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INTERVIEWEE: Archie McKay

INTERVIEWER: (Jasmine ?), Unknown 2, Unknown 3

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:12:57

Jasmine: --William H. Turner Tech and I'm about to interview Mr. Archie McKay.

Where were you born?

McKay: I was born in Fort Green, Florida.

Unknown2: Can you tell us about your parents and grandparents?

M: Well, my mother was a farm hand. My grandmother also was a farm hand.

Unknown3: What part of town did you move to in your early childhood days?

M: My parents-- my father was a migratory worker. He was what we call a sawmill worker. And he moved from place to place. At that time, my mother decided that she needed a place to stay and to stabilize and stop moving so much. So, she gave her husband an ultimatum- my father- that either he stay one place or she was going home to her mother. And she ended up going to her mother. We came to Miami in 1939 and I've been living here (?) ever since.

J: When you moved here to Miami, was it hard for your family to find work?

M: No, not my mother because she was alone and she was a laundry worker at that time and she found work doing laundry work.

U2: When you moved to Miami, how old-- about how old were you?

M: Thirteen.

U2: Thirteen? Like, what did you face? Did you face any race-- racial profiling when you were here by whites?

M: We were-- well, it was a segregated area and we lived in what was called 'Overtown'.

U3: What thoughts do you have about the changes that were made in the 1950s and 1960s?

M: Well, the changes were good because it opened up doors. It opened up jobs, it opened up a whole set of things, especially in the school systems.

U3: So, what were the things that were open to blacks?

M: Well, in-- when the segregation was ended, the schools, as I said, jobs were more plentiful. There were certain jobs that were denied blacks at that time- as we were called then: 'Negros'.

J: Oh, going back to where there was still segregation. When you were attending school, what was your mind-set like?

M: Well, your mind-set then were to do the best you can to make the best you can to improve yourself. You didn't have thoughts of doing anything else because you were taught by your parents. You lived in a segregated area, you were taught to respect, you were taught to obey, and to observe the laws. And these were the laws at that time that you didn't go certain places, you didn't work certain places, so you just stayed within the boundaries of which are set for you.

J: Well, within those boundaries, what were the places where-- that you can go for like, relaxation and leisure time?

M: Oh, you had everything practically that you want. You had your movies, you had your playgrounds. Oddly enough though, you didn't have swimming pools nor were you able to go to public beaches despite all the water you were surrounded by.

U2: Did you ever go to Virginia Key Beach?

M: Yes, I did.

U2: Can you-- when you were there, how was it like?

M: Well, it's a body of water, same as it is now. However, there was no-- there was only one way to get to Virginia Beach at that particular time and that was by boat and we used to load up on the boat and when I look back over it now, I just thank God we were able to make it over there because when I look at the boat and how low it was to the water, geez, amazing that we made it. But, we made it until they built the causeway over and then we were able to drive over.

U3: And how did you feel knowing it was only a segregated beach and that you were designated to go there and nowhere else to--?

M: At that particular time, you were young, you didn't have any knowledge of-- that you were segregated. You just knew that you couldn't do certain things.

U3: So, like, did your mom or your parents ever explain to you the situation that was going on around you or-- and warned you from certain things to go from?

M: Well, they warned you of certain places that was-- you were forbidden to go because that was by law you couldn't go. So you lived within those parameters.

J: Growing up, were you part of any organizations that you know, [school bell rings] tried to create peace between the two races?

M: Well, I wasn't a part of any organizations, but there were always elderly people that were fighting this and fighting that and looking for a better way to do this and even in the school they had organizations seeking better books and playgrounds and fighting the city to do what they were supposed to do.

J: So what profession did you go into when you finally made it out of your education?

M: I was a policeman.

J: Could you elaborate on the--?

M: I joined the City of Miami Police Department 1954. It was ten years old- that is, the part that I joined- because there were no black police officers before 1944. The first black police officer was hired was September 4, 1944. I joined April 1, 1954. We were segregated then. When the first black police officer was hired- they didn't call them 'black' then, they called them 'Negros'- when he was hired, they hired five. And they were kept secret from the public. On-- if the public knew anything about Negro police officers, they were already hired and that was done to keep the whites from rebelling for what the city had done, and they did it in secret. So they hired five and by the time I came on, there was about forty-four then. They had a small building that they housed them in. They couldn't associate with other police officers, they were in a segregated area. In 1950, they built a precinct and this precinct was to house black police only with white supervisors and I stayed there until I was moved to the regular police department in 1959. However, we were still segregated but I was moved over because of the need for detectives- black detectives- on the department and I was one of those that was selected to go over.

J: Was there any difference, like, trying to be-- becoming a police officer? Were there any different qualifications between then and when the first black were accepted?

M: The only thing I know is I took a test and whether that was the same test that everybody else took. I was later told that it was the same test that everybody else took and I passed the test and I joined the force, although it was segregated.

U3: Did you ever go out on the street as a police officer in uniform and felt uncomfortable in a situation you had to handle?

M: Yes. You we-- you were-- you were forbidden to arrest white people and take them down to the station. You could detain them and call for a white officer to come pick them up. When I first came on, you were not allowed to wear your uniform at home. They had-- when they built the precinct, they had a dormitory room like with closets and you changed clothes with you got to work and you changed clothes when you got off. And you didn't wear your uniform home. You had a selected designated route to go to your assigned area. At that particular time, there was three areas where Negros lived: Liberty City, and let me tell you Liberty City is not as lar-- was not as large as it is now. It was a square that ran from Twelfth Avenue, Sixty-Second Street to Seventeenth Avenue, Sixty-Second Street to Seventy-First Street, Seventeenth Avenue to-- back to Sixty-Second Street-- uh, back to Twelfth Avenue- that was Liberty City. We were assigned to Liberty City to work and we could only go down Twelfth Avenue to reach the area from the precinct which was Eleventh Street. Coconut Grove was another area that we worked and the only way we could go there, we had to go down Northwest Second Avenue down to US 1 and into Coconut Grove.

U2: Did you ever face discrimination by other white-- by white officers?

M: Yes.

U2: Like how?

M: Well, they would refuse to-- some would refuse to work with you. There were those that uh, would uh-- let me say, there was a canteen that was there and they didn't want you-- you weren't allowed to go in that canteen and if you went in there, they would either get up or leave or demand that you leave.

J: This being the final question, from the time you moved to Miami up until right now, how's your feelings toward the change of Miami overall?

M: Well, I think its room for improvement, but there have been great strides made in that you cannot-- you cannot tell the boundary of Miami so far as it was back then when you had three areas. See, your-- the boundaries are joined together. You can go from where we was-- first started, say Fifth Street, that was our boundary on the south side, Fifth Street. You can go from Fifth Street to Broward County line without a break.

J: Thank you. You have been good. Thank you.

U2: Thank you.

U3: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW