

**Transcript of an oral history interview in the collection of the  
BREVARD COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
308 Forrest Ave., Cocoa, FL 32922**

Speaker 1: Interview with Ulysses Wright, Cocoa Florida, three, twenty-eight, ninety-five. Interviewer Nancy Yasecko, camera man Robert Gilbert, equipment camera Sony DXC M7. Recorder Sony BVW-35. Copyright Brevard County Historical Commission, 1995. Rolling.

Nancy: To start out, tell me what your name is, and when and where you were born.

Ulysses: My name is Ulysses Wright, I was born at 710 Hughlett Avenue, in Cocoa Florida.

Nancy: What year was that?

Ulysses: 1924.

Nancy: Tell us about your great grandfather.

[00:01:00]

Ulysses: I would like to mention that my father had told me about my great grandfather, when I was a little boy. He said that my great grandfather was a mail carrier, and he came from Quitman Georgia. According to the book that I read, "Tales of Old Brevard" by Miss Georgiana Kjerulff. She said that Mr. William Gleason, he was first Lieutenant Governor of Florida. He came to Melbourne and brought these ex freed slaves, the slaves named Peter Wright, Dick Wright, Balaam Alan, and Wright brothers. Peter Wright was the first one to settle in Melbourne. He owned the property in Melbourne on the north side of Crane Creek. He had a log cabin on Front Street, on the Indian River. Then he had a farm, I was told that he had a farm on Melbourne beach. He grew pineapples. In fact they said it was a plantation. Then John Hector came to Melbourne from Australia, he set up a store, and he lived upstairs in the store. He became the first post master of Melbourne. My great grandfather traded some land for a boat that was owned by Hector, and Hector made him the mail carrier. Peter Wright carried mail from Port Saint Lucie, to Titusville, up and down the Indian River. It was a cat boat.

[00:02:00]

[00:03:00]

[00:04:00]

[00:05:00]

I was told the mosquitoes were very bad, that he had to swat mosquitoes just about all the way. Sometimes he had to fight off alligators. During that time there was swordfish in the Indian River, he saw a swordfish one time swimming by his boat. One time he brought mail to Melbourne, and he threw the sack [00:04:12] on the counter in the post office, and he only had a post card. I was told that when those freed slaves come to Melbourne, each one of them was given sixty-five acres of land, so Peter Wright sold some land to Mr. Goode. I believe the first settler of the Goode family was Mr. Richard, Richard Goode. His grandson now is a state representative of Florida, Harry Goode.

Peter Wright also sold land to a man named Mr. Mason. Mr. Mason was one of the first settlers in Melbourne. In 1885 Peter Wright moved to Rockledge. He had sold all his property in Melbourne. I don't know where his property was, but he had some property on Poinsettia Drive. What is now Poinsettia Drive, near now US 1. He had the property

[00:06:00] from Hughlett Avenue in Cocoa, all the way down to the railroad. He died in 1925, and he was buried in Hillcrest cemetery in Cocoa.

Nancy: Do you have any idea why he left Melbourne?

Ulysses: No I don't.

Nancy: When he was delivering the mail in a boat, I guess that was about the only way to get up and down?

Ulysses: Well the mail was carried by horseback too. I remember there was a Mr. Houston in Cocoa, a black ... I understand that he picked up mail on horseback, but the railroad was not established. Wasn't built in this area until 1885, it extended down here. Before that, the only way they carried mail was on horseback, and by boat.

[00:07:00]

Nancy: There must have been a lot of little boats going up and down.

Ulysses: Yes, there was. Steamboats come from up north, and some of them use to stop here in Cocoa. They had a dock in downtown Cocoa, near the ... I remember, well I don't remember, but I read that there was a dock down where Lee Wenner Park is, the now Lee Wenner Park in Cocoa. Later on they had a yacht club at the point just below the Lee Wenner Park, where Brevard Hotel is. There was a yacht club, they had boat races, they had sailboat races, motorboat races. People use to travel back and forth across the Indian River on boats.

[00:08:00]

Nancy: I wonder if Peter ever took passengers and (inaudible 00:08:23). Tell us, what is a cat boat?

Ulysses: I read that the cat boat is a lot like a catamaran boat. A catamaran is two boats joined together by boards.

Nancy: Wouldn't have been a very big boat, I guess?

Ulysses: No, those boats were about fourteen feet long. Each boat was big enough for one person to ride in.

[00:09:00]

Nancy: It was powered by?

Ulysses: It was powered by a sail.

Nancy: If the wind didn't blow?

Ulysses: I read that when the wind didn't blow, Peter Wright had to paddle with a paddle.

Nancy: You could get stuck out the middle of nowhere I guess?

Ulysses: Right.

Nancy: You'd have to be a pretty hardy soul to undertake that kind of a job, because there wasn't much of anything.

Ulysses: That's right, you had to be very brave too. I don't understand how he would have nerve enough to go all the way from St. Lucie county, to Titusville. There were Indians out there, and bears out there. Sharks.

[00:10:00]

Nancy: You never met your great grandfather, but did your father know him?

