

Shankleville Oral History Project

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Elzie Odom

INTERVIEWER: Dan K. Utley

DATE: June 16, 2002

PLACE: Odom family home, Shankleville, Newton County, Texas

TRANSCRIBER: Justin Snider

(TAPE 1 OF 1, SIDE A BEGINS)

Dan K. Utley: This is Dan Utley, oral historian from Austin, Texas. Today is Sunday, June 16, 2002. I am interviewing for the first time the Honorable Elzie Odom, mayor of Arlington, Texas. The interview is taking place in the Shankleville community (Newton County). This is the first in a series of tapes that we are going to be conducting on the history of the Shankleville community and the Odom family. We might start off by talking about what happened today. Tell me what's special about today.

Elzie Odom: Well today is our biennial family reunion, which is the eighth original -- eight strains of A.T. and Addie Odom and their descendants. It really started -- I think it was 1949 -- S.T. had moved to California about '38. (background laughter)

Utley: And who was that that moved?

Odom: S.T.

Utley: S.T.

Odom: Second oldest son. I think it was 1938. And he didn't come back for a number of years. And he was planning to come home for a visit in 1949, and we decided to just get all the family together. And we did. We still have some pictures around here of the group that was taken on that day. At the time I was living just down on 87. And so, he came in and we had a little party there like and then the first family reunion was held here. And everybody stayed here. Remember, this is '49. It wasn't a motel within a hundred and fifty miles where we could have gotten a room.

Utley: Tell me about this house and what the significance is for this house.

Odom: This house is the house that dad grew up in.

Utley: Really?

Odom: And it was a little --

Utley: That's A.T. Odom?

Odom: A.T. Odom.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: Daddy's father died -- no, no mother first. His mother died when he was something like about twelve years old. And, then his Daddy died when he was something like about fourteen. And, he was the oldest of five children. So, he sort of became the father, and his oldest sister became the mother, and they lived in this house a little further back down in the field there. However, right across the road and up the hill were their grandparents, who sort of looked over the family.

Utley: When you say back across the road, is that north of here?

Odom: You know I don't know the directions here. But, I think it is north. I know that's west.

Utley: Yeah. This will be toward Burkeville.

Odom: Yeah, but, it was right down here by the spring. It was just -- it was within sight. As a matter of fact, there are some crepe myrtle trees down there that was in the yard. And, then at some point in time, they moved the house from down there up here. And, I think moving then was sort of dismantling and bringing it up and rebuilding it. So, this is the house then that Daddy and Mama finished raising Daddy's four siblings and then by that time they had children of their own. One every two years. And they just kept coming. And I am the seventh of eight that they had -- well, they actually had nine; one died. So, I'm the seventh. So, I may not remember as much as some of the older ones.

Utley: Ah, that's okay.

Odom: But I do recall that --

Utley: Well let's talk about --

Odom: -- this the house we grew up in.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: Okay, growing up here --

Utley: Well now, who was Big Papa?

Odom: A.T.O. I call him Big Papa because of the grandkids. That's what they call him.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: We called him Daddy in those days and we called Mama, "Mama."

Utley: Okay.

Odom: But the kids all called them Big Papa and Big Mama.

Utley: Let's start with Big Papa first. Do you know off-hand when he was born?

Odom: No.

Utley: Okay, that's fine.

Odom: I could find out, but I don't know.

Utley: But he's buried out here in the cemetery?

Odom: He's buried in the cemetery across the way.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: And he died in seventy-nine. Yeah, 1979 he died.

Utley: Tell me what he looked like. What physically was he like?

Odom: Well, he was a medium build, very fair skinned, wore his hair short. And when his hair was worn short you couldn't tell what he was. He was no blacker than you are -- texture, skin. I can say I believe that's because of what had happened to his ancestors prior to. Because you know, Winnie was his great-great grandmother and she was a house slave, and she had children fathered by her owner.

Utley: Okay. Is that a story that's passed down from the family?

Odom: Yes, yes. And, how a slave sale was held in Mississippi. Winnie and Jim got married.

Utley: Now these are Winnie and Jim Shankle?

Odom: Shankle.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: You haven't heard that story?

Utley: Well I've read it, but I want you --

Odom: Okay, Winnie and Jim got married. And, Winnie was a house slave. She not only cooked in the kitchen, but she stayed in the house. So, Winnie was readily available. And I suspect, and many others do, that the reason she was sold was because she married Jim. And after marrying Jim, she started staying out in the shack with the rest of the slaves, therefore, wasn't as a valuable to the owner anymore. So she and her little girls -- two little girls. Three? Two, two.

Lareatha Clay: Which one?

Odom: -- were sold, and Jim overheard the sale just enough to know that she was sold to somebody from Texas. So, Jim knew that he'd never see her again unless he went to look for her, and he knew that the price -- what the price of a runaway slave was. He knew he'd be beaten or killed if he was caught trying to escape. And, he thought about this carefully, over a period of time, but he finally decided that his love for her and those kids was so great, until he was willing to risk it. So, he did run away.

Utley: He did?

Odom: And he walked -- couldn't travel the established roads. He couldn't travel during the day. He had to travel at night.

Utley: Do you know where in Mississippi they were coming from?

