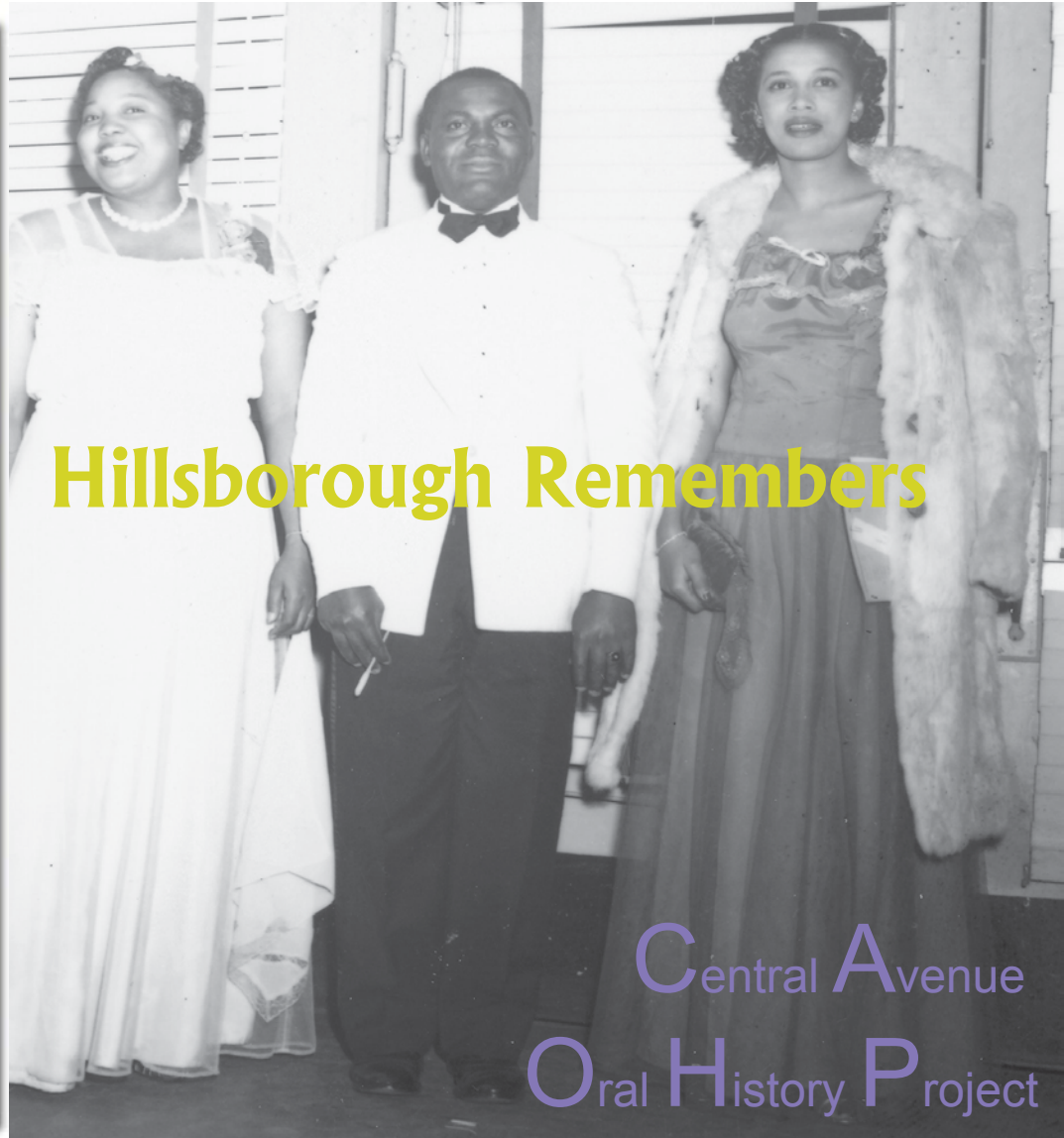


*Willie Dixon*



**Hillsborough Remembers**

Central Avenue  
Oral History Project

*This is an interview with Willie Dixon (WD) of Tampa, Florida. This interview is being conducted at the Robert W. Saunders, Sr. Public Library formerly the Ybor Public City Library on December 9, 2003 Mr. Dixon is going to tell us about his memories of Central Avenue. The interviewer is Carrie J. Hurst,(CH ) representing the Central Avenue Business and Entertainment District Oral History Collections Project.*

CH: Mr. Dixon, would you prefer to be called Reverend Dixon?

