

RUTH B. FOSTER

Ruleville, MS

* * *

Date: August 9, 2012

Location: Delta Fast Food – Cleveland, MS

Interviewer: Amy C. Evans

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 38 minutes

Project: Dockery Farms

[Begin Ruth B. Foster-Dockery Farm 1]

00:00:01

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday August 9, 2012. I'm in Cleveland, Mississippi, at Delta Fast Food operated by Gentle Lee Rainey and we're with Mr. Rainey's mother, Ms. Ruth Blaylock Foster. And if I could get you, ma'am, to say your name for the record.

00:00:19

Ruth Blaylock Foster: Ruth Blaylock Foster.

00:00:23

AE: And we're here to speak with you about Dockery [Farms], your time on Dockery and your family's time on Dockery. Could you just start wherever you want to maybe talking about your—your father?

00:00:33

RBF: Well my father [Sylvester Blaylock] was the farmer. He farmed—I don't know exactly how many acres of land, but he farmed quite a bit of land. And then his farming, he did cotton, he did corn, he had beans, he also had Louisiana [sugar] cane and some sorghum cane. That's when I was very small. We grew up with that kind of environment. And in that—in that we were able to even down for a garden we raised all kind of food. If you want to go with a few—beans, corn, string beans, butter beans, cabbage, greens, all kinds, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, all of the—all the farming things that people have now we had it then—tomatoes and just so many

more that I can't think right now. But we were able to have anything that it—was raised—that raised. We did it all.

00:02:11

My father was the farmer. He did the work and we helped him when the time come. We picked cotton. He planted cotton. He planted corn. And also we had chickens on the farm, all kinds of—all kinds of poultry. We had chickens, we had guineas, we had ducks, we had guineas and they was a mean thing—guineas run off. Then I had to go look for them. But it worked out all right.

00:02:58

And in the farming part for the cotton and, like I said, and the corn and beans and all that, he planted it. When it got up a certain—we chopped it. And when the cotton got ready to be picked, we picked the cotton. And it was enough of us that we picked a bale of cotton a day. And the cotton that we picked, I think it was about 500 pounds that would make a bale. And we picked that every day. And on a—on a Saturday we did a remnant, something other like about I reckon about 400 pounds and on Monday about ten o'clock he went to the gin. The Dockery had a gin, and he'd carry the cotton to the Dockery gin and they ginned. They silk(ed) it off—off—off his trailer and then he came on back and we was still picking cotton.

00:04:17

That went on for quite a few years. I don't know exactly how many years but in [19]'42 my two oldest brothers went in the service, so therefore that left us that had to have more—do more work; yeah.

00:04:44

So after—and, like I said, they—my two oldest brothers went in the service. Now it was five boys and six girls. Four of the boys went in the service. Two of them went in '42 and the—

the one of them went in '43 and one went in '44, I think, because he left home. And—and with him leaving home then I don't know exactly when it—when it was but he did leave. And he went in the Air Force. My oldest brother went in the Coast Guard. My second brother went in the Navy. And my third brother went in the Army. And my fourth brother is in the Air Force. And he's in the Air Force now.

00:05:49

We had a family reunion a few days ago. He was at the family reunion. He doing good. Now I need to rest.

00:05:59

AE: Yes, ma'am.

00:06:03

RBF: Like I said, it was—was good. It wasn't bad out here. Some peoples talk and say that they wouldn't live on the farm or they wouldn't farm, you know, stuff like that. But I'm telling you, it's all right. If you want something, you got to work for it. And we—we was out there and we didn't mind it. We worked all the summer; it wasn't hot like it is now. But in the evening time and right up in the morning time we did what we needed to do. And up in the day we sit under the shade tree—played or did whatever we wanted to do.

00:06:55

And—good life. Our—our father and our mother prepared things for us. My mama didn't fool around out in the—on the farm, you know, like picking or cotton nothing like that, chopping; she didn't do that. Our brothers didn't want her to do it. I don't know about the father.

But our brothers didn't want her in the field, so she didn't go out there. But everything was real, real good.

