

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

THE FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT PROJECT

RESIDENT AND PROPERTY OWNER IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

O. H. 78.02A

ADA L. WILSON

Interviewed
by

MICHAEL LEVERITT

on

March 29, 1978

O. H. 78.31

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY
JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer, and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be made available for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

Michael L. Leland

I, Mrs. Ada Lee L. Wilson, have read the above and, in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Mrs. Ada Lee L. Wilson
(Interviewee Signature)

March 29, 1978
Date

Introduction

Mrs. Ada Lee Wilson came to live in the Farish Street Historic District in the summer of 1945 after graduating from Alcorn College. Mrs. Wilson and her husband ran the Wilson's Grocery Store on Lamar Street. She was employed as a teacher in the Jackson Public School and Jackson State University.

Mrs. Wilson discuss her husband and his family background, her educational background. She talks about her and her husband running the Wilson's Grocery Store, owning rental houses in the area, and the deterioration of property in the area. She talks about some of the major landowners in the area, prominent people in the area, and the entertainment places in the area. She talks about the history of Smith Robertson School, some of the problems that the school had, and the closing of the school. She discuss her and her husband's occupational experiences, and some of the things they did to try to help keep the City from demolishing Smith Robertson School. She talks about some of the changes that have occurred such as the addition of new streets to alleviate the congestion, and about her husband writing a book about Dr. Redmond's life entitled God! Make Me A Man.

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Ada Lee Wilson
INTERVIEWER: Michael Leveritt
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 29, 1978
C.F. 78. 02A

Leveritt: This is Michael Leveritt. I am interviewing Mrs. Ada Lee Wilson in room 222 in the Educational Building at Jackson State University.

Wilson: My first experience at 835 North Lamar Street was in 1938. I went there to visit a friend. I came here to live in the summer of 1945 after I graduated from Alcorn A & M College. At that time there was a grocery store right in the yard of the living quarters. That was my husband's parents business.

Leveritt: What was the name of the grocery store?

Wilson: Wilson's Grocery Store.

Leveritt: On Lamar Street?

Wilson: Yes. The store took up the south side of the lawn and on the left side in the rear was a small ice house. I am pondering how to say this because when I first went there it wasn't my father-in-law.

My husband was working at Alcorn, that is where we met. We lived there for a while, but after his father died we came here to live. We came here to live with his mother because she was living alone.

Before we moved there, his father was running this little ice house. He was retired from the Morris Ice Company. For his pension, they let him continue to sell ice. The ice house stayed there until he died. After he died that house was moved away. The home had been placed on the corner lawn for him to work. My mother-in-law ran the store. It was very well known in Jackson and has been for many years.

They had some rental houses on part of their property. They had six rental houses, but there came a time when four of the houses had to be demolished because they had gone down. There are two still there, the ones that were on Lamar Street. The house is still there. but the store has been demolished. His mother stayed there until she was not able to run the store. After she died the store was demolished.

Wilson: The houses south between 835 North Lamar Street to the corner of Church Street, I think, are mostly rental houses. There have been quite a few homes demolished that were in back of those houses.

Leveritt: Was there a lot of rental property in this area?

Wilson: There was quite a bit in this area. They were in back of my mother-in-law's garden and behind the house on the front street. They were demolished and have not been rebuilt. The place was in very horrible condition for a long while. It became more or less a dumping ground. It has never been completely cleaned away. Instead of people putting their trash out on the street so the city would pick it up, they would just add to what was already back there. Just last summer the city went in and cleaned it out.

They cleaned out some of the trees and all of the trash that had accumulated back there. It was just quite a eye soar. There are still some houses back in there that really doesn't have entrance to the property, except for a walk path. The house that my mother-in-law had demolished has not been replaced. As of now, I don't have any intention of replacing them. My desire is to beautify and make something that you can enjoy.

Leveritt: Do you think the population is decreasing?

Wislon: I don't know if the the population is decreasing, although some of the houses have been torn down. When these houses were there, there wasn't large families occupying those houses. There were some children, but it seem that there are more children around in that area now than back then. I don't quite see it as a matter of the population decreasing in spite of the fact that a few of the houses have been demolished.

There is one place where there is a nice looking house on Lamar Street. There is a fence around it. It looks like a one-room building. There was once an old man living there. Everything he did he did in the inside. I forget what they called him. It was just a horrible situation. Finally he died and the house was torn down. It is all cleared up now, it looks like a different place. Right on the corner from there was a sad looking place, it was horrible to see too. Some people moved in and improved it somewhat. There is a little nursery or something on the corner.

Leveritt: Do you think that there is an overall improvement of the property in the area?

Wilson: I think the improvement has been more or less. I think with some of the bad looking places torn down and not replaced and a little improvement on the others, it would look a little better. When I go through there it looks all run down. I do recall having gone through there to church. The church was on the corner of Lamar and Monument. It was called the Christ Temple Church of Christ Holiness, U. S. A. It was a large building, not the building that is there now. It had a basement and a ground floor.

Mt. Helm was on the corner of Church and Lamar. The street was known as Grayson Street then. Mt. Helm was a frame building. It was a nice looking building. The general appearance all around the area was much better than it is now.

Leveritt: Do you know any of the major landowners?

Wilson: There was Dr. Redmond. He lived in a beautiful house. Jackson is not my native home. When I first saw his house it was quite attractive. The Conic's, I don't know whether it was Jay Edgar Conic who owned those houses or which one it was. He had a son-in-law who owned house right next to me. He had a son who owned a house on the opposite corner from him. Then there was the William's. There home was across in front of the Conic's home that was on the corner of Church and High Street. Where Mt. Helm Church is now once was a parsonage, I forget what others.

When Mt. Helm located on Dryphus and Church Street, it was a very small, plain looking building. I think it has been torn down now and a new two-story structure is built over near Fraizer's Funeral Home. That structure where Mt. Helm was, was divided into apartment dwellings.

In back of Church Street is Dr. William's home.

Leveritt: Do you remember much about Farish Street?

Wilson: No, not a lot. I do know that Farish Street Baptist Church was on the corner of Church and Farish Street. Central Methodist Church is far more elaborate than the one they had.

Leveritt: Did you go to Farish Street very often.

Wilson: Once in a while I would visit the churches on Farish Street.

Wilson: My husband use to go to Shepherd's Cafe for lunch.

Leveritt: Do you know anything about the Crystal Palace?

Wilson: More or less heresay. I can only tell you the impression I got, but I could be wrong about it. My impression was that it was just sort of a hang out. I really don't know anything about it say what it was like.

Leveritt: A night club?

Wilson: That is the way it sounded to me. It wasn't the most desirable place to be, that is the impression I got.

Leveritt: Did you ever hear of this district being called the "Jungle"?

Wilson: I don't remember.

Leveritt: Someone else might refer to it as "Heart's Alley."

Wilson: I know that there is a street called "Heart's Alley." Was that "Heart's Alley" down near Smith Robertson School?

Leveritt: Heart's Alley was off Farish Street toward the west. It was in an area where there was little law enforcement.

Wilson: I don't know where it is located, but I have heard of it.

Leveritt: Do you know very much about Smith Robertson School?

Wilson: My husband was prinicpal at the school at one time. Before my husband became principal, Mrs. Smith was there. There were a number of problems because the school was located in that area. He did a lot to improve things. There were a lot of problems that would not be present in the average school.

Leveritt: What kind of problems?

Wilson: Discipline was very poor, for what I understand. My husband had a hard time trying to straighten things out, but he made a big improvement. At one time he had collected a drawer full of knives from the students. Some of the parents became upset because he tried to discipline the children.

Leveritt: How long was he principal there?

Wilson: He went there in 1945. He was probably there five or six years then he decided to go back to the classroom.

Wilson: He resigned and went to Lanier as a classroom teacher. One thing they didn't do in the Jackson Public School was to hire relative, husband and wife.

Leveritt: Was Smith Robertson always a black school?

Wilson: As far as I know. All I know is that it was a black school while he was there and after he left.

Leveritt: Do you know the school's closing date?

