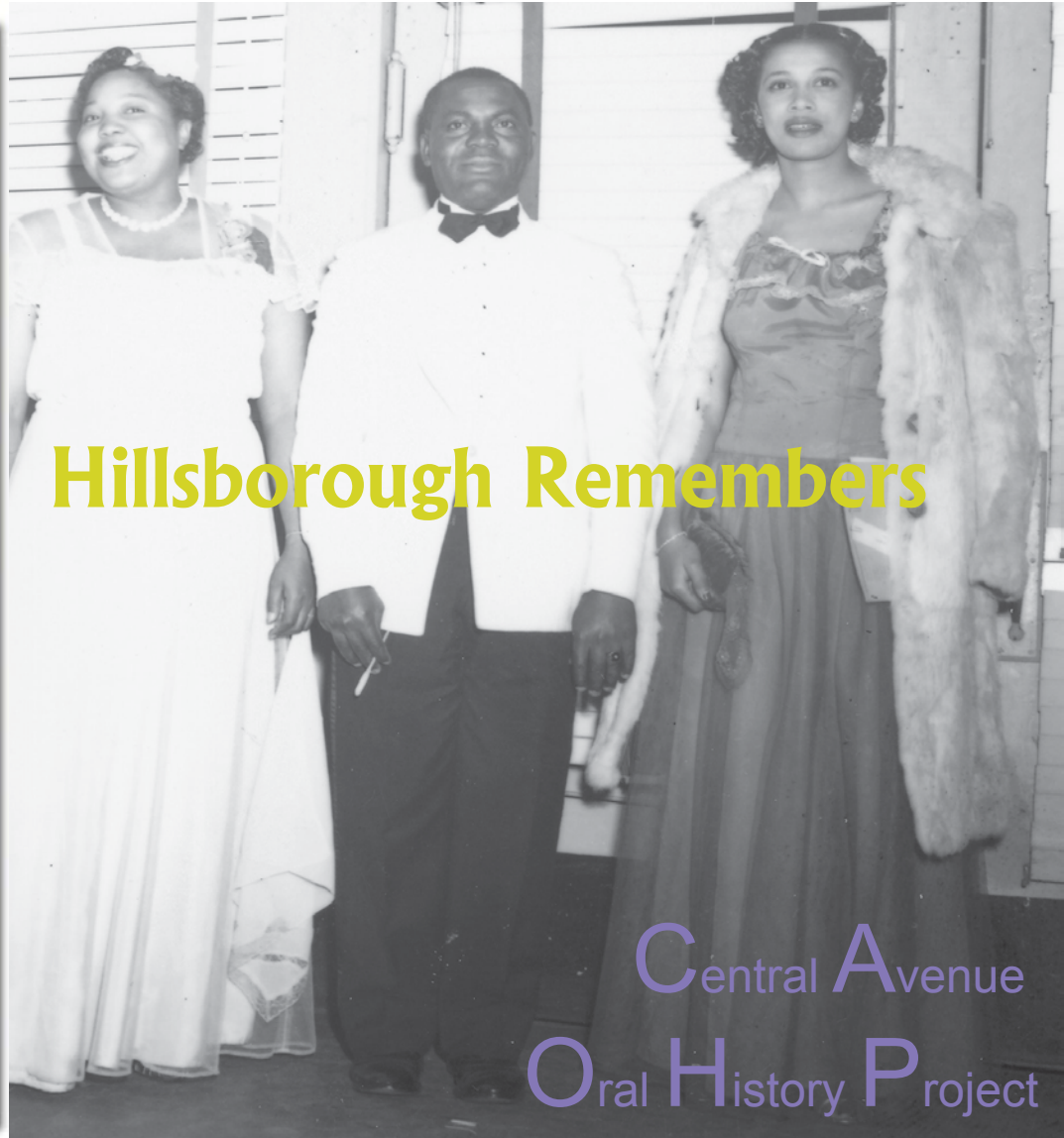


Annie Mae Gilchrist-Blake



Hillsborough Remembers

Central Avenue
Oral History Project

This is an interview with Annie Mae Gilchrist-Blake(GB) of Tampa, Florida. This interview is being conducted at the Ybor City Branch Library on October 13, 2003. Ms. Gilchrist-Blake is going to tell us about her memories of Central Avenue and her businesses.

