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Jerry C Bardwell
(Interviewee's signature)

Address 11600 Highway 431 Date 2-20-96

Phone 892-3215

Ray Peoples
(Interviewer's signature)

Address 504 Briarmeade Dr. Date 2-20-96

Phone 492-5488

Interviewee Background Information

Name: Mr. Bardwell
Address: 11600 Highway 431
Phone Number(s): 852-3215
Approximate age or date of birth: 76, Oct. 7, 1920
Mother's name: Martha
Father's name: Robert
Places lived and when: Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Alabama, Mississippi, New Mexico, California.

Education: Highschool, Univ. of Nebraska

Religion: Protestant
Business, political and social memberships (past and present): Republican

Present occupation: Retired
Former occupation(s): Airforce, Engineer

Special skills: Electrician
Major Accomplishments:

Local events in which you have participated:

State and/or regional events in which you have participated:

National events in which you have participated: World War II

International events in which you have participated: World War II

Natural born U.S. citizen? (Yes)/No
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date:
Country from which you emigrated:
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession:

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview:

Additional information:

Tape Contents

Mother and Father Occupation
Early childhood life
Schools
What they did for fun
The Depression
Life on the farm
World War II

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF

MR. JERRY BARDWELL

Ray Peoples

Questions

What did you do as a child?

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Did you have to work as a small child?

What were schools like?

How were they made?

What can you tell me about tenant farmings?

Did you have experience? What kind? How did it work?

Where did you spend money that was left over?

Were most of the store owners fair?

What kind of car did you have to travel around in?

Did ya'll buy some land in Mississippi?

What were the schools like in Mississippi?

What part of Mississippi did you settle in?

What was your house like?

Did you have many farm animals?

Did you do it because they were black, throwing the hornet's nest into Church?

How were your relationships with blacks?

Did you see a difference in blacks?

Did you play with blacks when you were a kid?

How old was you when you could remember the Depression?

Do you remember the big plantations?

What can you tell me about the New Deal?

Did any programs of the New Deal help you?

How long were you able to keep your New Deal job?

Do you remember having a poll tax?

How old were you when you joined the army?

What kind of experiences did you have in World War II?

How many missions did you fly in?

Where were your missions flown?

How long were you in Europe before they surrendered?

Historical Chronological

The Roaring 20's

The Great Depression and the 1930's

President Roosevelt and the New Deal

World War II

Chronological Order

Jerry Bardwell born 1920

Growing up as a child in the 1920's and 1930's

Jim Crow, How it was to Mr. Bardwell

How schools were like in the South

Roosevelt's New Deal

World War II and real prosperity to the South

Content

The following paper will discuss what life was like for a poor farm boy between the years of 1920 to 1975. The majority of the paper will be on his childhood in the South. My grandfather is the youngest of three boys. His older brothers' names are Uncle Gray and Uncle Buck. My grandfather's name is Jerry, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Bardwell. Mr. Bardwell's father worked in the oil fields of Oklahoma and his mother taught school on an Indian Reservation.

Mr. Bardwell was born on October 7, 1920, in Kellyville, Oklahoma, on a Creek Indian reservation. Mr. Bardwell was born the first year of the roaring 20's, but in the South or rural countryside there was not much going on much less roaring. While the rest of the country may have been doing good, the South saw a brief period of prosperity during World War I. This brief period of prosperity was the first one since the Civil War. So the South for sometime had been in a depression. For Mr. Bardwell and many others, he was born in the start of a Depression. For the South the war is over and farm prices fall; oil and mining prices fall.

When I asked my grandfather what he could remember most about growing up, like most people his age, it was how much stuff used to cost. My grandfather recalled a loaf of bread was a nickel, a can of pork-n-beans was a nickel, and quart of milk was a dime. Mr. Bardwell, like

most of the people who lived during the Depression, kept up with everything because they thought they might need it. Most of these people know how to get the most out of everything. People who were from the South during this time were very self-sufficient.

As a small child my grandfather moved around a lot usually looking for work or better land to grow crops on. So Mr. Bardwell went to several different schools while he was growing up. My grandfather and his two older brothers rode one horse to school, and the oldest brother got to drive. My grandfather told me his oldest brother was not a very good driver. Sometimes they would get strewed all over the countryside and miss school. The schools were very poor. The schools usually just had one room and were heated by a coal furnace. The schools were built by the community out of whatever they could use.

Mr. Bardwell had lived in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kansas before he moved to Mississippi with his family in 1929. He said they moved mostly because they were looking for greener grass on the other side of the hill. My grandfather can first remember sharecropping in the Arkansas Delta when he was very young. He told me it worked like this: If the land owner provided everything like the mule, plow, seed and food, he could receive half or more. The land owner would mark off a piece of land that you could plant a cash crop on and you would make an agreement. Anyone could make a living; all you had to

do was show up for work, my grandfather remembers. Some people who provided their own food, mule, and plow could work out a better deal for themselves. There was no industry in the South; it was some place else but not here.

