

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS  
DEPARTMENT OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES**

Oral History Project – Fall Semester 2004

**AfroAm 297A: Black Springfield: Revisited**

Course Instructors: *annalise fonza*, Doctoral Student –Department of Landscape Architecture & Regional Planning; *Dr. John H. Bracey* – Department of Afro-American Studies; and *Representative Benjamin Swan* of Springfield, Massachusetts

**General Topic of this Interview:**

This general topic of this interview is my grandmother's, Willie Mae Burgess, experiences in the city of Springfield, Massachusetts. In this interview we discussed her family's migration from Georgia to Springfield, her connections to the late City Councilman Paul R. Mason, and some of her own experiences as a black entrepreneur in Springfield. Like many other blacks in Springfield, my grandmother, Willie Mae Burgess, feels that she did not succeed at accomplishing her goals. Her entrepreneurial endeavors were complicated by a lack of money, black unity, and the strategies that local white business owners used to eliminate and/or exclude black competitors. During the interview, my grandmother expressed her longing for the South and the pain that local black mothers feel when their children decide to leave Massachusetts for better paying jobs and/or opportunities.

**DATE:** December 5, 2003

Interviewer: *Ashia Ahnie Alexander-Mason*

**PLACE:** My grandmother's home in Springfield

**PERSONAL DATA:**

Interviewee: *Willie Mae Burgess*

Birth Date: September 9, 1942

Background: Lifelong resident; migrated here when she was five years old, in 1947.

Current Occupation/Status: DARE Foster Parent/ Married

Length of Interview: approximately 1 hour

\*a taping error deleted about 5-7minutes of conversation

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Willie Mae Burgess is a native of Maxeya, Georgia and is the daughter of the late Deacon David Walter and Georgia A. Walter. She is a loving grandmother of 13, and aside from being interviewed on tape, she enjoys sharing her stories and has a lot to tell. At 62, Willie Mae Burgess is a very capable and loving -year-old foster parent. She has made significant contributions to Springfield's African American community. She was married to the son of the late Paul Russell Mason, who was a prominent black member of the Springfield City Council. Along with her current husband, Robert Burgess, she has owned and operated at least three businesses, including a local store and a bus company, Through these businesses, Mrs. Burgess has served the black community for well over a decade (during the 1970's and 80's). Her family's love and appreciation for the Mount Calvary Baptist Church is celebrated on an outdoor memorial to her father, David Walter. Mount Calvary Baptist Church is presently located in what was formerly the North End of Springfield.

## **INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS**

I interviewed my grandmother because she is the only person that I know that has contributed as much as she has to the city of Springfield. She is a lifetime member of Mount Calvary Baptist Church and she opened businesses that were important to the black community. Also, she married into a political family and her memory of the past provides is crucial to remembering and revisiting Springfield's black history. This interview went well, but at times I veered of from the questions I prepared in the interest of gaining more knowledge of my family that I never knew before. As her granddaughter, it was hard for me to stay within the guidelines.

**Ashia:** This is Ashia Alexander doing my interview for my Springfield class and I will be interviewing my grandmother Willie Mae Burgess. Hi Grandma!

**Willie Ma:** Hey Ashia!

**Ashia:** Okay my question is how and why did your family get to Springfield?

**Willie Mae:** Well your grandfather...well your great grandfather, he uh came to uh (pause) I guess to get a better job. Some of his family had already been up here, some of his brothers. There were seven boys and one girl and I think five of the seven was here, already. So, he followed them to get a better job. He was only making two dollars an hour, I mean two dollars a day in Georgia, so he came up to find a better job.

**Ashia:** Okay, um. Where did you live prior coming to Springfield and where did you move to once you were here?

**Willie Mae:** Umm. Well we lived in a little small town called Maxeya, M-a-x-e-y-a, Georgia, which wasn't even on the map in 1947. And uh (cough) once we were here, we moved into a community down, which was called the North End, which [is where] most of the black people that came up from the South uh kinda settled.

**Ashia:** While umm, grandpa was in Georgia, what kind of job did he have making two dollars a [day]?

**Willie Mae:** Well, back there in them days, most people worked for the white people. They did all kinds of jobs (laugh), all sorts of jobs, gardening (thinking) I don't know, taking care of the, the fields, the farms, most of the menial jobs as far as I can remember.

**Ashia:** Did your mom work?

**Willie Mae:** Did my mom work down South?

**Ashia:** Yeah.

**Willie Mae:** Yes, she worked very hard down South? She did washing, she, she did cooking; she babysat for the white people down there. She had a very, very, very, very tough uhh life down there working. She worked most of her life, which she's always telling us about how hard she had to work and uh plus taking care of her own children, her family of five, and uh life was just hard down in the South back in the forties.

**Ashia:** Okay. When you came to Springfield and moved to the North End, umm describe the community.

**Willie Mae:** Umm, down at the community, down...the [North End](#) was basically where most of the white, I mean the black people lived. They lived in uhh tenements of like five families, six families and most of them lived in that area.

**Ashia:** Okay, was there any reason that black people didn't live anywhere else or you guys didn't live anywhere else?

**Willie Mae:** Well, yes at that time most of the, most of the areas, they didn't want uhh black people in uhh the areas. Even down the North End after you got past certain streets there was uhh, I guess there was the French population and the (cough), yes French, Irish, and uh Greeks, they were in the outer areas and so the black people congregated mostly in the North End, just in one certain small area.

**Ashia:** Okay. Describe your community in comparison to the white communities.

**Willie Mae:** This community?

**Ashia:** Yes, the North End (WM: The North End?) where you lived first.

**Willie Mae:** Well, let me see. Most of the tenements were like run down, they were, most of them were rented and uh most of 'em were in horrible condition. There were a few people that, or families that had owned their own houses, but most of them, like I said were like five and six tenement housing and uhh I don't, the landlords, they really didn't take care of them very well, and uh it was just a hard way of life down there then, but it seemed like people were happy and got along better though.

