Interview with
MAE BERTHA CARTER

Kim Lacy Rogers,
Owen Brooks,
Interviewers

Rogers: This is an oral history interview with Mrs. Mae Bertha Carter in Drew, Mississippi, on September 15, 1995.

Mrs. Carter, do we have your permission to tape this interview with you?

Carter: Yeah, you have it. You want me to sign it? I ain't going to tell you no more than I want to say.

Rogers: We'll have a consent form for you to sign at the end of this. Is that all right?

Carter: Yeah, that's okay.

Rogers: We have to ask that.

Carter: You have to ask that? Well, yeah, you have to go through a lot of channels.

Rogers: Mrs. Carter, could we start at the beginning? You were born, you said, on a plantation here in Sunflower.

Carter: 1923, January the 13th, seventy-two years old. Born on the plantation in Sunflower County, about ten miles from Drew.

Rogers: Could you tell us about your parents? Your mother and father were farmers?
Carter: My mother was a sharecropper, my mama and daddy was a sharecropper, my granddaddy and grandmother were sharecroppers on the plantation, and I guess the other before him was. We all came from the plantation, sharecropping, far as I can go back.

Rogers: What kind of house did you live in on the plantation?

Carter: Well, it was a little old [phonetic] three-room shotgun. Do you know what a--

Brooks: Shotgun?

Rogers: Yeah, shotgun.

Carter: Three-room shotgun house.

Rogers: How many were in your family? How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Carter: My mother had twelve children. One died at birth and one died when he was a year and a half, and the last one died was five years old and that was in 1935.

Rogers: So she had three children who died out of twelve that she had?

Carter: She had three died.

Rogers: Did you start working at an early age?
Carter: Oh, did I! When I was five or six years old, I was in the field picking cotton. I couldn't chop cotton at five and six. You can't chop it at five and six, but you can pick it. I was in the field picking cotton in a sixteen-pound bucket of lard. We called it sixteen pounds because that's how much lard come in that bucket. And then I would empty it over into my mother's sack.

Rogers: What else did you do? When you were little, growing up, did you do other kinds of farm work or work around the house?

Carter: Well, I picked cotton in the cotton field and washed the dishes. You had to do work to help my mother because they were working in the field, so we had to wash dishes, go to the pump, get water. You know we had pumps out there on the farm, these old pumps you pump like that, and the pump was between two houses. Two houses on the plantation had to share one pump.

Brooks: Two houses shared one pump?

Carter: Yeah. And so we had to go down to that pump and pump water for my mama to wash. She would put it in a barrel, put this water in a barrel. We would pump it like the first of the week, so it would be slacked the last of the week. You know what slacked means?

Rogers: No, I don't.

Carter: Well, you put it in the barrel, and then you have some lye and you put some lye in there, and all that rust coming from that water would go down in the bottom of that barrel and the water would be clear. We had to do that in the evening time when we were very young.
Rogers: What kind of messages or things did you hear from your family about relationships between black people and white people?

Carter: When I was little?

Rogers: Yeah. What were you told?

Carter: I didn't have any kind of message, no more than that he was the boss man, the plantation owner, and owned the farm, and they didn't do any work, that we had to do all the work. And they would come out in the evening time. It wasn't a message. That's what I saw when I was young. He would come out in the evening time when it got cool, him and his family, to check on the work, what had been done, or just ride around and see how the crop was going. We didn't have no kind of communication with them, period.

Rogers: What kind of schooling did you get out there in the country?

Carter: None at all.

Rogers: None at all?

Carter: About a third grade one. See, here's what I'm saying. There wasn't no schools for me to go to. That was seventy-two years ago. We went to this church house, and didn't go no more than about three months, and sometimes we didn't go that much. Then one winter I didn't go at all because my daddy had left home and my mother couldn't cut no wood and make no fire. We had to stay in the bed. Didn't go to school at all. So I don't have no education, period. I am about--well, I may be third, but I don't think so. These third-grade
books are mighty hard now. So maybe I just would say about third grade. I didn't have no opportunity to go to no schools, and the teacher that taught the school, her education was so limited, very limited.

**Brooks:** Who was this?

**Carter:** The teacher that taught. You know, they would be limited. They didn't have no education. Just somebody on the place or somebody they sent there.

**Rogers:** You couldn't talk about anything like the quality in your school or voting?

**Carter:** Oh, my God. Ain't no voting come up back in 1920s and '30s. We didn't hear the word voting. We didn't know who the governor was. Didn't know they had governors. Didn't know they had no state representatives or nothing. Didn't know nothing.

**Rogers:** One of the things we're interested in is what kinds of messages or what kind of stories black people heard about what relationships between black people and white people.

**Carter:** They heard nothing. The only thing they heard about them, they were the boss and they were mean and they didn't do no work and the black folks had to do the work. We just didn't talk about them.

**Rogers:** You didn't talk about them?

**Carter:** No, just knew that they were the plantation owner and you had to do the work and they had to do the sitting down, and you had to do whatever they said. If you didn't do whatever they said, well, that was it. When I was coming up, nobody was talking nothing but picking cotton.
Rogers: You didn't hear about lynchings or--

Carter: Oh, yeah. I saw [unclear] some lynching. Then you had to hush up. Black people had to have a hush mouth, if you want to know, hush-hush. But, yeah, I saw some lynchings. When I was a little girl, there was man came up killed, and he lived out on the plantation. He was a white man. I think he was an overseer. But anyway, we just saw a lot of cars coming in, cars coming in, cars coming in, and go down where that man had come up dead. And they say some black person, a black woman had killed the man, but when they found out, his brother said, no, they hadn't killed him, he had killed himself. That was the first mob crew I ever saw, and I was about six or seven years old.

Rogers: It was a mob?

Carter: Yeah, coming out. And then I heard about another one in my family. When we were little, my mother's sister, they mobbed him up and shot him down like he was a rabbit.

Brooks: Was that in Drew?

Carter: That was out on the plantation from Drew.

Rogers: Your mother's sister's husband?

Carter: Yeah. He got killed by a mob, said he had did some shooting in Shaw, Mississippi. They came all the way looking for him. He got up and went to the door and he saw that there was a mob out there, and then he tried to get out of the house. He ran across the field, and they started shooting at him, like they were
shooting at a rabbit, and they killed him and took him in—you know, cars didn't have fenders back then. Running boards, fender, they tied him on that and took him on away. Since I got grown, I heard that they brought him back and they buried him out on the plantation. That's what I heard.

Brooks: Buried him on the plantation?

Carter: Yeah, that's what I heard after I got grown, but I didn't know.

Brooks: Did you know the man?

Carter: He was my mama's brother-in-law.

Rogers: So he was your uncle.

Carter: In-law.

Rogers: When did you marry? When did you get married?

Carter: I got married real young. I was sixteen years old. I didn't have no other choice.

Brooks: How old were you?

Carter: Sixteen.

Brooks: On the plantation?
Carter: Uh-huh. My first baby was born when I was sixteen years old.

Rogers: How did you live then? Were you and your husband in a little house of your own or a little cabin of your own?

Carter: No, we didn't own no home. You mean, in the man's house?

Rogers: Yeah.

Carter: Yeah. When we first did, yeah. We lived in the plantation home, plantation house, a house that was on the farm. We never owned a home.

Rogers: You had thirteen children. Was this all during the time you were on the plantation?

Carter: Yeah. Every one of my children were born on the plantation. When we moved here to Drew, he was five years old, the baby.

Rogers: You were a young woman during the Depression. What do you remember that being like here in Mississippi on the plantation for your family?

Carter: The Depression?

Rogers: The Depression, the 1930s.
Carter: Oh, yeah, I remember 1930, when it was the Depression. I never will forget it. My mother didn't have anything to cook but meal mush. You know about meal mush? We had meal mush. We had dumplings without the chicken, just some black flour into the water with black pepper and onion. That's dumplings without the chicken. We had cooch [phonetic]. We had to eat cooch.

Rogers: What's cooch?

Carter: Cooch is dressing without the chicken.

Brooks: Dressing without the chicken.

Carter: Well, you know how you do that? You make up this stuff, this cornbread. You know, you had corn. You raised the corn, so you had to use that corn in all kinds of ways. You cook some cornbread. You make it up. You put some onion--you grew onion--and black pepper in it, and seal it up like you were cooking chicken dressing. But you don't have the chicken. You just put it in a skillet with some hot grease and do it that way.

And then we didn't have clothes. The same sack that we picked cotton in, my mama had to take that sack and make us a dress to wear. My mother hated for to have a sack like that. She would go down on the bayou and get some berries, and she'd dye them dresses. I remember them dresses. They were gathered. Mama would gather them in the waist. They were gathered dresses. And the boys, my mother learned to make pants from them cotton sacks. Yeah.

We didn't never have any--you know, we couldn't go to the store and buy nothing. My mother, she did a good job about stuff like that. We didn't have soap. We didn't have soap to wash with, and my mother used to make her own lye soap, get some old grease and some lye and make soap. My mother did that, because
we didn't have no soap. I remember my mother used to keep those clothes, though, and the floors clean, but she had to do a lot of planning back in the thirties and like that.

I remember that my sister and myself, we had to share the shoes that we had back then. And my mother, she did really, really my mother took some of them sacks and made us some shoes, cotton sacks and made us some shoes.

