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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: A31-00037  
Interviewees: Willie Mickens (WM) and Rufus Robinson (RR)  
Interviewer: Fred Beaton (FB)  
Interview date: September 7, 1978  
Interview location: Unknown  
Transcribed by: Unknown  
Transcription date: Unknown  
Interview changes by: Kimberly Nordon  
Changes date: December 29, 2008  
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson  
Final Edit date: February 4, 2009

**Fred Beaton:** The date is September 7, 1978. It is 11:35, and we're interviewing Mr. Willie Mickens and Mr. Rufus Robinson. Their addresses—

**Rufus Robinson:** Eleven oh five [1105] Union.

FB: Eleven oh five [1105] Union Street. Okay, Mr. Willie, how old are you?

**Willie Mickens:** Eighty.

FB: Okay, Mr. Robinson?

RR: Eighty-six.

FB: Okay.

*pause in recording*

WM: Around 1913 or fourteen [1914], when bars went out. There wasn't no such thing as liquor bars. They close 'em up. They had, what you'd say, a "dry town." Whole states—not only in Florida, but everywhere in the United States was "dry."

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: And back in then we had what you call "speakeasies."

FB: Okay, now what year this was?

WM: Oh, I'd say from fifteen [1915] an up.

FB: Nineteen fifteen on up. Okay.

WM: Fifteen up to thirty-three [1933]. Bars come back in thirty-three [1933].

FB: Umm.

WM: Yeah. We had "speakeasies." Soldiers and sailor clubs and—kind of like bars is now, but they was clubs, you know. They called 'em clubs, anyway. All the liquor and stuff we got here had to order—it come from "across the pond."

FB: Could I get you to talk a little louder? I want to make sure I pick up.

WM: Yeah, I mean, it was come from "across the pond." All the liquor, you know? Because we didn't have none in this country, period.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Bars was closed up.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: And that was back—I guess you've heard of him—in the Al Capone days.

FB: Prohibition?

WM: Hmm?

FB: Was it Prohibition?

WM: Prohibition. Yeah.

FB: Yeah.

WM: He was the big boss, up state, not down here.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Up in Chicago, mostly. His home down here and he was down here (inaudible). I seen him two or three different times. Put him in jail here in Miami.

FB: Al Capone came to Tampa? He ever come to Tampa?

WM: No, I wasn't here in Tampa then. I was in Miami.

FB: You was in Miami. Oh, okay.

WM: I don't know whether he come to Tampa or not, but he got his own home—

FB: Oh, okay.

WM: —between Miami and Miami Beach, on a island of a (inaudible). But me and him was in prison together.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: At least they put—I was in prison in thirty-two [1932]. I was just ready to get out of prison when they brought him in.

FB: Hmm.

WM: And they took him out of Atlanta and sent him to Alcatraz. They was scared to keep him there.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: On account of he was such a big racketeer into Atlanta. Figured them henchmens was come to get him, you know.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: So they carried him out to—took him out of there and carried him to Alcatraz out in California, put him in that prison out there. He got out there and developed TB [tuberculosis] and they brought—let him come back home—or brought him back home there in Miami. And that's where he died at, on his island.

FB: Okay, when did you come to Tampa?

WM: Huh?

FB: When did you come back to Tampa?

WM: Me? I left here and I come— My first trip here in Tampa was in 1919.

FB: Okay.

WM: And I stayed here until 1924.

FB: Okay. What were the blacks doing in nineteen [1919]? And how was Tampa? How was the conditions in Tampa? How was the blacks livin', what jobs were they workin' at, and how was the price of food? Was everything low, high or what?

WM: Low. You could buy a dozen eggs for ten or fifteen cents.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Anyway, I was livin' Palm Avenue, around there. And we helped built all that Palma Ceia and everything out there. There wasn't no buildings in there then.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: There was concrete—I mean, I rolled in concrete for (inaudible). We didn't even have white plasters along in then. Neither blocklayers, mostly. We had nothin' but black folks doin' it. Such as layin' blocks and bricks, because I rolled mud for many—one of 'em in the wheelbarrow. Layin'— And this university<sup>1</sup>, what you all got up there now—

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: That's been three different things since I've been here. It used to be the old Tampa Bay Hotel.

FB: Uh huh.

WM: Change it from the Tampa Bay Hotel to the Tampa Bay Hospital. Now they got it what it is now.

FB: The university.

WM: Well, that was back in the twenties [1920s] when that—

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Because I worked right in there, helped buildin' that old—what you call it, the Curtis Hixon Hall?

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Yeah, I helped build that. Rolled a many a wheelbarrow of mud up there for 'em to build it.

FB: Let me stop you for a minute. Okay, were you in Tampa prior to World War I?

RR: Yeah.

FB: Before World War I? You was here during the period of World War I?

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<sup>1</sup> University of Tampa.

RR: Yeah.

FB: Okay, could you tell us a little bit about what was happening in Tampa: where the soldiers lived, did blacks work on the shipyard, and this type of thing?

RR: I worked for the shipyards.

FB: Oh, okay. Tell us about that. What was it like?

RR: It was all right with me because I had a easy job. I was the water boy. I was the head water boy at the Tampa Shipbuilders. And I worked over there till the union came in. And when the union came in they laid me off an account of three negroes.

FB: Umm hmm.

