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Reverend Willie Ford, Jr.

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Nadine Wilmot
in 2006

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Audiofile 2

Spent a lot of time at dance clubs in the Bay Area and Los Angeles—joined North Richmond Missionary Baptist Church upon arrival in Richmond in 1950—had been a church choir director in New York—describes childhood in Louisiana—New Orleans culture—going to Mardi Gras—how Richmond has changed—nowadays people are less cooperative than they once were, more possessive

Interview 1: August 4, 2006

Begin Audio File 1 Ford 01 08-04-2006.wav

01-00:00:00

Wilmot: Today is August 4, 2006. This is Nadine Wilmot here with Reverend Willie Ford. So what's your whole name?

01-00:00:12

Ford: Willie Ford, Jr.

01-00:00:14

Wilmot: Um-hmm. Your father was also a William?

01-00:00:17

Ford: That's—Willie, yes. And so was my grandfather.

01-00:00:20

Wilmot: So you're third?

01-00:00:22

Ford: Um-hmm.

01-00:00:23

Wilmot: Okay.

01-00:00:26

Ford: And I have a son whose name I gave—my oldest son, also. He would be the fourth. Yes. And I am here at 3069 Rollingwood Drive in San Pablo. I was—you want to ask me about my--?

01-00:00:57

Wilmot: I wanted to ask you where and when you were born.

01-01:01:

Ford: Oh, yes. Well, I was born in Louisiana.

01-00:01:04

Wilmot: Um-hmm. Let me move this back a little.

01-00:01:06

Ford: Yes.

01-00:01:07

Wilmot: Go ahead and tell me again, please.

01-00:02:05

Ford: I was born in the State of Louisiana. I was born, actually, in the country. Right near Alexandria, Louisiana. But before I was one year old my parents moved to a place called Crowley, Louisiana. That's southwest Louisiana and it's about 166 miles from New Orleans. And we lived there from then on until I was grown, in Crowley, Louisiana. I went to school there. And at one time I went to Alexandria to live with some relatives and I went to school there in

Alexandria and then I came back to Crowley because that's where my family--the reason we were there, my dad had a job at the Southern Pacific Railroad Company and he's worked there all of his life. And from—I was—let's see. I was born in 1919. September 18, 1919. And this was in 1920 that we moved to Crowley, Louisiana. My dad worked for Southern Pacific Railroad for 45 years.

01-00:02:22

Wilmot:

What did he do for them?

01-00:02:24

Ford:

He took care of the railroad. He took care of the ties and the railroad tracks. He was—I don't know what you would call that but he worked on the railroad and replaced ties and so forth and rails and what have you. But whatever he did, he worked and when he needed extra help he hired other men to come and work. But he worked there and we rode the train free. I always rode the Southern train when I was young, free. So I traveled everywhere. I went to New Orleans, Houston, Texas and Galveston and Beaumont, and so forth. And in the summer, when school was closed, I would go to Chicago, Detroit. And that was my life, traveling all the time when I was young. And I missed a lot of—sometimes I would miss school traveling.

01-00:03:26

Wilmot:

Were you just traveling with friends or were you going--?

01-00:03:28

Ford:

No, traveling alone.

01-00:03:30

Wilmot:

Traveling, I see.

01-00:03:30

Ford:

Visiting relatives. Wherever I had any relatives, anyone who I knew in any city, I would go visit them.

01-00:03:37

Wilmot:

And so you were visiting family on your mother's side and your father's side?

01-00:03:39

Ford:

Both sides, yeah.

01-00:03:41

Wilmot:

You went to Michigan?

01-00:03:42

Ford:

Yeah. My mother's side in Michigan and in Detroit, Detroit and Chicago. I had relatives living in Chicago and Detroit. My mother's brother, my mother's first cousin, and all of her folks lived in Chicago that didn't live in Louisiana and Texas. So I went to Texas and so forth. But I spent a lot of the time—I graduated from high school. I didn't graduate until 1939. And I immediately

moved to Detroit. Then the war began in about '41 or two. And then I went to school. I was studying aircraft mechanic but they wouldn't let me do nothing but structural mechanic because they didn't—for some reason they wouldn't allow me to work as an engine mechanic. So I had to do building aircraft because of segregation. All my class was all white at one time but me and I had to study the structure. So I learned how to build airplanes. I become a mechanic—structural mechanic, that's what they call it. Structural mechanic.

01-00:05:03

Wilmot:

May I slow you down for a minute?

01-00:05:05

Ford:

Um-hmm.

01-00:05:06

Wilmot:

I want to ask did your mother work?

01-00:05:06

Ford:

My mother worked when I was little. She worked—my mother didn't work for anyone. She was a seamstress and she did people's clothes. People would come down with the material and have her make clothes for people. And I learned how to sew from my mother because she was a seamstress. But none of the girls—there were eight of four girls, four boys and us—but I'm the only one that followed behind my mom because I learned how to sew from her. And she used to be like a nurse. When anyone got sick they had to go to the Charity Hospital in New Orleans because they didn't have any—a lot of people were too poor to go to the hospitals so they went to the charity hospital in New Orleans. And they would always come to her to take them because she rode the train free also, and they had to pay. But she would just assist them like a nurse. And take them to New Orleans and take them to the charity hospital and get them—put them in the hospital. Just sign them in and then she would come home.

01-00:06:15

Wilmot:

How far away was New Orleans from where you were living?

01-00:06:19

Ford:

166 miles from Crowley to New Orleans.

01-00:06:21

Wilmot:

So how many hours was that by train?

01-00:06:24

Ford:

At that time it took about an hour and—it depends on the train. They had to stop—let's see. We had to stop in Lafayette, New Orleans, New Iberia, and a few other places and it took about—a little over two hours, I would say, at that time. Depend on the—they have some places the train didn't stop, some stations. At the little smaller towns that—certain trains would stop and certain trains didn't. So in a smaller town, the train that was fast, like an express train.

The mail—in the mailroom they had a stick they'd hang out like that and you would put the mail on a rack near the train. And when we passed there, the train would slow down a bit. He'd raise that rack and catch it without stopping and keep going. And I forgot what you'd call it but that's how the mail continued to go even when the train didn't stop anyplace. So in a fast train—in the fast trains, it took around two hours or less to go to New Orleans. Oh, but wait, about 166 miles. The train didn't travel—probably about an average of 40 to 50 miles per hour, let's put it that way—50, 150, yeah. So it would take two hours or three hours to go to New Orleans.

01-00:07:52

Wilmot: Were the trains segregated?

01-00:07:54

Ford: Hmm?

01-00:07:54

Wilmot: Were the trains segregated?

01-00:07:56

Ford: They were segregated. The colored folks, they called them, colored folks sat in the front next to the baggage, and white folks sat in the back. And all the Pullman stations—the Pullman in the back had dining cars, sleeping cars. Black folks couldn't sleep on the train unless you sleep in your seat. We just didn't get a Pullman's car.

You couldn't eat on the train unless you carried your own lunch. There was a man who walked around with a basket selling fruit and you'd buy a sandwich, an apple, or something like that.

01-00:08:29

Wilmot: Did you ever ride on a train while your father was working?

01-00:08:33

Ford: While he was working?

01-00:08:35

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

01-00:08:35

Ford: Yeah, well, everybody knew my dad because he had been there so long. They would pass on the train and pass, they'd wave and, "Hi, Ford!" Whenever I got on the train, they'd say, "This is Ford's boy." So I never had to buy anything. They would always give me. [laughs] The man with the basket or the porter would say, "Give Ford an apple, an orange, or whatever." I didn't have to have much. But I didn't have much anyway when I was riding the train. A nickel, dime, or a quarter. I never even used to have to spend it because they used to be nice to me. When I got older, well, everybody that didn't ride the train thought we were rich because I was traveling on the train. But we didn't have any money.

We didn't have any money because during the time, that was time of depression, I think. And people didn't have money. And they thought we had plenty of money but we did not. Because I think my dad was making a dollar a day when I was small. I know he was because I used to go on the 15th to pick up his check. I would go to school later on that day. I would take his check straight home so mama could spend it. And it was \$15 dollars on the 15th and \$15 on the first.

He raised eight kids, sent the girls to college. My sisters were all school teachers except the baby girl. Three of them were school teachers. Went to Baton Rouge to Southern University and Leland College. And all of them went to college and they're school teachers. But, I don't know how they did it because there are other people who had less than we did. [chuckles] And my mom, the only extra money she made was from making dresses for—as seamstress for people, and accompanying people to New Orleans. She didn't charge them anything if they would donate something for the ride to the hospital. And that's all. And we did good. But there was no complaining. Everybody enjoyed that.

01-00:10:37

Wilmot:

Let me ask you a question. Can you tell me your mother's name? I know your father's name was also Willie Ford.

01-00:10:44

Ford:

Uh-huh. E-O-L-A. Eola.

01-00:10:46

Wilmot:

Eola.

01-00:10:47

Ford:

Eola.

01-00:10:47

Wilmot:

Beautiful.

01-00:10:49

Ford:

And before she was married, she's a Molette.

01-00:10:53

Wilmot:

Eola Molette.

01-00:10:53

Ford:

Molette.

01-00:10:54

Wilmot:

How do you spell that?

01-00:10:55

Ford:

M-O-L-E-T-T-E.

01-00:10:57

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

01-00:10:5

Ford: Eola Molette. And my grandfather on her side was Molette. He lived in northern Louisiana. He had a big plantation. And he had plenty people working for him and all that. But he wasn't highly educated, but he had a lot of—had—had been left him by his dad. And what happened eventually, the people took it from him. White folks took it from him because they say he owed them more money than he said he owed, was in debt with them. And they took all his property. He had a lot of property in northern Louisiana.

01-00:11:36

Wilmot: He was a black man?

01-00:11:37

Ford: Yeah. But he was—yeah, he was bright but he was light brown, you know, but he had acquired a whole lot of property of his that had been handed down to him through generations. And he and his brother had all of this property, and he used to have people working for him, and one day they—I think there was—they knew that there was oil on the property. And the white folks took all of his property. And when his nephews came from Chicago, came down to fight it, they chased him back to Chicago. [ringing phone]

01-00:12:13

Wilmot: Would you hold on one second? Okay, sorry. Would you say that again? When his nephews came down and took up--?

