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An Interview With
MRS. ONETTE LANG WATSON
February 13, 1977

Interviewed by
Daisy Greene and Roberta Miller

Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
and the
Washington County Library System
Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

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Interviewee: Onette Lang Watson

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

MRS. DAISY GREENE: This is February 13, 1977.

I am Daisy Greene interviewing Mrs. Onette Lang Watson, who lives at 200 North Edison. The place of interview is at Mrs. Watson's home. Mrs. Watson, what was your mother's maiden name?

WATSON: Annie Mosby.

GREENE: And your father's name?

WATSON: Cato Lang.

GREENE: And your birthday?

WATSON: May 25, 1910.

GREENE: And your age?

WATSON: Sixty-six right now - almost.

GREENE: In a telephone conversation, you told me that your daddy came from Alabama. Do you have any idea why?

WATSON: Carrollton, Alabama.

GREENE: Do you have any idea why he came to Mississippi?

WATSON: No, not exactly. I guess he just traveled about like, and settled here in Mississippi.

GREENE: And your mother was from what town?

WATSON: Natchez, Mississippi.

GREENE: As I remember them, they both looked Indian. Did they have any Indian blood in them?

WATSON: I think Mama did, because she had that complexion and that straight hair. Daddy had a brownish complexion.

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GREENE: What was Mr. Lang's occupation?

WATSON: A barber.

GREENE: In addition to barbering, he was an excellent cook.

WATSON: He sure was.

GREENE: I forgot to ask you where his barber shop was located.

WATSON: On Washington Avenue, in the 700 block, between Theobald and North Street.

GREENE: Is that above Fred's?

WATSON: Condon's Drug Store.

GREENE: Do you remember how long he was in business?

WATSON: Oh, he was in business for about 35 or 40 years.

GREENE: Since he was located on Washington, his clients were mainly white people?

WATSON: Well, he had colored. Most were colored. They say "black people" now.

GREENE: I see. Do you remember hearing your father talk about the times he went on hunts with Teddy Roosevelt?

WATSON: He went on hunts and he did the cooking for him.

GREENE: Do you remember anything else he would tell you about it?

WATSON: He said they'd do the hunting and he would do the cooking.

GREENE: To the Transcriber: We have another lady in the room who has talked with Mr. Lang about these bear hunts, Ms. Roberta Miller.

WATSON: He has probably talked to her about it more than he would me.

GREENE: Miss Miller, would you like to discuss this?

MILLER: A long time ago, say in the 30's, Mr. Lang told me that he had been on the hunt in Louisiana with President Roosevelt, and that was the hunt the men from Metcalfe went on, and my father was on, too. My father was Dr. Hugh Robert Miller. He was a big hunter, too, and, of course, Holt Collier was along. He was the main thing, because he was an excellent guide.

GREENE: Don't you have a magazine recounting some of those hunting activities?

MILLER: That particular hunt in Louisiana was reprinted - Theodore Roosevelt wrote it up himself - and it was reprinted in Scribner's Magazine in 1938, and I have a copy of it, and the Library is going to get a copy of it.

GREENE: Anything else about Mr. Lang and his hunting activities?

MILLER: I believe that is all.

GREENE: It is such a pity he didn't write some notes.

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WATSON: He would, you know, talk all the time. You know, I guess he didn't realize the value of it. They would just sit down and some people visit and go back to old times and he would bring all these things up and talk to them.

GREENE: Where did you go to school, Mrs. Watson?

WATSON: Sacred Heart.

GREENE: Have you gone there all of your school life?

WATSON: I went to Central School in Ohio two years, and I went to Central Elementary School two years until we moved back here.

GREENE: Oh, the Langs had moved to Ohio.

WATSON: We went up there and stayed two years, and they didn't like it as well as they thought, and came back here, and have been here ever since.

GREENE: Did you have relatives there?

WATSON: Oh, no; no relatives. They just wanted to go North, and found that they didn't like it, and came back.

GREENE: Do you remember what year that was?

WATSON: Oh, let's see...

GREENE: Was it during World War I.

WATSON: Yes, because we used to look at the parades.

GREENE: I imagine that he must have gone there to be with his folks.

WATSON: I know he didn't like it and came back. And me, I came back to Sacred Heart.

