

Transcript 2005 Interview with Children of JMB, Tape 1 of 2, side 1 of 2

00:00:01 Marty Olliff

My name is Doctor Martin T. Olliff. I'm with the Archives Of Wiregrass History And Culture at Troy University, Dothan. This is an interview with three of Johnny Mack Brown's children, Cynthia Brown, Locky (Lachlan) Brown, and Sally Brown.

This is being conducted in the Sakato Room of the Dothan Civic Center on September 10th, 2005. It's approximately 12:30 in the afternoon.

So I know that I haven't caught y'all's married names, so

00:02:40 Locky Brown

I live in Ventura, CA, which is just north of Los Angeles.

And our office . . . and I've been working in the Los Angeles area primarily, so I've had a long commute when I do go into the office and it's generally, with that traffic, you know it's sometimes it's a drive just coming home.

I like living in Ventura. Yeah, that's a very nice town.

00:03:29 Marty Olliff

And Sally?

00:03:36 Sally Brown Bergen

My name is Sally Brown Bergen. I am living in Oslo, Norway. I've been living there for last 34 years. I metsnles

00:05:29 Sally

Well, he's Norwegian.

00:05:42 Marty Olliff

Was he at Berkeley studying?

00:05:45 Sally

Yes, he was. Yeah. Yeah. So he's an engineer. Structural engineer.

00:05:59 Marty Olliff

Well, what was life like in the in the Brown household as children? He was already a pretty well-known movie actor by the time all y'all came along. And what was it like living in in Hollywood?

00:06:33 Locky

You know, we didn't live in Hollywood. We were raised in Beverly Hills. And I for . . . I can speak [only] for myself, I never really gave it a lot of thought, you know, just another kid and with another lot of other kids that their parents were in the entertainment business or they're doing other things. And I was just out doing my thing and I was playing baseball and football and I, you know, some of our best friends, their parents were in entertainment. So you know just didn't you really didn't think about that.

00:07:11 Marty Olliff

There was so much of it around you, it was just the natural order of things.

00:07:16 Locky

It's just that your father was does something that his father does or her father does and you don't think about those things. They're just other kids. And so you just, you know, you make friends and you enjoy the ones that you make friends with.

00:07:33 Marty Olliff

Certainly. Certainly. So you played sports, you played organized sports in school . . . baseball and football?

00:07:41 Locky

I played baseball and football. I started when I was in Cub Scouts playing the Cub Scout softball before Little League, and played softball and went to Beverly High and played football there and baseball.

And then went to junior college, played football and baseball in junior college one year and then went to the University of Kentucky and played football there for four years and then after that it went into the Navy for four years.

00:13:46 Locky

That was quite common though, with in in that area with the entertainment business, the film business

As we sat on the stairs with my sister behind and then Locky in there, and then Jane and it was . . . I even remember being in . . . and Cynthia and I having a twin pajamas, red pajamas and just, you know, we're all it was just it was this great excitement that was behind it. And I just felt it was built up also with Christmas time was with decorations around the house and they and just the atmosphere was . . . it was just culminated at that morning at 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning whenever we were able to, to, to enter that, that wonderful room that we called the drawing room. It was just a fine time.

And then, of course, as she mentioned, there was the friends that surrounded us, that, you know, came to be with us at Christmas and share the Christmas turkey and to and to just . . . and the gathering around the piano and singing and the filming and it was so well documented, as she pointed out, and. And so it's I've just seen a little bit of the footage that was sent me and it was it just it was all brought back it was so intense.

It was intense, but it was intensely wonderful.

00:18:13 Marty Olliff

Sure. Sure. Yeah. And that's what I was picking up from you last night. Not only was it a wonderful experience, but, but it's a very obviously for you from the way you tell it, a very focused memory and something that really struck deeply with within you.

Now we've heard about Christmas. What was this the year like? What about birthdays? How did
abi

00:21:35 Locky

Well, and Gene Raymond, who is Jeanette McDonald's husband, was an actor. Well, well known leading man. He flew airplanes during the Second World War and was, I think, kind of like a ferry pilot, you know, he ferried aircraft from place to place.

