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John Barnett

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ORAL HISTORY

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This is an interview of John Barnett, 98, of Charleston, by John Morgan of The Charleston Gazette on Sept. 14, 1978.

Q: I will begin by asking how old you are.

A: 22nd of this December coming, I'll be 99. 22nd of this December coming, I'll be 99.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born out from a little town they call Opelika (Alabama) on old man John Shield's plantation.

Q: Do you remember much about your childhood?

A: Well, no more than me and his children used to sleep and eat together and play together. And if we do anything wrong, their mother would whip me, and I better not tell my mother when I get back home or she would whip me.

Q: Now that was the children of old man John Shields?

A: That's right.

Q: S-H-I-E-L-D-S?

A: I can't spell it for you.

Q: You lived with your mother?

A: Yes, sir, my mother was living.

Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

A: Yes sir, I had one brother, and I had two sisters.

Q: Did you have a good place to sleep?

A: Oh, yes sir, such as it was.

Q: Plenty of good food?

A: Yes sir, such as it was. Sometimes we had it, and then again we didn't.

Q: Good clothes to wear?

A: Sometimes we had them, and sometimes we didn't.

Q: Did you go to school as a boy?

A: No sir, never did go to school.

Q: Never did.

A: No sir, never go to school at all. She had to work in the field all the time. You see my mother and my dad weren't married.

Q: They were not married.

A: They wasn't married. And my mother passed away when I was six years old, and my oldest sister taken me as a mother. Want to go on from there?

Q: Yes.

A: All right, set right there then.

Q: Okay.

A: She took me as her mother, and I had to nurse for her while she go to the fields to work. And she was only working for 50 cents a day. And the same boy, me and him that eat and slept together, one morning we was out there in the yard making sandhouses on our feet. He tore mine down and I bust him in the nose. And my sister told me, said Hon, I've not got time to whip you this morning, so I have me some switches here this evening then I come at almost sundown, and I know she was going to tear me up.

A man came by there on his buggy, and I got behind that man's buggy, and when it got stopped, says whoa, my heart got right in my mouth. He said come around here little boy and get in this buggy with me. Well, I couldn't go back, and I was scared to get in that buggy, but I got in that buggy with him and went home, a man named Lewis Mathis. And when we got hime with him, he had two

sons, one of them was a grown man, and the other boy was just a little older than I was.

He allowed to him, said "Luke, I got you a little nigger." Luke said, "Well I'm glad he is, daddy, but I can whip him. But he didn't know I was big enough to fight too, but he was a big old boy. And I stayed with that man four years.

Q: You left your sister and stayed with this man?

A: When she told me she would have some switches there I run away from her. Got behind his buggy.

Q: That was after you busted this other boy in the nose?

A: That's right.

Q: That was the Shields boy.

A: That's right. And I knowed what she was to do that night, so I ran away from her. And I had been all over this world, everywhere. And I come up in a town they called Birmingham. And when I made up my mind to go home, to see who did I have kin to me living, I was 56 years old right there in Huntington, West Virginia.

Q: Well, now when you left your sister to stay with this man, you stayed with him four years you say?

A: Yes sir.

Q: And then what did you do?

A: I left him and went to a colored man. I stayed with him on his farm.

Q: This was all in Alabama?

A: Yes sir, that was all in Alabama. And then I left him, run away from him and come to Birmingham. And I stayed in Birmingham,

I left Birmingham when I was around about 21 years old as near as I can guess at it. And I got with the Big Top Show, and I followed them a long time. When I left the show, and when I came back to Birmingham, then I started to gambling. I did everyting but steal. I didn't steal anything.

Q: Did you ever get in any trouble?

A: Yes sir, yes I did. I fit one case there in Birmingham three long years.

Q: What was that for?

A: Over a woman. Yes sir.

Q: Did you ever kill anybody?

A: Yes sir. That's what the trouble was about. I killed that man.

Q: Did you have to go trial for that?

A: Fit the case three years. I had five lawyers, they told me every day of my life, said John they'll never hang you, because you killed the dirtiest man in town.

Q: How did you kill him?

A: Well, I shot him with an arrow head (not clear).

Q: With an arrow head?

A: An arrow head. One of these British bulldogs loaded on the side.

Q: A pistol.

A: Yes sir.

Q: Called an hour head.

A: That's what they called them then. Some of them had the arrow (owl?) head on the handle.

Q: Oh it's a flintlock type.

A: I guess.

Q: Did it make a spark?

A: You break it down. One of these breakdowns. Wasn't no springs to it.

Q: Did you put powder and a ball in it?

A: No, it had cartridges, but it was a breakdown, loaded on the side.

Q: Did you hold it in your hand?

A: That's right.

Q: How many times did you shoot him?

A: Five, no it shot five times, but I didn't shoot him but three times.

Q: You killed him instantly?

A: Well, he died before he got home. But I couldn't stay there. My lawyer cleared me. But they told me that we done cleared you, but you got to leave here. So I did.

Q: Now did you kill him in self defense or . . .?

A: Well, he hit me three licks across my shoulder. All the boys told me not to go with her. You couldn't tell her from white.

Q: She was part black?

A: That's right. She was working for him. Now my lawyers told me every day, sometimes two and three times a week, it was _____, _____, and _____, a father and two boys.

Q: That's the name _____?

A: That's right. _____ and Adams. They were two buddies. And all five of them were telling me when they came to see me. Did

business. Did business. All of the boys were hustling then, gathering, you know. Leave money downstairs for them to give me. Sometimes the old jailer didn't want to give it to me, but they made him do it. But now when they cleared me, the last trial that I go all through with, they told me just like this: They said: John this here is your last trial. So go. We're going to clear you, but you can't stay here. If you do the mob will get you.