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GREENE: Give me some idea of the facilities and the teachers there at Sacred Heart. About what year was that?

WATSON: When we came back? I don't know exactly. I was seven years old at that time. And I came back to Sacred Heart, and we had this old school building and kindergarten on the first floor, and first and second grade, and upstairs they had the third and fourth grade on one side and the fifth and sixth grades on the other, and 7th and 8th grade, and that's as far as they went, until they built the high school.

GREENE: I see. Did you finish high school there?

WATSON: I finished high school at Sacred Heart.

GREENE: I know there was no "Home Ec" Department there.

WATSON: No "Home Ec" Department. My mother taught me how to cook right back there in the kitchen, and daddy made me a little stool. I was too small to reach up to the table, and he made this little stool, and I would stand up on that little stool, and if Mama was making a cake, she'd have me breaking the eggs - showed me how to break eggs - and do different little old things. I just went right back in that little kitchen. And then after I got on through the years, Mama would go to a party in the afternoon or maybe to a Club Meeting, or something, and I would get in there, and I said, "Well, I'm going to cook and make a cake or something." I would go in there and start. Well, if I was failing, I'd just throw it away and try again, until one day daddy came in for his lunch

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and I was baking, and he said, "Well, it's a good time for you to learn how to cook while I'm able to buy the food." You see, food wasn't high then, and I would just fool with different things and just ordinarily learned right there in the kitchen. We used to make icing, and we didn't have a mixer. I've got that dish in there right now. You would separate the yolks and put the egg whites in there, and Mama would let me sit down in a little chair - Daddy had made me a little chair - and beat those egg whites, and that's how you made your old-fashioned home-made icing. And after you would get through with that, you'd have this pot on the stove with the sugar in it. You would put about two cups of granulated sugar and take about four or five tablespoons of water, and you'd have to let it come to a boil, and keep stirring it, and when you take a spoon and test it and when it began to look something like before it began to candy, you poured it into the egg whites and kept on beating and beating until you got the icing for the cake. But they don't make it any more, but it is delicious. And that's how I learned to cook. And then when Father Kohler built his cafeteria, Mrs. Wiley called me one day and asked --

GREENE: That was Charles Wiley's wife?

WATSON: Yes. And she said, "Father Kohler is building his cafeteria, and if you like, you had better go over there. You might get a job." So I went over there. Helen Greene and I were the first ones who worked over there.

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MILLER: Was this the cafeteria at Sacred Heart?

WATSON: Yes. And then every summer, because we didn't start doing that until -- it was during Father O'Leary's time we started going down to Jackson where they had the Deaf and Blind Schools; we had these cooking school experiences in the summer time when we would go down there to school, and they would show you. Of course, I knew how to cook and prepare everything before, but the method was how much food to serve the children and how many dishes you could make out of different vegetables.

MILLER: How to cook for a large group.

WATSON: How to cook for large groups that they would have in this room. Finally, she would tell me she wanted me to fix a meat loaf, and then she would give you so many pounds of meat and you would figure how many slices you could get out of it. That was mostly what we did at cooking school. But for learning how to cook, I learned it right here in my own kitchen.

GREENE: To the Transcriber: That was Father Kohler, K-O-H-L-E-R, who built the Cafeteria.

WATSON: Yes, he was the one who built the Cafeteria.

GREENE: One day you and I were talking about the old-fashioned Tranksgivings. You said that you knew exactly what to expect when you came home from school.

WATSON: Oh, yes.

GREENE: What was hanging on the tree?

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WATSON: A turkey! We would go until Wednesday. In the afternoon when we would come home, back in those days, children had chores to do. Every day you had something to do. You didn't run and play like children do now. But on a Wednesday when I'd get here, on that big tree right out that window, Daddy would have this turkey hanging on the tree. And he had killed the turkey - blood coming out and things - and Mama would say, "Now, eat your dinner. Eat your dinner." You'd go out there and get the turkey down. You had to pick him, you know, and all that. I had to pick him, dress him, and everything. Mama was cooking, and she showed me how to cook, and that's where I learned how to do all my cooking. Right back there. So, it would be Wednesday. Thanksgiving morning we would get up and go to Mass at six o'clock. They used to have Thanksgiving Mass. Come back home and bake your turkey. I'd have to set the table. Right in this room was the dining room at the time. I would have to set the table. And most times she invited somebody to dinner. Very seldom when a holiday came around that they didn't have someone for dinner. And that was my job, setting the table, helping serve the food and all those things. We would have everything. We cooked our own cranberries. You would buy the fresh cranberries and you'd cook them and put your sugar in them and pour them in a mold and put them in the ice box. We didn't have refrigerators. We did all that and made a salad. That was my job. And when Christmas came around we

did the same thing, only you cooked more food. I made cakes and the sweet potato pie and lemon pies, and Mama would make rolls and all those things, because at that time, different people coming in, you'd have to feed all of them. She made her own wine.

