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Kevin Ming
Transcription: Tenant Farmers
4/11/93
Flk 399

Introductory Comments

MING Officially speaking, what church do you belong to?

FLEMING Elk Lick Baptist Church. Right here in the city of Spa.

MING I guess the one we're in now.

FLEMING That's right. Your on church property and you will be till you step over to mine, over across the road here.

MING Could you describe a typical ^{Sunday} morning service, the basic things you do?

FLEMING Sunday school starts at ten o'clock, and then at fifteen till eleven, the bell rings to call us in to the worship service. The worship service starts at eleven o'clock and we try to get out by twelve. And then I run home and have lunch.

MING Do you have an evening service?

FLEMING Yeah, ^{also} a Wednesday night service and ~~also~~ a Sunday night service.

MING Is the evening service the same?

FLEMING Basically. Unless there's a special on of some kind. On a fifth Sunday night in each month we have a singing and basically that is the church members, and they do a wonderful job of singing. If you'd ask anybody about Elk Lick choir and they'd say its one of the best in the country anywhere.

MING That's actually my next question, what role music plays in your worship?

FLEMING Without music we'd be lost almost. And that's no reflection on the preacher. The music is so great, if I do say so. It would just take away a lot without the music, and I'd say music is fifty percent of the worship.

MING Is it the same music that you grew up hearing?

FLEMING Same music as I grew up hearing. Exactly.

MING Are there some particular songs or hymns which are the particular favorite of your church?

FLEMING Well, I'd say there's several that are favorites of the church, and the choir well they can sing any song that's in the book. And they don't practice, so help me they don't practice. Now every once in a while they'll have a little practice session, but they're just plain good.

MING What were some of the favorites that you can remember growing up as a young man, that you have now that are still your favorites?

FLEMING I can't come up with any favorites, but if you had a song book you could just pick through there, ^{and there's just gobs of them.} And they do just such a great job with the songs.

MING Can you tell me a little about what you remember about going to church as a child?

FLEMING I can remember that very well. We went to church and when I was a kid we lived in Todd County, and I can remember my Dad packing me it seemed like ten miles, but it couldn't be over four or five, I'd be sound asleep and he'd carry me home at night. I can remember lots of times on that. And it was a church of a different denomination to what we have, but my Dad sung with that church group there some, not a lot. And he used to be a good singer and sung when he was a young man and they had 'em a quartet that he was a part of.

MING Was the worship service basically the same?

FLEMING ^{No} ~~Now~~, I don't really know the word I want to use. It was more of a Pentecostal type church ~~than our church is.~~

ELROD Did it have a certain denomination title like Baptist or Church of Christ?

FLEMING ^{No} ~~Now~~, I'm not sure about this now but I think it was an independent church. ^{I'm not sure about that.} I know it wasn't a Baptist, and it wasn't a Presbyterian and it wasn't a Methodist. And I don't think it had any, just Pea Ridge Church is what it was.

MING Who was the first one who taught you about God?

FLEMING Definitely, my parents.

MING So did you learn you learn in the home before you went to church?

FLEMING Well, I'm sure I did. We lived a right smart piece from church, like I said while ago, and we didn't attend regular. My dad worked awful hard, but we did go to revivals. All the time. ^{Like I said,} I do remember going to Sunday school one time.

Portion about the fellow chopping off his finger was omitted from the transcription.

MING What were the revivals like?

FLEMING Well, there was one at this Pea Ridge Church and there was what they called the Claymore Camp Meeting, and that's still in action there. We'd go to it in a wagon, we'd ride in a wagon, it's too far to walk. Literally, people'd come from all over the country and camp there. It was a camp ground. And we'd go to meetings over there, and you talk about shouting, buddy they had shouting there.

And they'd have it, I forget what month of the year.

MING What's your church's belief about prayer? do you think God answers your prayers?

FLEMING. Definitely, not always like you want ^{it} him, but he does answer it. Like I said, you might get an answer you didn't like, if that's a good expression.

MING Has he ever given you an answer that you didn't like, that you can think of?

FLEMING Well, I'd say yes, but I wouldn't care to go into the content of that.

MING Have you ever thought about, just on your own, why it is that there ^{seems to be} so much evil in the world, why so many bad things seem to go on, you know, why God allows this to go on.

FLEMING Well I think it's in scripture, but we can't understand why does it go on, but we ~~can't~~ no judge.

MING Tell me what it's like being a ^{part} member of the religious community that your a part of.

FLEMING Well, it's just like a family. Okay, you have your differences, okay you have brothers and sisters, you have differences, but you love each other after it's over. Differences shouldn't make any difference with us, everybody got a right to his own opinion. I always say everybody's got a right to be wrong.

MING When you remember your church community growing up, was it basically the same kind of atmosphere, the same kind of closeness?

