

Simeon Wright Interview, 5-23-11

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Civil Rights History Project

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Interviewee: Simeon Wright

Interview Date: May 23, 2011

Location: Fellowship Room of the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ, Summit Argo
(Chicago area), IL

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 1:30:56 minutes

Simeon Wright: I think I`m the grandson. [Laughs] I say, "Come on â□□"

Joe Mosnier: Yeah.

SW: Just twelve of us.

JM: Yeah.

SW: There aren't that many.

John Bishop: Okay, Joe. We're rolling.

JM: Okay, John?

JB: Um-hmm.

JM: Alright. Today is Monday, May 23, 2011. We are in Argo, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer and filmmaker John Bishop for the Smithsonian and Library of Congress, um, Civil Rights Oral History series, and today we're with Mr. Simeon Wright. Mr. Wright, thank you so much for graciously agreeing to sit down with us. We really appreciate it and we're glad to be with you.

SW: I'm happy that, uh, I can accommodate you all today and be with you.

JM: Yeah. Thank you. I know that Monday is a day that sometimes you're relaxing with â□□ after a busy Sunday schedule. So, thank you for accommodating our visit to Chicago on a Monday. Um, we have much to talk about today, and I thought we might talk about â□□ I thought we might begin with something that's very close and very personal, I'm sure, in your memories, and that's just a description of your mother and your father.

SW: Well, my father, he was [clears throat] what we call kind of â□□ kind of hard man. Fair â□□ you know, have you met someone that's tough but fair? That's the kind of man he was. He [clears throat] â□□ he loved farming. He was honest. They found out â□□ most of the people that he worked for in his early years, they found out that he was an honest man. If it didn't belong to him, he didn't bother it. And he was a hard worker and he enjoyed to see â□□ when cotton would begin to grow in Mississippi, he just became excited, and I couldn't figure out why. But that's the kind of man he was. He enjoyed the farming and told my mother, he said, "Hey, um, I was born and bred in Mississippi. In Mississippi I'm going to die."

Now, my mother, on the other hand, she was different. She was raised in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, below Jackson. And I think when my dad proposed to her, he â uh, she told him about picking cotton, he said, "I don't know how to pick cotton." But I think they met in Memphis. Memphis was the headquarters for the Churches of God in Christ, and she heard my daddy deliver a message there. And, believe it or not, her parents lived in Sumner, Mississippi, where the trial of Emmett Till was taken. And while she was in Memphis, she was teaching school there. Back in those days, if you were African American, you didn't need a college degree to teach school. But she was teaching there and she moved back to Sumner to be near my dad. And that's where they got married, in Sumner, Mississippi, in 1925.

She was an easy woman. She would sing; looked like every day she would be singing church songs. And, oh, she was something! And, you know, with four boys â at that time she had four boys around the house. And we asked her one day â I'm sure we had done something wrong â we asked her, said, "Mama, when are you going to whip us?" That's how easy she was.

And we just â when Mama would leave the house, we would be afraid something was going to come out of the woods, the bear or a panther or something like that. But when she was around the house, we weren't afraid of anything, because she was always moving, always busy, and that she would do anything to protect her children. She was somebody.

JM: Last year you published a beautiful book, Simeon's Story, um, about the Emmett Till case and how it reverberated through your life in so many ways, even right up until the present day. Um, and I thought we might use, or I thought we might start our conversation with just some reflections from you about how, after this span of time, you came to choose to write that book.

SW: Well, one of the reasons, I would â I would be watching these certain documentaries about Emmett Till, and I would see things that they would present that wasn't true, and I would get very upset. And my wife, every time I would do that, she said, "Well, why don't you write your own book?" And finally, after a couple of years of trying to persuade me to do it, I decided to write my own book and to tell what happened at the store, to tell the world what happened in my bedroom, to correct the myth and inaccuracies that's out there. There are so many, so many out there.

And one of them that really cut to the heart where they said that his cousins â that would be my brother Maurice and I â dared him to go into the store and say something to Carolyn Bryant. So, I wrote the book to correct that [5:00] â correct the inaccuracies. Certain reporters â one reporter said that my dad â he helped my daddy escape Mississippi in a coffin. So, I asked the question, I said, "Well, he had three sons at the time. How did they get out of Mississippi?" So, that's my purpose in writing the book: to correct history â

JM: Yeah.

SW: And to get the facts out.

JM: Yeah. Let me take you all the way back. Um, I know you've had opportunity to talk about this story on various occasions, um, and I appreciate your willingness to do it in this context, also. Um, let me take you back to the summer of 1955. You're about twelve years old?

SW: Twelve years old.

JM: And, um, it's late in the summer.

SW: Late in the summer. But, uh, when a kid is twelve years old â□□ they're never twelve. They're always twelve and eleven months. So, I was a month away from my thirteenth birthday. You only give your correct age if you're past fifty.

JM: [Laughs] Um, I think you have an October birthday, don't you?

SW: October the fifteenth.

JM: That's right, that's right. Um, so the cotton harvest is about to come on?

SW: It was the beginning of the cotton harvest.

JM: Yeah?

SW: Late August. Emmett arrived at my home on a Saturday, and we started picking cotton that Monday.

JM: You've written in the book about â□□ you felt a great deal of excitement anticipating the visit, not only by Emmett, but by some other members of your extended family. And can you talk about how you thought about that visit, and what it meant to you as a twelve-year-old then?

SW: Oh, once we found out that Emmett and Wheeler [Parker Jr.] was coming to Mississippi, man, that was â□□ that was something. We'd just get so much joy to see someone from the North to come down to visit and tell us about, you know, life in Chicago and the North. And, oh, we were just full of excitement. We wanted to show them, you know, the things that we did in Mississippi to have fun and whatnot, and we just couldn't wait till he got there.

And when he arrived, we weren't disappointed in him, because he was a great storyteller and he told us about Chicago. It was so great that some of the things he told me about Chicago, Lincoln Park and that area — even today, we take our Sunday School picnic at Lincoln Park and North Avenue Beach every summer. And I heard it first from Emmett.

JM: And you had — as a twelve-year-old, you hadn't been to Chicago.

SW: I had been there, but I had never been to, uh, Lincoln Park.

JM: Ah, so you had made a trip up there?

SW: I had, yes.

JM: As a younger child?

SW: Yeah, I had. I — I think I put down 1949, but I think it was early '47.

JM: Um-hmm.

SW: I stayed with my aunt, Aunt Alma, right down the street here.

JM: Um-hmm.

SW: Emmett lived in the basement, he and his mom and, uh, her husband, LeMorris Mallory. And I spent about two weeks here, because one of the great memories of being here — about two p.m. in the evening, Aunt Alma would gather Emmett and I together, and talking about we needed a nap, said "we was tired." I said, "We're not tired!" But that was the thing up North: you had to take a nap in the evening.

JM: Tell me about, um — tell me about Emmett and Wheeler's arrival on your farm and how you welcomed them and what you all set about doing the next few days.

SW: Well, we welcomed everybody. You know, after he told us about Chicago, told us about Riverview and Riverview Park — I couldn't believe Riverview Park. I mean, I just couldn't believe a park was this big, an amusement park. And I heard it from him, and when I saw it the first time, I said, "Man!" He just couldn't explain it, how beautiful it was. And, of course, it shut down in 1967. Many of us cried, because it was such a wonderful place to go to.

And we talked, and then my mother decided who was going to sleep with who. Emmett and I shared a bed. Uh, in my bedroom was two beds. Robert — my brother Robert was in one of the beds. And that Monday morning, it's time to go to the cotton field. And, of course, Emmett, he asked my dad could he go, and my dad said, "Yes." I'm thinking this guy has got to be out of his mind, because I had four years seniority in the cotton field, from the age of eight until twelve, and it was hot. It was a hot job.

But we told him, you know, we showed him the things we had to do in Mississippi. And one of the things we showed him how to — you swim in Mississippi. You just don't jump in the water. The first thing you do is you run the snakes out of the water. Then you go in and swim as long as you want. Make sure the snakes are out, because back in those days we were taught that snakes didn't bite in the water, and we believed that! But I found out later that that's not so. Now, we did what we do in Mississippi. We went down to one of our neighbors' house. He had probably a half-acre of watermelons, and we taught him how to "borrow" some watermelons. And [10:00] we each had one, and he thought that was a wonderful thing, you know.

