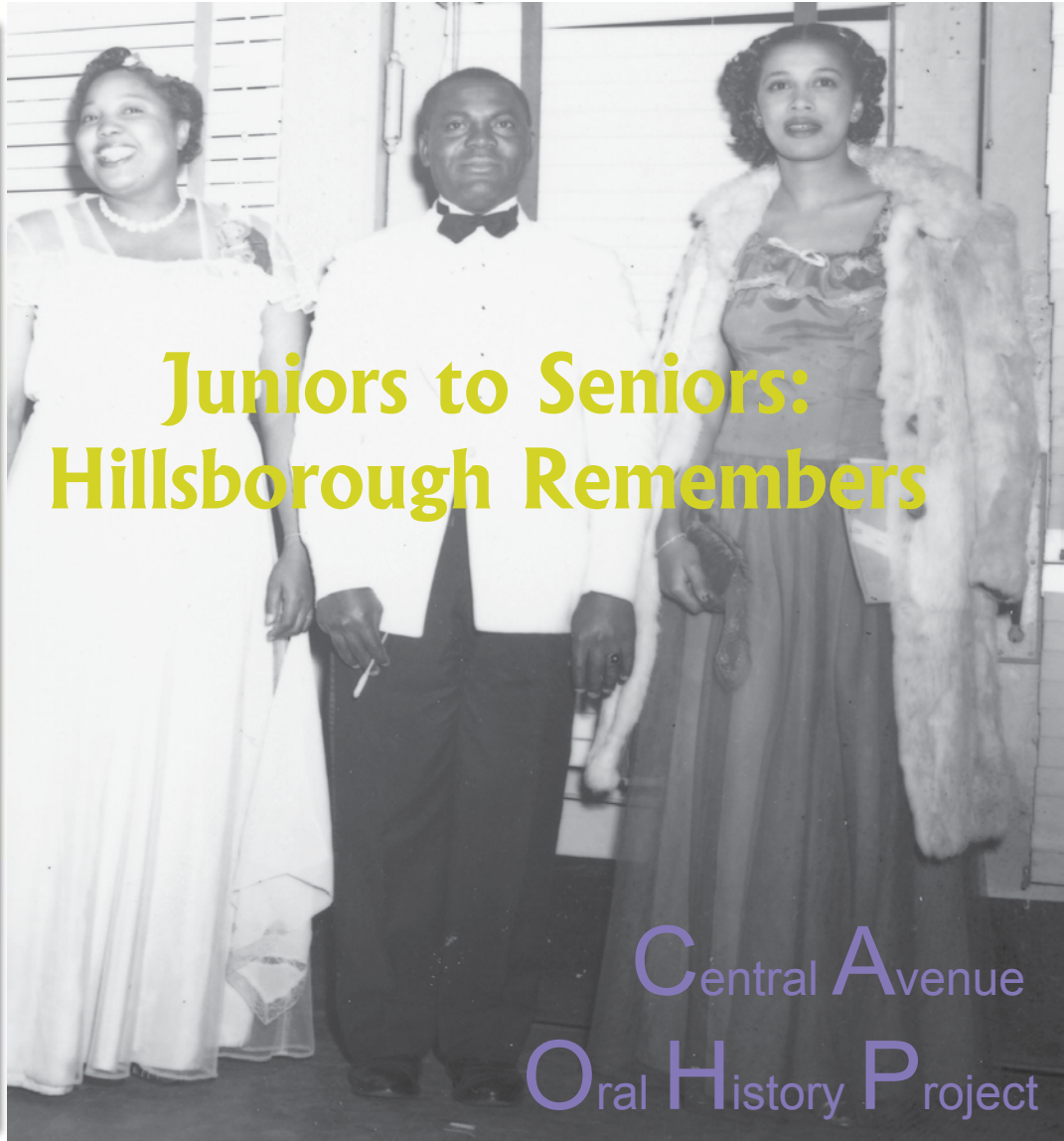


# *Watts Sanderson*

## **Juniors to Seniors: Hillsborough Remembers**

Central Avenue  
Oral History Project



*This is an interview with Watts Sanderson (WS). This interview is being conducted at the Library on.*

