

**SHERYL SMALL**

**Interview 298a**

**August 5, 2021, at The History Center, Diboll, Texas**

**Jonathan Gerland and Emily Hyatt, Interviewers**

**Allison Hearne, Transcriber**

**ABSTRACT:**

In this interview with Jonathan Gerland and Emily Hyatt, Sheryl Small reminisces about spending time in the Boykin Settlement Community in southern Angelina County, at the home of her grandparents Harrison and Mary Frazier. Mrs. Small recalls the lessons she learned from her grandparents and other family members, attending the segregated African American school at Vernon/County Line, the difference in her small community and her schools in the Houston area, and all of her aunts and uncles. She discusses the Frazier's thirteen children, their accomplishments, and how the family lived – their religious beliefs and how they navigated racial prejudice. She also discusses her education in segregated and then integrated Houston area schools, attending Texas A&M University as one of the few African American women at the school, and her career in the mining and petrochemical industries.

**Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG):** Today is August the...is it the 5<sup>th</sup>?

**Emily Hyatt (hereafter EH):** Yes. It is.

**Sheryl Small (hereafter SS):** Yes.

**JG:** ...August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021. My name is Jonathan Gerland and I'm with Emily Hyatt. We're at The History Center today, and Mrs. Sheryl Small from Houston has driven up, and she's showing us lots of photographs and documents from her family of the Boykin Settlement area. Vernon / County Line School District. We wanted to take this opportunity to record her memories as we go through some of these papers. But, Mrs. Small, just tell us some of your earliest memories of growing up in that part of the world.

**SS:** Well, my grandparents...I was very close, I can say probably, as a grandchild, I felt like they belonged to me. So, when my other cousins were around it was like 'they're my grandparents!'

**JG:** And who were you're grandparents, for the recording.

**SS:** Harrison and Mary Frazier.

**JG:** Ok.

**SS:** I just remember the house originally, it only had like, I think it was like three rooms...three or four rooms. And I remember my grandfather expanding the house, and he made it much bigger, so... And I remember that we had a double fireplace. There was

a fireplace like in the dining room and then on the other side, there was a fireplace in their bedroom.

**EH:** Right.

**SS:** I also remember we always had an outdoor toilet. I mean, that was it. And my grandfather, when he expanded the house, he put in a bathroom on the back porch, and my grandmother refused to use it. She said you weren't supposed to use the bathroom in the house. And so, she would always go to the outhouse, but everybody else would use it—the bathroom in the house—until it snowed up there one winter. And it was so much snow that she couldn't *get* to the outhouse. So, then she had to use the toilet.

**JG:** And then there was no going back.

**SS:** And there was no going back.

**EH:** That's right. Very convenient.

**SS:** My grandfather always had a strong work ethic. I do remember that as a little girl, because he always told me, 'Baby, if you want anything in life, you've got to work for it.' He says, 'Nothing is free.' And he told me to get a good education, because they weren't educated. He says, 'Get a good education, because man can take everything from you, but God has given you a brain.' He says, 'And use your brain. It's a God-given brain. So, man can't take that from you.'

And the memories were so good because I remember my...you know the house was on one side of the road and then they had like a pasture, and they farmed behind the house. Huge farm. Corn, peas, melons, cotton. They had pear trees, all kinds...pecan trees. Horses, cattle. And when I was three years old, my mom was sort of like an outdoors person, so she would always help my grandfather do something with the cows. Or my mom loved to hunt and loved to fish. And as a little girl, because the house was on one side of the road and the pasture and where they worked with the cows was on the other, my grandfather and my mom were moving some cows from one area to another area. And my mother was driving a tractor and I saw them. So, I ran out from the front porch and my mother ran over me—

**EH:** Oh, goodness!

**JG:** Oh, no!

**SS:** --with the tractor. And broke this right leg. It was the femur bone. Just popped it. I was about three years old. So of course, when you hear them tell the story, my mom...she was in such shock, every time she tried to jump off the tractor, she wasn't putting it in the right gear, so it would go forward and hit me again. So, my grandfather had to come and get up on the tractor, and then my aunt, my aunt Emma Lee—she was one of the oldest ones—she pulled me from up under it. And they rushed me to Jasper, and I was in the hospital in Jasper for three months. I still have the scars from it now—

**EH:** I bet.

**JG:** Wow.

**SS:** -- from such a young age. You know, these were stories they told me, that my grandfather told the doctor...and I'm trying to remember that doctor's name...he says, 'I wish it had been me. I wish it had been me.' You know. And the doctor told him, 'Harrison, if it had been you, you'd never get well. This child is going to be ok.'

**EH:** Right.

**JG:** What year were you born?

**SS:** 1953.

**JG:** 1953.

**SS:** Yeah, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1953. And I was born in Houston. We lived in Houston at that time. Spending time with my grandparents, I would see them working hard. They had chickens. They had hogs. You know, they lived off the land. They lived off what they grew. The animals they had. I remember going to auctions with my grandfather, because he would sell his cows. He would buy cows. You know, it just seemed like everybody knew my grandfather. My grandmother worked in the house, but also, she worked in the field. I never learned to milk a cow, but I used to watch her milk a cow.

**JG:** That's the thing we hear so much about your family was that they were well respected in both worlds.

**SS:** Mmhmm. Yep. Most definitely. And I think that was because of their love for the Lord. They were very strong in their faith. They were very strong in believing that they had a purpose in life, and basically your identity was in Jesus Christ. You know, man can try to find your identity, but we live in a...this is a spiritual world. We're in the world, but not in the world. And...

**JG:** Not of it.

**SS:** Yes, yes. We're not of the world. They just had this...there was something about them that was almost indescribable, and I was blessed on both sides. My maternal grandparents and my paternal grandparents who lived in South Carolina, but when you look back at history, my family never talked about hardships or being inferior or being oppressed. And I'm sure they were, but that wasn't the focus. The focus was always love. And you're blessed with what you have. You know, even the way the situations were when they were so segregated back then, it was just sort of like, 'This is life and you work with life, and you do it...'