**Rogers:** She made shoes out of cotton sacks?

**Carter:** Yeah. You can make them like you make a sock, to put on our feet. She just had to do something so our feet could keep warm. And we had to stay in bed part of the time, and the reason I remember it so well, that's when my daddy walked off. My daddy walked off the year of the Depression.

**Brooks:** During the Depression?

**Carter:** He left. My mother was five months' pregnant with my sister, and I remember it so well.

**Brooks:** How old were you?

**Carter:** Me? When my daddy left home? I was eight years old when my daddy left home. He ran off with this woman and he left home. I never will forget that.

**Rogers:** Did you ever see him again?

**Carter:** I saw my daddy again one time when I was about ten for about fifteen minutes, and the next time I saw my daddy, I had three children.
**Brooks:** You had three children?

**Carter:** I had three children the next time I saw my daddy. And then after I got grown, I got to thinking about the Depression and my mother was pregnant, and my daddy and my mother, they married when they were very young. My mother was about sixteen; my daddy was eighteen. And he had got this family and had all this Depression coming up on him, and then he just take this woman that didn't have any children--I think that's what happened--and ran off with her, where he could avoid responsibility. That's what I said after I got to be grown, that he was really avoiding responsibility. Yeah, I remember that Depression all right.

**Rogers:** Did the white people's attitudes towards black people change in the thirties when things were so hard? Did they get meaner? Did they get--

**Carter:** I don't know if they got any meaner. They were mean enough.

**Brooks:** It was hard for them to get meaner.

**Carter:** Yeah, hard for them to get meaner. I remember that a couple of them killed their ownself when I was little. I heard the older folks say that they had committed suicide. I don't know about getting no better and no meaner. I don't know when that happened. But we didn't have any dealing with white folks, period. Back then, we were just a slave and they were a slave owner.

**Rogers:** In some times, like in the 1890s, when there was another Depression, a lot of lynchings, numbers of lynchings seemed to go up when hard times hit the whole South. So I was just wondering if you noticed that during the thirties.
Carter: No, I don't remember that. I don't remember them getting no meaner, now. The only thing that I remember, when I was talking about a white man, when he come out on that farm and see if the work was being done, and talked to my daddy. He didn't even talk to my mama. And then he'd go on back to Merigold. See, Merigold was a place--we lived in Sunflower County, but the people that we worked for lived in Merigold.

Brooks: That's in Bolivar.

Carter: In Bolivar County. That's the way that was. So I don't know about this.

Brooks: So the boss lived in Merigold.

Carter: Yeah, he lived in Merigold.

Brooks: What was the name of the plantation?

Carter: Smith and Wiggins [phonetic] Plantation. That's where I was born, on the Smith and Wiggins Plantation. That was two men, and one was Smith and the other was Wiggins.

Brooks: That was in Sunflower County?

Carter: That was in Sunflower County.
Rogers: What do you remember about the war years, the years of World War II? Were things better in Mississippi then during the war?

Carter: World War II or—do I remember World War II or World War I?

Rogers: It would be the 1940s.

Brooks: It would be II.

Carter: It had to be II. Oh, World War II. Oh, yeah. What do I remember about World War II? You say, did things get better?

Rogers: Yeah, did things get better?

Carter: World War II, that's the war that the people left Mississippi and went on to Chicago or somewhere, all these northern states and everything in World War II.

Brooks: Went to work in the factories.

Carter: Yeah. My mother left here in World War II.

Brooks: Oh, your mother left?

Carter: Yeah. My mother's been in Toledo ever since then. My mother left here in 1943. Is that covering that World War II? She went up there and she got a job in the defense plant up there in Toledo, Ohio, then.
That's what I remember about. And then I remember about a lot more of my kin people left here in World War II to go up there and work in defense things. That's when they went to Chicago.

See, people in Sunflower County and Mississippi, they go to Chicago. That's where they go, to Chicago. So many of them left the farm then and went into Chicago, and my mother went to Toledo and took her whole family to Toledo, and she's been up there ever since, and left us out on the plantation.

Now, as far as things getting better out on the plantation, I don't remember. But I do remember a little bit on the plantation. See, we used to pick cotton. You'd take the cotton to the gin, and the gin separated the seeds from the lint. We would get lots of money out of the seeds during them years. During them years, we got more money when we took a bale of cotton to the gin than we had ever got, during them years. And Truman was--was Truman the president?

**Rogers:** He was president after the war.

**Brooks:** Roosevelt.

**Carter:** Roosevelt was the president then.

**Brooks:** During the war.

**Carter:** During the war. And then Truman got to be the president.

**Brooks:** When Roosevelt died.

**Carter:** Yeah, when Roosevelt died. And I remember this. When Truman got to be the president, he did say he was going to fix it where everybody would at least have food to eat and stuff like that, and things did get
better during the Truman administration, because we got more for the cotton and more for the cottonseed and we began to eat a little better on the plantation. That's the way I remember Truman.

**Rogers:** Truman also believed in health care for everybody.

**Carter:** I'll tell you, Truman [unclear]. That's true. And especially out on the farm. I think he did more for the farmers. The cotton was worth more money; the seeds were worth more money.

When my husband would take a bale of cotton to the gin, and, you know, after the seeds is taken out of this cotton, then the bale weighed 500 pounds, the average bale 500 pounds after the seeds are taken out.

You had to put 1,500 pounds in the cotton. What they call, you pick 1,500, that means you done picked a bale of cotton. But when you take it to the gin and separate the seeds from the lint, then that's 500, average 500. And then at the gin, they pay you for the seeds. That's what I'm talking about. And we got more money then than we ever had got out of a bale of cotton, because my husband could stop by the store and bring the children some Moon Pies and daddy wide legs and stuff then. We did feel better.

**Rogers:** I remember Moon Pies growing up.

**Carter:** Yeah. My children would be just waiting until he come from the gin and that cotton so he could get them Moon Pies and stuff.

**Rogers:** Moon Pies and Yoo-hoos.

**Carter:** Yeah, I remember that. And it was much better then on the farm. Then it got back. Cotton wasn't worth anything. Get a dollar when you go to the gin.
**Rogers:** Now, was this after Truman? Was this in the 1950s?

**Carter:** Yeah, it was after Truman, but I don't know what year it was. But I do know a bale of cotton couldn't hardly pay for the ginning of the cotton. We didn't get anything. The boss man had to come and start giving us money for a bale of cotton, five and six dollars a bale.

When we were out on that farm, the cotton got so, when my husband went to the gin to gin a bale of cotton, when he'd go by the office and cash the ticket, they'd write him out five dollars, seven dollars. Cotton got so the seeds didn't sell. Five dollars and seven dollars. That's the last year we were on the farm. They were five dollars. The children had to go to school. Didn't have no way for them to go.

**Rogers:** So you wanted your children to all go to school?

**Carter:** Did I! Yeah. That was my dream, children going to school and getting an education. When I had my first baby, she was so pretty, I looked at her and I said, "I don't want you to come up like me. I do not want you to have to stay out in that field and pick cotton for three dollars a hundred, if you're picking for somebody else."

After we share it, our sharecropper, and all the whole family worked, and then come home, my husband would go and get the settlement, what they call settlement. He'd come home and have $500, $600 for the whole family to work. And that sun would be so hot, 90-some degree. And I looked at my baby and I said, "Uh-uh, I want something better for you."

And I worked hard, hard, hard, and my husband worked hard, hard, hard. We picked cotton from Monday morning till Saturday night, Monday morning till Saturday night so my older children could go to school, five of them. At least they could get a twelfth-grade education. And when they get this twelfth-grade education, my dream was to leave that plantation, go somewhere and get a job. You know, a twelfth-grade
education was okay then, back then. It ain't good now. And go somewhere and get them a job and maybe send
back.

So I had got them five children out of school. They had finished school on that plantation. My oldest
son went into the air force, and he stayed there twenty-one years. My next son, he went into the air force.
He stayed four years. My daughter, the oldest daughter that I have, she went to school in Nashville,
Tennessee.

**Brooks:** She went to school where?

**Carter:** Nashville, Tennessee, to get a little better education. She went to some kind of business school,
something that she should have been getting in high school, typing and shorthand and stuff like that.

**Brooks:** How did you make that connection with Nashville?

**Carter:** Well, it came down through the school. She got the information from the school.

**Brooks:** From the public school?

**Carter:** Uh-huh. This was a Seventh-Day Adventists school up there in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Brooks:** And that's where your oldest daughter went?

**Carter:** Yeah, where my older daughter went. Then Bertha, she went to Detroit to stay with my daddy,
because he had got sick. So all five of them had left, and we only had eight children. And you know what?
We had those eight kids. Then this preacher came by. You may know this man. He stayed out there on
[unclear]. He wanted to write us up in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.]

**Rogers:** Is this how you got in?

**Carter:** Uh-huh. And so I stayed out on the plantation. You know, when you're on a plantation, you don't know too much. You don't know what's going on around about you. All you know is work, work, work, and go up and get settlement and that's all. So he said, "You want to join the NAACP?"

I said, "What is that?" That's the truth. I said, "What is it?"

She said, "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People."

I said, "How do I know what advancement meant?"

**Brooks:** Where were you then?

**Carter:** On the plantation. I didn't know what. I said, "I know what advancement was. I don't know why."

I said, "Yeah, if it's going to advance me, yeah, I want it."

He said, "I'll tell you one thing. You come out to Cleveland, and we're having this meeting Wednesday night." Mr. Amzie Moore was the president.

