Ernest Caldwell: The thing that happen to him or my family. So when I'd come down here, I'd say yes or no. And I never did have any trouble. Discrimination was here but I didn't want to get into that particular thing.

Stacey Scales: I was wondering, did you look at life different after having been in the north, just in general, Like your family from down here, or did—?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah.

Stacey Scales: Your experiences in the north change [indistinct 00:00:32]?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah, it did. Yes, it did.

Stacey Scales: In what ways?

Ernest Caldwell: Well, one of the things was that I could see things that were discriminatory that I couldn't see— Well, I imagine it was with the experience when I was here then, before I left and came back.

Stacey Scales: Oh, okay. So your eyes were opened?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. I had a broader outlook on life for one thing.

Stacey Scales: Now, would people from the south view you as a different person?

Ernest Caldwell: I imagine they did. I imagine they did, because when I came back here to Brinkley, I never bought anything on credit.

Stacey Scales: Oh.

Ernest Caldwell: I paid cash for everything I had. As a matter of fact, when I remarried and my wife was, she had a little account there and there, and I paid off all of them. And the place that she worked was in a little cafe, and they said they considered her man a rich nigger from the north. But I didn't have anything.

Stacey Scales: Right.

Ernest Caldwell: I still didn't have anything, but I was able to— Well, my salary was able to keep both of us going. I didn't have to ask for anything.

Stacey Scales: So it was a money factor that people thought—?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah, That's right.

Stacey Scales: That's an interesting thing when you [indistinct 00:02:22]

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Because I can recall since being here, it was White fella asking me, said they had an opening out there at one of the plants, they wanted know I wanted to be a night watchman. I told no. He said, "Oh, that's right. You one of them rich fellas. You don't need no money." I said, "It's not that, I just don't want to work. I worked enough in my days."

Stacey Scales: Right. So they kind of pick on you?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah.

Stacey Scales: Now, did your father end up staying on that farm all of his life when you were—?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. He stayed. Now, he didn't stay on that particular— He stayed on the farm that we bought.

Stacey Scales: Right.

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. He passed on that farm. But it was debt free and everything.

Stacey Scales: Where would he sell his product?

Ernest Caldwell: Same place that anybody else would sell it. Yeah.

Stacey Scales: What was your very first job?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh, my very first job after I left the farm was— I went to school. My very first job was on NYA, that was in the seventh grade. My job was to get there earlier in the mornings and sweep up. No, I swept up in the afternoons.

Stacey Scales: What does NYA stand for?

Ernest Caldwell: National Youth Administration.

Stacey Scales: Oh, okay.

Ernest Caldwell: That's what that was. And I would clean up the school after— Stay late and clean up the school. And in the mornings I'd get there earlier than the rest of the class and make the fires in the wintertime.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yeah.

Ernest Caldwell: And for that, I was paid $8 a month. And on Saturday mornings I had to go up and milk the professor's two cows.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yeah?

Ernest Caldwell: I never will forget that either. $8 a month. And I can recall, a lot of people don't believe, but I can recall chopping cotton from sun up to sundown for 50 cents a day.

Stacey Scales: How old were you then?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh, I was about— Hmm, let me see how old I was, about 15 or 16. Or was I that old? I don't think I was that old, because I would work with my dad with him on his crops through the week and Saturdays he would let me go out and chop cotton for somebody else.

Stacey Scales: Oh, right.

Ernest Caldwell: For 50 cents a day. Whenever the crops were finished at home, I could go out and chop cotton for 50 cents a day other places, but I had to turn that money in, all but Saturday. I could keep Saturday.

Stacey Scales: You had to turn into your Pop?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. Mm—hmm.

Stacey Scales: And what would he do with it?

Ernest Caldwell: He was farming.

Stacey Scales: Oh.

Ernest Caldwell: He was farming, yeah. He was taking care of me and everything. So that money went toward my clothes, buying my clothes and everything like that.

Stacey Scales: What was the relationship with your family and the neighbors and the community?

Ernest Caldwell: Well, it was good. You mean the Blacks?

Stacey Scales: Right. How would they function as a group?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh, well, the church. We'd go to church and we'd go to— The school had different functions, and we'd go there. And that's about it.

Stacey Scales: Would people help each other during hard times?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's right. I can recall, with my dad being a renter, he more or less was a little bit more able to help other people than the share croppers. They'd come to him a lot of times and he'd have to furnish them with facilities and subsidies or whatever, just give it to them.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yeah. So at what point do you feel as if you went from being a boy to being a man?

