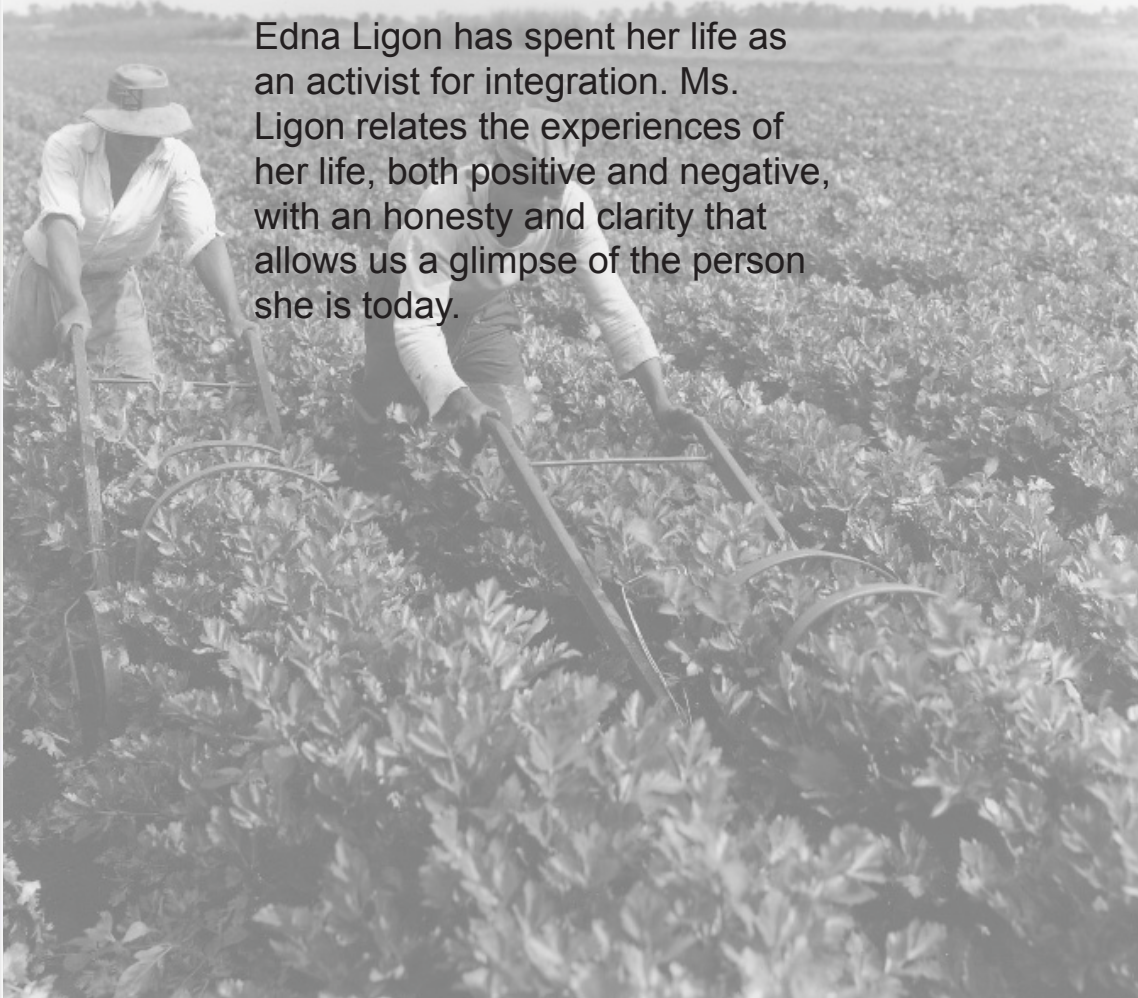


Edna Ligon

Hillsborough Remembers

Edna Ligon has spent her life as an activist for integration. Ms. Ligon relates the experiences of her life, both positive and negative, with an honesty and clarity that allows us a glimpse of the person she is today.



This is an interview with Ms. Edna Williams Ligon (EL) who is retired of Tampa, Florida. Ms. Ligon was an activist for integration. This interview is being conducted on April 13th, 2001 at Ms. Ligon's residence for the "Juniors to Seniors: Hillsborough Remembers Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library Project." The interviewer's name is Ben Clarendon (BC) and this is tape one.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

Ben Clarendon: *Alright, to start this interview off I would like to talk about the pre-segregation, or, I'm sorry, pre-desegregation, before the Civil Rights' movement, starting in about 1933 to about 1955. Ms. Ligon, if you could, tell me a little bit about your family.*

Edna Ligon: () *Nine children in the family. Ah, my father was a share cropper and my mother was a housewife and we all worked on the farm...as far back as I can remember, um. We would walk about three miles of school. We had a two-room school house that went from first through tenth grade...and we had to stay out most of the time and work on the farm. And I moved away—this was in, up from River Junction, Florida and I, we stayed there until I was 16 Then I moved to Tampa and my daddy moved from River Junction back to Marianna, Florida and, on his own farm then, because when we was down there at the River Junction, we was share cropping for someone else. And then I came to Tampa and I worked from place to place for—I got married and went traveling with my husband in service for about five years and then I come back to Tampa and then I start to work at St. Joseph's Hospital. And I retired there after twenty-one years. And I stayed home for a year and then I went into electronics, aircraft*

simulators, for four years and then electronics for five years, then I came home and was a foster mother for twelve years, then I retired. I adopted one of my foster children. I got him when he was three months old and he's now fourteen and, ah, I don't have any biological children except they my step-children. My husband had two and I helped to raise those two and they both adults and working now and I have this fourteen-year-old at home.

