AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MYRTLE EVELYN BRIDGES DAVIS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Myrtle Evelyn Bridges Davis and is taking place on June 12, 2010. The interviewer is Louis Kyriakoudes. Also present is Sharon Hanshaw and Cheyenne Keaton.

Kyriakoudes: This is Louis Kyriakoudes with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at The University of Southern Mississippi. It’s June 12, [2010], and we are conducting interviews as part of our effort to document the Biloxi Beach Wade-In, specifically, and the history of the movement in Biloxi, Mississippi, generally. And I am here with a group of individuals at the Church of the Redeemer. And I’m going to ask people to go around counterclockwise and introduce themselves, beginning with Ms. Hanshaw.

Hanshaw: OK. My name is Sharon Hanshaw. I am a native of Biloxi, Mississippi.

Kyriakoudes: Ms. Davis, if you could introduce yourself?

Davis: Myrtle Davis and I’m a native of Biloxi, Mississippi.

Keaton: Cheyenne Keaton, I’m a native of Biloxi, Mississippi.

Kyriakoudes: Excellent. OK. Well we’re here to interview Ms. Myrtle Davis, and all of us in the room are going to engage in a conversation as we accomplish the goal of documenting Ms. Davis’ memories and stories of her life here in Biloxi. If we could start, Ms. Davis, just tell us where and when you were born, where you grew up, and what the neighborhood was like where you grew up.

Davis: My name is Myrtle Davis, and I was born on December 9, 1926. I’m eighty-three years old. I was born in a house that I’m still living in. I’ve always had one address, one telephone number. I belong to St. John AME [African Methodist Episcopal] Church, and I went to Biloxi Colored High School. I had a few hours at [Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College], Jeff Davis [Campus], and I completed a course in tailoring, [sewing as a business], at—what’s this college way up there, state college? [Mississippi State University]

Hanshaw: State college? USM [University of Southern Mississippi]?

Davis: No, way up there at the Mississippi line?
Hanshaw: (Inaudible) Columbus?

Davis: Yeah, Columbus. Still can’t think of the name of the school. Anyway, I finished a tailoring course there, and I lost my certificate in [Hurricane Katrina]. That’s one of the things I really wish I had. I’m a member of St. John AME Church, and I’ve been there all my life. I was a member when the church [was on Lameuse] Street; then it moved to Division Street; then it moved further down Division Street. I’ve been everything in there but the preacher and the choir director! (laughter)

Kyriakoudes: (laughter) OK. Well, tell me a little bit about your parents. What your father did for a living, what your mother did, what things were like, you know—

Davis: My father was Walter Bridges, and he was a yard man. He called himself “the old reliable yard man.” Rode a skinny-wheel bike to and from work. My mother was Ellen Hardrick Bridges. I can’t remember what kind of work she did, but I remember her working out. [She did maid work.] And they were both from New Orleans.

Kyriakoudes: Do you know what the circumstances were that made them move from New Orleans to Biloxi?

Davis: No, I don’t know them.

Kyriakoudes: And when you say your dad was a yardman, what specifically? Who did he work for? What was his work? Was he in the railroad yard, for example?

Davis: Private homes, stuff like that, [Bradford Funeral Home, Biloxi Tourist Court].

Hanshaw: He was self-employed.

Davis: Yeah, he—I can’t remember the different people’s names that he worked for. But I do remember he used to—I think he used to work for Dr. Russ because I used to go to the bank to cash his check. He would tell me that they would give him the check, and I would go take it to the bank, and they would cash it and give it to me. So he rode just a skinny-wheel bike. And on Sundays, we would get the bikes and ride all around Ocean Springs, then come back across the bridge, and come home. And I was always the last in line because it would always go flat, and I would always have to stop and pump it up again. (laughter) But we had a good life. I don’t ever remember not having a place to stay, three meals a day, and changes of clothes. So I think I’ve had a good life because we was poor and didn’t know it, but we ate three meals a day. The food we ate then is good to me now. I can’t stand pizzas and hot dogs. Even when I eat that, I don’t get full. I always go back to the kitchen and find something that’s left over.

Kyriakoudes: What were some of the things you would eat in your home when you
were growing up that you remember?