01-00:12:20

Ford: When the nephews came down from Chicago to fight for him because they had taken his property, they chased them back down there and told them if he wanted to live, he'd better go back to Chicago. And he had to go back to Chicago and he never did--

01-00:12:32

Wilmot: What happened to your grandfather—that was your grandfather?

01-00:12:35

Ford: Grandfather's nephew. My--.

01-00:12:37

Wilmot: But your grandfather, once the property was taken from him, what happened to him? What did he do?

01-00:12:41

Ford: Nothing. He couldn't do anything.

01-00:12:44

Wilmot: Did he just live on a small piece of that land or did he--

01-00:12:48

Ford: Yeah.

01-00:12:48

Wilmot: What did he do?

01-00:12:49

Ford: He's my cousin. My cousin who's brother came from Chicago—lives in Chicago, it's her house I was about to go to this afternoon. I aim to ask her something about that and I didn't get a chance to do it yet. But she's the one that knew. She says it's a shame what they did to the grandfather, my grandpa, which was her uncle. And her father was next to him and they were together with the property. But they took all of the property because there was oil on it. They haven't dug oil on it yet, but they still took that property and it's still up there in northern Louisiana.

01-00:13:28

Wilmot: Did they use force? Intimidation?

01-00:13:33

Ford: Hmm?

01-00:13:36

Wilmot: They used force, intimidation?

01-00:13:37

Ford: No, they didn't use any force. It was just like, "Listen." It was just like slavery time in Louisiana before—in these days before Martin Luther King time. It wasn't slavery but you—people used to work on the farm during the summer, during the crop time. And when the harvest was over, in about November, then you didn't do anything until the next spring. But if you owned your own little land, you could do it. But people who were cotton farmers like, for instance, those who raised cotton, a lot of them didn't even have education. But they were sharecroppers. And the man you—on his farm—you used his property, raised the farm, sell the cotton not—take the cotton when—when it has grown and take it to the cotton gin. And they would separate the cotton from the seed. And they would say you had so many pounds of cotton and you had so much money. Whatever he told them they had made, that's what he made. And then he'd take that money.

You had some more money you go down and get when they weigh the seed, when the cotton was separated from the seed. You call that 'seed money.' Well, you take the cotton money and the first thing you do is pay off the boss who owns the property. He say you been—he has a store called the commissary. So all the year you go down and buy what you want and then put that on credit. Credit, credit, credit. So the year's over and you owe five—\$900 and your crop was \$1,200. You would take his \$900 first, then you got three. And then when the seed money come, whatever you say the seed

weighs and you got—that's just a few hundred dollars. You got that. So that's all you had until next year when you go back and--.

So just think, that went over and over and over again. The people didn't have much rights. They couldn't do anything. So, if the white man said that you owe him some money, you owe him some money. The judge was a white man. The lawyers were white. You didn't get any of that lawyer because it's the same thing. Maybe the judge was a lawyer himself. I don't know how they did that thing. But you didn't have no rights. All you did was there.

That is why a lot of people were glad to leave when they said that there was a war and there were jobs working in the shipyards and so forth. People were anxious to run. And then the first ones who came to work would work a few weeks, and when they had made a few good checks, they would go back and brag about how good it was. And then everybody wanted to come and that is how people began to migrate. How to get away from this. Because it may not sound bad but it was terrible. And the people don't know how bad it was and that's why a lot of people were so easy on their children when they come out here. They didn't want to take them back into that.

But one good thing happened. The Martin Luther King era came. That's when the woman decided to not sit on the bus. She made a decision. And that is what—and a lot of people stood back. They didn't want to say anything because they were afraid to get on her side because of the repercussion might have come from the white. But by her sticking to it and Martin Luther King coming in and having the march and so forth, that changed a whole lot because *everything* changed—turned over. And people were so happy. Now, that happened in the '50's and '60's, the Martin Luther King era.

But you see what I feel right now, what has happened to our people, a lot of the young people now don't know what happened in the past. They don't know what we went through. And when they learn a little bit about it, they rebel. A lot of them didn't get a chance to get a lot of education and a lot of them didn't—I guess they were too proud to go and get an education after they had gotten old enough, older. And they didn't want to go to school with their kids, so they couldn't teach their kids a lot of things that they should have been able to teach them, because they really didn't it themselves. So therefore, the new generation that's come on, it look like they have taken on over things for themselves because there's very little you can tell them. And I feel sorry for them. Right now, something else has to happen. A new era has to come over to turn people around because it's getting so bad. And the fighting and killing and kids don't think they're going to live to be older, so they care little about life. It's only seconds. 'Do what you can do now but you can't live forever,' and so forth like that.

And we'll sit around and think, "What can we do?" One can do one thing and somebody else will disagree and do something else. So there has to be a big—

something has to happen. Got to make some changes. Because we had a terrible time. I had a terrible time. But I looked at it as little or nothing.

I'll tell you something that happened to me when I went to Detroit. Eventually my sister—one of my sisters met a young man when she went to Detroit. My mother didn't let me go to Detroit. In 1933, there was a big fair in Chicago called the World's Fair and my mother took—that's the year I didn't pass a grade. And my mother didn't let me go—she had a pass for me—she didn't let me to go to Chicago to the World's Fair. But she took my sisters. And they went to Chicago; they went to Detroit. And while they were in Chicago, my sister met a young man in Detroit from Chicago. And she basically went back and married him. But when I went to Detroit—went to Chicago in '39, 1939, I went there and went to the park called River View Park. And we had a dancing contest there and I won the jitterbug contest.

01-00:20:05

Wilmot:

You were a dancer?

01-00:20:06

Ford:

Yeah, I learned how to dance in Galveston, Texas. And I learned. So anyway, I went back to Louisiana and came back to work in Detroit because the war had started in '42. And I went back to Detroit and there I stayed. I went to work in the aircraft factory after having gone to school. They wouldn't let me take mechanic. I wanted to be an engineer but they wouldn't let me do nothing but work on the structure. So I was a structural mechanic.

01-00:20:40

Wilmot:

And that was about discrimination?

01-00:20:42

Ford:

Yeah. But we don't look at it. We did what we could do. We got a job working, building airplanes. I worked on the B-17 line fortress and the B-19. And the B-24 was the last one that was coming out. I was a riveter. I had become a lead man.

01-00:21:05

Wilmot:

Were you in the union?

01-00:20:07

Ford:

I'd joined in—in—yeah, yeah. I'd got in the union and I was a steward. I become a steward and yes, I was real active in the CIO, UAW-CIO. Because I had worked a little while for Candlelight Motor Car Company as the thing started. But they turned over from making cars to making airplanes and aircraft parts. And they stopped making cars in 1942. I think that's his last car, in '42 and '43, '44, and '45 was all airplanes. So I was an aircraft mechanic. And when I left, Roosevelt was president. He got elected to a third term.

I left Detroit and went to New York. The war was over and they'd stopped making planes and the jobs--. So a fellow told me, "You could make good,"

because I was a dry cleaner also. I knew how to press clothes and clean them up. And I went to New York. And I went to Brooklyn College and I also worked as a presser. And I pressed in Long Island. And I had friends in New York, in Manhattan. I lived in the Bedford Stuyvesant district of Brooklyn.

01-00:22:33

Wilmot:

I love that part of Brooklyn.

01-00:22:33

Ford:

You know about it?

01-00:22:34

Wilmot:

Um-hmm.

01-00:22:35

Ford:

Oh, I lived in Bedford Stuyvesant.

01-00:22:37

Wilmot:

Did you know any people who were from the Caribbean in New York?

01-00:22:41

Ford:

I know a lot of people from there. In fact, I'll tell you later. I came from New York with a girl from—well, she lived in New York, in Manhattan. But she used to come there because, you know—and when I came to California, she and I came together.

01-00:22:59

Wilmot:

Was she also Caribbean?

01-00:23:00

Ford:

Uh-huh.

01-00:23:02

Wilmot:

Where—I mean, where was she from?

01-00:23:04

Ford:

Barbados, I think.

01-00:23:05

Wilmot:

Um-hmm.

01-00:23:07

Ford:

Um-hmm, yeah. Yeah. Her name was Nadine. Her name was Nadine. [laughter]. And so she—her parents lived in Long Island and she came with me. But anyway, before I met her lived—I used to get on Franklin and Fulton. There's this train that used to run to the baseball park. And Jackie Robinson used to leave Ebbets Field and get off of this—and get on at Franklin and Fulton. Got off that elevator to get on the subway. But usually, he would walk to his home. And I met him. Now, Jackie Robinson and I was about the same size. And I was pigeon toed just like he was. So people used to think that we were kin. But I would meet him there and walk with him awhile and talk.

People used—some used to think I was Jackie Robinson. But I was there when O'Malley first hired him. And Jackie Robinson and I was buddies.

But besides that, I went to Harlem and I used to go to the fire, to the—

01-00:24:30

Wilmot: Subway?

01-00:24:31

Ford: On the--

01-00:23:35

Wilmot: 125th?

01-00:24:36

Ford: Yeah. Well, you know, on 125th and Lexington, in the 7th Heaven, that's where Sugar Ray Robinson finally opened his place. Now, Sugar Ray I knew because he was from Detroit. I had met him there and also Joe Louis, who used to stay at the Theresa Hotel. And right next to it, when Sugar Ray built this place, opened up his little place next to the hotel, I was there then because he fought Jake LaMotta. And after he fought, he opened this place. Right after the fight it wasn't ready, so we got it a few weeks later. But his—Joe Louis, Sugar Ray, Buddy Young from Chicago. We were from the Midwest. And we used to buddy-buddy together, used to kid with the guys from down south. And Joe Louis, he was from Detroit also. So we had fun together.

I played with these guys and I went there but I used to dance at the Savoy—at the Savoy, that's what I was trying to say. It was on—Savoy was around 137th—38th and Lexington. Must have been Sixth. Anyway, you heard about the Savoy?

01-00:25:52

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

01-00:25:54

Ford: And I danced at the Savoy. But I never would—I was a member of a church in Brooklyn, Concord Baptist Church, and I sang in the choir. And I would not let them know that I danced. So therefore, when the Harvest Moon Ball came off in New York, I wouldn't dance in the Harvest Moon Ball, because if I had, everybody would know that I danced. So I didn't want to tell them that I danced, so I kept that to itself. So when I came to Harlem, I was Willie Ford, and when I went to Brooklyn, I sang in the choir. But that's home. So that's just a little secret that I kept.

