

Oral History Interview
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by
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Restrictions: Open with restrictions

Interview with Ann McConnell

The Samford University Five Mile Creek Oral History project began as a service learning project for the Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership, conducted by students in Dr. Ken Kirby's Communication Arts 101 class fall semester of 2004. Partnership members needed information about the communities along Five Mile Creek in Jefferson County, Alabama—Center Point, Tarrant, Fultondale, Coalburg, Republic, Brookside, Cardiff, Graysville, and Lynn Crossing—for grant applications, interpretive signage, and other uses as they developed a master plan for parks and greenways along the entire length of the creek. A group of six entering freshmen conducted the initial interviews and research for this oral history. During 2005 Dr. Kirby conducted another 25 interviews and periodically made reports to the Partnership coordinators. Portions of some interviews have been published in the Partnership's newsletter, *Five Mile Currents*.

Ann McConnell (b. 1919) lived in and near Cardiff during the 1920s and '30s. Ann's father died when she was 11 after several years of illness, and with 12 other brothers and sisters, they all had to work and care for each other to live. She describes the creek as being "used for entertainment and necessity," a place to play and wash off after a hard day's hoeing and a place to baptize, since the local churches didn't have baptisteries. She remembers the creek as being not terribly polluted, with turtles that her mother would use to make turtle soup. The woods also provided squirrels and rabbits for food, as well as 'possums and ground hogs, creatures she wouldn't touch now "with a ten foot pole." The interview was conducted at her home on June 22, 2005.

MCCON (she begins telling about the family property in Cardiff before the tape was ready) That bridge that's there now at Cardiff is a new bridge. The other bridge came out right in front of the old Tombrello store to the left of the new bridge, and the railroad track followed the creek and runs parallel to the creek. Further on down it turns to the right and goes through a tunnel; the creek of course went its natural course. Part of this land was on that creek bank. Leaving the bridge you turned to the right and there was a road going up that way, and on further over from where our farm was there was a hill they called Tremble Hill. There were a lot of blacks that lived over there. Of course I got married at the age of 20, and I've been away from Cardiff ever since. I've lived up this way. So I've lost contact with a lot of the things I was talking about. But the Tombrello store I was talking about, he was the minister of that little church. His son married my oldest sister, so that brought us sort of together in family. After we moved back from Cardiff to our old place, he used to say "I know we'll have church today, because we've got the Bush family." He wasn't the one that baptized me, but that creek you are interested in, it was used for entertainment and necessity because, of course, the church didn't have a baptistery back then. I was baptized in that little creek into that church. A sister just younger than me and I were baptized the same Sunday into that little church when we were teenagers.

- KIRBY Tell me the name of the church.
- MCCON The Baptist Church of Cardiff is all I ever heard it called.
- KIRBY That's the white church that sits up there right where you turn to go down into the old part of Cardiff.
- MCCON That little bitty white church, yes. At the time we moved to Cardiff it was setting up higher on the hill and was a bigger church. And not just the Baptists used it. There was the Church of Christ that used it. We were friends with one of the girls that went to the Church of Christ, and we'd go to the Baptist Sunday School, and after our Sunday School was over, my sisters and I would stay and go to Sunday School with them. So we got a double dose those Sundays. But it came a storm and destroyed that church, and when they rebuilt it they put it further down and made a smaller church. Now they have added some on to the back of that church since I was a teenager and got the fellowship hall back in the back. But I've been back down there to several of the homecomings they have in October in the church. Rose Mary is just a long time family friend, but she was also cousin to the Tombrello that married my sister, so that sort of brings us together like a family.
- KIRBY And you said the other principle family was Negron?
- MCCON Negron. He was a Frenchman.
- KIRBY Which one of them was the one your daddy bought the farm from?
- MCCON Negron. They called him Frenchy, Frenchy Negron.
- KIRBY What was the occasion for you to move there?
- MCCON He was buying the farm. My daddy was a farmer and a miner. And he also opened up coal mines on that property and mined it, my daddy did. We were cleaning up the field—my daddy planted cotton and corn down in the bottom next to the creek—and somewhere about midsummer I remember where he'd plant beans by the corn, and it would grow up and make beans. I've been to that field at Thanksgiving time with my momma and picked green beans off of those vines that had twisted up around that corn.
- KIRBY Still bearing at Thanksgiving, huh?
- MCCON I have—I went in November and helped her pick green beans off of those vines. And he'd also plant pumpkins. And the time, it was in the fall and

it come a flood, it flooded our fields. And pumpkins were just floating everywhere! Everybody got all the pumpkins they wanted.

