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Speaker identification:

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

LC: Okay, today is June the 20th, 2004, we just completed the Sunday of our family reunion and it is about to rain. And we have speaking today, Oletha Odom Woods, S. T. Odom. Oletha Woods is from Jasper, Texas. S.T. Odom is from Berkeley, California.

Unidentified speaker: Getting feedback.

(people speak indistinctly)

LC: Okay, starting over, it's June 20th, 2004, Oletha Odom Woods, Jasper, Texas; S.T. Odom from Berkeley, California; Arzela Odom Coles from Oakland, California; Larutha Odom Clay from Beaumont, Texas; James Odom from Orange, Texas; and Elzie Odom from Arlington, Texas. Okay.

All right, these are the offspring from A. T. Odom and Annie Odom. They grew up in Shankleville, Texas in the -- First off, let me just hear when you all grew up. When did you, when did you start schooling? What school did you go to? What year did you start school and what school did you go to? Estimate. About what year.

OOW: What year was it. Let me see.

JO: It was about 1925.

OOW: I was born in 1921.

LC: Okay.

(people chatter indistinctly)

LC: Okay. And when were you born? I didn't want to say that, when were you born?

OOW: It's all right, I remember. I was born in the third month, the 28th day, in 1921. I started school when I was six years old. I finished high school I was 17 and a half years old.

STO: I was born May the 3rd, 1918. I went to Enterprise High School. Five years when I started kindergarten. Finished Enterprise High School and went to Prairie View for a year and a half. From there, I moved to California.

LC: Okay.

AOC: I was born October 17th, 1922, and I don't remember the year I started school, but I do know that I finished 11th grade in 1939.

(birds chirping)

LC: Okay, why don't you all pass the mic around instead of me standing here? Can you all speak up please?

Unidentified speaker: Put it closer.

LOC: I'm Larutha Odom Clay, I was born June the 25th, 1926. I started school in 1933. I thought that was the only year. I didn't think anything we would ever change to another year, I just remember '33 being the year that I started school and I finished high school in '43. And then I went to beauty college in Dallas, Texas. I operated a beauty shop in Orange and subsequently went to Prairie View in 1945 and I finished Prairie View in 1948.

JO: Yeah, I'm James Odom, I was born October 29th, 1919. I started kindergarten in 1925, about six years old because my birthday was in October. I just was eligible to start that school year and I finished in 1938. My scholastic work, I finished in '37, but because of the small number of seniors eligible for graduation, they held me back over a year, because I was a pretty good high school basketball player and I worked with my daddy, my late father A. T. Odom, who was a carpenter. I worked with him off and on, a whole year, and so that explained why Oletha and I was in the graduating class together, only with one other person in the community. Because the community was so small so we didn't have, couldn't afford large graduating classes and so that was the reason why I graduated in 1938.

I worked a year as a carpenter helper, and partially a supervisor for carpentry, with my late father of a year and then I went to Prairie View and studied carpentry and interior decorating, I was there a year and a half. And I was selected among the better students in mechanical art division, to work all across Texas, in some kind of a program sponsored by the government, to teach out of school dropouts, vocations. I taught carpentry, taught auto-mechanic and painting, for a year and a half. And then I got married and moved on and started a postal career in '42 and worked there for thirty-five years and retired there, at the end of 1976. I've been retired now 27 years, and I live in Orange, Texas.

EO: I guess I'm the baby of the family and I was born in 1929. It was about 1934 when I started school, and I don't recall, anything like kindergarten. All I recall is that there were about four teachers in the school, just outside the fence up there and they taught everything. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, and then the other two would rotate from time to time, but Mr. and Mrs. Simmons was always there.

I recall that school was very small. And our mother, everybody knows, was quite a disciplinarian and she had us to work in the field until the five minute bell would ring, for the kids to go inside. All the other kids up there playing, and we out there picking peas, or pulling peanuts, or whatever it was she had for us to do. She'd stand on the porch and watch until the five minute bell rang. Then we could go to school. So we never had a chance to fraternize with the other kids. But that's the way it was at the Enterprise School. So I longed to get away from that, and away from mama's guidance.

