

Text

Conversations #204

Gene Edwards: Hello again, I'm Gene Edwards, and welcome to *Conversations* from Mississippi ETV. Tonight, we are going to talk about Willie Morris. Willie would've been 65 on the 29th of November, and that was the night that all of his old pals got together to tell Willie's stories and to celebrate the republication of his first book *North Toward Home* and his newest book *My Cat, Spit Magee*. Jill Conner Browne was there to talk about the book Willie helped her write, and she is here tonight. Rick Cleveland was there. He was one of Willie's closest pals. He is here, too. Later, a conversation with Willie Morris that you've not seen before. But first, welcome Jill and Rick.

Jill Conner Browne: Thank you.

Rick Cleveland: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: how did you meet him, both of you?

Jill Conner Browne: I met Willie because of my own writing. When I was on the *What Do You Know* show, when they came here with Michael Feldman. If you've seen the show, then you know he's mean. So when they asked me to be on the show I said—because there's always a fatted calf, you know, someone that's the burnt offering. They said, "It's the old blues man..." I said, "well, it's not going to be him." Or Willie Morris... And it's not going to him, and me. So it was me. It happened that Joanne and Willie were sitting in the audience in front of where I'd been sitting, where my friends were sitting when I was on. And so while I was on, my friends reported to me after that Joanne and Willie were sitting there saying, "Who is she? She's funny. Do we know her?" So, I used that as my entree to insinuate myself into their lives and get them to help me with my writing, which they did. I just called them up and said, "I need some help."

Gene Edwards: And he was so generous wasn't he?

Jill Conner Browne: He was so generous.

Gene Edwards: You could call him any time?

Jill Conner Browne: Uh-huh. I just called and reminded him who I was and he said, "Sure, we'd love to help you."

Gene Edwards: Come on over.

Jill Conner Browne: Uh-huh.

Gene Edwards: And there you were.

Jill Conner Browne: Yep.

Gene Edwards: And you? Was it through your dad?

Rick Cleveland: No, no. When Willie came back to Mississippi as the Writer-in-Residence at Ole Miss, I was covering Ole Miss for *The Clarion-Ledger* and Warner Alford, who was the Athletic Director at Ole Miss at the time, got us together at a reception they were having for the old SCC sky writers. Willie, you know as he always was, was so kind. He said, "I've read your stuff. I really like your stuff. Come here, pull up a chair. We need to spend a couple of hours together." And we did.

Gene Edwards: And off you went?

Rick Cleveland: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: And your life was never the same?

Jill Conner Browne: Never.

Rick Cleveland: No, never the same. And then when he moved to Jackson, of course. What a bonus!

Gene Edwards: A lot of people don't know that story about what happened on the night that your dad died, that ace passed away.

Rick Cleveland: Oh yeah. It's an amazing story.

Gene Edwards: Willie was on a book tour...

Rick Cleveland: Willie was on a book tour in New Orleans. I guess it was *New York Days*, and he got a call from Joanne, or he had called from a restaurant where they were all having dinner.

Gene Edwards: I think he told me that he was having dinner at Galatoire's or some place?

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. Joanne told him that Dad had passed away, and Willie excused himself from the dinner, and walked outside and hailed a cab. He said, "I need a ride." "Where are you going?" He said, "Jackson, Mississippi."

Gene Edwards: "a friend of mine's dad has died..."

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. "Friend of mine's dad has died, and I need to get home." I think the tab was \$300. But the best part of the story is that he and the cab driver became like bosom buddies.

Jill Conner Browne: I'm sure it was a life changing experience for the cab driver.

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. You spend three hours with Willie, your life's going to change a little bit, I guarantee you.

Gene Edwards: Well, and they talked about that so much--Everybody has those stories to tell about getting in the car and going to look at graveyards, and driving around Yazoo, and all those other things. All those people who were involved in making those movies fell under his spell, didn't they?

Jill Conner Browne: Yeah. They did. He was just one of the most charismatic-- quietly charismatic people. He is not flamboyant.

Rick Cleveland: No. Not at all. I wrote a column, about a week or so after he died, with a lot of my personal experiences with Willie, and I must have gotten a jillion e-mails and calls from people that I didn't know and had never heard of, who all had their own personal experience. It might have been at *The Gin*, the bar in Oxford, or it might have been at a bookstore, or at a signing.

Jill Conner Browne: It'd be a great book.

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. It might have been somebody who played little-league baseball with him or, American Legion baseball with him, but everybody had their own story.

Gene Edwards: There was always a kind thing that he did, or...

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. It was something that made a difference in their lives.

