

OH 1979.01/131

An Interview with  
MR. SALVADORE SIGNA  
December 1, 1976

Interviewed by  
Roberta Miller

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

OH 1979.1.133

Interviewee: Salvador Signa  
Interviewer: Roberta Miller

Title: An interview with Salvador Signa, December 1, 1977 /  
interviewed by Roberta Miller

Collection Title: Washington County Oral History Project

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 History Interviewer for the Washington County Library System. I am interviewing Mr. Salvador Signa, 1413 Marilyn Avenue, Greenville, Mississippi. The date is December 1, 1977.

MILLER: Salvador, will you give me the date of your birth and the place of your birth?

SIGNA: I am Salvador Signa, born July 5, 1902, at St. Michaels Parish in Louisiana, across the river from Donaldsonville, Louisiana. Before I was a year old, my parents moved to Vicksburg, Mississippi, where my Daddy went into business and operated a fruit stand across from the First National Bank Building on the corner of Clay and Washington Streets. We lived in Vicksburg from 1902 'til 1912 and moved to Greenville in 1912, where my daddy bought a grocery store on the corner of Hinds and Nelson Street. This store was about one year old, and the store was bought from old man Rosella. We at that time were new to Greenville, and the only friends we had or knew were my Uncle Frank Maucelli, who had a store on the corner of Shelby and Nelson, and my Uncle Joe Maucelli, who had a store on the corner of Union and Shelby, and my Uncle Paul who was a shoemaker. Later, Uncle Frank was on Theobald and Nelson.

MILLER: Where was his place?

SIGNA: He was up there where I think Frank Loyacono was. Ignace Loyacono's daddy had a shoe shop next to Frank

Ciolino there for a while. But he was a musician, a talented musician, he and my Uncle Frank. My Uncle Frank played the cornet, of course they call it the trumpet now. Uncle Paul played baritone sax. And, when a road show would come to Greenville at the old Opera House there on the corner of Main and Poplar, when the road show would come through, they would always hire my Uncle Frank and my Uncle Paul to play in the band and the orchestra. They both read music, and they were both told time and time again by different band members that the show brought along with them, that knowing music like they did, they should go to the big city and make ten times what they were making here in Greenville, on account of not only they would play good music, but they both could read music. So, after a while, Uncle Paul had difficulty getting his wine, Uncle Paul said, "To hell with Mississippi, I'm going to Brooklyn." He knew a friend of his in Brooklyn, and he wrote him. So, Uncle Paul moved to Brooklyn. So, Uncle Frank and Uncle Joe wasn't either one of them drinkers and didn't neither one of them smoke, in fact none of the three brothers smoked. Now, there was a fourth brother who was called the black sheep of the family, Uncle Ignace. He left Mississippi would up in Alaska living with the Eskimos. Now, that was before Alaska was what - the forty-ninth state? fiftieth state. Well, anyway, he finally came back to the states and settled in Chicago, and after all those years I had the pleasure to just see him twice. He was in Greenville once, and I saw him

once in Chicago before he died. Now, Uncle Frank and Uncle Joe owned the grocery stores, and then there was my grandfather, who I was named after, and my grandmother, they lived with their son, Uncle Frank. Grandpa didn't speak any English, and he never wanted to learn any English. And if he asked you something in Italian, you had better answer him in Italian. If you didn't and you were small, you'd get a nice slap. He wouldn't even talk to you. When he talked to you in Italian, he wanted you to answer in Italian. He always had some slang expressions, which I won't be able to say on the air. Anyway, he was a good old soul. He stayed active. He hunted until, I'd say, he was in his late eighties. He died at the age of ninety-four, and his exercise, until he was in his nineties, consisted of walking from the corner of Theobald Street and Nelson up to his daughter's - that's my house, Momma's house - and then he would rest there, that was his resting place. Then he would walk the other two blocks to the corner of Hinds and Nelson around to Shelby and Union, where his son Joe Mauceli was, and he would go by just about time for dinner. Why, he'd start back, and he would stop at the corner of Hinds and Nelson with his daughter and say, "Matea dear, I'm going, goodbye." After he rested there, then he would walk three blocks down to Theobald and Nelson, and he would always get there in time for dinner. He made those rounds every day. One day he stopped at the house and said, "Matea dear - he was talking to mamma, her name was Mattie, but he called her Matea - I don't think I'm going to be able to

make it." And mamma said, "Oh, you been saying that and saying that." So he went on around to Uncle Joe's house, so when he came back, he sat down on the front porch and said "This is my last trip, I'm not going to be able to make it." And mamma said, "Oh, you said that when you came through here just a little while ago." He said, "Take me inside." Well we had a bathroom, a girls' room, boys' room and we had a sleeping porch there - that's in this house that we are living in now. And she helped Grandpa in the house and put him in the bed on the sleeping porch, and we called the doctor. Grandpa said, "No use a calling the doctor, or the priest." "I can say my prayers as good as the priest can say them." But, anyway, we brought the doctor around there, and then Father Igoe came around and began giving him last rites, and he was saying his prayers right along with Father Igoe, and he went away very peacefully. He was a great big, six-foot-two, just as healthy and strapping and walked just as good at ninety-four as I'm walking now.

