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Interviewee: Berne Davis

Interviewer: Vernon Peeples

Date: October 2, 2000

P: This is an interview with Berne Davis at her home in Fort Myers on October 2, 2000. First, I would like to just ask, Berne, if you would give us your full name, including your maiden name so that we could have that for this record.

D: My name is Bernese **Josephine Garfield** Davis. My name is spelled a little differently from other Bernices, and even though I spell it and write it out, people just do not even think and just go ahead and put Bernice. Even my report card, I looked at a report card I had from the first grade, and my name was spelled -ice.

P: You had a lifetime trying to reform people.

D: Yes, and then **Sydney** dubbed me Berne, which is just a shortening of my name, so I guess I will go by that the rest of my life.

P: What was the date and the place of your birth?

D: I was born March 19, 1915, in Hamilton County, Florida. It is up near the Georgia line.

P: Do you know what was going on in Jasper in Hamilton County at or around the time of your birth?

D: No. I know that it was very rural and a small, small area. My father was with the sawmill there. I do not know much about the place or anything, but I have been back since, and I never could find anybody who remembered the sawmill being there or anything about the people who were there. I think there was one man whose name was **Barfield**, but he knew nothing about my family.

P: Do you know approximately where the sawmill was located?

D: No, I have not the vaguest idea. I have been back to Jasper and up in that county just briefly, and I asked just a few people around the motel and in the restaurant of where we ate that night. I think I was there, in fact, on a Garden Club meeting, and we were talking about it.

P: Do you remember where you lived in Jasper at the time?

D: No, I do not.

P: What was the name of your parents?

D: My mother's name was **Dorothy Victoria Lynch**, and my father was **Marshall**

Jackson Barfield. He was born and reared in North Carolina. Though I say reared, he lived part of his life in North Carolina but he ran away from home and came to Georgia.

P: And your father's occupation was?

D: He was a mechanical engineer. He operated heavy equipment. I guess you would call him a mechanical engineer, I do not know.

P: What do you know about your father's family, other than that he was from North Carolina?

D: I know very little about his family because his mother and father separated. I believe she remarried, and my father never got along with him and he left home. To my knowledge, I never saw her husband, do not remember ever having seen him, but she used to come to visit us all the time. We were all delighted to have Grandma come, but she was so strict. She used to tattle on us. We would go outside with our shoes and socks on, of course, and kick them off and go barefoot. It was not very good for us to go barefoot, my mother thought. Anyway, Grandma would always tell on us. We did not like her very much.

P: How about your mother's family? What do you know about them?

D: My mother had six brothers and two sisters. There were nine children, and there were three girls. I think mother was really the best of the three by far. She was always a very creative woman, but because she was the oldest...her mother died at a very early age, and her father was one who apparently, from what we can gather, did not assume too much responsibility. Mother was the one who raised the family. She really had a lot of get up and go, had to quit school at a very early age and run the house, and she and her brothers and sisters ran the farm.

P: Was your mother from Hamilton County?

D: No, Mother was from south Georgia. I have forgotten the name of the county, but she was near Alma, Georgia. That is near Waycross. You probably know where that is.

P: I know something about Ware County and Waycross.

D: Waycross was the town they all went to for shopping and groceries and things, as I recall.

[Break in tape]

P: _____'s father was also a Methodist preacher of that Methodist church, and that

church is still there.

D: It is a nice little town. I remember going out there. I would like to go back.

P: Berne, you do not remember anything, really, about Jasper?

D: No, I do not remember anything. My older brother was born there, and then we moved. I do not know where we moved from there, but it was to another mill. We moved all over Florida until we came down here.

P: How about your siblings, your brothers and sisters?

D: I have an older brother who was born up in Hamilton County, and then my sister Agnes was born. She was born in Branford.

P: Suwannee County.

D: Yes, Suwannee County. Eunice was born in Odessa—that was near Tampa—because they had a mill there in Odessa. **Darling** had that mill in Odessa, and then he went from Odessa to Gulf Hammock. Do you know where that is? He built that sawmill with **Dr. Grove** from Asheville, North Carolina. The Darlings used to go up in the summer and visit Asheville. They became very good friends, and he became interested in, I guess, a sawmill. I do not know how he did, but there was a **crate mill** in Gulf Hammock that was owned by a man by the name of **Atkins**, who had a son who was about my age whom I used to have a terrible crush on. They built the mill, and it was to, I guess, harvest hardwoods, but they went broke. Dr. Grove, I guess, felt like he did not have enough money to go on or did not want to put anymore money in it, and Mr. Darling went broke. That is when he came down to Fort Myers and bought **MacWilliams'** mill out at Slater. That is how I got here.

P: Did you complete naming all your brothers and sisters?

D: Oh no, I did not. Then I have a younger brother Jack. He was **MJ**, Jr. I guess Jack was born in Odessa. I cannot be sure. We never were a family that dwelt on any of our heritage. Daddy and Mother just never seemed to be interested, and we did not I know. Of course, we were too busy doing other things, I guess.

P: And you did move fairly often.

D: We did move, yes. We were moving all the time, it seemed. I guess Mother had a hard time with five children, not five all at one time but actually getting up to five. Life was really hard in those days. I do not know how the women really stood it.

P: When your family moved to Lee County, would it have been to Slater?

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D: We came to Slater.

P: What year would that have been?

D: That was in 1928. We moved out to Slater and lived in one of the company houses. They had houses out there. We lived in the house of MacWilliams. No, the **Sapps** lived in that house, and one of the Sapps married a MacWilliams.

P: They also had a commissary.

D: Yes, they had a commissary, and how well I know it because 1933, they did not pay off. They paid off in **babbitt**. We had no money, and you had to go to the commissary to buy groceries. Everything was twice the price in the commissary as it was anyplace else. It was really, really hard. If you had to go to a doctor, of course, the company furnished a doctor. But if you had to have money to buy drugs or anything that they could not provide in the commissary, you had to go to an office and make arrangements to get money because they were so hard up.

P: About how large was Slater at that time?

D: Gosh, I do not know, about 500 people.

