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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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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, William Preston Starks 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.

William P. Starks
Interviewee (Signature)

21 June 1978
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. William Starks, 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. 16
Interview Number

6-21-78
Date

Returned 10-4-82

DRAFT

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Farish Street District

Jackson, Mississippi 39217

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM PRESTON STARKS
INTERVIEWER: Eli Grayson
DATE: June 20, 1978 (Date of Interview)
OH 78.16

Biographical Sketch

This is an interview between Eli Grayson, the interviewer, and William Preston Starks, the narrator, on the evening of June 20, 1978, in the home of Mr. Starks at 2213 Queensroad Avenue.

Mr. Starks is a retired military person and is presently a Mail Carrier for the City of Jackson. He is 56 years of age. He was born in Jackson, Mississippi, December 26, 1922. He attended Lanier High School. He is married to the former

JUANITA
~~Junita~~ Jackson and has one son, ~~William Jr.~~ *IVAN CRAIG*

G: Mr. Starks, ~~my interest is in cafes.~~ *in* talking to people, ~~this little cafe, which is now called the Big Apple Inn, at one time had another name.~~ I believe more people know it by the name Big John's rather than what's written on the window. ~~Big Apple Inn, most people know it by Big John's.~~

S: That's correct, Big John's. It use to be the talk of Farish Street area, when your money didn't jingle too loud in your pocket.

G: Did you know him?

S: Yes, I did. ~~I knew Big John.~~ He was short and a little on the heavy side.

G: ~~Now this restaurant that he's running now, most people in this area refer to it as a cafe. He's been in business a long time?~~

S: Yes, quite awhile. ~~I can go back as far as 1937 with Big John.~~ *I think it goes back as far as 1937*

G: 1937.

S: That's 1937.

G: That's quite a few years. ~~Now tell me a little bit about him.~~

WSP

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- S: Big John was the type of person that once you ate his sandwiches ~~and~~ you'll like him, you'll be back. You wouldn't ~~say~~ ^{STAY} away, you might ^{even} go out of the way ^{to go} to come back by Big John's to get ~~another~~ ^{those} lick of sandwiches because they are quite tasty.
- G: What type of sandwich [?] would they be?
- S: ~~Well he specialized in pigears and the smoke, and the smokes were the fast goings, the smokes were.~~ ^{not} ~~GOERS,~~
- G: Were they on the bun?
- S: ~~On the bun!~~ ^{yes} Take a piece of smoke sausage pull the skin off mash flat on the grill, warm you ^{bread} on the grill put the smoke ^{with it} on, ^{IT} bring a little mustard or mayonaise, ~~a little sale if you wanted it,~~ ^{some} and some sauce, something like a hot chilisaucе. It ^{would} make you smack your lips when you bit into ~~that smoke.~~
- G: That's why they called it hot smokes?
- S: ~~Yeah!~~ ^{yes}
- G: They went pretty good?
- S: Yes, ~~they did~~ go very well.
- G: Did you know him before he went into business?
- S: ~~Well vaguely. I use to see him, selling hot tamales and he and another fellow we called Joe, was a Mexican.~~ ^{ja mexican called Joe}
- G: ~~Now we were talking about Big John and his family. Did he have any children?~~ ^{Big John}
- S: ~~Yes, he did. I know his wife and I know one of his sons, A. C. I don't recall any others. cause I saw him most.~~
- G: ~~I was in there a number of times, like yesterday I was in there. I understand that. . . I guess it's a grandson by the name of Harold Lee, who operates it, but I understand he is not the owner. This must be Harold Lee, Jr.~~ ^{same his}
- S: ~~Perhaps so. I was unaware of that because of my frequency of the place has been somewhat not often as it had been a long time ago. I have not been there recently. I have not heard any talk at all.~~ ^{I haven't been there in a long time VISITS TO INFREQUENT}
- ~~Who the owner was. . . now I still thought the boy still owned the place.~~
- G: ~~Now~~ what did he do before he went into ~~his~~ business?

