

HOME COMING

Transcript

Intro with Music

Malcolm X- Archival Audio: Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.

USDA official - Archival Audio: There are about 9 million negroes in our southern states and the majority of them live on farms. While many of these farmers have achieved independence and perhaps prosperity all too many barely make a living.

Julian Bond - Archival Audio: In 1910, black farmers owned 15 million acres of land. Since that time the 15 million have been reduced to 4 million acres. The future, 1984 will mark the black race as a landless people.

Verna James & Jessica Rockingham (Charlene's 13 year old cousins) working in the garden:

This is paying off so that we won't be in the streets or what ever and it's also um, renewing our heritage because our ancestors and our grandparents, and our parents also had to do this.

Charlene voice-over: These are my cousins, Verna and Jessica. They're doing what I did when I was about their age except I didn't use words like ancestors back then and I think I was feeling a little bit more like Jessica, dreading every moment I spent in that hot sun.

Title over land images and music:

Homecoming...

Sometimes I am haunted
by memories of red dirt and clay

A Film By Charlene Gilbert

Professor Marsha Darling: By all assessments and evaluations, the achievement of Black people by 1910 in their ownership of just over fifteen million acres of land is remarkable. Historians tell a story of the late 19th century's Reconstruction as one of betrayal, tragedy, disappointment for Black people, but also a period of time of aspiration and hope, and a period of time of hard work.

Creek Indians: "Dear Sir, in September 1847 I arrived at..."

He stated that the Ocfuskees and the Tookabatchas had become indignant in consequence of the sale of much of the Creek territory, which General William McIntosh had made with the Georgians, and they had determined to make him answer for his treachery by the forfeiture of his life.

They had determined to kill McIntosh in his own yard, in the presence of his family and to let his blood run upon the soil of that "Reservation" which the Georgians had secured to him in the treaty which he had made with them.

They frequently shouted with much exaltation, "McIntosh, we have come, we have come, we told you if you sold the land to the Georgians we would come."

Charlene (off camera): Now is this hard work, ladies?

Jessica Rockingham (working with Verna James in garden): Yes, very hard

Verna James: Not really, it's not really hard. You just have to condition your mind to wanna do it. Because, ya know it gets hot out here and you really don't want to do it. But if you condition your mind it's nothing to it really.

Charlene (off camera): Jessica, is your mind conditioned yet?

Jessica Rockingham: Yes, it just gets really hot like she said.

Charlene voice-over: I don't think I want their minds to be conditioned for anything, but Verna's right. A hundred years ago a six year old ancestor of hers, mine and black folks all over this country worked in the hot sun on days like this from sun up to sun down.

Pete Daniels, Writer/Historian: I always like to start with the end of the Civil War when 4 million African Americans were freed and then you go through some bitter years of Reconstruction and the Populists movement and then all the segregation laws and still, when you get up to 1910 there were 200,000 African Americans who had bought land that they farmed and that's just a remarkable record considering that during slavery people weren't allowed to learn to read and write, but they learned a lot about farming and they utilized that once they were free.

Dissolve into Warren working in the field

Charlene voice-over: This is my cousin, Warren James. Warren works long days in hot weather by choice.

Warren is a farmer, one of only 18,000 black farmers left in this country down from a high of nearly one million in 1910.

Warren farms here in Montezuma Georgia, the only place I know where it seems that one out of every three people I meet are related to me by either blood or marriage. When people ask me where I'm from, Montezuma Georgia is the only thing that comes to mind even though I've never lived here longer than a few weeks until I began this film.

This is the story of my family, this is the story of black farmers in the 20th century, this is a story of land and love.

Professor Marsha Darling: The Civil War, of course the end of the Civil War, opened the possibility with the Black agenda of 40 acres and a mule, literacy and the franchise had opened the possibility of some land reform program and they were basically two efforts: General Sherman's field order #15 deeding land over to Blacks on the Georgia and South Carolina coast, and the Southern Homestead Act, which set aside 45 million acres of land in the southern states for freedman and poor refugees. Ah, however, you know, unfortunately, most of that land never did get into the hands of Black people.

Freedman's Quote: To General Howard: General we want Homesteads, we were promised Homesteads by the government. We are left in a more unpleasant condition than our former..You will see this is not the condition of really freeman. You ask us to forgive the land-owners of our land. You only lost your right arm in the war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree and gave me 39 lashes and who stripped and flogged my mother and my sister. and who combines with others to keep land from me well knowing I would not have anything to do with him if I had land of my own--that man, I cannot well forgive. Does it look as if he has forgiven me, seeing how he tries to keep me in a condition of helplessness?

Charlene voice-over: I lived here for six months while I made this film. I learned a lot while I was here, I learned that they call this breaking the land, I learned that cotton seeds are blue, that there's a small window of time when you can plant, that a breakdown or one delay can cost you your crop, that only fools worry about the weather and only god knows how this day will end.

