KLINE WILSON

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO
PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

Co-sponsored by
The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library
The San Francisco African-American Historical
and Cultural Society

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HELEN WILSON

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Kline Wilson

Kline Wilson

Date 3/13/79

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Helen Wilson Date 3/23/79

Helen Wilson

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Co-Sponsored by:
The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library, and
The San Francisco African-American Historical and Cultural Society

Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

INTERVIEW WITH KLINE AND HELEN WILSON

JUNE 20, 1978

At 1742 Bush Street, San Francisco

Interviewer: Jesse J. Warr, III
Transcriber: Mary Wells

BEGIN TAPE 1:2:1

JW: Let's start with your birthdate.

KL: September 29, 1913.

JW: Where was your family living at this time?

KL: San Diego, California.

JW: How did they happen to come there?

KL: My grandfather owned a barbershop at India and Market in San Diego. My grandmother was a... What do they do when they work with children, when they travel with children?... She was a nursery maid. What do they call them?

JW: Nurse?

KL: The family that she worked for where she came from, which was Topeka, Kansas... she had charge of the children.

JW: A governess or nursemaid.

KL: Yes, whatever the Black people were called. And they came to San Diego. That's where she met my grandfather who was from Jamaica.

JW: Oh! How did he get here from Jamaica, do you know?

KL: I don't know.

JW: About what period of history was this?

KL: Well, this must have been in the... my grandmother... How old was my grandmother?

HE: Your Uncle George would have been about 104 now. So, she'd be about 102.

KL: Yes, so we go back one hundred and two... a hundred years. She was born maybe in '78. Because my great-grandfather fought in the Civil War. And because he fought in the Civil War in Alabama, he was freed. And he migrated to Arkansas.

JW: Do you have any documents from that Civil War period?

KL: We had a big Bible. I don't know who has it. But my grandmother kept many things in there. But, honestly, I don't know where it is.

JW: Did they have any stories that they told you about the slavery period, the Emancipation

KL: [Break] No, but my great-grandfather was a slave. He fought in the Civil War. He was freed. Born in Alabama. Don't know... it may come... After the Civil War, he was freed and he migrated to Arkansas.

JW: Of his own free will or was he given land out there, or...?

KL: No. Of his own free will. But, evidently he was a very enterprising man because he had a store. He had sold merchandise. He did fairly well. Then he moved to Topeka... no, what's that other place?

JW: In Kansas?

KL: In Kansas... Manhattan. Manhattan, Kansas. My great-great uncle was the first Black to attend Manhattan College and graduate from it.

JW: Oh. Then your grandmother came out here. She was in domestic service?

KL: Yes, yes. And she had children -- I remember her telling us this. She met my grandfather, who was Alexander Brock, whose father was Jewish, they tell me. And his mother was Black. But he was an enterprising gentleman too. In San Diego, California, three blocks from the waterfront, he owned a square block. There were houses, barbershop and a restaurant. I can remember part of this when I was a little fellow there, because we raised crops on one part of it... corn and things like that, I can remember. India and Market. I was down there quite a few years ago and God! that property is worth a fortune. But, so be it. But that's how my grandmother met my grandfather. They had eight children.

JW: Eight? Wow! So his father had been Jewish-Jamaican. And his mother was

JW: a free woman or a slave?

KL: Yes. I don't know... she must not have been a slave over there. Weren't they freed? That was a British possession, and slaves were freed in 1820.

JW: 1838, or something like that.

KL: Yes. So evidently she was free.

JW: What is your father's name?

KL: My father's name is Ben W. Wilson. And he's still living, by the way.

JW: Where does he live?

KL: Houston, Texas.

JW: The people we've been discussing were your mother's side?

KL: My mother's side, yes.

JW: Okay, well, let's start with her. What was her maiden name?

KL: Audrey Brock. I should know her middle name but... [To his wife:] What's my mother's middle name? Audrey Elvira Brock was my mother's name.

JW: And she was born where?

KL: In San Diego.

JW: So she was almost a second –generation San Diegan?

KL: Yes.

JW: About when was she born?

KL: I believe she was about eighteen years older than I.

JW: Did she ever go to school?

KL: Oh, yes. In the school system in San Diego.

JW: The public school system?

KL: Yes.

JW: Do you know how far she went?

KL: No, I don't.

JW: But she could read and write?

KL: Oh, indeed.

JW: Your father's name is Ben Wilson? He was also born in San Diego?

KL: No. He was born in Arkansas... they migrated to Texas, back to Arkansas, and then to California.

JW: What part of California?

KL: Los Angeles.

JW: When was this?

KL: Well, he had to be twenty years older than I am... maybe a little more... maybe twenty-two years.

JW: So he was an adult when he came to California?

KL: No. No. They went to school. He and Uncle Harry, they went to school in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles.

JW: Okay. Do you know how your parents met?

KL: No. My Dad was a baseball player. In fact, he was quite an athlete. He played baseball.

JW: What team?

KL: Oh, a barnstorming team. But I imagine they came to San Diego.

JW: Was this the Negro leagues?

KL: Honestly, I don't know. I would imagine so because they didn't mix then, did they? [In the background, son Paul says,] "Not until '47."

HE: No, they sure didn't -- not until Jackie Robinson.

KL: No, well he was a hell of a catcher. I've heard this from others... not from him so much. They used to travel around... where, I never asked him. I should have, but I never asked him.

JW: Was this a large Black community in San Diego as you remember?

KL: I can remember the picnics. And, boy, to me at age four or five, there was a whole lot of people! They had a big church. We used to go to the park. As I said, my grandfather owned this block. When we left that block we'd go

KL: right through the park -- it was a city park -- and then on the other side was a great big church. That's what I can remember. But I have no idea of how many people were there.

JW: What made your family move up here?

KL: Well, my dad and mother moved up here first. We came in on a train, I can remember. And we wanted to get something to eat. The train depot was at Third and Townsend. We went into what I would consider now a "greasy-spoon." And I can remember this very distinctly: The man couldn't talk English, but he said, "No niggers." I can remember that now. I can see him. He could have been Greek. Most likely he was. He couldn't talk English. But he said, "No niggers." And, boy, my dad was ready to grab him, but what good would that do? So we didn't eat there, that's for sure.

My dad's first cousin was living here and they lived right off of Townsend behind the station. We went there afterwards. From there they found us accommodations. We stayed in that area, because there were little pockets of Black people... here, and then in the Fillmore. Just small amounts. There couldn't have been... when we were young folks there weren't five thousand Black people in San Francisco, at that time.

JW: But you're not... I'm not exactly sure what made your parents leave San Diego in the first place?

KL: I have no idea. Employment could have been part of it.

JW: Do you know why your grandfather lost his property?

KL: Yes. I can remember my grandmother talking about it: not meeting the taxes. Plus the fact it was valuable property. So that's what they go by being tough. I can remember the conversations going back and forth. I guess that's when my dad and mother came here.

JW: Did they have any other experiences that they talked about with prejudice in San Francisco in those days?

KL: Oh, yes! You couldn't find a house to live. We ended up on Pacific Avenue between Jones and Taylor. My mother wanted to go to work, so she attempted to enlist me in the school which is at the corner of Mason and Pacific Avenue. Catholic school. And they said. "No niggers." They didn't say it, "No niggers." But there was no niggers. I can remember that.

JW: You were about six at that time?

KL: Yes, just about six.

JW: Was your family Catholic?

KL: No. No.

JW: Why not the public schools?

KL: Well, I think because you had care after school, which they didn't have in the school system here at that time. So if I was able to go there then my mother could go to work all day, I presume. That's what it was for. But they were very emphatic. Oh, man! I remember my mother, she was crying. It wasn't a good scene. That was here.

JW: What kind of work was she doing at this time when you were very young?

KL: Well, then, she didn't work.

JW: She didn't?

KL: No, she was home. My dad was working...[Long Pause] I'm trying to think what he was doing... He was shining shoes, down at the... at the Ferry Building. I think that was part-time. Then he got in in a barbershop.

JW: Was he fair-skinned?

KL: No. [To his wife:] "Is my dad my color?" Yes, we were both the same [color].

JW: I was told that the Italians seemed to have had the shoeshine market sewed up here. How did he break into that?

KL: Well, not at that time, I don't believe. They came after. No, not at that time.

JW: There were a lot of Black men in the shoeshine business?

KL: Well, I don't know if they were "in business," but they worked for people. Mr. Gordon [Benjamin Gordon, another interviewee] can really bring you up-to-date here because he was in that game since 19.... whenever he came here.

JW: What did your father think about that line of work?

KL: Well, he wasn't too happy, because he got his own shoeshine stand. I can remember that. He was at Mission Street near Sixth. He had his own business. He found that Black labor isn't too dependable and not too honest... including the family... and he got took. (Chuckle) Because he was holding a job, and then he'd work extra hours and the weekends at the shoeshine stand. He did very well. But, surprisingly, during the week when he wasn't there, the money was short. I can remember that... those conversations.

JW: Who was he in business with, his brothers?

KL: No, it was his shoeshine stand, my dad's. But he hired people to take care of

KL: the business. And they kind of thought that the money, all of it belonged to them, I reckon.

JW: Then during the weekdays he was working at a barbershop?

KL: In a barbershop as a porter... a porter in the barbershop.

JW: So he didn't cut hair.

KL: No. No, no.

JW: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

KL: Two sisters. I'm the oldest.

JW: What are your sisters doing now?

KL: Well, one of my sisters is in business with my wife. They are partners. They own Murray's Stationers on Divisadero Street... 1655 Divisadero. My other sister lives in Los Angeles, and she is... What is it? She's retired.

JW: What was she doing before?

KL: She worked for the State.

JW: Could you describe the first house you remember living in? The neighborhood and that kind of thing?

KL: Well, the first one that really sticks in my mind... was when we came from San Diego we lived... Townsend Street is on one side of the SP Depot. We lived on the other side of Townsend Street. But all night you could hear the trains moving... behind the factories which were... We were surrounded. Just a small pocket of Black people lived between two short streets on Townsend, facing Townsend. And there were houses going back... And I can remember that. Because, golly! you'd be sleeping and these things would go "Clang! Clang! Clang!" You'd think the engine was coming into the house it was so close. And you'd say "Golly!" Then we moved from there to... it was Leavenworth Street between Pacific Avenue and Jackson.

JW: How old were you then?

KL: That's when I started school so I must have been six. We didn't stay down in that area too long because it wasn't large enough actually for the family. One or two rooms and you climb all over everybody. But we moved to Leavenworth Street, and then we moved to Pacific Avenue. That was our house then.

There were cobblestones on Pacific Avenue between Jones and Taylor. And

KL: the horses... wagons with the steel wheels used to come up and down, and they'd make so daggone much noise. I used to jump on the back. And I'd get a whipping everytime because my mother would see me. 'Cause she just didn't want me jumping on the back of those wagons. (Chuckle)

JW: You'd just jump on for the ride?

KL: Oh, yes. Right. If one was coming up, I'd come back up. When I'd get back up to the top of the hill, there'd be my mother. She'd work me over. I'd wait until she'd go inside, and I'd do it again. (Chuckle) Crazy. But I did it.

JW: Were your neighbors on Pacific Avenue mostly Black people?

KL: No. We were in a little house that sat back off a street and there were... I don't think... No, there were no Orientals. But there were Italians, I would imagine. There were other people speaking foreign languages all around us.

JW: Immigrants mainly?

KL: Yes, yes.

JW: Who was in the house when you were younger? Who came over to visit? Or did your family keep pretty much to itself? Was there a lot of intercourse between the neighbors?

KL: I don't remember that. Because come dark, my mother would feed us and clean us and we'd have to go to bed. Now who came in after that, I just really don't know. There were a few Black families that lived around on Jones, still in that same set of apartments... they're flats. She knew several of those folks. And they used to go to Third Baptist Church. I believe that the church was the center of everything at that time.

JW: Did you play with the immigrant children that lived around there?

KL: Yes.

JW: Your mother didn't tell you not to?

KL: Oh, no, because we'd... I remember we used to get in fights all the time, because they... every once in a while, the word "nigger" would come out, and I was just automatic. I didn't know what it was about, but I knew we were supposed to [fight]. I would get beat up. (Chuckle) But, no, she didn't keep us in.

JW: Was there anything that she specifically told you not to do that you remember, other than jumping on the back of wagons?

KL: Well, the Orientals at that time used to come down Pacific Avenue going home. The men had the long hair, and we used to pull it. We weren't supposed to, but we used to run out and jerk! and then run back behind a fence. And they accepted it. Of course, I better not look at them now, they'd send me overseas. But we used to do that. Of course, I'd get whippings for that whenever she saw it. But we looked down on them. We were looked down upon, and we looked down on them.

JW: How were your parents different, your mother and father, were they more or less alike as you remember them... in temperament and the way they treated you and so forth?

KL: Well, my mother used to pop me a lot because I did things that I shouldn't have. Then she'd always save the good one for my dad, who would work me over. So they were very much alike in that regard, as far as raising the children.

JW: They believed in 'Spare the rod... ?"

KL: No, sir. They said they'd get you. And they got me.

JW: Were they unusual in that respect? Or did all the parents that you remember spank their kids?

KL: Well, my refuge was my grandmother. I was the oldest grandchild. And if I could get to her, then I was saved for a while.

JW: She lived in the house with you?

KL: No. She lived around the corner on Jones. Well, when we moved from Leavenworth then my grandmother came from San Diego and moved in. Then we moved to the house on Pacific Avenue. So if I could make it to my grandmother's, I was safe that day. (Chuckle) She'd take me to church and all this... She kind of spoiled me, I think. I love her, too, but...

JW: Did they spank your sisters as well?

KL: My sister didn't do things like I did. She was a pretty good girl. (Chuckle) [Some unclear disagreement in the background.] But it's true.

JW: In what ways were they perhaps different?

KL: Well, my dad was a... a "dreamer," I guess. He wanted things. He didn't mind working. As I can very well remember, he would work all day on this job. And you'd go... he went to work at six o'clock in the morning then. He didn't have no eight or nine o'clock thing. Then he would go at his own little business and shine shoes until ten or eleven at night, and then come home.

