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Robert Middleton (b. John Robert Ford)

2011

Interviewers: Zakkiyah Bergen, Portia Morgan, David Slutzky

ZB: Um, I am Zakkiyah Bergen, and I am going to be interviewing with my colleagues Mr. Robert Middleton. We are from the History Connections. Mr. Middleton, we are so excited to be talking to you. Tell us your story, when did you come here?

RM: Uh, my story, I came here as a kid, I was a year old. I was one of those illegal adopted babies, came from Philadelphia. 1931, I think, that's when I was adopted. My adopted parents is from here, but they move here and brought me as a kid to raise. Well what happened they told my mother, told my father that they was comin on vacation. But my grandmother knew better, knew that they wasn't coming back. Back in those days you could get debt hand or something, but all them do it in South Carolina. So I came here, and I grow up here went to school at Penn. Which I don't regret growin up here. But Penn school is one of the greatest place. If you wanna live in this count— island. I grew up on a farm. I had no problem growin up as a kid. I had all my rooms, I had, I raise my own cows and hogs, my adopted parents had their own farm, I fished. I could help with the boat, cast net, boat. We would, old man would what was amazing about it, we would catch enough fish for the community, would feed himself. Back then you could sell about eight fish for 25 cents. 25, you could get eight big fish for 25 cents. And what you didn't get, you could kill the hogs in the wintertime, and we would kill four or five of them, we had a smokehouse. And we would go from house to house to cut one up completely. And we had the kids had to walk from one house to another and share with all the people. But this wasn't, you know, I didn't know my mother and father until I was thirty years old. When I grow up, I went to Parris Island to work after I got outta school, and I went in the military, which I spent two years in Germany. And I engineer, came back, and I decided to go to Philadel— I was on my way to New York because my adopted uncle had a job for me. So I stopped in Philadelphia with a friend. because two marines on Parris Island with a friend of mine, so I rode with them, they were from Jersey. And I stopped in Philadelphia and I got a job the next day, so I didn't go to New York. So I stayed in Philadelphia about two years before I had this dream that my mother was sick. And a man came to me and told me this and that in my dream and told me "your mother is sick. I know your mother and grandmother and your mother is sick." So I went and they had a black, they got a black newspaper in Philadelphia, what you call it, the Philadelphia Tribune. I went there and talk to the manager. And he said, "Robert, somebody should know something." What he told me to go and take a picture, bring it back, and he run an ad in the paper, that uh, wouldn't cost me nothing. So he did. He wrote the article, put my name and picture but he get the wrong address. So the paper, paper come out the next day, and my aunt said that she saw the paper and she saw this picture and thought of my father because she said she'd saw me many times, but she wanted to ask me because me and my father resembled each other. But when she read the article, she called my father and told him to get the paper. She didn't tell him what happened, and when he got the paper my mother was in Washington. That's where my great grandparents are from, D.C. My great grandmother used to work with Woodrow Wilson. But my grandmother, and my mother, was with our cousins in Washington, had a nervous breakdown. So she said when my father called her and told her that Robert was in town, she thought he got drunk and went crazy, because you know this is thirty years later. So he, same day the paper came in, my sister and my father came looking for me but they had the wrong

address. So what he did, he didn't want a whole lot of publicity for this so he called the guy who still went to school together. And he told him that he think he knows some of my family. The next time I come around to the paper send me around, and he'd given him some information. So I went back to the paper nice guy, and he told me to go and to the bar, which the bar was three blocks away I was living, which I used to go in every other day, and I went in the bar and I got to the door, he reach out the bar and said, "how you doing?" I said I'm thinking that people were calling and telling him I was coming. He come in the back, he was tellin me about my adopted mother, my adopted parents, father and describe them to me. He still didn't tell me who he was. So somebody call him and tell him who you talking to, they thought I was a customer, and he said, I heard him and he tell somebody, "that's my son." And I had a glass, I almost dropped the glass out of my hand.

ZB: Wow.

RM: And then everybody came around. And I thought I was living in, my adopted parents were living in West Phillie. I thought, they were on, all my family moved to West Phillie. And soon as we got to take me to my mother house, there's house that I walk by three or four times a week, people sitting on the step, my mother was sittin on the step, and hear the ladies in the door with my mother. I could, I couldn't believe it. So I, I went home, and she told me, we talk for a while and then she told me to go home, and all everybody after school and work. So I came and, I went and told my wife, and I laid down, and the funniest thing about it is look like I couldn't find nothing to wear that looks right. Every time I'd put something on I'd say... and I have, I'd put a shirt down and my cousin look at it and she die, she said my shirt had so much starch in it, I couldn't turn my neck in it (everyone laughs). I was trying, what I was trying to impress them. Cause I didn't. I thought they wouldn't accepted me. And every time, the closer I got to the house, the more scared I got. Cause the house was full, just like it was somebody funeral, somebody's funeral, everybody was over and I, you know I'm goin in the house, and they had all these pictures out there with my father we look alike and he start introducing me to everybody, everybody huggin. And they took me just like I was there for all of my life. And I would have to go to my mother house, my aunt house every day for three months, I could go anywhere, I could go to the bar, I was a celebrity, my father was well known and— cause he used to play basketball, was Wilt Chamberlain my father, you know he was a basketball player, he and his brother. And they all knew him. And everywhere I go, all they'd have to say, there go Cup's son. And the rest of where I go, I didn't have to pay for nothing, if someone, they all accepted me and my family accepted me and my mother's sister was closer to me than my mother. She cried when she saw me, my baby aunt, and she explained to me what happened. My mother didn't tell me because, until my father died. After my father died, me and my mother told me, my ma told me exactly what happened. But I met my grandmother, too, I met my grandmother, she was living with my momma. And she didn't want, she didn't want to talk about it. My mother said not that she didn't want, wanted me, but she didn't want to, the truth to come out because she told my father a lie, and she didn't want, but. My adopted parents, growing up here was great people, but they was two loving people. And I, and I told my mother and my father had to be the best thing that they give me because I grew up respecting people. I grew up here, went to the service, I came back and my adopted parents didn't, they didn't, they take it, I think they want it to happen. But they didn't know. Cause my adopted aunt and my grandmother were friends. And I was born in South Phillie but in West Phillie, they were givin me to my adopted aunt. But she couldn't

