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Oral History Program
African American Burial Grounds
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: A67-00009
Interviewee: Jet Jackson
Interview by: Antoinette Jackson
Interview date: February 7, 2022
Interview location: Jet Jackson's residence [St. Petersburg, Fla.]
Transcribed by: Dahlia Thomas
Transcription date: July 8-13, 2022
Audit Edit by: Richard Schmidt
Audit Edit date: August 23, 2022
Final Edit by: Dahlia Thomas
Final Edit date: August 24, 2022

Antoinette Jackson (AJ): Hi. Today is Monday, February 7th, 2022. I'm Dr. Antoinette Jackson. I am going to have an interview today with the African American Burial Ground Project and I'll start by letting my interviewee state his name. Please state your name.

Jet Jackson (JJ): My name is Thomas Jackson, better known as Jet. J-E-T.

AJ: Okay. And could you spell your last name just for the—

JJ: J-A-C-K-S-O-N

AJ: Alright. Could you say your date of birth and your—

JJ: 6-14-1943

AJ: 1943. And we are here in his home today and I'm happy to be here in St. Petersburg. A live interview today. So, could you state your race, ethnicity? How do you describe yourself in terms of race?

JJ: I consider myself being black. Multi-colored. Negro. But I consider myself being a black person.

AJ: And your gender?

JJ: My gender is male.

AJ: Okay, thank you. So, we just got the housekeeping out of the way so, thank you so much. So, I'm here talking about the cemeteries here in St. Petersburg and we're really interested in the issues of black cemeteries in St. Pete near Tropicana Field. And what families and what peoples have been impacted by that. So, could you just start out by telling me your relationship to the cemeteries near Tropicana Field?

JJ: Well, let me start when I was a boy. We lived in that area near 21st and 9th Avenue South. And when we had to go in town, I used to run through the cemetery to get where I need to go on the south side to get down to 3rd Avenue. I was so afraid; I would always run through the one on the south side of 5th Avenue. We could never go into one on the north side of 5th Avenue because it wasn't our route. But we would run from 7th Avenue through there, all the way over to 5th Avenue because we had to go around because there was a trailer park sitting on 19th Street up to the back of the cemetery with the front part of the cemetery was going up to 16th Street. Okay? And the south side of the cemetery with 5th Avenue south all the way over to— I'd say close to 1st Avenue but not quite there, maybe a block away and that's how I knew about the cemetery. Then we had some far distant relatives, according to my family members that I talked to today, that said they were buried there. But they couldn't tell me the names because my family is a real old family. They are the Munnerlyn and there are some buried on the south side. And there were two cemeteries there, and there are some of our people buried on the south side.

AJ: Could you name the cemeteries that you're talking about?

JJ: Now from what I understand, the name back then was Royal Palms.

AJ: Okay.

JJ: Then they moved the cemetery out. Way out on Gandy [Boulevard] and there were Holy Light— Holly Light Royal Palm North. But it was Royal Palms. And then they built a— Now, we used to live in a place called Royal Court. Then they would run out to the cemetery. It was built on the north side of 5th Avenue South. And we lived there for years, but what happened, to my recollections, and my mom would always tell us, they said, they had a big mess going on about they up-earthed some bones and things when they were running the highway through there. And folk got really upset. But they were saying that somebody killed somebody and buried somebody out there. And that was never true because all those bodies— they never got them all up.

AJ: And could you start by telling me your parents name? Because you mentioned your mother but who are your parents?

JJ: My mother was Eloise Munnerlyn.

AJ: And spell that again?

JJ: M-U-N-N-E-R-L-Y-N. And that was my mother's maiden name.

AJ: Right.

JJ: It was a large family. Thirteen girls and four boys in that particular family.

AJ: And your dad was?

JJ: My dad was Thomas, James Thomas Jackson, but he lived in Tampa. My mother and father separated. But he lived in Tampa.

AJ: But when you were growing up, you grew up in the Royal Court?

JJ: The Royal Court. Yeah.

AJ: Yeah. And so, your parents were –That’s where your parents both lived when you were –

JJ: No, just my mother.

AJ: Okay, so you lived with your mother and could you say the address or could you describe Royal Court when you were growing up and what year to what year were you pretty much living there?

JJ: It was in the ‘50s because in the ‘60s was where my mother used to go the season. They called it the season. They would go up to Ashbury Park, New York and come back, work a season here. Then work a season up north during the summer months. And I would stay with my Aunt Beulah out on 33rd Street. But we lived— my mom had a place right there in Laurel Park where we stayed. I went to 16th Street Middle School [now known as John Hopkins Middle School] at the time. That’s where I was in Jordan Park, so we stayed there maybe five or six years.

