

Interviewer: Clint Alley

Interviewee: Reverend Jerry Reeves

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Clint Alley: Today is November 7, 2012, and I am at the Galilee Missionary Baptist Church with Reverend Jerry Reeves. Ah, and I'm Clint Alley from the University of North Alabama, and also from the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library today. Ah, Brother Reeves, I'd just like to thank you for helping us out with this project and, ah, I'd like to ask you just to start out, are you a lifelong member of this community? Have you been here your whole life?

Jerry Reeves: No, actually I, my home is a little town outside of Little Rock, a place called Riceville, Arkansas, out in the country. And, after I finished high school, I joined the military, and in 1967, and I ended up in Huntsville at Redstone Arsenal. And I spent almost two years there and I was sent to Vietnam. So when I got out, and I went back to Huntsville to live, and, ah, I started my ministry in 1975 there in Huntsville.

CA: Okay. So you've been preaching for several years.

JR: A few.

[Laughter]

CA: Okay. Ah, well, so now back to your military service, were you drafted into the military?

JR: No, I joined. I joined the military. I wasn't a draftee. [laughter]

CA: Okay, okay. So what branch were you in?

JR: Army.

CA: Okay, okay. Well, that's good. So you came to Huntsville, and so what brought you to Leighton, specifically?

JR: Well, I started my ministry in '75, and then six months after that, I started, I pastored my first church in Hillsboro, Alabama, and stayed there two-and-a-half years, then I was given an invitation to come here and preach. They were seeking a pastor. And here I am.

[Laughter]

JR: That was in 1978.

CA: 1978. Okay.

JR: So I've been here, I've been here thirty-four years.

CA: Okay. They must like you, then.

[Laughter]

JR: I think they do.

CA: Most of 'em do, anyway.

JR: I think they do.

CA: Well, that's good.

JR: I like them, too.

[Laughter]

CA: That's good, that's good. Well, now, when did you know that you wanted to become a minister? Was it something you had wanted from childhood or—

JR: No, actually, I believed that was my special calling. Ah, as a young kid—I mean growing up in Arkansas—I always wanted to be a singer. [Laughter] And, ah, I started singing when I was about fifteen years old. And, ah, singing Gospel. And then I kinda strayed away a little bit and I sung in a couple of bands back home. And, ah, after I sung in the band for a little while—that career didn't last long, my mama and daddy they ended that for me!—so, ah, then I came to Huntsville, then I joined the military and came to Huntsville.

CA: Okay, okay.

JR: I was, ah, I still was into singing, and I had a couple of opportunities for a few major recordings, but I didn't pursue it. Matter of fact, there were a couple over at Muscle Shoals looked at me and, you know, and, tried to inspire me to, you know, do some of that.

CA: And you said that you had done some recording with Lenny LeBlanc?

JR: Well no, I just sang with him on the Handy Festival a time or two.

CA: Oh, okay, that's right. Okay, okay.

JR: So that's pretty much how that was. And I'm on the opening ceremony each year for the Handy Festival, myself.

CA: Okay. That's a pretty big honor.

JR: Yeah.

CA: Now, the church, here, specifically, I noticed on the plaque outside that it was founded in the 1870s?

JR: 1874.

CA: 1874.

JR: Yeah, that's 138 years old.

CA: 138 years old. Okay, that's quite a long life for a church.

JR: I'm guessing I'm probably the longest-reigning pastor in the history of the church. I don't think no other pastor, nobody else has been here this long.

CA: Okay, okay.

JR: Of the previous pastors.

CA: That's good, that's good.

JR: The church was organized, I think, was it by some of your—

Joseph Hogan: Relatives, yeah, years ago. We've got a long history about it.

JR: Yeah, and it started off in a brush harbor. You know what a brush harbor is? Explain to him, tell him how it—

JH: Brush harbor was a thing, when the slaves went to worship, it was a brush thing built to where you could get up under it, that's what you call a brush harbor. I guess 'cause the master couldn't see them.

CA: Yeah, okay.

