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## Wright, Bernice

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Gullah Digital Archive

Bernice Wright

David Slutzky, Portia Morgan, Zakiyyah Bergen

July 7, 2012

St. Helena Island

ZB: I am Zakiyyah Bergen and I am here with David Slutzky, and Portia Morgan. We are with Carolina Connections and we are going to interview Mrs. Bernice Wright, who is a resident here on St. Helena's Island, from Seaside Road.

DS: [Off camera] Thank you Mrs. Wright for joining us today. Can you give us a little history of your life on the island from then and now?

BW: Okay, I grew up on St. Helena Island. I graduated from high school in 1968, and I moved away to New York, briefly, stayed up there until 1970. I could not take the cold weather. So I came back home [laughs] and immediately starting working, and have been working ever since, and I retired in 2005, and I am now working with my husband with this Island Grill. It was a restaurant, turned into a nightclub, and that takes up a lot of my time. In growing up on St. Helena, we did, during the summer, worked in the field—we called it “on the farm”—that’s how we made our money to purchase our school clothing for the next school year. Just about all the children on the island worked on the farm because that’s how they made their money to purchase their clothes to go back to school. We also worked in the packing house. And I don’t know if you noticed or not, but there are a couple of packing houses right up the street up here, where we sorted the crops that was picked and boxed them up and then they were shipped to other places, other areas. That was nice also to work in the packing house because you’re out of the sun, and into (laughs) a building with a roof over it. We just about knew every one because we were from the same community, all St. Helena, we all went to school together, grew up together, and those were very good times. From time to time now we reminisce about those times that we had growing up on St. Helena. Times were very hard, back then when we came along. I can remember there were times that I needed shoes to go to school and I could not... *did* not want to take up a day from school to go to town to try the shoes on, so I had a step-mother, she would go and purchase the shoes for us, and a lot of times those shoes didn’t fit too well, but you didn’t want to take a day off from school so you wore those shoes that didn’t fit too well to keep from having to miss a day out of school. There were also times I could recall when we, we didn’t live directly on the paved road, our driveway was a dirt driveway. And it was probably, I’d say, maybe about, I don’t know, a thousand feet from the paved road. And when it rained there was water from the house all the way to the paved road. So what we did was take our shoes and socks off at home and we walked through the water to get to the road and then we put our shoes and socks back on when we got to the road. Our parents also planted vegetables for sale, and

we used to have to work in the fields there. And I remember telling my father at one point in time that when I become grown that I'm not going to ever, ever work in a field again [laughter off camera][laughs]. But that wasn't true because once I became grown and then I started farming and then I worked in my own fields. But then life on St. Helena it was rough but it was good, for us it taught us good work habits. The generation today, I have a daughter who was born in 1980. She said that when I talked to her how I came up, and I have two older daughters, one born in 1970 and the other one born in 1967, and when I told them, told my younger daughter how we came up, she said "Hm, hm. Not me. I would not have done those things" [laughs]. Now my two older daughters they were out in the fields working also so they knew about it. But the one that came in 1980, ten years after the middle daughter, she said no, not her, she would have never done those things that her two older sisters had to do.

Unknown: [Off camera] Wow.

BW: Yeah, wow. It just goes to show the difference in generation. And when I grew up on St. Helena, of course, I grew up--when I started school at six years old I knew nothing, no other language except Gullah. That was the only language I knew because that's the only language they spoke around me. But when I got to school to the first grade and we started talking and our teachers immediately told us "No, no, no" they're not going to have that. So that, you know, a lot of us during my time when we came up we got away from that language because our teachers led us to believe that that was incorrect and we were not going to talk like that around her and around school. So a lot of us got away from that. And even relatives and friends who moved away from and here moved to the city they even got rid of their Gullah accent because they were ashamed of it. Because we didn't know any better, we were really taught to believe that it was wrong, ok? That we were actually speaking broken English and it was wrong. So we didn't know that we could have kept the Gullah and learned the King's English, also.

DS: [Off camera] When did you realize that Gullah was not the way they treated it?

BW: To be honest with you it was maybe only about say maybe 5, 10 years ago maybe? That's it. Yes. Yes. When we started learning more about the Gullah language, and how it got started, and why we were speaking Gullah.

ZB: [Off camera] And what were you told about your language that changed how you felt about it? Because you're saying just five years ago and now you have a pride and appreciation for your culture.

