



Interview with Booker T. Federick

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Itta Bena (Miss.)

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Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University
Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life
in the Jim Crow South

Interview
with
BOOKER T. FEDERICK
[DOB 7/14/30]

Itta Bena, Mississippi
August 2, 1995
Mausiki Scales,

Interviewer

Scales: Where were you born, Mr. Federick?

Federick: I was born in Leflore County, I'd say about five miles east of Itta Bena.

Scales: What are your earliest memories of growing up, Mr. Federick?

Federick: On the plantations around the city of Itta Bena, different plantations. I lived on plantations until I was about twenty-eight years old, and then I moved into the little town here. That's where I've been ever since I was twenty-eight years old. That was back in the year of '58.

Scales: Did your parents live on plantations, too?

Federick: Yeah. My mother lived on the last plantation that I

worked on. It was out about a mile from the complex where I began to work after I quit working on the farm. She stayed there about two years, and then she moved to the city.

Scales: Were you sharecropping?

Federick: That's right. Sharecropping, that's what we were doing, sharecropping.

Scales: Can you tell me how that process worked, as you experienced it.

Federick: As I experienced sharecropping, it was something like making a contract. That's what I call it, a contract with a landowner, where you would sharecrop with him on halves, something of that nature. If you made twenty bales of cotton on his place, you gather it all, but ten of them belong to you and ten belong to him. That's the way that sharecropping went, as I experienced it.

Oftentimes they would have you to work other places other than your crop there, like cleaning up old dead ones and what like that, places where bushes and trees grew and they wanted to get it up. They called it cleaning up new ground, getting it ready for the next two or three years they're going to use it for planting grain, cotton, or corn or beans or whatever that

they wanted to plant. We'd have to work in those places a lot of times. Very hard work, but I guess we thought it wasn't nothing else to do but that, and so it didn't bother us that much. We went at it.

Scales: Did the boss man treat you fair or the people fair?

Federick: Well, according to the way that, after I'd grown up and seen what was going on, had a chance to be in on them settling up with the parents and things, to me it wasn't fair, after I'd grown up and found out what fairness was, you know. After I grew up and found out what fairness was, it wasn't so fair.

A lot of them would do better than others. There were other places where the landowner would settle with you. He sold all of the cotton, but he would settle with you, if he got 22 cents a pound for cotton, he might would settle with you on 13 or 14 cents a pound. See, you wouldn't know anyway how much a pound he had got for it. He settled with you on that. I didn't think that was fair. That's what happened to us.

After I'd grown up and kind of had a chance to be in on that, then I thought it was very unfair. The thinking at the time was there wasn't nothing to be done about it. Somehow we worked out of it this far.

Scales: Did blacks ever steal cotton and sell it?

Federick: I didn't experience too much of that. I've heard said people would do that. Sometimes they would get caught selling cotton from off his boss man's plantation to the other man.

There was some black people that did rent land and they sold their own cotton, but they still didn't get the fair price for it. The white man still had something to do with the price.

If the black man would sell his own cotton, he still might get 18 cents. If it was 22 cents a pound, he still might not get but 18 cents, and the sharecropper might not get that. Some places they would do it, but some places, most places they would cut it in half or something of that nature, and we wouldn't really know how much a pound he sold it for because he wouldn't tell us the truth about it. He'd say, "I got 13 1/2 cents a pound for your ten bales." Then whatever that 13 1/2 cents a pound brought you, out of that sometimes he'd say, "Well, if you had made one more bale of cotton, you'd have cleared some money." So that sounded like unfair to me, but at the time we didn't know anything to do about it but try to make another crop with him or move to another plantation.

Scales: The people that would steal, was there a punishment for them if they got caught?

Federick: Most time there would be. They got caught, they would punish them. A lot of times they would punish them sometimes by some landowner would go get him out of jail if he got in jail, and he still would be punished because he couldn't move off that fellow's plantation. They're still imprisoned to me. You was in jail for doing something and I couldn't pay your fine, put you in my field and you can't do anything but work for me for nothing. That's still imprisoned to me. I called it punishment, and there was a lot of that going on whenever a black person would get caught stealing or taking something.

Scales: Did they have whippings and things like that?

Federick: Well, during that time they had the old county farm that these counties would have some sort of old place where they'd grow cotton and corn, beans, and stuff like was on a plantation. They would carry you out there and want you to do so much. If you didn't do it, they'd take you that night and strap you and things of that nature and make you do without food for that particular night if you done something that they disliked or if you had been, I call it a little hardheaded. If you didn't want to do what they say, they would strap you. That's what I understood about it. I never got a chance to go to see it and never have been in jail or anything, nothing of

that nature, so I had never had a chance to experience seeing this.

I've seen the policemen would whip black folks. I've seen that. I've experienced that on the streets in town. They would think he had done something, the police would whip him if he didn't talk to suit him. A lot of times a man would be telling him the truth, but he'd want to hear it the other way, and he'd whip him, make him pay for that.

Scales: What was the relationship between blacks and the police? Could you go to them if something happened?

Federick: If something happened between you and the other black man, you might could get some help with him. But most times, you ain't going to get that much help. If something happened between you and a white man, you wasn't going to get very much help, and sometimes they would get together and talk like they was going to give you a break somewhere down the line, but later on, when the results come back, you'd know that you wasn't treated fair. So these things did happen so many years ago. I was just fortunate enough to hear about it all and see very little of it, the beating part that they used to do.

There were men, that I've learned through listening to older people, that the plantation man, boss, plantation man didn't do what he wanted him to do, if he done something he

didn't want him to do, he'd take him to the little old commissary or shop somewhere and fatten him up in there and whip him, but I never did have a chance to see it. I'm kind of glad for my feeling that I didn't get a chance to see it. If I hadn't had a heart attack and died from it, I'm sure I would have got killed about it.

Scales: Did people ever defend themselves?

Federick: Every once in a while some black people defended themselves. Something would happen later on, but they had a chance to defend themselves because they would fight back sometimes. They would fight back and get by for a long time with it, but finally, if they couldn't catch up with that person that done the fighting, he'd do something to some member of their family or somewhere down the line to get, they call it revenge, I reckon.

Scales: Would they ever use guns in that, like armed self-defense?

Federick: Yeah. The listening part, what I've heard. Like I said, I've never experienced it, eyewitnesses of it. I've always had a chance to hear these things, because I'm a very good listener, and when older people would visit my parents and

things like that, I had to make that I wouldn't be looking them dead in the eye like they didn't want us to during that time. I would go to bed and cover up my head and keep my ears open, and I would hear a lot of things that were going on. They really didn't want the children to hear about these things, but I'd had a chance to hear talking, because I would play sleep a lot of times.

Scales: What would they say?

Federick: They would be talking about the thing have happened to their friend or whatever on the plantation. He and the boss man got into it and he jumped on the boss man, and then he had to run off and leave his family. Then they would threaten his family and all that kind of thing. The wife, she couldn't tell where the man was, then they wanted to try to punish her, and sometimes the children. Those are the kind of things that, in my listening, I would hear from older people about how we were treated.

There were some plantations--we did live on one plantation that, when you were working, you just worked. You didn't even take time to go, when time come to go get your groceries, you didn't take time to go get your groceries. You just make out your list that night and hand it to the boss man when he come to see if you was in the field, hand it to him, and he would go get

it and bring it back. You'd have a chance then to go to the house and take it out of his truck or out of his car or off the wagon, whichever way he brought it there, and carry it in the house, because if it was work time, you just had to stay there and work.

Now, there were some plantations that they allowed the womenfolks some time to kind of wash and clean up. They didn't allow a whole lot of time if it was work time. During the cotton chopping time, they stayed right there and chopped that cotton. A lot of time they would have a chance to--there were some plantations, the ladies had little babies at the house. The older child stayed there with the baby, and when she got ready to nurse the baby, then that older child would carry it to the field, the baby to the field for it to be nursed. Some of them would be nice enough to let the ladies go to the house and nurse the baby to keep them from having to nurse from that hot breath from that heat. They'd allow them a chance to go up there and kind of cool off before they would. But some of them, that older child would bring that baby in the field to that mother.

Scales: What was the youngest person that could work on the farm?

Federick: Well, whenever you--I think I started working on the

farm, type of work that we were doing, when I was about seven years old. My mother had had me out there with them. But whenever you get around seven years old, you go to the field and chop some cotton. If you wasn't a tall individual, they'd take something and cut the horehound off so it wouldn't be too much of that in your way for you.

Scales: So they'd chop it off.

Federick: Yeah, so that a child could chop some cotton. Most of us that was in the rural area and was on the plantation, we wasn't allowed to go to school until we was finished with our crops, and a lot of time our crops wouldn't be finished until about December in the year. So then there we were without clothes. We'd have to wait until about the middle or the last of December for him to make the settlement with parents to get whatever we were going to get.

If we'd come out behind and didn't clear any money, we didn't know nowhere to go but stay there. We'd have to borrow some from him to go get some clothes. By that time, school would be out for Christmas holiday. Now you can't get a chance to start until January.

Plenty of time I didn't start until the first week in January of the next year. Well, you'd go till they'd start getting ready for the cotton planted and start chopping some

time in April. A lot of time when the bigger boys got a pretty good size, they would want us to help our fathers in the breaking up the land, getting it ready, around March, February or March, like that. But see, then we might be done got a chance to go to school about twenty, maybe twenty-five days, and now we've got to help our father with this breaking up. By that time, school would be out for us during that time along about April, the last of April.

Scales: Did the girls go longer than you might go?

Federick: Most of the time they would have a chance to go till cotton chopping time. If they were small, they could go until school was out, but a lot of our parents, that smaller child, if that larger child couldn't go to be with them, then they all stayed at home. They had so far to walk and things, so those smaller children that wasn't able to go to the field and they couldn't send the older child with him to school, then that cut the whole bunch off a lot of time. We had plantations were like that.

Me myself, I didn't get a chance to go to school that much. Like I said, sometimes we may go around forty-five days out of a season. If it got bad, you had creeks and things to cross trying to get to those old rural schools, and sometimes your shoes and things, the parents didn't have enough money to buy

him a pair of boots to go through these muddy places, when it got bad, it stayed bad two or three weeks, they was kept at home.

We had it rough, some of us. Now, there are some of them had a chance to go to school. The children that was here in town during that time, they had a better chance than we did out in the rural, because they had a lot of rural schools then. I went to a city school about three days of my life. I went to this little school, I told you, [unclear]. I went to that school about two weeks, and I didn't go every day then. I went to that school about two weeks in the last of 1939. Then I moved right across the lake over here. Now I'm a little [unclear]. We still call it Itta Bena area. We was down in there about ten miles back in there. We was about six or eight miles from the school. We had to go through two or three little old breaks and boughs, stretch of woods to get to it.

Scales: Were your parents educated?

Federick: No, they was not. Mine wasn't, my parents wasn't. My daddy, I learned him after I got up there how to print his name. But my mother, she got to where she could learn a little bit how to read by after she got grown and started sitting around the house, when she did have that time to read old magazines and things and scuffle up on something. But they

didn't have any education.

Now, there was some people I known that was sharecropping and working on these plantations. Some of them had very good learning. But they didn't have the rights. They had the learning, but they didn't have no rights. That's what throwed them to be just about in the same shape I was in myself.

Scales: Did your grandparents talk about their experiences to you?

Federick: Well, no. My grandparents never did talk too much about their experiences to me. Like I said, the only time I would get a chance to hear this was because when they'd get together during my time, childhood, was when older people would come to visit your parents and things like that, they didn't allow the children to sit up and gaze at the older people while they was talking, and they would make them go to bed or something like that. Well see, I would go to bed, but I wouldn't go to sleep, and that would make me have a chance to hear many things that I can talk about, but not from an eyewitnesses or experiences, but from listening.

