

## CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY  
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin ValleyOral History Program

## Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	Christina Veola Williams McClanahan
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Boley, Okfuskee County, Oklahoma
INTERVIEWER:	Judith Gannon
DATES OF INTERVIEWS:	June 20, 1981
PLACE OF INTERVIEWS:	Bakersfield, Kern County
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## PREFACE

This interview is the experience of a black family who leaves an all black community in Oklahoma to begin a new life in California. They settle first in Rosedale and later in Buttonwillow where the interviewee's father eventually achieves his dream of owning his own farm. The interview gives a good account of the problems faced by minority persons in the 1930s.

Judith Gannon  
Interviewer

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INTERVIEWEE: Christina McClanahan (Age: 52)

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATED: June 20, 1981

J.G.: This is an interview with Christina McClanahan for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Judith Gannon at 3220 Lotus Lane, Bakersfield, California on June 20, 1981.

J.G.: Why don't you tell me what you remember of your childhood in Boley, Oklahoma?

McClanahan: I was born in a two-room log cabin. There were six of us kids who were born in Oklahoma. My mother taught me to read when I went to school. It was a two-room building with half the grades in one half and half in the other. I remember when it would rain and we couldn't get back across the creek to get home that we used to stay overnight with the lady who lived on the other side of the river. I was too young to work in the fields myself at that time but I remember my parents were farmers. I don't know whether they were sharecroppers but I do remember that my mother always said that when they had a good crop the animals died and when the animals lived they had a bad crop. So she wanted to leave that particular place if only to go down the road apiece. She just wanted to leave because things just weren't going right for her. That put it in her head to try and figure out how she could get Daddy away from his family and maybe head toward California.

J.G.: Before you go on I was reading an article last night about Boley, Oklahoma as being one of the only cities in the southwest that had a totally black population. It was apparently started after the Civil War and was intended to be a center where the population was totally black. Was that the way it was when you lived there?

McClanahan: Yes. It was totally black, as a matter of fact, we always laughed about it. It was an answer to any of the white cities that didn't allow us in after the sun went down. They didn't allow whites there after the sun went down and it was also the place where Pretty Boy Floyd or one of those guys robbed the bank.

J.G.: How did your parents come to settle in Boley?

McClanahan: My folks were born in Georgia. I don't know how it happened, but the whole community decided that they no longer wanted to live in Georgia. They'd heard about things happening out west and they wanted to go west so they all got together and chartered a train and moved west to Oklahoma. They all settled along this road and they called it the Georgia Line and that's how they got to Oklahoma.

J.G.: You were fairly young when you left Boley right?

McClanahan: Seven years old when I came to California. I remember that song some cowboy sang about sleeping at the foot of the bed and I thought nobody could sing like that unless they'd actually done it. My mother had two boys, four girls and then two boys were born in California. The two oldest girls and the two oldest boys slept in the same bed and the boys slept at the head of the bed and the girls slept at the foot of the bed. I remember that song waking up with a foot in your face.

I don't have any terrible recollections of how terrible times were at that time. The things that people called bad, I really enjoyed it. The next to the oldest brother was mischievous and my dad and mother would go to the fields and work and they'd leave us kids at home but they'd have to take him with them. They let him chop around with a hoe. Finally he'd learned to take a row and when he wasn't acting too well and my father said, "Listen boy, if you don't chop that row out to the end you're not going to get anything for dinner tonight." He muttered under his breath, "I don't care. We're not going to have anything but corn bread and buttermilk anyway." My dad looked at my mother and laughed because they knew he was telling the truth. That's what we were going to eat. That was a time when that was all there was but whatever it was I loved to have her cook that great big pan of corn bread and we'd have this clabber milk and we'd put some sugar with it and I thought that was a special treat. I didn't know that that was what poor people ate.

Living on the farm we always had a garden and my mother always canned and raised their own hogs so there was always meat and vegetables. They raised their own corn and took it, the sorghum, to the mill. The sorghum to make syrup and the corn to make cornmeal and then they bought the flour so I just have a pleasant memory of it. I can recall a little bit when my mother would cook a cobbler. We loved it with lots of juice and she must have been cutting on the shortening because she would just cook it with a crust. She would cook some biscuits and then we would pour this over the biscuits and I thought that was some of the most delicious food that I'd ever eaten.

J.G.: What crops did your father raise on this farm?

McClanahan: Cotton that he sold. Peanuts, he raised peanuts too. I remember that because I can remember when Daddy would go to town and they'd have all these peanuts stacked out there that they were going to sell.

So when they were gone we'd go out and raise up one of these and reach underneath and pull out what we wanted and he couldn't tell. We'd heat up the stove and parch those peanuts and we'd just have a good time eating up those peanuts.

J.G.: How far did you live from Boley?

McClanahan: We lived eight miles. That reminds me too when it was fair time and there were six of us my mother and father weren't able to take all six of us to town so she'd cook what we called a Christmas dinner with pies and cakes and all this kind of thing and she'd leave it with us and they'd go to town to the fair. I tell you kids have crazy ideas. We would run and instead of just going ahead and eating we would feel like we couldn't eat until it was noon so we'd just run the clock up to noon then we'd eat.

J.G.: What finally happened that your family decided to come to California?

McClanahan: Well, it was a combination of the bad crops one year, the animals dying the next and then the dust bowl and the Depression. Prices were down and so my mother thought that a move anywhere would do us good. She talked my dad and his older brother into coming to California. When it came time for them to come to California, it was time for his brother's wife to have a baby and he didn't want to go off and leave her. My mother said, "All this time I spent trying to get Arthur to California, what am I going to do now?" She grabbed the next brother and said, "Look, why don't you go? You're not married and you could do with a fresh start, why don't you go talk with Arthur and you all go to California and get started?" My mother had a brother out here already farming around Rosedale so they weren't just dropping into nowhere. They would be with her brother. She talked my uncle into coming with them and he came.

J.G.: How did they get the money necessary to make the trip? Did they have a sale or did they have money saved? How did that come about?

McClanahan: Well, they must have had money saved. My mother and dad could save money from nowhere, so it must have been that they had it saved. I don't know about my uncle. He was single. My grandfather owned his land. They bought the land when they came but my uncle was living at home so his family probably helped him to get the money to come. I'm pretty sure that my mother and father had saved theirs. My mother had because she'd been planning a long time to get to California so she'd been putting away every nickel to get here.

J.G.: Did they have a sale and sell any household items that they had and that kind of thing?

McClanahan: Only my dad came. He came out on September 17, 1936 on his birthday. Dad came here and worked in the fields. My uncle had not been back to

Oklahoma since he left in 1923 or something like that so he wanted to come back. My dad gave him some money so he would bring us out to California with him. That's how we got back. We didn't have any extra, but somehow or other we had money to do what we were going to do. My aunt and uncle came to get us in a 1929 Chevy. It was Mother and six kids and my aunt and uncle. We had a trailer hooked on the back. Those cars had a running thing on the side and, of course, you could only get in and out of the car on the driver's side because we had that running board on the side with suitcases and things packed in there. We got to Oklahoma City and my brother saw all these bright lights and said, "Are we in California already?" We spent the night with my aunt when we got to Oklahoma City before we started for California. It took us forever to get to California. I think it took us five or six days to get here.