P: And everyone worked for the sawmill?

D: Everyone worked for the sawmill, and they had the black section, the quarters they called them, and the white people. They were all separate, of courses. The children went to school in Bay Shore. I never did go to Bay Shore because of my brother. Bay Shore School went to seventh or eighth grade. My brother had to come into Fort Myers to school, and Mother and Daddy let me come in with him. We used to drive in and out everyday. Then later, we rode on the bus.

P: Where did you first start to school?

D: In Tarpon Springs. We lived in Tarpon Springs a short time. My father left Odessa, I guess, and went to work for a man in Texas, Nacogdoches, Texas. That is between Louisiana and Texas. I later went there. He was out there for two or three years. That was 1925, and I went to school my first year in Tarpon Springs.

P: In 1925?

D: In 1925.

P: Did you like school?

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D: I loved school. Where we lived out in the woods, there was nothing much going on, and school was a great activity. We all loved it, could not wait to go to school. Although we always had a good time playing at home, it seemed like, but it was not as exciting as going to school.

P: It did not put you in contact with other people your own age, which is certainly very important to people growing up.

W: [Woman] Berne, what games did you play when you were growing up?

D: My brother was older than I, and I always loved to do the things he liked to do. I liked to play ball. I never liked dolls. My sister Eunice said I was born grown. But we would play ball games. Then, he liked trains, and I can remember my brother making trains out of cans and making the tracks out of the _____ that they make at the mill. He would just do all sorts of things with that, and that was the neatest thing. We played for hours and hours with that. We played cards. I do not remember anything, really, that we did.

P: Is there anything that you remember particularly about your life, say, before you were six years old?

D: I remember the 1925 hurricane. I do not remember before then, other than just a normal life, you know, waking up and going to bed and playing all day. I do not remember anything that was outstanding. But I do remember the 1925 hurricane, standing at the window with my face just glued to the window watching the trees in the garden just move with the wind. You could see the roots just wave with the wind, and I thought, are we going to be blown away? Because we did not have the communications we have now? Of course, none of us knew whether we would be there the next day or not. It was that frightening at the time.

P: Where did you live then?

D: In Tarpon Springs. Isn't it odd, we were talking about this yesterday. I asked Eunice if she remembered that, and she said no, she did not remember that at all. Because I had run across my report card from 1925. That is how I remembered they had spelled my name wrong.

P: Did it do any damage to your home?

D: No, it did not do any damage. It seemed to me like it was late in the afternoon, but it could have been at any time of the day. It was over the next day, and everything was normal, like it always is after a hurricane, except the trash that is around.

P: When you traveled then, how did you travel?

D: By train. We had no car. My father bought a Model-T. I cannot remember the year he bought it, but he loved that car. It was the most wonderful thing in the world. We moved from place to place by train because we had no car. My father would always go ahead of us, and then we would have to come by train. They had trains then. I do not remember if we ever had to be met. When we left Gulf Hammock, we had the car, and we drove down here. I just thought it was the most wonderful trip in the world. When I saw the **Royal Palms**, I thought they could not be real. They had to be cement because they looked exactly like cement to me. That was really, I guess, the most exciting trip that any of us had ever had, perhaps the longest trip that we had ever made at one time from Gulf Hammock down here.

P: How long did you live at Slater?

D: We moved to Slater in 1928, and I went to high school. We lived out there until after. I finished high school and moved into Fort Myers in 1933. I lived with the **Reynolds**, Captain and Mrs. Reynolds. He was a captain of a yacht. Fort Myers was very small, and so many of the men worked for people who owned yachts. They would come here for the winter. The captains docked their boats. Because when I came here, the end of Hendry Street was a dock. There were loads of boats moored out there, and people used to rent those boats. I remember there were two girls in school who lived on those boats. I think **Evelyn Dreiden**, who has been out of circulation for some time now, but her family, she had a sister who lived out on one of those boats. We all thought that was such a neat thing, to go out there. There are old photographs of Fort Myers with pictures of those boats. Not all of them are there, of course, but a great many of them are.

P: What activities did you participate in, in high school?

D: Not much. My brother played football, but we did not do very much because of the transportation. We would have to go back to Slater at night. He played football, and then he used to get out the best way he could. We could ride out with the doctor. Dr. Johnson was our doctor out there, and he was really one of the nicest men. If any of us wanted to meet him at the drugstore, we could, and we could ride out with him. That was always quite an adventure because he was full of conversation about things and had been here for a long time. I guess he was one of the first doctors to come here. He was here with Dr. **Whisman** and Dr. **Grace**.

P: It might not have been very far in terms of miles from Slater to Fort Myers, but it was a long trip. About how long did it take you to go from Slater to Fort Myers?

D: I think about thirty-five or forty minutes. It could have taken longer. I never really thought about how long it took. I may have thought at that time it was a long time.

It was a long time, I am sure, because the roads were not as good as they are now. But it was a pretty drive. I thought north Fort Myers was one of the prettiest areas. It had the most gorgeous trees. I just liked so much to see those trees disappear and buildings go up there.

P: How did you manage to date under those conditions?

D: I did not date a great deal. I only went to special things, and it had to be somebody who had a car, or they would team up and we would double-date and go. Of course, the Darlings, when they moved down, they first moved to Fort Myers. They lived over here for awhile, but then they moved out to Slater. They took the house that we had, and we took another house. They had a daughter who was my age, **Gail**. [She] and I used to date. We would just get together and do things like that. I was lucky in that I had lots of friends and made lots of friends with whom we have known each other for over fifty years, since I came here. We would always entertain. I would help them entertain. I did not have anybody come out to Slater because it was too far. Cars were too scarce. We had no car, and I could not drive at the time. I remember, I could not drive when I went to work. I was ashamed to tell my boss that I could not drive, and he asked me one day. I had driven a little, but I had not driven a car alone by myself. He wanted me to go and pick up his wife. This was **W. H. Reynolds, Sr.** And I did. ____ I was afraid all the way out and all the way back. I had driven a little but never alone, and I had to back out of their driveway. That was really a test. But I had to do it because I thought, well, I cannot let them know I do not drive. That would be just too much.

