

***Civil Rights History Project***  
***Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program***  
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***Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture***  
***and the Library of Congress, 2013***

Interviewee: Mrs. Grace Hall Miller  
Interview Date: March 9, 2013  
Location: Campus of Albany State University, Albany, Georgia  
Interviewer: Willie Griffin  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 00:53:36

Willie Griffin: Okay. Let's go.

John Bishop: We're going.

Willie Griffin: Alright. Today is Saturday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013. My name is Will Griffin, and I am a research associate with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Oral History Program. I am with videographer John Bishop in Albany, Georgia, on the campus of Albany State University to conduct an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. We are here today with Mrs. Grace Miller, who played a prominent role in the local Baker County Movement.

Thank you so much for being here, Mrs. Miller, and agreeing to share your story with the Civil Rights History Project. So, first, I would like to begin with you stating your full name, date and place of birth.

Grace Miller: My name is Grace Hall Miller. My date of birth was July the 21<sup>st</sup>, 1932.

WG: So, could you talk a little bit about your upbringing, your parents?

GM: Yes. My mother—my father was named Joe Nathan Hall, my mother was named Nannie Hall, and I was the sixth child. It was six of us, and I was the baby of the group. And we were reared there in Baker County.

WG: Okay.

GM: My father was a farmer, and my mother was a housewife.

WG: Okay.

GM: I grew up and went to school there in Baker County, and church, also. And I met my husband at church. He's a Baker Countian, too.

WG: Okay.

GM: His name was Hosie Miller, Sr.

WG: Okay.

GM: And we got married in 1946, the twelfth day of 1946 in Baker County.

WG: Okay.

GM: And we got married secretly. [Laughs] And his oldest brother told the family. He found out some way that we had gotten married, because I had to go to school right on, and my parents were so upset, because I was the baby.

WG: Right.

GM: I didn't know how to cook, I didn't know how to wash, I didn't know how to do anything! And he told my parents. They said, "My baby don't—uh-uh, she just can't do it." And he said, "You know what?" Said, "Whatever she does is fine with me." Said, "She don't have to cook if she don't want to," [laughter] because I would do the cooking.

My husband was nine years older than me. So, we got married and we had a beautiful married life. We had five girls and one boy. And he was a great father. Those girls, they took him from me. They would call him “their daddy,” [laughs] and a lot of times I would be jealous, because he would take them—he was just a good father. He loved those kids! I wasn’t really jealous of the kids, but I wanted some of the attention that he gave them. [Laughs]

WG: Right. I can imagine.

GM: And he would always tell me, say, “You know you got my attention. Don’t worry about it. You’re my baby, too!” [Laughs]

WG: Right. [Laughs]

GM: And he farmed. We had our farm. That was his occupation, a farmer. And I was the housewife, taking care of the kids. And on March—

WG: Can we just back up a little bit before we move so fast? I want to find out a little bit more about, you know, your relationship with your parents.

GM: Okay.

WG: And the types of things that they instilled in you. You said you were the baby, so obviously there was a lot of attention doled out to you.

GM: Oh, yes.

WG: So, what do you remember about your parents the most?

GM: Well, I was the baby of the family.

WG: Right.

GM: And I was the tattletale. [Laughs] My oldest sibling would go, and my mama would say, “Take her with you! She want to go.” And they would do things and say, “Don’t tell Mama

and Daddy about it!" I'd say, "No." That night when we'd get in the bed, I would tell them [laughs] everything!

WG: So, your parents knew you were a spy? [Laughs]

GM: Yeah, they knew I was the one to get the news! [Laughs]

WG: Okay.

GM: But I had a good mother and father. They were church workers. My father was deacon of the church.

WG: Okay, what church was this?

GM: Huh?

WG: What church?

GM: Thankful Baptist Church.

WG: Thankful Baptist.

GM: I'm a member of that church now.

WG: Okay. Do you remember some of the lessons that—obviously, religion and other things that they instilled in you?

GM: Yeah, we had to go to Sunday School. We had to go to prayer meeting. We had to go to BYU at church. And they taught us values.

WG: Values.

GM: My parents really taught me values, to treat others as I would have them treat me. And the main thing my father taught: He didn't like for nobody to steal. And he taught us, "If you want something, you ask for it. And if you can't get it, then don't bother it."

WG: Right.

GM: And it will stay in me until today.

WG: Okay.

GM: That that I don't have, I don't bother.

WG: Okay.

GM: And I taught my children the same thing. Be honest in their jobs, whatever they do,  
[05:00] and to the people that they deal with. Be honest and treat them fair.

WG: Right.

GM: And that's the way I grew up.

WG: Oh, okay.

GM: Loving everybody! I think if you go in my community, they will tell you that I get  
along and I love everybody.

WG: Okay.

GM: And I grew up with that knowledge of treating people like you would have them  
treat you.

WG: Okay. So, let's talk about your early education. What were the schools like in Baker  
County that you attended?

GM: Well, my early education, we had to walk to school, and it was about two miles  
from my home.

WG: Wow.

GM: And it would be cold. It would be real cold. And we would get to school, and I  
would tell my daddy—the teacher would say, “Well, we need some wood.” And I'd tell my  
daddy when we'd get home, I'd say, “Daddy,” I said, “My teacher said we need wood.” I  
wouldn't sleep until he'd go get that wood! [Laughter] He'd have to go get it and stack it up and  
put it where I could see it to know that we'd have a fire the next day at school.

And the buses—the white kids had the bus to ride. They would pass through there with us, throw spitballs at us, and we were freezing, and they in a bus. But you know what? We kept going.

WG: Right.