But finally, they combined the schools with Wiergate and we were going to get the ride the bus to Wiergate, what a day, getting away from mama. But on the first day of school, guess who drove the bus? Big Mama.

The rest of my school career was uneventful, I went on and graduated there and was married to my high school sweetheart, and we moved to Orange in '49 and started a postal career, that lasted actually until '87.

LC: Okay, all right. So everybody went to, and now, just whoever wants to talk, just answer the question. So everybody went to Enterprise, is that correct?

- That's correct.

LC: Okay, did everybody have Ms. Simmons as a teacher? Mr. and Mrs. Simmons as their teacher?

- Yes.

- Yes.

LC: Okay, so who has a good story they'd like to share about being in Enterprise School?

(group chatters indistinctly)

LOC: At Enterprise, the students were responsible for everything, like cooking the food.

LC: Cooking what food?

LOC: Cooking food for the rest of the children to eat.

LC: So they had lunch up there?

LOC: Some people, I think the government gave us stuff, you know, whatever the food was and the girls were supposed to be in the hall, making it, you know, would cook it and serve it. And I guess we spent all of our days working and we'd have to come out and get wood, and clean up the building. Mr. Simmons brags about how, when Harold started school, he wouldn't leave until everything was clean, you know? And the great boys he raised, and going in and getting wood, and I just thought about it, you know, that was child labor, wasn't it? You know? Picking wood and we, anytime we were sent out to get wood, mama was sitting, I don't know what she was doing, but she could see us and get on our cases. What did you leave out of the classroom for? That's the kind of supervision she could do, from that window or from someplace.

So the school was just, you know, it just wasn't coherent the way it is now. We had rules and discipline and, you know, like I asked Mr. Simmons in his old years, why did he march us up to that church house, every time somebody died? We didn't know the person, but we'd have to go up there and we didn't have the embalming back in those days and we'd laugh about it, even after we got grown, how we could smell the bodies, you know? So school was just a loose thing. The others may think we really and truly got what we supposed to have gotten, but I just see where we lacked a lot, you know.

Because like Elzie said, those other teachers just would fill in, and most of the time they were teachers who didn't want to go any other place, you know. We had a few good ones but most of the time, they were just fly by night teachers who were here just to get ready to go some other place. So, I thought it was a good thing when we combined the schools with somebody else. In fact, you know, poor teachers couldn't teach. Poor teachers couldn't teach all grades, you know, somebody was lacking or missing something. What we did get we got.

LC: Anybody else?

(people speak indistinctly)

AOC: Speaking of lacking and not getting anything. I finished 11th grade with flying colors, but never touched a typewriter. Didn't know how to type. And when I went out to school, computers was coming into play. I mean, when I went out for jobs. At first I went to beauty school and working in a beauty shop, but I didn't like that, too much gossip. (laughs)

Then I decided I'd go into IBM, with the machines, and I had to first go to junior college and take typing, then speed typing. And then finally worked my way into -- And the matter of fact is, when I finished they found me a job. That's how I got into the old computers, doing key punch and that type of thing, but I didn't get it at an Enterprise School. They didn't have a typewriting class, I guess.

LOC: I don't think they had a typewriter.

EO: What you must remember, is the era of which we speak. The schools were totally segregated, and far, far, far, from being equal. We never saw new books.

AOC: Right.

EO: The books were always used and I remember the few times, when desks would be delivered to the school, they already had somebody's name carved in it. So, and there were no typewriters, you're right. None of that sort of thing, they taught the basics. However, I give Annie Simmons credit for doing a good job, of teaching literature. I find that she did a better job, than some of the modern teachers in today's world, but that wasn't the whole story. It was just the basic education, that was given in segregated, all Black schools during that time.

LOC: And the thing about our school district, it was not a part of the independent school district. They called it a common school district. Which meant, we could make our own rules and you know, and just, I don't know where we got the tax base.

EO: Well, it was a common district, but it was attached to the county. You remember when daddy and Courtney Strahan and John Lester Louis, when they served on the school board, it was a common school district. I thought they had an important job. I later learned that they did nothing but carried out the wishes of the county board, but it was under the county school district. But still, it didn't matter to me, because I respected the fact that they were the leaders of the school district, but it was a common district and we were apportioned, whatever they wanted us to have.

