An Interview with

JOE RICE DOCKERY

December 13, 1979

Interviewed by

John Jones

Mississippi Department of Archives and History
P.O. Box 571
Jackson, Mississippi 39205

AU 544
OH 1980.12
OHP 323

Interviewee: Dockery, Joe Rice
Interviewer: Jones, John

Title: An interview with Joe Rice Dockery, December 13, 1979 / interviewed by John Jones

JONES: This is John Jones with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. I'm about to interview Mr. Joe Rice Dockery. We are out on his plantation in Dockery, Mississippi, which is just east of Cleveland, Mississippi. Today is Thursday, December 13, 1979. Let's just start at the beginning Mr. Dockery. Would you tell me when and where you were born?

DOCKERY: I was born in Memphis, Tennessee on January 3, 1906. Our home really was Memphis, because in those days malaria was so prevalent in the Mississippi Delta that as soon as a man could send his family out of these swamps, he did. My mother and my sister and I had a lovely home in Memphis. My father commuted back and forth to the property he had in Arkansas and Mississippi.

JONES: Was he the first Dockery in this area?

DOCKERY: He was. He left Ole Miss I think about 85' and came to Cleveland as a young man of twenty years old. He started out from scratch. He bought timber, logged it, cleared it and sold it. He traded and trafficked and was very industrious.

JONES: So he cleared all this land.

DOCKERY: He did. He was a pioneer in the Mississippi Delta.

JONES: Did his family have money, or did he make the money himself?

DOCKERY: He made it himself. He had a small amount of backing from an uncle in Memphis, but he made it himself. He worked hard. He didn't drink, and his main happiness in life was to see property developed. He was a pioneer in every sense of the word.

JONES: Right behind us, is this his original home? Did he build that house?

DOCKERY: The home that he built was not a bad country house at that time, but it burned down in 1922. It burnt to the ground and we lost many personal possessions of antique value. Then he replaced it with pretty much of an ordinary home, not at all in keeping with the size of his property. But who was living down here but him? My sister and I were in Memphis. My mother died when I was thirteen years old and my father never remarried. So he just built himself a house down here and we rarely ever came down here. We'd come down two or three times during the summer and I'd spend a week fishing and hunting frogs and things like that. I'd come down for Christmas holidays, but I rarely ever came otherwise.

JONES: You were educated in Memphis?

DOCKERY: I was educated in Memphis at two Memphis schools then I went to Webb School at Bellbuckle, Tennessee. I was there '21, '22, '23, and '24. I graduated in '24. I then went to Mississippi State for one year. Incidently, my grandfather, Thomas C. Dockery was on the legislative committee that started Mississippi's A&M at that time. His name is on one of the buildings over there. My father went there for one year, then he went on to Ole Miss. But I went there the academic year of 1925. In 1926, I moved on up to Cornell University. And it was after the school year of '26 that I came down to the Delta. I made up my mind that rather than stay in Memphis and operate a cotton business that my father had called Dockery & Donelson, I preferred to come down and live with him in the country and take up agriculture as a career and help him with his operation rather

than lead a nine to five city life with which I was too familiar.

JONES: So you never finished after those two years of school?

DOCKERY: No, I only had two years. I was a special student in both places, which effectively eliminated me from any kind of athletics. And I found school rather dull without being able to indulge in one of my sports.

JONES: So you came down here in 1926?

DOCKERY: I got here in the summer of 1926.

JONES: What did your father have you doing down here?

DOCKERY: Well, I did a little bit of everything. I would work an hour or two with the bookkeeper, ride around with the managers. I would run errands for him; run over to the bank for payroll. When the seasons changed, I changed my activities with it. But I was in the office. I was not ever one of these get-up-at-dawn-and-go to-the-barn people. When I came down here, my father told me that he had eaten two meals by lamplight a large part of his life and that he was not going to do it anymore, and he was not going to ask me to do that either. But he did want me to work when I was here to work.

JONES: How large an operation was your father running at that time?

DOCKERY: His holdings reached the high point about the time he died. The paper said he had 18,000 acres in Arkansas and in Mississippi and a cotton business in Memphis. Now naturally I didn't indulge in having to oversee all of that amount of land, but after a year or two down here he had me as an inspector. I would make a trip that

would maybe take a swing way down nearly to Natchez and a half dozen places, and then maybe go on over to Arkansas and come back after a week or ten days and report to him on the conditions that I found. Then I'd stay down here a week or two, and he'd send me off again. But in the meantime, I was working with the bookkeeper and just odd jobs at various times. Then he started turning things over to me. For instance he let me start in selling cotton, handling cotton, keeping cotton books, keeping records particularly on cotton. So I spent a lot of time in cotton offices all over the Delta.

JONES: When did he die, your dad?

DOCKERY: He died in 1936. December 29, 1936, and I came down here in '26. I was with him ten years. He was taken to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. We noticed that he was not feeling too well at Thanksgiving dinner. We carried him to Memphis and flew on up to New York on a sleeper plane, which we had in those days. He was there in Johns Hopkins, I think, and the doctor's felt that he was going to be all right but he just needed a little rest. But he caught pneumonia in the hospital and died of pneumonia, which they did not know how to handle in those days. Now it is quite a simple matter, I understand.

JONES: When you came in 1926, roughly estimate how many people he had working for him in the operation.

DOCKERY: Well, in Sunflower County here there's approximately 8,000 acres of land, and with mules. There wasn't a tractor on the job when I first

came down here, or very few. The operation was not mechanized.

JONES: Was he running a sharecropping type of situation?

DOCKERY: He had sharecroppers and he had the day crop too. We had renters and people who participated and they paid a fourth rent for the use of the land and furnished most everything. And where we had sharecroppers, a half hand, we furnished more and got more. It was just a percentage on the basis of how much they put into the operation.

JONES: I suppose at that time he had a very large labor force of black people.

DOCKERY: They were all practically black. Not entirely so, one end of the place here was white. And we had some pretty good white ones and you had to be very, very careful in that relationship because a very good Negro was much preferred to what they called a sorry white man. But we did not have any color line in those days and--I mean as far as who did some work.

JONES: Where did the black people live on the plantation?

DOCKERY: They all had homes, and their homes were well kept up. They had gardens of their own, and they didn't pay rent on the gardens. We gave them all the land they wanted to raise their own food. A lot of them had been there for so long that we used to refer to them as so-and-so's kingdom over there. There was a Negro named Jeff Scott and Jeff Scott had a little lake over there, he had a pond which he called a lake. He had ducks on it, he had his stable and he had mules that belonged to him and he rented

the land from us and it was known as Jeff Scott's Kingdom.

JONES: In the article that I was reading there on your wall here in the office, you talk about your memories of the black people on Saturday nights on the plantation and the type of entertainment that they provided for themselves. Tell me some of those memories.

DOCKERY: Well, Saturday was the big day to us. Now I must say that during the ginning season, we ginned our own cotton in our own gin--no public work--and that was the end of the week for a week's work. No one in the world would have thought of working on Sunday down here. Now you practically see everybody running just like it was Tuesday. But in those days everything closed down on Sunday regardless of the necessity of bringing in the crop. And the Negroes got the seed money when they brought in a wagon-load of cotton. They got a gin tag, a receipt showing how much a bale of cotton weighed. Say you brought in 1,200 or 1,300 pounds of seed cotton right out of the field, that would generally turn out about a 500 pound bail and the rest in cotton seeds, less a certain amount of trash. And the Negro was paid for that cotton seed, his part of it right then. He would bring the ticket over to the store and he'd get money and buy a lot of his goods on Saturday. So that was the big day and it always ended up with crap games all over the place, particularly behind the gin down there on the riverbank whey they had practically a professional game going. But generally, it was not a drunken mob, it was controlled recreation. I mean there was no putting up with a drunken Negro bothering someone else in his own crowd. There was

nothing like that. They knew where to go and what to do. But, of course there were crimes of passion. And I've always said in the Negro race, as far as I'm concerned, there was never any premeditated crime. They didn't plan out a long story of getting this man killed someway or an accident. It didn't matter if he was drunk, it didn't matter if there was a woman involved or debt or anything that would cause any tremendous emotion about it. If he did it, it was over in the next minute almost. He would be sorry and he wouldn't understand what had happened.

JONES: Would you call the sheriff out here?

DOCKERY: Yes we'd call the sheriff if it was bad enough. We'd call the sheriff and they'd carry him over to Ruleville and put him in jail for the weekend maybe. Or if one of them, one of our Negroes went to Ruleville or Cleveland and got drunk and got disorderly some way or another in their gaming rooms they would get locked up. But generally they would call us in the next day or two and say they got one of our Negroes and "we all know he's a good Negro, we know that. Come over here and get him. We'll fine him five dollars or something like that." That was the way it worked. And you had a decided interest in seeing that that person was let free to come home to be with his large family so he could go to work the next morning.

JONES: In the article on the wall there, you talk about the ways that they entertained themselves and some of the music they made, along with some of the blues that was born here.

DOCKERY: There's no doubt about it. What is known as the Mississippi type of blues, Delta blues, did originate on the plantations down here

where it was really a case of the average man, colored man, had his family, his church and what recreation he could find. In the winter time when he couldn't work, he would rabbit hunt a lot. They were hunters of all kinds. They loved to fish also. But they got a tremendous amount of joy out of singing. In church for instance that's why the services lasted so long, because they sang so much down there. They spend hours singing, and that led of course to various types of other music. Maybe it is a carry-over from their previous days when they sang because they were so unhappy about being brought over to America and the conditions that their ancestors lived in was carried down to them. So they had their own blues, and as this man, B.B. King, this singer, who narrated the film they made here said, the cause of a man having the blues was because somebody else had taken his woman away from him or he was broke, somebody had stolen his money when he was sleeping or something of that nature which destroys him. He had lost everything he had in the world of any value to him, and he brought out a type of blues which has never been duplicated anywhere else that I know.

JONES: That's right.

DOCKERY: Dockery farms was big. I mean it was big for Sunflower county. It was probably the biggest farm in Sunflower county, I imagine it was. There were just some various types that came here. And my father had a standing offer, because he had work for anybody who came along. He put them to work doing something; cleaning

up the land - he'd find something for them to do. So it was a place where there was a lot of going and coming. And I would also like to say right here that it had a very good reputation. It's managers were not the kind that would shoot the people and all that or beat them up and behave themselves scandously with them and all that. It was that kind of a deal where it was known that they were going to get paid for what they did and certain things were allowed and certain things weren't allowed. That was pretty well adhered to. But no one ever objected certainly to the singing that they did here. And then later on after I got down here, they had a quartet or two of their own that sang on the radio in Cleveland. So they carried it on. They sang spirituals more than likely. But just the old blues thing, they could take one sentence and they could sing it a half a dozen different ways. We have a number of those records still left.

JONES: Most of these people played guitars?

DOCKERY: I would think that would be the answer, I think so.

JONES: But when you came down here in 1926 and in the early years of the 30s and before the second World War, was the plantation still run in that manner? Was it still that big and the black people still living in that way?

DOCKERY: It was still that big and my memory as to when complete mechanization occurred and when it was completed is rather dim. I don't know. Because when I came down there were vague rumors of a

mechanical cotton picker, for instance, which I later saw develop. And as a matter of fact, Mr. Fowler McCormick, the president of International Harvester Company, was our house guest several times and they did a lot of the preliminary work here at Dockery. Now they did not perfect it by any means at all and it turned out to be quite a tremendous engineering problem. But we still had lots of labor at that time. Now you would have times in America where a lot of labor would be attracted to the North, but as soon as they got up there and found they didn't like that kind of living - and then the first recession they had up there they were the first to be fired. So they immediately came back to their old home down here, where we had two-way traffic going on all the time.