Gene Edwards: You know, I met him at the little league baseball field. Do you know that story?

Jill Conner Browne: Uh-uh.

Gene Edwards: Years ago when John Evans convinced him that he should write the poem for the start of the Little League season, John also convinced him that he should come out and read that prayer to begin the season.

Rick Cleveland: I was there, yeah.

Gene edwards: I had just moved here, and I had just begun working for the television station. I think I read it in your column. Did you print it?

Rick Cleveland: Uh-huh. Oh yeah.

Gene Edwards: You printed the prayer in your column and I read it...

Rick Cleveland: At least parts of it, yeah.

Gene Edwards: That's kind of neat. I called John and John said, "Well you know, Willie's going to read this thing." So we went out and covered it, and I got to meet Willie. And that was it, hooked ever since. Boy he was nervous that night, wasn't he?

Rick Cleveland: He was, he was...

Jill Conner Browne: He was nervous before performances.

Rick Cleveland: He was, but then it was like something clicked in and he was great. One of the last trips he and I made together was for Cool Papa Bell Day. The day that they dedicated a monument to Cool Papa Bell up in Starkville.

Gene Edwards: In Starkville, wasn't it?

Jill Conner Browne: Uh-huh.

Rick Cleveland: He was a little bit nervous on the way there because he was going to be speaking. Then he gets up there, and they turn the mike on, and there's cameras going and it's like he had everybody spellbound.

Gene Edwards: He was great.

Rick Cleveland: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: One of the last times that I was with him, too, was at Indianola when they did the Medgar Evers Remembrance Day up there, and Charles was there, and Willie was there. Everybody was together, but you could tell that he was really nervous. Did he have any idea that he was so ill?

Jill Conner Browne: No.

Gene Edwards: Did anybody?

Jill Conner Browne: No. I mean, we knew he wasn't gonna run a marathon, but I mean...

Rick Cleveland: In a lot of ways, he did run a marathon. His life was a marathon, you know. You always knew, the way Willie lived his life, that something could happen...

Jill Conner Browne: But he appeared to be getting away with it.

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. But he appeared to be breaking all the rules and getting away with everything.

Gene Edwards: Right.

Jill Conner Browne: Uh-huh.

Gene Edwards: I guess that's why it was so shocking to everybody...

Jill Conner Browne: It was so sudden.

Gene Edwards: It was so sudden, and he was just gone, and all the other people you think of who were saved at the very last minute and...

Jill Conner Browne: We really thought it was going to be a wake up call and...

Gene Edwards: He'd finally quit smoking, and he'd finally quit all those other things.

Jill Conner Browne: But we didn't get that.

Gene Edwards: How did he help you as a writer?

Jill Conner Browne: Oh, God. I went and talked to Joanne and she told me what to do and I set about doing it. But then, she would work on it in the day time when I gave her the manuscript, and Willie would work on it at night. Sometimes he would change just one word on a page and Joanne and I would just go, "God, how stupid are we? Why couldn't we think of that?" Then the main thing he did was change the whole feeling of my book, because a lot of it is pretty wild, humorish.

Gene Edwards: Your book is *The Sweet Potato Queen*.

Jill Conner Browne: *Sweet Potato Queen's Book of Love*, and he loved the humor in it, but there's also a lot of sweetness in it. He said that was the most important thing, and that I had to close with that. I had to bring them back to that. So that's what we did. It's most people's favorite part of the book, where I talk about Charlie Jacobs and people that we've known.

Gene Edwards: That's the kind of writer he was, you know. It always struck me, especially during the Medgar Evers book, it struck me that there were some critical things that he wanted to say. There were some things that he may have felt deep inside about the way that film turned out but gosh, he just-- he was Willie. He just couldn't say those things, could he?

Jill Conner Browne: No. He was just a sweet, sweet man.

Gene Edwards: He just couldn't be mean-spirited?

Jill Conner Browne: No. There was not a mean bone in his body. What a gift to me as a baby writer, you know, to have him take an interest in me and just be so generous with his time and thoughts.

Gene Edwards: And so proud when it was successful.

Jill Conner Browne: He was so proud.

Gene Edwards: And with your columns, he was the same way, wasn't he?

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. He was like an idol to me. I mean, anybody that makes their living writing words-- when you read Willie it made you think. He made writing look easy and it's the hardest thing in the world to do. It's like Red Smith said, "It's easy. You just go in there, and open a vein, and bleed." But when you read Willie, he made it seem so easy. I think what he helped me with, more than anything else, is that he made me see things differently just from talking to him. Willie always saw the big picture, you know, and he helped you.