KIRBY So they just all waded out into the fields and got a pumpkin before they washed away.

MCCON That washed a lot of timbers and logs and stuff down the creek, and it just piled up along the bed. We were down there getting it ready to be plowed up for my daddy and brothers to start planting, and they found a body. My daddy sent us all home; he wouldn't let us be down there when they got the sheriffs and deputies there. My brother was pushing the logs off and letting them flow on down and uncovered a man. Rose Mary said, I think she said he was a soldier. But she must have heard some of the other people. Whenever my brother pushed the logs off and there he was, he had to get my daddy. And my daddy sent us girls all home. I never saw the body.

KIRBY How old were you, do you remember?

MCCON I'm thinking back—see, my daddy was sick several years before he passed away, and that was before my daddy had had his first stroke. So I was 11 when my daddy died, so I must have been 10, 9, 8, somewhere down in there, a child. And of course that's the reason we didn't see any of that and why he sent us home. But we all had to work to help each other.

KIRBY Did you work out in the garden, in the fields?

MCCON I sure did. I thought those rows of corn were a mile long and somebody might have to double back me up a little bit, but I had to hoe in the field just like everybody else did.

KIRBY Did your daddy raise those crops mostly for you to eat, or did he sell some of it?

MCCON Well, he might have sold a little, but mostly it was for us to eat. We had plenty of corn. When he passed away, we had plenty of corn, peanuts, and pumpkins, and collards in the garden. And don't you forget, we ate a lot of collards and turnip greens and pumpkins and peanuts, and we raised popcorn. The school, Brookside School, depended on us to bring the peanuts and the popcorn every Halloween. My daddy would take us to the Halloween party. We didn't get to go out like girls do these days; we all had to go in a group, and we were chaperoned by our mothers and daddies. We didn't just roam the world like that poor girl over yonder who's lost (speaking of Natalie Holloway, whose disappearance was in the news daily). She had too much freedom, that's what I've been saying. Anyway, we lived there about five years. My daddy had pneumonia. It got so bad

he had to go to the hospital. You know, people were pretty bad back then if they went to the hospital. They released my daddy and let him come home, and that was in the late winter and early spring that he was sick. We went back to the field for him to show my brothers where he wanted certain plots of ground plowed up and prepared for what he was going to put there, and as we left the field to come home, it came up a little shower. He got caught in that shower and got pneumonia all over again, and then he started having strokes. He wasn't but 53. He was 10 years older than my momma, so that would have made her 43, so she was still a young woman when my daddy died. But she would never marry again. She said, no, she wasn't going to have her kids scattered mixed up with a whole bunch of stuff. One of the doctors that had taken care of my daddy, he wanted to adopt one of my younger sisters, and momma said no, there wasn't going to be any separating. We were all going to live together. And we did.

KIRBY And how many brothers and sisters were there?

MCCON I had five brothers, and there were eight girls. She had two babies that, one was stillborn . . . (interruption).

KIRBY Well, while we're on the subject, tell me your parents' names.

MCCON My mother was part Indian, and her name is Willie Lee Magdalene Wedgeworth. And people said Wedgeworth didn't sound like an Indian name. I said, my grandmother was actually a Glover married a Wedgeworth. I never have traced it out. Some of the younger children in our family talked about doing it, but they never did. My daddy's name was Calvin Oscar Bush. Like I said, he was a farmer and a miner.

KIRBY And the year of your birth?

MCCON I was born Nicie Ann Bush. I was thinking when I talked to you the other day, when we moved to Cardiff I had not started to school. I started when I was 7; I was born in 1919, and I kept thinking that must have been about 1925 or '26 when we moved to Cardiff. We lived there five years I believe. I was 11 when my daddy died, but that coming May I had a birthday that made me 12. He died in January. Mr. Negrón had already written my mother that payment was overdue, but there wasn't any money, so there wasn't anything we could do. So he asked my mother to move, and my mother told him—I know I'm making a long story out of this—

KIRBY No, I want to hear it, I do.

