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Interviewee:

Willie Morris

Interviewer:

John Griffin Jones

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interviewed by John Griffin Jones

An Interview with

WILLIE MORRIS

December 4, 1980

Interviewed by

John Jones

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**MDAH**

JONES: This is John Jones with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and I'm about to interview Mr. Willie Morris. Today is Thursday, December 4, 1980, and we're at Mr. Morris's home on Faculty Row in Oxford. You say for the last couple of days you've been in Jackson and Yazoo City?

MORRIS: Yes. Dean Faulkner Wells is one of my good friends here. She's Faulkner's niece. She's come out with a little book of the ghost stories Faulkner told the children here in Oxford.

JONES: Right.

MORRIS: Her husband is Larry Wells, who's the owner of the Yoknapatawpha Press, which is located over the Sneed Ace Hardware store on the square here in Oxford. So we went down. Larry has brought out a kind of fancy reprint of a childrens' book that I did in about 1970, called Good Old Boy?

JONES: Oh, yes.

MORRIS: And so we were in Yazoo City signing books at the Yazoo library. And then we went out and had a historic occasion in Belzoni in the Delta. It was the first time that an author had ever signed books in Belzoni, in the library.

JONES: They don't have a bookstore do they?

MORRIS: No, they do not have a bookstore in Belzoni, but they do have a library. Thank God for that!

JONES: And you came back this afternoon?

MORRIS: Just got back this afternoon, driving up from Yazoo City.

JONES: We might have passed.

MORRIS: I might have passed you. I got a speeding ticket just outside of Grenada.

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JONES: Did you?

MORRIS: Yes, I did. We had a late night last night in Yazoo. All of my old friends gathered at Herman DeCell's and Harriet DeCell's. It was rather boisterous.

JONES: You say you saw Bubba Barrier?

MORRIS: I saw my old friend Bubba. I grew up with Bubba, who's your cousin. He was the best man at my wedding.

JONES: Was he?

MORRIS: Yes, in Houston, Texas many years ago. I've known Bubba since we were both about - well, it goes back before memory - since we were about one year old.

JONES: Yes, some of my favorite parts of Good Old Boy and North Toward Home ~~was~~ <sup>are</sup> when you talked about driving around in his red - what did he have, a Model T?

MORRIS: He had a Model T, yes. You know, one of those old models with one of the seats in the back.

JONES: Rumble seat.

MORRIS: Yes, one of those rumble seats. Of course, when we were growing up in Yazoo City we all started driving when we were about twelve or thirteen. I think Bubba started driving when he was eleven. He would borrow the family car, his parents didn't know about it, and come down and pick me up and we'd drive all over Brickyard Hill and out into the delta. I think Bubba was eleven or twelve at that point.

JONES: Is Muttonhead Shepard still alive?

MORRIS: At last report he is.

JONES: Where is he?

MORRIS: Someone told me he's teaching school and coaching up in North Carolina.

JONES: And Honest Ed Upton?

MORRIS: Honest Ed Upton is a Methodist preacher.

JONES: Where?

MORRIS: Out in Dallas, Texas. And Big Boy Wilkinson - I saw him the other day in Memphis. He's a very successful dentist in Memphis. So the groups seems to be doing okay.

JONES: Did you keep up with them through the years?

MORRIS: Well, off and on, sporatically. Since I've come back down here to live a good part of the year I hear a lot about them. So it's a form of keeping in touch.

JONES: Do you still have family in Mississippi?

MORRIS: No, I don't. All of my family is dead, except for my son David, who has just turned twenty-one. My mother died about three years ago. She was an only child. My grandmother died about six years ago.

JONES: Harper?

MORRIS: Yes, came from the Harper family at Raymond. Her father, my great-grandfather, was George W. Harper, who was the editor and publisher of the Hinds County Gazette in Raymond. It was one of the distinguished newspapers in the pre-Civil War period.