JONES: I don't mean to get ahead of the chronology of the thing, but let me ask you this while we're talking about the plantation. We're going to get back to it when we talk about your experience in the '70s and being a plantation owner in the '70s. But how did the depression effect your dad and you as plantation owners?

DOCKERY: It effected all of us tremendously. There's no question about that. Daddy was one of a very far-seeing person, and he organized a discount corporation to loan money to farmers; himself being the main recipient. Dockery and Donelson in Memphis, organized the Memphis Cotton Discount Corporation, which had for its purposes the same thing as Greenville Production Credit Association in Greenville. A person whom I know and love later on, Mr. Billy

Wynn of Greenville, whom I met in the overflow, and I were in New Orleans on a pleasure trip, and we found that both of us were trying to organize two companies. He organized the one in Greenville, which loaned money to the farmers and I helped out on this one in Memphis, but we did not get our money from the same source. The Memphis crowd got theirs from Louisville, a branch of the Federal Reserves in Louisville, a federal land bank, then New Orleans furnished Greenville. But my father had to do on such a small amount of money that it wouldn't be to suffice for a month nowadays. And he did a year of that. Cotton got down to three or four cents a pound. I sold a thousand bales of low-grade cotton one time at three cents a pound to my friends in Inverness and that's only fifteen dollars a bale. Now at that time, day labor was fifty cents a day. There wasn't any time clock on that. That was from sun up to sun down, all the way through. So people were effected by it, but to say that my father or I suffered, no that's riduculous, we didn't suffer. None of our crowd went hungry or naked or anything like that. They did not.

JONES: Were you still able to provide jobs after that?

DOCKERY: Based only on what was necessary. I mean certain extraneous things had to be put aside for the time being.

JONES: You said that the wages at that time were fifty cents from sun up to sundown, were they lowered to fifty cents or was fifty cents the...

DOCKERY: The bottom price. It would have been the bottom price.

JONES: In 1926 when you came were people getting paid more than fifty cents?

DOCKERY: Oh, I'm sure they were, but I don't remember that. The first year or two that I was here, cotton was high. I remember when cotton got up around thirty cents a pound, the Delta was blooming. So I was here for two, three, or four good years before the real depression set in.

JONES: Let's go back to 1926 when you first came. You've told us how some of your first jobs turned out. Let's talk about your experiences during the flood in 1927. If you'll just take it from the top and tell me - because I've heard parts of the story and it's really fascinating and I want to get it all down on the tape. So if you'll just take it from the top.

DOCKERY: Well, the flood was an experience that I enjoyed thoroughly. I met some wonderful people who later became close friends. As far as my activity, it was all voluntary, and I enjoy even thinking about it and talking about it. It occurred in April, 1927. The levee was known to be weak over around Benoit and Scott, below Rosedale. Many plantations sent men, working, abled-bodied stalwart men over there to help fight the overflow by filling sacks with dirt and sacking the levee where they thought there were apt to be weak spots. This was all under the direction of the Department of Engineering Corps. We had sent some men over there. I'll say twenty-five or maybe fifty, we had plenty of them, with a straw boss in charge of them. They had been over there a few

days and I went over there to see how they were getting along. I couldn't find my crowd, there was such a confusion going on over there. I spent the night in Rosedale at a hotel. The next morning my father called me a little bit after daylight. He said, "Joe, I know the levee is broken there at Scott." I didn't know it myself. It broke when I was asleep, I guess. So he said, "I'm sending a boat over there and I want you to go down and help rescue them and see what you can do for those people." He said, "I borrowed a boat from my very dear friend Mr. Mike Sturdivant from Glendora, Mississippi," a man whose total acreage was probably like my father's, and he said, "We will meet you there. I'm sending a white mechanic to help you operate the motor and whatnot, and we want you to be where the water has come furthest north along the gravel road right north of Benoit, Mississippi. We understand it's backing up, of course, north," even though the break was sometimes fifteen miles, air miles, further down. I said, "Yes sir." I had just one suit of clothes I think and frankly - in fact I had no pajamas. So I had very little in the way of clothing with me, except for what I had on. So sure enough about nine or ten o'clock I guess, I was out there on the gravel road and the water had risen along the ditches and out in the fields at that time. But the railroad embankment was high, so that was where we were holding fort, on the railroad embankment. So Arthur, the mechanic's name, came over and unloaded a very nice square-stern canoe, about seventeen or eighteen feet long with a Johnson motor; a three-horse Johnson

motor, and the necessary oil cans and whatnot. Arthur and I got in the boat. We just started the motor and took off. We went on down the ditch and went out into the field. Three or four miles down, we came to Benoit and we asked where we could help most. We ran into one of the managers of the Delta Pine Land Company. He was manager of the, I believe they call that area the Nugent Plantation, Nugent section of Delta Pine Land Company. He lived about a half a mile south of Benoit in a nice home. His wife and family had been removed several days before then because he was afraid the levee was going to break. Arthur and I went down there. Water was not in his house, but it lacked about three or four inches of getting up on the porch and getting in the house. But in the house, where we stayed, I went to the bathroom and I opened the door and there was a beautiful heifer calf, so I didn't intrude at all. But we stayed there three or four days and rescued where we could, because, as strange as it may seem, people living under the knife, you might say, sometimes refused to leave their homes. No authority would drive them out of their home there. They were living right under the levee, but they said, "No. I've been living here for forty years, and I'm not going to leave." So a lot of them were trapped, and we would take a boatload of them; go to their house. They might be in the attic, they might be on the roof or something like that. The weather was good. That was the most fantastic thing about it. The weather was good and the water was not so cold that if I had

turned over I believe I could have come on out of there. So we would take the boat loads of people all ages, from 100 down to squalling babies, and carry them over to the levee, which was the only land out of water. The levee was full of mules by the thousands, and cattle of all kind. Anybody that could get his things over there was home free. They would be fed by the barges that brought the feed in from down along the Mississippi River. The people themselves were also barged down as far as Greenville. We did this type of rescue work there, and every now and then a plane would drop a message to us telling us there were some people in certain areas, maybe five miles away. We'd go out there and get them and carry them on over there to the levee.

JONES: You were getting them out of trees and everything?

DOCKERY: Well, not exactly out of trees, but pretty close to it you might say. I mean, on top of a barn or in a barn. You'd find a barn-load of them. They'd all get up on the roof of a barn. They congregated. We pulled a few off of telephone poles and stuff like that, who mistakenly maybe thought they could walk from one house to another and fell in the water. I knew the management, the ownership and management of Delta Pine Land Company fairly well. We would go down every day to the headquarters in Scott where Dr. Fox, who was the general manager, had charge of everything. They had a boarding house there that kept serving meals twenty-four hours a day, or rather all day long, and you tied your boat up to a fire escape going up and climbed up.

The water was sometimes ten feet deep around there, and you swapped stories and got information of what you should do and all that. One interesting thing that I remember: Dr. Fox and I were talking and about that time the big seaplane that belonged to the Engineering Department came up and started circling. So Dr. Fox said, "That means he's going to land out here in the water about a half-mile away. I want you to take me over there and see what he wants." So they sat this great big - I think it was a four motored plane - down in the water there, and he made tremendously wide circles until I could approach him from behind. We finally got up to where we could grab hold of the fuselage. There was a lot of shouting going on while he conveyed the message that he was bringing, I think it was something like twenty or thirty drums of gasoline, which we needed very badly to operate our boats out there, and they would be along tomorrow at a certain time at a certain place. The man who was in charge of that operation was Major John C.H. Lee, who was head of the Mississippi River division in Vicksburg. He later became Lieutenant-General John "Courthouse" Lee who was famous in the World War for some of his eccentricities over there. That was interesting to me. Now, as far as the boats are concerned, I'd like to say that invaluable service was rendered by the bootleggers of Rosedale. They had their operations on the islands in Arkansas and out in the Mississippi River and everywhere. They had their own boats. They were good boatmen, they had to be, and they all volunteered and came down. We had been down there a

few days and I was taken for one of them. I didn't know many people. I didn't know the countryside. I knew Dr. Fox, I'd met him through my father. But I was known hardly at all. But those men did a beautiful job, and the Delta and the whole country is indebted to them.

JONES: At the time you got into your boat and went down to Benoit were there any other boats out?

DOCKERY: Not many. Not too many. There was a tremendous shortage of boats, and, of course, we were where the water had run up north, and we were not in the force of the stream. You see Greenville was in the force of all that water running through. Where we were operating was not all that rugged. Of course, it got to a certain point it moved up and it never got any further. It just didn't go any further. So we had that on our side. And when I decided that I had done all I could do there, - I want to refer back for just a minute - I went down to Dr. Fox and I said, "I believe I'll leave if you don't mind." Well, he said it was fine. I said, "I'm going on down to Greenville," and there was a man there who said, "Well, I want to bum a ride with you down there." So he did. We went on down and we didn't know that they had a supposedly protection levee north of Greenville and we went over that thing like it was a small Niagra Falls without even knowing it was there. But I would like to refer back another interesting thing to me. Arthur, my mechanic, got fed-up pretty quickly after three or four days of that kind of thing. He wanted to go on back to his wife and family.

And even though we were on the trip only twenty or thirty air miles from Dockery, we were a thousand miles as far as connections was concerned. There were no telephones or anything like that. So I said, "I'll take you on back up the railroad as far as I can, put you off where you can walk, because the railroad was the highest thing above water." So when I got him on solid ground well I said, "Goodbye," and I turned around and went on. So Arthur walked up - going on home - and he met some people who had a death message to deliver in Benoit. So they persuaded Arthur to go with them. They had a boat of some kind. Arthur got in the boat with them and they went on back to Benoit. They found the house down there - I think about that time it had gotten dark on them probably and the motor broke down. So Arthur stayed with them all that night and the next day, and I don't know how it happened, but somehow or another he found himself over on the levee with all these other refugees there. I'm sure he was trying to help out. I'm certain of that. So the next thing he knows, he was also shuffled down to Greenville in a barge that went down the Mississippi River. And it was difficult to explain to the authorities that you were one particular case and you had to be home by nightfall. So he gets down to Greenville where he is given a cotton tag number. The compress furnished us tags, just as if they were bales of cotton. We put them on these refugees in serial numbers - thousands of people. It was a good way of having them eat, because you had to eat all day long and all night long too. I don't know how many thousands of people were on the levee, strung

out along it, but they finally congregated and were collected in Greenville. So the kitchens they'd say, "Well we'll take this thousand head of people here and feed them," and so forth. Arthur gets down there and he couldn't get out any way. They were taking these refugees from Greenville down to Vicksburg. In Vicksburg, they'd take them over to a sort of concentration camp at Jackson. There the Red Cross took care of them. The Red Cross played a tremendous part in this matter. So Arthur was clever enough, knowing he couldn't get out of it any other way - when one of these barge loads was leaving there maybe in two or three barges, a thousand people or so on board, Arthur sees these nurses, Red Cross nurses, going on board and he grabs their suitcases and says, "I'll take these on board for you ladies." He takes them on board there and then he just hides himself in the crowd and he gets down to Vicksburg. But still he is not free to get away. So he finds himself over in Jackson and then he calls up home there. They came down and got him of course, or they gave him a bus ticket or something or another. Arthur, instead of getting home in a half hour or so from where I'd left him, was about a week getting home.