MILLER: What kind of wine?

WATSON: Blackberry wine, dewberry wine.

GREENE: Elderberry wine?

WATSON: All kinds of wine. Do you see that jug sitting down there with that vine in it? That's what the wine was kept in. She would make that wine and put it in those jugs, and set it in the closet in a dark place, and they didn't touch it until Thanksgiving or Christmas, and it was very strong. A really good one.

GREENE: Do you make some occasionally now?

WATSON: I haven't made any since.

GREENE: I imagine that was time-consuming.

WATSON: It was. You see, you had a large crock that we used to churn in, and you would put those berries in there and they would set for twelve days, and you would keep mashing them down, mashing them down, and when those days were up you had a big cloth, something like these curtains here - maybe a little thicker - and that is what you strained it in. Then you put it back in that jug and let it sit until whenever you wanted.

MILLER: Sort of a cheese cloth?

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WATSON: Cheese cloth. It might have been a little thicker, because, you see, they didn't want the seeds in it, and you'd have to get it a little bit thicker. But it was really good wine. Blackberry and dewberry wine. It was really delicious.

MILLER: How long did you work at the Cafeteria at Sacred Heart?

WATSON: I was over there about twenty years.

GREENE: That's a long time.

MILLER: When did you stop working over there?

WATSON: When I started working in Head Start, I think it was about 1967. I had just started at Head Start.

MILLER: So you worked there all during the Depression?

WATSON: Just about, just about. You see, you'd have to figure out the food, you know, and try to see how many were coming. We didn't have a lot of children at that time, but we did pretty good. Each child got a balanced diet. When I went to Jackson, that's when I learned how to make those rolls. They taught us down there how to make the home-made rolls.

GREENE: You are still talking about the flood and you are speaking of these food workshops. Is that what you call them?

WATSON: Food workshops.

GREENE: Did you ever go? Where did you go? To Jackson?

WATSON: I went to Jackson.

GREENE: You never went to "Ole Miss"?

WATSON: Well, this last summer, I went to Oxford, the first time. But that was for the day care. It was real nice.

GREENE: How did you like it?

WATSON: It was real nice. I liked it.

GREENE: Were there many blacks in your class?

WATSON: Oh, I saw plenty of them, a big crowd of them. You couldn't count them. They had different classes, and it was quite a large group.

MILLER: When did you go to the Brent Center?

WATSON: Let me see, when did Brent Center open? I believe it was 1968 when I started at Brents.

MILLER: And that's where you are now?

WATSON: That's where I am now. You see, how I got to Brent Center, the Head Start closed. You know, they closed so long. You didn't know whether you were going back or not. So Mrs. Gibson called me one night and asked me -

GREENE: What's her first name? Ruth? She was Supervisor?

WATSON: She was the Director of Brent Center at that time, and she called me and asked me if I would like to work at Brent Center, and I told her I would. And she said, "We can't afford to pay a lot right now, but if you come I guarantee everything will work out just fine." And it has. I started at Brent Center and have been there ever since. So I like it fine.

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GREENE: You have been there about --

WATSON: They opened in 1968.

MILLER: I think that's right.

WATSON: Sixty-eight, because Head Start was closed at that time. And I never will forget the Sunday night she called me about coming to work at Brent Center. After I talked to her, the lady - director of Head Start - called me to come to work Monday morning. So I didn't let them down. I just told her I was sorry I had a job, and then I went on to Brent Center. But, you see, you couldn't depend on Head Start. You didn't know whether you were going back or not. Then they had something that was just beginning, and after I got there I really enjoyed working there, and I like it fine. We didn't even have a stove. Mrs. Brent brought us, you know, these electric cookers and electric pots; and I had one little card table. I set that pot on a card table and another one on another card table, and that is where we cooked for those children at that time. And they wondered how did I fry chicken. And that particular day, I said, "Well, we'll have fried chicken." And Mrs. Gibson said, "Oh, my goodness, how in the world are you going to have fried chicken?" And I said, "You just wait and see." So we had fried chicken and they loved their dinner.

