

# **NOTICE**

**Materials in our digital Oral History collections are the products of research projects by several individuals. USF Libraries assume no responsibility for the views expressed by interviewers or interviewees. Some interviews include material that may be viewed as offensive or objectionable. Parents of minors are encouraged to supervise use of USF Libraries Oral Histories and Digital Collections. Additional oral histories may be available in Special Collections for use in the reading room. See individual collection descriptions for more information.**

**This oral history is provided for research and education within the bounds of U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Copyright over Oral Histories hosted by the USF Libraries rests with the interviewee unless transferred to the interviewer in the course of the project. Interviewee views and information may also be protected by privacy and publicity laws. All patrons making use of it and other library content are individually accountable for their responsible and legal use of copyrighted material.**

Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project  
Oral History Program  
Florida Studies Center  
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: A31-00001  
Interviewee: Homer Aikens (HA)  
Interview by: Otis Anthony (OA)  
Interview date: September 7, 1978  
Interview location: Unknown  
Transcribed by: Unknown  
Transcription date: Unknown  
Interview Changes by: Kimberly Nordon  
Interview Changes date: December 2, 2008  
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson  
Final Edit date: January 7, 2009

**Homer Aikens:** I was a young man in Tampa, I was around eleven years old when I left Tampa and ran away. Travel around Macclenny, Drysdale, 'round Jacksonville during the earlier thirties [1930s] and twenties [1920s]. Black people along in that time was working for just about anything they could get, anything people would give them. \$3.00 a day from six in the morning to six in the afternoon. They had to take it because there wasn't nothing else they could do and nobody was gonna do anything for them and do no more for them and that is just the way they lived. And they lived that way. Of course, I was one of the lucky ones. I didn't exactly have to work for \$3 because I had done a little fishing and I delivered a little ice at the icehouse for nine dollars a week for seven days. So many more had to do that and I thank God today they don't have to work and go on and do the things you or I had to take.

**Otis Anthony:** What was some of the conditions of Blacks? How was Tampa when you came here? The living conditions?

HA: Oh, it was bad, oh it was bad at that time.

OA: Something like the house for example?

HA: All these old houses we live in now, those what they torn down and all those, practically all them was put in like new at that time. They had those old outside toilets and all that where you had to walk outside to go out to the toilet, you didn't have no flush toilets, you had the big old toilets with a bucket in it out there, and you had to go out, a man came by once a week and dump them you know and clean them out and put a little lime and all that in it.

OA: What about lights and telephones?

HA: No, no lights and no telephone.

OA: What did you use for lights?

HA: Lamps, lanterns.

OA: Kerosene?

HA: Kerosene lamps and kerosene lanterns.

OA: What kind of school they have?

HA: Well, the school was bad, we had a little old school, we had Harlem.

OA: Where was that at?

HA: That's on the corner of Morgan and down there on Morgan and Jefferson. I meant on the corner of Harrison and Morgan. Of course, I went to little old school in West Tampa when I was growing up. A little old wooden school over there. It's torn down now.

OA: What was it called?

HA: I don't remember. It was a little wooden school over there in West Tampa I forgot what the name of that street is it's on, that was on four—can't recall—on the name of the street.

OA: What other kind of school did they have? Harlem was an elementary school?

HA: They finally built, well they had Meacham, they had Lomax, and they lately built Middleton, and Don Thompson.

OA: Around what time did they build Middleton and Don Thompson?

HA: I don't remember now what year they built those two schools.

OA: Will you tell us [about the] Depression years?

HA: During Depression days people were working for \$3.00 a day. If a man made \$6 a week, he was on one of the high-class jobs. He was just like a man bringing home \$400 now. Yeah, 'long in there, when you brought home that kind of money, car and all like that. Always been some exceptional Blacks, you know, in everything there is always be some exceptional Blacks. We have a few Blacks, through their boss, men got a hold of automobiles and had cars along in there. That was rare you seen a Black own a car.

OA: That was in the thirties?

HA: Practically every thing got, if you went downtown something on credit, they first had to call your boss man and he'd have to okay and if he didn't okay they didn't let you have it. So he was responsible to see that you paid for it. So that which way they done things then. But now, you is able to go down there and do it on your own now. People trust you and let you have it yourself now.