Ulysses: My father was living, where I was born, at 710 Hughlett Avenue, and Peter Wright was living across the street, in front of the house. Before he built that house, I don't remember when he built that house, but he had another house up on the hill there on Poinsettia Drive. Down there where US 1 highway is now. My father also had a house up there, those houses were demolished later. That's when my father had a house built down on Hughlett Avenue, and Peter Wright had a house built on Hughlett Avenue.

[00:11:00]

Nancy: They had a chance to know each other, and talk about things?

Ulysses: Yes.

Nancy: Your father probably heard some stories about the Indians, and the gators, and all that?

Ulysses: Yes, but he never told me anything about that. I never talked much with my father, he was usually at work. When I was little my father left home, when I was about five years old. He went to Miami, and he lived there about a year, then he moved to Lakeland. My grandmother, this was during the late 20's. Then my grandmother was married to Peter Rochelle. I'd like to mention that my grandmother had remarried. She married a man named William Rochelle, and William Rochelle was the principal of a high school in lakeland. That high school was raised in 1955, and they built the new high school, that was during the time of integration. The high school was named after William Rochelle, my step grandfather. My aunt, my father's sister and her husband taught school there.

[00:12:00]

Nancy: Speaking of family, do you know who Peter married?

Ulysses: Peter married Leah. She came to Melbourne from Georgia. She and his son, my grandfather. I don't think I mentioned, my grandfather Peter Wright Jr., he was a teacher, and he owned a store. My father was born in Rockledge, so Peter Wright Jr was living in Rockledge, and he owned the store. One day a man brought a rifle back to the store, that he had bought from him. He laid the rifle down on the counter, and the rifle fired and killed him. Killed my grandfather. I never got to learn anything about him other than that, because this was when my father was born, around 1893. I don't think my father was but about three years old, when Peter Wright was killed.

[00:13:00]

Nancy: That's rough.

[00:14:00]

Ulysses: He lived in Rockledge, in 1885. I saw that on the census of 85.

Nancy: The original Peter, he had Peter Jr, did he have any other kids?

Ulysses: No.

Nancy: Just the one?

Ulysses: Yes.

Nancy: Let's see, I was going to ask you a little bit more about stories that you might have heard about when your family first came to the area, whether it would have been Melbourne or Cocoa. What was their impression of this place?

Ulysses: They felt like it was paradise. It was so much agriculture. There was so much fruit, and fish. Some of the other people that lived in Melbourne, the early settlers, the blacks, they worked in lumber mills. When the railroad was built, they worked laying cross ties on the railroad. There was also sugar cane growing here, they say they grow a lot of sugar cane.

Nancy: Were there any stories about the wildlife? The gators, and the bears, and all that, that you recall?

[00:16:00]

Ulysses: I recall, during my lifetime, I use to go with my brother hunting out in West Cocoa. Near the Saint John's River. We use to shoot a lot of rabbits, and coots the birds, and ducks. We use to kill alligators. One time some of us kids went down by the railroad in Rockledge, where the train station was. We'd go swimming in the ditch down there, and one day I picked up a little baby alligator, and he grabbed my finger. I had to choke him

[00:17:00] to get him to turn loose. We used to catch turtles out there, they were alligator turtles, and soft shell turtles. All out in the west of where the railroad is now, in Cocoa, it was swampland. We did a lot of fishing out there, there was some ponds out there. There was a lot snakes out there too, you had to watch where you stepped out there. Also out

[00:18:00] to the Saint John's River, we went fishing out on the Saint John's River where the Lone Cabbage Fish Camp is now. I remember going out there with my brother, and two of his friends. The friends had a car, we went fishing up along the Saint John's river, north of highway 520. These guys that were with us, they left us. We didn't know that they were going, we walked all the way back to Cocoa. That was ten miles from Saint John's River, to downtown Cocoa.

Nancy: Did you ever get snake bit?

Ulysses: No, I never did. I was walking along Poinsettia Drive, down there was Florida Power Light Company is now. I was walking along there one day when I was a kid, and I saw a

[00:19:00] rattlesnake. He was about five feet long, and I picked up a limb, and I killed him, hit him and killed him. During that time, when I was a kid, I guess about ten years old, there was a saw mill down by the railroad station. We use to take sheets of tin, that they used on roofs, houses. We used to shape those sheets of tin into like a canoe, and reinforce them with boards. We use to use the tins also, we'd climb up on the sawdust at the saw mill, and we'd slide down. Like people slide down on sleighs in the snow. That was a lot of fun.

Nancy: Must have been a pretty big pile of sawdust?

Ulysses: It must have been about fifty feet high, at the peak.

[00:20:00]

Nancy: I can imagine that would be fun.

Ulysses: There was a canal that use to run across Magnolia Street in Cocoa, when I was that age. Some kids and I use to take these tin boats that we made, and we use to paddle in that canal. I thought I felt a turtle one day, I was paddling with my hands, and my boat tilted and I feel out. That tin edge of that tin cut my leg. I got out and I left the boat, and I walked all the way to what would be called the back road. That's where US 1 is now.

