

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Roosevelt Sands Sr.

INTERVIEWEE: Roosevelt Sands Sr.

INTERVIEWER: Virginia Irving, Unknown2, and Unknown3

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:60:25

Irving: -- (?)?

Sands: Yeah, Roosevelt Sands Sr.

I: Okay. Mr. Sands is a Bahamian descendant, right?

S: Yeah, that's right. I was born here, but my parents were born in the Bahamas.

I: Do you remember where they were born?

S: Yeah. My father was born in Harbour Island and my mother was born in Bluff, Eleuthera.

I: That's the same place where Mrs. Jones was from--

S: Oh, yeah, yeah, she's a cousin of mine.

I: Bluff, Eleuthera.

S: Right.

I: We were looking at the map this morning and there's an island called 'Eleuthera'--

S: Uh-huh.

I: --and we were trying to figure out about Bluff and we were thinking that maybe Bluff was a point on the island where the people lived so they called it 'Bluff', Eleuthera.

S: That's correct.

I: That's what we figured out, we don't know--

S: Yeah, that's-- I think you're both right about that.

I: What about your grandparents, their names? Do you remember their names?

S: My grandparents? Let me see. My mother's mother was named Mary Davis- my mother was a Davis before she became a Sands. My father-- my grandfather- you know, his father- he was a Sands. He died at a pretty early age; he was a seaman. I don't recall whether my father knew him or not. My grandmother, she was named (Sarah Larong?). My father was a (first?) member of that family and see Sands died and she married a gentleman by the name of (Larong?). And as the rest of the children became (Larong?), my father-- I guess from marrying (Larong?)-- during (Larong?) or whatever came after, someone was thinking that my father was a (Larong?) but he wasn't, he was a Sands.

I: So your grandfather could have been a spongeman or something like that?

S: Yeah, he was a fisherman.

I: A fisherman?

S: Correct.

I: Do you remember anything about the islands that they talked about or that was probably passed on to your father? Any information about Eleuthera?

S: Uh, not too much. I do know that at one time when the Nassau boats used to run here, that they used to-- one of my aunts remained over there and she used to send quite a bit of oranges from Bluff. (?) is a great town for raising oranges and they used to send more than the supply that the family could consume and then we used to sell the oranges around town there real cheap in those days, you know?

Unknown2: And that was on the island of Eleuthera?

S: That's correct. That's correct. That was a great place for oranges.

I: So your grand-- your father, who was a Sands--

S: That's correct.

I: --then was born here?

S: No, no, he was born in Harbour Island.

I: Harbour Island?

S: Harbour, that's right. My mother was born in Bluff, Eleuthera.

I: Uh-huh. I see. So that your father then came here?

S: That's correct.

I: Do you remember why he left-- left Harbour Island? Do you remember him saying why he decided to come here, leaving--?

S: I don't recall now whether there was some other member of the family that came over here before that. They told him this was the place of opportunity or something-- something like that. Stimulated the interest, you know? And then they came on over here.

I: So that's similar to what Mr. McKenzie said that he left because he felt-- he had the feeling then that this was a better place to make a living.

S: That's right.

I: There were hard times over there at that time--

S: Yeah.

I: --decided to come here.

S: Correct.

I: So then your father came here and then he began to raise a family?

S: That's right. He married my mother here, I think around 1900 because I was born in 1901.

I: So your mother then came-- did they come over married or they--?

S: No, no, no, they married in Key West.

I: Uh-huh. And do you remember your mother saying anything much about-- she was from Bluff?

S: That's right, she was from Bluff. Yes, the one thing I know she used to stress all the time: the people in Bluff had a great reputation of being great songsters where they could sing well.

I: Was this just the blacks or every-- anybody out there?

S: Well, mostly blacks.

I: Mostly blacks?

S: That's correct. That's why they claimed that the John Wesley Smith that used to direct the choir at the old Wesleyan Church- which is now the Presbyterian Church- because they learned vocal music at an early age in life. And of course, they have the natural ability to sing. After they learn the vocal part, why, they were pretty good. I think in the system over there- in the school system- they used to teach them vocal music. I think that was along with the reading and writing and arithmetic.

Unknown2: You don't know any of the folksongs that were sung--

S: No--

U2: --right off hand?

S: No, I certainly don't. [inaudible]

I: Mr. Sands, do you remember any other information? Any tales or hear them-- remember them talking about how people lived over there? Anything?

S: I think most of them lived from the sea, you know? I think they relied on catching sponge and fish- a great demand in those days, you know? And of course, like I said, they raised many fruit there, mostly oranges.

I: We talked to Mrs. (?) last night and she said that over there, when she was a girl, that before you could get married, say, to a man who was interested in you, would write your house-- write your house a letter saying that he wanted to marry the daughter and the parents would write him a letter back saying it that it was okay and then he could come. Do you remember if this custom carried over with your parents--?

S: In my day, I had to write for my wife.

I: Oh, so it did carry over--

S: I written my-- the Clair family in 1922. We went together for a year and then we got married in 1923. Her father was pretty ill at the time as I recall, and then they presented my letter to him and he said, "Well, you all see my condition. Call George and you all make the decision." Well, you realize he was on his last hurrah, you know? And they discussed it and then Wilhelmina's brother George- George Clair- wrote me back and they consented for me to visit the house. [coughs]

I: So that custom still carried over, yeah, from the islands- from the Bahamas, yes.

S: I have an idea that they even held conference. I think they went over there to Prichard Square where Lindsey Lumber Company is?

I: Uh-huh.

S: Well, that's where a lot of those people used to live in that area up in there, you know. When they found out (?) Sands boy proposed to [laughs] this Clair girl. Now what do you think about it? Well, parents might seem to be alright but now let's find out more about this boy. They had the letter I wrote, you know? [laughs] It was quite awhile before I received an answer, you know?

Unknown3: But were you permitted to see her before you got an answer to your letter?

S: Yeah-- no, no, no. I'll tell you the truth, not to the house. I would see her on the street once in a while and she'd be looking around, I'd be looking, too. She was scared to talk.

