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An Interview with Viola Johnson
An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Preface

Viola Johnson left Fordyce in 1942 to join her parents in Las Vegas. Her first home was a tent that measured approximately ten feet by twelve feet where she lived with six other family members. She worked at the Hilton and the Sands Hotels as a maid and at the Riviera Hotel making sandwiches in the pantry. After working long hours she was still able to be active in the church and with her family.

Viola's fifty-four years in Las Vegas allowed her to see tremendous changes. She moved from chopping cotton in Fordyce to maid work in Las Vegas. Her interview provides information about labor conditions and the Culinary Union during the early years of the Las Vegas strip casino development. The culinary strikes referred to in the text occurred in 1969 (3 days), 1971 (24 hours), 1976 (10 day), 1984 (75 days). All efforts to obtain the correct spelling have been taken by the interviewer.



Viola Johnson and her husband Clay in the early 1980s

An Interview with Viola Johnson

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This is Claytee White and today I'm interviewing Viola Johnson in her home on March 3, 1996. Mrs. Johnson, is it true that you have given me permission to use this recording, this information, for educational and research purposes?

Yes, it is true.

Thank you. Tell me just a little bit about the kind of work that you're parents did back in, did your parents grow up in Fordyce [Arkansas]?

Well, I'm from Fordyce.¹

O.K., good. What kind of work did they do?

Well, my father worked at the Fordyce Lumber Co., at the mill there. Of course, my mother did domestic work. She was in the home, private homes, washing and ironing and so forth.

Good, tell me just a little bit about your life in Fordyce. Did you go to elementary school there?

Yes, I went to elementary school there. I only went through eleventh grade.

Now, did you get married in Fordyce?

No. I got married here.

How old were you when you left Fordyce?

I left Fordyce when I was 21 years old.

O.K., you were 21 when you left there. What kind of work did you do in Fordyce before coming here?

Very little. I chopped cotton for a while and I did private home work for a little while.

What kind of money did you earn there?

¹ Fordyce, Arkansas is located seventy miles south of Little Rock.

I got \$2.50 per week, if I'm not mistaken, in the private home that I worked in. Of course, that was washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen and so forth. I think I stayed there about two weeks. I was working in another girl's place, but I didn't have a regular job other than picking cotton and chopping cotton.

How much did you get per pound for picking cotton?

As I can remember, it was thirty something cents a pound at that time, if I'm not mistaken, I don't remember the exact amount, maybe thirty-five, forty cents a hundred, let me get that right.

Yes, because I remember earning four cents a pound. Now, were you born right there in the Fordyce area?

Oh, about 22 miles, I think, from Fordyce, but I was raised in Fordyce.

What made you decide to come to Las Vegas?

Well, my mother and dad came out here and, of course, after they were out here for, I guess, a couple of years, they sent for me. I had a little girl at the time and they sent for us. That's why I came out here.

O.K., now, what kind of work did your mother do in Las Vegas?

My mother worked at the Sahara Hotel for a while.

What did she do?

She worked in the kitchen there. I can't think of the first hotel, El Rancho, that was the first one and then she worked at the Sahara later.

Do you remember the year that your parents came out here?

I don't remember that year because I came out in 1942 and they had been here for a couple of years because they originally went to Arizona and then they left Arizona and came here.

I guess a couple of years before they sent for me.

What did your father do here in Las Vegas?

My dad worked at the BMI Plant [Basic Magnesium, Incorporated] at that time.

I want to ask you about recreation. First, would you tell me, for a 21 year old person, what kind of recreation did you have in Fordyce. What kind of fun things did you have to do?

Well, not too much. Every so often the circus, not circus, like carnival came and, of course, that was a big thing and then some times they would have minstrel shows there and, of course, I loved to fish and go fishing. Not too much, I didn't do too much because I was kind of bashful. I didn't get out and mixing with the other kids like some of them did. Life was kind of dull for me.

What about church activity?