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- S: ~~I think hot~~ tamales was his business. ~~He was always in a good type business.~~
- G: Did he have some type cart like you see in the movies?
- S: ~~Well at that time, at the beginning, most hot tamales sellers had a little~~
 two wheel cart ~~where there was~~ ^{WITH} some type of heating device to keep ~~some-~~
~~thing like a big lard can, where they had the hot tamales and the shucks~~ ^{the} ~~WARM,~~
~~They stayed piping hot down inside this little cart. It must have been in-~~
~~sulated to when it roll it would look like two bicycle wheels on either~~
~~side with a handle on the front of it for pushing. There was a lantern on~~
~~it~~ ^{so} ~~and at night the light burned so it could be seen and hot tamales was~~
 printed on the side. ^{you could see what was} ~~of the CART.~~
- G: Was that a contraption you say he needed for himself?
- S: ^{yes} ~~Most sellers of hot tamales at that time had a little buggy that they pushed~~
~~around as their carts. They seemed to be covered in a white oil cloth or~~ ^{WITH}
~~some type of waterproof cloth and with "Hot Tamales," written on there for~~ ^{it}
~~so much a dozen. Something like fifteen cents a dozen at that time.~~
- G: He ~~just went back and forth,~~ up and down the streets?
- S: ~~Sometimes they'd have a station at~~ ^{SOME} ~~any point. Sometimes he'd have a corner~~
~~and each seller of hot tamales respected that corner. They wouldn't barge~~
~~in and try to compete with one another. Each one had an area of his own.~~
 Some of them ~~used~~ ^{had} have a bicycle with the cart on the front. They rode
 the bicycle, pushing the cart in front of them, ^{It was} ~~with~~ a three wheel bike with
 two double wheels in front and one behind. So, if you had a taste for hot
 tamales, it was a good thing to see one of those carts coming.
- G: ~~In talking to people about the Big Apple Inn. . . was Big John a big man?~~
- S: He was chubby, short and a little on the stocky side. ~~I guess that's why~~
~~they called him a little stocky bulky chubby, not just fat-fat~~ ^{AND} ~~but they~~
~~always referred to him as Big John.~~
- G: They still do today. Mr. Lee is his name. ~~I am wondering,~~ did he have
 a Mexican extraction?
- S: I would believe so. To hear him talk and to look at him, he had all the
 appearances of Mexican extraction; straight hair with a very light ~~red~~
 complexion. He had an accent which seemed to be a Mexican accent. I

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S: never heard him speak Spanish although he did have a heavy accent. ~~There was no need for him to speak Spanish because of the people he was dealing with. He spoke our language.~~ A very nice fellow he was too.

G: ~~You know I would guess then that accounts for the type of food that he sold because you know when you speak of Big John's you immediately think of hots, smokes, as people call them today. Now that type of sandwich, how much did ^{a hot smote} cost?~~

S: ^{IT} Cost a nickel. (Laugh). Strange enough you got a big 'bun' ^{with} and a piece of meat ^{on it} ~~... it~~ ^{was} very tasty. So, when you thought of Big John's you thought of a smoke or pigear. That was ~~the~~ ^{his} trade mark, "Smoke or Pigear." ~~it~~ ^{was} ~~wouldn't search the hot tamales, as it was the smoke or the pigear.~~ I believe some of the best ~~hot tamales in town, we would get them at Big John's.~~ ^{hot tamales} ~~You could get them hot or not so hot. That was the deal. It was the trade mark, smoke or pigear.~~ ^{were sold}

G: ~~Not hot tamales?~~

S: ~~Not hot tamales.~~

Understand that he has always been in this area;

G: ~~That's very interesting. Where Big John's is located, he was always in that area I understand.~~

S: ~~Always~~ ^{was} ~~there~~ between Parish and Oakley, and ~~of course~~ he didn't try to compete with the restaurants or cafes in the area. Big John just stood out. His attitude was of such, that once you went there and ate what he sold, you'd come back again and again and again. As often as you could accumulate a nickel, or if you had a pocket of nickels, whenever the thought hit you, you would go to Big John's. You may get a bag of them, or two or three of them or whatever your appetite called for. ~~He would fix you up and you would leave on out of there.~~

G: Was he always where he is now?

S: No. He was located next door to Mosley's Shoe Repair. ~~The downstairs portion was known as the Frazier Collins Funeral Home, located upstairs above was his little cafe or little fast shop.~~

G: ~~It's interesting.~~ I am sure there were other restaurants in that neighborhood.