OA: I understand that there were some lines where people did not have anything, line in the thirties during the Depression, soup lines?

HA: Oh yeah, well they have one here and one in Jacksonville as far that was concerned.

OA: Where was the one here?

HA: On Central. Charlie Edge ran the one in Jacksonville, he had the soup line in Jacksonville and he use to run that. Charlie Moon run the one here in Tampa. If it hadn't been for Charlie Moon it would had been a many dead Negroes starving to death in Tampa and so would have been the same in Jacksonville if it hadn't been for Charlie Edge.

OA: Tell me this, you mean those soup lines that Charlie Moon ran, that wasn't WPA money that bought that soup?

HA: No, WPA money didn't buy it. The man done it on his own. He had the money to do it with, he was one of the big *bolita* men here and everybody played *bolita* with him and they was catching it. He was showing his appreciation by running a soup line to help keep the people alive. Charlie Edge, he was a big *bolita* man in Jacksonville and he did the same thing; he was a big *bolita* man. He ran a big soup line in Jacksonville and kept the people alive.

OA: Describe to me what the soup lines look like and were they really that long lines?

HA: Well, sometimes they would be a block long and sometimes longer than that. They would dish out bowls of soup to everyone that came by. After you have gotten a bowl and everyone in the line had went through and if you wanted some more you go back until was all gone.

OA: So was Charlie Moon a respected individual in Tampa?

HA: Yes, all the people loved him, everybody loved him.

OA: Tell me about Central Avenue, the social life, the bands. What was the life like? Did people have good times?

HA: Well, that was the big time street. That was the main drag for Black people back

along then. Yeah, they had all the big time band. Well, they had the majority of them.

OA: Name some of the groups or individuals that came through there, singing and dancing, entertaining?

HA: Well, Ray Charles, James Brown, all a girl singing now, Ruth Brown, Asa Harris, I can't remember all of them. I can't think all of them that have been on Central. B.B. King and all them have been down here.

OA: Central was like that in the twenties?

HA: Yeah, Central has always been the main drag. Wet have two big theater way back in the twenties. The Central and the Macecola was there during the twenties, the two big theaters. Then they eventually tore the Macecola down and they had the Central Theater and then they had the Lincoln Theater down there.

OA: Were these just theaters for movies?

HA: They had movies and stage shows, vaudeville and all that jazz.

OA: Was Soakly strictly run by Blacks or what?

HA: Well, after Charlie Edge, White began to take over. Used to be the Black Labor Camp was on Central at that time from Scott to Harrison, was all Black business. Then White began to take over afterwards.

OA: Then Charlie Moon was like the leader of business on Central.

HA: He was the one practically had all the business on Central.

OA: What about Walt Sanders?

HA: They come in later, they taken over afterward, after Charlie Moon. They all come in and take over after Charlie Moon and even Lee Davis.

OA: How about the boom?

HA: During the boom, during the war? I wasn't here during the war. I was in American airfield in Miami. Capt. Anderson, Cecil Hill, during the boom.

OA: That was during the twenties?

HA: No, during the boom. We had one boom here, that was during the storm in Miami in 1926.

OA: Tell me about that storm.

HA: I was not here at the time. I was around Brightsdell at that time when that storm hit Miami in twenty-six [1926].

OA: Did it hit Tampa?

HA: No, it didn't do any damage to Tampa, just Miami, on the east coast. Did the most damage in Miami. It was in the east coast. Tore up Miami and destroyed everything around down there. There had to stopped and rebuilt everything. That last long about twenty-three [1923] and did not last too long around twenty-seven [1927], it started going down. The storm come back and did a little bit more damage down there. In twenty-nine [1929] the bottom just dropped out of everything, twenty-nine [1929] and thirty-three [1933].

OA: What do you mean the bottom dropped out? How did people react to the Depression?

