

**CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: GAIL ULREY**

**INTERVIEWER: BEKA URBAN**

**PLACE: BRANDON, FLORIDA**

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Beka: This is Beka Urban. I'm with Gail in her Brandon home and first, I really just want to thank you for doing this. Like this is super awesome and, um, I'm gonna kinda start with some basic questions and then we'll get into more of the fun stuff.

Gail: Okay.

B: So, we're just gonna start, and can I have your full name?

G: Yes, It's Linda Gail Akins, my maiden name A-K-I-N-S, Ulrey.

B: Okay, and then when and where were you born?

G: I was born in Lakeland, Florida in 1942.

B: Okay, and can you tell me your parent's names?

G: Yes, my father's name was Harvey Akins. My mother was Lela, L-E-L-A.

B: Okay, and then what did they do for a living?

G: My father was a painting contractor. My mother was, um, worked in a lunch room at John Cox's Elementary School in Lakeland for 20 years.

B: Oh wow, and is that the elementary school you went to?

G: No.

B: Okay, you went to a different one.

G: I went to Dixie Land; the best elementary school in Lakeland.

B: *Laughs.* Okay.

G: I lived in the Dixie Land neighborhood, of course.

B: Okay.

G: A great place to grow up.

B: And then, you have some siblings. Are they older, younger?

G: I'm the youngest of four. I had a sister that passed away in 1962. She was 32 years old. She was – she died during childbirth. Um, then I have a brother that's, um, 79 and a brother that's 81.

B: Okay, and do they still live in Florida or they live out of Florida?

G: They live in Florida.

B: Okay, and then when you were growing up, who was the oldest person you knew? Did you know a grandparent, a great-grandparent? Um –

G: Well, yeah, I had a grandmother that died when I was, um, in the ninth grade. It was about 1957, I think. And she was like 92 years old when died.

B: Okay, and what was she like? Did you go visit her a lot? Was she in Florida or was she out of the state?

G: Yeah, she was in Lakeland.

B: Okay.

G: She lived in North Lakeland, and we lived in – on – the south end of Lakeland. And you know I saw her occasionally, yes. She was, um, well do you wanna know a little background? Cause I'm like a fourth or fifth generation Floridian.

B: Yeah, I mean sure, some background would be –

G: My grandmother, um, my mother was from North Florida, in the Gainesville – Ocala area. She was from a town called Morriston. She was one of ten children; she was like middle of those. My grandfather died when my mother was nine, and so my grandmother raised those ten kids on a farm, by herself. She never remarried, so they were real pioneer-type people.

B: Yeah.

G: I mean they, you know, they worked the land. My mother actually went to – she probably did not complete the fourth grade.

B: Whoa.

G: And, um, but she basically stayed at home. She learned to cook, and anybody that knew her would tell you that she was the best southern cook in the world. So she had very little education, but in the twenties my grandmother and those children moved to Lakeland. And my mother opened a boarding house for railroad men – cause railroad was a big industry back then. Railroad men would live in that boarding house and my mother was one of the cooks there, and so they – they would cook for these railroad men.

B: Wow, yeah. Um, so what would you say was her best dish that she made? You said she was a really good cook.

G: Chicken and dumplings’.

B: Chicken and dumplings.

G: Uh-huh.

B: Awesome, that sounds amazing. Do you have her recipe or was it a secret?

G: She had no recipe.

B: Oh, okay.

G: But I’m not that industrious anyway. If I were to make chicken and dumplings today, I would use a box of Bisquick to make it.

B: And so, what was your school experience like?

G: Okay. I went to Dixie Land from kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and absolutely it was the best – best elementary school in Lakeland. We had wonderful teachers, wonderful principals. Christian – Christian teachers and principals, and we had, um, we had that –uh, uh – influence there. And um we didn’t think anything about it. I mean, it was just a natural thing. You know, we stood there and said the Pledge of Allegiance every morning and had an opening prayer and singing hymns, regularly. And that was just a part of what we did, and we loved it. And, um, so that was – that was through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. They had only one elementary – they had one junior high in Lakeland and that time I went to Junior High. I went there in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. It was

on North Florida Avenue and I think it's now called – Lawton Chiles Middle School. Lake Wire is behind it, and originally that was the first Lakeland High School.

B: Okay.

G: Then when they built the new Lakeland High School, over off of Lake Hollingsworth, that became the only Junior High in Lakeland and that's where I went. But then I think when I went into high school, they did open up Southwest Junior High in Lakeland. But when I was in high school, I went to Lakeland High School – that was the only high school except for Kathleen High School. But we didn't we really didn't consider that a part of Lakeland. That was country, you know? And there also – segregation was still going on at that time so there was Rochelle High School and that was of course where the African Americans – it was a great, it was a great time cause you pretty much knew everybody.

B: That is nice. Who was your favorite teacher? Did – would you have one?

