

BILL LESTER

Executive Director, Dockery Farms Foundation

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans

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Project: Dockery Farms

[Begin Bill Lester-Dockery Farm Interview]

00:00:02

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday, August 9, 2012. I am at Dockery Farm in between Ruleville and Cleveland, Mississippi, and I'm with Mr. Bill Lester. And Mr. Lester, can I get you to state your name and your occupation, I guess, for the record?

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Bill Lester: My name is Bill Lester, and I'm the Executive Director of the Dockery Farm Foundation. I'm retired from Delta State [University], and I was Chair of the Art Department for a couple of years there. And if I get to teach this coming fall, it'll be forty years I've been there, so that's a pretty good long time. But I spend most of my time out here at Dockery now, overseeing the site and just helping with all the different visitors we get.

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AE: And tell me how you first became affiliated with Dockery and when that was.

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BL: Well, it's a long time ago, back in 1973, when I came to Cleveland. I came out here to Dockery. My family has a farm at Estill[, Mississippi], which is about thirty-five, forty miles south of here, and my great-grandfather came there in the 1880s. And I thought, well, you know, if I build a house at Estill, I'll have to drive back and forth to Cleveland all the time. That would

be hard on me. And so I got to looking around and Dockery was the most beautiful place around Cleveland so I got—came out here and asked them could I build a house out here?

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And it didn't work right at first. It took six or eight years you know for me to work through it and—and—and get to do it. But anyway we finally built a home out here, so that's how I got to know the—the Dockery family.

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AE: Okay. So what was going on here when you first approached them about building a house? What was it like?

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BL: Well you know, the farm was still being farmed by the Dockery(s) then. Now the Dockery girls [granddaughters of Will Dockery] rent the farm out to other farmers, but Richard Cummins was here and they were farming it, you know, just like they had been farming it, you know, since the [19]30s, really. They had switched to mechanical farming, you know. There weren't any more mules or anything like that, and they were using tractors and combines and all that kind of stuff.

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But it—it was a big farm and it was a lot of interest to me because I had grown up on that farm in Estill, and so I knew about the farming life and it was just, you know, very intriguing to me to—to be a part of it with them. And I didn't actually farm. Occasionally, though, they let me drive a tractor if they needed something, and once in a while I would do other things to help

them, but mostly I taught, you know, art at Delta State. And I kept a horse out here, so I came out here every day to feed the horse and on weekends I'd ride.

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AE: Did they think that you were—well, I guess a better way to say that is, what did they think about you when you came to ask about building a house here?

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BL: Well, you know, they—they weren't against it but, you know, it was—you know, people are always wanting to buy land from somebody and—and some people just don't want to sell it, you know. And so it was one of those things that—that we had a good relationship, but it just took a little while, and I just knew that I wanted to build my own home and I wanted to live out in the country and so this was *the* spot. You know how us Ole Miss [University of Mississippi] folks are: you better—you might as well go for the good, you know. And so I picked—I tried to pick the best spot and—and fortunately, we were able to build a home out here, and we live out here now.

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AE: And it's just down the road here west of—of the service station where we're sitting talking now?

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BL: It is. It's in the—it's on the other side of the pasture from—from what I call the Big House.

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AE: May I ask how much acreage they let you have to build?

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BL: Hmm. I didn't ask for very much, but I didn't need very much, and they were very accommodating.

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AE: Are you only the person that they've given or sold frontage to here?

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BL: I—I pretty much think so. I—I don't think there's any—you know, anyone else that has—you know, been able to do that. But I was very fortunate and blessed, you know. That was—it was a—something I didn't deserve, but something I was real pleased to get.

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AE: Well and what did you know about Dockery before you moved out here?

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BL: You know, I didn't know a lot. I had come over here for the Crosstie Arts Festival [in downtown Cleveland] and sold a lot of artwork over here when I was going to Ole Miss and passed by Dockery and I knew it was a—a blues place, but I didn't know a whole lot about it. And then once I got to keeping my horse out here, I got to meet people on the place, and one of the folks I met was Tom Cannon who was Charley Patton's nephew. And he was fourteen years

old when Charley died and—and knew him, you know, as well as any fourteen-year-old could know anybody. But he also knew all these other bluesmen that came out here and played, and he watched all that go on and that would have been in the 1930s. And so he was still very alive when I got here, and he and I had lots of visits about, you know, what he would call the old times and fortunately, I listened and—and—and learned a lot, you know. He—he would—we would—you know, we talked, you know, not every day but when we would talk, we'd sit and visit at lunchtime or something and he'd tell me some of the things that went on when he was a child.

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And a lot of things that went on here at Dockery—he was born here at Dockery and so he was a good—a good reference for me. I didn't know I needed the reference then. That would have been, you know, over thirty years ago. But then, as it worked out, the [Dockery] family wanted me to help oversee the site and oversee the blues site, and I was able to, you know, call on all those old stories and things he told me about what it was like in the '30s and—and early—and late '20s here and—pretty neat, you know.

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AE: Have you ever written any of that down or has anybody ever recorded any of those stories here?

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BL: You know, I just tell to all the different visitors we get here from Europe. I mean almost every day we get a busload or a carload or—or people coming and I'm surprised there's not somebody out here right now. And I get to talk to them from all over the world.

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When my fancy cell phone my daughter made me get rings, and it's got Sweden or France or Denmark on it, it doesn't surprise me at all, you know. And sometimes they have an interpreter and most times they can talk English. And so we—we carry on and find about when they went to come and what they want to do and, you know, we just have hundreds of visitors. People don't realize how many, you know, folks come here.

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AE: When was the transition and kind of the timeline of this place where it went from Dockery Plantation to Dockery Farms?

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BL: Well the transition happened probably in about the '80s when Richard Cummins and his sons stopped, you know, farming here and they started renting out the land. The real—the people that were helping them farm, what we call the hands, a lot of them left, you know, and—and so you know, there are not—there are not any families on Dockery anymore. And when I moved here in the '70s there were, I don't know, maybe—you know, maybe eight or ten families that were living here on the place.

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And as—as—Tom Cannon, you know, was one of the ones that was born here, and he was still living and he worked here all his life.

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AE: And what did he do when he worked here? Did he have a specific job or he did everything?

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BL: Oh listen, you're not going to believe this. I was talking to him one day and he always called me—he always called me Mr. Bill, even though, you know, I was young enough to be his—his son. And I guess he just did that because he came from the old times. And he'd say, "Mr. Bill," he said, "you wouldn't believe it." He said, "For the first twenty-five years I worked here at Dockery till I was fifteen," he said, "I didn't have no boss." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "All I did was take care of the cows." He said, "For twenty-five years I'd get up in the morning before daylight," he said, "first of all, I had a mule and a wagon, and we'd put barbed wire on the wagon and we'd put staples and hammers and we'd go out, and we'd checked the fences all day long," he said. You know, there were thousands of cows at Dockery. This was—this was a big place at one time. I mean it's big now; it was even bigger back then.

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And he said, "Mr. Bill, we'd ride around that wagon all day and," he said, "when the sun got straight overhead, we'd stop and eat lunch," he said. "Then we'd start home," he said, "because we knew we were halfway through the day, you know, when the sun was straight up." And he said, "We'd come home after dark and put the mules up and go home." He said, "I didn't—I didn't have no boss." He said, "It was—it was the best job I ever had." And he did that for twenty-five years. He said, "Now we had to feed cows on Sunday morning," he said, "but Sunday after we'd go to church all day long and stay in church all day till dark." He said, "Then I'd get up and do it again." "And," he said, "I just didn't—," he said, "I didn't know no better." He said, "I thought that was—that was great."