take care of me cause she was working so she gave me to her sister. Yeah, but my adopted parents didn't know my name, and that's the funny thing about it they had either, they had my, when I went in the service, they had my birth a year earlier than when I got my birth certificate. It's cost me \$450 to get the birth certificate.

ZB: Now you said um, when you were growing up down here you used to go to the Prayer House?

RM: We didn't go the, what I used to do you'd go to the Praise House three times a week. Sunday night, Tuesday night, and Thursday night. One night for the womens, one night for the men, and also, when you go, become a member of the church, they had a thing goin then, it came from Africa, that the child who're here to have a seeker but somebody to teach you. And you had to go around, but that, my father believe, they didn't know what, they were just doin it, but I find out later, I was they were doin it during slavery. They couldn't go in church, they couldn't go worship God, but they would go in the woods, they had a certain way to try to hide it that the master didn't know what they, what the, what group they were. When the people when they go into that area into a tent, they could tell them by the way they had they hair tied. But they used, they had to use that in the old days, the church, they had to do that. And you had to go through these, meet these ministers, and these people, and they would teach you things and if you missed teach, anything happen in the community, the leaders in the community would go into prayer, Praise House and take something. If somebody gets in a fight, and they cut each other, well somebody would pray for doctor Bailey. See doctor Pritchen and Dr. Bailey, his office is down there, he knew everybody. And he would raise, he would raise em. But I, you know like I tell people, I was lucky to grow up here, because my mother told me, you know, she tried to kill herself, but she had no where. She was married before, but then she went back to her mother with two of my brothers, oldest brother and sister. And then when she got pregnant with my father, before they got married, my grandmother give her hard way to go. She fell down the step, almost kill herself trying to get rid of me. And that affected my right side of my body. And when I was a little boy, kids comin up, I could hardly move my right side of my body. But by growing up in the country and plowing them plow, and working the farm, and fishing the rowing them boats and stuff? It strengthen my, my uh. Cause I was a trying, when I went they accept me in the army, cause everybody said, when I wasn't goin, pass the examination, you know.

HH: But you did.

RM: I did I stayed two years in Germany. But I, growing up here, I used to walk the dirt road to churches, I used to walk here, that's, this road that you see there, I used to walk from my house there and cut through them those roads come to school.

ZB: Ok, you walk under the...

RM: I went to Penn, but in the community, the East community has this two little schools that go to sixth grade. Little kids could ride the bus they had two buses. I went there, graduate then I could get into Penn. But I, like I said, I enjoyed goin over and this place was, the changes was good, the only bad change is the people. People are not close together like they use to. It's not as close knit community. And that's what we is trying to bring back. Because I think that's why the

young people, we don't have that community gathering like we used to do, you know. Those fools walk to church. And they would, had respect for each other, they would argue to the point of fight, but if you, like a man and wife, and you go in there, somebody come in their, they act like they ain't never, there was nothing going on. And it used to tickle me to see that, you know. Them people were swinging at each other, then would come to company we would have to pretend it was lovin, (everyone laughs). But, and each area on this area was a, like this was called Corner Plantation. Each one of these sections was a plantation. Was name after plantation owner. And each section had a baseball team. That's how I know the island so well. Each part of the island had their own baseball team, and I used to love to play baseball and I used to travel the older folks. Go from one. And guess what they used to play baseball for?

ZB: What?

RM: I don't know if y'all heard, but moonshine.

ZB: Oh yeah.

RM: One gallon of moonshine, and whoever won the game got a gallon of moonshine. And the kids would get a fish sandwich. Like if I go, and I play, I would get a fish sandwich. But it was play for one, gallon of Scrap Pine, cause I used to know how to make that too. Cause see the people here didn't go to no whiskey store. We did go to town but only, only on a certain, for clothes. But my father, my adopted father, was a very proud man. He didn't wear no suit, even back in those days, unless it was tailor-made.

ZB: Oh wow.

RM: He had Stacy Adams shoes. He didn't have but one or two, but he had he believe in, that's why I love him, he believe in giving you...he always tell me he had three things, he had a roof over your head, food in your stomach, clothes on your back, and cracks in your legs, you got it made.

ZB: Ok. Alright.

RM: And he, and everybody, everybody used to look up to em! He was a man that could, you know he was. Anybody would go to jail, they would call him he would go and talk, and the people, they were white and black, they would listen to him. He had a respect in the community.

PM: So what did your father do, what was his...

RM: Farmin.

PM: He was a farmer. Ok.

RM: After he left Philadelphia he work the waterfront, but he farm, fish, make nets, make cart wheels, different things, do carpenter work. He do it for himself, he didn't. That's why as a kid I'd get so teased when I was growin up. See because I didn't have to go, see most of the young

people in my area, boys, had to go to work help the family, but I didn't have to, he didn't want me to work but on nobody else's farm. I work for him. But he did, I didn't take a lot of his teachin. Because he, when he died, I was in Philadelphia but I know somebody, he had, I remember, he had a hundred dollar bill in his pocket, til I was a man. He had that one hundred dollars in his wallet until I think the look it, fall apart. And he never took, spend it, but he always buy things cash. Never went, no credit. He didn't believe in credit, even in something like pay by year.

