

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
WILLIE BRANDON

APRIL 22, 2009

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

AND

JUNE 3, 2009

READYVILLE, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

PARQ

PRESERVE THE AREA'S RURAL QUALITIES

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #6



ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY
MT ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW #405

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ABSTRACT

Willie Brandon was born in an African American community a mile and a half north of Readyville, Tennessee, on June 12, 1906, almost 103 years before the two days over which he was interviewed. Brandon was the son of a sharecropper, an occupation shared by most people of African descent in the area at the time. He recalls his boyhood memories of his maternal grandfather, who before the Civil War had been a slave once sold at the Rutherford County court house, where Brandon was still employed as a custodian. Brandon relates memories of his large family and social and economic life in the Readyville area, including topics such as race relations, religion, school, and the role of the Readyville mill in the community. In the second part of the interview, Brandon visits the mill and discusses his memories with the current owner, Tomm Brady. Brandon recalls one of the mill's previous owners (Rat McFerrin), the operations at the mill in the early twentieth century, and the structure and adjoining buildings that had once been an integral part of the town of Readyville.

PHOTO



Willie Brandon at the Readyville Mill

PARQ photo by Jim Williams

Sketch of Willie Brandon

Mr. Willie Brandon was just shy of 103 years old when he was interviewed in the spring of 2009 about his life growing up in the Readyville area. He was the son of a sharecropper and his grandfather had been a slave. Because of his memories of slavery, his grandfather would offer young Willie sanctuary at his home, which adjoined that of Mr. Brandon's, whenever his mother wished to punish him by using a stick for whipping. It reminded the older man of slavery.

Mr. Brandon grew up living in a two room home with a fireplace for heat and cooking. They grew their own food. He said he had lived through three depressions and understood hard times. He also lived in the days of segregation and attended a school for three months out of the year that was located in the woods near Readyville. Mr. Brandon recalled walking through fields inhabited by rattlesnakes and having to be sure that he did not cross a field that was providing pasture for a bull, but that was required to get to the school. His father had never learned to read or write but his mother was a teacher and their children went to school when it was not time for them to be working in the fields.

Religion was a part of his community life, and he remembered that most of his folk were Baptist or Methodist. They took church seriously and one preacher used to walk all the way from Nashville once a month to conduct services. This was also before funeral homes and embalming in his community and Mr. Brandon remembered the rituals of quickly getting the body of a deceased person ready for burial and in a grave within a very short time. Services were short, if any were held at all. Necessity dictated custom.

Mr. Brandon remembered the mill at Readyville. It is where his family took their grain for grinding. In particular he recalled how he was frightened as a boy by the sound of the belts and machinery at the mill. He also feared that he would fall off the cliff overlooking the river. He did like the owner and got along well with the people in the area. He remembered the days when there was a store by the mill and the icehouse where Ice was made and stored before home refrigeration. When he returned to see it for the first time in many years, he was astounded and pleased to see what had been done in the way of restoration. He had a good conversation with Mr. Brady, recalling the days of his youth when such things as the moving machinery frightened him. A lot of memories are produced by over a century of living.

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Note: The first part of this interview was recorded with an audio recorder and a video recorder. Those wishing to view the videotape should inquire at the Albert Gore Research Center.

WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Mr. Willie Brandon. We're at his home in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, on April 22, 2009. My name is Jim Williams from MTSU, the Albert Gore Research Center, and this interview is being conducted for Preserve the Area's Rural Qualities, a group that's interested in the Readyville area. Okay? So Mr. Brandon, can you tell me when and where you were born?

BRANDON: I was born in 1906, June the 12th, in the Readyville area. I have to put it like that.

WILLIAMS: In the Readyville area?

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: How close or where in relation to the mill, for instance, was your family's house?

BRANDON: I was born about a mile and a half from the mill.

WILLIAMS: What direction?

BRANDON: North.

WILLIAMS: If I wanted to find where your home place was, how would I get there?

BRANDON: It'd be north.

WILLIAMS: And what were your parents' names?

BRANDON: My father's name was Charles Brandon.

WILLIAMS: And your mother?

BRANDON: Jimmie Brandon.

WILLIAMS: Your mother's name was Jimmie?

BRANDON: Uh-huh, and one sister. Lizzy Brandon that was the family.

WILLIAMS: How would you describe your father?

BRANDON: My father was an ambitious man, and couldn't read or even write. My mother, they had chosen her to be a school teacher in those days, and in those days a girl didn't have to go no further than eighth grade to be a teacher. So they chose her in that community to be a teacher, and my father—she married my father and he couldn't read and write.

WILLIAMS: Did he ever learn to read and write?

BRANDON: She tried, and she got him to where he could print part of his name, and he got so fast [?] she just quit bothering him, but you couldn't beat him out of a dime.

WILLIAMS: What do you mean by that?

BRANDON: Hmm?

WILLIAMS: What do you mean by that?

BRANDON: He'd count on his fingers. He'd count a thousand dollars as quick as you could—double back and do this and he'd have it, and finally she told him, she says, "Charles, there's a, I can't learn you nothing. I'm doing alright." So, I guess I got about seven and I asked her one day, I says, "Mama, why did you marry my daddy and he can't read and write?" She says, "I loved him." She says, "I loved him." And you know what, in those days if you made forty or fifty cents a day, you had a wonderful job. And he'd do his field work and get through with it quicker than the rest of them, and he'd be sitting on his porch and somebody would come by and ask him, say, "Charles, do you want to work today?" He'd a, "Yeah." Well, he'd go make that other thirty-five or forty cents. He'd done done his work at home. He went to the bank and put a dollar in the Readyville bank and got him a checkbook and he'd walk around with most of the rest of the guys with his checkbook in his pocket, and they made fun of him. Said, "Look here yonder. He don't know he's got that in his pocket. He can't read and write nothing, say got a checkbook in his pocket. And he saved like that. He'd put a nickel in the bank just as big as you'd put 500.

WILLIAMS: Is that what you mean by ambitious?

BRANDON: Yep, I'll tell you why he is ambitious. He did that for years, and when the old man died he had money, right here in this bank up, this bank, the man's sitting there where the bank, they tore down two or three banks up town. But when he died he had money, and before he died, he died at sixty-eight, he lived one block from here on the next street over. He'd get up every morning and Mama had to make biscuits, homemade things. He'd eat breakfast and get on his bicycle and ride to town and sit there until twelve o'clock. And people would ask him, why did he go to town so often? And

finally he told them, he would go up there every day to watch his money. His money was over there in the bank. And he'd park behind Goldstein's store there. They give him a parking place in there. He'd go to town every day and eat and watch his money and at twelve o'clock he's back on Vine Street and she had to have his dinner ready. And he'd eat and go to sleep, and go back up there until closing time. He did that every day but when he died.

WILLIAMS: So that was later on in life.

BRANDON: He died. She had—and it learned me a lesson—she had what little she had in her name, Jimmie Brandon. He had his little money in his name, Charles Brandon, I had to wait one year.

WILLIAMS: It went through the probate and all?

BRANDON: I couldn't touch neither one of their money for one year. So I said if I had to do that I'll have it where she—I ain't got nothing but a five dollar in the bank and she can go up there in the morning and get every bit of it. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: So what year was your father born?

BRANDON: Don't ask me. He was eighty. My mother was born in '81. Wait a minute. And she said was a, I believe six years . . . which one was older? She was born in '81. I know when she was born, and he was born in . . . born in the '80s, back in there somewhere. I don't know which one was oldest.

WILLIAMS: Did you say he died in 1968 or he was sixty-eight years old?

BRANDON: Sixty [?].

WILLIAMS: Which?

BRANDON: He died in the '60s, '68, '69, along in there.

WILLIAMS: So he was in his eighties, close to ninety when he died?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Is that right? Where are they buried?

BRANDON: Readyville.

WILLIAMS: Is there a cemetery?

BRANDON: There's a cemetery out there, a mile and a half from the ice plant. That's where I'm gonna be buried, too. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Why were they living in Readyville?

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: Why did they settle in Readyville?

BRANDON: They were bred up in that area.

WILLIAMS: So they were both born in Readyville?

BRANDON: Yeah, in that area, all of 'em, and back in those days there wasn't no way for you to get out of the area unless you—Why you goin'? You didn't have no money. You didn't have no transportation. You didn't have no choice. You stayed, right? Back in those days you couldn't move around from place to place. Where you goin' in?

WILLIAMS: So did your mother have brothers and sisters?

BRANDON: She had one sister.

WILLIAMS: Did she live close by?

BRANDON: Uh-huh. Her name was Lovie.

WILLIAMS: How do you spell that?

BRANDON: L-O-V-I-E.

WILLIAMS: Oh, okay.

BRANDON: My mother had a sister.

WILLIAMS: So you had an Aunt Lovie?

BRANDON: Hmm?

WILLIAMS: You had an Aunt Lovie?

BRANDON: Uh-huh, just one.

WILLIAMS: What was your mother's maiden name?

BRANDON: Brewer.

WILLIAMS: Okay. And what was your mother like?

BRANDON: She was a nice talking person, an awful wonderful person. She was, I had a wonderful mother.

WILLIAMS: Well-educated?

BRANDON: Yeah, in that day. Because it was all of 'em around here saying, "You know what? Jimmie Brandon's got a school that's paying ten dollars a month."

What? What is she going to do with all that money?" [laughs] Now I come from that day [?]. I think about twelve dollars a month, before she was kidding [?].

WILLIAMS: So where was that school that she worked at?

BRANDON: It was in the same area, but it was about a mile and a half from Readyville, from the center part of Readyville, back in the woods.

WILLIAMS: And was that a school only for blacks?

BRANDON: Only for blacks and they didn't go only for three months out of a year.

