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# William King Oral History - Great Depression - Dyess Colony

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**Student interviewer's name:** Kyrie King

**Interviewee name:** William (Bill) King

**Time and Location of Interview:** The interview was conducted in one session on October 25, 2016 and lasted approximately one hour. It was conducted over the phone while the interviewer was in Collegedale, Tennessee, and the interviewee was in Rockford, Illinois. The interviewee and the interviewee's wife were both present.

**About Bill King:** Bill King was born in Hoxie, Arkansas on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1934 and was the middle child of three children. Bill lived in Dyess Colony, the first resettlement colony established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt under his New Deal plan. Bill lived most of his childhood in Arkansas, and moved to Indiana after his family's New Deal farm was no longer able to make any money. At around the age of forty, Bill married Viki King. Together they had three kids. Bill did siding on houses as his livelihood until he retired. He now resides in Rockford, Illinois. This interview covered topics about Bills life while living in Dyess, Arkansas, and was conducted on October 25, 2016 over the phone.

*Interviewer: Kyrie King (KK)*

*Interviewee: Bill (grandpa) King (BK)*

*Spouse of the Interviewee: Viki (grandma) King (VK)*

KK: Ok, so to start off, what did you family do for a living before Dyess Colony?

**BK: Before we moved to Dyess?**

KK: Yes.

**BK: I don't know. Uh, jeez, I was seven; I don't know what they did.**

KK: Alright, well do you know if your dad had any prior farming experience before the New Deal?

**BK: Well you know, Arkansas, everyone had that.**

KK: Okay, well what kinds of things did he farm? Like, was it his job?

**BK: Well, he uh, he cut wood and stuff like that.**

KK: Okay, so what made your family move to Dyess?

**BK: Why did we move to Dyess? Because they were giving away, you know, farm, and they were selling them for really cheap. And my dad—you know the New Deal?**

KK: Yeah.

**BK: Well we got that from that. So, of course he had to pay some money for it, but not that much.**

KK: So do you know how the farm worked? Do you remember like how much you had to pay, how much you had to give back to the government? Do you know how yours worked?

**BK: I don't remember all that. Like I said (chuckles) I was young, you know.**

KK: Right, yeah.

**BK: But, um, yeah we were supposed to get a farm and a mule.**

KK: So all you got was a farm and a mule?

**BK: Yeah, and we had to build a house.**

KK: Oh, you did?

**BK: Oh yeah!**

KK: Can you tell me about your house? Can you describe it to me?

**BK: Well at that time it was three rooms. Well two bedrooms and a living room, a kitchen, and everything that goes in the kitchen, you know that we could buy.**

KK: Right. So the houses were pretty small?

**BK: Yup, it wasn't that big when we started on it. Of course, you always built on it too, as time went on and you had the money. Of course he was a carpenter.**

KK: Oh, your father was a carpenter?

**BK: Yeah.**

KK: Okay, how many people lived in the house, like including all of your siblings?

**BK: Well I think it was just me and my sister, and Bob-key, my brother, you know. We had, we had another brother, but he died. So there was just three of us.**

KK: So including your parents, there were just five in there?

**BK: Yeah.**

KK: Ok, so that's not too bad. So was the house built out of cheap materials or was the house pretty sturdy?

**BK: It was pretty sturdy. It was made out of wood.**

KK: Okay, I wasn't sure if they were built that well, considering the times.

**BK: Yup, it was built out of wood.**

KK: Okay, I know that Dyess is one of the first established New Deal colonies by Roosevelt—  
(interjects)

**BK: Yeah, yeah it was one of them. You know, there was other people that moved there later. Yeah there was a Dyess group at that time, with people moving in and stuff like that.**

KK: Yeah, so the town was pretty thriving at the time?

**BK: Johnny Cash was one of them.**

KK: Yeah, (chuckles) I read a lot about Johnny Cash. So what was it like to live in the newly developed area?

**BK: Well, we uh, we had no running water. We had to drill our own wells and everything to get water, and we had no bathtubs or anything like that at that time. We had an outhouse, but you know it was on a farm so we grew everything to eat.**

KK: What about for meat? Did you guys buy your own meat?

**BK: No, we grew our own meat. We had hogs and cows. We had all sorts of stuff to eat and everything. But we had an orchard, stuff like that, but we grew our own food and everything.**

KK: So the farm was pretty big then?

**BK: Yeah, it was just forty acres.**

KK: Oh. So what else did you grow there?

**BK: We grew cotton and corn. Everything that you could eat, we grew.**

KK: Okay, with the cotton did you guys make your own clothes and stuff?

**BK: No, we would take it to the gin and sell it. Other people would buy it and make their own clothes. We didn't, but someone did. But that's how we made a living, you know. We didn't depend on anyone giving us anything. We had everything we wanted to eat, and we grew it too.**

KK: Did you guys have any help on the farm?

