

J. W. Miller Interview

March 17, 1999

GG- explain the project and ask for his thoughts on past and present Jakin.

J.W.- mentions Jakin centennial book and talks about his father's store, which he opened in 1928. Then talks about the different stores in Jakin at the time and names their owners. Said the stores stayed open until 11 p.m. People would go to the picture show and then go shopping or get their hair cut.

GG- did you live in town?

J.W.- lived in the country as a child and went to the Springfield community school. Then to Jakin in the 3rd grade. Graduated 10th grade in Jakin in 1931 then went to Donalsonville in 1932 to graduate 11th.

GG- ask about what went on in town?

J.W.- talks about those on mule and buggies that would hitch them in town and came to visit different people.

GG- talk about my own experience as a child at Miss Daisy's store.

J.W.- he talks about Miss Daisy's family and how he told her at 91 she should think like she's 19.

GG- ask what kind of socializing they did?

J.W.- mentions Chatauqua, which came to the courthouse. Talks about he shows and singing, remembers in particular the black entertainers singing a song "My old black gal smells like a rank billy goat, but she's smellin' just the same" says that put a "wrinkle on his brain". Says they had magic shows and going was big time entertainment.

GG-did it occur after the harvest?

J.W.- yeah they knew when folks had some money. Says in the late '20s and early '30s you had to have fun without money. Recalls that 50 cents would buy two sandwiches and for a dollar you could eat and go to the picture show.

GG- ask him about the renovation trend

J.W. - talks about Dothan, Alabama's attempts, which he says, have been problematic. "When something's dead it's dead". Explains how Jakin as a lumber town began to die when the mill left and everything got smaller and smaller. Once the timber was cut the town dried up.

GG- ask about the Jakin School closing

J.W.-agrees about school closing taking away from the community, but talks about the teachers in the boarding houses and how two boys he knew climbed the watertower and spied on them while they undressed. Tells another story of a man who said whenever the teachers came his wife got pregnant. Mr. J.W. guessed it turned her on, or it turned on somebody. Says it's not about the good old days, but the good old age. Because folks are having fun right now. Says that youth is something money can't buy, but that youth and common sense don't always go together. Says you can't buy good health. Luckily he never found any good beer, liquor, or cigarettes. Says that some of the girls smoked and they didn't kiss right, that's the only smoking he did.

GG- ask about picnics at Steep Bluff

J.W. explains where Steep Bluff used to be the talks about the cable, which the boys swung from, and you could drop into the water. Then he mentions the girls from Gordon, Alabama who were "a step ahead of those around here" and they would come over with their skimpy bathing suits. Judge Peterman would take his paper, which he read over his glasses, and he'd get closer and closer until he wound up with his feet in the water.

Tells that they baptized there also. Tells story about a man who joined the church. The preacher preached a sermon about how they should pour all the beer and wine in the river and the next song was "We Shall Gather at the River" because the man loved his little toddy.

GG- tell me something about Jakin that I wouldn't know, or something you wish was still here.

J.W.--Well you can't go back. Tells me about a widow who thought somebody was breaking into her house and it was an old billy goat and she shot him right between the eyes. She didn't have to lock her house anymore.

Talks about turpentine business and tells where it was. Later in the same location there was an asphalt plant which paved highway 84. Then a sawmill and a gin.

GG- ask about Howard's Mill (an old grist mill)

J.W.--talks about it burning under mysterious circumstances. Recalls the baptisms there and how a whole family was baptized at one time (6 people). Tells story of a preacher and how three men in the community wanted to get rid of him. But says the preacher out prayed or out voted them and wound up having them thrown out of the church. But says at that time "there was mighty little religion gone" because the men were not Christian although they mended their ways later in life.

GG- ask him about his store

J.W.--bought in '35 from his father after haggle with an uncle. Says that when the war came running at store would get you in the army, but plowing a mule would keep you out so he got 12

mules and went to work. Says he made money in farming. His was the first store built in Jakin and the first to be torn down.

GG- did everybody shop in Jakin?

J.W.--said he had a good business. Tells story about a man with a neighbor who had several hounds. The dogs came through his house and eat some meat he had just bought. So he bought more and poisoned it and the next morning put the dead dogs in the truck and hauled them to the river and dumped them. The owner looked for them, but couldn't find them. Said that was an unusual circumstance, but they didn't have dogcatchers.

