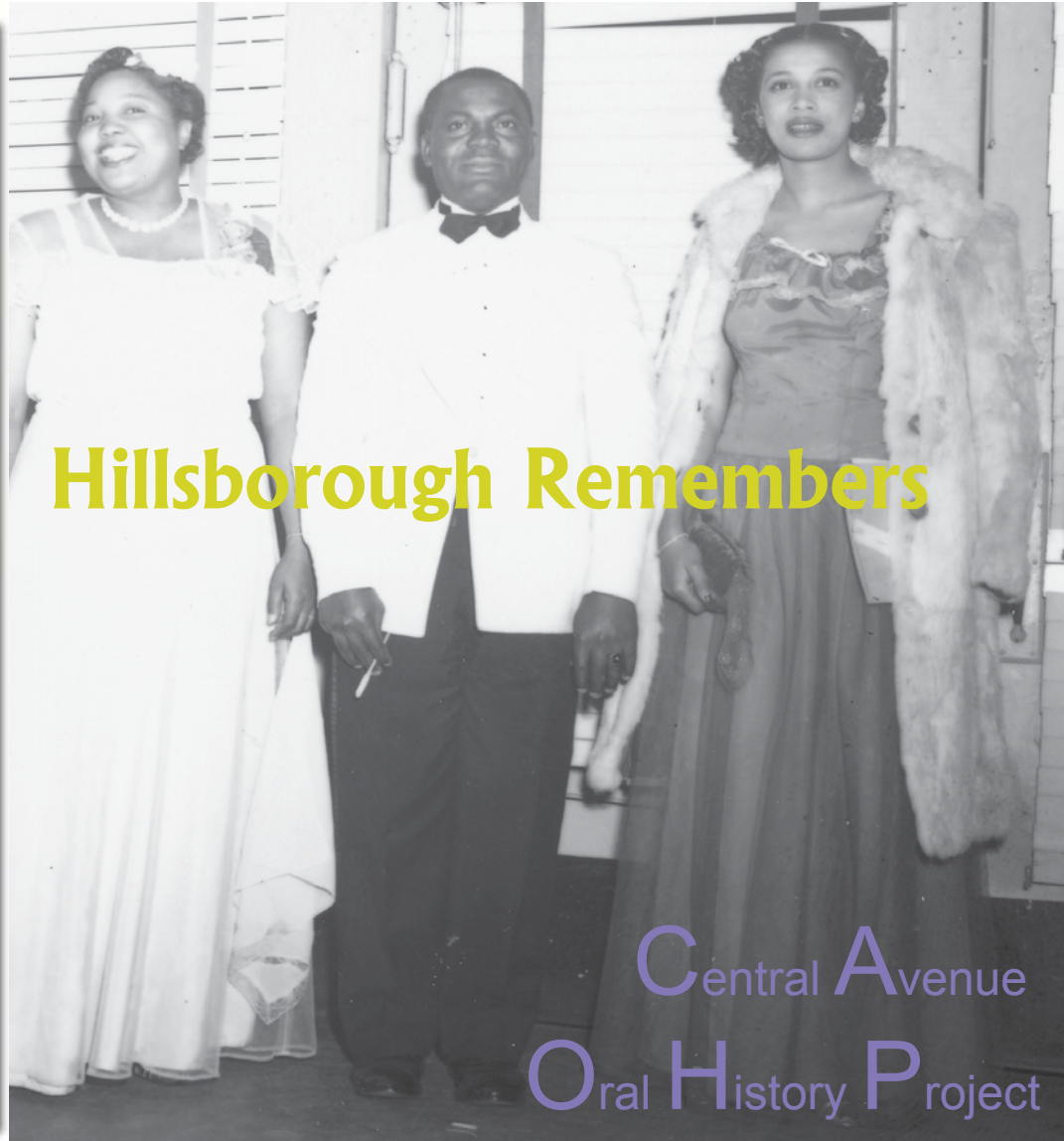


Bernadine White-King



Hillsborough Remembers

Central Avenue

Oral History Project

This is an interview with Bernadine White-King (BWK) of Tampa, Florida. This interview is being conducted on July 31, 2003 at the Ybor City Branch Library. Mrs. White-King is the daughter of Central Avenue business owner Moses White. The interviewer is Carrie J. Hurst, (CH) representing the Central Avenue Business District Oral History Collections Project.