BW: Because we were being introduced to information that led us to believe that it was our culture to speak that way, ok? There was nothing wrong with it, it was our culture to speak that way, and it was fine. You could speak that way, but you also need to learn the King's English, also. We do speak that way when we get around family members, folks who can understand us, and can appreciate us speaking that way, we do speak in our native tongues.

Unknown: [Off camera] I have kind of a back up question you were saying that when you went to school, were the teachers at the school from the island?

BW: No, no, and that's probably why. Yeah, they were not from the island, they were from elsewhere, a lot of them came from out of state, and a lot of them came from within the state, but up the state where they didn't speak that kind of language.

DS: [Off camera] It's apparent that two of your core values growing up were hard work and education, how does that compare to the children you see today on the island?

BW: They don't believe in hard work. Ok? They don't, children today do not have a good work ethic at all. Not at all. Coming up, growing up on St. Helena, like I said, working on the farms, hard work, helped us to have good work ethics. That's one good thing that came out of it, was we had good work ethics. When I retired in 2005, I was a manager of a department for 14 years, and I saw the later generation of children, how they, I saw their work habits, and I could never, you know, do that. They would call in almost weekly, don't want to come to work, call in with an excuse, and they would say with the least bit of excuse when, you know, I would have come in to work, ok? Because I had something to do, I had a job to do. But I often say to my children today, it's a shame the generation today, the employers have a hard time with this generation because they don't want to work. They do not want to work. And I often teach my children, go to work--you know you have a job to do, *go to work*. Stop trying to find excuses, don't try to find excuses, each little excuse to be out of work.

ZB: [Off camera] What do you attribute that to? What changed on the island that helped to take away, if you will, the work ethic of the youth?

BW: What changed is when... I think a lot of the folks during my generation, the didn't appreciate the hard work. Some did and some didn't and so they felt it was wrong for us to have to work that hard. And some left the area and said they would never return, and they did not return, and they probably taught their children, you know, "you don't have to do that." And then two, also when you have children having children, and grandparents in their 30s, ok? And there's not a whole lot grandparents in their 30s can teach their children and their grandchildren because they don't have the work ethics.

ZB: [Off camera] The same thing that we see in the city. (Unclear).

PM: [Off camera] A little switch, one of the things we keep hearing is the land, that the land is the most important thing. And I think you're a real estate agent?

BW: Yes.

PM: [Off camera] Ok. So, how valuable and how important is the land and holding onto the land in this community?

BW: My grandmother taught me how valuable land is because she knew how hard it was for her to acquire land. She acquired ten acres of land when she--she had 10 children--and she acquired 10 acres of land. And I live on a part of that land today, and so does my daughter, so does my sister, I have some nieces, nephews, my father still lives on that land today. That's important. Because, as time went by, the price of land had went up so much until they probably could not afford to buy the land and put a house on it, also. So if you had somebody who could deed land to you, ok? That's a help. My daughter lives on an acre of my grandmother's land. She deeded it to one of her sons, and he lives in Philadelphia and his children do not want to move here, so he sold it to my daughter, ok? And of course he sold it to her for less than market value, ok? So with that she was able to build a house, the house that she wanted, because she didn't have pay a whole lot for her land. But it is very important to own the land because you can make a living off the land. You can farm it--farming is still a viable economic category here. You can still farm. You can take your land and you can rent it out, there are folks who are looking for, who cannot afford to buy land, but they can rent a space to put a mobile home from you. You can plant like berry trees, blueberry trees, strawberry patches and things like that, ok? To earn money to pay the taxes if you really want to hold onto to the land. The good thing about it is the state of South Carolina offers taxing discount if you are farming your land. Yes, even if you have it in trees, if you have timber, you can apply for, and be qualified for, the agricultural use, and be taxed at a lower tax rate. So there are ways to hold onto the land if you really want to hold onto....

PM: [Off camera] So what is about the average tax bill on an acre of land here?

BW: Roughly about 30... maybe about \$300 and something dollars a year.

PM: [Off camera] For each acre?

BW: Yeah for an acre, right. And that's an acre if you didn't qualify for the agricultural use, if you didn't qualify for the discount. If you qualify for the discount your taxes could be probably 10, 12 dollars maybe?

ZB: [Off camera] Wow that makes a big difference.

BW: A big difference, yes it makes a big difference.

ZB: [Off camera] So as a realtor, what kind of business are you doing? Are you--most of the property is heir property--what is it that you exchange in your business, as a realtor here?