Odom: No, no.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: It's believed to have been about four hundred miles. We know that the Mississippi River and the Sabine River are between here and there. We don't know what he ate, except it had to be what he could find in the woods. And, we also know that he only had the clothes on his back, and he walked. No other way but walking, and couldn't be seen. We don't know how long it took, but it must have been months.

Utley: And he may have traveled at night and slept during the day?

Odom: Slept during the day, ate what he could find in the woods. But, what we do know is that eventually he reached Texas. And, even then the battle's not over, because Texas is a big state. He began to inquire about Winnie to other slaves that he could see out in the field. Everything he did had to be done secretly. And finally -- and I suspect, and others do too, that because of the way Winnie looked -- she was described as extremely beautiful -- and because of that, she was pretty easy to describe. And because of that, Jim was able to find out, "Yeah we know where she is and she's our slave" again. And they directed him, somehow, to this place.

Utley: So, this was the plantation where she was brought?

Odom: This was the plantation where she was brought.

Utley: And her family that brought her here, do you know that name?

Odom: I don't. I have never known that name.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: And so, Winnie was a house slave. One of her duties was to go to the spring to get water for cooking in the kitchen. And, this spring right down the hill is where she went everyday. And one day when she went to get water from that spring, she heard a rumbling out in the bushes and out stepped Jim -- torn and tattered and hungry. And, she of course -- they had a happy meeting there -- down there by the spring. But then the thought that came, "We can't tell nobody about this," because he could be killed. So, she sneaks food from the kitchen out there to him for a period of time. Don't know exactly how long, but long enough for her to discuss it with her new owner. And, he sympathized with her and was willing to negotiate. And, I don't know what that means. He arranged the sell, the purchase of Jim, so that they could be together.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: So then, Jim joins Winnie as slaves on this plantation, and they worked together side by side. She was no longer a house slave, she was just -- she worked in the fields along with him. And, they had the other children of their own. And, after the slaves were freed, I think he did sharecropping, and he bought a league of land and established what has become Shankleville, named for Jim Shankle.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: At one time, this was a thriving community with schools, churches; there was a college here. And, everybody did real well because it was an all black community, and everybody was related to each other because of this family structure. They all came from Jim and Winnie Shankle. And, even when I grew up -- and I was born in 1929 -- everybody in the community was kin to each other. And everybody cared for each other. It was a close-knit community. Whenever one family would have problems, like a death in the family, somebody seriously ill, they would ring the church bell. I don't care what kind of night it was. And when the church bells rang, they would go to everybody -- everybody would go to the church to find out what's wrong. (inaudible background talking) And once they found out who's having trouble, they go there and carry something and do something. So, this -- I've often said that Shankleville is not just a place, it's a way of life. That became the Shankleville way, you just helped each other. Whenever one farmer had to grind his cane to make syrup, others would come and bring their cane, and they'd do it together. Raising a barn or putting a roof on -- those kind of things, they just worked together.

Utley: What about when there was trouble out here? Like, let's say a fire or maybe the gin shut down or --

Odom: They'd all work together. They'd come together and help the other. May 30th, for example, used to be called Decoration Day here, and on that day, everybody -- children, adults, and all -- would meet at the cemetery. And, the ladies would bake cakes. They would make a big barrel of Kool Aid. They would be out there at sunrise with hoes, shovels, and rakes and clean that cemetery from fence to fence -- everybody working together. Along about ten-thirty or eleven o'clock, the sun got hot, and they would get under the trees and fellowship, eat cake, and drink Kool Aid. (Utley laughs). But that was a community effort.

Utley: Tell me about the two cemeteries. There are two cemeteries.

Odom: Yeah. The one across the field out here is the Shankle Cemetery. Nobody is supposed to be in there but direct descendants of the Shankles. However, the marriage, et cetera, it has gotten where almost anybody is there now. And, the other one was the general cemetery. And, nobody knows who owned them. It's just a community cemetery. And back in those days, we cleaned them, both of them, on --

Utley: When you say "cleaned" those, explain that.

Odom: Take a hoe and scrape the grass --

Utley: Alright.

Odom: -- cut the grass. Pile it up, burn it --

Utley: Some people who are going to hear this don't know what a scraped grave is.

Odom: Right. We didn't mow grass in those days. We cut the grass out because that thing in the little mounds of dirt was clean and free of grass. And to decorate the graves, they would break little pieces of glass, different colors -- some blue, some green, some white -- and stick in the dirt on the graves.

Utley: Um-hum.

Odom: -- and, that would make them all a little different. Keep them in individuality. All of them did not have tombstones.

Utley: Why do you think they scraped the graves?

Odom: I don't know except that is what our parents told us we were supposed to do, and we didn't question it. (laughs). We did it for our yard. We did it for the yard.

Utley: That's right.

Odom: We kept the yard scraped that way. And I never knew why and I never asked. (both laugh). But, I know that's the way Mama wanted it. We'd scrape it, then we'd get some dogwood and make a broom -- by the little switches of dogwood and sweep it! And we would keep it swept. And anytime that you started getting out of line, it might not need sweeping, but Mama would send you out to sweep it. (Utley laughs). And, if you got further out of line, there were cured switches from that dogwood, in that broom, made the best switch. And, she'd pull one out in a minute. (Utley laughs) So, that shows though how the community worked together. When somebody died, my daddy made caskets. He would get one-by-twelves; I helped him do it. And he would score it to where he could bend it, and he would shape that thing from one end and the other. He would get -- buy some cloth, gray looking cloth, and some rolls of cotton. He'd put the cotton on the inside and then he'd put the cloth in there and tack it on and cushioned the inside of it. Then we made just a square box for the outside, and this inner box is what a body was actually laid and put it in.

