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Mary Rivers Legree

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Mary Rivers Legree

July 20th, 2011

Interviewers: Deborah Oden, Ishmael Lewis, Unknown

DO: Hi, I'm Deborah Oden from Kenyon College oral history pro- project, and we're here today, July 20th, 2011, in the home of Mary Rivers Legree to interview her about her history here in the Gullah country. Mary?

ML: Good morning.

DO: Good morning.

ML: And thank you all for coming out and I'm very pleased to participate in your project. Um, I am Mary Rivers Legree, I was actually born here on St. Helena Island, and the house that you are sitting in and the property which you crossed over to get to my home is very historic. As a matter of fact, um, I do, um, I proudly display my family's deed, which dates back to February 28th of 1866. Uh, it's not displayed here in the living room; it's kind of in my office. But maybe at the end of the program we can just show that. Um, I was born, um, in July of 1941, to Abraham Rivers and Jamie Holmes Rivers, and this property, uh, was a purchase from the Rivers family to my mother as a wedding gift. Her father purchased four acres from the Rivers plat, as a wedding gift, when she married my dad back in 1940, January of 1940. I spent my early years on St. Helena Island for nine years, but unfortunately I was forced to leave this protective environment due to family circumstances. Um, when I lost my mother at the age of three, and both grandmothers had passed by 1950. So, um, I had no other choice but to go to New York City to live with my father and his second wife in 1950. Um, and thereafter I was educated in New York City, I pursued, um, a career in office work, so I eventually became a secretary. I relocated to Detroit, Michigan in my early twenties, um, I had a number of jobs at that time, jobs were plentiful in the 70s, so I'm experienced with a number of jobs but I eventually ended up at the Ford Motor Company, working on their financial North American Automotive Operations staff. Um, of course I again, worked through my career, and um, when I retired in 2004, I had a choice of moving to Phoenix with my daughter, staying in Michigan, because I lived in a very spacious home, or moving back to my roots. And I said to my father, he died in 2003, and his little home was left empty, and I thought it would be a good time for me to return back to my roots, not knowing that all of this history was waiting for me to take a part of it. Because all of a sudden, the history and culture of the Gullah people was becoming very eminent. I noticed that many people was travelling to the island, they were trying to explore the various sites, but most importantly they really wanted to talk to the people, and it's something that's sometimes very hard to do. But my role, I thought my role could be as, more, as a historian. Because I enjoy history, not only, uh, my history, but world history. And in my past I have travelled to Europe and to various islands. Um, so when I came hear I said, you know, why not explore my own history. So I immediately started delving and reading a lot of the history books, and I compared what they were saying to what I already knew. And uh, you know a lot of the

information was definitely very correct, very exact. Um, and then I noticed that many people who drove through the community, (whispers and points) tell them to be quiet please, (speaking again) uh many people who drove through the community would always make a stop at the Praise House, which is located further up on this road, and um, they would just look in the Praise House, which is located further up on this road. And, um they would just look in the Praise House, there was nothing there to give them a reason for the significance of the structure, there were no pictures to give them an idea of what our life looked like, uh, right out of emancipation, there was not even a postcard that they could pick up and maybe leave a dollar to learn the history of the Praise House. So, you know, I started collaborating with some of the tour companies, where they could get an opportunity to share some of the history. I don't know exactly what they were telling them; they were telling them stuff. Some of it might have been fact, some of it might have been fiction. But when I get a chance to, to really talk to a particular group I like to have good facts. Then I developed a booklet. A history of St. Helena island, so that people who stop in there can get an opportunity to purchase the booklet, and learn something briefly. What the island is about and what makes the Gullah culture, here. Um, so today I'm basically a planning commissioner for the St. Helena district. I am also, I also serve as president of the Penn club, which is an auxiliary to the Penn Center. Any moneys we raise, we basically turn it over for a needed project at Penn Center. And I've taken on the role as being president of the Coffin Point Community Association. And our main goals is to preserve the Praise House, and to also preserve or maintain the cemetery. You know, those are the two important historic locations in this community that is important to our culture. They go hand in hand. The Gullahs are a highly religious people, and they always knew that when their families were buried, each community had a graveyard. And I believe that surfaced out of slavery, probably when the slaves died, they were assigned a place to bury them, but there were no markers on the graves. Uh so many of our ancestors don't have markers. At times, they would put a favorite plate or a favorite cup or something that belonged to the deceased on the grave to mark where they actually were buried. But we still have rights to bury our dead in those cemeteries, and I must pass this as a compliment to the county of Beaufort, they have really cooperated with some of the things that is important to our culture, such as our land, our little historic spots, like the churches, the Praise Houses, and the cemeteries. And they try to work with us in terms of paying our property taxes. At one time it was due all at once. For many people who don't have much of a very, um, steady income, it really presented a problem for them to pay that amount all at one time. So now the county as devised a four-payment system, where you can pay a certain amount each quarter. And it makes it quite easy on a lot of the families. And they've also cooperated with is in allowing, um, by right, ownership of the land, like if you own ten acres of land, you can now sell off at least five of those acres for families who might be having a hardship financially, at least they can sell off an acre or so of their lands, and otherwise it is considered, it is zoned as a rural community, meaning that you cannot build any more than two houses, or two point five houses per, per acre? No more than two dwelling units per five acres or something. So if you have five acres you can actually build two dwelling units on the five acres. But if you