U3: So, you just--? [both speak at same time]

S: You know, they might report.

U3: Right. So you just saw this-- a lady--?

S: They even told me what I had to do.

U3: But you saw this lady and you were interested in her so you wrote the letter?

S: That's right.

U3: But you didn't date her before?

S: No, no.

I: Did you pass this custom on to your children? Or by the time your children were old enough to get married, the custom had probably died away, or what?

S: Yes, just about and then it could be negligence on my part. I'm sorry I didn't do that.  
[both laugh]

S: Some of the things that I see now, I'm sorry I didn't do that.

U2: We understand the custom, don't we? [laughs] After we see the way it's done.

S: Well, I think-- I don't know, it must have done something because it seemed to like there was-- well, over there in the Grand Lodge where I (canned?) every year-- every April, some of the new people that I meet, you know, and--

I: You mean over-- you go over to Nassau?

S: No, no, Jacksonville. I've never been to the Bahamas. I tell them how many years I've been married, you know. They say, "To the same woman?"

I: Yes.

S: Well, since yesterday, it was fifty-four year since we've been married- the 27th of June, 1923.

I: And Mr. McKenzie was married to his wife, wasn't he, for years? And then Mrs. Jones, remember she on the tape said, "They picked my husband, but they picked me a good man," because she was married for fifty-some years-- or sixty-two-- something like that, a long time to her husband. So, it may have been some merit in there, some good.

S: There might have been.

I: Yes, I'm sure.

S: I know aside-- as I can remember, aside from the marriage vows, the minister was named Reverend Johnson. He said, "Now listen, I want to advise you two young people that be careful about news because they speaking the news with a lie. If you ain't careful, it might cause a separation."

I: That's the truth.

S: Huh?

I: Yeah.

S: Yeah. I remember Reverend Johnson- W.A. Johnson. I remember those words. And he read the ceremony very slow, you know? Well, this marriage business is a very serious thing, you know? Of course, they don't take it as serious today as they did yesterday. Yeah. You know what I mean? My mother-in-law broke down that night and some other lady came and said, "Well, wait a minute now (Sarah?)," she says, "She'll still be there right there in the house with you." And as a matter of fact, I moved in the house on Louisa Street- 405 Louisa Street. My mother-in-law-- I didn't know the difference between living at home and living there with the mother-in-law- in other words, she treated me just like-- you know, there wasn't any difference.

U2: Families are closer ties. There's a stronger relationship within the family. When you get married, the family doesn't all split up, you stay together.

[audio cuts off]

I: --what I mean is, I know my grandmother was telling me about like when the Chinese workers came here and how Key West was a long time ago where certain parts of Key West, the black families lived-- she called them the 'good families' and she said that the people who were always having a good time lived in another part of the town, you know things like that--

S: Red-light district?

I: Yeah, yeah.

S: [laughs]

I: But any other kinds of stories you could remember about Key West when you were growing up?

S: Well, I know a baseball story.

I: Well, tell us.

S: Well, let's see. In 1920, the Bacharach Giants of Atlantic City, New Jersey was on their way to Havana, Cuba and they stopped over here to play an exhibition game with the local team. I happened to be a local member at the time, not that I played so well but they liked me and they put me on the team. And I saw the finest group of ball-player that I ever seen in my life. And I read the other day where one of the members of the team- Oscar Charleston- was inducted to Baseball's Hall of Fame. I was very happy to read that because I knew I played, you know--

I: And he had come here?

S: Oh, yeah, right up there in the old Army barracks was where we used to play all the games in those days- right where (William Casey Memorial Field?)

I: Oh, yeah.

S: That's the old Army barracks and that's where we used to play. And the Brooklyn Dodgers played there, the New York Giants played there-- as a matter of fact, the Giants played there the same year when the Bacharach Giants came here to play. So, the New York Giants played against the white team; so the Bacharach Giants- being a colored team- played against us, the colored boys.

U2: And after they played the games, they went to--

S: Havana. Havana, Cuba. Now, over there, they could play all mixed up- white, black, and everybody-- but in the United States, you couldn't play that way. It's a funny thing about--

I: I remember--

S: I mean, the Brooklyn Dodgers came here, the Key West people-- Ervin Brooks was the best pitcher in Key West- best that ever liv-- was born in Key West- best ball-player that Key West has ever developed was Ervin Brooks and he was ready to pitch without their warm-ups and everything. And that was in the year of 1915, I think, and the Dodgers refused to play.

I: Because--

S: He couldn't pitch that day. Of course, the fella that pitched against them did a good job. His name was (?). They won, one to nothing. He (held them to?) about four hits. But, you know, well before the barrier was broken down, you know how there was (awards?) which show them off to see because they used go barnstorming many years ago in the days of Judge Landers, too, you know. And they went out-- they were out there, they were playing mixed up and--

I: My father used to play baseball.

S: Real good third basemen- one of the best. One of the best--

I: And when you said 'barnstorming', they used to go up to Coconut Grove--

S: They certainly did.

I: --Miami and played.

S: Yeah.

I: I remember.

S: They played all-- out there. Well, anyhow, the crowd was out there to see Ruth knock a homerun. And this fella 'Cannonball' Dick Redding was some pitcher. He pitched-- he pitched three innings in Key West. [laughs] Well, I saw him pitch since then; I saw him pitch in 1927 over in Trenton, New Jersey. Oh, what a pitcher. Well anyway, in those days they used to talk, you know?

I: The players?

S: Yeah! Oh, yeah. Redding would be telling Ruth, he said, "Alright, Babe, if you knock a homerun today, you've got to earn it."

[all laugh]

S: And he talked (?), you know? Wham! And he struck out Ruth three times and the crowd-- that didn't please the crowd, that's a displeasing because they came to see Ruth knock the ball out-- [laughs]

U2: And this was a local boy from Key West?

S: No, no, no. No, no, no, he wasn't local. Ervin Brooks is the local boy.

U2: Oh, Ervin Brooks.

S: Ervin Brooks. He played--

U2: He could not pitch.