**EH:** Make the best of it.

**SS:** You make the best of it. This is just the way it is. And just always know who you are in Jesus Christ. And so...

**JG:** I think of that verse: All things work together for good for those who love the Lord—

**SS:** For Good! Always. And you know for them to have ten girls, three boys, unfortunately—well I can't say unfortunately, it was just the way it was supposed to be—you would think there would be a whole lotta cousins, with ten girls especially. But no, there was only fifteen grandchildren and one was adopted. So, only four girls and one boy had children, but it was a beautiful life, you know. During that time, when everybody would go to my grandparents' house, there wasn't enough beds so we would make pallets and sleep on the floor. Some would sleep on the porch. You know, because at that time you didn't air condition...didn't have air conditioning, you had window fans and all. But it was just a beautiful life.

**JG:** So, who was your mother?

**SS:** My mother was Genoria. Yeah, she was the tenth child.

**JG:** And did she grow up there?

**SS:** Yes, she grew up there, too. Until she went to school.

**JG:** Now you lived in Houston when you were born, but are these memories of your visits? Or did y'all move back?

**SS:** When my father died, I went and stayed. My mother was very close to her parents, so since my dad was in the Army, we spent a lot of time up in East Texas, because we would come back and forth every weekend. So, even though living in Houston and born in Houston and grew up, I remember more about my grandparents' place than I do living in Houston. Because it seems like I spent more time there. My grandfather taught me how to read, he taught me how to write. So, when I went to school, I started school in the Boykin Settlement.

**EH:** Oh, ok.

**SS:** At the Vernon / County Line School. Two room school house. High school was on one side. Elementary school was on the other side. So, they had Professor Phillips, who is in one of those pictures I think...I think it's maybe one of the ones I found. I'll show it to you. So, Professor Phillips, who was the superintendent, the principal, and the high school teacher. And then it was Toledo Russell, who was my mom's first cousin, who was Helen Darden's sister, she taught elementary and junior high. I think it was element—no, first through sixth. Just elementary and Professor Phillips I think had

seventh through the twelfth. And she had us lined up like first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, fifth, and so forth. And then she would go from one line to the next. She would teach the first graders, then teach the second graders.

And then I remember the old soda machines where you know it was like they would have the bottles because they didn't have cans. It was all bottles. And you'd have to take a bottle and take it through like a maze, and then pull it out. And we would have lunch. We had a little cafeteria area, and then I just remember playing out in the dirt. And those cockle-burrs...we called them cockle-burrs.

**EH:** Yes! Yes!

**SS:** They would get all in your clothes, and in your socks.

**EH:** You can't get them out.

**SS:** You can't get them out. No, no. So, when my mom actually moved to Bay City, Texas, I had started school at Vernon / County Line and then we had to move. Well, she ended up getting a job. She had a job in Houston, but unfortunately during that time – you know this was in the late '50s and like 1960 – she was fired from her job because this was when she was in the medical technology field. Because there were people that didn't want her to touch them, because of the color of her skin.

**EH:** Goodness.

**SS:** And so, these doctors fired her. And she had a friend living in Bay City, and that friend was the one who told her that three doctors were looking for a lab and x-ray technician in Bay City, Texas. And so, she got the job. We moved there in 19—I think it was around January of 1961. I know I was in the first grade, and because of what I had learned from my grandfather, and going to Vernon / County Line, they wanted to skip me a grade because I was already ahead of the kids at the school in Bay City.

**EH:** You got a better education in the county.

**SS:** Exactly. Exactly. But we still went back and forth almost every weekend or every two weeks. We were back up there in Boykin Settlement with Mary and Harrison Frazier and I remember my grandmother churning, because I loved buttermilk. I loved clabber. And I used to wear chubbies, because I loved cornbread and syrup. Because my grandfather had a syrup mill, and he grew sugar cane, so he made his syrup. I mean, when I say he lived off the land, he worked...he worked...my grandfather worked really hard because he had jobs. He cut timber. He worked at the quarry. You know that's how the Blue Hole was founded, because they came back one day and all the equipment was covered up with this water. They hit an aquifer and it was just beautiful.

**JG:** Talk a little bit about that. Did you swim in the Blue Hole?

**SS:** No, because I didn't learn how to swim until I was...lived in Bay City. But we used to go to the Blue Hole. I had a cousin that would swing off the tree. But what we did do at the Blue Hole, we baptized.

**EH:** Ok.

**SS:** So, you know, when you first go in the first part was high. It was a ledge where you had to jump off the rocks. But if you walked around on the other side, it was more shallow, and that's where we used to baptize.

**JG:** And what was the name of the church there? Do you remember? Was it that, uh...I was trying to remember the name?

**SS:** Wait a minute.

**JG:** Rockwall?

**SS:** Rockwall Union Church.

**JG:** Rockwall Union Church. And the cemetery is connected with that.

**SS:** The cemetery is...no, it's not. Well, you have to drive to the cemetery. It's more up near where...

**JG:** Yeah, I think by road it's a farther distance than by straight line distance.

**SS:** Yeah. Exactly. Exactly.

**JG:** So, the community was tied to the church? The school?

**SS:** Pretty much so. Because, yeah, the school and the church. That was it. And Zavalla and probably Colmesneil were the closest towns. Because I think after they closed Vernon / County Line School, the children were bussed to Colmesneil to go to school. But I was gone then.

**JG:** You know, physically it was in Angelina County, and then Jasper County was there, and of course you know the river dam was Tyler County, but it was always a part of the Tyler County schools.

**SS:** Oh, really?

**EH:** It went back and forth. We have records and the school records. You know, we don't think we can get our buses down there. Well, we can. Well, now we can't get our buses down there. Can you? You know and it was kind of back and forth.

**SS:** Back and forth. Yeah.

**EH:** But it's now, I still think that that part of the county is technically Colmesneil now.

**JG:** We thought that was very interesting...

**SS:** I haven't been there in a long time.

**JG:** ...and wondered if racism might have played a part in that. I don't know if..

**EH:** It's not in the school records, but I would assume so because...

**SS:** Yeah, because Zavalla was closer than Colmesneil, but they couldn't go to school in Zavalla.

**EH:** I think that was the unspoken issue in the records. But it was all about we can't get the buses down the roads.

**SS:** Right, right. But I don't know. It was just beautiful. I loved it up there. I mean, I'm not a hunter or fisherman, but my mom was now. My mom loved that.