are part of the Gullah community and heirs property, you can, you don't have to go through the normal procedures to put up a third or a fourth structure on your property. But I mean, even that has its limits. You know, in ten acres you probably can put up a lot more but you don't have to go through a lot of the procedures a person who is new, moving over here, to get, you know to get titles to your land, and to get a title search and all that. If you are part of the heir's property, they'll allow you to put it up. Of course, you'll have to pass the soil testing and um, to make sure your place is on solid ground, et cetera. But they've um, they've done quite a bit to help us here to maintain our culture. Um, having said that, I'll need some additional questions from you?

DF: Tell us about your grandmothers.

ML: Well, my grandmothers, um, as is prevalent in these communities, both sides of your family normally lives on the island. There were a lot of just intermarrying among people on the island, and as they say, just about everyone is related over here, one way or another. So my grandmother, who was my mother's mother, actually lived further up the road. And my grandmother, who was my father's mother, I didn't really know her either, because she died in his childhood. But my great-grandmother survived her. So my great grandmother, who was my father's grandmother, that's the person who I really knew. Um, and she lived, this is the property, this is the Rivers property. Thirteen acres of land was purchased. And she lived, like, a stones throw, a little bit over, on that side. And uh when my mother died, I was, I shared living between the two of them. I would have to live with my maternal grandmother when I was going to school, during the week. And on the weekends I would come down here, we called it down bridge, I would come down bridge to spend the weekend with my great grandmother. Whose company she actually looked forward to, because by that time all of her children had left, some had died, and now these were the great-grandchildren, myself and my sister, that would keep her company. So she greatly looked forward to my company. I was probably five, six, because I left here at nine. She died when I was nine. So I was like my grandson's age, five, six, seven, eight. And um, during the week if she got any really good treats, she would always set mine aside even if it was, back then things such as cinnamon sweetbread, raisin bread, was really a favorite, and if she was able to get to the store and get a pack she would put aside two rolls for me. It might've been Monday, but when I got there on Friday, she would be packing me into the room and secretly give it to me because my older sister, who lived with her, felt like, you know, she saved all the goodies for me. Or she shouldn't have saved it for me; she should've had it all. You know, you know how kids are selfish. But my grandmother, I remember kind things like that. That she would do, you know, for me. So uh, that was basically, I don't know what she did for a living. Everybody sort of farmed. My grandmother up the road was a little bit younger, and a little bit more educated, but I really, I knew she worked in Charleston at one time and she moved back here. And that's when my mother came with her, because my mother was born in Charleston. And my father, her being the newest kid on the block, you know how men are, they wanted to get to know her, and I, and he married her. I guess a year or

two later. And then, of course, they were trying to build a house at this very spot when she died, but when she died, you know, that was abandoned, he had someone else, got married, and went to New York. But when he retired he decided to come right back to this spot, and complete the house, so to speak, that they started.

Unknown: What took your father to New York?

