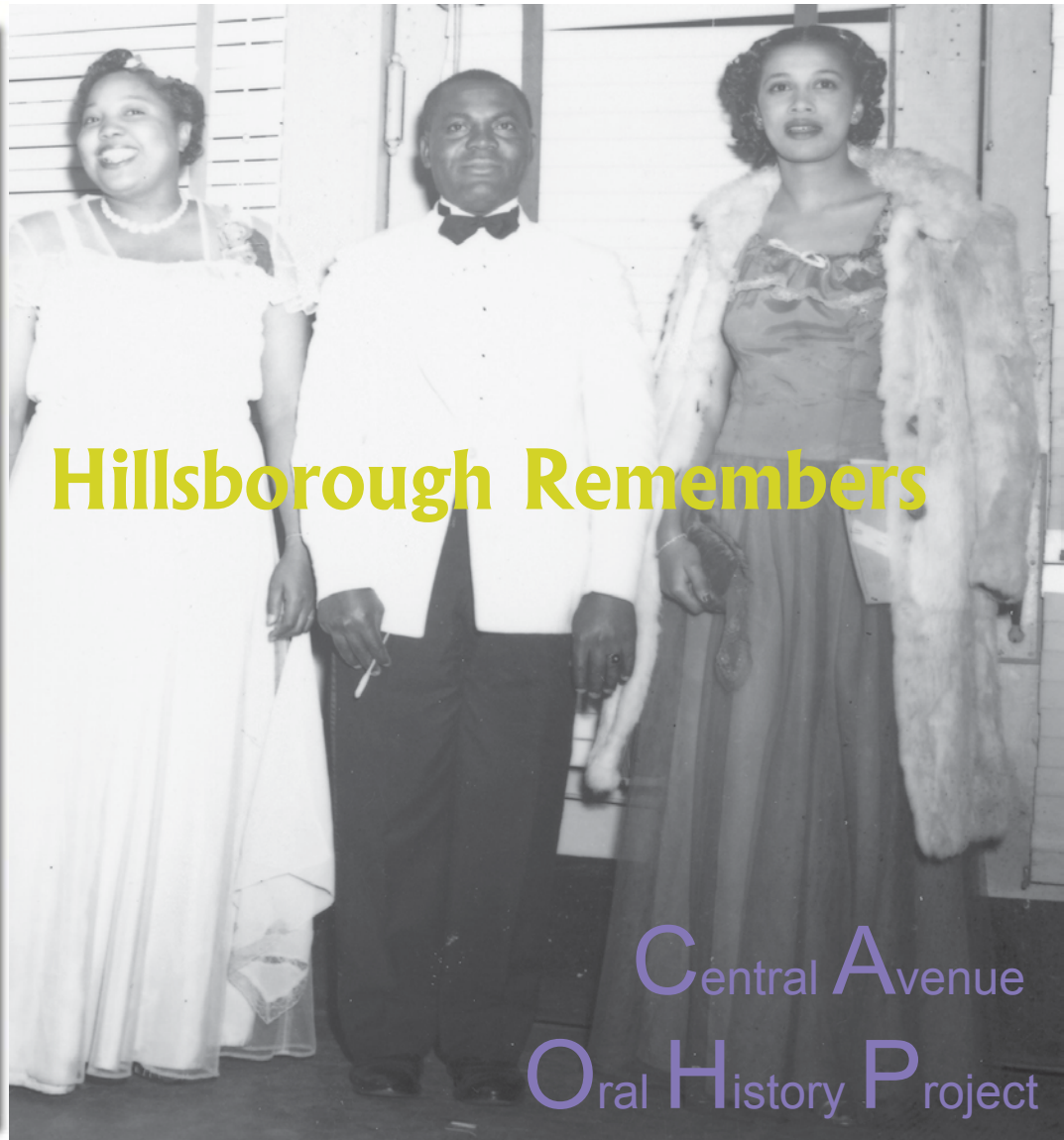


*Betty Davis-Jordan*



**Hillsborough Remembers**

Central Avenue  
Oral History Project

*This is an interview with Betty Davis-Jordan(BDJ) and Gloria Davidson Smith(GDS) of Tampa, Florida. This interview is being conducted on August 1, 2003 at the Ybor City Branch Library. Ms. Davis-Jordan is the daughter of Central Avenue business owner Lee Davis. Mrs. Davidson-Smith is a former employee of Mr. Davis. These ladies will discuss the establishment of Mr. Davis. The interviewer is Carrie Hurst, (CH) representing the Central Avenue Business District Oral History Collections Project.*

CH: Ms. Davis-Jordan what are your earliest memories of Central Avenue's business and entertainment district?

BDJ: The earliest part that I can remember is probably 50 in the fifties. My father would pick me up from school and carry me by his businesses on Central Avenue and I would get a chance to see all the stars that would come down the street or people walking around in the business area of Central.

CH: Ms. Davidson-Smith what were your earliest memories of Central?

GDS: My earliest memories is when I had to work at my at um Lee Davis ( ) at Central. And I had to work at night. From 6:00 until 2:00 in the morning. And I really enjoyed it. And ah I also worked for the Greek Stand. And ah, I um, I enjoyed everything cause everything was on Central. And all I know, even on my off day I would be hop in the back and get to Central. It was just a business strip that the enjoyment of everything.

CH: Ms. Davidson-Smith, do you know what years did you spend time on Central?

GDS: It was like, I was very young cause I had to put up my age to work for Lee Davis. I had to lie about my age. And I was eighteen. And we still ( ) together ( ). And ah I remember the dances, I remember the pyramid going upstairs, and the floor shaking. I remember so many things. Ah, that we used to do, get our hair done. My mother had to go upstairs to Dr. South and get her teeth cleaned. And the ice cream parlor was Scott and Central, and um we would hang out the rest of the night in the Greek Stand cause they stayed open all night.

CH: Ms. Davis-Jordan, we know that you are related to Mr. Lee Davis. Can you tell us how you are related and can you tell us about the business?