ZB: Ok. No credit.

RM: And he was fortunate, everything he touched seemed, it would come, because he helped people. You know, and back then, the way it was, you had land, a lot of people had land, and like you get to young folk get married and family? They give em a piece of land to build on.

ZB: Ok.

RM: Pay for it, you know. But that's the way, that's the good thing about land, he gave me about ten acres. But he tell, he alway tell me that you must always respect people, regardless of how old you get, somebody older than you, have respect for em. And that's the only, when I met my family, that's the only time me and my older brother had an argument. We had a family day every Saturday I had to go, dad and mom were cooking grits. And I had to cook at my aunt's house, everybody got together. And I would cook breakfast. Bacon and egg, and sausage and them grits. They didn't know how to cook grits. They cook grits soft, and some of em, so my aunt, but she love to cook and she love to learn. Cook grits, collard greens, ham hock. I had a good life, I ain't gonna tell her but I had a good life. Everything that happened to me, happened to me after I got grown. But as a young man, I had a good life, but when I went to meet my, when I met my family, I had a keys to everybody's house. I could go, you know they had trusted me.

ZB: That was here on these islands?

RM: This island and in Philadelphia.

ZB: And in Philadelphia. So both your adopted parents and your real parents came back here?

RM: No, my adopted, none of my family, my biological family are all in Philadelphia.

ZB: Oh, ok.

RM: None of em, they don't know nothin much about South Carolina except my sister and my dead brother, they came down after I move back here. Just cause they thought I was livin on somebody's plantation, they didn't believe I had no property of my own 'til they come down here. And my brother came down, he would come back and move down, but he got sick and died, he's in the grave. The only one that didn't come down is my older sister, and she didn't believe in it. They heard so many bad thing about it's the south. But they were, my other sisters that came down, they, uh, they enjoyed it, they wanted to come back. One came back and spent a

week. But what I'm trying to do, I don't know if I'll do it before I die, but I want us to get a family reunion with all. See I got a lot of nieces and nephews and grands, don't know each other. All they look at pictures, and so I wanted to have a family reunion on Penn. So that's what I was tryin to have. And I hope one day I can work em. You know I have, I've got this book I'm trying to get together. I have one grand, she's into that, she's in Atlanta. She get, she get her doctor degree in Atlanta, she's tryin to get, we're tryin to get the family together. I try to get my, I got a lot of nieces and nephews, they don't want, they want, they want to come here but they don't know the, they don't know, I got so many grandkids, they talk on the phone, but they never met each other, you know. But I had a lot of jealousy goin on when I was comin up, there's, some say I was fallin in a trash can, some say I was left on a park. See then, my adopted parents didn't talk about it, they didn't know, and they had me. And that's what made me, I leave school at 11th grade, I didn't graduate, that's why my, one of my adopted father's friends told me, he said boy, you better learn to work, because my adopted aunt, my adopted mother had some sisters, they didn't care about me none. She didn't care none, if you're from the city, back in that day, you'd be nothing but a tramp, you were a steed, you were... see I do mistake people say, the the rest of the boy do it but I do get the blame. It fall on that city boy, you know. And they used to tell me that uh, I'm not going, my adopted... see I was spoiled, I'm not gonna tell a lie, but I was a little bit spoiled. My adopted parents spoiled me, and they didn't like that, see? And my adopted mother and her sister had an argument, a fight about that. And she come in there, you really gonna take that thing out from the city and think you gonna take him or some idea? She, and I heard her, and she didn't want me to hear what people said, they get to arguin, you know. But I, to me, that's important because my adopted parents were my friends. And my parents. They didn't, you know, they didn't hide nothin from me. They didn't believe in banks. They used to keep they money certain place, and they would show me what this was, what happened. And you know what, I, last thing my adopted father told me after my adopted mother died, and we had another brother, my adopted brother Jimmy, he died in Virginia, he would've spent thirty something years in the service. We were just like twins, we grew up like twins. And when we left, the day we left, he told us if y'all don't come back and keep in touch with me, I'm gonna die, and you wouldn't know. And it almost happened. If it wasn't for a friend of mine the undertaker, and he died and the undertaker was one of my classmates. He called and told me the old man died. When I come here, half of the family didn't know, they were getting ready to bury him. You know. And everything in the house, they took out. I can't find a picture of them, they took beautiful pictures of the two of them together, you know, that I would like to find and put in my book, but somebody took the pictures off the wall, you know. The great big pictures. They took the pictures off the wall.

ZB: But then you still got the legacy and the land.

RM: I got the legacy, the land, and I still got the house. That I grew up in.

ZB: Ok.

RM: I still got the house that I grew up in. And what they, like I say, there is one of the most great, and that Praise House was something, those folks would sing, and shout, and you could, it would make you think. You know you could think. Back then, you know I didn't, it wasn't no Christian, I wouldn't tell a lie, I used to go to church cause I have to, you know. But after I went

away and start learning things, and things started happening to me, I started thinking what you people used to tell me, now, that God wanna show you something. And when I had that dream, just like I'm talking to you, and I didn't even think about my family! Cause I used to walk in Philadelphia, and people used to say, you came from the Fords. That's my blood father name. And I tell them, no. And all the people that I know from Philadelphia, that I met in the last two years before I met my family, everybody knew my family. Right, and everybody knew my family. God pointed them, two guys we were in the service overseas, and he come home, his family was my father, I didn't know, we didn't know he was my father's friend. And one of my adopted family that live here before— next door. The old lady had a son in Philadelphia. And guess who he was friend to— my father. And I met, he said, "what you doin up here?" and my father said, "that's my son," and he said, "no it ain't. That's not your son." Cause my adopted parent's called Andy, "that's Andy's son." And then after he start tellin the truth, you know. But nobody knew. But I had, like I had, God was good to me. Cause I tried to get my kids to believe that everything is possible if you trust in God. But this place, people were so, was close. And I did get along with all of my family, even my teachers. Even one of the meanest guy on the island was a teacher but he learned me to drag my land. Well, and I, and I stayed here, and I went off and I, workin for the city. My wife didn't like the city so she moved back. This is her home. My home is right across from the Praise House. Brick house, over, that's my sister-in-law house. That's my sister-in-law. That's my wife room. All those people, and Mary, my wife, is Gullah.