HA: Well there was nothing they could do about it. It was God's will. Closed up all the banks during the thirties, closed up all the banks, say all the banks had gone broke, all of then was broke. No money, nobody had no money. Of course you know at that time, it didn't get too many Black people. Because didn't too many Blacks have any money at that time and Blacks that had money along in that time, they usually went to the Post Office. They put all their money in the Post Office, they never put money in banks, they didn't believe in banks. They put their money in the Post Office. You could save money in the Post Office just like you can in the bank now and Black people used to go to the Post Office. And those that had a little money, that's why it didn't bother them as much, because it was all in the Post Office and not in the back.

OA: Well, tell me something about the Post Office, was it like you could take out a savings account?

HA: It was just like you go to the bank now, just like you go and get a money order. You put your money in the Post Office and they would give you a receipt. They paid interest on it just like you can do it in the bank. They paid interest on it and the federal government eventually cut it out, stopped it, and everybody who had money in the Post Office had to withdraw it out.

OA: They had a name for that?

HA: Savings.

OA: Just savings, Post Office Savings?

HA: Yeah, they took it out, the government had them take it out. They take it to the bank, after the government secured the banks. See the bank use to didn't be secured by the government. The government taken over all the banks and made them secure so nobody

gonna lose no money in the bank. The bank don't go broke cause the government back it up. See the bank could have gone anytime and take all the people's money, but they cannot do that now.

OA: We were asking about the Depression. Anything you can tell us about it? In the Forties [1940s], where did most of the Black people work? For example Black men, where did most Black men work?

HA: They worked on job like (inaudible) have any farmers involved. They worked on tractor machinery

OA: Was it the shipyard or railroads?

HA: Yeah, when they open up the shipyard. They worked all the machines, the dumping machine. The railroad always need, ever since I can remember Blacks were working for the railroads.

OA: Tell me about that? That is what we don't have. We had Blacks working on the railroads far back as you can remember? What kind of work did they do? What kind of stuff did they do?

HA: Yeah, far back as I can remember.

OA: Well, what did they do? What kind of stuff did they do?

HA: Well, some of them worked in the yards, worked on railroads, fixed tracks and all, bridges and all like that.

OA: This was even before the twenties?

HA: Yeah, they didn't have many engineers and all that kind of junk that they have got now.

OA: They did have some Black engineers?

HA: I can't remember no one saying anybody was an engineer, but they were working in the engineering department.

OA: What was the name of the railroad?

HA: All I know was Seaboard Coast Line.

OA: What was the name of the shipyard?

HA: I have never known. There was a shipyard over here and one in Jacksonville.

OA: Did they call that McCloskey shipyard [McCloskey & Co., and Tampa Shipyards, Inc.]?

HA: I don't what the name of that shipyard was? (inaudible)

OA: We understand that during the forties [1940s] when the soldiers came here—which was World War II, right? When the solders came here there was a riot.

HA: I was not here when the riots were here.

OA: You heard about it?

HA: I heard about that. But I was not here.

OA: What did you hear about it?

HA: I just heard that they had a big disturbance, and all. All the troopers, but I was not here. What it was about, how it started and what it was about.

OA: You know anything about this?

HA: Yeah, I was not here when they had all that.

OA: So is there anything about the forties you can think about that you want to tell us about except working on the shipyard and that type of thing?

HA: No.

OA: What about segregation? What were your feelings about that?

HA: Well, I tell you, it was a bad thing. When you live with those things so many years and you are accustomed to them. And you know you had to live with it and because there wasn't anyone you can turn to. You never worried about it, back then, you never worried about. Because there was no release, no help from nobody, and it certainly was no use of you turning to your color for no help. Wasn't no way they was ever going to do anything. Wasn't anything they could do.

OA: How about the NAACP or the Urban League?

HA: No, they wasn't anything. They didn't have no kind of power, no kind. There wasn't anybody to turn to, nowhere. The NAACP had no kind of power, or no nothing. (An unidentified man interrupts him.)

It was no use of you saying anything because NAACP, none of them had no power. The NAACP had been going for sixty-nine years, but they didn't have any power, they didn't have any power, they been struggling all them many years. They never got no power until



Martin Luther King, he built power there. Before then, they didn't have any power. So it was no use to turn to them for anything to do anything because they just couldn't help. So, during the Depression when you had to segregate when you got on the bus or anything, when people said go to the back of the bus and sit down, you might as well go to the back of the bus and sit down, because they would stop the bus and call the police. And the police would come and put you in jail, so you might as well go head on, because you were not doing nothing but hurting yourself.

