

Chesser-Williams House, Gwinnett County
Interview with Jerald Williams
Interview and transcription by Nicole Mullen
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I met with Jerald Williams on Tuesday, September 26, 2006 at 10:00 am. Jerald Williams is seventy-one years old; he currently lives in a modern house just a stones throw away from the historic Chesser-Williams house. Both homes reside on the same lot. Jerald purchased and moved into the adjacent property two years ago. Jerald was born in the Chesser-Williams house in 1935 and moved away when he got married to Sue Tanner in 1954 at the age of nineteen. His grandfather, John Newton, purchased the house at age 57 in 1924 and was married to Octavia Williams. His father was James Earnest Broadus and was married to Lillie Bell Williams. Lillie Bell's maiden name was Vanderford. Jerald Williams returned to the house on a regular basis to visit his parents. After his father passed away in 1983 he frequently visited his mother who continued to live in the house until the mid-1980s. Mrs. Lillie Williams died in 1988. Since her death, the home has not been occupied. Jerald answered many questions about growing up in the house and how the house has changed over time.

Mullen: What were the rooms used for when you were growing up in the house?

Williams: Well, it's a four room two story part with the kitchen on the side. It's just regular residential living. My mother and father, and my brother, and my grandmother and my grandfather all lived there. We had one main room called the heater room. It wasn't a heater; it was a fireplace—the main room we stayed in for heat. We put wood in the fireplace, went to the kitchen to eat. It was three bedrooms, two upstairs and one downstairs.

Mullen: And where did you sleep? Did you sleep upstairs or downstairs?

Williams: I slept downstairs.

Mullen: In the first room to the left [room 101]? And did you stay in that room with your brother?

Williams: I slept with him, and then after my grandmother died, I slept with my grandfather. Me and my brother we'd fight over the covers. I'd sleep with my grandfather most of the time.

Break in tape.

Mullen: Can we go back and talk about what the rooms were used for? You said your mom used the first room upstairs as a quilting room?

Williams: Yes, that's right, a quilting room upstairs and that's where my brother also slept, in a bed, kind of over in a corner of that room too.

Mullen: How much time did your mom spend quilting upstairs?

Williams: Her and three other ladies in the community, they would complete one in about three days. During the winter they would piece quilts and then sew them together. Then they'd put them on a quilt rack. My mother put them together on a quilt frame with wooden pegs to hold it together. She had it hanging from the ceiling. There were four one

by two strips of wood that were on a frame ten feet long. [*This information was recorded at the follow-up interview on 10/16/06*].

Mullen: And did they sell them or did they just make them for their families?

Williams: For their own use, we sold a few of them since my parents passed away since we had so many quilts; we didn't need them all. Now of course, central heat you don't use them no more. But we still got several quilts that she made.

Mr. Williams: I'd sleep under three or four quilts in the wintertime.
[*This information was recorded at the follow-up interview on 10/16/06*].

Mrs. Williams: They were so heavy you couldn't turn over.
[*This information was recorded at the follow-up interview on 10/16/06*].

Mullen: You slept downstairs and most of the family slept downstairs because the room downstairs had a fire place?

Williams: That's right. The main activity room where the fireplace was at, then eventually got one of these warm morning—that was the name of it—heaters. Drop door from the top, put the wood in and fill it full of wood before you go to bed and it would last till about midnight before it'd burn out. But you get up in the morning and it was straight cold and you start all over—fill the fire. Filled the kitchen the same way, built the fire in the stove in the kitchen to cook breakfast and so forth.

Mullen: And so you had a wood stove growing up and then your mom switched to a gas stove?

Williams: About the time we moved out. I got married in '54 so somewhere along in there, '55, she got a gas stove with a butane tank in the back yard; same thing with heaters. They put a butane heater in the kitchen and one in that room [room 101]; I slept in there, and that's where she slept. Then, in what we called the main activity room, that wasn't used anymore hardly ever with just her and daddy at home. We'd come up and spend the night and that was where my wife and I would sleep in there in the main room on the right [room 103]. They just called it the guest room from then on out.

Mullen: So where did you eat? Did you eat in the living room or in the kitchen?

Williams: We ate in the kitchen. We had a stove in the corner and a table right in the middle there, several chairs. After we left home that's where mom and daddy stayed 90 percent of their time. They would sit around the heater in there. Of course they would go back in one of the bedrooms to go to bed in the night time. The kitchen was the main activity room when it was just them two.

Mullen: I imagine in the summertime you spent a lot of time out on the front porch.

Williams: Out on the front porch, out in the yard; till I graduated high school in the summertime, I was out in the field working. I plowed a mule until 1951 and did a corn crop and the gardens and all that. We canned vegetables; that was the main way of living back in them days. You raised it in the summertime and canned it and eat it in the winter time—no money to go to the store with and so forth like that.

Mullen: What was the second room upstairs, beside the quilt room used for [room 202]?

Williams: It was just a junk room, used for storage.

Mullen: For the main living room, the painted room, what kind of things did you do in the living room?

Williams: Read comic books, my brother was the big book reader, I never did read that much. He was always reading, Western novels and so forth. I wasn't much of a reader.

Mullen: After you moved out did the use of the rooms change?

Williams: They remained the same. The furniture stayed the same in them. That room on the left now [room 101], that's the bed mama slept in until she took sick and died. We never took the bed out of the room. She had a stroke and went to a nursing home for three years. That's where she passed away at. That bed's never been touched. My wife keeps it made up.

Mullen: Did you ever sleep on the porch in the summertime to keep cool? Or were there too many mosquitoes?

Williams: No, at night we would always go in the house to sleep; we'd never sleep out on the porches. The temperature and humidity was different back in those days to what it is now, just leaving windows and doors open it stayed pretty cool. Down through the years, the temperature and the humidity changed, lots of window fans and attic fans. Now everybody has air conditioning, couldn't survive without it; but it wasn't that way back in childhood growing up. Everybody was in the field working. We had entirely different climate conditions then what it is now. I don't know what change has caused it.

Mullen: So in the summer did anyone sleep upstairs?

Williams: That's where my brother slept after he got on up, teenage boy, all that, he stayed up there. He went in the army. I was still at home at that time and he slept upstairs. When he came home from the army, he still slept upstairs. When he got married in 1956, '57, when he married, he was still sleeping upstairs at that time. I got married in '54 and moved out so he kept the room upstairs right on.

Mullen: Is that the same kitchen that has always been on the house or when you were younger was there a different kitchen?

Williams: No, ever since I can remember it's been like that. I know outside, looks like when it was built they messed up on the measurements somewhere on that eave up there. It's always been that way since I can remember.

Mullen: Has there always been a metal roof on the main house?

Williams: The roof on it now has always been on it since I can remember and I'm seventy one year old. When I was about six year old I can remember; it's never been replaced; it is the same roof.

Mullen: Now some of the porches have changed?

Williams: We rebuilt that front porch two or three times, now all three of them are in real bad shape. Being exposed to the elements, that's what they do. I know I helped rebuild that front porch twice, maybe three times. The last time I did it was after I got married, probably in the early sixties or something like that when we rebuilt it the last time.

Mullen: And what about the side porches?

Williams: Well we had to replace the floor in 'em and the ceiling came out on the kitchen porch side there. We had to put some seals in it a time or two when they rot out.

Mullen: What were those side porches used for?

Williams: No particular thing. My mother had the old flip-flop Maytag washer on the porch which is still sitting up there. The washing machine, she bought that in probably '49 or '50. It always stayed on that porch there—didn't have no running water until way on up in the years. And finally they did have a cold water line in the house but no indoor plumbing, no bathroom, no nothing like that in the house ever. We always used the outhouse and heated cold water on the stove, whatever, washer machine—that water had to be heated on the stove or wash pots out in the yard. I still have her two old wash pots. We used them back in the old days, washing the clothes, all your work clothes: put 'em in a pot and boil 'em, take 'em out, rub 'em down, rinse 'em off and hang 'em up on a clothes line to dry. We used the wash pots in the winter time for killing the hogs to heat the water; then you'd cook the lard out of the fat, put it five gallon canister. During the spring and summer we cookin'; we strictly depended on the farm for a living.

Mullen: So did you have a refrigerator system?

Williams: The first refrigerator probably came in the middle or late fifties; I am not for sure. We had an ice box for several years—the ice truck running around. We had a little ice box on the north side of the house on that porch there, an old twenty-five pound block of ice. The ice man ran around.

Mullen: So he just drove around selling ice blocks?

Williams: Every two or three days he'd come around and backed up to the porch, and put a block of ice in it. We'd pay 'em probably fifteen, twenty-cents. I don't remember what it was back then. And we didn't have an electric refrigerator until the late fifties. We still used the ice box. I wish I'd kept it. They let somebody have it [referring to his parents]. It would have been an antique today.

Mullen: Was there any painting like in the living room on the bedroom on the left [room 101]? Was that room ever painted over?

Williams: It never had none of those paintings like that other room has got. It was just raw wood and my mama, she painted it. And she and I put paneling on the kitchen at one time.

Mullen: So all of the decorative paintings that are on the house stayed on the house, you never painted over any of them?

Williams: All of them stayed; we never painted over them. What you see was there, years ago maybe, (laughs). I have no idea when it was painted.

Mullen: So what did you think growing up having such unique paintings on the walls?

Williams: Well, being raised in it from the time you can remember on up we didn't think nothing of it.

Mullen: Did you ever ask where is this painting from?

Williams: Well we were always told that some traveling German came through and he painted that for room and board. No one said anything about no time limit. It was painted before my grandfather bought the property so it goes on back to the Chesser property when they owned it. We had no idea, really, when that painting was really put on.

