

O. H. 78. 17

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer, and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be used for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

I, Lee William have read the above and, in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Lee William
Interviewee (Signature)

6-22-78
Date

JACKSON STATE COLLEGE
Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

I, Eli Grayson, in view of the
(Interviewer, please print)
historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the
interview with Mr Lee William, knowingly and
(Interviewee, please print)
voluntarily permit Jackson State College, Jackson the full use of this
information, and hereby grant and assign to Jackson State College,
Jackson all rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information,
whether or not such rights are now known, recognized or contemplated.

Eli Grayson
Interviewer (signature)

O.H. 78.17
Interview Number

6-22-78
Date

DRAFT

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY
Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
-Farish Street Project-

INTERVIEWEE: Mr. Lee Williams
INTERVIEWER: Mr. Eli Grayson
SUBJ: Farish Street Historic District
DATE: June 22, 1978 (Date of Interview)
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G: Mr. Williams, you were born in 1900?
W: January 10th.
G: January 10, 1900. That makes you 78 years old.
W: Right.
G: How long have you been around this area?
W: Every since 1915.
G: 1915.
W: I stayed around here partically all my life.
G: All your life around the Farish Street area?
W: Farish Street, Church Street, Oakley Street, that's where I've lived,
and Grayson Street.
G: I understand that area in there use to be an area where people lived
and there were also clubs and restaurants there.
W: Well, there is a restaurant on Farish Street. One restaurant on Farish
Street was Proctor's Cafe.
G: What about Home Dining Room?
W: Home Dining Room wasn't there then. You're talking about way back.
G: Yes, I'm talking about way back.
W: Well, Home Dining Room could have been in the 1930's.
G: That came recently.
W: 1920's or 1930's. Yes, but way back. There wasn't but one cafe and
that was Proctor's on Farish Street. It sat right beside the Alamo
Theatre.

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G: I'm interested in restaurants but I guess at that time you called them cafes.

W: Well, they moved up there. They were never down on Farish Street. You were around Hamilton, on the corner of Hamilton and Farish when the Home Dining Room came in ?

G: Well, what was his name?

W: James Holmes.

G: James Holmes?

W: That's right.

G: You know the man who runs the place now is called Lee. They tell me he is his grandson.

W: What Lee? That ran the Home Dining Room?

G: I'm talking about the Big Apple Inn. Then they called it the Big John's, everybody called it Big John's.

W: That's Big John's. There wasn't any cafe at that time it was all residence.

G: In that block?

W: In that block from Griffith Street on up it wasn't anything but houses, wasn't any cafes in there.

G: Well, what was Big John's then?

W: That's all I know is Big John. After the boy got big enough he took over. The Big John I'm talking about drove a Hot Tamale Wagon.

G: Oh, he drove a hot tamale wagon?

W: Yes.

G: He sold hot tamales before he went into business?

W: That's right.

G: What kind of hot tamale wagon?

W: Just had it on a two wheel cart and the tamales in a lard can. He pushed the cart up and down the street.

G: That was something he probably made then?

W: Yes, he made that. It just had two wheels.

G: You know I've never seen one of those.

W: You haven't?

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G: I saw them on T.V., guys pushing apple carts, something similar to that.

W: Yes.

G: And he sold hot . . .

W: Hot tamales.

G: When and where did he open his business?

W: He opened up right where it is now, right in front of Central Church.

G: Where he is now?

W: Where he is now. That's where he opened up. He was selling hot tamales out of a house. It was two or three of them Mexicans living together. it was in 1927.

G: You are saying that Big John was a Mexican and that he married a Colored woman?

W: Oh yes. His mother is a Negro and his daddy was a full-blooded Mexican.

G: Oh, that's Big John you're talking about who's a full-blooded Mexican?

G: That's right.

G: That's the cause of him starting out in the hot tamale? I've been by, in fact I stopped by yesterday. I ate some of them. He makes what we call hot smokes.

W: This Big John I'm talking about, he didn't make hot smokes. He made hot tamales. It was real hot tamale.

G: When he opened up his cafe he sold hot tamales.

W: Still sold hot tamales. He would make them out of ground sausage and meal and pepper.

G: He made it himself?

W: He made it himself.

G: These was the kind that was in the shuck?

W: I think the old man died not too long ago, I don't know what street he lived on. *Start here*

G: I know where you are talking about over in that area.