LC: All right, so Uncle Mack mentioned that you had to wait and graduate with Aunt Oletha. What, and during that year, you just hung out with Big Papa?

JO: Hung out with Big Papa, and did carpentry work, and did work in the field adjacent to, inside of the school and all around here and then, worked with Big Papa in carpentry.

LC: So during that year, you never even went to school?

JO: I never went to school, it was understood. L. A. Simmons understood we gon' hold Mack out after the year, because he had seen McBride was eligible to play basketball.

(laughter)

LOC: That's what I wanted to say, that's what I wanted to say.

JO: So that was the reason why that next year, see, McBride, Oletha and I, was the graduating class. There was just the three of us. That whole year I didn't go to school at all but I had finished my school.

LC: So you didn't go to school, but you played basketball with the team?

JO: Right.

LOC: And in my adult life, when I got to know Mr. Simmons, I interrogated him about this. I said Mr. Simmons, you should be ashamed of yourself. Taking these big grown men, who was all graded and finished, who was out there playing against all the boys, in those other schools. He

just had no tenacity at all, you know. He just, and that's not the word, integrity. He just didn't care, he just wanted to win at any cost and I got on his case about it --

LC: So did you all win?

LOC: Yeah!

JO: I remember one specific engagement we had in Jasper, when Wiergate was the team in this area. They were supposed to be, nobody could beat them. And Steve and I were there and L. A. Simmons had the uniform, our uniform, in the trunk of his car and called time out and they went into some kind of discussion, among the teachers, and L. A. Simmons went to the trunk of his car and got the uniform and told me and Steve to put them on. And they started the game over and we tore up Wiergate and they had a big ruckus about that.

(laughter)

JO: But L. A. Simmons was crooked enough to have our uniform, the whole complete uniform, basketball uniform, in the trunk of his car. And Steve and I were out there making rounds in the community, he say, hey, go put your uniform on. And I never say I'm game, Levon Greene, of Wiergate, was the best high school player in this whole area. I almost said the whole state, and my assignment, when I was winning there was to guard Levon Greene and I scored seven points in that game and Levon Greene scored five.

LC: Okay.

LOC: See that's not an achievement to me. It's not! If they are grown people out of school (laughs) and I told Mr. Simmons that.

STO: Supported by Simmons community.

JO: L. A. would bring his brother or somebody from the nearby community where he used to work and bring them up here and they would live with him and play basketball with the team. He would do that to improve our team.

LOC: He would win at any cost.

JO: Our biggest advantage, even and I really believe unto this day that we had potentially some of the best basketball players in this community, that would have made Kobe Bryant look bad. We had some good talent, but when there was a tournament coming up, if it'd rain five days, we didn't practice five days, we'd get in (indistinct), and pass the basketball one to another and couldn't even practice and the road would get bad, we didn't have highways out here and the road would get bad and collectively the team would go out to (indistinct) and leave the truck or car would and ride in the next day, come back home and go to bed and get up and meet up out there, with shovels and things and get out of this community and go to Silsbee or Jasper or somewhere and play basketball. And we almost won every time, we were just that good.

Our potential was good, but we didn't have certain things. But specifically we didn't have a gymnasium, never been a gymnasium in this community at all. And other adjoining communities had gyms and they had their program and we couldn't ever get into practice or anything like that. During that time, I just longed for the time to be able to practice, all I wanted to, as long as I wanted to, day or night. Several others that, you know, to make a real good almost a professional team, but we couldn't do it, because of the inadequate facilities. As Elize said, the school board couldn't do anything about it, because they were handed down from the county school board with it and we had to take whatever they gave us.

LC: Okay, okay. Aunt Oletha, Uncle Matt talked about staying back to graduate, so why don't you tell us, what the graduation was like at Enterprise?

OOW: I'd rather not say. I think what we are supposed to be talking about the greatest achievement we got out of being born in Shankleville and living here, ain't that right? They've all talked about that, I can just say amen and go and say what I said.