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

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

GB: When I was just a teenager we used to go to the recreation center on Saturday nights. That was our bare needs of dancing and having a good time. And Ms. Jenkins and Hammond was our, I guess their escorts or whatever they were. But anyway, um we would have a good time and if we got too close together Ms. Jenkins would come and put her hand between you so, and we turn the lights out and she come and turn them back on. We just kept her going, but you know, we all had good clean fun. It was just fun and it was turned out at eleven. Then we would go on Central Avenue to Cozy Corner and get that hot dog, or that chicken sandwich, that chili and it was wonderful. I mean everybody came. Or that red rice, you know, and then we would walk home. And just, you know, have a good time going home. We all walked together because we didn't have any other transportation but we just got in groups and we walked and ate our sandwiches and just had good clean fun.

CH: What was the name of the center?

GB: Kid Mason's Recreation Center.

CH: What years 1948 through '72 for example, did you spend time on Central Avenue?

GB: From 1950 I think was about the first time that I started going to Central. And of course I was going to church at Beulah and I joined Beulah at age thirteen, so you know, I was in the area but, you know, we just--. We did go on Central during that time when Easter come cause we would take, you know, do the Easter Parade down Central and then take pictures, you know. So, I say from fifties on.

CH: Did you live in that community?

GB: No, I lived on Constance Street down at the lower end of Constance down by the river. An that's where I was.

CH: Is that the Garrison?

GB: No, it wasn't the Garrison. Garrison was on the south end we were, Constance Street is where, you know, the jail, Sheriff's department is. That's Constance and a we lived just before you go across the Fortune Street bridge. Right down there.

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

GB: Yes.

CH: If so, tell us what business was that and tell me something about the business.

GB: Ah, I was a, I am a cosmetologist, or hairdressers what you called then and when I first came out of school I went to work for Lovie at Lovie's Beauty Salon and then after a couple of years, a friend of mine named Marion, we moved out. In fact, Marion Curles was a niece

of Johnnie Gray, and we moved down in the next block and we opened a shop called Personality Plus Beauty Salon. And we stayed there for, I guess, five years or so and then she left town so I ended up selling the business. And then I went back to Lovie's and worked. And ah, of course before that, you know, I went to beauty school. Ah at Sunlight Beauty School in '58-'59 and at during that time I worked at Shelly Green Restaurant as a waitress to send myself to school. And I worked, I went to school from 8 to 4 and worked Shelly Green from 4 to 12 and ah but I was there on Central when I finished beauty school in 1959. I was there until 1970 and then I moved on to Nebraska.

CH: Can you give me a description of the building that you were in? How it was set up, if you can remember.

GB: Well this building was one of their newer buildings. It was a block building and it was right at between Short Emory and Harrison Street. Right on the north, I guess, the northwest corner was Walker's Grocery Store and then the beauty shop was next to that and then there was a beauty supply place next to it. And John B's tavern was next to that. Ah, we had um, about five booths for rent and we had several operators but it was ah one of the newer shops, like I said because the building was a newer building. It was a block building.

CH: Did you take walk-ins or did people have to make appointments?

GB: We preferred to do appointments but we did take walk-ins if they didn't mind waiting.

CH: I know it's quite far back there, but could you remember what a typical wash and set was back then?

GB: Well, to be honest with you we didn't have wash and sets then. Ah no, we was strictly on straightening, straightening, press, and curl. Ah hair weaves then was \$1.25 and of course, when we first moved we ran a special for seventy-five cents to get business in. But that was the price a dollar and twenty-five cents. And usually if they had long hair we might get a little bit more, a quarter more or something like that but that was the going price.

CH: What other kinds of business were on Central Avenue and who owned some of them?

GB: Well, um going from where I was, going south the next door neighbor was a, his name was Chapman he wasn't from Tampa but he came to Tampa and he opened a beauty supply place and the guy that ran it for him was William Butler he is a Tampian. And then next door was John Reed and that was run by Mr. and Mrs. Reed, they were black. And then there were at some point in time there were another little restaurant I don't remember the name of it but ah it was a guy named Sam and Rose and I don't remember their last names but they opened a little restaurant. And then on the corner was the Moon which was owned by Cleo, um I don't remember his last name. Ah then upstairs was the Apollo Auditorium. I don't know if that was owned by black or white or who but that's where they had the dances and they () the Float and Shake. And then um well actually Rodgers Dining Room was in the next block and that was owned by blacks and Attorney Fordham and Rodriguez and there was some doctor, but I can't remember his name. And also Faragut, David Faragut owned the pool hall and then we cross the street and come back on the other side, Sollie had a fuse it place in there. I forgot Sollie's last name now. And then on the corner, Ms. Singleton owned the beauty the shop before Lovie owned it and then Lovie bought her out cause then she moved to Orlando. In then next door to Lovie was a dry cleaners, and I don't remember the

