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Atkins, Albert

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Interviewee: Albert Atkins (b. 1927)
Interviewers: Deborah Oden, Ishmael Lewis
Location: Penn Center, St. Helena, SC
Date: July 15, 2013

DO: Is it Atkins?

AA: Atkins.

DO: Hi, it's Deborah Oden and Ishmael Lewis at Penn Center on July 15th doing oral history with Mr. Albert Atkins for the Gullah archives. Mr. Atkins you wanna start telling us about yourself?

AA: Ok.

DO: Just start talking. Just tell us about your life growing up. Tell us about farming. What you do, yes? Family?

IL: Where you were born?

[Clip 2]

AA: Well, back in the day when I was coming up. We mostly had a farm to deal with, you know, that's the only way we could eat. You had your vegetable, your chicken, and your horse, and your chicken, and hogs. We used to kill them, you know, we had a chicken practically every other week or so. Then you have you the egg. Then maybe during Christmas time we kill a hog and we share them with the family, and a couple of people around us.

IL: What year were you born?

AA: In 1927.

IL: Could you tell us any fond memories of your grandparents or your mother?

AA: Yeah well, my grandmother, they had a farm. When they had a farm, we used to go there and have them harvests a certain time, you know, have it in a can. We didn't have no refrigerator or freezer they do in that time, you had to can it. You can your tomatoes and okra. Tomatoes by itself or okra by itself. Then you had the dry shrimp. You go in the creek and catch your shrimp and you boil it. Then you put it out in the sun where it can dry out. You used to take it in the afternoon before the dew fall on it. Dew used to fall that time, but now, dew don't fall now. And you put it up. Then the next morning you do the same thing until it's dry. And when it dry, you put it in a bag, and have it in the store house, and kiss air. Then you have to do this fish the same way, you know, catch the fish, clean it, then you put the salt in it. Then you hang it on the line just like you hang clothes and let them dry. Then you had dry fish.

IL: Could you tell us about school? Your first memories of school? What school you may have attended?

AA: Oh, the first school I attended was a school right where I live. We didn't have a school. We had an old hall, you know, an old building there, where they used to have different meetings in. Then we have that school.

DO: What was it called?

IL: Do you remember the name of the school?

AA: Well, it was called Eustace School. Yeah.

IL: And what grade did that go up to?

AA: Sixth. See and you had one teacher. You may have about maybe fifteen to twenty children, from first to the sixth grade. You had to teach them all and you don't have nothing but a little list, maybe a half-hour, to sort of deal with a group. And if you not smart enough you couldn't catch up with anything because you have a time to deal with them and most times children be playing. They don't have time to deal with that, so most times children who come out of school don't know anything.

IL: Did you go to high school?

AA: Yeah, I went to high school.

IL: What high school did you attend?

AA: I went to Robert Small, just in Beaufort with the court houses. You ever see the court house?

IL: Mhm.

AA: Well that's where it was then. Robert Small.

IL: Did you play sports in high school?

AA: No, only thing we had was the softball. You used to run around and hear softball, just to play a game, but we didn't have to, you know, to deal with a group, you know, go from one school to the other.

IL: Were you good?

AA: Yeah.

IL: Tell us a good memory of playing softball.

AA: Well, we go out there and we get ready to have recess. During that time a group of fellas get out there and have a team and we play for about half an hour. Then you quit, go back into class.

IL: Did you follow major league baseball at all?

AA: Well, we played that too. I played that. That was back in the 50s when we play baseball. So every plantation here had a group of boys that have a team, like where I lived out in Eustace. Then we have Warsaw. They had oaks every place there. They had enough fellows to play game and all down here. This place, Wallace Scott, Orange Grove, Lanzin, Tong Fripp, Coffin's Point, Frogmore, you have all, that's the plantation. You have a ball game there.

IL: Who was the best team?

