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Gracie Walker

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Gullah Project
Gracie Walker
Trudy Andereski, Debbie Frost, Malik Austin
July 19, 2012
St. Helena Island, SC

TA: This is Trudy Andereski, Debbie Frost and Malik Austin interviewing Ms. Gracie Walker. And we are at Miss Gracie's house on St. Helena Island.

DF: Is she gonna fall out that chair? (GW shakes head).

TA: It is Thursday, July 19th. And we're interviewing for Carolina Connections for the Gullah Digital Archive Project. So, Ms. Walker, can you tell us a little bit about growing up on the island? How long have you been here?

GW: I was here... I was born and raised on St. Helena. I left here in '56. Went to Mexico, stayed there for awhile and then went to New York. And I came back here in '76. And I been here ever since.

TA: Why did you leave the island?

GW: Well, I got married. And after I got married, my husband was in the Air Force. And he was stationed Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I went to Mexico. Leaving Mexico and I went to New York and stayed in New York for awhile. For what, like twenty years? That's awhile. Twenty years. (Chuckles).

TA: As old as I am. (Chuckles).

GW: And I came back home, '76 after my mother passed. But growing up on the island was uh fun to me. We didn't do like what the kids do now. We didn't stay inside the house. We eat breakfast, go outside and play. When we was young to play, but we got older, I was the oldest of the children so I had to make sure that everything was done right. My mom and dad were at work so... Me and my brother would always get in a consultation cause he didn't wanna nothing. So I had to, you know, use switch sometimes. (Chuckles). Like sometimes. But we all got along. For like, a lot of people talk about different things now and I didn't fight with a lot of people cause I knew what my place was. I knew I had to go to school. And we used to walk to school at first. And in later years, we went to St. Helena School. But we went to South Pine School first. From first grade until I think we was like... I think sixth grade if I'm not mistaken. And we moved from St. Helena, if you lived South Penn, you went to St. Helena. And I stayed there till... I don't remember. (Chuckles). I got out of school in July... I don't remember a year but I went to school up until I was a certain age and then stopped. Then I came back and went back to school,

finished, got my high school diploma. Until 1980, my daughter graduated, that's when I graduated from school. I came back home, finished school. Then I went to technical college for food service. And after that, I was supposed to be finishing but then moved out to... however many. 170... as you're going toward Hilton Head. On Hilton Head, it was hard for me to go back and finish my nursing that I was taken up. Because coming up, takin care of them. And then going back, it was just a little too much. By the time I get here, it was 5:30, 6. Fix them dinner, I had to be back to school. I had to quit cause I was too tired. I couldn't make it so... But eventually, I finished what I started.

TA: What was your first school like? Big or small or...

GW: It was small.

TA: How many kids?

GW: Bout... I think I remember twenty of us in a class. Maybe more I guess cause we didn't have like a... We didn't have a big school. Let me see. Cause they open it up. They did open it up and then it went all the way from first grade to sixth grade. So it was twenty, maybe twenty-one. I think that's how many kids was in a class. But we all get along.

DF: Now what difference was it when you were growing up for as the community and for yourself as a child versus when you were an adult, raising your own children? Was there much of a difference then, for you?

GW: Well when I was coming up, everybody was your parents. You didn't have no... If someone tell you that, "Mama said do so-and-so." You gotta do what that person tell you. An older person, you knew mama wouldn't tell them nothin that she didn't want you to do. And if you did somethin and they see you, you could get a whoopin from them, and then when your mama come home, you get another whoopin. Because you know better than doin what you shouldn't do. But then nowadays, as I was comin up, bringing my kids... well for going to bed and stuff like that, Charlotte at uh 7:30, Charlotte was in her bed. I took her to the park, I did what I was supposed to do for her, let her look at a little cartoon after dinner, give her a bath, and when 7:30... she was in her, she was sleep. Nowadays, these kids don't wanna go to bed. They don't wanna hear what you have to say. But now like you tell them to do one thing, it's A... they do Z. Up bringing my kids and well, my granddaughter bringing up her kids now is totally different. It's a different. Cause they say the children are wiser. And they don't seem to really hear you. And they don't hear you. You says, "Pick up that penny off the floor." They do everything else but what you tell 'em to do. So it's a different. I think that because they know so much, they don't listen to what you have to say to them. So you have to tell 'em more than one time. I ain't have to tell Charlotte that. If I tell her to do one thing, she was there. She did exactly what I said. I didn't tell her to clean the house; I didn't have to tell her to do anything. She know