Q: This was in Birmingham?

A: . . . in the city.

Q: But you shot the man in Birmingham?

A: That's right. On 28th Street and Brotherhood. That's right.

Q: How old were you then?

A: Well, I was turning into my twenties. Somewhere along there. . . But anyhow they told me that morning, said this is your last trial, said that man's wife going to clear you. This man lived on the south side, nothing on the south side then but millionaires, wasn't no Negroes on that side. And his wife help. That's what cleared me.

Q: I see.

A: But after they cleared me I stayed with this man who was a superintendent. I stayed in his house a little better than a week until he got a chance to get me to a depot to get me away from here.

Q: Now I believe you killed another man?

A: That's right, right here in this town.

Q: In Birmingham?

A: No, in this town (Charleston).

Q: Well, I believe, wasn't there another man while you were young?

A: Oh, yeah. . . . It was at (Walter's Tunnel Camp?) It was a grade job. That's right.

Q: It was a what?

A: It was a grade job, and a man was cutting a tunnel there.

Q: Oh I see. A railroad grade job.

A: That's right. . . .

Q: Well, I believe, how did you kill him?

A: Well, there was intent to rob me. I had them broke at the skin game, you know? A woman I used to live was on that job. And a woman told me about they was fixin' to rob me when I made the money, and Lizzie tried to get me not to go out but I just had the guts. I knew I had to leave there. So when I come out, he say here he is, just like that. But they done made four shots at me. But I stepped up beside the shanty, and they thought I was runnin' down the alley, and they was shooting that away, and I hit him. That was in Lewisburg, Tenn., wasn't it?

Q: I don't know.

A: I thought maybe you had heard that?

Q: Well, I heard that you stabbed somebody.

A: No, I didn't never kill nobody like that.

Q: Well, how did you kill this man?

A: I shot him.

Q: You shot him?

A: That's right.

Q: Had you gun right with you?

A: That's right.

Q: About how old were you then? That was while you were still very young in your twenties?

A: That's right.

Q: Now you think that was Lewisburg, Tenn?

A: It was Lewisburg, Tenn. At. . . tunnel. . . Because I didn't stay in jail but for about a couple of months, because he was a bad character and that camp had a bad name. Every man that would go in that camp and win that money, they would rob him.

Q: What kind of a camp was it? Railroad?

A: Railroad, L & N, cutting a tunnel through there.

Q: L & N.

A: That's right.

Q: Okay, what happened after that, did you. . ?

A: I left there. I got with the Big Top Show. I stayed, I was with the Big Top Show eight years. That's when I went all over the world. See, I ran away from my sister when I was 13 years old.

Q: Did you go overseas?

A: I went all over the world.

Q: Over to Europe?

A: I have been all over the world.

Q: Can you remember any place particularly that you liked while you were . . . ?

A: Well, yes sir, I did not like none of them places, which is the reason I came back to the United States when I quit the show.

Q: Really?

A: I didn't like none of them.

Q: You traveled, when you were going all over the world, you were with the circus?

Q: What were you doing with the circus?

A: I was a singer.

Q: Singer?

A: Singer and dancer. I was a comedian.

Q: What kind of a routine did you have? Did you . . .

A: It was a bunch of just stage dancing. Then I danced, did you ever remember this doctor they called Dr. Addie? Had medicine soap, called. . . soap. I danced for him four years.

Q: Was he sort of a medicine man?

A: That is right. He had. . . that away and that away. And it was full, six of them, three boys and three girls. We danced for him four years.

Now when I first come into West Virginia, I was a young man, but I have told people lots of times I was around about 19, but I just didn't name that to you, do you understand? Because I was a little older than that, I know, but I was a young boy.

The first job that I had that was steady in life, I went to work for the C & O at 23 at Russell, Ky., and I worked for the C & O 33 years. That's why I retired, and I quit gambling, went into the church, been in the church ever since.

Q: What did you do on the railroad?

A: Picked tap. All work, laid that steel. . . put in ties.

Q: You used a pick?

A: Yes sir, to tap the ties.

Q: To tap the ties?

A: That's right. . . I worked for the C & O 33 years, and I have been retired now, going on 24 years. Never been married in my life.

Q: Why is that?

A: Well, that woman what I'm tell you about now, knocked all the run out of me. I said then, and I hit the ground, that I will never T down to another one in my life, and I haven't yet. . . I got my diploma from them. They give me my diploma. I have had my diploma. . . Let them go.

Q: You don't want one now.

A: For a few minutes. . . Now you asked me for the truth. All right, I'm going to tell it to you.

Q: That's all I want, the truth.

A: That's right.

Q: What church do you belong to?

A: Metropolitan Church.

Q: Right here in town?

A: Yes sir. It was a man from Morris Harvey College that was in my church one Sunday too. He made a good speech there.

Q: Now after you came here - it hasn't been too long ago.

A: Killed another one.

Q: Yes sir, could you tell me about that?

A: You didn't ask me about it. . . He broke in my house on me.

Yes, he broke in my house on me. Then he was a bad character. Him and all his brothers. He was sitting in the pool room on the night when the man gave me \$400 that I had won on the ball game. Now he knows that I don't take up no kind of time with him. Now I usually didn't be out here in the street at night, but I stayed out there late that night to get my money. . . from. . . that borrowed \$20, \$40, \$50 from me. It got to the place they knew I would be going in when it gets dark. That's the time. . . coming into the pool room. That's the reason I was there.

