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Interviewer: Lareatha Clay
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Lareatha Clay: LC
Oletha Odom Woods: OOW
S.T. Odom: STO
Arzela Odom Coles: AOC
Larutha Odom Clay: LOC
James Odom: JO
Elzie Odom: EO

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

JO: ...and they gave him an examination of postal inspector, and he passed and moved on and I stayed there, but I had learned to really, to like the postal service. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed the daily, dealings with people, the general public and became almost a part of me, even to the extent that when I have a vacation, I'd be glad to go back to work, so I could see my people again, and I stayed there for 35 years. And of course, during that time, I built a home, and had a family there, three kids, and was active in church and limited in civic organizations. And I decided I would stay there, and I've retired from the postal service 30 let's see, 27 years ago and I'm still there.

I'm still there, 'cause I don't have any, sometimes, realizing Orange that's changed a whole lot in the last 20 to 30 years, Elize, Barbara, or Ruth or anybody who used to be there, they'd tell you that only its deteriorated a whole lot, so far as Black people in society is concerned. It's not, these are places to go, clubs or organizations that senior citizen become a part of. And a lot of people in Orange, that I know personally is bored with living there, but because going to the grocery store and to church is about it and going back home. So, I'm stuck there now, I'm not completely happy there but I can't move now. I'm a senior citizen and we got my own home there and I just, it's too far in advance for me to think about trying to relocate.

LC: Okay. Mam why did you decide to stay in Texas? Was it a conscious decision or was it something that just happened?

LOC: Something that just happened. Zee said she left the beauty shop because, you know, she got tired of it, but I never could do it. I just, I was unskilled, you know, I couldn't do it. People came here and left, looking as bad as they did when they came in, but they've had a good time visiting with me. So I just decided that I needed to get in some situation, where they'd be visiting or interactions, you know in the classroom, like that, would bring me more satisfaction.

So that's why I left it. I couldn't use my hands to manipulate the irons even, you know? And so I just wasn't skillful. And so that's why I did, but I didn't leave Texas because when I went to

college and met my husband, that was just it, we just never, wherever we go. I worked in Port Arthur and he came to Jasper to sign for a job and then after we, you know, he got a job in Beaumont and we, you know, he was working in Beaumont, I was working in Port Arthur, and we got married, and we just finally got together.

LC: But your first job was in Liberty? Why did you decide not to live in Shankleville?

LOC: Well, Uncle Charles was the principal, and mama and grandma lived in the same house, I just wouldn't have grown up, had I stayed in that situation, so I didn't stay, but just one school year in that situation. Mama was driving me to Liberty and coming back picking me up and I was just smothered in supervision and I just enjoyed getting to Port Arthur so that I could be a lady.

(birds chirping)

LC: Okay, so let's talk about Big Mama supervision since several people have mentioned it. Anybody have like a story they'd like to share, about the supervision that you received, as you were growing up in Shankleville?

EO: I don't know, we'd laugh about and joke about Mama being such a disciplinarian, but she had eight kids, she never had one with a drug problem, she never had one go to jail. They were always respectful and they have all lived respectable lives and respected by others, so I'm not sure it was all bad. I see kids now ruling their parents and we didn't do that. And so though I joke about it, I appreciate the type of parents that I had.

LOC: And here's one story we could tell. I don't know what we did in that cane patch. But Mama made us all go to that hall and whipped each one of us going through there. I never will forget that.

EO: It was about something that happened and nobody would tell her.

AOC: That's right.

LC: What was it that happened?

EO: I don't even remember

LOC: I can't even remember.

STO: I don't know nothing about that.

EO: I don't think S.T. was there. And Zee and Ruth or Oletha were bigger, and me and Lee were smaller. So they kind of walked through there slow and stubborn and mama just whip, whip, whip and when it came our time to come through, we went phew (motions moving quickly through). We run!

LOC: You didn't get that many licks, huh?

We only got one lick!

(all laugh)

LC: And you said through a cane patch?