J.G.: You were going to talk about your grandfather. Do you want to do that now?

McClanahan: My grandfather bought the home place which was 50 acres and then he had another piece of land. I thought it was 80 acres. He went in to make the last payment on it and he didn't quite have enough money so he went around and got some from boys. He thought, "You're going to inherit this one day anyway so you might as well help me finish paying this land off." So they all chipped in and gave him some money to pay this land off. He went down and gave this man the money and he thought the man went to give him a receipt and the man came back with a receipt that showed he owed as much money on the land as he'd already paid. The man was white and him being black, he questioned it, but there really wasn't too much he could do about it. He just couldn't stand it. He'd paid this land off and now this man said he hadn't paid a cent. He said he was going to go home and get his gun. He told my grandmother about it and my grandmother said, "Look, if you go and kill that man you know they're going to kill you. You go to sleep tonight and in the morning if you still feel that way you do it." My grandfather said that he had had this dream that night and in his dream somebody just came and set this casket down by the head of his bed. He didn't go back but he didn't pay anything else on the land and they moved him off. I question that because that land is full of oil wells now. They have never taken my grandfather's name off and I have written and asked about it and the courthouse won't send me any information on it. One of these days I'm going to get the nerve up and really check into that.

J.G.: Did that happen in Boley?

McClanahan: Okemah was the county seat.

J.G.: So he had to go to the county seat to make the payments.

McClanahan: Yes, that's where most business was transacted.

J.G.: I wonder if that was a fairly common experience both in Oklahoma and

here in California that many times because a person was black and dealing with a white individual that they were taken advantage of. Did you ever feel like your grandfather's experience was common to growing up in those areas or was that an isolated incident?

McClanahan: I don't think it was an isolated incident. They cautioned us girls that when we went some place, if we went alone never take the main roads. We always had to take the back roads. If we were on a main road we were accompanied by someone, because, I later found out, when the white boys go into puberty their first woman--many times they'd be standing by the road or under a bridge or something and this girl would go by and they'd grab her. I remember at least one incident when I heard my parents talking about it they'd grabbed this girl and if the man objected to it they would just simply kill him. Most of my seeing whites has been in the state of California.

J.G.: Must have been a frightening experience for your parents to leave a predominantly black area, particularly when your experience had been that you were prey to being taken advantage of and to come to an area where it was predominately white.

McClanahan: We had not anticipated having any prejudice in California because we hadn't heard anybody say anything about it and we thought this was the promised land where we wouldn't have to be faced with that kind of thing. Then my mother had two brothers in California and we were coming to live with one so things were obviously all right where he was so that's where we intended to live.

J.G.: That was at Rosedale?

McClanahan: Yes. It was right next door to the Rosedale School.

J.G.: Tell me about the actual journey from Oklahoma to California. What was that like?

McClanahan: We'd never been anywhere before. Every place we got to we thought we were surely in California.

J.G.: Did you stay in tourist camps or did you camp out as you were coming?

McClanahan: Are you kidding? You know they didn't allow blacks to go in anyplace. The only thing we could do was stop on the side of the road. We went to the grocery store and bought food for sandwiches and fruit and that kind of thing and ate like that. It was years later before blacks could stop along the side of the road to get anything like that.

J.G.: You have to excuse me sometimes if I ask questions that seem kind of naive because I forget that those kinds of things.

McClanahan: I'm glad you reminded me because it happened to me for so long until

sometimes I forget to mention that it did happen. I remember one incident that happened to us when we were down in Texas and the car started running hot. My aunt got out to check the water and she couldn't get the radiator cap off. There was a white lady there at the station and so my aunt thought maybe her hands were greasy or something and sweaty. That's why she couldn't get the lid off. So she looked up at this lady and this lady says, "What you mean you can't get that lid off? Why, you're big and fat and black enough to." My aunt got back into the car and drove on to the next service station. That's the kind of thing that we were subjected to at that time.

J.G.: Has it all changed all that much?

McClanahan: Yes. Since the 1954 Supreme Court decision a lot of changes have been made. There are individuals who still feel the same way and when you run into those people you get that same kind of thing. I don't know that we'll ever get that out of everybody but it's different now.

J.G.: So you camped along the way and went into stores. Was there a way you selected which stores you felt you could go into? Or as long as you had money was it fairly safe to go into a grocery store to buy something?

McClanahan: We didn't let ourselves get too low in gas because where you'd get the most ridicule was in the small areas so we would gas up when we were in the big service stations. And usually there was a grocery store or something nearby but I don't remember anybody ever bothering us going to the grocery store. It's only if you tried to go to a cafe or something and they had a back door and you'd have to know where it was. It was just better not to even bother. We felt that five or six days wouldn't hurt us to eat sandwiches and cold cuts and fruit so that's what we did.

J.G.: There were a lot of people who did the very same thing, both black and white who camped out along the way. They simply couldn't afford to go to a motel or tourist camp. I'm sure that you probably saw quite a few people.

McClanahan: We didn't camp out. You didn't know who was going to be along that road. You were at the mercy of whomever. Whatever a white person wanted to do to you you were at their mercy so you didn't stop because you didn't know who was there. I just mean we stopped and had dinner and we didn't go to the restroom either. We had to stop along the side of the road because we didn't dare attempt to use any restrooms because they didn't let us.

J.G.: So you drove right straight through without sleeping.

McClanahan: Yes. My aunt and uncle were driving so one of them slept while the other one drove. There may have been a time when we stopped. It had to be near a service station or something.

J.G.: When you got to the California border did you have any problems there?

McClanahan: No. We had a California license plate remember. Nobody said anything to us.

J.G.: Did they do an inspection of your car?

McClanahan: Just the same as they always do.

J.G.: So that wasn't a problem for you?

McClanahan: It was as if we were returning to California.

J.G.: How did your uncle who already lived here come to move to California?

McClanahan: I've never heard them say how they happened to move to California. They first migrated to eastern Oklahoma then someplace else and then to California. As a matter of fact, even in California they lived in southern California first and then they moved to Bakersfield.

J.G.: When your father first arrived in California before he brought his family out you said that he did field work. Did he have any difficulty finding work at that time?

McClanahan: No. We moved with my uncle and he knew where all the work was so he didn't have to figure out where he was going to go to work.

J.G.: So your uncle could clue him as to where a good place would be to work.

McClanahan: Yes.

J.G.: Was there, was far as you recall your father saying, any discrimination against hiring field workers? That they preferred to have black workers or they preferred to have any other nationality or was it pretty much first come first serve?

McClanahan: I don't remember hearing my father say that. My uncle farmed the land where we lived so he worked for my uncle as long as there was something to do there. After he finished there my father simply went with him to see about work. I don't remember them having any problem that way.

J.G.: Did your uncle own his farm or did he lease it or sharecrop it?

McClanahan: Evidently he didn't own it.

J.G.: What kind of crops did he raise?