JONES: We have copies of it at the Archives.

MORRIS: Do you really?

JONES: Yes.

MORRIS: I'll have to come look at them. He was one of the first white men reelected to the Mississippi State Senate.

JONES: During Reconstruction?

MORRIS: During Reconstruction. George W. Harper married Anna Sims, from Port Gibson,

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My grandmother was the youngest of seventeen children, and she was the last one to die. She's buried in the old section of the cemetery in Raymond, which is crumbling now. It's just falling in. Their grave is about fifty yards from where the Confederate dead are buried.

JONES: Yes.

MORRIS: But all my Mississippi people are gone. I've got some relatives up in Tennessee on my father's side.

JONES: Did your father have brothers?

MORRIS: Yes, he had one brother and three sisters. One of his sisters is still alive. My father was from Camden, Tennessee, which is in Benton County about eight miles north of Memphis. His parents died when he was a little boy and he was brought up by relatives. His father served in the Tennessee State Senate with Cordell Hull, among other people. But he was a Tennessean. But my Mississippi roots go back very far. Cowles Meade, who was one of the early territorial governors, was related. Henry S. Foote, who was a governor and senator before the Civil War, and then in the Confederate Congress.

JONES: Yes, he left the Confederacy.

MORRIS: Yes, well he did towards the end of the war. There's a letter that exists from Lincoln to Grant telling Grant to let ex-Senator Foote come through the lines. So he did leave. He became an immigrant. He went to Canada after the Civil War.

JONES: So somehow you're connected with Shelby Foote.

MORRIS: Well, Shelby and I - you know, most people in Mississippi are related one way or another - Shelby and I've got to be distant cousins I would think. The other day in Memphis I met probably the most beautiful girl I've ever

met in my life. Dean Faulkner and I were there doing a book signing in a store there and I met Lynda Lee Mead, who was Miss America in about 1962 I suppose.

JONES: Yes.

MORRIS: And she's from Meadville and Natchez, and so we must share this same great-great-uncle Cowles Mead. Meadville was named after Cowles Mead, so we have to be about twentieth cousins; kissing cousins I hope.

JONES: She and Shelby were involved in some kind of scandal up there, weren't they?

MORRIS: Well, Shelby's present wife was married to Lynda Lee's present husband.

JONES: That's right. He's a dentist?

MORRIS: No, he's a very distinguished ear surgeon.

JONES: That's right. Did your Daddy come down here to work because your mother wanted to be near her family?

MORRIS: No. They actually met in Jackson. My Daddy came down here during the Depression and went to work for Standard Oil in Jackson. That building still stands - that old office building right across from the War Memorial.

JONES: Yes, and now is inhabited by the Department.

MORRIS: Oh, is it really?

JONES: Yes, that's where our historic preservation office is.

MORRIS: I didn't know that.

JONES: Yes, site of the old Bowman Hotel.

MORRIS: Yes. Well, that's where his offices were. My mother lived with her parents at the time on Griffith Street. Is that part of your family? It's spelled the same way isn't it?

JONES: No. My family is Griffin.

MORRIS: That's right. Well this is Griffith or Griffin?

JONES: Griffith.

MORRIS: Okay. Anyway my mother and father met in the late '20s. They moved to Yazoo City when I was about six months old, in 1935.

JONES: I was reading some of the newspaper clippings on North Toward Home, and I read where some Yazoo Citian wrote in: "Why doesn't Jackson claim Willie Morris, he was born there?"

MORRIS: Yes. I don't know. Many people in Yazoo City were upset with me when North Toward Home came out.

JONES: I was going to ask you about that.

MORRIS: I knew they would be, but they're not anymore. I think they were mad at me for about five or six years. But this always happens in America with writers. In your hometown they get a little disturbed at first when a book comes out that deals with people there, whether it is fictitious or not. North Toward Home, of course, was an autobiography. Then they calm down about it. This happens time and again. They get kind of proud of you, in a curious way. It certainly happened here with Faulkner. Lord knows Sinclair Lewis in Sauk Center, Minnesota, they wouldn't let him back for twenty years.