EO: We were working in the cane patch, something happened, somebody said something, something happened and she couldn't get the truth about what it was, and she was going to force us to tell her.

LC: Did you all tell her?

EO: I don't think I knew.

(all laugh)

LOC: She got satisfaction out of whipping us.

EO: Yeah, yeah. And she whipped them big ones good, 'cause they walked through stubborn, but the little ones, scooted through there.

(all laugh)

LC: She did it in the cane patch or in the house?

EO: In the hall.

LOC: In the house.

LC: She waited til you all get home?

LOC: Yeah.

EO: Yeah.

LOC: We had conferences, court, you know, testimony.

EO: Nobody was telling. Nobody would tell it.

LOC: You testify. What did you see? What did you see? (laughs)

LC: She did testimony?

EO: She said I'mma whoop you all.

LOC: You know what I mean, we had conferences. You know Mr. Simmons used to teach like that, he called everybody in.

LC: Aunt Zee was saying what was it?

AOC: They said they'd give us a chance to tell the truth, and we all were stubborn enough to keep it back, whatever it was, (chuckles) remember that one? I remember one time that somebody stole a piece of chicken or two. And we went to court.

LOC: Mama cooked before we went to church.

AOC: Mama fried a chicken, and somebody was dumb enough to go in the kitchen and take two thighs like she wouldn't miss them!

LOC: Two thighs!

(laughter)

AOC: Like she wouldn't miss them!

LOC: Did she whip them about that?

EO: No she solicited the aid of L. A. Simmons. L.A. Simmons, we had court over that!

LOC: Yes! And it ended up in Oletha was the guilty person, even though she wasn't. And years later, Hal told him he was the one that took the chicken, after he got grown and gone. (laughs) He can tell you about that right now.

EO: Nonetheless, they were doing what they thought they needed to do, and in retrospect, I think it worked.

LOC: But you know I look back on the way we raised our children. We thought we were doing the right thing, when we thought, we got that from her. That a whipping would solve all problems, and we just whipped, whipped, whipped. (laughs)

EO: I don't know, we did too, and it worked.

AOC: It sure did work for me.

(all laugh)

LOC: But I was not whipping. It's a different day.

EO: I know it and it's not working!

LOC: (Laughs) We'll wait and see on that.

EO: We got a generation we're losing.

LOC: The jury's still out on that.

JO: But I emphasize what Elzie said a little while ago, there's something that worked because, name me a community you've heard of anywhere, where at a family as large as our family was and nobody been in jail, nobody been in any kind of crime, nobody got hooked up with drugs and we just, and our parents all well supervised us, they did a good job of making good kids out of us. So they tried to educate us the best they knew how because their income was limited 'cause they couldn't send us all to college, but they did what they could do.

EO: And they made us work, they wouldn't let us miss school.

JO: Right.

LC: I was going to ask about that education. How was education stressed in the house?

LOC: Oh yes, we got a lesson about that fireplace.

EO: Yes.

LC: Let's get Uncle S.T., since you didn't know about the cane whipping, let's talk about education.

(Larutha laughs)

STO: No I didn't know about it. The chicken either.

LC: You didn't know about the chicken?

LOC: You didn't hear about somebody stealing the chicken?

STO: Nope.

JO: We used to get lessons by that fireplace. And on that fireplace used to put a pine up there with a light on it lay down on our bellies and get our schoolwork out. We didn't have electricity then.

STO: All this happened in '38, in 1938 over to nine.

LOC: Harold left in '33.

STO: Yeah.

EO: He went to college in '33--

LOC: Went to college in '33.

EO: But he came back didn't he, in summer?

LOC: Maybe so, cause he was teaching in Bleakwood. You remember? That's another story.

LC: So do you have a story, since they are young, well not Uncle Mack, but Aunt Zee and Mama and Uncle Elzie, are younger, do you have like a story of some discipline that happened, when you and Uncle Harold met Uncle Matt?

STO: No I don't.