Then he knowed I wasn't scared of him, and I knowed he wasn't scared of me, but I didn't have the least idea about him messing with me, you know. And but when I got out there where I lived at, I lived on Donnally and Court, and it was big house right across in front of me, that's he living right behind it, him and his brother and daddy. Now he was on that side of the street that my house was on and Joe Howard's store was on the corner. One man said yonder is that sucker standing over there by the church, said what is he standing over there for? I went on up the street on his side of the house, got above him, then I crossed over because I was right in front of my gate, his house was right in front of my gate. When I crossed over and got inside my gate and went upon my porch, he says wait a minute, John, said I got something to tell you. I said you ain't got nothing to tell me.

I didn't have my pistol with me, but I had my hand sitting up just like that (indicates just over his belt with right hand) in my pocket, likewise on the hammer of my pistol. So he stopped. He didn't. . . I said you stay right where you are. So he stopped.

Q: Did you know who he was?

A: Sure, I knowed him. That's why I told him to stay there.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: I forget them boys' names. yeah, I know their names, but I just can't call their names now. I knowed all three of them. Every time they arrest them here in town, it take four or five policemen to arrest them. All of them were like that. And they had found a whole lot of them old black people out there with fingerprints under their neck. Been robbed. He was doing it. They broke in Joe Howard's store. You know Joe Howard?

Q: . . . Joe Howard?

A: Yes, used to have a grocery store out there. You know where Court Street is and Donnally?

Q: Yeah.

A: Going up Court Street that way to the grocery store right on the corner. That's where Joe Howard's store is at.

Q: Yeah, I think I know where that is.

A: That's right. That's right. Now I was living in the house right behind the church. Now I'm laying in bed that night, right around between 10 and 11 o'clock, listening to the ball game. He was much of a man, and I had my back door fastened with one of them silver-handled case knives. And when he hit that back door why my bed done just something like that (demonstrates shaking of bed) and I'm upstairs, and some big truck would go by like that you know. And it was a big truck going by at the time he hit that door. I just knowed that was a truck making that vibration, while I was listening to the ball game.

Q: Not a vibration?

A: That's right.

In a few minutes he hits it again and broke the knife off, and the knife fell in the floor, and I says to myself it wasn't no truck. I says this here is in this house. So I came out of my room. I had a little short hallway. I got to the end of the hallway, there is a window there. And a platform where you step on to go down in the kitchen. And I found the platform, and the back door was open, and I could look over the icebox, the frigidaire there, and he done stepped right up to this door. And the next step up from the stairway would have been in the kitchen. And if I had of got there, he would have got his hand on me. And one mind says you better be sure to make a warning shot. I did. I shot right over the icebox.

Q: Didn't shoot at him?

A: No, no, I ain't seen him, couldn't see him. He was standing right at the door, right at the stairway.

Q: You didn't know exactly where he was then.

A: Yeah, I know where he was. I'm telling you ain't I?

Q: Yeah.

A: But he was standing right there at the stairway and the stove right there, you know.

Q: You could hear him. You knew he went. . .

A: I know somebody had to be in there.

Q: I see.

A: But you know I made that warning shot.

Q: Yeah.

A: When I made that warning shot, he stepped out with his hand like that (puts right hand on forehead and shades his eyes in the manner of a man looking into a bright light). Said hey John, don't shoot no more, I want to tell you something. That's when I shot him. Now, if I had of let him got to me that would have been all of me.

Q: Because you knew him that well?

A: I knowed him. Whole lot. . . thought them boys was doing that. But couldn't never catch them doing it. See, I told Joe Howard twice that I seen them coming out of the store some night when I be coming from the ball game at Cincinnati at two and three o'clock in the morning. No. Four would get in here then around that time of night. Joe Howard told me, said no I don't believe it did, and then he caught them. Joe Howard is down there on Summers Street now.

Q: He still has his store there?

A: No, ain't nothing out there.

Q: What, urban renewal?

A: That's right, no, highways. See my church, the one that was on the corner, right straight up the street from here.

Q: Yeah.

A: But anyhow, one mind told me. . . I hit him right here. . .

Q: Right in the neck?

A: Yeah, a bullet lodged. . . Listen here now. He fell right across the stairway there where I have to come down the steps to go to the front door. I stepped over him, and he was laying there groaning. One mind said well, you've got to notify so if he

startts to get up. . . so I stepped over him and made it to the door. And just as I walk out on the porch, colored people living right above me she says I already called them Mr. Barnett I seen when he come around my house, seen him when he went upon your back porch.

Well, I stood there until they got there. So when the law got there, they all knowed him, and the law knowed me. When they got there, these up above me asked this woman about it. I says back here. He says, that you, John, don't you shoot me. They came with a whole lot of foolishness just like that, but I didn't want to have no foolishness. And so when he opened that gate and come on in I said here take my pistol, and he said, no you keep it, I don't want it.

Just like that. See they knowed who he was. But he went up to her and. . .said, well John where he at? I said he's back in there. Now all three of them walked in there. One of them says this here is the son of a-excuse me lady-that son of a bitch knocked me in the head. Took us all to the. . . All of them was bad people. Boy I forget them folks name. You might know them if I could call their names. That's just the way that was. Didn't even lock me up. Wasn't that. . .?

Q: It sounds like it. Did you have any kind of trial?

A: I had to go to court that Monday morning. That was all. The same jury is down there now, I believe.

Q: Well, did they drop the charges against you?. . .They did?

A: That's right. I haven't had no more trouble. I never did get away from my mother's teachings. Never did.

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Q: (After pause) Say that again.

A: I said if I didn't beat a man out of his money by gambling with him, I didn't try to rob him. And I didn't steal from nobody. I made good friends in Cincinnati when I be going to the ball game. People, you know I make friends with them. All of them be drinking, sometimes they say where you going to stay at night? I say I ain't found none. Come on and go home with me, just like that. And they get up Monday morning and go to work. Some of them will try me. They leave money in the kitchen there. One time a woman left \$10. I picked the \$10 up and put in her pillow case. And I didn't go back down there that next week for the game. It was two weeks before I went. And so when I did go, a man said my wife going to shoot you when you get there. She is going home with me now. She is red hot with you. She says she forgot and left her \$10 laying on the bed.

