

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Chattanooga - Hamilton County Public Library

Chattanooga, Tennessee

An Interview With

RONALD L. WILLINGHAM

By

Grey Gundaker

December 27, 1989

PREFACE

This manuscript is a transcript of an interview conducted for the Oral History Project of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Library. The purpose of the project is to capture the first-hand accounts of the social history of the Chattanooga area in the twentieth century.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that the transcript reflects the patterns of the spoken, rather than the written, word. The information is presented as it was recalled by the interviewee at the occasion of the interview and has been edited only for clarity.

Use of the tape and transcript is administered under the same rules and regulations as other materials in the Local History Department. Literary rights to the tape and transcript are held by the library and permission for duplication or use in publication must be obtained from the Director of Libraries.

Two indexes have been prepared for locating specific information from either the transcript or the tape. The page index to the transcript is located at the end of this volume. A meter count number has been given in the left margin of the text for locating a section on the tape. It should be noted that this number will vary depending on the equipment used.

Funding for this project was provided by local foundations and organizations, including the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga, the Chattanooga Area Historical Association, and the National Society of Colonial Dames, Chattanooga Committee. The project was sponsored and administered by the library.

CHATTANOOGA - HAMILTON COUNTY BICENTENNIAL LIBRARY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

PERSONAL DATA SHEET

Date December 27, 1989

1. Full name (include maiden name and married name, where applies):

Ronald Lewis Willingham

2. Current address and phone number:

735 East 10th Street
Apartment 1 F, Box 106
Chattanooga, TN 37403

3. Date and Place of Birth:

August 8, 1951

Starr. S. C.

4. Mother's maiden name:

Teleater A. Brown

Place of Birth:

5. Father's name:

Ollie F. Willingham

Place of Birth:

6. Spouse's name:

7. Children's names and addresses (if possible). Indicate daughters married names:

Willingham: 002 Along in about 1953 my father decided to leave Anderson, South Carolina. He wrote his brother, [who] was living in Chattanooga at the time, that he wanted to leave the farm life. And his brother's reply was, "Come to Chattanooga and go to work with me." At the time they worked for a man that owned the coal company, worked at his house. They would do odd jobs around the house. Later on they started working at the coal company, which was located at 13th and Broad. [It] is a different building now; it's a beer distributing place that's been mechanized. Then it was railroads and yard, plenty of black coal dirt, and something for mothers to really get angry about.

Gundaker: You're smiling. You must have done that.

Willingham: (laughter) Yes. I've had my share of good times and I've laughed a lot because I learned that the mineral which was dug out of the mines was not impossible to get, but it also made people fortunes.

019 People in the early fifties took coal for granted because there was not any wood plentiful. In the Tennessee Valley TVA had put a stop to the majority of the timber cutting, so coal was a natural resource. What few people used natural gas, you could count on one hand. So, it was a very lucrative business.

026 My father and his brother and one cousin all were employed. My father was a truck driver, his brother was a truck driver, and my cousin worked in the yard. Later on, I also came up through the ranks and I worked there. It was a unique place for the simple fact that they paid in cash money. There are very few jobs nowadays that pay you in cash. In the fifties the majority of businesses, regardless if you worked for the railroad or the insurance company or the filling station, whatever wages you received were in cash. There were very [few] checks, there was very little credit. The economic prospects were looking up because people had more desire in willing to work, more desire in willing to learn. As we get older we find that -- what my father has always instilled in us is to get out and earn your own, to make your own living. [It's] not so much as how much you earn, it's what you do with it after you earn it.

038 Tennessee, to me, has been one of the few places that learning is a great resource. I can learn by just listening to other people that I have never met, people that have just heard my name and called me to the side and [said], "I want to talk to you. We haven't [done] anything together, but I feel that you have something to offer people." Today it sounds like the world is moving at a very rapid rate. It's not that, but we have a learning experience to go through.

(Willingham): We must understand that our forefathers and our fathers taught us that time is a master, time is something that we don't control, we live beneath. And the day is coming that the test of time is upon hand.

045 Now I have three brothers, one sister, and a mother living. I have nieces, and nephews and they are doing well. I have two aunts still living here in the city. I have no uncles in the city, but I have uncles that are scattered throughout the world. My father comes from a very large family and my mother comes from a large family. But I remained a bachelor. I decided that marriage was one of the few things that didn't pay enough.

