DTB 061 Violetta Simpson
Down the Bay Oral History Project (DTB), Acc. 757
Interviewed by Ryan Morini on November 14, 2022
1 hour, 46 minute audio recording • 30 page transcript

Abstract: In this interview, Violetta Simpson is interviewed by Ryan Morini in the McCall Library on the University of South Alabama campus. The interview focuses on Ms. Simpson's experiences growing up and living in the Down the Bay community of Mobile, Alabama, and some of the details of her family history that relate to it. She also offers her thoughts on the ways that urban renewal played out for people Down the Bay, as well as the impacts that it and the construction of I-10 had on the community and its future. She further discusses the role of the Mobile Housing Board, and the I-10 bridge expansion that was in progress at the time of the interview. Ms. Simpson recalls people and businesses that she grew up with Down the Bay, describes community dynamics and mores, and relates some of the community service and organizing work of her mother, Clara J. Simpson.

The Down the Bay Oral History Project focuses on the historic Down the Bay neighborhood on the south side of Mobile, Alabama. Led by Drs. Philip Carr and Kern Jackson of the University of South Alabama, in collaboration with the McCall Library, the project took shape in conjunction with archaeological mitigation work for the I-10 bridge expansion. Down the Bay is a historically Black and Creole neighborhood, and a central focus of the project has been to document the constant threat of gentrification and the legacy of urban renewal.

Preface: This is a transcript of an oral history recording archived at the McCall Library of the University of South Alabama. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word which has been minimally edited for readability.

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DTB 060 Violetta Simpson
Interviewed November 14, 2022

This is a verbatim transcript of an oral history interview recording, composed and formatted in accordance with the McCall Library transcription style guide.

Verbatim transcription is a style of representing as closely as possible the exact wording and phrasing of the speakers on the recording, though false starts, repetitious phrases, and other minor edits have been made as needed only for the sake of clarity and readability. Readers of this transcript are strongly encouraged to listen to the recording.

Please note that if any text is **bolded** in the transcript, this indicates uncertainty of either spelling or accuracy of transcription regarding what was said. Italics indicate emphasis, or are applied to titles and similar proper nouns.

This interview was transcribed by:
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DTB 061
Narrator: Violetta Simpson
Interviewer: Ryan Morini
Date: November 14, 2022

M: Here, I'll press record now, so.

S: Okay.

M: This is Ryan Morini with the McCall Library at the University of South Alabama. Today's November 14th, 2022, and I have the pleasure of sitting with:

S: Violetta Simpson.

M: Thank you for joining me today.

S: Uh-huh.

M: If we can begin just with when and where you were born.

S: Originally, Mobile; and lived Down the Bay, in the Down the Bay community. My mother' folks were from Orrville, Alabama. Her name was Clara Valenia Simpson. And my father was James Lloyd Simpson. And my father's folks were from Louisiana. My mother's folks, as I said, were from Orrville, Alabama. My grandparents moved to Mobile when my mother was young; elementary school age. But anyway, we've been—grew up Down the Bay, lived Down the Bay, stayed Down the Bay until urban renewal came through and basically tore up the neighborhood. We were a very close-knit community, because everyone knew everyone. And all the moms knew all the children—or the grandmoms knew all the children. And the other moms, or the other grandmothers, other fathers, could get on you. If you were misbehaving, they could get—. And then, they would make sure your mom or your dad knew about it, and then you would get punished again once mom and dad got home. It was, as I said, it was very close-knit. Everybody knew each other. And back during that time, children could play outside until the street lights came on. And, once the street lights came on, then you knew it was time for you to go in. Now, that was during school. During the summer, we would go outside to play, and then you would come inside around lunch time. And you would get your lunch, you would take a bath, you would change your clothes, and then the rest of the evening, you stayed inside. Now, you could play on the front porch, but you couldn't go back outside where you would get dirty again. You could be on the front porch and that kind of thing. So, what would happen is—. [Brief interruption in interview.] But you would come inside around the middle of the day, and you would take your shower—well, take your bath; we didn't have showers

then. Take your bath and change your clothes, and then you would stay inside or on the front porch and play. So, what would happen is, other kids in the neighborhood might come over to your front porch, and we'd play games as long as we didn't leave off the porch. And then, maybe the next day or so, you would be given permission to walk to the neighbors' porch, and sit on the porch and play with their children. But it was. It was a very close-knit, very close-knit community. When urban renewal came through, a lot of people had to start moving out. And they did. Because the Housing Board was purchasing the property. And when they started purchasing the property, my mother helped a lot of the other residents that, like, owned their own homes, or even the ones that were renting. Because the Housing Board—at that time, the policy was for them to give you two years of rent plus pay your moving expenses. And a lot of times, if they didn't—if the resident didn't know that those things were possible, then the Housing Board wouldn't share that information. So, my mom helped a lot of them by knowing what was afforded to them. We were probably one of the last families to move from Down the Bay. Because we had a—my parents sued the Housing Board. They offered us a small—we owned a ton of property Down the Bay, and in some other areas, too. And they offered my parents a small, small, small amount of money for the property, and they took them to court. Now, when they took them to court, the court ruled in their favor. So, they were paid a fair market value for their property. And that's why we were some of the last to leave out of the area. But to back up a little bit, actually we had, back during that time, we actually had an integrated neighborhood. We had whites that lived in the neighborhood that we knew, and some of the kids that we played with and what have you; had one family about two blocks up the street, and had another family around the corner. And, it was not unusual—we had, it's now called Prince of Peace, but it was St. Vincent Church. And it sat smack in the middle of our community, of our neighborhood. And it was—at that time, it was a white Catholic church. But anyway, let's see. Things were—people were really happy, and they were satisfied. And they were—and I don't mean satisfied in a negative light. But it was home. And everyone knew everyone, each other, as I said before. And you have—there was a certain tradition with Black families. Black children were expected to address you as Mr. or Ms., no matter who you were or what you were. And, I remember there was one guy in the neighborhood who liked to drink quite a bit. And sometimes he would get a little *too* intoxicated, and somebody would have to help him home and that kind of thing. But he was still Mr. Virgil to us. We weren't allowed to call him by his first name. We were not allowed to disrespect him, or to talk about him, or kid him, or joke him, or anything like that. You know, if we saw that he was drunk—my grandfather had a seafood shop, over on Texas Street. And when we got out of school, it was our job to go to the seafood shop until mom and dad got in from work. And they

would come by the seafood shop and pick us up and take us home, even though home was about two blocks away. And one of the things I have to say about my grandfather—his name was Charlie Lee, Charlie Lee—one of the things I have to say about him was, he was—. [Laughter] He was a women's libber way back then. I had two first cousins—two female first cousins, and then we always had plenty of boys in the family. I had—two, four, six, seven—maybe about eight male cousins. Well, when we would leave school, we went to the seafood shop until mom and dad would come and get us. And while you were at the seafood shop, Grandpa made you do the same work that the boys were doing. If it was one of those days where we had to open oysters, then we—the girls, too—we opened oysters. If it was one of those days where we had to head shrimp, or clean crab, pick crabs, or anything like that—scale the fish, whatever—we did the same thing that the boys did. Like I said, he was a women's libber from way back when. And it was good, because I know how to do all those things, and have done them since that time. My parents owned a lot of real estate. And we had—across the street from us, they had a large rooming house. And they rented out rooms. So, we got a chance to know those people in the big rooming house. And the rooming house had some apartments and some single rooms, like the guys that would come in town to work on the roads or something like that. So, we got a chance to know the regular families. The families that stayed a while got to get pretty close to us, and pretty close to my mom and dad. As a matter of fact, a couple of the ladies actually worked for our family. They kind of took care of us while mom was working, or they would come in, clean the house; you know, that kind of thing. But anyway, I'm all over the place.

M: No, that's all really helpful. So, how did they start—do you know why they started a rooming house or a boarding house?

