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Ivy Reid Lewis

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Nadine Wilmot
in 2006

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Audiofile 1

Born in Oakland—Civil War story—ancestors were Southern slaves—talks about discovering his family history—growing up in the East Bay—recalls that racism was subtle but present—racial makeup of the East Bay—grandmother described pre-war Richmond as “ignorant and backwards” —ancestors lived in Barbados—experienced racism from young whites at summer camp—North Richmond was a small community—recalled people petitioning Earl Warren for having separate schools

Audiofile 2

Purchased land in Louisiana—Hurricane Katrina—racial divide especially present in the South—racism has developed into a bad habit—remembers expansion of Richmond during WWII—people grew gardens to combat rationing—effect of housing projects in Richmond—Chevron’s disruption of the water supply—before WWII, North Richmond was very rural—raised Episcopalian—Allentown—studied at UC Berkeley—discrimination in grading—recalls racism directed towards the Japanese—Hiroshima and Nagasaki—learns of anti-Semitism—Okies—women’s role in the workplace—confronted with homosexuality for the first time—homosexuality was less of an open subject then—describes the complete mobilization for the war

AudioFile 3

Would visit aunt who lived in Oakland—before the war knew few blacks in Richmond—some parts of Richmond were segregated, but not Downtown—Richmond’s Iron Triangle—many dance clubs in Richmond during the war—development of neighborhood councils—white flight—discusses racial makeup in the Bay Area and its shifts—Ford Motor Company in Palo Alto—father was a great baseball pitcher, but discrimination prevented his success

AudioFile 4

Rationing and black markets—how Richmond has changed—recalls the incidents of Richmond police officers shooting black men—Richmond Neighborhood Coordinating Council—worked extensively to organize the Richmond community—Chevron’s polluting in Richmond—remembers working in a cannery at age 13—recalls segregated cemeteries

Interview #1: 08-04-2006

Begin Audio File 1 Lewis 01 08-04-2006.mp3

01-00:00:00

Wilmot: And now we are recording. Here as well. Nadine Wilmot with Ivy Reid Lewis, August 4th, 2006. Okay, so good morning.

01-00:00:16

Lewis: Good morning.

01-00:00:19

Wilmot: We usually start off by asking when and where were you born.

01-00:00:26

Lewis: I was born in Oakland, California, February 25th, 1931.

01-00:00:33

Wilmot: 1931, and that was just like you were born kind of in the beginning of the Depression.

01-00:00:40

Lewis: Yes I think so.

01-00:00:41

Wilmot: And what are your parents' names?

01-00:00:45

Lewis: My mother's name is Beryl Gwendolyn Holder Dash. She was born in Bridgetown, Barbados. My father's name is Charles Rogers Reid. He was born in Angel's Camp, California in 1898.

01-00:01:04

Wilmot: Where is that?

01-00:01:04

Lewis: Calaveras County.

01-00:01:06

Wilmot: In California.

01-00:01:10

Lewis: In the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. My grandmother, her family moved there from San Francisco to pan for gold. Three of my aunts and my father were born in Calaveras County.

01-00:01:25

Wilmot: So how far back do you know your family? And I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your father's name?

01-00:01:31

Lewis: Charles Rogers Reid. I know my family's history because I did a lot of research on the subject. My great-great grandfather William Henry Galt and

his wife and children came to California in 1861. His white father, who was a slave owner, sent all of his black children to California by clipper ship over the Isthmus of Panama. They came to San Francisco in 1861

The white father took his immediate family and the black children's mother to Bedford, Massachusetts to wait out the war. The reason I know this is because my great-great grandfather's son Richard Galt drowned in the Sacramento River. He was twenty one years of age and they sent a telegram to New Bedford, Massachusetts informing his father of his son's death.

William Henry became a captain in the California State Militia stationed at Sutter's Fort. In 1873, at a July fourth celebration, Governor Booth gave him an award for having one of the best military outfits in the state at that time. I found this information in the *Sacramento Bee*. My grandmother said that the Governor named Galt, California after him; however, in my research, I did not find this information. The records state that Galt was named after a poet.

01-00:03:28

Wilmot: And you said that the white slave-owner sent his children to California. Do you know why?

01-00:03:44

Lewis: To escape the Civil War. And he didn't want to send them overland because they might get caught and put in slavery because they were black, and he sent them by clipper ship.

01-00:03:54

Wilmot: But he stayed with—but the mom of the children stayed with him?

01-00:03:58

Lewis: The mom of the children stayed with him and his family and they went to New Bedford, Massachusetts until the Civil War was over.

01-00:04:06

Wilmot: So were they together?

01-00:04:07

Lewis: That family, the Galt family, they were together, yes.

01-00:04:17

Wilmot: That must have been very rare during those times for—

01-00:04:20

Lewis: I don't know that it was rare because another part of my family was the Turner family and their white father also sent their black children to California at the same period of time, 1861. It is documented on our family's web site. My cousin Mary Lou Patterson is a physician and lives in New York City. Her father was a well known attorney, William L. Patterson. He was one of the first blacks to graduate from Hastings Law School. He wrote a book, *The Man Who Cried Genocide*. Mr. Patterson and Paul Robeson, the famous opera

singer, petitioned the United Nations General Assembly in Paris and charged the United States of America with genocide against black people. Mr. Patterson also worked on the Sacco and Vanzetti and the Scottsboro and Angela Davis cases. Mary Lou said that one day her father was at a speaking engagement in New Jersey and this Caucasian man came up to them and said, “You’re a relative of mine.” He was a member of the Galt family. Later he came to visit them in New York. We have never pursued looking for the Galts, but we know that they reside somewhere in Virginia because William Patterson’s mother who was William Galt’s daughter periodically traveled back to Virginia to visit and it was the Galts who paid for William Patterson’s college education.

01-00:06:07

Wilmot:

How did you know all this history? Did your mother and your father talk about it all the time? Or how did you learn—

01-00:06:13

Lewis:

William L. Patterson, who’s now deceased, wrote a book, *The Man Who Cried Genocide*. In the preface of his book, he talks about his family. That’s originally how I learned about it. And when I was a student at Cal I met a Mr. Abajian. James Abajian. And I was talking to him. He says, “You know you have a very prominent family.” You have a big history. It’s part of my anthology about blacks in California. He gave me a lot of information about my family through census records. The 1900 census. My grandparents lived in Angel’s Camp. And Mary Patterson who was a barber—she was married to some man and they lived in Battle Mountain, Nevada. So I got a lot of information from Mr. Abajian and then I did a lot of research myself. Mary Patterson and her husband sometimes gave Virginia as their place of birth.

01-00:07:12

Wilmot:

And when you were little, before you learned all this, was your family—did you grow up with your grandmothers? Were they here?

01-00:07:25

Lewis:

Yeah, I would like to say something. Even though my family originally came from Virginia, my immediate parents, we were not southerners. So we have a different perspective. Most things I hear southerners say, to me—I don’t see the same. My parents, my father was a semi professional ballplayer in California. And so we were always involved in a lot of sports. And my grandmother lived in Berkeley on California Street. She was originally born on Minna Street, now an alley in San Francisco. And I think that Goldie said her parents lived on that same street, too. Nadine Byrd told me that. They all lived on the same street. When I was growing up, my grandmother lived in Berkeley. And at that time, we could ride down Highway 40, which is now Carson Boulevard in Richmond. We could ride our bicycles over to Berkeley to see my grandmother. And I loved to go to my grandmother’s because she made apple butter and she always had good things to eat. My uncle worked at—well, now it’s Hostess Bakery, but it used to be Langendorf Bakery—and

he used to bring all the cakes and things over to my grandmother's. And we all congregated at my grandmother's all the time. I had a lot of aunts. My grandmother had 13 children. So we had a large family.

01-00:08:55

Wilmot: And she was at California and—

01-00:08:59

Lewis: She was a Californian. Her mother was Annie Galt so she was the first generation of Galts born in San Francisco.

01-00:09:07

Wilmot: And she lived on California Street, and what was the cross street?

01-00:09:12

Lewis: In Berkeley. Ward Street.

01-00:09:14

Wilmot: Ward. So right in that area. Right next to that—

01-00:09:15

Lewis: Right across from a school, yeah.

01-00:09:16

Wilmot: I know exactly where that is. Okay, and your grandmother's name?

01-00:09:24

Lewis: Virginia Reid.

01-00:09:26

Wilmot: Virginia Reid.

01-00:09:28

Lewis: She was originally a Parker. Her father Edward West Parker registered to vote on the first day the 15th Amendment to the constitution was enacted. He gave his occupation as a special boot maker and his place of birth as Virginia. Mr. Abajian gave me this information and also showed me where he voted. My grandmother used to talk about the San Francisco earthquake and fire and how all the people would come to her house—She saw how the fire was burning, it turned the moon red, it looked like there was blood on the moon. She always told a lot of history. My father was sort of a historian. Someone recorded his history but I don't know who he gave it to. But he talked about Berkeley when it was a small city and San Pablo Avenue was a dirt road.

01-00:10:21

Wilmot: That's how he remembered it. And your mother was from Barbados.

01-00:10:31

Lewis: Yes.

01-00:10:31

Wilmot: How did she and your father get together?

01-00:10:34

Lewis:

Oh, I think my father went to a party or something or a picnic and he met my mother. My mother, you have to know a little history of California. When I was a child, West Oakland was sort of like Sugar Hill, where the rich people moved out and more working-class families moved in, but not a lot of black people. A lot of immigrant people. Where we lived, there were Syrian people, Italian people, all different groups of people lived in West Oakland and they lived in these big old Victorian houses. We still have that Victorian house in our family. My sister now owns it. But it was really a nice neighborhood and people, my girlfriend Lala, her name was Elaine Chukovich, she was Russian. All different kinds of people lived there and it was really a nice neighborhood.

01-00:11:35

Wilmot:

Where was this house located, the house you grew up in?

01-00:11:39

Lewis:

At 1926 Chestnut Street in Oakland.

01-00:11:41

Wilmot:

Okay, and that was West Oakland.

01-00:11:43

Lewis:

Yeah, West Oakland. But West Oakland, even when we went down to Wood Street—because I remember so many things. You know the lottery they now have, like Keno, what they play in Las Vegas and Reno, it started in Oakland. Originally, the Chinese had the Chinese lottery, because I remember they used to deliver it, throw it on your doorstep. And my mother would play it and she would take me, we'd go down to West Oakland and play the tickets. They call them tickets. And all those big beautiful homes, they tore them all down, they were just beautiful, beautiful homes. Oakland tore down so many beautiful homes until somebody said Stop, you're tearing down really fabulous homes. They did. They tore down a lot. The Chinese moved their lottery to Reno, Nevada and opened gambling establishments. Before they moved to Reno, blacks were not allowed in the casinos.

But it was really a nice neighborhood. We had several people who were West Indian people. We used to visit down in those areas. But mostly it was not an all black neighborhood. It was a mixed neighborhood.

01-00:12:47

Wilmot:

And so you grew up with people from all different backgrounds. Would you say that racism was an issue when you were growing up?

01-00:12:58

Lewis:

It was very subtle. There was racism but it was not like it is in the south. I mean, we didn't have that extreme racism. People all lived in mixed neighborhoods.

01-00:13:10

Wilmot:

Like say when you were an adolescent then, was interracial dating something that was accepted? I mean, could you—I mean did you even want—did you want to have dates with white boys or—

01-00:13:23

Lewis:

[chuckles] Well, funny thing about that is that we lived in this neighborhood where a lot of people who were black looked like they were white. And they used to go to work every day as white people and came home at night as black people. And I have a half-sister who's passed for white for years. In fact she doesn't speak to me. Although my grandmother used to say Ivy and Bertha look alike, only Bertha's white and Ivy's black. So I don't remember, I know my aunts, both my aunts were married to Filipino men. And all of my uncles, my Uncle Vander was from British Guyana and my Uncle Robinson was from Jamaica and they were all chef cooks and so was my Uncle Gene—he was Filipino, he was a chef cook. So I grew up around a lot of mixed people. So I never really noted—and a lot of my family looked like Caucasians. So I didn't have that problem. I mean, as seeing mixed couple didn't—I just took it for granted that's the way people lived.

01-00:14:33

Wilmot:

But as an adolescent, when you were growing up, was that something—like in your social group were there mixed white and black couples?

01-00:14:45

Lewis:

When I grew up in North Richmond, and I went to Peres School, until I was in the third or fourth grade I was the only black child in the class. I have a picture I can show you. There's maybe seven black families in North Richmond, it was all Italian and Portuguese and all mixed groups of people, some Spanish people. So I played with all different groups of people. When I got older the whole city of Richmond changed because of World War II so I never saw—I don't think I ever saw any white people and black people together—I mean as boyfriend and girlfriend. But my half-sister Bertha married a white man.

01-00:15:30

Wilmot:

As teenagers. I think I'm confused because on one hand I have you in West Oakland, and now I have you in North Richmond, so could you break down for me the chronology? Like, you grew up in West Oakland—

01-00:15:43

Lewis:

I grew up in Oakland. My parents moved to Richmond when I was three years old, but I spent a lot of my time in Oakland. Summers and going to camp and going to DeFremery Park. My mother and father worked. So they didn't leave us at home and when we were small in Richmond we always went to my grandmother's or to my aunt's in Oakland. My grandmother and my aunt, they didn't want us to move to Richmond because my aunt considered herself to be a very socially prominent person and she had this huge beautiful home and she always gave these big parties and—

01-00:16:23

Wilmot: Where was her home?

01-00:16:26

Lewis: On Chestnut Street.

01-00:16:27

Wilmot: Same house?

01-00:16:28

Lewis: Same house. And Richmond was sort of a throwback, she said the people were ignorant there and there was no social life. In fact one of my aunts wanted my mother to take me to stay in school in Berkeley and not go to school in Richmond because they considered it a backward place. And we moved to Richmond. So we spent most of our time in Oakland. We were not involved. In fact, the first time my family was really—my mother was a good swimmer and we always—when we lived in Oakland—I don't know where Depression Beach is, okay, I couldn't tell you, but I assume it's someplace down in the general vicinity of Jack London Square, some of that area down there, and my mother—they always went down there. My mother was a good swimmer, and my father said my mother used to swim across the estuary all the time. So the estuary was from Oakland to Alameda, I think, and back. So when we came to Richmond, we lived in North Richmond, and at that time, Chevron had not blocked off the bay. The bay used to come into North Richmond and you could go swimming at a place down at the end of Vernon Street, they called the slough. So when we first moved to Richmond, Sunday morning we went swimming, and the people in the church talked about us. [laughs] They said these new people came and went swimming on Sunday and they thought that was terrible. So we never really fit in in Richmond when we first moved there. It was mostly southern black people and—

01-00:18:00

Wilmot: They talked about you in church?

01-00:18:00

Lewis: Yeah, they said that—

01-00:18:04

Wilmot: Which church was this?

01-00:18:06

Lewis: This was the Baptist church.

01-00:18:06

Wilmot: Which one was it?

01-00:18:09

Lewis: And our neighbors told us about it. But then my mother became very popular because she was a good cook. And at that time, I remember the WPA and the

Depression people. A lot of people didn't have food, and my mother used to cook a big pot of food and feed people.

01-00:18:29

Wilmot: Well, you said that your mom—okay, so your mom was from Barbados. Now did she grow up in Barbados?

01-00:18:36

Lewis: Yes, she did.

01-00:18:37

Wilmot: So how did your father find her?

01-00:18:40

Lewis: Well, he came down to Oakland to a party or something and he met my mother. Either they went—I think they were in a park, like a picnic.

01-00:18:49

Wilmot: So she was already here.

01-00:18:50

Lewis: She was already here.

01-00:18:50

Wilmot: Is her family here?

01-00:18:50

Lewis: My aunt who I talk about, my Aunt Maude Robinson, who lived on Chestnut Street, my grandmother's name was Ivy. And Ivy died and my mother was orphaned and when her father died—my mother's father was Caucasian—and when he died, her sisters didn't want to keep her because she was a half-sister of theirs. So a lady took my mother and kept her.

01-00:19:20

Wilmot: These are white sisters or black sisters?

01-00:19:22

Lewis: They were white sisters. And when my mother grew up, this lady raised her. Her name was Aunt Liz. And then when she got to be about 12, I think, or 13, Aunt Liz died. So she really didn't have a family. And she had some cousins but they didn't really pay her too much attention. And my aunt said she had a dream that Ivy came and asked her to send for my mother. So she did. And my mother came here when she was 15 years old. And my mother was very a beautiful woman.

01-00:19:58

Wilmot: Did she have an accent?

01-00:20:00

Lewis: Pardon me.

01-00:20:00

Wilmot: Did she have an accent?

01-00:20:03

Lewis: Yes she did, yeah.

01-00:20:05

Wilmot: What do you remember about your mother's Caribbean culture? Her Bajian culture?

01-00:20:13

Lewis: She's a Bajian.

01-00:20:13

Wilmot: What do you remember about her culture? What did you learn from her about being Bajian?

01-00:20:18

Lewis: My mother was a really good cook and she used to cook a lot of West Indian food. In fact every Christmas I still make coconut bread. In Barbados they have it every day, but we only make it once a year. And she used to make cou cou and fish, she was very—my mother was really a good person, she would give you her coat off her back, because she was an orphan, she always took in children—people would come and leave their children at our house and my mother raised so many other people's children. They would just drop them off and not come back and get them for a while.

01-00:20:54

Wilmot: How many siblings that were hers, how many—?

01-00:20:57

Lewis: We had three children in our family. But my mother raised three more children from babies until they were about 12 or 15. And then, she had other people just leave their kids there, like, they worked and they'd leave them there all week, and she always had a houseful of kids.

01-00:21:21

Wilmot: And your half-brothers and sisters, they were on your father's side or your mother's side?

01-00:21:29

Lewis: My half-brothers and sisters on my father—my father was previously married and he had two children, Bertha and Donald.

01-00:21:38

Wilmot: What a story. Well how did Ivy get here then? I think I may have missed that.

01-00:21:44

Lewis: Ivy didn't come here. Ivy died—my grandmother, Ivy, was from British Guyana and when my mother was five years old she went back to British Guyana and my mother never saw her again.

01-00:21:57

Wilmot: So the woman who sent for your mom—

01-00:22:01

Lewis: Maude Robinson.

01-00:22:03

Wilmot: And she was Auntie?

01-00:22:04

Lewis: Ivy's sister.

01-00:22:05

Wilmot: Auntie. How did Maude get here?

01-00:22:08

Lewis: They migrated from Barbados a long time ago. I think my Aunt Maude was a teenager when they came to the United States. Her mother and father migrated to California and brought my aunt with them. They had three children: my Aunt Maude and Uncle Vander and Ivy, my grandmother. I think my Uncle Vander came on his own. They left Ivy with her grandmother. Maude was born in Venezuela. Jules Vander and Ivy were born in British Guyana. My Uncle Vander spoke fluent Castilian Spanish I remember vaguely Maude's father. I never knew her mother. But she was somewhat like my mother because she fed and took care of a lot of people. One of the people she cared for was a West Indian man who was a merchant seaman. Somehow he got into trouble and he jumped ship in Manila. He became one of the richest men in Manila. I remember when they came to visit my aunt they would have like ten taxi cabs with theirs luggage [laughs] and everything. During World War II when the Japanese invaded the Philippines, Mr. Pritchard and his son were captured and forced in the march in Corregidor. H sent his wife and younger children to California and they stayed with my aunt for a while.

01-00:23:56

Wilmot: Okay, hold on one second. I'm doing some adjustments over here. [pause]

01-00:24:30

Lewis: So even though I lived in Richmond, a lot of my social life was in Oakland. [laughs] My family thought Richmond wasn't too good.