Jill Conner Browne: There would be stuff going on, you know, people—and he was always in his corner. No matter what was going on, he'd be sitting there, and there would just be this far off look. Then after a few minutes, he would just expound on something that was just a whole different way of looking at what was right in front of us, but that's just how he was.

Rick Cleveland: That's one of the things, you know, when we heard somebody had gotten Willie's eyes and could see, the first thing that I thought, "Wouldn't it be something if they could see things the way Willie saw them?"

Gene Edwards: Willie Morris was one of the best people to visit with on television. A couple a years ago before they started filming *Skip* and just before the release of the Medgar Evers book, Willie came by this studio to talk about a book that he wrote and contributed to, a book about coming of age.

;-----erase

Gene Edwards: I am old enough to read this book.

Willie Morris: I don't believe it, Gene. You and I have had so many conversations over the years, both on the air and off the air. I don't think you're old enough to read it.

Gene Edwards: Well, it's a confession I've never made before.

Willie Morris: Well, you don't look it.

Gene Edwards: Thank you. But I attended your wonderful birthday party.

Willie Morris: My 30th.

Gene Edwards: When, I guess that was the night that you discovered that you were old enough to read the book.

Willie Morris: That's right or to write for it. Right.

Gene Edwards: Did you discover that night that you were becoming cranky as...?

Willie Morris: Well, I'd had intuitions that my crankiness was giving away to a more mellow tolerance. As I age, I had the strangest experiences that I write about in this book. For about three hours every morning I have reveries, kind of half dreams and half reveries of my transgressions in my past-- kind of diabolic reveries but not major transgressions, only semi-transgressions.

Gene Edwards: Just the minor.

Willie Morris: But it's done something to me, in a way, and I'm a writer and I make my living as a writer. I think we all or most of us mellow as we age. I'm glad that-- I think I've mellowed. It helps to have a good marriage and three spirited cats and to live in Jackson, Mississippi. I think this is a very interesting...

Gene Edwards: Tell me about this idea. Tell me about the...

Willie Morris: Well, it's *Reader's Digest Books* and I think this book is going to be a best seller. It got a great review, I think, in *The New York Times* the other day. They say it was a "gold mine of wit and wisdom." It's got John Updike. It's got Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Prize winner, right on down the list. When they asked me to contribute to it, and they gave me a roster of who the others were, and they were all over 50, thank God... Why not?

Gene Edwards: Did you write specifically for it or had you done this piece for someone else?

Willie Morris: I'd actually done it for a magazine called *New Choices* which is owned by *Reader's Digest*. I had done three or four pieces with this very strange magazine-- it's based in New York, an over the 50's readership. The first one that I did was on the Byron de la Beckwith trial. I would have not written about that if they hadn't asked me to. I think the *New Choices* magazine and *Reader's Digest* sort of collaborated on this particular book. I think it's a little gold mine. My friend Larry L. King—as opposed to Larry King--the Larry L. King who wrote *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* and other works, I think he finally, at the end of his piece, says, I've scribbled it down, "The more you get older, the more your furniture is worth."

Gene Edwards: Who are your other favorites in here? This must be like a reunion, an old home week for you.

Willie Morris: A lot of friends of mine... Arthur Miller, of course, our distinguished playwright. *Death of a Salesman* was scribbling down, "Arthur discusses the meaning of family and what keeps it from chaos." John Updike ends his essay about getting older with two suggestions: one, love one another; and two, seize the day. My old buddy Dan Wakefield says "Cultivate young friends and learn from them." Bill Kaufman: the importance of three or four deep friendships, and he quotes Emerson, "The only way to have a friend is to be one." Richard Rhodes: "Family values are practiced not preached." Penelope Lively ponders the power of memories, especially that vision of the world we preserve from childhood, which as a writer and a man I've tried to preserve that. Having grown up in Mississippi, I have so many memories; it's almost like a storage vault.

Gene Edwards: Do you find yourself, now, in a rush to get them all down?

Willie Morris: Not really, Gene. I find that I consistently work. I don't have that terrible urgency toward producing quickly, and a lot, as I did as y younger person. I'm constantly working and I indeed have to work because I really have no choice but words. I've kind of reached the point where I like writing. For a long time, I thought writing a was sort of an iron maiden of angst. I don't feel that anymore. I just feel the urge to write. It's not that I enjoy it so much as that I have to do it and it's that I really want to do.

Gene Edwards: Do you do it everyday?

Willie Morris: When I'm really working on something big I do.

Gene Edwards: You do?