Wm PB

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- S: Yes, ^{was} Home Dining Room ~~just~~ on the corner of Hamilton and Farish and Shephard's Kitchnette was up beyond the Crystal Palace which is now known as Steven's Restaurant. ~~Shephard's was located in that area. He moved a couple of times but these people were there.~~ There were also other little cafes as they called them then, across the street. They did not have that fast movement or the traffic that Big John had.
- G: ~~That's very interesting. Talking to some of the people that frequent the area, I found not only the people who had just the nickels and the dimes, but when I was in there yesterday I saw people, ~~and~~ by their mannerism ^{and} ~~I guess~~ by their dress, it makes me believe they were of the upper middle class. ~~The middle class group of people.~~ That some what gave me the impression that maybe it wasn't just the person that was walking the street that ate out of Big John's, but maybe we could say, people who had a little money.~~
- S: Anyone who had even a taste of Big John's sandwiches ^{would} ~~were~~ ~~doom~~ to come back again. ~~They might have been with someone at someone's home that went and brought some back home. Maybe doing a party or something, just brough some back and say where you get this from? And they would say, "Big John's." Where is Big John's? It maybe some strange people in town. "He is now located on Farish Street, now known as the Big Apple Inn." I am going to try to locate it so you find what he had was equal. Once you bit into it you went back. It made no difference who you were. If you liked that type of food you went back. It didn't take a long time to get waited on. You might say, (I do believe he was the forerunner of the fast food business.)~~
- G: In other words you could go in there and in a little while you could get your sandwiches and be gone?
- S: ~~Be gone.~~ You didn't waste anytime there.
- G: Did he have places for you to sit down?
- S: No, not at that time. There was a long counter in ^{the} building when you came in. You told ^{him} ~~them~~ what you wanted, you stood aside, the next guy told ^{him} ~~them~~ and sometimes ^{he} you would have as many as 6 or 8 orders going at the same time. You got yours ~~put~~ in a napkin or something like a wax piece of paper

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S: and you either walked out or you stood back and ate it. ~~Just that system.~~
~~You see~~ with chairs or tables you have a tendency to lag or loaf there and
he just didn't have that in his business. ~~At that time as he has today,~~
~~which he has tables, booth and stools at a counter.~~

G: ~~Oh yes then we~~ can surely say he was one of the first fast food cafes ~~be-~~
~~cause I noticed there yesterday.~~ I been there a couple of times this week ^{and saw}
~~that people lining up, like you said they use to.~~ They ^{put in their order and} got their food and
left. ~~Didn't take long either.~~

S: ~~No, it doesn't take long.~~

G: ~~You know, I guess he put his business there.~~ I guess he selected that site,
~~because you said he been right there is in that block,~~ although you said
you remember him changing from one spot to another.

S: Yes, he lived on the corner of Hamilton and Bloom ~~there~~ for awhile. After
I left here, I don't know where he went to. I lost contact with him, but
no matter where I went, oversees, Asia ^{OR} Europe that sometime another, ^{he'd}
run across my mind, Big John's, ~~you know,~~ sometimes ^{when} you are reminiscing with
some of the guys from Jackson, man if I was in Jackson tonight I would have
to go by Big John's and get something. We always talked about Big John's
no matter where we were, because we remember those tasty sandwiches.

G: I would think that he did good business both night and day.

S: Yes, Big John was opened both day and night, ~~up~~ until a certain time ~~at~~
~~night.~~ ~~I don't know how late it was because I couldn't stay up too late.~~
~~Now, I have gone down there at 10:00 at night. I don't go to bed so early~~
~~now.~~ I have been there ^{at night} for ~~hot~~ ~~of~~ ~~females,~~ ~~or something like that.~~ I would
call first and they would tell me if they have them, ~~first.~~ If they had
them I would go down there and pick up a dozen or a couple of dozens ~~or so.~~
~~Day~~ ^{OR} ~~and night,~~ the traffic keeps flowing out as long as he is open.

