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https://digital.kenyon.edu/gullah_video/127

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Gullah Interview

Carol Small

July 20th, 2012

Ishmael: Today is July 20th 2012, we are at the Penn Center...(to Portia) What house it this?

Portia: Hampton.

Ishmael: The Hampton House—today we're interviewing Carol Small, a lifelong resident of St. Helena. Can you start off by telling us where you were born, date?

CS: (Laughs) Whew...actually I was born January 11th, 1965. I was born at the naval hospital, my grandfather was a naval officer and um, I've been here for um...for a short time before moving up north with my parents, of course. Stayed up there...probably about until I was a teenager and uh, I lived in New Jersey, beyond New Jersey, Jersey City, New Jersey, and also New York, in Bronx. And uh, we came back here. I've been uh, until I became an adult and I moved to Savannah, Georgia, lived there briefly, and I also moved to Atlanta, Georgia for the first time, to go to school. And...seems like I always end up back home (laughs). So I've been back here for the last eight years, for medical issues. So I decided to go to school and that's what I've been working on since.

I: Could you tell us about growing up here on the island?

CS: Whew...yes I can. I was bred by my grandmother after moving back here, teaching us about gardening- well, it's not a garden because a garden is small and not like the huge field we had to work in um, we had to do the harvesting, we did things like getting eggs from the coup, um, feeding hog, which we actually lived by...we raised it and sent it to the slaughter. Chickens as well, we raised them, and we would kill em' (laughs). But um, basically just...when I'm home, learning a lot of things I think I regretted at that time but now you know, it puts me in survival mode, when you don't have all the luxuries like we do today. But growing up here, it was a closeness to the community, it not as it is today. You could walk into someone's house you know, 'cus we didn't lock doors. I think the thing I enjoyed most growing up was, my grandmother had a wood stove that she used to cook on...she had a regular stove but there was just something about cooking on that wood stove, you know...you learn about the difficulties and how to get through and you don't know you're going through you know, hard times, until you got grown. And you're like, I don't know how grandma made it! Grandma used to cook in these school pots...we thought it was every day pots because that's how we came up but um, every day it's like anybody could come in, she'd feed them and send them on their way...didn't have to be a neighbor, could just be a passerbyer, stranger. She was a foster parent, you know, so people coming and going in my life was a norm for me you know, it might not have been normal for someone else. Other than that, it's...the thing I miss the most is the closeness, you could

depend on your neighbors and you know, it wasn't a lot of standoffish people like it is today. You really have to know who's coming to your house and you have to ask why ...and all this. Back then, everybody cared for everybody. It was that village I was taught about. And we don't have that any longer. You know, right now I have grandkids, and I'm very particular about where they be and who they with, because it's just not that togetherness like we used to have. It was my biggest rock with my grandparents.

I: What was her name?

CS: Um, Ellen D. Anderson. And um, Abraham Anderson, senior. Um, he was...these are my mother's parents. You know, I was told a whole lot. A lot of things I don't have in the modern time, I can improvise, you know, I might not want to do it but I can do it.

I: Give me an example.

CS: Washing clothes! Um, we didn't have a washing machine...I remember when I first moved to Atlanta, Georgia my apartment didn't have a washing machine nor a dryer. But my trilevel had a basement and what I would do was I found an Ace Hardware, because you can find those older things, and you get the scrub board and my sons were looking at me like, "Mom what are you doing?" and I said well, it costs a lot to go to the laundromat and right now our necessities we'll be handling it here in this tub. Because I had a basement I could make my little line and let my clothes dry. They can't handle that, they need a washing machine and a dryer! You know, other things like maybe starch...we can make our own starch, it's call iga liquid and...you can um, what my grandmother used to do was she would make her starch, she would spray the shirts down, I would see her spray grandpa's shirts down, or whatever he's wearing because he was a preacher. She would roll it up, put it in the refrigerator, and when it came out you would have boards! So you know, some were better than the cleaners. Again the cooking, you know, it's cooking for the community in our home, and just being able to share so it's kind of hard for me not want to kind of you know, share, we always want company, we always had a houseful of people, and that's what I was used to today. When I moved away, my house was the house where all the kids come, and you know, I'm a young mother, I was at the time, and um, they would hang out there or whatever but my kids weren't allowed to go because we weren't allowed to go to other people's houses so it's a lot of um...you know, we were taught there, I was taught there, it kind of spilled over from how I was raised. So my grandfather, being a naval officer, he was very strict about having things in order and that...pretty much rolled over into my life too. I have two boys, they're grown, but I remember raising them and they had to have their bed made and they had to have their shoes straight in the closet...um stuff just had to be...when I told them to do stuff they had to do it. It wasn't a repeatable thing, if I said it...that's... that was it. I see a lot of where I came from in me as I was growing up and then becoming a parent.