And then, after that, [clears throat] that Wednesday — a lot of people think that on that Wednesday that we went to the store, and that the men came to our house that same night, but that Wednesday he wanted to go to Greenwood. We had picked cotton all day. We wasn't bored, as someone said, that we was bored and we'd stole our daddy's car and we went into Money. I said, "Get out of here!" The boy that told that, he wasn't even there. And he claimed he helped Emmett steal my dad's car.

JM: In that account, in fact, I think I read that — that false account —

SW: Yeah.

JM: That you even took the car while your dad was preaching and left church to go into town, yeah.

SW: My daddy's last sermon in Mississippi was in 1949. For some reason, he just stopped preaching. And the reason he came to Chicago that summer was he was invited to deliver the eulogy for one of his old parishioners. And that's how Emmett actually got back to Mississippi, traveled back with my dad.

So, we went to this little store, and a lot of things happened. A lot of things in history that's out there that's not true.

JM: Yeah. So, it's the end of the day on Wednesday, and this would be the twenty-fifth now, I guess.

SW: Um, twenty-fourth.

JM: Twenty-fourth. Excuse me.

JB: Joe? Joe, let`s take a little pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We`re rolling again.

JM: I was taking you back to, um, to Wednesday â□□ you were at the twenty-third, excuse me, of August.

SW: Twenty-fourth.

JM: I beg your pardon. Again I`ve made the same mistake. Wednesday, the twenty-fourth of August, um, 1955, and you were out that morning picking cotton.

SW: Picking cotton.

JM: Yeah?

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: And can you take me kind of through the day from there on, and then how that fateful day kind of took its course?

SW: Well, in the morning, we all get up. We have a pretty good breakfast, no cereals. You wouldn`t last an hour in that hot sun with cereal. And Emmett, you know, he went to the cotton fields that Monday. And he came home and he told my mom, he said, "Aunt Lizzie, I can`t stand the heat." So, he was at home all day.

We picked cotton all day. I mean, when I mean all day, all day, from sun to not quite dusk. You had to have enough sunlight to weigh the cotton. And we finished up and arrived at home. We had supper. And then, at that time, we decided to go to Money. My brother Maurice was driving, sixteen at the time, Emmett and I, Wheeler, a young man by the name of Roosevelt Crawford, one of our neighbors.

And we went up to Money, and Maurice parked the car. I mean, we was in Money less than twenty minutes. I mean, people â€¦ what you heard in history it seemed like we were there two hours, lollygagging around. But we walked over to Bryant`s Store, and Wheeler went inside of the store first. And then Emmett went in after Wheeler. And Wheeler came out, and Maurice sent me in behind Emmett to make sure that he didn`t say anything that he shouldn`t, because he just didn`t know the ways of the South.

And the reason he did that â€¦ that Sunday we had gone to Money we bought some fireworks, which was common to us, but was new to him, and he began to set them off inside of the city limit. And that was a no-no. So, that was the reason Maurice sent me in there. And while inside of the store, he â€¦ Emmett didn`t say anything out of line. There was no bubblegum stuff, you know, that we hear in history. He paid for his items, and we walked outside of the store. We`re standing on the â€¦ that would be the south side of the door there.

Carolyn [Bryant] came out, walking north towards her car. And before she can get off the little wooden walkway there, Emmett whistled at her. I mean, usually I try to demonstrate the whistle. It was [demonstrates wolf whistle].

JM: Yeah.

SW: It scared us half to death. And we couldn`t get out of town fast enough. We ran to the car. And Emmett saw our reaction, and it scared him. And we got in the car as fast as we could and got out of town. So, less than twenty minutes, probably been ten minutes.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask you a couple of more points about that, because so many different stories are told about â€¦ about, um, those few minutes. Um, and your group was six: and so, your brother Maurice â€¦

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: Yourself.

SW: Right.

JM: Emmett Till, uh, Roosevelt, uh, Crawford â€¦

SW: Um-hmm, and Wheeler.

JM: Wheeler Parker Jr.

SW: Right.

JM: And â□□

SW: There was another young man. I want to say it was, um, James Parnell, but I'm not too sure. [15:00]

JM: Um-hmm, another neighbor.

SW: I'm not sure â□□

JM: A friend, a neighbor?

SW: Because the other gentlemen that were supposed to go with us, they got left.

JM: Yeah. Um, did â□□ can you paint a little bit of a descriptive picture of what you see in 1955 when you pull open the doors to the Bryant's Store, what it looks like in there?

SW: Well, we pull up, you know. Outside there's a bench there where people â□□ some young men was playing checkers. Wasn't no white men and black men. Trust me. There was no such thing. And inside of the store, you really couldn't see inside too good â□□ you have to get inside, because they've got all of this stuff in the front window and whatnot. And the store â□□ the floors were wooden, of course.

There was a counter. You just couldn't come in there and get in contact with, uh, the person behind the counter, as Carolyn said, that Emmett came in and put his arms around her and asked her for a date. That never happened. But she made that up during the trial. It wasn't under oath, because she knew that if she perjured herself that they could come back and get her, or her lawyer knew. I don't know if she knew that or not, but her lawyer â□□ they were some smart white boys. They ain't that dumb. And she said that â□□ I tell people, say, "In order for that to happen, you have to jump over the counter."

And other stores, mostly, was closed that time of night. I don't know why. Okay, this is it. I've learned later that on Wednesdays all of the stores close early, that for some reason â□□ I found out from my older brother â□□ on Wednesday we could go to the doctor there, on Wednesday. So, this is why, uh, Bryant's Store was the only one open. He wouldn't adhere to the rules of Money, Mississippi. Because actually, one day, when we first heard about him, he'd made one of the store owners close their store, because he had told him, you know, "We're going to close on Wednesday," and he didn't. And he pulled his gun out and made him close. So, this is why we was at Bryant's Store. Ordinarily we wouldn't shop in his store.

JM: When you stepped inside, when your brother Maurice said, "Go in and check on Emmett," when you stepped inside, the moment was not particularly charged with any atmosphere or any confusion or upset emotions inside the store? You just found Emmett about to complete his purchase and

SW: No, he was just looking for the stuff he wanted to buy and he purchased it, and we left. But, uh, less than a minute now, if he said anything before I got in there in that minute's time I don't have no idea. Only Carolyn Bryant can correct that.

JM: You were with him when he completed his purchase?

SW: Yes. Yes, and we left the store together.

JM: And that seemed completely routine?

SW: Right. And she came out behind us. She was walking towards her car to get something. I don't know what she was going to get. And he whistled at her.

JM: Your understanding is that she came out to the car just to go out and retrieve some thing for a reason unrelated to all of you.

SW: She was going to retrieve something, right, but I had no idea what she was going to get.

JM: Yeah.

SW: And he whistled and scared us. He scared us so bad.

JM: Yeah. So, you jumped in the car?

SW: We jumped in the car and, man, we got out of town. Someone said, "Why did you run?" It's just like breaking a window. If you break someone's window back then, you get out of town. We had no idea that he would be killed for whistling at Carolyn Bryant. That didn't even cross our minds. The only thing crossed our minds: If we got caught, then we'd be receive a whipping from that's the only thing.

And Maurice, my brother, we're driving down this Dark Fear Road, this road about seven miles long, east to west. There was no where we lived, there was no north and south highway. You couldn't travel north and south on a gravel road. You either had they had dirt roads, but it went so far, like to the woods line, and that was it. And we drove about two miles. We lived exactly from the railroad tracks to our house was exactly three miles, according to my odometer.

And about two miles down the road, Maurice saw these lights in the rearview mirror, so he thought it was Carolyn`s husband chasing us. So, he stopped the car, and they all jumped out of the car, except me, and ran down through the cotton fields, trying to hide, you know. I figured I could hide in the backseat. But it was our neighbors going home.

But when they got back to the car, this is when Emmett begged us not to tell Daddy what happened. He didn`t want to go home. And we didn`t want him to go home; we were having so much fun and never dreamed that he would be killed for this.

JM: In that moment of the whistle and just after, did you move so quickly that you â□□ did you have any occasion to see if there was any reaction from [20:00] Mrs. Bryant at that moment?

SW: A long look.

JM: Ah.

SW: Right.

JM: Yeah.