P: You graduated at Fort Myers High School, and then you went to work after that?

D: I went to work, and I worked at various places. I worked for the chamber of commerce when **Blain McGrath** was secretary. I worked for **Fred Miller**, who was an attorney. I worked for him first for a little while trying to learn to be a legal secretary. I went to Fort Myers Business School on the side. Then I started working for Bill Reynolds and worked there until I was married in 1933. He was in the municipal bond business and the tax adjustment. You know, they had the tax adjustment agencies set up to take care of the taxes after the land boom broke.

P: Before we started the interview, you mentioned about Caxambas?

D: Yes. When I came to school the very first day, I can imagine when they were going around, getting information, your name. When I said Barfield, that rang a bell because the Barfields from Caxambas had been here first and still lived down there. Said, oh, I know your sister. I said, you could not know my sister. My sister has never been to school over here. But they just sort of dismissed it. I thought where in the world is Caxambas? That was the oddest name I had ever

heard in my life, but I later found out where it was. There were two girls. I guess years later, I met the girl **Elma Barfield**, and then I knew the other one later one. I think the Elma was the older and then the one, I cannot remember her name. Anyway, she was very prominent down there. She was on the school board for Collier County. They were a prominent family in Marco. She was, I guess, the stronger of the two. She was the one who had the get up and go Mrs. Barfield had. **Tommy** Barfield, she was a friend of Baron Collier and with the people in the know down there. Marco was such a beautiful island. It was so pretty then, much, much smaller. They have just filled in how many miles of beach down there?

P: Yes. When did you first visit Marco?

D: It must have been, maybe, 1935.

P: Marco is the island. Marco is a community, and then you had Goodland, and Caxambas is on the island of Marco. There was not much there then.

D: There was not anything, it seemed to me. You would cross the bridge, I think at Caxambas or something. I think it was a little bay or a bayou. I have not been down there in so many years, I have forgotten just where Caxambas was, but there was nothing there. There was not very much at Marco except that big hotel.

P: Caxambas is at the south end of the island, and Marco is at the north end, and Goodland is kind of in between. It was primarily a commercial fishing area.

D: It was very attractive to winter people.

P: There was a railroad there once.

D: Yes, I know.

P: But that was mostly related to the clamming business.

D: Yes, they had a clam factory. The **Doxys** were a family who lived down there.

P: The Doxys and **Vernoms**. Vernom had a clamming operation and the Doxys as well.

D: I remember the Doxys. I do not remember the other one.

P: When you were growing up, what was the economic condition of your family compared with your friends and neighbors?

D: Our neighbors were all in about the same circumstances we were in, but the

friends that I met were all people who had a great deal more than we had. We had very little. I sometimes wonder now how my mother and father raised us. Of course, none of us had college educations, but that could have been had, had we been smart enough. We could have gone on to school, but Mother and Daddy did not know how to get us in school. I think I was just too proud to work because all my friends had so much more. My friends did not consist of the people at the mill. They were people I had met in Fort Myers. I grew up with this group of girls who all came from families of well-to-do families, people who did not work by the sweat on their brow like my father had. Daddy made a good salary for what he did. He was what they called a skilled laborer. We had a little bit more there, but as far as worldly goods, we had very little.

P: What was the effect of the economic Depression of the 1930s on your family?

D: It was very hard, I can tell you that. Fortunately, we were all very healthy. I still am very healthy, which is great. We required very little. We lived just from hand to mouth, almost, but it was never any real problem because Mother seemed to manage. Finances were never discussed. We did not have anything, but we did not know we were poor because we were happy. We did not know what poor was because we had been that way all our lives.

P: How often would you see a doctor?

D: We were always breaking an arm or a leg. I can remember I used to have malarial fever. I guess I was not very healthy when I was young. We had a doctor who was always the company doctor after we moved to Slater. I remember we needed doctors. I often think about Mother. We never really talked to her about childbirth, but I do remember that they had women who came in when you had a baby. Sometimes the doctor was there, and sometimes he was not. I guess he rode a horse to places where there were no cars or where it was very remote. But Mother did not have a child in a hospital. They were all born at home.

P: Either with a doctor or midwife.

D: Yes. I think we always had a doctor, but I could not be positive about that. I am sure we did after we moved to Slater because there was a company doctor. Dr. Johnson was there. You would go down to the office and wait your turn, and the doctor would see you. We always laughed because we never thought so highly of the doctor. We thought they gave the same pills for **everything**. Just the kids. My Mother and Father did not think that, of course.

P: World War II, Pearl Harbor. What were you doing on December 7, 1941?

D: I was sitting in the corner of this room. It was a Sunday afternoon. Playing bridge. Sydney was down at his business. We had the radio going, naturally, like it is

now. They interrupted to say that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Of course, we were just overcome. I will never forget it. I went to the phone and called Sydney, and he said, are you sure you heard right? He said, I will be right home, as if him coming home would stop it. We were just very upset about it, because I had a close friend, a girl whom I went to high school with all the years, who was living in Pearl Harbor at the time. Her place was damaged. A bullet came through her house, through the living room and through a bedroom where her child was asleep, just over the cradle. Her husband happened to be away on maneuvers, and she had talked to him earlier that morning. He had said that they would be in sometime that day, because I talked to her that night. She said that it was just terrifying. We were just all terribly upset. We did not sleep that night. We went out with a group of friends and, I guess, slept very little.

P: Did you have any idea of the significance, or only fear of what might possibly happen next?

D: No, I just had the fear of what might happen, of what would be the outcome. All my life, I had heard my mother and father talk about World War I. I just thought, what is a war like? You know, we could not imagine it. But I did Red Cross for it, got through it.

P: Let me backtrack now. What year were you and Sydney married?

D: 1939.

P: So you had only been married a couple of years when Pearl Harbor came along?

D: Yes.

P: You were married here in Fort Myers?

D: In Fort Myers, at the First United Methodist Church.

W: Berne, I have to ask, how did you meet?