KL: He was ambitious. Again, I repeat, he did want something. My mother was conservative, I guess you would say. That would be one difference. They were both very... easy. I don't remember friction. I honestly don't. Of course, aside from she'd tell him what I had done wrong and he would use a strap. But that was on me. I don't remember quarrels or things like that. I just don't.

JW: Which one would you most likely talk to when you had something bothering you?

KL: Well, they... At that time, young man, we didn't have that kind of a thing going. Your parents said (a snap of the fingers), and that was it. You didn't talk to them. I don't remember. I don't remember ever being able to communicate.

JW: Were you a good student in elementary school?

KL: In elementary school I was outstanding, really. But as I moved up the line I followed the course of least resistance -- to my regret. But, nevertheless, that's a fact. Because I can remember being so proud of bringing whatever the top grade was. At that time I could sing very well too. And, of course, 'all niggers can sing,' I guess, and they put you up in the front of the class. But I was fortunate, I guess, up until maybe the sixth grade... Oh! up until... When we moved to San Jose, they had this competition. (Do you remember this competition, girl, when they played records and all of that?) And then for some reason I got off the track and I didn't do so well. Passed, of course, but that's not... what you're supposed to do.

JW: Going back to your father for just a minute, when did you see him if he was working all this time? Was he home for dinner?

KL: No. But early in the morning I'd see him. And sometimes he'd come in. Well, of course, if it was time for chastising me, he'd come on in and say, "Hey, man, you better come on and get it. Your mother tells me you did this." "Oh, no, Daddy, you know..." (Chuckle)

JW: Were you at all afraid of him?

KL: No. No. He used to take us to the park on Sundays... Sunday afternoon. He used to take us... they had picnics at the time. I can remember Shellmound Park. Where it was, I don't know. It was across the Bay... Oakland. Shellmound Park.

JW: West Oakland [actually Emeryville] some place.

KL: Yes. We used to go there... Of course, Golden Gate Park.

JW: Did he have a car?

KL: Not at that time. Later on he did.

JW: So you went on...

KL: On the bus or the train, ferry, yes. Yes.

JW: Was he playing baseball during this time?

KL: No. No. He was working.

JW: He had given up baseball?

KL: Yes. He might play a little bit on Sunday or something. He had a catcher's mitt, and he wanted me to be a catcher because he was. He'd teach me how to throw it with the wrist and all of that, but...

JW: Did he like San Francisco? I guess he stayed here, but... Did he ever regret coming here?

KL: I never heard him express that.

JW: Did he say anything to you about moving somewhere else or moving on?

KL: No. No, not that I remember.

JW: Which school was it that you attended then after the rejection at the Catholic school?

KL: Well, we moved to Greenwich. Then we lived right next door to Mrs. Raymond [mother of Lillian Raymond, another interviewee] on Greenwich.

JW: Is this in Cow Hollow?

KL: "Cow Hollow," yes. And I attended... started at Yerba Buena.

JW: Were you and the Raymonds the only Black children in the school?

KL: I don't remember seeing too many others. I really don't.

JW: What were the other children's backgrounds?

KL: Immigrant children. Children of immigrant parents.

JW: But they all spoke English, the children?

KL: Yes.

JW: Did you have household chores to do when you got home from school?

KL: You betcha my life! You betcha my life. We had a wood stove. We lived on the second floor... I had to bring up the wood and coal. I had to clean out the stove in the morning or maybe twice a week. My mother had a little stand... a little box. And I stood on there and washed them dishes, or she'd wash them and I'd dry them. And she would turn the plates so I wouldn't break them. No,

KL: no. I worked. Well, she was teaching me.

One thing which I thought was so beautiful as I... as it comes back to me... Whenever we'd have crumbs from the table, she wouldn't let me throw them away... or little pieces of bread. She'd have me to put it outside for the birds. I thought that was just wonderful as I look back.

JW: What was the difference in age between you and your older sister?

KL: Two years.

JW: Did she have to do the same kinds of things?

KL: Well, she was two years my... she would do something, but the most of it was mine because I was the oldest.

JW: Did people think it unusual that boys had to do housework?

KL: Man, my mother said, "Do it." So I don't know what people thought. That was it.

JW: Do you remember any games or songs that stick in your mind from childhood... things you would do when you didn't have to... you know, when you had your own time?

KL: Well, my mother used to read to us at night.

END TAPE 1:2:1

BEGIN TAPE 1:2:2

KL: Golly! I can remember... "Three Bears"... Something about the bears. And then she changed... she'd read a story, and then we'd go to sleep. Because we went to the library. We went to the library. When I was a little fellow I didn't know what the library was. There was one not too far from us on Greenwich Street, if I can remember right. In the evening she would go... we would go to the library, and she'd take out a book for the children, or two. She'd read from the books for us. They were that kind of story... nothing involved, but it was interesting for young people, youngsters like ourselves.

JW: Did they ever talk to you specifically about the Black experience?

KL: The only thing I can remember distinctly was the lynchings, the horrible things... The Ku Klux Klan was very strong at that time in many sections of the country. And we used to... she used to tell us about those.. My dad would talk about... I think it was Marcus Garvey that was on the rise at that particular time in history. He [my father] would say, "There's a Black man that's moving! There's a Black man that's going!" But they didn't say "Black" then. "There's a Negro."

HE: "Colored."

KL: Colored -- There you go. But the expression of "Black" was not used. In fact, that was an offense if you called someone "Black" at that point.

JW: I think there was a very small Garvey chapter in San Francisco.

KL: It would have been and he could have belonged to it. Because my dad was a member of the Odd Fellows; he was one of the officers. Well, first, my great uncle was the secretary of the Masons; he was the secretary of the Odd Fellows. And who else did they have here then? They had something else... the Elks.

JW: What was your uncle's name?

KL: George Hamilton. Yes, he was quite active in the fraternal organizations. He then saw to my dad... became active. My dad was in... I remember the Odd Fellows. The rest, I don't know whether he belonged to the others. But I do remember the Odd Fellows. Because they would have affairs for the family. And we used to come out here to the hall at Steiner and Geary. [To Helen Wilson:] "What was the name of that Hall, Girl?"

HE: Hamilton. Hamilton Hall.

JW: No relation. Was it named for your uncle?

KL: No, no. I doubt it. But that was the center for Black people. There were different organizations. But I can remember that.

JW: Do you remember his saying anything more specific about Marcus Garvey's separatist ideas? Garvey put a lot of emphasis on pride and race.

KL: Well, that they did, but not the separate, I don't believe. It was the idea of coming together and collectively doing something. I gathered that from my dad. But not of separateness. I don't believe that he was inclined that way.

HE: I think he's the one who wanted all the Black people to go back to Africa.

KL: Yes, but that was part of his program. The first part, if I can remember correctly, was that, "Let's do something together first. And as a result of that you will be able to... do the following things." But that's where my dad's interest lies because he was very much in favor of "Hey, let's do something together."

JW: How did the family spend its leisure time together, when your father was home and your mother was home?

KL: My dad used to like to read a lot when he was home.

JW: Do you remember the kinds of things he was reading? Did he subscribe to any newspapers or magazines?

KL: No, he used to get those from the barbershop where he worked. So whatever was

KL: in the barbershop, that's what... besides the books from the library that my mother... and those were mostly for us, the children.

JW: Did you go to the beach or that kind of thing?

KL: Yes. Yes. We did.

JW: Were Black people accepted on the beaches? I mean could you go anywhere you wanted to?

KL: No. No. You could go to the beach. And there were a few places where you could buy something. But, no.

JW: Was the ocean Playland out there then?

KL:: Yes.

JW: Did you go? Was that open to you?

KL: Yes, you could go out there. But you'd be where... by yourself. You wouldn't be with everyone else.

JW: How does that work?

KL: Well, I don't know.

JW: When you went over into somebody else's territory they would shoo you away?

KL: That I just don't know. Many of these things went by, because I wasn't even aware of them. But I know we'd go, because we'd come back and our pants legs would be rolled up and be wet and all of that. But what transpired... I know there were a lot of places we didn't go on the... then it would be like the boardwalk or the activities. Now you go in here... "Well, let's go in here," and you would wonder why... But you would never ask any questions at that point.

JW: Did you make any trips outside the City, besides Oakland?

KL: Well, if you went to San Jose, that was a big thing. Yes, we went to San Jose. But, boy, that took almost a day.

JW: Why did you go down there?

KL: Well, my grandmother grew up with Mrs... her name was Hawkins. (It wasn't Hawkins when they were back in Kansas.) But she had settled in San Jose. And they were very good friends. Every once in a while we'd go... and she'd take me with her to San Jose. I'd ride on the bus, boy, and that was... that

KL: was a great big thing, wow! We'd get ready... it took you a week to get ready. (Chuckle) "We're going down to Sis Hawkins." Of course, I'd say, "Mama, can I go with you?"

JW: What about Christmas time? What did you do on Christmas?

KL: Well, Christmastime was the family. We'd have a Christmas tree and... were blessed. We'd have presents.

JW: Did they go in for Santa Claus and that kind of thing?

KL: Well, at the Third Baptist Church, again, they had their Christmas before Christmas. We'd get presents there too. Decorations... they'd have the Santa Claus. And come Christmas we'd have our tree... Our parents would set up a tree. We'd have presents, and it was very pleasant. A big dinner. And all of the family would be there whether it was at our house or my grandmother's house.

JW: What about birthdays?

KL: Oh, my mother would see to it that we had a birthday party... small... a cake and...

JW: So they actually had a party?

KL: Oh, sure. See, we never forgot our birthdays. We never forgot it and neither did my mother as long as she lived.

JW: Did you have a nickname as a child?

KL: No, they couldn't put something with "Kline" apparently, so I was just "Kline."

JW: They didn't call you "Junior" or anything like that?

KL: No, no. I'm not a junior. My dad is Ben... Ben Wilson.

JW: Who were your heroes as a child... people that you perhaps imitated or looked up to?

KL: Let's see. I can remember them talking about Roland Hayes... Roland Hayes and how he was "accepted." He was from... Wasn't he from Georgia? Yes, he was from Georgia. And that he sang. He was accepted as a concert singer, and this was just a tremendous thing. I can remember them talking about Madame J. C. [sic] Walker. I think she used to tour the country. And I can remember them talking about Booker T. Washington, and how he spoke!

JW: They had heard him speak?

KL: Oh, yes. Yes, Lord.

JW: Here in San Francisco?

KL: No, no. No, it wasn't here in San Francisco. This was... they had heard him and seen him. When he traveled around the country. I can't tell you where it was. I don't know. But they would talk about "Booker T. Washington!" I thought he must have been a great man, as a little fellow. And he was. But he was saying, "Put your bucket down where it is. Right now! Get a trade." And this made sense.

JW: Anyone else?

KL: Let's see... Roland Hayes, Booker T. Washington, they used to talk about... I guess that was my dad. He used to talk about Black baseball players. There was one Josh Gibson, I think his name was, who had a fantastic arm and could hit home runs. Josh Gibson, that was his name. And evidently there was communication in the Black community about Black sports... oh, yes, and Jack Johnson too. Yes, Jack Johnson. "He whipped that White boy!" (Chuckle) They didn't say "White boy," they'd say, "That paddy."

JW: Paddy?

KL: Yes. "Paddy." "He whipped that paddy." [Epithet for Irishman.]

JW: What was most likely to make you angry when you were small?

KL: Well, I guess the fighting word was "nigger." Just automatically. Discrimination, of course, would make you angry. And we've experienced it. I have. This is an aside, of course, but the day that... "D" Day. No, not "D" Day. What was that day, "M" Day? When I had to go to sign up for the draft? No, when the War started. "M" Day I guess it was, "M" Mobilization Day. All males ages from eighteen to twenty-five, twenty-seven or whatever it was had to go and sign up.

We were living in Cow Hollow, my wife and I, at the time. I passed a house [to rent] which appeared to be much better than ours, on Octavia Street going to the draft to sign up. So on my way back, I stopped. And there was an immigrant who couldn't speak English, but she told me, "No niggers." Just after I had signed up. So, of course, that made me real happy. [Some questioning from his wife.] No. No. "No niggers." She said... you remember I come home and told you -- "No niggers." She couldn't speak English, but she could say "No niggers."

JW: When do you think you were first aware that being Black was going to make a difference in your life?

KL: Oh, they used to read about slaves, and they'd read the story of Little Black Sambo in school. And I would cringe! I'd just try to get real small. That must have been six or seven years old. I knew there was a difference then. It had

KL: to be something, because how could this man (as I had it in my mind) who couldn't speak English, tell us he couldn't serve no niggers when we first came here. That's in there [my memory]. It never leaves. So I was aware of it then. Plus the fact that there just were not too many of us.

Of course, where there are numbers, it gives a different feeling entirely. But when we went to school, like the Raymonds and I, that was it, out of maybe five hundred students. Or when we moved out in the Mission, we went to an elementary school which was right across the street. And there was just my sister and I. So just not... your presence made you feel, "Hey, there's something." But what the heck it is, we weren't old enough to separate it and say, "Hey, this is the reason." But we knew there was something.

JW: But you were an outstanding student. So were you motivated in part by a motive to show them up?

KL: Now [that] I don't know.

JW: Or did your mother just tell you that you have to get good grades?

KL: Hey, that's where it was. She said, "We want you all" -- and she emphasized that -- "We want you all to"... she didn't say excel, but to have good grades. And, of course, it was a joy because she wanted it. You'd bring your papers home and daily or weekly [and] she'd go through them. When you had a red check because something was wrong, "Well, how come?" It was like a game, and I enjoyed it at that time. But then after that, I don't know what the hell happened. (Chuckle)

JW: Did you have pets?

KL: No. Each pet I had I lost. I had a little dog and it got run over. And somebody stole a little dog. I never had any luck in it.

JW: When did you move to the Mission?