I said she ain't going to have to shoot me about no \$10, I said I got money I'm going to pay her for that \$10. Just like that. I'm going to pay it. She said well you got my money. I said did you look in your pillow case? She said what? I said did you look in your pillow case? Go on and look in her pillow case and there was her money. I said how often do you wash your pillow cases? That's where I put it. She said well God knows I thought you took it. That's right.

Q: Let me ask you this, Are you sorry you killed those three men?

A: Yes sir, from the bottom of my heart. I have come to be a Christian man. That's the first thing I am faced with to God. That's right. That's right. But if I hadn't of done it, I wouldn't have been here today. That's the reason I said. . . and I think about my mother sometimes, and I can't hardly hold myself.

Q: You loved your mother, didn't you?

A: I can't hardly hold myself, I tell you. I was awful young when she died, but here is the way she died. You see my uncle always would carry me to town on his first bale of cotton. that morning she had been sick I reckon about two months. She got sick the first of the fall. I heard her tell him, said Jessie, I understood her to say don't carry Hon with you today. He allowed to her, how can I get away from him. Well just take him up there to the store and give him some candy and bring him back, walk him back to the house, and then go. You know he is going to have a fit. The reason I don't want, now listen to this, the reason I don't want you to take him is I ain't going to be here when you get back.

And my sister come at me three times, I was up in the ditch there playing, making me some flutter mills, and the third time she come at me she says Mamma wants to see you, she's dying, and when she said that I know what they do with people when they die. I had been to the graveyard several times. I said Lord have mercy. Mister, when I got through the middle door, and got where I could see her, she said there he is. She said you be a good boy,

although I know you will, and her head fell just like that (demonstrates how his mother's head slumped on the pillow). The last words she said to me.

Q: Do you remember some of the things she taught you?

A: Yes sir. Yeah I remember them. She always tell me, say leave them children's toys up there. Don't ever bring none of them home. You bring them home, I'll tear you up, which she would. And Mrs. Annie Shields, the white woman, the same way. If they did something down there in Mamma's yard, she whip them. They better not tell her about it when she get home. Yeah, that's the way I come up. Now I was a little better than 21 or 22 years old before I had any kind of fear for white folks.

Q: Any kind of fear?

A: That's right.

Q: Because they were good to you or. . .

A: We all slept together and ate together. But I was 13 years old when I run away from my sister. And I was 56 sitting in Huntington when I made up my mind to go home and see who I could find kin to me.

Q: Why did you come to West Virginia?

A: Well, I was just going anywhere, but when I got to West Virginia, I loved West Virginia.

Q: Why?

A: This is the best state I ever had. I'm telling you the truth man. West Virginia was a better state, although it was just like down south. Negroes have to go to this place and that place, you know. Just like that. That's the truth.

Q: Why did you like Charleston?

A: Well, when I come to Charleston, I made right around about \$180. Money was easy made here in Charleston. That's right.

Q: \$180 in how long, a month or week or . . . ?

A: No, I made that in the skin game. Yes, there wasn't a whole lot of money floating then. But I wanted what was in that game.

Q: Make it in one night? \$180?

A: Yes sir. And then I got to the place one mind told me just like this: You ought to quit this here gambling and get you a job. Well, I stayed in trouble all the time. I stayed in trouble all the time. That's right.

Q: How old were you when you came here?

A: I told you I think I was right around about 21 or 22 years old.

(Photographer David Vick enters, brief conversation)

A: Well, just keep talking and don't pay no attention? But I don't know nothing I can say. But now anyhow I wasn't on the road. When I came to West Virginia here, I had a whole lot of jokers to do me wrong. I'd bet them, and it would look like I did bet them. But I got tired of that fighting and running. I . . . get me a job, quit gambling and go to work. And I finally quit that gambling, and I went to work at Russell, Ky., at 23 on the C & O Railroad, and I had some hard times, hard. . . I worked for some mean old foremen, but I made it. And I stayed down at the C & O until '53, when I retired.

Q: Let me ask you this: How have you managed to live so long?

A: They ain't but one thing I can tell you. By the help of God. Because I've had my hat shot off my head four different times over here at this station.

Q: C & O station?

A: Some detective. I forgot the name, but I know that I used to know him good. One day I was over there, you know. . . I was working then when that happened, because I used to think a man was crazy when he went to buy a ticket when he could hobo. That's the truth.

So one day I was setting there in the station, all four of them walked up just like this and. . . this is the black son of a bitch, said we are going to get you yet, just like that. I had the hat shot off my head four different times.

Q: Four different times.

A: I looked up there at him and said you'll damn sure have it to do. I ain't going to never stand still for you to come and put the handcuffs on. . .

Q: Did they do it all one evening? Shoot your hat off?

A: No, different times, man.

Q: Different days.

A: When I jump off blind on that passenger train. Different times. A long time before I bought any ticket.

Q: When you jump out blind, what do you mean by jumping out blind?

A: When the train slow down enough for me to get off of it.

Q: You think they were trying to kill you or. . .?

A: Nothing, now listen, what's your idea if a man shoots your

hat off your head? Now you just please tell me that, and I'll be satisfied with you.

Q: Well, I think he was trying to kill you.

A: That's right. That's the God's truth now. But finally one day me and a guy came out of Chicago, white guy. He killed one of them.

Q: Can you eat anything you want to?

A: Anything in the world I want, Mister, I can eat it today. My eyes, I got that glaucoma in my eyes. But my health is good. I sleep good at night. Don't nothing worry me.

Q: Good.

