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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
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Melvin Thomas: —1906, March the fifteenth.

Otis Anthony: Nineteen— Okay, did you go to school there?

Melvin Thomas: No, I was (inaudible) when I was a baby (inaudible) what my parents say that was my home. I was born ten miles from (inaudible).

OA: Okay, when did you come to Tampa?

MT: Well, I come to Tampa in thirty-eight [1938] and before I come to Tampa, I come to Valdosta and the last two weeks in December in 1920 and I stay down there from twenty [1920] to thirty-eight [1938]. Well, I married in 1925 and stayed there from twenty-five [1925] to thirty-eight [1938]. And left there in January and I come to Florida and I've been in Florida ever since.

OA: Okay, can you tell me what black folks been doin' as far as work is concerned when you came to Tampa in 1938? What was the major work for men to do in Tampa?

MT: Well, I tell ya, when I come here I couldn't find anything; the onliest work that I know was workin' on the dock. I worked there and I stayed about three years and I come back and I got a job at Woolworth up there—the ten cents store—and I worked up there ten year. From there I went to Grants and worked three years, and then I went to the bus company, right there on Second Avenue and Twenty-First [Street]. I worked twelve years till I got sick. I got sick in sixty-seven [1967], July thirty-first, and I stayed in the hospital from that time 'till the last of October.

I was livin' on Second Ave. I stay there on Second Avenue about two weeks and my

sister got me an apartment here and I been here for ten years on this corner. And I am—well I did work up there at the (inaudible), and I worked up there about three years—six; after we build out there on Cypress [Street] then I give it up. I haven't worked since then.

OA: Okay, when you first started workin' at Woolco—Woolworth, or whatever—how much were you makin'? Per hour.

MT: I'll tell ya what they give me a week, twenty-six dollars a week.

OA: Now what year was that?

MT: (inaudible) I come here in thirty-eight [1938] and I couldn't find nothin' (inaudible). I stayed there about three years.

OA: You're talkin' about 1942 or forty-one [1941], somewhere around there.

MT: Then I started workin' at Woolworth. We wasn't gettin' but twenty-six dollars a week. Started as a (inaudible) and got to be a pantry man.

OA: And you was still makin' twenty-six dollars?

MT: I was makin' twenty-six dollars.

OA: When you became the pantry man?

MT: Yeah (inaudible).

OA: What about at Grants?

MT: Well, when I started at Grants, I was a busboy there. I started off at forty-two dollars.

OA: And the bus company?

MT: Huh?

OA: The bus company?

MT: No, I was bussin' dishes.

OA: No, you said you worked at the bus company.

MT: No, I worked in the (inaudible).

OA: Oh, okay; how much were you making there?

MT: Forty-eight cents an hour.

OA: Okay, can you tell me anything about—were you here during World War II, in Tampa?

MT: I don't know—thirty-eight [1938]—

OA: Yeah, World War II ended around the mid-forties [1940s].

MT: Well I was then because (inaudible) they women (inaudible) health cards. The men, you know, have bad disease. (inaudible) catch 'em, ya know, (inaudible) get shot (inaudible) have a bad case (inaudible) somewhere, I was here along that time (inaudible)

OA: Okay, so you say most of the men were workin' at the docks, do you know how much they was makin'?

MT: (inaudible) before the union (inaudible)

OA: Okay, what was the name of that union? Do you know the name of that union?

MT: CIA, I think.

OA: Okay, can you tell me about the streetcars?

MT: Well, I used to ride the streetcar. Yeah, I rode the streetcar. Streetcar come in, it come across here onto Sixth Avenue and Belmont Heights. The streetcars come across Twenty-Ninth [Street] on Sixth Avenue. Jackson Height (inaudible) turn on Sixth Avenue (inaudible) Seventh and Jackson (inaudible) And I was there when they started the bus, when the buses started running.

OA: How much was it to start, when the buses first started runnin'; how much did you have pay to ride?

MT: (inaudible)

OA: And you had to sit in the back?

MT: Right in the back, right back in the back.

OA: And also in the streetcar?

MT: And the streetcar—unless it was a charter, with a charter (inaudible).

OA: Um—what were the schools like? Did you know anything about the schools during that time?

MT: Yeah. Well, I remember Carver School over here (inaudible). I know there was another school, a wooden school right there on (inaudible), but what was the name of it I don't know. And I remember (inaudible), and then I remember when they built Blake [High School]. (inaudible) Blake (inaudible) My cousin used to have a chase down there and he had to move up on (inaudible).

OA: Okay, can you tell me how things were during World War II here in Tampa?

MT: It was kinda tight to my eyes (inaudible). I was kinda scared (inaudible) more than likely the only jobs was docks and the shipyards. Lot of people I knew worked in the shipyards. When I started working at Woolworth's (inaudible) you know people come there get a job might work there a week, might work there three days and they go on to the shipyard. But I still stayed there.

OA: Okay, you don't know how much the shipyard was payin'?

MT: No, I don't.

OA: Who was over there?

MT: Over at the shipyard?

OA: Um huh.

MT: The governor, as far as I know.

OA: Do you remember anything about police brutality, were the policemen really bad toward blacks during the early forties [1940s] and thirties [1930s]?

MT: Well, I didn't have—I mean, I'll tell you the truth, I ain't had no trouble with no police (inaudible) because when you start puttin' them color (inaudible) because (inaudible) self. I mostly tend to my business; whatever I do I keep it to myself, and I never had no (inaudible).

OA: So did you go out much? Did you have any social life here in Tampa? Where did black folks go durin' that time?