Utley: So all the person saw on the outside was a square box?

Odom: A square box, and was made out of pine.

Utley: Was he getting this pine from Wiergate?

Odom: Yeah, more than likely from Wiergate.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: And, he would pad it on the inside, I don't know, well to give it the appearance of being dressed up (background talking). And, so when somebody died, the first person they'd call would be Daddy to make the casket. And then, Pate Shankle was one who specialized in digging the grave.

Utley: Pate Shankle?

Odom: Yeah. He didn't do it on his own, he didn't do it by himself, but it seemed like he would just coordinate it. He was always there. He was a hard worker. And, Pate and others would dig the grave. And when they'd have the funeral and deposit the body, all of the guys that's there at the funeral pulled off their coats and come up and cover it up. That's how you saw community working together.

Utley: Well, when somebody died, what did they do with the body? There were no funeral homes.

Odom: They did embalm it. They'd put it -- laid it out on what they called a cooling board. And as soon, within a couple of days, they got him buried.

Utley: Tell me about the cooling board.

Odom: It was just a flat, two or three two-by-twelves across some sawhorses. And, usually in the house where they lived and they the body would get stiff. Stiff enough, and I never helped put a body in, but I saw it done. And, --

Utley: Tell me about that.

Odom: They just picked him up and put him in after they dressed him. I don't know who did the dressing. And, they just make sure they look good, and they would open that body at the funeral and let people look. But, the inside would be homemade casket. And I remember Daddy making several of them. I remember one time he went up to Brookeland to get his great-aunt who had passed and brought her back down here and made the casket right out there under the tree. So -- what this did though, I mean, although I remember the casket making, I remember the cemetery cleaning, but what I remember most is that people did it together. And that is so different from what we see now. That's why I call Shankleville a way of life rather than just a place.

Utley: Well, the tapes that we are making, they are going to be heard -- or transcripts are going to be read by kids a hundred years from now, let's say. They aren't going to know everything that you know, so tell me about what a funeral was like. Describe a funeral -- as early as you can remember.

Odom: First of all, every other -- ladies in the house and the community would make sure to carry up cake or some food items to the house of the deceased. I remember the body being brought to the cemetery in a wagon. And it stretched out in front of the pulpit in the church. And everybody walked by and looking and everybody screaming, crying. They'd have songs, and a sermon, and then go out to the cemetery. They would use a rope, two ropes on each end of the casket with men on each side holding the rope. And, they would put the rope underneath the casket and gradually let it slip down into the hole. And down in the bottom of the hole, they'd have two-by-fours so that when the casket rested at the bottom, you still had a little channel where you could pull the rope out. So, once the casket was seated, and it seated exactly equal distance from either side, then they'd pull the ropes out, and one man would jump down in there with a hammer and some nails and nail that lid, and then they'd start dumping the dirt in. And they would dump the dirt in and crown it in the middle.

Utley: You know today, everybody leaves the cemetery and that is all kind of done with a backhoe or something like that.

Odom: They insist that you leave now. I believe that is so they can get the rings and watches and all of that. (both laugh) But then, we stayed there until it was covered.

Utley: And did it with shovels.

Odom: And did it with shovels, and it was the same people who attended the services. I remember seeing them pull off their coat and hand it to somebody and they get there and

go for a while -- and they were going fast -- and then another one come up and touch him on the shoulder to replace him. There again, togetherness, everybody shared. So that's the thing.

Utley: But until the funeral, the body was in state at the house.

Odom: Right. And, people would come and bring something. Nobody came without bringing something.

Utley: Well what about --

Odom: -- either bring something or do something. If the grass needed cutting at that house, they'd do it. If they needed wood in, they'd get it. But the idea was to help somebody.

Utley: How were widows treated in the community? Were they treated specially?

Odom: Yes, but -- I don't remember any particular special treatment. I remember hearing it said to take care of the widows in the offerings. But we didn't have many alone. It was a family oriented community. However, I do remember a couple of ladies that lived alone, and they were pretty well together, but they were self-sufficient though. Almost everybody raised what they ate and ate what they raised. The only -- Daddy had a store. He had the only store in the community, and its right out there under that tree now. And he used to have some groceries. People would come here to get groceries from him. But, they didn't buy anything for our own use except baking powder and salt, stuff like that. Cause we had pigs and chickens and hogs and cows, and we grew peas and cucumbers and corn and we just -- we had it all.

Utley: And cotton was the cash crop?