S: Mom and Dad and Grand—you know, we have these extended families. Grandpa and Grandmother were living next door to this big house, and the big house went up for sale. As a matter of fact, the guy who owned—the family that owned the house—he actually used to teach here.

M: Okay.

S: Yes. He was in the Science Department. His family owned the house. I want to say "Mason" was his name. That was why back when. I graduated from Spring Hill, and then I came here for my Masters. And he was—I took a class from him when I was here working on my Masters. And like I said, that was in the [19]80s. But anyway, the house went up for sale, and they purchased the house. And then, they

started renting the apartments out. And then, there was a need for—like, when the guys would come in from out of town to work or what have you, then it became a need to rent just single rooms. And I think the house had—it was two-story. I think I have a picture of it. I just couldn't go find it. But it was two-story. And in the two-story, it must've had about eight apartments in it. Like, four downstairs, four upstairs. And then, about maybe another six or eight single rooms. So, they just kind of drifted off into that business. My dad was a builder, and he could actually take a wreck and turn it into a mansion. So, he did a lot of the work on the house and that kind of thing. And that's kind of how they drifted into the business. But we were one of the families—we weren't the only ones; there was others. You know, sometimes people get the impression that all Blacks came up standing in somebody's welfare line. There were *lots* of us Down the Bay. I can't say about the other communities, because, you know, I don't know. But as far as Down the Bay, there was a lot of families Down the Bay that were very, very self-sufficient. Children went to private schools. They had maybe a maid that worked at the home, but it still didn't separate us from the other folks that had less. Like I told you, my mom was one of those ones who helped a lot of people get a fair deal from the Housing Board, when Mobile Housing Board decided to come through—because, as I said, they didn't know what kind of rights they had; then, the Housing Board certainly didn't share it with them. And she was that kind of person. She was that kind of person that would just help folks. Let's see, what else? We were there, like I said, one of the last because we had the lawsuit going on. And then, once the lawsuit was settled, then we began to start moving out, you know. We had lots of people who came in the neighborhood as the houses would be vacant. People would, you know, leave because they had sold their house to the Housing Board, and moved in another community. And, they would come in, and they would ramshack [read: ransack] the houses. They would just take whatever was valuable in that, that the occupants may have left behind. They would take those. Sometimes they actually went so far as to just take the wood off the sides of the house. And it was kind of sad. Because it was our home, it was our neighborhood, it was our community. We had grown up in this community; we knew just about everything about everybody that was down there. And then, to see it gradually just fade away almost as if it's nonexistent. Anyway, it was just a sad, sad, sad time for us. What is "checkerboard"?

M: Checkerboard. So—well, you kind of alluded to it. Some people have said Down the Bay was kind of checkerboard in the sense that there would be white and Black neighbors.

S: Yes.

M: So, it wasn't just section, whole sections, but actually people living right next to each other.

S: Yes, yes, yes. And in and around each other; wasn't necessarily, you know, they were sectioned all to themselves. and we were in a section. It was not like that. Businesses on Texas Street: Texas Street for us was like the downtown. Not as many shops, but still like the downtown. One of the things we would do is, on Saturdays, we could catch the bus and we could go downtown to shop. And one of our favorite stops would be Woolworth, because they had this nice, big counter, and these pretty ladies that were the waitresses. They had a knack for hiring really pretty Black women; *real* pretty Black women. And we would go to town. We'd have our little spending money, and we would go to town. And after we did whatever, whatever little shopping we wanted to do—we had Kress. And Kress was like a five and dime. So, you might go to Kress because you wanted to get a new belt, you might go because you're looking for some handkerchiefs, or whatever. And parents would kind of trust you to go do that kind of shopping—not shopping for a dress or an outfit; they didn't trust you to go *that* kind of shopping—but just shopping for something small like that. I had an older first cousin, she was older than the rest of us. So, she was always kind of like the leader for our group. So, yeah. We were going downtown. She had to be with us, because she played the momma's role. Now, she wasn't a whole lot older than us, but she was older. So, we'd go, and we'd go do our shopping and stuff. And then, we'd go to Woolworth. And everybody would always save some money so they could go and eat lunch at Woolworth. And, Woolworth was such a beautiful—it was just beautiful. They served good food—sandwiches, you know, very good food. And the ladies were so pretty. And they actually would have these beautiful handkerchiefs in their pockets, and it would be fanned out in all these different arrangements, you know? And I remember once, I was downtown with my mom, and we stopped at Woolworth. Because my mom would park in the parking garage across from Woolworth. And she would park there so much, when she went to town, until the guys who worked there knew her. Plus, she'd tip them a little something extra anyway. So, she had her own special parking place. They'd save this little spot for her, because she'd go to town on Monday mornings and take care of business, and deposit money, and this kind of thing. So, they had this spot that they saved just for her. But anyway, so we would get something to eat, and then walk out of the back of Woolworths across the street, and there was the parking garage. But we were in Woolworths one day—with my mom, it was just the two of us; very rarely was it just the two of us, because it was more than that in the house, you know. But anyway, she and I were together, and I leaned over

and I told her, I said, "When I grow up, I want to be one of them." Talking about the waitresses. "I want to—." Because they were real pretty ladies, *real* pretty ladies. And then, they would dress so nice, and then they had these fancy handkerchiefs that they could just work magic with. And I told my momma, I said, "I want to be one of those when I grow up." And she turned and looked at me, she said, "You will *never*"—[Laughter]—"as long as I live, work like that. You are going to school, you are getting an education, and you will *not* have to work like that." I didn't realize the ladies really had to work that hard; they had to stand on their feet all day long, and this kind of things. But anyway, so she burst that bubble early on. [Laughter]

M: And how old were you then?

S: Oh, elementary school.

M: Okay.

S: Yeah, elementary school. My father used to also—and my grandfather used to also work at the Cawthon Hotel. And my father was one of the chefs at the Cawthon Hotel. And my grandfather was there; they were both excellent cooks, excellent cooks. And my father and my grandfather would work there. And every night, my dad would go in on Sundays sometimes and work, and whenever he came home at night—usually late, because they'd have some special something, some party, or some ball, or something. So, he and grandpa would work that, and then they'd get in late at night, about 10, 11, 12, whatever time it was. He would always bring my mother a sandwich that he had made for her and wrapped up. And I always thought that was so nice. And then, it was their little time that they spent, you know, because it would just be the two of them. Grandpa'd go on to bed, and it would just be my mom and my dad sitting there at the table. He'd bring her her sandwich, and she'd sit up and wait on him. Whatever time it was, she'd wait until he got in, and then they'd sit at the kitchen table and talk about their day, talk about the kids; you know, what the kids were doing and not doing, and that kind of thing. But anyway, my grandfather died when I was in high school. And then, my father died a little after college. So, it was kind of rough. It was almost like one died, and then shortly thereafter, the other one passed. So, it was kind of rough. Grandpa was a character. Grandpa was the type of person—he came from old school. He was accustomed to being the man in charge. And things were beginning to change. Women were beginning to gain a little more recognition, and a few more rights, you know, and this kind of thing. So, things were beginning to change. Grandpa, he liked to drink; enjoyed his alcohol. And sometimes, we would actually have to go up on Texas Street and get him. I remember one time my mom sent us up to—

it was like a little neighborhood club, little beer joint. And my mom told us, “Go get Grandpa out of that no-good place!” Now, my mom never drank, never smoked; you know, and she kind of felt like the rest of the world’s supposed to be like that. So anyway, we went up there and we knocked on the door—because we couldn’t go in—knocked on the door, and the guy who ran the place or owned the place came to the door. “Is Mr. Charlie in there?” “Yep, Mr. Charlie’s here.” “Well, my mom said for him to come on home and leave that no-good place!” We didn’t know we weren’t supposed to say that! [Laughter] But we did! So, we gave Grandpa—I’ve got two first cousins, males, and one would be on one arm and the other one on the other arm; and we would be walking, you know, Grandpa back to the house. Now, we’re talking about maybe three blocks at the most. And the closer we got to the house, the more Grandpa, “Get away! Get away!” Because he knew that my mom was somewhere peeping out of the window, watching to see what kind of condition he was going to come home in. So, he would make sure he was straight by the time, you know, she got within viewing distance. And **he did that**. And then of course, he would tell her: “I am your daddy! Don’t you ever send those kids for me ever again! I’m your daddy, not your child. Don’t send—.” And next couple of days, he’d go visit his friends, and have a few drinks too many—the whole little group of them. Now, they were all retired men, okay? The whole little group of them. They’d get together, they’d play checkers, they’d play dominoes, and they’d have their drinks and things. Next couple of days, he’s back around there again; Momma sent us right back to get him again. We’d go get him, and we’d go through that same routine again. Yep. But anyway. And we, even now, when we get together—like for Thanksgiving and Christmas, those kinds of things—and Mardi Gras, those kinds of things—we talk about and laugh about some of the—, “Do you remember when you had to go get Grandpa?” You know, so we, you know, talk about all of that. But—

M: And so, he retired from the seafood place? Is that—?