Mullen: There were three chimneys, but now two of them are no longer in use. When did those two fall out of use?

Williams: The fireplace in the room where the painting is; it [the chimney] got to leaning away from the house and I can remember as a child, grandpa went to the woods and cut a big pine tree and put it at an angle, a 45 degree angle, and propped it against that chimney and it stayed up for many, many years. And it finally rotted and fell and me and my daddy, one day, it was probably in the late '40s, early '50s; we pushed that chimney down 'cause it was going to eventually fall. We took a plank off them side upstairs and we just took a two by four and pushed and it fell.

Mullen: And that's the chimney on the north side?

Williams: On the north side; the room that's got the paintings on it. And then the chimney on the kitchen it got in bad shape and me and my mother were talking one day.

She said, "This here chimney is going to fall one of these days." And I said, "Yeah, I hope there's nobody home when it does." And one Saturday afternoon wasn't nobody home; there come a thunderstorm, and for some reason it did collapse and fall.

Mullen: Do remember what years the chimneys collapsed?

Williams: The one in the kitchen had to be in the '50s and that other one was probably in the early '50s too.

Mullen: So by that time you had the wood heaters?

Williams: We had the wood heaters. You see that chimney that's still standing over there? One of these days it's going to come tumbling down too. I don't hang around too close to that chimney in case it does come tumbling down.

Mullen: And so what happened to the remnants of the chimney?

Williams: We just hauled them off. Then my daddy had fox hounds and we'd drop a rock in the hole where he dug under the fence and they were used for flower beds. My daughter's got a few of them around her house, for flower beds. We did try to maintain them and keep them; they were rocks in the weeds; get rid of 'em.

Mullen: There were remnants of some green paint on the exterior, on the front door. Was there more paint around the entrance?

Williams: That was part of the original painting, what he done originally. It wore off around the door.

Mullen: Were the scalloped borders filled in before [on the east side exterior]?

Williams: That was some of the original painting; when that room was painted it had designs around it. If you look up over the roof of the porch, under the eaves of the house, there is also paintings across there.

Mullen: The acorns?

Williams: The acorns are still there, you show me some painting now that stay up one-hundred to one-hundred and fifty years or something like that without falling off. Those were the original pictures; I think you saw a copy of it. That was real lattice work on that porch. Back in the old days, it was pretty fancy looking at that time.

Mullen: So were the two lattice areas filled in at one time?

Williams: Not painted but it had lattice under the roofs' of the porch and the counters and so forth. All the paintings on that house have never been altered in any way. What you see now is what it was; course it was in better shape back in the old days.

Mullen: Did you ever have to do any repairs to the foundation?

Williams: The main stones outside the perimeter have never been altered. Now the floor got a little spring in, maybe, we crawled underneath there, and put some cinderblocks on a certain floor joist to steady the floor. Now the porches, when we rebuilt the porches we rebuilt the pillars on there. But those stacked stones, they have never been altered in any way. They still amaze me, how they can stack them rocks with no mortar in them and nothing like that. They just had ways of doing it back then; they definitely wasn't in no hurry. Did you see some of those wooden pegs that they used to put those joints together, some of the woodwork? I showed you a couple of the wooden pegs when your class came. I had a couple of extra pegs that I found between the walls and they're used on certain parts of the floor joists around the house and all. I've got two of them downstairs. I can show them to you. They were used primarily at your counter-spots, they would go into your floor joists and you upright them; that's what held them in place, was the tapered wooden pegs. One day one of the lower planks of the outside deteriorated and I went to replace it and there was a whole row of them that had been lying inside that wall all those years. I gave my relatives all some and I kept a couple of them myself.

Mullen: Do you remember when the street was widened? Do you remember a line of oak trees in front?

Williams: They were about, probably, eight or ten oak trees right along the side of that road there and on the far north end out there, there was several cherry trees right along the side of the road. Today 40 percent of the trees in that yard aren't there that were there when I was a child fifty or sixty years ago. Some of them died, my grandfather would cut them for wood—keep 'em from going all the way to the woods to cut one—he just cut one in the yard to be burnt. The last two in the front, the state highway took them down this year widening that road there.

Mullen: So some of them you cut down because you needed the wood?

Williams: Well, Red Oak tree is bad, the inside deteriorates and it will just be a hollow shell and it will fall on your house. Now that road was not paved until 1952 or '53; it was just a dirt road. In the winter time there were actual cars going up and down and everything—only about a dozen cars going up and down the road back in those days.

Mullen: There is a small pantry off of the kitchen; do you remember when that was built?