[00:21:00] There's was a doctor there named Dr. Scurry. I went to ask him for help, and he looked at the cut. That's the cut.

Nancy: Wow, that must have been some ...

Ulysses: The cut was about two inches long, and half inch deep. Dr. Scurry took some healing powder, and sprinkled it on me, said that's all he could do for me. I went home, and my mother took me to I believe it was Dr. Page downtown here on Delannoy Avenue. Dr. Paige, he squeezed the cut together, and he put some clamps in it. It didn't do much good though, it was too late.

Nancy: Sometimes we get in trouble out there in the woods, and like. Speaking of Doctors, do you remember any other doctors around that your family went to?  
[00:22:00]

Ulysses: I remember Dr. Kenaston. I don't remember where his first office was, but he had a clinic down by the [back end 00:22:31] in Cocoa. The clinic is still there now, there's a Dr. Henriques there now. He's I believe he's a Spanish Doctor.

Nancy: There's a lot of doctors in Cocoa now, but there weren't.

Ulysses: Dr. Counts, there was a Dr. Counts down on Delannoy Avenue. When I was a little boy, I never went to him. I know of other doctors that I ... Of the present time.  
[00:23:00]

Nancy: I was wondering if there was maybe one doctor that your family liked, or you thought gave good service.

Ulysses: Dr. Page is the one that I remember, that they liked most. There was a Dr. Hughlett too,

I don't remember him, but I heard of him. Dr. Hughlett. The street that I was born on, Hughlett Avenue, is named after him.

Nancy: He must have been there early on.

Ulysses: Right. Dr. Hughlett, my family thought a lot of him too. He spent a lot of time in Africa, I was told, back in the 20's. He was over there practicing medicine.

Nancy: That's a good thing to do. Was there a dentist in town, that you all ...

[00:24:00]

Ulysses: Not that I know of, I was told that there was a dentist on Delannoy Avenue, upstairs in a building next door to the arcade. I don't know his name (*Would be Dr. Daniels*).

Nancy: Where did your family do most of their shopping?

Ulysses: My family did most of their shopping, when I was a kid, at the Piggly Wiggly. There was a Piggly Wiggly store on Brevard Avenue, near Orange Street. We also had a store near the house where I lived, on Hughlett Avenue. No, it wasn't Hughlett, it was on Florida Avenue now, and Poinsettia Drive. [Kenrey's 00:24:51] store, that was a favorite store.

Nancy: You get your milk and eggs?

[00:25:00]

Ulysses: We got our little odds and ends there. Most of our shopping was done at the Piggly Wiggly.

Nancy: Did you all have a garden?

Ulysses: No, we didn't have a garden. We raised chickens.

Nancy: What about clothing? Clothes store?

Ulysses: There was Rubin's clothing store, on the corner of Harrison and Delannoy. That's where be bought most of our clothes. There was Swan's, I don't remember where Swan's was. There was Bennett's store, on the corner of Harrison and Brevard. The clothes at Bennett's, they were a little too expensive for us.

[00:26:00]

Nancy: Did all the store keepers treat you right?

Ulysses: Yes, we got a long fine.

Nancy: What was your favorite business when you were a kid? Was there one store that you thought was kinda fun to go to?

Ulysses: There was a Western Auto store down here, on Brevard avenue. I use to like to go there,

[00:27:00] because I use to like to look at ... They sold toys, and they had bicycles, and auto supplies. In fact my mother, one Christmas at a Church, we were members of a Methodist Church. Methodist Episcopal Church in Cocoa, on Magnolia Avenue. At Christmas eve, everybody brought their presents to the church, and put them on the tree. There was a bicycle under the tree, and I remember Charles Stone, Richard Stone, the mortician's son, thought it was his bicycle. My mother said, "No, that's my son's bicycle." That was my bicycle, it was bought at Western Auto Store.

Nancy: I bet you remember that bike pretty well?

Ulysses: [00:28:00] Oh yeah. During that time the kids rode the bicycles with the posts up high, I guess the post was about a foot higher than it was suppose to be, with the seat. That was the style.

Nancy: As a kid, when you get a bike, you can go a lot of places.

Ulysses: Oh yeah, you know I got on my bike one day, I guess I was about twelve years old. I was going to Orlando. I was going to ride my bicycle to Orlando. I rode up to Indian River City, they didn't have highway 520 then, you had to go up to Indian River City (*Just south of Titusville*). The highway up there that went from the Indian River to Orlando was called Cheney Highway. When I got up there, I had a flat tire, so I walked back home.

Nancy: I bet your mamma worried where you where?

[00:29:00]

Ulysses: Yes. There was another time I left home, I took the bus to Fort Lauderdale. I ran away from home. I stole ten dollars out of the closet in the house, that belonged to my mother, and I took a bus. I guess the fare was about five dollars from here to Fort Lauderdale then. I went to Fort Lauderdale to visit my sister in law, so while I was there, I went to Hallandale to visit a friend of mine that use to live in Cocoa, Freddy Shaw. He was a neighbor of mine, when he lived in Cocoa he lived on Hughlett and Travis Street. [00:30:00] Freddy and I decided to join the Navy, so his father took us to Miami in the car. This was in 1940. We went to the recruiting office, and Freddy was seventeen years old, I was fifteen. They wouldn't accept me, because I was too young. Freddy went in the Navy, and during World War II, he was on the aircraft carrier, I believe it was aircraft carrier Lexington. Charles Stone ...

