

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2015

Interviewees: Ellie Dahmer

Interview Date: 2015-11-30

Location: Kelly Settlement, MS

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Melville Bishop

Length: approximately 1 hour, 22 minutes

START OF RECORDING

F1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Emilye Crosby: So, Mrs. Dahmer, we were talking about when you went, were out at Alcorn [State University] in the early 1940s. Can you tell me what it was like?

Ellie Dahmer: The campus was, the buildings, we didn't have that many buildings on the campus, and they were far apart. I was out there about two months ago, and they got -- it looked like a city beside what we had.

EC: Were most of the men gone? Was it mostly females on campus?

ED: It was. World War II was in, was really going fast for the black community. There was very few men on campus.

EC: And you said you went to Alcorn for two years.

ED: Yes, and then I transferred to Tennessee A&I.

EC: What made you transfer?

ED: After my brothers had gone to Alcorn they found out they, well, if you want to do graduate work, you would have to do makeup work coming out of Alcorn. I found that out when I got to Tennessee, because the dean that was at Tennessee, he used to work at Alcorn. He threw out all my education. He kept me there a quarter longer than I would have been there, because I went to summer school, and I would have been out. I had to go back and pick up that education. He said that education I had at Alcorn was as old as he was, but that wasn't my fault. Alcorn should have offered better.

EC: Could you tell the difference in the classes, between the two?

ED: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

EC: It sounds like you liked Tennessee.

ED: Well, they were much harder, because really we didn't have the foundation that we should've had.

EC: Even though you actually probably had a better education coming into it than most African Americans had opportunity for, at the time.

ED: I don't know. The children that came out of the city school were so much farther advanced than we were.

EC: Was it? You think that was the difference?

ED: Mm-hmm. Even Hattiesburg school, Laurel school, they were far more advanced than we were.

EC: Yeah. Do you think that was because they put more resources into it, or they had teachers there with more education?

ED: I think they had more money to do something with. They probably had later books than we had. We never saw a new book. Never saw a new set of encyclopedias.

EC: Well, from what we were talking about earlier, it sounds like that most of the resources for the schools you went to came from the black community, and that there wasn't much contribution from the government.

ED: I think they were supposed to have given us, but they always took the best for their children, and we got what was left over.

EC: What did you do after you left Tennessee A&I? Did you graduate with your degree?

ED: I graduated.

EC: Your bachelor's?

ED: In 1947, I got a bachelor's degree in home economics.

EC: What did you do after that?

ED: I found a job in Jasper County, and I taught home economics in Jasper County I believe it was three years. Then I came to Jones County, and from Jones County I came to Forrest County. I taught home economics several years here in Forrest County.

EC: What made you move from one school to another?

ED: Better salary, different in the pay. Yeah.

EC: What were those schools like that you were teaching in?

ED: They was just a step ahead of the high school I finished with. We didn't have the resources for the children either, but we did the best we could as teachers. We

had a lot of college graduates by the time I was teaching. They didn't have them when I was going to school. Frankly, I -- they might have had one I can think, maybe one or two graduated from college. Most of them were finished at those normal schools.

EC: I know people could teach with a high school degree in those early years.

ED: If they could pass that test in the superintendent of the office, which he couldn't pass.

EC: So that was the white superintendent?

ED: Uh-huh. They couldn't help you with anything when you were around there. I know when I was making my first home economics report I went and asked him did they have the forms and he said, "No. Look at what the other teachers did. You can fix yours like that."

EC: Where would your report go to?

ED: It would go to the county, and I think they would send it to the state. I don't know where it would go after then, but we had to make reports.

EC: Was it related, was home economics related to the county extension?

ED: Yes.

EC: OK. All right. How did you meet Mr. Dahmer?

ED: They needed a home economics teacher down here, and they came up there, and I was available. I was available because they paid more money.

EC: [Laughter] So you were available because you wanted to be available.

ED: Well, the money will make you available.

EC: Yeah [5:00]. So you came, and you were teaching in Hattiesburg, in Forrest County?

ED: Teaching in Forrest County, right out there where Dennis went out there, before Dennis was making a surfeit. That's where we were teaching there.

EC: Oh, so you were right here in Kelly Settlement teaching?

ED: Right in Kelly Settlement.

EC: Do you remember when you met Mr. Dahmer for the first time?

ED: Yeah, he came up to my house. He and several more people came up there to interview me about the job. Of course, I was cooking dinner, and they didn't leave until they ate.

EC: [Laughter] They stayed for dinner.

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: You weren't going to get them out.

ED: I don't know if they was even invited for dinner, but they stayed. We probably invited them. They probably -- but he didn't leave until he ate, I know that much.

EC: Was it inevitable after that moment?

ED: Well, no. It developed later on.

EC: Yeah. Yeah. So did you like teaching here in Kelly Settlement?

ED: Yes, I liked teaching here. I taught here until they integrated the schools. After they integrated the school they told the principal who -- they didn't tell him who to hire, but they told him who not to hire, and my name was on that list.

EC: When was -- which -- so was that in [19]70 or [19]66? I know that they integrated at different times.

ED: No, they integrated in--.

EC: Was it with freedom of choice, or was it after that?

ED: It was before freedom of choice. They consolidated all the black schools in Forrest County into one school, and they renamed it Earl Travillion.

EC: And that's when they didn't rehire you?

ED: That's when they didn't rehire me. They built the new school around there for all the black students in Forrest County. The white schools kept their schools where they were. But our children had to pass by them going to that school.

EC: That was probably in the late [19]50s or [19]60s?

ED: I believe it was in the [19]50s, I believe.

EC: Yeah. So when they consolidated at Earl Travillion you stopped teaching?

ED: I stopped teaching in Forrest County. I was later, that same year I believe they consolidated, I was able to get a job in Perry County.

EC: Where is Perry? How far away is that?

ED: Thirty miles, Richton.

EC: OK. Were you still teaching home economics?

ED: No.

EC: That was after you went to--.

ED: By then I had gone to elementary. I had gone to elementary before I left Forrest County, however. I went to secondary first and then elementary.

EC: OK. Can you tell me about Mr. Dahmer? What was he like?

ED: If I've ever seen a Christian person, he was one. He put Christianity into practice. He was really concerned about his fellow man. We had a comfortable living on the farm, and the sawmill, and the grocery store, and the planing mill. We had, at that

time, we had a very comfortable living. But he wanted to make things better for other people.

EC: When you married, did he own all this land, or was he working with other family members?

ED: He owned this right here. Of course, he had sisters and brothers that owned land, and he was working some of their land.

EC: OK, so he worked his own land and their land?

ED: Uh-huh, and some of their land.

EC: Before you had children, who helped him work on the land? Were there--

ED: He had hired help. He had hired help. Of course, he had tractors. A tractor can do far more than a horse or a mule can with a plow. He first started with a one-row tractor, and then he moved to a two-row tractor, and that really could do something. Then he, as his boys grew up, Dennis was driving a tractor. Dennis was driving a cotton picker before he was twelve years old. So his children learned to work early. Betty was driving a car before she was ten. Those were different. The incident when they burned our house, Betty was just ten and a half.

EC: When she was --. I want to ask you about that, but I thought I'd maybe ask you some other things first.

ED: Yes, sure.

EC: When she was driving a car at the age of ten, around that, would she do that just here around the farm?

ED: Around the place. No, you didn't let her get out on the road. Now maybe she'd go from here, from the house, or maybe up to her aunt's house on the road, but the

traffic was nothing like it is now. It wasn't as dangerous. They didn't have to have a driver's license around here. Children on the farm learned to drive early, because all you needed them to do is get off on the gas and let the truck roll, and then get on the brakes to stop the truck from rolling. When they keep on doing that, somebody would [10:00] usually go and put it in gear for them, but they learned to put it in there themselves, early.

EC: Well, they had a lot of responsibility.

ED: Yes. Everybody helped.

EC: So how many children did you all have?

ED: OK, let me count them up. We had six boys, seven.

EC: And as soon as they were old enough they would all help on the farm?