00:07:34

We was in—we—all of us grew up on Dockery, our whole family, all six—all twelve of the children and, you know, my dad and mama was already grown, but they grew up on Dockery. And it—it was a good life. You know. I mean a good life. We—in the fall of the year he would buy up food, fifty gallons—fifty pounds of flour in a bag and then the corn for the cornbread—y'all know about cornbread, don't you? For the corn, he would take the—the corn to the mill and they'd grind it up. He didn't have to pay. They'd get told. You know what told is? Put—if he had ten cups, he would leave two cups for the man. That's the way he did it. Everything—like I said, everything was good.

00:08:48

AE: Was there a mill on Dockery?

00:08:49

RBF: Hmm?

00:08:51

AE: Was the mill on Dockery?

00:08:51

RBF: No, it was in Boyle, Mississippi, right down the road there. That's where it was. But the flour it was bought, you know, wherever—I don't know where flour come from other than that, you know, he bought it. And I'm sure they had a place for it. And that's right.

00:09:20

My father could do most anything. He only had one arm; his other arm was lame. But you couldn't tell the difference. And we worked on Dockery. That's why I said if I had of know(ed), I could have figured up the many years that we was there on Dockery. That's right. And all of my learning came off from Dockery. They had a church there and had a school. The school went to eighth grade, and the church was going on until a couple years ago. Somebody burned it down.

00:10:09

AE: This is the True Light Church?

00:10:11

RBF: True Light and it was on Dockery. But we—after that we did get a church in Ruleville on Ruby Street [True Light MB Church]. So everything, like I said, it was all right.

00:10:28

And then I got married and got children and [Gentle Lee] Rainey, and he have three sisters and two brothers. And they scattered out to different places. He stayed in—and I don't know why he stayed. He—I don't know but he doing all right, I think about well as he would do if he was somewhere else. I believe that.

00:10:56

And as we lived, like I said, on Dockery he worked mostly for his self. It was Dockery's land, but he worked something like renting land. And then the last of the year, well, he'd go up and they'd settle up. I don't know how they did that. I don't know nothing about that. But he would go up and they would settle up. The Dockery—Mr. Dockery, Will Dockery and Joe Rice Dockery; I think Will Dockery was the son and Joe Rice was the daddy. I'm trying to think—

00:11:53

AE: Will was the daddy.

00:11:56

RBF: Will was the daddy, yeah, uh-huh, and but they didn't have no children. But he got him another wife and she had two girls for him, yeah. I used to see them and talk to them a little bit—not much, talk to them a little bit. Keith and Kay, yeah. And that's about all I can think of right now.

00:12:24

AE: Could you tell us your mother and father's names for the record?

00:12:27

RBF: Sure. My mother's name was Hattie Bennett Blaylock. And my father was Sylvester Blaylock. And his father's name was Will Blaylock. And my mother's mother's name was Louiza Bennett. And that's—that's my grandparents. That's right.

00:12:54

I don't know—I don't know nothing—too much more about it and it's not hard to remember if you knew you were going to come into this, you know. It would have been okay, so—

00:13:09

AE: Well I'm sorry this was a surprise for you. We can pause a minute if you need to rest again.

00:13:16

RBF: He had—he had gotten—you don't have to hold it so close. You don't have—but he bought that tractor and paid on it by touring [?]: one—this year he paid, next year he paid, third year he was through paying. He bought that to do the farming. And he planted the—he planted the farm with it. He had his own little planter [*Laughs*]. I can see him now getting the planter together. And he would—after that he would buy his seeds—you know the cottonseeds and the bean—seeds for beans. He bought them and he put them in his little hopper. That's what they were calling it then on the—and put it on the back of the tractor in a little thing like a bucket. And he had two of them on there, one for this row and one for this row. And he'd go down through there and plant that same way he would cotton. That's the way he planted the cotton and the corn and the beans—all that was planted.

00:14:41

And I used to remember carrying him water so much, woo, my Lord. Bring too much memories back sometimes. But it was all right; it was still all right. And Pee Wee—well we call Pee Wee—Pee Wee, my son Pee Wee, that's what we call him, Pee Wee. He was very skinny, real skinny. And we thought he would never get no fat. And we call him Pee Wee, and he's running around there thin and all. But he started filling out and he did pretty good.

00:15:26

His sisters and his three sisters—they did real good. They—the sisters and brothers always had ups and downs. Do you have a brother? Y'all got ups and downs I bet. But they always had ups and downs. But they do pretty good. They come by here and see him sometimes—sometimes. But they had a good time at the family reunion. And they did and I sit back and watch them. They tease each other about everything they could think of. They did but they didn't fight, and they didn't argue. There wasn't no arguing, no fighting, they were there for some time but it wasn't bad. They know when that's a good thing. I was glad they know when to cut it off. I got to stop now.