[00:30:43] (*Break in DVD*)

[00:31:00] After we left the recruiting station, Freddy Shaw went into the Navy, I came back home. I never heard of him anymore until when I came home when I was in the service, about 1943. I heard that the aircraft carrier that he was on was bombed, and a piece of shrapnel hit him, and killed him. Then after the World War II, American Legion Post was dedicated to him in his name, in Hallandale.

Nancy: You served in the Military in the war?

[00:32:00]

Ulysses:

Yes. When I was in ninth grade, 1940, the school only went to ninth grade in Cocoa. Cocoa junior high school. I went to Lakeland to go to high school, the students had to go to Melbourne high school from Cocoa, the black students. Because there wasn't integration at that time. There was no high school for blacks in Cocoa. I went to Lakeland to high school, I graduated from high school in Lakeland, then I was drafted into the service. When I was drafted I had to go to Jacksonville recruiting station, then they sent me to camp Blanding. Camp Blanding is in Starke Florida. That's where they did a physical exam. They asked me at Camp Blanding, after the exam, what branch of service did I want to go in? I said, "I want to go into the Marines." They said, "No, you're going into the Navy." I finally wound up in the Navy, and I spent three years in the Navy. Three and a half years, I went to the great lakes Illinois, that's where I got my boot training. I was transferred from there to South Pacific, to New Caledonia, that's an island about two hundred miles off the coast of Australia.

[00:33:00]

[00:34:00]

We were a supply company, and I spent one year on that island. I left there and went to Espiritu Santo in New Hebrides. That was about a hundred miles from New Caledonia. I was there a couple months, then I was transferred to Guam in the Mariana Islands. That's near the Philippines. I spent five months in Guam, then I came home. I spent my time required over there, which was eighteen months. I was transferred to Brooklyn Navy Yard, in New York City. I served in Brooklyn Navy Yard for one year. I didn't have to live on the base, I lived in the private residence. The Navy gave me some assistance. Everyday I would report to work down at south ferry, in Manhattan. The Navy had some ferry boats that were leased from the city, the ferry boats carried Navy Yard workers, and service men to the Navy Yard annex, in Bayonne New Jersey. I was a deck hand on the boat, and we traveled back and forth. I extended my time, I could have been discharged in three years service, but I extended my time for six months because I liked the duty. I was discharged in Long Island, Lido Beach Long Island. I stayed in New York after that, for several years, for many years.

[00:35:00]

[00:36:00]

Nancy:

What brought you back home?

Ulysses:

What brought me back home? Jobs were plentiful then. I came back home in 1966 to live, and I didn't have any trouble getting a job. I didn't like the cold weather anymore in New York. Then they had integration, and [people weren't mean 00:36:45], you didn't have to put up with a lot of abuse.

[00:37:00]

Nancy:

You found it different when you came back?

Ulysses:

Yes.

Nancy:

Can you give me an example of something that was very different?

Ulysses:

The state theater downtown in Cocoa, before I left Cocoa as a kid, the theater was segregated. The blacks had to go up a stairway, on the side of the theater, to the balcony. That's where the blacks sat. When I came back, that was integrated. You could

[00:38:00] go to bars, any bar, any public bar. I don't remember the question is.

Nancy: You weren't here then, during the actual time of integration? You can a little bit after they had made the changes?

Ulysses: Yeah.

Nancy: It must have been still pretty fresh at that point when you came back? Things were still kind of settling in?

Ulysses: Right. I don't think I would have gotten a good job here, if it hadn't been for the Equal  
[00:39:00] Opportunity Commission. I had a friend who worked in the Community Action Agency, and there was also Equal Opportunity Officer there, in the Community Action Agency in Cocoa. I don't believe I would have got the job that I ... The first job I got was at Chrysler Corporation. Chrysler Missile Plant, at Cape Canaveral. I got that job through a friend of mine named Dorthy Sweetwine, she was working for the Community Action Agency. She recommended me to a job counselor at the Florida State Employment office. He sent me to Chrysler, and I was hired. I worked for Chrysler for a year and a half, and they laid  
[00:40:00] off. That part of the company went out of business. Then I went to work for McDonnell Douglas, in Titusville. It wasn't easy for me to get a job there, but a friend of mine put in a good word for me. I think that caused me to get the job.

Nancy: What did you do out there?

