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## Holmes, Lula and Geri Sims

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Portia Morgan

David Slutzky

Zakiyyah Bergen

*Roxboro Middle School*

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**Lula Holmes and Geri Sims**

Interviewers: Portia Morgan, David Slutzky, Zakiyyah Bergen  
2011

PM: Hi, I'm Portia Morgan, and today I'm going to be interviewing with my colleagues David and Zakiyyah, um, Ms. Lula Holmes. And um, very interesting, lots of uh pictures here we're able to, uh see four generations, and to see some of the awards she's received, uh over the past years of her life, so we're gonna be talking with her. Ms. Holmes! How're you doing today?

LH: Very well, thank you.

PM: Good, good. Can you tell me a little bit about, um, growing up on St. Helena?

LH: It's the best place in the world.

PM: And what makes it good?

LH: Well, the atmosphere, and the people who live here, and uh, you know, who visit! (Laughs)

PM: Well thank you, thank you. I noticed that you have an award from the Penn Center. Did you attend the Penn Center?

LH: Yes I did. I graduated class of 1929?

GS: 39

LH: 1939.

PM: Ok. And what was it like going to school at the Penn?

LH: It was beautiful because we had all of the advantages. We played baseball, basketball. (Someone speaks in the background).

PM: Go ahead.

ZB: What did you learn?

LH: Hm?

ZB: What did they teach?

LH: Oh, uh we were taught English, History, arithmetic, math.

PM: So you mentioned sports, what sports did you play?

LH: Basketball.

PM: Oh, what position?

LH: Um, what did I play in basketball...

ZB: Guard?

PM: They had an, um...

LH: Yeah, I was a guard, yeah.

PM: OK. So well that sounds like uh, you had a well-rounded time at Penn. What were the teachers like at Penn?

LH: They were good. We were taught uh, Home Ec for one thing, and the girls were taught the boys did the farming.

PM: Who were some of your teachers at Penn?

LH: Some of my teachers?

PM: Yes.

LH: Ira Berris, Katherine Boyd, Mr. Lewis, uh, Mrs. Willoughby, and Benjamin Boyd came through after, when we were seventh graders.

PM: OK

LH: He taught us seventh grade. And...

ZB: How did you get to Penn?

LH: Hm?

ZB: How did you get to school?

LH: And oh, we had buses, the trustees and friends in uh New York sent money down, and then the parents paid for gas to keep the buses running.

PM: Ok, well that was good of them.

LH: And we paid five cents for each individual that rode the bus, each student, rather. Cause only the students rode the bus.

PM: And how many students were in your graduating class?

LH: Eleven.

PM: Eleven. Now was it all girls or girls and boys, both of them?

LH: Girls and boys.

PM: OK. You mentioned the Home Ec. class. What would one learn in a Home Ec. class?

LH: Canning, for one thing. I'd do canned tomatoes or plums, berries, strawberries,

PM: You said you learned how to do canning?

ZB: How much was the tuition back then?

LH: I think it was six dollars.

ZB: A year?

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: That's incredible.

PM: Now that, that was a lot of money then.

LH: Yes it was.

PM: So what did your parents do for a living on the island?

LH: My grandmother and grandfather worked at, they had an oyster mill factory down at the drawbridge. And there they taught, the women of the community canning, they had a canning club. And we were taught also in Home Ec, canning. We did all the canning for Penn, they raised the fruit and the vegetables and the gardens around Penn. And the girls in the high school did canning.

PM: So the guys, the young boys did most of the farming?

LH: Yes.

PM: Did you take art or music classes?

LH: No, just, uh, I think just the afternoon we did some, uh, classes like that.

PM: What did you do on the weekends? Were there dances, parties, did they...

LH: Yes.

PM: Ok. And would the males and females go to these together?

LH: Yes.

PM: Ok. Uh, so, tell me a little bit about, um, I noticed that you went to college outside the area?

LH: Yes.

PM: And you attended what college?

LH: Voorhees.

PM: And that's located where?

LH: Um.

PM: Is that a Northern school?

LH: No, it's a Southern school.

PM: Oh, it's a southern school. So you stayed pretty much in the south for most of your education. Have you ever left the island for a long period of time?

LH: Just to work in the summer.

PM: Ok, and where did you work?

LH: In the homes of trustees.

PM: OK. And they lived, like in Beaufort, or...

LH: No, New York.

PM: New York. So you were travelling to New York and working the summer and coming back. So you lived in their homes while you worked there?

LH: Lived in the home of the...?

PM: Trustees?

LH: Mm hmm.

PM: OK. That's interesting. Um, so that was a way of earning money to pay for college?

LH: Yes.

PM: Um, when you, uh, came back to this area, um, did you eventually get married?

LH: When I, after I finished college?

PM: At Voorhees? Did you meet someone at Voorhees or did you come back home and meet someone here?

LH: I came back home.

PM: And met someone here?

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: So your husband is also Gullah? Is your husband Gullah?

GS: You came back home and taught as a choice.

LH: I came back home and taught.

PM: Oh, OK.

GS: At where?

LH: At the county schools.

PM: OK, what did you teach?

LH: Grade four.

PM: Oh, OK. So what were students like then?

LH: The average.

PM: OK. Pretty well behaved?

LH: Oh yes, because their parents were nearby, you know.

PM: OK, so parents were pretty supportive of teachers.

LH: Oh yes.

PM: Think you'd, think you'd wanna teach now?

LH: (Pauses) Yeah.

PM: OK. You would still do it now? (To other interviewer) Yeah, we can.

**[Cut to next clip] [9:33]**

PM: So Ms. Holmes, are you, uh, tell me about where you taught when you were here?

LH: I taught at Coffin's point, at the Leros Long school. Fourth grade.