G: ~~In the older days I understand that he was very good. . . I understand a~~
~~famous ballroom. . . I noticed on the side of the building down there where~~
they have the Crystal Palace that use to be a ballroom. ~~I guess people~~
~~from different establishments like that have come by and bought something.~~

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- S: Oh yes. ~~On the way to the ball. . . some night the ball would turn out at about 12:00 or 1:00 at night. I doubt he would be open that late but somewhere during intermission~~ ^{People} they would run down to Big John's and load up on the nickle sandwiches. Down below Big John's across Hamilton Street was ~~where the Savoy Ballroom was located. Somewhere across the street from the now Alamo Theatre.~~ The Crystal Palace always had some activities more so than the Savoy. Then of course, there was the Dotty Cab stand also ~~in the area next door to the Crystal Palace. Big John had a lot of traffic because of the~~ ^{MOVEMENT} ~~leaving of people from the Alamo Theatre which was located on Amite Street at that time. Later on was the Booker T. Theatre on Farish Street next door to the~~ ^{POOL ROOM} ~~Tea room. He had a lot of traffic up and down that area because of that neighborhood. Most of the people lived up from Hamilton Street on back up into north Jackson. That traffic was moving up the main artery of Farish Street. There was very little traffic on Mill Street but always all of it on Farish Street as long as he was opened.~~
- G: What about school children?
- S: Yes. ^{The children would} ~~save a nickle or find a nickle or hustle up a nickle and make it to Big John and get them a smoke or a pigear, because a lot of them didn't have them at home.~~
- G: Did they ~~have~~ ^{have} lunch as they do at school everyday?
- S: Yes, ^{IN HIGH SCHOOL} We had a cafeteria which was operated by Mrs. Johnson, ^{she} ~~who~~ is now deceased. Mrs. Flower^s was another one that I remember. We did have lunch ^{then} ~~then~~ but prior ~~to~~ ^{to} my years at Jim Hill, we didn't have a lunch program. You had to bring your biscuit and molasses and salt meat. Later on they started the free lunch where they would give you a sweet potato and ~~a~~ half pint of milk. Then it gradually ~~became~~ ^{got come in} into a cup of hot soup and a corn bread muffin. ^{so} ~~so~~, we didn't have a cafeteria, we just lined up and walked through the hall and they gave you a tin cup of soup.
- G: Although they had a lunch program ^{did} a lot of school children brought their money and went to Big John's?
- S: ^{yes} ~~Right~~, if they had some.

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G: How would you compare his prices of a nickle for a sandwich as compared to what you could get for a quarter in some other restaurants? What other restaurants did you say they had in that area?

S: Shephard's and Home Dining Room. The Home Dining Room didn't specialize ~~too much~~ in sandwiches. It was kind of one of the nice places to go and eat. They served a ~~dinner~~, meal for ~~somewhere in the neighborhood of~~ twenty-five or thirty-five cents. You ~~went~~ ^{could go} in and ~~sat~~ ^{set} down at a table and you were served. So, that's where you went for that. You didn't go in and holler for a sandwich. At Shephard's you could get either one, a sandwich or a meal. Most of the young people went to Big John's. So he had all the teenage and the younger people. He had all that traffic.

G: Would you say that was a good buy for a nickle?

S: ~~It was for a nickle~~ ^{yes} you got ^{because you got} a big piece of bread ^{and} a piece of meat that was tasty. You were satisfied, you would want another and another.

G: ~~I ate in his establishment yesterday. I'm wondering if it is the same, I guess I'll call it a receipe, or what is it that he made back there.~~ ^{Is it the same} ~~there.~~ ^{Here}

S: I may think so. There may have been some changes.

G: How does he ^{do} it then?

S: If you wanted a smoke he would ^{get} ~~order~~ a piece of smoke sausage, ~~cut it~~ pull the skin ^{over} and put ^{it} ~~them~~ on ^{the} a grill, and ^{he would} ~~with something like a spachler~~ ^{dashula} ~~he would mash them flat~~ and let ^{it} ~~them~~ cook awhile and then turn ^{it} ~~them~~ over, get the bread and split the bun in half and place them down on the grill and warm them up. ^{He would then} ~~turn them on the other side~~ and warm ^{it} ~~them~~ ^{until it was} ~~turn the smokes and, it was ready.~~ He would put mustard ^{or whatever you wanted} on the bun if you ^{wanted} ~~wanted~~ mustard. He would put the smoke and maybe some slaw and then he would add the hot chili sauce. He would put the hot chili sauce on and he would drain the excess and put it in the paper or napkin and that was it. ~~You backed up and bit into it and you paid yoru nickle and bit into it and you walked on out the door into the street eating your smoke.~~

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G: That was a good buy for a nickle.

S: It was.