S: He retired from several jobs. He did—he was kind of an entrepreneur all the time. He had the seafood shop, but he also sold—way back when, before we were thought of—he sold coal and that kind of stuff. Because people were using that to heat the houses and cook the food, and what have you. So, he did that, too. I can’t even begin to imagine all the things, or even list the things, different jobs he had, you know. But anyway, he was living with us the whole time. Just about the whole time.

M: But so, he was always good at kind of figuring out a way to make some money doing something.

S: Oh, yeah! Yeah, very much so. He actually—. [Laughter] He actually—well, as long as this is not going to the police or anything! [Laughter]

M: Oh, no, no, no.

S: Well, he's dead and gone anyway. He actually would loan out money, and you pay the money back with interest. So, you know, he also had that little business on the side, too. He always had something going on.

M: Where did he get his seafood from for the—?

S: Oh, that's an interesting story! Way back when, he would actually take a buggy with the horse, and they'd go to Bayou La Batre. And they bought the seafood from Bayou La Batre.

M: Wow.

S: Yeah, he sure did! He got the seafood from down—he had different ones that, you know, vendors that he would frequent all the time. And he got his seafood from down there. There was a seafood shop, another seafood shop, that was a bigger one, a white one, that was about four or five blocks from us. And that was Jemison's. And I always thought that was so odd, because my mom's maiden name was Jemison. And they were, like I said, four or five blocks away from us. But anyway, but yeah. Grandpa would go to Bayou La Batre and get his seafood. And he went with this horse and buggy down there to bring his seafood back. Now, we also had a guy they called Pijeau: P-I-J-E-A-U. He sold ice in the neighborhood. Now, this was when I was really little. This was—I must've been maybe three, four, five? Something like that. But anyway, he would ride through the neighborhood. He had a buggy. And he sold ice. Only, his—he was a part of, he was an employee of Crystal Ice. And the buggy, which wasn't really a buggy because it was metal, and then it had Crystal Ice written on the side of it. And he sold ice. And they had signs. The women had signs that they put on the front of their house, and they'd turn it a certain way if they needed two, or they turned it a certain way if they needed crushed ice, or a solid block of ice. You know. And the thing that was so odd about—everyone knew Pijeau. Everyone knew Pijeau, Mr. Pijeau. But the horse would know where to stop! I mean, he would just be going along, and the horse would just stop. And sure enough, that would be one of his customers. And then, Mr. Pijeau would take them the ice, he'd get back on the buggy, and just before he could get completely settled, the horse would take on off to the next one,

and stop at the next. And it would be the next customer. Now, the boys would get on the back of—[Laughter]—on the back of the cart. Because it was about as long as those extra-long pickup trucks? Yeah. It would be that kind of length. And then, Mr. Pijeau would be sitting up front, you know, guiding with the horse and what have you. And the boys would climb on the back, because on the back would be chips of ice. So, they could get some chips of ice and put it in their mouth, you know? Cool off during the summer. Mr. Pijeau, if he saw it or heard it, he would just turn around with that long whip, and go *pop! Pop!* [Laughter] And sometimes, he'd hit one or two of them. Of course, when he—when they would get off, if they got a lick or something and get off—of course, they'd eventually get off anyway, because he'd pop them until the point where they'd have to get on off. But they weren't about to go home and tell Mom and Dad, because they knew they would get themselves in trouble, you know? But he would, he'd pop them. And just turn around and keep going; horse go on to the next stop. When he got to a certain street, the horse would have to—the buggy would have to be turned around and come back up to go down one of the side streets; the horse knew exactly where to go stop, where to start turning around, and what side street to go down. You know? It was just amazing to see that. It really was. But Texas Street had some nightclubs. It had some restaurants. There was a shoe parlor, where you could go and get your shoes repaired, and shined, and all of that. They had a couple of—several of the—like five and dime stores, just smaller five and dime stores where you could go and shop. There was one man on the corner—which is another place that Grandpa and some of his older, some of the older men, older retired men would kind of hang out at. He was Mr. Buddy Malone. And *that* was a white business. They would go there, and they would sit down, and they would play checkers, they would play dominoes; and they may sit there all day. Around the heat and around the—had a stove in the middle of the store, and they would feed it coal. And they'd sit around there. And they would talk and lie. [Laughter] You know? And just have a good time. Sometimes we'd have to go to Mr. Buddy Malone and get Grandpa, bring him home, too. You know. But anyway, that's the type of place it was. We had—now, my dad used to read—my dad was an avid reader. He read three newspapers every day. If he didn't get them in the mornings, he would finish up in the evenings when he'd get in. And one of them was the *Philadelphia Courier* [read: *Pittsburgh Courier*]. He read the *Philadelphia Courier*, and he would get the *Wall Street Journal* from the hotel. And then, it was the *Atlanta*—?

M: *Constitution*?

S: *Constitution*, yeah. Yeah. But he read those three every day. Because back during that time, you used to get real newspapers; not like what we get now.

M: Okay. Well, can I ask—

S: Sure.

M: What are the boundaries of Down the Bay, as you know them?

S: As we knew them, at that particular time, it went from Government Street to—beyond—. Well, Government Street to Virginia Street. And then, from Broad Street over to—because see, there was no interstate over there. So it went all the way over to Conception and St. Emanuel. There were some streets—I remember talking to the mayor, Mayor Sam Jones, at the time; and I was telling him that when the interstate came through, that cut off a part of our neighborhood. Because that was also a part of our neighborhood. As a matter of fact, for us to get to school, high school, we had to walk over to Conception Street to catch the bus to go to school. And now, Conception Street is on the other side of the interstate. Okay? And I was telling him about—and he was saying there were never any houses. Say, "Yes, there were houses! There was a whole neighborhood over there!" Because I had a couple of friends that went to school with me that lived over there. There were churches; and, you know, just a regular community over there. But anyway, it went all the way to Broad Street. Now, we didn't consider the other side of Broad Street, the west side of Broad Street, we didn't consider that as being Down the Bay. Just like we didn't consider the south side of Virginia Street as being Down the Bay. I forgot what we called that area, but we had another name. We would go back there on our bikes and pick blackberries.

M: Okay.

S: Yeah, we'd go back there and pick blackberries. Now, we moved to—but my mom didn't like that place, didn't like out there very long. So, we didn't stay long. We moved to what they call Texas Hill, which is now Oakleigh Garden District, okay? We had a house over there. Matter of fact, still got houses over there. But they had a house built, and we moved over there. And while we were over there, we learned, of course, the kids in the neighborhood all eventually learned each other. So, we would go in the graveyard and play, and pick blackberries. Some of the best blackberries, some of the biggest blackberries in the world, would grow in the graveyard—because they could grow freely, you know? [Laughter] No one to bother—. But, and then there was Crawford Park, which was a white park. We were not allowed to play in Crawford Park. So, we would go through the graveyard to Crawford Park and play until we'd see some of the white families coming in. If

we saw the white families coming, then we would pick up our little things and we would, you know, run back; over in the graveyard, and then on back to the house. But anyway.

