

7-20-2012

Pearson, Sarah

Sarah Pearson

David Zelinsky

Zakiyyah Bergen
Roxboro Middle School

Portia Morgan

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Recommended Citation

Pearson, Sarah; Zelinsky, David; Bergen, Zakiyyah; and Morgan, Portia, "Pearson, Sarah" (2012). *Video Collection*. Paper 141.

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Interviewee: Sarah Pearson

Interviewers: David Zelinsky, Zakiyyah Bergen, Portia Morgan

Location: St. Helena Island, South Carolina

Date: July 20, 2012

PM: Today is July the 20th, 2012 and we are here on St. Helena's Island. David Zelinsky, Zakiyyah Bergen, and I'm Portia Morgan and today we're going to be---

ZB: Bergen (emphasizing the "r").

PM: Bergen (rolls eyes), Zakiyyah Bergen. And today we're going to be interviewing Ms. Sarah Pearson. Ms. Sarah lives here on St. Helena's Island at Coffin Point. Last year we interviewed her and today we want to have a chance to follow-up and see what changes have been made in the past year.

ZB: Hello Ms. Sarah.

SP: Hello.

ZB: We are so happy that you are here to share with us. 'Kay. Could you tell us a little bit more about this wonderful island that you have grown up on? Um, maybe some childhood stories you might have remembered you didn't have a chance to share with us last year. And just what it means to be Gullah, what makes Gullah the culture that it is.

SP: Well uh, on this island, that is Gullah, we have a lot of resource here, like the shrimp. It's shrimp season right about now, and the boats go out fishin' and they bring all the seafood back to the dock and a lot of people go down to the dock and head shrimp, I mean to pull the head off the shrimp. And they get paid for it. I used to do that when I was coming up, go down and that was my change when I was in school, my spending money.

ZB: Oh, really?

SP: Yes and now it is this season is vegetable. Tomatoes and cucumber---the tomato season is about over, now they gettin' ready to have something else going on like watermelon. And they keep plantin', once a group of vegetable is over and another group of vegetable they grow is like watermelon and um, the late---watermelon what else they have? Cantaloupe...fall okra and they have corn but the weather was so hot lately so, I don't know how they did this year. But they um on the farm. But as I was growing up, that's what we used to do then. And uh, after school we used to go and make our little spending change at the shrimp dock heading shrimp. And I

remember every afternoon we'd go around there when we'd get out of school and do that and come home and we'd have any choice to do, we have to do that too. Kids today they don't have that to do, and it's a shame because it make you to be a better person, make you be a um, more that you could do for yourself when you leave home. If you have that kinda training like some kinda choice. But nowadays children have more electronic device and they stay inside the house and look at TV and stuff like that, we didn't have that when we was comin' up. And um, the island is---is grown from the time I came back home I left here in '64 and came back in '76 and I have seen a lot of development on the island, since I been back. Uh, like we never had no traffic light.

ZB: Really, no traffic light???

SP: No, no traffic light. So now the island have two. And the road is much better, and they steady the building business is coming on slowly on the island but I hope it don't get too overcrowded.

ZB: Ok.

SP: Yeah. But we like to keep it, you know, almost like it was but we know progress, we can't stop progress. But hope we don't get like Hilton Head.

ZB: Ok.

DZ: Well is the, um business providing opportunities to the youth for employment as well?

SP: Yes. They have um, more now then when I finished school, opportunities for them to go to work. And then not only here on the island, in Beaufort they have a lot of opportunities cause they come out of school get a part time job and make some money for the beginning of the school year.

ZB: Ok, so this technology it has been good and bad for the island?

SP: Yes.

ZB: How so?

SP: Because, developing is like taking away some of the beauty of the island.

ZB: Ok.

SP: You know when you bring in business and more traffic and it's just busy. It take away a lot of the beauty of---of the island. But we know we can't stop progress, you know as people move in and people land bein' sold, so you know you can't stop anyone to put what they gonna put on they land.