RR: They wanted to keep the CIO union in here, and I wasn't in favor of it because I had a trade. And I wasn't that afeared and I told all the colored fellows that was workin' with me—I was the head water boy, I said, "Listen here, don't you all sign that paper. Because if you sign that paper, they'll never have another negro workin' as a skilled worker in here." And they all signed it but me and another fellow. I forget his name. But, anyhow, he wouldn't sign it. So I went to work that Monday morning, and they pulled my card—the union pulled it.

FB: Umm hmm.

RR: They pulled my card. And after they pulled my card I went on to the American Legion—see, I belonged to the American Legion at the time. I went to the American Legion and I saw Dr. Pent—I mean, Mr. Pent and Dr. (inaudible). And they say, "We'll straighten that out." So they sent me back to the hall with a letter. And the man—the manager, I can't think of his name now—but, anyhow, he wouldn't accept it, so I left it there. And so they told me to go—You know, I went back to the doctor, and he told me to go back and get it. So I went back there and I picked it up. And he said, "I'll see that they get it." So he mailed that letter to 'em and they had to get it then. And they got that letter, so they had court and they wouldn't allow me in the court.

FB: Who had court?

RR: The union. They wouldn't allow me in there. See?

FB: Umm hmm.

RR: So I went an back and I told 'em about it, Dr. Pent (inaudible). And he say, "Well, Robinson, you needn't worry. You'll get paid for every day you're off." And they paid me for havin'—seven dollars.

FB: Okay. Did your prediction come true, did they—all the blacks with skills were no

longer able to work?

RR: Yeah, they worked. See, they worked because I wouldn't sign it. See? If I'd have signed it, I'd have been right along with them workin'. You understand? But I wouldn't sign, because I had a trade.

FB: Well, tell me this, describe for me now, where were the shipyards that you all were working? Where's that? Where was that in Tampa?

RR: McCloskey Shipyard—out there to Hooker's Point.

FB: Say it again.

RR: McCloskey—

FB: Umm hmm.

RR: —at Hooker's Point.

FB: Okay. Were there any other companies out there that blacks worked for? McCloskey—

RR: Not that far.

FB: Umm hmm. Okay. How many blacks you think worked out there? This was around what year?

RR: Oh, it was thirty-seven [1937] with me.

FB: Okay, this is 1937?

RR: Yep. You mean what year?

FB: Oh, yeah—this was around what year?

RR: That was in 19—I think it was 1920 when I was workin' out there.

FB: Okay. All right. Were you workin' there during World War I? Were you workin' in the shipyards during World War I?

RR: Umm hmm.

FB: Okay, so that was around 1916, World War I was.

RR: No, I— World War I was in 1918 when they drafted me. That was after the war.

FB: Oh, okay. So it started after the war. You started workin' there after the war.

RR: Yeah.

FB: Okay. And about how many blacks were workin' there on the shipyards, do you think?

RR: It was about thirty-six—I don't know how many were workin' there.

FB: Just guess.

WM: Further back, there wasn't no whites workin'. Nothin' but blacks mostly.

FB: Really?

WM: Now, all the bosses was white—

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: —and labor was black.

FB: On the shipyards?

WM: Ship— Every yard. Work— (laughs) We had white bosses.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: But you done the labor. That's the reasons I'm tellin' peoples now why you talkin' about—

FB: All your skilled workers were white.

RR: All your skilled workers were white.

WM: They were white. No black—

RR: That's the reason I tried to—you know, when I had told them not to join, because I know that the negro wouldn't have had a chance at the skilled work. See, I learned how to ream, buff, and dry. And you know that's skilled work.

FB: Umm hmm. So what other kind of work did the negroes get?

RR: Labor. That's all they did. Labor out there.

FB: When you say labor what is that?

RR: Hard work.

FB: Okay. When you say "labor," that includes what, doin' what?

RR: Shovelin'. Doin' all the hard work.

FB: Uh huh.

RR: That's what it—

FB: Can you think anything else but shovelin'?

RR: There's shovelin', totin' that lumber, steel or whatever you had to carry around there to 'em.

FB: Umm hmm. I see. I see. So tell me this— Tell me a little bit about the twenties [1920s] in Tampa.

RR: Hmm?

FB: About the twenties [1920s]. What was the twenties [1920s] like—through the 1920s in Tampa, what was that like? We understand there was a land boom and supposedly a lot of money goin' around. Is that true?

RR: Yeah, there was money all right. There was money. Plenty of money.

FB: For who, though?

RR: Hmm?

FB: For who? Did blacks have a lot of money too?

RR: No. Unless they caught the *bolita* [gambling game].

FB: Well, can you describe— Can you tell us something about the twenties [1920s]?

FB: Tell us something about the twenties [1920s] that you can remember?

RR: In the twenties [1920s]?

FB: Umm hmm.

RR: Yeah. I was workin' in the twenties [1920s]—and gamblin'. I'll tell you what I was doin', I was workin' and gamblin'. Yeah, I handled pretty good money. And like I do today. (laughs)

FB: Okay, but what were—what was it like? How did the people live? Did they go out? Did they dance? What were they doin'—

RR: Dance.

FB: —for the twenties [1920s]? Did they have a good time? Or were you poor?

RR: Oh, yeah, we had a good time. We all had a good time. Our privilege wasn't taken from us in that way, of havin' a good time.

FB: Umm hmm. What kind of places we went to—they went out to?

RR: Movies.

FB: Movies.

RR: Dances. Picnics.