S: Not here in Key West.

U2: Not in Key West.

S: --he pitched up there when he played with the Brooklyn Royal Giants. Oh yeah, he played the outfield and pitched and did everything, yeah.

U2: So these teams would go down to Havana and they'd play down there. Now, when did this practice stop? When did they stop doing this?

S: Since Castro came in.

U2: Okay, up until that time--?

S: Yeah, up until that time, you could still go because Dick Lundy, I remember, that in 1920 when they came with the Bacharach Giants, he was nineteen years of age- that's what I was, too.

I: So in those early days, we had major baseball teams--

S: Oh, you certainly did.

I: --coming to Key West to play against the local players here?

S: Yeah, yeah.

I: So we must have had some very good players- baseball players.

S: Very good. Very good. Very good. Well, you're father didn't have to (?) and he played third base well.

I: I remember.

S: Yeah, he played third base real good. He was a good hitter, too. He had a very accurate throwing arm. When he got the ball off the ground and rifled across the diamond-- it's just right there, the first baseman didn't have to-- [laughs]

U2: That's what you need when--

S: He had accuracy. You could write that on his forehead when you speak about accuracy from third to first.

U2: It's a rough throw.

S: Yes, it's 127 feet, you know, over there across the diamond. [laughs] And he used to do it over and over again. He played third base well. But Ervin Brooks was the best that Key West has ever developed. Played all the positions there and he was-- he was a-- I don't know, he was an iron man. I remember another place that they used to play where the wireless pole was? The one in the Naval Station? They pulled down the poles now. Them iron poles, you know, wireless poles? They take them down some time. Don't you remember that?

I: I don't remember the poles.

S: You don't remember the poles there? Well, they had the big wireless poles there and that was a baseball ground where the sailors-- the quarters and the marine barracks and all that, that wasn't there, that was-- then, no buildings like that was around there then. Well, anyway, they played a series with the Miami Giants and Ervin Brooks pitched the first game and Key West won, and the second game he played shortstop, no rest, and the third game, he was in the box again pitching (he'd like to?) shut out the Giants- they made one run. Oh that fella, the way he could-- Well, I can't describe in words how the man could pitch. [laughs]

I: He was a Key Wester?

S: Yeah, Ervin Brooks? Yeah.

I: Do you remember his family?

S: Yeah, you know Nellie Brooks?

I: The Brooks doesn't sound--

S: You know Gilbert Gonzalez?

I: Yes.

S: His grandmother.

I: Oh.

S: That's his sister- that's Ervin Brooks' sister.

I: Do you know if they were from the Bahamas? Any--?

S: I don't know. No, I wouldn't know. I don't know where they--

I: Well then baseball was one of the local pastimes here.

S: It certainly was. Yeah. Well, you see, they had that cigar industry in those days and your grandfather was a cigar-maker. Well, you could go to on the job like I am now and come home, change and put on your baseball clothes and go ahead and play. And if it was up to you, you know, you make as many cigars as you wanted, you know, and you just tell the foreman, "I'm knocking off. I'm going to play ball," you know? That was a good trade, you know what I mean? It made nice of money, too. But right there where the commissary, that was Gato's Factory.

I: A cigar factory?

S: That's right.

I: My grandmother--

S: Yeah, that's Gato Cigar Factory and out there--



I: The same building.

S: --the (?)-- the same building. It was built for cigar-makers.

U2: Now that is news to me.

S: Yeah.

U2: That building that's there today was a cigar factory and then they took it over and renovated it for--?

S: That's correct.

I: And wasn't out there something like a cow-- where the cows-- they kept the cows or something? Back out that way? The cow pasture? No?

S: You speaking about the Butcher Pen?

I: Yeah.

S: Where they used slaughter the cows and stuff?

I: Right.

S: Well, you know, that's way-- that's toward the beach.

I: Oh, I see.

S: Toward White Street, at the end of White Street. That's where Lumley and them, they used to bring the cows over here and they had a butcher pen there and, of course, that was in the horse and buggy days, and they had a big wagon and they had regular meat markets. They'd kill them and butcher them, you know, and put them on this big-- we had a big strong fellow on there, we used to call him 'Mutton'- that was a strong man, used to lift up them-- I called them quarter-- a quarter of a cow. He had regular hooks that hang on, you know? He didn't need no help either. POW! [laughs]

U2: Well, now, do you remember Stock Island? The name 'Stock Island' was supposedly given because they did ship the cattle in live and they had stock pens out there. Do you remember them having stock pens out at Stock Island?

S: No, I don't remember that but I know there must be something in what you say because they call that 'Cow Key Channel' there.

U2: Yeah. Right.

S: Yeah.

I: You were going to say that some other building--?

S: Oh yeah, that (Summit Moving Van?), you know where that's at?

I: Yeah.

S: That was a cigar factory. And there was-- right where the bookstore is on the corner of Catherine and Duval?

U3: (?) on that one.

I: Yeah, I know that building.

S: You know, (Leonti?), you know where I mean.

I: Right.

S: Well, that was Thompson's Cigar Factory. It was even bigger than the building he has there now.

I: So it seemed like the cigar industry was on this side of town here.

S: Well, they had another-- before Gato moved over here to this building here, let's see, around 1917, he was downtown on Ann Street, it runs by the old City Hall--

I: Yeah.

S: --the wooden building over there. And right in front of the (red house?) on Petronia Street there was a big factory. Right over--

I: Oh. Not that-- is the structure still there?

S: No, no. That was a great big building.

U2: Now, you worked in a cigar factory?

S: No, no, I never worked in one.

U2: You never did?

S: No, no, I couldn't make any cigars--

I: My grandfather came from-- was a Cuban, see.

S: That's right.

I: He came-- he learned the trade over there, then he came to live in Key West.

S: Good cigar maker.

I: So, he worked in the factory.

S: Yeah. [inaudible]

I: But what did you do basically, Mr. Sands?

