

*MATHESON HISTORICAL CENTER*

*ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM*

*INTERVIEWEE: J D RICE*

*INTERVIEWER: Henry Gray*

*May 22, 1995*

Interview with: J.D. Rice  
May 22, 1995

I: It's now 3:25 in the afternoon on Monday, May 22, 1995 and I have J.D. Rice sitting in front of me. Jay, please state your full name if you would be so kind, sir.

R: My mother didn't give me anything but initials. My full name is J.D. Rice; that's it. Two initials.

R: Just two initials.

I: And where do you live, Mr. Rice?

R: 2223 S.W. 8th Drive, Gainesville, Florida.

I: And how long have you lived in Gainesville, sir?

R: Fifty-nine years.

I: Gosh, I was about right when I said that I was just a little baby boy when my daddy bought my first bicycle from you. You were born where, sir?

R: Commerce, Georgia.

I: And tell me about your parents. What were their names, sir?

R: My father's name was Luther Rice; my mother's name was Arlie Victoria Massey.

I: Alright. And they obviously are deceased today?

R: Oh, yes.

I: And do you have any brothers and sisters, sir?

R: I had three brothers and two sisters. Only one of them is still living.

I: And who is that, sir?

R: That's my sister who lives in Jacksonville, Florida. Her name is Lona Kitridge. She's 91 years old.

I: And Mr. Rice, you are married to a lovely lady whose name is Virginia.

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R: Yes.

I: And, let's go back a minute. What is the date of your birth, sir?

R: Mine? April 20, 1912.

I: And your bride's a little younger than you?

R: Yes.

I: And her date of birth if you know, sir.

R: August the 19th, 1914.

I: And when and where were you married, sir?

R: Valdosta, Georgia.

I: And when?

R: On June 7, 1936.

I: A couple of years ago, sir!

R: Yes.

I: And you and your bride have two children, am I correct, sir?

R: That's right.

I: And their names, sir?

R: Gay Rice Keys, and Jay Donald Rice.

I: So you did more than your parents did. You gave him a name.

R: A name, that's right. The same initials.

I: Is the J for Donny, J-A-Y or "J" initial?

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R: J-A-Y.

I: So he's J-A-Y D. Rice, and you're just "J" initial "D" Rice.

R: Right.

I: Now, do you have any grandchildren?

R: Yes, I have six grandchildren.

I: And tell me about them, sir.

R: Well, my daughter has two daughters.

I: That's Gay.

R: Yes, my daughter Gay has two daughters. One of them lives in Indianapolis, Indiana, and is married and has two little children. The other one lives in Dallas, Texas, and is married but has no children. And Don has four children, two by his first wife, and two by his present wife.

I: And what are the names of the present and former spouses?

R: Margaret Goff was his first wife's name, and the last one was Donna Kinard.

I: Alright sir, now where does Margaret live?

R: Margaret lives out from Gainesville a few miles. She and her former husband are divorced and she has a father that has Alzheimer's Disease, and she's out there looking after him.

I: Alright sir. Tell me about your bride. I know that she is presently ill. She has Alzheimer's Disease, am I correct? When do you recall that that first manifested itself?

R: In May, 1981.

I: Fourteen years ago, wow. And I think that you and particularly she are very blessed because I have had the honor to be in your home, and I know that you have the most delightful person that stays with Virginia and takes care of her. Tell me about her.

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R: Elma Butler.

I: And she is from where, sir?

R: She's from Bainbridge, Georgia.

I: And she's come down to take care of your bride.

R: That's right.

I: She does that.

R: She does that kind of work. My oldest brother's wife had the same problem and she worked for my niece helping my sister-in-law until she died, which was about four years after Elma went to work for my niece. My niece told me one time because we knew Virginia had this terrible disease, that if you can get her to come work for you, you do it. This was after her mother had died.

I: And she gave you good advice, didn't she?

R: She did, she did.

I: How long has it been since Virginia has been able to communicate and recall things?

R: Not since this woman's been with me, and she's been with me a little over eight years. The first seven years, the first six or seven, it was just forgetfulness - forget where she left her car keys or this, that, and the other. Then, about seven years, I guess, about seven years ago, I wouldn't let her drive her car anymore, because I was afraid she'd get lost or hurt somebody or herself. And, that's the way it's been.

I: Does she recognize you today? Can you tell me?

R: She recognizes me and Elma.

