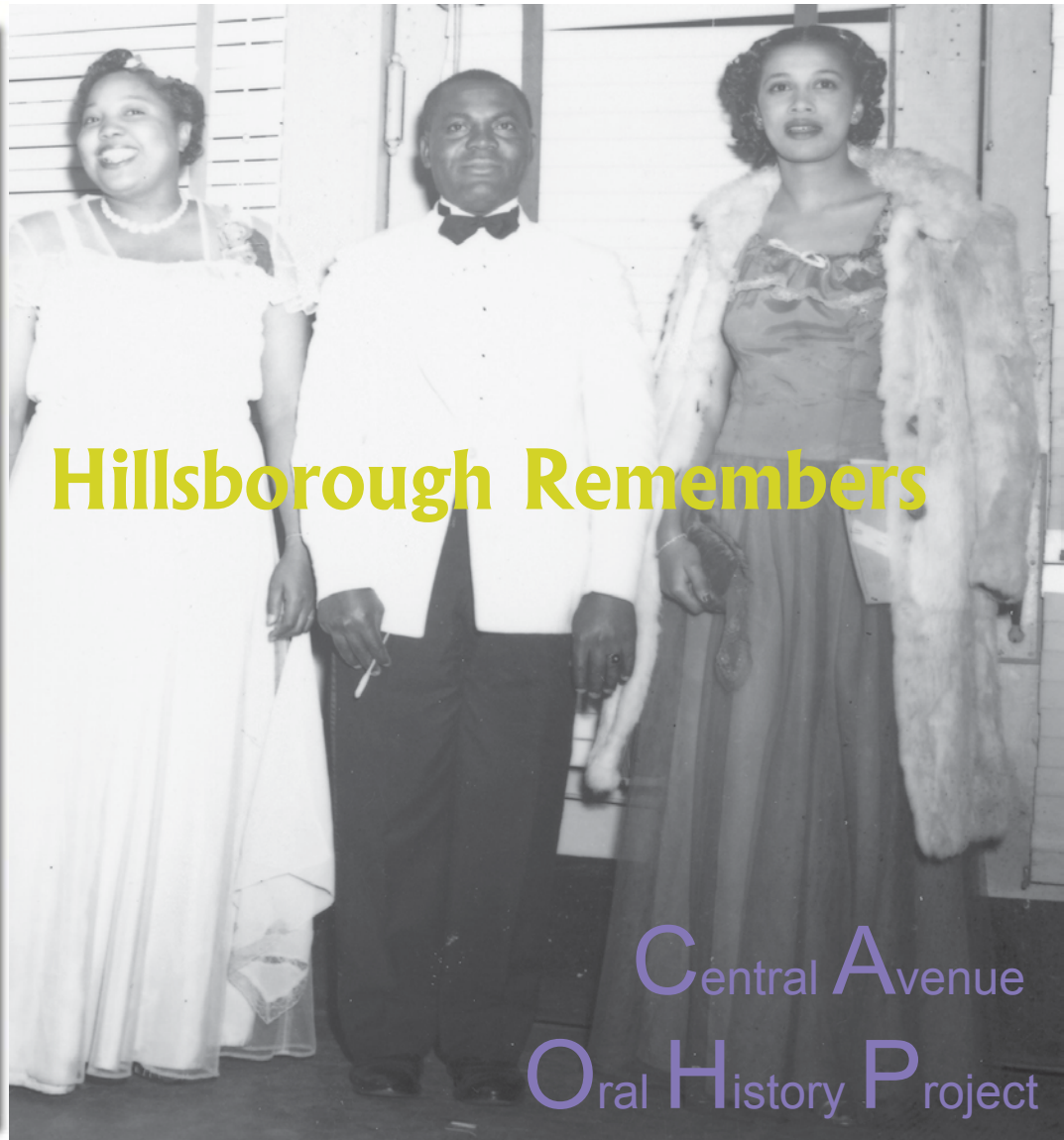


Moses Darby



Hillsborough Remembers

Central Avenue

Oral History Project

This is an interview with Moses Darby(MD) of Tampa, Florida. This interview is being conducted at the Ybor City Branch Library on October 15, 2003. Mr. Darby will tell us about his memories of early Tampa including Central Avenue.

The interviewer is Carrie Hurst,(CH)Librarian, representing the Central Avenue Business and Entertainment District Oral History Collections Project.

CH: Mr. Darby, what are your earliest memories of Central Avenue Business District and Entertainment District?

MD: Well, I can say being a young boy growing up in Tampa, in the Garrison section, I did come through Central Avenue area quite often, as a youngster and as an adult. And the businesses there we had two, three barber shops, Central Avenue. Black owned businesses. They had had beauty parlors. And ah we had restaurants. I remember Kid Mason's place we'd go in and have sodas, kids we'd have sodas and ice cream. Stuff like that, socialize. And we had dance hall we could go to. One we could go to as early teenagers, go down to the Elks Rest listen to the juke box and just hang out a little bit and go home.

CH: What years did you spend time on Central?

MD: Well as I said before, I lived in the Garrison section so I couldn't spend but so much time on Central Avenue, because we lived down in a different section. But we would come to the movies. During that time we only had one movie, Central Theatre. The Lincoln Theatre came later. Later years when I got out of service I found we had another theatre we could go to.