MILLER: You took the Italian newspapers, didn't you?

SIGNA: Yes. Every morning you could see him just before first dark sitting on a box in front of Uncle Frank's grocery store - his son's grocery store on the corner of Theobald and Nelson - without any glasses, as old as he was, reading that Italian paper. They got the Italian papers twice a week.

MILLER: Where did they come from?

SIGNA: New York.

MILLER: That was your grandfather Mauceli?

SIGNA: Yes.

MILLER: What was his name?

SIGNA: Salvador. That was the one I was named after. They say when I get old I'm going to be mean just like him. I said, "Well, I'm seventy-four, and I know when grandpa was seventy-four he was mean as hell, and I'm not mean at all." I've got a heart as big as the biggest airplane carrier we got. They are always kidding me. They say, "I swear sometimes you sound just like Grandpa." You know they don't have anything else to say. I say, "If I was grandpa, I think I would have given you a couple of licks by now for saying what you said."

MILLER: Now, your grandfather Mauceli and your uncles and your mother all came over on the same boat. Was your father, Carmel Signa, on that same boat?

SIGNA: Yes.

MILLER: Tell me about that.

SIGNA: Well, papa seemed to think that he was sick and achey. Said he ached all the way over and said he got the sympathy of everybody on the boat. Said he must have been the only one that was aching. He didn't think he was ever going to get over here. He didn't know what he was going to run into when he got over here. But I never could find out from papa about his family - his mother and father, you understand, that he left over in Italy. I never could.

MILLER: Now, they landed in New York.

SIGNA: In New York.

MILLER: Came to New Orleans.

SIGNA: Wound up in New Orleans. Said he was supposed to go to New Orleans. But, you know there ain't no boats going from Italy to New Orleans, you understand, unless they come down the Atlantic and come up the Gulf of Mexico, go down to the coast of Florida and then across the Gulf of Mexico. But he said he never was so sick in his life.

MILLER: So, when he got to New Orleans, then he went on to St. Michael's parish.

SIGNA: Well, they evidently had relatives there or something to wind up there or either --- I don't believe they know how they got there. In other words, when they came here, they were looking for the land of opportunity, and any kind of work that they gave them, why, they were ready to work. They didn't care what kind of tool or instrument they put in their hand. If they were going to get paid for it, you understand, you could tell then they were willing to do anything you wanted them to do. They landed up down there in the damn cane fields in Louisiana, on old man Borgeois' plantation, and I was the fourth child, and before I was a year old we moved from St. Michael's parish to Vicksburg.

MILLER: How much did he get for working in the cane field?

SIGNA: He got seventy-five cents a day for working in the cane fields and a little shotgun house to sleep in and had a little garden on the side of his house to feed his family with.

My records that the brothers' school in Vicksburg and my records at the post office and schools here in Greenville will all show my date of birth and place of birth in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Now, when we landed in Vicksburg, I was not a year old, but now when I became of school age, I went to St. Aloysius College, the brothers' school in Vicksburg, all boys school. It was St. Aloysius College. They called it the brothers' school rather than everytime saying St. Aloysius College. They would say, "What school do you go to?" I would say, "To brothers' school." "What school do you go to?" Say, "I go to the sisters' school." Sisters's school was St. Agnes Academy. All the girls went to the sisters' school, and all the boys went to brothers' school. So, actually, when I started school, they said, "Where were you born?" But, hell, I didn't know nothing about St. Michael's parish. The only thing I knew was Vicksburg. I don't reckon my Poppa could spell St. Michael's parish, I don't reckon he could spell Vicksburg.

MILLER: Were you christened in St. Michaels or Vicksburg?

SIGNA: Yes, St. Michael's. That's my papers where I was christened, christened in St. Michael's Parish before I was a year old. Now all my school records - when we moved from Vicksburg up here, they said, "Now, where were you born?" I said, "Vicksburg, Mississippi." My records at the post office - Vicksburg, Mississippi. There is my papers there -

St. Michael's Parish.

MILLER: When you moved to Vicksburg on Walnut Street, right across from the First National Bank ---

SIGNA: No. Papa had his fruit stand right across from First National Bank, not a store, but on the side of the building.

MILLER: Tell me about how that fruit store was made so he could lock it up at night.

SIGNA: Well, he had a fruit stand, not a fruit store. It was on the side of a building, a two-story building. Upstairs was Dr. Tillman's office, a dentist, and across the street was Desall's Drug Store on one corner and cater-corner on the other was the First National Bank Building. Papa was right across with this fruit stand from the First National Bank Building. Papa was there then they were working on the First National Bank Building, because this old brick layer, Mr. Knowles, he was about five feet seven and had a wife that weighed about two hundred pounds, and she was a great big six-footer, and he loved his liquor. Of course, Vicksburg was wet then. It didn't go dry until 1909. And she would come there to meet him and, she would get off the street car - that was the transfer point when they had street cars. You'd get your transfer and get off and when the other street car came, you would get on, and on pay day - on Saturday - she was there. He was a brick layer and he made good money, and she was there to pick him up, 'cause he would go down to the saloon, and papa would go down there and