Ulysses: My type of work? I was a machine operator at Chrysler, in the machine shop. We had a  
[00:41:00] sub-contract with Martin Marietta in Orlando, and we were making parts for a missile for Martin Marietta. We also built swing arms for the launch towers out the Cape, where they launched the missiles. Most of the time I operated a milling machine, sometimes I operated a lathe. When I worked from McDonnell Douglas, I worked as an assembler in the beginning. I assembled the parts, and did mechanical work on a dragon  
[00:42:00] missile. Later on I was taught to make wire harnesses, I made wire harnesses, electrical work. Then I worked on the Harpoon Missile Canister. The Canister was the container that they launched the Harpoon Missile from. I did alignment of the rails on the canister. I worked on the Cruise Missile. I built panels, electric control panels for the cruise  
[00:43:00] missile. I worked in the paint shop, doing printing for a while.

Nancy: Those are great jobs.

Ulysses: Yes.

Nancy: Were a lot of the people who lived in this community, kinda swept into the missile work do you think?

Ulysses: Yes. Missile work, that was what the majority of the people did. Missile plant in  
[00:44:00] McDonnell Douglas in Titusville, and the Chrysler Missile plant, then they had the missile launches at Cape Canaveral. At the Cape Canaveral air force station. The majority of the people that worked at Cape Canaveral air force station, worked for Pan American

Airways. Pan American Airways went out of business about, I guess about five years ago, and Johnson Controls took over. They laid off a lot of people, so jobs getting real scarce now.

Nancy: Kind of a boom and bust cycle here. Things go real good, and then not ...

Ulysses: I retired from McDonnell Douglas in 1986, the same day the Challenger exploded. It was January 28th, 1986. Now McDonnell Douglas is going out of business, this is their last year. At the present, they have about a thousand workers there, so these people will be out of a job.

[00:45:00]

Nancy: That seems to be the story around here, or maybe the Florida story.

Ulysses: Yeah.

Nancy: Back in the early days, there was a big land boom in the 20's, then kind bust during the depression.

Ulysses: Right.

Nancy: Goes up and down. You mentioned a little bit about your school days, where did you go to elementary school?

Ulysses: I went to elementary school at Cocoa junior high school.

Nancy: What was the school like?

[00:46:00]

Ulysses: The school was a brick building, I guess they had about ten rooms. During that time we had an outhouse, we had a basketball court outside. I think the ground, it was paved with marl, marl is like clay. We had an auditorium, and every morning we came to school we had to report to the auditorium I remember. I don't remember what the program was, but we would sing songs I remember. All the classes would perform in the auditorium. We sang songs, and I remember we would march out. The teacher, there was a Miss Margaret Allen, she played the song. I remember the song, "Hark the music sings, plays everywhere", something like that. We marched by that song to class. We had a first grade called Primer. I believe Mrs. Monroe, or Miss Jesse Monroe was my first teacher, and the principal was Mr. John Gilbert. I had a teacher named Margaret Allen, and there was a Mrs. Crowley. I remember in sports we use to have track meets.

[00:47:00]

[00:48:00]

Nancy: Would you compete with other schools in the area?

Ulysses: The older students, around eighth or ninth grade, they played basketball. I remember going to Melbourne, they had a black high school in Melbourne, Stone high school. We went down there and played basketball against that school.

[00:49:00]

Nancy: How was the school room furnished? What did the classrooms look like?

Ulysses: The classrooms they had about twenty benches in most of the classrooms. The way we kept warm in the winter, we had little wood stoves. We had a blackboard, that's about all I can remember.

[00:50:00]

Nancy: Bet you wanted to sit close to the stove in the winter?

Ulysses: Oh yeah. I thought about the time when I was a child in my house, we had a wood stove. We cooked on the stove, and we also kept warm by that. I remember my mother told me to get off the stove, I was real cold.

Nancy: Would you have to take care of the classrooms too? Did you cut the wood and that sort of thing?

Ulysses: No, I guess the janitor did that. When I was in high school, we had an organization called NYA. I believe it was the National Youth Administration. They gave students part time jobs, something like welfare. I had a job in high school, working for the NYA, I cleaned up classrooms after school for about three house. I don't remember how much money I got, I guess I got about ten dollars a week, or six dollars a week.

[00:51:00]

Nancy: Something?

Ulysses: Right.

Nancy: What other things can we talk about here? You mentioned your mom wanted you to get off the stove, what about the family life there at home? How'd you celebrate the holidays? You mentioned that for Christmas you always went to the church, did you have other holidays that you celebrated?

[00:52:00]

Ulysses: I only remember Fourth of July we went fishing. We use to go over to the Banana River, and fish. We'd have fish fries out there, we'd have a big deep frying pot, something like a kettle I guess you'd call it. We had ice cream churned, you had to turn a handle until it froze. We packed the churn with cubed ice, and that ice kept the ice cream, made it cold until it froze.

Nancy: Would several families get together, and go together? Or would it just be your family?

[00:53:00]

Ulysses: It was several families. Other than going to church on Christmas eve, and going on picnics, during that time we had a ball park on Magnolia Street and Washington Avenue, where the Joe Lee Smith Center is now. There was guys that played baseball on holidays.

Nancy: Was it an official team? Or guys that organized themselves?

Ulysses: Just guys that organized themselves.

Nancy: Easter I guess was a big church holiday?

[00:54:00]

Ulysses: We did go to church on Easter, a lot of kids got new Easter clothes. On Monday, they called Easter Monday, they had egg hunts at the church for the kids.