PM: Fourth grade. And so was that just a first-second-third-fourth grade or did it go first through high school?

LH: First through high school.

PM: First through high school. So then you left here and went to New York?

LH: Yes.

PM: And you worked for a home in New York. Who did you work for in New York?

LH: Um, one place I worked at in New York was Macy's.

PM: Ok, was the department store.

LH: Yeah.

PM: Ok. That's a difference from teaching. Did you like working in Macy's?

LH: Yes.

PM: And so there in Macy's was where you, um, or there in New York is where you met your husband and started your family? And then you moved back to South Carolina?

LH: Yes.

PM: And what made you come back to South Carolina?

LH: Well, my husband had property here. And then, uh, my grandmother was still here. No, my grandmother...

GS: Your mother was here? When you left Macy's, you wanted to come back home, you said. So you built the house.

ZB: Is this your property? Is this property your family's property? Who was here that started your family property, was that your father, your grandfather?

LH: My grandparents.

ZB: Your grandparents.

PM: So you came back and you got involved in the Praise House.

LH: Mm hmm. Yes.

PM: So what was that like, would the Praise House meet every Sunday, when did they meet? What happened at a Praise House?

LH: Well, the praise house met on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and Sunday. And there they, we, would sing spirituals, would pray, and it is through the prayer house that most of us became Christians, and lived and served in the Praise House.

PM: So if I lived here and I went to the Praise House, would I belong to another church, or would that be my church home?

LH: You'd belong to another church; the Praise House was a night service thing.

PM: OK, so on Sunday, you attended what church?

LH: Ebenezer.

PM: Ok, so are you still a member of Ebenezer?

LH: Yes.

PM: So how long have you been at Ebenezer?

LH: So this was, um, I don't know. (GS says something indistinct.)

PM: So you came back and you renewed your membership at Ebenezer. So I understand that you also participated in the shout in the Praise Houses?

LH: Mm hmm.

PM: And that they had shout competitions? Can you tell me a little bit about that?



LH: Mm hmm. Um, yes, they would sing a spiritual and clap a spiritual, and you'd keep rhythm, or sing the song, and they were clapping, and uh you'd shout and sing.

PM: OK. But as I said you would also travel to places where you would also... out in the city? Off the island?

LH: Oh yes, yes, we'd go and visit the church in Savannah, Macon, or Jacksonville. And you'd sing and shout there. There would be people who knew about the island, and some who had lived there and moved to Jacksonville for jobs, and they had a praise house there also.

PM: Oh, so there were, oh so there were Praise Houses in Jacksonville, and in Savannah too?

LH: Yes.

PM: Mm, we weren't aware of that, that they, we could find Praise Houses in those areas. So tell me a little bit about Gullah traditions or Gullah culture. What is it?

LH: It's just a bunch of Negro people working together, living together, helping each other, helping the churches and the schools.

PM: So, it's more than language?

LH: What, Gullah?

PM: Yes.

LH: Yes, it's more than language. Cause usually you have to know it in order to understand it.

ZB: How would you get to know it?

LH: The Gullah?

ZB: Yes.

LH: You have to enter the school. And you hear your parents.

PM: So if I were a student at Rosenwald, I would speak Gullah?

LH: Mm hmm.

PM: Ok. And that was OK?

GS: Mm hmm. Yes.

PM: Uh, are there special foods that would be considered Gullah foods?

LH: I think we do, uh, sweet potatoes, peas, beans, okra, tomatoes.

PM: Seems like there's a lot of rice eating in this area. Is there a reason why there's so much rice eating here?

LH: The, uh, the farming area here, if you look around and you see how, and then you see ground with no trees on them, and they plow, they make rows, long arrows down and plant.

ZB: Were Africans rice eaters?

LH: Yes, Africans were rice eaters.

ZB: And the slaves?

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: Did you hear stories as a young person about the Africans that were here?

LH: Yes.

ZB: Were there some of your family that you hear of?

LH: Some.

DS: Was there a favorite?

LH: A favorite what?

DS: A favorite story that you heard?

LH: Yes, we would hear all sorts of stories.

PM: One of the names we keep, uh, encountering here is a story about a doctor by the name of Dr. Buzzard. Do you know anything about Dr. Buzzard, or where he got the name, or...?

LH: I don't know where he got the name but I know him. He belonged to the church we belonged to. Mm hmm.

PM: So, it seems strange that, uh, it seems that his name is kind of, uh, linked with voodoo, and yet he belonged to the Ebenezer church? Um, was he pretty well accepted in the church, considering the fact that he was supposed to do voodoo?

LH: Yes, he got along with the church, and he was helpful, because he was paid by people who accepted voodoo, and then, he used to share his money.

PM: Oh Ok, how would he share his money?

LH: He'd give the church money.

PM: Ok, Ok.

LH: We'd have an anniversary, or the pastor's anniversary.

PM: Ok. So he earned his money helping people but then he would give the money back to the community.

LH: Right.

PM: That's a good thing, that's a good thing. One of the other the other things we've heard a lot about is seeking. Did you do seeking?

LH: Seeking? Oh. When you're gonna join the church.

PM: When you're gonna join the church.

LH: Yes, you have to go to the prayer house.

PM: Did you also have to go out to the woods, or a quiet area...

LH: Woods, yes.

PM: What would take place while you were in the woods?

LH: You'd pray. Quietly.

ZB: Is that something you did every day?

LH: Hmm?

ZB: Did you have to do it every day you were seeking?

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: So you would go to school, and then come home, and that's what you'd do?

LH: Right.

ZB: And they'd say you would get a dream? Did you receive dreams?

LH: Mm hmm.

