

Charles B. Timms, Sr.
(Recorded interview January 12, 2001)

I was born December 20, 1927. I was the youngest of six sons of Sam and Icie Timms. There were 10 children in the family – six boys and four girls. Our father passed away when I was only three years old, my youngest sister was only eight months old. Neither of us had the privilege of really knowing our father.

We were all born in a little community in Anderson County called Lebanon. Lebanon was made up of farm people. I was told by mother and my older sisters and brothers that it was normal for a mother to name the children after kin people or doctors. My middle name is Bickley and comes from Dr. Bickley who was in Pendleton. I assume I was born at home and he delivered me.

I was told by my older brothers and sisters that originally our last name was Hicks. They researched the family tree some few years ago. My great-great-grandfather came from Charleston, was adopted, brought into Anderson County and took the Timms name. That is why in this area, other than my immediate family, I don't know of any Timms who would be related to me. I have been in many, many states in the United States and always make it a point to look in the phone book to see how many Timms are listed. It is very rare to see more than one or two.

After my father passed away mother had to raise nine children, one son had died at an early age. We moved from Lebanon to what they now call Broadway Lake Road. We tried to farm. The plowing was done by the older children with mules. Mother did the best she could without a husband. The two oldest sons had to go into the Civilian Conservation Corps camps for mother to have money to survive. Cotton was a hard crop because of the boll weevil. They didn't have poisons that could correct the problem. You could just barely make a living.

It was necessary when you were farming to make sure you grew vegetables you could use to survive in the wintertime. You didn't go to town like people do today to buy groceries. You had to grow most of your own stuff.

Two of my brothers went to work in a textile plant owned by Gossett Mills. It was later owned by Textron and after that by Abney Mills. The older sons worked to support the family.

There wasn't any such thing as each child having a bedroom. I am sure there were at least four of us to the bed. The home we lived in couldn't have had more than four rooms. Farmhouses in those days were not like houses today. You didn't have electric heat and air conditioning. You didn't have electric lights and you didn't have running water. You had a privy out in the back. In cold weather, it was kind of rough to have to go to the privy.

Each child would have chores to do. My next older brother and I each had a cow assigned to us. Every morning before school, we had to go to the barn and milk our cows. Our mother was

very, very particular not to let things get into the milk before we brought it into the house. She was upset when she caught us playing with the milk.

When we came home from school we had to go to the field. We grew cane and cotton. Mother would ring the dinner bell late in the evening. We were in the fields almost until dark.

It was a very difficult thing for mother with father gone but it didn't matter how tough times were, people made a way. We didn't know what an electric stove was. My mother cooked on a wood stove.

When we grew sweet potatoes we went to the edge of the field and took corn stalks and stood them up. It looked a little bit like a teepee. We buried the potatoes in straw. We kept them that way when it was wintertime. When we would come in from the field mother would tell me to go to the potato hill and bring 6, 10 or whatever many potatoes we had to have. In order to cook them we laid our potatoes in the fireplace and covered them with the gray coals. After so long we uncovered them and that was our dessert, a sweet potato.

We didn't burn anything but wood. We didn't have coal until we moved from the farm to the mill where my two older brothers worked. We had to burn coal then. On the farm we would go to the woods and cut the wood. We used a crosscut saw that is a long saw with a handle on each end. One of the bigger sons would get on one end and one on the other. They pulled it back and forth. Of course there was an axe to cut the small stuff.

The people who owned the farms people lived on knew the tenants had to survive the wintertime. They knew it was a must that they cut some timber. People were more conscious and particular in the way they did things than they might be today. They didn't go out and cut the prime trees. They would cut a diseased tree or deformed trees. You didn't cut down the best timber on a person's farm.

All we had in the wintertime to keep us warm was the fireplace. Our pillows were made out of feathers from ducks and chickens. Being as you had to sleep three or four to the bed you had to survive with whatever covers you had and the warmth of the other children in the bed.