I: When Gay came down to visit with you for a while, your daughter, could she recognize Gay at all?

R: No.

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I: How about Donnie?

R: I don't think she knows Donnie either.

I: That's sad.

R: I know. She told me one time after Gay went back home, that she didn't know who that lady was, but she surely was nice. That's about the last sentence she ever said to me that I really realized what she was saying. That was about three years ago.

I: Tell me about your early life up in Georgia, sir.

R: Well, when I was born my daddy was a farmer. Then during the early '20's when the crash of cotton and all went down, and that was about the only thing he knew to raise to make a living, he went bankrupt. Now he didn't ever go bankrupt either, but he had bought a farm and put his stuff up for security, and --

I: Foreclosed?

R: The sheriff foreclosed on it .

I: Okay, sir.

R: This happened in Turner County, Ashland, Georgia. And then he had a chance to oversee a farm in south Georgia, right on the Georgia/Florida line. In fact, the Georgia/Florida line went through the estate. And he took that job, and worked it two years, and he and my mother decided they wanted to do something else, and they went to Valdosta, bought a little restaurant, and ran that the rest of their active lives.

I: Alright, sir. And when did you leave home and decide to go out on your own and leave mamma and daddy behind?

R: Well, I didn't literally leave home until I came to Gainesville. I lived at home until I came here on May the 10th, 1936. I guess that's when you'd say I left. But, I came here on May the 10th and took a business over that we had bought on June the 1st, staying here, and then went back and married my bride on the 7th of June.

I: Now I want to talk about that business that you were buying. And that was on East Main

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- Street, South?
- R: 330 East Main Street South.
- I: Alright Sir, and what was it, sir?
- R: It was a bicycle shop.
- I: It became Rice's Bicycle Shop.
- R: Right.
- I: And, how long were you at that location, sir?
- R: I was in the location there for nearly six years. Then I moved just down the block about four doors.
- I: Bigger or smaller space?
- R: A cooler building, had a front door and a back door. The other one, the building up there by the fire department, was right next door to the fire department, had no access to the back. Everything had to go and come out of the front door. And the other was a longer building, a little bit narrower. Had more floor space, but not much. Wasn't much difference in size of the floor. But, I stayed there about six years. Then I moved up across from what was Cox Furniture, on the corner of S.E. 1st Avenue and 1st Street.
- I: Which was then East Main Street, South, and Union Street.
- R: Which is where the parking lot is now, just west of the old Brooking Garage. Stayed there eleven years, and I bought the building where my son has the store now, on S.W. 1st Avenue.
- I: Alright sir. And what's the number of the street there.
- R: 15 S.W. 1st Avenue.
- I: Okay. Now, describe for me what the downtown area that you have just identified looked like back in the 1930's when you moved here.
- R: Well, the downtown area was the shopping area .

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I: Yes sir.

R: If you wasn't in the downtown area, you might as well not be anywhere.

I: Now, what was across the street from you to the west, where you first started?

R: The Chevrolet garage and dealership. The post office was down at the end of the street, more or less, and that was the way that was.

I: Then a little bit across the street and a little bit south, farther south, was the Lyric Theater?

R: Well, not across the street, on the same side.

I: On the same side of the street, the Lyric Theater?

R: Lyric Theater. When I moved I went from north of the Lyric Theater to south of the Lyric Theater.

I: And Mr. Evans had a soda fountain down there too.

R: Yes.

I: Alright. And how far, how close were you to the fire station?

R: I was next door.

I: Right next door.

R: Where the law office is.

I: That would be the law offices of John Worshaw, probably.

R: Yes.

I: Okay. Lets talk about what you remember. How about Cox Furniture Company? Was that there when you first moved here?

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R: Cox Furniture was where Parker's Office Supply is now on the west side of the square.

I: Oh, wow. I don't remember that.

R: Well, that was when the big fire - they went up in the big fire that burned nearly that whole block down in 1938. And they operated out of their warehouse and bought the old Baird theater building and while they was renovating it, they operated out of the warehouse down on South Main Street. And then they moved in where the old theater building is.

I: Now, tell me what do you do to stay active today, Mr. Rice?

R: Well, I have a little farm, a 17 acre farm where I go and play around a little bit.

I: What do you grow?

R: I grow corn and grapes and figs and tomatoes and most all that kinds of vegetables.

I: Now when you say you "play around" with it, that's kinda hard work, too, isn't it?

R: Yes, it is.

I: But is that your pacifier?