My grandfather can remember at the end of the year the books would be balanced at the General Store; usually the man who owned the land also owned the store, too. So if they had any money left over they would buy nice things like clothes, not just the necessities of life. The prices were high; that was so they could keep you in the hole and working for them another year especially if you produced a good crop. If you did not spend your money at the general store, there was usually some type of peddlar that was close by. Every place my grandfather can remember living had some type of peddlar. The peddlar would travel from house to house or farm to farm looking to make a trade. The peddlar traveled in a wagon. The wagon seemed to have everything under the sun. The peddlar's wagon had everything from chairs, swings, toys, groceries, and flavoring just to name a few things that would be tied to his wagon. My grandfather would trade him chickens for toys or candy. The peddlar had a big cage to keep his chickens in. The peddlar would eat the chickens or take them to the market or sale. My grandfather sure did like to see the peddlar coming because he knew he could trade a chicken for some candy or something.

When I asked my grandfather about Jim Crow, he told me that there was not much difference between poor whites and blacks. We always had black neighbors. Jim Crow is where blacks rode on the back half of the bus and could not use white public facilities. My grandfather does remember meeting and talking with a former slave though. My grandfather does remember playing games with black kids. He said the only difference in the game was how they said it. For example, if they were playing hide-and-seek instead of counting to ten, they would say "Fort night, night before twenty-four robbers at my door; I got up, let them in, and hit them in the head with a rolling pin. Ready or not, here I come!" We always had black people for neighbors, everybody down South had blacks for neighbors. There were no black and white districts, maybe a poor and rich district instead.

As kids, blacks and whites got along usually very well. For example, every year the old folks would sit around in front of the General Store trading stories. The old folks would talk about how the young kids would not be able to find their watermelon patches this year, enticing the young boys into looking all over the countryside until they found the watermelon patches.

Most of the time it would take a combined effort of both blacks and whites alike to find the watermelon patches. When they found the watermelon patches, they would celebrate their victory. The young boys

both black and white would meet at the watermelon patch at night to take a few watermelons and eat them. Just their luck, one of the old folks was guarding the patch. So the boys grabbed a few watermelons and took off running as fast as they could. My grandfather got sprinkled by a few shots from the old man's gun while watching his watermelon patch. My grandfather flew past the other boys and did not stop running until he reached the bridge where they were supposed to meet later on. A black kid came trotting up a few minutes later, all out of breath. The black boy said, "My daddy told me there was no white boy that could run faster than a black boy." My grandfather told the little black boy that if he would have caught those shots, he would have run faster, too.

"One time us kids, both black and white, decided it would be funny to throw a hornet's nest into the church. It was a black church, but that made no difference to the kids. They decided to remove the steps in front of the church before they threw in the hornet's nest. They thought it would be funny to watch the people fall down as they ran out of the church. They got a real kick out of doing that."

My grandfather was about 8 or 9 years old before they finally settled down around Calhoun, Mississippi. Mr. Bardwell's father bought an old Ford. When they got ready to move, they would pile everything they could onto the car. They would take everything they could use to keep warm with and put it into the cab of the Ford. Everything else like

furniture would be tied to the outside. That was not an uncommon sight to see back in those days. The Depression, which began in 1920, struck with such ferocity that it drove thousands back to the land. Usually these people had all of their belongings tied to their vehicle. There were no motels or hotels to stay in when you traveled around back then. When they got ready to stop, they would just find a nice place on the side of the road and pull over. The boys would gather up rocks and put them in a circle where their mother could start to cook whatever they had at the time to eat.

Mr. Bardwell's father would not own land; it would wear out and not be any good, he thought. The family lived in a regular three-room tenant house. They had to use old newspapers and cardboard boxes to fill in the cracks of the house. Life was hard in the South, especially for tenants and sharecroppers. "Throughout the South innumerable farm families received less than $100 in cash during the entire year" (F.D.R. and The South, p. 38).

Economic distress was not new to many of the Southern people. Most of the people in the South lived on the bare necessities anyhow. If my grandfather and his family decided to stay in one spot for a while, they would have a couple of cows, chickens, and hogs to help feed and house themselves with. You could always tell if people were moving if they had their cow tied to the back of the wagon. When the Depression

came, it drove thousands back to the countryside. The 1930's became the first decade in history in which more people migrated to the countryside than to the cities. As far as most people were concerned, like my grandfather, there was not any such thing as a Depression. That was something people or out-of-towners told you. We did not know the difference in a Depression; we were already poor. You would see grown men anywhere from 17 to 40 years old wandering around looking for work. These people would carry all of their belongings in a handkerchief tied to the end of a stick, much like hoboes. Most of the men who came by asked if they could do any work for some food. If we had any work to do, we would let them do it. Usually they would burst stove wood for a meal. They would all offer to do work and never asked for a handout.