Warren voice-over: The land preparation consists of several trips across the field with the harrow, chisel plow, bedding and waiting on the season to plant, so if it's the planting season you'll be planting all day unless you have a breakdown or something like that.

Warren goes to buy a new tire

Salesman: Well you ain't going to want to here it Warren but unfortunately we don't have a four reel.

Warren: How many reels you got?

Salesman: Three. On the computer it said we had two four reels but undoubtedly go back there and look in the stock and we didn't have any four reels. They're all three, they must have been entered wrong, you know, in inventory or something. I don't have a new tire.

Warren: Umm

Salesman: I can have you one here in...

Warren: Ten minutes?

Salesman: I wished I could. Bad as I hate it.

Warren: You'll have it here tomorrow? Ok

Salesman: We'll get it here tomorrow

Warren: Ok, we'll do that.

Charlene voice-over: When Warren went back to the tire shop they told him it would be 4 days before they could get him a new tire. Warren didn't have four days but he had family and they found him a tire.

Professor Marsha Darling: This process of Black people working to acquire this equity base, it seems to me, is one of the greatest economic achievements of the early 20th century. All the more because by 1910 almost every single southern state had politically disfranchised Black male voters who had been given the right to vote with the 15th amendment.

Voices in song

There were a number of ways in which black people acquired land. But in almost all cases, most of the other black land acquisition was really the result of a lot of hard work and saving money and often taking jobs other than farming in the off-farming season- in the turpentine industry, the steel industry or other industries in the South. Jobs that tended to bring cash wages. So, there were a number of ways that Black people acquired land but basically hard work and perseverance.

Charlene voice-over: A hundred years later black farmers are still relying on off farm work to make their crops. The average black farmer makes \$15,000 from farm income. Warren supplements his income by hauling chicken litter, which is in high demand as a natural fertilizer. Hauling and spreading chicken litter can be pretty miserable work. The day after Warren spread this litter Peanut, his helper, quit. I think my assistant almost quit too.

Family photos and sounds of a family gathering.

Charlene voice-over: When I was five my family left the South. My mother went home to Montezuma to say goodbye. I don't remember anyone telling me we were going or how long we would be but I do remember playing in the dirt out by the barn. I remember making mud pies with the red dirt and begging my grandmother for a fresh egg, a key ingredient to any good mud pie. When they called me to leave I scooped up all the dirt I could pack and took it with me to the car. I don't think my mother found the dirt until long after we had left. I'm sure she threw it out and never thought twice about it. I, on the other hand, think about that red dirt every time I look down at my feet.

Charlene and her mother in the garden

Earlene: Turn the dirt over. Alright now, you got to

Charlene: About how far down?

Earlene: Push it all the way down, all the way, a little further down. Now pick it up and turn it over.

Charlene: People use to do this with acres of things? (laughter) I'm tired now.

Earlene: All the way over, down, good. Ok.

Charlene: Alright.

Earlene: Alright. Good and- that's good. This called breaking up the soil, tilling the soil, you know, turning the soil over, bout three different names for the same thing.

Charlene: Now how many times do we do this before it's ready?

Earlene: Charlene voice-over It's going to be ready when we get through we going to rake it, and get all the roots out of it and make it smooth.

Charlene: and then I do it back this other way.

Earlene: All the way across, yes.

Charlene: I'm getting good at it, oh good. Would you hire me?

Earlene: No I wouldn't

Charlene: (laughter) But I'm your daughter.

Earlene: I still wouldn't hire you. I know you're my daughter.

B-ROLL DEPRESSION FOOTAGE

Professor Marsha Darling: People that I have talked with in the South suggest that the Depression started happening in the South long before an official stock market crash. and we know that 30 independent Black banks failed in this decade. What's important about all of these banks: 1) they represent deposits by black depositors, these were basically the life savings of many black people, 2) these were the only banks essentially in the country and in the South particularly, that provided operating loans to black farmers. And so the process of the cotton market bottoming out between 1920 and 1930 devastated the ability of black farmers to repay their operating loans and that in turn crippled the banks.

Willie B, former Sharecropper/Charlene's Grand Uncle: When Hoover was President, those years were tough it was tough with him. and everything went to the bottom. and when I say that I mean no money, no nothing. Everybody was driving cars, virtually the biggest of the Black people had to jack 'em up. They wasn't able to continue to operate them. and they would go to church with shoes tied up with strings, and wire the sole to the top of the shoes 'cause they didn't have any.