**Davis:** Pork chops, rice and gravy, and greens, green beans, green peas, cabbage, cornbread—oh, all that good stuff. We had roast, [red beans, butter beans], but we always ate good. They used to make cakes and cookies and they especially—not graham crackers, [tea cakes]. Well, we had a lot of cinnamon rolls, and milk, too. We’d come home from school because we wasn’t too far from school. We could walk home for lunch. There was four of us. We’d each have two sweet rolls and a glass of milk and go back to school. I’m trying to think of the cookies they used to make, but I can’t think of it right now. [Gingerbread, tea cakes, bread pudding]. What else can I tell you about my childhood?

**Hanshaw:** So how many children were there? How many siblings did you have?

**Davis:** Well, I have two brothers and [two] sisters. They were here; my oldest sister was mostly in New Orleans. She went to New Orleans to my aunt’s. She was ten years older than me. At that time, the schools only went to eighth grade. So she went to New Orleans and went to Dillard. But Frank and Joseph and Althea McGowan and myself was the four at home. Now I’m the only one living. All my aunts and uncles and everybody’s gone. I’m the only one. I have some distant cousins in California, but I don’t know too much about them because the ones I knew that was raised in Biloxi, they all deceased. You know?

**Kyriakoudes:** Now, you did get to go to high school. Was that something that was open at the time for you? Tell us about your time there. Which school you went to—

**Davis:** Biloxi Colored High School on Nixon Street. It’s not there anymore. They had a fountain in the front yard. We used to drink water on it and play basketball outside on the side of it. My principal was Mr. [M.F.] Nichols, and Ms. [Doris] Bush taught me, Ms. [Elmer] Hatcher. And one of them—I don’t know which one out of the two—I don’t know which one out of the two—told us whenever you sign your name and sign a legal document, always give yourself a handle. So whenever I sign my check or my name on paper, I always put Mrs. Myrtle E. Davis. And if you look at the poll records that you can see, I’m the only one on there that has Mrs. by their name, and that just tickles me. But it’s a habit now. I can’t stop. And I told the bank that if a check come in that don’t have “Mrs.” in front of my name, don’t cash it.

**Hanshaw:** They knew.

**Davis:** Let’s see. What else can I tell you about me?

**Kyriakoudes:** Well, let me ask you about some of your classmates and other students at the high school. What was the community of students like? Who were some of your friends? What did you guys do after school, perhaps, for fun? Kind of the life of being a high school student?
Davis: Well, we had a club called the Blue Girls. We had blue skirts and white blouses. And we used to wear that on certain days, but I think I’m the only one that’s still living. Well, no, maybe Norma Burbridge is still living. Just about all my classmates are deceased, now. I think Norma Burbridge and Walter Besteda is the only two that I can account for right now, [and Mildred Williams. Besteda is deceased now.]

Kyriakoudes: Do you have any memories of Professor Nichols, the principal?

Davis: Oh, yes. His main statement was, “Train up a child the way he should go, and when he gets old, he will not depart from it.” And what else did he used to say? “A good education is worth getting. Don’t waste it (inaudible).” Something he used to say at the time. And he used to have a study period near his office from 11:30 until twelve o’clock. And he would always give us one problem to work, and it was a long problem, but it would take the whole half hour to work it. And we could go downstairs and get us some ice cream or a cold drink or something, then come in his room and eat that or drink that while we were working that one problem. And he stayed two doors from me on Main Street, so I grew up with his children. Now all of them are gone. His wife and all three children are gone. What else can I tell you?

Hanshaw: What do you remember about Dr. Mason, when he started to go down to the beach?