ZB: Oh, ok.

RM: And her mother, and they, they were close. Their family are big.

ZB: So you married here.

RM: I married, I ma— yeah, I married here. I guess if I hadn't married here I would've married until I was in Philadelphia. But when I was in the service, I married three days before I went overseas!

ZB: OK.

DS: Wow.

RM: And I came back when I was, two years I came back. And I went to Philadelphia, you know, and I had—I was working on Parris Island. I think God work everything for the best. I went for, I was working on Phil— Parris island, we had, it was gettin to, we had a layoff. And they told me I was gonna be, because I just came out of the service, and these two marines walked from Jersey, young guys are, just comin to boot camp. And they were workin on their way to officer club, and they say they was going home on vacation, and if I wanted to go I could ride after them. Where I was going, they say I could ride after them, we could share gas. Yeah. I didn't even have to pay gas money, now, these two men drop me in Philadelphia. And I stayed, I called my uncle up, and told him, my adopted uncle, that I was coming if he had a job, and this other cousin of mine, he took me on his job. And everything work out, everything work out for the better cause if I, if I didn't find my family, didn't had a birth certificate, I wouldn't've been able to get none of my military stuff.

ZB: That's true. So they had everything you needed for your birth certificate.

RM: Yeah. See my birth name is John Robert Ford, I named after my father.

ZB: Ok.

RM: You got, you got that?

DS: I got it.

RM: John Robert Ford. That was my birth name. So I had, it's still in Pennsylvania, but I had to put it in my adopted parents name because back in those days, they get written by word of mouth, if you said, that's my child, that's what they'd take it back then, you didn't... and see, they didn't put it in no record when I come here that they raise me. See they didn't, all the people, they didn't believe in that's what they see, they say, you're my child, that's what they gotta, I got a sister Katy Cod, and that was it. And when I went to, to, you know birth certificate I went to Beaufort, I thought they had it uh answer well they, they ain't no record you was born! And that's how I, and that's when I went and, my mother I met my mother and she got my real birth certificate. John Robert Ford, that's my, my adopted parents drop my first name. You know. Cause I named after my father, I named after. And he was, I was his first child so my two, my older brother and sister is for my mother first husband. But my father, who is still living now, is for my father. And they, but the good thing about it right now I'm here, and different name, but we had a problem in Philadelphia that my aunt and I, every time something happen and they gotta share something, they sending me a paper I gotta sign. Always this paper, although I'm not in the name of the family, you know. But they respect me and call me if anything happen, cause I had one aunt, by the whole bury aunt, the old lady when she frail, after I moved back here, cause I go, I had to go every month to see her. And if a wind blew here, she'd call, see, and she fall and broke her hip and she wouldn't go to the hospital like a, I had to leave here, take her, quit my job and went to Philadelphia. Yeah, for her, you know to go to the hospital.

ZB: That's amazing.

RM: Yeah, but you know like say, if God take. You know, I have a lot of ups and downs in life cause you gonna have that, but everything works out for the good. I even got all my children, and all six grand, none of, none of is sick, everybody's. They're not listenin too much to me but they're doin alright, you know.

ZB: Ok.

RM: But I got one in college, one in the military, one is goin in the military— my great granddaughter. All the grands are grown. Great grand, and one great great grand.

ZB: Ok.

[End clip 1]

[Begin clip 2]

RM: So uh, I enjoy life, I'm tryin to, at this I love Penn, because this is all this place we got left. On this island for history. And this is history. And now on that corner that you turn, and you see that park where they're sittin there, well that's where the main place supposed to be on Labor Day, where everybody on the island would go there. Everybody had a table out there, picnic, and everybody from off the island, they had a band and everything, they had a, and the kids, they used to have a pole, a green, called a greased pole. They took, probably had about twelve, I don't know how many pile of lard and put it on the pole. And put it in the ground and put a dollar on top of it. And whoever go up there and take, got it off, made it slide down.

ZB: Made it slide down?

RM: Made it slide down. But this guy was, one guy was slick, he was muddying himself up, and see by doing that dirt, that mud, was stickin, and (laughs).

ZB: Getting the dollar. Getting the dollar.

RM: Nobody could figure out how he would do it.

ZB: He was the island champion.

RM: Yeah, every year. He would be the island champion. And I sed to be there every, and that's why we tryin to preserve that park and keep it, you know, to remember the history. And that little white building was the juke joint. And the jail. That little white building before the park, you see it.

ZB: Yeah. Juke joint and a jail.

RM: Jail upstairs. And they, and they didn't have no light, everything was dark there. If you act up, they put you up into the side that's closed (everyone laughs). And then yeah. They'll lock you upstairs, like someone get you high and act up? They had you put in. Mm hmm. Lock them up. But everybody knew everybody. That's how come I know so many people, I know so much about a lot of em, we used to walk from one end to the other. Horseback, or what. I know when they had one. On 21, at 11:00 I remember you could lay out there and sleep until the next day, you don't go nowhere ever while nobody bother you no car, there were no cars that drove over. And all the people had the, I that's when everybody had their little moonshine still.

