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Alston, Katherine and Major, Carrie

Katherine Alston

David Slutzky

Portia Morgan

Carrie Major

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Carolina Connections

Interviewees: Katherine Alston and Carrie Major

Interviewers: David Slutzky and Portia Morgan

July, 2012, St. Helena, South Carolina

David Slutzky (DS): Good Afternoon, I'm David Slutzky here with Portia Morgan and today we are interviewing Mrs. Carrie Majors along with her mother Ida Smalls.

Carrie Major (CM): No. It's Katherine, Kathy Alston

DS: Alston, ok.

CM: And also there is no S on my name it's Major, Carrie Major.

DS: Ok then, take 2

CM: It's Katherine, with a K, Alston. Hey Ma.

DS: Good afternoon, this is David Slutzky and we're here with Portia Morgan and I, we'll be interviewing Carrie Major and her mother Katherine Alston today about Gullah culture, strong youth leadership, a history of Gullah cooking, and recipes passed down through the ages. (turns to Carrie and Kathy) welcome ladies!

CM and KA: Thank you

DS: We appreciate your time and you joining us today, as you know we're educators that are bringing stories of Gullah culture and the island's culture back to our students in Cleveland that need to know their history that many of them do not know, and we're talking to people that live here and have lived here to tell us their stories to help and enrich their history up there as well, up north. So, let's just start, you're lifelong Islander here so tell us about St. Helena and what it's like.

Katherine Alston (KA): St. Helena is my home. I was born here, in 1932 on the 23rd day of February, and my mother had 16 children, my father had 17, and I'm the oldest one living, there are three girls of us living now, all the rest have passed. And I come from a long long ways, i had to do what I had to do, because sometimes my brother and I we had to go to school, but my mother had one pair of shoes. So sometimes my brother wear the shoes two days to school, and then I wear the shoes and my brother stayed home. And my mother was seamstress, and she used to sew and make clothes for us. My father was a fisherman, he was a farmer, and he was a butcher, my father used to go in the river and camp out there, and then he would come back friday, he would come early in the morning, I'm the one he would wake up to get the fish, then we would clean the fish, and then after I clean the fish I gotta cook breakfast. And then after breakfast he would have to take the fish and put it in the cart and I would go around to the people house and sell fish. Fish for sale, fish for sale, and I go and sell fish. And my father used to go and kill cow. He killed a cow, and then he'd butcher it and sell it at the market. And then my father could farm, he'd plant peas, he'd plant corn, and he'd plant cotton. And I'd used to stay home in the morning after breakfast and finish lunch, and everyone would go in the field to pick cotton, and my time to go in the field I go in the field but I was wiser than them. I bring a jar, a quart jar, of water and I put salt in the water, and they thinking I was bringing water for them to drink in the field, but I wasn't then I carry that when I pick and put my cotton in the sack they wonder how my cotton weigh more than

theirs, but they didn't know my remedy. (laughs). Yes ma'am, they used to go in the wood and get dry wood, and they make fire, and then we go to iron, like people now have iron board, we used to iron on the table. And we take the iron and go to the fire and bring it back and then iron our clothes. We used to have a well, and then we go there and use a bucket and get water out the well. Then I used to go on the farm and make a lap around the farm, I go on the farm two days one week and three and the next week. And my mama wouldn't let me go on the farm on Saturday because they don't pay on Saturday. Saturday morning, I got to find something to do on my own, I can go the whole week and I can't go on a Saturday so I've got to find a way to make my own money, because when I don't get paid my momma give me twenty-five cents out of my paycheck. So that day I went on the farm and I get my check and I go to Beaufort, and I go and spend money and then I come back and I give my mother twenty five cents. I come along and give my mother twenty five cents and my momma used to take care of a a lot of us and my momma used to buy the rice in a hundred pound sack, and she would rinse the sack out and bleach it and she would make under clothes for us. I would go to school and my momma would give me that panty with my clothes, and I would put that long leg panty on. I went to school and when I'd get down the road there's a tree in there that had a hollow in it, I take my panties and put it in the tree. Then later that day going home I would play in that tree and pull them out, and go "look, a cat go and got my drawers." I've come a long way. And we used to make a fire, a fire with the you know, the little kindle wood. And when we needed to get them, and my momma said I should go get some kindling, but I would play instead of get kindling. One morning when I got up to make the fire I had no kindling, so my mother had kerosene but she kept it in the room that she sleep in, so I go and get some kerosene to put on the fire and I couldn't carry the whole jar, so I put the kerosene in my mouth and coming out the room my daddy called me. And I couldn't spit it out so I swallowed the kerosene, that's why I got trouble with my stomach today. I swallowed the kerosene and they found out later what happened and they had to take me to the doctor. Well, I came from a rough time, boys and girls, yes ma'am, go to school two days one week, and three days the next. Share the same shoes, my brother and me. My momma didn't waste no time, my daddy didn't go to the beach you know, you I have time you need to put it up and if you don't my daddy beat you. When my daddy beat you he didn't hold your hand, he tied your hand and then he beat you again. Yeah, I come a long way.