BC: *BC: Alright.*

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

BC: *We got plenty of tape. Alright, so if you could describe to me, ah, your first experience with deseg—or, with discrimination, I'm sorry—with discrimination.*

EL: *Oh, I've felt it all my life because we was on the farm and we walked to school, three miles to school, and the white would ride the bus, pass us, and throw things at us out the window. And at that time they used to have prisoners walking the road. And we was scared to death of those folks. They was white and they was in this striper suit. They didn't bother us but they agitated us, y'know. We be walking and they knew we was afraid and they'd be on this road grader, grading the road and we'd get—the grader go real slow—we'd get close by and they jump up and run at us, y'know, and make us run all the way to school. And so I felt that all of my life, from day one, and uh, and even the man that own the farm where we was working, he had some children and they would come up in the field and stand at the end of the field, y'know, after school hours. We was there, the workers, we didn't get to go to school all the time. We had to go when there was no work to do. And we*

would be working in the field and they would come out and stand at the end of the corn--

[recorder was turned off and back on]

EL: ...whatever their crop was and then they would throw things at us and sometimes their father would catch them out there and they'd make them go back in the house. But they didn't even work in the field, we was doing the work and they was getting the pay. So, we—() but, we worked through it and as far back as I can remember we worked at that from day one up until I was sixteen, and then I left. But ah, when we went to the store to buy food, they would have meats or whatever in the counter and you could ask for that, they'd tell you, "No, you couldn't have this, you can get some of this,..."

cabbage, collard greens, turnips, carrots, beets and peas and corn and okra and tomatoes. So we raised all of that

BC: *BC: Right...*

EL: ...you could tell all the meats, you could tell they was turned dark but we was still blessed because we raised a lot of our hogs and cows. We kill our own and we made the sausage and made the smoke house with the ham, with the meat hanging in the smoke house and we had it most of the year. Every once in a while we would run out at the end of the year and we'd have to go and purchase from the grocery store and then we really couldn't get what we needed. But back in '44 or '45 [slight pause] they start t' rationin' food. You couldn't buy as much as you want. Sugar was one of the things. You could only get five pounds a month per person. And sugar, cheese, can milk.

One time they was rationing shoes. You couldn't get but two pair shoes a year. Well, we didn't have the money to buy two pair shoes a year anyway so we was blessed by that because it was nine of us children and my mother and father, that was eleven. So we had eleven stamps per month when if you was one person you only had one stamp per month. So food, coffee was another thing they was rationing. So we was blessed we had so many stamps so we could sell our stamps to the people who had no stamps and purchase our milk or coffee or whatever we need with the money we sold our stamps for. Like, we was exchanging the stamp for the products. So we was blessed with that and we didn't have a lot of shoes anyway and I remember when I made one pair of shoes and the sole would come off and we'd get some wire and tie the soles back up on it and I was,

we was very poor but we was still blessed.

We never had to do without food, like I hear some people say but, because we was on a farm and we raised all of our vegetables. Y'know, everything, all kinds of cabbage, collard greens, turnips, carrots, beets and peas and corn and okra and tomatoes. So we raised all of that and we was way out in the wood. There was a lot of wild fruits growing in the woods such as pears, peaches, we had peach trees, plums and figs and grapes, but we call them, they wasn't the kind of grapes you find in the store, they was called scution—scutiondized. So my mother canned a lot of food, when we grow it, we can it. So, when it wasn't in harvest we still had it in the jars. So, we always had plenty to eat. And we raised corn, we take all the corn to the

mill and have it the ground. Take the corn and make meal and grits.

And we raised a lot of chickens. There's been times we had like 500 chickens on the yard at one time. So we could kill two or three chickens at one time 'cause we was a large family and we had plenty chicken and we just didn't have any money. We did not have any money at all and we raised sugar cane for a few years and we ground that and made syrup and we used to sell the syrup to the Miller Institution in Chattahoochee. And evidently they didn't have a lot of money either, because I remember one year we got shoes, they traded us shoes 'cause the state had provided patients' shoes and we'd trade the syrup for shoes for us.

Oh, they was the ugliest shoes but they kept your feet warm. [Both laugh].

EL: But we had, we had a hard time but yet we were blessed and as far as integration, we knew our place. So you didn't just go into the town and drink water because you know it wasn't your place. Y'know, there was a water fountain says "colored" and "white" and we went to the service station to buy gas. They had service in the bathrooms "White Mens", "White Womens", then they had one that says, "Colored".

BC: Oh, okay.

EL: The black peoples, mens and womens, had to use the same restroom. That was the better service station. Y'know, they upgraded. The other ones didn't have one for the black at all, they would tell you, ' We don't have a bathroom.' So, it's gotten used to that and in 1949, my oldest brother had an accident. He was driving my daddy's truck and he turned over. He ran off the road and

two peoples got killed and my brother, that was driving, ended up in the hospital. And the highway patrolman used to come out to the farm, he was waitin' to prosecute my brother because he was wrong and he was speedin'. He was speedin', goin' down hill and they turned over and two people got killed. So of course, you need to charge him. Well, he wasn't able to be charged now, he's in the hospital and he was in the hospital for about eight months and it messed up his mind too. But, this white highway patrolman used to come out all of the time, about once a week, and we was working and this time I had smaller sisters and brothers 'cause I'm the sixth child. And all of my older family was in the field working and I would be to the house, keeping the little ones a lot of the time. And he was coming out there, trying to make a play at me and it took me a while, now 'cause I'm about fourteen, fifteen years old and I still, I wasn't smart enough to know that he was making a play.

And one day he put his arms around me and that's when I was, there's something wrong with this, y'know? So then, I told him, "Move, stop!" and he said if I told my daddy, he was going to kill my daddy. Y'know, so he really frightened me. That was one of the times I truly been frightened 'cause I always knowed my place and I stayed in my own place. But now I'm doing what I'm supposed to do and he's outta his place. So now what am I going to do? But uh, I did not tell my daddy because I knowed that my daddy would've been upset and he would've end up in jail or dead. But I just kept him standing up and then from then on, if my mother or father wasn't home, I wouldn't open the door. So that's how I got out of that one. So what else kind of accident happened...um...One, one, one while while my daddy was share cropping, he was share cropping for this guy named B----.

