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Carolina Connections
Louise “Lulu” Hamilton
Bernice Young
Debbie Frost
Malik Austin
Hilton Head Island

DF: Hello, today is July 26th. My name is Debbie Frost and Malik Austin is behind the camera and we are talking today with Louise Hamilton and Bernice Young. This is part of our Carolina Connections project and we’re studying the Gullah culture here in South Carolina. I’d like to begin with you, Ms. Bernice Young. Could you tell me what it’s like to grow up in South Carolina? What was it like?

BY: Well to me it was okay because when I grew up here I didn’t know any place else. So it was just, you know, growing up. And when I get to a certain age, I left and I went to New York. Then I finish school in New York. And I work for the government until I retire. I work at the post office until I retire. Then when I retire, I move back here because I had my house built right up the street there.

DF: Now about what year was it when you decided to come back to...

BY: Oh, I can’t remember.

DF: Any idea?

BY: Mm-mm. When I decided to come back or when I came back?

DF: When you came back here to live.

BY: Oh, (chuckles). When did I come back home?

LH: In the seventies, maybe early seventies.

BY: The middle seventies, I think it was.

DF: And you attended school here in South Carolina?

BY: And also in New York.

DF: Okay, so did you do your primary school in South Carolina?

BY: Mm-hmm.

DF: What was it like in school growing up?

BY: Well, it was like any other place that you live because you have one situation there. You have the school, and all of the children there from one (raises hand as if counting rungs upwards on a ladder) ages up.

DF: Now, you lived here and your house is right next door?

BY: I didn't live here. We lived further back.

DF: Any memorable stories you wanna share with us about growin up here?

BY: Iunno.

LH: How about when you stop workin and after graduatin, helping your parents out while you was here. You could tell a story about that. (To a child who stepped into frame) Ise, go in the living room. How you helped, when you...

BY: When I did what?

LH: How you helped your parents out when you was workin.

BY: Well when I went to New York, I helped them out.

LH: I mean before you went.

BY: (Chuckles) I didn't do much helping. I helped workin round the yard and stuff like that.

LH: Didn't you left home and went to Savannah and start working?

BY: No.

LH: Okay.

DF: Ms. Hamilton, could you tell us a little about growing up here?

LH: Oh my, it was hard. I'm a daughter of the late William Bolden and Paulie Bolden. I'm the seventh child of twelve children.

DF: Large family.

LH: And it was as door that I had (in air quotes) two or three brothers because as we was growin up, the older kids would take care of the younger kids. We didn't enjoy our parents like we're supposed to because they used to work so hard. They used to work from sunup until sundown. That's where our older brothers and sisters played a part.

DF: Like second parents?

LH: Right, right. And it was just a joy growin up in the low country. My parents used to work so hard to take care of us. You know, it was twelve kids! You know? And we used to live off the land.

DF: Lot of farming?

LH: Lot of farming.

DF: Gardens?

LH: It's the land and the sea because they used to fish a lot, they used to plant crops, and we didn't have time to get into no mischievous stuff. Because we was too busy--we always had something to do. My first doll was a grass doll. You know? It was a grass doll. And we used to have the toys, we used to make our own toys. It was just so much fun. And the neighbors, my dad used to go out and fish and stuff like that. When my dad go out and fish the whole community had fish. When my dad used to farm we used to have (lists on fingers) cattles, we used to have hogs, have sheeps. We had all kinds of stuff. And every time my dad killed a horse--a cattle--the whole neighborhood had cattles. We had food. It was a (interlocks fingers) tight-knit community back during that time. But now everything has changed tremendously.

DF: And so your family has a really strong sense of community?

LH: There you go. There it is.

DF: Now your siblings, are they still here in South Carolina, low country?

LH: Well we went abroad, and then we wind up back here. This little property that we're on now, when my dad was alive he'd call all the kids together. He said to the girls, "This piece of property belongs to the boys." (All laugh.) When you go out and get your husband, your husband is gonna provide for you. So this belongs to the boys when they get their wives. This gonna be for the boys. So we went out travelling abroad and we came back home and begged our brothers for a place to stay (laughs)! So they said, "Okay, if you wanna come back home, stay. Just cut your piece off, build your house or whatever you wanna do. Go ahead and do something." And it was so much joy and fun living on this land.

DF: And this land, you said, was your father's?

LH: Yes.

DF: Did it belong to him? Did he buy the land or did it belong to his...?

LH: Yes.

DF: Okay, so he bought it. How many acres?

LH: It's five acres.

