

Paul Ortiz: Mrs. Wright, could you tell me when and where you were born and something about the area that you grew up in?

Jessie Hill Wright: Okay. I was born in Macon County and that's, it's Shorter, Alabama. They're near Shorter. It was called Hardaway then, but now they have divided it up in part of it's Shorter and part's Hardaway. And I attended school, is that all right to go down that way? I attended school at several places down there and the reason we had to divide them up because at that time you didn't know, your father didn't own a home, so you was moving from first one place and then another.

Jessie Hill Wright: So the first school I attended was Damascus School and that was a church school. The next one was Mount Pisgah and that was another church school. The next was Nebraska, still church school. Then after attending those schools, it was a lady down there by the name of Miss Fannie Wheelis. She wanted to know, in fact, she tried to help all the children down in that area that she thought wanted to do something. She brought them to Tuskegee and I was one of the persons that she brought to Tuskegee and I lived in the families in Tuskegee in order to go to school. But I hadn't yet finished high school. So then I attended the Washington Public School in Tuskegee.

Jessie Hill Wright: And after finishing over there, I didn't have enough money to go to a private high school. And at that time you had to pay a certain amount of money. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was just like paying to go to school. See now you don't have to pay anything but then you had to pay a certain amount of money. But I was from down to shore where it was eight of us in the family. And back then the people just didn't think too much about school.

Jessie Hill Wright: So when I left, in fact I was the oldest child of the family, but my mother passed when I was two. So therefore the way I felt didn't too many people have a lot of interest in me, whether I went to school or not. So when I came up here to Tuskegee, I was 16 and I was determined to get whatever education I could get because I've always thought that education was very important from knowing, checking how the people would treat you when you go different places. Cause if you were in school, you had a different air, they would talk to you or something like that. But if you wasn't in school, they didn't think you were any good. So therefore education meant quite a bit to me. So I stayed out of school a number of years and worked in families, and I was near the college campus.

Jessie Hill Wright: And the kids from over there, I was always a pretty good cook because when I was at Nebraska School, I'm jumping back now, the teacher would get me to cook for all the children. It wasn't but 32 of them in there. So I had to cook for the 32 children and I got very little lesson and she didn't worry me about getting my lesson because I was doing all the cooking. And I know that wasn't quite what it should have been, but that's the way it was. So when I came up here, I already knew how to cook. So when cooking and working with the Tuskegee families, I didn't have a big problem.

Jessie Hill Wright: So they finally had a school up here, the adult school so that you could finish high school. But when you went to one of the adult schools, you didn't get all of the science and all that you're supposed to get, they just gave you enough so you could get out of high school, so you could have a high school diploma. And one of the teachers up here saw me working one day and he told me, he said one thing, "I believe if you had a high school education, you might be able to get a better job." He said, "I'm going to help you." He was one of the principals of school. Said, "I'm going to go back and get all your grades and compile them and help you to get a high school diploma." So he did. He got me the high school diploma with the understanding that I would never try to go to college.

Jessie Hill Wright: And the reason for that was because I didn't have a background. So he said just I would have the high school diploma. Somebody said, did you graduate from high school? Okay, I'd have the high school diploma, but if they checked my records, I wouldn't have had science and all the other subjects that you had. So I started working close to the campus and the kids would come over, slip me through the back door and I would do all that cooking and they would get As. So I said one day I said, "Now if I can cook and get them a A, I'm going to get in that school somehow or another and I'm going to get me a A and I'm going to see if I can't make it." So the man said and I was writing, now don't you try to go to college cause you can't get in.

Jessie Hill Wright: So I went on up Tuskegee Institute and made a mistake. I got in the line, I was going to go up and get a two-year course. Cause if anybody had said four years, I never would've tried that cause it's a lot of subjects in four years but the two years you could take certain subjects. But through a mistake I got in the four-year line and when I got home, I checked my material and it's four years. So I started crying, told the lady, I said, "I can't make it four years, I don't have any money." She said, "Well you already registered for it," and that was Mrs. Calloway. You've already registered up for Calloway, the Calloway family for it and she said, "Go and try. You can't fail till you try."