SW: She did look. But when you`re scared, you don`t pay too much â□□

JM: [Laughs]

SW: And, you know, it`s in history that we was standing out lollygagging, so to speak, and that he had pictures of his white girlfriend. That never happened. There was no such thing. There was no white picture. There was no picture of anything. Then they said that we dared him to go inside the store. I said, "No." I said, "My nephew that said that, he wasn`t even there." But they got him on film, Eyes on the Prize, saying that. None of that happened.

JM: Yeah, it`s good to â□□ it`s good to take some care, as you`re doing, to bring forth your personal, direct experience with this, because as you`re saying, there are many stories that got attached to that moment that have nothing to do with what actually happened.

SW: Right.

JM: So, and one of them was all of the, as you`ve just said, this reporting that some of you had sort of put Emmett up to this provocative gesture, um, other reports that he had photos of white girls in his wallet, and â□□

SW: Um-hmm, right.

JM: You were there.

SW: No, if he had them, he didn't show them to us, you know. But they try to make out that he was showing them. I said, "No. None of that happened." But it's in history.

JM: Yeah.

SW: And I'm trying to correct it.

JM: Exactly. So, you get back home, and, um, there's a â□□ there's a gentle, friendly conspiracy between you and your cousins and nephews to keep it quiet.

SW: Unusual quiet! But we â□□ we just didn't want him to â□□ you know, he felt Daddy was going to send him home. So, it was unusual quiet, and we just later on, went to bed, getting ready for the next day.

JM: Yeah. You mention in your book that there's a â□□ uh, you say "a neighbor girl" â□□ I don't know how old she was â□□ who, the next day, or maybe even later that â□□ no, I guess it was the next day.

SW: The next day, right. Rutha Mae Crawford.

JM: Comments to you.

SW: Rutha Mae Crawford. She was sixteen at the time.

JM: Okay.

SW: And she told us, because her brother â□□ not her brother â□□ her uncle. Roosevelt Crawford was her uncle, and apparently he told his family what happened. And she told us the next day, said, "Y'all are going to hear some more about this." Said, "We know these people." And, of course, we were apprehensive maybe the first day, but after, you know, Thursday passed, then Friday passed, and nothing happened, we forgot all about it.

JM: Yeah. And by Saturday â□□

SW: Saturday we're getting ready to go to Greenwood. It's â□□ man, it's â□□ first, you secure a ride. And, man, it was something! I mean, you have a joy â□□ it's Christmas morning in August to go to Greenwood and to enjoy the footlong hot dog, the malt, and go to the movies. And it was something. From six p.m. until twelve midnight we would be there in Greenwood, Mississippi, mostly on one street, Johnson Street. Johnson Street.

JM: And I think your older brother, Maurice, was sort of in charge of the car that night.

SW: Maurice had our car.

JM: Yep.

SW: So, I secured a ride with Roosevelt Crawford's brother, John Crawford.

JM: That's right.

SW: And Maurice, Wheeler and Emmett was in the car together with Roosevelt. But we all wound up at the same spot, Johnson Street.

JM: And did y'all come back in those same arrangements that took you down to Greenwood?

SW: We all get home around the same time, because everything shuts down at twelve midnight. And we went to bed that night just like any other night. But then, within an hour, a couple of hours, our world was turned upside down. It was never the same again.

The men, Carolyn's husband, Roy Bryant, J. W. Milam, they came to the house about two a.m. I don't know the exact time, but somewhere in that vicinity. And, of course, the house was four bedrooms. Wheeler's first house [bedroom] was on the west side of the house, where Wheeler was sleeping. They went in there. They awakened Wheeler and said, "This is the wrong boy." Said, "We're looking for the fat boy from Chicago," and they marched around to my bedroom.

And I heard the noise, you know, the loud talking, and I woke up and saw these two white men standing at the foot of my bed. One had a gun, flashlight. Later on found out it was J. W. Milam. He ordered me to lay back down [25:00] and go back to sleep. And he made Emmett get up and dress and marched him out to the truck.

A lot of things happened before they marched him out, because I still didn't know what was going on. Then when my mother came in there, and she was half-talking and half-pleading with them to leave him alone, that she would give them money to leave him alone. Roy kind of hesitated when they heard "money," you know, but J. W. Milam, he didn't hesitate at all. And he's before he left my bedroom he asked my daddy how old was he. Of course, at the time, my daddy told him he was sixty-four. And J. W. said that if you tell anybody about this, you won't live to get sixty-five. And they marched Emmett out. Emmett didn't say one word.

JM: Your mother's your mother kind of knew somehow, maybe.

SW: Well, she knew â€¦ she knew the â€¦ how lowdown those segregationists was. She knew. I didn't know, because I wasn't old enough to know. But she knew. My daddy knew, too. And once they marched him out to the truck, a lady's voice â€¦ she responded when they asked her, "Is this the right one?" A lady responded, "He is." Someone said, "Who was it?" I said, "We believed at that time it was Carolyn Bryant." Nothing has happened in fifty-six years to cause me to change my mind. I still believe it was her. I will go to my grave believing that. Now, she has a chance to rebut that, but she chose not to. And they drove off, and we never saw Emmett alive again. But in that house that night, I never went back to sleep.

My mother, she ran to neighbors, tried to get them to help, the straw boss, and he wouldn't get involved. Chamblee. I don't know how they spell his name. All I know is Mr. Chamblee, one son named Bruce. But she came back to the house. And all my dad could say was, "Uhm, uhm, uhm," because you couldn't go â€¦ couldn't call the police. We didn't have a phone, and there was no police. You had to get hold to the sheriff, and he wasn't going to do anything till the next day.

My mother was half-crying, half-talking, and she finally told my dad, she said, "I can't stay here another night." And he had to get up, drive her to Sumner, where her brother lived. And he dropped her off there for safety, and she stayed there until Emmett's body was found. Then she left Sumner and came to Chicago. She never set foot in that house again.

And so, we was there in Mississippi with no mother, no one to sing. It was terrible, because we didn't know at the time what had happened to Emmett. We was hoping that he wasn't killed, that we would get him back, and a whole lot of emotion was going on then. We got through it, but it was tough. It was tough.

JM: On that Sunday morning, your father, I think, decided that, uh, a phone call needed to be made to Emmett's mother in Chicago.

SW: Right after we contacted the sheriff and let him know what happened, we used the â€¦ the bossman, he's the only one that had a telephone. He let us use his phone. And the boy that claimed that he was at the store the night Emmett â€¦ actually, he arrived at my house that same night Emmett was kidnapped. Now, I didn't know he was in the house. And I asked Wheeler, I said, "How did â€¦ did he come with you all?" He said, "No." So, we don't know who brought him there, but he â€¦ we had a spare bedroom, and he was sleeping in the spare bedroom.

JM: He'd been staying with other family?

SW: Right. He came to Mississippi to stay with his aunt in Greenwood, and he traveled back to our country home that Saturday night. And he was asleep; he never â□□ he never woke up. And I think Wheeler, even today, was glad he never woke up, because he â□□ he had no sense of danger either. Now, he probably would have tried to resist and probably would â□□ he`s the one that made the phone call. He called his mom, which is my oldest sister, Willie Mae, and she got in contact with Mamie, Emmett`s mother.

JM: Obviously, at the time, you wouldn`t have known this, but later, and as you grew older and looked back on this, Mrs. Till was not passive. She took a whole range of steps very quickly â□□

SW: Yes, she did.

JM: That would [30:00] come to shape the events in significant ways.

SW: She did that, yes. She wouldn`t lay down. She wouldn`t â□□ what happened to her son, she was not going to let it rest until she got justice. And she fought down through the years trying to get justice for her son. And, of course, she passed away in 2003 before the federal government decided to reinvestigate the case. But she did what she could. And some things that were said that â□□ I explained in my book, I said, "That`s a mother`s love talking." That`s not the facts. There`s a difference in a mother`s love and facts.

JM: Tell me about those couple of days until the body is discovered and learning that news.

SW: Well, Monday was a normal scheduled workday. But that night we spent â□□ the next two nights â□□ with neighbors. My dad, you know, took us over to Mr. Clint Lewis. He had his own land. We had about five black families around there had their own land, so we stayed with them for a couple of nights, my brother Robert and I. I`m not sure who Maurice stayed with. And after two days, we realized that Daddy`s not afraid, and we`re not afraid, either, so we went back home.