what she supposed to do; she know how to clean, she know to cook, she know how to wash. These kids nowadays might know how to do it. They wash the clothes and all the clothes stack up. They don't fold clothes. They go outside looking like, anyway. They don't care how they look nowadays. But in our days, we had to iron, wash the clothes, hang it on the line, bring it in, fold the clothes, iron the clothes, put it up. (Laughs). And when mother comes home, the house used to be spick and span. No nothing on the floor. No toys on the floor. No nothing. And your room was... Nowadays, kids got they own room. In those days, it used to be me, was four girls. Four boys. We didn't have but one room. And you'd be surprised. The kids now got closet and they clothes not in the closet. They have drawers; the clothes not in the drawers. But in those days, you could walk in my mother house. You didn't see no clothes no where. The clothes were put up, the bed was made. First thing mother taught us was to make your bed when you get out your bed. Cause you don't know how you gone come back. You keep your front area clean. Nobody don't have to go in your bedroom. But make sure your front area clean because, in case you get sick, somebody bringin' you home. "They don't keep the house clean." They couldn't say that bout my mother. And my dad? He would sweep all day. Cause his floor had to be clean! He'd sweep and clean, rake the yard. He did all that. Nowadays, kids don't wanna go out to pick up paper. They don't wanna do nothing. But dad didn't mind doin that. That's the way it be... We was brought up to help each other. As far as grown people, if they say... my mother talkin bout, aunt you to do somethin. "No, mama didn't tell me that." I wouldn't go. My aunt come and get me. I ran in the house and I lock up. I don't know why I did that (DF laughs). Cause mama come home, I thought the sheriff had come. Shoot me until she felt good. She said, "And the next time I tell you to do something, you did everything I tell you to do. But your aunt tell you to come to do somethin for her, '[Note: unclear] Why don't she get them to do it? Why she gotta come and get her niece?'" That's what I sayin to myself. And I didn't go. Said next time she send, I went. (DF chuckles). I didn't wanna get another whoopin. And there was no child abuse back those days. You used to get a bruise, but you couldn't say it's child abuse. Couldn't call the cops. But nowadays, the first thing, "I'll call 911." I tell 'em, "You can call 911. But the beatin I put on you, 911 cannot take off you." (DF laughs). But I didn't have that... (Shakes head). Me and my son, me and my son give me more problem than my daughter. Cause he go to school Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Friday, He didn't know his way home. And I didn't fuss with him. I didn't say anything, so she say, "You hear from Shawn?" I say, "Uh uh. (Shakes head)." "Where is Shawn?" I say, "I don't know." I say long as the police don't call me, the hospital come, he's fine. So on Sunday, he'll come home. I still didn't say nothin when he come home. So I got enough of that. He keep on doin that for awhile til I got tired of it. So one Sunday night, he came home. I clean out his drawer, I took every piece of his clothes off the rack, and I put it at the door. So he came, I change the lock on all the doors. So he couldn't get in. He up there knockin on the door. I say, "Keep on knockin, but you can't come in." (DF chuckles). So he went and got this man who house he stayin with the whole weekend, and he came and he talked to me. He said, "Will you give him another chance?" I said, "Long as he promise not to leave here on Friday night like he's my daddy or my mama, and don't tell me where he at. He

can come back. But if he do it again, he can keep on goin. (Shoos hand). Cause I'm not gone look for him," I said. Because I have to work. I ain't got time to look at you goin at me and then on Sunday come, we cook dinner. Him and his friends come on by to eat. Me and my daughter at church. So I ask him if he work. He said, "No ma'am." I said, "So who give you the audacity to go in my part and I'm at church and you wasn't here to go to church." "But I wanted to eat." I said, "Not on top of that did you want to eat, you feed your friends and you didn't clean up the dishes behind you." [Note: unclear]. "No ma'am." I said, "Well, do it again." And I ain't had that problem with him no more. Him and his friends. Because, you know, I don't mind cookin. I don't mind feedin people. But if I'm at church, wait till I come home. Then we all sit and all eat together. Not you goin through my stuff and you know, not askin. So he was, you know, hard-headed. Still is. But he 41. 42 this year? And he still do it. (Chuckles).

