

# **Leonard Benton**

## **A Verbatim Transcription of an Oral Interview**

1701 East Main Street  
Urbana, Illinois  
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Interviewed by  
Melinda Roundtree  
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives  
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## Introduction

This is an interview with Leonard Benton, a resident of the Champaign County Nursing Home. Mr. Benton, a retired janitor, came to Champaign after his retirement in Tennessee.

The interview was conducted on July 12, 1983, at the Champaign County Nursing Home in Urbana.

The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

**Note:** Inaudible parts of the tape are indicated in the text of the dialogue in the following format: *(inaudible)*.

## **Leonard Benton, Oral Interview**

Melinda Roundtree: Mr. Benton, first of all, we would like to ask you — about your background, your family background. Could you tell us a little bit about when you were growing up?

Leonard Benton: Well, when I was growing up .. Well, let's see. I played bat all the time, what time I wasn't going to school.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell us a little about your parents and family?

Leonard Benton: Well, I had good parents. I had a good mother and good daddy, but I ain't got now. All of my folks now is dead except my two brothers of us and the Bentons. It was a young Benton (*inaudible*) but my other brother lives in Springfield. 'Cause he's older than I am.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of work did your father do? Do you remember?

Leonard Benton: Worked on the farm.

Melinda Roundtree: On the farm?

Leonard Benton: Yes ma'am, raised wheat, corn, stuff like that.

Melinda Roundtree: Did he have his own farm?

Leonard Benton: No. We lived on the white fella's farm.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood? What kind of things you did?

Leonard Benton: Well, let's see. Well now, I raised tobacco. Of course, after my daddy died I raised tobacco and corn and wheat, like that. The boss man had — oh he had to get at least five hundred and seven acres on the farm. Of course, after my daddy died, he buried my daddy free. He didn't charge us anything because some of us was just small then. And he told us, said, Well, if ya'll do right and stay there — he said now I'll be with you—(*inaudible*). So after that my other two brothers, two twin brothers which both of them are dead too now, 'cause it's just two of us living brothers, one in Springfield and one here.

Melinda Roundtree: I wanted to ask you a little bit about the sixties with the Civil Rights Movement and since you weren't here — you were in the South during that time right? You were in Tennessee?

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am that's right.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell me how the blacks reacted there? How they...

Leonard Benton: Well, now, they was all right. Yes ma'am they was all right.

Melinda Roundtree: How did things — did things open up more?

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am that's right.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of — what schools did you go to?

Leonard Benton: Elementary school and high school. Both of them. I went to the big school first and the big school probably it got burned down. But they sent me over to elementary school (*inaudible*) across the streets over there. So I stayed there.

Patrick Tyler: Was this in Tennessee?

Leonard Benton: Uh huh, in Tennessee. Just burnt down.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember the name of the high school?

Leonard Benton: Brownford, Brownford High School.. I guess you heard of it, I imagine. I imagine you have, but just forgot it. 'Cause it was a great big building, great big building.

Melinda Roundtree: You remember what year you graduated?

Leonard Benton: No, I never did graduate.

Melinda Roundtree: Oh you didn't.

Leonard Benton: No, ma'am never did.

Melinda Roundtree: Remember the first job you held?

Leonard Benton: Let's see, the first job I was raising tobacco — raising tobacco, corn and hogs. Yes ma'am that was the first job I had. Then after my mother died, well, I stayed with one of my oldest brothers. Of course, he's dead, too. I raised tobacco (*inaudible*). Well, they kept on sending me from the school, so I went on to school and they just got on my back. And so I've been there ever since 'til I come up here.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of people were in the community that you lived in? Were they friendly or...

Leonard Benton: Yes some of them was. Some of them was and some of them wasn't. And some of them wouldn't speak to you at all.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you know them all?

Leonard Benton: Yes I knew them about all, just about all.

Melinda Roundtree: You said you have a lot of relatives there?

Leonard Benton: Yes.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell us about the school, high school, what kind of courses you took? Do you remember?

Leonard Benton: I can remember some things, but not all things because it's been so long. Well, now it was a good school there. And the principal there, Mr. Patterson, he'd been there for, I guess he'd been there for twenty some years. But after the school burned down they changed principals then.

Melinda Roundtree: You said the first job you had was raising tobacco?

Leonard Benton: Yes, raising tobacco, corn.

Melinda Roundtree: What other jobs did you have?

Leonard Benton: Well, other jobs I had at the school, the last one I had.

Melinda Roundtree: At the school?

Leonard Benton: Yes ma'am the last one I stayed there eighteen years.

Melinda Roundtree: You were a custodian.

Leonard Benton: Yes, a janitor, yes. That's right.

Melinda Roundtree: That was at the high school.

Leonard Benton: Yes, over at the high school. Then left from there then — first school burned down, part of it — they sent me to the elementary school and that's where I been there ever since 'til I come up here.

Melinda Roundtree: What year did you come to Champaign-Urbana?

Leonard Benton: Huh?

Melinda Roundtree: What year did you come to Champaign?

Leonard Benton: Didn't do anything, 'cause I retired.