My mother would buy flour. If I remember correctly, it was Queen Flour. It came in a cloth sack with flowers on it. My mother would save all of the sacks. She was a very good seamstress. She had an old Singer sewing machine. Of course, she also did a lot of sewing by hand with a needle and a thimble. A lot of the girls' clothing was made out of flour sacks. When my two oldest brothers were in the CCC camps my mother would take their old CCC clothes, disassemble the pants and jackets and make clothes for us.

You got one pair of shoes a year. You didn't have pretty shoes. Brogans is what we called them. They were shoes that had to be your work shoes and shoes for school.

When the older children went to work, some of the money was given to our mother. I don't remember what my brothers' salaries were in the CCC at that time. This was before they

worked in the textile plants. My mother would go to the grocery store in Anderson perhaps once a month. There was a store on Whitner Street near what used to be the State Theater. My mother would spend about \$5 a month. It was a special treat when sometimes she would bring us back little orange candies.

When we started to school we had to walk. We lived a good 5 to 6 miles from the school. It was my mother's responsibility to get her children up early enough so they could walk to school. One of my older brothers had to go to work about that time of the morning and he would go with me most all the way and then would leave me and go to the plant where he worked. We had no buses or cars.

I went to what was known then as Kennedy Street School. It is no longer an elementary school. That is where I had to walk from what they now call Broadway Lake Road. That is a pretty long walk. The school began at 8 in the morning. My mother started me to school before I was 6 years old. After a couple of months the principal of the school advised my mother that she should take me out of school and wait until I was over 6. I wasn't learning anything according to him.

Kennedy Street School had six grades and then you went to McCants Junior High School for seventh and eighth grades and then Boys High School for ninth, tenth and eleventh grades. We did not have 12 grades then.

I got into high school and thought I was grown up. I wasn't a very good student. I am sure I had the capability but, like a lot of students, I didn't think it was necessary. As I got older I realized I should have applied myself more.

My older brothers had motorcycles in the late '20s. When I got in high school I was 13 or 14 years old and my next oldest brother and I went to Hartwell, Georgia, and I bought a motorcycle. I wasn't large enough to kick crank a motorcycle but if he cranked it I could ride it. I rode that thing to high school one day. Mr. "Frog" Reames was our principal. He came out that morning and said, "Boy, whose motorcycle is that?" I said, "It's mine." "Well you are not big enough to ride that thing." I said, "Mr. Reames, I rode it down here. My older brothers taught me how to ride."

It was very unusual for a young high school kid, especially living on a farm, to have a motorcycle. I didn't apply myself and that motorcycle was a little bit of a problem. I had two good friends and we thought all we had to do was get on the motorcycle and not go to school. Where we made a mistake was in staying out of school about five days in a row. If we had stayed out one day and then done it again the next week it wouldn't have been so bad but we weren't smart enough to see it at that time. We stayed out five days and just had a ball. Finally the end came. Mr. Reames came in the classroom and said, "I want to see you and you and you in my office after school." We found out what Mr. Reames and his paddle were all about. He had a blackboard in his office and said, "I want you to write your name on the blackboard." We all wrote our names and he said, "Now I want all of your name. I don't want you to just put your

middle initial. I want the whole name." We didn't know what he was leading up to. The number of letters determined how many licks we would get.

Mr. Reames told one of the others, "Take that straight chair and go from where you sit down in the chair and reach over and catch it." That pulled his pants tight. He told the other boy, "Just give him a lick and let me see how you can hit him." He did and Mr. Reames said, "That is not what I want." He said, "I am going to show you what I want." Well, he did and when we all finished we had a real good whooping. Then he said, and this was harder than the licks we were getting, "You sit down in the chairs over there and you are going to study for an hour." That was the last time I ever played hooky from Boys High School.

Mr. Reames went to his grave not knowing the influence he had on a young boy like me when I was in school. Not having a father I credit the guidance some of the men gave me in the community for the person I am and the life I have had since I grew up and matured.