But I loved New York and everybody knew me because when the guys from Philly used to come over to dance, they'd meet me. "Hey, Willie! Come on! These guys from Philly think they can dance, come on!" But when I started dancing, everybody would stop and make a circle around and I'd be in the

middle dancing and I'd find a girl that could dance with me. And it was—that was fun days.

01-00:26:55

Wilmot: Was Nadine as good a dancer as you?

01-00:26:57

Ford: No, she didn't dance much but she used to love to see me dance. But anyway, Nadine and I left New York and came here in 1950. I came here to visit my parents. My parents had migrated from Louisiana, they were all living here. And I came here visiting. And after being here, I—we decided I would stay and she was going to go back home because she worked for a telephone company, AT&T. And she would come back the next year because blacks weren't working up in the telephone company, not as an operator. So she got that fixed in New York in '50 and she went back and '51, she came back. Meanwhile, I opened up a cleaners in North Richmond.

01-00:27:51

Wilmot: I need to ask you to slow down and ask you one other question.

01-00:27:54

Ford: Yeah.

01-00:27:54

Wilmot: There's a couple of questions in my head and I have to ask them unless I'll forget them.

01-00:27:57

Ford: Carry right on.

01-00:27:59

Wilmot: The first one is, did your family own property? Your mother and father, did they own property? Did they own your house where you lived in Crowley?

01-00:28:05

Ford: My mother—in Crowley? No, we rented.

01-00:28:10

Wilmot: They rented.

01-00:28:11

Ford: Um-hmm.

01-00:28:11

Wilmot: Did they have property somewhere else besides--?

01-00:28:14

Ford: They had property in—yeah, in the country. It was in—near—there's a place called Bunkie, Louisiana.

01-00:28:22

Wilmot: How do you say that?

01-00:28:23

Ford: B-U-N-K-I-E. Bunkie. That's just a few miles from Alexandria. So we used Alexandria as the name because nobody knew about this small little country town. So it was near Alexandria.

01-00:28:36

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

01-00:28:37

Ford: And my grandfather owned a lot of property there.

01-00:28:40

Wilmot: And this is on your mother's side or your father's side?

01-00:28:42

Ford: On my father's side.

01-00:28:44

Wilmot: Okay.

01-00:28:44

Ford: On my mother's side, I told you about her dad.

01-00:28:47

Wilmot: Um-hmm, you did.

01-00:28:48

Ford: But my grandfather, my dad's father used to run the cotton mill. He was the cotton gin operator. And he lived—ooh, when did grandpa live—he lived to be 100—they said 17—19 years old. And he lived until 1949.

01-00:29:14

Wilmot: Wow.

01-00:29:14

Ford: And my dad was born in 1890. 1890 and my dad lived until '79, I think he died. Yeah, '79. And my mother passed in '82.

But when I left here and went to Hawaii, I was working for a company, at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, wanted me to operate the valet shop. So I worked at the valet shop at the Hilton Hawaiian Village. And they were building the Sheraton Waikiki, so we also had that contract. So I moved out of the Hilton Hawaiian Village to the Sheraton Waikiki in Oahu. And I operated the cleaner—the valet shop and everybody's clothes—everybody lived there sent their clothes downstairs to me. And the clothes from the Hilton came over to me. All the guest clothes, I cleaned them and pressed them and sent them back. And all the big shots, when they first opened the Sheraton Waikiki, Elvis Presley, I did all his big, heavy clothes. He had all these diamonds and stuff.

01-00:30:35

Wilmot: This was in what year?

01-00:30:35

Ford: In 1972.

01-00:30:41

Wilmot: So when your family left Louisiana, your parents, they didn't leave property that they owned or they left--.

01-00:30:47

Ford: Un-unh. They left it.

01-00:30:50

Wilmot: Their an—like your father's.

01-00:30:51

Ford: They took my grandfather's stuff.

01-00:30:54

Wilmot: On your mother's side.

01-00:30:56

Ford: Yeah, on one side.

01-00:30:57

Wilmot: And your father's side?

01-00:30:58

Ford: My father's side, my grandfather had retired from all of that. He wasn't working anymore. So tell you what he did. He came to live with us a while in Crowley. He had a daughter lived—three daughters who lived in Beaumont, Texas. Two daughters lived in Houston. A daughter lived in Galveston. He visited each one, stayed with each one. That's the way he was. Because I came down from New York in '48, Christmas of '48 and I went to visit everybody. And he was at one of the sisters in Beaumont. And I said, "Grandpa, you know me?" He says, [deepens his voice] "Willie boy, I know you." Old as he was he, over 100 years old then.

So anyway, he didn't have any—he had—they—the property they let you own don't usually belong to you then. It belongs to the white man and they just acquired it and took it when you get through. My grandpa worked for the cotton gin. He tried to farm, too, but he had to run the cotton gin. He ran the cotton gin all the life I knew of him. And when he retired he just got too old to do it. Because I remember when Social Security came out, they had to try to find out how to pay him. They gave him something anyway. Because he had been going before. He had been working a long time for somebody else. But for some reason, they gave him some kind of check. But they had to check to try to find his age. And they had to go all the way back and those people who search to see if they can try to find those folks that—background. [chuckles]

So I remember that very well. And he got a check even though it was late. But Social Security just started under during Roosevelt's administration. But he got something.

But he didn't get to claim the land he had because all that land my grandpa had, it just wasn't his. It belongs to the people where they were living.

01-00:32:56

Wilmot:

What kind of place was Crowley?

01-00:32:58

Ford:

Oh, it's a beautiful little city. It's the Rice City of America. We raise the rice there. They didn't raise cotton there like they did in other places, just rice. Irrigation. You know, you have land and you have to have water, a river with water to raise rice. So you pump the water out of the canal into the place. And in rice country, as kids, you work in the rice pulling the weeds out, separating the weeds from the real rice plant. And then you have to walk in water, deep, you know? I mean, as kids we loved that, so we used to do that. We'd make maybe, what? 75 dollar a day, they would pay you that and meals.

01-00:33:49

Wilmot:

75?

01-00:33:51

Ford:

75 cents a day, whatever it was. But after school was out, you didn't care as long as you made some kind of money.

So we'd pull weeds in the rice in the summer. Yeah, nobody made you do nothing. You'd go out there and you'd pull up them weeds and be sure you separate the weeds from the grass. And then you'd swim because you walking in water all the time. And the water would stay in the rice until it's so high and the seeds on the rice is ready for cutting. And they'd drain the water off out of the thing and let it dry up. After it dried up, a machine would come and cut it, cut it in bundles and then we called that shocking. We would walk behind it and pick up the shocks and stand them up and make a little bundle. And they had to sit there and dry for a few weeks, two or three weeks, couple weeks maybe. Then after that you'd thresh them. You'd go out there with a wagon. Somebody'd be here and stick a fork in it and throw it up to you, put it in the wagon, load up your wagon, and then you go to another place and throw it into the threshing machine, and it would separate the rice grain and the shell from the bush. Hay would go over here and the rice would go here. It'd go in a sack. You'd put it in these 100 pound sacks, load it up, and take it to the mill.

01-00:35:08

Wilmot:

Were both your families from Louisiana?

01-00:35:10

Ford:

What?

01-00:35:11

Wilmot: Were both sides of your family from Louisiana as far back as you know?

01-00:35:15

Ford: The size of my family was eight.

01-00:35:19

Wilmot: Were both your mother and your father were both from Louisiana as far back as you know?

01-00:35:24

Ford: Yeah, yeah. And one more kid they had, he didn't live. My baby brother was about three weeks or something like that before he passed because of some baby complication. But there were four girls, four boys.

And far back as we can remember and before that, this is what I said. They moved from the country because my dad didn't want to be a farmer. He was a railroad man. He left the farm and came to Crowley with all these types from Southern Pacific. And he retired from Southern Pacific in late '50's. Must have been the last of the '50 or the early '60. When he retired down there, then he came up and visited in the summer. But he didn't come up here to California to stay until he retired from Southern Pacific.

01-00:36:19

Wilmot: And that was in 19—late '50's?

01-00:36:21

Ford: He retired from Southern Pacific in '58 or '59 or something like that. He didn't come with the family when they first came out here. He stayed there working for Southern Pacific and he stayed there until he retired.

01-00:36:33

Wilmot: And your mother came up early?

01-00:36:35

Ford: My mother and my brother and sisters—one sister, my brother and his family. He had a wife and a daughter, oldest brother. My second and third brother behind me, came to Detroit where I was. And the one next to me, name's Henry. Henry Ford, he got a job working for Ford Motor Company. He was named after Henry Ford. [chuckles] Because they had a write-up about him, Henry Ford working for Henry Ford.

My baby brother went into the service and he didn't stay there but a little while because we had, from my grandfather, had a heart murmur. My grandfather had a heart murmur and we had heart murmurs and we didn't pass the test. At that time they didn't let you get into the army with a heart murmur. So I wasn't in. My baby brother went in and after he was in for a couple months, they found the same thing and made him—and put him out of the Army. So he—well, we didn't get a chance to do the army tour because of that heart murmur that my daddy had. [hands clapped] So anyway--

01-00:37:44

Wilmot: I have more questions.

01-00:37:45

Ford: Sure.

01-00:37:46

Wilmot: Okay, sorry. Where did you live in Detroit?

01-00:37:59

Ford: 354 Owens.

01-00:38:00

Wilmot: What neighborhood did they call that?

01-00:38:04

Ford: That's a—it wasn't mixed, it was a separate neighborhood but it was about half a mile from downtown. Downtown is where all the big, you know, stores and so forth are. But on the Claremont car line, I—oh, I'd forgot about that—there was a race riot in Detroit. After I got there, there a famous race riot in 1940—must have been about '42 or three. After I had gotten there, because I remember I was working with the NAACP. They had a race riot because they didn't allow blacks to do a whole lot of things, like drive a streetcar and drive the buses, all those type of jobs. So after the race riot, they opened up the field and started allowing blacks to do something. And we—listen, the guys—bus drivers got in first. Streetcar drivers—I went to take the test and I went to school for it. And they said the guys—you didn't have to go to school for two weeks to drive the streetcar, but you had to go for four weeks to drive the bus. But the moment you are hired, you get in the union and you have seniority. So in order to get seniority, I took the streetcar job. And I was one of the first black persons to drive a streetcar in Detroit. And I had forgotten about it.

