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Interview with Milton Miller

By Richard Barnes

[Items enclosed in brackets [] are editorial notes inserted for clarification.]

Dick Barnes: My name is Dick Barnes and I'm visiting today with Milton Miller, a life long resident of the Brownsburg area and northern Rockbridge County. Today is November 26, 2007, and this is being recorded in Brownsburg, Virginia. As I said we are meeting here today with Milton Miller, and Milton, I would like to ask you, if you will, to share with us some of your former background here in the Brownsburg area.

Milton Miller: My parents [William Wayt Miller and Gertrude Mabel Moran Miller] and I lived about five miles north of Brownsburg on [Route] 252 [4952 Brownsburg Turnpike]. But I also had a grandmother [Lena Bell Whitmore Moran, widow of Joseph D. Moran] that lived in Brownsburg, on Hays Creek Road, the first house on the right [get address]. My great-grandfather [Henry M. Miller] lived up about five miles north of Brownsburg also. He was a cattle dealer in addition to a farmer. My first contact with Brownsburg was visiting my grandmother. And one of the first things I remember, one of my uncles [Alexander C. Walker] had a Model T that he had to crank. And he was always smiling after he got that Model T cranked and was going home from my grandmother's. Another one of the first things I remember about Brownsburg was going to the barbershop which was in the back of this store, the old Whipple store [the current location of Old South Antiques]. And I remember some of the stories I heard in the barbershop. One of them was that Mr. [Bud] Wade didn't have any heat except the coal stove. And if you went too early in the morning it was kind of cold in this store, in the barbershop. One morning a Mr. Holland came in there and asked Mr. Wade if he could cut his hair with his overcoat on. And Mr. Wade said, "Mr. Holland, I could almost cut your hair with your hat on." [Laugh]

Dick Barnes: [Laugh] That's good.

Milton Miller: Another story I remember from that time was that one Saturday night my father took me to the barbershop and there was an intoxicated man in there. And he was asking another man about hauling some straw for him. And he told the other man, he said, "I told my wife when I left home tonight I was never going to take another drop. But when we haul that

straw we'll have to get a little drink." To me, as a youngster, he could hardly stand up when he was telling that story.

Dick Barnes: Milton, who were some of your neighbors in the Brownsburg area?

Milton Miller: Not referring to my neighbors as such, but to my grandmother's, I remember when visiting her [there] was a Mr. [Walter] Dice that lived across the street from her [22 Hays Creek Road]. And also a colored lady that lived across the alley from Mr. Dice was named Susan Porter. And her house was almost in a thicket to me as a youngster. There was Miss Pet Berry that lived in between my grandmother's house and [Route] 252, [Brownsburg Turnpike]. The present Post Office was part of her house. She -- I don't know why they called her Miss Pet Berry. She was married, but her husband I think was pretty rough on her at times and she had a peg leg. And then there was Mr. Harvey Matheny that had a little house on wheels that had been a VDOT [Virginia Department of Transportation] tool house at one time. And it set across the alley from Mr. Dice's garage. Mr. Matheny worked in leather, he repaired shoes and made harnesses and bridles and things for horses. Mr. Charlie Dice, Mr. Walter Dice's brother, lived down on Fairfield Road [now Sterrett Road] and he always carried a big stick for a walking stick. But some people said that he and Mr. Matheny had had problems, and that was the reason he carried the stick.

Dick Barnes: [Laugh] Milton, if you will, share with us some of your relatives, the names of some of your relatives that lived in the Brownsburg area.

Milton Miller: As I had said before, my grandmother lived in Brownsburg and my mother had lived there for a short time before her marriage. My mother was born and raised on the Moore place [Mulberry Grove, 2249 Sterrett Road], which is now the Sterrett farm on Fairfield [Sterrett] Road. Mr. [Walter] Dice that I was talking about [who] lived across the street from my grandmother had originally lived on the farm in the Dutch Hollow area of Rockbridge County. And one of the stories about the Dices when they lived on the farm was that they had a colored employee who was very strong. In fact, the story went that he pitched bales of hay with a pitchfork. But I asked Mr. Charlie Dice one time about that story and he said, "Oh no." He said that he was strong but he never pitched bales of hay with a pitchfork. And of course my father's family had lived north of Brownsburg about five miles for four generations before me [4952 Brownsburg Turnpike]. And, as I said, my uncle that had had the Model T that he was always glad to get started by cranking lived on Walker's Creek.