get him out. He was so small and so drunk, papa would just pick him up and tell her, "You go watch the fruit stand while I go down and get him." She said, "Is he down in the Saloon?" Papa said, "Yeah, he's down there." And, papa was a strong, stout man, didn't have no bad habits or anything. Papa would go down there and grab hold of him and pick him up just like he was picking up a bunch of bananas at the fruit stand and say, "Here he is." While we are on the subject of Mr. Knowles well, I said he was just a little bitty fellow, but one night I was there with papa. I used to go up there in the evening and bring papa peanuts from the house - we sacked them there at the house - then after school I would take them up there to the fruit stand because Saturday nights everybody would be there waiting to exchange transfers on the street car. Papa did a good peanut business and banana business. One evening Mrs. Knowles came over and went to the dime store, and she bought some dishes, and papa went down to the bar and got him, and he was drunk and brought him up there. Every time she would come - she didn't come every evening, see - papa would have to go down there and get him because she didn't want to go in there. When papa would bring him up there, papa said, "Here he is, Mrs. Knowles." So, she had these dishes that she had bought over at the dime store. So, she had to look in her purse to get the transfers out before she got on the streetcar, before the streetcar came. She wanted to be ready, so when she stepped on she could give them to the conductor. So, she took

NOTICE

This material may be  
protected by copyright  
law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

the dishes and said, "Here hold these, Earl." I think that was his name, Earl. One of his sons was named after him. When she gave him the dishes and went to reach in her purse for the transfer, he was so drunk he dropped the dishes, and then he fell on the floor. She hit him and almost knocked him out into the street. I swear papa used to tell it. He finally moved here. All his sons here were brick layers, Earl Knowles, Carter Knowles - you know these boys here.

MILLER: Yes, I know them.

SIGNA: They are all brick layers. Oh, yes, on Saturdays, while we are on the subject of saloons, not getting off the subject of the fruit stand, this was very comical, and we will just stay on the comic side of it. Every Saturday the saloons would give away free turtle soup if you bought a can of beer. Well, a can of beer, papa had a little bitty pot. Back in those days you could go to the dime store and get any size pot you want, and it held two mugs of beer. Well, you couldn't get any turtle soup unless you bought the beer. So papa figured. He knew the bartender; papa didn't drink; he drank his wine. So, on Saturday when I'd get there, I'd always bring the peanuts, and I'd always bring these two little cans, and papa would go down there and get a can of soup. A can would hold two mugs of beer. Papa told the bartender, "You know, I don't drink beer. You know, I send you all my customers down here." The saloon was right around the corner about three doors down from the fruit stand. The bartender says, "Well,

Mr. Signa, just send the can down for your turtle soup." Well, turtle soup, that was free; we could make a meal on that; that's that much Poppa saved, you see. So I wasn't allowed in the saloon because I was a kid. So, papa says go down there and get the turtle soup. "Oh, papa, I can't go down there. That man told me that I couldn't come in." I was selling papers down there one day, the bar there, you know, that has the iron rail at bottom and had the pretzels down on the end - they didn't ever have the top on the pretzels because they always had to reach down and were so busy going in there. So, I eased down with my head under the bar, and I got down there, and I had to step up on the rail - he had to see me step up on the rail - and I put my hand down in that pretzel jar. This great big hand grabbed me from behind, and, I tell you, I could have gone straight through that building. He said, "Son, what you doing in here?" I said, "I'm selling papers." He said, "Don't you know that you're not allowed in here?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "O.K." He took a few pretzels out and gave them to me and said, "Now, don't you come in here no more." I said, "Yes, sir." So I went on out. So, when papa wanted to send me for the turtle soup, I didn't want no more of that. But, anyway, I went down there. I stopped at the door, and I hollered at him. I didn't know what his name was. I said, "Mister, papa sent me after the turtle soup." He knew who papa was, so he asked somebody to hand him the can, and he filled it up with turtle soup. So, I went back to the fruit

stand right around the corner there, and Poppa said, "Take it home. It's time for dinner." I tell you, somebody says turtle soup now, I tell them I want to "urp". Anyway, when Papa had his fruit stand, it wasn't a store; it was on a side of a building. This carpenter fixed shelves on the side; there wasn't any building permit or anything then. You could build a toilet right there on Washington Street and wouldn't anybody stop you back in those days. They built the shelves on the side of this brick building. They must have had two by fours at the top, and they had some one by twelves that, at night when they were getting ready to close up, he would just pull those down, just like you would pull a shade down, and then he would run a big bar about as big as your thumb down at the bottom all the way through, and that would latch all of those. And then he had a little store room where the stuff that he had - barrels of pecans and bushels of apples that he didn't have any place to put them - about a four by eight and about five feet tall. Of course, he didn't carry all that much merchandise because he didn't have all that much money. So, at night he would lock up, and, in the morning, well, we'd all start to school. We'd get the Vaseline out and shine -- One thing we learned at the brothers' school was that your shoes had to be shined, yes-siree. That was in 1907. I reckon we used many a bottle of Vaseline shining our shoes. The school grounds were sandy, and we would walk across the school grounds to get to school, and, before we would get to school, all that Vaseline stuck with sand, and we

had to reshine them again before we could go into the school house. So, we had those black stockings on. We'd just rub our shoes like this on the backs of our stockings and the shine would put your eyes out. We would go on to school. But the two biggest thrills as a kid that I can remember was when I was seven years old and when I was six years old. Every Sunday papa used to take me and my oldest brother Carmel, he'd take me in one hand and my brother in the other, and we would go down Washington Street to the ice cream parlor, the two of us. We'd get two ice cream cones for a nickel. We'd get one a piece, and we'd walk back, poppa between us. Papa knew everybody in