BC: First name?

EL: I don't know his name. All I remember is B----. We used to call him Mr. B---- and he used to have this little one-seater car, two seater car, y'know. And he lived at the end of this road. So we had a gate, y'know to come in and we would see him and my daddy was not like me. He, I guess he knew his place, and he always wanted to give everybody respect. So Mr. B--- - would come, excuse me, and um, he would sit and blow the horn. First come out, 'cause he'd be coming out and check on the crop and see my daddy an' whatever. He sit and blow the horn for us to come open the gate to let him in and he would always come in and say, "Much obliged."

So later he sold part of the farm to another man, and I know his first, Steve, what was his name, ah . . . I know his last name was S---- and ah, so now they owns this crop together, but my daddy was still working it. So Mr. S----, he would come and if we opened the gate for him he always give us a nickel or two or three pennies, y'know. And we worried about that, because like I said, there was no money. So we'd see Mr.S---- coming, we'd run and open the gate for him and he'd come in and give us a nickel, two or three pennies or dime or whatever, and Mr. B---- always said, "Much obliged" and never give us nothing.

So we got smart and we wouldn't open the gate for Mr. B----. When we see him coming, we'd go down behind the barn somewhere and hide. And my daddy would call us to open the gate and he would ask us, and sometimes we'd be up under the house 'cause we had a old, really old-fashioned house that we lived in. This house was, had forms on each side of the house, and there was a big wide hall going through the whole house. It was like

an apartment but you could go in the hall and go from door to door. And the house was so old, it stood about four feet off the ground. It was way up like this and the beams under the house, they wasn't finished, you could tell it was hued out with the old chisel—

BC: Chisel, yeah...

EL: Yeah, something like that, and we could get up under that house and that's where we played and we had bowls and certain places done sealed it off and we could go in there and go up under there and nobody could see us, y'know. So that's where we would run and hide under the house and keep from opening the gate because Mr. B-- -- never would show appreciation, y'know. He just thought we was supposed to do it.

In other words, he was just nasty, because one time my daddy wasn't home and uh, my mother was home and he came and we didn't open the gate. He sat out there blowing and we didn't open the gate, we heard and momma wouldn't make us go open the gate. She wouldn't, daddy would. So, he got out and opened the gate and he drove on in and asked, "Was Abraham home?" and momma told him, "No," so he made some smart remark about us not opening the gate, 'cause now we didn't have to hide to keep from opening the gate. We could sit right there on the porch and what momma says something like, "If they don't want to open it, they don't have to", or something to that effect and he told her to shut-up, he's gonna slap her. So he didn't, now he didn't do it.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[START TAPE 1, SIDE B]

BC: This is side two of tape one, we're going to backtrack a bit so we can catch up where we left off.

EL: Okay, so, I think I was saying that uh, where my momma wasn't afraid of him like my daddy was. Then I, what was I... Turn it off a minute...

BC: *Sure, sure.*

EL: Thanks.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

EL: So when I was sixteen, 'bout me getting a bitter taste in my mouth to watch my daddy, because I felt that he didn't have to deal with all of this. He was the one working and making the money for these peoples and yet he was being mistreated. So when he moved down to Dunedin to work on the construction job, he and my brother, I came down with them. I was sixteen, just turned sixteen. And I came to Dunedin with them to cook and so I met this guy who was working on the construction job and he asked me to marry him and I admired him because I needed to get away

around and go to these homes and work.

We was getting paid ah, fifty cents an hour. An' ah, some of the jobs that I got was, it was unfair. That was right here in Tampa and we talkin' about in 1950, later part of 1950. And it was unfair. I go to work and I realized I was doing all I knew how to do or doin' what they asked me to do, but I'm sure I didn't get it all done the way they wanted it done. And sometime they would pay me half of that amount. They'd give you four dollars a day and bus fare. You worked eight hours. Four dollars and bus fare. And bus fare was a quarter 'cause you can ride the bus, you get four tokens for a quarter and if you transferred, you still had enough money y'know, to ride, to work, for going and coming.

And uh, I was trying so hard to better my condition, I kept going, yah go, and they'd tell ya, they wouldn't have you to come back there. Say, "Well I'll call you if I need you next week." And

I was sixteen, just turned sixteen. And I came to Dunedin with them to cook

from home. So I married and moved to Tampa then [pause for water]. Of course I, he didn't have any money either. I was still didn' better my condition, I was marryin' for the wrong reason.

But anyway, I decided I was gonna work. And I started doin' domestic work and I didn't know how to do it because I'd never done it before and we didn't have the kind of house that I was going to go to work in, of course. And so I would go and get a job. You go to the employment office then and they called it days' work. You go and get one day at a time work, and uh, I would take the bus, try to find my way

they never would call an' I'm sure it's cause I didn't get it done like they wanted but I kept doing it until I learned. I learned each time I went but then I realized this is not what I truly want.

So I went, 'cause I had not finished school. I had stopped in the seventh grade. So I got a job to (?) Hospital, they used to have over here in Drew Park, uh huh. So I worked there and I started going to school at night and then my husband went into the service and I go around with him from station, where he was stationed in the United States, I was with him... **BC:** *What was your husband's name? I'm sorry.*

EL: It was Earl L----, at that time. An' uh, then I dropped out of school, of course, and I was moving around. Then later when I, that marriage didn't work. As I said, I married for the wrong reason and we was married a little over five years, then I divorced with him and (slight pause, trying to remember)...I got married again in '62—

BC: To...

EL: '61 to uh, Grady S-----.

BC: Grady S-----?