PM: Was there an age limit in which you might go seeking? I mean did you have to be a certain age when you would be allowed to seek?

LH: Yes, I think it was eight.

PM: Ok.

LH: Because they say you should know what you're going through and what you're saying. Your promises.

PM: And so what kind of promises would one make?

LH: That you would go attend church.

PM: OK.

ZB: We understand, or we'd heard, that um, there weren't many slaves in your family, that there were Native Americans, you had Indians in your family? That owned this land, is that right?

LH: Previously owned.

ZB: Sorry?

LH: They previously owned it.

ZB: Really, before...?

LH: We came along. My grand, great grandfather, they were Indian.

ZB: And they lived on this land.

LH: Mm hmm. And Coffin's point.

PM: Ok.

ZB: And Coffin's Point?

LH: Mm hmm.

PM: So both the, the, uh, Negro slaves and the Indians lived here together on this island.

LH: (Nods) mm hmm.

PM: And worked the island, OK. That's interesting. Geri, can you pull a chair by your mom and...?

(Geri Sims gets a chair)

ZB: We want to hear about you too.

PM: Well, part of it is your story too, because you left and you came back. You two look like twins. (GS & LH both laugh) It is just amazing how much the two of you look alike.

ZB: What's it like for you, growing up on this island?

GS: I didn't grow up on this island.

ZB: No. You grew up in New York?

GS: (Nods) I came down the summers, well probably some, a couple of winters when I was very young, cause they would come down, but they came down every year, and sometimes I would come with my mom, and sometimes I would come with my Godmother. And she doesn't live on St. Helena, she lives in Burton. But uh, after my grandmother moved back here in 1955, I came down, I came down every summer until I was 15.

ZB: So what was it like to be a teenager on this island?

GS: It wasn't bad, it wasn't a whole lot to do. Uh, we didn't have streetlights. We would gather under the oak tree, and talk and sing, talk and, then we would walk down the road to a shop, and buy some candy, pickles and stuff, come back, go to the Praise House, and, um, and these people could pray. And we had washboards, and sing, and we'd clap. And we'd leave there. And we'd come over, sit on somebody's porch, and talk, and then we'd go to the Sanctified Church.

ZB: And where is the Sanctified Church?

GS: Seaside road. Up across from Cousin Etta's house, I think it was. And that was our enjoyment. Everybody went to church on Sunday.

PM: So religion was kind of the center...

GS: Yes it is.

PM: ... of what went on, on this island.

ZB: It still is?

GS: (GS & LH both nod) It still is.

PM: Ok.

DS: Is there any uh, shout competitions you can recall, coming down, as a girl coming down here?

GS: No. I saw them shouting but there wasn't competition. I don't think competition started until, maybe 80s, 90s. This is, it's not a performance, it's a feeling.

PM: Right, right.

DS: Oh, I understand.

GS: It's part of your connection with the Lord.

DS: Right.

GS: And uh, as a child, you know, you look around, "look at them shouting, she don't mean it. She shout every Sunday, you know." (Laughs) **[End clip 1]**

**[Clip 2]**

GS: ...but this is what they did, um, when I joined the church in New York, and for three months, I couldn't go to the movies, I couldn't go to parties (points to LH).

ZB: You were seeking.

GS: I was seeking.

ZB: What was seeking like for you?

GS: Seeking was a punishment, but not, I mean (everyone laughs), you were teenagers and you want to do these things with your friends, but the mom said, nuh uh, you joined the church. You can't do that. You need to talk to God no matter where you're going.

PM: So instead of going into the woods the way they would here, in New York, you were just taken out of the secular world, none of that.

GS: Uh huh. And at midnight every night, your deacon prayed with you.

ZB: He came to your home.

GS: No. Everybody stayed home at their own house. They would come during the week and pray with you, but at midnight, wherever they were, in each home, and pray. And uh, did that for three months. And then I was baptized.

ZB: So, your mother brought her Gullah tradition, with her, up.

GS: Yes, yes. Yes. Yeah, whole lot of Gullah traditions. Cause we had the shouting. We didn't have the Praise House, but we'd do it at each other's apartments.

ZB: Was there a large Gullah community where you went to in New York?

GS: Oh yes, there's a large Gullah community in Harlem, most of the families knew each other from here. We'd come up from here, like my great grandmother, my grandmother, my mother and I lived together. Someone would come up from here, and they'd come to the house, and they'd say, "momma told me I'd have to come see Ms. Hattie when I came." And that's my great grandmother. And so, they'd have to tell their mother that they've talked to Ms. Hattie. If they stayed in the area, they'd live with a member of the family or maybe us. And until they could find a position. Some of them had sleep-in positions, some of them didn't. And then they'd get their own place, and mostly we had family almost every block at home! And it takes a village, the village was there. I was smoking, on 114<sup>th</sup> street and 7<sup>th</sup> avenue, and that night, the telephone rang, and my grandmother who was living here called my mother and said, "so-and-so saw Geri on 114<sup>th</sup> street smoking!" So, it's still in place. They know. Whatever happens in New York, somebody will know about tonight.

PM: Geri, can you explain, you used the term "sleep-in position," and many of our students don't understand that term, could you explain what kind of job you had if you had a "sleeping position?"

GS: Sleep-in position was, um, I guess you could call it a housekeeper, or taking care of children, or taking care of someone's home, while they worked, or maybe the wife didn't work, she just wanted somebody to clean the house. But they were like maids, and they lived in, they slept over, stayed there, they were usually off on Thursdays and Sundays, cause they wanted to go to church. And that was something that they took with them. I have to have Sunday off. And they had Thursdays off and the New York city slickers, and they knew when these southern girls had Thursdays off, cause they'd meet up with them, and everybody going to the Savoy.