name of the people but they were there and they were black and next door to that cleaners was Johnnie Gray's restaurant. And ah next door to them was another little restaurant and it was run by the Dillard's. And then skipping some business Kirk had a pool room on the next block. And then we go on down further and then there was Lee Davis pool room and Kid Mason had a variety store near the corner with the Greek Stand. And I don't know if the Palace Drug Store was run by blacks but we frequent there, that was a hang out for us () to buy ice cream and what have you. And further on down was the ah Florida Sentinel Bulletin. And then the last business that I remember on that side of the street was ah The Helping Hand Day Nursery. And then when you cross the street coming back south, um on oh, that's right the the YMCS was there too. The YWCA was on the corner of Kay and Central. And across from that well, Buddy's Bar was there and then we had got to Archie and I don't know if Dr. Irvine was up there or down further, but Dr. Irvine. And then there was the library. And um, there was a barber shop on the corner and around the corner was Shelly Green's restaurant. And then Funny Boy had, across the street, Funny Boy had a little pool hall. And um Savoy, I don't know about the Savoy. I don't know if the Savoy was owned by blacks or not but I don't think so. But then there was in later years Henry Joyner – Benny Shuman had his bail bonds place there. And then many years Mr. Joyner had moved up there and he was next door to Benny Shuman. And then across from an alley was a um barber shop and before then Mac, Macarthur had a studio in there. And then there was also a beauty shop and then Club Rauls then Palm Dinette and Cozy Corner. Then there was a cash stand, but I don't know if it was owned by blacks or not. ().

CH: I'm () you remember everything, you've given a great idea of a lot of the types of businesses that were there. Who were some of the people, do you remember seeing any celebrities or ?

GB: Oh yeah. We saw all the celebrities just about then um coming up to that time because they stayed at the Pyramid Hotel and that was the only um black hotel. I don't know if it was black owned but they said it was black owned. But they would walk down Central and they would stop in the beauty shop which you would see and Goldie had his singing, all the singers. Some of them would come in and get their hair done. And I remember vividly Judy Sheiks when he used to come in the shop and even like the Five Roys they stayed in Tampa all the time and they would come in. And the Mighty Clouds, you know, you just saw everybody. Tina Turner and B. B. King, you know just all the old singers was that was there hang out. And an and you know, you just got to meet 'em you could just reach out and touch 'em, you know. And everybody was you know, basically really friendly.

CH: Is there any one specific thing that you remember happening on Central that was – that stands out in your mind whether it relates to a celebrity, or an event, or anything?

GB: Well, um we used to really enjoy the True to Maroon and Gold and you know they had the parades down Central and and and you know, it was really something to see. And FAMU you know, and and it was just, now we can't see that because we don't have that. It's just all in cooperation and the bands all meet still now. But then it was you know, a total black parade. And which it was really nice and it was something that you, you know just () was to see our people in these parades and what have you.

CH: What represented, you may have already covered this, but what represented some of the best times on Central Avenue? I was gonna say the parade as an example. But is there any other things that when you consider what some of the best times on Central.

GB: Oh, when we used to dance a lot. We'd go up to that Apollo Auditorium and we'd dance and the floor would be shaking. We say we gonna fall in () but you know, it never fell in. But you just, you just would think that it would, but it didn't. And then we also went to the movies, because that was the only movies we had two movies there. There was a Central Avenue movie and the Lincoln Theatre and you know, those are thing that we could go into 'cause we weren't allowed in the bars so we had to just go where we were allowed. And on Saturday's we'd get our soda water tops and what have you and we'd go and watch a movie. And ah like I said, going to the our () Cozy Corner chicken and hot dogs and stuff. And that was basically all we could really do as young people, you know, but as adults then you know, you had the Cotton Club that you could go in and have a good time. You know, if you indulged but ah and Buddy's Bar and you go in these places and you would see people that you know, you know especially adults that those the places that they had to be. Um they could only be in and they were nice places you were go in and they would be fighting and carrying on but you know, we have as much now no killing per se. We um during that time if it was a fight it was a good clean fight. The only thing that would probably happen that was bad was you get cut with a knife 'cause they didn't have guns and stuff then, you know. So it was more or less most of it was good clean fun. You would also go to the armory. The Fort Homer Hesterly Armory and they would have dances over there and that's when you know, all the entertainers would come to town and we pack up our foods. We were allowed to have food in there so we'd pack up our food and get us a table and just have a good time. You know and just good clean fun.