Vicksburg, because all the lawyers and doctors had their offices in the First National Bank Building, in fact that was the only office building in Vicksburg at the time. Then we would go back home. Well, in 1909, President Taft came to Vicksburg, and he made a speech at the courthouse in Vicksburg, and who do you think my daddy brought with him to hear President Taft? He brought me. I was standing close to him. I didn't know what an FBI man was or a detective was or nothing back there during that age, seven years old, and I got as close to him as I am to you right now. Didn't nobody push me back, you know, or anything. I can just see that big long mustache - he had a mustache like papa's.. I told papa, "He's got a thing like yours up there." We listened to him. I'd say the courthouse was about four or five blocks from where we lived on Walnut Street.

MILLER: And there were no security guards?

SIGNA: Didn't nobody push me or do nothing. We'd go up one street and go to the Courthouse, we'd take another street and go to Katzenmiers bakery, where we would get a loaf of french bread, and the next day, if we didn't eat all that french bread up, when papa came to close his fruit stand at night and come home, he'd get his bottle of wine and pour himself a half a glass of wine, take that hard bread and dip it in there, and that was it. Well, I'd say there was only two things that I remembered really that I'll carry 'til I die, and that was one of them. When Mississippi went dry in 1909, old man Tom Morrissey, who used to bring wood from the river, I say river - that little canal that the Yankees came up when they bombarded Vicksburg. They always said they go down to the river, you understand, they don't say go down to the water. Well, that ain't the river, that's just a canal, just like Lake Ferguson is 'til you get on the river. Well, they referred to that canal as the river. Old man Tom Morrissey used to pass by the fruit stand with a load of wood on his back to take home and a load to sell. When Mississippi went dry in 1909, Louisiana was still wet. Well, right across from Vicksburg is Louisiana. I don't know how that old man -- he must have been plenty smart. That's what you call a poor man being smart. He leased that land across the river from Vicksburg from the government, and he put him a little shanty over there and sold whiskey, and he run a boat from the wharf there in Vicksburg - the wharf ain't much bigger than this room here but they called

it a wharf, you know - it's nothing like ours here, and that thing was going and coming like this day and night, and he just made a fortune. Now, that is where the second thrill in my life came. I was selling the Vicksburg Evening Post. Well, I used to hang around the saloons, you know, catch the drunks when they was coming out drunk and sell him a paper, and he pay double what it was worth, and if I didn't sell the rest of them, well, that was all right, but I tried. Then I said I got to do something, all my customers, they are going over there. So I go down to the wharf with my hand full of papers, the Vicksburg Evening Post, and I told this fellow I knew, "That fellow who runs the boat told me not to come down here. He said, "Get behind me." So the fellow started the motor, an inboard motor, they didn't have outboard back in those days. It was inboard motors, just like these river rats that had these boats used to haul logs down the river for Paepcke Leicht Lumber Company, but, anyway, I got behind him, and the minute I got to the other side, everybody would jump off and leave me standing. I'd jump off. That fellow would grab me and say, "I told you not to come over here any more. How many papers have you got?" I said, "I don't know. Let me count them." He said, "Here take this dollar and get back on the other side." Well, that dollar was that big, you know. Well, I had me a racket going. I tell you, you can't meet the same man on the other side every day. They're bound to switch up, you know, different ones maybe got sick or got fired or something, so the next day I'd get my papers, you know. I wouldn't try to sell them on Washington Street. I'd head down

NOTICE

This material may be  
protected by copyright  
law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

there, you know. I got to bringing that money to papa. He said, "You sell this many papers?" I said, "Yes, sir." He says, "How you sell them so fast?" I finally broke down and told him what I was doing. Man!

MILLER: What happened after your father found out?

SIGNA: Well, that was the end of my paper selling days, as far as the Vicksburg Evening Post was concerned. And that was another something that I can remember in my childhood days, if you call a seven-year-old a childhood, one of the biggest thrills, I'd say the biggest was standing next to the President of the United States. Why, I wasn't that educated, being in the fourth grade, rather at that time I was in the third grade. I didn't know about the President of the United States, Congress and all of that, and I thought that was a thrill so far as being next to the President when I heard people talking about the Governor, seeing him stand on the corner there during an election and flashing election returns for governor - I think Vardaman was then running for governor. But the biggest, the greatest thrill that is something that I can remember was my daddy took a chance on a horse and buggy, those were the horse and buggy days, when I was at the age of seven and six. Weren't too many cars then. Everything was horse and buggy. The firehouse next door was horse and buggy. The Hook and Ladder was horse and buggy. The chief had the prettiest horse in town, except the one that my daddy won. Papa took a chance for ten cents on a horse and buggy, and they had what they call the

shoot-out one Sunday on Clay Street.

