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Interviewees: Jeanette Gatlin Collette, Larutha Odom Clay
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Speaker Identification:
Lareatha Clay: LC
Jeanette Gatlin Collette: JGC
Larutha Odom Clay: LOC

TRANSCRIPT BEGIN

LOC: Somebody asked me how did I learn how to spell—I didn't have anything else to do but spell! We didn't have art. We didn't have P.E.

JGC: But spelling bees! And we would win too. And another thing I never will forget was when I was about five—I started my first play. I was Chicken Little, The sky is falling, the sky is falling! That was something—you know when they would put on that play at the end of school and Ms. Simmons was in charge of it. I was doing that. Those were the highlights of my—

LOC: That's right. I'm so glad to hear you say that—people have accused Ms. Simmons of being so high and mighty she didn't reach down to touch the average child. That's the reputation they give her. They say, If you were smart Ms. Simmons wanted to teach you. But if you were not—

JGC: No. If you wanted to learn she worked with you. She would go out of her way to this.

LOC: She had a little sandbox and you know a little old sand table with little old animals and stuff in there—to teach you names and she just went out of her way like you were saying.

JGC: And even when she was in Wiergate—

LC: So she did go over to Wiergate?

JGC: Yes. She went to Wiergate—she taught English and literature in Wiergate. She would still use me as an example—and you're talking about more people resenting me! It's because I don't care what class I was in—if she would have a class—like if she had a senior class or a junior class and if I was a sophomore—and she had one of them classes come in there and those students was not diagramming the sentence right or not doing—she would send for me!

LOC: Now that's why I can't see why you were resented. I have a question I need to ask you—why did the other children resent you?

JGC: It's babysitting! They resented me.

LOC: I had children even when I was teaching come and tell me—

LC: She did that to you too?

LOC: No. See I don't remember her. Making me feel uncomfortable. I just don't see why the children in Shankleville didn't feel uncomfortable around us all of the time. I just don't see it. It just looks like we had more advantages.

JGC: Yes that's true.

LOC: And that's why I want to give back.

JGC: Yeah.

LOC: Because the Simmons' lived right next door to us. You know it appeared we had more advantage—because whatever they got up at the school they'd take it down to their house and then on down to our house. And now I can look back and see that wasn't right. It wasn't right.

LC: What do you mean?

LOC: Electricity. When they got that generator at the school—Mr. Simmons got it at his house and then they brought it on down to our house. And it wasn't right for us to have electricity from a generator at the school and other people didn't have it. I can see that now. But I don't remember—

JGC: At that time—like I said—we didn't know the difference. When y'all was growing up we knew y'all had things that we didn't have for the simple reason that your mom—y'all had the store.

LC: So you attribute it to the fact that they had the store?

JGC: They had the store. Just like we contribute to the fact that Cartra(??) and Buddy and Theresa had because Mr. Wiley had the store. As far as the little bitty things. That was the only reason. But as far as being resentful—I don't know. Some people might have been. But me personally I can't say that I was because I knew that we were all related. I'm the person that I love family. I love family.

LC: Where do you think that comes from?

JGC: I think that it come—actually it came from—honestly I can't remember because I do remember—like I said—there were some things that happened to me that were so much different from a lot of the others because of my mother's sickness. I grew up as kind of a lonely child. And my mother was sick and she would be gone to the hospital a lot and I had to go and stay with other people. I can't say that I was mistreated—when I was younger I didn't realize that—I can't say that I was loved and hugged and cuddled you know—like children when they're young—but nobody ever mistreated me. I was too young to understand what was going on. But I guess I would say that it was instilled in my mother—but you know even my ancestors that I didn't know that was ahead of me. Auntie had a lot to do with it too—Aunt Opal had a lot to do with it. Showing us family how important it is. And being brought up in the church. And like I said—not just the one church—of course I was brought up in the Church of God—but we all

visited the Methodist church, the Baptist church—in other words just the community. It was just something that was instilled in us about family.

LOC: See we didn't come home after Sunday School. There was some more church and we'd go—on a certain day we'd go to another church. On the next Sunday we'd go to the Church of God—on the fourth Sunday we'd go to Mount Hope. It was just a community thing. And we couldn't tell the difference from one denomination from another.

JGC: No. And that's the one thing that I do miss now.

LC: What's that?

JGC: The visitation to the other churches.

LOC: The visitation—that's right—I know you do.

JGC: I really do. I really miss that now because I don't really get a chance to see the people because we—at our church we have church on first Sunday and third Sunday. Methodist church have church which used to be the second Sunday. And the Baptist had the church on fourth Sunday. But now the Methodists have church every Sunday. So we don't get a chance to go visit.

LOC: They don't get a chance to go visit. And you miss that.