JR: That's—how did they acquire this land?

JH: Uh, it was donated to us by the, uh, Miss—I can't think of her name. Uh, she's part of the King family, but her name was, well I'll have to look her up.

JR: But, anyway, it was donated to—

JH: Two acres, two acres. Yeah, they donated the church and the cemetery. I can't think of her name. She was a member here, the lady was a member here.

JR: Yeah, we had, we originally had four acres, two acres?

JH: Two acres and the Kings had the cemetery.

JR: Yeah, and then we bought how many total? Recently? We bought—

JH: It was twenty-five acres.

JR: But before we bought that, this man named who?

JH: Brown

JR: No, who donated this land?

JH: Oh, I can't think, I'm getting old.

[laughter]

JR: But they had, we needed a little more extra land for parking and the gentleman who owned all this land—we'll get his name in a minute—he was a big farmer, as a matter of fact, that used to be a cow pasture.

CA: Okay.

JR: Yeah, and we asked him about buying some land, and we didn't have to buy it. He donated us a couple acres, I think it was. And, uh, he donated it. And he's a big farmer here in this area, he's gonna get his name here in a minute. He lives right up the street up there in that house. But yeah there used to be a bunch of cows right here.

CA: That's good. I think y'all are probably putting better use to it than that.

[laughter]

JR: Yeah, yeah.

CA: That's good, that's good. So, and you say, the cemetery is about as old as the church, then?

JR: Yeah, yeah, it is.

CA: So this is really a foundation of the community, this church is.

JR: Matter of fact, I think this is the oldest church in the community, in this community. And, uh, we've had some prominent people here, we have retired principals, school teachers. Uh, one of the oldest living members now is Deacon S.N. Nance. He was a professor at Leighton's Training School.

JH: Henry Vincent gave it to us, Brother Reeves.

JR: Huh?

JH: Henry Vincent.

JR: Henry Vincent gave the land, okay. And what was the man's name here? Louis Vincent? Uh, I'm gonna call his name.

JH: We both of us getting old!

JR: Doesn't it start with a 'P'?

JH: I thought it was Brown.

JR: No.

JH: He's next to them. I can't think what his name is.

JR: We'll think of his name in a minute. But, where were we at? What was the last thing I said?

CA: You were telling me who all has been members.

JR: Oh yeah, Deacon S.N. Nance. Yeah, we had some—matter of fact, his wife is also a retired school teacher—but we've had retired school teachers, uh, we had TVA, Reynold's workers that were members here. And the mayor, one of the previous mayors of Leighton here, first black mayor, woman, female, Renita Jimmar, she works for the Times Daily now. But she, uh, that's her picture up there.

CA: Okay.

JR: Then, also, Emmett Jimmar, he was county commissioner.

JH: Still is.

JR: Still is the county commissioner.

CA: Okay.

JR: And then we had, uh, who else?

JH: Percy.

JR: Okay, yeah, but I was talking about the home folk. Yeah, TVA, Reynolds workers. But he's a retired Reynolds man...

JH: ...TVA...

JR: ...TVA man. Yeah.

JH: We got, what, a lot of teachers down here, we got quite a few teachers down here.

JR: Yeah, uh. Yeah, I talked about the ex-principal. Um, then, uh, of course I think I mentioned to you that Percy Sledge grew up in this church.

CA: Okay.

JR: Yeah, that's one of his friends right there.

JH: Yeah, he still holds membership here I guess.

JR: Yeah, the only thing different between him and Percy is he can't sing!

[laughter]

JR: Percy, he was superintendent of the Sunday school, he sang in the choir.

CA: So he's a pretty active member then?

JR: Yeah.

JH: He didn't have no choice.

[laughter]

JH: His parents made him come!

CA: Now, did you say that you grew up with him?

JH: Yeah.

JR: Did y'all go to school, were y'all in the same class?

JH: No, he and my brother was in the same class.

JR: Which one?

JH: James.

JR: Okay, so okay.

JH: Well, we know each other. When we had the black school, we went from I guess primer, we went to the same school, so we knew each other from the first grade.

