

Audio File Name: shankleville_interviews_22
Transcription by: Rachel E. Winston, 2020 August
Interviewer: Lareatha Clay
Interviewees: Geraldine White Rowe
Location: Houston, TX
Interview Date: 2004 September 17
Duration: 32:45

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

TRANSCRIPT BEGIN

LC: Today is September seventeenth 2004. We are in Houston, Texas, and this is an interview with Geraldine White Rowe. So let's begin. Tell me where you were born and what happened around that?

GWR: I was born in Newton County Hospital but my residence was Shankleville community. May seventh 1957. I was the fifth child of Anderson and Lillie White—five out of eleven.

LC: Okay. Go back and talk about your lineage with regard to your father's side.

GWR: On my father's side there was my father and his mother—her name was Surfronie White. Do you want details?

LC: Yes.

GWR: And his father's name was Anderson White, Sr. He was one of eight children and he was the baby actually—of eight children. We lived in the same community—as matter of fact in walking distance from my grandmother. Our house burned—I was about five years old so I guess that would've been about 1962—our house burned to the ground. At that time there were six children and we lived with my grandmother for about a year until my father rebuilt a house—which is the house that they now live in—in Shankleville, Texas.

LC: Sufronie White—who are her parents?

GWR: Her parents are Simon Lewis and I'm not sure what her mother's name was. Her father was Simon Lewis.

LC: Okay. And your grandfather's parents—who were they?

GWR: We really don't know. As a matter of fact we've been trying to research that side of the family. I was told that—I was given a name which I don't recall at this time but that's as far back as was can trace it because we were told that he just showed up in Shankleville one day. We're not sure where he's from.

LC: Oh okay. You don't remember his name?

GWR: No.

LC: What about on your mother's side?

GWR: Now that side I can trace back quite a bit farther. My mother's father's name was Pate Shankle. His father's name was Houston Shankle. And Houston was the son of Jim and Winnie Shankle.

LC: Okay. What about your mother's mother?

GWR: My grandmother—her name was Thelma Watts Clay. Thelma Shankle Watts Clay. And I think that she was a Hicks originally—that was her maiden name. From what I can understand she was born in El Campo, Texas, and she was one of two girls and they were adopted is what I was told by the sister of her mother. I don't know the names of her mother or her adopted mother—that's as much information as I could get.

LC: Was it a formal adoption? Or a Black folks adoption? [Laughter]

GWR: I don't know. Probably so—Colored folks adoption back during that time!

LC: Okay. So y'all were living in Shankleville. Tell me about when you were living with your grandparents—or your grandmother. What was that like?

GWR: When we lived with my grandmother it was kind of crowded because she already had her daughter—whose name was Susanna Kirkland—and occasionally some of her grandchildren who lived in Houston. I remember I would call her Deborah and Ray—those were the two grandchildren living with her. And then here comes my mom and dad and then five other kids besides me so it was quite crowded. I don't remember a lot actually about that time because shortly after that I went to live with a relative of the family—Cousin Addie.

LC: When did you first start living with her?

GWR: I think it was about five or six. It started out I was going on the weekends and then I ended up staying with her for a few years.

LC: Why were you staying with her?

GWR: Because—I was told it was because all of her kids were grown and had moved away from Shankleville. She was lonely and she wanted somebody to keep her company and she also wanted a helper because they had a farm—and she raised a lot of stuff in the garden and she wanted somebody to just keep her company and to help her gather the crop.

LC: So why were you chosen out of all of the kids to go stay with her?

GWR: That's a good question! I still haven't figured that one out. I know that my older sister that was born before me—the sister right over me—she stayed with my grandmother even after we moved into our new house. My sister stayed back with—

LC: Which sister is that?

GWR: Her name is Walter Faye(?). She stayed back with my grandmother and my oldest sister—she pretty much took care of the kids under her. You know—like the oldest kid out of many usually takes care of the kids under them so she wouldn't have been a good choice. And I'm not sure why they didn't choose anybody younger than me because maybe they may've been too young at the time—now that I think about it.