JONES: That's an interesting story.

DOCKERY: That was just one of the many things that happened.

JONES: How big was your boat?

DOCKERY: Well it held some eight to ten people loaded sitting on the floor. It was seventeen or eighteen feet long. It had a square stern.

As far as boating was concerned, it was very difficult because in those days they had a pin in the propeller shaft and when you hit something, any kind of log or obstruction below, that pin broke. You didn't have neutral on board. It was a question, you pulled a cord - my hands were raw very quickly from pulling cords and trying to start a cold motor. But when you started it, then the boat just took off immediately and you had to go. And the only way you could stop would be to kill the motor and start all over again. So I spent half of my time putting new pins in. And when we ran out of pins, we took nails and made pins out of them, but they sheared off just as well. Now the little motor was not so big that I couldn't take it off bring it in the boat and put it in, because the shaft didn't reach far down in the water behind. So that was the trouble we had, and that was real trouble. But about the last few days I was in Benoit, or right after that, Daddy had found two big Johnson motors there in Memphis and he sent them to me in Benoit. The train would take them as far as where they got down there to the depot. Somebody came in and just appropriated one of those motors for himself. I'm sure he used it for a good cause, but he left one for me. So I had a new eight horse motor - I'd worn the other one out completely - instead of a three. But it was so big that I could not bring it inside my boat. And that meant that when I sheared a pin, I had to drift into a tree or a house or paddle my way to something where I could get out and sit in the tree, or sit on the house, move the boat all the way around

holding sides of it, get hold of the propellor, get hold of the motor which held the stern, raise that propeller, take a pair of pliars and a wrench and take that propeller off and put a new pin in there all over again; and it might not last a half an hour, it might break again. So that was really a problem. It was just so big but it was in pretty bad shape too, I might add, when I finally got home.

JONES: Wooden?

DOCKERY: Yeah, wooden planks or whatnot in there. A very lovely boat called the "Merrimac Speedster." We sure ruined that one.

JONES: How long was it across the width of it?

DOCKERY: Well, it was just about like that.

JONES: About four feet?

DOCKERY: About four feet, yes, with free-board about eighteen inches or something like that.

JONES: Yes.

DOCKERY: A canoe bow, but a square stern on it.

JONES: You said about eight to ten people could ride in it?

DOCKERY: Yes. When you get in a jam like that you'd be surprised how many people can get in there. Oh yes, they just stretched out in the bottom. We didn't let them bring everything in the world with them, they couldn't do that, but you could put a lot of people in it. We loaded it full, and we ran slow, but we got them over there. I didn't turn over a single time. I'd go over there to the levee and put that load out and go back to get another load. That's the

way it was.

JONES: Did you say at the protection levee, just up north of Greenville when you were coming in from Benoit there was like a waterfall?

DOCKERY: It was, because the water was the full force of the break that was hitting that wall, and there was a - I'd say that wall was maybe eight or ten feet high, something like that. And when it hit that it obviously made a leap over there. We shot it rather surprisingly, but surprisingly well. Then we went on down and continued in to town. This man knew, or had some friends - no I think he was some kin to Mr. Frank Robertshaw, a very well known person in Greenville, who lived on that main street that goes through Greenville north and south. The picture show was on one corner of that thing, on the southwest corner. But he lived on the northwest part, right across the street in the second house off the street. He had a house that had a picket fence around his house there on the street, and a very narrow gate. There was this raging current running on the concrete street down there. I would have to maneuver the boat to get through this iron fence with these pickets sticking up and then go on in the house, where we spent our first night down there, and tie up to the banister, the railing going upstairs there. I had to get out and go on up to the second floor where there were about five or six men who had spent the first night there. So the next morning they were out of food. We had eaten up everything there that was in the house. So somebody got a key to the door of a restaurant named "Muffaletto's," which was very, very well known

in those days. They served magnificent food, spaghetti and oysters and steaks. We got in my boat, two or three of us, and went down there and somehow or another they managed to get the door open with that key. The water was four or five feet deep inside the restaurant, but he had an icebox that was a sectional type of thing, and the top section was all right. So we took the boat and went up by the top section and we got all the meat he had in there, and anything that could be used. It was still in pretty good shape when we got out. So we took all that we could find and certainly all the canned goods around there. It was all properly accounted for. I mean you didn't refrain from taking something just because you were not able to give the man a receipt for it. From there we went on down to the Coca-Cola plant and took two or three cases of Coca-Cola off their stacks and went on back and cooked the meal, I believe it was. Men, you know they get hungry, so you always get some good cooks in a crowd like that. So then I decided that wasn't for me. I wasn't interested in that. So I went on down to the old post office, which was the center or hub of activities. I looked like any other bootlegger and what-not. I didn't get a very fine reception. Everyone, they immediately said, "We're going to commandeer your boat, use your boat; you and your boat. You'll be put to work hauling hay for the mules on the levee." I wasn't about to give them my boat, so I said, "Where is Senator Percy's office?" Well,

it was about a block or two away, but you had a wooden trestle type of thing built up because the water was three or four feet deep and you had to walk on wooden planks all the way around town. So I went around there, and that was the headquarters really of the Red Cross. Will Percy, whom I had never met, was the officer in charge of the Red Cross activities. It was volunteer work, of course. That was the center of that type of activity, the Red Cross activities and the main planning as to what should be done. Everybody else had their own little projects. Some of them were feeding the mules on the levee, others were in charge of feeding the people on the levee. It was just what a man could do and fit in anywhere he could. It was there that I met such people as Billy Wynn, Gervis Lusk, Judge Emmitt Hardy, Judge Bun Thomas, too many to mention. I became great friends with them later on. They were actually strangers then, and I was very young. So I simply went in the office there and said, "Senator Percy, don't you need a private boat man?" He said, "Yeah, boy, I certainly do. You'll do just fine. Let's go on out home right now. Where's your boat?" I said, "It's over there at the post office." So he said, "Well let's go home. I want to go home anyhow. You take me home." So we left the office there and walked on back to the boat, where my other friends saw Senator Percy and me going off. That was the end of that. The way I knew Senator was because he and my father and Mr. Andrew Learned of Natchez, Mississippi belonged to a number of fine duck hunting

clubs along the Louisiana coast. Every year, at least two or three times a year, my father and I would get on the train in Cleveland, Mississippi, the night train. Senator Percy would get on in Greenville, Mr. Learned would get on at Natchez, and we'd go to New Orleans. We'd spend the whole day in New Orleans, and take the train out that night for Lake Charles, Louisiana, where we shot ducks for six days. We all killed our limit every day. I would send fifty ducks to the University Club in Memphis. Daddy would send fifty ducks home to Dockery. The Senator would send fifty ducks to his home in Greenville, and Mr. Learned did the same thing. So Senator and I were old hunting friends that way. I was just so attracted by Senator Percy. I never saw a man that I thought was as attractive as Senator LeRoy Percy. So I knew Senator real, real well. I went on out there and met Mrs. Percy. Their home was also one of these where two or three more inches would have put it in the house there. They had tremendous reconstruction problems after the thing was over. They had to bolster-up everything up under the house. Mrs. Percy, who was very charming, Mrs. Camille and Mrs. Ada Williams and Mr. Charlie Williams, who were friends of the Percys and were interested in several operations with Senator Percy were there. Will was there, of course, in his own suite, and his good friend Tommy Shields. They put me in Will's suite with him and Tommy. I slept in Will Percy's silk pajamas, which he gave me very graciously. The legs came between my knee and my ankle and the

sleeves were just about elbow length on me. Will was about five feet two inches and probably weighed about 130 or 140 pounds and I was six feet and weighed about 180. But I never enjoyed better food, better conversation in my life, and I did for some four or five days. Senator would have me drive him over to Leland practically every day. He was a tremendous land owner, one of the big partners of Panther Burn Plantation. They headquartered, the Magee's and Dean's, in Leland. They were all big Leland people. So Senator and I would get in the boat there at his house and just go right on over to Leland where we would transact his business. Senator would do that with me and then he got so he would just send me over there with some papers maybe or a message or memorandum or whatnot. "Give this to Otho McGee, give it to him." So I got very familiar with the whole countryside from a boat. Then, Will, of course, was such a wonderful person in many, many ways indeed. Will and I never had the rapport, you might say, that the Senator and I did, because the Senator and I were interested in hunting and fishing and speculation in markets maybe. We liked to play quarter-of-a-cent bridge, and a lot of things. I just loved Senator Percy, and I admired Will, and we got along fine. It was an entirely delightful occasion.

JONES: You told me the first time you met Senator Percy he said, "Come on, I'm ready to go home." And y'all went home. You said y'all had a drink?

DOCKERY: Oh, we had a number of drinks. In fact, we drank more during the overflow than we would have normally, and we ate better food because

we ate whatever was in sight. If there was a chicken or turkey around there, well, he didn't live long. No, I'd never eaten better meals in my whole life. The Percys, of course, had wonderful food. Mrs. Percy was of French descent. So, it was fine. We all knew good food and we all enjoyed good food, and we all enjoyed a toddy as we called it in those days. And then we played some bridge too.

JONES: Yes, it is very interesting. The impression you're giving of Senator Percy is as a man who did have a good wit and a good sense of humor and that was lively company.

DOCKERY: Well, it's very interesting to me to remember, because I was very conscious of it at the time. When these three gentlemen and myself would get off the train there in New Orleans about eight or nine o'clock in the morning, Senator Percy would wait an hour or two for the Boston Club to open. He went there and spent the rest of the day playing bridge or poker with the Boston Club crowd there. I thought, my goodness if there ever came a time when I could become a member of the Boston Club, I would have made it in every sense of the word. My father and Mr. Learned would hire a tremendous car, a Packard or whatnot, in town, and a chauffeur for the day, and we would ride around all over scenic New Orleans, the Chalmette Battlefield, everywhere. We had our meals at Antoine's. There was no attempt to save a nickel or anything like that. Both of them were interested in doing whatever it was to be done, but they were not drinking gentlemen. They were not poker players or bridge players,

and it was just that difference. But we all met at the train that night, and everything was fine, and we had a wonderful week together. So that was the way that the Senator was, and all of that appealed to me.

JONES: Tell me what the Senator looked like. How big was he?

DOCKERY: One of the handsomest men I've ever seen. Now, later on in life he became a little bit stout, but not the least bit fat or to be called heavy, not, not at all. The last picture I have of Senator, he was in a double-brested tweed suit. Obviously some New York tailor probably made it for him. He wore a little bow-tie in the picture. He had snow white hair and he was a Hollywood movie star, he just was.

JONES: I told you the last time that I met you that I have that picture too, and you said you'd lost your print of it.

DOCKERY: I have the real picture of it. Will gave me an original of it and all.

JONES: That isn't the one that they made the portrait of. This is an earlier one probably; probably done in early part of the 1900s.