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

GB: Well, when they started rioting. Um that was one of the worst times that I remember because I was working down there. They was burning buildings and what have you. And the buildings were old and most of 'em was frame, wood and when they start burning, if they burn one building then all the other buildings caught on fire. And it just put so many people out of work you know, and we just lost a lot of our camaraderieness then and especially places that, that was the beginning of the downfall of Central Avenue. The riots, because when they tore up the buildings or burned the down then they didn't want to build them back. And of course, you know, they would not, we could not get financial money like, you know we could to build businesses because it was just not open to us. The loans and stuff was not open to us. So, that was one of my worst times ah with that happening.

CH: Where did you live or work during the summer of '67 and what do you remember about the death of Mickey Chambers and the Civil Rights, the services that followed in Tampa?

GB: I lived in Central Park Village and I was a in the next block right across the street from where Chambers was. And at that time I was home in the bed a sleeping, I heard everybody say, "He killed him! He killed him!" and um then I got up to find out what was happening. And then they told me that, you know, a Chambers had gotten shot. And so, you know, I'm trying to find out what it was all about, you know but I wasn't right in the center of it right then because they, his mother lived, they lived um on this side. I lived on State Road called

State Road Bird Court and they lived on Joyer Court () and State Road so we, I was very close in that and that's when the rioting began after that.

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

GB: Um, I moved off of Central in 1970 and um that was after the riots so it had begun to um not have the business because of the other businesses being burned out. And um people just didn't come down there like they did before. And certainly we started you know, going other places building business start moving out because of the deterioration of Central Avenue. And of course, there was still quite a few of them down there until the urban renewal came in but it was never like it was before. Ah, till like it.

CH: Where did you typically go for business or entertainment after Central was closed.

GB: Oh! Not much of any place (). We they had this golfers club, they opened this house the golfers club and we used to go down there on the weekends and dance. And of course when we was dancing we stayed nice and thin. You know, dancing's good exercise. And once you stop dancing then you just gain all this weight. And I know that happened to me but to me that was basically the only place that I went. And then they used to have the singings then Goldie stopped the singings after a point so we didn't have the spiritual singings come to town any more. Ah, then of course, ah Buddy's moved on Seventh Avenue and ah I would go by there sometimes but that, I couldn't drink. You know, I just, I tried to drink but I couldn't, I just couldn't absorb it. It just wouldn't let me drink and so I would just go in bars and just have a Coke just to chit chat and be around people that I knew. And you know, we had good fun that way. We, you know, because we, we had good camaraderie and ah that's about all that I can remember, the only place that I --.

CH: You mentioned several times the name Goldie, can you tell us who he was?

GB: Goldie Thompson. He was a, a DJ at WTMP and um he would ah promote gospel singing at, at that time it was McKay Auditorium, that's over there at the University of Tampa. And he would have singers come in, that's when you knew, you met all the, the ah gospel singers like the Clouds of Joy, and Funerals (), the Blind Boys, Southerners. You know, all the singers he would bring them in. we have never had that then since Goldie left. I mean that was just one thing, you just dressed up. Put on you hat and gloves and stuff and went to the singing. And you had a wonderful time. A hallelujah good time. And ah it was just wonderful. And then after he, he, he left I think he went to St. Petersburg and start promoting something over there but it was never like it was at the McKay Auditorium.

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

GB: Um, well you know I said Cozy Corner, when Cozy Corner was first ah – when we first got you know, Cozy Corner Dave and I can't remember the other man owned that Cozy Corner then. and ah then after a while they a Moses White () but they moved across the street but that chicken was just so wonderful and everybody would come and they would say, "Where's Cozy Corner?" you know. "I want some of that chicken we've heard about and that hot dogs, and that red rice!" And of course, Rod's Standing Room was one of the other businesses that ah was at the Harris and her sister owned and they had very good food. You

could always recommend people to go there because it was nice and clean. And of course, even the Greek Stand they some good 'ole pepper steak, you know. you just, you know, just had to have some of that pepper steak or something. Shelly Green of course, was another restaurant that had good food and now you just don't find the soul food restaurants like we used to. And you sort of miss that you know, at least I miss it because --. And you know, even Johnnie Gray you know, you just had more to choose from and whatever you choose to have you know, you could just have, you had the place to go and get it. 'Cause most of the people specialized in, in different dishes, you know. and you could go to this restaurant and get this and go to other restaurant and get that. And it was just wonderful that you had a choice. And now that we don't have the choices that we had then --.

CH: Well thank you so much for sharing your memories with us. This completes our formal interview. Thank you again.