01-00:24:40

Wilmot: How did you get back and forth?

01-00:24:42

Lewis: You know what? I tell people that on Saturdays the Key system used to have free buses. You could ride free. Now they're talking about this new system where you can ride free. This isn't a new invention, because when I was a child, on Saturdays, you could get on the bus and go free to Oakland. Because everybody went to the—was it the Seventh Street Market? Some market down there?

01-00:25:06

Wilmot: Housewives' Market?

01-00:25:07

Lewis: Housewives' Market. But it wasn't called the Housewives' Market then. It was called Swan's Market or something like that. We used to go to Swan's Market too. Everybody did.

01-00:25:22

Wilmot: It's so beautiful hearing you talk about Oakland and hearing you talk about your childhood.

01-00:25:28

Lewis: Oakland was really beautiful. We lived near 16th Street so we used to go up and catch the streetcar and go. And downtown Oakland where City Hall is, they had a plaza with all beautiful flowers and gardens around it. I know now, the discrimination, I remember we went to camp. I don't know where the camp was. I couldn't tell you. But I went with the kids from DeFremery Park. It was mostly black kids in those days, but I remember it was a mixed group, because my friend Lala came also. And this was before World War II, or it might have been just almost at the beginning of World War II. We went to summer camp and when we came out, some girls were there from Piedmont, and they were all white and they started calling us names. I don't know why [laughs] white people want to call black people names, I don't know what we ever did to them, but they looked kind of silly.

01-00:26:29

Wilmot: Did you smack them?

01-00:26:29

Lewis: No, I didn't. No. I don't know what their problem was but anyway, I didn't have the same problem they did. But things like that, people calling you names. Once in a while that happened. I remember when I went to kindergarten in Richmond, one girl didn't want to hold my hand because I was black. But I never had really a lot of problems—I was really a popular kid with other children.

01-00:27:02

Wilmot: So you were in North Richmond. Can you tell me the address of that place there?

01-00:27:07

Lewis: In North Richmond? When we first moved to North Richmond, we lived on Filbert Street and we rented from some Italian people, I can't think of their name. But then we moved. When I lived in North Richmond, we lived all around Italian people. And I got used to eating dry salami with French bread, and they would always have that, and everybody sat around in the afternoon talking, eating French bread and salami and salad and drinking Dago red, they called it. [laughs] North Richmond was really a small community—I lived in the city part of North Richmond most of my life, and it was paved but it was

still county. It was not incorporated in those days. And but if you went past Chesley Avenue, it was nothing—and I tell people that so many black historians have wrote about the cabbage patch; I didn't see any cabbage patch in North Richmond. Mr. Longo—when you went out First Creek, far as you could see there was lettuce. They grew iceberg lettuce. And over the Second Bridge. We used to call the different bridges First Bridge, Second Bridge, First Creek, Second Creek, which was the First Creek was the big creek, Second Creek was a smaller creek next to North Richmond. But if you went across there the Baronis had a farm. Now he probably had some cabbage, but he also grew a lot of vegetables at the Baroni farm.

In North Richmond, there was a big family who lived out on Market Street called the Turners, and they were black. And there wasn't too many more people—the Marlboroughs and the Turners had the biggest families. And I remember Richard Granzella, I used to like Richard Granzella when I was three years old. He would come down the street. Richard and Nelson Carter. Nelson and Richard Granzella were really good friends. And they used to go down to the dumps and dig around there because people would go down and nobody owned the dumps at that time. People would just go down and dump their things and then Richard and Nelson used to go down and do salvage work. And then Richard became the owner of the Richmond garbage dump. [laughs] So it was interesting. I knew those people when.

01-00:29:58

Wilmot:

Did you know anyone named Alfred Granzella?

01-00:30:02

Lewis:

Oh, I went to school with Alfred Granzella. Yeah, I went to Peres Elementary School. Yeah, we were in the same room, same grade together.

01-00:30:11

Wilmot:

Do you remember what he was like?

01-00:30:16

Lewis:

Alfred was a good little kid. I remember he was short and I was taller. I knew all those people who lived north of 7th Street. Let's see, there were the Banduccis, the Dell Simones, the Grandzellas and Angie Mapeli and Mary and Tony Uder. All the girls liked Tony—he was good looking. Yeah, I knew all of those people. I went to school with them. Alfred was always a likeable kid.

01-00:30:56

Wilmot:

Okay, what did your parents do? What kind of work did your family do? What were your parents?

01-00:31:01

Lewis:

We moved to Richmond because my father got a job at the Richmond Pullman Company sandblasting cars. My mother worked in the cannery and when the cannery wasn't on, sometimes she did housework, but mostly she

worked at Del Monte Cannery in Emeryville. There was a big cannery there. And all my aunts worked there too, Del Monte Cannery.

01-00:31:30

Wilmot:

Did anyone in your family go to college? Was your father or your mother a college graduate?

01-00:31:34

Lewis:

No, my father finished high school, but my mother didn't. My mother went, she said, as far—in Barbados, you go to a certain grade and only if your family's wealthy you can go further. But they all knew how to read and write and stuff like that, but they were not college graduates. My mother went to school later. I don't know too much about my grandmother's education. But all of my cousins and aunts were college graduates on both sides of the family.

01-00:32:06

Wilmot:

On your mother's side or—

01-00:32:09

Lewis:

On my father's side. I never knew my mother's mother. I never knew my grandparents on my mother's side. I knew my grandfather on my father's side died the same year I was born. But he came from Griffin, Georgia. And my cousin said there's a dispute—they have a story about a guy who was a bouncer. [chuckles] Well, my grandfather was a bouncer at Jim Corbett's Saloon in San Francisco. And when they wrote a story—they made a movie about that. My cousin says they didn't write it right because her grandfather was the bouncer at Jim Corbett's Saloon in San Francisco. But I didn't know him but I just knew my grandmother. My grandfather came from Griffin, Georgia. His mother was half black and Seminole Indian and his father was white.

01-00:33:17

Wilmot:

You mentioned that in Oakland you lived in a neighborhood where there were many passing black people.

01-00:33:29

Lewis:

I didn't know that when I was a child but I figured it out when I got older.

01-00:33:35

Wilmot:

How did you figure it out?

01-00:33:40

Lewis:

Well, I just figured it out that these people, they all looked like they were white, but they were not white. And they all worked in nice office jobs that blacks couldn't get. So I just figured it out after I got older.

01-00:33:52

Wilmot:

So it was like a whole community.

01-00:33:56

Lewis: It wasn't a whole community, but it was a lot of people who lived in the community.

01-00:34:01

Wilmot: Was there language for that when you were young? Was there a language for oh so-and-so is passing? Was there a language for that behavior?

01-00:34:09

Lewis: Nobody I heard talk about it.

01-00:34:11

Wilmot: And when you moved to Richmond were you in a similar community or—

01-00:34:15

Lewis: No, heavens, no. Richmond was more rural. When we moved to North Richmond it was the country, RFD.

01-00:34:22

Wilmot: RFD.

01-00:34:23

Lewis: People had cows. My neighbors down the street, the parents were from Arkansas and they had cows and a windmill and they used to shoot possums and coons and eat them. [laughs] And one day, my girlfriend's mother had a possum cooking, and she says, "I want to have a turkey for Thanksgiving just like Mrs. Reid cooks." [laughs] Well, we always went over to see the possums and the coons. And they had chickens. And they taught me how to milk cows and how to churn butter. It was a different life.

What the kids would do in the evenings—I was like the little devil—they would go out and pull people's corn. A lot of people grew corn, and they would go and get the corn and make a fire and roast it. And I would get in the window and go [makes siren sound] "Aaah!" like I was the fire department and the kids would start running.

But anyway, my neighbor, Mrs. Delgadillo, she taught me how to speak Spanish because a lot of my friends were all Spanish and I would go over their houses all the time and help them do their housework and their parents would be talking to them in Spanish so I just sort of picked up on it. I'd go help Mrs. Delgadillo grind her corn and clean up the corn husks and put them in a sack and everything. And then they'd kill a hog and they would get a big copper kettle and put it over the fire in the backyard and make chicherones and tamales and all kind of stuff. I learned how to do all those things.

01-00:36:19

Wilmot: Let me just adjust this for one second. Did you go to a place called the Plunge?

01-00:36:23

Lewis: We used to walk down the railroad tracks to the Plunge, down the Santa Fe tracks. Goes from North Richmond, you go straight to the plunge.

01-00:36:34

Wilmot: Did you know about the group of Native Americans who were—

01-00:36:39

Lewis: Yeah. I have a picture—I don't have a picture of them, but my father used to play ball at the First Street Park, there used to be a big ballpark at First Street and McDonald. And then right down from the ballpark close to where Saint John's Apartments—there were some little grey concrete buildings. I think they were two like barracks. And that's where the Indians lived. And then some of them lived over in the Santa Fe yards, also.

01-00:37:04

Wilmot: Were there connections there socially? Did you connect with them? Or was it—?

01-00:37:09

Lewis: They went to school with me, but let me tell you about a situation I remember. At 16th and MacDonald, they had carnivals and they wouldn't let the Indians come in.

01-00:37:21

Wilmot: Did they let little black children come in?

01-00:37:24

Lewis: Yeah, but they wouldn't let the Indians come in. One man came one day and I think he was drunk and I remember the man said that they're not manageable when they get drunk, whatever. I was a little kid. I just—my brother said—my brother used to call me the Black Dispatch because I would listen to every conversation anybody had [laughs] and I knew everything, so I heard that man say that, that they were not manageable if they were drunk. So they put them out of the carnival.

01-00:37:57

Wilmot: Were there Asian people in Richmond? Chinese, Japanese?

01-00:38:01

Lewis: Oh, I had a lot of Japanese friends in school. My brother used to work for Mr. Abbe.

01-00:38:14

Wilmot: What's your brother's name?

01-00:38:15

Lewis: Charles. And my brother worked for Mr. Abbe at the nurseries.

01-00:38:18

Wilmot: A-B-E-I?

01-00:38:22

Lewis:

Mr. Abbe who owned the nurseries—north of Wildcat Creek, he had all those greenhouses and grew long-stemmed roses. And there was a Japanese man next to him, too, who owned them and I think when he got interned, when they put them in internment camps, Mr. Abbe kept his place going for him. I read that story in the *Reader's Digest*. But I didn't know that at the time. But my brother worked for Mr. Abbe for a long time.

01-00:38:54

Wilmot:

So when you were in high school it was basically really your high school years that the war was going on, is that correct?

01-00:39:01

Lewis:

No, the war started when I was ten years old. I went to junior high school, I didn't finish school here, I moved to Los Angeles, so I went to school in Los Angeles. When I first—I think it was in the fourth or fifth grade when I came to school, there was a lot of black children who moved here because of World War II. And everything start changing then in Richmond. It got to be more discriminatory—my father used to go and cash his checks when he got off work. My father didn't drink. But he used to shine shoes in downtown Richmond with a guy called Ollie Freeman. He played blues and he was a local disk jockey but he had a really nice shoeshine parlor. And people would come in and my father worked there on Saturdays. Yeah, I think he only worked on Saturdays. When he got off work, he would go and cash his check at 16th and MacDonald. One of the local city councilmen, [Gay Vargus], he owned a bar, and he asked my father not to come anymore because he said he didn't want black people to think that they could all come in there. He didn't mind my father coming, but he didn't want this to be a black bar. So that's the only thing I knew about.

Other than that, I never had any problem. But the white people who came—they caused more discrimination. I remember once when I was about 16 I think I went to the skating rink in Oakland. And this white kid said to me, "You're supposed to come on Thursday nights." I said, "I can come on any night I want to come, and I'm coming here and you can't tell me when I—." "Well, the black people—" they called them colored people—"usually come on Thursday nights." I said, "Too bad." And I didn't learn till after I was grown and I went to the south, if they had like when the state fair was on or something, the black people only came on Thursday nights or they came on that day, Thursday, was the day for black people. So they were trying to institute their own thing. This happened after the war.

And I remember when I was in junior high school, a lot of the people petitioned Earl Warren. They wanted separate schools. They didn't want their kids to go to school with black kids. And Earl Warren had told them he went to school with black kids and his children were going to school with black kids and if they didn't like it they could go back where they came from. Earl Warren was the governor of California then. I remember we had lots of fights.

And the biggest thing I remember, my mother worked in the shipyards, and she was a welder. And one day we were going to Oakland after school. And my sister and I were to meet my mother and get on the bus. And we did. We met my mother and we got on this bus. And this black lady was sitting down and this white lady came up to her and called her nigger, she says, “Nigger, get up and give me that seat.” And the lady start crying and my mother said, “She doesn’t have to get up and she paid her fare and she can sit in that seat long as she want to.” My mother says, “I’m glad I came from a country where people are not uncouth like you white people.” [crashing sound]

01-00:42:37

Wilmot: That’s that cat. But go ahead.

01-00:42:41

Lewis: She said that she would get my mother after. She says, “When you get off of this, I’ll teach you.” She said, “People like you, we put in their place.” And so my sister and I—I think I was about ten and my sister was about six years old—so we had our lunch pails and we said if she bothers our mother we’re going to beat her up with our lunch pails. But she didn’t say anything else to my mother.

01-00:43:08

Wilmot: She was a white woman from the South?

01-00:43:11

Lewis: She was from Alabama.

01-00:43:11

Wilmot: From Alabama, how did you know she was from Alabama?

01-00:43:13

Lewis: She said she was from Alabama. She was a tough-looking toughie. [laughs] So there were a lot of fights. At school, I mean, the white people really resisted. And I keep telling people this and they laugh at me, and I say, “Sometimes you live too long.” The City of San Pablo grew with all those Okies and whatever they were, white trash, and then they moved out to Concord. They left Richmond. That’s how Richmond became more black. They all moved because they didn’t want their kids going to school with blacks.

01-00:43:54

Wilmot: So now you’re here in Concord. [laughs]

01-00:43:54

Lewis: Well, the reason I live in Concord is because I had a house at the Richmond Marina and my doctor told me—and I have real bad sinuses, allergies, and he says, Don’t live around the water, you have to live someplace else. And I kind of like the sunshine, I don’t like the fog. But when I was younger, I really liked cold, rainy days, I grew up in the Bay area. But as I get older, that damp weather’s really bad for my sinuses. That’s why I live in Concord. So I would

rather live in Richmond, closer, because I go to church there. I do a lot of things in Richmond. Our company is in Richmond.

01-00:44:40

Wilmot:

What company is that?

01-00:44:42

Lewis:

Well, I worked for the City of Richmond for 25 years and Lucretia Edwards was a very dear friend of mine, and people give her credit for starting the neighborhood councils, but nobody gives me any credit for those 18 years I spent organizing the majority of neighborhood councils. When I first took over the neighborhood councils, we had about five neighborhood councils in the City of Richmond. When I retired, we had 35 neighborhood councils and I started the Richmond Coordinating Council. So I've worked in Richmond and lived in Richmond. Most of the things I do over there benefit Richmond residents.

Before I retired, I started thinking about what I was going to do when I retired and I met this friend of mine who's an electrician. And he said, "You know there are a lot of women businesses going on now and so why don't you start a woman business." I said, "I'm not a businessperson, I don't know anything about business." He said, "Well why don't you just try it, he said you could be a wholesaler for electrical supplies and stuff like that." I went to several seminars before I got started and I hired a man to help me. He was a salesman. And I had a few good jobs. And that's before I retired. At that time I never bid on anything in the City of Richmond. But when I retired the Richmond Parkway came up and I bid on that and I won it.

And my son had had another business that wasn't doing too good because his business was really good but at that time it was a recession. And I asked him and his friend Bob to come over and help me because the business was growing too big and I really didn't have my heart into doing that. So they came over. Bob worked for me a long time. Bob was a friend of my son Todd's. And then Todd came over and took over the business and now we have two stores. We have one in Richmond and one in San Francisco. And we went to the planning commission last night to get approval for a conditional use permit to build an office park. So we're planning to build an office park in Richmond. And the business is Omega Pacific Electrical Supply. Most of our business is in San Francisco.

Want to talk about World War II some more?

01-00:47:34

Wilmot:

Well, I want to but I'm just putting—you just took me a different way. So when did you move out here to Concord?

01-00:47:41

Lewis:

I've been here about two years.

01-00:47:43

Wilmot: Two years, so you just moved out here. And before you were right on the waterfront in Richmond.

01-00:47:47

Lewis: I lived on the waterfront in Richmond. I went to Louisiana for a while. And then, I moved to Roseville, and in Roseville I had a big nice house with a swimming pool.

01-00:47:59

Wilmot: Where's Roseville?

01-00:48:02

Lewis: Roseville's 25 miles north of Sacramento. And I fell and broke my leg and so my children said you have to move back here, Mom. So this house cost more than my five-bedroom house with a swimming pool in Roseville. [laughs] The guy says, "Location, location." So I guess that's why things are higher here.

01-00:48:22

Wilmot: Well, it's the time, too. We're in that time. So you spent your whole life in Richmond?

01-00:48:32

Lewis: Practically all my whole life.

01-00:48:35

Wilmot: Except for that time in Louisiana?

01-00:48:36

Lewis: Yeah.

01-00:48:38

Wilmot: Why'd you go to Louisiana?

01-00:48:39

Lewis: Oh, well, I worked for the City of Richmond and I came under a whole—it's really—let me just say this. When I was hired for the City of Richmond, my job description matched what the City Council wanted me to do. And later on it didn't. And so they kind of gave me a bad time as they usually do most people in Richmond. Richmond's an unforgiving place to work. If you devote your life to it, you're silly. It's really kind of crazy. But anyway, so my doctor thought that I should get out and do something different. He asked me to retire. So I did. And I went to Louisiana and I really liked it. In fact, I still own a house there. I have a house on a lake in an area that's called the Hunter's Paradise. It's really a beautiful area. And you can go fishing. And I bought a beautiful home on one acre and it only cost \$59,000. [laughs] So I own a lot of land in Louisiana. It's really a beautiful place.

01-00:49:53

Wilmot: How did you deal with Hurricane Katrina coming through there? How did that affect—?

01-00:49:57

Lewis: Nowhere near New Orleans. I live in what they call the Arklatech, Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas up in the northwest corner of Louisiana. It's close Shreveport/ I'm about 40 miles from El Dorado, Arkansas.

01-00:50:15

Wilmot: How did you know that Louisiana was a place you wanted to be? Had you visited there—

01-00:50:20

Lewis: I had a friend who went down there all the time. And in fact, I had a friend years ago who was from this place where I moved. I actually don't live in the town called Homer, but I live four miles west of there. It's in the parish. They don't call them counties, they call them parishes. And I went down there visiting with a friend of mine and I really liked it.

01-00:50:43

Wilmot: It's funny, too, because I think of how you were saying that you don't have a background that's southern.

01-00:50:50

Lewis: No I didn't get along with the southerners too well either.

01-00:50:51

Wilmot: But then you chose a southern life at some point.

01-00:50:54

Lewis: Not really I never fit in with the southerners, but sometimes I think God puts people in places where he wants them to be. I went down to Louisiana and I got in with a crowd of people—I belong to the Methodist Church. So I went down there and I met this lady who's really wealthy. She owns about five or six funeral parlors in Louisiana. And she has always been outgoing and doing things. I went and introduced myself to her because I knew her sister who was a member of the Episcopal Church. We have like—this region here in California. California, Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Arizona and parts of Oklahoma is called Region Nine. So you get to know everybody in the region and I knew her two sisters here. So I just went up to her and spoke and told her that I knew her sisters, that I met them at several functions. And so we got to be good friends and she invited me to come to some meetings and they were trying to form a Boys and Girls Club.