MILLER: How did you fry it?

WATSON: In that deep fryer. I said I was going to try it out. I said I didn't know whether it would work or not. But I just tried it out like I would fry it in a skillet, and it

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turned out beautiful. And in the other pot I think I had a vegetable. I don't know whether it was green peas, or what, but it was a vegetable. In the other pot I fixed mashed potatoes. You see, I could let them boil, and mash the potatoes. And then we had fruit in cans. We had dinner all along until we got our stove, so we did just fine.

MILLER: What is the biggest number of people you've ever cooked for?

WATSON: The biggest number of people I ever cooked for, I guess, was probably at Sacred Heart, you know, being a school. Of course, now, we had a large number down at Brent Center during Mrs. Gibson's time. And one time we had around one hundred children, but you know they drop out all along. But now with this school you go according to the record they had at the school, but we never -- oh, no, it was about two hundred and some, two hundred and fifty children, because my children were going at that time to Sacred Heart. We had the High School and all the Grammar School children, and it was around two hundred and fifty.

MILLER: That's a big job, cooking for two hundred fifty.

WATSON: That's a big job, because I never will forget the lady in the cafeteria, and that day we were having rice, and I was preparing the meat and the vegetables. She said, "Oh, I don't know how to cook rice." Somehow I went in the storeroom and came back. She had every pot she could find, with a

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little rice in each pot. I asked her, "What are you doing with all these pots?" She said, "I'm cooking rice." I said, "Wait just a minute and I'll show you how to cook a full amount of rice in one pot." So I got this pot and put the water in it and let it boil, and you put your salt in it, and you put a little vinegar - that vinegar keeps your rice white - then you put a little cooking oil in it. That keeps the grains separated, you see, and it never gets gummy, and then I poured this rice in and showed her how to cook it. Then, after it finished cooking, you put it in the sink and run the water over it and take a strainer and take it out, and then I put a little margarine - we use a lot of it because it is cheaper than butter - put it in the bottom of your pan and let it melt, then you put your rice in and it keeps it from sticking, and it steams. If you are going to put it on a steam table, you don't over-cook it because it is steady cooking while you serve. Now, I learned that from the Air Base, when I worked at the Greenville Air Base.

GREENE: You worked at the Air Base?

WATSON: It was Graham Aviation at that time, and I learned how to cook that rice from this German cook. He was a German. Ostoff, or something, was his name, but anyway he would never let you over-cook it, because when you put your food on this steam table it is steady cooking by the time you serve a group of people. Now that is where I really cooked for a large number of people. I don't know how many airmen

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there were there, but I did cook there.

GREENE: Do you have any idea how you spell the German cook's name?

WATSON: Oh, I don't know his name, but he was a German. We would have to be in there at five o'clock in the morning.

MILLER: What group did you cook for at Graham Aviation?

WATSON: For all the Airmen. You see, it was a civilian club. I worked in the civilian cafeteria.

MILLER: Did you leave Sacred Heart to go out there?

WATSON: I left Sacred Heart and went out there in 1951 or 1952. I think that is when the Air Base was out there, '51 or '52, and it is a strange thing. When school was out in the summer, you see I had the three children, and I was sitting here wondering where I would find a job to work during the summer time, and I just said, "I think I'll go catch the bus and go to the Air Base." So that's what I did. I didn't know anybody up there. I was just going to try. So when I got on the bus, you know Lamar Britton, she worked there, and she wanted to know where I was going. I told her I was going to see if I could find a job. So she said, "When we get there, come on into the building with me, and I'll let you talk to my boss." So we went in and she told him who I was and that I would like to have a job and everything. So he said he had to come back over here because his wife was in the hospital, and

