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Interview with Billy Morgan

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Billy Morgan (M), May 19, 1982. interviewed by Dr. Roger Branch (B)

Man: Special Collections, Georgia Southern College, May 19, 1982; We're in the Georgia Southern Museum, Dr. Roger Branch, Professor of Sociology, will be interviewing Mr. Billy Morgan.

Billy Morgan is a native of Tattnall County, a sharecropper's son, who is now acclaimed widely for his rural art. Billy is speaking at Georgia Southern College today and this is a rare opportunity for Special Collections. He has a show, an exhibit, in the Hall of Man here at the GSC Museum in the Rosenwald Building. A former farmboy with little formal training, he's developed a distinct style in acrylics. He's had seven limited editions thus far. He's won 46 blue ribbons and presented ten one-man shows. Among those who own his works is former president Jimmy Carter. Billy has been named outstanding citizen and artist by the Georgia House of Representatives. Because of the powerful rural orientation of his work and his strong attachment to the world of his past, Billy Morgan was chosen as one of the speakers for the Cultural Heritage Lectures sponsored by Georgia Southern College. And now Dr. Branch and Mr. Morgan:

B: Billy, you and I share a number of things including the same region of the country as the place in which we grew up. It's obvious that this period of your life had a great deal of influence upon you when anyone takes a look at the art that you've done so far. I see many, many scenes that seem to be taken straight out of your childhood, but having read something of your biography it's also obvious that childhood was not really always a time of fun and games either. Like, you grew up in rural South Georgia and know that life on a farm can be tough. So, tell us a little bit about what it was like to grow up a sharecropper's son in Tattnall County.

M: Well, it was so rough with us- as far back as I can remember, when I first started school, you know I can remember a little further back but, we lived outside of Collins, Georgia down there on ... Braswell's place and we'd sharecrop it. God, I worked. I started plowing mules just before I started school- either that or get your butt whipped, that's one way or the other. And I remember the first drawing I ever did too was we'd be waiting for the school bus- Daddy finally got the school bus to come through there- we used to have to walk 'bout a mile to school. I'd draw drawings on the mailbox of ole cowboys and Indians. Each kid's gonna have something to do with the west, and I loved to watch the movies when we'd go to town. So I just kept on working at what I did. And I used to not have paper or nothing to work with so I finally got where I'd tear up my old soda (?) sacks with the bulldog on 'em and save the insides for paper where I could have something to draw on. And I'd sneak color crayons away from school- stuff where I could work with. I'd get more spankings about that than anything. That's what I wanted to be- I just wanted to be an artist, you know? Worked hard all my life- used

to sit in fields when we were putting out fertilizer, filling up ... for Daddy, and I'd sit there and look at the surroundings and said 'one day I'm gonna paint exactly like it.' and I see it- I want to put- be the only artist in the world that put heat waves in a painting, 'cause I've never seen a painting with heat waves in it. And I painted one that I've sold- it's got heat waves in it.

B: I can remember how they'd dance across the face of a newly plowed field and barely visible but it was a thing you almost felt as much as saw, wasn't it?

M: It sure was, well if you ever plowed a mule you know what I'm talking about- you go out on across there and it gets so hot during the evenings and right after 12:00 the heat waves going across the fields would almost stifle you- dusty and- that was the only way we had to make a living and during the winter months it really got rough 'cause we didn't have nothing to do. And we was lucky to kill squirrels out in the woods- if we found something to eat. Finally we started working at a sawmill during the winter and I thought that was the hardest work I'd ever done in my life. I done it all at the sawmill.

B: What age did you start working at the sawmill, Billy?

M: I was about 10 or 12. Helping during the winter months- helping Daddy, 'cause Daddy- he run the chipper at the sawmill grinding up the slabs and the logs, wasn't no good. And he got us on out there stacking lumber in the lumber yard- safest place. So we stacked lumber until we got a little older then they transferred us up to the sawmill pulling green lumber off the chain and running the de-barker and ripsaw. When the Then we went to the plane (?) maker where it was green lumber. I went- still farmed- and I sort of got tired of it when I got about 17 and I went off to the service. Stayed in the army, got out of there and went in the Navy.

