

GROWING UP ON A FARM (GREAT DEPRESSION/WORLD WAR II)



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Introduction

In this activity, you will examine excerpts from two oral history interviews, in which Mr. D.C. Moody (born in 1935) and Ms. Vedna Thomas (born in 1932) remember their childhoods growing up on farms in Mount Pisgah, a historic community located on the territory of what today is Camp Robinson in North Little Rock, Arkansas (Pulaski County). Camp Robinson is home to the Arkansas National Guard and is the main training area for the Arkansas Army National Guard. During World War II, the U.S. government took away land from farmers to expand Camp Robinson. As a result, Mount Pisgah was demolished, and local farming families were forced to relocate.

Oral history interviews are the type of interviews, in which individuals are asked to recall and reflect on past events that they witnessed and/or past experiences. The Oral History Association defines oral history as “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.”

Moody and Thomas were born during the Great Depression in farming families. They also experienced the forced relocation caused by the expansion of Camp Robinson during World War II. The excerpts that you will analyze focus on what it was like for them to grow up on a farm during those formative events. Both interviews were conducted in 2011 by Eric R. Mills, Cultural Resources Manager, Arkansas Army National Guard, in 2011, when Moody was 76 and Thomas was 79 years old. What challenges oral history poses when we interview individuals who are elderly and ask them about events that they experienced as children?

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TRANSCRIPTIONS

Excerpts from an oral history interview with Mr. D.C. Moody (born in 1935). Interview conducted by Mr. Eric R. Mills, Cultural Resources Manager, Arkansas Army National Guard, on March 2, 2011

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Mr. Moody grew up in Mount Pisgah, a historic community located on the territory of present day Camp Robinson in North Little Rock, Arkansas (Pulaski County). Camp Robinson is home to the Arkansas National Guard and is the main training area for the Arkansas Army National Guard. During World War II, the U.S. government took away land from farmers to expand Camp Robinson. As a result, Mount Pisgah was demolished. When Mr. Moody says “they came, and of course the families were all scared. They came and give us ninety days, I think to move,” he refers to how his family was pushed out of their home and land to make space for the expansion of the camp.

You can listen to or read the transcript of the full interview here:
<https://cdm15728.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p1532coll1/id/12358>

[...]

EM: Right. Regarding your farm, how much land did your family have out there?

DCM: Oh, that's hard for me to remember. I don't know how many acres. 'Cause I think daddy's land joined my grandfather's on around to the back. It just, it was enough land that we, you know, made a livin' on it. My grandfather made a livin' on it. We had, 'course, we raised peanuts. And we raised peas 'course. Corn, cotton; and cotton was our cash crop. That's the money that we used to make, you know, buy clothes and stuff with, the rest of it we raised for food or for cattle feed or horse feed, you know.

EM: Where did you sell the cotton?

DCM: They'd take the cotton from there over to Cato. And Ralph Harrell owned a cotton gin so they'd go there and gin the cotton. I can remember goin' with daddy there and getting' the cotton ginned and then sellin' the cotton.

EM: Did you have any other products from the farm that you sold?

DCM: No, except, you know, just a few rabbits and stuff like that now and then. Had a bus that came through there. Was Peyton Washam that drove the bus. And it was just an old, what we called a chicken coop. I was just a wooden bus you know. And he picked up, like if momma was gonna send some butter, or we sent some possum, or coon, or rabbits. Well he'd take all that, or whatever we sent-each neighbor where he put it in a, to hisself, he'd go sell it then he'd bring the money back and take out a little bit for what he done. So that's the way we created our cash.

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EM: Would he go into North Little Rock?

DCM: No, Conway.

EM: Conway ok. Vedna mentioned Peyton Washam as well. It's interesting that after all this time the bus driver's made such an indelible mark in your memories.

DCM: Right, see the schoolteacher there was, she might have even told you, name was Morris. Miss Morris was the schoolteacher.

EM: Ok, she did.

DCM: Yeah. See I was, I can remember a lot 'cause I guess it was just the impact on my life, 'cause when we moved out how it changed. You know they came, and of course the families were all scared. They came and give us ninety days, I think to move. Come up to our house, wrote a thousand dollars on the side of the house. Of course daddy lost all, all that he had, like cattle and stuff like that. People knew he didn't have nowhere to put 'em-bought 'em for nothin'-broke him really. And I can remember the families prayin' and cryin' you know. They hauled, they carried some of 'em out, three quarter ton trucks, movin' 'em when they didn't have the means-put 'em on outside the lines, set 'em out there you know. I guess what always, in my mind, they would not sell the land back to us and they promised us they would. They said they promised us they would sell us the land-the land less the house. And they went to court and couldn't get that one done. So, it's always been home to me.

[...]

EM: Can you tell me a little bit, just going back a little bit, how your family came to be in the area, came to be landowners?

DCM: Well, the best of my memory, I remember hearin' momma and daddy talk. If I'm not mistaken, the Moodys settled in there around those chains of lakes. My great grandfather, after the Civil War, he was in the Civil War, and then that group of Moodys settled in there around Grassy and Greens and that was before the lake was ever in there. And he was a, I'd run into an older fella told me about him, and I never did know this about him, but he said he used to trap hogs there and bootleg whiskey and put that whiskey in them carcasses of hogs, put 'em on a wagon and carry 'em to North Little Rock, and that's the way he sold his whiskey and made his money. I found that out about ten or fifteen years ago from an old fella that was real old and got to talkin' about it. But that's how the Moodys come in there. And part of the Moodys went to Lonoke, and they's some went to California, they split up. That's the way I understand that the family came in there. And then mom and dad, they worked before they married and aid for that place. They married at 25 and 32. And so they got the place paid for before they ever married, and so that's how they purchased the place. And I would not know what

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year that would be because daddy was born in 1902, him bein' 32, that would be probably 1934 wouldn't it?

EM: Yes

DCM: About '34, right during the Depression, right along in there.

EM: When they completed, or when they purchased the place initially?

DCM: When they purchased the place, I believe. Somewhere in there I don't remember.

EM: So they weren't homesteaders, they purchased this property. And do you know if there was a house on the property when they purchased it?

DCM: I would think so, it was an older house. [...]

EM: Did the military assist with relocation either logistically finding a new location or the actual moving of people?

DCM: No. What we, what we heard and talked, talk was, them that didn't have the means to move-the government moved them but they didn't give them no place to live. They just took them on outside of the line. Put the furniture and all out and all about when the time was up. Now I heard some of them talkin about that. I didn't, seems like I vaguely, seems like I vaguely remember seein', it might of been because I heard it so much. Still a memory, ya know what I mean? In your mind that far back, bein'small as I was it could make an impact on you because 'course it's really fearful when you know somebody is doin' that. You know what I mean.

EM: So were you afraid as a young man, a young boy? Did this make you, cause concern in you?

DCM: Yeah I just, I was like family you know? It's like, it's sort of a feelin like if you and your family was at home and somebody broke in. You don't know what's going to happen. It was a fear of the unknown. 'Course mama's scared; daddy's scared so naturally the kids are scared you know. We don't know what's going to happen to us. I mean, where we gonna go, what we gonna do? How we gonna live you know? How are gonna make a livin'? How are we gonna eat? Because see we raised everything we eat nearly. Didn't buy much, like flour maybe just salt, stuff like that. We never drank iced tea. Never had stuff like that you know. Just milk, water, whatever you raised on the farm. And of course mama got a lot out of the woods you know. She canned a lot of stuff out of the woods, and out of the porch, and out of the garden. Well we ate better than we eat today we just didn't have no money. We raised our own hogs, our own beef, you know. So when you look at that and where we gonna go and where we gonna get-how we gonna survive 'cause your survival was on the place that you were losin'. So that's where the fear came.

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EM: So when you did move, you moved to Mayflower first?

DCM: Faulkner. Faulkner Gap.

EM: Oh Faulkner Gap. I'm sorry. What did your parents do then? How did your...

DCM: Well we tried to farm on that place. 'Course we didn't have the facilities. He had to sell his-daddy had to sell his cows and horses and stuff like just to keep the minimum we could get by with. And I remember a year that they farmed. I can remember the old place. I can remember the fields. It wasn't a very good farm. Cotton didn't grow very big. So it was very little money made from there.

EM: Did your father continue to farm when you moved back over onto Maddox Road.

DCM: We moved to Maddox Road. We farmed that for, I don't know, I guess up to about '45, somewhere in there. Daddy went to work at the Jacksonville Ordnance Plant along the end of the war.

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Excerpts from an oral history interview with Ms. Vedna Thomas (born in 1932). Interview conducted by Mr. Eric R. Mills, Cultural Resources Manager, Arkansas Army National Guard, on January 27, 2011

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Ms. Thomas grew up in Mount Pisgah, a historic community located on the territory of present day Camp Robinson in North Little Rock, Arkansas (Pulaski County). Camp Robinson is home to the Arkansas National Guard and is the main training area for the Arkansas Army National Guard. During World War II, the U.S. government took away land from farmers to expand Camp Robinson. As a result, Mount Pisgah was demolished. When the interviewer Eric Mills says “what life was like before the base expanded in the early 1940s resulting in the removal and displacement of hundreds of families,” he refers to how families were pushed out of their homes and land to make space for the expansion of the camp.

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[...]

EM: And [your father] farmed, I trust?

VT: Yes, he farmed. And of course my grandparents did too. We raised just about everything. They had cotton, corn, and we had gardens, two of them, one in the front of the house, and one in the back. One was a fall garden and one's a spring garden. They had grapes. We had honeybees. Cows and horses, you know just for our own use.