**JG:** Talk about that. What do you remember of your mom hunting and fishing? Describe that a little bit.

**SS:** Every time we were in the country, she had a .22, and she liked to hunt rabbit and squirrel. I don't ever remember her hunting deer. And she would go out by herself. Once she got lost in the woods.

**JG:** Uh oh.

**EH:** Oh, goodness.

**SS:** Yes.

**JG:** But she grew up there though, right?

**SS:** She grew up there. She loved to hunt. My grandfather built a pond across the road from the house, and then there was a pond back in the field that was north of the house that you had to drive to. You couldn't walk to it. My grandfather loved to fish, but he was an impatient fisherman. He wanted the fish to bite as soon as he put his pole in the water.

**JG:** We call that you like to catch fish, not fish. That's the difference.

**SS:** But he loved to go. My grandmother was a homebody. She stayed close to home. But my grandfather, if you said go, he was ready to go somewhere. And I guess my mother got that from him. I remember some of the old stories they told about my great-grandparents lived in the field south, southwest of the house.

**JG:** And who would that be?

**SS:** And that was the Runnels. Yeah. So, they could go...you could walk to it. And my mom told me a story about how they sent her to get some butter, I think. She was coming back across the field and they saw her and she was running because she wanted to hurry up and get back to the house. She said my grandmother said, 'Genoria, don't you drop that butter.' And she said as soon as she said it, she tripped and down she went.

And then they told a story of...ok, so it was just three boys, and I don't know how many children. It might have been close to the thirteen. I don't know if Aunt Rose had been born or my Uncle Preacher. But you know at Christmas time, they didn't get a lot. My grandmother made dolls for them out of...the doll hair was corn...cornsilk. The dolls she made out of sack cloth and stuffed them with cotton. And my grandfather might would go to town and get some apples or oranges. And that was Christmas for them. He'd cut down a tree. Well, my uncle...

**JG:** Pine? Or Cedar? For Christmas tree?

**SS:** For Christmas tree. Cedar. And so, my Uncle Brah, who was the oldest boy, he knew that my Aunt Emma Lee was afraid of snakes. So, what he did was...

**EH:** So is this Emily. (laughter)

**SS:** So, he decided he would kill a snake and put it in a shoebox, which you know, they never got shoes. And went in the house and said, 'Who wants some shoes? Who wants some new shoes?' And of course, my Aunt Emma Lee said, 'I do, I do, I do.' She opened up the box and – she used to have seizures – and she had a seizure. So, when he told this story, he said, 'Mama' – meaning my grandmother—'Mama took me out to that pecan tree, and tied me to the tree, and whipped me.'

**EH:** He deserved it.

**SS:** Yeah, he deserved it. Then I remember this story about how my aunt Martilla, her nickname was Crybaby. And I brought you a book. Some of this is captured in their golden wedding anniversary. Her nickname was Crybaby, but she loved to bake. So, she used to bake cookies, and she would bring the cookies, after she would bake the cookies, she would be so proud. And my mother said instead of all of them coming together and ask for a cookie, they would go in one at a time. 'Martilla, can I have a cookie?' 'Martilla, can I have a cookie?' (laughs) 'Martilla, can I have a cookie?' And you know it's a long line of them until they said she would start crying and say, 'Just take 'em all!'

When we used to have big family reunions or gatherings, whether it was Christmas or my grandparents' anniversaries, or whatever...I don't know any of my aunts and my mother who couldn't cook. All of them could cook. But what was funny was that they would be in the kitchen and nobody would just go ahead and cook what they knew how to cook. They would always say like, 'Emma Lee, you know, how do you cook your greens? How do you cook your steak? How do you cook your whatever?' But

all of them would gather in the kitchen, and it would be so...I would remember the greens. It would be so many greens—this was after my grandparents got a washing machine because until then they would hang their clothes out on a line—but they would take the greens and wash them in the washing machine.

**EH:** Yes. I have heard of that.

**SS:** Because there was so many to wash.

**EH:** That's a lot of greens.

**SS:** Lot of greens. Lot of greens. And then another story I remember my mom telling me was my grandfather was a deacon. So, they were really big in the church. I mean...I wouldn't say big. I would say active. Very active in the church. Every Sunday, the pastor...they would always invite the preacher and his family to come over and eat. Well, the adults would eat first, then the children. So, they decided...I think the adults were sitting on the front porch and my grandmother had set the table, because we always sat around the table to eat. So, there was a ham sitting on the table. So, they decided that they were going to get some of that ham before the grown-ups got to eat. So, they had taken the ham off the plate. They didn't pull the platter. They just took the ham off the plate and was getting them some ham, and they heard my grandparents coming and tried to throw the ham back on the plate, and it slid off. So, then all of them got a spanking.

**EH:** I'll bet.

**SS:** Yeah, all of them got a spanking.

**JG:** I was looking here in your, this is the golden wedding anniversary for Harrison and Mary Frazier, and it lists your mom as a cast member, and the description for her is 'Game Hunter.'

**SS:** That's right.

**JG:** I can't help but notice but, "Dessor Ree (pronounces as De-sorry)"...I don't know if I'm saying that name correctly.

**SS:** Which one?

**JG:** "De-sorry" or "Des-ah-ray"

**SS:** Oh, yeah, Dessor Ree (pronounces Dess-ohr-ree). They were twins.

**JG:** It says 'Lost Soul.' What is that referencing?

**SS:** You know what? I don't know what it was. "Lost Soul?" Let me see that...

**EH:** Were they putting on a play? Was it a character? Maybe it was a character in the play.

**JG:** It's sort of a uh...It's got acts. Act I, Act II, but it seems to be a history of the family.

**SS:** But I wonder...lost soul? Wonder if it's because Aunt Dess never got married. And Aunt Dess like...she was the one who moved out there after my grandparents passed away. She was a nurse at John Sealy in Galveston and retired from nursing after about forty years. She went back out there, bought more cows. I mean, she treated the cows like children. Because she never married. She never had children. We would come and she would have cows in the yard. You'd go in the kitchen, you'd go in the kitchen and the kitchen would be just so messy because between the dog food, the cat food, the cow food, cow bottles. She had turned their...We said that we weren't surprised that if we were gone, she probably had the cows inside the house. (laughter)

**JG:** You may be right. In here, it's describing the children being born, and they're being creative in their descriptions about getting married, and adding to the family, and for...how do you say her name again?

