

*Marjory Stoneman Douglas describes Elizabeth Virrick's work in Coconut Grove's black community*

Marjory Stoneman Douglas: In fact, we had bi-racial committees and the wonderful work that Elizabeth Virrick has always done. I was on her original committee; well it was originally "Coconut Grove Committee for Slum Clearance," which was trying to improve the conditions in the part of town that was then called Colored Town. And we found that there were little houses, but they didn't have running water in them, and they had privies in the backyard and wells, and the white people's laundry was being done in the backyards of those houses, with water that was polluted from these backyard privies. Elizabeth found this out and she formed the Committee for Coconut Grove, the Committee for Slum Clearance, and it took us two years to get a referendum, which would make the City of Miami pass an ordinance that said that every house in the city had to have running water and inside toilets. An inside toilet; at least one. They had never even had an ordinance to that effect. White people would build houses for the negroes to rent that had no toilets or running water in them, and you could imagine the conditions. So...

Interviewer: What year was that?

MSD: Well, it would be a little hard for me to say. It was after the First World War, and I can't remember, Elizabeth Virrick and her husband owned an apartment house backing up to the black area, and that's how she knew about it. And I can't remember exactly when that was, because I can't remember whether it was before '26 when I built this house. I'd rather think it was before '26. I think it may have been in the '20s. I'd have to ask her to remember about that. She's kept the work up, you see, all this time. Well, I had said to her, when she said we're going to have to go into this business of getting water mains. There were no water mains in the black area, and we had to have the water mains made. Well first, we had to get this referendum ordering, making the law that there must be running water and a toilet in every house everywhere, not just in the black areas, but everywhere in town. And I said to her, well Elizabeth, when you get that one we get that, because I was going to help her with that however I could. I said, you're going to have to set up a fund, by which the black people can borrow money to have the water mains have water come into the houses and build bathtubs. I may have been down here because I knew about that, because I had a lovely black woman working for me who had a little

grandson, and I knew they didn't have any running water, so then again, I don't know if it was before '26 or not. And I said well, they, you've got to have a fund from which they could borrow. And she said, "well you'd better come on the committee and do things about that" and I said, "I'd be glad to." So, in the two years in which we got the referendum, by that time, we set up a fund with the help of some banks and private people backing them, so that the people who didn't have running water in the houses and inside toilets and sinks could borrow, and did. And you know, in the years after that, we loaned them this money without charging them interest, and every cent was paid back. Every cent. It took several years for some of the people to do it, but before we were through, neither the Coconut Grove Bank, which helped us a great deal, or the private people would go on their notes ever lost a cent on that. It was wonderful. The people were so glad to get running water, so glad not to have these nasty dirt, backyard privies, you know, and all that, and polluted wells; glad to have city running water. We never lost a cent, every cent was paid back.