JGC: I really miss that. So that is why when I moved back—I go to church in Shankleville two Sundays. I came back and I rejoined the Church of God. And then first Sunday and fourth Sunday—I was going to church here in Jasper over at Wiley(?) McBride's church.

LOC: Now he's gone to Port Arthur.

JGC: Now he's gone to Port Arthur—so this would give me a chance to go back to Shankleville and visit the other churches.

LC: When you graduated from high school then where did you go?

JGC: Actually—truthfully—I never graduated from high school. I got pregnant. I got married. Not that I wanted to—I married because I had to get away from home. I stayed in Shankleville for a little while and then my husband's job moved to Louisiana—DeQuincy, Louisiana—and I stayed in DeQuincy about four years until my son was five years old and my husband and I separated. So I left there and I went to Beaumont to my grandmother and I stayed there about two or three months with her. Then I went to Houston. That was in May of 1960 when I went to Houston. I was there about a week and I got a job and I was there until the year 2002. I spent most of my life in Houston.

LC: So why did you decide not to stay in Houston after you retired?

JGC: Actually I had not even planned to retire. This was in the working of God. After Auntie's health began deteriorating and we started noticing what was going on with her and the Alzheimer's and we had to put her in a nursing home—God started speaking to me. And I'm like Larutha—I wanted to give back. Like I said—she's always been a role model of mine. So I felt like that—I knew that she would—even being in a nursing home—that I didn't want her to feel

like shew as alone. By her never having any children and she had so much for me—not once did she ever turn her back—she always did all that she could for me. So when God started speaking to me about coming back I hadn't even planned to retire because I said I was going to work until I was seventy or so. But when He first started speaking to me the first part of 2001 I didn't say anything to anybody. So I started secretly thinking about it and praying about it. At that time my youngest son was still living with me. So I finally told him that I was thinking about retiring when I got sixty-five—which would've been in July—and that I was thinking about moving back to Jasper in order to be close and visit Auntie as much as I could. So he told me that that was fine because he was planning on getting his own apartment anyway. So he did. So I finally started telling the people at my job that I was going to retire. Of course they didn't believe me.

LC: Where were you working?

JGC: I was working at a company—Greene Tweed and Company—that manufactured down hole oil well parts. And when I told them—I finally gave them my date—I said, This year I'm going to retire. My son moved out in August and I started. When he moved out and got his apartment—of course there was an empty room—so I started packing. When I started coming up here I started looking for places to stay. This is the reason I know it was in God's plan. I was looking for a downstairs apartment or house or something—you know I knew I didn't want to be up and down the stairs. So I finally told my job I would work until December the twentieth and I said the rest of the month I have vacation time that I could use it on so it could go to the end of the month. So I would try to find someplace—I didn't want to—my lease was up. I said, Well I'm going to have to go on a month-to-month. I couldn't find anyplace up here that was suitable. So the week before I actually retired it was the lady—the apartments where I am now—a vacancy came up. She told Linda—Linda went to see it—

LC: Linda's your sister?

JGC: Linda's my sister—and I rented it sight unseen. This is God's working. I came up that weekend and I saw it and met with the lady. I retired December the twentieth—December the thirtieth I was in Jasper.

LOC: Are you satisfied with your apartment?

JGC: I am truly satisfied—it's a blessing from God. God knew I needed something that was quiet. I had looked at all these other places—you know where you would be—a lot of traffic in and out. The apartment where I am there are eight units—four where I am and four down. I have a wonderful eighty-five-year-old neighbor. Then myself on the ground floor. I have a young Black man that live up over me. Now the only thing I'm having to get used to now—we just had some new babies move in and they have a teenaged son and he got a lot of company coming up and down the stairs—but I'm asking God to not let me get bitter and to take that little noise away from me—you know—to get used to it. But it is nice and quiet. It is nice and quiet and we do not have—because she don't put up with that. I knew it was the hands of God. And I go and visit Auntie just about every other day. Some days I just sit there and I talk with her. Some days I go with them on trips—some days when they have things there at the nursing home I help them—even the other people that's there. I just love doing that! I wash—well I don't wash all of her

clothes—I was her dresses and keep her trying to look as nice as I can—make sure she has the things that she needs. Go shopping for her. She’s always been a role model and I just like doing this. And it’s not only her. Even volunteering at the History Center—

LC: Newton County History Center.

JGC: Newton County History Center—I enjoy doing that. I go down and whatever I can do. Right now I help input the 1930 census into the computer so we can get ready to print out the books for them. I do typing, indexing—I’m getting ready to start updating the Newton County cemetery books. Answer the phone—people come in and need some help in looking up family history and looking up the census—I help them. I just enjoy doing that. When I first came back to Jasper I volunteered down at the Jasper Share where they give out food. I volunteered down there until I had to go into the hospital for a procedure on my heart. So I volunteered down there for about six months.

LC: So the main reason that you came back to the area is family?