FB: Where they went to dance?

RR: To the different halls.

FB: Okay, like when you say "different halls," like what?

RR: It was Sunlight Hall, the Odd Fellows Hall and then the parks—we could go to the parks and dance.

FB: Uh huh, I see.

RR: But I didn't never learn how to dance. I wasn't in that racket of dancin', because I thought my shoes were too good to wear out dancin'. I walked 'em out.

FB: How did the white folks treat us during the twenties [1920s]? How did police treat us? That's what I want to know. How'd they treat us?

RR: Yeah, well, I didn't have no trouble with 'em only for fightin'.

FB: Okay, not you, but how did they treat most blacks?

RR: I don't know because I wasn't—you know, I wasn't in contact with that rough crew.

FB: Okay. Excuse me, Mr. Willie, how did the police treat the blacks?

WM: They treat you like the dog out there in the street.

FB: Tell us all about like—corner police—

WM: He would find a white fellow and said you was guilty of somethin', you was guilty. Because they had nobody to go for you, unlessin' you had good ol' white man on your side. Otherwise the whole town wasn't nothin' but Ku Klux Klan. I lived here in the twenties [1920s].

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: I helped built all of that Palma Ceia and all back out there where it is in the twenties [1920s]. That's when it was built up.

FB: What kind of work you was doin'?

WM: I was rollin' a wheelbarrow. Rollin' rocks and mud. Makin' mud for plasterin' these hou—inside here and layin' blocks here. There wasn't nothin' out in Palma Ceia but trees. A house would be about every two or three blocks apart, until we started to buildin' up. And as you boys said—what was a black— See, the "boom" come on in Florida in twenty [1920]-twenty-three [1923]. Lasted from twenty-three [1923], twenty-four [1924], twenty-five [1925], twenty-six [1926], twenty-seven [1927], twenty-eight [1928], when ole Herbert Hoover got to be president of the United States, that's when we had a "bust." A "boom" and a "bust," you know what I mean?

FB: No. Explain it to me.

WM: Huh?

FB: Explain what you mean by the "boom" and the "bust."

WM: We had plenty money during the boom.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Real estate companies down here sellin' all kind of real estate, and he was makin' \$2.50, \$3.00 an hour back then.

FB: Umm.

WM: Because the boom was on. Then everything fell—bam!

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Even which all the banks closed. You couldn't even get a nickel out of the banks. You couldn't get nothin'—well, they closed up.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Cried "broke." You know what I mean?

FB: Can you remember any blacks who had money in the banks that went to the banks?

WM: I had some in there.

FB: What was it like? Explain it.

WM: (laughs)

FB: Yeah, tell me what it was like when you went to the bank to get your money after the bust.

WM: Well, you went to the window and draw it just like you did now.

FB: Did they give you your money, or they told you had to come back? Did they close down or what?

WM: No. You got your money then.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Only we had a different department for negroes, where you went.

FB: What you mean?

WM: Black door here, white door there.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: It was segregated all the way around.

FB: What did you think about segregation during that time?

WM: I was raised up with it. I was born and raised in it, I couldn't think nothin' about it. I thought it was right.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Really, couldn't think no other way.

FB: Yeah.

WM: Borned up and raised with it. Didn't know no better until here lately, you know what I mean? I was raised up with them crackers callin' me "nigger" and ready to kick my behind, and what the hell, all I had to do is play "Uncle Tom" and "yes, sir, boy."

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Otherwise you got beat—whipped. And Mr. Robinson can tell you, they used to have Ku Klux Klan just come to your house and take you out during the night and carry you out in the woods and whup you and bring you back.

FB: In the 1920s?

WM: Yeah!

FB: In Tampa?

WM: Yeah! Tampa, Miami, Jacksonville, all over Florida.

FB: Did they ever march the streets?

WM: Huh?

FB: Did the Klan ever march the streets in their white robes in Tampa?

WM: (laughs) Up until the forties [1940s], when they quit marchin' in them white robes and scooped up hats.

FB: Can you remember 'em ever marchin' in Tampa, the Klan? No kiddin'?

RR: I came to Tampa in 1916.

FB: Uh huh.

RR: I was raised up here. Of course, I didn't have no trouble—only with young boys, you know. I didn't have no trouble with no white people.

FB: But tell us about the Klan, did they march in Tampa, you said?

WM: Yeah, they marched.

FB: Where?

WM: On Franklin Street. Central [Avenue]. Tampa Street.

FB: They marched down Central?

WM: Yeah, them Ku Klux—

FB: How did the blacks react to this?

WM: You better get out the way when you see 'em comin'.

FB: Umm hmm. Yeah, that's right.

WM: Get out the way.

FB: And this is around what time they was marchin' through Tampa? Can you remember some years they would march?

RR: No, I don't remember nothin' of that.

FB: Can you remember any the years, Mr. Willie, they would march in Tampa?

WM: I wasn't here. I was in Miami from twenty-six [1926] up until—

FB: But can you remember any time during the twenties [1920s], them marchin' in Tampa?

WM: Who, me?

FB: Yeah.

WM: Yeah!

FB: Tell us about it, where they march?

WM: Well, they come from— See I was raised up in Plant City, about twenty miles from here. That's when the clubs rooms wide open, *bolita* wide open—everything was wide open, gambling and everything.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: The Ku Klux Klan was runnin'—boss of it was (inaudible). You know Rob Holme. You don't know him, but you know him. Run him out of Plant City, the Ku Klux Klan was there. That was in 1924.

