

**Shankleville Oral History Project**

**TRANSCRIPT**

***INTERVIEWEE: Larutha Clay***

***INTERVIEWER: Dan K. Utley***

***DATE: June 16, 2002***

***PLACE: Odom family home, Shankleville, Newton County, Texas***

***TRANSCRIBER: Justin Snider***

***Edited by interviewee***

**(TAPE 1 OF 1, SIDE A BEGINS)**

**Dan K. Utley:** This is Dan Utley, oral historian from Austin, Texas. Today is June 16, 2002. It's Father's Day -- it's Sunday. I am interviewing for the first time Mrs. Larutha Clay of -- where do you live?

**Larutha Clay:** Beaumont, Texas.

**Utley:** Beaumont, Texas. Okay. But, we are in the Shankleville Community in Newton County. This is a series, hopefully, that will continue to record the history of the Shankleville Community. Let's start off with, first of all, where you got the name Larutha. Where did that come from? That's an unusual name.

**Clay:** Yes. My mother had three daughters, and we were all Oletha, Arzela, and Larutha, and symmetrically speaking poetry. I don't know how she got them all symmetrically right. And I found out later when we started gathering names that Pate Shankle had an aunt -- or somebody that was named 'Laruth.' The 'a' was not on there, 'Laruth.' I guess that came from French.

**Utley:** Okay.

**Clay:** You know, that Laruth.

**Utley:** It sounds French.

**Clay:** Yes, and that's why I think a lot of people write my name, they want to use the capital 'r' and just end it with 'Laruth.' But I don't know how she decided to put the 'Larutha' on there.

**Utley:** Now your maiden name was --

**Clay:** Odom.

**Utley:** Odom. Okay.

**Clay:** Right, yes.

**Utley:** And one of the reasons we are here today is the Odom family reunion.

**Clay:** Right.

**Utley:** So, tell me who your parents were.

**Clay:** Addie and Alvah Odom.

**Utley:** Okay. And that's Big Mama and Big Papa?

**Clay:** Big Mama and Big Papa.

**Utley:** All right. Let's start with Big Papa. And tell me, when I ask you about what he looked liked, what do you remember? How do you remember him?

**Clay:** He was not too tall -- solid, stout, and reddish. Light skin, but sort of reddish with it. He had a bald head all the time I knew him. Jovial, he just was a sweetie pie. Just find jokes about anything. There was something last night on the tape all about how he (my soon-to-be husband) had to corner him down to ask him to let him marry me. He just found some place to go day long. (Utley laughs) And that was, I guess Christmas Day, and he finally had to go to bed. He slept in the same room as the fireplace where we all sat there and visited and that's how he caught him. So, he was happy--

**Utley:** What did he say when he asked him?

**Clay:** Happy-go-lucky. He stuttered, and he could stutter to his advantage when he wanted to.

**Utley:** Your father?

**Clay:** My father. He started off saying, like he wanted to say she and he switched over to her (both laugh). But he still was reluctant about it, and my mother just cried because he was asking me to marry him. But he was just a happy-go-lucky person. He had a nickname for everybody, teased everybody, made everybody feel so special.

**Utley:** Give some examples of his nicknames for people.

**Clay:** Well I was "Baby Ruth." I was always Baby Ruth to the older generation. Lareatha walked in here one day and said, "Oh, I'm so sick of these two. I don't know what the next generation is going to do." And they laughed and told her, "Your generation is what we're worried about." (Utley laughs) He called her "Generation". He called Oletha 'Klank' -- I don't how he got 'Klank' from Oletha. He used to have a nickname for everybody, even those people in the community. He was just a happy-go-lucky person, and just willing to give -- like he made a joke about his name. "My name is 'Odom' but I

don't 'owe them (owe'm) -- I pay them.' (Utley laughs) My name doesn't suggest that I owe a lot of people." He was just a sweetie pie. And I was always so inclined to "over love" him and not love my mother as much. And I got paid back when Lareatha was born, because she loves her daddy. (both laugh) But I had to accept it.

**Utley:** How many children were in the family?

**Clay:** Eight.

**Utley:** Okay. There were three boys, three girls, and then two boys, is that right?

**Clay:** Right.

**Utley:** So how did the girls get along with him? Did he treat each of them differently? Was he closer to some than others?

**Clay:** I was his special. Oh, I was his special. We were talking about it last night about -- I knew I was his special too, and my second sister was lazy. She didn't want to do anything.

