

Text

Conversations #236

Gene Edwards: Willie Morris warmed our hearts and tantalized our imaginations through the years with his wonderful heart felt stories about southern life. Who could express so passionately an understanding of Mississippi landscape, with it's contrasting and often contradictory phases? For his readers, the answer is Willie Morris. For Morris, it was his photojournalist son. Before Willie's death, he collaborated with his son, David Rae, to produce a gorgeous masterpiece which is called *My Mississippi*. It includes manuscripts by Willie and over 96 color photographs by David Rae. Hello, I am Gene Edwards and tonight we are proud to welcome Willie's son, David Rae and Willie's widow, JoAnne Prichard Morris. Glad to have you both here.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: How, talk about this book and you talk about Willie and how the whole thing got started. How did it get started?

David Rae Morris: well, I think the original idea came about 20 years ago when I was a second year student at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts and I came across a letter my father had written me in 1979 where he added a p.s. saying, "Our Mississippi book will be a great one." I do not remember actually talking to him about it or proposing an idea, but obviously I had and I think at the time I had these grand notions of what I could be doing, but in reality I was far too immature and not developed enough as photographer to do really much of anything. So, I quickly forgot about it and many years later in the late 90's I started thinking about the possibility of collaborating with my father again. We had done little things together, we had done magazine pieces together, I had illustrated stories, I had done book jackets, but it was very limited.

Gene Edwards: This was a very big project...

David Rae Morris: His was a huge project and so I proposed it to him again and we quickly got to it and got started and that's sort of how it came about.

Gene Edwards: He was really excited...

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Oh, he was very excited. He was just thrilled to be working with David and to be writing about Mississippi, which, of course, he loved dearly. And, to have an opportunity to put down-- to sort of gather together thoughts that he had over the years, and some of which he didn't have any more and had changed his ideas on perhaps-- but mainly he was excited about working with David.

Gene Edwards: There were hard questions that he wanted to talk about.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Yes, yes. The idea was that he would-- that he did not want to just write things, collect a bunch of things, that he had written before. And, the press was very happy with that.

Gene Edwards: The University Press...

JoAnne Prichard Morris: The University Press of Mississippi.

Gene Edwards: So, you're going to do something new.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: So, it would be a totally new book about Mississippi.

Gene Edwards: And, it required a road trip, didn't it?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: it required many road trips. He took a few with David, over the years, and then one during the book, but Willie loved nothing better than a road trip. Willie was normally a very late sleeper and he got up and worked in the afternoon, but you put him in a car and have a plan of going to little towns. He was up every morning at 8:00 ready to hit the road.

Gene Edwards: Ready to go. Ready to go.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: And we took a number-- but just a couple of weeks before he died when he had pretty much finished all the draft of the book except east Mississippi, the northeast part of Mississippi. He wasn't as familiar with that as he was with the rest of the state. He hadn't been in some of those places as often. So, we took a wonderful road trip. We went over to meridian and went in that area a bit and spent the night and then went straight up. I want to say highway 45, but we went on-- actually we went on smaller roads than highway 45, but sometimes we were on 45 and went straight up the eastern side of Mississippi, in and out of every little town. I took the WPA guide which had been written in 1939, and I think published in 1941, which is a guide to traveling around Mississippi, and I would read the description of the place or the road, the way it looked in 1939 and we would see the places that didn't have trees then, now had trees, the forests then, were now flattened. It was just very...

Gene Edwards: He was fascinated by those things, wasn't he?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: And he loved, yes he was fascinated...

Gene Edwards: By minutia.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: He loved details, yes. He liked big ideas, too, and we had discussions about the history of Mississippi and related Mississippi politics and the development over the years just in our discussions along the way.

Gene Edwards: Did he take notes along the way? How did he do it? I've always been interested in peoples' writing process.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: He took some notes, but he didn't take them as we rode. He would, usually at night when we got someplace, he would write down a few ideas and during the day if there were things that he wanted to remember, he would ask me to take notes on it, or underline something in the WPA guide, something like that.