FB: Tell me about Plant City in 1924; what was Plant City like?

WM: Nothin' but a regular joint. Peoples come from Miami, Jacksonville, from here, Atlanta, everywhere come there. They had what you called "Tuesday Night Ball."

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Stay open all night long gamblin'. Nothin' but gamblin' goin' on. Well, the people, what little work they had 'round there. Biggest work there was was pickin' oranges and

strawberries. There wasn't no other work around Plant City.

FB: Was Plant City—

WM: A big strawberry center now.

FB: Was Plant City mostly a black town or white town or mixed?

WM: Ah, it was mixed up.

FB: It was mixed up. Okay. But segregated.

WM: But you was segregated and you had to use—had some (inaudible).

FB: Tell me about the houses and living conditions. What kind of houses we lived in? Did we have toilets?

WM: No.

FB: Did we have lights?

WM: No. One or two had lights. Them was able to get some back in the twenties [1920s]. But none had no toilet in the house; all that was out in the yard back then.

FB: What do you call them toilets that were out in the yard?

WM: Outhouse.

FB: Outhouses.

WM: (laughs) Yeah.

FB: Is that right?

WM: Yeah. Uh huh.

FB: Tell me more about that. No water? Was the water inside?

WM: We used to have pumps. No. No water inside. You had a faucet outside like that. You had a spigot. Four or five different people—families would go there and draw water out of there and bring it in.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: They use to have them old big water buckets like that, you know. Fill your water bucket up with water and carry it in the house, use it, you know.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Sinks like that—we never had no bath or nothin' like that.

FB: Most of the blacks live in wood or brick houses?

WM: Wood houses. Not only the blacks; the whites had wood houses back in then. Wasn't many. Just startin' to buildin' the stone buildings in the twenties [1920s], late—about the middle of the twenties [1920s]. Wasn't nothin' in Palma Ceia and all them cities and places back out there. What few was out there wasn't nothin' but wood houses.

FB: Okay. Okay, besides the shipyards, what other kind of work did black people do? Did we work on the railroads?

WM: Yeah.

FB: Tell me about that. Do you know anybody worked on that?

WM: I don't know nothin' about the railroads. I didn't work on 'em.

FB: But we did work on 'em? Can you— Do you know anything about the railroads?

RR: We always had the union.

*pause in recording*

RR: We had colored masons, painters—my uncle was a painter—and carpenters. All skilled workers. We had masons, but it was hard to get a job, you know. And when they got a job, they mostly be workin' for some rich person.

FB: Well, where were most of the skilled blacks located, their offices and stuff like that?

RR: Where they had their offices?

FB: Right.

RR: They didn't have no office.

FB: Oh, they didn't have no office or anything? Okay, was there any organizations to stand up for blacks?

RR: No. Only the AAFL [Afro-American Federation of Labor]. There's never been one standin' up for blacks in Tampa until the longshoremen group.

FB: Until the longshoremen.

RR: Yeah. And I forget what year they came.

FB: Was the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] in Tampa then?

RR: What you say?

FB: NAACP.

RR: Yeah.

FB: Did they—

RR: No. No. The AAFI union. That's when I got fired from the shipyard, on account of they wanted to—what's the name of that—?

FB: AFL-CIO?

RR: Wanted to come in, see, in Tampa and they wouldn't let 'em come in. See?

FB: Umm hmm.

RR: They had a vote an it. You know, and they didn't—decided not to take and sign their paper. That's to keep the CIO out. And they went on and signed it and they fired me—  
(laughs)

FB: Yeah.

RR: —because I wasn't—you know, I wasn't with 'em, with the union.

FB: Okay. Were there any organizations like the Tampa Urban League? Was the Urban League here?

RR: They came on later.

FB: Came on later. Okay. And the NAACP wasn't—

RR: Yeah, they came on later.

FB: They came on later. So prior to that time, there was no organization that stood up for black people.

RR: No. No.

FB: Okay. Did the black people try to organize any other organization or any other

protest against the whites?

RR: No. Not that I know of.

FB: But did we have some mutual benefit societies to help us when we got sick, took care of us like the pallbearers or the—

RR: No, not that I know of. Not that I know of.

FB: Where did we get insurance from?

RR: Afro. That's the oldest insurance in Tampa.

FB: What is?

RR: Afro.

FB: Afro-American Insurance.

RR: Central.

FB: And Central. Y'all remember how much you paid for policies?

RR: No I don't.

FB: What you think you might pay for an insurance policy during that time?

RR: You could get insurance for ten or fifteen cents. Street insurance.

FB: That's ten or fifteen cent, what, a month?

RR: No. A week.

FB: A week.

RR: Umm hmm.

FB: I see. I see. Okay. Do you remember about any conditions on Central involving the, say, blacks and the police department?

RR: I didn't never hang around (inaudible).

FB: Tell us about the Depression.

RR: Well, I'll tell you the truth, it didn't hurt me, but there was many people it did hurt.

FB: How did it hurt?

RR: Huh?

FB: How did it hurt?

RR: Didn't have nothin' to eat. Got to get in line to go get food.

FB: Where you had to get in line at?

RR: Different places, in Ybor City and also town.

FB: And where in Ybor City? Can you remember where?

RR: No. I didn't— Here but, see I wasn't in that—

FB: Uh huh.