AJ: Okay, so you moved there when it was called Laurel Park. Royal Court became Laurel Park.

JJ: Yes, it became Laurel Park but Laurel Park’s first name was Royal Court. Then they changed the name.

AJ: And you said, your mother worked the season. What was her occupation?

JJ: Cafeteria work.

AJ: Okay

JJ: Cafeteria work.

AJ: She worked at what school?

JJ: She wasn’t in school. She worked in those restaurants; you know that would travel.

AJ: Oh, those restaurants. Okay.

JJ: I can’t think of the name of the restaurant right now, but she did work for two of them. She worked for all of them and they left here in the summer and they would go to Ashbury Park.

AJ: Okay. But when she was in St. Pete, she worked at restaurants locally in St. Pete during that time?

JJ: Right. Downtown.

AJ: Okay. And can you describe Royal Court or Laurel Park apart? What did it look like and what did you like—

JJ: It was a project, a project-style setting, had two roads going through one on the back side, one inside. And then, you had people over on the next Street which is 3rd Avenue and you had people living along 5th Avenue side. We stayed on the 5th Avenue side. Just like a project upstairs, downstairs.

AJ: What color were the buildings?

JJ: It was all white. All white. It's the only color I've known it to be. Yeah.

AJ: And were there any stores or any other things in the same vicinity there?

JJ: There were stores and that's what I would tell my grandson today, there was— actually let me start with the churches. In that area there were, Travelers' Rest right across the street from it. There was 60-Minute Cleaners, there was The Weekly Challenger, there was an insurance company, there was a store, and across the street on the east side was Welch's Yard. He sold dirt and stuff for your yard. Stuff like that. Feeds for animals and things like that. And then there was a Perkins. They had a store across the street. I used to work in that store. Then there was First Baptist down on the corner of 3rd and 16th Street. You know, then there was Prayer Tower. It was down on 14th and about 4th Avenue. Then there were Galilee Missionary Baptist Church down in the Camel Park Area. There was Georgia Baptist— a lot of people are not going to remember that. There was Georgia Baptist on the corner of 16th Street and 5th Avenue, which is now known as Second Bethel Community under Reverend Enoch Davis. He was the pastor at that time but then they named the Enoch D. Davis Center after him.

Then there was Camel Park. We used to play over in Camel Park and there was St. John's, down the hill from the back of Camel Park. Then there was Bethel Metropolitan on top of the hill. Then there was all kinds of stores. There was so many black businesses all along 3rd Avenue and 2nd Avenue and 1st Avenue. We lost a lot of businesses— 16th Street, and then 5th Avenue coming down to 22nd Street. They were all black businesses. The interstate came through and took it all out like they took the graveyard out.

AJ: Do you remember seeing anything to do with the cemeteries when you were growing up?

JJ: They were just burying people out there, that's all. And upgrade when they brought the interstate through there, we notice them upgrading when they were taking people out. They supposed to be taking everybody out of there.

AJ: You saw them taking somebody?

JJ: Yeah. We see that.

AJ: Okay. Which year was that when you witnessed or saw them taking— the first time that you really saw?

JJ: It was in the early '50s. I was in 16th Street School. I graduated in '63 so that had to be the late '50s when the interstate. If you get the date of the interstate coming through, it was part of that.

AJ: But you actually, when prior to the interstate coming through, when they were doing the construction, you saw them moving.

JJ: You can see it.

AJ: You saw the cemetery.

JJ: We were nosey. We used to play basketball on the school grounds and we could look right over there and see everything.

AJ: Which cemetery again was the one you saw?

JJ: Palm. They used to call it Royal Palm. The one that it sat on this side. Most of the white folks were buried on this side.

AJ: Which side was that? Like the north side?

JJ: North side, south side.

AJ: Okay.

JJ: But then some black folks were buried over there too according to some elderly family members. They were buried on both sides. But I've never seen too many of us buried there. But I know a lot of white folks were buried in that cemetery.

AJ: And then, so you actually saw the cemetery and you actually saw them moving bodies from the cemetery?

JJ: Right. Right. Well, you know, you couldn't see the bodies. You could see what they were moving.

AJ: Well, yeah. The caskets.

JJ: You know, you could see what they were moving.

AJ: And do you know who was doing that? Like which —

JJ: I can't remember. I can't remember what organization was doing it, but the interstate came and cleaned all our stuff out. Because see there were people houses all along that stretch. A lot of folks lost their homes and things. You know, and they call imminent domain? They put the highway through a lot of folks. From there all the way to 34th Street.