S: Well, let's see. Let's go on back a little bit, now. Let's see now. In 1915 and '16, I used to attend Douglas school there. I came out of school in 1916 in the third grade and I wouldn't stay in school no more because I was the oldest one of the family and I had eight little sisters and brothers below my age, you know, and the old man needed help. So he got me a job out in the athletic club- that doesn't exist anymore now, that (?) Duval Street there, you know. They used to play basketball and all kinds of athletic games and everything there; there was also a dancehall, too. So I started to working there and \$5 a week as I can remember, that's what I made. So, the manager quit and he start to working in the Navy yard and he encouraged me to come on down there; he liked me pretty well. And I started working for the government. I started to work and I was only sixteen, yeah, but one of the men in the-- one of the officers who used to be on the house committee out there at the athletic club, he liked me and he just disregarded the age business, he said I could work like a man. So, the law said eighteen but they still take me on in, sixteen, you

know? I worked there all during World War One. As a matter of fact, I was right there in 1918 when the war was over. Your grandfather on your mother's side, you know, Joseph (?)--

I: Right.

S: --we called him 'Cotton'. Oh, there's a story about that. You know, your grandfather, you know, he was a really bright-- your complexion.

I: Yes, they say--

S: So on the cards, you see, they have their color, already count them in, take their pictures and he put on black because you see the color of their hair. So you taking your grandfather's picture, he put down white, so-- [laughs] That was amusing. So-- but we worked together in the S&A department- that's supplies and accounts. For quite a while, we worked together very nice. Your grandfather was one of the best bakers in Key West.

I: They say.

S: He worked at the Tip Top Bakery, Mr. Sawyer owned it. You see that you reading why you didn't hear too much about him because he worked for the other fella. You see, you heard about Joe Wake's father-in-law, Roberts and (Lance?) Sawyer has a pie bakery-- pie baker because they owned their own business. But your grandfather worked for the Tip Top Bakery and Mr. Sawyer got the credit but your grandfather did the baking. [laughs] You understand what I mean? But he enjoyed it. He enjoyed it and I can remember now, Saturday nights, I used to go down to (A. Lewis and Sons?) and come back. He didn't like a coat, but he wore on some beautiful silk shirts. [laughs]. Oh, he liked that. He had a \$25 gold piece, I think it was. Your grandmother can tell you. I think that's the amount. He used to have very bright hair, watch charming, watch in the pocket here and so on. He was alright. Happy go lucky fella.

U2: People seemed to dress more back then than they do today or--?

S: Well, you know, they had a-- the method was different. In those days, the clothes that we wear on Sundays, we only wear on Sundays- they were special, kept aside, you know? [chuckles] Not like the people today. You know, we put on them anytime now.

U2: Yeah.

S: Special clothes were for funerals, for dancing, and-- mostly people dressed on Sundays. And that was a special day for certain foods. You use Sunday for a better dinner than the other days of the week and so on like that. That's the way we lived, you know?

U2: Anticipate. Looking forward to it.

S: Looking forward.

U2: Right. Right.

S: When we-- well, you know, you had a Sunday school in those days and the fellas would-- well, some of the boys with tailors, too, you know, they went down to (Mr. Morris?) and they make clothes, you know. Them were the days when the tailors made the clothes for you instead of going to the store, you know, you put in your order and they tape you up, you know, and then make them there on the machine. [laughs]

U2: Then your clothes fit.

S: Oh, yeah.

U2: Today you buy clothes and you never can get them to fit right.

S: You're right about that. Yeah. Now, that building right on the corner of Fleming and Whitehead over on the other side of the courthouse there, you know? That was (Culmer's?) Tailor Shop. An old building, it's still right there now. Fleming and Whitehead, old building. It's right next to where them-- where lawyers have offices there.

I: Yeah, that building right around the corner?

S: Right. Right, those buildings right there. And Mr. (Morris?), he had his building- there ain't nothing there at all now-- yeah, I think Southern Bell Telephone Company keeps trucks or something in there. That's where he was- on the corner of Fitzpatrick and Greene.

I: And Mr. (Morris?) was a tailor?

S: One of the best that Key West has ever produced. One of the best. One day-- that reminds me, one day, (Willy Coker?) told me, he said that it was a drug store on the corner of Petronia and Duval right there where that (Margaret Ann's?), used to be (Margaret Ann's?). There's something else there now.

I: A grocery store, yeah.

S: Well, the drugstore burned down years afterwards. Well, anyway, when it was in operation, this stranger was there asking (Willy?) different questions and all like that and (?). He said Mr. Morris always looked-- Well, he made the stuff! He came out of the drugstore there and he say, "By the way," Frank said, "who is that gentleman there?" He just-- he looked like he was-- [laughs] He said, "Well, he's a successful tailor." He said, "I thought he was something." [all laugh]

S: He said he's a (?), you know? He trained many of the boys down there in the tailoring business.

I: That has died out. I think we may have one or two left, right?

S: Yeah.

I: Mr.-- what's his name now, the tailor? Um--

S: Oh, (Kivel?)?

I: (Kivel?).

S: (Samba?) taught him. (Willy Samba?) taught him. I think (Culmer?) taught (Willy Samba?). (Culmer?) was married to (Willy Samba's?) older sister, you know? And I think he went there to (Willy Samba?) and he taught him tailoring trade. He worked for (Morse?) one time, too. He was a good tailor, real good tailor. Only, unfortunately, he let the liquor beat him, you know? He's done exactly like his brother did. Stop a while and-- he stopped longer than his brother but he's going again now. I don't think he be able to-- I'm praying that he be able to redeem himself. I don't know.

I: Mr. Sands, what about some of the child-raising customs like we were told that children-- it was like, children could be seen and not heard.

S: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

I: You raised many children, what kind of practices did you apply from-- you know, with your children?

S: Well, I'll tell you what I would do. I'd make it a point not to discuss certain things in their presence. And as I remained silent, they'll see that I desire to say something that they wasn't invited to hear and they got used to that and they'd walk some other place and not listen to, you know, what's going on. But my old man-- my old man would said, "Alright son, you get going then, I'll be saying some things here you are not supposed to hear." [laughs] He tell me right on out, you know what I mean?