And he was very talented. And one evening he was with us for dinner. And he did the same thing, he played the piano. But that, you know, those are some of the memories that I think are very warm. Very, very endearing.

00:22:26 Cynthia

I was just thinking about [unintelligible]. I've never heard the Hoagy Carmichael one because I was too little.

But I remember a very endearing one that happened with me and Lou Ayers, and we called him Sarge Lou, and he came to . . . he was part of the party, the parties or the people that would come. And I just remember him sitting down with me at the piano and we were playing, you know, I was about five, or four, I don't know, four, I think. And I just remember him being so sweet. And then he came up the stairs with me because I had to go to bed, you know, I always had to go to bed early, anyway, so we went up the stairs and he came up with me because I didn't want to go to bed yet, you know? And he was playing hide the penny with me in my dollhouse.

It's just very sweet that this man would do that. But it was cute because we were, you know, playing, I don't know, something like the "Bullfrog Sat oy

00:24:33 Locky

Well, you played your graduation.

00:24:34 Cynthia

I played big pieces, but I had to really be forced to do that.

00:24:37 Locky

You play your graduation, grade school. She played the piano for her graduation . . .

00:24:49 Cynthia

Traumatic experience. [laughter] That's like giving a speech in [unintelligible due to cross talk].

00:24:52 Locky

I had no talent from that, but

00:26:30 Cynthia

Oh yeah, she was the disciplinarian. She was the one who was there all the time, and she saw to it that we got the lessons and the whatever, you know, what would be swimming or taking to or the dancing lessons or the music lessons happen to come into the house because of the piano.

00:26:50 Marty Olliff

So your piano teacher came to your house. A house call?

00:26:55 Locky

Right, right.

00:27:00 Cynthia

This is . . . A lot of other friends we knew. I think that's not, I don't know, maybe that's uncommon today I don't know.

00:27:07 Marty Olliff

I couldn't tell you today. When I was growing up, we went to our piano teacher's house. Although we had a piano, hers was better. And so we went there. I couldn't speak to anybody [today].

00:27:16 Locky

Yeah, taking violin. I went to his home, but yeah. But piano, the piano teachers that we had, and it all seemed to come up.

00:27:32 Marty Olliff

You know, different places do different things. Very interesting. Do you have any stories about piano lessons?

00:27:42 Sally

Well, yes, I was. I guess I do. My piano teacher, I think she probably realized I was not going to be a pianist at a very early stage in my piano [career]. I did persevere for seven years with piano. However, I finally gave it up to my

But piano lesson's, leus.. hn fort up shal d h r e) At the b r u s t y d e m k i w a s t h a t t h a t I w a h a d n o t p r a i d d u r i n g t h e

00:29:00 Cynthia

I got out of [that]. I didn't do any for her, I don't think.

00:29:04 Sally

Ohh, good for you. Well, I and we went to people's homes and it was, you know, lovely tea and the little girls who were taking these piano lessons would perform, you know, *expertly* and of course I e

I wonder and I've noticed this in my own children, that as I got older and my younger children came up, I was a little mellower with my younger kids. Did that dynamic work in this family as well? Everybody's pointing -- for the benefit of those who can't see -- everybody's pointing at each other.

[Much laughter and joking crosstalk about younger children being "oppressed."]

Let me ask the question the way that my children would probably ask it: is Sally spoiled?

00:01:22 Locky Brown

No, I don't think so. Not now. [More laughter] Her husband has taken care of that. [More laughter] Yeah, she she's lived in Norway for the last 34 years.

00:01:45 Cynthia Brown Hale

Sally is not spoiled. I don't think we, you know, she's not a spoiled person and she hasn't been given everything that the rest of us have been given. Because by the time she came along, Dad's career was really, you know, at its end because television came in and everybody didn't know, "Oh my God, it was this thing going to take off, you know, what do we do with this television? Is it going to, you know, what is it going to do?" And the movie houses stood very vacant.

