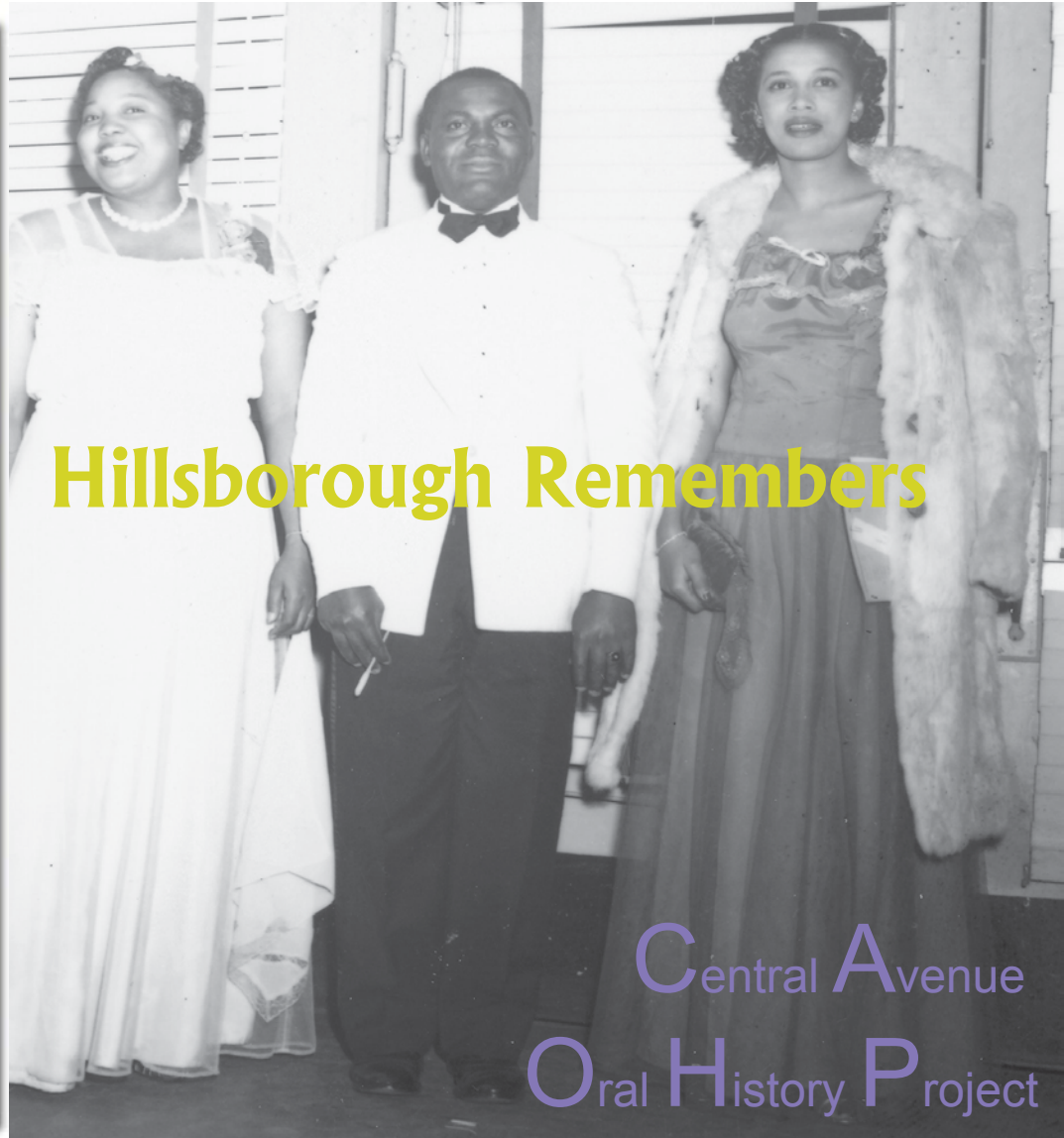


*Artis Clayton*



**Hillsborough Remembers**

Central Avenue

Oral History Project

*This is an interview with Mr. Artis Clayton (AC) of Tampa, Florida. This interview is being conducted at the Robert W. Saunders, Sr. Public Library on December 16, 2003. Mr. Clayton will talk about his Central Avenue memories. The interviewer is Carrie Hurst, (CH) representing the Central Avenue Business and Entertainment District Oral History Collections Project.*

CH: Mr. Clayton what were your earliest memories of Central Avenue's business and entertainment district?

