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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project  
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**Alma Ford:** 3408 26th Street, zip code 305.

**Fred Beaton:** How long you been in Tampa?

AF: Been in Tampa since the 3rd of July in '57 [1957].

FB: What were the conditions of Blacks and how were they treated?

AF: Well, when I first came here it was all right, when I first came here.

FB: Can you explain what you mean by all right?

AF: Well, I mean I didn't have no trouble with them or anything, with the streets or anything.

FB: Were there, ah—did you come in contact with segregation?

AF: No.

FB: I'm talking about on buses and stuff like this here.

AF: Un uh.

FB: I'm talkin about—okay, what I mean by that, I mean, were the bus—did you have any problem by getting on the bus or sitting in the front?

***pause in recording***

AF: No. Fifteen years and five months and I was the only Black one working there. And I

had White salesladies working under me and they never gave me no problem about it.

FB: Okay, how about Central Avenue; how was Central Avenue when you first came here?

AF: When I first came here, the house we were living in, I'm a tell you the truth, it was a old wooden frame house. And it didn't have no Frigidaire [brand of refrigerator]—well, I only stayed a week. They had a ice box. And the floors, you had to keep a water hose on the floors all the time and it was really bad. And the bed was full of (inaudible) [some sort of insect].

*pause in recording*

AF: —and everything and we didn't know what it was, and God knows if you scratch it, and it would make it worse, and it was red. And day so I told Claude, I said it's something on this bed ain't right. Man we raised that mattress up—them little hold down there and all them was around on the rails and all them little things like that, ooohs, them were covered with (inaudible).

FB: Were these the conditions of most of the houses on Central?

AF: We didn't live in the one on Central; we only stayed there for a week.

FB: Oh, only a week.

AF: Then we moved in Moses White's house.

FB: Oh, Moses White owned houses back then, in '57 [1957]?

AF: Uh huh. He owned the apartment house right there by the yard.

FB: Oh, down on?

AF: On Constance.

FB: On Constance, called Mango Rooming House.

AF: Then we moved from there and then we got a house. Mary, Claude, Jeff and I got a house together until, you know—then Claude and I moved in. We had a big two story house. And then when they got ready to tear down on that side, then we moved back on the other side of the street in Mr. White's house. We stayed there until—we still rent from Mr. White.

FB: Oh, I see.

AF: Uh huh, we still rent from him.

FB: Well, ah, what did most of the Blacks do on Central? Was it a meeting place for friends or what?

AF: Well, I'm gonna to tell you what they mostly did, Fred. People just be up there drinking and having a ball and things.

FB: So most of the activities on Central were drinking and socialization?

AF: Uh huh, yeah, uh huh. You know how your mother and I, we use to be up there all the time. We ain't never had no problem with nobody up there. You know, we be in the Cotton Club, and sit up there drinking, we ain't never had no problems with nobody.

FB: Can you name some of the business that was on Central?

AF: Well, the Cotton Club, the Little Savory, the Pyramid, the LS, and ah, the Moon, and John Reeds, and Rogers Dinette, and ah, about—Mason was right across the street, the Greek Stand, and it was the—some groceries stores there before we had the rioting. There was a washerette up there on Central, a laundromat, and it was a Moon Clothing Store—oh, well, it was so many things, you know.

FB: Do you remember—what do you remember most about the Elks Club?

AF: Well, I use to go over there a lot of time to parties and things like that. I wasn't a member, but I knew a lot of people that was. Something like those parties they use to have over there. We use to go over there, but we were not a member, but they use to invite us to them. On top of that, my husband was working at Eckerds [drugstore chain], and like they would give a big party every year, we mostly—if we have in Tampa, we would have it over to the Elks.

FB: The parties that they had, can you describe some of the things that was going on in them?

AF: Well, I mean it was like—well, the one that we had from Eckerds, where we had all kind of drinks, and food, and everything. It was all free and give away prizes, and things like that, and get tickets at the door. And they have ah—the Elks would have different parties over there. When they would have different parties over there, we would be invited over there, carrying food and drinks and all that kind of stuff like that. And dance, they had bands and things like that.

FB: Can you name some of the bands right offhand, can you remember any?

AF: Oh, Lord. Fred, I really can't do that, cause they would have so many of them over there. And sometimes they even would have local bands from here.

FB: Did they ever have Count Basie's band over there?

AF: No, I don't know nothing about, I've never seen Count Basie over there. They had some nice bands, but I never seen Count Basie over there.

FB: Did they take part in any type business on Central, any members of the Elks that you know of?

AF: You mean was any of them in business or some—?

FB: Yeah, did they have any business that you can think of?

AF: I know about five or six men that was ah—and I know Rubin, she live across the street, right over there. I know she was member. Oh, five or six men that I knew, but I think most of them dead now; I don't even know their names now. But it was a lot of them, I knew ah—but you mean that had business on Central.

FB: Did they take part in any type of social organization or any type of self help organization for Blacks, you know? In other words, did they—were there any organization within the Elks that set up things that can help Blacks?

AF: What you mean like a Mason thing, like that? Well, you mean like Bennie Shuman?

FB: Ah, yeah, you can say that.

AF: Uh huh, Bennie Shuman, and God bless the dead, Mr. Lewis, yeah, all of them was in the, ah—

FB: Can you tell us any thing about the Masons? Were they strong?

AF: I don't nothing about that, cause I wasn't in—I was just being invited to the parties. So I can't say nothing about that.

FB: But getting back to Central Avenue—see what we trying to do, we trying to get a good picture of how Central Avenue was when you first came down here. Were the streets constantly crowded?