My mother had what back then they called leakage of the heart. She was a very sickly lady. She worked hard preparing food, doing the clothing and those kinds of things for us children. My mother would have to get up in the night. She would call me. By then some of the older children had gotten married or moved on. She would get in a chair she had and I would take rubbing alcohol and rub her wrists and her ankles. I don't have any idea what it did. When I was 13 years old I got up one morning about 2 when my mother called me and about 2:30 she passed away. She was only 53. My daddy was 45 when he passed away.

My youngest sister, my next oldest brother and I were the only children left at home. We lived then with the older sons and daughters. When I finally reached the age of finishing high school I was drafted into the military.

When I was about 13, I went to the office of the *Anderson Independent*. At that time it was located near the Anderson Police Department on Market Street. A Mr. Griffin was the circulation manager. I said, "I want to get a paper route." He was a nice man. He could tell I was from a family that didn't have a lot of money. He said, "Do you have somebody to go your bond?" I said, "What is that?" He said, "You have to have somebody sign a bond in case you don't pay for the papers." People don't realize that the paper carriers have to pay for the papers whether they collect for them or not. That is why they wanted a bond. I asked a Mr. Chambers who knew my family if he would go my bond. Back then if your word wasn't your bond you just couldn't get anything in life unless somebody left it to you. Mr. Chambers went up and signed my bond and they gave me a route.

You don't make a lot of money on a paper route and you didn't then for sure. They gave me a route and if I remember it was 80 customers. I had trouble collecting. The people would tell me to come back and come back. It was hard to get enough to pay the paper bill. I learned a good lesson. I was raised and taught to be honest. That was the way my family was. It was very difficult for me as a young lad from a farm family to realize that people would tell you they were going to do something and wouldn't do it.

I went up one day and said, "Mr. Griffin, I am sorry but I am going to have to quit taking this paper route. I don't even get enough money to do anything. These people won't pay me. Then they call up and get mad because I don't keep bringing them a paper. You make me pay for the paper." He said, "You have been a good paper carrier. Why don't you just hang on for a little bit? I have got a route that a man and his son carry but they are wanting to get out of it. We are going to split that up and I will give you enough customers and I believe it will be a better route." Well he did and, sure enough, I had about the same number of customers and every Saturday if those people weren't going to be at home they would leave my money somewhere for me. That is how I really got started. I made a little money. I saved it.

People used brush brooms to sweep the yard. You didn't have grass, just dirt. You didn't want your neighbor's yard to look better than yours. I would go into the woods and cut what I needed and make brush brooms and sell them. In addition there was a mill where we moved and they had a machine shop. There would be metal in their trash. I would come home from school and go down and collect brass, copper and cast iron. One of my older brothers had an old car, probably an A model, and every so often he would take me to sell the metal. They would weigh my brass, my aluminum, my copper and my iron. You got more money for the brass.

I had saved all that money and that is how I had bought the first motorcycle. You could buy a pretty good motorcycle for 50 bucks.

If you didn't have financial support from a family, they would let you out of school a little bit early. I had a bicycle then and would leave Boys High School, ride home, change clothes, and go to the mill. I worked from 3 in the afternoon until 11 at night. I don't remember exactly what I made but it seemed like it was like \$12 for 60 hours.

I never will forget as a young lad in the middle '30s when social security started. They would take 12 cents out of my \$12 and I thought that was the hardest thing in the world.

I started off sweeping the floor in the mill. You took two brooms, flared them out and pushed them down the isles between the looms. I also did what they called doffing cloth. There was a big spool on the loom and after it got a certain size you had to cut it loose and put an empty one on. I did some other odd jobs. That was along when I was reaching the age to be drafted. That was the only public job I have ever had in my life. When I came out of the military I went into business for myself.