AC: Well, when I was between the age of seven and eight years old, I used to visit my Aunt that stayed in the scrubs behind the Lincoln and the Central Avenue theatre. The theatres that we had to attend during those early days. Which was a fond remembrance. And ah up until I got to be a teenager ah I used to frequent Central Avenue with some of my classes, what we call a rec. This be called now the Kid Mason Center. That's where um I get, I get into ah the entertainment business of talent shows. We had all our talent shows at the rec. In which ah, I used to sing, I love singing. And ah, we formed a group. Me and a couple of school mates. So we named ourselves the "Star Lighters." And we went on from there, signing from different schools, Booker Washington Jr. High School. We left from the basketball games and whatever over to the rec, because that's where we had all our activities at. Was at the rec.

CH: You said the rec, you mean the recreation center?

AC: The recreation center. That's what we called it. Instead of seeing the recreation center we see the rec we must be had our head ( ), you know. But ah it was simply the recreation center. Tampa Recreation Center. But anyway, that's where we met all our friends on the weekend. In which was this block on the corner theatre. Where they had all the entertainers like, Vi Royers, the Midnighters, Charles Brown, Amos Milburn, and all those guys. But you was too young to go in there. But ah, when we go to, I got to be up in, in my late teens when we start singing, I got to be entertaining along with those guys. With we open up shows for the Five Royers, the Midnighters, ah B. B. King, all those guys.

CH: So your little neighborhood group grew to be ?

AC: We grew up to be, we grew up to be, right now ( )the ah they call them "Odysseys" not because you sung, recorded "Odysseys" that recorded records and that went nation wide like, you know. But ah, we came in fifteenth, in the State of Florida of all recording artistes. But, but, but our songs you know. But any way, there were those singers that you took lot of auditions of to the Pyramid Hotel. That's where the majority of the singers stayed at to the Pyramid Hotel which was on Central Avenue. And ah that's where I got to meet Charles Brown, we did some songs with him. Amos Milburn, we did songs with him. Those I would, those I would say musicians ah, ah doubles and they looked at our source, cause we was a young group, you know. We was a young group. And ah, Mr. Mose White! Mr. Mose White? There wasn't nothing we couldn't get from that man. Not nothing, that was his hands, his hand was here. You all trying, you know. We didn't have to worry about going out say, "O.K. we want a chicken sandwich, you want this," he have it ready for us. If he see us coming "O.K. Fix these boys whatever." You know, that's what type, that's what type of ah, ah, ah. That's what ( ) on the old ah I say, say business owners. Mr. Joiner. Mr.

Henry Joiner, he was the same way with us, you know. We sung at his clubs, the Cotton Club which was on Central Avenue.

CH: What years 1948-1972 for example, did you spend time on Central Avenue?

AC: Well, to tell the truth during, during, during my, during my ah teenage years, you know no more than going to the recreations club. We wasn't allowed to go in the bars during that time. But between, between the times when I got ah, we got into the, the music business in the early sixties. Ah, I spent my time between the Cotton Club with ( ) working cause that's the club. That's the club to be, you know, that's where everybody be at you know. Teachers, the ah coaches or whatever, you know. Like me being a basketball player and so forth, you know when I done got grown that's where I hung out with. But other wise ah.

CH: What years, do you remember?