WILLIAMS: Which three months? The winter months?

BRANDON: To get out to do the farm work up before it got cold, pick the cotton and stuff. Get it all in before it got cold. You went to school three months, and you had to walk some of them. Like me and my sister had to walk about a mile and a half, across fields. You'd have to get permission from the people that own it. Could you go through? They had bulls, rattlesnakes. Back in those days, the country was full of wild varmints. Rattlesnake: you see them sitting up there, head that wide, licking his tongue at you. "Don't bother me and I won't bother you. You going to walk around me." I've come a long way. I've been through a lot, head that wide. Bite you, you'd drop dead before . . . [laughs] But if you didn't bother him, he wouldn't bother you.

WILLIAMS: Did you're, did Lovie get married?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Did she marry a local fellow?

BRANDON: She married my daddy's first cousin. See, they was both Brandons. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Okay, and they lived in Readyville also?

BRANDON: Yep.

WILLIAMS: All their lives?

BRANDON: All their lives.

WILLIAMS: What did they do for, well, her husband's name was?

BRANDON: His name was Lawyer Brandon.

WILLIAMS: Lawyer?

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: And what did Lawyer and Lovie do for a living?

BRANDON: Farm work. Wasn't nothing else out there to do but farm work.

WILLIAMS: What did ya'll farm when you were growing up?

BRANDON: Different people lived across the area. We farmed for Barker. The Barkers owned five, six, seven, or eight hundred acres across, in that area. Most of all of us worked for the Barkers, in the years.

WILLIAMS: So were there any black families that owned their own land in Readyville?

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: Were there any black families that owned land, or were they all sharecroppers?

BRANDON: All sharecroppers at that time. In the beginning. Some of them didn't own nothing.

WILLIAMS: Did that change eventually?

BRANDON: Didn't have nothing. The man that owned the property would build them a house back on his land somewhere, where they cook, come to and fro back down to the main house and take care of stuff, in the beginning back there. They had a post office at—there was a post office in Readyville, finally, and they give me one.

WILLIAMS: So did you say your family worked about 3 or 400 acres?

BRANDON: Yeah, on a . . . D.H. Carter owned 3 or 4 acres. He was president of a bank here in Murfreesboro. I worked under, for Carter.

WILLIAMS: What was your house like that you were born in?

BRANDON: Well, some of them you could see the sky through. Some of them had a pretty good top. Didn't have nothing but tin.

WILLIAMS: Tin roof?

BRANDON: Tin. All had wood [?].

WILLIAMS: And walls?

BRANDON: Whatever, so whatever you could find to make the walls, if it's pasteboard or whatever. But we stayed warm.

WILLIAMS: How did you stay warm?

BRANDON: By using here [pointing at his head]. You can do a whole lot of things that you think you can't do if you get down to a push. Get down to push. They're talking about the depression. See I've been through three. And they

something else. But you've got to learn how to work with what you got. That's all you do. They have one now, no wonder you all take pause and kill yourself. Couldn't stand it. Young generation couldn't stand it.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

BRANDON: You couldn't.

WILLIAMS: Probably not.

BRANDON: Wake up in the morning and you go to the bank and the blinds is closed. There's a big sign in it: "Closed." Go to the next: "Closed." And what you had when it closed, you'd go crazy. I've been through those days. I had eighty-four dollars in the state bank of Illinois and she closed. They said, "You better go on down there; they're closing the bank." I said, "What?" I am going to tell that manager, "Don't tell me they can't close, because they wasn't gonna close on me."

WILLIAMS: So that was in the 1930s you're talking about.

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: The house that you grew up in, how big was it?

BRANDON: Two rooms.

WILLIAMS: Two rooms.

BRANDON: Yeah. I don't care if there was forty of you.

WILLIAMS: Was there separate bedroom and living space?

BRANDON: Yeah, that was it.

WILLIAMS: Did everyone sleep in the same room?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: You and your sister and parents?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Was your sister older or younger than you?

BRANDON: She's younger than me. Two years difference.

WILLIAMS: Was her real name Lizzie or was that just what you called her?

BRANDON: That was her real name.

WILLIAMS: How did you heat your house?

BRANDON: Wood logs. They'd build a good area where you could frame it up with rock stones with the chimney, where she wouldn't catch a fire. You could roll a log that long in, and put some little ones in front of it and get that big one started to burn, and she'd burn a day or two. Wasn't no problem to get heat. Just roll them in the house, just like you'd . . .

WILLIAMS: Where'd the logs come from?

BRANDON: Out there in the—all you had to do was step out the door. You'd be setting, your house was around logs, trees. All you had to do was step out the door with an axe and go and cut it.

WILLIAMS: Somebody had to cut them down.

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: Someone had to cut them down.

BRANDON: Yeah, you'd cut 'em down.

WILLIAMS: So did your mother cook over that fire or did she have a stove?

BRANDON: Yeah. You take a wire and hang it up in that, put a brace across in the top of that chimney, a big steel pot that big, let her hang down in there. Then she'd cook some of the best potatoes and stuff, a big steel top on it. Good food in there, man. [laughs] Good, good! I wish I had some of it now.

WILLIAMS: Did you grow all your food, or did you buy things as well?

BRANDON: Yeah, grew it all. In the summer, they'd dig a hole and make a cellar with steps to go down in it, and you can believe it or not, but they'd be raising turnip greens, cabbage, and every other little thing down in that cellar. When a storm come, we went in the cellar. Pull the top down, wind blowing out here and we're under the ground.

WILLIAMS: So was this a root cellar and a storm cellar?

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: Did you have a happy childhood?

BRANDON: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Did you have fun?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: What did you do to make fun?

BRANDON: Well, the boys would catch a, get a stick, about as long as that, tie a rag on the top of it, put it between your legs, get him another switch, and go boogity boogity boogey, ride the horse. See which one could beat each other riding the horse on a stick.

WILLIAMS: So you must have had hogs.

BRANDON: We'd get a few marbles. We'd shoot marbles and pitch horseshoes. We had a good time. Had just as good a time in that day as the childrens are having in the modern day. We just doing different things. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Where'd you get your clothes?

BRANDON: Mama made most of them. Mama make you socks. She had a big knitting needle like that with some white thread, and when she wasn't busy she'd get down at your feet and knit you a pair of socks.

WILLIAMS: And she sewed by hand or did she have a machine?

BRANDON: Didn't know what a machine was. She mentioned that—I guess I'd done got about twelve then, when a salesman came through in a buggy selling a little sewing machine, and he drove over while Daddy was somewhere, and me and my sister was peeping at him, and he says, "Can I come in?" He told him, "Yeah." He come in the yard and showed her the machine. We'd never seen one before. She says, "Well, I'd like to have one but my husband's not here. About that time he come home. And she says, "Charles, this man's got a machine and he said he'd let us have it and he can come back through here next summer or something and get to paying." He looked at it. He says, "Jimmie, that's a nice one but we can't afford it today." That's the end of that. She said, "Well, my husband said we couldn't." Back in them days women did what they husbands said to. He said, "No." There wasn't no mouth stuck out or nothing. That was the end of it.

WILLIAMS: And there's no credit card to pull out to pay for it.

BRANDON: When he said, "No," that was it, didn't hear no more about that. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: You talked about riding on the hogs and did you, did you . . .

CAROLYN HOLT: No, a horse, stick horse.

WILLIAMS: Horse. Oh, a stick horse! Oh, I'm sorry. I misunderstood.

HOLT: A stick horse.

WILLIAMS: Okay, sorry about that. But did you have, did you raise animals or did you have pets?

BRANDON: Yeah, I had a dog. I had a big brown dog about that big. He'd watch after you, keep, he'd keep things away from you. It was a smart dog. Most everybody had a good dog. What they . . . croppers didn't want you to have nothing. You could have a few chickens, but otherwise other animals they stayed down to the house.

WILLIAMS: So if you only had chickens, did you have any meat to eat?

BRANDON: Yeah, we'd raise meat. You'd kill hogs, you know, and cure them. That's all we had. Now folks will think about ham, ham, ham. That's all we had was a ham and the shoulders and stuff because it was cured. You'd preserve it and it would hold all the year, and we get tired of eating that, and every now and then somebody in the community would kill a Billy goat or a calf and all of them shared together to have first meat, you know. This man over here killed one this week and he shared because he didn't have no refrigerating outfit and all of them would share it between each other, you know, like that.

WILLIAMS: Did you help with the butchering?

BRANDON: Uh-uh.

WILLIAMS: No?

BRANDON: No. I didn't help with nothing like that.

WILLIAMS: Did your mother make sausage or anything like that?

BRANDON: Yeah, yeah. She'd make sausage, and they'd keep. She'd make sausage.

WILLIAMS: What was she especially good at cooking?

BRANDON: Well, the biggest thing that she liked to make was a potato pie. She could make some sweet potato pie and she used to, I don't know, slice those potatoes and cook them or something another, and have that juice and that top on them. It'd be good. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Did you know your father's parents? Your grandparents on your father's...

BRANDON: I knew my granddaddy on my father's side, I saw him once.

WILLIAMS: You saw him once?

BRANDON: One time in my life. I was fifteen years old. He came from, I don't know where, but he didn't stay in here but about two days. I saw my grandfather on my dad's side one time. I think I was about thirteen or fourteen years old, but my grandmothers on both sides was dead before I was ever born.

WILLIAMS: Okay. What was your Grandfather Brandon's name?

BRANDON: His name was Bill Brandon. That's what he said his name was.

WILLIAMS: Where did he live that you didn't see him?

BRANDON: I don't, never did find out. I don't know where he lived. He just come in here and I ask my daddy where was he at, and he said, "He's gone, and I don't know where he went."

WILLIAMS: And did you know your mother's father?