**Ashia:** Okay, umm, when your parents got here, what did they do for work?

**Willie Mae:** Uhh, My father (cough) was lucky enough to get on the, working on the railroad, and uhh most of his other brothers were working at this rubber tire company, which was a very good job, but he didn't go that way. He went, like I said, to the railroad, which afforded us, in the summertime, a lot of trips down South because (inaudible), so every summer we would travel back to [the] South for our vacations and homecomings and things like that.

**Ashia:** What did Granny do?

**Willie Mae:** Oh, Granny? Well, Granny, again, had to do, well when she first started, she was ah working on the tobacco farm, and then she started doing housework, which she would work in Forest Park, Longmeadow, East Longmeadow for wealthy white people, and, uh, that's what she did, cooked, washed, cleaned and then came home and took care of her family and did the same thing at home.

**Ashia:** Um, when you were old enough, did you work?

**Willie Mae:** Yes. I worked on the tobacco farm, believe it or not! I was fifteen when I started but I wanted to start earlier, but you couldn't work until you got fifteen. So every summer, on my summer vacation, I worked on the tobacco farm, which I enjoyed it.

**Ashia:** Did your brothers and sisters work?

**Willie Mae:** (laughing) At that time, no, they didn't work, I think my older sister, she worked for about two weeks and she didn't like it and like I said, we had fun, it was really fun. Working, it was hard but it was fun, but nowadays you couldn't get our children to work on the tobacco farm. Although its changed now anyways because the jobs that we had on the tobacco farm the minority kids can't even get, its more like exclusive because it doesn't have that, you don't have that wide range of jobs anymore, and so it only went to exclusive people so they can't, the tobacco field farms are gone, that way of making a living for the kids like we used to buy our school clothes and (pause) we just had extra money. It wasn't a lot cuz I was only making sixty-seven cents an hour. But, that sixty-seven cents, at the end of the day, brought me like thirty, forty dollars because I liked to work hard and do piece-work. So I was always at the top making the top dollar.

**Ashia:** Was sixty-seven cents the minimum wage then?

**Willie Mae:** That's what they started. No, I don't remember what the minimum wage was, but that was what the tobacco farm paid, but I don't think it was much more than that.

**Ashia:** Umm, what schools did you go to? Well, before that, how old were you when you actually moved up here?

**Willie Mae:** I was five. We moved in the month that I was born in September, and so that's how I remember how well, very well how old I was cuz we moved in 1947 and I was five years that September.

**Ashia:** Did your birthday come before or after you moved?

**Willie Mae:** It came that...around the same time...as my birthday.

**Ashia:** So what was the first school you went to?

**Willie Mae:** Uhh, Eastern Avenue...Elementary School which is now Bridge Academy on Eastern Avenue.

**Ashia:** How was it...like as far as umm, the race in the schools, the supplies, your teachers, and the actual building?

**Willie Mae:** Well, it wasn't a, a very pleasant experience because most of the teachers were white and uh I felt like they were prejudiced. I don't, I didn't feel like we got a very

good education because I don't think the teachers were really interested in minorities. When I say Eastern Avenue, that's up on The Hill because we moved up on The Hill when I was (pause) six. So that's where we were in, a predominately white area, we were in the Italian area, the Rovosa's [?] the Germaldi's [?] and all them, so that's why I really felt like they they didn't really teach us, and so if you weren't really up in, on to the (inaudible) to learning you didn't really learn and I don't really think they cared if you learned or not because all the teachers were white. I don't remember any, any white teachers, I mean any black teachers til I got to Buckingham Junior High School and then there was a few there. Like Willard Wright, he was one of my first black teachers.

**Ashia:** Whoa, that's good you still remember their names. I don't remember my teachers (**Willie Mae:** inaudible).

**Ashia:** Um, I forgot what my question was going to be...oh was, was your school segregated then or no?

**Willie Mae:** Not really segregated, but there were more whites because there were more whites in the area.

**Ashia:** Okay, so when you went to school, segregation in Springfield had already happened or no?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, it had happened. Yeah. Yeah, it was segregated but only because you lived up here, but the attitude of the people, it wasn't really you know segregated.

**Ashia:** Okay, you went to Buckingham (**Willie Mae:** Interruption -I meant not integrated...)

**Willie Mae:** Yes I went to Bucking- Buckingham Junior High School.

**Ashia:** And how was that?

**Willie Mae:** That was basically almost the same, as far as the teacher, teachers most of them were white, and like I said I only remember a few black teachers. Like I said...I remember, like I said, Willard Wright and I remember Mrs. Brown which was the music teacher. Mr. Wright was the math teacher...like I said, I don't remember, don't remember any more really. There might have been a couple more but...

**Ashia:** So in Buckingham, when you had black teachers, those few black teachers, did you feel that they worked a little harder or cared a little more then your other teachers did?

**Willie Mae:** Well... I sort of got that, yeah, got that feeling.

**Ashia:** Did they push you more, to do your work or were [they] on you compared to your other teachers?

**Willie Mae:** No, not really, I don't, I don't really think so, no.

**Ashia:** Okay, what about high school?

**Willie Mae:** Oh, I went to Commerce High School.

**Ashia:** Okay, how was Commerce?

**Willie Mae:** There too (chuckling), there wasn't very many black teachers, and I don't think the white ones cared much either if you lived, I mean if you got a good education or not. The first time I felt like anyone was really interested in my education was, ah, in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I don't remember her name, but she was like a home economics teacher and she was encouraging minorities to go to ah, to go to college, and that was the first I heard of going to college. Like I said my mother and father, they were interested in us going to school, but they, they were working hard taking care of the family trying to bring us up right and they really didn't, you know, stress going to college and all.

**Ashia:** Did you, were you apart of any sports or anything in Commerce.

**Willie Mae:** Ah, not really. I played basketball a little bit, but ah I babysat. That was another job, so after school I went and I babysat. I guess I liked extra money.