CH: What years was that?

MD: Well, I got out of service in 1946 from WWII. That's when I learned we had another theatre down the street, actually the name of it, The Lincoln Theatre. The old Central Theatre was still operating although. I moved away in '46 so, since then the businesses that came up after I'm not familiar with them. But, I did revisit Tampa at least once a year. And I saw the progresses being made, different businesses coming up. That I wasn't used to.

CH: Who were some of the people you remember from that time? On Central Avenue.

MD: When you say people what do you mean?

CH: Do you remember seeing any celebrities?

MD: Oh! We seen quite a few of them. Musicians come down because we had the dances, it was usually Monday nights. Why, I don't know, Monday nights but that's when it was. Monday nights we'd go to Watts Sanders they had Buddy Johnson, County Basie and even our own Florida Collegians. We had a little band here in Tampa called Florida Collegians. We had ah I think I seen Count Basie once. There was quite a few can't remember right off now.

CH: You've mentioned a place called the Garrison, where you lived. Can you tell us a little about the Garrison?

MD: All right. Um, my father migrated here with the family in 1926, and he was working for the Civil Railroad. And that's why he came here. And we lived on Seddon Island in a what you call a "section house". Belonged to the Civil Railroad and during that time we

stayed over there for, I was a baby when we got here, one year old. We stayed over there until 1930 then we moved to the main land. Garrison's main land. Down Nebraska Avenue, Waltham, Caesar Street. They had one school there called the Caesar Street School, that was on the corner of Bell and Caesar. Down the street from Cone Brothers which is a noted name, that's still here Cone Brothers Construction. They had horse driven wagons during that time for the company that had Cone Brothers. Later on as time passed they wound up getting motorized vehicles as time was passing on. And we had a real active community in the Garrison, I can say. And I'm proud to say everybody in the Garrison knew each other. It was a close knit family like thing in the Garrison. In the boundaries that we lived in, we could tell you each other address and the name of the family. I'd like to say this, there was a lady by the name of Mrs. Daisy Johnson, she was considered our matriarch in the Garrison. As I said before, it was a well knit unit down there. Everybody knew each other but if you needed to know anything or needed anything you saw Mrs. Daisy Johnson.

CH: You said that you left Tampa to join the military in the early forties.

MD: 1943.

CH: So when you came back annually, as you've said. How did you see Central progressing, what did you see happening?

MD: Well, it was like night life. That was really a going, like another big city. And I noticed that the black population was making progress, far more than when I was here. We had a uniformed policeman during that time. During my time, there was no uniformed policemen until I think, '41-'42. I was a teenager the first time I saw a uniformed black policeman.

CH: What represented some of the best times on Central that you can remember?

MD: Well, one was at the parade. When you come for the football game, you know. That was one of our good times.

CH: Do you remember what they called it?

MD: Ahh, well I know we went to Phillip Field for the game.

CH: Was that () to the Maroon and Gold?

MD: Well, that was Cookman and Florida A&M () to Maroon and Gold. I should remember that because I was at Cookman myself in '42.

CH: What about some of the worst times, when you were coming back and forth what did you see happening to Central in the worst times? Were you here when it went to decline?

MD: No really, I never seen anything bad happen around, you know. I only come for a couple of weeks or what have you. There was um, I came down to bury my father, he was still in Florida, he never left. And that was in 1964 during the time they were getting ready to tear the city down. That's what it looked like because everything was getting bombarded, you know.

CH: Now you brought with you some pictures and on one of these pictures I see the corner of Nebraska and Walton, and that was on Central Avenue.

MD: No. That's down in the Garrison.

CH: That's down in the Garrison.

MD: Yeah. South of Nebraska. As you leave the Union Station and head south, a couple of blocks away you've got Jackson Street. After Jackson is Washington and then the next street is Whiting, that's where the Garrison began on the north, Whiting Street. And you keep going south to the river on the channel, that's south. East would be the Channel Side today, which was the estuary, 13th Street Estuary. And east, Morgan Street where the courthouse that was considered the end of the Garrison.

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

MD: Well, I'll tell you some more about the Garrison right now, 'cause I remember when they first started the projects in West Tampa. That was something new coming up and it was a good thing because there was a real ghetto in that area. Main Street, you know Albany, North Boulevard, Spruce. And that's when Cone Brother really came to light because they got the business through all those blocks, men got jobs building the projects and that was good.

CH: You mentioned earlier the name of a man in a – I can't remember his name but you want to tell us about him?

MD: Oh! We had a real pioneer here in Tampa but it seems like he don't get too much publicity. His name was Mr. Dewey Richardson. Some of the old people will remember him. I remember him. I was a young boy but I remember him because he was always be around looking out for the community, for the city's work, you know. Civil work. He always emphasized voting rights and what not, which he wasn't getting at the time but he was always plug it. But strange to me right now, I will say this, I don't ever hear anybody ever mention Mr. Dewey's name. Dewey Richardson was one of the pioneers of our civil rights movements around here but I guess he was just before his time.

CH: That concludes our formal interview and I thank you so much for taking time to share your stories with us.

MD: Your very much welcome.