GM: You know, at that time, you didn't have any animosity against them because we grew up thinking, you know—

WG: That was the way it was.

GM: That's the way life is—

WG: Right.

GM: Was, you know, back then. And from high school—I mean, from elementary, we had to go to Newton, down to the city of Newton to the high school.

WG: Okay. What was the name of the high school?

GM: Baker County—Newton-Baker County Colored High School.

WG: Okay.

GM: They had Newton—Colored High School. That's the name of it.

WG: Okay.

GM: But my husband's parents didn't let them go to school in Newton. He let them drive to Camilla. All of his kids was educated in Mitchell County.

WG: Mitchell County?

GM: Uh-huh, because he felt that high school just wasn't adequate. You know, everybody at that time wasn't able to take their kids out of the county. But he was able to take his kids to Mitchell County for an education.

WG: Okay. So, while you were in school, do any of your teachers stand out? I mean, some of the—who were the more memorable teachers?

GM: Oh, yes! I had some beautiful teachers, teachers that felt our heart—you know, they were just dedicated teachers. Miss Granberry was one.

WG: Granberry?

GM: Granberry. She's from Albany. She taught down at Baker County. We had Miss—let's see, what's the lady—Miss Smith from Albany taught us. And we had a teacher, a principal, named Miss Spratley in the elementary class.

WG: Spratley?

GM: Uh-huh, Spratley. And we had to do what was right. We said Bible verses every morning. We had to pledge allegiance to the flag.

WG: Okay.

GM: And we learned songs and we learned poems, you know, those poems and Bible verses is with me today. I think if you start off teaching a child at an early age about God and life and how to live, it will go along with them. But today's time, they can't teach that kind of thing.

WG: Right.

GM: And I believe that's why we are having so much trouble in our schools, because they are not being taught the right—you know, about life skills. They are not being taught about them. Even now, in our schools, we don't have Home Ec anymore. And, see, those teachers back then taught Home Ec. They taught you how to sew on buttons on your clothes. They taught you how to cook and how to save. But, see, now they don't teach those things. And our children are just so wasteful, and they don't know how to be observant, you know, how to save. And I think if we could go back to some of those old days, our whole world would be in a better shape.

WG: Okay. So, now, what type of student were you in high school?

GM: I was a good student.

WG: Good student?

GM: Average. [Laughs]

WG: You were average, okay.

GM: I wasn't one of those excellent, you know, A students always, but A and B.

WG: But you did what you were supposed to do?

GM: Um-hmm.

WG: Okay. So, what year did you graduate?

GM: It was in '50.

WG: '50. 1950. Okay. And, now, let's move on to the time that your husband, as old folks say, starts courting you. When did you meet him, and what do you recall about that first time you met him?

GM: Oh, see, his parents were like mine; we *had* to go to church.

WG: Right.

GM: And we used to go to BTU on a Sunday evening.

WG: BTU?

GM: Uh-huh.

WG: What does that stand for?

GM: That's for Youth, Bible Youth, Bible Teaching Youth class.

WG: Okay, Bible Teaching.

GM: And we started—he started looking at me and talking. And I was [laughs] afraid of him, because I knew I wasn't old enough to start dating, as they say. So, he kept—we kept going



to church, and he kept talking. [10:00] We secretly courted, because I wasn't really old enough.

[Laughing] My parents didn't know I was dating him. So, after I got to high school, we started—I would start playing basketball.

WG: Okay.

GM: And I was living with my oldest sister. And that night, particular night, he carried me home. And then, we started talking, and he said, "Let's go marry." You know, back then in those times, you didn't have to have blood tests.

WG: Right.

GM: So, we went to the probate and got married.

WG: Now, how old were you?

GM: 14. [Laughs]

WG: 14!

GM: But he said, "You continue going on to school," after we got married. My parents didn't know it. He would come by.

WG: So, were you—you were still living at home?

GM: Huh?

WG: You were still living at home?

GM: Yeah, I was still at home.

WG: But married? [Laughs]

GM: But I was living with my sister, oldest sister, in high school, because she lived in the little city where the high school was, and we lived in the country.

WG: Okay.

GM: But he would come to my sister's house, but he was afraid to go to my mama and daddy's. [Laughs] So, anyway, his brother found out. I guess he told his brother.

WG: Okay.

GM: That we had got married. And his brother went down, talking to my mama and daddy, and told them, said, "You know, people sure are marrying around here!" And they said, "Huh?!" Said, "I didn't know they were marrying." Said, "I didn't hear of anybody." He said, "Did you know your baby daughter had married my baby brother?" [Laughs]

WG: And what did he say? How did he respond?

GM: And Daddy said, "Oh, no! I know that's not true!" [Laughs]

WG: But I guess they eventually got over it.

GM: Oh, they was crazy about him.

WG: Okay.

GM: He was just—he was so nice to me. Because, just like I said, I didn't know how to do anything. Everything I did was fine with him. I cooked one day and, as I got older, I realized it was a mess. [Laughs] And he said, "I tell you what. Let's not eat—" we had rice and something else. He said, "Let's not eat that," because I had stirred it. I thought you were supposed to stir it.

WG: Right.

GM: And it had got gummy. [Laughs] So, he said, "I tell you what. Let's not eat that today. We'll go and get us something else." I said, "Okay." So, we went, and later on, he teased me about it.

My sisters came up there, and they said, "Well, you just—," said, "I don't know how you're making it. She can't cook." He said, "I don't care. It's good to me." [Laughter]

Everything I cooked was good to him, he said. And my sisters said, “Well, ain’t no need of you saying that, because it’s not good!” And they kept that up, teasing me all the time about how I cooked. But I finally learned how to, because going to school and teachers—Home Ec, you know, you learn how to do a lot of things.