A: I;m just having trouble where I'm staying at now. . . I'm having trouble trying to get in one of them elderly homes. But I'm glad of onething. If there ever was a child of God, I'm one of them. Because I serve the Lord.

Q: Go to church every Sunday?

A: Every Sunday. I say. Sometimes I go at night. Sometimes I have to walk back home in the dark, and sometimes some of them will carry me home. Sometimes. . . get me to go to church. I do it, and ask the Lord to help me. That's right.

Q: How much longer do you think you will live beyond 100 years?

A: There ain't but one answer I can give you on that. I feel like I'm going to make it, but I'm going to live just as long as God will let me.

Q: Will you live a lot longer than 100 years, you think?

A: I say I want to. I can't say I will, but the way I feel

like, I'm going to pull it. Yes, I do.

Q: Feel like you're going to pull it?

A: The way I feel right here in your place this evening, I feel like I'm going to make it. Although the way looks kind of thin. Now where I'm at right today. They done stole me raggedy there. I ain't got a heavy suit of underwear in my room. And how they get in there and out. I don't know whether they think I'm missing them or not, but I'm scared to say anything, because. . . They know I'm not scared of them, but what's the need of me making a . . . about it and get shot down or shoot some of them down? If they ever have to make me say it, I'll do it, but minds runs with me to take it to God and leave it there. And forget about it. That's the way my mind runs.

Q: Do you carry your gun now?

A: No, no. I ain't got it on me now, but sometimes when I got to go out and try catch some of them suckers that owes me money, I slip it in my pocket. I done quit that. I can't catch them in the daytime. . . but I tell you about up there where I'm at, don't none of them mess with me, I don't mess with none of them.

Q: Where do you live, John?

A: I live on Washington Street, 1324 East Washington St., right down next to that tooth dentist there.

Q: You have a room by yourself?

A: By myself.

Q: But there are others in the house?

A: All of them in the house. I'm upstairs, yeah. It's a good

place to live, got great big rooms. I got a radio and a TV. This boy there, some of them goes in a messes with my TV. I know that. But no need of making no wrong about it, until I can find me a place to leave there. Then I'm going to tell this woman that's got the house, I'm going to tell her, I say well, I've been having been having trouble here, I done lost stuff here. But I'm going to be in better shape, I'm going. I said, but I was a Christian man when I come in your house, and I'm going to be one when I leave out. That's my word.

Q: How much rent do you have to pay there?

A: Forty dollars. Can't find me another place like that. Can't find me another place like that. But I'm trying to get in one of them elderly homes. Now one of my church members was supposed last Tuesday to come by and pick me and carry me over there. I don't know what happened to her, but she didn't show up. I don't eat there no more. The last time I ate there at that house, I woke up between two and three o'clock that morning, woke up in my bed just like this (shaking). I can't say that what I ate done it, but I believe it. I believe it.

I got up and set on the side of the bed, I said Lord what is this here? I said what's wrong with me? I couldn't hold myself steady. I couldn't hold my hand steady, I tell you. In a few minutes then I got up and opened the door and then went back and set down, it got steady on me. Now it's got to be something that I ate.

Now the thing for you to do now is to put you on a . . . suit and go down to that bus station and go to Georgia to your

people. No use waiting until some of them get up and go shooting. Now I got good clothes, and I had on a gray suit, dark, you know, and had been raining that evening, raining, it was sprinkling then, but right on the platform of my yard is concrete, two steps to go down to the street, and on this platform was holding water. You know I seen I was going to head down. I eased myself down right in that puddle of water and that good suit. Old joker setting over there on that porch of his. There was nothing but thugs over there. He said what's the matter, man, with that clean suit on, falling in all that muddy water?

When I fell I had my pistol with me, you know, and he sees the pistol. He says looky here, if you'll throw that pistol over here, I'll help you up. I says you stay right where your're at. Now it was just like that, but I was holding my pistol. And I went back in the house, and my mind was still telling me to go. One mind said don't go like that now, said change clothes. And I put on a dark suit almost like this suit but another one. And they all done got off that porch, gone up to a little juke box up there on that side of my street. And I crossed over the road, and you know I fell right in the middle of that street again, and one mind says you know where you're at now, but I personally scolded myself, and as I got in the clear, there come a car (indicating car threw mud on him).

And so I got across to the other side, Mister, and one mind said now you go on back to that house and pull off them things and go to bed. One mind you go on away from here or some. . . will do something to you. Now they are all on that side. One of

them say, hip, here he comes, let's get him. Another guy, this one was on the porch, he done gone up there where they was. He's the one that told them that old man fell up there, but he got to change clothes, but he got that pistol with him. I heard another one say well I ain't going to mess with him. And when I got up there where they was, they had all gone inside.

Q: Was that fairly recently?

A: Yeah. It ain't been so long. And so but anyhow here come the police coming along. And I see them coming, I make a shot in the ground up there at the school, I thought maybe they stopped in there and kept hiding. None come by there. And I shot again and he kept hiding. And I stayed there a little while and I made for the depot. Now I got a bus. I went to Georgia. I stayed down there about four or five days, I got better. My people down there they are always sick. They ain't no room for me. Well when I cam back here Peachy (Masinter). I got sick when I got to the bus station. I set there, had a brand new suit of clothes. Somebody got it. Because when I got so I could walk across to Peachy's, Peachy wanted to carry me to the hospital.

He put me in the hospital, and I stayed in there for around about nineo'clock that morning until nine o'clock that night, and they couldn't find nothing (wrong) with me. So. . . I went right to bed.

Q: Now you'll be 99 in December?

A: 22nd of December, I'll be 99 years old.

Q: What do you think is the most important thing that has happened in your life?