MCCON —he wanted to sell the farm to somebody else, because we were not able to take care of it. She told him that she couldn't move my daddy, that he

was too sick to be moved. And he was; he was bedfast and chair bound. We lived there until school was out after my daddy died, and then we moved back to the old place. We all had to stay out of school the next year because we didn't have any way to go, no money for books or clothes or nothing. My mother had two more children while we lived in Cardiff. (names of brothers and sisters; she was 11th out of 13 who lived) This house place is not there any longer. My sister told me that Bertha Marie Tombrello married a Glover, and they bought the place and built a big log house (interruption; photo of Ann's mother reveals the Native American features) At the old place they hunted a lot of wild hogs. They had a lot of wild hogs out there.

KIRBY Really? That's the first time I've heard about that.

MCCON Really? And there might still be some out there, and deer now. I've been told they go deer hunting now on the property, our property. They've got a hunting club out there now (speaking I believe of the property out away from Cardiff, which wasn't very far, but I'm not sure where)

KIRBY When you were a little girl, I guess your big sisters and brothers kind of took care of you, right?

MCCON We took care of each other.

KIRBY What was it like having all those brothers and sisters and caring for each other?

MCCON I'll tell you this little story. You can imagine this little girl thought the rest of those girls in Cardiff, they thought they didn't have anything. But they had pretty little patent leather shoes to wear to church, and these little stand-out dresses and all that stuff. I longed for that, but I'd think, well, if there wasn't so many of us—now this is a child thinking—"if there wasn't so many of us, I could have some shoes like that." I'd go down the line: which one would I eliminate? I couldn't ever find one that I could eliminate, so I just lived right along. I'd even take lime and polish my shoes to make them white, or else I've gotten soot and rubbed on my black shoes to make them look better. That was my own doing; my momma didn't do it. I sang in the choir with the rest of the little girls, and I was a little embarrassed because I didn't have what they have. And they think they didn't have anything. But Rose Mary can give you a story—she uses me and my family for examples over and over again. She tells me she'll hear these people say, "I can't do that. I don't have any money." Or "There's no way to do that." She said we always found a way. She said she always admired us because when we came to church and Sunday School that our clothes would be starched and ironed; it might be feed sack dresses, or it might be flour sack dresses, whatever my momma could

pick up to make into clothes. But she said we were always clean. And all of us were talented; we could do something. One way or another, we got it done. But necessity is the mother of invention. You find a way to do it. Some people think I'm out of my mind when I tell them this: I learned to cut hair on my invalid daddy. Now remember, I was only 11 when he died. And momma would tie him into a rocking chair and fix it so he wouldn't fall out, and keep one of us kids posted with him to bring him water and come get her if he needed help, because he was bed bound when he wasn't in the rocking chair. She had to diaper him, and back then they didn't have all these throwaway diapers. It had to be old sheets or anything she could find that would hold water and keep him dry. I looked at my daddy one day, and he had a beard getting—he always wore a moustache, but he had a beard on his face that was getting pretty long, and I thought, I could take the scissors and cut that off! And that's exactly what I did. I could see that the boys had their sideburns cut so, and I would start there and cut as close as I could and cut all the hair off his face. And one day I thought, he needs a haircut—what am I going to do about that? I slid my hands up under his hair, and all the hair that came through my fingers, I took the scissors and cut it off. Well, I thought, that looks pretty good, so I went all the way around his head doing that. So that's how I learned to cut a man's hair, on my invalid daddy. I always cut my sons' hair. I had five sons and a husband, and four daughters.

KIRBY When you moved back to the old place, did older brothers and sisters work the farm—is that how you made a living? Because your mother didn't work, right?

MCCON She worked!

KIRBY But I mean, she didn't work in the mines and collect a paycheck.

MCCON I know what you're talking about. No sir, she never worked out in a plant or factory or anything. But we worked altogether. There wasn't any work back then. You remember, this was back in the 1930s; we were having a depression, and there wasn't any work. One of my brothers went to Beltona and got a job in the mine. He was old enough to do that, the oldest brother. And he didn't stay at home; he stayed with relatives that lived up there, miners. Of course the rest of us all branched out to work for people on the farm. I've hoed many a crop and picked many a bole of cotton and all that kind of stuff coming up. We'd pick peas and butter beans. Sometimes they'd let us pick them on halves, and sometimes they'd pay us some way. It usually was whatever they had excess of. Everybody worked together way back, but you don't see many people working to help somebody else now.