Well, my mother was saved, I don't know, I was fifteen years old at that time and, of course, I went to church there. Well, I went and got saved, but I didn't really get filled with the holy ghost at that time. And, we went to church very often. That's was about, that was the most thing, the most recreation we had, going to church. We'd go, stay all day on Sundays, two, three times a week. Sometimes they'd run revivals, we'd be there nightly, but that's about my life in Fordyce.

So, when you first moved to Las Vegas, where were your parents living? What part of the city?

They were living on Jackson Street, on Mr. Hughes' place.

Now, on Jackson Street, now is that the same Jackson Street where all the night clubs were?

Yes.

O.K., now, what kind of place did your parents live in? Was it an apartment or house or . . . ?

We had a one-room tent. A one-room tent and there was about six of us living in there.

Now, had your parents lived in that tent for the whole time that they had been in Las Vegas?

Yes.

Tell me how big this tent was.

Well, it wasn't as large as this room. I guess it was about a ten by twelve, maybe, something like that.

How many people lived in the tent?

Well, I have to count them. My mother, my dad, my uncle, my step-brother, my cousin, myself and my little girl. That was seven of us.

O.K., your step-brother and your uncle, did they work also?

Yes.

So, your uncle, your step-brother and your dad worked and what about your mother?

At that time, my mother was working at the El Rancho.

Now, who, and your daughter and yourself and who was the other person?

How many do you have there?

I have your uncle, your step-brother, your father, your mother, your daughter and yourself.

My cousin.

Now, who's cousin is it?

My cousin, my mother's sister's boy, Walter.

How did he come out? I mean, did he come out because your parents encouraged him to come out?

Well, I don't remember. I think so because after the BMI Plant, well, everybody that could come, you know, was coming. They were sending back telling them the money they was making and how good things were here and everybody that could come, catch a ride, they would come. Now that's, I don't remember, but I think maybe that's the reason he came is because of my uncle and my mother and my dad coming out.

Was the uncle that cousin's father?

No.

So, all the men worked at BMI?

Yes.

Do you remember what kind of work they did out there?

No, I don't but I think they were making something for the war. I suppose it was some kind of ammunition, I think, or something like that.

When you first got here, living in a tent, what kind of place did you live in back in Fordyce.

Back in Fordyce we had a two-bedroom house, kind of shotgun like and, of course, we had a little kitchen and we had a little, my mother called it a little sun porch. Now, our house was a little bit larger than some of the others, but that was the way . . .²

²A "shotgun" house received its nickname from the way it was constructed. It was built only one-room wide, but as deep as the number of rooms. If a shotgun blast went through the front door it would exit the back door and pass through every room.

- *So, how did you feel then about living in a tent after living in a house with two bedrooms and all of that?*

Oh, my goodness, it was terrible. And, when we first came out here, it was so hot. I'm telling you, it was so hot. They said it never rain here. One day it came up a rain and then this tent, we got up under the table, we that was in the house, that was the only dry spot in the house, under the table. Sand, sand, sand, blow, oh, the sand would blow everywhere.

Because there were no paved streets or anything like that?

No, and not too many trees in those days.

Now, tell me, with seven people living in this tent, how did you arrange the sleeping and the cooking and all of that?

Well, the sleeping, when my dad and some of the other men would come in, they was working days, when they came in, it was time for the swing shift to go to work. They would get up, my brother and my cousin. Then, beside our tent, we had some trees. I don't know what they call them, but they little fine pen like things on them and we would sleep outside, some of us. We'd sleep out under those trees. My mother had a little thing about right up side of the tent under the trees and we would sleep out there. But, we had to change shifts with sleeping because some would be going and some coming. When the swing shift go then the day shift would go to bed and when the swing shift come in, graveyard would be up, getting ready to go. So, that's the way they did it.

Tell me, how was the tent furnished?

Let's see. As I can remember, we had one large bed, we had a table and we had a two-burner, oil stove, that's what we cooked on. And, I think, really, there's just little boxes

and things, maybe, that we had put our clothes and things in. I don't remember a clothes closet.

You also, you cooked on an oil stove on the inside?

On the inside, on the outside we had a huge woodstove out on the lot and, of course, we, if you had a lot of meat or pork chops or greens or something, we would cook it on the outside stove.