R: That's my pacifier.

I: Alright. I can relate to that, because I know that Curtis Powers has either a relationship with you out there or at least you do things with him out there.

R: Do things with him.

I: And he enjoys it.

R: I think he does, too. He seems, he comes out and plants my corn. And the first crop we planted this year didn't do very well. We planted too early and the cold nights didn't let it grow, and it got stunted, got about that high, and just set there, set there, set there. I bet we didn't get fifty ears of corn out of that batch of corn. Three weeks later, I planted another one, and it's going to have good corn, and lots of it,

I: What is normally the growing time for corn?

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R: I'd say three and a half months.

I: Okay, and it's going like wild fire right now, is that right?

R: Yes. It's maybe not quite that long, maybe three months. I guess three months is about it.

I: Does Donnie help you out there at all?

R: Yes, Don goes out and kinda helps on his own. He goes out on the weekends and does what he wants to do. He has taken an interest in it and he's run an irrigation system out there for me, on the corn, on the grapes and on the garden spot.

I: I gottcha. Tell me, where did your children, now grown adults, go to school growing up?

R: Where did they go to school?

I: Yes, sir.

R: Gay went to P. K. Yonge, and then went to GHS three or four years, and then went back to P.K. Yonge. She graduated P.K. Yonge. Don went to school out there where Myer Terwilliger was the principal but it wasn't named for her. Out there on 5th Avenue. Corner of 5th Avenue about 20th Street. I can't recall the name of it now.

I: My bride could tell you but I can't recall it.

R: It just missed me right now. And then he went to GHS. And Gay - I didn't finish with her - Gay graduated from the University of Florida. Ten days after her first baby was born, she got her diploma.

I: Fantastic. I know you are proud of her.

R: I'm proud of her.

I: I think I've told you and we've talked about it before, my wife's brother used to date your daughter, and said she was an absolute doll. This was way back in high school days. I think Gay was either one or two years younger than my brother-in-law, Hank.

R: Maybe one.

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I: Beg your pardon?

R: Maybe one.

I: Maybe one year, yes, sir. What is happening with the store downtown these days? Is it still doing okay?

R: The one downtown is doing fine.

I: Alright, sir.

R: And my son runs it.

I: Good.

R: And has since January 1974.

I: Alright.

R: I sold out to him then.

I: Uh-huh. So you play cards once in a while to keep your mind alert. What do you do for exercise these days?

R: Pardon?

I: What are you doing for exercise these days?

R: Oh, very little. My circulation in my leg won't let me do much. I can't walk any distance.

I: But your color is good.

R: My color has come back. It was bad about six months ago. But my coloring has gotten better.

I: Let me turn this thing off for just a minute and we'll do some talking. Now we're going to do some more talking. Tell me about, describe if you would, let's just start talking

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about downtown Gainesville when you first moved here.

R: Downtown Gainesville, when I first moved here, practically all the grocery stores were downtown, with the exception of the little neighborhood grocery stores that were around, that the mini-marts have taken the place of now, but they existed by selling to people on credit. They would credit the people who lived in the neighborhood, and the people would go there and buy their groceries and go by and pay them at the end of the week. They'd deliver. One thing that kept me in bicycle business was their delivering with bicycles. Some of them would actually send the bicycle out and pick up the order from the lady, come back and fill it and take it back to her. In the morning, they would send him back to pick up what she wanted, she'd have a note written out what she wanted, bring it back to the store, fill the order, and he'd take it back to her. And the population of Gainesville, if my memory serves me right, was 10,449 in 1930.

I: Wow.

R: That was six years before I came.

I: I see.

R: And the year I moved here, there was one house in the city of Gainesville under construction.

I: Only one.

R: One, one house.

I: Now let's go right up East Main Street from your store, and on the east side of the street, facing west would have been what?

R: East side of the street facing west. Well, there would have been Margaret Ann's store, and then there was a boarding house first after you left the downtown business district you're talking about, then there was a boarding house, then there's Gainesville City Hall, then across, next there were some more dwelling houses, and then the Methodist Church, and there was a Church of God or something like that up there - I don't remember the name of it. Maybe it's still there, I don't know. Ida Burkham and Louie Burkham and their father and mother were living up there, and then, the Morrison's that you know about.

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I: That was Mrs. Morrison who was a Gray.

R: Yes, she was a Gray, and she was married to Dr. Morrison. And they lived there and their house is still standing.

