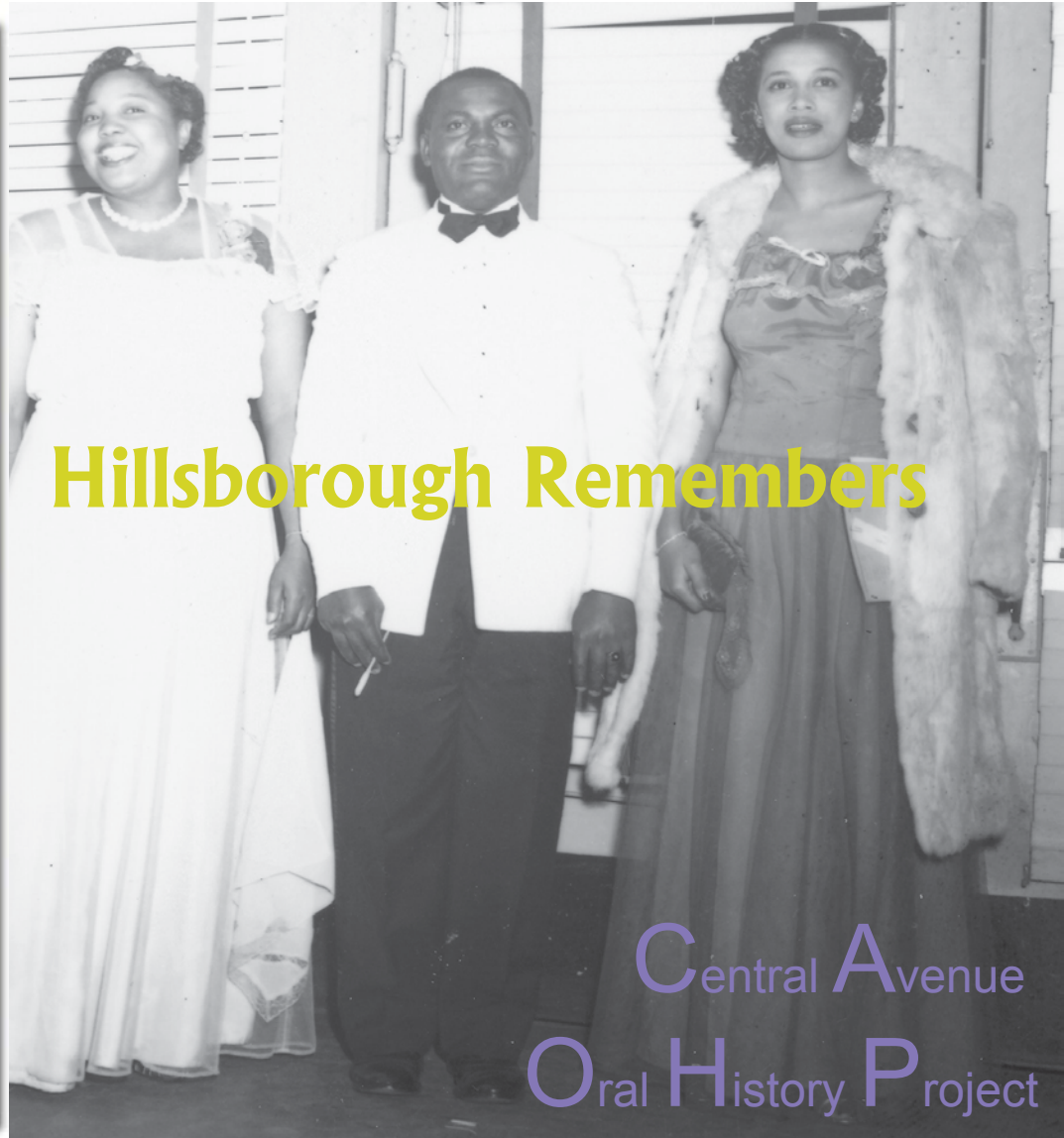


Rosa Bell Mitchell



Hillsborough Remembers

Central Avenue

Oral History Project

This is an interview with Rosa Bell Mitchell (RBM) 100 years old of the city of Tampa, FL. This interview is being conducted on September 19, 2003 at the residence of Mrs. Mitchell, 382 E. Flora St., Tampa, FL. Ms. Mitchell will talk about her memories of Central Avenue and Tampa. We also have Johnnie Sanders (JS) and John Byrd (JB) who may have some input. The interviewer is Carrie J. Hurst, (CH) representing the Central Avenue Business and Entertainment District Oral History Collections Project.