Melinda Roundtree: Oh, you retired after you finished working there?

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am.

Melinda Roundtree: And then you came here?

Leonard Benton: Yes ma'am.

Melinda Roundtree: What year was that?

Leonard Benton: Well, I was at Jewel's house when I come up here.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember what year it was?

Leonard Benton: Let's see, 1980.

Melinda Roundtree: 1980?

Leonard Benton: Ah huh.

Melinda Roundtree: You lived with your brother?

Leonard Benton: I lived with my nephew.

Melinda Roundtree: Your nephew?

Leonard Benton: Yes ma'am.

Melinda Roundtree: Where did he live? Where does he live at?

Leonard Benton: He lives in Champaign.

Melinda Roundtree: In Champaign?

Leonard Benton: Yes ma'am. He works at the university.

Melinda Roundtree: University?

Patrick Tyler: What's your nephew's name?

Leonard Benton: Joe.

Patrick Tyler: Joe?



Leonard Benton: Joe Benton.

Melinda Roundtree: Are you a member of any club or organization or anything like that?

Leonard Benton: No, it's been so long. It's been so long, no I couldn't imagine anything like that at all, been so long.

Melinda Roundtree: When you came here to Champaign-Urbana what did you notice? What kinds of things about the people?

Leonard Benton: Well...

Melinda Roundtree: Were they friendly or?

Leonard Benton: Well, now some of them was and some of them wasn't. Some of them wouldn't speak to you at all. No, ma'am.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you like it here, since you've been here?

Leonard Benton: Yeah, I like it. The first time I — now I'm going to tell you the truth. The first time I didn't like it at all, but now as I got used to it, I like it so far.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you attend any church?

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am, they have a church right in here every Sunday morning.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you attend a church outside this nursing home?

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am outside. But they have the church in here in now.

Melinda Roundtree: In here?

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am right in here where we at now. So then, when I was at my nephew's house, now I went to their church while I was there.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember what church it was?

Leonard Benton: Let's see? I know the church but I can't — Jehovah's Witness they call it.

Melinda Roundtree: Jehovah's Witness? Oh.

Leonard Benton: Yes ma'am, that right.

Patrick Tyler: Could you tell us about some things that has happened to you since you've been living here in Champaign-Urbana?

Leonard Benton: Well, I had kidney trouble and (*inaudible*) whatever you call it, whatever it is. But I know one thing, man. I was hurting all — one morning they carried me to the hospital. One morning I hurting all over. They carried me to the hospital bed the last time, then they pumped that knee. I mean, drew some of that fluid out of my knee. Now my knees don't bother me now. But I used could walk — got so where my knees — where I couldn't get up. So I walked a long time, but it don't bother me now. Now, bother me now by eating. That's my trouble eat everything, but they just won't let me have it. 'Cause they won't let me have no more Wendy's at all, won't let me have no ham meat, and don't let me have no ... and no salt. That salt uh uh. Stuff don't taste good unless it's got a little salt on it, but they don't give me any at all. Don't give me any at all.

Before I come up here, I had my eye taken out. Of course, you couldn't tell it. No, you couldn't tell it. But you couldn't tell it from that other. I had it taken out in February. So it never gave me a minute's trouble after I had it taken out. So I asked him was he going to put me to sleep. He said yes, (*inaudible*). Said you couldn't stand it (*inaudible*). But now it didn't give me a minute's trouble. Well, I stayed over there three days. Well, they sent me back home. Well, I had to go back. Him put that stuff in my eye, but it never give me a minute's trouble. So I hadn't got but one good eye — this one over here, this eye on this side. But I can go anywhere out in that yard I want to go, go upstairs, anywhere I want to go. Anywhere I want to go. So it never give me a minute's trouble.

Melinda Roundtree: You said you have, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

Leonard Benton: I had four, four. I mean five of us. I had two twins, brothers, and rest of us just brothers and sisters.

Melinda Roundtree: And you're the only one living now?

Leonard Benton: I got one more brother living in town.

Melinda Roundtree: He lives in Springfield?

Leonard Benton: Springfield, Tennessee, yes ma'am. Porter is his name.

Melinda Roundtree: Were you married ever?

Leonard Benton: Yes, I have been married. Me and my wife parted.

Melinda Roundtree: Oh.

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am, me and my wife parted.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you plan on staying in Champaign for a while or do you want to go back home?

Leonard Benton: Well now, I would like to go back home and see my folks, but I don't know whether they'd let me or not. Probably afraid I'd get sick. Well, now listen, you can get sick anywhere, anywhere you go. 'Cause see, the Lord, He'll take care of you where you on your way if you trust him. He'll take care of you on the way back and on back here. Yeah, they afraid I'd get sick. I talk to the Lord. Now I won't get sick. If I talk to him that's right. I'd make it there and make it back.

Melinda Roundtree: Well, Mr. Benton we thank you for letting us interview you.

Leonard Benton: Yes, ma'am. That's all right.

Melinda Roundtree: That's all the questions we have for you right now.

Leonard Benton: All right.

End of Interview