BDJ: Well my father was Lee Davis and he was in business from 1930s on Central. He opened up the first business on Central in 1930. The first business he had was in '26 and Floss Door. And he saw that Central Avenue was the place to be because all the black businesses was opening up on Central. So he and my mother decided that they would open up a bar and a pool room. And my uncle ran the pool room which was his brother. And his name was Moses Davis. And he and my mother had a bar and a little restaurant. And when I was a little girl they would always carry me on Central to the bar and restaurant. I would sit in the restaurant part and I would get a chance to look out and I would see Mr. Kid Mason down the street with his little shorts on. I remember his shorts. And then I started going to St. Peter Clavier Catholic School which wasn't too far, and I would walk from Central to Clavier and I had to stop at Kiddy Mason's all the time to get me a soda or get me some potato chips. And then I would go up to the restaurant with my dad and wait for him to carry me home from school.

CH: Can you describe for us what the restaurant looked like?

BDJ: I remember when the very first time I went up there it was like a wooden they had wooden sidewalks. It wasn't wooden sidewalks it was like a board and you could hear people walking on the boards and going click, click, click. And I said, "Oh my goodness, all this noise! You know, cause the soldiers was coming to town also. And I remember seeing the soldiers. That was the first time I saw soldiers was on Central Avenue. Because I think they had had a war and something had happened at MacDill and all the black soldiers would come to Central. And I remember that and I remember um, Mr. Mose White was across the street and I used to call him Uncle Mose. I remember Cozy Corner. I remember going to the Lincoln Theater. I remember the cab stand and I remember seeing my float, let's see what was it. The motorcycles coming down Central. Some black people had some motorcycles, and I used to be scared of the motorcycles when I was a little girl. And I would always get down in the car and my mother would say, "Well, why are you hiding from those motorcycles?" I said, "Momma, there making so much noise. I'm scared of those things, I'm scared of those things!" And they was just really nicest of all the black people and all the black businesses just leaning and keeping it through years. They was always happy wasn't anybody sad. Though at that time, I never did hear of anyone getting shot or killed or anything like that. Like when you go out now it's dangerous.