**Utley:** Give me her name. You've got to give her name.

**Clay:** Arzela. (both laugh) And she just could always find a way to get out of work. Each person had to take a row to hoe -- where you chop weeds out --

**Utley:** Just in the garden?

**Clay:** It was a field. We had fields all around, any place you could find them.

**Utley:** What would you be raising in these fields?

**Clay:** Corn, peas, and cotton -- I remember cotton. We were talking about it last night. We had a government project where you raise string beans and cucumbers and take them to a certain place to market them.

**Utley:** So you're out there, and she's not doing her work with the hoe?

**Clay:** Right. And see, I was the youngest, so the other two were out there playing. I was supposed to help her keep up her row -- She and I were supposed to hoe this one row -- and she knew I was coming so she would just talk -- just pick up a hoe and keep up with the crowd and talk and talk. So one day, I just decided I just wouldn't hoe the row. He threshed me with a switch -- he pulled the switches down. Oh that hurt -- she made up a song. You know we were talking about it last night. Every time someone would come to play with us, she'd say, "Let's have a program." And the first thing on the program was her solo. And it was about, "When we were down in the bottom, we had to hoe some

corn." And she would go on step-by-step about that with me. (both laugh) I think my feelings were hurt. I don't remember him hurting anything. It was sibling rivalry.

**Utley:** Did you ever feel like you did anything that disappointed him?

**Clay:** No.

**Utley:** You were always the apple of his eye?

**Clay:** He thought I liked to talk, and I he said I would argue with the signboard. I just liked to be argumentative.

**Utley:** Well, that explains some things that I -- that explains a lot of things. (both laugh)

**Clay:** Yeah, I did my side of it. Mama didn't want you to express yourself. She wanted you to accept without complaints. Whatever she said you just had to do it, and you couldn't even hum or sing for an hour, because then that was just brushing off what she said under the rug. (both laugh)

**Utley:** Your dad, how did he work with other people? Tell me about some of the stories you remember about how he worked with other folks.

**Clay:** Okay.

**Utley:** Maybe through the store or --

**Clay:** Yes, he had a carpentry crew. Wiergate is a little sawmill that was close by, and he got a job working with maintenance people, I suppose. They owned those little houses, all of the houses.

**Utley:** They owned the whole town.

**Clay:** And back in those days they had the white quarters, and the Mexican quarters, and the black quarters, and Daddy worked with -- I think this man was named Mr. Nolan -- who was in charge of maintenance, and he taught Daddy how to flush a flue. I don't know if you know what that is? Just put that tin and stuff around the pipe, just to get into the top of the house to let the smoke out of a heater. And there is a certain way you can put that tin around there to block out a fire because that pipe is hot. And so he learned how to do that with this man named Mr. Nolan, and he just started doing other repair jobs, then he got his own carpentry crew. I've got some pictures standing by the truck -- he got a truck -- with A. T. Odom name on it. That is the truck we had to get on the back and ride to go to these other communities to singing conventions and church activities. The other children enjoyed it, but I resented getting my hair all fixed and my clothes all clean and sitting on the back of that truck going to church (Utley laughs) with the wind blowing. But, he had a successful carpentry crew. But he had fun with those guys.

**Utley:** Who were his best friends?

**Clay:** I guess the people in the community, those people who worked with him, these young boys that he brought up like Monroe Knighton that ended up owning a funeral home in Beaumont, he taught him. Well he taught in a CCC camp, too.

**Utley:** Your father did?

**Clay:** Yes, he taught.

**Utley:** Oh, tell me about that.

**Clay:** He had a sixth grade education, but he ended up to be an expert in his carpentry. He'd build houses -- we could just pass by a house in Jasper and -- he couldn't read a blueprint. He was a contractor who could build the image in his mind. If he ever understood what you wanted, then he could do it. My husband was an architect and he was a mechanical engineer and sort of smattered in all of it, and he would draw blueprints for people, the churches and so on. He drew a blueprint for our house, and my daddy couldn't read the blueprint, but I knew how he wanted it. So I just took him in the car and showed him the Gaidry's house with that roof -- the way we wanted it. He went back to the house under construction and did it, but he couldn't read the blueprint, but he just was an expert.

**Utley:** Tell me about the CCC. I didn't know about the CCC here. That's the Civilian Conservation Corp.

**Clay:** Yes, it came out during World War II when Roosevelt was trying to put some young men to work. CCC Camps were in areas that needed roads so that fire trucks could get through back up in the country.

**Utley:** Okay.

**Clay:** So they would give these boys some other things to equip them for life, and one of the things they wanted was to teach them carpentry. Men were just expected to use a saw and the hammer, and that is what he taught.

**Utley:** Where was the camp?

**Clay:** The camp was out from Newton, between Newton and Kirbyville. Right out of Newton on the Kirbyville highway. What is that highway?