FLEMING No, it was more of a closeness then. Okay now, we're just involved in the church. Back when I was a kid, we went to church and then we visited. And now, a big portion of our able bodied people are working at public works. And that just cuts out the visiting, because if you work at public works and then a great big number of them farm on the side, or do something else on the side, and when you do that, there's just so many hours in the day, and you just don't have time. When I was a kid, it wasn't anything uncommon to look up and see somebody coming down the road to spend the day

with you. Didn't excite my mother a bit.

MING When you were growing up in your church community, how did the members help each other out, or did they?

FLEMING Definitely. I'm thinking ^{one} of time now when a man lost the last mule he had, no he had two and lost one of them. Okay, he's a poor man, so the community pitched in and bought him another mule. And if you got burned out, why they'd pitch in and get you back on your feet.

MING Could you tell my ways in which your faith has supported you, times in you life when it's helped you?

FLEMING Well, the first thing that comes in to my mind is nineteen fifty six, my wife was sick, pregnant, we carried her to Logan County to the hospital, they sent her to Louisville to the hospital, they sent her back to Russelville, and from Russelville to Nashville, and it was a very trying time. And faith there takes you a long ways, a long ways.

MING Has there ^{ever} been a time when things are really bad, when you've doubted your faith?

FLEMING Oh yes. Oh yes. And that's not a good feeling. You get depressed when you get that way.

MING Is there a specific example you can think of?

FLEMING No, not really, not really.

MING Okay, well I think that's all on the religion questions.

ELROD I'm going to ask you some questions on the landowner/tenant relationships.

FLEMING Okay.

ELROD How was the amount of work divided between you and the landowner? *This is ee going to be brand new to me, too! The first question*
what was the relationship there?

FLEMING There was two different ways that they went. If the landowner furnished the stock and tools, he got ^{the} half and the renter got half. And if the renter furnished ^{the} stock and tools, then he got two thirds and the landowner got a third.

ELROD Was there another term used besides sharecropper?

FLEMING Tenant farmer or sharecropper.

ELROD Was there any way in which the landowner himself was actually involved in the labor?

FLEMING They was, especially with my Grandad. He'd come up there and stay a week and help Dad in the busy part of the year to get the crop out.

ELROD So he didn't just stay home, he led a busy life?

FLEMING Uh huh, he owned some land around here, and he farmed it himself. What went on at his house I have no idea, cause I was a youngster. I was ten years old when we moved from there.

ELROD When your house had problems, were you required to do the repair? or was that the landowner's responsibility?

FLEMING The only thing that I can remember, the house caught afire, up in Todd County, and burned a little, and my Grandad put the new roof on the house. It was a board roof and he put a new tin roof on the house.

ELROD At his expense?

FLEMING At his expense. And they had a working, that's the way I see it now, they hired a man for the head carpenter, and the neighbors came in, and he did and told them how to do and what to do.

ELROD As far as how the family got on as tenant farmers, how did you get on as a tenant farmer?

FLEMING I have no idea. The only thing is, see, that was before my day.

ELROD Do you think that tenant farmers, if their parents worked for a man, that they would work for the man as well?

FLEMING Possibly.

ELROD Do you think they (your parents) enjoyed their work?

FLEMING Oh yes, yes sir, they loved to work. I don't think I knew of but two, three people who didn't just love to work.

ELROD Where did the extra labor needed for special projects like raising a barn come from?

FLEMING The extra labor that come from that, there'd be somebody in the crowd who had a little extra knowledge, and they'd just invite the community, and say hey, we're going to have a barn raising next Thursday.

ELROD The man who had the knowledge of the carpentry, basically.

FLEMING Not necessarily. The man who was having the

building built. Anything to go good, you got to have somebody to look to and make sure everybody's doing it right. And they'd say, okay, we're going to have a barn raising, and they'd go in there and put that thing up in no time flat.

ELROD Was the landowner always the head.

FLEMING Not necessarily. If he had any carpenter knowledge, well then, he would be, but if he didn't have any carpenter knowledge, why then he'd get somebody, and I have an idea that sometimes the lead carpenter got paid.

ELROD Would that be out of the ordinary?

FLEMING I've only been to one or two, and as far as I knew, everybody just pitched in. I put up one one time, and the landowner himself was a carpenter, and he engineered the rest of us, and told us what to do, and he did to. They'd works just like the rest of us.

ELROD Why do you suspect he was getting paid?

FLEMING Well back there then, didn't anybody have any money much, at least that I knew, and they didn't want somebody doing something for em for nothing, so they couldn't pay them very much money, I guarantee you that, but they'd probably pay them a little money to take over the lead.

ELROD Do you think the tenant was every exploited by the landowner, or do you think it was a fair and just arrangement?

FLEMING I'd say that ninety percent of it was fair and just. Okay, back in those days, a handshake was just as good as something wrote on a piece of paper. And people did not cheat, some people did, but we never had any problem in our family of anybody accusing us of cheating, or that we did or did not get our share of the crop. I think everybody was just honest, course, I'm sure there was a few heels around that would take advantage.