DF: Well, how important is community on the island?

GW: Well... When I first came back, before I went. Like I said, everybody was together, to me. Everybody was together because if they had planned something, if your stuff come in early, they share. When you get somethin, uh okra from me, until mine come up and when mine come up, they share. Just whatever they had, they share. But nowadays, I guess after the '90s, 'like 90... people don't do like that no more. When I came here in '70... 1977, when I was here. Had people come and I wasn't here. I was back (points) there. Before I moved here, I was in my daddy house. People used to come and like, I got somebody come cut the ground for me. I used to plant tomatoes, okra, green beans and stuff like when I first came back. And now you can't hardly get nobody to cut up no ground nothin for you. Because I used to have, was younger children. They was younger and now they all grown up. That was it. Because they used to come and cut the ground. They come back and anything needed to be done in the field, made sure I had it done...

[End Clip 1]

[Begin Clip 2]

GW: ...I didn't have no problems. I have to ask them one time. I didn't have to ask them to come and like come back to cultivate with the tractor. They would come and do it. And I just paid them what they charge but now, you don't know how to do a little somethin for yourself... It seem like everything is money, money, money. You know, everybody want you to pay them. Some even to come and cut your grass. Nobody do nothing for you for nothing no more. One guy came, was doin my yard, and he wouldn't take nothin. So what I did, I had to give him like a gift card for him to go to dinner somethin. But he's the only one that come and like cut my yard and don't ask me for anything. Or do somethin. Or anything he's done, they do and mostly charge. You can have family members, they can have lawn mower, ridin one, they don't care what kind they had. They'll do they yard and they'll see yours need to be cut... (Shakes head).

DF: That's not the way it used to be?

GW: No. Wasn't like that. Even... if me and my daughter was to start cuttin the yard, we used to have the young man, used to come, and just fix them some Kool-aid or some lunch and they'll do it. And do the whole yard. And when they're finish, they'll be laughin, tell 'em look at game or play a game, maybe on TV. You'll look at a game and they'll cool off and then they go. Nowadays, those such of people not here no more. Cause the younger generations, like my grandson, he don't wanna go outside and wash the car. He don't. "It's too hot!" They'll sit up in there, they go look at TV. He'll, he clean up, he clean the house. He'll wash the dishes. He put the dishes up. He'll turn this living room around, do whatever. But say wanna go outside and do somethin. He didn't even wash my car before he went to Columbia. (DF and TA laugh). But other than that, they don't like go outside unless he go walk his dog. He'll walk and run and do things like that but they don't like goin outside like we used to. We didn't like to stay in the house. Didn't care how hot it was outside. When we were comin up, we was glad to clean up the house and go outside and play and run around. We didn't have the toys like they have now. We used to pick at the grass and make braid hair; learn to braid it. Dig up the grass, wash it, braid it. That's how we learn to braid hair. With grass. Make it like it's a doll baby but now, they got toys they just throw all over the place. Don't even look at it.

TA: What else would you do when you played outside?

GW: We used to play hopscotch, we used to play... we jump rope. We used to let the guys, the boys used to get the cans, tape the wire, and make the different type of can and made the tractor trailer. Like the big can, the small can and we'd pull it down the road. Or we could, we played marble. We did all kind of things. We used to go in the field and sometime take people stuff. We shouldn't eat the people watermelon and stuff. Mama didn't have the watermelon field, we should go. We used to go alllll the way... you know it's hot. Nice corn, that corn in the field? Like they have watermelons? We used to go to the other end of the field. And we didn't have no sense to know that they used to knock the watermelon so they know which one get ripe quick. We didn't know that. We take the watermelon and crack! (Slams fist in hands). Bust it and then eat the heart of it. (Laughs). That's what we did. And then, "Who been in the watermelon field?" Ain't nobody gone talk. So you know everybody get a beatin for that. But that's what we used to do. We play and we used to love different types of fruits. Like they used to have the plum tree, used to have the mulberry tree, they used to have different kinds of trees. We used to go to those different places and get fruits. And vegetable, whatever we want. We used to eat it. And like different things. You never go back in the house for no food. Cause as long as they had fruits outside, we could eat. You know, find some kind of fruit to eat. Not unless your mother say, "Come and get a sandwich." Then you go and get a sandwich. Other than that, we didn't look for nothin to eat. We used to have, eat like the tomatoes, cucumber, all that kind of stuff, the veggie outside. We didn't have to go inside and ask for nothin. Anything we needed. We didn't even go