Where did you get the wood from for the wood stove?

If I can remember right, Mr. Hughes, the people that we were renting from, they furnished wood for the stove.

How close was your next door neighbor to you?

Well, in front of us, directly in front of us, oh, I guess, about fifteen feet was another trailer, I mean, a tent. I'm trying to think, Mr. Hughes' place was directly on Jackson, he was facing Jackson but we was kind of in the back, you know.

Did Mr. Hughes live in a house?

Yes, they had a house and he ran the grocery store there and that's where we would get some of our food from.

Now, tell me about recreation at this time. You had a daughter and, it sounds like, your brother and your cousin were probably young then, what kind of recreation did you have?

Well, at that time, they had one club. I'm trying to think what the name of that was, Harlem Club. The Harlem Club was the first that I remember opening and that's where everybody went for entertainment. They had a live band and dancing and gambling.

They had gambling?

Yes, because I, the first time I went there, they gave me a job with, on the penny machines. I took care of the penny machines but I didn't get to work but a couple of nights because my boyfriend came in with a little bit too much to drink and I was talking with him, so, they got rid of me.

Was this a boyfriend from Fordyce or a boyfriend you met here?

I met him here.

Was your first job, then, at the Harlem Club?

Yes.

What kind of recreation did they have for children?

My little girl just played around on the lot. I don't remember . . .

Swimming pools, anything like that?

No.

Were any of you active in the church?

Not here, no, not when I came here . . . no more church for a while, long time.

How did your, the men in the household, how did they get back and forth to BMI?

They had a ride. I don't know, I think the neighbor, somebody with a car would pick them up and bring them back because my dad didn't own a car, neither did my uncle. As far as I can remember, they had to catch rides with somebody.

Tell me, I want to know about your mother's work. Which hotel was she working in at this point?

El Rancho.

So, she was at the El Rancho. What did she do at the El Rancho?

She worked in the kitchen.

Did you ever see her at work?

No, I didn't, but I think she washed dishes and I don't know whatever else they did. But, that's where she worked, in the kitchen.

Tell me about, the job at the Harlem Club only lasted, what was it, two nights?

Couple of days, I think, something like that.

O.K., where did you go after that to work?

Well, after that, well, I got married, married the same guy, but this was in 1943. I just kind of took care of, around the house, cooking and this and that for my mother after I left from there. But, I got married and the first job that I remember after I got married, I worked at the Flamingo Hotel. *Now, did you and your husband, when you got married, you left the tent?*

Oh, yes. He had a little one-bedroom house.

Was it in the same area of the city?

Yes, it was on Jackson, but it was down a little further.

How did you meet him?

At that club.

Tell me, so, you start working at the Flamingo, what were you doing there?

I was doing maid work at the Flamingo.

Do you remember the year that you started?

I don't remember exactly, but it was in the late 1940s or early 1950s, late 1940s I think.

O.K., late 1940s, we'll say. Tell me, how many rooms did you have to clean at that time.

Well, I worked on the night shift and on the night shift we had certain buildings to work in. We had to turn the bed down. We didn't really just do maid work, you know, make up the beds and do the bathroom unless we had a check-out. Sometimes, I guess, we had eight to ten rooms, whatever the girls on the day shift didn't get to. But, our job mostly was to turn down the beds and put clean towels in at night.

So then, did you think that was hard work compared to chopping cotton?

Well, no, I didn't because I was inside in the cool.

How long were you at the Flamingo?

Well, I didn't stay at the Flamingo too long that time, about three months, I guess, because I forgot and left some of the keys in the boss's room, so, that cut that off.

So, these were the keys to the rooms that you were cleaning?

Yes, you'd have several things of keys around your waist and, you know, you'd have to go to this building where you got a thing of keys in another building, so, I had two, three things of keys around me and I forgot and left one in the, one of the boss's rooms. So, the old lady, I'm sorry, the housekeeper fired me.

So, where did you go after the Flamingo?

After the Flamingo, I went to the Sands.