Music & B-Roll Depression Footage

Professor Marsha Darling (voice-over): This is the decade of foreclosures, duress sales, tax sales the serious inability to recover from economic recession. and so this is a decade in which some numbers of the people who migrate to Southern cities and towns and northern cities are people who can't otherwise make it and who have been just adversely affected by the economic circumstances. and again, while it's hard for everybody black and white who are poor, it was much more difficult for black farmers.

Uncle AB, former Sharecropper/ Charlene's Great-Grand Uncle: I was sharecropping 'fore that, and I had sharecropped about 3 or 4 years. That means working with the white man. It was rough, from sun up to sun down, men making \$.40 women making \$.30, \$2.20 for five and a half days at \$.40 a day. Folks furnish the houses and everything we was living in and you have to do just like they said do because they was, we was working for them, you know. They couldn't treat a dog any worse. We couldn't say, couldn't talk much about it. The black folks couldn't talk to much about it, you'd be missin' and nobody know where you is.

Professor Marsha Darling voice-over: In the 1930s, there, basically two major things happened. On the one hand, the Farm Security Administration and the New Deal Legislation did nothing, almost nothing to help sharecroppers and tenant farmers. That is, whatever subsidy payments were sent to the South were siphoned off by whites who owned the land and the people in most dire need were the people who never received that assistance.

Pete Daniels, Writer/Historian: The land-owners got all the payments from the government and they could share some of them with sharecroppers or tenants. But the land owners got the allotments and they got government money. and some of them were notorious for not dividing the money. There were complaints, thousands of complaints every week, they went into Washington during the 30s when it started.

In Arkansas these conditions lead to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union when a group of Black and White sharecroppers got together near Tyronza Arkansas and formed this union. Immediately the planters reacted with violence and started all kinds of beatings and so forth to intimidate these people, but the union continued to grow anyway and eventually they got about 30,000 members in six southern states. But they had no support from the administration and finally they just faded away.

Charlene voice-over: In 1937 despite the hardships and years of struggle, my grandfather Fred Mathis purchased a small farm through the farm security administration's short lived tenant purchase program. My mother grew up on that farm, working in the fields next to her brothers and sisters. One day when she was a little girl she was picking cotton and looked over and saw a dog laying underneath the shade of a tree. She looked back and said to her brother, "sometimes I wish I were a dog." She got in a lot of trouble that day, my grandfather was pretty hurt, but my mother had decided that this was not the life she wanted. She worked hard to get out of Montezuma and she did. She left when she was seventeen and only came back to live one month the year I was born.

Music

August Wilson's Folk Traditions: We were a land based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans and then we left the south. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized north. It was a transplant that did not take. I think if we had stayed in the south we would have been a stronger people and because the connection between the south of the 20s, 30s, and 40s has been broken it's very difficult to understand who we are.

Charlene voice-over: Warren's father sold him his land two years ago since then Warren's made a few changes. His father didn't believe in irrigation. He said, if God wanted him to make a crop he would. Warren like most farmers left in the South is making different choices.

Warren: Well for some reason, it's one of the first questions lenders ask, "do you have irrigation?" It'll stabilize your yields and minimize your risk.

Warren signs the loan for the irrigation.

Warren: Alrighty

Loan officer: Ok, this is inspection report. Are you satisfied with the work that the well driller and the electrician have done, so far with the operation of the system?

Warren: Right

Neal: That's good.

Officer: Ok, you know how much money you still owe the fellow?

Warren: Uhh, not in my head, I got it at the house.

Officer: You got it at the house. Better look at this right? I hope it is.

Warren: Uh, lets see... that's it.

Charlene voice-over: The day after Warren signs the loan for the irrigation it rained for two weeks.

Warren voice-over: The weather's a major factor. You just have a lot of variables. You could get a rainy spell where you can't work for a week in the field and you may be in trouble. You don't want to run your blood pressure up or anything worrying about the rain, so just do what all you can do within your control. That's all you can do.

Preacher and congregation running underneath becomes dominant: Give me, just give me the strength to climb. The lord will be a shepherd for you and I heard the voices. ____ Great God almighty ____ I got to walk down through the valley of the shadow of death. I'm not worried...

Ralph Paige, Executive Director, Federation of Southern Cooperatives: That was the most important thing that I could remember, when people would come back, families would gather back on the land for homecoming, come to the family church and all that was hooked to the land because it was a sense of ownership, a sense of being, a sense of connection. It still happens but not as much as it would happen in a rural area.

Professor Marsha Darling: Many, many, many a community in this country tells the story of how their local, small little church was built from the timber cut down on the farm of a Black landowner.

Ralph Paige, Executive Director, Federation of Southern Cooperatives: I could go to a family reunion or a homecoming and get a chance to see everybody, you can't do that anymore. That's lost. That's part of our culture and it's lost now.

Footage of people congregating in and out of church after service.

Charlene (off camera): Why do you have to work on Sunday?