AF: Oh, gosh, yes! Uh huh. I mean everyday they were packed, and people were working, and they didn't have no problem getting no job, and nothing like that. My husband used to go down there at breaks and made twenty five and thirty dollars a day.

FB: Really?

AF: Uh huh, so did, you ask Gladys, she'll tell you. Sure did. I mean like the work problem like it is now, shoot.

FB: Uh huh.

AF: The only way you weren't working is because you didn't want to.

FB: So it was a plenty jobs for Blacks during the fifties [1950s]?

AF: Sure! Sho 'nough was. 'Cause Paulette was worked for about, almost two years, Paulette was working two jobs working at the First National Bank at night and working at Eckerds in the day time. No, you didn't have no problem getting no job. Naw, it wasn't no problem with no job; like I say, only reason why you didn't get one was because you didn't really want to work.

FB: Were most of the Blacks confined to being janitors, waiters, waitress, and cooks or something like this during this time?

AF: Any type of work you was qualified for, you could get it. Cause, just like when I first started working at Russells in Britton Plaza, and I started working there in '58 [1958] and I use to wonder how they dress some mannequins and put the pants and things on them. I didn't know nothing about that, and Altamese, my friend, she was supposed to go and her baby was sick and she couldn't go. So she asked me to go and I went there that morning, and so Mrs. B.—Mrs. Burnhouser, we called her Mrs. B. Anyway, so, she came out and so she ask me what I know about working in a store. I told her nothing, she say you never worked in a store before, and you came here looking for a job. I say, "I didn't come looking for none; you called Altamese [Brown], my friend, last night and she couldn't get here, so she told me to come," and so she ask me if I had Social Security card and she asked me my name, address, telephone number and I gave all that to her. And I had went to a Publix [grocery store chain] and got some groceries cause I was fixin' to go back home, so she wrote all that down. So I was fixin' to take my bag and go out. And so she told one of the other sales lady to take me back there and show me where to put my bag, and they had a big Frigidaire back there, and she ask me if I had any meat or anything to put in there, and so I started right on to work.

FB: Yeah?

AF: Uh huh, and I did all them windows like I wanted to do, and every time they open a new store, like Clearwater and what's the other big shopping center on 7th Avenue—Everybody's Store, and I did all the decoration for the store.

FB: What you. were doing there? Interior decorating?

AF: Uh huh. And they open the store in Clearwater, I did all of that.

FB: Were there any, ah, when you were working there, were you discriminated against in any way?

AF: Un uh, no. When I had to go to Clearwater, we opened a store in Clearwater, I did everything just the way I wanted. And my boss—see I wasn't working under no manager,

I was working for the boss. And, ah, and so they—and, like, I go picking things for the grand opening of the store. And if I picked things out, and I've three or four racks of things and if I want to change that, and then if I didn't like what I put in the window, I put whatever I want in there. Oh yeah, I did all of that. And all them that was were working in there, what I was telling them to do, and there was another Black girl and the rest of them was White but they had—

*pause in recording*

FB: How many people were—how many Blacks were working at the company you were working at, that you know of?

AF: Where I was working? I was the only one.

FB: Out of the whole company?

AF: Oh, no—well they had a girl working at Northgate and they had one working in Clearwater after I trained them.

FB: Oh, you trained all of them?

AF: Uh huh, yeah.

FB: So it was only three Blacks working?

AF: We had three stores.

FB: And three Blacks?

AF: Uh huh, one working at each store, but they was just employees, and they wasn't on no training or nothing. I had to do the training to them and everything. I was—you know, I had to teach, I had to go to the different stores and teach them to do that.

FB: See, this is important.

AF: Uh huh, Well I did, I would have to go—see, like, they get new help in the store, and then I would have go to different stores and teach them how to do the windows and things like that.

FB: So you were in display?

AF: Huh? Well, I was in all of it. They never resented by me being over or nothing. They never resented that, none I of them. And sometimes it used to be like 11 and 12 o'clock at night when I get home. Because when we closed at Britton Plaza, I would have to go to Northgate and do the windows. No, I ain't had no problems at all. And I had customers come in that store—it was two or three ladies, they come in there and if I wasn't there

they wouldn't let nobody else wait on them. Then they got where they started calling and—I mean, they were White, too—and they got where they started calling to see if I was there before they come shopping.

I never had no problems. And you know what they would do, I could be sitting down reading the paper, cause see I had my own desk and I could be sitting down behind the register, and I used to do all Mrs. B.'s shopping for her house, grocery shopping, I did all that for her house too. And sometimes, she say, "Baby, a little shopping for me when you get a minute, please." And anything she want from the house she would, like she go off and leave the groceries, what Kathy be done made out for her. And I call Kathy, and asked her what she needed at home. I had it made there, but see we just went out of business.

FB: Oh, they went out of business?

AF: Yeah, uh huh, Mr. B.—he dead, had two strokes and then he had a heart attack—I mean that's after we closed the store. All her banking and everything, I did all that.

FB: Well, ah—they didn't hire too many Blacks though, did they?

AF: If they would come there for it and they were qualified to be a sales lady, sure they would hire her, uh huh.

FB: Were there any in management or anything like that?

AF: Huh?

FB: Were they in management?

AF: Well, see, okay, like I had been there so long, couldn't nobody come in there and be no manager over me, but they could be a sales lady if they was qualified for it. But other than that, but they couldn't do that, unless, they would have to have my permission for it.

FB: Okay, all right, see that now that wasn't—

*end of recording*