G: Yeah, yeah, in the ninth grade, I had a Civics teacher named Mr. Dandridge, and – um – he was great. He – he had a big influence on me and I had an opportunity a few years back at my 40<sup>th</sup> class reunion to tell him that – that – I had always cited him as being a tremendous influence in my life. I said there have been many opportunities, even sitting in Sunday school class when somebody would ask you that question I'd always say 'Oh, without a doubt, my civics teacher, Mr. Dandridge.' And – and he was real sweet he said to me 'Um, I feel like I've probably had a good influence on a lot of kids in my career.' But he said, 'But you're the only one that's ever come back and told me that.' So I was pleased that I had that opportunity to tell him that he's definitely influenced my life in a positive way.

B: That is super awesome. So, obviously with school you get summer breaks. What did you usually do during the summer?

G: Well, okay, we were – we were relatively poor. So we didn't take family vacations, but I lived very close to Dixie Land School. For a while I actually lived right across the street, and back then in the 50's – um – the summer playground program was very important. Each elementary school had one. I don't know if they still do that or not. But usually there would be a – uh – coach that was assigned, you know, a teacher slash coach that was assigned to work there in the

summer time. And so, my brothers and I and all of our friends and neighborhood kids, all went there. I mean, I went there from – every summer from that time it started, which I was quite young, through probably 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I stopped doing that. But they had all kinds of activities and when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I played on the girls' softball team, and we'd play other schools in Lakeland. And we'd go to the – um – recreation center in downtown Lakeland and – and – we'd have competitions with jacks. You ever played jacks? I was a champion! But we'd do that; we'd play a lot of different things.

B: Okay, that's cool. Um, so when you – I mean you said that you guys were fairly poor – so did you ever go to the cinema at all? Was that like ever a treat?

G: We had three theatres in Lakeland: the Polk theatre, the Palace theatre, and the Lake theatre. The Polk was the main theatre. You know where that is?

B: Yes, yes, I've been there.

G: Okay, and then the Palace theatre was on, I think, Kentucky, and that was where they had all the like cowboy movies, like Roy Rodgers and Gene Audrey, and all these - and then they had serials and things like that. Well that's where basically most kids went. But I became a movie connoisseur at a very young age. So that was a little beneath me; I didn't go to those very much. I would go to the first run movies at the Polk theatre and then on Sunday's I would go with my brothers, and we'd go to the Lake theatre. Which was at the bottom of Main Street, I believe, right at Mass – close to Massachusetts Avenue. Like, like you were going down to Lake Mirror. And they had all these film noir movies that were black and white, prison movies, gangsters, that kind of thing. So like on Sundays, because we'd already seen the- the first run movie at the Polk theatre on Saturday, we'd go to the Lake theatre. So, no, I went to the movies all the time. And, um, have you been to the Polk Theatre? Okay, so it's beautiful. It's like the Tampa theatre in downtown Tampa.

G: But I would – at the time I was growing up, it cost 9 cents, and my mother would give me a quarter. And that was a nickel to ride the bus to the movie, 9 cents to get in, a nickel to run back – ride back, so that's like, what, um, nineteen cents?

B: Yeah.

G: Five, ten, nineteen. And then, whatever's left something to eat. But a lot of times, we would walk there and walk back so then I'd have more money for at the concession stand. But you could go in anytime, you know, you could go in the middle of the movie and then the movie would end and then you could stay for the beginning. You could just stay all day long and nobody questioned that. And then during intermission, we'd go up to the mezzanine. You've been upstairs to the mezzanine?

B: Yeah.

G: Well it was really beautiful back then, and I was there so much I really felt like that was my home. And you'd go up to the ladies, like, parlor part and they'd have these little dressing tables against the walls with mirrors. I mean you just felt like a – uh, uh – you know, a movie star sitting down, and so, you know, we would spend some time up in the mezzanine between movies. But yeah, I would sit in the movie theatre all the time.

B: What would you say are movies that, um, like stuck out to you the most? That were either like really good or you just didn't enjoy?

G: Okay, when I was a kid, basically. Okay, well I loved musicals, um, I loved Doris Day and Gordon MacRae, and – um – there was, there was a movie called like *By the Light of the Silver Moon* and that was one of her movies. I loved those. Um – and, and – the thing is, you could see adult movies and there was not anything obscene. In fact, now when I sit and watch one of those movies on Turner Classic Movies, there might be some, um, suggestion of something that now I get.

G: But I was like, oh my gosh! They were doing that? I had no idea! You know, I wouldn't have known what that was anyway that early on. But so, it was safe. You could watch anything and – uh – and I did; I mean I watched Humphrey Bogart movies and Cary Grant and Clarke Gable. And then, of course as I got into Junior High, James Dean became a really – he was the main, he was the hot item, you know. So I was a real James Dean fan, and then – and then as we got a little older Steve McQueen came along. So but, yeah, I – I watched any and all movies.

B: *Laughs*. Um, and so what was your first job? Did you have one when you were in high school or was it after?