PM: (To LH) Was that alright, that she went to the Savoy?

LH: Mm hmm.

GS: I never went to the Savoy.

PM: Oh, you never made it to the Savoy!

GS: When I went to the Savoy, I was a child. And we had Saturday things that they did with Dr. John, but my 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my 9<sup>th</sup> grade graduation, prom was held at the Savoy.

PM: That was a pretty big deal.

GS: Yeah, it was.

PM: To get to have your prom at the Savoy.

ZB: Is there a difference in a funeral, like, a Baptist funeral up north and a traditional Gullah funeral on the island? Is there a difference? Is there some tradition that Gullahs do that...?

GS: There's no difference. They have a wake. They have a wake, in New York, you know, a wake is a little bit different, but not much. Um, the uh, wake is, in New York, mostly, they come and they speak to the family, and they sing, well, if they're from this area, they sing and shout.

ZB: Ok.

GS: Kay? Uh, same thing they do here. I didn't see very much difference.

PM: Do you have a lot of people though, that die in New York who want to come back here and be buried?

GS: Yes we do, a lot of them, most of them come back home to be buried.

LH: Yes.

GS: Um, and we have quite a few cemeteries on the island, and most communities, Frogmore, Tom Fripp, Ann Fripp, McTeurus, Wallace, they have their, Frogmore Cemetery is down Seaside Road (points). And uh, Hope Cemetery is up between us and Coffin's Point. Uh, there are about, in this area, twelve to fifteen cemeteries.

ZB: Cause people want to come home.

GS: People wanna come back home. Mm hmm. And most families, you'll find families, in that particular cemetery, unless they're in the national.

DS: Do you have friends that, like you, travelled from here, up north, and then came back?

GS: Yes, most people... we talking about my age?



ZB: Mm hmm, mm hmm.

GS: They go up, and they work, and they come back home. Uh, I think, younger than me, I don't know. They may go up, and they may stay, because of the opportunities. It's still a better opportunity to make money, coming and going. Um, there's not much farming going on anymore, you know, things have become agribusiness, and a lot of laws have come into play talking about how and when you can shrimp, how much shrimp and fish you can catch. This is why St. Helena is self-sufficient. Because we had the rivers. Nobody went hungry. They could fish, they had shrimp, they had mullet, lightings, bass, oysters, clams, crabs, um, and the farming. So nobody went hungry. And nobody was on welfare (laughs).

ZB: That has changed.

GS: Yeah, it's changed. All without the rules and regulations, you can't just go out and fish and crab anytime you please. They have seasons now, they have, uh permits. Um, so they have welfare and they wanna know why. But, uh, and when you have welfare, (sighs) people don't want to work then, why would they have to work?

PM: Mrs. Holmes, then, I've noticed you have several awards. You were pretty active in different organizations? Can you tell me a little bit about some of the organizations you belonged to?

LH: St. Helena League.

PM: What was that? (GS repeats to LH)

LH: It was, like an insurance.

PM: Ok.

LH: You join and pay weekly, including your family, children up to a certain age. (To GS) And um, what else?

GS: The Co-op.

LH: Oh yeah, the Co-op, we had a Co-op store. Where you could buy for a reasonable price, low price.

PM: I noticed one time when I was here there was a Co-op behind Gullah grove? Could that have been part of that same Co-op?

LH: Mm hmm, mm hmm.

GS: They bought shares in the Co-op.

PM: Ok.

GS: Um, my great grandmother had the shares. And, of course, she has them now, or we have them (laughs). And uh, it's changed a lot, it's not as it was. So, we've gotta change with it, so we're selling our shares back, cause they're not doing what they used to do. Uh, my mom's been in many organizations. Alright, Penn Club.

ZB: What's the Penn Club? An alumni club for your school?

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: Just the students who went to Penn? No?

GS: (LH & GS shake their heads) It started out as students who went to Penn. But now the Penn club is usually anyone who went to Penn or their descendants

PM: Oh, Ok.

GS: And/or anyone who would like to join, because we're now at 501, five-oh-what?, 3, see? And our purpose is to support Penn.

ZB: The Penn Center?

GS: (Both nod) And uh, my mom was president of the Penn Club in New York. For alumnis,

PM: Oh, so there's...

GS: There are quite a few

ZB: There are Penn members in New York.

GS: And Philadelphia.

ZB: And you would come together and meet when you went to New York.

GS: They had, uh, South Carolina and Georgia association. Another club in New York, where they'd come together and have meetings every month, hold dances, and send money back home. Um, I'm trying to remember anything in New York that I grew up with. Um, I know a lot of elderly people, older people, because that's who I was around, with four generations in one household, uh (gestures to ZB to speak).

ZB: Did you have brothers and sisters as well?

LH: In the club?

ZB: No, here, on the island. Did you grow up with a lot of brothers and sisters?

GS: Who'd you grow up with?

LH: My cousins. We were all first cousins.

GS: There were people I called aunt and uncle that were my second cousins, and her first cousins.

ZB: But you were all so close. It was a close family.

GS: They were all raised together as siblings, as, by their grandmother.

ZB: Ms. Lula, do you have cousins and family around here, on this land, with you?

LH: Yes.

ZB: You were all together in the same part?

LH: No.

GS: No, they're on that side (points to the left). That side (points straight ahead).

ZB: So this is your side?

GS: They're parcels of land. Land does not run straight in a square. Land runs crooked, so my land runs from beyond those woods, beyond, beyond the other trailer, the second trailer that's over there, then it cuts across behind the oak tree.

ZB: Ok, and that's that oak tree you showed us that home garden.

GS: Yes. (LH and GS laugh).

ZB: It's a beautiful tree. Are there stories about that oak tree you remember, Ms. Lula?