KL: Well, I guess we must have been about... oh, eight years old maybe, a couple of years after we lived down in Cow Hollow. And to illustrate how discipline worked: my mother, my sister and I were on the No. 22 car. Years ago the cable car came two blocks down, from Broadway and Fillmore to Green and Fillmore. Then it would unhook and run each way. We used to use that to go to the Mission because you take 22 and then you'd transfer at Sixteenth and Mission. We would see this lady, but we didn't know her. And whenever she would come aboard... she'd board at Green... and whenever there were no seats, it was just automatic -- my mother didn't have to tell me, "Hey, man, get up." You know, she'd just look at me (Chuckle) and just up I'd come and offer this lady the seat. So the lady one day said something about how well-mannered my mother's children were and she said "I'd like very much for you to come to my house." So my mother said, "Okay," I guess. So we ended up on the corner

KL: of Green and Webster.

It turned out that this lady's name was Mrs. Clay of Sherman and Clay Music. She was so impressed with how well-mannered my mother's children were that she, you know, started us in music -- two Black children. She was instrumental, I know, in us getting a piano. Just how this thing worked, I don't know. But we ended up with a piano and were taking lessons. But that's how my mother raised us. It was just automatic. Like I say, if somebody was standing, like a lady, she didn't have to say "Kline." You just got up. (Chuckle)

JW: When you got into music, did you enjoy it?

KL: I did, but I didn't make the most of it, unfortunately. I enjoyed it very much. I kick myself now, but I didn't do what I should have. Because in my family, my uncle had a very beautiful voice. My sisters can sing even now. They have lovely voices.

JW: I don't think I asked you your sisters' names?

KL: Marjorie is the one next to me; and Early, E-a-r-l-y, is the third sister.

JW: Why was the family moving so often? Or did it seem to be a problem when you were young?

KL: I think there was a fire on Greenwich Street. If I remember, there was something about a fire. Then we moved out in the Mission with my grandmother, because she had a big house right on Mission between 25th and 26th.

JW: Did she own the house?

KL: No, she rented it. And that' how... I believe that's how we moved from Cow Hollow.

JW: Hod long did you stay out there at that house?

KL: Until my mother died. Let's see, I would imagine about three years or four years.

JW: And then where did you move from the Mission?

KL: We then moved to San Jose.

JW: With Mrs. Hawkins?

KL: No, near her, but not with her.

JW: And you were how old by that time?

KL: Well, again, I think I had started in junior high. No, that's not right. No, I must have been in the fourth grade, I guess. Then we were there a couple

KL: of years... and was ready for junior high when we left there. That's what it was.

JW: So you moved back here for high school?

KL: Junior high, yes.

JW: Where did you go to high school?

KL: High school in San Francisco.

JW: Which school?

KL: Commerce.

JW: Wasn't Commerce primarily a girls' high?

KL: No.

JW: It wasn't?

KL: No. Never.

JW: It wasn't ever?

KL: No.

HE: There was a girls' high school. It's where Hamilton is now.

JW: How was San Jose different from the City, from San Francisco?

KL: Well, there was work for the whole family during the summer in the orchards. It was extremely cold in the winter and hot as Hades in the summer. It had just a small group of Black people there. And a wonderful library. I used to go there all the time, I can remember.

JW: Were there any laws against children working in the fields?

KL: There could have been. But everybody's child worked in the fields.

JW: How long did you have to stay out there?

KL: Well, when you're picking fruit, you start in when the sun rises and finish when the sun goes down.

JW: Was it hard work?

KL: You bet you my life.

JW: I don't know what kind of fruit they grow down there.

KL: Well, at that time it was apricots, peaches, prunes. That would run through the summer. Then you'd have to go back to school.

JW: How did you get paid? By the amount?

KL: Yes, by the box.

JW: Did children get the same wage scale as adults?

KL: Well, no. Your family would contract to do a job. I don't know what they collected. But I know we worked.

JW: Who were the other workers, Mexicans or Filipinos?

KL: No. No, I don't remember seeing too many Mexicans. There were Italians. I remember that.

JW: Going back to the question of your moving, did it disrupt your education in any way? Did you feel any instability in the fact that the family was moving every couple of years?

KL: No. We just started another shcool. There was none of that...

JW: When you moved to a new school, did you have to fight to establish your position?

KL: Oh, yes. They put it on your shoulder. And there you were. And most times there you were by yourself, too. (Chuckle)

JW: Did you have to fight to protect your sister, or did she have an easier time as a girl?

KL: I believe she had an easier time. They didn't seem to pick on the girls. But a boy who would come in, he had to prove himself, I guess, that's what it was. And, of course, if you talked a pretty good one, you got a good lick in, because being scared to death... you survived. And I was lucky, I guess.

JW: What were your favorite subjects about junior high and high school age? Or were you beginning to lose interest by then?

KL: I loved to read and still do for that matter. I don't know, truthfully. Music was one.

JW: Was it classical music or jazz?

KL: No, not jazz. It was songs like the "Indian"... No. What were some of the names? Oh, boy. Wish I could remember. I don't know.

JW: This was vocal or instrumental music?

KL: Both. Both.

JW: You played an instrument?

KL: No. No, just piano. I was taking piano. And choruses I remember were very interesting to me at the time.

JW: What kind of school was Commerce High? Was it considered one of the top schools?

KL: Well, it was oriented toward business. There was the typing... commerce, but what it said. I don't know... No, it wasn't like Lowell. It was just a regular high school.

JW: What were you expecting to do when you got out of there?

KL: Well, I was leaning toward journalism, I can remember that. Because I was fortunate at that time to work for the Spokesman, The San Francisco Spokesman. First I was hustling papers... selling them or delivering them or something. Then I was writing the sports column. That was the dream -- journalism.

JW: What did you do to pursue that dream?

KL: Well, when I graduated from Commerce, I went down to the College of San Mateo... San Mateo Junior College for two years, and journalism was the major. Spanish was the minor. But then that was the end.

JW: Why?

KL: Just about at the Depression time, when men were selling apples on the street -- that was in 1935 and '36. So an opportunity to work was presented, and yours truly grabbed it.

JW: What opportunity was that?

KL: To work in an insurance company. What was the name of that?... Commercial Union Ocean Group; they were at 315 Montgomery Street.

JW: What kind of job did you have there?

KL: I was in the mail department.

JW: Was that considered a good job at the time?

KL: It was. Down in the financial district, there were not a hundred Black people. There were not a hundred Blacks. And anyone that had one of those jobs was

KL: supposed to... Hell, they didn't pay no money, but... (Chuckle)

JW: How did you get it?

KL: A very dear friend of ours, Mr. John Fisher. I was doing volunteer work at the Booker T. Washington Community Center. Mr. Fisher was the chairman of the board. He offered me a summer job down at the company. One of the jobs was to take information that was in files and file it properly. I didn't know until years later how the job came about. But there was work to be done and yours truly did it. When they told me the job was over, it still didn't register because I had a job to do. And I finished it. So, many years later he spoke at... I think it was at a scholarship... about how a young man he knew didn't realize or wasn't interested in the eight-to-five. It was a job. He was supposed to do the job and he did it, and as a result of that they hired him. And then, lo and behold, he called my name. I wasn't even aware that this had transpired. But that's how I got the job. There were others who wanted the job. Because for every job that was available...

To give an illustration: At the corner of Golden Gate and Market was the Golden Gate Theater, and right next to it was a shoeshine stand. They advertised in the paper that there was a job opening. And at five o'clock in the morning... this job was paying ten dollars a week by the way... at five o'clock in the morning when I got there, there was a line, if you can visualize it, all the way up Golden Gate to Taylor and Leavenworth, all the way the Leavenworth, all the way around to Turk, of men who wanted that ten dollar a week job, White, Black, Oriental. I was over there at five o'clock in the morning. [Mrs. Wilson offers refreshments.] Come on. Have a drink... lemonade, orange juice. You're welcome. Oh, we have things stronger than that.

JW: I think I'll wait until the end of the interview.

KL: All right. You're welcome. But to illustrate, so when a job...

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JW: When you were at Commerce, did you go to that one school for the whole four years?

KL: No, three years. Junior High -- John Swett Junior High -- was the school from seven to nine. And then from the tenth through the fourth year.

JW: Did you play sports in high school?

KL: Yes.

JW: Which ones?

KL: Basketball and football, until I broke my ankle. Soccer in junior high. We were city champs. No basketball... baseball in junior high school too.

JW: Catcher?

KL: No, I was at shortstop. I had a pretty good arm, and could hit every once in a while.

JW: Who were your friends in high school? Were they people at the school or were they people that you had known before or met outside of school...?

KL: No, I had two... No. One person, Robert Gibson; we grew up together. Then there was...

JW: Was he Black?

KL: Yes. Then there was Juro Hosada who was Japanese. We were very close. Then there were some Blacks there -- Wesley Peoples -- who was quite a basketball star. He was varsity. That was during the Thirties.

JW: In other words, you didn't socialize very much with most of the kids there?

KL: No. Well, you didn't. You didn't. You had a place...

JW: Was this because by that time you had learned? Or was it because they rejected you when you tried to...?

KL: No. You just knew. Rejection wasn't necessary. You just knew.

JW: No interracial dating?

KL: Oh, hell, no. Yes, Lord.

JW: Do you keep in touch with Wesley Peoples and people like that?

KL: Well, he's now deceased. But we see his sister occasionally.

JW: What kinds of things did you all do besides sports and school?

KL: Well, we would go to Hamilton Playground. That was a center on the weekends, or to the Booker T. Washington Center at night. We had our activities there. There was the Scouts. It was like the San Francisco Boys Club, but it was over here, with the Black people in charge.

HE: It was on Divisadero Street. It wasn't where it is now.

KL: Yes, it was on Divisadero by the way.

JW: You said you were doing some volunteer work there. Was this in high school?

KL: No, this was at the Booker T. Washington Center.

JW: No, I mean was it during your high school years?

KL: Yes.

JW: What kind of work was that?

KL: Well, working with younger people, younger lads.

JW: In athletics or...?

KL: Well, whatever they... we didn't have the facilities. But in their sports, going to the parks and playgrounds... supervising them and coordinating whatever activities they had... programs.

JW: When would you say you lost interest in school? Not lost interest in... but stopped being the outstanding student?

KL: Oh, I can remember the transition from grade school to junior high. Coming here... now I was in San Jose and had things going. They were darn good grades, I can remember that. And singing at the time too. We came to San Francisco and [I] went to Francisco Junior High School first. And there was just... I think I was the only Black... and Orientals and Italians. There was a lot of Italians.

And... I don't know. Myabe I was a overwhel -- I don't know. No excuse. I just didn't do like I should've. My dad was saying, "Hey, come on." But it didn't get through to me. And then I just didn't have the momentum. The only person I can blame is me.

JW: You mentioned that your mother died when you were living on Mission?

KL: Yes.

JW: How did that happen?

KL: There was an operation. What it was for, I've never known. But...

JW: Did it happen rather suddenly?

KL: To my way of thinking it was. She was rushed to the hospital. It could have been a ruptured appendix. But I don't know. I've never known. My grandmother never told me. My dad didn't either.

JW: So the remaining family was a boy, two girls, father and grandmother. Was that the family unit basically?

KL: Well, at that time my grandmother wanted to move, or did move -- whatever the reasons, I don't know. We were in San Jose. Then my dad came down afterwards. He was still working in San Francisco. He started working there [San Jose]. Then we moved with him.

JW: So during high school your father was pretty much supporting the family on his own?

KL: No. No, my father left. When we came back to San Francisco, we were living with my grandfather. Then my father disappeared. Where he went, I don't know.

JW: You never heard from him again?

KL: Well, I know... he's in Houston now. But it was I guess twenty years... twenty years? Was it thirty-six. [For] thirty-six years we did not know... I was under the impression he was dead. The information was given to me that he had gone to Alaska -- and that up there he had been killed. Everything I knew was that he was dead. So we lived with my grandmother.

JW: How could she support children?

KL: Now that's quite interesting, isn't it? Because they had no relief [government assistance program] at that time. We had two uncles... three uncles, and two aunts, and my grandmother. My grandmother used to do French ironing. She did a beautiful job with the irons that you heat on the stove. And she used to do laundry. That was one of the things. The family worked with that. The girls did, I know. One of my uncles used to deliver it. That was one method. The other uncles worked and they brought in... and helped support us. Then, of course, I used to hustle sheets [newspapers] myself which brought in a few bucks.

JW: The family still felt well enough to let you go off to college, and you graduated?

KL: Well, that was a dream, I guess, of my grandmother that someone should go and I was the...

JW: She must have been a remarkable woman.

KL: Oh, she was. She weighed ninety pounds soaking wet. And she worked. She was strong. She was strong. She believed that the Good Lord was going to do things, and she called on Him. And He made things happen, believe me. She was a remarkable woman.

JW: What was her name again?

KL: Harriet Brock. Harriet Hamilton Brock, that was her name.

JW: How did you get back in touch with your father?

KL: In 1963, no, prior to 1963, there was a Ben Wilson who was at the University of Southern California. And for someone... how they came about... said, "That's your brother, man." I said, "Yes, that's nice." So they won the Rose Bowl. No, they were to play in the Rose Bowl. And the word was that my dad was here... was there, rather. Of course, we went down to the game... oh, no, went down to visit friends of ours. We were right there, but we didn't know that and they didn't know this, because they attempted to reach us here. So after that... [To his wife:] Now, girl, you're going to have to help me What happened? Because we had them come out here then. [Discussion.] Oh, yes, yes, yes. Yes, I'm a little bit behind or ahead or something.

HE: You're ahead.

KL: I'm ahead? Oh, back up. I had joined a club of Texans, and one of the gentlemen kept looking at me and saying, "Were you in the Service?" Well, I said I was in the Maritime Service. "Where were you?" He kept asking questions. He said, "I know you from somewhere." And I said, "Yes, I guess so, because I don't know you." He insisted. But he also went home and told his wife that he met my father's son, because my father had married his sister. Hey, you got it?

JW: No, but...

KL: Let 's run it back through. This gentleman -- his name is T. J. Wilson by the way -- looked at me and went home and told his wife that he had met Mr. Ben's son. Just looking at me. He didn't know me. I didn't know him. But in order to clear it up for himself, when we would meet at the club meeting, and we also had a house that we were working on, he was asking me questions all the time -- "I've met you some place." And, honest to God, I didn't know him. I didn't know who in the hell he was. So it finally came out.