G: No. No, not many – um – not many teenagers worked, simply because there were not that many opportunities. There were no fast food places in the fifties. I think maybe McDonalds; the first one was on Memorial Boulevard. I might have been like in the early sixties, something like that. But there were no fast food restaurants, so most of my friends were well off. They lived over off of Lake Hollingsworth. But any – I was the token poor person, but they wouldn't have worked anyway probably, but um – no I didn't work then. My first job out of high school was telephone operator at General Telephone Company.

B: Okay. So did you do that right out of high school or did you go to college?

G: No, I didn't go to school. Didn't have an opportunity to go to school, um, and there wasn't a Polk Junior College at that time. When I got out of school in 1960, I had several friends that went to USF cause that was the first year of USF. And they actually, there was no on-campus, you know quarters, so like four of them would car pool over to USF every day the first year of so, I don't know when they began to have housing. But, um, that would have been – unless you were gonna go, you know, Florida State of University of Florida – and I had friends that did. I mean, but um, there wasn't a real opportunity for it. There was no community college at all. Florida Southern was, was the one.

B: Yeah, was the big honcho in town. And, um, speaking of Florida Southern, obviously Frank Lloyd Wright designed it. So what did you learn about him growing up, like was it a big deal that he had come and was building on campus there or was it just kinda – ?

G: Well as a kid, you just sorta accepted things and didn't think a lot about it. I always read the newspaper, though, I've always done that, you know. Well we didn't have television until I was about in the ninth grade; we'd listen to the radio. But I always read the Lakeland Ledger and whenever he would come, there were always pictures of him in the – in the Lakeland Ledger, so I knew when he was in town. I knew that he had designed some things at Florida Southern, but I was little, didn't make a big impression on me. But when I was in elementary school, I won an art contest at school, and then – and then they sent me to a county-wide competition and it was at Florida Southern. So, it was in one of his building that he had designed, in a classroom, and I can remember sitting in there and I – I'm thinking it was this way, I could be wrong. But I don't remember furniture being in there. I seemed like I was all concrete, like tiers.

B: Was it, was it like a circle?

G: Yes.

B: A circular – um, that's the – I think they call it the Frank Lloyd Wright theatre. It's just like a little, yeah.

G: Yes, and everything – it seems like it was just concrete tiers, and I was sitting there and um, and uh – and then it seemed like the windows were real high. It wasn't where you could see, and I – I can remember just thinking to myself 'I wonder why they didn't complete this building when they were building it.' I wasn't impressed at all! I thought here we are, in just a half built building; so that was pretty much what I knew about Frank Lloyd Wright. Um, oh, when I was in high school, our proms – our junior, senior proms – were at, in the industrial arts building [Ordway], I think that's what it was called at Florida Southern. So, um, Florida Southern was, um, was – you know- it was just a common part of our – of our lives, you know? It was right there in the center, and um – well the center of where I lived at least, I mean. But um, yeah, um, I married a guy that graduated from Florida Southern, he was a KA, and graduated from there. Um, my one brother went to Florida Southern on a baseball scholarship, the other one went there briefly. Knew many, many people that went to Florida Southern, um, a lot of Lakeland people went to Florida Southern, good friends of mine, and through them I met other people from out of town that went to Florida Southern.

B: Did – were there like a lot of community events on the campus? Cause, if it was – If it was like the center-ish?

G: Yeah, probably so. It seems like we might have had – I don't know if we had any part of our graduation there or not. I'm sure that as time went on, there was more of that, but um – yeah, yeah – I can remember being there on occasions and I don't know why. Cause I can remember being in that like garden-type place where there was the – it seemed to me like it was like a Buddhist temple or Hindu temple – something.

B: Yeah, the Hindu temple, yeah that's still there.

G: I can remember being there, like several times. Um, and see here's a picture of Frank Lloyd Wright.

B: Oh, okay, yeah.

G: And, um, let's see, and I think these walkways were called like esplanades or something.

B: Yes, yeah, I never say it right.

G: The whole thing just made me feel like it just never got completed, you know?

B: And they're so short. If you have anyone tall with you, they just, like, run right into it. So, when you were growing up, and even as you stayed in Lakeland – did you stay in Lakeland as an adult? Like when did you move out?

G: I got married in 1963, and actually I never lived there again, all my family was there. I did live there one year when my husband was in Vietnam, 1965-66. I lived there with my – my first child. And then, um, when he came back, we – we were, you know we went to another, um base to live, and then came back from there when he got out of the Marine Corps and we went to Temple Terrace – lived in Temple Terrace area until I moved to Brandon.

B: Throughout all that time – when you lived in Lakeland, what were race relations like? I know you said you had the segregated schools, but what other, um, just like issues with race or how did you –?

G: Okay, I think in the fifties, and this was just my advantage point as kids, we didn't recognize or feel like there was an issue. Now I told ya, that I had some wealthy friends.

B: Yes.

