

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

THE FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT PROJECT

BUSINESSWOMAN IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

O. H. 78.12

ELIZABETH THAMES

Interviewed
by

LINDA A. McLAURIN

on

June 19, 1978

O. H. 78.12

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.

I, Elizabeth Thomas, 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.

Elizabeth Thomas
Interviewee (Signature)

6/19/78
Date

Biographical sketch

Mrs. Elizabeth Thames is a native Jacksonian and had performed in the capacity of expert designer, owner, and manager of Boot's Flower Shop located at 817 North Farish St for the past 25 years. In addition, she was a full time mother of one daughter, as well a homemaker.

She received her education at Lanier High School and Jackson State University and was trained for the floral profession by the former owner of Boot's, Mrs. A. B. Thompson.

Mrs. Thames, age 62, plans to retire in the near future, but remain in her present capacity and location until she retires, at which time the responsibility for Boot's will be turned over to her daughter or husband.

Summary

Much to the dismay of this researcher the conditions under which the interview with Mrs. Thames was conducted were unsatisfactory to say the least. The session was conducted in front foyer or showroom of the flower shop. People were constantly in and out of the shop and, thus, very disruptive to the parties involved in the interview. But, perhaps, despite the unfavorable conditions, this researcher was able to witness first hand the actual operation of Boot's its customers and experience the true atmosphere and flavor of the area.

I found the interviewee to be in the best of health, very pleasant, and cooperative.

Introduction

Mrs. Elizabeth Thames is a native Jacksonian. She is employed by Boot's Flower Shop, 817 North Farish Street, as a designer, manager and owner.

She received her educational background from Lanier High School and Jackson State University. She was hired as a floral designer by the former owner of Boot's Flower Shop, Mrs. A. B. Thompson.

Mrs. Thames plans to retire in the near future and the business will be passed to her husband or daughter.

In this interview Mrs. Thames discusses her working experiences at Boot's Flower Shop. She also discusses the deterioration of the Farish Street business district, the Red Light District, the night clubs on Farish Street and the customers of Boot's Flower Shop.

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Elizabeth Thames
INTERVIEWER: Linda A. McLaurin
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 19, 1978
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McLaurin: Mrs. Thames, are you a native Mississippian?

Thames: Yes, I am.

McLaurin: Are you a native Jacksonian?

Thames: Yes, I am.

McLaurin: Are you married?

Thames: Yes, I am.

McLaurin: Do you have any children, if so, what are their names?

Thames: I have one girl, Bertha.

McLaurin: How long have you been operating in this particular location?

Thames: Twenty-five years.

McLaurin: In what capacity?

Thames: As manager and co-manager.

McLaurin: What was your life like before entering this profession?

Thames: I was a busy career woman.

McLaurin: What kind of career?

Thames: I was employed as manager of insurance at Collins Funeral Home.

McLaurin: How would you describe your business?

Thames: Floral designing and all phases of flowers. We have wire service for any type flowers. I have two expert designers, Lavern White and Cheryl Robinson.

McLaurin: What is your educational training?

Thames: I finished high school at Lanier High School and I had two and one-half years at Jackson College.

McLaurin: Did you have any prior training in this profession?

Thames: No, the previous owner-manager, Mrs. A. B. Thompson, was trained in floral designing and she trained me.

McLaurin: What was Farish Street like when you started in this location in 1953?

Thames: Pretty much the same. Families have died and moved away. It's a business section and a negro section. Some businesses have left and others have moved in. Nothing really, as I can see, other than the usual deterioration of a city.

McLaurin: Would you describe those businesses and explain that which you call the deterioration of the area?

Thames: The buildings have not been kept up nor the section of the city. The business places aren't up to par. People move away and things change.

McLaurin: Do you remember exactly what the area was like in 1954?

Thames: Pretty much the same. I was away quite a bit of the time then, but it seems to be about the same.

McLaurin: You have just said that it has not changed not that radically during your stay here. How has the 1960s been compared to the 1970s? In other words, since you were around during the civil rights struggles, has your business been involved in anyway? How did you life change, if any? Were you affected by it, any of that struggle?

Thames: I was not in Jackson at the time, but after the civil rights struggle things have changed for the better. Most of the people have better jobs. They've learned more. They've made great strides in all phases. Things in that respect have changed, but I was out of the city during that time.

McLaurin: Who are your customers, and who has been your customers over the years since you have been involved here?

Thames: Anyone who accepts the design and the freshness of the flowers of Boots' Flower Shop. We have no particular customers. Anyone who wants flowers, white or black. We service all funeral homes. We wire anywhere in the United States. We have quite a rapport with the various wholesalers here in the city and over the United States.

It is al well-rounded floral business and we do just about any work that anyone else would do.

McLaurin: How was your business, or what was it like when you first started in this business? Who were your customers then?

Thames: It was a slow process, but I think in any business if you don't give your best and give the best service, the best product, no business will stand. When we started it was very very slow. With first class service it has grown tremendously!

McLaurin: What is your relationship with the other black business persons in the area?

Thames: It's okay. We all get along. They're my customers too.

McLaurin: What is it like being a black businesswoman in a white male oriented society?

Thames: I really don't know what you mean, what it's like. I have no complaints. I get along with all of them.

McLaurin: What has been your problem involved with your business?

Thames: Problems---keeping good health is the only problem I can think of.

McLaurin: You said the white business was your competition. Is that your only competition? In other words, who is your competitor?