But you see, the streetcar had two drivers. The motorman who drove in front, he would operate the streetcar. And midway was the conductor. So when you got on the streetcar in the front, you had to get out on the side door. And to get out, you had to pass through the conductor and pay your way in. But you didn't have to pay when you first got on. So I was a motorman, and I was one of the first black motormen in Detroit after the race riot. And I had forgotten about that until I was talking to my sister one day and I said, "Wait a minute, do you remember what happened to me?" And this is what—let me tell you what happened to me.

Most of the people who working there were Hungarian and Polish. We called the Hungarians "Hunkies" and we called the Polish "Polacks." We called the Polacks, we called those from Poland "Polacks." And they—I'm going to tell you what happened to me. I was driving the streetcar and a guy who worked as a conductor was Hungarian or Polack, I don't know. But anyway, he—a long time we weren't speaking because he didn't talk to black folks hardly. But eventually we did. And I will never forget. I was driving [McGrath Hill?]

streetcar, when we got to the end of the line, he, his buddy that wasn't working at the time, would get on. We had a ten minute rest at the end of the line before we start heading back. And he asked me did I want a drink? And I was surprised and said, "Yeah!" He went and got another soda and gave me one. And I didn't remember what happened after that. Next thing I know I was in the hospital.

So they said I had—something happened. I fell out like I was drunk. They had epileptic seizure, they said I had an epileptic seizure. And I went to my doctor, and they said, "You didn't have an epileptic seizure, you drank something." They gave me a Mickey Finn or something. And I had to stop driving the streetcar, he said. And he had to run upfront and stop it because I was driving over the red line and so forth. I don't know what happened. But I didn't hit nothing. So I had to go through a whole lot of stuff with that. I went to court and I said, "Wait a minute. He said that somebody gave me—." The judge didn't pay that no mind.

01-00:42:41

Wilmot: Sabotage.

01-00:42:44

Ford: Um-hmm. So I didn't care. I went on back. I said, "Well, I would make more money working in the aircraft factory, anyway." So I went on to the aircraft and left that streetcar. I would like to have stayed because there was driving but they—they—they passed that on me and I didn't fight it because you couldn't fight nothing anyway because the lawyer I got was white. And the discrimination was terrible. And they just had ended a race riot and everything was against me. I had to walk the chalk line, anyhow. So I just got out of it, but that's what happened.

01-00:43:19

Wilmot: You had to walk the chalk line?

01-00:43:23

Ford: Yes!

01-00:43:24

Wilmot: What's that mean?

01-00:43:26

Ford: You know, doing everything that they wanted you to do. Without—without ruffling their feathers, you know.

01-00:43:32

Wilmot: I understand, thank you.

01-00:43:32

Ford: Uh-huh. So I went onto the aircraft and I become a lead man because I knew all about the—I could teach new people how to rivet. And inspectors—I knew how to inspect the plant. How to put the stiffness in when the aluminum under

there was not tight enough. When you push on it and you hear a noise, that means you had to put a stiffener inside. And I had to teach all the men how to do that. So I did that.

When I came out here, I went to work for the naval air station--

01-00:44:11

Wilmot:

I have one—two other childhood questions.

01-00:44:13

Ford:

Um-hmm?

01-00:44:14

Wilmot:

First, what were you like as a child?

01-00:44:16

Ford:

What was I like as a child?

01-00:44:18

Wilmot:

Um-hmm.

01-00:44:18

Ford:

Well, I was born in September, so they told me September kids are the best. And my aunt told me that the date I was born I had in an almanac calendars—she opened it up to see what September 18th was and it said I was a *good* child. And I supposed to read the Bible: psalm the third chapter and third verse, I think it was. And it said that, "But, thou, Oh Lord, are the shield about me. My glory and the lifter up of my head." And it said, "I shall not be afraid of 10,000 men who would come and fight against me because the Lord will be with me." And I always thought just that. I always said, "Psalm three third chapter, third verse, the fourth and fifth." And I always felt nobody's going to ever harm me.

And that's why eventually I stuck after—you know, you play around a bit. I loved to dance and all that, but I still was a good boy. I didn't do nothing wrong. My mother said—I remember when I was a kid, we stole a tea cake—my mother made tea cakes. Mother said, "Well, why did you do that?" She said, "I hate a thief! A thief is worse than a liar and a liar will steal! Don't be a thief!" And she did it and so on and just hit me and hit me. "Don't take nothing that don't belong to you! It's not yours!" And she just welded that in me so that I couldn't—if I was with kids that wanted to do something wrong, I would say, "Y'all go ahead." Stayed away from that. I just--.

01-00:46:08

Wilmot:

What was her personality like?

01-00:46:09

Ford:

My mother?

01-00:46:10

Wilmot:

Um-hmm.

01-00:46:11

Ford:

Ooh. Well, my mother, I'll tell you, well, she was a church worker. And she came out here and she was head of the mission for about 15 years at the North Richmond Baptist Church. She was a missionary. And she taught Christ. And she had a lot of women working—she organized circles in the church. She had women over women. She had A circle, B circle, this circle, and that circle. And these circles had so many women working and they would meet and get all their things together and then they would all come together. And my mother was a teacher. She was always at the church all her life.

And that kept me same way. And I couldn't take nothing. I might not pay something back on time, that's the worst thing I ever had. I'd be late one time on a payment because I didn't have it. But to steal, I wouldn't take—if I was hungry and if it was there and it wasn't mine, I wouldn't take it unless I found out nobody else wanted it, and I got permission to get it. And I tried to teach that to my boys. And I admired them—I tried so hard to keep them from doing anything wrong.

My oldest boy, in Hollywood, he graduated from high school up there and he used to run with Stallone and all those. When I was in Hawaii, they'd call me in Hawaii. They'd call me there. Stallone did it when he came to Hawaii, "Hi Dad, how you doing? That's Butch's daddy." And Butch—my boy's name is Butch. We called him Butch, so they called him Butch Cassidy after that movie, the Sundance Kid. Well, he passed away about three or four years ago.

01-00:47:59

Wilmot:

I'm sorry to hear that.

01-00:48:01

Ford:

A fast life in there with all them—I saw them pictures he used to take with all the big shots. But anyway, but these boys here that I have, we kept them in the church. They play music for the church. One plays piano and organ, and drum and guitar, and the other one plays the drums. But I try to keep them in line. And all they know is they didn't get in to dancing, doing like I did. Of course, I kept mine clean. But they didn't get in the dancing. They work in the church.

01-00:48:35

Wilmot:

Um-hmm.

01-00:48:35

Ford:

And I started in Hawaii to—oh, I did I tell you about Hawaii?

01-00:48:42

Wilmot:

Okay, let's go to Hawaii then. I had a couple questions. Okay, so your mom and brothers and sisters moved to Richmond in 19--

01-00:48:54

Ford:

Wait a minute. My mother's sister left Detroit in 1939, in the year I graduated from school. And she came—no, it must have been '40. And she came through Crowley and she told me that if I had told her she would have gotten a car and had me drive out here. But she came there a little while in '40 and she visited all the people that she used to know and then she came out in '40 or '41, she came to California then. She lived right here in Richmond. And she is the one that bought the house. [phone ringing]. She bought a house. And she wanted my mom to come and bring her mom. So my mom and my grandmother and my baby sister came out here. And my mom's sister had bought this house. So that's how we got the house. My mom's house. And that sister of hers passed away and she had turned the house over to my mother and her mother, my grandmother.

01-00:50:03

Wilmot:

And which house was that?

01-00:50:04

Ford:

It's in North Richmond.

01-00:50:06

Wilmot:

This is in North Richmond.

01-00:50:08

Ford:

So we have that house. And when my mother passed, we decided to—before she passed—we sold the house and divided it up. And said either one of us that wanted to buy it, buy it. So the first one wanted to buy it, buy it.

01-00:50:24

Wilmot:

Could you hold on one second? [interview interruption]

01-00:50:33

Ford:

Okay. Boeing Aircraft.

01-00:50:36

Wilmot:

You were working at Boeing in Los Angeles?

01-00:50:39

Ford:

Boeing—well, a subsidiary. I worked for a company that was doing work for Boeing.

01-00:50:46

Wilmot:

Can I come back to—so you came here in 1950. At that point I turned off the camera because—so I wanted to just go back to you came here in 1950 from Bedstuy. You left Brooklyn.

01-00:50:58

Ford:

From Brooklyn, yeah.

01-00:51:00

Wilmot:

But you left Brooklyn?

01-00:51:00
Ford: Uh-huh, yeah.

01-00:51:02
Wilmot: Oh. And you came to Richmond?

01-00:51:04
Ford: Uh-huh.

01-00:51:05
Wilmot: And what did you think when you got here? What did you think of this place?

01-00:51:07
Ford: It looked like—this place looked like the South. I mean, it looked like everybody I saw was from the South and everybody was working, or looking for work, or just stopped coming from work. Well, work was just about over because the war had ended.

01-00:51:22
Wilmot: Um-hmm.

01-00:51:22
Ford: But there were a lot of kids coming out of the service who had decided not to go back South. They was going to stop here. So there was a lot of work, inexperienced people still around. Lot of people didn't know anything, how to—you know. But they were still fighting in Japan, I think, somewhere in the Far East.

01-00:51:46
Wilmot: Korea.

01-00:51:47
Ford: Korea, yeah. In Korea, that's it. And I was repairing planes to bring them back to the Naval Air in Alameda.

01-00:51:53
Wilmot: Naval Air Station Alameda.

01-00:51:55
Ford: Um-hmm.

01-00:51:56
Wilmot: I wanted to ask you something, because I've kind of skipped over World War II. But you were in Detroit at that time?

01-00:52:00
Ford: Yeah.

01-00:52:01
Wilmot: And you remember Pearl Harbor?

01-00:52:02

Ford: Yeah.

01-00:52:03

Wilmot: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

01-00:52:05

Ford: That happened on December 7, 1941. And—

01-00:52:11

Wilmot: Where were you when that happened?

01-00:52:13

Ford: Let's see, where was I? Oh, that's before I got back to Detroit. I was still in Crowley. I had left and gone back and waiting. My sister said, "As soon as things get hot, I'm going to call you." And "I'll send you a ticket," or something like that, she told me. And anyway, I was back in Crowley, I remember that. And said, "Uh-oh, everybody got to go to war." So I got married to one of my high school--

01-00:52:53

Wilmot: Sweethearts.