**Ashia:** I remember telling you about the Fab Five. My ...Me and my friends at school call ourselves the Fab Five and you said you had a group of friends, what did you call yourselves?

**Willie Mae:** We called ourselves the Chickalongs (laughing). It was a group of girls that we got along together. We went to different places, out to the dances, and we just hung out together, we had parties at the house and we would meet on. I think it was one Saturday out the month at each others homes and we had little refreshments and it was fun.

**Ashia:** Did you have coats like *Grease*?

**Willie Mae:** Like who?

**Ashia:** Like the girls in *Grease* [the movie], did you guys have coats?

**Willie Mae:** What kind of coats?

**Ashia:** Like jack-... did you say you guys had jackets or something?

**Willie Mae:** Oh, oh yeah, we had, yeah, sweaters. Yeah, like a little uniform or something. Yeah we had ah, we had all of that too. Yeah. Yeah. Our jackets, we had little caps when we were together, when we went to the basketball and football games.

**Ashia:** Okay. Now did you guys, um your family I mean, ever move to anywhere else besides the Hill?

**Willie Mae:** Nope. That was the only place we moved to up on the Hill on Lebanon Place, which my mother, my mother, my mother died in the same place that we'd been there fifty something years. But uh, my uncles, they owned the house and we lived with an aunt on the, an aunt and an uncle on the second floor, and then they moved out and we had the apartment by ourselves. And then on the first floor, there was two uncles that lived together and they eventually moved out, and then my father bought the house. So that's where we lived and then also my mother worked at S.W Sickles, which was a, a factory in Chicopee, and uhh she worked for I think a dollar ...a dollar thirty-seven an hour. It was piece-work and she was an inspector, and she did piece-work on the 5th floor. Most people remember Sickles. It ah hired a lot a lot of minority workers.

**Ashia:** Okay, after high school, what did you do?

**Willie Mae:** Tuhh hah (chuckling), I got married in my twelfth grade.

**Ashia:** In twelfth grade?

**Willie Mae:** Twelfth grade yes, I got married.

**Ashia:** Before you graduated, or after you graduated?

**Willie Mae:** Uhh, aft... before I graduated.

**Ashia:** Okay.

**Willie Mae:** And I had my first son and then we got married.

**Ashia:** And that's Uncle Kevin?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, that's Uncle Kevin, and then I went back to school and finished and graduated from The High School of Commerce.

**Ashia:** So when you got married, where did you live?

**Willie Mae:** Uhh, I moved to his mother's and father's home.

**Ashia:** Okay, it is the Springfield class so we should say, who you were married to?

**Willie Mae:** Oh gosh, I married Paul Mason's second son, Roger Mason.

**Ashia:** Okay, and I'm sorry, where did you guys move?



**Willie Mae:** We moved to his parent's house, Paul Mason's house

**Ashia:** Okay and where was that?

**Willie Mae:** That's on Dartmouth Street (clearing throat).

**Ashia:** That's the the big house on Dartmouth Street?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah (**Ashia:** That was their house?) Yup. Yeah. The one on the corner of Dartmouth and Amherst. They had been living there a few years.

**Ashia:** Was that the Primus Mason house that they tore down or...?

**Willie Mae:** No that wasn't, no. I did live there though for a little while. He (Roger) had an aunt that lived there and uh when we left, let me see, when did we move there? Oh we uh, we left his parent's house, we stayed with his parents for about a year, and then we moved into our first apartment on Dearborn, no not Dearborn, Middlesex Street and we stayed there about a year and uh, he, my husband, decided that he wanted to be a dancer with Frank Hatchet. So they went off and he did a few engagements and they traveled a little bit, then when he came back home, I don't know why we left uh Middlesex Street, but then we moved to the house there on Bay, which was the Old Homestead and we lived there for a little while, then we moved to another place on Kenyon Street. But the house, the big old house they tore down, they were supposed to been making it a historical house, but your father or his father really didn't push that hard, I don't think, to make it a historical site, which it should have been. So they eventually tore it down and two weeks after they tore it down they decided they were going to make it a historical site, after the fact.

**Ashia:** And they still haven't, it's just an empty lot now?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, it's an empty lot.

**Ashia:** That's funny, I never knew my grandpa wanted to dance with Frank Hatchet (laughing), or danced with Frank Hatchet (**Willie Mae:** Who Paul, ah Bruce [Roger]?), yeah, cuz we, I danced with Frank Hatchet and I never knew my grandpa did

**Willie Mae:** Oh yeah, he was a very good dancer, yeah he traveled (**Ashia:** So that's where I get it from!!) I, I, I, I don't know! Yep, he was one of Frank Hatchet's dancers. They went to New York and they went to where is that, Rhode Island, and they danced a lot around here in Springfield, The Famous Four. He was, he was very good.

**Ashia:** Hmm, I never knew that one. I accidentally skipped over this question but umm, what church did your family belong to?

**Willie Mae:** We belonged to Mount Calvary Baptist Church. I guess I must have been like seven or eight and uh that was our family church and that's where I am now today.

**Ashia:** Okay, were you or your mom or your dad a part of that church like beyond just being a member?

**Willie Mae:** Uh, very much so, she got us up every Sunday morning. We didn't have a car when we first moved up here so we took the bus, which was five cent to ride the bus downtown, and I went to Sunday school and we had all the uh, we did all the things that young people did. We had all the programs. And when I became sixteen, I think it was, I became a Sunday school teacher. Granny, she was very much a part of Mount Calvary. She was the person that used to raise the most money for her captain days and things like that. She was on the Usher Board. She was on the Pastor's Aide. She was in the Mission. Did I say ushers?