00:16:22

AE: Okay.

00:16:22

[End Ruth B. Foster-Dockery Farm 1; Begin Ruth B. Foster-Dockery Farm 2]

00:00:02

AE: Okay, we're going to talk about hog killings.

00:00:07

RBF: And we had I don't know how many hogs we had. I cannot tell you. I could not tell you how many hogs we had. But I do know we had a plenty, a lot of them. And they used to—they would kill them hogs in the winter months when it's cold. They didn't kill no hogs in the hot weather. They killed them in the winter months, and he would kill two or three at the time. And

that's the thing that I really hated because—and the reason I hate it, I'm talking about my part now—the reason I hate it, I had to clean the chitlins because, you know, hogs have chitlins. And we—and they killed so many and there was just too many. We had to clean the chitlins and wash the liver and the tripe and all that stuff. We had to wash it, hang it up, and let it drip dry.

00:01:19

And then we'd take it and put it in the top of the refrigerator so it could stay cold. We killed too many hogs. Woo, I don't never—sometimes I don't—I think about it and I say, “Woo!”, that's right. And did they—when I come up they was doing it. And we did that until we stopped farming. Every year, he had—and then plus, we killed yearlings too; that's a bull. That's right; we killed them—beef meat. So we had pork meat and we had beef meat, and we had poultry, which is chicken. You know that. We had all of that.

00:02:08

AE: Now is this something you did as a family or was this a community-wide and—on Dockery?

00:02:13

RBF: That was our family, Sylvester Blaylock's family. No community, not—no. Them folks were too sorry. They wouldn't come help you. You had—if you were doing it and they helped, that's fine. “I'll come help,” uh-uh. But they want some meat. Um-um, that was a family and I—we had—we had two uncles and my Uncle Phineas, he would come help my father. And my Uncle Bud, he would come help my father. Any time he got ready to kill a hog or calf or cow, something like that, they'd always come and help. That's right. They had their—my Uncle Bud didn't have no children. My Uncle Phineas, had some children. But they never did come help

because they'd pretend they was scared of the dead hog, so he never did bring them, but they ate the meat you know, so—.

00:03:29

AE: Do you remember how your family would prepare the beef when you would kill the cow?

00:03:35

RBF: How they'd prepare it? Well, what they'd do—you know they'd hang them up so that blood can run down on the ground. And they did that. And then they would take them off. He had a trailer—and it's a table like, and they'd put them on there and cut them up.

00:04:00

One year—one year—I don't know what year it was, either—my brother got [*unintelligible*] Delta State [University in Cleveland, Mississippi], at that time—long time, too. And they wanted to can some of the beef and the pork. So what they did, they came the time that they killed them and they took a half—half of the—the beef meat and half of the pork and they carried it—I don't know whether they carried it to Delta State or where they carried it to, but they carried it somewhere and they canned it. They put it in a can just like you buy it at the store today. And they brought it back. But they did that for experience. They didn't charge nothing but they did it for experience because a lot of stuff was getting—getting more familiar with what to do. You know time was getting better and you could—you know, you could do things.

00:05:33

But before then I don't know whether Delta State had anything or not. I can't say that. But I know they canned. They did some canning. And that beef was in the can and that pork was in the can. And they had it wrote down which one was beef, which one was—was pork, yeah.

00:06:02

AE: Do you recall ever barbecuing the beef in your family?

00:06:04

RBF: We didn't barbecue it, not as such—putting it in cans or stuff like that. They used to make it—barbecue it. A big old grill and stuff and put it on there and cook it. They did that—barbecue been in our family for many years. They used to—get this—catch them little old squirrels and we would clean them and skin them and throw them on the grill, and it wasn't no meat because you know how little they are, but they wanted to do some, so the put them on the grill. Put the rabbits; we used to go rabbit hunting. They'd get them rabbits, skin them, wash them, put them on a grill. That's right.

00:07:02

AE: And how about tamales? Rainey tells me that your father made tamales.

