

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Edward Mounts, Johnny Roberts, Anna Wilhelmina Ashe, Ms. Norah

INTERVIEWEE: Edward Mounts, Johnny Roberts, Anna Wilhelmina Ashe, Ms. Norah

INTERVIEWER: Virginia Irving and Unknown2

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

TRANSCRIBED: December 4, 2007

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:26:46

Irving: Mr. Mounts, would you give us your full name?

Mounts: Yes, I will.

I: Maybe you need to come a little closer. Mr. Roberts, will you bring your chair a little closer?

Roberts: Yes.

M: When you're ready.

I: Okay.

M: My name is John Edward Mounts.

I: Okay. Mr. Mounts, we're interested in finding out about Key West, how it was a long time ago and the reason why we're doing this is because much of the information that you know, our children don't know and we want to take this information and put it on a tape so that when the younger children want to know about Key West, they could listen to these tapes, okay? Now, one of the main things we're interested in is if you lived in the Bahamas or if any of your people lived there. And if so, when did you come here or when did your parents or people come to Key West?

M: Well, I, John Edward Mounts, was born in Key West around about 1909. I understand that my father and my mother both came from Bahama Islands. My father was born at (Marsh?) Harbor, Bahama Islands and my mother at Green Turtle Key, Bahama Islands. As far back as I can remember since 1913 when my father took the children- he had three or four of us- to (?). It's right where the old pawn shop now, somewhere in the vicinity. Before that (?). Things were quite different from what they are now. Very little electricity; they had the old gas light lamps. Horses and wagons on Duval Street and the other streets. Of course, my father-- digress in awhile-- my father was known as Captain Samuel Mounts- Captain Sam, they called him. He owned one of the largest sailing vessels in Key West. He was one of the few Negroes that owned a vessel. He, Octavos-- Octavos Knowles, Mr. Gilbert Aubrey, Mr. Sydney-- let's see, they used to call him Sydney Williams- called him 'Uncle Gov', they owned their boats. Mr. Williams and Mr. Gilbert Aubrey would go on the Keys and burn coal for a living. My father would sponge. He could have as many as eight others besides himself. I remember right well the first trip we made in 1917- and this was about a few days before we coming home- the mate made a mistake. He threw the anchor out before he threw the buoy line and the anchor flew, came back, and struck a hole inside the flank of the boat and she sank almost immediately. But Mr. Governor- Sydney Williams- Sandy Williams- Uncle Gov they called him- his son came from the other boat on the boat and he said, "Save the boy. Save the boy." They took me aboard and my father and the others got in the other smaller boats and they came before she sank. The water was about five feet above the (cookhouse?). But they raised her a few days later but-- they had oil drums and they put them on there somehow or the other and they got a carpenter from Key West-- I mean, I believe it was Mr. Dick Russell they called him. He was my father's carpenter and a few other men who knew something about it. They raised it (?). I think they put an old mattress on there first- in the hole that (?). And as far back as I could remember, my father had to sell the lots of property because the Depression came and I was (a laborer?) I lost just about-- we had to (good as gill there?) some away.

I: Mr. Mounts, could I ask you a question? Okay, you said that you came to Key West in 19--

M: No, I did not. I said I was born around about 1909.

I: Okay. And you're-- do you remember the dates your parents came?

M: No, I do not know. Somewhere in the '90s- 1890s; the earlier part of 1890s, I believe, 1890 or 1891, maybe longer than that. I heard them speaking something about the big fire in 1886.

I: Was this fire in Key West?

M: Yes, it was in Key West. About half of Key West was burnt down- twice they said.

I: Okay. And you mentioned something about falling overboard?

M: No, I said my father's boat sank. It had about nine men on it as much as the-- a friend of ours- a neighbor- Willy Williams, Uncle Gov's son brought his small boat over and took me onboard. He said, "I can't wait much longer because that ship will drive me down."

I: Do you remember how old you were when that happened?

M: Yes, I was about six or seven years old, around about, I don't know definitely how old I was. But I couldn't have been over seven years old at the time, around 1917.

I: Okay, now, you said your father sponged for a living. Is that what he was doing with--?

M: Yes, at the time

I: Okay, at the time. And he had his own boat?

M: Certainly.

I: Did he bring his boat with him from the islands or--

M: No, no. He acquired it here in Key West.