Odom: No, no this little area in here wasn't much for cotton.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: The only cotton I remember him growing, they made pillows out of them. Used them right here at home. The only cash crop that I remember him ever growing was cucumbers and beans, and that was a government subsidized program that came along in -- it had to be the forties. (background talking) And, they would plant these beans, snap beans and cucumbers, and they had an outlet in Newton where they would carry them and sell them. They would weigh them and size them and all that kind of stuff and pay in cash money for that crop. That's the only cash crop I remember dad and them have. He wasn't a farmer; just a carpenter. But, he raised what he needed to feed his family, and there were eight of us. Now, the older brother was gone when the two younger of us began to grow up. But at one time, there were eight of us here. And, all of us ate -- all of us ate together. The table was one that daddy made. Even the benches on the side of it he made. There probably wasn't a table big enough anywhere in any store. But that table would

hold four on this side, four on this side, Mama on one end and Daddy on the other. And we sat and we ate together, and we talked, and that's where we got our training. There again, the lesson of sharing was there because they trusted us to pass that plate around -- and bowl -- (Utley laughs) knowing that it had to reach all the way. Now there was some times that Mama could do it, and boy she could it and it come out right every time. But nonetheless, we knew then that, "Hey it's going this way, but that last one around is going to have to eat just like I do."

Utley: Well, of the food we had today, did you see anything out there that reminded you --

Odom: Oh yeah, oh yeah, the peas -- the black peas, snap beans. Because snap beans, even when we weren't selling them, that's something easy to grow. We always had snap beans. And Mama could go out there (background yelling), and from the moment she went she go out in the garden until the beans got on the table it ain't much time, cause she could snap those things (Utley laughs) and wash up two or three times. I don't know what she put in them. I never learned to cook. But yeah, we had plenty of meat, sweet potatoes, beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, all that kind of stuff. We always had plenty, and even --

Utley: And you smoked your meats?

Odom: Smoked the meat. So, in the wintertime we even had smoked meat, dried peanuts. There was something year round to eat. Sweet potatoes, we kept them year round. So, we didn't need anything but baking powder and the salt.

Utley: In addition to what you raised here on the land, did your family hunt and fish, too?

Odom: Uh yes, but just for fun. That was Daddy's favorite sport. He'd kept squirrels in the box almost all the time. There was a creek right down here; it's still there, but it isn't as big as it was then.

Utley: Which creek now?

Odom: Clear Creek.

Utely: Clear Creek? Okay.

Odom: And we used to get catfish out of there. We'd set out hooks. We'd go down there just before nightfall and you'd put the bait on the hook and on a pole, one of these reeds that -- what is that stuff?

Utley: Like bamboo?

Odom: Yeah. Bamboo pole. You stick it in the bank and leave it there, and go back about ten o'clock and you'd see that line just swing, that's a big catfish. (Utley laughs) So, we'd get the fish off and re-bait it and then you go back first thing in the morning as soon

as you get up and they'd be there again. And that's good eating -- and rabbits. Daddy caught -- he shot rabbits all the time.

Utley: Did you see deer out here when you were growing up?

Odom: No, very few deer.

Utley: When did you first start seeing deer?

Odom: After I'd come back to visit, I'd say in the mid-fifties.

Utley: Is that right?

Odom: Um-hum. There weren't many deer out here. I think they'd been hunted out or something had happened, because the deer hunters in this area would have to go away someplace to go deer hunting. But, there were plenty squirrel --- and rabbits. You could get rabbits driving down the road. And, they'd get in the lights and just stop. And if you were sharp enough, you could shoot them. There were even some lights made that would fit around the head, and it fit right over your left eye, so that when you looked down the gun barrel, it would shine at the bead on the barrel and the eyes of the rabbit.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: So I killed them that way, what we ate.

Utley: Yeah.

Odom: And, I didn't know we were poor until I got grown and found that we didn't have a lot of money.

Utley: But you know, your family had the store. You would think that your family might have been better off than some other people out here.

Odom: Well they were --

Utley: They were a little bit?

Odom: They were. They got the first electricity, and I remember that very vividly.

Utley: When did they get electricity? Just about, I mean. I know you don't know the specific time.

Odom: I was about six or seven.

Utley: And you were born in twenty-nine?

Odom: I was born in twenty-nine. And, actually, in retrospect, I think what dad did was probably a little bit illegal. Because they got the electricity for the school, they had got a power plant for the school.

Utley: Now the school was right across --

Odom: Right up here. Just above where you parked, and the school was there and right about where you parked was a house that daddy owned that the principal of the school lived in. But when they got the electricity for the school, and it was a locally generated, they had a little power plant out here with batteries and a motor that run --

Utley: Delco plant.

Odom: Yeah, it produced electricity for the school.

Utley: It only ran when the school was open.

Odom: It only ran -- no, but they tied these two houses onto it.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: So, when I came home one evening and there was this [wire], and it was hanging down in the middle with a chain on it, and that's the first time I'd ever seen it. And the first thing I was told was, "Don't mess with it." But, I decided to try it. So, I stood up in a chair, and I pulled that thing and it came out. What I had sense enough to know that if you pull something to get it on, you ought to push it and get it off. But, the chain -- (both laugh) was flexible. So, I'm in trouble, because they told up front don't mess with it. And I closed the door and came back out and went to my sister. And I says, "Hey. How do you turn on those lights?" She said, "Just pull it." I said, "Oh yeah. And how do you turn it off?" "Pull it again." Oh boy, I run back in there (both laugh). I got up there and pulled it again and got it off. I'll never forget -- it was the first light. Now, there was a problem with them because whenever the thing would run, the lights would get dim or something, and I think eventually, four or five years later, we did get the rural electric co-op program and got the real electricity. But that was the first electricity we had. And, not too long after then or about then, we got the first radio. And I think we were the only ones in the community that had one.