ML: I... probably better job opportunities, although, what was offered to them was either a job as a domestic or a job in the garment district. Because that was a big thing in New York at that time. The Garment District materials, to produce clothing. And he would be what was called the shrinker, he would actually get the roll of wool and it was a process to shrink the wool. So once you bought it, it wouldn't shrink anymore. And he was able to make a decent living from that because he was able to join the union. And it made sure they got proper wages. And even in retirement he received some small check from the union until he died. Aside from his Social Security check. So that was um, kind of a good move. Because here, all that was available was like agriculture, and maybe your own, and fishing, and your own brand of doing, this was if you were a good auto mechanic or a good barber which I heard he really cut hair but he didn't go to barber school, this is a craft they developed, so. Therefore, the way to earn money here was seasonal. You had to follow the season, the farming season only started in March through July, the fishing season started like in June, through probably October, and then the winter. You can grow some peanuts in the winter. Peanuts grew and sweet potatoes grew, but those were not considered cash crops. Cash crops are your corn, I mean your tomatoes, your cucumbers, sometimes watermelon but tomatoes and cucumbers, really was the big, and corn, was the big cash crop. Now back in the day, before in -- the industrial revolution, or industry took over, we would take the corn, this time of the year or maybe in August, September, harvest time, we would take our corn to a mill, that's located just where you're at where the Red Piano gal - um, art gallery is?

DF: Yeah.

ML: And where the Island Grill is at, there was a big mill there, you could grind your corn, into cornmeal? You could grind the white corn into grits, and you would take your sugarcane and grind that into syrup. So you figured, if you had syrup and you had cornmeal and you had grits, all you needed was to buy maybe sugar, and maybe buy the white flower. But at home, if we needed to make grits, you know, we used to corn that was ground for the grits. If we needed to make cornbread, we used that with a little bit of sugar and the eggs from the chicken, and the milk from the cow, you know and we made our own stuff. Of course, fishing was always available because all around these communities there are creeks and rivers and sounds, and people always had a fisherman's catch every day. In fact, when I was young I always got tired of eating fish. Which is a healthy food and which probably gives credit to, you know, my skin, because they say fish, and the fish oils is really good for your skin. And we don't age that rapidly. So, um, we had a variety. We had conch, we had clams, we had oysters, we even had turtle. Yeah, cause turtle meat, uh, we had all

kinds of fish, but the favorite was whiting. For some reason, the people liked the whiting fish here. I liked the flounder fish because it didn't have all those bones, from the whiting fish. But flounder is harder to come by. But I liked them. And there was catfish, but we never really liked that old type catfish, we liked the farm-raised catfish. Cause even to look at the catfish, it's an ugly fish, and it's slimy.

DF: Yes it is.

ML: Yeah. And uh, but we had, sometimes we'd get a nice catch. We even ate shark here, too. The young shark meat, it's delicious. I mean, not the big ones, who've probably already eaten all kinds of stuff (laughs), but the young shark fish, you know, that's considered a delicacy here, too. So we had lots, lots of seafood. And we always looked forward to Sunday in terms of a meal because Sunday we would go into the yard, get a chicken, wring the neck, put it in hot water and feather it, take the feather off, and we'd have good fried chicken. For Sunday dinner, with rice. We'd have to have grits the rest of the week, but we'd have rice on Sunday. And maybe with some kind of, not a cake, but it was called a sweetbread. A sweetbread, where you just put some sugar in it. I don't even know if they had vanilla, but if you had some vanilla you'd drop some vanilla flavoring, some eggs, and you hand-beat it. And you put some shortening- I don't think we even had butter - you put shortening, threw it in the oven, you baked it, and that was your sweetbread. So whenever I came back to visit, like in the 60s and 70s, I always wanted some sweetbread. Or baked biscuits because that's, that, to me, I wanted to get away from the grits. But now I enjoy hominy grits, I'm back to eating hominy grits in the mornings! (Everyone laughs.) With bacon and um scrambled eggs, or, or some kind of pork sausage. I don't eat it everyday, maybe once a month, because we know of the dietary reasons for not eating it everyday. But it sure tastes good when I eat it now! (Laughs). So you go back to your roots in a way of speaking, in a way of speaking. But I think our great legacy here is how the people of the island still have a culture, you know, they still, there's still certain things they'll do. Like when my mother died, the, the, uh tradition was, if you left a child behind, you had to pass that child over the grave. Because they had a belief or a superstition that, if you didn't pass the child over the grave, the mother would return in the spirit, to, they call it to haunt the child. To "hant", to "hant" the child. So, you know they, all babies had to be passed over the grave. And an amazing thing that I remembered, I vaguely remember a funeral and I remember a pine box, you know, I probably, didn't know it was my mother, but I kind of remember people around in the graveyard. And that night, my dad was living with my uh great grandmother down here, he was sleeping in the room that they had slept in because they were trying to get the house built and he was staying there with her. And that night, I slept, he had me sleep in the bed with him, I remember that. And the window was kind of left kinda open like maybe there was a shade, and the shade was up, it wasn't drawn. And I touched him, and I says, "daddy, daddy, who's that at that window?" And he was scared out of his wits, because he thought it was his wife in spirit that had turned back and me being a child, saying that there was something at the window, he just jumped up, jumped up and was so frightened at that thought, because they was highly superstitious. And