G: Alright, several of – several of them had, um maids, that were more like nannies, in a large respect. They didn't just come and clean the house. They were there a large part of the time; I got to know them real well, loved them. One friend, she lived on Lake Hollingsworth and I could tell you exactly where and tell you the name and you might be familiar with it, but I won't do that. They had a maid that lived on their property, and we didn't think anything about it. She lived in a little house on their property, all the time, and um, that was interesting when I think back, she did all the cooking and she pretty much raised those kids like she was a nanny, and um, but I will tell you, I rode the city bus, a lot. That was our main transportation, and black people did sit at the back of the bus. You didn't think a lot about it, but when I think back on it, I think how horrible.

I mean that was awful, you know? I mean they would get on the bus and they'd go completely to the back, and um, they rode the bus a lot too cause like me, most of those riding the bus didn't have other transportation. Um, now, I will tell ya, when – when I was a teenager in Lakeland in the fifties it was like – have you ever watched the TV series *Happy Days*?

B: I haven't, no.

G: Well do you know what that's about? It's with Ron Howard and, um, it – it was based on a movie, I can't even remember the name of the movie. I should know it, but anyway it was about teenagers in the fifties and the things that we did, and um we would – we'd all have some, um, someplace that we would hang out. Like I said there wasn't a McDonalds, but my group of kids, and it was a large group considering the different ages that were involved. We hung out at a place called Pipkins. It was on Florida Avenue and Patterson or Park Street, on the corner. Right across the street was a Publix. And we, we hung out there all the time, after school – well in high school – from then on, and – um – and, you know, just play the jukebox. You don't even know what a jukebox is. You put a nickel in and you pick out a song, and just sit around and talk. And – and – we would go cruising, now we didn't call it cruising back then, but after having seen that movie and watching *Happy Days*, I know now that's what it was. You just get in your car, and just – just go look for something to do, which usually amounted to nothing. You know? You'd see some other kids, go 'Oh, there's so-and-so' and stop and talk. I mean it was nothing, but we thought it was fun. It was a kind of independence, and we didn't do anything bad. But, one night when I was in high school, um – uh a few friends of mine; Carol and Beverly and me, and then Beverly had a new boyfriend, and he was from Winter Haven. And Beverly and he, his name was La – uh Ford, it was Ford. And um – and I was in the front seat and my friend Carol was driving, going down Florida Avenue, and we were almost in front of the Polk Theatre and a car went by us. Did you mother tell you this story?

B: Yes.

G: A car went by us, and they were all wearing Ku Klux Klan apparel. I mean we had never seen that, for real. And one of us said 'Oh my gosh, that's the Ku Klux Klan', and so somebody says 'Let's follow them'. It wasn't me because I was a chicken about a lot of things back then, but someone said 'Let's follow them'. So we did, we started following them and they were going

north on Florida Avenue, they continued north. And I don't know if you've familiar with a lot of Lakeland, but as we got, you know, farther north, there's an area out there called Polk City and uh – uh Lake Gibson, and Kathleen. Well somewhere in there they got off the main road and we did too, and they finally got on to a little tiny road, and I don't know what we did. I don't know how we kept from having them see us. I don't know if we turned our lights out or what, but they actually went into the woods, and we did too. And – and, uh, they got out in their garb, and I mean it was like um, did you see *O Brother Where Art Thou*?

B: Yeah, I've seen it.

G: Well that's exactly what it was like, but I think we got on top of some cars in order to see better. We didn't really think about being afraid because it was absolutely the most fascinating thing in the world, you know? It was like, and so anyway, we got out of there safely without anybody detecting us. So, um, that was – that was an adventure, and I think we're probably the only kids that we knew that had ever had that experience. That was kinda hard to realize that there were active members of the Ku Klux Klan in Lakeland, but I'm sure there were far more than those four people.

B: Yeah, did you ever see any ever again? Or was that like the only time that you saw them?

G: I mean, we'd seen pictures and things in the paper and all that, but –

B: But in person.

G: Yeah, and I – I mean, they were just boldly going down – right down the middle of Lakeland. You know they could have taken those hoods off, and nobody would know the difference, but they were just boldly riding down the middle of Lakeland. So why wouldn't we follow them? That was too good of an opportunity.

B: That is. Um, so what were the differences in race relations then when you lived there in the sixties for that year? Like, um, how was it different in the area?

G: Well, let me think. O – Okay, you're talkin' about when I came back to Lakeland?

B: Yeah, when you came back there for that year.

G: Cause I came back in 1965, and I guess it was the early sixties when they had the Freedom Riders and Mississippi and that type of thing. So the Martin Luther King era, well he was alive – he was still alive. So I – I don't recall a whole lot of stuff. He was a very um – I mean I had a great deal of respect for him, and um, so those things were coming to a head. The head unfortunately being his death, you know? Which nobody, I mean I guess some people did anticipate that, really – I mean – but, um, I don't recall that – that I had any direct interaction then. My husband was in Vietnam, most people didn't know what Vietnam was. It was a war, and – and I knew it, but few people did. I had – I came home with a 10 month old child, so my whole life was about taking care of her and – and praying that my husband was safe and waiting for him to come back home.

B: Did you move back in, like, home or did you find your own place?