MILLER: This is in Vicksburg?

SIGNA: Yes. Not on Clay Street, on Jackson Road. papa told the doctor at the fruit stand, he says, "You know, I didn't take but one chance, and I'm gonna win that horse and buggy. Well, that doctor told papa, "Mr, Signa, if you win that horse and buggy, I'll give you one hundred dollars cash for it. You won't have to ask nobody else what they will give you for it." Papa said, "That much?" He said, "Yes, you want to shake on it?" Papa didn't know what "shake" meant. Papa threw out his hand, and the doctor grabbed his hand, and they shook, and said, "Now, if you win that horse and buggy, the minute you win it, if you win it, bring it out to my house. You won't have to ask no questions or nothing." He said, "You just drive that horse and buggy up to my house." Come the day of the raffle. Papa had me by the hand. Up we went Jackson Road to the raffle. Well, they had a great big wheel with lord knows how many numbers on it, and they spun this big wheel around, and a man with a 22 rifle, standing back about thirty feet took one shot, and they called the number out, and me and papa looked at it, and I said, "Papa, you got it." Papa said, "I got it. I got it." And the man says, "Mr. Signa, you got the lucky number?" And papa said, "I got it." I say that's all papa could say, "I got it." So, he went up there, and that man said, "Yeah, Mr. Signa, you won it." He said, "All you got to do - he's out there - just get in and take the weight -- " They

had a weight attached to his bridle -- "Just slip that little thing-a-me-do they had there hitched to his bridle, pick up the weight and put the weight in the buggy and drive off." So, when papa was walking back to the man to give him his number, before I could get to the buggy, he and I, some big red-neck - when I say red-neck back in those days, they had them, they'd get drunk - I seen them whip three National Guards when it was just one of them; they was meaner than hell. Well, I don't reckon papa had been called dago in I don't know how many years, and this big red-neck said, "That damn dago won it." Papa picked him up around the collar with one hand and raised him straight up, and said, "Me no Dago, me kill you." Everybody said, "Put him down, Mr. Signa," and everybody said, "Oh, I sure am glad you won it, Mr. Signa. You just work so hard." Papa was good to all of them, he'd go down to saloons, you know, and get them out and make lies with the wives when they'd come looking for 'em and he'd tell them this and that and the other. Well, me and papa got in that buggy, and I told papa, I said, "Go straight down Jackson Road to Washington Street." I said, "Let's ride right up Washington Street so everybody could see us. Papa said, "All right" but papa had never drove a horse before in his life. We went down Jackson Road, straight down to Washington Street, and all through town, then almost to the end of Washington Street - back at the time it was residential area - it was like woods - it wasn't that many people there.

Well, we pulled up in front of this doctor's house.

We got out. Papa got out. I jumped out. We started in the house and I said, "Oh, papa, wait a minute. We forgot to put the thing on - the weight." So I was going to be fancy. I went and got the thing. I petted the horse. I put the weight on him, and I looked at him, and I kept looking at him and feeling him. We went on and knocked on the door. The doctor's wife came to the door, and she says, "Can I help you?" He says, "I'm Mr. Signa. I got a horse and buggy out there for the doctor." She said, "For the doctor?" She didn't know what the hell's going on, she didn't know nothing about the deal he and Poppa had going on - he could have been joking her. So she called him and he come. She asked us in the house, and she called her husband, and the doctor come, and they sat down in the living room. She told me, she said, "Young man, come here." She brought me in the dining room. They had a bowl of stuffed olives sitting on the dining room table. I knew what a black olive was - but a stuffed olive - I never heard of a stuffed olive. I'd never been anywhere to hear anybody tell about it. It was something to eat so I just said, "Yes, ma'am." She give me a few in a dish and I ate them. They tasted pretty good. Well, she left me in there by myself so I didn't ask her if I could have any more. It was a big bowl, so I just put me some more in the dish. I was standing up there - I just could reach the table - I was just eating up a storm. So I went in there where papa was and they was talking business, so I went back in there and I looked at those olives again, so I had to get me a

few more. Well, in a little while, I got sick in the stomach, so I went out of the dining room into a kind of little hallway - a kitchenlike - and went out on the back porch. The porch was real high and had about thirty or forty steps leading down to the ground and I just hung over that rail - just like a drunken sailor - and I was urping up a storm. Since that day if anybody says, "Do you want a stuffed olive?" I say, "Don't mention stuffed olives to me. I go to urping." Well, I come back from there and I told papa, I said "Papa, I'm sick." Papa said, "Well, we're going home in a minute." Do you know that we walked home from away out there - sick as I was? Papa had gotten a check - he'd given him a hundred bucks for this horse and buggy - and we walked all the way home. Papa wasn't going to spend no money to ride a street car. Of course, street cars didn't run that far out, but we went on home with that hundred bucks and I felt as proud as anything in the world. But, if you say stuffed olives to me, I'm telling you, that's it.