Scales: What stands out the most out of all those stories that you heard?

Federick: Well, right now it won't come to me like I'd like for it to come, because there's so many things that have went on, and when I got into the shape I'm in now, just try to let it go out of my mind. I don't think about it, because sometimes your thinking back that away, sometimes it will get you upset.

Scales: Did they ever talk about lynchings?

Federick: I've heard them talk about how they would lynch people and how they hung them up in trees and things of that nature. I heard them talk about that. A few years ago they showed some films, pictures of where they used to would do these kind of things, and so that made me believe that that part that I heard must have been true.

Now, I've heard of them drowning people. That happened back in the fifties here in town here. A young man wasn't drowned here in this lake, but up the road over yonder in the river. But the things that they put on him that may keep him from coming up and make sure he drowned, those weights and things come from here in town. It was about ten years before I learned that, and those people that they said that got these things and give them to those people that was going to drown this young man were people lived here in town, and they was some of our own people. Well, I guess they didn't know that's what was going to happen, and if so, it was a mighty evil thing for

them to do, but I guess they were trying to defend their own lives. Well, if you don't do this, don't do that.

I can recall a friend of mine lived here in Itta Bena, when the Scotts and them first came here, they came way back in the fifties and they had a black man working for them. He was a right nice fellow, but he didn't take too much off of white folks. If they done something to him he didn't like, well then they'd have to hurt him, because he didn't back up off them. They'd have to whip him off of them because he was just that type of individual. Mr. Scott would get him out of jail when he would get drunk, go uptown and getting to fighting with some of his friends and he'd go to jail, and Mr. Scott would get him out of jail. Somehow or another he learned that he had a jumped on a white man down there one day, and he told him, "Now, I've been getting you out of jail and trying to keep you from going to the penitentiary, but now you're going to have to go the next time I hear tell you hitting a white man." They boy quit working for him right behind there. He didn't work for him no more. He had him put in jail because he quit working, but a man up here out of Schlater, Mississippi, or somewhere got him out of jail, and the last I heard of him he was working with somebody up there around Schlater, Mississippi.

But some of these folks on these plantations, if you lived there, if you were uptown and got in trouble with some of your fellow men, friends or something of that nature, and went to

jail, they'd come get you. They wouldn't allow you to stay in jail. Sometimes the policeman, if he found out whose plantation you live on, he wouldn't lock you up. He'd tell you to get out of town, because he knew that white man was going to come up there and raise Sam with him. But if you fooled around and got in trouble with another white man, he'd just about had to go, just about had to go. Every now and then one would defend a black man if he got into it with a white man, and if you'd search the record, then you'd find out he didn't like that white man, either. That's the reason he would help him out.

We come through these things, and many of us experienced a lot of things that went on in our town and around our town and on these plantations, and many of us, like myself, had a chance to hear it through conversations of older people. I've heard a lot of things about this town through older people. I didn't have a chance to, because I lived in the rural area, didn't have a chance to be uptown much, because I think I was around sixteen years old before I come to town and would be up here by myself.

They'd bring me to town sometime maybe twice a year, and my father or mother one was going to be right there with me while I was in town and then carry me on back home. But I had a chance, like I said, to receive some information from listening to conversations.

There was a time when there was a lot of black people owned businesses right here in Itta Bena. They was being treated

unfair by the white folks, but some did own businesses here.

Scales: What were those businesses?

Federick: We had a family here, if I could think of one of them's name, the first name, but the last name was Brown. They had what they called Brown's Beef Market, and it was located down here on this lake where this Griggs [phonetic] tune-up shop is, right along in that spot there. They owned that, the people. They had some white customers. But they owned some land somewhere. I don't know exactly where it was. But they would raise cows, and they would kill those cows and they'd haul that, had a little cold storage thing here that they kept the meat in. They owned that. In about a year, the white folks undermined them.

Scales: How did they undermine them? Would they threaten them?

Federick: Well, you see, they would want to buy your business. Quite naturally, they want to buy your business, they want to give you what they want for it. They didn't want to give you what you would want for it. They'd ask you, but then they'd say, "Well, I can't give you that for it." Then if you didn't go right on and sell it to him for what he wanted to pay you for it, you'd have a threat out, you see. Well, anybody want to

live. He feel like he can pick up somewhere else. If he thinks he's going die over here, he'd leave. So those are the kind of things that did happen to some of our black people that owned businesses here.

My mother had an uncle owned a bakery shop right here in Itta Bena, just like these little places where they cook donuts.

He owned a bakery shop right just about far from here to the corner yonder from where this man had this beef market. The streets we got coming in from the schoolhouse down here is called Main Street, coming by that old Scott place. There was barber shops, cafes, and different little businesses along that street, and it was all run by black folks.

They finally worked it out back in the forties. All that was under the black folks that had it. The whole south end of Itta Bena, from Delta Parks' [phonetic] place, back in there, all the way down to where the south end now, all that used to be owned, the property and everything, was owned by black folks, and they got to working around till they worked them all out from up there back in here. We used to have a lot of black folks that owned barber shops and cafes and things like that, and everybody was getting along pretty good, and some of them had money, you know. But somehow or another they run them around and threatened till they--you know, frightening them out of there. We mostly frightened out. We tried to dodge being put in the river or lake or found dead somewhere else.

A lot of time you'd find somebody done something or other, you can about rest assured, you say, "Old Uncle So-and-so got mad and Mr. So-and-so jumped on. He hurt him or did such and such a thing to Mr. So-and-so." You can rest assured if he didn't hurry up and get out of here, you'd have to bury him.

Scales: Did any survive those threats, any of those businesses?

Federick: Yeah. Some of them lived here a long time, and then finally they left. Those Browns and things, the year before last two or three of them was back here for a school reunion. They wasn't here last year and this year. Yes, it was. One of them was here last year, but wasn't none of them here this year for a school reunion. A bunch of them, the older part died out, but the younger part, along from my age back down, some of them are still alive.

Mostly all these older people that own these businesses and things, they moved out from up there after they wouldn't allow them to be up there. Then they finally died out and left. Some of them left and died up in the northern parts and some of them died here.

Scales: Were blacks landowners, too?

Federick: We had a few of those. It was Mrs. Dorothy Treat

[phonetic], she owned from this house right here all the way back down there to the end of the--well, she had a great big home out there.

Scales: So about a block.

Federick: It was a whole block, practically. She owned this land, and then she owned a lot of farmland on back toward the highway back there. She would have a chance to sell her cotton and things when she'd harvest her cotton. She had a chance to sell her cotton, but, like I said, those kind of people they were watching. They made sure that they didn't get no top price for that cotton. Whatever they sold, they didn't give them no top price.

If a black man owned enough land to have some hay, this is something that they would get it together and fix it up to feed their stock with--mules, cows, and things like that. If the black man owned some land and got a chance to have some hay and got it baled and up to sell to the white man, if he bought some from another white man, the other white man wanted 20 cents a bale for his. Well, then he wasn't going to give that black man 20 cents a bale, either. Now, I call that unfair, but that's the way they mostly did the things. They just wouldn't allow him to get as much for whatever he had that the white man would get. I'm thinking that even the government was in on it.

Scales: Because of those type of conditions, did people try to leave, like--

Federick: Some people after they had left, some people left and stayed away some number of years and came back, and we have had some that have come back and start other little businesses for a little while. Then it would cost him so much. If he owned a business uptown, you know you've got to have electricity. Well, see, the electricity, they say he used so much electricity, then he'd have to pay for it. Well, the white man might just give them something on his electric bill if he run the business. The black man, he's going to have to pay that one. If he didn't, they'd shut him off, and things like that. So a lot of times the experience would make them close back down.

If they were in business the first time, it was closed down because of a threat or trying to save their lives. When they come back, they try to open up a business. It's so much expenses on it, he just couldn't make it. Most time, if he was running the business, he's going to have rent a building from some white.

We come a long way. We ain't completely out from under the pressure yet, I don't think, but it's better now than it was then.

Scales: Those people that had debts on those plantations, did they ever try to sneak away to the North?

Federick: Well, there were times that I learned, as I say, through listening there were times that men would slip their family away off a plantation. He left owing the man something. After the crop was over, he'd want to go leave, and he'd sneak his family away. He'd stay there a day or so, and then he'd leave.

They would threaten them sometime after they'd find where they would be at. Sometime they'd be done moved on another white man plantation that didn't care that much about that one over yonder. He'd just tell him don't bother him. But now, he was still imprisoned to me, because he couldn't leave there, because if he'd leave there, he don't know where this other fellow is. So he had to stay there and work because he done protected him.

Scales: How would they manage to leave? Would they leave at night?

Federick: That's the way they would slip off, after dark, like that. He'd get his family out of there like this night. The man probably wouldn't be paying much attention because it was during the winter months and he wasn't doing much no how. He

would stay around on the place, with his family already gone for two or three days, and then one night he would leave himself.

He might be done went somewhere and made a trade with a white man to make a crop with him and put his family there and told him what's happening. Then he would make a trade with him.

He'd come on over there. And after he'd get over there, then this man find out that he done left him, and when he find out where he is, he might contact this landowner that this fellow moved with, and he'd tell him, "Well, he's on my place now. Don't you bother him." Most of the time, they wouldn't bother him. But like I say, I still thought you were still putting yourself in prison, because if this man done protected you, you can't go nowhere. You've got to stay there.

Scales: Were there any blacks that had farms and you could go work for them?

Federick: Very few of them, very few of them. We had very few people that owned--we had a man used to live right there, Mr. Arthur Burkes [phonetic]. He had some land of his own, and a lot of time he would hire people to work for him, hire people to chop his cotton and corn and things of that nature in that time of year. He'd hire people to pick cotton for so much a hundred.

During my real young day coming up, from the time I got started in the field, because when they would get ready for you,

they would do the same when like they would get ready for you to pick cotton. Now, if you had done got seven years old in that house, well, then, when the man would bring those cotton sacks around for you to start picking cotton, he'd make sure he'd bring that one, because he knows I'm over here. He'd bring that, say, "You got such and such a child now seven years old, so this is his sack." The cotton sack was nine-foot sacks.

Scales: Nine-foot sacks?

Federick: Nine-foot cotton sacks. But they'd bring that child of seven one. He'd have a short sack. Now, when he'd get nine years old--he'd know when he'd get nine years old. He'd know how old every one of them is, because you're going to have to tell when you move on the place. He keeps up with their age. He just about knew how when they were born, because you had to go through by him a lot of times to get a midwife to wait on the ladies birthing children. Just about all children were just born in their own home. They had midwives. Some of them stayed on the plantation, but if that midwife stayed on the same plantation as you, if you go get her, she still got to report to the boss man about she done delivered a child, because he's going to have to pay her.

Scales: Oh, yeah?

Federick: Yeah, he's going to have to pay for it. It might not have been but \$3.00, but he'd pay her. Then when you get through getting your crop, then he'd sit down and settle with you and say, "Well, Miss So-and-so or Aunt So-and-so, whoever the midwife, such and such a day I paid her such and such a thing for such and such a child you got there." So then that made him know. If you stayed there a number of years, that made him know how old all your children were; and when they got big enough to go to the field, he knew that. He'd let you know he knew it.

Now, you might would get by if you had a child seven years old and got a little baby at the house, and you say, "I would like for that child to stay there with that baby so I can go to the field." Now, he might go and make arrangements for you. Your child needs to go to the field. He's seven years old. Such and such a man and his wife got a child up there five years old, see. We'll take your baby up there and let it stay with that child. He's not old enough to go to the field. Those kind of things would happen a lot of time. Yes, sir, we've come through all of that.