But that Monday we was right back out in the cotton field, picking, wondering, hoping that we would see Emmett alive again. Monday the same thing. Tuesday same thing, picking cotton all day. Wednesday some men came and were talking to my dad, then they left. And we figured at that time something had occurred. They had found him or whatnot. And that`s when they had found his body in the Tallahatchie River about twenty miles north of where we lived.

Actually, they wanted us to bury his body that same day. We had â€œ the body â€œ they shipped it. Tallahatchie County sent it out to Leflore County, where he was kidnapped from, and we had the grave dug, the body there, and the sheriff of Leflore County came, George Smith, and put a stop to it. The undertaker kind of protested, said that he was told to bury the body today. And George Smith said, "I`m the sheriff in Leflore County. There will be no burial here today." And he just jumped in his car and â€œ back in those days, instead of getting rubber, you just spin the wheels and throw gravel all over the place. That stopped that â€œ George Smith.

JM: Do you understand â€œ you wouldn`t have known at the time, but do you understand now how it was that Sheriff Smith intervened to stop the burial â€œ what his motives were in doing that?

SW: Well, number one, uh, from what I gathered down through the years, Leflore County was a little bit more fair than Tallahatchie, and he was not going to have that stain on his record. He did all he could to get these men, but he came up against those segregationists. And the same thing happened in Leflore County when my dad went back for the kidnapping trial. The same thing happened. The same caliber of people said, "No true bill," whatever that means. But he was determined to, to get justice, but â€œ

Probably the sheriff of Tallahatchie was determined until somebody got to him. Because when somebody got to Strider, even he changed during the trial. He testified for the defense, and that`s almost â€œ I don`t know if you`re supposed to do that or not! Doesn`t the sheriff work for the prosecutor? [Laughing] That`s what I see on television.

JM: Oh, I hadn`t known that. Strider testified for the defense?

SW: Yeah.

JM: Can you tell what you know about that?

SW: He was a defense witness about the body that was pulled out of the Tallahatchie River, see. At first he was saying it was a black man. Then he changed it and said, "I can`t tell whether it was white or black."

JM: And that obviously connected to the defense argument that we`re not even sure this is the body of Emmett Till.

SW: Right, um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

SW: Yeah.

JM: Yeah. Huh. It`s interesting that, um â□□ so George Smith, to return to him for just a moment, in some sense, in all this landscape of this ubiquitous and overwhelming white racist culture, George Smith, in some sense, in doing his job as a sheriff, in at least that small moment in time â□□

SW: He tried. Some of them tried.

JM: Um-hmm, yeah. It`s interesting.

SW: But it was too many. It was too many segregationists there to overcome them.

JM: Yeah.

SW: He did what he could.

JM: Yeah.

SW: He arrested them. He had [clears throat] a grand jury hearing on it and whatnot, but the grand jury said â□□ [35:00] I guess they said it was not enough evidence.

JM: Well, that would later for the â□□

SW: Yeah.

JM: For the kidnapping part â□□

SW: Kidnapping. By that point â□□ we had eyewitnesses!

JM: Yes.

SW: And they admitted they took him!

JM: Exactly.

SW: I mean, goodness, this is a done deal! But that shows you how evasive and evil the segregationists was.

JM: Did he have to go in front of a grand jury in the first instance to get the murder indictment?

SW: Oh, yes.

JM: Yeah. Yeah.

SW: But that was, uh â€¦ they â€¦ from what I hear later, it was the debate whether they were going to try to get a murder indictment in Tallahatchie County or, uh, Leflore.

JM: Right.

SW: They felt they had a better chance in Tallahatchie County.

JM: I see. So, they did it there?

SW: Right.

JM: Yeah. Yeah. You obviously didn't go to Chicago for the trial â€¦ I mean, excuse me, for the funeral.

SW: No, I didn't. We had to â€¦ we had to stay for the trial. We â€¦ [clears throat] actually, I'm the one to identify the ring that was taken off the body. They â€¦ my daddy never identified that ring. He said the ring cleared it up. But when the sheriff brought the ring out and was showing it to my daddy, I said, "That's Bobo's ring." That's what we called him.

And, of course, I had to go to Sumner, and I didn't know what I was doing. I was talking to the lawyers, and that's how they trick you up, they get you, you know. But, "This is Emmett's ring," and I was subpoenaed to, you know, to appear as a material witness. But the only reason that I wasn't called, when Mamie came down there, when she was put on the stand, she identified the ring as that being her son's.

JM: Yeah, let me ask you about the trial. You were â€¦ you were, um, anticipating, as you say, anticipating perhaps being called as a witness, and you spent time during the trial waiting in the witness room.

SW: Right.

JM: Can you recall and describe that â€¦ it's a complicated several days and so full of so many things, but can you describe some of the things that come first to your mind when you think about that?

SW: What? Being in the witness room? One, that the bailiff was â€œ looked like he was extraordinarily nice to me and made sure that I was comfortable. And the, the, the cameras and the newspaper reporters and all this swarming around out â€œ even when I would go outside of the witness room, standing there â€œ it was a circus atmosphere.

But I`m thinking, "Oh, this is a done deal. We`re going to get a conviction." I guess I watched too many cowboy movies. The bad guy always got caught. But I`ve learned the lesson about, uh, segregation and racism.

JM: When you think back on, say, the â€œ all of the folks who came to that courthouse, and the men, and it was twelve white men, on that jury, and that judge, [pause] do you ever ask yourself, "Well, how is it that these people can hold this sort of â€œ this, this viewpoint, this, this whole way of thinking about race in the world and all?" Do you â€œ is there any way that â€œ is there any way that you can think about that that makes any sense to you?

SW: After [clears throat] reflecting on it, I â€œ it doesn`t make sense, but I`d say that it, it, it goes deeper than the color of my skin. And, as I reflect, I`d say I think it goes all the way back to the Civil War, where these men lost a way of life, and they blame me because I`m black. I mean, they were the aristocrats of America, and they lost that. And from that, that hatred began to fester, and it`s been passed on down through the generations. Because the kids, they`re not born with that. Someone has to teach them that.

The young men that we played with, they wasn`t racists. I mean â€œ nah! We ate together. We fought together. We`d hunt snakes together â€œ that was their idea, not ours. I thought they was half crazy. But, sooner or later, someone older had to tell them that we were different and that you couldn`t play with â€œ you know, after you get a certain age, we had to separate.

Even my mother told me that the boss â€œ one bossman had a son named Tommy, Tommy Peterson. He used to come and get me to go swimming with him. And my mother said, one day said, "When you get older, you`re going to have to call him Mister." And I said, "Not so. I`m not going to do it." So, that was a change right then in the â€œ in our attitude and thinking. I`m not going to call Tommy Mister.

Unless, of course â€œ now I call a young man Mister â€œ he might be young enough to be my grandson â€œ it depends on what kind of job he has. I don`t go to a high school and call this young boy John. I call him Mister Whoever-he-is because of his position. [40:00] But just to call him Mister because he`s white â€œ oh, nah! That was changing.

JM: Tell me about â€œ

JB: Joe.

JM: Yeah.

JB: Joe, let`s take a little pause.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we`re running again.

JM: Mr. Wright, I`d like to â□□ I`d like to spend a few minutes talking about, um, the, the move your family then makes and the feelings of your father that, "It`s time to go. We`ll leave." Can you describe how that all came to pass and how you made the move to Chicago?

SW: Well, I â□□ [clears throat] I remember after the trial was over and we left that little town, Sumner, looking back, realizing we had no one to help us. The verdict: not guilty. People rejoicing â□□ of course, the other expression, the segregationists rejoicing at the verdict. And we was crushed. Daddy was crushed at that verdict. Yet, he â□□ from what I learned later, he had an idea of what was going to take place. But it still crushed him. And he came home â□□ he had been somewhere that Saturday morning after the verdict and he came back home. He said, "Boys, we can`t stay here any longer. We have to leave."

JM: Your father, in taking the â□□ in taking the decision to testify, had obviously done something that, um, put him and all of you, in that sense, in a very precarious and dangerous position.

SW: Dangerous, yes.

JM: And obviously he understood that and he decided to testify anyway.