The biggest thing I got out of being raised in Shankleville, was parental guidance from this home right here, and my mother and my father. I got enough of that that other to live by with the exception of common sense and good home training, then I developed my life from there, with what I think is right and what I think is wrong. Those extracurriculars was fun then when you little then but I don't want to spend all my time rehearsing because, I got families here living in my house and I got to go home.

LC: Okay.

OOW: I want to say this before I left, that's the biggest thing I got out of it and I treasure my life. That I contributed all, not to the school, because that's history, and it's better than that now. If we had a better chance, I probably would have done something better with my life, but I'm not going to say that, they did do the best they could, with what they had. To raise eight children, and give them a good sound raising at home and got them ready to go into the public. I lived in the public too, but I did it on my own after I got grown.

LC: Okay.

OOW: I was a beautician by trade and a mother, and a wife and a housekeeper and a church worker. I'm deeply interested in the religious development of the whole country. And I spent my time working with young people from young people, young adults, and now I'm with the adult group. I'm about to get grown, but when I get grown, I'mma come back and teach y'all all how to live like Big Mama did.

(laughter)

OOW: But you all have good luck. I got to go. I got family here at the house (indistinct), so you all continue the discussion. See you later.

(Oleatha Odom Woods leaves)

LC: Okay. So I'd still like to get a description of the graduation, since it was so few people in a class, how was it, what was the graduation like? Anybody?

JO: Well, as I said, it was very, very simple. It was only three people in the class and it was almost held in conjunction with the junior high graduation. At that time they had to do graduation from junior high to senior high and they were scheduled at the same time. So, we would try to hold a graduation and call the whole community together, for three people, to graduate so it was held in conjunction with a larger graduating class, from junior high to high school. And just this portion of the program, with Oletha, Steve, and I, at this graduation, high school graduation. And of course, as I said, Steve and I were delayed from last year, but we stayed over to play basketball.

LC: What kind of, what was the program like though? Were there speeches, did you all march, was there a band playing music?

JO: They had a schedule for speeches. The teachers in the lower grades, whose classes were graduating to high school, was chiefly in charge of the program. I think they had a valedictorian and a salutatorian, of the three of us. But other than that, the program was basically the junior program, where the junior was graduating into high school.

LOC: I have a different perspective of the graduation, because by the time I came along, we no longer had a speaker like we did. I remember Dr. Bank's wife would come, that man from Southern would come, I can't think of his name right now. And, you know, and deliver a commencement address, but we always had, well, we had a baccalaureate as well as the commencement and you're familiar with the War March of the Priests? Everybody remember that song? Well, that was the traditional march to go in and God of our Fathers, that was the one for the baccalaureate.

And when I came along, we had started having a, what we called a vitalized commencement program. It was in a pageant form and the students did it, we would I remember in '41, when that class finished, we did a, sort of resume of the country. You know, I can't remember what the theme was, but in my time, when we along we did, our theme was "For this we fight" and it was war-like pageant, you know. Playing, you know, war like songs and patriotic songs and then the narrator would fill in, "During World War II," this that. And, you know, there was scenes depicting that theme, and that's the way our commencement went.

LC: What's a pageant theme?

LOC: A pageant is telling a story through song and words. I was always a narrator, 'cause I'd memorize the whole thing, and tell the whole story, and then when I get to a certain point and, you know, then they start playing drums, beating taps or something like that, you know to tell the story through song and words.

LC: All right, so then, after graduation, who decided to go to California first?

STO: I think I was.

LC: Okay. What made you decide to go to California?

STO: Looking for a job. (chuckles)

LC: Why did you decide that you might be able to find one in California as opposed to Texas?

STO: Because I went to Prairie View, and went through vocational education program. And I wanted to go and study at Prairie View, in the mechanic art division, which I did and finished there, a year and a half later. Then I had got California then I came back and stayed about three months and went back again.

LOC: Didn't you go to Phoenix, Arizona?

JO: Didn't you go to Phoenix and stay with Big Mama's brother for a while before you went to California?

STO: No, I went from graduation, and left here in August, got to California, September the 5th, 1937, and went and stayed with Uncle Eddie for about six or eight months.