LC: Did you ever get spanked by Big Mama?

STO: Oh yeah, I can't, you know, it came up (chuckles) I don't know what it was about, I was a good boy, but I know she always chastised.

AOC: Does anybody remember when S.T. used to get a high fever and he would try to jump out the window, do you remember that?

EO: Nope.

AOC: If it's in my head then I don't believe it.

(Larutha laughs)

LC: No, say it, go ahead.

JO: I remember when S.T. was kind of delayed about being weaned from the bottle, and he drank quite a bit and Daddy had a little trouble disciplining him about his drinking.

But I think one of the things they considered, was that that was his period. Bob Simmons and somebody else, (people speak indistinctly) and get that old homemade whiskey and drink it and get drunk and get S.T. drunk and then laugh at him, and then the Daddy would get on to him and chastise him. I remember that specifically, but I feel that that was not a discipline problem from our parents.

That was an incident where a brother, was running with the wrong gang, that's way I put it. I was younger than he and I didn't fool with it, but they did quite a bit of drinking and running around together, but other than that, we've had no problems in this family so far as growing up and kids.

LC: Okay. Sir?

STO: It couldn't have been much of a problem for me, I was only 17 years old when I left the state.

LC: Oh you was 17 years?

STO: Yeah and I don't what this is about a drinking problem.

LC: Okay. So Aunt Zee, you were going to say something about Uncle S. T. had a fever?

AOC: Yeah, he used to have a high fever and it would get him out of his head, get hallucinating, I should say, and one time he tried to jump out of the window but it was screened, it was nailed real tight. The next day we could see the birds there where he was--

LOC: Oh yes.

AOC: You forgot that?

LOC: I remember now.

EO: I was too small for them to let me know that.

AOC: So anyway--

LC: So how would you cure a high fever?

STO: Again I had to be ten or eleven years old when that happened.

AOC: Could have been. Every time he had a high fever, he would hallucinate with the high fever.

LC: What was causing the high fever?

AOC: I guess it was some plain cold or flu or something, I don't know what was it. Kids all get sick, (chuckles)

LOC: Most people didn't go to the doctor, they went to the doctor, the doctor didn't do anything. Gave everybody the same pill, we didn't have any skill for doctors around here, and those who came, acted like they were coming wait on some hogs or something, they just didn't care about Black people.

LC: A white doctor would come out here?

LOC: Dr. Matthew would come out here.

EO: That was the only kind there was.

LOC: It was Aunt Letha telling me, that the man was out here playing ball or something, with the children, while Zee was suffering in labor, when she lost her baby. Zee was telling me that last week. I didn't remember that.

AOC: They used to take wild leaves off the trees, and put some ice, and then lay it on Mama's head to run down the fever, and they would never check to see what was causing the fever. Mama would be in real high fever, you know, and they would take leaves off the trees and put ice and then put them in ice bags to cool her body down, I guess.

LOC: We're just blessed we made it.

JO: We had a doctor in Wiergate (indistinct) Dr. Mackinaw(?) and he made house calls. And he'd come out here, I don't care what you had, he would give a big pill then a little one, I don't care if you got a toe ache, a headache, or had a heart attack.

AOC: You never knew what the pill was for. Aspirin or what.

LOC: 'Cause Zee stayed in labor, a long time, he didn't do anything for her. I mean, he slept out here. He wasn't doing a thing.

AOC: He slept in that front room.

LOC: Yes. He wasn't doing a thing!

LC: And you paid him?

LOC: I'm sure they did. I remember when Lee was born, Aunt Lu charged \$7 and all of us we paid our dollar apiece (laughs).

AOC: I remember that. Dad gave us all a dollar each.

LC: Where did you all get the dollar?

LOC: Mama and them gave it to us. We were paying for our new brother, and Lee was our little brother.

AOC: So we paid it.

LOC: And that's how the midwife cost, and I don't know what happened--

EO: I was about two years old, so I don't remember.