Willie Morris: I try to put in about my four or five hours a day living on the banks of Purple Cream Creek, which overflows in the rains, which it is today on this day of rain. I feel pretty good about my work. I just stick to it.

Gene Edwards: I want to talk to you about a couple of things that are happening in your life. This new book, this book, is going to be popular.

Willie Morris: Yeah, that's a collection.

Gene Rdwards: But this book is your book. This is the rough copy of it and we're going to do a whole lot more about it as the weeks go along and it actually gets published. This has been a labor.

Willie Morris: It was a tough one. I didn't think it would be so tough. It's not, per say, about the movie *The Ghosts of Mississippi* although, that's sort of the organizing thread that runs through the narrative. It's a profoundly personal book. It's about me, it's about Medgar Evers, God bless him. I spent a lot of time in Hollywood. Myrlie Evers and I

were the consultants on the movie, and I spent more time in Hollywood than I ever had in my life. I've got a lot of Hollywood stuff in it. Very bazaar material but it's...

Gene Edwards: There are a lot of issues that you hadn't addressed before.

Willie Morris: That's right.

Gene Edwards: You hadn't addressed with yourself, maybe?

Willie Morris: Exactly. That's why it was so difficult, and why I'm glad I did it. Addressing a lot of national and cultural issues which I had never come to head with so much in my whole writing career.

Gene Edwards: We're going to spend a lot more time talking about *The Ghost of Medgar Evers* as we get closer to the publish date. I have 10 seconds left to mention wonderful news about a movie.

Willie Morris: They are making a movie-- Hollywood is-- of my recent book *My Dog Skip*. They are going to film it in Mississippi in the spring, two months, and this is definite: The guy who did *Rainman*, *The Natural*, and *Diner*—and they're still auditioning, Gene, all around the country for a dog who can bark with a southern accent. So, your fans out there, if you've got a dog that can bark with a southern accent and is a English smooth-haired fox terrier, he'll make millions.

Gene Edwards: He'll do it. Always fun.

Willie Morris: Always.

;-----erase

Gene Edwards: Well... That was two years ago. The movie is coming out here after the first of the year. You've both seen the movie.

Jill Conner Browne: It is so wonderful.

Gene Edwards: Willie saw it before he died, didn't he?

Jill Conner Browne: He loved it, too.

Rick Cleveland: Yeah. He loved it. In fact the last time he talked to both of my kids-- he called them from New York right after he had seen it and told them, "Annie and Tyler, you're both stars."

Gene Edwards: Because they are both in the movie.

Rick Cleveland: They're both in the movie in fact...

Gene Edwards: And Bailey is in the movie.

Jill Conner Browne: My daughter's in the movie, uh-huh.

Rick Cleveland: My son actually strikes little Willie out in one of the big scenes in the movie.

Jill Conner Browne: Tyler's got a big scene.

Rick Cleveland: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: It was interesting to watch both of you watching that, because when we talked to Willie about being in a rush to get things all down you said, "Well, he should have been."

Jill Conner Browne: Yeah. Wish he had been. There was a baseball book in his workroom-- the notes, because he wrote everything on little note cards, little chicken scratch. You know how he wrote. They're all laid out in order. He was about to sit down and write it. Rick had talked to him about it a lot and it was going to be great.

Rick Cleveland: It's fascinating to see how he outlined a book because it's index cards that go up and down, and cocktail napkins, too, by the way, that go up and down this long table. That's how he has the book outlined. Two days after he died, Joanne took me u there and showed it to me. I know enough about a lot of the stories that he had on the cards that it was going to be a wonderful book. It was going to be an incredible book.

Gene Edwards: I loved that line of Bill Styron's about Willie having the most elegantly furnished mind.

Jill Conner Browne: Elegantly furnished mind, uh-huh.

Gene Edwards: Because all those stories were there. My gosh, I've never met anybody in my whole life who had such a wealth of material tucked away in his mind.

Rick Cleveland: He's not only the sweetest man I ever knew, he's the smartest man.

Gene Edwards: He really was.

Rick Cleveland: He just knew so much-- well he's an intellectual.

Jill Conner Browne: He had a great vocabulary.

Gene Edwards: He had no idea that he was doing all that stuff. That's one of my treasures: the last time that we all went out to have supper together, we were talking

about the Mississippi Century, the last 100 years project that I've been involved in. He had several writing suggestions and ideas and was working on his own...

Jill Conner Browne: And he wrote them on a cocktail napkin for you.

Gene Edwards: No, he wrote them on his checks. So at home I have all these checks of Willie's that I'll never give back to Joanne.