BRANDON: He helped raise me, my mother's father, that's why he got no sense. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Now that's not true. What was his . . . ?

BRANDON: My mama's daddy helped raise me, and finally when they bought the place, they bought thirty-two acres of just rocks and sticks and stuff that nobody else didn't want. My daddy bought it. Six hundred dollars for thirty-seven acres. And his down payment was a little mule colt worth forty dollars. He put the mule down and we moved there. We stayed there about a year, and he told my mother that he was going to sell my granddaddy nineteen acres of it so he could build him a house there, and they did. And he built him a little, I'd just say it's a nice cold house. He built him a little house and moved in. And his house wasn't no further from my house than this one over yonder. He lived by his self. He was ninety something then. Just about as old as I am then but he was on his feet, enough. My mother would go down there and cook his breakfast and he'd eat at home and he'd come on up there. And I'd get into devilment and my mama would whoop me. He couldn't stand the switch because he was a slave. He'd been a slave. He'd tell us things. "By golly quit beating him and talk to the boy." He said, "I can't stand that switching." So one day she got after me switching me and he was sitting up under the tree and he said, "Come here." He said, "See that line right there?" I say, "Yeah." Well, he said, "This over here belongs to Jim Brewer, and says this over here belongs to your mama. Now the next time she get after you, if you make it to this line and jump it, you free." So I say, "Okay." I got into it again and he was still sitting up under that tree. Here she come to catch me and whoop me. He didn't say a word. Got to the line, he said, "Hold it!" Said, "This over here belongs to Jim Brewer." She said, "Pap!" He said, "Pull on back. He's home free." [laughs] We set there, and I got hungry, because he didn't have nothing in the house. I say, "Pap," I say, "I'm hungry." He said, "I don't know, but you better not go up there saying that after you pretty rough." He says, "Wait a minute." He got his stick: "Let's go!" I went behind him, got to the door. He done this away to me: "Stay back." He went in, he looked, come out, and he said, "Everything looks pretty quiet in there. You can go on in there and be quiet." He told me, "Go on in there and be quiet." I'd go in there and sit down, ease into the bed, and go to sleep. I stayed with him. I thought more of him than I did my mama or even my daddy, and when he died it liked to kill me, and I'll tell

you what he did. I was in Illinois. My aunt sent him to Chicago. When I went to Polk Street station to get him, he was a hundred and twelve years old . Had his grip [suitcase]. He rode from here by his self at a hundred and twelve. I met him at the station, and when they got off the station, people looked at him like he was Santa Claus. Beard hung to here. White rows of curly hair. No bald.

WILLIAMS: Wow.

BRANDON: He was dark brown skinned. And his hair and all just hung down here on his shoulders, just . . . I carried him home. My daughter, that was his great-grandchild—she’s in Illinois now—my daughter was seven. We’d go off and go to work and leave him there to take care of her. He did. Now I was the first who’d come home from work. And he was sitting on the porch like that. I said, “Pap, what are you doin’?” He says, “I don’t feel good. My ole stomach’s been growlin’ and messin’ up all day.” Well I been hearin’ that all my life. It’s that stomach. I said, “Mama’ll be here in a moment. She’ll give you something.” My mama come. She said, “Pap, what’s the problem?” “Oh, ole stomach’s worryin’ me again.” She says, “Well.” “Well, no, I’ll be all right.” I lived upstairs over my mother, apartment up over. I come in, start them steps, he said, “Hold it a minute. I’ll go up there with ya.” I said, “For what?” He caught the banister, walked up the steps just like you would. I had a three-room apartment. He went and looked his way in it. He says, “All right, let’s go back downstairs.” We got down halfway downstairs and there’s a bend and you had to bend and come back, he says, “Sit down.” Hit me on this right leg. He says, “Sit down, I’ve got something to tell ya.” I sat down. He said, “You know what? I’ve lived a long time. A long time.” “Well, say something.” “It’s over.” He took his hands like this, just like that. He says, “I see two roads, one going up, and one going down.” He says, “Every now and then, you see one going up.” He said, “You be a good boy.” He says, “I got, I made some friends here and saying everybody at home loves me.” But said, “It’s too late. I’m lost.” Got up, girl, walked on down and to my mother’s apartment, and her bedroom faces the door. He went and laid down crossways on her bed, and went “huh” [a quick sigh]. That was it. People has told me from that day ‘til this day that I imagined. I got sense enough to know what was told me. That’s what he left with me. He says, “You be a good boy.” He says, “I’m lost.”

WILLIAMS: What year was that?

BRANDON: Thirty . . . three.

WILLIAMS: You said he was about a hundred and fifteen when he died?

BRANDON: Yeah. If not older.

WILLIAMS: So he was born in about, before 1820?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Wow.

BRANDON: And was active up to death, he was. Every tooth in his head. Eye sight was clear. So I got that mixed in me.

WILLIAMS: Did they bury him in Chicago?

BRANDON: No. He's back here at home. I put a big stone right. It's right out there at Readyville. No, he's here. The date of his birth is out there on that stone. I can't remember it, but I can take you out there and let you see it. It's out there.

WILLIAMS: Is that a mixed cemetery or was it just blacks and whites. Did they do that?

BRANDON: They'd not bury no whites back there when I was— it's all black.

WILLIAMS: Was there a white cemetery in town?

BRANDON: Yeah, but it wasn't close to this one. But I'll tell you what they did do. And I'll praise 'em for it. They gave us another acre to extend our cemetery. That was nice. We done filled it up. They gave, the man that owned the property from the cemetery gave us another acre. That was very nice.

WILLIAMS: Now you said he was a slave.

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: You said your grandfather was a slave.

BRANDON: He was sold up here on the courthouse!

WILLIAMS: What do you know about his life as a slave? Did he talk about it?

BRANDON: Yeah, he said he was sold up there right there where she's working on them back steps up there. For seven hundred fifty dollars, shipped to Virginia. And was freed in Virginia. When he got free the man that owned him was a Brewer. He said, "Jim, I either got to pay you, or you've got to go." And Jim said he looked out there and them that was free was out there cuttin' bushes and makin' harbors to live under. Said he looked at that and says, "I can't, I don't want that." He went back to his owner, the slave owner and asked him could he stay. He said, "Jim, if I keep you, I'll have to pay you." He said, "Well," he said, "Yeah." And he stayed with his master two years for pay. I don't know what the pay was then [?], and got enough money and come back to Tennessee. He had cleared that up. He said around that courthouse, wasn't nothin' but just a wilderness. He said they cut all day and rick. And when it rained and dried, they'd burn those ricks, you know. He'd cleared up, my granddaddy.

WILLIAMS: Do you know if he was born here?

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: Was he born here?

BRANDON: Who?

WILLIAMS: Your grandfather?

BRANDON: I don't know. He don't know either. Seems like, back in those days, they go and have an auction just like ya'll sell houses, huh. A woman got five babies. They slick them babies up, lay their hair down, a man come through and look at that, sell that baby for four dollars. This one over here for six. Different folks getting 'em. See, see? Don't know who, who, who, who, then turn around and sell the mama. All the whole never see each other no more. Just like you're selling pigs out there.

WILLIAMS: Did he talk about slave days much?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: He did?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: What else do you remember?

BRANDON: He said he had some good slave masters. He said he was fortunate enough to have some good masters. He said if one was going to have an auction somewhere, and one looked a little puny, he said rub him up and slick him up the night before the sale and try to boost [?] something in his belly to make him spruced up. So they could sell him. Some harder days, man. That's been here though.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

BRANDON: That's been here.

WILLIAMS: Do you know where he met your grandmother?

BRANDON: Uh-uh, I don't know about the grandmother.

WILLIAMS: And you said never met her.

BRANDON: No, I never met neither one.

WILLIAMS: Anything else about slave days that he talked about?

BRANDON: No, I just about got it.

WILLIAMS: But he definitely didn't want the switch being on—

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: He definitely didn't want your mother using the switch on you, right?

BRANDON: Yeah. [chuckles]

WILLIAMS: What did he—he was a sharecropper, as well?

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: In Readyville?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: All his life except for . . .

BRANDON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He was a sharecropper.

WILLIAMS: What did ya'll mostly grow out there?

BRANDON: Potatoes and all types of vegetables, and corn, cotton, and sugar cane. You know make molasses and stuff. We grewed them all. In fact, all of 'em.

WILLIAMS: Was there a mill to put the cane through to make molasses?

BRANDON: Yeah, they had homemade mills that grind that juice out of it, and big tubs they'd cook it right there in the field. Cook that juice, you know.

WILLIAMS: Was that for ya'll to use or did you sell it?

BRANDON: They'd sell it and for their own use too, and give it to friends and everything. Yeah, they'd have sugar cane patches.

WILLIAMS: When, did you have to work in the, in the fields growing up?

BRANDON: Oh, yeah.

WILLIAMS: When did that start?

BRANDON: Oh, yeah. Keep them horses going around for one thing.

WILLIAMS: On the mill?

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: Was there a store in Readyville?

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: Was there a store in Readyville?

BRANDON: Yeah, Hollandsworth run it?

MRS. BRANDON: [bringing drinks] Think your mouth is getting dry, isn't it?

BRANDON: Oh, boy. [drinks] Yeah, there was a store in Readyville.

WILLIAMS: What did you say the name was?

BRANDON: George Hollandsworth run it.

WILLIAMS: Hosworth, so that would be H-O-S-W-O-R-T-H?

BRANDON: I don't know.

HOLT: [faintly, to Williams, helping with the spelling]

WILLIAMS: Was that near the mill?

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: Did your family take your grain to the mill to get ground into flour?

BRANDON: Yeah, everybody did. That's the only way they could get it done. Had to carry it to the mill.

WILLIAMS: What did you think of that big mill when you were a kid?