I: Okay. Do you remember your father ever talking about why they left the Bahamas?

M: Well, yes, certainly. The conditions were terrible. There was-- everyone was seeking America a place to live, you know, a whole chance to make a better living. This was nothing outside of a few little fishing, sponging. But Florida was really a growing state especially down south. A Negro could really earn something. Could get more property for almost good as nothing at the time but very few Negroes embraced it, especially those who came from the Bahama Islands.

I: Okay. Do you remember if they came directly from the Bahamas--

M: Of course, yes.

I: --to Key West or did they go somewhere else first and then come here?

M: Well, some might have stopped in Miami, but most of them came directly from-- you see the closer contact from-- Key West is closer to the Bahamas than what Miami is. Of course some-- little came-- some from Bimini which is much closer to West Palm Beach. I understand it's only fifty miles from Palm Beach to Bimini.

I: Does the-- I'm going to keep interrupting you because I have to ask you--

M: Oh that's alright. You're not interrupting. I'm only too glad to answer.

I: Okay. Now, when your parents came, did they come-- do you remember how they came? Did they talk about how they came?

M: Oh, sure. They came on an old square sailing boat. In those days there wasn't as many steamers or so used. Came on a sailing boat. Sailing boat, yeah. (To me, it's all open ocean?).

I: Okay. And when they came here then, they-- for a living they sponged, that was basically--?

M: My father, yes.

I: Yes.

M: My mother probably took care of children, white children sometimes. Very poor family.

I: Okay. Do you remember your parents ever talking about how it was when they got here about-- did the people that were living in Key West at that time accept them okay? Did they have any problems adjusting?

M: Well, no. As far as I know, there were no problems whatsoever. (Even?) the greater part of them came from the Bahamas (mostly?) [laughs] (earlier?). No problems with that. They're the same people.

I: Right, you mean so the other people that were here basically came from over there?

M: Yes, pretty (now?) all of them. There were a few from Georgia and Mississippi at that time, Virginia.

I: Is this including the whites, too?

M: Yes.

I: Many whites came?

M: Yes, certainly. Yeah, practically all of them, yeah. 'Conchs' they call them; they came from the Bahama Islands or Cuba.

I: Okay. Mr. Mounts, did you have any brothers or sisters?

M: Yes, I had. I'm the last of nine. Not the last because my brother may be living, I'm not sure.

I: Were all these children born in Key West?

M: Born in Key West. Every one of them, born in Key West, yeah.

I: Okay. [inaudible] Okay. Mr. Mounts, I want to talk to Mr. Roberts, too--

M: You're quite welcome.

I: --and get some opinions from him. But don't-- if you could just sit there for me.

M: I can do that. Yes, certainly.

I: Okay, Mr. Roberts, do you want to hold this and give us your name?

R: My name is Johnny Roberts.

I: Okay. And we need to know if you came to Key West from the Bahamas or if you were born here.

R: No, I came from a place they call Hatchet Bay, Eleuthera. Father and I came together in 1913 on the boat (*Bugle?*) *Elizabeth*. Yeah. And after then, we sent for mother but I forget the date my mother came over. But father and I came 1913 on the tenth month of October.

I: Okay. When you got here, what did your-- did your father work or did he--?

R: Oh, he worked.

I: Do you remember what kind of work it was that--?

R: Well we used pick and shovel, worked in the rock pit, rode in the wagon, the mules pull it around.

I: Mm-hmm.

Unknown2: How old were you at the time when you came over?

R: Who, I?

U2: Yes, how old were you?

R: Well, I don't know, but I know I born 1894, the tenth month of October. Yeah.

I: And you came over here in 1913?

R: Nineteen thirteen. My age now is forty-- is eighty-two. I born 1894, the twenty-sixth of January.

I: Okay. Do you remember why your father decided to leave and come to Key West?

R: Well I-- well (probably things just coming slowly?), had to come to make daily bread for us. We left mother. After then we sent for mother. And she was seamster, make dresses.

I: So, when she got to Key West, what did she do? Did she help--?

R: She used a machine making dresses and things. Yeah.

I: Okay. Mr. Roberts, do you remember when you got-- well, maybe you don't remember but do you remember your father or mother talking about how the people were when you came to Key West? You know, the Key Westers that were here already, did they offer any-- were they a problem? I mean, did they accept you when you got here?