**Ashia:** Yup.

**Willie Mae:** Senior Usher, yeah. (Mumbling) But, uh like I said, they used to have great big dinners, and uh in the summertime they used to have the uh garden, luncheons, out in different people's homes and, it was really, really, really a good time for being at church and the children, you know, getting along and we used to have bible school and it was fun going to bible school. Um, one of the deacons used to pick us up and bring us back and forth to bible school and I remember our, our ... the leader was Mrs. LaCount and uh, it just seemed we enjoyed bible school. We went to bible school. We had the Sunday school, not the Sunday school, the youth group on uh after church. We went back after ah, the morning worship service. We had to go back in the afternoon or the evening for different programs, like I said the youth programs. My father became a deacon, or Granddaddy became a deacon, and he was active in the church until he had a stroke, but we've been involved with Mount Calvary a long, long time. I can remember since I was there all the pastors we went through. We had ah Reverend Hamer, we had Reverend Sumpter, we had Reverend Wells, we had Reverend Raspberry, and Reverend O'Neil, and Reverend Thompson, and now we have Reverend Wilson.

**Ashia:** Okay, you weren't there when Silas Dupree was...?

**Willie Mae:** No, Silas Dupree was before my time.

**Ashia:** Okay because we learned a lot about him in....

**Willie Mae:** Yeah. Yeah..., the history of Mount Calvary from Silas Dupree... he did a lot for Springfield and Mount Calvary.

**Ashia:** Were you and your family a part of the credit union that Mount Calvary had?

**Willie Mae:** Yes we were, very much so and I hate the fact that its gone now because Reverend Wells really worked hard to get up to, to have that credit union started in our church. And ah, I was one of the, I guess maybe the two hundredth-something member to join.

**Ashia:** They told you that when you joined?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, well they put it on our books, the number on the books. I think I was two hundred and something.

**Ashia:** Now, it was, it was nice when we went on our Springfield tour because we drove past Mount Calvary and umm, everybody paid attention to the sign out front, and so it was umm it was nice that I got to tell them that Granny and you guys had dedicated that to Geindad and um they wanted to hear the story about it and so, I didn't know everything about you guys being in Mount Calvary, but from what you guys had told me before I was able to tell them some stuff about that.

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, just that they loved Mount Calvary and when Geindaddy died, part of his insurance money... she wanted to put him um, leave a memorial to him and that's what they decided that they wanted to have done. So that's why they erected it because we didn't have a billboard, I guess you would call it a billboard, a sign for the church, yeah.

**Ashia:** Okay, umm, do you remember any of the black leaders that were involved in the community once you got older?

**Willie Mae:** No, not too many. Like I said, the main one that I, I knew was Paul. We called him Russell, by his middle name. So, that was the main one. I'm trying to think, that's was like back in the fifties. (Mumbling) Like I said, my sister-in-law was married to Oscar Bright but I wasn't involved or anything during them times, but I did hear about Paul and ah I used to hear about Ben Swan and his brother, they were activists, and were trying to get people together, get black people together here in Springfield. So I'm sure he did things in the community... I know he did, like I said, I don't know personally, but I do remember some of the speeches and things they did give or were trying to you know, to get people together. I'm trying to think, later on, Moe Jones (thinking). Like I said, much later, Raymond Jordan, Buddy Williams. But I think, there was a there, was a few that ran. Uhh, Mr. Grant, he ran for City Council and he didn't make it, and so that's... first of all, it was hard, once they changed the system ah from ward representation to Plan A, it was very hard for a minority to get on the City Council anyways, and I think it was done purposely for that because it was kind of a good thing when you had the ward representation because you kind of like held your councilman kind of like responsible because you knew him, he was in the community. Well I should say they, it's not he, but there wasn't any women really that I can remember, so I say he. They can kind of like hold them responsible, you would meet him because he lived there in your community. You would know him, know of him and what he was doing. When they changed it to Ward A [Plan A] it was hard for minorities to get on the Council, and Paul was one of the, one of the few, well he was the first one that got in under Plan A and uh, he was the first one to become the, the president of the Council and uh.

**Ashia:** Was Grandpa Russell on the City Council before Plan A or only after?

**Willie Mae:** He was on Plan A. He was the only one on Plan A. I think, long time ago, there was another man, but I don't remember his name. I don't, I wasn't into politics at that time and like I said I was younger, but there was one, maybe one or two back in the maybe like the forties or the thirties, but during the fifties, sixties, and seventies Paul was the only one, and then I think Moe Jones was the next and I think the only way he got on is because someone dropped out and he got the next most votes, but if he had to have been...he wasn't elected (tape cuts out).

**Ashia:** So we talked about the black leaders, do you remember any of the community organizations and what they did? Like N double A-A-C-P or CORE, or umm the one Grandpa Russell had, the Negro Independent Political Association?

**Willie Mae:** I don't remember too much about it, but um, they met at the house a lot, but uh, I was really into politics at the time, I was in my early teens, early twenties. I know they used to come to the house and meet and that's about all I remember about those. ... But, um, I do remember though that uh they used to try to get black people together to do different things, as a matter of fact they ah had one of the first black like a Dairy Queen up there roundabout where Angelo's is now, and ah, I remember Johnny Jackson he was uh, wasn't into politics, but he was a supporter of Russell's and ah Roger Williams, and they had got together and formed a company, and ah I don't know why, I guess we didn't support it, because it didn't stay in business long, but it was like I said like a Dairy Queen, it had the hamburgers and soft ice cream and stuff, and I remember them trying start to ah get people to give uh or save a dollar a week, and they were going to invest it but that didn't go over well because it seems like here in Springfield [people] just don't, they don't get together and want to help each other, or else they don't trust each other to start anything or do anything. Just like the credit union, it was hard to get the neighborhood people, the church people kind of like supported it, but when it came down to opening up to the neighborhood, a lot of the black people they just didn't trust it or they didn't support it like they should have, and ah, I think it was one of the best things for us, and I still don't believe to this day that Carol [Aranjo] did anything wrong, maybe she might have mismanaged or something, I don't know, but to actually steal or take any of the money or do anything crooked, I just don't believe it, because she really, really, really tried hard to me, and to me she really had it in her heart, and uh I just think that some body was probably jealous and didn't want to see it succeed, because the youth credit union was a great thing and she took the kids and traveled with them, and they had gotten to be well-known and then next thing you know here comes the devil, up pops the devil, and now we don't have a black credit union anymore.

