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1973

Mrs. Bessie Haygood

Twila Haygood

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Interviewed is a middle-age black mother and wife, native South Carolinian, who came to Savannah when segregation was at its height.

Interviewed: Bessie Haygood.  
Interviewer: Twila Haygood.

Question: What is your name?

Answer: Bessie Elizabeth Haygood.

Q: How old are you

A: Forty-nine.

Q: When is the first time you came to Savannah.

A: Well, I came through Savannah in 1946.

Q: Where were you born .

A: Georgetown, S.C.

Q: Do you think many people from Georgetown came to Savannah.

A: A few not many.

Q: What brought you to Savannah.

A: I uh, marriage.

Q: Did you get married before you came to Savannah.

A: yes.

Q: Well your husband was staying in Savannah?

A: Yes he was staying in Savannah because his job was in Sav'h.

Q: What kind of work did he do?

A: He is a crankhand for the Seaboard R.R.

Q: Did many black people work on the R.R. during that time.

A: Lots of them.

Q: Was that considered a good means of work?

A: That was considered a good means of work at that time for the black man.

Q: Wher did you stay when came to Savannah?

A: I roomed on 39th Street west 39th Street 611 to be exact.

Q: Was it an all black area?

A: It was an all black area.

Q: Was it an upper middle class or lower middle class area.

A: I would considered that umh middle I wouldn't say upper or lower middle but middle.

Q: Middle Class?

A: Right. They would be more or less upper middle class because most of the people there were either attending school or had graduate from college.

Q: When you say school you mean...

A: I meant college.

Q: College?

A: Yes or postman or so it would be more or less to the upper middle class.

Q: What kind of professions did they go into.

A: Teaching postman ... preachers fireman.

Q: Firemen?

A: Conductors.

Q: There were black firemen during that time?

A: There were black firemen. In other words, my landlord was a firemen.

Q: Were the stations (firestations) intergrated.

A: They were all black. What stations do you have reference too.

Q: To the firestations.

A: I am not talking about firemen in the city. I'm talking about firemen on the train. There weremen on the Seaboard R.R. and coastline R.R. at that time.

Q: Which was considered the largest at that time you just mention two.

A: I think seaboard was considered the largest and than coastline now they have meraged.

- Q: When you came to Savannah what kind of transportation did you have in the city. How did you get from place to place.
- A: I drove a car.
- Q: Oh! Was that unusual for that time.
- A: Well you didn't see many black woman driving.
- Q: So you were considered unusual to be driving during that time.
- A: Well there were quite a few driving but not the majority as today.
- Q: Was it unusual for you all to have a car doing that time.
- A: Not really
- Q: Everybody had a car?
- A: A lot of people had cars but most women weren't driving it but there would be a car in the family.
- Q: So males dominated driving.
- A: To a great extent.
- Q: Getting back to college graduates were talking about were you referring to males then, too.
- A: Male and Females.
- Q: Females were attending college too.
- A: Right.
- Q: Were there a large number of people attending college.
- A: Well, I didn't know many people in Savannah the ones I knew were attending college because I met them in college.
- Q: What college did you go to?
- A: Savannah State.
- Q: What kind of courses did you take.
- A: Elementary Education.
- Q: What courses did you take in Elementary Education.
- A: Well I took Child psychology, Educational psychology, Methods of teaching in elementary school, methods of teaching reading and oh I can't remember.

Q: Had you finished high school by the time you came to Savannah?

A: Yes. I had already had a few college credits when I came to Savannah.

Q: Did you consider the education you received at that time inferior to what you thought the whites were getting?

A: Naturally it was inferior because we did not have the equipment.

Q: Did you think that?

A: I ...other words we didn't have the tools yes we knew it all the time but we just figured there was nothing we could do about it.

Q: After you left the rooming house where did you move?

A: We moved in Craver village.

Q: Is this the settlement where you buy homes?

A: Right. At that time thought they were renting they weren't selling at that point. Later they decided to sell, but they weren't as they should be. The houses were poorly structured they were unsealed. What I mean by that the inside of the house was cement block, the rooms were divided by cement block, of course, they had hot water and bathroom facilities but it would be bad for your health unless you could seal it with some other material and the floors were cement, tile over cement.