Now, at the Sands, did you know Jimmy Gay?

Yes.

Was he at the Sands at that time also?

Yes, he was working there.

How did you get the job at the Sands?

I got the job through the union, if I'm not mistaken, because I think that was about 1953 when I started there.

At the Flamingo, were you a member of the union?

No, I don't remember being a member, but I was a member for thirty something years, but I don't remember what year. Maybe, I was, I don't know. Maybe there wasn't a union, I don't know, but I know I was in the union at the Sands.

You got that job through the union.

Yes.

So, how long were you at the Sands?

Well, off and on, I worked there for nine years.

What kind of work did you do there?

I was doing maid work there.

Which shift?

I worked day shift. I worked all the shifts. I worked days, swing and nights, but I was working days when I first started, I think.

Which shift was the easiest work?

The night shift.

O.K., so the day shift, then, was the hardest, you had more rooms to clean?

Yes, fourteen, fifteen rooms.

Now, is that alot in a eight-hour shift?

I thought so because sometimes we wouldn't get in our rooms early, you know.

Sometimes the guest wouldn't let you in the room until sometimes ten, eleven, maybe you haven't done but one or two rooms before noon. Then, you got all these other ten or

twelve to do before you get off from work, or sometimes, we would have to leave them and the night shift didn't like that too well.

You're here now in Las Vegas, your married, what do you think of the decision to leave Fordyce at this point? Do you think you made a good decision?

I think so, I think I made a good decision. Because there wasn't very much work and then what little that you did get, you wasn't getting very much for it. So, I thought I made a good choice.

Were you making friends with other people there on Jackson Street and at work?

At work I had a few friends because, you know, going to lunch and this and that, quite a few of them would be in the lunch room. I wasn't a friendly type person but, you know, seem like they would kind of make you friendly because they'd come up talking when you just want to sit there, but I wasn't a very talkative person. But, I made some friends there, but, Jackson Street, not too much because going to the little clubs and then I'm at home in the day time, I didn't have too many friends.

Did your diet have to change at all from moving from Fordyce to Las Vegas?

Not really. The things that we was used to back there, they ate the same thing here, but, I don't know, seemed like the food back there tasted a little different from out here, I guess, because we raised it, most of it.

Did any black men, at the time, work in the hotels? At the Sands, did you have black men working there? I know Jimmy Gay did.

Yes, there was housemen, you know, working in the rooms. They would do the vacuuming most times, sometimes, but it was quite a few men.

Did you ever have any problems with, today we call it sexual harassment, did you ever have any problems with any men? Did the maids have any problems with the men bothering them?

No, I didn't, I really didn't. At that time, though, I had gotten saved and, you know, I was in church and they knew that, so I really didn't have no problems with that.

And, do you remember any girls complaining about that?

No.

At that time, we're talking about, now we're well into the 1950s, if men would whistle at a woman or touch a woman, today we call it sexual harassment, would that have been considered harassment at that time?

No, I don't think so.

How would your, how would women, at that point, how would you have looked at that? If a man would, you know, pat you and touch you where he wasn't supposed to or try to grab you or something, would that have been looked . . . ?

Well, we'd think that he was kind of smart, but we wouldn't look at it as being harassed. I wouldn't.

Did you ever have any problems with any of the hotel guests?

Yes. I've had little problems at times. You know, we were told, you never open the guest door for nobody, you know. Sometimes, some of the guests come, well, you know, I don't one guest from the other, at times, and sometimes they want you to let them in. If you didn't let them in then they would have a problem with it, but that was the rules, we weren't supposed to let guests in.

Were all of the maids black at this point?

When I first started working, they were, but after I quit, well, you had different, white, Mexican, because I worked with a Mexican girl. I guess whatever other nationalities that was that worked there, but I know of more than blacks worked there.

When you were at the Sands, in the union, did you ever go out on strike?

Yes.

Tell me about that.

Well, we were striking for, you know, more wages and, of course, it lasted, I don't know, about two, three weeks, but we did get what we asked for.

Did you actually picket?

Yes, I walked the picket line.