even right now, when a body is buried in the cemetery, the last person who is buried is keeping watch at the gates. So the new person who gets buried, he is now the one that is keeping watch at the gates. Ok? But in the, in the, when we were growing up in the nighttime it would be dark, we only had a lamp. We would think that we would see ghosts on the road because it was so dark, and we were saying that person who was keeping watch is, you know, roaming around on the plantation. I mean, we were scared, we were scared to death. As young kids, it just took a lot, because it was just so much superstition out there. You know, every little thing had a superstition attached to it. And some people feel like if their bodies suddenly get warm or their hair rises on their head there's a dead spirit, some kind of spirit is around. And if too many hawks are hanging overhead? Crows are hanging overhead or something? Somebody's gonna die. You know, so when you see a lot of crows hanging around, you know, people say, oh, somebody's gonna die, nearby or in that house or something, or if you've been sick and you see crows gathering, and then, you know, if animals start acting really funny, in the middle of the day, and they start crowing a lot, or, um, the cows start mooing a lot? That means bad weather is on the way. You know, watch out for some bad weather. And a lot of times, that's true. You know, watch out for bad, bad weather is coming, when they start acting jittery, or, or the dogs start, not barking but they do a sinister sound like "ooooh," you know, howling or something? You know something, something terrible as about to be on the way with the weather. So, um, you know, there's a lot of those, um, superstitions. Some of it is true but most of it is just, most of it is just, you know, most of it is just, you know, superstition. But they believe that if someone comes to your house and you get a funny feeling when they leave, you're supposed to take the salt and sprinkle some salt after them, to destroy that spirit. You know, it's all that kind of stuff. That goes on.

DF: So do you do, follow any of those superstitions? Do you...

ML: I, well, when I first moved here, I sprinkled salt all around my house (laughs). I just think salt is a purifying, it purifies things. And I bought a big box of Kosher Salt. And I made sure I sprinkled it all around my house, because I was moving from north, moving in the south, and I wanted to sort of... and I did burn some, some kind of, uh, oil. I still like to burn those.

DF: The incense?

ML: It's an incense but there's a certain leave, the Indians used to burn it, too. I have some in my drawer. That every now and then, I burn it, to just purify the house. I do believe in that, right. But I don't burn, like, incense on a daily basis.

Unknown: Like olive leaves?

ML: No, it's not like olive leaves I, I have it in my... can, I, if you cut it...

IL: Go ahead!

ML: I had it where I can bring it.