ED: Everybody had something to do. Betty, the poor thing, she worked all her life. Even when we planted cotton, Betty could put the cotton seeds in there and plant on the tractor. They were light. She would sit on the truck. When he backed up there, she put the cotton seeds in. Dennis would put the fertilizer in the hamper there. I was here cooking dinner, because on the farm you want dinner right at the time, if he was coming out of the field hungry.

EC: So would you cook for everybody working on the farm?

ED: Oh, yes. I cooked for everybody.

EC: That's a big job.

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: So I know that you mentioned the cotton and the sawmill.

ED: And the corn, peanuts, and we had sugar cane. All of that brought in money.

EC: And you also had a store?

ED: Yeah, we had a grocery store.

EC: Did you and the children ever work in the store?

ED: No, his aunt ran the store.

EC: So she would just take care of it?

ED: Mm-hmm. Only thing I did, I would fill out the report for the sales tax for the store. I'd fill out the report for the social security for the people who worked at the sawmill.

EC: So you would do some of the paperwork, some of the bookkeeping?

ED: Yeah.

EC: When did you first try to register to vote?

ED: That, I don't know what year it was.

M1: [Inaudible].

ED: I don't know what year it was, but I was one of the, some of the first that tried to register to vote.

EC: Here in Hattiesburg?

ED: Here in Hattiesburg.

EC: So you just mentioned you were one of the first people in the Hattiesburg area to try to register to vote.

ED: We would go down and fill out the application. Mr. Lynd never looked at you, and he would say, "Now I've got a fill-out exam," and turn around. He gave me a card, a two-by-five card with the Constitution on it, not all of the Constitution, part of the Constitution, some of the Constitution on the card. He told me to read that and tell him

what it mean. Of course, I read it, and I could very well explain it to him. He would tell me, "Oh, you don't know what you're talking about. You didn't pass." He never listened.

EC: When you would go down, would you go by yourself?

ED: No, Vernon usually went with me.

EC: So the two of you would go?

ED: Mm-hmm. He would go with everybody that he could go down there. Of course, they took your tag number.

EC: When you were doing that, is that when they would put your name in the paper for register, for trying to register?

ED: What they really would do was send it in to your employer. But at that time we'd already made affidavits out to an organization we gave money to. NAACP was a no-no. You could not give them any money. We had to have that notarized.

EC: So you would have the deposition notarized, or the--.

ED: We'd have to have the form that we filled out, the organization that we gave money to, we'd have to have that notarized to.

EC: You mean, though, for the teachers?

ED: For the teachers, yes.

EC: Yeah. And then that they would fire you if you--.

ED: If you gave money to NAACP. We didn't have that nerve to say we gave it to them.

EC: So you wouldn't put that on the form?

ED: No. Nobody would put it on the form that wanted a job.

EC: Were you a member though, at that time?

ED: Oh, yes.

EC: Yeah. You were a member. So when you would go down to register, was Mr. Dahmer registered at that time? Was he able to?

ED: No, he never had a chance to register. He never had a chance to vote. His card came after we buried him.

EC: I didn't know that.

ED: No, he never had a chance to vote.

EC: So all of those years of trying?

ED: He never had a chance to vote. I always go to the --. I never want to vote absentee. I never go to the--. I voted once at the courthouse when I had a hip replacement and was on a walker. But I always go to the polling place to vote. I go to the place they wouldn't let me go.

EC: Are any of those same people there?

ED: No.

EC: But they were when you first started? What was that like?

ED: Well, by then things had changed some. In fact, I worked with some of them that were in there in his office. I was the election commissioner now for three terms of District 2 out in this area.

EC: Did you run for that?

ED: Office, yes.

EC: How soon did you run for that office after the voting, after Mr. Dahmer was killed?

ED: These are questions I cannot answer.

EC: I don't, it doesn't have to be exact dates, but was it soon after that [15:00]?

ED: No.

EC: It was a little while?

ED: Probably some ten or fifteen years after that. We had a lady that was running for it. I guess I can say this. It won't be --. She had a white opponent, and she refused to run against him.

EC: Was she afraid?

ED: She said she just didn't like competition. She was well qualified. She had a PhD degree.

EC: And she didn't feel comfortable running against the white--.

ED: Uh-uh. When they told me we had a --. I think she told the person that was helping, who had helped her get into office. She must have told them on a Thursday or a Wednesday morning that she wasn't going to run, and it was -- wanted Betty to run, but Betty couldn't run because of her job. By then I had retired. We got out there, from Wednesday night, and got up enough, got enough signatures on the form for me to qualify.

EC: I bet it was, you had a lot of connections you could draw on for that.

ED: We had a lot of help, because we called key peoples in the community, and if they were going to sign it they put their lights on. We had several people going with forms. My daughter-in-law was one of them, which was helping me. She was off from work or got off from work. I can't remember how many signatures we had to have, but we had more than enough. When they got to the number, they just stopped.

EC: I guess you probably always did more than you needed.

ED: Yeah.

EC: What was it like to be elected election commissioner after being kept out of voting for so long?

ED: It was a wonderful feeling to be able to help with something that they had denied me of, and I made sure that nobody else was denied. We followed the law. If it wasn't the law, we didn't do it.

EC: That must have been a nice change, to be able to impact that in such a tangible way.

ED: Yes, and be able to work. Now, there was only two black ones down there. They were predominantly white, but we got along good.

EC: Yeah. So the attitude had changed by that time a little bit?

ED: Well, I need to say this, and I've said it wronged so many. All the black, all white people wasn't bad. There were always some good white people. But just so many of them were nice to us. There were always some good white people.

EC: Were any of them, did any of them come out of their way to talk to you during the early days, or let you know that there was some interest? Or is it just that they didn't go out of their way to cause trouble?

ED: Yes, some did. But I'm not going to mention the families, because they may have some family friends here still around here. Not only did the white people take precautions, do things to us, they would have put them out of business.

EC: Citizens Council would go after anybody. We were talking earlier --. When -- can you tell me, can you remember when you first found out about the NAACP? Do you remember? Did your parents belong?

ED: No. I don't think we knew about it in Jasper County at that time. I really found out about it when we came down here, that it was active.

EC: Would you have, would you ever go to meetings?

ED: They had the meetings in the house, in their living room, right here on this same spot. I sat out there on the carport. I was the lookout person. Often the chief of police came out here one day. I didn't know who he was, but I was hollering and telling them, "You need to come. You need to come to the door. There's a white man pulling up out here in the car." And Vernon came. I said, "Chief, what brought you out here?" Chief of police came right out there in the yard and wondering about how many people were in the house then.

EC: Was this before Curtis [Hayes] and Hollis [Watkins] came out here?

ED: Yes.

EC: So this was the early days?

ED: Mm-hmm, this was before they came to live with us.

EC: You know, in Claiborne County, the people that belonged to the NAACP at that time was about ten people, and they told me that they used to burn the cards. Did people do that around here? They wouldn't want to be caught with the NAACP card.

ED: I don't remember any of that going on, but it was a very few of them here, too, because they could hold a meeting in the living room, and then have some room.

EC: Were they people you knew?

ED: Yes.

EC: Were they people that lived right around here?

ED: They were people we knew and lived right around here.

EC: What kinds of things were you doing with the NAACP?

ED: They were making strategy to register to vote, and they were making strategy to who's, saying merchants you don't need to spend your money with. These are the kind of things they were doing.

EC: Would Medgar Evers come to those meetings?

ED: No, Medgar Evers was the state president.

EC: He didn't ever come to those?

ED: No, he didn't ever come here to the local meeting here.

EC: Dorie Ladner and Joyce Ladner?

ED: They was young children then. They were over-young. They wasn't--.

EC: Yeah, they said they remember working with the NAACP branch.

ED: Yeah, with their aunt with them, his sister [20:00]. They all was in the same church together.

EC: Yeah, that's what I wanted to ask, is that Miss Beard?

ED: Yeah. They were all in the same church together.

EC: Can you tell me what she was like?

ED: She was very fair-skinned. Her hair came down to here. They were Holiness people. They didn't believe in cutting their hair. They just wore it long.

