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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
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Otis R. Anthony: State your whole name.

Ruben Taylor: Ruben Taylor.

OA: Mr. Taylor, where were you born?

RT: I was born in Thomasville, Georgia.

OA: When did you come to Tampa?

RT: I came to Tampa in 1921.

OA: You came to Tampa in 1921.

RT: Mm-hm.

OA: Just start telling. We're ready.

RT: Well, you have to ask the questions, what you want me to talk about.

OA: Okay. You had just started talking there for a minute and I didn't want to interrupt that, but I had to get your name.

RT: Yeah.

OA: And then I was going to ask you the question after you—you know, just got comfortable.

RT: I came to Tampa in 1921 from Thomasville, Georgia.

OA: What led you to come to Tampa?

RT: Looking for better conditions and employment.

OA: Had you heard it was like that, or you just took a chance?

RT: I just heard the conditions were a little better here than it was in Thomasville. I came down here looking for work, and after I got here, I started working in building construction and I learned the trade of plastering in the city.

OA: Where did you learn the trade?

RT: I learned the trade here in Tampa. Joined Local Number 3, Bricklayers and Masons International, the bricklayer and mason union.

OA: Okay.

RT: Through the union—white and Negro wasn't allowed to work partners together on the job. The jobs would have partners; two of you work on the scaffold together, you know, putting on mortar. Well, the rule was a Negro couldn't work—a white and a Negro couldn't work together. It had to be two Negroes or two whites to work together. I was very successful in my trade.

But public transportation, Negroes had to go in the back of the car. They had to stand on the sidewalk till all the white folk get on, and then after all the whites go on, they you could enter the car. But yet you had to pay the same fare they paid. You had to go in the back of the car and stand up if there wasn't no seats available, because the seats—they had a sign there on one side of it that said colored and the other side said white. If three or four seats was empty and where it said whites, you couldn't sit down. You had to go behind that part where it said colored, even if you had to stand. That's the way it was. They had a little thing on there they'd turn and move that little sign (inaudible).

OA: Was blacks working on the streetcars?

RT: Yeah, some blacks was working on the tracks, you know, the streetcar.

OA: What type of positions?

RT: Keeping up the tracks, building them, putting in ties and stuff like that. Wasn't no blacks operating no streetcars. They's keeping the tracks up, you know, putting in the ties and all that, just like they doing now on the railroad tracks.

OA: Was there any other places that blacks couldn't go, where the situation was the same in terms of—?

RT: Well, the only thing I know about concerning blacks, during the time they have the fair. Just like they have the state fairs here now. Well, they have a sign up there on—it was Grand Central Avenue then, but they call it Kennedy Boulevard now; they changed the name from Grand Central to Kennedy Boulevard. They had a sign up there where you go into the fair, "Not Responsible for Negroes and Dogs." They had that big sign up there, so I never did—I lived here five years and I never did go into the fair. Ain't been in it once, since I been back here.

OA: That was as soon as you go into the fair? At the entrance to the fair?

RT: Yeah, that was the entrance where you go into the fair. They had a big sign up there, wrote on there, "Not Responsible for Negroes and Dogs." So I never did go into the fair for the five years I lived here at that time.

OA: Did other blacks go in?

RT: Yeah, some went in because—I guess whatever happened to them, they figured the whites done told him he wasn't responsible if some went in, but I never did go in. And over there where we got the University of Tampa, that was a hotel there then. Wasn't no Negroes allowed to go out there on those grounds over there where the hotel was; wasn't no Negroes allowed to go out there unless they had a white kid with them, in the carriage, in their arms, or leading him along. It had to be people that [were] taking care of white peoples' kids. Wasn't no Negro allowed over there where the University of Tampa is now, where you can go and sit on the benches and everything out there; wasn't no Negro allowed to go out there then.

OA: Okay. Mr. Taylor, could you tell me anything about the land boom?