**Brooks:** Was the chapter president.

**Carter:** Yeah, he was the president. And so my husband and us, we'd go out there lots of Wednesday nights, and when we went out to them NAACP meetings, then that broadened my concept about different things. Mr. Amzie Moore, they would come in and they would bring the newspapers and they would read things
what's going on. I think that's when I first began to know we had a governor and we had a state legislature, because on the farm you didn't know too much. We didn't know too much.

And the children joined. At that time, it was one dollar for the adults and 50 cents for the children, and the children joined the NAACP. I'm on the farm now. I'm slipping away. I'm slipping away from the plantation.

I remember one time I went to the courtroom. I had to take the Drew school system to court. And they said to me, "Well, they let you stay out there on the place, and you was a member of the NAACP."

I said, "They didn't know what I was a member of." We was.

And you know, out on the plantation, people talk a lot on a plantation, and I said, "How are we going to slip off at night and go to this NAACP unless this man's going to be getting around the barn talking."

They'd always get around the barn and talk.

So Roy Wilkins came down, and we wanted to go to Jackson to the state conference. I said, "I'm going to ride the bus. It's going to come up in there and pick us up and we're going to Jackson. Now, how are we going to do this?"

So we got his wife and family to join the NAACP so they couldn't tell on us.

Rogers: So they couldn't tell. So you were in the same conspiracy together.

Carter: Yes. So we went to the NAACP then. And then what happened, after we were there at the NAACP, you know, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating [Committee] started coming in.

Brooks: SNCC.

Carter: SNCC. After then, SNCC started coming in. Yeah, Lord.
**Rogers:** What was your impression of the young kids in SNCC? What did you think of those people?

**Carter:** I don't know. I'll tell you one thing what I think about them. I think they opened my eyes up and told me a lot of stuff that I hadn't known about. They broadened my concept and motivated me. That's the truth. And the children, they used to go, and it motivated them. And so then that's when I said when the school integration come, the children was already motivated, and they had that freedom of choice.

I always did want a good education for my kids, and I didn't know how we were going to do it, because we didn't have--you know, they're going to have nine months school. They used to have split session here, you know, to give the children on the plantation time to come home and pick cotton. So the school never started until November, about the 15th of November, so the children on the place--now, this was, I guess the state knew all about this. They would go to school from like November 15th, after all the cotton had been picked, most of it at least, and then they would get out when the cotton would be ready to chop in April. Around April 15th or something like that, they were out of school. And the white children went to school from September to June.

But the people out on the plantation, they planned a way for to put them in the field to pick the cotton, so they couldn't go to school like that when you were out on the plantation, see. And that's the way my oldest children went to school, like that. And they went to school in the summertime. They'd start about June, and they'd go about six weeks in the summertime to make up for some of that other time. After the cotton is laid by and don't need no more chopping, then they opened up the schools again for the black children to go. That's what happened in Mississippi.

But now I got a letter saying, "Do you want your children to go to school from September to June?" I didn't know why we were getting this letter from the school system. And I am the only one, the teacher told me in her room, that said yes. I didn't know how we were going to do it, because the children had to be home to pick cotton in order for us to eat. You get five dollars and six dollars a bale, and you had to get out there and pick cotton hard and pick three bales for fifteen dollars. And with the children in school, I didn't know
how we were going to do this, because we could not pick no three bales with our children in school, and fifteen dollars, nothing for to take care of no family of eight people, ten. And so school was going to start now in September. Now, how are we going to do that?

But anyway, I always wanted an education for the kids. So here come the freedom of choice thing. So I signed it. I was in St. Louis visiting, though, and my daughter wrote and told me about it. And my daughter said, "Let's go to the white school," because she was tired of going--you know, a lot of people said, "Why do you want to do this?"

Well, the kids said they got tired of getting these handed-down books, torn up, pages out, coming from the white school. The [unclear] that they had to go to the board had come from the white school. All the materials that they used come from them. After they got tired of it, they switched it over.

Plus, another reason--I always knew this. This board, school board, was all white. Now, here was the board over both of the schools, black and white. I always wanted an education for my kids. I said, "That school board is all white, and over both of the schools, I know that he's more concerned about the white school where his children went than he was the black school." I knew that. And I got tired of them children coming home, I'd be looking for my kids to come home, the bus broke down on the road.

So that's when I couldn't get along on the plantation. The plantation don't go out for education. The only thing they go out for is something that maybe you know how to weigh the cotton and put down how much is this and add up when you get fifteen of those bales. That's all they want you to have. So as I said, out on the plantation, it was hell out there. [Tape interruption.]

In the church?

Rogers: Yes.
**Carter:** Well, when I was little, I went to church and Sunday school when I was small. When my children got up some size, I always went to church, but I'm not the person to be there every minute, every time the door opened, because I didn't have time.

**Rogers:** What church do you go to? Baptist? Church of God?

**Carter:** When I was little, I went to the Methodist church, and when I got to be grown, I went to the Baptist church. And when I came here to Drew, my children went to United Methodist. So then I told my husband, "The children are going to United Methodist. We just all ought to go to the United Methodist." That was thirty years ago, and we started going to the United Methodist. That's what I am now.

But I was never a person to just be there all the time, all the time, because I had too many children and I didn't have time, and I felt like I'd be neglecting them. We worked Saturday to sundown, and when Sunday come, we'd be so beat. And my husband, he'd be going down to the truck patches and bringing up food from the truck patches so we'd have it the next day, so he didn't go to church, either. He worked hard. We really started going to church when we got older and the children got older. While the kids were little, we didn't have too much time to go, and I just felt like we don't have to be in church every time the door opened. There's more important things we could be doing.

**Rogers:** You had to send your kids to the school of their choice, to the public school. Was that in Drew?

**Carter:** Yeah, here in Drew.

**Rogers:** What happened immediately?
**Carter:** What happened immediately? Oh, I don't know. Let me tell you, everything happened immediately. Well, when the papers came, you know, I had to sign for the younger children, but the older children, they could sign their own. I don't know what age it started at. They brought the paper by--they didn't bring it by mail. They brought it by hand, brought it to our house by hand. Then when I got home from St. Louis, I signed these papers, and then the children signed theirs, and we brought them out here to the school.

Really, that freedom of choice, my husband thought they really meant it. When they wrote that proposal to get that money, government money, they didn't have to write a proposal to get for the first grade to the twelfth grade. They only had to write from the first to the third grade that year, and then add on more. But Drew, the people here around Drew, they knew the black folks wasn't coming. They thought they knew black people. White folks think they know black people. They think they know everything about them, what they're thinking and all that. They were so sure that it wasn't nobody going to accept it. That's why they went from the first to the twelfth grade. They think they know us.

**Brooks:** They didn't.

**Carter:** So then when the papers came, my husband, we came out to bring the papers. We couldn't mail them in. You know, you couldn't mail them in. I don't know why you couldn't mail them in. You had to bring them. That was another one of the things, too. They thought that black people wouldn't have the nerve to walk up in there and say, "I want my children to come to this black school."

So we walked up in that school, and this man took them, and this man, he turned red. And so when we came out of that school, going on back home, I asked my husband, "Did you see his color change? Why did his color change?"

He said, "I don't know."

We came on home, and the next day, the very next day, here comes this overseer. You know, on the plantation you've got overseers. Riders they called them back there in them days. Way back in the slavery
days, they called them riders because they rode on a horse. That's why they called them riders. You would see them coming down through the field on this big horse, so that's where we got that rider part from. But then they changed it to overseer.

And here come this overseer, out there blowing his horn. Toot, toot, toot, toot, toot, in my home. Went out there. He wanted my husband to get in the car. And then he comes up with, "I heard. They called me from the school. I heard that you had run out there, you and your wife, and enrolled all your children in the all-white school. I was just shocked. I was shocked."

My husband was trying to tell him we have a freedom of choice and they had the right to do it. They could sign; we could sign.

"They didn't mean it when they said that. And let me tell you, you can get as good an education in the black school as you can in the white school. In fact, you can get a better education in the black school. I'll go with you. We'll draw them out."

Now, my husband, I don't know how old my husband was, and then we had sense enough to put them in. Why did he think that he needed to go out there and help Matthew withdraw them out? And then, you know, on the plantation you always have a barn. You had barns when they had mules, and when you got tractors, you had tractor barns. He said, "I'm going to go down here to the barn, and you talk it over with your wife."

My husband came in and telling me he's going to be back and he's just going on to the barn and he wanted him to talk it over with me about withdrawing the children out. I snapped then. I said, "You go back out there and you tell that man that he can't tell me where to send my children to school to, and I'd be a fool to try to tell him where to send his kids."

My husband always saw when--you know how men are. He said, "I won't tell him all that. I'll just tell him we decided to keep them in."

So my husband went on out there, you know, and just told him like he said, he decided to keep them in, and this man went on. The next night, my husband was up late. For some reason, we had a little baby
visiting in the home. We were getting up fixing his bottle. My husband looked out the window, and he saw them cars coming. My husband, "What are all these cars doing coming in here?"

When my husband said that, them shots started coming through the windows on the porch. My husband, "Oh, they're shooting out there."

My daughters were sleeping in this bed. Their name is Ruth and Gloria, and those shots came right over their head, right over their head. You know, on the plantation they think they own you. They think they own you, body and soul. We should have listened to him. He even told the other people on the plantation, "Why didn't you-all tell us that Matthew was getting ready to put their children in the all-white school?"