RR: —because I had a pretty good job.

FB: But you remember any other places?

RR: Another thing. There was two white fellows, Adam Katz and Falson, they partly raised me. One was a Jew and the other one was Italian. He partly raised me and I didn't have to go through that.

FB: Umm hmm. I see. But some people starved during the Depression.

RR: I don't know about starved, but I know they was hungry, plenty of 'em was.

FB: How was the housing conditions of that time?

RR: Bad. Of course, I had a pretty nice house where I was stayin'. My mother had a place, nice enough.

FB: What did it— Did they ever get any work during the Depression?

RR: Who?

FB: Could you get any kind of work during the Depression?

RR: Oh, you could get laborin' work. And then if you had a trade you could work your trade and— If you had a trade you could work it. But the white fellows always had the preference, first preference.

FB: What were you paid during 1920 on your job? You say you— When you was

workin' on the shipyard?

RR: A dollar and eighty cent an hour.

FB: And you changed jobs, right? Didn't you change jobs? You changed jobs, right, after that? Where'd you work after you stopped workin' for the shipyards?

RR: I worked at a hotel.

FB: How much you made there?

RR: Oh (inaudible) dollars. In the hotel you'd get a—but I would paid a—week was my tips. Oh, our tips was sometimes I'd get \$35 or \$40 in one day.

FB: Worth of tips. What hotel you was workin' to?

RR: I worked at the Floridian [Hotel], Hillsborough [Hotel].

FB: Florida and Hillsborough?

RR: And then I went to Orlando and worked a hotel in Orlando.

FB: What were you doin' in the hotels?

RR: Busboy.

FB: Busboy. Were there many blacks in that profession during that time?

RR: Hmm?

FB: Were there many blacks—they workin' hotels during the twenties [1920s]], or during that time when you was there?

RR: Many workin' on skilled work?

FB: Hotels.

RR: Oh, yeah. Mostly they had then, they were colored. They didn't have no white bellhops or nothin' like that then. And maids. Those were all colored.

FB: Okay, what about— Can you remember— Can you think of anything else that was happenin' during the thirties [1930s] when you were in Tampa that you can tell us about, during the 1930s, besides the Depression?

RR: Well, see, I always have got along with whites.

FB: Do you remember when the union came for the longshoremen?

RR: No, I don't know what year it was, but I know when they—I was workin' on the waterfront when the union came in.

FB: Okay. But who was responsible for bringin' the union to Tampa?

RR: Georgie Boy. I don't know his right name, but you know George what runs the drugstore, his daddy.

FB: Umm hmm.

RR: We called him Georgie Boy.

FB: Did y'all—

RR: His name is Perry.<sup>2</sup> Perry—

FB: Did a lot of people admire him?

RR: Hmm.

FB: Black people liked him?

RR: Yeah, they had to like him.

FB: Why?

RR: Because he did a big favor for Tampa. Because he put that union through. And anything that he carried up there that come from president, they considered it. Yeah, he did a whole lot for Tampa.

FB: He did, huh?

RR: Yes, sir. And not only Tampa, the whole United States. In the waterfront—

FB: He was a leader all over.

RR: I don't know if he was a leader all over, but I know whatever he said went.

FB: People stuck behind him huh?

RR: Umm hmm.

FB: I see.

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<sup>2</sup> Perry Harvey, Senior.

*Side 1 ends; side 2 ends.*

FB: —waterfront and things like that. Okay, start in about the 1920s when you came to Tampa.

WM: I come to Tampa in 1919.

FB: Okay, well, start there.

WM: And so far as the work doin' in that particular time, I was doin' common laborer work, such as rollin' bricks and makin' mud.

FB: How much money was you makin' then?

WM: Oh, yeah.

FB: How much money were you making?

WM: Ten dollar and fifty cent a week.

FB: That's about how much an hour?

WM: That'd run you about a dollar and two or three cents—somethin'—

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Ten dollars and fifty cents, workin' five days and a half.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: See, our work days along in then was six days a week. Ten hours per day. We didn't have no eight hours. It was ten hours.

FB: Was the majority of blacks—?

WM: All of 'em. You know, now—common labor.

FB: Umm hmm. I see.

WM: At the particular I was helping—working out there at Palma Ceia.

FB: Okay, you told us about that. Now, tell me this. You told us about the houses. Where did most of us live in Tampa during that time, what areas? The same areas we live in now?

WM: Palm Avenue. Wasn't no blacks over here, though.

FB: Uh huh.

WM: Nothin' but Italians—what few it was, wasn't too many of them.

FB: Where?

WM: Most the Italians lived in West Tampa.

FB: Most Italians lived in West Tampa. Uh huh. And where did the blacks live, mostly?

WM: Blacks was Ybor City and all on Central Avenue, and down in there and back out towards Belmont Heights, you know.

FB: Umm hmm. I see. Okay. Where did most blacks go to have fun at?

WM: On Central Avenue.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Central Avenue was the popular street; it was in Tampa back in there and that's where all the businessmen had their business at and everything.

FB: This is during the days of Charlie Moon? Was Charlie Moon on Central?

WM: Yeah, he had a (inaudible) had a bar on Central Avenue.

FB: Umm hmm. What did blacks think of Charlie Moon? Did they like him, or didn't like him, or he was just a business?

WM: Most of 'em liked him all right.