CH: In the restaurant did they have waitresses or did they have buffets?

BJD: My mother was the cook. Um, I know that there was some waitresses there. Also, there was like soul food served and she would have breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And then after, I guess, the bar closed people would come over and eat also.

CH: So they stayed open pretty late?

BJD: Till three o'clock in the morning.

CH: And back then how did they dress? How did people dress?

BJD: Let's see, the boots, the ole fancy boots. They had some lace up boots, I remember seeing those. Um, some people wore short dresses it was just up and down with the styles because I remember some people had short dresses on and I remember some had long dresses on. I guess cause my grandmother was still alive I got a chance to see the people with the longer outfits on. Then I had the chance to see the ones with the short dresses on when I would go to church. And I remember the Easter Parade. Everybody would want to go dress up on Easter and go on Central for the Easter Parade. And let's see what else I remember about Central. There's so many things. Um, I remember the library, that Miss Paine, she was a very soft spoken lady. You'd go in the library, everybody, all these people fighting in the library and she would talk real soft to you.

CH: Ms. Davidson-Smith can you tell us what you remember about how they dressed?

GDS: They finely dressed back then. And all these styles the young people are wearing now we done worth 'em. Like the fishtail um, and the little short skirts and the dresses it's going on right now. And I bought it my own self when I was eighteen. So there's a lot of things that's going on now that it's repeat it self. Like um; the hair all on one side, and another thing is the cluster curls. High as we could get it. And what you call this here-mushrooms because we get mushroom hair style and um looser things that's been there. That we did.

BJD: I remember that it was still two theatres on Central. When I lived on my own going to the Lincoln Theatre. I can't remember the name of the other theatre. Maybe Ms. Smith can remember the name of the other theatre that was located on Central. It was the Lincoln and then they closed it. There was two of them. They had closed one of them by the time I became of age to go to the theatre. I remember my first movie was the Ten Commandments that my mom and dad carried me to see. And um.

CH: What were some of the people you remember from Central Avenue? Ms. Smith tell us about some of the people you remember. Some of the business owners, did you see any famous people?

GDS: Oh yes. B. B. King, Bobby Flubane. I remember ( ) James Brown, and Ray Charles and all the great singers would come. BJD: The Platters. GDS: Yeah. The Platters. All these people, all this entertainment and just like it was so beautiful cause we had the Pyramid to go upstairs to dance. And we danced and watched Sanders on every weekend. And ah, the Robert Mann used to act and make sure everything was in order. Cause there were times when Robert Mann would see me and he was a great dancer but he was Lakeland man, you know. He would flip me, jitterbug with me and any ( ) you said and my little short skirt would come. So I had to be well situated on that because I knowed I either hid from him or he always would find me. I used to dance with Robert Mann. And um, you know the most the entertainment that used to come in New York? It came here. We were well thought of. And ah, ah, then I remember the ice cream parlor on Scott and Central. I remember the Greek Stand. I worked at the Greek Stand. And I remember Chip that worked behind the Greek Stand. He Masons and ah, um, the grocery store.

DH: When you worked at the Greek Stand was it still being operated by the Greeks or was it under Mr. Jordan at that time?