**Ashia:** Was that the umm, the one on State Street that you had me sign up with the what, the W.B. Wells one?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, yeah, Wells Credit Union, yup, that was the one. I signed you up and I signed some more of my grand kids up.

**Ashia:** That was our first bank account, and we were like four.

**Willie Mae:** Yup, yup, but I just hate to see it gone... I don't know.

**Ashia:** Now speaking of the businesses, like you talked about um Roger Williams with his Dairy Queen, you had two, I believe two, no, you had a few of your own businesses, but two in the black community right? (**Willie Mae:** Uh huh.) There was the Shopping Cart on Eastern Avenue and your bus business, so tell me a little about that that.

**Willie Mae:** Well, uhh the first one was the uh, like I said, The Shopping Cart. We started off with a truck, rolling truck and we used to go through the projects and we brought the people the foods and we had hot dogs and sodas and everything on that little truck. And then ah, we were looking for a warehouse and we found a building on Eastern Avenue next to the, what they called The Black Top and uh Felix Package Store. And so we decided we wanted to just open it up for a warehouse, and every time we would go to try to unload and load the people would come and ask to buy stuff, so we got the bright idea to let's ah open it up as a store. And so we did, and so, it was a trying time when we first started, we would stay in there all day long and we would uhh, make about forty dollars a day (chuckling). Then we had ah someone else running the truck at the time. Well as a matter of fact, we had another, well at the time we had the rolling store, then we decided we wanted to open up another store, and then we decided there was a little restaurant in the (inaudible) and we decided we were going to try to operate it. So we had the, the two stores, the rolling store, and we had it all going at one time, and the little restaurant. And trying to get (sighs) black people to work for black people, it was almost a disaster because people just don't treat your businesses like you would treat it, and then we had people stealing from us, and the fella that ran the truck he would bring it and he would unload and load, and (tape cuts off)...

Side 2

**Willie Mae:** (continues) And so when he would, like I said, load and unload he would need the same amount of money so we found out he was letting people have credit where we asked him not to let um have credit, and so when they paid him he would keep the money and keep it in his pocket. And then we had the other little store, we had a girl running it, and she was taking stuff, and we had the restaurant and the girl, she was selling dope out the back door, she was (sighing)...it was just a terrible, terrible experience when we were trying to, you know, prove to the black people that could have something that was decent and we [black people] just didn't cooperate. So then my husband [Robert Burgess] decided he wanted to have a bus business, not really a bus, he wanted to have a truck, but he found these buses, and so we decided to go into the bus business, and we didn't have a good experience there either because the Small Business Administration at that time was kind of like prejudice and they weren't giving black people good loans, but there was a girl down in the office, a great girl, Gina Collins, she really helped us out and we eventually got the loan, but it was a farce because we had to go up to Boston to get the uh, get the, the ah licenses, the license to operate, and we had Peter Picknelly oppose us and he owned the other uhh, Travel Time, and they opposed us and Longia [spelling], which was in business at the time. See they all opposed us, but we

had a great lawyer from outside of Boston, who wasn't afraid of Peter Picknelly and he, he represented us, and so at that particular time there was no reason for them to say that we couldn't have a bus business, and so, they [the License Commission] uhh, they gave us the uhh, the license so we can operate. And at the same time here in Springfield we had a bad experience because I went to the Urban League, which I knew Henry Thomas from ah a long time ago, we kind of like grew up together, and I went to the Urban League and I asked him, cuz we had to get the support of the community, and uhh, I went to Peter Pan, I mean I went to the Urban League and talked to Henry Thomas and he wouldn't give me a letter, and I was so hurt because he told me there was a conflict of interest because Peter Picknelly was on the board of directors. And so Ida Flynn, who ah also went up with us that day of the hearing, ah, which she was the head of the N-A-A-C-P at the time; and she was very shocked to hear that ah Henry Thomas had done that to us, so she came back and she jumped all over him and then he was willing to then support us, but we didn't need it then because we had already got the uhh, the license approval. And so when we went up there we had to take, ah Reverend Morgan went with us, our...my Pastor Reverend O'Neil, we had a Reverend Lee, we had, like I said, Ida Flynn, N-A-A-C-P, we had thirteen or fourteen different people go up to, you know, to stand with us to say that, you know, they would support us if we got our license. This was a horrible experience too because when we finally got the approval to get the busses, they sold us raggedy buses, which we didn't find out because we got 'em in the winter time and then before we could start operating it was the next Spring, and the buses were no good so... and the only ones that helped us too was the credit union [Wells], at the time, they gave us a loan to kind of like help us get our insurance, which we had to have five million dollars worth of insurance on both buses. And so, Carol had told us that we were really just set up to fail which ah they really do a lot of black people. They gave us a bad loan with a bad interest rate, then, after we couldn't make the first few payments, we had some trips, and some were good and some weren't good because of the buses. Every time they went out and came back in we had to uhh, uhh put them in the shop and so...but uhh, it was, it was, it was quite a trying time. It was good, the fact we were able to, to, to learn and to experience it, but we almost had a nervous breakdown trying to run umm, because we were always worried about, you know, what the people were going to think and say when they didn't, you know, the buses broke down, or the drivers didn't drive right or something. But uh, my husband was a good driver, he would go out sometimes, but he was trying, which his goal was, to have a black business that would have black young drivers going up and down the road driving their own, you know, company black company, and that was his dream. But we did, we were in business for about two years and one of our bus drivers, which was my brother-in-law, which was Paul's second son, he took a trip for Mount Calvary and they were so impressed with him that ah they said he even smelt good, he had on his cologne, he was polite, he got into a space of the church down in Philadelphia where everybody else had given him a hard time getting in because it was a real narrow place, but they were really, really impressed with him. We had a couple of trips to Florida, North Carolina, but like I said, every time we came back the buses had to go into uhh the shop, which Peter Picknelly owned, or his cousin owned it, but basically it was him that owned it, and uhh (**Ashia:** They would never fix it.) No, they didn't fix it right (chuckles). They ah, I believe the just fixed it enough for it to go out and break down really...umm hummm, umm hum.