EC: And she worked with the young people in the NAACP?

ED: Yeah, with the NAACP.

EC: Did they live close by?

ED: They lived right out there where Dennis and They -- can I say that all of this was Dahmer land. They all lived right in this area.

EC: So the whole family lived --.

ED: Close, the ones that were here. Most of the children went north now.

EC: OK. Where were they living?

ED: Chicago mostly, California. They were fair-skinned. They just crossed on over, some of them.

EC: So they passed?

ED: They crossed on over. Some of them couldn't even come to his funeral, because they had been going for white all their lives.

EC: That must have been --. Were you in contact with them, or was he in contact with them?

ED: Yes, the family was in contact with them, because once, when his mother got real sick, one of the brothers came.

EC: I would think it would be hard for them to not be able to come back for something like that.

ED: They couldn't come back for that though, because they had gone for white most of their lives. They couldn't come back to a black man's funeral when they was passing for white.

EC: When you were having those NAACP meetings at the house and trying to register to vote, were you afraid ever?

ED: Yes. Yes. I answered the door at night. Vernon didn't answer any door at night. We were getting threats. I broke out all the way up here on my neck and all the way down here. Yes, I was afraid. Nobody wants to die.

EC: How did you cope with that?

ED: Prayer and leaning on him. We were strapped to each other.

EC: Did you ever think about giving up the fight and doing something different?

ED: Well, I knew he wouldn't give it up, but I do want to --. I've said it many times, I wish he'd have let the last two children get grown. The rest of them were grown. Betty was ten and a half, and Dennis would have made twelve on the second of February. This happened on the tenth of January. I think he should have let them get grown. But by the time they got grown I reckon nothing would have been done.

EC: Did you all talk about that at the time?

ED: Well, he kept saying, "If we don't do it now, it won't ever get done."

EC: What did you think?

ED: I was afraid. He was afraid. We didn't let him go nowhere in a car by himself. Dennis could drive well, even though he didn't have no license. We told him to get him -- if something happened, if somebody was shooting that car and shoot him, to get him to the hospital. Run the lights if he had to, and we would deal with that later. He was not on the tractor in the field by himself; somebody was always with him. Of course, he always had a gun. He was one of these people that didn't try to drive when he was going anywhere. He had to see everything. But he didn't let a car pass him. He would get in the middle of the road and before he would let the car pass him, because he was

afraid they would shoot him. He didn't know who it was in that car behind him, he didn't let them pass him. We kept the front porch light off, because we was afraid they would shoot him coming in the door or something.

EC: I read somewhere, I don't know if it's true, but that before the attack on the house you all had just stopped keeping watch all night.

ED: We stopped sleeping in shifts. I would sleep the first part of the night when I got through with supper and the clothes ready, especially during school days for the children and everything, everybody's school clothes ready. I'd go to bed, and then I'd get up at 12:00, put on my clothes, because I know I couldn't go back to sleep. Then he would go to sleep, and I'd stay awake until day. Sometimes I would be watching and moving around in the house quietly with no lights on and on the front. Now we had, I had made curtains for the living room and the den, and when we looked, when we were out there one night, you could see through the curtain, you'll see flickers through there. So I had to take all them down and line them so you couldn't see through them.

EC: So sort of blackout curtains.

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: Just for the protection of that.

ED: On the outside.

EC: Did people drive by and shoot before the night that they burned [your house?]?

ED: Oh, yeah, they shot up the mailbox. They would shoot the windows out at the store. They put up the Klan sign, KK[K], they'd nail them up on poles, so he would

tear them down. People was afraid, and those people who tell you they wasn't afraid, they're not telling you the truth.

EC: Did he know any of the people that were doing the harassment?

ED: I don't know if he knew any of them or not. But the ones that [25:00] attacked us that night, they came out of Jones County.

EC: Yeah. Did you all ever talk to the sheriff or the police?

ED: What good would it do when he was one of them? If he wasn't one of them, his daddy was one of them, or his brother was one of them, his cousin. They were all in this together. Wasn't no use to calling the sheriff or police.

EC: Did you ever talk to the Justice Department lawyers when they had the lawsuit against Theron Lynd?

ED: Yes. I was one of the eighteen that he had to let register, that he had to issue the voter registration card to. We didn't have to go back and register anymore.

EC: Can you tell me about that?

ED: I went to the court in New Orleans.

EC: So did you testify?

ED: No, I didn't testify. We had very few people to testify. Mr. Lynd was the one on the stand most of the time, with John Doar asking him questions.

EC: Were you at the court?

ED: Yes, I was there. We went. We went every day.

EC: What was it like to see him have to answer?

ED: I was glad to see him one time be --. He was afraid then. He was not happy at all.

EC: And so they were able to prove that your applications were qualified, and so they forced him to put you on the rolls?

ED: What really broke it open was Vernon's sister was the --. Her name was not Beard, was not Dahmer anymore, she was Erlene Beard. A neighbor out there on the other side of her, they were very fair-skinned people. They went down and registered to vote. They didn't ask them any questions. They didn't ask them to read the Constitution. All they asked his sister was, "What took you so long?" and she told him, "I had my mind on other things, and voting wasn't one of them." They thought that was so funny. She was sitting them up then. They allowed those two people to register. They didn't ask them if they were black. They didn't ask them if they were white. They just looked at them and let them register, because they thought they were white.

EC: So after that, that was the proof that was needed?

ED: That was the proof was needed, that he was segregating against black people.

EC: So were you all the first group that he had to put on the rolls?

ED: Yes, eighteen of them. I can't remember all eighteen of them now. Harold was one of them. Burnham was one of them. I was one of them, and some more people. There was eighteen of us that he had to allow to register.

EC: Was that trial, was that in Hattiesburg?

ED: They had the first trial for him I believe in Jackson. I didn't go to that trial, because we, all of the people who was here, that the court said he must let, send us the voter registration card, did not have to testify against him.

EC: Because you had done the affidavits?

ED: Uh-huh. But we were wanting, I wanted to go to court, because the attorney, United States Attorney General, was going to be down there, and we wanted to see him. They wouldn't let us take any pictures, of course.

EC: Was that Bobby Kennedy?

ED: No, no.

EC: You mean John Doar?

ED: John Doar was down there.

EC: OK. Yeah. Did you know him?

ED: No, I met him down there.

EC: What was it like to meet him?

ED: Wonderful. Wonderful. There was a young black man. He must have been about sixteen or eighteen. He had his camera and he took a picture, and they were going to put him in jail. We was in the federal courthouse, and, oh, that man was mean to that young man.

EC: Was that before Judge Cox?

ED: No, that was with the three judges.

EC: OK, the panel?

ED: Wise -- what was the one? The only one -- I know one, and one I used to.

What was the name of him? I can't think of the name of him.

EC: But it was the three-court panel?

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: That it was appealed?

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: OK. We talked earlier that when SNCC got organized and COFO, that Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes out of McComb came and stayed.

ED: He went to the NAACP meeting in Jackson. When I knew anything, he was coming back with two young men with suitcases.

EC: So he went to a meeting by himself and came back with two?

ED: And came back with two, as if I didn't have enough to do.

EC: What did he say? What did you say to him?

ED: Nothing. He said, "They'll be staying with us. They're going to help with the voter registration."

EC: Can you tell me about what Hollis and Curtis were like then?

ED: They were just like our other children here. They had to work like everybody else. Whatever was around the house that needed to be done, they had to do their share of it. Then when the work was over with, they'd go out in the community [30:00] and try to get people to register and vote.

EC: Do you know who they were talking to?

ED: They talked to community people here. And they wired Hollis one time to go around with, to talk with Theron Lynd.

EC: Yeah. Do you know how that went?

ED: It went good.

M1: OK, we're back.

EC: I've been told that he was a very intimidating person, Mr. Lynd.

ED: He was, his size and his voice.

EC: Well, how would he treat people?

ED: He treated me all right, now. We all, to all the white people, we were girls and boys.

EC: And what did you call them?

ED: Well, I called them by their name when I wasn't in their face. They didn't have the --. I hated them bad as they hated me.

