the land was idle. I'm talking about the lower Delta when I say sixty to seventy-five percent.

MILLER: Now, in 1930, I believe, you started buying some farmland for yourself.

NASH: Many plantations, from 1929, 1930, 1932 down to the Depression, the Insurance Companies and the Federal Land Bank owned. That is when we started acquiring the land. We had repossessed hundreds of tractors and equipment. We utilized this equipment on the land that we contracted to buy from the Insurance Companies, which comprised at that time Red Leaf Plantation, Dillingham, California, Muscadine, Omega, Kelso, and part of Baleshed, and Reality Plantation.

MILLER: And these were turned into cotton plantations?

NASH: These had been cotton plantations. One of the plantations, I well remember, prior to 1920, had 75 families and 75 mules. We took the plantation over. There were no tenants, no day hands, no mules, and several delapidated tenant houses. During the ten to twenty years there,

we remodeled the tenant houses and tore the ones down that were not on a good road, and moved them to the gravel road.

MILLER: Then you still own all these places?

NASH: Let me see. We own 8000 acres, comprising Realty, Kelso, Shiloh, Omega, and part of Baleshed, comprising 8000 acres; 4000 acres in cultivation, and the balance in growing timber.

MILLER: When you bought this land, did it have timber on it that you could sell?

NASH: In 1924 and 1925, all of this land that was in woodland, the timber had been sold, cut and moved.

MILLER: So you had to wait for another crop to grow?

NASH: We harvested timber in 1971, and we hope to harvest the balance of the timber in the next year or two.

MILLER: Are these hardwoods?

NASH: Yes, largely hardwood, gum, oak, and some cottonwood.

MILLER: Well, I think we have just about covered everything. Do you have something else you would like to talk about? What about the boll weevil? When did they become prevalent?

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NASH: The boll weevils became prevalent in the Delta in 1914 and in 1916.

MILLER: They had come up from Mexico?

NASH: They came up from Mexico, and were first noticeable at Tallulah, Louisiana. I remember that fellow Cole, an entomologist down there; and 1916 was one of the worst years of the boll weevil infestation, because it was a wet year, which was always reasonable for the boll weevil to increase.

MILLER: Now, in 1918, of course the price of cotton went up, and stayed up in 1919. What were they getting for it along about that time? Was it 40¢?

NASH: In 1918 and 1919 cotton was about 40¢.

MILLER: And people thought it was going to go up, and they were holding out for a dollar?

NASH: Some. Very few.

MILLER: And then it finally went down to five to seven cents?

NASH: Now, I'm afraid to say. I know that some planters in the Leland area shipped their cotton to England, and got it back. I would say it went down to a dime, but I wouldn't say for sure. That's not authentic.

MILLER: Yes. I know it varied, but this was the

period when people really had been buying plantations, extra plantations, and counting on the price of cotton going up, and lots of them lost their places in that 1920 Crash. Then, what did cotton do in the Thirties?

NASH: In the Thirties, cotton was around seven or eight cents a pound. In 1936, cotton went to fifteen cents a pound.

MILLER: And then in 1937?

NASH: Which was a wet Fall, and the grade was bad, it was difficult to get  $8\frac{1}{2}$  cents.

MILLER: And, then, after that cotton gradually began to stabilize, didn't it - the price of cotton - to some extent?

NASH: Well, I'll tell you, B. F. Smith, Secretary of the Delta Council, could give you the prices of cotton. The Delta Council started early in the 30's.

MILLER: I can get it. One other thing I was interested in was how much it used to cost to pick a bale of cotton by hand. How much did you say that was?

NASH: To pick a bale of cotton by hand was fifty to sixty dollars a bale.

MILLER: And then when the Cotton Picker was in use, how much did it cost to pick a bale?

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NASH: Nine dollars.

MILLER: So we can see that mechanization probably saved the Delta. I don't believe they could have survived without mechanization.

NASH: No way.

MILLER: Didn't mechanization come to the Delta a little sooner than it did to the rest of the State?

NASH: Yes, mechanization came to the Lower Delta sooner than it came to the Upper Delta, because the boll weevil infestation was worse south of 82 Highway or the C & G Railroad. It was colder in Bolivar, Coahoma, and Tunica Counties.

MILLER: So they were desperate, and had to do something?

NASH: Then, too, after the backwater of 1922, the labor left, and after World War I, labor continued to leave, and after the 1927 overflow, 80 percent, or more, of the labor left the Lower Delta.

MILLER: When you first started selling tractors and moving around the counties - Washington, Bolivar, Issaquena, Sunflower, and so forth, were the roads bad? Did you have much difficulty, or had the roads improved?

NASH: In 1924, Washington County had a nine-foot

road to the county line north, south, and northeast and southeast. That was in 1924, when they began building 61 Highway, extending it about two miles south of Leland in 1924, and then on to Hollandale; then, from Hollandale to Vicksburg, it was gravel and dirt, generally following Deer Creek. If you would meet a car, you'd have to stop until the dust settled. Seldom would you go to Vicksburg on business today and try to get back tonight. You would generally spend the night.

MILLER: Yes, that is what I was wondering, that, as you traveled around, you probably couldn't make a trip in a day.

NASH: I would like to point out that the mechanization of cotton and the cotton picker did not displace workers, but did replace them. That is very necessary to understand. Every publication you've seen, particularly the Delta Democrat-Times and The Commercial say that mechanization ran the Negroes off. If you read Minor Grey's article - he was President of Delta & Pine Land Company at Scott, Mississippi - that is the only one I've ever seen printed that was the truth.

MILLER: Because they were already leaving?

NASH: Already gone.

MILLER: And they left certain areas sooner than others?

NASH: And you couldn't stop them from leaving.

MILLER: And the very reason that the Delta was mechanized early was that the need for mechanization in the Delta was greater because a large proportion of the labor had left?

NASH: Yes.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Alice C. Nagel)

Final  
6/17/77  
Alice C. Nagel

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DELTA IMPLEMENT COMPANIES:

1. "A Quarter Century of Progress", 10-20-1950
2. "50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1924-1974"
3. "Partners in Progress", 9-10-1974

Delta Implement Company

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