**Utley:** Texas Highway 87.

**Clay:** 87. That's 87. I think it's a Baptist encampment there now. People down in the Beaumont area come up there.

**Utley:** Now was your father in the CCC or did he --

**Clay:** No, he was here living in the community. They just employed him -- it was so unusual that they would employ him to go out there, because he had no formal education even though he had taught carpentry in a public school. Enterprise School was a school right here, right here where this graveyard is extended down here now, and Daddy taught those guys up here. I saw a little minister at a reception at my sister's church, and he said all he knows about up keep at his house he learned it from my father.

**Utley:** Now he taught carpentry at the school?

**Clay:** Yes -- with his sixth grade education -- just one period in the evening. Just like they have agriculture one period, then they would have wood-working one period in the evening. I don't know how much theory he could teach them, but he could really teach the manual part of it.

**Utley:** Tell me about his relationship with the church, how he worked in the church.

**Clay:** He was just beautiful. He led songs, and we were talking about that at our Friday night session about how he taught oral singing with shaped notes -- that's what they should have said -- oral singing with shaped notes where we didn't have any musical instruments, and you had to recognize --

**Utley:** Is that because the musical instruments weren't allowed in the church?

**Clay:** Just didn't have any.

**Utley:** Because some churches don't have musical instruments.

**Clay:** Right, I know that. But no, we just didn't have any musical instruments. We would just sing the notes, "do, ra, me, fa, so, la, ti, do." Those make you run the scales, then you could recognize those and what lines they're on, and you were supposed to be able to do that -- what is it 'sightseeing'? 'Sightsinging'?

**Utley:** Some people call it 'sacred harp.'

**Clay:** Is that right? Well he taught that, and that was one of the questions, "What two things did he teach?" He taught the singing, and he taught woodworking.

**Utley:** Well talking about teaching, what did he teach you in life? What did you learn from him? Tell me some of the lessons he taught you.

**Clay:** Nobody else has given you all of that. He just taught me to tell the truth, and to be myself. I started teaching living in this house with them -- I was teaching in that community over there in Liberty.

**Utley:** Liberty?

**Clay:** Liberty Community.

**Utley:** Okay.

**Clay:** Right after you get on 87, you go like two and a half miles and there's a little community over here. And by my living here with him, he just taught me how to get along with those people because the principal was my uncle (Utley laughs) and it was just a new experience for me to be in this area where educated blacks were not accepted. And it was just a new experience for me, and he tried to bridge the gap because he knew all of my cousins and kinfolk that I was teaching, and they were trying to -- I was trying to be a professional at the same time deal with my kin. And he taught me how to deal with that, and then my mother's brother was the principal --

**Utley:** Well, would you sit down and talk to him about this?

**Clay:** Oh yes, sit out there in that swing, and sometimes I'd look up to the 87 and say if I could drive up here and sit in this swing, I'd talk to him about this problem I had. (Utley laughs) He was just "a hands-on man", and he just knew the answer to all your problems.

**Utley:** Did you ever see him mad?

**Clay:** No, I don't think he ever got angry. I don't know if anyone has told you that his mother died when he was like twelve; his father died when he was fourteen. He took over the family at fourteen. He took over the family -- at the time there were seven of them. He and the older sister raised those other five under him. He took on the job at fourteen.

**Utley:** You said he got a sixth grade education because he had to help the family. Did any of your family, though, try to drop out of school?

**Clay:** No.

**Utley:** Would he have allowed that?

**Clay:** No, it was never thought of. His way of thinking was we were going to get it because he didn't. There were other people in the community just didn't make their kids get it. In later years, I would interrogate the former principal of the school, and he could tell me the children whose fathers would keep them at home to plow. If it was rainy day, they could go to school, but if the sun came out in the middle of the day, they'd come and get them from school. They had to go home and do their work. I compared the way we came up -- and I don't see how those children liked us -- because we had more advantages than they did. And now since they are adults, they don't resent us. They don't resent the Odom children. We had the store, and Daddy had some means of traveling. We had the radio, and everybody would gather so we could listen to Joe Louis fights. Children now days resent those who have. Today, the children resent the haves, but not

then. The reason I question, the skin color. They didn't let us know about skin color. Somebody was saying in church that skin color made a difference in racial attitudes. Shankleville did not teach that. (Utley laughs) We hadn't found out there was such a thing as light skin and dark skin until we got out of this community. They just taught us that people were just people.

**Utley:** When were you confronted with the differences of people -- the gaps people put between themselves?

**Clay:** I don't know because I went to an all black college. I don't know, after the schools were integrated I guess, because we were brainwashed into thinking everybody in white schools came on time, had the materials to work with, was dedicated and energetic -- we were just brainwashed to feel that way -- and then when we found out that people are just people.