So I became the first director, non-paid director, of the Claiborne Parish Boys and Girls Club. And we started the Boys and Girls Club. The city gave us an old armory and we got the prisoners to come out and clean it up and we did a lot of work and got it going and then we started another club in Hanesville which is about, oh, 14 miles from there. And we lived in what they call Karl Malone country. Karl Malone is a famous basketball player. I met his mother before she died and a lot of good people. A lot of white and black people together. Gene Colman is a State Farm agent, has a lot of money. And he put a

lot of money into it and there was another family doctor, Stewart, she and her husband. He was an engineer. I just met the right kind of people who wanted to do something for children. We had these two boys and girls clubs now going, and Karl Malone just recently donated \$100,000 to the Claiborne Parish Boys and Girls Club. I attended a meeting through the school district. And I always contribute money each year to the Boys and Girls Club in Claiborne Parish. So that was one of my pet things that I got involved in and I'm very proud of that.

01-00:53:50
Wilmot:

So when you say that you didn't fit in with Southerners, can you just give me your early memories of that? What do you mean?

01-00:53:57
Lewis:

They have a different perception than I do. One of the things I learned immediately when I went to live in the south, black people and white people have a serious problem. They *hate* each other. I mean the hatred runs deep. I mean, blacks are just as bad as whites. But not everybody, you know? You hear it. I mean they'll express it to you. And sometimes I would look at some white people, hillbilly-looking people would come in and I'd look at them before I speak and they say, "How y'all doing?" or, "How are ya?" And I'd speak to them, you never know. But some of them are really prejudiced and they don't mind telling you that. But like my neighbors where I live in the country, I'm the only black person on that street, and my neighbors always watch my house and call me and come over and Miss Joyce calls me, she doesn't hear from me, she'll call me and ask me how I'm doing. The all called me Miss Ivy.

The reason I didn't fit in too well, let me tell you why, I don't have the same frame of reference to white people that they have. I haven't been brutalized or seen black people brutalized by white people. So I don't hate to the extent that they hate, and I'm more readily easy to just fit in. You know, when I first went there, I would go to the doctor and I would speak to the white nurses and they look at me like who you talking to, they wouldn't talk to me. But after a while, when they got to know me, I call them when I come to visit now. "Come on down and see me, Miss Ivy!" That's what they call me. My real estate agent told me—I could buy houses. I bought like seven houses in Louisiana. I never had to pay a down payment or anything. And I tried to sell a house to a lady one day, and my real estate agent said, "Miss Ivy, we don't sell to blacks like them." "Why?" "Well, I don't know why." And they have a very bad habit of—and then this is why when I go to the bank in Richmond or anyplace and they start acting funny, I know this is the same tactic they use in the south. Black people go into the bank and if you have a check—like I have my own business check with my own signature—this lady started to question me. They think they can ask you anything. I mean, you have no privacy and you're nobody. She started, "What is this signature?" And the other lady told her, "That's fine," not to bother me. But that's how they treat other black

people down there, that have nothing or don't know their rights. And they don't stand up for themselves.

Tony Johnson is our real estate agent, and he told us we're the first black people who ever questioned him, about anything. Whatever he tells them, black people don't question him.

Wilmot: He's a white man?

Lewis: Yeah.

Wilmot: Well, I need to stop and change all our recording media, tapes and everything, and then we'll continue for another hour.

Lewis: Talk about World War II?

Wilmot: Yes.

Begin Audio File 2 Lewis 02 08-04-2006.mp3

02-00:00:00

Wilmot: Okay. So World War II, Pearl Harbor.

02-00:00:13

Lewis: Okay, I think I was ten years old.

02-00:00:19

Wilmot: 1941.

02-00:00:22

Lewis: I went to the movie on Sunday. We went to the matinee and they stopped the movie and they said that all military personnel have to report because United States had been attacked by Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. And a lot of the sailors were—like, they all got up and left out of the theater. And that was the first thing I remember about World War II. And then Richmond was sort of like a little town with very few people. You'd go downtown Richmond and Richmond really had a nice downtown—we had two movie theaters; Safeway was on MacDonald Avenue; dress shops; three, four markets; bakeries; all kind of things. And overnight Richmond changed drastically and a lot of black people moved to North Richmond. Housing projects were Canal, Harborage—mostly blacks and whites went into those projects. But they didn't get along. That's how they first started the neighborhood councils—the neighborhood councils were first started to try to ameliorate the friction between whites and blacks. This was started after the war.

02-00:02:07

Wilmot: Were they successful in doing that?

02-00:02:10

Lewis: I don't think so.

02-00:02:10

Wilmot: What was the friction like?

02-00:02:11

Lewis: Well, because these people had never lived together before. If they all came from the south, they didn't jell. Like when you go down South now. In the town where I lived, there's a few blacks scattered in different neighborhoods, but there were clearly defined black and white neighborhoods. So they were not used to living in the same complexes with black people. Atchison Village, which I learned when I was on a tour recently out of Betty's office, was primarily set up for the personnel that worked in the shipyards and in Kaiser Hospitals and stuff like that. But for years Atchison Village didn't allow black people to live there. I mean they couldn't live there even after the war.

North Richmond, the county part of North Richmond, grew during World War II. A lot of people went out there living in tents and sheds and then they built little shack houses and things like that.

I remember going downtown. Richmond then, that's when they started having everything open on Sundays. Before you couldn't go shopping on Sunday because everything was closed. But then Richmond, after the shipyard came, they had everything open—you'd go downtown Richmond, it would be just like going to the fair or something, there'd be so many people changing shifts and things like that. In fact, I saw a movie, somebody had a movie that they made of that period, I would like to get a copy of that, because it has the minister that built our church originally. He used to stand on the corner of Tenth and McDonald and ask people to help him, give him money to build the church. And I tell people that. I don't think they believe me—when I was going to junior high school, when I'd come home and catch the bus to go home, he would be standing on the corner.

But we went from two movies on Macdonald Avenue to how many—five or six movies. People stayed in the movies, some people didn't have places to live so they stayed in the movie theaters all night. And we had a big place, and we had—white people lived on one end, they were from Louisiana, and we had some black people. And you know, I tell people this, they—we had the Jones family come and live with us from Schaal, Arkansas. Their daughter was ten years old. I was 12. I'm two years older than her.

02-00:05:02

Wilmot: So your family took in boarders?

02-00:05:08

Lewis: Yeah, we had all kind of people live—the authorities asked you to let people live in your house, if you had room, because there was no place for people to live.

02-00:05:14

Wilmot: So you had two families come stay with you.

02-00:05:17

Lewis: We had three families in our house. We had the Jones family, then we had the Devers family.

02-00:05:22

Wilmot: And did they stay in a room or did they have two rooms to themselves?

02-00:05:26

Lewis: Some had two rooms. The Devers had two rooms. The Jones family had—let's see. The Devers had one room. Well, first we had the Devers and then some Devers moved out and then we had some other Devers. But the Devers had one and the Jones family had two rooms. And the other people who lived, the white family, I can't remember their names, they lived in what—we had another unit to our house. So they actually had an apartment.

02-00:05:57

Wilmot: So the Devers family, they were a black family. And they were from?

02-00:06:00

Lewis: Schaal, Arkansas. And their daughter became the surgeon general of the United States. Joycelyn Elders. She lived in Richmond and went to Richmond schools and they never mentioned it and nobody ever talks about it, but she did. And they lived in our house for two or three years and then they moved to the projects because when they first came they didn't bring all of their children, and then when they sent for their other children they needed more room.

02-00:06:36

Wilmot: So Jones and Devers were both from Schaal, Arkansas?

02-00:06:38

Lewis: Devers were from Shreveport, Louisiana.

02-00:06:43

Wilmot: And that's Joycelyn Elders' family.

02-00:06:44

Lewis: Joycelyn Elders' family was the Jones. Her mother worked the swing shift at the shipyards, they would leave—they had cooked food, so when we came home from school we would have dinner. And she'd tell me, "When I get big I'm going to change my name to Joycelyn because I hate Minnie Lee." Her name was Minnie Lee and she *hated* that name. But she was really a smart kid. I mean she was very smart.

02-00:07:15

Wilmot: That was your friend, that was your little girlfriend.

02-00:07:17

Lewis: We got along well together. And I loved her mother and in fact, I've visited her when I was in Louisiana, I'd go up and visit her all the time.

02-00:07:31

Wilmot: Did the families all get along well? Your family—

02-00:07:33

Lewis: Not the Devers, I hated the Devers family. I don't know why, I just didn't like them.

02-00:07:39

Wilmot: They stayed to themselves?

02-00:07:40

Lewis: No, I just didn't like—you know, you meet somebody you don't like? My mother got—everybody got along with them but not me, I didn't get along with the Devers.

02-00:07:48

Wilmot: Did they have any children?

02-00:07:53

Lewis: What I didn't like about them, they didn't know how to go to the bathroom. They had been going to outhouse bathrooms. So they used to go outside in the bushes and do their business. And I *hated* them. I mean as a kid, I just didn't like them. But I never got along with them. Now that I look at it, Mrs. Devers really tried to be nice to me. But I wasn't receptive to them. But anyway they moved, they built a house and they moved.

My father when he came from Oakland to Richmond, he happened to be at a ballgame at Nichols Park. And they saw him and people recognized him because I told you he was a semi-pro professional ballplayer and they asked him to be an umpire, to umpire games. And he became the official umpire for the Richmond Merchants. And all the games that were played at Nichols Park, my father was the umpire. And so because we had—my father came out and he had two ball teams and they used to play in North Richmond Ballpark, and my father got a job working for the City of Richmond, and he'd go out on Sundays and fix the ball diamonds and we sort of lived—that was our whole life, going to the ballgames—we used to sell peanuts and hot dog and my mother's friend Rosie Delacruz would make—tortillas with cactus, did you ever eat that? Yeah, she used to—I forget what they call—nopales? And we would sell all that stuff and soda water at the ballgames, and then I'd play ball on the girls' ball team and basketball. We were all involved in sports. And that's how my father retired and they named the park after him, Shields-Reid Community Center in North Richmond.

02-00:09:57

Wilmot: What was he like? What was your father's personality like?

02-00:10:01

Lewis: My father was a really good person. He—I never heard my father cuss and he didn't smoke and he didn't drink. He worked a lot. You know he was a hard worker.

02-00:10:15

Wilmot: He had the Pullman job, the shoe, the—

02-00:10:16

Lewis: Well, that was earlier. Then he worked in Mare Island during the war. He worked in Mare Island in the—he worked in the place where they tended to submarines.

02-00:10:26

Wilmot: What'd he do there? [repeats] What did he do there?

02-00:10:29

Lewis: Do to the submarine?

02-00:10:30

Wilmot: What was his work there?

02-00:10:34

Lewis: When the submarines would come in, they would bring them up—I guess if you're in water a long time, you get barnacles and corrosion and stuff like that. And he worked there, because they used to have a hot pot they set out, I think it was something like that, melting hot lead and painting the hulls of the subs—I don't know exactly, but I know it had to do with submarines.

[pause] There's a cat on the front page of the paper, look just like him today. [referring to her cat]

Then my father you know with the ballgames, all the ballplayers used to come and meet in our house and we'd always have a crowd—when he first got a job at the park we had a house that we bought from the Lodedi family. They were Italian. Their house had a large grape arbor with grapes, and it was a big—it was on an acre and a half.

02-00:11:47

Wilmot: Was that the Filbert Street house?

02-00:11:50

Lewis: Pardon me?

02-00:11:50

Wilmot: Was that your Filbert house?

02-00:11:51

Lewis: No, that was on Kelsey Street. And we had a big yard and everything, and my father, because we didn't have a recreation building at the park, my father would have all the kids over to our house. They would have wiener roasts and

dances and everything. Our house was really the recreation center. [laughs] And so and when he would come home, Sundays he would invite all the workers up from Mare Island to come over to our house to have dinner and all that stuff. So our house was always full of people, crowded, full of people.

And we had rabbits and chickens and we grew all kind of vegetables, cantaloupes. And around the front of our house we had a lot of cactus. And we had all kind of fruit trees. So a lot of people would come and buy cactus and we would sell them rabbits. That's when everything was rationed—if you didn't have a ration book you couldn't get meat. So people would come and ask us to sell them chickens and stuff like that. North Richmond gradually grew out of being a rural community because then they had a law you couldn't have chickens anymore. But all of our neighbors, like our next-door neighbors were Portuguese people, and they had a big garden. Everybody had a big garden. And had chickens if you lived in North Richmond, but then gradually the laws wouldn't allow you to have them. And people used to kill hogs all the time. I never liked to see them kill hogs because hogs really scream and holler when you kill them. And it grew out of being a rural community into a ghetto of shacks.

After the war North Richmond had a lot of working families and people started fixing up their housing. But one of the things that we fought against was bringing the housing projects to North Richmond. That kind of ripped North Richmond off. North Richmond used to be a very good place to live until they brought the housing projects and then North Richmond went downhill. To tell you something about the topography of North Richmond, if you went down Vernon Street, you come to the bay, and if you went down Gertrude, there was a lot of people who lived—you know like they live in Sausalito out in the little boats, [you can] walk out to their little houses and boats out there? All that was water. And then when Chevron made those settling pools or whatever they did, they cut off all the water coming into North Richmond. So we didn't have water there anymore. You couldn't go fishing, couldn't go swimming or anything.

But North Richmond was really a rural community. Everybody had cows and I'd go around helping people churn butter and stuff like that. It was a different life. Peach trees. We used to go to First Creek, that's San Pablo Creek. First Creek had a peach orchard. And we'd pick peaches out there and pick blackberries and come home and make pies and I remember my mother would go with some people, ladies from Texas, and in the springtime, you know, you see those yellow flowers now, you see them, they're wild mustard is what they would—those people would go and pick the wild mustard greens and cook them. My mother didn't know anything about cooking greens because she wasn't from the South. But they showed her how to cook them. My father wouldn't eat them. The Turner family would always have a big barbecue, and they would barbecue goats. They would kill goats and everybody would go out there. There were two churches, the Baptist church and then the Church of

God in Christ. Well, the Baptist church was there first. So everything was centered around the church.

02-00:16:02

Wilmot: Is that the North Richmond—

02-00:16:05

Lewis: North Richmond Baptist Church. Yeah.

02-00:16:08

Wilmot: Is that where you went? It's still there.

02-00:16:08

Lewis: I know.

02-00:16:08

Wilmot: It's the oldest black church in Richmond.

02-00:16:11

Lewis: It's the oldest black church in Richmond, yeah. It was in a little church and then they built another church, then they built that big church.

02-00:16:18

Wilmot: You don't go there anymore now, since you're Methodist?

02-00:16:21

Lewis: I'm not a Baptist. I just—

02-00:16:22

Wilmot: But you went there when you were little.

02-00:16:24

Lewis: I was an Episcopalian, but the Episcopalian church in Richmond is all white. We never went to that church. But when I lived in Oakland we went to the Episcopalian church.

02-00:16:33

Wilmot: Which one was that?

02-00:16:37

Lewis: Saint Augustus. I think it's on Telegraph now.

02-00:16:39

Wilmot: So when you were in Richmond, when your family moved to Richmond, you went to the Baptist church but—

02-00:16:44

Lewis: It was just right down the street.

02-00:16:46

Wilmot: And you went there growing up even though you were Episcopalian.

02-00:16:49

Lewis: Yeah.

02-00:16:51

Wilmot: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about that church?

02-00:16:56

Lewis: That was a little old church. Reverend Watkins and Mrs. Watkins ran the church. I remember that they had a program for illiteracy, people who couldn't read, they taught them to read. And all kind of programs that they came in the community they would have at that church. I remember they used to have a sheet, you know, if they had a program, and I would always be on the Easter program. Get up and say your piece, they call them. You learn a piece.

02-00:17:36

Wilmot: What kind of pieces did you learn?

02-00:17:37

Lewis: Oh, about Jesus and the cross and he rose on Easter morning and stuff like that. You know, my first—my Sunday school teacher, I really liked. And everything I would always say, "My Sunday school teacher said that's not right." You know, I would really quote everything she said. My mother let us go to Sunday school and then we'd come back in the evening for BYPU and I sang in the choir.

02-00:18:12

Wilmot: What is BYPU?

02-00:18:15

Lewis: I don't know what—it's really a part of their program. I think it's like for young adults. And until World War II I went to that church. And then I had a best friend, her name was Jeanie Scurlock. And her grandmother was a Methodist, but she was an AME, African Methodist Episcopal Church. And we met a friend, Gloria Spearman, from school. They were two years ahead of me in school but we all became good friends. And Gloria was a CME. We didn't have a CME church in Richmond. So we would go down—there was a little place in Richmond on the corner of York Street. Or York and Gertrude. And we would go down there. Reverend Davis lived there with his two daughters. They came from the Imperial Valley. And this was time that the shipyard was going and everything, and people were used to living in little shacks and stuff like that. And we would go visit them and he wanted to start a CME church in Richmond. So, the night that they decided to build the church, I was one of the people who was there, and Davis Chapel CME Church is the church I belong to now. It burnt down a couple years ago and we're presently going to rebuild. We're back in North Richmond, but the county's giving us kind of a runaround. So you know it takes a while. We're not a priority [chuckles] on getting permits in the county so it's taking a while.

02-00:20:04

Wilmot: Were Jeanie and Gloria from Richmond?

02-00:20:07

Lewis: Jeanie was from Berkeley. And her family—I mentioned Ollie Freeman a while back. Ollie Freeman's father was married to her grandmother. And they were sort of a prominent family in Richmond, and Ollie had a record store in North Richmond, and he was a radio disc jockey.

02-00:20:33

Wilmot: And Gloria, where was she from?

02-00:20:37

Lewis: Gloria, I think, originally is from Oklahoma, but I think, when I met her they had lived in Arizona and then they lived in Allensworth—an all black town in California. They lived down there in the valley.

02-00:20:57

Wilmot: I never knew about an all black town in California.

02-00:20:58

Lewis: Oh, yeah there is. There is. Founded by black people, it's an all black town in California. If I think about it, when you get my age you sort of can't think of things right away.

02-00:21:11

Wilmot: That's amazing. I only hear about that happening in Oklahoma.

02-00:21:12

Lewis: No, there's an all black town in California. And I think that's where they lived before they came here. And then her husband got to be minister and then a presiding elder of the CME church. She's now in a rest home in Vallejo, she had a stroke. But I went to see her several months ago. I need to go back and visit her again.

But I hadn't seen Jeanie in a long time. And when I was on that Channel Five News she saw me on there so she called me up. She looked me up. And called me. I hadn't seen her in years.

02-00:21:47

Wilmot: So she called you last night?

02-00:21:51

Lewis: No, she called me after she saw that news—saw me on the Channel Five News. Remember I told you the Channel Five News people—

02-00:21:58

Wilmot: About being hot?

02-00:21:58

Lewis: Yeah, about being hot. And so she called me but—

02-00:22:02

Wilmot: So, okay. So you went to school at Peres first.

02-00:22:08

Lewis: I went to Peres Elementary School.

02-00:22:09

Wilmot: And then Richmond.

02-00:22:11

Lewis: I went to Roosevelt Junior High School. Then I went to Fremont High School. And I got married very young and I moved to Los Angeles and I went to finish high school in Los Angeles and then I came back to Richmond and I went to night school, but I didn't like night school because it was for dumb people. And so I took my GED and went to Contra Costa College and then I went to UC Berkeley and I took some graduate studies at San Francisco State. And then University of Michigan.