McClanahan: He raised cotton. They were used to raising cotton in Oklahoma and Georgia so this would be a natural thing for them to do when they came to California.

J.G.: Did you live in the house with your uncle or did you have another place to live?

McClanahan: There was another house on the place so when my mother came and fixed the house up we moved into it.

J.G.: What was that house like?

McClanahan: Well, it was bigger than the one we had in Oklahoma. I think it had three rooms and by then each sex had his own bed so the boys had their bed and we had ours. I remember that it had a great pump that watered the land. It was near that house and the belt on it went way down into the ground. I remember animals would get caught in there and you had to get them out. One time we had a skunk that got mixed up with that belt. My dad had to go down there and bring that skunk out and that place smelled terrible. I remember one other time when we had smallpox. I think everybody in the house had smallpox. My mother even had smallpox.

J.G.: Smallpox or chicken pox?

McClanahan: We had some kind of pox. I can't remember which. They quarantined you.

J.G.: It must have been smallpox. Smallpox is when you get really sick.

McClanahan: That's right and there were six of us and we were all sick. I mean sick. Then they quarantined us and the nurse came over, I tell you, that poor lady had to come to the house. When she knocked on the door my mother came to the door and here she was in all this stuff and then we kids were looking out from under her dress with all this stuff on our faces. She wouldn't come in the house. She said, "No, that's all right." I don't blame her. I wouldn't have come in either. I think it was smallpox because that's the one that leaves a pit in your skin if you tamper with it.

J.G.: If you got quarantined it probably was smallpox.

McClanahan: Well, we all had it at one time and that was really something.

J.G.: As far as medical care at that time that you came to California, how did you find the nurse to come out?

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McClanahan: We never had any problems getting medical attention. Every time we scratched our toe we didn't go to the doctor. I remember my folks did a lot of doctoring. We went to Kern General if it was something where you needed a health nurse or something.

J.G.: Contagious like?

McClanahan: Where you got the health nurse--we all got medication and anything we wanted. All we had to do was go and get it. Of course, we had to take all the vaccinations. The kids don't take the vaccinations like we did then, everybody took those things at school. That was a holiday

and we all got the shots.

J.G.: So you found that the medical seemed to be fairly easy to get and adequate?

McClanahan: Yes, bearing in mind we weren't used to any. When we came out here if we needed the doctor there was no problem for us to get medical care.

J.G.: Before we get into your experience here in California, one of the things that I wondered was whether your father was affected by any of the policies that Roosevelt began in the early 1930s, the government policies that came out of the Roosevelt Administration that you might have heard you dad talk about.

McClanahan: Like what?

J.G.: Well, there were times when they paid farmers to kill their animals to raise the prices and not plant crops and in some cases when the crops had been planted to plow them up as a means of increasing the prices.

McClanahan: I really don't remember too much of that in Oklahoma. I don't remember them killing animals in California, but I remember them not growing crops and things in California. They did that in the south?

J.G.: They did that in Oklahoma too.

McClanahan: Well, I was seven when I left so I don't remember my dad ever plowing up anything.

J.G.: Or killing any animals?

McClanahan: No, they died on their own. They had something that was going bad. They died on their own. He never killed any. You were talking about medicine back in Oklahoma. I've got to tell you this. Something happened to our dog. I guess he got into a fight and got bitten on his leg. That leg got infested and the worms got in it. We didn't have a vet so dad tied this dog to the tree. I guess he must have tied his head to the tree and he stretched him out so that he couldn't turn his head around to bite him and he got a very sharp knife and sliced that piece of meat out of that dog's leg and he filled it with kerosene and sand and everyday he would pour a little kerosene in there and that dog's leg healed and he went on about his business.

J.G.: I think I read in the questionnaire that you sent back that you did a lot of home remedy things. Granny's recipe kind of medical care with herbal teas and things like that.

McClanahan: Well if we got sick it was either some tea or poultice. They'd go out into the trees and find these herbs and they would come back and they would make a tea and also made it out of cotton seeds. They used cotton

seeds some way and they actually used cow chips. I don't even know how they figured out which ones to use, but they'd go out there and have to walk through the pen to find the right one. It was used when a person was very, very ill and there was nothing else and they'd go out there and find that and make this tea out of it. They'd drink it.

J.G.: I would think that would kill you instead of cure you.

McClanahan: No, those animals eat all these shrubs and all this green stuff and that's what they were using.

J.G.: Do you remember any recipes for these home remedies or anything like that? Did you ever use them later on?

McClanahan: My mother used peach tree leaves. She'd put them in this bucket in hot water and then if we were congested or something she'd hold our head over that and throw a blanket over it and let it steam us.

J.G.: Peach tree leaves? What else?

McClanahan: My mother would make wine out of the wild berries and that always helped with home remedies.

If you had a cough and all else failed you would take a teaspoon full of sugar and put a drop or two of kerosene in it and you'd take it. I've used it on my kids in the modern day after I got through using all these cough syrups I got off the shelf and the cough has still lasted. I always keep kerosene around. I'd put a couple drops in there and I would sit them up because kerosene has a sort of seeping effect in your windpipe where that stuff is that won't come up. You let them sit up until you're sure that it's gone down. You can go to bed and to sleep because they're going to stop coughing.

J.G.: You've used that yourself and that really works?

McClanahan: I've used it myself. I don't like to use it but if it's night and they're coughing and I've used all this cough syrup and they're still coughing then I'll get up and do that.

J.G.: What you're saying is that in Oklahoma medical care was practically non-existent. That you figured out how to take care of yourself if you got really sick. What if somebody broke a leg?

McClanahan: Boley had its doctor.

J.G.: Were your brothers and sisters and you delivered by [a doctor]?

McClanahan: We were delivered by midwives. My great-aunt delivered us.

J.G.: And your two brothers here in California were delivered by doctors.

McClanahan: My mother went to the hospital and at that time it isn't like it is

now. My mother stayed fourteen days, but she was really glad to stay fourteen days.

J.G.: If I had six kids I'd stay for fourteen days too.

McClanahan: She had six kids at home and she looked forward to resting.

J.G.: You were old enough to go to school here in California. What was that experience like?

McClanahan: I was always kind of ambitious so I was kind of at the top of my class, in fact, I was a year ahead of myself. In California they go by your age so they made several attempts to move me back and I was just too far ahead of the others to get moved back. Back in Oklahoma it was cold so you wore clothes for a cold climate like long union suits. We had bloomers and cotton stockings, the kids ridiculed us at school for having that.

J.G.: In Oklahoma was the school integrated or segregated?

McClanahan: Everybody was black in Oklahoma, teacher and everybody. Once and a while we'd get this canned beef from the welfare and they'd give it to the school. We had this pot bellied stove which would always set in the middle of the floor to keep the room warm. The teacher would get this pot out and dump all this stuff in it and warm it up and we would eat it out of tin cups. I don't know how I came into possession of that cup because there was no cafeteria or anything like that. We would really enjoy it.

J.G.: That was back in Oklahoma then?

McClanahan: Yes, that was back in Oklahoma that we had that. Well, we had breakfast at school.