AC: Ah the year between, up until the riot. Up until the ( ) riot. ( ) yeah, that Martin got killed. See, because we stayed, we stayed right across the street from, from, from Martin and his family. Cause my step children they grew up with Martin. And ah, as I said ( ) I was working, but ah—it was a sad day, I hated to see what, you know, what, what had happened there. You know, which we never got the right story of it yet. They still trying to get the right story. And ah, because like, like ah Chief came to the house, I had ah what you call it, a small alarm clock not to come to my house right before my son passed want to question my son about the shooting. I say, "My son don't know anything about the ah shooting", you know like that, you know. So ah I said, "By the way he back in my den back there, he gone." But I don't that's why I don't like to talk about it too much. You know, cause my son he died at a young age. And ah, he said, "Well then his mother said that he knew something about it." I said, "No, he was on the front porch when Martin got killed." See but he had started drinking, was going around saying, "Yeah I was in the area, blah, blah, blah." I say, you know saying that he seen the shooting. He didn't see it, you know. ( ) you know like that. I said, I say we done told Chick that ah, that ah you didn't see no thing. ( ) department say "Now I assume that you going ( ).

CH: Are you a relative of a Central Avenue business owner?

AC: No, no, no, but my sister used to work in the bar there for to a the Club Rev and for ah, what's it. I can't think of the other club that was, that was down on the corner of Morgan and Central.

CH: You mentioned the Cotton Club as one of you favorite hang outs, can you describe it for us? How did ----

AC: The Cotton Club, yeah. How it was? It, it, it was, it was very unique. He had the stones, out in the front he had the stone wall. ( ) guess no playing he had it ( ) it was very unique the way the Mr. Jordan had it, you know. ( ) when you come inside, you had your bar, you had your tables around with the little lights on the tables, you know. Cozy! Very, very cozy like, you know and clean. One of the most cleanest clubs that was on Central Avenue, because Mr. Jordan would clean. Jordan was cleaning. One of the best dressed mens in Tampa.

CH: What other kinds of businesses were on Central Avenue? Who owned them?

AC: Well, you had ah, you had the little meal ( ) and all that. It's called ah Reid, Reid Tavern. That was next to, now get this, they called it the Silver Moon and the teenagers, I mean the young people call you to tell it right, they call it the State Moon. But otherwise that was on the Corner of Harrison and Central. The ( ).

CH: That was Mr. Charlie Moon's place?

AC: That was Charlie Moon's place. ( ) Charlie Moon and his son, at least Charlie Moon's son and I we grew up together. We played basketball together. But ah, that was Charlie Moon place.

CH: Who were some of the people you remember from Central Avenue?

AC: Well, ah, well I knew a lot of business owners. Like I was saying, I knew lot of business owners, Mr. Louis Mete, he, he ran the cleaners, yeah the cleaners there Central Avenue Cleaners. And ah, he would come over, he could ah, he was a promoter for entertainers. He promoted some of the dance, brought in the big stars. ( ) which he promoted the stars that go over to ah, go over to ah the Cuban Patio, which was on the corner of Seventh Avenue. Where the ah, ah, the apartments at right there on the corner. That's where, you know. And then ah this guy named Cleo. Cleo Brown, he was the one that was ( ) at the ( ). He brought all the big stars to the ( ), Cleo Brown. He was, he was a very, very well known man around here. Which, which a he went on and owned the Silver Moon business, I think out on the east, after they chose to ah ( ) Central Avenue down.

CH: Do you remember seeing celebrities?

AC: Oh yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah. Elvin John, like I said Elvin John, Fowl Lawyers, James Brown, all those guys. I been around with them. And ah ( ) Mead, that was a blue act, and ah who this, let's see what this guy name, he was real, Clive was real close to him. He was ah, oh yeah, Larry, Larry Balio, he was a very popular singer around here. See all, all those guys now they, they, theys what you call now ah singers that they bringing 'em back now then you tell them to cham three and see these guys singing, like I seen the Spinners, you know, I'd, I'd love ya. I said, "My God, their kooky", you know like that you know. That same with the a Spaniards. We open up the club together, which was the Harlem Club on Central. The Harlem Bar. We opened up that bar together with the, the ah with Spaniards. And ah, Jerry Butler we did a show together with him. But all those, all those guys now I still see them singing, you know, they, they, they still singing. ( ) this new guys here they wanted to go back and try it again then ( ) some up and they not up to it so I don't bother with it no more.