PM: Is the land being sold to more outsiders?

SP: Yes.

PM: Is there anything any, um, movement among the people here to try to keep the land still within the Gullah community and the families here?

SP: Yes they um, try to help those that can't pay tax, they have a meetin' all the time that they go and try to get help to keep their land in the family. And what they do they pay a tax for the people and then they'll pay, you know, money back to you know whoever---whoever paid for them to try to keep their land.

DZ: The house that you grew up in as a girl, is that still part of your family as well as land going back?

SP: The land is still there but the house is um, the old house is not there. We have a new building on the land because of this hurricane that went through here. You know, sooner or later, wooden house don't last too long.

ZB: Ok.

DZ: Right.

SP: And cause back then, the way building houses back then is not the same way building now it's much stronger. So, I'm still on the land.

ZB: Ok.

DZ: Well how far back can you trace your property to? What year it was first acquired by your family?

SP: I, oh, uh way back, I can't give you the definitely if I had known I woulda looked up--I don't know the year. But my Grandfather, the land was in his name and um, my Mom when she got married my Grandfather gave her acre of the land and that's the---where--the part I'm on now is what my Mother, and the rest of the land is heirs property.

ZB: So both of your parents grew up in these islands?

SP: Yes. My um, my Mother---uh----parents grew up on the island. My Daddy, after he married my Mom, he move here. My Daddy really was born on Parris Island where the marine base that's where my Daddy grew up at and the marines when they took over, the government took over that and that's when they move off there Parris Island. But that's where my Daddy was born.

ZB: Wow.

SP: It's really, it's historial [historical] because a lot of people grew up on that island, Parris Island.

ZB: And the government, did the government buy the land from them?

SP: I---I guess so. I don't really know but way my Daddy talked, they didn't get that much. You know?

PM: They kinda forced them out.

SP: Yes.

ZB: That's marines---

PM: One, one of the things that's the focus of course of our interviews is this Gullah tradition and I know we talked a little bit about it last year with you. But I guess I'm wondering what Gullah traditions could I find today, on St.Helena? What examples of Gullah tradition would I find?

SP: Well, we---a lot of people still talk the same way and that's---that's the language is still exists that will never go away. 'Cause I went to the city and I came back and I still talk in the same way, I talked that way when I went up to the city. And I went to New York and when I came back you know, it's not too much different, that I have changed. And especially when you get someone mad you really gonna hear the Gullah. 'Cause you wouldn't be able to understand.

(ZB and DZ laugh)

DZ: But you could.

SP: Yes. And they're still farmin' although a lot of small farmers isn---don't exist no more but people still have their own garden. They still plantin'. Still fishin'. Still havin' prayer---well---prayer service is not all over the place some of the prayer house have closed down, but we still have a few prayer house still around. And we still havin' church service. We still doin' most of what we did back then.

PM: So the traditions are still there. They're more modernized but still the same.

SP: Right it never---it never leave.

ZB: And we have our---your youth here, they are still participating in the traditions---

SP: Yes.

ZB: ---of their forefathers?

SP: They still, yes, their still, and uh basically when we have different service in the church and you let the youth perform and do whatever they wanna do like praise, dance and all that they s--they have all of that.

DZ: We hear about a lot of uh, a lot of people that were born here, left, came back, um, how many people from here did you see up north in New York and also saw them return around the same time, give or take a few years, when you came back?

SP: Well a lot of 'em, that I--that left before I did, a lot of 'em have return. And even when I left a lot of my classmate is back and we uh--we have a reunion, class reunion, and um, like my class we have meeting once a month. And we still, my class right now, class of '64, we give scholarship every year to the student. We try to give back to the community. Yeah---

DZ: That is wonderful.

ZB: That is excellent, that is excellent.

SP: So we been doin' it now I think fourteen years, I think. Since we was started giving scholarship and then now the whole, coming up in September I think, we havin' our alumni, we havin' our class, the whole school gonna meet and they gonna have a banquet and fish fried at friday night banquet. So we still doin' so we give back to the community.