Jessie Hill Wright: So I went up and started and I had a little trick as I told them that if I was in a class and the teacher would ask, who in here has had certain subjects? Well, I'd check around and if everybody had had it, I had it too. And then I'd go from there to the library and check it out and see what they was talking about, see what it was all about, so if anything came up I could be able to keep up. And so that was the way I kept up in school and I got out in four years. But it was hard struggle. But I got a BS degree in four years from Tuskegee Institute.

Jessie Hill Wright: And I graduated in '47, which I was a little late, but I got a job working on Tuskegee Institute's campus in '47 with the understanding that it was about 12 of us that graduated in that class and they were supposed to be building a school down at Florida. And the 12 of us was held over with the understanding that we'd get a job when they get through at the school. So I don't think they finished the school yet. So they didn't send for us. And I started working for Tuskegee Institute at the snack bar, recreation center snack bar. And I kept working and waiting and I worked there 32 years. So after working there 32 years, then I retired.

Paul Ortiz: Now Mrs. Wright, you said that the first schools that you went to, you mentioned Damascus

school and then these were church—

Jessie Hill Wright: Church school, Damascus, Mount Pisgah and Nebraska. Those were church schools. And then Washington Public was school in Tuskegee Institute and Louis Adams in Tuskegee. See after I went to Nebraska, I came to Tuskegee.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, okay. And which church sponsored those schools? Was it a Baptist church?

Jessie Hill Wright: It was a Baptist.

Paul Ortiz: Baptist.

Jessie Hill Wright: All of them was Baptist churches. And I have, well I don't know where that would come in now, but after I, that's what I'm working on now because that could come in later or you want that to come in now?

Paul Ortiz: I'm sure that could come in now.

Jessie Hill Wright: Come in no? Cause I left Nebraska and I can show you the, can I get up? I want to get this book right here and let you look at this. This is what I'm doing right now. This is the school right here.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, okay.

Jessie Hill Wright: That's the school. And after I retired, I thought it'd be a good idea to do something for this and honor Mrs. Wheelis because Mrs. Wheelis brought me to school and I wanted to do something in memory of her. So I asked the church to let me remodel this old church. So I'm working on that now. I'm still in the midst of it. And that's it, that's what it looks like now and these are the progresses, things we worked on down to there. And I went back just last year, I mean this year and that's where I'm working. I put a steel door there and a storm door in the back of the church. That's the same church. That's where that put on that. And that's what I'm doing now. I'm in the midst of doing that now and I'm painting it. I painted the door so that's where I am now. And so that's jumping a little bit.

Paul Ortiz: And that's Damascus?

Jessie Hill Wright: That's Nebraska.

Paul Ortiz: Nebraska.

Jessie Hill Wright: Where Ms. Wheelis used to teach.

Paul Ortiz: And that's in Shorter?

Jessie Hill Wright: That's in Shorter.

Paul Ortiz: Oh.

Jessie Hill Wright: That's in Shorter. That's the old church right there. That's the first pictures of it. That's what it looked like when I asked them to let me remodel it. See? That's it right there. The original time. See that door is open.

Paul Ortiz: Oh I see.

Jessie Hill Wright: And that's what I'm working on now.

Paul Ortiz: That's great.

Jessie Hill Wright: So let's see now where were we?

Paul Ortiz: Oh okay. And I was also going to ask you about your, what was your early family life?

Jessie Hill Wright: Oh, my family life. As I said, my mother passed when I was two. My father got married again and they had six children and I was a nurse for three of them. And they used to be out in the field chopping and I was at the house nursing, but the children was more problem to me than out there chopping. So one day I got my hoe and told them, let me chop out there in the field. And then my mother came home to take care of the children so they kept me in the field. But I didn't like that after I got out there, but I stayed.

Paul Ortiz: And what kind of farming were your parents doing?

Jessie Hill Wright: Roll crop farming, corn, cotton and peas, butter beans, I mean soybeans.

Paul Ortiz: Were they renting or sharecropping?

Jessie Hill Wright: Sharecropping part of the time and renting part of the time.

Paul Ortiz: And this was in Shorter?

Jessie Hill Wright: Shorter. All this is down in Shorter.