Porsche Morgan (PM): Did your whole family, your parents they were from here also?

KA: Yes, my mother and father from here

PM: So how far can you go back? Generations?

KA: Generations, I believe, I'm the 5th generation, me. I'm the great great great grandchild, me. And going way back, just like a said about my momma, my sister she was a little bit older than me she used to go out to work and she would stay the whole week, and she had three children. And we stayed with my mother and she used to come over every 2 weeks home, and one time when she was supposed to come home she didn't come, and my mother was sick but she had to stop in to take care of those three children. I went to school until the 10th grade then I had to stop and take care of the children. But after they got grown and move in in 1970 I went back to school, 11th and 12th grade, and I did finish. I had to take care of those three children or they wasn't gonna be raised. And on the farm I picked, there was a packing house where I used to go and peel tomatoes, from there I went around the country, I went to quail factory, I went to the shrimp factory, I went to the packing house, I've been to school for 10 ½ years I was a substitute teacher, I worked at Penn Center cooking in the lunchroom for 10 years, I been at the nursing home taking care of private patients, I've been around.

PM: You have been

CM: She has been

KA: I've been around, and since I've grown up I haven't had the same occupation. I even worked at the mill.

CM: You've asked her too about going back, we've only gone as far as my great-grandmother. Yeah, we don't have any history that far, but with my grandmother having 16 kids and 12 living we did a family history, and last weekend was her side of the family's family reunion, and like she said she has 5 generations for her, but we have over, my grandma had one hundred and something grandchildren. My grandmother died when she was 95. Yeah 95, and she has, I Don't know how many, eighty something great grands, and some amount of great-greats, I'll show you all the history but we've got it written and we add every year, you know, the children, so it's a rich history.

PM: So it sounds like you did a lot of work, what did you do for fun?

KA: I didn't have time to have no fun, ha, what is that. I had to go in the field and pick the peas, I had to go and get the corn and my daddy used to come home and take the corn to the mill. So we would go in the field and pick the corn, you pick the corn and shuck it, wash it, then we shell the corn and take it to the mill, and what you do is take the cob of the corn and take it and burn it in the fireplace, do it for the heat, and one day my daddy told me to go ahead and shell the corn and carry it to the mill, and I was late, and I take the corn and pick them and put an axe inside the sack and beat em up, and my daddy would come and say "how come you didn't shell the corn?" because I played around and I didn't have time to shell the corn. You had to do the peas like that too, and go to the mill because we had so many children and we had to fill the home., and you gotta catch fish, and catch coon, and to skin the coon hide is called a mink and you take it and sell it at the market, but yes, I been to the mill.

PM: While I was farming someone told us that you were a pretty good cook

KA: I had to cook.

CM: She's a good cook, she loves to cook.

