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Joe Helton
Ricetown
Owsley County, Kentucky
February 22, 1987

Dr. Garrett: And where do you live?

Joe Helton: Ricetown, Kentucky.

Dr. Garrett: And where were you born, Joe?

Joe Helton: Jett's Creek, Breathitt County.

Dr. Garrett: How about, how big a family were you over there?
Who was your family?

Joe Helton: My wife and I raised six children.

Dr. Garrett: I mean who were your mother and father?

Joe Helton: Oh, J.M., Milan, Helton was my father and my
mother was Gilbert, Martha Gilbert.

Dr. Garrett: And who were their ancestors? Do you know?
Grandparents?

Joe Helton: Yeah, my grandparents were Joe Helton and Kate
Mason.

Dr. Garrett: They were from Breathitt too?

Joe Helton: No, they were from Tennessee.

Dr. Garrett: And then how did you get over to Owsley County?

Joe Helton: My father left there in 1900. I was born over
there in '98 and he left in 1900 and came to Indian Creek.

Dr. Garrett: To this place?

Joe Helton: Right down the road down there.

Dr. Garrett: Down toward Colson Duffs place.

Joe Helton: Yeah, just the next house below Colson's.

Dr. Garrett: Alright, and then you've been up here around...

Joe Helton: I've been here all my life except the first two
years of my life.

Dr. Garrett: Where were you then, in Breathitt County?

Joe Helton: In Breathitt County.

Dr. Garrett: Alright, now where did you go to school when you were a kid? That's way back there, isn't it?

Joe Helton: I went to school right here at this Grassy Branch school for grade work and then I went to school...I was 20 years getting through high school. I went to Buckhorn and did some work. I went to Booneville and did some work. I went to Berea and did some work. I went to Richmond and did some work to get through high school. Getting 16 credits.

Dr. Garrett: To finish high school?

Joe Helton: Yes sir.

Dr. Garrett: You went to Berea, even Berea and Eastern to finish high school?

Joe Helton: Yes sir, I did.

Dr. Garrett: Alright, now then, you tell me you spent quite a time in college.

Joe Helton: Yes sir, I entered college in '31 and I graduated from college in '58.

Dr. Garrett: Gosh, you were a long time getting out of all...

Joe Helton: I was a long time getting out.

Dr. Garrett: Of course, you were teaching school here.

Joe Helton: I was teaching all the time and agoing.

Dr. Garrett: When did you start teaching, Joe?

Joe Helton: 1917

Dr. Garrett: Where did you start teaching your first school?

Joe Helton: Here at Grassy Branch.

Dr. Garrett: Did you teach here all the time?

Joe Helton: I taught here 22 years.

Dr. Garrett: And then where did you teach?

Joe Helton: I taught at Booneville and at Athenia at Cow Creek and at Bee Branch on Buffalo and at Wolfe Creek and Owsley County. That covers the 45 years that I taught.

Dr. Garrett: Now when did you get married and who did you marry, Joe?

Joe Helton: I married Helen Jackson, she's from here.

Dr. Garrett: Who were her parents?

Joe Helton: Her parents was Steve Jackson and Dicey Hall.

Dr. Garrett: Where were they from? Were they natives of Owsley County?

Joe Helton: He was from Breathitt County and she was from Owsley County.

Dr. Garrett: How many children did you all have, Joe?

Joe Helton: Six.

Dr. Garrett: Who are they?

Joe Helton: The oldest one's been dead for two years right away.

Dr. Garrett: What was his name?

Joe Helton: Edwin, and Phiona, Inez, Adelaine, James Glen, and Lois Shirley.

Dr. Garrett: Now tell me about your school, Joe. You said that you started school.....Where did you start school? Down here at Grassy Branch? Now who taught you in that building?

Joe Helton: Taylor Gabbard was the teacher that year.

Dr. Garrett: Was he the one that went on to become the president of a school out west?

Joe Helton: He was the one that went to Arizona.

Dr. Garrett: Did he become the president of Tempe State?

Joe Helton: I don't know.

Dr. Garrett: I think so.

Joe Helton: He might have.

Dr. Garrett: He was raised here?

Joe Helton: He was raised over here on Cow Creek.