EC: Because of the treatment?

ED: Yes.

EC: Can you tell me what you remember about Freedom Summer?

ED: I did not participate in nothing but cooking, getting food out there for them to eat, and helping with whatever needed to be helped with.

EC: Did people stay at your house?

ED: I don't remember any of them staying and keep with us. Most of them lived in town, because they could get around better down there than they had out here, because they didn't have no cars --. If you didn't have a car, there wasn't no way people --. They'd walk from house to house down there. But they did come out here for the picnic, and we cooked food for them. We were the ones that fixed the food. They had a lady to fry fish for them, and I was fixing all the potato salad and all the other trimmings for them. I was doing all that by myself.

EC: Now did you do --. Was this picnic for all of the volunteers?

ED: All the volunteers that came down here to work.

EC: And I've heard stories that it was a wonderful picnic.

ED: It was. The young man I think had by then, Harold had been called up, they had drafted Harold and Alvin in the service then. So he had a young man driving a

tractor to go get some melons out of the field. Instead of him coming back the way he told him to come, he went right through the white community, with blacks and white up on that trailer. That put a scare in us.

EC: Did anything happen?

ED: Nothing happened, but that wasn't the right thing to do.

EC: Do you know why he didn't go the way--.

ED: He was young and going to do what he wanted to do. Instead of coming back across the dam the way he went and come on back up this road, staying in the black community, he went right out the other end of the field and went on down the road through the white community.

EC: Did he know what he was doing?

ED: Yeah, he knew what he was doing. But he probably didn't know how dangerous it was, that it would get him killed and all the people on there with him killed.

EC: So your son, Dennis, was telling me that all of your sons, all of your older sons, were getting drafted as soon as they turned eighteen.

ED: Yeah, they made sure they got his work force around. Now I think Vernon, Jr., volunteered. Martinez volunteered and Joey volunteered, but Harold and Alvin did not volunteer. They drafted them. They drafted Alvin on crutches. He had hurt his foot, but they took him right on in the service.

EC: They didn't care about any kind of injury?

ED: Well, I reckon they knew they had means of treating the injury.

EC: So do you think that they were doing that deliberately?

ED: Yes, to cut down his work force.

EC: Did they serve in war zones?

ED: I think Harold was in Vietnam, and Penny was in Germany when he died I believe.

EC: Did you ever go to any of the mass meetings?

ED: No. I stayed at home, kept Betty and Dennis.

EC: Were they the only ones in the house during that time, the only children?

ED: Harold was in here. Harold had just come back from the service.

EC: So you had him coming back from the service as well as the younger children?

ED: Mm-hmm, in the house at the time.

EC: How did you feel when the Voting Rights Act passed?

ED: Oh, it was wonderful that we were able to vote. And after they passed it, they didn't allow the black people to go up in the courthouse and register. They had a little booth over there where they sold gas. That's where they put the registration books, out there. Most of the black people did not register in Forrest County courthouse at that time. They register down there now.

EC: Because they register with the federal registrars, and they rented the space?

ED: Mm-hmm, and put them out there.

EC: Did people start registering really quickly?

ED: Yes, they did. Yes.

EC: Was there a strong drive to encourage people?

ED: Yes.

EC: What was going to be the first election? Was it like a supervisors' election in [19]67?

ED: I don't remember. You carry me [35:00] back. This has been, oh, it will be fifty years since he's been dead coming up in January.

EC: It's almost the fiftieth anniversary, isn't it?

ED: In January.

EC: Are you all going to have any kind of commemoration?

ED: Yeah.

EC: What are you going to do?

ED: The family is going to have something at the church.

EC: Will it be private?

ED: No. It will be for the public.

EC: Yeah. So I've heard that he went on the radio.

ED: He did. They allowed him and other people to take the poll tax book out to the store. You could pay your poll tax. You had to pay poll tax before you could even make out an application to register and vote. You had to have that with you. They had to know you had paid them poll tax. They allowed -- he wasn't the only one they allowed to take it out to the store. There were other people in Hattiesburg that kept poll tax books at the store.

EC: So was it black and white, or, well, it was whites and then they allowed you?

ED: I don't know what the white people had allowed, but they had other blacks had them, their businesses. They allowed them for the blacks to go there and pay poll

tax. That's what he went on the radio to tell them, that he had the book at the store where they could pay their poll tax, and they didn't have to go all the way into Hattiesburg.

EC: I've always understood from reading that he believed people would be more comfortable coming to him than going into Hattiesburg.

ED: Well, naturally they would. You would have to be. Anybody's more comfortable when you got friends and friendly faces smiling at you rather than mean faces looking at you.

EC: You showed me a copy of a poll tax receipt earlier. What was it like, for you, when you paid your poll tax when he was still living? Would you go down to the courthouse?

ED: We'd go down to the courthouse and pay them. We paid. I paid the poll tax and the property tax at the same time, one place. It was when you could pay the property tax at a place where you paid the poll tax and paid them all at the same time. That's what he did when he was living, he paid them all at the same time.

EC: And if--

ED: Now, see, Harold wasn't down there when I filled that out. I just paid it for Harold.

EC: Can you hold that for a second? So this is a copy of a poll tax receipt, and the date is January 25th, 1966, and that's for Mrs. Ellie J. Dahmer and Harold C. Dahmer, paying the poll tax. What's the significance of this particular poll tax for you?

ED: This is the one we had left. The others got burned up. We had had the poll tax receipts before, but everything was burned up in the house.

EC: So tell me what happened after Mr. Dahmer went on the radio.

ED: We was already getting threats, but we got more threats after he went on the radio. They was coming in, saying, "E. and Vernon, you're going to get killed. You want to be white. You want your children to go to school with white people." And he would answer back, "When you come to get me, I'll be ready for you." We thought we were ready for them. Two carloads came around here. Four white men would sit at the store, and four would be at the house. They worked for two people, three people, there weren't that many. Dennis could shoot well. Harold could shoot well. Betty and I hadn't learned to shoot then.

EC: You hadn't?

ED: No.

EC: You didn't think you needed to?

ED: Yes, I know now we should have learned how. But there wouldn't have been nothing we could do. When we waked up --. We stopped getting threats. By the end of, by Christmastime in 1965 we stopped getting threats. From Christmastime on up, we stopped sleeping in shifts. We thought it was over with.

EC: You thought that with the passage of the Voting Rights Act?

ED: It was over with. They were going to let us alone.

EC: You'd won, and it was going to be peaceful.

ED: Yes. See, when they came that night, I was the first one to wake up that night. We kept loaded guns in the house. That's the only way we got out, as he was shooting back at them. Of course, he had built the house out of his own money, out of the lumber he had cut, and we weren't able to put the metal windows all the way around the house. We had them on the front of the house. We had the metal frame where the

screen was made into it and the glass pane was made into it. You would wind them out. It would have, both of them would open out with the --. You wind the handle there, and both of them would open out, which was a blessing we ran out of money, because Vernon and I couldn't have got through that screen, through that metal, and neither could we have torn it out. Betty could have gotten through it. So we had these push-up windows on the back he had bought secondhand, had never been painted. He got them out of an old house somewhere or another. They were old [40:00]. You push up the window and put a stick up under to hold it up. We were going to replace them when we finished picking cotton in January. We never did get through picking cotton over in January, when the last of it opened up. He tried to pick twice. You pick when you think about half of it is open, then you wait until all of it opened the next time, and you'd get it all the second picking. We were going to sell cotton and replace the windows. But before then, they hit us that night.

When I waked up, gunshots was flying in the house. The eaves of the house were burning, and it was just everything. It just looked like we were going to get burned up in the house alive. The fire hadn't gotten to the room where Dennis and Harold were sleeping. It was up in the front part of the house where Betty's bedroom and our bedroom were. I raised him when I went and got Betty up. We didn't have time to get coats and shoes or nothing; we all went out barefooted. We went out with what we were sleeping in. I raised the window to put Betty out, and she had left and went for her daddy. Well, I didn't know where she was, because we didn't turn on no lights, because they would have known where we were. The window fell down, and I couldn't get it open no more, and I hit this sash so hard by then I knocked the sash on out. I fell out

with the sash. By then he was handing Betty out the window to me. She had gotten burned on her hands. Something chemical got her on up here, and he was burned. He came out the same window. But he didn't have time to bring no guns or nothing out. By then Dennis had waked up, and he was coming around hollering, wants to get out. He thought the fire had rolled out of the fireplace. We had big fireplaces like this one here. We had a chimney with three fireplaces with one stack. There was a big fireplace in the den, and one in each bedroom, small fireplaces.