KA: I had to cook, ma'am, for all those judges when they go in the field they would leave me home to cook. And when I don't cook I go in the field with them and they wonder how my carton weigh more than theirs even if I hadn't been there for as long. Like I said I have the carton with the water in it and I have to leave them and pick at lunch. Then when we leave the field to weigh the carton they go "how come your carton weigh more than ours?". And I never tell them that I put that salt in that jar. And we have cow, a lot of cow, and I used to go out there and milk the cow. And one day when I got back I go on and pull the cow breasts, trying to get the milk out of the cow breasts, and the cow kicked me. But I milked the cow and we had something, we could put it in a can and let it stay for a while, and that's how you make cottage cheese, but no we had something called "clabo" and we make that from you know letting the milk stay a long time, and sometime we take that and put it in a jar and put some salt underneath and if you shake it from time to time it'll make butter.

DS: Right?

KA: Yes ma'am, that's how we did it, you have cottage cheese and we didn't have no such thing as cottage cheese we had clabo.

PM: Clabo??

KA: And tongue flowers that would grow behind the corn you mix the hox with the corn, and make a big part of the flour. So my daddy came to cook corn mush, and I said what is corn mush. You take the cornflour and take it in and cook it into the pot and keep turning that and mix that with clabo, and do all of that.

PM: And now what do you cook? What kind of things do you cook now?

KA: What do I cook now?

PM: Yeah.

KA: Oh now, I cook now, I cook great rice, I cook peas and rice, I cook Austin Rice I can fry in there and cook corn bread, they really love my corn bread. They love red rice, because my daughter can't cook red rice. Everybody wanted red rice, Katherine cooks and everybody wanted corn bread, but I son always wanted corn bread, he loved it when I cooked corn bread, and I cooked corn bread for every week. Not a week passed that I wasn't cooking cornbread,

CM: We gotta put it on the market, it's that good.

KA: And I have all these people that come here, some men, pay me to cook cornbread, some pay me to cook red rice, some pay me to cook beans and rice. I cook that every week, it's hard but I do it, I even made a tomato gumbo last week but I can't harvest and pick the tomatoes.

DS: God bless.

KA: Just canned tomatoes.

PM: Do you can tomatoes to get tomato gumbo or just canning them for ?

KA: No just put the tomatoes in a jar and save them for later, for winter. And I keep then them and the tomatoes are still good, the man who take me in his truck inside the field, I see the tomatoes and they look so good so I take tomatoes and put them in a bucket. And I went to my neighbor's house last week one night and I tell him I got over 4 dozen tomatoes this week, but I can't eat it because I got acid reflex.

PM: You'll get even more this week.

KA: I got acid now that I'm old, can't eat no tomatoes, ketchup and all those things, but sometimes I sneak a little of that red rice.

DS: So is that your favorite family recipe the red rice?

KA: Oh yeah, I gotta pick that one, oh, that red rice, a little beans and rice, cornbread, black eyed peas, all that, some cabbage, collard greens, all that.

DS: So no personal favorite? You just love to cook?

KA: Yeah I love to cook and some people ask me to cook for them. It's like, my daughter, my granddaughter and a friend of hers we used to take Sundays, different sundays to cook. And then we had 18 people on Sunday to cook, but after you know I started cooking my own food because she have Christmas, she always have a big bake sale on Christmas, Thanksgiving and all that, but on sunday now sometimes we all go together, but I cook my own food because I don't know what they eat so I cook, well, sometimes I do cook for myself and my son, and sometimes other people come and I don't have any at all left. Just like yesterday, yesterday I cooked some food and I have none left. Everybody come and just go help themself you know.

CM: That's what happens when you cook.

KA: Yeah, yeah, sometimes I try to cook enough for Monday, but I don't have enough, I don't have anything for today. I love to cook.

PM: So if someone uses the term Gullah what does that mean to you?

KA: Gullah? To me means people who came way back, like my mother come way back, and my father came way back. And see, they never used to work and never have a job like this. Just Like my mother used to do the sewing my father used to do the fishing, they never were holding a job, and my mother had a lot of children and she knew that she could go out and get food from anyone and they could get food from her, we grew up like that. Next door people come and borrow some sugar, I'm gonna borrow some salt and sometimes they borrow and never bring back.

DS: So I guess Gullah to you, more than anything , just means family and community?