W: ~~Well~~ he died on that street. He put it through there, I ~~can't~~ think *it is* ~~of the street right now. Right down on~~ the corner of Randolph.

G: Randolph, that's the street where his father was living?

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- W: That's right.
- G: ~~That's where Big John was living.~~ I mean that's where his son was living.
- W: That's where the old man was living.
- G: That's Big John himself.
- W: The boy lives in Washington, D. C. somewhere doesn't he? At least he use to.
- G: ~~Well his son,~~ ^{his son one} there are two of ~~them~~ living ~~now,~~ one of ~~them~~ lives on Rhondo.
- W: ~~The old man?~~
- G: ~~That's his son.~~
- W: The old man lived on Rhondo for a long time after they moved off ~~Farish Street~~ ^{off} Hamilton Street. He stayed on Hamilton Street and he stayed on Henry Street. That's where they made hot tamales when they first came here.
- G: ~~You know one thing Mr. Lee, honestly,~~ he was mighty successful. ^{because} A lot of businesses have come and gone, as long as you said he has been there.
- W: He made more money than any man I know of, just off nothing. He took nothing and made something out of it.
- G: ~~Well,~~ I'm trying to find out what is it he had special.
- W: At that time he didn't have anything special, just hot tamales.
- G: Later on he started selling pig ears and hot smokes.
- W: Yes, ~~that's right,~~ ~~after the boy got up big enough,~~ When his children were small he ~~wasn't~~ ^{didn't} selling anything but hot tamales.
- G: Hot tamales, ~~that's~~ ^{is} all he made?
- W: Yes, ~~hot tamales.~~
- G: Did people buy like they buy out there now?
- W: Oh yes. Man they would drink that corn whiskey and buy 'em. They weren't but 10¢ a dozen.
- G: ~~A dime a dozen?~~
- W: ~~A dime a dozen.~~
- G: Was that a lot of money?

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W: ~~During that time~~ that was a whole lot of money, a dime.

G: How much did it take for a man to eat a dinner at another restaurant?

W: Well, you could go ~~right down~~ on Farish Street and ~~you could~~ get a fifteen (15¢) cents stew. ~~Right there~~, I can't think of the old man's name. He made a fortune ~~there~~. Right in that alley there where you go into the back of Seale Lilly. I've gotten old and I can't think of all the people's names. Reeves is his name.

G: Reves?

W: Reeves.

G: Well, I didn't know Big John was a Mexican. I wonder where he came from?

W: I reckon he came out of Mexico.

G: Well wasn't there other Mexicans around here?

W: Yes, up there was plenty Mexicans in 1927. I worked on the railroad putting in the GM&O station there and Mexicans worked on the railroad there.

G: Maybe that's what brought them to Jackson.

W: It was three or four of them staying together. One killed another there. Threw a butcher knife and killed him right there on Henry Street.

G: Threw a butcher knife at him?

W: Threw it in him, not at him.

G: You know the restaurant that we're talking about the Big Apple Inn, is still growing strong but of course they are going off of something else now.

W: Oh yes.

G: I was just wondering when I was in there the other day, I was just looking around, because I knew I had to do work on the business. Well I saw by their mannerism and the clothes they had on that they were people of the upper class that were coming in there.

W: They sold hamburgers and everything cheaper than everybody else until wages came up. He was selling them for 5¢ and 10¢. When he went up

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- W: to 10¢ others went up to 15¢ or 25¢. People would go in there and get them 12 at a time. "Give me a dozen hot dogs, hamburgers or pig sandwiches, pig ear sandwiches.
- G: Different kinds of people went in there, not only the ones that was hungry and just had a nickle.
- W: No, it was people at home who were hungry and didn't want to cook. They would just drive down there because they could get them cheap and didn't cost them that much.
- G: How long did it take for him to give you some service?
- W: Not any time. He put them on the grill or already had them boiling. Depending on what kind of sandwich you wanted. If you wanted a hot dog sandwich, they would already be in the water boiling. Just take it out and put a little mustard on it and that was it.
- G: From what I could learn about him, he probably was one of the first fast food services we had around.
- W: He was absolutely.
- G: What did the place look like on the inside? Were there any tables?
- W: When he first started, he had one table. He didn't have any place for you to sit down. Just go in there and order what you wanted and line up.
- G: You would have to line up to get a meal. Just like the fast food places like McDonalds? Get your sandwich and go. Was any school children going there?
- W: Well, I don't know. No children from over Smith Robertson's because
. . .
- G: Did they usually have any night clubs down there?
- W: Not back in that time. They had dance halls.
- G: What about the Crystal Palace?
- W: Crystal Palace, that was a dance hall.
- G: Yes, that's what I mean.
- W: The Crystal Palace, later on there was the Shephard's Cafe on Farish Street, P D. Shephard. It was between Church and Oakley for a long