ZB: Wasn't like that in Philadelphia.

RM: Oh no. Philadelphia was, it was not like, it was not like that. That's why I didn't... anyways Philadelphia wasn't much for my job, see that's why a lot of young people would leave here when I was coming up. See back then, that's the only problem, you couldn't get no job here. And blacks couldn't own business back then, now they're different. Now you can open any kind of business you want to. Once you get out of college, even if you ain't got college you can, you can

go to training school and everything. Didn't have that then. Only thing black had then... only jobs they had then were on Parris Island, Marine Corps base. That was the only place that black people could work. Then they open a gas station. But now they got jobs, you can get to Savannah in 45 minutes, back then you had to go through, go around this corner, take you all the way around, take you two hours to get to Savannah and back. A lot of people of people there used to go to Savannah to work at the waterfront, and stay over, you know, stay over there. But that's what my father, he worked in there for forty some years. But I, you know I used to get along with people. I used to, I used to like to talk with older folks, cause I always love history. Always love to read, and old ladies used to tell me, like I say, she used to send me all these magazines and I used to read all about Billie Holiday and all them. Used to be, young people around this area don't know nothin but all that we had in this area was blues, and gospel. Don't listen to jazz, and um, you know, and stuff like that. And baseball was the only thing that most people played, and I would go to baseball and thats where the old folks would take me around. I would give them a quarter, they took a quarter, and that was for a fish sandwich, a fish sandwich, a quarter to get a nickel for a soda, and that's all you get, that guy had that one truck if you all wanna ride on that one truck. Drink beer and the ladies would be drinking beer and soda and laughin, everybody was, like I say, they would work from Monday until 12:00 on Saturday. Nobody would do no work, no washing, all you do is cook on Sunday. Sunday you didn't, Sunday you didn't do nothin.

ZB: Ok, alright.

RM: If they were goin, if they walking, going to church and somebody forget to leave the clothes on the line, they take that clothes off and put em on the street. You didn't do nothin after 12:00 on Saturday. And I don't care who they were, they didn't have nothin to much but they was proud people.

ZB: What kind of jobs did you do when you were...?

RM: But when I get, I went, well after I got out, I did landscaping and then I moved back here. I enjoy, I love, I worked for the city of Philadelphia for a while, and then I came back here and I, I went to do landscaping. And I loved that, because I just place and people, a lot of these places got out of work and we did a lot of, I work for landscape and... I just quit working last year, think it was around last year.

ZB: Last year. How old are you, Mr. Middleton?

RM: 82.

ZB: Wow. And you just quit working?

RM: Just quit working.

ZB: God is good.

RM: God is good. Last of his creatures, plan, God, cause my kids and grandchildren, they don't eat chicken, we used to have a lot of chicken, I had a lot of chicken and eggs, they don't eat that. They have to go to the store, and they don't like the ground chicken and... see back then, they didn't like it when she was. When I was growing up, we would kill the chicken, cut the head, and hold it up, and let the blood drain out of it, and then pick and, and the egg, we used to have so many chicken, we would give a bucket of them collect it, somebody come out we would give them a whole bucket of eggs. Collecting, so many chicken. And hogs and stuff. We kill four and five hogs, we had a smokehouse, and we would, you know, we would some out to little kids, you know, we would give em clothes, and the woman they didn't miss it, kill them, a young man would talk about that thing, one of my friend the other day, in holidays, like to come in the house cause we only have so many. The old man and the old ladies cook, they always had a big pot, and they would feed every kid come by, and if you didn't eat this, they would get mad at you, no manners. The only thing that I never eat that somebody from these old folks, they was so rotten. But it was good for me. You know they, they had a store about three miles, and I used to walk to the store, and this old lady, I never forgot, she would just sit there, she was nice, she would see me going to the store, and wait till I go to the store, with my package and come back, and she'd take my package, send me back to the store. I had to go back to the storefront. I didn't, she said what did you say, I said nothin, cause if you say somethin, you get a whippin! You didn't talk back to those people. But it was great, it was a life and Penn, as I grew up here in Penn, yeah Penn had a farm, too. And we had a dairy. We had a sugar, sugarcane mill, we had everything here that uh, the kids that still, all these buildings went down between for the girls. They went on this side, and the boys on Lathers, that was a boys' dormitory. They only communicated in the schools and the class.

ZB: Ok. The boys and the girls?

RM: Yeah, the boys... unless you sneak around, you know (everyone laughs). Heh. But they uh, they would give you, if you do something bad they would give you a note, the teacher would give you a note to take home. They didn't have no telephone, some of them had no calls but they would know if you took them in your home.

ZB: Did you take them?

RM: I took them, took that, you'd better take them home! (ZB laughs) and the teacher whip, you don't come home and say somebody whip you, they wanna know what you did, they never do nothin wrong. You know, they. If they know they wrong they won't say it in front of like, you know, some kid, people would do now. But it was great, this was, like I said, this was the greatest place. And that's why I come to Penn, and I take tours, getting people to talk to when I take tour, go on tour, show them around, let em take pictures in different areas. Cause it's no, it's nothin, all these areas I walked. And when I tell people I lived on this street, I'm not telling em what I read. I say what I experienced.

ZB: You said this is the best place in the world.

RM: Best place if you wanna live. Unless you don't want, you don't like quietness. If you don't like quietness, then, then. All the thing you have to have here is transportation. And it's a whole

lot better now cause we got a lot of shopping centers now, you go shoppin, and people really have buses to take people to... we didn't have that stuff. We had to walk. You know I know, we had to go to job, when I first started work, we had to walk two miles ride to catch a ride to go to work. Walk back. And then go to, and work on the farm, you know, on the field. But if your kid has, that's why the kids today get into so... they don't have exercise, they don't get the exercise.