Dr. Garrett: Then who taught you then?

Joe Helton: After I finished the eighth grade over here I went over to Athenia over on Cow Creek. I was over there from 1913 to 1916.

Dr. Garrett: Was that a high school?

Joe Helton: It was supposed to be. It wasn't accredited.

Dr. Garrett: Was it a church school?

Joe Helton: It was a church school.

Dr. Garrett: Now Gene Garrett, my uncle, taught you down here.

Joe Helton: Yes Sir, right over there.

Dr. Garrett: How long did he teach?

Joe Helton: He taught two years.

Dr. Garrett: Where did he train, do you know?

Joe Helton: I don't know.

Dr. Garrett: I think he trained at Eastern. He told me one time he would have been the first student enlisted in Eastern except the president had him take a carriage out to the railroad station, and bring in....I think he was the 13th. You might be interested in knowing he had two boys Russell and Clifford. You knew them, did you, or knew who they were, and Russell is in the process of dying of a heart attack in Florida. He was 77 years old. That's Clifford is dying and Russell lived over on the.....

Joe Helton: Now who's that you are talking about?

Dr. Garrett: That's Gene's boys.

Joe Helton: I never did know Gene's children. I knew his wife, Bertie.

Dr. Garrett: Now where was she from? Who was she?

Joe Helton: She was a Combs. Her mother was a Reynolds. Her mother was old Uncle Helsey Reynolds daughter.

Dr. Garrett: Who was her Dad?

Joe Helton: Her daddy? I don't know who Bertie Combs daddy was. She had another sister Julie that married a ~~Geales~~ ^{Seales} boy there in Booneville.

Dr. Garrett: Who was her....who was her...Wasn't she raised by Aunt Bertie.....

Joe Helton: Bertie and Julie and Harlan was one of them.

Dr. Garrett: Harlan Combs?

Joe Helton: Harlan Combs. You knew them.

Dr. Garrett: I was thinking Bertie was a Duff.

Joe Helton: No, Bertie wasn't no Duff. Bertie was a Combs.

Dr. Garrett: Aha, now where did they live over on Buffalo?

Joe Helton: Where did Bertie? I don't know. They weren't from Buffalo. They were from Cow Creek.

Dr. Garrett: Now, my mother was born at the mouth of Cow Creek in 1887, and you don't know anything about that of course, you aren't that old. Tell me a little about this country up here. What was this country like in the early days, Joe? What was transportation? How did they make a living and all that stuff?

Joe Helton: They made a living the hard way. This is not farming country anyway, and they cleared up the land and lived off the land.

Dr. Garrett: How did they store food? How did they get through a winter for instance?

Joe Helton: Now, we've not had electric except for 25 or 30 years. You know they had to store their food by drying it or salting it. They'd salt their bacon and kill their hogs. Put away meat and lard thataway in the smokehouse.

Dr. Garrett: Food got a little bit skimpy by late winter or early spring didn't it?

Joe Helton: I imagine it did.

Dr. Garrett: Between the crops. Did a lot of them live in log homes in those days?

Joe Helton: Yes.

Dr. Garrett: Most of them?

Joe Helton: Most of them.

Dr. Garrett: Was there a lot of fishing in this creek? Was it a pretty creek, big, creek?

Joe Helton: No, no fishing. Might have been some fishing take place around the mouth of the creek.

Dr. Garrett: Much hunting?

Joe Helton: A very few people kept bees. My father kept bees as far as I can remember. I still have bees but there were a few colonies of bees in this country. Uncle Joe Wilder kept a lot of bees.

Dr. Garrett: Who was Joel Wilder?

Joe Helton: He was an old Civil War veteran in Sherman's March from Atlanta to the sea.

Dr. Garrett: A Yankee huh?

Joe Helton: A Yankee. He would sing "We're Marching Through Georgia" anytime.

Dr. Garrett: I would have been a Confederate in that war, Joe, myself. Transportation wasn't by automobile in those days was it?

Joe Helton: Oh, no. Horseback and walk.

Dr. Garrett: Walk. Let's see. There are a million questions. Did you log out of here a lot at that time or had it been logged out?