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And I thought to myself, golly, can you imagine fixing fences for twenty-five years? He said, "Finally, we got rid of the mules, and we got an old beat up tractor." He said, "But it pulled

the same wagon that the mules pulled.” He said, “They didn't give me no new wagon, Mr. Bill. They just let me have the old wagon and,” he said, “I’d haul my barbed wire and my staples and my fence post.” “And sometimes,” he said, “Bill Scott will go with me.” And Bill Scott was alive, you know, for a good portion of the time I was—you know, the—the early time I was here. And he was just another, you know, helper or worker around the place.

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AE: So when—what was the original acreage of—of Dockery?

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BL: So if you read Robert Palmer’s book *Deep Blues* he did an interview with a lot of bluesmen, Howlin’ Wolf and all those kinds of people, so he was very knowledgeable and he said that one time they owned forty square miles, which is 28,000 acres. Now I know from having a family that came here in the Delta that my grandfather, at one time, was the largest single landowner in Mississippi for one week. And then he lost it all in a gambling game and won it back and—and ended up with, you know, several thousands of acres that he gave his—his children. But anyway, what they would do is they’d buy property, cut the timber off of it, and sell it.

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And so, you know, at one time, they may have a big bunch of acres and then three years later they might have sold some of it and not had as much. The farm is not that big now, but it’s still—it’s still a large farm.

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AE: Can you say how big it is now?

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BL: Well you know that's—that's the family's business, you know, but—anyway.

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AE: All right. So when this was booming and when there were lots of families living here, I imagine that the living situation, everybody was pretty scattered. And so then this—this part would be where everybody would come together. Can you talk about that?

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BL: Yes, exactly. Well the reason—one of the reasons this site is so important to blues enthusiasts and—and just the music world in general is because they had a commissary and people would have to come and buy their food, most of them would at the commissary because it would be a five mile walk to Cleveland or a five mile walk to Ruleville. So that commissary was a focal point.

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Well, if you got 3,000 or 4,000 people working here, and they're getting paid on Saturday afternoon, then these bluesmen would want to be here because they had a controlled crowd. If they'd go to town and it got rowdy, the Sheriff or the Mayor or the—whoever would come and run them off, which is very typical in these small Delta towns, you know, is if they—if they caused, you know—which they probably would. Just imagine, you're living out here and there's no electricity. Nobody has got a radio. Nobody has got a thermostat. There ain't no Kroger stores. There ain't nothing. You know, and all the sudden these guys show up on Saturday

afternoon and they'd hit that first lick on that steel guitar—they played steel acoustic guitars, so they'd be very loud and—and—and metal-y and they'd slide that slide up on there and, man, the hair would stand up on the back of your neck, you know.

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And so they would play there at the [Dockery] Commissary for thirty minutes and get everybody all riled up, and then they'd walk across the one-lane bridge that was here at Dockery. It's gone now. There was a one-lane metal bridge—to the first house on the right, which the bluesmen and everybody on the place, according to Tom Cannon, would call the Frolicking House. And you had to be fifteen years old to be able to go in the Frolicking House. So you can imagine they were probably pretty wild. But they'd take all the furniture out of the Frolicking House, move it outdoors. The bluesmen had bought big mirrors for these people, and they'd have coal-oil lanterns, and they'd put the coal-oil lantern in front of the mirror. Remember: no electricity, now. They'd put the coal-oil lantern in front of the mirror so that when it got dark the house would just illuminate, and you could see it from all over the place, you know, because that part of Dockery had been cleared. That's what we call North Dockery, and it had been cleared. South Dockery hadn't been cleared completely at that time.

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So anyway, what would you think if you walked out of your house and you heard this [*Gestures-Music Sound*] you know, and you look out the window and here this one house looks like it's on fire? You know, you'd gather up what little money you could get together and go down there, and the bluesmen would charge them twenty-five cents for them to stay there all night and listen to them play.

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And so Charley [Patton]—and Howlin' Wolf was here as a youngster. He did that. Pop Staples was here as a youngster of the famous Staple Singers out of Chicago. Charley taught both of them how to play the guitar here. Tommy Johnson would come here. Robert Johnson came here, you know, fairly often. Willie Brown came here. But anyway, they'd make more money in one night than a lot of those men would make in a month, you know. And so one of the things that Tom Cannon told me and I could see it in his eyes, you know, he had those old—his eyes, the whites of his eyes were not like the whites of my eyes. They were—they were leathery and—and muddy looking, you know. But I remember he squinted down real tight one day. We were talking, and we were sitting in the back of the pickup truck. We had been mending a fence out here where I keep my horses. And he said, "You know, Mr. Bill," he said, "Charlie was a real man."

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He said, "I remember in the late [19]20s, maybe '28, '29," he said, "he come home one time and," he said, "he had on white man's Sunday school clothes, and he was driving a brand new car." He said, "He was a real man, Mr. Bill." And I thought, you know, he was a Mick Jagger of his day, you know. We all think of them as being drunks and, you know—which I'm sure they drank, you know, but people drink today. But they were entrepreneurs, you know, they—they realized, you know, that they had something that these people really needed and wanted. And so to think the first blues note was probably not written at Dockery but so much of the training, you know, for the blues came from Dockery because Charley taught so many people how to play here that got on the Pea Vine [Railroad] train and rode to places like Chicago and Detroit and all those kinds of places and took that music that they developed right here at Dockery and in the Delta to a big venue so the whole world could see it. And that's why so many people come here, and that's why they think of it as the birthplace of the blues.

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You know a lot of folks got crossroads and birthplace of the blues and all that kind of stuff, but if you let the world, you know, tell you where it is, they'll tell you it's right here. Just like BB King. You know, BB King says that if you had to pick only one spot, you know, you'd have to pick Dockery as the spot where the blues was born because so much of it came, you know right from here. And so much of it was performed here.

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AE: And do you think—why do you think that is?

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BL: Well, I think it's one of those things that some people call them what—happenstance, you know, or just—it just happened to happen and me being Presbyterian, you know, I call it predestination. And so Charley was predestined to be this music giant, and he needed a place to perform and he needed a place that would allow him to—to stay there. Most plantations would run the blues people off because, you know, I mean, here again, remember: all day long, you know, six days a week, you're working and all of the sudden you get to play where you play pretty rough and you drink pretty hard and people get mad and girlfriends get, you know, swapped up and all of the sudden somebody gets stabbed, and now you got a big mess on your hands and nobody comes to work on Monday morning.

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So most of the time they'd try to run them off, but they didn't do that here, and I think that was—obviously, that was good.

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AE: Do you know why? Do you know why the Dockery family was accepting with that?

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BL: Well I—I have to believe that Mr. Will, since he cared about these people—there were lots of things that he did that other plantations didn't do. He provided a full-time doctor. He had a burial policy to help the people that worked for him because burials were expensive. And—and he—he did a number of things.

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For instance, the plantation money that I—I have some in my pocket. I'll show you in a few minutes—they—they used here, he made sure it was good in Ruleville and Cleveland because he realized if it was only good at his commissary that they could be taken advantage of. And so if they didn't want to spend it at the commissary, they could go into Cleveland and get fifty cents at the bank and then the bank would bring the money back to Mr. Will, and he'd give the money back to them.

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And so, you know, that—that was a good thing. And I think he—I think he realized those people needed some sort of outlet, you know, some sort of something to do, and since they probably didn't cause him a lot of trouble, since he had so many workers, if one or two of them got rowdy and didn't show up, you know, it wasn't the end of the world, and so he didn't run them off.