AJ: Did your family have to move from Royal Court because of the interstate or anything?

JJ: No, we left before, way before then. We didn't have to move mom there. Mom got a place over on 21st Street, 9th Avenue. She rented over there. Yeah. We didn't have to. We were gone, because they wouldn't fix it up, you know.

AJ: And today, if you were standing at Tropicana Field and the parking lot, what is in the area where you used to live right now? Have you been over there recently? What is there—

JJ: Its just a parking lot. It's just a parking lot there right now.

AJ: Right where you used to live?

JJ: Right where we used to live. Right there. The parking lot. That's where— on the north side of 5th Avenue between 16th Street and 19th, that's where Laurel Park was heading. And then one thing a lot of folks can't remember, there were another set of apartments across the street that they built. Three story apartments right on the grave site. And for some reason, when the interstate came in, demolished it, and a lot of folks were displaced during that period.

AJ: Yeah, yeah. Is anything remaining that was there that they didn't take up because of the interstate like any trees or any buildings? Nothing left that you remember that time?

JJ: Yes, one little building is there.

AJ: Which little building is that?

JJ: This one little building sits on the corner of 5th Avenue and 16th Street. And if you go around the curve going to 16th Street, now they have the hockey people, roller skate people— whatever you call them.

AJ: Anchor Skate. That's underneath there?

JJ: That was the original building. It used to be a sandwich shop.

AJ: Oh. Okay.

JJ: Yeah, it used to be a sandwich shop. Miss Ivita Martin used to run that sandwich shop.

AJ: The Perkins' house was one of the places that was near Anchor Skate?

JJ: Yeah those two houses right behind it? Those were original houses. The Perkins, he was a professor. A very educated. His daughter was educated. Eloise Perkins— I can't think of the other daughter's name but, he had Perkins Elementary School named after Mr. Perkins. And they owned all that property all the way back.

AJ: And did you know that family at all?

JJ: Oh yes.

AJ: So, you knew the Perkins?

JJ: Oh yeah. She used to beat me. Mrs. Perkins was an English teacher at Gibbs High School. Well, I met them before that when I was a little kid because I used to work at the grocery store. They had a grocery store across the street. And then I went to school and she was just like a mother to me. I used to go in and make yards, then make money and stuff like that. And Miss MacMurray was her sister. Very beautiful people and they took care of the kids. They really did.

AJ: Yes, right. And so, did you go to one of the churches in that area?

JJ: No. I—

AJ: Or your family was affiliated with any of them?

JJ: None of the churches. But my godmother who is to be 102 years old next week.

AJ: What's her name?

JJ: Beatrice Cumming. She took me to church on the north side. Near St. Martin Missionary Baptist Church. And I'm still there. I joined in 1958.

AJ: What are some of the most memorable things you can think of when you were growing up? You were about what, 10 or 11? How old were you when you actually living in—

JJ: In that area, about 10 years old. Little league baseball. Harlem Globe Trotters. Satchel Page, coming out of the Camel Park, played baseball in the field over there. Big name ball players were in there. Yeah, and then in middle school we used to go to Dr. Swain's house for parties, and he would have all the major league baseball players coming through there. They couldn't go nowhere else.

AJ: Right. Did you know anybody who had like a rooming house or a black hotel or something in that area when you were growing up?

JJ: The Perkins had rooming houses along 5th Avenue but not in that particular area. They're the only ones who had a rooming house on 5th. There were rooming houses over on 3rd Avenue. Mrs. Grayson used to hold a bar, and it had rooms and things over in that particular area. There were so many businesses in that area. What they called a gas plant area but you're away from the cemetery now. You're almost five or six blocks going back east, going away from it.

AJ: So, the gas plant was in the vicinity of the cemeteries but that wasn't where they were?

JJ: Yeah, they were in the vicinity of it. Maybe five or six blocks away. But they were right on 10th, between 10th and 11th coming up 3rd Avenue. I remember all of that.

[Unidentified speaker]: Do you mind if I use this table to—

JJ: Yeah. Move my stuff out of the way. Just literally

AJ: When you hear the phrase "African American Burial Grounds" and remembering and stuff like that, what comes to mind?

JJ: Well, the only one I've known for them to labor that was Lincoln Cemetery. They never did labor it that way to my remember. But they always labor African American Cemetery for life. That's why I didn't go for it, but actually St. Petersburg is on the edge of Gulf Port. I know you've probably heard about it.