02-00:22:55

Wilmot: What were you studying at U Michigan?

02-00:22:58

Lewis: Business administration.

02-00:23:00

Wilmot: Okay, and at Berkeley what was your major?

02-00:23:02

Lewis: My major was sociology—let's see. I started off as a major in political science but did not like the teachers. I mean, they didn't know anything. I was way ahead of what they were thinking. Politically, there was discrimination at UC Berkeley. I mean I would write papers for other people and they'd get good grades, and I—because I was a very good writer—and I never got really good grades. I mean, I always had to explain why my papers were not what they were supposed to be. Some black males could not express themselves in writing. I shouldn't say that, maybe that's not categorically true for everybody. But I helped a lot of them write papers.

02-00:23:53

Wilmot: And they would get good grades.

02-00:23:55

Lewis: And they would get good grades and I wouldn't. They were not outspoken like me.

02-00:23:59

Wilmot: So you were outspoken. We have to talk about this. This is very exciting. Okay, so first husband. Moved to Los Angeles. Was he from Los Angeles?

02-00:24:11

Lewis: No, from Tennessee. His sisters lived in Los Angeles.

02-00:24:14

Wilmot: Okay, and you got married when you were—

02-00:24:17

Lewis: I'm not going to say. But young.

02-00:24:21

Wilmot: Young. Okay. How long were you in Los Angeles?

02-00:24:27

Lewis: I stayed in Los Angeles about ten years.

02-00:24:30

Wilmot: Whoa! You were there for a long time.

02-00:24:33

Lewis: Yeah, maybe not quite ten years.

02-00:24:34

Wilmot: Did you have your children when you were there?

02-00:24:36

Lewis: Let's see. No. My children were born here. I'm trying to think exactly. I know I turned 21 in Los Angeles. I didn't stay long after that. I came back to Richmond. And went back to school. And, you know, because in Los Angeles everything I did was wrong. Education was not a priority for that group of people. I mean it was a waste of time as far as they were concerned. But it wasn't a waste of time for me because I wanted to get a good education. So, you know, sometimes you just get in the wrong group of people. And they had different priorities. They liked to party and have good times and I wanted to get an education. And they could not see the value of having an education.

02-00:25:43

Wilmot: Okay, so let me then be focused on World War II. And you told me about hearing about Pearl Harbor. Can you tell me a little bit about when the Japanese were interned? Did you know that that was happening?

02-00:25:59

Lewis: Oh. Yeah. I remember that. But I'd first like to say this, that my mother worked in the shipyards, and we got in Kaiser when my mother worked in the shipyards. So my number is 0029200. That's my Kaiser number. So you can see it's a really early card.

I remember in school that—this is not spoken of. Everybody talks about the Japanese internment. What about the Italian people and the German people and what they did to them? I remember the—let's see, what was her name? I don't remember their name exactly but they lived in North Richmond, some Italian people, and they made them move to another area because one of the plants down in there, they were doing war stuff, so they didn't want them around there. And then I remember the Schwartz family, because they had

some really pretty girls in their family. And they did something to them, too. They made them move. Or they did something to them, I remember that. Because they were German. And I remember how terrible it was and they took the Japanese people. And all over there by Cutting Boulevard, the white people went over there and broke all their windows. You know, they had hothouses and broke their windows out of their hothouses and stuff and broke the windows out of their homes after those people were interned. It's really terrible. I remember that. I really didn't like it.

02-00:27:47
Wilmot:

Tell me more about that.

02-00:27:50
Lewis:

Well everybody—you know people were really vicious if you were a Japanese—you know, just as what they're doing now to some of those Mideastern people here. Where that black guy just shot somebody? Said he thought he was a terrorist? I mean, that's what they were doing to the Japanese people. And not so much the Italian people, but some Italian people I don't know why did they investigate them or something. But see my mother didn't have a citizenship, so they were always calling our neighbors, asking about my mother, too. My mother—our neighbors would tell my mother. My mother would listen to Helen Trent, Our Girl Sunday, that's—you know those were soap operas then on the radio. They would say my mother would have the windows open, and she would be playing the radio and the neighbors would say—when they would ask about my mother, “Oh, Mrs. Reid, she's a nice lady but she plays the radio really loud.” And so they were kind of—in those days if you were not a citizen they were checking up on you during World War II.

And I remember nobody in our family was a warden. They had wardens and they came to everybody's house and they gave you a bucket. Was a tin bucket with like a handle. I don't know what you're supposed to do with that, put water in it. And then they'd give you a packet to tell you if they had a—oh, you had to have sand, in case they dropped bombs and you could throw the sand on them and whatever that tin pail was going to do, put out a fire, I guess.[laughs!] But they had a block warden and used to have a tin—metal hat and a band around his arm and he'd go around at night. You know I don't know what it was all about. But I remember that. And they would teach you, in case the place was bombed what to do. It was kind of scary for me. And you had to have dark window shades so lights could not be seen at night.

02-00:30:00
Wilmot:

Did you know any of the people who went away?

02-00:30:02
Lewis:

To the internment? I probably did, but they—some of the Japanese kids were not in my class, they were in upper classes. But after the war, I met a lot of

people, friends that I know, that were interned that I didn't know that they were interned.

02-00:30:25

Wilmot:

What did they tell you about that experience if anything?

02-00:30:32

Lewis:

Well they—you know, one of my really good friends, she died recently. You know it was if you haven't done anything and people accuse you of doing things and take everything you have away from you I mean, it doesn't give you a lot of hope, does it? And she was a very bright person. She felt—she always talked about it, but she never really expressed her regret or how she felt. She talked about being there and the things they did, you know, like passing the time. But, I think, if I remember, she said that it was mostly her parents, who really suffered—she was younger, but her parents really felt bad about it. I can imagine that too. I mean, they take away everything you have for nothing and put you in a camp, I mean it's kind of a dead-end street for you. And then for the people to destroy all their property, it was really—you know—terrible.

I don't really know how they felt. I'm going to tell you the truth. Because no—they have never expressed it to me. They didn't talk about it. Not to me anyway.

02-00:31:52

Wilmot:

Do you remember your mom or your dad talking about what was going on?

02-00:31:56

Lewis:

Yeah. And you know the funniest thing about it, I tell people that and people laugh—nowadays you look at television or—everybody's got a radio or TV, people don't listen to radio anymore. And living in North Richmond, when anything would happen, the news people would come out, the newsboy would say, "Extra, extra read all about it!" They would be out selling papers and people'd be running out buying the papers to find out what happened because you didn't know. Communication wasn't that good and people would run out to buy a paper, "What happened?!" You know. So that's how you got the news.

But then, let me tell you more about North Richmond. North Richmond became very curious. A lot of people who lived in the county, little businessmen, they'd start setting up little businesses, barbecue joints. Then came the Savoy Club and Minnie Lou with her club. And then on Grove Street they sort of had a lot of little joints. And they start having blues places and then Tapper's Inn was down at the end of Chesley right where that plant is. And the guy who owned Tapper's Inn was an Indian guy, a Hindu. And he turned that into a big nightclub. And all the big names like Hedda Hopper and Little Willie John, I can't think of all of them—Louis Jordan, all those stars of those days used to come to Tapper's Inn. Everybody went to Tapper's Inn. I

mean, that was the place to come and North Richmond sort of became the blues capital. Lightnin' Hopkins? Oh, I can't think of the name, he was just at Point Richmond last year. Oh, Jimmy McCracklin! All those blues players, everybody came to North Richmond for the blues. They came to the Savoy Club on Sunday afternoon. After they'd get out of church, everybody from Berkeley and Oakland, they'd come to Richmond and start all kind of fights. They said it was people in Richmond but it was really them.

And I was right in the middle because we used to tell lies that we were going to church but we wouldn't go to church, we'd go down and watch all the action, till one time my father caught us down there and we couldn't go back. But as I got older I would go down and when they had Hedda Hopper, and you probably don't know anything about Hedda Hopper, but Hedda Hopper was really sort of like Mary Blige I guess, or somebody nowadays. So everybody wanted to go there. And Hazel Scott and all those players, we'd all go down to Tapper's Inn to see all those stars. And it really became quite popular.

Everybody came to North Richmond. I mean, we had a gang. We told people from Canal they couldn't come to North Richmond. Canal was out off of Gerard before you got to Cutting, right in that area was all kind of projects.

02-00:35:34

Wilmot:

This is the Canal housing projects.

02-00:35:36

Lewis:

Yeah, so they used to have to ask us if they could come to North Richmond.

02-00:35:41

Wilmot:

I interviewed one person who used to live in those projects, her name was Ermastine Martin.

02-00:35:49

Lewis:

Yeah, I know Ermastine Martin, but I didn't know that she lived in the projects. But Nat Bates' wife, Shirley, lived there. I used to go visit her all the time at Canal. And a lot of my friends who went to junior high school lived in Canal.

02-00:36:09

Wilmot:

Did you know Edith Hill growing up?

02-00:36:12

Lewis:

Who?

02-00:36:12

Wilmot:

Edith Hill.

02-00:36:15

Lewis:

No. And so but Canal was the closest housing project to us. Then there was Harborsgate. I had a friend from North Richmond who married a girl from

Harbortgate. Then Seaport. All those housing projects. We didn't all go to the same school because I think Seaport might have went to school in El Cerrito.

02-00:36:44

Wilmot: So you made a club *against* Canal Street, Canal projects? You disallowed?

02-00:36:51

Lewis: Oh no, you know, we just—when they'd go to school, they'd say, "We're coming over tonight." "Oh, you can't come to North Richmond, "we would say that. It was just—we didn't do anything to them. I mean that was just talk.

02-00:37:02

Wilmot: Was that like—

02-00:37:04

Lewis: Turf war.

02-00:37:04

Wilmot: Folks who had been here for a long time versus people who had not been here for—

02-00:37:08

Lewis: No, most of these people, I had been here a long time. Most of the people, my friends all were people who just came in the wartime.

02-00:37:15

Wilmot: Well, let me ask you a little bit more about that. So there was this—you were living with those three families, the Jones, those three families were staying with you. Was this at the house—this was not the house on Filbert.

02-00:37:31

Lewis: No it was on Kelsey Street. We had a great big house. Let's see, it had one, two, three, four, five, six bedrooms in that house.

02-00:37:41

Wilmot: And you said the Devers went ahead and moved out.

02-00:37:45

Lewis: Who?

02-00:37:46

Wilmot: The Devers you called them, one of the families?

02-00:37:50

Lewis: The Devers.

02-00:37:51

Wilmot: The Devers, they left.

02-00:37:54

Lewis: The Devers—we had a lot of people moved in our house. First the Devers came. And then the Devers' came before the Joneses, and then when the

Devers' moved out we had another small bedroom and the Devers' brother-in-law came and lived there for a while, and then the Jones family came and then the Jones family had two brothers, the Reids—and they spell their name differently, that's R-E-E-D—and they came and lived a while. Just in and out.

02-00:38:31

Wilmot:

And then the white family?

02-00:38:32

Lewis:

The white family was—we had to make them move because my father had to go over there one time: the lady was pregnant and the man was beating her up and kicking her. And so my father, you know, got after him about it and asked them to move and then we had Mrs. Riley moved in there and they lived there for a long, long time. She just died recently. She was 92, I think. But they lived in that house for a long, long time.

02-00:39:00

Wilmot:

And the Jones, did they go and buy a house or make a home somewhere?

02-00:39:03

Lewis:

No, the Jones went back to Arkansas. And they had a lot of land and they were cattle farmers but, you know, living in rural Arkansas you don't have much money. And it was really funny because—my mother was really a good cook and as I told you my uncles were all chef cooks—the Jones family had never baked a turkey before. They never—and I found that out when I went to live, visit my in-laws back in Tennessee. If they had a roast or a turkey or a chicken, they would put it in water and boil it and then brown it. So that's how they cooked, they cook differently. And so—my mother would cook all this food and they would say, "Is that done?" Because they didn't think it could get done just roasting it in the oven, you had to boil it. [laughs] Had to boil it first. But it was really funny.

They still have the same little house out in Arkansas and they live way out in the country. Like Haller Jones used to tell my mother, she said you couldn't even hear a train whistle, they live so far in the country. And they did.

02-00:40:21

Wilmot:

Do you remember hearing about the end of the war? Do you remember hearing about the bombs being dropped on Nagasaki and—

02-00:40:27

Lewis:

Yeah, I do.

02-00:40:30

Wilmot:

—Hiroshima?

02-00:40:32

Lewis:

I heard all about it. The end of World War II, I was right in San Francisco, right in the middle of all those people running down the street kissing each other. Everybody was—Market Street was jammed with people just running

round dancing in the street! They were really something. I was young but I remember.

02-00:40:52

Wilmot:

Do you remember, was there like a sense of—did people know what the capacity or the power of those bombs were? Did they know the kind of—?

02-00:41:02

Lewis:

We knew it was terrible and after that I read about it. Enola Gay, and how it burned all the skin off—yeah, horrible and I always—you know, if you live through a war—now I didn't feel that way in the Korean War—but World War II really made an impact on me. I was really frightened as a child about the war, and so to know that atomic bomb could do that to people, really it does something to you. It's really terrible and it's left a scar on me that I think you know will never go away. It hasn't gone away.

02-00:41:43

Wilmot:

Did you learn that later on about what they did? What the impact of the bombs were?

02-00:41:50

Lewis:

I heard people talk about it and how terrible it was, and a lot of black people thought that they wouldn't drop it on the Germans but they dropped it on the Japanese because they were dark people and they didn't care about them.

02-00:42:03

Wilmot:

Did you hear about the Holocaust, what was going on—what the Germans were doing to the Jewish—?

02-00:42:09

Lewis:

You know, I was living—when I lived in Los Angeles there was such animosity about Jewish people. And I really didn't understand that and I talked to my mother about it and my mother said that I was supposed—no matter what—because I didn't understand it. Nobody had ever talked to me about Jews before. And my sister-in-law wanted me to go with her and work for some Jews. She said she didn't work for Jewish people. And I said I didn't mind going to work for Jewish people. But I asked my mother and my mother told me to treat everybody accordingly, if they treated me right to treat them the same way and not to discriminate against anyone because discrimination was wrong. So I was just beginning to learn about this animosity for Jewish people.

But then when I got around the Jewish people, they started telling me how they hated Germans. [laughs] How the Germans were no good. And so it's the same thing as you see with the blacks and whites in the south. And I can understand to some extent if people are brutalized by other people, there has to be some animosity between them.

02-00:43:42

Wilmot:

But while you were a young person in the Bay Area or in Los Angeles, you didn't really know, did you know about the camps that were happening in Germany?

02-00:43:52

Lewis:

I read about them. I heard about them. And I heard people discuss how terrible it was and I always—you know, after I read about it and how the people came here in ships and how the United States turned them away, I wonder how could they do that to people. You know. Have you ever read that? They had a ship that just went all the way around, nobody would let them land, with Jewish people? Yeah, and they didn't—you know, I just wonder how they could do that to people, the people were trying to escape, you know. And it's terrible.

But my—you know my daughter-in-law is German and I've been to Germany and, oh, I don't know, it just takes a certain kind of person. You know, I talk to my son's mother-in-law about Hitler and she says, "Well, he wasn't even a German. He was an Austrian." So, people see things differently. I don't think that she agreed with everything, because she had a terrible experience, she lived in what is it—she now lives in south Germany but she lived in past Berlin, and she was behind that wall and they had to escape and she said the Russians shot at them and everything. So everybody has their experience of World War II and the results of World War II, it wasn't very good. Richmond changed. My life changed. The whole area of California I guess changed because of World War II.

And I remember the Okies too you know. That's one of the things that really stays on my mind. I had a little friend named Bessie. And Bessie was an Okie that came when they had the problems in Oklahoma and they all came to California. And it's a really sad part of my life because they were all so young and they came and I was a little kid but I remember vividly they lived right down the street, Bessie and her family, and they were all sick, and they all died, really young. They came from Oklahoma when—and then California, do you remember reading about California—trying to stop the Okies from coming across the border into California? They enacted the Anti-Okie law. The Okies came because of the—what happened in Oklahoma? They had a drought. The dustbowl. And they all came to California but a lot of them were sick and nice-looking people, and they died, Bessie's brother died, and they all were sick. Really poor people. And that was before World War II. Had to be before because I still lived on Filbert Street.

02-00:46:59

Wilmot:

What kind of—what do you remember about your mother working in the shipyards? What do you remember about that?

02-00:47:06

Lewis:

Oh, my mother was really proud. She got a job. And my mother's best friend's name was Rosie Delacruz. And Rosie lived down the street from us and her husband Faustino had a good job, but when he got paid he used to go to the canteen, it was right down the street from our house, and he'd go and spend all his money, and he wouldn't ever have money for his family for food. And so my mother used to loan Rosie money and they got to be good friends because we kids played together. And they worked at the Santa Fe cleaning out cars during World War II. A lot of jobs became available because everybody who wasn't in the service, they worked in the shipyards. And my mother—we really were kind of late getting in the shipyard. And Rosie and my mother went and got a job in the shipyards. And they were so happy. My mother was a welder. They were both welders. And my mother would tell me how she could do this row and how you weld stuff, and one time she got hot slag on her and burned her and, oh, how they climbed up all on those big ships. And it was really interesting for them. And how they wore dark shades so they wouldn't get their eyes hurt from the welding torch.

And for me, I was 12 or 13. And then I put my age up because they couldn't find anybody to work in the canneries and so I worked at Red Rock Cannery during the summer when school was out. I worked the swing shift from 2:00 to 11:00.

02-00:48:38

Wilmot:

Was that your first job?

02-00:48:40

Lewis:

That was my first job, working in the fish cannery. It was the Red Rock Fish Cannery. Point Malote.

02-00:48:45

Wilmot:

What did you do there?

02-00:48:48

Lewis:

We worked on assembly line. When the fish came down, they beheaded them and gutted them and then you put them in the cans and then the cans go on to the cookers and stuff like that. All the kids worked. All the kids who could get a job worked. Because in those days, they didn't hire black kids. You couldn't work in like retail stores or anything. Sometime they would let you do inventory but you never could be a salesperson or anything like that.

02-00:49:22

Wilmot:

Could you shop there?

02-00:49:24

Lewis:

Yeah, you could shop there, I never had any problem shopping. They just didn't hire you.

02-00:49:30

Wilmot:

What kind of work did you get after the war?

02-00:49:34

Lewis:

After the war I moved to Los Angeles, and I did a lot of domestic work, and my sister-in-law, she did parties, like we used to work for Doc Stone, an actor on Gunsmoke and the producers of the Amos and Andy Show. A lot of show people she worked for. I'd go with her to serve parties. I liked serving parties the best. Sometimes I worked for a big company that would give banquets. That's the way you could make the best money.

02-00:50:03

Wilmot:

Where did you live? Where did you live in Los Angeles?

02-00:50:06

Lewis:

I lived in a nice area right off of Adams Boulevard and it was called Cimarron Street and I lived in a court—it was the funniest thing. [laughs] I lived in this court and it belonged to a friend of Pearl Bailey's. And she lived in Kansas City and one day she came and they had this big limousine and she had this little dog named Coco. And she came and she said, "Oh, this place is not being taken care of properly. You people are ruining our place." And I didn't know what she was talking about, because it was a nice place. But if you're never there and you hire people to do the work, then I don't know. You know. Anyway her dog ran in the street and she just screamed, "Oh, my dog! Something's going to happen!" And I went out and got her dog, I said, "Come on, Coco." And Pearl Bailey said to me he doesn't understand English, he only understands French. [laughs] That was my negative opinion of Pearl Bailey. But anyway. It was a nice area where I lived in Los Angeles. Now I understand it's a ghetto.