Joe Helton: Take around 1890 or 1900 or 1910 along there till 1920, they did a world of logging out of here. Haul them to the mouths of these creeks, dump them in the river, raft them, float them down to Frankfort and sell them.

Dr. Garrett: A lot of big timber at that time, wasn't there?

Joe Helton: Yeah, a lot of big timber.

Dr. Garrett: Who originally owned Cow Creek, do you know? Who were the first settlers in here, Joe?

Joe Helton: The first settlers in here were Gabbards and Moores. Gabbards on Cow Creek, Indian Creek and Moores and Wilsons on Cow Creek.

Dr. Garrett: Do you have any idea where they came from?

Joe Helton: No.

Dr. Garrett: Was the educational system pretty strong, Joe, when you were young?

Joe Helton: It's 6 months free school was all we had.

Dr. Garrett: Did the teacher have to have a certain minimum of requirements or could anybody teach?

Joe Helton: You qualified by taking a state examination that the state office sent out to these county seats and you took the examinations.

Dr. Garrett: Did you ever know old man Granville Davidson born over on Frost Branch?

Joe Helton: I went to school with him right over there when he was at home.

Dr. Garrett: He went to school here? I met him up at Clay County and he's a real fine old man. He's dead now.

Joe Helton: Yeah, he's dead. He's ninety two when he died.

Dr. Garrett: Yeah, and he was just a remarkable old man.

Joe Helton: He's an old school student of mine. We went to school together. I don't mean student, schoolmate.

Dr. Garrett: Was there a lot of wild turkey up here in those days?

Joe Helton: No, there was several wild turkeys we had when I was a boy, but they all played out at the time of 1925 or '30.

Dr. Garrett: Do you know anything about the history of the Indians up in this part of the country, Joe?

Joe Helton: No, I don't.

Dr. Garrett: Well, they were not in here obviously at the time they came in.

Joe Helton: No, all I know about them is they lived here and there. A lot of people nowadays dig and find Indian relics under these cliffs.

Dr. Garrett: Do you.....still Indian relics around in these fields and all?

Joe Helton: Huh?

Dr. Garrett: Are there still Indian relics around in the fields and all?

Joe Helton: I have a grandson that comes in here twice a year and that digs and switches under these cliffs. He found quite a lot of stuff under one cliff way back here.

Dr. Garrett: What did he find?

Joe Helton: Beads and tomahawks.

Dr. Garrett: Looks like it may have been an Indian village or home?

Joe Helton: Looks like the Indians lived under there. You'd be surprised to see that cliff. It was a sight to see what a space they was under.

Dr. Garrett: Was it a big cliff, sort of a rock house?

Joe Helton: Yes.

Dr. Garrett: Where is it from here?

Joe Helton: It's on the head of Cow Creek. They go up the creek and over the hill to it. It's about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from right here to that cliff.

Dr. Garrett: So obviously, there was settlement in here then of Indians.

Joe Helton: Yes, oh yes.

Dr. Garrett: Now when the whites came in here, where did they prefer the land? What kind of land did they look for? Did they look for timber? Did they look for cleared land, level land or what?

Joe Helton: Well, they just where-ever they could find them a suitable place to build them a cabin, they settled.

Dr. Garrett: Did they claim it or buy it?

Joe Helton: They laid warrants on it and got the state to make them a deed.

Dr. Garrett: Did the people come in here mainly after the Civil War or before the Civil War?

Joe Helton: They came in here just before and during the Civil War.

Dr. Garrett: Wonder why that was, do you know?

Joe Helton: My grandparents left Tennessee because they was a Rebel state and they were all Republicans and couldn't get along down there and they just about had to leave Tennessee at the close of the Civil War.

Dr. Garrett: Where were they in Tennessee, Joe?

Joe Helton: They were in Kleberg County AND Hancock County.

Dr. Garrett: Unfortunately, all those court records have been destroyed during the Civil War when the courthouses were burned.

Joe Helton: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Garrett: What was their....there apparently was a lot of feuding up in this part of the country. Was that the result of the Civil War?

Joe Helton: I doubt if that has anything to do with it. These feuds, I don't think have any roots from the Civil War. They just originated between factions within the community.

