

ZEPHYRHILLS ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Irene Dobson

Recorded November 23, 2019

Steve [Spina]: Alright. Hi, Miss Irene.

Irene: Yes.

Steve: We were going to talk a little bit about when you came to Zephyrhills. I remember you said Mr. Dobson came first and then you came later.

Irene: Yes.

Steve: Why did Mr. Dobson come here?

Irene: For work. He worked for the Hercules Powder Company and that was in the area. That was how I got to Zephyrhills.

Steve: About what year did you move here?

Irene: Oh, God, Steve. Please.

Steve: The 1950s, right?

Irene: Somewhere back in there.

Steve: And you had two children with you, and you moved onto the Hercules property.

Irene: Yes.

Steve: Then what happened? How long did Mr. Dobson work for Hercules?

Irene: I don't know how many years. He retired from the Hercules Powder Company. He followed them from Georgia and they came here and he came with them.

Steve: And then, after Hercules, you moved out to [Krusen Quarters] where you live now, right?

Irene: Yes.

Steve: Why did you move out there?

Irene: Well, where we were living was small, and we got out to where there were more people.

Steve: Was Zephyrhills segregated then? Did you have to live in just an African-American area?

Irene: Zephyrhills was just Zephyrhills until the people started coming in, you know?

Steve: Where did your kids go to school?

Irene: They went to school in Dade City.

Steve: Was that Moore-Mickens?

Irene: Yes.

Steve: Was Zephyrhills High School segregated then?

Irene: Oh yeah. Yeah. But later on, when it got better, they could go to school in Zephyrhills.

Steve: Tell me a little bit about when you became active in the community. You told me once [that you got involved] when your kids started going to school here. Was that because you saw that you had to kind of stand up for their rights?

Irene: I taught school long before I came here. I think I subbed a little bit after I got here, but I taught school in Georgia. I graduated from Savannah State College.

Steve: Betsy went to school at West [Zephyrhills] Elementary?

Irene: Yes.

Steve: What was that like?

Irene: It was school.

Steve: *[Laughs]* It was school?

Irene: Yeah. You know, back then, I told them, you don't fight. Get along. If you can't, just be yourself. That's the way I was raised and I've always gotten along with people. Of course, you know that and everything went lovely.

Steve: Now, a couple of years ago, you worked pretty hard to get your streets paved.

Irene: Yes.

Steve: In the Otis Moody subdivision, it was all dirt roads. You helped write a grant. Tell me a little bit about that.

Irene: Lord, Steve. Don't wake that up. You know I can't think that far back.

Steve: You can't think that far back?

Irene: About the community. That's basically what it was based on: getting somebody to do the work and do whatever had to be done to get it done.

Steve: Right. And then you ended up getting the money to help get the street paved, right? Do you remember that?

Irene: Yeah.

Steve: You got street lights, too?

Irene: Yeah. We needed it just like you all needed it and had it.

Steve: Right. Tell me a little bit about when you wanted to name Sixth Avenue after Martin Luther King.

Irene: It wasn't too hard. They knew that Irene stood for business and I didn't take no shit.

Steve: Right.

Irene: So we didn't have too much problem with them. You know, you always have a few on each side [causing trouble.] But it was always, "Irene, do so and so." They all came to me and I talked. I get along with people. I was raised that way.

Steve: You told me one time that one of the jobs that you had when you first moved here was you were a driver for Dr. Harry Brownlee. Do you remember that? You said he had a hobby. Do you remember that?

Irene: Dr. Brownlee? Harvey?

Steve: His father. Didn't you take him to watch birds?

Irene: Uh-huh. Yeah. I drove him all around.

Steve: Where did you go?

Irene: Oh, some little town. There was this place they were from. I drove him up there once or twice to visit and then came back. I can't think of where they were from. Some city up there. I brought him back home. I worked for him a little bit.

Steve: You worked for the Linvilles awhile, too.

Irene: Yeah, I did. Housekeeping, cleaning in the house, driving them around.

Steve: So you drove them around, too? I think you worked at the schools a little bit as well, right?

Irene: When I started with the school system, I just stayed on until I retired with the school system.

Steve: Tell me a little bit about when you met me and Terry at the Zephyrhills News. Do you remember that?

Irene: Terry?

Steve: Terry Darden.

Irene: Oh, Lord, yeah. I remember meeting because I'm just a people person, and you were raised to talk to people, and we always got along like sisters and brothers. We never had any disagreement over anything, and I have always loved Steve ever since I met him. He got married to a nice wife, and we got along, and I get along with you all, too. Everybody knows Miss Irene.

Steve: That's right. You became active in the community in your early years here, didn't you? You thought that some of the segregation issues weren't correct and you wanted to help fix some of that.

Irene: Oh, yes. Oh, definitely so. I did that. You have to look them in the eye, look them in the face. We were raised that way. We were just raised to talk and be kind to people and it doesn't hurt at all. And young fella, you do the same thing. You're just looking in that camera...Okay?