**SS:** Dessor Ree.

**JG:** Dessor Ree. Dessor Ree, the youngest. She was an identical twin.

**SS:** Yeah, Marjorie. Marjorie and Dessor Ree.

**JG:** So, they tell about Marjorie marrying and adding to the increase through their children, and then Desoree, their youngest, feels life is a slow process and she needs no accomplice.

**SS:** That's the way she lived.

**JG:** So, you may be right.

**SS:** Very independent. Very independent.

**JG:** 'Yet, her unselfness, greater than self. Nevertheless, the world of medicine knows her as a second Florence Nightingale.'

**SS:** Mmhmm. Yep. Very dedicated nurse.

**JG:** It just goes through each of the children. That is fascinating, but it's kind of like a family history here in the back.

**SS:** And this was...see these are kind of old but...

**JG:** Yes. Some of this I saw at Mrs. Rose's house. And Arverta.

**SS:** They showed you some of them.

**JG:** They had something similar. But that's been a while since I've seen them. Oh, wow. I don't think we got any original photos.

**EH:** No, we did not. We just have what you took a snapshot of.

**JG:** Yeah. Man, these are awesome.

**SS:** Those were...this was the 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. (papers rustling) Emily, here's some more stuff. Ok.

**EH:** Alright.

**JG:** Now see this man's complexion is very pale.

**SS:** Yes. That was my Aunt Emma Lee's husband, Chester Papillon (spelling?)

**JG:** Papillon.

**SS:** Yes. That was her husband.

**JG:** Do you know his racial background?

**SS:** It was mixed.

**JG:** Ok.

**SS:** He was from Louisiana.

**JG:** Louisiana. Papillon. And this is the house out there? That's their home.

**SS:** That's the house. And we used to sit on that porch and...

**JG:** Still had the bare earth yards.

**SS:** We used to sit on that porch and shell...I remember shelling purple hull peas. (laughs)

**JG:** Do you remember the dog's name? Probably had a lot of dogs through the years. It looks like a collie. Some kind of collie mix.

**SS:** Yeah, we did. We had...I don't remember the dog's name, because I think that dog was one of my aunts' dogs. Because my grandparents never had a dog looked like that. Their dogs were short haired dogs.

**JG:** Did they work the stock? The livestock?

**SS:** No, no. Well, yes, they did have some. Earlier when I was a little bitty girl, they did.

**JG:** Maybe round up the hogs.

**SS:** Mmhmm.

**JG:** Ok. Yeah, so this one might be more of a pet, then.

**SS:** Yeah, because they had horses, but you know what, I don't ever remember my grandfather riding the horse. I remember my cousin riding the horse, but not my...

**JG:** Now are you in this photo?

**SS:** Yeah, that's me.

**JG:** Ok, there she is.

**SS:** Like I said, right in front. Right in front of my grandmother.

**EH:** There you are. Oh, yeah! Those are your grandparents!

**SS:** (laughing)

**JG:** Like you said, they belong to you.

**SS:** They belong to me!

**JG:** I'm surprised you're not sitting in your grandma's lap.

**SS:** Probably because they wouldn't let me.

**EH:** Probably tried.

**SS:** Ok, so, let me see what I have. Two of these. I didn't realize I had...

**JG:** That's a great photo.

**EH:** Mmhmm.

**JG:** And this is inside the house.

**SS:** And that's inside the house.

**JG:** Wow. (sound of photos flipping over) That looked like they've had a...Your grandfather is smiling and your grandma looks like they're very proud.

**SS:** Let's see. I thought I had brought a picture of them.

**JG:** I went to Arverta's hundredth birthday party. I think I told you. I mean that was just...

**SS:** Oh, you did. Ok.

**JG:** I was blown away with how the family had grown and from everywhere. Everybody from I don't know how many states were represented there.

**SS:** So now this was a tribute. I probably should take a picture of this in case I don't have another one.

**JG:** Yeah, yeah. We can make a copy. Give you copies of all of these.

**SS:** If that's something that you want to keep. But I thought I had put a picture of my great-grandparents', I mean my grandparents' wedding, I mean, when they got married in 1911. Oh, here it is...

**JG:** Now there is this picture.

**SS:** Yes!

**JG:** Oh, ok. Yeah, yeah.

**EH:** Oh, yeah.

**JG:** Yeah, that's the one.

**EH:** I love the feather in her cap.

**JG:** 1911, I think is what I remember reading. And there they are fifty years later. And so, where did your mother grow up—I mean—your grandmother grow up?

**SS:** In East Texas. Mmhmm. Yeah, Runnels was her maiden name. She was a Runnels.

**JG:** I read through this real briefly and I remember some Rockland connections, and uh...

**SS:** He was from Magnolia Springs.

**JG:** Magnolia Springs in Jasper County.

**SS:** And my grandmother, as far as I know of, was from

**JG:** From that area.

**SS:** Right. Mmhm.

**JG:** And she was a...

**EH and SS:** Runnels.

**JG:** It takes me a while.

**SS:** That's ok.

**EH:** So, the great-grandparents were her parents?

**SS:** Yes. And I don't know...I think. See, I was just throwing stuff together. You can decide, you know.

**JG:** Oh, man. This is all great.

**EH:** Yes. All of it.

**SS:** Ok.

**JG:** What we'll do is digitize it. Scan it and put it on the website.

**SS:** Oh, ok.

**JG:** And so, everybody will have access to it.

**SS:** Now, you know my Uncle Preacher? So that was my Uncle Preacher out on the farm with one of the hogs. Oh, and here was another picture I had found.