ZB: Ok.

RM: And they sit in there look at television, on the computer. I got grandchild, they sit in the house all day. We sure didn't sit in no house all day. Right now, I can't sit in the house all day. I gotta get out, ride or walk around, you know, I don't like to staying the house cause it seem like its. I don't use. and I used to. I got a cousin of mine, right down there, an adopted cousin, he's gotta be a hundred years and he even got them old car. He was out there today looking at it. And he paint it, his own paint, show somebody help him paint, he show me how to do it. And he, he got his own little garden.

ZB: 100 years old.

RM: Almost 100 years old.

ZB: Wow. Cause life is so much slower.

RM: Yeah, but when he used to, a lot of people that actually say work don't hurt you but the way you work. It's how you work. Them older folks didn't live too long, they work hard but they had a lot of problem. They, they had...

ZB: Ok. What kind of problems?

RM: Oh, they had all kinds. You see, they didn't have no rights to do things that they wanted to do.

ZB: Ok, so the political.

RM: Right. Everything was against them, so the law was against the blacks, back when I was coming up. But they accept it, they didn't know, but the didn't know how far to go and things they didn't have to accept, they didn't like it, but to, to survive. They accept. And that's what help the people. They were doing it so we could have the opportunity.

ZB: Mmkay.

RM: But that's what came, that's what people did in there. But they had help for food cause everybody got it off the farm. See, they had to work on somebody else farm, come and work on their farm.

ZB: Where did they work? Your grandparents.

RM: They work on a different farm. My grandparents, like I said farmin, farmin. They didn't do a... the old ladies did some, she didn't like farm work. So she would get to stay in the house (laughs).

PM: She would stay... she get to stay in the house.

RM: And when she come home, she come home, and everything is in order. It was all in order, yeah. And she'd do all the cooking and stuff. But she didn't like that farming work. And she stay in this. But she was fortunate that she would love to cook and she was loving, and everything she works for cares for her.

ZB: Your adopted parents here, would they work in Beaufort?

RM: No, my adopted mother, she had lived, worked on Rhode Island. That's why I say I knew I wanted to get these magazines. She had a family that took her to Rhode Island, New York. And she would come home every certain, they would come bring her home, and they would go to Florida for, after the kids out of school. And they would stay too, and then they would come back up, they would take em, and that's why I say, they had a clothing store. And I knew that when they come back, I had that stuff in the farm prepared, they love that stuff, everything I could think of take back in they car. Cause they had that thing on the top of they car, I would load em up, cause I know I had a box coming up. With clothes and shoes, and the kids here couldn't understand where or how I got those clothes. They thought the old man had a lot of money. But they didn't know that he wasn't the one buying the clothes.

ZB: It was your mom.

RM: Hm?

ZB: Your adopted mother.

RM: My adopted mother would get it, get it from our people. Mm hmm.

ZB: Ok.

PM: You were telling us about the Dr. King house, um, was there much of a Civil Rights Movement on the island?

RM: Yeah, well, when he started comin. This is where, he came in when he was working on his speech for Washington.

PM: Ok.

ZB: Oh really?

RM: And that's where he stayed at.

ZB: The March on Washington speech?

RM: Yeah.

ZB: He worked on it over there?

RM: He stayed in it but he worked on it uh, Frissell there's a building, first building across the road, on the way by the road? That's where they had the conference at.

ZB: Ok.

RM: Cause one of his secretaries had to move in after he retired, when he died now. Only guy that worked with him when he was here? He moved back, moved. But on the water they got the retreat house. Where he and his wife, they had build that for he and his wife. But then that never got he didn't, he got assassinated same year that they finish it.

ZB: Oh, ok. That's why it has 1968 on it.

RM: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

DS: Did you get to meet him?

RM: I met him, but I met him in Philadelphia. I was in Philadelphia when he came here. I did meet him in Philadelphia. Where I was living he came into the area, black area, I met him, I talked to him. But he, I met, the most greatest person I met to shake is hand was Obama. I met him in Beaufort, he came to Beaufort when he was running.

ZB: Oh yeah?

RM: To the Auditorium and I met him and shake his hand, talk to him and...

ZB: How does that feel to um, have that?

RM: Good. Well, see, that's another thing. I never thought that I would ever see the day that I live to see a black man in the White House. Did you see how awful I was crying on the television, I was crying I was sitting up there when he was walking up here in the White House, I was sittin there cryin. I didn't, I didn't thought I'd ever live to see that.

ZB: That's phenomenal.

RM: That was a great, you know, it was great to see something like that happened, and the way he came up in everything. And he got a beautiful family, cause his wife is from South Carolina.

ZB: Yeah, she's Gullah, right? The story is...

RM: Mm hmm. And you know, this young lady, I don't know if you know her, she's an actor, Kerry Washington?

PM: Mm hmm.

ZB: Yes.

RM: You know, I took her on a tour. She, her grandparents, I know all her grandparents. They still got the property here. And I know you comin, when you coming down 21 you see all them cows? That right there, right back in there that's where her, cause I took, she wanted to go and see the property. Her mother and father in New York, and, but they still get, payin taxes on the property, and she came here, and I took her and a friend.

ZB: Oh, wonderful.

RM: And everywhere I stop, and she introduce herself to them kids, and she take pictures with all them kids. Them kids was having a ball, baby. I got a picture with Alicia McShaw, you know, we introduced her in our Hall of Fame on Penn. And she took a, she was very friendly, she spoke to one of the gatherings, we have an 1862 Gathering. And she one of the speaker, couple years, every year we do a celebrity, you know.