Ernest Caldwell: When I went to AM&N college, Johnny Pine Bluff. I can recall, my dad gave me a hundred dollars and told me, he said, "Son, this is all I have and you got to make it on your own." So I can remember at one time at Pine Bluff, I had four jobs. Four jobs. One in the mess hall, one on the college farm, one in town, and working NYA in the shop. I had four jobs and the one in NYA, in the shop that was more or less connected with the government. So that particular job, they paid me a check. The three jobs, the other jobs that I had, it was enough to pay my college tuition. But this other one I had, I could get a little check from that until they found out that I was able to get a check. So they cut me off for one of them jobs.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yeah.

Ernest Caldwell: And I had to turn the check in. Sure did. And I can also recall going to school at Pine Bluff and having to work. I was employed at the Pine Bluff Arsenal. Have you heard of the arsenal in Pine Bluff? That's the Pine Bluff Arsenal. They were building the Pine Bluff Arsenal, that's where they been making ammunition and everything for the war and everything. So I worked there at night and went to school in the daytime.

Stacey Scales: What did you do at the arsenal?

Ernest Caldwell: Well, I was promoted up to pouring concrete with a dipper. They had a big dipper. And I would be on the dipper on these buildings at the arsenal. I'd be on the dipper to pour the concrete. Pour the dipper — Yeah.

Stacey Scales: Did they have Black doctors when you were growing up?

Ernest Caldwell: Let's see? Hmm. I can't recall that.

Stacey Scales: Who would deliver the babies in—?

Ernest Caldwell: Midwives.

Stacey Scales: Midwives?

Ernest Caldwell: Mm—hmm. There would be a White doctor come out sometime but midwives, most of the time, delivered the babies in the local community.

Stacey Scales: How did they learn all that they knew?

Ernest Caldwell: From other midwives.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yeah.

Ernest Caldwell: Mm—hmm. Sure did.

Stacey Scales: So it's usually like a generational thing?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah.

Stacey Scales: Did people back then use herbs and different plants to help people feel better when they were—?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. I can recall my mother having to make us drink, let me see, what's the name of that tea? Every year in the spring, it was some kind of tea that she made us drink. It grew out in the woods, and we'd have to mix this with the greens and I guess we'd make a tea. She'd make a tea out of it, that's what it was. And we drank that tea. I forgot the name of it now.

Stacey Scales: Do you remember any of the other plants that they would use or herbs?

Ernest Caldwell: I can't recall right off hand. I can't recall right now.

Stacey Scales: Right. Would Blacks back then talk about spirits and the ancestors?

Ernest Caldwell: Yes, that's right, they did. As a matter of fact, where we lived, when my dad was renting, there used to be a graveyard, oh, about half a mile from our house. And when I played basketball when I was seventh and eighth grade, and I would fear going by that graveyard, I'd go the other way cause they said [indistinct 00:12:02] were out there and I had to walk home by myself.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yeah. So was that something people took serious?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, they took that pretty serious. Most people did. But there were some that said, "Oh, there's no such thing as spirits and all that."

Stacey Scales: How about the signs, would that be—?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. There were signs like not walking under a ladder, and that would give you bad luck. What other signs was that? Hell, there are any number of them, I can't think of them now. But yeah, they—

Stacey Scales: Did your father use the zodiac signs to plant?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, he did. Yeah, he did. Yeah. There were certain times he would. He'd do his planting on certain signs of the zodiac, and he would harvest on certain signs too.

Stacey Scales: Would that work out better?

Ernest Caldwell: To him, he thought it what did, I really don't know.

Stacey Scales: Where would he get that information from?

Ernest Caldwell: It was an almanac that was published every year. And he would get those different things from that. I think it was MacDonald's almanac. He'd get those signs from that almanac, it had the months of the year in it, and each month had different signs.

Stacey Scales: Do you remember ever listening to a Joe Lewis fight?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh yes.

Stacey Scales: Yeah.

Ernest Caldwell: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, as I was saying, the independence that my father had, he was one of the ones that had the first radio in that particular area. And what happened was that the fights, the Joe Lewis fights, he would raise the window and set the radio in the window outside so the people outside could hear the radio. And when Joe Lewis won, we could talk about it among ourselves, but don't say anything about it near the Whites. You couldn't mention that around the Whites.

Stacey Scales: Yeah?

Ernest Caldwell: That's right. Sure. I never will forget that.

Stacey Scales: What would happen?

Ernest Caldwell: Huh?

Stacey Scales: What would happen?

Ernest Caldwell: I don't know what [indistinct 00:14:32]. They probably jump on you, whatever the case,

man. Yeah.

Stacey Scales: That was kind of like something you knew not do?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, That's right. That's right.

Stacey Scales: Amongst yourself, how would people react when he would win?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh gosh, They'd be real proud. But now they'd keep that proudness to themselves because they were afraid if they act up in anyway, that they made cause a riot or anything.