DF: Five acres, and it was divided among how many brothers?

LH: We have, it was six brothers.

DF: Six brothers.

LH: Yes, but a few of my brothers, they moved on their wife's property. That's how I guess we, the girls... Three girls came back to live on the property. And it was very exciting growing up in this area. My father, he was a strict father. We didn't understand at that time when we was comin up but I love my father to death for bein so strict on me, myself, when I was comin up. Because there's a lot of my friends... They started havin kids at an early age and stuff like that. They went to parties and stuff and I thought, "Hey, why can't I go to the parties?" My daddy said, "Oh, (wags finger) it's not time! It's not time." And I really appreciate that today. Lookin back on my life, my father was strict on me and I appreciate that to the utmost high.

DF: So he had some strong moral values.

LH: Values, right. And that's what I try to instill in my--I only have one daughter. But I adopted a daughter and she has kids of her own. And this (pointing back towards house) is my grand. I have two grands, and I have three grands by my adopted daughter. And I tried to instill that strictness in them. And they--I don't wanna brag on my kids, but--they grew up to be beautiful kids. You know? I never had to go and bail them out of jail or anything. And that's what my father instilled in us by being so strict. My father never had to go to the jailhouse to take none of us out of jail, and never had to go to the courthouse. He'd never been in the courthouse. I don't think he never was in the courthouse except to see a woman who was taxing all his property (laughs). But I really appreciate that in my father. And my mother likewise, she was a strict, strong lady and she tried to instill in us the best, and want the best out of life for us. And I really appreciate that. And she taught us about this area. On Hilton Head Island in the early 40's all the Caucasians left Hilton Head Island. And said, that his place here will never be nothin. So then left Hilton Head Island. They moved, they went abroad. And they said, "Hilton Head, and this area, will never be anything." So in the early 60's they start comin back. They start comin back in this area. And now Hilton Head Island developed so rapidly after the 60's until you... I left here in '69 and when I came back in '81 I didn't know--I got lost just going over to Hilton Head Island because that's just how much it grew since I left. Over here in Callawassie area, same thing happened. Over there in Daufuskie--I have a picture over there of Daufuskie right now (points behind the camera). Malik, there's that picture right over there by the refrigerator? Of Daufuskie. Could you bring it over for me please, if you can? (MA hands a framed, black and white photograph to LH) could you read that inscription down there (LH hands the photo to DF)? That's Daufuskie Island. All the people left from that area and said it just wasn't gonna be anything. You know? And what does it say?

DF: It says, "Gilbert Gullup Montigonie, son of the Daskuffie oyster family and Gullah workers. And this is 1910-1912. [Note: the photograph shows a portrait of three light-skinned men. Two

wear suits and hats, and the third wears a white shirt, possibly with suspenders. Two are sitting possibly on a box while the third stands behind them, in front of the brick wall of a room.]

LH: That's 1912-1928. That's when they left Daufuskie Island. They left that island for their slaves. They left and they went abroad. And they started comin back in the late 60's, early 70's, and now you go over to Daufuskie Island now, and you won't know the place. It's developed so rapidly over there until it's a shame.

DF: Now I know I met you over at Ebenezer Baptist Church which is on St. Helena Island. The island really has been able to sustain most of their culture. Can you talk a little bit maybe about how that came about in that the people on the land are trying to hold onto their land to maintain that culture.

LH: Yes. In the early 50's they built a school over there.

DF: On St. Helena Island?

LH: On St. Helena Island. And there was a college over there. They call it the Mathis College. It was called Mathis College.

BY: Now it's a school [Note: LH and BY are probably referring to the Greg Mathis Charter High School].

LH: Now it's a school. There was a college and a school. They taught us over there for seven years. They taught us over there for seven years at Mathis College. And a lot of people come from different areas go to that college. And that college over there taught us a lot over there. And it's a lot of people over there fight to keep their property over there. They fought to keep their property and they start buildin different churches and they brought in different restaurants and different boutiques and stuff over there. And it's very popular over there now. And right from Martin Luther K, back you go down there to the, there's a beach down there, and it's a lot of fishin and our culture is comin in over there on St. Helena Island. Start from Martin Luther King, all over that area now is developin tremendously. But a lot of black and heritage--that's where we get all our black inheritance from... We tried to bring that over the water, over here. In Jasper county. It started over there in Beaufort, in St. Helena, but we trying to bring it down toward the Florida area and Savannah area. Because right there in our area, right across from where I pick you up from the date, we start every year now to have a cultural, a Gullah culture. We try to develop a Gullah culutre. Every year...