Williams: It was there when that kitchen was built with no ceiling on it. In the wintertime we referred to it as the refrigerator; it was the coldest room in the county. It had no ceiling in it and all that. That's where we would keep our meat in the winter time. We would kill the hogs and of course we'd cure the hams out in the saltbox and take 'em out and wash 'em and hang 'em in there and take some of the meat down—slice off what you want to cook and hang the other back up. It had no inside ceiling on it; it was exposed up to the roof. All the walls were naked. It had an outside wall on it. It was called the pantry;

we kept canned goods in it. Of course the wintertime, we'd go in there and drop a quilt over the canned goods to keep them from freezing.

Mullen: What sort of out-buildings were on the property?

Williams: At one time it was eighty some odd acres and my grandfather sold off fifty-five. I can remember when we owned it but I was so young I don't remember the years it was sold off to Mr. Crow. When I look out from the kitchen, we had a smokehouse and it was in pretty deteriorated condition from when I can remember it.

Mullen: So when you were young you weren't really using the smokehouse anymore?

Williams: Well to kill the hogs we would. We would put the meat in there. My grandfather would build a little fire and use some kind of wood to make it smoke and make sure you kept flies away while the meet cured out. North of there where my daughter lives now we had two barns. We had three barns, one of them was an old log barn. It was done, I can remember, it was in sad shape; it finally rotted on down. The corn crib, to put your corn in, and what was referred to as a barn. It had two stables facing the road, we kept the mules in and on the back side we had two stables for the milk cows. In the middle is where we had the cow feed and up in the loft is where we put the hay, the fodder, corn shucks, whatever, for the winter feed for the livestock. We always had a milk cow growing up.

Mullen: How many hogs did you have at any given time?

Williams: Oh, we never had but more than two that I can remember.

Mullen: So you just had a couple at a time, just for food?

Williams: For home use.

Mullen: And how many cows did you have?

Williams: We always had one milk cow and we had a young female; we referred to as a heifer, you got a good milk cow you kept it and when that old cow got too old to produce then you would get rid of her. I can only remember having one mule; we had what's called a one horse crop I guess. My daddy went to Public Works in '46 or '47 and left the farming up to me and my brother, and my mother. Then my brother graduated from school in '48 so it was up to me. So I plowed and never missed a day of school. I graduated in 1951 and I went to Public Works and they finally sold the mule to some fellow in Lawrenceville who had a little small garden. The barn and the corncrib they eventually deteriorated and fell down.

Mullen: Were there any other outbuildings?

Williams: We had the castle, which was a two hole outhouse, which is still standing. My daddy's been dead now twenty-three years. I helped him build that thing years before he died and it's still standing. I refer to it as the castle (laughs).

Mullen: So what kind of crops did you grow? Did you have a farm just to feed your family or did you live off of it in anyway for income?

Williams: It was just for family use. We had about ten acres of corn. That was to feed the mules, and the cow, and the hogs and we'd shuck corn and grind corn meal out of it. And we had patches of garden for the beans and tomatoes and such and we would can— everything was put up in glass fruit jars back in those days. I still got my mother's old pressure cooker; it held eight quart cans. We would can corn, cut it off the cob, cook it, and put it in those jars and can it. Same thing with sausage, you would kill the hog and cook your sausage and put it in those fruit jars and pour hot grease on it and seal it and turn the bottom upwards and that grease would get down around that lid and make sure it was sealed good to preserve the meat. Then all you had to do was take it out and warm it and it would be ready to eat. We canned green beans, tomatoes, squash, things like that, cucumber-pickles. Back in the '40s and before then you lived off the land. There wasn't nothing to do around here. Daddy used to work some at the sawmill for fifty cents a day and walk three or four miles to get to the saw mill for work.

When I graduated from high school in '51 I went to work in Atlanta. The minimum wage was seventy-five cents an hour, going all the way to Atlanta for work. That was big money for the country boys back in those days. My children and grandchildren now, I tell them about it, they look at me and laugh: "How'd you survive?" They just can't believe how we were raised up, everybody, everyone in the neighborhood.

If our milk cow went dry the neighbors gave you milk. If their cow went dry you gave them milk. We had a pretty good size apple orchard here. Mr. Holland had a peach orchard. Mr. Aiken on the north side had apples and peaches and everybody helped them selves; swapped back and forth and gave to one another. Nowadays you don't know who your neighbors are, but back then everybody helped one another out. If you had a crop and got sick; the neighbors came in and plowed your crop until you got well again. I can remember being twelve or thirteen year old or something like that and going to hoe cotton in another man's field 'cause he was sick and wasn't able to. Neighbors was neighbors back then; they'd help you out.

Mullen: So everyone had small farms?

Williams: Everyone, I guess, Mr. Holland here and Mr. Aiken had the two biggest farms. They bought them back in the, I'd say, early '40s. They had a government program; they'd finance you to buy a farm, you'd pay 'em back. Of course ours wasn't that way; my grandfather had bought it earlier. But Mr. Aiken, he was a World War I veteran; he bought his through the government. He kept the family farm and handed it down to his children. Mr. Adams bought one out here and he sold it to his boy and Mr. Allen had one and kept it until he died and passed his onto his children. Mr. Holland did the same thing. This is called Holland Park now, which is part of the subdivision that I live in. But

everyone got their farms that way through the government or either share cropped for someone.