Warren: I'm running a little behind.

B-roll Warren getting in his truck after church to go to the field. Warren, his father and workers working on the truck.

Charlene voice-over: Warren, is it hard on you having to work six days a week?

Warren voice-over: No, sometimes I work seven days. Well, see it's season, you have you pre-planting and your planting season. That requires you to go, cause you're working against the weather, so when it's, the conditions are favorable you need to make the most out of it. Once you're past planting I call it the growing season. Where say, for instance, the cotton. Cotton you have problems with insect so you have to scout your cotton and, uh, spray accordingly.

Footage of Warren and County Agent

Agent: What do you think about all this new technology that's coming along? I know you've already got a system worked out and this new stuff means a lot of change.

Warren: I got an interest in that "BT" cotton, ___mix. Been talking with different ones. Some of the farmers been spraying the BT cotton and uh some, I heard, wasn't exactly satisfied with the yields and some were. So I'm still kind of puzzled about the BT cotton. This year since we been having a lot of rain it's been hard to get in with the ground rig to spray sometimes so the BT cotton would be-

Agent: It would be nice to have it, have some protection out there without-

Warren: 'Cause your plane coverage is not as great as the ground rig. Plus I had one time when I sprayed with the plane and maybe a couple hours later it came a rain washed that off, so I didn't get all the benefit from that spraying.

Voice-over- poem with overlapping verses: You see, the farm said to them, see, see what you can do. Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. We live here on this planet, in this country. Grab it... take it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, squeeze it, turn it, sell it, own it, kick it, kiss it, reap it.

Never mind you were born a slave. Here, this here is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back to it. "Stop sniffin'", it said, stop pickin' around the edges of the world. Take advantage and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage. It's here and nowhere else. We got a home in the rock, don't you see? Nobody starving in my home, nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home, you got one too. Hold it my brothers, make it my brother,

shake it, reap it, rent it, twist it, beat it, multiply it and pass it on, can you hear me, pass it on!

CIVIL RIGHTS FOOTAGE

Pete Daniels, Writer/Historian: In 1954, with the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the South turned into a very tense place and part of that was because the white people feared that any advances that African Americans made would be at their expense. So when Brown v. Board came down the countryside, a lot of farmers who needed credit found out that they couldn't get credit anymore. The Farmer's Home Administration would say "Well, you can't get credit this year." and the bank would say, "We don't want your money." These were the people who only belonged to the NAACP maybe. That was their only crime, or they tried to register to vote or they tried to sign a petition so that their children could go to integrated schools. And if you did that, likely you wouldn't be able to find money to farm.

Ralph Paige, Executive Director, Federation of Southern Cooperatives: I can remember during the Civil Rights days where refuge, in many cases, on Highway 80 during the March from Selma to Montgomery. Well, a lot of the land where people stopped along the way to rest, that was owned by Black families. That was "safe haven," the Churches, the land all that connected together. And there were cases when Black landowners was able to go down and sign a bond and bail people out. You know, that was power.

Professor Marsha Darling: The decades of the Civil Rights movement really made clear, I think, to Black Southerners, Black people around the country but particularly to Black southerners, that the stakes for standing one's ground and for pursuing self-help and race uplift were increasing.

Uncle LeRoy: Yeah, I can tell you about that now. That was in, about mid 1950s, therein about 55 or 6, when Lynmore came out of high school and my mother said she would like for him, wanted him to go to college, said he had a gift that the rest of us she didn't think we had and she wanted to send him to college. Tuskegee Institute, then I believe was the name of it. and I said, "Mama, I'll go down to the bank, get a little money so we won't have to use up all our little money, like that, so I went and stepped into the bank and asked the man...I walked in there that day and he said, "What is it for you, boy" and I told him and he said, 'College?' and he got close to me, he got down, just as nice talkin' just like if he was going to help me. and he asked me several questions, "Where was he going to college at? What's he going to major in?" different things like that. When I told him, when I finished he said to me, "College, hell, ain't no damn nigger got no business in no college and he say now you get up and get out of here and go to the fields and go to work."

LULU: He was trying to send each child to finish high school or send them to college. and um, he said he didn't have enough money to send them all so he said he was goin' try and send them and he did. He sent all of 'em to college but two or three.

J.W.: I remember my sister Earlene, when she got ready to go to college. Mama told me that was her first time ever witnessing her husband cry. They went to the bank to borrow money for her to go to college at Tuskegee and the president of the bank told my Mom and my Dad that niggers didn't need no education. All they needed to do was stay behind the plow and that he wasn't going to lend him a dime to send no child off to school. Even after Dad went down and offered to put his land up.