Scales: How soon would a mother go back out into the field after she's had a baby?

Federick: Well, most of the time it would be at least a month.

They wouldn't allow her to go back out like the people are today. They'd be around the house about a month before they would allow her to go back doing this hard work.

Scales: They would wait about a month before they would--

Federick: They'd wait about a month before they would get back out into the field. If the field was a distance from the house, or either if they had some long road, this mother wasn't allowed, for the first eight or ten days she'd go to the field, wasn't allowed to pick cotton, if she was picking cotton, all the way down to the other end. She would pick a little piece up in the field and get some more rows and come back so she'd be closer to the house.

Scales: Oh, instead of going--

Federick: Instead of going a distance from the house, until after, say, about forty days or something like that before she was allowed to get too far away from the house. Now, that was on some plantations. Some plantations, they didn't care what she--they told her, "You carry it down to so-and-so's house. They got some kids ain't big enough to go to the field, so you carry your baby down there and they'll keep your baby for you

and let you get on out there in that field."

Scales: So would blacks help other blacks?

Federick: We had much more of that then than we do now. We had much more of that. If we would be fortunate enough to get through with our what land we had traded with the man to work, we traded with him to work fifteen acres of land, we were fortunate enough to get through with our fifteen acres and you had fifteen acres and you wasn't quite through, when we got through, we'd just take our hoe and go on over there without asking any questions. That's the way we'd help one another then. And go on over there and make sure, and if another person wasn't through, all of us. That's just the way we did, right around one another. We'd try to make sure everybody was sitting on the porch at the same time.

Scales: So that's when you got a chance to rest.

Federick: Yeah, when you'd all get through. We'd go around it the first time and maybe be out of there about, sometimes about ten days. The grass started growing back. Then you got to go back around and chop around. At least sometime we'd have to chop around our cotton the third and fourth time, because what they would do, they would--

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Federick: A lot of time what they would do, when we would have to get through with our chopping our own crops, the man would have some extra land somewhere. He called it his day field. And then he would let everybody that had gotten through with theirs go to his field and chop, and he would pay them by the day. Of course now, they wouldn't get the pay till on the weekend, but he'd pay them by the day.

During my childhood days, when I first started working the field, cotton chopping was somewhere around 75 cents a day, 75 cents a day. I was chopping cotton for less than--well, I've chopped cotton for a dollar a day. I have chopped for a dollar a day. But during the early forties, my mother was chopping cotton for 75 cents a day, and the day didn't start like our days start on these jobs we got now. See, didn't start at no seven or no eight o'clock. It started at the beginning of the day, when the sun come up. If there was enough light out there, you'd already be out there chopping, already be out there chopping. Then if it got five o'clock, you didn't pay that no attention. You chopped till sundown. Older people use the word "you had to be out there from can to can't," can see till you can't see. Then I've chopped like that. I've chopped cotton like that.

Scales: Did people use almanacs and the signs?

Federick: A lot of older people used almanacs and signs for the planting of their gardens and truck patches. That's the thing that they would allow you to have on these plantations was a place for a garden to raise some vegetables and things of that nature. We had another little spot we called it our truck patch, where we raised watermelons and cantaloupes and things of that nature.

Scales: Why did you call it a truck patch?

Federick: That's the old word people used, called it a truck patch. I wondered, even when I was coming up, why did they call it a truck patch. And then a lot of times the man would come and say, "Ain't you going to leave this spot here for your truck patch?" You'd tell him, "Yeah." A lot of times he'd pick the place for you. A lot of times he'd let you pick it. But most times he would let you have somewhere in the corner of the cotton field to plant something like that.

A lot of times in our truck patch we would plant watermelons and--well, we had two kind of--we had a thing we called a cantaloupe and a mush melon. All those kind of things we'd plant out there. And there was something else. I can't

think of it now, but anyway, we'd plant it. And popcorn. We'd plant popcorn out there. So those are the kinds of things we'd plant in that spot that he'd give us.

Scales: How would you plant popcorn? How is that different than regular corn?

Federick: Well, see, it was a different type of corn from the regular corn, because you take regular corn, you shell it off there and put it in the skillet or somewhere it's hot at, it'll just parch up. But see, you put the popcorn there, it'll turn just as white as snow.

Scales: How did you tell the difference between regular corn?

Federick: It was a difference in the size of the grain. Most of the grains on popcorn, they're round grain, and this other one was kind of a square-looking grain of corn, and that's the way you could tell the difference. Now, they had two different kinds of popcorn, but it all was the same thing. It would pop when you put it in a hot skillet or whatever object you put it in.

A lot of time, those landowners, they would come and ask you for some vegetable out of your garden. Theirs wouldn't grow up enough for them to eat from, they'd come get some out of

yours. It was on his plantation. He could come get it if he wanted.

Scales: He had access.

Federick: Had access to whatever he wanted to have access over, he had it. We didn't know nothing else to do but think that he was right. We had grown up from the older people behind us. They was doing it when we got here, and so we went along with it. until things went to looking better.

Scales: Were there ever any like bad storms or weather problems?

Federick: Not as regular and not as many that we have now, but we used to have them every once in a while. The older people mostly, I've heard them call--I think I was about twelve years old before I heard anybody call the name tornado. But I had seen storms, and I heard them say, "This is a twister. This is a cyclone." They had different names for it.

But as I say, I was about twelve, because it was in '42 when the tornado wrecked this nearly about everything in here all out in the rural part. When they told me that's what it was, from then on I heard people talk about tornadoes. But we didn't have them as often as we have them now then, because it

was plenty houses out in the rear for it to blow down if it had come, because that's where we all was at, just about, out on these plantations.

Scales: Did people have ways of making a storm go away? I've heard--

Federick: Well, I had heard of these things that people had, some sort of action that they would go into to, they said, divide the storm. I don't know what happened. I seen big dark clouds make up, you know, and look like they're fixing to do something, and all at once one part will go that way and one part will go that way. Two or three days later, I hear them say, "Well, Aunt So-and-so, she prayed and stuck her ax up in the ground and had faith, and the Lord divided the storm and it went around us."

I read a little reading about that after I became working in the church over here and was a Sunday school teacher. I would read little things, and I read a little reading about that once. It mentioned when those folks would do this, they would do it with faith. They didn't think the ax was going to do this. They used the ax to exercise their faith. They're showing that they had faith in the Lord. They believed whatever they done in faith, the Lord would grant it to them in grace, and that's what they felt like. They felt like it wasn't the ax

that split the storm. The action that they had that their faith let them do that, and they really had faith, and it would happen. So that's what made it happen. That's what this reading said about it to me, and so that's what I gained within myself, because you just go out there and stick an ax up in the ground and the storm goes around you, something like that, well, you could say it was the ax. Anybody could go out there and do it, you hear what I'm saying? But if you had faith that something different would happen from you exercising your faith, then it had to have been faith for it to happen. I have never made no effort to do it, but I've heard people see it done. I've never made no effort to do it, and after I heard it years ago, before I come in contact with that little reading, after I heard it I'd always, when I'd see a storm coming, I would believe that somebody else would do it and I would feel the effects of it, too. I believed somebody else would have faith enough to stick this ax up and it would go around, and I wouldn't bother about it myself.

Scales: Was it any type of ax or was it a particular--

Federick: Well, they would just use ax. I guess it was whatever ax you had. Like I say, after I started to being in the Sunday school, I read a little reading about the people that used things of that nature.

There was a lot of folks years ago that they would use different things for different types of sickness. I don't know whether it was faith. I'm sure it was that they had faith in God. I've seen people so sick it looked like they wasn't going to live, and some older person come there and say, "Go such and such a place and get some bark off of such and such side of the tree and peel that stuff off of that and bring it here and put it in the kettle and boil it and give it to him." In a few days, that person would come around. In my thinking, that had to come by faith, an act of faith.

Scales: Was that something that the older people would--

Federick: Older people would use, and they used it a many time and didn't have to have no doctor. They used a lot of different things.

There were a lot of old things that I had experienced myself. My mother and them would use it. I was the type of person to have what they call--they had a fever would break out among people in the summertime. They called it malaria fever. This thing would break out among people, and I would have it every year, sometime twice a year. There was something they called a tratchair [phonetic], a bush, and they would dig that thing up and cut that root off and put it in some water and boil it and just bury me down in it, and that fever would go away.

Later on, after I got grown, when that fever come I got to find some medicine at the drugstore to get rid of it.

Scales: That would have been handed down from the next generation?

Federick: Handed on down. I don't know if we just lost the faith that we should have kept or what happened, but most people say now you can't use these kind of things. It could be the doctor telling you that, you can't use these kind of things because it's against you. We've got too much chemicals going into the ground now for to use this stuff. And so that's why our people are not using it, I think, because I hear people say that things like that won't do you any good now because there's too much chemicals going into the ground to try to make this cotton and beans and whatever they plant to grow. And it could be so, but I'm still thinking that somewhere along the line we lost some of the faith or quit exercising our faith as the older people did years back.

Scales: Do people still practice faith and prayer with the ax when storms come?

Federick: Well, I hadn't seen any since back in the forties, back in the forties. I hadn't seen that happen. Now, it could

have, but I haven't seen it. I know that I've heard people talk about this and I've seen this clouds make up and disappear, the dark part would disappear. One side would go that way and one side would go that way. Then you'd hear somebody say, "Well, Aunt So-and-so stuck the ax up in the ground and turned the storm around." I don't see--it couldn't have been anything but faith.

So we come out from under all that. We come from that. We don't bother about using anything now that you used to use to try to do something about our bodies when we'd get sick or something like that. My father used to, if he had a headache, he'd just pour him a handful of table salt, just regular table salt, and throw it back in his mouth and drink a glass of water and go ahead on and he wouldn't think about it. I never did see him take anything for a headache but salt. If he had some sort of stomachache, he'd just go get the baking soda and pour a handful and drink some water and go ahead on. I never did see him take anything when he said he had any stomachache or anything of that nature.

Scales: Did people back then talk about saints and spirits and things like that?

Federick: Yeah. That's one of the main things I used to want to listen to when the older people would come, and I'd want to

listen to that kind of thing. I guess I listened to it so much until there were times that my conscience, I guess, made me thought that I seen these things, because I've seen such as that I heard them talk about.

I had a chance to see them, but I never was afraid of them. I've seen people walking, you know, and I've heard folk walking at night and there wasn't nobody there and all this kind of thing. I had heard the folks say these kind of things was true, and so I felt like if they survived and these things was about when they was out there in the streets at night, out in the road at night, I felt that I could survive, too, and it didn't bother me whenever I saw it or thought I saw it. I just kept going and didn't think nothing about it.

Now, I've thought I seen people I knew that person was dead. I'd see him and then I'd go somewhere else to try to see if that was somebody or the person that I thought it was. If I went to the other end of the house and didn't see nobody, that would come back in my mind that who it was, that person, that person's spirit. I still wouldn't get excited about it because the older folks said it was so.

Scales: Was that something that people could communicate with?

Federick: I've heard people say they have talked with their mothers. They didn't say they saw them, just their spirit, but

they could hear their voice. I've heard people say they could hear their mother's voice speaking to them and things of that nature. And those things have happened to me, but, like I said, it didn't frighten me or anything, because I'd heard those folks say it. They survived, and I feel that I can, too. So those kind of things is in the background of our lives. I think it should be some history about some of those type of things.

Scales: Do you remember any of the stories that stand out the most in your parents telling about when you would be up at night, listening? Do you remember any of those stories?