AA: Frogmore, was the best team. They was pretty tough. See they have two or three pitchers, who they can change up on you, you see. By the time you started to him them they change up the pitcher. Then we would play a game like a, we play nine innings sometimes we play one to nothing, one to two, two to three.

IL: What position did you play?

AA: I was the catcher, yeah.

IL: Did you pitch? Were you ever at pitch?

AA: No, I didn't pitch.

IL: How was your hittin'?

AA: My hit was good. Yeah, my hit was good. You gotta be very careful to catch me. Yeah, I get a hit every time.

IL: Did you steal any bases?

AA: Oh yeah, I was the best stealer. Yeah.

IL: And what team did you play for again?

AA: Eustace Tago, Eustace Tago.

IL: What color were your uniforms?

AA: We had a gray.

IL: Gray?

AA: Gray. Yeah, and we had numbers on it.

DO: So was that the Negro league? Was it called that or just community leagues?

AA: We didn't have it like that, so we didn't get into the major league, just a regular team.

IL: Do you remember the first game you've ever listened to or seen, major league baseball? Did you all follow major league baseball?

AA: No, well, I'd see it once in a while but during that time I was working. You don't get to see the ball game most places, maybe have a place down in Saxon Village. It's a baseball team now because all those places, what had a game, no boys there, nobody to play now. Nobody to play now, so you go to that one place and play on Sunday because most times everybody is working. They don't get no chance to work on through the week. Most of them might have a game on Saturday and they definitely will have a game on Sunday.

DO: He's talking about professional baseball. He's asking you did you ever watch it, or listen to it on the radio, or have a favorite player?

AA: Oh oh yeah, I watched that.

IL: Could you tell us anything else about high school? Did you have to work when you were going to school?

AA: Oh yeah, after school I had a job in town for a restaurant. We worked until about ten or twelve at night, sometimes 11 o'clock.

IL: How were you able to wake up the next day to go to school?

AA: Oh, it's easy. With no trouble. See most of the time you stay up till twelve and one o'clock anyway. Yeah, you get up and go to school.

IL: Were your parents strict?

AA: Well, they wasn't too strict. Between all the boys, we had five full brothers and one sister, so we always on the go.

IL: Are you the oldest?

AA: No, I was the third one. The fourth child.

IL: Did you learn anything from your older brothers?

AA: Oh yeah.

IL: Tell us some of the things they taught you.

AA: Well, most times we go out there and teach us how to swim. We used to swim at night. We go to the river and swim at night in the river. Yeah, and how to fight.

IL: You said fight? Taught you how to fight?

AA: How to fight, yeah.

IL: Was there a lot of fights then?

AA: How to steal.

IL: Steal? Survive, huh?

AA: Well, you know.

IL: Things that you was supposed to know.

AA: We'd go some places and somebody would have a watermelon patch. We would go there and probably one of us would go in there, walk in there, and get a watermelon, and walk back, so they didn't know who, you know, they didn't see no track.

IL: Let me ask you this. Do you have any other memories of your mother or your father?

AA: Oh yeah.

IL: Could you talk about them for us?

AA: Well, our father would work. My mother worked a little cashier job during the day and after that we'll be home. You gotta be home at a certain time in sundown. You gotta be in the house where you go to bed.

IL: So that was your curfew?

AA: Yeah, curfew.

IL: Sundown?

AA: Sundown.

IL: What other types of things did you get into after school if you weren't working?

AA: Well, when we come home, we go to the neighbor house and I'll help them do their work in the field. Then they'll come by and help us in the field, you know, like that.

IL: What did you all grow?

AA: Watermelon, cantaloupe, tomatoes, string beans, butter beans, peas, okra, all that stuff.

IL: You all didn't have to go to the store that often then, huh?

AA: No, you didn't have to go to the store.

IL: Mmm.

AA: You didn't have nothing to go to the store with because you ain't had no money. During that time, when I started working, I was making \$4.15 a week. That was big money then, but now fellas over who wanna work for eight dollars an hour.

DO: So did you give your money to either family or did you keep it for yourself?