WG: Right.

GM: And we got along real good. He never got angry with me about anything.

WG: Okay.

GM: We just—we had our little differences, but we always before we’d go to bed, we’d clear it up. I said, “I’m going home!” He said, “If you go there, I’m going, too!” [Laughs] We lived together eighteen years, and it was a beautiful eighteen years.

And as the kids grew—Shirley was my oldest daughter. And she was graduating that year, and we were just looking forward to going—she wanted to go to Fort Valley.

WG: Fort Valley State College.

GM: And he would tease her. He said, “When you look up, I’ll be standing out there on that campus to see what little boy you’ll be walking around with!” [Laughter]

WG: [13:30]

GM: [Laughing] And she believed that, too, because—I told them if he had lived, all of my daughters would have been old maids, because he just didn’t feel like they needed to get married! Nobody was good enough for his daughters! [Laughter] I’m sure he would have changed it as they got older.

WG: Right.

GM: But I tease them now, tell them, “Honey, if your daddy had lived, you’d be an old maid!” They say, “We know that!” [Laughs] But he was a really good father.

And I still miss my husband. It's been 47 years. I never married anymore. And the memory of him still lingers with me. And I can't hardly talk about it up until this day. I really can't. It's something that I hope nobody else will *ever* have to go through, because when he—it's coming up this month. March is always a hard month for me, because he got killed in March.

WG: March 15<sup>th</sup>.

GM: Uh-huh, and we buried him on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

WG: Okay.

GM: And we was expecting our sixth child. I waited eight years. And my mother, she was sick. And I told her, I said, "I just don't want no more children. I'm afraid it'll be another girl." She said, "Just try one more time! Try one more time!" Said, "You might have a boy."

And I told him, I said, "My mother—," and she died that same night when we were talking. I said, "We can go ahead on and try for a boy." And he told *everybody* before he died—the baby was born in June. [15:00] He gave out cigars in January—

WG: Oh, wow! [Laughs]

GM: To everybody who would come—we had a store. He wanted to celebrate his boy. He said—they didn't have sonograms back then.

WG: Sonograms, so you didn't know, right.

GM: But he told *everybody*. We built the house. He built the room. He painted it blue. And everything he was geared to, with the baby, he knew it was going to be a boy. He told everybody!

WG: Okay.

GM: And I said—you know one thing I said? I said, "I guess the Lord revealed that in him," because he was more happier that time, it looked like, with me being pregnant than he was

any other time. Because I don't care who—where we would go, he would tell somebody, "Look at my wife! Don't she look good? We're having our boy this time!" [Laughter] "We're having our boy this time!"

WG: Right.

GM: But he got killed in March, and the baby was born the sixth of June.

WG: Okay. So—

GM: And the doctors what I was going to—he told the doctor, said, "This is my boy this time!" So, when the baby was born, they wouldn't let me name nothing but Hosie!" [Laughs]

WG: Right.

GM: [Laughs] They said, "Don't put nothing but Hosie Junior on this baby!" Said, "Because he wanted him *so* bad."

WG: Right.

GM: Said, "We just hate he didn't see it."

WG: Okay.

GM: But he looks—is just like his daddy. I tell him all the time he's even got ways like him. I say, "You're living—your daddy's living in you, because you've got too many ways like him!" I thank God for all of my children.

WG: So, can we talk a little bit about that day?

GM: All of it. That morning, he got up. We had a store.

WG: Right.

GM: He got up and left me in bed and he went down to the store. And it was a man staying there, helping him with us, in a little house down from us. And he got him to come back up to tell me that he was going with this guy had come to get his cow out.

WG: Okay.

GM: And I said, “Okay.” And my brother was there. My brother came up and was talking to him.

WG: What’s your brother’s name?

GM: Vernon Hall.

WG: Vernon, okay.

GM: And he rode with—he asked him to go with him down there for the guy to get that cow. And said when they got around there to the pasture where the cow was—he had been in our pasture about three months—he wanted some, said, “No, that’s my cow over there,” wanted some of our cows.

WG: Right.

GM: And so, my husband told him, said, “No, that’s my cow.” Said, “I’ve kept your cows all this time. You’re going to come here and try to take *my* cow?” And said, “Well, I’ll tell you what. We’ll let the law settle it.” And said my husband walked out of the pasture to fasten the gate, and he shot him. And the guy—

WG: Did he shoot him in the back?

GM: He shot him right through here, right in the heart.

WG: Right in the heart, wow.

GM: Um-hmm. It might have been a little above the heart, because he lived about a week when he shot him.

WG: Okay. So, you didn’t—did you hear the gunshot at all?

GM: Uh-uh, I couldn’t hear, because it was way—it was a distance from the house.

WG: Okay.

GM: But my brother got him and carried him to the hospital.

WG: Okay.

GM: And the guy what was staying with us, working, he came back up there and told me that the guy had shot him.

WG: Okay, and what was his name? Do you remember?

GM: George. George Williams.

WG: George—

GM: George Williams, uh-huh.

WG: Williams, okay.

GM: And, I don't know, somebody came and carried me over there. And when I got to Camilla, they had transferred him to Albany.

WG: Okay.

GM: But he was able to talk to me. And all of his brothers came and wanted to stay with him. Because I couldn't—you know, I was just—I couldn't stay with him, so he came to stay with him, his brother.

WG: Okay. So, he told you everything that happened, right? He was able to.