B: Why did you decide to switch services?

M: I just wanted to see what it was like.

B: How would you compare them?

M: It's best to stay at home. (laughs)

B: The best comparison between the Army and the Navy is to stay at home and not go to neither. (laughs) I understand. If you were working- and you say that much- summer and winter, the time that you spent in formal schooling, even when you were in school must've been sort of limited.

- M:** Well, it was. I had to quit school in the eighth grade, well I got past to the ninth- I went a week in ninth grade and had to drop out to help support the family. If I hadn't we wouldn't have been able to make it.
- B:** How many children were there in your family?
- M:** Well, besides- with me there were eight of us. There was three boys and five girls.
- B:** You're one of the older ones, I believe.
- M:** Yeah, I'm next to the oldest.
- B:** And it always falls on the older ones to have to try to help support the younger ones, doesn't it?
- M:** Right. That's the way it works out.
- B:** Let me ask you to do something for me- describe for me going to town on Saturday night for a farmboy, and let's say you were growing up in the 40s and early 50s, how did life go down on Saturday night?
- M:** Well, we'd go on Saturday afternoon, say from three o'clock on, and the only way we had to go to town was with a mule and wagon. Mama would spread out a quilt in the back for all us kids and we'd go to town and they had hitching rails in Collins, Georgia at that time- there were very few cars, you hardly ever seen a car. I know that was during the 50s and that sounds ridiculous but the only ones that could afford a car was somebody that had money. We'd park the mule; they had a hitching rail and then a water trough, just like in the Old West. I told my son about it and he literally laughed- thought I was kidding about it, which I wasn't. And I'd go and show him, you know when he got older I'd carry him around and show him where everything was at- old blacksmith's shop, we used to have one of these. We'd go to the theater and it would cost us- Daddy would give us 15 cents. That was our weekly wage, you know- salary that he'd give us. So we'd go in the show, it would cost us a nickel, go in the show and see Red Rider and you know. And then we'd get, used to get them silver tails (?). With a dime, you could get about 100 with a dime. We'd get home and we'd get sick on chocolate (laughs). It was a lot of fun back then, I look at it sometimes and it was a lot of fun then again, it was hard. But well, I appreciate everything I learned when I was coming up. It showed me that if I could ever make it I didn't want my son to work like I did. Well, you didn't get spanked, you got whipped. I put it down there, that's before these laws got passed on- no spanking kids. I can see spanking them and stuff like that but not, you know, tee-totaling beating them. It learned me to respect my elders and my father- I

- loved him after I got grown. So yeah, ain't no telling what kind of person I might've been.
- B:** He didn't have a great number of choices about what he was gonna do anyway, did he? He had to- putting food on the table was a true problem, real pressure.
- M:** That's right- that was it. Either you helped out or you ...
- B:** What else other than the occasional trip to town- buy a few groceries and go to the movie and that sort of thing, maybe get an ice cream, what else did you do that you recall as being a lot of fun as a child?
- M:** Well, we'd start plowing like, on Monday, you know- the field. And you'd have to make a round to a road, you know where the sand was starting to... And Daddy'd say "we're going fishing this Friday, I want y'all to have that cotton, tobacco and the corn plowed if you want to go." So me and my brother were only ones that plowed. And we'd start it and we wouldn't stop 'til late at the night until we couldn't see. And me and my older brother were praying for a full moon night so we could see. Because that's one thing we looked forward to was going fishing. We loved to go fishing. At the river, we'd stay all weekend, we'd go down And Daddy tied the mule off and bring some corn and stuff in a sack and we'd stay down there at the river. Sleep on the wagon.
- B:** That still lingered in your mind as an important and interesting part of your life. Have you ever thought about trying to capture some of that in your paintings?
- M:** Yeah, I want to in the future- I want to paint it as I remember and seeing all these things. It's just like when we'd be having these cane grinds.
- B:** Tell us about that.
- M:** Well, we had 10 rows of cane and we'd make a bowl into a rudder (?), that's how good the cane was. And the rows wasn't that long, they were about 50 foot long, a little longer- might've been a 100 foot long. Well anyway, there was so much cane on these rows- just giant cane, and we'd cut it down, strip it, and we'd have these cane grinders. This is when the neighbors come in and they'd bring their cane too. We'd have syrup bowls and my job was to feed the cane into it. Oh, and I got tired of looking at cane.
- B:** But all the juice you could drink though,

