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Joseph Murray

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Gullah Digital Archive
Interviewee: Joseph and Rosa Murray
Location: St. Helena Island, South Carolina
Date: July 26, 2012

Unknown: Good afternoon today is July 26th and we are in the home of Deacon Joseph Murray and Rosa Murray. Thank you for allowing us to come to your place to talk to you.

RM: It's a pleasure.

Unknown: This project is part of our Carolina connections and we're in the process of collecting our oral interviews for the Gullah Digital Collection for Kenyon College. And we're gonna begin today with our interview asking, Sister Rosa...

RM: Yes.

Unknown: What was it like growing up on St. Helena Island?

RM: It was just wonderful, I used to take it for granted. Until I went around and started lookin' and seeing all the beauty and I enjoying it, very much. I enjoy it very much, I love it. I wouldn't swap it for the world.

Unknown: That's good.

RM: I love it.

Unknown: Love it, that's strong words.

RM: I love it.

Unknown: Now this um, this Island tell me, growing up on this Island, how long have your family been on this Island?

RM: All our lives. We--

Unknown: And how many generations?

RM: My Grandmother, my Mom, my sisters, my brothers, my Uncles, my Aunts and now my children. My nieces and nephews they all are here. And it just wonderful, it just wonderful.

Unknown: And Mr.---Deacon Joseph Murray can you tell us a little about you growing up in South Carolina.

JM: Ok, well I was born and raised up over there in a, in a community called Biggie Stick[?]. And I come up in that community and I leave from home kinda young age, 'bout the age of fourteen when I leave from home. Went up there to a place they call Spartanburg, South Carolina, stayed up there 'bout twelve, fourteen weeks then I returned come back home. And that was in the year of 1952, and 1953 I went up there to Red Creek, New York, stays up there for a few months up there, workin' up there and finally come back home again. Then in 1955 I went up there to Canton, Ohio and from Canton, Ohio back down to Lake Placid, Florida. And I was travelin' back and forth from, from Ohio to Florida I did that mostly for around ten, eleven years. Than I finally got me a job in Lawrence, Ohio to America's Steel Furnish, I stayed up there probably about right around three years workin' for America's Steel Furnish then I decided to come back home in the year of 1966. And, I was in South Carolina ever since. And that 'bout, right around forty 'bout---you're lookin' at 'bout right around forty six, forty seven years ago. And I was stayin' back home ever since. But I was big enough to know my Grandmother on Daddy's side and Momma's side, both of them passed, in---away in 1956. I was eighteen years old when they passed, but anyway, I was a good-sized young man was ready to step out on my own when they pass. So, my Mom and Dad they live a number of years behind them and finally my Dad died in the year of 1965, January the 18, 1965, he passed. And I believe my Mom and I mo---after my Dad died in '65, that's the reason why I moved back from Ohio in '66. Just to be with my Mother because she had five head of--um, son and four of them livin' in Florida and I was living in Ohio. So that one were livin' in Florida seemed like they didn't wanna come back home to be with my Mom or d---my Mother was a young woman when my Daddy died 'cause she was about fifty two years old when my Dad died. But anyway, I'd been already married, first married that time 'bout six years had two head of kids, a son and a daughter. But anyway, I quit my job in Ohio in 1966 and I moved back to South Carolina just to be closer to my Mom. And I leave from home no more until, up until this day not set to go and stay, I goes down to Florida, yeah visit my Brothers that down there 'bout four, five days and after that I return. And after my first wife died, here about thirty years ago then I was hangin' tight out there with all the people until me and this beautiful lady here got together. And after we got together here 'bout se---eight years ago then we decided we would try somethin' else for a change. Which we got involved and we are--had a real nice relationship among me and her and we had a good relationship with God, because I'm a man that's love to praise the Lord, and love to serve the Lord and she likewise. And we decided that we would do somethin' else for a change so we decided we would get married. And uh, we got married here about, 'bout seven years and about four, five months now. And then---

Unknown: That's a good, good recollection.

RM: Dates.