Federick: A few. I didn't see it all, but I experienced some of it. My mother was talking about it the other day. Back in the year '39, after we had finished and it was beginning to come close to the end of the year, a man come--the first of the year, I mean. A man came through and had everybody that wanted to--he talked with everybody that wanted. He came through talking that evening on a loudspeaker or something, saying that he had 100 hundred acres of cotton that had never been picked and he needed somebody to go and pick this cotton. I think he was paying about 40 cents a hundred for it, and that was a lot of money during that time. If you was going to pick 250 pounds of cotton, that 40 cents a hundred, you picked 200, you wasn't going to get but 80 cents. So if you picked 250 pounds, you'd

get a dollar.

This sound good to the people, because if there is some cotton had never been picked, if you was a good cotton picker, you'd go on and pick you a lot of cotton. It ain't never been picked. So everybody that wanted to got up the next morning before day and got themselves ready to go get that cotton that had never been picked. My mother and them got up around four o'clock that morning and fixed a little food. She left it there for us. I was the oldest child.

They left before sunup. They got on this big truck. It goes on, and it quit on them up on the railroad track and had them all scared to death that the train was coming and this thing done quit up on the railroad track and about 100 head of folk on the truck. Now they're excited, you know, but they survived that and got into the field where the cotton had never been picked.

Scales: How did they get past the tracks?

Federick: Well, the train wasn't fast enough to destroy them. They finally got the old truck cranked up and got it off the track and went on to this field.

Sure enough, like he said, it had never been picked, but there wasn't nothing to pick at to start with. It was this kind of thing that he had some poor land he had planted. It was a

lot of old gumbo land or whatever it was. But anyway, the stalks were about this high.

Scales: About [unclear].

Federick: Just about that high. Those rows of cotton sometime would have one lock in there. Most rows of cotton, during our time, had five locks of cotton in it. Well, this thing didn't grow enough, it didn't develop. Boll weevils got it. Every now and then you'd find four or five stalks [unclear]. Them stalks didn't have nothing on it. But he had told them the truth. It had never been picked. But from the sound of it, there was going to be a lot of money made, because if you made a dollar, you had a heap of money in '39. Yes, sir, you could buy some groceries. A 25-pound bag of flour, you get it for about 25 cents. If you find one for 30 cents, it was good flour.

But that was one of the things that, after she told me that, I often think about how they were making preparations to get something that wasn't there. They were told it was there, but it wasn't there. So that was one of the things that I often tell when we're talking and I experience sometime, talking with younger people, and I bring this story up. I'm sure it sounds like a story to them, but it's a true fact. There was many times that we made preparations for one thing and what we were looking for wasn't there. Those are some things that you never

forget.

Even myself. I caught myself going to cheat a man one time picking some cotton for him. Well, I did, I cheated him. He was a black man owned a farm. I think that street right there is named after him. His name was Tom Gammett [phonetic], but this street right up here is called Gammett Street. He had me picking some cotton for him, about 100. I wanted to pick 100 because he was paying a dollar for 100, and I wanted to pick 100. I picked two sacks of cotton, and I had 38 pounds in one sack and the other sack had 48 pounds in it. Now, I need 50 pounds in both of these sacks, so what I done--I weighed it myself. I wasn't supposed to, but I weighed it myself. What I done, when I weighed this 38 pounds, I knew it was 38, I could read the scale, 38 pounds. I knew from looking at the other sack that the other sack wasn't going to be no 62 pounds. I knew it wasn't. So when I got through, I put it up on the scale. It weighed 48 pounds. I took out of this sack laying on the ground till I got 62 pounds in there and weighed it, and then I threw it up in there. I let that big sack stay out there, and I was emptying the little one when he come up.

He said, "How much you had, son? You ain't supposed to weigh your own cotton." I knew he was probably going to take that 2 pounds that I had, that sack with 62 pounds, I knew he was going to take that. I felt like he was going to take it. So I told him I had 40 pounds in the sack I was emptying, so

that if he took the 2 pounds off it, 40 and 60 was going to be 100. I was going to make a dollar, because I cheated him.

Down through times, whenever I'd run into some sort of problem like that and I'd fool around and get cheated, my mind would go back to what I done, and that made me try as much as I can to be fair as I can with people, because those kind of things, you get by with it while you're doing it, but down through time that thing will come right back on you. So that's what makes me try to be as fair as I can with people, because it doesn't profit you anything no more than while you're doing it.

Scales: Was there a lot of cheating going on?

Federick: I'm sure it was. I'm sure there were those people who would cheat you that were weighing their own cotton. I believe that a lot of times. We used to cheat the white man that way. We'd cheat him like that. We tried our best to cheat him. We could pull off green bolls and put it in the bottom of the sack.

Scales: Pull off what?

Federick: Pull off the green boll that wasn't open and put it in the bottom of the sack and then pick cotton and have it on top of it. That green boll's going to weigh a whole lot. Yeah,

it was a lot of cheating going on.

Scales: Was it considered cheating, considering how times were?

Federick: Well, I say it was cheating, because anytime you're doing something unfair, you're cheating. That's the way I feel about it. It was unfair. We thought, because the white man had been unfair for all these years, it was time for us, if we could, to get some payback, and that's the way we thought that we could get it, by doing that. We got caught a lot of times. After my unfairness, I didn't try it no more. But we got caught a lot of times, they got caught a lot of times, and he'd find out about it and he'd say, "I ain't going to pay but such and such a thing for that sack of cotton."

He cheated, and most of the time if we had a chance, we would, too, cheated even in our farming out on the plantations.

If we raised corn, half of that corn went to him and half would go to us, and a lot of time we would [unclear] to the corn. If we had a few rows of corn that had some full ears on there, we would try to pull those ears, because the first load of corn is going to his corn house, you know, where he put it. It was going to his house.

What we would do, if we feel like he's going to come out there and search it, we would pull all them little short nubbin of corn that wasn't full ears and put it over in the bottom of

that wagon. Then we'd start putting some full ears on top. So when he'd come out and climb up there and looking, sometimes if he climbed up there and looked and seen all them little short ones, it may be the load that was going to his house, but he'd tell you to carry it to yours. So whenever we got a chance we could get by with it, we'd try. Some of them got by with it many times for a long time. Sometimes he would find it out way on up in the wintertime as he feed his stock out of there and get that, because, see, when you unload this corn, you throw that [unclear] off there first, so that when--

Scales: It was the first thing.

Federick: The first thing he going to run into it when he go in there, that nubbin. Some of them were smart enough, they'd throw that nubbin over in one corner and the good corn over in another corner, and when they'd get through unloading it before he'd come out there and look, they'd get over there and rake over the top.

Scales: Would people have an underground like network where they would take food?

Federick: I never did have anything, but I've known people. There were many black people in the country, they had what they

called a storm pit. When a storm come, they had this thing, a big old hole in the ground, and they'd have it sealed up like a house in there, and they had a door on the top. When a storm come, people that was afraid of storms, they'd have a storm pit and they'd go down in there when they would see the storm making up to survive the storm. Sometimes they would get caught.

[Tape interruption]

There were many people out in the rural area--well, we had some people in town here built some storm pits to go into during the time of a storm. A lot of people had them a good piece away from their house, and some of them had them right in the back yard. They would go in those places whenever a storm would come, and sometimes the storm would last--the weather would be so bad, they'd just spend the night in there. I never did have a chance to go in one, but I've seen many of them built and I heard of many people going in them, but I never went in them. Of course, we had some people, a lot of people would use them sometimes for what we call a utility, like people have utility houses. A lot of people used them for that, and they'd have different things in there that they'd use in the house. There were some people had them fixed up nearby like a house.

Scales: Really? Under the ground?

Federick: Under the ground. So those are the only underground

events that I know about is people had storm pits and things like that. They would protect themselves.

There were times I heard they had to be dug out of them because a storm would come and blow the house down on top of that thing. I have never experienced seeing it, but I have heard people say that whole families would be in that thing sometimes well on up into the next day because of the storm done moved the house that day. They would run out of the house into this thing, and then when the storm blow the house down on it, then they don't have no way out of there, because too much weight. I didn't hear of anybody suffocating and dying from being in those things, but I have heard of people getting trapped in them.

Scales: On the plantations, did you get days off, like holidays? Did the boss give the blacks time to do what they wanted to do?

Federick: Well, on many places, they would give you that 4th of July. Now, that would depend upon what they called how the work was. If you needed to work bad enough, they didn't bother about giving you time off. Most of us wouldn't worry about it. We'd be trying to finish up. But most of them would give you that day off, the 4th of July.

Scales: Did they have a day for the blacks?

Federick: Sometimes the boss man would go to his pen and kill a hog or a cow or something or other and have this meat cooked and let everybody on the place come up, and they would just eat and have a good time. He'd have things to drink there, whatever they wanted to drink, from lemonade to alcohol. Whatever they wanted, it was there. A lot of times they would have somebody to come do some sort of little play or little show or something or other, some sort of activity they would have. Then some of them they would allow to have a ball game, a baseball game. He would buy different baseballs and bats, and maybe two plantations would get together and do this, buy baseballs, bats, and things and let the men play baseball, this plantation play this one. They would have a good time with that.

Scales: Was that a big event?

Federick: That was a big event to me when I got old enough to go to it. I enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun to me.

Scales: Did you ever play?

Federick: No, I never did play. The only baseball playing I played was at school, and it wasn't very much. But I would be

out there with them, be out there watching and having a good time out there with them. Every now and then they would have a big round, what we call a big fight. Somebody would get too much of that heavy stuff in them, and they would lose their temper, lose his understanding, and get into it or something like that.

Scales: Would the blacks ever play white teams?

Federick: No, never would. The white people would bet on those black teams playing one another. They would bet one another, you know, on their team. They would do that, but they never did hardly--

Scales: Were there benefits to playing baseball then on a plantation? You said they would bet. Would they ever--

Federick: Those folks, the men put that money in their pocket. Them fellows that were playing, the only thing they got out of it was a fun time. Yes, sir, that's the only thing they would get out of it. We called them pasture baseball. We played it out there in a big old pasture where you had fenced in. We would play out there. They would come together, a bunch of them. These other white friends would come, and they'd sit and watch those men play baseball and bet their monies on them.

Yes, sir. The only thing we would get out of it was enjoyment and be tired.

Scales: Do you remember all the Negro League players?

Federick: Not really. We had a ball team here in Itta Bena one time. I don't know whether they called it a Negro league, but it was a good ball club, because they would go to Arkansas and Louisiana and different places like that and play on the weekend. If some of those folks lived on the plantation and if he didn't get back like on Monday to go to his work day, they didn't bother him.

Scales: No?

Federick: No, they wouldn't bother him. He could be late getting back, because he'd done gone to Arkansas somewhere to play ball.

The last one we had here, I believed they called it the Itta Bena All Stars. We had a ball park here. Down on Freedom Street back yonder going out of town they had a ball park, and they let one of the last players who died two or three weeks ago, one of the last one of those men that played--

Scales: Was that from the thirties and forties?

Federick: That was way back in the forties, in the thirties and forties these folks were playing ball. The last man that I know that did play with that team, he died about a month ago, Cal Townsey [phonetic]. He was one of the pitchers of that ball club. All the rest of them had died some eight, nine, ten years ago and back farther than that. But he was the last one that I know now that died, and it's been about two months ago, I believe it was, he died.

They had a good ball club here. Friday they could get out of the field and make themselves ready to leave Friday night going somewhere they had to transfer, because they were going to be transferring on the back of an old truck or something. They had an old truck with a top pole, and they'd enjoy that ride. I think they had a chance at one time go as far up as Missouri, somewhere, playing a team.