LC: So how did you feel about that?

GWR: At first it was kind of scary because I didn't want to go because there were two graveyards. There was one directly in front of the house and there was one as you look out the side back porch—there was a graveyard right in front of that. And there was a grandfather clock—which I wasn't accustomed to—and it chimed “ding” every half hour and on every hour.

LC: Just like my house!

GWR: [Laughs] And it was really scary at night when I was trying to get to sleep. But after I realized that I didn't have a choice in the matter—she was very sweet to me—after I realized I didn't have a choice in the matter I kind of liked the idea. I have fond memories of not having to share stuff! [Laughter]

LC: We can go into that—okay—not having to share stuff. Was there a lot to not have to share? [Laughs]

GWR: Well there was a lot. Now what there was and what you could touch were two different things! [Laughter] And I think because she was probably a baby from the depression era—I think that she had some very conservative habits. I know that she was self-employed—she and her husband Cousin Alvin had a store and that people in the neighborhood went there to buy things from them—so I don't think that they—you now—had a lack of money. I know that they were well respected in the neighborhood and people always looked up to them as some of the leaders in the community. So I always felt that she had money and she had things but what you were actually able to access is something totally different! Because—you know we recycled everything. Recycling was something that they thought they came up with in the late seventies and early eighties but we recycled all my life and she really brought a new meaning to it.

LC: Recycled—like what?

GWR: Okay. Take a fig for instance.

LC: A fig?

GWR: A fig is a fruit that you get off of a tree. And you pick it—and you can peel it and eat it or you can preserve it—which means you boil it and you make a jam type preserve out of it and then you eat that later. That's not what I want to talk about! I want to talk about watermelons. [Laughs] Watermelons—first of all you know you save the seeds and you replant them. Right? And then when the vine comes up and the watermelon grows you eat the watermelon and then you spit out the seeds but you always save enough to replant. And then after you eat the watermelon you cut the rind off and then you make watermelon preserves. I don't know that anybody—

LC: Yeah I don't know. [Laughter]

GWR: I don't know anybody recycle any one things anymore! [Laughter]

LC: Okay. So after awhile you got used to it?

GWR: After awhile I did get used to it.

LC: What kind of—when you were growing up and you were living with your sisters and brothers—what kind of things did y'all do for fun?

GWR: Oh we did things like—for the girls—and that's what I'm accustomed to but I was kind of tomboyish too so I'll talk about the boys in a minute—and for the girls what we did—because we couldn't afford real dolls we would take soda water bottles and corn silk from the top of corn and we would stuff the corn silk into the top of the soda water bottles and we would make a doll head out of it. We didn't care about the face. We just wanted to play dolls. And we would dress it—but mostly we just wanted to play with the hair. And we also made mud pies. And there was always enough of us to have any kind of game like hide-and-seek or any other game that we wanted to play. Now for the boys—we did have a basketball goal. So I used to play basketball with the boys. We always had a baseball team. We always had a football team.

LC: And that's just what y'all did around the house?

GWR: Around the house.

LC: Okay. What about when you went to live with Annie Odom and you were up there by yourself. Then what did you do for fun?

GWR: There wasn't a whole lot of fun out there. She had a quilting club so these ladies would come over and they would make quilts a certain time of the year—I want to say it was in the summertime. And that was always intriguing to me because I always liked colors and piecing and patching things together and having a vision for what the finished look of something is going to be like. So that was interesting. So that was kind of fun.

LC: Do you know how to quilt today?

GWR: Yep. I remember the concept of it. If I had a quilting frame I think I could still do it. And a sewing machine! So I learned to quilt. I really did a lot of reading—she made me—she had me read the Bible every summer. Starting in Genesis and going all the way through never mind that I didn't understand it. I'm trying to think—I want to say that we used to go to Jasper to Cousin Oletha's house probably once a week—

LC: Is this Oletha Woods?

GWR: Oletha Woods's house. And her granddaughter Katrina was there and that was somebody to play with so that was fun. And of course occasionally I got to go home or the kids would come over and visit. But I don't remember having a lot of fun—I remember having a lot of work [laughs].