JM: Then I---we got married then I leave from neck of the woods up there my hometown that cross the [inaudible] river, and I move over here with her. Because she had a house and I had one, but she had a bigger house than mine so I just mover here with her for more room. And then later on, 'bout a year later, then I decided to move my membership from the FFE back to this church, which I was a Deacon up there must be for about twenty, right around twenty six years, I was serving on the Deacons board to my other church. Then I finally come to Ebenezer and I been to Ebenezer now for the last past six years and some months.

Unknown: Now you know that's love, that's love, when you leave your church for twenty eight years to come to someone else's church, that's love.

RM: That's love.

JM: Well you see the reason, the most---the reason why I did that because she had more pull in the church than I did, because she was a---

RM: Choir member.

JM: Presidents of two choir. She was a Sunday school teacher, she was on the miss---

RM: I'm is. I still there.

JM: She was on the missionary board.

RM: President of that too.

JM: And I said, well ok instead of pullin' her from where she was and came over with me, I decided I'd leave from over there come with her. And that's how come I wind up we both in Ebenezer today.

Unknown: Working together, working together.

JM: Workin' out our soul salvation to give God the praise that he would get the glory.

Unknown: That's right, that's right. There is a strong sense of family on this Island, I sense that even in your story. And also a strong sense of, of relig---of spiritual connectedness.

RM: Yes.

Unknown: I find this Island very spiritual and that most of the families are connected to the church.

RM: Yes, yes.

Unknown: And I see that too. Now tell me a little bit more about the land because that's another, it seems that this family is church and is community, but also it's the land.

JM: Yeah.

RM: Like this property---

JM: Wel--Ok go ahead.

RM: My Mom, my Grandmother which her name was Josephine Green, I know that much because the older one before they died I asked questions. And Josephine Green was my Grandmother, she had this property, then after she died then her children, I had like, I had an Uncle Frank and an Uncle Bill Green, and an Uncle Clarence Green, and I had an Aunt Rosa Green, and I had an Aunt Sarah Rodan, and only it was my Aunt that had owned this property. After Grandmamma died, then when they all passed away, then it was left to the leader---the next generation, which I'm a head of.

Unknown: Ok.

RM: So, you know like, right now it's only like five acres here, but we all try to put something on it, add like trailer 'cause we couldn't put no house on it. 'Cause it's not in our name so we had to put everybody who got one, two, three, four, five six trailers.

Unknown: Ok.

RM: And then, we all just you know we have to pay the taxes every year. So we get together and we do that. And being I'm a head of it, it's cheaper than tryin--now, like right now, would've been maybe seven, eight hundred dollars a year. But right now it's like only a hundred and something dollars a year, and it, it's just a privilege for me to be here, and have the authority to talk about this.

Unknown: Yes.

RM: It's very---I don't know how to express it but it feels good. Feels good, and what is so good about it become, any problem they call me. And they ask my advice on different things and I love that.

Unknown: That's the sense of listen to the elders

RM: Yes, right.

Unknown: And the elders havin' a voice.

RM: Yes. And that like right now I have a Grandson over in Hawaii. And it was so precious of him and his wife, they sent for me in March and I stayed over in Hawaii for eleven days.

Unknown: Wonderful.

RM: In march, and I just cannot forget it, you know because everybody was sayin', "How come they sent for you first, and not his Mom". I said, "Because I'm the Grandmother". I brought the Mom here, and the Mom brought him so he had to show me this first then now in November, he gonna send for his Mom.

Unknown: Wonderful, wonderful.

RM: But this property is, I could say, all we got, all we have got the family and we try to keep everybody close together and that's it.

Unknown: Well those are strong ties.

RM: Yes

Unknown: And then when the family has property it's a sense of pride.

RM: Pride.

Unknown: That ownership.

RM: Right.

Unknown: Ownership. It says something it's a legacy, a legacy from your Grandparents that you're able to pass on to future generations in your family.

RM: Right, right, right.

Unknown: And that's the important part.

RM: Yes.