BRANDON: I was scared of it. [chuckling]

HOLT: [To Williams] Is it still operational? I mean symbolically?

WILLIAMS: [To Holt, who inquired about the mill today] He's trying to get it so it's operational, gradually getting the pieces back together. I was out there a couple months ago.

BRANDON: What is this, homemade iced tea?

HOLT: I don't know what your wife—it's lemonade. It's good.

BRANDON: What is this, babe?

MRS. BRANDON: Lemonade.

BRANDON: Lemonade.

WILLIAMS: It's good.

HOLT: It is good.

BRANDON: Aaahh! [drinking]

WILLIAMS: What was scary about the mill?

BRANDON: Everything, because I never had seen nothing before, you know. Them belts would get to rubbing and flapping and scare you to death.

WILLIAMS: Did they like the, did the owners, do you remember any of the owners of the mill?

BRANDON: Rat McFerrin. That wasn't his name; that was his nickname, I can't think of his name.

WILLIAMS: What was the nickname?

BRANDON: Called him Rat McFerrin.

WILLIAMS: Ratback?

BRANDON: Rat McFerrin. He created electricity over that river to run that stuff. He was a smart man.

WILLIAMS: So it was rat like the animal?

BRANDON: Yeah. I reckon.

WILLIAMS: Back?

BRANDON: Yeah. He created electricity . . .

WILLIAMS: And what was the?

BRANDON: . . . to run that mill.

HOLT: Ratback Faron, what'd you say? Ratback what? Ratback what? What did you say his nickname was?

BRANDON: McFerrin.

HOLT: McFerrin.

WILLIAMS: Oh. Rat McFerrin.

HOLT: Yeah, Rat McFerrin.

BRANDON: That's what they called him. I don't know what his name was. But he created electricity to run that thing. Smart man.

WILLIAMS: Was your family religious?

BRANDON: Yeah, went, had to go to church every Sunday.

WILLIAMS: Where was the church?

BRANDON: Beside the school house. You'd take, get soot around the chimney, and dampen that soot and get down there and shine them shoes and go to church. Now you've got to have polish, all that. See, soot will form, you know, up in the—the best shoe polish you ever put in your mouth.

HOLT: What was the religion? What was the religion? Was it Baptist?

BRANDON: Just like it is now.

HOLT: Or primitive Baptist, or was it primitive feet washing Baptist?

BRANDON: Yeah, yeah. That was standing just like it is now.

HOLT: Alright, so it's primitive Baptist that wash feet.

BRANDON: Yes, but it's been standing for years.

WILLIAMS: Did the church have a name?

BRANDON: Methodist church was standing just like it's standing now.

HOLT: Do you remember the name of that primitive Baptist, that church that you went to then? And was the minister somebody that lived in the Readyville community?

BRANDON: I know what you're saying, I can't remember it. But they was all typed out just like they are now. I wondered how that happened.

HOLT: Like the Baptist, Methodist, and so forth.

BRANDON: Wonder how it happened.

HOLT: Well, it's nothing new under the sun, nothing new.

WILLIAMS: Were all the black folks Baptists or were some Methodists?

BRANDON: No, no, no.

WILLIAMS: No?

BRANDON: No.

WILLIAMS: So there was also Methodist?

BRANDON: My daddy was a Baptist and his cousin was a Methodist. There was different denominations back in that day.

HOLT: Yeah, but was the, was the preacher somebody that lived in your community or did they just come there every Sunday or every third Sunday and that kind of stuff?

BRANDON: Every third Sunday like that, and he walked from Nashville.

HOLT: Oh my god! He was real about his religion, wasn't he?

WILLIAMS: Walked from Nashville?

HOLT: He had to start on Thursday.

BRANDON: How was he going to get here?

HOLT: That's right!

BRANDON: He walked from Nashville to here, and he'd have stopping places.

HOLT: Oh, yeah.

BRANDON: And when he got ready to go back home he did the same thing.

HOLT: Same thing.

BRANDON: And come up here and preach.

WILLIAMS: Did you like church as a kid?

BRANDON: Yeah, you had to like it or they'd get a switch on you.

WILLIAMS: When did you get baptized?

BRANDON: Oh, I was, I was thirty, thirty, I got baptized here in town. I was thirty-two or thirty-three years old. I got baptized here, but back in them days you went to church whether you wanted to go or not. They was religious.

WILLIAMS: How many times a week would you go?

BRANDON: Once. That'd be on Sunday, but they'd have church meetings, you know, every now and then and then they'd go to the deacons and the mothers thing. But the churches haven't changed they way of doing too much from that day. They still do . . .

WILLIAMS: Now what would happen when somebody in your family or community died?

BRANDON: Well, he died at home. See there wasn't none of these fancy hospitals. The neighbors and things would sit up all night before he died, and when he died they'd cover him up. And there wasn't no such thing as embalming, you know, and the next morning they'd get the wagon and pull it up side the door. While they was doing that the man was making the coffin, and put you in the coffin, and the rest of 'em would cut across the field and lead the way into the cemetery, and bury you and go on back home and go to work.

WILLIAMS: So the family would get the body ready? So there normally wasn't what we call a funeral service?

BRANDON: I know, I guess I was nine. A woman lived *way back* down in the woods behind us, and her name was Emma Haley. She had some children the age of me, but I can't remember the children's names. That's funny. And she dies, and my daddy went back down there with the wagon and the mules and me and got her. And brought her out of the house and never did stop 'til he got to the cemetery. And they buried her, and stuck a rock up to her head, and everybody went on home and pulled off what they call their Sunday clothes and went to work.

WILLIAMS: So you did have Sunday clothes?

BRANDON: Well, they had some things they called Sunday clothes, but you know, put them reins back on and go to work.

WILLIAMS: So there weren't really any undertakers in the community?

BRANDON: Scales was the first ones.

HOLT: Did they service Readyville, too?

BRANDON: Scales come to Readyville, everywhere. Scales was the first black undertaker in the area, and he had a rig with horses and two black horses and a pretty rig and he started burying people. That was about twelve or fifteen years passed up. Negroes had just started to have a little inch mile [?], a little this and that. Well, one of them bought a little house, but didn't have no money. But they believed in paying as they went back in that day; it'd be paid for. Scales would take the body and bury 'em. That's where he got his start. Scales has put many a person in the ground.

WILLIAMS: So how many black people were there in the Readyville area when you were growing up?

BRANDON: A lot of 'em. Lot of black in that area.

WILLIAMS: More than in other parts of the county?

BRANDON: Most all parts of the county, Woodbury was full of 'em. See, they barged [?] there. You couldn't get out. You just had to stay where you was at.

HOLT: What's was another name, you know like the Brandons was in Readyville? What's another, you know like, you know like Houses [and other family names]?

BRANDON: Milton and all them named little places.

HOLT: No, what was, you know, like your—

WILLIAMS: Family name?

HOLT: Like your name was Brandon when you's in Readyville.

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: What's another, you know, like a well-known name? You know, like in Murfreesboro now you got Houses and you got Johnsons and Jones. In Readyville you know how the families are. What was another name, family name, besides Brandon and Brewers? Can you think of anybody else?

WILLIAMS: Your neighbors, kinfolk?

BRANDON: I was trying to think. That's about it.

HOLT: It was full of Brandons, huh?

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

HOLT: Brandons ruled the Readyville area.

BRANDON: Yeah. Yeah.

HOLT: Okay.

BRANDON: There was a lot of them at that time. There was a lot of Brandons at that time. They'd fill up a church.

WILLIAMS: So you had a lot of—

BRANDON: It died down, but my family used to be a [unintelligible word] family.

WILLIAMS: So I didn't ask you, how many brothers and sisters your father had?

BRANDON: Nine or ten.

WILLIAMS: Nine or ten, and they all lived . . .

BRANDON: Yeah. Now they all dead.

WILLIAMS: But they all lived around Readyville?

BRANDON: Yeah. And they all scattered, and there's a whole lot of them I've never seen now.

WILLIAMS: So could you name all those aunts and uncles if you had to?

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: Oh! You want some more [lemonade]?

BRANDON: Uh-uh. I got enough.

HOLT: That was good.

BRANDON: Oh, boy. Well, we've had an enjoyable evening.

WILLIAMS and HOLT speak quietly about whether to continue.

WILLIAMS: Are you worn out? Have I worn you out?

BRANDON: No, no.

WILLIAMS: Well, can I ask a few more questions today?

BRANDON: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Okay. I have a few more questions and five minutes left on the . . . How would you describe relations between blacks and whites when you were growing up?

BRANDON: Well, I was always, you know what? I've been a fortunate person. I've never had too much problem with neither side. I haven't. I've had folks, "Oh, I can't stand so and so, he's white. I can't stand so and so, he's black, but as far as racists, I've never had too much problem. Ain't had no problem. Now for years, the South was integrated. I was raised in the South. I knew the South. And I'd transport my self back and forth to Illinois. She's open, free. To whoever wants to be, it is free. Well, I had sense enough to know, when I hit the Mason-Dixon line that I was in the South. I'd pick up my luggage before I was asked, and be up in the front of that train where I was supposed to be. And a lot of them would slow around and drag around. I obeyed the laws, either side. But I'll tell you what got me. I had just left the South and been in the North about six months and had a good job, because I was making fifty cents a day here, and I was making five dollars and five cents a day in Illinois. It was a good job. I walked down on the corner street car one morning and a white lady come in here with a fur coat on, and I'd never seen one before. I'd never seen a fur coat before, with perfumes and stuff on her. I'm sitting in the street car like this. I always tried to get on the side with the window where I can see my number on the, and it was cold and about, just about zero. And she sat down. [Here the audio recorder microphone failed. The following section is taken from the videotape.] I commenced to doing this [scoots away]. She looked at me, and when she looked at me it scared me worser. I commenced to do this. She grabbed me at the top of my coat right here and says, she says, "Where you from?" I said, "Tennessee." She says, "Poor thing." She says, "Listen, I'm not going to hurt you and I'm not going to bother you." [End section of failed audio] She said, "The next person that you see, don't do like that." I said, "Alright." It scared me *to death*. That was the first white person that I ever had sat down in my life with. She said, "Just sit down like the rest of the people." I said, "Yes'm." She said, "Don't say [laughs] yes'm to me. Say yes." I said, "I wasn't saying that." [laughs] When you've been trained, let

me tell you something, when you've been trained from here up to here and so and so is so and so, it's hard to get it out of you. Hmm! It's that.