We moved away from up here for three years. Before my grandmother died, somewhere there was a family riff. I wasn't even going to school at that time; I was so young. We moved over to Ms. Jackson's place and sharecropped on thirds. She got a third of everything we made and that's how the rent was. We didn't have no money to pay the rent. We hauled us two loads of corn; we'd take her one load of corn. And that's how sharecropping was back in those days.

Somewhere there was hard feelings; I don't know what it was about and we moved out for three years. My grandmother died and at the cemetery my grandpa said I'm going home with y'all. He went home with us and as soon as the people got out of the house we moved back up there.

Mullen: So there were other people living in the house?

Williams: At that time someone lived there and took care of my grandmother because she was bedfast. I was in the third grade of school when that happened and we moved back into this house when I was in the third grade and we stayed there until I got married and moved out. We was out two or three years. Of course we communicated back and forth and all that. Like today, I guess, people had bad feelings, but I didn't know what it was all about at that time.

Mullen: So what did your dad do for a living?

Williams: He farmed at that time and then he might have helped someone work on their house a little bit and then he worked at a sawmill. And then in '46 or '47 the government started financing housing for the veterans getting out of World War II. He worked with Mr. Cain down there building houses. He'd come around and picked up three or four people, sitting in the back of that pick-up truck going to build houses. And then in the late 40s the union come in and he got to join the company union and he worked on apartments over there in Lakewood, building them. Of course those apartments have been torn down and replaced probably two or three times since then. He worked with J.A. Jones Construction Company building apartments back in the late '40s; '47, '48, '49, '50, something like that.

Mullen: How old were you when you moved out?

Williams: When I got married?

Mullen: Yes.

Williams: Nineteen year old; I graduated high school at sixteen. I went to work, had to lie about my age because they wouldn't hire nobody that was sixteen year old. I told them I was seventeen. I went to work on Spring and Tenth street and I stayed there, working there, when I got married. Their records when I left still had me at seventeen year old. They wouldn't change it: "Can't do it," they said, "child labor laws."

Mullen: So where did you move to when you got married?

Williams: We rented a two room apartment on Euclid Avenue over in Atlanta. We lived at 226 Euclid Avenue and that house is still standing... We moved down here, it will be two years in November... We got a chance to buy this house...[the house beside the Chesser-William's House].

Mullen: Was there anything else besides quilts that your mom made by hand?

Williams: She made me clothes. Back in the '40s a lot of people had small chicken houses and raised chickens and chicken feed came in printed different design sacks. And the people who raised chickens, they would wash those sacks out, iron them, and sell them for ten cents a sack. And my mother, she would buy some and make her clothes and make me shirts.

Mullen: With the chicken sacks?

Williams: Chicken feed sacks.

Mullen: Pants or shirts?

Williams: Shirts, I got two pairs of overalls for Christmas and I couldn't stand the things. I got two new pairs of overalls at Christmas and a pair of shoes.

Mullen: Were they itchy?

Williams: No it wasn't. The women made a lot of female dresses and blouses. The women wore those chicken feed sacks.

Mullen: So why didn't you like the overalls?

Williams: I just didn't like overalls, but that's what I wore as a child on up, until I got in high school; I got to wearing blue jeans. All us country boys wore overalls.

Mullen: Were there other recycled materials she made clothes from besides chicken sacks?

Williams: Well you could go to the clothing stores in town. Mr. Crow down there had that general store. He had cloth; if you saw a design that you liked he would buy so many yards of it.

My mother was a good seamstress; she could cut and sew anything and make it look good. She used to make me and my brother a lot of shirts and she made her a lot of dresses. Some of the nieces she'd make dresses for. My wife, her mother, did have a small chicken house, and they did the same way. They'd wash those feed sacks out and sell them for ten cents. A few sacks added up to a lot of money in those days. It was country; it ain't like that now.

Mullen: So did your mom have a sewing machine or did she sew by hand?

Williams: She had an old Singer; of course, she did a lot by hand too, you couldn't do it all on the machine. She'd do some of one and some of the other. I've got two daughters and one of them has her sewing machine now. It was an old pedal top Singer. I bought a little motor and put it on [for his mother] after I got married; I guess so she could have an electric machine. I put a motor on the back and put a little belt on it. If you took that belt off you could go back to peddle if you wanted to. She was a very good seamstress.

Mrs. Williams: My mother and daddy raised chickens for extra income and the chicken feed came in colorful different prints. You could sell them or you could make things for yourself. So my mother made lots of bedspreads and curtains to match out of the chicken sacks.

Mullen: Did she make quilts out of them too?