Dr. Garrett: Why?

Joe Helton: Huh?

Dr. Garrett: Why, do you have any idea?

Joe Helton: No, I don't.

Dr. Garrett: It was a pretty wild time for awhile wasn't it?

Joe Helton: Yeah, Yeah. Certain people would rule the county. Take Breathitt. Callahans and I forget some other poeple that lived in Jackson up there. But helps run, meddle in affairs, right or wrong.

Dr. Garrett: And that was the same situation here?

Joe Helton: I don't know if that was the situation here or not. I don't remember of very much discord in this county. Now, I know there was a difference between the Gabbards and your Uncle Gene and the Rices and that's about all I remember of the faction.

Dr. Garrett: They had a lot of trouble, didn't they?

Joe Helton: Yeah, they had some trouble.

Dr. Garrett: Were the Garretts and the Rices intertwined someway businesswise or?

Joe Helton: I don't know how to....Now the Garretts and the Rices was all together. I believe they were, yeah and the Gabbards on the opposite side. I don't know what the difference was.

Dr. Garrett: Were the Bakers involved in that?

Joe Helton: No, I don't think there were any Bakers. That Baker trouble. The Bakers had a lot of trouble but it was seated in Manchester in Clay County and I never did know anything about it.

Dr. Garrett: Oh, a lot of trouble up there with the Bakers.

Joe Helton: Yeah, a lot of trouble in Clay County.

Dr. Garrett: The Gabbard clan seemed to have been pretty prone to pull a gun in a hurry. I say some of those Gabbards pulled a gun pretty quick. Maybe to defend themselves, I don't know.

Joe Helton: And it's mostly....I was awfully small when most of that was taking place.....

Dr. Garrett: Why did people settle in this rougher country?

Joe Helton: I don't know but they came in here just after the Civil War. Must have found it a little better place than Tennessee for most of these settlers in Owsley County came from Tennessee. Through the Cumberland Gap.

Dr. Garrett: It wasn't too far really, was it?

Joe Helton: No, just two days walk.

Dr. Garrett: Highway 11. Must have been a game trail.

Joe Helton: It was a trail.

Dr. Garrett: Joe, what has been the quality of county government? What is your analysis....you have been here and you are a good observer. What is your analysis of county government and the educational system in Owsley County way back as compared to present or vice versa? Do we have a stronger educational system today or did we have a stronger educational system in the past?

Joe Helton: In my opinion, in the past it's been pretty weak. It's a pretty strong system now.

Dr. Garrett: Do you think the kids are going out well prepared now?

Joe Helton: More so than they used to. We've just got one school in the county and they used to have 50 or 60 and they're, most of them, operated by the local school trustees. They employ the teachers and now I'd say the system is far ahead of what it used to be.

Dr. Garrett: You think it's better. Do you think a lot of kids are going on and making successes in colleges and afterwards. Are they going into professions and so forth, do you have any idea?

Joe Helton: There are a number of them that goes into college every year.

Dr. Garrett: A lot of them go into military service?

Joe Helton: A lot of them goes into military service, that's right.

Dr. Garrett: Let's go back to farming a minute. Farming here has been basically a pretty limited thing due to space. What kind of yield did these people make when they got in here an acre? How much yield an acre of corn did these people make?

Joe Helton: 50 bushels an acre was counted pretty good, I think.

Dr. Garrett: And it worked now till they got much poorer than that.

Joe Helton: Huh?

Dr. Garrett: They gradually wore their soil out. Then the yield got down low. Well, how did they survive otherwise?

Joe Helton: I don't know

Dr. Garrett: How would you characterize the people, Joe, that came in here and settled this country and had to work so damn hard to make a living?

Joe Helton: How would I characterize them? They were generally an honest, old-fashioned bunch of pioneers that lived from their labor ; they were honest and truthful.

Dr. Garrett: They worked, didn't they?

Joe Helton: Yeah, they worked.

Dr. Garrett: Man and woman

Joe Helton: Yeah

Dr. Garrett: What did you do for medical care?

Joe Helton: Did without.

Dr. Garrett: What did they do.....What did the earlier ones do? What did you have for medical care then if you didn't have a doctor? How did you get through a sickness?