RT: Yeah, the land boom. I think it started around about nineteen—let's see, when did it start? It started right around 1921, and had a bust about 1926. The land boom was great. People was making plenty of money. You have a lot, you sell it today and tomorrow you get twice more for it, you know; that's the way the story went. Everybody went—most people went broke. Some of them committed themselves—I mean, killed themselves—right there on Franklin Street where they paid forty or fifty thousand dollars for a piece of property. The way they had the thing going, it was supposed—like you buy today and you could almost sell double tomorrow, that's the way they (inaudible) people out of all their money. And some people committed suicide because people had sold out their property and stuff up north, come down here and invest down here in Florida and lost everything they had. Some people just committed suicide; some people killed themselves.

OA: This was black people?

RT: No, these was white. Black people (inaudible).

OA: Did blacks make any money off this?

RT: Yeah, some blacks made money; some blacks made money off of the deal. I know some people now that had property on Rome Avenue and sold it for three or four times more than what they paid for it and they made money. Some wouldn't sell, expecting more and lost and didn't get nothing out of it.

OA: Okay. What other jobs could blacks have during the twenties [1920s]? All different types of jobs, possibilities of jobs that blacks usually could get?

RT: Well, some of the questions I can't answer, because my particular trade was in the building trade. Now, we had Negroes working at the docks and different places, and I wasn't here but five years.

OA: Did you ever go down to the docks?

RT: Yeah, I went down to the docks, just to see the boats come in, but never went down there for employment.

OA: Blacks were allowed down there?

RT: Yeah.

OA: Did you ever hear tell of any blacks being mistreated at the docks or the dockyards?

RT: Talk, yeah, but I couldn't prove it. I wasn't working there, but I heard talk of it. They was mistreated until this colored—what was his name?—[Perry Senior] Harvey. He become the head of the union, you know, of the dock workers.

OA: What about police brutality? Was there any police harassment, brutality, during the twenties [1920s]? Blacks walking the streets and things like that?

RT: Never heard no trouble with the policeman. Course we had one Negro here, called Pearl McAden, he just shot Negroes like you would rabbits. He's a deputy sheriff. He wasn't police; he was a deputy sheriff. He killed several Negroes, just innocent Negroes. I remember a young man came home one evening, and when he got a telegram that some of his relatives had passed. When he got home he was trying to get himself ready and catch a train. So, he was running to the station to catch a train and McAden saw him running and hollered for him to halt, and he didn't hear him and he didn't stop, so he [McAden] shot him and killed him.

He was a very (inaudible) person, Pearl McAden. I stopped by a place one Saturday in Jackson Heights, and I found out this lot that I was going to buy was next to a woman that he was going with, so I didn't buy the place. I said, "If I buy that place, he could kill me and wouldn't be nothing done about it." He ended up—he killed some guy running a liquor store over there, Charlie Moon, I think; Moon somebody. They put him in Raiford [State Prison]. He escaped Raiford and went to New York; the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations] men following him. He ended up in Chicago and the FBI was right behind

him.

So I was wondering, I said, well, I knew him and they had a Negro in Tampa—in Chicago—called Two-Gun Pete. He had killed about as many Negroes—either one of them did nothing but kill Negroes. He had killed about as many Negroes as Pearl McAden. So I said, well, I hope if he comes to Chicago, Two-Gun Pete will try to arrest him because both of them was gunmen (laughs) and I'll see which one will kill the other.

OA: Was the Urban League doing anything for blacks in the twenties [1920s] that you can remember?

RT: Well, I didn't know nothing about that.

OA: What about the [*Florida*] *Sentinel* [*Bulletin*]? Was the *Sentinel* around?

RT: No, no, I didn't know (inaudible) in the twenties [1920s]

OA: NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]?

RT: Well, back in the twenties [1920s], I didn't know nothing about the NAACP, but since then I found out about the NAACP. The NAACP was organized by millionaires' whites. They organized it.

OA: When was this?