Gene Edwards: So, was this a simultaneous adventure?

David Rae Morris: It was simultaneous and it sort of existed on different levels. Because on the one hand he had his own style of doing things, and my style of doing things was slightly different. I quickly realized that they weren't always compatible.

Gene Edwards: No.

David Rae Morris: Because, to be a photographer you have to sort of throw yourself into the middle of things and wait for things to happen and he like to sort of hang back in the fringes and observe everything. You know, if you were a visitor from outside of Mississippi and you came to visit, inevitably he would want to take you on the tour of Yazoo City and the delta and you would pack up a thermos of coffee and maybe a little cooler of fried chicken and you drive out to Yazoo City and you would go out to the delta and maybe go to midnight, and Louise, and Bentonia. You would circle around and you would always end up in the Yazoo cemetery at the witch's grave. But, he was very, very structured and at the same time very magical. I've been on a number of those. I think everyone that has come to visit has been on one of those little "Willie Tours" that we called them.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: When Willie and I were first dating, in the late 1980's, we took a lot of these drives. I had known Willie for 20 years or more at that time, but we took a lot of-- but I didn't know him nearly as well as I was getting to know him. We would take-- just driving through the countryside and then the next day, it usually took him a day or two to sort of sort out his thoughts, and then two or three days later he would tell me all these things that he had seen and thought about on the trip, and they were different, totally different, from what I had seen. I mean, he was seeing little things. Sometimes he was seeing the little things and sometimes he was connecting big ideas, but it was really pretty amazing.

Gene Edwards: It was amazing, too, the way his mind worked.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: I mean, it was all there. He wasn't making up something. I knew when he said it.

Gene Edwards: Well, now sometimes he would kind of stretch...

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Well, he could, but not in that context.

Gene Edwards: So, you decided that the two of you really couldn't go out together and do this little project, but was there a discussion about what needed to be in?

David Ray Morris: We, we had sort of informal swapping of notes and discussions. My style of working is one that I don't like to put too much structure into what I do. So I would pick a place and go to it and not try to pre-conceive what I was going to get, and that allowed my work to be more spontaneous. Because again, that sort of reflects the difference between a writer and a photographer. He can put his thoughts on paper any time at any place and I have to be there and be in the moment and catch the moment. So that sort of encapsulates the difference in approach, not only artistic approach, but medium approach.

Gene Edwards: Did you always know that you wanted to be a photographer-- photojournalist?

David Rae Morris: I think I did, and the way it came about was when *North Toward Home* came out in 1967, *The Saturday Evening Post* serialized a portion of it and they sent all of us to Yazoo City with a very renowned German photographer to recreate scenes from the book and I was to play my father. So at the end of the two weeks that we spent, I was given a grand salary of \$75.00 and a little Polaroid Swinger and that was essentially the beginning of my photographic career, when I was seven years old.

Gene Edwards: Did your dad always think it was a good idea?

David Rae Morris: I think so.

Gene Edwards: You think so. Let's look at some of these images, okay?

David Rae Morris: Okay.

Gene Edwards: This is a picture of Jane Rule's back porch. I love this image. This is after a rainfall, Taylor, Lafayette County it's also the cover.

David Rae Morris: ...the cover of a book.

Gene Edwards: And it appears later on. Just a beautiful, beautiful piece of work. And, there's an abandoned store along Highway 61 that's also an image in the book. Can you tell me about that store?

David Rae Morris: It's my understanding it was the old Nitta Yuma Store/Train Station in the delta. It was not taken during the period I was actively shooting for this book. There are about 10 or 15 images that are taken in the early to mid 90's and that was from another project when I was just cruising through the delta and found that.

Gene Edwards: But, did you go out looking for particular things, for example, we're going to take a look at a picture of the Standard Life Building in downtown Jackson? Did you go out intending to shoot that building?

David Rae Morris: Yes, I did. In that case I did. I mean I realize that the Standard Life Building is sort of an iconic structure in Jackson and that I really had to have a picture of it. The challenge was,

how do I do it differently? Because, I have friends who have whole shrines of four or five or six different images of the standard life building and how was I going to do it differently?