M: Yeah, it was good when it was real cold- during the winter. And we'd swap around, me and my older brother and some other boys would swap around feeding the cane and then we'd help out skimming the syrup to get the skim off of it- you'd boil it 'til it would come up- you know, real pretty, thick syrup. And it just was good. And we'd have hog killings right after that. We'd all get together- 2 or 3 of the neighbors would, and we'd kill about 30 or 40 hogs. The women folk would clean out the chitlins- now, I've eaten my share of chitlins. I've ate everything out of a hog but his squeal and hair (laughs). We'd boil cracklins out in the same meal, in the same big boiler that we'd boil syrup in. They'd put fat in there and we'd make the lard and cracklins- they'd make cracklin cornbread and we'd eat fresh tenderloin then have cane syrup right there on the table it'd be warm in there inside the little shelter there where we were, on the lawn (?) we were making lard on it. Then Grandma and my mama, they would get out there and get some of the fat and they'd have 2 or 3 wash pots going making the lye soap at the same time.

B: It made a great deal of what they had to eat and ... did or not.

M: That's right, anything you got then- see, we had an icebox, we didn't know nothing about no refrigerator. I didn't even know nothing about no electricity for a long time. And we would have a smoke house- you'd have smoked meat dangling where flies or nothing- you have the smoke and cured down and salted down fatback that flies wouldn't bother with 'cause it'd be so cured, you know nothing like that would touch it.

B: As you describe some of the things that you did and lifestyles and habits, you sound a great deal like the way people lived in this section of Georgia for a hundred years or more from the time that it was first settled until very recent times and in your case your lifestyle reached far back in the past and the traditional ways of making a living, preserving what you made, and of using what you had then preserved. So you in a way sort of personify and exemplify a way of life that has by now pretty much passed away. There's not that much still remaining of the world that you experienced so deeply and so vividly not more than 20 years ago. Let's talk about some other things now. You are untaught and informal training with your art and you simply received whatever you had available to you in the way of materials, your interest in trying to put down on paper or anything that would lie still, something of what you saw and the way your mind's eye translated it. What sort of encouragement did you get, if any, when you were a youngster doodling all the time and coloring all the time and painting all the time?

M: Well I didn't get too much; my mother would say something every now and then and my daddy'd get mad 'cause sometimes I'd be drawing when I should've been working and he thought it was a waste of time. There was one

time when I was going to school- I ain't gonna call no names or nothing, but the teacher got me up in the class and ridiculed me, you know 'cause I was drawing where I should've been listening, I reckon he was right. But that's all I wanted to do was sit and draw.

- B:** Did any teacher or anybody else other than your immediate family say, "Billy, that's good and you really ought to develop that talent."?
- M:** Yes I did. I had some school teachers that did tell me, you know, to keep on, just keep doing it. And they knew I was slow about learning books you know, then I'd finally catch on when I got grown, you know- what to expect in life. But they did really encourage me, aunts, some of my uncles did, and when I went in the service I kept drawing things. I'd draw some of the boys or their wives or kids there on the ship I'd draw their families- and that's where I kept with it
- B:** Portrait sketching sort of thing?
- M:** Yeah, I'd do stuff like that. Now, I did a lot of walls, that's how I really got started.
- B:** Murals?
- M:** Yeah, in the service. And I started messing around with paints, you know, with a- not oil paints or nothing like that, just regular old house paint- little small cans, you know, little 30 cent cans. And I started messing with it, they'd go and buy it- they had it there on the base. They'd go and get all kinds of colors and I'd do the bay room and the ship's room or something- I told them I could paint and I couldn't. I didn't have no idea how to Once I got it all, started messing with the paint and mixing them together, that's how I started liking it and when I really started getting fascinated by it.
- B:** Trial and Error.
- M:** Yeah, it was trial and error. I made a lot of mistakes- you always make mistakes. I still do. No artist, I don't care who he is, that says he ain't never made a mistake- he's just a big liar. Because I ain't met a man alive who don't make a mistake, I don't care what he does. That's just not life.
- B:** Your family have lived in this, members of your family or various lines of your family, have been in this region of Georgia for generations, have they not?
- M:** Yeah. We come out of Carolina, the Morgans did. They strung down and went everywhere- some to Florida, Virginia, out west, all the way to