Nancy: Which church did you go to? Where was it located?

Ulysses: The church that I went to was a Methodist Episcopal Church, at Magnolia Street. It was where US 1 is now, when they built US 1, they tore that church down. That was about in the early 50's, I wasn't living in Cocoa at that time.

[00:55:00]

Nancy: Do you remember any hurricanes coming through?

Ulysses: No I don't.

Nancy: There were plenty of mosquitoes?

Ulysses: Oh yeah, when I was a kid we use to have to fight mosquitoes every night. We just had an ordinary bucket, we'd fill the bucket with rags, and smoke the mosquitoes away. We used straw, palm fronds, to beat mosquitoes with. Palmetto fronds. Later on, we had crop dusters, airplanes that flew over the neighborhood and sprayed the neighborhood.

[00:56:00]

Nancy: They got them under control pretty well, but they're still out there.

Ulysses: Oh yeah. Now they have trucks with a generator, with a pump on it that blows the spray out. The truck goes around the neighborhood, up and down the street, and sprays.

[00:57:00]

Nancy: Let's see what other things we haven't touched on here. Did you have anything much to do with the ranching, or the citrus growing that was happening all around here?

Ulysses: I didn't any ... No. I was told that my great grandfather had a stable there on Hughlett Avenue, near Poinsettia Drive. He had cows, and horses. I remember Mr. Henry Smith lived up on the hill, there's a lane there by my great grandfathers house called Smith Lane now. Mr. Smith owned the property on the north side of Smith Lane, opposite my grandfather's property. Mr. Smith use to have an orange grove, and he also had a garden out in west Cocoa. Other than that, I don't remember any cattle raising.

[00:58:00]

Nancy: Kind of hard to imagine now, when you see town.

Ulysses: I use to see, I remember there was a ranch out in west Cocoa, somewhere around Clear Lake Road, where Clear Lake Road is now.

Nancy: What about the first automobiles in town? There weren't too many when you were little?

Ulysses: I remember Dr. Scurry had a Model T Ford. Dr. Scurry was the only black doctor we had during that time, with a Model T Ford. I rode in it one time, it didn't have the gears in it like modern cars. He had a gear shift lever on the steering wheel. It had a rumble seat, what they call the rumble seat, it was a one seater. It had a back seat, but the rumble seat was like on a convertible car.

Nancy: Let me cut, I think we're near the end of this tape. We were talking a little bit about early cars, and you say you went for a ride in a model T.

[01:00:00]

Speaker 4: Time code five hours, three minutes, fifty seconds.

Ulysses: Yes, I also had an uncle who had a Packard. His Packard was a little larger than a Model T. It had the floor shift gear, the lever was in the floor board. His car also had the rumble seat, had white wall tires, and that's all I remember about that.

Nancy: What were the roads like then?

Ulysses: Most of the roads around Cocoa were built of tar and gravel. I remember a man named Faulk had a paving company, he use to keep his steam roller next door to the house where I was born. His barn is still there on Travis Street, near Hughlett Avenue, where he kept his trucks. I remember some of the roads were paved with marl. My sister told me that when I was two years old, that Hughlett Avenue was a dirt road, and they had this laundry where right now there's a Mustang Ford company there. Well that building originally was a laundry, and my mother worked at the laundry. My sister said that one day she had to run and catch me, I was crawling. Two years old, I was trying to crawl up to the laundry from my house. It was a dirt road, so even when I became a teenager most of the roads in the black neighborhood were dirt roads. I know Lemon Street in Cocoa, between Hughlett and US 1, was just recently paved about fifteen years ago.

[01:02:00]

Nancy: For the first time?

Ulysses: Yeah.

Nancy: It must have been quite a drive to try to get up to Indian River City, or down the Melbourne?

[01:03:00]

Ulysses: Oh yeah. I remember the first highway was on Indian River. Dixie Highway ran along side the Indian River, from Melbourne, to Cocoa. Later on, the highway ran up where Florida Avenue is. We had a Greyhound bus station in Cocoa, on Florida Avenue and Orange Street. Sometime in the 50's they built the present US highway.

[01:04:00]

Nancy: Would you ever take the railroad to go places?

Ulysses: I never took a train from Cocoa, until I came home from Great Lakes Illinois, and I was in the Navy. I had finished my boot training, and I came home on a two weeks leave. I took a train back to Great Lakes, well to Chicago, and I never will forget on the way back to Chicago there was no room for ... There was enough room, the train was segregated, and there was no room in the black coach for me. I had to stand in the freight coach, where they had a coffin. I stood by a coffin that had a dead body in it. I don't remember how far I had to stand, but I remember going through Tennessee. I took the train to Chicago, and from Chicago I took a bus to Great Lakes. I remember taking the bus. When I was in high school I came home to Cocoa on the Greyhound bus, it was during the Christmas holidays. On the way back, it was during segregation 1942, the bus stopped in Orlando and Kissimmee, and we had to change buses in Kissimmee. The buses were so crowded, you only had one seat I believe on the bus during that time, for blacks. The backseat.