Davis: Well, he went down—I didn’t know Dr. Mason. He was my mother’s doctor, but that was all I knew about him. And when he went to the beach that first Sunday, I didn’t go. But when the white boys came down Main Street, shooting into every building that had a light on, I was in my house and had two plate glass windows there. And my son was at the desk, getting his lessons. And my sister stayed next to me in the house that I’m in now. And four children was over there. So I told him, “Let’s don’t sit you in front of this window. Let’s go over there.” And just as we started out the door, these boys came through shooting. My son went out and got their license tag number. And my sister was working across the street. George Riley was in front of her, and I think he was shot by three pellets in his back. I don’t remember; must have been a BB gun or something because it didn’t kill him. And I didn’t hear too much about it after then. But anyway, so when the policemen came, my son opened his big mouth and told them he had the license number. They told him; they said, “Well, you’ve got to go to jail.” And my sister, they had to take her because she had witnessed what went on across the street where she was working. So I said, “If you’re going to take my son, I’m going, too.” So I jumped in the car and went down there, too. And just as we were crossing the railroad track, out of the blue I said, “If I’d had supernatural power, I’d have cleared out city hall!” I don’t know what I meant by it, but I remember saying it. So when we got to city hall, it was surrounded with white men. I believe every white man in Biloxi who was over eighteen years of age was around that city hall, because the whole city hall was completely surrounded by white men. And when my son stepped out of the car, they rushed into him and started hitting him. And when I made a dash to go to him, the
policeman said, “You better not come another goddamn step further.” And I said, “Get that goddamn hand off my child.” And that’s when they stopped and got them off. And he was hurt pretty bad because his nose bled all night long. And several policemen kept walking backwards and forward, making different comments and things. And one, I remember one policeman said, “Arrest that one, and arrest her for me. I’m going to see to it that you don’t have a job or a place to stay on Monday morning.” I said, “Well, it is all right with me. I’m a taxpayer, and I’m self-employed! If you’re going to see to it that I don’t have a place to stay on Monday morning, do it. But I bet I’ll have your job before you’ll have mine.” And I don’t know where we got all the courage to say all the nasty things to say while we were in jail. One policeman came by and said, “Do you know that y’all are in the jail, and they’ll put y’all under the jail?” “Oh, well, so be it.” And they had one window in the cell that my sister and I was in, and we could go up to the window and talk to people passing. So I told them to go and tell my brother where we was because I had left these children in the house by themselves, and Althea [McGowan] and I were in jail. So he came up and talked to us through the window. But that morning, he came back. And we refused to eat any food that was served to us. We told him to go get food out of my refrigerator and bring it to us, and that’s what we ate because we say we didn’t want no hospitality from the City of Biloxi. But anyway, before that morning, I told them that they better get my son to the doctor because I asked the policeman if his nose was still bleeding, [and] he came back and said “Yeah, it’s bleeding.” I said, “Well, if y’all don’t hurry and get him to a doctor, I’m going to sue the State of Mississippi, the County of Harrison and the City of Biloxi.” So at six o’clock that morning, they took him to the railroad and put him out. From the jail to the railroad, put him out. But before he left, I told him that—I didn’t know Dr. Mason too good. (brief interruption)

**Kyriakoudes:** We’re back on the record, and Mrs. Myrtle Davis is telling us about her experience in the Biloxi jail with her son, who was—

**Davis:** Son-in-law?

**Kyriakoudes:** I’m sorry; I misspoke. Her son, who was injured. And if you can just continue.

**Davis:** Well, I told them that if they didn’t get him to a doctor, I was going to sue the State of Mississippi, the County of Harrison and the City of Biloxi. So they took him at about six that morning, right at daylight. And they carried him as far as the railroad track, which was just about a block down the street, and they put him out. And I told him to go to Dr. [W.P.] Kyle to take care of his nose. And I told Dr. [W.P.] Kyle that I’d take care of it when I got out of jail. And I didn’t know Dr. Mason well enough to send him to Dr. Mason. I knew him, but I had no dealings with him. But anyway, Dr. Kyle took care of him and didn’t charge me anything. And we stayed in jail all of that day, and Frank brought us food to eat. And we could hear all the comments they were making about Dr. Mason. Some would say they’d be glad when they got Dr. Mason on that stand, “I hope they throw the books at him.” One say, “Well, I hope he never
gets out of jail,” and all kinds of little comments like that. And that night when we went to court, they asked me why I wanted to go to the beach. And I told him that I was a taxpayer, and on the tax receipt they had “seawall tax.” And I understood that the seawall was on the beach. And I wanted to go down there and let the sand go between my toes! So I told the children that, and every time they go to the beach, and the sand gets between their toes, they come back and tell me. (laughter) And let’s see. What else did they ask me? “Well, you don’t live on the beach. That’s personal property down there.” I say “But I’m paying a seawall tax, and that’s where the seawall is! If I buy a loaf of bread, I’m going to eat it, or I know who I’m going to give it to eat it. If I pay seawall taxes, everybody else from anywhere else can go down there, and I want to go down there, too!” And I don’t know where we got the nerve to say all the things that we said in jail. It surprises me now when I think some of the things that were said. But my sisters said different things, too. But anyway, they fined us twenty-five dollars, and we went down to pay it, but they wouldn’t give us our pocketbooks at the time, so the NAACP came down to pay it. And it was—there were two men. I can’t remember who they are. And they paid the tax. So I promised the judge that I was going to join the NAACP. And I was going to go to the beach the next [time] Dr. Mason goes, but I [did not know] he was going to go the next Sunday, so when I was coming home from church, I saw all these young people around his office. So I went home and changed clothes, and I went back around, and they told me, they say they were going to the beach. And I say, “Oh, I done open my big mouth and say I was going.” So really I got to go. So I went—see, that was the first night I stayed in jail in Biloxi. The next Sunday when we went, it was a lot of people then. And they had an eighteen-wheeler that came down there and got us. And we was in there like sardines. You understand? You couldn’t sit down, and you couldn’t move. You were just standing straight like that. The eighteen-wheeler was packed. They carried us to the Biloxi City Hall, and then they carried us to Gulfport. So in Gulfport, they put all the men in one cell and all the women in another cell. And we didn’t sleep at all that night. We sung church songs and blues songs and any kind of song anybody wanted to sing. We just sung and prayed and sung and prayed and just had a good time. The only thing is we didn’t have food. But we just had a good time. So—what happened then? Well, after then, when they had court, we got out. Well, it was later that night when they had court, and they turned us loose. I don’t remember how all of us got back to Biloxi; I don’t remember that. But anyway, that was my two nights in jail. And what else can I tell you?