KA: Oh yeah, family and community, and sometimes we'll be family. Even now I can eat some rice, just like growing up on Sunday my momma cook a pot of rice, a big pot of beans, peas, and grits, and Sunday people would come in and she'd give the rice to the strangers and give me grits and we had a lot of chicken in the yard, and one day my momma went to Beaufort and she said catch and kill a chicken, and I said ok. Ok, so, when my mother had me kill a chicken the only thing I get was the head or the foot, and that day when she went to Beaufort, I killed two chickens. And I said, well, I have me a head and I have me a foot, I get to eat a piece of chicken today. My mommy came back early and it turns out the cat come to take some of the chicken out the pot. The cat had gone upstairs and he came back low and momma said "what the cat got there?" The cat dropped it and kept on going. Then my momma start stirring the pot and she look in the pot now and said "Katherine, come here." What I do now? I go up to my momma "Katherine, how much chicken you kill?" One chicken ma'am. How come you kill one chicken and three foot in the pot. That one's from the chicken in the yard with three foot that's why I killed that one!

CM: That's my mother's favorite story. She's got a lot more too.

KA: "Why there three foot in the pot?" That's the only chicken in the yard with three foot, that's why I killed that one. You don't get nothing but the head and the foot. No other part of the chicken" I go in the kitchen and I get a piece of chicken.

CM: I think growing up from what they've been telling me, not only that but when the preachers came to the house as well, they ate the good food and the kids had to eat whatever was left over.

KA: Yeah, yeah, we get the grits and they get the rice. Yeah, I come a long way, in the field, cleaning the fish, my daddy called me in the morning, he get back at three in the morning, I had to get out of that bed, clean that fish, and cook breakfast, then I go outside and we got something called the marsh, you put the fish head in there let it go through and put it on the cart, then I go around "fish for sale, fish for sale." I was a tomboy, and I came a long way.

DS: As you know, we are taking these stories back to the students we teach in Cleveland to teach them more about their history and American history, where so many of us have come from the South to the North. So just to give them an idea, just age wise, and to tell them you know what you can be a little bit more resourceful, look at your elders. About how old were you when you were killing chickens and skinning fish?

KA: I was about 15 or 16, because I stopped school when I was in the 10th grade, like I said to take care of my sister children, and it was hard because my mother was sick. Then after I got grown and got married, I went back to school. And I finished high school, 11th and 12th grade, in 1970. I got my high school diploma and everything, I was determined to go back to school because my momma made me stop school to take care of my niece and them because she was sick. Because my sister, she been away to prison, and she been in New York almost 30 years before she come back home. And I was the oldest one in the house so I had to do what I had to do. And because of that kerosene, I still have trouble today I had to swallow it to answer my daddy. Even though my daddy see that didn't solve it. I got sick, and they take me to the doctor, but I still got trouble today.

DS: And how old were then, when that happened?

KA: I think I was say, maybe 18. Probably 17 or 18 years old.

DS: Wow.

CM: She's 81 now.

KA: Yeah, 81. When my daddy. When I was being courted, I had a friend over and my daddy had a fire and he put his foot up and he was chewing tobacco, he turn to the fire and go "phh" (spits). And sometimes my friend say "alright, I'm going home," and my daddy say, "Yeah, well good lady ain't going." and he'd be right there sitting down. He'd be right there sitting down. What kind of daddy is that chewing and spitting his tobacco, he said good lady is not going and old daddy is not sleeping.

PM: We probably could use some daddies like that now.

KA: Yeah (laughs). That is the truth. Yes, ma'am, I came a long long way.

DS: We asked about what Gullah means to you and we always hear family, we hear fellowship with your community and we hear church, and one thing that always stuck out to me was pride and work ethic. And I know that you do a lot of work with youth and leadership as well. What are some messages that we can give to today's youth? You're telling a very compelling story of how hard you had to work and how you

didn't have much fun, how do you convey that work ethic, that you know you need to work hard to get to a better place to the children we teach today?