LH: Hmm?

ZB: Do you remember stories about that oak tree? It's burnt.

LH: Climbing it.

ZB: Climbing it, as a child?

LH: Used to climb it, yes. Hide and seek.

ZB: Hide and seek.

GS: If the oak tree could talk, it'd have some good stories to tell.

PM: It'd have stories, yes.

GS: Yes, because when you come in here, to Frogmore, and someone tells you directions, before we had street names, they'd say "the oak tree". Now, there are many oak trees, true, on St. Helena, and Seaside, but it's *that* oak tree they're talking about. Which is now only the one at Seaside.

PM: Guess I'm still trying to get a sense of social life, I have, I think I'm grasping a sense of the uh, religious life on the island (phone rings), but I guess I'm still trying to figure out what social life is like. What did you do for, for fun? Were there restaurants, um, juke joints, what did you do for fun?

LH: Baseball.

PM: Baseball, lots of baseball.

LH: Yes.

PM: And so were there, how were the teams developed? How did you know what teams, or who had a team?

LH: Well, depends on what area of the island you came from. People that came from Hope's, had a Hope's team, or Coffin's Point, they had their team.

PM: So each of the different areas would have its own baseball team that would play each other.

LH: Yes.

PM: And did you have like, uh, at some point there would be a big championship game with a picnic, or how... um, I'm still trying to get, what was the fun activities. I get the baseball, but were there other things that you did, for fun?

LH: Um, well what else did we do for fun?

GS: (Sits back down) They were big baseball players.

PM: Big baseball players.

GS: My great-grandmother was a catcher.

PM: Alright!

ZB: So, the women had a team?

GS: (both nod) Yes.

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: And the boys had a team.

LH: The boys had one, and the girls had one.

ZB: OK.

GS: When you say fun, that's sort of hard, because they were at Penn. She wasn't in the community. She's lived at Penn. It was a boarding school.

PM: So her whole life was centered around Penn, kinda.

GS: Penn and the church. So when she left the church, and went to Voorhees, well some of the teachers from Penn were at Voorhees, which, so they didn't miss a step, they just went right from one to the other. Um, I'm trying to think. Baseball was the big pastime, uh, I don't know of anything else. We had a field down there, and we must've had four, five Praise Houses on Seaside Road. And each community, basically, had a baseball team. Uh.

PM: Someone told me that the, uh, white building, by the park, at the light across from the...?

GS: Yes.

PM: ...that that bottom was a juke joint and the upstairs was a jail, can anybody verify that for me?

ZB: They said that uh, people would party there, and just if they got in trouble...

PM: Across from Gullah road. Across from the red piano in that park.

GS: (To LH) What's it called? Wise Hall or whatever?

LH: What you say?

GS: Ok, when you're going to our plaza, the building, what was it all called, wise hall?

LH: Wise, uh, yeah, a religious group was in it, Wise Man Club.

GS: (To LH) Was the upstairs a jail?

LH: Yeah. If they did wrong in community, we brought them to Praise House and then they would have to go upstairs to the jail.

ZB: So, the Praise House was the, like the judicial system, like the judge and the jury?

LH: Yeah.

ZB: So, the Praise House was the center of your life then, outside of Penn Center.

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: More than the church. More than the church?

LH: We had uh...

GS: More than the church? No.

LH: No. The Praise House wasn't more than a church.

GS: We had an, um, Municipal Court across the street, in my time, my grandmother's time, in the 80s. Um, we went over next door, Judge Eddings was the magistrate. And then he would have the, the local issues, the small issues, in the one room, right here.

ZB: Ok, so you had a court also.

LH: Mm hmm.

PM: So St. Helena had a police force, or was it Beaufort County's police force?

GS: We never had a police force.

PM & ZB: You've never had a police force? No.

GS: Not on St. Helena.

PM: So Praise Houses took care of everything, and the police would...

LH: Right.

PM: Ok, Hm.

GS: We had a sheriff, called, they called it when I was growing up, called "road man". (To LH) It used to be that, too, right? Yes, road man. That's the cops. Road man comin! And um, a few people had cars, so, you know but everybody knew whose car was whose, by the sound (makes car sound). Zoom, that's boo, zoom, that's bungee,

zoom, we're sitting on the porch. My cousin right now can tell you whose car is going by.

ZB: Really? That's amazing. (LH and GS both nod) That's amazing. Unbelievable.

GS: And everybody would come by, drive and then toot. Keep going, zoom, toot.

ZB: Mm. Ms. Lula? You were in charge of the shout at the Praise House?

LH: Mostly.

ZB: And you learned to shout from...? Who taught you to shout?

LH: Hmm?

ZB: Who taught you the shout?

LH: Well, we did it in the Praise House.

GS: Who taught you?

ZB: Who taught you?

LH: Um, I, any person was allowed to shout.

ZB: So that would be your mother, your grandmother...

LH: And great grandmother.

ZB: The whole community?

LH: Yeah.

PM: Now what are the rules about your feet?

LH: You can't cross a certain level and...

PM: And if you do, I mean, what, is there a difference between where you're, the placement of your feet?

LH: Mm hmm.

ZB: So if you don't if you cross your feet the wrong way, what does it mean? That you're dancing? Is that the dance, the difference in shout and dancing?

LH: Mm hmm. It's the way you move your feet, the heel part and the toe part.

PM: Ok, so it's the heel part and the toe part. It's not that you just have to stay flat,

LH & GS: No, no.

PM: ...but you have to... Ok. Alright. Cause that's not, what we pretty much have heard, it's the lifting of the feet, not moving the feet, so, you cleared some of that up for us.

ZB: Thank you.

PM: What's the date?