GM: Yeah. He could tell everybody what happened. Um-hmm, he talked. And I really thought he was getting better, because I was getting dressed that morning. Looked like every time I would go to see him, he would get worse. And they said, "Well, maybe you need to stay away." I think it was just the idea—

WG: The pain that he—

GM: Yeah, the pain for him was me.

WG: Thinking that he may not—

GM: And he knew how I felt. And so, I was—that morning, I said, “I’m going.” I said, “I don’t care what nobody says, I’m going.” And just as I got up and got dressed, one of his brothers came in and told me at six o’clock in the morning he passed.

And that was a awful time for me and my kids. I hope nobody ever has to go through nothing like that. Because I had those kids. I had never worked and had them to take care of and expecting a baby. And, you know, that was—nobody—I hope nobody don’t ever have to go through that. That was a hard time.

And then, they started the Movement in Baker County after that. And my kids was involved with it all the way through. But I couldn’t, because my baby was just three weeks old when they started. But they went to jail. But when the people [20:00] would march and come back, they would come out to the house and eat and sit out on the lawn.

WG: Do you think that helped you sort of begin to heal or begin the process of having people around you?

GM: Yeah, the whole community just—

WG: Came together?

GM: They just stood by me. The whole community did. And it really helped. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t had loving people in the community like I had. Because I had a sister-in-law stayed with me at night. And I had a friend that lived close to me stayed until in the night, trying to help us to heal.

The kids would come in from school, and that was really the time that they would be with their daddy. You know, he would be there, helping with homework and playing with them and doing things. And that was a hard time for them. They just went through so hard a time. But after



the baby came, it sort of helped us a lot. We had him to play with, and, you know, they had never had a brother, and it sort of helped to relieve some of the pain for them.

WG: Okay.

JB: What happened to the man who shot your husband?

GM: He finally died. They didn't even lock him up. They didn't even indict him. But he died.

WG: And you tried to take him to trial?

GM: We tried to, uh-huh.

WG: On three separate occasions, right?

GM: Right, um-hmm.

WG: The first time, what happened?

GM: They had an all-white jury.

WG: Okay.

GM: And all of those men were Baker County men, and they knew him and they didn't even indict him. And the next time we came to Albany, and nothing happened.

WG: And he was never arrested or questioned or anything?

GM: Never, never, um-um. And he used to—well, the main thing of it, going back, he was my daddy's brother.

WG: Wow.

GM: And I grew up with him. You know, I didn't understand it, because always he was at our house. I grew up around him.

WG: So, you knew this man?

GM: And I don't know what happened. They say he said he was a diabetic and he just went into—that's what they say he said. He never told me anything. I never talked to him anymore, because I didn't even want to see him anymore. Because when I would meet him, it looked like my blood would just go up in the top of my head. And I just had to pray and ask God to don't let me feel that way, because I knew it was injuring me. But, then, somebody told him how I felt or something, and he stopped coming through our way. He'd go around the other way. And he sent word to tell me that he wasn't going to harm me and the kids. But I just—it was just hurting. Um-hmm, it really was.

WG: Okay. I'd like to back up a little bit, in terms of you talked about the Baker County Movement. And I'm wondering if your husband was at all political. Was he a person who was registering? I know in 1958, blacks began to start to register. Was he among this group of black men?

GM: Yeah, we was the first two that registered in Baker County.

WG: Oh, wow.

GM: We got up that morning. He had to go pay tax. And he said, "Get dressed and come with me, now. We're going to pay taxes this morning, and I'm going to ask them—I'm going to tell them I want to register." So, we stopped by my sister-in-law's—they had a little café down in the city—and told them what we was going do. And she said, "Well, I'm going, too." Her name was Josie Miller.

WG: Josie.

GM: She said, "If you all register, I'm going to register, too." And she said, "If that man do anything to you, with the two of us, we're going get him!" [Laughs] We felt strong! He knew

we were going to back him up, but he wasn't afraid. But the guy what was the registrar, he was so nervous he couldn't hardly even get the paper out for us to register. But he let us register.

WG: Okay.

GM: And so, we went back in the community and told everybody that we had registered to vote. And we got people to go down.

WG: Right.

GM: And then, they changed it. The little card that they gave us was a small card with just, "Are you a citizen of the United States and Baker County?" You know. They got a long sheet, because they felt like a lot of the people couldn't read and write, and that would stop them from voting. So, then, we had to call—get the Justice Department to come in. Sherrod and those came in then.

WG: Okay.

GM: And got the Justice Department to come in. And they changed it, and we got everybody to register to vote.

WG: Okay. So, were you aware that, like in 1958, there were some bombings, in 1958?

GM: That was my uncle.

WG: Bubba Hall?

GM: My uncle, he tried to vote. And friends of ours, Mr. [24:51], Carl Broadway—

WG: Broadway, right.

GM: And Mr. [24:54].

WG: Joshua Williams.

GM: Uh-huh, Josh Williams, that was my uncle. He was an old man, too. [25:00]

WG: Oh, wow.

GM: He was down in his eighties. But he really wanted to register to vote. And they went out and tried to register. And that night, they came back and bombed his house. Mr. Carl Broadway, they bombed his car. Mr. [25:17], they bombed his car. And Mr. [25:19], they put whiskey—this stump whiskey they call it; it's whiskey that you make—

WG: Right.

GM: They called it stump back then in those days—and they put it around his house. And they told him that they heard he was running stump whiskey. And he told them he never ran any stump whiskey. And they went around the house—they had put it around there—and found it and told him that was it. And they arrested him, and he stayed in jail about two weeks down in Newton. They wouldn't give him a bond.

WG: Okay.

GM: So, he had some friends in Bainbridge, he said. And his pastor got some of his friends to come up and bond him out, and they got him out of jail that way. But they was fixing to send him to prison.