WD: Either way, it doesn't make any difference.

CH: What are your earliest memories of Central Avenue's Business and Entertainment District?

WD: Well it goes back I say, to about thirty-eight or thirty-nine because I used to come on going to St. Peter Claver a School.

CH: You were a youth then?

WD: Yes, I was very young then.

CH: O.K. What years did you spend time on Central Avenue?

WD: Well, I spent time on Central Avenue in a little bit of the forties and I came back a after I finished school. I came back it was in the fifties and the sixties and a part of the seventies. I spent quite a bit of time on Central.

CH: And looking back on those years what do you think was the most—what stands out in your memory as the most prominent thing about Central?

WD: Well, to see so many black businesses in the area. I saw everything a on Central Avenue in a four or five blocks. Well, really from a Kay Street to Cass, that's the boundary of the business district section. Ah I remember that we had a couple of theatres on Central. We had pawn shops, we had restaurants, we had the Palace Drug Store which is on the corner of Scott and Central. Across the street you had the Greek Stand. Across the street you had, we had the Little Savoy and going back North we had the library there. And upstairs we had Prince Hall Mason Masonic Hall upstairs. And then we had quite a few barber shops and a you had almost any business that you can imagine in that area. ( ).

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

WD: No, I'm not.

CH: What other kinds of businesses where on Central Avenue and who owned them? You know, something specific.

WD: O.K. Well, um ah that were actually owned by blacks. Ah most of the businesses that were on Central that were not owned by black, I would say was the Greek Stand, the Palace Drug Store, and ah the theatres. During that period of time everything else was owned by black. You had the Pyramid Hotel. A you had the um a ( ), Charlie Moon right on Harrison and Central across the street you had Johnnie Gray, and then you had the Park Theatre and you had a several restaurants. And then one thing about coming to the end of Central going South which is as far as most of us would go, in that area was a um we used to have a vacant

lot on the corner of Central and Cass, the South Green of New Orleans ( ) used to come every year. And then also we had Claxton's in the ( ) event in Havana. It was a group that used to travel over and they had Tampa as a ( ) winter residence because they would travel during the winter months.

CH: What were some of the people, such as Kid Mason for example, you remember from Central?

WD: O. K. I remember Lewis Pawn Shop, I knew both of the Lewises he and his father. Mr. Lewis. I knew the Thompsons, that owned the Brooklyn Café. Ah, I ah Mose White was over, he had the Cozy well it wasn't Cozy Corner at the time because it was another family at the time at the real Cozy Corner across the street from Mose White place. Then you had a ah tea room ah right behind that on Constance. And ah you got the Rodgers Dinning Room and also you had Watt Sanders and ah Watt Sanders' Little Blue Room and then Watt Sanders later became Club Royale. And Joiner, Henry Joiner had his place ah his first place was ah down was a little shop on Central and then later he moved further North on Central where his last place was next to the Savoy. You had Benny Shull was the barsman. You had Tony he had a shoe shine parlor over on Central. You had Wade Cab Company that was also on Central. Um, and down further Baby had a place in ah Lee Davis' at that time would be down Central. And a the Florida Sentinel was further down on on Central, they weren't exactly in the business area but they were close enough to the business area. And um, you had um, I said Johnnie Gray's. You had um, um, the Apollo Theatre and then Baby had a, we called it Baby's Pool Room, he was there. You had Shelly Green's, he was over ( ) he was on Central and about a half a block he had a restaurant there and across the street you had a Silver's um he had a little place there. You had um a service station um one block west off of a off of Central.

CH: You know, I've heard of a lot of the businesses you've mentioned. What I'm having a hard time with is having people to describe to me what Watt's Sanders' Blue Moon looked like. You know, we weren't there so we just want you to visualize what some of the places looked like.