Dick Barnes: Milton, did you attend school in Brownsburg?

Milton Miller: Yes, that was the only school that I attended. Miss [Osie] Trimmer was our principal, and she ruled with an iron fist. In fact, I made the statement that if she was principal today, she'd probably murder half the kids going to school. As I remember when I was in the very low grades, school wasn't called off too often because of the weather. In fact, the state didn't put chemicals on the roads or scrape them very good and the snow became packed but we still went to school. On some days, the teachers out of the area could not get there. And so we in the first and second grade would be kept by Mrs. Rosenell Patterson who usually taught the freshmen in high school. And one of the things she would do when she was keeping us small kids was go around and pat the ones on the head that she had taught their parents. And when she got to me she patted me on the head twice. [Laugh] Some of the stories that she would tell us during these days was about the Civil War and how it had affected Brownsburg. One of the stories was that the Withrows who lived in the first house south of the bridge [currently Janis Ayres' house] had a fine carriage and fine horses. So when they heard that the Union Army was coming through, they sent the horses and carriage around back of Brownsburg to hide them from the Union soldiers. But the soldiers happened to be coming from Walker's Creek and met the horses and carriage. They gave the colored boy the option of coming back once they took him to Lexington. But they cut the horses from the carriage and took them with them. Another story that she told was that down on Hays Creek Road [at Bellevue] someone saw the Union soldiers coming, and hid behind a rail fence. Well, when the Union soldiers got to that meadow, they decided to hang a prisoner that they had with them. And they hung this prisoner from a tree there, and this person laying behind the rail fence was watching. The story is that up the valley somewhere, the soldiers had wanted to go in a house. And the owner said you can go in my house all except one room. My daughter's in there sick. So the soldiers went into the house, and honored his request, but after they left, one of the soldiers got curious. He was going back and see what was in that room. So when the homeowner caught him in his house, he had an axe in his hand and he killed the soldier. But he made the mistake of getting the colored person to help him to take the body out and bury it. And the colored person reported it. So that was the man they hung in the meadow there. The soldiers had gotten him, and brought him down there and I guess they decided that was a good time to get rid of him. There's another story that I heard about the Civil War that I only heard once, and it did not come from Mrs. Patterson, but one of the Walkers from Walkers Creek was in the Staunton area. And why, I was never told, but the Union soldiers started running him. And he had a horse that he could go around a turn and wait on Union soldiers to come in sight and he'd fire on them. And that horse would turn and run and he could outrun the Union soldiers. And this happened on the turns coming from Staunton to Newport. When the Union soldiers got to Newport they wanted to know where that man on that horse went. They didn't care about the man but they sure would like to have that horse. [Laugh] When I was a youngster going to school, we had milk cows as well as beef cows, we had sheep, hogs and draft horses. I milked cows before I was big enough to carry a full bucket of milk. And sheep were prone to give up if they got ill. They very seldom ever got well once one was ill. But these were some of the tasks I had to do in the morning before going to school, and then in the evenings after school I was to look after these animals. After I graduated from Brownsburg High School, I did not go to college. But I got my rounded education in the Air Force. I spent over eight years in the Air Force. And that was my higher

education. After my tour in the Air Force of over eight years, I returned to the farm in Rockbridge County and have farmed since then.

Dick Barnes: Milton, in that you returned to the farm, when did mechanization first come to the farm in northern Rockbridge County, or your farm in particular?

