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Recommended Citation

Bee, Patricia; Bergen, Zakiyyah; Slutzky, David; and Morgan, Portia, "Bee, Patricia" (2012). *Video Collection*. Paper 147.
https://digital.kenyon.edu/gullah_video/147

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Gullah Project
Patricia Bee
Zakiyyah Bergen, David Slutzky, Portia Morgan
July 23, 2012
Beaufort, South Carolina

SB: Good morning. Today is July 23, 2012. My name is Zakiyyah Bergen. I am here with David Slutzky and Portia Morgan. And introduce Ms. Patricia Bee, who is a published author here in Beaufort. Good morning, Ms. Bee.

PB: Good morning.

SB (offscreen): How are you?

PB: I'm doing fine. Thank you.

SB (offscreen): We are very excited to have you here with us and share what it's like to be connected to this wonderful, historic Beaufort and growing up around here. Could you start sharing your story with us?

PB: Well, basically I am a native of Beaufort. My parents literally came here around the 1930s and began on Parris Island, which is now the military base. So we actually have relatives who lived on the island in 1937, then were moved into Beaufort. And that's when our family actually started here. In 1937.

Unknown (offscreen): What happened? Why'd you move from Parris Island?

PB: Well, it had not become officially a total military base. You still had natives at that time living there. So they were sort of at the end when the natives all moved off around 1937.

Unknown (offscreen): Why'd they move off the island? The military?

PB: The military connection. Yes.

Unknown (offscreen): And then you came here to Beaufort?

PB: Yes. (Nods).

Unknown (offscreen): You have a Gullah connection here? Tell me about it.

PB: Well, definitely! Gullah basically stems from the fact that when you had the enslaved Africans who lived on the islands, around the Sea Islands, if you could envision a place where

they had no bridges, so the dialect was pretty much distinct. With more of the African words, some English. And we didn't have the day-to-day interaction with the mainland. So basically the Gullah heritage was pretty much intact. So the language was such that, you know, we maintained it here.

Unknown (offscreen): You have brothers and sisters?

PB: I have five brothers and sisters.

Unknown (offscreen): What was it like? Tell us about... do you have a story that you can remember? Or something? What made growing up here special?

PB: Growing up here was very special, in a sense that living was very easy. In the summer months, for example, we would play outside from maybe noon until 8,9 o'clock PM. You know, and you could play hide and seek when it was dark. It was when you didn't have to think about children being abducted or any of that. We had a neighborhood where family members were all apart of an extended family. So grandmother lived in the house. So that made it special, even though we had parents who worked on Parris Island, we had grandmother who was in the house, all day. She saw us off to school. When we came back in the afternoon, she was there. Dinner was ready. We never went without. Never.

Unknown (offscreen): Tell us some stories having grandma around... do you remember something?

PB: Well, my grandmother was one, I would say, who was a genius in her own way even though she only had a third grade education. So she was the one who inspired me to write this first book, "Mama's Pearls." And basically...

Unknown (offscreen): Is that a picture of her?

PB: This is a great-aunt on the cover. But "Mama's Pearls" is a collection of my grandmother's sayings that I wrote the poetry for and I used photos from her collection. And in this one for example, we have a picture of my grandfather's grandmother, who was a slave.

Unknown (offscreen): Grandfather's grandmother? She was a slave?

PB: So, my grandfather and grandmother were both born in 1896. So two generations prior, definitely would put her back before the end of slavery. So she told us stories about Mother Jane. And how she cared for her, even on her deathbed. And then one thing that Mother Jane spoke to her was the fact that as long as my grandmother lived, that she would never work for bread. And I have seen... I saw rather just in our house, where she would always have more than enough. On

Sundays, when dinner was prepared, not just for the family. Anybody. And preacher who may be visiting. Who could just come in just in case, they needed to have place to stay and a hot meal. So that was the kind of environment that I came up in.

Unknown (offscreen): Is that a tradition that carries on in the family still today?

PB: Yes. We may not always have the spread, but the bread pudding, and the chicken and the greens. But when you come, we definitely believe we will offer something. That you will have something to eat while you're not home.

Unknown (offscreen): Story [Note: unclear].