DF: A celebration?

LH: Right. Just like St. Helena. They have a celebration over there every year. So we're trying to bring it here every year so we can get it stronger. And who knows? We could unite down the line somehow and make it bigger. And that's what we're trying to do in this area. We're trying to develop this area here tremendously. Right now, we are at the table now, trying bring some schools in this area, and trying to bring, uh, something for the kids in this area. Like a 4-H club or Boys and Girls club. And we're at the table right now trying to get that off and going. We're

trying to make that move. We're trying to make that happen. We need to make something happen in this area for our young kids. Cause these kids are our future. When we leave, we wanna leave something so they can keep on going. We need to make it happen in this area.

DF: I know St. Helena is a Gullah culture, language. And I say culture and language is trying to be maintained. Is there a push in this area to also maintain that Gullah culture or language?

BY and LH: No.

LH: That's why we want to create something in this area to keep it goin. You know?

DF: So I know a lot of people left St. Helena and they've moved up this way as well. Do you see any of the arts, or anything to still kinda keep that culture alive for the people here?

LH: Yes, yes.

DF: In what ways do you see that?

LH: Well I see they still makin the baskets. They're still doin the arts of the different old pictures, like the (points offscreen) Grandma Moses and stuff like that. And we trying to teach our kids more about black history. We wanna teach them more about our inventors. It's a lot of stuff our foreparents invented and they didn't get the credit for it. And we're trying to install... we're trying to teach them more about that.

DF: About black history.

LH: (To granddaughter) go on back, I'm busy right now. Yeah, we're trying to teach them more about our black history. We're trying to teach them where we started from. We're trying to teach that we, our foreparents, once were slaves. Where our foreparents came from. We're trying to teach them about the motherland. And one day we wanna have, we wanna get this established, that we could take our kids over to the motherland to show them how the kids are strivin back there to get food on the table. The food that you throw in the trash in the lunchroom every day, the kids over there in the motherland wish they had this food. And y'all go over there and see how those kids live over there then y'all know the value of that food you throw in the trash can.

DF: And I think they could also make a connection as to...

BY: Where is the motherland?

DF: ... as to what they have here that was brought from the motherland. And that they also have a lot of things in common. I mean, growin their own food, and maybe even valuing ownership of land. And I think if we could talk a little more about the ownership part, then that would give them a sense of identity.

LH: Right, yes. Because it's like, when I was comin up, my father used to grow food on the plantations, and when the government stepped in, and said, "No, we don't want you to do this

anymore. We want you to buy from us.” I didn’t understand that. When the government stepped in, and tell me in my house that I can’t discipline my child in my house, I can’t see that. I can’t see that. When the government gonna tell me I can’t pay my light bill if I take somethin outta my house and put it in front of my door and try to sell it to try to pay my light bill, I can’t see that. I can’t see that. You know? Because a couple of weeks ago, my light was due, and I said, “Well let me set up a table here, and see if I could get me some money to pay my light bill.” The government said no. “You can’t do that. You have to get a license to do that.” You have to get a license to sell my stuff out of my house after I paid tax for it--I can’t put on the side of the road to sell it? When the government step in and tell me that I can’t do this and I can’t do that, somethin is wrong. Something is wrong.

DF: Now your neighbors, the family members around you, now where are your siblings? Can you tell me who--I know you said your father, bless his heart--decided he wanted to divide it up among the boys...

LH: Now my oldest brother’s over there (points to her right). My baby sister is right here (points to her middle left) in that house right there. My baby brother’s right here (points slightly more to her left). The boy’s next to the oldest back here (points behind her) and the sister’s a year older than me is over there (points to her far right).

DF: And do you ever get together and do celebrations? Do you ever sit down and talk about what it’s like growing up?

LH: All the time! All the time! It’s so funny because my oldest brother said to me one day, he said, “The kids below my brother (points behind her) back there, says you guys are lucky.” He said, “Because when I was comin up,” he said, “my dad was so strict on me until I got a whippin after I was married (DF laughs!)” He said he got a whippin after he was married. You know, that’s just how strict my father was. All the kids in the neighborhood wanna go to the baseball field or stuff like that, we had to be in the field hoardin the vegetables and stuff in the field.

DF: But it taught you a skill.

LH: It taught me a skill.

DF: And that skill was passed onto another generation.

LH: And that’s why I love flowers today. Every piece of flower I just put it in the ground and it just come up like that (snaps).

DF: And I know this area, this land is so rich.