BW: We do have a lot of heirs properties, and they are the hardest to sell because it takes so much to clear the title. It costs so much to clear the title. No one wants to buy a property unless it has a clear title... because the main reason for that is because your lending institution wants a certifiable title if they are going to loan money. And, of course, the attorney is the only one who can certify a title, of course, and they will not

certify a title to a property that is heirs property. And the average price to clear a title on a piece of property could run you anywhere from \$7,500 to \$15,000.

PM: [Off camera] To clear a piece of property?

BW: It all depends on how many heirs are involved, and if these heirs are on accord, or if they are bickering among each other, and if say for instance, one heir goes out and hire their own attorney? OK? You got two attorneys working on the same property, ok? And sometimes that happens. Sometimes that happens. Now one of the things that used to happen here in the past, and may still continue after this new treasurer takes office. We had a new treasurer elected last year, and one of the things that was asked of him is that he keep the tradition of the previous treasurer who used to allow heirs to bid on heirs property to take the property out of the heir's name and put it into one person's name. Which would make it much more easy to clear that title then.

PM: [Off camera] Ok, so if my family had 20 acres, they could then take that 20 acres and put it in just my name, and so then the tax bill would come to me, and I would be responsible for collecting from everybody to pay the taxes on it.

BW: Right. And then when it's time to clear the title it wouldn't be so complicated because it's only dealing with you. So that was one of the ways the folks at Penn Center had met with the previous county treasurer and asked if she would allow that to happen. And she did. She allowed that to happen, allowed them to bid on heirs property and of course she could not control it because she could not tell the bidders there that you can't bid. You would just ask the bidders that if you would, please do not bid against an heir because they're trying to clear the title on their property. And in very, very few cases we did have bidders who wanted the property real bad, and they would bid against the heir. Because they really want the property real bad. And then also in some instances you had family members fighting against each other and two family members would be there bidding against each other.

PM: [Off camera] So one of the other things I've noticed, I've been coming to St. Helena for about thirteen years is that you've been able to manage to keep the McDonald's, and the Burger Kings, and the Car Washes, and you know the grocery stores and everything out. Has that been difficult, or fairly easy to do, and is it a trend you want to continue?

BW: It wasn't too difficult because of zoning, we were in on the zoning, and the zoning pretty much controlled that, kept it out. [Child coughs off camera] Is he okay?

Unknown: [Off camera] Uh huh.

BW: Ok. We had a grocery store that wanted to come over on St. Helena, the Publix. A lot of folks spoke out against it, they didn't want Publix on St. Helena. But I didn't think that was a good idea. I think Publix would have been a good idea for St. Helena. Or, if not Publix, a grocery store. Because, there were a lot of folks who spoke out against the Family Dollar, down the street there, they did not want the Family Dollar. But then there

were a lot of us who wanted the family dollar, and I'm glad that we got the Family Dollar because now you can run out to Family Dollar and pick up things where you would have actually had to go into Lady's Island to get, and with the cost of gas, it saves us quite a bit to have the Family Dollar here, and Publix was going to go in right next to, not very far from, the Family Dollar. So, it would have been nice if we did have a grocery store on the island, also. I mean because of the cost of gas, and not only that, the older people don't have transportation. There's no public transportation per se. They have to pay someone to take them places. And folks who don't have cars, I see a lot of them ride bicycles. Well, they could ride the bicycle down to the grocery store there. So it would have been nice if we had a, not necessarily a Burger King or McDonald's, but a grocery store. And like I said, it did not have to be Publix, but a grocery store.

PM: [Off camera] And I guess the biggest argument against it is they don't want the change the look of the island, or the feel of the island. Is that pretty much why people want to keep Publix and other places out of the area?

BW: Not necessarily why people want to keep it out because some people sit back and talk among themselves, but they don't go to meetings and speak up. Ok? And those who go to the meetings and speak up, those are the ones who talked against it.

ZB: [Off camera] Do you think it has to do with the idea that a lot of the resources, economically speaking, here still comes from the land and you make money amongst each other, selling your wares?

BW: No, I think it was really Publix. I think that if it was another grocery store it would probably have been ok. But they look at Publix as being an expensive grocery store, ok? Who caters to the folks who live behind the gates, ok? In the gated communities. And so they wanted to send a message to Publix that no, you can't come over here. Ok? But I think if it was another grocery store, because there was some support for another grocery store. They were going to bring a Piggly Wiggly. Now the Piggly Wiggly grocery store is a store that the folks on St. Helena goes into town to shop at Piggly Wiggly because they sell the things that the folks on St. Helena like to buy, the kind of merchandise they like to buy. And Publix does not. So I just think it was Publix, not a grocery store per se, but Publix. Yeah.