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AE: Tell me, do you know anything about the dynamic of the churches being here on Dockery and that relationship with the Frolicking House and blues music?

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BL: Well there were—when I first came here, there were several churches on Dockery. There was True Light, which is south of Dockery, and then there was another older—or maybe not older, but another smaller church in the middle of Dockery, and both of those buildings have been torn down, unfortunately. One of them burned down, and the other one they tore down. There's still a Baptist Church here and the Dockerys has allowed that congregation to have that property and they built that church on that property and they're still functioning and they're still the same congregation.

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AE: And is that primary an African American congregation or mixed or white?

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BL: All right, this one is primarily white. The two other churches that are gone now were—were all black. And unfortunately the—the—the True Light Baptist Church, where Annie and Bill Patton [Charley Patton's parents] are buried and a lot of the other old members of the—the hands and the workers that worked here at Dockery, some folks came and burned it down. It was really sad. I remember Thanksgiving night when they set it on fire back in the '70s. You could see it from my house.

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I was laying in bed and I was wondering what is that flashing light, you know. And I looked out the window, and I could see the church burning you know. It was sad. But anyway, one of the interesting think about and my wife Tennie is—is involved in music and does the choir at—at the Presbyterian Church and got a music degree from Delta State and got a Masters from there—but anyway, she and I were thinking one day, and we were listening to one of Robert Johnson’s songs, and he’s talking about selling his soul to the devil and all that kind of stuff, and we supposedly have the [blues] crossroads here, the real crossroads because, you know, Robert Palmer said it happened when Robert Johnson came to play with Charley Patton and Willie Brown, who were running buddies and who played here a lot, and said that they dismissed him because he was fifteen years younger than them and couldn’t play as good.

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But anyway, we were listening to one of his songs and in the end it says he was leaving on a train and there were two lights in behind. Well I thought to my—and Tennie said, “The depot was right down there across from the cemetery, wasn’t it?” And I said, “Yeah, the depot was right down there, right across from the cemetery.” So when you left on the train and you were sad and you were thinking about death, you wouldn’t see two lights in behind, you’d see True Light in behind. And they’ve just misinterpreted his words. His words were never written down and we were listening to them and—and if you listen to his words, they’re very gravely and run together [*Gestures*] but it—it could be True Light just as easy as two lights. And two lights at the end of a train track don’t mean much, but if you leave Dockery on the train and you’re looking in behind and you’re watching the train, what do you see? You see the True Light Cemetery.

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So anyway, we think it says True Light in behind, not two lights in behind.

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AE: I've never heard anybody say that, and now I'm going to listen. So tell me a little bit more about the—the railroad and talking about what you were talking about when we were looking at that picture earlier about bringing the food in.

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BL: Okay, well at—at the turn of the century—Mr. Will [Dockery] came here in 1895, and so by the turn of the century, he had several thousand people working here. And to keep them fed, they weren't any roads or not very good roads, just dirt roads—he would have to bring the supplies up on what we called little steam ferries, little tiny—packet, little flat looking little boat. And you know, how big the Sunflower River is; man, you can't hardly—you can spit across it almost.

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So to get that much food for those people must have been horrible. You know, wagons every day, steamboats every day and he finally—he just realized he couldn't—he couldn't grow bigger unless he had a bigger workforce. If he had a bigger workforce, he had to feed them. So he had the Pea Vine Railroad train spur built from Boyle, Mississippi, up here and it was twelve miles long. And the train would back up from Boyle and unload everything here at Dockery—food—and take on cotton and take on other, you know, goods that he was selling and go back to Boyle, back and forth, you know, once a day.

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And so without that Pea Vine train he wouldn't have been able to keep those people alive. But the other factor, and this is going back to predestination now, the other factor was that

blues music couldn't leave here and go to these places like Chicago unless they had some way to get there. Remember, all they had was mules and carriages, you know. You know, in the early part of the farm. And so those men like Howlin' Wolf that could play here and learn something here, hopped on the train and within twenty-four hours be in Chicago playing the exact same music he just learned on the commissary front porch. And so that was remarkable for that period of time.

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Now, you know, we got cell phones. I can email you a picture, you know, in two seconds. But back then all they had, you know, was—was mules and walking. And so that was quite a— an extra benefit that helped the blues leave Dockery and go to the rest of the world. They found out when they left Dockery they could plug their guitar in. There was electricity up there, see, and so that was amazing to them that they had the electric guitar. That's where the electric blues came from, you know, from this old blues that they found out there were other instruments that you could play it on.

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AE: Tell me—I want to ask first another question about the train before I forget, but what were they bringing in food-wise for the commissary and where was it coming from?

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BL: The food that they brought in here came from, you know, probably all over the South. But it was mostly staples. They brought a lot of molasses, a lot of cornmeal, dried beans, sugar, salt, flour—all that kind of stuff. And you know, you have to really understand what was going on. A lot of people don't. Those men that worked here and—and—and some of the women that were

working outdoors, too, which was, you know, what families did back then, were burning anywhere from 8,000 to 10,000 to maybe 12,000 calories a day. That's what Michael Phelps burns when he practices—12,000 calories. And you don't have a camera on this microphone, but if you could look down to my tummy you would see what 2,000 calories does to a person. So they had to have some way of—of getting enough to eat to where they could—wouldn't die.

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And so molasses was the most high, you know, caloric, you know, kind of food you could get, I guess. And so they—they used hundreds and hundreds and thousands of gallons of molasses and that went on—just think how many taters it would take to eat—to eat 12,000 calories worth. You couldn't put them in a pickup truck, and so they had to have something to— to give them energy. And that was—that was molasses.

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AE: Now the families on Dockery, did they maintain their own gardens or was there a central garden for the community?

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BL: They had—each family had their own garden. And one of the interesting things about Dockery I find is that Mr. Will realized that some men were more capable than others, which is, you know—our world tends to shy away from that thought now, but no matter whether they do or not, some men are more capable than others. And when I meant men, I mean women, too. And so he allowed some men to farm more than just what most men could farm, which was like forty acres. Some of these men had kingdoms on Dockery, and Joe Friday was one of them. There was a man named Pelham that was another. One of them farmed 3,000 acres and one of

them farmed 5,000 acres [*Emphasis Added*] for Mr. Dockery. He did it himself. He had other people hired, but he ran the show himself—within Dockery. And it was called a *Kingdom* and so the—Bill Scott and Tom Cannon, you know, would refer to the *Kingdom*. You know when—when I would be going hunting on a certain place or something I'd tell them I was going to go down you know south of the—of the highway here. “Oh, you're going to the—you're going to the Friday *Kingdom*.” And I thought, man, isn't that neat, you know, that—that they were able to do that?

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And that's just good business sense. If a man is capable, you know, don't—don't hold him down. Help him, you know, so that's a trait I admire.

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There are a lot of things that went on the Delta back then and that go on today, you know, that aren't right. They just weren't right. You know, they were rough. But I tell everybody that comes here, if you're going to talk about the rough times and the bad things, you also have to talk about the good things. There were good people back then, and they did what they could, you know. It wasn't perfect, but—but some did more than others. And, you know, you can't have it both ways.

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AE: Well, and I've always heard that Dockery was a fair place in this bigger picture. And even on that blues marker outside out behind here it talks about how people came from other places to work on Dockery because it was such a great opportunity. Can you talk about how people found this place and what they had to do to work here if they came from outside?