inside for the water. We used to get water from the park cause we ain't have no running water. We had to pump water at that time. So we get water from outside. We didn't go in the house to dirty up no glasses and no dishes. Another reason we go outside was to go crabbin. And all kind of stuff. We had all kind of different things to do. So we never got bored. We played jacks. Sit on the floor and play jacks. I play, you play, then everybody else play. We had fun. And look around, after awhile. Time to go cook dinner for mama dem. We had to start dinner.

DF: Now what's your typical meals? Did you do a lot of cooking at home?

GW: Cook? You mean now? Or before?

DF: No, when you were growing up. What was... You couldn't just go to the store to get it so I'm sure you had some special meals that you had.

GW: Well mostly when we was comin up, we had a lot of fish, crab. They use to fix like soup. Different kinds of soup. Beans or peas. Different kinds of peas or beans. Fix like a pot of okra soup. Okra and tomatoes. Any soup have like, you know, I used like shrimp and okra. With rice or grits. It doesn't matter which as long as I had somethin to eat. Then used to cook cornbread. Like on Sunday, we have chicken or greens, cornbread. And during the week, most of the time we... when dad and then come home from work, they lookin for somethin hot. You have a hot pot of grits or rice and fried fish. Mullet fish, whiting fish, they used to have the little fish. I can't remember it's name but it's small fish. But we used to fry it, cut up onion over it, make a gravy. We'd have it like that. Sometimes we have bake bread, sometime we have this. We used to call this sweet bread. And they fix cornbread sometime.

TA: I'm hungry. (GW laughs).

DF: Is.... Go ahead. I'm sorry.

GW: And as far as... like on Sunday, we didn't really have to cook. Cause mama used to start a pot like on Saturday night. And on Sunday... the most thing we had to do on Sunday she have to fry the chicken. Cause she didn't want the chicken to be cold so she fix that after or before we go to church in the morning. She do that in the morning, not at night. But in the morning, she go fix that grits, egg. If we had bacon. We didn't really have bacon. We used to have salt pork. Used to call it butt meat. You fry that with eggs and grits. Sometimes you have oyster and grits. Or oyster and rice cooked together. They fix, you know, different kinds of stuff. They cook. Because you know we didn't have all that goin to the store, they had like an ice refrigerator. We had the ice box, you put the ice to keep your stuff. So they didn't do a whole lot of buying meat and stuff. They buy just enough to last for a certain knock of time.

DF: You said that your aunt lived down the street. Do you still... This is Air's property so you have a lot of family members that live around you? Close by?

GW: Well, this is my father property. My aunt lives around... you go out this way. One that used to stay with the s'mores. She married a s'more. She was up there. We had to... Well we didn't go this way (Uses hands to show). We used to go 'cross the field to go to her house. In the back... Daddy house, we had a road, you go back. We used to go to her house. The family behind us. But now you see, it's a lot of weeds and stuff. You can't even do that no more. But we used to go that way. But this like Air's property. Like I got what? I used to have a half acre, my brother have the most because... It's me, myself, Quinn and Rebecca had our property cut off before mama and dad died. So the others, they didn't have theirs cut off. But then my brother, the one that passed about three, goin on three years now, he moved behind daddy and mama. But then he put his property, his house on daddy and them property. And up until he died but it's still on the property that my brother's on so... I tell him, I'm not in that. Do whatever y'all wanna do. Let me stay up here. And then my brother over here (points), he died goin on what, five years now. Him and his brother like switch... They had land or somethin like that. And his house is over there so I don't know. I don't keep up with them. I try to keep mines. And you know, pay taxes, whatever needed to be paid. What is it, once a month, they property over there. I don't bother with them either. Let them pay they own tax; I pay mines.