EC: Is that how you heated the house?

ED: No, we had gas. That's what made it burn so fast was the gas. The stoves, the hot water heater in the bedroom were gas.

EC: What did you think when you heard the shots? I mean, did you have time to think?

ED: Oh, no. I hollered to Vernon, "Get up! They got us this time." We had jumped up before when we thought they was coming in on us. It was just so --. My God was in there praying. That's who brought us out of that house.

EC: It's hard to imagine what it would be like to live through that. So how did you all get to the hospital?

ED: Harold came out and got the pickup truck, and he went out there and got his aunt. She came. We went down the house to the barn -- the barn is still standing that he built down there -- to get out of the light, because we were scared they were going to come back and shoot us. By the time we got out his auntie had already got out. She was already over there, back of the woods, before we got out.

EC: So she ran back out of the store to the woods--.

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: --after you came out the back windows? You were--.

ED: We went to the barn, and she came on her own, to get out of the light.

And his sister came out there and carried Betty, me, and him to the hospital, and his aunt got in the car to get out of the cold. We left Harold and Dennis here, and the neighbors brought them some clothes to put on.

EC: When you all were attacked, you said you and Betty were at the back window, and Mr. Dahmer was up at the front.

ED: He was shooting out. Betty said he was shooting out the kitchen door, through the window there. I didn't ever know where he was shooting from.

EC: Did he hit anybody?

ED: I don't know. We had a planter where I had flowers in it and dirt was in it. I think he was squatting down behind it, where he couldn't hit them.

EC: Is that what made them drive off?

ED: Well, I think him firing his shots back so fast is what made them finally drive off.

EC: Did you realize how badly injured he was?

ED: Yes, and I thought Betty was injured real bad, too. He did, too. We thought we were losing her in the hospital, because he raised up to see about her, because she began to get sick on that, whatever the fumes was. They bring a little pan to up chuck in, and it went all over in on the floor there and everything. That's when he raised up. He was scared something had happened to her. But she wasn't as bad off as he was.

EC: How did you cope with all of that?

ED: I was crying. He was trying to stop me from crying, because I walked around in the hospital barefoot with nothing but a gown on [45:00]. One of the black nurses there brought me a blanket and a wheelchair, and I was able to get my feet up off the floor in the wheelchair. A friend of ours brought me some clothes to put on when she found out what had happened.

EC: Did you have any trouble at the hospital?

ED: No.

EC: Was the hospital a black hospital?

ED: No, it was Forrest General.

EC: It was Forrest General?

ED: But they were letting black doctors in it then. So Dr. [Jones?] was his doctor.

EC: So you were able to have a black doctor.

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: What kind of treatment were they able to provide for people, from a fire?

ED: Well, Dr. Jones said he had done all he could do. He knew he wasn't going to make it. Some of the people said we should take him to Jackson. I talked with Dr. Jones. Dr. Jones told me, "I'll do what you want to do." But I decided to leave him here. After he passed he said he never would have made it that much out of Hattiesburg, moving him. He was telling me, "You're doing the right thing to leave him here."

EC: Were you able to talk to him?

ED: Yeah. I sat between his bed and Betty's bed. I was sitting between the beds, and Betty was asleep. Then I'd turn though, and his face was turned away from

her. And after she went to sleep I went around on the side of where his face was turned, and I leaned my head down there on the bed, and I went to sleep. The next day he raised up a holler, "My dame," and he was gone then. We were bringing --. They didn't put that big tent of oxygen on him, they just put the bottle on him. They brought the big tent after he was dead. Betty run down --. We were ringing for the nurses to come, and Betty jumped out of the bed and went down to the nurses' station to get them.

EC: And she was injured because she was gone looking for her father?

ED: No, she knew something was happening to him, to her daddy, and she ran out of there to tell the nurses. They wouldn't come.

EC: I meant back in the house, when she was in the house. You said you were both at the window, and then she went back looking for her father.

ED: She went to where he was, when I raised the window up to pull her out, and did when this fell out. Now Betty was praying all the time. She was hollering, "Lord, have mercy. We're going to get burned up in this house alive." We was trying to keep her quiet so they wouldn't know where to shoot.

EC: And she was at that time, she was--.

ED: She was just hysterical. We was trying to get her quiet.

EC: Was she ten years old?

ED: Ten and a half.

EC: Ten and a half years old. So when she ran down to get the nurses?

ED: They finally came, and then they brought the big tent of oxygen, which they should have had on him to start with.

EC: Do you know why they didn't?

ED: I don't know.

EC: Was he able to say anything to you at the hospital?

ED: Oh, yeah, he talked to me all the time. He was telling me to stop crying and everything was going to be all right. But how could it be all right when you lost everything you had? I thought he was getting better, now. I really thought he was going to live. But I guess you see what you want to see.

EC: And he had inhaled too much smoke?

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: Was he burned, or was it--.

ED: Yeah, his lungs were burned. That fume or whatever they threw in here, that fire was just coming like just the fire was about up to the ceiling. I believe they threw more gas at us. Somebody said they probably had thrown some of this fuel that they use for these planes to make them lift up real quick. They could have gotten it, because the white people -- on the airport. They could have gotten anything they wanted to get.

EC: What did people in the community do after?

ED: They came to our aid, but they were scared, too. If this could happen to us, it could happen to them.

EC: I know you knew that there was a threat, that there was danger that you were worried about. Did you ever imagine them burning the house up?

ED: No, I thought, we thought they would shoot us in the car or coming in the house. We never thought they'd do the house.

EC: So you thought as long as you could keep the car from--.

ED: Safe, or get some, a driver in there with you. Then if he got shot they could get him to the hospital.

EC: Or when they shoot at the house, they're not going to be right there.

ED: No, we wouldn't --. If they shoot at the house though, we would be back in the back. It wouldn't have got us. But you can't plan for nothing.

EC: I heard that, you know, I know he was a longtime member of the NAACP, and then he also was the first person to welcome SNCC into the community and his home, your home. You were taking care of them. I heard that he was having trouble with the NAACP over COFO.

ED: Well, do we need to discuss that?

EC: You don't want to speak about that?

ED: No [50:00].

EC: OK. What was it like to try to go on after that?

ED: Oh, I had a hard time. Things were really bad for me. I still had a distance to go with no car to go. We get a car. We were able to get one to -- dispatch a car to go that distance every day. It was a good while before I was able to get another car.

EC: How did your children cope with that?

ED: They did the best they could. For years they were sad. All of us were sad. We just didn't have very much to smile about.

EC: And how many of your sons were in the military at that time?

ED: I believe it was four in there. Five. Let's see. Vernon, Martinez, George, and Alvin.

EC: So they were all in, serving the US government, serving--.

ED: Harold had just come out.

EC: And they came back for the funeral.

ED: Yes. We had to get addresses from other people to find them, because all my addresses were burned up.

EC: Did you get --. What kind of help did you get to rebuild the house and to have clothes?

ED: The NAACP offered to build the house back. The chamber of commerce in Hattiesburg offered to build the house back. Dr. Noonkester was heading up the chamber of commerce at that time. I chose the chamber of commerce to build the house back. We had had enough of dying, and I was afraid some more people would get killed.

EC: So Dr. Newcastle, is that what you said?

ED: Noonkester.

EC: Noonkester.

ED: Oh, he was president of Carey College at that time. He was heading up the chamber of commerce in Hattiesburg.

EC: Did you know him before that?

ED: No.

EC: You said you chose the chamber, because you didn't want anybody else to get--.

ED: I didn't want any more friction or nobody else to die.