**[Cut to next clip]**

DS: Ok, yeah. Geri, as somebody who has experienced living here, and living in New York, and coming back, as much as there are other people just like you that you knew of, other people like you in New York as well, so you felt home, at home there as well, there were definitely cultural differences between you know, living in a city, and living down here. What was it like, because your adjustment process, going back and forth?

GS: (Laughs) I'm a city girl at heart, so there are a lot of adjustments to make. I don't like bugs. We have lots of them here. So, I'm not an outdoor person. Uh, I do a lot of sedentary things. I like to read, do puzzles, I liked watching movies, and I love to dance. I also like to go to plays. I haven't been able to do that, unless I go to Savannah or Charleston. They offer these amenities. Um, I miss that a lot. But then I'm here to take care of my mom, so that's my first priority, right?

DS: Right.

GS: And um, it's not a real hard adjustment, it's just something that, you do what you have to do, and you make the best of the situation. Um, I'm involved in church, and I'm also vice president of the Penn Club. Uh, I sing at church, uh, I don't do a lot of things that I wouldn't normally do, because I'm running two households. Uh, I was grounded in church in New York, so I was never in trouble. My great grandmother was president of the missionaries. My grandmother was president of pastor aid.

**[End of clip 2]**

**[Clip 3]**

GS: My mother was the church secretary, the Sunday school teacher. I was president of the junior ushers for thirteen years, treasurer of the young adult choir, a Sunday school teacher. Lots to keep me busy and out of trouble. And I had to be focused in order to teach these things. Here, my minister wants me to do all these things, but he knows that I can't right now. And I enjoy it, um, that's about it, uh, it's not that big



of a change, because it's just the going out and doing my particular things. But as far as food and the way you are with each other, it's all the same.

DS: Thank you.

PM: So, would you like to see the, I'm sure you would, the Gullah traditions, um, to remain, what is it going to take, do you think, to get young people to embrace and continue some of the traditions and culture of the Gullah people?

GS: It's going to take more education to some of them. They don't know, they make assumptions, because of Ebonics, Gullah, they're all the same. And uh, what you heard as Gullah is what the Africans heard, how they phonetically heard these words, because Gullah in, is it West Africa, is the Gola. And it's a part, part of Gullah and Creole, Louisianans have the same thing. Um, Gullah people are in Oklahoma, oh they're on the East Coast, true, but they're out in the Midwest as well. And Geechees are mostly on the East Coast down. A Geechee, a Gullah, same difference. I think it's a, maybe it's a **[End of clip 3]**

#### **[Clip 4]**

GS: ...term, because they ate rice, and they had a way of saying, "Well, that's a Geechee, because they eat rice all the time, you know." But you don't say "that's a Gullah," because she eats rice all the time.

ZB: Hm. What does it mean to be Gullah to you, Geri? What makes you Gullah?

GS: Well, I was told that we came from Sierra Leon. And they speak Gola. That's where it comes from. Um, what it means to me, you know, it doesn't mean anything to me in the north; it meant things to me in the south. It meant that here were my people. We had a connection, uh, we all talk the same, I didn't understand some of those Gee- words, my great grandmother couldn't say spaghetti, but she'd call it fuhgaytas. My teacher mother, I was looking at the tonight show one night, and they have a guest, and they ran the name on the screen, and my mother says, oh, Pen-ah-lope. Well the name was Penelope. Ok, pronunciation, how you learn it, who taught it to you? I laughed til I cried. I laughed til I cried. But, um, I didn't know she didn't know it was Penelope. Is it Penelope or is it Pen-eh-lope? Depends on if you're up north or down south.

DS: So a lot of the uh, a lot of the uh, education that we have to do is, is teaching that it's not, it's not a degrading thing, you know, a lot of times, people will look at something as, um...

GS: Degrading, or humiliating, or if they don't know, they may think you're trying to look down on them. Uh, these people are really proud. They will speak up, they will hurt your feelings, they are very frank. And, uh, it was the way they were brought up and the way they were taught. Um, my mother says some hurtful things, but she's,

now, she doesn't hold grudges. You can do something to her, and she'll say what she has to say, you'd get angry, but you can call her back within ten or fifteen minutes and say "I need a ride somewhere," and she'll take you. Not the daughter. She holds grudges, for a while (everyone laughs). I get rid of them, it takes me some time, and um, she tells me I'm mean.

PM: So do you have some young people who are working with you guys, on the Penn, at Penn, or are there some people working, young people working who try to maintain the Praise House and some of the Gullah traditions?

GS: There are not that many. Through the Pace Club, that we call that at Penn, for young students and stuff, uh, they're learning about it. Um, when we do the nativity, mystery play, uh, they perform. Um, we give them trips, um, the churches, uh, we have community sing. Talking about fun things. There's a community sing, every third Thursday of the month, and a church or two churches, or a group is a sponsor. And they handle the program that night. And I think we're closed down, July, August, maybe June July August September. Or June, July, August. And, that's a fun thing. Different churches come, and they perform, or they tell jokes, we have riddles, um, that's fun. It's another way of, a gathering of the community together. And it's been a staple at Penn for years. I think, (To LH) was it Agnes Sherman that got it started? (LH nods) It was Agnes Sherman that I think started that. And my mom got one of her awards. Ms. Sherman was a really nice lady, too. I don't know too many people at Penn who weren't. And everybody was giving, and willing to share, you know? There's a lot of history on this island, lots of people who've been here for a while. Some never left. But those that left came back home. And, you see, you can tell by some of the houses. You see the trailer, you see the nice brick house, you see a little, um, what do you call it?

LH: Cabin.