Pete Daniels: You get up to 1964, you'd had a number of years of civil rights movement and finally under the Johnson administration, they do a study, studying the department of agriculture. In every agency, they found out, there'd been discrimination. But not just discrimination, there'd never been in the south an African American elected to an agricultural committee in a county. and it went on from there in every level--whether it was borrowing money, trying to get more land to farm, or whatever, there was discrimination.

Footage: speech: Our goal is to ensure equal access and opportunity in all aspects of our programs without regard to race, color or national origin to the fullest extent of the law. The policy is clear. Any discrimination in our programs and activities must cease.

Robert Browne, Founder, Emergency Land Fund: In the midst of this burgeoning interest in the land question in the south, several of us got together and ran an advertisement in the New York Times, alerting people to this question, raising their consciousness about this question, and maybe a year the add appeared we came out with our report which was called only six million acres. We learned that black land ownership had been at its peak in the 1915 agriculture census and that by 1969 black land ownership had declined to about six million acres.

Pete Daniels: After 1964 the Department of Agriculture said it would do better. It did a little better. There were some Black people elected to county committees, there were some Black people employed on the local level, many more on the national level, but all during this time there were Black farmers, they were leaving the land and so by the time you had any African American power to do any good the people they were supposed to help had already left the land.

Robert Browne: Based on the reports which we were getting from our law students that we had we decided we would experiment we would actually go through an operation to try to understand better what was happening so the Black Economic Research Center asked one of its staff members who was stationed in Mississippi to take some money, we sent him

\$2500 if I remember correctly, to take it into the tax sale in September of that year and to see what he could do. So he could learn the ropes of how it operated. and so he identified some Blacks whose land would be up for sale that September and his assistant went into the tax sale. One of the first things he said happened was that one of the people in the room shouted across and said, "What are these Negroes doing here?" Apparently it was the first time a Black person had ever thought or dared, I don't know which, to come to a tax sale. and this guy replied, "Oh well, some folks from New York sent a big check down here the other day I don't know if it has anything to do with this or not." Well, it did, they saved a little land that day.

Professor Marsha Darling: So there was a just an increased visibility and focus on the problems of Black farmers, and concretely and specifically in addition to all the written things that were being produced, the Emergency Land Fund emerged.

Robert Browne: We hired some staff down in the south, opened some offices in Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, uh....and South Carolina, cooperative arrangement in South Carolina, and uh, we started to work.

Professor Marsha Darling: I remember being a researcher in the south at the time and traveling around the south and meeting farmers whose land had been saved under some- from some measure of adversity or duress by the Emergency Land Fund. It was crucial.

Robert Browne: We discovered in a general sort of way that Blacks were losing their land very heavily out of chicanery. Things that were being done to them by White people which were not necessarily illegal, some of them were, but they were only marginal legal and they were ill motivated.

JW: Our property borders that of a white man, he was a great big property owner during his day, and this white man, he always approached my daddy about buying his land. We were fixing the pastor's fence one time when the cows would break the fence, our line right up there borders his and he drove by in his car one day. and he stopped and he got out. White people had a tendency back then in those days to refer to people as reverends or preachers. They would call them preachers. So he spoke to my daddy, he say, hey there preacher, he said um, aren't you a little bit over the line, aren't you over on my property. and daddy told him, he said, no sir he said um this is my property line here, I'm even with the star. When they sold the land to my daddy they put up stakes marking the boundary. So, daddy said to us, he said, "after I'm dead and gone I want someone to remember that I moved my fence back, so if they ever start any problem with yal saying you're over the line. You know you got at least five feet more out here that you can go."

Robert Browne, Founder, Emergency Land Fund: Black folks are rather reluctant to make wills. But if you die without a will the property goes to a number of people depending on how the state likes to allocate it, but certainly cousins, sisters, brothers, parents and so forth, so that they all have a community ownership in the property. No one owns a particular piece of it, but collectively they own the property. What is done, is that some outside individual who has his eye on that piece of property can come in and buy a small share of it. So this person comes in, buys out one of the Black owners, demands that it go for sale, it's sold on the steps of the county courthouse and you have to pay in cash.

Professor Marsha Darling: In essence, these elderly black people who often died knowing what a will was but choosing not to leave one, I think they believed in their hearts, often that their children would know what to do with the land and that their children would value doing with the land what they had done with the land.

Footage of Charline, Earlene and her sisters by the grave sight of Big Daddy and other relatives

Earlene: I got this yellow flower because I like yellow for my daddy. I'm going to put it right here.

Charlene voice-over: My grandfather, Fred Mathis died in 1983. He had seventeen children by two different wives. His first wife, my grandmother, Janie Milliron, died in childbirth after bearing nine children. His second wife, Lula Mathis bared eight children. He made two wills before he died and the last one reads as follows: To my first set of children I leave my love, to my second set of children I leave my land.