[01:05:00]

[01:06:00]

[01:07:00]

The backseat was full, and there was no place to seat. They wouldn't let me get on the bus, I had to wait for the next bus to come. I must have stayed in Kissimmee about two hours, waiting for a bus. A couple of buses passed, but I couldn't get on it, because the buses were crowded. During that time, it would take you two hours to go by car from here to Lakeland. I was going to Lakeland. It took me half a day to go to Lakeland on the bus to Lakeland. Since they have the super highways now, they got the Bee-Line express way, and I4 run to Lakeland, you can drive to Lakeland in an hour and a half.

Nancy: During the time of segregation, and when you were younger, what can you tell me about the activities of the Klan in this area?

Ulysses: I don't remember any, all I heard a black man named Knight. He was lynched in Eau Gallie, he was having a love affair with a white woman. He was lynched. One friend of mine said he was with Richard Stone, the black mortician, who went to Eau Gallie and helped him to get the body. He lifted the body, while they cut the rope. Other than that, I don't remember the Ku Klux Klan in this area. I was told that there was several lynchings when I was a child, before my time, in this area.

[01:08:00]

[01:09:00]

Nancy: I guess they weren't around as much as they were in some other communities.

Ulysses: No, they didn't come out in the open like they do now. It was hard to tell who was a member. I remember while I was in high school in Lakeland, black man hit a white woman, and the Ku Klux Klan came out. They marched by my house, and there was a big field in back of my house. My father and I were standing out in the yard, and they said, "Come on, get on out here, we're going to lecture to you." One of them had a whip, and they told us to get on out there to that field. We went out to the field, and they warned the blacks about what they would do. They had the white robes on, I guess it was about ten of them.

[01:10:00]

Nancy: It was hard to know who was involved.

Ulysses: Yeah.

Nancy: It was sort of a secret.

Ulysses: Right.

Nancy: Only the people who were in the club knew, I guess people made guesses, but they wouldn't necessarily know.

[01:11:00]

Ulysses: My family was very friendly with the whites. We got along very well. They use to come, and some of them give us fruit, and give us fish.

Nancy: Even with the segregation, then the black and the white community got along, it just wasn't a fair kinda situation.

Ulysses: Right, in my neighborhood there was a white family living on the corner of Poinsettia Drive and Hughlett Avenue, named Higgs. The family had a little boy, and we played together everyday. I'd go in his house, and they would invite me to dinner. There was another family across the street, on Travis Street and Hughlett Avenue. White family, I played with the little white girl when I was little. I had very little mistreatment by whites. The only time I was hurt by a white, during my childhood, I was walking down back of the Piggy Wiggly store, and a white boy threw a potato, and hit me. I guess I was about six years old then, or eight years old. I just kept going.

[01:12:00]

[01:13:00]

Nancy: It was a small town, I guess everybody kind of knew everybody?

Ulysses: Yes. We were very friendly with Mr. Maxwell. I remember Mr. Maxwell the police chief, when I was about ten years old. He was friendly, he'd come to the house, and talk with my mother.

Nancy: There were only a few police men, it was a small police office.

Ulysses: Yeah. I don't know much about the police department, since I left home 1940, and I didn't live in Cocoa for about twenty-five years. I came back to Cocoa in 1966, and when I came back they had a big police force. I guess they had about fifteen police men on the force when I came back here in 1966. Before I left here they didn't have any black police men, I came back they had two black police men.

[01:14:00]

Nancy: Do you remember any of the politicians? Were your family involved with politics?

[01:15:00]

Ulysses: No. I've been voting, but I didn't get involved.

Nancy: Was it in the 60's that you and your family began to register to vote in this area?

Ulysses: Yes. Yes it was.

Nancy: Or you could register earlier?

Ulysses: Yes. When I came back to Cocoa, they had several drives. The Cocoa civic league, their main purpose was to register voters. I was a member of the Civic league, and I would go up to some friend's homes, and ask them to come out and vote. I worked at a poll one time in Rockledge, as a poll watcher at precinct eight-five, on Barton Boulevard. I took some people to vote. I also took some people that didn't have a ride, there was a poll at the Kiwanis building. The Kiwanis building was on Peachtree Street, by the water tower. There was a precinct there, I believe it was the ninetieth precinct. That building was first a recreation center, and then Kiwanis moved in. They tore that building down last year, 1994.

Nancy: I don't expect that you did, but maybe you heard some stories about some of the tourist industry that went on in the Cocoa area?

Ulysses: When I was a child, back in the 30's, there was a Cocoa House on Willis Street I believe. Then there was a Brevard Hotel, there was the Indian River Hotel. The Brevard Hotel is still down here on Lee Wenner Park, on the Indian River. The Indian River Hotel was torn down in the 40's. I worked at the Brevard Hotel, in 1946. I came here after I came out of the service, and I worked as a dishwasher. I didn't like the job, so I only stayed there about a month. I went back to New York. The Brevard Hotel is a very popular place back in the 40's. Seemed like it stayed crowded. They had a yacht club there several years ago, I believe they still have the yacht club there. Boats still tie up there. Now that the Brevard went out of business as a tourist attraction, it's a home for senior citizens.