DOCKERY: Well, I don't know. We'll talk to Keith tonight and ask if we can institute another look, because I've looked all over my attic the best I know of several times. Probably what happened is that they took that picture out of the frame and used the frame for something else with the picture being very hard to find itself. But Senator, to me was just charm personified. I have had several charming ladies there in Greenville talk to me about Senator Percy. I remember one of them said, "Some men have the ability to make money. Some of them are very glad-handers, good fellows, well-met. Some of them are sportsmen

entirely, mens' men. Some of them are ladies' men entirely." But she said, "Senator Percy had just about everything you could mention, and he had it in the right way." So he was my idol. There's no question about that. And my father knew that and understood it real well. I never did any drinking that amounted to anything at all, but I would have a drink at that time. I would have a drink with Senator when we were duck hunting. My father told me, "If I could get as much pleasure out of a drink as Senator Percy does, then I could have one every now and then." But he just never drank himself. He couldn't smoke because he didn't like nicotine. But he did drink good wines. When we went to New Orleans, we had the finest wines Antoine's had, and the finest food he had. But the Senator was just simpatico in every sense of the word.

JONES: So you drove him around in your boat for three or four days?

DOCKERY: Yes, I stayed there a week, I believe it was. And I finally said now - there's one interesting thing I want to mention while I'm thinking about it. They asked me one day, they said, "Look Joe, we want to borrow you and your boat. We'll send the boat over to the Mississippi River and we want you to come over there. We have some work for you to do over there."

JONES: Who told you that?

DOCKERY: Some of the crowd that were running the operation there. So I pulled up to the levee on the inside now, and there were thousands of refugees there. So about eight or ten of them grabbed ahold of this boat of mine, which wasn't all that heavy, it was light really and they carried

it up the levee, over the levee to the Mississippi River side and put it in there. I go over there, I'm with them, of course, and I see all these things wrapped up in white sheets. I said, "What's this?" He said, "Well, you're going to do some burying for us." He said, "There's no place to bury these people. You can't put them in cold storage or anything like that." And with all the thousands of people you had on the levee, a lot of them died, older folks, the younger ones even. A disease would break out or that kind of thing, just natural causes carried a lot of them away. And it was told to the preachers there that there was no place to bury the people there so they were just going to put them into the river. That's all there is to it. So another, maybe two other men and myself - it was me handling the boat and they handled the rest of it - loading the boat up with corpses that were wrapped up well in sheets and bound very nicely. Then we went off shore out in the Mississippi River, and right in sight of these thousands of refugees who were singing and all that kind of thing there. There were many preachers in charge, well not in charge, but there to see that it was a very dignified thing, not just throwing some boxes overboard or anything like that. I did that one whole afternoon. I don't know how many bodies we tucked away out there in the Mississippi River. When I came back, they picked up my boat and carried it over the levee again and put it on the inside. I went on about my business. A lot of interesting things happened to me, I can assure you of that.

JONES: Will writes in his book, Lanterns on the Levee, about having a lot of

trouble during the flood with black people who refused to unload barges. Do you remember that trouble?

DOCKERY: That's literally true. Now I was not part of that, so it's all hearsay with me. And I didn't find out about that possibly - Oh, I knew about it, but everybody was busy. I mean you had your own task to do, you might say. And Will had his task to do which did not coincide with Senator looking after his business and other things and all. I might say that I also carried VIPs who came there. Well, they'd turn them over to me to show the effects of the overflow and things like that. And then one day Senator asked me, he said, "Joe, Louis Nicholson hasn't heard from his family down below Hollandale in a good long time." He said, "Would you mind taking him down there? You won't have to stay any time at all, but would you mind taking him down there? It will be a long, long trip." And it is. So I said, "No Senator." So we left at daylight, Nicholson and myself. He was the former Sheriff down there. We went within sight of Leland, but we were just picking our way, cutting through. It was all water, but nevertheless you didn't know whether there was a barbed wire fence underneath there or what. We went on down there. I'd say it was twelve or one o'clock from five o'clock in the morning, for five or six hours. I was just about out of gasoline. We got down there to this house which is in the bend of the main road down below Hollandale. It's right north of Percy, Mississippi, a little place called Percy. This house was a lovely home and it was one of those built up on steps kind of, eight or ten feet off the ground. So they were above the ground, and above the water.

They were so happy to see him, and the house was just full of people, kin folks and neighbors all in there. We only stayed there about a half an hour, and I said, "That's all the time we've got. We're gonna have to buck this current going back. So we borrowed all the gasoline we could fill up with and went on. That was quite a task.

JONES: Did you make it back?

DOCKERY: Yes, the two of us made it back all right. Now when I'd been down there a good while, I think about five, six or seven days, I told him one time here, I told a crowd of them. I said, "Now look, I just came down here to rescue y'all, not to stay here and work for you." Because at that time, there was no loss of life. I mean everybody had been accounted for and they were moving the natives down the river to Vicksburg. The Red Cross had charge of the thing. So I said, "I'm gonna leave tomorrow, Senator." He said, "Well, if you do I want you to go by Leland and do this, then I want you to go by my gin at Percy down there, Trail Lake, I want you to go down there. I want you to take these papers and tell so-and-so what I want done." So I had to leave in the morning on over there and do that, go on down to the gin which was in deep water. And we were up on the cotton platform there where they press - where the pressroom was. They gave me a pretty fair country meal while I was there. And I said, "How do I get in Sunflower River? I want to go on home up the river." You see I was way down there, and instead of going back by Scott and Benoit it was easier for me to go on around and keep on going. He said, "Well, you just go east of here and you'll be able to tell the river by the trees on the bank. You'll see where the

trees are curving around, the big trees, and you just get in the middle and you keep on going." So I got in the middle down there and I continued on up. Now I remember going under the bridge at Indianola, which had water, but it was a high bridge. I kept on going, and it started raining on me. Darkness came on and it started raining too and lightning and all, and several times lightning flashed just as I was getting ready to run into a log boom or hit a stump; well not a stump, but a floating debris out there in the water. So I decided two times was enough, even though it was raining hard and I didn't know where I was. So I pulled up to the bank there, and by that time I'm wringing wet, the boat's full of water, I'm by myself in there in the black night. So I climbed up the muddy riverbank, the Sunflower River, and the first house I could find, and light I could see, it was a coal oil lamp of course, I went there and I said, "Can you put me up?" He said, "No, sir, but there's an old couple about a quarter on down the road with a big house and there's nobody there. The children are all gone." So I went down there and sure enough it was a nice old couple there all by themselves in what we call a four or six room house. She gave me a clean bed to sleep in. And when I - I said, "Don't call me, I want to sleep all day, sleep until I wake up." So I don't know what time it was when I woke up, but it was late. I went in the kitchen, and there was no one in the house, and she had cooked my breakfast. I never will forget because she had a dish on top of every other dish like they used to, to keep things warm. So I

explored and opened the dishes and there were cold fried eggs that had been cold for a number of hours, bread of some kind and molasses I believe and some side meat. So I sat down and had a very nice breakfast, and I found out where I was. I was right below Doddsville, Mississippi. That's where I was, so I ate my breakfast and I left a couple of one dollar bills, I believe it was, on my bed there which at that time was all right. It wouldn't amount to much right now, but I think they understood that. So I came home. Now from there on, there was water only in the river. There was no more overflow from the time I left Indianola, that area down there, besides that in the river itself. When I went home by Sunflower River, the old store and Daddy, Uncle Tom and two or three of the store employees were sitting out there in front. I couldn't see them, but I tied up in front of my own house down there and I walked on down to the store, a poor sight to see. I mean the clothes I had had on for so long. But they were awfully glad to see me and I was glad to see them. They kept me busy answering questions. So I stayed at home about two or three days and daddy said, "Joe, you're nervous. You need a rest." He said, "Go on to Memphis for two or three days and play some tennis up at the University Club." So I went on up there and I was only there a couple of days, but this is very interesting to me too. They also had crap games at the University Club on Saturday nights occasionally. And it was a very well-run type of gentlemanly game. So there I was shooting away real hard and I looked across from me and there was Billy Wynn from Greenville,

Mississippi, who also had had to get away. He said, "I was about to go crazy down there, we've been so busy for two weeks." And he said he was just in town for a few days in Memphis. His brother-in-law, Doug Brooks, lived there. So Billy and I got together again and later on, and that led to a deep friendship. We used to go to New Orleans together to football games. We used to go down there a whole lot. That kind of ended my flood experiences. I never regret having done that.

JONES: I think that's one of the most interesting stories I've ever heard. I tell you what, maybe a good idea now is that we take a break and we can pick it back up here in an hour or so, just to give you time to rest. It takes something out of you just talking straight through.

DOCKERY: Well it's interesting to me to think about those things.

JONES: It's certainly interesting to hear about. (Break)

DOCKERY: Let's pick it up when you were at the University Club there in Memphis. Tell me what happened. Did you decide to come home from Memphis after two or three days?

DOCKERY: After two or three days I came on home. It was the time of the year when preparation for crops was going on. But I was still not through with the overflow, because some friends from Tunica called me and they wanted me to go down to Vicksburg where the Secretary of Interior, Herbert Hoover, was on a private car down there investigating what was needed down there in the way of reconstruction and charity and so forth and so on. And they wanted me to go with them as a person

who could give them some first class, first-hand information from the Greenville area itself. So I did go down there and I thoroughly enjoyed being on board. It was the first private car I had been on. I had a number of chats with Secretary Hoover who asked me what I though were some very intelligent questions. He and Will Percy had been together in Belgium after World War I doing rehabilitation and charity work of all kinds. So I had entree in both ways.

JONES: As far as getting it right historically, wasn't - Will was with Secretary Hoover in Belgium in 1916 before America entered into the war.

DOCKERY: Well, I just knew that they were friends and they worked together.

JONES: So you came up to Greenville on this private car?

DOCKERY: No. The car - you couldn't ride to Greenville. This was right after, oh, this was probably less than a month after the overflow itself. The country was flooded. They had a terrible situation in that they had a second rise in the river that flooded them out again in some areas, and it was a long time before train connections were established into Greenville as far as I can tell.

JONES: I knew the water was there for about three months or so, wasn't it?

DOCKERY: Something like that. Now I can't give you exact data on that. In thinking of it - in thinking of the great times I had later on, they probably did not occur that summer even, because the conditions of the ground and the area was so devastated that I can't imagine that we played any tennis on the courts out at the Country Club there

that following June, July or August. I'm sure we did not. But later on in the years, I used to go down there quite often on Sundays and sometimes I'd play tennis out there, and then invariably see Margaret and Billy Wynn. I'd go by and see the Percys. And very frequently Senator and Margaret and Billy Wynn and I would play quarter-of-a-cent bridge there all afternoon and then go down to Muffaletto's for a delightful meal that night. And then Will and I played tennis together, and some of the others I used to see at horse shows all the time. So I kept up my friendships that had been developed. I just kept them up throughout the years. And I was very flattered that just back two or three years ago, Margaret Wynn told me over there, she said, "Joe, you know you got credit for doing more work than any volunteer that came in down here." I said, "Margaret, really when I got to Greenville my hard work was over." There's certainly nothing arduous about being a guest in the Percy's home for a week, being around the Senator, but I had done some rugged work before I got there. So we had a very keen understanding. I have often wondered why we have not recorded things for posterity, and I don't believe that enough has ever been said about the flood, at least by people who were in a position to know. Will, of course, could have written a magnificent tretise on the matter, but he was not going to. I just leave this really for my family. So when they say, "What did Grandpa do?," or something like that.

JONES: Well, it will be valuable not only to your family. It's going to be valuable as far as getting a real history of the events, so please proceed.

DOCKERY: Well if you have any questions you'd like to ask me - I've kind of run out of thoughts right this minute about it.

JONES: Well, let's talk about - you said the river overflowed a second time.