Jill Conner Browne: Right. We have a check that he wrote to Bailey for \$33.33 for editorial cat advice. Tyler's got one.

Rick Cleveland: Tyler has a check that he wrote him for \$5 million and in the notation down at the bottom it says, "for books!"

Gene Edwards: Very important. Well, I have a check of Willie's. In the amount it says, "It all begins with the land." That's what he had planned to use as his starting point in his book about the century. Tell me how he'd feel about the cat book, because he didn't like cats at first.

Jill Conner Browne: But he came to. He came to. That was after he got my daughter, Bailey, to be an extra in the movie *My Dog Skip*. Then she read the book and she said, "But when we've been over to the house, they have cats. So how did that happen?" And I said, "I don't know." And she said, "Well he ought to write a book about how he's a cat person now and how that happened. So I told Joanne and she said, "No, Bailey will have to tell him. He will listen to her." And she's very shy, so we just dragged her over there and threw them out in the backyard and made them talk. Of course, you know Willie, he drew the best out of everybody and he certainly did with Bailey. They spent an hour or so out there and he came back in and announced that he was going to write a cat book, and did.

Gene Edwards: And he threw himself into it 100%.

Jill Conner Browne: He did, I mean, he cranked that one out—got Bailey to write stories. That's when he wrote her the check for \$33.33 for editorial cat advice. He said that it was the first installment. But that's one of the greatest gifts to me, and I'm sure Rick feels the same way, is what Willie meant to our children. We have that personally, but he certainly, with all his books and everything, has made a great contribution to childhood forever more.

Rick Cleveland: He was so good with children. One night I was putting Annie to bed, shortly after he died, and she said, "You know, Daddy, Willie always made me feel so smart."

Jill Conner Browne: He wrote in Bailey's copy of *The Ghost of Medgar Evers*, "To my pal Bailey, Miss Wizard"-- he taught her that phone game-- "at age 10, you have sensibility in your heart. You have greatness in you. Read good books, read, read, read,

read,-- underlined—then read some more. Believe in who you are. Trust your imagination. Be yourself. Have fun. Laugh and cry. Don't be afraid to cry or to laugh. Think a lot. Keep your eyes and ears open. Don't miss anything. I believe in you. Love, Willie." She never knew her grandfathers, so that's what he was for her. He made her feel better about herself because she knew how special he was, and so by extension, if he gave her his time and attention then she must be special too.

Gene Edwards: And he was the same way with your kids and most any kid that he met.

Rick Cleveland: Absolutely.

Gene Edwards: And all the kids who were involved in that movie became his best friends, too.

Rick Cleveland: The Hollywood actors.

Jill Conner Browne: Everybody. Everybody: cab drivers, waitresses, everybody.

Gene Edwards: And he became friends again with his own son, didn't he?

Jill Conner Browne: Uh-huh.

Rick Cleveland: Yes, sure did.

Jill Conner Browne: He wrote a piece in *The Parade Magazine*, I think it was in 1981, and he ended it with a quote from Thornton Wilder that said, "The greatest tribute that we can pay the debt is not grief, but gratitude." I think that's what we feel for Willie.

Gene Edwards: It is a wonderful thing to me that the University Press people have decided to republish *North Toward Home* because, as we saw at the bookstore the other night during that birthday celebration, there are dozens and dozens of people who are going to be reading it now for the very first time and paying attention to it, and that's a terrific gift, I think.

Jill Conner Browne: All his books are doing great on Amazon. They are all-- people are really-- he would just love that. It's very important to him.

Rick Cleveland: I hope that people rediscover his sports books. The books that he's written about sports, because I mean...

Jill Conner Browne: He thought the Marcus Dupree book was his best book.

Rick Cleveland: Absolutely. But some of his short stories *Always Stand Against the Curve*, and *The Fumble* are the best I've read. He loved sports so much, and one of the lessons he's taught me was that we always write best about what we care most about.

Gene Edwards: Well he was the best and we miss him and we love him and...

Jill Conner Browne: But we are grateful for him.

Gene Edwards: But we're grateful for him and I'm constantly reminded of Bill Minor standing up in front of that whole group the other night and mentioning the fact that Willie was kind of the glue that held all those people together.

Jill Conner Browne: That never would have crossed paths otherwise.

Gene edwards: And what are we going to do now?

Jill Conner Browne: Keep on.

Gene Edwards: Now we're just going to celebrate him.

Jill Conner Browne: Uh-huh.

Gene Edwards: Thank you both.

Jill Conner Browne: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: Come back and we'll talk about *The Sweet Potato Queen* book, all right?