**Kyriakoudes:** Let me ask a couple of clarifying questions. The first time you were arrested, had you gone down to the beach?

**Davis:** No. I didn’t go to the beach!

**Kyriakoudes:** OK. I’m just—so it was in the neighborhood, after the—

**Davis:** The shooting was across the street from my house where my sister was working the Southern Kitchen across the street from my house. And my son went and wrote the license number down on the back of an envelope. And I had that envelope
until [Hurricane] Katrina came. It had the license number on it. Because they never did ask me for it in jail that night, they never asked me.

**Kyriakoudes:** What was the reason they were moved to arrest you? As a citizen, who was making a complaint?

**Davis:** What was the reason what?

**Kyriakoudes:** Yeah. When you went out with the license plate number.

**Davis:** Well, they never did ask for it. But my son just told them he had the license number. So [the police] told them that he would have to go to the jail and fill out some papers. So I said, “If he’s going to jail, I’m going to go with him.” So that’s how I got in the car. And my sister, she had to tell what went on, but she was working. So they was going to take the two of them, but not me. But if they were going to take my son, I said, “Well, I’m going, too.” So I went down. But now, if I hadn’t went down, they probably would’ve killed him. He was beat pretty bad, and one of my nieces still thinks that was the reason why he was so sick at one time, that it was something, and he had got hurt during that time because his nose bled terribly that night, and I don’t think he was too well, too much, after then.

**Kyriakoudes:** How old was he at that time?

**Davis:** He was sixteen years old, but he was tall and muscular. He looked like a man.

**Kyriakoudes:** You did later go down to the beach?

**Davis:** That next Sunday, I passed by and saw all of them getting ready to go. I said, “Well, Myrtle, you done opened your big mouth. You got to go, too.” So. And they had paid the twenty-five dollars to get me out. I said, “Well, I’ve got to go redeem myself. I’ve got to go pay them back for that twenty-five dollars.” So that’s what I’m still doing; I’m still working, and I’m still trying to pay them that twenty-five dollars back. They came down and got us out of jail that night, and nobody else—that’s all I know, I think, about that.

**Kyriakoudes:** After the wade-ins, through the rest of that decade, people began to open up the vote, or try to open up the vote. Do you have recollections of that?

**Davis:** Opening up what?

**Kyriakoudes:** The vote, registering to vote. Do you have recollections of trying to register to vote?

**Davis:** I was already registered. I was a registered voter when we was paying poll tax. Yeah, it was poll tax. Like I said, I was paying seawall tax, but it was a poll tax.
I paid every year. Had to pay that poll tax, and I had my receipts.

**Kyriakoudes:** Did you have to show your receipts to register to vote?

**Davis:** When we go to the—you know, when we had something we had to vote on, you had to have that poll tax, um-hm. That was way back there then. As soon as I made eighteen years old, I went down there to register.