So that's what really happened. And then it all happened, all the pressure, cutting off the credit and all of that. So when September came, the children went on to school. But they used to let us pick our cotton, you know. Brought that mechanical picker out there, picked all our cotton. You can't get it all at one time at that time. You couldn't get all of that at one time. Then had the man to come on the tractor and cut up the cotton stalks, plow them in.

Brooks: Plowed them under.

Carter: Yeah, under, and then left us there, just left us there with no cotton to pick. I didn't know how to feel, wasn't no cotton to pick. They did that in October. We usually picked cotton till Christmas, and they did that in October. They were running us away then, you know.

Then you had to go up and get a settlement. You know about the settlement. That's to find out how much money you made that year, over the year, your whole family. And so my husband went up there to get the settlement. That's done in December.

Brooks: You wound up owing them, didn't he?
Carter: Ninety-seven dollars in the red! [Break in recording.]

Brooks: Shot up in the house.

Carter: Yeah! Three o'clock in the morning. So we stayed there, and then we went to Cleveland to Mr. Amzie Moore's house. When we got to Mr. Amzie Moore's house, Charles McLaurin was there. And then we told Charles McLaurin about the shooting and everything, and Charles McLaurin called the FBI and the sheriff from Sunflower County. Charles McLaurin called the FBI, and the FBI came--

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Carter: At Mr. Moore's house.

Brooks: Who asked you that?

Carter: The sheriff, Sunflower County sheriff, to call us. "Why couldn't you just go over here (see, we didn't have no telephone). Why can't you just go over there--he was talking about where the white folks stayed.

We lived in a resettlement, you know. See, this place facing us was a resettlement place. It used to be a plantation with a lot of black people on it, and then they had to move all the black people off and it would be a new settlement for the white people to have forties and eighties on low income, a Sunflower plantation between here and the highway going to Cleveland. On this Merigold Road, you run into this resettlement. We stayed right over the front.

He said, "Why didn't you go over there and tell some of them to call us."
I said, "Well, I don't have no confidence in no white people. That's why I didn't do it, because I ain't got no confidence in them." I said a man. That's what I said. I said, "I ain't got no confidence in a white man in Mississippi." That's what I told him.

Then when my husband went up to get the settlement, he just told my husband, "I ain't got no land for you to work, and you've got to move."

When Matthew came, I was sitting out on the porch, and I said, "What happened, Matthew?"

He said, "We came out in debt ninety-seven dollars. And that ain't all. We've got to move."

I said, "Got to move!"

He said, "Yeah, got to move."

So I said, "Well, come take me to Mound Bayou." You see, at Mound Bayou, I had to go that far to a telephone.

So I went to Mound Bayou. I called a lady named Jean Fairfax [phonetic].

Brooks: Oh, I remember Jean.

Carter: Oh, Jean worked close with me. That's why they couldn't do me in, on account of Jean Fairfax. I called Jean Fairfax. Jean said, "Well, I'll send a man out there to see about this, putting you off the place."

Jean, she called the Mississippi FBI, and that man came out to our house, coming in there telling me whose place I was living on, whose plantation I was living on. I said, "Wait a minute. You don't have to come out here and tell me whose plantation I'm living on when I've been here ten years. I know exactly what plantation I live on."

"What I'm saying, he has a right to tell you to move if he wants to." That's the Mississippi FBI.

I said, "Let me tell you one thing. This man gets a lot of money from the federal government just to lay his land out, and then he got cows and everything. He's getting money from the federal government, and
you mean to tell me you ain't got no say-so over him? Spending the taxpayers' money like that, he got to tell me."

"Well, I'll tell you, you just got a raw deal."

**Brooks:** That's all he said?

**Carter:** That's all he said, and he left there. Then I went on down there back to Jean Fairfax, and said, "Jean, this man ain't going to do nothing. He's coming out here telling me whose plantation I'm on when I know whose I'm on."

And so she said, "I'll send somebody else."

So she sent a man from Washington, D.C. He was a young white man. I wish I could see him today. His personality was so much better when he got there, and he showed me a card identifying himself. I told him to come on in, and he came on in.

Then he started talking to me about what happened, and I was telling him what happened. I told him the man said he ain't got no more land for me to work.

He said, "What!"

I said, "He said [unclear]."

He said, "Well, how many people have moved here since you moved here?"

I told him two.

"Did he tell them to move?"

"No."

"Why didn't he tell them to move, since you-all have been here--you know, we were there first. Well, he knew about it. He was just asking questions."

Then he asked me, "Anybody else on this farm he told them to move?"
I said, "Yeah, the Lee." Next door down there, he told them to move, because when the man came out there to tell us to withdraw the children, they had put their children in, too. They had a girl, one child, and they ran out here and withdrew them. But when it come to their settlement, though, they told them to move just like they told us, although they had withdrawn them. And so we went down there to talk to them about it.

He said, "Well, I'll see your Mr. Pendle [phonetic] in the morning."

He went on out there and seen the man, and then that same old truck come back to our house, blowing the horn, toot, toot. Matthew went out. "You can stay on. You want to farm, you can stay on."

**Rogers:** But they'd already plowed under your cotton.

**Carter:** No, this is another year. We didn't leave that plantation that first year. We stayed on that plantation because we wanted to show the black people out there on that plantation--show the black people, not the white people--that that man cannot run us away off that plantation, and we hadn't done anything but did what they asked us to do, choose what school we wanted our children to go to. We did not leave. We stayed there until the next fall. He wasn't through with us, though. The plantation man wasn't through with us.

**Brooks:** Now, that second guy that came down to talk to you, was he from the Department of Justice?

**Carter:** Yes, the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. I went out there and they pulled the record and showed me my folder out there. Yeah, he was from the Justice Department, came all the way from Washington, D.C., to that little old country road, dirt road. He came all the way.

So then we stayed on. There on [unclear], that's when it happened again. He wasn't through with us. Come out there, tore the fence down from around our hogs, let our hogs go all out in the field. Then we had a cow we put over in that lot, and I heard him say--he stopped before he got to our house, the day boys. You
know, the day boys tore it down, black people working by the day for him. He told them to come out there and tear it down. He was behind them in the truck. They stopped before they got to our house, and I was out on the porch. He said, "You're at the wrong damn house," told the day boy.

**Rogers:** Did they take your cow, or did they try to?

**Carter:** No, they didn't take the cow, just let the cow run out in the field, the hogs run out in the field. I told Matthew, "Matthew, they're going to come here and start tearing this house down." See, the man had gone on back to the Justice Department. He'd gone on back. I said, "He's going to tear this house down. We're just best to try to move."

I went back to Jean Fairfax, and Jean Fairfax said, "Mrs. Carter, we just let you stay there to show the other black folks that you didn't have to move and show him that you didn't have to move. But now it's time for you to move, time for you to move now. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to send a man down there." They called him Allen Black [phonetic]. Allen Black worked with Coalition. That's the name with all organizations, coalition. He worked for them. She said, "I'm going to send Allen Black down there."

Allen Black came on down there. He saw the hogs out across the field. He knew I wasn't lying. Then Allen Black came on into Drew. Okay, Matthew had been coming into Drew looking for a house. When they found out he was Matthew Carter, no doing, no doing, no house no more. Matthew said they'd look at him just as [unclear], "No, we ain't got no house out here." And I know they would keep on telling my kids about, "When you move, don't carry the books away." That's when we found out we were going to have to move.

And so then Allen Black came. He come on into town. He was all dressed up. He was one of these here honky-tonk Baptist preacher. He came in and he said, "Reverend Black. I'm here. I've got a church around here, and I want to buy a house. I want to move my family here."

They went to showing Allen Black all the different, telling him that, "That house down there is for sale. That one down there's for sale," and all that kind of stuff.
Well, the American Friends Service, that's what we really picked this up, American Friends Service. The American Friends Service had told them--because Jean was working for American Friends Service.

**Brooks:** Jean Fairfax. She worked for AFS.

**Carter:** She said, "Don't get no house that he wouldn't live in." So he saw a lot of little houses around, and he said this was the only one that he would live in. This man was in Nashville, Tennessee. He was a schoolteacher in Drew.

**Brooks:** Who was this?

**Carter:** Jones, Mr. Jones.

**Brooks:** He was a schoolteacher in Drew?

**Carter:** He was a schoolteacher in Drew, and he left here, and a Scout Boy or something. He worked with the Scout Boy some way in Nashville, Tennessee. He left this house furnished, everything in the house. When he got to Nashville, Tennessee, he wasn't coming back, so he wanted to sell the house.

Allen Black went all the way to Nashville, Tennessee, bought the house, came back, went and got groceries and food, put it in the refrigerator and everything. About a week later, we moved in the house, and when them people looked down there and saw us, who moved in that house, they liked to fainted. We threw it by them. They tried to starve us out. And he told the black folks on the plantation, "Now I'm going to be good to you-all. I'm going to be good, nice to you-all. But I don't know about them Carters." He meant he wasn't going to do nothing for us. He told them he wasn't going to do nothing for us; he was going to be nice to them.
So the way he was going to prove it—see, out on the plantation, you don't have no money at all much, and in the fall of the year, I think it's around October, that we had to buy a license for the car, tags for our car. My husband didn't have no money, so he would always go out to Indianola and get all the tags for the plantation people. He went on out there this time, and he got everybody tags but us. We weren't no good in no more.

