

KK-CD-012-086

Rev. Jerry Watkins interviewed at his home in Elon, N.C. April 29, 2008

This affable and loquacious pastor in his early sixties grew up one of twelve children in a sharecropping family on Dailey Store Road on land now owned by the Occaneechi Tribe. Rev. Watkins loved his family and the ways in which they all worked together to make a living, in concert with another sharecropping family of Graves children on this prosperous land. His father knew land, and recognized this soil as especially suited to tobacco growing. So even after giving up half the yield to the land owner, the family had what they needed to survive comfortably.

Watkins, his brothers and sisters and the Graves children spent hours playing in the creek and fields around the farm where the families lived throughout his growing up years. The children made all the toys they played with, including a bat and a ball made from wrapping tobacco string around a rock. The families grew acres of vegetable gardens because there were plenty of hands to help in the harvest. Watkins's mother canned enough food for the winter. There was never hunger at their house. Early morning chores before the school bus came included getting in stove wood, milking the cow and carrying water from a distant spring, but nobody minded the work.

The Watkins children attended the Pleasant Grove Union School and were hungry to learn something beyond growing tobacco. At school were an array of complexions, which was sometimes a problem, because people didn't know their backgrounds and who they were. So one group always thought they were better than another group, which was ironic, because all the students were considered "black" by the board of education. The school taught about the fate of the Indians throughout American history, "but when it came to Indian kids in our class rooms, nothing was said about that. We believed that the Indians were less than the blacks, the lowest people on earth. And with lessons like that, no one wanted to be one.

We were taught that the Indian wasn't what was happening," recalls Watkins. And the parents never discussed family history, so there were no clues. The Watkins father attended the Snow Hill Primitive Baptist Church, but none of the churches met regularly in those days, so the family attended various churches in the area served by circuit-riding preachers. But the Watkinses were praying people and the children were taught that God is the Source. Watkins describes in detail the cooperative nature of the community and how neighbors helped each other. Those are the happiest memories for him. Rev. Watkins and his wife Evelyn now pastor a non denominational church for street people.