Did you attend any of the union meetings?

Well, sometimes. Sometimes I would go, but mostly when we were compelled to go, you know, like they going to select different ones for offices and this and that, but just to go to all of the meetings that they had, I didn't go too often.

Did you know anyone who were officers?

Well, Al Bramlet, when I was in the union, was the head of it, was the president at that time, then Smooty. I think when I left there, Smooty was the president, but they've had several since then.

Did any of the women that you knew from Fordyce or other areas ever become shop stewards or anything like that?

Some of the women did, but not from Arkansas. I worked under several.

After being at the Sands, where did you work next?

After the Sands, I went to the Riviera in the pantry there.

Tell me about the work in the pantry.

Well, my job, I was mostly on the sandwich board. You know, they have a sandwich board and a salad board. Ours was right together, but I worked sandwiches most of the time. Now, at this hotel, I was working in a lady's vacation. She had six weeks, I think, and that's how I got started there and after that, I got laid off after she came back. Well, my next job, pantry job, was at the Hilton Hotel.

So, you were only at the Riviera for that short time and then you left there and went to the Hilton?

Yes.

Is this the Flamingo Hilton?

No, this was the Continental, I think, first name was International or Continental and then they changed over to the Hilton later on.

Now, that was in the pantry also?

Yes.

Tell me, was it different than the pantry at the Riviera?

A little bit different. They all handle it a tiny bit different, but my job was still on the sandwich board because I was kind of fast, they say.

Good. Tell me exactly what it means to work on a sandwich board?

Well, they have six, seven, eight different kind of sandwiches. Some they have hot sandwiches, some cold sandwiches. Well, I had a little grill in back that I put my hot sandwiches on like grilled cheese, ham and cheese and so forth. But, chicken salad, egg salad, like that, cold sandwiches, well, all that was in little things in front of me. It was a busy job.

So now, the waitresses would give the orders to you, O.K., and you would fill those orders for the waitresses?

Yes.

You know, when I was asking about how you came to Las Vegas, I forgot one of the most important things. What kind of transportation did you use to get here?

Oh, I came in a car and I can't even think of the man's name, but anyway, that's what he did. He would come and get loads and carry.

Now, was that Red Mitchell?

Mr. Mitchell, yes.

Tell me, how big is Mr. Mitchell's car?

Well, it was two-seated. I don't even remember what year, model it was, it was two seated. But, he brought seven of us, I think, at that time with my little girl, seven of us.

Now, that's seven of you including your daughter?

Yes.

How old was your daughter at the time?

Two. She was two at the time.

So, she was a little baby, you held her on your lap. So, seven people were in the car?

Did you stop? How long did it take to get from Fordyce to Las Vegas?

It was either three days and two nights or two nights and three days. I don't remember which.

Where did you sleep along the way?

In the car.

So, did he drive, did he stop to sleep?

I don't remember him stopping to sleep.

Do you mean that he drove without stopping?

Maybe he had a driver to help him, I don't remember that. He probably had somebody to help him. Maybe some of the passengers that was in the car. I don't remember that.

But, you did not have to spend a night any place? You just drove the entire time?

Right.

Where did you eat along the way?

Well, when we left home, they fixed big boxes of food, you know, cakes and chicken and this and that. I don't remember us stopping, eating, really.

So, you just ate the food that you had and everybody had food with them.

Everybody had food with them.

How did, did everybody have, what, just one suitcase?

That's all I had. I don't remember.

You couldn't have had a whole lot. Along the way, when you had to stop for rest stops, did he have certain places that he stopped all the time? Did he seem to know these places?

I don't remember. I'm sure he did because that's what he did. He transferred people out here for I don't know how long.

Do you know if he's still alive?

No, I don't. I heard he passed away.

Oh, I see. Do you remember which highway he took to get here?

No, I don't. I know we had to come through Texas and Arizona, but I don't remember what highway.

Do you know any people from Fordyce who received help from Mr. Jimmy Gay?

No, I don't because I wasn't that close. You know, I knew Mr. Gay, I knew him back home, but, you know, we weren't that close of friends. I just don't know.