PB: Uhh, this book basically, we were told for example, as young ones when grown people were talking, that you were not. So we had to stay out of grown people company. So in this particular poem, it just tells us that as a young one, a child needed to... When you saw a grown-up speaking, that meant you were not in that particular room. We had to go outside, play or find somewhere else to be. So we were just told how to have respect for parents, to honor them. Therefore, when my grandmother became, maybe in her nineties, when she could no longer do her daily chores and the things she would do at the home, we knew because she had invested in so many of the others, like Grandma Jane. That there was no way that we were not going to invest in her. So therefore, we made provisions to have someone to come in while we were at work. (Nods). Type thing. But we felt it was important for her to stay in her own home. And we cared for her.

Unknown (offscreen): And where was her home?

PB: We actually have a home in town, in downtown Beaufort.

Unknown (offscreen): Are there other Pearls that you would like to share with us?

PB: One I have is a poem that is called... well I'll say "Young to Old." And it simply says, "child you must crawl before you walk and make sweet sounds before you talk. So only covet were for you, for you will reap when you're season's due. If in fact, you do not fate, a beautiful canvas God will paint. Of things that you could never dream, the long the road your path may seem. Child, you must crawl before you walk. Make sweet sounds before you talk." So basically, we were taught that maybe what you may want in a dream, may not come overnight. But you have to take the steps and start at a place and don't feel that because you may not get there tomorrow, that you not on your way. So that was one valuable lesson that my grandmother taught.

DS (offscreen): We're looking to bring stories back to the students that we teach in Cleveland. What are some things about Gullah that you would like people to understand or embrace?

PB: Alright. Well, one other book that I have is called "Try'umsee's Wings" and this one is a Gullah folktale about a bumblebee who thought he couldn't fly. And as a teacher myself, I believe in building self-esteem. So the name Try'umsee is a Gullah name that means "try" and "see." So my grandmother used to talk about a man in our neighborhood that she called Mr. Try'umsee Major. And nicknames are very big here. Sometimes, when we have obituaries, they will always put the person's first name, then the nickname, then the last name. And that is because, most people in the community, may have only known that person as Mr. Hambone and not as Ulysses. But we had a friend in our family. His name was Mr. Ulysses Brown. But however, when he passed, it had to be included - Ulysses "Hambone" Brown. So everybody would know, that was exactly who it was. Because you know basically in our community, we didn't go by the birth name necessarily. So in this particular story, I used the name Try'umsee from the man from my grandmomma's community, Mr. Try'umsee Major, to use that as the bee, because "try" and "see." This bee who thought he couldn't and found out that he could. So it helped us to have a story of, you know, other insects that could do various things. And all were bright, beautiful, etcetera. And this bumblebee thought that he had this large body and small wings and thought, "What did I do?" Until he was told why he was built the way he was. And his body was built the way it was because it represented the size of his heart and the wings meant that he could do nothing by himself. He would need others along life's way. And that therefore pulled into another teaching that when we look and find other people or other situations that may be even more in need than the one we think we have, that's when we can find out wealth and give to others. So this was also used in the story, as the bee helped the flowers.

Unknown (offscreen): What part of that in the Gullah tradition, that a lot of people didn't know the value of being Gullah. Did you grow up understanding the treasure, the richness of your heritage? Or was that... did that come later on?

PB: I began to appreciate the heritage in the sense that I knew that my grandmother did not have the opportunity. So, to go to a formal school passed third grade. My father, however, did attend Penn School. My mother had a sixth grade education. So we were taught to have the value to want to learn, to do as much as possible so that we could get the most out of our educational opportunities that were made available to us. So, therefore, I didn't have a negative feeling about Gullah, however, many people may have had some negative things about, "Well, you're going to school because you need to speak 'good English.'" And that was, you know, not presented in a way of the cultural heritage, to appreciate necessarily the fact that Gullah is what we would have. Something that's very rich, something that's valuable. And it's not something that we're not to use, but in essence, we need to understand that when we're in, example, a job setting. Then I need to make sure that I am in a setting where I'm understood by all. However, when I'm in my family or when I'm speaking about my cultural heritage, et cetera, if I want to just go into my

flow, I can do so. And not have to think about being, you know, whether it was understood. You know, because it just comes freely.