A: Well, I tell you the truth, I never was no mistreated man, never was. I've had stuff put on me, I hate to take it, but I did. I would fight. You take right here in West Virginia, I used to go up these hollows here with a white boy to get moonshine. And if he got mad at me, he knew I would fight, and he would fight too. Now he is dead.

Q: Now I'm not sure that you told me the important thing that's happened to you.

A: Well, now the most important thing that's happened to me, when I killed that man out on Donnally Street. . .

Q: Well, of course that was a big thing, but I was thinking maybe of something that stood out in your mind as affecting the whole course of your life, something like that.

A: No, no sir, I haven't. I never have been no mistreating man to nobody, never did pick no fuss out of nobody, but I've been treated awful dirty in my life.

Q: Is there any part of your life that you would like to live over?

A: No sir, no more than what I'm doing right now. Although I have been with good people. I have been with good people, but if I had my life to live over again, I wouldn't start with it.

Q: You wouldn't what?

A: I wouldn't start with it.

Q: You wouldn't start with it?

A: No sir.

Q: You just don't want to live it over?

A: No sir, because I ran away when I was 13 years old. No

sir. Now I got one boy here that his mother said was mine. He went to school at Morris Harvey and graduated at Morris Harvey. He led Morris Harvey to three victories. He ain't but five foot, seven, a boy they call Shane Phillips.

Q: Who is he?

A: Shane, Shane Phillips.

Q: He is related to you?

A: No sir, his mother say he is my child.

Q: Oh, you just sort of adopted him?

A: Yeah, no he is still with his mammy. I didn't adopt him.

I got him.

Q: Oh, his mother, I mean you think he is your child?

A: All of them say he looks just like me. He's short. But I hope I put him thorough college.

Q: How old is he?

A: I don't know how old he is, but anyhow he's got a little family of his own.

Q: Is he the only child you have?

A: In the world that I know of.

Q: He lives right here in town?

A: That's right.

Q: What does he do?

A: I don't know what kind of work he does, but he graduated from Morris Harvey. Call him Shane Phillips. But I hope, hope I put him through school.

Q: What's the boy's name?

A: Shane. Shane Phillips.

Q: You don't have any other relative at all living here?

A: No sir, never have.

Q: All in Alabama and Georgia?

A: All in Georgia. But, when I settled down here, I didn't have nobody on my mother's side in Alabama. All of them on my mother's side in Atlanta, Ga.

Q: You ever see your son?

A: I ain't seen him in I don't know when.

Q: About how old would he be now?

A: I don't know how old, but anyhow he got a family. He don't bother about me and I don't bother about him. I hope I put him through college though. So I don't have to bum nobody for nothing, I make \$276 and a few pennies.

Q: That's all Social Security?

A: Yes sir. So I live good. I eat out. I don't try. . . but I'm about to get a place. I don't know when it's going to happen, but if they don't hurry up, I don't know what's going to do with it. I'm trying to stay right where I'm at until they do get me in one of them apartments.

Q: I think you are wearing a silver dollar or something?

A: This man that used to have a dry cleaning on Lee Street there in Charleston called (Lew Walden) give me that. He was a Jew. I've been offered \$400 for it.

Q: Hey, that's good.

Q: That man that give it to me offered me \$350 for it, and you know what I told him? I said Mr. Walden when a Jew gives you something you ought to die with it. Now he's dead now, too. I used to run errands for him. That's when I had quit gambling here, and I didn't have no good loafing place, and I loafed in his place, and I run errands for him.

If you find anybody in this town that say I'm dirty and lowdown, I'd like to look them in the face and let them tell the truth. Because you don't catch me trying to bum nobody.

Q: I understand you like to wear colorful clothes. Do you have a reason for doing that?

A: I just always liked them.

Q: Always like them?

A: I always did like bright colors. But now I got, I got a dark. . .

(End of one side of tape)

A: This place where I am trying to get. . . I think it's a three-room apartment. One woman, she bought her some new furniture and will give me her old furniture. I don't know what they're going to do. I'm going to try to find me a place to live, because I done got sick and tired of that place where I'm at.

Well, now, I hope I made a good statement.

Q: You made a good statement.

A: I hope I did, because I tried to tell the truth to the best ~~know~~ knowledge. And my life today I'm not ashamed of it. My life at this hour, I'm not ashamed of it. For I know I do serve the

Lord to the best of my knowledge. I know that.

Q: Is there any kind of principle or code that you live by, other than your mother's teachings?

A: Well, no more than I took it on myself to be right, my desire to treat everybody right. That's right about me. I take more than I give. Now I got sympathy for people.

Q: You seem to have a lot of energy.

A: I got sympathy for people.

Q: Got sympathy for people.

A: Yes, I have, got sympathy. I've done some of them trash right down where I hang out. I still go in them beer joints. Some of them I eat in them-the Monarch and the Diamond. But you know them places are so high. Now you take the two places I ate, I ate, got a pork chop dinner there yesterday. I ain't ever eat no (such) pork chop before in my life, couldn't hardly cut it with my knife. Mashed potatoes, that's the only thing I could eat good, mashed potatoes, cost me \$3.09, \$3.09. I guess that was tax on the dollar, wasn't it? Three cents tax, that's right. But. . . got to live. I don't bum nobody.

Q: Do you sing and dance anymore?

A: No sir.

Q: Do you get lots of evercise, move around a lot?

A: Every day. About six or seven blocks from where I live at, I walk it every day.

Q: You walk from your house to where?

A: Downtown.

Q: Downtown?

A: That's right.

Q: Do you go in to see Mr. Masinter every day or. . .?

A: No, no I hang up there in the Diamond, Monarch, the bus station, just now and then I go to B & B.

Q: Then you pretty much spend your time every day downtown?