**Kyriakoudes:** And you didn’t have a problem with registering to vote?

**Davis:** No, I didn’t have no problem. I went down there and answered—I don’t remember what the question was at the time, but I guess whatever I wrote down satisfied them. And I think it was three dollars you had to pay, I believe. I think it was. I don’t know. Mrs. Willie Jean McSwain, I think, held some of her receipts. She can probably look at them and tell you how much it cost during that time.

**Hanshaw:** You don’t remember what year it was when you registered to vote? You don’t remember?

**Davis:** No, I don’t. Well, I was born in [19]26. Whenever I made eighteen.

**Hanshaw:** OK. We can probably calculate and see what that was. So they didn’t give you any kind of problems?

**Davis:** I didn’t have no problems, no.

**Hanshaw:** Now, even today, is the process simple? You know where you’re supposed to vote, and it’s no problem when you go, and you just register? You know where you’re going? You don’t have to go to another place?

**Davis:** I’ve never had a problem voting, no.

**Hanshaw:** How many women was in that eighteen-wheeler? That eighteen-wheeler you mentioned, that was packed like sardines? How many women?

**Davis:** Oh, I don’t know. In that room that we was in, it must have been about ten or twelve of us in there. I can’t remember who all was in there. I can picture them, but I can’t remember all of them’s names. But I can picture different ones, [Mrs. Aslend Massey, Mrs. Altease Magee; men, Mr. Rehofus Esters, Jack Martin, Sneckinbird brothers].

**Kyriakoudes:** Do you remember when the beach was finally opened up to everybody? To the community? Do you remember going down in the later [19]60s, after the—

**Davis:** Yeah. We’d just go down there. I would just like to go and get out of the car,
just walk around, get the sand between my toes, then get back in and go. I might pick up a handful of dirt and take it home with me. But it just amazes the children, my grandchildren. Every time we go to the beach, they tell me, “We went down to the beach and let the sand go between our toes!” (laughter)

**Hanshaw:** So did you tell your grandkids anything about the history of how that came about? That you were allowed to go (inaudible).

**Davis:** Yeah. I told them why I have to go down there and let the sand go through my toes every year. Um-hm. It’s so you-all can go down there in the sand, so there you go. Um-hm.

**Kyriakoudes:** Any other thoughts you want to share as we wrap this up?

**Davis:** No, I don’t know of anything right now.

**Hanshaw:** Because you mentioned that you and another person were the only women that were arrested. Were you the first ones arrested?

**Davis:** That night, the first time I went to jail, my sister and I were only two women that spent the night in jail. And there were several other men. I know [Alonza] Parker. You remember Parker?

**Hanshaw:** Reverend?

**Davis:** No. I think his name was Alonza Parker, who’s in jail, and I can’t remember nobody else but him. But there was several other men in jail. I can’t remember who they were. But they were in jail whenever we got there. They wasn’t there from the beach incident.

**Hanshaw:** OK.

**Kyriakoudes:** When the police arrested you, living in the community, what was it like to deal with the police on a day-to-day basis? Before that and after that? As that just part of normal life? I mean, were they just that one day harsh, or were they generally unhelpful and oppressive?

**Davis:** I didn’t have no dealings with any of them before then. And I don’t think I had any dealings with them after then.

**Hanshaw:** I guess it was different than the way it is now. Did you have policemen canvassing the neighborhoods like now?

**Davis:** They still, you know, go through the neighborhood at times. You can see them coming through.
Hanshaw: But it was more so when the beach began to segregate? That’s when you saw them more? To be more present?

Davis: Yeah.

Hanshaw: I think we’ve got a lot of history here. I was just wondering about the school. What are your thoughts about now, now that we’re trying to save the school right now?

Davis: I hope they save the schools because that’s a part of our history, and we need to save the schools. If they took the Reed House on Elmer Street and teared it down, and they’re saying that the schools is more important than the Reed House, so. I think the schools—we need somebody to identify with. The school I went to, Biloxi BCHS [Biloxi Colored High School], is gone. And there’s not too many people who know anything about that.