**Ashia:** So was, was the bus business and the stores and the restaurant back to back or (Willie Mae: Yeah)...or all at the same time?

**Willie Mae:** Well the two stores, the restaurant and the truck were at the same time and then we had the buses. Well one uhh, I guess it was one holiday, it was the fourth of July I think, my husband had uh, well your grandfather had gone down South to bring Granny and Geindaddy to help them drive down South, but he called me that Fourth of July and uhh, it was about six o'clock and ah I was out (chuckles) trying to, you know, load up the truck to go to the projects and so when he found out I was there he was kind of upset and so he said, he got on the plane and came back and he came and found me and he said "go home...put this truck up, go home and forget about it." So he decided to close everything but the ah but the store there on Eastern Avenue, which we, you know, we stayed in there for almost fourteen years.

**Ashia:** I remember.

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, but ah...like, it, it was a trying time. It was fun. We had just, with the buses, we had just gotten the contract to ah do the Black College Tour, not the one here in Springfield, but one in Connecticut, which ah Russell had knew someone in Connecticut and they had booked it with us, but the bus was so bad we decided that we better not take a chance with the children out there on the road, and so we had to give the lady back her money.

**Ashia:** So you couldn't do what they do now, um, just rent out the buses and drive, or that would have been too much money?

**Willie Mae:** It would have been too much money because all of the little bit of money we had it was all tied up and like I said, like all our, I think our monthly rent ah payment was like almost nine-hundred dollars (Ashia: For the bus?), yeah, and it was, it was, it was really high and steep and if you didn't have the runs going almost every day it was hard to, you know, come to pay for it, so that's when all the things had started acting, you know, coming back, they wanted to recall the loan and stuff. Uhh, and so we ended up giving 'em back and we had to file bankruptcy. And so, that's was our experience with the, the bus business, but like I said, we operated the store for almost thirteen years, almost fourteen years, and I got to know a lot of the young people, I see them now and they always say, "Hi, I remember you from the store," and, uh it was it was good watching the young people grow. It was a bad area though at different times, we stayed there; hard times, good times, that's when, the Square [Winchester], the, the big stores was closed and we had a lot of trade. So, that little store really it brought us a lot, a lot of ah, a lot of customers, and we had, and we tried to have different things in there that, that they really needed from a big store and they couldn't get anywhere else. They would run around like on Christmas and holidays, cuz we opened for all of them, they would run around and were so surprised that we would have stuff like cream cheese or whip cream, and I tried to keep a pepper or an onion or something, bread and needles just, it was fun.

**Ashia:** Okay, do you remember one major event in Springfield that had something to do with the black people that you'll never forget?

**Willie Mae:** I just remember the Harambee. That's when it looked like I guess the black people were trying to get together and they came up with the Harambee, they were black ethnicity, I guess they were trying it or something and so like they said Harambee means togetherness, I guess in Swahili. And uhh, it used to be really, really, really, really fun and we went out and had a good time. The older people went out, and they had a good time, and everyone remembers the old Harambee, but then as the children started changing and, I don't know what happened or why, but the children nowadays every time we had our Harambee they would go in fighting and shooting and that would just mess up our image, and, now we just we just don't, we don't even have our Harambee and I look at all the other ethnic groups, they have their harambees and carnivals and they have 'em every year and they are still going. But ours, (pause) they stopped ours because (chuckles) they're fighting and shooting and all that stuff, so I don't, I don't know what's going on there, but it's, it's sad that we can't get together in a crowd, but a lot of it has to do with our young people, and I don't know, I don't know, I just, I just wonder.

**Ashia:** Do you think that has something to do with how back when you were growing up in Springfield there was always stuff for you guys to do and now in Springfield, like there's, the kids can't get jobs because the adults have the McDonalds jobs and the tobacco jobs and there's no credit unions or youth groups anymore for kids the to get involved in?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, that's sad, it's, it's sad. Like I said, we had the Dunbar and we, a lot of the churches had the basketball games and we went to the dances at Buckingham and, like I said, we just, we just had fun and it seems like we had cleaner fun than nowadays, I'm not saying all young people because there are a lot of good young people and I guess we just don't hear enough about 'em, but we hear more about the bad than what they're doing, but it just seems like they're just, they're just so disruptive and when they, when they try to do things, it just doesn't happen. But I do feel bad, because of the economy and I know the kids, they're bombarded with all these things that they want and clothes and sneakers and stuff, and it's sad that the jobs are not here, because I believe more of 'em would work if there were the jobs, cuz I hear all the time, "I want to work, I want to work, I want to work," and they're not willing to wait, they want, they want it now.

**Ashia:** They want something to do.

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, and I, some of the organizations, like Martin Luther King, it's not all for just, just the community kids, you have to have a reason or a, or some, I don't know what you call it, but you have to, like you have to be working or you're looking for work or something for your children to go and it just seems like any and everybody can't go, which they ought to be able to go if it's a community center. And I think more things should be happening that, that, you know, any and everyone can go to. And then again, it, it gets expensive to, I guess families that have three or four and they have to pay these fees for these kids to go to these different places.



**Ashia:** And they're not reasonable.

**Willie Mae:** No, there not, if you got three or four children that need to go, and I just don't like the system cuz like I said when we went to the Dunbar, we might have paid two dollar dues or something, I don't really remember paying anything really but, we [were] in and out of the Dunbar. Go home, do our homework and go to the Dunbar. I really don't remember paying a fee, might have been, but....And they had all the different classes, arts and crafts and dance and, we had movies and we had dances on the weekends. I, I don't know. I don't know the answer.

**Ashia:** Okay, what do you think of Springfield today? Like if this was, if you were still in Georgia, and you knew what was going on up here would you have the same feelings your parents had and come here?

