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Interviewee: Elizabeth Spencer (Mrs. John Rusher)

Interviewer: John Griffin Jones

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And Interview With

ELIZABETH SPENCER

August 10, 1981

Interviewed by

John Jones

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JONES: This is John Jones with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, about to interview Miss Elizabeth Spencer. Mrs. John Rusher is how you're known in Montreal.

SPENCER: Yes.

JONES: Today is Monday, August 10, 1981. We're at the Archives building in Jackson. I've got a list of questions for you. Looking during my research on your writing life I wasn't able to find out a whole lot about your early background other than the fact that you were born in Carrollton, Mississippi, and the names of your parents. Can you tell me something about your early memories, your family, and that type of thing?

SPENCER: I was born in Carrollton. My parents were both from Carrollton or from Carroll County. My mother, I suppose, was born at the McCain family plantation. My mother's family were the McCains. There were some military heroes in the family. There was a military leader from West Point and one from Annapolis. My great-uncle was General Pinckney McCain, who was a general during the First World War and who was known, I think, as the father of the Draft Act. He trained the whole Expeditionary Force, the Allied Expeditionary Force that was going across, and came under the command, I believe, of General Pershing.

JONES: Sure.

SPENCER: Camp McCain at Grenada was named for him. Then my mother's brother, William Alexander McCain, who went to West Point, I believe he was in both the Mexican Rebellion and the First World War, and later became head of the quartermaster depot in Philadelphia. He retired to Bucks County, Pennsylvania,

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married there. And his brother, Admiral McCain, commanded the task force under Admiral Halsey during the Second World War. His son was another admiral, John Sydney McCain, who was in command of the entire Pacific fleet. He retired about five years ago, and only recently died, as you may know. My mother, however, lived a very quiet life. Of her two younger brothers, she was - there were two crops in that family for some reason. There were my two uncles who were in the military, and a girl, Miss Katie Lou, who taught Latin for years at McComb, Mississippi, and was a very highly educated lady. Then there was a long gap. I think maybe two children died. Then there was my mother and two other brothers. My mother, I think, was next to the last of that. Then my father was the youngest one in his family, and I was the youngest one in our family, so it happens that I was only two generations from the Civil War. My grandfather remembered it though he was too young to go. My father's father, who was dead before I was born had fought at Gettysburg. So when I say that, that my grandfather was in the Civil War, people look at me like I'm crazy, but it really is true.

JONES: Right.

SPENCER: Let's see. You were asking me about my parents. Well, my mother was born at Tiac - that was what they called the plantation - in Carroll County. It was the plantation next to Malmaison which was Greenwood Leflore's plantation in the Tiac country. That was the Choctaw name for tall pines. You may have heard of that. Well, my mother was a very pretty girl and she became a music teacher. That was one thing open to young ladies. My grandfather ran for county sheriff and moved into Carrollton, and she moved up to McCauley, a little town near Carrollton, to get what music pupils she could. That was the thing one did: you lived with nice people who had a piano and you taught music. She saw my father up there, or rather he saw

her. I think they went together for a little while. Then he moved into Carrollton to start business on his own, and they lived there ever since. They finally bought a house there. I was born in that house, and they both died there. It was a long lifetime for both of them in one place.

JONES: Yes. I'd read where your dad worked as a farmer.

SPENCER: Well, I don't doubt that he worked as a farmer when he was growing up simply because they were very poor. It was right after Reconstruction in the 1880s that he was born. His father had died. They had farms and apparently had houses and friends and everything, but it ~~was~~ just a hard life. His mother had to raise the four brothers. There were four brothers and a daughter that died. She had to do her best with those children. So he went one year to college and had to go back home to take care of his mother who was sick, and then they all got together because she got tuberculosis and they chipped in and sent her out to San Antonio to try to prolong her life. It went back a long way, but he remembered it just as fresh. Then he left McCauley. The Spencers at McCauley were C&G station agents, and Railway Express station agents. They had a country store and the station, a whistle stop. They had a house and a farm. My father moved into Carrollton, and I believe he bought a store, but he might have come in to work for the Railway Express in Carrollton. But sooner or later he started doing absolutely everything. He had stores for this and that. You know, anything that was going he'd try it and make money at it. It cost a lot to raise us, I guess, and he knew he had to do more than one thing. He had the Chevrolet agency and the Standard Oil franchise, and he sent the Standard Oil delivery trucks all over the county. I think my brother used to drive them in the summertime. And he had a cotton gin, and he had a little farm down in front of our house. In front of our house was a good many acres,

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about forty acres, on the outskirts of Carrollton.

JONES: Is the house still there?

SPENCER: Oh, yes. We sold it to a family that descended from a family that had always lived there, so I know it's going to be done right by.

JONES: And who in your family remains in Carrollton today?