LC: What kind of work did you do?

GWR: Feeding the chickens. Feeding the hogs. Feeding the cows. Gathering the vegetables from the gardens. Tilling the gardens—we called it hoeing. Feeding the dogs. Doing house chores. Oh I used to love when she baked! She baked tea cakes. She made hard tea cakes and she would always let me help her get the stuff together to make the tea cakes so I thought we made them together. And lemon pies.

LC: Do you know how to make tea cakes today?

GWR: Nope! [Laughs] I mean if I had to I probably could come up with a recipe but no—I haven't made tea cakes probably since high school.

LC: Okay. What did you and A.T. Odom do. Or did y'all ever spend any time together when you were there?

GWR: We didn't interact a whole lot but there was a wood shed where he did like woodwork and carpentry. And that was out where the car barn was—or the garage—which was a car shed separate from the house. It was detached. And he had these weird things—like he had this little round thing that opens up and he would have something that he picked his teeth with. It wasn't a traditional toothpick—I can't remember exactly what it was but it might've been a feather from a chicken or something. Or the bottom of a chicken feather. Do you remember that?

LC: Oh yes. It was the bottom of a chicken feather. Yes.

GWR: Anyway I thought that was just quite interesting. I just remembered that! So that was one of the things—I used to watch him do that and watch the way—yeah he was just interesting to watch. When he was getting ready to smoke a cigar he did a lot of rituals to it before he smoked it.

LC: Rituals like what?

GWR: Like he'd cut it in half first of all—he'd never smoke a whole cigar. He'd cut it in half and then he'd wet the whole thing with his mouth. It seemed like to me—and I know this probably didn't happen—that he would light it and then wet it again—but as a kid that's what it seemed like happened. You know it would go out and then he would wet the thing again to make sure it wouldn't burn too fast. Even in his cigar smoking they were very conservative. He also had this horn that was made out of a cow's horn that he would use—I don't know what he was calling with it—but he would do that sometimes. And those are the things that I remember about him. And he whistled a lot. And he stuttered.

LC: He stuttered?

GWR: Yeah.

LC: Okay.

GWR: And all of that was fascinating to me as a kid. Because I'm not sure I'd heard anybody stutter before that.

LC: So that's what you were doing. And then when you got ready to go to school—how did you go to school?

GWR: From Cousin Addie's house?

LC: Yes.

GWR: Walk down to the end of this long road that seemed like a mile to me but it wasn't. And I'd catch the school bus and then get off the school bus there in the evenings. You know one of the things that I remember about going to school was that she would have my dresses made every year. She had a tailor—Ms. Thelma Reed—she lived in Wiergate which was the

neighboring town. But the interesting thing was the dresses were made out of flower sacks and feed sacks. And I know that sounds gross but they were very beautiful prints. It was a nice grade of cotton and I remember lots of floral prints in it.

LC: So when you were staying with her she was buying your clothes and everything too?

GWR: Yes.

LC: And when you got your report card you would take it to her?

GWR: Yeah—I vaguely remember that. But I’m pretty sure that I did take it to her.

LC: And so what was your relationship with your parents. You would see them at church right?

GWR: I’d see them at church and sometimes I’d go home—like over the weekends—or if Cousin Addie did some traveling with different associations she was in and she would visit her different children out of town—so there were quite a few times that I went home when she was traveling.

LC: Okay so let’s talk about school. What school did you go to?

GWR: I started out at Wiergate Elementary School.

LC: How many people in the class?

GWR: Probably about fifteen or twenty kids.

LC: I’m assuming they were from Shankleville—where were they from?

GWR: Shankleville and Wiergate—from those two communities. Oh and also from Forestville.

LC: Where is Forestville?

GWR: Forestville is between Jasper and Shankleville. And Jamestown I think. I’m not sure.

First through third was elementary. I remember going to grade school which was like four through eight. And we integrated—Wiergate was an all-Black school. Black teachers, principals, all the students were Black—

LC: Was there any teacher or principal that stood out to you?