WG: Wow.

GM: But only by him having a pastor that knew somebody, a lawyer in Bainbridge, they got him out. That was Gator Johnson at that time.

WG: Okay.

GM: I know you might not have heard of him. That was our sheriff.

WG: That was Gator Johnson?

GM: Gator Johnson, they called him. You couldn't pass through Newton.

WG: Right.

GM: He was just tough.

WG: And he would growl at—anytime a black person came in.

GM: Uh-huh, make a noise. [Laughs]

WG: Right.

GM: Sherrod can go just like him. [Laughter]

WG: Okay. So, let's move forward back into the—'65, after your husband is killed, and the Movement sort of takes off, and your house becomes sort of like a meeting headquarters, and Charles Sherrod comes in. I mean, what are you thinking about this?

GM: Well, you know what happened to me? At that time, when they would congregate at my house, my husband and I had—my husband just had built our house—I'll say him. He stayed one week in the house when he got killed. And there was a lady at Family and Children's Service down in Newton. I went down to try to apply to help me with—something for the kids.

WG: Right.

GM: But they wouldn't—turned me away. She wrote—the guy what was in there, the FHA man, she got him to—brought him out there, saying that I was violating the law letting those people come out to my house, that I had built the house through Farmer's Home.

WG: Right.

GM: So, we called the Justice Department in Atlanta, I mean, in Washington. And they told us as long as I was paying my payments, they had nothing to do with it, and he better not come out there bothering—he almost lost his job from that. And I didn't have any more trouble out of them.

WG: Right.

GM: But they tried to—

WG: Intimidate you?

GM: Take my—uh-huh, my house!

WG: I understand they did some cross-burnings on your land.

GM: Oh, after then, they integrated school down there at Newton. My kids were some of the first ones. The state patrol blocked them. We couldn't get in there. But they went on to school there, finally got them in there.

WG: Okay.

GM: And they burned a cross in the front of my house. One of my daughters was at the dining room table, getting her homework out. I was in bed. And she said, "Mother," said, "it's a fire here! It's a lot of cars!" And I jumped up, and you could see the cross burning.

And I tell you what, you can get so angry till you don't think about death, I guess. I got up—my husband loved to hunt. He was a—he loved to quail hunt. And he had plenty of ammunition around there and he had taught those girls how to shoot. So, I was giving one a gun, told one to get on the telephone, and I had one. I had the pump gun. And I was on the porch and I was pumping that gun [laughing] as fast as I could. I said, "If they come, they might get me, but I'm going leave one out here!"

So, my neighbor saw it. The kids called him, and he saw it and he got in his car and he drove down there. And my brother, they got him, and my brother-in-law, Walt Miller, he started shooting. And when he jumped out of the car, drove past them and started shooting, then they started leaving. And I don't know, but I really believe some of them got some bullets in them, because it was some firing going on! In about an hour, it was about fifty black men in my yard!

And we called the sheriff. The sheriff's son was in it, because I recognized a lot of those men was there. I recognized them, because I could see from the fire, and they was that close to my house. And so, the sheriff talked to—had the GBI, we called them out there.

WG: The GBI?

GM: He talked to them first, instead of talking to me. So, I told him, I said, [30:00] “Well, you’ve talked to them.” I said, “It’s nothing for me to say.” He said, “Well, I want to get your view of it.” I said, “They burned a cross, and I told you.” But he said that some of the guys told them they were possum hunting.

WG: Ptt!

GM: And they decided to warm up and—

WG: With a cross.

GM: Build a fire in the front of my house. But I had sense enough to know, and my eyes could see what was going on.

WG: You knew what that represented.

GM: Right! And we had them—brought them to federal court. But nothing happened of it. Baker County was a county you couldn’t get any—and it’s almost like that right on. Can’t get no justice down there.

WG: Okay.

GM: Um-hmm.

WG: So, one of the things I was intrigued by about that particular story was the tree line phone. I mean, what was that—the phone that you got on to contact people? Was that like a regular phone or what?

GM: Yeah, it was a regular—

WG: It was just a regular phone, okay.

GM: Regular phone. We got on the phone and called everybody that we knew that was in the Movement.

WG: In the Movement, okay.

GM: And those men came.

WG: Okay.

GM: And for about two months, they watched my house. They come every night and stayed until about twelve or one o'clock—

WG: Okay.

GM: So my kids and I could sleep, because it was a frightening time. It was *frightening* for me and my kids, because we was afraid to go to sleep. Because you could hear—one night, I was in the bed, and I didn't let them know what happened. A bullet hit my window, and glass was down on the floor the next morning. And one of my daughters asked me why was that glass down there. I said, "I don't know." I said, "Maybe—I don't know what shattered it." But I knew what had happened. I just didn't want them to be afraid.

So, I would take them—they had a flood down in Newton at that time, that year, and they wanted to go see the water. And I carried my kids down to see the water. And some of the white—those young white guys were down there, and they was teasing each other, going on about "the man killed the coon," you know. "They're down here, but that coon got killed," and all of that, you know. And my kids went through a lot.

WG: Right.

GM: Even in school, they would be talking to them—they'd come home crying. And I would tell them, I'd say, "Well, all you've got to do is," so, we'd pray, and I'd say, "because you're going up there to get what they're trying to get, just an education." And I said, "You try to get all you can while you're there." I said, "I know it's hurt, because it's hurt me just as bad." I said, "But we've just got to go through it," you know.