Unknown (offscreen): So how do we translate that? How do we translate that to the young people today? One of the worries, we're afraid that it's gonna get lost. That if people die away, the language, the culture and stuff will get lost. So how do we get that in some schools and translate that?

PB: Well, I personally try to take advantage of every opportunity I have in my classroom to share my, you know, cultural background. And one thing I do, whenever I meet any person, for example, I'm intrigued by names. So I will try to find out more about the background of the name. And I will talk about, you know, my heritage. And when I see students, for example, in this area, when I start talking about Gullah and if they have their head to drop, as if 'I'm not proud of being Gullah.' I then explain to them why we have to be proud. I explain to them, you know, the heritage that we have here is the richness of what went on in this area. The people such as Robert Smalls, and you know, it's not just because we have a school named Robert Smalls, but to know the legacy of the man actually lived and everything that goes behind that.

DS (offscreen): Did you have a nickname?

PB: Yeah, I had several. (Chuckles). One was Watermelon. And that was because, when my mother was carrying me, one of my father's friends, you know, recognized that she just craved watermelons at that time. So before I was even born, according to him, the baby would be called Watermelon. And for him, Watermelon was my name. And another gentleman used to call me Butterball. And that was because when TV came to be very popular, they used to have a big butterball commercial during Thanksgiving time. And I cried because my mother said one Thanksgiving, she wasn't gonna have a turkey. She was gonna have some other kind of meat, you know, like rabbit or something different. And that just did not set well. I said, "I want a butterball! I want a butterball!" And I just literally, you know, cried and just went all out. So from that episode, the name Butterball became mine. So, and plus I was plump. (Chuckles). So that sort of fit, too.

Unknown (offscreen): What grade do you teach?

PB: Right now, I teach eighth grade social studies.

Unknown (offscreen): So have you used your book? Your "Pearl's" book in your class?

PB: Yes, I use both of them. Whether I'm speaking to small ones in the daycare centers or eighth graders on up, I talk about self-esteem, with the "Pearls of Wisdom." I use them both. (Nods). And I think one thing that helped me to incorporate both is the fact that when I wrote the first

book I shared with the students that I had the book. And one child looked at me and said, “Ms. Bee, you don’t look like an author.” (Chuckles). So I said, “Well, what does an author look like?” And that brought out a whole ‘nother line of teaching. Because of some of the thoughts and preconceptions as far as what certain people should talk, should not do. So we had a teaching about that. (Nods).

Unknown (offscreen): Are you working on a third book?

PB: I have definitely thought about a third book. I have several other stories I would like to tell. Yes. (Nods).

DS (offscreen): You know, we’re here at the Water Guns. At the back of us we have the bridge from Beaufort to St. Helena. Do you see other bridges on top of the bridge from St. Helena to Beaufort, since you’ve been teaching?

PB: Well, I find that we are now, you know, on the same road. It’s not isolation anymore, so bringing the past, connecting it with where we are now to build the future. I think it’s important and the bridge is very symbolic of that.

DS (offscreen): So it’s better integrated... you’re not gonna find teachers that are going to, putting down the accents or dialect or people who don’t...

PB: No, and even when I was in school, I don’t think it was necessarily that people were trying to put it down, but I think maybe some felt that if the English was not “the proper English” that maybe you would not have some of the opportunities because people would think maybe because of the dialect that that had some influence on your amount of intellectual. Which as I said, my grandmother, you know, she didn’t have a formal. She had, more what I call a wisdom of somebody with three PhDs. So understanding the value of both is I think the bridge that we are trying to connect.

Unknown (offscreen): So, as a history teacher, is Gullah incorporated in South Carolina’s curriculum?

PB: Oh yeah. Yes.

Unknown (offscreen): And when you teach it, is it a small unit or integrated into curriculum? How do you teach about, because this is such richness...

PB: Well, it’s easy for me in the sense that my subject area is eighth grade South Carolina history with a U.S. influence. So we are actually in the center of a lot of what we own throughout U.S. history. So it’s easy for me to pull alllll of, you know, the history of South Carolina. And we

as a people, whether Gullah or you know, any other facet of that. It's just intertwined because we lived through this history.