EL: Uh huh, that was my children's father. You know, the children that I helped raise. Grady S-----. And uh, ... I started to work in to St. Joseph's Hospital.

BC: Uh huh.

EL: And I worked there, uh, the hospital not where it is now. It was along 7th Avenue. And I worked there for twenty-one years. Of course, during that time, they built a new hospital and we moved over here and I was living at that time in Hyde Park and then Grady got drowned, shortly after I married him, 'bout a year or so later—

BC: About 1962?

EL: Yes. We got married. Yeah, he got drowned in October the 7th in '62. Then I was single for seven years and I uh, got married again in '69, in January '69. And that's when we moved here and built this house. And uh, of course all this time I'm still working at St. Joseph's. And uh, I retired from St. Joseph's. I started at St. Joseph's in '57, worked until, '57 to '68, no, to '80, '70— an' uh.

BC: '70...

EL: '70, and then that marriage went bad so now I'm single again. And—

BC: What year was that?

EL: When we divorced him? I divorced him. (pause) '70, '79--

BC: '79.

EL: An' uh, so after I retired from St. Joseph's then I went to work for Reflectone. It was a aircraft simulator company, moved here from Connecticut and they was building aircraft. And I worked there about four years, then I got laid off and uh, I stayed home for a short while, like three or four months. And then I went to work for Inacanics(?). That's a branch, took over part of Honeywell, uh, Electronics. We was making little component bulbs, y'know the filling tv's with it, they were worked on that. And they, the union, everybody was in the union down there and they started () like that and they just closed up on Friday at 2:00. They closed up, shut down ,cause the union would not agree with the disagreement.

BC: About what year was that?

EL: That was in '85, I believe, '85.

BC: 1985.

EL: Yeah, '85. But you know they open, they close on Friday and open and close again on Tuesday under a different name. So all of us who was in the union was just out. And I realized I'm not gonna work any more and so I came home and enjoyed my unemployment. First time in my life I dropped my unemployment and I, uh. The church, in the church bulletin they had a article in there about help. Y'know, if you're retired or something like that, help if you're interested, help a child up. So I read that, I brought it home and I laid it down. It was on

Sunday and this was on Wednesday I guess, I picked it up and I read it. I said, "I'm gonna call this number" 'cause I was getting to think, y'know, maybe this is something like, Big Sister/

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: So I got some spare time, I'll do that. So I called the lady, and she said, "Well, let me come out and talk to you." And so she did and she come by and said that she needed somebody to be, keep children when they pick 'em up as the emergency. Like, parents walk off and leave them and this kind of thing, and they needed a place for them to stay immediately. And it's called a shelter, emergency shelter. That's what this would be, she said, "But we don't pay you." I said, "Well, no I wasn't looking for pay. I have some spare time." So she said,

I had all kinds of children, black, white, Puerto Ricans and you name it, y'know. And, I had to trade my car and get me a van

well, after I told her, I wasn't looking for pay, she said, "But we do take care of the children." I said, "Oh, okay, so do I have to go to school for that?" [cough] Excuse me. Uh, I think for six weeks, one night a week, six weeks, and get a license. The state has to license you to do that. And I did, once a week(). I got my license. The same day she brought my license, she brought me three children. So, I kept those children. And I'm still thinking, y'know, this is gonna be a part-time deal, that I got all this spare time. I keep a child here and, 'cause she tole me they wouldn't stay. Y'know, they be coming in until they can process the child.

BC: *Mmm. (agreeable)*

EL: They either go back home or the foster or go to foster care or go

wherever, y'know, so. And I'm thinking, "Oh, I'm gonna have this just a couple of days a week." Then when they brought me my license and brought me three children, I never without another child for twelve years. And with the times, I've had as many as seventeen children in one weekend.

BC: *Wow.*

EL: And it didn't bother me. Now this was in '85, starting '86. So, I had all kinds of children, black, white, Puerto Ricans and you name it, y'know. And, I had to trade my car and get me a van 'cause I couldn't get all of my babies in the van, uh, in the car. So one day I went out to Westshore. I was in the Walgreens. I got my sister to go with me 'cause I had, ya know, about six children. It was hard. At that time I wasn't taking bigger children, I was taking small ones. So I had six

babies. So we went to Walgreens one day and I had two in the basket and two holding on to the basket, and my sister had the other two and the cashier, she was yelling back there, she said to me, "Who's are all these children?" And I said, "They're mine." So she said, "Oh, they're not all yours. Well, why are there some of them black and some white?" I said, "Cause I had two husbands." Then I thought she was kinda () so I...I told her I had two husbands and so I had black children and white children [laugh].

But I used to get a thrill out of the reaction that I got from peoples when I take all my babies out, ya know. And I did some bankin' down that bank that was on Kennedy, its not there any more. But I used to take all my babies to this bank. And I had to go to the bank and I would sit 'em down in the

lobby, you know, in a circle. And I give 'em some instruction, "Now sit right here while I go to the window", you know. And it always drew up everybody's attention. So now this bank adopted us as a family and every Christmas that they would give my children a party and give 'em gifts and things, ya know.

And uh, I'd take 'em out to eat, at least once a month. And we used to go down there on South Dale Mabry to Morrisons and I would take 'em all in and sit 'em around a table. I said, "Now sit here until I go get your food." So then I would go down the line and them employees would help me to take the trays, ya know. And they adopted us. So it was, it was good keepin' kids. There was a lot of joy in it. And uh, the manager down there. I can't think her name right now, but it will come to me. She said one day we was down there eatin', and she came to the table and she said, "Did you, uh, did you prepare for Thanksgiving yet?" And I said, "Oh no, I hadn't got that far yet." She said, "Well, then, don't." She said, "I'm gonna give the children Thanksgiving dinner." I said, "You don't have to do that." 'Cause every time we went there, she always give us pies and stuff to bring home, ya know.