My mom and Dad live in California now. They say they have no desire to go back to Georgia. They keep a beautiful garden and grow fruit trees in their back yard. For my father I think this is true. He grew up in a small town called Sparta and has far more bitter memories of the jim crow south. For my mother though, it seems different. I find it hard to believe she doesn't want to go back. All her sisters and three brothers still live in Georgia. Her mother, father and several brothers are buried there. I ask her all the time about going back and she says she doesn't want to. She says my brother and I wouldn't be around to take care of her grave. I think we would if we knew how, but maybe she's right, maybe we just don't know how to dress a grave and maybe it's the kind of thing you just can't learn from a book, you learn it from a place, a place we don't really know.

Footage of Charlene and Earlene in the community garden

Earlene: Lets take these to the weed-

Charlene: Oh, this is so fun, how come we didn't do this when I was younger?

Earlene: Charlene you couldn't- I couldn't get you in the garden. Chuck would help me in the garden, you tell 'em- you know I tried to get you in the garden when you was young. You always didn't wanted to- you always had so much to do, you never had time. You remember I had the garden and me and Chuck used plant the garden and you wouldn't help. You wouldn't even turn the plants around for the sun.

Charlene: (laughter) Was that an assignment I had?

Earlene: Yes, yes you had to turn them around every day cause the sun would Make 'em go over.

Charlene: Uhuh

Earlene: and you wouldn't turn them around. Chuck had to turn them around for me.

Charlene: I hope it's all weeds.

Earlene: Well if it's not what else is there? That's weeds, hon.

Charlene: Well, this looks like a plant, that's not-

Earlene: Charlene, that's weeds, honey, weeds.

Charlene: Ok

Earlene: You don't want that.

Fannie Lou Hamer - Archival Audio: We just though you know, if we had land to grow some stuff on then it would be a help to us, because, you know, living on a farm, on some plantations they still don't give you a place to grow stuff. So we founded Freedom Farms in 1969, um we got in February we got some money some donations to um, put an auction on 40 acres of land.

Charlene voice-over: This is the day I planned to film Tina James, Warren's wife, but it rained all day so we decided to play spades instead.

Charlene and family play cards

Narcel: You're not supposed to tell what lead.

Elaine: But, uh, Charlene don't renege, but she constantly ask what lead.

Narcel: We don't play that where I'm from.

Tina: Now, guys lets not get that harsh about the game. (laughter)

Elaine: If my memory serves me correctly, when you were not Charlene's partner and she asked me what lead you ____different.

Charlene: It's a friendly game.

Elaine: Oh, ok.

(Laughter)

Tina: It's funny the associations you make with cotton. Especially as Black people, cause, I remember the first time I saw cotton when I was walking with the Federation and when I saw it, it was like- I don't know what I imagined cotton would look like (laughter) but it just wasn't what I thought it would be. and then actually we went to this old lady's house, Ms. Witherspoon and she had it, she just had a few of them just growing outside of her front yard. and that's the first time I had ever actually touched it, but I just, I don't know, I guess that's the city stuff in me. I never-

Charlene: ...farmer's wife

Tina: I don't know all about it, but yeah you're right, yeah I'm a farmer's wife, but it's interesting. Ok, where are we at...

Charlene voice-over: Tina grew up in New York city, moved to Georgia a few years ago, met my cousin Warren and now lives in the blue house on Highway 26 just outside the Montezuma city line.

Warren voice-over: My wife helps me with the technical part. I'm trying to get our system where we have it all on computer.

Tina voice-over: How would I describe Warren? I guess I'd describe him as honest, hard working, loves what he does, also really family orientated in the sense that any chance he gets to do business with family he'll spend like fifty extra bucks. Just because.

Shirley Sherrod, Albany Office, FSC: A lot of farmers were doing quite well during the 70s. That's when our government told farmers to plant fence row to fence row, and that bigger was better. You know, so everybody was trying to expand, trying to get more land, trying to buy bigger equipment, trying to plant as much as they could. and then all of a sudden toward to end of the 70s, well actually starting around '76 we started having droughts. and we had a drought in '76,'77,'78, and then we had a year with rain, and in '79, also during those years we a had a grain embargo during the Carter Administration, then the oil cartel, you know, realized the strength that they had and the price of oil shot up and therefore you had diesel fuel and fertilizer and everything going up. The price of equipment started increasing, and all of a sudden we were really into a farm crisis. Now, black farmers had

been into a farm crisis all through the years, 'cause we've been losing land, and losing farmers, but now all farmers were hurting, but you had a lot of farmers during those years who were in real trouble. It's hard to bounce back from so many years of drought and so many years of high prices when the costs, when the price they were receiving remained the same, or decreased. So you'll hear people talk about the farm crisis. Our farmers just moved to, Black farmers just moved to a different stage of the crisis.