JR: As a matter of fact, this was the school.

CA: Okay, okay.

JR: I'll take you up there and show you the, we got a little museum, I guess you could call it up front there.

CA: Okay, I'd like to see that.

JR: We've got a cabinet with some trophies and stuff in them.

CA: Well, now, growing up with Percy Sledge, did he, was it real clear from early age that he was going to be a singer?

JH: Percy Sledge probably would have been a professional baseball player if he had got a chance. He could play baseball. They had what they called the Negro Farm Association, NFA, that's where he started singing.

JR: That's where Deacon Nance, Professor Nancy, was an instructor.

JH: Nance, they had contests. Percy, he was in a group they had at school.

JR: Yeah, singing in the quartet, that was one of the competitions in the NFA.

JH: Percy first started singing with the high school band. The band director for the high school, he had a band, and Percy started singing they had Pop Wright and the Lewis guy, the one who wrote 'Man Loves a Woman?' So he started singing at clubs, and at school stuff, is how he got started.

CA: Okay.

JR: Actually, Percy was an overnight hit. The first song he cut, it was a hit, and it's been a hit ever since. Yeah, 'When a Man Loves a Woman.'

CA: Oh yeah, that's a classic. A lot of people have remade that one, too.

JR: Right, and every time somebody remakes it, somebody's getting paid!

[laughter]

JH: Bob Ross said everytime somebody plays it, they get \$500.

CA: Is that so?

JR: Yeah. And we had Emmett Jimmar and a guy named Ollie Luster. Now Emmett was, whose manager was he? Was he Percy's manager?

JH: Ollie started first.

JR: Ollie was, yeah, he was a minister here before he started preaching, and he was really Percy's manager. And then the guy, Emmett Jimmar, who is now the county commissioner, he traveled with him. He was a manager. So we've got a very unique church.

CA: It sounds like it. A lot of talented folks, in a lot of different areas.

JR: Matter of fact, our church is supposed to be in the movie that's, in the documentary that's coming out on Muscle Shoals music.

CA: Is that right?

JR: Yeah.

JH: Now, this is the program, this is out of date, but.

JR: I don't know if you know Rick Hall, do you know who Rick Hall is?

CA: Rick Hall. I've heard that name before.

JR: He owns FAME Studios. That's me and him, and the guy that's Mars family candy bar? He's a multi-billionaire, he's the one that's doing the movie.

CA: Oh, okay, okay.

JH: I used to hang out there.

JR: That's the guy doing the filming, that's the guy who filmed *Avatar*.

CA: Oh is it?

JR: Yeah. That's me and my choir, and Alicia Keyes, there.

CA: I was about to say, is that Alicia Keyes?

JR: She about made me lose my religion!

[laughter]

JR: That's my choir and her, there. Yeah.

CA That's something else. Y'all are going to be internationally famous.

JR: But we've, we've gotten a lot of visits from different artists that've come by and stopped by here.

CA: That's something that there's so much musical talent in this part of the state.

JR: Yeah, it is.

CA: I wonder if it's in the water.

[laughter]

JR: I don't know. He didn't drink none of it!

JH: Most of the talent is in Leighton.

JR: Yeah.

JH: Max Barfeld and Leon Douglas.

JR: Yeah, we've had a couple of professional basketball players from the area, from Leighton area. And, how many football?

JH: Arley Newsome.

JR: Arley Newsome, yeah, he's a professional football player. He's part-owner of the Cleveland Browns now.

CA: Well, I was interested to know, we were talking about the school was here for part of the history of it? Was that a black school, a segregated school?

JR: Yeah.

JH: Yeah.

CA: Okay, and when did that close down and integrate?

JH: Which one, that one up there?

JR: No, this one.

JH: No, they built a school.

JR: Okay, but when did this close?

JH: I don't know.

JR: You don't have no idea of the date?

JH: If I had my history book, I could tell. It was way back, way back.