WD: Well, Watts Sanders' Blue Room it was, it was a large hall it had um, as I remember it had a bar on the--when you walk in to your left and then you go further, in the front they had a stage of a different band. And you had a lot of the musicians that would come to town they would have jam sessions in there. Ernie Cab, who's been around forever, he would play and then you had um a several a Buddie Johnson used to come there and Sister Ella Johnson. In fact, most of the musicians used to talk about Tampa, they could be all over the United States, and come to Tampa and get stranded. And so they would, I know, I can't think of a young man who ah he put out the the the the record A Hammer and the Nail. I can't think of his name but anyway he got stranded. I remember he came up, we were standing in front of Rodgers Dining Room, I know he had to sell his leather coat to get something to eat. And, and on thing going back previously to that time, as it comes to my remembrance, is that on Central during the forties, during World War II, we had a lot of service men would come down on Central. And ah, and we had a few black policemen, but the irony of the thing was the black policemen could not arrest anyone white. They had to hold them until the white policemen come. And one incident happened that a white policeman ah they kinda roughed up a couple of black soldiers, and there was almost a riot cause those men they went back to

MacDill Field and they came back with all kind of artillery and they was getting ready to tear up Central because of , of that incident. Now that is vivid in my mind. And you see however, a a under their ( ) they had a little crank on them. Like you see in the movies that they would call the patrol and the black policeman did not have a patrol car, he just walk the beat. They would walk the beat ( ). And most of the them during that time they were a little more empathetic toward the person that they were arresting. It's not like in this period of time. And in fact, we did not have a lot of young people hanging on Central. You know ah, like it is in a lot of areas today because, because the parents wouldn't allow 'em, their children to hang around on Central. In fact, ah I always said you had two Central Avenues: 1. was the Central Avenue that allowed the people who come and go to the Rodger's Dinning Room and go to different places, but after dark those same people would come on Central Avenue and really Central Avenue then become ah Central Avenue. The real Central Avenue until after dark and then that's when um what they say, that's when all of the people that like to party would come out and party. They would come out and party during that time. But, and I know that a lot of people had a read and books about Central but they never put ( ) except during the day. They don't really know Central but they know what they passed to other and so forth. But Central was, was the place to be in and it was sad that they took Central away. And when I say they took Central away, they did and it appeared, I know you didn't ask me this question. But it appears they're going to take what elements that you know, Central away with the next few months. And again it's what we call beneficiation. And ah, but it's sad that we have lost much of our heritage and ah they wouldn't allow that in Ybor City. But we have some people who look like us who will sell us out to people who don't look like us for you know, for a dollar. And if you go back and check your history most of those people that have sold out except for a few, their the centers of their growth.

CH: What represents some of the best times on Central, like such as the parades, you know?

WD: O.K., it just so happened that in the sixties I was band director and so um whenever they would have the Classic or have dances we used to march down Central. We had, we had some fellows parades and you would have the different bands and every year that the Classic would come you would have ( ) the college bands to come down Central. And so just good to see so many people come out and it was not disorderly, at all. People knew how to act and they came out to appreciate the festivities.

CH: What represents some of the worst times you can remember?

WD: Some of the worst times that I can remember is when they started to allow Central to be taken. That was and I know that it started with the riot, with the shooting of the little boy. Chambers. And which didn't help ( ) but it was sad to see young people that didn't know who to take out their frustrations. Because they burned down the places where their mothers worked. They burned down places where their family lived. And I used to say to during that time, "If you want to take out your frustrations, and your not afraid go downtown." But they were and the thing about it is ah ( ) that I see that those who were supposed to protect the ( ) never ( ) back, because they were on the destroying. And maybe by some, some, some way they knew that once they burned down part of it, it would be easy to take, take the city. And disbar the city and do what their doing now. They ah because there are certain plans that are in place for the next ten years, twenty and thirty years that most of us of color are not

privileged to. So ah I think it's all a part of a master plan. Not to burn it down but to take it all back ( ) on an early time to take it over.

CH: Where did you live or work during the summer of 1967, and what do you know about the death of Mickey Chambers and the civil disturbance that followed?

WD: I was in New Or-I was here in '67 ( ). But the only thing, I know I read about it and I had a lot of people to tell me about it. In fact, I've talked to Miss Chambers several times because she's still trying to have something done concerning her son's death. But um, but I know that, and as I recall he was shot in the back. And during that time I don't know whether they had a law of fleeing felon. You know, if a person is fleeing and you not in there and not in harm's way that you should not try to take that person back.

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

WD: Well, before the closing of the street um, well, that was the area there drugs became pronounced in this area. And ah, we started finding ah lot of the young people started hanging ah over in the pool room because ah, if my memory serves me right, ah Club Royale I think, was a next door to the pool room that's where most of the girls were sold there. And, and you didn't see as many people during the day time come over on Central except for those who work in this area. You know, you had Francis Rodriguez, had an office. And Kenny Jackson had an office. And Photum, Attorney Photum ah but we saw that Central started deteriorating and then we saw that ah, ah a lot of whites started a buying some of those businesses.