'Cause I didn't have the money to give desserts. Especially, if I give everybody a plate to eat, then I would go by the grocery store and buy half a gallon of ice cream and come home and have ice cream. So, she was watching us and she would always give us three or four pies, and bread or whatever she had, to bring home. So this day she said she's gonna do Thanksgiving day, alright? She said come on Wednesday morning, whatever time, and pick it up. And by the time I went down there to pick it up, she had 'bout twenty-two pound turkey, all this is cooked food. Turkey with mashed potatoes, green beans,

the gravy, the rolls, the, I guess she had about six pies and all kinds of muffins and things. We had food for a half a week. So it was good, not because, just because they was givin' me. But it was, it felt good to know somebody else saw all these needy children now. "Cause I had from six to ten kids all the time, ya know. (Clears throat)

And uh, Icarus (?) would uh, give a party for the children at Christmas time, that you had to take all your kids to wherever they rent this place. So one Christmas, they had the party out in Brandon and uh, I went and I had all these small kids. And they had a buffet line, so you gotta go through the line to get your food. So, I can't go through the line, 'cause I got two arm babies, two one-year old ones, ya know so I just sit. And this gentleman, this white guy, he was sittin' over there. I didn't even know this man, but he must have been observin'. So he came over and asked me if he could help me to feed the kids. I said, "Well I'm waiting for these people to go and get through. When the line is clear, you know, when everybody's finished then I can go, 'cause I can't go when I have my kids." So he says, "Well, I'll get some", so he got somebody to help him. He got up and brought a plate for every child and he sat there, help me to spoon-feed. 'Cause all these kids, ya had to spoon-feed too. So when I got ready to go, he helped to load up the kids and he said that, uh, could he have my phone number, 'cause he might want try sometime to help out. I gave it to him and uh, 'cause this was like, 'bout two weeks before Christmas.

So, he called me two or three days later and said that, uh, if I had not got a Christmas tree, he wanted to give the children a Christmas tree. I said, "No I hadn't got one." So, he came over on the twenty-third of December with a big truck and two guys. There

were three guys on the truck. They came over in this truck. Anything that you can name to eat, was in that truck. They brought boxes of food, they brought the children individually wrapped gifts for every child, a toy and, a Christmas tree, a lot of decorations for the tree, and turkey, ham, sweet potatoes, and all the canned goods and whatever, ya know. And uh, so he was a member of the Lions Club and he had put my name in the Lions Club for the one who's doin' this. This came as long as I kept kids, they always did for me. So, I truly was blessed in the keepin' the kids. And I was thrilled. I enjoyed that. **EL:** But uh, as far as the integration, I've gotten over that because I just always knew my place and I stayed in my place and when the time was right, I, you know, just went like... I'm a changeable person. I don't have any problems changin'. You know, when we could not go to the bathroom where the white went, I knew that, and I stayed in my place. And when I could go, then I moved up. And when I was travelin' with my husband in the service, () we was out in Wyoming. That was a big adjustment for me because there was no black in Wyoming itself, 'cept the ones that was in service.

And I went out there right around rodeo time. And something like that, the rodeo time here, ya know. And everybody was wearin' tight jeans and cowboy hats and leather belts and I couldn't even dress like them. I didn't want to, I didn't know about that. Ya know it was really, to me we would have called that hillbilly dressin', ya know. But I was there and there was nothin' I could do about it, so I lived with it and when I was out there I was workin' at the NCO Club on the base. And uh...

BC: *NCO stands for ...?*

EL: Uh, non-commissioned officers. It's a private club. You know, they have the lieutenant and a private and all of those. I mean, lieutenant and all the brass got their club and then the non-officers got their club. NCO is non-commissioned officers. And uh, I was working there and I was the only black working there and uh, waiters in the club cause all the officers and sergeants, would come in for lunch and the white girls I was working with. I always got along with everybody, 'cause I made up my mind from day one that if you want to talk to me, I'll talk to you. If you don't want to talk to me, it's fine. I don't have to deal with you, somebody else, you know so, for that reason I always got along. And I got along very well with them, being the only black there and in '52, you know, and they didn't know anything about black either.

Some of 'em who lived out there, who'd never experienced with black 'cause I worked and I was a black, back there in the fifties, you know, especially in the boondocks. So this girl asked me, cause by that time, people used to nurse the babies when they had them, they breastfeed the babies. She asked me one day did, when black peoples nursed their babies, was their milk black or was it white. But that just got me, 'cause I didn't know whether she was trying to be funny or, so, I replied like, "Well, what are you asking me?" And she said, "You know, when you breastfeed a baby, is the milk white?" I said, "When you milk a black cow, is the milk black or is it white?" So, she took that for an insult, so I didn't deal with her anymore and we got over that.

Then uh, I always got along, I always got along with 'em no matter how they treat me and even here in Tampa, when Gasparilla used to come. We only had two black schools in Tampa, two high schools, that was black. That

was Middleton and um, Thompson. Later Thompson become Blake.

BC: Uh huh.

EL: The only two black schools and uh, and they had Gasparilla parade. Of course we wanted to do some sort of...my schools got in the parade but they always got put at the end of the line and y'know they had horses and wagons and things in the parade, and the horses be done messed up the streets and these black kids got through this. So we always went to the parade and if that lady always wanted me to take her to the parade so I would take her. So one year she didn't take me and I was still young and I went with a lot of kids from West Tampa. We walk across Fortune Street Bridge to the par-, Gasparilla Parade on 43. It was always, we was goin' to come back around where by that bank is downtown now. Not by there, it used to be up on, uh, Holiday Inn—

BC: Uh huh.

EL: Up on Fletcher. That used to be Royal Street, and all that up in there. So we was gonna walk back around and come across the bridge and there was a little service station on the same street and we asked to use the bathroom and they told us it was out of order.

