

Elra Johnson

Interviewer: When and where were you born?

Elra: I was born in Mississippi.

Interviewer: When?

Elra: 1906.

Interviewer: 1906. Ok. What month?

Elra: January 28<sup>th</sup>.

Interviewer: Tell me when and where you were born?

Elra: January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1906.

Interviewer: In Mississippi.

Elra: Mississippi with my mother and father.

Interviewer: With your mother and father.

Elra: Yes, they was living.

Interviewer: Ok. Tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up.

Elra: I went to school and I got to fighting with everybody there.

Interviewer: Tell me what did you do? Did you grow up on a farm?

Elra: Yes, my daddy had a farm.

Interviewer: What did you do on the farm on the way of work or chores?

Elra: Plowed. Plowed a mule. And when I get to the end of rope, then I tied a mule to a post.

Interviewer: What were you doing with the mule? Plowing with the mule. What type of crops where you plowing?

Elra: Well my dad just had us doing the plowing you know doing little things. I want you all to know how to work for yourselves because I not going to be with you always.

Interviewer: So how much land did your dad have?

Elra: Now, if I'm not making a mistake I'm thinking it is 290 acres of land.

Interviewer: 290 acres of land. Wow that is a lot.

Elra; If I'm not making a mistake.

Interviewer: What were you doing for fun growing up on the farm as a little girl?

Elra: I worked like the devil.

Interviewer: There was no time for fun.

Elra: No, there was no fun. We had to work. Yes we did.

Interviewer: So can you describe your father for me, what kind of a person was he?

Elra: My father was a tall, dark man with good hair.

Interviewer: So what did he try to instill in you growing up. How did he influence you?

Elra: He influenced me, he said, "Black hair," he called me Black hair, "do the thing that is right and don't let nobody turn you around."

Interviewer: Your grandfather. What was your grandfather's name?

Elra: His name was Bill Wade.

Interviewer: Bill Wade. Alright.

Elra: My uncle was named Henry Wade and my daddy was named Joseph Wade. Grandpa Fred was my momma's daddy, he was white.

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit about you as a young adult. Let's talk a little bit about the business you started, your sewing business.

Elra: Sewing machine. I sewed for the public and I could make anything that a person wear. A coat, the pants, what they wear. I don't need to have nothing but a machine.

Interviewer: who taught you how to sew?

Elra: In those days they don't do that much you just went to a place where they train people if they want to learn something.

Interviewer: Ok. So then you would take what you learned and you would become a seamstress and sew a lot of clothes for people.

Elra: I sewed for everybody in the community and some out of the community.

Interviewer: So how much would you sell a shirt for?

Elra: No more than about a dollar. And it had to be a nice one otherwise I wouldn't get that much.

Interviewer: What about a pair of pants.

Elra: Oh, it would be about a dollar and a half.

Interviewer: So you were a good sewer. People would come to you all the time.

Elra: All the time. It was me and Georgia Clark were the two seamstress among the colored race coming up in our time. Clark lived in West and I took care of Bowling Green and Durrant.

Interviewer: And you were born in Durrant, Mississippi.

Elra: Yes. My dad named Joe my momma named Minni.

Interviewer: Ok. Lets talk about you going on to get a nursing certification.

Elra: I did. I did. I got it.

Interviewer: What was it like being a nurse, why did you want to be a nurse?

Elra: I wanted to help sick people. Somebody was sick I always wanted to help somebody.

Interviewer: What hospital did you work at?

Elra; Durrant. Durrant Hospital.

Interviewer: So you like helping people.

Elra: I do and me and White, she was from West and me and her went together.

Interviewer: So you worked in the same hospital together.

Elra: Yes and me and her worked together.

Interviewer: And this was during segregated times

Elra: Segregated times. And her momma didn't had one good and my momma just had one good. And this was told of us to get out there and do this and do that. And me and her got together. They let them come on out there and they put some weapons on us.

Interviewer: Do you remember working with any white or black patients.

Elra: All black patients.

Interviewer: Did you care for white patients.

Elra: They did not want to be with us period and I used to care for white peoples babies when they went out and did their own thing.

Interviewer: Ok. So being a nurse was something you wanted to do as child?

Elra: that was just what I wanted to do. When I got old enough to think about doing something that is just what I wanted to do, I wanted to help somebody.

Interviewer: Now also I know that you did work for a white family or several of white families going to their houses.

Elra: But I had to go in the back door. And when I left I had to go out the front. They had to check me to see what did I have.

Interviewer: Ok. So you work for white families they would hire you out to come in as a maid a cleaning lady.

Elra: No I didn't clean no houses I took care of the babies.

Interviewer: Ok. And what was that like for you? Did you enjoy it?

Elra: I enjoyed it. I fell clear down on the floor and a little boy climbed on my back and pulled my hair.