02-00:51:19

Wilmot:

How did you watch women's roles change during the war?

02-00:51:24

Lewis:

Well you know women worked more. Before women didn't work a lot. You know—they stayed at home mostly.

02-00:51:35

Wilmot:

Do you think that was true for black women as well as white women?

02-00:51:38

Lewis:

No. I think black women always worked. If you look at the history of the blacks in the United States, black women could always get a job and black men couldn't get a job. And black women were always more successful than black men. But overall, more people worked out of the home. I know when I was smaller, my mother didn't work as much. She'd be gone half a day or something like that. But then, when the shipyard came, everybody was working. All the husbands and the wives and the kids were all by themselves. And as it turned out in our house, some people worked dayshift and some people worked swing shift, so there was always some adult around.

02-00:52:35

Wilmot:

And how were you children being watched? While you were all young people, and there was all those people around, did they all just take turns watching you while they all worked?

02-00:52:45

Lewis:

Well, every Saturday we were allowed to go to the show. To a movie, or Sunday, depends if we did our work. We didn't have a lot of stuff to do for a long time. You know you'd go to your friend's house or you'd go to church. Everything centered around the church. And then when the church got so full, the Baptist church, then they didn't want me there anymore. Because I wasn't a Baptist. So a lady asked me, "Are you a Baptist?" I told her no. She said, "I don't think you should sing in the choir anymore then if you're not a Baptist." And so I stopped going to the Baptist church. But I had some friends—my brother and another friend of ours, Leroy McGrew, we would go to church—at nighttime. There was nothing in Richmond. I mean nobody was going to bother kids. So we could stay at church, we would go to the Baptist church and then we'd go to the Church of God in Christ. And they always had a show. We knew this kid named Elmer Cleveland and his sister now is a minister—her name is Ernestine Reems. She has a college in Oakland. Also, she has a large church. Anyway they're missionaries and ministers. Elmer got to be a minister, too, and he would tell us different things he was going to do in church and we would all go there and see it. It was like a show. Have you ever been to a Church of God in Christ? It's really Holy Roller, you know. Shouting and everything. So we would go there and look at that.

02-00:54:30

Wilmot:

I wanted to ask you also about sexuality. Did you know different people who had different sexual orientations when you were in that age group?

02-00:54:35

Lewis:

Never saw that before in my life until I was a teenager—there might have been, now that I think about it, I think that a couple of people I knew might have been—but nobody talked about it. Nobody, you knew, nobody said, "I'm gay." I was about 15 years old and I was in the Greyhound bus station and there was this white sailor and he was standing by his self and the two sailors behind him. They were bothering him when he got on the bus. And I was sitting there terrified because they were threatening him, they were going to beat him up because he was gay. And then I asked my mother about it. But my mother didn't know that much either. She just said you know some people are different. If I heard people call people names—they would call them sissies, and nobody mistreated them, I mean I know—I didn't know that they were different. Took me a long time to really iron that out.

02-00:55:47

Wilmot:

Where were you going with your mom on the bus? Where were you going with your mother on the bus?

02-00:55:52

Lewis:

I don't know, someplace. To San Francisco probably. The Greyhound bus used to be the only form of transportation to places like Vallejo, Sacramento, and any small towns around the Bay Area. People did not have automobiles before the way, only a few did. If you worked at Mare Island, you rode the Greyhound to Vallejo and caught the boat over to the island. When the war came, transportation improved. Before the war, only a few people had cars and telephones.

02-00:55:55

Wilmot:

On the Greyhound, okay, interesting.

02-00:55:57

Lewis:

When I was a little girl I remember going on the ferry to San Francisco. And I remember going across the bridge when it first opened, 1939, in a rumble seat because I was a Campfire Girl, no I was a Bluebird. And the Bluebirds went to Treasure Island to the World's Fair. We went to the World's Fair. I remember that.

02-00:56:26

Wilmot:

How old were you when you went to Berkeley?

02-00:56:30

Lewis:

I was in my—I was 39. I was grown. I mean I already was married and had children.

02-00:56:34

Wilmot:

You had children. Were you married to that same husband from Tennessee or a different—

02-00:56:41

Lewis:

No, my second husband. My children's—Lewis.

02-00:56:50

Wilmot:

So, tell me a little bit about getting married to Lewis, Mr. Lewis.

02-00:56:56

Lewis: Oh, I met him at one of the first families we made friends with when we moved to Richmond. Their daughter got married and she married a guy who was in the service, and Randy was his friend. They were in the Air Force. So we met at a wedding. My mother belong to the Jolly Thirties Social Club and they always gave big parties, and he came to the them, so I saw him from time to time. So my mother liked him a lot and they sort of picked him out for me. So finally we started going out together. I am probably a hard person to get to know. I like to read. I'm more of a studious person. Right now, I know a lot of people, but I have very few good friends. Well, we finally got married. We were married for thirty years. My husband is deceased now. We had three children together and I had three from my first marriage. Three of my children are deceased

02-00:59:22

Wilmot: I'm sorry to hear that.

02-00:59:25

Lewis: But back to World War II, it was a really interesting time. You would have had to live here during World War II to really get the whole impact of it. People everywhere, the movie theaters stayed open all night—everything was like wide open in Richmond.

02-00:59:42

Wilmot: How was that war different than the war we—how does it feel different than the war we're fighting now in Iraq?

02-00:59:49

Lewis: Because everybody isn't mobilized. In World War II, everyone was working towards the war effort. Everybody was doing something, working in the shipyards and other war related jobs. We were all praying for the war to be over and for us to win. We all knew some who's relative got killed and we all had to make sacrifices. We did not have all the food we needed. You were given ration books and if you ran out of stamps, you couldn't buy meat, sugar, or butter. There was no leather for shoes. Some people ate horse meat. Everyone worked together. We bought liberty bonds. We had slogans like a slip of the lip can sink a ship. I was frightened especially when they dropped the atomic bomb and I thought that could be us. Everyone was affected by the war in some way and we all worked together. Not now—some people just act like they don't know there is a war.

02-01:00:53

Wilmot: Thank you. I'm going to close this for today.

02-01:00:55

Lewis: Okay.

Interview #2: 09-14-06

Begin Audio File 3 Lewis 03 09-14-06

03-00:00:00

Wilmot: And we're recording. Okay. This is Interview #2 with Ivy Reid Lewis. It is September 14, 2006, and good afternoon.

03-00:00:23

Lewis: Good afternoon.

03-00:00:24

Wilmot: I'm glad we found the time today.

03-00:00:25

Lewis: Yeah, I am, too.

03-00:00:27

Wilmot: Just to start—there was a story I had heard secondhand from someone else and I wanted to ask you about it. This was the story about World War II and how your neighbors responded and talked to you about the influx of African Americans from the south during World War II.

03-00:00:48

Lewis: You know, my family moved to Richmond in 1935. And we lived in North Richmond, which was primarily Italian, Portuguese—it was European mostly—a few black families and a few Mexican-American families, but predominantly Italian. And we bought a house and our neighbors were the Costas—Mary Costa. One day she came over to my mother's. Our property adjoined each other. They had a great big garden—North Richmond was rural. Everybody had a garden. And she said, "Ms. Reid, have you heard that you have to move because all of these black people are coming from the south? Aren't you going to move?" [laughs] And my mother said, "I don't know where I'm going to move to. No," she said, "we don't plan to move."

And unfortunately Mary Costa was one of the first victims. Somebody beat her up at the bus stop and her family did move, but her husband didn't move. He stayed in the house there until he died. But that was a transition that took place in North Richmond. North Richmond was primarily not a black community. I am not sure how many black families there were, but there were not very many in North Richmond, and so the transition took place and most of the white people moved out and black people moved in.

People wanted to rent our garage, chicken houses, any place that they could live. There really wasn't any place for people to live. So, the county part of North Richmond didn't have paved roads. It had all dirt roads. And there was a lot of truck farms. And so these people just moved in with tents and whatever they could put together and overnight it grew up like a little shantytown. And that's when the population in North Richmond grew.

Most of the people that I've been noticing now that used to live in North Richmond lived—the white people—live in Lafayette because I've been seeing obituaries, a couple, like Mary [Politich?], whose family really got rich off of black people, but they never mention that. She came from North Richmond. She lived in Lafayette when she died.

03-00:03:19

Wilmot:

What do you mean her family got rich off of black people?

03-00:03:22

Lewis:

Well, they had the only grocery store. It was Pete [Politich?] Market, North Richmond Grocery. Their family—that was the only grocery store when you came into North Richmond, so actually it grew—they became quite wealthy from that store. And then I don't remember when they moved away, but when the kids got bigger, everybody moved out. Like, Nello [Bianco?] just recently died; he was on the BART board. But his family also had a grocery store in North Richmond. The Corteses, Banduccis—all of those people lived in North Richmond, but now that they're prominent people, they live in Lafayette and other areas. But they never mention that they lived in North Richmond.

03-00:04:11

Wilmot:

And were these like—did you play with the children of all these families? Were you close with—?

03-00:04:15

Lewis:

I went to school with them. Yeah.

03-00:04:16

Wilmot:

You went to school with them. And you went over to each other's houses?

03-00:04:20

Lewis:

I went over a few people's houses. Banduccis lived over on the other side of town. There used to be water that came into North Richmond but then people used to come out there and fish and go swimming, but then Chevron cut them off with their settling pond. On the way to school, I'd stop by some kids' houses and wait for them to go to school. And sometimes I'd go down on 10th Street to play with some white kids down there. But mostly, they never came to North Richmond until after we got a park out there and then a lot of people came out to North Richmond. My best friends when I was growing up in North Richmond were white. They moved away when World War II started, and the area changed.

03-00:05:00

Wilmot:

And you mentioned that one person, Mary Costa, was the first person—you said she was the first victim?

03-00:05:11

Lewis:

Well, the only victim—I guess that she might have not been the first one, but that I knew about, because she was our neighbor. Somebody beat her up at the bus stop and robbed her.

03-00:05:20

Wilmot: During that transition time, was violence and crime very common?

03-00:05:28

Lewis: Yes. Because, before that, you never saw anything—once in a while, there were some Mexican people and across from our house on the corner, it used to be a beer garden, but people would just go in there after work and have beer and things like that. And there was never any violence. On the weekend, kids would go in there and I remember they used to play the beer barrel polka and all of the kids would dance and stuff. I'm talking about small children. I'm not talking about teenagers.

03-00:06:02

Wilmot: Beer barrel what?

03-00:06:03

Lewis: Beer barrel polka.

03-00:06:06

Wilmot: What's that?

03-00:06:07

Lewis: There was a song that was called the beer barrel polka. And that was really popular in those days. And because the people were mostly European people, that's what they played, a lot of polkas and stuff like that. And sometimes these Mexican guys—Nacho and his brother, Lalo—they'd sometimes get into fights with people, but very seldom we saw any fights until World War II, when all of the black people came. They were always fighting and cutting up people and beating up people. A lot of violence.

03-00:06:40

Wilmot: Amongst themselves? Was this inter- or intra-racial violence?

03-00:06:44

Lewis: Among themselves. A lot of violence. And before, we never locked our front door. Sometimes, we'd go to my aunt's house and spend the week. We never locked the front door. Nobody ever came in our house, but after they came, you had to lock your doors.

03-00:07:03

Wilmot: Where did your aunt live again?

03-00:07:04

Lewis: Oakland.

03-00:07:05

Wilmot: Did she live over in West Oakland? So, what do you think was going on? Why was there so much violence? What was happening? Do you have any thoughts on why that was?

03-00:07:15

Lewis:

Well, if you go to the South, in some parts it's still that way. [chuckles] When I was living in Louisiana, the black people couldn't have a dance or party unless they were shooting and fighting. Not all black people from the South are violent. However, someone once told me that the majority of blacks who came to work in the shipyards were saw mill people, whatever that meant.

03-00:07:37

Wilmot:

You had mentioned that the real estate agents also had a role in kind of deciding during World War II, kind of talking to people and talking about how the neighborhoods were going to look. You had mentioned there was some red-lining.

03-00:07:52

Lewis:

There was red-lining—I took that tour with the state park in Richmond and they went through Atchison Village. Well, Atchison Village didn't allow black people to live there when they first opened it. And during the war years, it was all white. And they were segregated. That's how the neighborhood councils got started with Lucretia because there was a lot of people who—I could tell you a whole story about that. [chuckling]

03-00:08:19

Wilmot:

Please do.

03-00:08:20

Lewis:

The people between the whites and the blacks couldn't get along because they were not used to living together or going to school together. We had a lot of fights in school. Between whites and blacks.

03-00:08:31

Wilmot:

This was in 1940s or 1950s?

03-00:08:36

Lewis:

1940s. And over in San Pablo, there was a lot of trailers. We called it Okie Village. A lot of people, white, poor white people lived, they migrated to San Pablo and actually, later, I guess, in the '50s, they moved out here to Concord and you go further back out Concord, the farther you go, people are all way back there and had migrated out from World War II out of the shipyards. When they closed the shipyards, they all moved out there. And it wasn't very many blacks at all that moved out here. Some of my neighbors here don't speak to me. I think they're Mexican, next door. And one man across the street. But most of the other people are really friendly.

But, Richmond became really—North Richmond and parts of South Richmond—before the war, there was just maybe three black families—the Petgraves and the Ellisons and the Graves—the only black people that I knew lived on the South Side.

03-00:09:49

Wilmot: Of Richmond?

03-00:09:50

Lewis: Of Richmond. All the rest of the black people lived in North Richmond. The Malbroughs, Turners, Spencers, Morgans, Robinsons, Freemans, Chase, Bonaparts, Reids, Gordans, and the Blackmans to name a few are the families who lived in North Richmond. Blacks did not live in the Iron Triangle.

03-00:10:11

Wilmot: And I understand the Petgraves, they were also—they were Jamaican.

03-00:10:14

Lewis: I don't know. I didn't know them. I just knew where they lived—I knew them if I saw them, but I didn't have any contact with them at all.

My father used to work with Ollie Freeman in downtown Richmond. They had a shoeshine parlor, and when my father would come off work, some evenings he'd work there. .And on the weekends he'd work there—and I never saw a lot of discrimination in Richmond until after World War II started. Because there were a lot of places where people said, "Well, you can't go in that store," but I never had any of that. I never had a problem. I always was able to go wherever I wanted to go. But I see signs—some lady once had a sign—it said, "Whites only" and that was the Jack Newell's store over on Cutting Boulevard—she showed this picture. We had some things on the south side of Richmond, but I never went over there so I never actually saw that sign. Downtown Richmond, I never had any problems. I always went every place I wanted to go.

03-00:11:23

Wilmot: And you mentioned that the neighborhood councils grew out of the kind of hostility or the ways that blacks and whites couldn't live together? And I wonder—

03-00:11:35

Lewis: That was in the war housing, Harborgate, Seaside, and those areas. It seems like—I was too young to know about them but since then I have read some of the material—that's when they started to try to get people together, to work together, but it didn't work out. I know that when I went to Junior High School—I think I told you this—about how they were asking to make the school segregated and then Earl Warren was the governor, and he said that he went to school with blacks and his kids did and if they didn't like it, they could go back where they came from. They were not going to have segregated schools in California. So, there was a lot of that. People didn't want to sit next to you on the buses. It was a lot of hostility, but we lived through it all I guess. [laughs] If you have lived out of California, you know that California is probably more liberal than a lot of states. If you go other places, you'll see it still. It hasn't changed that much. People still have their old hostilities. In wartime, Richmond's downtown really grew. There were only two theaters in

Richmond, but after World War II, we had about five theaters in downtown Richmond, a lot of stores, a lot of people, it was really strange.

03-00:13:06

Wilmot:

So, did the real estate agents actually try and scare people out of the area?

03-00:13:10

Lewis:

Well, they really did redline. If you were black, you could not buy anything out of North Richmond. You couldn't move anyplace. And I think that later, about in the 50s, it changed, and people started moving. And I remember this—maybe I shouldn't call by name—but this guy used to go to school with me and they lived over at Iron Triangle, and they lived in a little shack of a house. Their house was—they were poor, white people. They were not rich working-class white people, but they all had little houses. But after the blacks moved in there, the neighborhoods all start running down, and he was saying, what a shame, but their house wasn't any good anyway to begin with. [laughs] So I mean, it didn't take much for it to run down. After that, the Iron Triangle started to become all black.

And you know, Tom [Butt?] recently had an article in his newsletter, which is not true. He said that the Hilltop Mall Shopping Center closed up Downtown Richmond and that's not true at all. The Redevelopment Agency and Napoleon Britt closed up downtown Richmond. The Redevelopment Agency essentially moved whites from downtown Richmond.

03-00:14:28

Wilmot:

Tell me about that.

03-00:14:29

Lewis:

All of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown Richmond in the Iron Triangle were white. There were really nice homes. From Lucas Avenue and from 5th Street over to 14th Street, north of MacDonald Avenue, Richmond's Redevelopment Project. I don't remember the boundaries of the project, but it was white removal. They bought all of these homes and businesses, and tore them down. The redevelopment agency and Napoleon Britt closed up downtown Richmond. Hilltop Mall might nailed the lid on the coffin, but it was already dead.

On 10th and Barrett, there was a big Episcopal Church. There were apartment buildings, nice homes. All those things were torn down. And so downtown Richmond, people started moving out. Businesses started just leaving. They moved the population that supported downtown Richmond away. But Tom Butt hasn't been here that long, so he doesn't know that. I don't know where he got that information, but it's wrong. And sometimes I read stuff where people say they were historians for Richmond, and they don't have it right at all.

03-00:16:11

Wilmot:

I wonder who you're thinking of—

03-00:16:13

Lewis:

I don't know. I don't know their names. I know I read a book once, or I read an excerpt from a book, about North Richmond, talked about the cabbage patches. I never saw any cabbage in North Richmond, so I don't know what they were talking about. But people get it all wrong. But North Richmond, you'd have to live there and see how it evolved after it became an all-black ghetto. There were some Spanish-speaking people. A few white people lived in North Richmond. Not very many.

But then, during World War II, they started to have nightclubs and everything going on and I can remember, down at the Dew Drop Inn, and the Savoy Club, and I can't think of the other names. Jimmy McCracklin's. All people would always come to Richmond, to North Richmond, to go to all these nightclubs and I guess it was an era of the blues that really evolved in North Richmond.

03-00:27:52

Wilmot:

Was it blues?

03-00:27:54

Lewis:

It was blues and—I don't think it was rhythm and blues, but just maybe blues. And down at Tapper's Inn, everybody, I mean, people would come from all over to go down there, and they'd have Hedda Brooks and Louis Jordan and all those people that got to be important in those days. Of course, you don't know anything about them. [laughs]

03-00:17:59

Wilmot:

Well, you know, actually there was a project that came out of where I work at ROHO which is focused on the blues and the musicians in West Oakland and Richmond, so Jimmy McCracklin was interviewed as part of that.

03-00:18:14

Lewis:

He had a club in Richmond.

03-00:18:16

Wilmot:

Yeah, so he was interviewed. I mean, it was—so I have heard some of these names, but of course there are a lot of people I don't know of. And it's not my specialty, my area either, so—

03-00:18:27

Lewis:

I have a newspaper someplace if I find it, and it talks about all the different blues, you know, the different nightspots and different things in Richmond. Like, on Sunday afternoon, they would have like blues festivals and people would just jam out to North Richmond, and go to all those things. It was really kind of exciting.

03-00:18:56

Wilmot:

Did you used to go out and dance?

03-00:18:59

Lewis: No. I wasn't old enough, really, but I used to go sometimes and watch.