DOCKERY: It had a second rise, in the Mississippi. You see they couldn't plug that hole up there in the river, you know, and with that current swarming through there, you know, they had an engineering job. That thing, that break, I think cost Delta Pine Land Company five or ten thousand acres of land. It dumped so much sand on that land it was made five or six feet deep in some places. But later on they were able to plow that land until they finally got it all back in cultivation. The other water that swarmed all around and didn't dump all that sand on them left sediment there that enriched their property. It was worth millions of dollars to them in the end. But, of course, they had some awful rough goings until they got themselves straightened out again. But I knew that crowd real well. Mr. Oscar Johnson took over at that time. He became president of it relieving Mr. Salisbury, whom I knew through my father. Later on Oscar and Mrs. Johnson were part of that Greenville crowd. We had lots of parties up at Scott. All together it was very, very pleasant.

JONES: You were telling me about your conservations with Secretary Hoover, saying that he had asked you some really intelligent questions about the conditions there in Greenville during the flood. When he came to Greenville, did he take a boat from Vicksburg to Greenville, or did he fly in or what?

DOCKERY: I couldn't answer that. I just don't know. I'm not sure that Secretary Hoover was secretary when he got to Greenville.

JONES: Well, you know there are pictures of he and Will together in Greenville.

DOCKERY: I mean there is certainly no reason why he couldn't have had a seaplane flying in there if he wanted to. But, I don't know. But I certainly won't dare say his car could get up there. But it was certainly possible for him to have gotten up there. The Army Corps could take him if he went up the Mississippi River, as a matter of fact. Maybe they'd take a fast launch and carry him up the Mississippi River. That would have been the easiest thing to do.

JONES: But you were called to Vicksburg just to discuss the conditions over there?

DOCKERY: Well, with friends who were family friends that lived in Tunica, Mississippi and knew some of his party on board - the newspaper crowd, the editorial crowd and all. And there were several ladies in the crowd that were very prominent in the newspaper field at that time. One of them, the lady editor of the Times or something like that, I don't remember in detail. Senator, I mean, Mr. Hoover would ask me questions like one in particular: if I felt like the Red Cross had done a fine job in taking care of the destitute people, something like that. I would say, "Here's what I know." Now you had all kinds of problems with the Red Cross being able to channel supplies to the proper people. Every now and then something would

come up there, just like in Cambodia today the stuff didn't get where it was supposed to get. I don't know who was responsible for it, but a missing link was somewhere or another in the chain. So it was that sort of thing. He asked those kind of questions. Well, he was in the devastation, of course, but he was taking a big picture of it rather than a small picture of it, which was all I knew. I just knew what I had done myself.

JONES: Did you have occasion to go back to Greenville during that overflow?

DOCKERY: No, I did not. I didn't want to go back there. There was nothing to bring me back there. There really was not. After the overflow, the first one, a lot of the ladies who were there, a lot of them left because they needed a rest. And all those who had gone before the overflow, a lot of them came back. And when they got back, maybe three weeks later or a month later, the river rose up again. The river comes out of Montana, Missouri, Ohio and everywhere else, so it rose up again and they had other problems. So it was one of those type of things. It was possible to get in and out, I'm sure, but I saw no reason for me to go back down there.

JONES: The flood damage didn't effect the Dockery land?

DOCKERY: No, no. As far as I'm concerned, it didn't come up any further than Indianola. We had a high river. The Sunflower River stayed high all that time because it couldn't get out to the Yazoo, which couldn't get out to the Mississippi. It was being backed up all the way. But our land was situated so that we had very few small spots where an acre or two of ground may go under along the riverbank.

JONES: So you all were able to make a crop that year.

DOCKERY: Oh yes, we made a fine crop that year.

JONES: I wonder what the flood did to prices that year?

DOCKERY: As I said, I remember the first few years I was down there everything was lovely. Prices were good with cotton. When I got into it and all that, I had no problem at all. There was a good demand for cotton. There was twenty-cent cotton and all that kind of thing and I was in charge of it for my father.

JONES: I was just thinking maybe because so much of the Delta was underwater and they were unable to make a crop, if that drove the cotton prices up?

DOCKERY: Well, it did to the extent that our cotton down here being such fine quality, long-staple cotton and only raised in this section - yes, but that was a very small part of the whole problem. Take for instance the Texas crop out there which has millions of acres, but has a very poor grade of cotton compared to ours at that time. But, no, we had no problem with cotton.

JONES: So you came back and busied yourself on the farm here.

DOCKERY: Yes, I just went on with working for Daddy and spending a lot of time on inspection trips, going from one place to another. But, in the fall I took over the cotton program. And my father, the first year I was down here, around Christmas, said, "Joe, I want you to take your vacation in January and February." He said, "There's nothing for you to do down here particularly. We've got bookkeepers around, this that and the other. There's really nothing for you to do.

You sold the cotton and so forth." He said, "You can go wherever you please. Just go on and have a fine vacation wherever you want to, but I want you back here the first of March to go to work. That's when the season opens. But otherwise, you can go where you please." So I used to go to Mexico every year, and I would leave Dockery around the first week in January, cross the river there at Greenville on a ferry, go on out through Shreveport, through Texas, and I'd go on out through Monterrey down to Tampico where I fished for tarpons for a week and shot ducks and partied with all that international oil crowd down there. I was young and...

JONES: Were you married?

DOCKERY: No, no. I wasn't married. I was a young man. I didn't marry until a good bit later. And I spent a month to six weeks in Mexico. I rode horseback down there. I was always riding. Then I'd come back here and be ready, rested up by the first of March. The first furnish day on all these plantations was the first of March. That's when the real season started. And from then on, well, I did whatever I was told to do. My father never relinquished the reins as long as he lived. And that might have hurt me. But, anyhow he never did. He was a man who had made it all himself, pioneered it. He would try to turn over things to me, I'm sure. But it didn't take very long before he had taken them back again, which I can understand very well. But that's what I did, just whatever he wanted done. I didn't have any particular

title, or anything like that. I just represented him.

JONES: You were telling me about a second overflow that happened during a colder part of the year.

DOCKERY: Oh, this other overflow I was talking about. This was a number of years later. It may have been three, four or five years later. But my father was alive. He died in '36, so it would be in the early '30s. I was in Memphis during the Christmas holidays, and I had gone to a party at the Polo Club there, which I remember continued on and on and on. And I got back to my grandmother's home where I used to stay when I was up there. I got in the house just about daylight and the phone rang. It was my father. He said, "Joe, my friends over at Webb and Sumner are having a terrible time. The overflow has occurred over there and they're being flooded out and I want you to go over there and help them." He said, "And I want you to be in the house here by dark, so you can leave tomorrow morning. I'll have your boat loaded on a truck and everything prepared for you so they can take you right on over there." I said, "Well, I'll be home tonight Daddy, don't worry." He said, "No, I want you in the house by dark! So I'll know where you are. I'm leaving here to go to one of the other projects." So I came on down. And the next day I went on over there. Mr. Ben Sanders was one of Daddy's good friends. Mr. Sanders was about six-two or three, and 200 pounds at least. He had lost an arm in a gin accident. It was wintertime. It was cold and there was ice all over everything. It was anytime in the world not to go boating. But there they were. It was an inland

flood. I don't know how wide it was. It was about thirty or forty miles wide maybe. But that whole basin over there was flooded. I was staying there in Webb with some of the Webb family. I knew Tom Webb, we'd been to school together. But Tom was in India working for Standard Oil. I used to take Mr. Sanders around, but it was not pulling them out of trees or anything like that. He used me for transportation going to look into various things. His own home out there, out from Webb on a lovely plantation, was built up on a small mound. But still, we went inside and when we walked in the door, I had to pull my hip boots up just as tight as I could to keep the water from getting in my boots. That was in his dining room. I never will forget, I heard this tinkle, tinkle, tinkle of bells like Chinese bells, or wind bells or something like that and I couldn't figure it out. I finally looked over there and there was an upright china cabinet. The teacups were floating around in it. And the waves we were creating by walking around in there, when I say walking I mean inching around in there, was causing these cups to hit together and you got the most beautiful little sound out of it. I spent about four or five days over there. But that was very dangerous, because if we had turned over both of us would have drowned immediately. I could not at my age saved myself with hip boots on and two or three overcoats, a pair or two of gloves and all that. And Mr. Sanders just would have been lost. There's no question about that. So I put in some time over there. Mississippi as a whole

probably knew very little as far as what those people were experiencing over there.

JONES: Yes. I've never heard about that.

DOCKERY: Yes. Then later on - the Sardis dam and reservoir were put in, and that corrected all that wild river business and Cassidy bayou business and whatnot they had over there.

JONES: The what...?

DOCKERY: Cassidy bayou. It was a famous bayou over there - C-a-s-s-i-d-y, I think it was. And they even had several real wars about that. People would protect their own property, and by doing that it threw water on somebody else. It was just like the old range wars in the West. And there were a number of times over there where you found armed men facing each other. That's a matter of history.

JONES: You mean on a levee?

DOCKERY: Well you might want to levee your own property there.

JONES: Yes, and that would make it go into the other place.

DOCKERY: Anything you do to obstruct a natural flow of a stream is against the law. Not only was it against the law, but you were drowning out your neighbor, maybe, or in case you were taking more water than he wanted and vice versa there. But no, it was a terrific thing over there. That was one of the best things that ever happened to the Mississippi Delta when they put in those dams and resevoirs.

JONES: Where is Cassidy Bayou?

DOCKERY: It's over there in the area around Sumner, Glendora. It's a part of that whole thing.

JONES: Yes, you know in Will's book, Lanterns on the Levee, he talks about armed men on the levee keeping Arkansas people from blowing it up.

DOCKERY: Sure, from blowing this side up. Oh, look, I mean many times there have been cases where men ready to kill were ready for each other there. And they forced one good friend of ours, whose name I won't mention, to blow up a levee.

JONES: Really?

DOCKERY: They sure did. And he had just as many armed men as they did, but it was a question of that. He had to, because what he was doing was drowning them out. And they were just not going to have it.

JONES: They were demanding that he drown himself out too?

DOCKERY: No. Rather that he'd be part of the crowd in there, something like that rather, and not protect himself and throw all the water over on them. That's just the way it was, that he not interfere with the natural course of the stream itself.

JONES: Did that happen over there at Cassidy Bayou?

DOCKERY: Yes, that's part of that area over there.

JONES: Seems like he wouldn't have been penalized for his foresight.

DOCKERY: Well, as you can imagine, if we both owned land here, if you can protect yourself by doing something, you're going to do it. You're going to put a levee around there. If that's going to throw all the water the other way, on another man, you're going to be in danger.

JONES: Do you want to take a break now.

DOCKERY: Yes, we can go on up to the house if you feel like it.

JONES: Okay. I think that would be best, and then we can start it again.

(BREAK)

JONES: Let's pick up where we left off. We were talking earlier about your connections through Will Percy and in and around the Greenville crowd and you had said that in your experiences there you ran across the writer, David Cohn. Could you tell me when and where you met him?