I: What about your mother and father? (9:02)

CS: Um, my mother...my mother pretty much stayed up north for a while after sending us up here. My mother was a nurse in New York um, my father was a tractor trailer driver. My mother is now remarried and my stepfather, I don't like that term, but anyway, to distinguish the two, he was a commercial fisherman. Pretty much they did a documentary on him...um, about two years ago. So um, he...taught me a lot (laughs), I didn't grasp a whole but um, I just loved seafood. But um, he can tell you anything there is about the water or what comes out of it, I mean, as long as I have shark and flounder and...and I'm cool. I don't need nothin' else.

I: How do you cook shark?

CS: Fry it like fried chicken! He bakes it, I'm eating. He's the one who makes it, you'll probably gon' have to talk to him but you know, you can fry it, you can stew it, you can grill it I mean it's like any meat, you know.

I: Can you tell us your grandparents names again?

CS: Um, Abraham Anderson sr. and Ellen D. Anderson.

I: Are they from the island?

CS: Um, actually I...don't know. I'm not sure. I know we have family here but I'm not sure if that's where they came from. Because we have a...family reunion in St. George, so I'm thinking that's where my grandfather is from. So um, I'm not particularly sure where my grandmother originates from.

I: Where you're from, is that considered [unintelligible] property?

CS: Yes.

I: And what family is that?

CS: That's my stepfather's farm. Yes, I'm from Dulamo. Dulamo Road.

I: When y'all were coming up did you ever intermingle with one another, from the next island to the other?

CS: Um, well it's...this is just St. Helena. I mean, [unintelligible] came later and I didn't really know a lot about [unintelligible] over there...we didn't really go to places like that. There was always a Lady's Island. So um, but other than school, if you we didn't see you in school or church, that's basically it.

I: What school did you go to?

CS: Um, St. Helena Elementary. And Middle. Well, it's Middle now but it was St. Helena Junior High that I went to...and then I went to Beaufort High.

I: Did everybody from the island go to that same school?

CS: If you were from this side of the island, you go to Beaufort High. If you were from the other side of the island, it was...Bannary Creek, I think.

I: Did kids from over here get along with kids from kids from...Lady Island?

CS: You mean in my day? Oh yeah! I mean, you know, we were kids. Real kids. You know, not like the kids today. You know, we all intermingled um, you know, it wasn't no...it wasn't separated. When you see each other, it's happy. You know, sometimes it's kind of sad you know, when you got to go home.

I: Are there any home remedies that you remember that your grandparents did?

CS: (Smiles and laughs) Mm-hmm! Oh yeah (laughs). One was called "life everlasting." That was a weed that was in the woods and you would take it, you would boil it, and strain it. Make it into a tea. That was...not gonna' say supposed to, but that kept you from getting sick. My grandmother didn't believe in being home. You didn't miss days from school. So there was the "life everlasting" and the "three sixes" or um, it's another one...yeah, it's "three sixes," like six, six, six. It's in a little yellow bottle, 'bout this big, it's kind of yellowish...it tastes awful, I mean, (laughs) real awful. But, you know, you didn't get sick. You didn't have colds. Um, none of that. I'm trying to think, there was one more thing. Other than that, her praying. Because the virgin olive oil, being that she's a minister, she prayed- we prayed- we had to, we lived there. You had to pray. You would get a table spoon of that too. So pretty much right off the top of my head, the life everlasting- I mean it tastes so bad, she didn't put anything in it, no honey, you had to drink it just like that. And you would go to school. I tell you, I can't recall having sick days. You might miss the bus, but then you had to walk to school.

I: How far is that?