Milton Miller: Well, after World War II, tractors started replacing horses, and in the late 40's pickup balers replaced handling loose hay. And soon after, corn pickers replaced cutting and shucking corn by hand. This also was a time when there was plenty of labor out on the farm. Because mechanization replaced labor by people and horses on the farm, the labor also became not existent as far as hiring was concerned. By the mid '50s, combines replaced binders and threshers for small grains. With the disappearance of the threshers, the big mid-day meals disappeared also. Maybe 15 or 20 people were needed to thresh and they were provided a meal at the mid-day. My generation is probably the last that knows how to harness and work a horse. When I wanted to harness a horse, I had to [get the horse under the harness] and slide the harness over onto them because I was too little to lift the harness. I started plowing all day when I was 10 years old. You either did it with horses or with manpower before mechanization. In the winter, as I said, in the winter the horses had to be fed and watered and bedded every day. Draft horses ate a lot of the corn and the hay crop. But they usually performed very well.

Dick Barnes: Milton, have you ever attended any of the area churches?

Milton Miller: Yes, I was born into what is now referred to as a Reformed Church. But my family started attending New Providence [Presbyterian Church] when I was a couple years old. Dr. [Henry] McLaughlin had left New Providence, but I remember him coming with Briar Hills [boys camp] during the summer. He and his family have had a long association with New Providence. I remember reciting the Child's Catechism one Sunday morning during Sunday School. And the teacher stayed late so I could finish. She was Mrs. Williams. At one time, one time at least some of us children rode in the trunk to church, in the trunk of the car to church if we had relatives visiting during the summer. New Providence was almost a one church community when I was growing up. And no one questioned why you were a Christian or a Presbyterian. That all changed when I went into the Service.

Dick Barnes: When did you and your family first own an automobile?

Milton Miller: My family had autos before my time. But I remember going to Spotswood with my father with horses and wagon to get fertilizer, two trips in one day. We also went to the mill sometimes in the wagon and to take broomcorn to be made into brooms, and take cane to make molasses. My father drove a buggy to Brownsburg School. For a short period of time, one time

some man ran a bus from near Spotswood by Wade's Mill through Brownsburg and to Staunton on Saturdays. As far as publications are concerned my family subscribed to the newspapers and we listened to the radio. My first memories of radio was listening to Wheeling, West Virginia on Saturday nights. I don't know why, unless that station was the only one that had power enough to reach us.

Dick Barnes: What individuals stand out in your memory from growing up in or living in the Brownsburg area?

Milton Miller: Dr. [Henry] McLaughlin, as I said, was not a minister at New Providence in my time, but from hearing stories, he seemed to have had a lot of influence on people. Not only spiritually, but also for their total welfare, as far as economics and things were concerned.

Dick Barnes: Milton, if you lived in the Brownsburg area during the Depression years, describe life during that time, as well as the life in this area during World War II.

Milton Miller: Well, let me say first, money was extremely hard to obtain. There were very few people who had any surplus. There were taxes and mortgages to pay with the small amount available. I don't know how we survived. Children didn't have allowances or were paid for doing work. Most labor was traded. When I was in High School I had an opportunity to plow two days for 50 cents a day for myself. My father was paid \$2 for the team of horses a day. Rationing didn't affect farm families as much because we raised our own meat. And sometimes we could trade some city people meat for their sugar stamps. I was given a pig by a friend of my uncle. She [the pig] had two pigs the first time. I sold them for \$10 and bought my first suit of clothes. The second time she had five pigs, and I got \$22 and a half for those pigs, and bought two calves. That's how I got started in raising animals.

Dick Barnes: What changes have you seen take place in the Brownsburg area during the time that you've lived here?

Milton Miller: Well, my family had a phone before my time, so that wasn't a change to take place. But the biggest change I've seen is all the residential development taking place, swallowing up farms. The farms that remain need to grow to be profitable, and with less labor. Most of the roads have changed since my time. In my [early years] there was only [Route] 11 and [Route] 252 paved, and most all the others were gravel roads.

Dick Barnes: Milton, what businesses existed in the Brownsburg area when you were growing up and tell us how they affected you and your family?