ZB: Ok. Ok.

DS: Wow.

ZB: Did she come from the islands?

RM: Hm?

ZB: Did she come from the islands as well?

RM: No, she's from, her mother is from... some place in South Carolina, but she was born in, I think Kentucky or Tennessee.

ZB: Ok.

RM: But her mother still has got, there's a little place her mother was born in, they got a old school in, she made a, uh, a museum for her mother to take care. Cause her mother was here too, you know. But they were born, I think in Tennessee or Kentucky.

ZB: The children. Ok.

RM: But Danny Glover came down here for two weeks, you know, he stayed... one of the principle there was a friend of his. And he stayed with the school for, what was it. For two weeks. We get a lot of celebrities.

ZB: You get a lot of celebrities that come here.

RM: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

ZB: Ok.

RM: We was trying, you know I was always trying, I wanted to get Oprah, I wanted to get Oprah here. You know. We sent a lot of stuff but I guess she, it was, but we wanted that. We figured. Well now we's trying to get Obama wife to come down next year, I don't know if it's gonna work out. We would like for get her down, and put her.

ZB: You would have to have a lot of security.

RM: Oh yeah, that's the problem here.

ZB: Yeah, that's the only thing.

PM: So tell me, growing up, what did you do for fun?

RM: Baseball. That's the only thing we have. Baseball, fishin, and swimmin. You know, we had this Atlantic ocean, like I said, I could work in the field and then sun would get a little hot like it is now, I could watch the tide go out. On uh, on his the car, or horse, whatever, working, and go out and swim and care for swim. Or fish. And lady cookin, and they be cookin while you out. Come back everything is ready.

DS: Is there a position you played in baseball, is there a favorite?

RM: Pitcher, center field, and first base. I couldn't, I didn't go, I was left handed, I didn't' go behind the back. But I loved... center field wasn't my main position, but I do some pitchin too, you know. But I was young, see, you know. I grew up, but I think I take after my father and my uncles. They were interested in sports, they were into sports, all of my sister did play basketball. But we had, most of the basketball players then were girls. I don't know why. Girls. Cause we had... the gym was right in front of Lather. They call it. The one all the way back there. Farrah Hall. That used to be up front, but then they put it back there after they start having the heritage. They move it in the back. But that used to be the gym. And the girls used to play a lot of basketball. And school come from lot of place. And when they used to have, in November they have what they call a farmer's fair. When everybody that raise crop would bring it here, we have biggest watermelon, the biggest, um, sugarcane or something like that. They get a prize, second prize for this one. Every November we have to have that. Have that there. But people was, you know, you wouldn't have to much get into. And some mischiefers but you didn't have too many things to get in trouble, cause you had to work most of the time. And you were always watched by people, I don't care where you go, somebody know who you are, you know. The only thing about it is you could, going with girlfriends was kinda... you gotta be careful there, every time you go to somebody's cousin so and so's side, everybody was family. And my adopted mother, my adopted mother had more family than I ever seen in my life. Every time I go I say got me a girl, she'd say, boy, that's my cousin's daughter. But she would pray about me now, and boy, I

used to had, I didn't pay it no mind. Late at night, she used to get down on her knees and ask God, to keep her, till I became a man. Then she'd go all night I hear her praying that prayer. Because she knew the other people that filled in but. They didn't do it the right way, but like I tell folks, sometimes bad things happen to you for good reasons. I always, always think that. You know. Sometimes things happen to you, cause, I'm always still, I thought I was the only one who that happened to, after I, you know I knew I was adopted, I was shamed by my self cause I thought I was the only one in the world that had been given away, somebody had given away. Then when I grew up, I met a lot of family the same way, you know. I met a young lady, I was telling about my story, and she said she didn't know her mother was her mother till she plan her wedding. She thought her mother was her sister. Her grandmother. They didn't tell her no better. And then when she were... putting together the list for her wedding, she put her mother down as her sister, they tried to change the list... she didn't know until she got grown. But let me tell you if they say you, if so and so your mother, you don't question it, that's one thing. You didn't question, that's why I didn't talk to my, my adopted parents about what happened. I knew it was something that it, it wasn't legal, so I didn't, they were so good to me, I didn't question them. I just lived with what, you know. No, but I always ask God, you know, even before I start going to church, I asked God to let me find somebody to tell me the truth. But I never thought I'd meet my mother and father, that's the... never.

ZB: That's amazing.

RM: And my adopted grandfather pictures in their museum. Now I can remember thinking back then that I couldn't remember this. Now I remember, for three or four years I remember he used to get up at every morning, start his job, get up every morning, drop out of bed, grab my hand, and say a prayer.

ZB: Wow.

RM: I remember, I remember that day like it was yesterday.

ZB: Do you think that's the strength of this community?

RM: Yeah, that's the strength of this community. That, that prayer, and community. That's why, if people were so close they would pray, they would have prayer service and they would sing song and yeah cause yeah that old lady would be workin in them fields and they could be hummin. Singin them old songs. A lot of them used to smoke that pipe and I wondered why, but it was for them gnats and mosquitos. See when they hoin' in the field, that smoke would keep the mosquito out. And they would sing them old song, they would sing goin to church, and they would walk together, you know they had communication. I know this old man, he late from church here, we used to walk together and talk, man would gather in the river. And he got late so he rode his horse. To either, put it, tied his horse behind the church, and come out of church, forgot he had rode the horse, and walked with the people all the way home (everyone laughs). He got to go all the way back to get his horse. After he got off he said oh... (everyone laughs). So we're used to walking together, you know. They would have a conversation. But they believe in what the bible say, they would never go to bed mad at one another. They would argue but before the sun go down, they'd all be back together.