RT: They was the head of the NAACP. I don't think they had but three leaders of the NAACP here—it's over fifty-some odd years on the line—they had but three Negroes head of it. Walter White—I think we had just three Negro leaders. The NAACP, I don't have no respect today because it never did nothing for the poor man like me. They only would try to help the wealthy Negroes, the doctor, lawyer, or some famous, you know, wealthy Negro. They never did nothing that I know of for the poor Negro.

Now, take the Scottsboro case in Alabama. The Till case, where the little boy went down in Mississippi from Chicago. He was killed and lynched and throwed in the river. They found him tied to a big cart wheel floating in the water. Well, they never did nothing about that. I never knowed nothing that the NAACP did for poor men. Now you take Dr. Sweet. He's a doctor; he's in Detroit, Michigan. He moved into a white neighborhood, and the whites was harassing him and he killed one of them. Well, the NAACP went to his rescue because he was a wealthy man, but I ain't never knowed nothing the NAACP did for a poor person like myself.

The Scottsboro case, when they had them nine Scottsboro boys and all like that. NAACP come in there, well, they employed Clarence Darrow; he's the criminal lawyer. He guaranteed that they wouldn't be hanged, and they dropped him and they got—what's that lawyer's name? From New York; he's a Jew lawyer. They got him. Well, I ain't never, I don't have nothing.

A lady out there in the hall asked me about two weeks ago, "Give me a dollar." Well, I told her, "I lived in Chicago half my life. I lived in Chicago for thirty-nine years, and they used to have rallies every year. I never did join, but I used to contribute money to them." When she asked me, I said, "No, I wouldn't give you—I'd give you a dollar for yourself, but I wouldn't give you a dime for the NAACP, because I never knowed the NAACP to do nothing for no poor person like me and yourself." The only thing they ever did was for wealthy people, wealthy Negroes.

OA: Okay. Mr. Taylor, did you go to any churches in the twenties [1920s]? Any churches around town, the black churches? What were the black churches? Where did the blacks have go to church in the twenties?

RT: I don't know much about the churches in the twenties [1920s]. I never was such a great church man myself. My wife was a member.

OA: Okay. Do you remember Clara Frye Hospital?

RT: Yeah, I remember the hospital.

OA: Did you ever have to go there?

RT: No, never.

OA: Anybody you know?

RT: No, not during that time.

OA: That was the black hospital in the twenties [1920s], wasn't it?

RT: Well, yes, it was. Now, they tell me the foundation of the Clara Frye Hospital; they tell me Clara Frye was a nurse. She had a little hospital, had a little place somewhere they called a hospital. This hospital over here on the river, they tell me that hospital, it wasn't her hospital, but it was named in honor of Clara Frye. Just like this building is named—what is it, Ms. Bethune?

OA: Yeah.

RT: Mary McLeod Bethune. This hospital wasn't her hospital, but they called it Clara Frye Hospital because it's named in honor of her because she did have a little hospital. That's what they tell me about that.

OA: When did you come back to Tampa?

RT: I came back to Tampa in 1965. Left here in 1926, and came back in 1965.

OA: Any changes that you could see about Tampa since sixty-five [1965]?

RT: One hundred percent!

OA: Positive or negative?

RT: (laughs) A hundred percent changes. Positive.

OA: All positive?

RT: Yeah. A hundred percent change. Since I came back, I seen the conditions here like it is practically anywhere else, Chicago, Detroit, New York, anywhere. I can stay in any hotel I'm able to pay to stay in, and I can eat in any restaurant that I want to eat in. Almost two hundred percent changes to what it was when I left here. Now, there's one thing that I noticed since I've been here. When I left here, they didn't have no Negro policeman in uniform.

OA: In the twenties [1920s]?

RT: They had a lot of Negro detectives when I left here in 1926.

OA: They weren't police?

RT: No, they wasn't police. They didn't dress in civilian clothes like I did, but they didn't have on uniforms.

OA: What could they do?

RT: Huh?

OA: They could arrest you?

RT: Oh, yeah, they could arrest you.

OA: Did they arrest mostly blacks?