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BL: You know, they found it by word of mouth, you know. There was so many people working here and what Mr. Dockery did was he realized that sharecropping was not a—as fair a way to do things as possible. So if they didn't want to sharecrop—some people wanted to sharecrop; that's just the way they came up and brought up and they wanted to do it, but he would pay them by the hour, by the day, by the month, by the week—you know, and he paid top wages. Now they wouldn't be—it wouldn't be much money to us and—but he paid the top wages of the day. And so then he could turn people away.

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And I was interested to find out, Tom Cannon told me that one of the—on the Friday *Kingdom* the motto was *live clean or leave—live clean or leave*. And I thought, isn't that something, you know. That was the motto of the—of that part of the plantation. And so, you know we—we just don't—it's hard for us to conceive what it was like back then because we have so many things that are better and—and we might have an understanding maybe better about how to treat people and not treat people. I'm not certain that we all have that, but I mean I think that's more prevalent today than it was then. But it was a different world back then. I mean you know they—they had to help each other or they died. You know, it wasn't any—nobody is going to come help you and nobody is going to give you a check or give you some money. You know, you would just die if—if nobody helped you. And so it was a different—different world. I'm not saying I want to go back to it; I'm just saying we have to realize it was different.

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AE: And what happened to the Friday Kingdom?

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BL: Well when—when that man got old enough not to run it anymore—and I’m assuming this now—this is what I would assume happened—and no one stepped up of equal character, then it just went back under the directorship of—of Mr. Will, you know, or Joe Rice [Dockery]. That’s his son. And so those kingdoms probably dispersed as they wore out, you know.

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AE: Do you know if any of the Friday family is still around in these—?

00:27:43

BL: Oh yeah, I got—I got a neat story. You know, this is one you’re just not going to believe, you know. About four or five years ago—now, remember, Tom Cannon told me this story about the kingdoms back in the ‘70s, and so that was just some old information in my—in my aging computer-like brain that I just stored away. But I came out of the—my wife and I came out of the Dockery house, the Big House I call it, and we’re coming around the drive here and there’s a large mule watering trough out there, really big, thousands of gallons. And they used it to water the mules. There was several of them on Dockery. There’s two of them still in existence.

00:28:23

And they used this one for baptisms, though, because the river at the turn of century was full of snakes and alligators and so they were scared to go down there. You know, you wouldn’t want to lose your baby to an alligator. So they baptized them in the mule-watering trough. It was clean, clear, artesian water.

00:28:39

Well anyway, we came out of the Big House and before my daughter made me get this fancy iPhone, I carried around a little camera with me every now and then—not always and very rarely, only when I had something specific to do with it. Well that Sunday I put it in my pocket because I was coming down to take a picture of the swimming pool that I had been working on and was going to show the family the repairs. Well, I pulled out of the—the mechanically locking gate there, and there by the watering trough stood Joe Friday, a tremendous big, tall black man, bald-headed, big white turtleneck on. It was in February. Long white sleeves, nice fitting black pants, patent leather looking black shoes, looked like he could have been an NFL lineman, you know—tremendous big black man. He was standing there with an unlit cigarette in his hand.

00:29:28

And so I pulled up cautiously and rolled the window down, and I said in my best executive director-voice, you know, “Can I be of service to you?” And he said, “You can.” He said, “You’re the one.” And that kind of made me want to roll the window up, you know, but I thought well, okay. **[Laughs]** I said, “Well, how am I the one?” He said—by this time I had opened the door and gotten out of the truck. He was about six-eight, six-nine, big old man. He said well, he said, “Mr. Bill”—he didn't say Mr. Bill. He just said—I told him my name was Bill and he just called me Bill. He said the—the—“I lived here as a kid and,” he said,” I started smoking here at Dockery. And,” he said, “when I left here I—I went to Texas. And I live in Austin, Texas, now. And,” he said, “I smoked all my life. And,” he said, “about three days ago the Lord came to me and told me if I go back to the place I was baptized and take my last cigarette and light it and not smoke it and put it on that baptismal spot, there would be a man there to take my picture.” Jeepers, man. The hair stood up on the back of my neck, and I thought unbelievable because in my pocket was a little Canon Elf camera that I rarely carried out—you

know, because I didn't want to get it hurt, you know. I had it wrapped up in a little napkin. Anyway, and I had it in my pocket, and I took his picture. And he pulled a card out of his pocket and he said, "I don't do computers, Bill," he said, "but my daughter does." He said. "Can you send her one of them pictures?" And I said, "I'd be happy to."

00:30:53

And so I sent his daughter a picture of her daddy lighting his last cigarette. He got back in the car and drove back to Austin, Texas. He said, "It's going to take me fourteen hours to get there, and it took me fourteen hours to get here," he said, "but it was worth it." And I said, "Well, thank you very much." And so, you know, those kinds of interesting stories still happen. And when I told him—when he said, "I'm Joe Friday," well my little brain went to work, and I said, "Well, you must be from the Friday Kingdom." And he said, "You know about the Kingdom?" And I said, "Yeah, I know all about it." "Whoa," you know. He was really happy. And so that little bit of information that I had learned, you know, so many years ago paid off because we got to be fast friends in just a few minutes.

00:31:35

AE: That's quite a story. And he went off to Austin. Do you know of anybody who is still around here of the Fridays?

00:31:42

BL: I don't. You know I—I mean I—I don't know, you know, what happened to the extent of the families of these people. I'm assuming some of them—some people that worked here on the place are still in Cleveland or some of their descendants are but it's—it's a difficult thing for—you know, I have—I wish I could, you know find out but it's difficult with all the other things I

have to do to, you know, make sure the grass stays cut and the—and the tin stays tacked down on the buildings and that kind of thing. I'm pretty busy all the time. But I'm sure there are people still here.

00:32:15

AE: I just wonder if Friday is a name in the phonebook in this county.

00:32:19

BL: Yeah. Yeah.

00:32:19

AE: Amazing. So before I forget, I keep going back to this in my head and I don't—I never say it out loud, but I want to go back to the Frolicking House and ask you how far from the Big House was that and also ask was it not ever called a juke?

00:32:32

BL: No, I don't think Dockery ever had what they call juke joints. I mean that—that's a—you know, a fairly modern thing in the '40s and the '50s. Towns would have juke joints, but out here at Dockery, no, the Frolicking House was just right across the river from the Big House, just right across the bridge, and so I'm sure they could hear, you know, the different things that were going on. But, um, you know, you got to remember back at the turn of the century in the '20s you couldn't afford to have a place that you didn't use, you know. And so these homes, you know, were the only places they had to play—except the commissary front porch. But they couldn't charge at the commissary front porch because—because people could walk up out there

and, you know, stand around and hear it for free. And so they would, you know—they would go across the river where they could, I guess, control, you know, the people coming and, you know, get—. They wanted that money, you know. That's what they did for a living.

00:33:24

AE: Is the commissary one of those buildings that's still standing back here or is it gone?

00:33:27

BL: Unfortunately, it—it burned down but we—I cleaned off or I got some people to help me clean off the front porch, so I got all the old bricks off of it and the old burned up tin and so you can actually stand up there on the front porch and that's where Charley Patton played, Howlin' Wolf played there, Robert Johnson played there, Tommy Johnson played there, Willie Brown played there—just many more blues singers came to play at Dockery because they could and because they had that captive audience, you know, of several thousand people on Saturday afternoon.

00:33:57

AE: Okay, and so that's that kind of a shell of a porch that's where the marker is?

00:34:00

BL: It is exactly. That's—that's—that's where all the blues performers performed, you know, at Dockery.