CH: Mrs. King what are your earliest memories of Central Avenue's business and entertainment district?

BWK: My earliest memories of ah Central Avenue are centered around my father's business which was the Palm Dinette Restaurant. It was a place for family gatherings and of course, all of us eventually worked in it, my siblings, my mother and self.

CH: Was the Palm Dinette associated with Cozy Corner or was that something else?

BWK: No, actually my father owned the four business on ah Central Avenue. Ah the Palm Dinette, the Flamingo Rooming House, Four Walls Club, and Cozy Corner.

CH: What years did you spend time on Central Avenue, if you remember?

BWK: Well, I was born in 1951 and um my father ah went in business in um, on Central Avenue, long before I was born. Um probably in the early 40's. So all of my life, I've ah all of my, up until I um left Tampa in 1973 I was ah involved with ah Central Avenue in in some form.

CH: Can you tell me something about the businesses that your father owned?

BWK: Well, the Club Mose was a night club. Well let's start with the first of them. The Palm Dinette. Um my brother, my father's brother; Chester White Sr. became partners in the Palm Dinette on Central Avenue. To the best of what what I've been able to determine was 1944. And Uncle Chester went to work for the Tip Top Bread Company in the early 1950's leaving my father Moses and my mother Lucille as owners. Um, when you dined at the Palm Dinette you did not eat on paper plates. There were crisp white linen tablecloths with matching napkins, and your food was served on fine china. There were no drug dealers standing in front of the Palm Dinette. The Palm Dinette was a place to take your family for dinner, a place to entertain out of town guests, and a gathering spot to visit with friends after the Easter parade. The Palm Dinette was a favorite of the soldiers from MacDill Air Force Base. The soldiers got paid one a month and more often than not their desire for a good time always outlasted their money. Dad was able to negotiate a deal with MacDill's base commander to establish a credit card system for the soldiers. You see, Dad was a forward thinker and according to research done by my son, Zachary, he is a student at the University of Florida, this was an unprecedented act and absolutely unheard of for a black man parlaying such a deal with any branch of the military then or anytime since then.

CH: Do you remember how the dinette looked?

BWK: Yes. Yes. As you walked down, let's travel um South on Central Avenue. Um, my father displayed the food in the windows. Of for example, they had like jumbo shrimp and French fries, and fried chicken. And um, you know, all kinds of soul food, so he had the steam tables right in front of the windows, so as people walked by not only could they see it

but ah they could smell it. And you know, as they walked by then you know, the menu was posted outside or what ever and ah they would come in. It was um I I think it held maybe about 150 people. Ah there were tables uh with ah linens like I described and then along the wall, the north wall there were big booths that could hold you know, could ah hold about six people each. There was ah what we called piccolo, a juke box, and um ah ah the music was always going and of course, on Sunday my father played religious music but otherwise they were popular tunes of the day. Then it was very common to see some of the people who actually were on the juke box, a piccolo, walking down Central Avenue. Like a Sam Cooke, or um Ray Charles, or a just any of the entertainers. A my father also had a rooming house which was the Flamingo Rooming House. And many of because of segregation the entertainers couldn't go to the fine hotels downtown or the restaurants. So not only would my father have them um performing in the Club Walls nightclub he also had the rooming house that they stayed in and then he could feed them too. So it was a good deal for him and also the entertainers that performed at what was then called the Chipman circuit.