J.G.: In Oklahoma?

McClanahan: No, here. When I was out in Buttonwillow we had breakfast at school. They had half a grapefruit sitting there and they'd put a spoonful of sugar over it. I would eat and eat. They had toast and butter and oatmeal because they said so many kids weren't eating breakfast. My mother got up faithfully at three or four o'clock in the morning and cooked breakfast every morning and the rest of the kids were eating at school. We wanted to go and eat with the kids so that's what we did.

J.G.: You moved from Rosedale to Buttonwillow. Is that right?

McClanahan: Yes. We lived in Rosedale from 1936 to 1938, during that time my dad worked in the fields in that season, then in the off-season he would be on WPA [Works Progress Administration] and SRA [State Relief Administration] and together he got \$48 so he decided if he was going to work and get around he had to have a car. He bought

his car and paid down on it and paid \$25 a month. Then my mother decided that if she could help out she could make most of our clothes. So she bought a sewing machine and it was \$5 a month. That came to \$30 and he had \$18 a month to live on. Working in the harvest season and that \$18 he saved enough to make a down payment on two and a half acres at Buttonwillow. He and John Dixon went in and both bought two and a half acres which had a great big two story house. They bought the house and tore it down and each built a house from it out at Buttonwillow. Daddy was so excited about that two and a half acres. When Daddy gets excited and starts telling you something you can just visualize it. He took us out Rosedale Highway. You know at the time before you'd get to the thirteen mile corner half way there it was desert. Of course, when we started getting into the desert part, we thought Buttonwillow was any moment. Daddy went and went and I was afraid he was going to drop off the other side of the world. I don't even know how he found that two and a half acres but he found it and when he drove up those weeds were so tall they just lapped over the car. I said, "He's kidding." He was so excited he was telling us all about it. I thought, "Lord have mercy. Surely he's not going to move us out here." Sure enough. He moved us to Buttonwillow and started tearing down the house. He was working days and then weekends and evenings. He and the man would tear the house down. So the man started stealing the lumber and he was telling Daddy that somebody else was stealing his lumber. So then Daddy had to stay at the place. It was funny that the lumber only disappeared when the man stayed and not disappear when Daddy stayed. They built this house. It was a four room house with a porch across the front in Buttonwillow. Nobody had told us about the alkali in the soil and we didn't want to stay out there in the first place. That first day we were out there in that dust and it started stinging you and when it stings you you scratch and then it gets further into the skin and boy you talk about six kids hollering and screaming and I thought he's surely going to move out of here, but he didn't and we were stuck with staying out there and I tell you until I was in high school I did not know there was anything on the other side of Buttonwillow. I thought that was the end of the world over there.

J.G.: How did you get to and from school? Were you close enough to walk?

McClanahan: I don't know how far we were from school, maybe a mile or two. The bus picked us up at the corner and we rode the bus to school.

J.G.: Did you go to an integrated school at Buttonwillow?

McClanahan: Oh yes, all schools were whatever the neighborhood was. There were an awful lot of Italians there at the time and they made up a lot of the population. There weren't so many Spanish people there and at that time. Then I guess blacks were next but all the time I was at Buttonwillow at the peak of the harvest season I had five black kids in my class. Usually it was just me and my brother and Leroy White.

J.G.: What did your father do with the two and a half acres that he bought out

there?

McClanahan: He farmed it. He put in cotton on at least two of the acres and then we had to have cows and hogs and chickens. Then we raised a great big garden. When we moved out there there were canals everywhere. There was a great big twenty foot canal then where they drained the water in front of the house. Then there was a road and then there was this little canal that the water came through and irrigated the crops in the neighborhood. My dad planted all over the canal banks and everything. He was meaning to work progressive. We were on welfare in the off seasons. They had what they called commodities. Usually it was a crate of oranges. Daddy would take this sack and get a crate of oranges and then we'd get all kinds of clothes. You made out an order. You actually ordered the stuff. You got an order blank and you ordered and turned in your order blank. So we'd have new dresses and the boys would have new jeans and new underwear. I'll never forget those pink bloomers, seersucker bloomers that they'd give us. The girls would have those bloomers on and the girls' dresses matched the boys' underwear. We all looked alike. I thought, "Well, now we certainly are all poor" because we'd eaten up all those oranges the night before and the next day when we came to school we were broken out in a rash.

J.G.: That was while you were living in Buttonwillow?

McClanahan: That was when I was living at Buttonwillow.

J.G.: When you lived at Rosedale was your father able to find work most of the time or were there off seasons that you went on the SRA or WPA?

McClanahan: Yes, we started that in Rosedale and it continued when we were in Buttonwillow.

J.G.: Did you ever hear your parents talk about what the attitude of the welfare people was toward you?

McClanahan: My dad was a progressive person. He wanted to be independent so was working toward that and saving whatever little he could out of his money. He had this social worker, I guess, she didn't want him to do that and she cut him off. He did something and she just cut him off. Roosevelt was in at the time. We'd get the black newspapers and we'd seen where Roosevelt had campaigned with this man and this mule so dad wrote a letter to the President and told him what this lady had done to him. She was really mad because she had to come back out there and put him back on. He was only trying to get himself independent and as soon as he got independent, he was going to get off anyway. I think she didn't want him to be independent so she just cut him off of there. I can't remember what it was that my dad did because he already had the two and a half acres when we moved out there, but he did something else and she just didn't like it so she cut him off.

J.G.: Is that the way it went? You were at the mercy of the welfare people? Whatever they decided? You had no rights as a person receiving welfare.

They could decide and you really had no rights and no way to appeal.

McClanahan: Well now, you are saying welfare, that was true of us period. Anything that we were into we were at the mercy of whoever was dealing with us. If they decided that this wasn't the way the deal was going to do, we didn't have any recourse, we had to take whatever they did so I wouldn't just say that was welfare at that time. Whatever nasty words the kids wanted to say to us they could. Of course, with kids we could kind of say something back to them but the teachers, some of them went along with it in the classroom too. I remember a woman who came to our class from fifth grade from Iowa. We were all in the classroom when she arrived and she walked in and said, "I've never had any niggers in my class before." If she decided to pick somebody to do something she'd say, "Eeny, meeny, miney, mo, catch a nigger," and she pointed, "a nigger by his toes." She did it. What are you going to do? My folks were telling us to go to school and get an education. She's already got hers. You just go on and get yours. If you don't you won't be in a position to do anything so just take the little bit that she's doing and go on and get your education. Now you ask her about the people in Buttonwillow and she was quick to brag about the Williams family in Buttonwillow. I guess that was her first contact with any blacks and that's what she thought so that's what she did.

J.G.: Was it common to be called nigger at that point in time?

McClanahan: Yes. The kids would fight each other about it, but if an adult called you that there was nothing you could do about it.

J.G.: What about in your parents' dealings? Did they have that same experience where there were derogatory words used?

McClanahan: Well, I doubt that they would have told us because that would be discouraging to us to go ahead and do whatever it was that they wanted us to do so unless it was awful they never said anything about it.

J.G.: Did you as a family have much contact with the Okies that were coming into the Valley?