00:34:09

AE: Okay, so tell me about the picnics that happened on Dockery or whatever word you want to use to describe that.

00:34:14

BL: All right. When I first came here in 1973, I didn't live out here at Dockery, but I had a horse. I had a horse since high school, and I kept it up at Ole Miss and I brought it over here with me, and so I needed a place to keep it. And so I talked to the people out here at Dockery and Richard Cummins was farming out here then and running the place and he said, "Well, you can keep it in my pasture." So he had some horses, so I kept a horse out here.

00:34:38

And once—he had—he had several sons that I got to be friends with and got to go hunting with and duck hunting and rabbit hunting and stuff. And one of the—one day Richard told me they were going to kill hogs out here like they had been doing since the turn of the century. And they smoked the meat, you know, and they'd barbecue and do stuff like that. And I thought, well I'll come out and take pictures of that. I can't find the pictures, unfortunately. But it was in 1973, 1974 and it was in December before Christmas, and they used to do this for Christmas for all the people on the place. And you can imagine how many hogs they'd kill if they had forty, fifty, you know, families living on the place.

00:35:20

But they would give them smoked meat and—and—and they would cook and make chitlins and cracklins and all that stuff. And so I said, "Well, I'll just show up and, you know, take pictures of it." And so one Saturday morning, it wasn't real cold, but it was, you know, it was like in the high thirties, I came out here and they had an old house on the place that's still there, and they had a bathtub cut out and submerged in the porch—you know, one of those old

white porcelain bathtubs, just cut out and submerged flat in the porch. And they had a giant fire going and they had a big cauldron of hot water and they had fifty-five-gallon drums of hot water. And they had these hogs all out there, you know, all the way from big ones and medium-sized ones to little ones. And they were dispatching the hogs and then they would put them—drag them up on the front porch and roll them over in that hot water in that bathtub and—and loosen all the hair off of them and then pull them out and scrape all the hair off and sweep it off the porch and then begin to eviscerate the hog and—and cut it up into pieces and dress it and all that.

00:36:28

And I'll tell you about the smokehouse in a minute. But anyway, I was watching all this; there was six or eight or maybe ten people there and Tom Cannon was there and Bill Scott was there and Richard Cummins was there and Buster Cummins, I believe, was there and there were several of the Cummins boys there. And they started working on the hogs that morning. And I watched and took pictures and they would—you know, people, they were laughing maybe and drinking beer and, you know, carrying on and having a good time.

00:36:57

And this last big hog had been very docile, standing around out there in the yard, you know, just waiting her turn and the way they dispatched them was with a pistol and they would shoot them between the eyes and—and that would you know, of course, kill the hog. And then they would begin the process of getting the hair off of it. Well, they shot this hog but—but I guess they shot her at an angle and the bullet went around her skull and came out the back and nobody noticed that. And so it just knocked her out. And she was a pretty big hog, you know, about 250 pounds. And they drug her up on the front porch, and I thought she was dead. And I'm standing there taking pictures, you know, of them doing it. And they rolled her over in that hot water, and when they rolled that hog in that hot water that hog came alive and jumped out of

there, snapping its teeth and jumping at these people. And I stepped over the side, and the hog jumped off the porch. And so I stayed on the porch. But she ran those people around out there in the yard for ten or fifteen minutes, and I mean they were all up in trees and hollering and carrying on and she was snapping and biting at them and carrying on. And they finally had to, of course, you know, come down and finish the job.

00:38:01

But they would scrape all the hair off of them and—and cut them into certain pieces. And then up the road a little ways they had a—a smokehouse. And it's still there now. It wasn't built for a smokehouse; it was just a little small kind of like a little shed, you know, but it had walls on it and no windows and a tin roof. And so they would take—and they had racks in there and they'd take the meat in there and they would cover it with salt and brown sugar and different kinds of spices and things and they would pack it down. And they would put it in there and then it had a dirt floor. And I remember that and it had a—a wash drum or—or a wash tub like you'd wash your clothes in, you know, a galvanized tub. They'd put that tub in the middle of the floor in there and they'd start a big rip-roaring fire outside, I mean a big fire, all kinds of hickory wood and oak and all kinds of stuff and get it going and get the coals real hot. And then they'd take it with a shovel and carry it in there and—and dump it in that wash tub that was in the middle of that smokehouse. And then they'd cover that with—I think—I think I'll saw them put green leaves on it sometimes; sometimes just wet wood like oak and hickory that they'd—or pecan wood that they had been soaking in water and it caused a great smoke to come out. And the smoke would just fill that room.

00:39:23

And they would smoke that meat for I don't know how many days. I can't recall exactly. But I remember seeing it in the end. Of course it would be—in the beginning it would be fresh

and then when you'd go back three or four—I have forgotten exactly how many days later, it would be glazed over and—and smoked, you know. And then they would take that smoked meat and give it to the people on the place at Christmas time. And that was still a holdover from an old tradition that the—the plantation owners did to try to help out the people on the place. And so Richard was still carrying on that tradition and even though he didn't have but maybe eight or ten families working here and they might not kill but four or five hogs, it was still a tradition, you know, that they carried on. And it was a privilege for me to watch them do that because that was a unifying effort that they all were making so that Christmas would be better for everybody, which, you know, is—is a good thing.

00:40:24

AE: Were there any other animals that were raised here on Dockery besides cows and, well, I guess they raised mules, and—and hogs?

00:40:30

BL: Well yeah, but maybe they had more—more chickens and—and, you know, mules and things like that than you could shake a stick at. You know, everybody had to have chickens. Remember no—no Kroger stores with the—with the yellow plastic and the clear plastic on top, you know. It all just came out of the yard, you know. And they're—you know they're what they called yard chickens. You know, they didn't feed them. They just let them run around wild and so, you know, there were a lot of animals like that.

00:40:56

I don't think they had many sheep or—here—here but I know one thing they had was turkeys. They had domestic turkeys and they would let them run around wild and, you know,

have them for Thanksgiving and stuff like that. But—but chickens were—I would imagine the main thing that people raised because they were small and they were mobile and—and it didn't take a whole lot of doing. You kill a cow you know or a big hog it takes a good bit of doing to dress it, to get the meat prepared, and, you know, if you don't have refrigeration than you got to do something pretty quick, you know, or a lot of it goes to waste.

00:41:29

And so I remember that day that they—that—that hog killing day I watched they had a big pot out there and they were boiling the intestines in it you know making—making chitlins and cracklins and I remember watching that and they were laughing up a storm and—and I tried one of them and—and it was just a little bit oily—excuse me—it was just a little bit oilier than I—than I wanted. I'm ashamed of myself that I didn't, you know, have another one or two because I didn't realize what a—a rare event I was watching, you know.

00:41:58

It was just the end of an era, you know, it just—. You know they may have done it one or two more years but it wasn't many. That might have been the last year they did it.

00:42:07

AE: Well when you think about that annual tradition of hog killing in the winter that's across the South, given the seasons and raising hogs and everything and that—when you think of that relative to barbecue culture and how there's not really an established barbecue tradition in Mississippi, can you talk about why maybe you think that is?

00:42:26

BL: Well, you know, I'm certain that they barbecued meat, you know. I'm certain they did. And I guess—I guess Mississippi just—just didn't latch onto that as—as something that was important to them. They had so many other things, you know, that they did and—and the culture in the Delta was very diverse—a diverse, you know, culture. And so they brought in all sorts of Cajun and French foods and all sorts of things were being—they were being cooked and prepared, you know, in—in the farmhouses here in the Delta. And I don't know that a certain barbecue didn't develop in the Delta like it did in North Carolina or Texas, you know. I guess—I guess the Delta had the blues, and I guess that was, you know, better than barbecue.