M: I've been told there was actually a city official who used to patrol the park to make sure that Black children weren't there. Do you remember that person?

S: I don't remember who it was, but yes, it was. Yes, it was. And if I remember correctly, I think it was a Black man. I think he was a Black man that was kind of like an officer or something? But I know we weren't supposed to be in the park—and all of us knew that. Even though the park was right here, and the cemetery was right here. And right across the street from the park was where the Black neighborhood was; but we still were not allowed to go over in the park and play, unless we slipped. Now, we would get some spankings from being in the park, especially if our parents found out about it, you know. We would get spankings. Because it was dangerous! You know? Somebody could do something to you or whatever; they could put you in jail, you know, whatever. You know what the parents would tell you: stuff like that. So, if we were ever found out, we were always punished for it. But to us, it didn't make any sense; it was right across the street! So, we couldn't we play in it? So, we would go and take a chance on getting in trouble.

M: What did your parents tell you about segregation growing up? I mean, it just seems like it would've been even harder when there are white neighbors in the neighborhood, and yet, there are also these signs that say, you know, "White only," "Colored," like—.

S: It was. It was.

M: Yeah. How did they kind of help you to navigate all of that?

S: One of the things, like Woolworths: they had the counters in the front of the store, which were nice, and bigger, and longer, and, you know; that was for the whites. But the one in the back was really nice, too. Not as big, not as nice, but it was nicer than anywhere else. If you went to Kress, you had to stand up at the counter and eat. And then, Kress had another area over there for whites to eat, where you could go in and sit down. And eventually, all of that changed. My mother was very active in—well, my dad was too, but my mom more so because my mom was a little more vocal than my dad was. But my mother was very active in all of the civil rights. She was a member of the Non-Partisan Voters League; that used to be a group. And

then, it was two or three other groups, and she was active with some of those. But they just explained it to us that that was just the way it was, and you had to live with it. Now, my mom looked like me, only fairer. And my mom was one of those kind of people—we had the income where we could've done private school all the way through. As a matter of fact, my parents paid for me to go to Spring Hill College out of their pocket. We had the kind of income where we could have gone—all of us could have gone private school all the way. My mom was the type that, she was more realistic. She made you understand that it didn't make any difference what you look like: you know who you are and what you are. So, she would say things to us and made sure—I had one other brother that, well, he's really a first cousin, but my parents ended up adopting him because their mother died early, and he looks like me. All the rest of them are kind of—look like, I say, "coffee with cream in it." You know, that kind of a color; kind of mocha. But anyway, my mother was the type that always made you realize that she would not allow us, even though we could live differently, we had the means to—there was always two cars and a truck, and a lot of the families didn't have any transportation other than the bus, you know. And we always had good. They always took two vacations a year. And anything else, you know, a lot of people—middle class. Good, comfortable middle class. And there were a lot of Blacks in the Down the Bay community that lived like that, that don't know anything at all about a welfare line; don't know anything about any kind of public assistance. Didn't live like that; owned their own business, worked in their businesses; had funds and things. That's the same neighborhood that General Cooper, Gary Cooper, came from, about two blocks over from us. But my mother was always very careful to make sure that we always realized and never forgot who you were and what you were. Now, when the Civil Rights Movement kind of got started, it was a little late in Mobile. Mobile was always so complacent. Because I don't think Martin Luther King ever came to Mobile. I heard that—from the older heads—that he offered to come at one time, and I think—or, he got here or something, and they turned him around. They did. Because they felt like everything was fine in Mobile. Everything wasn't fine in Mobile; still not fine in Mobile. But especially my mother. My mother was very, very careful about making sure—it didn't make any difference how we lived, or what we had or didn't have; you are just like the next family down the street. You know, so don't ever think that you're better than. So, she instilled that in us. And even today, it is not difficult for me to approach anyone. I don't necessarily have to—and it's helped me all through my career. I'm a retired educator. And that's another thing: I worked 25 years in the school system. Twenty years in predominantly white schools. If you were any good as an educator, you would have to fight your way to get to a Black school. Maybe my last five years, I went to Council—which is in the Down the Bay community—just before it became a magnet school. But it was never, never

difficult. I worked in Bayou La Batre at Dixon Elementary. And at that particular time, it was like mid [19]70s, early [19]80s. It was right at the time when a lot of the Vietnamese was coming in—well, not just Vietnamese, a lot of the Asians. Because it was Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, they came in. And they were good people, real good people. Kids were good kids. I mean, they were a little different, but you expect them to be different. They're coming from a totally different kind of world than the world we live in. The parents were very respectful of authority. Very respectful of the school, and the teachers, and the principal. You weren't going to see the parents up there unless there was an issue. And it had to be a serious issue to them, because they felt like when their child was with you at your school, then you're totally in charge. And whatever that teacher said or that principal said, that's what it was. So, we had an incident where one of the parents—well, the mother and father came. So, my principal—I was assistant principal then—she sent for me. So, I went in with her, and we find out what it was. And we kind of handled the situation and what have you. And the parents were—I knew it was serious, because first of all, they don't come to the school unless they felt it is really important. So anyway, when it was all over, my principal told looked at me and she told me, she said, "You know, you are really, really good with the Asians." And I told her, "No, it's not that I'm really good with the Asians; I'm a minority myself. So, I know how they're feeling. I know what they're worried and scared of and what have you. I'm a minority. I can relate to that." You know. But anyway, that was one of the things that happened along the way. As far as the Civil Rights Movement was concerned, my mother was—she supported, financially, a lot of them. And she took part in some of the organizations. They did a march one time in Mobile when we were getting ready to vote, and some of my other cousins took part in that. But she was rather outspoken when it came to the civil rights stuff. She was pretty outspoken. She was pretty good at kind of throwing her weight around at times. She had—this is going to sound horrible—but she had the advantage of looking a certain way, even though she was a member of another group. And sometimes, that gave her kind of a foot up, you know? And she would use it. It used to burn me up. It used to make me so angry! She always went to a white beauty shop. They had Hammell's and they had Gayfers; she'd always go to those places to get her hair done. It used to burn me. It used to make me so angry. Because I felt like if you were Black, you are super Black. You don't do any of that. As I got older, I realized a lot of times she would use what she looked like to help somebody else. She could walk up to—in a business, and it might be three or four people ahead of her—but because she looked like she looked, they would, "Oh miss, may I help you?" But she would stand back: "No, they were first. Let those people go." So, you know, it used to make me angry that she would use it like that, but then as I got older and a little more mature, what have you, then I realized that.

"Oh, yeah. Might be a good thing, the way she's doing it." It was her way. Okay, let's see. Oh yeah, Davis Avenue, yeah. We talked about going downtown. Going downtown was like an event. Usually on a Saturday, when you finished up your chores, you could go downtown. Christmastime we would go downtown. Well, we would go downtown other times too, but important times would be like Christmastime. We'd go to Mardi Gras. We'd go up on Government Street to see the parades. The whole family would have to go together, and the whole family would have to stay together. The whole family would have to come back. Now, because it was—what'd I say? Eight, three—like 11 of us altogether, we could go to the parades. Everybody could walk to the parades; it wasn't dangerous. You could walk up to the parades, you and all your other little siblings, and then see some of your friends. And we're all walking to the parades, and then we'd walk back home. You would be in big trouble if one of you in the group was missing or got left behind, okay? But anyway, we'd go to the parades and have a nice time. And then, downtown, we went downtown, like I said; we usually would go downtown on Saturdays, because that's when we got our little extra spending money. And you could go and spend some of it. You weren't allowed to spend it all, but you could spend some of it.

M: We—oh, sorry. You mentioned Christmas. We've heard that roller skates were really big.

S: Oh yes! That's what you did on Texas Hill! You got the skates, you would get a new pair of jeans, and you would get a, generally—what do they call that material? Fleece-like shirt.