I: Yes sir.

R: Some of these houses have been torn down now. And then, from there on up to 8th Avenue, which was as far as it went.

I: Which was Boundary back in those days.

R: That's right, it was Boundary Street. Up until then it was just houses, places, numerous living quarters. And I know one of them finally became the Methodist parsonage.

I: Okay.

R: I'm not sure which one it was, but it was along in there. The Methodist church bought it and used it as a parsonage.

I: Now let's go back over to the west side of the street, and come south from Boundary. What do you recall as you come south?

R: Well, there was twenty houses all the way down to and including the Baird Building that you and your partner tore down, and then there was another house south of that, and another one south of that, and then the Episcopal church, and then Wilson Co. had a big department store at University Avenue and East Main Street.

I: Right on the corner?

R: On the corner, yes.

I: Tell me about just south of University Avenue. What was on the corner of University Avenue and East Main Street South?

R: On the east corner? Baird Hardware Company.

I: And what was upstairs?

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R: Some dentist and lawyer offices. George Robertson had an office up there, a dentist.

I: He was the dentist, yes sir.

R: And I think that the firm that your father was with was up there.

I: Leighton, Gray and Waldo.

R: Yes.

I: Yes, sir.

R: And then downstairs was Cannon Insurance Company next door to Baird's, and then Piggly Wiggly Grocery Store, then McCrory Ten Cent Store, then there was an appliance store, and then the Pfeifer State Bank was on the south corner there.

I: You've got an awfully good memory, sir. What was around the corner, what was around the corner from Baird Hardware on University Avenue to the east?

R: Jimmy Gable's Grocery Store.

I: Alright, sir.

R: Courtesy Market.

I: Alright, sir.

R: Now wait a minute. I take that back. Not when I came here. Jimmy was over in that part that got burned out.

I: On University Avenue.

R: On University Avenue, right in there where Bob's Shoe Store was.

I: Shoe store, alright sir.

R: But when they both burned out there, then he moved over there east of Baird's.

I: Alright sir. When did, was it Bennett's, move there?

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R: Bennett's Drug Store?

I: Bennett's Drug, when was that?

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R: Bennett's Drug Store was there when I moved here. They were on the north side of University Avenue, in the 100 block west of Main Street, and they ran the store for several years, and then finally, Marvin Gresham bought them out.

I: Became Gresham Drugs. That would have been back in the 50's probably?

R: Yes.

I: Going back a little farther east, wasn't there a couple of restaurants on University Avenue, a little cafe between East Main Street and West Main Street? Or at least in that area?

R: Well, there was one between East and West right on the corner of Main and University. Ran by Louie. Royal Cafe.

I: Louie Coullias.

R: That's right, Louie Coullias. And then in the end of the next block going west, was the one ran by another family of Greeks, called the Presto Restaurant, I believe.

I: Presto Restaurant, okay.

R: The next one in the next block then, was the Primrose Inn, on the north side.

I: Who owned it way back then? Do you have any recollection at all?

R.: Mr. Wynne himself.

I: Byron Wynne, okay.

R: Byron Wynne. He opened it about 1929 or 1930. Somewhere along there. It was open when I moved to Gainesville.

I: Alright, sir.

R: Stayed there as an eating place until the final owner sold it about four years ago.

I: Okay, after Byron was ready to get out. That was probably Byron Sr. you were talking

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- about.
- R: Byron Senior was.
- I: Because Byron Jr.
- R: Ran it for a while.
- I: Ran it for a while, and then Jack McCraw.
- R: That's right.
- I: Which in fact he bought. In fact he bought it, I think.
- R: He bought it.
- I: Yes sir.
- R: And a lot happened in the center. McMillan put an old railroad passenger car that he got from the railroad company, and across the street from the Ideal Laundry on S.W. 2nd Avenue, opened up a drive-in, one of the first ones of those where they brought the food out to your car. You drove in and parked, gave the waitress your order, she went out and got it and brought it back out and served it to you in your car. You didn't have to get out of the car to eat. I remember when we first moved to Gainesville, my bride and myself went down there to eat. They had a little filet mignon steak, wasn't very big, but a whole lot bigger than a silver dollar, about three times that size, and french fries and a salad, and drink for 30 cents.
- I: Wow, wow.
- R: And I remember she says to me, we can't eat here very much.
- I: Do you recall the price of gasoline when you moved to Gainesville? In Alachua County?
- R: Well, it ranged from 18 to 22 cents. Sometimes it'd get down to 16, but I gave my wife \$6.00 a week to buy the groceries and she fed the gas meter, which was a quarter meter, and went to the picture show occasionally with that \$6.00.
- I: How about that. My goodness. I remember as a child, a train would come right down the middle of West Main Street. And the train station was where the bank is, where the

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First Union Bank is, as I recall. But I remember when the train would stop and people would go over to the White House Hotel for Sunday noon meal. And in the dining room they would have these black men wearing white coats, dressed fit to kill, and it was just a really classy thing.