00:43:19

AE: Mmm, I love it. What can you say about tamales and Dockery, anything?

00:43:24

BL: Well I know there were tamales eaten at Dockery and the—the Delta is traditionally known for tamales and I've had lots of good tamales and—and looking forward to more. We have parties out here at Dockery. We have big—big groups that come from Europe and—and—and want to have a get-together out here. And so we do and a lot of times we serve them tamales and—and salad and, you know, it's a—it's a good treat.

00:43:50

AE: Where do you like to get tamales when you serve people from out of the country?

00:43:52

BL: Well in Cleveland and you're going to hit me because I can't tell you the name of the place. I know where it is, but even though I graduated from Ole Miss twice, this white hair I have on my head is beginning to affect the brain cells that live underneath and I can't—I can't recall the name of the place. But anyway we—we call in the order. I got the phone number and we call in the order and we go pick them up and bring them out here.

00:44:18

AE: Could you tell me where it is in Cleveland if you can't remember the name?

00:44:21

BL: It's on the south end of town and it's off Highway 61 on the right. **[Laughs]** That's all I can tell you. I could look the name of it up, but I just can't recall it right this minute.

00:44:32

AE: On the right going south?

00:44:34

BL: On the right going south, yeah.

00:44:37

AE: Well because I think I told you on the phone when we talked before about Gentle Lee Rainey, who was born here on Dockery and has Delta Fast Foods, and his grandfather, he said made hot tamales here on Dockery and then would take them into Ruleville and sell them on Saturday night.

00:44:51

BL: Yeah; yeah, you know, that still goes on in Rosedale sometimes and different families will get together and—and make these treats, you know, and then carry them to town and sell them. That—that’s still a tradition that goes on now. I’m not real familiar with, you know, with all the different traditions that went on at Dockery through the years, but I’m certain that one did because I’ve heard that too. And I know it still continues in Rosedale. You can go out on a Saturday night in Rosedale and there are people that make tamales and bring them out and sell them.

00:45:18

AE: So tell me about how Dockery has kind of reinvented itself over the years and this—how you established the Dockery Foundation and with the popularity of this being a pilgrimage site for the blues and what that’s meant to the family and to this place.

00:45:35

BL: Well, you know, in—in the ‘50s [Interviewer’s note: *Deep Blues* was published in 1982] when Robert Palmer wrote his book *Deep Blues*, he came and interviewed Joe Rice [Dockery] and [his wife] Keith Dockery and then interviewed a lot of the blues singers that were still alive. And he really focused his attention on Dockery, and so therefore the world began to focus attention on Dockery.

00:45:57

And the Dockery family just has always realized that—that it was an important blues site, but they had really never done anything to improve it—just keep—you know keep it up. And so

about six, seven years ago Will Porteous, which is one of the Dockery grandsons, and Keith Derbes and—and Kay Dockery and—and Douglas decided that, you know, there ought to be something done to preserve this place better than just keeping it up. And so they asked me, would I help? And so they formed a foundation. They decided that—this is—it's such a national treasure that they would seek money from things like Save America's Treasures to help restore the place.

00:46:42

And so it was a matching grant we applied for, much paperwork, and—and documentation but we got a Save America's Treasures Grant, and we have matched that funds and we have used it to help restore the service station and the seed house and—and—and different buildings on the place. We're always looking for extra funds to finish the job and, you know, being involved in predestination that'll happen when the time comes, you know.

00:47:10

AE: Tell me about how you formed some of the—your Advisory Board that you have listed on your website. [Dockery Farms Foundation Advisory Board members are: Dr. William R. Ferris, T-Bone Burnett, Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones, Thelonious Monk III, Hodding Carter III, Tom Rankin, Sam Haskell, and Mary Donnelly Haskell.]

00:47:14

BL: Well, there's so many people interested in the blues that an Advisory Board can be of—of great service. They don't have—do a lot with the day-to-day running of the Foundation—excuse me, but when you need support or you need to get in touch with someone that might be helpful or could help you then these Advisory Board Members, you know, are—are really helpful. They

have a heart for saving this—this spot and—and so they've been very helpful in the past, and I know they will be helpful in the future.

00:47:47

AE: Does the Foundation have a mission statement of sorts or some—some long-term goal that's written down?

00:47:54

BL: We—we do. I don't have it memorized but—but they are—I'll paraphrase okay? They—the mission statement involves supporting and educating folks about the Delta culture, the Delta music, farm life, the different crops that were grown here in the Delta, and of the music itself. You know, it's just—the mission statement involves educational purpose of trying to help folks better understand and have real information about what went on and why the Delta is important and how the Delta got to be like it was. And you know it wasn't—it wasn't even formed. When—when my grandfather came here in 18—my great-grandfather came here in 1880, and I mean it was still—there were no levees, there were no nothing, you know, just—it was just virgin alluvial farm—timber. And so to come here and to clear all that and dig all the ditches and drain it all, that was a big deal and most of the United States had been settled long before 1880. And so this was the last frontier, you know. It really was. And so it—it developed a certain type of person, you know, that just didn't develop other places.

00:49:04

I know that's kind of arrogant sounding, isn't it, but anyway.

00:49:05

AE: Well when you talk about part of the Foundation's purpose is to educate, how do you do that? Do people come and talk to you?

00:49:12

BL: Well they do and—and—and we're also partnered with the Thelonious Monk Institute out of Washington, DC, and Thelonious Monk, Jr. is a big supporter of—of ours along with Tom Carter, the director, and lots of other folks that work with that organization. And they have come to the Ruleville School System and—and formed a music education program that goes on year-round. People from Delta State actually administer the program and teach it to the kids, but you know we—we—we work through them and—and through our tours, you know. When people call, if I'm available, I'll come talk to them and—and a lot of days I am. Sometimes I'm not but a lot of times I am, so it's pretty neat.

00:49:57

AE: What does it mean to you to have your—your connection to Dockery evolve into this opportunity?

00:50:06

BL: Oh, wow. I mean you know, I look back on it and—and my father died when I was ten, and I remember thinking that I wanted to farm at Estill, and so I kept that little hope and dream alive until I realized that—that I wasn't going to be able to get to do that. And so I was always involved in art and I was always loved it, and I thought, well, I'll just teach art till I can farm down there.

00:50:31

And I got to liking teaching art up here so much that I didn't—I didn't ever take up the opportunity to farm. And so I've always loved Estill, but I can't live there and so look what happened to me: I got to live at Dockery and got to be a help in preserving, you know, the Dockery site and—and it's been a real, been a real pleasure for me. You know I enjoy—I built—Tennie and I built our own house down there and—and so we're familiar with building practices, and so we get to use those practices on these old buildings and—and I've done a lot of restoring of different things, paintings and—and other things. And so I get to use that ability here too, which is, you know, very satisfactory for me.

00:51:14

AE: Tell me about the collage that you did for Dockery.

00:51:16

BL: The—?

00:51:16

AE: The collage on that poster.

00:51:18

BL: Oh—oh, well several years ago I decided that it might be nice to use some of the information that I have and some of the imagery that I make and—and do some collages. So I've done four, and that's just one that you see in there. But it takes pieces and parts of Dockery and puts them together in—in an image almost like Bill Dunlap says, you know, you're riding along in a car and you look out the window for a brief second and you look back. Well you've seen

some image, you know, and—and so the images that I put together are like that. You—it’s not like Dockery is today, and it’s not like Dockery was a long time ago. It’s a—it’s a mixture of the two. And I was able to use some of the old farm stationery and different things that, you know, that—that give the image a powerful look. And so I just enjoy doing them.