Gene Edwards: And you're walking downtown and what did you see?

David Rae Morris: Well, I had been scoping it out for several hours and the obvious thing to do is try to get it at sunset when the neon is lit nicely, but again, as I said before, I try to keep myself open to something happening spontaneously and that's what happened. I sort of made about four loops around the building and shot it at different angles. As I came back to the east side of the building it had rained very heavily the day before, and I looked over in the parking lot and saw this huge puddle and as soon as I saw it I knew what I wanted to do. I spent about 30 minutes as the light disappeared photographing the building in the reflection in this puddle.

Gene Edwards: That's wonderful. I also love this picture of this house in the delta that was built on top of this indian mound. It's amazing to me that it would still be there.

David Rae Morris: If you've ever been driving, it's north of rolling fork just a few miles down a little road and it sort of comes out of nowhere. It's such an awesome sight, just being in the delta and suddenly there's this huge mansion, growing out of-- sitting on a hill, essentially.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: I visited there one time and talked to some people about that and during the flood--the 1927 flood--not only all of the people who lived in the house, but everybody on the plantation and people from miles around went, spent many days...

Gene Edwards: ...that was the higher ground?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Yes. They all came up to that spot.

Gene Edwards: How many of these images did Willie see before he passed away?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Probably most of them.

David Rae Morris: It's hard to say. I mean, he probably saw a good bit of them, I mean, he didn't see--because we had a meeting two weeks before he died.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: We had about two or three showings of photographs.

David Rae Morris: Yes. He didn't see, obviously the last stuff I did in early or mid to late July. But, he probably saw the majority of it, now he might not have seen it in any specific order, because that was before we started editing.

Gene Edwards: The order is a part of your creative process too, isn't it?

David Rae Morris: It's very much so.

Gene Edwards: Trying to decide which one goes where and which one goes next to...

David Rae Morris: And linking them, one image to another, and sometimes it's subjective, sometimes it's color. Ultimately, I try to thread images together so that you can have sort of a whole continuous sequence where every image is related to each one on one level or another but, you get five or ten images down the road and one and ten have nothing to do with each other. But, you know, I link them together.

Gene Edwards: something's happening. Tell me about Oscar Whitfield.

David Rae Morris: Mr. Whitfield was somebody who--I had been working in east central Mississippi and I had a contact in Newton and this woman took me to see him, because he had, you know, this large garden and I just spent about an hour with him and got him to show me around his little homestead there and they ended up using three pictures of him.

Gene Edwards: He's somebody Willie would have liked.

David Rae Morris: Oh, he would have loved him.

Gene Edwards: I think he would also want to spend time with Son Thomas, wouldn't you?

David Rae Morris: He did spend time with Son Thomas. Son Thomas actually spent the night in my father's house in Oxford back in the mid 80's. I was living in Greenville, Son was living in Leland. He was going to give a show at the Hoka in Oxford and I agreed to drive him to Oxford and we put him up in the house. I remember we were having a conversation, we were talking about ghosts and Son Thomas said, "I don't believe in ghosts; but I know they're there."

Gene Edwards: Willie believed in ghosts didn't he? Witches and ghosts.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: He probably did.

Gene Edwards: Who is Jim Stewart? I think this is such an interesting shot that you came up with in the deer camp in the trailer, and some of the people that you found are just fascinating.

David Rae Morris: I think a lot of the people in this book are people I met because of other people. In this case, Bobby Cleveland's the sports writer for *The Clarion Ledger*, I knew obviously I had to have something about hunting and I had actually spent a day with Bobby duck hunting in the delta and there were several images from that shoot also. But he had taken me--it was the end of deer season and I had wanted to go to deer camp, so Bobby took me up to this deer camp up in Madison County and Jim is sort of the head honcho there, and they made me welcome and showed me around and it's sort of a classic representation of rural Mississippi rituals.