BC: Oh.

EL: They would not let us use the bathrooms, so everybody just..., right down in the back of the service station. So he said he was gonna call the police. So we took off and ran across the bridge to West Tampa. Everybody took off and but what it was right there and we done sit through the parade and everybody gotta go to the bathroom, so they did it right there outside of the service station, we ran. [laugh] So I had some

experiences, stuff like that but I always managed to get out of it.

EL: Then, after I started working, y'know, and I, at the time when I workin' at St. Joseph's, you know, St. Joseph's hospital used to be run by the Catholic Nuns. And uh, they was, they treated black much better. You know, that was some of the better, that was our of beginning then it was from workin' there, and then we didn't make any money. I think I started out making a dollar an hour. But they fed us at the hospital. You worked there, you ate there, but later in the years, you had to pay for your food, of course. You've gotten a raise when times changed, but when they moved over here. The state had something to do with it. They had to abide by the regulation of the state. When they was over on 7th Avenue, it was private owned, they pay what they want to pay, they do just, they made their own rules and regulations. Then when they moved over here, they had to pay minimum wages and I think it was like \$2.15 an hour by now, so they had to pay that.

BC: Uh huh.

EL: They could no longer pay \$1.00. But I was there for twenty-one years and when I left I was only making \$4.36 an hour. [slight pause] And uh, yes, \$4.36 an hour. Last year I got paid, last paycheck, not the paycheck but the stub. But it wasn't all bad! Like I said and there we learned to work with the whites and 'specially after we moved over. When I first started work there, uh it was mostly blacks worked in the kitchen and in the laundry.

BC: Uh huh.

EL: And uh, we didn't have to do that much of integrating but even so, they had one little room 'bout big as this right here, for this black dining room

for little tables and chairs and that. That's for the black to eat in there and it wasn't even enough space for the kitchen and the laundry, to eat all at the same time so they had to, y'know, make the, one go this time and that time to accommodate everybody. Then after we moved over here, then that's when everybody ate in the same dining room and uh, like I said, they had to increase the pay 'cause the white was making more money than we were making. Even when they started hiring the white in the kitchen, they was still making more money than we was making doing the same thing. As I working and Sister Ann Dolores.

BC: *What was her name?*

EL: Ann, Ann Dolores and she and I got along really good. She kinda took a likin' to me and she moved me up to Supervisor. So I was supervisor for about five years and then she moved me up to Dietician Assistant. I would help out with the Dietician and so I, by working there and in getting to integrate and everything we, I had quite a few white friends and I don't, first then, I don't see colors anymore. I see a person as they act. However you are, that's the way you are, not because you white or black or blue—

BC: *Uh [agreeable]*

EL: It's the way you act is to tell me what kind of person you are. And I don't have any problems in life I have a lot of white friends now. I got one white friend, that comes over and spends the night with me and we play cards together, and One of my white friends, she moved here about ten years ago from Louisiana and I met her through another white friend of mine. And when I got ready to adopt my child, she said that she was going to be a godmomma, so we still

do good, you know. We on good terms still.

And uh, my other white friend where I met Jenny through, she moved to North Carolina. But we goes up and visit with her. We stay in her home. She come here and I fix her up. If she fly, I pick her up at the airport and she comes and stay with me.

We, I don't have any problems, y'know, unless somebody mistreat me, I don't have any problem, unless they mistreat me I leave them alone! You know, if they don't want to be bothered, fine! Like now I go walking in the mall every morning. I walk five days a week. And uh, this one white guy down there, he got a mind like an elephant. He remembers everything and everybody. When you start walking, I've been walking about two years and a half, he asked you, "What your name?" So over my, "Hey Edna," "Hey Pat", "Hey Sue." He know everybody name so we call him "Roll Caller". [laugh] But my niece just started walking with me this week and she said, "Who is he?" and I said, "That's our roll caller. He calls roll every morning." [laugh] She say he talk too much, she didn't want to be bothered with him.

[recorder turned off and then back on]

EL: Yes, we was stationed in Augusta and when my husband was in the service. I went to work for a lady that worked in a private home and I was keeping her little boy. But I always took the bus to her house and back so one day, I, my husband was out to work and he came to pick me up and this was, I guess in the '52, '50, yeah, 1952. And we had a 1951 Chevrolet, so when he come to pick me up I was all through and I gone on home. Then, when I went back the next morning I rode the bus. So she asked me, "Who picked you up?" I said, "That's my

husband." She knew he was in the military she said, "Is that you're car?" I say, "Yeah." She said, "Well, if you can, if you all can afford a car like that then you don't need to work for me. " And she fired me. She fired me because we had a car that was one year old.

BC: Uh huh.

EL: So, that's one of the incident we had and...a few things comes to me little by little, I can't— **BC:** *What about, you mentioned the rationing for World War II, 1940-45, like that—*

EL: Uh huh.

BC: *BC: Do you think, was there discrimination in that. Like, were white people given more?*

When he got killed in Vietnam, my white friend lived in Tampa, she went with me to the funeral up in Marianna

EL: Umm...

BC: *Rations and...*

EL: Yes, yes. I do think so, but there were certain things you couldn't get without the stamps, so they had, I guess, they had to give everybody those books of stamps. I remember when my daddy went to apply for the stamps. You had to go and sign up and give everybody's name and all, uh. Like I said, there was eleven of us so he started at the top, coming down and, y'know, name and age of each child and when they got to me they would even ask what color the hair was, what color the eyes, y'know? So when he got to me, he was describing me, y'know. They said what color's the hair. So by now, like I said, I'm the sixth child. He was tired of asking, answerin' the same question so he said, she said, "What color's her hair?"