D: How did I meet Sydney? Sydney was a young man about town, and I always had gone with the boys in high school my own age. I knew who Sydney was. He was in the bank, Lee County Bank, and then he opened this men's shop. I had no occasion to meet Sydney because as I said my family lived in Slater and I lived here in town. I went to _____ party that was being given for a friend of mine who was marrying a friend of Sydney's. His date could not go that night. She was ill, so our hostess called and asked me, because I was a friend of the bride, if I would come and fill in, come with Sydney Davis because here he was left without a date. She was just having a few of them, you know, the couples, so that is how I met Sydney. I did not have a date with him until several months after that. Then

I went to a Kiwanis party with him. I guess that was the beginning of our courtship. We went together for three years, had no idea that we would ever marry, I do not think. We just were good friends, and then it just developed into something more than that. And we were married.

P: Let me ask you a few questions about Sydney. I think you said he was originally from North Carolina?

D: No, he was from Chincoteague, Virginia. His father was in the oyster business. He had come down here to Fort Myers. Well, he came to Tampa to look at property that he and friends of his put their life savings into. This was in the 1920s, I guess, 1925 was when he came here. He got to Tampa. I forget whether it was on a weekend or what, but anyway, he could not find the property _____. But on the train before he reached Tampa, he had met **Colonel Battle**, who was then president of the Lee County Bank, on the train. They got in conversation, and he was telling Sydney all about Fort Myers. He found out Sydney worked in the bank up in Chincoteague, so he told him that he should certainly come on to Fort Myers because it was an up and coming town. He explained then to him that Arcadia had been the town but that he thought Fort Myers was going to surpass Arcadia and that there really was a great deal going on down here. And he said, if you come to Fort Myers, which he urged him to do so, come by and see me. And he gave him his card. So, Sydney came on to Fort Myers and went by to see him, and he offered him a job that Sydney said was so much more money than he was making at home, that he ever dreamed he would make. He said he would go home and think about it and then let him no, and he said oh no, do not do that, just send them a telegram right now, wire your resignation. That is what he did, and he came back down here and went to work in the Lee County Bank.

P: When you and Sydney were married, what was he doing then?

D: When we were married, he had given up the bank job. He gave that up to work for **Harvey Firestone**. He had met Mr. Firestone at the **Edison's**. They had talked him a job, and Mr. Firestone wanted him to come to Akron to see him. I do not know how much time elapsed between that conversation and Sydney's actually going because I never did think to ask Sydney about it. But anyway, when Sydney got to Akron, Mr. Firestone was ill, and his secretary knew nothing of the conversation. So, Sydney said when he got there and saw that situation, he just came on back home. He had given a leave of absence at the bank, and his job had been filled by somebody who had a family, and Sydney said he did not want to go back, he did not want to deprive him of the job because he had family. The **Hiteman** Clothing Store was going out of business, and **Lloyd Hanshaw** was the manager and, of course, clothed most of the people in Fort Myers, including Sydney. Sydney said, what are you going to do? And he said he did not know what he was going to do. He asked him why he did not buy the

business, and he said that he could not afford it. So, Sydney said if I buy the business, will you manage it? That is how he opened the men's shop, knew nothing about the clothing business. Hanshaw ran it for all those years. Of course, Sydney was there, and they were very successful. Of course, he had a great following. That is how he went into the clothing business.

P: Do you recall what year it was he went into the clothing business?

D: I think it was 1931. I am not real sure, but I think it was 1931.

P: Okay. He had some rough years at the beginning.

D: Oh, he did. Yes, because I remember his saying, it is nothing like working for somebody else because when you closed those doors, it was not your responsibility to meet the payroll. But he loved the business. He had become involved in things around town. He was very active in the **D Melee**. They used to have the most wonderful parties. They were a great group of people. We had organized this sorority in high school, all the friends. We have stuck together well. We have been friends. The last one has just died about two or three months of this little group that we have been friends all these years. We were all doing things with that, and then the D Melees would have dances, and we would go to them. They were always well chaperoned. We had glorious high school years. We really did. All of high school was fun.

P: You mentioned the Methodist church. Were you always active in the Methodist church?

D: No, I was not. Mother never let us join a church. Mother and Daddy were Baptist, but we never had a Baptist church when we were coming up at the different mills. So, Mother would never let us, although we had these evangelist ministers who would come all the time and preach that fire and brimstone and scare us to death. We all would go home thinking we were going to hell, did not dare say hell, the bad place. But anyway, she would never let us. She said no, that she felt like people should not join churches and get out of churches. They should join a church and be associated there forever. She told us all we would have to wait until we were married. I became a Methodist the day I married Sydney. He had become so interested in the Baptist church, but we had so many friends who were in the Episcopal church that I think I may have gone there sometimes. But I did not, and I was active in the church for a good many years. I do not do much anymore. We had that Sunday school class for a long time.

P: When you were first married in Fort Myers, how would you describe the social life here at that time?

D: I thought it was very active and very good. Fort Myers has always been a party

time, I think. I think bridge was very popular, and, of course, for the young people we had dances. At that time, they had stag lines. You would go to the parties with a date, and then people would break on you. We had chaperones, and there was always punch and cookies or something like that. Then, we used to rent the barges that **Mr. Trobridge**, who was a great fisherman down on Hendry Creek, why, he had a barge and took people out on fishing excursions and things. We would rent that barge. That was the big thing that we did, when we could all get together and rent a barge and go out on the moonlight picnics. He would fry fish, catch fish and fry fish, and we would have that, or we would have steak or something like that. We had lots of picnics, and people all entertained in homes, which is so different from now. It seems like everybody wants to go out someplace, where we had parties at home. The dates would come and pick us up. The little sorority would have suppers every Sunday night, and then our dates would come and pick us up, and we would go to the movies. Of course, you went to the movies. Then we had a drive-in restaurant that people would go to, to have a hamburger afterwards. We had **Wayne's** that was out here on the corner. You cannot imagine it being there, but it was, the corner of **Raymond** and **McGregor**. That was a little drive-in restaurant, and you could go, and they made the most wonderful hamburgers. They were \$0.15, and he put a cigarette on each hamburger. Of course, none of us smoked. If we smoked, we had to sneak around and do it. But that was the greatest thing in the world, to go to the movies, which was then \$0.15, and then go to Wayne's and have a hamburger afterwards. I guess the whole evening would cost about \$1.00, which was really, we thought, just a big evening. Then we would have the dances, and they were fun. Life was always busy. We always had something to do.