Mississippi had a nice little bunch of ball clubs. Greenville had a pretty good ball club and Itta Bena had a pretty good ball club and Greenwood had a ball club. But most of those fellows, if I can remember, I can't think of none of those fellows had a chance to go into the big leagues. Now there's some people from Mississippi have played, and some are playing in the big leagues now, played for Mississippi, but they had gone away from here and played somewhere else before they went into the big league. We have--I can't think of that young

man's name now. His people still live back here somewhere, went up into the big league playing baseball. But that's here in the earlier days. But back in the olden days, I can't recall none of those men having a chance. It could been, but I can't recall.

Scales: Did they play any other type of sports?

Federick: There wasn't any other type of sport that they played right around here that I know of but baseball. Basketball always was played mostly by white folks until some recent years, and then any other kind of sport was pretty near played by white folks. Black people wasn't interested in those kind of sports then.

Scales: Do you remember the Joe Lewis fights?

Federick: No, I can remember hearing people talk about him. I never had a chance to even read about any of his fights in the paper. I could hear about, and I believe he was what the folks say he was. I had a chance to see his picture. Some people have his picture in their house when we go visiting. They say, "This is Joe Lewis." They talked about how good he was in his skill of boxing and things like that. I never did want to be a boxer. The only thing that I ever really, really wanted to be,

and I started going to the picture show when I was about sixteen years old.

Scales: Was it a segregated picture show?

Federick: These old Western pictures. About the only thing I was interested in wanting to be, if I wanted to be anything, I wanted to be a cowboy. I wanted to be a cowboy.

Scales: Did the blacks have their own movie theater here?

Federick: They done a lot of working at these places. They didn't never really own any. There was a black man set up a little place around here, but way around yonder on the other side of that place where I was telling you about the Browns used to have their market shop. There was a black man set up around there, but it was so far back behind everything else, didn't very many people go around there.

Scales: Really?

Federick: No, didn't very many people go around there. He just had a little screen set up there, and he didn't have a sufficient screen and thing. He had it fixed so he could just hang up an ordinary sheet against something and show it to kids

and all.

Scales: So where did you go to the movies?

Federick: We went to the movie show run at the Dixie Theater, and Itta Bena had one called the Strand Theater, but each one of those theaters belonged to a white.

Scales: When you went in, did you sit in a separate place?

Federick: Well, the Dixie Theater, didn't nothing go in there but black. The Strand Theater, black and white went in, but they had the black people in a little old upstairs place. It couldn't hold but about fifty people up there, if it was that many. But that was the only place I know where they had the blacks above the white folks was in that Strand Theater, because they had them up and the white folks downstairs. We could sit up there and look right down on top of them. In other words, if a fire broke out, we had to come downstairs and they could go right out the door. That's the way I seen it there.

Eventually, before they shut it down--I think that's one of the reasons they shut it down. Some black people started coming in here from different places, and they'd just go on in there and sit down. They didn't ask could blacks go in there. When they bought their ticket, they just kept on. Instead of going

up that little stairway there, they'd just go on in there and sit down. I think that's one of the reasons that they shut it down, because they shut down two other cafes here because of that.

Scales: What was the name of--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

Federick: Southern Cafe that was run by a man named Joe Seville [phonetic]. Him and his wife run it. But they had one side where they served the black people in and the other side where they served the white folks. But eventually, in taking down their old cooking equipment and things to put up new equipment, they put it in the corner over there where the dancing room was, where the young people go in there and dance, they filled that in over there with all this old cooking equipment and stuff over there in that corner. Those black children didn't have nowhere to dance in there then, and they quit going. Whenever the black folks got ready to eat, some of them, they'd just go in that white folks' side. They would serve them. But I'm thinking that's the reason they went on and closed it down.

Scales: What was the name of that again?

Federick: The Southern Cafe. The Delta Cafe was around the corner. They've still got a cafe there, but it don't make no difference who go in there or how they go in there. But it was run by white. His name was Joe Russaside [phonetic], and he had a little old table about as long as this thing here in the back part where the black folks go in there. If more than ten people go in there, they couldn't sit down and eat. If they wanted to eat, they'd have to stand up and eat back there. But the white folks were up front. But eventually the black people come in here from different places and just walk on up there and go to eating. They'd serve them, but I'm thinking that that's the reason they eventually closed it down, because they did so long serving nothing but white folks up there and now they got to go in and serve these black folks.

Scales: The blacks that went up North and came back, were they looked at differently when they came back?

Federick: I think that's what started these cafes to closing, but those are the people that, when they'd come back, would go in there. But when they'd go in there, that would make some of us go in, too.

Scales: Would blacks down South here in Itta Bena look at blacks that came back from up North different?

Federick: No, not that I know of. I don't think they looked at them different, unless there was a different way--we had some black people who changed their--to maintain their attitude when they got away from here and went up there. Then sometimes the black folks here would say, "Well, he done got different since he went up there," and that made them treat him a little different, you know, sometimes.

But I don't think it happened too many times, because most of us knew one another, worked in the field together, went to school together, and fight some, too, and all that kind of thing. I never looked at nobody any different. If they came back and I had a chance to meet him and talk with him, I enjoyed his company and invited him to my house if I met him uptown, you know. I never did treat anybody any different, and I haven't really had nobody go away and come back and treat me any different. All of the people that I've known and that knew me, when they come back, a lot of times if they didn't have a chance to see me, they'd ask about me and try to find me before they--

Scales: Did you ever get a chance to go up North?

Federick: No, I never did live up there.

Scales: Have you ever been there?

Federick: Yeah, I visited Chicago and Gary, Indiana. I visited those two cities. I was forty years old before I ever left out of the state of Mississippi.

Scales: When you were growing up on the plantation, did black people vote?

Federick: No. No, indeed. They didn't want you to say nothing about it, didn't want you to say nothing about it. When I first hear of people voting, it was in '60. I knew they had it going before then.

I was working at this compress here where I just retired from, and there was a lady, she worked there in the fall of the year. They let her have a job of cleaning up the office. After they laid her off in the fall, they just give her this job of cleaning up the office. Every morning she'd come down there and just move this, empty garbage and whatever from the day before.

They wasn't paying her but \$2.50 a week. She happened to go to the courthouse and register to vote, and they put the names in the paper. So when she came to work one morning, the boss man met her at the door. He said, "Marguerite, I saw your name in the paper yesterday talking about you went over there and registered to vote."

She said, "Yes, sir. They told us to come over there and

register to vote."

He said, "What are you voting for?"

She said, "Well, we're just registering to vote for whoever we would like to have in office, president or whatever office that they're running for."

He said, "You all niggers don't know what you're all doing. That registering to vote ain't going to do nothing but cause a lot of problems, especially when you [unclear]. Give me that key." She handed him the key. He said, "I'll get somebody else to do this job. Don't you come back here no more." Wasn't paying her but \$2.50 a week. I know he wasn't paying her but that because I'd bring her her check every Friday, \$2.50. He took that job away from her.

So the next time he got hold of a paper and he come out there and asked us did we know this Beverly [phonetic] boy. We said, "Well, we know his daddy. His daddy lives in Itta Bena. His daddy's named Dennis Beverly."

He said, "You all better try to get to his daddy and tell his daddy to try to make him stay up there in St Louis or wherever he is, because he's going to get killed down here, running down here and telling these niggers about voting."

So we had a time when that started. Yes, sir, we had a time. There was a lot of people lost their jobs. When they found their names in the paper, registering to vote now, they lost their jobs. There was some schoolteacher was threatened

lived right here in Mississippi. They had to prevent their jobs from being terminated. They wouldn't go. I think some of them went on anyway, but they were still threatened.

We had a time when that started. When they did get it, then they started having these little march. They were protesting, them black folks were protesting. They was making bombs and things and throwing them in our churches. So we was having a time during that time.

Scales: Did anyone ever on a plantation talk about voting or was that--

Federick: Well, see, most of the black people that owned land at that time had to give up that farming anyway. They had to give it up and rent the land out, a lot of times to the white folks, and they didn't bother them too much. They would still be threatened a lot of times for voting because they would feel that they was trying to entice somebody else to vote, too, you know. They would threaten them a lot. A lot of times those people were threatened, too, because they registered to vote. People that owned these little--like this land here still belong to colored folks.

Scales: This lot down here.

Federick: Now, this next lot here belongs to this lady here. Her husband was old lady Street's [phonetic] son. He was Rhoda Street's son, and he owned this lot and the next lot and his mother owned from that on back around yonder, all the way around to the next block back there, and then she owned a lot of land, I don't know how much, back in there. I think they're in the process of selling some land now.

Scales: Did blacks own cars when you were growing up?

Federick: Yeah, a few of them had them. A few people had cars, like my uncle I was telling you about had the bakery shop, he had a pretty good car, and several other black people had nice cars. They had to be careful about having that big old car, you know. They'd have to buy a Chevrolet or something like that. They couldn't buy them Rolls Royces and things like that.

Scales: Why couldn't they?

Federick: Some white folks would start some mess. A few blacks had them. We had some people in here, Robinsons. They were running what they called a taxi cab here in town, and they bought some of these big old cars because they were running a taxi cab. Then what they done, they paid extra tax here in town to run that cab, and they done pretty good. Just a man put on

some good, clean clothes and things like that, he'll do pretty good with a nice Chevrolet or Ford or something like that.

They had some old funny-named cars--I don't even hear tell of them no more--during that time, the old Studebaker cars and the old--well, they're still running these old Plymouths and Dodges. They're still running them. Black folks could own something like that. He wouldn't get that, if he went over there, he'd have to buy one of them cars didn't have all this shiny stuff on it, you know. He couldn't buy a car like that too much. He might would get his life threatened. But he could buy one with no decoration on it.

Scales: Were there places in Itta Bena where blacks couldn't go?

Federick: Yeah. They had their side of the town, you know. Now, if they felt like it, they could come over on our side of town, but we couldn't go over there on their side of town.

Scales: Where did their side of town begin?

Federick: Pretty near they would hang around those two cafes if they were uptown, but most of the time white folks didn't come up on the street no way. Like we black folks would come up on the street on Saturday evening sometime if we wasn't doing

nothing during the time we laid the crop by. That means when you're finished chopping your cotton, then you got to wait until it open to gather it. That's what we called laid by time. That was a time we could go fishing if we wanted to and be up on the street. We would come to town then early on a Saturday evening, and we'd be up there on the street like just gathered up like this.

But the white folks never did gather up like that on the street. They would drive uptown and stop over there at the cafes, and pretty near all of their little business things, like they had to have their car worked on, was going to be over to Greenwood, anyway. One time we did have, I believe it was Delta Shurlate [phonetic] Company used to have a little old place over here. It's been a long time ago. And Phillips had several service stations in here a long time ago. But that's the only place you'd see them white folks hanging around, at them places like that, here in Itta Bena.

They would gather out on the plantations. They would get together like that. That was most of the time when you'd see black folks and them practically mingling together would be something they'd have out on the plantation and they would have a bunch of us to come out and be out there and eat around there with them, everything. That was something to entice you to know that you ought to want to work for him, you know, because he was a good man, work for him. So that was all that was for. We

seen it the way they wanted us to see it.

Scales: Were there places that were considered the bad side of town?

Federick: Well, no. We had a few black men here, they didn't fool with one another too much because they were known as the men that didn't take anything. The white folks would put on like they wasn't afraid of them, but they were. They was afraid of them, because anytime, you's a man, I'm a man, me and you get into it and I got to go get a great big group of folks to come back, I got to be afraid. [Laughter] So the other thing would happen a lot of time when one of us would get in our mind we wasn't going to take it anymore and they found it out, then they'd get them a gang and come after you.