Steve: You were active in your church, too. Tell me about your church.

Irene: I was a baptist—belonged to the baptist church. We had a very good pastor. We had programs and we did everything we could to bring people into the church. And we worked and we kept things going, raising money and having services every Sunday and Wednesday night—prayer meeting nights. You'd go in and there would be a few people there. That was the way on up. It got bigger and it got better.

Steve: How important was church to your daily life?

Irene: Very important! Young man, you could ask me that.

Production: We want to keep you talking to Steve so that you'll look at him [for the shot].

Irene: Oh! You want me to talk to Steve! Why didn't you explain yourself!?

Production: Sorry! Now you know, so whenever you answer, make sure you talk to Steve.

Irene: Say, "Irene, I'm going to talk to Steve who will talk to you." And young man, I'm trying to bring you out from the camera. I'm over here looking at you and you're acting silly and looking at him, but anyway...wherever else you go, you let them know what's what before you get started.

Production: Yes, ma'am.

Irene: And I love you. You're a nice looking young man. You were raised and were snatched up by the hair of the head. So what were we talking about? *[laughs]*

Steve: Church? It was St. Johns Missionary Baptist Church?

Irene: ...Missionary Baptist Church. And we had a pastor there who would preach and we'd have prayer meetings on Wednesday night, and it grew little and little and little more and more and more. So, where do you live?

Production: Oh, I live in Tampa now.

Irene: Well, you come on Sunday and go to church with us, okay?

Steve: Ms. Irene, another thing that you were active in was um, the Martin Luther King Day services in Zephyrhills and Dade City. That actually started at your church. Tell me about that.

Irene: Yep. It was hard. Well, not hard, but people were slow to get involved. We kept trying to have programs and bring in different speakers, and it grew, and we got along real good. The idea grew better and better.

Steve: How do you think Zephyrhills has changed recently?

Irene: Zephyrhills has come along real good since I've been here. You know, you talk with people. You let them know you were a human being, because it was a while getting you all used to us black folk, but now you know we don't eat you white folks *[laughs]*. We get along. So that's the way you have to do it: look 'em in the eye. Don't turn your head and talk; look 'em in the eye. Say what you wanna say. You too, okay?

Steve: Tell me a little bit about your children. You have four children?

Irene: Yes. There are two of them over there.

Steve: Tell me a little bit about bringing children up here [in Zephyrhills] back in the day, before everybody had cell phones and air conditioning. What happened?

Irene: For me, it was alright, because I understood and was raised how to talk and deal with people, white or black, and I never had any problems. But I taught my children. They played with [everybody]. "You can play, but no fighting," and I never had any problems. No big problems, nothing like that. I always got along with people.

Steve: That's good. What do your children do now?

Irene: Well, tell him what you do. Y'all tell them what you do. You don't live with me. Tell them what you do, Charles.

Production: That's all right, Charles.

Charles: I'm a civil servant. I work with the United States.

Irene: Celia?

Celia: I retired from Bellsouth Telecommunications.

Irene: And what does Betsy do?

Celia: Betsy's a retired postal worker, and Robert works for the City of Little Rock, Arkansas now.

Irene: That's all I know.

Steve: So your children have done pretty well?

Irene: Yes. They have done pretty well. I'm proud of them. We raised them to be that way.

Steve: Right. And you originally came from Patterson, Georgia?

Irene: Patterson, Georgia.

Steve: You had a tobacco farm, right?

Irene: Yeah, we worked in tobacco.

Steve: That was hard work.

Irene: Yeah, it was hard work. The plant would grow up. You have to pick it, straighten it on sticks, put it in the tobacco barn, and cook it until it's dry. Ooooooh Lord! It was work! Those great big, old, fire room tobacco barns. You had to put the tobacco on strings and hang those sticks up in that barn. When they got full, you'd get that fire going in that furnace and smoke that tobacco until it got brown and dry, then take it out. You'd take it off the tobacco sticks. You'd put it onto big old sheets—tobacco sheets. You'd tie 'em up in big bundles and you'd go to the place they called the warehouse. You had auctioneers that came in, and it was a great big building. It would be filled with piles of tobacco, and depending on the grade—if it was good grade tobacco, you'd get good pay, and if it wasn't, it wouldn't be. And that's the way it was.

Steve: Did all of your brothers and sisters work in the fields with you?

Irene: I worked with them.

Steve: You were the youngest, right?

Irene: Yeah. They worked until they all got grown and married and left home.

Steve: How old were you when you came to Zephyrhills?

Irene: Oh, Lord. How old was I when I came to Zephyrhills? Let's see: must have been around 38 or 39 or somewhere up in there.

Steve: Wow, so you've lived here a long time.

Irene: Yeah. I've been in Zephyrhills for a loooong time, but I've always liked it. I learned to like the place and get along with people. That's the way I lived. I raised the children. They all went to school and they all did good.