EC: So this was a way for the white community to sort of apologize?

ED: And help. And help.

EC: And help. Did that change?

ED: Well, yes and no, because I often made a blank statement about all of them was bad. If a few was good, they wouldn't open their mouth and say nothing, so they was a part of it, too. But all of them wasn't bad.

EC: We talked a little bit earlier about, there's been a number of different trials over the years. What role did your family play in trying to get a conviction for the people that attacked your family?

ED: I was the first person to testify in all those trials and before the grand jury. I don't know how many. Finally we counted up about seventy-five times I took the stand and testified. I was the lead-off witness to testify at all of them.

EC: How did you feel about the local law enforcement and their efforts to find the people who had done this?

ED: I didn't feel good, because I didn't think they tried. It was the FBI who came in here and found them. It was fifteen of them they rounded up.

EC: Where--some of the Klansmen involved in the attack were indicted and tried and convicted and sentenced?

ED: Yeah, it was four of them. Mr. [James] Duke and Mr. [James] Finch did all they could do to get them indicted.

EC: And who were they? Mr. Finch?

ED: Mr. Finch was the--.

EC: District attorney?

ED: District attorney. Mr. Duke was the county attorney, assistant.

EC: And these are local white men in --?

ED: Yes, they're local white men in Hattiesburg. Mr. Duke is still living.

EC: Is he?

ED: Jimmy Duke is still living.

EC: And according to these dates, they started serving in like [19]68 and [19]69. And I'm not sure if this is right, but it seems like that must have been one of the first convictions by the state of Mississippi for people for attacks in the civil rights movement. Do you know if that's true?

ED: I don't know if it's true, but I understand, I've heard that they were the first people sent to prison for killing a black man. I've heard that, I don't know if that's true, and I don't have no--.

EC: I know that there were convictions of some of the people involved in murdering the three civil rights workers in Neshoba, but that was in federal court.

ED: Yes.

EC: Initially.

ED: Yes. We didn't get anything out, but we were at the federal court with them. But I don't -- I think there was. Well, some of them served some time in federal court, but it wasn't very much.

EC: Much later, right?

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: What happened after they were convicted? How many years did they get for murdering [55:00] your husband and attacking your home?

ED: Not that many. They got pardoned by the governor.

EC: How did you feel about that?

ED: We felt bad about it, but we knew the governor and all of them was a part of it. Mississippi was just as responsible as those Klan was of what happened to us and what happened to other black people. If they didn't know about it, they didn't care about it, and they didn't do anything about it.

EC: You know, there are a lot of people that think that things have really changed in the last fifty years. What's your perspective?

ED: Oh, they have. Oh, they have. A lot of things have changed.

EC: What do you think is most important about what's changed?

ED: People are able to get better jobs. People are able to go to these white colleges and get a better education. They stay at home, closer. When I was going to school you didn't have but two places you could go in Mississippi. That was Jackson State or Alcorn. Now they can go to these junior colleges. They had junior colleges then, but we couldn't go to them. Children can stay at home and go to the junior college and stay at home and go to USM and Carey.

EC: One of the things that we haven't talked about, I remember, you know, I've talked to Dorie Ladner and Joyce Ladner. They were both very angry about having to leave home to go to school with two colleges right here.

ED: And then they put them out in Jackson State, too.

EC: That's right. After a year.

ED: They put them out of Jackson State. Up there they had to go to Tougaloo.

EC: Do you remember when that happened? Were you aware of it then?

ED: Yeah, we was aware of it, that they had pulled them from--.

EC: How did people in the community feel about it?

ED: You have to remember, most people in the community were not active in civil rights, and the few that was active, they couldn't do anything about it. The black people was afraid, and they had a right to be afraid. Look what happened to us. He was self-employed. They couldn't fire him.

EC: What kind of things did they do to harass him besides the attacks?

ED: You lose your jobs.

EC: Did he have any kind of --. Even though, before they murdered him, even though he was independent, were there ways that they could affect--.

ED: Oh, yeah. They froze us out of two banks. He had land with no mortgage on it that he used as collateral to borrow money for the farm with the bank. The bank wouldn't loan him any money. They loaned him three hundred dollars. But anybody that needed somebody to co-sign with them, the black people that needed somebody to co-sign, they sent them to Vernon, and he said, "No, I can't sign it. They won't loan me no money." They said, "They told us to come to you and get you to sign it."

EC: What were they trying to do with that?

ED: They was trying to get him in debt. Once you go and sign for a person, co-sign for a person to get money, the bank, you say, "If they don't pay, I will."

EC: So they were trying to set him up to lose the land?

ED: Yes, he'd lose property.

EC: Would he sign bonds for people in jail?

ED: I don't know of him signing any bonds in jails, putting up no property for any bonds in jail.

EC: So was it hard to make the money to pay the taxes on all of the land? Was that one of the--.

ED: No. He, we had a--.

EC: That was OK?

ED: We had a comfortable living with cotton. The cotton was -- Eastland and Stennis on plantations in the Delta.

EC: You were saying about the senators?

ED: Senator Eastland and Stennis was in Washington, DC. They had the plans set up where the farmers was paid to grow cotton. They had a good plan set up. It was for them. It wasn't for Vernon Dahmer, but he got in on it because it was federal. You could grow the cotton. He could take it --. They had warehouses here in Hattiesburg where they stored your cotton. They charged you a fee for storing it. You could go and get the value of whatever the market price was for cotton when you were selling it that day. But if it went up higher, or when December or January or February, you could get -- they would have to pay you for the difference between what you got and what it went up.

EC: So you were able to wait until the market was--.

ED: A lot better. Now, that wasn't set up for us. It was set up for Stennis and Eastland up there in the Delta, they were the ones growing the cotton, and the other white people up there growing cotton.

EC: But you all were able to take advantage of it?

ED: We was able to take advantage of it.

EC: How?

ED: One--.

EC: I'm sorry.

ED: One year they paid us not to plant any cotton. They had too much cotton.

Whatever, they paid you according to whatever your acres produced.

EC: How big was the farm, how many acres?

ED: He was growing his way to seventy acres of cotton at that time [1:00:00].

EC: And how much was the overall property?

ED: I don't know how many acres they had, but he had that much in cotton.

EC: Seventy acres in cotton?

ED: In cotton.

EC: How many people would he have to hire to work on that?

ED: Well, you had to have a lot of them when they was picking it by hand. But now when he got a cotton picker, he could pick a bale of cotton every forty-five minutes. So you didn't need that many hands. That's when threats really come in, when that new cotton picker was brought in here, too.

EC: So was that because it showed that he was doing well? So he got threats with the farm and with the voting?

ED: Yes.

EC: OK. Did you know Mr. [Clyde] Kennard?

ED: Yes.

EC: Was he a friend or--.

ED: Yes, he was a friend. We knew when he was going to go to [Mississippi] Southern [College]. We tried to get him to wait and not to go.

EC: You did?

ED: We did. We was at Mary Magdalene [Baptist] Church when he told us, down at the church, in the little community that he went to. Betty must have been about three or four, might have been four. She was playing on the ground when we was talking, and he said he wasn't going for himself, he was going to open up the school for her, so she wouldn't have to go nowhere else to go to school. Betty graduated from USM.

EC: She did?

ED: Mm-hmm. Dennis went to, had to go to Jackson State, because he was trying to correct the professors. They were saying "Nigra" instead of "Negro."

EC: At Jackson State?

ED: They were saying that at Southern.

EC: Oh, at Southern.

ED: At Southern.

EC: Oh, so he started there, and then he went on?

ED: Uh-huh. I kept, I'd tell him, "You're going to correct up on a F. You need to let it alone and try to get through there." And he did. He corrected up on a F. And when he know he had made more than that he said he had to go there, he wouldn't go nowhere else, so we got him in Jackson State, which was a tremendous burden on us. We needed him here to help feed cows, but that fell, all that fell on Betty and I. He would come in on the weekend and load the truck up for us, and we would feed the cows in the evening, because he was up in Jackson.

EC: So when they went to school at home they could continue to--.