**BK: Well, we had some help in the cotton picking time. We'd hire people to get it out of the fields and everything. Yeah there wasn't many machines at that time, but we had a tractor and a couple of mules.**

KK: Did you help out a lot on the farm?

**BK: Oh yeah! Us kids, we only went to school half a day. You'd come home and work the other half of the day.**

KK: What did you do on the farm then?

**BK: I did everything, I was big enough. Boy, we were farmers, I was doing everything. I'd drive the tractor and everything. We moved out when I was about twelve or eleven or something like that. I was doing a man's job.**

KK: So you helped your dad a lot on the farm then?

**BK: Oh yeah. I had to. I had to or they'd whoop my ass. Put that in your interview!**

KK: I will (chuckles).

**BK: See it's not like the kids anymore.**

KK: So you would say back then that the work ethic is different than now?

**BK: Oh it's a lot different than it is now. You didn't go to the store and buy things, you know, you have no money! Everything you ate, you made at home, ice cream, everything! The only way you would go to the store is when you took some stuff to the market or something. Sometimes Pops would take us with and we could get an ice cream cone or something, if we had the money.**

KK: You didn't really buy things from the store then? You would mostly just make everything and grow your own food?

**BK: Well, when we would go sell the cotton they would buy us clothes and stuff, but no money to give for the time. That's where we would get our clothes and everything. Otherwise, at that time of the year, you could go barefoot at the time down there. We didn't have that many shoes to wear around. You went barefooted. Of course you had clothes on, you didn't go naked.**

KK: How many sets of clothes did you have? Like less than five?

**BK: No, we had five sets; but we had pants and skirts like they have now.**

KK: So with the New Deal did you family start making a lot of money because of it?

**BK: No, we didn't make a lot of money, but we made enough to live.**

KK: So it was better off than before?

**BK: Oh yeah. At that time we didn't get no money from anyone. You didn't get no money from the government or nothing. No handouts. You made it on your own, you worked for it.**

KK: Yeah. On the farm did you sister and your mom help?

**BK: Oh yeah! Everybody worked, honey; but my ma, she would quit early and come cook supper. But we had everything we would want to eat. Well we didn't have *everything*, but we never did starve or nothing, cause we grew our own stuff to eat. We had hogs, stuff the hogs we would eat. We had cows, small cows.**

KK: So did you mom have a separate job besides the farm, or would she just help out on the farm and in the house?

**BK: No, she would just help out at the house.**

KK: Well, during the Great Depression, there was a bunch of flooding in Arkansas, so when you first got the land was it like super hard to tend to because of that?

**BK: They drained that whole part, honey, before, the swampland, before we moved down there. It was a swampland before, they drained it. That's what created all of the farms, you know. You could grow stuff there then, that's what it was all about.**

KK: Was the land pretty fertile then, despite the flooding?

**BK: Yeah, it was real fertile for growing stuff.**

KK: What sorts of things did your family have to cut back on? Did your family have to cut back on anything?

**BK: Not to my knowledge. You know, we grew everything that we ate.**

KK: So there was enough food, enough water, shelter. The basics.

**BK: Yup. We had to drill our own well for water. Later on we put in a bathtub and everything like that, but before we moved we had running water and everything. We lived there, I don't know, ten, twelve years.**

KK: So it just took a while to get the running water thing happening?

**BK: Yeah. We had to drill a well. You've probably seen a movie with the old folks drawing their own water out of a well and pumping it up. That's the way it was. No**

**bathroom, we had an outhouse. And if you wanted a bath, you would have to rinse in one of the big ol' tubs. You'd fill it up with water and take a bath, didn't dump it.**

KK: Did your whole family share one bath then?

**BK: Oh yeah! We didn't bathe every day. It's not like you kids now.**

KK: (chuckles) How often would you say that you guys bathed?

**BK: I don't know. The guys probably twice a week, my sister, she was more often; but we didn't care, we would go jump in a lake or something and go swimming.**

KK: In the town were there a lot of shops, or not really since everyone grew their own things?

**BK: Well you would have to drive a mile to go. Yeah there were a few shops, but not very many, but they had a few stuff. Most people around where we lived would very seldom go shopping anyways, because they grew their own stuff too. But the shops would sell stuff that people didn't have like sugar, tobacco, stuff like that, you know.**

KK: So you said that when you went to school you only went for a half of a day, right?

**BK: Yeah, half a day. You'd work the other half.**

KK: Did everyone work the other half? Or was it just like— (interjected).

**BK: Yeah. Yeah. Everybody that lived there had kids. They had to work too.**

KK: So it was common for everyone at the half day to just go home and help out on the farms?

**BK: Yup, they had too to get by. Epically in the season where you're ginning' cotton, or chopping cotton. Somebody had to do that, they didn't hire nobody. There was no money.**

KK: Could you describe the schooling to me? Besides that you went home at the half day. Like what was school like there?