EM: Sure. Any of these items that you grew, obviously as you said, you survived off those as well, but did you trade in any of these items with your neighbors?

VT: Well my grandma raised chickens in the spring of the year and raised them up to fryer size. I remember she'd put 'em in a coop and the town bus would come by and they'd load 'em up in the bus and take them to town in what was called the Curb Market down in North Little Rock.

EM: The curve?

VT: Curb Market, where they brought fresh produce, you know you can buy fresh produce now. And she'd sell 'em to somebody. They had a restaurant there in it, in that Curb Market. And they would buy chickens back then and dress 'em there and cook 'em at the cafe. There at the Curb Market. And she'd sell 'em to them, those fryin' size chickens you know. Now that's the only thing, and of course their cotton, they'd have it baled and they'd sell their cotton, but they kept their cottonseed to feed the cow.

EM: How many acres...

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VT: We had peanuts, kept in the barn loft. You know me and my grandpa go out there in the wintertime, and pick off a bunch of 'em and bring 'em to the house for my grandma to parch.

EM: So you really had quite a few staples you were growing there, and then some that could generate some income.

VT: Yes, and there was a little store there at the corner where the 89 and Clinton is. The Riffle Grocery Store.

EM: Riffle.

VT: Riffle, R-i-f-f-l-e, I believe's how they spelled it. And sometimes my grandma'd send me over there to get some flour, coffee, meal, or snuff. I never had any of that snuff. Anyway, but most time they traded at my uncle's store down the other way, but it was a little further, you know to go to his store.

[...]

EM: So was there a bus that came up through there?

VT: A town bus, yes. It went to Little Rock Monday, Tuesday... I think on Wednesday and Thursday it went to Conway. And the other three days of the week, it just run on the weekdays if I remember correctly it went to Little Rock, well North Little Rock really. So that's, most the time we went to town on the bus, whether we were goin' to Conway or Little Rock. We didn't drive to town.

EM: So when your mother, grandmother would go into sell chickens, would she take the bus?

VT: Yes, we rode the bus. My grandpa'd help her carry the chicken coop, with the chickens in it out to the road. And the bus driver's name was Peyton Washam. He'd get out and help my grandma load that in the back of the bus back there on the floor you know, take it down there, and they'd buy her chickens and she'd bring the coop back home. And the bus was there sittin' at the Curb Market all day long, so if people got tired of shoppin' or what have you. It left at a certain time to go home in the afternoon, so you, if you wanted to go home on the bus you needed to be there.

[...]

EM: Now as I've told you, one of the primary objectives of this data we are gathering, this information is not only to learn what life was like before the base expanded in the early 1940s resulting in the removal and displacement of hundreds of families. But I'm interested as well is that transition period, how that came about, how that affected the community, and the individuals that were displaced.

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VT: Well they didn't like it, the people, didn't like it. My grandma really complained about it. Because she'd been livin' there in that house for thirty-five years, and she had to work hard to pay it off. And she didn't like it, not at all. I thought it was funny, at the time.

EM: At the time you did think...

VT: But as I grew older, I didn't.

EM: Of course.

VT: People were just like us, now. People that already had their property when the, you know, and had farms that they could grow their food and stuff they did alright. I think that's the way I'm gonna look at it, or the way I look at it. But some people, younger people you know didn't do so well, I don't guess. Because some people that lived there, were, I mean at that age and stuff I didn't consider myself poor, but I guess we were really. But we always had plenty to eat, even if it was just cornbread and butter milk for supper at night. And part of that was probably because my grandma didn't want to cook three meals a day. Which I don't blame her.

EM: No.

VT: We'd eat leftovers, but if we didn't have leftovers she'd bake a pan of cornbread, and we'd have cornbread and butter milk, you see we'd had our butter and milk and eggs, we had all that stuff, and you know, vegetables from the garden. So as far as goin' hungry, we didn't go hungry durin' the Depression.

EM: Do you think you were somewhat un-affected by the Depression because of the nature of your lifestyle, that you weren't dependent on outside employment, you know you're family, the adults?

VT: Well I guess so, yeah. [...]

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Questions:

1. How did the Thomas and Moody families make a living? What did they grow on their farms? What did they sell? How did they sell what they produced on their farms?
2. Who was Peyton Washam? Why was he an important figure for both Thomas and Moody?
3. How do Thomas and Moody remember the Great Depression? How did farming shape their and their families' experience during this time?
4. How do Thomas and Moody remember the time when their families and other local families were pushed out of their land (see "Introduction" for more information)? What was Moody particularly afraid of? How did Thomas's understanding of that event change as she grew up?
5. What happened with the Moody family after the forced relocation?
6. In what ways was farming important in the early lives of Moody and Thomas? Did it have a positive or negative impact on their lives?
7. Based on Moody's and Thomas's experience, what do we learn about Arkansas farmers and farming families during World War II? Were their land and jobs secure? Or were they vulnerable?
8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of oral history interviews as historical sources?