One day he said, "I know your father, man." I said, "Yes, that's nice. Who is he?" "His name is Ben Wilson." "No," he said, "Your father's name Ben Wilson?" I said, "Sure, that's what his name was." "Well, when is the last time you saw him?" I said, "Well, my father is dead." He said, "Well, I don't know about that." (Chuckle) So how we got together at that point, I'm hazy. [Son, Paul:] ("He called Mr. Ben and said, "Do you have a son named Kline Wilson?") Oh, that's how it was.

HE: He doesn't remember his own story. [We all laugh]

KL: Well, I don't remember it. It wasn't that important to me. I saw my dad. He came here. We brought him out here. And we've been together since. But...

JW: He never explained what suddenly made him leave?

KL: No. No. No.

JW: Was it financial pressure?

KL: Well, there were two things I know that did happen, and Hugh can attest to this...

HE: I wasn't there.

KL: No, I said Hugh Smith.

HE: Oh, you said "Hugh." I thought you said somebody else.

KL: At the corner of Larkin and Bush used to be the Yellow Cab headquarters. My dad worked there at night, he and a gentleman we just met Sunday, Hugh Smith. Something happened and he was jumped by three men who had been drinking. He tried not to fight them, but one of the fellows insisted. So he knocked them out... he beat them up. My dad used to box too, by the way. So the fellow said he was going to get him. It turns out that this man was a big Shriner or Mason, and he had him fired from that job. And wherever he went here in the city, he found him and followed him. This was one of the things. Now the reason why he left could be attributed to part of that. But the other I don't know.

JW: How long after your mother had died was it that he left?

KL: Well, we lived in San Jose for three years... sixth, seventh, eighth grade in San Jose... three years. Then we came back here and we were here about a year.

JW: So you don't think that [wife's death] was the reason?

KL: No. No. No, there was another factor involved. I learned this later, about this man who was after him and who did follow him. Because he had another job. I think he was working for Federal Clothing then, because he bought me a new suit and everything for Easter. And pretty soon he wasn't there. It wasn't that my dad didn't work, because he was a damn good worker. This was one thing. Now the rest I don't know.

JW: When you were reading growing up, are there any particular books that stick out in your mind that really influenced you or that you really enjoyed?

KL: Well, I used to enjoy... It wasn't Merriweather at that time, it was someone else. Golly! And he was... Was it Horatio Alger?

JW: Stories about rags to riches?

KL: Yes. I used to get my jollies with that. (Chuckle)

JW: Did you go to the movies a lot?

KL: On Saturday afternoons we'd go to the movies because it was five cents. That was our reward for being decent, I reckon. We couldn't go on Sunday because my grandmother wouldn't let us. That [film-making] was the work of the devil. She was quite a Baptist. We'd have to go in church and sit up there all day.

JW: Were there any Black movies that you remember?

KL: No. Never saw one in my whole life, until later.

JW: What about theater? Did you see Ellington or any of the people that came to town?

KL: No. I would hear about them. [Talking in the background.] Well, when we lived over here I can remember going to the Royal Theater. I don't think I saw a Black face, except "Our Gang" comedy or something like that. But I don't remember -- ever.

JW: How did men go about getting their sex education in those days? Was it taught in school?

KL: No.

JW: Did your parents tell you?

KL: No. You learned it on the corner.

JW: Was it really something that interested people much? I've gotten some feedback that people just weren't that interested... really concerned about it. It wasn't a problem.

KL: What, about sex?

JW: Yes.

KL: No. Three or four fellows would say, "Gee." You'd see the girls and you'd know they were pretty and you'd look at them. The fellows would talk about it. But that's it.

HE: It was sort of taboo. You didn't discuss things like you do today. [Tape unintelligible]

KL: No. No.

JW: When did you start dating, or did you in high school?

KL: I guess about seventeen, huh? Well, I'm looking at you, because that's who I was taking out. (Laughter)

HE: There was somebody before me...

KL: Oh, was there?

HE: I'm sure. That girl down in San Jose...?

KL: Bob Gibson and I, we took that old Ford and made it over and we went down to San Mateo -- someplace down there.

JW: How did you meet your wife?

KL: We were going to the same school. High School.

JW: What is your maiden name?

HE: Brown.

JW: Helen Brown? You just started going out together, or were you introduced?

KL: Oh, no. She used to come... They used to have a dance... What was it, a dance once a month up at the Center? Yes. I couldn't dance and she was helping me. I was stepping all over her feet. (Laughter)

JW: I think I'll jump over to something else...
Were there crime problems in San Francisco when you were coming up?

KL: Crime?

JW: Were people involved in gambling or theft, this kind of thing?

KL: No. I didn't hear of any. If someone became involved with the law, it was just, "Gee," as far as the Black community was concerned. It was "Oh, my God!" Really. We didn't have that. Every once in a while a youngster would get out of line, and... but... No.

JW: People weren't afraid to be out on the streets at night?

KL: Oh, no!

HE: A young lady could walk the streets until twelve, one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning. There was nothing to worry about .

KL: We used to be walking. I'd walk home from her house, and lived down on Spruce. Because the buses... no, there were no buses... the streetcars would stop running. You'd just walk down the street. Nobody would bother you.

HE: We used to get out of the [motion picture] show at twelve... one o'clock. I'd

HE: come home by myself. Think nothing of it. Prior to the War. Now during the War we did, because everybody was working all hours. Nobody bothered you. It's just after the War that...

JW: What brought about the change?

HE: People's values changed, all over the country.

KL: Yes, not only here.

HE: You know, like today people think nothing of your property or anything.

KL: Or your life!

HE: They just abuse anything that didn't belong to them. I guess the whole world has changed -- I don't know why. "Moral breakdown." That's what they're trying to find out now. The family broke down during the War... I guess because everybody was working and trying to make money. And they didn't have time to raise the children.

JW: There were no Black professional criminals?

HE: Not that we knew.

JW: People involved in Mafia activities or running whorehouses, or anything like that?

KL: No. Well, wait, you've had that since the time of Jesus Christ. So that's nothing new. They did have a few people who were pimps that drove great big Cadillacs. They used to have a straight twelve, some long ones. I used to sell them papers, right over at McAllister and Buchanan. But that was separate. You didn't go there, and they had their own clientele. The women weren't out in the street as they are now. You just knew that that was going on there, because you'd see their customers who were all White. I would sell papers to them. Instead of me getting five cents, I'd get a quarter or fifty cents. So I didn't mind that at all. But, no. They really...

To my knowledge, now, they had gambling. This we know. Because my uncles every once in a while would get lucky. They won some money and they'd come home and share some with my grandmother. But, really... you certainly could walk the streets. Now that's for certain.

JW: There were no temptations, given the fact that there were very limited job opportunities, for Black men to go into crime to make a living? Today people talk about... you know, a lot of young boys look up to pimps as role models because it's a lot of money and they can move out of their situations... There was no temptation to do that?

KL: Of all the young men that I know, and I knew quite a few, we'd look at that

KL: fellow and say, "Hey, man, look at him! He's got money and he's got good-looking gals. Boy, it'd be nice." But they didn't aspire to that. I don't know of any. [To his wife:] Do you? Of the ones that we knew... now we'd go and play pool at the pool halls. We'd go to the same barbershops and you'd sit up and listen... while you're waiting you listen to them shooting off, while they're getting a manicure and all of that. But that just didn't seem right. Well, in fact, it isn't right. So that had no interest. You say well now the young fellows wanted to be sharp... They'd go work, and they would spend all of their money to get the crease in their pants and their shoes shined. And they'd wear a "conk" [special process to straighten hair] and that kind of good stuff. But I don't know of any. Now that's the truth.

JW: How did people look on the police?

KL: Well, that they were no-good SOB's. Because there was a great deal of prejudice. May I give a case? A gentleman that I know bought a Hudson automobile from a man who worked for PG&E, and you had a special license plate plate -- public utilities. So he was taking us for a ride. We were on Market Street. They pulled him over. And they verbally and physically abused that man. "What are you doing riding in a car with this license plate? You must have stolen it, nigger!" All of these kinds of things. Right on Market Street. I remember that. Well, of course, he proved that it was his automobile. But not until after they had got their licks in. Another case is...

JW: What did he do about that? There was nothing to be done? They just accepted it as the way things are? He didn't report it to the police or the NAACP?

KL: NAACP did not have the clout at that time as it does now. You voiced your objections, and that's it -- period. That's what happened to him. He had a nice, big shiner, and he'd been kicked in the pants several times and all of those kinds of things -- in front of his wife and the other people. And that was it. Period. Another case...

JW: Was this in the daytime?

KL: No, evening.

JW: But there were people on the streets?

KL: Yes.

JW: And they just let it happen?

KL: Yes! We were in there, and I saw it right here. Looked right at it. But what the hell could I do?

JW: Were the policemen mostly Irish?

KL: I don't know. But they were big men and they had the billy clubs, and they used it! They used to have a big florid, drinking cop that patroled Post, Fillmore and Sutter. That was the center of Negro activity. And he'd just walk up and kick you in the ass man. And, boy, when he'd come, "Shoom!" Everybody scattered.

JW: Nobody thought of maybe way-laying him one night and teaching him what-for?

KL: They talked about it. But I think he died a natural death. (Laughter) But, another case: I used to operate a shoe service and I had a young man by the name of Ken Burkhardt who worked for me. Well, he didn't take a whole lot of guff. He was good and he'd strike back in a minute. Left... he had got his payroll on Saturday evening. (Foster's used to have a cafeteria at the corner of Sutter and Fillmore.) He went in there. I saw him go in.

The next thing I receive a phone call from him late on Saturday night -- "Come and get me out of jail." "Well, what happened, man?" "Come and get me out." So I went down, but I couldn't get him out until Monday for whatever reason. When I saw him, man, he was beaten unmercifully! All swollen. So I asked him, "What happened?" He said, "Well, the police came in and made the niggers do something and I objected." Well, I could see what they did. They split his eye... It was horrible. Well, we went to court on it and he was fined.

JW: He was fined?

KL: He was fined based upon the testimony of the police. And there was no NAACP. There was nothing. You just grin and bear it. Now that happened to someone I know. But this happened all the time.

JW: Was there a high society in Black society? Were there people that were considered sort of the in-crowd or the upper class?

KL: Well, they had what is known as the Cosmos Club. And that was... when they had their affair once a year, it was THE, THE, THE. There was a gentleman by the name of Mr. [William] Lashly. I forget what Mr. Lashly did. He used to wear spats, I remember. Distinguished looking gentleman. But that was it -- the Cosmos. If you were invited to the Cosmos once a year, well you were quite a nigger! (Laughs)

JW: On what basis did they give out invitations?

KL: You had to know the right folks. (Chuckle) And I think they kind of leaned toward... you had to have a certain color and all that kind of good stuff... which is ridiculous -- but that's it.

JW: That was an integrated club, right? There were White people in it as well

JW: as Black people?

KL: No, not to my knowledge.

HE: There was no integration until after the War.

KL: There were many, many fair[-skinned]folks that were in there that could have passed for White, and I think that's the direction that it leaned. Because I used to live with a gentleman. He had a house out here on Spruce and he was... made good money. Noble? What was his name? Noble, wasn't it? He was on the dark side. Of course, he was invited to the...

END TAPE 2:2:1

BEGIN TAPE 2:2:2

[During the break, Mrs. Wilson shows the interviewer a "joke" from her high school yearbook -- in order to illustrate the racial climate in which she and her husband had to live:

Commerce High School Yearbook (December, 1930):

Bernie Levin tells of seeing a pickanniny on a curb in Birmingham with a large uneaten section of a huge watermelon.
"What is the matter, son," he inquired, "too much watermelon?"
"No, say," was the reply, "not enough niggah."

(Bernie Levin, by the way, was a fellow graduate.)

Then, she goes on to say...]

HE: ... until I got to looking at that book again. And I thought, "Oh, my gosh, we took that!" and said nothing. These kids [today] would have had a... they'd have torn the school down. Well, they never would have put something like that in there [these days]. "Not enough niggah!" It's "funny," it says.

JW: The people that were in the high (Black) society... did people envy them or ignore them or try to get in the group or what?

KL: Well, first... of course, that has never interested me at all. So I don't know. When I saw what was supposed to be "high society"... doormen, bootblacks... well, they were just living like anybody else to me.

HE: They weren't a 'professional' group.

KL: You didn't have any.

HE: Until the War you really didn't have any.

KL: No, you had two lawyers, two doctors, one dentist.

HE: And their clientele was mostly White because there weren't enough Blacks to support them.

JW: Who were the leaders in the Black community? Who did people look to? When the politicians came to look for "the Black spokesman," who did they come to look for?

KL: Church.

JW: Ministers?

KL: Well, Third Baptist Church. I can remember that, because our center was around Third Baptist Church.

JW: But other than ministers was there anybody else around?

KL: Well, there was Mr. Wesley Peoples...

HE: Senior.

KL: He was quite active in politics. My great uncle was active in politics. But that was a once-a-year thing, when they -- they must have put something in their hands. I don't know that, but they must have. And that was the end of it. They couldn't go down there and get a favor. Or maybe they could. But it was limited.

JW: Did Blacks in California feel that they were in any way... removed from problems that Blacks had in the South and other places in the country? Did you feel you were better off, or just cut off, or what?

KL: No, I figured we were cut off myself.

HE: You did. But most of them didn't. They thought they were better off because they didn't have the overt prejudices that they had down there. They didn't say, "You can't sit here." They would sit beside you. But they had subtle prejudices here that we had to deal with. So they thought in California they were free -- really! -- when they weren't. But they felt so. They used to say, people born in California... years ago I can (I shouldn't be talking, but, anyway --)

JW: I'm getting ready to move the mike [over to Mrs. Wilson]. (Chuckle)

KL: Go 'head, girl.

HE: People who weren't born in California. They were ashamed to say they were from Texas or Alabama. They always said: "Where were you born?" "I was born 'back East'." And come to find out they were from Texas and Louisiana. It was not until during the War when people... when this influx came out here

HE: from Texas and the South... they were proud of being from Texas. But the the people that were here prior to that wouldn't say they came from the South.