U2: The direct approach.

S: Yeah, no questions about that.

I: And what about--?

S: But I could see that dying out because-- you know my brother Thomas that died, you know, sudden, dropped down there (?) or something back over there? Don't you remember that? My brother Thomas? You know, he was married to (Doris?), you know? The (Tynes?) girl, you know? Maybe you're too young.

I: Yeah, I remember her but I don't remember--

S: You don't remember her husband, eh?

I: No.

S: He didn't live very long. Well anyway, when he was coming up, you know, I remember one day that the old man said something to him and Thomas told him, he said, "Oh, okay dad. Okay, papa, when I get time." He said, "Who you talking to, boy? I could beat as many boys like you as it is in hell." [laughs] And he talking to my brother, you know? And my brother walked off; he left the thing undone. So I could see this thing, you know? Yeah.

I: And it's fading away--?

S: My mother had a (reducer?), she had a good mind. She would say-- she told him. I remember one day I was outside but listening to the discussion. She said, "Listen, Thomas and George and (?)"-that's the other three brothers. She said, "They're not going to respond to your desires like Roosevelt did. It just a different day so you better make the adjustment." My mother--

I: You were the oldest?

S: Yeah, I was the oldest. Oh, yeah, I was the oldest.

I: So then, your mother could see the change coming?

S: She had a better brain than the old man.

I: Yes.

S: The old man could write and read and stuff but she could analyze things and draw pictures of success, you know, that had some value, you know?

I: Mm-hmm.

S: I recall one time that a man carried some news to my mother. Now that fella was married. Well, I did something (?) was wrong. Well anyhow, this-- she (waited about and she calls me?) then the man-- another man, he (goes?). "Your son better be careful because this man, you know, he'll kill you." [laughs] She said, "Alright." She told me-- she cautioned me and then she said, "But I'll tell you, you ain't walking through this life afraid of no man. Now, you wrong in this case, but you ain't going through life in fear." Built my confidence right on up, boy. [laughs]

I: Did we ask you about how old your father was when he came here? Do you remember?

S: No, I don't remember that.

I: Uh-huh. And you don't remember about your mother?

S: No, I certainly don't. My sister Sarah has a Bible-- you know my sister, Sarah, married to Duke?

I: Yes.

S: She's (?) senior citizen.

I: Yes. Isn't that Coffee's mother?

S: That's Coffee's mother. Correct. Correct.

I: Coffee and--

S: I think she--

I: You see how this is-- everybody's related? I've been pointing out to Mrs. (?) the different people. See, she's not from Key West so when we pass the streets out there, "That's so-and-so's mother and that's so-and-so's son."

S: Yeah, sure.

I: But Coffee, we've been to hear him sing.

S: Right. Yeah, that's Coffee's mother.

I: So you're Coffee's uncle.

S: That's correct. That's my sister's son. You know that story about Coffee's father?

I: No.

S: Well, there was a misunderstanding between my sister and Coffee's father and my sister said that she was gonna quit him. He says, "Well, if you quit, you'd better watch out." But that didn't bother her because she had-- my mother had instilled in her just like the illustration I drew about myself. All of us was that way, you know what I mean?

I: Confident and sure of yourself.

S: That's right. So, she got on the train and left. And do you know what he done? He got on the train, too, and he shot my sister on the train.

I: Really?

S: Yeah, he shot my sister on the train.

I: Because he didn't want her to go?

S: Because he didn't want her to go. The train had to back up. There was a big mix-up about that. They saw the train go out. After he shot her, they didn't know the condition and they had to back the train up. Anyway--

U2: Right in Key West, now?

S: Yeah, right in Key West. Yeah.

U2: Do you know the year of that?

S: I'm trying to-- my sister Sarah has it. Yeah, she got-- she has a scrapbook and she has the Bible and things like that, you know?

U2: Now, where was the train depot located? Was-- I read that it was down where the Truman Annex is today.

S: That's right!

U2: Right?

S: That's right. They built a highway on the-- right on the railroad.

I: Mm-hmm. It's still down there.

S: It's still right down there. I was looking around today-- I was out there and I looked. The buildings goes out towards that end there still there and where the ferry slips used to come in with pineapples and carrot, the freight cars to Cuba back and forth, and like that, you know, had a regular apron where the railroad track, you see? What happens is they have an apron like this and it comes up like that and then the ferry backs onto that and it come on down like that and the tracks meet and they have bolts to bolt the track together. Well, I used to work on that job and the switch engine would hook into the cars, you know, and then back them right on into the ferry boat. Had four tracks in each ferry. They had three ferries in those days- the Henry M. Flagler, the (?), and the (?). And in the big days is when they used to bring the pineapples over. See, the cars that they-- the Cuban cars that they brought the pineapples over here, you couldn't ship the pineapples up north in them, you had to put them in the refrigeration cars. So it had a regular rack where they would have to transfer the pineapples out of the Cuban cars into these refrigeration cars.

U2: Now, was this--

S: Then they would make--

U2: --a routine every day or--?

S: No, no, no, that's the season. A season.

U2: A season? What time of the year was the season?

S: It would be going on right now. Around June and July, yeah.

U2: Early summertime then, the pineapple season. Was there an increase in employment because of this?

S: Yeah, it was a dandy. Oh yeah, because the other work around town was paying thirty cents an hour which would be \$2.40 a day and you get fifty cents an hour out there handling the pineapples.

U2: Almost twice as much.

S: That's right. I used to pray for that time to come.

U2: Oh, I bet a lot of people did.

S: Yeah. Cleaning the car I'd be-- only get twenty-five cents an hour- that was only \$2.00 a day and you know--

U2: Cleaning the refrigeration cars you had to clean?

S: No, no, these were passenger cars- (?) cars and day coaches and all like that. But during the pineapple season, they would give us extra jobs for oiling up the wheels, you know, and like that and everything.

U2: So you were working on repair work on the railroad machinery?

S: That's right.

U2: So you were not unloading the pineapples?

S: No, no, no, I never done anything like that, no.

