

Interviewee: Ed Barrett
Interviewer: Beth Rogers
Date: December 13, 1980

BR: This Beth Rogers interviewing my father, Ed Barrett, in Cleveland, MS on December 13, 1980. I would like you to share with us some of your recollections of your father's sorghum mill of when you ere a child, but first would you give us some biographical information about yourself? Where you were born?

EB: Lee County on June 8th, 1919. My father was born November 13, 1889 in Lee County, MS. My mother was born April 14, 1897 in Monroe County. They were living in Lee County when I was born.

BR: Tell us about your father's sorghum mill that he had when you were a child.

EB: Well, the sorghum mill was real close to our house. My father and his brother ran it for the public- that is they made it for other people, neighbors, besides their own sorghum. The sorghum mill was something great for us kids. There was something sweet there and something good. Well, in the thirties there was no money for candy, so the sorghum mill was our treat. The sorghum stalk was sweet, and we chewed that to our delight. Then, near the end of the molasses makin' process the sorghum usually made a white foam which was very light in texture, but which had a good sweet taste- we dearly loved this. This was near almost the end of the sorghum film where the finished molasses came off. We dearly loved this white foam, and we could lick that for hours. We could lick it for hours. Of course the sorghum stock itself was sweet, and we dearly loved to chew this.

BR: How much sorghum did your father grow?

EB: Well most of the time I would say an acre per year.

BR: Well how much sorghum could he produce from one acre?

EB: Well if it was real good soil, and a good year, we had made as much as 300 buckets. Now the sorghum bucket was only about an 8-pound bucket, which is a 2 pounds short of a gallon, which you are talking about a little over 3 quarts in the little old bucket. Of course sometimes in the thirties fertilizer wasn't easily obtained or maybe a lot of years it wasn't even used. So, maybe you would end up with about 100 of those 8 pound buckets per acre.

BR: Did he sell most of the sorghum that he made or keep most of it for the family?

EB: Well most of the crops that he grew on his own farm that we kept for our own use, and then he tolled or that portion at which he charged his neighbors for making their sorghum now that accumulated, and he sold that. Now I remember one time that he had nearly 2,000 buckets that was tolled that he had accumulated in one year of sorghum

making that he sold. There came a man from Arkansas, and the soil in Arkansas was black and didn't make a good sorghum. The good sorghum came from the sandy soils of North MS. This man came from Arkansas and he sold him all that he could haul what was being equivalent to a ton and ½ truck back to Arkansas. I think he got 25 cents on the gallon for it. This was back in 1935 or '36.

BR: Tell us sort of the process of making the sorghum from the time they cut it.

EB: Ok, well the sorghum grows a good year might grow as much as 10 feet tall and you have to making something like a wooden sword to cut the leaves off. We call this the stripping process. You strip the leaves off - more or less hack them off - with this wooden sword. When you get all the leaves off of it, you take a hole, and one man uses the hole, and usually two or three got boys or men. And at that time I was a boy, and I did a lot of it: catches the sorghum stalk in his hand prior to the man cutting the sorghum stalks down with the hoe. Then he takes these stalks and lays them across the road in a matter with all the sorghum heads- now, all the sorghum head has to be cut off before you make molasses out of them. The sorghum seed itself has some acid or something that doesn't do the sorghum molasses any good when in the processes of making syrup. So the guy catching the stalks, his process is to lay all the sorghum across the roads, but to have all the heads even. So they can be cut off with the hoe and not leave any of them on the stalk, so after this is done then somebody else comes along with a wagon and loads this stalks on the wagon and hauls them to the sorghum mill. My father had his sorghum mill in a grove of trees with lots of shade. This is good too in the sorghum making process because those sorghum stalks brought to the field on the wagon can be stacked in the shade against a tree in the shade. These are laid straight in a manner of like pistols in a pack you buy from the store, or cigarettes in a pack. These stalks are laid straight so you can pick them up without a great hassle. If they are all tangled it takes time to straighten these things out. They are going to this pile you have made in shade tree to the mill which usually has 3 rollers. These rollers vary in diameter from the two small rollers on the mill. We used around 8 inches and the two big rollers were about 14. The rollers fit on an upright position. Now the mill is set up on post usually three post that you set on a ground in a permanent situation, which my father's was and it has a big lever, which two mules and two horses pulled in a round motion. They go around and around in a circular motion and they pull this lever that of course turns the rollers- the rollers are geared one to another with a sprocket. Somebody has to sit there and poke these stalks in there at this mill. Of course it is inclined to take halt when you put the stalk in the roller with the motion of the roller turning against one another. They catch this stalk and put it in. That's the whole idea of the mule turning is to catch that stalk and pull it through there and mash and squeeze that juice out. You have a barrel or a tub at the mill that has a little spicket that runs out. You catch the juice and someone has to go in and out from that mill over the pan, which is set just right outside diameter of these mules or horses going round and round. And there with the fire on it, the sorghum pan is usually about 12 feet long and 4 feet wide. It is made so that it has little divisions- little raised partitions about every 6 inches- all the way up the 12 feet. They are made so that there is a gap on one end and then on the opposite end for the next gap. It makes the sorghum juice flow continues from one side to another in a zigzag fashion- all the way up the pan. The