 Although I want to go back to school and pursue an education, I just think that teaching from experience is beneficial. You can learn as you teach, so to speak. You don't have to get it out of a book if you have the desire to learn.

057 Myself, now I'm involved in teaching classes, or in the process of starting [to get back] some of the old classes that I have already taught in. My main goal is to someday return to college as a fulltime student for the simple fact that it can be done, you know; it's no stipulation if you want to learn.

066 My advice to the people that are involved in the educational system is to believe in the system, to believe in those who are in the system, and the facts and functions of the system. We have been in the dark a long time as far as education, finance, knowledge. Because of today's technology, we can simply hit a computer and punch up the answers. But I can remember back in the days when a pencil and paper was knowledge; you wrote it down, you learned it, you found out the source of it, and then you prepared yourself so when that day came, you had an answer. Today they put it all on computer disks and program sheets, and if you lose your program or your disk, you're in trouble. But if you write it down, then you've got it. You understand it, you can look at it. You can say, "Well, I did that, I wrote that out."

Gundaker: Could you tell us a little bit about where you went to school and what school was like?

079 Willingham: The elementary schools I went to -- two of those are totally torn down, they're just vacant lots. One of them is a vacant lot and the other is a bank. The one that's a vacant lot was out in North Chattanooga; it was a small school that had combined grades. I mean you had the first and second grade, the third and fourth, and then the fifth and sixth. Then you went to a junior high school. Out of my family, four of us went to that school, two of them graduated and went on to

(Willingham): junior high school, and one graduated from junior high school and went on to high school and graduated. The other two of us went to different elementary schools.

089 I had one unique experience about my brother who's a year older than I am. He had an opportunity to go to [the] night school that the city was sponsoring. The classes were so big, so enormous, that they couldn't fit all the junior high kids into the day program; so, they had to send part of them to school at night. And there is an irony to it; it can be done, you know. It's not that we don't know how to do it, we never try to do it. If we take time and simply listen to the people that have the means and resources, we can accomplish a great deal in our lifetime. We don't so much have to look back as we do to look ahead into the future, to become a part of the future.

Gundaker: What was the name of that school?

Willingham: Alton Park Junior High School.

Gundaker: And the one in North Chattanooga?

Willingham: Spears Avenue Elementary School.

Gundaker: That's the one that's the vacant lot now.

Willingham: Yes. The Alton Park's still standing. [After] my brother graduated from the sixth grade, he was in the seventh grade at Howard, but because of the zoning structure they had too many people to go into -- there was no integration, period. And there were too many kids in a day program, so they selected a minute number to send them to school at night, you know, not --

Gundaker: What year is this? About?

Willingham: Let's see, this is '60, about '60 or '61 somewhere.
102

Gundaker: When did they begin to integrate the schools here?

Willingham: They integrated the schools in '65, I believe, somewhere in '65 and up. But at the school I went to, an all black school, they had no integration. (laughter) There were supposedly people to be integrated, but you won't put your kids in a dangerous situation, so to speak.

Gundaker: Did you feel like your school was dangerous for the kids that were there?

Willingham: It was dangerous for me and I'm black!

Gundaker: So was it dangerous for little kids because big kids beat up on them?

Willingham: No, you don't do that. The schoolhouse has an unwritten law. Now, although these kids are small -- they may not be no kin to me -- but I can defend them. It's not a written law. If I want to step out there in the middle of them and say, "Hey, man, bust it up, take me on," then they deal with me. "Because the next time I see you doing this to that kid, we're going to go at it." As far as being an agitator, [it is] nothing like that, it's just that maybe they could be from the neighborhood, somebody else's little brother or sister, or you've seen them once or twice.

Gundaker: So the big ones look after the little ones?

Willingham: Yeah, yeah. I had big brothers. I was a fortunate guy; I was able to fight before I was even in school. I learned how to fight at home. When I got to school I was a little bitty fellow, but you don't worry about the size because you don't know what you're getting into.

Gundaker: So what was dangerous about it?

Willingham: Dangerous? Well, you may just be with the wrong people. You had sections. If you lived on the east side of town, then you don't go to the west side of town. If you lived on the west side of town, you don't go to the south side of the town. I had big brothers, and I went where I wanted to go 'cause I would fight. "If you beat me up, then meet me tomorrow, we'll fight again."

Gundaker: But the schools would, without knowing about this, stick kids with other kids they didn't need to be with?