AJ: Yes [laughing] definitely. So, you said you had family members buried in the Royal Palm cemetery.

JJ: That's what my cousins were telling me, but they couldn't give me the name. They were such elderly people that happened back then. I guess I was too young to know who they were.

AJ: But, how do your relatives come to know? They attended the funeral or—?

JJ: Well, they're old enough. They're in their late eighties so, you know they were young folk. Its only two of them left. Well, I'm almost 77. But I am 77. Ruth Ann Munnerlyn and William H. Stuart. Those are the two that I talked with this past week. They remember extremely well.

AJ: That they had people buried there?

JJ: Yeah.

AJ: Yeah. And did they have any funeral programs and things like that that you know of?

JJ: No, I know none of that stuff can be found because when Aunt Beulah passed all of that stuff for some reason her children got rid of all that stuff. All those kids, all of them are gone. I don't know anybody around me that would have something like that.

AJ: Okay. Well, you can think about it.

JJ: Yeah, okay.

AJ: Then back to the actual where Royal Court was and the cemetery. Did you actually see like headstones? How did you know it was a cemetery?

JJ: Well, I used to run through it as a little kid and you saw headstones, and they had a laborer. And we formed a path going through everything anyway. I wouldn't walk, I would run through it. I did many days running through the cemetery. There were headstones everywhere.

AJ: Were some of them upright or some of them fallen down?

JJ: Some of them were laying down, some upright, some fallen. You know, they didn't keep the place up like they do today. You know, I worked for a funeral home that I didn't tell you.

AJ: I was going to get to that part because I understand that you work for a funeral home now.

JJ: Yeah.

AJ: So, it's your funeral home or you work for them?

JJ: I work for one.

AJ: Which one is that one?

JJ: Lawson [Funeral Home and Cremation Service]

AJ: Okay.

JJ: And I started out with Creel [Funeral Home], then I worked with McRae [Funeral Home], and then I worked for Lawson. I do it parttime. I'm retired from the city. I worked 56 years for the city.

AJ: And you know, I want to go back to the visuals of that cemetery again. Was there trees or like grass?

JJ: What Laurel Park had— well, Royal Court— when they first built Royal Court it was one of the beautiful places— you want to move in.

AJ: Really?

JJ: It had pretty grass, palm trees, flowers, and all that. And, they maintained it pretty good at one time. Then they stopped doing the back side.

AJ: The complex. The housing complexes?

JJ: Yeah. Yeah.

AJ: Okay.

JJ: And the other one that they built across the street from it, it was a nice place but it didn't have any trees and things. It was just a big three-story high rise that folks were living in.

AJ: But the cemetery itself also had trees or—?

JJ: Yeah, they had oak trees. A lot of oak trees. Yeah. A lot of oak trees in that cemetery. Just like that cemetery in Normandy Beach. You can tell it's an old fashion cemetery. Really, if you go 9th Street and 11th Avenue or something similar to that, but only that one has a wall around it. These did not have any walls around. It was just open space.

AJ: And if you look where Travelers Rest is now, was that close to the cemetery as well?

JJ: Right across the street.

AJ: Okay.

JJ: Right across the street from it, because when they built Laurel Park— you know, you'll have to excuse my language, when it was Royal Court then they changed it to Laurel Park. So, it was off of Main [Street] with both of them. I lived in Royal Court. I didn't live in Laurel Park, but then I did live in Laurel Park.

AJ: Yeah, because it changed.

JJ: So, then they put a wall up. Then they put a laundry mat across, down on the backside. And then, they had a drive-in little restaurant. And that man still living to the name too, name of Roosevelt Swinton. He's still living. He owns a little store right now on the corner of 22nd Avenue and 19th Street, I believe it is. The store on the left-hand side. Roosevelt Swinton. And then, he run the little league baseball in the city. So, he's all that stuff. He can tell you a lot of stuff too.

AJ: So, what do you think— How did you feel when you learned about your family having been— having some family members buried in that cemetery and it's been covered over by the highway and parking lot. What does that make you think of? What did you feel?

JJ: Now, I feel somewhat disturbed, but before then I didn't pay it no attention, to be honest with you. I didn't pay it no attention, because I really didn't know what was happening. I heard mama and them talking. And you can hear what was going on. I remember lots of it. For some reason, I got a good mind and I remember a lot of that stuff. And they were saying— even what I was telling you about, they were saying that someone killed somebody and buried them there and that wasn't true. They were just up-earthing those bodies and stuff and they didn't get them all out.