CH: Let's begin. What are your earliest memories of Central Avenue?

RBM: Central Ave? Know about the hotel, know about Lee Davis all them big names on that building () up and down there. I done forgot their names.

CH: Moses White, do you remember him?

RBM: No, I don't remember him.

CH: He owned the Cozy Corner.

RBM: I remember Dustin or two or three of them, but I can't recall their names.

CH: Who owned the Greek Stand?

RBM: Yeah, the Greek Stand was on Central. Just before you get to Scott Street. Boo's drug store was cross on that corner.

CH: What was the name of the drug store?

RBM: Unh uh. No, boy!

CH: Were you born in Tampa?

RBM: No, I was born in () in Valdosta, Georgia. I been here ever since I was three years old.

CH: You used to live down by Central Avenue? You lived in the Central Avenue area?

RBM: Yeah, I lived in the hotel for two years. Mama had bought on Scott Street and she rented the house. For two years we lived in the Central Hotel up on the third floor for two years.

JB: That's where where my family met –

RBM: () James Butler was the one that owned at that time.

CH: James Butler? Do you remember how the hotel looked? Can you describe it? What it was like living there?

JB: It was a big ole red brick building. If I remember correctly, I think it was about three stories high, and ah it was just that Beluga Hotel. And ah () people who lived in there.

CH: They had shops on the ground floor?

JB: Yeah, they had a couple of shops on the ground floor. I don't remember, I know one was a cleaners or a pressers.

CH: And the hotel was between two streets, which two streets on Central Avenue?

JB: Between Harrison and Pierce I believe it was. What was the next street over from Harrison? That was Pierce.

JS: Do you remember Muzzy Ally?

JB: Yeah, that was behind the hotel.

CH: Were you related to any business owners?

RBM: No. No. No. I got no kin people, nowhere. I'm related to nobody but my momma and my aunt, my sisters. We were a very small family.

CH: Do you remember seeing any famous down there? Do you remember an famous people coming through singers or movie stars?

RBM: No.

JS: Annie, do you remember when Cab Calloway came to town?

RBM: Cab Calloway? Yeah, I remember but I don't know the year. Yeah, I remember we went to St. Pete ().

JS: They ran him out of St. Petersburg.

RBM: Yes, yes. I remember, sure I remember.

JS: Annie, who else do you remember? Do you remember Chick Webb?

RBM: Who?

JS: Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald. Do you remember them?

RMB: Yeah, Ella Fitzgerald () remember all them ole singers. Sure I do. Susan Boganbees all them ole ()

JS: What about Silas Green?

RMB: Yeah, Silas Green. Right, right.

JS: Tell Carrie about Silas Green.

RMB: Well, well all I can say about it Johnnie is that one was short. That's all I can say about it. ()

CH: Do you remember the parades down Central? Parades they used to have?

RMB: Let me tell ya, the last parade I went ta was on Franklin Street. And me, my mother, and I think it was my sister, but I can't stop I was so hot. When I know in the day again I was back home in the bed. So, I been to one parade since then () on 7th Avenue and always toted a stool for momma to sit on. That's the last parade I been ta.

CH: What year did your momma die?

RMB: '64. 1964.

JS: Did you ever see a parade on Central Avenue?

RMB: No, I never seen a parade on Central.

JS: And neither did I for that matter, so they may have happened after.

RMB: Where the Desoto Hotel was that was a sand street back there playing with the () and dogs they knocked my hands up, knocked my legs out, come by on the window glass, cut that open. Right behind the Desoto Hotel.

JS: You was in the alley behind our house.

RMB: Yeah. Yeah, they still staying there on Zack Street.

CH: John is going to tell us some things that he remembers about Central Ave.