As I said, we lived on Walnut Street next door to the fire house there in Vicksburg, and the chief was Captain Sheeler. He lived across the street and Harry Fuller was one of the firemen, and the Stringfellows, and one of them was named "Dynamite" Cannon, I think, because he'd go into a blaze just like it wasn't a blaze. The Chrichlows are still in Vicksburg - they are an old, old family - and the Fullers, and two or three more of those old firemen, they just went like -- this fireman here and he answered down to his son -- they're not too happy to get

out of high school, some of them had to work like me when I got out of high school, so they'd just take any job they could get that they thought that they would qualify for.

I never will forget the lady across the street next door to Mr. Sheeler's house. They had some turkeys over there and we were going to play cowboys and Indians. Well, we had one boy in the neighborhood that was so bad - he was the baddest thing around there - bad but not destructive. When I say bad, he just did things, you understand. He didn't break anything or steal anything, but as kids go, he was a little worse than others. So we were talking and we said, "You can play cowboys and Indians but we ain't got no feathers." So he said, "I'll get you some feathers. Mrs. So and So's got some turkeys in her back yard." She had some red ones and some black ones and some mixed up ones. When it came time to make the headdress for the Indians, he got him a rag - he couldn't sew it so he just stuck the feathers through - they were pointed - all the way around. He was slick. He didn't wear the headdress himself. He made the headdress but he let Captain Sheeler's son wear it. He said, "I'm going to show you how to put them on and tie them." He showed him how to do it. He says, "Now here. You put them on." He said, "Wait. Let me help you." So he put them on. He was going to be the Indian and we was going to be the cowboys. We was having a big time. Everything went all right. The next morning when the lady went out to feed her turkeys she noticed there wasn't a damn tail feather - all the feathers were gone out

of them in one place or another. She wondered what went wrong, so she hollered over to her neighbor, Mrs. Sheeler, the chief's wife, and told her about what happened to the turkeys. She said, "I just can't imagine." Well, we weren't playing over there where she could see us. We was playing across the street. The next day, we were going to play cowboys and Indians and Chief Sheeler's son put the thing on and he began whooping and hollering and that lady heard all the noise. She looked out there and saw all them damned turkey feathers and that's when all hell broke loose. She wanted the Chief to pay her for all the turkeys but wasn't nothing wrong with the turkeys. But it wasn't the Chief's son. It was that boy from up on the corner - the bad one - he'd done all the fixing of the headdress. But I tell you, you talk about living in those days -- now there I was, seven years old, eight years old, a nine year old child; in other words, between the age of six and nine - to take a basket of peanuts and walk seven or eight blocks at night and never have to worry about anybody stealing. Now, if I'd take a basket of peanuts - or any six or seven year old child - take a basket of peanuts and start down the street - even Washington Avenue, in broad open daylight - they'd snatch it away from you and run. But, back there in those days, you could go and come - you didn't have to worry about nothing. People back there in those days didn't know what screens were. They slept with the windows straight up to the top - no screens or nothing. Half of them didn't have curtains. They had lamps. When papa would come home, when he closed up his fruit

## NOTICE

stand, mama would bring the lamp from one room to another. We didn't have that many lamps, and she'd sit it there on the table where we ate. I wouldn't say it was the kitchen table or the dining room table, because we didn't have no dining room table and stuff like that. We just called them tables. You ate there, and you had to put your clothes on there while you was dressing. Papa would pour him a half a glass of wine, take that hard bread and dip it in there - that was his supper.

Where the Signa family got a break -- there was a fire across from the Illinois Central Railroad down there - I think they called it Levee Street - and it was right across from the Illinois Central Railroad. It was a Wholesale Grocery place. So papa went down there and bought a case of sardines, and he bought him a lot of canned food without any labels on them. You might say they practically gave them to him because when you opened them, you didn't know what you were getting. So we'd get a can opener - I think we used about three different can openers we wore out trying to open them sardines. If you've ever tried to open a can of sardines with a canopener that started wrong, you're in trouble, sister. I'm telling you, especially, when you're under ten and you don't have the strength you're supposed to have and you started wrong. You start on the other end, you start in the back, and you start in the middle. If you've ever opened a can of sardines, you know what I'm talking about. Well, I never wanted to look another sardine in the face as long as I lived after that. It was sardines for dinner, sardines

for supper, and sardines the next day - we'd start the same routine. It wasn't no change in diet. Mama would open a can of stuff - we'd open it up - she'd throw it in a dish and we'd say, "What is it?" This one would say, "I think it's this", and that one would say, "I think it's this." She'd say, "Let's open up another can", and she'd get another can. Didn't none of them have labels on them, so what looked good enough, we'd go on and eat it, but the other stuff, we'd just throw it out because it didn't cost hardly nothing - but we stopped that. Papa said, "When we going to get through with these sardines?" They came a hundred tins to a box - they came in a wooden box in those days. I don't know what they come in now - pasteboard, cardboard or what. I said, "Papa, these sardines every day - sardines, sardines. Milk. Hell, we didn't know what milk was. When we wanted water, we had a cistern out in the front yard - old brick cistern - and we'd just go out there and put a bucket in there when we wanted a drink of water - but we used lamps. Then in 1912 --

MILLER: What did you use for heat?