AA: I give my pay to my family. See, if we somehow make \$4.75, I'll keep the 75 cent and give them the four dollars.

IL: What did you like to spend your money on?

AA: Well, do enough time to get a bottle of soda for a nickel and an around the world sweet roll. It was round, you know, like that for a nickel. Once somebody couldn't eat one, yeah.

DO: So, basically when you talk about supporting your family, you supported your family through meals through the fields and the river. Can you talk a little bit about the farming and a little bit about fishing, or what did your family eat for meals?

AA: Well, during the time we was working in the field, we worked not far from the river, maybe a quarter of mile from the river, less than that. We'd tie in low, we go out there and have a gig because flounder and stingray. We go and catch that, and comeback, and clean that. We have that for dinner. We have that for dinner.

[Clip 3]

AA (continued): We'd have shrimp, catch crab, all that stuff. There's always something you can-

IL: What was your favorite dish?

AA: I think it was like shrimp, we'd have crab, crab and sweet potato, crab and grits.

IL: Did you all get together as a family for the holidays?

AA: Yeah, we'd come down to the corner down there like on the 4th of July, Labor Day, that was a big deal for us. You had to walk, there wasn't no car hardly back in the young days.

DO: And before the farmer's market, how did you harvest and sell your produce?

AA: Oh. During the time I start that farm I plant my own crop. I plant about 2 acres of different things. At harvest time I harvest it.

DO: Tomatoes or what?

AA: Tomatoes, corn, string beans, sweet peas, corn, cucumber, okra.

DO: And did you sell it to the packing house or did you sell it yourself?

AA: Well we sell the tomatoes and cucumbers to the packing house, they'll buy that. But because they have tomatoes and stuff that grow on plastic – you ever see the plastic – you have to hold them, plant that but now that cut us out because it takes so much for the plastic-

IL: Too expensive.

AA: -that you have to have irrigation, if you don't have irrigation you won't hardly make them because the sun's too hot and stuff wouldn't grow.

DO: So that stuff pushed more farmers out?

AA: Yeah, pushed out.

DO: What about the fishing and shrimping? What happened to local people with fishing and shrimping?

AA: Well, we got pushed out with that too.

DO: How?

AA: We got different people coming in from different places that go casting and there ain't much left unless we go in at night. We go in at night, we catch a lot of shrimp during that time.

DO: Wasn't there a time where you could go anytime, anyplace and go fishing and shrimping until the big industries took over?

AA: Yes.

DO: And all of a sudden you have to have a license to do everything?

AA: Yeah, you have to have a license to go fishing with. You catch like bass and trout. The bass gotta be a certain size and length and the bass the same way. But other fish now you can catch as many as you want. It's the bass and trout for the sport fishing. See, you catch that you get a good price on that. But like grouper and shark and stuff like that, they were less, you could catch all you wanted of that.

IL: What did you do after high school?

AA: Oh, I went into the service.

IL: What branch?

AA: I went into the service in 1945.

DO: Army? Navy?

AA: Army.

IL: Could you tell us about your service?

AA: Service? Well I went in the service the 19th of August, 1945 from there we went to Fort Jackson, you know, in Columbia. Then we stayed there for a night or two, then we pass, then they ship us out to Texas. We went to Texas and took training and after training you get a job you know? And after training I was the meal carrier, I carried meals to different places.

IL: Did they ever send you out of the country?

AA: No. During that time so many people, the war was over by that time so we had a shipment to go overseas, but instead of sending us overseas, like the job I had, I was a cook so I went in the kitchen and cooked for about 11 months.

IL: Did they teach you how to cook?

AA: Oh, I know how to cook.

IL: Who taught you?

AA: Well, I was working at a store in Beaufort, a restaurant in Beaufort, yeah.

DO: When you were in the military, were you treated – was it an all African American unit or were you with whites and blacks?

AA: No, just blacks. Blacks.

DO: Segregation.

AA: Yeah, we were separated.