It was scary. You wondered if another movie was ever going to be made, you know, to go into these beautiful edifices of gold and gilt and everything. And they were [unintelligible]. Something else has happened, you know? And so Dad's contract came to an end at that point. And so it was a little iffy, you know, and what was going to happen next? And anyway, so a lot bad things happened to a lot of actors at that point and if they could be picked up, or if they could move into the live theater . . . live television, which is a little scary too, then they made the transition.

Now Hopalong Cassidy bought all of his movies. Pop Sherman had told him to do that type of thing. He went ahead and mortgaged his home and bought all of his movies. And it was, in retrospect certainly, a very, very smart move on his part, because that is all you ever saw practically at the very beginning, was Hoppy and the black and white, you know. And so that was a very smart move. And he made a lot of money doing that.

But Dad didn't own his movies. A lot of people didn't own their movies. Y

20s, thirties and, you know, and they could just never show those other ones and not have to worry about that.

00:04:41 Locky

They paid them a lump sum for that.

They paid him a lump sum in place of any residuals, and then anything after a certain date then they would give a residual and everything he did was acquired.

00:04:57 Cynthia

Anyway, so that was . . .

00:05:00 Marty Od pw96)090TP004 Tc0006 Tw70 1 Tf6.13 .09TJ[286) TJ[66) t900:)TW46]116:) Tw1] TJ[66) TJ[0060] TJ[66)

that were in the entertainment business that hung out or were close to that restaurant. And he and Mickey Rooney became very good friends. And he used to say how talented Mickey Rooney was. And several others. Richard Arlen, I believe, was one of the others that used to going out there. Anyway, there was several that he got to know quite well.

And so he did what he could and then after, after a while, he finally just retired.

00:07:46 Marty Olliff

Were you still in the house when he was looking around for a different career? How did that affect the household?

00:07:58 Sally Brown Bergen

Well, certainly there was a certain amount of uncertainty, naturally, and my mother was, though in real estate, and that was she was kept. She kept busy.

00:08:09 Cynthia

I think she started doing that, what, in her 50s? I think that was her first time to get out.

00:08:15 Marty Olliff

Once most of the kids were out of the house and you were, doubtless in school and relatively self-sufficient so she could go off . . .

00:08:16 Sally

Yes. I was in school.

00:08:22 Locky

And we sold our Calle Vista home, too, to some friends of the family. We had access t] TJ[9(o)] TJnu ac

00:16:16 Locky

Yes, he did, but I don't. I don't think that he became less of a leading man because of it.

00:16:23 Cynthia

People speculate, you know. Writers want to say something, and so they say, "oh, well, it must have been that," you know, or it must have been something that I don't think that was a biggie really.

00:16:33 Locky

No, he took voice lessons and he always maintained his Southern accent or drawl to, you know, but not to the point where he had a high kind of a pitch voice and he developed a very low, very wonderful voice.

00:16:50 Marty Olliff

And my question then is, did he speak that way at home, or did he revert back to an older [southern accent]?

00:16:58 Cynthia

Sure, they brought his voice down, I suppose. I think he even took opera, didn't he? Well, voice lessons, voice training, whatever you call it, you know, to bring it down to a certain level. And. Yeah, very, very nice voice. I guess after that.

00:16:59 Locky

Very distinctive.

00:17:19 Cynthia

And everybody remembers he had a slight tinge of the southern, no, it wasn't really so southern, but it was just a slight tinge.

00:17:28 Marty Olliff

Just enough to make it distinctive and a little bit, "you're not sure what you're really hearing there."

I remember hearing him from last year, which was the first time I was ever cognizant of seeing Johnny Mack Brown movies when they had the birthday celebration at Landmark Park. We watched a few movies out there and yeah, I heard that little softness that was, to a southern ear obviously southern, but may not have been to a western ear, particularly southern.

Your mother, I pointed to yo

So in that sense she was really very, very, you know, aware of the surroundings and made the people who were her clients, give them a greater interest in the homes.

00:19:04 Locky

She could give the best tour around, I think, yeah.