G: I – I found – I moved into a duplex home on Belmar Street. And here's the thing that was the third time in my life I had lived on West Belmar Street.

B: So, speaking of your children, cause you have three. Were you mostly a stay at home mom when they were born? I know obviously when your husband was in –

G: Yes, I was. I was a stay at home mom until I got divorced. I was married for 21 years, and then when we got divorced, I went out to work, of course. But I had always been a stay at home mom. For the first four years that we were married. He – he was in the Marine Corps, and we lived a lot of different places in those four years. So then when we came back, we moved to Temple Terrace, and then we moved out of Temple Terrace, just um still in East Tampa though, and lived in that house for 30 years.

B: Okay. So then what did you do, I know you said you were telephone operator um out of high school, what did you do after um you got divorced? Like what career did you do?

G: I went – yeah, I went to work for a company, um, called W. R. Vanzel Company, and they are a cement packaging company, and they package – or produce, anything related to cementitious products, like concrete mix and play sand and all kinds of industrial things that contractors need. I worked there for 25 years, I was a customer service rep for a long time. Then they centralized that to Atlanta and I – I did other things. I was a shipping supervisor and inventory supervisor

and safety coordinator; so I was just a lot of things. They were good to keep me on because everybody else that worked in the customer service department had been let go at that time, so.

B: Would you ever consider moving back?

G: No, I wouldn't go back to Lakeland because this is my home, you know? And I – this is where I raised my children and – and our church. And – and for me, church is a central of my life, even though my kids aren't here to go to that church, but that's still – that's where I raised them, and that's – that's where my memories are. I wouldn't go back to Lakeland at this point in time; there was a lot of my life when I would have loved to have gone back to Lakeland. I think that Lakeland is absolutely – I get kidded about being from Polk County, and I don't know why, but um. Lakeland is a super town and it's – it was a wonderful place to grow up.

B: Um, did you go to church also when you were growing up? Was that just something that everyone did or was it -?

G: I did go to church. My mother didn't drive and I went to First Baptist Church Lakeland and at that time it was on – it was on, um, North Florida Avenue. And um, now it's actually – First Baptist Church is now over on Memorial Boulevard – the big mega church.

B: Um. Yeah, I can't think of the name, but I know.

G: But anyway, that was First Baptist Church that was one of the bigger Baptist churches in Lakeland. I didn't go real often because I lived on the other side of town, and I – again I'd catch the bus, and um go to – uh Sunday school and church. And – and go to training union on Sunday evening, and so um, yeah. That was – that was a good part of my life.

B: Um, and obviously you like movies, and you mentioned 9<sup>th</sup> grade was when you guys got a TV. Did you ever sit around and watch the TV? What were your interactions with TV? Did you watch on it?

G: Um, okay, there wasn't a lot. We were so thrilled to have a TV set, you're not gonna understand this. It was in black and white, the reception wasn't that great, and about 11 o'clock it would go off. I mean there was nothing on TV, except what we called a test pattern, and sometimes you just kinda sit and look at the test pattern. I guess just kinda not wanting to go to

bed, you know? But, and then, sometimes the reception was so bad and we had rabbit ears on the TV sets. And you'd have to go over and jiggle it and, you know, it was a big pain in the neck. But we were so happy to have TV, not just us, anybody. That – that was technology at its best at that time, but you know we'd – you'd do whatever needed to do to get the picture in. There were lots of local things. Tampa – uh all of our shows - we lived in Lakeland, but everything was – that was broadcast locally from Tampa, of course. And there were maybe three television stations, like WFLA and WFTB and there was a television station, it was uh channel 38. It's still on, but it's not the same thing, and it was out of St. Pete, I believe, and they had a lot of local people. That you – you would watch because there wasn't anything else to watch. It was really, really hooky like you know, Captain So-and-so or just dumb, but um, I'll tell you what I did watch starting in about the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade. *American Bandstand* made its debut and that was a major thing to come home from school and watch *American Bandstand*. Now do you know what that is?

B: I've heard of it, I've never seen any.

G: Have you ever heard of Dick Clarke?

B: Yes, yeah.

G: Okay. So it was super, I mean it was – and you know, they'd have all those local kids from Philadelphia there in their studio and they would play real popular music and have really popular bands and groups on. And it was just fun; we loved watching that, but as far as when we first got a TV set. There wasn't a lot to watch. There were a lot of network shows. Westerns and *Gun Smoke* and um, but I think that was even farther down the line. Um, it's hard to remember – *Howdy Doody* had been on for years; that was a kids show and I – by the time we got a TV set, I was too old to even want to watch *Howdy Doody*. But I can remember there was a children's program – well there was several children's programs: *Captain Kangaroo* – I mean I was too old for this, but I remember my niece watching these. *Captain Kangaroo*, that was a major thing for kids, and then there was one called *Romper Room*, and that was just sorta like a babysitting thing. This lady was, you know, but – my kids, when my kids were little, they were addicted to *Sesame Street* and *Electric Company* and Mr. Rodgers. *Mr. Rodgers Neighborhood*. So for us,

back in the fifties, it was the *Captain Kangaroo* and um, and he might have even come along a little later than that.