Unknown: And that's where it needs to be told, yes.

RM: Right.

Unknown: Well how was school growing up here?

RM: School was....

Unknown: Education, yeah.

RM: Educational, the biggest thing I didn't like about going, 'cause I had to walk (laughs).

Unknown: Yeah.

RM: You see where I'm living at now, and from here to Penn Center. Just imagine, every morning you gotta get up rain, shine, sleet, or snow. You gotta go to Penn Center to school, Penn School they used to call it.

Unknown: So you attended Penn School do you remember what year---

RM: Well, I started, 'cause we start---had a little school over there in Scot---call[ed] Pine Sch--- how that sound, Pine School. No, South Pine School. And it was just a like, one big building, one building everybody in the same classroom. Than in, oh God whenever, see I'm not like him with the dates and stuff but I was like, when I went over to Penn School I went over there and I think I went like the sixth grade. 'Cause we went first to the fifth grade over here, then the sixth grade we went to Penn School. And I went to Penn School until graduation.

Unknown: About how long did it take you to get to school when you were walking to school?

RM: We had to leave like seven, and you know kids like to play. Well by the time we get to school, we just get to school time enough to dust our feet off and get in the classroom. So it took us like, I don't know, 'cause from here to Penn School is how far?

JM: From here to Penn School? You're lookin' at about two and half hours.

RM: That's what we had to do.

JM: Or three hours. One way.

RM: Then when finally got a bus, everybody had to ride the same bus. Everybody. So that mean, if they come here first we had to be at the road by six.

Unknown: Oh I see.

RM: Then they took us to school. (phone continuously ringing) just answer. But um, but I enjoy going because today I still see some of my old teachers that taught me. And I thought they wouldn't remember me, but they do. And a lot of people that we went to school together today we're, we meet we just like, we're back in the school days. Yeah it was---and then when after I left school I got (whispers) pregnant before I got outta say graduate. So I had my daughter. And I said I wasn't goin' back to school 'cause they not gonna call me Momma and that's what kids usually do when you had a baby, they call you Mommy at school, yeah, call you Momma. Yeah, so. I didn't want that so I told my mother I said, "I'm not goin' back to school". She said, "Oh yes you are". I said, "No I'm not". I didn't go back, I said I'd go to work first. Didn't like to work either, but I told her I would go to work. But anyway she, she said, "Ok". So what I did that other girls, ladies, young womens, and guys that went to school, I finished gettin' my teaching from them.

Unknown: Ok.

RM: But I never graduate.

Unknown: Ok.

RM: But I'm proud of what my Mother, what rubbed off on her, rubbed off on me because like they always said, said you got mother's whit, that's what I got.

Unknown: Yeah, mother's whit.

RM: Mother's whit.

Unknown: Now what kinda stories that your Mother shared with you are teaching you how to be a woman?

RM: You know, you know, she didn't do that. I don't know why but she didn't die an old lady, she was only fifty six years old when she died. She died in '56, the fifth day of September. And we d---I was only twenty so I didn't have chance, the question I ask her was more about the family, who is who and where is---where are they and all that kinda stuff. I got all that outta her. And then I ask, I said, "But now that I'm a mom what can you tell me to d---". She said, "Just be loving to them. Love them, make sure they get something to eat, and make sure they have a place to sleep". [She] say, "Now I can't teach you no more than that, right now". And that was it, she died.

Unknown: Wow.

RM: Yeah.

Unknown: Well you've done a good job and obviously what she said to you impact how you, how you treated and became that mother.

RM: And she, she always taught us about, taught me about---I never seen a bible 'cause she didn't have one. You know when they c---in that age they never say well, went to school so I asked her I said, "How high did you go". She said, "Well I did make it to the second grade and so did my older sister, she made it to the second grade". And I think I was bless because I did learn finally to read the bible. 'Cause when I went to Florida the preacher told me, he said, "You know, you suppos---when you come to church you're supposed to have your bible". I looked at him I say, "Bible"?! He showed me his. I said, "Well I don't have a bible". He said, "You don't"? I said, "No". I said, "I never read one". He said, "Ok". So the next Sunday he came to church, he brought me a bible. And he showed me, he said, "This is Genesis". And he flipped the back and he said, "And that's Revelation, so you start reading here and you ease along until you get there". I told him, "Ok". And that's how I learned to read the bible . And today I love the bible, I stays in it every morning I have my praise and worship right in here, by me and the Lord by ourselves. After he (point at JM) go to work.