Paul Ortiz: Do you remember what the conditions were like in farming?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well the conditions in farming was that, as I say, that was the reason for so many schools because the man would rent your farm this year and if you didn't like the way things would go, then you'd have to find someplace else to go. And I remember my father lived on a Mr. Jim Adam's place and when Mr.

Adam would gin his cotton, he'd put his cotton on the porch but he didn't want the other people to put theirs on the porch. He didn't want that to happen. That was his cotton, he put it on the porch. But he wanted you to bring the first cotton to him.

Jessie Hill Wright: So then he had his porch off full of cotton. But daddy said no, I'm going to put me a bale of cotton on my porch and I'm going to take him the second bale. Well that was wrong. He shouldn't have done that because he told him point blank that he'd have to move because he would spoil all the rest of the, on this place and he didn't want them spoiled. So he would have to find someplace else to go. So he had to move.

Paul Ortiz: Now your father wanted to put the first bale on the porch?

Jessie Hill Wright: He put it on there.

Paul Ortiz: In order to sell it.

Jessie Hill Wright: Well no, the porch was the only place they had to cover, just the place keep from raining on it and your first bale of cotton looked good and most of the people would carry their first bale to Mr. Adam. But he wanted to keep his first bale and give him the second bale because he realized that first cotton was the cleanest cotton and the prettiest cotton, you get more money for it. But see a lot of the people didn't realize that and they give him the first bale, but daddy's going to keep his and he said if he let daddy do that, then everybody would want put the cotton on him, keep the first bale. So he had to move.

Paul Ortiz: Were there a lot of landlords like Mr. Adams who—

Jessie Hill Wright: Oh yeah, quite a few of them. Some of them would farm all year and they wouldn't get in at the end of the year, they stilled owed. And if you'd buy fertilizer, well my daddy wouldn't buy fertilizer. He didn't make as much cotton as his next door neighbor but at the end of the year all of his stuff belonged to him cause he refused to buy the fertilizer. The first year he bought fertilizer, it rained just like it's raining now. It rained, we put the fertilizer down, the latter part of May and it ain't stop raining yet. Rained all the way through and he didn't have nothing but grass. Now the first year he ever used fertilizer so you couldn't get him to use no fertilizer anymore.

Paul Ortiz: But if other farmers that worked there, they had to buy their fertilizer from—

Jessie Hill Wright: From the man, the Mr. Adams, from the boss man, they called him. They'd have to buy the fertilizer from him and he would charge whatever he wanted to charge them for it. And they didn't know when they paid for it or, he'd just tell them bring the rest of this in and you almost got out of debt, said you're not quite out. Said maybe you'll come out next year. Well then you hanging out with nothing for your family. And then the year that it rained so hard, that daddy bought that fertilizer, he got his money from the Alabama Exchange Bank because he had moved out by himself then. And—

Paul Ortiz: Your father?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah, after he left his place, he went to another place. And I remember the man came around and daddy said the man said he going to clean up. I guess you heard people talking about how they clean up and clean up means that if you owe some money and you haven't paid your money, then they come around and get everything you have, all your corn, all everything you have. And then some of the people told the story, I don't think it was really true, but they usually say they'd shoot the cat, get all the other stuff and shoot the cat cause the cat ate some of the corn. That's what they, that was, I think that was a joke.

Jessie Hill Wright: But anyway, they would take all you had. So I remember daddy had us to go down there and pull the corn, pull some of it and he left some of it on the stalks. And that's the only way we had any bread to eat because they took all the corn out and swept the thing, swept the shuts out.

Paul Ortiz: And this was the bank that came out?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah, that was from the bank. He borrowed some money from the bank that time.

Paul Ortiz: So it sounds like it was really hard.

Jessie Hill Wright: Well it was rough. The people, it was really rough on them, really rough. And that was in my childhood. And—

Paul Ortiz: Now, would these people like these landlords like Mr. Adams— This is right now, were there cases where these landlords like Adams, where they would discriminate against Black sharecroppers?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well really they just had Black on the premises. They didn't have anything but Black then. Cause the other White fella, he would've him some Blacks, he'd have farm and have Blacks. I don't remember any White people being on it.