He also owned the Deluxe Cozy Corner Sandwich Shop on a Central Avenue. And anyone who is familiar with Central Avenue is a I'm sure can remember, gizzards and rice, and the fried chicken, and the three hot dogs for twenty-five cents. Can you imagine? But ah my father was real a real giver and um of course, the Central Park Village housing development was ah to the east, and that's really the reason my father started the twenty-five um cent hot dogs. Three for twenty-five cents and I mean he didn't spare anything. He put the chili and ah they even had a special chili sauce and onions and just whatever. Sometimes the toppings were even bigger than the buns would hold. But he saw ah the need for that because there were so many children that would come, Central Avenue was a safe place in coming up, it wasn't like a bunch of drug dealers hanging out or whatever, because there was really a sense of community. Ah the people there knew us, if my father needed something from the grocery store down the street, or if my mother was at the beauty shop, or if we went to the movies and um if the movies let out at seven o'clock at night or whatever we never had anyone ta you know, bother us or anything like that. And ah the children that came from Central Park Village a a they would love those hot dogs, and so people would ask my daddy, "Why don't you raise the price?" He said "No, as long as I'm here I'm always going to sell hot dogs at that price." Because he wanted everybody, you know, to feel a welcome and not excluded.

The businesses, particularly the a Cozy Corner was like a gathering place also, for politicians, or people who um just ah just wanted advise or whatever. My father was real giving and caring a not only with respect to his businesses but he was very concerned about the community. And ah I can remember a one time when I answered the telephone and um at the Cozy Corner at it was Vice President Hubert Humphrey and I thought my brother was playing a trick on me. So when he said the White House calling for Mr. Moses White I was like "What do you want? Don't don't bother us here. Busy" or whatever and I hung the phone up. And they called back and my father answered the phone, and they said we're calling, I can't remember, telephone number and this is the White House calling for ah Mr. White. And ah my father realized that I had actually hung up on the ah White House and he told me "Don't you every answer the telephone again!" And I mentioned it to my mom when I went home and a she was aware that he had that relationship with ah Vice President ah Humphrey and my father never mentioned () and so I was like so excited and

everything. And mother said, "That's not something to be shared." That's something that you know, is between ah but then she said, "But you obey your father, don't answer the telephone." So that's one early memory that I have about working at a Cozy Corner. I was young during the Palm Dinette and the Flamingo Rooming House era so I never worked there. I just remember visiting with my parents while they worked. Ah we would fold napkins. My mother, you know, would like let us roll the change and stuff like that and my older brothers and sisters actually did the work. But my sister Madeline, ah myself, and my brother, Reginald we were younger and we didn't actually do the work. But ah we all remember wrapping those hot dogs at Cozy Corner. So it was a real idyllic time there um all of ah, basically all of your needs were served there. You had an insurance company, you had a hotel, you had a a grocery store, a beauty shop, a jewelry store, a various restaurants, movie theatre, a just just just a total business district. And it wasn't until the late sixties that um Central Avenue began to decline and I think that was throughout the country with drugs and organized crime and that kind of thing. And ah with urban renewal which was the ultimate reason that ah that contributed to the demise of ah Central Avenue. My father did relocate um his Deluxe Cozy Corner business ah to at the corner of Main and () in West Tampa. And Main Street is now Moses White Blvd. named after my father.

He was a big proponent of helping people. Ah my family, brothers and sisters ah they are constantly meeting people that he ah did things that you can't even imagine. Like a got a call from somebody to go to school. It was a veteran and his wife was pregnant, and he just happened to be sitting on the patio at the Cozy Corner and um on Central Avenue. And um my father noticed that he had some kind of military check and he asked him what was happening. And he said, he was going to have to stop going to school because he didn't transportation. And my father arranged for him to get a car. It wasn't until two years ago that this same gentleman came to my brother's restaurant in Ybor City. Ah my brother, Gerald and his family now are carrying on that tradition of a with the restaurant in Ybor City, Moses White and Sons. And that man whose now older than I am came in and told my brother the story. And we were like "dad, gave somebody a down payment on a car?" But it was just like when I was um campaigning um this earlier this year for City Council, asked a lady to put a sign in her yard, and she said that her husband had been turned down by a bank to get a down payment for their house. These people were in their seventies, late seventies. They were regular customers at the Palm Dinette and they were you know, talking among themselves and my daddy overheard the conversation. And he took them down to a bank, downtown, and co-signed for that house. I mean like, I was like, I could not believe it. You hear stories like this all the time and we often say, if my daddy had kept the money that he gave away we would be living on the French Riviera today. The money didn't mean anything to him. He said, "You can be the richest person in the world, but the bottom line is it's going to be the human touch or another person that really makes the difference in your life." ()