M: Okay. Oh, flannel?

S: Flannel. Flannel shirt. Okay, and that's what you got for Christmas. And that's what everybody got for Christmas. It didn't make any difference how much money your parents had, or how much money your parents didn't have; everybody got skates, pair of jeans, and a flannel shirt. Okay? And you would go skating. Oh, you'd get a bag, and in the bag it would be like an apple and an orange and some peppermint, you know, that kind of little thing. And it would be tied with a little bow and what have you. And we'd all get together and go skating on Texas Hill. Well, Texas Hill was actually—is actually—a hill. So, you'd go up that and you'd go skating. And I mean, it would be kids from all over; the whole Down the Bay. Maybe 200 kids up there trying to skate down the hill, on Texas Hill. And that was kind of our fun thing for Christmas. And you did it—probably, because you'd be out of school anyway—you did it probably a full week or more, before it began to get old

and people started, you know, not attending and what have you. But yeah, we did that. Davis Avenue, we went to school on Davis Avenue. So, we'd walk to Conception Street, catch the bus, and ride over to Davis Avenue to the school, and get off and go to school. Sometimes—we had a lady, she was a cousin, another cousin, Ms. Mable. Sometimes if we could get past Ms. Mable, she worked for us—for my mom and dad. Anyway, if we could get past Ms. Mable, we would walk to school, to Davis Avenue from Down the Bay, just so we could keep the bus money. And then, there was a favorite bakery on Davis Avenue right by the school. So, we could go there and buy us two donuts, and donuts be about this big. [Laughter] And they'd put them in these little paper bags? And by the time you got out the store, the paper bag would be just dripping with grease. Sometimes we'd walk so we could hold onto our money. We'd either buy it on the way to school, to class, or we'd buy it after we left. So, yes.

M: Can I ask about Our Alley?

S: Mmhm, yeah.

M: Yeah, what do you remember about Our Alley?

S: I remembered it was a place, it was off of Texas Street. And there were—it was an alley, and then there were a row of houses on either side going down. Now, according to my parents, and for us, it was supposed to have been a dangerous place. So, we were never allowed to go in there, even though I did know some kids who lived in there. I think—and this is just me—I think they were pretty poor that lived in those houses. None of the houses looked like anything just passing by. But I do know—and it was down closer to Conception Street. Because you could go straight down Texas Street and run into Conception Street. So, Our Alley was further down on that end. But we were always taught not to go in there. So, that's the extent of my knowledge. Like I said, I did know some friends who lived in there, you know. But our parents had always told us, "Don't go in that place." You know? That's about it that I knew about Our Alley.

M: I mean that helps, though, because I-10 ran right through it, so it's not there at all anymore.

S: No, it's not. I-10—and see, back during that time, I-10 tore up a lot. First of all, it tore up our community. Urban renewal was the first half, first start of that. And then, I-10 came through and just, you know, did the rest of it. And I mean, it was a community before that. And we probably would have been content being there

until, you know, we got grown and moved away or something. But yeah, I-10 came straight through it. And see, back during that time, people didn't know; especially Black folks, they didn't know they had rights that they could fight this stuff. You know, and then people could come along and tell—I didn't know I lived in what was considered a "ghetto" until I got to Spring Hill! And I'm in some classes at Spring Hill, and they're talking about, "minority neighborhoods, and they're called 'ghettos.'" Wait a minute. You know? But anyway, we would've been content staying, and then they started—you know, they were coming around and they were telling you—because they wanted you to move anyway. They didn't want you to give them any resistance. I'm talking about Mobile Housing Board. Horrible. Horrible people back during that time. I'm not that crazy about the executive director now. But anyway, they would come around, they would talk to people about their houses being substandard, and this and that, because they want to put the idea in your head that you need to get out of this place. When their ulterior motives was, "We want you to move anyway," you know? "You're either going to move on your own, or *we're* going to move you out." So, it did. It was. When did I first hear about the community being called "Down the Bay"? All my life.

M: Always called that.

S: Always called Down the Bay. I was at Spring Hill, and we were doing some research on—we had to do a research project. And our project was on the urban renewal: how that came about, and why. And we were actually at the Mobile Housing Board, Claiborne office, downtown on Claiborne Street. And we were doing, you know, pulled out—they pulled out all the books and stuff, put us in a conference room so we could work as long as we wanted to work. And we found out that the idea for the urban renewal actually came about 40 years before it was actually happening, you know? And in their paperwork, it was considered "Central Texas Street Community." All we've ever known is Down the Bay. And it will always be Down the Bay, you know? And now, we have—I still live down there. As a matter of fact, moved away for a while and then came back. And we have a very active neighborhood association, and it is still Down the Bay. Now the city recognizes it as "Down the Bay community." So. We fought pretty hard for that. Let's see, going downtown, we talked about that. Talked about the newspapers. I remember we did have a boycott. We did have a bus boycott. I remember—and I don't remember, because I was young—I don't remember all the details to it. But I do remember we were downtown shopping. And it got to be kind of late, you know; it was beginning like sunset. So, we knew it was time for us to go home. It was just cousins together. And we had to pay—they were called jetties. I guess J-E-T-T-I, or something like that. But anyway, it was a man, and he would pick up several riders. And you gave

him a certain amount of money. And he would take this one, drop this one off first, and then drop that one off, and eventually get to your house and drop you off. And that went on for a while. I don’t remember, I guess I was too young to be tuned into any of that. I don't remember the circumstances, and I don’t know if it was related to the boycotting that was going on with Rosa Parks and all of that. I don’t know if that was connected or not. But I do remember riding home a time or two in a jetti, what they called a jetti. Just gave the man some money, and that was it. Voting, very important. Pushed, very much so. My mom worked with all of that. Made sure that people she knew—I remember my parents paying some people’s poll taxes. Because they put the poll tax in place? And some people—I think it was like $2.50? But back during that time, that was like maybe $50. Some people would work all week long and get paid $50 for the week. So, $2.50 was—you could go to the grocery store with $2.50, you know. Because back during the time in the grocery stores, they would sell you a bag of rice for a dollar, and they would bag it up in a separate little bag. They’d sell you a bag of beans for a dollar. You know, you didn’t have to buy the whole package. You could buy smaller pieces. But anyway, I remember them paying some poll taxes for some people, because they couldn’t vote. They didn’t have the money to—they didn’t have the money to spare, you know, to pay for the poll tax. And I remember my parents paying for some people’s poll tax.

M: Well, your mother was involved with organizing; do you know how she got started with the Non-Partisan Voters League, and some of the other—?

S: She had a very good friend, Ms. Pauline. And Ms. Pauline’s husband was Mr. Joe. And Mr. Joe, I think, from day one, was always an activist. He was always fighting for this cause or that cause. Wherever he felt that there was some injustice. Now, that was another family that was financially secure. They had a lot of rental property, too. A lot of real estate, too, that they owned. So, both of them, Mr. Joe and Ms. Pauline, were financially secure. So, I guess that gave him the leeway to do some things that other people couldn’t, because they had a job, and somebody was holding a job over your head. You know. But anyway, I think she was the one—her and mom were very good friends, and I think she was the one that got mom started with all of that. And started to going when they were younger; started to go into some of the different organizations, to the different meetings, and what have you. Yeah.

M: Do you remember their last name, or were they from Down the Bay?

S: Malone. Malones.

M: Malone, okay.

S: Mmhm, do you remember—what's the Malone guy that used to play basketball?

M: Oh, Karl Malone?

S: Karl Malone. It's Karl Malone's aunt and uncle.

M: Oh, wow!

S: Yeah, uh-huh!

M: Where they from Down the Bay?

S: Who? The Malones?

M: The Malones, yeah.

S: These Malones were, but the Malones—and Vivian Malone that integrated Alabama, that's one of the nieces, their nieces. They were actually from Crosstown, but *this* set of Malones lived Down the Bay. Yeah. And one of the Malone girls—as a matter of fact, Vivian's sister—is married to Eric Holder, who used to be in the Obamas' Administration.