AOC: Mama said some of the kids were born—

JO: You remember the home-made blackboard that Daddy made that hung in the hall? And every time a baby would come, he'd write the name of the new baby on the hall, you know, Elzie, (chuckles) Lee Esther(?) (chuckles) or whatever, you know, after Aunt Lu delivered--

AOC: Most of the kids they--

LOC: All of us? I didn't know.

JO: I think Aunt Lu delivered--

AOC: Shut up. When Mama would get pregnant with a baby, Daddy would pick out a little pig and say that's who's going to pay for the baby, and he would fatten up the pig and Aunt Lu would get the hog.

(all exclaim, Larutha laughs)

LC: And you're talking about Aunt Lu, Big Papa's sister?

JO: No.

LOC: No. Grandpa's sister.

EO: Aunt Lu Smart.

AOC: She was a midwife.

EO: She had a black bag, we thought the babies came in the bag.

LC: What was in the bag? You ever find out?

JO: Well--

EO: Her utensils and tools.

JO: Her utensils and whatever.

LC: She actually had tools?

JO: Yeah.

AOC: She was a midwife.

JO: Midwife's tools. You got things to cut and things not to cut.

LOC: I think Elizabeth was born up here, with that same old doctor that Zee had. But Oletha's other two children were born with midwives at her house. They came to her house.

LC: Okay--

LOC: I wanted to tell Elzie that your name came from Uncle Simon Lewis' son. Somewhere where we dedicated that building up there, somebody said he didn't know where you got your name from.

EO: I asked mama and she told me she had an uncle named Elzie. Uncle Simon Lewis's son, yeah.

LOC: Uncle Simon Lewis's son. And I finally met his wife, his wife came to Beaumont, and I took Daddy down there to meet her, and oh she had a story to tell, about how she had three boys, I believe it was, got killed coming home one Christmas and one of them was named Elzie, after her.

AOC: I thought that it was Ezell and they just turned it around.

LOC: Ezell was Aunt Vet and them's brother. He got shot in a hunting accident. But these three boys, one of them named Elzie, got killed coming home for Christmas.

EO: I've never known whether the name meant anything or not, but Mama told me that she had an uncle named Elzie.

LC: All right, okay. We gon' wrap it up, so I just want to ask one as one more thing and that's, so this is June the 20th, and I know that Juneteenth was big, if you all would just kind of go down in line and talk about what you all did growing up in Shankleville for Juneteenth. Uncle S.T.?

STO: Still don't know anything about that (indistinct) again, I'll tell you I was born 1918.

LC: But did you all celebrate Juneteenth?

STO: No, they might have celebrated but not to the extent that I could remember.

LC: Okay.

STO: Being that young, it was nothing for me, at that time Wiergate was pretty big. They had a lot of working people up there and everything but I didn't know nothing about it.

AOC: That's what was about to say. We always had the day off, out of the school and it was--

EO: School was out.

LOC: It was summer.

AOC: Well maybe that was why. But anyway, we would be in the field working, and the kids was all going and coming by, going up to the dance to hear the music. All the way down here.

LOC: We couldn't go anywhere.

AOC: Do you all remember that? We would be in the field working and they would pass by.

LC: And you all didn't go?

LOC: Un uh.

AOC: Uh un.

EO: Wiergate was off limits, we didn't go to Wiergate.

LOC: Look like Ms. Velma got her honkytonk at the top of that black line and I don't know how I got something out of there but it was real soupy but Mama didn't let us go.

LC: Why was Wiergate off limits?

AOC: The honkytonks and a lot of liquor stores.

EO: There was just no reason for us to go. This was an all Black community, and we lived in it, and very seldom left it. And you left it when Big Mama said you could leave.

JO: Basketball game or fair or something like that, but just ordinary--

EO: Just to go and we did not celebrate, it seems to me one time, Daddy had barbecued a goat, just for something special for Juneteenth and we had watermelon and stuff like that, but going some place else, no.

LC: Did you all ever go on a family vacation?

EO: No.