Mrs. Williams: She had some scraps that she made some quilts out of. Some of those chicken feed sacks sold for a quarter and some for a dime. A lot of my dressers were made out of chicken feed sacks.

Mullen: And did you know how to sew your own clothes too; did your mom show you how to make dresses out of the chicken sacks?

Mrs. Williams: Yes, I knew how and my sister. A lot of it was sewed with our fingers, some was sewn with a sewing machine.

[This information about with chicken sacks told by Mrs. Williams was recorded at the follow-up interview on 10/16/06].

Mullen: Is there anything else that you can think of that you would like to tell me about the house?

Williams: Of course, you saw that handrail from upstairs to downstairs. When I was a child I slid down that thing. It seemed to be a mile long. Of course you see it ain't but fifteen foot long, you get on it now, you're down at the bottom, before you know it; but, I slid up and down that thing a million times.

Mullen: The steps were so narrow compared to the way they make steps now.

Williams: Times have really changed. Modernization, it's good in a lot of ways and again it's not. We are living too fast this day-in-time. I wouldn't take nothing for memories on the farm. We wasn't poor but we sure wasn't rich either (laughs). We always had something to eat. You let your milk in the bucket, down into the well, right down in the water line, keep the milk cool. Or if you had a spring you'd carry it and put it in the spring. Most every farm had a spring.

Mullen: You had a well?

Williams: I had a well up there. Of course that well's got a cement slab up over it now. It's still there.

Mullen: When did you stop using the well?

Williams: My daddy got a second-hand well pump in it after I left home. He got it from a cousin of ours that went on county water and he put an electric pump in there. He had one cold water spigot run into the house to pump cold water in. In the winter time he put a one-hundred watt light bulb against the tank to keep it from freezing up in the winter time. The well house broke over. Of course the old tank pump is still sitting outside of the house; it's all rusted. But that's the way they used to do it.

Mullen: So your mom didn't do any weaving; she just did quilting?

Williams: No she never did do no weaving. We didn't have no spinning wheel. I can remember seeing some spinning wheels in the other houses but I never saw one being used. I never did know how they operated.

Mullen: And is there anything that your dad made by hand?

Williams: No, he might have made that bench that was sitting in the kitchen that we sat in there to eat on. We had a bench on one side of the kitchen table; I don't know if he made that or what. Now my mother's daddy, when she got married he made her a kitchen table and I have that table downstairs in my basement now that he made her back seventy some-odd years ago. And I also got an iron bedstead down there that was her grandmother's....

Mullen: I forgot to ask you, when was the ceiling put on in the pantry?

Williams: It would have been at least in the mid '40s or later. It had been something that my mom, she rigged up to do. That woman, she set her mind to do something she would get in there and work. She would go to the field and stay all day long and work in the field. She could do a little patchwork around the house. It was a way of survival, not an attitude; everybody did it.

Follow-up interview with Mr. and Mrs. Williams on 10/17/06

This entire interview was not all adequately recorded on tape due to a problem with the location of the tape recorder which made it difficult to hear Jerald Williams clearly on some parts of the tape. Some of this second interview with Jerald Williams was compiled by hand-written notation at the interview; memory of the conversation, and partial tape transcription and is therefore not entirely verbatim. Both Mr. and Mrs. Williams are referring to Jerald's mom when they say 'she.'

Mullen: Mrs. Williams, what are some of your memories of the house?

Mrs. Williams: . . . I remembered the house just being nestled in the trees; to me it was just an old country home. It was very clean. Mrs. Williams kept the home very clean and she worked real hard to keep it up. She was so creative in doing things, with things she had and made do. I remember that she made a lamp out of a little old jug she had.

Jerald and I lived in Atlanta when we first got married but on the weekends we came back to her old house and stayed the weekend. We were used to having heat in our apartment in Atlanta. So here, the rooms would be so cold. She would heat her old irons and wrap them in some material or an old blanket and put them at the foot of our bed so our feet would get warm.

When they did get running water in the house, when the sink was made, she dug a trench all the way to the outhouse so the water going through the sink would go right under the outhouse to keep it clean. Also I remember the old washer machine that we had. Lots of times, I would bring my clothes home for the weekend to wash and it had the old ringer type that slung from one tub to the other and you manually put it up and it cranked it through. It was an old Maytag washer that she bought with her own money selling eggs.

The house was always cool even though we had a wood stove. The way the house was made you could open up the windows and the doors and whichever way the breeze was coming, it would come through the house.

We just had [a lot] of time on that old back porch making ice cream—having a good time. She was a good cook and she always kept cake or pie or something cooked; her chocolate pies were really good. She was a person that cleaned a lot, but you had to clean a lot in those old houses.

Mr. Williams: We still maintained the gardens on the weekends and canned corn, beans, and such. We did hog killing in the wintertime.

Mullen: So did your parents keep hogs after you moved out?

Williams: They continued to keep a milk cow for many years, and hogs.