DO: Segregated.

AA: Yeah, but we had a white commanding officer and stuff like that, but we didn't um, but after forty-eight when I was there they changed over instead of have an army air corp that I was in it changed over to army air force. In 1948 they changed it over.

IL: Did you learn anything from the military?

AA: Well yeah.

IL: Could you tell us about what you learned?

AA: Well, I had a chance to go to places I'd never been and never thought I would be. I was only in Texas back in the days and oh about eight or nine years ago, while I was in [?], we had a trip to go different places. I had a chance to go back to Texas. But I was a long ways from where I had been when I was in the service. Where I was in Texas there was just a few blacks, you know, in places a few blacks. It's a wide open country out there.

IL: After you got out of the service, did you come back here?

AA: Yeah I came back home. Then I went and had a little job and then, about, I can't remember what year that was, we had a chance to go to school and you're making a hundred and twenty dollars a month.

IL: What school did you go to?

AA: Robert Small. Back to the same school I left.

IL: What did you study?

AA: Well, we studied how to carpenter. We had so many years to do one thing, then if you have any extra you go into something else. I did carpenter for two years, then bricklayer for another half a year.

IL: So if someone comes and visits you on the island and asks you what does "Gullah" mean to you, what do you say?

AA: Gullah.

IL: What is Gullah?

AA: That's just a broken language.

IL: Did you speak it?

AA: Well, yeah.

DO: But Gullah is more than a language, it's a way of life.

AA: Eh?

DO: It's a way of life, it's the way you live, the way you walk, you talk, raise your family. It's your culture.

AA: No. It's just the way you talk. Even though Gullah, you know, instead of saying "this" you say a different word.

DO: "Dis."

AA: Cut it short.

IL: When you were in the military did people notice that you spoke differently?

AA: Yes they did, most people do, they believe in that, then the first thing they do, the people from Charleston, they'd call you Geechee, they'd say that you a Geechee, you know that you eat alligator, but we've never seen alligator. (laughter)

IL: Crab. Shrimp. What was your nickname growing up?

AA: Well, my nickname was Buster. Yeah.

IL: Can you think about any of the nicknames your friends might have had?

AA: Yeah. Quite a few of my old friends have passed away now. Where I live, I'm the oldest man over there. Um-hm.

IL: Your friends coming up, what were their nicknames?

AA: Oh they – Skitter (sp?).

IL: Skitter?

AA: Skitter, like Thomas, John.

DO: Those are real names. Give us nicknames.

IL: Where I'm from, I have friends named Pro, Jock, Box, a whole variety of names.

DO: Big Boy.

AA: Nickname. I'm Buster. But we don't have names like you say.

DO: Who gave you the nickname Buster?

AA: Well, I'm just called, when I was born you know somebody com by call that boy Buster. But another lady gave me the name Albert.

IL: Did you all have doctors on the island when you were coming up?

AA: Well yeah, we had a man down there by the corner by the name of Dr. Billy.

DO: George W. Billy.

IL: Did your parents have any home remedies?

AA: Oh yeah.

IL: Can you tell us about some of the home remedies?

AA: Well if you walk on a nail you get a piece of board and slap in a couple of times and get a penny and put it over that hole and tie it up and you're good to go. But now, if you get that nail in you now it'll give you lockjaw.

IL: How about if you caught a cold? Try to stay awake? Stay out of school?

AA: Yeah, they give you um. You pee in a cup and take a drink and it'll knock that cold out of you. (laughter)

IL: Would it work?

AA: Oh yeah. If you have some, we call it fever bush that grows wild, if you have a fever you put it on your head and you tie it up and go to bed and next morning that fever bush will dry up and the fever's gone. That's what we had, because you know you didn't have no money to pay the doctor and it wasn't too much sickness you gotta learn to do something.

IL: Could you tell us about how many children you have?

AA: I had six. Four of them died. Got two left and I adopted seven of them brothers and sisters.