California but they got spread out so far we don't never keep up with none of them. I'm probably kin to some of them out in Washington...

B: You are, I believe, descended from the Confederate commander of Morgan's Raiders. You want to tell us a bit about that?

M: Yeah well, They were five brothers and they was three of them, I think Grandma told me that they were Generals, one of them was a Captain or a Colonel or something or other and anyway, one of them couldn't make it and he all the time stayed in trouble. But anyway, right at the end of the war, 2 of them were getting out, well all of them were getting out but the others were gonna take their families and they were going up north, out west. But two of them said they was coming home to see my great-grandmother, here in Georgia. Well anyway, they got- on the last 2 or 3 days, just before the war ended they got killed. When she got the letter- it was 3 or 4 days later- she got the letter from the Confederacy War Department saying they had gotten killed. And so I did a painting of this- in my own mind- of the old house, inside the old house, looking out the window and it shows a ghost image of them riding up on their horses. Which, they ain't there but they did keep their promise to come back.

B: Were you descended from one of those that got killed or from one of the-

M: From all 5 of them. They was all brothers so- I really don't know which one was which see, my grandma never did tell us that, she just told us we were all- you know, they were our uncles. And one of them was Granddaddy, you know Granddaddy and all. And it just kept on down see- on the Mosby Rangers, see I was kin to them.

B: Yeah, that was another of the famous guerilla type...

M: They went down to Florida. The Mosby Rangers went in and out of Florida, the Carolinas, up the coast lines all the time.

B: Isn't he the one they call the "Gray Ghost"? There used to be a television series about Mosby's Rangers.

M: Yeah, well he was kin to them by marriage. But I had an uncle that did ride with him, his name was Jared Adler (?), which was on my mother's side at that time. I seen him before he died; I was a little boy. I think I was 5 or 6 years old. He was 110. We'd go to my Aunt Maggie's and she was married to him. And he would get up there telling us about all this. He had his uniform and everything. And he'd tell about the raiding he'd do with the Mosby Rangers.

- B:** That must be fascinating.
- M:** Well I was real young and I caught some of it, some of it I didn't, but I still remember some of the stuff. You know, as I got older it dawned on me what he really was.
- B:** Wouldn't it be marvelous if we had a record of the things he was telling you youngsters.
- M:** Yeah, it would've been nice if we could've had those tape recorders like we're talking on now. It would've been great if we could've had something and just taped it. And that's old. You just thinking about 110 years old and I wasn't but about 4 or 5 then. And he died the year right after that. I remember him dying- he was an old man. I told my wife about it- she thought I was joking about his age. No, I wasn't joking. She had never heard of such. There's something about being that old. I told her he was. I wouldn't think my aunt or my grandmother would've lied about it.
- B:** No, I wouldn't think so.
- M:** I remember seeing him and they did say he was 110. He had white hair and a long beard, way down his chest.
- B:** If they would not be dead if you wanted to do so, I believe I'd take their word for it too.
- M:** It did make me stop and think, you know, about stuff like that. It goes back up my ancestors way back far.
- B:** Well you already may have had that certain kind of quality in your childhood, not having money to spend or fancy clothes and you may have discovered that life was pretty tough in the way of having to work hard, but it sounds to me as if you had a very broad base of experiences- family history and that sort of thing to draw from in doing your painting. Seems to me that I see that in some of your paintings- that whole business of your childhood and of course the painting "Promise Kept." What others do I see- all these echoes of the past, the scenes that you paint in many cases seem to have come more out of 20 years ago than they do out of today. You're sort of building that sort of trademark of your work- with the weathered and gray pine board. Has so much passed from existence to be replaced by something that perhaps has less character than that weathered pine does- so it does look a lot more like the world of my childhood and yours than it does today. I'm very pleased that you're preserving that- it's part of the cultural heritage and I don't think we would ever have that particular sort of memory, mainly the visual memory, if someone were not painting it. And that's of course one of