JGC: Yes.

LC: When you were living in Houston—how often did you come back and forth?

JGC: At least two or three times a year in my later years when I had my own transportation. Now in the earlier years I was not able to come back because—first thing, I was late learning how to drive. I never had confidence in myself enough to learn how to drive. As I became more confident—I think I was in my thirties when I learned how to drive—and had more time off. Because the first years—1969 I started working for the phone company and I worked for them for eighteen years and I didn’t have a lot of time off but I would always try to come back for the Homecoming as often as I could. Now that was one of the things that was really important to me—that I really missed—is coming back to the Homecoming.

LOC: I think they’d come on Saturday and clean up and cook.

JGC: Yeah that’s right. We’d come on Saturday and tell her, Your kitchen—you can have it back on Monday! But this weekend it belongs to us.

When I came back it was just—moving back I knew that I could not live back in Shankleville for one thing after the house got burned. But I knew that I wasn’t brave enough to live up there alone. Being here in Jasper—it has all the conveniences I need—a grocery store, a Walmart and a doctor’s office. And of course the library. I just enjoy being in a smaller town. I don’t know it’s just—don’t have to worry about the traffic and people—so far I haven’t run into anyone that has been rude to me. I really haven’t. Although I know that it’s here as it is everywhere. But I ran into it more at my job in Houston than since I’ve been here in Jasper. You know—the prejudice and things like that. But I just enjoy being home. To come back to do whatever I can to whomever I can for as long as I can—because I feel like this—with God being the head of my life and I’m trying to follow in whatever purpose He has for me—and that is to do good, to live a righteous life and I know that it starts with the family.

LOC: She found her purpose!

JGC: And that is my purpose. I'm an encourager. I say all the time with my computer—I have certain people that I would email every morning a scripture, kid word, or whatever I was reading. So you know I say the devil crashed my computer so I could not spread the word of God every morning because I had some women that I was kind of a mentor to and they would always tell me how encouraging it would be. But you know I said, Satan—you may have got my computer today but you not going to stop me from spreading the word of God. So I just take my messages on my telephone and every so often I change my message.

LOC: So somebody calls you, gets a message.

JGC: So if they call me and I'm not at home it gets a message. My daughter-in-law called me she said, Mama I like that message that you have on your machine. She said, I'm going to have to think about that. I've had other people tell me—Sister Williams called me she said, Oh I like that message you have. She said, How did you do that? I said, I do it myself—if I'm reading something, meditating the word, or if something hit me while reading a verse in the Bible—I put it on there. It might stay on there a day or two until something else come along. It might stay on there a week! But that is my way—

LOC: Until you get your computer fixed.

JGC: Until I get my computer fixed. And then I'm going to start working on my life story. Now that's a goal of mine. Working on my life story because I was telling my niece—I want to tell my story but to tell it truthfully it would hurt a lot of people.

LC: Whenever we're doing these kinds of things—she's always telling me to watch asking people to go into more detail than they want to.

JGC: Yes. And the reason being—and it's the fact that I was raised under a stepfather. And that my mother has two children by him. So there are some things—you know that I can't go into details because I don't want to hurt my two younger sisters. But I still want to tell it.

LC: Was your stepfather Strahan related to Aunt Opal's husband?

JGC: Yes that was his father.

LC: Oh!

JGC: Yes. My mother married the father and Uncle Strahan [Aunt Opal] married the son.

LOC: And see that would be some hurt you know with Opal's family. That would be some hurt with that.

JGC: Oh yes.

LOC: Because he was a staunch church person. You know what I'm saying?

JGC: Oh yes!

LOC: More than Courtney. You remember? I don't know if you remember A.B. Strahan—those were his brothers. You don't remember A.B.? I mean—you don't remember Courtney and Kenzie? Those are his brothers.

JGC: Kenzie I don't remember but I do remember Courtney. Yeah.

LOC: Courtney seemed to have been the best educated one in the family.

JGC: Yes.

LOC: Because he liked to use his big words!

JGC: Oh yes!

LOC: A.B. was just [inaudible].

JGC: Then it was some of the other siblings—the Odoms—and the things that was done to my mother's children that she had before she married that—

LC: So you father—did he stay in Shankleville?

JGC: My father moved away. Matter fact—my father moved to Beaumont.

LOC: Is he still living?

JGC: Who? Hoy?

LOC: Hoy.

JGC: No Hoy died in 1986.

LC: What's his name?

JGC: Hoy.

LOC: H-O-Y.

JGC: Yes.

LOC: You see these are all Grandma's brother's children. I mean it's a bunch of Gatlins!

JGC: Oh yeah! You know my daddy moved to Beaumont. And when he and my mother separated he took my brother—

LOC: And that was your companion.