SPENCER: Nobody. Friends. My uncle from McCauley and his son, and for a while his daughter until she married and moved into Greenwood. They skipped Carrollton. They just jumped from McCauley to Greenwood. We went to Carrollton and never got to Greenwood. That was sort of the step. You know, a lot of Greenwood was settled by Carrollton. Carrollton is in the hills, but Greenwood is in the Delta and richer.

JONES: But you grew up with a strong sense of the difference between hill people and Delta people?

SPENCER: I was brought up on the margin of the Delta, on what they call Valley Hill. Valley Hill can be any road going down that last hill. There were many Valley Hills. Just like that song about the Tallahatchie bridge. Well, what bridge did she mean? Nobody really knows. Any bridge over the Tallahatchie might have been it. Those plantations dated back a long way, and they were just on the margins of the Delta. Usually the houses that were built - I know my mother's family home that burned in the 1880s was built on the last hill overlooking the Delta. It must have been extraordinary. But their plantation was, you know, part of it would be in the hills. But you get central to the Delta, most of that was swamp if you remember. It was just dead things and swamp. Really ugly. All that's gone. The trees are gone, all those big trees that used to stand in bayous along the road. Most of that's gone, as I understand it. I've just ridden over to Greenville this trip, but it looks to me like it's all been drained and controlled.

Where're you from?

JONES: From here. Jackson.

SPENCER: Are you a lifetime Mississippian?

JONES: All my life.

SPENCER: Where's your family from originally?

JONES: Yazoo County and the Delta.

SPENCER: Yes. But the central part of the Delta is what I'd think of as new country. Right along the river, Greenville and those places, they were all old. The central part of the Delta was dangerous. It was a very rich land if you could control the buckshot and the bayous and get the mules out of the mud. You had to get the cotton picked in the fall. Black labor was what it came to. But Mexicans used to pour in to do that too. They were called wetbacks. It's just a whole different thing now from what it used to be. There was also yellow fever. Everything bad.

JONES: As Amos Dudley discovered in This Crooked Way.

SPENCER: Well, that's the book I wrote about tales I'd heard about the people who opened up the Delta. People like that.

JONES: Fascinating book. Was there anybody in reality that you fashioned Amos Dudley after? Somebody in your family perhaps?

SPENCER: No. He was an imaginary character. But I used to hear a whole lot of stories. I remember that what started that book off was my uncle sitting and talking one twilight down at Tiac. Somebody asked him about two brothers who'd gone over into the Delta and made what amounted to a lot of money at that time. Somebody said, "Where did they come from?" And he said, "Just like a lot of Delta folks, they came from out of the hills dragging a cotton sack, and in twenty years they had a fortune." That sort of stuck in my mind. And I thought about, "Well, why did they leave home?" You know,

there had to be some impetus. I had conceived of there being two brothers, just following what he said, but then as soon as I set up that scene there I realized it might be a man and his friend.

JONES: Arney.

SPENCER: Yes. And then he developed a strong personality of his own. His resentments were strong already, and he was caught up in the whole opportunistic thing of the Delta and its really primitive condition. See, he married that woman. She was over from near the river. I thought there would have been older families over there. The part he was opening up was very new.

JONES: A lot of people who talk about the phenomenon of there being so many writers from Mississippi, especially from the Delta, say that there was a compression of history, a great deal of drama and life packed into a very short period, that took place in the Delta, so that a family could go to rags to riches to rags often over a couple of generations.

SPENCER: Yes.

JONES: They say that is great for a writer, for developing his sense of his time and place. Did that help you, that much being packed into one generation?

SPENCER: Which generation do you mean?

JONES: Well, just in general over the two generations that cleared the Delta; the people who went from rags to riches like Amos Dudley, and the ones whose riches were lost.

SPENCER: Who were ruined. No, that didn't affect my family. We were from Carrollton as I was telling you, and that's a hill town. I separate my father from a man like Amos Dudley. His ambition was to make a living for his family, to raise his children and furnish support. He was very conscientious, responsible about money, but money was just so hard to make. It was only in the last years of his life that he had any kind of affluence, modest though

it was. He was always just struggling away trying to put my brother through college and then medical school, and then me through college. I went to graduate school one year, but that was all. That kind of syndrome of just fabulous gains from cotton land, and failure, largely depended on.. I suppose unexpected crop failures might ruin people, or two or three bad years. But I don't think that in This Crooked Way Amos Dudley fell on evil times financially. Do you?

JONES: No, ma'am.

SPENCER: I did hear stories about people going broke. "Becoming land poor," they said. They acquired more land than they could manage. Sometimes there would be accidents like that. I never personally knew anybody who went under that way. I know my mother's family plantation was always mortgaged, but I think it acquired the mortgage just after the Civil War. They probably had a large investment in slaves, and they couldn't sustain under what had happened. I just don't know how they managed the debt. But it wasn't until the 1940s that my father and my uncle got together and paid it out. They put it under permanent management rather than leave it divided property among the heirs.