It finally got better, but it was rough. All of those kids that went to school at that time, they really caught it, from the teachers *and* the kids. My daughter told me one day, said they was in the lunchroom. And one of the teachers came through, “Let that Nigrette”—said they wouldn’t say “Negro”—“Let that Nigress get by!” [Laughs] Said it so, so—you know, they could say it, but they said it the way they wanted to say it, so ugly.

WG: Right.

GM: And one day, I had to go up there to the school. They called me. They had my daughter in the—my baby girl, Deborah—in the superintendent’s office.

WG: Wow.

GM: And I was so upset. I said, “What did she do?” They said, “Well, you come to the superintendent’s office. She’s up there.” And the superintendent’s office was down in the little town. The principal had carried her down there, now. And she’s sitting up in there when I got there. And I was so upset.

And what happened, now, the little thing that happened: she said it was a big fat white guy that go there. They told her she was liking him. And she had a nephew, now, he was really handsome. My brother’s boy was handsome. She told the white girl that she liked him. And she told the principal, and they carried her down to the superintendent’s office, the principal did.

And I got there, I told him, I said, now, I didn’t like it and I hope this didn’t happen anymore. I said, “I wish that girl could get a boy as handsome as my nephew is!” [Laughing] I said, “But that old big fat boy what she tried to put—said my daughter’s liking,” I said, “But I wouldn’t want her to say even anything to him!”

But we—it was rough. It was rough. But they didn’t take another one down, because they knew I meant what I said. And I told them, “Down there with two men in that office, my little

daughter,” you know, and both of them was white. And I was just upset, because the way they were treating them, they could have done anything to my daughter. But that didn’t happen anymore. And it—

WG: We’re going to pause for just a second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, sorry to interrupt.

GM: That’s okay.

WG: Okay, so let’s talk about—go back to the Baker County Movement after ’65, and you worked on voter registration. Would you deem it a success? How long—was it a real uphill battle? And how long did SNCC stay in Baker County before they started to see any real success?

GM: They stayed in Baker County [35:00] probably about two years, off and on.

WG: Okay.

GM: Um-hmm, yeah, Sherrod came in there. And it was a funny thing. He started dating my oldest daughter! [Laughs]

WG: Right.

GM: Shirley, the one that was at college.

WG: Right.

GM: And he got married to her. I said, “Oh, that’s my oldest daughter!” But he’s the best son-in-law and the best husband she could have gotten.

WG: Okay. So, after the Movement died, you became somewhat politically active in the community around education. How did you get involved in that?

GM: Well, that's what made me get involved, when I went down there and my daughter was sitting in the superintendent's office.

WG: Okay.

GM: And I knew somebody had to do something.

WG: To be a voice for the kids.

GM: Yeah. I was working. I worked at a lingerie place there in Newton they had opened up, and I got a job there. And I was sitting down in the office one day and I said, "I'm going to ask the people would they vote for me if I would run for the Board of Education." So, I went to the meeting. They had the mass meeting that night. And I got up and I asked them if I would run—

WG: Where did you have the mass meeting?

GM: We had it down at Springfield Church that night.

WG: Springfield, okay.

GM: I asked them would they vote for me if I would run. What did they think about it? And *everybody* in the church said that would be a great idea if I would run, that they would support me. So, that time to pay in, I was going to go down to pay in. And my cousin said, "I'm—" Julius Williams—he said, "I'm not going to let you go by yourself. I'm going with you." And he said, "What time are you coming down?" I said, "Well, when we have our break at ten o'clock, I'll be down and pay in."

So, I went down and I told the guy that I wanted to pay in for—to run for the Board of Education. He told me how much to pay and all.

WG: How much did you have to pay?

GM: At that time, it was just 35 dollars.

WG: Okay.

GM: And so, I paid in and I started going around—by the time I got home that afternoon—I paid in to run in the Newton district. That was where the little city—because that’s where I always voted. By the time I got home, he called me. He said, “Grace,” said, “Did you know that you’re not in the Newton district?” I said, “No.” I said, “I’ve been voting all the time there. I thought that’s where I was.” He said, “No.” He said, “We’ve checked the binder, and you’re in the Elmodel district.” He said, “You want your money back?” I said, “No. I don’t care where I am, I’m going to run.”

WG: Right. [Laughs]

GM: So, he said, “Okay.” And I ran against two white guys, and I was in a runoff with one. And I’ve been on there ever since, until 2013, I resigned. I retired from it.

WG: Okay.

GM: But I had—I worked so hard. I tell all of your people, I said, “Now, if you’re running, you’ve got to get out and work.”

WG: Right.

GM: I said, “You’ve got to go and sell your vote to the people.” I went from door to door, white and black. And if they were picking peas, I picked peas. If they was picking butterbeans, whatever, I got out there and helped them, shelling peas, and talked to them. I sat there and told them, I said, “I’m for quality education for all our children. I want to work for all of the children of Baker County. I’m concerned about them.” And I ran into one problem with—well, he was old.

WG: Okay.

GM: He was feeding his hogs out there one day, and I drove up. And he said, “Could I help you?” And I said, “Well, I hope you can.” I said, “My name is Grace Miller, and I’m running for the Baker County Board of Education.” And I said, “I would love it if you would vote for me,” I said, “because my platform is quality education for all our children in Baker County.” He said, “You know what? I might just vote for you, because y’all niggers don’t give up, do you?” I said, “No, this one is not going to give up!” I said, “Well, I tell you what. I would appreciate it if you vote for me.” [Laughs]

WG: Wow.

GM: And that’s the only one gave me a negative talk.

WG: Right.

GM: Uh-huh. And I’m going to tell you my experience with my first—I won the election and the runoff.

WG: Okay.