Interviewer: So were you paid a lot to do that?

Elra: No. They didn't give you that much.

Interviewer: So did they trust you?

Elra: They trusted me with their children. Whenever they get ready to go somewhere I have to go and stay at their house with their children until they get back and they called once or twice a week to see how they are doing.

Interviewer: Do you remember any of the families' names?

Elra: I can't think of any of the families' names.

Interviewer: Did they live in Durrant?

Elra: Yeah.

Interviewer: Ok lets talk about your involvement in the church. Because I know that you went to Rice Chapel Church in Durrant, Mississippi.

Elra: Went to church every Sunday unless it rained and we didn't want to get wet.

Interviewer: I know that you were a Sunday school teacher.

Elra: I taught the little children and the white lady taught the bigger.

Interviewer: So did you enjoy.

Elra: I enjoyed it and I still like it. And I asked the Lord to help me help somebody.

Interviewer: You were doing that in the Sunday school you were teaching them about the church and the religion right?

Elra; That's right but what I'm saying I asked the Lord to please let me help somebody.

Interviewer: Obviously you would do that on latter on in your life and we will talk about that latter. Some of your involvement with the civil rights and stuff.

Elra: Yes, I was a head leader.

Interviewer: Let's talk a little more about the church and your role.

Elra: And they told me that if I didn't get out of the civil right stuff that I would get killed out there. If I die, die right. And I just stayed with it and no one said nothing else of me because I was going to lay the hammer down.

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit about your involvement in the civil rights.

Elra: I was the head. Georgia Clark was on the side of me. She was from the West Station.

Interviewer: So how did you guys meet?

Elra: Georgia joined the church.

Interviewer: So you guys worked together?

Elra: We worked together and us didn't give a hoot. If they come in the front door and she look at me and I look at her and in there, good morning.

Interviewer: Are you talking about going to church now?

Elra: No at the people's houses we were working. We were supposed to go in the front door. The law told us, the police told us you aren't supposed to go in the back door you are supposed to go in the front door. Me and Georgia done it and they got mad at us.

Interviewer: Wasn't this pretty much the conditions at the time in the south.

Elra: Yes Sir.

Interviewer: Where colored people had to come in the back door.

Elra: He's sitting on this side of the door and she's sitting on that side of the door then they say stop and they had to see what we had.

Interviewer: So this really bothered you didn't it?

Elra: Yes, so I quit.

Interviewer: So you quit the job.

Elra: I sure did.

Interviewer: This type of racism, is this what motivates you?

Elra: Let me tell you one thing. White folk made Negro's Hell. I hate to say it like that. But you couldn't come in their front door and you couldn't eat out of their plates. And when they put dog food and then have the same thing placed on your plate. Me and Georgia saw them do it and just walked out.

Interviewer: Now you would react to this and you would become involved politically in Durrant, Mississippi. You would react to this you would see things like the discrimination and racism.

Elra: I would get up, what did they call it, I would call out and tell everything on white folk on what they did and wasn't scared. I had white folks standing behind me. Me and Georgia Clark done it.

Interviewer: How did you and Georgia Clark use the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party to get civil rights.

Elra: We were scared of the devil.

Interviewer: Tell me about that organization you were a part of.

Elra: Freedom Democrat Party. Me and Georgia Clark. She lived in West and I lived in Durrant and she and I decide how they treated our old parents in the front and decided they aren't going to treat us like that. So me and her got out and protested and that opened the door for the next fella behind me could come in.

Interviewer: So you used the democratic party to fight for civil rights.

Elra: That's what us did. And us did like the devil too. They didn't want us in there but we went on in anyway. And they said come in the back door. I said, I will when I be going home and when I come in I came in the front door. But the police and the law told us don't ever go in the back, always go in the front. And us done what the police told us to do and the police were out there watching and so we did what they said. We went in the front door. And they didn't like it. So they hopped up and moved to Memphis. I don't know where they went but they didn't come back no more.

Interviewer: Can you talk about some of your political activities, what you were doing on the political scene as far as fighting for civil rights.

Elra: We weren't supposed to go to white, when we'd go to whites they would tell us opt go around. We weren't supposed to go in the front door. But me and Georgia Clark we did.

Interviewer: Do remember any of the awards, because you received a lot of awards for fighting racism.

Elra: I remember and they had it on the side of the road to kill me and Georgia Clark. But the white man was behind us and then they was going to do something and then he looked at us and said go ahead.

Interviewer: When and where was this?

Elra: In Durrant.

Interviewer: Where were you guys coming from?

Elra: That's where I live in Durrant.

Interviewer: You said that there was a white man behind you.

Elra: Yeah.

Interviewer: And he was going to kill you.

Elra: Yeah. Wanted to kill me and Georgia for getting on the streets saying we were going to overcome one day.

Interviewer: Ok. You were marching. You and Georgia.

