An Oral History Tape Transcription

Of

Baytown Oral Histories

With

Interviewer: Betsy Webber
Interviewee: Mrs. Ella Williams

Exact Date Unknown (Estimated 197?)

Transcribed by: Lynnette Sargis
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BW: My name is Betsy Webber. I’m a reporter for the Baytown Sun, and I’m making this tape of Mrs. Ella Williams of Channelview for the Baytown historical uh tape collection in the uh oral history collection. Mrs. Williams?

EW: Mhm?

BW: How long have you lived in this area?

EW: 74 years, minus 7 years

BW: When were you born?

EW: 1902, March the 21st.

BW: Where were you those 7 years?

EW: We lived in Houston, from then when I was 13 till I was 20, and then Pasadena.

BW: Who was your father?

EW: George Davidson.

BW: Do you know where he came here from?

EW: He was born in Lynchburg with no sisters or brothers. His mother died when he was born.

BW: When did he die?

EW: The 20th of February, 1918. He would have been 52 the 22nd.

BW: Do you know how long he lived in Lynchburg?

EW: Well except for those seven years we lived in Houston, and he has, well not all, well he lived there all his life more or less you know, in that, in that house.

BW: I understand that you lived on Hog Island when you were a little girl.

EW: Yes, mhm.

BW: Where was Hog Island?

EW: Right in the middle of San Jacinto.
BW: Was it near Buffalo Bayou?
EW: Oh no, it we-, see San Jacinto splits on either side of that island, and it sits right in the middle of the water.

BW: Isn’t it close to the mouth of the San Jacinto River?
EW: Not too far, but it’s a little ways, mhm.

BW: How old were you when you lived there?
EW: 12 years old.

BW: How long did you live there?
EW: Approximately a year.

BW: How did you come to live on that island?
EW: My father leased it for two years from the government.

BW: Do you know if it was the county or state?
EW: The government, the United States Government. They owned all that island you see.

BW: Do you know how much he paid for it?
EW: 25 dollars for two years.

BW: What did you uh how many houses were on the island at that time?
EW: None, my father built this here palmetto house. Then he started building a frame house and then the flood got us.

BW: Which flood?
EW: The 1915 storm, Columbus, it was August the 13th not sure about,

BW: Can you describe that uh storm, what happened?
EW: Oh yes it was very dramatic, [laughs], if you want to use that word.

BW: Did it start raining or blowing or what?
EW: And, well, my father had been to Crosby the day before, and they were flying their storm flag, which was a black flag, meaning a hurricane was on its way. But it turned into a tidal wave; it was a hurricane.

BW: Where were you during the storm?
EW: On that island.

BW: Tell me about it.
EW: Well, my mother wanted to leave the morning of the storm and Papa said, “No, we don’t want to bother the neighbors until it’s necessary.” And there we sit with 5 skiffs, 3 on one side down and two on the other. ‘Bout 9 o’clock my oldest brother says, “I’m going out and see where the water is.” Papa said, “Well, the tide was going out at dark.”

BW: Was this 9 in the morning or 9 at night?

EW: 9 at night. So my brother couldn’t open the door ‘cause tree limbs and thangs had blown up against it.

BW: Mmm.

EW: So he took the ladder and, and jumped out the window, and he jumped ankle-deep in the water under the house. In the flash of the lightning nearly all he could see was the sterns of the skiffs sticking up.

BW: Gosh.

EW: Couldn’t get to ‘um on either side, so when the water got waist-deep on Papa, it was right nearly over our heads, so we got up on top of the house. He opened all the doors and windows, and the house did not wash off the blocks.

BW: Was the wind blowing hard? Was it hard to--?

EW: Oh my goodness! The tops of the trees was touching the water back of the yard.

BW: Was it hard to hold on, to stay on the roof?

EW: It, no it was a rather flat roof, and we lay down and sat down and… Well see, all those trees there at Lynchburg…actually the water was real calm around the house, because the water was at the treetops and that broke the waves, see, and out in the rivers the waves were rolling higher than this house. A big tugboat came up the bayou that morning about 6 o’clock, and we’d been on the house all night [laughs].

BW: That was the next morning; ya’ll spent the night on the roof?

EW: Mhm, and Mama and Papa and six children. And we saw everything blowing away but there wasn’t nothing we could do about it. Colt went down the, past us and got.

BW: A colt, you mean a baby horse?

EW: Mhm.

BW: Oh did he drown?

EW: Oh yeah. We never heard of it again. But, uh, this tug boat came up there looking for quieter water she was being buffeted around…They couldn’t take it. A big tugboat called the Arlet A, and uh,

BW: Mhm, “Harland,” did you say?