FB: Umm hmm. We've heard stories about him. Did he actually help poor people sometimes?

WM: Not that I know of.

FB: (laughs)

WM: He might of.

FB: Uh huh. (laughs)

WM: But you see, Central Avenue along in then wasn't no wider than just over here at that wall, was it? It wasn't no wider than from that wall to that wall. Just two cars could

hardly pass there.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: While we had our theaters, old Bijou Theater. Charlie Moon's was on the corner of Scott [Street]. That hotel—they done tore it down now—what they used to call it, that hotel that they tore down on Central? What they call it 'fore they tore it down?

FB: Pyramid?

WM: Pyramid. That used to be old Central over there. They used to have gamblin' underneath there.

FB: Uh huh. Do you remember some of the bands used to come through Tampa?

WM: No, I can't think. There wasn't too many bands. You know back in the early '20s we had them guitar players. They'd come and get out there and— In fact, we had more jukes than anything else. You know what a juke is?

FB: Mmm mmm.

WM: Mmm mmmm. (laughs)

FB: Tell me that.

WM: That's a man got a piano and a place and he's playin' the piano and the other one got some tops on a board that he—kind of beatin' it, kinda like a tambourine or something like.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: That's a juke. Were no bands. Oh, they might have one of them old harps, what they call it, mouth organ, playin'.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: That's what (inaudible).

FB: Let me ask you this, you ever heard of Marcus Garvey?

WM: Sure, I was in the prison with him.

FB: Tell me about Marcus Garvey and don't stop talkin'. Tell me everything you can tell me about Marcus Garvey.

WM: There ain't much I can tell you about Marcus Garvey.

*pause in recording*

WM: —Garvey, he had a boat. He called it the Black Star<sup>3</sup>—

FB: Okay.

WM: —travelin' from Africa to the United States. Marcus Garvey had his own little army here. It was about forty joined his army. You know, children, eleven or twelve, had trainin' 'em out here, soldiers just like (inaudible) training.

FB: Did he have any of 'em train in Tampa?

WM: I can't say here.

FB: Okay, where did you know him from?

WM: I know him from Plant City. No, I knew him from after I went to prison in Atlanta. They sent me from here—Atlanta prison, you know.

FB: And that's where you learned about Marcus Garvey?

WM: While I was there, they turn—put him into prison there. And deported him, you know?

FB: Around—this was around what time?

WM: The thirties [1930s].

FB: Early thirties [1930s] or late thirties [1930s]?

WM: Thirty-one [1931].

FB: Thirty-one [1931]? Okay, go ahead, finish tellin' me about Marcus Garvey. Did you like Marcus Garvey?

WM: Yeah, he was a real wise— I think he was a wise man.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Or he was talkin' about carryin'—takin' all the negroes—but, you know, he said they—he's so bad back in there, and he talked about takin' 'em out from here and carryin' 'em back to Africa.

FB: How did people feel about that?

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<sup>3</sup> Black Star Line, was the name of the shipping line, not a particular ship.

WM: Now, you know, I was awful young. Some of 'em say, "Yeah, I'd like to go," and some, "No, I ain't goin' nowhere."

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: But after he got so strong— That's what they put him in jail about, talkin' about deportin' peoples out of this country.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: And then they put him in the jail and deported him. Got rid of him. They didn't want him to stay here, because he was growing too strong with deportation, where they want to deport peoples out of this country to Africa. Carry all the black people back to Africa.

FB: Okay, when you were in prison did you see him?

WM: Sure, I seen him.

FB: You saw him?

WM: Yes.

FB: How would you—How could you see him? He was in the yard with you, or you would—?

WM: Yeah, all of us, we'd go out—big old yard there. We'd go out in that yard everyday, what you call it, for recreation.

FB: And this is what, the Atlanta—? This is in Atlanta?

WM: Atlanta prison. Federal penitentiary in Atlanta<sup>4</sup>.

FB: Umm hmm. I see. Describe him.

WM: Hmm?

FB: Describe him.

WM: Marcus Garvey?

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: About (inaudible) black folks.

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<sup>4</sup> Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: (inaudible)

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: —about the same (inaudible) taller.

FB: You ever heard him talk in prison to the prisoners?

WM: Huh?

FB: Did he ever talk to the prisoners in prison?

WM: Oh, you could talk to one another. But they didn't allow but three people to stand up together.

FB: Oh, I see.

WM: Just like we three talkin' here. It gets any more than that, why they got police dogs.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: They didn't allow over three people to stand up and talk, because they didn't know whether he makin' a plot or what. I don't know.

FB: Uh huh.

WM: But they didn't let but three people—

FB: Did you see Marcus Garvey as your leader during that time?

WM: Well, I'll tell you they didn't know too much about him until Atlanta. I was a young man myself, and I didn't know too much about him.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Marcus. All I know is what I read about him. I could read real good before I got this cataract.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: After he did time in prison—he didn't stay there but about three weeks before they deported him, you know. Got him away from there.

FB: Tell me a little bit more. Tell me about the prison. What was prison conditions like?

WM: I'd say they was just like everything else.

FB: I mean, but how did they treat you—the prisoners?

WM: I can't talk of the state prisons, 'cause I know they was mean and nasty as the devil in them state prisons.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: But in federal prison you would see—not joined together—segregated, you know. I eat over here and you eat over there. I slept in here and you sleep over there.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: So far as the treatment, we all was treated about the same, white and black.