DOCKERY: Well, David and I became fast friends. I am indebted to Will for more or less sending David up to see me here. David, of course, recognized my father as having all the experience in the world in the Mississippi Delta. And David was also a crack businessman, having retired from his work with, I believe, Sears & Roebuck in New Orleans, because he wanted to write. David was very close to all the literary crowd in New Orleans, especially Roark Bradford, he's the one that I remember most of all. When David came up, we just seemed to hit it off and the next thing I knew we had decided to go down to New Orleans for about a week. So I drove down there. David was strange in a number of ways. He didn't drive a car. So we went down there, and David stayed with his literary friends like Roark Bradford and his wife, Mary Rose, and I stayed in an apartment. I had a number of apartments in New Orleans. Through David, I met all that crowd which was referred to as the New Orleans group. A

lot of them were very more or less - well, they were famous writers. I'm sorry I can't think about or complete some names for you right now, but they were well known. I believe Baton Rouge had a school of writers, also like Robert Penn Warren. The name just occurs to me. He was one of the crowd. The newspaper crowd in New Orleans - George Heely was one of the editors down there. David knew them all. And I met them and we had something in common. David and Roark Bradford, I remember one time came back up to Dockery and spent about a week with me. Bradford was one of the greatest writers of Negro stories we've ever had. He was simply magnificent. Brad, as I say, spent lots of time with my father getting information and pointers out of him. But an interesting thing happened that I will always remember. For four years, I was penitentiary commissioner up at Parchman. There were three of us that ran the system at that time. I handled all the cotton, that's the reason I was put on the board. And I took David and Brad one rainy day. In one of the camps, all the prisoners were out cutting wood for the gin there. They had a great big cotton gin, of course, and they burned their own wood for it. So they were all cutting wood - the sergeant of the camp called for one axe. That meant he wanted all those axes to fall at one time creating just one sound, one tremendous sound. So we were there, and Bradford was talking to one of the prisoners and he asked him, he said, "How long you got here?" And the man said, "Boss, I got it all." Which meant that he had life. So Brad said, "I'm sorry to hear that, but what are you here for?" He said, "Boss, I'm here for killing a woman, and I couldn't be here for no better reason." Well, Bradford

could take something, an instance like that, and he'd go back and write a story about it and get it published in some well-known magazine, as of that time. So David and I stayed friends for years. I saw David in Washington during the war when I was up there. He would come over to visit. The Delta has always been a very hospitable place where a guest came, not with any idea of leaving the next day, but staying a few days and ingratiating himself with the cook and as David did. He got a lot of information out of the cook we had. I believe it was Ella. David would talk to her about some stabbings or cuttings and things like that. He would get something out of it. And like I say, he would not only ingratiate himself, but endear himself to other people. David, incidently, brought as a guest Dorothy Thompson, who was Sinclair Lewis's wife. I was not here unfortunately. David brought her down and Daddy told me that he had never had two more attractive guests for a day or two, I think. And they discussed many, many things of interest to him. So I would say David is the one that sticks out in my mind.

JONES: What kind of stories would your dad tell them?

DOCKERY: Well, just true stories of plantation life as it occurred. For instance, in his early farming days one time the chancery clerk of Bolivar County wanted to borrow some money. The county needed some money in a big hurry. And the county put up for collateral marriage licenses, and various things like that. In other words, someone going to get married needed a marriage license - you know, you'd get around to the question of whether it was a marriage, a regular license or a district plantation license, as they called

it. No, I mean it was all in good fun and humurous, and also very sincere because Daddy could look way ahead to the times when everyone would have a real education, which we're striving for now, and where complete justice would prevail.

JONES: Well, David and Roark would come here during the 30s? Was it during the 30s?

DOCKERY: Daddy died in '36, so it would have had to be between '30 and '35, on or about there.

JONES: After you took over the operation here at Dockery, would they come down?

DOCKERY: Yes. I was married in '38, in April of '38, so I lived here for two years or more by myself. I did an awful lot of traveling. I still hunted, fished and rode in Mexico. I did not go to Europe until relatively late in life, because I found everything in Mexico that I wanted. They had a lot to offer, and they still do down there, and it was cheap. I could go down there and have my trip cheaper than I could stay at home. I'd spend more money than that out of my pocket with everything paid.

JONES: Roark Bradford and David Cohn turned out to be very successful writers and very adept at depicting the Negro way of life in the '30s.

DOCKERY: Well, David picked a lot of that up. I mean he was picking their pockets. He wrote a book called Picking America's Pockets, which was based on taxation. He wrote several books. I have them. I can't recall all of them right now. But David was a very clever person and delightful.

JONES: Well, tell me, you took over the operation here at Dockery in '36

following your father's death?

DOCKERY: Yes. I took over and I worked hard, hard, hard. I worked awfully hard for a number of years to try to get everything straightened out and get a smooth running operation. But I still kept up with all my sports, and I still lived a very lovely life as far as I was concerned. But, I found, of course, that getting hold of the reins gave me a tremendous amount of satisfaction. In fact, a good friend in Mexico City, a very rich Mexican who was educated in Spain and Oxford, England, I was telling him about it when I was down there after my father had died, and I said, "I'm having more fun now than I had just playing down here." He said, "Yes, that's true." It was a kind of sense of accomplishment in getting things the way you wanted them. There were a few glaring errors which occur in all businesses we managed to straighten out, I think. I was delighted with the situation. My sister and I divided the estate equally, as equally as we could. There was never a cross word between us. Even when we had to have a clarification of the will because of an oil problem later on, we had four sets of lawyers in the deal, and we still ended up better friends, because we just took the court's judgement on it and went on with it.

JONES: You were telling me at supper that when your father died he had 18,000 acres?

DOCKERY: That's what the paper said. I know he had that much. I would have thought there would have been a few more, but he had 18,000. I was at this meeting, family reunion up in North Carolina two or three years ago, and somebody produced this booklet, a kind of Who's Who

so forth and so on. It was not the original Who's Who, but an agricultural Who's Who maybe, something, where it said Daddy had 18,000 acres. This man asked me, he said, "Joe, what happened when your father died in '36?" He said, "How many acres have y'all got now? Of that 18,000 how many are left?" Well it just happens that there are 16,000 of them still left. Maybe not the original 16,000 of the 18,000, but there are still 16,000 acres comparable to what he had.

JONES: I'm going to turn the tape over now. (Break)

JONES: I know you're tired, so I just want to cover a couple of more things before we go to bed. Let's talk for a minute about your experience during the second World War. Someone was telling me - I can't remember who it was, it might have been Charlotte Capers, but I'm not sure - was saying that you had an interesting experience through the second World War in that you served as a dollar-a-year man. Is that right? What kind of agreement was that?

DOCKERY: Well, my war experiences were like this. A few days after Pearl Harbor Day, I applied to the Navy and offered to give them this big yacht I had and go along with it. They said, "Thank you very much. We're just so busy right now we don't know which end is up. So we'll just take it under advisement, and we appreciate it. You'll hear from us." Instead of that, I went on to Washington and I got an audience with Mr. Will Clayton of Anderson-Clayton Cotton Company due to a letter of reference from Mr. Oscar Johnson, the head of Delta Pine Land. Mr. Clayton read the letter of reference, and he said, "You come up here the first of January and go to work." I said, "Yes sir."

So I was up there very early in January. They postponed the day from the first because they didn't have the desks ready or anything else at that time. So I went up there the first week in January, and I worked for six months, you might say, as a volunteer worker without compensation. They called a dollar-a-year man, that was what you were supposed to get, a dollar a year. But that dollar a year included about twenty-five dollars a day living expense, which I did not take. I did not take the dollar. Then I was sent to Mexico by them, because I was familiar with Mexico, where I had an opportunity to ride out the war down there in the shipyard, just watching them build ships down there representing the United States Government. I was also offered the secretaryship of this commission we had down there. It was part of Nelson Rockefeller's good neighbor deal; Nelson was coordinator of American affairs, so forth and so on - which my Mexican friends advised me not to take because they said after the war, "thay might dig into these things and Joe you were not down here and you'd be responsible for a lot of things you didn't know anything about. Don't do it!" I wanted to get a uniform on anyway. I came on back, I found that the Coast Guard wanted my boat, my big boat. They wanted it very badly. They had sent word to me - being out in the country I didn't know it - so when I got back they got in touch with me. They said, "We want your boat and all the crew you can get ahold of. We're going to put you to work hunting submarines down in the Gulf." The submarines were just eating us up at that time. Well, the big sailboat could sail and there were

no motors. It had a tremendous diesel and all that, but if you could sail you could pretty well creep up on a boat. Obviously, you would not have motors for them to pick up and all that. So I said, "All right." So then they proceeded to draw up rare rules and regulations, specifications for arming and this, that and the other. So that went on for a couple of months, and I got nervous and impatient about it. I was down there one time talking to this captain, and he said, "Dockery, what do you know about horses?" I said, "I know plenty about horses. I know more about horses than I do about sailing that big boat, Captain." So he said, "All right. I want you to go over to Mobile. President Roosevelt has come up with the idea that all the beaches in America must be patrolled day and night because some saboteurs have landed on Long Island and come ashore." The submarine would just go up to the bank and where there's a beach so they can just jump off. So he said, "We want to put in this program and this man doesn't know anything about it. You go over there, you write him a letter." I said, "No, I'm through writing letters for the military." I said, "I'll go over there." So he said, "fine." He gave me a nice letter. I went on over to Mobile and this old fellow said, "The idea of horses and beach patrol; that's utterly ridiculous, and I don't want any part of it! " So we talked for a while there and he said, "Come over here, I want to show you these charts on the wall." And he said, "Now

this is so forth and so on." I said, "Commander, I've been hunting and fishing all my life along these beaches. I don't need those charts, I really don't." And I convinced him of that. So we talked for a while and anyhow, I said, "Well would you put some kind of endorsement or whatnot on the bottom of this letter that I've been here?" He said, "No, I won't do it." He said, "It's as if you didn't come." So really as I was going out he said, "I guess if they sent anybody over here, you'd do about as well as anybody they'd send." So that was my introduction to the military. And when I went back and I told the captain and the admiral, at that time, and they said, "You did fine. That's all right. He's known for his crankiness. You'll have your own commander over there anyhow." So about ten days later I was a lieutenant JG in the Coast Guard and reported to New Orleans. I was only there a short while, then I went over to Mobile and that was my territory. One of the sections that started with the Pascagoula shipyards, took in Mobile, Mobile Bay, the Islands and all that and all of Pensicola, the Air Station and all, and went on over to Destin, Florida, where the Panama City section took over. So I was there for about a year probably, and then I was asked to come back to New Orleans by my boss, whom I was really fond of. He was about the same age I was, an ex F.B.I. man. I went back just to be with him. He wanted me to and yet he knew - he said, "I won't order you back, but I'd love to have you, Joe."

So I went back, and about ten days later they let him go back to civilian life and left me there with his job. So I sat there for about a year or two running the whole Eight Naval District Beach Patrol. I had about 3000 men, lots of dogs, lots of horses and airplanes, small ones. We patrolled the beach, day and night, from Brownsville, Texas over to Tallahassee, Florida, right below Tallahassee. Then, when I wound that up I went to sea as an executive officer on a big schooner the same size of mine. And I made a trip or two that way, but that was pretty rough and I lost an awful lot of weight. I've always suffered from motion sickness. Even though I've had boats, airplanes and whatnot all my life, I still had inner ear problems. And I lost so much weight that they said, "We'll put you ashore." So they gave me everything from the mouth of the Mississippi River to Sabine Pass, Texas, what they call Port Security duty; that type of thing. But also I had all the light houses along there, radio stations. It was a conglomerate of everything. A number of beacon cities in there and all. I headquartered at Grand Isle. I had a seventy-five-foot boat of my own and a crew of six. I had charge of the station down there. It was a very good job, an excellent job. For one time it was a person who knew what he was supposed to be doing in an area in which he knew by heart. I did not mind circumventing military regulations to get things done, as one Southerner going to another and saying, "Now look, damn these regulations here, we got this

thing to do and I'll see that the paper work is straightened out. later on." We went on and got things done where sometimes a person as a foreigner doesn't get the same type of reception. So I did nothing big during the war at all, but I did spend the time doing what I was told to do and what I was supposed to do.