WILLIAMS: So as long as you followed the rules . . .

BRANDON: That's the reason why I tell you, that's the reason why I tell you about training your children. If you start training him some right there, [raising his hand] and he coming on up there, you gonna nearly have to take a hammer to knock it outta his head. Of course you put it in there, it's stamped. You can stamp it in his head.

WILLIAMS: Well, thank you for talking to me today. I hope we can visit again.

BRANDON: Yeah, I hope you come back here.

WILLIAMS: I'd love to. I think there's a lot more I could talk to you about.

BRANDON: Come back whenever you please.

WILLIAMS: Okay, thank you. [audio recorder stops; remainder transcribed from videotape] You're a good storyteller.

HOLT: He is. All you need is more time. You could spend the night.

WILLIAMS: [To Holt:] I'd love to come back some time.

HOLT: Well, if you just call me, we'll see. You know, we'll work on something. I'll call him, and I'll just come on back over here.

BRANDON: Alright. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: What I'd really like to do if you're interested is to go out to Readyville and look around at some of these places.

HOLT: He's interested.

BRANDON: Listen, whatever ya'll need and I'm at your service.

HOLT: That's right. He means it.

BRANDON: Good enough.

WILLIAMS: I'd love to see the place where—

END OF APRIL 22 INTERVIEW

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CONTINUATION OF INTERVIEW IN READYVILLE, TENNESSEE

MAY 3, 2009

WILLIAMS: [Outside the gate at the highway entrance to the mill grounds] It's May 3, 2009. We're in Readyville at the mill with Willie Brandon. Continuation of the oral history interview for PARQ.

BRANDON: There she is.

WILLIAMS: So what do you remember about the mill? You were saying a few things in the car.

BRANDON: Well, you used to, you used to do food here, you used to buy ice here. Grind food up for, wheat for food. This was the main event.

WILLIAMS: The main event?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: What does that mean?

BRANDON: Everybody came here for everything.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: Now, I think you told me before that you thought it was scary.

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: What was scary about it?

BRANDON: You was afraid you'd fall off the cliff. There's a cliff down there. It's awful fragile. You might slip off that cliff into the river.

WILLIAMS: Now we can walk down there if you feel like it, but . . .

BRANDON: You can go.

WILLIAMS: You think so?

BRANDON: Yeah, you can go down there.

WILLIAMS: Well, what about you?

BRANDON: I'll go for part of the way. [tape stops then restarts with Brandon and Holt walking down the driveway toward the mill] I guess, if they have one.

WILLIAMS: It's the main, it's the main one with the...

HOLT: Okay, because all these little things were little shops or little stores?

WILLIAMS: The owner said, well one was where they stored the grain.

HOLT: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And then, I think there was an ice house somewhere.

HOLT: So is their plan now just like a museum kind of thing, you think?

WILLIAMS: He wants to have a restaurant in one of these buildings and the owner, current owner wants to have a restaurant, in one of these buildings . . .

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And he, the mill he wants to get it so it's operational again.

HOLT: So it's workable again.

BRANDON: He do?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. And he just needs to get some of the machinery that had been, some of it had kinda collapsed down in the river and get it pulled up and all the belts hooked up, and . . .

BRANDON: Hooked up.

WILLIAMS: Now you said this was overgrown.

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: What was it?

HOLT: Was it where the river was?

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: Are you sure the walk's okay?

BRANDON: Yeah. I'm alright.

WILLIAMS: Now what would you bring here to get ground?

BRANDON: Wheat, oats, corn, barley.

WILLIAMS: Was that all for your family use?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Or did you sell any of it?

BRANDON: They sold it and used it for the family too. It was for both uses.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember the owner of the mill when you were growing up?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: What was his name?

BRANDON: It may have not put his name, but I know what they called him. They called him Rat McFerrin. I don't know what his name was. That may not have been his name. Of course I was a young kid, but that's what they called him, Mister McFerrin.

WILLIAMS: See he has picnic tables out here and I think he wants it to be a place for like—

HOLT: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Like a bus group could stop and have lunch. School groups could come out and learn about the—

HOLT: The history of it.

WILLIAMS: The history of it, uh-huh. One thing he has to do is get the dam repaired, on the other side of the road.

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: So then he'd have water.

HOLT: That comes—

WILLIAMS: To bring through.

HOLT: Yeah, because if not it wouldn't turn anyways.

WILLIAMS: Right.

BRANDON: If you win on this program, you'll be in the money, won't you?

WILLIAMS: No, not me.

BRANDON: Somebody will.

HOLT: Because there's no water down there at all now.

WILLIAMS: No, it doesn't.

BRANDON: Uh-uh. Ain't no water in it.

HOLT: I, I, I don't see any.

WILLIAMS: No. Now there is in the river.

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: Well, there ain't nothing down here.

WILLIAMS: Not there.

BRANDON: Nothing?

HOLT: Nothing. Nothing but a bunch of poison ivy.

BRANDON: Poison ivy. I don't want it.

HOLT: But the big ole wheel is what, on the other side of there?

WILLIAMS: No, it's under, actually, you don't see a wheel.

BRANDON: You don't see it.

WILLIAMS: It's underneath.

BRANDON: It's underneath.

HOLT: Is that how it's always been?

WILLIAMS: On this one.

HOLT: Okay, I don't know. I guess I thought it was on the side of it.

WILLIAMS: Did you tell me about the electricity that they generated here?

BRANDON: This man produced electricity in the beginning, off of this water line or something. I don't know how he done it. That was before the electric people come in here.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

BRANDON: He had electric.

WILLIAMS: He had it but not everybody did?

BRANDON: He had this water, I don't know. That's before the electric company come to Tennessee. I was here when she come in. They wanted me to take a dollar stock in it, and I didn't do it.

WILLIAMS: You didn't?

BRANDON: Uh-uh. That was in 1930. Electricity come to Tennessee in 1934 or five. I was working over there where Ben is.

HOLT: Working where?

BRANDON: On the square where Ben is today?

HOLT: Were you? In '30?

BRANDON: '34. [laughs]

WILLIAMS: Why didn't you buy the stock?

BRANDON: Didn't, money was hard to get a hold of.

HOLT: A dollar was a lot of money then.

BRANDON: And a dollar was like forty now.

WILLIAMS: In the depression, yeah.

BRANDON: And if you had a dollar you tried to hold it as long as you could. I ain't spending my dollar on that, you see, money had a value then. A quarter, woooooo! If you had a half a dollar, boy, you could go see your girlfriend and everything else. "You have a half a dollar?" That's funny, ain't it?

HOLT: It is.

BRANDON: Well, it's been, it's true. It's been like that. It's unbelievable.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. So you said you were afraid you would fall off into the—

BRANDON: Huh?

WILLIAMS: You said you were afraid you'd fall off into the river, on the other side?

BRANDON: Yeah, and there used to be for fish, it was a white fish. It'd be about that long [indicating on his cane, about two feet], and he was built slender but he had a big head. He used to swim down there, and I used to catch him. The scales were thin on him, you hit him once and you could nearly scale him, and they were good. They called it some kind of white sucker, and he was the prettiest, cleanest fish you'd ever seen. I used to catch them until I'd get tired.

WILLIAMS: So could you fish anywhere you wanted to along the river?

BRANDON: You didn't have to have no permit. See, I was here before you had to have a driving license. Didn't nobody know nothing about no driver's license. If you bought a car you got it; if you hit a tree you just hit it. [laughter]

HOLT: There probably wasn't no insurance either, was there?

BRANDON: No! If you get a nick on the head and don't know, wasn't no insurance you was supposed to go to. You just put some coal oil on it and keep walking. That's all you had to put on it was coal oil.

WILLIAMS: Corn oil?

BRANDON: Coal oil, what you put in—

WILLIAMS: Coal oil, oh.

HOLT: Kerosene.

BRANDON: Grease it with it, and pat it. Put your hat on and go on about your business. [laughter] Wasn't no hospital. Well, in these big cities they had 'em. But I mean in these kind of areas, wasn't no hospitals.

WILLIAMS: Now where was the general store that you, in this community that you'd go to?

BRANDON: General store? I don't remember that.

WILLIAMS: Dry goods.

HOLT: Just a store, just a store. Where did you go to the store? They didn't have a store like?

BRANDON: Yeah, there was a store here.

HOLT: Oh, at the mill. Okay.

BRANDON: Across the street from the mill there was a store.

WILLIAMS: So it was right here.

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Everything was right here.

BRANDON: Yeah. There was a store across the street there. Hollingsworth run it. That was his name, and you could get your flour and everything, your shoes and your socks. Everything at the same place.

WILLIAMS: Was the post office always there?

BRANDON: The post office was separate on the corner over there.

WILLIAMS: And it's always been there?

BRANDON: Mhmm. But it was small, wasn't nothing but a little box sitting out there. But, back in those days, if you wanted to buy flour, it was over here. If you wanted to buy shoes, they was over here. If you want a pair of socks they was down there. They kept all that merchandise in one place.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

BRANDON: Whatever you wanted, he had it. And you better not put your hands on it. He went and got it and brought it to you and asked you, "Is that what you want?" You say, "Yeah." "Well, it's so and so, and so and so." You'd pay him and walk out the door.