DF: Okay. Now when your father divided the land up among his children, how was he able to divide it. Cause I think you kinda told me this story last time of how he divided the land up.

GW: His friend... It's eight of us. So eight of us had a half acre. So the baby, who's... the youngest one, they say years ago. The youngest one get the... what daddy have. But all over, all of us have half acre. Then dad had like an acre. But what happened when dad died, my brother, not the youngest one, the one next to the youngest, he was staying in the house so he have the most of the property. So I don't... I don't know about that. Let him stay back there; he'll pay the tax.

TA: Do all of them still live in the same houses?

GW: Um, my brother... It's just four of us still alive. My sister don't live here. My sister live in Burton. Her twin died in Florida. She had a twin. So then I got a sister live in Saxonville. As you going back out, you know where Sister Frida live at (to DF)? (DF nods). My sister live down that way, on Saxonville Rd. Me and my brother's the only two live here now cause the one used to live right here (points), he passed.

DF: Now who has his land?

GW: Who? His wife. His wife is still alive so his wife rent the house out to her sister.

DF: Okay, okay.

GW: She got married again. So it's just me and my brother. And the other brother, my next oldest brother, Nate, he died goin on three years now. So his, I don't know who it is now, somebody in his house too.

DF: Do you remember how long... How long has this land been in your family? Do you know how long it's been years wise?

GW: Well I'm 72, I mean 71... When daddy died. Daddy been in his in 80, 70. So they had this for years.

DF: 80 years?

GW: Over that cause dad brother was older than he is and they been here. And the dad was here before that. So over, maybe this land been over a hundred years. It'd have to be. Cause if I'm 70, dad would be 107 now. If he was still alive and his dad was older than he is so have to be. And all the brothers, his brothers died and his older sister passed. So at least, well his nephew, he died and his wife died also so (shrugs). It's just the children now.

DF: So this could be five generations?

GW: Well, with me and my daughter, it's four generations. Right here.

DF: Okay.

GW: It's me, my daughter, Heather and her children. That's four generations.

DF: And then your father's generation would be five and then his father's generation would be six. Six generations. If there's any parting words that you'd like to send in your story, that you tell in your story. What would you like to say? Your culture, your land, your community, or your family. What message would you want to leave for your family?

GW: Well, the only thing I would...

[End Clip 2]

[Begin Clip 3]

GW: ... say that, we are. Like there's just four of us now, so you know they always callin me. They callin me yesterday. I call my brother (points). He say, "It's just three of us." I say, "Well