GWR: Yes. They all did! Teachers didn’t play back then! Yes but Mr. Artie Brailsford was the principal and everybody remembers him because he was strict—

LC: He was there when you were there?

GWR: Yes. When I was little.

LC: Not Valree?

GWR: Artie. When I was in elementary school.

LC: Oh really? Oh.

GWR: Yes. The thing that I remember about him is that corporal punishment was no big deal back then—I mean there was no such thing as corporal punishment. You just got whipped! You

got beat down if you did something wrong. So I remember that he went through the halls with this big belt and if he caught you in the halls outside of the times you were supposed to be in the hall during class time you know—you just might get hit. That's what I remember about him. Everyone was terrified of him. Oh teachers! I remember Ms. Nash stood out because she was also a cousin. She was related to Cousin Addie so I used to see her sometimes outside of school.

LC: What was her first name?

GWR: Othaleen(??)—I think that's her name. Ms. Baily stood out because she always had bad breath [laughs] and everyone would talk about her but nobody told her. So I wrote on the blackboard one day, "Ms. Baily needs Scope." And when she came back in the room she asked who wrote it and everybody told on me! So I had to go to the office [laughs].

LC: [Laughs] And what did you say when you got there?

GWR: I said, She does need Scope! But anyway—

LC: And what did they do?

GWR: They said it was disrespectful. And I think I was punished for it but it gets kind of fuzzy after that.

LC: Did she get Scope?

GWR: I don't remember her breath improving! [Laughter] I don't remember her breath ever improving. I'm trying to remember what year we integrated. I want to say sixty-eight or sixty-nine. That was really interesting because I'm not sure that I had ever—I'd probably seen white people on tv but I'd never really interacted with white people. So that was a trip.

LC: The whole time before then?

GWR: Yes.

LC: When you went to town you didn't see them?

GWR: We would see them but we never really spoke to them and they didn't talk to us. I mean I can remember having separate restrooms. There was a restroom for whites and there was a restroom for—niggers. It didn't even say Blacks.

LC: Where was that?

GWR: Burkeville, Texas. It was at Snow Ervin's(??) gas station. So anyway—needless to say we didn't have any interaction they just kind of pointed at us and laughed and called us out of our names and stuff.

LC: And what was your reaction when this was happening?

GWR: Oh I just thought they were really ignorant. And we were told not to say anything so I was just wondering why they act like that. But because I didn't know any different it wasn't anything out of the ordinary to me. I just remember pointing—I don't know if I heard any name calling. And it was also during the time where everyday you'd see riots on tv because it was during the time when civil rights movement. So you'd see police hosing Black people down—all the time you'd see them beating them across the head with clubs so it wasn't so bad to be pointed at and

talked about. It was no big deal. But I guess the interesting thing was that once we did integrate and we got to know white kids I realized that they weren't as bad as I thought they were—because I really didn't want to have anything to do with them. So I ended up with white friends that I went to their house after school. So I guess that lesson was—you know—not to make an opinion of somebody unless you get to know the person—that you can't stereotype people.

LC: So you were about in the sixth grade when y'all integrated. What school did you go to then?

GWR: We were then bussed to Burkeville. Burkeville School. And then Wiergate became I think an elementary school. And then it was eventually phased out.

LC: So then you went to Burkeville High School?

GWR: Actually Burkeville Middle School and High School—Junior High and High School. That's what it is called.

LC: When you were growing up and people found out that you were from Shankelville—how did they react to that? If at all. In that area of Texas.

GWR: In that area of Texas when they found out we were from Shankelville we were considered country people. Although if you're—if you've been there then you know the whole thing is the country. The reason we were considered country was because it was dirt roads. We didn't have paved road or anything and so they teased us for being from the woods.

LC: But how did you feel knowing that you were a—or did you feel anything at all—knowing that you were a descendent of Jim Shankle—who the community was named after.

GWR: Actually I didn't find that out until later.

LC: When you were growing up you didn't know that?