Rogers: How did you-all survive? Did your husband work here in town or did you--

Carter: How did we survive?

Rogers: Yeah.

Carter: God. The Lord. You asked me about church. Back down here you were asking me about church.

Rogers: Yeah.

Carter: Well, I didn't know nothing about trusting in God. I had been going to church, but I really wasn't thinking about no trusting in God. I was just going. But when they shot in my house and my children started coming to this school down here, I started trusting in God. I said, "I'm not going to let these people turn me around. I'm not going to do it."

You know how much we had? We had forty dollars to our name. It was in the bank. And the reason that forty dollars was in the bank, we had fifty dollars, but my husband had to get ten for some reason, so that left forty. My mother lived in Toledo, and my husband said to me, "Your mama stays so far away. I used to have to go get money from my mama, but my mama's dead. So now we've got to save this forty dollars so if something happens to your mama, you can jump on the bus and go up to Toledo." You could go to Toledo
for twelve, fifteen dollars at that time on the bus. And so that's what the money was for. That's all we had. We didn't have nothing. But we were not bound to that plantation man. We weren't bound. I don't know what would have happened.

But let me tell you what happened. We were there at the house, and here comes somebody. I was visiting next door, and this little girl was about seven or eight, Beverly. She came there and said, "Come home, Mama. Somebody's there to see you."

And I got there. There was a white woman and there was a black woman. I didn't know their names. They said they had gone to Ruleville from New York City, and while they were in Ruleville, they heard that we had enrolled the children in this all-white school, and they decided they would come by and see what they could do for us.

Oh, my gosh, they were God coming to my house, to my house. I talk a lot. See, I always talk a lot. I told them all about the shooting. She jumped up and got a camera, and she took a picture of the house and the broken window where the shot came through. She asked me, "Can I come back tomorrow and talk some more?"

I said, "Yeah."

That was on a Friday. She came back that Saturday. She said, "We're going home today."

Oh, I hated for them to go. She said, "Well, if I don't go, I can't help you." She told me, "I don't have no money, but when we get back to New York, we're going to churches, lodges, and everything like that, clubs, and get them to send you all the donations, the money."

And she did just what she said. Them letters started coming, and the money inside the envelope kept coming. U-Hauls started coming all the way from New Jersey, New Jersey, everywhere.

Then somebody sent me--I was telling them about the forty dollars we had in the bank and that's all we had, and we're trying to save it so we'd have a little savings. Somebody sent me $500 and said, "Put it in the bank for your savings."
I said, "Lord, this is God. This has got to be God. It's got to be God," because I had never saw those people in my whole life.

And then she said, wrote me a letter and said, "Just like you send me a donation, you feel sorry for me and send me a donation, you may not send it no more and the other person may not send it no more. We're going to turn you to American Friends Service and let them adopt you, your family."

American Friends, that's when Jean come in the picture. That's when Jean come. I got a letter from Jean Fairfax. Jean Fairfax said, "I'm going to come to your house." She came to Merigold. She had rented a car, and she come to Merigold. Well, she didn't know the way out there. A man was going to be out there on the highway sitting on the car. When she gets to that turn after she passed Merigold, she seen Matthew sitting there. That was my husband. And my husband brought her on to that house.

Jean Fairfax is a woman among women. I was at her house last year. She's now in Phoenix, Arizona. She helped me whenever I had problems. When we had problems, that woman went direct to the proper source and solved those problems. See, out on that plantation, see, they thought I didn't know no contact, I didn't know nobody, so they could do me any kind of way. See, that's what they thought, and they were right. They were halfway right. But I had gone to them meetings, so I had really learned a lot about going to those meetings.

And then Mr. Amzie Moore, he brought Reverend McCracken [phonetic] to see me. Reverend McCracken, he was working for--what's that organization's name? I can't think of it right now.

**Brooks:** I don't remember, either.

**Carter:** I may think of it. But anyway, Reverend McCracken is a white minister.

**Brooks:** From Ohio.
Carter: And he lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, and he was down here and he came to my house and he talked to me. Those pictures that you see on there, he made those pictures. He was there when the children come from school. He talked to me, and then he started getting me some help.

So they didn't do what they thought they were going to do. They thought they were going to put pressure on me and run me out of the state of Mississippi into Chicago or somewhere. But they didn't do it. Thank God they didn't do it. When I look back, I get scared, I get frightened. Then I say, "Oh, Lord, would I do this again?" I don't know.

But the main thing about it, my kids went into that school. My kids went through all kinds of stuff. You'll see it in the book. Spitballs, nigger calling, in the class, when the teacher in the history would "nigger them," "nigger this," all that. They got all kind of stuff. I can't go into all the details. But anyway, they graduated from Drew High School, eight of them. They graduated from Drew High School and they went on to college.

The American Friends Service, the friends in Boulder, Colorado. Jean Fairfax, she started working for NAACP Legal Defense Fund. She changed and started working for them. She got funds from them to send my children to college. She's an angel.

I didn't have one penny talking about going to no college and didn't know how to get them in there. But this lady, she was working for the American Friends Service, Connie Currey [phonetic], and they transferred us from Philadelphia to Atlanta, Georgia. Connie Currey was working in the Friends Service out of Columbus, Georgia, and so Philadelphia transferred our stuff. When the children were ready to go to college--Connie come in the picture before then. Connie come in the picture when we stayed on the plantation. She used to come out there on that plantation and ask me all kind of questions, do some things for me. But when they got out of--eight of them graduated over there, and seven of them graduated from Ole Miss. They went to Ole Miss. They graduated out of Ole Miss.

Rogers: Seven of your children graduated from Ole Miss?
Carter: Yeah. Ruth, she was the oldest one. She went to Delta State for about two years, went to Toledo and get married, and now she works out of the school system in Toledo. That's the eight children. And Gloria's down to Jackson. My baby's in Columbus.

In other words, they're not on this welfare that Dukes, what that man talking about, the leader. What's his name, that man talks about the welfare? Well, they're not on the welfare. But you don't have to put this in the record. But I don't see how this American white man can talk about welfare, and it seems like they're talking about black people on the welfare. That's the way it seems to me.

But they ought to be made to pay some of this welfare, when they didn't give them no kind of opportunity to go to school. All right, you're going to give me no kind of opportunity to go to school, and then you're going to call me ignorant? And then you're talking about nothing but welfare and lazy, when you were out there in that field picking that cotton and digging them ditches and doing everything while you're going to school?

I just talked to my uncle, and he said he felt so sad when he was a boy that he would see the white bus going by and the children going to school, and he said, "I wish I could do that. I wish I could do it." But he had to be on the farm, farming.

And the boys had a hard time getting the girls, because they had to help prepare the land for the planting, and the girls just had to wait until it come up. But in the wintertime, when we was coming along, that's when they did the breaking of the land, and the boys had, my brother had to stay out of school to plow and get the land ready for the planting. So I could stay there a little longer.

And then you're talking about some welfare. I was helping them my sending my children to school and being interested in education. They're not drawing the welfare. They're off the welfare. They've never been on the welfare. I've never been on the welfare. We worked. You know, they wouldn't give you welfare if your husband was at home. You may not know that. We went out to get the welfare because we didn't know how we were going to do anything. My husband and myself, we went to Indianola, and when we got to
Indianola, we went in time for us to go in and talk. We come down to apply for welfare. That's what we told them. And he said, "Well--

**Brooks:** They only had three forms of welfare, ADC, Aid to Dependent Children, disability, and [unclear]. That's all Mississippi ever had. They still don't give any assistance to families, two-parent families.

**Carter:** Two people. So I went down there to get on the ADC. He said, "No, you cannot. I'm so sorry. You have to leave home or your husband has to leave home. We're not giving nobody no help with no two parents in the house."

**Brooks:** Black males left their families in order for the children to be able to receive ADC.

**Carter:** Uh-huh. So I got the letter after we got home. They had the board meeting, and we got a letter saying we were turned down because both of us lived in the home.

**Rogers:** When was that that you did that?

**Carter:** I did that in '66, right after I put the children in the school.

**Rogers:** Because they'd gotten rid of your livelihood. They'd taken all your cotton.

**Brooks:** They had no source of income.

**Carter:** So we just went down there again to see if we could get on the welfare. If we had of got on it, we wouldn't be able to send the children to school, though.
Rogers: They would have cut you off if you'd gotten on it and sent your kids to school.

Carter: No, I went after I had enrolled the children in school. Then I said, "Let's go down there to the welfare."

Rogers: But if you'd been on welfare and your kids had been in the white school, they probably would have cut you off.

Carter: I don't know whether they'd cut it off or not.

Brooks: You would have never got on.

Carter: I would never get on no welfare with the husband in the house. That's the way Mississippi is about welfare. I hope they put a stop to it after a while, but that's the way it was.

Rogers: Well, there's some people--I guess it was in the Rims Barber [phonetic] papers that's there's some cases of people registering to vote and then being cut off of AFDC.

Carter: Oh, yeah, they did everything. They shot them and killed them.

Brooks: They were able because they controlled that institution. The state welfare department was controlled by those folks, and then there was going to be reprisals, because they all were administered at the county level. So they were able to do that, let you off the role.
Carter: Yeah, they get you off--they were going to cut us off the food stamps. We got some food stamps, and we had some money in the bank for Ruth to go to college on.

Brooks: All they have to do is fail to certify you.