JONES: Did y'all catch any saboteurs?

DOCKERY: No, we did not. I won't comment on submarines, but we didn't catch anybody in that sense of the word.

JONES: But you did find some submarines?

DOCKERY: We put them out. I mean we ran them out of the Gulf quickly.

JONES: German submarines?

DOCKERY: Yeah, German submarines. There're stories that they even get up the river. I don't think they got up the river. A German submarine of that caliber could operate in ten fathoms of water, that's sixty feet of water. These were little things. These were not atomic submarines. But they sank all the oil tankers coming out of Beaumont, Texas and Galveston, Lake Charles and places like that for months. They just sank them right and left down there; Mobile Bay and all that. You could read in the newspaper at night by the burning oil down there during part of the war, the first part. But when we got everything going, we soon got rid of them. And it was right funny. These fliers down there, they had a red epaulet on their uniform there, known as Beach Patrol.

Excuse me, they were known as C.A.P., Civil Air Patrol. I saw them down there and didn't know anything about them. A number of years later, I was out at Aransas Pass on the big boat, and with me as my main guest, Colonel Harold Stovall of Stovall, Mississippi; an ace in World War I. He and I were very fine friends for years and years. So Howard and I were out there fishing with a big crew on board, a great big boat and everything. We found out that General Spaatz who was head of the Air Force for a long time, was ashore and General Vick Beau and Colonel Johnson and Colonel Harold Byrd. Howard and Tuey Spaatz were aces together in World War I, and dear friends. So they moved out on the boat and Colonel Harold Byrd, a Texas oil man, had been financing Civil Air Patrol practically. But Major-General Vick Beau was assigned by the Air Force as our boss, as the boss of CAP. They would start working on me because Mississippi was terribly low nation-wide in civil air patrol. I just wouldn't buy it. Vick said he knew me in Washington. So I was up there about two weeks later and Vick and I got tobether and I went out to General Spaatz's house. I went out there for dinner, and the crowd there, I'll never forget, because General Jimmy Doolittle was there and the secretary of the Air Force Stewart Simington was there and Vick Beau was there and Harold Byrd was there, and I never heard better stories in my life than that crowd told. And on the way out, General Spaatz said, "I'm throwing you all out of here. It's one o'clock," because he was flying to Europe the next

day. And as I left, he just looked at me very sternly and he said, "Joe, I'm planning on you straightening out that mess down there in Mississippi." Well you can't say, "General, I ain't gonna do it." I said, "Yes, sir." So that's the reason I got into Civil Air Patrol and I was the head of that in Jackson for two or three years. We had an awful lot of fun with that and did a lot of good work. It's rescue work. When an airplane goes down they immediately notify Civil Air Patrol, and they don't get a dollar for what they do. And they spend their own money on mostly everything, and use old worn-out obselete equipment, that kind of stuff - electronics. We did a wonderful job. I worked awfully hard on that. I used my boat a whole lot. I could convince the General pretty easy if I had him out on my boat there for cocktails or something: "What I need is transportation for two or three hundred cadets to Colorado for summer school," or something. So that's the way the game is played anyhow. My war experiences carried on and I came out of that one with the rank of Colonel. I was just senior lieutenant in the Coast Guard.

JONES: This was after the war when you...

DOCKERY: Yes, this was after the war, way after the war.

JONES: That's a very interesting story. Tell me, I've always thought that submarines in the Gulf was just a wives' tale.

DOCKERY: Oh, no, no indeed. Now if you could have seen the tar along those beaches from sunken tankers. There was two or three hundred miles of it all the way from Panama City back to Lake Charles or Beaumont

or Galveston over there. Oh, no. They just murdered us at first.

JONES: How did y'all go about ridding the Gulf of submarines?

DOCKERY: By airplanes generally. They kept these planes in the air all day long, spotted them and all that. These little planes would spot them and then bigger jobs would come along, Air Force and stuff would come along and blast them all to pieces there. In other words, it takes a good long time for a country to get organized for a war, to fight a good defensive war when the enemy has been planning what they are going to do for years. And there are so many places where the ten fathom curve comes in very close to the beach. That meant the submarine could ease on up there in that sixty feet of water. They would swim ashore or use a rubber raft and come on ashore there and disappear in America. I'm not saying we didn't prevent some of that, because it just happens with the ten fathom curve. On the other hand, off of the Louisiana Coast where they're drilling oil wells, you see, twenty-five or thirty miles out in very shallow water sometimes, twenty miles off-shore and the water is only forty or fifty feet deep. So you had that problem. And then over there in Florida, why they'd come right up to a beautiful sandy beach right along the highway there. But that was interesting too. I met some delightful people there. But my dollar a year was purely voluntary. I was in New York V-J night, on Victory over the Japs night. I was in a crowd of about a million or two people down there at Times Square.

JONES: Big celebration.

DOCKERY: Oh, yes, it was.

JONES: What happened to the Dockery farms during the war while you were gone?

DOCKERY: Well, I had a very fine friend, Oscar Levingston, who was president of the Planter's Bank in Rulesville. Oscar substituted for me, and I had a fine staff of managers anyhow and Keith lived here and things went along very nicely. They went along just fine.

JONES: Were you able to come back up here?

DOCKERY: I was able to get back occasionally because I was not out of the country very much. I had the means. I mean if I had the time I would just come on up here if it meant flying immediately you know, that kind of business. So I was able to stay in touch fairly well. And they offered me a job when I got out - when I was taken off the boat due to losing all that weight, they said, "Joe, you can take a three-hundred foot freighter - there were freighters being made down in New Orleans - out to the Pacific to haul supplies to McArthur up those rivers. That's one thing you can do, or you can take this job on the boat." So I said, "I rather take the job on the boat because I'd be back to shore every month or so." We'd go out and stay out and stay out as long as our water lasted. We had five thousand gallons of water on this boat and no spigots on there. Our water was even rationed out a quart at a time or something like that. When we ran out of water, then we came on back and filled up again.

JONES: That's a very interesting story too. Tell me about - we were talking earlier about how you came to here on the farm switch from cotton to rice, or the rise of rice as a major crop here in the Delta. Tell me

about that.

DOCKERY: Well, that's an easy explanation because the government had cut our allotments of cotton down so severly that we had to find something to do with the land that previously had been in cotton. So one of my managers said, "Mr. Dockery, let's try some rice." Around Greenville, Mississippi, some farmers being closer to Arkansas and Louisiana, tried it one year and then I got in on it the second year. My first crop was in '48. We started in with a couple of hundred acres, and we immediately expanded and the next thing I knew, we had grown so much that the government put that under allotment. But Mississippi started out with nothing. We went up to around fifty or seventy-five thousand acres and stayed there for a number of years because the market dropped out of rice. It was not particularly profitable. We couldn't sell it. We didn't know how to sell it. So a number of us conceived the idea of having a marketing organization and out here in my guest house, we organized the Mississippi Rice Growers Association.

JONES: What year was this?

DOCKRY: I guess that would have to be around '53, along round in there. Just four or five years after we got into the game. We were just tired of having our rice practically stolen from us because we didn't have a marketing association and no one knew anything about rice. Now, rice attracted a lot of Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas people. Most of them were the kind who were floaters. They recognized something that was good, they came in and took the cream and went on away. The Mississippi Delta farmer in a big way did not appreciate the opportunities in

rice, and they didn't get into it until twenty years later, most of the big ones. They went into other things, soybeans, I guess, and whatnot. I went into cattle also. But I saw that I could see a future in rice, because it is a food crop, and heavens knows the world would never run out of the need for food; also because we have one of the main ingredients for successful rice farming: water. That is what we have a sufficiency of down here. It's not a question of getting water with us, it is a question of getting rid of it most of the time. We have these wells that you can drill to get water at fifty to seventy-five feet, where as in California they may go thousands of feet down there, and thousands and thousands of dollars. Their water table is sinking all the way where we've barely tapped ours. The Mississippi Delta, of course, being close to the river, an old bed of the river, we have all the advantages of any rice growing state in America. We produce the finest quality rice, long grain, most of it long grain. We've got all the water and we've got this rich land and, strange enough, the land that is best for rice was not good for cotton. The land that was sour for cotton and what we call "crawfish land" was low and ill-drained and heavy buckshot was ideal for rice. So people who were going broke, making half a bale of cotton an acre, went into the rice business and got rich, just practically overnight. So we organized that. I was president of it a while. I was always vice-president, I think. And then we joined in with Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas in forming The Rice Council for Market Development, which is international. At that time we

only had fifteen or twenty thousand acres of rice; where each of these other states had about a half-a-million acres of rice apiece - including California, they had a half-a-million acres - I didn't have any. Well, the Mississippi Deltans are inclined to let Joe do it or let John do it. So I had the time and the inclination and the motivation to do it. I represented them on practically all these National Rice Advisory Boards. I never did trt to raise my voice and get into an argument with them and I generally went along with them, and they went along with me. Al I told them, "It doesn't make any difference, whenever you slice the pie, we're gonna get our share. It may not be much, but we're gonna get that. We're in it, and Mississippi is going to be represented at all the rice meetings I ever hear about. We're gonna be in it somewhere or another." Now we're up to 225,000 acres of rice, and we didn't have any rice mill until about two or three years ago. The same crowd that organized Mississippi Rice Growers, the stockholders, put up some money and we built a rice mill of our own out here at Cleveland. It was in the last eighteen months, that Uncle Ben had put up probably a $25,000,000 plant at Greenville, and Shipper's International I understand spent $35,000,000. So Mississippi will have three rice mills. That means a demand for our rice. We won't take a beating like we used to. Rice, to me, is the coming crop. They have agreed that we could easily have a half million acres of rice in the Mississippi Delta, easily. It is displacing cotton in many areas. I was at a meeting the other day where there was a well man there and he said,

"I'd just like to tell you I've got more work than I could ever do the rest of this year." And most of the wells are for new growers, going into it even on this present low price basis. The rice market is international, and the United States only grows about one and one-half percent of the rice grown in the world. In other words, there are about several billion people that eat rice everyday. Some of them eat it three times a day. But while we only grow one and a half percent of it, we are the biggest exporter of rice in the world. That includes Thailand and places like that. We are in a terrific situation right now due to this Iranian crisis, because Iran was one of our very, very best customers. We're losing that market. It is an international thing. We're having a terrific row with Japan right now. The Japanese government subsidizes their farmers to five times the world price of rice. That means they buy the stuff from the farmers, a certain amount of it, and then when they get a surplus like they have accumulated in the last number of years, they put it out on a world market and break the market all to pieces. How can we get four dollars a bushel for rice, you might say, when Japan can sell it at whatever they please? If you've noticed the papers in the last few days, there's been a whole lot of that in there. But rice is a crop that is virtually mechanized. You can even plant it with an airplane. You put down fertilizer with an airplane. You put water on it, and keep it under water a good bit at a time. You have weed killers of various kinds. The same equipment with slight changes that handle soybeans can handle rice. In harvesting

rice you're in muddy fields and obviously you would use bigger tires, but the same combine. The mechanically basic combine does that. And that's a crop that blends in well with some of our crops down here. I don't advocate, I don't think anybody does, putting rice land back in cotton, unless you're just goine to give up rice forever, but one year or two years of rice followed by one or two years of soybeans will keep your land in fine shape and you can even irrigate soybeans and make a tremendous crop there. Now I'm very much concerned about rice. And due to my - I got what I call an attendance prize. If you go to meetings long enough, you finally end up an officer. So when Mississippi's time came to have a president of the International Rice Council, they selected me. For two years I was president of this international organization with offices in London and Paris. The head accounting office was in Zurich, still is. They had offices in Germany and all that. I made trips over there. All that was at my own expense, I might add. I didn't get a dime for any tremendous contribution of that type of thing. I'm still president of the Mississippi Rice Council, which is one of the state groups that make up the big organization. I'm director of the big rice council in Houston, and I'm director of this mill out here, and maybe one or two other storage plants or something like that.