Gene Edwards: And, sometimes you just kind of stumble onto people too.

David Rae Morris: Absolutely.

Gene Edwards: For example, this young couple from Scott County, where did you find them?

David Rae Morris: I found them at the beauty parlor. I had gone to my friend Janette Thompson's beauty parlor, in Scott County, because I knew, again, I had to have some kind of representation of that kind of small town, organic culture. I spent the whole day hanging out at Janette's photographing the old ladies and the people who were coming in, and this couple came in. The young man was getting his hair cut and he worked at one of the nearby factories, and as they were leaving I said, "May I take a family portrait?" We just walked out by her uncle's pick up truck and I got the picture.

Gene Edwards: You also have in the book, a shot of Jill Conner Browne who was--I love what she said to me once. She said she inserted herself into your lives. She wanted to write.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Well, it was a happy...

David Rae Morris: ...insertation?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: It was a very happy thing that she did. I don't know exactly what she said.

Gene Edwards: She said she did it because she wanted to learn how to write, she wanted to have your help, and she loves you.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: well, Willie was crazy about her, and I certainly am too.

Gene Edwards: ...and about her daughter.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Yes. She enlivened and enriched both of our lives.

Gene Edwards: Her book has been enormously successful and there is another one coming out...

JoAnne Prichard Morris: ...in January.

Gene Edwards: in January.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: *God Save the Sweet Potato Queens.*

Gene Edwards: And, you're the editor of those books?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Uh huh.

Gene Edwards: She said too that Willie said--I will never forget this--she said that Willie said, that the book had to be sweet.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Yes.

Gene Edwards: Had to get back to being sweet.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: She said, "You've got to come back to some essential core values, sweetness."

Gene Edwards: There is a wonderful image in the book of the Mississippi mass choir performing at a gospel festival, and religion plays a very big part in the book.

David Rae Morris: Well, it has to be because religion is so much about Mississippi and the various aspects of Mississippi culture from the sign on the highway that says simply, "read bible," to the trailer church in McComb, and again that is part of trying to weave together-- and as well as the seder on Passover.

Gene Edwards: Why did you choose to do a trailer church in McComb and not do a big Baptist church in Jackson or somewhere else?

David Rae Morris: I think in a lot of cases, my instinct was instead of doing what would have been the most obvious, which would have been to do a big metropolitan Baptist church, to do the off the beaten track stuff, the small trailer church. Instead of photographing the Miss Mississippi pageant, do the Miss Catfish pageant. By doing that I could get closer to a truth or reality or perspective that no one would have been looking for and that that would be more spontaneous and more representative of who I am as a photographer and how my thought processes work.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: And possibly more Mississippi.

David Rae Morris: And possibly more Mississippi.

Gene Edwards: I think you're right. Willie loved bands and he loved sporting events. You've got an image of the sonic boom of the south at the capital city classic. He also liked to go down to Alcorn.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Yes. He went there many of times.

Gene Edwards: See those people, and the teams greeting each other after the series of the stick ball competition over in Neshoba County, fascinating place to go and just study people.

David Rae Morris: Absolutely. I spent two days at the Choctaw Festival, or the Choctaw Fair, and one of the things I focused on was the stick ball, because it's such a fascinating cross between football, hockey, soccer, and various native traditions.

Gene Edwards: One of the great civil rights activists is Bob Moses. There's a picture of Bob in the book teaching that math project that he does.

David Rae Morris: He is a remarkable human being and I was very touched that he allowed me to come into his class. He's a very soft spoken and very humble man. I stayed in his class for about two hours through two or three class periods. Before each period he asked me to introduce myself

to his class and to tell them about what I was doing. It was very--i was proud that I was able to watch somebody, who I had admired so much over the years, to watch him in action today.

Gene Edwards: I'm going to show everybody this image here. I don't know if I've got the right camera to do it. This is the back of Byron de la Beckwith. Now why would you want his back and what is the process that went on? It took a long time to figure that out.