00:07:04

RBF: They had—now he didn't want us to fool with that. He—they fooled with it; they didn't want us to bother with it. He didn't say let them alone. He didn't say let them alone, but if he'd look at you, you know, to let them alone. That's right. You know that. Won't nobody have to tell you. You know you don't supposed to do that—they worked with them. They had all their big old pots—woo-wee, bit old pots like that [*Gestures*], great big pots, you , they had them in. And that's what they had and they worked with them too. They used to sell them; carry them out there

to Ruleville. Carry them out there to Ruleville. You can buy anything you want on the railroad. And they was sitting on the railroad selling hot tamales.

00:08:02

That's right. I don't know how much they cost. I don't know how many they sold but they did. And he used to save old his shucks [corn husks], and we better not mess with his shucks. That was it, yeah.

00:08:22

AE: Do you have any idea how he learned to make tamales?

00:08:24

RBF: Uh-uh, no, I can't bother with that, uh-um because I'll mess it up, uh-um. But—but then when my daddy and his granddaddy, they fooled with that and we didn't. That's it.

00:08:48

AE: And can you say what you were telling earlier before we recorded about the blues music and you not know anything about that and why?

00:08:56

RBF: I told you they did have blues. I told you that. And I told you they went down the hill—down the hill. Mississippi River—they were down there but—. Now this Charley Patton man, they—they were down there playing, and you could hear them but we didn't—we didn't do that. That—that wasn't lady like so the lady like didn't go down there. And they usually boogie a while, I imagine. They used to bring movies in and we used to go up and watch a movie. We

were permitted to do that but we were not permitted to go down there—that hill where they were singing the blues. It was not lady like, so we didn't do it. That's right.

00:09:52

AE: So when you say down the hill, is this—this was in the town of Ruleville or this was on Dockery?

00:09:57

RBF: Oh no, no, that's on Dockery. That's on Dockery.

00:10:00

AE: Just on the other side of the river?

00:10:02

RBF: No, on this side of the river. You know where the gin at?

00:10:06

AE: Yes, ma'am.

00:10:07

RBF: It was right down—right down from that, a little further back this way, and that's where they was. They was clean down there. They had it clean and most of the time they worked every day and on a Saturday that's when they'd live it up—right.

00:10:38

AE: Now Mr. [Bill]Lester was telling us today that they—people called that the Frolicking House.

00:10:42

RBF: The who?

00:10:43

AE: The Frolicking House instead of a juke or anything?

00:10:45

RBF: Uh-uh, can't tell you nothing about that. I ain't saying they didn't have it, but I'm saying I didn't know nothing about the Frolicking House. The only thing different that we did when I was coming up, they had a movie and they would show that movie on a—I believe a Friday night and we got a chance to go once or twice. But we wasn't allowed, so we didn't go. And about the Frolicking, I don't know. That part I don't know but I know they had their wang-dang-do. I know they had a wang-dang-do.

00:11:33

AE: So what—do I remember correctly that your father passed in the [19]'60s sometime?

00:11:38

RBF: My daddy passed in '72—'72. [Interviewer's note: Sylvester Baylock's headstone lists his death as 1967.]

00:11:45

AE: And he is buried there next to where True Light was?

00:11:47

RBF: He's buried in—where True Light—where the church used to be. He buried out there in the cemetery. The church burnt up and he's buried out there where the church burnt up at. Uh-hm, that's where he's buried at.

00:12:04

AE: Is your mother there also?

00:12:06

RBF: My mother was not because her—I reckon after—I reckon after twelve children(s) and a couple grandchildren came and a few more things she just got tired and left. I suppose—it's me saying that; she ain't told me nothing. She just got tired and she left and went to the city and that's where she passed at—in the city. He still stayed—he still stayed here in Mississippi because after that, he left Dockery. He left Dockery and went right up the road not far on Highway 8 and he rented some land from up there because Dockery was going on down. It was going on down. People were moving away and wasn't coming back and everything was just getting on slower and slower. So he moved up in another place. He still farmed, though.

00:13:28

But no, Mama didn't stay with him no more. She didn't like him no more. That's life, you know. So that's it.

00:13:38

AE: We're—and I remember Rainey was born on Dockery. Were all of your children born on Dockery?

00:13:44

RBF: Hmm, well, say that again.

00:13:48

AE: I was just asking if all of your children were born on Dockery.

00:13:51

RBF: All my children?

00:13:51

AE: Yes, ma'am.

00:13:52

RBF: No, he was. And he had a brother born on Dockery. But the others, no, they was somewhere. I don't even know where I was.