P: Most of the recreation was self- and group-created.

D: Yes, it was. We went to the beach. We loved going to the beach. So many people went to the beach in the summer. That was the only place. They did not travel around like they travel around now because traveling was very expensive. People would go to the beach and rent a cottage. A great many people had cottages there.

P: When you are referring to the beach, you are referring to...?

D: The Fort Myers Beach, because we had the beach. The beach was very wide and very pretty. They had the county road, which did not go very far, but we would not have gone on that county road for anything. We just thought you were dead if you went on that county road. We had to ride on the beach, and you could ride for a good long ways on the beach. What we would do is ride down in the afternoon and spread a blanket. There was no place to dress. You had to dress in the car, roll up the windows and put the towels to the windows, and put on your swimsuits. We had lots of picnics at the beach.

- P: But there was a very active social life among the younger set of people.
- D: Yes, there was. Of course, there was very little drinking. No alcohol anyplace, and very few people of our crowd smoked. I can remember when we first got onto cigarettes that we would sneak around. I tried to smoke, but I never liked it, thank goodness, because I do not know how I would have ever bought them. My allowance would not have allowed for cigarettes. I do not know how much they were a package then, but they were very, very inexpensive.
- P: After you were married and after Pearl Harbor, do you recall how World War II affected you and Sydney personally?
- D: No.
- P: Was he in the service?
- D: No, he could not enter the service. He had some physical handicaps which prevented him from going. I did Red Cross work. Sydney did lots of volunteer work, but I worked at Red Cross three and four days a week. I rode a bicycle all around. All of us rode bicycles.
- P: You had Page Field and Buckingham.
- D: Yes, we had Page Field and Buckingham, and I worked with the group making bandages, taught officer's wives how to make bandages. Then we had a gray lady unit that went out to the _____ school in Buckingham. We always entertained the soldiers every Sunday after church. The soldiers who were there would come. We would invite them. I would have two or three for dinner on Sunday in the middle of the day.
- P: You had rationing of various kinds.
- D: Oh yes, we had rationing. We had the meat rationing and...
- P: Shoes.
- D: Yes, leather. Then they put the tax on pocket books and on the shoes. That was terrible, to have that extra tax. That was a luxury tax. That was what they called it. Gosh, I have not thought about these things in so long.
- P: You had the rationing stamps and the rationing tokens.
- D: Yes, all of those things.
- P: Sugar was rationed, and gasoline.

D: And we only had one car, so that meant I would have to drive Sydney in or he would go in. We each had bicycles...

[End of Side A1]

D: ...we used to have garden tours. I guess it started with Mrs. Edison and with **J. D. Growers** and Mrs. **Rae** and the people who had bigger places in Fort Myers, I guess mostly the winter people were the ones whose gardens. It really started as a money maker for the Congregational church there in Edison Park. They would have these little garden parties and sell tickets. Our little sorority group was asked to help serve because all of the girls' mothers knew Mrs. Edison and J. D. and all the others. My mother did not, of course, because she was out in Slater. Anyway, we were asked to do that, and we went to Mrs. Edison's, and then we would go to J. D. Growers and then to Mrs. Rae's, wherever the party was, and we would help serve. That is how I met her. Of course, she did not know who I was. I was just one of the girls. My first introduction to her was through Sydney, when I started going with Sydney. He, of course, was a friend of their's. He had met her through the bank, when he worked in the Lee County Bank, and then when he established this Sunday school class. He had a young men's _____ Bible class that they had over 250 in membership at one time. It was a real nice class of young men. They were college age, and they would come home at Christmas and have parties. They always used to have parties at the Royal Palm Hotel. That was the place to go. It only opened in the wintertime, a very nice place. When he told her we were going to be married, he wanted me to meet her. That was a scary time because here I was frightened to death to go. But she invited us, and we went for dinner. We arrived. We parked on McGregor Boulevard. You could park on McGregor Boulevard for the Edison home then. There was **Scarf** at the gate waiting on us. We walked in over the Friendship **Walk** and to the little guest cottage. I guess you would call it the guest cottage, not the main house but the cottage where the dining room was and the guest quarters were. Sydney and I walked in, and here was Mrs. Edison. He said, this is Berne, and she held out her arms and hugged me. My fears just melted right then because she was so sweet and so nice. Just the three of us had dinner that night, with **Henry**, her butler, waiting on us. It was fun because my fears and all my nervousness just disappeared. We sat and talked about, oh, flowers because always they had interesting centerpieces because she had taught Henry how to work with the material that was in the yard. That was always so fascinating to me, to be able to grow flowers that you could use in your home and not have to go out and get them, and have something different. She liked flowers, she liked gardens, she loved clothes. We just had lots of woman talk, and that was the beginning of our friendship which lasted up until her death. I had them all to our apartment. Sydney insisted. Oh, and we visited her when we were married. She wanted us to come to **Chatauqua**. Of course, they went to Chatauqua. Her family had helped found the Chatauqua. So, Sydney and I went west. We went to

the Canadian Rockies and came back and stopped in Chatauqua. That was another thrilling event, to go there. I have forgotten the name. **Athenian**, I think that was the name of the hotel in Chatauqua. Big old rambling frame building. When we got to our room, there was a note from her saying that she wanted us to join her for tea and that Scarf would pick us up. He came and drove us all around Chatauqua, and we went to the **miller** cottage, and it was fun. Then we met her for dinner that night and had a good time. We went to some concert, and then afterwards, she loved to get ice cream sodas, so we went someplace and got an ice cream soda and said goodbye. Later, when she came down that winter, why, we had them all up at our apartment. We lived on the third floor of the **Seville** Apartments. I had **J. D.** and **Mona**. I think Mona was here then. Yes, she was because she was married to her first husband, **Martin Wondrac**, who was a very good-looking man. We had Mrs. Edison's sister, **Grace Hitchcock**, who at that time was a widow and lived out in **Rio Vista**, and Mr. **Miller**, Mrs. Edison's brother. I think that was all who were there. All of them sent me flowers all day from their garden. Flowers kept coming in. The whole apartment looked so pretty, and I had used the wedding presents they had given me and worked on the meal for days, planning it. Everything went real well. From then on, why, we just got together very often when she was here.