McClanahan: The neighborhood I lived in was a black settlement. There was nothing in it but blacks in Buttonwillow. It was not a part of the town. It was away from the town and we were out there in two and a half acre parcels. We only had contact with whites when we went to wherever they were.

At Christmas time they had all these Christmas parties for migrant workers and daddy loved Christmas so he would take us to wherever they were. We'd go to Bakersfield, Buttonwillow, Shafter and I think we went to Arvin one time. There were six of us. They didn't give you a little bag, they gave us [a bag like you get from Safeway] at least one-third the way filled with nuts and candies and fruit. There would be six of us

with that and boy we'd have the car full of trash when we got home. Then we'd sit around the fire at night. Now that I think about it I don't know how my mother stood all that. Sometimes I don't sweep this floor everyday but when you've got a big family like that you've got to sweep the floor everyday to get the trash out.

Oh, we took the proverbial Saturday night bath too. When we moved to Buttonwillow we had no electricity or gas or running water. So we had an outhouse and a slop jar. That was the toilet. We had those two canals for water. We drove the cattle down to the canal each morning and evening for them to drink. Other than drinking water we used the canal to wash and then we hauled our drinking [water]. We had a wood stove. I remember, I used to have to cook breakfast. In the summertime when school was out while we were eating breakfast my mother would go out and gather the vegetables and things. Then when they'd finished eating I would sort out the vegetables and see what I was going to cook for dinner and the rest of it I canned. I canned everyday. When my mother would do it she'd wait and get a whole batch of it and we'd have to spend all this time and I thought while I'm cooking if I just have this one pot on the stove with the can in it then I wouldn't have to do that everyday so that's what I did. I had to cook breakfast, school or no school, so my dad would be at the fields when the sun came up. I'd be so sleepy in the mornings. One morning I got up and was going to cook some biscuits. I reached up to the shelf to get the baking powder and was half asleep. When I reached to get it it moved back. I thought, "I'm out of my mind." I went to lean against the doorjamb to get myself together only when I leaned against the doorjamb it moved. I thought, "Oh my God. I am really going crazy." About that time my mother said, "Oh, did you feel that earthquake?" I said, "Thank God."

J.G.: Restored your faith.

McClanahan: I was really kind of afraid then.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

McClanahan: When I was home I did the cooking. I was going to tell you how we got running water and that kind of stuff. One of the reasons my dad didn't hook us up to that kind of stuff was that he didn't like California. We weren't going to live here. He wanted to live in Oklahoma near his folks. My mother, of course, didn't want to go back. He had to wait until he had enough money to get back. My mother said, "Rather than just moving back there because you might not feel the same way about that place as you did when you left, why don't you just go on back there and I'll stay here with the kids while you go. Then you just make up your mind whether or not you want to stay."

We wanted a radio. You could have a battery operated radio if you didn't have electricity. But, we weren't going to have this kind of

stuff because we were going back to Oklahoma so Daddy went back to Oklahoma.

J.G.: What year was that?

McClanahan: It must have been during the war, like 1942. He went off to Oklahoma and came back and got up the next morning and said, "Wife, let's go to town." He bought Mama a radio; he signed up for electricity; he got the stuff to put in this hand pump as soon as he came back. That was the turning point. We were going to live in California.

Well, the war came along and my dad was 38 and did not go. He had no idea that the war was going to last as long as it did. It took my two brothers. We had a tree by the edge of the yard and when my brother walked out of that yard my daddy stood under that tree and just cried. I don't remember him having gray hair, but then he started greying. He did not want his son to go fight a war. The other brother wasn't quite old enough to go in, but he volunteered. I think he was the only guy I ever knew that owed money to the government when he got out. They put him down south and he was used to California and all that junk they would say to him he wouldn't take it. He'd hit and he was always in trouble for doing that so when he came out he actually owed money. During the war prices went up so daddy was able to get off of the WPA. He also did some contracting. It was long about that time that I started doing work in the fields.

J.G.: Before we go onto the war years and what happened then did your father work crops around Buttonwillow and come home each evening or did he follow the crops on a circuit?

McClanahan: We never went anywhere. We always stayed at home.

J.G.: What crops did he mainly work in? You said in Rosedale it was mainly cotton at your uncle's place.

McClanahan: Daddy worked cotton really. We worked some in the grapes and did a little bit of picking up potatoes.

J.G.: When you say we, did you and your brothers and sisters get involved in that too?

McClanahan: Yes.

J.G.: Did your mother work in the field also?

McClanahan: My mother worked picking cotton. But you know at that time they didn't let ladies work like they do now. I remember her picking cotton.

J.G.: How did you find out about the jobs? Was there a central place that they'd go to collect before they went to the fields or how did he learn where there was going to be work available?

McClanahan: My dad didn't catch a truck to go to somebody else's field. He contracted. I don't know how he made arrangements for the contracting.

J.G.: He was the one who got the labor crews together.

McClanahan: Yes. After his welfare days he was the one who got the crews together.

J.G.: That was in the early 1940s.

McClanahan: Yes.

J.G.: So from 1936 to 1940 that was mostly working locally in the cotton when there was a crop to be brought in.

McClanahan: Yes. We did not follow crops. We only did the ones that were around.

J.G.: What kind of work did he do when he worked for the WPA?

McClanahan: They cleared all the river banks off. I think some of them worked in construction but he didn't. He mostly worked clearing trees and fields and things like that.

J.G.: You went to grammar school around Buttonwillow. Did you go to high school there too?

McClanahan: I got bussed 30 miles every day, one way in and one way back.

J.G.: Where?

McClanahan: Bakersfield High School is where I graduated from and Bakersfield College was together. I rode that same bus to Bakersfield College too.

J.G.: Was there a high school at Buttonwillow?

McClanahan: No, there's not one there now. They go to Shafter. I graduated from Buttonwillow Grammar School and then I went to Kern Union High School which was Bakersfield High School. Some of the fellows who were going to Bakersfield College were usually the bus drivers and they drove the bus into town and we would pick kids up from Buttonwillow and we even picked them up in Rosedale and on through to town. That was before they put in Isabella Dam. I tell you we'd get into water and ride down Brundage Lane. There was water almost to where the College is now. Sometimes the motor would get wet and we'd have to stop out in the middle of this water and let the motor dry and start again and come to school. Naturally, when the water was up like that we were late every morning. I kept wondering why they'd have us go to school because we were really not getting too much. Now that I've gotten older I know that they go on the ADA [Average Daily Attendance] so we had to show up. We had to show up at school or they wouldn't get the money from the state and they needed the money from the state to keep the

school going.

J.G.: Did you continue to live on the two and a half acre farm in Buttonwillow?

McClanahan: I lived there all the time I was in Buttonwillow. As I say, Daddy started contracting and he got a hold of more money and he started buying farm land and started to farm but we always lived on the two and a half acres.

J.G.: While your father was working in the cotton did you ever hear any talk as to what the relationships were like between the Okies and the minority people? Were there animosities between the two or was there competition for the jobs or was everybody equally taken advantage of by the growers or equally treated by the growers? Do you have any memory of that?