process with the heat under it in a slow motion going from one side to the other- the idea is that by the time it gets the full length of the pan that it will be cooked enough from raw juice to sorghum molasses. Somebody has to bring that raw juice from the pan over to a barrel, usually a barrel, the bottom of the barrel being level with the top of the sorghum pan and this has a whole in the bottom of it with a peg in it. This peg is rotated with a sliding to let the juice come out of this barrel onto the pan you are cooking. Someone has to bring that juice over in the bucket, usually from the sorghum mill that is making it- into the pan and fire on the pan and make the juice go into the circular zigzag motion all the way down. It probably takes 10 gallons of that raw juice to make 1 gallon of molasses. That fire reduces that about 10 to 1. Of course it takes a couple hours in the morning to get things going – the heat going good and the boiling process. My father made molasses from the time he was 15 years old almost until he was 75. He made a tremendous amount of it. He was very good at it. He and his brother did this in the fall of the year- from August till Thanksgiving. Besides farming cotton and corn, they had this little sorghum crop that they grew for our family and they grew some to sell. They had all these neighbors in the thirties that grew sorghum for their family. My father and his brother rotated their time at this mill at a week apiece. Their profit came from 1/5 of the amount of the sorghum that they made at the mill. It was that early that my father at one time had two thousand gallons of this that he had accumulated over a period 2 months that he had made the sorghum. It was a great delight for us boys, and girls- I had sisters too to go by the sorghum mill to chew these stalks of sorghum-, which was sweet. The choice process was that at the very near end of the sorghum pan where the finished molasses come off when it boils up is this white foam. This white foam isn't like the pure molasses, which is heavier and sweeter of course. You can't eat this molasses all day, but this white foam was very light in texture and it doesn't have the sweetest that the pure molasses has. A boy or young teenager could consume a great amount of this light foam because it doesn't have the same texture or sweetness that the finished product does. That was one of our great delights. Of course my father was ready to help us get some of this out on something- a bucket lid or something, so that we could enjoy this white foam. That was one of our great delights.

BR: How did they strain impurities out of the sorghum?

EB: Well my father usually took something like a stiff piece of wire if he could find one, something like an 1/8 of an inch in diameter and made a hook about 24 inches across or 24 inches in diameter. At that day in time it wasn't hard to come by 48-pound flour sector. A flour sack was a very fine moving cloth in order to continue flour. I would take this flour sack and my mother would sew this flour sack one ply thickness. My mother would take this flour sack on this hook of metal. This was used when the finished molasses came out a peg hole was which was about two inches in diameter at the last end of the sorghum pan. That is where it accumulates into a pot or a wash tub or any kind of container that would contain hopefully 5 to 10 gallons, so it wouldn't have to be emptied too often. There on the top of this is a strainer made from this flour sack on a metal hook that would catch little impurities coming from the pan or the sorghum. The texture of this flour sack as fine as it was would give you something real clean. The molasses syrup would be real clean after this process of straining. Then these strainers we would wash

from time to time by carrying them back to the high boiling point of the sorghum pan – the end near the fire. The finished product – the molasses coming off the upper end- which was the furthest away from the fire or where the fire had died down where the cold juice was subject to greater intensity of heat on the fire of the pan.

BR: So to clean off the strainer you would take it back to the point where the heat was very high?

EB: Yeah, the end near the fire and splash the hot, boiling juice on it. It was a lot easier to wash by putting it in there and splashing hot boiling sorghum juice on it than taking it to a tub of water and try to wash out hot sticky molasses out with cold water. This was a process that you probably did once a day or twice a day to keep this strainer clean. This hot juice would do the job so much better than cold water would.

BR: Did you and your brothers and sisters work at the sorghum mill when you were younger?