GS: Well, yeah, I'm trying to think of that thing called... cinderblock house. Then you see a wood house. Then you see the, you know, really, really a house that should be in another community, like. But these are people who went home. This is their land. They came back. Why pay rent, up north, where it keeps going up? You own nothing, unless you purchase your home. Most of you have homes here. Lot of people in other countries, too, do not understand, that in New York City, most of us rented. In Washington DC, in Baltimore, most of us owned. You may not own the land, but you own the building with Baltimore. You own the building, and the land, in South Carolina.

PM: Ok.

DS: What are some, uh, Gullah traditions that you're hoping that your children will have, hold on to, or pass on?

GS: I think, my children all really know, and my grandchildren, and they're proud of their ancestry. My children are all black, males, and we have one now, one was killed in '96, in a hit-and-run. So I have one son, and three grandchildren. And my three grandchildren are mixed. And, they love their heritage, my grandson lives, two of my grandchildren are living in Minnesota. Um, my, he's sixteen and my granddaughter's thirteen. Sixteen-year-old was in Georgia like, about, two months ago, and he went down the slave trail. And, um, my daughter-in-law, ex, but she's my daughter-in-law, um, keeps them grounded. We keep in touch, we call, they talk, I've taken my mother out to Minnesota to see them, and they're adorable kids, and they're bright, inquisitive, and she wants to know. My granddaughter says, "I need some information". So I wrote a quick history for her. I had half of it, but I didn't have - I had, my great-great-grandfather's history, but I didn't have my grandmother's, my great-grandmother's history completely written. So I did that, real quick for her and sent it to her. She got it, and she took it to school the next day (laughs). Um, because it ends, in seventh generation. And that's her name, Landon Nicole Sims. And so she was tickled, to know that her grandmother's a historian, to know that her great-grandmother - no, her great grandmother's a historian! They're trying to make me one.

PM: Oh, OK.

GS: The great-great-grandmother, also went to Penn, her great-great-great-grandfather was the constable, first constable on St. Helena, um, there were teachers, most of us believed in education; my family believed in education. They felt that that was the way, uh, a lot of them didn't use the education they got; they may have started out that way. My mom didn't finish up a teacher. She finished up as managing, um credit union at Macy's for twelve years. Um, but she started out at wrapping gifts at Christmas time at Macy's. She painted the shop store. Everybody knows Ms. Lula. We were in the doctor's office here, and the guy starts looking at her, and he says "'scuse me," he said, "Miss, I don't mean funny or fresh, but are you from New York?" my mother says, "well I worked there, for a time." He said, "did you work at Macy's?" she said "Yes," he said, "are you Ms. Holmes?". People on a bus trip in New York, sitting next to each other, not knowing each other. They start talking. So this lady's talking, and this girl is answering her, and this girl says "you know, that lady sounds like my girlfriend that I used to work with." Kay? So, she says, "And her mom worked at Macy's too." So she says "would you do me a favor? Here's my name and address, phone number. Would you give this to your co-worker at Macy's, and ask her to pass this on if it's her daughter." Well, the lady's name was Lillian Paulstine, she was talking about me and my mom. She says, yeah, she married a guy in the service named in Fred, OK? Lillian Paulstine and I worked at a professional place in southern New York City, New York State employment. In the 60s, we're talking in the 80s these people are meeting. And I wrote her, and she says, "I can't believe this." So, we make impressions on people and uh, OK, who believes I'm from Harlem? Yeah, I meet people, and then they go, "where are you from?" and I go, "Harlem." I like the shock value. I say "Harlem," and they go "no, you're not," and I say, "Why not?" And they go, "because you don't talk like you're from up there." I

said, "How am I supposed to talk?" You know? And then I go, "you have a misconception." I said, "Harlem is not how a lot of people think it is." Harlem was great for me to grow up in. I mean, we had gangs and stuff, but we fought with our hands and our fists, we might pick up a stick, there were no guns and stuffs like that. I mean, Schools were great, we went to local schools. Neighborhood schools until high school. Um, integration wasn't a problem. We didn't have to. We lived in the UN. We had Puerto Ricans, we had Caribbean people, we had black people from the south, we all lived in Harlem. We had Latinos, we had, might've lived in East Harlem. We had blacks lived in East Harlem. We didn't have whites, too much. I had a girlfriend, I'm still not sure if she's white or not. Her name is Hattie Watson. She was white. Blue eyes, and her brothers had blue eyes, the skin, the hair. We were like that (crosses fingers)! To this day, I don't know who Katy is. Didn't care. They were very fair people, big difference.

PM: So the difference between there and here, though, would be, you wouldn't have a UN.

GS: True, because most of the people on this island were black.

PM: Ok. And so you didn't have a problem with racism, or...

GS: You didn't have racism per se because when, after, um freedom, the whites fled, so that left just us. Not justice. Just us.

ZB: Just us, right, and that sense of community.

GS: So, that's how we kept it going. Everybody was there, they stayed where they were, they worked the land, they swapped food, they gave food, they taught when? Until later years, when everybody found out what a great mecca this is. And now, you know, we have a lot of Caucasians on St. Helena, on Lady's Island. But St. Helena is the last bastion, because we're still going back and keeping our heritage intact. It's not that we're not going to change, it will change, we know that. But when, we don't know. It's a long time, uh, a lot of heirs probably going, because a lot of people are not taking care of their land.

ZB: Do you think, um, because of the economy, and the taxes, that a lot of the heir property is migrating north, does that have any...