So ah he had four businesses in um on Central Avenue. To my knowledge no other or a one person had that many business ventures going ah over the period of time that Central Avenue was in existence.

CH: Who are some of the people you remember from Central Avenue? Some of the movers and shakers of Central Avenue. You know some of the real main people like the ones on the mural but who are some of the others that we may not know of who were business owners?

BWK: Um, I remember Walter's Dining Room, and I also remember Macarthur Studio it was a photography studio. Ms. Lovey that had the beauty shop, she did our hair. Um and I don't know the gentleman's name that had the sundry. But we went to Allen Temple Church every Sunday. After Sunday School and church we would walk to the sundry, that was at the corner of Scott and Central. It may have been Lincoln Drugs, I'm not sure. I know there was a Lincoln Theatre. But I remember that very vividly, you know, waiting for church to get out so I could get my French Vanilla cone of ice cream.

CH: What represented some of the best times on Central Avenue?

BWK: Well, just the camaraderie. Just to know it was a safe place, it was a loving place, it was a nurturing place. I particularly remember a tradition in our family, a every Easter we had a family picture taken, and it was at Macarthur's Studio. And I can remember countless other families lined up and ah Mr. Macarthur taking our picture. I remember vividly the parades. Ah it was just like, oh, I can't imagine the Thanksgiving Parade in New York City being more exiting. It's like people came from everywhere. It was, you know, just an annual event. The bands and ah just like a big almost like a town family reunion because all of us were on Central Avenue and just having a real good time. My ah father started ah two of the parades a Touch of Maroon and Gold. He and Mayor McCloud Bethune were a very good friends. In fact, he was um a pall bearer at ah Dr. Mayor McCloud Bethune's funeral. Of course, she's a a the lady that established Bethune Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida. And then he also organized the first football game between a predominately black school and a predominately white school. The black school being Florida A&M University in Tallahassee and the white school being the University of Tampa. So a from that football game came the first Florida Classic and that parade. So I had very a vivid and fond memories of a Central. Mr. Joiner, I can remember what a dapper dresser he was. I mean he was just like somebody like Denzel. You know, every time he stepped out, "Oh! There's Mr. Joiner." He had always had like the finest of clothes and was just such a gentleman and was a gentleman that a our family thought very fondly of. And he had helped my father when my father was having some hard times, like getting established or whatever, it was Mr. Henry Joiner a who sort of opened the door for my a father and helped him. That's Arthenia Joiner's father.

CH: What were some of the worst times you remember?

BWK: I think the worst time of a in the history of Central Avenue was during the riots. A there was a young man who was shot and um it just, for lack of a better word, just all hell broke loose. I can remember my father not coming home for days and days at a time. Because literally he was having to stay and guard a over his places. And a the town was just in a turmoil with respect to race relations. A which it was just very um my mother said that she never seen my father more hurt or more upset about anything. Because um one thing that he had always stressed to us during our lives is that um all black people are not your friends and all white people are not your enemies. You treat people the way they treat you and you always a wise higher than how your being treated. And to see that mother suffering, to see the anger and the hostility that had been brewing so long on both sides to just totally erupt.

And it did so much to bring race relations you know, to a forefront. A lot of businesses were destroyed and it was just, it was just so confusing because a so many, so much hurt was there. People were really suffering. And of course, it wasn't only Tampa it was like all over the country and that was just what was you know, going on. But um it was not a good time.