JONES: Right. Tell me about your early life. You were born in Carrollton in 1921?

SPENCER: Yes.

JONES: Can you tell me where the literary influence came when you were growing up?

SPENCER: Well, I wasn't a very healthy child and mother loved to read. She had extraordinarily good taste in childrens' literature, and also other literature. She came from a family that liked to read. I told you they had a plantation house that burned in the 1880s. They always said that ^{they} lost everything, but there were a great many books somebody had grabbed and got

out with. Either that or maybe the library wasn't destroyed. There was Dickens and Scott, and then there were a vast accumulation of the things my uncles and my aunt had studied at college: Latin texts and histories and things like that. I don't think the McCains were literary or bookish people, but they made ready reference to books. They put great weight, like a lot of Scots Presbyterians do, and they were a strong Scots family - I think my grandmother was only one generation from Scotland. I have heard that. I'm not quite sure that's true. She was from an old town that vanished called Middleton. You might have heard of that. It was between Vaiden and Carrollton. It was a very thriving town before the Civil War. There was a shoe factory there during the Civil War to make shoes for the soldiers. They read an awful lot. I suppose my father's family had nothing against reading, but they probably had too tough a life to give themselves over to too much literature and music. I'm not certain of that. It may not even be true, but my impression was that. But one was supposed to read and talk about books. When I was sick a good deal as a child my mother used to read aloud to me all kinds of things: Greek and Roman myth. She was very strong on Bible too, so she used to read Bible stories. Let's see, she read King Arthur's stories, Robin Hood and other children's books. Later on I became fascinated by all this, and as soon as I began to write in school I began to write down stories I imagined. I had a little black playmate. I knew far more blacks than I did whites when I went to school, because I used to spend a lot of time down at the plantation. Around the house the cook's children played with me. Our house wasn't out in the center of town anyway. I used to make him listen to stories I'd make up. I think he was bored.

JONES:

That's interesting, because certainly the kind of relationship a small white

girl living on the fringes of town had with blacks in the '20s and '30s is something you have always investigated from "The Little Brown Girl" to "Sharon".

SPENCER: Yes.

JONES: So listening to your mother read instilled in you an early love for the language?

SPENCER: Oh, I think so. People probably have this naturally. I'm sure my brother was read to too, but his bent wasn't literary. He was inclined to want to study medicine and scientific things. Since mine was literary, I had all that to catch onto. I kept on with it. I got encouraged when I went on through school by the teachers I had who were also interested in literary things.

JONES: You came to Belhaven after graduating from Carrolton High?

SPENCER: It was J. Z. George High School then. They consolidated some schools. J. George was the senator from Carroll County who had reconstituted Mississippi after the Civil War.

JONES: Why did you choose Belhaven?

SPENCER: I didn't! Well, I liked Belhaven. I'm sure it is a good school. No, I wanted to go to the University. My family were all Prebyterians and they had ties with Belhaven, and they decided I should go there. So, I guess I counted my blessings that I could be given a college education. I think I got a scholarship there too. That was a little bit of a help. It was because I was first in my class.

JONES: Yes. At Belhaven did you have someone who took you by the hand and said, "You have talent. You could be a writer."? Was it that early that you knew that's what you wanted to do with your life?

SPENCER: I wanted to be a writer for a long time. I started writing stories when

I was in grammar school. The teachers said they were really good, and they read them aloud to the class. I'm sure they weren't any good at all, but it was just the idea of having done this that was exciting to me. I used to sit up in trees and write. I would sit out by myself. It was a large property and there was a gully in back of the house and a steep fall of land. I used to sit back there and write in notebooks and hide the notebooks in some old machinery that had been dumped down there to prevent erosion. I used to hide the notebooks in the old machinery down there. That was one thing. Then I wrote long stories and composed them in tablets and gave them to my mother and father. They were generally adventure stories about people getting isolated at the North Pole about which I knew absolutely nothing. Crazy things like that. I must have picked up fragments to put together in stories like that from reading and magazines my brother had.

JONES: So even that early you knew?

SPENCER: Yes.

JONES: It's interesting to me to talk with writers about the first impulse to write.

SPENCER: I don't know. I think there's something chemical about it. I remember when I got this terrible urgency. I stayed awake all night with a kind of excitement about something or other. There was a fire in the room burning and casting shadows. The next day I tried to paint that, I tried to draw, but I had no talent for painting, so I wrote a poem. You know, it was some way to release this inner excitement. I don't think that's explainable. Mississippi doesn't explain it; nothing explains it. Being read to as a child doesn't explain it. It's a kind of chemical excitement you feel, and you're drawn toward one sort of expression or another. As I couldn't draw it, I wrote.

JONES: So you almost had to do it?

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