I: What else did they bring in here except pineapples into Key West? Did they bring turtle? Did they have a turtle industry?

S: Yeah, they had a turtle industry. Well, they had a regular canning pineapple factory here, you know.

I: Oh, did they?

S: Yeah, yeah. There was a canning factory over there where that-- them small cars on Eaton Street--

I: Oh, Volkswagen.

S: Right in that area.

I: That was the canning--

S: Big factory there. And they employed plenty people there.

I: Hmm. I didn't know that. Pineapple canning--

S: Yeah, they had a regular canning factory right there. They employed plenty of people there.

U2: I've read and we've all read in past history that there was some production of pineapples here in the Keys--

S: Yeah, they did good. My father worked with them up there. I never worked with it--

U2: Up there, now you talking about--

S: Matecumbe and all around there. Yeah, they produced plenty of them there, shipped them out, too.

U2: Now, they were not closer to Key West, they were way up the Keys.

S: Right, right, right. They were way up the Keys. You know also, you know, where they make the cigars, the boxes were made right here, too. They had a box factory and that was right on Caroline Street there- Caroline and William. That's William? I think that's right, yeah.

I: Mm-hmm.

S: Caroline and William, right across over there, you know?

U2: Now, do you remember when we were talking about your sister going on the railroad?

S: Uh-huh.

U2: Do you remember how much a ticket costs to go?

S: Yeah, it was \$7.18 from here to Miami.



I: One-way or roundtrip?

S: One-way. One-way, \$7.18.

U2: Must have been a beautiful trip, too, the scenery up there.

S: Well, they used to have excursions and they give you a-- you know, you paid a little less than that, two and three days excursions maybe \$10, you know and like that. That was excursion that gave when the railroad was destroyed. That's why it happened on September, that was a Labor Day excursion, and the train came in that day, too, right out there. But the storm hit the Keys in the meantime and the train couldn't go back.

I: And that was what year?

S: Nineteen thirty-five.

I: Mm-hmm.

U2: And it cut it off. There was no damage down here of the railroad.

S: No, not here. Back out on the wrecker. I was supposed to be on the wrecker working in the kitchen, you know? It start to slowing down, finally stopped. It start to work-- it started to work right then and there, but then later on, some airplane came by and--  
[audio recorder drops]

S: --delivered a message that further up, it ain't nothing but water. The rail-- the tracks and everything was gone. Well, I worked on Long Key Bridge after then and widening up the bridge in order to make it a highway, you know? And then they was salvaging the track that the water had gone on top of the bridge and taken off and-- that's powerful, that water, you know? And I saw the fellas there, they was about 200 yards away from the bridge where it had taken it off and, you know, carried--

U2: As heavy as that is.

S: As heavy as that is.

U2: Carried it that far.

S: Some of it 300 yards.

U2: You worked on the Long Key Bridge?

S: Long Key Bridge, yeah. I worked--

U2: So after the hurricane, you were repairing the damage or--?

S: No, that was quite awhile afterwards.

U2: So, awhile.

S: Yeah, yeah.

U2: And this is when they--?

S: It happened in '35; I worked on the bridge in '37.

U2: And this is when they were making it into a regular--?

S: Highway, that's correct. Correct.  
[audio cuts off]

S: You see that Bahia Honda Bridge, the train used to run right in between the (?)-- that's right, but then they built the thing up above on the top (the old one?). You can see how it--

U2: Yeah. Yeah.

S: Yeah. That's where.

U2: How long did you work on the highway bridge? Just a--?

S: I worked a couple of years.

U2: A couple years?

S: Mm-hmm.

I: Did you work on Bahia Honda at all?

S: No, I didn't work on Bahia Honda. No, no, that's another contractor there. I worked on Long Key with this (C.Y.?) Construction Company from Greenwood, South Carolina and it went on the-- over there to [pause] that other key, you know? Pigeon Key! That's the Seven Mile Bridge that's going across, that was another contractor. And then there's another contractor taking care of Bahia Honda.

U3: Mr. Sands, when John was doing research, he found in his research something about Obeah.

S: Mm-hmm. Voodoo?

I: Yes. We would like to know, do you know anything about that?

S: No, I--

I: Did that come from the islands of--?

S: Yeah, there's a lot of superstitious people. I'm not. But I had a friend that-- [laughs] --you know the friend, too-- Jimmy Roberts. [laughs]

I: Yeah, Mr. Roberts.

S: He spent money to go to the Bahamas Islands and he got results.

I: He did?

S: Yeah, he got results. They had him accused innocently, you know- I think it was innocently. He worked in the postal department, you know and--  
[audio recorder drops]

S: --built up down there and he went over there and he saw-- I think it was a lady. Yeah, it was a lady. He paid her some money. "Alright, you don't have to worry about a thing," she says. I think this case was about his father the first time but he was looking after the interest of his father, you know. She says, "You go back," she says, "and your case will not be called, and if it's called, I'll walk into the door." [laughs]

I: This is what they told him on the island?

S: That's what they told him on the island over there. She said, "I'll walk into the courthouse door, I'll be there. But it won't be called." So, they was getting ready to close the court and the lawyer said, "Just a minute. How about the case of this man against Jimmy's father? You know, so-and-so-and-so?" Says, "It's not on the docket." Said, "Oh yeah? It has to be there. I have a copy over here." He said, "Well, it isn't there." While they were arguing, see, the door slammed. BAM! He says-- and the judge says-- hit the gavel and says, "Order in court." But there was nobody there. Jimmy said, "Well, why did that door slam?" [laughs] That's amusing, isn't it?

U3: Yes, it is. So the case wasn't--?

S: No! It was no-- he couldn't find it! It wasn't there.