Milton Miller: I've been told that Mr. D.D. Woody, who later founded Woody Chevrolet, ran a store on the southwest corner of Hays Creek Road [8 Hays Creek Road]. Then, Mr. Engelman had his store there, which was [later] run by Douglas and Fred Whipple. After them, Rockbridge Co-Op had a store there. All this time, Mr. Supinger had a store on the northwest corner with a barbershop in the rear [at the present location of Old South Antiques]. Across the street from the bank [2711 Brownsburg Turnpike] Mr. Huffman had a store [2712 Brownsburg Turnpike]. The post office was run by the Bosworths in a building south of the bank [2707 Brownsburg Turnpike]. Of course Carwell's Garage [across from 22 Hays Creek Road] was past the store on Hays Creek Road and there was a blacksmith's shop on the south end of Brownsburg [at 2610 Brownsburg Turnpike]. My father took me to the bank to open an account. Not because I had money, I don't think, but it was more or less a ritual for him. And I suspect Mrs. [Jen] Heffelfinger told most new customers this story. But the story she told me was that her uncle came into the bank one day, and she told him he had overdrawn his account. His reply was that he would just write her a check to cover it. [Laugh]

Dick Barnes: What stands out in your memory as the most significant or important event that occurred in the Brownsburg area during the time that you've lived here?

Milton Miller: To me, the flood of '69 [Hurricane Camille in August 1969] was the greatest thing that's really happened in this area. It was so devastating.

Dick Barnes: Milton, if you would, please share with us any stories, humorous or otherwise that you have heard or were involved in during your time that you've lived in the Brownsburg area.

Milton Miller: One of the stories I guess I'll never forget gave me the first lesson in life. It's what other people maybe done at times. One day, when the snow was packed on the road and pushed up on the sides, there was quite a bit of snow on the ground, I rode my bicycle to school. I'm not sure why I rode it that day, but after school, when I was coming down through Brownsburg on my bicycle, two boys came out of one of the stores. And as youth would do, I rode my bicycle along and they walked along with me. When we got out almost to Rocky Lane, here came the storeowner, and said to one of the boys, "Give me that pack of cigarettes you took." My first reaction was, "You're crazy, man, no one would take a pack of cigarettes from a store." And the boy reached in his hip pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. To me, this was a shock. Another story that I remember was, there were stories that people who had money, and some kept it at home. And I suspect, if you didn't have a debt and a small amount of money by today's standards, you were considered as having money. We had a neighbor who passed away [Mrs. Arch Lyle], and they were selling her farm in Brownsburg one Saturday afternoon. As a small child I looked up and saw her nephew [Elmer "Doc" Wiseman] coming up our driveway with two paper bags, one in each hand. My first reaction was, here he is coming

with money to get my father to take him to buy his aunt's farm. As it turned out, he was returning flour that my mother had used to make bread for them while the lady was sick.

Dick Barnes: If you would like, share with us any of the history or events of your family.

Milton Miller: My mother's father [Joseph D. Moran] and his family lived on what is now the Sterrett Farm [Mulberry Grove at 2249 Sterrett Road]. He had an uncle, I've heard my mother say, that lived up on Montebello Mountain. He would drive his buggy to Vesuvius and then ride his horse up on the mountain to visit his uncle because of the rough and steepness of the mountain. On my father's side, he had an uncle [Robert J. Miller] who lived on the other side of Montebello Mountain. And I've heard one of my uncles [Fred I. Miller] say that he and his father [William B. Miller] went over there to visit and they got off the horse, and led the horse up the mountain because it was so steep and rugged. As I said earlier, on my father's side of the family, I had a great-great-grandfather [Joseph Miller, married to Sarah Hawpe Miller] that lived five miles north of Brownsburg on land I now own [where Beard Road meets Otts Mill Road]. My great-grandfather [Henry M. Miller] lived where I live [4952 Brownsburg Turnpike] before moving to Bellevue [952 Hays Creek Road]. He is the one that Dr. [Zachariah] Walker stabbed to death in the old school building. He also served in the Civil War.

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