WILLIAMS: No credit?

BRANDON: To people he really knew. No credit. And if you was black, in that store across there, and I'm talking about in my day, I mean when I was twelve and thirteen, and my mother sent me to this store, and if you was standing there talking to the man, I stood there and waited until ya'll got through if it was an hour.

WILLIAMS: So the white folks got first.

BRANDON: Till they were done talking. Then he'd ask me what did I want? And if I refused to stand there and wait until he got through talking, he would call the people, the landlord that we lived on, and he'd put you out.

HOLT: Because you we're being disrespectful, They called it being disrespectful.

BRANDON: [Nods yes] That's where I come from. That's the reason why I tell you I got a lot of sense.

HOLT: Yes, you do.

WILLIAMS: So you knew to wait your turn?

BRANDON: That's the reason why I tell you I got more sense than anybody. I've been through more than anybody. Ya'll don't know nothing about what I'm talking about, and I'm glad you don't.

HOLT: I'm sixty-two.

BRANDON: You don't know nothing about it.

HOLT: And I don't, uh-uh.

BRANDON: Never heard of it.

WILLIAMS: I'm glad you're telling me though. So we'll remember.

BRANDON: That's been the laws of this country, just like they are today. You obey by them [?] or went to the jail, and when you didn't obey them they'd put you on the cord [?], the county road. They'd tie your feet with a big chain, about that far apart, and that chain would have a ball on it that weighed about ten pounds, and you drug that. They called it a ball and chain. And you drug that chain and ball all day long. Unruly. That's why I keep telling you that you don't know what I know. I'm glad you don't.

HOLT: But it's very important that you tell these things, and when you do, like you said nobody knows, you know. They don't know. When you tell these things to people, who may not have known or whatever, but it makes you teach your children, and that's the only way that our world is going to live.

BRANDON: That's the only way.

HOLT: You're going to teach your children to teach their children. Because if not, history is lost.

BRANDON: That's the only way. That's the only way you do it.

HOLT: Yeah. You can't begrudge things that happened. You have to learn from them.

BRANDON: Did I ever dream that I'd live to see a black president?

HOLT: I doubt you did.

WILLIAMS: You never dreamed that?

BRANDON: Uh-uh. I never did think the country would stand that, which it did. So we don't know. The majority went for him, or else he wouldn't be in there. It was a close, it was a close race. There's still a majority out there that don't want him, and there's still a majority out there that want's him. So there we are.

HOLT: And what year were you born? 1906?

BRANDON: 1906.

HOLT: That's right.

BRANDON: 1906.

WILLIAMS: Let me. [break in tape; discussion turns to location of the black cemetery nearby]

BRANDON: Takes us off the road, and it's rough. You've got to go through a man's cattle farm. We can't get in there.

HOLT: Do you think you know where the general area is?

BRANDON: I wish we could, but we can't get in there. Is that right? [reading his watch] 1:27 [laughs] Who, boy. It's cool up here, ain't it?

HOLT: Yeah, it feels pretty good. If we'd known we was coming we could have packed us a lunch. It's a little warm.

WILLIAMS: Some a . . . well, I was hoping that we could get back to . . .

HOLT: Do you think that you could just get us to the general area? We may not be able to, you know, go all the way back in there. Do you think you might, we can get to like the general area where your homeplace is?

BRANDON: Where my homeplace is?

HOLT: Yeah.

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Get us as close as we can?

HOLT: Close as we can, and then yeah.

BRANDON: Okay.

HOLT: Alright.

BRANDON: I can carry you to the general area.

WILLIAMS: Okay.

HOLT: Alright then, that's what we need.

WILLIAMS: Anything else about the downtown here?

BRANDON: Not that I know of.

WILLIAMS: You said there was the mill and the store and the post office. Was that about it?

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: That's all they had, huh?

BRANDON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And you didn't have any trains out this way?

BRANDON: Uh-uh.

HOLT: How'd ya'll get from like point A to point B? You're going to show us like when you come to the mill. How'd you get here?

BRANDON: Wagon and horses pulled me here.

HOLT: Okay.

WILLIAMS: On the, on the dirt roads?

HOLT: Hello.

TOMM BRADY: How are ya'll? [walking up to the picnic tables]

HOLT: We're great, thank you. How are you?

BRADY: Hey, how are you?

WILLIAMS: This is the owner of the mill.

HOLT: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: This is Willie Brandon.

BRADY: Hey Willie. Tomm Brady.

WILLIAMS: He grew up in Readyville.

BRANDON: Man, I used to come back in here when I was seven years old. I'm 103 now.

BRADY: Oh, my gosh, 103?

HOLT: He'll be 103 next week.

BRADY: Well, welcome back to Readyville.

BRANDON: I was raised on this river.

BRADY: 103?! I don't think I've ever met anybody 103 years old.

BRANDON: That's what everybody says.

HOLT: That's right.

BRADY: 103.

HOLT: He'll be 103 June the 12th.

BRADY: And you're twenty-nine.

HOLT: Absolutely! Absolutely.

WILLIAMS: So we're talking about Readyville.

BRADY: Oh, good.

WILLIAMS: Another interview.

BRANDON: You put a whole lot of sweat and tears into here.

BRADY: Yes sir, I have. Three years.

BRANDON: It shows it.

BRADY: Well, thank you. Thank you.

BRANDON: Where's the power at? The rollers and stuff?

HOLT: The wheels.

BRADY: Well, there are stones on the inside. The rollers they took out in the early '70s, and they put back stones.

BRANDON: Put back stones?

BRADY: Uh-huh, would you like to see?

HOLT: We went back there, I did.

BRANDON: I done been back there, and they took the rollers out.

BRADY: They took the rollers out.

HOLT: The big old wheel that's on the picture is not going to be like that anymore? Is that what you're talking about?

BRADY: Well, this is a mill stone.

HOLT: Okay.

WILLIAMS: I think she's—

BRADY: And this mill had mill stones, and then at some point it had steel rollers.

BRANDON: Yeah.

BRADY: For flour, because the technology to produce a lot more flour they went to steel rollers in the, probably in the '30s or '40s.

BRANDON: Well listen.

HOLT: What kind of rollers did they have? Do you remember Mr. Brandon?

BRANDON: Listen, you're younger than I am but you read a lot and keep up. What was the man's name that invented the electricity before electricity come to run this?

BRADY: Rat McFerrin.

BRANDON: That's what I told him.

HOLT: That's what he told us.

BRADY: Arthur McFerrin.

BRANDON: I wanted to see if I had the name still.

BRADY: You got it.

HOLT: You got it right.

BRADY: Rat McFerrin, and when he, when he, when he put electricity to all those houses in Readyville, they called him *Mr. Rat*.

HOLT: He said, he said, "I didn't know if that was his right name," but he said that it was Rat. He remembered.

BRADY: Yes sir.

BRANDON: Why I asked you that, is that they asked me here while ago, and it's been a hell of a time.

BRADY: Yeah, it's a long time.

BRANDON: And it was running in my mind that, that was his name.

BRADY: Uh-huh. Rat McFerrin.

BRANDON: I got it right, okay.

BRADY: And he put, I guess he ordered the tin for this roof.

BRANDON: He did.

BRADY: Because I saved some of the tin that came off when I replaced it and it has his name on the back of it.

BRANDON: He ordered it.

BRADY: Yeah, and put it on. He's a smart, smart man.

BRANDON: Wonder how he got that knowledge back in that day?

BRADY: I don't know. It amazes me, to produce ice in this building.

BRANDON: God, God gave him that.

BRADY: He did. He had to have because there wasn't anybody else. Uh-uh.

BRANDON: There wasn't no books.

BRADY: Uh-uh, uh-uh. He engineered I mean miraculous things.

BRANDON: He didn't have no, none of that ya'll got.

BRADY: No, he just knew how to work and he figured things out.

BRANDON: God give him that.

BRADY: Yes, you're right.

BRANDON: He had to, because that man could do anything he wanted to.

BRADY: Yeah, and he did.

BRANDON: Anything he wanted to convert, he could do it. I don't know what if he went to the first grade or the second grade.

BRADY: Well, it don't matter. He was a smart man.

BRANDON: But that man had knowledge.

BRADY: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: Did people like him?

BRANDON: Yeah, he was a loveable person.

BRADY: Yeah, very well liked.

BRANDON: He was nice to people, but he wasn't uppity up like we got now. You see them all wandering around here. Listen, let me tell you something. I can work on my own before I work on anybody else. I got four, a daughter and three granddaughters. Listen to me good. They not in Tennessee. All of them call themselves well educated, which they are for this day. But did you know you could be an educated fool?

BRADY: Absolutely! Yes, you can. You can have a lot of school and not have a lot of sense.

BRANDON: And not have sense enough to walk up to that tree and put your hand on it.

BRADY: I agree. I think you learn from doing things.

BRANDON: That's it.

BRADY: You can read, and I read a lot.

BRANDON: This man we talking about, I doubt if he went through the eighth grade.

BRADY: Oh, I would assure you that he didn't.

BRANDON: Back in them days.

BRADY: But he worked and he taught himself how to do things, and learn from every mistake I'm sure. Until he got it right.

BRANDON: He'd talk to people. He'd help you if he could. I said his name was Rat McFerrin.

BRADY: That's what his name was.

BRANDON: I guess I was nine or ten in that day. It's been a long time hasn't it.

BRADY: Yes, sir. It's been a long time.

WILLIAMS: Now you said at the store that the black people had to wait their turn.

BRANDON: You'd better wait.