Joe Helton: The only medical care I ever remember in this country was Dr. Anderson and Doc Glass. They both lived in Booneville. You know Doc. Anderson and Doc Glass. You call them and they'd come horseback and that's the medical situation.

Dr. Garrett: Most of the time your family took care of you. What did they use?

Joe Helton: Yes, some kind of home remedy but I wouldn't know what it'd be.

Dr. Garrett: You didn't note that too much.

Joe Helton: I wouldn't know just what they used.

Dr. Garrett: Was it Wash Garrett that ran the store down here at Coulson's duff's place?

Joe Helton: Who?

Dr. Garrett: Wash Garrett or Lafayette?

Joe Helton: Wash?

Dr. Garrett: George Washington Garrett, Lafayette's father or was it Lafayette?

Joe Helton: It was the old man Fayette, Lafayette.

Dr. Garrett: What was his wife's name?

Joe Helton: I don't remember.

Dr. Garrett: Thompson, wasn't it?

Joe Helton: I don't remember. I just remember seeing her. I remember Arthur Garrett. Arthur knew Gene lived with him down there. And there was an Ella Garrett, I think.

Dr. Garrett: Yeah, that was a sister to my dad. Lafayette's daughter.

Joe Helton: She was in the family with Lafayette.

Dr. Garrett: Now Joe, you told me there was a lodge up above that store. Do you have any idea what kind of a lodge that was?

Joe Helton: Yes sir, it wasn't masonic. It was Oddfellow.

Dr. Garrett: Is that still in existence today, the Oddfellow Lodge?

Joe Helton: I'd think it is, but I don't know of any.

Dr. Garrett: Do you have any idea how I might go about finding any records of that lodge?

Joe Helton: No, I don't.

Dr. Garrett: In other words, I'd have to find an Oddfellow Group and see if they have a National Headquarters and see if I might run something down.

Joe Helton: I wouldn't know a thing about it. It didn't exist too many years.

Dr. Garrett: What was the purpose of it, do you know, just fraternal?

Joe Helton: I don't know the purpose of the Oddfellow Lodge.

Dr. Garrett: Did you get into the Masonic bit?

Joe Helton: Yes Sir, I paid my dues 42 years.

Dr. Garrett: Where?

Joe Helton: Booneville

Dr. Garrett: They still have a lodge there?

Joe Helton: They still have a lodge there, 939.

Dr. Garrett: Did you have a lodge up here?

Joe Helton: No

Dr. Garrett: How did you get into Booneville in the winter?
Were your roads real good?

Joe Helton: Horseback's the only way you used to get into Booneville anytime.

Dr. Garrett: Well, in the winter it was just a nice smooth trip wasn't it?

Joe Helton: Yeah, I can remember when the streets in Booneville was a mudhole.

Dr. Garrett: I can remember real well myself. Be kneedeep on a mule or a horse.

Joe Helton: Hitch the horses all around the courthouse square.

Dr. Garrett: Any bootleg whiskey or moonshine made up here?

Joe Helton: They used to bootleg, but I don't think they's any bootleggin going on in the mountains. I don't think there's any moonshining Now they's bootleggin, yeah. They buy the whiskey and bring it in here and resell it but they ain't no moonshining going on in this country.

Dr. Garrett: Joe, do you know of any sites up in this country where the early people gathered saltpeter to make gunpowder?

Joe Helton: No, I don't.

Dr. Garrett: Did you ever see a muzzle-loading rifle?

Joe Helton: Oh yeah, my father owned one.

Dr. Garrett: What'd he do with it?

Joe Helton: I don't remember. He traded it off sometime.

Dr. Garrett: Did he shoot hogs with it or go squirrel hunting?

Joe Helton: He used to kill hogs with it.

Dr. Garrett: Were there any deer when you were young?

Joe Helton: Mighty few. More deer in here now than when I was young.

Dr. Garrett: Were there enough wild hogs or stuff....were the hogs loose in those days....did you ever kill hogs or were they privately owned?

Joe Helton: All the hogs that we had that I can remember, people owned them. They would run out in the hills on mast in the fall of the year, and the farmers would gather them in and sell them in the spring or kill them. We didn't have any wild hogs that was unclaimed.