ED: They could help here on the farm. Because we needed the farm animals, because the farm animals is what paid the tuition. My children didn't get no loan. Betty got a loan, five hundred dollars, from the bank. Dennis got five hundred dollars from the bank. We worked for the rest of it. Southern had a plan then. You could pay part of your tuition, and in the time you take that semester test you had to pay the other in order to get your grade. So by that time we would have been able to save enough up to pay the other part. Southern also used to furnish books free. You'd get the books just like, just college, like the high [school], like the children going to public school.

EC: So did you have any hesitation about the children going to Southern?

ED: No.

EC: No.

ED: I was glad they could get in Southern.

EC: Glad that things had changed?

ED: Southern would be a whole lot cheaper than getting into Alcorn. In fact, Dennis could have gone to Alcorn on an athletic scholarship, but I knew he would have a better chance of getting a better education. See, I had been to Alcorn.

EC: For people that don't know about Mr. Kennard, can you tell us what happened with him?

ED: He came back home to help with his mother. She was ailing. His stepfather had died by then. He was in Chicago with his sister. He built a chicken farm here so he would have a livelihood. He filled out an application to register at USM, and some of our people knew about the application. They called certain people, and they were really waiting on him when he got there. He didn't smoke or drink, but they

pretended he came on campus with whiskey in his car. Now where was he going to get whiskey from since he didn't smoke or drink? He was put in jail for that. Then, of course, with him being in jail, they also had the man, the family that lived on his place, he furnished a place for them to live and for them to work in the chicken house there. One of the sons worked at Forrest County Co-Op. Clyde bought feed from Forrest County Co-Op. They had this man, they said Clyde showed him how to leave the door ajar and get feed from there, and that Clyde was buying hot feed from him. They had him say that. But he was testifying late in it that that wasn't true. They told him they could have that bursted feed on the floor and do what they wanted with it. Of course, they helped them out by busting some more. He didn't only sell feed to Clyde Kennard, he sold it to white farmers, too, but they didn't do nothing about the white ones.

EC: [1:05:00] What happened with Mr. Kennard?

ED: He went to prison, and before he was going to prison they had already made arrangement that they was going to sell his farm, all his equipment, on the courthouse steps. Vernon and some other people got hold of that information. They got the two black insurance company, out of Jackson, to come and pay off the farm, and it wasn't able to be sold on the Forrest County courthouse steps because they had paid it off, paid it.

EC: So they were able to save the farm?

ED: Uh-huh, they paid off the indebtedness against it, and his sister was able to redeem it later.

EC: Oh, OK. What happened to him in prison?

ED: He died in prison. Well, he didn't die in prison. He came down with cancer. They kept him there until he couldn't walk. He was crawling before they let him out, and they finally let him out. My understanding was his sister, and I can't think if it was a comedian in Chicago. What is--?

EC: Dick Gregory?

ED: Dick Gregory. They got in contact with millionaires up there, and the millionaires there contacted one in Mississippi. They contacted the governor to let him go, and they let him come home to die. He went to Chicago where his sister was, and he died up there, I believe.

EC: I know there's been a campaign recently about getting the state to acknowledge the wrongdoing in that case.

ED: Well, they did, down here in the courthouse. I was there when they acknowledged that it was all wrong. Clara Legend – or Mitchell was the one that got them to do it. Mitchell.

EC: Jerry Mitchell?

ED: Mm-hmm and John. This is what old age do for you. The man, the black man, John Horhn, Horhn.

EC: Yeah, the senator?

ED: Horhn, mm-hmm. This is what old age do to you people.

EC: I hope I'm as sharp as you are, ma'am. [Laughter] I know that, you know, it's been very recent that they acknowledged that Mr. Kennard was set up.

ED: Yes.

EC: And that they also didn't get him the medical care that he needed. I know Dorie Ladner and Joyce Ladner were involved in that. Can you describe what they were like as children?

ED: They were young together. Clyde had a very good education out of Chicago. They were energetic, and they got along good and worked good with the NAACP for the youth. Mm-hmm.

EC: Did you know Miss Gray?

ED: Yes.

EC: Can you tell us what she was like?

ED: She was very energetic, too. She was a go-getter, too. She wasn't afraid of nothing.

EC: How far from here did she live?

ED: She lived in what we called Palmers Crossing, where the black school was located. That's about twelve miles or more. Go with twelve miles.

EC: So how often would you see somebody like that?

ED: Probably, maybe every two or three months or something like that. Everybody was going their own way. Now, of course, I stayed here at the house trying to protect it, with the two young children.

EC: So that was one of your jobs?

ED: Mm-hmm.

EC: In addition to cooking for everybody.

ED: Uh-huh. In addition to cooking for everybody, you didn't dare leave them alone, because Betty and Dennis was able to ride their bicycles in the community until we

began to get so many threats, and we told them, "You cannot go out of the yard."

Though we got a big yard you see here now. They could ride all around here. But if you came riding around here, you just had to put the bike up. We didn't tell them we was getting threats. But it wasn't safe. We were scared they'd kill them on the road.

EC: And I know that you and your family worked hard over the years to -- so there was the men that were in the cars that conducted the attack, but who was the person that planned it?

ED: Sam Bowers, the [KKK] Imperial Wizard, was the one who gave the orders.

EC: And you were able to get--.

ED: Him convicted in [19]98.

EC: What did it take to get him convicted? How did you --. How were you able to make that happen?

ED: I think it was the young District Attorney and the young State Attorney. These are young white people now; they're not the old people no more. I think they had a different view. I think they saw things as they were and what they ought to be. They didn't have the same view maybe as their forefather, as their grandfather had, or maybe their daddy had. They were seeing things different.

EC: What about the jury. What was the jury? Was it a mixed jury?

ED: Yes. But we've had, some of those people that were convicted right there were convicted from an all-white jury. I don't know which one, I can't remember [1:10:00] which one it was.

EC: It wasn't those first ones that we were talking about?

ED: Them first four, uh-huh. One of them, some of them had an all-white jury.

EC: Were they surprised, do you think, that they were convicted by a white jury?

ED: Yes. Yes.

EC: They felt they were going to be protected?

ED: Yes.

EC: Do you know, did people just feel like that was going too far?

ED: Well, but you know, they made a statement that a white man would never be convicted for killing a n-- man. And I didn't think it would happen either.

EC: Yeah. Did it give you any relief when they were convicted?

ED: Oh, yes, and I cried every time we had a mistrial.

EC: Yeah. You know, you're sitting here telling us about this, and it's very painful, and I just think about, you said, I can't remember the number you said, but it was a huge number of how many trials.

ED: Oh, yeah. I had to go before every grand jury that was going to bring this trial, go, bring an indictment. We went all over Miss[issippi] -- no, we didn't go all over Mississippi, we went to Biloxi one time, we went to Jackson, went to Meridian to testify before the grand jury. I think about we --. One of the scary experiences I had was coming from Richton. They needed me to testify, and they sent, they brought me over here in a highway patrol car with two white [officers], and they never said a word to me all the way from Richton to over here.

EC: Wow.

ED: When we got to the courthouse they said, "You're here now."

EC: That must have been a--.

ED: It was scary.

EC: Intimidating?

ED: Mm-hmm. Because it looked like they could have sent a black person over there with a car to get me. They had a patrolman in that area, and they sent, had them to come there and get me.

EC: And each of the trials was separate, right? Like, none of these were tried at the same time?

ED: No.

EC: So each person that was ever tried, so you had to -- how did you manage to just do that over and over?

ED: Oh, I wanted something done with them.

EC: Yeah, whatever it takes.

ED: I wanted something done with them. The scary part about it was there wasn't that many black people who would come to the trial. Betty was subpoenaed, but she got so frightened she couldn't testify, because she went to pieces. Mr. Finch said he wasn't going to do that to this child, "No, she can't go on that stand." So Betty was there. Harold was subpoenaed, and I was subpoenaed. When I was over --. If Harold wasn't right in the courtroom with Betty, I didn't have nobody to leave Betty with. I was scared for her to be out there, even though she was in the witness room. I was scared for her to be out there.