B: When did, um, *I Love Lucy*, when did that come out? Did you ever have that on?

G: Oh, yeah, that was a major thing to watch. *I Love Lucy*, but I can remember so that I enjoyed that people now wouldn't have known even what they were. One was called *I Married Joan*, and the lead actor was, uh a guy named Jim Backus, and he went on to be in lots of things; he was also the millionaire in – on *Gilligan's Island*. Have you ever seen *Gilligan's Island*? But everything was black and white, we watched what there was because there just wasn't that much. Of course, um, Elvis – Elvis made his appearance in the mid-fifties, '54, '55, '56, and then – then he was on TV. And whenever Elvis was gonna be on TV, that was like a major event; that would be like if U2 was gonna come into my living room tonight and play, you know? I mean that was a major thing.

B: Yeah. And, um, speaking of Elvis; you did see him at the Polk Theatre.

G: I did.

B: And was that two times or three?

G: Three and it was general admission. So you didn't have reserved seating, so um two friends and I – one which was the driver when we went to see the Ku Klux Klan, Carol. One of our mothers dropped us off at the Polk Theatre at 8'oclock in the morning, and we had our brown bag lunch, probably a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And the first show wasn't until like 1 o'clock in the afternoon, and she dropped us of at like 8'oclock. And there were two girls that we already there, and they – as it turned out – they were from Pinellas County. They were older than us, they were like sophisticated. They had already seen him the night – the day before, in Pinellas County. So they had ticket one and ticket two, and I had ticket three and then my friends were four and five. So, we had on dresses, you know, not shorts, not jeans. And we had on dresses and we – we just stood out there from 8 am until they let us in. So, when we got in, I sat front row center, and it was a tremendous show; it was great. And then at the end of that show, we had to leave; so when we went outside the lines were long. Cause when we got there – we were the first in line, so we didn't have that experience; the lines were long. So I got in that line, thinking

‘okay I’ve seen him, you know, I’m gonna go back and see him. I won’t have the same experience.’ So when I got in some – some boys that knew I liked him real well were going ‘Gail! Gail! Come, we saved you a seat!’ So I went down and I sat in the front row, not front row center, but just a little ways down. So then after that show, went outside, I think the last show was like 7 o’clock last night, and I’d been there since 8 in the morning, went outside now the lines really were long. Got in line again, and when I came back in, another two guys had saved me a seat. Front row, but this time I was over towards the end, where the – the stage would kinda come out. So, I was over there; so, um, I um – let’s see. That one’s older. Okay, here we are. So, I’m in there.

B: You’re in this picture? Oh my goodness, are you in the back? Where – which one are you?

G: I – I – I am this one right here, with the skinny arm. So actually I’m the first person because those are the policemen. His named was Mr. Lorde, so he went in that back and got me an autographed picture of Elvis.

B: That is so cool!

G: So it was terrific; it really was – it was so great. And, um, he and his groups stayed at – at the Tiger Villa Hotel on Highway 92; a motel. And um it was just – it was just a neat thing; I’ll so you the picture in a little bit. Now when I was in junior high – I don’t know if this is of any interest to you.

B: Oh yeah, anything.

G: This – this young lady right here was named um, Neva Jane Langley, she was from Lakeland and she was my brother-in-laws cousin. And – uh first cousin, well she went to school in Georgia. She went to Westland, and she became Miss America.

B: Oh!

G: So she was Miss Georgia who became Miss America, but she was from Lakeland. And so, you know, Lakeland was just really proud of her. So they had – when she came back home we had a big, huge parade for her, and um. I was in like the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. And I had a friend named Betty Mincer, and her father was a doctor and he – his office was in Marble Arcade building

downtown in Lakeland. You know where the Marble Arcade building is? It's like – it's like Kentucky and Lemon or something like that. But, um. He was upstairs – his office was maybe like on the fifth floor. So Betty invited me – we, it was a school day, but she asked me if I would go with her, and um her dad allowed us to come up that day. And um we watched the parade from – from his uh window in his waiting room. And uh that was, that was exciting. Now something else that happen in Florida that was a big deal was we had rodeos all the time, and every time we'd have a rodeo there'd be a parade. It always came down South Florida Avenue because I'd always watch it in Dixie Land, and sometimes would go to the – um – to the rodeo. Lake Mirror, at the promenade right there; when my sister was a young girl, she and her friends took pictures all the time. And she was really a pretty – a pretty girl, and they would take pictures, really nice pictures. But so many of them were made down at Lake Mirror and in the – the civic center didn't have Barnett, you know, the Barnett's beautiful gardens here at that time, but it was still pretty. Yeah. We had like three or four hotels in Lakeland. We had the Thelma hotel, the – the New Florida I believe it was, the hotel terrace – the Terrace Hotel, the Florida hotel – the New Florida Hotel, that's right. New Florida hotel it backed up to Lake Mirror. The Lakeland Terrace hotel, and the Lakeland Terrace Hotel kinda went – got pretty shabby, and they re-did that years ago. But there was like three hotels, there weren't many motels and anything like that. Alright, Munn Park was a big thing.