JR: It was before the '30s, wasn't it? I would say somewhere in the late 1900s, I mean, I'm sorry, 1800s. So it was the late 1800s, probably, when this school closed down.

JH: This church was here in 1874.

JR: '74, yeah.

JH: So it was in that era, somewhere.

CA: Okay, and they moved it to a different location?

JR: They built the school here, cause it's closed down, now.

JH: Yeah, we got a plaque about it. Plus, there's a plaque up at city hall about it. Got a marker on one side, talking about the school.

CA: Okay, so I guess that closed down when integration happened in the '60s?

JH: This other school, it closed in 1970.

CA: Okay, okay. Was it, you know you hear all the time about Birmingham and all of the violence that happened there, was it anything like that here?

JH: No, it wasn't anything like that here. We stayed, we were the last one to close, and they really—

JR: When did they integrate the schools?

JH: '66. In '66, you had a choice, to go up to the high school or to stay there. But actually, we were one of the probably last schools that closed in this area.

CA: And it went pretty peacefully?

JH: Yeah, we took the same folks we had, the team with Leon Douglas, they won a state championship.

JR: Leon Douglas, he's a professional basketball player with the Detroit Pistons, and his brother is with the Phoenix Suns, I think. But both of them now are coaches at Tuskegee.

CA: Wow. A lot of athletic talent down here.

JR: Yeah, Leighton is very unique.

CA: It's a quiet little corner, and nobody knows all of this is going on up here, do they?

JR: Well, yeah, they did, they knew about Leighton. Always had a good football team, basketball.

JH: Got the best-looking girls.

[laughter]

JH: That's a fact. But like he said, we got a lot of people that work at school in this church, and excel at college. We didn't have a lab for nothing, but we had people do good in chemistry. We didn't have band equipment for nothing. We had girls who left here, who never had seen a band, and made college majorettes.

JR: And I think that most of the graduates from here went to Alabama A&M.

JH: Either A&M or Bama State. Didn't have no money, Tuskegee was expensive. But a few. We've had a few lawyers and doctors and all kind of stuff that come out of that school. Preachers. Not many singers, but one of the greatest preachers. He was called to this church after he left.

JR: I did recording. They were recording sermons, and I did a recording then. And had a sermon made a national '8' on the national Billboard Charts. And we had a Gospel group that I sang with that we had organized here. One of the musicians, he was a nationally-known artist who played on the Al Green, and a lot of other. But, anyway, we've done some good stuff for the neighborhood. Kind of like a light house in the area. Good people here.

JH: At one time, our church was the only one here, in Leighton. Closest one to here was First Baptist...

JR: Our choir, we've got a wonderful gospel choir here, and they get a lot of recognition, too.

CA: Even without Alicia Keyes in it?

[laughter]

JR: Yeah, yeah. But the documentary they're doing is the one, let's see, Paul McCartney, Mick Jagger, Percy Sledge, uh, Aretha Franklin, all of them are going to be in that documentary, and our choir, our church is supposed to be in it.

CA: Well I look forward to watching that, I bet that'll be a good one.

JR: Now, I don't know, they filmed it, but you know when they go to editing, you don't know how much—you might have 2 hours, they might only show 30 seconds of you!

JH: Yeah, it took them 4 or 5 hours to cut that didn't they?

JR: Yeah, they came down a couple of times. You never know how that's going to turn out.

CA: Well, I think I've run out of questions.

[laughter]

CA: Y'all have given us so much information! Thank you...

JR: That sheet might tell you who gave us this land...Mr. Posey! Cecil Posey!

CA: He's the one that gave you some land?

JR: Yeah, it was about an acre and a half. Matter of fact, our church was right on the line. So he gave us from the edge of this church, all the way over to where the fence is moved, to where the pavement ends. And from this treeline on back, we just bought that, it goes all the way back to the railroad track.

JH: How we got that, the King family, they gave us first shot at it.

JR: Some farmers wanted to buy it.

CA: Well gentlemen, I appreciate it. Now, what was your name again?

JJH: Hogan, Joseph Hogan.

JR: He's the chairman of our deacon board.