GM: And the guy shook my hand, and he said, “We will always be friends, and any way I can help you, I will do that.” I told him, “Thank you. I appreciate it.” So, when we had the first board meeting, the superintendent said, “This is our new board member, Mrs. Grace Miller. I don’t know whether all of you all know her or not.”

And it was an old man on there, a white guy, and he—I imagine he was about 80-some years old. He looked like he was at that time. His name was Roy Kelly. And he had lost his billfold, and my daddy found his billfold. And he said, “Who are your parents?” I said, “My daddy is named Joe Hall, [40:00] and my mother is named Nannie Hall.”

He said, “Joe was one of the best niggers, I can say, in Baker County.” Said, “I lost my *life savings* in my billfold, and he found it and he gave it to me.” And he said, “I just thought,”

he said, "I thought I would never get it." Said, "Because—but he was an honest man." I said, "Well, you know what? He always taught all of us honesty."

So, but when he said "nigger," the other board members, they looked—and the superintendent said—he looked at me. And I guess they thought I was going—

WG: Try to say something.

GM: Going to say something. But I told them, I said, "I can understand Mr. Kelly." I said, "He done said 'nigger' so much, he didn't realize what he had said." I said, "But if it was a young guy that asked—but, Wayne, if you had said it, it would have made a difference with me." I said, "But Mr. Kelly didn't realize what he was saying. But I want you to understand this." I said, "Our little word—sometime I might get upset and I might say 'cracker,' and I want you to take it the way I took it."

And we never had any—I worked with them. I never had any problem with them. Because I learned one thing: I had to listen and I had to learn. Then, I had to work with them, and they worked with me. Any problem that we had, they would explain it to me. And if I said my opinion in there, they looked like they would really respect my opinion. And then, when I would say something, tell them something, they did the same thing. So, we really got along. They saw I wasn't in there to try to be a bully. I wasn't in there to try to—the only thing I was concerned about was our kids in Baker County.

And that's my thought until I left: the kids of Baker County. We're having problems with our schools now, but I'll be right there. And I tell them, I say, "The only thing I'm concerned is about our children. If we can just educate our kids, there will be less welfare, there will be less crimes, all of us work together and try to help these kids." And that's my philosophy up until this day.

WG: Okay.

GM: The children of Baker County.

WG: Okay. So, I guess—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

WG: In the Baker County Movement, what transpired—and the state of education today, what are some of the larger issues that you think still plague education for blacks? And even, blacks in Baker County, period—what are some of the issues that trouble them?

GM: Well, the trouble there is—the issues now. We've got an all-white board except one, and she's just there. They came in there, fired our attorney first, fired our superintendent—he's black. He got in there with—the school was in debt. He's gotten our school out of debt and he's doing a good job. The teachers, the children, all respect him. And now, they are going to pay him out of his contract. Now, the contract is up in June. Well, he's got a year's contract. But until June, when school is out, they could have let him stay on, because the CRCT test is coming up.

WG: The CRTT?

GM: CRCT, uh-huh. CRCT test is coming up, and he knows about the testing and all, and they're getting him out of there. And they don't respect him at all. The first meeting they had, instead of accepting his agenda, they brought their own agenda. And, see, when you have an agenda, you're supposed to publicize it. They didn't publicize theirs. They just brought their own agenda, and wouldn't even pay attention to his agenda at all. And they're not giving no respect to him.

And the lawyer let them go—they got a new lawyer. And I know he knows better, because he's from Albany. He's over every school there is in this south Georgia, Tommy Coleman, but he's letting them do—

WG: What they want to do.

GM: Get by with things that we know—because we've had training and we know some of those things that he's letting them get by with. And it's just got everybody upset. Everybody's upset in the county about how they're doing our schools.

WG: So, you think it's going backwards?

GM: They're trying to get it to go backwards, but hopefully we can stop it before it goes too far, because a lot of citizens are concerned.

WG: Okay.

GM: They had a meeting last—on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February, and everybody was standing. There were about 200 people there, letting them know that they're just really dissatisfied with what's going on. And it's 90% black, a 90% black school.

WG: Okay.

GM: And these people, they don't seem to understand, or don't really care. I don't know what it is. I won't say, because I don't know. But it's just hurting, I know, to see things going like they are.

WG: Okay. So, when [45:00] all this stuff began to happen with your daughter, Shirley Sherrod, a couple of years ago with the Department of Agriculture, how did that make you feel? I mean, I read in the book that, you know, you called your daughter, crying, when you first heard about it.

GM: Oh, that was just like the night they killed my husband. When I—they were trying to keep me from knowing it, because they know how emotional I am, I get.

WG: Right.



GM: But one of them called me and told me did I hear the news. And I said, “No. I was in bed.” They said, “Well, the guy has fired—we call her Ann.”

WG: Right.

GM: And said, “She had to stop on the *highway* and turn her resignation in.” I said, “What?!” So, I tried to get her and I never could get her that night. So, I got up early that morning and I was just crying all the way, going to Albany. I made it and when I got there, CNN was at her house, and I couldn’t talk to her.

I turned around, but she saw my car when I passed the window, and I went to one of my other daughters’ house. And she asked the man to let her stop long enough to talk to her mother. And she said, “Mother—” I was crying, so she said, “Mother, don’t cry. I’m fine.” Said, “Don’t cry.” Said, “I am *fine*! I want you to know I’m fine.”

But it was hurting. I tell you, that was a really hurting thing, the way they treated her. You know, if—they could have let her go to her office, you know.

WG: Right.

GM: Let her go on to her office.

WG: Right.