SW: He understood that, because the neighbors â□□ the neighbors was trying to convince him not to testify, telling him, said, "They`re going to kill you." And, of course, Medgar Evers â□□ he was down for the NAACP â□□ encouraged my daddy that they were going to do all they could to protect him and whatnot.

So, finally, one day my dad said, "I know one thing. I know I`m going to testify. Whether I live, I don`t know." So, he knew, by testifying, he could be killed for this. But he said, "A man has to do what a man has to do." And he did it. He did something that no other black man had ever done in Mississippi and lived to tell about it.

JM: In years later, months later or years later, did your father ever talk with you about that night? Did he revisit that? Was that something that he â□□?

SW: No. He [clears throat] â□□ he never talked about what happened at that store. We never brought that up, uh, even Emmett`s mother. We never talked about it. She never really asked us what happened. And for years I wouldn`t talk about it. I worked with millwrights, pipe fitters, at Reynolds Metals, and after twenty years they saw me on television. They said, "We had no idea," because I never talked about it.

But Daddy, he put his life on the line. He was so devastated â□□ you know, it`s like sending your son in the care of someone else, and your son come up killed or murdered. It â□□ it destroys you. It â□□ it just tears your heart apart. And he was willing to die to bring justice for Emmett Till.

JM: Can you talk a little bit about your, um, both your mother and your father when they â□□ how they made the transition into a new life in Chicago, because that clearly was so much at odds with the life that they had known and such a big shift under such traumatic and horrible circumstances?

SW: Um-hmm, um-hmm. The life in Mississippi â□□ working was so much different than the North. Mississippi, you had â□□ my dad had the winter off. He could hunt; he could fish. Mississippi, even now, if it`s raining â□□ I love rainy days, because in Mississippi, if it rains, you`ve got a day off and the next day you can go fishing. So, the work was different.

And you`ve got â□□ at that time my dad was sixty-four. We found out later that actually he was, uh, sixty-three at the time, but we went back and got the census records and whatnot. And at that time, when we moved to Argo Summit, there was no job for a sixty-three-year-old in the factories. They just wasn`t going to hire you. He was too old. So, he really couldn`t get the job or make the money that he was making in Mississippi.

He made good money in Mississippi, because we had, uh, we had a bossman that was a German, believe it or not, and he was fair. He was a born-again Christian. He was fair to us. And Daddy always [45:00] cleared money at the end of the year â□□ two thousand. I think in 1948 he cleared about six thousand dollars. I mean, that`s after all your bills are paid! I mean, if you find somebody doing that now, today, that`s a lot of money.

And when he got here, all he could find was, uh, restaurant work, cleaning up and whatnot. The thing that really helped us was my older brother, James. He had a four-flat, and he let my dad and [clears throat] our family live there, rent-free, until my dad moved out in 1964, I believe. That`s why I tell kids, I say, "I never left home." I say, "You`ve got to be out of your mind â□□ my mama cooking every day, washing my clothes." I say, "They moved off and left me!" The place they got wasn`t big enough for me, and I`ve been on my own ever since then.

JM: Tell me about your mother`s experience.

SW: That experience changed her so. I think it took years off of her life. She never could get over that. And she was a churchwoman. She was used to singing every â€œ you could hear her singing every day in Mississippi. I don't remember her singing here â€œ because of that. And she worried about it and she just thought about it.

I think what really helped her one day â€œ she was thinking about it and she said the Spirit of the Lord said, "These men have killed whole families and nothing was done." He said, "I spared your family from being killed." I think that kind of comforted her a little bit, but she never could shake it.

My mother couldn't shake it, and Maurice couldn't shake it, because Maurice thought my dad should have resisted. But resist with what? This man got a gun! What you going resist? How you going resist? Resistance probably would have been death to us all.

And â€œ but she â€œ she held onto her faith in the Lord until she passed away, you know, young. I call seventy young, that's young, I mean. She was seventy [someone coughs] when she passed away. But she was â€œ oh, I tell you!

What did the writer say? He said he took one look at my mother and realized she was uneducated. That's why I don't believe a word he says! How can you look at a person and tell they're uneducated? That's what he said. That's why I put a picture of my mom in there, in the book there, because in African American, uh, culture back then, they were well educated.

She did all the reading, told us about all of the stories and the Lindbergh cases and the kidnappings and Hawkjaw Mullin and how that he, if a prisoner escaped in Mississippi, they'd send Hawkjaw after him, and he always got his man. We heard that from my mother. Warning us never to go on ice in Mississippi. My brother Robert was ice fishing one day, and the ice broke. He almost died. I just said a few words. The only thing I said to him, I said, "You know better! Mama told you not to do that!" But he won't do it anymore. But she was somebody.

JM: You were only twelve, which is pretty young.

SW: Twelve, yes.

JM: Only twelve at the time â€œ that's really pretty young. And you came up and had to make the whole transition and, um, went to school just â€œ

SW: Argo School.

JM: Right down the street?

SW: Right down the street, Argo School, sixth grade.

JM: Not two blocks from where we are now.

SW: Right.

JM: Um, and made your way forward. Um, and I want to ask, um, because I think this goes in important ways, as you explain in the book, to the question of how we try to make sense of these kinds of things. Um, Martin Luther King obviously came to Chicago.

SW: Exactly.

JM: And brought a certain message of a certain strategy to Chicago, as he had earlier argued in other places, too, and that wasn't necessarily a message that really persuaded you at that time. Can you talk a little bit about that?

SW: Well, the message was that [clears throat] he wanted us to march with him in Chicago, Marquette Park, nonviolence. And my friends and I, we were told that, if we got slapped or spit on, we couldn't retaliate.

We said, "No way." Said, "If they slap us, we're going to slap back. You're not going to stop my car and pull me out of it. It's not going to happen." [50:00] Now, a lot of people might get ran â□□ before they got ran over â□□ but I wasn't going to stop my car and let you pull me out, because I know, from Mississippi, what them segregationists do to you. And we â□□ I wasn't a violent person, but if you slap me, I was going to try to slap you back, if I thought I could win. Now, if I thought I couldn't win, I might [laughs] wait my chance.

But I came to, after years â□□ I would say at age twenty-four â□□ I was getting into a lot of scuffles uptown there. Nothing serious â□□ I mean, we didn't carry guns or knives â□□ fistfights or whatnot. And we knew the boys, they'd start drinking beer, and they couldn't help it â□□ they had to call us the n-word â□□ we knew that. And when they did, we â□□ the fight would start â□□ me and my friend, Jesse, who's passed on.

And one night, about age twenty-four, I'm sitting in this tavern, half high. And some people say you don't hear voices, but I heard this this night. It wasn't an audible voice, but I heard it very clear. I was â□□ I had a buzz. And this voice, it didn't say, "I love you," or didn't say, "I know what you've been through with." All I heard was, "If you die in your sins, you're going to hell." That changed my life.

I left that tavern. Within two weeks, I had quit drinking, quit smoking, quit my girlfriend, went to a church, committed my life to Christ. Now I see the nonviolent way is the way to go. If you're going to change things in America, or in any country, it has to be nonviolent. Because if you resort to violence, then the authorities are going to resort to violence, and a lot of people are going to be killed, I mean, in America! I mean, we see it overseas where people are being killed by the government. I haven't forgotten Kent State. It'll happen in America, trust me, even today. So, the nonviolent way is the way to go.

But my early years in Summit, I did a lot of things to keep money in my pocket. My daddy didn't have a lot of money. I stated, I think, after I got my first job, I never asked my daddy for another dollar or whatnot, because I knew he didn't have it. I started shining shoes on the street. I did pretty good. Then I started working in the bowling alley, [clears throat] hard work, harder than picking cotton, but it was just two or three hours long.

JM: Resetting pins? Were you resetting pins?

SW: Spotting, yeah, setting pins. Man, it's just jumping two alleys. You've got to figure [makes sputtering noise] I'm a hundred and five pounds, and you've got to pick up two pins in one hand, but I did that.

But I had a friend of mine â□□ this is what she said: "I've never known him to be broke." I kept money in my pocket. Shining shoes â□□ I shined shoes, actually, after I left the street, I started shining in a shoeshine parlor for another man. Then I shined on my own. I had my own parlor in Wheeler's [Wheeler Parker Jr.'s] barbershop until I got out of high school.