[22:45 Cut to next clip]

ML: Oh yeah, because sage, sage is known to ward off, uh, evil spirits? And um they're, it's hard to find these, you have to go to an herb store, and they're very expensive. They're sold, I think, by the pound, but, you know, just to get a little bit costs quite a bit. And this frankincense is very expensive. It's actually a stone from a hard wood. Uh, that's supposed to kinda bring good luck, more or less. But I really like burning this every now and then. And you're supposed to kind of, burn it, to us as burning it, where it goes through the house from east to west, rather than north to south, where east to west, where the smoke would just permeate in that direction. And then sometimes I do cross ventilate by going, opening up those doors, and letting it go north to south, to south to north. But I like to burn it from east to west, the sage, for, for uh peace in your home, and for keeping spirits out. And this is kinda like for, for good luck. For good luck and protection. Right. And I think most peoples here, oh, they call Life Everlasting as something is that used to grow here naturally. And um, they used that in a tea, but back in the old days, these people used to smoke these pipes. They used to smoke an awful lot, and we think it was actually a form of weed they were smoking. Really. I think those Life Everlasting and, um, Ho Hum. There's another one called Ho Hum. That one now, I think, the Ho Hum, or the Life Everlasting, I think if you're caught with it it's considered a, it's considered a substance? And you could get arrested or they can come, and not grow it on your property? So if there are any Gullah people here that's growing it, nobody knows about it, and nobody really talks about it. Because that's just something that the Gullahs do, and it's just a part of their culture. But you know, the authorities want to look at it differently. And maybe among the young people, maybe it should be looked at differently, but the old people, for them, they didn't have, they didn't have uh, no entertainment, they had to create their own entertainment and maybe that was a form of relaxation for them. Because remember, they were basically still agricultural people. And, uh, when you're tired and after you've had a meal, maybe you did wanna smoke your pipe, you know, a lot of them had what is called a corncob pipe, which is something that was taken from the Indians. You know, some kinda way, they would take that corncob, and shape it into a pipe. I wish I had one to show you but I don't have one. You see, I got, I got it, I lost all of those when I left here at nine, whoever got it, they probably didn't even value it. Now if people find an old quilt or something in the house, it's really a treasure. Very much of a treasure to have. An old quilt or an old mortar? Because we used to make our own peanut butter. We'd get the mortar, we would get the peanuts, roast them, and put them in this mortar, and beat it. And just add sugar to it. So we had our own natural form of peanut butter. Or we would take the peanuts and boil it, which some of you have had. Boiled peanuts. Or roasted peanuts. Right, um, I can't think of a lot of stories offhand that they would tell, because here again, you know, at nine I was snatched away. So maybe some of the people who lived here during that time, could tell, um, a lot of those stories.

IL: When you went to New York to live with your father, did you come back during summers, or how did that work?

ML: Definitely.

IL: Can you talk about the trip back down?

ML: Yeah, because every time I had to write an essay, and I wrote an essay on, you know, that trip that I took and how I had to go live with this man who was supposed to be my dad, but I wasn't living with him every day, and he just looked so tall when I met him at the train station. And I then had to meet his wife, who I knew wasn't my mother. So it was really, it was really quite a change. But someone, I was put in the charge of someone to take the train back to New York. No, no that's not how it happened, my dad came down to his great-grandmother's funeral, and I went back with him to New York. But my first summer coming back, they, you know, a lot of people will return to the south in July, and, um, we all kept our Gullah community going up north, so whoever left here, they got together, they lived close by and they went to basically the same church, and they, um, they mixed together, they communicated together, they had their parties together. So we, he knew someone that was coming south, and then he would send me with that person, down south, to my aunt's house. Who lives, uh, she's still living now. She's ninety-two years old. She's still living, but we would come down to Auntie Galley's house. That's that picture of her there, in that fancy hat. Aunt Louise, the fancy yellow? In the yellow outfit? That's my ninety-two-year-old aunt. Now I took this about picture six years ago, so she was eighty-some, and that, and doesn't she look good (holds up photo)? She was eighty-some years old. And she looked very nice. And she still looks good today for her age. Aunt Louise, uh, Rivers Jenkins. Yes. And she's the one that stayed here. She went to New York for two or three years but returned, and married, um, her childhood sweetheart, or whoever was pursuing her at that time, from here. He asked her to come back and he married her. They lived happily until he died. You know, out of retirement. And I would come back, and in turn, I had a chance to send *my* children back, to the same lady. And now that I'm retired, now my grandchildren come to me. So, um, that was a part of the experience of going. We would take the train. It would be, like, a fourteen-hour ride. And of course, they would pack your lunch. Because they didn't, well we didn't have the money to buy food on the train anyways, but a lot of times blacks weren't served, so, the lunch of course always consisted of course, of fried chicken. And probably some white bread, and probably a piece of cake. A piece of store-bought cake. And um, probably some lemonade, and maybe we could buy lemonade on the train, or some kind of pop on the train. I can't remember, but I always looked forward to the lunch, because that was a, to me that was a nice treat, to get fried chicken and cake, you know, and something sweet to drink. And so, I enjoyed the train ride.