Unknown: After he go to work. So Deacon.

JM: Ok. When I was born and raised up, my Mom had eight heads of children. She had seven boys, one girl. And she was blessed to raise five out of the eight. The last three children she had died. But she raised the first five older son. And I'm was the third one, one of the oldest ones. I had---so she raised five head of her son. Two was older than me and two was younger than I do. When we come up, my Mom and Dad were livin' on a plantation. We didn't have a school house on the pla---that particular plantation but it was another plantation right out front, whole other plantation they called Bernie Hall. And that had a Baptist church on that plantation. And what they does they used to teach the kids then in the church, to read. Then the people would have the

church on Sunday for service. And we had to walk from one plantation over to the other plantation, and that been right around three miles one way. Three miles go in the morning and about three come back in the evening. But anyway we had to walk to school because there wasn't a such thing about a school bus. Not like these days sometime, wasn't no school bus. We had to get out there rain or shine and walk from Port Buddy Plantation[?] to Bernie Hall Plantation. To school, school closes about nine o'clock and it out three in the afternoon, we used to have an hour out for recess. Called in nine get out twelve for recess, go back in one and come out two. So we spendin' no more than about five hours total in school per day. You see, but anyway, that's the way we come up on a plantation my Mom and Dad theu didn't had no car they didn't have no, no home of their own set to live in. And that the reason why they was on the plantation because there was---the white people be on the plantation but they had servant house on the plantation. They had a lot of house, more than my Mom and Dad livin' on the plantation was servant people livin' on the plantation. But they had to work for these rich white people, because they live on the white people place. You see? And they, my Mom and Dad did that until they, until God blessed them, they were able to their hand on a little bit of money then they gone and get their own house. And then move off the plantation. You see? And we moved in a little community they called Biggie Stick and they had a school house then that was no church house that was a school house a four room school house. One room was a lunch room and the other three room teach class. And each one of them room teach two class. One teach from first to second, the next one teach from third to fourth, and the other one teach from fifth to sixth. Then when it get to sixth grade we had to move from that particular school and come to another community they call Dill. And Dill had the High School. You had to go there to finish up school, finish up your high school. But it was very difficult for we to walk all the way from Biggie Stick community to Dill and didn't have no transport. Because they didn't have no school bus, so that ch---we, we didn't really get no, so much a high school [inaudible] because we didn't have no where to get from where we livin' at over to, to the other community because that been every bit around, right around from Biggie Stick to Dill you'd been lookin' at been around, right around eleven to twelve miles apart. That's a long walk. For morning, and evening, and every day, Lord. But anyway, we uh, that's the way we come up. But thank God my Dad---my Mother could not hardly read nothing too much at all, she could do a little bit of counting but she was no reader. But my Dad could of read pretty good. And he used to take time out at night and teach me how to read, and teach me how to write, and teach me how to add and subtract, and you know figured, teach me how to tell time on clock and all like that. And you know one thing, I sittin' in this house today and they're goin' to the yonder cemetery, God done took them away, my Dad gone died now for forty seven, forty eight years ago, my Mom just died another seven years ago. But I thank God and I praise God out of my heart for what they taught me. It's a blessing.

Unknown: That's right.

JM: That's right, that's right. And they teach me a lot more other things, more than education because they teach me how to, how to behave myself in the community, we had to honor them older people. We didn't go up there and say, "Hey you". Or, "Hey who is him" and all that kind of stuff. You had to give these older people respect. Oh, yeah if you wanna live among them you had to respect them. And my Mom and Dad, but he had five head of we boys and my Mom had a little job, goes on the produce farm cut collard greens, cut cabbage, pull red radishes all that kinda stuff. And---

RM: Pick tomatoes.