And I finished that and, of course, I got a different job, started [clears throat] about two blocks from here in a place called Dearborn Glass. Stayed there about three years, and then I got a job at Reynolds Metals, working as a laborer. I said, "This is crazy." I said, "I'm going back to school." I said, "This don't make sense."

And I was planning on going to college and I read in the union paper they had an apprenticeship program starting up in the pipe shop, electrical, I believe, machine shop. And I took the test for machine shop, because I had machine shop in high school, but no opening came up. And the guy told me, the personnel manager said, "Well, we've got an opening in pipe shop or electrical."

I thought about electricity and I said [laughing], "My goodness, I'm scared of that stuff." So, I selected the pipe shop. And I â□□ the apprenticeship program was administered by [Union Local] 597 out of Chicago, and I spent from 1968 until 1994 pipefitting, in-house fitter, from '94 to 2004, outside construction. Of course, I retired from Reynolds after twenty-eight years, [55:00] at age fifty-one, or I'd say fifty-one and [laughs] â□□ actually, it was August 26th, 1994.

JM: Is that right?

SW: Yeah, August 26th. I said I should have â€œ just a couple more days until August 28th, the night that Emmett was kidnapped.

JM: In these years, you have lots of extended family here, obviously, people whose lives are all connected to the Emmett Till case, just as yours is, and â€œ

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: Was it something that had a â€œ that had an obvious presence in your lives, and if so, on what kind of frequency? I mean â€œ I mean something that you all publically acknowledged. Obviously, it was all very much a part of your lives, but was it acknowledged amongst you in any circumstances or instances?

SW: Well, most of the family members was quiet about it. They really didn't want to talk about it, especially on my, uh, my mother's side. They just â€œ they were so devastated about it that they never really brought it up at family meetings and reunions or whatnot. On my father's side, they would bring it up sometimes, because [clears throat] it was my uncle that drove us to the train station, you know, to get out of Mississippi. But mostly, it was â€œ we just didn't talk about it that much. It was â€œ it's something about a tragedy like that you â€œ even my friends, when I was out drinking and acting a fool, I never brought it up, but they would. They would bring it up. It's not something I'm going to bring up myself, but if you bring it up, I'll talk about it.

JM: Did you have a close relationship â€œ I mean, can you describe your relationship â€œ obviously, it was close, but can you describe your relationship with Reverend Parker now, as you were both here in Chicago and coming up in age?

SW: Oh, you know, he's a little bit taller than I am. I tried to whip him one time. I didn't do too good.

But during, down through the years â€œ you know, he was in high school. We didn't have too much contact. But after he committed his life to Christ and he would come to this little place â€œ it would be a tavern and restaurant combined â€œ and I would look at him and say, "Man, he's got something I â€œ something I want." I could see the difference. I could see the â€œ every time I would see him, I could see the difference in the joy and the peace that he had. And this is one of the things that I remember most about him, standing up for Jesus Christ, as an example. And I would look at that and say, "That's what I want. That's what I want." I think that was the main, one of the main issues or causes of me to commit my life: I could see the joy that was in him. And, man! Have you ever wakened every morning with a smile on your face? That's something.

And that's the extent â€¦ actually, uh â€¦ then, of course, he got married. I was selected to be the best man. And, of course, he's still married to the â€¦ I mean, that's the way we were trained. We wasn't trained to put them away; we were trained to keep them. [Laughs]

But, of course, now he's my pastor. He's my pastor, and I'm â€¦ at this church, I'm deacon. But I like to tell people I teach the second and third graders. Oh, we have a wonderful time! That's more important than being a deacon. Yeah. So.

JM: Tell me about how, um â€¦ if you would, please â€¦ how, um, the Till case found its way back in a more, uh, involving way into your life?

SW: Well, actually, that started â€¦ for years I wouldn't talk about it, but that started after I began to look at the documentaries. Uh, some of the reporters that I talked to would take what I told them, what happened at the store, and they would merge it with what's in history and just mess the story all up. It's so much stuff out there now, especially on the Internet. I tell the kids, I say, "There's a lot of information on the Internet, but it's not all true."

And after I see these stories and the inaccuracies â€¦ I can name them. Oh, my goodness! That my daddy escaped Mississippi in a coffin. That we dared Emmett to go and say something to Carolyn Bryant. That Emmett didn't whistle â€¦ because some people don't understand, "Why do, why do you get upset?" I get upset because you're calling me a liar! [1:00:00] He whistled! I mean, it's always been that.

And what James Hicks said about my father, that he stood up in court and said, "Thar he." I said, "Dad didn't talk like that." I'm glad I put a portion of that in the â€¦ my dad's testimony â€¦ in the book to tell the world what he said, because I think they've got a play called Thar He that's shown in the South.

And all of these things, you know, that bring back sad memories, and I'm trying my best to correct history and let the people know. It was a sad story, but we got through it, and changes have â€¦ can be made. It depends on the generation that's in charge. The generation under the Jim Crow system, they made the laws and they didn't abide by them. That's sad.

JM: Let me ask you about, um, 2004 and 2005.

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: Can you describe the â€¦ what â€¦ the series of things that happened that caused the case ultimately to be, in a formal sense anyway, reopened? And then, there were some fairly significant events associated with that.

SW: Um-hmm. Well, one of the things was a young filmmaker, Keith Beauchamp. He tried to get me to talk to him for I don't know how long. I refused to talk to him until my wife finally said, "Well, why don't you talk to him?" Said, "He's a young black filmmaker." She said, "If he was a white boy, he'd lay across your threshold and he wouldn't leave until he got the story."

So, I began to tell him about what happened at the store and what happened in my bedroom. And he began to investigate. And he came across the gun that was used and he came across certain, uh, things that took place on a federal level. And he got, uh, a boy by the name of Alvin Sykes involved in it, and they began to piece together some federal violations that had taken place and federal, I guess, uh, charges that could justify them in actually getting into the case. And this is what happened.

Actually, we traveled to Mississippi to talk to Mr. Greenleaf, who was the Northern District State's Attorney — uh, U.S. Attorney — at the time. And I went into his office and I told him the story of what happened. And he was visibly shaken and he promised me at the time that he would do all he could to get the case reinvestigated. And we — I left Mississippi believing that he was going to do that. And he did.

He told me about the prosecutor, Mr. Chatham, I believe, that he never could shake that. He was so disappointed in the verdict that he — that he died, actually before his time. So, a lot of people, white and black, was very upset over what happened to Emmett and what happened to the justice system in Mississippi, but they couldn't do anything about it.

JM: It's a really interesting part of that reopening of the case that, um, it gets launched as a joint effort between the Justice Department, the federal level, —

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: And the state of Mississippi.

SW: Right.

JM: And all these years later, as we know, some things have changed.

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: And interestingly enough, in Leflore County, Mississippi, the prosecutor is now a black woman. [Someone coughs]

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: And I'd like you to talk about — the body is exhumed here in Chicago —

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: DNA testing is done. But then, ultimately, you get a report with no explanation from Mississippi that the case will not be reopened. And I am and I'm particularly in relation to Carolyn Bryant, can you describe that series of events in some detail? Because I know, in your book, you say that I finished that experience not understanding why, even now, that that case was not pursued.

SW: Well, the exhumation you know the state of Mississippi and the federal government combined. The state of Mississippi told us that, unless we could prove to them that the body buried at Burr Oak [Cemetery in Chicago] was Emmett Till, they would not reopen the case if they had enough information. So, that's why we had to do the exhumation, and it was put in motion to exhume his body.

Of course, there was, uh, opposition from so-called one cousin. [1:05:00] We found out later that some of the civil rights, so-called civil rights workers, put her up to that. And because the newspapers are announcing that there's a controversy in the family about the exhumation, some family members I said, "Get out!" I said, "We agreed on that already!" And I said, "The girl that's protesting, she wasn't born then, and the people that was putting her up to it, they just wanted to get some TV time." Because, during that time, there was nine of us that had a say-so; six of them was in my family, so we had six to three right there. So, there was never a controversy.

So, that's why we had to exhume the body. We exhumed, uh, Emmett's body. Uh, we found out some things that that's been reported was that wasn't true. The DNA testing was done. Uh, Wheeler just found out a couple of weeks ago that I was the donor, that, uh he didn't know. I never I never told anyone. I said, "I don't like to go around you know." And we found out that [clears throat] he wasn't castrated, like some had said. I had heard it from a young man. I didn't comment on it, because I didn't know. I didn't go around telling people he was castrated. I didn't know. But I found out he wasn't castrated. I found out that his teeth wasn't knocked out.