Carter: And then they found out she had the money in the bank to go to school, they didn't want to give us no food stamps. Connie Currey made contact with them food stamp people, told them that wasn't our money, that was some money for my children to go to college on. When American Friends Service got through, they said, "Come on in and get your food stamps."

Rogers: It sounds like such a struggle, Mrs. Carter.

Carter: It's a struggle just living in Mississippi, especially on the farm, on that plantation, and in town, too.

Rogers: Did things get better for you when you moved into town? Were things less scary for you in here?

Carter: When I come here?

Rogers: Yeah, when you moved here, rather than being on the farm.

Carter: When I came in here, I had nothing come against me when I came here. I was a person here, didn't have to ask them for nothing. I only got some little call and then hang up. That's all I ever experienced being in Drew. Get on the phone and call and then hang up, that's all.

Rogers: You said your children experienced a whole lot of awful stuff going to Drew High School.
Carter: Both the schools, elementary--

Rogers: And high school. Did all of them have those experiences or did they soften up a bit when the littlest one came through?

Carter: Soften up when?

Rogers: When your youngest kids came through.

Carter: See, what happened, see, I had children for the elementary school and the high school at the same time. [Tape interruption.]

It may not be, but I believe it.

Rogers: Senator [James] Eastland had a real big influence here.

Carter: Senator Eastland was up there in Congress for so many years. He's a powerful man in Congress.

Rogers: When did your youngest child get out of high school? When did your youngest child graduate high school?

Carter: Oh, my. My memory is so short on that. I don't want to lie. I really don't. Maybe Deborah could tell you.

Brooks: What did you ask her?
**Rogers:** When her youngest child finished high school.

**Brooks:** How old is your youngest child?

**Carter:** How old is my youngest child? He's thirty-three years old.

**Brooks:** That's sixteen years ago, roughly, and that would make it probably--'95--about '79 or '80.

**Rogers:** The whites didn't get any nicer as your kids went through school? All of them had the same bad treatment?

**Carter:** No. You know, people are individuals. No, they didn't all have the same treatment. I couldn't say that. You know, no two people are alike. My little baby girl, Deborah, her teacher was always nice to her, always. She didn't get none of that. Like they had to go places or go somewhere, and the teacher would take her hand. She used to tell about it, how the teacher used to take her hand and she would walk with her.

We had one in the fifth grade. She was worse than the whole school system. She did Pearl so bad. Pearl went up on one of them [unclear]. All that stuff about, you know, they seat you. But every day or two she would go and ask the child that had to sit next to Pearl did she want to move, she want to move. She would take them down to the hall and say, "Do you want to move from side of her," and all that kind of stuff. And they were really cruel. Every time they would say, "You need to take a bath. You need to bathe." Every morning, she'd put on her clothes and took a bath and fresh clothes. Pearl didn't need that. She would use this stuff. She was really the devil, devil walking around.

Then at the elementary school, the way to be mean, they was thinking about how they should be mean. When you go out to play for recess, they would do it by class. They had never did it by class before, and they
ain't doing it by class now. But they would do it by class so Pearl couldn't play with Deborah and Deborah couldn't play with Pearl.

And Carl, my little baby boy, what I was telling you about, he would be by himself too when he started going to school. Deborah was there, and he put Deborah on one side and he on the other side so he didn't have nobody to play with or be with. They thought about all that kind of stuff. They'll sit down and think about everything they can think about, how they're going to do.

And then some of the children, they didn't eat at the lunch place because they treated them so bad when they ate lunch, them older ones. We thought they were eating every day, and they were hiding the money, because they didn't want to come home and tell me exactly what happened in that school. Really, in fact, if you read the book, every one of them kids, they own right up, and they own how they made. If you read that book, you will see eight write-ups by my kids.

Brooks: The experiences they had.

Carter: The experiences they did in that school, that's in the book. In fact, I didn't know they were going through so much.

Brooks: They wouldn't tell you?

Carter: No, they wouldn't tell me. They didn't want to worry me. And they said they knew I'd be going over to the school and raising hell, so they just kept their mouth closed. Gloria said she'd pray and say, "Oh, Lord, I hope the next day will be a little better." She would get back to the school and be disappointed. It would be just as bad as the first day was.

So if you read the write-up. I've had folks read that part of that book, and they say they cried, grown men. I was Connie's house one day in Atlanta, and this man come and he had read--what you call that part
of that book? They call it something, before the book. He had read it, and he said he cried. He said it was so sad. He didn't know people were so mean.

Rogers: We're hearing a lot of that in Mississippi.

Brooks: I know they are.

Rogers: You've been here thirty years, right?

Brooks: She's been here sixty.

Carter: Yeah. Seventy-two. I was born in Mississippi. I was born in Sunflower County.

Rogers: Do you think of this as your home?

Carter: Yeah, I think of it as my home. I plan to die here. And I'm working now. We had a meeting last night. I'm still working. I work every day. They have meetings right here at my house now.

Rogers: What are the meetings about?

Carter: Anything that comes up in Drew. School system is getting worse, racist stuff still existing, and all that kind of stuff.

Brooks: What's the name of you-all's organization?
Carter: Concerned Citizens.

Brooks: Of Sunflower County or of Drew?


Rogers: You said earlier that the NAACP and the young people in SNCC had raised your awareness.

Carter: Yeah. If you're out on the plantation, you don't know nothing. You're ignorant.

Brooks: You got a quick education, didn't you?

Carter: Yeah, I sure did.

Rogers: Do you remember any of the young people in SNCC particularly. You mentioned Charles McLaurin.

Carter: I don't know. One was named Bob. Do you know that Bob?

Brooks: Bob Moses.

Carter: And different people. They would come into Cleveland, and then this group would go back and another group would come in. They were all over Mississippi, you see, and they would come in different places, SNCC.
Rogers: Do you think they did good work?

Carter: I know they did good work. I don't have to ask that. They exposed the state. See, you've got to expose it. They exposed a lot of stuff happening. That's what really happened. They exposed.

I had some come right here to this house, and then after SNCC was gone, some young white came to my house from a college. I forget that college they said they were going to. They were all dressed up, you know, in these common clothes. They weren't no poor person. They thought they were. And this policeman here harassed them, called them communists and all kind of stuff, and them people took them to Oxford to court. They would come to my house. I didn't have nothing hardly to give them but some cold water. They'd get their cold water, and then they'd go back on the street and talk to the people.

So the old policeman came, "Why are you talking to them children? They're not old enough to vote." He called them a communism.

Rogers: Communism?

Carter: Yeah. So anyway, so they come up there to Oxford to the court. And then he was going around here trying to get these black people to say he was a good man and never bothered nobody, come to court and help him out. He didn't know who the people were, see. He thought they were just some you know what they call white trash. You know what the white folks call the other white folks, white trash. When they stand up for something and stuff like that and they don't like them, they call them white trash. So that's what they thought these was, but they wasn't like no white trash. They were university teachers came here and went out on the street and went in the home, people's home here in Drew.

Rogers: So, Mrs. Carter, you stayed active the whole time? You stayed active here in this community?
Carter: Yeah. I had a meeting last night.

Brooks: She hasn't even told you she worked--how many years, twenty years, in Head Start?

Carter: Twenty-one.

Rogers: We haven't even gotten to Head Start. How did you get started with Head Start?

Carter: Well, I was thinking about American Friends Service, and I said, "They ain't going to take care of me all of my life. I need a job." And I went out on that little back porch there and I sat on them doorsteps. I said, "You know one thing. I need a job. My husband needs a job. My husband didn't have a job." I got up and I said, "Matthew, come on take me to Cleveland. I'm going down here and see if I can get a job."

I went to Mound Bayou first to Olivia Johnson's store, and I was telling Olivia Johnson about I was looking for a job. Olivia Johnson said, "Why don't you try Mr. Moore?"

I said, "Yeah, that's it."

Went on down there to Cleveland, went to Mr. Amzie Moore's house, and I told him I needed a job. He said, "Well, I thought you would come." He really said these words, "I thought you would come." He said, "Let me get up here and call Mr. Vent."

Brooks: Aaron Vent [phonetic].

Carter: Aaron Vent. And he called Mr. Vent and told Mr. Vent to come over there to this house. He came, and he said, "Mrs. Carter needs a job. Can you find her some place in Head Start?"

He said, "Oh, yes, I can find a place."

Then Mr. Moore told me, he said, "Come back Monday and go to work."
I went back that Monday, and I worked at Peter Rock Church.

**Brooks:** In Cleveland.

**Carter:** In Cleveland.

**Rogers:** Peter Rock?

**Brooks:** St. Peter Rock.

**Carter:** In Cleveland.

**Brooks:** It was used for the Head Start center.

**Carter:** I worked a month and I got paid off, and that was the best thing I ever did in my whole life. I don't know old I was, forty-something. I don't know how I felt. Oh, I felt like a person, feel like somebody. And then the next two weeks, we got paid off again. It was more money that I ever had in my hand in my life, and I don't know how that felt. But anyway, I know I worked for Head Start for twenty-one years.

**Rogers:** This was a good experience for you?

**Carter:** Yes. Yeah, a lot of experience. We went to a lot of--

**Brooks:** Invigorating.
Carter: Yeah! Then I went to training sessions and all that, and stuff like that. That improved me. And then we went to school.

Brooks: Adult education.