Elra: And we tried to get some of the other people, black people. And we said we are living on so and so's place but if we go out there and march we are going to have to move. Me and her told her forget it. But me and Georgia Clark done it.

Interviewer: So you guys started it but you tried to get the support of other black people but they would not follow you.

Elra; No No. They said no I am living on the man's place and if I get out there I've got to move.

Interviewer: So black people could not fight for civil rights for fear that they would get kicked off their land.

Elra: Right, now you are talking.

Interviewer: This shows a lot courage and strength, fearlessness on you.

Elra: And Georgia Clark. Me and her done it.

Interviewer: So it was you speaking up on racism that would

Elra: And they would ask us, the man that was orating would ask us, would they let you through the front door? I said no. They'll be sitting on the front porch and we have to go around and come in and then come back to the front porch.

Interviewer: Now you went to Washington DC didn't you?

Elra: Yes. The people got together and got the money and sit me to DC to talk. And what was the lead man's name?

Interviewer: Lyndon Johnson.

Elra: Johnson. We had to go and talk to him. And they had a school and a red gym. And we had to go there and tell them everything they asked us we told them. And when us go back some of them said they were going to do this and do that. And they wrote it down on paper. And they said that if anybody put their hand on you all then had to go.

Interviewer: Ok. So you would go to DC and talk to the president.

Elra: President Kennedy.

Interviewer: Kennedy.

Elra: Kennedy was for the blacks.

Interviewer: So you liked Kennedy.

Elra: I liked him he was for the blacks.

Interviewer: So he listened to you.

Elra: And Georgia Clark. And Reverend Whitaker from Goodman.

Interviewer: Reverend Whitaker from your community.

Elra: Yes Reverend Whitaker came with us. He was a big dark man. He stood by us. With me and Georgia got out their by ourselves they were going to kill us then they stepped in.

Interviewer: When you were to return from Washington, DC a mayor from one of the neighboring towns in Mississippi gave you an award.

Elra: Yes, I got it at home.

Interviewer: Mayor of Shulla.

Elra: If us get out in the road and lead a march they don't want us to killed. And us boss man telling us you all need to do it. Risk your behind, ain't nobody going to harm you. The mayor was white he said it was about time Negro to have rights just like the whites. And he walked behind us. But me and Georgia Clark, Reverend Whitaker, and Crom lead the march down the highway. And we got on one side and let other folks on the other side and we sand as loud as we could sing, We'll overcome one day.

Interviewer: This was down highway 51 wasn't it.

Elra: It was.

Interviewer: It was a very important day.

Elra: It was. But me and Georgia Clark done it. Some were scared. White man told them you get out there and march you aren't going to have no where to stay when you get back and they believed it.

Interviewer: Your timing was good in that you got the support of the mayor, you went to talk to the President. So where did the march start and where did it end?

Elra: In the highway. They told us you stay on this side and let all the day traffic come the other way. And me and Georgia Clark did it and was sang, "Lord we will overcome some day."

Interviewer: So why did you choose that song.

Elra: I don't know we just done it.

Interviewer: It was appropriate, it sounds appropriate.

Elra: Me and Georgia Clark we did it. We'll overcome one day. And that's the day they let us know. They didn't bother us no more. And used to come to our church but we couldn't got to their church. And we did what they told us to do. We went to their church and sat in the back and they came back there and said you'll come on up to the front you don't have to sit back there.

Interviewer: I know that you were also working with the NAACP.

Elra: That's powerful. If you would stand up on one foot they hang you.

Interviewer: The NAACP

Elra: I talking about they are tough. They were all black. Some white people don't believe in mistreating Negroes.

Interviewer: So there were white people involved in the NAACP also?

Elra: Yes and they are ones who stood up on their feet and told us what to do and how to do it. The road, the highway is free for everybody. Get up in the highway and do it.

Interviewer: The NAACP was made up of white people.

Elra: They were black people but white people got in there with the Negro because they know they was right.

Interviewer: Now you got an award from the NAACP.

Elra: Yeah, I got one. Georgia Clark got one too. It was white folk that give it to us.

Interviewer: I know that you were fighting for civil rights. You were doing other things too. You were working with the youth and the head start program.

Elra: I worked with the head start with the little children. And what they did then, they put black kids and white kids in the same thing. The white people at first had their children going there and our children there. When they got in it deep all of them got together. And the black children and the white children at our momma and daddys house

playing together and when momma gets the food together and says “All children come on in.” All of children went on in. There wasn’t no difference.

Interviewer: So obviously you love working with children.

Elra: I do. White and black.

Interviewer: Because when you were going to school and coming up in Mississippi you were able to teach white kids.

Elra: Yeah. So they played at the house all the time. Sure did.

Interviewer: Let’s talk about one thing lastly about Mississippi and why you were living.