Says the railroad used to be hard labor worked mostly by black men who lived in camps and moved up and down the railroad.

Talks about the bridge over the Chattahoochee and Georgia/ Alabama river politics. Says that the ferry prior to the bridge was run by black people who took people, animals, and cargo across the river. Tells story of wealthy Yankees who were going to Florida on vacation and missed the ferry and drove into the river. They fished out their suitcases and dried their spending money on clotheslines. He said nobody took it.

Tells another story of coming back to Georgia late one cold night and he and his friend couldn't find the ferry operators, so they decided to operate it themselves. The operators were under the scuttle hold trying to keep warm and they wound up scaring each other. Says that put a wrinkle in his brain too.

Talks about Mr. Whittington and Mr. Jackson who never said good morning but gimme a chaw of tobacco when greeting each other. Whoever said it first got tobacco from the other.

Asks about my grandmother then tells how she and my grandfather and several other couples lived in the boarding house when first married. The house eventually burned, and tells story of neighbor who prayed while the fire burned and the wind changed and saved her house.

GG-ask about wake

J.W. Talks about the last wake he went to and how you sat in shifts, 12, 3, 6, up all night. They had coffee and nic nacs for those watchers, but says that's real old timey.

Talks about Northern man with an ethnic name "a Sunday name, not an everyday name" who was cremated, but says that's not his way. "It's the cheap way, but it's not my way." Talks about his aunt who died suddenly and then talks about burial in Key West, Fla. "Say in Key West they bury them 5-6 deep. Well, judgement time comin' and we ain't all going to the same place. There's going to be some scuffling in that hole. I don't want that either."

GG--mention some of the recollections of others about social events, particularly those of a Pineview resident, Lucille Dutton.

J.W.--says Pineview was an active community where he saw his first picture show a silent film. Says Pineview has a club like the Jakin community club, which they enjoy, but says there are only a few left.

GG- why do you think that is?

J.W.--Folks priorities are different. Old folks dying out and the young ones aren't interested. Same with family reunions. Modern life not all for the best. Tells story of an old maid who asked a girl if she was pregnant. The girl said no, but the old maid said time will tell. And it will, he says.

Jakin used to be good folks, no trash then, but that' s progress too. Time marches on and that's what you put up with. You never used to have to lock your doors.

GG- do you feel good about the future of Jakin?

J.W.--There's no way for it to come back. There's nothing to come back to, got to have check's coming in from somewhere. Somebody used to say don't care what you used to do, want to know what you can do now.

J. W. Miller

Journal

Mr. J.W. is a character. Although he hesitated on most of the direct questions I asked him, he found a way to answer part of what I asked and throw in a humorous anecdote. He told more common stories, about dating girls, the hijinks of childhood friends, the current bad behavior of certain individuals than anyone else I've interviewed. He gave small personal accounts rather than broad information about the way of life. He was also the first older person who mentioned the work of black people of the community. This may be because he dealt with them directly as a merchant or because he has always been involved in local politics on a lay persons level. Since I know him personally, I know that community is very important to him. He attends everyone's funeral, black and white (he had just been to a funeral that day) and sends everyone a birthday card.

Points out the differences in people's priorities today as compared to those of his generation. But points out that progress is neither bad nor good. Says that although Jakin will never return to its heyday, he says it depends on what people now do with it. However, he seems to be enjoying his retirement and doesn't want to spearhead any attempts to renovate Jakin. I think he believes that it's someone else's turn.

The phone rang early in the interview, which resulted in our starting and stopping after the first question.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Fieldworker Gretchen Geringer Date 3/17/99
Artist/Informant S. W. Miller Time 1pm
Recording Location Sakin GA Project Eng 8700
Other People Present NO

General Subject Sakin history Specific Subject _____

Cultural Group _____

Equipment Used Recorder

Stereo _____ Dolby _____ Tape Brand/Length Maxell 90

High Bias Normal/Low Bias _____ Metal _____

Amount Tape Used: Side 1 about 1/2

Summary Description of Recording Context/Technical Assessment of Tape Quality

Slight background hum; a couple of skips

Summary Description of Tape Contents

Talks about Sakin that he remembers. Also comments on present politics & future prospects