R: Oh, sure because a lot of the people- my people- was over there already, see? Sure.

I: And these were people that come from where you lived?

R: That's right.

I: Could you say the name of the place that came from?

R: Hatchet Bay, Eleuthera.

I: Would you put the microphone--?

R: Hatchet Bay, Eleuthera.

I: Okay. Did I ask you if you had any other brothers or sisters?

R: I'm the only child she had. It was ten of them sister and all of them had three and four, five (?). And my mother name was Hannah. And I (prayed?) and said my soul (redress?) and all that. (Samuel?), remember (Sammy?) had the dream before he won the senate race? [laughs]

I: Okay. Let's talk to-- I don't know your--

Ashe: Ashe.

I: -- your last name. All I know is just Mina. Yeah, that's right, Ms. Mina Ashe.

R: Alright, (homegirl?).

I: Just talk and that'll pick up your voice.

A: Oh, this? Yes. Well, my mother-- my grandmother and my grandfather came from Nassau.

I: Okay, tell us your name before you go on.

A: Oh, my name Anna Wilhelmina Ashe. My mother-- and they brought my mother, my Uncle George, Sam, and Aunt Irene- they were the four childrens they brought here from Nassau. And my grandfather was a carpenter but now the name of the place-- all I know was Nassau but I can't remember the name-- I don't know if it's Bimini or where they came from but I often hear them say that they came from Nassau. And when they came here, my grandfather got a job working as a carpenter, working in a furniture store on Simonton Street here and my grandmother used to take in laundry. And we all lived down on Simonton Street not very far from where the post office is now. We were born down there and when we came here-- when we were children, all I could remember that we used to have-- instead of electric lights, we had little gas lamps on the street that they used to light at night for us to see the way and that's all I could remember.

U2: I want to ask Mr. Mounts. Mr. Mounts, will you tell something about your grandparents? The things that your father might have told you about your grandparents?

M: Well--

U2: Where they came from and just some information about that.

M: I only knew my grandmother. My grandfather on my father's side, one was named-- oh, excuse me.
[unknown person speaking indistinctly in background]

U2: Okay, go ahead, Mr. Mounts. Go ahead, Mr. Mounts, tell us.

M: Well, as I said, I knew my grandmother because she died when I was about eleven years old. But the rest of my grandparents, I don't know. I heard him speaking (?) about (Eddie?). (Eddie?) was my father's father--
[indistinct chatter]

I: Just a minute, Mr. Mounts.
[audio cuts off]

M: I said I only knew my grandmother; I only saw her. She died when I was about eleven years old in 1921. Her name was Helen (Moore?). She was born one year before slavery was in the British Isles, you know. Born 1842 and the British slaves were freed in 18-- for the last time, the third time in 1843.

I: Is that what she told you?

M: Yes, they told-- they told that, yeah. Now (Eddie?), I don't -- I never seen him. I'm told-- I was told by my father that I was named after both of my grandparents. My mother's father was named John (Moore?) and my father's father

was named Edward Mounts, they called him (Eddie?). Well, I was named John Edward Mounts. That's as far as I know about him. They never talked too much about him.

U2: Did your father-- did your father ever tell you anything-- um, anything about when he was a boy? Do you remember--?

M: Oh, yes. Of course, yes.

U2: You want to tell us something about--?

M: Well, he said he had to work for himself from the time he was nine years of age. He often told me that. I didn't have to work for myself until well I was a good sixteen, seventeen years old. Even then, I only did a few days of work. It was too hard for me.

U2: Was he born in Nassau?

M: Yes. He was born in a province of Nassau, not Nassau, now, is the capital of the Bahama Islands. I said he was born at Nass-- at (Marsh?) Harbor. My mother was born at Green Turtle Key. It must be two islands not far from Nassau.

U2: And his parents were born in the province?

M: Yes, all (?)-- they were-- they were born in the Bahama Islands.

U21: In reading, I notice that a number of blacks were bought-- brought from Charleston to the Bahamas.

M: It's possible. Oh, yeah, they had-- yes, they (had the interchange?), I suppose, yeah.

I: But you don't--?

M: As far as I know-- I don't know no more than what I heard. I understand that they brought a lot during the war- this First World War- from Bahama Islands and they'd take them to Charleston, South Carolina. They did with, you know, the others to relieve the pressure on the others so here-- so the others could go to camp (?) the battlefields.