Willingham: The real black mark in public education was slower learning kids [that] were mentally retarded; they couldn't be coherent, they couldn't understand. They hadn't taken time to really separate these people and screen these other people out, so [that you could] get on with your education. The few people that came up through the system that really had an education really had to bear down, had to cut out their friendships. I mean they almost had to become loners. Because if you hung around with certain people [and] they got in trouble, you were with them, so you were in trouble.

And I was the kind of guy, I wouldn't have popped a fellow, but because I had big brothers, my classmates would understand. If I'm out there thumping, the only thing they'd say is, "Man, what's your brother going to say?" And I

(Willingham): 144 wasn't worried about what my brother's going to say. I'm worried about me; I'm worried about what I'm going to be doing while they're wherever they are. I was always taught to defend yourself. I had a little sister so I couldn't let nobody run over me because I got a lady under me -- you know what I'm saying. So it wasn't feasible. I quit fighting at one point, I strictly just refused to fight. I came home, and my clothes were torn off me, and my aunt suggested 151 to my mom not to whup me. But she made it very specific if I came home again with my clothes torn off and crying to not only whup me, but to pay me up for all those times I should fight.

Gundaker: So you had to fight.

Willingham: Oh, I enjoyed it then. I mean guys would come in my backyard. I couldn't go out my backyard [without them talking about] jumping on me. They were going to beat me up.

Gundaker: How old were you when all this -- ?

Willingham: I was in seventh grade.

Gundaker: Seventh grade?

Willingham: 158 Yes, but I didn't weigh but about 119, maybe 115 pounds. But I would tell them, I'd say, "Man, I ain't --" This guy hits me one day, and he had a [lock?] on his finger. I told him, I said, "You take that [lock?] off your finger, I'm going to beat you up." I ran him through his house. I mean he went in the front door, I went in behind him, he come out the back door, I come out behind him. I didn't go around starting 163 fights but once you started a fight, then you had to fight.

Gundaker: That's true. So what about in the classrooms, did the kids talk back to the teachers?

Willingham: Well, there were isolated incidents. When I say "isolated" [I mean] you had more people trying to learn than you had the bullies. When I went to school, I went to school as a student to learn. I didn't dress up, I didn't wear a shirt and a tie, I didn't worry so much about how I looked or 170 smelled. I took my books and I wanted to learn. And up until high school, there wasn't a show case for me; there wasn't a distraction, so to speak. I beared down in the subjects I liked, the ones I didn't like I eased up on them. I would have come out of school at seventeen. I hadn't missed a grade. I could do the work.

178 My mom had two sons to graduate. My oldest brother never graduated. I come along and I'm a year behind my

(Willingham): brother. Now, he was a model student; he wanted to dress up and change clothes and look good every day. I didn't really care how I looked just so long as I got my books and my paper and my pencil. I'm going to school to learn because I know I'm not going to be able to go to college. So I got to buckle down, I got to get me a good education, I got to get some solid learning done.

182

190

One day in high school -- we've skipped junior high -- we were in high school and these guys were picking at me. They asked my brother, "Say, is that your brother?" I was walking around like a little tramp. I didn't worry about what people thought. He said, "Yeah, that's my brother." He said, "Man, why don't you shine your shoes, change your clothes, comb your hair?" "Yeah man," [I said]. He said, "Well, I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to let you wear my starched shirt, my dress clothes." I said, "Okay, man." I took a bath, changed clothes, and all the other stuff. But you know what happened? I threw my books away. I tossed my books in the locker. I picked up a deck of cards and a pair of dice. Every day. But I was clean now, I was dressed up!

Gundaker: Sharp dresser, goes with the cards and --

Willingham: I was sharp! I was real nice dressed, hair combed, everything in place, nice smile. But not nary a book, nary a paper, nary a pencil. It got to the point that I failed eleventh grade English for not going to class. I mean, it wasn't that I couldn't do the work; it's just that I knew I wasn't going to go to college. So I was taking a vocational trade, and I wanted to apply myself. You have a three-hour day, but when you go in there in the morning and you play cards or shoot dice the first two hours of the day --

196

200

Gundaker: Where would you do this? Where in the school?

Willingham: In the shop. Yes, you see the shop has separate -- you got a work area, then you got a tool area, then you got a storage area. So what we would do, if we're going to play cards, we'd go back in the work area and get behind one of the welding booths. You'd see all of these feet back here, but you [wouldn't] see no arc flying.

206

Gundaker: (laughter) I wouldn't want to be a teacher. So who was the teacher for this?