03-00:19:04

Wilmot: And what do you remember seeing?

03-00:19:06

Lewis: [chuckles] People dancing and drinking—but it was really—the atmosphere. You know, North Richmond before, it was like nothing. There was never anything there. Not even streetlights. It was just an old country place. People had chickens and cows. So to see all these things, it was cool for a kid. It was really quite interesting.

03-00:19:45

Wilmot: Were people beautifully dressed? Did they wear gorgeous clothing?

03-00:19:53

Lewis: My father worked at Mare Island and he would invite people over on Sunday for dinner and they came dressed up. Yeah. But a lot of people were really poor, you know.

I can tell you one thing I remember about World War II. Most of the people who came here, they had rotten teeth. Their teeth were really in bad shape. I mean, not taken care of at all. And you could see how poor some people were. I'm talking from a child's perspective, there were just a lot of poor people. Both white and black poor people and some people used to sleep in theaters.

And my father always had a ball team. My father had two or three ball teams and on Sundays he used to play games out in North Richmond Ballpark, and people would come from all over to see the games. We had the Spiders and the Spiderettes, the girl's team, and they had a lot of stuff. I mean, you just would have had to have been there. Richmond changed completely overnight.

03-00:21:13

Wilmot: Where did you go to get your hair done when you were little?

03-00:21:15

Lewis: I never.

03-00:21:16

Wilmot: You never did?

03-00:21:17

Lewis: I did it myself.

03-00:21:18

Wilmot: You did it yourself. Like your mom did it or—?

03-00:21:20

Lewis: We all had long hair and we had to wear braids. We didn't go to the beauty parlor. But they had them. I remember when Miss Norveline [Harris] came to North Richmond.

03-00:21:31

Wilmot: Tell me about her.

03-00:21:33

Lewis: Miss Norvaline and her family, they moved to North Richmond, and then she opened up a beauty shop and people used to go over there all of the time. Once in a while, I would get to go to Norveline but they never did my hair right because I have natural, curly hair, and they'd always wanted to straighten my hair out. My mother didn't let us go. We could do our own hair. But once in a while, like if I was in somebody's wedding or something, I would get to go to Miss Norveline.

03-00:22:00

Wilmot: What was it like going to Miss Norveline's house? Was it her house or was it a shop or—

03-00:22:06

Lewis: She had her shop in her house. It was on 4th Street across from Davis Chapel, and then she moved down on 7th Street, which became a redevelopment area, and then she relocated to the south side.

In fact, Davis Chapel, that's an interesting story because my best friend was Gloria—her name was Gloria Harris, but her name is Gloria Spearman now—and my other friend, Jeannie Surlock, we all used to go down and play with Reverend Davis' daughters, he had two daughters and they came to Richmond. At the time, I didn't know that they were planning to build a church or anything—but I was at the first meeting they had to plan to build Davis Chapel Church. But Gloria and her mother were Methodist—I was Episcopalian at that time, and I didn't go to the Methodist Church, but later I joined the Methodist Church and I still belong. But I was there when they planned at the first meeting to build Davis Chapel, and I remember Reverend Davis—there's a film—I don't know who has the film, but I saw it once, and he was on the corner of 10th and McDonald when all the shipyard workers were getting off. You have no idea how downtown Richmond looked. I mean, people were walking all over. It was always jam-packed full of people. And he would be asking people to help him build the church, and he was passing his hat. I don't remember if he had something that he put the money in, but he was always asking people to help him build a church.

And I remember Richard Granzella. And Richard Granzella and Nelson Carter used to walk—I think I told you this before—and he became the owner of Richmond's Sanitary District.

03-00:24:13

Wilmot: Is he Alfred Granzella's--?

03-00:24:15

Lewis: Yeah. He's Alfred Granzella's brother, but I went to school with Alfred. Alfred Granzella's—Richard Granzella is older than I, but I used to watch him—that's what a lot of people used to do. They'd dump trash and garbage, and just go out there and just dump stuff and then a lot of people would go out and—I don't know what they'd collect, but a whole bunch of junk from out of there and sell it. But then Richie used to go out there all the time, him and Nelson, and then he became the owner of it. I don't know how it went, but anyway, I know that he became rich.

I brought this book to show you. This is a book of Jocelyn Elders, and here on this page, if you'll read it, I don't have my glasses—

03-00:25:09

Wilmot: Hold on one second. Would you say that one more time? This is the book of Joycelyn Elders?

03-00:25:14

Lewis: "When we moved to California," read that part right there.

03-00:25:18

Wilmot: Okay. I'm going to move this. Hold on. Just read the first part?

03-00:25:24

Lewis: When we said, when we moved to California. Right down there in that paragraph?

03-00:25:26

Wilmot: Okay. [reads] "When we arrived in California, we stayed with our cousins in Richmond at 1361 Kelsey Street. Our cousins had a large place they'd renovated into a rooming house with apartments for rent to the many relatives who were leaving the farm and moving to California to work in the shipyards during World War II. The cousins with whom we lived were Beryl and Charlie Reid and their children Ivy, Florence and Charlie Junior. They had moved to California with the first wave of sharecroppers who had left the south during the Depression. Beryl and Charlie, in particular, had been able to find work, and for Negroes at that time, were doing quite well economically. They had work in the shipyards and factories, pooled their money, and purchased a large rooming house located on the edge of the city limits of Richmond."

03-00:26:11

Lewis: Yeah. Well we—Chester Ray wrote that [laughs] and Chester Ray was a baby when his mother was in California so he doesn't really know our history, but that's his view of how we got to move together.

03-00:26:25

Wilmot: I didn't know she was your cousin.

03-00:26:26

Lewis: They're not really my cousins, but we got to be very good friends. In 1996 when I was living in Louisiana and I had to go to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and I called him up and told him I was there, and I hadn't seen him since he was a baby, and he came over, he and his wife. He's a minister in a Methodist Church, United Methodist Church, and we had got to talk and that was really nice. But he, I guess someone told him that we were there cousins. They stayed with us, and my mother and his mother got to be very good friends.

03-00:27:13

Wilmot: It's interesting, too. They said that you were—your family came from the first wave of sharecroppers to come from the south, which also was not your story.

03-00:27:21

Lewis: Was not true, but that's what probably he thought because they were sharecroppers and they came and I had not realized how hard she had—Minnie had to work. When we were children, I was two years older than she, and she would always tell me, "When I get to be grown, I'm going to change my name to Joycelyn," because she didn't like Minnie Lee. She was named after her mother's mother. Her grandmother. And she didn't like that name. But she turned out to be the Surgeon General under the Clinton administration. But they were always smart. The kids were really smart. I think one of her brothers was a veterinarian and they all did very well after growing up.

03-00:28:13

Wilmot: So, what year did the neighborhood councils begin?

03-00:28:18

Lewis: The neighborhood councils, probably somewhere about in the—maybe in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Probably the early 1950s, when there was a lot of people after the war was over and there were not a lot of jobs, but people were still living in war-time housing. And I don't remember, I can't tell you when they started to tear down the war-time housing, but that's when a lot of people started moving out here, to Concord, white people moving, and the black people were sort of—just like in Oakland, all of East Oakland never was black until after World War II. And then all of the people started migrating back that way. Because San Leandro, Hayward, all those places were farms. You could go out there on Sunday and people would go out to buy produce. Like you would go to the farmer's market. I remember San Leandro, you could buy peaches and plums and different kinds of things like that. And also, when I was a kid, after World War II, a lot of people worked in the harvest, so we would go in the summertime and work in the harvest. In Walnut Creek, you could pick walnuts here. They had all kinds of walnut trees and peaches, plums, let's see, tomatoes—a lot of people worked in the harvest. That area was mostly agricultural. My aunt got married in maybe 1943 or 1944, and she

lived out on A Street. We would say, “Oh, you’re going to go way out to A Street in East Oakland.” Her family was maybe one of the first blacks who moved out there. There were no black people out there, and that’s the same thing that happened in Richmond.

03-00:30:22

Wilmot: Was she very fair?

03-00:30:24

Lewis: Mm hmm. Yeah. You know Betty Reid Soskin? My aunt was Maybelle Allen, and she was fair skinned. So was her husband.

03-00:30:34

Wilmot: That’s who gave me your name.

03-00:30:36

Lewis: I think my uncle, my aunt’s husband was Betty’s cousin. They’re related in some kind of way. But she has it on her Web site, so if you want to look at the Web site, you can see it there.

But that’s the same thing that happened in Richmond, San Pablo—all of the white people start moving this way—

03-00:31:04

Wilmot: Over the mountains?

03-00:31:06

Lewis: Over the mountains, and the black people sort of grew in Oakland and Richmond. Just—Berkeley was always kind of integrated a little bit. It wasn’t as—it wasn’t as separated by race as Richmond and Oakland. But Oakland hills, all of the black people moved all over there. There was never any before that. And San Francisco, I can’t tell you about, but I knew that in San Francisco, like the Fillmore, they used to be black, but now it’s gone. I have a magazine that talks about the black population, about it leaving San Francisco.

03-00:31:46

Wilmot: Well, I think the black population left San Francisco a while back, if we’re thinking about Fillmore. But—

03-00:31:54

Lewis: No, I have a book that’s a San Franciscan—

03-00:31:56

Wilmot: Are they talking about the Bayview Hunter’s Point now?

03-00:31:58

Lewis: No, they’re not talking about that. I haven’t been reading it but it just gives you statistics on how many blacks used to live in San Francisco, but now they don’t. Another thing that happened in Richmond that made a big change, too—after World War II, Ford Motor Company moved to Milpitas.

03-00:32:19

Wilmot: I'm sorry. Would you say that one more time?

03-00:32:21

Lewis: The Ford Motor Company moved to Milpitas.

03-00:32:23

Wilmot: After World War II?

03-00:32:25

Lewis: And a lot of people moved down to East Palo Alto. That's actually how East Palo Alto grew up into being a black neighborhood. A lot of black people migrated down there. They bought new homes in East Palo Alto and they worked in Milpitas.

03-00:32:45

Wilmot: And Milpitas was—

03-00:32:46

Lewis: The Ford Motor Company—

03-00:32:47

Wilmot: The Ford Motor Company—

03-00:32:48

Lewis: —moved to Milpitas. It used to be down on Tenth Street in Richmond.

03-00:32:53

Wilmot: So you would just cross over the Dumbarton Bridge, take it to Milpitas—

03-00:33:00

Lewis: The reason I think that they had to move—you know, I always wondered why they moved to East Palo Alto, and in those days, they advertised a lot of new homes out there, and I don't think they had homes for sale in Milpitas. Milpitas was like a big open field. I mean, there was nothing there. All that area—San Leandro, San Lorenzo, Hayward, Fremont—all that was just open fields. I mean, a few people had farms and stuff, but it's not—like now you can go out and look at new housing, but they didn't have that then in those days. I remember people moving down to East Palo Alto to buy a new home, and they worked at Ford Motor Company. So that was another migration out of Richmond.

But Richmond and Oakland sort of became the center for all of these people coming from the south, white and black, so that's how a lot of these areas just grew up, grew out of that. And I remember people saying that—because since I've been back to the south, a lot of people would talk about how their families came, but some of them didn't come and most of the people that stayed back there were more black professional people because the poorer people came here. We got most of the poor people that came out of the south, came to the shipyards to work. So.

But the red-lining went on until about the '50s, and then people started spilling over into the Iron Triangle, if I can remember dates but I can't—I can just remember things happening. It must have been sometime in the '60s, the late '60s, Coronado School was built and that was supposed to be a junior high school, but the white people refused to send their children there because Coronado was turning black, so they turned it into a grammar school, which it is today, but it was supposed to be a junior high school.

But the neighborhood—now Coronado was really a nice area. And it started becoming all black and then the Southside became all black. For instance, when they built Easter Hill, it was on the cover of Look Magazine as one of the new modern developments after World War II, a lot of veterans lived there. Mostly white. No blacks. They lived there while they went to school on the GI Bill. And then after they moved out, the wave turned again and blacks started moving in and it became public housing. It was low-cost housing. And the Welfare Rights Organization started over there, thriving, really going great, doing all kinds of things. So, if you look at the history, you can see different transitions taking place, and now I understand that North Richmond is in transition again. And our church is going to build a \$1.5 million dollar church there, back in our old spot where it burnt down on Fourth and Chesley. So we just got our building permits, so we should start building soon, and new housing is being built in North Richmond—and the populating is turning Hispanic.

03-00:36:40

Wilmot:

Let me ask you this question while I adjust this—where do most of the members of your church live?

03-00:36:51

Lewis:

Oh, well most of them grew up in North Richmond and now live in Hercules and Oakland, different areas out here. Some live in Suisun, Fairfield, Vallejo, but most of them do not live in North Richmond. My sister still lives in North Richmond, but few families still live in North Richmond. But they wanted to go back to their old spot where their church was before, so that's why they're building it there.

03-00:37:25

Wilmot:

On that neighborhood where the old site and the new church will be, what's in that neighborhood now?

03-00:37:35

Lewis:

It's basically the same as it was, but a lot more Mexicans live there now.

03-00:37:40

Wilmot:

Interesting.

03-00:37:41

Lewis:

My family, my father, in 1947 was a playground director in North Richmond, and he was always buying kids something. You know, people would go to

work and leave their kids at the park and my father would take care of them. [laughs] Most of the kids would tell you—if they are in their ‘50s now, they would say, “Well, Mr. Reid raised us in the park.” But he started, because the kids didn’t have a lot, and after World War II, people had a lot of hard times, you know, working and not making much money and trying hard to find jobs, but he was always buying stuff for kids. So he started a Christmas party with California Highway Patrol, Inspector Lieber and Captain Brooks came out and they wanted to do something for the kids of North Richmond, so my father started this Christmas party with them.

And this year, I think it’s going to be our 59th anniversary. We still do it every year. After my father died, some of the ministers in the community came to me—I wasn’t going to have the Christmas party and asked me to “Please have the Christmas party.” My father died in 1979. And so I started giving the Christmas party myself and then my children started helping—and then my nieces and nephews started helping and so now they mostly take over. I’m still the president of the Charles Reid Foundation, but last year, my daughter died. She was the person who made the party happen. It has become a family tradition and an annual event for the children in North Richmond.

So we have noticed, now, most of the children who come are Spanish-speaking. But we see two generations; we have people who came when they were children and now they’re bringing their grandchildren and now their grandchildren are bringing their children. So it’s sort of like a homecoming. People will come back and say, “We came to this party when we were kids.” And now we have one person—I’ve known his mother since I was four years old. When we moved to North Richmond, they were here. Their name was [Nzunzas?] and Danny comes every year. He brings bicycles and everything for the kids at Christmastime. And people just come out and bring all kinds of things. And last year we held two Christmas parties last year. We had 1,500 children.

03-00:40:48

Wilmot:

Did you have 1,500 gifts?

03-00:40:51

Lewis:

Oh, we have gifts galore. People donate everything and our business also gives money to purchase toys. We have a family business, we have one business in San Francisco and one in Richmond, and the San Francisco Fire Department gave us a lot of toys last year. And a couple of years ago, my son, when he got out of college, he was drafted by the 49ers to come and try out, but they had the football strike so he never got to play. And after that he went into business so a couple of years ago the Retired NFL Player’s Association to come in with us and every year we have retired football players. We have Benny Barnes from the Dallas Cowboys and Honor Jackson, I think he’s of the Baltimore Colts, and Charlie Weaver from the Detroit Lions. We have all kinds of guys come out and play Santa Claus. And it’s really touching because

if you see the kids, who are really poor, sometimes those men cry. And they really fight over who gets to be Santa Claus. [laughs] We have a lot of gifts, so you know. My father didn't distinguish between anybody. He always wanted to help children, so it doesn't matter that our population is changing. We still want to help children, so it's really rewarding.

03-00:42:23

Wilmot:

Your church, is the congregation starting to change, too, in terms of—are there more Spanish-speaking folks?

03-00:42:29

Lewis:

No.

03-00:42:30

Wilmot:

Is it primarily African American?

03-00:42:32

Lewis:

It's primarily African American. I think before we had a few white families that belonged to our church, like inter-marriage, we had a few Filipinos in our church, but mostly primarily African Americans.

03-00:42:47

Wilmot:

Is there a generational transfer happening so that there are young people who are members in the church? Is that—

03-00:42:56

Lewis:

You know the problem we've been having—we do have young people in our church but we have a serious problem because our church has been burned down about four years now. We're just now getting able to build a new church, and so we have to share a church with another church.

03-00:43:15

Wilmot:

Which one?

03-00:43:17

Lewis:

We share with St. Peter's in El Cerrito, so we have early-morning services at 8 o'clock, so we don't get a lot of young children—sometimes, we get a lot of children, but not often. I think it's too early. Like I have to get up at 5:30 because I sing in the choir, and I have to get there at 8 o'clock. I must leave here no later than 7:10 or so I think people don't wake their children up that early. Hopefully, when we get our new church, will go back to 10:30, 11 o'clock services, and we'll have more children.

03-00:43:55

Wilmot:

But there are like young people?

03-00:43:58

Lewis:

Oh, yeah. There are a lot of young people in our church.

03-00:43:59

Wilmot:

That's great. So, your father is a very well known figure in Richmond, and I wanted to ask you what it was like to be the daughter of this very well known person in Richmond.

03-00:44:15

Lewis:

Well, you know, when you're growing up you don't realize that, but I could never do anything or anything bad because everybody knew I was Mr. Reid's daughter so that was a kind of disadvantage, but people see me now, you know, I was in Los Angeles getting on a bus one day and a lady said, "Aren't you Mr. Reid's daughter?" and I said, "Yeah." See, a lot of people knew my father because he used to have those ballgames, but then before that, when he lived in Oakland and he was a semi-pro professional baseball player and he played for the Oakland Pierce Giants, he was well known then. And then when we moved to Richmond—he went to a ballgame out at Nichol's Park, and those games used to be really big in Richmond. I mean everybody came out to those games, and the Richmond Merchants were playing and somebody recognized my father sitting in the stands and they asked him to come and umpire the game. And then he started umpiring all of the games at Nichol's Park. He even umpired when we would play—we had a girl's league. We'd play softball.

My father was a person who always wanted to help people. You know, he grew up, and he was one of the best pitchers around in the Bay Area, but he could never get to the big leagues because he was black. And he had a lot of friends who were white who would say, "Charlie, if you were white, you'd be in the big leagues," you know. He was just a really excellent pitcher. So, because of that, he really tried to help—I mean, I don't know how many young men he helped get into college. The coaches from other states would call him and ask him—I don't know how they knew about him—but they would ask him if he had any good players, baseball or basketball, he'd want to send to their schools, and he got a lot of scholarships for kids to go out of state schools. He had a lifetime membership in the PTA and he was just really involved with kids and sports. And so, that's how most of the people knew him. When he died, I don't know—we had maybe 500, 600 people at his funeral. I mean, he was just well known from the work he did with children.

03-00:46:37

Wilmot:

Did he ever talk to you about what that was like? To be so talented and yet unable to pursue his career due to racial discrimination? Did he ever talk to you about that?

03-00:46:47

Lewis:

About—because he was—

03-00:46:50

Wilmot:

Being such a brilliant pitcher but being black and not being able to go forward.

