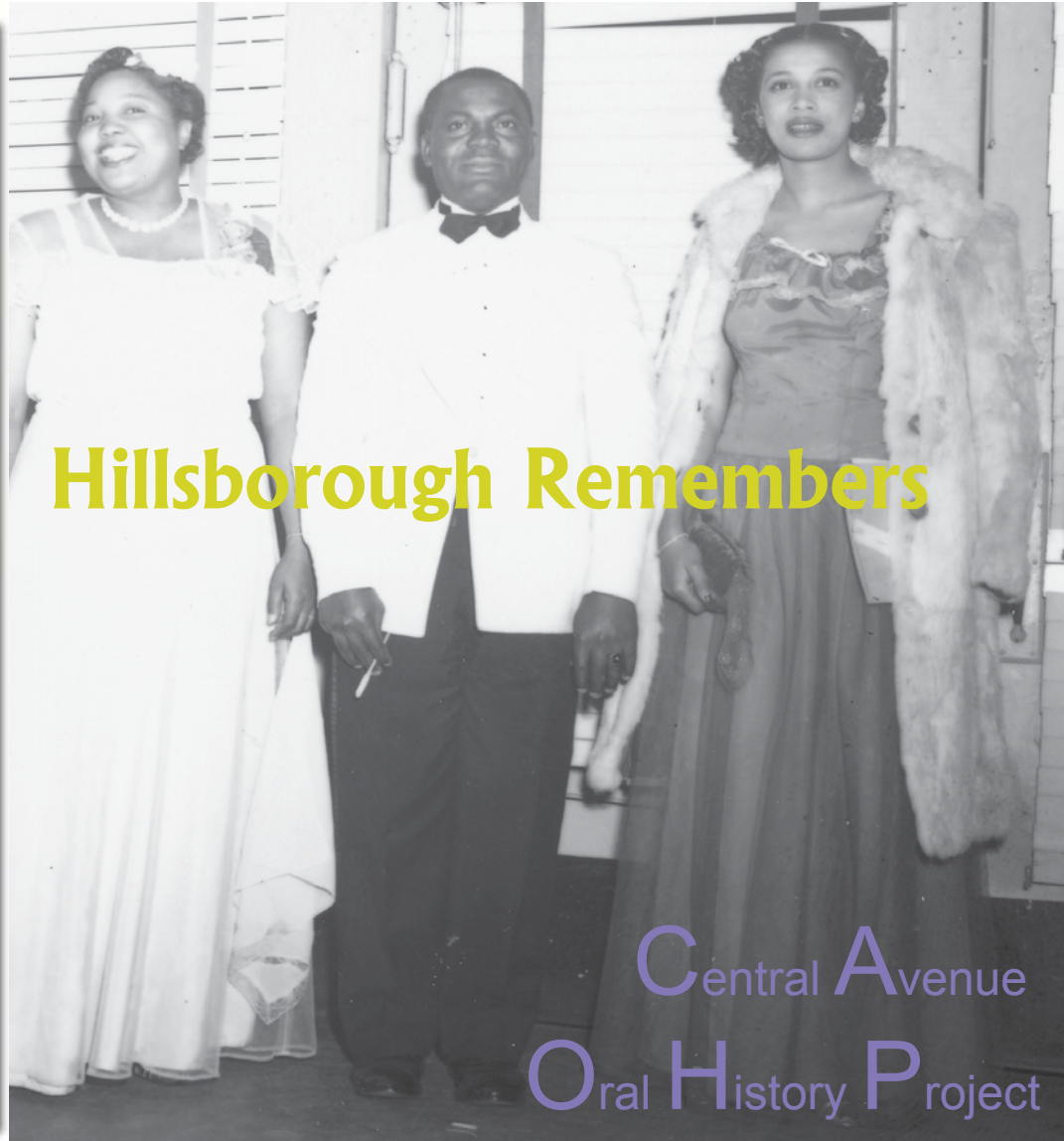


Robert Gardner, Sr.



Hillsborough Remembers

Central Avenue

Oral History Project

This is an interview with Mr. Robert Gardner, Sr. of 209 W. Palm Ave., Tampa, FL 33602 (RG). This interview is being conducted on July 18, 2003 at the Ybor City Branch Library of the Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative. Mr. Gardner will be talking about his father Isaac a Central Avenue business owner. The interviewer is Carrie J. Hurst (CH), Librarian representing the Central Avenue Business and District Oral History Collection Project.

RG: I am Robert Gardner.

BS: Mr. Gardner, you are related to a Central Avenue business owner. Would you tell us who he is, how you are related and talk about some of the businesses that he had.