CM: well basically when you ask about Gullah, I think as far, as more of a lifestyle for us language as well, and a lot, you've heard my mom talk a lot, and I do too, and at certain points when we're talking it'll come naturally, but to teach our young people you have to instill that in them and let them hear it, like in some of our stories we need to let them know how hard it's been to get to this point, and, they just need to look a little bit harder and take life more seriously and know that what you achieve is not going to be handed to you, that you have to really really work for it. You have to make some decisions early on as to what you want, you know, where do I go from here, how do I get there and a lot of us, especially me, I lived in two worlds growing up, my mom and my dad separated when I was in the 2nd grade so I left St. Helena and you keep hearing her say going to Beaufort, we didn't have transportation to go to Beaufort, all these roads that you see were unpaved. They walked, they were dirt road and they walk in order to get to Beaufort they walked those place and they had to get a boat to get to Beaufort, yeah. So, that was a special trip, there were certain people with cars who would pick up my grandma and talk them to the town. Take them to where the boat landing was to catch the boat for Beaufort, and then they'd have to catch the boat and walk back. And when we moved to Beaufort, that was in 1960 I was in the 2nd grade that was a great thing, I didn't get to go to Beaufort before, but the drawback was, and as you talk about learning and achieving when I got there the kids teased me because of the way i talked, and I was the Gullah speaking kid, I didn't know then like I know now that it was really two languages, they teased me a lot about the things I said. And what I decided to do, I'm thankful that I was smart enough, thank the lord for giving me some extra smarts there, that I needed to speak their way while I was in Beaufort, and when I came back on the island, which I did on the weekends which I spent with my daddy I had to talk, go back to the Gullah, because the kids over here would say, you know, you think you better than us when you was talking. So I had to transition, and it wasn't until the later on, when they started talking about the Gullah language and all this that I realized, coming up, I spoke really two languages, because I had to adapt. Kids in Beaufort teased me, you know, because of my Gullah style so when I came back on here and I was speaking proper the kids were like "who do you think you are?" So I had to do that. But I learned early on in order to get somewhere you had to work hard. And kids in Beaufort, they're very smart, and, so I had to keep up with them educationally. So I learned, ok, learn fast to keep up with me in order to fit in with them and in order to achieve, that's all, the mindset I think and that's what I work with youth on is changing mindsets, no matter where you come from. I'm very familiar because my daddy, when him and my mom broke up he lived in a one room shack, that's what we called it, before that we lived in a what, what was it, it was like a two room house. Mom and dad had the bedroom, but the other room was everything else. The living room, the dining room, the children's room and I had two other brothers so, that was it for us. So sleeping 2 or 3 to a bed was not an issue because that's all you had. In fact, you had a cot, in the little kitchen area, and that was where we slept. So that was no big deal for us, but that was not a barrier, learning that where you came from does not determine where you can end up.

DS: Amen for that.

PM: So the young people that you've worked with today do you have to try and instill or teach what Gullah and St. Helena used to be and mean or do they already have some appreciation for the rich history?

CM: No, you really have to tell them a lot of the youth take their heritage for granted. They don't familiarize themselves with it at all, for instance one young lady was at the family reunion, she didn't even know what a praise house was. You know, she's lived here all of her life and when we were talking

about the praise house and the singing she says “what’s a praise house?” you know, and she is 20 something years old. The young people need to know, we have to tell them about our history, and a lot of the older people passed on some oral history, and we’re failing to do that, I think we need to make them familiar with, not only their history, but the struggles. They see and know a little bit about Martin Luther King, but I don’t think they really know the struggles that have taken place to get them to where they are now.

PM: We’re feeling quite honored that we’re staying at Penn and we know that Dr. King came to Penn to plan the March on Washington which we’ll be celebrating next month for 50 years.

CM: Yes.

PM: and we just feel like we’re walking on hallowed ground.