**Willie Mae:** NO! (Laughing) Not knowing what I know now. No, I would go back to Georgia. I'm not happy with they way, I feel like the minority situation, the, and the, I guess you call it the majority, but they're not the majority, the Caucasian race, they're not very open to helping minorities or blacks and I don't know if you want to say Spanish, but I'm talking about blacks. They're not willing to, to help us, and ah they don't, they act like, they don't want to see us with anything, they're all interested in building up downtown and we own and we operate and we do nothing downtown. Peter Picknelly has bought up most of downtown, and I was so upset, and it bothers me to see that there's not gonna to be any black business or anything down on that Riverfront, if they ever develop it, where are we gonna be? We're not gonna be anywhere. And, and that upsets me too about the black people because they don't, the only way the black people here in Springfield are going to do anything of any major (pause), do any thing large, is they're gonna have to get together and form a corporation or do something so they can get something big or do something big or outstanding, and I don't, I've seen different people try to do different things, like Sam Bass has gone downtown to try to open up an arts center or a retail place, but I'm sure he's closed by now, because we, we don't support each other either, so, we're in a catch [twenty]-two situation. We don't support each other, the white man don't support us. So, I don't know, whatcha gonna do? You go in business, you spend all your money, and I can understand why black people are afraid to, you know, invest and move because we don't, we don't help each other, so I don't know. But like I said, that white man, he just, he don't want, and I know everybody's saying, "you can't blame the white man, you can't blame the white man," but to a certain extent, if they're not giving you the funding and they're making it hard for you, I blame them then. Like I said, you can be, we go to their stores, we go to their restaurants, how many do you see of them coming and supporting or you know coming to our places of business? You don't. I, I don't know, but I feel like I have always wanted to go back South; if I had gone when I was younger, I would have loved to go. I don't know about now that I'm older but the different places that you read, the little bit that you do read or hear about, like on B-E-T, I always watch B-E-T News, you can see where black people are trying to do something in different places.

**Ashia:** Yeah its funny how, well, umm earlier on, they were, everybody was trying to come up here (Willie Mae: Uh huh.) and you see this whole generation is now going back there trying to build everything up.

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, cuz it seems there's no opportunity. So why do they wanna go to school, spend all that money, and the jobs here are (sighing), in Massachusetts anyways, I mean, I'm sure, I've heard a lot of people talk about other different places, it's not just Springfield it's Massachusetts, period. The, yeah, the jobs here, the pay is lousy (**Ashia:** Compared to other places.).

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, yeah, compared to other places. Yeah, Washington and Baltimore, Virginia, Atlanta, parts of Florida. There, there's opportunities, even if, like I said, small businesses, its opportunities. But here, where can you go? Mass Mutual? They're only gonna pay, ten, twelve dollars an hour (**Ashia:** Uh huh, that's if you have a degree.). Yeah, and look at the price of the cost of living, it's so high, it's not, it's not enough. It's unfair to the mothers that they have to loose their children because their children have to leave and it's, it's unfair to us that way, but then again you want your children to succeed after they've gone and they've invested in going to college and everything. What's here for them? Nothing.

**Ashia:** Okay, with all that said, what would you like to see happen in Springfield?

**Willie Mae:** Umm, well, I would like to see a thriving black community. I look at the Spanish people and I see what they're doing, and ah, they're getting together, they're buying up houses, they're opening up businesses, and they're, they've got their own chamber of commerce in Holyoke, and, I think, I remember some time ago, I wasn't in business at the time, but I remember they used to have the Black Men's Breakfast and that just petered out. What happened to them? What is the problem? I just don't, I just don't know. I would just love to see black people thriving. I, I, I'm into, I love business, I'm interested in business. I, I, just would love to see black people doing stuff and getting along, maybe it's unrealistic, but I don't know. I see, I see black people, we have beauty parlors, we have barber shops, the major, that's the major thing that we have, it seems like. I don't know, there's no vision, or here in Springfield or what, do something great or big, like I said, I would love to see a black hotel, not that it's mainly for blacks but for everybody, but it'd be op-, owned and operated, be down there on that waterfront, to have some kind of retail, banquet facility or a store (pause) or something, I, I, I....

**Ashia:** Do you see any of the black organizations that used to help support the community like the N- double A C-P and the Urban League, do you see them doing anything now? Are they a part or the community? Are they doing anything?

**Willie Mae:** I guess they're doing [something] but it's not on any large scale. To me when I, I see things happening, and you hear about the other N -A-A-C-P's going into action, getting to together, rallying behind a situation, I don't see a great outcry or (pause) anything. I am, I don't know, I'm waiting to see what is going to be done about this police brutality with this young man that got, supposedly, allegedly got beat by the cops

and pulled through a window. I don't...I say allegedly because they say that's what you're supposed to say, but how can you pull a person through a window and it be alleged? (chuckling) When uhh, you could, if you want to open, if you wanted to break out the glass, okay break out the glass, but why didn't you not unlock the door, why you gotta pull 'em through a window? I just can't imagine a grown person getting pulled through a door and then supposedly the door was already open anyway, so. We have a hard time here in Springfield with this police, police brutality and then when someone on the City Council would say he ought to be thankful, that they were trying to save his life, but that's lawyer-talk to me. They're trying to justify it and (pause) that's crazy.

**Ashia:** Yeah because, what happened with that situation? Did they pull him out and they beat him, right?

**Willie Mae:** Well, this is what it, this is was it was said. But, like I said, they say this same person, this same policeman has had other, other issues with black people and doing certain things and he is still on the ah, police force, and, well, it's just keeps going over over, over and over and they do, they do things, they intimidate people I guess. It's not a good situation here in Springfield with that either (pause). I don't know about Springfield (chuckles).