ZB: [Off Camera] Are both your parents from the islands?

BW: Yes.

ZB: [Off camera] St. Helena?

BW: Yes.

ZB: [Off camera] And do you have property with both families? Your mother and your father's family?

BW: No, my mother passed away when I was an infant. And my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, she only had a couple acres of land. And I think that that couple acres now, there was one daughter who went to a tax sale and purchased it from the tax sale, and so she passed and she left it to her siblings. Ok? No, I'm sorry, that daughter passed away, and she left it to her children. But my father's side, that's my father's mother's property that I live on now.

ZB: [Off camera] And what part of the island do you live on?

BW: On Seaside Road. The island was once divided into plantations, I know you were probably told that. We now call them communities. But the area where I live we call Hope's, ok, and most of them are named after the Masters that settled in those areas.

PM: [Off camera] So what Gullah traditions do you think still exist today? Things that people might do today, like are there any religious ceremonies, or funeral ceremonies, or anything that if we were to bring students, or if we were to go out, that we could see, or places where we could eat where we would find traditional gullah customs, or foods, or... I know we occasionally hear some language, just tidbits, so we have at least trained our ear a little bit to pick up some wording. But are there other traditions that we might be able to, or that we could see?

BW: Well the food, the way they prepare the food, is one tradition that's still alive today. Every dish is cooked with meat. Even your vegetables--cooked with meat. That's one of your traditions. The other tradition is they eat a lot of seafood because that was the way they lived back then, was go out in the river and catch their meal. So today they still eat a lot of seafood. As far as restaurants around that sells the Gullah food... the only one that I know of is right across the street over here [pointing] that sells Gullah foods, your collard greens, your red rice. Fish, fried fish--that type of meal. The other tradition, as far as religious tradition would be... yes, at funerals we have wakes. Some folks still prefer having a wake. The other is where you drive by, you go to the deceased person's home site, and you line up there and go from there to the church. A lot of times you would just drive by the person's home to say, for the last time, goodbye. The burial grounds, a lot of the burial grounds, you'll find them on the water, on the marsh. And the reason for that is because they believe that the soul, the water, the wind, carries the soul away. That's still traditional, where they are buried. Although a lot of folks now--not just now, but before--we have a national cemetery here and so if they have served in the military it's cheaper for them to be buried in the national cemetery, because they don't have to pay for a burial.

DS: [Off camera] So any favorite memories you can talk about that related to food, or religion, family?

BW: Family growing up, we used to have family reunions, and we still do. We used to get together on the weekends and play, you know, with the family. We used to go and visit. In the community we'd go and visit different folks, even the elderly people in the community, and go and visit with friends in the community. We used to walk everywhere



we went, we used to have a lot of paths, or short cut, instead of taking the road, we would make paths through the wood. A lot of that is gone now... And growing up on St. Helena, a lot of us used to have old wood stoves to heat by, also, they used the wood stove to cook on, because they didn't have electricity, they didn't have gas and what have you. And so you go in the woods and you cut the wood for that purpose--and folks didn't mind. But nowadays they'll tell you, you know, you can't come on my land.

ZB: [Off camera] Really?

BW: Yeah, not allowed on my land. So if you don't have enough of that on your land, then... And then, you know, a lot of folks had fireplaces to heat by also. But, not anymore. A lot of these houses that are built, they don't have fireplaces. It's a lot of work to maintain a fireplace, to even get the wood to use your fireplace. I still have a fireplace. I love the heat that comes from that fireplace. The fishing industry, because the state has stepped in with their laws regarding the fishing industry, you're not allowed to catch certain types of fish with a net--you have to use rod and reel. In all my father's years--he's 88 years old--he's caught his fish in a net. With regulations now, that's illegal. So regulations have caused a lot of changes as to the way Gullah people live today.

ZB: [Off camera] I know you--you ready? [BW nods] I know that you are a very young lady, but I was wondering if you have any memories of the praise house, and if you were involved in seeking?