GDS: It was under ah um I worked under Mr. Jordan. Under Jordan, yes I did. I worked under him and you get bowl a soup for thirty-five cents. And it stayed full and um I remember all the policemen walking the beat. Of course they couldn't arrest nobody, they had to call in the white police to arrest them. Ah, any arrests to be made. I remember all the soldiers at the MacDill. In fact, I married one of them. And ah, we had a guard station set up there and ah think even if its violence with the soldiers the guard station would step in. There wasn't a whole lot of violence. And then you had like four policemen walking the beat all day and all night. Six policemen they walked in twos. And then we had Central Avenue Sandwich Shop next to um Lee Davis' place. And then on that corner was a theatre and then that theatre a baby turned that into a he had pool room. And ah, then down further about three stores down, there was another theatre which was the Lincoln Theatre. And ah, down by Cass was Central that was a pay station it was a bar. Across from there was the Pyramid and I think Lee Davis owned part of that. And ah, then come back up we had um Pearlle Jones' and then we had um, ah Lovie we had Lovie the ah beautician, and then we had um, Ms. um the restaurant. Ms. um. Ms. Harrison. I nearly forgot him. Cause you could just relax. Then next to that was the cab stand there was the Green cab stand um, anyway their cabs were green like. Aryls the cab driver. And um, Mr. Harris the cab driver and then next to those was the set up for the guards for the soldiers. Then over across there was the Cozy Corner and then there was the Palm ( ) Moses White and then next to that was Lyle Sanders and next to that was the Paris Beauty Parlor and next to that was Mr. um Mr. Max picture taken. And then you go down further and you look upstairs cause there's a alley there,

and then you look upstairs to Robert's Hotel and downstairs there's the um -- right on the corner. Oh goodness I know that now.

CH: Did you have something you wanted to say Ms. Jordan-Smith?

BJD: I also remember my father told me um Joe Lewis came to town and he stayed at my father's and my mother's house and then he was on Central Avenue. GDS: Yes he did.

BJD: And that was really something to talk about now and remember pictures of him being there. GDS: I took a picture of him. With us together and he also walked, walked on Central Avenue to 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Street where a fellow named Roy had a house and he signed autographs and he had a parade. And ah we marched all the from 21<sup>st</sup> to Central Avenue and we were so happy. But we didn't have pictures of him.

CH: So that leads me into my next question. Which is what represents some of the best times on Central Avenue that you can remember?

GDS: The football games. The crashes. The parades. That was very nice, enjoyable and everybody was happy.

CH: I'm getting a sense here that there was a lot of pride and there was a lot of camaraderie among the people up there in the earlier days.

GDS: Yes. Yes. We used to dress just to walk Central Avenue. ( ) just at work strips we used to dress and get in our car we could not go home and go to bed without riding down Central Avenue just one time. I bought my first car in 1954 working for Lee Davis at the Crab Palace. And I was a very young woman. A brand new car! A Chevrolet a 1954 Chevrolet. Yes, I was proud and I rode it everyday. I didn't miss a day going down Central.

CH: Did you want to say something about this Ms. Davis-Jordan?

BDJ: No, I just wanted to talk about the Pyramid Hotel. They had the Pyramid Hotel and Investment Company and I have pictures showing my father was president. And R. R. Williams, which was a doctor here, he was only vice-president, and had Mr. Mason as second vice-president, and Johnnie Curtis was secretary, and Mr. E. E. Barton was treasurer and some of the people that was on the Executive Board was Mrs. Gardner, Mrs. Rogers, Mrs. F. B. Stone, and Mrs. L. B. Young and Mr. Allen Jones and Dr. Sowers and Dr. Lewis was also on that board. And the Pyramid Hotel Investment they started like in the early thirties. I'm thinkin it was about the early thirties. And they had the Pyramid Hotel which is one of the first black hotels in Tampa and it's located on Central Avenue. And that's where they used to have the dances in the hotel combined.

CH: What were some of the worst times that you can remember on Central?

BDJ: To me it was when Central Avenue started going down. That was like in I think the late well the late fifties or the middle fifties. '55 the business started gentling away the older people started dying out um, they came through and they made the roads larger and they finally closed all the business up. Started buying the businesses from the people so they can close Central Avenue totally down. And people had to move. Some people were lucky enough to move businesses in other locations. And they just took away all the black pride and all the black images that was in that one little area. It just went away. And then black people started

scattering and not sticking together and not having the talent to find about each others businesses or helping each other to get another business somewhere else.