Nancy: What kind of folks would come down to holiday here? There wasn't that much to do here in the 40's, was there?

Ulysses: What kind of?

Nancy: Why would tourist come to Cocoa?

Ulysses: Because of the climate. Very seldom do you find the temperature in the winter below seventy degrees in the afternoon. Very seldom it freezes here in the winter. Fishing was so good, I remember Cocoa was called the trout capital back in the 50's. They said you could catch more sea trout here, than any other place. They had a golf course out there on what is now Fiske Boulevard down near Barton. The country club is still there. They use to have boat races on the river, and the beaches. It's not one of the best beaches I would say, but it's got a beautiful beach, Cocoa Beach. People like to surf. When I was a kid, I don't remember seeing any people surfing, but that's one of the main sports here now on Cocoa beach.

Nancy: Would you get over the beach very often when you were a kid?

Ulysses: Did I?

Nancy: Yeah?

Ulysses: No. Here of late though, I go fishing a lot. I go down to Satellite Beach, and Melbourne Beach. You find a lot of tourist down there, but I don't see many people go in the water now, because I think they're afraid that the water is too polluted. You find, You hear of sharks, porpoise dying in the water, and sometimes quite frequently you find tar floating out of the ocean, onto the beach. So many industries around here now, so many ships are coming into the port at Cape Canaveral. The ships, when they pump the oil out of the, what they call the bilges in the bottom of the ships, some of the oil waste into the ocean, and it forms into tar balls, and the tar balls float on to the beach. I think that's driving some of the tourist away now.

Nancy: Nothing like it was when you were younger?

Ulysses: No.

Nancy: You like to fish in the river when you were a kid?

Ulysses: Yeah, I use to fish on the old bridge, that ran across from Cocoa to Merritt Island. I remember it was a wooden bridge, you could look between the planks on the bridge, into the water. You could see all kinds of fish swimming down there, the water was so clear and clean. I use to catch a lot of trout down there on that bridge, yellow tails. You don't see any yellow tails anymore, seemed like they have become extinct. We use to go crabbing down on the Indian River, crabs were plentiful at night. We took a lantern down, and hung the lantern down to the top of the surface of the water. From the bridge, so we could see the crabs when they come along. We took a long dip net, with a long handle. The handle was about ten feet long, and we dipped the crabs. We use to come home at night, after crabbing, and boil crabs in the big wash tub in the backyard at my house. Fish and crabs were plentiful back when I was child, but now the water in the Indian River is polluted. The bottom is full of mud, from run off mostly. Run off from people's yards. So many people have built homes along the Indian River, and when it rains, fertilizer washes off into the water. Other trash that comes out of people's yards.

Nancy: It was good eating then.

Ulysses: Right.

Nancy: I guess if you had to, you could almost fish enough to eat in the early days.

Ulysses: Right. There were many days we went fishing to get food.

Nancy: Is there anything else that I haven't covered, that you'd like to talk about?

[01:26:00]

Ulysses: No.

Nancy: Okay, cut. Mr. Wright, tell us what we're looking at here, while he's shooting.

Ulysses: You're looking at the 19 ...

Nancy: Looks like 18.

Ulysses: 1880 census. It shows where Peter Wright was a US mail carrier, and Leah was his wife.

Nancy: Okay, who do we have here?

Ulysses: You have Peter Wright, and his wife Leah Wright.

Nancy: Is that their ages?

[01:27:00]

Ulysses: There are they ages here. Peter Wright was thirty years old in 1880, and Leah Wright was twenty-three years old.

Nancy: It shows that he's a mail carrier?

Ulysses: US mail carrier.

Nancy: She is listed as?

Ulysses: House keeper.

Nancy: Yeah, keeping house. Down here?

Ulysses: They also had a servant.

Nancy: Looks like Marret, or Marrita?

Ulysses: Ms. Miller, that's not her. They had a lady named Miller, that was a servant, a maid.

Nancy: Balaam? Balaam?

Ulysses: Balaam Allen, he lived in Melbourne, one of the first settlers there.

[01:28:00]

Nancy: Okay. It says here he's a, what? What does it say for Balaam?

Ulysses: Balaam, fruit grower.

Nancy: What census are we looking at here?

Ulysses: 1885.

Nancy: Obviously Peter's moved?

Ulysses: He moved to Rockledge from Melbourne.

Nancy: Okay. When we look at what we have here, we now have a new entry. If you could read this for us? What does it say here? Wright, Peter, and Leah his wife, and then his son Peter.

Ulysses: Right.

[01:29:00]

Nancy: He really had a varied career?

Ulysses: Right.

Nancy: Tell us how you came to have your picture taken here?

Ulysses: One day I was sitting in the house on Sunday morning, and I was reading the today newspaper. I read this announcement that Peter Wright memorial would be dedicated at one PM today. That was the first I heard of it, and I got dressed and I went down the Melbourne. When I got there the dedication was winding up. They were taking pictures, and there was a man in the crowd ...