Elra: That is my mother and dad’s place so when they passed went home and still stay out there.

Interviewer: Let’s talk about your husband Bud Johnson.

Elra: He was crippled.

Interviewer: Ok. I want to know.

Elra: He was scared. And then he’d tell me, you’re going to get killed out there and then I’m going to have to kill somebody. And I said, no you aren’t going to have to kill nobody.

Interviewer: Sounded like he had your back.

Elra: He had a gun he kept by the front door and he kept it loaded. But he didn’t have to do that.

Interviewer: What about the time the KKK came to your house.

Elra: Well, he got out of the way but I took care of them. I dealt with them

Interviewer: You dealt with them. What did you do? They come to your house on horses in their robes.

Elra: Yeah they had all that stuff on.

Interviewer: The hate attire.

Elra: That is what it was. But I’ll tell you one thing they couldn’t scare me.

Interviewer: Tell me about that day.

Elra: I waken to a white man and he told me. Don't worry I'm right behind you and you know that.

Interviewer: And he was going to support you.

Elra: He supported me, he sure did.

Interviewer: Tell me about that day when you were at home, you and your husband together and the KKK came to your property. How did your husband react to that?

Elra: My husband was scared to death. I wasn't scared. His name was Bud Johnson. He said, I just don't see how you do that. I said you just stay on back I can take care of myself. I never carried a weapon I just left it with the Lord.

Interviewer: so did they say anything to you while they were on their horses around you house.

Elra: Not a word. And I sat there on the porch.

Interviewer: Did they burn a cross in your yard?

Elra: Yes sir. They burned up a cross in there. I didn't even move. He was acting a fool and I didn't move.

Interviewer: Can you describe their behavior, their action did they look at you stare at you.

Elra When they hit the ground. You think someone would run from their house. But I didn't. But I hadn't something right there.

Interviewer: You had your gun right there.

Elra: And they got scared and left.

Interviewer: So why do you think they came to your house?

Elra: They didn't want the Negro to have no freedom. I was working at the hospital in Durrant.

Interviewer: Shortly after your husband's death

Elra: I came to Waterloo.

Interviewer: And why did you come there?

Elra: All my folks up there. My relatives are in Waterloo.

Interviewer: For example, who takes care of you or who watches over you?

Elra: Nobody but the Lord.

Interviewer: Now I know that one of your children is here in Waterloo. Your son JB.

Elra: Him and his wife.

Interviewer: Ok. So would you come and stay with him.

Elra: If I ever had to stay with somebody that's who I would live with whether he wants me there are not I'm move in. I told him, I'm coming in buddy, he said I don't care.

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit. You came to Waterloo and continue to do some volunteer work

Elra: I love to do work like that.

Interviewer: You worked with the senior citizens. You came to Waterloo in 1986.

Elra: Now I can't say that because I can't remember.

Interviewer: What are some of the things you remember when you first came to Waterloo.

Elra: Took care of old people. I went to their home but I couldn't come in the front door I had to go in the back door. This was in Waterloo. He was sitting on this side of the door and she was on that side of the door and then I would get searched but I didn't have nothing.

Interviewer: so you are here and Waterloo but you are still doing something you did for people in Mississippi so you are enjoying yourself.

Elra: I love to help sick folk. One day I'm going to be sick and I want somebody to help me.

Interviewer: And that is what you have JB your son to take care of you.

Elra: He may not want me and his wife may not want me but I'm coming.

Interviewer: You are coming either way.

Elra: But I'm just kidding.

Interviewer: Now you just recently had your birthday.

Elra: January 29.

Interviewer: How old were you?

Elra: I turned 100. And in my daddy's days some of them lived to be 105 and that is when George Washington was in the office.

Interviewer: So that runs in the family. So you will live to be 110 then??

Elra: I don't know, it is whatever the Lord do.

Interviewer: You are a member of Pamami Church. You are the oldest living member at this time.

Elra: I'm the oldest? I don't know.

Interviewer: That is where you had your birthday party. A lot of fun. Thank you so much for coming to Waterloo.

Elra: I don't mind talking about what I do because I never did nothing wrong.

Interviewer: Before we stop talking let's talk about your birthday party tell me how you are doing now?

Elra: I feel like I'm 12. I don't hurt no where.

Interviewer: So what would you say to young people coming up now if they want to be 100 how to take care of themselves.

Elra: You can't tell them nothing. They know more than you do.

Interviewer: So describe the party. Who came to the party?

Elra: So many I can't name them.

Interviewer: Friends and family.

Elra: White and black I took care of white folks children. The little things cant talk and they call me Latte. Momma T the bigger one call me. The little ones Latte. The babies run around all over the floor. At white folks house taking care of their children they were outside selling books and the children called me latte.

Interviewer: What does that mean to you?

Elra: I didn't care what they called me.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Elra: I don't mind.