W: Now, was she a member of your garden club?

D: She organized the Garden Club, and it was like a council. She organized us into the national **Plant, Flower and Fruit Guild**, which is something we never should have been in. It was something they had up in the east, which I later found out. But I became secretary, and **Jerry Holt** was treasurer. She knew **Parker** very well, and Parker and Jerry Holt were married about the same time Sydney and I were, and we were all very friendly. We would go, and they had various groups in town. She was extremely interested in the **black** area, in Dunbar, and had people from Dunbar to come to her house. We would meet at her house. She was real interested in birds, naturally, and could do all the bird sounds. That was fun to be with her for that. She was extremely interested in civic beautification and always wanted to do something about any blighted area, and particularly out in the Dunbar area. That was how I became interested in garden clubs, I guess, at that time. I did not join one. I was playing golf and doing other things, but I was always interested in gardens, always wanted a garden.

W: I know you know what garden clubs are and I know what garden clubs are, but the people who read this years from now may not understand how important garden clubs have been in this town. Can you tell us a little bit about the garden club and [why they are] important.

D: I think it is very important. I think they have done a great deal because women turn more to beauty, I think, than men, unless the men are trained in fields like

that but so many times they are not. You have so few of them, it seems, compared to other professions. But I feel like that women see a different side of life than men, and garden clubs seems something that I feel like everybody should be interested in because it deals with the home and it deals with our whole town, our whole area. It offers so much because people really take advantages of all the different things that they offer. It could be wonderful. I think the garden clubs in Fort Myers maybe in the past made a much greater impression than they do right at this time. They had a better image in Fort Myers. It is hard to get publicity, and we have so many clubs and so many groups now, all doing the same thing.

W: Well, I know it has been something you have been involved with for years, and you have certainly left your mark with the garden clubs.

D: I thoroughly enjoyed it, but I think the civic improvement is the greatest thing. I think that is where women have really come to the front in showing people what can be done, bringing to their attention.

P: We were talking earlier about your very beautiful home. When was it built?

D: 1941-1942, we began this house. We began this house right after Pearl Harbor, I guess. We started it. We had been working on plans and worked, as I said earlier to you all, we worked on so many plans and finally just gave up and decided to build this square-type house because it gave us the room that we wanted. We hoped to have a family. We were in New York when Hitler marched on the Low Countries. We were there that weekend. Our plans and all were to be open when we got home from that trip. I am really mixed up, I tell you. We were on our honeymoon, coming back, when Pearl Harbor...I was thinking about the war. We were on our honeymoon whenever Hitler marched on the Low Countries and war was in force, of course. We were there, and we were coming home to open the bids to whatever house we might build. Opened all of them, and we could not build any that we had. They were all too big. We decided to go into this type of house and did. I lost my train of thought. You asked me when we built it?

P: You mentioned earlier that this was kind of out from the main part of town. There was not much in the area.

D: There was nothing out in this. We were way away from town. There was very little. **Riverside** and **Seminole Park** across the way was developed, but this had a great many lots. Only the Spanish-type houses that are out in this area were built at the time we built our house, because I think all the building just stopped when the economy changed at the end of the 1920s. Nothing had been built out here until Sydney and I built our house, and that was in 1941. We started our house the year that, as I said, whenever Hitler marched on the Low Countries,

because we were in New York and we were very upset. We came home and built it and moved in, in 1942, if you can make any sense of that.

P: Who is primarily responsible for the design?

D: I guess I am. If I had it to do over again, there would be so many things I would change.

P: That is the case universally when people build a house.

D: I guess it is, but we have not done a thing to this house since we moved in except remodel the kitchen, and we did lower the windows. When we built this house, the steel window frames had come into being, and we had steel windows. That was a great improvement because they were so much tighter and just better looking. We changed them in later years because _____ took care of windows, the lower ones particularly. That is when we lowered the windows and we did the kitchen over, and that was all. It cost more to do that than it did to build the house in the beginning, because things had changed.

P: You have been through several hurricanes since residing in this home.

D: Yes, and we have never had any problem with water. Only once did the water come up into the back, and that was very shallow. It may have come up, maybe, ten or twelve inches. That is the deepest it has ever been up here. It has covered the lawn, but it has always subsided in a few hours when the tide would change. The river here is very shallow at the edge. The channel is quite a ways out, and the only water we have is the wind wafting the water over the seawall. The tide comes in, but then there is no real flooding.

P: Which of the hurricanes gave you the most apprehension since you have been living here?

D: I guess Donna did.

P: September 10, 1960.

D: Because that was in the daytime. See, all the hurricanes always happened at night. First, you have all this wind and rain and all the preparation for a hurricane, and then the lights would go off, the telephones would go off, and everything. All the thunder and lightning and weather. If it was at night, you could not really observe. But when Donna was along, why, that was in the daytime. I think that made a big difference. It made a big impression. I had three people here at my house. Water did beat in through the windows, but that was all. We never had any problem with the windows blowing out. We have never covered these windows or anything.

P: Did you ever consider evacuating?

D: Never thought about it in my life until two years ago. We had left Fort Myers. I cannot remember the name of the hurricane, but it was two years ago when it did so much damage up in the panhandle. We left Fort Myers. It had gone out to sea, and we went to Gulf Shores. We had to evacuate Gulf Shores because of that hurricane. That is the only time I have ever evacuated in my life.

P: But not in Fort Myers.

D: Not in Fort Myers. But I tell you, coming across that Pensacola Bay, that bridge, our car was swerving. I did not think we would make it, but we had called the Highway Patrol who said that if we could off the island and get over that bridge within the next thirty minutes, we would be all right, we could come south, and so we did that. I tell you, it was really scary. But I have never evacuated from here. We never do. I do not know how we will get on McGregor. You cannot get on there when there is something going on.