But it had to be done to prove to Mississippi. And the DNA testing proved to the state of Mississippi that that was, indeed, Emmett in Burr Oak, buried at Burr Oak. And after we had gone through all of this, gathered all of the information, traced the gun back, the shelling what was used, back to Bryant and Milam, the state of Mississippi still came out, and Joyce Childs said, "There just wasn't enough information to bring an indictment against Carolyn Bryant." We just didn't have enough information, yet we had a witness to put her in that truck, eight o'clock that night. So. Maybe someone else might look at the evidence and say, "Well, we've got enough."

JM: Do you know â□□ did Joyce Childs, who was the local prosecutor at that time down in Mississippi â□□?

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: Do you know if she was able to question Mrs. Bryant? Or was she able to, in any way â□□?

SW: I don't think she questioned her.

JM: Yeah.

SW: Just the FBI.

JM: Yeah.

SW: That was in charge.

JM: Yeah.

SW: Questioned her. He told me that she wanted immunity. Said she would talk, but she wanted immunity from prosecution.

JM: Oh, you've heard that about Mrs. Bryant?

SW: Oh, yeah.

JM: Interesting, interesting.

SW: Yeah, but they wouldn't give it to her.

JM: Right.

SW: Yeah.

JM: Right. Interesting. Huh. Um, how did you feel at the end of that couple of years, having â□□ that's a lot to go through.

SW: Well, I was greatly disappointed that â□□ you know. You just indict her. Make her talk. Give her something to think about. But they didn't do it. From what I understand, Joyce Childs didn't present the case before the grand jury. It was one of her associates. And I don't know whether she was forceful or persuasive in her arguments or â□□ or what.

JM: There'll be another, um, another part of the long legacy of this case that will take you to Washington, uh, subsequent then, in 2000 and â€¦ well, on several occasions â€¦

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: And that's the â€¦ what some persons call the Till Bill.

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: Can you talk about the genesis of that legislation and kind of your perspective on its course and its form and â€¦ ?

SW: Well, it started with, uh, Alvin Sykes out of, uh, Kansas City, Missouri. He pursued the case and he, uh â€¦ apparently he had connections with the senator from Kansas City, and they pursued to get the Till Bill passed. It's a bill that's designed to set aside funding to go after cold cases that have not been settled. And they began to pursue that and they began to talk about it.

I [clears throat] â€¦ I probably felt the same way when they said, "We're going to try to reopen this case." I said, "Ah, it'll never happen." And as they began to pursue, and phone calls were made, and one day I got a call, said, "They're going to have a vote on the Till Bill. [1:10:00] Can you come to Washington?"

So, my wife and I, we jumped in our car and we drove to Washington. We were sitting in the gallery when they were debating the bill. But that day it wasn't passed. They had one holdout senator. And later on, a few months later, they came together and they passed the Till Bill, setting aside I think it was a million dollars to go after cold cases in honor of Emmett Till. I think this is â€¦ this is great legislation, because a young man was killed for no reason at all, and this is one way to remember him, to show the world.

And the only thing else that I probably would â€¦ is looking for, I doubt if it would happen: the state of Mississippi or the county of Leflore come out and say the verdict was unjust. I don't think they have enough nerve to say that. Even if they don't have enough nerve, just give me the permission to say it for them. I'll speak for them. I'll tell them: the verdict was unjust. If the verdict was just, if there was a guilty verdict, we wouldn't be sitting here today talking about Emmett Till. We would have forgotten about it by now. But because of that verdict, Emmett's still â€¦ memory and legacy is still alive.

JM: John, can we pause just for a â€¦?

JB: Yeah. Good idea.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're set.

JM: We've had a brief pause and, um â€¦ Mr. Wright, I wanted to ask about â€¦ you've done so much in your book, as a central thrust of your book, to set the record down as itâ€¦

SW: Um-hmm.

JM: As events actually happened and make sure that the circumstances of the Till case are understood for what they were. Um, I want to talk a little bit about maybe some of the reasons why in the more â€¦ not just popular telling, but then what became even scholarly tellings, frankly â€¦ the more formal, academic tellings of the circumstances of the Till case, um, things were so askew in some key details. And, in that connection, I want to ask you about your perspective on both James Hicks and William Bradford Huie, Hicks being, in fact, an African American journalist who covered the case in Sumner in '55 for the black press, and then Huie, who wrote a piece in the January '56 issue of Look magazine.

SW: Um-hmm. James Hicks â€¦ he's the black reporter. I think at the time he worked for the African American press. And he put out â€¦ I'm not sure exactly when he came out with this, giving my daddy's testimony, that my daddy stood up, pointed at J. W. Milam, and said, "Thar he." This is his [], that my dad said, "Thar he." But my daddy didn't talk like that. I have a copy of the trial transcript. My dad stood up and said, "There he is." And there's Mr. Bryant sitting next to him.

And things like that â€¦ then James Hicks said he helped my daddy escape Mississippi in a coffin. He began to describe to, uh, a reporter or someone from Washington University in St. Louis there how that he and Medgar Evers was helping my daddy escape and telling how fast he was driving one way, and Medgar Evers driving seventy-five miles an hour the next way â€¦ I don't know why he knew all of this â€¦ and that they had put my dad in a coffin and they drove him to Memphis, Tennessee, to catch the train there. So, I asked the question, I said, "Mose [Moses] Wright had three sons there. How did they get out? Did they have four coffins?"

So, it's inaccuracies like this that I'm trying to correct. James Hicks â€¦ they ask me, say, "Why did he say that?" I say, "He wanted the world to think that he was an expert on the Emmett Till case, and he came up with that preposterous idea."

William Bradford Huie â I have no confidence in his writing when he wrote a piece that said that he took one look at my mother and realized she was uneducated. Then he said that he interviewed us here in Argo and that we showed him where Carolyn Bryant lived â not Carolyn â where his white girlfriend lived, and, you know, we were discussing, remarked did he ever go to bed with her. I said, "Get out of here! We never talked to him! He never interviewed us!" But he got away with it. I don't know how much money he made off it, but these things he put out there.

So, I don't believe [1:15:00] practically anything he said, even the interview with Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam. I don't believe what all he said about what took place. I don't need him to say that to convince me that J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant killed Emmett Till. I don't need that. I knew that before he wrote that piece. But why he did it â some say he was a checkbook journalist, whatever that means. But he did it. He put a lot of inaccuracies out there. I'm trying to correct it, set the record straight.

I just got a call from a lady, wanting me to endorse a play in Virginia â Hampton, Virginia. She told me what was in the play. I said, "I don't endorse stuff like that. It's not true. I will not speak to the press to give you any publicity on that." Because they had in this play that Emmett was trying to say "bubblegum" and that we put him up to doing what he did. And she thanked me, said, "You're awful brave." I don't have to be brave to say that. I just tell you the way it is. If it's not true, I'm not going to endorse it. Tell the truth or shut up.

JM: There's one other â another of these inaccuracies I don't think we've touched on. And it's an important one, and I wanted to ask you about it. There was even an account, um, that circulated that, um, that your brother, Maurice, had, uh, had taken fifty cents â had, had, had been persuaded by fifty cents of store credit from the Bryant Store to, uh, to assist in locating your house.

SW: Right. I [clears throat] â I read that in a magazine, Emerge Magazine, in 1995. I think that's the first time I've seen that in print, and I was shocked that that was out there, that Maurice, for fifty cents store credit, showed Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam where we lived. Now, all the reports I've heard, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam wasn't home from that Wednesday night until that Friday night. But this is not true. We had no credit at Roy Bryant's store. We hardly ever went in there. If we was â if the other stores had been open, we would have gone somewhere else. But that was the only store open that night. Plus, they didn't give us credit. Trust me. No credit. Cash only.

JM: As you think back on, uh, how you make your way with all this, can you talk a little bit about how, um, your view of the, uh, indispensability of nonviolence kind of became your perspective on this question and how you think about that issue now?

SW: What happened at age twenty-four when Dr. King came to town in 1966, he wanted us to march. I said, "No way," because they said if you're slapped, you can't slap back. I wasn't a proponent of nonviolence at the time. I thought that if a man slaps you, you have a right to protect yourself, to fight back.