00:19:07 Cynthia

We often wondered if we shouldn't have just put it in the car, put a tape recorder on and just go up and down the streets of Beverly Hills, slowly, asking in that house and, you know, and who owned it. And you know, because I mean everybody who was . . .

00:19:18 Marty Olliff

Well, it's a relatively small community of people who know each other fairly well.

00:19:29 Cynthia

Concentrated with movie people and people who are behind the scenes, the directors, the producers, and the actors as well.

00:19:37 Locky

The complexion has changed entirely. Now it's entirely different.

But and then a lot of the old houses that have been torn down and big new and big, big, new obnoxious looking things have been put in. You know, it's the whole quaintness is gone

00:20:01 Cynthia

We used to see, like, Doris Day hopping on her bicycle and going down to the same bakery. We would go to get croissants or whatever they were you know, at the [unintelligible] bakery, or you'd run across the street and especially at Christmas time, you would see Elizabeth Taylor walking this way and Ursula Andress walking that way and you know somebody else, you're standing next to you and then, oh, yeah, it was so and so else. You know, it was always you could just see all these people.

I always was astounded at now looking back because I didn't wasn't aware of it at the time so much, but like we all went to Hawthorne School, which was a grammar school. It was a public grammar school there and in Beverly Hills, and there were four public grammar schools there. And we just happened to be in this area. But the people that were there, that were the dads and the moms, I mean, I remember Ralph Edwards's wife was the PTA president one year. And they were doing a big fair and Dad was going to be the fellow who crowned the Queen and shot the guns and did something else, you know.

And the people, like on our Mayday, maypole dances, we would b

mother-father night to come or you had a production at the school or whatever it was, I mean, the audience, you could just point out Cornell Wilde you know, or Wendell Corey. You know, just all over.

And so we didn't know who these people were, particularly at the time at all, because you know, and we

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[N.b.: Conversation continued while tape was being changed, shifted from Sally to Locky]

00:00:02 Locky Brown

[Mother] was having physical problems, maybe about four or five years prior to her passing, so she passed in '86, and so I'd say probably about '82, '83. So whenever she started real estate, I don't remember the date, but then up until about [19]83 I guess.

00:00:30 Sally Brown Bergen

I think around '58.

00:00:32 Marty Olliff

So she started in '58 and she worked into her 70s.

00:00:34 Cynthia Brown Hale [with much crosstalk from Sally and Locky]

I think that or maybe a little later, little later, maybe she was studying up to that, but I think maybe. She was working for Joe Sirenko down and in Los Angeles, at the magazines that that was . . . you were on Fountain, we were on Fountain at the time.

00:00:52 Locky

Yeah, but she hadn't started real estate at that time.

00:00:54 Cynthia [Crosstalk from Sally]

No. She was thinking about it . . . doing decorating at that time or something like that. So it was after that.

00:00:59 Locky

That was in the early '60s.

00:01:02 Cynthia

Yeah, it would be early '60s. [Unintelligible].

00:01:03 Locky

[19]60, '61 because I came home from the service in '60 end of '60, by November '60.

00:01:12 Cynthia

Yeah, because you weren't there for the wedding.

00:01:19 Locky

She went in in '58, I was in Cuba at that time.

00:01:28 Marty Olliff

I would say then that she really must have thoroughly enjoyed

00:04:11 Cynthia

Part of those lessons. 12 years old.

00:04:15 Locky

Yeah, and she studied art too, not only in, you know, in school, but out of school, too. She went to Chouinard [Art Institute] and some of these other academies.

00:04:28 Cynthia

She also, when she was here in Dothan, she was here at the University of Alabama for two years, and she won a little contest, I remember at the State Fair with her artwork as I recall.

00:04:43 Marty Olliff

Now, now she made her living as a real estate agent?

00:04:46 Locky

She worked for the County of Los Angeles.

00:04:48 Cynthia

Yeah, basically. She transferred into that area. She had worked in real estate and different things. As I mentioned the Tishman, the big group and there's some other ones. But anyway, she basically really for about 17 or 18 years of her life . . .

00:05:03 Locky

She was she worked for the Hilton chain too.