Production: Miss Irene, I was reading about the Hercules Powder Company your husband worked for. Could you tell me a little bit about that company? I read they were very kind and fair to all their employees. Is that true?

Irene: Yeah.

Production: How did they treat your family?

Irene: Very well. We never had children fighting and getting in wrong with people. We always got along with them. I was raised that way. We didn't fight the whites or the blacks. They just didn't do that kind of business because Miss Irene did not play. White or black, I didn't play. If you say I just didn't give a damn, I sure didn't. If I had to, I'd go there.

Steve: Hercules was a powder company, but they broke up stumps and different trees and got resin from the trees.

Irene: ...and shipped it to a big company.

Steve: So that's hard work, especially in hot weather.

Irene: Oh yeah. That was hard work. Mm-hmm. It doesn't exist anymore. Not in this area it doesn't.

Steve: No, they closed here. What did Mr. Dobson do after that? After they closed?

Irene: After Hercules closed, he went to...what was that factory place he went to? What was the name of that place? I know one thing. He worked with the cattle farm where they raised cattle and stuff like that. He worked there for a long time and then after that where did he go? What did he do?

Steve: Did he work at C.F. Industries? Was that it?

Irene: No, he didn't go to C.F. Industries. We made it through. It was nice. We got along with everybody. I worked for a lot of people too

Steve: I remember that you liked to bake, too. Sweet potato pies. Fruit pies, too. What was your favorite kind of a dinner to make? What was your favorite family dinner?

Irene: The meals? Well, we always had some vegetables—radishes. We used radishes all the time. We had grits for dinner, we had grits for breakfast. Sweet potatoes and baked potatoes, baked sweet potato sometimes, along with collard greens and pork chops or whatever. We killed hogs that we'd raised for our meat, and [grew] vegetables. You know, just regular food.

Steve: You had a big garden at your house.

Irene: Yes. We had garden and grew greens and peas—field peas. Pick 'em. Shell 'em. Wash and can 'em and put 'em into jars. That's what we were doing in the winter time when we didn't have a farm; we ate the canned food. So we got along real good, and the children all went to school and they were very good. Charles was my oldest, but they all got along good in school. Charles, did you play ball? No. You weren't a sports fan. Celia, you played a little bit, but I played basketball. I played basketball like *wildfire*. On women's teams: Patterson, Blackshear, Jessup—teams that let everyone play.

Steve: Patterson is on the edge of the Okefenokee, isn't it?

Irene: Uh-huh.

Steve: Did you have to watch out for gators and things up there?

Irene: Every now and then they'd crawl up. Snakes. We got used to that. We got along real good working in tobacco. God...picking that tobacco, taking it in the barn. Then you'd call the horses to the barn and you'd put your tobacco sticks up there and you'd have to hand over the tobacco string and put it on a stick. And those big old fire room tobacco barns, it filled them up. Then they'd have a furnace in them, a long brick thing, and then you would cook them, getting the barns filled with tobacco. Then you'd burn them, put fire in the furnace and cook the leaves until they get pretty and dry, and then you'd take them off the sticks and put them on the floor. Then you'd grab big old tobacco sheets and you graded tobacco, taking off the bad leaves and keeping the good ones. Then you'd take it to the warehouse and sell it, and you'd get so much per pound for each sheet.

Steve: Wow.

Irene: It was work. Grading that tobacco...ooh! Big old fire rooms of tobacco, all on sticks. They had to cook them, t keep that fire going until that tobacco dried up.

Steve: A lot of hard work in those days, wasn't it?

Irene: It was hard work. Then, if you had to hire help, you had to cook a heap so you could feed all of them. But we made it. We made it through. It was fun. And we had to pick cotton: we planted cotton and picked the cotton off the bush. 100 pounds of cotton...I never

picked 100 pounds of cotton, but a lot of people picked 100 pounds of cotton a day down that one row. Picking cotton, God! That was something! Then you'd take it to the mill where they'd grind it, take it and take the seeds out. Seeds would be in the cotton, and they'd go through. Take it to the place and sell it, then they take it on and have it worked on. See what you're wearing? Good, cotton clothes. Okay, there you go.

Production: Can I get you to just tell us your name into the camera and then tell us how old you are?

Irene: What! [*indignant*]

Production: If you don't mind.

Irene: I'm just kidding.

Production: If you don't mind.

Irene: I don't mind, sweetheart.

Production: Tell us your name and how old you are.

Irene: My name is Irene Gladys Dobson. I was a Davis before I married, but I'm a Dobson now that I got married. Okay?

Production: How old are you now?

Irene: What?

Production: And how old are you?

Irene: How old are who?

Production: Are *you*.

Irene: I was born April 30th, 1924. You can do the math.

Steve: You'll be ninety-five in April.

Irene: Ninety-five.

Steve: You're 94 now. You'll be ninety-five in April.

Irene: No, I'm sixty-something. I'm in my sixties.

Production: Well, you look it. You look like you're in your sixties.

END