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- W: time and moved from there to Farish Street, up by the Crescent Laundry.
- G: He competed with all those businesses, didn't he?
- W: Who Shephard?
- G: No, Big John.
- W: Yes, he held his own. A lot of them went out of business. He still stayed right there.
- G: Yes, that's what I'm trying to find out. His food price was such a thing that most anybody could buy it.
- W: That's right.
- G: What kind of man was he?
- W: He was a very nice man. He was always pleasant with his customers. He treated you with courtesy. He was a very nice man. I've been in there a million times I reckon. He was alright.
- G: Did he ever do anything else but sell food?
- W: I never knew him to do anything but sell hot tamales and smoke sandwiches.
- G: At the time, I guess they could go around down to the pool hall and play dominoes for recreation?
- W: They shot pool nad dominoes came in later. They didn't do anything but shoot pool and gamble a little in the back. That was in the Barber Shop.
- G: The Barber Shop, who ran that?
- W: A fellow named Jones, O. D. Jones. He left and went to Chicago and he died in Chicago. Then old man Conic, Frank Conic, Jack Conic, their daddy ran a Barber Shop too, rihgt in front of the pool hall.
- G: Mr. Lee, I was talking to a young lady by the name of Ojetta Smith Hart. Her name now is Ojetta Martin. She said her daddy had a clinic somewhere in that same block, by the name of Dr. Smith.
- W: Yes. I use to go to Dr. Smith. It was a house they didn't have a building like doctors have now. It just was a private house.
- G: They called it a clinic?
- W: Yes, it was a clinic. It had beds in it.
- G: She was telling me that people would come to the clinic and when they

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G: got ready for lunch or something, the would run down the street and get something.

W: Right down the street, not quite five houses down from the place.

G: You think some of those people use to go down there and get those sandwiches?

W: Sure.

G: What about the people from the pool hall?

W: Well, they would eat mostly at Proctor's Cafe. It was a cafe down in that part of town. That was the only cafe they would eat there. All the Negroes, gamblers and everybody went to Proctors to eat. It stayed open late at night.

G: About what year was that?

W: Somewhere around 1918, 1919, or 1920.

G: Do you remember anything about when they started to work on Smith Robertson School?

W: On the building?

G: Yes.

W: No, I don't remember. Smith Robertson was built when I was big enough to go to school.

G: Before you were big enough to go to school?

W: Yes, Smith Robertson is an old school.

G: Somebody told me that it burned down once or caught fire.

W: It caught fire, it never did burn down.

G: Yes.

W: Professor Lanier wanted to be buried at Smith Robertson School yard.

G: Did they do it?

W: No.

G: Would you say Big John was an average peddler arriving on the street? Did he work harder than anyone else?

W: With the hot tamales he was just a peddler. The he went into the cafe

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W: business. After he quite pushing the buggy, he got that place. That is where everyone went to get hamburgers and hot dogs. He started out pushing a two wheel cart all over town. That's where he started at on Henry Street. A bunch of Mexicans, about four or five lived in the same house. If I could only think of the woman's name. She was a nice looking brown skin woman, hair about that long, woman he started living with.

G: But that wasn't his wife?

W: No, he married another colored woman after this woman died. I don't know if they were married, but they stayed together. I don't know if she was his wife or not. I don't know anything about that part, but she was a real nice looking woman. I use to know her name, but I can't think of it.

G: Why do you think he opened the business where he did on Farish Street?

W: That's something I don't know. I guess the place was empty. The place was built after Big John took over. All those little houses from Hamilton Street on.

G: You're saying Big John just started in a house?

W: Yes.

G: I didn't know that.

W: Yes. It wasn't any building like it is now.

G: What did they call it?

W: Big John's.

G: Big John's. Was he a big man?