P: Do you remember the first time that you experienced an air conditioned business office or home?

D: The first time I ever visited one? No. I know it was a long time before we air conditioned our house. I thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world that could have happened. Air condition and electrical refrigeration, I think, are the greatest things in the world.

P: When did you air condition this home?

D: I guess in the 1950s. They were building the house across the street on the corner over here, on the corner of **Harod** and **Wales**. It was the second house for the family. They had built the house where the **Deans** now live, the young Deans, near the Edisons. They had sold it and were building out here, and they were air conditioning their house. Air conditioning was just coming into play. Sydney had air conditioned the shop. I do not know when he did that, but he enjoyed that so much and thought it was just terrible to come home to a hot house. We all had fans everywhere, but then that does not take place of good cool air. So, we air conditioned our house then, in 1952 or 1953 or somewhere along there, and it had the heat, the reverse heat cycle.

P: Do you remember when you would have seen your first air conditioned automobile?

D: Oh yes, I remember very well.

P: What was your reaction to that?

D: Oh, it was wonderful. This friend would drive so far, and then she would turn off the air conditioning, and the car would warm up, to save gas. I decided that when I got an air conditioned car, we were going to keep the air on, which we did, but we had so many friends who did that. They would drive, and then they would turn the air off and then turn it back on. It was so funny. But I think it is the greatest thing in the world to have an air conditioned car to arrive fresh.

P: You lived in Florida all of your life.

D: Yes.

P: What is your experience in dealing with mosquitos?

D: Having lived here all my life, I think I have built up an immunity. They do not really bother me at all. I can be outside and they can be all over me, but I do not really feel it. But now, Sydney never really grew accustomed to him. They would always find him, and they always annoyed him. But the no-see-ems, I think they are terrible. We were some place recently where we had loads of those. We were on Sanibel. I was at a little garden club meeting over there. They had the **Blanche Covington** nature study course over at Sanibel this past month, and they invited me to come over one night. It was really nice, but the sand flies were bad. But they used to be terrible going to the beach when we did not have air conditioning. We would have to mop the screens with kerosene because they could come in, those little tiny sand flies. But the mosquitos were not bad except when there was no breeze, because they could not fly against the breeze.

P: Was Sydney ever involved in politics?

D: Not really. He did handle the campaign for Doyle Carlton [Florida governor, 1929-1933] when he ran for governor. He was his campaign manager here in Fort Myers, but he really never did get involved in politics locally. I think a great many people did not ever because, living in small towns, it used to be so bad when your friends ran and they were defeated. It just wrecked so many families, I think. I was always one sort of felt like my politics were private.

P: The *Fort Myers News Press*, how do you feel about it throughout the years?

D: I think sometimes they have been pretty cruel about some things. I do not always agree with them, but I do not think I am smart enough to even make a good comment about them. I think that our newspaper suffers because they change personnel so often. No one ever gets to stay here long enough to have any real feeling for the community. I think that is what we miss because we did have a wonderful paper.

P: Do you remember **Carl Hanton**?

D: I certainly do, very well. He was a good friend of Sydney's. He was against the radio, though. He did not really want the radio because he thought that was competition. He really was a good editor, I thought.

P: Then you had **Bill Spear**.

D: We had Bill Spear, whom I thought was excellent. **I thought our Fort Myers** paper was one of the best. I think it has suffered somewhat since we have been owned by Gannett. We have a new man right now, don't we? **Is Jacoby** gone?

W: Yes, he is gone.

D: Now, who is here? The man who is here, hasn't he been here before?

W: He has, and I just cannot remember.

D: I cannot either because I missed the issue where it was announced. I do not remember. I do not know who is here, but someone said it was someone who had been here before. But I think that is the whole thing, that they never really get into Fort Myers.

W: I think you are right.

P: Again, the problem of the institutional memory plays a role, where you do not have that continuity within the local newspaper and you do not have people with institutional memories who can help to guide the...

D: We do not at all.

P: ...the editorial policies as well as the news policies. That is true, I think, generally of the newspapers all over southwest Florida.

D: Yes.

P: They do not have that.

D: It certainly happened here.

P: Now, I asked you earlier about the social life in Fort Myers when you were first married. This is fifty years or so later. How do you feel about how social life has changed in that interim period of time?

D: I think it has changed a great deal. People used to entertain in the home very much because people could get help, and we did not have the restaurants that we have today. I know myself, there were a great many more parties than there

are today and certainly more that were at home. I do think that is because of help. You cannot get help. A great more people would do it if they could get help, I think. Or maybe things have just changed. The town has grown, and there are more activities available. We did not have the performing arts place. We just had so few places to entertain other than home. I think people were forced to have parties at home, to do their own entertaining that way. I do not know. I am out of the party circuit because I do not have a husband anymore, and I do not have big parties anymore. We used to have big parties, but I do not anymore. It is not as much fun going without my husband, or an escort.

W: Berne, you do have a reputation for being a beautiful entertainer, though. What was your favorite party that you ever gave? Can you tell us a little bit about it? I know you have given some wonderful ones.

D: Well, I do not know. I guess maybe one of the most fun parties I ever had was when Sydney was eighty years old. I had a party for him. We had a manager at the Yacht Club at the time who agreed to cater the party. I started out by having a surprise party, but I realized early on that could not be because we had to do things. Of course, having lived here as long as we had, we had a great many people. We had it outdoors, and I realized I had to handle it in some way that if it rained we would be taken care of. That was the reason I went down and asked him. We had this manager who had just been here a short while but who really knew how to give parties. He had been connected somehow to the social life in Washington, D. C. He got me entertainment for the night. We moved the piano outside, and we had music and had lights all over and tables out on the lawn. That was the biggest party I ever had, and it was wonderful. He did not really want me to have the party, but I think he was so delighted that we had it. Everybody came, and it was so much fun. That was, I guess, my biggest party. But then, when Sydney was president of the Centennial, that was for the county, he wanted to entertain all of his committee members at home. He wanted to always have parties at home. We had all the spouses of the committees that he had. That night, we set up everything. We had been having glorious weather, and the forecast was good. We had the bar set up outside, and we were going to have the buffet and everything outside. About 6:00 that afternoon, the heavens opened up, and we had to move. It was a little cool, a little chilly. We had to move everything indoors, and I think we must have had about thirty people. They were upstairs, downstairs, everywhere. We had no room. People just had to sit wherever they could, but it was exciting. Everybody had a good time. _____. But that was a fun party and one I will never forget because of the ____.