McClanahan: It didn't seem to me that we had such an abundance of workers that we had that problem, I don't remember.

J.G.: You're thinking that there were so few people that one had no difficulty in finding employment?

McClanahan: Yes, that's what I'm saying. I don't remember that they had such an abundance of people that they could afford to be picky. We had those labor camps out there and a large majority of those labor camps were black people and I didn't hear of anything like that.

J.G.: What labor camps are you talking about?

McClanahan: Each farmer had his own housing on his own farm. Now they're furnished by the government or something aren't they then each farmer had his own little rural houses that the people who worked for him lived in.

J.G.: But your family never lived in grower-owned housing?

McClanahan: No.

J.G.: And if I'm understanding you you say that the majority of the people that did live in grower-owned housing were black people.

McClanahan: I really couldn't tell you that because I was more familiar with the ones that housed the blacks. There may have been. I'm sure that there were others but I was not familiar with that.

J.G.: One of the things that keeps cropping up over and over again is that there was such an over abundance of people for the jobs available.

McClanahan: Where?

J.G.: Here in the San Joaquin Valley. Because of the huge numbers of people

coming in from Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas during that time because of the Depression and the Dust Bowl particularly in Oklahoma that there were probably three or four laborers for every job in the field.

McClanahan: I'm not familiar with that one. Now it might have been. My dad didn't come as a migrant worker. He came to live with his brother-in-law who already knew the people that he would be working for. Dad was not a person coming in looking for a job. He was there all the time so they knew that he could depend on him so it probably was a difference between somebody coming in and going to work the season.

J.G.: You felt like your family was more of a permanent part of the community and a permanent worker for the farmer.

McClanahan: Yes.

J.G.: Did your father work for a lot of different farmers or did he generally just work for one?

McClanahan: When he was contracting he'd work for several.

J.G.: But that was later on when he was doing the fieldwork part of it. Sometimes the people who had it slightly better than the others were those that were able to land a job as a hired man.

McClanahan: Did you hear people say that about Buttonwillow?

J.G.: No, Buttonwillow is a new area for me. You're the first person that I've talked to that lived out in the Buttonwillow area. I've talked with people that have been in Arvin, Lamont, Shafter.

McClanahan: My husband could tell you. His mind is crystal clear on that because I met him when we moved to Rosedale. He was already at Rosedale. His dad worked more for different people than my dad did because Daddy was determined that he was going to be on his own so all of his work was geared to that point. But I'm not familiar with what you're saying and I can't even reason it in Buttonwillow. We had Hare's Camp and they were looking forward to these blacks coming in to do their farm work. I don't remember anything like a competition or anything and those that stayed it was with the anticipation that they did the work. I think that probably was those people who migrated. That would be an influx at one time so there might have been more of a hassle for a job. I don't remember.

J.G.: As far as you knew around Buttonwillow there were lots of jobs to be had during the season.

McClanahan: No I won't say that. I will say that I don't know anything about anybody hassling about a job. The only thing that I can remember is that if jobs were limited the women did not go to the fields only the men did.

J.G.: Did you ever know anybody or hear anything about the government camps like the ones built out at Arvin and I think they had one at Shafter. The federal government came in and put up these labor camps for the migrants during the 1930s.

McClanahan: My husband has lived in one of those things but I never have. The only thing I know that the government did out at Buttonwillow was during the war. They had those Italian prisoners of war and they also brought some people in from the islands and they both stayed in that same place when one left the other one came.

J.G.: When you say the Islands do you mean Hawaiian?

McClanahan: They were Jamaican. They came and stayed in that camp for a while during the war years.

J.G.: They did farm work?

McClanahan: They did farm work. That's why I say I don't remember that big a hassle about farm work in Buttonwillow.

J.G.: During the war years it got tight because then a lot of these people went off to war but in those late 1930s, 1936 until the war broke out, many people have talked to me about the migrant workers.

McClanahan: Were they migrant workers?

J.G.: They were migrant workers but they were also people that lived at Lamont and Arvin and in those areas and how difficult it was because there was an overabundance of people coming in and not very many jobs were available and the competition for what few jobs there were was really keen.

McClanahan: That might have been, but I just don't remember it because my dad did all the work that he had time for and my brothers when they got old enough to go to the fields they went and when I got old enough to go to the fields I went.

J.G.: When did you go to the fields? When did you start working on the fields?

McClanahan: I guess when I was about thirteen.

J.G.: What kind of work did you do?

McClanahan: I chopped cotton and I picked cotton and I picked up potatoes and cut grapes.

J.G.: That would have been in the middle 1940s.

McClanahan: Yes.

J.G.: Did you work during the summers?

McClanahan: Yes, chopped cotton, cut grapes, picked up potatoes. My last experience at picking cotton was when my mother said if I go out and pick a certain amount that I could quit. At that time you worked from sunup to sundown and I did. The sun was still up a ways so she said, "Sister, if you go back out there and pick another little sack full it would make 300 pounds of cotton and then you could say you picked 300 pounds of cotton once in your lifetime." I said, "Mother, that's quite all right. You see, I'm not going to be a cotton picker." After I made that statement she looked at me and said, "That kid really isn't going to work in this field." He had once said I wasn't going to go to college so she says, "I better see about her because she isn't going to work in these fields and I'd better see that she has some kind of job." I don't really remember going into the fields again. I've been in the fields again but it was never a life or death thing anymore. She just started in to try and figure out what she was going to do with me in school so that I would not have to go to the fields.

J.G.: During the 1930s time there was a book written by John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath. Did you feel any identity with the characters or your family's experiences? Anything like the way the characters lived or the conditions? Was there anything that you recall or what you thought or felt about that book?

McClanahan: Not from my personal experience, but my husband lived like that when they came to California because those people came straight to California. My husband's people are from Louisiana and his father said that he would not raise another black child down there. He was going to bring his kids to California. They had ten kids already so he just went across the river into Texas and started working. His mother was pregnant and when she had the baby they moved to Texas and then three or four kids were born in Texas. Then they moved to Arizona. He was living in those labor camps. You remember when those kids ran in and turned the water on and the water ran and they were flushing the toilets, well, he said that they did the same thing. My uncle had all that stuff in his house. He had a telephone, light and gas and running water and when we moved to California that's the first thing we went into.

J.G.: Sounds like your uncle had done quite well in California.

McClanahan: He had.

J.G.: He had all the conveniences and everything?

McClanahan: He did and that's who we came to stay with.

J.G.: That's interesting because that seems to be the experience of many people; if they had family that was settled here and was doing fairly well and had made some connections that they could get along fairly well.

Those whose families hadn't made those connections or came out with no family had a much harder time.