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

BWK: Punks, drugs. That was um it is, it was you literally saw a people dying right before your eyes. You know you heard about drugs and seen a few things on T.V. and stuff like that but people that you've known all of your life, people that came from good homes, people that have had so much invested in them, just one slip and just to see them literally just sink to nothingness right before your eyes and not really knowing what to do or how to help them. And then the trust factor, where I was telling you earlier how you always felt safe, well that safety net was totally um lifted and you just had to be on guard. Even with respect to my father leaving his business at night, because he would always leave his business, come home and he kept his money in like a shack or whatever. And he and my mother would you know, before he went to work the next day they would do the deposits and on his way to work he would make the deposit. Well, he had to get a policeman to escort him because people knew he, you know, made money and handled money. And every night before he left he counted the money, made out the deposit and the policeman followed him or you know, I don't know if he was in front or back or whatever, but he always trained him to the bank and then he waited for my father to get into the house. And that was something was something that you know, was an experience! That at the expense of losing your life or you know, whatever then that's something that he had to do and a that was just so different.

CH: Similarly, where did the people typically go for business and entertainment after Central?

BWK: You know, there was no black business district and ah of course, my father relocated to what is now Moses White Blvd. but that was Main Street when he left, and he had a clientele, I mean a it even grew because he was off the interstate which made anybody's name. With Bar-B-Que when you cook it, you know, it smells and he could even go down the interstate and people like this wow this is the exit or whatever. So he kept his black clientele, he picked up more clientele in West Tampa of black people than in um. Where he relocated in West Tampa it was a mixed area near the interstate so he his business really flourished. Now in so far as other people relocating like the theatre, the ice cream shop, and all this kind of stuff, many of the business had begun to decline before Central Avenue actually was closed down and they did not relocate. But in so far as the impact on my father, it really did not impact him because of, you know, I guess the product that he had. People have to eat and people like to. Good food, I know they do. I find out about a good restaurant I'm going to keep going. So he, it really didn't impact him um financially as much as it did other people. There was no black theatre. There was no drug store. A there was no hotel. A no grocery store. A they relocated to my knowledge.

CH: Was that the only business that he retained after Central?

BWK: Yes. Ah he had other ventures ah that were not located on Central. Rental property, a funeral home, this kind of thing. But those were businesses, the Palm Dinette, Club Walls, um the Flamingo Rooming House, and the Cozy Corner were the four businesses that he had going at one time or simultaneously on Central Avenue. When Central Avenue was closing, the business that he had was a restaurant and that's what he relocated in West Tampa.

CH: What about the development of 22nd Street, was that in the aftermath of Central? A lot of businesses relocated, not relocated but is that the closest thing to another black business district?

BWK: I would say so. I would say so. Never to the extent of a Central because see on Central it was both sides and it was four blocks. Ah on 22nd it ah was on the ah east side of 22nd Street and on the right side was public housing. So you never had like a corridor of you know, and of the magnitude. But on Central you had a hotel, on 22nd there was never a hotel. On Central you had a movie theatre, there was never a movie theatre on 22nd Street. Ah there was a photographer a a photography studio on Central Avenue ah the ah personal care type places like a drug stores, and beauty shops, and jewelry stores, to my knowledge, never on 22nd Street.

CH: Is there anything further you'd like to tell us before we close out? About Central or?

BWK: It was ah, I'm just so thrilled this project is coming to fruition. I had a talked to ah Fred Hearn and Bobby Baden over the years and this is just a delight because our history has been lost. And if we don't create pride and let our young people know that there was a time where we owned our own businesses, we had our own business district. And as the city moves forward we're missing something that we want to keep ever present on their minds that we held a piece of the economic pie that is being sliced. And we have people who are entrepreneurs who with just a little help could really succeed and we want to encourage that type of support for economic development in our community as the other a the larger majority members of our society join.

CH: Well this concludes our formal interview, and thank you so much for you time and your contribution.

BWK: Thank you, it's been my pleasure.