U3: Do you know any more stories like that or--?  
[audio cuts off]

S: --he was branded as a thief, you know? So, one gentleman saw him one day and he said, "Now listen boy, I know that you've been going in my field and stealing potatoes and sugar cane and different things like that," you know? He said, "Don't go in there anymore. If you go in there anymore, you're gonna be sorry. All in the right time, you'll find out." And that boy went in that place sometime afterwards and the next morning, they went there-- no, the man went first and he saw him. He was walking around and around in places only partially fenced, but he couldn't see the opening. He passed the opening and go walking-- and the crowd went down there and said, "Didn't I tell you?" Said "I dressed the place and you couldn't find the opening there. You could go. You won't come back anymore though. You will learn your lesson." (?) to us here because the fellow walked around-- he went in the night, but everybody saw him in the day. He couldn't get out. Even when the daylight came, he couldn't see there.

I: To get out.

S: [laughs]

U3: Very interesting.

I: So what, the Voodoo got him, huh?

S: Yeah.

I: Well, they say there's some truth to that and there's a lot of superstition. But a lot of people do believe it and then some don't.

S: Well, you know, I have an idea that George Foreman believed it because in his battle over there at that time with Ali, that lady came there and dressed the place and he was looking at her and stuff and all like that and he lost the title. So, I guess it depends on the individual.

I: Yes, in your mind.

S: Yeah, yes.

U2: Some people believe in superstition and other people do not.

U3: Are those stories told a lot over there, would you know?

S: Over in the Bahamas?

U3: Yeah.

S: Yeah, I think so.

U3: So that could be a part of their folktales.

S: Yeah, yeah. I think so.

I: How are their folktales?

U3: Yeah.

S: McKenzie didn't tell you anything?

I: He said he didn't believe in it too much. He didn't know too many stories. He didn't-- you know, he didn't--

S: He knew peoples-- yeah.

I: He said that there was some people who believed and some who didn't.

S: Well, we had a lady here, you know, too. She was from Africa. We called her 'Congo (Hula?)'

I: He said-- he mentioned her, Congo (Hula?), yeah.

S: Yeah, yeah. And people used to go to her and she'd do things for them and stuff.

U3: Did they work?

S: Yeah, some of the things worked.

I: Was that like something like what they would call a 'fortune-teller'--?

S: Jimmy said-- Jimmy told me, he said that this lady when he went over in the interest of himself this time, you know? And she was going to fix it for him and everything. She says, "But listen here, you came for yourself, see, but you've got some children that's in trouble." She says, "If you give me so much additional money, well, I'll do something about it, but they going insane." He says she-- Jimmy said he told her, he said, "Well, I haven't got no more money." She said, "Well, I'm sorry, I'm not charging you much but you gonna regret it because it's gonna happen. It's right here." The cards, you know, she could see it and stuff like that. And you remember Jimmy's two children by-- his wife died in the asylum- little Jimmy and his daughter, both of them died in the asylum.

U3: Where did he go? Do you know the name of the island that he went to to see--?

S: He went to Harbour Island. That's where his father was from. Jimmy's father was a very strong man. Oh, he used to build houses by himself. And so I see him myself working in 1915 on Angela Street with a lamp after working all day downtown there in the (dreg?), you know, with (coal?) and bananas and different things like that and then at night, he'd be still working out there. Strong, a bigger man than Jimmy and--

I: He was from--

S: Oh, yeah he was born right in Harbour Island, yeah. Oh, yeah. (?) And Jimmy believed in it quite a bit. He said somebody was working on (Tom?) one time, too. It didn't work (?) his other son, you know? He had great faith in it, Jimmy did. I don't know how much (Tom?) has in it since he has doctor philosophy degree, maybe he looks at it a little differently, I don't know.

[all laugh]

S: But (Tom's?) a fine fellow, though. He married again, you know.

I: Oh, did he?

S: Yeah, yeah, yeah, he's married to a white lady this time.

I: Tell us about the park then.

S: Oh. Let's see, Nelson English Park was named in honor of Nelson English- the first and only Negro postmaster in the history of Key West and--

I: Was this during the time you were living? Was he postman?

S: No, no, that was before my time.

I: Before your time.

S: But do you know his son was principle of the school when I came to Douglas? James (N.?) English, he was the principle of the school. And he had another son-- he had two more other sons. He had one named George English, used to work the Hotel Jefferson- that was the best hotel in those days down by First National Banking, but there isn't anything in there now- he worked there and (Neil?) English practiced dentistry in Toledo, Ohio and (Neil?) English was also one of the best cornet players- they call them trumpets now but that's the same instrument- that Key West has ever produced. He could triple tongue. You're young, you don't even remember when (?) band used to come- the soldiers.

S: No.

S: You were too young. You were too young. Well, if you were old enough, you see, I could have drew an illustration how a fella used triple tongue in (?')s band. Because these fellas around here now (I don't hear them doing?) that, you know? But this (Neil?) English, oh my. Let me see, you all-- your grandfather's brother, (?) Terry.

I: Mm-hmm.

S: You've heard of him?

I: No.

S: The best bass player Key West ever produced. You know that tuba?

I: Yes.

S: He carried mail, you know? He was a mail-carrier and I can remember that well. The band used to have on nice uniforms in those days. He'd have on his uniform from the-- you know, his uniform from the post office. (?). But, oh, he could play that instrument.

I: So, in Key West-- around what year was that-- we had black mail-carriers even in those days?

S: All were black except one.

I: Oh.

S: All of the mail-carriers was black. The first two men that carried mail was (Willy Cocoon?) and a white gentleman by the name of Billy (Jenks?)- both are dead now. But--

I: Do you remember what year this was?

S: That they taught them how to carry mail? Let me see now. A man came from Jacksonville-- I read it some time ago, too. My sister Sarah has (?). I'll say roughly guessing around 1910, something like that. But all the carriers were black in those days- Let's see Victor (Tynes?), (Cohen?), Eli (Aulbury?), and then that (Mason McGee?).

I: What were you saying--?

S: (?)--

U3: Could you give us a list of names of the more prominent blacks in Key West back around 1915?

S: Yeah, let's see. That's in the days of Dr. (Kershaw?) - he was a medical doctor. And then you had another gentleman that worked in building number one downtown there, he was the only one that did clerical work during World War One, that's Thomas (Reeves?). You've heard of him? He lived in the house there on Thomas Street-- I think where there's the house right there where (Keith Raymond?), you know the (Stubbs?)?