GDS: When integration came it ah they start to or were unable to see the goals so many places and that's one of the reasons why they didn't do anticipation about business because they had the ah freedom to move about to any bar and ( ). So ah we would slack of support for um the black business. Even after we had to move off of Central. So, I want to say this about ah Lee Davis. Lee Davis, he was ah a good man and ah he used to talk to us. He didn't mix, he always tell you he don't mix business with pleasure. So you don't get the wrong idea. He always was a business man. And he used to tell us, when we working for ourself he was always puttin in for ours. Monies for our social security so it could be secured in the future. And he would tell us a lot of business things that he really needed to know. You know, wasn't nobody else talkin to us about it. Like different insurances. And you know, different insurance ah didn't accept black applications. Like this time he would tell us the ones we could call to go to. And not only that he would never let you work without a voter's registration. You know, after that he would tell all us, encourage us to go and vote. From that day on from eighteen and I'm still voting. It just, there's so many things that he um a really had done so much for the community. And ah things that he didn't even discuss. Papers that we found later, you know after he passed, that said things that he had done. Like I remember a time when he went to ah tried to encourage the community to help the blurred vision. Belmont Height ( ). And he was the first one started it about a uniform for them for the Belmont Heights ( ) and Moses White had a --. Lee Davis was a person who didn't put advertisements in his window for you vote for this and you vote for that. He didn't believe in that. He believed in very, very sincere about voting. So he wouldn't let them put signs in his window but he anticipated so strong behind the door, you know, who to vote for and because he was very serious about it. And he didn't need to put no signs in his window. Telling you you can't leave no sign here. I know exactly what to do. So, I I guess he like on Christmas ah how he would a some of the policemen and I couldn't understand it, the policemen full in the bar and because of Christmas and honey, he was donating like fish and fish and pastry and biscuits and beer to ah the ah police department. And different, you know, different organizations and ah folk. Ah he was very helpful. I knew, remember a time when um Monday, we didn't get paid until early Monday, Linda would see David paid everybody he didn't care who you were. And ah, so on Monday he would give me an envelope to take to the store, the grocery story, down from the place to a give to this man behind the counter. So one day I got nosey and I went in there and looked, cause it was so fat, and it was ah money that makes people that bought groceries from this store, that he volunteered and ah he paid for their groceries and I thought it was really beautiful. You know it's just so many things that Lee Davis had done for our community that's set out that needs to be spoken about. He didn't advertise.

BDJ: You've seen this one. ( ) of Tampa to Central Avenue he also had like um one of the first hair pomades which was No Key hair pomade and now its now as Do hair pomade. And he had the original formula for the No Key Care pomade which men used to put on their hair. It laid the hair down. And I still have the patent on that No Key hair pomade. And then I think he sold it, the other he sold it to, then it ended up becoming Duke's hair pomade. And his picture was on the can, on the original can.

CH: On the one that you have?

BDJ: I have the patent. I had the cans, but I made some I kinda lost them the cans I had.

CH: What do you remember about the death of Martin Chambers and the civil unrest that happened after that? Do you remember the a Martin Chambers incident that caused the riots?

BDJ: The first ones your talking about, I don't remember we may have already moved from Central. I was still young, but I remember my father talking about it and really bent off the stick. It was in '67, I was away in school but I remember my father – he was really upset. Um, because at that time they started burning down the area that was the dominant black and they didn't go any further than like in the black area. And they were destroying their own businesses in their own area and so you know. I don't want to say right out somewhere else destroying property, but anyway, it destroyed basically Central Avenue at that time.

CH: What about you Mrs. Smith?

GDS: I was down in South America, I was overseas then.

CH: What were some of the changes you saw on Central Avenue a few years after the closing of the street? I mean, how did it change the community?