03-00:46:56

Lewis:

I think that it really bothered him, because he talked about it, and—he talked about it a lot, how he grew up in Berkeley and how it was in the neighborhoods, and you know, they had 13 children in their family and he said, I remember my father telling me this in 1919 when they had the epidemic, influenza they called it. And my father had to go to work—I think he was only 16 years old—and he had to drive a truck, delivering coal to people to burn in their stove. And he would drive up in the hills because, he said, nobody else could work in the family, they all had the flu. And he used to go down to San Pablo Park, in Berkeley, and play ball and he'd play with Chick [Haffie?], which—I don't know who these people are, but I remember him calling their names—Chick [Haffie?], some more guys who, eventually, went to the big leagues. And I think he really felt bad because he was discriminated against. I remember my mother said that he used to pitch in the Negro League, semi-professional league, and some days, I guess back in those days, he would make \$100 on a Sunday, pitching. The best game he told me he played up in Ukiah, probably in Ukiah, and it was like a 1-0 game. That's what the score was. 1-0. But, he talked about that a lot. That's why he always encouraged young people to go to school and get a good education. If they could get a scholarship using sports, that was fine. And I remember a lot of times kids would graduate and their parents couldn't afford to buy them clothes and he would buy them suits. When he died, the biggest bill we had to pay was a sports because he kept buying kids school, spikes, and mitts and stuff, for kids. He really pushed them into sports.

03-00:49:25

Wilmot:

And you found that debt after he passed?

03-00:49:29

Lewis:

Oh, no. We knew that he did that, but I'm just saying, my mother would say that was the biggest bill we had to pay after he died. Yep. He was really into-- [laughter] our house was always full of people, ball teams, all kinds of things. Before they built the playground over on Kelsey Street, we had a big house and we had a big yard and we'd have wiener roasts and kids would come in our house and dance and have all kinds of parties and stuff. We always had something going on.

03-00:50:06

Wilmot:

Sounds like fun.

03-00:50:09

Lewis:

Yeah, it was busy. I mean, we were always doing something. Every Sunday we had ballgames and we used to travel to ballgames. I remember we'd come down to Pittsburg and play. They had a big park in Pittsburg. We'd go over, up to Ukiah, all over playing ball. That was his whole life.

03-00:50:36

Wilmot:

Okay. I want to stop and change my recording media. And then we'll move on.

Begin Audio File 4__ Lewis 04 09-14-06.wav

04-00:00:00

Lewis:

—about World War II, I remember the time when there was nothing. You couldn't buy leather shoes. [chuckling] I remember I had some shoes, once, that my mother bought me. They were made of canvas and they had wooden soles. And the wood, you know those little popsicle sticks? They were like a lot of little popsicle sticks so they actually bent in like this, but they were not good to walk in. So most of the people started buying huaraches you know what huaraches are—and that was one of the things that teenagers—we wore huaraches because that was the only place you could get leather shoes. You couldn't buy them in the United States. They all went to the war effort. You couldn't buy sugar, butter, anything like that. You had to have stamps. You had a book of stamps and everything was rationed. So, if you didn't have a stamp, you couldn't buy it.

04-00:00:58

Wilmot:

I think it was you talking about somehow you had enough stamps all of the time. I think you had a system set up.

04-00:01:09

Lewis:

Well, my mother—yeah. I mean, you could buy stuff on the black market. They had a black market where you could buy butter and stuff like that. We never. Not that I know of, we didn't buy it from there, but it was really interesting that people take everything for granted, but when you really have a big war, like they talk about the Iraq War, that's not really a big war. I mean, it's some little war, although it's killing people and it's a tragedy. But when your country really goes to war, you don't have a lot of things. You have to really live differently. You had to have black shades on your windows and stuff like that. Of course, if we had another war, it wouldn't be the same. That war was a minor war, I guess, actually, in terms of having it, because now we have atomic bombs and stuff like that.

Then, they thought, if they bombed your house you could put the fire out—they went around and gave people sand and another thing you could pump water with. They gave that to all the people in their homes, Richmond really came like from a sleeping little town to a big—to almost like a big city, I guess, in World War II. The population in 1940 was something like 20,000 and in a matter of months it grew to over 100,000.

I want to donate some things to the Richmond Museum. I have pictures of the school before World War II and how the classes looked, and how many black children were in the schools and how, at that time, Peres School was mostly an all-white school. So it all changed.

And then, I remember, Hercules, Pinole, Crockett, I think it was—Crockett was in another school district but Hercules, Pinole, everybody had to go to Richmond High School because they really didn't have any schools out there.

It has really changed. And Parchester Village and all out there, it was all vacant land, the Atlas Foundry or Powder Plant was out there, and it was another little city. But all those things are all gone now. It's all changed.

I was just thinking that that might have been important in terms of how—even in North Richmond, all of the people that lived out there had big farms. And now—have you been out in North Richmond lately? They are changing all of the streets and they're remodeling everything and they're going to build real expensive homes. It's all really changing. It may become an all-white community again.

04-00:04:20

Wilmot: Will that be a good thing or—?

04-00:04:25

Lewis: Well, I don't know if that would be a good thing, but it just shows how towns and cities and things go through different transitions.

04-00:04:39

Wilmot: I know that was kind of a simple question. Sorry. Thank you for giving me a complicated answer. I wanted to ask when did you started to work for the City of Richmond?

04-00:04:51

Lewis: I was one of the first people hired when they had model cities program. I had been involved with the neighborhood councils. And I was hired in February of 1967 by the City of Richmond

04-00:05:10

Wilmot: Tell me about the Model Cities program.

04-00:05:12

Lewis: The Model Cities program is quite interesting. I had worked at Neighborhood House for a while and then when the model cities program started, they advertised for jobs and so I applied for the position as a Citizen Participation Coordinator, because I thought that my background with the neighborhood councils would be good for the City of. In fact, one of the planners with the City of Richmond had asked me to come out with them and do neighborhood counting. You know, you count the houses and look at the quality of housing and that sort of thing. And we did North Richmond. So anyway, I applied for that position and I think there was about 300 people that applied for that position and then it got down to 60 people and then it got down to three people, and I was one of the three people that they were going to talk to and interview. So I got that position. I really didn't have a lot of expertise in working in an office because most of my work I had done was working in the neighborhoods and organizing projects for different kinds of things, for people. But I had worked with social services and getting women who were on welfare to get involved in, like, activities outside of the home.

04-00:06:45

Wilmot:

Clubs like women clubs? Or social clubs or—

04-00:06:50

Lewis:

Like social clubs. Like we would take them bowling, you know, try to get them out of the house. Some people really had, I'd say, mental problems from being home with a lot of kids, and I guess they didn't have hope, you know, how you have expectations that your life is going to change? Well, I don't think they had any expectations. They were sort of like in a dead-end street.

But anyway, so one of the things we talked about—in order to make our program good in Richmond—let's go back. The first neighborhood council they had was the North Richmond Neighborhood Council, which was the county of North Richmond not the city, and the Iron Triangle neighborhood council, Point Richmond, Coronado, and Santa Fe. There were five neighborhood councils.

04-00:07:48

Wilmot:

Did you work with all of them or just one?

04-00:07:50

Lewis:

No, I worked with all of them. But the model cities program was a much bigger area and so I had to organize neighborhood councils where there had never been any before. Recent when I was back east, my sister-in-law showed me a news article that I had sent to her. You know, I used to be quite popular. In this article my photograph was on the front page of the paper. In the article I was talking about the councils and listed them in three categories: action oriented, social clubs, and issue oriented. Neighborhood councils were difficult to work with because it depended on who the president was. If the president was really a go-getter and wanted to do things, the neighborhood council was really great. But some neighborhood organizations did not have good leadership and they were hard to work with. Even though I organized new councils, I was constantly having to rebuild them. When I retired, I had organized 35 neighborhood councils. Someone asked me, what's the best way to organize a neighborhood council? The old fashioned way, you walk door to door. [laughs]

04-00:09:16

Wilmot:

And that's what you did?

04-00:09:17

Lewis:

I walked all over. Up hills. Down hills. All over.

04-00:09:21

Wilmot:

All over Richmond and—

04-00:09:23

Lewis:

All over Richmond, El Sobrante Hills was a new housing development. Fairmeade Hilltop, Richmond Annex. I walked door to door.

04-00:09:40

Wilmot:

What was the idea behind the neighborhood council? What was the point?

04-00:09:45

Lewis:

Well, the point is that you wanted to involve as many people as you could in the Model Cities Program, and the best way to do it was to set up the neighborhood councils, and it truly proved to be the best way because Richmond was the third city in the United States to get funded for a Model Cities Program. And basically it was built on neighborhood councils.

04-00:10:10

Wilmot:

What were the other two cities do you know?

04-00:10:12

Lewis:

I don't remember. Back east.

04-00:10:13

Wilmot:

I think I could look it up, too.

04-00:10:14

Lewis:

Yeah. But, anyway, so we went on this whole thing of the neighborhood councils and I sort of—when I originally got the material from Lucretia and we sort of patterned it in her style but it changed because the neighborhoods were different—different conditions for different reasons. People were meeting. People wanted to secure their neighborhoods, and some of them were concerned about crime, and we worked with the police departments, and the same thing the next police chief is doing—Magnus—he's trying to get more people out, more officers in the community. And that's what we did in the neighborhood councils during the model cities years, is that we got the beat officers to meet with the neighborhood groups and he got to know the people in the community. So, because Richmond went through a period, and you'll probably know about it, and I don't remember the dates, but the police officers kept killing black men. Whatever their crime was, they'd just shoot them and kill them. And so the community sort of got really disenchanted with the police department so they came to me and they asked me could I work with them—because they would try to have meetings with the community and nobody would come out to the meetings. [laughs] So I said sure, I'd work with them. And I did. And we got the beat officers to come out to the neighborhood groups and everybody got to know one another. Things got to be much better.

But it's a hard job because you can't stop. You know, you can't miss a beat. You have to constantly keep going. So what I did was I encouraged every neighborhood organization to write a newsletter and the city printed them and we did the mailing for them. So they would bring me down the articles that they wanted to go out and everything and I'd put it together for them and then we had a citywide newsletter with everything in it.

But part of the problem was originally, when they hired me, they wanted me to be a liaison, between the community, or a citizen's advocate for the community. But as the city council changed—I retired like three or four months shy of 25 years. As we got new people, they began to see me as a problem because they thought that I had more power than the city council had. And so around in the—let's see—my husband died in 1985—shortly after that, I began to get a lot of problems with the city council. Some city councilmen didn't like it that—because the mayor called me in and said to me, “We don't want you to be introduced when we're introduced,” you know, and all kinds of crazy stuff.

But anyhow—I fell out of grace with the city, with the city council, because they thought that I was too powerful. So they—sometime in 19—let's see. When was it? '92? No. Before that. Maybe it was in 1990, '91, they moved me out of that job and put me into the parks and recreation doing special services.

04-00:14:15

Wilmot:

How could they move you out of that job?

04-00:14:17

Lewis:

They did.

04-00:14:18

Wilmot:

They just did?

04-00:14:19

Lewis:

They just did. And they treated me rather badly there, so I retired in 1992 after that. I was just—it was unbearable to stay there. It was really bad.

Most of the neighborhood councils in the city I organized, a lot of people see me now and they say, Oh, they're telling me what their neighborhood councils are doing, and I'm still as ex-officio member of the Annex Neighborhood Council because I lived in the Annex. But, the neighborhood councils were really a viable part of the City of Richmond. And if they utilized the neighborhood councils, they could get more participation and more impact, you know, on what happens within the community. I still think that they're going pretty good.

One of the areas that—see, some of the neighborhood councils were non-profit organizations and they had a lot of money. But some of the neighborhood councils were poor and they had small neighborhoods and they didn't have a lot of money and they didn't have a lot of political power. They didn't have a lot of muscle. So when things happened at the city, they were not able to go down to the city and really make an impact because the city council always counts votes. They see potential voters when the citizens come to council meetings.

Some neighborhoods were not getting the kind of recognition they should have. We had an issue in the Annex where a lady wanted to open a daycare center in a residential neighborhood and the people were really upset about it. Well, her husband was a retired colonel, and he knew some of the city council members, so they approved it to give her—47 children in a three bedroom house. And so people were really upset. So, then it got to be a pattern. All over the city, people who were living out of Richmond and they were coming in and wanting to put in daycare centers, so I organized the Richmond Neighborhood Coordinating Council and each neighborhood council would send a delegate to the coordinating council and an alternate. And whenever there was an issue regarding something like the daycare centers, which was a citywide problem, the neighborhood councils would all come to the city council meetings and the city council got confused.

They really got mad at me then because, “Who are all these people? This is not their neighborhood. Why are they up here talking about it?” So that’s when the Richmond Neighborhood Coordinating Council was born. And it’s still functioning today and it’s really a good vehicle because it helps smaller neighborhoods and it helps the neighborhoods know what’s going on citywide, what their concerns are.

04-00:17:38

Wilmot:

Why daycare? Why daycare centers? Why were they all coming to Richmond? Why was that?

04-00:17:42

Lewis:

Because people were moving out of Richmond and they worked here, this area, and they didn’t have a place to put their children. There was like one advertisement for a daycare center in Fairmeade Hilltop, was that it was close to the freeway, so people coming from Vallejo could just drive off and drop their children and go on to work here. Maybe not in Richmond, but maybe in Oakland or San Francisco. I don’t know why. But anyway, for a while, you know how things go through phases, it went through that phase of putting daycare centers all over the city. And not that people didn’t want daycare centers, but they didn’t want the traffic and the congestion in their neighborhoods, the smog—for instance, the house that was in the Annex was on a corner but it was a really narrow street. And most of the houses along there were residential so people just felt that that was going to be too much traffic and too many problems there.

But let me just tell you some of the things that we were able to accomplish, though. One of the most important things that I think I did when I was the Citizen Participation Coordinator—we had the North Richmond Wildcat Creek Flood Control project and I was sent to Washington to testify before Congress and the Army Corp of Engineers to get the project and we were funded for, I think it was, in those days, was a \$3 million or \$4 million dollar flood-control project, which was, I thought, was really good. Plus, it was a

good experience for me. And I was able to go to Washington several times and visit different congress men and women, and I was able to travel mostly all over the country looking at different programs and projects and got involved in a lot of things, so it was really rewarding.

04-00:19:40

Wilmot:

So can you tell me some of your favorite interactions that you remember from organizing the neighborhood councils?

04-00:19:47

Lewis:

I can't think off-hand but—I don't know what I talked about then, but I don't know. Favorite interactions with the neighborhood councils?

04-00:19:58

Wilmot:

Yeah, or just organizing like going to people's houses or—

04-00:20:02

Lewis:

Oh. Okay. Well, you know, for instance, when they built Shields Reid Facility, I was involved in all of those—Nevin facility, Parchester, Martin Luther King, all of those were built either with model cities money or they were built with urban park money. Getting people to come out to meetings, I would get flyers and I would put things—it wasn't a lie. It was like—if you don't come to the meeting, your home may be moved or something—and people would say, Why am I getting this? So actually what happened, in North Richmond people really came out because we had two blocks and the people who came to the meeting who lived on this block and didn't want to move had voted to tear down the other block. So the people who lived on that other block didn't come to the meeting. They had to move because that block was destroyed, you know, demolished, so they could put in a community center.

04-00:21:19

Wilmot:

Here I was just thinking free cupcakes, you know.

04-00:21:24

Lewis:

Let me tell you, I did develop a technique. If I went to a new neighborhood and I wanted to start a neighborhood council, at that first meeting, I always gave people something to do. "Next meeting, you bring the coffee or the cookies," and this sort of thing, and we chose officers, and we chose a person to call people to remind them to come to the meeting. If you give people a job to do, then they're sort of committed. If you don't give them anything to do, they may not show up again. So I always made sure I gave people something to do. And for instance the Annex Neighborhood, when I organized that neighborhood council, I met at a school—it was the Bayview School—and nobody came. So, there was another school on the other side of Carlson Boulevard, Alvarado School. and the next meeting I held it at Alvarado School. And it was packed. So people saw themselves in that neighborhood as wanting to organize rather than the other neighborhood, people didn't care about it. So we started the Annex Neighborhood Council in that area.

El Sobrante Hills, I see signs on the Dam Road. It says, "Save ElSobranteHills.Org." I don't know if that's something, if you put it into your computer and you get a message or if they're really trying to save the neighborhood. I don't know what it means, but in order to do that neighborhood council, I had to walk up all those hills out there, and it took me five or six times to really get them started. Finally, we got a few people interested and they started. Once people get interested and they want to do things in their community, it was good. And it really helped because, in model cities, the city council we had at that time was committed to working with the citizen's groups to get things done. So what happened was that even though I was supposed to organize the model cities area, I organized all of the neighborhood councils on a citywide basis.

04-00:23:59

Wilmot:

Who was the city council at that time who was interested in working with the groups?

04-00:24:04

Lewis:

I can't think of their names. I know Nate Bates got elected during that time. Al Silva. I can't think of all of them.

04-00:24:25

Wilmot:

Yeah, well this was a long time ago.

04-00:24:27

Lewis:

It was a long time ago. But we did have a working relationship with the city council so that made it really good. And we worked out of the planning department and I worked with one of the city planners, Ann Copperman. We had one of the best model cities programs in the nation. And when we went over to community development, I worked for the Citizen Actions Committee. I did this on a part-time basis where we had the new guidelines and the regulations for community development, and I went over to, let's see, Washington, Utah, Oregon, California, and Arizona to talk to people about how to set up their citizen participation plan.

04-00:25:18

Wilmot:

That's excellent. And who was Lucretia?

04-00:25:22

Lewis:

Lucretia Edwards, there is a park named after her in Richmond. Lucretia was a Quaker. She came from Pennsylvania and lived in Point Richmond and I worked with her years ago before I worked with the City of Richmond in North Richmond, you know, that was started by the Quakers. And she was trying to do daycare and work with parents. Well, some of the young black people didn't speak to her and I kind of felt sorry for her and so I adopted her and we became very good friends. Lucretia and Barbara Vincent and the other lady just died recently. I can't think of her name. But they worked to save the shoreline. Their whole thing was that citizens should have access to the bay. And they wanted parks. I mean, I know that Barbara Vincent worked on the

San Pablo dam project, you know, to get people to go down there and fish. They just sort of opened up the shoreline for the residents. And there is a park named for Barbara and her husband, Jay Vincent, at Marina Bay. Then there is a park named after Lucretia down there also. Lucretia bought Nichol Nob and then she donated it to the East Bay Regional Park District.

04-00:26:53

Wilmot: Nob Hill in San Francisco?

04-00:26:55

Lewis: That's that hill that's right across from Miller Shoreline Park. Lucretia, she donated that to East Bay Regional Parks District.

04-00:27:07

Wilmot: So she kind of started the neighborhood councils and then you came in and took them over from her?

04-00:27:12

Lewis: Well, I didn't take them over from her. She did this during World War II, the neighborhood councils were there—because they had some clashes with the neighborhoods, race relations and things like that. They were defunct when I took them over. North Richmond was going—Iron Triangle—just barely existing—because I belonged to the neighborhood councils after I got grown. I worked with them but they weren't really functioning really well. Point Richmond. Doug Corbin, I think, was the president. Rosemary Corbin, who used to be the mayor, her husband—I knew him before I knew her, and I worked with him in the neighborhood councils. So the neighborhood councils were like there but they were not really functioning well, and so somebody made a remark, and it might have been Lucretia, when that news article I was telling you about said that the neighborhood councils were not the same as the old neighborhood councils and they weren't, because it was a different time and a different reason for having a neighborhood council. But it did bring people closer together.

04-00:28:41

Wilmot: Do you feel like it was a good way to have a livelihood? Was it a good way to make a livelihood?

04-00:28:46

Lewis: It was a good job. I really enjoyed it. I went to work everyday. I really enjoyed what I was doing.

04-00:28:53

Wilmot: And when you moved out here, did you just drive back and forth a lot?