Paul Ortiz: Did you feel at the time or did your father feel that he was treated unfairly by Adams?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well yes he did because he figured if he made the cotton he should be able to put it on his porch and it drove him to one thing, he went from there and he tried to find somebody and he bought him some land, bought him 40 acres of land himself. Mr. Logan in Tuskegee had some land down in that area and he came up here after he left for Mr. Allen's place and start bargaining to buy him some land and he let him have 40 acres of land. He started cleaning it up and that's where he made his little extra money and took care of his family after he got his 40 acres of land. And tried to encourage the other people in that area to buy. But no, they didn't. Very few of them bought, very few and they could have bought real cheap at that time cause he paid \$600 for that 40 acres of land.

Paul Ortiz: So now your father would encourage other farmers to try and buy. Were they afraid of buying

land? Was there a—

Jessie Hill Wright: No, I don't think they were afraid but they just weren't encouraged enough and the boss man didn't encourage you to buy land or anything like that. And it wasn't too many Colored people had land so it was no incentive. They used tell daddy, I don't know what you going to do with it. But after they didn't buy then White people bought it all up around there then they couldn't buy it unless they buy it from them, cause daddy bought his from Mr. Logan in Tuskegee. Mr. Logan was a Colored fellow that worked for, Logan worked for Tuskegee Institute. Mr. Logan was one or two of Logan and Calloway, was one or two of the persons that came to Tuskegee near the time Booker Washington came.

Jessie Hill Wright: And the story told about that is that Booker Washington asked everybody for all the cash money that they had or anything valuable that they had they could sell because he needed X number of dollars to put up to start buying land around Tuskegee Institute. And as he would buy land, sometime the White people would give land and as they would give land, he would donate so much land to these people that helped him out when they got started. And Mr. Calloway and Logan and two, three others, I don't remember their names, he gave them land. Some of it's out in the country and some of it was in the city. And this along here where I live now on back up that way belonged to the Calloways. In fact, he had from Greens Faulk all the way down here and that's the way they got their land.

Jessie Hill Wright: And then they started selling to people until a lot of people bought it. They just sold the last of it oh, a few years ago. And I was instrumental in handling 250 acres of it. And I sold it to, well Mr. Caldwell used to talk to me and say what he liked to see the young people buy. And I sold, most of that sold to the younger couples that was getting started. So I sold all of it about two years ago.

Paul Ortiz: Mrs. Wright, would you say that there was a sense of community when you were growing up among other sharecropping families?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well yes. You could always get help because they used to, I remember people used to come over if you got through picking your cotton, they'd come over and help somebody that didn't finish. And you need to pull your corn, they'd come over help you pull it and they just pull it and everybody put it in the barn and that was all. And you didn't have to pay them cause ain't nobody have any extra money anyway. So they helped, they were really, you had a lot of communication in the community and you knew everybody and everybody was everybody's mama and daddy. And I said today that that is one of the reasons you can't get along with the children too well now.

Jessie Hill Wright: Because back then I wouldn't let nobody in the community see me do anything wrong because see, they spanked me right there and I wouldn't go home and tell mom I got to spank cause that'll be another one coming up. And that's the way we were reared. And you respect everybody. If you talk to girls today and they got married tomorrow, you had to start calling them Mr. and Mrs. and respect them as adults and you just got through playing with them.

Jessie Hill Wright: But that's what people had you to do. If they got married, they were grown and you

weren't, you were still a child and they could spank you and the [indistinct 00:21:36] wasn't going to say anything. I mean if they caught you doing something that you weren't supposed to do. And therefore I think people were, children were respectful then. And right through in here, maybe I'm too old to think about it because you haven't asked me the main question yet. You get round to that after a while. And how old are you? I'm sorry, I forgot.

Paul Ortiz: I was going to ask. I was going to sneak around it.

Jessie Hill Wright: I know.

Paul Ortiz: So well actually now Mrs. Wright, what year were you born?

Jessie Hill Wright: Beg your pardon?

Paul Ortiz: What year were you born?

Jessie Hill Wright: 1913, 1914. 1914.

Paul Ortiz: Okay.

Jessie Hill Wright: I'm not but 80.

Paul Ortiz: Was there a church in the neighborhood that you grew up in?