Carter: Yeah, we went there. People came from Delta State and volunteered their time and talked to us. And then I went down to Itta Bena and got my GED. And then, child, I don't know, that makes you feel like a woman, a person. And, you know, I love children, because I had so many of them, and I really understood children. I understood them because I had a lot of them.

By the way, my husband, he did not have a job. At that time, they had some jobs for people that were over forty coming through the county, and my husband went down to Indianola to sign up for that. He was an older person. And so down in Indianola they gave it to him, told him to come to work here in Drew. I come home. I thought my husband was working. The man had sent him away from that work. He said, "He don't work here in Drew." That old policeman sent him away. He was over the projects. "You don't work here in Drew," and my husband came home.

I said, "Why are you at home?"

He said, "I was home five minutes after I got there." So my husband didn't have no job, you know.

But like I was telling you about New York, people in New York, she was always right. I said, "No, he doesn't have a job." And I don't know how that woman knew, but, you know, they know. She made contact with who was over Head Start here in Sunflower County, she made contact out of Washington, and she come on to Jackson, Mississippi, with that contact and told.

So one day I was at work at St. Peter Rock and the phone rang. It was for me. It was Charles McLaurin. And Charles McLaurin said, "Mrs. Carter, does Mr. Carter still need a job?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "The people down in Jackson called this office and told us to give Mr. Carter a job."
That's where he got his job through, not because of Sunflower County or nothing like that. He said, "Are you still working over there or do you want to come to Sunflower County and work?"

I said, "I'll still stay here."

He said, "Well, tell Mr. Carter I said come down to the center Monday morning and talk to the center administrator and get ready to start to work."

That's how he got his job. He worked on that job twenty years. He loved that job. Oh, he loved it.

**Rogers:** What did he do?

**Carter:** He was a teacher's aide.

**Rogers:** So he worked with the children, too?

**Carter:** Yeah, he worked with the five-year-olds. I always worked with three-year-olds.

**Rogers:** What was, I guess, the biggest change that Head Start made in your life?

**Carter:** In my life? The change? It made a lot of change, a lot of paperwork. More paperwork than anything else that changed in my life. I think they wanted to go more to education. I don't know. I can't say. But I know when we first started working in the Head Start and we had three-year-olds, most of them were learning through play. They were learning through play, especially the three-year-olds. Most all the children were learning through games and puzzles, thinking skills, stuff like that. I don't know, I think they wanted to go more into educational.

**Brooks:** She worked in the Bolivar County Head Start, and he worked in Sunflower County.
**Rogers:** When we were down interviewing Charles McLaurin, the Head Start that was there, was that Sunflower?

**Brooks:** That was Sunflower, yeah. They have a center in that building that we were in. He used to work there before he went to [unclear].

**Rogers:** Where we were on those tiny little chairs?

**Brooks:** Yes.

**Carter:** Charles McLaurin, he used to do a lot of work.

**Rogers:** In the last forty years, a whole lot of folks have left the Delta. Have you noticed the change that this has brought? Have you seen the people moving away, young people?

**Carter:** Well, the young people, now back, the young people got to going. When they finished high school or something, they would leave Mississippi and go someplace else. But now, most of the people, they get out of school and college, they stay in Mississippi. They're not going north. I think they found out the North ain't no better than the South, so they started staying in the South. Mostly for the weather and everything, they finally did stay here. I know my children do. I have five children in the state.

**Rogers:** They like it better than up north?
Carter: Oh, my God, yes. My children go up there and say, "Mama, thank you for not bringing us up here. Thank you."

Rogers: What do they not like about the North?

Carter: Really, I'll tell you what they don't like about it. They really don't like that cold weather. That's number one. And number two, they have found out when you're poor, you're poor; and when you're uneducated, you're uneducated. And then don't care where you go, if you're uneducated, you're still in poverty. And most--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Carter: . . . is lower in Mississippi and in the South than it was in the northern places once upon a time. But it looks like to me--

Brooks: No more.

Carter: It looks like to me they're catching up and passing us.

Brooks: Yes.

Carter: But anyway, they just don't like the North. I never liked it. I went up there when I was very young. I didn't like it and came back.

Brooks: How long did you stay up there?
Carter: I stayed three months in Toledo, and then I decided I'd come back home. I didn't like it.

Brooks: Was that when your mother moved up there?

Carter: Well, I really went up there before my mother went up there. My oldest brother went to Toledo when he first got married. His wife's family lived in Dayton, Ohio, and so they stopped in Dayton. And then his wife has family that lived in Toledo, so they decided to go on to Toledo, and he's been there ever since. Ever since he was eighteen, he's been in Toledo.

Brooks: But there are not a whole lot of job opportunities here in the Delta for young people.

Carter: No, there's not a lot of them.

Brooks: There would be many more that would stay here if there were some job opportunities.

Carter: Yeah, they would stay if there were job opportunities. But I guess they got jobs. In one of them write-ups, one of my sons said, "Mississippi is where I'm going to stay."

Brooks: Is that what he said? That's where he's going to stay.

Carter: Yeah, that's what he said.

Brooks: He's fought the good fight.
**Carter:** Yeah, he really did. In fact, all them kids. I have never had a dropout out of high school out of thirteen children. I never had a dropout. I never had to go to the schoolhouse about discipline, thank God. The records here in Drew will show it, where they done acted up at school and I'm going over there to fault the teacher and all that. I've never been there. And they'll be talking about those problems. I said, "I didn't have no problems. I don't know."

I'd tell my children before they'd leave home or before they go to school, "You're going to go to school for one thing, and that's to learn. That's what you're going for. And get your education. You better go there and be nice. If you don't, you're going to hear from me." That's what I would tell them.

**Brooks:** That's why they wouldn't come home and tell you no bad stories, because that's what you told them, go get that education.

**Carter:** And then another thing I told them. When we were doing these things, signing the freedom of choice. Well, the little children on the picture, they didn't know too much. Ruth was the oldest one, so Ruth said she thought she was responsible for them. They went because she said, "Let's go," the oldest one, and she thought she was responsible for them. But I told Ruth, the older one, and Larry, I said, "Okay now, you want to go?"

"Yeah."

I said, "You sure you want to go?"

They said, "Yeah."

I said, "Let me tell you, now. A Carter never starts stuff and stops. It's better not to start than to start and stop. Now, if you're going, you've got to go and stay there." And I told her the possibility wouldn't be no more black children there, and then I told her the possibility that [unclear] and different stuff would be coming. I said, "But you just have to make up your mind that you're going to stick and stay."

And so I told them kids that, and they said in them write-ups that they made up in their mind that they weren't going to let them people run them from their school, that they were going to stay there and they were
going to graduate from that school. They made that up in their mind. You know, a lot of people, as soon as a little hard something comes against them, they really get out of school and so this, but they never were that type of person. But anyway, Gloria and them said they had some good teachers.

**Rogers:** So you had some teachers that were good to them, too?

**Carter:** Yes. That don't mean they were good people. You know what I mean? They taught the class good. That's what she said. They had this Miss Sampson. She was about the best there. She was their math teacher. She would teach the older children. They said in her classroom, she taught the class. That's what she was there for, and that's what she did. And if you wanted to ask her any questions, she would stop right then and answer questions. And then she would ask, "Do you understand it?"

Ruby Sampson, that's her name, and Miss Sampson was the best math teacher. She was a good math teacher. That's why they made it in college. Gloria said, "I give Miss Sampson credit for being a good math teacher." That's what she did. She was a teacher, and she taught. She wasn't in the classroom trying to show no race stuff.

**Brooks:** She was white?

**Carter:** Yeah. Her name was Ruby Sampson.

**Brooks:** What kind of shape is the school in now?

**Carter:** Oh, my, don't ask me that. Down to the lowest of the lowest. We're at the bottom on these test scores.
Brooks: Drew?

Carter: Drew. One other school was lower. One more school below it. This school--I don't know. All I can say is this. They went to the private schools.

Brooks: Yeah, the white children.

Carter: They fled to the private schools. And after they fled to that private school, then my concern about education over there. We got people on that board need to be off of that board. They haven't had no children in that school in over twenty-some-odd years, and some on that board, their children went to the private school. Just last year, one lady was on the school board, and she sent her child to the private school. And that Duvall's been on that school board for thirty years. He don't have no children in there. I don't understand why he's holding on to that school board.

It's bad, because here in Drew I don't have the opportunity to vote for school board members, if you're living in the city, this town. You can't vote for a school board member. Now, out in the rural--

Brooks: In the county. Do you understand that, that the county district is elected and the municipal district is appointed.

Carter: That's it.

Brooks: That's the way it is in Greenville.

Carter: But look, let me say this. Let me tell you this. Now, two people out in the rural, like I say, them white folks out there in the resettlement out there, them people outside of town, they send two school board
members. They elect two school board members. And the other three is appointed by the board of aldermen. So that leaves us out for voting for a school board member.

**Rogers:** So you can't vote for a school board member if you're in the city of Drew, in the town?

**Carter:** We've got no voice in voting for a school board member, and that is real bad. And that school board is not concerned about no education. The only thing that school board is concerned about is discipline, sending children home and stuff. And too many subs are going over. We're going to have to do something. We're going to have to do something about it. I don't know, we done got here now where we don't know what to do.