I finished high school in 1945. I was drafted into the military in early 1946. I had to go to Fort Jackson in Columbia and be examined. It was kind of a funny story. My mother had always told me that when I was born the doctors said I may not live too long, that I had a heart murmur. They thought a heart murmur was pretty serious. When I went down to be examined I had to fill out a form and where it asked if I had any problems I put I had heart problems. They examined me and the captain wanted to know what was the matter with my heart. I said, "Well, my mama always told me I had a heart murmur." He said, "Soldier, there ain't nothing wrong with you. You are going to be in the military." I passed the examination.

They sent me to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. We did some preliminary things and they issued us our clothing. From there they sent me to Aberdeen, Maryland – Aberdeen Proving Grounds. I went through basic training and then was sent home on what they called a delaying route. They didn't call it a furlough. I was home a few days and then got on a train to California, Camp Stoneman. I rode the train five days and four nights. They called the cars where the service men rode cattle cars and that was about the truth.

At Camp Stoneman we did some more training and then boarded a converted battleship – the *General Black*. I didn't know what a typhoon was. About 3 one afternoon it got as dark as any night I had ever seen. All of a sudden the ship started coming up in the front and you could feel it when it would go down and hear those screws come out of the water. The captain ordered us to go below. In a little bit we could tell that instead of the ship lifting from the front and dropping back down, it was going sideways. It got to listing and we were down below decks hanging on to our bunks – they were just canvas tied to metal posts. There were about 2,200 G.I.s on the ship. The thing got to sliding so badly that the captain told us to man our life jackets. We thought, "What are we going to do if this thing goes down?" When the sea calmed we learned we had blown a boiler and that was the reason it got to going from side to side. We had to go into Hawaii and put in a boiler.

We went on from there into Yokohama, Japan. This was just a few months after World War II ended. My outfit was the 8th Army. We were what they called Occupational Forces. We rode a train (that wasn't much of a train) up to Tokyo. The train went through a lot of countryside where there had been no bombing. Japanese people were trying to hang onto the train. We had never seen anything like it. They wanted food or cigarettes. Those people were in desperate need of anything.

We were put up in a building that was six or seven stories high and hadn't been bombed. The buildings on each side of it had been completely destroyed. Just the rubble was left. Most of the surviving buildings looked like some type of stone rather than brick. We were moved down on Tokyo Bay to a warehouse district. The building we moved into was two stories. We were assigned to General Headquarters, GHQ. We handled all the supplies for that part of Japan for the military.

We were adjacent to General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters. You could see General MacArthur going into his office. It was a beautiful building. It looked like marble. Everyday when he arrived in his big old car there were Japanese everywhere, just wanting to get a glimpse of him. We were told the reason those people worshiped him was because he furnished bread and things like that for them.

We were very restricted. They didn't allow our people to abuse the Japanese people. They weren't the ones who decided to bomb Pearl Harbor. Some of the forces from other countries were a little bit different but we couldn't interfere with them.

The few cars I saw had a kind of a furnace in the back in what would be the trunk. They had a great big pipe, maybe a 2 inch wide pipe, that went over the top of the car. They were

running the cars on gases produced by charcoal. If a driver hit a hill of any size he had to get out, go back and get a little more blaze going. They drove on the opposite side of the road from us. It took us awhile to get used to that.

The Japanese had very limited food. They were pretty primitive compared to the United States. We weren't allowed to partake of anything they grew. For one thing, they needed it themselves but they had oxen and wooden carts that went by the houses every morning picking up the human waste. That is what they put on their vegetables.

We didn't use money over there. We had script. At that time a GI could buy a carton of cigarettes for 65 cents and you could get anything you wanted for a carton of cigarettes. They had a lot of fine silk things. A lot of the older men brought things back. They got them for virtually nothing.

The houses were very small. The floors were raised up. They sat on the floor, they didn't sit in chairs. I only got to go in a couple of them. The houses looked nothing like a house in this country, nothing at all. They were just like little shacks.

We weren't allowed to get out and go wherever we wanted to. We pretty well stayed right in Tokyo. The only time I saw Yokohama again was when we left to go back to the ship to come home.