JB: Well, I used to work in the Central Theatre. Which is on, I think that's on Emery and Central. Yeah, it's on Emery and Central of the theatre there.() inside of concession area.

You walk up and down the aisles selling peanuts, soft drinks, candy, and cold sodas. Ha, ha, ha. And then across the street from there, was the first black supermarket in Tampa with Jenkins Supermarket. I worked there delivering groceries on a bicycle, uhuh.

CH: Was that on Central Avenue?

JB: That was on Central Avenue, right across the street from the the Central Theatre.

CH: So Central Avenue was **the** place for black people?

JB: Oh, it was the rage then, yeah. Um, ah, I'd say 95% of the businesses on Central Avenue was owned by blacks. It was a very small percentage of white rulers on on Central Avenue.

CH: So, do you remember the good times, I mean, when people--?

JB: Oh, they used to () we used to have a dance hall there on Central Avenue. Almost directly across the street from the hotel. Upstairs, one flight up. And every evening there was dancing going on there. Until, they built the () room.

JS: Tell her about Charlie Moon's place and all of that.

JB: Oh, yes. Charlie Moon was, back in those days they had bollita which was legal in Tampa, and right on the corner of Harrison and Central was this bollita house which this guy's name was Charlie Moon that owned it. And he had black guys used to work for him in there.

CH: What were some of the changes, were you around when the changes to Central Avenue came?

JB: No. No. No. I left Tampa in 1935 when I got back they showed me around Tampa. Central had changed so much. I came back in 1971.

CH: So you don't remember the riots?

JB: No.

JS: No, I don't either. I wasn't here when that happened.

JB: You know they used to have a black guy, used to be a policeman.

JS: His name was Purdy, oh God, I know cause he used to come to our house. He was a real mean policeman too.

JS asked Ms. Mitchell: Do you remember the name any of those black policemen?

RBM: Black policemen? Yeah! Pearl ()

JB: Yeah, that's it. Pearl ()

RBM: Joe Nash was one.

JS/JB: Yes. Yes.

RBM: Those the only two I know. Joe Nash and Pearl Mac. And Pearl Mac () got killed ya know. Got killed in a Miami.

JS: Yeah, that's what I heard.

CH: What were their names again?

JS: Pearl Macadin and the other one was Joe Nash. They were really tough guys.

CH: I've heard, is it true that the black police were against black people?

JB/JS: Yeah.

JS: That was true. Absolutely true.

JS: Annie, when you was ten years old and you was attending school down in the church basement, you remember when you was ten years old?

RBM: Yeah, I was about between nine and eight when I was going to school and living by the () basement.

CH: Reverend Botany.

JS: What was the name of the church?

RBM: Yeah, yeah, we was still living on Zack Street. And then momma moved from Zack Street after my step-father got drowning, she moved on Owens Street. But I still went to school in the basement run by Miss Church. That's were I was when they lynched that man over in the, in the Morgan Street Jail. Oh, had the name on, had the name, it didn't say police station cause that wasn't the name. The County Jail.

JS: County Jail.

RBM: County Jail! It was across the street from the church, yeah. The cemetery flowed this away and cross Mitchell way was the Amdro Insurance shop.

JS: That's right. That's right. Amdro America.

RBM: And that big wooden building you had to pass to go the --- what I called it?

JS: County Jail.

RBM: That's where the people were standing up on that building looking over over in ---

JS: The jail yard.

RBM: when they lynched that man. I was there in school then. they were all up in the window of the church. We was on Owens Street at that time.

JS: What's the name of the church?

RBM: All I know Reverend Botany. Reverend Botany all I know. I done forgot the name of the church.

JB: That was the only school ---

RBM: Reverend Botany ---

JS: That was Harlem Academy.

JB: Harlem Academy ()

RBM: I think () Oh! My yes, I go somewhere now I don't know where I'm at one half of the time.

Pause in interview.

RBM: () I'm the closer neighbor so's the bell and the white men beat me up and kept () towards the bell ()

JS: The fire station?

RBM: I'm the first to pull the bell () on Zack Street.