Mrs. Williams: She churned her own butter throughout the '50s.

Mullen: Were there any other homes in the neighborhood that had paintings on them?

Mr. Williams: This was the only one. I never saw or knew of any other ones.

Mullen: What was the distance between you and your neighbors while you were growing up in the home?

Mr. Williams: Going north it was a couple of hundred yards to the first one and the other closest one was a quarter of a mile away from our house.

Mullen: When was the paneling on the kitchen walls installed?

Mr. Williams: I would guess in the early '80s.

Mrs. Williams: I would say in the '70s.

Mr. Williams: Before the new paneling went up, for a time she had put up cardboard all along the walls.

Mullen: Why did she put the cardboard up?

Mr. Williams: To cover the cracks where the wind blew through. You can still sit in that kitchen and look up at a certain part and see sky where the roof don't fit on the house too good.

Mullen: What did the original wood panels look like in the kitchen before the cardboard was put up?

Mr. Williams: They looked like the rest of the downstairs wood paneling.

Mullen: So they were hand-planed like the rest of the downstairs wood panels?

Mr. Williams: Yes.

Mullen: When was the cold water line installed?

Mr. Williams: Probably in the late 1960s. Once the county water line was rigged up she started drawing from that instead of the well. This was sometime in the early 1980s I guess.

Mullen: How old is the original well? Is that the same well you had growing up?

Mr. Williams: It's the same one since I can remember and I am seventy-one year old. It's been there at least since the 1930s, but it may even be the original well that was built when the house was made.

Mullen: Which one of your parent's father owned the home?

Mr. Williams: My daddy's father owned the home. My father was born in 1906 and his father bought the home in 1925, so he must have been nineteen when his father bought the home. Before that time he lived somewhere in the Lawrenceville area.

Mrs. Williams: Jerald's mother and daddy married in 1929. So, it's my thinking that they probably started living in the home once they were married and taking care of Jerald's grandfather and his wife. And I found out that Jerald's brother Jack who was born in 1931 was also born in that house.

Mullen: Where did your mother live before marrying your dad and moving into the house?

Mr. Williams: She probably lived closed by in the area as well. I am not sure where.

Mullen: Is there anything else you would like to add about the house?

Mrs. Williams: Well I remember every weekend when we came we would sweep yards and burn leaves in the fall—acorns and leaves. As well as keeping the house clean, she kept the yards swept clean; the leaves burned and I enjoyed getting out and helping do that.

Mr. Williams: Back in childhood days they didn't have grass growing in the yards. They kept them all dirt. We always had a swept dirt yard. It wasn't until sometime in the late 1950s that she had a grass lawn.

Mullen: So all the homes in the neighborhood when you were growing up had swept yards; it was just dirt?

Mr. Williams: That's the way it was back then. In Atlanta they had grass back in the '40s but out in the country it wasn't until the 1950s that grass lawns were common.

Mrs. Williams: The brooms were made out of dogwoods; you'd go to the woods and get a bunch of limbs and tie them together.

Mr. Williams: We also made brooms out of broom straw for sweeping the house with.

Mullen: Did you both make brooms?

Mrs. Williams: I don't remember making them. I remember using them.

Mr. Williams: I used to collect branches to make flip-staffs with—we call them flip-staffs; city folks call them slingshots.

Mullen: Did your mother grow flowers or have flower gardens?

Williams: She grew flowers; she had a flower garden. Back in those days dahlias and petunias were popular.

Hunting and fishing was a way of life back then to supply meat. After I was married I would visit my parents on the weekends and go out hunting or fishing with my daddy. In the summertime we fished. We hunted rabbits, squirrels, possums. We fed the possum for two or three weeks, get its system cleaned out, and then kill it, put it in the oven and bake it with sweet potatoes. Best, sweet potatoes you've ever eaten because that possum had all that fat. There were a lot of quails back then; we'd go quail hunting. Quails were about the best meat that you could hunt and eat back then.

Second Follow-up Phone Interview 11/4/06

This interview was not recorded but transcribed via phone as the conversation occurred.

Mullen: Could you please describe some of the furniture that was in the rooms?

Williams: On the porches we had three or four rocking chairs. In the house, in the main living room there were three or four straight chairs. In the bedroom there were two beds, a chair or two, and a dresser. Upstairs in the quilt room there were a couple of beds set up over in the corner. You saw the iron bedstead we have in our current home; that used to be in the house. The other beds were old-timey wood frames with designs on the headboards. You don't see those now, some of them were dark-colored wood. My mother sold them all off to antique people years ago to refinish. We had a small four-legged table in the living room to keep the flower pot or radio on. In the hallway there is the wooden ringer to squeeze the water out of your clothes. It was part of the old hand crank washing machine; the legs folded out. The wooden tub deteriorated years ago. My mother got that back in the mid-'40s.