- KIRBY I guess everybody had to share back then, because if nobody had anything
- MCCON Yeah, we all worked. We'd pick blackberries when the season was in by the tubful.
- KIRBY Where would you sell them? Would you take them to town?
- MCCON We had, Joe Tombrello was a taxi driver. He lived in Brookside, and he went from Brookside to Ensley and Pratt City and all over in there. We would carry—we called it "tote,"—we toted tubfuls of blackberries to Cardiff for him to pick up and carry for us, and he would sell them. We didn't hardly get anything for a gallon. Now, oh goodness, I think my daughter paid \$4 for close to two quarts. Oh everything's so high these days.
- KIRBY Tell me more about what you and your neighbors did. Certainly you weren't working all the time, so you could play in the creek, or play at somebody else's house. What kind of things did you do when you had time to have a little fun?
- MCCON We were not allowed at a lot of people's houses. My momma raised us tied by the apron string. You've heard that before. But, yes, our daddy would allow us to play in the creek after work, so we were sort of getting a bath in the creek after we worked in the field all day. And I'll tell you a little story that some of my younger brothers and sisters and nephews did. My sister who married the Tombrello had two sons. I was only two years old when my sister got married, so I was still a little kid when she had her babies. So we were down there in the creek—I guess our daddy had released us for a while—and we were having church, and I was going to do the baptizing. (laughs) I dipped my nephew down in the water, and he opened his mouth and got a mouthful of water and got strangled. It about scared me to death! (laughs) So that ended our church services. But I was baptized—I already told you that. It was a preacher Knobloch, and Chandler, that were doing the revival and services. Brother Knobloch was doing the baptizing, and Brother Chandler was helping him.
- KIRBY When your nephew got water in his mouth, did it make him sick because of the creosote in it, or it just kind of halfway strangled him?
- MCCON He just got strangled.
- KIRBY Did the water seem real polluted to you?
- MCCON No, it wasn't that polluted.

- KIRBY Were there any fish in it?
- MCCON Well, I don't know about the fish, but there were turtles. And I remember that my daddy got one of those soft-shelled turtles, and momma cooked it and made turtle soup out of it, and it was good—we ate it. And of course, my brothers and my daddy hunted, and they would get squirrels and rabbits, and ground hogs! I've seen my momma clean a ground hog. She'd take it out to the wash pot and scrape it. I don't know what she scalded it to make the hair come off, but she scraped it and scalded it and treated it. And it might sound gross now, but she'd put it in a big pan and put sweet potatoes around it, and those were the best potatoes around that possum—well, possums too, but this was a ground hog. It was good. I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole now.
- KIRBY Of course not, but when it's the Depression and you're hungry, you'd eat a ground hog.
- MCCON And we were brought up that way—fried squirrel, biscuits and gravy. Then we taught a sister-in-law how to eat rice other than put sugar and milk on it, because my mother used rice with chicken and squirrel and stuff like that. Oh, my momma was a wonderful woman. She could stretch it. I remember she'd kill a chicken—this would be a grown chicken. She would take the best parts, like the thighs and drumsticks and wings and breast and cut it up, and everybody got a piece of fried chicken with biscuits and gravy. Then she'd take the bony parts and boil them and make the soup stock and make dressing and dumplings and whatever. And she could make a chicken last nearly a whole week with us, and we were a big family. We always had plenty of potatoes though—sweet potatoes and Irish potatoes. My daddy knew how to bank them. And oh, he'd plant turnip greens, and we'd have big old turnips, not those little bitty ones. And after momma would cut the greens off of them and cook them, they would bank those potatoes and turnips with pine straw and I don't know what all. Then it would be a big heap out there in the field, pretty close to the house. When momma wanted to get some potatoes, she'd go and dig in one little corner where the potatoes were and get the kind of potatoes she wanted, or if she wanted turnips she'd go and scratch her out a place and get some turnips.
- KIRBY Did they kind of dig a hole, or just mound up right on top of the ground?
- MCCON You'd just mound it up from the ground up this way, and they were layered with the straw in between them so they wouldn't get any dampness. It kept dry. I remember momma, after we moved back home and it was getting cold weather, she didn't want the greens to get frozen. She took the old saw horses like my daddy had to saw lumber on, and she put poles over that, and she took those collard greens and turnip greens