ELROD Do you recall hearing about certain landowners who had a bad reputation about how they ran things?

FLEMING Well the only thing, and this I don't much believe. There was two people, one of em was a landowner, and the other was a cropper, and the landowner said that when they'd gather corn, when they'd get to the end of the field, said that the cropper would get up on the other side to turn the team around and then when he'd come, he'd walk down the other side. And that being the case, he'd tromp down and put on quite a little bit more. But I knew both those people, and I didn't think either on of em would do that

Most the people I knew, the sharecropper would aim, if any difference, to give the landowner a little more than he'd taken, because he was on his honor and people, they lived up to that honor.

ELROD Would the landowner and his family keep themselves kind of seperated from the sharecroppers, let's say would the landowners children play with the sharecroppers children?

FLEMING Oh sure, yeah. Of course our sharecropping was in a family way, but there wasn't any problem like that. The kids all played together, played with the neighbors kids, cept I was a loner.

ELROD You used the term cropper. What's a cropper?

FLEMING It's a sharecropper.

ELROD That pretty much wraps those questions up.

ELROD What was the major crop?

FLEMING Okay back when my dad was farming, my grandad grew wheat, corn, and tobacco.

ELROD Not much cotton.

FLEMING No. I can't much remember anybody in this locality raising cotton. Maybe they did, but I never heard of it. Corn and tobacco, and course they had to raise hay to feed the livestock. That's about the size of it.

MING Well that's the first two questions on here, so I'll go ahead and do this one [farming beliefs and practices]. What did you use for fertilizer for the crops?

FLEMING Back in my grandad's day, they just used fertilizer. I think it was just twenty percent phosphate, and of course they had manure that they hauled out and spread, and that's fun too.

MING How'd you distribute the fetilizer?

FLEMING With a pitchfork, wagon, and team. Pull them dudes in there and take that stuff and dig it up with a pitchfork and sometimes a hoe and get out in the field and throw it off, and go back and get another load.

MING Do you know what it cost to fertilize a field?

FLEMING Very little. I have no idea what it would be. Because there wasn't much money involved in it.

MING Who provided the seed?

FLEMING In that case, they had two corn cribs and they divide the corn, and when it came time to plant the corn, I'm sure my dad went to his crib and shelled the corn himself, for the seed corn, and then he would turn out the tobacco for the tobacco seed, we didn't know what it was to buy tobacco seed, or seed corn either. Now where they got the wheat to begin with I don't know. I'm sure they raised it, but I don't know about that.

MING How could you tell when a crop was doing well or not doing well?

FLEMING You can tell, but I don't know if I could explain it to you. But if you'd a been there, you'd know.

MING If it wasn't going well, is there anything you could do?

FLEMING Put more fertilizer on. Course you couldn't get more manure, cause you cleaned out the barn once a year. That's just like spring training, or uh spring cleaning.

MING How did you deal with insects and worms?

FLEMING Buddy, believe me, we pulled em off by hands, the worms. And uh, my dad would put Paris Green, I have no idea how to spell it, that was a poison, and he would come to the house and spray it and it would be as green as that right there, and we was uneasy afraid we'd get poison on that stuff. And the worms, we just pulled em off.

MING How often did you have to do that [pull the worms off]?

FLEMING Start in Monday morning and finish dinner on Saturday, where you could go to the ball game that evening.

MING So you did that almost every day?

FLEMING Yeah, you'd have to do that stuff all the time. See, you had to sucker it to, sucker it and worm it. I don't know if your familiar with suckered or not?

MING Suckered? No.

FLEMING Okay well, you'd have this tobacco plant, and between every leaf and the stalk, there's this sucker come out and you have to take your thumb and pull those things off, and go plumb to the ground and then the next week, you'd have to do the same thing again. And back there then, when they'd cut the tobacco, they had a tobacco knife, and they'd start at the top of that dude, and they'd split it nearly to the ground, then they'd bend it over and chop it off, turn it upside down and let it, what they call wilt, that way it wouldn't break up when they picked it up. You had to watch

it because it get sunburned and ruin, and put it on a stick. Take five or six, whatever it take to fill up a stick, and you put em up in that barn.

MING Where there ways you predicted the weather, like were there ways you could tell if it was going to rain?

FLEMING Well, here again it was an educated guess with these people. They would figure, how it look back yonder, and another thing, if the sun went behind a cloud when it set, it would rain, and if it came up behind a cloud, it would rain. But there's a saying, red in the morning, sailors warning, red at night, sailors delight. Now I tell you what, they was religious on it being right, and I tell you what, I watch it now too. It's about as good a sign as I know.

MING Can you tell if it's going to be a particularly good crop, are there ways that you can tell?

FLEMING Yeah, yeah, it's just an instinct.

End of side one.