Scales: Did you hear of any mobs that went after--

Federick: No. The only thing, I didn't get a chance to see it, but I knew it some people out of this town went down in that area. I don't know whether they went to try to help with what was going on. There was something happened in Lexington years ago, in the fifties I believe it was.

Scales: Lexington, Tennessee?

Federick: Lexington, Mississippi. A black man got in a shooting spree down there. His name was Eddie Nolan. And those white folks come from everywhere and had him cornered off somewhere in some woods or something or other. They supposed to have been shooting at him, and he was shooting back at them. Of course, it was a bunch of them.

Now, I was told that after they did catch him that he told them he could have killed all of them, near about all of them if he wanted, but he didn't want to kill them. Every once in a while he would shoot close enough to one for to scare him so bad he'd leave, he wouldn't stay out there. When they did catch him--well, he give himself up. I think he stayed a week or so out there in the woods, and they were shooting and had dogs out there. Anytime one of them dogs got close to him, he had to turn around, too.

Scales: His name was Eddie Knowles?

Federick: Eddie Nolan. That was the only event that I can recall, you know, that I could hear it every day, you know.

Scales: Why did he turn himself in?

Federick: Well, I'm thinking that he felt like that--I don't

even think they ever sentenced him to a long time in prison. Somebody said they finally just got him away from here. Of course, he was half and half. You didn't know whether he was a white man or black man, but he lived among the black folks and he had a black family, a wife and family.

But they tell me he frightened a lot of them, and I know it was a bunch of them left here and went down there, but I don't know whether they went down there to participate in the shooting. I'm sure if I hadn't been going to try to help, I wouldn't have went down there, and a fellow already cutting folks' shoes off their feet and stuff. I don't think I would have went. But that's about the last real bad event we had.

Before then, we had a black man here in town they beat him. He was a little old preacher. I say a little old preacher. He wasn't a pastor of no church. He was a big man. He hadn't been working and he'd gotten some furniture or something from one of the furniture stores over there in Greenwood, and something happened and the job laid him off or the job was finished what he was doing, and therefore he wasn't working.

I'm told that he went over there and told these people that he owed for the furniture to just let him keep the furniture and he would pay them just as soon as he'd get a job, and they wouldn't allow him to keep it. They told him they were going to come get it. So when they come after it, he didn't approve of it. He frightened them away from there with his gun. So they

went back and got the law here in town. Wasn't nobody here but Mr. Weber and one other lawman. He went down there. He was scared of him, and he couldn't get him to act right. So they got the sheriff from over here in Greenwood, and they talked about burning his house down and things like that. I think he shot at them a few times or something and frightened them off, and they talked about burning his house down.

Mr. Bill Daley [phonetic], sometime that night he went there and told him, "You give yourself up, maybe we can help you work this thing out. It ain't no use in you getting your family and everything burned up with that thing going on like that, because they ain't going to let you alone. When you fired at them, that put them on edge, and they ain't going to let you alone. They're liable to have the FBI down here."

Well, he was a white man, so he talked him into giving himself up. Instead of them carrying him on to the county farm--they had a county farm then. They didn't do nothing but carry him on to the county farm. They put chains around and beat him over there, the next block over there, before his children and things like that. Well, then that kind of stirred up a lot of the black folks then and everything.

Scales: What year did that take place?

Federick: This was back in the fifties, the early fifties.

They carried him to the county farm, but he didn't stay out there no great long time. Well, he hadn't killed nobody, but he frightened them pretty good. They just were that way, you know.

When you do something to let them know you're not afraid of them, then they'd try to do something or other to calm you down, to cool you off, you see, scare you if they could, if they could get you scared. They'd carry you to the county farm and work you out there. The man out there would whoop you and all that kind of stuff. If you went out there and acted right, you'd get some days cut off your time. But if you went out there and didn't do what they said, then you would have a long time out there and a heap of whooping.

Now, one thing for sure, we didn't have a whole lot of young folks going out there then. We didn't have a whole lot of young folks went out there, because the young folks, most of the older people that had big size children, they were already taught what to do and how to do, and pretty many of us done like our parents told us to.

Scales: Were there local leaders that would speak up against the injustices that were taking place?

Federick: Not too many black folks. They didn't speak out. We'd sit around and talk about, talk a lot of us felt that was the day coming. We were waiting on the day until we got some

folks that were brave enough to come from other places, come in here and join with the folks that had that in mind. But see, you couldn't hardly get too many folks. If you got talking about doing something or other brave, you couldn't get too many black folks to join in with you. So when they got somebody come in from other states in here to join these people here that did have the nerve and were brave enough, then that's when it went to moving.

But we had some black folks that got bad with a lot of things. We had an old man, he owned a plantation and he was bad about getting drunk. They would catch him, because when a man owned a plantation, he fooled around and got high or got drunk, they'd put him in jail because they were going to make him pay a big fine. He'd get drunk some Saturday and get uptown. He wasn't that thick, but he was just a dangerous old man. He didn't bother nobody, but it was kind of dangerous to bother him.

If they'd come to arrest him and he done got drunk, he didn't resist arrest, but he didn't allow them to take his gun from him. He told them, "I get up in the morning and put my pants on. Before I put my shirt on, I put the gun. I don't intend to leave it with nobody." When they'd lock him up, they had to lock him up with that gun on him. He wouldn't allow them to take his gun. But now, he didn't resist arrest. He didn't tell them, "I ain't going," but he'd tell them, "I don't part

from that gun." They'd lock him up. His wife would come up here and get him.

Scales: Were there ever relationships between white men and black women or black men and white women?

Federick: Well, it was a lot of relationships between the white men and black women, and some of them were doing it, they say, because they were afraid that something would happen to their family. Some of them were doing it because they felt that they could get a little more support out of it, something to help them, you know. Some of them never did say why they did it, they just went into it.

That was something never did bother me. I guess I've always thought that an individual, whatever he wanted to do, if he was satisfied at it, it was all right. But there was a lot of that going on, you know. There were a lot of old insurance men would happen up in houses and men gone to work somewhere and he happened up there with that woman and keep flashing money around till he get her attention about some money and things like that. The next thing you know, if she's a young woman, there liable to be a white child coming out. If that black man, he near about afraid to say anything. He knows something done went wrong, but he was afraid to say anything.

But you didn't hear too much going on about no black man

and no white woman. If they even heard of it, they'd be ready to give you a big drink of water. That means put you in the lake. I learned that it was a few times that it did happen that black men was dealing with white women, but it wasn't public as it was with the black woman and the white man. All those things went on right here in our town. We had some of everything that went on in this little town here. Yes, sir, had some of everything I guess that went on anywhere else happened here in this little town.

Scales: Were there black doctors here?

Federick: No, it wasn't no black doctors here. We had people that knew some things to do, but they wasn't licensed, you know, and so that told them not to be able to do anything other than just go by personally and do something. The only thing we had close to anything of that nature was these black women that would deliver children from these ladies, the midwives. They were the only thing close to a doctor we had.

Scales: When you left the plantation, where did you work?

Federick: When I came off the plantation, I come to the Itta Bena compress in the year '54, and I worked there and around from there to other compresses till the year 1980. I came back

to this compress here in Itta Bena, and that's where I retired from about two weeks ago.

Scales: When you worked there in the fifties, were they treating blacks with respect or was there discrimination?

Federick: It was the same. They treated blacks just like they treated them everywhere else. You wasn't getting nothing for your work. When I first started working there, I was getting 50 cents an hour. Nowadays, you see, you work so many hours and then start overtime after that. It wasn't no such thing as that when I first started. If you put in 100 hours, you just got your \$50.00. That's what that was. That's what I started off with, 50 cents an hour, and it wasn't no machine, equipment to move the carton around. It was all muscle work. You moved those bales of cotton. You moved them all on, most people call them a dolly. It's a two-wheel thing, you know. You load this bale of cotton up on it. If you had to carry it from here to round up yonder to that school, you carried it up there on that thing.

Scales: So that's how you delivered cotton?

Federick: You had to carry it from one section of the compress to the other one. Even when you had to take it off of the truck

that brought it in from the gins, you had to take it off and load it on this thing and carry it where it's supposed to go.

Scales: Were whites working there, too?

Federick: Very few. Very few whites were working there. They didn't fool with too many white folks. Most white people that worked there were real poor and in the same condition we were in, and they would have to work for that 50 cents an hour.

Scales: So everyone made the same wages?

Federick: Pretty near everyone made--now, they had some people who made a little more per hour, like they had a press there. During that time, they got all their cotton from the gin. They needed to press it, to bale down to a uniform bale, and they would run that press. Well, they had men to tie those bales of cotton down to a smaller-size bale. They had those men tie those bale downs, and then they paid those men that tied that cotton about 10 cents more an hour. Some of them wasn't getting but 5 cents more an hour. Most of them were getting 10 cents more an hour, which was about 60 cents an hour. The man that had to operate this press, he might would get 10 cents more than the other man would. See, like I was getting 50 cents an hour. That man that was operating the press, he was getting about 20

cents more than I was getting.

We tore down an old office there in '81 or '82, and looking at some old back-time records, they had sixteen men that worked there year-round, and that sixteen men, that whole payroll for one week for sixteen men was \$128.00

Scales: What year was that?

Federick: That was way back in the thirties sometime or other.

Sixteen men. The total of the whole total payroll for sixteen men in one week's time was \$128.00. Wasn't that something?

Scales: It was.

Federick: Those was hard-working men.

Scales: Those poor whites, would they get treated just like the blacks or did they get treated differently?

Federick: Most time, if he would go to the boss man to ask for some kind of relief, you know, talk to him about how he been treated, he'd tell him to hit the door. He'd tell him to go.

The only time he'd hire a man anyway, a white man, he'd done been somewhere else working, been a little foreman or something other on a job. He'd hire him, and he quite naturally

going to treat him different. But those three white fellows that were working out there with us, doing the same kind of work, they was near getting in. After they started using and buying equipment to move the cotton around with, those white men, they allowed them a chance to operate those things first. They done that. He would have to learn how to operate that thing before he upped his salary.

Scales: Would blacks have their own way of protesting, like breaking machines or anything like that? Would they ever protest how they were treated in their own way?

Federick: No, they never would protest how they--if they allowed that white man to drive the machine, it didn't bother us, because we knew that when that machine come there, we knew if it was a white person there, he was going to be the one to drive it anyway, at least we thought that was going to be, and so we never did go to them and we never did protest against it. We'd just keep on working.

If it was any rough work in that machine that he was operating, we were going to try to push it so till he'd want to get off it. Several times we did. We made one leave there one time. We'd work him so hard he'd have to leave there. We had the skill of what to do to keep him busy with what he was doing. See, we'd keep him so busy till he'd get off of that thing and

leave there. Now, we'd do it that way. We'd make a plan. Since he got a job of sitting down, we were going to make him tired of sitting down, don't give him no room to get off and stretch his legs, let him stay going.

Scales: How would you do that?

Federick: Well, you see, most time when the first machine, the equipment that they got in, they got one in there to stack cotton, and when we started doing that, we who was using these two-wheelers to bring that cotton from one shed over there for him to stack, if we'd play around, he'd have a chance. We had a long way to go. If we'd play around, he'd have a chance sometime to get off that machine and stretch his legs around like that and cool off, because see, that thing had a little old leather seat on it, and this time of year you'd get a wet behind, you know.

We didn't give him no chance to get off it till twelve o'clock, and when he'd get back on at one, five o'clock come, he'd be just as wet behind, wetter we would, because, see, we had a lot of youngsters. I was young at that time, and it was a lot of fun to us to race with one another with these two-wheelers. We'd see how many bales I could haul more than you. So that worked him to death. He'd soon get away from there.

Scales: Did you all laugh about it?