W: He was a pretty good size, a little heavier than you are. Everybody called him Big John because he was larger than any of the other Mexicans that stayed there.

G: What do you think that could have been a reason that those Mexicans came to Jackson?

W: I imagine they came here traveling and looking for work. Some came here from the Delta after they carried them up there to pick cotton. If I am not mistaken a lot of them came here in 1927 from the high water.

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- G: High water in the Delta?
- W: They shipped them here in box cars off the plantations up there. Some of them went back... some of them didn't.
- G: Could he have opened his business on Capitol if he wanted to?
- W: I don't know. Mexicans always have encountered Whites. They could go places Negroes couldn't. They treated them two steps higher than they treated us. They could go anywhere they wanted to go.
- G: So most of all the Blacks were right around in the Farish Street, Lamar area?
- W: That was his whole trade, colored folks. You didn't hardly see a White man.
- G: Did they have any churches down there?
- W: Yes, Central.
- G: Central?
- W: Yes, and you don't know about . _____ St. Miller _____ Street is right above the Home Dining Room. Next door to Miller _____ is the shoe shop and next door is the undertaker. Frazier and Collins Undertaker. Later in the years, Frazier and Collins pulled out from one another. Collins moved across the street where they are now. Frazier sold out to Collins. He left there and went North. He got in with some White people.
- G: Frazier?
- W: Frazier's son.
- G: Where did People's come in?
- W: People's was a branch from Frazier and Collins. They had always been up from North Farish between Cohea and Monument.
- G: Those big houses down there. They were there when you came, right? You've been here since 1915?
- W: Yes. I started work for the City when I was 18 years old. I worked here until I retired.
- G: Let me ask you this question. Was there any other street that people went to other than Farish Street?
- W: Yes, South State Street. There was a few cafes down there. Steven

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- W: Johnson's Cafe and they had one on Pearl Street. The law closed the one on Pearl Street. Later on they got all the Colored folks off State Street to Pearl Street.
- G: They all began to come in that area. What was the first movie theatre that you remember?
- W: Movies?
- G: Yes, where you go to the show.
- W: Right down on Farish Street.
- G: Alamo?
- W: The Alamo was the only theatre, not the first one, but only one. Now Central, we could go to Central on Capitol Street but we had to go through the back and sit upstairs. They didn't allow us downstairs.
- G: What about pool halls. Were there any pool halls down there?
- W: It wasn't but one pool hall. It was right there on Farish Street. It was the only one. Do you know Randolph?
- G: No I don't.
- W: He use to run the pool room.
- G: I heard about him.
- W: His daddy was a white fellow. I don't konw his name, use to run a shoe shop.
- G: Am I correct at thinking that when Farish Street started opening up buisnesses that it more likely started on the North end by the YMCA or back here toward Capitol?
- W: Down on Farish Street between Capitol and Amite, Barber Shops, all the Colored Barbers, right there on Farish Street.
- G: That's the northern end?
- W: No, between Capitol and Amite.
- G: That's on the south.
- W: That's on the south end way on down. See, Farish Street starts north at Capitol, that's the 100 block that's North Farish Street, on up is where people lived. They had a baker shop in there. The colored folks had a baker shop a long time ago named Harry Lewis. From there on there

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- W: wasn't anything but living. It wasn't any cafes or business place.
- G: You mean starting about from Amite on up is where Colored people lived?
- W: Yes sir.
- G: As the years went by they started putting up businesses?
- W: Yes, on up until today.
- G: Big John might have been one of the first ones out there in business.
- W: Yes, on that end across Hamilton Street, but down on Farish Street, Proctor had been there since I was a boy. It wasn't but two Colored Cafes in Jackson.
- G: Two?
- W: Yes, two.
- G: That was Proctor?
- W: Walter Ford and Proctor.
- G: This was around 1927?
- W: No, I was a boy paying 5¢ to go to the show. This was way back. I was staying with my uncle and going to Smith Robertson then.
- G: Do you remember any of your teachers at Smith Robertson?
- W: Yes, I remember one, Mary Whitestein.
- G: Mary Whitestein. [REDACTED]

In this house where Big John started his business, was it the only one there?

- W: At the time, yes. He wasn't living there. People had moved out and he moved in there. He was staying on Henry Street, like I first said.
- G: Was it a big house?
- W: Yes, it was a big house. A family of people stayed in it.

END OF INTERVIEW