

LULA MAE JACKSON

Interview 233a

January 8, 1986, at her home, Lufkin, Texas

Odis O. Rhodes, Interviewer

Patsy Colbert, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this interview with her son-in-law Odis Rhodes, Lula Mae Jackson reminisces about growing up in Lufkin's African American community. Mrs. Jackson was born in Lufkin and lived in Angelina County her entire life. She was known, as a child and an adult, for her musical talents, playing the piano and leading choirs all over the city and traveling for religious conventions. She also recites poetry and recalls recitation contests with fondness. Most of the interview covers her childhood and life as a musician, mentioning her parents, siblings, husband, children, and school teachers and friends, including Mrs. Long.

Odis O. Rhodes (hereafter OR): Hello, the date of this recording is Wednesday January 8, 1986. My name is Odis O. Rhodes and I am conducting an informal interview or an informal conversation with my mother-in-law, Mrs. Lula Mae Jackson, who is affectionately referred to by most people in this community as Momma Lula. So, you will most frequently hear me refer to her by that title rather than by any other title. Momma Lula is a rather remarkable person because at the tender age of 92 she maintains the alertness, the vision, the wit and the wisdom of a much younger person. She cooks for herself and maintains her own home. She counsels the neighborhood's youth and adults including myself. She is an avid reader and she is very active in her church, the First Missionary Baptist Church of Lufkin, at which she is in regular attendance and she presently plays the piano for the Sunday school. Now Momma Lula if for any reason or at any point during this interview you wish to postpone, delay or cancel it simply say so. Okay? I'll begin by simply asking where were you born?

Lula Mae Jackson (hereafter LJ): I don't know, just here in town. It was here in Lufkin, I'll just use that word because I don't know whether they was carrying any of them to hospitals and things like that or not.

OR: So, you were born in Lufkin?

LJ: Yes.

OR: Were you born in the little town of Lufkin or were you born in some little settlement on the outside of Lufkin like Kelty's or Cedar Grove or were you born in Lufkin itself?

LJ: Here in Lufkin.

OR: So, you were born in the little town of Lufkin?

LJ: Yes.

OR: What was your father's name?

LJ: Forrest Jones.

OR: Forrest Jones. And do you know where he was born?

LJ: No.

OR: You do not know where he was born?

LJ: No.

OR: What about your mother, what was her name?

LJ: She came out from Trinity County somewhere is what she told me. When she left home she run away. They were on a farm and she come on in here because she left her husband. Well I won't say she left him, she left him but they couldn't get along.

OR: I see. What was your mother's name?

LJ: Emma Jones.

OR: Emma Jones. That was after she married your father, who was Forrest Jones, then she became Emma Jones.

LJ: That was his name too. They had been married you see.

OR: Oh your father...

LJ: And her.

OR: ...and your mother had been married and then they kind of split up and came back together later.

LJ: They didn't come back but here is what he would do. When he would go to the woods laying down pipelines and things like that he would always have a woman at his camp.

OR: Oh really?

LJ: Yes, them with gowns you know, and all like that and he always had a woman and he would get mad and he would say, "Emma come on out there and cook." She wouldn't have nothing to do with him but she would go out there and cook, one or two and they would get mad and when he would leave going on to his work she would go to the commissary and just buy, buy, buy and catch that train and come right on back to Lufkin.

OR: Come on back to Lufkin where her children and other folks were. (laughter)

LJ: Yes, that is what she would do. That is what she would do. (laughter)

OR: Did you have any sisters or brothers?

LJ: Lonzo, there is Jo Nita, and M.C. is dead.

OR: So, Lonzo is your brother then?

LJ: Yes.

OR: Did you have another brother?

LJ: Yes, M. C., that was the baby boy. He was younger than me you see. He was with us you see.

OR: So, you had two brothers Lonzo and M.C. What about sisters, did you have any sisters?

LJ: No.

OR: You didn't have any sisters at all?

LJ: No.

OR: And, have you lived in Angelina County all your life?

LJ: Yes.

OR: You've lived here all your life.

LJ: Yes.

OR: Is that so? Then you are a long time resident of Angelina County then. You have just indicated one...

LJ: You see, I was raised in the church and we go places and there were several places where we go I would play the organ or piano for the funerals and people would sing in that convention. I was always into that.

OR: I see, but you always lived in Angelina County and in Lufkin?

LJ: Yes.

OR: Well you have already indicated one way that your dad earned his living. He worked laying down pipeline I guess.

LJ: Yes, but them women they were good to us. They would pack up boxes of brand new ready made things and send to me and M. C. and send them here, and there was one woman...I don't know whether Lizzie is dead or not or one of them Nacogdoches women, she come here and she would stay five or six days with Momma.