RT: That's all they were allowed to arrest. Wasn't allowed to arrest nothing but blacks. You take Pearl McAden, he's a deputy sheriff, he wasn't allowed to arrest no white man. If he saw a white man violating the law, he had to get a white—you know.

OA: Pearl McAden was white?

RT: Hmm?

OA: Pearl McAden was white?

RT: No, he's a Negro.

OA: Oh, he's black?

RT: Yeah. He was a yellow Negro; he wasn't as black as me. He was what we called a yellow Negro. A sheriff. A tag on his collar, just like you got your license, he had a sheriff on his.

OA: And he was going around shooting blacks?

RT: Yeah, he shot up several of them. He didn't shoot no whites. Killed (inaudible).

OA: Okay. So, what other places were the places that blacks had to go for health care? If you got ill, where did you go?

RT: I never was ill, so I couldn't answer that. Me or my family never had to go to the hospital or something like that. Now, we had doctors back then. You know, the doctor would come to your home.

OA: What black doctors was around in the twenties [1920s]?

RT: Well, I didn't have no black doctors when I was here. I had a white doctor, Dr. [Roscoe C.] Hubbard. You could get any—a doctor would visit your home. Doctors don't visit your home now.

OA: They would visit the black people's homes?

RT: Yeah. I had one doctor—my wife was sick—Dr. Roscoe Conklin Hubbard—and she was so sick. She had had a child. I guess I came to Tampa, and I had a midwife, and this midwife give my wife—after the child was born—give my wife a half-teaspoonful of turpentine. That had drawed her bladder up so small that it wouldn't hold a tablespoon of water. So, I got this white doctor, and he worked on my wife for months. He'd come to the house every day for three or four weeks, working on my wife, until she felt able to go to the office. And so when I asked him how much I owed him, he said, "You're not able to pay me what you owe me. I'll get that out of some rich people, 'cause you're not able to pay me."

And so, at that time, my wife was working for the doctor that was the head of the health department; he's from New York. I told him about it, about this, and him and this doctor was working on my wife, Dr. Roscoe Conklin Hubbard—they was schooled, going to the same medical school. And after I told him that, he said, "Well, I'll tell him you're doing okay for your wife."

OA: Okay. Anything else you want to tell me about the times, that you can remember? Social life, housing—what was the housing like where most of the blacks lived?

RT: Well, they all lived—you know. We had what you call segregated neighborhoods. We all had to live bunched up together; we wasn't allowed to live among the white.

Now, you take Ybor City, you take the colored—maybe they might have been Cubans—but the white and colored lived—you may be living on this side of the street, some live on the other. It was Cuban; they call them Cuban people. Just like there's dark Cubans and white Cubans. Well, they all recognize each other, the dark and the white. They stopped the dark Cubans from going to the Cuban club they got over there in Ybor City. The American whites [were] the ones that stopped that.

You take your Cuban people; a Cuban is a Cuban, regardless of what color he is. Just like that guy [who] used to pitch for Chicago White Sox, [Minnie] Miñoso or something, he was colored. Well, they called him Negro. In the United States, if he had dark skin, he was a Negro. No other country in the world, people named after a country. Now, the United States is the only country in the world that have a Negro, a nigger, the United States. All other countries, the people's named after the country.

Now I asked a white fellow during the Depression, I said, "Where did you get our name from?" He said, "Well, you folks was found down in (inaudible), down by the (inaudible) River that flows through Africa, and that's why they called you Negro." I said, "Why is no other people named after a river? Other people is named after countries; why is we named after a river?" He didn't give no answer to that.

So, I asked a poor white fellow—this was an educated white fellow that told me we was named after a river. The poor fellow said, "I'll tell you where you get your name from. That's the name that the slave masters gave your people; that's where you get your name from, the reason you're called Negro."

OA: Anything else you want to tell me?

RT: I wish I could. I wish I could have knowed that I was coming in contact with you, because I know enough about the country and conditions for you to write a book. But just as it is now, I just can't think of everything.

OA: Right, right.

End of interview