CM: Yes, yes. And Penn itself has a lot of history and I think a lot of people try to familiarize themselves with that even, because Penn school, we talked about my mom went there for a little while

KA: We had to walk, we had to walk 5 or 6 miles in the morning to go to Penn Center and when you get to Penn Center they have a workshop and if you get there late you have to go in the Shoe shop. Some day you go there and they be having corn, you got to go in the mill. Sometimes, they had a field back there, and we had to go in the field. And you had to walk there, even in the winter you gotta walk there, and after it get so bad the Penn Center start paying you to go to school. So my mother transferred me from Penn Center to Robert Smalls School in Beaufort, I was supposed to catch the bus and go to Robert Small school but you had to pay. And plenty of times I go to school and I get there late and my teacher would give my next door neighbor a note to give to my mother, and I tell my next door neighbor, don’t give my mother the note, if you give my mother the note I ain’t giving you none of my food. And we come home later and I say don’t give momma that note, don’t give momma that note, and they never give it to her and I need to go to school on Monday morning and I go and wait to go to Beaufort by standing in the place for the bus on time, but I never go to school and my mother didn’t know. And when we were growing up, just like I said my mother had chicken and we take the chicken and the man who had a shop used to credit, and my mother tells the man at the store not to credit us unless he sent a note, so I said to myself, momma don’t think I can write a note. And I used to like to get for myself, condensed milk, applesauce, and milk crackers, cause that was my favorite, and mom sent me and my sister into the woods to get dry wood so then we get the dry wood and I give my sister a note to pin to the stove and I get her part of the wood, so we stay so long that my mother come to meet us and wonder what happened and she said “Where Bell?” and I said at the store, I sent ‘em to the store ma’am, who sent ‘em to the store? I said my sister sent herself to the store, and my mother said “who sent ‘em to the store?” And my mother standing right there when Bell coming over, and I’m like “don’t tell ‘em on me, don’t tell ‘em on me.” I had learnt something, and she had to tell her it was me. So my mother took the wood back with her and when I came home I got a beating, my father used to beat you for everything you do. He was beating me for three things, he said “You remember you do something yesterday? You remember you do something yesterday?” And I said I do papa, I do. And he said “come here,” and my papa used to tie you, not hold you, tie you. Yes ma’am, I come a long ways. My dad had some chickens, and the chicken they lay eggs and I go get a chicken and I turn the chicken upside down and kick, so it turns me it’s back side, and I do that to the chicken to get an egg. I was a bad bitch of a child.

PM: I was gonna say, sounds like you got in a lot of trouble.

KA: I was a bitch. And after I get the egg I got two or three eggs then I got a cup. I go in the woods, we got a well there we can use some water from the well and put it in the cup and we go inside and we can boil an egg inside there, sometimes take the egg of the stove and cash it in for something, and momma come "Katherine, what happened to that chicken egg?" I don't know ma'am. Cause the chicken backside turned upside down, look I be there assaulting them and I got the egg. I came a long way lord.

DS: At least you were crafty, wow.

KA: Yeah. I came a long long way, I made it.

PM: So now you didn't have time for any fun activities?

KA: Didn't have time for any fun. Had to take care of children, take care of momma, go on the farm, did I tell you all those things I did? I had to do all that, pick the meadows, cut broccoli, when I got older I cut broccoli, I pull radish, I dig sweet potato, I broke corn, I broke peas. I did all that on the farm, I had to do it, and I had to do it enough.

PM: What was Christmas like?

KA: What is Christmas? Christmas wasn't much different momma cook the rice then, cook the rice and cook the peas, plenty of peas on one side. But we don't have no present or no Christmas tree, we never had that. Momma had too much children she couldn't buy something for all of them. Maybe you would have a new pail, or a chick bag, when she got the rice she take the bag and she would piece the bag and take it and make the panties from it because she was a seamstress. And make that into a new pair of drawers. Sometimes I would go swimming in my panties because I had no trunks. I got beaten but I had my panties. I turn around like this, turn around like this (brings hands up to waist and puts arms out), I was a catch of a girl. I had to do what I had to do.

CM: When we were younger though, Christmas for us was an apple, an orange, and three pieces of the hard candy

KA: Yessir.

CM: Yes, hard candy, so if there was somebody in the neighborhood who got a wagon, or sometimes somebody might get a bicycle, then it's everybody's toy. Everybody did that, everybody rode in the wagon, everybody rode in the bicycle, but basically it was an apple, an orange in a brown sack and a few pieces of hard candy, that was it.

DS: Wow.

KA: That's it.

DS: It's enough to make you smile though

CM: Oh yeah, everyone else around you had it too.