**BK: Well they would teach you reading, writing, and arithmetic. That's what you learned. You better learn it, or they'd whoop your butt. You got spankings in school there. If you didn't mind the teachers they'd whoop your butt.**

KK: Was there only one teacher there then to teach all of the children?

**BK: Well no they had a couple of teachers.**

KK: So it wasn't like a one room schoolhouse?

**BK: No, at Dyess, well the school is still there, but before they closed it they had three or four rooms. It was pretty good sized rooms, it was a new schoolhouse, but they had a bunch of kids going to school then. That place it grew up, you know, with all these people who moved in, they had kids.**

KK: Was there a separate school there for the black children in Dyess?

**BK: No. We didn't have no blacks.**

KK: No? None?

**BK: None. Well there was two. Two came once but we killed them.**

*VK: No Bill! Don't tell her that!*

**BK: Well, (chuckles) no hun, they didn't have no blacks there then.**

KK: They didn't allow them?

**BK: No.**

KK: Because of the segregation laws?

**BK: I don't know. None just never came. Nobody even tried to move in or nothing. That was a long time ago though.**

KK: When did you realize that your family was a part of Roosevelt's New Deal plan?

**BK: Well, to tell you the truth, I never did think about it.**

KK: Your parents never mentioned it to you? You just found out on your own when you were older?

**BK: Yeah. When we sold it and moved I found out. I was never interested in why or anything. I never did have to write on it for school, but I was there. I lived it.**

KK: So your parents just told you one day that you're moving to Dyess?

**BK: Yeah. Everyone down there was broke! Cotton, you couldn't sell your cotton for any money anymore. Other places were growing cotton for cheaper. Everything wasn't worth it anymore. So we just, one day, dad said we got to go. Sold our house and peeled out, been gone ever since.**

KK: Was it difficult for you as a child why you had to move to Dyess?



**BK: Well, we had to go somewhere; there was no work there in Hoxie. There wasn't no work and that's why we moved. Plus he got that deal. We thought we'd make it rich! Well he did, I didn't think nothing. I was too young. He wanted to farm anyways, so there we went. You know, I think I told you, they was supposed to give you two mules—they didn't give you squat! You had to buy your own mules. They lied. They didn't give us nothing; we had to buy our own mules and land. It was cheap though, a good deal. It was the government though, they always lie!**

KK: The farm was on a loan though, correct?

**BK: Yup. We had to pay it back. We payed them back yearly. We would sell our crops and pay some of it back. It's like you would if you buy a car, same thing.**

KK: How was selling the products different then than it is now?

**BK: Well if we needed a pig or something like that you could trade it to someone that had a pig, trade them the corn for the pig, you know, bartering like.**

KK: Why did your family move away from Dyess?

**BK: We didn't have no more money, we lost farm. Well, we had to move, they took it. We couldn't keep up with the payments no more. Things got bad; you couldn't grow anything and sell it. It cost you more to grow it than to sell it.**

KK: Where did you guys go to after Dyess?

**BK: Well we went to Indiana to pick tomatoes. My dad was sharecropping for some guy growing tomatoes. A stinkin' storm came by and wiped out all of the tomatoes, so we lost money there also. After that we came to Rockford, been up here ever since.**

KK: What one image pops into your head when you think of Dyess, Arkansas?

**BK: Yeah, working on the farm. I loved it! Plus, they had pretty girls there at school. Of course I was only seven, eight years old.**

KK: Okay, do you have any last things to say about Dyess?

**BK: Oh yeah, I enjoyed Dyess. I enjoyed that part of my life. But would I go back and do it again? No. Not knowing what I know now, no.**

KK: Well that is it for the interview. Thanks grandpa for doing this!

**BK: You're welcome honey.**

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### Original Questions

1. Did you live in Arkansas before the New Deal?
2. What did your family do for a living before Dyess?
3. Did your father have any farming background prior to Roosevelt's New Deal?
4. What was it like to live in the newly developed area?
5. What types of crops were grown on your family's farm?
6. Did you have to help out on the farm? If so, what were your typical duties?
7. Was the land that you were given easy to tend to with all the prior drought and flooding that happened in Arkansas?
8. What was the housing like?
9. How did your family suffer through this time? More specifically, what were the things that you had to cut back on?
10. During the years that you lived in Dyess was the town thriving? Were there many shops and people around?
11. Were you able to attend school while living there?
12. What was the schooling like?
13. Was the schoolhouse run down? Did it have resources?
14. Was there a separate school for the black children in Dyess?
15. When did you realize that your family was a part of Roosevelt's New Deal plan?
16. After your family left Dyess, what did they do for work?
17. What were the reasons they left Dyess?
18. What one image do you think of when you think of Dyess?