G: ~~For that. You know,~~ in thinking in terms of what we now of days call "Soul Food" I look at Soul Food as food that ~~blacks~~ were eating all their lives. ~~You know, they came up through childhood eating.~~ I'm sure that chitterlings were being sold in that particular day and time.

S: No, he never did fool with chitterlings. The only thing that I can recall is ~~hot~~ tamales, smokes, and pignorears. ~~Of course hamburgers and hot dogs, but his major sellers were smokes and pignorears.~~

G: ~~Of course Blacks were quite familiar with the pignorear but the thing about it I can't seem to understand is how did he ^{sell} so many hot smokes, ~~because~~ ~~everywhere I have done and said Big John's hot smoke. . .~~~~

S: . . .smoke was it. Smoke sausage. Smoke was for short. ~~It wasn't nothing but smoke sausage but the way he fixed ^{it} with the chili seasoning ~~which~~ was hot if you get it on there or not and ~~he would heat up the buns. The buns was what kept it from having. . .he had something kinda like an oil to keep it from drying, ~~but~~ maybe something he had from cooking meat, not grease. It was just enough to keep it from sticking to the grill and what ever and put it on top. When you bit into it with that sauce on it you would smack your lips. Now his pignorears were kept warm unlike other places that you could get a nickle pignorear sandwich. The pignorear was cold but Big John's was hot. You could buy a nickle pignorear all out west they were kept in a refrigerator and sliced ~~all off~~ but at Big John's you got a whole pignorear.~~~~

G: ~~You have been around to a lot of different places. I understand that you have been in service quite sometime. Have you ever tasted something similar to Big John's?~~

S: ~~Nope. I must say the sandiwch he sold stood out just like it was his trade mark. No one else ^{made} sold them like he ^{did} ~~did~~. They didn't have the stuff to go in them like Big John's, ~~the taste the flavor and what have you.~~~~

G: ~~I would think that this was something about the taste that attracts so many different people, ^{was the taste} something that he created or was given the idea~~

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- G: from his childhood days.
- S: ~~Plus his ability to develop that taste that people would like in doing so it was a boom.~~ *His ability to develop that taste was a big boom*
- G: ~~Now, you have been down there, he has been selling down there, of course he is deceased now, but his son I understand his grandson . . . If you had to name one or more reasons why he has stayed in business so long, what would you say?~~
- S: ~~I would say it must have been his attitude and his understanding of people that he was dealing with. Big John, I never saw him up to the point that he just exploded if his customer was just absolutely wrong or something like that. He understood and he was always nice. He came in and was always prompt. He had good self control. A lot of kids and people understood that they could see that he would say, just stand over there and I'll get to you in a few minutes. So you would do that and then he'd say, now I'm ready for you. Now you can give me your order now I'll take care of you and get you going so you can hurry back or something like that. That~~ *was* ~~is just his attitude and you couldn't help but to like him. You just had to like Big John if you ever got to know him you would like him.~~ *AT* *where as* *If he was busy he would say "I'll be ready for you in a few minutes"*
- G: ~~His attitude I would gather that he passed on to his son and grandson and now the business is still going strong. Did he ever do anything else in the community beside the restaurant?~~
- S: ~~No.~~ Not that I know of. After leaving here in 1942 I didn't see Big John that often or come in contact with him anymore until somewhere in 1964 when I came back from service. I don't get around that area much. One reason ~~is due to the fact that~~ *because* they turned Parish Street into a One-Way and it's hard to park down there. So, I think that kind of made me stay away ~~from that area so much. I don't go down too often anymore. So I lost track of him.~~ Sometimes when I am down in ~~that~~ *the* area I'll walk down there and get me a sandwich or two.
- G: ~~You can't think of anything unusual that ~~was~~ happened in they Big Apple Inn?~~ *Samson*
- S: No, I can't recall a thing.

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G: Do other business _____ and he sit right here, right?

S: That's true. He was right in between. There was the high hat on one side and low hat on the other. John always maintained in between. He was always right in the middle.

G: Well, there is ^{anything else} more that you can tell me ~~Mr~~ Starks about Big John's, ^{you have given} certainly the information I get is going to be ^{very} helpful. I appreciate ~~that~~ ^{that} very much. *I appreciate this very much*

S: Well, I'm sorry that I couldn't bring out any fine points. There may be others I can think ^{of} ~~but I probably can when~~ ^{after} I get off the tape.

G: Well, I thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

wmm

Wm P. G.