Mullen: How were the flower gardens designed and kept?

Williams: Just around the house, where you had a good spot of dirt, where there wasn't too much shade from the trees. Dahlias, petunias—all the ladies kept flowers. And old maid, it was a stem top with one bloom that grew real tall, that isn't the proper name for it though.

Mullen: Did you have other siblings besides a brother?

Williams: No, just my brother, he was four years older than me.

Mullen: Did all the other neighbors get grass in the late 1950s as well?

Williams: Everybody back in my childhood days had swept yards. In the mid '50s to late '60s everyone in the neighborhood started putting grass in. We got citified.

Mullen: Was the second room upstairs ever used for anything else besides a junk room?

Williams: It was always used a junk room as far as I can remember.

Mullen: Did you ever have a telephone in the house? If so when was the telephone installed?

Williams: I installed a telephone for my mother in the late '70s so she could call me if she needed to. We had it in the house until she went into the nursing home.

Mullen: When was the outhouse built?

Williams: We must have built that thing in 1980. That is one of two or three outhouses that we built. That was what we called a two holer.

Mullen: Was there ever a fence around the property?

Williams: We had a cow pasture fence probably for about five or ten acres to keep the cows and mules in. It was a three strand barbwire fence. I can remember as a child they had some old split rails on one side of the fences, stacked them zig-zag. I can remember a little section of that; when that deteriorated they put the barbwire in its place.

Mullen: What was the well like before you had the cold water line installed in the house and you had to go outside and draw water from the well?

Williams: It was called a well windless. It had a pulley on it. You had to crank it by hand and the rope would wind up and pull the bucket up. That's what we used until they got the well pump in the late '50s.

Mullen: Could you tell me more about your grandparents?

Williams: My grandfather, he is the only grandparent I ever knew. I was in third grade, when my grandmother died. I was in ninth grade when my grandfather died. No one in the family knew anything about his relatives. We knew where my grandmother was from. She was from the area; she was born less than ten miles up the road.

Mullen: Was your grandfather retired; was he a farmer at one time?

Williams: I never did know him to do any work. He was around seventy-nine when he died and that was in '44 or '48 when he died. I was thirteen when he died; he must have been sixty-six when I was born. He was probably a farmer before we started farming the land. One thing I remember about him is, he only had one tooth left in his mouth, and he did have that tooth pulled before he died. He kidded that he was saving that tooth for seed.

Phone Interview with Eugene Smith conducted by Nicole Mullen 10/11/06

The interview was transcribed as Mr. Smith spoke over the telephone.

Benjamin Chesser was Eugene Smith's great grandfather. Mr. Smith said that Benjamin Chesser had twenty-one children. He married young and was married twice. Benjamin Chesser and his first wife had ten children; he had eleven children with his second wife. His first wife got sick and the eighteen year old housekeeper looked after her. When his first wife died Benjamin Chesser married the housekeeper who took care of his former wife. Colonel W. Chesser was Benjamin Chesser's son, the father of Eugene Smith's mother. Eugene Smith remembers his mother, Mary Delphia Chesser, telling him the story of how an itinerant German folk painter came to town and painted parts of the exterior and interior. One of Benjamin Chesser's children who was five years old stood watching the painter. The painter said to the boy "Did you bite that apple?" He was joking with the boy about one of the apples in the apple frieze in the living room that he painted with a bite taken out of it.

Benjamin Chesser was a farmer and did not have any slaves because Chesser did not believe in slavery, nor did he believe in killing his fellow countrymen over slavery. However, he respected the South's decision to enter the Civil War. He joined the Georgia Volunteers Regiment and drove ammunition wagons. Benjamin Chesser was with General Lee at Appomattox when he signed the surrender at the end of the Civil War.

Chesser farmed the land and had livestock. Mr. Smith knows of no other work done by Benjamin Chesser other than farming. He is not sure why Benjamin Chesser decided to move to Alabama. Benjamin Chesser's second wife passed away in 1942.¹ Eugene Smith's mother told him that everyone in Gwinnett County was farmers back when she was growing up. Each farm was important to the community and everyone chipped in and helped each other out when they needed it. For example, Mr. Smith said that neighbors helped each other pick cotton or plow corn fields.

¹ According to the files at the Gwinnett County Historical Society another relative by the name of Ken Berryhill, who emailed the Historical Society in 2001 said that he was the great grandson Amanda Lockridge Chesser. Amanda, the first wife of Benjamin died at the age of forty-seven and is buried in the Hog Mountain Cemetery or Prospect Church Cemetery. Benjamin remarried to Hannah Fountain and the couple later moved to Rainsville (formerly known as Chavis) Alabama around 1901. The couple is buried together at Town Creek Cemetery in Rainsville, Alabama. The researcher of these files attempted to contact Mr. Berryhill at the address in Houston, Texas, located in the Gwinnett County Historical Society's files but to this date has not heard back from him.