J.G.: I never thought we were having a hard time. My memories of those days are really good. I really enjoyed it. I did not know that for instance when I said we had corn bread and clabber milk. I loved it. It was a treat for me. I didn't know that I was poor and that my dad couldn't afford anything else. That's why I ate it. When I came to California I can remember we were on welfare and we'd have oatmeal for breakfast. We hadn't eaten anything for breakfast except meat and bread and rice and that kind of thing so here we come to California and you poured milk over cereal. They expect me to eat that? I learned to eat it. They'd load us down with this oatmeal. We'd have plain oatmeal for breakfast and in the evening we'd have oatmeal for dinner and we'd drop some raisins in it. I loved it. I never thought that we didn't have anything. We did have something to eat because my mother raised a great big garden and she canned everything and she had food left over when the season came again. We were doing this obviously because this was the way we were eating I guess.

J.G.: That's how your parents managed to save money regardless of how little their income was by living so carefully and frugally. We've got you graduated from Bakersfield High School. What happened to you after that?

McClanahan: I graduated from Bakersfield High School in 1946. Then I went to Bakersfield College. Since I'd declared war on fieldwork my mother decided I was going to have to go to school to learn how to do something. Here I was in my senior year trying to make up all these subjects that I needed to go to college so I started Bakersfield College. I came to Bakersfield and lived with my godmother. My mother thought that I'd be so discouraged by the time I made up all those subjects so she said that a long time ago we'd discussed my going to beauty school. When she picked me up from the summer session at Bakersfield College, she said, "Sister," they always call the oldest girl sister, "you know we talked about you going to beauty school one time. Are you still interested?" I said, "I sure am." We went home that Friday and Monday morning my mother had me in Los Angeles enrolled at a beauty school. Blacks did not go to beauty school with whites, in fact, we didn't go to any trade school in Bakersfield. They didn't accept blacks not even to business or anything so I had to go to Los Angeles to a black school but I had to pass the state board on a white's head of hair. They didn't do any blacks' hair at the board and they didn't even consider what we were doing to our hair. I liked the big city and the bright lights and I wanted to stay but my dad said that that was the end of the money so I had to come back home.

J.G.: So you graduated from beauty school and came back.

McClanahan: Yes. I came back to where my godmother's daughter ran a beauty shop. I came back and lived with them and worked at the beauty shop there.

J.G.: You wanted to talk about religion?

McClanahan: Yes. I was going to mention that from Oklahoma too. I had an interesting experience. Money was very short and this particular time I remember my mother made me this little white dress. I'm not sure it wasn't a bleached flour sack trimmed with pink bias tape. I got a pair of white sandals, tennis sandals and I was really dressed. Daddy gave me a penny to put in Sunday school and I went to Mama's sack where she sewed from and I got this long string and I wrapped this penny in it real good and I was going to church, boy, I was dressed up. I was sitting on this bench that didn't have any back on it and I just couldn't be still because I had this money and I was all dressed up and I kept moving around on that bench and went over backwards.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

McClanahan: I am a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and we were on our circuit which meant that we didn't have a minister every Sunday so we went to church meetings on meeting days. Then when we moved to California and we lived out at Buttonwillow and the church was in Bakersfield, so we would drive 30 miles to church on Sunday. That was the only time we ever got to go to town and mix with other people so we would look forward to doing that and that's one of the reasons we never established a church there. We were baptized, the four girls, in 1939 into that church and they gave us a godmother. We were never used to anything like that before and she was really nice to us. She was a maid and they gave her all these things. She never gave us a whole bunch of junk. She'd sort out the best things and wash and iron them and then she'd sew them and then once or twice a year she'd give us this box of clothes and they all fit and they were all nice. I always appreciated her for doing that. When I got out of beauty school I went to live with her and I worked in her daughter's beauty shop.

J.G.: The African Methodist Episcopal Church was that church in Oklahoma or here in Bakersfield?

McClanahan: Both.

J.G.: You're now working in the beauty shop. What happened after that?

McClanahan: Then I met Melton. I can't say I met him. I already knew him. He was playing football. My mother was very religious and anything was a sin and you were going to die and go to hell so I didn't get to participate too much in extracurricular activities at school. The only football game I'd been to was in eighth grade they brought us to Bakersfield to introduce us to high school, they brought us to one of the games. Interesting thing happened to me then because Harold Matlock was in my Sunday school class at church. He was playing football. I said, "I remember that name. He's in my Sunday school class. Boy, when I get to high school I'm going to look him up." When I got to high school

the war had started and they drafted Harold so I thought, "Well, I'll be grown up when he comes back." When Harold came back I thought he would start back to Bakersfield College because I was in Bakersfield College by then but he didn't. He met the girl he's married to now. I says, "Well, goodbye Harold."

J.G.: Was Harold a big football hero?

McClanahan: He was a big football hero at that time. I met Melton when we came to California. We went to school together out at Rosedale in 1936 so I already knew him and he was playing football. I thought I would like to go to one of those games and we were friends. I mentioned it to him about the game and he said that he would take me. I wasn't thinking about boyfriend or girlfriend stuff. We were friends. Anyway, that's what happened.

J.G.: That was how many years ago.

McClanahan: I've been married to him 32 years.

J.G.: I think that was a friend relationship that lasted.

McClanahan: Yes, it did.

J.G.: What year were you married?

McClanahan: 1949.

J.G.: I think you said you had three children?

McClanahan: Yes. Brent, my oldest, he's 29 now, he's just finished eight years with the Minnesota Vikings football team.

J.G.: Well, Brent McClanahan.

McClanahan: They cut him last fall.

J.G.: Did he play a lot?

McClanahan: He was running back for them.

J.G.: How interesting. So your husband's football talents must have rubbed off on him.

McClanahan: Oh, I was going to tell you about his football talent. He was playing for Bakersfield College at the time. He played with Frank Gifford. When the scout came from UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] he was talking to the coach and at that time Melton was on the other side of the wood partition. This guy was talking about Frank Gifford and when he got through he said, "Now, tell me about

McClanahan." The coach says, "You don't want him." The coach says, "Why?" He said, "He's black." Melton said that that was the end of the conversation. They went on talking about something else.

J.G.: That was in the early 1940s?

McClanahan: No, that was the late 1940s. He was out of the service then.

J.G.: I've heard football players talk about the experience of the black football players. The segregation and that kind of thing that went on up to quite late. So your son is a pro ball player. What's he going to do now that he's no longer with the Vikings?

McClanahan: He doesn't know either. He's just floating around. He's spent every dime that he made having a good time. He's moved to Phoenix. He went to Arizona State so he's back at Phoenix.

J.G.: What about your other two children?

McClanahan: Teri is an engineer with Pacific Telephone Company and she's stationed at Sacramento. My baby is sixteen.

J.G.: That baby that I saw walking through here, all six feet of him?

McClanahan: Yes. He's the tallest one of us. He's very good at baseball, football, and basketball, but he's got a bad hip so we don't know whether he's going to pursue sports or not.

J.G.: To get back to the 1930s, I've got a couple of questions. During that time, there were some attempts to organize the field laborers. Do you have any memory of your father being involved in either attempts to organize or being organized or involved in any strikes?

McClanahan: No.

J.G.: I think Buttonwillow must have just begun to be developed as an agricultural area.

McClanahan: It was a river bottom they were beginning to develop. Miller and Lux were still out there when we went out and I don't think Daddy would have been involved in anything like that because he wasn't planning to be a laborer. He had one thought in mind to be an independent farmer.