Willingham: We had a gentleman teacher named Mr. Romine, Norris Romine.

Gundaker: And what was his specialty? Machinery?

214 Willingham: Machinery, welding, and sheet metal. He was a good teacher. Matter of fact, he was above average. But, he was in the system. He went to Tuskegee University, graduated, and came into the school system, and he stayed there, raised his kids. You become "hum-drum." You don't be up on the times.

Gundaker: Yeah, you get used to it.

217 Willingham: Kids come to school and they look like they're drinking orange juice in a orange container, but it's really orange wine, it's orange rock. You come there and a guy has a coca-cola cup -- it looks like it's coca-cola, but it's not, it's bourbon and coffee.

221 Gundaker: If you decided that you didn't want to do that, would the other kids give you a real hard time if you didn't want to get . . . (tape stopped, words lost, begins again in mid-sentence) . . . new lines were being drawn and this affected where people ended up going to school, somewhat?

228 Willingham: Yes. My parents were not educated in Tennessee. My cousins and them were -- which are grown people now -- they were educated in Tennessee. So they knew which schools were doing the work, which teachers were being paid the most, [and] so which kids were going to get the value of an education. They had an opportunity if they wanted to cross what you call the "zoning" and pay to go to certain schools -- they could do that now through the federal program. Basically, wherever we moved, the closest school to us, that's where we attended.

236 I wanted to go back to Howard in my high school [years] because I had went there in junior high. I guess I was an above average student because I liked academics. I hadn't got into vocational trades or nothing. My brother, he was a vocational major, and he was really, you know, "at it." He wasn't the kind of person that would just sit around and twiddle histhumbs when he could learn how to lay bricks or put in joints and stuff like that. But me, I'd rather get a book and thumb through it and find somebody I know in there like, "Hey, I'm up on you, because I know something that you don't know."

Gundaker: A competitive brother.

243 Willingham: Yes. The way I sum it up is: my older brother would have teachers, and then the following year, or a year or two later, my next brother would have these same teachers. Then, the brother after him would have [those] teachers; and then, I come along and I would get all of these teachers that have taught all of these people in front of me. I mean they taught cousins and brothers and friends.

(Willingham): So this one teacher, she was in junior high school -- these are the years of junior high school -- it was in English -- and I usually sat in the back so I could look out the window and watch the band. So this day I decided to get me a seat on the front row. She said, "Ronald Willingham, will you please go get your brother." I said, "Yes, ma'am, I'll go get my brother." I had two brothers in school. I had one that was a year older than I was and I had one in the twelfth grade. So I went and got the one that she had just taught the year before. I went to his class, I knew where he was. I went, I knocked on the door. "Mr. Slaughter, Miss Bates" -- which was the English teacher -- "would like to see Clifton Willingham." He comes out, he says, "Man, what have you done?" I said, "Man, I haven't done nothing! I did just what you told me to do, 'Blow the class'." "Aw man, don't start that, man, don't tell no tall one." "Man, I went to class, the woman said she wanted to see you. Now if you ain't going up there, I'll go back up there and tell her you ain't coming." Well, me and him, we go up to the classroom, I open the door and I walk in, he walks in behind me. She looks up, "That ain't the one I want! You go get the one I want." I say, "You said go get my brother." "Do you know the one I'm talking about [that's] going to get his shoe repaired?" I said, "Yes, ma'am, I'll go get him." (laughter)

Gundaker: What did she want him for?

Willingham: So he could tell Mom and them that I wasn't doing what she wanted done. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work, it was simpler. See, they have taught every one of my family and I'm getting the same teachers. This woman asked me, "Is there any more Willinghams at home?" I said, "Oh, yes, there is one more." "Oh, my God," [she said]. "No, that's a girl," [I said].

Gundaker: I would have thought a lot of the kids would come from big families.

Willingham: Well, this is what happened. There were only about four black schools in the city. There was Howard, Booker T.. Second District, and then the elementary schools. Wherever you lived if you had big brothers that went to Calvin Donaldson Elementary School, when you grew up you went to Calvin Donaldson Elementary School. They went to Alton Park Junior High School, you went to Alton Park Junior High School. So you get these same teachers that are in the system that have taught your family. You can't tell those folks, "Well, you don't know nothing about me," my name is Ronald Willingham. They already heard of you before you get there. Before you come in the door, they know that you got three big

(Willingham): brothers and a little sister. And they know your dad worked at the coal company and your mother worked at the car wash. They know that. Because they have dealt with these other ones.