PM: So what do you---what do you think is the draw for people to come back, I mean there's no McDonald's there's no WalMart. You know the big name stores aren't here, so what is it that makes people want to come back home come back to St. Helena to live?

SP: Peace and quiet. I think they're so tired of all that noise in the city and rush rush here and rush rush there. I think it's peace and quiet and to get around you don't have to rush, you know, you could ride your bicycle, you could walk, you could fish. You know it's just different.

ZB: We see it.

SP: Yeah.

ZB: As soon as we crossed the bridge we know that we're home as well.

SP: Yes, that's the difference.

ZB: And how has um, the Penn Center contributed to keeping the history alive? I know a lot of your parents and grandparents went to the Penn Center.

SP: They um, they have different programs, held there. They have the library now they have the historical [historical]. You know they have everything there that people could see, what went on back, way back before I existed. And how the people did and how they grew up and what they did is history, they have history here at Penn Center, to let you see how they live and where they live and what they did and wher-- and um, what they live in. They houses, you know, look like little---we call little shack now. Back then wasn't a shack it was where they'd live. But Penn Center helps a lot to educate especially the younger people, who don't really know about their grandparents and great-grandparents, slavery time and it helps them a lot. Because, when I was going to school, we didn't get this in school where I was going, we didn't get all this history. I learned more after I got older, about St.Helena Island.

DZ: So children, I guess, learn to value education, as well as their history because of what Penn does?

SP: Yes, yes.

DZ: Cause that's something we don't hear, I mean, we hear it from you but I don't---I'm not sure people understand the educational value not just the historical value that is instilled in the young people because of Penn.

SP: Right, right. And that's because of Penn a lot of people know more about this island than before. Because of Penn, 'cause uh, a lot of great people comes and visit and just enjoy listenin' to what's going on on the island and what had been, and how we live. And some people, you know, here when they think of a Gullah Island they think of a foreign land, I don't know where

they think but when they comes and find out it just a name, a way how we talk, and that's why they call it Gullah.

DZ: Do you find that people don't fully understand the fact that it's not just a language?

SP: Uh, now I think they understand more, because there's more educated [educational] programs going on now and they know more now than then. That it's a rich island, surrounded by water, who love to swim I can't swim.

(All laugh)

SP: Everybody says, "You live on the island and you can't swim". And I said, "No I can't". But I'd love to learn to swim one day.

ZB: Um, your family also lives on the land that you live on now?

SP: Yes.

ZB: How many siblings did you have growing up?

SP: Well, my Mom had thirteen children.

ZB: Wow, and how many of you all are still alive and share this space?

SP: Eight.

ZB: Wow.

SP: But my---I don't have all my brothers and sisters stay here, some of them have moved and went to the city and, and have not returned. I did, I returned. My oldest brother he retired he's back home. My baby sister, she never left really, she vis---she's still here but right now she's in North Carolina. Then I have another sister she's here, and I got my baby brother is here.

ZB: And all of you have homes on your land?

SP: Yes.

ZB: That is wonderful. That is absolutely amazing.

SP: Yes.

PM: So yesterday we heard a couple things. Uh, that the heir property someone has heard that the heir property goes first, or the biggest pieces go first to the sons. And then we heard that the--
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DZ: Youngest.

PM:---youngest get bigger pieces. So is there some way of deciding who gets what piece of land on the heir property?

SP: Maybe to some family but not my family, 'cause um, my---I got---my Mom will, her heir acres to me. I got that---I'm the oldest girl and my oldest brother he um, bought another piece of land from someone else. So he's not on the land, but he's here but he's not on our land. And the rest of the children that is on the land they just on the land, I mean nobody got no portion of the land nobody have a cut off. We just live on the land, pay tax.

PM: So you didn't take that cake and cut it up---

SP: No.

DZ: Ok.

ZB: No, ok it's just that you're on it together.