MT: Well, I—

OA: Dances and parties and (inaudible)

MT: —Nebraska [Avenue], I handled West Tampa, West Tampa and on back over to (inaudible) and then when they (inaudible) they had a little old place over there on Tenth Street called the Vaudeville Club. I visited there several times. And Buddy Bar—Buddy used to have a bar there on Central [Avenue] and [Martin Luther] King [Boulevard]. Buddy Bar. I used to go in there .

OA: What about Depression; do you remember the Depression?

MT: Well, it was tight.

OA: You knew about the soup lines?

MT: Oh, I (inaudible).

OA: Do you know where they were? Where did the people have to go to get that stuff?

MT: You mean the (inaudible)?

OA: Yeah.

MT: Oh, I got some of that. I went up here on Willow [Avenue] (inaudible) up there, I got (inaudible) up there.

OA: Have you heard anything about black troops coming to Tampa? In the forties [1940s]?

MT: No, I don't know anything about troops (inaudible).

OA: Y'all remember anything about this? Was there a riot in Tampa durin' the forties [1940s]?

MT: Was there a riot—I don't know anything about that either (inaudible) on Central Avenue.

OA: That was in the sixties [1960s], right? But you don't know anything about the Tampa Riot. It was a riot right here in Tampa in the forties [1940s] called the Tampa Riots.

MT: (inaudible)

OA: Okay, do you remember the Jim Crow days?

MT: (inaudible) The onliest thing I know about Jim Crow was you couldn't eat downtown and you couldn't go in the restrooms. (inaudible) same place as you drink water had colored and white. When I was workin' at Woolworth they had that sign (inaudible) and the colored folks were like—they come from a different part of town, they want to go to the restroom, they either had to go to the bus station or up to the (inaudible). Wouldn't allow 'em to go to the restroom.

OA: Could you use the bathroom down there, since you was workin' at Grants?

MT: No, no.

OA: At Woolworth's?

MT: (inaudible) They had a restroom upstairs for the employees. (inaudible) the colored, they had their restroom upstairs (inaudible) and the whites had theirs. Woolworth's had their restrooms upstairs (inaudible).

OA: Did you use the same one as the blacks—as the whites, then?

MT: The same restroom?

OA: As the white employees.

MT: No, no, we had separate restrooms.

OA: But men and women used the same one?

MT: Women, they had their own private restroom, and white women, they had their own restroom, and colored women had their own restroom. Colored men had their restroom, and white men had their restroom.

OA: Okay. Do you remember the land boom in Tampa? The bust, something known as the bust?

MT: Do you mean when the bus started running?

OA: No, I guess it was something else during the Depression. Or the bust, or something like that.

MT: Only thing I can remember is when the bus started running, and we were paying seventy-five cents for the streetcar. (inaudible) the bus would take 'em to the streetcar ride.

OA: Okay, when y'all got sick. When black folks got sick, back in the thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s], where did they go to get medical help?

MT: I'm gonna tell you the truth. I don't know too much about that cause I never was sick much. When I got sick—I got sick in sixty-seven [1967] and that's the only time I went to the hospital. And I remember the colored hospital down there on the river.

OA: Clara Frye. Do you know the woman that it was named after?

MT: No.

OA: Ms. Clara Frye, you never saw her? What about Madame Fortune?

MT: I never had to go down to no hospital or no doctor till I got sick on the job, and that was in sixty-seven [1967].

OA: Okay, durin' the time when Reverend [A. Leon] Lowry and Mr. [James] Hammond and all those were fighting for integration, were you a part of that, when they were goin' downtown?

MT: No (inaudible).

OA: Is there anything else that you'd just like to tell me? You know, any folklores, or jokes that like—you know, just sit around and just talk about. Any tales that you knew?

MT: Well, I never did socialize (inaudible) but I noticed that if I didn't drink (inaudible). I mostly drink by myself but at the place on Nebraska there called (inaudible). Nebraska and Sixth Avenue—well that's where I headquartered, 'cause that was a nice place in the back there for colored folks, you know; they'd meet back there in the summer, you know, whiskey and wine. I lived right across the street from there, so (inaudible).

Then after I quit drinkin', and everything I got chased from there (inaudible) chased down there on Eleventh [Avenue] and (inaudible) called New Hope (inaudible) stayed down there until the other new (inaudible) come through and then had to sell and moved out there on Thirtieth [Street] and (inaudible) out there in Jackson Heights. I stayed out there—I mean, I was out there until I moved up here. I went about two or three times after I moved up here and it was so far I didn't feel any kin so I just joined Taber, Old Mount Taber.

OA: So you're in the new structure now, right?

MT: Right.

OA: Okay, now. You have anything else you want to tell us?

MT: (inaudible)

OA: When you first came to Tampa, where did you live? What street?

MT: Well, I first lived with my brother, livin' on Lawrence Street. I stayed there (inaudible). I come back and I stayed with my sister (inaudible) until she moved in the projects. When she moved in the projects, I moved up here on (inaudible) until I moved back in with Tom, and I stayed with Tom till I moved here.

OA: Can you tell me somethin' about Tampa in general durin' the fifties [1950s] and sixties [1960s], early sixties [1960s]? How were things in Tampa? How were blacks treated?

MT: Well, I got along all right. Well, see, I must have be in Florida. I never lived here

before and I worked all the time (inaudible). I'd work and go home, unless I'd stop by the bar and get me a drink or somethin'—'till I stopped drinkin', and when I stopped drinkin' I got (inaudible).

OA: Okay, thank you.

end of interview