Stacey Scales: Now, was your father considered a leader in the community because he had—?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, I think he was, they kind of looked up to him more so than they did the regular share croppers because— But Dad could do so many things, and they would come to him on Saturdays to get the haircuts. And if things went wrong with, well, we'd call them grafonola, but it was little thing that you wind up and you'd play records on. They'd break the spring. He'd fix the spring for them. And fix their shoes, he had a little thing where he'd fix their shoes and different things. Carpentry.

Stacey Scales: Did he ever tell you about how it was for him when he was coming up?

Ernest Caldwell: Huh, yes, he did. He told me that there was certain things that in certain places I couldn't go because of the Whites, how the Whites would treat the Blacks.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yes. Was there ever any time where he would talk about stories from slavery times or anything?

Ernest Caldwell: No. I never did hear him mention anything about that.

Stacey Scales: No?

Ernest Caldwell: No.

Stacey Scales: Had he ever shared with you any kind of lynchings of any type?

Ernest Caldwell: No. He didn't. Sure didn't. I don't know whether he witnessed any lynchings or anything of that nature.

Stacey Scales: So you don't remember anything like that happening?

Ernest Caldwell: No. No, I don't.

Stacey Scales: Was there a NAACP in your in—? [indistinct 00:17:15]

Ernest Caldwell: Well, I was in [indistinct 00:17:22] and yeah, in Arkansas, you mean or what?

Stacey Scales: Yes.

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. I was a member of NAACP for a long time.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yes.

Ernest Caldwell: I'm not a member now because I let my membership expire. But I was a member of NAACP for a long time.

Stacey Scales: When you were younger?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah.

Stacey Scales: Did you get the magazine, Crisis Magazine?

Ernest Caldwell: I don't recall getting that. I've seen it though.

Stacey Scales: How did people get their news when you were growing up? Blacks?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh, down here in Arkansas, there was a little Black newspaper in Little Rock. With Daisy Bates, I think. Oh, was it Daisy Bates? [indistinct 00:18:19] let me see. One of them, she was a Black lady publisher, Black newspaper there in Little Rock, and it would come out in the community. And while I was in Gary, there was a Black newspaper, The Gary Info. As a matter of fact, I still get that. And in Chicago, it was the Crusader, that was a Black newspaper. You know about the info though?

Stacey Scales: Yes.

Ernest Caldwell: Uh—huh.

Stacey Scales: So there wasn't a local paper?

Ernest Caldwell: No. I can recall here, right here in Brinkley. It was the Brinkley August. And the little things that they had to say about Blacks was on the last page. And the caption was, With our Colored Readers.

Stacey Scales: With our what?

Ernest Caldwell: Colored readers.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yeah.

Ernest Caldwell: Yes. That stayed in the paper a long time. The Brinkley August, With our Colored Readers on the last page. And it wasn't too much, but that's the only—

Stacey Scales: It just had a small section.

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, small section.

Stacey Scales: Did you ever visit the agricultural school when you were coming up in Fargo?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, Dr. Brown and all those. Matter of fact, my first wife graduated from Fargo.

Stacey Scales: Oh, yes.

Ernest Caldwell: And as a matter of fact, I was a state official, basketball official, and I used to referee tournaments down at Fargo and different places here in Arkansas.

Stacey Scales: So you were a referee during the time that it was functioning?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah.

Stacey Scales: So you would be in that gym? I saw a picture of that gym the other day. The old gym.

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. I'd be in the gym and as a matter of fact, teaching veterans. And my first job when I got out of college was teaching World War II farming veterans. And a lot of my veterans were in that vicinity, Fargo vicinity. The Pritchards, and the Holdens, And oh, it's a lot of them, the Purcells, a lot of them.

Stacey Scales: What were you teaching in your—?

Ernest Caldwell: Teaching the newest methods of farming. I got my degree in agriculture and at that time, I was on the Farm Veteran's Program that was handled by the government through the local schools. And I would go out in the community five days a week and teach them the newest methods in how to better themselves so far as farming is concerned. And on Saturdays, there would be eight hours of classroom instruction. That was in the school. And I did that until it played out. I did that for about six years.

Stacey Scales: So is there anything that you think that's important about, maybe your growing up in this area, or just Arkansas as it relates to Blacks in particular? Anything that you feel that should be put into historical accounts that you think that is very important to be saved as history [indistinct 00:22:13] your experience in Arkansas?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh, the only thing I can recall is the segregational schools at that time. I can recall teaching

high school science in Visco, a time where they found out that a high official from the Board of Education in Little Rock was coming to visit our school. And I was teaching high school science. They found out about it, so they brought over some microscopes to the school, and they brought over some rocks from the school. And when the fellow came to my room and he asked the students about the microscopes and the rocks, I spoke for them, I said, "Well, this is the first time we saw those. They haven't been in this school all the time. They came from the White school." I never will forget that. And the students told him too. They didn't know what they were.