Utley: What would you pick up on the radio? (background talking)

Odom: Joe Louis fights I remember, and *Amos and Andy*. And, whenever it came on, we would all get around and look at it and be quiet. And when the Joe Louis fight [came on], people in the community would come and stand around in the yard, out here around the house with the windows up so they could hear.

Utley: So you had a box unit, you didn't have a crystal set. It was a real --

Odom: Yeah right. It was a real radio -- we were uptown. (Utley laughs) We had the only, I believe -- well, except for Mr. Simmons the principal, he had a car, Daddy had a pick-up. So, there weren't many cars out here. And, there were a lot of people that lived right here, they'd walk right past our house then to go to their houses. And, in the morning kids coming to school would come right by our house. But nobody's living over there now. But at that time, that school there was the school. I mean there were four teachers that taught everything from first through eleventh grade. And one teacher, the principal's wife, she taught first, second and third, and then she taught high school English. They taught everybody, and they cared.

Utley: How many grades were taught there?

Odom: Eleven.

Utley: Eleven grades?

Odom: Eleven grades.

Utley: So you could graduate from the Shankleville --

Odom: Yes, everybody did down to me. I think it was my class was the first one that we consolidated with the Wiergate district. But hey, I learned later on, I came to realize, I didn't know then, all of our books were used books that came from the Burkeville High School. We never saw new desks, and --

Utley: Sporting equipment probably the same.

Odom: Oh sporting, we had to sell candy and buy our own balls to play with. That was the only way we got those. That's when those schools were supposedly separate and equal.

Utley: Tell me about the school as a community center. When did you use the school other than for classes?

Odom: For whatever purpose. They had a board of trustees that sort of governed the school. There again, I learned later, my dad was one: Daddy, Grandpa, and another community man. And I felt those were important jobs for them because they actually were of a school board. But, I found out that they were a common school district. They had no authority, no power. The county school board told them what to do. But it didn't matter even when I found out -- I still think it was important. That's probably the reason I perform public service today, because Daddy always said you need to pay for the ground you stand on -- give back to the community. But, they directed the activities of the school. They hired teachers, they --

(END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1 OF 1, SIDE B BEGINS)

Odom: We would have devotion at least two mornings a week, and that devotion had prayer and singing, and it was lead by the principal --

Utley: Religious singing?

Odom: Yes. And everybody participated. I almost had the scripture he used to read all the time. (both laugh) I will think of it a little later on. He used to have one scripture that - - "Open your pearly gates oh ye God, and be you lifted up everlasting door, and the King of Glory will come in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord, God of olds, He is the King of Glory." And, he used to like to sing *Battle Hymn of the Republic* -- "Mine eyes have seen the glory" that is one of those that we sang. First thing of all, though, my mama was a disciplinarian.

Utley: I was going to ask you who the disciplinarian was.

Odom: Mama was.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: Until the day she died. (Utley laughs) The school was right there, so Mama walked out on the porch, she could see what was going on at the school. The other kids would get to school fifteen, twenty minutes early, and they'd go out there and they'd play and have a ball. Mama would keep us out there pulling peas, doing something until the five-minute bell rang. The five-minute bell rang, then you go to school.

Utley: Because you are only a hundred yards from school --

Odom: Yeah. Now, we never missed a day. Some of the other kids would have to stay home sometime and help work in the crops -- she didn't allow that. But, you were going to stay home until the last minute. And, when that bell rings, to let out in the afternoon at two-thirty, she'd stand on that porch with her hands on her hips looking at you. So, you had to get right down -- I never had a girlfriend. Never got to participate in any of the activities up there because Mama was so closely on it. And if she happened to miss seeing something, Mrs. Simmons' first stop was to tell her. And so, we were strictly supervised. That went on until I think I was in the eleventh grade when those schools were consolidated, and this school was closed and we had to ride a bus to Wiergate.

Utley: Okay.

Odom: I was so glad --

Utley: Did some of the time -- go ahead.

Odom: Finally, I'm getting away from Mama. And on the first day of school, I had heard that they had hired a bus driver, and guess who -- Mama (both laugh). I couldn't get away from her at all. It wasn't but about a dozen kids.

Utley: How would she discipline you?

Odom: Oh God!

Utley: Other than give you --

Odom: The switch from that brush broom -- that dogwood brush broom -- the hedges she kept growing around the house that we didn't need, but it served their purpose. And, she was big on --

Utley: Now did she make you go get a switch?

Odom: Oh yeah. You got to think about that.

Utley: That's right.

Odom: If you get one too big, she is going to kill you with it. (Utley laughs) And if you get one too small, she going to make you go back and get a bigger one --

Utley: Or it's too much like a whip. (laughs)

Odom: You got to decide. What do I take -- somebody calling me? So what do I take, do I go back and -- usually you tried to get some middle ground someplace --

Utley: Did you ever try to get away from her?

Odom: Oh no, oh no.

Utley: You didn't try to run away?

Odom: No. Oh no. I would have to come back. (Utley laughs) I went to church -- I will never forget -- one of the things about church, when a kid starts getting twelve, thirteen years old, it makes him feel special if he can get up and walk out before the services end. And, I always wanted to do that. And the other boys did it. I knew not to do it, but finally one day I decided it was worth a try. So, I got up and left out just like the other boys did. And, came when church was out and Mama walked out, and she just looked at me. And we came home -- I walked home. Well, usually we had the pick-up. Church is down there--

Utley: And your church is Mount Hope?

