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Interviewer: Lareatha Clay
Interviewees: Geraldine White Rowe
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Speaker Identification:
Lareatha Clay: LC
Geraldine White Rowe: GWR

TRANSCRIPT BEGIN

LC: Okay. Keep going.

GWR: Because our parents were so strict—there was one time that we weren't quite so supervised because they were always so involved with the church on the inside. Like my dad was always over the finance committee or something. And then Maw Maw was on the mission so she was always inside the church. But once the choir sung we could pretty much do whatever we wanted to do and so we'd socialize outside after church. It was a lot of fun.

LC: So tell me one of your best memories from the Homecoming—from a Homecoming. A good story or something.

GWR: [Pause] Not any one memory stands out more than the other one. They were all something to look forward to. And they were a lot of fun and we were never disappointed.
[Laughter]

LC: That's what I'm trying to find out—what was so much fun about it?

GWR: Oh! Because we were outside running around. I never was inside the church I couldn't tell you what was going on in there! [Laughter]

LC: When you go to them now how do you feel?

GWR: When I go to them now I really enjoy them because I go back and you get to hear all the choirs sing on Saturday night. I particularly like Saturday night because it's cool—it's not so hot. And because I like music—I like church music and singing and that's the time when everybody—you know—they get crunk. [Laughter]

LC: Okay! Alright so you went through high school and then you—after high school then what?

GWR: After high school—the summer I graduated I enrolled myself into college—or into university—at Lamar University in Beaumont. Wanted to go to college because I wanted a better—I wanted to get a job and I wanted to have a career. The main reason was because I wanted to leave Shankleville and see some other parts of the world. So I was so excited. I went

to Lamar University and I majored in nursing for the first two semesters and then I changed my major to business administration. I graduated from there and moved to Houston.

LC: You wanted to get away from Shankelville.

GWR: Yes.

LC: Why?

GWR: Because I thought it was all too confining. I thought it was a lot more to the world. I watched tv and I'd see how people dressed and I'd see—sometimes when talking to other people from other places there were certain movies we didn't even get because we only got like two stations in the country. And I just was ready to explore whatever else was outside of Shankelville. And just because of growing up there I didn't appreciate it as much as I do now.

LC: So you appreciate it more now?

GWR: Ohmigod. Yeah.

LC: Okay so talk about that.

GWR: Well I cant wait to go back to Shankelville! I was just there this past weekend as a matter of fact. I really enjoy going home because—I don't know—it's just a peace that you get when you go there. And the trees and the fresh air and the animals—just the nostalgia of being home and thinking about how I grew up and all the fun that I had as a kid. And also giving my child a chance to experience that and to experience it though his eyes. That's been quite rewarding too.

LC: And your child's name is?

GWR: Michael.

LC: Michael what?

GWR: Michael Rowe. And he's fifteen. I've been waiting to see when he starts to get bored with the country because I know with some of nieces and nephews they love it as a kid—those kids they always ask the same questions when we're driving out there because it takes two and a half hours to get out there. So every twenty minutes they're asking you, Are we almost there? Are we almost there? Then they fall asleep and then wake up, Are we there yet? [Laughs] So I know they get really really excited about it but I've noticed with some of the other nieces and nephews after they get a certain age you know—they don't get so excited about going and they want to do other things. But he's—he still gets excited.

LC: So what do you think it is about it that excited him?

GWR: I think that he loves the safety of being in the country. I don't watch him as much. I see him in the morning when we get up and have breakfast and sometimes I don't see him again until that night because he gets to run around with his cousins and ride the four-wheeler. He gets to go out and experience the animals. Whatever he wants to do. That's one thing. And he loves also his grandmother's cooking. And just the fact that we're all together as a family.

LC: So you went away because you wanted to get away.

GWR: Yes.

LC: Do you think you'll ever move back? How long have you been gone—I guess I should say that first.

GWR: Let's see—I left in 1975 and it's now 2004. What's that—twenty-eight or twenty-nine years? I could definitely see myself living there again. It's funny you should ask my mother asked me that this weekend and I told her no.

LC: Why'd you tell her no?

GWR: I told her no because I don't see myself living there full-time. What I'd like to do is be able to live there like three or four months out of the year and then get out of there. So that I can get excited about coming back and appreciate it again. Because once you're there I think you're kind of stuck—it's kind of limited—there's not a whole lot to do. But I do have land there. And I plan to build on it so that I'll always have a home to go to. Outside of my parent's house—

LC: Do most of your brothers and sisters have land out there too?