**Utley:** How did your dad and mother meet? Do you remember how they met? (laughter) Have I asked you something I shouldn't have? (Utley laughs)

**Clay:** No, no I don't think she's [Lareatha] heard this story. They played at the school, and the boys on one side and the girls on the other side. And so they had a game riding horse, where one boy would get on his all fours and the other would get up on his back, and he said "Get up horse! Get up horse!" And they'd ride around, and play little chit chat games with the girls that the boy on the horse admired. So, this boy on the horse went up to my mother and tried to flirt with her and so on, and she said, "Well you know what? I think I'd rather have the horse." (Utley laughs) And Daddy got up and said, "Her-her-here's your horse." (both laugh)

**Utley:** How old was he at that time?

**Clay:** I guess he must have been eleven, because he quit school at fourteen. Around eleven or twelve -- I don't know, but it was before he was fourteen because the courtship did not develop until he started working to take care of his family. I believe he was a brakeman on the train -- the job at fourteen, and he got his leg broke. And when he got his leg broke --

**Utley:** Where was he a brakeman? Up here at Wiergate?

**Clay:** Wiergate, yes. And when he got his leg broke, then -- What was that lady's name? The lady in Beaumont? Was married to Elzie -- that's how Elzie got his name from that lady's son, and she took him to her house in Liberty and took care of him until the train -- the train didn't run every day, from up here to Beaumont -- he had to go down there to get his leg set.

**Utley:** How did he break his leg?

**Clay:** On the train -- something about that train -- I've forgotten what they said happened when that train -- he was going to put those logs up on the train. I guess he mishandled that, and it broke eight, fourteen -- anything could have happened, you know. But he got his leg broke, and while --

**Utley:** But there was no doctor out here that could help him?

**Clay:** No, no.

**Utley:** Even the sawmill doctor wouldn't?

**Clay:** No, I guess he couldn't set the leg. So they sent him to Beaumont to get the leg set, and that was when my mother was able to show him some attention. She started fixing him some boxes of delicacies how we used to have boxed suppers, where the girl would fix the boxes and take them to a program or general assembly, and the girl would try to pick the guy she wanted to buy her box. They would sit down and eat this lunch together. Well she was able -- her daddy would let her send him boxes through -- I don't know how she sent them. I guess by -- I can't think of their name now -- but, Mrs. Eugene White's mother's sister, Simon Lewis's daughter. And that's how Mama started sending him -- Eddie. Eddie figured in some kind of way. They'd put the stuff in the box and decorate it up with trinkets and little sweeties and stuff like that, and that's how this courtship really developed.

**Utley:** How long did they court before they got married? Years?

**Clay:** No, no, no. No, because he inherited all of these sisters and brothers to take care of. He needed a wife (both laugh). My mother, yes she was a worker, oh she was a worker. Loved to work, and thought everybody else should love to work. And so, she got out of her mother and daddy's house and came over and took over his house with sisters and brothers.

**Utley:** How old was she when they married?

**Clay:** She was twenty-two -- that's right he was twenty-two. That's right, they were twenty-two, so this did not happen right after his father died -- his father must have died when he was twelve, and his mother at fourteen -- so this was twenty-two when they got married. So maybe it was to closer to 1908 when he got his leg broke, but --

**Utley:** Did he serve in the military?

**Clay:** No, he didn't serve in the military. That was during the time of World War I, wasn't it? No he didn't serve in the military because he got married -- no, he got married in '15 -- so that was really before World War I. 1921, right?

**Utley:** Well, '18.

**Clay:** Well, he got married in 1915. Harold was born in 1917. Some people want to say he got married in '16, but see that was one month after the wedding in 1916, so Harold was born in 1917, and S.T. in '18, so he had children every year, so I guess they wouldn't have taken him in the military.

**Utley:** Yeah. How did he and your mother get along? How did they work together?

**Clay:** He was so submissive. I wouldn't say he was henpecked, but she just had her way. She was just was a dominate, (laughs) and I'm not talking about in a negative way, but I guess I'm just saying she was a "take-charge" person.

**Utley:** What was her maiden name?

**Clay:** Lewis. Addie Lewis.

**Utley:** Addie Lewis Odom.

**Clay:** And when he asked my grandfather to marry, he said, "You are getting the best hoe hand." (both laugh). Hoe hand, that's all he thought about. Children were made to work.