What was it like to work, O.K., you're a maid or you're working in the kitchen with food, what was it like to be in such a glamorous atmosphere with all these people with all this glamorous, these glamorous clothes and you're working there? How is that? How does it feel?

Well, during the time when I was working as a maid, oh, I would just stand and look and just wonder if I would ever, ever get to that point to, you know, relax and do like they did. Women could come out so nice in the evening, going to dinner, this and that, and me working, making these beds and washing toilets. But, it was nice. I used to enjoy going to work, really, I enjoyed work.

What about it did you enjoy?

Well, it was like getting away, I guess, getting away from home because I had kids at that time. I had six kids.

What are your kids names?

Their names? June Carolyn, Shirley Ruth, Patricia Ann, Lorice, Cassy and Clay. I got one son, five girls.

Are all of your children still here?

Yes, all of them are here in the city.

Any of them working in the hotels or casinos?

No, Clay, Shirley, Lorice, they work for the post office. My son's not working right now, but that's where he worked the last fourteen, fifteen years and the other girls are still there.

Now, do you remember when the strip became integrated?

Somewhat. I know, well, you couldn't go in other places down there.

[Do you remember when you] started going to some of those shows?

Downtown you mean or on the strip?

On the strip or downtown, yes.

No, honey, I'll be honest with you, I don't. I know Sammy Davis, Jr. used to come there because I was working in the maid department at that time and several others, but I don't remember because at that time I wasn't night clubbing, I was in the church and I really don't know.

Did you get to see any of them?

Oh, yes, we'd see them, you know, a lot of times they'd come out the hall going to the pool or wherever. That's about the only way that I would see them when they come out of their room.

So, you are now active in the church?

Yes.

What religion?

Church of God in Christ, Pentecostal.

Now, tell me what kind of activity you participated in and tell me how they were different from Fordyce's church activities.

Well, the Fordyce activities, when I was growing up, as I said, I was a girl fourteen, fifteen years old, we didn't have too much to do because they didn't allow you to play ball. This is another thing they didn't allow you to do then, but they're kind of leaning, now, to letting you do some of these little things. My church here, I don't do too much. I'm one

of the church mothers, but I'm not too active, you know, but I enjoy myself. We have prayer meetings going on now. We have an hour prayer and other times we have revivals going on. Something keeps going all the time.

When you first joined, back in the 1950s, did they provide any activities for children?

Yes, they would take them out on picnics and Valley of Fire and different other, to the lake.

What is the Valley of Fire?

The Valley of Fire is mountains up toward Utah. I don't know, about forty or fifty miles, I guess, up that way. The whole entire, something like a little valley and all of it is red clay or it looks like clay to me, it's red. That's the reason they said they call it the Valley of Fire because everything there is red, looks like fire.

Now, tell me about taking the kids to the lake.

Well, they had different ones take them to the lake in cars. I never did go, honestly, I never did go, but my kids would go. They would have different chaperons, you know.

Did the children have a pool because I know how hot it was?

No. They just went in a little area, you know, where the kids go to the little beach area.

Where is this beach area? At the lake?

Yes.

How did your church feel about, now, I realize that this is Las Vegas and the church knows that gambling is here, but did the church ever talk about gambling? Did the ministers ever talk about the gambling?

Yes, they always talk against it. In our church, we don't believe in gambling. We were all taught against gambling, it was wrong.

But, how did they feel about the members who worked in the casinos and worked in the hotels?

Well, they figured that was all right as long as you didn't take a part in the gambling and stuff.

Once you got here and you were working in the different jobs, did you go back and forth to Fordyce?

Yes, every Christmas we would go back home for I don't know how many years, as long as my mother was down there. My mother left, my sister and I went and got her, I don't remember how long, it was twenty years ago. My sister live in San Francisco and that's where my mother was until she passed away about six years ago.

Now, when did your mom leave Las Vegas to go . . . ?

Back to Arkansas?

Yes.