Jessie Hill Wright: Nebraska and Damascus. Those are two churches that we always went to. And then when I came to Tuskegee I went to institute chapel every Sunday. Didn't miss a single one.

Paul Ortiz: And what kinds of activities would happen at Nebraska and Damascus Church?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well they used to have little plays and things like that to have children on the stage, acting and things like that. I remember way back when we used to have little plays and the kids used to wear little paper dresses and little skirts and things like that. And the little skirt didn't cost but 30 cents. But I always thought my mama couldn't even afford 30 cents so I wouldn't tell her. And I went to try to go on the stage. I thought they was going to let me come on there anyway but they wouldn't let me come on cause I didn't have my skirt. So I cried. Mama wanted to know why. So I told her that I thought she didn't have 30 cents to buy my little skirt because I don't know why I was always thinking that if I didn't have to have it, I don't have to have it.

Jessie Hill Wright: So they had plays for the children. I think sometime they had more down there then than they have right now for the children cause some of the churches are kind of fading out for activities for the children. And that was the reason we were trying to remodel that old church. That's what I had on my mind then that they could learn to do the stage acts and all that but it hadn't turned out yet. But I think maybe we

might finally get around to it.

Paul Ortiz: What were, during the years that you were growing up, what were race relations like in Macon County?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well as I think of it now, I guess as Sam was saying, you knew where you belonged and you stayed where you belong. They had what was in my mind a long time when I was, I couldn't understand what's the difference between White water and Black water. So I never would drink the water any place like that cause it had White and Black and you had your White and Black restroom. Well you knew that so you didn't go in one of the White ones, you'd go in the Black ones. And I mean it was kind of understood, that's the way I felt about it. And I thought that's the way it was supposed to be. And we accepted it because we thought that's the way it was supposed to be. When I came here it was like that and that's all I ever knew. So when they started to change then I realized it wasn't supposed to be like that.

Jessie Hill Wright: Cause after I got married, my husband and I went out to California five times and the stories that you would encounter from here to California would fill a bucket where you go to places, you see the food but that's the end of it. They would not serve you. No. And we went to one place and they told us to point blank, we don't serve you all in here. So my husband asked him please give me a cup of coffee and started him to drink coffee. He wasn't drinking coffee but he started, he said they going to drink that coffee if it killed him. So they passed us a coffee.

Jessie Hill Wright: I never would go in. I would let him go in and I would stay outside. So he came to the door and told me, here's a cup of coffee. And they brought him one. So we got some coffee but we came out the front door with the coffee but they wouldn't let you stay in there and eat it. And it was fella that, I don't remember his name, but we went to his place and he felt bad about it. He said now he wished that he could let us sit down in there and eat. He said, "But if y'all sit in here and eat, then all my customers would go," and said "I can't afford to lose all my customers." Cause we understood, I understood that. So he had a little table back there in the kitchen and he let us eat in the kitchen and I think they said something to him about that because evidently somebody saw him.

Jessie Hill Wright: So we went back naturally to that place when we went back to California the next time and he couldn't even let us do that. He told us, he said, "I'm very sorry," he said, "but y'all stay in the car and I'm going to come out the car and bring about the food out to the car," and stayed out there till we got through. He didn't talk with us. And he said, "One of these times when y'all come back through here," he said, "I don't know when it's going to be but you all going to be able to come in that front door and sit down here and eat like everybody else." He said, "because I don't, I know this is wrong." He said, "but I can't do anything about it because they said this is the law of the land." So the next, third time we went back by there, we went back to that same place and we went in the front door and sat down to the table and we were served.

Paul Ortiz: Was that in Alabama?

Jessie Hill Wright: No, no, no this was in Mississippi.

Paul Ortiz: Mississippi. Did you have experiences like that when you were growing up, say as a child, experiences with discrimination in the county?

Jessie Hill Wright: No, as I said, I think I missed those experiences because I knew where I was supposed to go. You kind of know that you can't go different places and I kind of stayed where I was supposed to go. I remember I went in a White church one Sunday. I told the people they don't know what it is till everybody look at you one time, you freeze. But see I didn't know that it was a White church. I was looking for somebody and I opened the door and went in there and those eyes got me [indistinct 00:28:18] I been going, the soul moving. And I just stood there and somebody finally came to me and I told them what I wanted but I couldn't hardly turn around cause I froze.