**Utley:** Describe her. Tell me what she looked like physically.

**Clay:** I look like her, except she was browner. She was brown. I don't think she ever got as stout as I am now. But she was browner, and not too much taller -- maybe a little taller -- but she just had a commanding eye. When she told you something, you knew she meant to it.

**Utley:** Give me an example of how she could work you.

**Clay:** She could sit up here in church, and if you were doing something you knew you shouldn't do, she'd just turn around and give you the eye. You just can't describe it. It wasn't a mean eye, but it was a determined eye. (Utley laughs) You knew you weren't supposed to do that. And she would do that same way when she was soliciting funds for homecoming. We laugh about that -- quiver in her eye would make people give her more money. You talk about people don't give you money, when you solicit with her, Mama would just -- she just had a commanding eye.

**Utley:** What gave her that authority? Where did she get that?

**Clay:** Now Mr. Simmons the former principal at Enterprise School told me she bossed her daddy. The question came up about where my grandfather sold his mineral rights to his property, to the land over there. And Mr. Simmons said, 'Well, I guess Mrs. Odom told him because she just had a way of dealing with her father.' She'd talk him into doing it. She'd brag about it; let me take care of Daddy, as if to say the other three can deal with Mama.

**Utley:** Well you kind of were the special one for your dad, who was the special one for you mom?

**Clay:** Lee, my baby brother Lee -- the apple of her eye. Yes, special, very special.

**Utley:** He couldn't do anything wrong?

**Clay:** Not then. Never, never. He's the one that passed away when -- My oldest brother passed first in '77, and Lee passed away -- I believe '97 come to think of it -- but he had Alzheimer's. Smart -- he was smart -- he just lost his IQ. His IQ just got lower and lower. But yes, he could do no wrong.

**Utley:** But, your mother was the disciplinarian? How would she discipline you?

**Clay:** With a \_\_\_\_ or stick or switch -- that's what they called it, switch. You could go out there to one of these of bushes and pull one off, and if you got one too small for her, then she'd go get it. (Utley laughs)

**Utley:** If she had to go get it, she was even madder.

**Clay:** Oh yes. She got a bigger one than you could imagine. I tell my husband all of the time, he needed my mother in his life because his mother would tell him to do it fifty times, and maybe he would put it off and delay it and not do it at all. My grandson does that too -- he just can connive, but not with my mother. She meant do it now, not after a while.

**Utley:** What did she expect of you? How did she control you?

**Clay:** She really didn't have to control me. I had two sisters who were older. I was the third girl, and they were partners. They were a few months -- ten or eleven months apart -- they did everything together, dressed alike and everything. I was just sort of a loner, so she just didn't have to control me. I guess I was "Miss Goody Two Shoes."

**(END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1 OF 1, SIDE B BEGINS)**

**Utley:** Let's go back to the nickel thing. I don't know about this.

**Clay:** Well last night we were talking -- the six of us that are left were reminiscing about what happened -- and my sister remembered that we had a little store out there, and she said my mother sent the mayor (Elzie Odom) -- that you just talked to -- out there to get the change box, and Elzie hid a nickel under the steps and brought the change box to Mama and said, "I believe I'll go look for some money." And he went out there and found the nickel. I think Elzie was too intelligent to do that at four years old. I just don't remember it. It may have happened, but I don't remember it. S. T. would take more money than that. He would just take money to buy his drinks. And then when he came

back, we found out that he was buying the bootleg liquor. And somebody in the community, the upstanding people didn't know it was bootlegging, except for him, and tried to collect the debt. (laughs).

**Utley:** Somebody in Shankelville was bootlegging?

**Clay:** Yes. (both laugh)

**Utley:** Your brother S. T. left in the thirties to go to California.

**Clay:** Right.

**Utley:** How old was he at that time? You think he was born in 1918, so --

**Clay:** S. T. was born in 1918, so he left in the thirties he'd be --

**Utley:** So, he was about twenty years old.

**Clay:** Okay.

**Utley:** Did he leave mainly because of that because he was under a lot of pressure here?

**Clay:** Right, yes. I don't know if he left with their blessing -- I don't think he sneaked off because he went out there to stay with my uncle for a while in Arizona. Then he left there and went on to California. I think that's where he was, but he didn't come to here until '47. Somebody said he left in the thirties? He didn't come back until '47 when he married Ivey. When he married his second wife, she started bringing him home, and that's how we started family reunions in 1947.

**Utley:** '49 is what I heard. Tell me more about your mother. Could she sing? Did she like music?

**Clay:** She couldn't sing as well as Dad. She sort of had that hoarseness in her voice like I have, and she couldn't make the notes real well, but he could really sing. She would sing congregational songs, but I don't remember her being in the choir at all. She could speak well, she could express herself well in teaching Sunday school lessons, mission lesson, and so on.