SIGNA: For heat? Fire place. That's all. Wasn't no gas.

MILLER: The stove in the kitchen - a wood stove?

SIGNA: Wood stove and fireplace. Well, when we moved to Greenville in 1912, and papa bought the store there on the corner of Hinds and Nelson, we had a wood stove in the back of the store. Over at the house, we had a fireplace in mama and papa's room, and naturally, we got a chimney, we got a fireplace in the

room opposite and they had a fireplace there; but back there in the boy's room, we didn't have no heat or nothing there, but I reckon there was so many of us we just kept each other warm sleeping back there four or five of us in the bed - but that was the only heat we had in Vicksburg, and, come to think about it, I can't remember a fireplace to save my soul. I just can't remember, in Vicksburg, a fireplace.

MILLER: You remember the stove in the kitchen?

SIGNA: Yes, but I don't remember a fireplace, but I imagine all those old homes back there in those days, because we moved from Vicksburg to Greenville. Why, in that little old shot-gun house, it had a fireplace - one chimney - a fireplace on this side in this room and walk through the door and a fireplace on the other side. Then, when we moved to Greenville, we had a fireplace and we had a stove - a wood stove - in the back of the store. Mama used to wash her clothes -- she'd light the furnace and we'd fill it up with water and she'd boil her clothes on this furnace in the yard, just like you'd wash your clothes -- didn't have no washing machine, no washerette or nothing like that. In those days - strength in your wrist and your arms. Yes, sir, she kept us all clean to go to school. Mama kept us all going to school at one time. We were going to Court School, Catholic School, Central School and High School. We didn't miss a school in Greenville - all twelve of us. Of course, we didn't all graduate. My sister, Lena, didn't graduate, my sister, Frances, didn't graduate, my brother, Carmel, didn't graduate because he worked at the Light

Company. He was another one had to work to support the family. I worked during the school vacation to help support the family. I worked down at Chicago Mill. I was making, that was during World War I in 1918 - but I was 16 years old - but they didn't know that I was 16. I was drawing a man's wages. I was drawing \$18,75 a week and we got paid off in an envelope. We'd go by the office and show them our tag and sign our name and they'd give us this envelope. Well, I couldn't open my envelope up. I was 16 years old in 1918. I'd bring that pay envelope home, and it had written on there \$18.75. I'd walk in papa's grocery store there on the corner of Hinds and Nelson and I'd say, "Papa, here's my pay - \$18.75." He'd open it up and sign it and give me a quarter. That was my Picture Show money out of that \$18,75. That was during my school vacation. But the sad part came later. Somebody must have snitched on me or wanted my job, that I was on, drawing a man's salary, and they called me in the office. I said, "Lord, Lord, I hope they're not going to tell me they don't need me no more." Because I was counting on that \$18.75. They called me in the office and says, "Salvador." Old man Berry, Jim Berry's father was in charge.

MILLER: This was Chicago Mill?

SIGNA: No, it was Paepcke Leicht Lumber Company then; of course, it's Chicago Mill now but then it was the Paepcke Leicht Lumber Company. He said, "I'm sorry to tell you -- all I could hear when he said 'I'm sorry to tell you' was he's going to say they didn't need me. He says, you know you're under age and we

can't work you eight hours a day so we're going to have to put you over in the Cleat Department nailing cleats." So, I said, "Well, you know I need the money and papa was planning on something - I don't know what - and this \$18.75 had helped him out a lot and everything." So, he said, "I'm sorry, it's the State Law that you come under the Child Labor Law." So, he put me to nailing cleats over there in the new box shop that they'd put over there - an electric shop over there then all electric (the shop that I was working in first was operated by steam.) Mr. Lathrop was the millwright, Mr. McCormick was the saw filer, "Baldy" Bergman was in the print department, and Mr. Ed Stigler - he was the foreman - the saw line foreman. There was "Snitch" Maucelli working there at that time, Johnny Sims, a boy that I went to school with who quit school, and John H. Bowen, who eventually both of us wound up at the post office together, and both of us retired from the post office, of course, at different times. Johnny was much older than me. The reason why I mention "Snitch" Maucelli and Johnny Sims and Johnny Bowen - Johnny was the shipping clerk, and Johnny Sims was working on the saw line, and "Snitch" held some kind of job over in the new shop - in World War I, somebody came through there hollering, "Today's the last day of the volunteers. If you don't volunteer today, they gonna draft you. You know ya'll don't want to be drafted. I'm going to tell you one more time, today is the last day." Here comes Johnny Sims, "Snitch" Maucelli, and Johnny Bowen. Red Stigler was standing up to his desk. Of course, we called it a desk but it was a couple of 1 X 12's nailed