who you countin out?” (Laughs). I say, “It’s four of us! It’s three sisters and one brother so that’s four!” He say, “We don’t ask to be together but once a month.” We usually get together once a month. Brother and sisters. We get out and we talk, and we laugh and talk about things happen in the past and stuff like that. So we try to keep it like once a month. The older sister, before she died, we used to go out once a month, every month every year. Whether she was sick, whether she feel good, that once a month, we would go out. So we try to keep it the same way, at least go out once a month. Plus, like when somebody birthday, we usually go out and take them out to dinner. Like the twin, Rebecca’s birthday this month. We hadn’t take her out to dinner yet. So we s’posed to be doin that next Friday night. No, next Thursday night. And she wanted to know whether it was her birthday, but I have to call back and set that up. I’m not sure. But I know we are meeting together this month. So we tryna like, you know. To me, the message for my family, I always say they need to stay close, connected. Not to say we not really close, we don’t get together as a family. Not my sibling. But I mean every, all... the whole entire Johnson family. Cause you know it’s Johnson and like we have other people. Other people cause they married out like Ferguson. We call each other. But we don’t get together like we used to get together and have like havin like a family reunion. And now we had the last family reunion, I think about three years ago. It was the Johnson family reunion; we had over there (points). And I think it’s goin on three years now, but I would tell ‘em that they need to stick together and you know, just keep the love, that you know. It’s not that we don’t show love when we see each other, we show love. But I at least should be able to get together at least every once or twice a year. You know, so that the children would know who their family is cause a lot of children don’t know. A lot of family don’t know who they family is until somebody died. Whenever somebody died they say, “Oh that’s my family!” Then you wanna come ask me, “Well how are you gett...?” I don’t know. (Shrugs). I’m gettin old. I’m not sayin I don’t remember everything, but some things you don’t remember everything until. Somebody died and your mind go back to say, “Oh yeah. That’s so-and-so mother or father or aunt or something.” But if you don’t keep in a contact with one and other, it goes away from you. Then somebody died, then you wanna go. That’s not the time you s’posed to visit them. The verse: “Give me my flowers WHILE I live.” So that mean, “I love you,” I call you, I might can’t see you all the time, but I can call you. Like my aunt in New York, I don’t know that a week go by that I don’t talk to her. I got friends; I don’t let a week go by that I don’t talk to them. And if I call them and they don’t call, I say then I’m gonna avoid you. (Laughs). “What you mean you gone avoid me?” I say, “I ain’t heard from you all last week.” “Oh, I know I call you last week!” I say, “No.” But the weeks are goin by so fast, and everybody gets so busy, they say they don’t have time. When we was walking, we had time! Now we ridin and we don’t have time? I don’t think so. You just gotta make a effort to do. Cause a lot of time, I don’t feel like doin what I have to do, but I have to get up and do it. Like the day I didn’t go to the pool, cause if I go to the pool, when I come out, I’m sleepin. (DF, TA and GW laugh). But I try to go to the pool Monday, Wednesday, Friday. But last week I went Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. So I try to get in the pool and do exercise and try to keep myself mobile as much as I can because I got a pickle I have to take care of. And by the

name of Bernie Sue. And now's she kinda quiet today. She ain't talk cause I guess we got strange folks in the house. But other than that, just want them to stay focused and try to keep the property in four. (Clasps hands together). But you know, cause people'll come and take everything you have if you don't stick together. And stay prayerful. (Nods). Stay prayerful. Cause now, there hasn't been a time to pray... We need to pray more. Pray more each and every day. Not only for our family, but the whole entire family, nation. Because everybody need prayer. And I have my prayer time. I pray, if I wake up at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. That's when I pray, or whenever. I try to give God some of my time, instead of running here, running there. Doin nothing. Reading my Word. Try to say the Word. Understand the Word I had on TV, but I like to read. Cause see, when you read the Word, then if you hear it again, it give you more understanding. And a lot of time, people say, "Well why? Why this happen to me or why this happen? Why you not worried?" I'm not worried 'bout what tomorrow gone bring. When I keep my hand, God hand, He gone take care the rest.

DF: That's right. (Nods).

GW: We just gotta learn to love one and other. And everybody's sister and brother. Ain't nobody here that's not sister and brother. Because we cut from a Adam and everybody is brother and sister of Christ. If you not, like, what you call it... I need a tissue. Can you hand that over here please? (To TA; points). This fan. (Chuckles). Just take out one, honey. This fan got me runnin the nose. Cause you know I don't sit under no fan. Thank you (to TA). But other than that, everything seem like it goin on okay. And I appreciate y'all comin by and I hope I enjoy when I see that tape.

DF: Yes, I do too. You know what? And I'm thankful; I'm grateful that you spent this time with us, telling us your story. This is very important because we're needing to pass on your rich culture. So I really appreciate your time and sharing your story with us. Is there anything else you wanna say?

GW: (Laughs). I just thank y'all for takin time with me, too.

DF: Good.

GW: Nice to meet you. I didn't meet you (to TA). Just y'all two last time (points to DF and MA).

DF: Right, we had this last year but she didn't come back this year. So Trudy is joining our team.

GW: So where y'all come from, now?

DF: Cleveland.

GW: Cleveland. (Nods).

DF: And Trudy's from...?

TA: I'm from Cleveland.

DF: That's right! Cleveland Heights, too.

GW: Okay.

DF: We're all from Cleveland. I had something (looks around). I'll drop it by a little later today.

GW: Okay.

DF: Just forgot to bring it.

Unknown (offscreen): [Note: unclear].

GW: You see? See, she tryna invite y'all in. (Everyone laughs).

DF: Okay, well thank you for the invitation.

GW: (Laughs). Okay.

[End]