David Rae Morris: This is a remarkable image to me because it took me five years to figure out what it was about. I took this image during jury selection for his third murder trial in 1994, and this was in Batesville before they changed or moved the trial down to Jackson. And, I had taken it and I sent it off to my agency in New York who had sent it back. They weren't particularly interested in it, but I saw it and I knew there was something there. I knew something was interesting, but I could never figure out what it was. I filed it away, and I would come across it every now and then when I was looking for something else and I would always stop and look at it and admire it and know that there was something there. It wasn't until I started pulling some of my material from the early 90's just to review for possible inclusion in the book that I came across it and I studied it for a while and then suddenly out of nowhere, I suddenly understood what it was about, and Beckwith was convicted of shooting Medgar Evers in the back and I suddenly realized that this was my symbolic assassination, my review of Beckwith, and also, you don't have to look at his face. So, it exists on sort of multiple levels, but that's when I realized that, that was what the picture was about. I sort of had to get up and walk around the room a few times because it was so powerful to me.

Gene Edwards: What would Willie think about this?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: About the book?

Gene Edwards: About the book.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Oh, he would be...

Gene Edwards: What would he have--would he have changed anything? Would he be happy with it?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: He would be very happy with it. No, I don't think he would have changed a thing.

Gene Edwards: He turned it over just--was it two weeks?...

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Well, actually--and I put this date--he died on August 2, and the last date, the date of his draft is...

David Rae Morris: That's mine.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Oh, that's yours. The date of his draft was July 31. There it is, July 31, so that's when he finished the draft. Oh, he would be very excited about it. He always, he trusted editors anyway, and he trusted

publishers to take his material--he felt he knew how to write, but the publishers knew how to publish books. So he was a very easy writer to work with in that regard, and he always loved the finished product. As an editor, sometimes, I don't want to look at it. I'm scared that they may—but Willie always loved getting a new book and he would open it and go page by page.

David Rae Morris: He just loved holding on to it.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: He loved holding it and reading it, and if this had been Willie's copy instead of mine, it would be fingerprinted.

Gene Edwards: Bent up and dog-eared...

JoAnne Prichard Morris: He loved books and he would have been very excited and he would have loved having book signings with David. The whole concept of doing this with David would have just been very meaningful to him.

David Rae Morris: I think one of the things that I regret the most is that he's not here to enjoy this. That we can't be together to do book signings together, because it would be quite a show.

Gene Edwards: Because he would love being on the road right now.

David Rae Morris: He would love being on the road.

Gene Edwards: And he would love those book signings. Can I show you one of my treasures?

Both: Yes.

Gene Edwards: We all got together--remember this? In March of '99--and we were sitting around and we were talking about this book, and this project, and all that stuff, and you know how Willie...

Both: Wrote on the back of the check.

Gene Edwards: Wrote on the back of the check... Let me show you what I have kept for all this time, and will keep forever.

David Rae Morris: "Let us begin with the land itself."

JoAnne Prichard Morris: ...he said, "This is the way the book is going to start, 'let us begin with the land itself'."

Gene Edwards: He said that was going to be the beginning sentence, and off he went from there.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: And...is that correct?

David Rae Morris: I think it is.

Gene Edwards: It is. It is absolutely correct.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: There's the first section.

David Rae Morris: Now, what check number is that?

Gene Edwards: I don't know, but how many of Willie's checks do you suppose are around?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: There it is, "Let us begin with the land,..." Oh, dear. Unfortunately he was known sometimes to fill them out and sign them; checks for a million dollars and such as that. I live in fear...

Gene Edwards: Important checks for buying books and things like that. Thank you both; and there's another Willie book coming out in the spring, right?

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Yes.

Gene Edwards: ...which no one knew about.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: Well, he worked on a novel, off and on, for most of his writing life called *Taps*, and he had completed a draft in the late 80's and put it aside, he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do to it. And, that is being published by Houghton Mifflin.

Gene Edwards: ...in the spring.

JoAnne Prichard Morris: ...in the spring.

Gene Edwards: Thank you, and thank you. See you next time.