I: Mr. Mounts, did your father ever talk about some of the things they did when they were living in the islands? Like any games they played or--?

M: No, no, he had to work for himself most of the time, so-- practically all of the time, so he doesn't know about-- very little playing. The only game I've ever known him to take any interest in was checkers. He's a good checker player.

I: Mm-hmm. Do you play checkers, Mr. Mounts?

M: Sometimes. Sometimes, I do play checkers sometimes. I lose (?).
[all laugh]

I: Um, I'm interested in asking this question. I want to find out, for example, when your people first came to Key West, where was it in Key West that they lived? Where especially did the black people live?

M: Well, they lived all over town. There's no particular place in Key West because most of them lived--
[indistinct chatter]

M: --white and black neighborhood.

I: But do you remember when they started separating when the blacks came?

M: Oh no, no, no. I'm told that from Duval Street back was mostly colored. Most of them lived there- colored people. Cubans lived far beyond the beach there behind Division. But there wasn't no really segregation. From time to time-- I know a colored family that remained up there right on up to 1930s. Before that--

A: [inaudible] by a (Polish?) school that has been there for years. I know about fifty or sixty years.

M: The same-- excuse me. The same family- the (Ashley?) family- they grew up around the post office down at-- down here. What's the name of that lane? I never did learn it.

A: Dey and Allen Lane.

M: What?

A: Dey and Allen Lane.

M: Dey and Allen Lane?

I: Is that still the name of it?

A: No, they-- the people that bought that property now, they named it Simonton Court.

I: Oh, I see.

A: It's named Simonton Court now after we moved out from down in there. But we were all born down in there, though. My mother got married down there just on the other side of the city (?) on Simonton Street there.

I: Mm-hmm. When you were growing up, how did your parents encourage you about going to school or getting an education?

M: Oh, yes. They always (?) on that. I remember the first-- about the only whipping I ever had, I overslept myself one morning. My father, he put it to me.

I: That's because you overslept and didn't get to get to school on time?

M: Yes, yes, that's it.

I: Did you ever-- I bet you were on time after that.

M: Oh, yes, most of the time. Sometimes it's almost impossible to get there on time, but nevertheless, they punish you.

I: Now, where did you go to school?

M: Douglas School.

I: It was Douglas School?

M: Before Douglas was a private school, there were a couple ladies who taught just like the lady across the way. We'd have as much as twenty students or so. All set in one room. She gave different-- four or five different classes.

U2: Where was this school located?

M: This school was located on Elizabeth Street right near (?) by Elizabeth-- I mean Olivia right there.

U2: Elizabeth and Olivia?

M: Olivia and Elizabeth, right (?). (?) used to call Ms. (?), Mattie Wing, they called her.

I: Mattie Wing?

M: Yeah.

I: Was the teacher?

M: Yeah. And then after Ms. Blanch McCall. Later on, my father sent me to Douglas. They never sent me to the 'sister school' as we called it (?) like they did the others. Went from the private school right to Douglas School.

U2: Were these black ladies or were they--?

M: All different colors and shades of Negro, yeah.

U2: They were all Negro?

M: All Negros, yes.

I: Do you remember what were some of the things they taught you? Some of the subjects you took?

M: Subjects? I don't remember subjects. The ABCs, she's talking about the ABCs. [laughs] They had trouble teaching (me lines?) (?) I haven't learned yet how to make (?).
[indistinct chatter]

U2: What about the churches? Were there very many churches on the island?
[loud background voice]

M: [inaudible]

A: On Duval Street.

M: Yeah, Duval Street.

A: We had quite a few churches.

I: Do you remember some of the names of the churches?

M: Yes, I do remember. Zion, St. Peters, Bethel, (Newman?). See, we didn't have too many of these 'Holy Rollers' as you call them--
[indistinct chatter]

U2: Were they well-attended?

M: I don't know that.

U2: Did people go to church?

M: Yeah. Oh, yeah.
[indistinct chatter]

A: You had to go to church.

I: You had to go to church?

A: Oh, yeah.

I: And if you didn't go?

Norah: They'll beat you and (stay?) all day long in the house. (?) couldn't go out (?).

A: [laughs]

I: Okay. When you were growing up as boys and girls in Key West, do you remember some of the things you did to entertain yourselves?