and turned them upside down with the roots on the top and the leaves down under there. And she put soil over them, and you know those collards and stuff kept growing, and the collards almost turned like a cabbage, you know, light colored, under there. And it was good—oh, was it good! And what I always loved best, she would go cut the big leaves off the collard stalk and leave the stalk standing. Then it would branch out these little fresh sprouts, and the black people—a lot of black people lived around us—they'd come buy those from my momma. Momma called them collard sprouts. And they were delicious. This farm where we lived, right up in front of us, one lower and one higher up on the hill. They were owned by one black, and he rented the front one out, and he and his wife lived in the back one. They had, oh, the prettiest apple trees, and there'd be red apples. Now she would let us come inside the fence and pick apples up. But I had a little friend who wanted some apples, and I was going to help her get some. And my daddy caught us. I won't never forget that—that's the only time I remember my daddy ever whipping me.

KIRBY Do you remember the family's name?

MCCON Dennis—her name was Alta Dennis, but I didn't ever know her husband's name. And the one that lived in her lower house, he was a preacher, and we always just called him "Preacher." His wife's name was Margaret. The surnames I don't know. They had their little piece of property, and they farmed and raised vegetables, and those big old apple trees. And they sold their apples, but she would just give us some, because we were her neighbors. But I wasn't supposed to be taking anybody else in to get any. But then just right down the road from us was a black family, and just right around the curve from her was another black family, and you went on down the road a little bit and up the hill, and there was a black family that lived up there. Their name was Jackson, and we were all friends. We'd sit down together just like you and I talking. But they worked in the field for my daddy. They'd pick cotton, because there was too much—we couldn't get it all picked. He'd hire them to pick cotton, and we just worked with them and thought nothing about it. This lady, Alta Dennis was her name, she'd have singings at her house a lot of times, and we just loved to hear the singing—they'd sing so beautiful.

KIRBY Would you go over and listen into the church?

MCCON They would be outside in the yard. This would be at their house singing.

KIRBY And you could hear it from your house.

MCCON Yes. And my daddy had built us a swing out of a tire on a rope or chain or something in that big tree that was in our front yard. And oh, one of my delights was getting in that swing and swinging, and I'd sing as loud as I

could scream I guess you'd call it. She told me one time after I'd been married and had two children, I wanted Dennis to see my babies. We were walking and went by there, and she saw my babies. She told me, she said "Oh, I used to listen to you and your sister Ella sing!" It was funny her telling me that after all those years. But I would, I'd get out there in that swing, and I'd swing as high as I could go in that old swing. But we used the creek as amusement and necessity.

KIRBY How was it a necessity—what sort of needs did it meet?

MCCON We used it for baptism. We had a well. We had to draw water out of that well. My job most of the time was carrying water to the ones who were working in the field. And it was a little gallon keg about that long and about this big around, and it had a spigot on there. You'd twist it, and it would pour water out into a cup. I know I used to—I think about this now, and I think, "Oh, I know I used to starve them to death for a drink of water," because I'd stop and play with the birds (laughs) and bird nests, look in them to see if the little birds have hatched. (keeps laughing) I was a kid back then; I didn't think about it then, but I do now. I tell you, that sun would get awfully hot. Oh, that perspiration would get in my eyes and burn them out.

KIRBY Did you have any kind of holidays? Did you celebrate the Fourth of July, Christmas—how did you do those?

MCCON Well, we always had a watermelon for Fourth of July. That was something you had to have. But oh, yes, my momma would cook up pies and cakes, and my sister would make all kinds of good candy.

KIRBY For Christmas maybe?

MCCON Yes. She had a big old cupboard, and you know, I've talked about it with my sister—I've got one baby sister, and we talk pretty often—and I said, I get to wondering, how did momma take care of all that food, because she'd have fried apple pies, fried peach pies, all that kind of thing. And my sister Ella, she would make all this divinity candy and stuff that people don't hardly attempt to make any more, and we'd just have it in that cupboard. We didn't have a refrigerator, no ice box. I've seen momma put the butter in a bucket and lower it down in the well to keep it cold. Like I told you before, the school depended on us for the popcorn and peanuts on Halloween. Momma would parch them while we were at school, and we'd get these little bags from the grocery store, and she'd put so many peanuts in a little bag, and that was sold at the school. The popcorn was sold the same way. Momma did all that while we were at school.