Q: Was this considered unusual was Craver Village considered unusual?

A: Yes. Most people thought they were nice places to stay.

Q: So it was better quality even though...

A: Yes Even though it was substandard it was better quality.

Q: Did you move any place after Craver Village or how long did you stay.

A: OH. I imagine we stayed there I'll say about six years.

Q: Were you still attending school during this time.

A: No. I had stop school years ago.

Q: What kind of profession did you have before you came to Savannah.

A: Well, I taught school before I came to Savannah but by me not having my degree I wasn't hired here and that's why I was going to

school to work on my degree. but then I started with a family. And I couldn't afford to complete my education.

Q: Did everybody who was teaching in school in Savannah have a degree?

A: When I came the ones who had been here they were allowed to stay and work on it but they weren't hiring anybody that didn't have it.

Q: What kind of entertainment did you have? Where did you go? What did you do?

A: Well, church was one of them.

Q: Tell us about that. How did you get involved in church after coming to a strange place.

A: Well coming here I met a friend, In other words she came to be a friend and she invited me to her church, I liked it I joined. And I've been a member there ever since Connors Temple Baptist Church.

Q: Was the church what you expected.

A: It wasn't what I expected. It really wasn't what I really was accustomed to but since I got in I never moved.

Q: What were you accustomed to in church?

A: Well, in church I wasn't accustomed to the type music that we have nor was I accustomed to the type pastor that we had.

Q: What kind of music did you have (Georgetown).

A: We had more of a sacred music that we have more of a gospel music.

Q: You are talking of hymns and so forth.

Q: And what was the difference between the pastors?

A: Well, I would say he didn't have as much education as the one in Georgetown.

Q: So you didn't get as much from the sermons.

A: No. I didn't get as much from the sermons because I couldn't follow him.

Q: This gospel music could you describe it.

A: Well, at times you could dance to the music better than serve God by it. I would say.

Q: Is the singing loud or what?

A: Well, it's loud and it's, it's very close to the music you dance by I would say that it would be very close to a jazz or rock.

Q: Well, you just didn't enjoy this type music did you know of anyone else in that church who didn't.

A: Yes. Quite a few of my friends said the same thing about it. Why we stayed we'll never know. But even now I won't leave it.

Q: You wouldn't leave the gospel even though you don't like it?

A: Even though I don't like it I will still stick to it because now I feel as if I am a part of that church. And to make a change now I just wouldn't want to.

Q: Were there any churches in Savannah that you know of that had the kind of music you were accustomed to.

A: Quite a few of them.

Q: And you visited them.

A: Occasionally.

Q: There has been a lot of talk of Daddy Grace in the black community in the earlier days. Did you know anything of him?

A: The only thing I knew about him was disgusting. He was very disgusting, as far as, I was concerned. They had a tent, I guess you would call it a tent with sawdust flooring and the people would jump and get happy and waller in the saw dust and he would laugh about it and I through that was very inhuman.

Q: They say he was a very rich man.

A: I would be to if everybody would sacrifice and give me all their money.

Q: Oh! They sacrifice to give him money?

A: I know they had to you could tell from the type homes they came from they ~~were~~ had to sacrifice to pay him. They would even make him paper suits at what they called confoncation I think that is what it is called. They usually have that the third Sunday in Sept. That's when they have a big parade and these people put on \$100.00 gowns just to parade and dance in the street. It was just a waste of money when that money could have helped some poor person.

Q: You said the people sacrifice, you mean they were mostly lower class.

A: Lower Class Blacks.

Q: That were interested in Daddy Grace.

A: I would say that, of course, it would be a mix group but the majority I would say. I have no statistics to back me up now.