DO: So you had thirteen in all?

AA: Thirteen in all. Yes. Four sisters and two brothers in her family.

IL: Could you tell us, what was your approach to parenting? Were you a strict parent?

AA: I let my daughter take care of that. She'd teach them how to do and whatnot. Didn't have too much trouble with that because I had to work.

IL: Did you have them working as well?

AA: Oh yeah, in the field.

IL: What would you have them do?

DO: Everything?

AA: Drop the corn and harvest them a little bit, so when they got out there-

DO: We planted and we hoed the fields and we harvested and we waited until he took it to the market and he'd come back with a big cookie and some-

[Clip 4]

DO: -ice cream for us. That was our thing. So you were married?

AA: Oh yeah, I'd been married for 63 years and then my wife died.

IL: Tell us about your wife.

AA: Oh, she was a gem. She was a lady. She used to work a little bit in the field. She had stuffed cooked when I get home from the field. Stuff like that.

IL: How did you meet?

AA: Mhm?

IL: How did you meet your wife?

AA: I meet on a job that we was on, working in this restaurant but had she lived too far from me after we started working.

[Clip 5]

AA: We met back in 1943. Um-hm.

IL: Could you tell us, how has the island changed since you were younger?

AA: Oh it's a big change because during this time you had, wherever you had to go you had to walk. I used to walk from back up there, I lived up there, there's this church up there, and I would have a chance to get a ride sometimes, but now there's nothing but cars and trucks. Now the kids are riding around in their own cars. I had a car and a truck but now I got rid of the truck, my son has got my truck.

IL: Have race relations changed since you were younger that you can see? Did you grow up around just blacks or was it integrated or?

AA: No, it wasn't integrated. It was integrated – what year that was?

DO: In the 60s.

AA: In the 60s all the schools was integrated. My boys, just two I had in school, a boy and a girl and they went to Beauford High. And that particular morning I was about to get ready, come on let's go, I would take them there, so when I looked the patrol man was behind the schoolbus stopped in the road and they ran on and caught the bus and went to the school. I went over there for a little while, didn't see nobody, everyone was in class and everything was quiet, no race riots or nothing.

IL: When you were in school, what was your favorite subject?

AA: Oh it was math. Yup.

IL: What was it about math that you enjoyed?

AA: Well, to make those figures you know how to subtract and how to divide and how to multiply and all that, that was something. But now they, they don't have it like we did at that time, they have something different, but the same thing but it's different, you could hardly teach our children what they are taught now because it's different from the way we had it.

IL: So, you knew how to survive on almost nothing.

AA: Oh yeah.

IL: Do you have inheritance property on the island?

AA: Yeah.

IL: How did you get it?

AA: Well, see I had it after my mother and father died, it was four or five of us living then and in order to redeem the land you have to pay the tax, two or three dollars a year and it finally went up you know so my brothers didn't want to be bothered with it, so that's how come I got it.

IL: Do you have family that still lives on it now?

AA: Oh yeah.

IL: Who lives on the property now?

AA: My granddaughter and my grandson-in-law.

IL: You said you went to Brick Church, were you always a member of Brick Church?

AA: Yeah. Yeah all of us.

DO: So your family, your mom and all were members of Brick?

AA: No, my momma was a member of Ebenezer and my father was a member of Ebenezer.

IL: So how did you end up going to Brick?

AA: My wife was a member of the Brick Church first so I joined it for her and I was glad to do it. That's what we do here if the wife is first or whoever is first they go.

IL: That's the church you still belong to?

AA: Yeah.

IL: How has religion - spirituality - played a role in your life?

AA: Oh a big one, 'cause I become a deacon, but now I'm a deacon emeritus now.

IL: What was your role as a deacon?

AA: Oh, well visit the sick...community... I have to think about it.

IL: How did you become a deacon?

AA: Well, during that time when a young man come up in the church, during my time there was nothing but old folks and during that time that I become a deacon I was the youngest, one fellow was younger than I was, excuse me, there were ten of us.