Odom: Yeah. I came back -- I walked home -- got home, went in there and pulled off my clothes, and I went out there and sat down in the garage. But, I just couldn't face her. And she let me come on and have dinner -- she got dinner ready and called us to dinner. She didn't say a word about it. Let me sit there and eat, and that food just wouldn't go down. I

knew it. And she let me wait until I guess about three o'clock that evening when she called and said, "Come here." (Odom laughs) And, she started (inaudible) (Utley laughs). I'm still careful about walking out of church. (Odom laughs)

Utley: What would she discipline you for, other than walking out of church? What other things did you do to get into trouble?

Odom: Don't fight. I mean this one time Daddy got me. It was because me and Lee had a fight. He said, "You're supposed to love each other. You don't fight." He just didn't believe in that. And, he believed in being truthful. You had to be truthful. You tell the truth.

Utley: Did he ever catch you in a lie?

Odom: No, no. I knew better than that. (Utley laughs) I had older brothers and sisters. (Odom laughs) I knew better than to lie, and she knew it.

Utley: By that, you mean they'd turn you in?

Odom: No, I watched them get into trouble for trying it.

Utley: Well in your family, who was the troublemaker?

Odom: Well see, the way our family was structured there was three boys up top, then three girls, then two boys. So, me and my brother --

Utley: You are in the last group with the two boys?

Odom: Yeah, yeah right. And, we were so far removed from the others, until they were high school and above when we were little kids. And the girls didn't associate with us. So, me and Lee were sort of together. And, he would tell on me and I would tell on him. We'd get in trouble. But, it wasn't nearly as bad as some of the kids nowadays.

Utley: Well what would you do to get into trouble?

Odom: Not come immediately when Mama called. I mean, you didn't question why anything. The only two words you needed to be successful with Mama was 'yes ma'am.' (both laugh) Anything else is out of line. We were talking about school when I ventured off and got into Mama's watching us.

Utley: Okay, okay.

Odom: But, it was not unusual for us to have these religious services at school. We had box suppers, that is when they were trying to raise money, usually to buy athletic equipment, or to buy balls or something. Or, the girls would bring a box -- the high school girls -- take a shoe box and dress it up, put some ribbon around it, put food in it.

And, they would bring it, and the boys would bid on it. And I don't remember the amounts --

Utley: Well, they weren't supposed to know who --

Odom: Whose they were getting --

Utley: But, they sometimes did --

Odom: Once they bought it, once they got it, well then that girl would sit down and eat with them. So, that was a big deal. (Utley laughs) -- a box supper and those kinds of activities -- all community activities. And that is how the school was used. But, that school I think did more to prepare kids with what they had than any of the schools do today.

Utley: How is that?

Odom: We had teachers that cared.

Utley: They all lived in the community.

Odom: Oh yeah. Mrs. Simmons lived right there, and one lived down the road, and they had one that changed often, I mean every two or three years. But, she lived with somebody else in the community. Well, we had some live here with us, in spite of having eight people. We had some that lived here. But, there was something different about their caring, really caring about the kids, and really wanting them to learn. Hey, I can recite literature now that some people from some of the better high schools don't recall, or was never taught. But, it's the things that Annie Simmons just believed in teaching. And she cared. And she -- hey, I remember she put on plays at this little ole bitty school -- *Lady Windemere's Fan* and things like that. She just cared. And as a result, we have had a few people leave this community and do quite well, in spite of having to use second-hand books and less of everything. So, I recognized the iniquities and shortcomings of the community at that time. I think there were some other things that more than compensated for it because of the caring, cooperative attitude that the people in the community had towards each other.

Utley: How often did you get out of the community?

Odom: Never. I never. I bet I was sixteen -- well, occasionally I would go to Jasper with Daddy when he would go to get groceries for the store -- and that is how he got groceries for his store. He went to --

Utley: Wholesale house? Okay.

Odom: He went to a wholesale house in his pick-up truck and bought the stuff and then brought it back. He would usually do it on Saturday, and we would get to go with him.

And, there was a big shop in Jasper, and we'd get a hamburger. That was the extent of it; that was the extent of it until I was in high school --

Utley: How far is Jasper from here?

Odom: Well, it's twelve miles now. It was a little bit further then because we had to go around -- twenty-five miles. But it took probably an hour then because of the roads and vehicles, et cetera. But, going to a singing convention or something like that. I didn't realize that there were any racial problems until I got grown. Everybody out here was black. I didn't see anybody else. So, what's the problem? (Odom laughs) You know? Hey, it wasn't until I was at least sixteen or seventeen years old before I really knew that there were problems out there.

Utley: When did you first confront that? How did you first confront it? When you got into high school?

Odom: No, no. Our high school was all black. It wasn't until I was married and moved away from here that it really grabbed me. I went to work in the Orange post office in 1949, and they had -- when I went to work for the post office, they had separate drinking fountains.

Utley: Let's back up a minute. How did you know to go get a job in Orange?

Odom: My brother was working at the post office in Orange.

Utley: But you could have worked here, at Wiergate, or kept your family's store?