JM: Pick tomatoes and cucumber, that what my Mom used to do. My Dad had a job, worked on sawmill, where they cut the log and, and dress up the board. Big log, and had the mill cut the log into board. And he used to work there and uh, we five boys, we had to take care of the farm. And we five boys who there is, we had to take care the farm, run the house. We had to plant that corn, we had to plant that cotton, we had to hoe that cotton, we had to chop the corn, we had to plant the potato, we had to plant the, the peas, we had to plant the can, huh, huh. We had eight head of cows, out there, none they ain't in no pasture. We had three cows to get milk, we had to milk them cow every morning before we go to school, huh. Every God morning before we go to the school house we had to milk them cows.

RM: I'm glad I wasn't there.

JM: And when we come from school this evening. My Mom done strain that milk, she done jar up that milk, and she got dozens of quart jar up on the table full of milk. And we had a jar, we had to distribute that milk to them, all the people in the community who didn't have a cow to get milk. We had to carry milk to them. See that's the way we come along.

Unknown: And you shared, yeah.

JM: But see back them times, the all the people didn't mind share what they had with others. They didn't have that thing 'bout this stuff mine and you should've had yours, this stuff mine and where yours they didn't go that kinda way. When one got, all got.

RM: I'd know.

JM: You see, people totally different now, they don't do that anymore, huh. People sometimes have to see who comin' by now but then all the people, you know stare across that road they come and holler to my Momma, "Heyyyyy Sister Murray, how 'bout sendin' me some rice over here". See that the way they do. And you know one thing? She'd go in the cantine or wherever she got that rice, and get a pot, and she'd dip that pot, dip that pot, that pot was that tall and that

thick around and she'd dip 'em full of rice. And one of we boys had to carry through our day, we had to carry 'em, huh. They didn't tell us when they'd come for your rice we had to carry 'em to them, huh. We had to carry their milk to them. When they came home, my Mom used to raise and my Dad used to raise about twelve head of hog. And when it come Christmas, they kill about six head of hog, one time. And five for the house, for the house use and they kill one hog and cut that one up, they don't take a piece of that meat and share that meat up to all the people in the community who didn't have a hog to kill. And every one of them, all the people, who had a hog do that. And when this old lady gonna get a piece of meat from me, and a piece of meat from you, and a piece of meat from the next person, she got more meat than some of the people that killed hog. 'Cause it'd be [inaudible] to give her a piece of hog meat. So that's the way we come along, you see? And you know today I-I-I would forget that. I would forget that, that way you see my blood right down to the---I don't mind share things with people. Oh yeah. Who you can share things with, because some people act so independent now they don't want you to give them and before they ain't go nothin'. But the minute you gonna walk out that door they gonna broke in your house and steal all you got. You see, we got people like that today. Wait until you go---leave home and next thing you'll come back your house ransacked, somebody up in your house. Take all of you possessions, you done work for for years the jewelry and all like that. But anyway, but that's the way we come along. When I was a young man comin' up, my Mom and Dad didn't have no car, we come up poor, very poor.

RM: We all did.

JM: We didn't have no car, we didn't have no TV, we didn't have no---

RM: That's why I love my TV today. TV amd phone.

JM: We didn't have no kind of runnin' water, no had to go off in the yard, had to go with a bucket and---we didn't have no electricity, had to burn a oil lamp. Like one up there, you see that [inaudible] lamp up there, that's what we had to burn. That's what we had to get lesson by, in the night. (Video cuts) I'm married to this woman right here for going on eight years now. And I reach out to her just like, way back, this my wife. And I know she is my responsibility, it's my place to see that she supposed to have. If God bless me than she is bless. I can't do nothin' for her until God bless me. When God bless me in a mighty way, than I can reach out to somebody else. And I thank God for that. Oh yeah, and I also use it in my prayer. Day after day, times after time, I fall on my knees and I say, Lord Jesus, I said, I come bow down before you in thy holy name. Askin' you dear Lord to please help me, so I may be a blessing to some of your people. And just like how I ask him, that's the way God is fixin' it for me.