KL: That's true.

HE: They were ashamed of that. They felt that they were much better off than their Southern brothers -- because they could go to the same schools as the Whites... they could sit on the bus. But you never saw a Black person doing anything except menial out here. Yet in the South you saw Black people doing a whole lot of things that they didn't do out here. But that was immaterial to some people.

JW: First what was your reaction, and then what was the general reaction to the influx of war workers?

KL: Well, to me it was good... it was a good sight to see. When you go... I had never seen so many Blacks in my life. And to go see them -- Wow! man. And to go see them working! I felt good about it myself. But many people resented it. Many people resented it.

JW: Why?

KL: Ask me not. They were more industrious. They attempted --

HE: They thought they created problems. They felt that more, you know... Before, you were sort of assimilated into the masses. You were so small they couldn't see you. But when so many came, you were very much in evidence. Then incoming we had some very good people, and we had a bit of the other kind who made themselves... they were a little obnoxious.

KL: Yes, we experienced that.

HE: Yes, so... I mean this is people, you know. This is all kinds of people. And that [this negative behavior] didn't sit so good with lots of people. Because I have had people here in California tell me, "Well, before these people came here, we didn't have any prejudice." Well, you know that's not right! When you couldn't live in a house.

KL: Couldn't rent one.

HE: And you see that kind of stuff in a book. Don't tell me. [Refers to year book "jokes."] And you didn't see a Black person in a store. You didn't see them sweeping the streets. You didn't see him doing anything, any City job. We didn't have any City jobs. We had two people in the Post Office.)

KL: And Wesley Johnson, Jr. was one of them.

HE: And Mr. [Franzy L.] Ritchardson, [another interviewee], and Chauncey Roane. Those were the only ones in the Post Office. Now you can't count the Black

HE: people in the Post Office.

KL: Or driving the streetcar.

HE: Right.

KL: Or the bus. They were just non-existent.

HE: That's right.

JW: People have told me that they had Southern accents, and were from plantations, and they just didn't know how to live in the city. How do you feel about that? Did they adjust well to being in San Francisco?

KL: Well, some of them did and some of them did not. I have been... in many occasions I felt very ashamed, because their actions were... just not in keeping with what should be. Many of the folk who came felt that they were in the land of milk and honey and they could just do as they dad-gum well pleased -- which, as we know, isn't a fact. And they did. And it wasn't a pleasant sight to see. But most of the people were attempting to make progress and have... They acquired more property than people who had been here for ninety years... in a very short space of time.

JW: How did they integrate themselves into things like Third Baptist Church and other organizations and institutions?

KL: They just came in.

HE: That's the first thing they'd do, they'd find a church.

KL: Just kept on coming.

JW: Were they accepted by the people who had been there before?

KL: Oh, no. There was friction between the two. But then if you get enough of them, they...

HE: It didn't matter because they then ran the church. (Laughter)

KL: They sure did.

HE: It was more of them than it was of those that were there all the time.

JW: In those days was Third Baptist a "shouting" Baptist church?

KL: Yes, sir.

HE: Yes.

JW: Had it been a "shouting" Baptist church before these people came?

KL: Yes, sir.

HE: Oh, yes. Baptists are always pretty vocal.

JW: You've always been a member of the Third Baptist Church?

KL: No. After my grandmother [died], I drifted away. The reason being... the church to me is... "Please don't tell me. You do as I say do, don't do as I do." And I just haven't been able to adjust to that. I'm not ready for that part of it. So I just... drifted away.

JW: What do you think of the overall affect of the Black ministers and church on the community... is it negative or positive? Did they make a contribution, or what? What's their role in the community?

KL: Well, my experience, if I may comment on this, is that they do right well for themselves.

JW: The ministers you're talking about? What about the rest of us?

KL: Yes. And for them who surround... or the immediate... the people around them. They look out for them. When they do some of the things that I have seen and know, I can't buy it. I just don't believe that that is what the church's role or the minister's role is. And when I had a very good friend who was a minister, who believed that, "Hey, come on, let's work together. Let's do something." And them people at church crucified that man. He had to get out.

So, my belief is that the church should be the rallying point by which many things can happen. And I have seen this happen in Philadelphia, where Rev. Leon Sullivan has done this, and has done an excellent job. That type of minister I could support. But, unfortunately, we don't have too many of those.

JW: So you think the church's overall affect on the community is somewhat conservative... rather than rallying the people to change their lives?

KL: Well, they do an exceptional job of selling that "pie-in-the-sky." But it doesn't affect them. They [the ministers] get the pork chops here. But to the people that follow them, "Hey, man, you're going to the land of milk and honey." And my concern is here. Here it is. Now we'll just take our chances with what's going to come afterwards. But we have to eat here. And our children have to eat and wear shoes. I don't think they do a... In fact I think they do a piss-poor job, if you ask me.

HE: Kline, the tape's on.

KL: Well, that's unfortunate. But that's just my feeling.

HE: (Laughing, [along with Paul, her son.]) He'll have to cut everything out. [Paul:] Well, he asked him. He asked him, hunh? Yes, but still...

JW: We've got stronger stuff than that on tape.

KL: When you see it, young man... I don't know whether you are aware of it or not. But promising, "Oh, Lord," and what they did two thousand years ago... And it's today. Today. Our children are not being educated today. They are not taking any books home. I look at them and I feel sad... I feel sick inside. It should be at the church, "Hey, you got to study! You got to excel! This is our future. Let's put ten dollars a week in the church. Let's do these things like Rev. Sullivan did in Philadelphia." And it works! But you have to have somebody that's strong and who isn't looking to put it all in here [their pockets], man. I've seen these cats. And I ain't ready to buy it!

My poor grandmother would go out here... and, of course, we would support her because we loved her. But she was out here hustling. You hear me? Hustling, so that this cat could have him a three-hundred-dollar suit to go back to the convention with twenty-five hundred dollars in his pocket. And ain't got nothing for her. Well, I got some other words, [but] I won't put them on here.

JW: Do you want to name this friend that got crucified?

KL: What was that? Rev. Boyd? Was his name Rev. Boyd? He used to be our customer. Was it Rev. Boyd?

HE: I guess that's who you're talking about.

KL: You don't remember?

HE: At Bethel.

KL: Bethel. He was a man who attempted at that time..

HE: [To JW:] Are you going to put all of that in there?

KL: Well, it's true! Well, I don't care who hears it. Well, Rev. Boyd was a wonderful man! He was a man who believed in the people, and that the church should be the focal point by which these things could be accomplished. Because it wasn't out here. In business it wasn't. The city government it wasn't. We had nothing. Nothing! And he was saying, "Come, let's... this is the work of the Lord. Let's do something together." And, man, they hung him up by his fingernails! because he wasn't preaching, you know, all that good stuff.

JW: Did he move away?

KL: He sure did.

JW: Do you know what he is doing now?

KL: No, I don't. [Still some disagreement from Mrs. Wilson about putting this story on tape.]

KL: Well, his name was Rev. Boyd. And I think he was a wonderful man. Because that was his teachings, and I can support... I can live with that.

JW: Do you belong to any fraternities?

KL: No.

JW: What do you do with your leisure time?

KL: Well, at this stage of the game I don't have any. I work. (Chuckle)

JW: What do you do?

KL: Right now I'm in the concrete game down in Houston.

JW: Oh, in Houston?

KL: Yes.

JW: Oh! Well, that's a boom town.

KL: It is. It's a lot of things moving there.

JW: Are Black people getting any of the gravy?

KL: A few. But they are in city government. They are in state government. Every place you go you see Black people doing something there. Now they have the "Fillmore"[a run-down neighborhood]. They have that. They have skidrow... where these young people stand on the corner at eight o'clock in the mornings, seven o'clock in the mornings, with the wine bottles. They have plenty of that. But they also have the other side. And it's more of the other, it seems to me.

JW: What about NAACP, Native Sons, "Mighty Few," and any of those clubs? Did you ever affiliate with any of those?

KL: Oh, yes, yes. We attended... One thing that stands out in my mind, which is just so wonderful: When A. Phillip Randolph, Mr. Webster, Walter White, had the meeting over in the Oakland Auditorium and were preparing for the March on Washington.

JW: '41, '40?

KL: Yes. As a result of that, 8802, President Roosevelt initiated 8802, Executive Order 8802. But that was one of the most glorious moments I have ever

KL: experienced, in my life! To see those Black men getting up there and say what they told the President of the United States! And, man, he did something! Oh, that was glorious! I said my hallelujahs that day, believe me.

JW: What do you think brought about the changes during the War years? Was it the War itself? Were White people slowly becoming more aware that Black people were human beings too and citizens of the country? I mean the Muni was integrated... and the first Black school teacher. All of these things started during the War.

KL: It wasn't that they realized. They knew all along. But then with the weight of the Federal Government saying, "Now, this has got to change," something happened. We cannot change people's hearts. I believe it was our dear Dr. Martin Luther King who said, "You can't change their hearts. But you can certainly legislate so that they won't hang you by your thumbs tomorrow morning." And that's what happened. Then after[wards] it's slowly acceptance [sic] to the fact that, "Hey, these people don't have tails. They are human beings." And may I say this: that in the South, the part that I have been in... there's much of it that I don't know anything about... but they have accepted it more so than the people here.

JW: Why do you think that the Federal Government even changed during the War? What was really... what made Roosevelt act? I know that Eleanor Roosevelt had deep convictions about certain kinds of things. But she was just one woman.

KL: It was an idea whose time had come, as I view it. Pressure was applied, and the result of Executive Order 8802 had a great deal to do with it. I was reading in... oh, golly, what was that author?... who explained the various pressures that were coming at that time. It was just... there was a... There was going to be an explosion! When you stop to consider that our young men were in the Army, our young men were being shot at, our young men were being sent overseas never to come back. And, hey, you can't even get a job? This... It was festering. It was festering and something was going to happen. And, of course, thank God, Roosevelt was there at the time, and President Truman followed him who did an excellent job, in my estimation, of following up.

JW: Are there any particular organizations that you feel any particular affection for or that have involved most of your time?

KL: Well, at one time I was with the Elks, and I believe, I sincerely believe, in their teachings. I question the motives, of course, and actions of many. But the teachings of the Elks was very important to me because they stressed helping widows and orphans and those who were not as fortunate as other people. And that's one of the tenets that I live by... no, I attempt to live by. Let's put it that way.

JW: Umm... (I get more anxious when we run out of tape.) I want to talk a little bit more about your job history. But... you served in the Second World War?

KL: I was in the Maritime Service. That's interesting, if you have a moment.

JW: You were overseas?

KL: Yes, I was overseas.

JW: I'm trying to figure out -- there are so many things I want to talk about -- what I can talk about in ten minutes.

KL: My cousins, first cousins, my brother-in-law, were drafted here, and they were sent down in the South. They were able to smuggle letters out... information that... "this is not such a good place, man. We got to stay on the base, and they chase us off the streets, and we can't go to a lot of things." Plus the fact... the episode of this woman who told me she didn't want no niggers... and a whole lot of things. So when my time came for the draft... the chairman of the draft board was one of my customers. I went to the draft board...

JW: What business were you in then?

KL: I was in the shoe service business.

JW: What does that mean... shoe repair?

KL: Shoe repair. The whole shoe, servicing the shoes.

JW: Where was it?

KL: My business was on Polk Street, 2248 Polk and 1505 Vallejo. But one of my good customers, in fact, their family, the Helbeins... Mr. Helbein was chairman of the draft board. So when my time came I went to him and I said, "Mr. Helbein, I don't think that what's going on is right." I related exactly what was happening in the South. "And you're going to send me South and I ain't going, because the first fellow who gets out of line with me, it's either going to be him or me. And most likely it's going to be me." So he said, "Well, what do you want me to do?" I said, "Well, I don't know. But I ain't the cat. I'm just not. I ain't ready for it." So he said, "Well, my son is over in the Southwest Pacific. You don't think I'm going to let you go [release] and have my son go over there."

So I said, "Well, I'll do anything." At that time the Japanese were bombing or sinking ships off the Golden Gate. I don't know whether you are aware of that or not, but they did. And nobody wanted to go in the Merchant Marines. So I said, "Well, hey, I'd rather take my chances there than go in the Service in the Army, because I know exactly what you're going to do with me. He said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll let you go and you report to me every time you come in." And that's what I had to do. He said, "I'll let you go into the Maritime Service." So that's where I was for almost four years.

JW: Where did you travel?

KL: In the Southwest Pacific. We carried fruits and ammunition and supplies to Guadalcanal, to the invasion of the Marianas, to the invasion of the Philippines. We were the second line. We had two cannons aboard ship and we were torpedoed at, and all of those kind of good things. But, thank the Lord, I'm still here.

JW: Did you have anything like a boot camp for that?

KL: Yes, I had to go into training. I ended up Chief Cook, and had troops or workers who were from the South. Caucasians mostly. We had lessons: They learned that Black people can give orders and see that they are carried out. They found out that I was a rotten SOB, but I got the job done. (Chuckle)

JW: How did you learn to cook?

KL: Well, I went to school.

JW: They taught you how to cook in the Merchant Marines?

KL: Yes.

JW: That's not the Merchant Marines? The Maritime Service is something different ?

KL: No, we were in the Maritime Service at that time. Then after the War it went back. They released certain vessels.

JW: I see. Were you involved in any battle action? I mean did you observe any kind of violence?

KL: Well, as I said we were tor... in the Marianas, the Mariana Islands, that was the step before Saipan, Tinean. Then it was Leyte and the Philippines. We were in there. We were the ones that brought in troops. We brought in troops to Guadalcanal. We saw the planes and heard the guns and saw the flames and all of those kind of things. But we were actually defenseless because we didn't have any defense.

JW: Did you ever consider making that kind of thing a career, or was it strictly something to do until the War was over?

KL: No, 'til the War was over.

JW: Did you not enjoy it?

KL: Well, that was the first time in my life that I had ever been separated from my wife and my family, and it wasn't the most pleasant... I'd rather not.

JW: Did you get to land anywhere overseas?

KL: Yes. After the action, then we would keep moving troops up to the front lines. Bring supplies, come back to the States, load supplies and then bring troops. Deposit the new troops where the old troops were, and then transferred those up to the front lines.