**JG:** So, Preacher was his nickname?

**SS:** Yes. His name...he was Harrison Frazier, Junior.

**JG:** Junior. Ok. The hog's climbing up in the trough there.

**SS:** And this one is 1965. I couldn't get that off, so...

**JG:** Father's Day, '65.

**SS:** And this one is my grandparents from 1948.

**JG:** Oh, there's photos on both sides of this. Originals.

**SS:** And this is a congressional order from 1921. Oh, here. I had put that in an envelope.

**JG:** This here?

**SS:** Yeah. I had just put it in that envelope.

**JG:** 'Taxing our people to support Russia.'

**SS:** (laughing) It was very interesting.

**EH:** Yeah! Goodness.

**JG:** 1921.

**SS:** Very interesting stuff. I just really hate that I threw away that other stuff. I mean.

**EH:** Everybody does it.

**JG:** And I know we have the recorder on, but she'd mentioned that she had some payroll stubs of her grandfather working for the quarry there, that eventually became the Blue Hole. The rock quarry.

**SS:** So, evidently these were our home, because I know this is my grandmother and grandfather, but see there's no dates on those. So, I don't know what they were celebrating. These were my aunts and uncles here.

**JG:** So, do I get a sense that your life in Bay City and Houston, visiting the country, was it an escape? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but...

**SS:** It was home!

**JG:** But really, there was home, not necessarily...

**SS:** You know, home is where the heart is.

**EH:** Mmhmm.

**SS:** Yeah. You just looked forward to going there. I don't know if I...I'm trying to remember if...when I knew we were going, we were just going. You know, it was just home.

**EH:** Right.

**JG:** So how was life where you went to school? Like Bay City and what was the...

**SS:** I was a small-town girl. Bay City wasn't a big school, but when I started there, everything was segregated. But I think it was in 19—I'm trying to see if it was—'65, when they first integrated. It wasn't forced integration where they had closed the black schools. But it was the first year—

**JG:** Like freedom of choice?

**SS:** Freedom of choice. Yes. And my mom told me, she said, 'Sheryl, you're going to the white school.' She says, 'Because I know they have the better books and the better...you'll get a good education.'

**JG:** That was in the fall of '65?

**SS:** And this was in...no, no. Yeah, I think it was the fall of sixty...I think it was '65.

**JG:** Ok.

**SS:** Because it was my first year of junior high. I graduated in...well, maybe that's not right. I went into high school in '68. So, that might have been right.

**EH:** That sounds about right. Sixth grade.

**SS:** I went into high school at '68 to '72.

**EH:** So junior high would be sixth grade three years earlier. That would be about right.

**JG:** Well, tell about that.

**SS:** I didn't have any negative experiences, at all.

**JG:** Did you have some friends from the segregated school that went with you? Or were you alone?

**SS:** Maybe one or two. Not many. Not many. But my mom says she just remembers growing up and at Vernon / County Line the only books they had...they received the books that the other schools were throwing away. So, the pages were torn out, you know. So, she says I know...you're going to go.

**JG:** You had no choice.

**SS:** I had no choice, but the thing about it is, because of the way I was raised, it didn't bother me. I didn't feel like I don't want to go because my friends are going here. It's just the way it was.

**EH:** You knew who you were.

**SS:** Exactly. So, I went to school. I never had anyone to treat me any different. I did have a teacher, when I went from junior high to high school, I made a hundred on his first test and he wrote at the top of my paper. 'I have heard about you.' You know...uhm...ok. (laughter)

**EH:** I still got a hundred.

**SS:** You know, so, I was a bookworm. I was an only child, and basically my mom said my only job was school. That was my job. I made the best of it. Had a lot of friends on both sides. Like I said, I never experienced any hatred, any animosity, anyone calling me out of my name. Yeah. Because a lot of times I think it's the way...this was another saying my grandfather said, 'Your attitude affects your altitude.' And so, it depends on what kind of attitude you have. You give respect, you get respect. Those people who don't give you respect, then you know you haven't done anything to cause that...

**EH:** Right. That's on them.

**SS:** It's on them. It's like it says in scripture. Jesus says if you go to a door, and you're going in peace and with the gospel, and they say no, don't think it's a you. Just turn, walk away, dust your feet off, and continue on your journey. Because we're all on a journey. So, I enjoyed high school. Very active in high school.

**JG:** Did you play any sports?

**SS:** I'm not athletic. (laughs) I only did P.E. because I had to. I was in the band. So, I played the clarinet. We had a piano at home, and I remember our next-door neighbor told me after we were grown that he thought we were rich because we had a piano. So funny things children judge as being rich.

**JG:** I asked about sports because the—I don't know how unique it was—but for Diboll there was a basketball, wasn't it?

**EH:** Mmhmm.

**SS:** My mom played basketball.

**JG:** In the days of segregation, the school here had a very good girls basketball team. In fact, one particular player—what'd she score? —seventy points in one game. And then when they integrated, the white school did not have a girls basketball team, so her senior year, she didn't get to play...

**SS:** She couldn't play! Interesting.

**JG:** ...and I thought, you know, how ironic, you know, with the integration, that she would excel...

**SS:** A star!

**JG:** ...yeah, a star and then something like that. Because they didn't have a white team...

**SS:** She couldn't play.

**JG:** ...that she couldn't have an integrated team. Because everything went that way and not... It wasn't a true combination.

**SS:** Even when I went off to college, you know you have to do some P.E., even in college. So, I took two semesters of swimming and two semesters of bowling. (laughs)

**EH:** Where did you go to college?

**SS:** At Texas A&M.

**EH:** Oh, ok.

**SS:** Yeah, yeah. So, you know even the first year I went to A&M in '72 was the first year they allowed females to live on campus. Females, I think, started going there in about...it was opened up to females I think in '68. Maybe to professors' daughters. It might have been a little earlier than that. But when I went in '72, they just opened Krueger-Dunn for females. Otherwise, females had to live off-campus. But, you know, I went there for...I wanted to go to Marquette. And my mom says nope, I'm not paying out of state tuition. You're going to have to stay in Texas. There's too many good colleges here in Texas.

**EH:** Right.

**SS:** So, I happened to go to A&M for a science fair. And while I was at the science fair, the campus was so friendly. You know, people were 'Howdy! Howdy!' And it was a small town, and at that time it was a small school, and so I came home and I told my mama, 'ok, I want to go to Texas A&M.' And she was shocked, because of course when she grew up, you know, black kids didn't go to Texas A&M. The way it was...