Stacey Scales: So why had they sent those things over?

Ernest Caldwell: Because they knew that a fellow from the Board of Education was coming down to visit our school, and they were trying to impress him that we were using those types of facilities in the science department.

Stacey Scales: So they wanted to make it seem like everything was okay?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. Yeah. That's one of the most outstanding things I can remember so far as segregation is concerned. I never will forget that.

Stacey Scales: So how did he react when you all responded?

Ernest Caldwell: Well, he acted surprised because he thought we knew all about that, in the science department would have microscopes and have different kinds of rocks, layers of soil, or whatever the case might be when they were teaching science. But we didn't have that.

Stacey Scales: So how were you teaching without those things?

Ernest Caldwell: The only thing I could do was to teach them the things that were visual because we didn't have anything that they could actually look through and see.

Stacey Scales: Were there changes after he left from that meeting?

Ernest Caldwell: Well, not too much. We never did get microscopes in the science department. Never did get that, and then we never did get the rocks or whatever they brought over. We never did get that either.

Stacey Scales: So those things went back?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, they went back the next day. Sure did.

Stacey Scales: How about the books?

Ernest Caldwell: Oh, the books that we got came from the White school. Most of the books that we got came

from the White school, secondhand.

Stacey Scales: Oh yes.

Ernest Caldwell: The same thing happened when I was teaching veterans over at the veterans training program. Now, this was government facility. Now they had some white classes and they had some Black classes. But in the white classes, they were able to teach. They had, oh, different teaching facilities that we didn't have in the shop. That shop was well equipped, but we didn't have that in our shop. We had hammers and squares and saws, hand saws and stuff like that. But over at the White school, they had all that. They had all electrical stuff.

Stacey Scales: So this is even recent?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, this was in 1953 to '55 or '56, something along in there.

Stacey Scales: Okay.

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah.

Stacey Scales: Did you ever notice things starting to change?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah, I noticed that the changes after they found out that they had to integrate the schools, well the veterans program had played out. But the Blacks were able to go to the White schools. But I did notice that as the Blacks entered the white school, the Whites went out. Just like right now, here in Brinkley, it's more Blacks than they are Whites in the school system. On account of, before this past two years, there was a Black principal and Whites didn't want to be taught, didn't want any Blacks over there. So rather than do that, they'd go to private schools.

Stacey Scales: So they have private schools now.

Ernest Caldwell: They have one little private school right here in Brinkley in the lower grades. And I think they have another one somewhere going toward— Let's see, what is that? It's out of Brinkley and they'll bus their kids there. There's some Whites that still go to the school.

Stacey Scales: So is it pretty much like it was when you were coming up?

Ernest Caldwell: No, it's nothing like that now. Because as a matter of fact, when I was coming up, at one time there were no Blacks in the high school over here. There was a Black high school and a White high school.

Stacey Scales: Were there Black businesses in this area?

Ernest Caldwell: No. Mm—mm, The only Black business I can recall was that it was a Black blacksmith, he shoed horses. And here, up until here, recently, about four years ago, there was a Black undertaker.

Stacey Scales: Right.

Ernest Caldwell: Because right now you buried— Well, you got a section of the cemetery that's Black and then a section that's White. And here recently, about four years ago, there came a fella in the community that wanted to open up a plastic shop. He has it open now, but it took a long time for him to open it because he had to get the backings of so many White people.

Stacey Scales: Were the burial practices of Blacks back then different than they are now?

Ernest Caldwell: No, I think they're the same. The only thing about it is that, well, I do notice that they vary in the same cemetery here in Brinkley, but there's a section of the cemetery that's Black.

Stacey Scales: They still don't mix it up?

Ernest Caldwell: Same thing in outlying communities. They got a Black one and a White one.

Stacey Scales: Is there an all Black cemetery in Brinkley, Fargo? Is there?

Ernest Caldwell: Yes. There's one in Wheatley.

Stacey Scales: Wheatley?

Ernest Caldwell: Yeah. That's five miles from here. Five miles east of Brinkley.

Stacey Scales: What's the name of that?

Ernest Caldwell: I've forgotten the name of that cemetery. Matter of fact, my wife and I have plots out there too. I can't think of the name because I let her do all that. I just give her the money and we pay once a year for the plot.

Stacey Scales: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Ernest Caldwell: That's about all I can think of right now.

Stacey Scales: Thank you. I enjoyed talking to you.

Ernest Caldwell: Same here.