Odom: Well, there wasn't anything to do. I had worked with Daddy as a carpenter during high school, and that's what I was doing when I married. But, I worked at a service station out here at Burkeville one day. I say one day, it wasn't long, about a week or so. And I'll never forget, a Greyhound bus came in from Louisiana and had a flat on the inside rear tire. I didn't know a thing about that. I started working at it, and he came out there and was going to make me rush. The driver. Not my boss, but the driver. And, he called me a few unhealthy names, and I quit, right then and there. I don't know how long after then, but I had taken the exam for the post office in Orange. I had a brother who lived there, and they called me, and I went down for an interview. I was put on the sub list, and of course in those days, we'd sit out on the dock hoping that the carrier would get sick and couldn't work his route, and we'd get a chance to work. Ninety-five cents an hour, that's how we started.

Utley: You had separate drinking fountains and separate restrooms?

Odom: There wasn't separate restrooms, but there was one stool over on one side of the large bathroom, and two on the other side. And I was told the first time I went up there that there is an unwritten law that you use that one. But it wasn't labeled. Now, not too long after I went to work there, they changed out the drinking fountain. I heard one of the

ladies say, "What are you going to do with that old one? Take it down stairs for the niggers?" So, that is when I first began to realize how bad it was.

Utley: How did you face that?

Odom: Well, you learned to roll with it.

Utley: Did your family prepare you for that?

Odom: No, because we did not know that was out there. The only thing that they did that would prepare you for something like that, they did teach us a certain amount of passiveness, a certain amount of turn the other cheek, a certain amount of do good to those that hate you. And all of that is embedded in you.

Utley: But they also taught you pride didn't they? In the family and --

Odom: Pride in what you do, with what you accomplish, who you are, and those kinds of things. And I suppose that is what enabled me to -- I don't like to use the term -- "rise to the top." But, I am the highest elected official in my city. (Utley laughs)

Utley: Can't get any better than that.

Odom: I became the fifth black postal inspector -- I went to work in that post office in '49, where we had the separate fountains and worked as a sub carrier. And it was in '67 that I was appointed from that post office as a postal inspector. And I was the fifth black postal inspector in the nation. So, somewhere along the way, I must have done something right. But by then, I knew what it was like, and we had some very, very unpleasant experiences, racial. And, I can take it better than the other people can. I don't know--

Utley: Has any of that ever crept into the Shankleville community?

Odom: No, not to my knowledge. Now I remember seeing some old guy come out there and talk to Daddy one time out in front of the gate about voting, trying to tell him not to vote. And, that is the only time I saw Daddy show any signs of fear, because it looked like Daddy was trembling. And I don't who the guy was, but he had on cowboy boots and a big hat. And, I won't wear cowboy boots or a hat until this day because something about that image that really bothered me. But, I don't know who he was, but he was trying to persuade Daddy not to vote.

Utley: Did the law ever come out here for anything? Shankleville has remained sort of isolated.

Odom: Um-hum, um-hum. Way back when I was a little bitty kid, there was some shooting on a Sunday afternoon at a singing convention, and somebody fired a shot, and the sheriff came. By the time the sheriff got there, Daddy had gone home and got his shotgun. Daddy stepped out of his truck and said, "We don't need no sheriff. Send him

on back.” (both laugh) I don’t remember the details of it. They probably wouldn’t let me know.

Utley: Tell me about the relationship between the two of them. How did they work --

Odom: Mama and Daddy? Well, Daddy’s boss as everybody knows, but what Mama says always goes. (Odom laughs) Dad was an easy-going type guy. You couldn’t pick an argument out of him no way you tried. He was easy-going, and he just wanted everybody to be happy and make everybody happy. Mama is a little bit overbearing. Mama is going to have her way, and what Mama believes, Mama believes, and you don’t changer her much. She’s in charge when she was around.

Utley: I don’t want to leave the impression she was all bad though -- (Utley laughs) -- always the disciplinarian.

Odom: She wasn’t all bad, all disciplinarian. She had a heart of gold.

Utley: Tell us about the good side, the humor she had maybe.

Odom: She’d give anybody anything that they needed. She loved to help those in need. Boy, she’d go see sick people that she didn’t even know. Mama had one thing that always tickled me. She believed that one New Year’s Day, the first person that comes to your house, if its is a man, brings you good luck. If it’s a woman, she brings you bad luck for the whole year. And there was an old lady that lived over here by herself that came to Mama’s house on New Year’s morning. (both laugh) Mama got upset, told her to get out. And from then on, she’d get one of her brothers to come to her house early in the morning on New Year’s (Odom laughs). Everybody knew Mama, everybody in the community. You heard a couple of those ladies this morning mention her --

Utley: Sure.

Odom: She was Mama to everybody, and they all respected her, they all loved her, and they all did what she said. And she would help them -- absolutely.

Utley: What other superstitions did she have?

Odom: She wasn’t really that superstitious. She used to tell us things like, “ice cream and fish would kill you.”

Utley: Yeah.

Odom: But I think she told us that because she didn’t want us to have any ice cream. (both laugh) But those kinds of things. But they weren’t very superstitious. And Mama and Daddy, to have come from a situation where I think both of them must have dropped out of school about sixth grade -- that must have been as high as they go -- both of them were quite learned shall I say. Both of them were able to read well, write well, count well -- they were what I considered intelligent people. I have often told people that my Daddy

was the smartest sixth grade dropout that ever lived. Because he would come up with a way of doing thing -- he could while he was out on a job. A skill not many people have anymore, Daddy could sit down and mark off the rafters of the roof, up there with a framing square. He could take a square and he could cut every one of those rafters and throw up there to you, and they'd fit.