IL: Could you talk about the Gullah community in New York? And what part of New York you were in.

ML: Well, yeah, we lived in Harlem. I specifically lived on 119th street, between Lennox and Fifth Avenue. And uh, there was a family called... there were certain houses that everybody would gather over, usually it's the people who had, like a five bedroom apartments, where there was more room, because a lot of people just had rooms, a room and a bathroom. Um and Eleanor Quailey, who, at one time came here and built a house across the road, but she met with an untimely death in an auto accident, because it was her first time driving and she was already in her sixties, and she had a head-on collision and both she and her husband, and her mother perished. The husband didn't die until about a year or so later, but she and her mother died instantly. It was tragic. After coming here and enjoying some progress in New York, you know, and building a house that was completely paid for. And they only enjoyed it for a year or two. But we would always congregate over to Eleanor's house or over to Florence. Florence Mudgen, the Mudgen family, all of her sisters lived here. Whoever came from the south would always end up living in Aunt Florence's house. At any given time, there was about five or six part, members of the family with their children living in a room! You know. That house held a lot of people. And on Sundays, I would have to go to Sunday school. So I would walk from 119th street to 132nd street to the Central Baptist Church. But after Sunday school I could go to Florence's house, who lived on 132nd street. She would have breakfast prepared for me. So I would eat a little breakfast and then I would join my parents at church at eleven o'clock. So, you know, church was definitely a part of our lives there. And as a result, when I grew up, you know, church was important to me. And um, for a while, you sort of leave it, because you have some freedom not to have to get up every Sunday morning for Sunday school, so when you become grown you sort of break away from it. But you find yourself being drawn back to it, and especially when you have children you definitely want your children, to, you know, have some breeding, in terms of knowing Christ and knowing about Sunday school and getting baptized, et cetera. Um, and we, my father used to get paid on Tuesdays. And, uh, the subway station was at 116th street. So every Tuesday at five thirty I would walk to the subway station to meet him. He would give me my one-dollar allowance, and there was a donut shop nearby and he would treat me to some French Crullers. That was my favorite donuts. French Crullers, homemade, it was homemade, so it was delicious. I would have a chance to buy two or three donuts, and I always remember that, meeting him on payday. And I'd get my one-dollar allowance for the week, and getting some French Crullers. Uh, for my treat during the week. And uh, of course, during the summers when I couldn't work I would come south. But I think around the age of thirteen or fourteen you could get your working papers? Or fifteen, I don't remember, cause it's even on my Social Security statement (laughs). Even when you worked part time they still took out Social Security. So that's, that's my first wage-earning money. I was only making a dollar and hour but I worked for, for lawyers. Um, I think that was my first job, working for lawyers? But I felt good, getting up, and dressing up, to you know, to go to work in the summertime. Uh, the lawyers, downtown, on uh, 29th Street and 9th Avenue. I would have to take the subway. So I felt kinda, a little bit grown up. So, to get up and go to my job, I think it was three hours a day, or something, fifteen dollars a week. And after my Social Security taxes it was thirteen dollars (everyone laughs). But you

know, at least that's money I could save up over the summer and buy the kind of shoes I wanted. Back then, white buckskins was popular. White buck's skins were popular. So, and nice socks, you know. And I could buy my own shoes. And I would treat my parents -- back then, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes wasn't considered taboo for, for the older people, so, my treat to them would buy them, uh, Schaefer beer or Rheingold beer. That was the beer that was popular in New York. Shae -- maybe, I, I wouldn't buy it, because I couldn't, but I would give them the money to, have them buy a beer or treat them to cigarettes. But the rest of my money I could keep and save, and then it was, when it was time to go school shopping, I could go and do some, you know, look more stylish for school. Yes.

IL: Did your father ever, uh, send money back, or keep open lot, open-

[End clip 1]