CS: Well, it's just...in Tomford, the school was closer to where I went. So it was good it wasn't planned...it wasn't just one person missing the bus it was a group of us (laughs) so, especially the last day of school we intend not to catch the bus so we could walk home. And it used to be a store here, the owner of the store, his name is Mr. AJ, and at the time we used to get our little candy and stuff like that, it cost like 1 cent. And um, we missed the bus so we could go by the store and stuff like that.

I: You learn to cook from your grandmother?

CS: Oh, yeah! You had to learn, it wasn't a choice. Cook and clean (laughs). Yes m'am. I'm sorry. Yessir. You had to learn how to cook. Bake...you know, yes.

I: What was her specialty?

CS: Her specialty? Soups. Yeah. Because she always fed a lot of people. Soups are the easiest thing to make. Something we used to call “survival soup,” but it’s called succotash soup. You throw a whole lot of vegetables and maybe some meat in it or whatever um, you know you just—we didn’t care. We had soup...she had corn bread, she baked the corn bread every day. Every day. I’m trying to tell you...maybe that’s why I don’t like cornbread today unless it’s sweet but um, every day because you know, you had to feed them and make sure, you know, but had you had the chores that go along with it too. So. You know. So it may not be her specialty if she was here to tell you but that’s what I remember. But I mean we did have the things like the macaroni, the greens, the turnips, peas and all of that because most of the time we would have to go in the field and pick the tomatoes, pick the peas, you know, somebody might give you some greens, you might have to get some squash, and zucchini, you know, all of the stuff that grows out of the ground.

I: How about seafood?

CS: Um, I don’t really recall it but I know we had a seafood day. It was Friday. I distinctly remember because that was the last day of school and she had a mission in Dorchester, so we knew if we saw fish, we knew red rice was behind it, we knew we would have to go to St. George this weekend. We were not going to be home that weekend.

I: What’s your childhood church?

CS: Um, Scott New Church of Christ. Um, it used to be Scott Holy. It used to be Scott Holiness but it’s Scott New Church of Christ now.

I: How often did you have to go?

CS: Hm! Okay. We can say 30 days, if you were on revival, um, you must attend Sunday school and church all day, and I do mean church all day. We would probably go at like 11 o’ clock in the morning, for Sunday school, then church starts at about twelve, you probably get out about 3 or 4, and then you might have to come back that evening for evening service. Um, that was just on Sunday. If we had a revival that could be 30 days, it just depends on, you know, whatever happens. You have the like, big general sessions where you go to the main church which is the main Pentecostal church. We would go there and you know, all of the churches would combine um, and that would be one big Sunday. And then you eat and stuff like that?

I: Did you have to seek?

CS: Well, seeking at that age...you know, you would call on Jesus and um, he would you know, come in or enter your body...As a little girl, that’s what I understood it to be at the time. Um, you know, he would live with you, he would walk with you, he would help you make good decisions, be a better person and whatnot. Seeking is just calling on the name of Jesus, you know, you would get on your knees, somebody’s over you, and you know, and they would help

in assisting you. But you know, as we know it today, you know a lot of it has to do with really believing. I'm still a Christian, I still walk the way, but it was very different than now. You know, I mean, you couldn't wear, you know, a lot of things we can wear now, it's very liberal now. The seeking thing is... (laughs) it's kind of hard to explain because being a little girl or, you know, a younger girl, you're not understanding but you're doing what someone is telling you to do. So if you don't understand what you're doing it for, you're kind of defeating the purpose but you kind of satisfying everyone else. But as you get older and you begin to study the Word, you can understand what it is you are asking the Lord to do in terms of coming in and taking over your spiritual, you know, side. It has helped me a whole lot. I probably would have been in a different direction, you know, if I wasn't in the church so I give a lot of props to my grandmother... for... even if at the time we were made to go to church, but now, you know, it's something that I want to do. 'Cus now if you look at a lot of other things, where can you go to get a high- which is a spiritual high- without worrying about killing anyone or you know, driving your car or whatever having an accident or whatever. So that's how I look at it and I parallel it to how I was growing up and where I am now, you know. Because I know prayer is my rock and without it I don't know where I would be, I can't speak for no one else, but I know it has brought me through... so there's no other way for me.

I: What does Gullah mean to you?