288 Now, the oldest one, he was a sports enthusiast, he liked to play sports. My next brother was a "book worm." And Clifton, he could do it, but he didn't care if it got done or not. He did it because that was the only way he was going to get out of school. So, when I come along I'm just open to suggestions. I mean, "Hey, hey, if it worked for you, it'll work for me. You've taught the rest of my family."

296 It wasn't a great thrill to go in there and have to sit with this woman a whole hour and she looking at you like, "I'll just be glad when this school year is over with. You just get on my nerves." "Well, woman, you get on my nerves! Why don't you just give me a pass and I'll go to the library, anything to just get out of your face." But they specify, if you come to class every day, no matter if you did the work and you weren't disruptive they're going to have to pass you. They'd have to give you a passing grade if you didn't do any work. Just as long as you came.

303
Gundaker: Yes. Do you feel like that part of this was the inadequacy of the schools you were given, or do you think this would happen with all the money in the world and all the opportunities of the world?

308
Willingham: Well, if you don't screen out your people, it's going to happen and happen until you wise up. See, you don't mix people that won't -- first of all, the simple fact of the matter is, people that want to learn will find a way; people that don't care to learn, just go on and get a job and work. You don't have but two choices. You can learn and go to college and become something or you can work and earn a living that way. There is no middle of the road. Your parents are not going to support you if you're black till you get old enough to get out on your own. They ain't going to hold your hand till you see fit to go in the service.

Gundaker: They can't.

316
Willingham: Well, it's just an idea that today's parents will buy kids Nike tennis shoes, and they're kids that are small and just beginning to walk. Those kids haven't grown an inch, but as soon as you buy these \$60 - \$70 shoes and put them on his feet, you've got to turn around and buy some more. Then when the guy that you got this baby by is not helping you, you're running up there telling the judge that this guy is

(Willingham): not doing nothing for my child; but you're not thinking about
334 these Nike's you're putting on this child's feet. You could
take and buy some simple tennis shoes, and take the rest of
that money and put it on some clothes and some food or what-
ever. They aren't thinking that way.

Gundaker: Now this raises a real interesting question because, nowadays,
340 if kids don't come to school in certain clothes, looking a
certain way, from what I hear, the other kids give them a
real hard time. Now, when you were in school, was it like
that or could you pretty much have freedom to -- ?

Willingham: Well, I did, because I didn't care what people thought. But
345 there were people that had to come to school with dress
clothes on and hair combed and hair cut a certain way or
part a certain area, a line. I was with these people, but
350 if I had three buttons missing off my shirt, it was my shirt,
and [if] you put your hands on it, I'd bust you up side of
the head. That was my rule. But you also got to have a
tendency for when things go bad. If you were running with
five guys and these four guys is out there trying to impress
somebody, they figure, "Well, what's with him?" And I'm
sitting there and I'm thinking about this, I'm thinking about
how the map of the United States is shaped, why they put a
square right there, why Utah is made like this instead of
like that. I'm sitting there using my brain. I'm not so
much as wanting to use my charm and elegance. It ain't
nothing.

365 My brothers and them, they buy clothes. If they had
the money, every one of them would buy so many clothes they
couldn't wear them all. I don't want to do that. I can
take hand-me-downs and feel just as comfortable as they will
going out there to Ira Trivers.

Gundaker: Now, for the sake of history here and the future, tell a
little bit about what some styles were back in those days.

Willingham: Okay. You had what you call a "cavassie" [spelling?].
374 That's when your hair is cut real low, I mean it was cut
down real low like you'd almost been shaved. Or, you had
a "stack," and that's where all of this on the side is cut
off like the kids do now, but then you put a part in it.
Then you have what you call a "process." All of those is
hair styles.

Gundaker: Is the process a straightened one, or -- ?