A: Oh yeah, I'm downtown. I'm not up there. I'm downtown every day.

Q: Ever go to the movies or anything like that?

A: No, I never did like them in my young days. No sir, never go to the movies.

Q: Ever go out of town?

A: I ain't been out of town since I come back from Georgia. No, I don't never go nowhere.

Q: How long has that been?

A: About, a little better, almost a month and a half. It was last month when I went down there. Now you see what it is now in this month, don't you? See I drawed my check when I got back. So you know I wasn't gone much longer.

Q: Ever go down for Christmas or anything like that?

A: No, I ain't been down there for Christmas in a long time, no sir. Well, I tell you about it. This boy I was crazy about. I first met him. It was in New Jersey at my sister's funeral, that I first met. . . He was a good boy in a way, but he was kind of half way jealous of me in a way. He don't think I know it. He's the one what got that money. I've got four of them down there. They is multimillionaires, four of them.

Q: Four?

A: Four black people in Atlanta, Ga. Multimillionaires in my family, you know.

Q: All your relatives?

A: Yeah, but I don't look up to none of them.

Q: Do they ever come and see you?

A: Nobody ever been to West Virginia to see me. I go there and see them. I ain't wrote to none of them since I got back. None of them. No sir.

Q: Let me ask you this: What kind of advice would give somebody who wants to live a long life?

A: Well, being you said that. I don't know. But there is a lot of them old boys up there who are pretty nice with me. I tell them lots of times, I said I'd quit what you's doing-stealing, drinking, beating these women up. I said you can't raise nothing that way. I know you see in the paper where this colored guy killed that girl.

Q: Yeah.

A: I knowed him well.

Q: You did?

A: He always was a dirty sucker. Always was. I wouldn't want to lose no time with him. You better get out of my face man and and get you a job and go on to work. The other day we was talking about it. I said, Lord, was that him? I don't feel a bit sorry for him.

Q: Have you learned to read and write?

A: Never have. Ain't but one thing I can say. I can travel anywhere in the world you give me your address. I don't care, way

back yonder when I was hoboing, I make friends with a woman, and she tells me what part of the world she lives in. And when I hit that town, I ask somebody about the street, you know. They tell me where that street is, and when I head for that street, I can look up at the first house and tell which way to go. All you have to do is to give me that address and let me hit that street. I can look up at the first house, at the number, and know which way to go. Wasn't that pretty good? Ain't that good? I've got that down pat. Now, before my eyes got bad, whenever I got my check I could sign it.

Q: Sign your name?

A: Yes sir. J-o-h-n B-a-r-n-e-t-t.

Q: Who taught you that?

A: Hoboes and women I'm living with. That's right sir. When I first learned to write my name, it was a white boy. Me and him went together for about eight years. Anywhere he went, if I couldn't stay, he wouldn't stay. Anywhere I would go, if he couldn't stay I wouldn't stay. Me and him was that way for eight years together. For eight long years, me and him was just like that.

Q: How do you spell your last name?

A: B-A-R-N-E-T-T.

Q: No E on the end of it?

A: No, people used. . . you can use it that way, but don't do it.

Q: That was your father's last name-Barnett?

A: Yes sir. Now I tell you a thing about my daddy. He was a

. . . man. He was on a plantation. But now I hardly ever got to see my daddy. Because he was a great gambler and a drinker. And one day, I was about six years old, and that was in the spring, and my mother got sick that fall. And one day I was eavesdropping, my mother was sitting there talking to him, said, what the hell is this, you say you've got two kids here by me. Said these other children ain't yourn. Said I never want to see you coming in that yard drunk no more. I never will forget that.

He said I come any goddamn time I get ready. That's what he said. My mother got up, and when she got up I didn't know whether she was going to come to the end of the porch to look for us kids, I stood like that, I crawled up under the house until I heard her set back down. Then I got out and went up where the other kids were there, didn't want to be caught. And she said now well you hear what I tell you and I mean it.

About a week after that or two, I looked down the road and see him coming. We was all up there. . . and I see him coming, and when he got out of my sight then at the house, I went down this side and see where they're coming in the yard. My mother hadn't been long come to the house, and yeah he was coming up in the yard. I don't know. . . but in them days and times, they would go down on the creek bank and cut down some old limbs and make brooms, what they sweep the yard with, you know.

And I'm crawled up under the house, and I can look out from under the house in the yard and she went out there and got that limb of wood out on him. And when he left there his head was bleeding like I don't know what.

Q: Now what did she hit him with?

A: That broom.

Q: A broom?

A: Yeah, one of them brooms, what they cut out, tie a string around and sweep the yard with. And you know that was the last time I seen my daddy.

Q: He left with a bloody head?

A: I swear she tore him up. He never did come in that yard no more. And that fall she got sick, and she was sick that whole fall, almost Christmas. I think she ate a guinea watermelon.

Q: A what?

A: A guinea.

Q: A guinea watermelon?

A: That's right. Hot sun, you know?

Q: What kind of watermelon is that?

A: Them that are a little small, but grow out in the field, call them guines watermelons, a small thing. And she ate one of them you know that had been laying out in the hot sun. That's what I heard all them old people tell about what made her sick. And it was cotton pickin' time. She never got well no more.

Q: How old was she?

A: I couldn't say how old. I ain't going to lie about it. I ain't going to try to guess at her age. My mother, she had, let me see, Isabella, Mary and Anna May, she had five kids. But Anna May, she died. No my mother had six children, had a girl and a boy that died, younger than I was. That's when I met these people I'm telling you about now, Tony.

I hadn't seen nobody kin to me in 43 years. I left right out of Huntington. I took a notion to go home. I was 56 years old. I jumped off blind on a passenger train at Opelika, and the boy I busted the nose and run away from was a depot agent and a little constable.