He said, "Red, 'bout the color of yours," and, y'know, that didn't set too well and she said, "Ah, well, what color's her eyes?" and he said, "Green." And then she looked at me, she said, "You her father?" cause my father was real dark, y'know, and he said, "Well, that's what my wife told me I was the father, y'know." But, yeah, it was, I was real, real sad cause my hair was red and my eyes were white. And the older I get, the darker they turn, but they didn't understand that, 'cause my daddy was really dark, you know, this color dark. My mother, my mother's granddaddy was white. My grandmother used to tell us how they forced the black womens to go with them so I have a lot of white peoples in my family and I didn't want, my grandmother's sister was really, she was your complexion, so that

never bothered me. There's nothing I done wrong. And so I accept all those kind of things.

I was going to tell you about my brother. When he got killed in Vietnam, my white friend lived in Tampa, she went with me to the funeral up in Marianna . They really wasn't, black and white was not mixing then, like they do now. She went with me 'cause she knew my brother and she and I was good friends. She went with me to the funeral out of respect. We went on Friday, stayed 'til Sunday. So, of course, we lived at my aunt's house and so it wasn't just the white was discriminating, the blacks discriminates too. You know that. You know, they had a hard time adjustin' 'cause, you know "why was this white woman here with all those black peoples?" "What is she doing? She's my friend! She was there for support."

But then, I have a white friend that lives in Seffner and this hasn't been that many years ago and she and I are very good friends. And she's got a lot of Indian in her, so she's really got a beautiful tan. She and I used to go around together and say we went to different classes and things together. Just because people react, we played games with them. We used to play games. On her application and she put, y'know, she'd put her name and she'd put black, and on my application I put my name and I put white and when they call, they'd look at the application and say, "Well, got the wrong person." Y'know, well we used to play games, just to see people's reactions. Blacks discriminate against whites just like whites discriminate against blacks. Uh, I can't remember all the details.

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: So, if there's anything else you need to know, ask me and I'll try to answer.

BC: *Um, you were working for St. Joe's during the time of, like, legal desegregation, or forced integration.*

EL: Yes, when, in '67, '65.

BC: *Um hmm, right there.*

EL: When they burned down the city, yeah, I was...

BC: *And speaking of burning down the city, what kind of events took place in Tampa before that. Like during the Civil Rights Movement itself, that you remembered as being--*

EL: Before or during the time?

BC: *Uh, before and during, like, if there was like the Montgomery Bus Boycott up in Alabama and there was*

the March on Washington with Martin Luther King. That's big national events and was there anything here in Tampa that—

EL: Well, not before, but as that went along, yeah. They burned Tampa down. They burned down Central, where the black theatre was, the black restaurants, y'know, cause we had to, we had to go to our own black things. You know, we had Central Avenue over there and...

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B] [START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

BC: *This is an interview with Ms. Edna Williams Ligon who is retired in Tampa, Florida. Ms. Ligon was an activist for integration. This interview is being conducted on April 13th, 2001 at Ms. Ligon's residence for the "Juniors to Seniors: Hillsborough Remembers Tampa-Hillsborough Library Project." The interviewer is Ben Clarendon and this is Tape Two of side, Tape two, side A and we will continue where we left off on Tape One, Side B.*

EL: Yeah, this white friend of mine when they was burning down the Central, she wanted me to come over to her house, so I wouldn't get hurt 'cause we was very good friends. So I told her, "Well, I was safe, 'cause I was black and I was in a black neighborhood and they was not going to bother me." She said, "Well, if you don't come over here, I'm gonna come over to your house 'cause I want to make sure you're alright." I said that, "It wouldn't be safe for you to come," but she came on anyway. She said, just came on anyway and she stayed at my house a couple of days and uh, nobody bothered her. I was not in the area where they was burning at. So we got along alright and we was working together and we would ride from my house to work and back and

forth. We did okay with that. And um, of course, I was living in the black neighborhood and a lot of my black neighbors didn't understand it either. You know, they just couldn't understand why Pat would be staying over to my house being white, you know, in the black neighborhood. But it didn't bother me what people say or talk, y'know, 'cause we was friends. And we didn't go in the area where they was burning at, of course, so I got along okay with that.

And uh, this friend of mine out in North Carolina, Becky, she can't understand why all black peoples are not like me. She said that, "I could deal with it, why can't they deal with it? Why does the blacks don't treat her right?" And uh, but she understood about segregation. She definitely understood, because she was so determined to be my friend because she said, when she was a child her daddy was so prejudiced about black that he wouldn't even let her watch t.v. when Ed Sullivan was on t.v., blacks was on there. She had to turn the t.v. off instead of watch it. So when she grew up, she was determined she was going to have some black friends. So, she and I met at a reward dinner one night and we just hit if off real good and been friends and she comes to my house and stays and I go to her house. I've been up in North Carolina to visit with her and we still get along good and we talk to each other almost daily, on the computer, of course. But uh, she's learned a lot she said, from me. Because a lot of things she had no way of learning about black peoples and she learned a lot. And I learned a lot from her too because when I first started keepin' foster kids, I had never experienced head lice on a child, 'cause black people usually don't have head lice. And when I got my first white child with head lice, I had to call her, so she come and right there to help me and then she wants to know,

"Well, why don't black people have head lice?" "Well, because of the chemicals we use in our hair!" So she learned from me and I learned from her.