**Ashia:** Would you like to stay here or would you really like to go back and see your grandchildren go back with you?

**Willie Mae:** I wish I had gone when I was younger, I wish I had left, because ah, I've always wanted to go back because I love the South, I love the open air and I guess I would to, I used to like Springfield when I was younger, but I always wanted to go back South. So in me, I'd love to see my grandchildren go South and enjoy their life if that's where they wanted to be, but, I can't see 'em really wanting to stay here (laughing), so, but I guess someone's gonna have to try to keep breaking the ice, I don't know.

**Ashia:** I know, I feel how you are talking about not wanting to stay because when I graduate I'm like, I want to get out of here, but then nothing is gonna get better if everyone leaves.

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, yeah, I listen to Sam Bass every week and that's what ah, he's kinda (inaudible) he's wanted to leave but he hasn't left because I think he's wanted to try make a change or make a difference here in Springfield too. And uhh, I don't know, I guess there's some more people that have done it, but it seems a lot of people leave and then they come back. Why, I don't know! (Laughing) but maybe one day Springfield will change, I don't know.

**Ashia:** Well we got through our interview questions very, very quickly. Do you think that there is anything you missed or want to retouch on looking through the questions?

**Willie Mae:** Uhh, let me see. (Reading) I have no idea, Ashia (shuffling papers), I don't know, I'm not a very big talker Ashia.

**Ashia:** I know.

**Willie Mae:** [You] kinda like asked the wrong person for this interview.

**Ashia:** No, you have very good memory so...

**Willie Mae:** No my memory is not that good...

**Ashia:** You remember your teachers.

**Willie Mae:** Oh yeah, I can remember, like I said, almost all their names. It's was funny too though, now that you're thinking...talking about Eastern Avenue Elementary School, the teachers lived here in the, the area. They ah...

**Ashia:** Your white teachers live in this area?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, I remember, my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Tuwey [?], she lived on uhh, uhh Greene [?] Street.

**Ashia:** The way the umm, the information was presented in some of the reading that we did, it seemed like everyone was split up. So were these, do you think they were poor teachers, or like lower white class?

**Willie Mae:** No. No.

**Ashia:** They had money, they just lived here?

**Willie Mae:** They lived here. This area right where I am now, Eastern Avenue, Alden, this was the Italian Community.

**Ashia:** This wasn't the black community?

**Willie Mae:** It was basically the Italians and then the few, the black people that migrated from the North End to The Hill. Yeah, cuz when we moved here there were very few (pause) (**Ashia:** When you guys moved to Lebanon [Place]?) Yeah, very few black people that ah lived in the area, there was a few like the, some of the black people that were born here in Springfield, but those that came up from the South, there were very few. Like I said, like the Rovosas, the Gramaldi's, all those big names, the Scibelli's, they all lived, I went to school with them, a lot of them. This was, this was their neighborhood, and Six Corners. Yeah, I remember when ah, I used to have to walk to school, there used to be a bakery, right there on the corner of Greene and Eastern Avenue, oh, and the donuts, they smelled so good and fresh.

**Ashia:** Were you guys allowed to buy from them?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, we could buy, yeah.

**Ashia:** They weren't racists like that? Like it wasn't segregated?

**Willie Mae:** No, they weren't really racists, but they were, but as far as going in the stores and stuff, we were able to do that stuff. There was a drug store, it's amazing, there was a drug store almost on every corner and uh, now all your, all your drug stores are gone out of the neighborhood and you've got your great big chains, your C-V-S's, your Walgreen's.

**Ashia:** They were privately owned then?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, yeah and you had your little grocery stores in the neighborhood, your meat, meat shops.

**Ashia:** Yeah, we talked about that in class how, it was funny umm, we were talking about how they used to walk to the grocery store.

**Willie Mae:** That's right. That's right!

**Ashia:** And everybody in the class was like, walk to the grocery store? How do you carry all your stuff home?

**Willie Mae:** Yep, yep, they had a couple of big stores down to ah, down in the North End that people would go, that's where they would buy all of the black, the black foods that we ate, the pig feet and the stuff like that. And it was funny, when we first moved up here, most white people hadn't heard of cornbread and black-eye-peas, there was no such thing as Jiffy Mix. They started asking, "What's Jiffy Mix?" Then they finally started putting it in the big stores, but umm, but it was, it's amazing what they did to the North End, when they tore it down, they tore all those great big six family apartment blocks down and they put everyone down in Riverview, more or less, and made the projects. So that, that destroyed the North End. They brought the highway though and there was ah, my husband, or your grandfather, he would tell you ah tell the story about how they ah...there was one man and he went around buying up all the most houses down in the North End because he knew the highway was coming in. So he bought the houses from the black people for little or nothing, then when the highway came in he turned, sold it to the city, yep. Yeah, we, we just had rough times, yep, all the way around.

**Ashia:** (Laughing) We have so much time left.

**Willie Mae:** Like I told you, I'm not a talker. I hope one day maybe you will be a talker and you can take the whole hour to talk.

**Ashia:** If I have to find something to talk about.

**Willie Mae:** I just hate too that ah...

[\* **N/B:** Never leave your equipment around little people. A cousin of mine got a hold of this while I left the room and recorded over what you don't hear.]

The tape picks up on...

**Willie Mae:** The family, they weren't really instrumental in changing like Winchester Square [she is referring to the Mason Family at this point] another, a group of ah people that weren't related...

**Ashia:** Made it Mason Square.

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, they just weren't interested I guess. And therefore you, and your mother, and Uncle Kevin, they, they don't know really history and there not concerned about it because, I don't know. He [Russell] was a good politician, to me he was a good politician, he was a good father, but he just didn't, he wasn't interested in the historical part, maybe he just wanted to forget it or something.

**Ashia:** I wish that house was still there.

**Willie Mae:** I wish that house was still there too. At one time, I had tried to, to move in there and try to do what I could do to save it, but they had a relative to come up from, I think it was California, yeah Donald, and uh...

**Ashia:** He tried to get the loan (Willie Mae: Yeah.) to fix it?

**Willie Mae:** Yeah, to fix it, but see he was from out of state. But I don't think he was thinking about historical anything, I think he just wanted it for himself.

**Tape Ends.**