Q: Was he glad to see you?

A: What? . . . kissed me right in my mouth, and the gal that used to play hide and seek with, he married her and had four kids.

Q: Now that is when you came back at age 56?

A: That's right.

Q: After leaving at age 13?

A: That's right.

Q: And this was the first time you had come back?

A: That's right. Hadn't seen nobody kin to me in 43 years. And this gal, well, the way it was, this here's my sister's baby boy, he is living today in Atlanta. She told me to bring her a switch, and now he was a little gambler then. And he said well Uncle John, no when I. . . the passenger train, and he's handling the baggage, and he was having to reach in there and get a piece of mail, and he was telling me to go ahead on up the track you know? I'm a big shot, got good clothes on under that overalls, overcoat on, I walked up the track a little piece and shook the cinders off me, you know and smoking my cigarette. Every time I would look at him, I would say to myself, you go to hell.

I said if you got sense enough to handle that mail, you got sense enough to care something about my people, just like that. I see this guy come through there doing this. I said you had

better stay in there to myself. I said because I'll die and go to hell now before you'll give me a deal, just like that. I had a .38 special right in my pocket, and sure enough, when this black boy got through with the mail, he allowed mto me and says come on. I says where? He says up this way. I says where? He says come on, man. I looked at him and. . . what in the hell for? He says that's the law looking out the window at you there. I said damn the law. I said they ain't paying me nothing to look for the law. I said who are you? Just like that. He said I'm little Glenny. I said you wouldn't be Glenny Bowman's boy would you? He said yeah you got to be my Uncle John. See people had done seen me, that lived in Alabama, done been back there and told them about it. Because I had met a whole lot of them out in California. They would ask me where you from. Say I from Alabama. Said whereabouts? Birmingham. Anyone you see out of Alabama comes from Birmingham. I said were you born in Birmingham. Said no, just worked. I said where were you born? I said Opelika. Well I didn't know nothing about it. I said who is your people? He done come down since I left there, you now.

And when I told him, when he say little Glenny, his daddy was little when I run away. I said you wouldn't be Glenny Bowman's boy would you? He said you got to be my Uncle John. Now he walked up to me and hugged and kissed me, pulled his truck down there. Here comes that fellow from the depot and says who is that nigger you are kissing up there? He said that's Hon, my nickname is Hon. Said that's Hon, Mr. John G. He said is that Hon? He come on back. . . He said Hon this is Mr. John G., heard every word I said.

Q: Called you Hon?

A: Yeah, that was my nickname.

I said you call that son of a bitch Mr. John G.?

He just looked at me, his face kind of red. That boy walked up and hugged and kissed me right in the mouth. Now here come his wife, Lilly. She said what kind of stunt you pulling off here, kissing this nigger? . . .Just like that. He said, Lord this here's Hon. That's the truth. Ain't none of them living today.

Q: Let me ask you this: You spent some time with a chain gang in Georgia?

A: What? I pulled nine months in Columbus, Ga.

Q: You did?

A: That's right. I pulled nine months in Columbus Ga., for sitting in a boxcar. That's right again, yes sir.

Q: That was not because--it didn't have anything to do with your killing that man?

A: Oh, no. I hadn't killed anybody then. I wasn't nothing but a boy then. See I hadn't ever left home. I had left home, but I hadn't got out of that state.

Q: Did you work while you were in the chain gang?

A: On the street. Made nine months with having that ball and chain around my leg.

Q: I think you could slip your foot out of it?

A: That's right. I didn't sleep with them at night. The rest of them couldn't get theirs off. I had such little feet you know. I got little feet.

Q: You slipped your foot out of the. . .?

A: Out of the cuff.

Q: Out of the cuff?

A: That's right. I was running around the stockade there with no chains on, but every morning I would have them on when that man would get there. Yeah, I would.

Q: Now that was the time they took you to the whipping post?

A: That's right. He made out he was going to whip me, and he didn't hit me a lick. But he hit the bell, you know. Because I was a good workerr, Mister. He told me I got to take you. Well, that's the reason he had it done.

Somebody sneaked on to the head man you know about my shack. And he told me he would take me there. That's the truth.

Q: They let you go from that?

A: I made my time. Got on a freight train, come right back to Opelika and seen my uncle running a blacksmith shop there. But I stayed on that freight train and come on to Birmingham.

Q: Let me ask you this: How much do you weigh?

A: Well, my standing weight back here recently-look at my arms (with fingers curled around them demonstrates loss of weight), look at that- see that my standard weight when I was back there working was 163. That was my standard weight, 163.

Q: But now I wouldn't weigh 100. You can see how little I is.

A: Oh, you'll weigh 100 all right.

Q: Reckon I would? I doubt it. Well, I'm going to have to get on the scales tomorrow.

A: . . . Look at how I can lap my fingers around my arm.

Q: Lap your fingers over your wrist.

A: See there, I make my home up there.

Q: How tall are you?

A: About five-foot, seven inches.

Q: You have any trouble telling time? You can tell time all right? That's a good-looking watch you got there.

A: I've done had that watch a long time. That's a railroad watch.

Q: Elgin?

A: Oh, Waltham is the best made. Bangor Waltham. When I first went to work for C & O, labor couldn't buy that watch.

Q: Yeah, that's a good watch.

A: Labor couldn't buy that watch.

Q: Yeah.

A: Ain't nobody had that watch, but the flagman, engineer, brakeman and conductor.

Q: That says 15 to five, doesn't it?

A: Yeah.

Q: That's a good time to quit, I believe.

A: That's right, and if you're ready to knock off, I am too.

Q: Okay, you think of anything else?

A: And I'm glad to meet you, God knows from the bottom of my heart. Glad to meet you.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Yes sir.