- Q: You said you could tell they sacrifice by the dwellings they lived in. could you describe some of them?
- A: Well, all you have to say is a shack and that would be it.
- Q: A little more description.
- A: Well, it was worn, the places should have been torn down years ago.
- Q: Did they have indoor baths.
- A: No. They had outdoor baths, the floor you have to step across holes in the floor. You could go to bed and look through the ceilings and tell how many stars was in the sky.
- Q: Were the majority of the blacks in Savannah in the lower class?
- A: That's hard to say but you found a lot of them in places like frog town, oh the houses surrounding Yramcraw Village, and The fort and there were other places that I can't remember because there were places I had never been but I heard a lot about it.
- Q: Did the lower class have any other special religion. I have read of Father Divine did he have a following in Savannah?
- A: Not that I recall.
- Q: What kind of work did you have during the years?
- A: Since I didn't complete my education what I did mostly was in dry cleaning and I did this because the hours suited me because of my children.
- Q: Was the work hard?
- A: Very hard.
- Q: Do you think if you were from Savannah, a black person from Savannah with two years college and knew people you would have to work so hard.
- A: No. I think I would have had a better chance.
- Q: So you think it was discrimination partly because you were from off.
- A: No. I wouldn't say it was discrimination because I wasn't a Savannahian. I would say it was not discrimination, at all. I would say I just didn't know the right people or get in the right circle. In other words I didn't visit enough or didn't get around enough to know the people who could probably have help me.
- Q: You found this in every walk of life or just in getting jobs. That you had to know the right people?



- A: To a certain extent in all areas.
- Q: What were your other jobs.
- A: Until recently I worked in the cleaners, then for about two months at Holsome bakery and that was hard work. And since that time I worked as an aid (teacher's) for three years, so after my experience with all different low paying jobs I decided to go back to school and that's what I am during now.
- Q: Do you find many black women going back to school at middle life.
- A: At my age no.
- Q: You don't find more than usual.
- A: Not at my age, you see quite a few but there are still more white than black but they are the majority that we have to take into consideration.
- Q: You were talking about entertainment and you stop at religion what else did you do.
- A: Well, I like to dance I would dance a lot. And I would go to concerts.
- Q: Where were these concerts held?
- A: Well, it was the umm the city auditorium (a few whites in balcony) and oh, coconut grove I just can't think of this other place the only thing I can think of everytime I think of this place was hearing Ruth Brown she was a great singer at that time.
- Q: Well, do you know where it was located at.
- A: It was on Laythorpe west Laythorpe between Bay and Augusta Ave. (Lincoln Inn).
- Q: You mention Ruth Brown and you said you heard her twice there.
- A: I heard her there twice.
- 
- Q: What are some the other famous people you saw.
- A: I have been to hear Buddy Johnson, Lionel Hampton, all that came that I like I went to see.
- Q: What kind of people frequent these places more black? middle-class? Lower class? or what?
- A: Well, no I don't think the lower class brother to much about it and it would be more or less the middle-class.
- Q: The middle-class.
- A: Umph, Umph.

- Q: Did you find more women than men or...
- A: There were always more women than men?
- Q: At these affairs?
- A: Right. You find that even in church.
- Q: Did the famous artist come to perform just for the black community?
- A: Right. They were booked for the black clubs.
- Q: And they didn't play on separate night for the white community?
- A: No these were black entertainers.
- Q: Well, in other words blacks did not entertain whites during that time?
- A: A few did, but they didn't entertain blacks at the same time that they did whites.
- Q: If they did it they were booked on a different...
- A: date. Right.
- Q: They didn't come and just stay two days and left.
- A: No. They would be at different places, different entertainment centers. I don't know of any leading blacks entertaining whites in Savannah. But I know of local bands were often at white entertainment but the real famous ones I don't know they entertaining the whites.
- Q: What kind of dress was worn at these concerts?
- A: Well, just an after five no long dress just basic cocktail dress is what we mostly wore.
- Q: What date was this?
- A: Just before you were born (1952).
- Q: About 1953 or so?
- A: yea.
- Q: Were the dress long then or what?
- A: They were about I say midi length.
- Q: Where is that
- A: Half way the leg just the midi that you where now it's fashion coming back. We had the platform shoes at that time then we came from there to the ankle strap then to pointed toes.