M: I remember that name.

S: Yes, uh-huh!

M: Down the Bay produced a lot of successful, very successful people.

S: We did, we did. Yeah, we had a—and I know you know about Hank Aaron.

M: Oh, yeah. And Satchel Paige.

S: He's from Down the Bay, okay? And actually, the house that's out there is not the house that he lived in. That house, the house that's at Aaron Park, that house is the house that came from Toulminville. When they started this urban renewal, and people started moving out, well, one of the hottest areas for Blacks to move in was Toulminville. So, their family moved to Toulminville, and that's the house that they

settled in Toulminville. But by the time that happened—Hank Aaron had been playing ball for years before that happened. I went to school with Hank Aaron's youngest sister. So, and I know that by the time urban renewal came through and was just about winding out, they had moved to Toulminville, number of years. White flight—segregation and white flight, stayed—. You know, we were already going to schools that were segregated. We used to pass Barton Academy going to our school. When we were walking to school? We passed Barton Academy going to our school, which was probably about two miles further. And again, of course the kids would hang their heads out the window, and call us names and this kind of thing. And we'd say names back to them, and that kind of thing. Gradually—. We had a lot of white businesses that were in our community. Because like I told you, our community was probably 50/50, but gradually they started moving out, moving—. Somebody came along and convinced them that they were different, and that they were better than, so they didn't have any business living around all these Black folks. And they gradually began to kind of move out. And then, when a lot of Blacks started moving to Toulminville, then *that* group—because Toulminville used to be all white. Toulminville, when they moved out—when the Blacks moved in, then the whites moved out of Toulminville. Prichard used to be a very dangerous place for Black folks. You could go and you could work there, but it was like a sundown town. By a certain time or night of whatever, you got to be out of there, or you go to be on your way to a job there, you know? And they got to know that you're working there, and you're Mr. Joe and Mr. Joe works right here; you know, that kind of thing. So, it used to be—. Chickasaw, Blacks couldn't live in Chickasaw. I had a friend, when I was at Spring Hill, she and I were working on our project together, and we had to meet over to her house. So anyway, I went over and I told her, I said—I was telling her mom and dad, I told them, "You know, this is the first time that I had ever had a friend in Chickasaw." And the dad quickly spoke up, and he said, "We don't live in Chickasaw. We live—." I said, "I thought this was Chickasaw." He said, "This is Chickasaw *Terrace*." They could live on the outer edges of Chickasaw, but not in the town of Chickasaw. So. When we lived on Texas Hill, that same family—they were the Barneys, B-A-R-N-E-Y. They were the Barneys. Mr. Barney, the friend of mine's daddy? His daddy ran for, I think it was either mayor of Prichard, or councilman for Prichard, or something. But he was like the first Black to run in that position, and it was really dangerous. They were actually—I think they either set the house on fire, or did something like that to the family. So, Mr. Barney had to disappear for a while. So, he came and lived with us. My parents let him stay in one of the bedrooms. Now, I knew he came to live with us, because actually he really worked with my dad some. He was a carpenter, too. And he was at the house; I was little then, too. But he stayed with us for a while. And then, I didn't

find out until I was older what were the circumstances of him living at the house; he actually was hiding out. Do you know how dangerous that was—[Laughter]—for my family? Back during that time? But anyway, he came and stayed for a while. I think he eventually just kind of dropped out of the race or whatever it was. I don’t know if it was councilman or what. But it was some office he was running for in Prichard. And the people were looking for him. They had either set the house afire, bombed the house, did something like that. But his family had to leave town. So, the family went in one direction, and then Mr. Barney went in another direction. And he ended up spending some nights in the spare bedroom at our house, so. Amazing.

M: And your mother seems to have been a very strong person.

S: Oh, she was!

M: Where did that come from? Was that just who she was?

S: My parents were—on my mom’s side, were German and African American. Her dad was actually German. He was actually Irish German. He was—his last name was McKenna. And she was not even the oldest. She had a brother that was older, but it was always like she was the one that was more in charge. And she just—I don’t know. She was very strong. One of my brothers—and when I say “brother,” I’m talking about those cousins, my first cousins. Anyway, one of them, he named her, way back when: Queen. His nickname for her was Queen. And eventually, we all started calling her Queen. Now, he *treated* her like she was a queen. Okay? And he was her favorite. And she didn’t mind letting you know he was her favorite. [Laughter] And she *felt* like she was a queen, you know? [Laughter] In the family. But she was a very strong woman, and she was very outspoken. And a whole lot of things, she really didn’t have to endure. A lot of the times, because of the way she looked and the kind of life that she really lived, being able to afford some things that other folks couldn’t afford and what have you. But it didn’t really make that much of a difference with her. It really didn’t. And, she was really good. And I guess I get some of that. Because, you know, she was known for trying to help the underdog. She really was. I have to give her credit. She was strong, now. She was strong.

M: It sounds it.

S: My dad was kind of quiet. Of course, with somebody like that, you’d have to be kind of quiet! [Laughter] Going to the beach, yes. We would go to the beach, and

the boys could go to the end of our street. I lived on Elmira, and the boys could go to the end of Elmira and go swimming. Now, they would know how to swim. Most of the girls didn't. We didn't know how to swim. The boys could go down there and swim. Because, you know what I mean, you were at the bay down there. When we went to the beach, is when we would get in the water. And we—and the beach would be Faustina or Chestang, down on Mon Louis Island. So, we would go down there. And they had a dance hall, and they served—had a concession stand and what have you. And we would go—and then, we had some relatives down there. So, sometimes we'd stay overnight, and we could go and go crabbing, softshell crabbing, and fishing, and all of that. So, we did a lot of that. The movies we went to: we could go to the Saenger Theater, which was kind of like a treat. But the Saenger Theater, you had to go in through the back door, and you had to sit in the balcony. You couldn't come downstairs and sit in the area downstairs. That was off limits for Black folks. So, we would go to the Saenger Theater on occasions. The regular movie house was Harlem Theater, which was right there. I saw a picture of it in the case out there, but it was right in the neighborhood. And across the street was Pope's Luncheonette, which was a restaurant, seafood restaurant. Well, you could get hamburgers, too, and hotdogs. But so, we could go over to Pope's Luncheonette and get us a sandwich or something. You can buy a hamburger for a quarter. [Laughter] A quarter back then! And I think hotdogs might've been, like, 15 cents. Shrimp plate—because I know, I used to buy them—shrimp plate was $1.25. $1.25; one dollar, 25 cents for a shrimp plate. And that's the whole plate. But our hangout on Sundays—you couldn't go anywhere or do anything unless you attended church. If you didn't go to church, you had to stay home. But Sunday evenings, we could walk around the corner to the Harlem Theater, which was about two blocks from us, and we could walk there and go to the movies. It was, like, maybe 25 cents to get in. And a lot of times, your friends would come from other parts—that you went to school with—and they lived in other parts of Down the Bay. Because you actually played in your community. You didn't go outside of your community. And I should say, you played within maybe a two-block radius in all directions. You didn't go beyond the two blocks to play. So, if you had friends that lived five or six blocks over, you wouldn't see them unless you were at school. Unless it was a Sunday and they came to the movies. So, that's where we would—that would be our treat on Sundays. After you had done your chores on Saturday, and went to church on Sunday—if you didn't go to church, you didn't get to go. You had to stay home. Everybody else could go, and you had to stay home. So, that was our movies. Every now and then, when we got a little older, like high school age, where we could get on the bus and go Across Town, we could go to the movies over there. But that was a rare occasion, not something that you would do every week. It had to be something very special.

M: And you'd said Pope's Luncheonette was a seafood place? Was that their best stuff, their seafood?

S: The best stuff was the seafood. They made some pretty good hamburgers, too, though.

M: Okay.