KA: I told them we had fig tree and we had peach tree and at those times when we were picking them sometimes my momma jar it, sometimes my momma keep it there and had it like that. But you couldn't go and buy a fruit that was that ripe and we was poor.

CM: And like I told somebody once, I never knew I was poor, because everybody around us had the same thing. So we thought that was great, there was one boy in our neighborhood who lived on John Frep, he had a TV, we used to call him BG, and everybody gathered at his house to watch the TV, of course it was black and white, but everybody was there. Even when I remember when I was young, papa, my daddy, would kill the hogs, that was a great time in the neighborhood, killing the pigs, because everybody ate. And what he does was he would kill the hog and he would cut it up and he would send a piece of meat to all of the neighbors, everybody would get a small portion of that pig, then they would have the fire going, course they wanna clean the intestines, we call it chitlins, they clean that some of the woman were there cleaning it, then they would give us a little tiny piece at the fire, they give us a tiny piece, and we would put it on a stick, or a store it in a brick on the fire and let it cook there and boy that was a great day. That was a great day we ate well that day, you know. We had a piece of meat, usually we don't have meat, you know. If they had a chicken they cut the chicken up and the pieces were so small that we hardly got any, so when we got that piece of meat, that was a great day there, so you know,

KA: In my day we had something called Ho-hong, we had something called lake blasting, we had peach tree in the yard and you take the pit from the peach and you draw that

CM: That's some medicine.

KA: Medicine, yeah, and the ho-hong and lake blasting now, people don't want to do that now because it's a drug. Lake blasting and ho-hong if they see you doing that now they want to put you in jail. Because you used to go to the pier and take it and take it and dry it beside your house it like that but now if the people come buy and see that they gonna put you in jail for that.

CM: It's an herb.

KA: Yeah, yeah, herb.

CM: You use it for colds.

KA: And there's a certain time of year you can't find it so if you do find it, you take it and put it in a bundle and put it inside your house. And just like you store the shrimp, the shrimp and fish, so we take the fish so we clean the fish and we take salt and we put it on top of the house loft and let it dry, and same thing with the shrimp, and when the time come we take the shrimp and go like that (rubs hands together vigorously) and the skin come off the shrimp. And we take that fish and put it on the screen, and also the ho-hong, and sometimes my daddy take it and put it down low. And sometimes in the night my daddy go and start a fire and roast it and it was just upstairs so we would hear him when he goes up stairs, but we ain't got no bed, we on the floor. Boys and girls all that, and we ain't got no mattress we take, my daddy take the shuck off the corn and make mattress out of that, so we lay on the pillow and the mattress, and I come a long way now, a long way.

PM: That's true.

KA: Laying on shuck to --

CM: They didn't have refrigerators, that's how they kept the food --

KA: We didn't have refrigerator, instead of that we had a man come by with the ice. We take the ice and we dig a hole, and put it [the food] in a bag with the ice and put it inside the ground, and then we cover it up and after that you got something called ice mouth. You put it in the ice mouth and if your children got spots of white on their mouth when you had no cold water or anything, we got water from the well, that's the water we had. And a cold drink of water from the well, the ox drink the water, the horse drink the water, and we had to bring that water, yes ma'am we had a long walk to go get that water and carry it to the house.

PM: That was the good cold water?

KA: Yes ma'am we came a long way baby.

DS: The self-sufficiency just never ceases to amaze me, just how resourceful making us of the land, and you mentioned before you didn't know you were poor you were like "well, that's a matter of opinion" and if it's not defined it sounds pretty rich to me when you have food, family, fellowship, education, it's remarkable, you mentioned you went to Penn School, you also went to Beaufort, I'm thinking about the years that you were in Beaufort school, you were in the thick of integration at the time.

CM: Yes, I was. When I went to Robert Smalls, when I left St. Helena elementary I went to Robert Smalls over there. In fact I've been to all the schools in Beaufort, (laughs) but when I went to Robert Smalls, during integration what we did, and I don't know, we wanted the smartest kids to integrate and I know we didn't have to do it but that's what the African American people did at Robert Smalls and they had you take a little test and if you wanted to you could go to Beaufort Elementary and that's where I went, I split up with my classmates. It was closer to my house, because we walked to school it was closer to my house anyway so I went to Beaufort elementary. During that time when segregation ended in the schools, then went on the Beaufort High, but I was one of the few, the very few, that left Robert Smalls to go to Beaufort Elementary. But when I went there my eyes were really opened because we really thought in our minds that white people were smarter than us, we were taught that, we were told that and when I went there my eyes were like ohhhh, no.