Oh, gosh, I don't know because after they worked here and, you know, saved their money so they could go back and buy a house there. I don't know, I guess it was in the, oh, late 1940s I guess, I don't remember. But I do know that they bought them a house, built a house, you know, couldn't afford to buy one already built. Then she stayed there until, well, my dad passed away about 25 years ago and, of course, my mother got down with arthritis and this and that, so, we went and got her and my baby sister kept her with her until she passed away.

Did a lot of people come to Las Vegas and make money and then go back?

Well, I only know a few, but I'm sure others did.

Were those, the hotels that you told me about, were those the only hotels that you worked at?

Well, not really. After I retired, I worked at the Hilton for fourteen years and then I retired, but after retirement, I went to, would go and work vacations, maybe sometimes two weeks at this hotel. I worked at the Desert Inn, I worked at the Frontier, I worked at Sahara. I was working parties, you know, like they have a convention and things come in, I was working it.

So, what did you do when they came in?

We had to serve and, you know, set the tables and serve and then after they left, after the convention was over, then we would break down the tables and sometimes we'd have to set it up again. We had, sometimes we'd have two parties at the hotel.

O.K., so, you were actually working then as a waitress, plus doing all the things that are associated with a beginner. Which job that you've had, because you've had several different ones, which one did you enjoy most?

I think I liked the serving, you know, as a waitress. I think I liked that better. Now, I had a chance to be a waitress, but when you first start it's kind of hard, at least it was for me, because I couldn't think of this ones dinner separated from that one and you didn't want to go having it wrong then. Working these parties, you know, everything was the same. You put them down and go, but I think I liked that better, I think I liked working conventions and things better.

Earlier we talked about the culinary union. Did you ever file any grievances?

No. Once, I'm sorry, once I did.

Do you remember the incident, what happened and why you had to file? Could you tell me?

Well, I was working at, you know, it's hard for me to get these hotels all separated.

I can imagine because you worked at quite a few.

At this time, I was working in a girl's place that was taking off some time, but it was on an Easter Sunday and, you know, all of the hotels are a little bit different, I mean, the way they put the food on the plate is different. Where they keep the food, you know, you first go there you have to find out. So, I was working for a lady there and, I don't know, for some reason she seemed like she didn't like me. I don't know why, but anyway, I was asking her about the set-up on the plate, you know, had salmon, I think, salmon were on some of the plates. You have to put it on a certain way on the side or across the end, you know, your vegetables, she didn't want to tell me that. Then, I wanted to know where I could go and find different things and she didn't want to tell me that, so, I just took all my tools, put them in my little thing and left.

So, you owned your own tools?

Yes, you have to buy your own tools, knives, have to have knives and for grapefruit you got to have a tool to do the grapefruit and your watermelons and cantaloupes, you got to have some tools for that.

So, are you saying that the hotel did not provide the tools?

No, no. You had to buy your own tools. Cheese slicer, you have to buy that. The only thing they gave was the tomato slicer and the lemon slicer and that's a nice size machine that we had to do a lot, but your other small tools, you had to furnish them yourself.

Do you know if it's still that way today?

As far as I know, they still have to buy their own tools, as far as I know.

Of the jobs that you had, which paid the most money?

The pantry.

The pantry paid you the most money?

Yes.

When you were a maid did you earn tips?

Sometimes we'd get a few tips.

Doesn't sound like it was a lot.

No.

O.K., what was the average tip you would get from a person who would stay several days?

Well, the most, I remember working, we had one guest, sometime they had to come and stay for three, four weeks, sometimes three or four days, but I had one guest that stayed, he would come in and stay, I don't know, for three or four weeks, but I think they told me he was one of the owners, or something, but anyway, I felt \$5 under my pillow about every week. But, some of the others would leave \$3, \$2, sometimes nothing. Now when the stars would come, you know, they would come and stay three weeks, whatever, most of the time when they would leave, they would leave a big tip, maybe \$75, \$100 to be divided among the girls.

Were your meals provided by the hotels?

Yes.

So, you ate there on the job, free of charge.

Yes.

Tell me about race relations. When you left Fordyce you were 21 years old, I want you to tell me what race relations were like then.