RG: Well, Isaac Gardner is my father. Was my father. Is now deceased having passed away in August of 1995. Ah, my father is one of the early Afro-American business men ah that had businesses on Central Avenue or in the Central Avenue area. Now you want me to enumerate some of the places that he owned? Ah well, the Palace Drug Store which is on Scott and Central Avenue, The Pyramid Investment Co. which ah actually was the arm of the Pyramid Hotel. And ah, he owned and operated the Scott Street Pool Room which was on Scott and Orange Streets. And the Royal Palm Lounge and Restaurant which is on Central and Scott. He also owned a small hotel on Central which is named after my mother, The Georgette Hotel. And of course, I think that I mentioned that he was one of the founders of the Pyramid Hotel and Investment Company, of course, this owned the Pyramid Hotel which was on Central and Harrison Streets. Ah, it really was named the Rodgers Hotel ah named after Mr. Rodgers who was also a founder of the Central Avenue Insurance Company which my father was one of the founders as well and served for a number of years on the Board of Directors.

BS: Would you like to read it from the () some information about the businesses?

RG: Well yes, I do happen to. My father came to Tampa around 1905 at the age of about 25 and ah he started his business career with the Manhattan Café, located at 1010 E. Scott Street just off Central Avenue. Now, this information I'm giving you now has been verified by the Tampa Historic Preservation Commission which uses the information to nominate our primary home to be listed on the National Register for Historic Places. After the Manhattan Café was opened my father opened the Palace Drug Store, as I mentioned at the corner of Scott and Central Avenue and it soon became the hub of activity for pharmaceutical needs as well as a social gathering spot for Tampa's tight knit Afro-American community. A significant impact to the black community was the founding of the Central Life Insurance Company ah started by my father and a group of other business men which pooled together ten thousand dollars to get this business started. In 1923 the Scott Street Pool Room was opened by my father and ah the Horseshoe Bar, the Georgette Hotel, which was named after my mother, and the Royal Palm Lounge and Restaurant followed along with an increasing portfolio of investment property. The Pyramid Hotel, the anchor to Central Avenue, at Harrison Street began with the Pyramid Investment Company, my father being part of the group. In 1923, my father reinforced his commitment to the neighborhood by building his elegant home and raising his family at 209 W. Palm Avenue. He had it designed and built and ah the home remains in the family today. Ah my father was one of the most successful

business men to grace Central Avenue in his time, contributing to the variety and success of the business district all without the benefit of a formal higher education. But my daddy flourished as an entrepreneur and my mother, Georgette Lucille Maddox, served the community as well as my father. After receiving her undergraduate degree from Florida A&M and her masters in education through Columbia University New York, my mother turned her attention to the a school system and also she made contributions to civic and religious initiatives within the community. Serving as a teacher and a principal at Lomax School ah my mother held the position of Coordinator of Liberal Education for the Hillsborough County School System. This position actually served as a liaison between the School Board and the Afro-American School Administration in order to promote and advance education in the you know, segregated schools. Carrying on the () tradition of commitment to community ah I, who of course, as the son of my father still live in our family residence at Palm Avenue where I have raised my family. I served the ah Hillsborough County School System ah in various capacities for forty-two years. I was the second Afro-American to have an office in the Hillsborough County Courthouse. Ah being appointed at that time as Coordinator of Personnel Services for the school district. Ah I was also one of the founders of the Young Adults for Progressive Action an independent civic group that organized anti-segregation activities in the 1950's and was successful in obtaining a variety of employment positions that were previously not open to blacks long before integration of the late 60's. Ah, do you want me to continue in that vain?

BS: No. I've got some questions here I want to ask you. What are your earliest memories of Central Avenue Business and Entertainment District? How old were you back then, as far as you can remember back?

RG: Well, um life on Central Avenue goes back as far as I can remember actually, because I was born during the era the Central is flourishing as a ah very vibrant business um um community. And of course, as I evidenced earlier that my father had businesses, you know, um during that time. And I would have occasion to visit Central Avenue um um ah as a young boy growing up. Ah, ah visiting the Palace Drug Store and ah other businesses that wanted you to know about my father at the time. So, my – I'm sorry.

BS: You mentioned Palace Drug Store. Can you describe it for me?

RG: The Palace Drug Store was on the corner of Central Avenue and Scott Street which was the cross roads actually of the black community. Ah it was said sometime ago, that if you stood on the corner of Scott and Central long enough you would see everybody that lived in Tampa. Over a period of time, of course. It was a place the Palace Drug Store was place where young folks gathered to socialize. Young boys met their dates there. Ah people congregated at the Palace Drug Store before and after ah shin digging at the Central Theatre. Which was a couple of blocks south of the drug store at the time. And ah it was actually just a simple place for people to meet and enjoy life.

BS: And they could get prescription drugs?

RG: Oh yes! They had a pharmacy as well as a soda fountain and other um items that are normally found in drug stores (). A first class drug store with the pharmacist on duty at all times.