Hanshaw: Biloxi Colored—

Davis: High School, um-hm. Yes. And I can remember when I was in school, they would take—the boys at Biloxi BCHS wouldn’t have uniforms. All the uniforms was the same as each other, purple and gold. And the white schools was red and white. Well, every year the white school would get new uniforms, but they’d hand the red and white ones down to the purple and gold. And I remember once my son was playing on the railroad, and he found a lot of—I think you call them Bunsen burners. You know, what you use in chemistry or something? And he carried them up because they were better than the ones he had in school. He carried them to school, where he was going to school. Because the [white school] school was right here on the railroad, right down there on the railroad. And that’s where he found all of these Bunsen burners, down on the railroad. He picked them up and carried them across the railroad track to school. It was Nichols High then. It wasn’t Biloxi Colored High then. I don’t know of nothing else I could tell you.

Kyriakoudes: You had mentioned your older sister, who’s ten years older than you, went to New Orleans for her high school. So were you one of the first or second, earlier classes in Biloxi?

Davis: Earlier classes?

Kyriakoudes: Yeah. I mean, was the school fairly new when you were in it?

Davis: No. My sister went to school in Biloxi. She finished the eighth grade in Biloxi. But then she went to New Orleans, then on to Dillard University. Now, I had some aunts living there in New Orleans, and she went over there with them. But they’re all gone, and she’s gone.

Kyriakoudes: Was there a reason, though, that she left the school to go to New
Orleans school in the eighth grade?

Davis: They didn’t go to twelfth grade. The schools only went to eighth grade at that time. It was after then when they had a four-year high school. So she went to New Orleans and went to Dillard University and became a teacher in New Orleans.

Hanshaw: Because I heard you mention Ms. Doris Bush, because she went to Dillard University—

Davis: Who?

Hanshaw: A woman named Doris Bush.

Davis: Ms. [Doris] Bush?

Hanshaw: She went there.

Davis: Yeah, she went there. And this lady who’s a-hundred-and-something years old in Bay Saint Louis—oh, what is her name? She went to Dillard, too.

Hanshaw: So I guess Ms. Bush is about the same age? One-hundred-two or one-hundred-three.

Davis: You know, they honored her. Had her picture in the paper a couple of weeks ago.

Hanshaw: Yes!

Davis: (Inaudible) I can’t think of her name. I sewed for her. I can’t think of her name. [It’s Victoria Webb.] But anyway, let’s see. What else can I tell you about myself?

Hanshaw: Tell us about your business that you had.

Davis: Oh, I had a sewing shop. Well, when my son got sick, I had to find something. I was doing some day’s work somewhere. I had to stop and go home to work, so I started taking in sewing. And then eventually, I opened up a shop, and it was Davis Tailoring Shop. And I worked there for many years. Then I got an opportunity to get a contract on Keesler, but before then, I had my own shop. But I was buying coffee from a man who would go around and sell coffee, and he said [that Sol] Frank needed a seamstress, and he turned my name in and talked to me. So I went to Sol Frank’s clothing store and worked for five years. And while I was there, I got an opportunity through procurement at Keesler, to go on Keesler to work, and I worked out there five years, until the building that I was working in closed down. And then I came home and opened up at home again, Davis Tailoring Shop. And I sewed until [Hurricane] Katrina. I’d still be sewing. I can’t see as good, and I can’t
hear good now. People are still asking me, “Can’t you just cuff my pants for me? Can’t you just take my pants up?” I say “No.” When I went down to the city the last time after Katrina to pay my taxes, they wrote on there, “Building condemned, not reopening.”

**Kyriakoudes:** For your sewing job?

**Davis:** Yes. And they came out and put a paper on it, “building condemned,” and I had to tear it down. So now they’re trying to get me to take the concrete up. And I told my children to play on it, so they gave me a permit to leave the concrete there and let the children play on it. They got a basketball thing set up on it.

**Kyriakoudes:** Did you evacuate for Katrina, for the storm?

**Davis:** Yes. We just went right across the bridge to Windgate. That’s right there by Wal-Mart. And they had water at six feet, five inches in [my] house, and so that was above my head. So I lost everything downstairs. And it went all the way through the ceiling [of the sewing shop] because it was down on the slab on the ground. But my house was elevated two feet.

**Kyriakoudes:** Have you fixed the house?

**Davis:** Oh, yes. I’m in the house now. I had some volunteers to come in. One group that came in told me that it was too far gone; it couldn’t be done. Then in the next two days, another man came and said, “Oh, yeah. I can fix that.” And shortly after then, I came by and looked, and everything was new up under there, and the house was lifted up. And I said, “Oh, my goodness! Look here!” (laughter) And they repaired the house. I got all new—they completely, you know, gutted it. Wasn’t nothing but the rafters up in there. And now it’s completely finished. My bedroom is a dining room. The room that was my bedroom is a dining room now, and I sleep in the front room. And my daughter and her four children are upstairs. So we’re living good.