Willingham: A process is when you like a permanent in it. It stays.
381

- (Willingham): Then you had cashmere sweaters, you had the button-down collar shirts, long sleeve shirts; they had to be starched. Then if you wore dress slacks, they had to be french-cuffed, they couldn't be cuffed upward this way, they had to be cuffed underneath. Your jeans had to be straight-legged jeans, and you had to have a certain amount of give at the end of them. They couldn't be tight around your legs. Let me see, what else?
- 389
- Gundaker: How about the girls --
- Willingham: Socks -- you didn't wear any with rings around them. You didn't wear any where they just barely come over your ankles.
- 397
- Gundaker: Right. Could you wear white socks?
- Willingham: You could, but you got talked about pretty bad. The only time you wore white socks was when you were in gym.
- Gundaker: What color shoes did you wear? Leather shoes or tennis shoes?
- Willingham: Mostly black in tennis shoes, or every now and then brown. You were saying something about girls?
- 403
- Gundaker: Yes, what were their styles like in those days?
- Willingham: Oh, girls -- man, they wore the tightest outfits. I mean, skirts -- they wanted them tight. They had a little split on the side. And very few dresses; most of them were two-piece outfits or three-piece outfits with a jacket and blouse. Plenty of makeup, plenty of makeup. Eye shadow, finger nail polish.
- 407
- Gundaker: So at school you were allowed makeup?
- Willingham: Yes, yes. Eye shadow, finger nail polish. And you didn't come to class [unless] you had put on some deodorant or washed under your arms in the morning because we had a physical ed teacher that would single you out, and ask you to go into the locker room and put some water on your body. She was a good person. She was teaching us the importance of hygiene. When you came out of elementary school, you didn't have the specifics about how you smelled. All the specifics was when you get in junior high school, try to get your education 'cause I got mine -- (tape ends abruptly)
- 427

(Willingham): (tape begins mid-sentence) -- not allowed to take your dad's
002 car. Dad, he had bought his car for a specific reason. If
you wanted to go to a party, you'd best get a friend, or get
somebody to take you there and pick you up, or you get there
the best way you can. So, my party life was contained just
within my family, so to speak, unless I went to a function
at the schoolhouse. Now, those parties at school, they
would try to play hits that they hear on the radio or some-
007 thing, but [there's] just something missing on the mike,
it ain't on one, so to speak.

Gundaker: What about the gospel music? Was that played in churches or
did they come through on a tour?

Willingham: No, no, you could turn on the radio. Every Sunday morning
before you go to church, you just turn it on WNOO, and it
011 was playing. You woke up with it. And out there about
two o'clock after you have dinner, you want to get into that
rock and roll thing 'cause you got to go to school Monday
and you want to know what's happening, you want to know who's
got the tunes.

I didn't too much "dig" music because I didn't dance.
Strange to me, I was taught to dance by a group of girls,
I was taught how to slow dance. We were all hanging out
and they said, "Come on, let's dance." I said, "Well, I
don't dance." This girl told her friends and they all
pitched in and taught me how to slow dance. But my brothers
and them, they would dance with any record that come out --
018 the Hully-gully, the Twist, the Mashed Potato, or the Swing,
the Two-step, all of those dances. They just picked them up
from Mom or whoever. And I didn't care that much about
swinging my body all over the world. I ain't that interested
in seeing it move different ways.

Gundaker: That's one of those talents people get into. But for high
school, music is always part of it. Memories.

Willingham: The unique part about high school was I didn't have the
025 insight to get into dating. I had the insight to get into
making money. I worked after school with my dad. I earned
my money, I kept my money, I went on about my business. A
lot of the guys wanted to go sit over at Patricia's house,
or Linda's house, but when they came to school, their parents
had to support them. Their parents had to give them some-
thing. Me, my parents didn't have to give [to] me because
I'm out there getting mine. I did it ever since junior high
school, all the way up into high school.

031 Every day after school I would go down there where my
father was and work. During the summer I would cut grass
and stuff, and I'd still have money. I didn't have a life-
time job or nothing, but I've always worked. I never had

(Willingham): to depend on other people to give me nothing. That was just
instilled from the way my parents are. A lot of kids, they
037 look today, you know, "Give me." They don't say, "I'm going
to get me no job." They say, "Give me." I say, "Okay, yeah,
all right."

Gundaker: In that time when you were growing up, what were the differ-
ent churches that people went to?

Willingham: Okay. There was Olivet Baptist, Shiloh, Second Baptist,
043 West Side, Orchard Knob. The churches would have what you
call "Homecoming." Like our church would go to, maybe,
Orchard Knob or somewhere for homecoming. We have to go
there, have to be on our best behavior, our whole church
has to be on [its] best behavior because we are the guests.
Although we're both in the city, they are hosting us. And
049 then when another church comes to us -- they may be from
Georgia or somewhere -- then they have to be on their best
behavior.

Gundaker: What was the program like at a homecoming?