LOC: Un uh. No. We got on the back of that truck--

JO: We used to lay by the fields and everybody go out there and get a pole and some string and dig up some bait and then get in the back of that truck and go fishing down the--

LOC: The girls couldn't do that.

JO: A girl couldn't do that.

LOC: They wouldn't let the girls go outside.

AOC: We're not complaining. I'm not. That was quite alright with me.

LOC: No. (giggles)

EO: But I still say, we talk about it, laugh about it, but it worked.

AOC: Because all of those girls I was going to school with, in my class that we'd see come pass and their parents were taking them, they're all gone.

JO: Yeah.

AOC: Every single one, I don't have a classmate left.

EO: Hattie Pearl was my classmate, and Hattie Pearl was my classmate.

(all laugh)

LOC: Ms. Simmons said that she would come to school and slip off and go on back wherever the bus driver went. That's how interested she was in school (indistinct).

AOC: There was a lot of hanky panky.

LOC: Yes, and that's what, you know, shocked me, when we had to go Wiergate. See I was gone. But that was your last year, when you went to Wiergate to school.

EO: I think I went two, didn't I?

LOC: Un uh. This would've been '44, '44-'45. You finished in '45, right?

EO: Yeah, well it might've been.

JO: I didn't want to bring that up, but somebody just hit on it. So I'm going to briefly talk about it, you talk about hanky panky, we had some hanky panky and that kind of stuff in this community, where men who impregnated women in the community and illegitimate children, they don't have a field, but have a field down by the bayou, when it rain, they get the gun and dog and go hunting and to go down there to see a tree fall on the fence, to let the cattle in and visit with a woman, and stay all night, and then we had one or two instances where people died over that.

LOC: But see they didn't let us know that.

EO: No I didn't know that.

LOC: You got grown you could figure it out.

JO: It's just, since I got grown, I found out a whole lot of hanky panky went on there in this community.

LOC And one new family, the Cooper's, you see lived up there somewhere up there between here and Wiergate, and Mama dared you all to go up there, she wouldn't let up on it. (chuckles)

LC: Did she let you know why she didn't want you to go there?

EO: I don't know.

LOC: She didn't have to!

JO: Henry Shankle married one of them up there.

LOC: Henry Shankle. That was a nice one. But the others you know--

JO: Yeah. And I had a friend in Orange that married one of them.

LOC: There's loose women, you know, just a bunch of loose women coming at you, about seven of them, I believe it was. The men, the boys were having a field day, going up there.

JO: They had one, nickname of Scoopy or something like that, and I think S.T. used to kind of knock around with her.

LOC: Uh oh!

AOC: S.T. and Scoopy?

STO: I don't remember that.

LOC: You don't remember that?

STO: I was only seven, eight or nine years old.

(laughter)

EO: Yeah, you were 17 when you left.

LOC: You were 17 S.T.?

STO: What?

LOC: When you left?

STO: Yeah. When I left after I went to college. After I had been to college.

JO: I went to school with one of those girls and she just passed.

LOC: She was a nice one.

JO: She was a nice one.

LOC: Yes. Some good came out of that Cooper house, you know.

SOC: Let's go--

LC: I know you all ready to go.

EO: If I could start life all over again and select my parents, I'd select Big Mama and Big Papa.

AOC: I would too. Right here in the country.

LC: If you had to do it all again, would you still grow up here?

AOC: That's right

LOC: Yeah.

JO: Yeah.

LC: In the twenties, and the teens?

EO: Yes.

LC: Would you still go to that school without very many facilities?

AOC: That's right.

EO: Yes.

LC: Would you take all the discipline you had?

EO: Absolutely.

JO: Yeah.

LC: Okay, and all the working when everybody else is going to Juneteenth?

AOC: That's right.

EO: You don't appreciate—

LOC: See I remember a time when you could negotiate.

EO: You don't appreciate a roof, until you've been out in the rain.

LC: All right, thank you very much.

TRANSCRIPT END