Utley: That's a skill.

Odom: Not many people can do it. Not many people can cut steps. How do you determine how many steps it takes? All he did was measure that distance and divided it, and he would lay it out on the square, every bit of it on that steel square.

Utley: Tell me about his store.

Odom: His stories?

Utley: His grocery store.

Odom: They had rice in a hundred pound sack, they had flour in a hundred pound sack, sugar in a hundred pound sack, and they sold it by the pound. I don't remember the figures, but I guess they made a profit off of it. It wasn't highly profitable, he kept working --

Utley: They sold canned goods, and hardware --

Odom: Yeah, canned goods. No hardware, I don't remember any hardware. Sardines, mackerels, and canned meat -- no meats. They didn't have refrigeration -- well they did have some salt bacon that didn't have to be refrigerated. They had a little icebox where you put ice in. But, not electric. It was practically everything that the people in this community would need. I remember people buying canned mackerels and salmon and sardines, those are about the only meats that they would have.

Utley: How long did that store last?

Odom: I don't know. That store must have lasted fifteen, twenty years.

Utley: When do you think it closed?

Odom: I would have been --

Utley: You said he died in '79.

Odom: It's before then. He moved it away there before then. He took the building, took it down to the church. He'd give the church anything he had. I think I would have been twelve, fourteen years old when they stopped having the store. I was big enough to go out

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Utley: I'm getting a 'no' here.

Clay: I don't remember that store.

Odom: You remember it?

Clay: Vaguely. So, it had to be in the late fifties, early sixties.

Odom: Do you remember the building or do you remember the merchandise in it?

Clay: We were told not to mess with stuff in those sacks.

Odom: Yeah, they had the sacks.

Clay: We got caught messing with the stuff in the sacks.

Odom: But I know they sold the rice, sugar. All that came in the sacks and they had the little scoop and the little scales where they put it in a bag and weigh it and sell it by the pound. Lard, Crustene in a little yellow packet.

Utley: Yeah.

Odom: So, they sold practically everything -- and they didn't sit out there all the time. Mama would be doing whatever she needed to do, and they would come out there, "I want to get into the store." And, she would go in and sell what they wanted and they would go on back home. (Utley laughs) And, a lot people bought on credit. And, they paid whenever they got it.

Utley: We've got about seven minutes left. Let's talk about Mount Hope Baptist Church and how important that was to your parents.

Odom: Mount Hope Baptist Church was my Mama and Daddy's heart, as it was to most of the members of the community. There are probably others in the community that felt this close, but there wasn't anyone who showed it anymore than Mama and Daddy and who passed it on to their children anymore than Mama and Daddy, because that was the backbone of the community.

Utley: Rather than the school [that was the center of the community], it was the church?

Odom: Yeah, it was the church. And, that is where you got a lot of your training, in your Sunday school class, and then the closeness of the people who were members there. You kept getting that training every day of the week as you met them, as you saw them, wherever you saw them. And, that's the thing I think is missing so much today, that we don't get that. But the church was the backbone of the community.

Utley: What do you remember about the church itself? About the services or baptisms or anything?

Odom: We baptized in the creek down there, and nothing particularly significant about it or the services. It was -- I mean, I thought all churches were like that.

Utley: You remember one preacher over another one?

Odom: There was one that was there when I was a little kid. His name was Reverend Fisher. He had a real heavy voice. He always came here -- I think he came from down around Call. He came on Saturday evening whenever he was going to be the preacher, and when he drove down the lane the chickens would all run, (Odom laughs) because one was going to have to die. (Utley laughs) At the time I got married, my wife's father was a minister, and --

Utley: What was his name?

Odom: Henry Treuvillion.

Utley: That's a good name.

Odom: Um-hum. Then, deacon's son marrying the preacher's son, that was it, you know? (Utley laughs) That was the way it was supposed to be. But, the church just reinforced the values that the community had. The community values were, really, just principles. Hey, "help each other," "treat everybody the way you want to be treated." Those are the kind of values that were taught in the community. It was in the schools, it was in the homes, so it's no surprise that O'Donnell Odom will decide years and years later that he wants to be a model citizen because it was passed down. I mean, there are probably many others that could would do the same thing. So, what I'm saying is that it was the values of the community. Hey, even now this house sits here empty with that air-conditioning in that window. Nobody bothers it.

Utley: Um-hum. Because of respect for --

Odom: There's a shed out there that's unlocked, and it's still got some miscellaneous tools in it. Nobody bothered it. I mean for how long? Six years?

Clay: Fifteen years.

Odom: Fifteen years. See, I say it's the community. Now, that might change because -- (both talking) I drive around here now, and I see some mobile homes on the side of the road, and I don't know who they are. I don't know how many there are --

Utley: But you never see people in this community that you don't know, right?

Odom: Usually not, usually not. Usually you know everybody. Everybody leaving out there, I don't want to miss everybody.

Utley: Okay. I'm going to end right now. I appreciate your time.

Odom: Okay.

Utley: Thanks a lot.