EC: And you couldn't get anybody to come and help out?

ED: Black people just didn't come. They was afraid. I guess they was afraid. But when Billy Roy Pitts came to testify, they filled the courthouse up.

EC: What was the difference?

ED: I don't know why they wanted to hear what that white man tell what he'd done to us and not hear what I had to say. I don't understand it.

EC: They didn't understand that you needed the support?

ED: I don't think they did.

EC: Maybe they just saw you as being so strong.

ED: Or they felt so sorry for me, they didn't want to see me suffering up there. That's what his sister said. She just couldn't stand to see me suffering on the witness stand. But a friendly face is something what you need in court.

EC: So, you know, reflecting on this, what do you want people to know about the movement, about Mr. Dahmer?

ED: That a good man's life was taken from him, but he did it so that other families could have a better living. We had a comfortable living, but he wanted other families to be able to do better.

EC: Do you feel like he would be happy with where things are?

ED: No. He would wonder why we hadn't progressed farther.

EC: Yeah. Are there things, other things about your family, growing up, or your work in the movement, your support for him, that I haven't asked you about that you want to talk about?

ED: We have a wonderful family. I have a wonderful family of children here.

EC: Tell us about your children.

ED: Oh, they're wonderful. I'm not the mother of but two of them, but all of them are mine. When I married him I married the whole bunch.

EC: Yeah. So he had, so the older boys--.

ED: Are not mine.

EC: So how many boys did he have when you married him?

ED: He had six. That's them up here.

EC: So you married a whole family of children?

ED: Uh-huh, a whole family of children. That's all of them up there. There's two, [1:15:00] four, six right there. That's Cary, the one on the end. That's the one that owned the bar with Dennis, but he did everything around here except sleep down here. He ate down here.

EC: So he might as well?

ED: Uh-huh. He was here when we ate breakfast. He was here when we ate supper. He just had to get home before dark.

EC: The one on the end?

ED: The one right back here by Betty.

EC: Oh, OK.

ED: That's Betty in the blue. That's Cary right there.

EC: Next to her.

ED: Uh-huh.

EC: Yeah. That's a great photo -- drawing. Is that a -- that's a painting.

ED: George had that done in Germany I believe. They fixed us up like that.

And it's on the other side, too.

EC: How many grandchildren do you have?

ED: Oh, I don't know. You have to go to counting them up. I don't know.

EC: Enough to keep you busy.

ED: And we got great-grands, too. Not only grands, but we got great-grands.

EC: I imagine that your family reunions are quite the occasion.

ED: We enjoy each other.

EC: Well, thank you so much, Mrs. Dahmer.

ED: OK.

EC: I know that--.

ED: Is there anything else I need to answer?

EC: Well, can you think of anything?

ED: No.

EC: Well.

M1: Did we get anything from the beginning when I wasn't recording?

EC: Would you like to talk about your family growing up again?

ED: Yeah, we can do that.

EC: Do you have time?

ED: Yeah, we have to do that.

EC: So are we good?

ED: You have to ask me the questions. I don't remember.

EC: I will. I will. We're running?

M1: Yeah, we're running.

EC: Can you tell me about your parents and where you were born and growing up?

ED: I was born in Rose Hill, Mississippi. My mother and father had a -- we had a large family. I believe it was six boys and three girls.

EC: Tell me what your family did for a living.

ED: We farmed.

EC: You owned your own land?

ED: We owned our own land. At one time he had two tenants, two tenant farms, two tenant families living on the land.

EC: So that's a pretty big, successful farm.

ED: Well, it's a way of bringing in, helping somebody else make a living and bringing in some more money for the family.

EC: What were your schools like?

ED: They wasn't -- they was poor.

EC: Did you like school?

ED: Yes. Yes, I liked school. But I'm sure they did the best they could with what they had to do [it] with. We just found out they were not up to date when we went to college. Children coming out of Laurel school system, Hattiesburg school system, they were far more advanced than we were. I never heard of chemistry until I got to college, got over to Alcorn, and you know we should have had a chemistry book.

EC: At least know what it is.

ED: Yes.

EC: You mentioned before that one of the schools that you went to was a Rosenwald school.

ED: Yes, the one, the high school I finished from was a Rosenwald school. We first, when I first started school we had school in the churches, in the black churches. We didn't have a building.

EC: When you were little?

ED: Yes. Most of us. I imagine I was about in the sixth or seventh grade before we had a building. We went to school in the churches.

EC: And was that --. You had said before that your father donated land?

ED: My father donated the land that the school was built on.

EC: The Rosenwald one where you went to high school?

ED: Yes. It was a grammar school one. It was K through -- it wasn't K then. It was first grade through twelve.

EC: What was the community contribution to that school?

ED: They needed lumber to build the building. It was built out of lumber mostly. Community people gave the logs to cut the lumber out of. They brought in log trucks to haul the logs. Now, I don't know who paid for the log trucks or how they got paid, but I do know they came in and went in those woods. They would tell them what length to cut the logs in.

EC: You mentioned that once your father gave that land, and then what happened to it?

ED: He gave them the land. It was on there... The road had washed out, and some trees were there. He had the trees cut down, and they made him pay for them trees.

They wrote him a letter and threatened to put him in jail, that was the school property.

He didn't know to put that clause back in that land share, to revert it back to the family.

EC: So what did the -- was it the county?

ED: It was the county.

EC: What did the county do with the land after the school closed?

ED: Sold it.

EC: So they sold you the land that your father had donated?

ED: Uh-huh. They sold it to somebody else.

EC: Is your family land still in the family?

ED: Yes.

EC: Your brothers and sisters or their children?

ED: Well, I'm the one paying taxes on it. [Laughter]

EC: You keep him.

ED: I pay taxes on it. I've asked my children, if we don't get it divided up, to don't let it go for taxes. I'm the person paying the taxes on it.

EC: Yeah. Well, that's good, because I know a lot of people lose land because they get so divided up.

ED: And fighting each other some.

EC: What do you think is important about your childhood?

ED: My family knew education was important. They knew [1:20:00] we would have a better life if we could get to college. At one time there was five of us in college, because three of them had been to the service, and two was --. I worked all the

way through college. I worked from the, when I went --. I worked at Alcorn on a work scholarship. I didn't have no scholarship, I went on a work aid.

EC: You mentioned before that you were in college during World War II?

ED: Yes.

EC: I don't think we, I asked you this at the beginning of the interview, but some people might want to get the time frame. Can you tell us when you were born?

ED: Nineteen twenty-five.

EC: Nineteen twenty-five. And you left home during World War II to go to college.

ED: Yes. When I finished high school, [19]43 I believe it's, I think I got that date right. I think -- I ain't going to be able to tell if I finished high school or college. I finished college in [19]47. I can remember that.

EC: When you were growing up did you have a, did you want to go to college? Did you think about that?

ED: Yes.

EC: That was part of your family?

ED: I had an aunt that taught school, and she had a better living than we had. She only had two children. They farmed, but her living was better than our living was, right there in the same community. Some money coming in is better than no money coming in. It might be a little bit, but it's better than none coming in.

EC: So you looked at what she was doing?

ED: Mm-hmm. She had something coming in. See, the only time we had money coming in is when we sold cotton, sold cows, or sold some kind of animals. That's the only time we had money coming in.

EC: Can you think of anything else that you want to share?

ED: No.

M1: What's the significance of the colors you are wearing?

ED: Huh? Oh, the clothes I'm wearing. I belong to Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, and this is our color.

EC: Did you join out at Alcorn?

ED: I didn't have -- no. Tennessee State was where I would have joined. I didn't have the money. I joined after I finished college and were able to get some money. It takes money to join those things. By the way, my daughter is a Delta. She's not a Sigma Gamma Rho.

EC: [Laughter] She didn't follow you. And you still let her in the house?

[Laughter]

ED: Uh-huh. I like the Deltas.

EC: [Laughter] That's good.

M1: Thank you.

EC: Thank you so much, Mrs. Dahmer.

ED: You're welcome.

EC: I hope we didn't wear you out too much.

ED: No.

[Break in recording]

F1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF RECORDING