Lynmore: If you wanted to buy a piece of land then certainly there would be some difficulties there. and we tried to expand our farming operation and things like this and some of the things, they didn't say this outright, but they just felt that we shouldn't be doing, you know this was the wrong thing for people like us to do and, uh, our applications were denied.

Stanley Brown, Farmer: I was with Farmer's Home for eleven years and uh, well some of the farmers were lucky though, but I was one that wasn't. Every loan I got from Farmer's Home was in a supervised bank account. It wasn't because I was a bad guy, I don't think, but I wasn't in the loop hole of getting money released. They would take that money, I'd go through the problem of going trying to get a loan, they put it in a supervised bank account and they put their supervised committee over it and every nickel of that Farmer's Home money I spent is, uh, the farmers home supervisor, their employee wrote the check. I didn't even get family living, I was going to a job every day. I took care of myself and I still couldn't make it.

Warren voice-over: Average harvest day we leave the house around 7:30, 8:00, and it depends upon the weather. We go and check out the machine, and service it and get it ready so when the dew dries off we can get started. and depending on whether we on schedule or behind whether we'll go to lunch or we'll bring lunch to the field.

Elaine: He's always loved farming. The only thing outside of farming is his motorcycle, basically.

Warren's riding partners arrive and greet each other

Partner #1: Lord have Mercy. What's up Daddy? You know you know me.

Partner #2: You the daddy, now.

Partner #1: You know it, you know it (they snap each others fingers) Hey!

Partner #2: Yeah, I might learn something from you today.

Partner #1: Pay attention

Partner #2: Pay attention-

Partner #3: I'm gonna get you man.

Partner #2: Huh?

Partner #3: That Honda look broke down.

Partner #1: You know what though, cuz, he was saying- that boy right there was talking bad about this Honda. I said you better hush.

Partner #2: Who's that, Warren?

Partner #1: Yeah, I say he come there, he'll make you ashamed of that thing.

Partner #2: Well, was it Warren or was it ____?

Partner #1: That gentleman right there. He was saying something 'bout that old slow Honda. I said you better watch out.

Partner #2: Oh, we gonna have to...we have to take care of that real quick.

Partner #1: Do something about that- gonna take care of that real quick.

Partner #2: Y'all can't put that camera on the back of here can you? Cause you put it on the back of here you catch 'em all.

Partner #1: Oh my goodness gracious.

Elaine voice-over: Everybody else in his age group, they went off to school and they went away and started doing their own thing, but he stuck it out because it wasn't always easy when he first started. He had a really, really hard time, he struggled a lot, but he stuck with it.

Charlene (off-camera): Why do you think they should have a farmer's union, that can't be trouble.

Partner #1: Because, they need something to protect theyself, because everything, it seem like to me, , coming from across the water and everything they got here ain't no good for nothing, but yet they growing it but they takin' it from 'em, you know, but they ain't getting' nothing for it and they gotta work seven days a week, you know what I mean. Charge 'em all that for them tractors, and bringing those tractors, making them over there, putting them together here, you know what I'm saying. There's no win for the poor man, there's no win for him.

Ralph Paige, Executive Director, Federation of Southern Cooperatives: In 1982 the U.S. Civil Rights Commission issued a that stated that the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture was in fact a

catalyst in the decline of the black farmer. It also issued a stern warning that if something was not done that there would not be any black farmers by the year 2000.

Uncle Leroy: I believe it was in '86 when I first applied and got the money and everything, put it in the lawyers hands. and he was gon' pay off, I was trying to pay off all my in debt, put it in one note, and he didn't do it. I gave him a cashier's check, he paid off the two least ones, he never did pay the rest.

Shirley Sherrod, Albany Office, FSC: He owed some money to Farmers Home Administration and he, he negotiated with them and they decided to accept an amount of money for payment in full. So he borrowed the money from a local bank to debt settle, to pay them off. and they actually had a closing. So as far as he knew, he was paid, he had paid them, and he was paying the bank, you know, on the note that he had borrowed to pay Farmers Home.

Uncle Leroy: When I went to Albany when I found out the thing that wasn't in place, the money hadn't been rightly applied. So I went down there and hired a lawyer. The FHA ain't said a word. The bank ain't say nothing. I was just paying the money back, and they was taking it in. Them people knew that just as good as I'm looking at you.

Shirley Sherrod, Albany Office, FSC: The bank had to know that the money had not been transferred. There's just no way it could have happened without the banker knowing what was going on, and certainly the attorney knew.

Uncle Leroy: He look me in the eyes and told me he said I supposed to been dead. I asked him why would he say that. He say because of what they done to me. Say, it supposed to gave me a heart attack or a stroke, and killed me.