**JG:** Prairie View A&M, probably.

**SS:** That's right. That's right. So, I applied and I didn't apply any place else. And I was getting worried because I think it was around March and April of '72 and I hadn't heard anything. I was like, 'Oh my God, what am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?' And then finally I got my letter and so from the first day I went until the year I graduated, no regrets. None whatsoever. And I was even doing some recruiting because I live in Katy to try to get more blacks to go to Texas A&M, and I had this one dad to tell me, he says, 'We don't want our son to go to that plantation school.'

**JG:** Plantation?

**SS:** And I'm like, 'Do you want your child to get a good education?' I mean, a plantation school? What makes it a plantation school? You're looking back in history and preventing your son from being able to probably excel for years from now. But yeah...

**EH:** Right. And that Aggie network is second to none.

**SS:** Second to none! I don't care where I travel in the world. That's right. An Aggie...you're always an Aggie. Yeah. Not a part-time Aggie. You're always 100% Aggie. But yeah, it was a good experience in college, and I remember it was only the first year we lived...we went to A&M, there was three black females in Krueger, and when we met, we decided we didn't want to be roommates. Because once you start isolating yourself, you're treated like that. I remember Sylvia had...she was from Navasota and she had been going to Prairie View and she transferred from Prairie View to A&M. And then Graydene was from Snook, Texas. Basically, we just lived on different floors on the dormitory, because my mom wouldn't let me live off campus. And that's how we went through and made lots of friends. Accepted, I never had any issues or problems at A&M.

I think I experienced more racism...I mean, you experienced it because you knew, like...even driving up here—not today, but years ago—everything was segregated so if we stopped to get something to eat, we couldn't go through the front door, we had to go through the back door. Or some places we couldn't even stop. But that's just the way it was. You know, you did what you had to do. But then when I went up to A&M, of course things had changed totally. You just didn't see yourself any other way. So, I don't think I really experienced true racism where you're limited until I got in the corporate world, and then you could see more or less how people sort of dismissed you. It's like you would have to work *extra* hard, you know, to get promotions, or get bonuses, or whatever.

**JG:** And what profession did you go into?

**SS:** It varied. (laughter) Ok, when I went to A&M, I thought I wanted to be a doctor and of course they didn't have a medical school then. My advisor...I was planning on declaring biology as my major and my advisor said to select zoology because it had more science versus biology. That had more liberal arts. And so, I changed my degree to zoology. And then when I graduated, I was like, 'Ok, what am I gonna do?' So, I just took a job with Ben Taub Hospital to try to figure out ok, what direction do you want to go in. And I worked in outpatient medicine with two other doctors in a gastroenterology lab. And...

**JG:** Were they all white?

**SS:** One was Indian... It was three doctors. One was Indian, and two were white. Because most of them were on their fellowship, so they had a senior doctor training the doctors going through on fellowship. They were fellows, I guess you could say. But working, even in outpatient medicine, it was just so depressing. And I realized, nah, this is not for me. So, I started looking...As a matter of fact, even one of the doctors told me, said 'Sheryl, you know, medicine.... I'm not being chauvinistic, but I feel like if you want

to have a family, dentistry is a good field for females because it doesn't take you away from your family as much.' And so, he said, 'why don't you apply for dental school?'

And I said, 'yeah, you know, that's a good idea.' But I had been looking in Houston already, trying to change jobs because it had gotten to the point where I would wake up in the morning, I'd feel good, and I would drive to work and when I'd see that hospital it would be like a dark cloud was just sitting over it. You know? So, I had started looking and I applied to take the dental entrance exam, but Shell offered me a job—and it's a long story in between that too—offered me a job. Because I just say God's hand is always in everything. I had applied for Shell and had been turned down. Nothing. And then I applied for a secretarial position. And when she got my application and looked at it, the lady says, 'Why are you applying for a secretarial position? You need to apply for one of our tech...' I didn't tell her I had already applied and hadn't gotten anything. And she says, 'Yeah, you would be bored to death.'

And so, I took an exam that you had to take for a technical position at Shell and ended up getting hired in their mining engineering group. I worked in mining engineering for...what was it...thirteen years, and then Shell decided to sell their mining division and then I took a job with product safety and worked in product safety for three years on the chemical side of the business. I got a call from a recruiter and the recruiter just said, 'Would you like to go on an interview? We have a job opening up on the west side of town.' And I was going from west side downtown to work to One Shell Plaza. And I said, 'Sure!' Not that I was looking for a job. I hadn't been on a job in sixteen years. On a job interview. And I didn't even have a resume and I used to have to go to Washington D.C. almost every two weeks, so at least once a month. And so, I asked the secretary, I said, 'Would you do something confidential for me?' And she said, 'Sure.' And I said, 'My resume needs to be updated. I have to go to Washington. I'm coming back Thursday night. I have an interview Friday morning. Would you update my resume and put it on my desk?' And she said, 'Sure!' So, she did and I came in Thursday night, went to One Shell Plaza, got the resume, went on the job interview the next day. Interviewed with three different people in this company. At that time, it was called Vista Chemical Company. For product safety position.

Then I had to go to Washington that Monday, and when I got to Washington, the manager that interviewed me at Vista Chemical was in Washington, too. He had left a message at the hotel where I was staying that he would like to meet me for dinner. And I'm thinking, 'How did he know where I was staying?' So, we met in Georgetown for dinner, and I said, 'How did you know where I was staying?' He said, 'All Shell people stay at that hotel.' (laughter) I went, 'Oh, ok!' So, we were eating and he said, 'Sheryl, we want to make you an offer.' And in my mind, I'm thinking, 'Just tell him you've got to think about it.' Because I really wasn't looking for a job. He says, 'I'm upper management,' and he went on and on and on, and he said, 'We'd like to offer you this.' And in my mind, I'm like, 'Nah, you're not going to quit your job,' but out of my mouth, said, 'I accept it.' (all laugh) I'm telling you all, this is exactly how it happened. And I was sitting there going, 'Oh, what did I do?'