Jessie Hill Wright: I realized what I had done but they didn't bother me anything like that, didn't say anything was just everybody, them eyes zoom in on me. And they got the man I was looking for, they sent him out the back door because the lady sent me and he was working on a house for us and we wanted to find him to tell him something and that's how, and he had told her he would be at this church but she sent me in. She didn't go in but I didn't know where I was going so I just went on in there. But you wasn't supposed to go in their churches, they could go in your church but you couldn't come to theirs.

Paul Ortiz: That was the church around here that you went into?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yes, in Tuskegee. But I don't remember where the church was, was in that direction. I know way on out somewhere we went was a White church.

Paul Ortiz: Is this down Highway 80?

Jessie Hill Wright: It was off of the highway as I remember. Cause it was when I first came to Tuskegee, I didn't ever go back. I done told the lady I was so hurt, when I got back I cried cause they didn't do anything to me, they didn't say anything but I just wasn't accustomed to doing that. And it was just something that I hadn't done before. And it was before things got straight.

Paul Ortiz: When you were growing up, do you remember hearing about or seeing cases of violence against Black people by White people like lynchings?

Jessie Hill Wright: Only thing I ever saw about that come through a TV. But when I was a little girl, I remember being at the church and the people down there used to drink moonshine, which they still drink it but they used to drink moonshine. And these policemen came down there to Damascus church one Sunday and arrested a man and his wife went up to get his billfold out of his pocket, which was right and the police slapped her. And I had been hating policeman and anything with the law, it just made me, I just turned against them, didn't never want see them cause I thought that was wrong for him to slap her.

Jessie Hill Wright: And I said, well I sure hope he come up and slap me one time, I had in my mind I'm going to fight me a police. I just got that out and left. I got a feel I couldn't fight one but it built up something in me to see that. And that's the only time I really was close to anything and it just turned me around. But he wouldn't let her get that pocketbook and her ass slapped. And as I said, all the Colored guys was standing up there and I wanted somebody to do something but see, they'd put all of us in jail. I didn't have no sense but I was ready to fight right there.

Jessie Hill Wright: So I told him if I ever get a chance I'm going to fight me one of y'all. But I never did get the chance, thank the Lord cause I understood. And that's about the closest I've ever gotten to it. All the rest of the stuff, I saw it on TV. I never did, actually never involved in any of it.

Paul Ortiz: Did you hear about people, about Black people who may have challenged that system and pushed the system, challenged segregation or who got just fed up with it at some point during those years?

Jessie Hill Wright: I don't remember an incident, not offhand. I know I remember when we was trying to vote it was hard to vote, real hard because I went down to take my exam and I was answering all my questions and this White fella came up and told me to let him finish my questionnaire. I told him no I wasn't going to let him finish. I said, because you going to put something down here and I never will vote because I've always been brave. I'll say what I think if you going to get me.

Jessie Hill Wright: He said, "Well, why can't?" I said "No, I don't want you to do it." So I failed anyway. So I went right back down there to the same place and I told him, I said, "I don't want you to even pick up my paper, let me give it to somebody else." And I gave it to somebody else, I wouldn't give it to him cause see he fixed it so I couldn't pass. See it was hard to even get a chance to fill out that paper so you could vote and you're so glad when you got to be a registered voter, you just knew you was on top then. See that was the main thing that people were trying to do to get everybody registered so they could vote and see a lot of things that you couldn't do because you weren't a registered voter.

Paul Ortiz: When did you first try to register?

Jessie Hill Wright: I don't remember what year. I don't, I really don't. But I know I was grown when I registered, in fact I was married. That means that—

Paul Ortiz: That was after you got your degree?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yes, it was about '51. It was about '51 when I got registered cause I was married and everything.

Paul Ortiz: Did somebody talk to you about registering beforehand?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well I knew they were trying. See you keep trying, I don't know how many times I went down there to try, but it always be something that they would throw you off. Just like the fellow wanted to

help me finish and I didn't ask him to help me finish. I told him, "I didn't ask you to help me finish." I said, "because you not going to finish it right." He knew I knew what he was trying to do.