**Utley:** By the way, you taught a wonderful lesson. That was very interesting. Do you do that a lot?

**Clay:** Thank you. I do it every family reunion. I teach Sunday school every Sunday. It is a challenge for me say something to these young folks because they look all clean and dressed up there today, but we have some rascals in the family. (Utley laughs) That's my chance to tell them. And I meet them out there on the yard, they kiss me good-bye, I reiterate and try to keep them straight because they want it now.

**Utley:** Yeah.

**Clay:** They don't want to work their way in. It is a challenge for me to try to say something that would meet all of those different personalities that we have. I work hard on it.

**Utley:** When you are teaching the young people, do you feel like you can hear your mother in you sometimes?

**Clay:** Yes.

**Utley:** How does that work?

**Clay:** It works fine because I know I'm pleasing her. In the end, she started calling me her "beloved daughter," because I took care of her. I just retired early -- she had cancer of the uterus -- and I was with her to take the treatments and everything, and yes I hear her when I start talking to my children. I hear her when I try not to push them, because that is the way she knew how to do. And it's not that she wanted to push, but that's the way she was pushed. So now we've come along, we've learned some psychology, we try to wait for them to want to do it, try to motivate them.

**Utley:** Was she more like her father or her mother?

**Clay:** Like her father.

**Utley:** Her father was a strong-willed man?

**Clay:** Right. Her mother was submissive to the strong husband. She took more like her father.

**Utley:** Did you ever make your mother mad?

**Clay:** Yes.

**Utley:** What did you do?

**Clay:** It was easy to make her mad. I just would say it. I just would tell her I didn't think that was fair -- what she did or what she said or the way she treated other children. Now, my sister was saying today, "She let you play basketball -- she didn't let us play basketball." I just had to negotiate. I just had to convince her that I didn't want to play basketball to go out there and get into drinking and smoking and sexual activity. She just learned to trust me, so I just didn't have to. But they didn't put forth that effort.

**Utley:** Well, somebody said today that if she were still around there wouldn't be all of these ladies out there with shorts or pants on, and she didn't believe in --

**Clay:** No. And as soon as the preacher left, they changed the music from religious music to bebop. She wouldn't have let that get through. I started watching for her to come across that field for the radio. (both laugh) [She is buried in the cemetery in front of the Odom residence].

**Utley:** When did she get to be Big Mama?

**Clay:** When the grandchildren started coming -- in 1940 I believe it was -- that's a term used in the black community --

**Utley:** Well, there is always somebody -- in any community, there is somebody that kind of sets the tone for everything. I don't think there is a woman around here that rivaled her.

**Clay:** No.

**Utley:** She was it for the whole community.

**Clay:** Most of the other women were was in a different age bracket.

**Utley:** There's a term "high toned" woman. You know somebody who knows what's right and what's wrong and they're going to be the example for the community. That's what she was. So, she would reprimand somebody that wasn't her kid?

**Clay:** Right. Oh yes. I'd like for him to see some of those -- that thing the lady did on the radio. She did that series of her. You've seen those? Okay. And Joan McBride will be writing a book about Big Mama. She stayed with her to do her research report. Well, she's supposed to be writing a book about that. Somebody put out a book *The Teacake Lady*; she was known for making teacakes.

**Utley:** Tell about the teacakes. First of all, since the people listening to this may not know what a teacake is, tell me first what that is.

**Clay:** It's a cake you serve with tea, that's the way we use it. And it's just nothing but a cookie that's --

**Utley:** It has pretty simple ingredients doesn't it?

**Clay:** Yes, simple ingredients.

**Utley:** What are the ingredients? Put you on the spot.

**Clay:** I have a little book with that, too. We'll send you that, with all the ingredients and the procedures to use it. Now the men in the family did a videotape of her doing it before she passed away. And a lot of the men in the family can make it better than we can. I

can't because of my carpal tunnel syndrome -- I just don't have the dexterity to manipulate the dough, and it's skill more than the ingredients. It's skill working in these ingredients one by one and ending up with that ball of dough. And I think the thing that makes it different from a cookie -- well I guess a cookie can roll it out and then shape it with those --

**Lareatha Clay:** He makes the teacakes.

**Clay:** Yeah he is the teacake man. (laughs)

**Utley:** Say your name for the tape.

**Harold Odom:** I am Harold Odom Jr.

**Utley:** Harold Odom Jr., and you are the keeper of the teacake recipe?

**Odom:** It appears that way. (all laugh)

**Utley:** How did that happen?

**Odom:** Well, my grandmother Big Mama came down to Houston -- what year was that, Aunt Larutha, when you came down for evaluation and treatment there?