ZB: So what's different now from when you were growin up in that generation?

RM: Different... people are separated. People are separated. This is a, you know, these families will be having dinner and I know they whole family, there are some... you know, uh. Nellie, the old lady with the club. Well, you know her mother and her father died when they was little kids. Three months apart. When her mother died, her father died three months later. But older sister, the first turn when you get to that, she raised most of them, the older sister. She's the baby. But now they was close but now, she said half of them don't speak to each other. See, that's the price. And, I guess it's progress does it. Cause my daugh—my son actually met actually one of their cousins. The one that got the gift shop. One of my son, he got the gift shop. And he do all, he and his wife do all the school uniform, and have all the hats and stuff like I got here. And he did, they do all that.

ZB: And that says (reads from RM's shirt) from chains to change. Ok.

RM: Yeah. And they, they uh, he does that a lot of that stuff. And he mails things all over the country, you know like school uniform, people go... I met, every time I get a tour through I take em behind, get the people there. And then we got a black real estate, we got a a lot of people that, that I met, that I take on tour, and I introduce myself to people in my city. I believe I'm a deacon of the church, and the sixth chairman deacon, but I believe in God can bless. God have blessed me. I have everything had not going the way I would like for it, but I always have hope. I always have hope that I will have this family reunion. I'm gonna get all my nieces and grand, I'd like to see them all together just one time. And just look at, just let em see each other and you know, know each other because you don't know who you... you know like I said I went to Philadelphia I have, if I was bad I could've run into one of my sisters. You know? Cause I was right next... I used to, I saw one of my nephew got stabbed on their sixteenth birthday, I was across the street. But I didn't know them at the time, I didn't know who he was. The young little girl, he was walking the girlfriend on on my sixteenth birthday. Easter Sunday, stabbed in the chest. Then I found out later it was my sister oldest son.

ZB: Wow.

RM: But they accepted me with open arms. But everybody told me, that's why I never went to look for my family, cause everybody told me my mother was a street woman one of them street woman and the city give away the child. But he told me you go look, you ain't gonna push it but God had the time, right time during the now I have no, like I told my mother and I told I have nobody. Cause my life is good. Now if I'd had a rough life and had fought the home then maybe I would have bitterness. But I have nothin to be bitter about, you know. Cause I met my mother father they had they own, they had they own place they accepted me with open arms. I had people who drove, when I first met my family, I had people drove all the way from here. To Philadelphia. Come from New York. And my house was full every weekend. They didn't believe it, you know, they didn't believe that I had a mother, you know people have been thirty years, and they used to drive, my friends and I grew up with some... most of them were in New York, and they would come every weekend, a carload would come to my house. I had to take around my sister and my father, he was, you know he had running that bar and then they had this private

club after the bar closed. I had a membership and didn't have to pay nothin. I could walk in there. My father, they would call his Cup, cause he had like a cup and, "that's Cup's son." It was all that, you know, everywhere I walk in, I was... everybody accept me. But the way you treat, you know, I would tell folks, if I didn't know how to treat my myself my father wouldn't know who I was, and I used to go in the bar. See, if I was a rowdy person, he wouldn't know who, but because I went into the bar two years, he didn't know who I was, I didn't know, but all the friends I met, and one of my closest friends that I met when I workin, living a block from where he was workin. And when I went, when he went in there, and he...

[End clip 2]

[Begin clip 3]

RM: He said listen, he told me, listen, and I don't know how he, the word got out on the street, but when he told them guys that this is my son, word must've got. And it was comin from the street, and they were like flies, you know. Cause they didn't believe it. And see, even my uncle didn't believe it, cause my mother, that's why they kept it from my father family. See back in those days I don't know if you, black folks had a thing. If you was real light, you didn't associate with darks. See my grandmother was light, see, and she didn't like my father people cause they were dark. That, that was the problem, my father.

ZB: Wow.

RM: (Laughs) yeah, they had it right here, right on Penn Center. Yeah, they had it right on Penn Center, some of the young guys that graduated dark, right now don't support Penn behind some of the stuff they had. You know, the kids were pushed in school, if the parents, if they, if they were lighter parents. Most of the teachers, some of them had kids teaching school here. They would get first privilege in everything, so they get business on that, you know. And if you went to Penn school on this island then, your family was rich. Cause you're paying admission... it wasn't that much, but people didn't have that. A lot of kids, a lot of people couldn't even afford to go to Penn. Yeah, and if you go to Penn, your parents is, you high class (everyone laughs). But it was great though, I enjoy, I look back in it. But I didn't know nothin about history then. Because see, they didn't, the only person I heard about was George Washington Carver.

ZB: Wow, really?

RM: And my adopted mother had always talked about this later, I don't if you've heard of the blues singer, Bessie Smith?

ZB and PM: Yes.

RM: Bessie Smith, she'd always talk about how Bessie got, and after then and never, there wasn't another girl in the house but that was her favorite person, Bessie Smith.

ZB: Mm hmm.

RM: But I ain't, like I said, this is, this, I enjoy life, cause I enjoy being here and Penn and enjoy people coming here to Penn, and I hope we can keep this place goin.

ZB: Well, we hope you can too.

PM: We hope you can too, we really do.

RM: We're been trying to get as much people to come here and visit as we can, because this is... and y'all have never been here to the heritage, then.

PM: No, we've never been in able to come for the heritage.

ZB: That's like in November, right?

RM: Second weekend in November.

ZB: Ok.

RM: We have about 15 or 20,000 people here on this campus.

ZB: And there are people from over here, and they come back?

RM: All over. Come back. From California, from all the same area, full of RV, what do they call them, trucks with, RV?

[End clip 3]