Paul Ortiz: In the community when you were growing up in Shorter, what was the medical care like if you got sick?

Jessie Hill Wright: Well we had two doctors and Dr. Booth and Dr. Leifer. And if anything happened to you, you'd go to them and they would take care of your medical problems. Two doctors in that community.

Paul Ortiz: Now were they they Black doctors?

Jessie Hill Wright: No, both White. We didn't have too many Black doctors then. Both of those were White.

Paul Ortiz: Did people use if they couldn't get medical care or if they were trying to cure something, would they use say herbal remedies?

Jessie Hill Wright: They used all that kind of stuff and it seemed to kept them going. Cause as I tell them, soon as the [indistinct 00:35:18] used to live across over there. Every time I get out there to cut those hedges, the walls would sting. That's why they had tall right now. Went out there the other evening and I thought I saw walls and I can't put the hedge clippers right there and sat down cause I thought I saw walls passed by. Because every time one was staying there I would call him to come over and he would get the kerosene bottle. I wasn't supposed to have no hair now and just do like this and dab all that kerosene on, it would take it down too.

Jessie Hill Wright: And they used to do that in the country and they used the cobwebs and soot to stop bleeding and it would stop it, cause we didn't have but two doctors. Doctor couldn't take care of all those problems so you had to learn how to do a lot of things at home. And they believe in using castor oil and turpentine and kerosene but you can't use that now, it'll kill you.

Paul Ortiz: Would people talk about spirits or ghosts?

Jessie Hill Wright: I know I'm this old and I think that it was something like a ghost cause I have seen something my own self, but I didn't know what it was. And when I was a little girl, I used to have what they call jack-o-lanterns, those lights over in the pasture. I still can't find out what they were. You could see them going, going away over the pasture. You look out the door at night when it was dark because there wasn't no other lights, and you can see them.

Jessie Hill Wright: I discussed the ghost problem with the preacher. I'm not saying that they know everything, but when he got through talking it made a little sense. And he said the reason you can't see the ghost now is because they have so many lights and so many other things that take from them. He said "They still here but you can't see them because of the lights and everything and they don't come around as much as they used to." Cause I know something used to come around but I don't know, I couldn't explain what it

was.

Paul Ortiz: Oh, but you would see this at night?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah, I've seen them in the daytime. You see something in the daytime that just fades away, long time ago when I was small. So I don't know what that was. My imagination, I imagine.

Paul Ortiz: What'd they look like? People?

Jessie Hill Wright: They would look the image of people, people you didn't know. Cause I didn't know my mother and I used to see her all the time when I was young and after I grew up I stopped seeing. So I don't know whether to believe in ghosts or not to believe in them, look like little spaceman. I think the space people are coming here doing something to us now.

Paul Ortiz: Was there Ku Klux Klan activity in Macon County during the time that you were growing up?

Jessie Hill Wright: They were here but look like to me they were located someplace else. But the whole thing, the Ku Klux Klan, there was certain things you didn't do that they would, the boys said they'd get you. Cause it used to be as near as I can remember, it was some over the Tallassee because they came by the house to get my daddy once to take them to Montgomery. See Tallassee is right over there. And my daddy lived down to Shorter and they came from Tallassee to Shorter to get him to take them back by that and take them to Montgomery.

Jessie Hill Wright: Daddy had a new 1927 Chevrolet. Now they didn't like that. They didn't like for Negroes to have any new car. You're supposed to get a secondhand car. But my daddy said he didn't, wasn't going to buy anybody else's trouble. If he got a car, he going to get it new, so he bought him a 1927 Chevrolet. And shortly after he bought it, that's why they came all the way to get from over there to get him to take them to Montgomery. But see the word was out that they put a lot of people over there in that Tallassee River. We still talk about that now. So daddy was aware of that's what was going to happen to him because it didn't make sense for them to be riding in a truck and come tell him, take them to Montgomery. So they came to the house and they sat out there a long time and they went and got in daddy's car and told him to drive them up the road to see how the car sound.