- Q: Did you dance when he bands came to Savannah?
- A: We sure did.
- Q: What kind did you do?
- A: We waltz and the fox trot the, Swing, the Bop oh what you call it?
- A: Are you talking about the mumbo?
- A: The Mumbo, the Tanglo, and the Rumbo. We didn't have the dances you have today.
- Q: In other words you were never entertained at any of these places by white entertainers.
- A: Never.
- Q: Were any of the bands intergrated?
- A: Never.
- Q: Savannah is famous place for Voodoo and Roots do you know about Voodoo and Roots.
- A: I know of Voodoo and Roots.
- Q: Are they two different things.
- A: I don't know I put them all in the same category because it something to laugh about as far as I am concern.
- Q: But did other people believe in it.
- A: Some people really believed in it.
- Q: Did they put money in it.
- A: Yea. They put all they earned in it because it was a way to help them.
- Q: In voodoo do you remember if they through it was a way to cure them when they were ill, to make them rich, to help them get good jobs?
- A: Right. Those were incentive for using Roots and Voodoo. Whatever name you have for it. They would use rabbit feet and the sort for good luck or a lot of people especially the lower class would spent a lot of money and buying numbers and they would run to these root people or Voodoo or what have you for numbers trying to catch the lucky number. They would play a whole year maybe \$10.00 a week \$20.00 a week some as high as \$25.00 a week and probably once a year they would catch it for \$600.00 and through they well.
- Q: The point of the Numbers was to get what they considered rich.
- A: Yea. In other words it was just a vice.

Q: You said twenty to twenty-five dollars a week are you talking about lower class people?

A: Lower class people would spent about half of their check on Roots. I mean numbers, numbers and Roots because they have to go to the man to get the number and after they get the number they have to spent some to buy the number. And that is how a lot of our people got rich. By selling the numbers.

Q: Oh! Selling them not catching them.

A: Well, naturally they couldn't catch enough because they were spending too much but the person who ran the game profited from it a lot.

Q: Was the numbers the only illegal racket in Savannah during that time that you can remember.

A: Well, unstamped whiskey was and is now.

Q: Un what?

A: UNstamped whiskey.

Q: Do you mean moonshine?

A: Moonshine, right of course, it was more of it then than now because the law is really tougher on them now and they give them longer sentences so that has stopped a lot.

Q: Did they have moonshine liquor in houses.

A: Right. That is the only place they could sell it.

Q: They didn't have speak easies?

Q: In unknown of clubs.

A: Oh! NO! All the clubs that I have ever gone to had stamped whiskey they were sold at a higher price than you would get it from the whiskey store. But they were sealed in other words all the clubs have bars.

Q: What kind of work did most black females have as a whole not just upper middle class.

A: Domestic work.

Q: They worked in the homes of whites.

A: Right.

Q: Did they stay in?

A: No. They commuted, by bus.

- Q: Did you ride the bus much during this time?
- A: No. I never got a chance to ride the bus too much.
- Q: You were from out-of town and had a chance to compare. Did Savannah seem behind to you in racial attitudes.
- A: Whose attitudes.
- Q: Whites the community or a whole with race relations were they behinds.
- A: I don't know they were both in the south.
- Q: Do you think things are better now?
- A: They are about the same.
- Q: yea. We are intergrated but you see a lot of segregation in all jobs. On the surface we interated.
- Q: Were you ever North you said both of these cities were southern states?
- A: I was in New York I spent time in New York.
- Q: How did you...
- A: They are segregated there there. Not in the sense that we are here but they are segregated maybe more so than we are. Because in the south the black man in the south owns more property than the black man, too, but he hasn't accomplished as much.
- Q: So you feel that this accomplished is worth more than being able to go where you want to.
- A: The place you go didn't mean that much if you didn't advance any more in your jobs. But now its quite a difference the last time I was in New York was in 1948. I mean to stay for a while, of course, I went for a few visits but the questions you are asking can't be answered by a few visits. I've know in New York you could go to a club they couldn't ask you to go out but, as soon as you've have finished eating they would break the plate you ate out.
- Q: Did you find a lot of people from Savannah going north?
- A: I have ment quite a few people from Savannah up north. In other words in all southern states there are a lot of blacks that migrated north. That was because they could find better jobs they do have better jobs they just don't accomplish as much and that's because because its overcrowded I suppose and property is harder to get.