BDJ: It changed significantly because basically all the black businesses had scattered. My father was lucky enough to start a place on Central I mean to move from Central Avenue to 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. Where in their time they started black businesses. He opened up a strip mall. He had a um another bar, a pool room, a laundry mat, College Hill Pharmacy was part of the strip center at that time. And he had a grocery store, there's a Five and Ten Cent store, and it was Lee's Dinner on one corner and um he basically he went from Central Avenue to 22<sup>nd</sup> Street with his businesses. But a lot of people was not able to keep their businesses going.

CH: So where did people go for entertainment after Central Avenue? I mean, after that district was gone what happened? Where did they go for entertainment after that?

BDJ: Into the Paradise Bar, chuckle, which was located on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. And um, what else, someone opened something up in West Tampa on Main Street.

GDS: The Brick Wood. They was at the Brick Wood on West Tampa and Main. And we stayed out all night at Anthony drive ins.

BDJ: And there was a little bar that was located over here, used to be like um

GDS: A station bar.

BDJ: No, I mean the other bar that the ladies had. Remember? Um.

GDS: We hung out at the Zanzibar too.

BDJ: The Zanzibar and there was another bar before they went over into West Tampa, there was another little bar at the end of 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I was young so I don't remember the name of it. But I remember the bar that was there. And I used to hear people talking about it.

CH: So after Central Avenue everybody just kinda just burst to other areas of town. What about 22<sup>nd</sup> Street did 22<sup>nd</sup> Street ?

GDS: It was packed.

CH: I know that there were a lot of businesses that migrated over to 22<sup>nd</sup> but there wasn't the same effect as Central?

GDS: No.

BDJ: There wasn't as many businesses, cause my father owned basically all the businesses that was up in that little area. Um, there was a Mr. Shelly Brene he owned the restaurant on the end. That was later that was like in the seventies when he got the West Gardens on the end. And ah, before then we had Lee's Diner which was I think at that time one of the longest black restaurants left. Because Ms. Harris was closed. And then we went from there to the Guard and then we had College Hill Pharmacy. And then there used to be a little man had a Bar-B-Que stand right on the corner, I don't remember his name but he was on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street also. So everything just left Central. Central just died away and moved to 22<sup>nd</sup> and moved to West Tampa Main Street. Mr. White moved to Main Street he had Cozy Corner on Main Street. And Mr. Bexely had another place on Main Street also.

CH: Is there anything further you'd like to tell us about Central Avenue and your father and businesses?

BDJ: I just wish that he could have um preserved Central some kinda way. Still had stores there. I wish my children would have been able to see what was there like in the early twenties and thirties and forties like in Atlanta. I had a chance to go and see Auburn and all the stores are still there like they were originally. And that was the black district. We have nothing to show our children now. We can only tell them the stories and they look at me like your crazy, o.k. you know. I can't really show them or carry them there and say "Oh, this is where your grandfather had his store." And this is Central Avenue. And you know, it's hard to inspire the children what happened back in the early years if there's nothing really there to show them.

CH: Ms. Smith is there anything you'd like to say?

GDS: We really need something to show that we were there on that street. We need something, I can't really explain but it's so empty to go up there and spend. If sometime you pass it before you know it. But there are so many memories there that it there's a whole lot of memories. And your happy even if there weren't nobody on Central just you, you still was happy. And you get so crazy everything you see down here right now we had it in that one little spot. Central Avenue. Everything! I can't name nothing that this Tampa got that we didn't have. But we had a sense of belonging we just felt like it was ours. And I wish so many times that we could have kept it. It was it's a beautiful feeling. Even the captains of the police used to come there.

BDJ: I like to remember my father as the bridge builder. And there is a poem, it always reminded me of him, saying how he always wanted to do things to help other people. And he want to leave something there so that the world know or the children that's coming behind him would know that someone did care about them.

CH: Thank you so much! There is nothing further, this concludes are formal interview. I would like to thank you ladies very much for sharing your stories and your memories with us.