**Unknown Man #1:** NAACP. When them boys got killed up there (inaudible), what did the NAACP do for them? NAACP ain't never won a case in their life and what did they do with the money? Well, I'm telling you what I know. I was a grown man when them boys got killed right up there in Alabama. Every one of them boys the NAACP was fighting it, fighting it.

OA: I know what you are talking about, the Scottsboro boys?

Unknown Man #1: That's right, they was fighting it and ain't done a thing in the world.

**Unknown Man #2:** The man told him a while ago the NAACP and you and nobody one else didn't have no power or nothing. Only the man that had power was the White man. If you open your mouth to try help one they would hang you in front them and keep you scared, right here in Tampa they would tie a knot and beat the hell out of you.

Unknown Man #1: The NAACP got a lawyer at that time and paid that lawyer a lot of money and never won a case in his life. Look what they done to that boy in Robles over there. They killed them when the Depression was on. They didn't win that case.

OA: So, do you recall incidents of anybody being hung in Tampa?

HA: Hung, no I wasn't here until heard it said but without knowing, no.

OA: You know we keep hearing about people being hung but we have not gotten any documentation on it.

HA: I remember a fellow that use to run the joint right here on the corner, Henderson. I got the clipping here, I was at the university and they had albums, one year of clippings out to the university, of all great thing that happen here in Tampa. And I can remember this and I was sitting down one night and I happen to pick up one of those albums. I was happen to be looking in it and I see they have one of them clipping, the clipping of that happen in this album.

OA: The clipping of what now?

HA: Of the Ku Klux Klan's taking this boy out to this place here carried him over round Plant City and they beat him.

OA: Do you remember his name?

HA: No, I can't remember. I believe I have the clipping home somewhere, I believe I made a copy of it. I saw this clipping in this paper where they were carrying him out and beat him. And someone called the sheriff and the sheriff, nobody would answer the phone, someone did answer the phone an hour or two later. And, ah, when they got the sheriff, he—claim nobody advised him, nobody told him he never received no call, no nothing, about this here incident that happen. I remember it, and I just happen to see it in this clipping in the paper. They have all the old things, events and all that, at the university.

OA: What university was this?

HA: Tampa U.

OA: University of Tampa?

Unknown Man #1: One thing I want to say, I am going to say until I die, I don't care who it hurt. Anytime you are wrong, you wrong, I don't care who it is white, black or what kind. Right there in Marianna, Florida, 1935 old Flake Chambliss the high sheriff of that county, Flake Chambliss was the sheriff of that county. All right they brought the boy and put him in jail; they claim the boy worked on a farm out there (inaudible). She claim the colored boy, Claude Neal raped her, [she said] "I know him as good as I know my name." All right, Flake Chambliss went out to Greenwood and brought him and put him in Marianna jail, I was staying right down from the jail. They said the mob in behind him so bad, he took him out of there and carried him Panama City for safekeeping. He claim the mob was so bad there and carried him to Brewton, Alabama. Is I'm right or wrong, regardless of what I'm doing I don't care who it is, they got him out Brewton, Alabama and brought him right back to Greenwood, Florida about nine miles from Marianna and killed that poor colored boy Claude Neal right in that cracker yard. What has the NAACP done about that? Nothing. Now, I know what I am talking about. That was in 1935.

OA: Have you heard about anybody being hung down here? What happened, Larry?

Larry (Man #1): I don't know about down here. I didn't believe. Me and my sister was working and the same street and she went to work before I did. She jump up that morning, come back to the house "Mama, Mama, Mama, they got a colored man hanging up there in the street." I said, "Mama, sit down here in the chair," because I thought she was just trying to wake me up. I said, "Wait. Let me take a bath and put on me some clothes." I went up there and let me tell you something, gentlemen. That boy; his legs were cut up near his crack. His arms were cut up to here, eyes were swelled up about your color and hanging there by his neck. I said "Lord have mercy, what kind of world is this, what kind of people in this world?"

*end of interview*