JONES: Told Thomas Wolfe they'd lynch him if he ever came back to Asheville.

MORRIS: That's right. I was there once in Sauk Center, Minnesota, and I made a point to go to Sinclair Lewis Boulevard. The sign there on Main Street is not just "Main Street," it is "The Original Main Street." All that.

JONES: I remember my mother gave me North Toward Home when I was fifteen or sixteen, and I read it and thought "What a wonderful book." I talked to my relatives in Yazoo City about it soon afterwards - not the Barriers - and I was interested to see them look away and half-smile. They said, "Well, you know Willie could've come back here, but he didn't. He should've had

had the courage to write it living here." That sort of thing.

MORRIS: Well, I think I probably couldn't have written it living there. It's that old question of where a writer feels he should live. I couldn't live in Yazoo City. You know I love Yazoo City, I have many friends there, but I don't think I can ever work there. I know it too well. And they know me too well. This is the perfect compromise for me, living here in Oxford, with Ole Miss here. Oxford is a hill country town, but there's great similarities between Oxford and Yazoo City, so this is a healthy compromise.

JONES: At the time you were working on Yazoo: Integration in a Deep Southern Town, had the town accepted you again, were you able to move freely in the white community?

MORRIS: Very much so. I talked to anybody I wanted to, from old John Satterfield, the lawyer, former president of the American Bar Association; William Barber, a friend of mine who probably represents the moderate-conservative establishment in Yazoo City. Of course I had this entree with the blacks, which also helped.

JONES: We'll talk more about that later. At the time you were growing up in Yazoo City, did you have any sense that what you wanted to do was write?

MORRIS: Was to be a writer?

JONES: Yes.

MORRIS: I think it was a feeling that grew on me over a period of time. I don't think I ever said to myself explicitly, "I want to be a writer." But I was always writing. I had a little portable typewriter I think I got when I was twelve or thirteen years old, and I started writing sports for the Yazoo Herald and for the school paper, and I never stopped. I guess - it's hard to remember these important things - it was at the University of Texas

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when I was the editor-in-chief of the Daily Texan, which I think by then was almost without peer the greatest college newspaper in the country. It might have been. I suppose it was when I got to Oxford, England, to Oxford University which I call now the "other Oxford," that I began to have the feeling that I was going to be a writer. I know I started a novel over there in Oxford. I started it after my son David was born in Oxford in 1959. I would stay up all night, and my son was just beginning to crawl. He'd be crawling around the floor of this old Victorian house we lived in, and I'd be writing away on this novel, and sometimes he'd get a little boisterous and I'd kick him across the floor. But I didn't get anywhere with that novel. I burned it.

JONES: Set in Yazoo City?

MORRIS: Well, set in the delta as I recall. I did get a few little things from it here and there in North Toward Home. But I think I wrote three novels that I burned over a period of time.

JONES: During what point in your writing life?

MORRIS: Ten or fifteen years ago.

JONES: Really?

MORRIS: Yes. Sometimes you have to burn them, it's the only thing to do with them.

JONES: Were they after North Toward Home?

MORRIS: I think one was before, and one was after. See, I left Harper's magazine in 1971, and moved out to the east end of Long Island to a little town called Bridgehampton. That's been almost ten years.

JONES: Was there anybody in Yazoo City that influenced you in your writing life, that was an intellectual mentor for you in Yazoo City?

MORRIS: Well, I had a great high school English teacher, Mrs. Olme Parker. I saw her

yesterday as a matter of fact.

JONES: She's still alive?