Dr. Garrett: Yeah, did you ginseng in those days or did people do that?

Joe Helton: They still ginseng. They have as long as I can remember.

Dr. Garrett: Yeah, it was one of the money crops, wasn't it? Did they have a good breed of horse and a good breed of cattle when they came in here or did they have scrub stock?

Joe Helton: I imagine it wasn't too pure. That's been a long time ago when they came in here. They came in here in the Civil War days and I imagine they had native stock.

Dr. Garrett: Basically just whatever they could pick up. Were there a lot of good horses, good horesflesh in this country?

Joe Helton: No, there's no horse races.

Dr. Garrett: I said horseflesh.....

Joe Helton: Horseflesh. Yeah, they had work horses. They trained them to go to work.

Dr. Garrett: Did they use oxen when you were young?

Joe Helton: Yes sir, they used oxen. I remember right well. They logged timber off this land in here with oxen.

Dr. Garrett: Why did they used oxen?

Joe Helton: Well, they were more powerful than horses and you could get along in the hills and brush easier than you could horses.

Dr. Garrett: Could they pull a bigger load?

Joe Helton: Oh law yes.

*2 often to a yoke
w/ a yoke!*

Dr. Garrett: The people raised their own yokes and trained them? And of course that's all been replaced by machinery today. Whats the biggest tree up here you've ever seen, joe?

Joe Helton: Oh, i'd say 36 to 40 inches.

Dr. Garrett: Did you ever make maple sugar?

Joe Helton: No, I never did make any but I know they make it in this country . Right now they're making it.

Dr. Garrett: Where?

Joe Helton: Over on Cow Creek.

Dr. Garrett: Over on Cow Creek. Who does it over there?

Joe Helton: Carl Sebastian for one.

Dr. Garrett: Where does he live?

Joe Helton: He lives at the mouth of the Smith Fork.

Dr. Garrett: If that above the road I turned off at....

Joe Helton: Above the road.

Dr. Garrett: They're making it now?

Joe Helton: Yes sir, they're making it right now.

Dr. Garrett: Have a lot of trees?

Joe Helton: Yeah, they tell me he's got several trees he takes water from..

Dr. Garrett: And boils it down? That's Carl Sebastian you say? I don't know him.

Joe Helton: Yes sir, he's making maple syrup right now. I don't know if he boils it down to sugar or not, but I know he's making syrup.

Dr. Garrett: That's a lot of things I just wonder. Do you have any interesting stories about Owsley County you could tell me?

Joe Helton: No, I wouldn't.

Dr. Garrett: You have one of the best memories in this county. You have been an observer a long time and so forth. Tell me a little bit about Harve Rice. Did Harve kill a man in his store down here?

Joe Helton: Yes, the man made him kill him. That's all they was to it.

Dr. Garrett: Who was it?

Joe Helton: He was a Murrell. Green Murrell

Dr. Garrett: And Harve Killed him? Did Harve kill another man later on?

Joe Helton: No, that's all Harve killed.

Dr. Garrett: I was thinking he killed two men down there.

Joe Helton: No.

Dr. Garrett: When did that store open down there?

Joe Helton: Harve Rice opened that store down there I'd say about 1902 or '03.

Dr. Garrett: And when did he sell out and move?

Joe Helton: Well, he killed Green Murrell in 1905 and I think he left here right then.

Dr. Garrett: You had a picture of Gene Garrett. Do you remember if I copied that? Do you remember if I copied that photograph you have OF YOUR SCHOOL?

Joe Helton: Yeah, you photographed it.

Dr. Garrett: I've got a copy of that at home. It's interesting to me because he looks so much like....

Joe Helton: It Favors him exactly.

Dr. Garrett: Yeah, it sure does. He looks so much like Leslie and of course like his oldest son that dying this week. He may be dead by now. Clifford looks so much like Uncle Gene. Now Gene was the youngest boy in the family I guess.

Joe Helton: I don't know if Gene was younger than Arthur or not.

Dr. Garrett: Mark and then Arthur and Gene. Mark, George, and then Gene I guess. Arthur, Mark, George, Arthur and then Gene.

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