OR: Is that right?

LJ: She didn't care. (laughter) Momma didn't care, Momma would go on and do her work.

OR: Well what kind of work did your momma do?

LJ: Momma worked, sometimes it was according to...she worked mostly cooking and when she wasn't cooking she was just a maid, you know, at the hotels and things like that.

OR: I see.

LJ: Yes, and we...she always had a babysitter, Momma always had a babysitter.

OR: A babysitter for her kids?

LJ: Yes, me and M. C.

OR: Is that right?

LJ: Right, you are right about that now O.D.

OR: So, even though she was out working herself she made sure she found...

LJ: Yes, and I mean they was like...they would like to do it too because she kept plenty of flour and stuff.

OR: Plenty of food to eat in other words.

LJ: Yes.

OR: So, the babysitter knew they were going to get plenty to eat when they came.

LJ: Yes, they got plenty.

OR: Well when you grew up and got older did you do any kind of work around the house yourself when you were still living with your mother and dad as you became say ten or twelve, fourteen years old?

LJ: As I grew up you see, Mrs. Garrett was a wonderful woman and she seen that the Henry's, she would pick up the best girls and carry them to the place where she worked and so she would take care of us. She seen that we walked right and talked right. She absolutely took care of us!

OR: Is that right?

LJ: Yes, she sure did do it! And she is the first one come to camp meeting and Sunday school and church. Little old...it was New Zion, y'all's church.

OR: Is that right?

LJ: Yes, come around there, you know close to that railroad track, down in there. You know you can come up a street and come out to Main Street you know, like you are coming to that building there.

OR: Or you could go through a trail or something and go across the track and also get over there.

LJ: Yes, used to be Shiloh or New Zion.

OR: New Zion. So, as a young girl you didn't have any steady job?

LJ: No.

OR: Is that right? So, you kind of grew up in a culture kind of way that I would suppose most young girls of your age and race maybe didn't quite have the upbringing that you had then.

LJ: Momma seen that every time I had a good day that...now a lot of times I used to would go with her on jobs and put out a washing and help her in that way.

OR: Help her on her job.

LJ: Yes, and hike out to school and put in a few days and then kept...it take Mrs. Young to tell you about me.

OR: Is that right?

LJ: Yes.

OR: What was school like in those days? What kind of things did you run into?

LJ: Oh it was wonderful!

OR: You enjoyed school then.

LJ: Yes, I did. When there was Mrs. Long, Mrs. Long, her husband was a brakeman and she take extra lessons to come out to the school house and take extra lessons under Professor...I did know his name, I can't think of it now, Fears. She would come out and take but she would hate to be, you know, by herself in there and they...and she would stick her head out and say, "Lula come on, come on in here and be in here with me in this class." Even though I was learning I would go in there. I would go in there and sit down and I learned a lot.

OR: Even though the class was not especially for you, you would go in with her to be with her and you could learn.

LJ: No, no I was just to be with her. And as sure as it was over with, it wouldn't be no more than a half an hour, I could be back out there with R. D. Jones, and I had a friend, she was so jealous she couldn't stand it. If she talked to another girl and so, but that was it.

OR: That was what your school life was like. Did y'all have any special occasions during your school days like they have now?

LJ: Oh yes, that Hugh (unintelligible) could get up there and there was a speech he said, no that was Robert Brown that spoke that speech.

OR: Would these be special programs the school would put on?

LJ: Oh, you talk about special programs and when that girl came out from Beaumont, Laura Bass, beautiful black girl, she was...had been studying music, of course she hadn't finished but she came on in here and got our class, so she done very nicely and had a big concert one night. Laura had me playing the bass part. She was on this end and I was on this end and some of them said, "my God," said, "Lula can beat her." (laughing) You know, it just...it's wonderful to live like that O. D.

OR: It is indeed.

LJ: Yes!

OR: You mentioned awhile ago one of the happiest moments of your life, can you explain again what the happiest moment of your life was? It had to do with them needing somebody to teach music or something like that. How did that come about?

LJ: Oh it was! It was a big association was coming here and they were needing First Baptist Choir trained and I been intended to ask our pastor and his wife, but at that time they ought to know a little something about this old lady, she was a regular missionary

woman. She was coming and her daughter was coming right to First Baptist to this here meeting, and they wanted, you see, they were going to need somebody to train this First Baptist Choir and get it ready for Beaumont, get it ready for Beaumont. So, I got word that they needed, that they were going to need somebody that could play by note. Play by note, Odean.

OR: Play by note and not just by ear, I see.