JW: Did you have any contact with the native or civilian population?

KL: Yes. In Honolulu, of course. In the Admiralty Islands. I saw Black people who had yellow hair and red hair and green hair.

JW: That comes from the dye that they used?

KL: Yes. Yes. In the French possessions...

JW: Tahiti?

KL: There are some other islands there: Fiji. Lord, I can't think.

JW: All of these people down in there are brown-skinned?

KL: Various shades. Some are from the islands of Micronesia, and some are from the islands of... like Hawaiians or Polynesians. Some are in the Samoas. There are two Samoas. There's the American and British Samoa. They are Polynesians, yes.

JW: What I was trying to get to is, did you feel any kinship or did they feel any kinship with the Black American?

KL: Well, may I say this? The supplies were limited, and since I was the Chief Cook they thought I was an all-right brother. (Laughter) But that was the reason, I reckon. (Chuckle) But, of course, you kind of look out for them... when you can.

JW: Were the White Americans racist in their treatment of the natives?

KL: Yes! They [think they] are better [than the natives]. I saw that all along the line. When I heard that... we were in the Admiralty Islands... and when I heard that the President had said that in the Armed Services no more discrimination. And they made First Mates... not First Mates... Warrant Officers... they made Warrant Officers. And I'm looking right at it, and I'm just, "Wo-o-o!" just jumping! Because you could only be a Messman in the regular navy... hey, that was it. You were the Messman. They you'd see these fellows [Black Officers], they'd have it [Rank insignia] on their arm. And when they'd come aboard... and these guys stand at attention, I said, "Oh, Glory Be!" It was wonderful, really. It was wonderful. (Chuckle)

JW: Have you had any opportunity to travel outside the United States since then?

KL: Down to Mexico... Canada.

JW: Anywhere that you haven't been that you would like to go?

KL: Well, my wife and I are going to go through Canada again. We enjoyed it very much when we were there, when we made our trip with our own lads before. So we are going to go back. We plan to go to... [To his wife:] Where is that place, lady?

HE: The Caribbean.

KL: The Caribbean.

JW: You had ancestors from Jamaica, didn't you?

KL: Yes, but they wouldn't know us though. (Chuckle)

JW: You're going to be like Alex Haley. (Chuckle)

KL: Yes, he's a wonderful person.

JW: Let's see. We are about close to the end, but I did want to talk about a few other things. But particularly about your job experience. Let's see if I remember correctly: your first job in San Mateo where you were hoping to be a journalist but ended up going into a commercial union?

KL: Insurance Company, yes.

JW: And then what happened? How did you get into the shoe business?

KL: Well, sixteen dollars and twenty-five cents a week, even at that time wasn't a huge sum of money. So I started working as a doorman at night, thirty days a month, a dollar a day... a dollar a night. But you hustled with the people.

JW: What kind of place? You mean a restaurant?

KL: No, apartment.

..... END TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

Co-Sponsored by:
The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library,
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and Cultural Society

Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

INTERVIEW WITH MRS. HELEN WILSON

MARCH 16, 1979

In their living room at 1742 Bush Street,
San Francisco, CA

Interviewer: Jesse J. Warr, III
Transcriber: Mary A. Wells

JW: Okay, let's start with your birthplace and birthdate.

HW: Oh, I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, March 23, 1913.

JW: So your birthday is in a couple of days?

HW: The 23rd, next week.

JW: 1913?

JW: And what kind of home was it your parents were living in?

HW: Well, the best I can remember, I went back in 1953 and saw the house I was born in. It's a little short street named Leon Row, #3 Leon Row. And I saw that after I was grown and went back in 1953.

JW: How old were you when your family left New Orleans?

HW: I was six years old.

JW: Had you started school yet?

HW: No.

JW: You hadn't?

HW: No, I don't think so.

JW: Do you have any memories of New Orleans?

HW: Oh, I can remember that there was a church on the corner, St. Mark's Church. I remember that church because when I went back I...I looked for it and it was there. But that's just about all I remember.

JW: Were there mostly Black in your neighborhood?

HW: Yes, oh, yes. There were all Black people living in that row. It was a little short street. They called it Leon Row but it was just a short street like a street in between two other streets.

JW: What area of New Orleans was that? Was it near the French Quarter?

HW: I don't know. No, I don't believe so.

JW: Were your parents Catholic?

HW. No, my mother was a Baptist and my father...(In background, "Didn't we go there?") "Yes. it was with Walter. That was in 1953 when we went there." (The last time we went there was in 1976). "Yes, but we didn't go to where I was born. We went to other places but we didn't go where I was born. I went with [Unintelligible.] Walter took me to where...the place where I was born."

JW: What was your mother's maiden name?

HW: Mary E. Grim.

JW: G-r-i-m.

HW: G-r-i-m.

JW: And was she a New Orleans born person?

HW: No, she wasn't, but I really don't know where my mother was born. I probably heard it, but I just don't remember. I know where my father was born. I remember that.

JW: Where was that?

HW: That was Williamsport, Louisiana.

JW: And what was his name?

HW: His name was Isadore Brown.

JW: I-s-a-d-o-r?

HW: E. I-s-a-d-o-r-e.

JW: Can you tell me about him? Where did he grow up and what was he doing at the time you were born?

HW: Well, part of that time...I can tell you some of the stories he used to tell me about. This was before he was even married. He said his father was a share-cropper in whatever small town they lived in. And every year...he had, oh, about three or four brothers and sisters, and every year his father would tell him, well next year would be the year he would be able to be out of debt from that man who owned the store, and each year they...it came up for the accounting, they were always short. They had to get their medicine, the seed and everything from the man who owned the store. So they could never get out of debt from him. So he said he was a young teenager and he said there must be a better way. So he left home when he was about four years old and came to New Orleans and that's where he stayed until the time he and mother married. You know, years later.

JW: What did he...what kind of occupation did he find?

HW: He was a cook by trade. He was a cook by trade.

JW: Did he cook in any of the restaurants? HW: Yes, he did. No, he cooked in a restaurant in New Orleans. It was called...let me see...it meant the White House. What was...La Maison Blanche. That was it. That was in New Orleans. That's the restaurant that he cooked in.

JW: Did you inherit any of his skill?

HW: Well, I can cook fair. I don't think I'm as good a cook as my father, no.

JW: Can you cook Creole style food? Or you don't like to?

HW: Well, I just cook ordinary. I can cook gumbo but I don't go in for too many things. My father liked a lot of pork in his time and I don't care a great deal for pork, but he cooked many pork dishes.

JW: Do you put shellfish in your gumbo?

HW: Yes. Crabs. Sure. Crabs, shrimp.

JW: And prepared sausage?

HW: No. No sausage. I don't put sausage. I like chicken base but no sausage. My father never put sausage in it. I've only seen that in people who cook out here. I don't know what...but he never put sausage in it.

JW: Do you have any old family recipes?

HW: No, I don't think so. No.

JW: So did your father ever have a chance to go to school?

HW: Yes, I think he did. He probably went up to the fourth grade...not much farther.

JW: And your mother's background you don't know too much about?

HW: I really don't.

JW: Do you have any idea when either one of them were born? The dates?

HW: Well, my father was born in 1891. Let's see. I think they were both the same because I got my birth certificate out and I do have it here. Both of them were born in 1891.

JW: Did he ever...did your father ever talk about his parents? Were they in slavery before they became sharecroppers, or what?

HW: I don't remember him ever saying that, only about life as a young man, as a sharecropper, but I don't know if they were slaves before that. My grandparents, I guess they were but he never spoke of them as being slaves, only sharecroppers.

JW: What about your mother's parents? Do you know anything about them?

HW: I knew my grandfather. I knew my grandfather because he came after my grandmother died. I was ten years old. That was 1933. My grandmother died. He came to California and he lived with us about two years and then he went back and then we never saw him again. We sort of lost touch with him. We never saw him anymore. He died.

JW: Did you get along with him well when he was living here?

HW: Who?

JW: Your grandfather.

HW: Oh, yes.

JW: Did your mother have sisters and brothers?

HW: I'm trying to think. (In background...talking.) Yes, she had a sister that...yes, she died. That's why [Unintelligible] were out here. She had sisters and brothers, but the only one I knew was her younger sister and she died when I, oh, I guess. Let's see, Jean was [Unintelligible] was three [Unintelligible].

JW: Was it a natural death or was it an accident?

HW: It wasn't an accident. No, it was not an accident. She died many years ago.

JW: Did your parents ever talk about violence against Blacks in the South or between Blacks and Whites?

HW: Oh, yes. I can remember them speaking of that because at that time we got the Chicago Defender, and there were lynchings and things like that. They spoke of that, but to be involved in it, they were out here at the time, so I guess I don't remember him speaking of any incidents where they were actually fighting among Blacks and Whites when he was there other than the way they treated them, you know, generally. But he often spoke of the lynchings and things. You'd get the Chicago Defender and there was always somebody being lynched, almost every week at that time.

JW: You said your mother was Baptist but your father was not?

HW: My father's family was Baptist but he wasn't a church-goer.

JW: So when you got out here in California, did they encourage you to go to church?

HW: Yes, we all went to a Methodist church because it was close to me. It was close to where we lived when we first came to San Francisco.

JW: Which was where?

HW: That was...I can't even think...Zion Church. Reverend Byer's church.

JW: I mean, where did you move...What was your address when you first moved here?

HW: Oh, I lived on...

JW: 700 block of Willard.

HW: Willard Street.

JW: That's up near St. Mary's Cathedral now.

HW: It's not too far. It's a street...It's where Glad Tidings Church is. You know where Glad Tidings Church is?

JW: Yes.

HW: Well, at that time it was a short street, an alley street back of that. That's where we lived. That was the first house we lived in when we first came to San Francisco.

JW: Do you remember the trip out here?

HW: No, on the train, no. I don't remember that.

JW: Well, what were your first impressions of San Francisco?

HW: I have to backtrack there. The first place we came to was Chula Vista, California, which was a little place out from San Diego. We stayed there about a year and my mother and I came...

JW: What were you doing there?

HW: My father was cooking. He was cooking at a restaurant there.

JW: Did he know about this job before...I mean, how did you happen to come there?

HW: Well, I think, from what he told me, he said that one day he had always heard about California and he said that one day, he saved his money, and he told my mother that he wanted to go to California. So he...I don't know how he...he got to Chula Vista. I don't know why he chose Chula Vista but perhaps someone told him about it but, anyway, that was the first place we lived. That was out of San Diego and we moved to San Diego. We weren't there very long when we moved to San Francisco.

JW: How did you like Chula Vista?

HW: Well, as a child, I guess it was all right. I just don't have any particular memories of it.

JW: You hadn't...you didn't have to start school yet?

HW: If I did...I just don't remember. No, I really don't remember. I don't remember.

JW: Do you have brothers and sisters?

HW: No, I'm an only child.

JW: Oh, do you think you were spoiled?

HW: I don't think so. (Chuckle) Maybe that's just my opinion, but I don't think so.

JW: Do you have any other memories of New Orleans before we focus on California? Any games you used to play or any of the neighbors, or getting sick as a child, having measles, mumps or anything like that?

HW: No, not that I know. This little street that we lived on was a very close knit street and I can remember... this was sort of...I don't know if I even mentioned it but I know that I think of this. I can remember asking my mother...there was young woman who was married and she was expecting a baby and I asked my mother what was wrong with her and she said, "She swallowed a watermelon." (Chuckle) She did, and I often thought I couldn't tell a child today that. They wouldn't accept it, but I accepted that. I remember that very well. But...

JW: I guess you must have looked at her real strange for a long time.

HW: I did. But, you know, I didn't question it. You know, in those days you didn't question your parents. If they said something, you know, even if you thought something was wrong, you still didn't say, "Well, why? When I eat a watermelon, I don't look like that." But I didn't say that.

JW: How long did you live on Willard Street?

HW: I guess it was a matter of two or three years.

JW: So you started school.

HW: Oh, yes. I went to Henry Durant School.

JW: Is that still in existence?

HW: Pardon?

JW: Is that still in existence?

HW: No, it's not. None of the schools I went to are in existence now.

JW: They were torn down because of redevelopment?

HW: Well, at that time it wasn't redevelopment. The buildings were condemned. Yes, sir, it was an old, old school. And I went to John Swett, which was another grammar school. And I went to Hamilton Junior High and I graduated from there, from Hamilton Junior High, and then went to the High School of Commerce. And I graduated from the High School of Commerce.

JW: Now, when you went to Henry Durant, was this the first time you had been a minority, that is, I assume there weren't that many other Black children at the school?

HW: No, no. We were used to that. There weren't many Black people anywhere in the city.

JW: But in New Orleans you were surrounded by Blacks then, weren't you?

HW: Yes, but I was too young to even remember, you know, that. I mean, I know it was, but I guess I had lived here long enough to just not expect to see a lot of Black people. So I'm sure there were not too many Blacks in school when I was at Henry Durant.

JW: Do you remember any incidents with any of your teachers?

HW: Not at that school. Not at that school.

JW: Did your parents...Your father made the decision to come out here.

HW: Yes.

JW: Did they ever talk about the decision? Does he think he was better off by coming to California?

HW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

JW: Did he continue as a cook?

HW: He did. He worked in a club owned by Mr. Matt Brooks, the first job he got here. He worked down... that was a Black club. That's Willie Brooks' father owned the club at that time.

JW: Was this a White Club?

HW: No, no. I said that was a Black club.

JW: Oh, was that the one over in the Marina?

HW: Yes. And then afterwards, he got a job working for Mr. Shipman which was a White owner and he cooked there for several years.

JW: Was this good money...considered good money?

HW: Oh, I suppose it was. I'm sure it was.

JW: Did your mother have to work?

HW: Yes, she worked. She was a cook. She was a domestic worker because that's all it was. That's what Black women did in those days...Colored women did in those days, as we were called.

JW: Did your parents ever spank you?

HW: Oh, yes. (Chuckle) Sure, I got spanked.

JW: What about your neighbors? Did they spank their children too?

HW: Yes.

JW: Was it often?