And I went back to the hotel and I couldn't even sleep. I was just pacing. Because Shell had been a good company. It wasn't like I really was looking for a job. When I got into work the next day, I mean when I went back and went into work, I called the secretary and I had her to come in my office and I said, 'Oh, my goodness, Charmane, I

don't know what I've done. I feel like I've committed some kind of treason. I accepted a position with another company. Oh, my goodness, I don't know what to do.' And she looked at me and she said, 'Sheryl, that wasn't you. That was God. And I'm not going to let you turn it down. You're here with twelve other people doing the same thing. You don't get the recognition. God provided this for you. And you're going to take it.'" And I said, 'Ok.'

But, yeah, I turned in my resignation and then I worked for this company twenty-five years. I retired in July of 2019.

**EH:** Oh, ok.

**JG:** Wow.

**SS:** I worked always on the chemical side of the business. And sort of in health and safety, because I went from wanting to be a doctor to really...product safety is about safety, health, and environment. So, you're trying to prevent illnesses and environmental...complying with environmental and safety laws. So that's...that was my career. It was very interesting. Especially when I worked for Shell mining company, because my mom says, 'I never thought I'd have a daughter working in a coal mine.'

'I didn't think I'd ever work in a coal mine either, where you'd have to crawl around on your knees (inaudible).' Because of a coal seam...a four-foot coal seam. But it was very interesting, even in that area, because we had coal mines in West Virginia, and Tennessee, and then we had a surface mine in Ohio, and a surface mine in Wyoming, and a gold mine in California. But when I first started working for them, it was only coal mines. Underground coal mines. So, you go in as a safety and health person trying to prevent them from getting black lung disease and losing their hearing. We weren't a union mine, but the miners walked out. Because they felt like you're trying to steal our benefits. My grandfather, great-grandfather did this and they lost their hearing, you get black lung disease, and you walk around with an oxygen tank, and they felt like that's what life was supposed to be about. So, it was all about education and letting them know I'm not here doing this for the company, I'm here doing this for you. I would like to see you have a better life...

**EH:** Right. No oxygen needed.

**SS:** Yes! And you can hear your grandchildren. Yeah, you can hear your grandchildren. And it got to the point where it was because initially...

**JG:** Was that true across the races? I mean, white and black workers?

**SS:** There wasn't any black workers. I was very unique in my field. When I started working in mining engineering, there were really not many females. As a matter of fact, I would go to meetings and I would be the only female. And the only black. (laughs) You would hear the men go, 'Who's the female? Who's the female?'

**JG:** Wow!

**SS:** Yeah, I've been blessed. I truly have been blessed, and it's been an awesome career that has taken me all over the world. And I live by that. You treat people, you accept people in their environment, their culture, and whatever it is because we were all created by one God. And so, I just want to do what is best for everyone.

**EH:** Right.

**SS:** And like I said earlier, my family just taught us to love. That's all we know is love. People have to be taught to hate. I think because of who we are as creations of God there's love in our hearts, even though we're sinners. You know, but a person has to really be taught to hate. Because God is a god of love, and once you see that it is...I don't know.

**EH:** I know. Yes.

**SS:** He just open the doors that you don't even think will open for you.

**EH:** Right. Your mouth, too.

**SS:** Yeah! (laughs) That's right. That's right because I was so afraid. Oh, my goodness!

**JG:** Even talking through Balaam's donkey.

**SS:** Yeah! That's right. That's right. But it was. I had an awesome career. Awesome career. Never planned it. It just worked out that way. Yeah.

**JG:** Well, that's a great story and I appreciate you very much sharing that. And that's probably a good place to stop the recording.

**EH:** Yeah. Yeah.

**JG:** But I want to go back a little bit in time and talk a little bit more about the race. You know you commented on 'that's the way things were.' Help someone understand... You know, I think...I know I personally, and society's learning now, such things as people of color were raised to act certain ways maybe.

**SS:** Mmhmm.

**JG:** You know...

**SS:** I didn't know that.

**JG:** Oh, you didn't know... (all laugh) ...well that's what I'm getting at. So, yeah, elaborate on that. I mean... What I'm getting at we've heard stories in recent days about you know, you act a certain way around certain groups, certain neighborhoods maybe.

You know there was a story that was told, I won't go into all the details but you know... a white man and a black man were friends and they jogged a lot. But when they went into a certain rich neighborhood, the black man would stop jogging, and he says, 'Come on,' you know, 'let's keep up the pace.' And he's like, 'no, no. I was taught don't run in a rich white man's neighborhood.'

**SS:** Oh!

**JG:** You know, things like that. And there's many other stories. But we've heard stories that certain African-Americans were taught that by elder generations, you know. These are dos and don'ts when you go out into the world.

**EH:** For safety.

**JG:** Yeah, yeah. So, again, I'm not saying that's everybody's story, but you commented on that already.

**SS:** But I think...

**JG:** So, elaborate a little bit more on that. That you never experienced any of that, like maybe even in Zavalla. When you went into Zavalla, your grandfather Frazier never said, 'Do this. Don't do that.'

**SS:** Uh-uh. No. No. Like I said, my grandfather would take me into Zavalla and we would shop. You know, you knew where you could go, what you could do, what your limits were, and that's just the way it was, you know. My grandfather was...

**JG:** But that wasn't necessarily taught in...you know...deliberately?

**EH:** You just picked it up as observing.

**JG:** Yeah, that's kind of what I'm sensing, you just kind of observed it. Your mother never said, 'Sheryl, you know, don't go here or don't go there.'

**SS:** Uh-uh. Never. Uh-Uh.

**JG:** Really?

**SS:** No.

**JG:** Interesting.

**SS:** Now, back when my father died in the '50s, which I understood because of the...

**JG:** He was in the Army?

**SS:** He was in the Army. He was killed in the Army. Because of the segregation and the hatred, and what was going on in Alabama, Mississippi—you know, the southern states—we couldn't... like after my father... My father's funeral was in South Carolina. We went to the funeral, but after that my mom never felt safe driving from Texas to Winnsboro, South Carolina because...

**EH:** Where you'd have to drive through.

**SS:** We'd have to drive through, and there was so much...you know, there was lynchings and being a female and having a child she just didn't want to take a chance on..