LJ: Play by note! So, and so, when we got the choir organized she told this man, the commander of that choir, a man that was going to come in and train this choir, you see. He lived over here in Lufkin Land, and I can't think of that man's name now. So, when I come to train them I trained them because it wasn't another black woman, black gal, in Lufkin that was playing by note but me.

OR: Is that right?

LJ: But me Odean.

OR: That is remarkable.

LJ: Now, I'm telling you. The only one and that was me.

OR: So, they chose you to train this choir?

LJ: Yes, and I trained them and when I got through with them then I went on and then there are people who can play good music and don't know one note from another.

OR: Yes, that is true.

LJ: Sure was, but it wasn't a one, just that one Negro, I was the only Negro in Lufkin!

OR: That could play by note. That is remarkable.

LJ: I'm telling you that is enough to be happy over.

OR: That is indeed, and you are quite talented.

LJ: I left them and went on out to Kelty's and got Kelty's ready for Beaumont.

OR: After getting First Baptist ready?

LJ: After I got through at First Baptist.

OR: You went to Kelty's and got them ready.

LJ: Yes, because Kelty's is in the same association that...

OR: First Baptist was.

LJ: ...she is carrying them to Beaumont.

OR: I see.

LJ: I smell something burning.

OR: Okay, when you got grown and started your family how did you meet your husband?

LJ: How did I meet mine?

OR: Yes.

LJ: Let's see, he was the best! He was about the best thing you ever want to see. We went...

OR: Where did your husband work at that time?

LJ: The box factory.

OR: The box factory.

LJ: The box factory, up here where the train goes, where you go around by Mrs. Hills.

OR: The round house I think we used to call it.

LJ: Yes, and not far from there used to be a box factory in there, a box factory in there.

OR: And that is where you met him?

LJ: That is where I met him.

OR: His full name was what?

LJ: Nathan Jackson.

OR: Nathan Jackson.

LJ: Yes and...

OR: And y'all had how many children? The oldest child do you recall?

LJ: The oldest one was Lola Bea.

OR: Lola Bea.

LJ: Yes, the oldest one is Lola Bea and she is the oldest and Boy, that is Nathaniel.

OR: Nathan Jr.

LJ: Yes, and there was Roscoe next.

OR: Lola Bea wasn't the same as Velma was it? Did you have a girl name Velma?

LJ: Velma was his sweetheart, he was intended. Velma was the one that Boy was going to get married to.

OR: Oh, that wasn't your daughter?

LJ: No.

OR: Oh okay.

LJ: That is the one you were helping me out with.

OR: Okay, so Lola Bea was the oldest, then Nathaniel Jr. who we call Boy, then Roscoe.

LJ: Yes.

OR: Then Bobby.

LJ: No, there was Tee up there.

OR: And then Bobby and Pat and then Fulton.

LJ: Yes.

OR: In all then you had Lola Bea, Boy, Roscoe,

LJ: I don't have Boy do I?

OR: Yes, that was Nathan Jr. I mean all the children you had at one time. I was thinking of...

LJ: It was...

OR: Lola Bea was your first child. Boy was your second child.

LJ: Yes, Boy was second.

OR: Was Roscoe older than Tee?

LJ: Yes, Roscoe is older than Tee.

OR: Then Tee, and Bobby and Pat and Fulton.

LJ: Yes.

OR: So, all in all you have had seven children all in all. I see. You were mentioning where you worked, after you became grown yourself then you started working. What kind of job did you work on?

LJ: I cooked.

OR: You cooked most of the time.

LJ: Yes, I cooked and then I still take music again because you see she was a German.

OR: You were taking music even after you got grown?

LJ: Sure!

OR: Is that right?

LJ: It is so much to learn.

OR: Did you ever teach anybody else music?

LJ: Oh yes, yes, yes! I reckon I have. I had good classes, good classes!

OR: Did you ever teach music in school or did you teach music at your home all the time?

LJ: I taught music here.

OR: Here at your home.

LJ: I taught it here.

OR: Are there any special events that affected your family after you became married that affected your family more than any other event such as World War I, World War II, prohibition days or the Depression days? Do you recall any particular event that was especially hard for you or especially happy for you after you became married yourself and had a family? Was your family life pretty much just a normal everyday family life?

LJ: Yes, it was good, you know, after Momma married...no after Momma died then we...the place we was living we swapped it with old man Julius Smith for these.

OR: I see.

LJ: And so we got along all right. We got along all right.

OR: Can you recall any famous individuals that you met during your childhood or during your adulthood as you traveled to these different churches and played with these different choirs and things?

LJ: Yes, the thing that thrilled me most was I love church and the friends that I went about with from time to time they were church workers and that kept me in the church taking part with the different activities that would come about, you know.