LC: And Uncle Eddie is, we have to explain everything--

STO: Uncle Eddie was my mother's brother.

LC: And how did he end up—

STO: He was a--

LOC: I think he was the one who went to Arizona to stay with Uncle Johnny. And subsequently went to California.

STO: That was long before I moved there. Long before.

LOC: Yeah that's right. I think we were getting that mixed up.

LC: How did he end up in California, Uncle Eddie?

STO: Oh, he went there years, I don't know how many years before, because he had his home and everything in California. His marriage, everything there.

LOC: He was doing trains.

STO: He was a railroad cook.

JO: He was Big Mama's brother, right?

EO: A lot of people were leaving the south going west, looking for a better life.

STO: And that was during, before World War II.

LC: And why would you think that the better life would be in California? I'm trying to get people to understand.

EO: It was believed, that there was less discrimination and segregation in the east and the west, than in Texas. And so, it was common for people to migrate west from Texas to look for a better life.

LOC: And I found out that people living in Carolina and in Georgia, that those people went to Detroit.

EO: Yeah, right.

LOC: I don't know why, but in Mississippi and that area, they went to Chicago. I found that out in recent year, but everybody was looking for a better day ahead.

LC: So then you got out to California. So what was it like to get out to California and leave Shankleville? What was that like for you?

STO: It's just like, a different world.

LC: In what kinds of ways?

STO: I mean, the living conditions in homes and everything, education. University of California right there, three or four high schools and one district. Just I thought it was an opportunity which it proved to be one.

LC: Did you feel that you were, I mean, did you feel like you had not known enough about the world or something, and you got out there, you met all of these people who knew a lot more, been more places and stuff. Or did you feel like you pretty much knew what was going on when you got there?

STO: No, I didn't feel inferior to nobody, because practically everybody you meet was from somewhere else.

(laughter)

STO: And people did migrate out there for job opportunities, just like I was. Some of them was going in to the shipyards, welding, all that stuff up there preparing for World War II, and it was just better for jobs.

LC: What was your first job?

STO: My first job when I got there was, I went to ship yard six months as a welding instructor, 'cause I knew how to weld. And then I went on the railroad, and then from there in 1943, I went to Longshore industry and stayed there until 1993, when I retired.

LC: So did you find that the rumors that there was a better life in California, did you find that to be true for you?

STO: Sure, I did.

LC: And in what ways? Can you elaborate a little more?

STO: You got jobs that were better, you had more jobs to choose from and the wages was better. The wages, everything were unionized out there and it was just, better living.

LC: It was unionized?

STO: Oh yeah.

LC: And Blacks could join a union?

STO: Blacks was head of the union and joined a union all of us, no discrimination at all.

LC: So you found that it was less discrimination?

STO: Sure.

LOC: And I was debate coaching when I worked on the topic of collective bargaining. S.T. helped me more than the books that they gave me, you know? Cause he had firsthand information, about labor and management and how that worked out, the bargaining process and so on. So I won the debate championship that year, based on his knowledge of collective bargaining and so on.

LC: Okay, so Aunt Zee, you said that you had gone to, you graduated from high school, went to beauty school, decided you didn't like that. So tell us about how you made a decision to go to California.

AOC: No, I really don't, I guess it's 'cause everybody else was going, and I had an opportunity. When I first got out there, I took while I was, you know, getting accustomed and seeing what was happening, I took a waitress job. It was all mixed people coming in to eat and mixed workers. And the very first customer I went to wait on, asked me for a waffle. I went in the kitchen and asked the cook, what is a waffle?

(laughter)

AOC: She was the best friend I had in town and I would go to her for help. Old lady, her back bent way over washing dishes. I don't know what nationality she was but she wasn't Black and

she was a lot of help and then about two weeks later, a large lunch counter opened up downtown, in this huge open market. And this man was hiring every --

TRANSCRIPT END

CASSETTE TAPE NO LONGER RECORDING BUT INTERVIEW CONTINUES:

AOC: [and this man was...] hiring every nationality there was, I mean every nationality there was. Chinese, everything. And they had us all in there working together and that's how I really got into what was happening and how to act you know.