Federick: Oh, yeah, it was a lot of fun, fun to us. A lot of time we'd be done made up our mind to let him stay busy. A lot of time, the little foreman, you didn't have but one foreman in this big old plant. A lot of time three or four fellows over yonder and three or four fellows there, it was hard for him to just keep walking through there and keep up with us, and a lot of time we'd do something to keep up a lot of dust over there. He'd look down and he'd see all that dust, he'd think we were real busy. We'd liable to be outside there in that little cemetery out back. We'd be out there behind in that cemetery smoking cigarettes. We would be where we could watch him, though. We'd work him, too.

Scales: You'd keep the dust up.

Federick: Yeah. See, what we'd do, there would be a lot of dust in those places where that cotton come in, and they had that old dust that come in from them old gins and hauling it up and down those old dirt roads. There'd be a lot of dust, and all we had to do was just get to playing with eight or ten bales of cotton around and run around a circle, and this dust just falls up like there's a lot of work going on. If the foreman was way down and see that dust up, he thought there was work

going on, so he'd stay up that a way if he didn't have to come down. But we'd get where we could see him and watch him, and he happened to start that way, then we'd get back out there. We worked him, too.

Scales: Did he ever figure out what you all were doing?

Federick: Well, that foreman, later years he found out what we were doing, and he eventually said, "I don't blame you all." He said, "I don't blame you. You wasn't getting nothing for your work." He was a very nice fellow, anyway, but the old head boss, he was pretty rough.

When I first went there, they had a man there, he was the roughest fellow I ever seen in my life. But somehow I got along with him just like that no sooner I went there. But he was a rough man. He was rough. He didn't care how white you was, if you didn't do it like he wanted it done, he'd point you to that door. He was just rough. He was rough on his own self.

Scales: Did you have vacations?

Federick: No, no vacation. You didn't take any there. If you left there, you didn't get paid for them hours. You left there sick, you didn't get paid for them, unless you got hurt out there. They'd pay you for that day if you got hurt, but if you

stayed hurt, they wouldn't pay you for no more. Like if you were hurt around one o'clock and you get paid for that whole eight hours. Well now, if you stayed hurt the next two months, you wouldn't get nothing but your doctor bill paid. That's all the benefit we had.

Scales: Did they have health care back then, the blacks?

Federick: No, we didn't have nothing like that too much around on no job like that. No, we didn't have too much. The only insurance they carried was if you got hurt, they were supposed to pay your doctor bill. They'd pay your doctor bill up to so long. Then they'd cut that off.

Scales: Was it safe working in the compress?

Federick: No, not really safe. You'd have to try to make it safe as you possibly could. It wasn't safe at all times, because there was some danger anywhere you went near about there was some danger there when I went there, because they had old wooden floors and those old wooden floors in some places had some weak place in them. I've seen--and I have done it, too. I've walked over one little place where the weak floor was and my leg went through there all the way up to here.

If you were hauling this bale of cotton on your two-wheeler

and that floor break in and one of your wheels go off in there, automatically that bale of cotton's going to turn off on the floor, lay down. Now, if I was right behind you, I couldn't stop and help you pick that bale of cotton up. You had to scuffle and get it up yourself. I'd have to just drive around you and keep a going. That's the way we had to work. You lose your bale of cotton, it belonged to you. If I stopped and didn't get caught, it was all right for me and you to help one another that way. But if I fool around and got caught helping you--

Scales: So that was something that was put forth by the boss?

Federick: Mm-hmm. No, every man was for hisself. If he'd lose that bale of cotton, he try to get it back up on that two-wheeler and get it where it's supposed to be going. That other man ain't supposed to stop and help him. Many times that happened to a lot of us. It have happened to me. I thought I was a good man, and it [unclear] me. You reach down and pick up this end of it and stand it up, and when you get it stood up, then you can go back and get your two-wheeler and push it up there and reach over there and pull it back down there.

Scales: So would there be just one bale on each?

Federick: One bale, from 480 to 600 pounds sometimes. Very few times we'd run into a bale of cotton that weighs 700, but most of them weighed from around, I reckon 90 percent of them bales of cotton would weigh 520 to 550 pounds. We had to handle them, though. It got to be where we thought it wasn't much to it. We thought it was a lot of fun, us young people did.

But after we'd gotten two or three machinery and things like that, it made it that much better, so they went to giving us a little benefit for that machine. Whatever company they bought that machine from, then they would have some sort of insurance, and they had to have some, too. So they give us a little something to go on if we got hurt, something like that, or if we got sick. A lot of time I've seen people get sick out there, and I'm sure it come from being out there because--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 2]

Scales: Cold in the wintertime.

Federick: Yes, cold, and hotter in the summertime than any place I know. See, it's got this cotton in it, and before they built all metal sheds, they had these old wooden sheds. It had this regular tin on top of it, and then a big slab of tar would be poured up on top of that, and when that tar would get hot up over your head, you got a lot of heat coming down.

Then in the spring of the year, a lot of time we would have to, where the roof would spring a leak during the wintertime when it would freeze up, we had to go up there and fix it, or either if the roof got in bad shape, we had to go up there and tear that roof off and put another one on, and that sun up there was about 105 degrees. That was a rough job. When I come away from that other Saturday morning, my mind went all the way back to those days, when I punched out the other Saturday morning not to go back to work. I was punching out for done the time. My mind went all the way back to those days when I come up through there. Sometimes I wonder how did I make it through all that, but I made it up to that day.

Scales: What do those times back then mean to you?

Federick: Well, I look at it this way. The first thing, I know it wasn't the sense I had caused me, so much sense I had. I give myself credit for having something, but nothing I had caused me to make it through there. I'm thinking that it was the good Lord who made everything and everybody and made it possible that I made it through, because there were some times that I was in very much danger of being killed.

I drove off, one morning I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, I had the thing in gear and drove off that thing deeper than this thing here and turned this machine bottom up,

and I didn't even knock the skin off anywhere. All of the fellows seen it, they thought I had killed myself. They all broke and run through the shed and thing, until they saw me climbing up out of there and then they came back. When I got up out of there, no sooner I got up out of there and got back up on the platform, this thing caught afire. Sure did. And now they're afraid to go back down there and try with the fire extinguisher to put it out, because they were afraid the gas tank was going to blow up on it. I took the fire extinguisher and jumped back down there. Water was this deep, jumped back down there and sprayed up under there till I got the fire. Now, that was one of the dangerous times that I know that I'd gotten through and could have been killed.

Scales: What made you do that?

Federick: I wasn't paying any attention. That's the reason I say--

Scales: What made you go down there and put that fire out?

Federick: Well, they kept a fire extinguisher on all of them, and they said if any time one catches afire, that's what we were supposed to do was to take that fire extinguisher and spray this stuff on it and put it out. So I was operating this thing. I

couldn't get back down and get the fire extinguisher off of it because it was already on fire. So I took one off another one and went back down in there.

Scales: You were afraid it was going to blow up?

Federick: I wasn't afraid. I was hoping I would get it put out before it reached the gas tank. See, butane gas in it, and it had caught fire up under there where it turned over. The transmission fluid came out of it and got on the manifold, and that's what started the fire. So as long as I could see the fire wasn't getting to this gas tank, I cut it off first, that fire, and went on and put it out. Those fellows taught us that.

I never would have did that. Even my boss man told me, he said, "I never would have done that. That thing would have ended up burned up." But I took that chance and went back down there and put it out, because I was down in a pit and it was deep as from this up here down. In other words, this thing is 55 inches deep, because we measured it when we got ready to build that pit in there. We measured it. It's 55 inches from the top of the floor down in the bottom, so that's near about 6 feet.

But anyway, that was one of the dangerous things that I went through. There were other dangerous times, but to me that was one of the dangerous times that I went through.

The last event that happened to me that was dangerous that I could have been killed was one night--I was working that night anyway then. I was on the night shift. See, that thing has to have water run through it just in case of a fire, and they have a little old thing that if it get hot enough, it'll trip this thing and cause the water to come out of these pipes and things to put out the fire if it comes on fire. They have what they call a fire bell, and it started ringing, it either done tripped in the little fire house or in the shed out there, and I knew this thing hadn't tripped in the shed.

I heard this bell ringing, so I went around there to just cut it off, because it had tripped--I knew it wasn't no danger up in there. I just went around there to cut it off and didn't have a flashlight. I was walking down alongside of the building, and there's so many bricks and things up there, I hurt my ankle, twisted my ankle. So when I decided to go back, I thought I'd go out there in the road where we used to walk up and down, and they had dug up a fire hydrant out there, and that thing was near about deep as the same thing. It was full of water, and I didn't know they had dug it up out there. I dropped off in that thing at night, by myself, and that thing, it dug straight down. I got out of that thing, and I went under two or three times, and somehow or another I looked around the top there till I found a little something it might have been two times as big as this here. I caught one around that way and

brought myself up out of there.

Now, that thing, I could have got drowned in that thing, because my boots got full of water and I went down about twice below the water and I came back up. This thing that I pulled up by, I didn't know what it was because it was dark. I knew it was something that I caught hold of and pulled up out of there.

So the next day, after it quit raining I decided to go around there and look at what I had fell off in and to see what I found to pull up by. When I went around there, it was just a clog of dirt, just a big old clog of dirt. I said, "Well, son," and I took my foot and bumped it that way and it fell on off in there.

Now, that was one of the things that got by me. I done pulled up out of this big old hole of water by this object and it wasn't strong enough the next day for me to put my foot against it. It was strong enough that night to hold me and the boots full of water and all them wet clothes. That was the last thing that really happened that could have carried me on away from here down there. There was many other little things that happened, you know, but that was one of those things that happened that could have carried me on away. So there were many experiences in working that I don't mind thinking about them, but I sure would like to turn around and go back.

Scales: Is it anything that you think that has been omitted from history that should be included?

Federick: Well, I can't think right now. I guess I'd have to get in a big conversation for it to come back through my mind.

Scales: What do you think young people could learn from your experiences about through those times of Jim Crow?

Federick: Well, if the young people would believe these things.

I used to sit down and tell my children these things, and I could see that to me I was saying something to make them laugh.

In other words, they didn't really believe all this stuff I was saying, and it was all true. If you could get them to believe in it, if they didn't want to do nothing but do what you're doing, using it to write a history, to go back and look over it, it would help them a whole lot.

I often over here at the church I get up sometimes and tell them about some of the experiences that I had, about being disobedient when I was at home and something like that. I'll tell them about those events and what happened to me because I was disobedient, and then it wasn't all the times my mother whooped me because I was disobedient, just something happened because I was disobedient, and I tell them about that. And if they would use it or write and make a history out of it, have something to go back to, Mr. Federick said this, that, and so-and-so happened, and they go to somebody else and get something

else, it would be something in years to come that might would be real interesting to them.

I used to tell my children, "I have never been arrested in my life by no policeman," and I would tell them this. I said, "Now, it wasn't because that I was so good I didn't do nothing, but I was fortunate enough not to get caught in doing what I would get arrested about." See, I never did get caught or nothing like that. I was trying to let them know that, I wasn't trying to teach them that I was the best person in the world. I was just trying to teach them what will happen in life and what can happen in life, and you have to kind of be looking forward to those things that I've told you so you may know how to handle it when you're facing it. See, I tell them things I faced in life, and I tell them, "I'm telling you this so if this thing happens to you, you may think of what I told you and you might know how to make it easier on you than it was on me."