00:05:05 Cynthia

Well, that4 Tc-0.004 Twrars

00:05:25 Cynthia

She was very good. She almost had an French Impressionistic style. She liked lots of light in her paintings. And then she gravitated into the portrait. She seemed to, in her later years, do the more portraits, and did them of friends and things of that sort.

And then one thing, too, that Locky was surprised to hear, was that she had like a big, thick book of just poetry. And she used to send her poems off to something or other, that they make a big binder of everybody's poems. You know, I'm sure it's it was just a deal where, you know, they want you to buy the book for \$30.00 or \$50.00, and you get to see your name in it. But it was something that gave her pleasure.

So I have a whole binder of poems, and some of them are cute and funny, you know, and kind of tongue in cheek. Others are based on history, you know, historical things that are happening around at the time. I mean, might be outer space and all. And interesting things. And then a lot of them are religious, meaning more from a metaphysical aspect rather than an actual religion in particular, but more metaphysical and spiritual, I should say.

So she's very gifted in the arts, so that all goes with the piano and the music and the art, you know.

00:07:00 Marty Olliff

What did she die from?

00:07:01 Cynthia

Well, she died from being anorexic. It was kind of a weird thing to have that late in life, but anyway.

00:07:08 Locky

It was because that she was being treated for a thyroid condition, and the doctor was giving her certain medication. (T) (U) (S) (Y) (G) (in) (M) (a) (rt) (ans)

00:08:59 Cynthia

Died on the way back with us. But she was having a good time up to the very end.

It was something that I heard when Locky said that he was called to look in on her. Her friends from work had brought her home one day and I think things have been going on that we didn't know about. You know that she just didn't, you know, pass on to us. And when Locky and I saw her one time at the Golden Boot Awards or the pre party, we kind of both looked at each other, because we had invited Janie to come, too, and we kind of looked at each other and said, "my God, what is going on?" You know, she was so gone . . . thin . . .

00:09:37 Locky

She had recovered, though, far better at that time than she had looked when I had seen her the first time and taken to the hospital. She was at least able to, you know, look presentable and move around and do things and go places, you know, but she still is very frail.

00:10:03 Cynthia

Very frail. Yes. And I think if the Dachau you know, people from the German concentration camp, you know, I mean, it got to

time they didn't have the long parade. It was just the float. And you know, you throw candy out at everybody as you were going down.

But I was by Santa, too, in the car going back to wherever we were going, being taken back to, anyway, I don

didn't get to go over there. You somebody wanted to know if I rode the horse much

And there was a minister who was the father, a little . . . what do you call the boys that carry the ring? [multiple answers: ringbearer] . . . who had a loop cushion with all these little Cracker Jack rings? You know, when you get out of it, Cracker Jack Box, I think. And it was all done in great spirit and Daddy stood there and waited for all these . . . decked out in his cowboy outfit and he had his guns on and all these little girls came up and then the minister said, and the and the girl who was having the birthday party, she had written this. What? When I say the sermon, what they what, what the speech.

And the ministers turns to Daddy, "now do you promise not to smoke or drink or eat crackers in bed? And Daddy had to think.

All these little girls came along and he slipped the ring on their finger and it was all great fun. He loved kids and this was just one of another thing that he did just, you know, the for fun and for the neighbors and for all of us.

He was, you know, he got into the spirit of it.

00:23:13 Cynthia

That is a good story.

00:23:15 Sally

And wedding cake was had. That was the birthday cake.

00:23:18 Marty Olliff

But of course.

Well, time is sh ti J0 T8.77J[-3.4(c)] TJ[-[1.7(s)] ye ans20 Tc0 TldF0 1 Tf-5.a6(t)] TJ Tj0.002 T3ny] TJ[-2.5(u)] TJ[-0.8(k)] T

00:23:33 Sally

Thank you very much.

00:23:34 Marty Olliff

We didn't have an opportunity to introduce this tape from the other one. This is the end of tape two of the interview between myself, Doctor Martin T Olliff of the Archives of Wiregrass, History and Culture at Troy Univee