Unknown (offscreen): How do you feel about the connection of Sierra Leone? How does that make you feel?

PB: Oh definitely. I went to grad school at Iowa State. I had a girl friend from Sierra Leone. Basically the whole connection of how we have similar words here and similar cultural traits as far as foods that we eat. It's very rich. So, it's almost like feeling that you have a cousin, just in another place.

Unknown (offscreen): So what do you think the difference is in Gullah and Geechee? Or that there is a difference and if there isn't, what do you think what is the difference that you would find?

PB: From my understanding, it's basically the same. Just terms you use in different settings or different places.

Unknown (offscreen): Different places? (PB nods). We hear that more often than not.

DS (offscreen): We hear a lot about the strong values of Penn education and some stories of the, you'll find with the Great Migration, you'll find people that have done more because of their accents. Their teachers don't wanna think [Note: unclear]. And smarter than those who were born in New York...

PB: True and I think that's probably the focus as far as why during the time that you're referring to where people thought, "Don't speak Gullah as much. Speak more of 'proper English.'" That that was probably what they were thinking. The opportunities to get in the door and get jobs. But we have now come to understand just the richness of the heritage and that it's something to be proud of, to preserve. And even back in the day, I had a brother who was very much, very much adamant about getting a recording done of my grandmother while she was alive. We did not follow through on that. So therefore I had the memories of the sayings. But he was on to something at that time that we were a little bit slow on.

Unknown (offscreen): What are some things that you think your brother wanted your grandmother to share?

PB: Just maybe her own words. You know, in her own words.

Unknown (offscreen): Are there some experiences that she shared with you that you would want to share with us? A story? An experience that you think she would want us to show the children? Something funny? Something wise?

PB: Well, basically I know she taught us about how in her day, when you didn't have the hotels, people who had houses with extra rooms. Like teachers would come from different counties to Beaufort to work, and that's where most of them would start. They would start in an elderly person's home and board. So my grandmother, for example, took care of one little girl because her mother came here to work. She was a teacher. So they lived in the house with us. Had the front bedroom and many teachers got started in Beaufort that way. You would come and just board with a family. So, you know, that was just popular. We had extended families that way. So therefore, you didn't have the problem of "was Anne acting out in school." Because you had the teachers right there in the community. (Everyone chuckles). Came right back home.

Unknown (offscreen): Teacher living in your house.

PB: In your house. Literally. Who could just tell, you know. This is what went on. So, we didn't have problem with behavior, per se.

Unknown (offscreen): I heard you say your dad went to the Penn School.

PB: Yes, I did.

Unknown (offscreen): So, did he live on St. Helena?

PB: No, he commuted.

Unknown (offscreen): So, he had to commute from Beaufort?

PB: Well, Parris Island. They came by boat. And then they stayed over there. And went back, I believe, during the summer months. So that's how, you know, they did that.

Unknown (offscreen): So did you have any family on St. Helena?

PB: Not on St.... Well, I do have a first cousin. I started say no, but I do have a first cousin who lives on St. Helena. (Nods). And a few cousins. Our family now is pretty small. But we do, you know, have little pockets here and there in the county.

Unknown (offscreen): Do you have a land connection? Tell me about the land story for your family?

PB: Well, we still have the homesite where my parent... my grandparents actually lived in Beaufort. And our philosophy is, you know, you hold on to whatever property, whatever, you know, pieces of furniture, anything. Even when she did laundry, I have just the little cap that you use on the water bottle to sprinkle clothes.

Unknown (offscreen): Oh my goodness!

PB: I kept that. We...

Unknown (offscreen): I haven't heard that in a long time.

PB: Yeah, we get any of that out of our eyes. We kept lots of things to remind us of the place that she had to come to get to where we are today.

Unknown (offscreen): Do you think this area would be right for like a Gullah history museum?

PB: Oh, it would be wonderful. Yes. I really think we would, because of a lot of the work that you've seen with Anita Prather and Dr. Emory Campbell. And just all those who tried to preserve as much of the culture as possible. You know, I think the world needs to see and appreciate as much as we do, the rich heritage that we have here.