**Clay:** About in '86.

**Odom:** '86?

**Clay:** October of '86.

**Odom:** I convinced her to stay out with me to take treatments, and we took her back and forth to the treatment center. One day we were talking about teacakes, and I said 'Big Mama when was last time you baked them teacakes?' And she said, 'Well, it's been a while. But I would like to make some if you got the stuff.' I said, 'All right, we'll get it.' So, I had her tell me what she thought she needed, and I wrote down a shopping list and looked through the cabinet and got all of the stuff she needed. I grabbed my video camera and set up in the kitchen. I said, 'I want to just videotape you making these teacakes.' She started making teacakes, and I said, 'What you doing? Tell me what you're doing.' She said, 'Well, I'm putting in a cup of this, two eggs and beat this and put this in.' She was telling me stuff and reaching for more than she was actually saying. So she made the teacakes, and we rolled them out and baked them, and they were Big Mama's teacakes. And then so, I tried to interpret the recipe from what she said the recipe was and tried them, and they didn't work quite that way. So, I took the videotape and sat down and analyzed what she did. Every time she reached and said you put a cup, she would reach back and put a little more than a cup (Clay laughs) I added that to it. And when she said put this in and the texture of the dough and how you roll it out, and then I finally got it down to like Big Mama's teacake recipe. And most people who eat them, and have eaten

them over the years, think it's not quite Big Mama's, but it's a reasonable interpretation of Big Mama's.

**Utley:** What are you guys missing?

**Odom:** I don't know, probably something in her hands, her skin texture. Who knows? (all laugh) But for what I remember them being, it's pretty doggone close. And folks in Houston trying to tell me I ought to sell them commercially. Sell Big Mama's East Texas teacakes.

**Utley:** What do you remember about Big Mama?

**Odom:** You don't got enough tapes. (all laugh)

**Utley:** I've got about fifteen minutes. You got a good long story to tell?

**Odom:** Oh man.

**Utley:** What are some of the stories you remember about her?

**Odom:** I just remember coming down spending the summers with Big Mama, and the fact -- teaching work ethic and how to work. And she would trick us into working. She'd tell you about how smart, 'Oh, you're so smart.' And, that would just get your ego going, and you would work harder. You would just be picking peas faster and chopping harder, and she would just say, 'Oh, look at those boys work! They're sure smart.' We stayed the summer. I remember laying in the bed in there and black dark outside, and you'd hear feet to the floor -- baboom, baboom, baboom -- Big Mama walking through the house into the kitchen. We'd pop out of bed.

**Utley:** It would be total dark?

**Odom:** It didn't make no difference \_\_\_\_\_ because we had to by the time its dark in the afternoon we're in the best seat. (all laugh) Because when it got dark there wasn't no neighborhood theater and multi-screen cinemas and stuff like that. It was an old brown -- I guess it was an Emerson radio -- with a big old dial, and we sat there and listened to radio show *Fibber McGee and Molly* and all of those mysteries and sit in that room in there listening. After bathing in the tin #2 washtub. (all laugh) You didn't change the water. We were down here, we would go everywhere with her. She was able to coral us. We were probably some of the baddest grandkids she had. But she was able --

**Utley:** What did you do?

**Odom:** One day when they killed cows -- cows, we came to learn, mourn when a little cow died; they'd smell the blood. They'd come around, paw the ground, act crazy, and carry on. And they killed a beef down there one year, and they hauled off the pine needles that caught the blood, but they dripped some out front. Next thing we knew all

the cows in the neighborhood showed up. This was open range territory back then with the little highway that had cattle guards at all the entrances so all of the people's cows ranged open. And out there showed up, it seemed like twenty or thirty or forty cows and bulls just running around out there and acting crazy. Well I grab my red shirt -- I'm going to be a bullfighter. I run out there, jumping around, and it ran me up a tree. Big Mama came out with her broom, hit those cows, 'Get out of the way,' and all the bulls part, she just beat them out left, and she got me out of the tree, got me inside and just wore my butt out. Well for going out there! She was glad she saved me, I wasn't hurt, but she wore me out. (Utley laughs) Then one time, me and my brothers were wrestling and jumping around in the room, and Big Mama in the kitchen said, 'Look out in there!' So we ran to the window and we said, 'We don't see nothing.' She heard us. The next thing I knew, she was on top of us with that switch, 'I'll teach you to smart me off.' We remember that about Big Mama. She was a loving, caring --

**Utley:** Tell me about the humorous side of her.

**Odom:** The humorous side is that she would discipline us. She would see the humor, but she wouldn't let it slide. Even when she'd think it was funny, she would have to spank us. She'd have that little 'I'm spanking you, but I'm laughing' type technique. It wasn't an angry type of spank. It was discipline, and she said, 'I've seen everything these crazy boys do.' But she was humorous, but she was a serious person. She was very real.