BW: Oh yes, I have memories of the praise house--oh yes, I do. There was one right in my community. We used to go there on, I think it was Tuesday nights, we'd have prayer service. We were children, young kids, growing up, ok? And our reason for going to the prayer house was because after prayer service they served us honey graham crackers and hot chocolate [laughs]. And so we were going just to get that [laughs]. But we had some good times, we had some good times. A lot of the songs that they used to sing in there, and who used to lead those songs, we always remember those, always remember those songs and who used to lead those songs. Even today, when we get together we'll talk about those songs and how those folks used to sing those songs. We would mimic those folks and how they used to sing those songs. We had fun. We had fun at the prayer house. Didn't know what it was all about back then because we were kids. We were going basically for the refreshment afterwards [laughs]. And that prayer house has since been taken down, and one of my cousins now has a house on that spot. Yes. But that's the only one that I've ever attended, and it was that one because it was right in our community and we could walk to it. And it was pretty much family members that attended that--my uncles, aunts, cousins. Pretty much family members.

ZB: [Off camera] And seeking?

BW: Seeking? I never went out in the woods, I was always afraid of snakes, so I was not about to go out to the woods to seek [laughs, shakes head]. I mean, I was, I waited until times changed when you could just go in the front of the church and say you wanted to

become a member and get baptized. Ok--I waited until that time. I was not about to go out into the woods and get bitten by a snake [laughs]... I was terrified.

ZB: [Off camera] What Gullah traditions will you pass on to, or have you passed on to your daughters, and would you like to see your grandchildren carry on?

BW: Respect. I taught my children how to respect, ok? To show respect, and how to get respect, ok? How to demand respect, ok? And I teach my grandchildren the same thing. And my daughters teach their children how to be respectful, and how to carry themselves in a respectable manner. Also, I talked about, earlier, about work ethics--I taught them good work ethics, and I even teaches my grandchildren today how to work. When they come to my house, they have to work. When I need the yard raked, or when I need to take the garbage from here [nods head toward restaurant], I take them, so they can take it. Even though I pay them, I want them to earn that money. Not just hand them some money, but earn it. And this is what I'm teaching them and I try to tell other folks, too, that you have to teach these children because when they grow up it will become a part of them. Because if you don't teach them now, they're not going to know how to work when they get older. They don't want to work. And that's when they get out and they want to steal, and kill, and everything else because they don't know anything about working. So I taught my children that, and I make sure my children teach their children that. And any neighbor's children that I see around, I try to encourage them that, you know, hey, because I used my sister's grandchildren to show them how to work, also.

DS: [Off camera] How many siblings did you have growing up?

BW: Well, it was actually four of us. But we didn't all live together. My mother was married twice, so I had two older brothers that did not live with us. When my mother passed away they went to live with an aunt and my sister and I came to live with my father. I had another brother, who was my father's child--he never lived with us. But even though we were separated, we all knew that we were sisters and brothers, we knew we were siblings. And so today it's four of us, three live here, and one lives in Florida. One brother was a shrimper, on a shrimp boat, and he drowned.

[All off camera] Aw. So sad.

ZB: [Off camera] We take your stories and your culture and we take it back to our students because we want them to know about your rich tradition. What is it that you would like us to share, mostly with our students?

BW: I would like for them to know that even though we lived down south, because a lot of folks think that the folks down south were dumb. Ignorant. Backwards. And I'm saying that because they told me that. When I worked... I worked for the county--I was a tax assessor for fourteen years, and I worked in that office for 32 years, and I've met a lot of folks from up north that has pretty much told me that that's how they think about us, ok? And I have to, you know, tell them [shaking head], no, we're not... we're not. We're pretty smart people. Ok? So I'd like to say to the students here that you cannot... *do not*

judge a person from where they came from, from the location, the state, or wherever where they came from. Learn that person, and learn all you can about that person before you make a determination about that person. The Gullah culture was a very rich heritage. It taught us a lot. And like I said, by us having that teaching growing up, it helped us quite a bit when we got older, as far as being able to be self-supporting, being able to be very independent. It taught us how to appreciate the hard-living that we endured coming up. So, this is what I like to pass on to the students. We do have a rich heritage down here, and we still today we have a way of making a living for ourselves. Whereas if they live in the cities, they may not be able to go to the river and catch some fish, and have something to eat. Or go plant a garden and have something to eat, or to sell to make money. But we have that way down here.

DS: [Off camera] Sounds like a lesson that some of your teachers could have stood to know themselves, back when you were going to school here, in terms of being misjudged.

BW: Well, true. That's true. But, you have to remember, too, that back then in the 60s when I started, and in the 50s, is that they were not aware of the Gullah culture either. But even some of those same teachers today, well a lot them are gone now, but they have learned about the Gullah since then, and realized since then that they were wrong in what they taught us.

ZB: [Off camera] Thank you so much for sharing with us today.

BW: You're welcome. You're welcome.