Jessie Hill Wright: So daddy went around, didn't go too far and going up the road and he said he thought, he said, these folks finna get me. So he went up there to the church and turned around that quick, forgot something, let go back to the house. I don't have my driver's license. And he went, came back to the house and parked the car in the yard and went in the house and got his guns and laid them down in the door and said, "I don't believe I want to go to Montgomery. I got to clean my guns." And they talked and talked and talked. He sat down and doing those guns, those folks finally left.

Jessie Hill Wright: But I know that's what they was going to do for him. They going to take him over there and take that car from him. See they'd do that to you in a minute. If you had something they wanted, they'd

take it. So that was his experience. So he say he had seen those people in Tuskegee when he was buying the car cause he bought it in Tuskegee and they trailed him on out down to where we was living and told him to take them to Montgomery. And they all riding up and down the road, talking about take us to Montgomery. See they really wasn't up for no good. It was three of them.

Paul Ortiz: But they were actually in the car with him?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah, they got in the car. The car was sitting out in his yard and they went on and got in the car. Hey come on, come on, does ride in your car? Let's see how the car ride. And when he got in there they said, can't you take us to Montgomery? And that's why he went the opposite direction. And he thought about that church and went up in churchyard and turned right around, came back home cause he couldn't very well go in the house and get the gun. So he came back and went in the house and came back, I got to clean my guns and laid the shotgun on that side and put the pistol down there by it and they decided to leave. They never did come back no more.

Paul Ortiz: So that was really the only way to defend yourself.

Jessie Hill Wright: Oh yeah. Let them know that you shoot.

Paul Ortiz: Do you know of other cases like that?

Jessie Hill Wright: No. I might have heard about them but I don't remember. This was a case that I knew about.

Paul Ortiz: Now you mentioned the Tallassee River, that they would take people there.

Jessie Hill Wright: That's what they would say. You'd miss them and they never would see them no more. And they'd say they just miss somebody like they doing today. You miss people and you don't know where they are. But they used to say White folks put them in the Tallassee River, but they never would come back. They might not have put them in there, we didn't see them put them in there but that was what they would say. But then you never would see them, you miss them. Cause I know if they had gotten daddy with that new car, we never would've seen him no more. And there wouldn't have been anything we could've done other than cry cause the policeman, they've never paid you too much attention when you say something.

Paul Ortiz: You wouldn't have been able to go to the sheriff or the—

Jessie Hill Wright: No, because see that was the group that was in charge and the sheriff wasn't going to do anything if they didn't want it done. And sometimes the sheriff would know where it was going to happen, but wasn't anything they could do either. Cause the Klansmen to me, they had everything under control.

Paul Ortiz: Do you think they were really, seem to be really the ones who were controlling?

Jessie Hill Wright: Yeah, they was in control all right.

Paul Ortiz: So you graduated from high school in 1919? Or no, I'm sorry.

Jessie Hill Wright: No, that was the high school. I told you that I came up a little bit later on because I had to get out of school and I didn't actually graduate from high school per se. I went to adult high school to graduate.

Paul Ortiz: Okay. And what kinds of subjects were you interested in in adult high school?

Jessie Hill Wright: Home economics and math. Cause they taught you to cook and make clothing and redo furniture, all that kind of stuff.

Paul Ortiz: Now was your father good at things like math?

Jessie Hill Wright: Daddy couldn't read. He couldn't read or write. He learned to write his name after he got grown. Cause he went to school but he just determined he wasn't going to learn. His mama sent him to school to get out and do something else. He really couldn't read or write, but he had good common sense. Now he could count faster than I could count with a pencil. Weigh up cotton, weigh all your cotton up and then ask How much is it? I ain't never put it down yet and he'd have it already in his head. He was good like that.

Paul Ortiz: So that was the way he had to stop from being cheated out of his—

Jessie Hill Wright: That's right. No, they couldn't. You could not defeat him with a pencil cause you have a pencil, I know sometimes you'd be saying six and five is 11 and you throw that one away in your mind and put it down there. And he said, "Well how did you get that little, I got such and such a thing." You be looking back and say, oh yeah. He said, "Well you better do like I do. Add it in your head. You ain't doing no good with the pencil." But he could keep up with it nicely.

Paul Ortiz: Would you ever go with him when he went to settle up with the landlord before he owned land?

Jessie Hill Wright: No, I was too young before he got his own place. By the time he got his own land, I was a fifth—