B: Yes.

G: And, um, there was a gazebo or a bandstand – there was a bandstand in there, and Santa Claus would come to town and I don't remember how he got there. It seems like he might have come in on the fire truck or something. And then he would go up on that gazebo; we'd all be waiting until he came up – it was so exciting. He'd throw candy to us, that was in Munn Park. When I was in junior high school, we would walk after school from – from our junior high which was on Florida Avenue to the – to the, what we called Teen Mid-way, it was the rec center, and it was where the Lakeland jail used to be. And then they built a new – uh Lakeland Police department just – just North of that, but it was on a corner there. And so, we would go to the mid – teen mid-way after school, then after school we would leave to go catch the bus which was like across the street from Munn Park. So, we'd walk through Munn – I have walked through Munn Park hundreds and hundreds of times, and I've seen that statue, never gave it a thought, just thought it

was nice – and now I see there’s a big ruckus over that confederate statue. One of my friends married into a family and they were originally from Georgia, and she told me recently that that – that family, her in-laws owned a marble granite company in Georgia that actually built and installed all those confederate statues and they did the one in Munn Park. But, I’ve watched Munn park change throughout the years, but that is just a – that’s just – we would go to town. When I was little, my mother didn’t drive, my sister didn’t drive; she was thirteen years older than me, and it was like having two mothers. But we would go to town, we’d get all dressed up, we’d go downtown and, um, you know, we would shop all day on Saturday. We’d shop all day Saturday, not that we had a whole lot of money, but you know – we’d, we’d find something. And we’d eat, we’d eat down there and it was just so neat. It was a really typically small town with a town square so to speak. So, I can’t think of a better place in the world to have grown up.

B: Do you still go – I know at Munn Park they have like a lots of events now-a-days – do you ever go to any of the events?

G: No, I would like to and I haven’t, and I know they have a wonderful art fair down on Lake Mirror that I wanted to go to. I haven’t done that. I have – I have friends in Lakeland that I go see occasionally, maybe spend a weekend – we’ve gone to some of the restaurants downtown like Harry’s restaurant. That used to be Jewett’s Drug Store, and that’s where my family bought all of our – our prescriptions. And the pharmacist was named Mr. Watson, and they had the typically um – soda fountain bar there that you could get, you know, they’d make sodas for you and that kind of thing. And they had the little cute, you know, soda fountain table and chairs – I can remember how that smelled in there. I – I can remember to this day. And then down the street from that – and this is all across the street from Munn Park. Across the street from, from – or down the street from – from Jewett’s which is now Harry’s, there was like two Five-and-Dime stores. One was W. T. Grant and then there was Kress’s, and then you continued on down closer to the railroad tracks and there was uh Montgomery Ward’s. Then when you crossed the – the street beside Montgomery Ward’s, then it was kinda like you got into a whole different, older part of Lakeland, you know? And, um, there was still some clothing stores down there. But one of ‘em, I can remember principally sold jeans, and um maybe some Levi’s because I know Levi’s jeans have been around forever. But mainly Wranglers and Lees cause that – they really catered to the older section of Lakeland, and there was still a lot of farmers out in North

Lakeland. And I can remember clothes weren't necessarily hanging up, they were folded on big tables. So, um, going into Kress's, they had a popcorn machine, right in the front door, and I don't know why it always smelled stale. There was just a stale smell when you would go in Kress's. But those sights and those smells and those sounds just stay with you.

B: Yeah. Um, I don't know when they started the Strawberry Festival in Plant City, but was that – did that happen when you were a kid?

G: Yeah, when I got older. By the time I got into like high school, you know did that occasionally. But for the most part we went – as we were growing up – we went to Winter Haven. They had um what they called the Orange Festival. But, but yeah, um, we went over to Cypress Gardens once in a while. We snuck into Cypress Gardens one time, I remember doin' that. I've told you about how we would just get in cars and cruise around, and I had a couple friends that actually had jeeps, and we would just load up in those jeeps and cars, as many as it would take. But we used to go to a place called Sand Mountain and – near Fort Meade, still Polk County, but a lot of mines – phosphate mines. And they, when they mined that stuff, you know, they're building big things of sand. So that was a big thing, we'd go over to Sand Mountain and climb that and then, you know, slide down on it on our butts, like you know – like we were snow skiing or somethin'. You just had to find your own fun. Going to football games was a lot of fun, and then when I was little –the Detroit Tigers training in Lakeland was a big deal, and my brothers were – were baseball players and athletes and my – my father and my uncle so that was a big deal in our family to go over and watch spring training and that sort of thing.