KIRBY Where did you—was there a school in Cardiff?

MCCON There was, but it was a black school. We went to Brookside School. I went nine years to Brookside School, then I went to Minor High School, about 30 miles away, for my high school. Buddy, that was—I'll just tell you the story of my school. I'm not bragging, but I was the only child my mother had who graduated from high school. In all that time it seems like something was just telling me, "You've got to—you've just got to." And I tell her it was God telling me to push ahead, push ahead. Now we had to go by momma's rule, and she did not want me to go to high school, because I was going to have to ride the bus. They did cut up and act ugly, but I was not one of them, because I wouldn't have ever done anything that would make my momma ashamed of me. See, my daddy was gone, and I was more or less on my own, and the principle there at Brookside School got a sister and me and another girl on student aid while Roosevelt was in office. And I made \$6 a month, and I crammed every little minute I could to get my \$6, because if you didn't have the amount of hours in you didn't get the \$6.

KIRBY What kind of work did you do?

I worked for the teachers. I was in high school most of this time, but I did work one year at Brookside School. Mr. Shaw—his name was P.B. Shaw—had me checking school records in sort of like a little office. When I went on to Minor, I had a home economics teacher who thought a lot of me, so she asked for me. I could sew; I didn't even need to be taking home economics, but it was required, and I had to have it to graduate. I already knew about sewing that I helped her teach her class and helped her make her clothes. I helped her make a beautiful white wool coat, and we made her a crepe dress that was hand smocked, and I was the one that smocked it. Underclothes, I helped her make some satin slips and things. But I knew how to sew, and I could handle it, because I had been used to it all my life. I'd been sewing since I could hold a needle and thread in my hand. I loved it! And I wanted to be a home economics teacher. I made the National Honor Society and got a scholarship to go to Montevallo, sort of on the government program too. I would have been living on the campus, but they would have work for us to do—I didn't get to go, so I don't know what kind of work I would have done—but I know they have a laundry room and cooking the meals, and the dishes have to be done and all that. I would have been doing some of that kind of work, but my mother said, "No, it's too far away." Back then where we lived, and the modes of transportation, it was like Siberia or somewhere.

KIRBY Did she just need you at home to take care of your younger brothers and sisters or what?

MCCON

She just didn't want me that far from home. I was old enough that I could have said, "I'm a-goin'." But I wouldn't do my momma that way. I listened to her, and when she said "No," I listened to her and didn't go. But I got married, and she liked to have had a fit when I got married. I didn't ask her if I could get married; I just did. I didn't have a real wedding. My sister went with me and my husband. We just went up to Mt. Olive and got married in the parsonage right there behind the church. And the funniest thing, it was so late when we got there, he was already gone to Brotherhood meeting. His wife invited us in and said we could wait for him. And I'd look at that clock, and I knew that momma's feathers were getting ruffled and ruffled. But my sister that she trusted—she was just like another parent for us—she didn't let us cross the line either, but I knew momma was going to be mad. So we got married, got back home, and we couldn't stay at my house because we had weekend guests, my sister-in-law was there with two or three kids, a brother and great uncle was there, and there just wasn't anywhere. So he had to go home. He didn't have any place at his house either. That was on Friday night right after Thanksgiving, December 1, 1939. His name was Felton Hutto McConnell. He came back on Saturday—same story, he had to go home. So on Sunday morning my sister said, "I'm going to tell on y'all this morning. I'm tired of the racket." Well, she just let me get my breakfast eaten. And my momma and another sister, oh, they liked to have had a fit. My sister who kept pushing me to tell, I had spent the summer in Florida with one of my teachers. She needed some help that summer, and I didn't even know why I was going. I was just going as companion to my teacher. She thought it was something great that momma allowed me to go with her, and I thought it was something great that I was even getting to go "out of the country" you might as well say. So I lived with her from May to early September. Well, her niece that had the summer home together with her was expecting another child. In those days, you didn't talk like that. Everything was on the Q.T. Momma didn't tell us nothing. I got married into a married life that I didn't know what to expect. And I was very surprised. You better believe that. I was down there, and I guess she thought that by me being raised in a big family, I would know how to manage kids. She was going to be left with a little 9-year-old and a little 13-year-old great nephew and a niece who couldn't talk because she had been paralyzed with infantile paralysis. So I worked with Carrie May in the kitchen at whatever she was doing, because I love to work—I like to be busy, and it's killing me that I can't be busy now. I would help Carrie May in the kitchen, and we'd wash dishes together. I could see where she got things from, and I would just wash and dry and put them back where I saw her get them from. Then when she went into the hospital and left us out there, and Miss Craig was going to do the cooking, and bless her hears, she hadn't ever had any cooking lessons. So I would sort of take over, not to get her ruffled or anything, but because everything had to be done for Miss Craig. She was my English teacher. I ranked first