Willingham: Oh, man! They have choirs -- our choir would have the day
off. If we had homecoming, our choir has to sing, their
choir gets the day off. So, they sit in the audience while
our choir performs for them. You may hear tunes, "Swing
056 Low," "A Pair of Wheels Are Turning," "Jacob's Ladder."
I learned to sing a little bit. I didn't pursue it, but I
was taught the difference between the notes and the keys
so that you can read the [words and the] music from a book.
My dad was a deacon, and my brothers were in the church, also.

Gundaker: Which church did you go to?
062

Willingham: We went to Morris Hill.

Gundaker: So what else would they do at the homecoming? Did they
have different sermons and speeches?

Willingham: We had different deacons. Their church would ask a certain
couple of deacons to come and join with them. They would
066 have a few prayers and then they would have devotional
services, and take up a collection for the visiting pastors
and stuff. They's have somebody in the choir that would
stand out almost like a soloist. The choir would start
singing and all of a sudden it would just touch you, and
before you know it you're into the mood. You're really
feeling what you're involved with, you're not just sitting
072 there patting your feet because everybody else is doing it.

Gundaker: So they knew sort of how to pull people into the spirit, into the occasion?

079 Willingham: They would have revivals. And that was another unique function, because this church would come in your church for a whole week. You'd have different people there for a whole week. Every night there would be a different minister and their choir, maybe just him, if he's from -- and these people, they are not like your regular minister. Your minister, you know how long he's going to take to get a word out, you know how long it's going to take for him to ask for a song from the choir. You just time yourself. 082 But these people, they get up there and they speak about the word of God in the sense of you already know what's right and wrong, but you got to go a certain way to stay with what's right and what's wrong. You can't be half right and half wrong all the time. You're either all wrong or you're all right, you know; you can't be in the middle of the road.

Gundaker: So this was more the fine points that they did for the people who were already --

090 Willingham: Yeah. And the unique thing about a black church is discipline. You have people that are not related to you in this church, and if you get smacked, stomped, beat, or choked it's all right with your parents; it's just fine. You shouldn't have done what you done, you're in church. You ought to sit down and behave. And if somebody runs up and hits you, you don't have to run back there and hit them back. You just think about it because some day you ain't going to be in church. Then you can get them for that. But you're in church and if you run back there and hit them, the only thing they're going to see is you got up out of your seat and you went over and hit that kid. 096 That's all they going to see, they ain't going to see that kid run up there and hit you first, they ain't going to see that. They going to see you run over there and hit that kid, and then you're going to get punished.

Gundaker: So you think that the black churches are also discipline for adults? How does that work?

100 Willingham: I don't know how people have a tendency to say that I don't believe in God. But if they think back, at one time they didn't believe in church till Mom and Dad said, "Hey, put your clothes on, get up out of that bed. In a few minutes I want you in the car." Parents back then didn't have to tell you three times to get the paper off the floor. They said it once. You did it or you got a whupping

(Willingham): for not doing it. You didn't get no: "I might do it tomorrow."
[There] wasn't no in between. If they asked you to go some-
107 where, you went and did what they wanted you to do, and then
you came back home. And if you had an urge to do something
else, you asked them could you do it. You didn't tell them,
110 "Well, I'm going to the Center." You say, "May I go to the
Center?" You asked them, you don't say, "I'm out of here,
I'm gone."

Gundaker: With the grownups in church, supposing that one of the adults
did something wrong -- I don't know, anything -- would the
church discipline them?

Willingham: Yes.

Gundaker: How would they do that?

Willingham: They would. If this person was in any office capacity or if
he had a function, the deacons, maybe even the minister,
115 would pull this guy aside and would ask him why. They would
want to know why, what, [how] this happened. If there is
119 just the misplacement of funds or the abuse of language, they
want him to understand that this is church. This is not the
bar down the street, this is the house of God. This is
where you put all that other stuff aside. You come in here
and you attend to learn from the teachings. Not so much as
you can't learn, [but] do you want to learn?

Gundaker: Would they discipline somebody for what they did away from
125 the church? Like, say, they got in trouble somewhere else?
I mean, not in the building.

Willingham: If it's not a church function?

Gundaker: Yes.

Willingham: No. If it's criminal or if it's something that happened
to an individual -- if it's not pertaining to the church,
most likely they wouldn't get involved with it. The
131 church is one of the few places that you can be talked
about one minute and loved the next. You know, you haven't
got to always be the dark sheep of the -- you can always --

Gundaker: They welcome you back.

Willingham: Oh, yeah.