FB: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about the Depression. What can you tell us about the Depression?

WM: I was in it (inaudible) about it.

FB: All right.

WM: We had about four years of Depression. We had a real Depression 'til [Franklin D.] Roosevelt took over office. We was under Herbert Hoover (inaudible).

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Herbert Hoover was president during the Depression. He brought it on and it was on. After then—I was in prison in thirty-one [1931]. I came out of prison in thirty [1930]—thirty-one [1931]. I come out in February. (inaudible) And there wasn't no work here. No kind of work. Everybody was ridin', white, blacks and all was ridin' freight trains huntin' for work. Goin' from one town to the another. That's what started me to hoboin'—runnin' around tryin' to find work. That was back in thirty-two [1932]. I come back here in thirty-two [1932].

FB: Uh huh.

WM: And when Roosevelt took office he started to puttin' people back to work.

FB: How'd he do that?

WM: Huh?

FB: How'd he do that?

WM: Send you out in the woods and we'd chop wild cotton or any kind of thing.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Of course, me myself, I didn't do the work because I done got to be a bootlegger and I was sellin' moonshine for fifteen cent a half pint.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: I had me a Cadillac automobile during the thirties [1930s].

FB: No kiddin'.

WM: Early thirty-three [1933]. Yeah. Twenty-nine [1929] model, you know.

FB: Where did blacks line up to go eat at during the Depression?

WM: Oh, they had four or five, what you might call—

FB: What'd they call 'em?

WM: —soup lines.

FB: Soup lines.

WM: Umm hmm.

FB: Where did they line up at? Where'd they go?

WM: Now, here in Tampa I couldn't say because I wasn't here in Tampa—

FB: Okay.

WM: —when the soup line was going on. But in Miami, our hall down there where they line up to come in there, where they got (inaudible) union halls, church houses, where they served that soup.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Give you a soup and some white bread. All the single people. Now the married folks have wife and little children or somethin' like that, they'd give 'em a little piece of bacon and flour for their home, you know.

FB: I know.

WM: Room rent. Well, I don't say room rent. Three room house like which I got here one-room house—one bedroom, dining room, kitchen. People didn't know nothin' about no dining room. Cooked and eat all in the same place.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Well, everything was cheap then. You got a hat for—your shave for a quarter.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: (inaudible) and a shave, twenty-five cents.

FB: Uh huh.

WM: You know. But you know things had to be cheap. And you could go to the store— We used to have some baskets about that long with a handle in middle of it so you could carry it with you. You could go to a grocery store with that basket and spend a dollar and a half, or two dollars and have that basket full of food. Rice, flour, sugar, lard, grits, everything for about a dollar and a half or two dollars. Eggs was ten and fifteen cents a dozen. Bacon was seven and eight cents a pound.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: You had no (inaudible). Like, you go to the market now and get neck bone. They've got neck bone and pig's heels—pig's foot. They never had nothin' like in that markets.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: When they killed a cow or a hog or somethin', if you go out to the butcher's pen and they'd give you all of that stuff. Tripe, chitterlins and all that stuff, they'd give it to you. You never had nothin' like that in no store.

FB: Tell me about the forties [1940s].

WM: Hmm?

FB: Were you in Tampa during the forties [1940s]? Before you get to that—

WM: No.

FB: How about the police department, like Pearl McAden, and all that; tell us about him and bring it on up to the forties [1940s].

WM: Well, I wasn't in Tampa when Pearl McAden (inaudible). I was in Plant City when—that was right after. I gambled with him on many a days.

FB: Okay, well, tell us something about that before get into the forties [1940s].

WM: Hmm?

FB: Tell us something about him and how he treated blacks and the black policemen and all this.

WM: Ol' Pearl was nasty. From what I hear—I don't know about—I can't speak for everybody. I can only speak for (inaudible). He was a nasty man. You know towards blacks—the whites was kickin' us around and he'd go right along with 'em. He didn't care what he did to you. (inaudible) They had him for—policeman—there wasn't no policemen; it was black pimps, you know. Now, he could arrest you; I didn't say that he couldn't arrest you. But when it came for your trial he couldn't even go in the courthouse to tell against you.

FB: Hmm.

WM: He had to turn you over to that white officer and the white officer, they would give him all the information he wanted about you, and then the white officer go in the courthouse and say against you, you know.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Well, along in there now—they had a policeman here they called—they called him policemen. No uniforms, period. You ever seen them overalls what come over your—got a little strap that come over your shoulder and the bib come in under your chin?

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Well, that's what he wore all the time. Not only them—most of the people wore overalls (inaudible). Now, them black polices they was callin' their-self, they wasn't even allowed to have a pistol where it could be seen; they had to wear it down in here, under that bib. But he could arrest you—he couldn't arrest no whites, he could arrest me and you. He ain't gonna arrest that white man.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: That happen. There was a lady that eventually got killed. As late as the forties [1940s] I say—or he ain't dead yet as I know of. They sent him to prison from here in the forties [1940s].

Unknown Voice: Who?

WM: Pearl McAden. He killed five or six people. Now the taxpayers— This man you just asked me about, that's old. And Charlie Moon, the one that used to run that place on

Central Avenue, [he] killed Charlie Moon. That's why they sent him to prison.

FB: Okay, tell us about the forties [1940s]—gettin' into the forties [1940s]?

WM: I wasn't here in the forties [1940s].