S: But it was—yeah, the seafood. And it was like a neighborhood—and see, because they knew everybody, you couldn't go in there and sit down, because you were underage. You could go in and stand at the counter, and they'd fix you a hamburger or they'd fix you your plate, and you'd take your food and you had to leave. Because you couldn't come in and sit down, and stay and sit down, you know. And even if you going sit down and eat your plate, and maybe drink a Coca-Cola or something like that; you couldn't do that, because they knew your mom, and they knew your dad, you know? And, they were going make sure mom and dad knew it! [Laughter] Most of the time, before you got home. But yeah, that's what we would do. And we'd go to the movies on Sundays; that was our little outing. I played on a baseball team. We had one guy, he was a postman, and he helped—his name was Aaron. Aaron Butler. And he—big family, big Down the Bay family of Butlers. Anyway, he organized a girls' baseball team. So, he would come around and pick us up, and then we would go to Maysville to play ball. We played at the park out there at Maysville. And of course, the Maysville girls didn't like us, because they thought the Maysville boys liked us. And they didn't really like us. But anyway, so we would, you know, play ball; sometimes we'd win, sometimes we'd lose. And then, we'd all get back in the car with Aaron. And it might be eight—he had an old-fashioned station wagon—it might be eight or nine of us in there. Sometimes even sitting in each other's laps, it would be so many. And then, we would go buy—there was a Black drive-in. Not a drive-in; it was a Black—. Well, kind of like a drive-in restaurant. Kind of like a Sonic?

M: Okay. Okay.

S: It was over in Toulminville. So, after the game, we'd all load up in the car, and Aaron would take us over there. And then he would buy hamburgers and a drink for all of us. And then, he'd take everybody home, drop everybody off, you know, at home and what have you. We did that for a number of years. As a matter of fact, some of us still get together, maybe once a month, and do a little something. Go

to a nice little restaurant or whatever. I don't know if you know where Saucy Q is on Government?

M: Mmhm.

S: The owner, his wife, Jackie, was one of the ones that played on our baseball team.

M: Oh okay, okay.

S: Yeah, she did. And she was one of the younger ones, but she played on the baseball team. I think we covered just about everything. Can you think about anything else?

M: I got just a couple of other questions if that's okay.

S: Sure.

M: Well, so one, let me think—so, one thing a couple of people have mentioned is that—I don't know what your thoughts are on it, but around the time the city really started pushing eminent domain and trying to take properties, someone said they did at least some of that after Hurricane Camille came through, and it was easier to get people to agree because the neighborhood was kind of in disrepair. Do you remember anything like that?

S: I remember Hurricane Camille. We came out—what year was Camille? I can't remember.

M: I want to say it's [19]69.

S: Okay, I was still in school then. We came down Texas Street in a boat. We had gone to—I had another cousin, and she lived with her grandmother. And, we called her grandmother "Momma Suzie." And, we went to—my parents sent us to go see about Momma Suzie, because Momma Suzie even then was probably 80-some years old; 88, whatever. So, we went to see about Momma Suzie. And they lived right on the Ditch. Their house was right next to a ditch. So, we were—they were afraid that something could happen, that they were so close to the Ditch and all this kind of stuff. So anyway, we went to see about—so, we got Momma Suzie, and we got Brenda, the cousin. And we were trying to walk back. And the water was up so high, until—I don't know why our parents sent us, but they did. But anyway, a guy was coming down Texas Street in a boat. It was just a small boat,

you know, with the motor on the back? And he picked us up, and we rode down Texas Street in a boat. But, I—you know, urban renewal was coming through. And urban renewal was probably the thing that started all of that.

M: Okay.

S: You know. I wouldn't say it was—now some people, I'm sure, may have been, especially if they were the ones that had been flooded, that they wanted to get out then. And they may have. But if they did, they got a little bit ahead of urban renewal. Because all the houses and the businesses and everything else was still intact at that time. Yeah.

M: Okay. Okay, and that's—. Yeah, just wondering about that. And I mean, did your mother try to fight the Housing Board at all?

S: Oh, yeah! Constantly! Constantly. Is there a fight she didn't get in? [Laughter] Yeah, she did. She did. Now, here's what prompted the lawsuit. There was the Mitchell man. Old man Mitchell. He owned some red brick apartments right up the street from us. I think it was about eight. And probably four of them were vacant, empty, and were in disrepair. And the Housing Board came through, and because he was a buddy with the Alexander man, who was the executive director, he gave him something like $7500 per unit, and the unit, and the apartments, it was like eight of them. So then, that's when they decided, "Well heck, we going to court!" Because they weren't offering them anything like that. So, they went on to court with it and won. Won the case. They sure did. Which was a good thing. But the judge just happened to be—I told you my dad was a contractor; the judge just happened to be a guy that he had done some work for. [Laughter] So, he looked pretty favorable on them, you know? Which was a good thing. Because he wasn't offering—and it was amazing when my mom would tell those stories about how much they had offered some of the people, some of the money, for some of the houses. I mean, like $7,000. $10,000. And there was nowhere they were going to buy something for that. And then, if you were renting, they would maybe help you with some moving expenses, but they didn't tell you anything about you're supposed to get two years of rent. Because they had to, you know, uproot you. So yeah, she had quite a few she helped with that.

M: Well, and so, part of the justification they gave for urban renewal was, they used words like "blight" and things like that, or "disrepair." I mean, what do you remember about the condition of the houses?

S: The reason—now, we had some that were like that. But we had some really nice—we actually, our neighborhood, our current neighborhood association, we've been trying to get some signage. And we had a guy come in to design the signage boards. And because we had so many sports figures that came from Down the Bay, we wanted something on the signage about sports, and so we did. We got that. And we got something on there about Mardi Gras. And we got something on there about General Cooper, on that. You know, kind of, just something representative of the community. But anyway, we were talking to—the guy who designed it, he put “historical” in there. So then, they came back to us—our city council members came back to us—and said, “We can’t use that, because it’s not a historical neighborhood.” Actually, if urban renewal hadn’t’ve come through there, it would’ve been a historical neighborhood. Down the Bay would have been older than Oakleigh Garden District. Because, you know, the people settled here, and then later on they kind of migrated further out, and further out, and what have you. So, Down the Bay would have actually been older. We actually had—the house I lived in, the house we all lived in, was a historical house. It had the white columns with the wrap-around porch, with the—how many rooms did we have? I think we had about five bedrooms. And I don’t know what the square footage; I got a picture of that, too, I just have to find it. But it was a historical—there were several historical houses that they tore down. Of course, we didn’t know at the time they were historical. We learned that much later. We had to move out of our particular tract because they were taking the property for a middle school—which never came.

M: Yeah.

S: Okay? We never got a middle school. So, it wasn’t a matter of—because they did have the option of, you could either fix your house up, and then the Housing Board would loan you the money to fix it up at a lower interest rate; or they would buy the house and demolish the house. Well, we didn’t have that option, because we lived on the tract where the school was supposed to have gone. Of course, it didn’t. Never did. But there were lots of homes, nice homes—*very* nice homes—that were torn down, because of urban renewal. There were not lots of—we lived in a historical house. Now, from what I know now, it was a historical house. It didn’t have a plaque on it, because they wasn’t putting plaques on anything back during that time on any of the houses. But it was a historical house. And they—there were others, too, that were torn down because of urban renewal. Sure did!

M: So, I mean, a lot of the damage kind of happened already, I guess, to Down the Bay. But are you concerned about the bridge project now, this new expansion?

S: Heck yeah! We have fought that thing through one, two, came after—three. Sam Jones, and then after Sam Jones, it was Stimpson. We have fought that thing through three mayors. From Dow, to—who came after Dow? Was that Sam Jones?

M: I'm learning still. I moved here in March.