under her, and she didn't give me any grades either. She wasn't that kind of a teacher; you earned everything you got. She'd say, "I'll declare, I've been coming here for years, and I don't know where anything goes. You've just been here a short while, and you are the quickest observer I've ever seen. You know where everything goes. You can cook here just like Carrie May." But I'd been cooking all my life too. That was another thing I was always interested in—I liked to help my momma cook, and I liked to help her prepare those vegetables. I loved shelling those little peas and snapping those green beans up. You know, that wasn't work to me—that was fun.

KIRBY Well, now that we've returned to Cardiff, you have had so many positive memories here, were there any scary things—any bad characters? Surely you had some kind of worries? Can you—maybe you don't want to talk about them. But those miners were pretty rough people, weren't they?

MCCON Well, not always. There was drinking and carrying on like that. But my daddy was a fiddle player. He could really play, and he'd win competitions when they'd go on the fiddler conventions. My older brother, he played the violin. And my daddy's daddy, my granddaddy, he played the violin. My daddy got us an organ, the kind you pedal with your feet, and the thing you do with your knee. I could pick out church songs. I never had a lesson in my life, never knew how to sing by note or anything. But I could pick out church songs on the organ. I bought a piano, because one of my teachers wrote me that one of my children was talented, and then three more of them wanted to take music. So I gave them music in school. We could have been a very musical family if we'd had the backing.

KIRBY Oh, yeah, those musical instruments are expensive.

MCCON My sister could play the piano—the last time she was here she played the piano, and never had a lesson in her life. It was something we acquired by ear. But we were sort of talented musically from both sides of our family. My mother told us about the time that her mother made her a little banjo with a big gourd. She put the strings on it and everything, and she could pick that little banjo—she's part Indian, a whole lot of Indian, but I've never found out how much.

KIRBY Made a banjo out of a gourd—so I guess she stretched a goat skin, cut it in half and kind of stretched a goat skin over it? I'm trying to picture how that would—because a banjo, you know, you have a flat surface, and the strings would make that surface vibrate. Hmm, interesting.

MCCON I never saw it, but my mother told us that her mother made her a banjo out of a big gourd. Indians were creative, and she would take rags and make

rugs, what we used to call out of tow sacs, and she had a way she would weave those strings between the threads of a tow sack and make rag rugs, shaggy rag rugs. She'd make chickens and stuff on them, roosters. It would be real colorful. Then my granddaddy that I was telling you about, who could play the violin, he would come stay a few days or a few weeks with us. My grandmother died before he did. He'd bring his fiddle and sit out on the porch and play, and he wanted us to dance. But I couldn't ever dance; I couldn't ever get my feet off the floor. But I still love music.

KIRBY Would your neighbors come over and you'd have a little hoedown?

MCCON Yes, my daddy would have a Saturday night when we lived way back out. Our front porch was nearly as wide as a room, and that was the purpose of it. He'd play the violin, and they'd do square dancing. I was never old enough to go with him. He would take the girls who were old enough to go off with him.

KIRBY When he went to a fiddler's convention or something?

MCCON When he went to play for a square dance somewhere else. At one time my momma helped him play—I remember she had some straws that she'd hit the strings on the fiddle in between his bowing.

KIRBY I think I know what you are talking about—you've got the buzzing sound and then the plucking sound. I think I've heard of that.

MCCON My momma would have done anything for my daddy.