HW: That I was spanked? I don't think so. I don't think so because I didn't have any brothers and sisters and I...I had pets. I had a dog and I played a lot by myself, I think, because my parents worked. And at one time my mother worked until late and I would be there by myself and I did pretty well.

JW: You didn't feel lonely?

HW: No, I don't think so. I think I had a lot of imaginery playmates and what have you, so I got along pretty good by myself.

JW: Did the family make a big deal out of your birthday?

HW: Well, I know every Sunday...I don't say about birthdays. I'm sure we celebrated them but I don't remember having a lot of big birthday parties but every Sunday that my people were off, they always took me...we went to the beach or went out to Golden Gate Park. We went to... all the...the Legion of Honor...all the places that we could go. We went many places like that as a family unit, along with other friends too but the beach was a big thing in those days.

JW: Weren't there a lot of fleas at the beach?

HW: Fleas?

JW: Yes.

HW: Well, fleas was just a way of life in San Francisco. Everybody had fleas (Chuckle). We don't have them now but we did in those days. I don't know why but everybody had fleas. You didn't have to go to the beach to get them. They were right...they were in your house.

JW: What did they...did they leave little marks on your skin?

HW: Well, I guess if some people were allergic to it. No, you just hit them and...that was just the way it was.

JW: Well, who took care of you when your parents were away?

HW: Working?

JW: Yes.

HW: I was big enough to stay in the house by myself, really. I know at one time my father worked...he cooked... but I mean he took all sorts of jobs. I mean jobs that were available because that was a time...I guess during that period jobs weren't all that plentiful so whatever he could, why he...whatever work he could get he took. I can remember one time he was working at a cleaning shop. I think he was a janitor there and that was at the corner of...it was on Eddie near Fillmore and he would let me...there was a show right around the corner and I would come by from school and stay there and he'd let me go to the show. I paid one nichel. When the show was out, I would come on back and he would go home with me. So they had different ways of seeing that I was taken care of but I didn't have a babysitter like they have today. If I was in the house and my mother told me to stay there, that's where I stayed. Because I had to be...how old was I? I must have been nine or ten years old.

JW: Other than your grandfather, you didn't have any other relatives in San Francisco?

HW: No, I had...when my mother's youngest sister died, she took her two boys and my mother raised them until she died and my father finished.

JW: And what were those two boys' names?

HW: Eugene Baker and Wilbert Baker.

JW: Wilbert?

HW: Wilbert. They were my first cousins.

JW: And how much older or younger than you were they?

HW: Eugene was five years younger than I and Wilbert was ten.

JW: So you were like...Was your relationship close?

HW: Yes, just like my brothers because when they came out here, one was eight and one was three, and my mother kept them. Let me see, she died in 1930... in 1930. So I was seventeen and Wilbert...the baby was only seven. My father just raised him until he was grown...until he finished high school.

JW: What about Christmas? How did the family celebrate Christmas?

HW: Oh, we always had a nice Christmas. My father loved to cook. He was a cook from his heart. So we never had a problem with food. And during the lean days, WPA days, when work was scarce, we used to get groceries, you know. It was like...we didn't have relief in those days but that was a form of relief where you could get groceries once a week, and he could take that meat and doctor it up and make it taste real good. So we went through that period. Until the War, it was pretty lean times. That was all over, I'm sure.

JW: Did you ever have a nickname?

HW: No. Just Helen.

JW: You were how old when your mother died? Seventeen?

HW: Seventeen. Just when I finished high school.

JW: What did she die of?

HW: She had a heart attack.

JW: Had she had heart trouble before?

HW: Yes.

JW: How did that affect the family life?

HW: Well, it affected us...We were living up on Walnut Street when she died.

JW: On what street?

HW: Walnut. You know where Presidio Avenue is and California?

JW: Yes.

HW: The next street is Walnut.

JW: That was a pretty nice neighborhood, wasn't it?

HW: Yes, it was. At that time my mother and father were both working so we had a very nice house up there and it was furnished very well.

JW: Were you the only Blacks in the nieghborhood?

HW: I think there was a Black next door...next door to us. There was a Black next door. Next door to us. The house next door was Black but I think within that block, we were the only two houses that had Black in them.

JW: Okay, anyway, I think I interrupted you. You were telling me about how your mother...what happened at the time your mother died.

HW: Oh, yes. Well, that was just before I finished high school and I...I graduated and then my father...See work was very scarce so we moved from that house about six or seven months after she passed, we moved from that house to Elm Street...a little short street and a little small house. So that was 1930. So during that perood he had many, many jobs. He had to go from one job to the other because there was nothing too steady coming in I guess until the War.

JW: Were you...Would you consider your relationship with your mother close?

HW: Oh, yes.

JW: Could you talk to her about almost anything?

HW: Just about.

JW: So it must have been a long period of grief, I guess, after she died.

HW: Well, it was. I had my two cousins with me. They were with me and I had a very good father, very good father. So I mean he really took care of us and looked after us and tried very hard to keep us together, which he did. So I always admire my father for that because he was a good father.

JW: So you were close to him too.

HW: Very close.

JW: How were they different from one another?

HW: My mother and father? Well, I just...I just...I kind of don't know how to even express that--how were they different. Meaning what?

JW: Was one more talkative than the other and the other more shy?

HW: My father was quite a talkative gentleman. He was a comedian. I mean he said things in a very comical way because I think of things that he used to tell us when we were just, you know, and we thought it was a joke. But as you get older you realize that he wasn't joking. It's really true. So he...we...we talk about him right now, things he used to tell us, you know, that we found out was really true.

JW: For example.

HW; Well, he said something, going back when he was a young man, he said when the War broke out in 19...I forgot. Was it 19?

JW: 1914.

HW: Fourteen. He said a lot of the young Blacks heard about it in the...in the...in the papers and things that the War was breaking out and they wanted to go and sign up for the draft. And when they got into the

HW: cities, they told them it was a White man's war and they couldn't sign up...He said that went on for a long time and then there was a time it came up in the House of Representatives and the States that they were going to leave all these Black men here with these White women so they started taking these Black men (Chuckle). And we used to laugh because we thought he was joking but when you get older you realize that their thinking that is really true. And we used to laugh about that. He told us many things like that. He was very comical.

JW: What did you plan...Did you go to Commerce High School by choice or was there somewhere else you might have gone to school or were you assigned there?

HW: No. No, we weren't...I think it was choice. I think we could choose our high school in those days, as I remember. I don't think it was so much you had to go in your neighborhood. In high school you could chose.

JW: What did you plan to do when you got out of school?

HW: Well, I was very good in typing and it was a commercial school...Most of the things tended toward business but at that time there was nothing...you received the education but you couldn't get a job. So when I got out of high school I think I went out...I went out and [Unintelligible] serviced. Then I decided to take the beauty course, which I did. And I got my license in 1937 and went to work.

JW: For Mrs. Nurse.

HW: For Mrs. Nurse. That's right.

JW: But she was Mrs. Beverly then.

HW: Right. Right.

JW: How long did you work there?

HW: Oh, I must have worked there about two years. Then I worked at another beauty shop about one year. Then I opened my own shop in 1937.

JW: And what was the name of that?

HW: Helen's Beauty Shop.

JW: And where was it?

HW: It was on 1343 Buchanan Street between Eddie and Ellis.

JW: Then you got enough business to keep yourself going?

HW: Oh, yes, at that time, in the 1930's? I opened my shop in 1939.

JW: Thirty-nine.

HW: Thirty-nine I opened my shop. I married in...I got my license in Thirty-seven. But I opened my shop in Thirty-nine.

JW: Were your clients interracial?

HW: No. Oh, boy. And see, the War started in 1941 and then we had a terrific business then. I had five girls working in my shop.

JW: When did you leave the business?

HW: Well, I stayed there until...I had one child while I was there and I had...I had two children and then my second child was killed by an automobile. He ran across the street in the back here and he was killed in an automobile accident. So then I came on home. I was pregnant with my third child at that time so I just... When the lease was up, I just came on home.

JW: We'll come back to your children in a minute. Let's see. Did you ever feel any particular...What were your feelings about the fact that here you've been HW: trained to do office work but you can't get a job. ^I think we felt...we felt rebellious but at that time you just didn't show any rebellion because it was nowhere to show it, other than among yourselves... you would talk. But this was the fate of all my friends. The few of us that had fair jobs, there weren't that many of us that had them. There were some girls that worked in the theaters in the restroom, there were some girls that worked elevators and that was a good job. I don't know of any women that worked in the post office at that time. I knew two or three men that worked in the post office--Mr. Richardson, Mr. Rone (Sp.?). But I didn't know of any. So there wasn't...you didn't feel...you felt bad in one way but it wasn't like everybody else was doing something and you couldn't do it. I mean, all of us Blacks were in the same position.

JW: Did it ever occur to you to leave California and go somewhere else?

HW: No.

JW: Why not?

HW: Maybe I didn't have enough get up and go. I don't know. I just never did. I always liked...I like San Francisco. I really did. And when I was doing beauty work, I did very well. That was better than a lot of people did...a lot of people that I know. It wasn't until after the War...during the War, many people got jobs because of the shipyards and the things that were related to the War.

HW: But it wasn't until after the War that Blacks were able to get into those jobs.

JW: Did your father ever remarry?

HW: No.

JW: He didn't?

HW: No.

JW: What did he do after you had moved out and gotten married and everything?

HW: Well, during the War, he got a job working for Armour Packing House and that was his last job. He died in 1953. He worked there from about '41 until 1952 when he got sick.

JW: Were the packing houses down toward South San Francisco?

HW: I'm sure it was. I don't know exactly now offhand but it's in the book. It's in the telephone book.

JW: What happened to your cousins when they got grown? What kind of jobs did they get?

HW: Well, one of them went in the Navy. When he finished high school, he went in the Navy and served in the Navy and when he came out...He's a longshoreman. In fact, he just left here. He's down in Long Beach now. And the other one lives in Stockton. He went in the Army and he's also a cook.

JW: Oh.

HW: Yes. He works in a restaurant up in Stockton.

JW: Let me see, let me back up. The family was living on Willow when you went to [Unintelligible.] Then you went to John Swett. Then you moved.

HW: Yes. I moved on McAllister Street. Although it was in the same area, I don't know what the reason for

HW: that...the reason I went to John Swett...I guess it was closer. It was only two blocks from there, so it was closer. And then I went to Hamilton Junior High.

JW: Did you move again?

HW: No, I think it only went up to about the sixth grade, John Swett.

JW: So you were on McAllister for about six years.

HW: Right. Right.

JW: And then were you there...Did you move when you went to high school?

HW: I...We lived on Walnut Street when I was in high school.

JW: What was the house like on Walnut?

HW: Well, it was a two-bedroom house, very nice. It was a nice flat. My mother liked nice things. She had nice furniture and what-have-you. So it was a very pleasant house.

JW: And there were five people living there?

HW: Yes.

JW: Were you always even tempered?

HW: We had three bedrooms...three bedrooms.

JW: Three bedrooms.

HW: Yes, three bedrooms.

JW: The whole thing was on one floor?

HW: Just like this house. It was an old flat just like this.

JW: Oh, I thought it was...

HW: See, but that's separate. There's three flats in this building.

JW: Oh, I thought it was one house.

HW: No, no, no. This has seven rooms in this house on one floor and there's eight on the second floor.

JW: When you were...before you went into junior high,

JW: would you describe yourself as an even tempered person?

HW: Before I went to junior high? I think I was. I was always fairly even tempered, I think.

JW: Was there anything you remember that could always get you mad? Or angry or upset?

HW: I guess the usual things kids fight about. I'm sure I had fights with people and, of course, at that time they used to taunt us about...if we were walking down the street and if there were a bunch of us together, then if there were White people coming down the street, White kids, they would say, "Oh, there's a dark cloud coming," or, "It's going to rain." That type of thing, so I'm sure we had...I had my share of fights with people, with children.

JW: What about just within your family? What did your mother spank you about most often?

HW: Maybe not coming home on time (Chuckle) or not doing my work. Oh, I used to get in trouble about not cleaning the house up. I know that and I...sometimes I would try to clean very good and then on my mother's day off, she would still find dirt (Chuckle). So I guess that was one of my pet peeves, you know, but this is the way it is when you are growing up.

JW: Did you enjoy school?

HW: Yes, I did. I was a fair student in school, I guess, and I did my homework. My parents weren't able to help me in school as far as helping with my work but I managed.

JW: What were you favorite subjects?

HW: Oh, I used to like to write...I...English was my favorite subject. I took Spanish in school and... (that's the telephone).

JW: So you liked English. You must have liked to read.

HW: I did. I do.

JW: What were your favorite kind of books?

HW: I used to like books by James Oliver Kerwood. I just loved it. That was the stories of the Northwest Yukon. I used to love that. I think I read every book he ever wrote.

JW: Did you ever have...were you ever exposed to any Black writers?

HW: Yes, well, we used to go up to [Unintelligible] Center and we had this Black library up there and Black history. And that was the place where most of the young Blacks went. And Booker T. Washington Center, we had a club there when I was a teenager and I belonged to it. It was called the Harriet Tubman Ever Ready Girls. It was named after Harriet Tubman. I belonged to that. It eventually grew into [Unintelligible] Club.

JW: Oh, I didn't know that.

HW: Yes. Many of those young girls started out as Ever Ready Girls.

JW: And would you have people come and lecture you on Black history or what?

HW: Yes, we used to have what they called a forum at that time. I think that was once a month where they spoke of timely topics...things that affected us today, as well as things in the past. And we would have discussions pro and con on the issues of the day but we were encouraged to read those books on Black history.

JW: Were you ever involved in any plays or...?

HW: Yes. They had...I don't remember the gentleman's name who was in charge of the plays but they used to give plays there and I was in some of the plays.

JW: Did you ever learn any musical instrument?

HW: I took piano lessons but I didn't get too far with it. (Chuckle) I don't think I'm musically inclined that way.

JW: What about through the church? What kind of activities...?

HW: Oh, I went to Zion Church. That was the first church I went to was this Methodist church and I was in the junior choir and took part in all the activities, Sunday School and what-have-you.

JW: What kind of man was Rev. Byers?