Unknown: We are blessed to be a blesser.

RM: Yes.

Unknown: One thing I also noticed about the Island, not only the fact that it's very connected to the church, very connected to the community, is that they hold their traditions very dear to them. And that this Island is also trying to maintain their culture.

RM: Right.

Unknown: Which is the Gullah culture, which is connected to Africa. How do we, how do you see preserving that, preserving those traditions and that culture, this rich culture, in your families and in your community?

RM: How?

Unknown: Or how important is that for you as a family, as the Murray family.

JM: Well, myself I-I see it very, very beautiful because, when I first come on the---well I been working on this Island, let me start from back on. When I first start workin' on this Island it been about forty five years ago, but I been doing custom work I wasn't livin' over here then. I was doin' custom work for the farmers 'cause I used to work with a fertilizer company and these--- this company used to sell fertilizer to all the big farmers and the little farmers on this Island. And I was one of the man used to deliver the fertilizer and the chemical to these farmers. You see, all over St. Helena and Lady's Island. And not only St. Helena and Lady's Island, but I used to do it all over there in the Bluffton area all over there on Hilton Head, you see. Sometime all back up on there in Bamber county. County on county, whatever the company send me I go up there and I do what the company send me to do. Drive a big truck, spread the fertilizer, spread the limestone, spread the basic slag carry---come back in another truck, hoe all the seed, hoe all the chemical, what---the nitrogen, to the farmers. Rather if it's a produce farmer, a dairy farmer, I still do all of that. But and uh, during that time when I used to do all of those things back about forty years ago I wasn't livin' on this Island then. And after me and Sister Murray here got married then I move over on this Island and I said well, I don't know how I'm gonna like it, you know.

RM: I love it here. I love it.

JM: But you know one thing, it seem to me that---

RM: I love it.

JM:---I said well, try something. I said, try for a change of scene you can like it. And I move over here with her and it seem to m---and it look like the longer I stay over here now, the more I get to like it.

RM: It's a beautiful Island.

JM: Yeah.

Unknown: It is.

RM: It's a beautiful Island.

JM: You know it, it just like when I come to Ebenezer Baptist Church here. When I be comin' to the church for the last, past seven or eight years but I didn't join the church 'til I get there 'cause I was up at another church up there on my---in my community. But after I come to Ebenezer and start to---and I got my wife Rosa here and she been know a lot of churches on the Island more than ever I know, people. That I travel around with her from one church to the other one and meet more people and get to know these people and now, it, it just like I been over here for years, all of my lifetime.

Unknown: Right.

JM: And I love it now. Oh yeah, I love it. I love over here after my spirit done, done got to wind down over here it seem to me like it would take about God almighty now to move me. 'Course I still love my hometown too now, he said no where like home, I still love it over there too. But you know, I love over here now.

Unknown: You've made this your home too.

JM: Yeah. So I told the wife more than one time I said now, if I should pass before you do---

RM: Don't go there, please.

JM: If I should pass before you do. Don't worry about carry my body back up across the river, in that community. My body's in your hand now, so you carry me, wherever you want to carry me.

Unknown: Well I know I think uh, is there anything else you need to add to our interview, that you wanna share with, about St. Helena the Gullah culture, or your church, or your family, community? I think I have to thank you guys for allowing us to interview you---

RM: I thank you for coming.

Unknown: ---and to share your stories with us. And we will give you a copy of your interview when we come back.

JM, RM: Ok.

Unknown: But I do appreciate your time with us, Deacon Murray---

JM: Ok.

Unknown: ---and Sister Rosa.

JM: Ok, well I appreciate you comin' by too.

RM: Yes.

Unknown: Thank you.

JM, RM: Yeah.

RM: Thank you.

JM: Yeah, I appreciate you all comin' by and came to ask some questions and we try to respond to---