*The interviewer is , ( ) representing the Central Avenue Business and Entertainment District Oral History Collections Project.*

His hay day in the late mid to late 40's. That's during the war time, right after the war this was a very popular place. All the larger organizations of social clubs, the Shriners, the Elks, the Governing Waiters, all the sororities and fraternities they would all have their dances and balls in that place because it was kinda upscale. The most upscale club for blacks in town. And it was big enough to cater larger crowds of people. You know, so it was the place that the people would come after church on Sunday, you know. have dinner, and he carried all the name brand in his stores, exclusive brands of liquor so you know. they name something that he had something that he had it in stock. That was one of the things that he was most proud of, that he could service all your alcoholic needs. Beers of every kind and that kind of thing.

Well, o.k. Well a I guess too, too often when I talk to people um a you know, Central Avenue that's one of the first place that they mention. I think, um clearly, um people of the Calvary far remember businesses that located business people. You know I had a I think a novel idea not only to a offer much needed um links for entertainment and people to unwind also. I would think they had to be considered the forerunners on on what we know as as community services, you know.

Well, why?

Well for people in those um neighboring communities, not just there. In other areas of Tampa where where history took place near West Tampa or you know, Belmont Heights, Jackson Heights area. Ah, what what what sort of other, let's say you know, maybe community service or just a a community relations type activities, you know that involve other people ( ) achieve your call. Internal, like supporting and you know, hanging out.

WS: Um, again this recollections that mom gave to me and um. Which would be Idella Sanderson.

WS: Idella Sanderson, right and she was a school teacher. And I think she retired from Oak Park, was it?

WS: Oak Park Elementary, right. After, you know, serving thirty-two years. Thirty-two years.

WS: Yeah, but he was a member of several community groups like the Elks, and the Shriners, and that's kinda like why I followed in his footsteps and a Community of 100, largely with the Masons and that. He was also considered the "Black Mayor of Tampa" so he got at Rogers Park baseball diamond, he got the to throw out the first pitch generally when they open the season. Ah, you know, providing a jobs for in many different arenas because he owned a multitude of apartments and that kind. So maintenance jobs and the jobs at the pool room itself, you know. Waitress and that kind of thing so. And supported many of his

family, you know, like brothers and sisters and all that kind of stuff. Who also worked in in the floor. But ah just like some of the things that I know that Mose White did, he did those same things. Feeding people at you know, different times of his life. During Christmas offering meals to you know, poor and needy families and that kind of thing. He did that as well. You know, that kind of under cover kind of things. If guys got in a tight you know, with the law, he come to their rescue. And a he kinda was in the bail bonds business. Uh but unofficially, not a licensed bail bondsman, but you know he'd get a guy out of jail just on his word alone. A phone call and that kind of thing. Cat need to be home with his family, go to work until his court appearance come he could do that, you know.

And so basically, I guess it be o.k. to say this, like a clearing house that assisted in the war and the number of caps. Which is probably um, I'm sure in it's day was well known some of them probably still used more of it today but those types of actions and commitments which were made( ) that we all know to well. And I think in terms of – I wasn't familiar with the ( ) but certainly many people were. It was just slightly( ) my memories are like yours, vague during the time I was on Central. Now was that on Central Avenue? I seen Tree's Lincoln Theatre on the other side.

WS: Well, it was on the, it was on the opposite side of the street. But, let me say something else, in coming to you know, it was a deeply segregated society at that time. And and and and at best in order to matriculate and and and do whatever kind of business you had to do on Central Avenue it was a negotiated truce, so to speak, between the races. Blacks and whites. A you know, in order to be successful at it you had to have a some some input from white people, had to have some permission, so to speak, in order to be successful. He was able to negotiate that, not only for himself but for other blacks that a aspired and strove to get a in a business themselves.