WILLIAMS: Was that the same here at the mill?

BRANDON: All over the state of Tennessee, it was the same.

BRADY: Well, yes sir.

BRANDON: Not just this mill, but all mills. Tennessee was in that day back there. When I'm talking about, you waited everywhere in Tennessee, or get your head knocked off. You would pick your choice.

BRADY: And did you know that we now have a black president? Can you believe it?

BRANDON: I couldn't believe it.

BRADY: Could you believe it?!

BRANDON: I thought it would never happen.

BRADY: I would have said it wouldn't have happened.

BRANDON: I said it would never happen.

BRADY: Well it's a great day. We've come a long way since when you waited at this mill, and at that store.

BRANDON: That's what I'm sitting here telling you.

BRADY: You're not waiting anymore.

BRANDON: And I'm still alive.

BRADY: That's right, and 103. I know I've never met anyone 103.

HOLT: And telling about it, and telling about it. 103 and telling it.

BRANDON: I'm still alive and looking at it.

BRADY: That's awesome.

BRANDON: And I get scared of myself. What's kept me here?

BRADY: God's kept you here.

BRANDON: Yeah.

BRADY: There's something left for you to do.

BRANDON: I wonder what.

BRADY: Well, only he knows that.

BRANDON: To pick up trash up and down the street. That's all I've ever done.

BRADY: That's alright. It's worked well for you for 103 years.

BRANDON: I guess that's what he want me to do.

HOLT: He's also left you here to tell a story. You know? To tell the story. Because, like, there's not too many 103-year-old people that can, that still have their mind and the ability to be able to explain things to people and you, and like you were talking today, the knowledge, you were talking about the nurses and all, you've lived to be 103 so you've seen quite a few things. So I feel like the Lord has left you here for that purpose too.

BRANDON: I know it.

HOLT: To tell it.

BRANDON: I know he's blessed me.

HOLT: Absolutely.

BRANDON: Listen here. I fell the first day of this year. We work together. I had finished working night, six hours. I had finished all my work at the bottom. And the second floor men's bathroom, I said, "I'll go up there and check it." I went up there and checked it, and I turned around in the mirror in the bathroom had finger smears on it. I had my little cart. I reached over and got a cloth, a clean cloth to wipe those marks off of that glass, and so I made me just like a ball [twisting his wrist to demonstrate]. I said, "Doggone, I'm falling." I couldn't balance myself. I couldn't catch myself, and fell.

BRADY: Yes sir.

BRANDON: Broke this hip [pointing to his left side]. I got a scar right there, knocked a hole in top of my head. They put me in the hospital. I'd black out and come to. When they got me to the hospital I didn't have no use of nothing but my hands. No use here [pointing to his legs]. My mind would work when I could stay awake, but I'd go to sleep. I woke up and they had me—I'm little anyhow—they had me like that, and had a big band around my neck. Hook. Hook. Girl was standing there. I say, "Girl, I ain't got use of nothing but my arms. Take all that mess off of me." She says, "I can't." I said, "I know you can't, cause you've been all with them that did it." About that time another nurse come in and asked the girl, "Is he giving you trouble?" The girl said, "No, he wants this stuff off of him, but he can't get it off." I say, "Yeah, it's coming off of me. I am upset [?]. I ain't got no control over nothing but my hands." I said, "What's the use of tying me down here like this?" The owner of the hospital happened to come flirting through like this [swinging his

shoulders back and forth]. I mean she owned it. “Girls, what’s the problem here?” I said, “There ain’t no problem.” I say, “They trying to tie me in this bed,” and I say, “They done tied and I ain’t going to be tied.” She said, “Yeah you going to be tied.” I said, “What do you bet?” She said, “If you stay out here you’re going to be tied.” I said, “I don’t have to stay out here.” She owned it, but I didn’t know it.

BRADY: Yes, sir.

BRANDON: She say, “Yeah.” I say, “Listen, lady. I own the place.” I said, “You’re exactly who I want to talk to, the owner, because you can produce.” I said, “Take this mess off of me, or else I’m going to leave here.” “You can’t leave here!” I say, “How come I can’t?” “You was put it here.” But I said, “I can go out when I get ready.” I said, “I got just as much right as you got. Now if you don’t take this mess off of me I’m going to get up and get out of here.” So she told the nurse to take it off and when [she] went out the door, the nurse say, “What are you going to do?” She said, “I ain’t going to do nothing with that fool. He’s crazy.” [laughter] I blacked out again.

BRADY: They were worried that you were going to fall out of the bed or get out of the bed?

HOLT: Probably.

BRANDON: How could I get out when I couldn’t stand up?

HOLT: They probably thought so.

BRADY: And that was last year?

BRANDON: This year!

HOLT: No, this year.

BRANDON: Ain’t been four months ago.

BRADY: You know how many people break a hip and never get up again?

BRANDON: That’s right.

BRADY: That’s amazing. You’ve got something left to do.

WILLIAMS: He still works at the court house.

BRADY: I know. I read his shirt.

BRANDON: The doctor told me—

BRADY: Well, that’s what gets you to 103 is working.

HOLT: Absolutely.

BRADY: I tried two years not working. Uh-uh.

HOLT: It don't work.

BRANDON: It's no good.

BRADY: No, it's no good. That's why I bought this, because I had to have something to do.

BRANDON: Keep on doing.

BRADY: I'm going to. I've tried retirement at forty-two and that—

HOLT: It just doesn't work.

BRADY: I bought a motor—I bought a Harley Davidson cause I didn't have anything better to do and no more sense than that, and I rode and rode and rode, and now the Harley Davidson is the metal on this roof.

BRANDON: And you work.

BRADY: I sold it and bought this roof.

BRANDON: You did the right thing.

BRADY: I did. Yeah, you've got to work. I don't understand.

BRANDON: I don't care how much money you've got. I don't care how much education you've got.

BRADY: You've got to have something to do! Get up in the morning.

BRANDON: You've got to have that brain involved in something.

HOLT: Or else you'll lose it. That's what he says.

BRADY: You're right. You're right.

HOLT: He has been nominated to go to Washington. One hundred year olds who still work. Actually he hadn't worked since he did his hip, but he's still like on worker's comp, so he's still qualified as working for 100 years old. So he's been nominated to go to Washington.

WILLIAMS: Some sort of ceremony.

BRADY: They ought to have a ceremony for that.

HOLT: He don't want anything else. He had a hundred—

BRADY: You ought to just go to make the rest of us feel good.

HOLT: He doesn't want anything else.

BRADY: Not for you. But do it for the rest of us who, we don't see 103-year-old people.

HOLT: Still walking around.

BRADY: And sharp as a tack.

HOLT: Look, I got out of breath walking from the car back here.

BRANDON: No, you ain't going to see many of us.

BRADY: Well, you need to go to Washington if you have that opportunity, to show the rest of the country that hey, if you just keep working and you can live this long.

BRANDON: Yeah, I'll go if they can get it, you know, to where it's convenient, you know, to go.

BRADY: Yeah. Well, I'll bet you they'll make it convenient for you.

HOLT: They will.

BRADY: That's quite an honor.

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: It is.

BRADY: I see people on the news occasionally on maybe Channel 4 News, they show the centenarian people.

BRANDON: Uh-huh.

HOLT: Yeah, he was on—

BRADY: But I've never in real life met one.

HOLT: He was on, let's see. He was on there I think his hundredth. He had a great honor for a hundred birthday.

BRANDON: You haven't hit sixty yet, have you?

BRADY: No! I haven't hit fifty yet.

BRANDON: I knew you were fifties.

BRADY: No, I'm forty-seven.

BRANDON: Forty-seven?

BRADY: Forty-seven.

HOLT: He's just a child. He's just a mere child.

BRADY: Just a baby, compared, just a baby.

BRANDON: Just forty-seven?

BRADY: Just forty-seven.

BRANDON: Your life just started.

BRADY: Now, see, what year were you, what year were you forty-seven? You're 103 in '09.

BRANDON: Oh, man. How many years would that be?

HOLT: Nineteen, what, fifty-two or -three.

BRADY: I don't know, but when you were forty-seven I wasn't born yet.

BRANDON: You wasn't born yet.

HOLT: Oh, okay. Let's see, I'm sixty-three.

WILLIAMS: I think you were up in Chicago then. Is that right, or had you come back then?

BRADY: You don't look sixty-three. I would not have guessed that you were sixty-three.

BRANDON: When I was forty-seven years old I could have run two miles and go "huh" [small breath] and it'd be over with.

BRADY: Uh-huh.

BRANDON: Tough. The doctor told them out here when I got all banged up at this age, he say, "You know what's holding this old man?" Say, "He's rough." Say, "His body shows he's been through it." Say, "He's tough." Say, "It's just like a stone that you chip off of."

BRADY: Well, nobody, no elderly people—and I don't mean, that's the wrong word—but no old people get up from a broken hip. That's usually what kills old people.

BRANDON: I know that.

BRADY: They get a broken hip, and then they lay up and get pneumonia, so it's amazing that you're—

BRANDON: They die.

BRADY: —out at Readyville Mill four months after a broken hip at 103.

BRANDON: I told the girl at—

BRADY: That’s your story.

BRANDON: I told the girl at [unintelligible word] hospital that I was going to die. I said, “I can’t make it. I’m too old.” I said, “This here’s broke.” She says, “Oh, don’t you die here!” [laughs]

HOLT: Who was that? Janie? Who was that? Janie? She didn’t want you dying on her, huh?

BRANDON: [Nods] See, I read enough to know that the condition I was at my age I couldn’t make it. I say, “Girl,” I say, “don’t waste no more time,” I say, “because I can’t make it.” She say, “What?”

BRADY: Well, you did.