CS: Gullah... as I learned it growing up, it's kind of like a broken language... um, as a matter of fact I wore this t-shirt, one of the ladies of our church, she's incorporating Gullah and this is what they are basing their business off of. But it's basically a... it's not proper English, it's broken English, and what may sound funny or what you may say is improper English, here, everyone understands each other. You know, I remember going to uh, Jersey for the summer with my parents and... I didn't know I had broken English, according to school or whatever, but when I got up there to the city, everybody was speaking "proper," so to speak, and I was just saying "got," "aint," um, you know... a lot of it... the only way I can explain it is I have lived up North and I have a little Northern accent when I want to. I can talk a little but not much so, I've actually... I'm not sure how to explain it... even though I'm from here, I'm appreciating it a lot more now than when I was growing up. So... you know. To hear someone... like I said, I have family in St. George, you really... their dialect is so strong you really have to actually sit and listen to what they're trying to say. Here, it's not as bad and even though the dialect can be... kind of... it's really not as strong as other places. For me to explain Gullah to you, I really can't explain it. It's just... I know that that's our culture because I grew up here. So...

I: [Unintelligible, volume is too low]

CS: Um, I would say... the closeness of the people. Um... when you in New York, it's kind of standoffish, you always have to be on your guard. And they call me a country girl because I'm a country girl, always hugging... I don't think there's nothing wrong with it because that's the way we are here. When you up North you have to be very careful because you can... um, probably

intimidate someone and someone might think you're trying to hurt them when all you're trying to do is...this is how we say hello. The quietness, the trees...the serenity, I guess. Not a bunch of (demonstrates talking gestures with her hands) noise and you know, you hear em' but it's not as bad as in the city. It's every 5 minutes. You might see someone down the street get stabbed. I mean, I have. I've never seen someone get shot, you know, that's crazy...to me. So Atlanta is the furthest place that I've went since I left up North. I love Atlanta but I would love to be- there's no place like here, the serenity, the trees, the water...I love the water, I mean, I only live five minutes from the beach but we have access through our property and through other accesses on the you know, on the island. You can go there and sit. You can't do that in the city. You have to go to a park...I can't remember the name of the park. But you have to go there. Okay, you leave home (laughs), you have to go through traffic, you sit down, you don't know who is going to go crazy that day, and then you can't really enjoy the water. Where here, I can go through any one of the accesses and sit and close my eyes...so the water is the main thing for me here.

I: Do you remember any stories your grandmother might tell you when you were little about growing up here? Any family stories?

CS: Um...no...just how they used to get along...my grandmother had more people, I kind of didn't want to go with her because she knew everyone. Didn't matter if you were white or black, wherever she went, she had friends. And I mean, you know, they looked out for each other. For her to actually sit down and actually tell me stories you know, she always taught us to respect an individual space and who they are, if they're different from you, then they're different from you, and not to judge and stuff like that. But I don't remember any...you know, story-stories.

I: You also come across people who want to keep St. Helena-

CS: Preserve it-

I: Could you talk about some of your feelings on that?

CS: Well, first of all I was a little upset, when I was away from home and the change came. Because it wasn't actually St. Helena, it was Frogmore. It's sad to say I don't really know the history behind it, why it's called Frogmore- I know the stew- Frogmore stew- other than that, you know, it was apparently a fight about the name and all of this. Because I don't know what transpired I can't really speak on it but all I ever knew growing up was Frogmore. And then I came home and it was changed to St. Helena. So I think I would have a problem with it being developed because it takes away the history and it would definitely take away the serenity. Because you know, all you have here is business and you have people after money, money, money making money, money, money...but I think ugh, we need a place where we can have peace and a place where we can come and relax. Like I said, my version of comparing the city to here, um you won't get that. If it's built up and everyone's a developer getting what they want. Sure, everyone needs a place but to erase everything and you have a lot of families who have property that go way, way back and you want to preserve it so your children's children can enjoy

what you enjoyed. You know, so...my thing about it, I just, I don't want to be in the city. If I wanted to be in the city I would move to the city. I love it when I go to one of my friend's houses and sit on the porch and you're covered by trees, you know- I'm a little scared of worms and stuff but to embrace nature, I believe that's basically what it's about. You can't get nature anywhere. When you go to the park it's limited, there are rules and regulations and things you have to do but, you know, like now, we can look out, you're so relaxed and you're not stressed. Being in the city you have to worry about where I'm going to park and all of that crazy stuff, I get enough of that in Beaufort.