BS: Do you have any um recollection of a the hours of operation? How long did they stay open through a day or um ?

RG: No honestly I don't remember you know, specifically what the hours were. Um I'm afraid I can't.

BS: You mentioned something about a sundry, they had a sundry?

RG: Yes.

BS: They had a bar and you come sit to the bar?

RG: Right, they had a bar. City bar where you could get ah various ah milk shakes and assorted ice creams and related items that went with those kinds of things. And ah there were tables of course, for people to sit and consume the latter products they purchased at the ah counter. And ah.

BS: Your father had several businesses, did you circulate among them or was it home based or one business or other?

RG: Well ah he circulated among them all. Ah now some of these businesses weren't in operation at the time that others were in operation. For example, ah the Royal Palm Lounge and Restaurant was after my father sold the Palace Drug Store. Ah and of course, the Scott Street Pool Room was in operation during and after ah he operated the Royal Palm Lounge and Restaurant.

BS: One of his other businesses was ---

RG: Oh, the Georgette Hotel. Which was next door to the Central Theatre ah ah which was razed I think in the forties. I believe and replaced with the ah Lincoln Theatre on Central Avenue. Ah the Central Life Insurance Company had its main office on I believe, on Central and Harrison in a building that housed the a Pyramid Hotel. And it became later the Rodgers Hotel.

BS: Did you, did he actually work in the business? The a Central Life or he just an investor?

RG: Ah he was one of the founders of the ah Central Life Insurance Company and served on the Board of Directors on the Central Life. He never was um personally involved in the operation part of the insurance company. You know, working on a day to day basis. Ah he attended the ah board meetings ah which I think were about once a month or something. ()

BS: Do you know of any of the other investors who ()?

RG: Ah yes. Mr. Nick Martin, um Mr. J.D. Rodgers, um Dr. Howell, ah Dr. Silas I believe, and there were several others that I I can't remember right off hand. I don't have that information.

BS: So it's like an insurance agency with agents?

RG: Yes, it was a regular insurance company and there were a number of agents that ah that ah sold insurance policies and collected insurance payments ah premiums that type of thing. And then they had the main office of course, where there were a number of clerks and secretaries and that type thing. And eventually the ah main office was moved to North Blvd. in the building that now houses the City of Tampa Construction Committee Office or

something. On North Blvd. and Laurel, I believe right near the expressway. That building was renewed and ah was due their home office of their Central Life Insurance Company.

BS: Is there another business that we haven't talked about yet?

RG: Ah, ah I mentioned the ah Scott Street Pool Room which was a sort of a recreation center. Ah of course there were pool tables, and domino tables, and card tables and those type things. And um of course, they was ah patronized mostly by men, of course and ah (), French fries.

BS: What were some of the, do you recall seeing famous people coming through Central Avenue?

RG: Oh! Yes, yes. There were many, many celebrities that visited Central Avenue. Frankly, you must remember of course, that Tampa was segregated like every where else in the South at the time. And ah any person of any prominence ah visited came to Tampa ah that was Afro-American of course, ah ah visited Central Avenue. Many of them stayed at the Pyramid Hotel at the Rodgers Hotel, it became the Rodgers Hotel eventually. And ah of course, they frequented the ah nearest restaurants on Central Avenue and other places ah to socialize, socializing and () meet people. They were baseball players and Jackie Robbins, Larry Goldberg, um and many of the others. Jimmie Gillum, of the Brooklyn Dodgers and all used to hang out on a Central Avenue. Plus the all the musicians that came to Tampa to perform and to a various clubs ah of course, often seen on Central Avenue. Lionel Hampton, Ersten Hawkins, Billie Epstein, Sara Vaughn, and many others.

BS: When they performed, did they perform on Central Avenue or some of the little jazz clubs there?

RG: Yes, there was the Apollo Ballroom on Central where most of the big dances were held and most of the bands and entertainers performed at the Apollo. Now of course, there were some clubs that had entertainment as well at times. Like Rock Sander's ah Blue Room ah employed ah some nationally renowned black entertainers and musicians that performed at the Rock Sander's Blue Room which was on Central Avenue.

BS: What were some of the best times on Central Avenue that you can remember? Like could it be parades? I heard about parades.

RG: Well, that's the first thing that came to my mind. Was ah in the ah Maroon and Gold Classic was held in Tampa each year. It was ah a football extravaganza really. That ah which in Bethune Cookman College and ah a selected opponent participated each year. And it pulled people from all over Florida of course, to that event each year. And ah most if not all of them congregated on Central Avenue. It was quite a spectacle to see the various fashions and the ah people promenading up and down Central Avenue. And there was also a big parade associated with the activity and ah all of the () bands and bands from nearby communities like St. Petersburg, participated in the ah parade.