J.G.: Did he achieve that dream?

McClanahan: Oh yes, he did. He became an independent farmer. As a matter of fact, California chose him as the Black Farmer of the Year and sent him to India. He and my mother went to India for six weeks and was over there telling them how they farm in California.

J.G.: How big a place did he wind up farming?

McClanahan: Oh probably about 1,000 acres or something like that.

J.G.: He was a big farmer.

McClanahan: He passed away last year and my brothers have the farm now so it's Williams and Sons. I guess it's still Williams and Sons because their sons are with them now.

J.G.: So they're now farming his acreage out in Buttonwillow?

McClanahan: Yes.

J.G.: Was it difficult for a black person to achieve the status of owning his own land?

McClanahan: Well, he went out and bought the first land. The powers that be didn't think he was going to do that much. It was rough land, unleveled and all that. After he really went there and did that from then on getting a piece of land was quite a bit to it. The principal, Bruce Crawford, of the grade school, seemed to like our family and his family were farmers. Daddy leased land from him then finally he sold Daddy the land. Daddy just made a few right connections I guess. I thought maybe some of it had to do with him being black, but also since I've gotten a real estate license, I was talking to some people about some farm land out there. They say Buttonwillow is sort of a family type thing. It's hard for anybody to get in there because if anything becomes available the fellow tells his brother or cousin or somebody about it. That's the way they do that.

J.G.: Did your father ever talk about being taken advantage of or being cheated by the growers during the late 1930s?

McClanahan: Cheated how?

J.G.: One lady that I talked to who picked peas in the Imperial Valley said that if you didn't keep your eye on the scale when they were weighing they would short you as sure as you were alive. They would call off your weight as being ten pounds less than it was.

McClanahan: That wasn't just the farmer. That was whoever was in charge. The people in charge is trying to make an extra dime. That happened to me with the labor contractors. You have to be awfully careful about that. The contractors would have so many people in the field and you'd have to go out there and count because sometimes you didn't have that many. I think that was something that just went with whatever was going on. If you didn't watch it you'd get cheated. Even weighing your cotton you'd have to be careful that the scales weren't set back. It wasn't just the farmer, it was whoever was weighing, whoever was in charge who stood to gain that amount of money.

J.G.: That's probably true. That guy had more to gain than the actual farmer did. During that time Roosevelt was in office during the 1930s and 1940s years, the war years, do you have any memory whether your parents had any feelings one way or the other about Roosevelt.

McClanahan: Black people thought Roosevelt was God's gift to humanity. I don't think he could have done anything wrong. It was great because all the breaks that they'd ever gotten were under his administration so I think, traditionally, a lot of blacks have been Republicans but I think during the Roosevelt Administration many of them turned Democrat for that reason.

J.G.: What kinds of things did they think Roosevelt did were good for them? Any programs that you have in mind in particular that the people thought were better than or were good for the black people?

McClanahan: I don't know if they thought in terms of the program. They just figured that the man in the White House was understanding and tolerant of them. I think it was more of a personal thing. Like my dad felt that if things didn't go right he was just going to write Mr. Roosevelt. We weren't all that well versed or well read at that time and nothing had ever really gone right for us in the first place. It seemed like nobody else was concerned, so to become involved in some issues wouldn't have meant that much to us because when the whole thing went down, we were going to get the worst end of the deal anyway. I think perhaps the group that I was with wasn't that sophisticated to be concerned about issues and things at that time.

J.G.: Just felt that Roosevelt had a sensitivity to the needs and problems of the black community.

McClanahan: Yes.

J.G.: I think that covers what I had to ask you. Do you have any thoughts in any areas that I didn't cover that you would like to mention?

McClanahan: What years were you concerned about?

J.G.: Particularly interested in the 1930s, the late 1930s, in detail as you probably recognized. I keep coming back to 1936 to about 1940 in detail then just generally what I'm trying to get is a history of your life. What it was like for you as a person, your coming up years and then the migration to the San Joaquin Valley and a little bit about what happened to you after.

McClanahan: I was going to say about 1954 the Supreme Court Decision came in and many things opened up for black people. It was also a progressive thing, something you have to keep working on. The reason I thought about that is when we were looking at this house. We lived up on Madison Street and the state bought our house for the freeway and we thought we'd just go out and buy a house. I went out and there just

wasn't a house for me. Finally, they were building a new house and I had been over there looking at it and I think my husband must have mentioned something at that time we could sue for discrimination. So his boss called him in and told him that he could not sue, if he did he wouldn't have a job. Here we were. The state had bought our house and we were going to move and I thought what in the world are we going to do? So we tried FHA [Federal Housing Administration]. I call it town and city. They have one for farming and one for in town. After we weren't able to buy the house that we wanted we thought we had this land here already we would just build. We were too far out for the one in the city and too close in for the one in the country. We couldn't get a loan anywhere. Finally, I said, "I'm not going to let this go down." Daddy wrote President Roosevelt once and things happened so I said, "We've got a nice guy up in the state here and I'm going to write him, Governor Brown, Jr." I wrote and told him what had happened to us and my husband was a veteran and he had eleven brothers and nine of them had already been in the service and everything and here they'd promised these boys they'd have a home and here we are outdoors and nobody would let us have a loan. So he wrote me and told me to go down to Cal Vet and get my loan.

J.G.: And you did?

McClanahan: I did. I went down and got it. An interesting thing happened. They only let us have \$12,500. We couldn't build this house for that so we had to get a construction loan. The only fellow who would let us have a loan said he'd let us have \$10,000. He said, "Go ahead and go to work and if you need any more I'll let you have it." In the meantime, my dad was farming and he was the one who insisted that we move out here. He said, "If you move out here I'll level the land for you." Daddy being a farmer had all this heavy equipment. The day that Elmer Karpe was to come out here and look at this house to see that we had the money he came by and my dad was unloading all this heavy equipment out there. He wouldn't let my husband have the money because he lied to him. He did not let us have it.

J.G.: He lied how?

McClanahan: He says he didn't want us to have any more money when he gave us the money. We were suppose to be completely out of money. When he saw all this heavy equipment being unloaded out here he assumed that there was no way we'd have access to that without coming up with some money. So he wouldn't let us have any more and he didn't. There are two sides to everything. There's a side in it for me too. You can't get all the angles, there has to be some left so I'm going to look for the ones that you left unturned. I've always found them. That's really the way I live my life. It's interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW

Arthur Williams  
b. 1904, Georgia  
[His parents from Georgia]

Martha Dillard Williams  
b. 1904, Georgia  
[Her parents from Georgia and North  
Carolina]

Christina Veola Williams  
McClanahan  
b. 1929, Boley, Okfuskee Co.,  
Oklahoma

Education: AA Degree -  
Liberal Arts

Church: African Methodist  
Episcopal

m. 1949 →

Melton McClanahan  
b. 1926, Roaring  
Springs, Texas

Brent Anthony  
b. 1951  
Professional  
football player

Teri Denise  
b. 1954  
Engineer

Melton, Jr.  
b. 1965  
High school  
student

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