Wilson: No, I don't remember.

Leveritt: Did it burn at one time?

Wilson: I don't know.

Leveritt: I think it burned in the 20s.

Wilson: That is after I was there. When he first went there, there was a lot of problems with the children playing hookie from school. He had trouble with the students fighting. I recall that he took a group of students on a field trip. One person got with the group that wasn't suppose to be there. This youngster stabbed another student. The one that was stabbed fell in my husband's arms.

Leveritt: Did you know that there was a movement by the city to demolish Smith Robertson School?

Wilson: I have heard, but it is very vague to me as to what I heard.

Leveritt: It was a petition that put up a good fight. We would like to see the building kept because it will serve as a memorial to this area. They were going to tear it down and build a community center. I don't think that will be a good idea.

Wilson: I would hate to see a community center put there unless they were going to make other changes there. I think, it would create problems rather than minimizing the problem.

I often think of some of those little miniature parks they have around in some areas. It might be helpful in some places, but I don't know what they are going to do with that little area.

Leveritt: On High Street?

Wilson: It's not exactly High Street. It is right between Church Street and Monument. I know the children are using it as a playground now. They keep it messed up and there seems

Wilson: to be no one who feels responsible for cleaning it up. I don't see where they hurt anything except when they have to cross over other people's property. I have a lot of trouble with them myself, crossing over to get to the playground.

I feel, if a community center was put in there they would have to do an awful lot to get a place where people could enjoy the use of it. If it isn't going to contribute anything useful, I can't see why they would put something in there that's going to create problems.

Leveritt: I would think they are going to renovate the building and rent it out to different organizations. There are organizations that would be helpful there, but I think a community center would not be the answer. I think, not so much a center, but a community redevelopment program for the entire community. I think that would cover a better area.

Wilson: I think it would be better than putting up a community center.

Leveritt: Why don't they concentrate on putting in better lights on the streets or getting special interest group to loan money to renovate their property? We do not need absentee ownership. We need people who own the houses.

Wilson: You're right about that. There is a need for what you are talking about here. Right next door to me is a Church of Christ U.S.A. Holiness. It is still there but it is a new church altogether. It is different from the structure that was previously there.

The church bought some of that property and it was torn down to make space for the church ground. That has been a change so far as that church goes, but that's north of me. South of me, looks pretty good, but most of it is rental property.

It's just hard to find people who rents that takes enough interest in the property to keep it up. There are some people who do, but when it comes to rental, you find those people who are less interested.

Leveritt: I think a lot of it is they don't know how. They've never had the opportunity to own anything and appreciate things.

Wilson: I'm thinking a lot of it is they don't know how. I own two rental houses. One person told me the reason she wanted to move in was because it was kept so clean. I told her that they don't automatically get clean. They are clean because somebody has worked to get it like that.

Wilson: I tried to get it across, I like it clean. I try to keep it that way, but I don't expect to clean up after the people who live there. I talked to both of them like that. They seem to have appreciated the idea. There are some times now when I want it cleaned, I have to get it up. The reason I'm saying this is, they don't think they know how. They seem to feel that they have to wait until a lot of stuff gets down there and then pick it up.

As I go to work sometimes and see paper or something, I'll bend down and pick it up before I go into the house. In our location, this is just something you have to do. I didn't put it down there, but I'm the one living there. The public is putting it down, but the public is not going to pick it up.

Leverett: That is true.

Wilson: That's the reason I say it isn't that they don't care. In some instances, yes, but sometimes I think they don't have the least idea of what it takes to keep things clean and keep it up.

Leverett: What influential people do you know that have come out of that area?

Wilson: Probablely the most famous is Dr. Redmond. The Conic's were very well known. I'm trying to think what was their claim to fame. The one that was very outstanding, I'm trying to think if he lived in that area. The ones that are better know aren't there anymore.

Leverett: That's right, they lived there before or at one time.

Wilson: Yes, but I'm not sure where they lived. The one that's pressing on my most was the Conic. How long he lived there, I'm not sure. I know he's one of them. He is not a son of the one I named on Church Street, but that was his uncle. I don't know if he lived on Chruch Street or not.