the very important reasons why we wanted you here at Georgia Southern and why we wanted people in Statesboro and at the college to see the world that you are recreating. Not many people are doing this and if someone were not doing it- this important service that you're doing- it might be gone forever. Here and there you will see some photography of it, but that too is fairly limited because not many people a few years back thought these weathered, old buildings were attractive or had any value to them. In retrospect, looking back we can say there was a special kind of beauty to these things and now that they're gone, or almost gone, we can see it. What other things do you think influenced your painting in content and style?

M: Well the main thing that really inspired me, this might sound funny or strange to y'all, but the good Lord inspired me 'cause he created- see, I ain't the one that really did the painting- he does through me. He shows me what he can do through me on canvas- what I can create with my thoughts, but he's doing it. If it weren't for him I couldn't paint at all, nobody could. And a lot of people will think- a lot of them say "I do it." That's true, he's doing it, but he couldn't do it if the Lord wasn't letting him do it. That's one of the greatest inspiring to me when he just

B: When did you come to this feeling that your talent and that your artwork was an inspired thing- God working through you- when and how did you come to that understanding?

M: Well, when I accepted Christ as my savior- it's just a feeling that I can't explain, you know? I'm studying the Bible too and I'm studying to be a layman too- you know?

B: A lay speaker, a lay minister?

M: A lay minister, yeah. Well it happens to just take a long time. I'm trying to do it on my own, which I know I have to wind up getting a certificate from a school, but if you already know it, see you can get it that much faster, which I think will help.

B: At what point in your life did this experience come along?

M: Well, it happened- well it hadn't been too long really, it's been about six months ago. This ain't no joke- I thought, you know- now you can see the difference in my paintings from that time 'til now.

B: How did you understand your painting? You said now you understand your painting as sort of, a work of God through you. How did you interpret them before? How was your understanding before?

M: Well, we're just painting and sitting down and doing something real fast and do it, you know- for the money. And it wasn't that important. I know that now. So now, if it wasn't for Him- I'm seeing things in my paintings now that I've never seen before. This feeling I have of- I don't know, just- He makes me feel in a way that I've tried to create a new method in art. If I can do it, I'll be the only artist, well the second artist alive that can do this. It's called a 3-D method, it looks like you're looking out the real window at the real McCoy. When you walk up to a painting I want people to feel like they can feel the breeze, or the birds singing off in the tree; I want them so perfected and I can't do it myself. The only way I can do it is if God wills me to do it. If it's his will, I will paint that way. But I can't do it see, and I can do it- I have to let Him say it's His will. If it's His will for me to paint like that. That's the way I want to paint. I hope one day- I know I'm going to Heaven, but when I do I hope He finds me a place to where I can paint all over the walls in Heaven. That's the way I feel about it.

B: (laughing) Do frescoes of the whole thing!

M: That's right! I'm gonna do rural America all over the walls. (laughs) No, I ain't trying to be funny or nothing, but you know, that's the way I feel about it.

B: I used to- I have a friend who was a teacher in theological school and who was a fisherman and he looked at that segment of the Revelation where there's a statement that says, "And there shall be no sea," and he sort of jokingly said, "I hope that isn't exactly right- I hope there's at least a river somewhere because how could it be Heaven if I couldn't go fishing." So how could it be Heaven if Billy Morgan couldn't paint, hunh?

M: Yeah, that's right. I believe any talent you have that you pursue here on Earth- that you do while you're here- and you die and go to Heaven, I believe that He's gonna let you do it when you go up there. You know, something that's special.

(end of interview)