So we worked together with all the kids and I kept her kids and she kept mine and she just... I go up to North Carolina to visit her and she got a new home up there and I'm treated royal when I go up to her home and I treat her the same way when she comes here. I'm always wanting to go to the airport and she stays with me sometime and we go out to dinner and everything together and everything she want to know about blacks, she feels comfortable asking me. Because she know I don't have any problems trying to answer her questions. I tried to explain to her but some of the things I can't get it through to her, because she never experienced it and she doesn't know. It's hard for her to understand. She says, "But why can't all blacks feel the way you do?" "Because some of them been hurt more than me." I've had a good life, poor but good. Good life and, cause when I was a child we was on share cropping, remember I told you that—

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: And it was the family across the road from us and they was working in the field. Their name was Goodman, Good, Goodman. And this little white girl went out in this field, 'cause they would come out and jib at you, y'know, pick at you in the field working and she spit in his face. And he slapped her and left the field and went home. And that night, all the white guys around there came and broke into their house, got him out, tied him behind their truck and drug him. I witnessed that, y'know, I didn't witness the draggin', but I saw him, y'know cause they was neighbors. And they drug him and left him out in the

woods, tied him behind the truck and drug him out there. Untied him, left him out there to die. He got okay, somebody found him and he got alright after a certain length of time. So you can imagine that family can't be like me. That didn't happen to me.

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: Even though I saw it, it didn't happen to me. Now those people will never be able to say, y'know, these are good white people. It's hard, y'know? I be trying to explain things like that to Becky. But I've witnessed a lot. And, of sadness. Like I said I think we was truly blessed because we didn't... I think my father might have protected us from some of the things that other black went through, but I

***you don't want to dwell on those things,
'cause if you start remembering all of
these bad things, you can't be happy.***

saw it happen to other peoples. And, as far as riding the bus. We didn't do what Rosa done because we knew our place was at the back of the bus. I never rode the bus until I come to Tampa 'cause we didn't have buses in the country. When I come to Tampa, I knew that you ride on the back of the bus, so I went in on the back and rode the bus. And by the time it was integrated, I didn't have to ride the bus anymore cause I had my own car... But, uh, ... I guess these things come in spurts.

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: Y'know, you remember these things and then you don't remember, and some things I just can't remember, because I deliberately blocked them out.

BC: *Right, right.*

EL: You know, you don't want to dwell on those things, 'cause if you start remembering all of these bad things, you can't be happy. So, I, I'm at peace. I'm happy. I've got a good life. Like, this morning, somebody called me and want to loan me money on the phone and you know all of these advertisements and stuff right. And I just hang up on 'em. And I was talkin' to my friend, "You know, I don't have any money but I don't want no money." I don't need anything. I got peace of mind, my children's grown. There's just this one I got here. He's fourteen and he's been a pretty good child. Y'know, I adopt him and he's been a pretty good child. I've been blessed with that, and I'm at peace and I don't work. I do whatever I want to do. All day long I walk and I am just

at peace. I sit down, and watch t.v. I go out to lunch and I'm so at peace, I don't dwell on--

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: ...what could've been or what used to be, 'cause I could go back and think on all that hard times and the poor times and the things we had and I would be miserable and I don't want to be miserable. I want to go day by day now, so a lot of things that happened in the past, that I wasn't pleased with, I truly blocked them out and I can't remember them.

BC: *Well, this has been a, uh, incredibly informative and a couple clarifications and then we'll wrap it up. The name of the woman who had to come over during the riots. This is for the tape.*

EL: Pat F----

BC: F----?

EL: Uh huh.

BC: *And the other one whose—*

EL: From North Carolina?

BC: Yeah...

EL: Becky S----

BC: Okay.

EL: And then Jenny L----, who's my child's godmomma—she's white.

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: She's white and then I have a friend Lila G----, she's white. She used to, when she divorced her husband she came and she stayed six months with me, y'know, so...I don't discriminate against colors but I do discriminate against people.

BC: *Right, yeah.*

EL: If you understand what I mean, you understand. But, I get along, I have a lot of white friends and...

BC: *Um, do you feel that the African-American's position today in America is uh, as good as it's gonna get or do you think we have a ways, a little ways to go? How would you—*

EL: You know, it was, and my truly feeling was, it was getting better when Dr. King was marching and peaceful and everything, things was moving forward for the black. I feel, I feel, personally feel that we're slipping back from that, from where we used to be, we're getting a step backward. And at this late date, all this robbing, burning and things in Cincinnati. I called and got a girlfriend living in Cincinnati. I called her last night and I say to her,

"Are y'all alright up there?" and they was telling me about the prosecuting and being in the house at 8:00. I think it's ridiculous at this late date.

Everybody in America should be smart enough to live without that nowadays. I don't see the need of that. In fact, I feel that we're truly slipping back from where we were. I can see that back in the 60s and things but this is 2001!

BC: *Right.*

EL: And, now, I don't see it getting' any better right now, I really don't. It's gonna always be some ... segregation. I truly believe that. Some peoples are still teaching their children. You shouldn't play with this child, they white, or you shouldn't play with this child because he's black. Like my niece, she was in the service and they was stationed down around Homestead, down by Miami, and their next door neighbor was white, and my niece had a baby about three. And so, the white couple who lived next door and their children would play together and the little girl would come over when her mother wasn't home. Her daddy was home, he would let her come over. When the mother came home, the child, the little white child had to go home.

BC: *Uh huh.*

EL: So one day, the white child was over there playing with, Chason, my niece, and they got into the baby powder, the talcum powder, and the little white girl sprinkled it all over my niece and rubbed it and said, "Now I can play with you." Said "Why you can play with her now?" She said, "My momma said I couldn't play with her. She was black but now she ain't black no more." I know it sounded cute but you know....

BC: *Yeah.*

EL: This mother's teaching her child this.

BC: *It's not of the times, yeah...*

EL: Yeah, you can't play with her cause she's black, but her father wasn't teaching her that because he would let her come over. You could tell when her mother come home, she had to go home. So, it's, and that's still going on today! People are teaching their children, "you shouldn't do this 'cause this is white or this is black." And I think it's awful but I can't change the whole world, so I just stay in my own little corner and live by my own mind and self.

BC: *Well thank you, and I think with that we will end this interview. All proper names will be attached with the paperwork and, when this tape is submitted to the transcriber. Thank you.*

[END OF INTERVIEW]