I: Did they teach you about the history in school?

CS: No. I do not recall that. And that's pretty much why I'm trying to learn a lot more now. I've heard bits and pieces of us having the school for African Americans, you know, across here. There's the museum, um, but to say out of the twelve years I went to school, I really don't recall them talking about the Gullah as a culture...um, we talked about the Civil War and the Revolutionary War and all of that. We didn't go beyond slaves. We knew about slaves. We knew our forefathers could've been slaves, the plantations, but as far as teaching what the culture was, no. I don't recall that at all.

I: When you were in school, was it integrated?

CS: Oh, yeah. I'm not that old (laughs).

I: I'm just saying you were on the islands, there was such a large African-American population.

CS: Mm-hmm, it was integrated (laughs).

I: Did your grandma teach you any songs coming up?

CS: Well the oldest songs we would call boring because they were so slow and you know, they had the double beat and other stuff like (starts clapping the double beat to demonstrate). Who's side you lean on, that was my grandma's song. (Starts singing) Who's side you're leaning on, leaning on the Lord's side, who's side you're leaning on, leaning on the Lord's side...you know, stuff like that. I'm not much of a singer.

I: You call that the double beat?

CS: (Laughs) That's what I call it, that's what I call it. I think it originated more from the Baptists, back in the day when you did have slaves and you know, they would be in the fields and singing- now I don't know a whole lot about that now but um, you know when you watch little documentaries and stuff like that, you see how they were clapping and stuff like that and matter of fact, I just viewed a documentary I didn't know about, it's called "Families Across the Sea," and it's very interesting and I'm like wow, 'cus I know Emory Campbell, I know Ernestine Atkins, my mother and them are best friends but ugh, I didn't know stuff like that, you know, my

mindset was different than it is now. Now that I get more older, I want to know more things. If I'm going to be here I like to be aware so, my friends when they visit me, I have some place to take them.

I: Have you ever gone to the praise house?

CS: Yes, that's when we lived in Tomford. It's a very small place, wooden benches, the same scrub board I was tellin' y'all about earlier where we used to wash the clothes and you take a wire hanger and you would use it to scrape the board, we had little drums and stuff, tambourines, and we would just get together and have what you call "praise," and um, it was a praise service, probably about an hour or two, but again, coming from my perspective as a young girl, all I knew was the benches were hard and you know, the place was real small and it was real hot and we had people we seen all day, and you know, I really wanted to go home. But as I see now, it's so precious, you know, we have one in every community from what I understand. Ms. Merilee Gree is in charge of the one here in Coffin Point where I live, I'm not exactly sure who's in charge of the one where I grew up from because the person that I knew there passed on now so, but those are the things now I can cherish because now I can understand a little bit more why my grandmother used to take us, so. Um, that's where I learned how to play a little music and stuff because we used to sing back in the day so um-

[Unclear person]: How about songs from the praise house?

CS: From the praise house- that was one of them, um, it's whew lawd, it's been so long because...oh my god, I feel so bad right now because it should pop off like that. It was mainly songs that didn't require music behind it you know, everything was acapella, with the exceptions of the little manmade instruments and stuff. They were meaningful songs. They may not have sounded good, gold status or whatever, it was songs you would go to if you were probably in a dark place in your life um, you're like Lord I need you, you know, don't leave me alone, walk with me um, hold my hand, you know, things like that, don't let the devil ride, um, you know, and those things you're really communing with God. We don't really talk to him, like back in the day, you know, everything is glorified and everything is buttons and bowls and you know, it's pretty. We're ashamed to actually be out and really give God praise and my grandmother- you've been with her? It didn't matter where she was, you know, it's real different. So ugh...real different. Because you know, it's...you know, I look at a lot of...I'm not trying to pull on tags or titles or whatever, but I look back in the day when I was growing up and for what I went through growing up, today I don't tolerate a lot of things from a lot of Christians, I guess you could say. I know what can happen, I know prayer changes you know, but when grandma prays, and she taught me how to pray, you know, you expect it. She spoke it, it's coming to pass. It's guaranteed money in the bank. Today you hear people speak and you're like uh...I don't know (laughs) so-

[Unclear person]: How did she teach you to pray?