01-00:52:53

Ford: --sweethearts. And we left and went—I left and went to Detroit.

01-00:52:58

Wilmot: So you were a married person in Detroit?

01-00:53:00

Ford: I married at that time because—I tell you why I got married. Because they said that if you married, then you won't go into service right away. I didn't know about all the other stuff wouldn't have gotten me in, about that heart thing. But I got married just before they start signing you up. I went to the girl's dad and asked her, she—and he let us get married. And I signed up. Then I came—before I came to Detroit. And I left here there and I went over to Detroit.

And that's where my first son was born. But she came after—she didn't work at first, but later on, she started working in the aircraft also. We both worked in building airplanes. She was a riveter. And we didn't work together but we worked in the same plant. Briggs Manufacturing Company. We were working for Boeing, building Boeing aircraft—B-17 and the B-19 and the B-29. We built those parts, wings and tails and so forth, and then shipped that back. And not just for Boeing in Seattle. But they did the work all the way here and had to pretty much send it all the way across the country. That's where it was going.

01-00:54:19

Wilmot: Did you know about what was going on in Germany? Did you hear about the Holocaust and how the Germans were putting the Jewish people in concentration camps?

01-00:54:31

Ford: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:54:31

Wilmot: You knew about that then?

01-00:54:32

Ford: Yeah, I knew about that. Learned about that when I was—after—it was before Pearl Harbor, yeah. Hitler. Yeah. I was—that's—I was in Louisiana then. But I'll never forget when I made that first trip to Chicago and the kids was talking—kids in the playground was talking about that, what was going to happen. They had all kinds of jokes about Hitler in Chicago. But I forgot. Let me see.

01-00:55:08

Wilmot: Hold on one second. My recorder just turned off for no reason. Very strange. Oh, you know what? Because I didn't have it on. [transcribed from minidisk]

01-00:55:16

Ford: Oh?

01-00:55:17

Wilmot: Um-hmm. So, okay, I'm going to turn it on now. Sorry. I had asked you about—so it didn't capture any of that about your marriage or Pearl Harbor.

01-00:55:35

Ford: Oh, it didn't?

01-00:55:36

Wilmot: Un-hunh. May I ask you again about it?

01-00:55:38

Ford: Okay, go ahead.

01-00:55:38

Wilmot: Can you just tell me about wartime and when you heard about Pearl Harbor. Do you remember that?

01-00:55:43

Ford: Yes. I was in Louisiana and Hitler—we were talking about Hitler.

01-00:55:49

Wilmot: Um-hmm. Well, I was asking you—first I wanted to ask you about Pearl Harbor.

01-00:55:54

Ford: Pearl Harbor. Oh, Pearl Harbor. Well, Pearl Harbor happened after Hitler because Hitler had done his thing. Pearl Harbor is when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

01-00:56:06

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

01-00:56:07

Ford: The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Where was I at that time? In—I was in Detroit. [pause] Oh. Everybody was hating the Japanese then. What year was that?

01-00:56:30

Wilmot: 1941.

01-00:56:32

Ford: '41.

01-00:56:36

Wilmot: And do you remember the internment of the Japanese?

01-00:56:38

Ford: Yeah, they put them all in a special camp.

01-00:56:44

Wilmot: Um-hmm. You remember that? Did you know people who were in the camps?

01-00:56:47

Ford: I didn't know anybody, no. I didn't know any of the—wait a minute. In '41, where was I at this time? The war was just still going on with Hitler, wasn't it? Hitler was—the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Oh, Lord, I'm trying to figure out how—how—how—where was I at the time? Conscription, they called it, when everybody had to sign up for the war, was before that, I think. Before Pearl Harbor. And Hitler was still raging in Germany. And Roosevelt and—who was the head in England?

01-00:57:53

Wilmot: Churchill?

01-00:57:53

Ford: Churchill. Churchill and Roosevelt had talked and people—and then the bombs had been falling in London. And they just about tore up Paris, France. They didn't bomb the city but they bombed near it. And they were saving that part. And let me see. Hitler in Germany. Hitler and Russia had a—and then he—I can't figure out—I can't—I'm trying to figure out exactly what happened at that particular time. I'm a little screwed up with the time because of the mixture.

01-00:58:40

Wilmot: I know I mixed them up, I'm sorry.

01-00:58:43
Ford: I'm mixed up, yeah. Because I'm trying to figure out how far had we gone. When did Hitler surrender? When did they force Hitler to surrender?

01-00:58:55
Wilmot: I know that the war ended in 1945 when they dropped the --

01-00:58:59
Ford: '45.

01-00:59:00
Wilmot: --on—on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

01-00:59:00
Ford: On Hiroshima, yeah.

01-00:59:02
Wilmot: And then I think—but the part of the war that was with Germany had I think ended sooner because they had some kind of success in Europe.

01-00:59:14
Ford: Yeah.

01-00:59:16
Wilmot: I'm wondering--

01-00:59:18
Ford: They had VJ day was Japan.

01-00:59:20
Wilmot: V-Day.

01-00:59:22
Ford: But VE-Day was victory in Europe. And that's the time when they got Hitler to—he didn't—what did he do, commit suicide or whatever? I forgot what happened to him.

01-00:59:33
Wilmot: Um-hmm. That's what happened to him.

01-00:59:35
Ford: Yeah.

01-00:59:36
Wilmot: So you were hearing about all this while you were in Detroit and in—

01-00:59:40
Ford: It was during the time that I finished high school in '39, to '41, I was going between Detroit and Crowley, Louisiana. And all that other stuff happened and I signed up in Louisiana. But I got married just before I signed up and I carried that little girl—later on I went on to Detroit and sent for her. Later, after I was working, I sent for her. Because I'll never forget where I first

worked in Detroit: Michigan {Malmalide?}. And I stayed there. And then I got a private job working for a rich family in Grosse Pointe. That's where all the rich millionaires lived. And I worked in the family and I went to school at night, you know, when I got off from where I go to school and come home late at night. And I was working on this aircraft—a sheet metal mechanic.

01-00:60:44

Wilmot:

Did you have any perspectives on what was going on with the Japanese being interned? Like did you feel like that was a positive thing or a negative thing? Did you have any feelings?

01-00:60:52

Ford:

Well, I felt bad about it at first because they had bombed Pearl Harbor and—but I didn't know about—I thought the Japanese was terrible people until I went to Hawaii and I found out that there are so many Japanese people that lived there. They wouldn't bomb Honolulu. They bombed the ships and they killed a whole lot of people. But there weren't many blacks because the blacks weren't doing anything but working as cooks and so forth on the ship. They weren't doing any shooting. They weren't doing any shooting. See, they didn't allow you to shoot because you were black. [chuckles] I never could figure that out. But the only guys that had a chance to fight, really, firsthand, was the black aircraft group that came from Tuskegee Institute and was fighting down in Europe against—but other than that they didn't mingle together.

01-00:61:257

Wilmot:

Um-hmm. A segregated military.

01-00:61:58

Ford:

Real segregation.

01-00:62:00

Wilmot:

Okay. I'm going to stop for a minute and change all—

[interview interruption while recording media are exchanged]

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02-00:00:00

Wilmot: Okay. So you were just clarifying for me that you came to Richmond in 1950 but then you went to L.A., came back to Richmond, then you went to San Jose, and then you came back to Richmond, and went to Hawaii.

02-00:00:16

Ford: Um-hmm.

02-00:00:17

Wilmot: So Richmond was kind of like your base of operations over the years.

02-00:00:19

Ford: Because that's where my family was.

02-00:00:20

Wilmot: Right.

02-00:00:21

Ford: My folks and my—and I would come back because of them. I went to Los Angeles because I liked the life in Los Angeles [laughter] and so while I was there I did a lot of [pause] things besides working at the plant. And I worked in dry cleaning.

02-00:00:42

Wilmot: Were you still in dancing in Los Angeles or was that a different time?

02-00:00:45

Ford: Oh, yeah! I danced a little bit. I used to fool around with—I forgot the name of the club that I used to go where all the musicians used to go on Monday night. But I used to go to—every Friday night I would go to a club called the Five Four. It's on 54th and Western, I think. And Ike and Tina Turner would be there. And I used to run behind them because there was one of the girls that sang with Tina. There was three, Tina and two other girls, in Ike's band. Ike's band played and Tina, and these girls sang and danced, you know, in the show. So there was a girl there, a really beautiful girl, that sang with them. I liked her. So after the show I wanted to take them out—at 2:00 o'clock in the morning—take them out for a coffee or something. And the first time Tina said, "You got to ask Ike." I said, "You know, I want to take you..." He said, "Yeah, you take them out, make sure to bring them back." And I took them one time. And the next time I went up there and that Friday night, this girl didn't sing. And I asked, "Where was she?" "Oh, she can't operate tonight—she cannot sing tonight because she's—she's high." "She high?!" "Yeah, she's..." "What do you—?" She had been using that stuff. So I said, "Uh-oh." I put them down after that. I said, "I don't fool around with those girls." What this girl doing with this? She overdosed herself and I gave them a—that's just when Ike and Tina were together. At the Five Four. I never forget the Five Four in Los Angeles. 54th and Western or something like that, yeah.

But anyway—and I worked for the aircraft company and so forth. And then I had this girl from Richmond that was a friend of my sister's. And she had—her name was Lovejoy. And Lovejoy, I liked Lovejoy. She had been hooked up with a guy who played baseball for Oakland A's. Not Oakland A's, a San Francisco minor league team. Anyway, I came over and proposed to her. Brought her—she and the two little girls. She headed to Los Angeles because she didn't have a husband. I mean, they didn't—their father was—I became their dad. Yeah.

02-00:03:24
Wilmot:

Um-hmm. And that's your wife you're speaking of?

02-00:03:27
Ford:

Yeah. That's the one, second wife. I have to—the first one—Nadine and I wasn't married.

02-00:03:35
Wilmot:

Um-hmm, I understand.

02-00:03:36
Ford:

And this is the girl I married. So we stayed together until Los Angeles got really hot for her. She was really beautiful, also. I say that's the bad part. When you get these beautiful girls, everybody want them. [chuckles] And they keep tempting them until they'll--. And so anyway, we busted up because she wasn't loyal enough to me. So anyway, whatever. But we had a good...