Thames: Any florist in the city would be my competitor. I have no complaints. They have their customers and I have mine, there's enough for all of us.

McLaurin: Primarily who are your customers since you say they have theirs and you have yours.

Thames: I suppose you mean by my customers, people I have served. Everybody that comes in this door is a customer. We have, as I stated before, customers who are black, white, red, any-one that comes in here is a customer.

McLaurin: Would you please describe for me a routine day? Say today's activities for example, thus far.

Thames: We open at eight o'clock and the first order of the day is to find out what type work we have, then order the flowers. It's just floral designing from then on. We have you mail

Thames: service, banking service, delivery service, and as I said, floral designing. That's our job. If we have a customer come in, the first thing we need to know is if we can serve them. We sell flowers, that is what they buy.

McLaurin: I asked you earlier about your problems with your business, specifically I would like to know what is your relations with your employees. Would you describe your employees and your relationship with them?

Thames: I have all women. It seem to work our a little better. We had one or two men in the business, but I found that the women get along better together. I have women designers and women deliverers. We are more like a family. Employee wise, I have no complaints.

McLaurin: How many employees do you have?

Thames: Four full-time and one part-time.

McLaurin: Are your employees members of a union? Are the unionized?

Thames: No, we're not that large of a business. It a small, but thriving business.

McLaurin: What are your outside activities other than Boot's Flower Shop? Are you involved in any community activities?

Thames: Not necessarily. I am a member of Central Methodist Church, Iota Phi Lambda Sorority, the Business and Professional Women's Club, Eastern Star, and one or two other organizations.

McLaurin: Are you active within these organizations?

Thames: Semi.

McLaurin: Describe you role, please.

Thames: I'm just a member now. I have been president and I have been on various points of the star.

McLaurin: What about your political activities? Are you involved politically in this community or elsewhere?

Thames: No, not yet anyway.

McLaurin: What are your plans for the future, Mrs. Thames?

Thames: In what respect?

McLaurin: With reference to your present capacity as a black business-woman and with reference to your particular location, what are the plans for Boot's Flower Shop in the future and what are your future plans?

Thames: I hope to retire soon.

McLaurin: What about the shop? Who will assume responsibility for the shop once you are gone?

Thames: That'll have to be worked out. I still have a daughter and a husband. If I retire, either one of them probably will take over.

McLaurin: What is your age?

Thames: I'm very old, sixty-two.

McLaurin: What do you foresee for the future of Farish Street? What do you see ahead for Farish Street?

Thames: I really don't know. I'm hoping the section will be cleaned up, built up, other than that I can't say.

McLaurin: Would you tell me a little about your background? What type of family did you come from, sisters, brothers, etc? Your parents, where were they from?

Thames: My family came from the Carolinas to Brandon, Mississippi and from Brandon to Jackson, Mississippi. There were ten children, six boys and four girls. We had a close knit family. They were all good looking. I don't know what you would call it, we lived well, it was just a typical black family's livelihood.

Until the 1960s blacks had no particular business other than preaching teaching, or doctoring. Since the 1960s we have had some scientists, but they weren't known. We have the same type of qualifications in the blacks as you have in the whites or any other race. We are beginning to come into our own now, that we have learned and still learning. We are better educated. We know more so we can go further. We can make more money. Times have changed in that aspect.

McLaurin: Has Farish Street changed according to those times?

Thames: I can't say . . . yes and no.

McLaurin: Why yes?

Thames: We do have more blacks on the streets, more black businesses on the streets. The relationship with people is much better than it use to be among black and white. We get along now. We talk to each other. The atmosphere around Farish Street is much better. I think, all in all there are no complaints. We get along, chat's the main thing.

McLaurin: Have you always gotten along on Farish Street?

Thames: Yes, as far as I can remember, I've never had any problems here with anyone.

McLaurin: What about the people on Farish Street, who are the residents? The ones who rent the apartments, live in the houses, up the street, down the street that surround your business? What about these people?

Thames: They're all just about gone from the area. There're more business places now. The residents have moved away. We have a few retired people on this street. Other than that there are no living quarters.

McLaurin: Do you remember the Crystal Palace?

Thames: Yes, it was a dance hall. It was one of the few places we were able to have dances back in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

McLaurin: When you say we, who do you mean?

Thames: The black man and the black woman.

McLaurin: Are you familiar with Farish Street's so called Red Light District?

Thames: No, that was before my time.

McLaurin; There's no Red Light District now?

Thames: Not that I know of.

McLaurin: What is your relationship with the ministers in the area?

Thames: We're friendly. We know each other and they respect me and I respect them. We're an old family in Jackson and everyone knows us. We have their respect and we always respect people. This is just home.

McLaurin: Back to your business, is it very successful?

- Thames: For the type of business it is, I think so. We have no complaints. When we first began the business money was short. We managed to keep plugging. Now it takes care of itself. I think, we're successful at it.
- McLaurin: Do you have any plans to relocate your business, and if so, in what possible area and why?
- Thames: I don't know if I could find a suitable place. This section and this place we've been in has been so successful I don't see why I should.
- McLaurin: Has the earlier deterioration you spoke about with reference to the area affected your business?
- Thames: I don't think so. It may have at one time, but with the situation changing I have no complaints.
- McLaurin: Does it disturb you that you are surrounded by pool halls, bars, and etc?
- Thames: No, because they're all my friends and they look out for me. I think they look out for me.