**Kyriakoudes:** That’s good. Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your stories. They’re very powerful.

**Davis:** I hope I told you enough. I can’t think of nothing else right now.

**Kyriakoudes:** OK. Well, I’m going to stop the machine. (brief interruption) This is Louis Kyriakoudes, and we’re continuing to talk with Ms. Myrtle Davis to discuss her experiences working with the NAACP in the Biloxi branch. It’s my understanding that Dr. Mason began the Biloxi branch. Is that right?

**Davis:** Yeah.

**Kyriakoudes:** Were you around then? Is that when you got active in it, or was it
later when you got active in it?

**Davis:** It was later because I didn’t get in to it until after [Dr. Mason] went to the beach. But I think he had organized it before then. And I said, “Well, they came and got me out of jail. They wouldn’t let me pay back their twenty-five dollars, so I’m going to have to go and work and redeem myself and work with the NAACP.” So I went right on and joined, and I was the secretary at one time. And I was the first Mother of the Year. I don’t remember what year it was, and I ran again since then. And I would’ve won that year, but I forgot to put in some (inaudible) checks. I would’ve won that second time, but I [forgot to turn in some checks].

**Kyriakoudes:** Who do you recall as people in the community who were also active? Do you recall some of the other people who were active in the NAACP when you were active in it? Some of the other men and women who—

**Davis:** Most of the people are still in there. Bobby Triplett, and let me see who else could I think of? Well, most of the people there are still living are still active in it. I can’t remember nobody else’s name right off. No, I can’t think of nobody.

**Kyriakoudes:** Do you remember some of the other subsequent controversies and actions that the NAACP was active in after the wade-ins? Maybe with desegregating any public places, or even later, when they started to desegregate the schools or restaurants?

**Davis:** Oh, the restaurants? Oh, yeah, I went to every one of those. Anytime they said they were going out Sunday evening to go out and eat, I got in the car and went with them. The White Pillars Restaurant, Buena Vista [Hotel Restaurant], and this place in Alabama that I can’t think of, Longfellow House, I believe, was the name of it.

**Kyriakoudes:** Were you often the first group to try to integrate the restaurants?

**Davis:** Yes.

**Kyriakoudes:** How did that work out? Did people confront you?

**Davis:** No. Everywhere I went, we were treated nice. And the employees that were working, they would be working in the kitchen, and they would just come to the door and be looking and clapping their hands and saying, you know, “Y’all come on, come on in. We’re glad to see you.” I can’t think of all of them that I went to, but—Woolworth counter, Kress counter. They had F.W. Woolworth and S.H. Kress at that time, but they’re both out of business now. They were right here on Howard Avenue. We went in there when they went. I don’t know of nowhere else I went.

**Kyriakoudes:** Later, do you have any recollection of integration of the schools, like in [19]70 or [19]71, here in Biloxi? Was the NAACP active in that, as far as you can
remember?

**Davis:** No. No. I just I raised my sister’s children, but I don’t remember having any problems or anything like that. My sister died, and she had five children and rather than separate them, the five of them, that’s why we’re still in that house. But my husband and I, we took care of them, and we raised them, and they finished high school. All of them went to college but two. Two went; two didn’t want to go. I mean, I would’ve helped them go if they wanted to go, but they didn’t want to go. They all got good jobs. I never had to get anybody out of jail or never had to pay any bill that they ran up and didn’t pay. For Mother’s Day, they all sent cards and sent gifts. And it just a good bunch of children, never had any problems, and they all will be here next week for the school reunion.

**Kyriakoudes:** Wow. That’s pretty good. Just for the record, your husband’s name?

**Davis:** Charles Ray Davis.

**Kyriakoudes:** And what was his occupation?

**Davis:** He was an electronic instructor at Keesler.

**Kyriakoudes:** Well, thank you for taking the time to share these stories. They’re really quite wonderful and worthwhile.

**Davis:** Well, I gave you what you wanted? I’m sorry I couldn’t think of all of it.

**Kyriakoudes:** Oh, no. It’s good! I’m going to turn the machine off now.

(end of interview)