04-00:28:58

Lewis: I never moved out here when I was working at the city. I lived in Richmond. I lived at Marina Bay. At the beach.

04-00:29:09

Wilmot:

You mentioned that Lucretia was an environmentalist and she had worked a lot on the shoreline, and I wanted to ask you about the settling ponds, the Chevron settling ponds that you mentioned earlier on. When was that built and what was the effect on the community around it?

04-00:29:42

Lewis:

If you go to North Richmond, when you cross on the tracks, the first street you come to is York Street. Straight down York Street, at the end of York Street, there used to be an inlet. And when the tide would come in, that would fill up with water and we used to go swimming out there. But now if you go out there, Chevron has cut the tide out from coming into North Richmond and they put in a settling pond where they—I don't know what they use the settling ponds for. They also covered over some Indian burial grounds with their settling ponds.

04-00:30:16

Wilmot:

What do you know about—like, what has Chevron been like in Richmond?

04-00:30:24

Lewis:

A lot of pollution. [chuckles] You know, it used to be terrible. I remember it used to smell a lot and it still does, and a lot of people move from North Richmond because they said it smells, and you can still smell it sometimes in Parchester. It has an odor. It comes from Chevron. We had American Standards, CertainT—all of those things used to pollute North Richmond terribly. And I remember once CertainT had some junk or something out there in a field and the kids would walk by and they would get sores all on their legs.

04-00:31:07

Wilmot:

This was when—around what time period?

04-00:31:10

Lewis:

That was in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

04-00:31:13

Wilmot:

So they had a presence out there in the 1950s, but not in the 1940s? Or in the 1940s as well? Yeah.

04-00:31:17

Lewis:

Oh yeah. The '40s—we would always see big flames shooting up out there, but you know North Richmond was different in the '40s. If you went out, like I say, down that York Street, but if you went out Gertrude Street, the bay used to come all in out there. People lived out there in little shanties and they had like little walkways to their houses, and they were actually living in the marshlands. And water would be under their houses. So, it's really—I don't know what happened to all of them. I know Chevron stopped all of the water from coming into North Richmond.

04-00:32:03

Wilmot:

So then people didn't get to go, which is interesting, too, because so many people were from the south, and from Louisiana, which was kind of the place where there was a lot of shoreline access.

04-00:32:13

Lewis:

Well, they used to go to—well, there's not a lot shoreline access in Louisiana unless you live in South Louisiana—but there's a lot of swamps and bayous in Louisiana that people fish in. But a lady used to take care of me from Louisiana when I was a little girl when my mother worked—

04-00:32:35

Wilmot:

What was her name?

04-00:32:36

Lewis:

Mrs. Malbrough, we called her Nana though. And she would take me—she and her husband had a big old Buick and they would take me out to Point Richmond, to the end down there, where the shoreline park is. You'd go in there and there was a pier and they'd tie me up, they'd put a rope around me and tie me to the pier so they could fish so I wouldn't fall—I think I was like three-years-old—so I didn't fall in the water. But they'd go fishing everyday. They could have fished in North Richmond. And they probably did. I remember the people when we first moved to North Richmond, Mr. Nappy—their name was Nappy, Joe Nappy—and they would go fishing. And also in Point Richmond, the herring used to come in to spawn on the beach at certain times of the year. You could go out there and people would have barrels and just scoop up all kinds of fish. I remember that. A lot of fish would just be flopping all over the place. [laughing] They don't come anymore I don't think.

04-00:33:47

Wilmot:

The birds or the fish? The birds?

04-00:33:50

Lewis:

The birds eat them all up. No. You know they had a spawning season. I think it was in February. I'm not sure. But all these fish would wash up on the shore and people would be out there picking them up. They were herrings. And people would make pickled herring.

04-00:34:11

Wilmot:

Okay. That's why there was a cannery over there, too.

04-00:34:15

Lewis:

Well, I used to work at the cannery when I was a teenager. Red Rock Fisheries. Well, we'd do a lot of mackerel. That's the kind of fish that came into the cannery, mackerel.

04-00:34:25

Wilmot:

What was it like to work at that cannery?

04-00:34:28

Lewis: Really nice.

04-00:34:30

Wilmot: Tell me about it.

04-00:34:32

Lewis: I don't know. I think I was about 13. I used to put my age up to 16 [laughs] and go to work at the cannery, we leave at two o'clock. The bus would come into North Richmond and pick us up. Get on the bus and take us out to Red Rock and we would get off at 11:30 at night, I think, and bring us back to the community. But they had three or four stations, upstairs, I didn't like to work upstairs. I liked to work downstairs where the fish came by on a conveyor belt and went into the cooker. All you had to do was make sure that the cans were straight before they went into the cooker. Upstairs you had to pick up the fish and put them on a conveyor belt and the machinery would chop off their heads, gut them, and remove the scales. The fish were then put in cans and sent down to the cooker where I worked. After, they went through a process where tomato sauce or mustard was put in the cans and then sent through a steamer where the cans were sealed.

04-00:35:51

Wilmot: Why'd you go to work so young? At 13?

04-00:35:54

Lewis: All the kids would work in those days. Nobody stayed at home. It was war time. They took anyone they could find to work.

04-00:35:59

Wilmot: Was that just a summer job?

04-00:36:01

Lewis: Yeah. It was just a summer job. When school was out.

04-00:36:03

Wilmot: And with your money, did you have your own money or did you give it to your mom and your dad?

04-00:36:08

Lewis: My mother let us buy school clothes. We kept—I don't know how much money—I don't even know if we made a lot of money. I don't think so. In fact, I don't even remember how much we made an hour, but I know my brother, he worked out at the nursery for Mr. Abbe, he worked out there in a florist, where they had the nursery, the roses. And then in the summer, if we didn't work in the cannery, we worked in the harvest. Before the war, people didn't make a lot of money in those days. I think my father made \$15 a week working at the Pullman Yards, so people didn't have a lot of money. I guess in those days you could buy a lot of stuff for \$15, but I think we paid \$10 a month rent when we moved to North Richmond. [laughing] I remember my mother used to take us shopping in downtown Richmond—we'd go to

Safeway—and we'd buy a big box of groceries that cost \$5 and we'd go home in a taxi. I remember that before World War II.

04-00:37:16

Wilmot:

Because you can't carry a big box of groceries?

04-00:37:19

Lewis:

Not for \$5. Bread was ten cents. You could get a loaf of bread for ten cents. And I don't know how much milk cost. Maybe not more than that, much more. So you could buy things much cheaper. And every Saturday we always got \$1 to go to the movies. So all of the kids would go—we'd all leave—a bunch of kids would come from North Richmond and this was before World War II, and there'd be Mexican kids and a few black kids and white kids and we would come down to downtown Richmond to go to the movies. It cost ten cents to go to the movie. I remember when we all got mad when it got to be eleven cents because they made us pay another penny for some kind of tax. [laughing] But every Saturday we would go to the movies and look at—what do you call them—serials would come on Fu Man Chu and all that. Charlie Chan. [laughing] It was really fun. And you didn't want to miss a serial because then you miss what happened. Everybody would say, Oh, we've got to get our work done, so we would go to the movies. It was—Richmond was kind of a dull place then before World War II.

04-00:38:31

Wilmot:

Did you have friends at the cannery when you worked there?

04-00:38:35

Lewis:

I had a couple of friends because mostly it would be women. We were just kids. But we would put our age up to go. And I was always tall so nobody ever asked me if I was really 16 or 17—I forget which age I said I was—but I wasn't. [laughs] You know? I didn't know—some of those women—I remember this one woman, she got sick because she couldn't stand to smell the fish so she had to go home. But most of the girls that went were my neighbors. Like, three of us came off of the same street.

04-00:39:13

Wilmot:

How did you get the smell off of you when you got home?

04-00:39:16

Lewis:

I guess we took a bath. I don't remember that I ever—someone would tie your hair—and maybe we would wash our clothes. But I didn't think—it just smelled funny out there because—I don't think the fish got on any one—at least where I worked, the fish didn't get on me. The smell was the fish cooking, and she didn't like to smell the fish cooking. They would put them in a big machine. And I remember that machine had a lot of steam in it and they would come out and I think that's what she smelled, the steam.

04-00:39:52

Wilmot:

One question I had from early on was when there was the migration of black people from the south, and you were telling me how your white neighbors were reacting, was there a way where you had to continue to remind them that you were still you, the same person you'd always been? Or did they mistake and confuse you and put you all in the same category?

04-00:40:15

Lewis:

I don't think so. I don't think they confused us. We lived there. I know recently I went to Carol's Restaurant in El Cerrito and I met some people that I knew when I was a child, they were Italian people. And they were telling everybody in the whole restaurant that they knew me when I was three-years-old. I don't think—when people grow up with people, they don't really see them as different. The same thing happens to me when I go to the south, when I lived in the south. I was telling somebody the other day—I didn't have a problem that the other black people had. They always thought that they didn't belong anywhere. They always thought that they couldn't go there because it was only for white people. I never had that hang-up. I just went where I wanted to go. So I would go in places and I'd be the only black person. And I remember this judge, a Caucasian judge in Homer, Louisiana, someone asked her, "Does Ivy come to all these things?" She said, "Well, she's here if you expect her or if you don't expect her you might see her." She wouldn't say if I'm supposed to be there or wasn't supposed to be there because a lot of places I would go—there wouldn't be other black people. It would be a city function. It would be in the newspaper, but black people did not go because they felt that they couldn't—that it was for white people only. I never felt that way. And I remember when I went back recently my neighbor across the street—I was the only black person who lived on the lake, and she came over, hugged me, I went down to talk to a lady at the newspaper. They hugged me. Everybody was glad to see me. I had been really civic minded. I helped start a boys and girls club in Louisiana, and I did a lot of work in the community, so—and then I was the Housing Authority Director for a while, and I just think that—for instance, in North Richmond, Mr. and Mrs. Costa, they were our next-door neighbor for years, so I guess they just saw us as being people. I don't know. But they wanted to know if we were going to move, though. So I can't answer your question. I don't know the reason.

04-00:42:38

Wilmot:

It's a question that is outside of you. Okay. Well—

04-00:42:44

Lewis:

Do you think we've got enough?

04-00:42:45

Wilmot:

I think I have more than enough. Do you want to—should we call it a day today?

04-00:42:50

Lewis:

Yeah, fine.

04-00:42:51

Wilmot: Okay. I'll stop here.

[interview interruption]

04-00:42:57

Wilmot: Now we're both on.

04-00:42:58

Lewis: My great-great grandfather, William Henry Gault was buried in the New Halvania Cemetery in Napa California. And when I did a research paper for Mary Ellen Pleasant, when I went to Cal, she was also buried there. She buried a lot of people in New Halvania Cemetery. And we found out last year that it's no longer in Napa. We could not find out where my great great grandfather was buried anymore because now they don't know where they moved the bodies to.

04-00:43:34

Wilmot: So the New Halvania Cemetery, which was—it was formerly all for black people?

04-00:43:38

Lewis: Well, I'm not sure that it was all for black people, but I knew that Mary Ellen Pleasant lived in San Francisco and she buried a lot of people in New Halvania Cemetery so I assume that that was the only place where they could bury black people in those days. Because when my grandfather was buried he looked like he was white. He was buried in Sunset View Cemetery in Albany—I think that's in Albany, California—but when my grandmother died in 1944, she couldn't be buried there. She's buried in Golden Gate Cemetery because they didn't allow black people to be buried there. So I assume that New Halvania was a cemetery where they could bury blacks.

04-00:44:22

Wilmot: So they were buried in separate places? Your grandmother and your grandfather because he looked different than she did? Our country.

04-00:44:32

Lewis: It was terrible, huh.

04-00:44:35

Wilmot: That was just the very recent past. It's very close to us.

04-00:44:37

Lewis: Oh yes, it's not long ago. Yeah. That's true.

04-00:44:42

Wilmot: And Mary Ellen Pleasant, she knew your great-great grandfather?

04-00:44:46

Lewis: She knew my grandmother's mother in San Francisco. My grandmother's mother—you know, there are sketchy stories. I never talked to my

grandmother about it. I was 12-years-old when my grandmother died. But I heard my father talk about it. That, they either helped start the first Baptist Church in San Francisco—and I talked to the minister there recently to find out. And I need to do more research. I just need to do a lot of research, but as you get older, you don't feel like doing all that work, all that driving all over and asking questions and stuff.

04-00:45:20

Wilmot:

Even though you're in the good time of your life to do it because you don't have to work.

04-00:45:24

Lewis:

Yeah, but the traffic is worse than it used to be. And parking is non-existent in Sacramento so I don't, you know, I just don't feel like being bothered with that. But there's a lot of research that needs to be done. Mary Ellen Pleasant was a really important figure in the state of California. People don't realize it because she came here from the south and she—I think her mother was from the Dominican Republic—and she was a mixture of white and South American—and she would go back periodically to the south—well, a whole long story about her. When her mother died, her father sent her back east and she lived with Quakers. And then she married this guy who was named Pleasant, and that's where she got that name from. But he was an abolitionist, so she was involved in that movement—she would dress up like a jockey and go down south and recruit black people to run away from the south, and when she came to California in 1849, she had a rooming house. And then she would go down south and get a lot of black people to come out here and work, and she would put them in all these affluent homes—can't think of their name right offhand, but he found silver in the Comstocks in Nevada—not gold, silver, in the silver mines. And she was a very wealthy woman and she believed in voodoo and things like that. Her mother was from the Dominican Republic. That's where she was from. And she had one gray eye and one blue eye. And she was known to put spells on people and all these kinds of things. And she brought all these slaves out here and put them in different rich people's homes and they would tell her about what was going on and I think she blackmailed people. And then she had a house of assemination—of prostitution. And then she got into one business where she had these prostitutes working for her, but when they had babies, she would sell them to Chinese people because the Chinese people really coveted Caucasian children. And then she had one lady who had a baby by the guy who became the governor of California and she blackmailed him. I mean, Mary Ellen Pleasant was a really interesting figure, and if somebody could really find out more about her, there would be a good movie because she was really a formidable figure in the state of California. She actually controlled the governor of California.

04-00:48:21

Wilmot:

Interesting. Well, let's close for today for a second time. How's that?

04-00:48:26

Lewis: Fine.

[interview interruption]

04-00:48:30

Wilmot: So what did you major in at UC Berkeley?

04-00:48:35

Lewis: I majored in political science, but I graduated in sociology. And I took some classes—they were really, really racist. Once, I was in this class [laughs] and they asked a question and I gave the answer, and there was a TA—it wasn't a professor—who said to me, "I bet you don't know how you got that answer." I said, "Well, I read it just like anybody else." But it was really—I thought it was terrible. I thought it was very racist.

04-00:48:07

Wilmot: The whole school or just the political science department?

04-00:49:09

Lewis: Well, probably not the whole school, but I meant certain people in the school. For instance, I was a good writer and a lot of black guys would go to Cal—

04-00:49:25

Wilmot: You told me about this.

04-00:49:27

Lewis: —and I would write their papers for them and they would get better grades than I would.

04-00:49:32

Wilmot: So it was sexist, too. And what years did you go?

04-00:49:40

Lewis: When did I first start? I can't remember. I know I graduated in '74 and I only went there two years so—

04-00:49:45

Wilmot: And you shifted from political science to sociology? And why did you leave political science?

04-00:49:50

Lewis: Because I was always arguing with people. I mean, I'm pretty outspoken so I kind of—I guess maybe that's why I felt like I was being discriminated against because maybe I was too outspoken. But I got a A-plus from one TA because he said I was outspoken. So I thought that was good.

04-00:50:16

Wilmot: Were you married already when you were at Cal?

04-00:50:18

Lewis: Yeah.

04-00:50:19
Wilmot: So you didn't have like the whole dating life and social life in school?

04-00:50:22
Lewis: No. No.

04-00:50:23
Wilmot: You were done with that part of your life/

04-00:50:24
Lewis: I was working too. Full-time.

04-00:50:25
Wilmot: Where were you working?

04-00:50:26
Lewis: I was working for the city of Richmond. But I told them that I was going to school and so they allowed me to take the time off to go to school.

04-00:50:37
Wilmot: And you had children by that time?

04-00:50:40
Lewis: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

04-00:50:41
Wilmot: Did you have all of your kids already or—

04-00:50:43
Lewis: Yes.

04-00:50:44
Wilmot: So you were a working full-time mother of three kids? And—

04-00:50:52
Lewis: Five boys and one girl.

04-00:50:53
Wilmot: Six children. And you were in school full-time, so your husband must have been really helping you out. Must have been supportive.

04-00:51:02
Lewis: My kids were pretty good but I used to get up early, like four o'clock in the morning, and study if I had a test or something like that. I did pretty good.

04-00:51:16
Wilmot: How did you get back and forth?

04-00:51:18
Lewis: I drove.

04-00:51:19

Wilmot:

You just drove? Wow. Did you have a good, you know, did you have a good place to leave your children during the day? Did you have a good daycare center that you liked?

04-00:51:30

Lewis:

At that time, I only had one who needed to go to daycare and my mother took care of him.

04-00:51:37

Wilmot:

And your mom took care of the rest of them?

04-00:51:40

Lewis:

I was just talking to him last night and he was telling me that my father—he said, you know, how people have lost—he thinks that since the grandfathers have died, the children are going downhill instead of keeping the same practice. Because he remembered my father used to come out to the Peres School and get him on bicycle. There was a daycare at Peres School. And he would bring him home. Riding his bicycle, he would take him home. The school was really good. I had started going to college at Contra-Costa, a two-year college, before I went to Cal, and most of the people I worked with, sort of all went to college. They let a lot of people go to school. And the school district did too. I would see a lot of people from the Richmond School District at Cal.

04-00:51:42

Wilmot:

Now, this was before 1974. Do you remember when the black studies department was created at Berkeley and Ethnic studies and all that?

04-00:52:48

Lewis:

I was in ethnic studies, in black studies. Doctor Arabho. And she was married to an African. I remember that. But I don't know when it started. It was there when I got there. It was controversial at that time.

04-00:53:15

Wilmot:

Yeah. I think it was. Well, maybe we should—do you have everything else you want to say about your time at Cal and about juggling being a mama, being a student, being a worker full-time, a wife—everything you were doing.

04-00:53:32

Lewis:

The only problem I had was getting my paper—I didn't type—getting my papers typed. And I got people to type my papers who made a lot of mistakes. I could have probably got better grades if I could have did my own homework, did my own typing. But no. I really enjoyed it. It was really great. Except that I was sort of a—what—not an innocent but—

04-00:54:01

Wilmot:

Naïve?

04-00:54:02

Lewis: —a naïve person. When I went to Cal, in those days, I don't know if they still do it, so many of the professors were cursing all of the time.

04-00:54:12

Wilmot: It was the times.

04-00:54:13

Lewis: I had one of these classes and this professor was using all these filthy words and this lady was sitting behind me and she tapped me on the shoulder and she said, "I want you to know, I'm his mother and I didn't teach him to use those words. We never allowed those kinds of words. Why do you students put up with it?" And I said, "I don't like it either, but it doesn't seem to bother anybody else." [laughs]

04-00:54:43

Wilmot: In sociology, did you work with Troy Duster or Harry Edwards?

04-00:54:46

Lewis: I worked with Harry Edwards. I brought him a lot of old newspaper clippings that my father had that showed black people, calling them coons and this sort of thing, pickaninnies and stuff like that, in *The Oakland Tribune*.

04-00:55:03

Wilmot: Interesting. Listen, thank you again. This has been such a pleasure for me.

04-00:55:14

Lewis: Okay. Thank you.

[End of Interview]