JS: On Zack Street. They lived at 806 Zack. We lived --

RBM: Which wouldn't a come () across the street.

JS: That's right!

RBM: Momma wait over there.

JS: Have you ever heard of the Café Cardin? It was down there, it was it took like a whole block. And it was surrounded by a big um high wall. Do you remember John? Um.

RBM: () no pool shark would touch a woman downtown cause you had to go downtown ya know to the post office.

JS: Do you remember the City Market?

RBM: Yes. I remember that. Yes, yes when towards Zack Street () on this side.

JS: Exactly.

RBM: Yeah, I remember. I remember.

JS: And what about when we used to go crabbing down by Tampa General Hospital?

RBM: Yeah. Yeah, I remember all that.

JB: You didn't tell me that was our swimming hole down there.

JS: What about that great big fish house down there at the corner? Just before you go across the bridge. You remember the name of that fish --?

RBM: Bella ain't it?

JS: I don't remember.

RBM: I think that's Bella. You know there's two. There's one like going, I can't name the bridge, going to West Tampa on the back side.

JS: Yeah, that's not Bella.

RBM: () sit down in that.

JS: Annie, there was a fish market like if you was going across to Bayshore but going across to Hyde Park there was a fish market over there. Down at the end of Zack Street. Or what they call it, Grand Central.

RBM: Yeah.

JS: Remember that street, Grand Central?

RBM: I don't know the name of the street. Now I remember when Clara Frye Hospital.

JS: Uh huh, Clara Frye.

RBM: I don't know where that was. What street it was on I can't --

JB: I think it was on Main Street. Wasn't it?

RBM: () They tore it down, they moved off the river() I don't know the name of , I don't know. I done forgotten the name of the streets.

JS: When did you move away from that neighborhood?

RBM: From over on Zack Street? I couldn't tell you. It's been so long, I couldn't tell you.

JS: Where did move to when you left from over there?

RBM: We moved to Owens Street. That's the same neighborhood. Yeah, on Owens Street and when you was (). You don't ().

CH: No.

The Jordan's? One of them's name is Rosa. Rosa Jordan. They own a big grocery store.

Where you know us japers hung on ().

JS: Annie, was the streets paved or was it all sand?

RBM: Where, what street?

JS: On our street.

RBM: Was they paved? Yeah, it was paved.

JS: Was it in the scrubs?

RBM: No! No! We was across Scott Street.

JB: I remember, I remember when they built () grocery stand () on Indian Street, that was a dirt road when they built that street.

JS: Now that was the scrubs.

JB: Right, that was the scrubs.

JS: What about the garrison? Do you remember the garrison?

RBM: The garrison. Yeah that was a jail too. I was a child—I can't tell you. I remember it when they had the street cars. Everybody trying to get on the streetcars and I know them so well I getting on the streetcars going all over town. Everybody there knowed me. Yeah! Everybody. Do you know, where I lived and () home base security, did you know things got to older people they didn't nobody. And when I go back there ().

JS: Annie, do you remember the garrison?

RBM: The garrison?

JS: Yes.

RBM: Sure, I remember the gar. Munchie and I done playing on the old () in there.

JS: That's right. Back behind our house over there, going across the railroad track.

RBM: Yeah! () used to chew on ham, I wanted something to eat. () Sure I know ().

JS: Do you know. Do you know they done brought back the street car down there now? They done brought the streetcar back to Ybor City?

RBM: The streetcar. Yeah, I know they had an ole yellow streetcar that slung out on the side when you get in they took out the railings. Yeah ().

JS: How much it cost you to ride the streetcar?

RBM: Nothing. Everybody knows me. I get to go on the ride. Especially on Fourth St. you know that whole () park was a yard, anybody's yard. Out on Polk St. about four houses going back to Central Avenue them was nothing but no shacks. She ones that made cigars in them shacks. Yeah, in them shacks they made cigars.

JS: Who does your momma work for? Who did Momma Lizzie work for? Did Momma Lizzie have a job?

RBM: No, momma momma worked somebody's at the convent. No, momma going in ().

CH: What about you, did you have a job early on? Did you work?