P: What are your activities today?

D: I like to garden, and I like to travel. I guess that is about all I do anymore. I do club work around town. I am two or three boards.

P: Not long ago, I saw you handing out programs for the inauguration of the president of Florida Gulf Coast University.

D: Yes. I do a little work like that, but that is all. I do not do very much anymore. I do serve on one or two boards.

P: Are you involved with the symphony at all?

D: Yes, I am a great supporter of the symphony. I think it has added so much to our town, just like the college and the university. We are so fortunate to have it because we worked so hard to get it. I think they filled a great need here.

W: I know you are very active with the Edison Home.

D: Yes, that and the **Uncommon Friend**. That is something I am interested in. I do a little, not much, church work. I used to do more church work. I am interested in the **Altar Guild** at our church. And in garden clubs. I do a great deal of garden club work.

P: Do you still do judging?

D: Yes, I still do judging, and I am a landscape critic, they call them. I have taken advantage of a great many of the courses that they have given. They are so interesting. I am on the state and the regional and the national boards, and I am going Thursday to Princeton to a national council board meeting.

W: Berne, you have been all over the world, haven't you, with your garden club?

D: I have been to a great many places. Through the courses that we have had, we have met people. This trip that I took this August was to southern Germany and Austria, and it was handled by this man who had helped us with our landscape design schools here in Florida. He has pupils who came to the University of Mississippi, and they worked these tours together. They do the gardens. They find the gardens, and he does the reference and then promotes it over here. We have been on several trips with them. We go to gardens that are not the touristy gardens. We go to a few of those, of course, but not many. We go to small places, and it is a lot more fun and more intimate. He is taking a trip to Spain next year, and I hope I can go. Unfortunately, it is the same time as the Edison soiree they are planning. I do not know if we can change it or not. But then we have the board meetings in different parts of the country. Some places can not have conventions, but they can have national board meetings. So, we are going to Princeton this week to a board meeting. A neat thing, the American Horticultural Society honored our national president, who happens to be **Dean Day Smith** from Georgia whom you probably know. Her husband started the Days Inn Motels years ago, which I do not think they are connected with anymore.

Anyway, he had ____ and sent every board member two of those plants. I thought that was such a nice honor. Just imagine. We have over 100 members on that board, so for them to do that for her was, I thought, quite a _____. I am waiting. Mine has a bloom on it. Every time I go away and come back, I think, are they still alive? So far, they are.

P: How many years were you and Sydney married?

D: Almost fifty years. He died in April, and we were married in July.

P: He died in what year?

D: 1989. I had just about talked him into taking a trip in a wheelchair, because, see, he had a stroke in 1986. He handled that stroke very well, but he said that it was not any way to live. He was so, so handicapped by not being able to rise to his feet immediately when a lady entered the room or to get up to speak to people. He walked everyday and he exercised, but he said every time he walked into a room he was looking for the nearest chair, because he felt like that he had no support on his left side. That was the side that was affected.

P: You and Sydney had many wonderful years together.

D: We did. We had a wonderful marriage. We really did. I feel like I have had a charmed life. We always wanted to have children, but we never did. But he helped several young men through school, and they have all turned out so well and remained friends all these years _____.

P: You certainly have a wide circle of friends in Fort Myers today?

D: Oh, you think so?

W: I know so.

D: Oh really? Well, I hope so. I really feel very fortunate to have the friends I have.

W: And your niece and your sister, too.

D: Yes, and to have my family here, which I am very sad about because, my goodness, **Eunice and Alexandra will be here alone**. There will not be any of my family here, which is so bad to think about. I have a sister in Alabama and a brother who is in Clermont. That is our family. They will never be here again, so Alexandra will be alone.

P: Is there anything else that we should have asked you?

D: I do not know anything else about it.

W: Do you have a philosophy on life or anything that kind of keeps you going?

D: I have a great zest for life. I really do. I cannot believe that I am as old as I am, except when I start to do something and I have forgotten dates, and I go to say something and I have forgotten what I was going to say. That is bad, but I do not feel like I am as old as I am. But I love life and I love people and I love my home and garden. To me, life is just an adventure.

P: You seem to everyone I know to be a very happy person.

D: I think I have a lot to be happy about. I think I can attribute that to my mother who always taught us that it was not what we had, it was what we made of what we had that really gave us pleasure. I just always had that feeling that it is not what you have, it is just what you make of what you have. We have always had a good time. I think that is the reason I never was brighter than I was. I was so busy having a good time that I really did not study much. I should have. I am not a very good reader. I wish that I were because I like to read. But I sit down to read, and then I think of something I need to do and I get up and do that. I miss a great deal. I miss not being a good reader because I think it is so important.

W: I think this has just been a lovely interview, Berne. Thank you so much for sharing all of these stories with us.

D: I cannot see that it would be very interesting, myself. I am very flattered that you came and asked me, but I....

P: Berne, you know, is it CBS that has a program once a week where they just pick out somebody at random in the country. Their theory is that everybody has a story. Well, maybe everybody has a story, but you have a very beautiful story to tell.

W: You sure do.

D: Oh, aren't you nice? I cannot believe that it would be very interesting because I think people can tell stories and can do things and do it in a very interesting and fascinating way, and I do not have that ability. But I do have lots of friends who do, and it is wonderful for me to be around them.

W: Well, we sure have enjoyed this time we have spent with you.

D: Well, you are very nice, and I have enjoyed being with you, and this has not been as bad as I thought it was going to be.

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[All laugh. End of Interview.]