S: I think it's been at least three mayors. And we have fought it. Because first of all, the first exit—they're supposed to close the exit that's on Canal Street. So, the first exit will be on Virginia Street. Now, the Chamber of Commerce did a survey; this was maybe 5 years ago, 10 years ago, I don't know. But they did a survey, and something like 79 percent of the people in Baldwin County worked in Mobile County. So, if you keep that number in mind—although I know it may have changed over the years—but if you keep that in mind, if they put the exit—and the exit is supposed to go on Virginia Street—if they work downtown, they have got to come down Virginia, back up Washington Avenue, to get back downtown. Now, Washington Avenue is narrow, okay? It's two lanes, and then you get up a little further and it turns into a turning light: three lights. That means they're going to have to take some property on either side in order to widen it, okay? So, if that much traffic comes through, then it's going to split our neighborhood again. Because our neighborhood actually goes all the way over to Broad Street. So, it would be another split just like the interstate did. So yes, we have fought it, and yes, we are very concerned about it. Now, the exit they—although ALDOT doesn't listen to anyone; not anyone. It is their idea, and their ideas alone. I'm not an engineer. You're not an engineer, I don't guess.

M: I am not, no.

S: Anybody could have told them that that dangerous curve going into the tunnel—the Wallace Tunnel, was dangerous. That you didn't need—but it went on for about 15 years before they finally closed it off. I mean, anyone in their—and they're supposed to know better! [Laughter] But anyway, we, with the exiting on Virginia Street, there is a nursing home right there on Virginia Street. There is the magnet school on Virginia Street. The little lady right now stops all the traffic for the kids to cross and the cars to come out. That bridge is supposed to be eight lanes wide, and then it's going to pare down, okay? And the first exit's going to be on Virginia Street. Now, what if the little lady stopped all the traffic? That means the traffic's going to be backed up onto the—and do you think they listen? We have done meetings after meetings after meetings. We've had meetings with the mayor. I know Mike Dow, Sam Jones, and somebody else was in there, maybe before Mike

Dow. But we've had meetings after meetings after meetings about the issue. We know that there's a need for it. I have gotten caught in that traffic, you know, coming back from Baldwin County or what have you. So, we know that there's a need. It's not that we're saying we don't recognize that there is a need. We know that there's a need. It's supposed to be a pass-through bridge, okay? So, we suggested, "Why not put the exit at Brookley Field?" If it's down there, it would definitely be pass-through, because no one's going to go all the way to Brookley Field and turn around and come all the way back up to get to downtown, okay? And then, they still are going to keep the tunnels open. And then, they have the Cochrane Bridge, Cochrane-Africatown Bridge. But they haven't paid any attention. And Brookley Field can handle high volume traffic. Lots of lanes and things, especially when they finish all of that down there—Airbus and all of that. But Airbus doesn't listen. Not to anybody. If they didn't come up with it, it didn't happen. Because we've had—I can't tell you how many. And then of course, it went on and passed, you know, that they were going to do it. And we're not saying that there's not a need. We know that there's a need. We know. We get blocked in *now* with the traffic going back through the tunnel. Because our streets, you know, sometimes you can't come out of them, because the traffic will be down Government Street. We get blocked in with the Mardi Gras. We're not the only ones, there are other—I've gone to some of those meetings—there are other communities. We've got East Church Street right there. And then, our—East Church Street sits here, Down the Bay sits here. And we're all blocked in during Mardi Gras. And we've gone into some meetings about hopefully being able to change that route some. And I don't know how successful those will be, either. So. I guess that's one of the things you have to deal with, you live so close to downtown. Yeah.

M: Hopefully someone will listen at some point. I guess the—because you, I really appreciate your time this morning.

S: Yeah, mmhm.

M: I guess the main remaining question I have—and you've touched on this already—

S: Yeah.

M: What does Down the Bay mean to you? What does the community mean? What's the importance of the community to you?

S: It is very important to me. There is a lot of legacy there. It's a lot of history there. My parents, you know, met and were married and lived in that area. I grew up in

that area. And like I told you, I moved away and then moved back; and I'm back Down the Bay, you know? So, it's very important. Now, it's not necessarily that important to the younger ones, like my grandkids. Both of my grandkids and my daughter—well, my son was transferred, his job transferred him over to Texas. He's an engineer, transferred him to Texas. And my daughter lives in West Mobile. My granddaughters live in West Mobile. [Laughter] So, it's not that important to them. But it's very important. It's home! It's home. My parents are in the cemetery right there on Virginia Street. My grandparents are there. Aunts, uncles, cousins are all there. So, it's home. It's home. It is. And I would just like for it to remain a residential area, you know? There—now, I have to say this: we do have some young folks that have moved in. And they have bought some of the older homes, and renovated them and what have you, moved in. We sold a house to a little young couple. As a matter of fact, I taught the girl in that family. And we just recently sold them a house last year. So, some young folks are beginning to move in. I guess they're realizing the advantages of the house—the community, you know. Being so close to everything that's going on. I lived in Theodore for a while, and I promise you, anytime I wanted to go anywhere or do anything, I had to travel into town. And then, gasoline like gasoline is, too, you know. But it's very important. As I told you, we have a very active neighborhood association, and we fight for our neighborhood to remain a residential area. We got a—was a sports complex that's closed now. And, it's on what they call "Texas Street Place." And we have fought three different companies that wanted to move in there. But it sits smack in the middle of homes. And they—to move in there, to get that property, we'd have to change the zoning. So, the zoning would have to go to a business zoning. And then, they were going to have to bring in 18 wheelers. Who the heck wants that coming through your neighborhood? So, we have been successful in fighting three companies to keep them away. We would love to be—we would love for the city to take over the property, and just lease it to some of the nonprofits or whatever. We don't have a problem with that. We just don't want some industry moving in there, and we've got to endure with all the traffic and changing of the zone. Because if they change it to a business, where it can be zoned business, then if they ever move out, any kind of business can move in there. You know, and then we've got that with—. But anyway, that just demonstrates how much we care for our neighborhood, our community.

M: Yeah, it's good that someone's doing that work to look out for the neighborhood.

S: It is. It is.

M: Yeah. Well, because it seems like, at one time, there was more of a shared voice, and now it's a different—different moment.

S: It is. And we've got a different group of people now. We don't have the folks that, a lot of the folks that came up in the neighborhood, grew up in the neighborhood, parents came from that neighborhood; we don't have a lot of them. We have people that have come in from other places, even though it's young couples. I told you about those two or three young couples that have moved in; they came from other places and moved in, you know. So. Anyway, it's not—and then, people don't connect like we used to, you know? We had the telephone, but I mean, we didn't have cable and all of that kind of stuff. So I can just go in my house and shut up and entertain myself; I didn't have to come out and meet my neighbors or talk to the folks across the street, and all of this. I happen to live—my particular street is only two blocks long. And we all know each other. I live on an old-fashioned street, because we all tend to know each other, and we all kind of look out for each other. If I have a package coming, and it's sitting on my porch, then someone—one of my neighbors will get it for me and hold it until I get in. And then they'll bring it over. And I do the same for them, you know. So. But anyway—but it is, it's walkable, and that's one thing we're moving back to. Walkable, or bike trails; it is that. We have lots of people who ride through the neighborhood with their bike, you know, on the little bike trails and things. So, it is that.

M: Yeah. It really did kind of paint a picture before when you were talking about all the kids playing out on porches and all the—

S: Yeah.

M: It's—yeah.

S: And the boys used to play football in the streets. In the streets. And then, if a car came trying to get through, they'd toot the horn, and boys would clear the street, the car go through, and then they'd go right along back to playing. Yeah, sure did. Sure did. But it's home, and we would like to keep it that way. We would.

M: Sounds like you're doing important work.

S: We're trying. We're trying. We run up against some obstacles, but you know, we still don't give up. We continue to try.

M: Well, I think that's all of my questions.

S: Okay.

M: I don't know if there's anything you would want to add for the—.

S: I can't think of anything. I think that's—we kind of covered some of everything.

M: Okay, well, thank you very much.

S: Sure, sure. I enjoyed this after I found the place. [Laughter]

[End of recording]

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