GWR: Yes. Most of them do. Yeah as a matter of fact my father bought us some land in Jasper which is near—and he subdivided it up and so a lot of the street names are named after his grandchildren. You know the kids take a lot of pride in that. I think a lot of us would settle back there one day.

LC: Do you think you'll be retired before that happens? Or do you think you would go back before?

GWR: I think that I'll probably be retired when that happens. Just because there's not a whole lot of—a whole lot to do there. And there's not—I think it would be hard to make a living to accommodate the lifestyle that I've become accustomed to. [Laughter] You know I'm so rich and all! [Laughs] That was a joke!

LC: We get it! So one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you was because I wanted to try to get the feel of people who grew up in Shankleville in the 1960s and 1970s and to compare it to how it was in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and even today. Have you ever heard your parents talk about—you know—how they grew up there. Do you think it was a lot different from when you were growing up there?

GWR: Oh yeah! Yeah. I think it was a lot different.

LC: In what ways?

GWR: Well I was talking to my Uncle Leon—Uncle Leon is my mom's brother—

LC: Hold on a second [adjusts microphone]. Okay. You were talking about your Uncle Leon.

GWR: Yeah. Anyway. He talked about how they used to ride horses and cross the creek and all that.

LC: Y'all ain't cross the creek?

GWR: Not on a daily basis. [Laughter]

LC: Didn't you go hunting?

GWR: I did when I was growing up! I did used to go hunting with my brothers and stuff. And it was a little creek behind the pasture at our house but you know we wasn't riding no horses or nothing! [Laughter] I think—

LC: Y'all were just walking?

GWR: Yes. I think in that way it was different. I think things were a lot harder for them back during that time than it was for us because you know they had to carry water back from the spring to drink and to take a bath with and all that stuff.

LC: Did y'all have water—a well—or did y'all have water in the house?

GWR: When we had the first house that burned we had well water. Once we moved in—I want to say 1963—from that time on we had rainwater. But I just think that you know—in terms of the respect that Shankleville got compared to then and now—I think that it was pretty much the same. I think it was the same in those ways but you know—I in the early 1940s and 1950s I just think things were a lot harder and that things were done a lot differently.

LC: Differently how?

GWR: For instance—women got married at an early age. They weren't allowed to date unless they had intentions of marrying. Uncle Leon was telling me also that my mother's first husband was killed in a logging accident. He was telling me that my mom only knew him only a month and a half before he asked my grandparents if he could marry her—for her hand in marriage. And that was just unheard of during our time. I mean my dad—if we'd brought somebody home that we only knew a month and a half—my dad wouldn't even talk to us about that!

LC: When you got married did your husband have to come ask your father?

GWR: He should have but no! [Laughs] No. I was engaged one time before I got married and I think I was nineteen or twenty. I was still in college at Lamar. I was engaged to this guy—his name was Michael Landry. Anyway he came up and asked my dad if he could marry me. And that all ended kind of traumatically because I found out that he had not gotten a formal divorce from his wife that he married when he was in the service. So shortly before we were to march down the aisle we broke if off because he wasn't divorced. So the second time I got married [engaged]—I don't know in the back of my mind maybe I didn't want to jinx it so se didn't come and ask him. But I should have! [Laughter]

LC: Okay. Now I'm going to ask you this question—

GWR: Uh oh.

LC: I want to hear what happened—what you knew about in regard to Anthony Peacock.

GWR: Oh Ray Anthony Peacock?

LC: Yes.

GWR: I graduated already but the story that I was told was that he was an athlete—he was quite popular and a lot of the girls really pursued him—and particularly the white girls. And this girl named Lisa Larkin who happened to be white—I was told that she called him up and asked him to meet her someplace. And when he got there there were a bunch of guys there and they jumped him or attacked him or whatever. And no one knows exactly what happened. They found him—pants down below his knees and it looked like he'd been beat or drug of whatever. He was definitely dead.

LC: Okay. So did he—I had heard that he went to the prom or something. Is that not what you knew?

GWR: I didn't hear about—I didn't know if it was the prom or not.

LC: Did you hear anything about what happened after that? As far as investigations and stuff like that.

GWR: Oh there was some investigations. The NAACP came up. As far as the local authorities—I mean they did some preliminary investigations but I don't think that they really really spent a whole lot of time on it. I don't think it mattered that much to them. But the family wasn't pleased with that so they had some authorities come from out of town including the NAACP and did some investigating but I don't think anything was ever done.

LC: Okay. But you weren't living in Shankleville when that happened?

GWR: No.

LC: When you heard about it—did you think, Oh man that's really something that is unique. Or were you, Oh yeah that's something that I would've expected to happen. From that standpoint—how'd you feel?