**EH:** You don't know where it's safe to stop and where is not.

**SS:** Exactly.

**JG:** But you picked that up. You don't remember talking about it.

**SS:** Yeah. No, we talked about that because she told me the reason. It was almost ten years before I saw my grandparents from 1957. I think I didn't see them again until I was thirteen. Yeah. And we drove from Texas to South Carolina. But the beauty of it... because see, we don't harp on what you can't do. You can't do it, but you can't do it, and if you can't change that, then you can't do it. You do what you know is safe and right for you. God gave you a brain. Use your brain, you know. So, if my mom knew it was going to be hostile then she made a choice not to go into a hostile environment, but when I grew up, I don't even know of any hostile environments. From the time I entered elementary school to the time I graduated from high school, I'm really trying to think, was there any where my mother told me not to go for my safety? And it really wasn't.

**JG:** How old were you in say 1964?

**SS:** Eleven.

**JG:** Eleven. Ok. Did you remember much of say the so-called civil rights movement? The marches?

**SS:** Uh-uh. I didn't know about June 19<sup>th</sup> until I was grown.

**JG:** Really?

**SS:** Because those were things my family...my family talked more about God. I mean there wasn't a time we set down to eat that we weren't praising the Lord. Or at Christmas, having our own Christmas programs at the house. It wasn't about the way somebody treated you. It was about your identity is in Jesus Christ. And so, I don't ever remember celebrating emancipation and talking about emancipation in my family. It was life.

**JG:** It was salvation.

**SS:** Yes! Oh, (claps), thank you! That was perfect! Perfect. It was. It was about salvation. And so, my grandparents, their house was always open to anybody. You know, somebody going down the dirt road and they're lost, and they stop and they come knock on the door, you know...they'd offer them some water and something to eat. I mean, that's just the way it was. Did I grow up knowing the fear and what could happen? Yes. But I didn't *live* in fear.

But it's interesting because for my son, I look at it totally different now. I tell him, 'Harrison, you can't do everything that your friends do. You've got to be very careful.' I see it worse now because back then you knew the boundaries. You knew what you could do and where you could go and that was that. But I just didn't...that was just it. You know, even...I can say...even my white friends, they knew that their boundaries were 'ok, I don't go into the black neighborhoods,' where my boundaries were...(sound of a hand hitting the table). But I didn't go into the neighborhoods because what did I have a reason to go into the neighborhoods? You don't go unless you have a reason to go. You know? That's just it.

**EH:** Right. Right, yeah. That's not where your family or your life was.

**SS:** But if I had a friend who had invited me, like high school friends that I went to school with and they invited me...

**JG:** Like after integration?

**SS:** Yeah. That was totally different. You know, that was totally different. So I went, not thinking about what could happen to me. When I went to A&M I didn't think about I was any different.

**EH:** Right.

**JG:** Yeah.

**SS:** When I just...you kind of know if you're in an environment that's not conducive for you. Your hair stands up on the back of your neck, and you just do what you've got to do to put yourself in a safe place and protect yourself.

**EH:** Well, it's similar to being... I live alone. As a woman alone, navigating the world, you can sense, this is not some place I'm going to go, or I'm not going to park here, or...

**SS:** Mmhmm. Exactly.

**EH:** It's not exactly the same, but there are similarities.

**SS:** Yeah. I look at it as that little voice inside of you that lets you know, 'ok, this is not a safe place.' And then that's what you respond to. But I never was taught. I guess it was about observing. Plus, at that time you had signs.

**EH:** Right.

**SS:** You know...White only. Colored only.

**EH:** Nobody had to tell you that.

**SS:** Nobody had to tell you. Yeah, you just grew up and that was life. And then once things started changing, yeah, you could tell when someone didn't have a loving or a welcoming demeanor. I always say that your eyes are the windows to your soul and that was another thing my grandfather taught me. When you talk to somebody, you look them straight in the eye. You can tell. It's something about people when they are welcoming. You can feel it. And when they're not, you can sense it. And you just know how to handle yourself. I think that just comes from that internal conscience saying, 'ok, this is how you have to handle this situation,' and that's what you do.

Yeah, but I do. I tell my son he has to be careful. My son has gotten tickets for rolling stop signs. My son has gotten a ticket for not using his blinker. My son has gotten tickets for unbelievable...and you're just like what? Half the police cars going down the road don't use signals. I mean, you know...

**EH:** None of them do.

**SS:** And he's thirty-four. And I'm almost sixty-eight. I'm sixty-seven. It's just a different time, but it looks like it's an uglier time.

**JG:** Yeah.

**SS:** But it's because man has taken his eyes off the most important one, and that's God. Because when you look for your joy, your peace, and your contentment in man, you're going to be disappointed.

**EH:** Right. Every time.

**SS:** You have to look at that higher. The source of it, you know. Because you can be happy, but we know that happiness is temporary. Joy is complete. The joy is something you never lose. It doesn't mean that you won't have doubts, and you won't have, you know, hardships, or whatever, but it's the joy that gets you through those, knowing that, you know, this too shall pass.

**JG:** Contentment.

**SS:** Yeah. Mhmm. Yes. But happiness, no. It's based on what's going on today, and—

**EH:** How you feel.

**SS:** Yeah. How you feel, and all of that. But I think today, when I hear people talk, it's a lot different from my perspective. Because I just see people as people. And I have friends on both sides of the fence that, you know...I just hear what they say and I just think, 'Wow.'

**EH:** Yeah.

**SS:** 'Wow.'

**EH:** Yeah. Not much you can...

**JG:** Well, thank you again. I think we'll stop the recording, unless you have more to say.

**SS:** Once you get me going, I'm sure...

(laughter)

**JG:** Like I said, some of this stuff, this kind of thing, oral history is the only way to get it. Is to tell the stories and once it's running, I hate sometimes to turn it off. Because usually that's when people start opening up.

**SS:** Yes, because once I think, then I'll start thinking about a whole bunch of other stuff.

**JG:** You'll probably think of all kinds of other things on your way home. But anyways, just to conclude the recording I want to thank you again. We appreciate it very much.

**SS:** It's been nice meeting with you all.

**EH:** Yeah.

**SS:** Yeah.

**JG:** Good. Now I'll turn this off.

**END OF INTERVIEW**