GWR: I did know that my grandfather's name was Shankle and my mother's maiden name was Shankle and that was the name of the community. But I didn't really take pride in that until I knew the whole history. And I didn't know that growing up. I only started learning that story—probably once I was in high school—maybe a junior or senior in high school.

LC: Really?

GWR: Yes.

LC: That's interesting. Why do you think they didn't talk about it?

GWR: There may've been a couple of reasons. There may've been other members of my family that told it down in the generations and my grandfather may have told it at one time but my family was broken. My grandfather—he and his wife got divorced and he remarried. And he married a Strahan and she was very domineering and I don't think she had a lot of pride in the Shankle family. And so the story wasn't taught to my mother so then my mother didn't reach it to us.

LC: Oh so your mother was still living with—

GWR: They had six kids and three of them stayed with my grandfather and my step-grandmother. And my biological grandmother moved to Victoria, Texas which is outside of

Houston and she remarried so she no longer had the Shankle name. So she didn't tell it. That was my conclusion—I would have to really ask my mother why. But that's what I would conclude from that.

LC: Okay. So the first time you heard it—what were the circumstances around that?

GWR: It was Shankleville Homecoming. I had gone there for Shankleville Homecoming which we have once a year and I think it started with your mother—with Larutha Clay when she was trying to dig up some history on Shankleville and trace family trees and things like that. And then I just got really interested in it and that's when I started asking a lot of questions.

LC: Were you there when they dedicated the marker?

GWR: I was. Maybe that's the beginning of it. When was that?

LC: I think that was 1973.

GWR: Yeah. I would've been in—I would've been a sophomore in high school. That was the beginning of it! Yeah.

LC: Okay so then after that how did you think of it?

GWR: Oh lots of pride. I tell the story as often as I can.

LC: Okay so you went to high school and you graduated from high school—oh this is another question—so when you're growing up and you're in Shankleville—how do you think Shankleville was different from Jamestown or Wiergate or other communities if at all.

GWR: I think Shankleville was different in that it had a lot more heritage. A lot of people were more morally aware of how they were raising their kids—

LC: Give an example.

GWR: Example. Some of the other kids I went to school with—they didn't go to church—their parents didn't really go to PTA meetings—they weren't really involved in community development—they weren't involved in what was going on on a county or local standpoint. They were just kind of like—a lot of the kids raised themselves because their parents were partying and you know—they got into stuff. They got into drugs and stuff.

LC: So when you were in high school what did you do for fun?

GWR: Played tennis. Played basketball after school when I got a chance—my parents didn't really let me play on the basketball team.

LC: Why not?

GWR: Because I was a girl and the girls rode with the boys and they felt like that was too much exposure with the girls with shorts on riding with the boys [laughs]. My parents were very strict.

LC: You'd be surprised how many women have told me that they couldn't go on the basketball team.

GWR: Are you serious? I thought it was just Mama and 'em.

LC: Back to my mother's time. [Laughter] Anyway this is your interview! Okay so what else did you do. Did y'all have parties and stuff?

GWR: [Laughs] No.

LC: Why do you say it like that?

GWR: Whatever church events we had—now Cousin Addie used to take all the youth to—we had this thing called Youth Encampment and it was a youth fraternity and they were the daughters and sons of the Eastern Stars and the Masons. And so we did get to do that in the summers—we had these summer camps that we did.

LC: What'd you do at camp?

GWR: We'd go and stay in dormitories and then we'd go to workshops and learn about nature and also learn about the Bible.

LC: Oh okay.

GWR: And then there was something else in San Augustine I used to go to with Cousin Addie—I forgot what it's called—Association or something like that. That was kind of fun.

LC: What'd you do there?

GWR: Mostly Bible school. Like Bible stuff.

LC: What about the Homecoming?

GWR: The Homecoming was a lot of fun. That was the event of the year! We looked forward to the Homecoming because anybody that had graduated and moved away would come back home for the Homecoming. Plus relatives of people—you know like yourself and other cousins that lived out of town—they would come up for the Homecoming so you're spending all this time planning what you're gonna wear and how you're gonna do your hair and then you gotta practice for the choir and then after you sing—

TRANSCRIPT END