DS (offscreen): What's your favorite family tradition if you had to pick one from when you were a little girl?

PB: I would think the favorite tradition would be to pass stories on. And that's one thing that I realized from my grandmother. She did not have the writing side where she wrote the things down, but she did speak them. So she would tell us stories. And I believe it's important to pass those on.

Unknown (offscreen): What kind of stories?

PB: Do I have a story? Umm... Well I know she would talk about, you know, just family members and... okay I do have one. One is about my brother Joe, who somehow went to a neighbor's home, Ms. Daisy Brown's home. And my grandmother had taken him with her and somehow Ms. Daisy had a pot with some chicken or something on her stove. And Joe went and got a piece. And didn't ask. And he got beating that lasted for the rest of us. Because all through the line coming down, we were told about that story. About how Joe went and went in Ms. Daisy's pot. So we learned, when you go to somebody's house, if they have not invited you, don't you take it upon yourself to go and volunteer to get anything.

[End Clip 1]

[Begin Clip 2]

Unknown (offscreen): How has education changed in the schools here in Beaufort since you were a little girl? Integrated? Segregated? And how is education being taught here?

PB: Our school actually integrated when I was entering high school. So Robert Smalls was segregated up until '93. And then tenth, eleventh and twelfth, I attended the new integrated Beaufort High School. So, we've seen lots of changes over those years. And now we have lots of various groups, for example, we have students who are from Honduras, you know. Where Spanish speaking is big now. So we found that we not only need to speak English, understand our Gullah, but we have to appreciate other backgrounds as well. So this is the new side of going to school in Beaufort County.

DS (offscreen): Do you find commonalities here, too? Between the Hispanic population and Gullah?

PB: Well, I do in the sense that many of the students who have come, their parents are sometimes not knowing the language themselves. The students know the language more so than the parents. So, it's sorta like how we came up. Our parents in the home not necessarily speaking "the fluent English," but the students going to school learning the language. So, we have lots of similarities with that.

Unknown (offscreen): So, we're going back to Cleveland and we're going to share these to teach our students. Eventually, we want to build an archive. [Note: unclear]. What would you want, students who have never been to Beaufort, have never been to St. Helena, to know about this area of the Gullah culture?

PB: If I could break the word "Beaufort" down to two, I would say that the "B-E-A-U" stands for beautiful. And the "F-O-R-T" stands for fort or strength. So there's a beautiful strength that we have here in the people, in our heritage, in Gullah and it's something that we must preserve. Because it's because of that strength that we have seen our forefathers come and it's upon their backs that we have to build upon. So that we can truly be strong in the century that we're living in.

DS (offscreen): It does seem that Beaufort seems a lot more progressive historically since the Civil War than other parts of the South. Am I off base there?

PB: I would think you're probably very much on, in the sense that even when you talk about Penn Center, we know that Dr. King literally came to Penn Center with his staff, write some of his speeches. So we've always been an open-minded community. And always... we've always

been open for change. (Nods). So I think, you know, that's one of the strong points that we have, to see beyond just what is right now, but what can become.

Unknown (offscreen): Well, we certainly appreciate your spending time with us and we're looking forward to that third book. Thank you.

PB: Thank you!

Unknown (offscreen): Any time you're in the Cleveland area, please feel free to stop by and see us. And show us that.

PB: Thank you! This one is "Mama's Pearls" and "Try'umsee's Wings." And we do have a saying on the t-shirt I'd like to show you.

Unknown (offscreen): Oh, yes please!

PB: "It's a 'bee' thing! Bee a leader! Bee a reader! Bee smart! Bee a part! It's a 'bee' thing! So don't be a 'wanna' bee!"

Unknown(s) (offscreen): Aw! That is wonderful! (Claps). Well, thank you!

DS (offscreen): Thank you.

[End Clip 2]

[Begin Clip 3]

PB: When you say interview...?

Unknown (offscreen): Sharing your story.

PB: It's a matter of passing it on. So that the next generation... Yeah, please. So that the next generation will not forget. The importance, the richness of the culture. And know from one's we've come.

[End]