B: Yeah, did you – you said you played softball for two years, right? Did you do any other sports besides that or was that –

G: There was not a real – there was not an opportunity. I don't know when they ever started gymnastics in – in Lakeland or in Florida because that was not something that we were familiar with at all. There were not any sports provided for girls in high school or junior high school – it was all for boys. I know that in high school there was a tennis team and a golf team, things that girls could've done, you know? But there was not opportunity given for that.

B: Growing up, was there something that you really wanted to do when you got older for like as a career or were you just gonna kinda figure it out when you got there?

G: I was fairly smart, I could've you know, If I'd had an opportunity to – to go to college – in fact, I was a great student all the way through elementary school; I was very competitive, and I was that way in junior high. And then when I go to high school all of a sudden, I realized that my friends were all preparing for college, and I'm – and it's like well what am I doing? Cause in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I took biology, and I took a second year of algebra and you – you know some college prep type courses, and then it dawned on me, I thought 'well what are you doing? You're not gonna go to college', you know? So after that I began to take, you know, I took business courses and everything that was required and then in addition, I took business course.

B: Are you friends with any of the people that you grew up with, like in Lakeland, are still friends with them now? Any of the people that you went to school with?

G: Well, a friend that lives up the street, we're in Sunday school together, um we have been friends since we were five years old, and we're 75 now. We were in each other's classes from kindergarten all the way into the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, even in junior high and that was just kinda weird cause you had all these classes. We were still in all the same classes together. And she and I, of course, are still friends. And then, yeah, I have – I have friends in Lakeland; I'm supposed to go over to a birthday party this next weekend for a friend that's turning 75. And I have several that I'm real close with, and then there are a number of them that live other places. When we're able to get together we still do. I mean, it – most of those kids that grew up over there, whoever they were friends with they've remained so for the most part.

B: Yeah, that's good. I feel like it's hard in our day-and-age now, just with like all of technology, and we're all so like ADD whereas at least when you were growing up, like you just found your own fun.

G: Exactly, and it bonded you with your friends because you were sharing that together – doing that. And you know, I feel sorry for kids today, I really do. I mean I was blessed to come up in the fifties, and I know even my kids felt like they had a – a good, you know growing up time and one graduated in 1982 and then '86 and '89. But even theirs was fairly different from my opportunity; growing up in the 1950s in Lakeland was probably the best experience you could have.

B: What would you say is one of your favorite childhood memories?

G: As silly as it sounds, going to the summer playground every summer, that was just – couldn't wait for that to start. And then– and then of course when Elvis came to town – and, and just being an Elvis fan anyway. That was just exciting – and just enjoying the music from the fifties. And going to the movies, I mean I don't go to the movies much anymore simply because I don't have anybody to [go with.] It – it would be difficult for me to go to the movies anymore because you have to, you know, do everything online and pick out your seats – like my word! And you can't say to somebody 'hey, I'm gonna go to the movie. Do you want to go?' and if they say 'Well I, I can't be there until so-and-so' Well I'll save you a seat, you can't do that anymore! Well it's just too – I don't know, I just love the spontaneity of just 'hey, let's go to the movie'. Cause back then, like I could just go in any time of the day, and if you didn't want to go into the theatre to watch the movie from the beginning then you could go up into the lovely mezzanine and pretend like you were a rich lady or something. But yeah, movies – I would say, movies is real high on my list. I think one of the first Disney movies I ever saw was *Bambi*.

B: Oh.

G: And when my daughter – my oldest daughter was getting ready to be married, I mean just like days away from being able to be married, um. They re-released *Bambi* for the first time since it had originally come out and that was such a great memory for me. Have – have you seen *Bambi*?

B: Yeah, I've seen it.

G: That is so precious. Well I got all my kids together and we went to the Florlamo in Tampa to see *Bambi*, they couldn't believe and I said 'No, you can't grow up without seeing *Bambi*! This may be your only opportunity.' Shelly was getting' married in a few days; she still tells that story. I said 'What kind of mother would I be if I didn't take y'all to see *Bambi*?' But that was the first – I'm sure that was the first Disney movie that I ever saw – but that, like I said, I didn't – I wasn't into like little kids movies too much. I kinda –

B: Did you ever go see the cowboy movies or you just like totally –

G: Once in a while – once in a blue moon, yes, but that was just like hooky to me. And it was loud, I mean those kids they didn't know how to behave in movies. You know, they were loud

and just throwin' popcorn all around and everything. It's like, I was like – I was a serious movie go-er at a very young age. You can relate to that.

B: Yes, yes, we're very serious about movies. We really are. We'll I don't have any other questions for you, do you have any other fun stories or...?

G: Occasionally we would go to the beach, and usually it was Indian Rocks. There were no condominiums, there were – there were some hotels – and they're still there. The Thunderbird hotel – they were mom and pop cottages, and the pine trees were still growing there. You had the sand, but beyond the sand, you had the pine trees and then these little cottages, and just owned by, you know, local people. And to me, that was so much more of a beach experience, you know? So that was fun; I did have a friend whose parent's owned a cottage at Indian Rocks, and we went with her occasionally.

B: Got it all.