A: Yeah.

I: Except for the church? Yeah?

A: Jump rope, play hopscotch--

N: Jack stone--

A: --Jack stone, play ball, and all like that.
[indistinct chatter]

A: We used to climb trees and (slide down the cistern?) [laughs]

N: (?).

I: So you always had something to do to entertain yourselves?

N: Something to do, you're right (?).

I: Did you have to do much work at home?
[indistinct chatter]

N: Well, we got to clean up that oven, scrub it nice and clean.

A: Everybody had to take a turn and wash dishes for a whole week.

I: Uh-huh.

A: A whole week and then my mother taught me how to cook.

I: Mm-hmm.

A: (And I didn't want to learn?) how to cook but she gave me whipping if she-- she beat me as long as I (?) cook and I learned how to cook.

N: I got beaten when I was in the nighttime scrubbing.

A: I became 'a number one' but now that I'm getting blind, I can't see how to cook the food anymore. (But I turned?) 'a number one' because I used to cook for the Greyhound fleet. I used to feed all those buses that came in from Miami and went out to Key West.

U2: What were some of the dishes that your mother taught you how to cook?

A: Well, peas and rice- black-eyed peas and rice. (Bean?) conch and (stew meat?) and--

N: Fried fish.

A: Yes, like that, and steamed turtle. [chuckles] All like that.

N: (?)

A: We used to make-- turtle, we used to cook it with eddoe and yam and sweet potato and white potato and all like that, you know?

I: So you would have a mixture of, say, Cuban foods and some of the foods that your parents used to eat in the Bahamas?

A: Yeah. That's how they used to cook, you know?

U2: I want to ask. Did the Cuban people eat very much turtle or was that sort of brought over from Nassau-- from the Bahamas? Did they-- when you first came-- I know they like turtle now, but I mean, at that time, had they been eating turtle?

A: Oh, yes. Yes. They've been eating turtle since I was a little girl. George Thomas used to kill them down (for?) the dock and (Juan Back?) and who else? Dewey Pinder-- Dewey Pinder. I used to go down there and watch them, when I was a little girl, chop the turtle heads off and they'd be getting ready to cut them up, you know, and take and cut all that big hard shell from under the cover and that's where they get the meat. And I'd stand there and look at it 'cause I used to get a kick out of it.

I: Mr. Roberts, do you remember any of the dishes your mother used to fix that, say, she remembered, you know, from the islands?

R: Sure, I do. Fish, crab, all like that, okra soup and all like that.

N: They don't have that now like they used to.

I: You don't have what?

N: You don't have that now like you used to.

I: No?

R: Used to be nice.

I: It used to be nice, you say?

A: Still is.

N: I (?) now.

A: I can make crab and rice.

N: I can cook up all kinds of mess.

A: Ms. (Norah?), did you-- did your grandparents come from the islands?

N: From the Bahama Islands.

I: Do you remember anything about them? Anything that they said about the islands? Yes?

N: (They told me?), when I went over there, I was small like a baby. (They told me?) bye-bye to my grandmother, I don't know my grandmother.

I: Your mother, though, and your father?

N: All I know my mother and my father.

I: Where were they born?

N: They born in Nassau, too.

I: Do you remember-- was it Nassau or some other place?

N: Oh, they told me Turtle Key or something like that.

A: Green Turtle Key.

I: Green Turtle Key?

N: Yeah, they told me Green Turtle Key.

I: So your mother and father came-- they were born over there or--?

N: They born and raised over there, too.

I: And they came to Key West?

N: And came to Key West and that's where they had me, in Key West.

I: Now, do you remember why they came to Key West?

N: No. They haven't told me why they came to Key West. They told me the boat was named *Mayflower* is what they they came on. They came on a boat.

I: And do you remember them saying anything about your grandparents?

N: Oh, they talked a lot about my grandmother. I know my grandfather, but my grandmother, I don't. Because he was named (?). And then he came here, my mother had him to take care of him until he died over here.

I: What did your-- what-- you remember what kind of work your father did?

N: My father did all kind of work.

I: You remember any-- do you remember whether he fished or sponged or anything like that?

N: He was a sponger. He was a sponger.

I: Did your mother work?

N: Yeah, my mother worked-- working all her days and my father--

A: We got to go.

I: Okay, we'll talk to you in a--

END OF INTERVIEW