But then, at age twenty-four, I was after I don't know if we had had a fight that night or not. It wasn't nothing serious. No one was seriously hurt. Uh, I was sitting in the tavern about two a.m. and I heard this voice. It wasn't an audible voice, but I heard this voice. I heard this it didn't say you know, a lot of people say, "Oh, he said." He didn't say he loved me or he didn't say, "I know what you've been through." But this is what I heard: He said, "If you die in your sins, you're going to hell." And that changed my life forever.

Within two weeks I haven't had a drink since. That was 1967 February, 1967. I took my cigarettes; I threw them in the garbage. I called my girlfriend over to my house; I laid her off, quit her. Because church back then couldn't kiss a girl, what are you going to do with her? And I just committed my life to Christ. And I would catch the bus and go to Chicago to stay in a hot church service, because when I was out in the world, I was having so much fun that I knew that if I had gone back, I would never make it back.

And ever since then I've never had really a fight. I've been in a couple of tussles. A couple of young boys tried to you know how sixteen-year-olds are. They kind of rise up and reflex, reflexively I didn't hit them. I just grabbed them and put a chokehold on them, and they couldn't get away, and it embarrassed them. That's about all.

And I've been walking with [1:20:00] Jesus Christ since 1967, and that's what changed my perspective to love your enemy, love one another, treat others as you want to be treated. And that's the way I live now. I treat others the way I want to be treated.

JM: You've written that, um, it became necessary for you to do something that was very difficult, but you felt ultimately just necessary for you, and that was to forgive Bryant and Milam. And I'm wondering what you mean exactly when you say that, and how and what precisely you think about in your faith and your sense of ethics? What does that mean to forgive them in a context like this?

SW: Well, they did a great crime against my family, against Emmett, and when things like that happen to you, you want vengeance. You want to get even. And usually you can't get even with the people that have committed this crime against you, but you take it out on someone else. Now, you're going to do that until you are able to forgive those people for doing it. And forgiveness in the sense that I'm not saying that justice shouldn't come your way I'm not going to pursue it for vengeance, that I'm going to leave vengeance to Almighty God and justice to the government. And I'm going to use the rest of my life because I don't want to get up I know a lot of people don't believe in heaven and hell or final judgment. I don't want him to get up there in judgment, and I have something against him. I don't want that to happen. God said, "If you don't forgive them, I won't forgive you."

I've heard it explained different ways and whatnot, but it's a difficult process. It's not something that's going to happen overnight. It's something that, as you submit your will to forgive, that God will help you through it. And pretty soon you forget about, you know, the hurt, the anger and whatnot, and the vengeance. You don't seek vengeance now; you just seek justice. That's what I mean by forgiveness.

JM: What is this kind of a difficult question, in some ways, to answer maybe, but what set of emotions do you feel when you think back about all of this? What's the mixture of feelings that you have?

SW: It depends on what brings those, uh, feelings back. It could be I was just in Houston about a month ago. I smelled the honeysuckle and I said to my nephew, "Oh, that's the honeysuckle!" He said, "What is that?" I said, "Everybody knows what a honeysuckle is." But the smell of that flower brings back the time I lived in Mississippi. A certain noise, a car a car going down the street, because I lay there that night, and every car that I would hear, I thought it was, uh, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant bringing Emmett back.

And it brings back emotions. When things bad happen to you, your heart is broken. It's just it's shattered. And you've got to have something to heal that. But in each broken heart I love to tell the kids this, especially the ones that call themselves courting, I say, "When you have a broken heart, the heart heals, but it leaves scar tissue."

And a certain bump will bring back that night. It'll bring back the hurt. It'll bring back the grief that we had. But it'll pass. But it still comes back. But I feel that if I hadn't forgiven these people, once it came back, I would try to act it out on probably someone else. That's the value of forgiving.

And I tell the kids, I said, "There`s a story in the Old Testament, the eighteenth chapter of Jeremiah, where the Lord sent Jeremiah to the potter`s house. He said, âI`m going to cause you to hear my word there. He saw the potter making a vessel, and the vessel was marred in his hand." And I said, "That was my life. I was marred. I was broken. But I went to the Potter`s house, and the Potter made me over again, now maybe to smile."

JM: How do you measure the, um, the wider legacy of the Emmett Till case in our nation`s history and our sense of transition or some measure of transition in our race relations and our habits and mores and opinions? [1:25:00]

SW: I`ve seen a lot of changes. The Emmett Till case brought about a lot of changes in the laws, in federal law mostly. Thank God federal law trumps state law! We see a lot of changes there. But men`s hearts â I don`t see too much change there. Laws can`t change a man`s heart. Relationship is better. I see things happening now that I never dreamed that would happen. I don`t know whether it`s good or bad, but it`s happening.

It`s getting better, but then I see racism. It`s alive. Like I`ve said many times, once you`ve seen a water moccasin you know it when you see it. You know the difference. And Chicago, great city, but I see it here. But it`s not â under the Jim Crow system, it was in your face. It was forced upon you. Even if you had the money, you couldn`t move to a better neighborhood. Now, in order to have the better life in America, you have to have the money.

But it`s getting better. As each generation comes on the scene, they see the injustices that have taken place and they hear about Emmett, hopefully, because a lot of the states are trying to bury that. They don`t want that â the school system don`t want that known to their children. They`re trying to bury it. But once they find out what happened in 1955 to Emmett Till, they are horrified. And they promise and they make it their life legacy to bring about a change, bring about a change.

Like the â I don`t know the gentleman`s name [clears throat] that prosecuted the Ku Klux Klansmen that bombed the churches in Birmingham, but he said he was sitting in college when he saw that. He`s from Birmingham. And he said it made him sick to his stomach, a young law student. Yet, he finished his course, came out of school, and prosecuted those people that did that. This is all we`re looking for. And it`s happening. It`s taking place slowly, but hopefully the economic plight now doesn`t slow it down. That has a lot to do with it also.

JM: Yeah. You mention the honeysuckle in Houston. Do you ever â have you ever felt an impulse to go back to Mississippi? Does that call you at all?

SW: The â would you repeat the question?

JM: Sure. You mention honeysuckle â

SW: Um-hmm, the honeysuckle.

JM: In Houston â□□

SW: Right.

JM: And how it just focused memory of Mississippi.

SW: Just â□□ um.

JM: In all these years, have you ever felt any impulse to go back to Mississippi as it â□□ ?

SW: To live?

JM: To live, to visit.

SW: Oh, I go back to visit.

JM: I know you do, but I â□□ I guess, in a way, what I`m asking, more directly put, is when you think of that place, what`s the mix of, what`s the mix of feelings?

SW: Well, it`s â□□ in one sense, it`s a place of horror. But, in another sense, it was a place where I was born and raised, and all of my childhood â□□ the good memories, they`re still there, and the bad memories. And if I go down Dark Fear Road now, my wife says a whole new spirit comes over me, because one day I told her, I said, "I`m from this dirt." But to live â□□ I don`t think so. I wouldn`t want to. It`s something like Florida â□□ good place to visit. I don`t want to live there. I mean, not in the sense â□□ not trying to put Florida in the sense of â□□ but it`s the sense of beautiful there, but then here come the bugs! [Laughs]

JM: Mr. Wright, you`ve been so generous with all your time and accommodating us. I just want to check in with you one last time. Are there things that we haven`t talked about that you`d like to finish up here with today?

SW: Oh, I â□□ [clears throat] if I just â□□ I`ve talked about it, finished up with the young people.

JM: Um-hmm.

SW: Go to school. Listen to your teacher. Respect your elders. Love one another. Fight for one another. You can change the system. What I see coming is horrible but, hopefully, somebody will wake up and say, "Hey, we`re in this together." [1:30:00]

We saw some things that took place in Chicago this year to show to Chicagoans how lowdown their police are, but, especially the bartender that was beaten by this one policeman, I'm sitting here horrified how they're trying to get this guy off. I said, "I can't believe this!" It doesn't matter to me whether you're black or whether you're white, if you commit the crime, you should do the time. I've seen cases down through the years black men have committed crime, and they got away with it. I said, "It's not right. It's not right." You do the crime, do the time.

JM: It's been an honor and a privilege to be with you. Thank you.

SW: Thank you.

JM: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:30:56]

END OF INTERVIEW