My mother lived here and we were good friends and she was my sister's best friend at one time. And they were still best friends. But everybody was in her corner but they didn't know the real thing because I know the only real thing.

So anyway, we bust up and I came back to Richmond. And I worked for a company which seen me working in Los Angeles. The man that promised me if I come back here, he wanted me to teach his employees how to produce. So I went to work for him. He's over there near the 49'ers in San Francisco, right near the stadium. And I worked for him. And while I'm working for him, a man in San Jose came by and he told him about what nobody could press clothes like Ford, my speed and so forth. So the guy came and whispered to me he'd pay me double if I come work for him. *Double*. [laughs]

02-00:05:03
Wilmot:

So did you?

02-00:05:03
Ford:

Well, yeah, but I had already applied for a job at United Airline. And United Airline interviewed me and they were going to hire me. And on the end, the guy said, "If I hire you, you going to go back to your wife and bring your family?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I doubt it."

02-00:05:21

Wilmot: This was in?

02-00:05:22

Ford: Here.

02-00:05:22

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

02-00:05:24

Ford: And they didn't hire me. So I passed all the tests and everything. "Why didn't he hire me?" So I went to the FEPC and got an attorney who was named Francois. He was the attorney that worked with Willie Brown when he started out in San Francisco. So Francois took the case, but I went to work for this guy in San Jose. And I was there. And the guy has 32 cleaners he supplied and he made me the manager. And I was sitting up at my desk with my feet at the desk one day and Francois called and said, "Ford, we've been looking for you for a couple months." He said, "We won your case with United Airlines!" "So you ready? You want to take the job?" And I'm sitting up there with my feet on the desk. I say, "Nah! [laughs] I got a good job now."

Because everything the man had gotten me, an apartment in San Jose, bought me a car. And paid for my car. Got me the apartment, a real fancy apartment where the lady keeps house. I didn't even have to make up my bed. Just—so I had everything in there. So I didn't take the job with United. I wish I had. Because I would have been able to fly anywhere I wanted to and all that. And the FEPC had won the case for me, but I didn't take the job. I hated that afterwards, but just one of those things.

So and this man had Hodgkin's Disease and he passed. And he had me in his will but I didn't know it so I stopped working for him. And after I was gone, his will stated that if I stayed and worked with his wife six months after he was dead, he had left something for me. And I missed it. But anyway, I opened up a cleaner's in San Jose, a small cleaner's for myself and I had several people working for me.

That's when I met the lady whom I married here. She had just come out of high school. She was 18. And she graduated that year, in 1966. I said, "You're too young for me" She say, "Age ain't nothing but a number." [laughs] I was like a playboy over here, you know. But I gave up everything and married the girl. And we came back to Richmond and I opened up a couple of cleaners here. Then I met this—somebody wrote me from Hawaii and said, "We heard about you and we'd like for you to work for the company." I said, "Look it here!" So the man came over from Hawaii and interviewed me. I said, "Well I—" and I talked to someone and he said, "Man, I would take that if I were you."

02-00:08:07

Wilmot: What kind of work was it? What did they want you to do?

02-00:08:09

Ford: Manage the valet shop in the Sheraton at the Hilton Hawaiian Village.

02-00:08:11

Wilmot: Okay.

02-00:08:12

Ford: So I went to Hawaii. They sent me a ticket.

02-00:08:15

Wilmot: How long were you based in Hawaii?

02-00:08:17

Ford: Ten years.

02-00:08:19

Wilmot: So you were there for ten years. Did you—okay.

02-00:08:21

Ford: From—almost ten. From '61 until '70. Some—from six—wait a minute. From '71... From '71 until Christmas of '79.

02-00:08:34

Wilmot: So you were there. So let me ask you a question. You were here in Richmond in the 1960's sometimes. So do you remember when the Black Panthers were around in the Bay Area?

02-00:08:47

Ford: Started in North Richmond.

02-00:08:49

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

02-00:08:50

Ford: Yeah. I had a cleaner's on Filbert. And they started on the other end of Filbert Street. I heard about a group of kids who was doing something and the last one I heard is (inaudible) but they couldn't do nothing to them. I forgot all the history about those guys but I remember when it started. And they had a leader; the Black Panthers they called themselves. I had a shop there on Filbert Street. But I didn't think much of them at the time. And I didn't think much of any of that until after I left here and went to Los Angeles. And while in Los—let's see. After I come back—I was in Los Angeles during the time that Martin Luther came here because I remember when he came and spoke after he had marched. He came and spoke in Los Angeles at a—not at the Coliseum—at a baseball park or something. Let me see can I (inaudible) where he was. I remember when Martin Luther King came there.

But after—when they passed the desegregation law, I was in Los Angeles, I think. Yeah, when they passed the law. But when they—where was I when they shot him? When he was killed I was in—what year? You remember what year he was killed?

02-00:10:33

Wilmot: 1968?

02-00:10:35

Ford: '68, yeah, I was in San Jose.

02-00:10:37

Wilmot: Um-hmm. I have a question for you, also. When your family came here, did they like Richmond better than Louisiana?

02-00:10:49

Ford: Oh, yeah.

02-00:10:50

Wilmot: What did they say about coming here?

02-00:10:52

Ford: They were thinking about the finance. They were thinking about money. They were making—my brother was the one. He was making a lot of money. And I remember my second oldest sister, she came in the '40's and she came and she stayed with my mother and she started working for an insurance company. I don't know what's... When my baby sister came, she worked in the—I forgot who she worked for but this all has to do with the war. Um-hmm. My brother worked for a construction company. He used to—this was a big construction company and he used to put out the lights when they had roads under construction, areas where they had to have a light at night. He used to put out lanterns and—for Lee J. [Emmel?] company, construction company. That was one of those big companies around here that—because they had stuff all over. And he used to put the lights out at night. I remember when I came here and he worked seven days a week because he had to put them out on Sunday and turn them out in the mornings and put oil in them and all that. So he worked for Lee J. [Emmel?].

He took me around when I came. And I came in this big 1940 Cadillac with the wheel tilt and the seat up in the back. Royal blue. [chuckles] You could see my car, blue like the top of that cap on that soda bottle you have there. And I had the prettiest car in the Bay Area when I had a car like that. And people didn't hardly have cars around here. Everybody walked and caught the bus. And I used to give somebody a ride, now and then I'd see somebody and I'd just ask—people were afraid to ask me for a ride because they didn't think I'd give them a ride in that big car, that pretty car. But I was me, you know. I didn't change me. I was just like, "I like everybody. I treat everybody right."

I started directing the choir. I was directing the choir in the church because I directed music, too. But they—I remember when they came and told me, "We heard that you dance." And they told me that I shouldn't dance if I'm going to lead the people in the church.

02-00:13:11
Wilmot: This was here at North Richmond Missionary Baptist Church?

02-00:13:15
Ford: Um-hmm.

02-00:13:16
Wilmot: So tell me when you first became a member.

02-00:13:19
Ford: 1950, when I came here.

02-00:13:20
Wilmot: Right when you came.

02-00:13:21
Ford: Yeah.

02-00:13:21
Wilmot: How did you know to go to that church?

02-00:13:22
Ford: My family did.

02-00:13:23
Wilmot: Okay.

02-00:13:25
Ford: My family did. This is the church. [shows pictures]

02-00:13:35
Wilmot: I see.

02-00:13:40
Ford: From '44. From '44 to '60, it's the one I...

02-00:13:45
Wilmot: Um-hmm.

02-00:13:49
Ford: And then, and this is my mother.

02-00:13:52
Wilmot: Let me see her.

02-00:13:53
Ford: And that's my dad.

02-00:13:55
Wilmot: Beautiful.

02-00:14:03
Ford: That was back in the—what, in the '60's—or '70's. That's the '70's, that picture (inaudible).

02-00:14:11
Wilmot: If you could show it up here so that we see.

02-00:14:13
Ford: Yeah. That's '75, yeah, they made that.

02-00:14:22
Wilmot: Okay, I'm not doing a very good job of showing it but trying to. Here, I'll get over there and look at it.

02-00:14:30
Ford: And that's—and I showed you this picture here about the--

02-00:14:35
Wilmot: Which picture's that? Which picture?

02-00:14:36
Ford: The family. Yeah, the family.

02-00:14:47
Wilmot: Hmm. [pause while moving camera around to shoot still images] And your mother and your father? Did you want to show me your beautiful family portrait? Your brothers and your sisters and your mother and your father?

02-00:15:37
Ford: My mother's not on that one.

02-00:15:37
Wilmot: Yeah, and your father's there?

02-00:15:39
Ford: He's in the middle. Yeah, he's this one.

02-00:15:40
Wilmot: Um-hmm, beautiful. And there you are on the left.

02-00:15:44
Ford: That's me on the left. I was in Hawaii at this time and I came over to visit. My mother was sick and I came to visit. That's when they took this picture. And that's just—you saw my church back in '66. But this is my church now.
[showing images of church]

02-00:16:08
Wilmot: Okay, okay. So your family had joined this church, so that's how you knew this was where you wanted to be?

02-00:16:18
Ford: Yeah.

02-00:16:19
Wilmot: Can you tell me a little bit what it was like in those early years?

02-00:16:24
Ford: Oh. Well, when I came here, I --

02-00:16:27
Wilmot: Let me—let me ask you to say that again. Go back there. Now I got you.

02-00:16:32
Ford: In spite of everything else, when I came here first thing I had to do was join the church. I guess that's the family tradition. My grandfather was a preacher.

02-00:16:41
Wilmot: He was?

02-00:16:42
Ford: Yeah, my grandfather was.

02-00:16:43
Wilmot: In what denomination?

02-00:16:45
Ford: Baptist.

02-00:16:45
Wilmot: Um-hmm.

02-00:16:46
Ford: And my grandfather could not read --

02-00:16:48
Wilmot: Mother's father or father's father?

02-00:16:49
Ford: -- or write. My father's father.

02-00:16:51
Ford: He could not read or write, but he knew the Bible. We used to read for him. If we made a mistake, he would say, "Hey, back up there and say that again." He just knew the Bible. And I don't know how he knew it, but he knew the Bible. And he could preach anywhere, my gran. And he had a strong voice. I remember back when I was little, if you went into church and the church starts off, they could tell he was there because his voice was so strong that the windows would rattle and he'd say, "Oooh." [makes deep sonorous sound in imitation of his grandfather] And that was grandfather. They said, "Reverend Ford is there."