FB: You wasn't here in the forties [1940s].

WM: I come here in the fifties [1950s]—that's my last trip comin' here. Been here ever since then.

FB: Okay.

WM: I left Miami when (inaudible).

FB: Well, tell us about what Tampa was like when you came here in fifty-five [1955].

WM: Fifty-five [1955]?

FB: Uh huh.

WM: Well, still (inaudible). I was workin' on the docks. I'd been a longshoreman in Miami and I come down here on the docks, and after the war started in forty [1940] you couldn't buy no sugar to make no whiskey I went to work. I joined the longshoremen in 1942 in Miami, and I come to Tampa. I transferred and I went to work for 'em here in Tampa until I retired. In 1965, I retired.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: But along in then I was livin' right there what time I stayed here in Tampa on Palm Avenue.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: I done (inaudible) jobs. Worked down in the longshoreman there. Lived in Ybor City before (inaudible), that's before they built all that project out (inaudible). Used to live on Marilyn Avenue runnin' from Seventh Avenue down to the stockade. You wasn't there durin' the old stockade. When they had the old stockade down there—

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: On Marilyn?

FB: Yeah.

WM: I livin' about three blocks from there about—but I still work in the longshoreman

when I come back. Just where I went to workin'—I never joined the union, joined it in Miami. After I come here I got my transfer.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Worked for the long—

FB: I see.

WM: And I worked for 'em up until '65 when I retired. Well, so far as the Ku Klux Klan, all them, I wasn't here, but I can tell you about 'em in Miami. They was in Miami plenty.

FB: Hmm.

WM: And you know when the Ku Klux Klan goes out, that's the reason they wore that hood. We didn't know who the hell they was. And the judges, polices, lawyers and every other things. That's the reason black man had such a hard—that white man say, yeah, that nigger done so and so you went to prison. This lily white man say you done something to a white woman and you're gone. Your money couldn't keep you out of there.

FB: But how was the Ku Klux Klan in Plant City?

WM: Huh?

FB: Ku Klux Klan in Plant City, how was that during this time?

WM: Same like any (inaudible). Only they was a little meaner in Plant City 'cause it was a little ol' small town, you know.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Plant City, when I left there. I left Plant City in twenty-seven [1927]. I ain't been back there yet.

FB: You know how mean they were.

WM: Yeah. I left there. Well, I left there in twenty-six [1926] and went to Miami. I come back in May to visit—my mother was stayin' there, and stayed with her about for a year. In twenty-seven [1927 ] I went back. Been there ever since. I went to prison for a crime I committed (inaudible) in Miami.

*pause in recording*

FB: Yeah, but I just want you to tell us anything else from fifty-five [1955], from the time you came here, since you've been here since fifty-five [1955]—anything you want to tell us about that you can think of?

WM: I can't think too much. I come back in fifty-five [1955], I went on the docks and went to work, the longshoremen. That's the thing— I was gamblin'—a young man runnin' around— nothin' happened (inaudible).

FB: Okay. That's what I thought. Okay. That's good enough.

WM: I used to hang around that (inaudible) hangin' around—I don't know if you know where it's at, town house on the Red Top.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: It been there for years. That Red Top, I remember when the Red Top—

*pause in recording*

WM: Huh?

FB: Around what year was this?

WM: Oh that was in eighteen [1918] and nineteen [1919].

FB: Say that again.

WM: The Red Top Bar down there.

FB: Say it again. They had what now?

WM: They didn't have no tables in there or nothin', just a bar lined up there. You stood to the bar. They didn't even have no bottled beer, canned or nothin'. They had mugs like that. And wanted some beer charged them mugs where—people used to have little tin buckets about that high and about the wide, what they carry a lunch to work in. Now, you could take that and carry it to the bar, get a "pull" for ten cents. About a half a gallon.

FB: They had sawdust on the floor.

WM: Huh?

FB: They had sawdust on the floor.

WM: Oh, yeah, sawdust on the floor. No chairs. No seats. No—

FB: Did they dance? Did they dance in there?

WM: Go on dance.

FB: Huh?

WM: Sawdust on the floor (inaudible).

FB: Okay.

WM: Know how you clean the floor? In the morning when you (inaudible) yourself cleanin' up, get you a rake and rake all the trash and stuff off in that sawdust if you don't want to take the sawdust up, and put fresh on there.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: No, about no chairs. There wasn't no bars. Town was dry, but there was bootleggin', what they might call the speakeasy, you know, which was in the same buildin'.

FB: What did you say the speakeasy was now?

WM: Huh?

FB: What was a speakeasy?

WM: Well, the bar was a speakeasy now.

FB: That's what you called a speakeasy, a bar?

WM: That used to be the speakeasy, what you callin' a bar now. That was when Al Capone controlled mostly all the liquor comin' here. They didn't have none in the whole Tampa was moonshine. All the red whiskey and scotch was shipped in here, you know.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: I've unloaded many a boats right there in Palm Beach, Florida, scotch whiskey. You ever seen a—you're old enough to see it.

FB: Uh huh.

WM: A scotch whiskey bottle, it's kinda green one with a hole up under the bottom of it.

FB: Umm hmm.

WM: Well, that's the way they used to ship it here. Put it in a cornshuck, you know, and put it on a towsack and bring it over here on boats that way.

FB: Umm hmm.

FB: Okay, that's good, Mr. Willie.

*end of interview*