RBM: I work? No. I always had to come back to () when you took my () keep my clothes clean you done enough. () child or man took care of his wife or his family. You understand me. () you could live on me. Two dollars and a half mostly goes from () that (). Two dollars and a half a week would buy anything you wanted to eat.

JS: You could buy a nickel's worth of chicken. You could buy a nickel's worth of grits. Cause people didn't make any money in those days. If somebody made five dollars a week working that was a lot of money.

JB: And most of us try to have a little garden in the backyard where they grow something.

JS: It was a lot of money. Can you imagine living on that amount of money? In the Charleston House people paid a dollar and a half a week, room rent. They raised it up to two dollars round about 1946 so that they were paying two dollars a week, room rent. When I went to work at the Floridian Hotel, I was being paid fifteen dollars a week. And that was a lot of money, a lot of money fifteen dollars a week.

JB: () I was down there looking at the place the other day, they done took those signs down.

JS: Yeah, they took the wall down ()

RBM: They had a big wood yard in their backyard. Was all cutting up wood. Jimmie and Thelma used to go on the truck and () hauling the wood in town. ()

CH: Do you have any memories of slavery times?

RBM: No, I don't.

JB: That was before our time.

RBM: You know I lay around sometime, you know the Bible is true it don't lie. It tell me your mind will go back over your life and when I lay down sometime seem like my mind starts traveling. And I'm laying back thinking on the changes that I say, Lord though I'm laying here thinking about all them changes. But the Bible don't lie He tell you, "your mind will get old, your mind goes back."

JB: That happens to me all the time.

JS: It's good to be able to remember, Annie.

RBM: Yeah, yeah, I remember. I remember.

CH: Is there anything else you remember that you want to talk about?

RBM: Naw.

CH: What about school? Did you go to school?

RBM: I went to school to Harlem. Harlem, went to school Harlem. You know, the Harlem School over beside the grave yard. Miss Beach was the principal.

JS: See there, she can remember all right!

RBM: She was the principal.

JS: Yes, she was.

RBM: I had my () and my knowledge Leona Fox. She was a teacher there.

JS: She was a teacher. Yeah, right.

RBM: Lil gal jumped on me and beat me one day. The next day I whupped her. Latinos () she's gonna wup me. Leona went in the room with me and told, told em said, "This child jumped on (). Leona Fox () took her names on Lena Fox, she was a teacher.

I tell ya, darling now everybody that come up with me – gone. Did you know I don't know too many people. And these people now that drive, you try to make friends, you know.

JS: They don't take care of old people the way they used to, do they? Well you got love.

CH: What's your secret for long life?

RBM: Yeah. Yeah.

CH: What is your secret to living a long life?

RBM: Yeah.

CH: Why do you think you lived so long?

JS: Is it God that's keeping you here, Annie?

RBM: I don't know why He's keeping me here because I ask Him to take me. I ask him to take me!

JB: She's suffering, nobody wants to suffer.

JS: Annie. Annie.

RBM: When I'm using the () I can't get up. Help myself, I can't wash my behind. Take me! Take me! I want Him to take me.

JS: Yeah but your able to do-- Annie, don't you cook every day?

RBM: I don't want be pushed here no way.

JS: Alright.

RBM: () on Franklin Street and the corner of Polk.

JS: Yes, and ()

RBM: Yeah, and the best () we had and that big Sheriff he stays right on the corner of Polk St. and Chaney St. where I told you I got leg cut on the back of the ()store ().

JB: They used to have a parade when they came to town.

CH: Who?

JB: Silas Green. Silas and he was a traveling show. A tent, they used to go from town to town.

JS: And they came at the same time the fair came. They was here at the same time the fair came and they had beautiful women that did a show like the Rockefeller girls, you know. A review they call it. I remember that it was on Scott and Nebraska now I remember as you said.

JB: Some of the () I don't know cause Fannie, Fannie was very popular. This music was very popular. They songs of female () and she was one of them. Minnie Butler and Rudolph Butler and another lady named Grace. A couple of em, I don't remember all of em, you know. But they was the socialites, the black socialites.

CH: O.K. Thank you all so very much for your input here today. And this concludes our formal interview.