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if I could wait until he came back around two in the afternoon, he would talk to me. So I stayed there until two, and when he came back he talked with me and everything and he said if anything came up he would let me know. That was on a Monday. Well, the following Sunday Lamar came and told me this man said come to work. I went to work. He sent me to this cafeteria. I had never cooked so much food in my life or ever saw so many large pots and pans. He said, "Now, this man who is over the kitchen is a German, Mr. Ostoff." I don't know how to spell it. And I went on and he talked with me, and he said, "Now, don't be afraid. He may say some words you would not like, but just don't pay him any attention, which a lot of people do, and they get angry and quit their job." So he has never known until today that I didn't know how to cook that much food. I never did tell him. He kept asking me if I needed the job, and kept asking me about different things that I do, and to everything he said, I said, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir." So, all right, the hardest time I had, and it really frightened me, one Sunday morning, and all the others, you see, had two days off. I had Thursday and Friday off, and I would go in Saturday and Sunday. The next Sunday morning I went in there and saw all those airmen. There wasn't anybody in the kitchen but me, and I just stood there and thought, "How in the world am I going to prepare all this food? I don't know what to do!" I knew how to cook, but there was so much of it to prepare. So I

just went to praying. I said, "Dear God, You and Your Mother, please help me!" And I just went on, and when I knew anything or realized, I had it all prepared, and by the time he came in the kitchen he said, "That's the best meal I've ever had." You see, those pots were large, and you had it all to do, and it scared me to death. But after that day had passed over and I had done that, I was all right then, and wasn't afraid any more. And I would cook on this grill. And he would come and stand up in that window and look in at me. And a lot of those people - you know, he was a nervous type of person - and when he would see that line coming, he would just get afraid, you know, that everything would go wrong. He didn't want everything to go wrong, and he would get all excited, and he may come up there and say some word you wouldn't want to hear, but I didn't pay him any attention. I would keep on doing my job. And it turned out all right, so I liked it. So I've had a lot of experience with cooking.

GREENE: You are a natural cook.

MILLER: When Graham left Greenville, did you go back to Sacred Heart?

WATSON: I went back to Sacred Heart when Graham closed. You see, when Graham closed, they wanted us to follow them, you know, but people had a home and didn't want to break up their home to go. They offered to pay your expense and everything. Somehow, Father called me back over there, Father

Gasper, and I went back over there.

MILLER: How do you spell that?

GREENE: Gasper - G-A-S-P-E-R. Father John Gasper.

WATSON: Father John Gasper. And then I went back over there to work, and afterward I left again going to Head Start, and from there to Brent Center, and that is where I am now. So, I guess when I leave Brent Center soon, I won't do nothing. I'll retire.

MILLER: But you'll still be cooking.

GREENE: Cooking for your grandchildren. Let me ask you this question: Is it difficult to introduce the small children to new foods - to things to which they aren't accustomed at home?

WATSON: Well, now, that's one thing that is left up to the teacher. You see, we prepare the food. And I remember that Mrs. Gibson would always explain to the teacher to get the children - if they would eat with the children. Like in Head Start, those teachers would eat with the children, and if you've got broccoli, tell them what it is, "This is broccoli." And some say, "I don't like it." And the teacher would say, "Well, O. K. Let's see how it tastes." The teacher would taste it and ask the child to taste it. Well, after a few days, or whatever, when you serve - a child is funny - if they see you eating something, they want to try it, too. But you have to coax them. You have to keep on and keep on, and say, "Let's try it."

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GREENE: Was there much waste down at Brent Center?

WATSON: There wasn't too much waste there. I say, if you know how much to cook for them, you won't have waste. That meant you would cook enough to serve them and probably the teachers would eat or something; you don't have too much food or waste.

GREENE: That meant they would eat?

WATSON: They would eat. They ate well.

GREENE: Some schools have so much waste.

MILLER: How about Graham Aviation? Was there waste out there?

WATSON: With the food?

MILLER: Yes.

WATSON: They didn't seem to have any. In fact, all the food we prepared in the kitchen - they were Civil Service, you see, they were in the Civilian Building, where the people who worked at the base would come in and eat their dinner. They would have to pay for it. There wasn't any waste.

GREENE: Ms. Roberta Miller will continue the interview with Mrs. Watson.

MILLER: Mrs. Watson, you were about sixteen years old during the 1927 flood, isn't that right?.

WATSON: Should have been, if the age is right. I was in high school.

MILLER: You were going to high school?

WATSON: Going to high school.

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