I: Right here on Thomas?

S: Yeah, yeah. There's a house where (Raymond Carey?)'s family is. That's the one (?) English.

I: Oh.

S: They bought them from the English. And so this other house is where the--

I: There was another doctor here, um, the name (Grio?) but they were--

S: Professor (Grio?)?

I: Was he a Key Wester?

S: You mean used to be principle of the school?

I: Yeah.

S: Yeah.

I: He was a Key Wester?

S: Yeah. Yeah, he was born here himself but I think his parents came from somewhere--

I: We had a doctor who used to practice right over on Emma Street.

S: Oh, you mean Dr-- yeah.

I: I remember he took care of my-- a black doctor--

S: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I remember. I can't think of his name.

I: He took care of my ankle when I was a little girl.

S: Yeah, yeah, that's Dr. Benson.

I: Dr. Benson.

S: Yeah--

I: Because his name is written on the cement over there where (Jack Sawyer?) is.

S: Is that right?

I: Yeah-- [both speak at same time]

S: --Dr. Benson. Yeah, he practiced there--

I: I remember.

S: --when you was a little girl.

U2: Does the name Bethel ring a bell to you?

S: Bethel?

U2: Bethel- capital B-E-T-H-E-L or double L.

I: We had some Bethel's here.

S: Yeah. But you want to know of something--?

U2: Well, in the research that we've done, we know the Bethel family was in the Bahamas. We know that. We also know from the cemetery that the name 'Bethel'--

S: Well, there was a man, I think he was named (Malikai?) Bethel and (where he?) used to go to cut wood Cedar Keys or somewhere over there. Well, they claimed this man could cut more wood than any man alive. I remember that. They used to cut the wood and then bring it here and then they'd-- they used a furnace system in those days, so they make coal kilns and then they have charcoal. So in these furnaces is where you cook your dinner and stuff and all that. You didn't have no gas anywhere, you know, you just rely on the furnace. And then for baking purposes, you had something that you call a 'Dutch oven'- it was made out of iron and you put a cover over it and you put your bread in and you baked it there like that. Well, the coal business was a great business in those days. Old Man John (Duvo?), I think he was the last one that had some coal kilns--

I: (Duvo?)?

S: Yeah, you've heard of (Duvo?), huh?

I: We came across it--

U3: --by Bahamian origin.

S: Yeah, correct. Oh yeah, he was a great (?) man too, Old Man (Duvo?).

I: He was a mason?

S: Yeah-- well, he belonged to (?) but in masonry was where he excelled mostly.

U3: Um, you mentioned a lot of men who played instruments in bands and--

S: Oh, yeah.

U3: What did they play for, particularly?

S: Funerals and parades.

U3: Okay, the funerals-- the band leading the funeral procession, is that a custom that's--

S: Yeah.

U3: --peculiar to Key West?

S: No, no.

U3: Did it come from the islands? I haven't seen that in any other place.

S: You haven't, eh?

U3: No, I haven't.

U2: They do that in New Orleans.

S: New Orleans they do that.

U3: Yeah, New Orleans. Yes, I've heard of that in New Orleans.

I: I don't know if that custom came from there or from the islands.

U2: Well, did they practice this in the islands or the Bahamas? Do you know--?

I: I might think that they did.

S: Ever since-- they've been doing it ever since I know right here in Key West.

I: In Key West, I know.

S: And the bands practice funeral dirges and things like that. And they do it now a little bit different from how they used to do it in those days. You see how they go slow like that you know?

U2: Uh-huh.

S: But then we come away from the cemetery, we play marches.

I: Right.

S: You know?

I: I remember.

S: [laughs]

I: And everybody would march on back home happily.

S: That's correct.

I: I used to go when I was a little girl--



U3: Happily, huh?

I: All the funerals were on Sundays. We would walk slowly with the band, with the music, with the cars. Then after they buried the person, we'd stand there and watch the entire ceremony and then everybody was happy when that man was lowered into the grave there. Then we knew we were gonna start marching back and we would get behind the band and march up Solaris Hill there all the way back down to this area here--

S: (Armed with Christian soldiers?).

I: Yeah.

S: [laughs]

U3: Oh, that's very interesting.

U2: This was a community-type-- this wasn't the immediate family, this was the--

I: Everybody would go to that funeral- all the blacks. We would all go-- we knew everybody so if somebody died, you went to that funeral. And then-- [both speak at same time]

S: And--

I: Go on, Mr. Sands.

S: What I was gonna say is that they had more musicians in those days. Now, you take the Welters band, they had about thirty or forty members; and the (?)'s band had about thirty or forty-- plenty people played-- they must be more musically inclined is how I would put it because no plays them instruments.

I: Yeah, plus they didn't have the TVs. See, they could--

S: That's right, that's right.

I: --they didn't have the diversion--

S: You correct, Mrs. (Irving?), you correct about that.

U3: You mentioned a Gabriel-- the Gabriel Apartments in those times--

S: Yeah, named in honor of Robert Gabriel and he used to be a state representative. I know him personally, he was a fine gentleman.

I: He was a Key Wester?

S: Oh, yeah.

I: Born in Key West?

S: Yeah. Yeah, Robert Gabriel was born right here.

I: Do you remember anything about his family? Whether they came from the Bahamas?

S: No, I don't they came-- they were born right here.

I: Born here?

S: I think so.

U3: And what year was he a representative? Of what years?

S: Uh, I-- if I can remember now, he was not a state representative when I used to talk with him in the barbershop and all like that, but roughly guessing, I'd guess it was around-- somewhere between 1898 and 1905 or '06, or something, you know, in that park -- in the neighborhood. But you could see that he was a very brilliant man.

I: And destined to become something important and great?

S: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he was a statesman, ain't no question about it because you ask questions inside of a barbershop and you say, "That gentleman that was such-and-such a state." "Oh, you mean so-and-so-and-so," you know? [laughs]

I: He had the information.

S: Yeah, he'd tell you. [laughs]

**END OF INTERVIEW**