It was Mr. Bardwell's job to kill a chicken, cut its head off, and clean it for his mother. My grandfather's mother would cook fried chicken with gravy and biscuits. They usually had some type of vegetable to go with it like turnip greens. Usually the men would stay and eat, then be on their way. Sometimes they would get their food and keep going. Two or three of the men wanted to stay for a while and work. My grandfather would fix the men a place to say in the barn. The men would stay and work for food and a place to stay. One day the men would decide it was time to leave and they would move on. Life would

go on just like it always had for us. These nomads or Hobos would create their own little cities almost called Hoovervilles. They were named after President Hoover. For the people of the South, the blame was on the Wall Street Yankees and the man in the White House. This would help set the stage to get a man like Roosevelt into office in 1932.

In the Fall of 1932 the South, having helped elect the president of its choice, Franklin D. Roosevelt, waited eagerly for his promised New Deal with no idea of what it might bring. Roosevelt's greatest challenge was the alleviation of poverty in the South, not the maintenance of white supremacy which upset many of the Southerners. The South was so painfully in need of security that they sought federal aid. Even though the New Deal itself threatened to upset the status quo and alter some of the institutions cherished by Southerners and considered to be the very existence of Southern culture. No President since the Civil War showed as much concern for the South as did Franklin D. Roosevelt. I asked my grandfather what Roosevelt was like? "He was a hero to some and not too popular with others," replied Mr. Bardwell. Only a drastic program of recovery and reform would bring the South to its share of national prosperity.

Roosevelt implemented many New Deal programs. The various programs of the New Deal furnished government credit, debt adjustment, crop controls, crop loans, soil conservation, and a variety of efforts to

rehabilitate farmers. The Agriculture Adjustment Acts of 1933 and 1938 were aimed at regulating farm production and maintaining purchasing power. Throughout the South farmers slaughtered animals and plowed under crops which had been declared excess. Millions of dollars flowed southward in payment from the federal treasury. Southern agriculture produced more than a mere living along with the government subsidies. Although too large a share of the profits went to the landlords, some managed to make it to the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Benefit payments were made directly to the planters, who usually kept the money in payment of croppers' debts owed to them. Crop restrictions forced thousands of tenants and sharecroppers off the farms and into despair. Times in the South were hard, even with relief payments of some kind from the government.

President Roosevelt's New Deal had several different programs. The Works Progress Administration built sidewalks, sewer systems, and roads. The WPA copied historical records, painted paintings on public buildings, and produced his entertainment. These people were white collar working class. The Civilian Conservation Corps helped reforestation and battled against corrosion. Most of these people were unskilled young men who were placed in work camps. They would receive food, shelter, and 30 dollars a month. They had to send $15 a month home to help out the family. Ironically most of the Southern

taxpayers objected to the WPA and CCC and similar agencies on the grounds that they were safe havens where loafers were supported at public expense. By offering shorter hours, lighter work, and year-round employment, this effected the labor supply of the mill owner and planter. For some of the people in the South, the New Deal ran counter to the established Southern ideals.

Mr. Bardwell benefitted directly from one of the New Deal Programs, the National Youth Administration. The program was set up to allow so many for students to fill in high schools. Mr. Bardwell's job was the janitor's position; he received six cents an hour. Mr. Bardwell's duties were to keep the fires going in all the classrooms, sweeping the floors, and any other odd jobs that he could handle. Mr. Bardwell liked to work during the summers where he could get more hours. One summer Mr. Bardwell installed the first electric lighting system in his school. He was doing a good job; Mr. Bardwell kept his job all the way through high school.

The Rural Electrification Administration made cheap electrical power available to remote rural areas which had been bypassed by private utilities, making possible the development of diversified farming, small industries, and promoting the general attractiveness in the South. In May 1933 Congress passed a law creating the Tennessee Valley Authority. The government invested $831,320,978 in the TVA and in

fifteen years more than tripled the electric capacity in the area. This proved beneficial not only to the South but the rest of the nation during World War II. The TVA played a vital role in the military effort of World War II. It promoted industry where it was most needed and raised incomes in one of the most depressed parts of the South.

The richest Southern state ranked lower in per capita income than did the poorest state elsewhere. The average income for the region in 1937 was $314 compared to $608 in other parts of the country. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers worked for ten to twenty cents a day. In the long run it was the outbreak of World War II which brought real prosperity to the people of the nation and especially to the South. "Between July 1940 and 1945 manufacturing facilities alone grew by over $4,442,000,000 in thirteen Southern states" (John S. Ezell The South Since 1865, p. 436). Many different areas for the first time were experiencing large scale industry. The ability of Southerners to produce goods needed during the war helped serve as a base for future opportunities. Manufacturing was responsible for most of the South's prosperity. In a short span of one generation the South added 653,684 people to its manufacturing force. The South is moving more toward industrialization and mechanized farming in the 40's. As a result of mechanized farming, hundreds of thousands of farms disappeared. The number of tractors alone increased over 300% between 1940 and 1947;

along with improved farming techniques hurt the little man. "One Mississippi plantation reported the loss of 1,800 people in twelve years, laborers that had been replaced by thirty cotton-picking machines and 180 tractors" (John S. Ezell, The South Since 1865, p. 480).

One of the most successful developments was the increase in livestock and poultry farms in the South, which provided not only additional income but also an improved diet. The South made greater gains in livestock than the rest of the nation in all classes except horses and mules, with cattle jumping 76% during the Roosevelt years in office. By 1952 over 25,000,000 acres of pasture had been planted giving it winter grazing for the first time in history. The land not only supported more cattle per acre than rival regions but also took advantage of winter forage and high spring market rates. Montgomery referred to itself as the cow capital of the South. While beef cattle tended to dominate the large farms, dairying spring up on the smaller farms near market centers. I would like to note my grandmother grew up on a dairy farm, and their slaughter house is still open to the public here in Calhoun County, Thompson's Meat Processing. I got to grow up on the dairy farm some too as a child. I really enjoyed it. My grandmother told me it was hard work though, and I believe her.

Life on a dairy farm was like any other farm. A couple of hours before dawn my grandmother and her brothers and sisters would get up to get started on their chores before breakfast. The first task was to get the cows in the dairy barn and milk them. After that they would take the cows back out and feed them. When the chores were finished, they could come back to the house where breakfast was ready. The dairy business was a good one to get into during this time. From 1940 to 1952 the sale of whole milk doubled. The South became one of the most promising regions for increased milk production. "The South by 1970 had a better balance between livestock and crop economy than it had at any time since the Civil War" (John S. Ezell, The South Since 1865, p. 843).

Another big boast to the livestock economy of the South was the poultry industry. My grandfather had a poultry farm at one time in Mississippi. He claimed it was hard work also. The South's climate automatically gave them an advantage in the poultry industry--like year-round outdoor raising and savings in construction costs. Also Southern farmers profited from the facts that rival regions went in for egg production. The South saw the profit in providing chicken meat. Along with other livestock products, the South made great gains in a few years.

As the livestock industry steadily increased more and more, slaughter houses were opened to serve the public. Most people who lived

on a farm had hogs, cattle, and chickens. For a poor man the cheapest way to feed his family was to raise his own food. Every so often people would bring in a hog or cow to be processed at the slaughter house. The animals would be processed for so many cents a pound. This provided good and cheap food. I have worked on the kill floor of my Uncle's processing plant, and it is an experience. As I noted earlier, the impact of mechanization and agriculture diversification resulted in steady declines in tenancy, small farms, and staple crop agriculture. The growth of the livestock industry only added to the misery of former laborers and farmers. Thousands more were forced to join the ranks of seasonal migrant workers, moving from area to area to harvest crops. The migrant workers were worse off than sharecroppers and tenant farmers. They had no permanent housing and could not raise any of their own food supply. They were at the mercy of whoever had work for them to do. In 1970 a Senate subcommittee member described it as "undoubtedly the worst living conditions in America. The existence of such groups helped to explain why 46% of the country's poor live in the South, though the region has only 21% of the total population" (John S. Ezell, The South Since 1865, p. 888).

As World War II neared, my grandfather at 19 years of age joined the Air Force. Like most Southerners, he was eager to answer his call to duty. Mr. Bardwell attended Arts and Engineering school and received

his degree in Engineering. He did not get to see much active combat but did fly in three missions in World War II. Mr. Bardwell was with the first bunch that went over to Africa and remained in Europe until the end of the war. After the war he was stationed in California, then at Arizona before retiring. After retiring he worked on the Alaskan pipeline for a time, like the isolated work camps of the South. They would be flown out to the job and left for a couple of weeks. Mr. Bardwell worked on several other jobs in various parts of the country, also.

To my grandfather, there was no place like home. That meant on a farm just keeping himself busy doing different things around the farm in Mississippi. Mr. Bardwell has lived in many different states and even in Europe for a while during World War II. But to Mr. Bardwell after he got out into the real world, he realized how much he loved the farm life and longed to go back to it. It was 35 years later before he was able to go back to Calhoun, Mississippi, and buy a farm.

Mr. Bardwell returned to the land to grow a small garden for his own benefit. When Mr. Bardwell returned to the South, it had undergone many changes. The new South he came home to now had industries in all parts. Jim Crow and segregation was dead. The small farm was disappearing along with customs of the South. The South is

not the same South it once was. For better or worse, you must decide that question about the new South for yourself.