I had one Japanese man I supervised who was a schoolteacher, a very educated man. I had learned a little Japanese and thought I was pretty smart. He could speak some English and finally he told me what little I had learned was from the lower classes and he said in the United States what I had learned would be what we would call slang. It wasn't proper Japanese.

I was there barely over a year. They didn't let you stay too long. When I got out of the army I rode a train from California to Seneca and one of my older brothers picked me up and brought me home.

I lived with my next older brother and his wife a little while. I checked to see if I could go to college since I had finished high school and I could have gone to Clemson but for some reason, I can't explain it, I decided to go into the motorcycle business. I had \$300 the United States government gave me as mustering out pay.

I wrote to Harley-Davidson in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to see if I could become a dealer. They said Anderson was too small a city for a Harley-Davidson dealership. I wrote to Indian Motorcycle Company in Springfield, Massachusetts, and they gave me an Indian franchise. I opened a motorcycle dealership and car repair shop. 1948 was the first year I sold a motorcycle and it was a 1948 Indian Chief. They don't make them today.

A man named Woody Simmons who was in the automobile wrecker, garage and car painting business in Williamston raced Harleys with his brother. He and his brother got the Greenwood Harley dealership. It was offered to me but I didn't want to go to Greenwood.

Eventually they got Harley to let them have a sub-dealership in Anderson. They kept it awhile but knew I wanted it. Mr. Simmons came to me one day and asked me if I would like to have it. I said yes. I let a man in Spartanburg have all of the Indian parts and motorcycles and tools that I had.

My next to oldest brother, Lewis, and I went into partnership. He had been an automobile mechanic all of his life, worked for the Ford dealership here. He was a car mechanic more than I was but it didn't take me long to learn with his guidance. The car business really kept us afloat in the early years because the motorcycle business was not very big then. In 1957 Harley-Davidson came to us to see if we wanted to take over the dealership in Greenville. For some reason they wanted someone new to have the franchise. We bought it and closed up the automobile garage.

Later Lewis and I separated our businesses for family planning reasons and he took over the Greenville franchise while I kept the Anderson franchise by myself. He sold his out in 1975 and I have been the only Timms brother in the motorcycle business since then.

When we began selling motorcycles it was a very small industry. It is worldwide now. Harley-Davidson at one time was within three days of closing its doors as an American manufacturer. The American people supported the only surviving American motorcycle made and still, today, the only American motorcycle is a Harley-Davidson.

It used to be that motorcycle people had a negative reputation but that has changed considerably. Now many professional people ride and our customers are upstanding citizens. I even sold one to a pastor of our church.

The Harley dealer network has given more than \$40 million to Muscular Dystrophy. Our local charity in Anderson is Meals on Wheels. Since I was raised the way I was by a widow with meager means I have had a burning desire to help those people who don't have family, don't have a way to go anywhere and don't have any way to cook meals. I just have a desire to help someone who is less fortunate than I am.

A young lady at a bank not long ago said, "Mr. Timms, are you that Mr. Timms that runs that Harley-Davidson shop?" I said "Yes, I sure am." Referring to people who ride motorcycles, she said, "Some of them look so bad." I said, "Honey, let me tell you something. Some of them would cut their arm off to save you. Trust me, I know what I am talking about." She just didn't know. I don't care what anybody does as long as they try to help someone who is less fortunate.

My wife's name is Edna. My son, Charles Bickley Timms, Jr., is in business with me. He graduated from Hanna High School and has two sons who are at Clemson and work at the business part-time. My oldest daughter is Charlene Marie Timms. She has had a veterinary hospital for about 20 years in Greenville on Wade Hampton. She went to Clemson University and obtained her doctorate degree in veterinary medicine through the University of Georgia. My daughter, Lucretia Perkins is married to Mike Perkins who with his brother runs Perx Carwash. Lucretia teaches at Calhoun Elementary School. She has her Masters degree and is eligible for

her doctorate degree. My youngest daughter, Cynthia Faye Garrison, teaches at Pendleton High School. She also went to Clemson University and has a Masters degree.