But anyway, going to church was the thing. So my mother came here and she became the president of the mission. And she was president of that mission for over 15 years, I think, at North Richmond until she—I've got the picture in the mission. And I came, and my brother, and my sister-in-law and all of them

went. It's just singing and they had the gospel chorus and said we need a director and said, "Why not? You like to?" I said, "Well, I'll direct the choir." So I became the choir director of the gospel chorus and I directed the choir at the church until I left to go to Los Angeles.

02-00:18:07

Wilmot:

Had you had experience directing a choir before?

02-00:18:09

Ford:

No, but I had been assistant to the director before and I always did like directing. And in Detroit, at least I sang with the Robert Mosely Choir and I sang with the church choir in the Brooklyn, New York, at the Concord Baptist Church.

02-00:18:26

Wilmot:

Are you a bass voice or a tenor voice?

02-00:18:28

Ford:

Yes, baritone.

02-00:18:29

Wilmot:

Baritone. What do you like about directing?

02-00:18:30

02-00:18:34

Ford:

Oh, I love directing. Copycat, I guess. I learned from watching someone else. And I love directing the choir. *And* the kids used to love to see me direct because I had copied from the best. And even when I went to Hawaii, the first thing I did when I got there, my wife told people at the First Baptist Church of Honolulu that I was a choir director. And the choir director who worked in the military was leaving. And they came and got to me. And they called back to ask this church about me, the pastor of this church about me. And after he gave his recommendation, I became the director of music at the First Baptist Church in Honolulu in 1971 or two. One, I think it was, yeah. And I directed the choir there until I heard about another church that had a radio program on Sunday night, just in Pearl City, called Trinity Missionary Baptist Church. And I heard them on the radio and I asked the people about it and they told me it was a black church. Because the First Baptist Church of Honolulu, my wife and I were the only blacks there besides one other guy in the military. And so I went there and immediately they asked me to be their director because the director was leaving in the military. So I went over and took over the choir and the radio show. And every Sunday morning I was on the air on radio station KNDI in Honolulu.

02-00:20:12

Wilmot:

Do you still direct today?

02-00:20:15

Ford:

Right now I'm not. I'm not directing now. But I was a radio announcer for nine years—eight years.

02-00:20:21

Wilmot: In Honolulu?

02-00:20:22

Ford: Yeah. Radio show—I had a radio program every Sunday morning.

02-00:20:26

Wilmot: Do you have a favorite, you know, song or--?

02-00:20:32

Ford: Well, I'll tell you—I have a lot. But during my tour in Honolulu, I also became a member of the Lion's Club. I was the only black in the Lion's Club and I told them about my radio show. And they—I had all of them listening to it, because a lot of them didn't go to church. And they used to ask me—this one woman used to ask me, "Willie, play James Dean *Oh, Happy Day*. And they all liked *Oh, Happy Day*. And I used to have to play that—not every Sunday, but I played it nearly every Sunday. "Oh, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away." And everybody wanted *Oh, Happy Day*. So that was my favorite at that time because they all wanted to hear it. But I turned a lot of guys to listening, to music, who didn't even go to church.

And I was also—when I left the hotel because they needed carpenters and they were paying big money. I wasn't a carpenter but I went and joined the carpenter's union because they paid, and I went to school at the Honolulu City College to learn carpentry and I was working. So I worked as a carpenter. And you know what happened? The men in the Carpenter's Union of Honolulu made me president. And I served as the president of the Carpenters' Union in Honolulu, [Kama ki?] for two years. That's just the greatest thing that ever happened. So I had the radio show outside—

02-00:22:06

Wilmot: It sounds like Hawaii was pretty good to you.

02-00:22:09

Ford: Ooh! And I was in the Lion's Club and I become its secretary. And I ran for the office with the President of the First Hawaiian Bank. He said, "Willie, I want to run for president next year. Will you be my secretary?" And I said, "I wouldn't, but since you the president of a bank with all the money, I will." And I said, "We going to win." He said, "How you know we'll win?" I said, "Well, I fixed up a good platform. Our platform will be salt and pepper." I said, "You will be the salt and I'll be the pepper." And everybody got excited about the salt and pepper, and we won the election on salt and pepper. [laughing] I was secretary and the President of the First Hawaiian Bank was the president and I was secretary. And I served as the secretary for two years for the Lion's Club. And I served as president of the Carpenter's Union for two years. And I served as a radio announcer for eight years or nine years.

02-00:23:09

Wilmot: I have two more questions today.

02-00:23:11

Ford: Um-hmm.

02-00:23:12

Wilmot: The first one is how do you compare World War II to the war we have going on right now in Iraq?

02-00:23:21

Ford: Oh, Lord. Lord, Lord. I disagree with the Iraq War 100%. First place, that is not our country. And we didn't find any weapons of mass destruction there so we should have left it alone. And what has to do with the—the President of Iraq was none of our business in the first place. And if he had done something to us before, I don't see what he did to us in the first place. And because he didn't have weapons of mass destruction, there's no reason why we should be there in the first place. He did not declare a war against us. We declared a war against him. And if we declare a war against him *and* his people, what? What did they do? And I cannot see how we could find any excuse for going to war with that country when they never have—*still* haven't declared war against us. We declared war against them. And look at the lives that have been lost. And if Hussein, if in his country, he found reasons to kill a group of people, and they did, and that's their tradition of doing—killing your enemy, he did it, just like any other country would kill their enemy. But we have killed more of their people as we go into help them. We have killed more of them than Hussein killed. And we have killed more of our own people. We say we had to do it because we sent them to war. So I cannot go along with anything that is being done over there now.

I'm opposed to it 100%. And the quicker we get out, the better.

02-00:25:24

Wilmot: Now I'm going to just put myself into the picture just so that you know that we're both here. So you know that we're both here.

02-00:25:30

Ford: Um-hmm.

02-00:25:31

Wilmot: I also wanted to ask you a question about, your family's from Louisiana. How did you perceive—how did you witness Katrina and the aftermath of Katrina? Did you still have family there?

02-00:25:47

Ford: I have distant relatives. I'll tell you what. A lot of my people used to leave their home to go to the city. They called New Orleans the city or they called it New Orleans or they called it N'Orleans. That's the Creole accent. N'Orleans. "Y'all going to N'Orleans." To the city. Well, everybody wants to go to the city.

Now, a lot of the people left the farm. In—in—in that area where my mother came from, they raised sugarcane. So they left the cane—because people used to, in the fall they would cut cane, and then they'd grind it and make sugarcane and serve it and so forth. In that area. They had another area that they raised cotton. Those people raised cotton and go to the gin and so forth. But a lot of them went to New Orleans.

And I had a lot of folks there on my mother's side. And my mother—I had a step-grandfather on my mother's side because my grandmother and my grandfather separated at one time. And she married in another family, the Griffin family. And the Griffin family had—oh! They had more peoples in that Griffin family than you could count. And they were step-cousins. And those Griffins went to New Orleans and there just hundreds of them. So when I went to New Orleans, I didn't have to worry about anything. It was just whichever Griffin I wanted to find, I found them. Because they knew I was Jack Griffin's grandson and that was my mother's stepfather and he was my step-grandfather. We didn't use no step things. He was just grandpa.

And he had so many kids. And he was head of a plantation of a whole group of people who were kin to him. And he didn't do nothing but ride on a big horse and have people working in the cane field, growing it from the time they planted until they cut the cane. And he—and they cut the cane in the fall and make syrup and sugar out of it and so forth. But Grandpa Griffin was a—and he had more people in New Orleans than you could shake a stick at. And whenever I went to New Orleans, I could—"Who am I going to see?" Grandma said, "Well, you could go see and so. So and so." Step this and step-cousin. But they had a lot of them. So when Katrina came and I heard about it I felt sorry because I got kinfolks there that I don't even know. Hundreds of them. And they just loved to go to New Orleans.

And I used to go myself when I was a kid. Whenever Mardi Gras came, I'd get on the train and go to Mardi Gras. And what they used to do, they'd have an excursion, they called it. Train would leave from—the Southern Pacific would leave from Houston going to New Orleans. So the night—Tuesday—Mardi Gras was always on a Tuesday. So on a Monday, the train would leave from Houston and then travel all down through Beaumont, Texas, and Lake Charles, and Crowley, Lafayette, New Iberia. And it'd go down. So when that train came to Crowley, it was about—almost midnight. And then they'd stop there and they'd fill up. Sometimes they'd have to add a coach when they got on to New—to Lafayette because the train would be full, had gotten full on the way. And all those coaches were black folks. They had white but I didn't know about the white because they had so many black. [laughs] We didn't go into the white folk section anyway. But every time they'd get to another city, more would get on. And we'd get to New Orleans early in the morning.

Now, let me tell you one thing. Before I was old enough to go by myself, the train did not go all the way to New Orleans. It had to go over the river. So the

train would get on a boat and go over the Mississippi River into New Orleans. And they built a bridge called the Huey P. Long Bridge when I was a little kid. And said when they get the Long Bridge built, the train is going to go over and you won't have to get on that boat anymore. So you didn't have to get on that boat. Because it used to take a longer time to get to New Orleans. So after the Huey P. Long Bridge—that was after Roosevelt come into President. That's '32 or '33. And the train could go over the tracks. So that's the time I'm getting big enough to go. But this was there ever since I started going by myself. But before we had to get on that ferry.

And that train would be full of black folks, *all* coaches going to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. I didn't have to worry. Because they had to get a hotel. When I got there, I had so many kinfolk, I just figured out which one to go to. And I would go to the kinfolks' house, and start in the morning and then all day long, you'd Mardi Gras, Mardi Gras. And you'd wear a mask if you want. And at night, at a certain time, you'd take the mask off. You don't know who you've been with all day until you [laughing] take the mask off. Mardi Gras is over. And after that, Lent began. And just like that everybody stopped. All the stuff they've been doing and partying, it ends that night. And the next day Lent begins. And you do this the six weeks until Lent is over or Easter Sunday. Easter—Friday before Eas—Good Friday is all over. And then you could relax. Good Friday. Bad Saturday we used to call it, and then Easter Sunday. And you'd dress up in all your new stuff.