R: That's right, that's right. You could eat there for about 75 or 80 cents. Get a fine meal, fine meal.

I: What else can we talk about, sir?

R: Well, I really don't know anything we need to talk about except Gainesville has changed a whole lot.

I: I remember as a young child - and I am a little bit younger than you are, Mr. Rice, since my folks bought my first bicycle when I was six years old from you - that we could, that I could walk downtown with my granddaddy, and we could speak to everyone we saw, black and white community. How Gainesville has changed.

R: Knew most of them.

I: Yessiree. Yessiree.

R: It was that way when I came here, even with the University and the coming and going of it. They had about 3000 students the first year I came here, and they thought that was a gracious bunch, and it was. But other than those students, it wasn't long till you knew just about everybody in town.

I: Yes sir.

R: And they knew you.

I: Did you have to lock your front door back in those days sir?

R: Well I did at the business, but I didn't want to worry about it too much about locking that apartment.

I: Where did you live?

R: The first apartment was the old Marable Apartments over on Seminary Street.

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I: I remember that name, Marable Apartments.

R: We lived there for I guess twelve or thirteen months, then we moved to the Duke Apartments. The Duke boys, who ran a lumber company, built an apartment

I: Bill Duke was one of them.

R: Bill and Steve.

I: Bill and Steve. Okay, I didn't know Steve.

R: Steve died kinda young.

I: Alright, sir.

R: Built an apartment over there. A four-unit apartment, right where there's a batch of them up there now. Right on the corner of 3rd Avenue and 13th Street. And they didn't tear it down when they decided to put some buildings in there. When they widened 13th Street, they was going to do away with some of the apartments, so Jack May bought that apartment and moved it in there north of the University and reconstructed and rented it for several years,

I: I'll be doggoned.

R: Then he eventually pushed it down and built a high rise.

I: Jack May. I hadn't thought of Jack for a long time. He's a military man.

R: Huh?

I: He was a military man.

R: Yes. Well, if you call going to West Point a military man.

I: That's pretty much of a military man.

R: Well, he resigned it. One year and one day after he graduated West Point, which was his obligation, to stay in a year, and that's what he did.

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I: Tell me, what was the end of Gainesville west, as you went west? When did you come to the end of town? Where were you?

R: Well University Avenue stopped just beyond where the President's home is now.

I: I see.

R: And Newberry Road went around the other way, and it went on. That was where I lived for a number of years, in Hibiscus Park, and that's the way we went and came, was Newberry Road. It was several years before they ever paved University Avenue, and it was a pig trail. You couldn't go through there, you might get stuck. And Newberry Road was paved, so that's the way we went, down Newberry Road and turned into Hibiscus Park, which is North of the Golf and Country Club.

I: I see. What else can we talk about?

R: Well, a lot of water went under the bridge.

I: Yessiree.

R: In this fifty-nine years I've been here, alright. I've seen some of the older fellahs pass on that were very influential in the town.

I: Yessiree.

R: John Tigert. One of them was Pat Keeter, Addison Pound, Bill Shands, and Dan V. Dixon, a black man.

I: Greer?

R: Greer Kirkpatrick, and lot of others that I can't recall right at this minute. Jess Davis was the Postmaster for a lot years. He lived to be ninety-four years old, and I used to visit him for the church since he and I belonged to the same church.

I: And which church was that, sir?

R: First Baptist.

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I: First Baptist?

R.: First Baptist.

I: And what was the name of the preacher when you first came?

R: Tom McCaul.

I: I remember Rev. McCaul, my goodness. That's a long time ago.

R: Well, he stayed here.

I: For many years.

R: Yes. In fact he stayed here and he baptized my daughter when she was twelve years old, and about the next year was when he retired, and I think she joined the church so he'd baptize her, to tell the truth about it.

I: Well, that's about all I can think about right now. Let me hang it up.