SP: Everybody---right, yeah. Some people they'll cut it off and give the children their portion of the land but, but in my family we all just live on the land.

DZ: What do you think is more common? You know dividing it up equally or just this is the land for the family as it is with you?

SP: I think um, most---mostly now they probably---some not everybody dividing it up. But I think it's sometimes best to just leave it like it is.

DZ: Right.

SP: Because when you divide it up that person probably sell their land to somebody outside the family. And that cause a problem.

DZ: Have you been approached by developers?

SP: Oh I--we get letters in the mail all the time, all the way from California (DZ laughs).

ZB: From California.

DZ: Wow.

SP: Yeah.

ZB: Trying to purchase your land.

SP: Yeah.

ZB: What are some of the most memorable experiences you had growing up here? Like what was your aha moment or most memorable moment growing up here, what story that you might share with us?

SP: My uh, most memorable moment was when I was in school. I was in every--this I tried to be in just about everything, is our--our---we had a band that was out of this sight, out of the world. We had a beautiful band, our band director Mr. Felix, oh man, we'd win a lot of trophy and I was one of the major eight[unclear]. Our choir was number one, during the time I was coming up I was in the choir. And um, most of all is---when I was much younger, thinking back now, is riding them big horses.

ZB: Wow.

SP: I couldn't believe it now I think about it, I said, you know I must've been crazy (all laugh). I look at them horse now and I said, I was right---oh my god, just thinking about that now that was bac--that was beautiful. Just to be on them horse and then make the horse jump the fence

ZB: You did that!

SP: I think about that now, I say, oh my gosh. I said, you know God take care of fools and babies (all laugh). Yes I-I was young, I mean, hey I didn't know I coulda get hurt. You didn't think about that, you know. And it was just beautiful ridin' them horse.

ZB: Wow. Now we have the cars.

DZ: Right.

SP: Yeah we got cars now. We don't have to ride horses. But it was um, when I was ridin' a horse it was just the time of--I just carried the kids that I was babysitting. And with they Granddaddy horse and wow we was babysitting every day we'd go and ride the horse that was good for me. You know, I learned how to ride a horse and---

PM: ---did you go to the Beaufort High School or was there a high school on the island?

SP: St.Helena High. On the island.

ZB: There was a high school here.

SP: Yes, there was a high school. Right where the school at now. That was a high school, where the school at now and the elementary was where the little kids at now. The school was right there where you see that.

ZB: On Penn Center?

PM: No right where the---

SP: No, down the road on twenty-one.

PM: Oh by Bare Foot, ok.

SP: Yes, that's where the high school, everything was right on that location.

PM: So was that a sad moment, when they closed that high school and moved the students to Beaufort?

SP: Yeah it was because um, our school was always competing against the school in Beaufort and it was sad because the kids would have to travel from here to Beaufort, early morning. It was kinda sad when it closed 'cause it was a lot of memory in that school. And it was sad when they, when they pulled it down.

PM: Now did Beaufort have a colored school or was there---had they always been integrated?

SP: No, it wasn't---they didn't get always was integrated. I think they got integrated in, I think it was '71, I think. I can't remember.

ZB: That late---

DZ: Wow.

SP: Yes.

ZB:---1970s.

SP: In the '70s.

ZB: Wow.

SP: Yes.

ZB: What is something you would want us to share with our students about the Gullah culture? Such a rich culture, what is something that you would want us to take away from this?

SP: That the Gullah culture is a very rich culture it comes from slavery, that our forefathers came here, not on they own but they came and they survived.

ZB: They survived. That is a great lesson for us to take to our students.

SP: Yes, it doesn't matter where you go at, you know, you can survive if you just put forth and keep God first, you can.

ZB: And that's what the Gullah people meant.

SP: Yes, without God I tell you probably wouldn't know what to do but He was always there He said He'd never leave or forsake you. So He never left the Gullah

ZB: That's great. Thank you.

SP: You're welcome.

ZB: Thank you so much for taking time.