**Rogers:** Too many substitute teachers being hired?

**Carter:** Oh, substitutes don't really substitute.

**Brooks:** Non-certified.

**Carter:** Non-certified anybody. Me. I can go over there.

**Brooks:** Who is the superintendent? Smith?

**Carter:** No. What's that man's name? Wait a minute. I'm blocking that man out of me because I want him to be blocked out, and I'm blocking him out.

**Brooks:** That's all right.
**Carter:** Yeah. And their kid's at the private school and they're on the school board. You tell me they're concerned about these schools down here? No, they're not. We're just wondering why they want to hold them positions on the school board.

**Brooks:** Some of the teachers are white, and they're not interested in the education of black children, but they're teaching in the schools.

**Carter:** Well, they're in the school system.

**Brooks:** It's their job.

**Carter:** I'll go along with this. Let me tell you, when my children were in the school, I went along with this. Now, if you've got a white teacher there, you integrate the classroom, you have white children in that classroom and then you have black children in that classroom. One time when we were going to school, that one school, and my baby, Carl, came home and told me, "Mama, I've been changed out of this classroom."

"Changed?"

"Yeah."

"What do you mean about you being changed?"

"They put me in a class where there's no white children in there, and we've got a white teacher in there."

I said, "Are you kidding?"

I got on that phone, and I said, "Wait a minute. Carl, my son, says he's been changed from one classroom to the other, and I want to know why."

"Yeah, we changed him."
I said, "Well, look, put him in an integrated class. If you're going to go to an integrated school, with integrated teachers, mix that class up. Put him back where it's integrated black and white in that classroom."

The next day he went back, because they can just sit there and don't teach your children nothing, especially teachers like these teachers here in Sunflower County. They'll sit up, and nothing but black children in there, and some of them white teachers are not concerned about there's nothing but black children sitting up in there. That's why I say, if you're going to integrate a school, integrate the classroom.

**Rogers:** Has anything gotten better in race relations since the 1960s, since the time when you--

**Carter:** Personalities have gotten better.

**Rogers:** Pardon?

**Carter:** I guess personalities is better. They speak. Is that what you call personality?

**Brooks:** Yeah, I suppose you could. The attitudes are a little better?

**Carter:** Yeah, attitudes. You know about Mississippi attitudes are better.

**Brooks:** Yes, I do.

**Carter:** That's right.

**Rogers:** But how do you really feel? Do you think that much has changed?
Carter: Since when?

Rogers: Since the 1960s.

Carter: Oh, yeah, something has changed. I won't tell that lie, yeah. In the sixties, before the sixties, we couldn't go in the restaurants, we couldn't use the bathroom. We had get behind them on the Greyhound buses and all that. We couldn't go to vote freely. Yeah, a lot of stuff changed. But a lot of stuff has got to better. There's a whole lot of change, but it's got a long, long way to go. But, yeah, lots of things have changed. I remember when I used to be young and had to go and get groceries. We had to stand back, as long as a white person was there, to be checked out, and be the last one being checked out. Then a lot of stores, black folks was working there in Mississippi, they used to couldn't work in them stores and stuff like that. Nobody up in them stores but white people, right here in Drew and all that. So there is a lot of change, really.

Rogers: Have white attitudes changed much?

Carter: Well, that's what I said, their attitude has. They've changed, too, some of them.

Brooks: Would you say, Mrs. Carter, that even though attitudes have changed, they're still in control?

Carter: Yeah, that's what I'm trying to get around to telling. They are controlling everything, like the schools. What do they want to be controlling that school for? Their children are in the private school. They want to be in power. As long as they're in power, they're okay. They want to control everything. We can go out and vote, and we stay at home and won't go. We could put black folks in black positions, but we stay at home and won't go vote.
I ain't started on the black people, and I hope I don't start, because if I do-- [Laughter]. Oh, my God. Now, ain't that right? Huh?

**Brooks:** Right.

**Carter:** I don't want to start on them, because I'm going to tell you, there would be lots more change, there would be a lot more change. We are the ones keeping our ownself back, some of it. Last night I told them. I just flew off with them.

**Brooks:** Where were you?

**Carter:** We had a meeting at the national guard armory.

**Brooks:** You had a meeting at the armory?

**Carter:** Yeah. The black folks need to get up and be more concerned about their kids and think about their children need education and you ain't going to be able to survive without it. But, you know, lots of black folks is doing it. When voting days, instead of them going to the polls, where one vote don't count and they're going to do what they want to do. It's a lot of stuff, and you get so sick. It just makes you sick. I'm tired of begging folks to go vote. You've got to beg them. People done died that we had this right to do this, and they stay home. [Tape interruption.]

**Rogers:** Is there much communication between older people and younger people?
Carter: It's a lot of communication with me between them, the younger people. The younger people, they do have respect for you if they know you stand up for them. They have some respect for me, I know that, here in Drew, because they know I've been to the school standing up for them. I've been places standing up for them. So they have a lot of respect for me. Sometimes I get at them about not going to vote.

Rogers: If you had something to say to the young people who will be listening to your interview here, the students and Tougaloo and the students at Dickinson, where I teach, what would you say to them?

Carter: I would tell them to stay in school, study, get a good education, reach for the sky, feel good about themselves, and they can do anything anybody else can do. I don't know what all I would tell them. But the main thing, get an education, be proud of yourself, and remember that this is your country and you have as many rights here as anybody else. You may have to demand them, but you've got them.

Rogers: What's been the most rewarding thing to you of all of your years of being active?

Carter: Oh, I don't know. So many things have been the most rewarding things to me. I don't know. The most rewarding thing, that I'm proud of, that my children all stayed in school and they got an education, and some of them are trying to go back to school and do some more. They think they need to get more and more education. That's one of the proudest things, is my children.

Let me see. Well, what I like about here in Drew, that the people have got confidence in me and make me proud, and they listen, when I get angry with them. [Laughter] And I have got some rewards. I'm proud of them. I got one from the church here in Drew, Mississippi. I'm proud of that. I got an award from Cincinnati, Ohio, and the key to Cincinnati up there. I got the Wonder Woman Award. Did you see the Wonder Woman Award up there?
**Rogers:** The Wonder Woman Foundation.

**Carter:** This is one of the awards that made me really happy.

**Brooks:** Women Taking Risks.

**Carter:** Women Taking Risks and Wonder Woman Award.

**Brooks:** Wonder Woman Foundation, 1982.

**Carter:** I got that in New York. I was able to meet Danny Thomas' daughter, Marlo Thomas, and all them stars. A lot of stars up there I met, and I got that award.

And then I went on to my own university, University of Mississippi, and got an award from the University of Mississippi. That's on the wall, so that really makes me happy. Then my children gave me awards, so that makes me happy. Just different awards, and they make me happy.

I keep on stressing, emphasizing education, and every time they see me they say, "That's the education woman." That makes me proud when children go to school and stay in school and get an education. That really makes me happy. Any children that do that.

**Rogers:** Do you have anything you'd like to ask, Owen?

**Carter:** You can ask me anything you want to ask. I told Mr. Brooks that I'll say what I want to say, anyway.

**Brooks:** You didn't need to tell me that. You sure didn't need to tell me that. [Laughter]
Rogers: Is there anything else you'd like to say to us?

Carter: What I'd like to say?

Rogers: Uh-huh.

Carter: Just ask me something. I'll say it.

Rogers: Are you happy?

Carter: Happy? Well, yes, I think I am. My husband used to say, when his children were happy, he was happy; and when his children are sad, then he's sad. So that's what I say. When my family's happy, I'm happy; and when they get sad, then I get sad. But, yes, I'm happy. Of course, sometimes I can be so happy, and I think about me working for 30 cents an hour and on the farm, working from one end of the year to the other one in the hot sun. The only time we would be happy out there was when it rained and we couldn't go to the field. And then I said, "Thank you, Jesus, that I don't have to go through that anymore and my children don't have to go through it anymore." So that makes me happy. So many things.

And then I'm able to go on vacations and go visit my children, and I got a lot of them to visit. And they make me happy when they say, "Mama, we're going out to eat today." I never had the opportunity, never had the opportunity to do that, you know. So that's what I do.

Brooks: So it was worth it?
Carter: Yeah. Oh, I could tell you a lot of things makes me happy. It makes me happy like when Mother's Day and holidays, and I look outside. My children are on the inside, and I look outside and I see all them automobiles, fine automobiles sitting out there in the yard.

One time, a woman just had moved here, and so she called another friend who had been here all the time and said, "Has Mrs. Carter died? I see all those cars."

The lady said, "Every holiday those cars will be parked out there. I don't think so."

Rogers: That's just all your kids.

Carter: And then it makes you happy, too--there's so many things that make you happy. Your children got jobs and they're not up in the house with you on welfare and you've got to take care of them after they're grown and share your little bit with them, like I see a lot of people have to do. I don't have a child on the welfare. They're making their own thing. That makes you happy. You want to shout to [unclear].

Rogers: What do you wish for now, Mrs. Carter?

Carter: Well, from now on I wish that I'd be going on vacations and going visiting my children and putting some more room onto the house, because I've got thirty-five grandkids.

Brooks: Thirty-five?

Carter: Yeah.

Brooks: Have mercy.
Carter: And I need more room. I'd like to have this house have some more room so when the children come they'll be comfortable here. My children are just like me. They never leave their children behind. So they bring them. That's what I wish. That's what really my wish is, to have enough money to put some more room on this house so when my children come.

Rogers: Well, thank you, Mrs. Carter. I hope you get that.

[End of Interview]
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