JGC: The thing about it was the fact that Daddy did it out of spite. And my mother's only son—he took him and that hurt her. And I think that had a lot to do with her sickness because she had a nervous breakdown.

LOC: Were you aware of that Lareatha? That she had mental illness.

LC: No.

JGC: My mother had nervous breakdowns often. Like I said—the first I remember I was three—when she had her first one. And off and on all of our lives—

LOC: Did other children tease you?

JGC: Oh yes. Yes unmerciful. Unmerciful. You were called—you know—Your crazy mama. Or, You're crazy like your mama. Children can be cruel. Children could be really cruel.

LOC: Ain't that sad. Tell me about it. And you excelled some of those that were saying that!

JGC: Yes.

LOC: That's what I tell my grandson.

JGC: And, You gon be like your mama you gonna have a house full of children. And, Oh you just your mouth. I was—when I said I was a black sheep I was serious. Sometimes I thought I was the black sheep of Shankleville.

LOC: But you see Ms. Simmons lifted you up.

JGC: Yes. She did.

LOC: She was trying to lift you up. She wasn't trying to put you down. She was trying to show the children.

JGC: Yes. And at that time—even going though all of that—I had to deal with that. I can thank God—I can look back and say—when they say, He will keep you—He kept me. Because with the childhood and all of the things that I went though and all of the things some of the people in the community—stepfamily—did to me I could've turned out to be anything.

LOC: That's right!

JGC: Even with my pregnancy—it wasn't deliberate. It was just one of those things. I was infatuated and it was just a weak moment. I wasn't even ready to get married—I didn't want to get married.

LOC: You didn't let it keep you down.

JGC: I didn't let it keep me down and my child—I did whatever I could. There was sometimes I had to work three jobs a day. When I went to Louisiana I had to work three jobs a day in order that my child was fed and taken care of. But I never put him off on anybody. Of course people had to watch him while I was working. There was the time he stayed with Auntie one semester going to school because she said he was too small to be going to school in Houston [laughs] but other than that I always—that's another thing—I proved them wrong. For twenty-one years I only had one child. Then twenty-one years later—

LOC: That's when you had the second.

JGC: Four months before my mother died I had my second one. Which is a God sent child. He was taken my mother and I felt like he knew this—he knew that I needed something to console

me. I could not dwell on what was happening with my mother because I had a small child to take care of. Yes.

LOC: Lareatha—her mother and Opal were dear dear sisters. And her mother got killed in Opal's car—it was a car wreck. Right where that Newton thing—where you come to that light where we go straight—and a car was coming and couldn't stop. So I'd like to know how that hurt you. How old were you and how you felt about that.

JGC: Let's see—I was thirty-nine.

LOC: Because Opal was devastated.

JGC: I was thirty-nine because I had Marcus when I was thirty-nine. And it was before my fortieth birthday. The weekend—my mother she had only seen my son one time and that was the weekend before. I think it was Ms. Leona's funeral. And I had rode up with my sister Joan and I believe Sister Birdie and we spent the weekend. And that Saturday and that Sunday—my mother would just sit there and just hold my baby and sing and rock and lay him down by her to take a nap. So we left that Sunday and went back to Houston. Went to work that Monday morning—I was working for the phone company at that time—and I had taken some pictures of him and her and he and Auntie. So I took them to the drugstore to be developed that Monday when I got back. And that Thursday they told me they would be back and they would be ready. It was a little before two o'clock and I got a phone call at work. I was just getting ready to go on my break and my oldest sister called me and told me that my mother had just gotten killed.

LOC: That's Lavonia?

JGC: Yeah. And my supervisor was across the hall in another supervisor's office and I walked across the hall and calmly told my supervisor that I got to go. I said, My mother just got killed and I got to go. And I turn around a walk and was going out the building—I was going to get in my car. I wasn't too far from where my older sister lived but to me—I was fine. I said, I got to go I got to get to my baby. Because my sister is upset and she—Lavonia was keeping him—and the next thing I know here come both the supervisors running behind me. They wouldn't let me drive. And they took me over and when I got there I can say it was quiet. And then I knew that—I felt like I had to do something—like they say kind of take charge for which I got on the phone and I knew that Johnetha was the type of person that she would go to pieces at everything.

LC: Who's Johnetha?

JGC: That's my sister next to me. And I did not want her to find out me calling her job. So I called her husband on his job and told him to go to her and to tell her. Then I called my sister in California and I told her.

LC: What's her name?

JGC: Lavenia.

LOC: Married the Ridgeway boy.

JGC: Yes. Lavenia—Lavenia Buchanan at the time. She was married [inaudible first name] Ridgeway was her first husband. I called and I told her and I just stayed around there with my oldest sister at her house—Lavoina. And then my brother came over and we were calling to decide—we had to come up here—well my youngest sister Linda—two of her boys was in the—

TRANSCRIPT END