HW: Well, as far as I know he was just a minister. I don't know too much about him one way or the other, other than we went to church there and he was the minister at that time. My family was not...well, my father didn't go

HW: to church that much. My mother was a churchgoer but she still was not a person that took too much part in the church other than to support me. She wasn't like...like some women that just work in the church, you know, so everybody knows who they are. She didn't do that.

JW: What did she do for her leisure time?

HW: Well, she was a club woman. She belonged to the...my father was a club man. He was a Mason, and he was an Elk and that took a lot of...that was a lot of their social life. My mother was an Eastern Star and she was a Daughter of Tabor so she went to meetings two or three times a month, plus church. So that was their social life. Plus having friends over. They liked to play cards.

JW: Oh, they did?

HW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

JW: Baptists didn't play cards.

HW: Well, they did (Chuckle).

JW: Were you exposed to alcoholic beverages?

HW: Yes. My father drank. We had liquor in the house.

JW: Did your friends think that unusal?

HW: Well, I don't think so. I don't think so because at the time I was grown I met the...the young people I went with, I mean, if they had a party, they either took wine and that was about as much as they drank. It was no hard liquor but we were exposed to hard liquor. My father...my mother didn't drink but my father drank.

JW: Then they didn't mind if you had some every once in a while.

HW: No, they didn't give me any liquor. I mean, I don't think I was even...took any liquor until after I was grown...in my twenties...because...but you said was I exposed to liquor. Yes. But it just never...I mean that's something that never bothered me...liquor.

JW: Did you start smoking when you were in high school?

HW: No. Never did.

JW: Did your friends smoke?

HW: Oh, yes.

JW: How did you avoid it?

HW: Well, I just didn't. It just didn't appeal to me.

JW: Did you have any vices?

HW: Oh, nobody tells about their vices. (Chuckle). I don't think anybody tells about that (Chuckle).

JW: Were your friends all Black, Colored?

HW: In high school I had some White friends but at school... but not to socialize to come to the house. I didn't have that many. I really don't think so. But during school and anything connected with school we would discuss things or go on places together that way. But to come to the house, I don't think I had a lot of White friends, no.

JW: Did you feel that being in...Well, you said you liked San Francisco but it was such a small community. Did you ever feel that...how do I want to put this...Did people feel basically content with the Black community life here or did people feel that they in some kind of way were left out?

HW: I...You might have felt left out but I don't think you thought you could do anything about it so you just let it lay because there were many things that came up that you knew weren't right but then you didn't make waves in those days.

JW: How did you feel about all the new Blacks coming in during the War? The new People.

HW: Well, that didn't...that didn't bother me. It bothered some people but it really didn't bother me because I had never seen as many Black people until I went down to Los Angeles. I had a chance to visit in Los Angeles. They always had more Black people there. And I had a sister-in-law, Kline 's sister, after we were married, I went down to visit her and she lived near Central Avenue and I used to go on Central Avenue and just see... just look at Black people because I had never seen that many, you know, in my life. I had seen them in New Orleans but then I was young but I had never seen that many at one time but it was just...I'm looking at them like...(chuckle)...Well, wow. But, no, it didn't bother me. No, it really didn't.

JW: Did you feel as a girl comfortable that you had career choices or anything else were limited by the fact that

JW: you were a woman. Did it bother you that you were a woman.

HW: Not a woman but because I was Black...Colored as they used to say. I think that was it because I don't know if we had pursued jobs in the way...I guess we were so afraid of being rebuffed that we just didn't go after things that maybe we should have but we weren't conditioned to do that in those days. We weren't.

JW: You never felt that being a female was a particular disadvantage?

HW: No, no, because I went into a work that was classically female at that time and I made a good living at it, doing beauty work. And I kept the shop from Thirty-seven to Fifty. That was thirteen years.

JW: When did you start dating?

HW: Oh, I was a late bloomer, I guess. Oh, in high school... late in high school. Kline and I were in high school together but we weren't going around together. I was going with somebody else.

JW: White or Black?

HW: Black, of course. (Chuckle)

JW: There was no interracial dating?

HW: Not that I knew of.

JW: Well, how did you meet...When did you start seeing him seriously?

HW: Well, after high school, I guess. Maybe when I was about twenty-one.

JW: And how long was it after you started being serious did you get married? Or when did you get married?

HW: About three years later.

JW: Wasn't that a little late in those days for a woman to get married?

HW: It was. Yes. It was. I was twenty-four. I was twenty-four. It was.

JW: Your father didn't...?

HW: No, it wasn't nothing like that but Kline at that time, Oh, I don't know what he told you in his interview but

HW: his grandmother had them and then when he finished high school and started working down at [Unintelligible] Union, he moved out of his grandmother's house and got a house for he and his two sisters. One sister is two years younger than he is, the other is ten years younger. And at the time that Kline and I were going around together seriously, I mean, he and his sisters had a house. He had an obligation immediately to them to take care of them and he wanted to wait until they were sort of on their feet before he got married. So he just...he waited a period of time and then when we married, I married him with two sisters (Chuckle). They lived with us until one finished high school and one of them got married. One stayed with me two years and the other one stayed with me...she was only fourteen... she stayed with me until she was nineteen until she got married. That's the girl that's in the shop with me right now.

JW: Did you have a big wedding?

HW: Yes, I did.

JW: Where was it?

HW: At Third Baptist Church, at Hyde and Clay. Reverend Hayes marries me, the senior.

JW: Did you have a honeymoon?

HW: Yes, we went to Santa Cruz in a borrowed car from his cousin (Chuckle). I guess that's what you pass as our honeymoon.

JW: What was Santa Cruz like in those days?

HW: Well, it was a lovely beach and there was a Colored lady that had a house down there we stayed in. I can't think of her name now. I didn't think about that but we stayed at her house for about four or five days. And then we came on back home.

JW: And where were you living when you first got married?

HW: On Greenwood Street, 1975 Greenwood street.

JW: Greenwich.

HW: Yes. Greenwich. Yes, down in the Marina...Cow Hollow they called it in those days.

JW: I'll have to ask you certain questions [Unintelligible]. When did you have your first child?

HW: 1942. December, 1942.

JW: And the name was...?

HW: Kline.

JW: Junior?

HW. Yes.

JW: And what is Kline, Jr. doing now?

HW: Well, he works for the Western Pacific Railway. He's a vice treasurer.

JW: Vice...

HW: Treasurer.

JW: And then the next child was...

HW: A boy. His name was Michael...Michael Allen Wilson and he was born in 1946 and he died in 1949.

JW: And then the next child was Paul?

HW: Paul Isadore Wilson and he was born in 1950.

JW: And no girls?

HW: Three boys.

JW: Did you want a girl?

HW: I really didn't (Chuckle). I got my wish. I wanted boys every time.

JW: Oh, isn't that unusual?

HW: Yes, it is. It is, but I did.

JW: Well, that's good that you got what you wanted.

HW: But I did. But I love my little grandbabies...my little granddaughters (Chuckle).

JW: How many do you have?

HW: Two.

JW: Did you try to raise your children...did you have any... like did you sit down and think about how am I going to raise my children or did you raise them like your parents

JW: did and what are the specific things you said I'm going to make sure they have that I didn't have or that I had?

HW: Well, I don't know whether I did or not. Thinking about it, I just don't know. I just had them and raised them the best way I could. I had a very supportive husband of my children in that we tried to raise them together. For instance, when I corrected them, he supported me with it and I think that's very important with children because children can divide you. They can play one against the other if you are not real careful. I think that's something that we did with our children and I think my parents tried to have the best for me as best they could and I tried to have the best for my children. They came up at a time if they were educated they could do much better than I and I tried to work toward that end...to give them an education if they wanted it. And both of them wanted it. So they are certainly better off than we were just by virtue of the time they were born because we know in our day, we know men who went to college that had to be waiters, who had to work on the trains. You couldn't get jobs. And one of our big real estate men here in San Francisco, he trained to be an architect.

JW: Who was that?

HW: T. W. Washington...and he couldn't get it so he went into real estate. He's done very well but I mean in those days you couldn't get a job as an architect.

JW: Were there any sort of in-groups, cliques in the Black community in the Thirties?

HW: Well, I guess so. There were different clubs. I can't think of the names. One was the Cosmos Club was very important in those days. They used to give...it wasn't dances but they were like concerts and everybody dressed up and went to them. That was quite a society thing I guess you would call it. And then there were...

JW: But everybody went.

HW: Yes. Lots of people went.

JW: Did you go?

HW: No.

JW: Why not?

HW: Because I wasn't invited. (Chuckle). As simple as that.

JW: Why not?

HW: Well, I don't know. It just didn't mean that much to me. I just don't know why I wasn't invited.

JW: I was just going to say, here you are in business for yourself, probably doing better than most people in the Cosmos Club.

HW: That doesn't tell me anything, either (Chuckle). It's who you are with and I guess what group you get along with, you know. And at that time that was an older group, older than I was, you know, although they had some younger people that were in it. I mean, it wasn't nothing to do but sit and listen to music, like it was dancing. We used to go to dances and things, my husband and I before I married him. After we were married we went to many dances.

JW: There was no kind of division according to complexion in the community?

HW: Well, at that time it was just kind of in to be light, you know. I think this was the way we thought all over the country, you know. I don't think it was just here. It's everywhere. There were some people that by virtue of color they could do things that maybe I couldn't do but this is the way it was in those days.

JW: Did you join any of the NAACP?

HW: Oh, yes.

JW: Were you active in it?

HW: I used to go to meetings. I was never an officer or anything. My husband was very vocal in things like that. But we always belonged to the NAACP, even now.

JW: What about the Native Daughters?

HW: No. Well, I'm not a Native Daughter. We went to affairs they gave but I was never in Native Daughters because I'm not a native daughter. A lot of people think that I am because I have been here so long but I was born in New Orleans.

JW: I can't understand why that club even survived when there was such a small community, why would they have a club for only the...

HW: Well, because it was in to be from California...it was... prior to the War, no one that came here was from the

HW: South. Everybody was from back East or some place, you know. Nobody wanted to say they were from Texas or Louisiana or any of those places, you know. And so to be a native Californian, this was a big thing. So they could get a group together. In fact, we had a group after that. There was a man who used to call himself Governor. I forget his last name but, anyway, he joined...he formed a club that was called Californians by Choice. You could belong to this group if you just came to California. You didn't have to be born in California and I belonged to that group of others. We used to go on picnics and things like that. We had nice times. But getting back to the first thing that I was saying, it was just sort of in to be a native born. That made you maybe a little better than somebody that was from Tennessee or some of the things in the South. But when the War came...when the War started and the people from the South came out here, it was in to be from Texas and from any other place (Chuckle). So that's the way that was.

JW: Do you remember people having run ins with the police?

HW: Oh, I guess they did but it didn't affect me that much. I guess I heard of things but I'm sure there were people who had brushes with the law, had a tough time because they have a tough time right now. But I don't remember any particular instances that I can tell you about.

JW: What would you say is the...would you say that during your...most of the life that you can remember, you always were aware that you were Black and what that might mean or was there a particular time that you... something had happened and all of a sudden it really became clear to you that being Colored was going to make a difference?

HW: No, I always felt that being Black made a difference and I think we weren't as proud of being Black as we...as later on and the kids turned us around and said, "Okay, let's not be ashamed of being Black," because we were, you know. We just were. We were so limited in being Black.

JW: Did your parents talk to you specifically about being Black?

HW: Maybe on how to get along with those other people.

JW: Was their attitude hostile towards Whites? How did they talk about White people, as the enemy or just...?

HW: Well, I don't think they were hostile because I think

HW: doing the type work they did like my mother worked in service and she took care of children, you know, and I think there was a very nice relationship, you know. It wasn't hostility. They felt these people were their friends and my father was the same way. I don't think he got into that...unless he happened to have a run-in with a particular person but ordinarily I think that they felt that they...they [Unintelligible] a job, they were nice to them, they did extra things for them at times and I think that they felt that those people were their friends and it was a way of survival, you know. You know, you don't rustle the boat if that's your living and I think they had sense enough not to do that. I don't think hostility got into it until later on when we became militant. I think this is true in any part of the country. Like you go South... you don't have to go South. You can go any place where women have raised certain children and they feel as close to those children as if they were their own children because they were being the mothers to those children, (Chuckle) bringing them up. So I think they felt a kinship toward the people that they worked for. I don't ever remember having any hostility toward them except if they had to quit a job or something and they did something to make them mad, well, that was different.

JW: We have time for about two more questions and I'm trying to think which one to ask. One would be why do you think the country changed during WW II? Here? What was it that made things improve for Blacks during the War? Was it the people that came here and insisted that they improve?

HW: Well, I think it was...I believe it was the numbers of people that came here who had been doing that type of work in the South. For instance, there were men who helped build houses; there were men who worked in the streets in the South and there were men who drove buses and things like that that we didn't do here and I think that the sheer numbers opened the doors. I believe... to me, that's what opened the doors. If these people hadn't come here, we'd probably be doing the same things we were doing years ago. But when...when it's just a small amount, you're almost invisible. They can pretend you are invisible but when there are so many here, you just...you have to reckon with them someway and this is what happened. And, of course, Martin Luther King and all of that. I mean, all of those were contributing factors because the jobs did not open up until after the War, really. And then I think you know of the times that they had, even to get a motorman to drive the streetcar and all that, they still protested but they finally won through.

JW: Have you had an opportunity to travel outside of California since...?

HW: Well, my son was in the East for about five years.

JW: Which one?

HW: Kline, Jr. (Talking in background). You didn't meet my oldest son. No. He lived in the East for about five years.

JW: Where was that?

HW: Well, he got a scholarship. He went to the University of...where was that...Southern California. He graduated from that and then he got a scholarship to Harvard. He did his masters at Harvard.

JW: Harvard! You visited him there?

HW: Yes. There and then in New York after he got his first job at Chemical Bank.

JW: What was your impression of Boston and New York.

HW: Oh, I liked it. I mean, I thought it was very nice. Boston is a very historical city and we had a very nice time there looking at the different sights. New York...it's nice. I wouldn't want to live there but I enjoyed being there.

THE END