BS: What were some of the worst times that you can remember about Central Avenue?

RG: Well, I think the worst time I came up on Central Avenue is the time of the ah riots on Central in which newer businesses were destroyed by rioters. Um um I forgot now what year that was but ah anyway, there where a couple of incidents that ah that I of course I will never

forget it. But ah it was ah much of Central Avenue was destroyed by the fire, looted, and ah by destruction they could possibly use.

BS: What were some of the changes that you saw on Central Avenue after the closing of the shoe, do you remember the closing when they closed it down?

RG: Well, ah yes. I remember that ah all the buildings that were in that area were demolished you know, and the grounds were leveled. And um you can see today, you know, it's nothing but an open area most of Central Avenue is just a park. Um--.

BS: Do you have an opinion as to why it was closed or why they did away with it?

RG: Well the ah interstate highway system chose to build through the black community in the Central Avenue area. And of course, that led to the removal and and ah ah the demolition of all these ah businesses. That was the catalyst that did it. Stuck it back in Central Avenue's heart. And then there was Urban Renewal which of course ah which was it was East of Central but ah the expressway, the interstate highway system was what really killed Central Avenue.

BS: Where did you typically go for business entertainment after Central Avenue was closed? Was there another place that blacks congregated after Central closed? What happened?

RG: Well, after Central closed there was still ah sections of the city that housed ah ah businesses the catered predominantly to Afro-Americans. Ah Main Street in West Tampa and ah 22nd Street in Belmont Heights ah still had ah businesses ah that were owned and operated mainly by blacks and and ah patronized by blacks. But they weren't of the same quality nor were they recognized as well as those businesses were on Central Avenue.

BS: Who were some of the other business owners that you remember? Some were Pete Rains. What were some others?

RG: Well Pete Rains, Watt Saunders, ah Henry Joiner, Ruth Edwards, ah.

BS: What did Mr. Davis own?

RG: What did he own? He had a pool room and I'm not sure about the pawn shop, but he had a pool room, I know on Central Avenue and later he had a thriving business of course, on 22nd Street. Ah a big, ah social ah big night club, bar on 22nd Street. Ah there was Charlie Green, who owned a ah Savoy, which was in the same building with father's business was several years prior to that. The Royal Palm. And a Charlie Green took over that business and the name changed to the Savoy on Scott and Central. There were barber shops. So the Marshall barber shops, owned by Mister Marshall a business man. Ah. There was Macarthur's Studio. Ah, Mr. Mac Author was a photographer and I think the only black photographer in Tampa at the time. He had a business on Central Avenue. There was a hot dog stand that eventually the whites ah owned. They purchased it from a friend of my family's ah. We were originally from Lake City, my mother's home. Ah on Central and Constance which was a business most people um frequent at one time or another.

BS: Did you work for any of your father's businesses as a young man?

RG: No. No. I never did it. When my father owned and operated most of the businesses off or around Central Avenue area, I was of course, elementary aged child even younger, and in junior high, senior high and on to college. And ah during my college years of course, ah he

uh divested himself of most of the businesses that he owned and ah () that he had businesses in West Palm Beach that he ah ah was involved with and spent most of his time ah operating. And so no, I never worked or was involved in his businesses.

BS: Do you remember ---

RG: It just dawned on me one summer I was in high school, I think the summer after I graduated from high school and was awaiting ah fall to come to attend college, I worked at the Central Life Insurance Company, you know. Of course which he was on the Board of Directors and one of the founders and because of his influence of course, I realized that that's why they hired me that summer. But other than that I never had any employment in them.

BS: Do you remember the death of Martin Chambers, when that happened?

RG: Ah, yes I think Martin was a young Afro-American boy that was shot by the City police. Ah attempting to avoid being arrested or something of that nature but then they had I think that that's what motivated ah incited to black community to to riot. And as a result there were many business and buildings were ah damaged and destroyed in the Central Avenue area.

BS: Is there anything further that I haven't asked you that you want to share with me at this time about some black businesses of your father?

RG: Well I would like to see, to have seen Central Avenue continue as a ah clinic for black businesses and and ah so that I could see how these changing times would have affected Central Avenue. Ah central integration of course, ah blacks have access to many places that they didn't have during those days when Central was in it's hay day and that's just one thing. Since and because of that change would Central has survived and to what extent it would have survived and would Central ah have become ah integrated or would Central have died a natural death? Those are questions of course, that will never be answered and unfortunately we just will never know. But deep down I I really feel that ah if circumstances had not caused Central to Central Avenue area to be ah transformed into interstate highway interchange ha that Central still would be a proud and popular area today for all people.

BS: This concludes our formalized interview. I want to thank you so much for sharing and um thank you again.

RG: Your certainly welcome.