EB: Oh yes. I worked there. In fact, I don't remember when I didn't worked there. Starting with the stripping operation in the field and the hauling operation and making the sorghum. This principally, we hoped to get most of ours done before school started in September. Now if we didn't at this time, I would probably have to miss some school in order to help my father with his sorghum crop. Then, later on my father and his brother continued operating this thing with our neighbors; it operated as late as thanksgiving. I would come home from school, and it was a great light foam that cooks up at the final end of the molasses making process, which we enjoyed very much. We could hardly wait to get off the school bus to run and enjoy this foam we called it. I almost never got to that sorghum mill that my father didn't have a little chore for me. He needed a fresh drink of water, or he needed a new strainer for his molasses, or he needed somebody to carry a few stalks of mill, or he needed somebody to bring a few sticks of wood close to the pan so somebody could fire it better. I was out done by him, but I still would go down. I didn't understand why the guy who had that crop there couldn't do his chore and let me enjoy my sorghum.

BR: Did your father have any hired help with the sorghum or did he depend on you children?

EB: Well, with their own crop, he depended on us and his own brother. But when a neighbor brought a crop there, the neighbor was expected to bring everybody that it required. It usually required about three hands. My father was the maker of the molasses. He operated his end of it, and he acquired two men - a fireman and somebody to assist him at the evaporator of the sorghum pan. It required somebody to feed the stalks into the mill that the mules were pulling and acquired at least one more hand to bring the sorghum stalks from the pile of mill and someone to take away the flattened stalks at the back side of the mill. So it required at least three hands, and my father to operate this thing. Any man who brought the sorghum there was expected to bring himself and at least 2 more hands. My father did not expect to furnish anyone but

himself – the sorghum maker. The other hand was expected to be brought by the man who had the crop of molasses being made.

BR: What about the stalk of the sorghum after it was run through the mill? Was there any use or purpose that it could serve?

EB: Many times I saw it ringed around the sorghum mill like a horseshoe. It would be head high where it was carried from the back of the mill where it came out flattened with all the juice squeezed out. I've seen it look like a horseshoe as high as my head. Horses and cows would eat on it some, but it usually sat there until spring. One of my father's pet project was for my brother and I to take forks and load it into a wagon and haul it and mulch our orchid. We had about a 3-acre orchid plus a bunch of fig trees in the backyard that he insisted they have good mulch of this. By that time, half-rotten sorghum salt was about six inches deep. That was the only purpose that we used was to mulch our fruit trees.

BR: What about planting the sorghum? How did they go about planting the sorghum?

EB: The sorghum was planted just like the cotton and the corn. They ground was plowed in the same manner as you plowed it for cotton and corn. It was planted in the same planter, of course it had a different, well we called it a sorghum plant. Sorghum seed is very small compared with corn or cotton. You had to have a different size hole. You had a plate that went into the planter. Flat plat rotates is how you drop the seed to put out with a planter. Corn seed is about times at big as the sorghum seed. It required a different size hole to plant that sorghum. The ground was plowed in the same manner as cotton or corn, with the same machinery used except it had different size holes to plant the seed. It was farmed the same way. It was chopped just like cotton and plowed just like cotton. The only difference was when the sorghum gets ready to be made into molasses you cut the leaves off with this wooden sword, you chop it down and bring the stalks to the sorghum mill in a wagon. The corn you let it ripen in the field and only take the ears. Then you pick cotton out of the bulbs.

BR: Did your father start this sorghum mill?

EB: No, I have a picture of my grandfather making sorghum in 1915. He was a sorghum maker and his brother was a sorghum maker. I think my father learned from them. My father was making molasses when he was 15 years old, which you are talking about he was born in 1889, so about 1905, 06, 07, 08 that he was making molasses.

BR: What happened to the sorghum mill? Is it still standing?

EB: Yes, it is not standing as such, but it is still on our property on the ground. It is not up on raised platform or anything, but it is still sitting on the ground. It is still there. It is possible that it might be serviceable. The pan that you cook the molasses on is rusted out. The sides of the pan were wooden, but the bottom of the pan was metal. The wooden sides are completely rotten, but the bottom part I think is rusted out.

BR: Is there a better technique for making sorghum now than the way that you described to us? Is there a more modern way to do it?

EB: Well, they have mills that have tractors that are pulled with a belt for the grinding process. As far as evaporation, a cooking process, I have never seen any other process used. Now of course in South Louisiana the sugar process is in a huge plant of some sort. The evaporation by steam of some sort, but in MS – in north MS at least or all of Mississippi that I know of there is no other process to make this sorghum except with this cooking process with the sorghum pan or evaporation process you might call it.

BR: Well, do you think that anytime in the near future that you would want to get the sorghum mill going again and operate it yourself?

EB: I could get the mill going probably, but I do not know about the pan. I haven't looked at it lately. If it is too badly deterred then I am afraid that it is a lost cause.

BR: I see. Can you think of anything else that you would like to tell us about sorghum making that we haven't talked about?

EB: No, except that I still love the finished product.

BR: ok, thank you very much.

End of interview.