Well, they were, they didn't want us on that side of town, you know, about like it was when we moved here. They called this the Mississippi of the West, I think that's what they called it, but I got along all right because I knew, you know, where I lived and where my place was and it didn't bother me that much.

So, you didn't see, really, any difference between Fordyce and Las Vegas?

Not that much.

Did you have to, in the pantry, did you work with white people in the kitchen?

Yes.

When you were a maid, did you have white supervisors?

No.

Everybody was black?

Oh, yes I did. I had black supervisor, but I had, I mean, white supervisors, but I had black inspectresses. Now, you know, they have black and white.

Were any of the men in the kitchen black men?

Yes.

What kind of work did the black men do in the hotel, I mean in the kitchen?

In the kitchen? Well, when I worked at the Hilton, we had all black cooks in the kitchen. All in the line were black. Now, some of the, the ones who fixed the hot cakes because I remember we had one or two whites for that, but the main line, the grills, when the guy fixed the different meats and stuff, was all black. It's different now.

Do you remember a place here in the city called Four Mile?

Yes.

Tell me a little bit about that area.

Well, I don't know too much about it, but I know one of our elders had a church out there. We used to go out there to church sometimes. I think they had pig farms, if I'm not mistaken, they had pig farms out there.

Now, who lived in that area? What group of people? All blacks or . . . ?

No, they were mixed, if I'm not mistaken, they were mixed.

Do you remember the kind of housing?

No, I don't. Well, they weren't just elaborate houses, they was kind of like some of the little houses back in Arkansas, I guess. But, some of them had nice homes, don't get me wrong, some had nice homes, but some of them had, you know, like little shanty like houses.

Tell me about the schools in Las Vegas for your children? Did you have schools right here on the Westside?

Yes. Mine went to Madison, Kit Carson and over here was Westside School where they got the radio station and the high school, of course, was downtown. I had one girl graduated from Rancho, the other two or three from Western and, let's see, my son graduated from Clark.

The schools, at that time, for the smaller children, the schools were located here on the Westside? Were they integrated?

Not at that time. They have only been integrated the last, oh, I don't know, maybe the last eighteen years, but they weren't at that time.

Tell me some of the changes that you have seen here on the Westside.

Well, there's been a lot of changes made. We have nicer homes, we have nice shade trees, grass. We didn't have that in the beginning. And, I don't know, it's just much different place.

So, you've been here for 54 years?

Yes. Some of this stuff might not be exactly accurate, but I'm telling you as it comes to me because I can't think like I used to. I'm forgetful.

We all are. We all get that way. Tell me a little bit about, are you a member of the Fordyce Club?

Yes.

Were you one of the first members?

No, I've only been in it about three years. No, I've been in it about five or six years.

Have you been on any trips with them?

No, I haven't.

Well, you know, I went to Fordyce last year when you went to Fordyce.

Did you?

I went with the group, yes. So, I've seen Fordyce.

You know what Fordyce look like then.

I grew up in a small town just like that.

But, honey, it's nice size now, Fordyce is.

So, it was much smaller?

Yes.

Do you attend any of the club meetings now?

Sometimes, I haven't been in a couple of months though.

Is there anything else that you can think of, now that I've sort of recalled some old memories, anything else that you can think of that you would like to add before we quit?

Oh, sweetheart, I'm just happy to be here, glad I left Fordyce when I did and I have enjoyed myself since I've been here. It's made a great difference.

Before I end, you told me that your husband also worked at BMI?

Yes.

Now, how long did he work out there?

Oh, I don't know, honey, he worked, when I met him he was working there. That was 1942, we got married in 1943 and he worked there for a while after that. I just really don't remember. Because then he went to the hotel.

Good. Do you remember any of the hotels where he worked or what he did?

He worked at the Frontier Hotel, but the type of work that he did, I'm sorry, I don't know.

How long were you married?

43 years.

Where is your husband now?

He passed away ten years ago.

O.K., now, had you moved here in this home.

Yes, we were living here.

O.K., well, thank you so much.

Your welcome.

[This concludes the interview]

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