GWR: For me I was traumatized. I thought it was unique and I thought it was almost like a nightmare because Anthony—Ray Anthony grew up with us in the same church and we rode the bus together and although there were a couple of years difference in our age I was close to him. Ad to hear that something like that happened in a town where I thought white people were okay as far as what I told you once we integrated—for me that was a total shock.

LC: Did it have any effect on your family? Because you had brothers and sisters that were still living there. Did it have any effect on your family or the way they interacted later on?

GWR: Yeah. I remember that with my brother Bill—my baby brother graduated from high school and my daddy called me here in Houston and asked me if Bill could come live with me because there were these white girls that kept calling the house—because he was also popular in sports and there were quite a few of them that were chasing him so he came down to Houston and lived with me for a while. But that—backing up now—there was nothing that was really strange in my family. I don't remember what year it was but I remember my dad running for the

school board. You know with eleven kids you need to be on the school board or something! But the unique thing that happened about that was that he was the first Black on the school board. And I remember they used to meet at the different people's houses sometimes. Sometimes they met at the school and sometimes they met at either the president of the school board's house or one of the members. This particular night they met at one of the members' house and I was quite young—I don't remember what year it was—I just remember my mother getting a phone call and just crying. We didn't know what was wrong. What we later found out was that my father was in the house where they were having the school board [meeting] and one of the radical people from the town had gathered—

LC: What town?

GWR: From Burkeville—had gathered outside and apparently they were having a problem with him being Black and being on the school board and being in a white person's house. So you know there were some people that were threatening to kill him and all that stuff. And so I just remember her was there up in the night and finally I guess the local authorities came around and they were able to escort him out of there so he could come home.

LC: Okay so we're almost at the end of the tape and what I'd like you to do is just tell me—just say one of your favorite stories of growing up in Shankleville or of Shankleville or being related to Shankles—anything regarding—related to Shankleville and one of your favorite stories about the place or the people or something like that.

GWR: Okay.

LC: It doesn't have to be funny, good or bad.

GWR: I have a joke—you want it?

LC: Okay. Yeah.

GWR: Okay. This was Uncle Donnie Shankle. Uncle Donny was my grandfather's uncle. And he used to go—you know how the Shankles used to always speak tied tongue?

LC: Yes.

GWR: —[speaks phrase]—or something like that. So he went to Calvin Smith's store which is the same store I was just saying that my father had gone to his house for the school board meeting—right? And so he went to Calvin Smith's store which was the neighborhood store in Wiergate and he went in and he said, [with emphasized speech] Give me twenty-five cents worth of keys. And they said, What? What'd you say Donnie? He said, [with emphasized speech] Give me twenty-five cents worth of keys. [Laughs] And they said, Donnie we didn't understand you—what did you say now? He said, Go to hell—you understand that didn't you? [Laughter]

LC: What was he trying to say?

GWR: Give me twenty-five cents worth of cheese.

LC: That's what I thought! [Laughter] You have the Shankle speech impediment down pretty good. I can't do it!

GWR: That's because I hard Paw Paw—

LC: Can mock Big Papa's stutter? A.T. Odom—because you said that he stuttered. He did.

GWR: Ooh! [Laughs] I'm trying to think of something he used to say all the time—I have a sister named Mary and every time he would see her he would say, [with emphasized speech] Mary, Mary—no, Mary had a little lamb his fleece was white as snow. Everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go! [Laughter]

LC: That sounds like him! How about some of my favorite people—like Fletcher Byerly—he used to call me Pie.

GWR: Mr. Fletcher—he was a trip. Mr. Fletcher—he was what you would today call very charismatic. And we just thought he was over the top back then. He was a really nice man but he just put everything into what he did. Like if he was giving a gesture he gave you the full gesture. Or if he was signing a song he'd close his eyes and throw his head back and sung the song. He was just like—very dramatic. That's what I remember about him.

LC: How about his wife—Ms.—

GWR: Ms. Velma—the town gossip! She'd say, I told Fletcher and I told Glow now I'm gon tell you and don't you tell nobody because I'm gon tell them all! [Laughter]

LC: Who's Glow?

GWR: Her daughter. [Laughter]

LC: That's what she would say? I heard she would sing when she was mad.

GWR: I don't know if I remember that but she did used to sing a lot.

LC: And you could hear it all over the community.

GWR: Yes. Oh yeah. She used to sing a lot. Her granddaughter Benita and I were very good friends so—what I remember about her was just going over sometimes when we would go to her grandmother's house. But other than singing I don't remember a whole lot about her except that she gossiped a lot.

LC: Okay. Thank you very much!

GWR: You're welcome.

LC: That's the end.

TRANSCRIPT END