CS: One, it was a physical thing, you had to get down on your knees, there was no sitting you know, you could stand, it depends on where you were, she taught me to talk just like I'm talking to you, you know, she made it very simple, you didn't need a whole lot of hooflah, you know, tell the Lord what you want. Ask him- the main thing was to ask the Lord for forgiveness for things that uh, you know you did wrong and for things you may have done wrong and didn't realize. That was number one. Anything beyond that, it's on you. It was everything from Lord, help me with school, but she's teaching you, she's telling you, don't ask the Lord to do something you could do for yourself, you know, you're asking him to help you pass this test but you know you ain't study, so why ask him, you know? So she was pretty much off the chain, you could say, but she taught me how to make my prayer real, you know, don't add a whole lot of fancy stuff because it doesn't really mean nothing. Ask for what you really need, or what you really want, and mean it. Don't ask for something you don't believe he gonna' give to you, you know, and I'm just paraphrasing. If she was here she would be preaching right now, you know, and that's just her hot second. So that's why when I pray, I don't have a whole lot of people to pray with, it's good to have a network, but you don't know who that next person is going through or are they really praying? If you need somebody, or gonna get somebody, you gonna get somebody who's gonna pray! It's kind of hard for me to move passed that, I do good with praying, I do have a little network, because I know that they believe in what I'm asking, I don't have to tell you the whole story, if I call you and ask you to pray, they pray. I can explain later. For some people, they got to know the whole history and who they need to pray for and that's not what prayer is about. God knows everything that's going on with, if you pray to him he's going to deal with whatever needs to be dealt with. But um, it's a very simple...you know, thing that my grandmother has taught me so, it's very genuine, you know, and I don't see that in a lot of older people now and I stay away. I'm considered a loner. But it's only because if I don't feel like you're authentic, I don't feel the need to have to be around you. So,

[Unknown person]: So Carol, you talk about your grandmother but did you have brothers and sisters who were here also?

CS: My older brother, he's an adult also, he came and then... I have three more other brothers. My mother adopted. But they didn't experience the upbringing like me and my oldest brother did. He left and he went back to New York. He was like (shaking head), mm, mm, and when he got a chance he took off. But you know, I'm a grandmother's baby so you know. Up until the day she died I was by her side. You know, the upbringing when we were going through it, man, I tell you I thought we were in slavery. I didn't know about the real slavery but I thought we were in slavery. But now I can sit back and honestly appreciate where I came from, um, because I don't need a whole lot of things to prove my worth, you know, I can improvise when I need to, I can enjoy the modern things and I can g back to the old way of doing things. It's really been an honor to have grandparents like that. I understand when they say, you may not like it now but when you get older you're gonna appreciate it, you know, and I honestly do. I'm an old timer,

old fashioned, I believe my grandmother used to tell us things about guys and all of that, we went through all of that.

I: What'd she tell you?

CS: If a guy liked you he would come to the door, he would ask her, or my grandad, you know, to take you out, they don't just call you on the phone and say hey let's meet someplace. He had to be a gentleman- he had to open the door for you, close the door, walk you through the house door, see you through the house safely...you respect one another, you know, of course you don't do the deed until you get married and all of that but we all know that's out the window now. It's good to see because I didn't have to...if a guy told me I was beautiful, it wasn't something that blew my mind, because my grandfather always told me I was a princess and I would be somebody's queen one day, he said- well I'm not going to tell you what he used to say- but um, he was basically saying don't let no knuckle head tell you nothing. If you didn't hear it from me, you don't have to worry about nothing. That's how I grew up, that's how I raised my sons, you know, now they're grown and now they do what they wanna do but the seed is there. You always cherish your woman as a rose an as a flower. It's just funny that I'm talking about it because it's really the first time I went back and think about a lot of things that were said to me and why they were said to me. We didn't have the guts back in the day about why I gotta do this, why I gotta do that, no you better keep that in your head and hope it don't spill out your mouth, you know. If they told you to do something, you know there's a good reason behind it. You didn't question it. Whatever. So. You know, of course we know today, things are different. Very different. That's it.

I: I'd like to thank you for sitting down with us today

CS: No problem. No problem (Smiling).