Gundaker: When you were talking about Lincoln Park, did they have
special celebrations out there? I don't know, some place
137 they had "June Teenth" and emancipation day for the black
people, and stuff that are special.

Willingham: No, there's just summer out of school.

Gundaker: What did they have barbecues for?

Willingham: Well, if it was a tour bus, most likely the tour bus would
141 come from, say, some part of Scottsboro, Alabama. There
is not a black facility there. And if there is an issue,
bias, or whatever, they'd want to get out; they'd want to
take them to another place that's similar to them, but
live under different guidelines. This park was just in a
black community. You had industry around it, but it was
run by black people. The blacks had the say-so of how many
146 or how much, [what] went on in the park.

Gundaker: Is it still there?

Willingham: Just traces of it, Erlanger has bought [it].
149

Gundaker: Is that where it was?

Willingham: Yes, on the back side of Erlanger. Some of it, the walls
and stuff, some of the courses here and there, but basically
Erlanger and the Water Company have bought almost all of it.

Gundaker: When did it stop being a big place to go?

Willingham: I guess about early '60s, really.
152

Gundaker: A little bit before integration?

Willingham: Yes, because after they stopped that, they integrated Warner
Park. We were able to go there. They lost a lot of money.
A lot of kids wouldn't want to go there, they would want to
go to the lake. They were so far out, they lost money.
156 There weren't places for blacks to hang out, really. It's
getting back that way today. You can't just hang on the
street corner. The police and people mind -- the undercover
161 folks -- you ain't got to do nothing, just be seen talking
to a certain person and they get all crazy with you.

Gundaker: Do you think that these improvements are real improvements?
Or do you think that it's just a kind of a face-lift?

Willingham: Well, basically, I think it's a face-lift. I think when you
get improvements, you're going to have to get down to the
dirt. I mean, you're going to have to get down to these
people that wrote the laws, not only uphold them, you know
what I'm saying? It's bias for you to come out, and you
167 can't go into a men's restroom if the women's restroom is
occupied. You've got to use the restroom, you haven't got

(Willingham): time to be sitting here in the hall waiting on somebody to
come out of there. That's against the law. You can go
173 into a man's restroom and be fined because you're a woman.
They can take you to court and find you guilty for tres-
passing.

Gundaker: So it's still that way?

Willingham: That's government for you, that's the system. There is not
177 a lot of things you can do about it right off the top, but --
you can.

Gundaker: Well, what about in the city facilities, though, did they
180 become integrated pretty smoothly when you were coming up,
or was it a rocky road? Did you ever run into personal
difficulties with it?

Willingham: No, because I was a simple person, I got along with whoever.
I don't have racial parts about me. It's just little kids,
I look after them more than I do myself. I had a tendency
to always understand it. I may be black but [there's]
188 another 99% of people out there, excluding these "knuckle-
brains" I call black women, that's another whole bunch of
girls out there. I'm the kind of guy, if I wanted to go
somewhere, I didn't care where it was. I just didn't want
to be at home.

Gundaker: But nobody came up to you and said anything mean or racist
to you when you were trying to go places, or did they?

Willingham: I'm trying to think of where was I at or what I was doing.
When the integration movement was afoot here in Tennessee,
I was in high school so I generally fell along the "follower"
196 role. There wasn't a leadership person that had the ideas
and things like that for a young person. I was in the ninth
grade and President Kennedy was assassinated. We heard it
over the news. I just happened to be looking at the world
at the time. I was gazing out the window while everybody
else was trying to focus in on what their eyes saw and,
to me, the sunshine and the light kind of opened up a little
204 bit of insight. I didn't think about the legal aspects of
it or nothing like that, then. I just wanted to get away.
I didn't want to be a part of the system any more because
it wasn't right.

208 I still think it's got some flaws in it for the simple
fact that everybody around George Bush has a gun. But he
hasn't got nary a one. Everybody else in the other countries,
they carry guns. If I was the president I'd carry a gun be-
cause [if] people start shooting at me, I'm going to shoot

(Willingham): back. George Washington, all the way up until Harry Truman,
Roosevelt, Hoover, all of those folks before them, they'd
carry guns because they knew people would shoot. And when
216 they shoot, you ought to be able to shoot back. But they
got laws saying that you can't harm the citizens. But the
citizens try to harm you! Hey, you're only defending your-
self when you really look at it.

Gundaker: We're about out on this [tape].

End of Tape 1, Side 2
END OF INTERVIEW