- Q: Did you find a lot of people moving from rural areas to Savannah?
- A: That I wouldn't know my circle was so small so I wouldn't know too much about that.
- Q: Now we have a lot of people who say they hate white people. Were there people like that during an earlier period.
- A: There will always be people that way.
- Q: Then there were people like that?
- A: Naturally
- Q: How were they treated by the black community?
- A: They were accepted because all the blacks had some bad experience from some white person sometime or other.
- Q: So these people were just the ones you felt...
- A: They were the ones who let everybody know about it. Their some bad experiences I have had, of course I don't talk about them. Because me having two years of college then there are people who have been my foremen who doesn't even know what a high school was like so naturally, I would have a little hostility but it was because of my color that I could be nothing but a presser. Although they would make mistakes and I would have to help them. Not really have to but I did. But still there were times when I resented them getting more money than I did when I figure I could do as well or better than they could that in itself would cause a lot hostility if you just take for instance yourself if you were equip for a job and you wasn't hired for that job because of your color it would effect you it really would and that couldn't be helped.
- Q: So you are saying that most of the people were behind the demonstration (60) so forth and and Martin Luther King.
- A: Most people were interested in the demonstrations, of course, they didn't like the violence. I don't think anybody like the violence but the ones who took part in it and I don't really believe that they really like the violence but a lot of the violence was brought on because of being provoked. Because during all these demonstrations a colored woman could walk down the street and a white man would just holler out profanity and there was a lot done to colored woman walking alone during that time and naturally that would cause people to want to fight. When they had the sit-ins and wait-ins they were being insulted lots of these whites its hard to keep from hitting somebody after they have hurt. The Bible says if they hit you on one cheek give the other but who canddo it. Or if you do you think of something I've heard once it says yes the Bible says if slaps hit on one cheek yes

you give them the other but it didn't say what to do after that. really you would want to knock him and hurt him back. That's human nature.

Q: Who did blacks in Sav'h. feel was their leader?

A: Hosea Williams and W.W. Law he did much but as a whole in Savannah there was noone who did as much as Martin Luther King himself. Although he wasn't here he came on visits but his visits meant more than the ones who had been here people respected him.

Q: You saw on Television about demonstrations did it hit Savannah as hard as other southern cities.

A: Well, yes and no I remember the time when the boycott was on Broughton Street we would have sit-ins there and a lot of my people was hurt. A lot of police here here were burtal to them. And I didn't like the idea of them putting gas and water hose on our people. I guess they felt that was the only way and they would throw them in jail and a lot of our young people they would throw them in jail and throw charges on them and they had policerecords. Those are the things I dislike about it but now I realize to have a break through they had to do this. There was no other way. If it hadn't been for that a lot of people who have jobs now wouldn't have jobs a lot of our children who are able to go to Armstrong they wouldn't be there today if it had been for these wait and sit-ins, a lot of our girls who out of school back there why I had to go to dry cleaners if you didn't preach or teach you were just out you didn't have a job unless it was a domestic or some job of that nature. Some low paying jobs.

Q: And things are better now?

A: Well, our children are seeing better they have better jobs so it could be much better I'm not saying it cann't be better it needs much improvement in other words it needs polishing.

Q: Did you think certain people in the movement more he rm than good because they are militan?

A: Yes. I would say they did hurt a lot of them. I would say started the veillence but if they were thinking could probably have prevented some of.

Q: What was the moving force behind the movement.

A: The Church. The Churches.

Q: What was the moving force behind the churches.

A: Dr. Patterson . He was one of the best.

Q: What church was he the pastor for?

A: He was at Bulter Pres. the same place he is now.

Q: Where did the upper class blacks live?

A: Well, Henry street between price and East Broad was known as the five hundred for blacks and out Liberty city, 39th St. west and 37th St. on back.