DS: I don't think so.

CM: No, I don't think so, I knew not. I knew not, so you know, my eyes were really opened that that was not so. I was just as smart as they were, you know, and excelled, did very well, but that was something that we were taught coming up. We were taught that so,

PM: Would you say it was a smooth transition or did you have some of the racial tension at some point?

CM: Oh, lot of racial tension it was not smooth at all, a lot of people, this is when Beaufort Academy started, Beaufort academy started so that they [white people] were pulling their children out and segregating them. So one friend, well he's my friend now, he called me a nigger, yeah Steve did and we were in the hallway, and, of course, I ran after him because I was gonna beat him up, but he sure did. Couldn't catch up with him but I kicked his books all over there and we went through high school together and when he sees me now, we're you know, best of friends and we talk, you know. I think he soon learned that that should never have happened, but he was going through what he had learned also,

but it was not a smooth transition, not at all, but we survived, and then everybody started coming around, cause we had a good, what now, 40th class reunion the last time. Really good, and he was there, so it was very good, very good. In fact, I think our class when we graduated was the largest ever because they never had Battery Creek School and all the kids from Burton, Beaufort, and St. Helena came together, in fact, in 1971 when I graduated because of bringing the school together they choose the eagle mascot from St. Helena, they choose the colors, ok, from Beaufort High, the colors came, excuse me green and white from Robert Smalls and they kept the name Beaufort High. So the eagle mascot, the colors, all of us merged together as one. Yeah so that was great.

DS: It sends a strong message when you do that, to the world.

CM: It did, it really did. So that was a good combination there.

DS: I'm guessing as the years went on the percentage of African Americans being integrated did steadily increase from 2nd grade to high school you definitely saw a noticeable difference?

CM: Yes, Yes, it increased, it really did, and transition then become smoother. Children, you know, children we learn and imitate what the adults do, but if you allow children to be children, they come together and they don't see color if you allow them to, it's just what we imitate when we see other people do.

DS: Kind of like that Norman Rockwell painting right?

CM: Yes, yes, definitely.

KA: And it was good because when I been to Robert Smalls school a boy bite me one day, and he thought he was doing something so good, and he run and hid in the bathroom, and I went in the boys bathroom behind him and they caught me inside the bathroom and they sent me home for five days. They sent a note with my neighbor and I tell him, don't you tell momma, and he didn't give momma that note. And I used to ride the bus and go to Beaufort every day but I didn't go to school for five days, but I bet you I didn't go in that bathroom and bite him there too. You think you going in the bathroom and you can hide? I went in the bathroom behind him. They sent me home but I went to school everyday momma didn't ever know. I give him a little bit of food when he comes to my table, I say here have some food but never tell my momma, if she asks tell her that every morning I always go to school, yes ma'am.

DS: Always got away. From all these stories did you have a nickname? I gotta ask.

KA: Nickname? Her son, which is my son-in-law call me Kitty Mouse, I don't know who give me that name but you don't call me that name. My name is no Kitty Mouse My name is Mrs. Katherine Alston

DS: Yeah, I think of Tom and Jerry and then hear Kitty Mouse and think you're probably just as clever and crafty (laughs) was Jerry right?

PM: We sincerely appreciate both of you talking with us today and sharing these stories and I'm sure children in Cleveland will certainly identify with you (points at KA) because they can be pretty mischievous. But I'm sure they're going to appreciate hearing all the stories and knowing what it was like to grow up here in St. Helena.

KA: (to CM) do you have the hiccups?

CM: Is it possible for us to get a copy of this?

DS: Oh, we definitely can get you a copy.

CM: un-cut?

DS: Yes.

CM: Yeah, you know, because I would love to keep some of that storytelling that she has and some of the stuff I told you today.