Yeah, sort of introducing them in the steps of economics. Foothold for a community ( ). I'm sure we have a residual impact of that as we have now more people that are engaged in their own personal ventures or unfortunate or not just you know, a successful business district as Central. However, I think it's always ( ) to acknowledge bridges that brought us to where we at. Now you are a little bit of an entrepreneur yourself with a-- Didn't one time you mention you sold papers over there?

WS: Yeah, well. That's after my father passed. That's you know, how I um well got all a lot of my recollections about the businesses that were already established on Central Avenue. Cause I used to go in and out of those establishments as a young, young, boy, eight years old. And I started selling newspapers though cause my mom worked at Meacham and then I'd walk up to the Florida Sentinel Bulletin which was on Central Avenue as well. It's on, I guess it was farther east than my father's place, where I get my papers and a anywhere from eighty to a hundred papers a week. And I mean twice a week. And then and I walked down to Central Avenue walk into the barber shops, the restaurants, the even the night clubs and sell the newspapers. And a all on Central until I got to the end down by well, the theatre and then I cut back to Meacham and sell them to the school teachers, and then I come to West Tampa and sell the rest of my papers. So I had a pretty good paper route. I didn't even have the money. Yeah, I made plenty money. And I always had me a few dollars.

Yeah, see you jogged my memory, I didn't remember the Sentinel Bulletin was located ( ). Uh they do have a ( ) o.k.

WS: And he and my father, you know, were lodge brothers and you know, and a they were, a you know, Shriners together and stuff like that. Yeah, they were good buddies.

Um, anything else about Central that really stands out that um you'd like maybe to throw in here?

WS: Well, the thing that's marvelous about Central Avenue it's like a self contained microcosm of the entire you know, Tampa community. So right at Central Avenue you can get all the business services that you could get anywhere in town. It would be very difficult for a black person or a colored person, or whatever you want to call it, to get services really outside that community. You know, they go to the doctor, or go to a lawyer, or go to wherever outside that community would have been you know, kinda crossing some lines. And sure there were some blacks that had white attorneys but you know, very difficult you know to cross that line and you always under the microscope when you come out of that world. Out of the colored world into the white world, you know. So I mean everybody had to keep on. But in that world you could matriculate freely and get everything that you needed. And with doctors, the lawyer, and the pharmacy, the cleaners/laundry, pawn shop, shoe repair, um barber shops, the tailor shop, the beauty parlor, a movie theatre, hotel, restaurants, cab stands down there. You get your cab and go to West Tampa to go to ( ) with ( ). So, I mean, I'm trying to think a all the services you could every want were right there. And a even the day care, nursery was right there on Central Avenue which is halfway up. I mean you drop the kid off. Um, what else is up there? All the services you could ever want including entertainment was right there on Central Avenue.

You throw everything into a different perspective. When I'm thinking about it that is very well put. You know, I myself personally, I a you know, I think it but I didn't think about it all dovetailed into just being a whole self sufficient community.

WS: Yeah, self sufficient.

Exactly right.

WS: You had everything you needed.

That's right. You know, in as much as people, well I knew people residents now they talk about the entertainment but you did have a ( ) but you also had you know your professionals and your like you said your day care. And someone even mentioned, Clove mentioned there's a there's a bottling company down there that was near. It wasn't on Central but it was near Central near Allen Temple Church. ( ) when Calvin ( ) was doing the Boy Scouts, even though it was on the tail end when Central was ( ) because Central went ( ) that was in the sixties, you know. but a Calvin a you know, used to let us march through Central Park, you know. You know, there was very much a Central sort of thing. You know, people seeing that this guy has this going on, you know it stirs you. ( ) I still now riding down Fowler to 301 ( ) out there at USF. You had those type individuals you know that would

have a deep sense of commitment you know and made it a really you know a productive you know environment. Yeah, yeah. You know, I appreciate your input. If there is anything else you want to add to it, I mean you know we can put that on there.