Those are the kind of things might would help some of those young people. I wasn't bad about stealing anything. The first thing I ever caught myself stealing was just a little old plaything, truck. I carried it to the house and my mother asked me where did I get it from. I told her I got it from somewhere else, and she knew where it belonged to. She said, "Take it and carry it down there back to them boys and call their mother out and tell their mother you stole it and put it down on the porch and come on back. I'm going to be standing right here. If you

don't tell her exactly like I told you, I'm tearing you up." So now I got to go down there and call this white woman out and tell her I stole her boy's truck. So those were the kind of things that were rough to me.

Scales: How did you feel when you did that?

Federick: Well, I felt like I wasn't going to get the whooping.

In later years, I found out that's how come I didn't get the whooping, and then later years I found out what can happen if you make a rogue out yourself, you go try to steal something or other. Eventually you're going to get caught, and if I got caught right off like that, I was afraid to do it anymore. So that eliminated me from wanting to steal anything of anybody's.

Scales: Do you remember your parents or grandparents telling you stories about slavery times or things that you remember that were passed down?

Federick: Well, not too much, because a lot of parents, after their parents talked to them about this slavery time thing, they told so much of it and let go. Like I said, at the beginning we were not supposed to sit in the company of these older people while they were talking anyway, sit there looking right at them, you know, and so you had to get out of there, do like I did,

play asleep or something to hear. Most times, I didn't get a chance to say too much about way back in the slavery times.

Now, I heard an old man used to come to our house and he talked about how when they would get in slavery times, his father told him that the white folks used to didn't allow the black men to go to church on Sunday. He said that they would let the women go to church on Sunday, but they didn't let the black man go to church on Sunday.

On Sunday, all through the week they'd be out in the field, like chopping their cotton and corn, and then they would have these men out there on Sunday, these insects that would be out there on their beans, like grasshoppers and bean weevils and things, they had the men out there all day Sunday parting that stuff, getting them things out of there, putting them in cups and things, bringing them back to the end and filling the cup full of dirt and letting these things smother to death in this dirt. He would often talk about that kind of thing, that the white folks used to didn't allow the black man to go to church.

I never did experience that, and I'm glad I didn't experience that.

Scales: Was church mandatory when you were growing up?

Federick: Oh, yeah. That's one thing that I haven't strayed away from. I might have strayed away from a lot of things that

went on in my time, but church is something I just have never strayed away from. I've stayed with it all around through time from the beginning of my start going to up until now, I've always stayed with it. It was something that got in me, and it never has come out. Nothing that I've done, not so much, I've been the kind of the church man the Lord would want, but it stayed in me to want to stay with it and go to church and do all of the service I can there.

Scales: Did they have baptisms and revivals?

Federick: Yeah, they had them. During the time when I come up, they didn't have pools in these churches to baptize. They would baptize us in the lakes and rivers, and sometime they'd have some sort of little pond or something on the plantation, great big old thing with a lot of good, clear water in it, deep. They'd have a good time down there. We'd go down there.

We used to baptize on this Roebuck [phonetic] Lake here. We would be over on this side baptizing. Well, we'd baptize on the other side of the lake. We'd be over there on the other side of the lake baptizing, having a good time over there, and we'd look across on this side, and I imagine we'd have more white folks down on this side standing there listening at us over there. They would be down on this side of the lake down there. There was more of them over here at the baptizing. The

only thing we had between us was the lake. But they could hear us, because the echo of our voices. They would be there. They would know about it and come.

Now we have a few white people some years ago would go to our church. We had a white lady used to go with my mother and my grandmother to church every third Sunday. If she didn't go that day, she'd go that night. When a revival come, she'd go every night. She would go with them every night to the church.

We'd find some every once in a while would do some things that looked like wasn't so mean. We had a good time.

Scales: You said that as a child you couldn't look into the adults' face. When were you considered a man?

Federick: Pretty near you was going to be around twenty, twenty-one years old after a man, considered as a man. They would change their way with you when you got up in your teens.

But it was the older people's way of teaching their children not to sit look right in the face of the old people when they were talking like that. I guess that come down through older and older generations and it just come on down, because they don't do it no more now, you see. All that was happening in my time. When I was a child, we just didn't--my mother didn't really have to get me about it, because when I heard them say that that's what they did back in those days, I

just knew it would have to be done with me, and I'd just be on the lookout. Whenever I'd look out and see somebody come late in the evening, I'd make sure I got everything, my work, so when they get there, if I had to go to bed, I'd be ready because I'd have my work done.

Scales: What type of courting practices did they have back then when you were ready to date a young lady or see a young lady?

Federick: Well, they had hours. They had it on a schedule, hour schedules. You didn't go there and stay as long as you wanted to and leave when you get ready. You didn't go there and they didn't know who you were. Sometimes when you're up on this day and time now, a young lady liable to bring a young man to the house and the parents ain't never seen him before. But that's who she'd bring there with her, and he don't ask the parents anything. They just sit there and talk.

But see, back in my day, if you wanted to be with that young lady, you're going to have to go to the older people and get an okay. If it was all right with them, they'd say all right, and then they'll give you that time. Pretty near your parents, if you were a young man, your parents had already give you a time. "Don't you go to that house and stay." Nine o'clock was a good leaving hour at any time. If you didn't get there till fifteen minutes to nine, you had fifteen minutes and

you had to go. It might would work, if enough people practiced it now, it might would work. It seems kind of strange, but that's the way it was done.

It was still some things went on like it is today. Young ladies got out the places because of the young man visiting them and the parents wasn't at home, or they slipped out and their parents didn't know it. But they had a strict rule, and mostly all of the older people went by the same rule. You go there, and you didn't go there no every night. They had a night, you know, and pretty near a young man, pretty near he's going to have services at some church on Sunday night. That's how he's going to get a chance to be with her Sunday night. He's going to walk her home from church. But now after he walked her home from church, that's it. You turn around those steps and go.

Now, Wednesday night is your night for you and her. They get together and sit down and talk. You're going to come there, and you ain't going to stand outdoors around the house. You're going to have enough respect to come in the house, and she'll entertain you there in her house. And there was times when sometime the mother and father and all be in the same room, mother sitting over here, father sitting over here, and the boy and the girl sitting over there by her mother. So anything going on, they know about it, because they're sitting right there. Now, in my day, I had a chance to be in a different room, but I knew how to act in that room, and I knew what time

to leave there.

There was a time when I got with friends of mine and we left and sneaked back. But now, when you sneak back, you see you done made some kind of preparation, you know, for the young lady to leave the house or something like that. Well, most of the time, if those old folks were still up, it wasn't no use in making that preparation, because they're going to look that thing over after you leave anyhow. If any movement be going on after you leave there, then they're going to know what it's about. So you didn't get very many chances on going back there seeing her after you leave.

Then from that Wednesday night, if a bunch of you get out there and get to playing or running up and down the road, you might run up into one another. But now, you ain't going back to that house to be no company until Wednesday night again or Sunday night. They had some strict rules they went by, and they didn't just fuss at you about them rules. They'd go get something or other and work on you about them if you disobeyed.

Scales: What if a young lady was pregnant in the neighborhood?

Federick: Well, a lot of times they would kind of house her up a little, the parents would kind of house her up a little sometimes from the other girls, and sometimes the other parents wouldn't allow their children, especially the girls, to be with

her. That didn't seem so fair to me, but I guess if it's their rule, you had to abide by it.

There was a young lady did come pregnant and had to tell who the boy was involved. I thought it would be too late to make him stay away from her then, but a lot of times they'd make her stay away from him. The damage has already been done. Sometimes that was their rule. "You stay away from him. Don't fool with him no more."

Scales: What if you wanted to marry the young lady?

Federick: Well, a lot of times, if they were old enough, they would work on that. They would try to get that done. I wondered sometime if the girl had just dealt with the boy and didn't love him, if you made her marry him, would you be putting her in a position where she would mess up somewhere down the line later on, you see.

But I think what the older people had in mind, that if you marry him, if he's the daddy, then by chance you have any more, they all would be one man's child. You won't have no mixed bunch of children. I think that's what they had in mind. I feel that that's what they had in mind. And they felt like maybe if they stayed together long enough, they would come to be in love, because evidently they wasn't in love right that quick anyway, you know. They'd have to become to be in love with one

another. I'm thinking that's what the older people had in mind.

It might have been a whole lot better for our time now if they could have made everybody get married that got pregnant by a young man. He could have married her and let all the children that she had been that one man's child. Sometimes I feel like the reason why, especially our black young people, can't get along with one another is because there's so many mixed. Sometimes you got five children in the house and five different men is supposed to be the father. That's a little different itself right there.

I can appreciate a lot of things that didn't seem right when it was done, that these old people done, but since I come in the knowledge of knowing about life and running into things in life, I can appreciate a lot of things that the older people done, and feel good about it. I'm glad I know about it and glad I was a part of it, because it has helped me. I've done a lot of things in the way of old people telling me that I see somebody else doing it different and wouldn't get nothing out of it. When I do it like the old folks did it, something would happen for me, and so that's what made me appreciate a lot of things old people did back in those days.

Scales: Would there be a place for blacks to take their money, like banks? Were there black banks?

Federick: No. If they carried their money to the bank, they carried it to the same bank then back in those days that the white man carried theirs.

Now, I learned that they got a lot of it took from them that way, because they would claim something happened, you know, the bank went broke and all this stuff and with that black man's money in it, and he couldn't get it. If the thing went broke, well, see, he couldn't get any of it.

I never did believe that was so. I believe there was some way they had fixed up that they didn't want him to have it after he accumulated so much, because this man I was telling you about had the baker shop, he had money in the bank, and the man I was telling you about that wouldn't allow them to put him jail, he had money in the bank, and those people lost a lot of money in the bank up here in Itta Bena.

Scales: Did blacks bury their money?

Federick: I never heard too much about black burying any money. They had places they kept some. I've known people to have some money and kept it hid around in things around the house there somewhere. If he buried it, he buried it in his yard somewhere. He didn't carry it nowhere else and bury it.

Scales: Did they have an all-black cemetery in Itta Bena?

Federick: Yeah. That's where every black person was buried. If he wasn't buried at some of these churches, he was buried in this cemetery out here in the end of town. Then the white cemetery was up here.

Scales: That's still practiced?

Federick: It's still there. That's still in practice now. Yeah, they still got that going. The white folks still going to their churches and we're still going to ours.

Scales: Do you have anything else you would like to add?

Federick: Not right briefly. Sometimes things come to your mind as you sit around and as conversations continue sometimes things will come to mind like that.

Scales: We'll have to come back and talk to you.

Federick: There are a lot of things that you can think of when you don't necessarily need to think of them, but then there are a lot of things that you've done experienced you done forgotten most of it and so you have to leave it all out because you done forgot most of it.

There are a lot of things that I've experienced in my working and in my going here and there, and especially going to churches. That's the thing that I've been doing ever since I was fourteen years old, going to churches and visiting churches and trying to get whatever I could out of going, and then being among all kinds of people. I've been out among the drinking kind, the cutting-up kind. I've been among them. But whenever I get in a crowd where there was going to be some trouble that I thought maybe would cause me to be hurt or hurt somebody to prevent me from getting hurt myself or go to jail, I would figure some way to leave, and I'd always be successful in figuring out a way to leave and I'd always leave.

So therefore I've been around mostly all kind, and the only work that I've ever done was on the farm and in these different compress buildings. That's the only kind of work I've really done long enough to know anything about it. I've had many experiences in life with friends and things like that, but I never had no great big problems, no falling out where we couldn't see one another again and communicate with one another.

I never had no problem of that kind. That's the reason I say I can appreciate some things that I've gotten from older people, because that's the way I avoided a lot of things in life that I could have got into by remembering what I was taught by some older person.

Scales: I've enjoyed talking to you.

Federick: I'm glad you did. Sitting around here trying to tell you these.

[End of Interview]

[transcribed by TechniType]