to the wall with a couple of 2 X 4's up where you could stand up and write on it. They said, "Red, we been standing all this crap from you day in and day out. You been spitting tobacco out of this side of your mouth and cussing, and spitting tobacco out of that side of your mouth and cussing. You damn red-headed Irishman, we're going to tell you what we're going to do." All of them turned their back to him and told him to take a good look and a good kiss because this was the last time you going to see us, we're going up to volunteer - this the last day to volunteer. Everything stopped on the saw line; of course, we couldn't cut the saws off but we didn't saw a single board - but everybody stopped. We couldn't believe what we was seeing and hearing. They went up to the recruiting office - it was right next to where Commercial Bank used to be on Poplar Street - where the old Western Union Office used to be - that was the recruiting office where they signed up. Of course that brother of mine, my oldest brother, he signed up over where L. L. Mayer used to be. They had a Navy recruiting office upstairs there, but he wasn't seventeen but he went up to join the Navy. He told them he was seventeen so they brought the papers to papa to sign. Papa said, "What you want me to sign?" He said, "Well, I'm going to join the Navy and you've got to sign the papers if I'm going to join the Navy." Papa didn't know it but he was swearing that he was with him - that's my oldest brother that's in Vicksburg now. He was in World War I. So he joins the Navy and before he gets to New Orleans, he changed his mind and said, "What the hell am I doing joining the Navy?" Of

NOTICE

This material may be  
protected by copyright  
law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

course, he'd already joined before John and them, because John and "Snitch" was holding back. When he got to New Orleans, he told them, "Hell, I didn't want to join the Navy, I want to join the Army. I want to switch over." I don't know how they did it but they let him switch over, and he was stationed at Jackson Barracks there at New Orleans, and then from there they sent him up to Newport News, Virginia, and from there they took him on across to France. When he came back, then like a damn fool - I say damn fool - that's what ruined him. He reenlisted for three years peacetime soldier. Well, that peacetime soldier did it. He was fortunate to be stationed out in California out at Angel Island, California, across the bridge from Friscoe. All of the soldiers in peacetime, they'd come across the bay - they had an apartment -- they'd take their Army clothes off, put civilian clothes on, and that was it.

(End of Side 2, Tape 1)

MILLER: We'll start when you came to Greenville in 1912. Tell me how you think Greenville looked then.

SIGNA: I came to Greenville in 1912 and the first school I attended was the Sister's School on the corner of Hinds and Main Street. My first day in school, mama gave my sister an apple, and said, "Now half that apple is for Salvador." She said, "Yes, ma'am." So we went to school and we were both sitting in the same seat. There was a little girl sitting across the aisle who asked my sister for a piece of the apple. It wasn't recess time at the time, and my sister said, "Yes, I'll give you half of it." I said,

"Well, you can't give her a half because mama said half of it was mine." The Sister told me, "Salvador, you keep quiet back there." The conversation came up about the apple again between me and my sister and I said, "Well, you're not going to give her my half of that apple." The Sister said, "Salvador, if you don't keep quiet I'm going to have to take you up stairs." I said, "I don't care where you take me - I'm going to get half of that apple." She said, "Young man, you're sassing like that and I'm going to take you upstairs and wash your mouth out with soap." I said, "Yes, Sister." So she led me out on the porch and we walked up the stairs, and she took me upstairs in the Sister's quarters. The Sisters' living quarters was above the classroom. I was standing there and here she comes with a big, brown bar of octagon soap. When I saw that big, brown bar of octagon soap, I ran, slid down the banister, jumped down to the end, went into the classroom, grabbed my books, and jumped out the window and went straight home. I walked in the store and papa said, "What are you doing home?" I told him about the apple situation. He said, "All that for a piece of apple?" I said, "Yes, sir, part of it was mine and I wanted my half. What's right is right." He said, "All right, just go on and put your books down. I'll wait until your sister gets home." He was referring to my oldest sister, Lena - she was working at Nelma and Blum's or Hafter's at the time - across the street from where Jim's Cafe is now. When she came home he told her. She says, "Okay, if he wants to act bad we'll send him up to Court School." So I told papa, I said, "I'm scared." The next

day, my sister took me by the hand - and I was ten years old then - brought me up to Court School and before I had got ten steps down the sidewalk, there they were -- "Here's a new boy, where did he come from?" -- this and that and the other. I think I had about three fights between the corner of Poplar and Nelson and the school that sat way back on the ditch bank - the old Court School. I finally got in there with my clothes all rumped and everything. My sister signed me up and they asked me what grade was I in, in Vicksburg. I told them I went to the Brother's School and I was in the Low Four but it was an all boys' school and from what I heard them talk about, the Low Four at the Brother's School was equal to Fourth or Fifth in the public schools. I wasn't but ten years old. I just listened to conversations. Well, they decided to put me in the Fourth grade. Miss Carrie Bowen taught there and Miss Maude Brian, and Miss Susie Trigg was the principal. Then, the next year I was in the Fifth grade. Well, I just ate the Fourth grade up it was so easy, and the Fifth grade was just about the same. When I was in the middle of the Fifth grade, they sent me and this Johnson boy - whose daddy worked at the Blocker Dairy out on North Broadway Street - they promoted us to the Sixth grade at Central School. I went to Central School about a month when my oldest sister, Lena, came down with scarlet fever and we was all quarantined and we had to stay home. She lost most of her hair. I didn't know scarlet fever affected you that way until I took a look at my sister's head. We all got to laughing and kidding her about it.

## NOTICE

This material may be  
protected by copyright  
law (Title 17 U.S. Code).