DO: They nominated you?

AA: Yeah.

IL: Oh, so the congregation nominated you?

AA: Yeah.

DO: Did you have to go through a certain – do anything special in order to become a deacon or just not being nominated, that's all?

AA: Just being nominated. That you know how to pray. And how to -

DO: There was a training? You had to go through a training to learn what to do as a deacon?

AA: Oh yeah yeah yeah.

IL: When you were younger were you baptized or did they have you seek?

AA: I was...seek.

IL: Could you tell us about that experience?

AA: Well, during that time these old people you know they was very strict and while you do a little seeking you pray, then you pray about that person because it's gonna be about somebody in your neighborhood, then you go to this man and probably he's, they always see you coming, according to what they tell me and what I dream about that afternoon I go over there, we talk about it, what's going on and stuff like that. But during that time, I was married then, then you couldn't be with your wife, you had to be separated from your wife that time.

IL: Did you have to go into the woods?

AA: Not in the woods but you stay on the other side, be on the other side.

IL: And how long did that process take?

AA: Well, it just depends on... I think it took me what, about three weeks to get over that.

IL: Do you have any hurricane stories?

AA: Yeah, we had a story here, we had a storm here in um...

DO: '42. Gracie? '42. [Gracie occurred in 1959]

AA: '42? I forgot what year that was. But we had a storm and we called it Gracie's storm. During that time, Sunday morning I was over at the [unknown word]? You know – you've heard of a [unknown word]? I was over there on the weekend and be coming to my cousin's house, I was spending the night with my cousin. So we got up that morning, then the wind started blowing, then the rain, then the tide started coming. The tide sweeps, comes crossing out of nowhere and the tide was practically all the place over here. A man was, a man, a family with his wife and four kids got drowned.

IL: How were you able to survive it?

AA: Well, we stayed in the house. We had this two room house and when the tide want come in, a cousin of mine knock a hole in the front door and the tide come in and went through to the back and the tide go out through the back and it didn't last too long, but it was rough.

IL: Who was with you? Who else were you with?

AA: Well I was with my cousin. Yeah it was two men, a lady from off this island up there up in Oaks that come across our way. They found her the next day, that Monday morning and the man found all his kids that morning, Monday morning.

IL: So after the storm, was there a lot of devastation?

AA: Not bad, there was a few houses torn down, but um-hm.

IL: Yep. What kind of advice could you give the youth about how to make it like you've made it? What kind of life lessons could you tell them?

AA: Yeah, that would be hard for them to understand because they wouldn't want to go through that kind of life that I went through, you know, you have a certain thing. During that time you have one a pair of shoes and pair of pants and a shirt and you go to school and when you get home you take that off and you get raggy, you know. But now they come from school you they still dress up.

DO: So what things do you think they should have? What kind of values in order to make it? Because you had to have certain values in order for you to make it – determination, honesty because you started selling your products. You became an entrepreneur with your own business.

AA: Yeah, but you know, they don't want to work in the field now. That's why so many of these Mexicans come over now, because they don't want to work in the field.

DO: So they don't to work in the field because they just don't, or because they don't pay enough?

AA: Well, during that time, see they work on Saturday and Sunday in the field, but they don't want to do that, like packing house give them work, then they work half a day and then they don't come back.

DO: And I think it's also because they have more choices. You didn't have a choice, it was do or die. Now they have a variety of choices and they decide to take the easier way out rather than go through all of that.

IL: Is there anything else you can tell us that you remember, that you would like to say?

AA: Well, I can talk about these kids. During the time they were coming up - they was young and their mother got sick and called me and I went over to Savannah to check on her. She passed away the same night so I brought the two youngest ones home the next day, kept them over for awhile, then back. That was the situation. And then after the funeral I bring them all home, seven of them, so the in-laws they had planned you know what they wanted to do with them, but I am glad I got them because we had the chance to – they all finished school.

[End Clip 5]