AJ: And when you heard your mom talking about it, were they concerned that bodies were there or that their people were there?

JJ: They were concerned but a lot of them were working for folk and they couldn't talk too much back then.

AJ: Working for folk like businesses?

JJ: Yes, and most of them did housework. You know like maid work and stuff like that? And they just couldn't do a whole lot of talking. They would get fired; you know what I mean? I guess progress was in the making. Most of those old folks gone. Wish they could be around here to help you.

AJ: So, when did you first hear about that people were concerned about bodies in—

JJ: Oh, I was a small kid and I remember the day talking about it.

AJ: But today, when you hear more contemporarily like, more recently, when did you first start hearing people talking about—

JJ: When Tampa brought all that stuff up a couple of years ago, I said, "Well, the same thing happened over here." They didn't get all those bodies out over there. We know that, but we can't prove it. But we know they didn't get them all out. It happened too fast. When that highway came through this place, a whole lot of folks. You know.

AJ: So, what do you think should be done now about, you know, the fact that there were cemeteries and now you know—

JJ: If they can salvage some of those folks and move them. If they can find them, they should do it. You know, I'm from the old school. I don't think it should bother unearthing graves but if you got to unearth it, move it. That's just my belief. I don't think you should disturb them, but it's too late for that now. It's already covered up.

AJ: So, if you could tell the new mayor that you know, do you know Ken Welch at all and his family?

JJ: Do I know? Yeah, I know him. Yeah, I know him real good.

AJ: What would you tell him about what to do or—?

JJ: You see, I know Ken. That wouldn't be fair. I know him, see? And he's a tender-hearted man. Yeah, he's very tender-hearted. And I love and respect the man. If they could move them, move them. That'll be my thing, but if you can't move them, leave them alone.

AJ: Right and do you think race is a factor in why all this happened with these cemeteries?

JJ: I think it was money. I think it was progress and money. You know, I think that's what happened, because it happened so fast. If you look at the setup where the highway went through the city, it blocked off a lot of corridors that we used to travel getting from point A to point B. You know, especially when you hit 5th Avenue. You can't even go to 15th Avenue to get anywhere. You got to go all the way to 18th or you got to go to 5th Avenue. But we used to go all the way around. We can't do that anymore. I'm just being honest.

AJ: If you want to, I'm going to pretty much conclude, but if you want people to remember something about what it was like prior to the interstate or prior to the parking lot being there, what would you want people to remember about that area where you grew up?

JJ: The businesses— and I'm going to talk about this Sunday. I will say this to you. My grandson came up to me and he asked about the same thing. He just turned thirty. For some apparent reason, why would he come home and ask me that question? So, I immediately got on the phone and called my pastor say, "Can I have three or four minutes to talk about the history of St. Petersburg, and share some of the knowledge that I know of?" Because a lot of these people are thirty years old and don't even know that black businesses was a flourish thing in this city and they had businesses on 3rd Avenue, 16th Street, 22nd Street, all the way out to 34th Street. They're gone. They're not there no more.

AJ: So, that's what you definitely want people to know about.

JJ: Yes, it might energize some people to pick up their bootstraps and start some businesses. Work together. That's how you get people off the street. So that, what I want. I'm going to do that Sunday.

AJ: Okay. Well, did you have any other thing that you want to say other than— that I didn't ask that you think I should know?

JJ: Well, funeral homes had a great impact on the community as well. They helped folks that couldn't even pay to bury folk. Especially if it was Creel, he would bury folk and never get paid. I still believe today that he's would have been a rich man if he would have gotten paid.

AJ: Creel Funeral Home? What other ones do you remember that you remember back then.

JJ: McRae, Arch Royal, Sanchez [now Sanchez Rehoboth Mortuary and Cremation Services]. Ray [Lee] Williams [& Sons Funeral Home and Crematory]. There were a lot of funeral homes back then. And now, they work together in the community style. Also, I remember, preachers had an impact on the people. They worked and kept the people together and had a community of compassion and love. Now, where's it at? And all of that gone. It's all about money. If you got some money, you can move mountains. If you don't have money, you can't get out. Yeah, I want to talk about the businesses, I don't think any young folks that are thirty years old— because my grandson couldn't believe it while I was talking to him. He works for the city too. Yeah, I have two of them working for the city. He couldn't believe what I was telling him today.

AJ: Well Mr. Jackson, I believe what you're telling me and I appreciate it so much, so thank you so much for taking the time. I'll turn it off now—turn this interview off and we can look at some of the maps and things, and I think Kaleigh has a couple questions. Thank you.

JJ: You're welcome.