JONES: Of the land that you have presently, what do you think the ratio is between cotton, soybeans and rice?

DOCKERY: Well, my own ratio is about two, two and one. You might have 2000 in cotton, 1000 in rice and 2000 in soybeans right now at a minimum. My land

in Sunflower County - well you have to account for more land than that - but, my land here this particular year did have certainly two thousand acres of cotton, about a thousand acres of rice, and I must have had nearly three thousand acres of soybeans. You see, rice has to be rotated. You just can't plant the same land, but you can certainly plant as mucy rice as you want. There are no limitations on rice now. But on the other hand, the government gave you an original allotment many years ago when they put these allotments on, and possibly only your allotment will be supported by a government loan, but otherwise the rest of that you sell on the world market at world prices.

JONES: So do you think as far as futures, do you think that rice is where the Delta has to go?

DOCKERY: I think so. I think it will play an increasingly important part.

JONES: Is it because it is so easily managed?

DOCKERY: Well, it's not the cheapest crop in the world to make, but it's about as sure a crop as I know of. Now cotton is anything but sure. Soybeans, you don't make a tremendous fortune raising soybeans, but you won't go broke raising them either. It doesn't cost you that much to make an acre of soybeans. Rice costs you more, but you get more. You get a whole lot more with rice. You mentioned the word futures; I was a member of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange when it went out of business, because the government made it practically unnecessary. About two years ago, a man down in Lafayette, Louisiana conceived the idea of reorganizing a commodity exchange in New Orleans. We would have as an additional attraction a futures contract

in rice, which you never have had before. Now there's a futures contract in wheats, in oats, in cotton, grain and soybeans, frozen shrimp and plywood, everything you can think of, but there has never been one used in rice. I was still a member of the New Orleans exchange, even though it was inactive. They came to me and they said, "Look Joe, you are still a member of the New York Cotton Exchange and you used to know your way around slightly, and you're also in the rice business. We want you to kind of act as liason between the rice crowd and our exchange to see if we can't get them to back us in organizing this commodity exchange down here." So we worked on this for two or three years at least. My name and the names of Judge Merritt and Bob Wright were the three names that signed the application to Washington. Our legal fees amounted to three or four hundred thousand dollars, trying to get one of those things started. Bob put up all the money and he's going to make a fortune on it. He is entitled to it. It was his idea. We had our first director's meeting about a month ago. The membership is 400 and the government says you have to sell 250 memberships at six thousand dollars a piece before you can crank off. Everything else had to be paid too of course, but you had to have that much. Well, they've sold 380 the last I heard. And we had our first meeting down there when we elected directors, and that's what I'm going down there for tomorrow. Now when I got down there Bob Wright said, "Joe, I know the hard work that this board of directors is gonna have to do. We had in mind making you and Dr. Harlan honorary directors - the man who did all the statistical work from

Baton Rouge, from LSU. "We want to make you honorary directors instead of the responsibility of all this hard work." He said, "Is that satisfactory?" I said, "It's more than satisfactory." So, anyhow, we had a wonderful meeting. He acknowledged who had helped him put the thing on and get it together. He was very gracious about my part of it. We had our first meeting the next morning. It started at nine o'clock and it ended at two fifteen. We only got up from our chairs one time. It's that kind of group; the cagiest and probably ablest body of men I ever sat around a board with. But when they had the first meeting they said, "We want to have a private meeting without you and Harlan first." So they called us in about ten minutes later and said, "Look, honorary means almost as if you had been on it a hundred years and just retiring for that reason, but now what we want to do, with your complete agreement and satisfaction, is to make y'all advisory directors. You will attend every meeting. You will be a director in every sense of the word, except that you won't vote. Do you want to vote?" I didn't care anything about voting. I said, "That suits me better than an honorary director." So there are now about three or four of us who are advisory directors. That means I don't have the responsibility of fighting all the detail that's involved in opening up one of those things. You have no idea. This twenty-five years from now or even five or ten years from now could be equivalent to the Chicago Board of Trade or the New York Cotton Exchange or

any of these other big markets. We hope to particularly use soybeans and then this rice contract. Well I got - finally we all worked. I say "I", but I did have something to do with it. We got the rice crowd to agree to back this thing, and we have two of the top rice operators in the whole country: the president of Riceland Foods in Stuttgard, Arkansas, which is a big outfit, handling a billion dollars worth of soybeans and rice a year; and then the executive man of American Rice Growers, and they are capable of representing rice anywhere in the wide world. High-priced executives are basically what they are. And I'm going down there for that. We hope to be open for business by the first of March or something like that. But we've got all this money in hand. It's interesting to me that we got the city of New Orleans to lease us the Old Board of Trade, which is down there near the river, a perfectly beautiful building. It's an old fashioned building with a dome in the ceiling painted and all these signs of progress like the Mississippi River, unloading cotton, steamships and all that type of thing, but beautifully done. And marble columns all over the place. Old New Orleans. Just lovely. We are going on ahead and fix it up like it ought to be. And that's one contribution of which I am strictly delighted, and also the fact that I don't have the responsibility that I would have as a regular director on the staff. I'm just an advisory director, and that's the job I like.

JONES: That's something that you ought to be proud of. It's new life in

American capitalism. One final question I wanted to ask you. It's getting late. Rice, soybeans, and the type of labor and the type of farm management that those two crops require is something that's really changing the way the Delta has traditionally been. It doesn't require the great use of manpower and the labor force that cotton did. Do you see it as something that will change the way the Delta has always been?

DOCKERY: Well, it is going to add to the continuation of the changes that we've been going through since we first mechanized with tractors. I often think that when I first came down here, a mule plowed one row at a time. Now my own renters do twelve rows at a time with a tractor. They run up and down the field as fast as they can go. So it's that kind of a thing. Now we know how many people, how many hands a cotton picker, mechanical, can pick. Whereas a cotton picker, probably you set a hundred of them out in the field they probably wouldn't average two hundred pounds of cotton a day, taken on an average. So the rice end of it requires a more intelligent operation. It does that and all. I would say that the greatest change in farming, almost, means that a farmer today has got to be a chemist among other things. He's also got to be a banker. He's also got to be a person familiar with government regulations, keeping up with that. He's got to be a distributor of his own product. And he's also got to contend with a labor supply that is anything but substantial. As we can tell by the welfare rolls, we know where a good bit of the labor, a number of

the people in the Mississippi Delta, of course white and black, get their living from. They don't get it working out on that farm anymore. So it's not a situation that I personally wanted to be in. And I managed to start getting out some twelve or fifteen years ago, and I'm completely happy that I am not responsible personally for it. Of course, I'm affected by it because if they don't make a good crop, my percentage of the crop as the landowner gets down to the vanishing point you might say. But I don't know what labor is going to do. I don't know whether if you're educated and all whether you'd stay here or not. I must say that it's almost impossible for a newcomer to break into the farming game; for one thing because of the land, the equipment, $50,000 or $60,000 combine, or more. It's the same thing for cotton pickers, $100,000 for a farm tractor, or $200,000 for a caterpillar tractor. No one can get in fresh on something like that. So it comes down to the old landowners who have managed to hold on to their land, which has escalated in value to where it's utterly ridiculous. They would be lucky to get two or three percent on the value of his land. That won't average that on an average rental, you might say, some of this land and the price they're paying. So inflation is so deeply ingrained in agriculture until it's beyond me. The cost are going up every day; the things we buy. Certainly let's take energy for one, it's outstanding, of course, right now. But that's not the only one. The steel that you buy, the plowers that you buy. Everything is so much more

complicated and it cost so much more. I don't know. It's not a question of putting a seed in the ground and waiting for it anymore. It's a matter of protecting that seed before it's ever planted, and then the minute it shows up, well, you start spraying it with some kind of bug killer or something to keep lice off of it and then use your various types of fertilizer and you analyze your soil all the time. It's not the old timey deal where the English said, "I believe I'll make one boy a lawyer and make one a soldier," and the stupid one they put on a farm. Well, I tell you, that just doesn't hold. But it's also true that we've got some young farmers in the Mississippi Delta that are doing a magnificent job, and they're living a beautiful life too. They're getting a whole lot more out of life than their fathers did at that same age. I'm talking about employees too. I'm talking about boys - some of them got an agricultural degree, some of them didn't. In my case, a law degree would have been a lot more valuable to me than what I learned in the two years of agricultural college, absolutely. So you've go a new class of person. And I would also like to say in the sense of these younger people, as I call them. You don't hear about big estates being wasted or drunk up like you used to in the old days. The Delta was full of that in the old days. They gambled it away maybe, or they drank it away. You don't have too much of that kind of thing anymore. I don't know why. But as far as I'm concerned, I don't know. And I can site you a dozen cases of where the young people are carrying on beautifully, and are just - well their land is inflated so much in value that they're

worth so much more money for that reason, but they're doing a good job with the thing too. And they're living a nice life. They get on an airplane. They fly to Europe for a week or ten days every now and then. They go skiing. They utilize their time well. And now it's the time where you pay a man for an hour's work you want an hour's work out of him. You just don't create something for him to do. There is not the same spirit, I don't think, exactly letting a tenant, or you feeding one you might say from the first of December to the first of March, and then if he was there he went to work for you if he hadn't gone to Chicago, and that cancelled the debt in lots of cases. The Delta has tightened up that way. And when you get ahold to a real good tractor driver, well, you do everything possible to make it practical for him to stay. But you can't go beyond a certain point in something like that or you'll have him running the show too. No, I think the future of the Mississippi Delta is mainly going to be in rice, and I think it's going to be a good future. A real good future.

JONES: So I guess it's pretty safe to say that the Mississippi Delta has always been in flux and it's always changing. And who is to say that rice becoming the major crop here in the Delta won't make it better than it's ever been?

DOCKERY: That's indicated in the value of these lands anyhow. Somebody must know something. Somebody must. I'm completely happy with my main holdings. And I believe that my heirs, my three daughters, feel the same way about it. This land will always take care of them.

They can always get a good living out of renting this land. I've never felt that agriculture would ever go out of existence. It's not going out of existence.

JONES: It can't.

DOCKERY: Synthetics can never take the place of certain things.

JONES: Well, tomorrow is gonna be a long day for you I know. I want to thank you for having me here, and for the nice supper, and more than anything, for the pleasure of your company and your conversation. I enjoyed it. Thank you for the tape.

DOCKERY: It was a pleasure. Anytime.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Janice Sanders)

(Final Copy Typed by Janice Sanders)

Index of

JOE RICE DOCKERY

December 13, 1979

by John Jones