00:52:07

AE: Tell me again about the jaybird that you incorporated.

00:52:11

BL: Well, there’s a jaybird. I use a jaybird in all of them, a blue jay, because Tom Cannon told me that when his uncle [Charley Patton] would play on the commissary front porch and all the children could hear him play there—now they couldn’t hear him play at the Frolicking House but they could hear him play there—and that his voice was real gravely and, you know, I played a little piece on my fancy iPhone for you, and you could hear his gravely voice. And so the kids called him jaybird because jaybirds have gravely voices, you know [*Gestures*], you know, how they do when they jump up and down and make sounds?

00:52:42

AE: Would you mind playing that again?

00:52:42

BL: Yeah, sure. And so he told me, you know, “Uncle Charlie, all the kids called him jaybird.” And so when I started doing—you notice I can talk and—and do the phone at the same time don’t you—[*Playing Music*]—.

00:53:10

AE: What song is that?

00:53:10

BL: That's "Jersey Bull Blues," and that's Charley Patton singing and playing the guitar himself and so he's—he's accompanying himself. And if you listened, ninety years ago this is what it would have sounded like right here. There'd have been no cars, none of that sound that we hear outside the—the windows here. It would be total silence with just this man playing like this. And, again, you've been working all week long, daylight to dark, you just think what that would do to you, you know. That's neat, isn't it? [*Music*] Isn't that something? Golly. But anyway, what were we talking about?

00:53:58

AE: We were talking about the blue jay on the collages.

00:53:59

BL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah and anyway, so I took all those pieces and put it together and that blue jay I thought would be neat, you know, if he's symbolic and he was—was plucking or pecking on the guitar. And so I took a photograph of an old Gibson guitar and used that as a symbol of the blues or music and—and the bird pecking on it is a symbol of Charley Patton because a lot of times we'd be—we'd be—. The way I heard the story was I was mending the fences with Tom Cannon and Bill Scott, and we were sitting on the back of the pickup truck gate having a—you know, a water or Coca-Cola or something and a jaybird lit on the fence and

starting singing and jumping up and down like they do when they sing. And he said, “There’s Uncle Charlie.” And I said, “Where?” you know? [*Laughs*] I wasn’t looking at the bird. And he said, “That bird, there.” He said, “That jaybird—you know that’s what we used to call Uncle Charlie is Jaybird.” And he said, “Look at him. He’s singing now.” And so that was the spiritual embodiment of—to Tom of—of his uncle, you know, a jaybird. So anyway—neat story.

00:54:59

AE: What can you tell me about Ms. Rosetta, Charley’s daughter, who is in that picture that [photographer] Bill Steber gave to y’all?

00:55:05

BL: I can't tell you a lot about her except that Bill Steber took her that photograph and then took that picture of her. And at the time, he said she was living outside Duncan [Mississippi] and—and, you know, that’s one of those things that I wish we had—had more time and energy and money to pursue, you know, is talking to some of these older people that, you know, won't be with us probably much longer.

00:55:32

AE: Is the—outside of the Joe Friday story that you told about taking his picture by the mule watering trough, are there people who come back to visit Dockery who lived on this place at one time?

00:55:44

BL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I get calls, you know—you know, quite often of people that want to come back and visit the place they were baptized. I've had numerous—mostly women but—but numerous people have called and said, “Can I come out there and—and, you know, I was baptized there as a girl or my grandmamma was baptized there, and I want to see where she was baptized.” And I have—I have groups that, you know—I do that frequently.

00:56:04

I had a large group of—of African Americans come from Jackson last weekend, forty of them on a bus, and got to give them a nice tour and talk to them and all that. And when I told them about the living conditions and—and how hard those people had to work and all that some of them said, you know—some of them—most of them were retired, you know, that came so they were in their late 60s, 70s, and 80s and they said, you know, we just never realized how hard it was. You know, we had it hard, but we didn't have it as hard as they did. And so that was you know—. Some of them even hugged me; how about that? *[Laughs]*

00:56:39

AE: Well tell me what some of your international visitors have to say when they visit Dockery.

00:56:43

BL: Oh boy, they're the—they're the most enthusiastic group you ever saw. I mean they come here. They know this is the birthplace of the blues. They know that the Delta was magical back then, and they assume it still is which it is and so they—they come here; they want some of that. You know, magic is the word, you know, us grownups aren't supposed to use, you know. But anyway, that's what they're looking for.

00:57:03

And it was something unique here, you know, and it—it had to do with both sets of folks, you know, the white folks and—and the African Americans. It had to do with both of them, how they lived and how they interacted and, you know, it was just a unique time in America.

00:57:22

AE: What does Dockery mean locally anymore? Has it kept a reputation or gotten a new reputation or how has that evolved?

00:57:32

BL: You know, obviously in the state, you know, it—it's well thought of because of the—the state has made it a—oh, you know, one of the historical sites, you know, in the state of Mississippi and—and the governors have—have talked about us, you know, at the different times about how important we are. And of course the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce and the folks in Indianola, you know, they all realize the importance of it. You wouldn't have that big fancy BB King Museum down there. I think it's one of the biggest tourist draws in Mississippi, I've been told. And so you wouldn't have that there unless they realized the importance of it.

00:58:12

AE: Well, I'm anxious to walk around and look at the grounds. Is there anything that you haven't shared that you'd like to share or something I wouldn't have known to ask about?

00:58:23

BL: Well, um, I don't—I don't think so. I—you know, there are other stories and other you know little things here and there that you have to have your memory jogged to—to bring up but

it—it's a—it's an interesting place to come and—and visit. And we're trying to—with the restoration of these buildings, we're trying to make it more suitable, you know, to the many visitors and tourists that—you know, that we have—that we have come here. We're working on it.

00:58:53

AE: Speaking of renovations, you have this beautiful Viking kitchen in this room next door.

00:58:55

BL: Oh, we do.

00:58:58

AE: Tell me about that.

00:58:58

BL: Fred Carl and all the folks over at Viking [Range Corporation in Greenwood, Mississippi] was—was so kind to us. We—we started restoring the building, and we realized we wanted it to be a special events place that we could use. And so we talked to them and they were very gracious and—and gave us this kitchen equipment. I mean they were just as nice as they could be. And—and if you—if you go in there with me, I told Fred after they gave it to us, we got a giant refrigerator in there. I took and sent a picture of myself holding the doors open, and told him the only thing I was disappointed in was he didn't send us a big enough refrigerator.

[Laughs] And it—the refrigerator is eight to ten feet wide; I mean it's a monster. And so you

know, those kinds of things are—are very pleasing to me when others reach out and—and help us, you know, as much as they have. We're in partnership with them.

00:59:42

AE: So have you had a lot of interest in—in special events of people? Do they rent the place or do you just do in-kind donations for events or how does that work?

00:59:51

BL: No, we—we have a rent and—and we don't—we have events on a regular basis. Now, you know, we don't have them every day but—but we're in all kinds of groups, educational groups, we have—Baxter had a workshop out here, the—the local company here in town that makes the chemical and pharmaceutical things, you know, for the medical industry had a big workshop out here that lasted three or four days. And so we have lots of folks—wedding receptions, you know, that kind of thing.

01:00:21

AE: Where on the property do they do a workshop? Where—is that where do they do it, here?