Leverett: Do you know anyone else who lived in there, besides you and your husband?

Wilson: I guess you could think of it that way. He has, if writing means anything, written a couple of things that have been published.

Leverett: Did he like it?

Wilson: Did he like it! Home was important to him. He was sent away to school pretty early. He did high school work at Tuskegee Institute; college work at Talladega and then graduate work at the University of Southern California. He did other studies in Chicago and elsewhere.

What I'm thinking about is that he felt pretty close to his childhood area. He has three sisters and they cared nothing about living in Jackson, but he did. He retained the house, but they wanted to get rid of it.

Leverett: What did you know of Dr. Redmond?

Wilson: I more or less knew him from what people had told me. I had the opportunity to meet him. One of the books my husband wrote is on the life of Dr. Redmond. You can get information from that particular book. I think, there is one at the library here.

Leverett: Oh really!

Wilson: I think there is.

Leverett: What is the title of the book?

Wilson: God! Make Me a Man.

Leverett: It is about Dr. Redmond?

Wilson: Yes it is.

Leverett: What is your feelings about the area, would you like to see it revitalized, preserved, or what?

Wilson: I would like to see it preserved with some improvement.

Leverett: Right.

Wilson: I think it could be improved. I hate to see it carelessly let go.

Leverett: My personal feeling is that, it is probably the most culturally significant portion of Jackson for blacks. It has always been the black area of Jackson, so it is probably the oldest section of Jackson.

Wilson: I would think so, from what I have learned about it. I'm not a native of Jackson. My first trip to Jackson was with a group of sisters that came here to sing.

Leverett: Were all the street paved during that time?

Wilson: No, they weren't. There were sidewalks in that area where we walked. I don't know to what distance the sidewalks extended. I do know the streets were gravel. When we first came to Jackson to live on Grayson, it was so dusty that you couldn't keep the dust out of the house.

Leverett: That was probably the last area of central downtown to be paved.

Wilson: It probably was. Shortly after they paved it, they changed the name.

Leverett: There were some movements toward the upward end of downtown. I think, they have been doing some renovation. I think, it is drifting southward, actually east to west. Of course, you get different opinions. Some feel that the loop, you know, they're building is to relieve congestion on the streets. They built the Federal Building down there. I think, it was built in hopes to revitalize the area. Do you think it will have an impact?

Wilson: It might. I know some of the churches were designed there, putting steps down front. They were advised to do differently because they were thinking about widening the streets.

Leverett: Are you referring to widening Farish Street?

Wilson: No, Lamar Street. There is a cemetery around there and they didn't want to take any of street from that side. The idea was to take it from the residential side. I don't know what they're going to do with it. They made part of it one-way, but the part where I am is still two-way traffic.

Leverett: Two-way and then one-way?

Wilson: George and Lamar.

Leverett: That's one-way going south?

Wilson: I don't know if they have dropped the idea of widening it or not. I would hate to see them cut too deep on the property.

Leverett: They have been talking about under Farish Street.

Wilson: I know they have torn down much of what was there. The cafe that was improved that I was telling you about, was once a

Wilson: smaller place. They enlarged it and put it on a higher order, as far as the operation of it was concerned.

Leverett: Our area of concentration stops at Fortification.

Wilson: That's north.

Leverett: When we go to Capitol and Lamar?

Wilson: That's south.

Leverett: Lamar on the east and Mill on the west?

Wilson: Mill on the west.

Leverett: Monument is the street that confuses me because it changed its name too. Isn't that High Street?

Wilson: Monument doesn't change its name until you get to Capitol. Monunent comes around here and runs into Capitol and then its Rhodes. The street that corsses Monument is Gallatin. What you have is South Gallatin on one side and Bailey on the other side.

Leverett: We appreciate your help, Mrs. Wilson.

Wilson: I hope it has been helpful. I didn't know what I would be talking about.

Leverett: You've done a wonderful job.

Wilson: I didn't know it I've cleared up anything. I didn't want to say things I didn't know about.

Leverett: Again, thank you so much for your time.