CH: After Central Avenue was closed, where did the people typically go for entertainment?

WD: After Central closed, they started going on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. Ah, and when they went on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street there was only about two or three blocks ( ) across the street from College Hill and the project at Ponce de Leon but it was not the same as Central. And they ( ) also had names but the thing about Tampa the Fortune Street bridge used to always separate the people from West Tampa and East Tampa. Of those and those that lived in West Tampa they wouldn't move or live on this side of town. And those who lived on this side of town wouldn't move to West Tampa. So, so you had West Tampa had their own little businesses in fact, Kid Mason moved to West Tampa on Main Street. And Mose White moved on Main Street. And Baxley's and he moved on Main Street so we have several of those businesses that was on Central Avenue moved to Main Street. And Lee Davis he was on 22<sup>nd</sup> Street and he had a few people who would go on around Lake and 29<sup>th</sup>.

CH: Is there anything further that you would like to tell us about Central Avenue.

WD: O. K., um Central Avenue. Well, I don't know of anybody a mentioned a lady by the name of Black Beauty. Anybody mention Black Beauty? ( ) her name, in fact she was living in Bradenton. I worked with a relative of hers and she used to stay in the Pyramid Hotel. And she would come out of there at night saw those people that was potent and prominent there. You see them sneaking around with Black Beauty. You know, cause she was a beauty young lady. And um, and the next thing I remember is the Greek Stand. The Greek Stand ah was a restaurant right on the corner of Scott and Central. It would stay open all night. It was one place that um if a person gets stranded they'd stay in the Greek Stand all

night. And after they had dances that were over around 2 o'clock, they would either go to Johnnie Gray's cause they stayed open when all the dances were over. And then they would go to the Greek Stand. And ah, I don't know whether anyone talked about ah, ah Charlie Moon. Do you mind if I talk about Charlie Moon? Well, Charlie Moon, he was one that would not, he kinda kept the whites from coming into town. On this part of town and on the businesses. As long as he was living he kinda, he kinda kept things in control. But then he—  
CH: He kept some kinda black control?

WD: Kinda black control. But as it is the system always have someone that do what they want to do and then it look like a black person did it, cause a white did it but they gonna say, well you know, that's racist. But if one of our own did something, you know. But anyway, Pearl McAdams, he was a one who went to Raeford for killing Charlie Moon. He stayed in and there were some influential people who ah, who made sure that he was an old man when he got out of Raeford. But they didn't want him to come back, they pulled some strings. And the rumor is now I don't know, but the rumor is that most of 'em were ( ). Is that when he was murdered a lot of people got their start by going in and going in to his safe. Cause he had a safe with a lot of money. And some of the people that started their businesses and to help their businesses they helped themselves to some of the money that he had, so.

CH: Who's money?

WD: Ah, ah Charlie Moon's because he was sorta like the king pin. He also was the, you know, a he had like a shoot man. They used to call it the State Room. I remember I used to go in there sometime ah I'd go in and look around, but it's something that a lot of people don't want to talk about it, you know. ( ) they don't want to sit in the skeletons and –

CH: Now, tell me about Pearl McAllister, did I understand that he was a cop?

WD: Well, you can say he was the police, yeah. He was the police but I guess he worked somewhere like a deputy but a um ( ). I would say he was more than a police. But now usually police don't go to jail for killing somebody. Unless we want them to go to jail.

CH: Um, hum. Do you remember when they had the Greek Stand?

WD: Yes. Ah, ah, I don't know, you know, they had the Greek Stand and then they guess they sold it, I think it was to the Jordan brothers. And ah because they were, I think they were working there for a long time and they owned they. And right around the corner Slim had a, a news stand. And a now, I did say I didn't have a relative but I did have a relative that was not on Central but they were on Scott off of Central. They had a what we called a pension drugs, a cleaners. And ah, and ah, John Tillis he had a, had a, he had a, he had a, a, cleaners there for many years. But um we had news stand, and we and a the cab stand was owned by a black person ah, ah Wade Cab. His name is Prince and he also had a barber shop over by the old ah what we call it the old Starkey. Cause my grandfather used to cut hair that was over on ( ) ah but the cab stand was right on the corner of ah, I think it was Central and Constance. Right across the street from ah, ah what was Mose White's place. I done called it Cozy Corner but Cozy Corner was really across the street.

CH: Thank you so very much. This concludes our interview and I thank you for sharing with us.