01:00:24

BL: They did it actually in this building right here. They—all this furniture got moved and they set all the things up and they—people went through you know and—and did the different stations of that workshop. I don't know exactly, you know, what all they were doing, but they were doing something that involved their company. All I had to do was eat the barbecue.

[Laughs]

01:00:42

AE: Who did the barbecue?

01:00:43

BL: I think David Crews did the barbecue.

01:00:46

AE: Yeah, he's a good friend of ours. So what do you think the—the future of Dockery is now with the Dockery Foundation?

01:00:53

BL: Well obviously it's—it's a whole lot brighter than—than before they formed the Foundation, and we're making progress every day. And the site will—will before too much longer be totally restored, you know, back to the way it was after the turn of the century. And then we'll move on with the educational programming through the Thelonious Monk Institute and we'll have guests and visitors, and we'll have special events and, you know, it'll just—I mean it will be back to life again.

01:01:24

AE: What do you think Mr. Will would say about that?

01:01:26

BL: Oh, he would be absolutely amazed. I mean he would—he’s turning over in his grave, I know, to think all this happening and the interest that has come back to here. He obviously loved it or he wouldn’t have worked so hard and—and done all he did. But, you know, the—the fringe benefit of the blues is one of those extra things you just don’t imagine is going to happen, you know? For me, you know, I imagined I wanted to be in the art world and I remember going to talk to Theo Inman [Vaughey] in Jackson, Mississippi, back when I was in high school. And I said, “I want to be important in Mississippi in the arts.” And—and she and Lida Rogers ran the [Mississippi] Arts Commission. And I said, “I really want to be important. I want to do something.” She said, “Well get an MFA and don’t leave the state.” I wish she’d have said get an MFA and don’t leave the state and learn a lot about the blues because that’s what’s come to me. And you know, I’m very fortunate that I feel very important because I—I get to help out with one of the premier places in Mississippi that—that the world thinks of. Now you know there’s lots of places, you know, lots of Mississippians are more important—the State Capital or all that. But when we have thousands of people from Europe come all the time and you ask them, “How come you don’t want to go to the Grand Canyon?” “I don’t want to see that Grand Canyon. I want to see where the blues was born.” Well I mean it—that means a lot to them, and so I feel fortunate in being able to help preserve the place.

01:02:50

AE: Do you still have much time to do your own artwork?

01:02:52

BL: Some. You know, I make turkey calls and you’re going to have hear one. You know you got to hear—I make turkey trumpets and I’m famous in Nashville, Tennessee. [*Turkey Calling*]

And that's a trumpet. And so I make those every year and we go to Nashville, Tennessee, and I have 50,000 admiring fans come in three days time at the National Wild Turkey Show, and I sign autographs and take pictures with babies. Isn't that wild?

01:03:25

AE: How did you come to make turkey—

01:03:25

BL: Nobody knows that in Mississippi. *[Laughs]*

01:03:27

AE: How did you come to make turkey calls?

01:03:29

BL: Well, I've always hunted and about twenty-five years ago I—I tried—I began realizing that I couldn't really call real good with a—what they call a rubber diaphragm call that goes in your mouth or a box call. I just couldn't make—it didn't sound like a live turkey. And so I heard about trumpets, and there was a guy named Tom Turpin that died back in the early—the late [19]30s, I think, in Memphis that made trumpets. And so he had a grandson or a great-grandson or something named Steve Turpin, who is alive now, and I got to asking about trumpets. And so I got one from Steve and then I looked at it and I thought, you know, his was hard—to me, it was more difficult to play. And I thought well maybe I can make it easier to play.

01:04:17

And so I got to fooling with air channels and baffles, ways to stop the air, and so all I'm doing is kissing on it [*Gestures*] like that. [*Turkey Calling*] And then when you stop the air flow, you hear that double note? It's a harmonica note. Listen. [*Turkey Calling*] Here, it's two notes at once. That sounds like a turkey. And all of the sudden I got to killing way more turkeys, and got to calling up a lot of turkeys. And all of the sudden I realized how good it was, and so I started making them for my friends. And then all of the sudden one day I saw something I don't know on some show about Nashville, Tennessee, and the World Turkey Calling Contest and all that stuff and how many people came. So it costs \$1,000 bucks to get a booth up there now, and when I first started it wasn't that much, but I thought, I'm just going to go Nashville and see how really good I am.

01:05:11

I was scared to death. Man, I went up there and I realized I had one of the most life-like sounding calls in the whole show. And all these people would come up to me and you know, "You're a nobody. How did you do that?" And I just kept telling them I just kept practicing and trying and figuring out ways to make it better. And all of the sudden I got one of the—one of the best trumpet calls in—in the nation. I get all kinds of orders and all that kind of stuff. I'm—I'm amazed. I look forward to it every year. It's addictive. You know when thirty or forty people stand in front of your face, you know, for three days in a row and want what you got, you know, that's—that's pretty addictive. [*Laughs*]

01:05:45

AE: So do you manufacture yourself all those individual parts?

01:05:49

BL: They're turned on a lathe and that's a brass cartridge, 257 Magnum Wetherbee cartridge and that little top thing right there is the eyelet out of your shoe. That's an eyelet that I thread and I epoxy and I put down there, and I make a brass mouthpiece that goes down in it and then I have a brass loop on it that allows the call to hang perfectly straight. Before I put that on there, everybody's calls hung from the middle and hung crooked. And one time I was using one of those and running through the woods chasing a turkey I didn't kill but fortunately, I did run him down, but my call got hung on a tree limb, and it liked to choke me to death.

01:06:23

And so I came back and I put a knot in the call at first and it hang(ed) straight, but then one time when I was pulling the call up to my mouth the knot got in my mouth first and the turkey was standing there and I needed him to step another direction so I could shoot him, and I couldn't get the knot out of the way with my tongue and so I missed the turkey. So that next Sunday I went to church and went in the kitchen to wash my hands, and it was a ring on the kitchen sink that held the thing where it would run. You know it's one of those dish washing things like the—oh, what do you call it—commercial dish washing things. It had a ring on it that held the handle down so you could wash your hands without turning it loose. And I thought, god-dog-it. And I ran home and I got myself a ring, and now I have the only turkey call in the whole world that hangs perfectly straight every time you drop it. Isn't that cool? And then it sounds like this. [*Turkey Calling*] How about that? [*Laughs*]

01:07:29

AE: I think you're making music on Dockery is what I think. Well—

01:07:35

BL: I have fun making them and I just make 100 a year, that's all. And I'm starting in about a week to get started making them, and I make them and I go the third week in February and sell them all and that's the end of that. I don't make any—you know, I don't—you know, if people want to get on a waiting list and all that they just have to wait till I make them. I got too many other things to do to just, you know, just make them year-round, so—.

01:07:56

AE: That way, people come begging.

01:07:57

BL: They do. They really do. And—and I get pictures—I sell a lot of them to—to daddies, you know, for their sons and things and I get pictures of little boys holding up a turkey with my call hanging around the turkey's neck like he came there that way with it. So it's pretty neat. It really is a good feeling. A young man kills a turkey with your call that's a—that's a big deal.

01:08:17

AE: Well I am so pleased that the interview took this turn. Thank you for sharing your turkey
[Laughs] calls with us.

01:08:20

BL: You're welcome.

01:08:22

AE: And thank you very much for sitting here with us and telling us about Dockery. I appreciate it a lot.

01:08:26

BL: You're welcome. I sure enjoyed it. Thank you.

01:08:29

[End Bill Lester-Dockery Farm Interview]