LH: Oh yes, yes. It is very, very rich.

DF: It’s cause a lot of love and attention has gone into this land just like your parents raised you with that love as well. Now how important was education from your father; how far did your father go in education?

LH: My father went to... I think he went through sixth grade.

DF: Now what did he feel about his own children?

LH: We had to be on that bus every morning. Unless we were sick. We would have to be on that bus every morning.

DF: So that's important as well.

LH: Yes. Very.

DF: Strong family ties and the fact that he wanted his children educated. So this land is also heirs property which means it belongs to your family and it's gonna be passed on to your children's children?

LH: Yes. All of us have our deeds to our property. And it will be passed down to the children's children.

DF: And that's important because we do know how important ownership is. You're passing on a legacy. Your father passed it on to you, and you're passing it on to the next generation. That's important.

LH: Yes, that's why that's why it's that um that's where that's where I think that's where that this went and want something out of life kicked in. You know? In order for you... you work hard. You work hard for what you got. And when you pass it down, you don't want your kids just to give up on it and give it away. We instill in them--we instill in our kids: we work hard for what we get. And what we give to you, we want you to appreciate it.

DF: And be able to do the same for the next generation.

LH: There you go. Exactly, exactly.

DF: And that's what I sense on the island. And what I sense from the people that I've been fortunate enough to talk to that there's a strong sense of community, a strong sense of ownership. And their family and their heritage is really tied to the land. And that we need to preserve that for generations to come. And not only that, the stories! Everybody has a story. So you gotta be able to pass that story on. And we're doing this oral history because we know how valuable that story's gonna be not only for you, but future generations to come.

BY: (To DF) where are you from?

LH: Right and we got, we have...

DF: That's right. (Turns to look at BY.)

BY: Where are you from?

DF: I'm from Cleveland, Ohio.

BY: Ohio, uh-huh.

LH: We always instill in our kids. It's a way to make things happen. If you know that your light bill is going to be cut off today, it's a way to make things happen. You have a little table in the corner over there? Just set up a table on the side of the road and put up a "For Sale" sign. This is for sale. To pay my light bill.

DF: Well you've gotten resourceful. You've been able to use what you have. To get what you need.

LH: There you go, there you go. My father always instilled in us, "Don't ever depend on anybody else to do anything for you. (Grandchild appears behind LH briefly.) Go out there and make it happen." You know?

DF: Well, you know that's character. (Grandchild goes back into the house.) It's character building and integrity. That you are able to take care of yourself and that does make you feel like, you know, to be proud of who you are.

LH: There you go, there you go.

DF: I think that maybe one more thing we wanna talk about is just, maybe--we didn't talk about your mom!

LH: Oh, that woman--ooh! (Shakes head) if I was half of the woman my mom was, I would be (in airquotes) "all right." That woman--oh, she used to take anything and make something happen with it. And she was a strong lady. Dedicated lady to her kids. I used to see my mom... I think my mom went through the seventh grade. My mom used to get up, 6:00 in the morning. Cold ice on the ground, ice on the ground in the wintertime, cold. My mom used to get up 6:00 in the morning. "I got to get up and put food in my kids' mouths. I gotta get up and put clothes on my kids." And I don't know how she did it. But she was a strong woman.

DF: She did it because she loved you.

LH: Very strong, loving... (Grandchild appears behind LH again.)

DF: Why don't we get your grandchildren over here? Come over here, sweetheart. These are your grandchildren?

LH: Yes.

DF: So this is three generations here?

LH: Yes. My mom, she was a strong lady. She used to love to farm, and she used to love to do whatever it takes to put food on the kids'...

DF: Make sure you were comfortable. Provide for you.

LH: Yes, yes, yes, yes. And this is my granddaughter, her name is Iselin.

DF: Iselin? Come on over, darl! Come on here.

LH: And this is my little niece, grandniece.

DF: Mhm, have a seat. We're gonna talk about our children here, because this is going to be the legacy that's gonna be passed on to them. So we're gonna make sure you get a copy of this so your grandchildren and your grandniece will be able to share your story as well. And they too will have their story. Thank you so much for allowing us to spend time with your grandmother. I know this was hard because you wanted her attention, but again this is so important because our story has to be told and we appreciate the story you've been able to share with us. And we took some great information back because, again, a love for this land and ownership. The richness and the community, sense of community in your family and the fact that everybody came back. I always notice when we have these interviews, people say they went away, but they came back because we all know...

DF and LH: There's no place like home!

DF: That's what they say! Thank you so much. Thanks again.