**Utley:** It sounds like she had real strong convictions about what was right and what was wrong.

**Odom:** That's putting it mildly. (all laugh) It wasn't that she knew, she wrote was right and wrong. It was amazing to us how the people in the community looked at her. You could just look at looks on their eyes when they would come by, and the respect they would give her when they were talking to her. She didn't -- they grew up right out here, so this was no palace and fancy place, but everybody just seemed to respect her and her opinion and her leadership. I never heard anyone cross with her. Never heard her cross with anybody. She would get upset about something. We remember her talking about it down at church with the people, but never an argument --

**Utley:** Did anybody ever cross her? Or were there people she didn't like?

**Odom:** I can't think of anybody.

**Clay:** I can't think of anybody. She found out later that there was one lady in the community she didn't invite to the wedding, and she quickly explained how she missed that lady and this was said to somebody. And she sent an apology to Miss Lucinda because she missed her. That was a big deal to miss somebody like that. No, she wasn't challenged at all. (all laugh)

**Odom:** She taught us so many things, but how to "make do" with stuff.

**Clay:** That's it.

**Odom:** You look down here, and I can look back at the things that happened -- wheelbarrows, how they were put together. What they were made out of. The fact that what came out of the kitchen -- wasn't no garbage, no garbage disposal. It was eaten, went to slop trough, went into the chicken pen, went into the fertilizer deal. They would kill chickens and plant the entrails under stuff they were planting in the garden to make them grow. Her expression that I always remember was, 'A willful waste makes a woeful want.' That's something I always thought in my life. I've got a big plastic tray full of nails and screws. I have them in my hand, ready to throw away. I can't throw them away -- I've got just junk screws.

**Utley:** Or take an old beat nail and straighten it out. Tell me about when she passed away. How did that affect you?

**Odom:** I was in Houston at the Black-Tie function for my son; it was a debutante ball. They called us at the hotel when Big Mama died.

**Clay:** It was a relief to me. I was just glad to see her out of this misery. She got those bedsores, and I had people come in to dress those bedsores. It was just so painful to her. It was an acceptance, when she passed away. I just knew then that she was better off.

**Utley:** How did the community feel?

**Clay:** Same way. Everybody just accepted it. She was ninety-four?

**Lareatha Clay:** Ninety-three.

**Odom:** Well, she probably made us all feel the same way, but she always thought I was special. And she made everybody feel the same way.

**Utley:** Every single person?

**Lareatha Clay:** I thought I was special.

**Odom:** I was in business, working real hard and everything, but at least once a week, I would pick up the phone and call Big Mama to see how she's doing. Then I would drop her a letter, and send a hundred dollar bill and tell her to buy some candy. I knew what she would do with it, she was going to put it up. I told her to buy candy or ice cream. Every week I would call her and once a month I'd drop her an envelope in there. She didn't want stuff -- she didn't need stuff. But it was some of those phone calls, the fact that she was getting a letter -- I sent her a letter that made me feel good, and made me feel special because she made me feel special.

**Utley:** How are you like her?

**Odom:** How am I like her?

**Utley:** When you do something and you think this is Big Mama coming from me.

**Odom:** I probably just have to say -- I don't know what phrase I would use on it, but Big Mama was able to keep the peace and the savvy to make things work out. And I believe that between my daddy, he getting it from her, and Big Papa is being able to work with people. And, that has been one of my strong points all of my working career, my college career -- working with people to get people on the team, getting them to understand. I probably would say that I watched her, how she got things done. And she would make it clear what she wanted you to do. That is what she would do.

**Utley:** What about you Laretha? When do you see something in you that reminds you of her?

**Laretha Clay:** Honesty and commitment (crying).

**Utley:** That's when I know I'm doing the right thing. I'm touching the right chords here.

**Laretha Clay:** When she told you she was going to do something, it was done.

**Utley:** You did not have to question.

**Laretha Clay:** There was no question. She died the day before my thirtieth birthday, so every birthday I always think about her. My birthday was last Thursday so she's been dead for fifteen years now.

**Utley:** So these reunions are the same though?

**Unidentified:** The door wouldn't be open, children would be banging the swing against the wall

**Utley:** That music wouldn't be playing.

**Laretha Clay:** Everybody would have been on time to church.

**(END OF INTERVIEW)**