GM: But they stopped her on the highway! My daughter didn’t even know anybody on that highway. Anything could have happened to her. And I just don’t see the reason for them that she had to do that. But she said they harassed her all the way. She had to do it. But I told them that the bounty hunters would have had to come get me, because I would have made sure I got in the light! I would have went on to the office and then I would have turned in my resignation. I wouldn’t have stopped on the highway. But, you know, everybody’s different. She felt like she had to do it.

WG: Okay.

GM: But anyway, she told them to go and review the whole tape, and they wouldn't listen to her on it.

WG: And when they finally did—

GM: And then, when they told me what was happening, I said, "I didn't raise no fool!" I said, "If she thought that, she wouldn't have spoke it." [Laughs]

WG: Right.

GM: I said, "I didn't raise no fool, and I know her better than that." I *knew* she hadn't said that.

WG: Right, okay.

GM: But those people that came to her rescue, they were so wonderful, the Spooners.

WG: Okay.

GM: They are some nice people.

WG: The Spooners?

GM: Um-hmm.

WG: Okay.

GM: They invited us to the birthday party. He was 90 years old and still driving 18-wheelers. [Laughs] I wish you'd go meet him!

WG: [Laughs] Right.

GM: They are just as nice as they can be.

WG: That's good. So, the community feel, in Baker County, is still pretty much intact, would you say, in the black community?

GM: Yeah. It's not like we would like for it to be. You know, the younger people—I found out one thing: if you don't know your history, you'll repeat your history.

WG: Um-hmm, absolutely.

GM: We need to get with our kids more about the history of what—because a lot of them don't even know what happened to us.

WG: Right.

GM: And they don't even know that we couldn't even go to the courthouse to drink water. They don't even know that we couldn't sit in the same rooms when we'd go to the doctor, had separate—"colored" on one side, and "white" on the other side. A lot of these kids today don't know that, because things had already happened. We had already suffered through it and got it for them. And they just don't—I think we need to make sure they get more history of what's going on, and it might remake the whole thing. But, see, now in school they don't give it to them.

WG: Right. Was that something you tried to push while you were on the school board?

GM: Yeah. But we have one little program and nothing else about it during the school year, you know. But I think it needs to be a law that—black kids should know their history, and maybe they would do better. Maybe we would do better.

And maybe the whole community would do better. It would be more love, you know, if the younger, white *and* black, would know what happened. Because I'm sure a lot of the ones now today wouldn't condone nothing like that, you know. But they just don't know.

WG: Okay. So, it—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

WG: About your experiences in Baker County that you think—?

GM: Well, the only thing that I know [laughs] that I can say. I had a birthday. I was 80 years old. And I just thank God to be able to help any community, because I don't think it's nobody, if you go to—they have two roads named after me. The school road is named Grace Miller Circle, and the road coming by my house is named Grace Miller Road.

WG: Right.

GM: So, I'm just so thankful [50:00] that I didn't wait till I died.

WG: That they honored you.

GM: They did it while I'm alive. I got a chance to smell some of the flowers while I'm alive, and I'm just so happy over that, you know. You don't know really how you're touching other people's lives until they let you know. So, I feel like I have done my best. If I don't do any more, I feel like I have done my best for that county. Because I've been on all county boards, and I've worked honestly with them, and I've earned the respect from them, and they have earned it from me.

WG: Okay. Well, thank you so much, Mrs. Miller, for—

JB: I have a question.

WG: One more question? Okay.

JB: Could you tell me just very shortly what the story of your daughter's problem was, you know, what her position was, and what happened?

GM: Oh, she was the first black director of—

WG: Director of Agriculture.

GM: Director of Ag in the state of Georgia. And I just feel like it was a thing out for her, from the beginning, because why would somebody be at a meeting? They knew she was speaking at this NAACP meeting, and why would somebody be there to sneak around to try to

get some information? So, I feel like it was a sort of setup, just like that she was there. Now, that's my feeling about it. It might not be, but that's the way that I feel in my heart about it.

WG: So, the story was that she went to this NAACP meeting and gave a speech.

GM: Right.

WG: And spoke about—

GM: She was trying to convince the people there how we need to come together. And she said, "If I can do, I feel like it should be done, because anybody else can do it," because her father got killed by a white man when she was young.

WG: Right.

GM: And she forgave. And she tried to help—the only thing she was just trying to say is that we need to come together as a people.

WG: And she told the story of the Spooners, that—

GM: Right, and the Spooners heard it on the—well, one of the sons said he was watching the TV, and he told his mother, went up to the house to tell his mother and father, said, "They've got your friend in trouble!" And said, "Turn on the TV." And they turned on the TV. And he said they tried to call, and they couldn't get through. But they called CNN. His son got CNN. And he was at—CNN was at her house. And they told her, said, "Shirley," said, "I believe this is somebody that you would love to talk to on the phone." And they talked to them and let them know that it was a lie, that Shirley helped them. Because she said they came to her office twice. And the white guy they had wouldn't help them. But she found somebody to help them, you know. She said it was at the last minute, but whoever this guy that she got was her friend.

WG: And they were looking for help to save their farm?

GW: Save their land, their farm, uh-huh. And they own that farm now!

WG: Okay.

GW: Um-hmm, because they had this birthday. It was in, I believe, November, because it was just getting cold. Because I went down. They wanted me to come with them. And it's a beautiful place down there. And they're just so thankful. They're still—the boys, they all live right there around their father and mother, and they're happy, you know, that they were able to save it. And I'm so thankful to them that they came forward at the right time for her.

JB: [53:30] Thank you.

WG: Thank you, Mrs. Miller, again.

GM: Okay. I hope I didn't—

WG: No.

[Recording ends at 53:36]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council