BRANDON: I say, “I’m going to die.” She said, “Mr. Brandon, please don’t die now. Hold it! Hold it!” [laughs]

HOLT: You’d be surprised at all of the people who ask about him. All the commissioners.

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: I work in the mayor’s office.

BRADY: Uh-huh.

BRANDON: I’m glad I’ve got, I’m glad I’ve got a lot of friends.

HOLT: Yes, you do.

BRANDON: I’m proud of that.

BRADY: Well, you should be. That’s all any of us have.

BRANDON: I’m proud of that.

WILLIAMS: And you’ve got a beautiful family.

BRANDON: Children, are you all ready to go?

HOLT: Whenever you ready, sir.

WILLIAMS: [To Brady:] I know you don’t your picture made, but could I?

BRADY: Shoot, yeah. I'll have my picture made. [tape stops while Williams photographs Brandon and Brady together; tape resumes] —what a plow is?

BRANDON: Uh-uh.

BRADY: Yes you, well, I know you've, I know I bet you've run one before. Anyway, I was hanging an old plow in the mill this morning at six o'clock.

BRANDON: What is it? What kind is it?

BRADY: Well, you walk behind it and the mules go in the front, and it's a harrow.

BRANDON: That's a V harrow.

BRADY: Yes, sir. So I was hanging it from the ceiling and here comes all these people and they said they're here for their appointment. And I said, "What appointment?" And a photographer had, without asking me, had charged these people to come out here and take a bunch of photographs. And when she, she didn't get here later and I said, "What'd you mean charging these people to take pictures out here without asking me?" I said, you know, "Somebody going to make some money out here, I'm getting some of it! I want some of it!"

HOLT: I want some of it. No!

BRADY: So my morning started rough but got much better.

HOLT: Well, good. And look how you topped it off by meeting Mr. Brandon.

BRADY: It wouldn't get any better. Wouldn't get any better. It was a pleasure to meet you!

BRANDON: I'm glad to meet you.

BRADY: It's good to meet—please come back another time.

BRANDON: Alright. Keep on with the good stuff.

BRADY: Okay, well I'm going to get this mill running one day.

BRANDON: Alright.

BRADY: And I'll be sure you're here for the first cornmeal.

HOLT: Oh, that would be wonderful.

BRADY: Yeah.

HOLT: That would be wonderful.

BRANDON: I hope I'm here. I hope I'm here.

HOLT: That would be wonderful.

WILLIAMS: Carolyn's wondering about the, she, I think she expects to have a water wheel on the side—

HOLT: Because all I ever did was see pictures. I've never been out here before in my life. I was born in Murfreesboro.

BRADY: Well, this mill has a turbine, which is a waterwheel on its side.

HOLT: Okay.

BRADY: And it's under—

HOLT: I looked up there and saw the mechanism, all the stuff, all the guts are kind of just laying around.

BRADY: Uh-huh. Well, way down deep—

HOLT: Oh, deeper than that?

BRADY: Yeah, deep in the mill race is the turbine, and it's a waterwheel on its side, and when water comes down this mill race, it hits that turbine and spins it just like a waterwheel.

HOLT: Oh, I see. Okay.

BRADY: And that's what powers this old mill.

HOLT: Oh, okay. I always saw pretty pictures of it.

BRADY: Mr. Willie I know remembers that.

HOLT: Yeah, he does. He was telling us it was under there.

BRADY: It's still there.

WILLIAMS: [To Brady:] So how are you doing on the dam?

BRADY: Oh, who knows?

WILLIAMS: Still waiting for . . .

BRADY: It's in the hands of the state and the engineers. And I don't know.

HOLT: Oh, is it?

BRADY: That's over my head.

HOLT: That's a hurry-up-and-wait situation.

BRANDON: Ain't they got that Halls Hill Pike torn up?

BRADY: I don't know.

BRANDON: They're working on it, ain't they?

BRADY: I don't know. I never go down there.

BRANDON: I'm afraid to take them down there.

HOLT: We were trying to get to where his, just in a general area, where his old home place was.

BRANDON: I don't think I can get to it.

BRADY: Well, you need to try.

HOLT: Yeah, we'll just get as close as we can get, or you can just point and say this is where it was. We won't know the difference anyway. I won't!

WILLIAMS: The census says it was Vaught Road. Do you know?

BRADY: Vaught?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. V-A-U-G-H-T.

BRADY: I've heard of Vaught Road. Do you have GPS?

WILLIAMS: No.

BRADY: Do you want to borrow mine?

HOLT: They probably called it something else.

WILLIAMS: He knows where it is.

BRANDON: I think they've done got that road cut off. They keep working on it.

HOLT: From Halls Hill Pike?

BRANDON: Yeah, I think it done cut if off.

BRADY: I live in Bell Buckle, so I go the other way.

HOLT: Well, if you can get us just to as close as you can get that'll be fine. I know you said the cemetery's back.

WILLIAMS: He says you have to drive through a farm field to get to the cemetery.

BRADY: I don't know.

HOLT: You don't plan to be buried up here, do you?

BRANDON: Huh?

HOLT: You don't plan to be buried up here, do you?

BRANDON: Yeah.

HOLT: How we going to get, how we going to get up there?

BRANDON: They'll get there somehow.

HOLT: Okay. We'll have to go back to the mules.

BRADY: He don't much care.

HOLT: He's flying. He might be going to mine. Who knows?

BRANDON: My mother and father's buried back there. If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me.

BRADY: I understand.

HOLT: You're right. I know you were telling us about it, about the cemetery, how your people were buried there.

BRANDON: I'd rather be buried back there than be buried in California.

HOLT: Well, yeah.

BRANDON: And I've been to both of them.

HOLT: Okay. I was glad to meet him.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. You'll get an invitation to the grand opening.

HOLT: Absolutely!

END OF INTERVIEWS

Willie Henry Brandon

-- 1/6/2010

Willie Henry Brandon

Lie-in-State:

8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. on Friday, January 8, 2010

the courtroom at the Rutherford County Courthouse located on The Square in Murfreesboro

Visitation:

11:00 a.m. - 12 noon on Friday, January 8, 2010

Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church, 510 Mason Court, Murfreesboro

Funeral:

12 noon on Friday, January 8, 2010

Mt. Zion Primitive Baptist Church, 510 Mason Court, Murfreesboro

Elder Gerald Ogilvie, officiating and Elder Carl Blackman, eulogist:

Interment:

on Friday, January 8, 2010

Wilson Hill Road Cemetery, Readyville, TN

Obituary:

Mr. Willie H. Brandon was born June 12, 1906 and passed away on Tuesday, January 5, 2010 at the Middle Tennessee Medical Center in Murfreesboro, TN. Mr. Brandon was a lifelong resident of Rutherford County. He worked as a cook at the old James K. Polk Hotel from 1933 to 1938 and later worked at the City Cafe. He was also a cook at the old Seward Air Force Base, which is now the Smyrna Airport.

Mr. Brandon was a long time and dedicated custodian at the Rutherford County Courthouse in Murfreesboro, TN.

Mr. Brandon was preceded in death by his parents, Jimmie Brewer and Charles Brandon and sister, Lizzie Brandon. His survivors include his wife, Mrs. Addie Bell Brandon; daughter, Annie (Kirby) Smith; grandchildren, Regina Stewart, Patricia Morris, Pamela Smith, Mattie Cawl and Donald McKnight and many other relatives and friends.

JANUARY 6, 2010 ARTICLE IN THE MURFREESBORO POST

At age 80, Brandon began custodial duties at the Courthouse. He worked until he was 102 and his health prevented him from working.

His annual birthday party at the Courthouse has long been a public celebration. At his 103th birthday held last June, Brandon attributed his long life to a higher power.

"God let me live," Brandon said. "I feel fine."

He spent much of his last birthday celebrating with Rutherford County Commissioners and employees at the Courthouse.

"I love the whole community and God bless them," Brandon said during his birthday party.

Co-worker Janie Davis worked with Brandon eight years.

"Willie is an icon," said Davis. "He's wonderful. He's absolutely adorable."

County Mayor Ernest Burgess said Brandon represented a class of people with high character.

"It is so refreshing we have people like that who are loyal, they're honest, their work ethic is unbelievably strong, their faith in their fellow man and God is astounding and they have an attitude that is so positive that it's contagious," Burgess said.

"Mr. Willie's clarity of mind and memory was remarkable," the mayor said. "He was able to share many of life's difficulty in a very constructive and positive way. I was almost in awe of his depth of understanding of what life is all about."

Brandon felt an urgency to work every day.

"He didn't want to let up on being a positive, constructive influence in the community," Burgess said.

As a child, General Sessions Court Judge Larry Brandon spent time with his cousin, the elder Brandon who came by his family's house almost every day.

"For a kid, it's important to treat them with respect," Judge Brandon said.

The younger Brandon, his brother and father helped Willie Brandon load his hogs and transport the livestock to Nashville for sale. After the sale, the elder Brandon treated the brothers and father to eat all they wanted.

"Nothing was better than a stockyard hamburger," Judge Brandon said. "Those were some of the best times I ever had."

The judge has tried to treat his son, Larry Brandon II, with respect by spending time with him.

Willie Brandon had a special bond with Larry Brandon II because he was the oldest and Larry Brandon II was the youngest of the family.

Brandon never got in a hurry and enjoyed his time on his farm.

By his example of working, Brandon was rewarded with a longer life, his cousin said.

At Brandon's last birthday party, County Commissioner Anthony Johnson described Brandon as "walking history."

When attending commission meetings, Johnson said he often arrived early to visit with Brandon.

"He'd tell me stories of the past," Johnson said. "He's definitely a role model for anyone — the way he carries himself. He's just a gentle giant full of life for his fellow man. It's an honor to have him as my friend."