Shirley Sherrod, Albany Office, FSC: It makes you wonder sometimes why is it that it took Farmers Home Administration that long to, to send a notice. Why is it that the county supervisor didn't send any kind of letter, you know, leading up to getting' the delinquent notices in '87. So many strange things happen when you have only white people in charge of dealing with our people.

News Montage

Warren: Several of us beginning farmers got together and we all had the same problem, we were all denied. and we got some media coverage. The situation changed and we were all granted loans.

[Warren and Neal stand by his truck discussing his acreage, crops and debt.]

Neal: What we gonna do is just take a look at what you had projected or planned versus what look like you actually made for the year.

Warren: Right now I done harvested about fifty-five acres of cotton, the biggest ever still to be harvested.

Neal: Ok, now, the big part, I know it may be still a little early.

Warren: The big part.

Neal: The big part.

Warren: Ok.

Neal: Debt repayment.

Warren: I finished paying for this year.

Neal: Huh? (laughter) Which one? FSA? (laughter)

Neal, Local director, Farm Security Administration: When I think about Warren I guess right off the top I would say he's a very hard worker, young farmer. Warren is the type of person, type farmer who really wants to make a go at it, I feel like he's in it for the duration, he's in the field each day doing whatever it is and whatever it takes to make his crop.

Charlene voice-over: For the past six years I have lived here in Philadelphia. Recently I was on a t.v. show talking about this film. A woman named Smitty Morrison who used to live in Montezuma and now lives not to far from me in North Philadelphia called me up. Smitty wasn't sure who I was or what I was talking about but she said she thought I looked like one of those Mathis girls. It seems like the older folks from the south know faces the way white folks know family names. We talked for an hour on the phone about the people she knew in Montezuma, how on Sundays my great-grandmother, Vysie Mathis, would feed her and all the other children from the church. She remembered my great grandfather Bill Mathis and my grandfather Fred Mathis. She asked me to carry a message to my grandmother and my aunt the next time I went home to Montezuma. She didn't think she would get back there again before she died, so she just wanted me to tell them that she was doing alright.

Professor Marsha Darling: A number of the interviews where I asked Black people, " what does your farm mean?" they talked repeatedly about having value being able to have a place where they could keep their family together. Raise their family, take- nurture of their family, take care of it as well as a place where they could be producers instead of consumers and a place on which they could make major decisions. But I think for a whole other generation they very much talked of farming and ones ownership of a farm as having a home place where you could sink your roots and hold on.

Ralph Paige, Executive Director, Federation of Southern Cooperatives : The strategies for the future, it has to be a holistic approach when it come to saving Black farmers, or saving Black owned land in this country. We have to take a look at it as an economic and social issue. We can do it through cooperatives. and this is the real answer to creating real wealth in our communities. and it may be the last opportunity of the new frontier.

Lynmore: There's no question in my mind that a lot of land has been lost, and it was lost to, because of discrimination. But I don't think we need to just close the books on it. I think that where people have been wronged, I think it should be righted. I know a lot of these people have passed on now, but, they have heirs. and I think the heirs should be entitled to what they once owned. and certainly we'll say that for people that bought this land, they should be entitled to it, these kinds of things. Maybe you can't give them back the land that they lost, but you can certainly give them the value of that land at today's prices. You can give them monies for their pain and suffering and things like this. I think that could be done, and I think it should be done.

Pete Daniels, Writer/Historian: If this had happened in any other country, that is, if you had a united states dept. of agriculture was in another country, if it had caused the farming population to dwindle from 15 or 20 million down to 2, if a certain segment of the population which wasn't popular with the people in that dept. had been dwindled down to practically a handful, and even those were threatened, if all these things happened anywhere else in the world, and the united states went in and investigated, we'd call for land reform. and we would call for real changes in that agency that was responsible. This would be a violation, perhaps even , of human rights. But certainly a violation of people's right to farm and do what they wanted to on their land. But it happens in our country and we think it's the American way.

Ralph Paige, Executive Director, Federation of Southern Cooperatives: You see land is the only real wealth in this country and if we don't own any then we're out of the picture. and we ain't growing no more land this is it.

Stanley Brown, Farmer: I think with the next say 15, 20 years if things don't change there won't be no black farmers when we gone because, what they seen what's goin' on now, it won't be nobody...what you think?

Charlene voice-over: I haven't seen any red dirt here in Philadelphia but I did find this community garden near my house. I now have a ten by ten garden plot and I'm trying to make a few things grow. It's not the same as Montezuma, but I like this garden, I like my neighbors. Smitty and her daughter are coming by to check out my peppers and see how

I'm doing. Maybe with some time I'll be like Smitty, Montezuma will be my home and Philadelphia will be the place where my people stay.

Warren voice-over: Black people in general have always played a major part in farming. It's part of history, we're a part of history. I just think it's important to own property and it's important to have black farms in the community.