OR: I see.

LJ: I love church and as I grew up...

OR: Then the most important people that you came in contact with perhaps were church people, either outstanding singers or outstanding choirs.

LJ: Absolutely.

OR: Can you recall any particular preacher or any particular choir or any particular singer that you consider to be most outstanding?

LJ: Well I met...uh...I would say...well you see to mention these people...I'm just talking right now, see the people that had a lot of interest in me were church goers, church workers, and there were these people we went about from different little towns and things like that we worked in the church. That was our...

OR: Mission in life so to speak at that time.

LJ: Yes.

OR: How did you travel back in those days? Did you have cars?

LJ: On trains.

OR: On trains, is that right?

LJ: Now, let's see...Kennard, I'm trying to think, it's on the way to San Augustine. I'm trying to think of that particular little town. We would go there and change and go on into San Augustine and Mrs. Garrett, you know, now that was my bodyguard.

OR: That was your bodyguard.

LJ: We followed her leadership. We would go to Diboll. She was the teacher you know.

OR: I see.

LJ: She was a school teacher.

OR: I imagine that was pretty exciting for you girls to travel from place to place by train in particular at that time.

LJ: Yes, you had to do right.

OR: You had to walk the chalk with her in other words.

LJ: You sure did, you sure did.

OR: Do you recall any particular sayings or poems or songs or passages that meant something special to you from those days? I have heard mention you used to recite poetry is that right?

LJ: Yes, Dunbar's Poems.

OR: Dunbar's poems. They fascinated you did they?

LJ: It would take a good one. I tell you the people that run the place up here, the undertaker.

OR: Oh, Timms?

LJ: Yes, they got a sister who was much younger than me but we rallied together.

OR: Oh, is that right.

LJ: Oh, she was something. She was good and...

OR: Y'all would kind of compete against each other huh?

LJ: Yes.

OR: Do you happen to recall any of those poems?

LJ: Well I can't recall any of her poems only they would be Dunbar's, Dunbar's poems but to remember any particular poem I can't.

OR: Can't recall any of them.

LJ: I can't, but I could always remember mine and I yet, now this is *When Malindy Sings*. I do that along now.

OR: Oh, you do that now. You want to give us a few verses of it or as much as you can remember of it.

LJ: Yes, I will. "Go and quit that noise Miss. Lucy," see you we're sitting at the piano here and just a going and there ain't no way in the world for you to learn how to play but you sitting there fumbling with that piano, I walk up to the piano and I say, "go away and quit that noise Mrs. Lucy, put that music book away. What need of keep on trying, if you practice until you are grey, you can't start by no surprise. I tell you one thing now Miss. Lucy and I'm telling you for sure, when it comes to real good singing it ain't no easy thing to do. It's easy enough for folks to holler and looking at the lines and dots and it ain't no need," ... (whispered) Let's see what is that. I got that book here, "looking at the lines and dots and there..."

OR: Well that is mighty fine for you to recall that much of it.

LJ: ...looking at the lines and dots and it ain't no need" and (whispers) it goes on to say...

OR: Well, I can just detect that you were a tremendous recital of poetry back in those days.

LJ: "And there ain't no one to (unintelligible) and the tune comes in and starts but when it comes to real good music and I'm telling you for sure it ain't no one can...you just ought to sit and listen at me. You all can hear that gal a warbling down here, you just ought to hear that girl a warbling, the robins and birds and all them things. Throw away the drums and guitars when Melinda sings, she just breathes her mouth and holler come on to Jesus do you hear, sinners trembling heart and voices timid like a growing (unintelligible) then she comes to rock of ages, simply to you Lord we cling. And you here (unintelligible) you ought to sit and listen with me while I sit and listen. Go away and quit that noise Miss. Lucy, put that...stop that dog from barking, can't you hear, I can hear it as I sit and listen when Melinda sings."

OR: Well that is mighty fine. We can tell you have quite a talent reciting poetry those days. To close our informal conversation out would you like to just strike us a little tune on the piano so we can sort of reminisce of what it was like to hear you in the days when you were the famous pianist.

LJ: Playing the piano.

OR: And there you have it gentleman, the life and times of Mrs. Lula Mae Jones Jackson. A remarkable lady, thank you Mamma Lulu and God Bless.

END OF INTERVIEW

***Editor's Note:** Mrs. Jackson recites part of *When Malindy Sings* by Paul Laurence Dunbar, an African American poet and the namesake of Lufkin's African American Dunbar High School. For the full text of the poem, see <http://www.dunbarsite.org/gallery/WhenMalindySings.asp>