MORRIS: Yes. In fact, I dedicated this new edition of my childrens' book Good Old Boy to her. She was just a marvelous high school English teacher, and a genuine taskmaster who opened up to me the whole world of language and its possibilities. She got us to reading good books and good literature and poetry. Then I guess the Yazoo Herald under the Motts was always good to me. I could write sports stories for them anytime I wanted to. I started quite early, at about thirteen as I recall. But in general I think it was the whole atmosphere of growing up in a town like Yazoo City, half hills and half delta, and half crazy, that must have brought out the writer in me.

JONES: When did you get your political education, become aware politically?

MORRIS: The University of Texas. There's a fellow out there named Ronnie Dugger who had founded the Texas Observer, a really great little paper. It was a weekly at that time. I came under the influence of Ronnie who was a politically active, brilliant young man several years old than I. I'd never been really political before. I do remember that I wrote an editorial in the Yazoo High Flashlight in 1948 endorsing the Dixiecrat ticket of Strom Thurmond and Fielding L. Wright, the Mississippi governor. But I became pretty political there at the University of Texas running the very controversial newspaper the Daily Texan. I then went off to Oxford, England for four years, and then came back and took over the Texas Observer, which was a kind of political and literary journal. I think for a writer the best thing about that experience is moving around among different kinds of people, and travelling around Texas and writing a lot of words under a

deadline, thousands of words every week. That was probably the toughest job I ever had, the Texas Observer. Boy, after my tenure running that I was exhausted. It was a lot harder than running Harper's, because at Harper's we had good people working under you, and it was a monthly. You had the great writers contributing. But the Texas Observer was a marvelous experience for me in that regard, writing constantly about that vast and unusual state.

JONES: Yes. As editor of the Daily Texan as an undergraduate, did you think about returning to Mississippi and getting into journalism?

MORRIS: As a matter of fact, I remember I left the University of Texas and went to Oxford, England in 1956, on a Rhodes.

JONES: Yes.

MORRIS: I expected to stay there two years and I ended up staying four. I got married in my third year. But I remember I wrote Big Hodding Carter with the Greenville paper during my last months in England asking him if he had any jobs. He really didn't at the time. I did come back to this country in the summer of 1958 and worked with Ronnie Dugger on the Texas Observer that summer. Ronnie was getting tired, and he asked me to come back from England and take it over from him. Subsequently I did that. But I certainly did have hankerings to come back to Mississippi after England.

JONES: I've heard you say that you thought for a time about coming back and entering Mississippi politics.

MORRIS: Well, I think I <sup>did</sup> have some thoughts about that. I guess if I had done that I would've come back to the Ole Miss law school, and would've had quite a different life. But I don't know. I eventually stuck with the written word, and I don't have too many regrets about that.

JONES: Was Mississippi something that you felt you needed to leave at the time that you left it?

MORRIS: Well, I don't think it's that conscious. I don't think it was that conscious a decision on my part. One can look back over one's life and give a rationale to things that I don't think often in reality exists. You know, in retrospect you can give some kind of rational pattern to your life, but the big decisions are often so - not haphazard, but often the creature of accident. It depends so much on the moment. I'm not sure. But I am glad I went back to Texas after England. I wouldn't take anything for that experience on the Observer, and an atrocious several months in a place called Palo Alto, California.

JONES: Doing what?

MORRIS: Oh, my ex-wife had a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and was doing graduate work in English.

JONES: At Stanford?

MORRIS: Yes. As I recall she had a choice between Stanford and Columbia, and we decided that we'd go out to Stanford on the grounds that we would probably never live in that section of the country again. I had a suspicion that we were going to end up in New York City at some point. I remember we were sitting in my breakfast room in Austin, Texas one morning. I was running the Texas Observer, and I had been doing some writing for Harper's when John Fisher was the editor. Out of the blue, with the morning mail came this letter from John Fisher, editor of Harper's for a number of years. I must have been twenty-five years old, maybe twenty-six, and here was this letter from John Fisher saying quite frankly that he was looking for a successor, that he was getting tired and he like my writing, liked the