CH: What were some of, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. What represented the best times on Central Avenue for you.

AC: What are the best times?

CH: Such as the parades—

AC: That's it the parades, the parades. It was great.

CH: Tell me about great.

AC: O.K. the parades, the parades used to start on Kate. Kate Street, right there K and Nebraska right there and come down to a Central Avenue to Cass Street. Now, the biggest problem of the parade before, before, we got before we got ah Blake High School, you know,

it was Middleton, Booker Washington had a band, you know. But, but, ah that was the big, that was the biggest, that was the big, that was the biggest part of Central Avenue for those parading and then the ( ) maroon and gold. That was Bethune-Cookman College ( ). When they come to town, it was, it was real enjoyable.

CH: What represented the worst times you can remember on Central?

AC: Well, the worst times, ah I was, I was, I wasn't around too much but I think I was, I was sleeping when they were doing all the robbing. But I remember that Ms. Begley and Coach William and ( ) he talked to some of the boys. They listened to others, you know.

CH: Do you remember the riots?

AC: Yeah, yeah during the riot, during the riot we went over there, went over there, went over there, you know. ( ) Coach Williams, Coach Williams walked over there on Central Avenue he just ( ) the messing the guard up over there. They don't have much a respect that Coach William did. That's how much respect that the young peoples and the elder people had of Coach William, when he went there. Then that's when they found the "White Hats."

CH: The "White Hats?"

AC: The "White Hats."

CH: Can you tell me something about the "White Hats?"

AC: Yeah, I knew some of the guys, I knew some of the guys that, that, that um, that ah, that was on ( ) last night. He came over, he was a Yellow Jacket he came from, from Blake High School. And he was like trying to restore the peace to you know, but otherwise I wasn't in too much of it. But otherwise I talked to some of the boys they say, "Hey" you know, guy went through your ( ) or whatever. That start all over again.

CH: Where did you live and work during the summer of '67?

AC: Well summer of "67.

CH: That's when Jeffery Martin Chambers—

AC: Martin Chambers. I was working building the interstate. I working on the interstate. I was building, I was out building Interstate 4. I was doing construction work. And ah, I didn't have too much time around in Tampa during that time because I was, I was on the road working.

CH: What were some of the changes you saw on Central Avenue a few years before the closing?

AC: A few years before the closing? Dreary. It was a very dreary place. Very depressing place. And ah tell the truth I don't come back over to this side too much. And I have changed direction, as you know, I done got, I didn't come on this side too much. I come back over on this side ( ) I seen friends that were still riding over on this side, you know. otherwise, cause ah--.

CH: Where did you go typically for business and entertainment after Central Avenue was closed?

AC: Tell the truth, West Tampa. I ( ) just stayed around West Tampa and ah didn't hardly go too much. I got to be a felon down there, you know I don't hardly go out too much then.

CH: Is there anything further that you would like to tell us about Central Avenue or your memories?

AC: Well it was a fun place. That's what we had. It was a fun, a very fun place. Sometime it could be depressing and sometime it wasn't. but otherwise that's what that was ours. It was, it was ours and I got to meet a lot of people, lot of good peoples. A lot of friends was over there, you know. And I think, think what, what, what, what all we trying to do now to revive Central Avenue in pictures and, and, and, an on paper to let our young peoples know see, that this is how Central was. Yes, that's how Central was but I think some of the names that I mentioned was the entertainers you all know. The colored nobody, you know but the elder peoples know, you know the elder peoples know. That's, that's what make it so great.

CH: Well, I certainly want to thank you for coming in and sharing your memories with us. And ah, thank you.