GS: No, I don't think the taxes, the taxes are not that high. I mean, my great grandmother paid \$43 and stuff for tax. I'm paying a lot more than forty-three. And that's another thing, rules. They have something called impact fee. An impact fee. I said, "what's an impact fee?" I purchased a trailer off of foreclosure. When I went to register and pay whatever, they told me I had to pay an impact fee. I said, for what? They said, well, you're putting this on property that hasn't had anything on it. I says, "oh no, that's not true." I said "the property has been in our family for over fifty years. Maybe a hundred years." I said, "we have had houses on that property, we've

had a business on that property. I said, "How much is an impact fee?" It was almost, it's almost, it's like 2,800 dollars! And I said, "what does it do?! You know, I'm already paying water, sewer, and everything else," so I said, "uh uh, I should be grandfathered". They said, "well, you said you had a couple of other buildings and stuff on it, prove it. Prove it." I said, "OK!" I came home, I went in these sheds out here, I sweated, I couldn't find a thing. So I said, well, well I'll have to come up with 2,800 dollars. And I kicked a suitcase. And I looked at it, and I picked it up. And I said, opened it. On top, tax records, from the 40s. Tax records that my grandmother had when she had her little shop her. You know, I was shouting hallelujah.

PM: I know you did (laughs).

GS: So I go back to town, and you deal with a little racism there, and she ignored me. Wrong. So finally I said, "you need to get off the phone. This is business." "I have to go, somebody's trying to get out of paying the impact fees." I said, "I'm exempt. You said prove it." I went to the business office for a business license, because my grandmother had a business. They said, "we didn't give licenses in those days." We're talking the 70s. So how do you prove that you've done these things? You can't prove it. A lot of people don't have those records. I was just fortunate that my family... rat packers. They keep everything. And um, I got the exemption, but it made me think. You know, how many people have to come up with this kind of money? It's hard. Nowadays, it's hard.

PM: Well it's almost easier to sell it, sell the land and try to...

GS: But you don't want to sell it. Well then, I can't sell \$2,800 worth of land. I'm on a main drag.

PM: Alright, Ok, yeah, yeah. You have a really nice home.

GS: So that's, uh, yeah, I don't plan to sell. I don't believe my son is going to move here.

PM: Maybe one of your grandkids.

GS: That's a very good possibility. But uh, I have I have friends that want to move, I have my second best girlfriend moved to Columbia, South Carolina. My maid of honor lives in Winston-Salem, South Carolina. And another girlfriend that I worked with lives in Bowman, South Carolina. So, people are moving south because we can't afford the prices up north. It's... astronomical. If we could, we'd buy back from brownstones in Manhattan.

PM: (Laughs) yeah.

ZB: We love it here. We love the spirit of this island, and the heritage, and the people. And we just want to...

GS: We enjoy having visitors, we really do.

ZB: We want to tell our students about this wonderful place,

GS: Well tell them to come on down!

ZB: And we want you to keep this heritage.

GS: Come on down! Anytime, we're here. We have a heritage, weekend, second weekend in November.

ZB: Yes.

PM: We've gotta figure out how to do that.

ZB: We keep saying we have to... Thank you so much for taking the time with us.

PM: Yes, thank you. Thank you so much **[End of clip 4]**

**[Begin Clip 5]**

ZB: Ms. Lula, you're holding a book called *An Island's Treasure*. Can you tell us about that book? You wrote that. Tell us about your book.

LH: It was written by, yeah, me, and um, my daughter who, I taught...

ZB: And what can you tell us about your book?

LH: I, um, the book's about St. Helena, Penn School, and, Penn Center. It's where we went to school, it's the high school I graduated from, and uh, I grew up in the area.

ZB: Does it tell the history?

LH: Hmm?

PM: Does it tell the history of Penn?

LH: Oh, Penn was an...

PM: Does the book?

LH: We have a book, yeah, from, about Penn.

ZB: Its history?

LH: Yeah.

ZB: Why did you call it "*An Island's Treasure*"?

LH: Because it's something that I'll always keep in my mind and in, truly in the minds of the children. That they will know. We'll always want to keep the island.

ZB: Always keep the island?

LH: Hmm?

ZB: You want to always keep the island.

LH: Mm hmm.

PM: Well thank you so much for writing the book. It's a wonderful story...

LH: Thank you.

PM: ... about Penn.

LH: Thank you.

ZB: Thank you so much. **[End clip 5]**

### **[Clip 6]**

PM: Could you tell us about the first picture there?

GS: This picture is a picture of the matriarch when I was growing up. This is a picture of my great-grandmother Hattie Holmes Willis Pope, my grandmother, Rebecca Mitchell Willis -- Rebecca Willis Mitchell Daise, my mother, Lula Everdale Mitchell Holmes, and my aunt Katy Williams Jackson who is the twin to my grandmother. And this little person here is me, Geri Mitchell Sims, I was about eight years old, and, maybe seven, between seven and eight years old at that time. And this picture was taken in New York.

PM: OK.

### **[phone rings and cut to new photo]**

GS: Ok, the second picture is another four generation picture, and this is my grandmother, Rebecca Willis Mitchell Daise, my mother, Lula Everdale Mitchell Holmes, myself, Geri Mitchell Sims, my two sons Palmer Lee Sims and Kevin Wendell Sims. And this is Fred Sims, the father of these two boys. **[cut to new photo]**

ZB: This is Ms. Lula, back in the day. **[cut to new photo]**

GS: Best picture up there.

PM: Oh yeah, that's a nice one. I'm telling you, they're twins.

GS: I'm gonna get some pictures taken of us again.

DS: Oh yeah, that is nice.

PM: Ms. Lula and her daughter, looking like...

DS: And that is?

GS: This is the adopt-a-highway program that she was in. I'm not sure if she was an... I don't think she started it, I think she was a member.

ZB: Tell us about this alumni, or plaque.

GS: That's a leadership award and service award from the Voorhees Alumni College where my mother was a past president.

**[Cut to new plaque]**

ZB: Amazing what a quality of life Penn Alumnis contribute. **[End clip 6]**