LC: What do you mean what was happening and how to act?

AOC: I mean, I had never been around other nationalities. And I found out they was easy to get along with. There were some Blacks, it was all mixed up. But it was a delightful job I learned so many people. I worked there seven years. Then I decided to go into, I wanted to wash my hands of beauty work, I wasn't seeing enough public or something and I wanted to get out of that. And I found out I had to do a thousand more hours of study there. See, I had done a thousand hours with Larutha to get our beauty license in Texas. And when I went out there I couldn't use my Texas license, I had to go a thousand hours. And I didn't want to do it, I couldn't afford it, I had to work. So anyway, I decided to go into typing as I said and get into the secretarial field which led me to the computer work. IBM machine, they called it key punch and how to work a computer and everything. And I just grew and grew and that's what I ended up in. But I liked the weather best of all. When I first got there I knew that hooked me. The weather was more even all year round. Wasn't too hot, wasn't too cold.

LC: Did you ever think when you got out there that you would stay there for as long as you have and never move back to Texas?

AOC: Yeah. I thought. But several times when Mama and Daddy got older and especially after Mama was alone it was hard for me to stay. I wanted to do something back for her. And I'd put in as much time as I could to come back and stay as long as I could to help take care of all the things. And love her harder! But that was about it. And I'm stuck there now (laughter) I guess I'm too old to be moving again.

LC: Uncle S.T. did you ever think that you might move back to Texas?

STO: I don't think so.

LC: You didn't?

STO: Nope. Never gave it any thought.

LC: You didn't. Why not?

STO: Well I was at home. I'd built my home there and everything. I had a family. I didn't see no point in leaving (laughs).

LC: Okay. So we've graduated from high school. Those of you who decided to stay in Texas, let's talk about why you made your decision and what was it about it that made you decide to stay.

EO: Well you see I came along a little bit different there. I became an adult in the '40s. And by that time we in Texas had decided to try to make things better instead of running away from it. And I mentioned earlier how I admired Dad and Grandpa how they served on the school board here. I went to work in the post office. That was about the best job you could get if you weren't a teacher. And along the way I decided that I could help make things better. My wife and I spent our time with our kids and community organizations and everything they were in and finally PTAs and finally I ran for the school board in Orange. There had never been a Black to run for the school board, to serve on the school board in Orange, and I was elected after the first failure. And I felt as if I was sitting on the board when we were forced to integrate the schools in Orange. And I felt being a part of that was some of the things we needed to do in order to make things better, in order to improve the conditions that I had seen in the segregated and unequal Enterprise School. So I chose to devote my time trying to make it better rather than leaving it. Same thing with the postal service. I sought a position for postal inspector. There had never been any Black inspectors when I first applied. By the time I was appointed in '67, I was the fifth in the nation and it took me to California. I was appointed in 1967, was assigned to California for three years and I spent a whole three years wanting to get back to Texas because it was ingrained in me that you change things, make things better instead of leaving them. That's why I chose to stay in Texas and why I have always stayed.

LC: I'll ask you another question then. I know that when you first graduated from high school, you worked with Big Papa. So you stayed in Texas, but what made you decide to leave Shankleville?

EO: Well I was perfectly happy doing carpentry work. But Daddy had reached a point where he just wanted to work occasionally and I had a family. And I needed steady work and I didn't see it here. And I had the opportunity to go work in the post office which was a good job. And I started to work there as a letter carrier in 1949 and it paid as good as anybody would allow with degree could earn. I never thought about leaving the state.

LC: Okay. Uncle Mack why did you decide to stay? And if it just happened, you can say that too. If it wasn't a decision, that's just the way everything happened, that's fine too.

JO: Well I was selected out of a group of the better, maybe best is the right term, of students in the vanguard(?) division to work throughout Texas. Out of school drop outs. And at that time I was courting. I guess I thought I was in love and I got married and moved to Orange and passed the civil service examination and was called to the post office and went to work for the post office in '42, October '42. And I worked there 35 years. And during that time is when Elize came and worked and he and I would work together 17 years there in Orange...

LC BEGINS NEW TAPE AND RECORDING