00:14:06

AE: Taking care of children. [*Laughs*]

00:14:08

RBF: Yeah. [*Laughs*] Yes, indeed.

00:14:16

AE: So about when would you say all the families moved off Dockery?

00:14:22

RBF: Uh, [*Thinking*] I really can't tell you that because they—they got older. They started dying. They started being buried. And the people just started leaving, going different places. But the year, right now, I can't give it to you.

00:14:53

AE: That's okay.

00:14:54

RBF: Uh-um, I can't give it to you. Some come to Cleveland. Some went other places and lived. Like I said, they just old and got fevered and then they just slipped on away. That's right. But thank God they wasn't fortunate as me. [*Laughs*] I been here eighty-two years. I'll tell you that. And you did ask.

00:15:26

AE: [*Laughs*] Well you sure don't look it, my goodness.

00:15:31

RBF: Yes, indeed. So, but to know when they started leaving I could not tell you. But ain't been many years ago. I don't think—I don't think nobody that lived on Dockery is living now. I don't

think no—well, you know, y'all see me but—but what I'm saying, they all gone, uh-hm. They all gone.

00:16:09

AE: And all their stories are gone, too.

00:16:11

RBF: Most of them—most of them came to Cleveland. Most of them did now. And then some of the men folks scattered on out maybe to Tennessee, some probably went to another—more cities, more cities or something like that. But then I—I remember that some came back and they passed here and that was all the way in Cleveland. Well we're in Cleveland now. [*Laughs*] But that was here, uh-hm, and I don't know. I don't know what year—sure don't.

00:16:58

AE: Okay. I wonder if you could tell me what you think about how now Dockery is so well known for blues music and how they've rehabilitated that service station and people come from all over the world to visit Dockery Farms because of the blues music.

00:17:14

RBF: You know you need to cut that off a minute, and then I'll get back. That's what made Dockery.

00:17:19

AE: Okay, say that one more time.

00:17:21

RBF: I said the black people is the ones that made Dockery. The black people were able to—to buy stuff to keep them in business. That's right. When the black people left, the business went on, too. You see what I'm talking about? That's right. And I—I see them out there. I don't know who behind it and really don't care, really, to be honest with you. It's still good. And sometimes I go all around through up there, just ride and go ahead on. But when the black people left, the business left. That's it.

00:18:14

AE: So you have good memories associated with your time there, though?

00:18:16

RBF: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I remember a lot, a lot—a whole lot too.

00:18:28

AE: Is there any one thought you'd like to leave us on, some—some thought about your time on Dockery?

00:18:34

RBF: Well, the only thing I can say, I do—thank God that I was able to—to be in that number. That's right. And there's a great number, a lot. Didn't nobody—didn't nobody reject us from going to church, from going to baptizing. We—we baptized—I was baptized in Sunflower River. That's right, right around where—everything is a little different but that's where I was baptized

at. And a whole lot of them were baptized in that pool, right. But the pool went dry and therefore they didn't—you know, it wasn't no more water. But I still believe it's some water there. You don't know. They had some good water. That's right.

00:19:40

And all my children left. They gone on about their business and a whole lot of—all the families on Dockery had children, the black people. And those are the ones that kept that place going—sure did. But most of them, like I said—and I still say the same thing, I don't know where there's any person living that stayed on Dockery. I don't know that. Uh-um, no. I don't know because most all of them come to Cleveland. And I knew where they all lived [*Laughs*]—being nosy. I knew where they all lived. But they were still good people. Yeah, they were still good people.

00:20:37

AE: So outside of visiting with you I feel like the history of—of Dockery is about to be lost. What would you have to say to upcoming generations about Dockery for them to know and remember about the place?

00:20:52

RBF: Only thing I can say if anybody—of course I—they did have a nice article in the paper sometime back, and I clipped the article to keep it. I don't know where that article went but if—I just don't know where it went. But if—if anybody knew anything about Dockery, if they did, it's all right. But I don't believe it's like they got it. Nope.

00:21:43

AE: We'll never know.

00:21:44

RBF: Never will know, sure won't. Toodle-oo.

00:21:49

AE: Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it, Mrs. Foster.

00:21:53

RBF: I don't know whether I gave you anything that you wanted to hear.

00:21:56

[End Ruth B. Foster-Dockery Farm 2]