But New Orleans was the place. I loved that New Orleans day. And all the good food. You could go anywhere and eat and all...

And one thing I'll tell you that happened to me when we was in Hawaii. I worked part-time at the airport, make some extra change as a skycap. And Fats Domino, who lives in New Orleans, came through with his—had come from Japan. And none of the caps wanted to wait on him because they say he doesn't tip. So I said, "I'll get him because he's from Louisiana." So I got him. He and two of his bodyguards. And I took care of his bags and I called him home. I said, "Home," I say, "Yeah, home." I say, "You from New Orleans, aren't you?" I said, "That's where I'm from, New Orleans. I'm from Louisiana." So we talked and talked. He came in that morning and he—I said, "When you leaving?" Well, his plane leaving from New Orleans, it didn't leave until night. So he going to be—I said, "What you going to be doing all day?" He said, "Oh, I don't know." I said, "Wouldn't you like to go down to the beach, see some of these topless'?" [laughing] He said, "Topless?" And he said yes, so I took he and his two guards with me to my house. And my wife experienced this and she—he played for piano. I had a piano at my house because I was working with the choirs and the radio. And--

02-00:33:04

Wilmot:

Who plays the organ here? Who plays the piano here?

02-00:33:07

Ford: My kids.

02-00:33:09

Wilmot: Okay.

02-00:33:09

Ford: I got that when they were small. They didn't play with it much but after they got big. They play now for the church. He plays for a church in Oakland.

02-00:33:16

Wilmot: Um-hmm.

02-00:33:19

Ford: And then Fats told me when you—he gave me \$100 tip. He said, "When you come to New Orleans, don't forget to come to my house. I got plenty of cars, couple of limos." He said, "You can go around and have fun."

02-00:33:30

Wilmot: Okay.

02-00:33:31

Ford: And I took the family down there when we left Hawaii and I forgot all about Fats until I left when I would say, "Oh, look what we missed." I went in the hotel and spent all this money and I could have gone to Fats'. He told me to call him.

02-00:33:43

Wilmot: Well, I have a question for you.

02-00:33:44

Ford: Um-hmm.

02-00:33:44

Wilmot: And this is my last question, which is, how has Richmond changed from the time that you first moved here to now?

02-00:33:53

Ford: When I came, everybody loved everybody. If you had a—if you fixing your house, all the guys would come to your house on the weekend when they got off from work on Saturday and help you. People helped each other and gave to each other. And like, for instance, if you were fixing your house and someone's fixing your house, somebody say, "You working over there? Yeah, we coming over, we'll be there Saturday." So the people's whose house you were fixing would fix dinner. Everybody'd come over and they'd work on the house and they would eat. They didn't ask for a dime. They just came. They help each other. Love one another because they all came from down South and they help. All right. What happened?

People start saving their money, I guess, and start getting up on their feet. They buying a house, moving up on the hill. The hilltop wasn't Hilltop then.

They built it up. And people got a few dollars ahead and they start moving from North Richmond. They still went to church but they all got big headed and they stop helping. When I come back, everybody charges you. You know, it's all right to charge but it looks like you start looking down on the people you left behind instead of helping like they did. So they lost that love that they had for one another like they had. But people let finances, I would say, it's money. It caused people to change from what you used to be to what you are now. And everybody got big headed and so forth. And I don't know. It's far different from what it used to be.

And then the new people don't know about this. They think that that's the way it's supposed to be, I guess. But all the people who came here, most of them have died off now. And they didn't take their people back to the South, and they didn't tell them all about the things that happened to them, I assume. And the generation now, just, we on our own. We say, "I don't have no background to look at—look, you know, look at your background." You supposed to have had a good background to look at. See, "When I came up I had this." And they don't have anybody to tell them that. Because the second generation came and the third generation's come and there's nobody to tell. *And* since the second generation didn't get it good enough, they don't have nothing to give to the next generation because they don't know nothing to tell. And if this generation didn't go to school and learn anything, they don't have nothing to teach their children.

And the children don't want to go to school because their parents didn't go to school, I guess. And the parents don't make them go because they didn't go. And they don't know how bad—detrimental that is to them. And I don't know what can we do now after this thing has passed. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We've all done some wrong. But there should be a change in our lives. We should be able to help somebody. Because we use that motto when I was a youth, said, if I could help somebody, as I travel along, then my living would not be in vain.

But unless a change comes...it has to be done not by one person, because no one person could do it, because a few would listen and a few won't. But if there could be a change and we could all see how wonderful it is to be good, and be nice, and train all the kids that follow behind how to be nice and to stay away from the things that's detrimental to them, like the drugs. And it seems like you can't turn any place without getting hooked up on drugs. But you don't *have* to get hooked on drugs. *I didn't*. I hung around a whole lot of people that did everything. One thing they couldn't get me to mess with any drug. I used to drink a little, take a little nip. I'd take a little nip. And you know what they used to tell me when I went around these high—they'd say, "We'll leave it to Willie. You handle the bar thing. We going in another room." They'd go in another room, they'd be smoking and doing whatever this was. But I never allow myself to because I didn't think...

One big thing they caused, some person who was a doctor, a very wealthy doctor in New York, got hung up on drugs and he wound up on the Skid Row. And I heard about that. And they say, "Ain't that a shame?" But the people who were saying it are people who were hung on drugs, too.

But I say, well, I'll never... you can't—it's something that you can't just get away from and you can't just quit it when you get hooked on it.

02-00:38:27
Wilmot:

That's true.

02-00:38:28
Ford:

You can stop drinking but you can't just—you got to go through a whole lot of stuff so I never would allow myself to get it. I spend most of the time trying to tell other people not to.

02-00:38:33
02-00:38:37
Wilmot:

I have one other question, also, which is about the environment here in Richmond in terms of having Chevron or what used to be Standard Oil here.

02-00:38:46
Ford:

Um-hmm.

02-00:38:47
Wilmot:

Did you ever notice like funny smells or anything like that as a result of these industries here?

02-00:38:53
Ford:

Yeah. We had a case in 1980—somewhere in the '80's. Had to be in the '80's or the '90's. I think it was in the '80's. The fumes from Standard Oil. I know it did because I was working for one of the contracting companies. When I came back I went to work in carpentry, at first when I came from Hawaii.

And I worked for a company—Bechtel, I think it was. And I went and worked for Standard Oil. And one day we had to run and go way over in the hill because something had come unloosened and stuff was loose in the—smelling the stuff was bad for the body. So that's when I knew then how this stuff affected people.

But something broke loose once and everybody here had to sign up for it because we were going to get paid. And everybody was running to get a check and they were more interested in getting that check than in their health. But I remember—I can't exactly remember what had happened. But something broke loose up there and the fumes came out in North Richmond. And that has happened more times than once. But this particular time I signed up and we got a check ourselves for me and the wife and the kid—one of the kids. My baby boy was away at school and I had sent him to around Los Angeles

because he—the big one you saw. He has gone to a bunch of schools. I sent him to different schools.

02-00:40:25

Wilmot: Um-hmm, okay.

02-00:40:27

Ford: Because I'm trying to cure his—his problem, but...

02-00:40:29

Wilmot: OK.

02-00:40:30

Ford: But this boy here was there. Because he was born in Hawaii. I think he was. Yeah, he was born there. So he's our Hawaiian. But we left there when he was two. He was born in '77.

02-00:40:46

Ford: '77. I mean, '77. Yeah.

02-00:40:50

Wilmot: Well, Reverend, I want to just say thank you to you for your time today.

02-00:40:53

Ford: Um-hmm.

02-00:40:53

Wilmot: And ask you if there's anything else you want to say because I'm done with my questions and I want to ask if there's anything else you want to say?

02-00:41:00

Ford: Well, all I could say is I hope that some good can come out of what I have said to you. And I had so much to say. If I had had a chance to put it together in order—orderly, I'm sure it would have been more beneficial to you.

02-00:41:17

Wilmot: It was good.

02-00:41:17

Ford: But I have so many things happening. As we speak something else comes to me that I had forgotten I even knew about. And I had forgotten it had ever happened to me. But a whole lot of things have happened in my life. I have had the chance to meet with a lot of people and converse with them. Like I was telling someone, I met with all these big musicians. I used to meet them at the Savoy in Harlem.

02-00:41:52

Wilmot: When you were dancing.

02-00:41:52

Ford: And oh, I can't think of it. These people, some of them—Sarah Vaughan. And when she first started singing, she came from--

02-00:42:04

Wilmot: Beautiful singer.

02-00:42:05

Ford: Yeah, she came from Jersey, used to sing and dance at the Savoy. Oh, Lord knows, I met so many people. I was with them. I shook hands with them and I talked with them and I was very bold about speaking to someone. Because whenever I saw someone who had a big name or something, I just boldly walked up to them and spoke. Yeah. And when even Martin Luther King, when he came here, I went and spoke to him as he was catching a plane to go back. I shook hands and talked with him before he was killed.

02-00:42:28

Wilmot: Okay.

02-00:42:42

Ford: So, so many things happened in my life and I just, I'm so proud of—well, to think, because I didn't think much of them but when I started looking back over my life...

02-00:4:53

Wilmot: You have a lot to say.

02-00:42:54

Ford: Oooh, well, that's it. And I haven't told you a half of it. It's never been told.

02-00:42:58

Wilmot: I know.

02-00:43:00

Ford: Because as we'd go along, I'd say, "Oh, look at this. Wait a minute. So and so had..." Yeah.

02-00:43:03

Wilmot: Well, listen, thank you so much.

02-00:43:06

Ford: Yes, well, I enjoyed speaking to you and I hope maybe sometime I'll get to talk to you again.

02-00:43:13

Wilmot: All right. Thank you.

02-00:43:13

Ford: And if there's anytime that I could say more, I'll be glad to.

02-00:43:16

Wilmot: I know you will. [laughs]

02-00:43:17

Ford: Next time I'll know how to do it and I'll have it—I need to write down notes on some of this stuff because....

02-00:43:22

Wilmot: Thank you so much. You did a great job.

02-00:43:25

Ford: Oh, thank you.

02-00:43:26

Wilmot: Thank you.

02-00:43:27

Ford: Thank you, thank you, thank you.

02-00:43:28

Wilmot: All right.

02-00:43:29

Ford: Yeah.

[End of Interview]