EW: Tugboat,
BW: What did you say the tugboat was called?
EW: Arlet A.
BW: A-R-L-O-T?
EW: T-A, Arlet.
BW: I didn’t get that, how do you spell it?
BW: Arleta was the name of the tugboat?
EW: Yeah.
BW: Did they come, did they rescue you?
EW: Well, when they were up on top of the huge waves, they didn’t have any cones on then just rollers. Well, they saw us waving a blanket. So they came up as close as they could to the island and run a line along the big cypress tree on the little bank and course then the water was calmer there, where the trees was. But the stern of that boat just swung around as fast as even can, you know it was headed back the other way by the time they made the rope pass. Well then they put a lifeboat over the edge and came over to the house, which was just a little ways.
BW: The wind and the waves were still up the next morning?
EW: Oh yes.
BW: And they rescued you in a lifeboat, is that right?
EW: Uh-huh, and took us up the bayou through some,
BW: Up Buffalo Bayou?
EW: Yeah. No, San Jacinto. That’s San Jacinto.
BW: Up San Jacinto River?
EW: Mhm.
BW: And where did they take you?
EW: To some people’s house named Godic.
BW: Mhm, how do you spell that?
EW: G-O-D-I-C.
BW: And what happened there?
EW: Well you wouldn’t believe it if I told ya.
BW: What?
EW: My father was a very sensitive man.

BW: Mhm.

EW: And he knew Mr. Godic all his life.

BW: Mhm.

EW: And he married a young woman, Ms-, Mr. Godic, after his wife died and his children were grown.

BW: Mhm.

EW: So that’s where we went, to their house. Had a huge house with a big old porch, you know. Well, they never asked us if we wanted anything to eat; we did have breakfast on the tugboat, you know.

BW: Mhm.

EW: But the day was going by, and finally it was getting evening and Papa said “Well, Mrs. Godic, where do you want us to sleep tonight?” And she said, “Well, come around here, Mr. Davidson, and I’ll show you where all of you can sleep.” And would you believe that she took us to what we called a potato house with nothing but a dirt floor with dirty sacks and quilts where dogs,

BW: Goodness gracious.

EW: --usually slept and said--; and when summer got around, I’m telling you, it was August.

BW: Uh-huh.

EW: She said we could sleep there. She hadn’t offered us any supper or anything and, uh, just for a instant my father almost killed that woman.

BW: Oh yeah?

EW: Oh!

BW: It made him furious. huh?

EW: Oh, mercy me! So we walked about a mile down to some people’s house named Alec Gumm.

BW: Alec who?

EW: Gumm, G-U-M-M.

BW: G-U-M,

EW: And, oh , they just took us right in ‘cause we knew ‘em you know, and, uh, so we stayed there. And God, she was a huge woman, and my mother, she was only 5 ft. That woman cut holes in her skirt for us girls to stick our arms through and she tied ‘em around our necks [laughing].
BW: To make you dresses to wear?

EW: Well, yeah. And my mother, she rolled ‘em over and over and over [laughing], so Mama could wash what rags we had left the storm had gotten through with. Would you believe that my Daddy moved and it was, the first house we got was next door to that Mrs. Godic?

BW: Oh really [laughs], did he buy a house next door to,

EW: Noooo.

BW: Or built you one?

EW: We didn’t have any money; we didn’t have any clothes; we didn’t have anything.

BW: Well how did you get the house next door to Mrs. Godic?

EW: Oh well, you could practically move into houses back them days, and if they caught you, well, you paid the rent that they asked, if you had it [laughing]. But Papa undoubtedly knew the people that owned the house, and they probably knew about it and that and were good enough to move there. Now, my daddy was a worker; he could do anything.

BW: What was his, uh, trade?

EW: He was a ships carper’s-, Carpen-

BW: A ship’s carpenter?

EW: And a caulker, if you know what a caulker is?

BW: Ships caulker.

EW: Yeah and a carpenter, house carpenter, a dairy man, farmer, a horse trader -- anything you could think of, my father did some of it [laughing], and he did it good. He was good as a cabinet maker; he could make ‘em pretty good. But, uh, every time my daddy thought about Mrs. Godic, he’d start cursing out in the yard, and I’m telling you, it would scare us out of our wits. We just thought surely Papa someday would kill her before we could move from there.

BW: Mhm.

EW: Which we did, not too long after that.

BW: Can you, uh, describe, uh, the house and the island that you lived on before the hurricane, can you describe Hog Island to me?

EW: The palmetto house?

BW: Uh-huh, yeah. Tell me what ya’ll had over there and uh was it, where there lots of woods or was it pasture or what?

EW: It was woods and palmettos, and let’s see, somebody else had lived there before we did, and built this palmetto house. It was as big as this room here, probably, maybe a little bigger. But it’s all built with palmetto.
BW: Really.

EW: Built out of nothing but little branches off trees and palmettos.

BW: Mhm.

EW: And you start at the bottom, and you strip off the strip on these palmettos that they use to make fans out of, and you take half hitches around the bottom of the limbs that you put around there.

BW: Mhm.

EW: And you just keep going up and that even the doors and the windows was made of,

BW: You layered the fan part of the palmetto on top of each other?

EW: Mm-hmm. We built from the bottom, so that the water run down.

BW: You overlap ‘em all the way up, huh?

EW: All the way, yes.

BW: And it, was the roof made out of the same material?

EW: And the all, doors and everything, it was all made out of palmettos. He just propped them in there, [inaudible.] [Laughs].

BW: And it, I guess it must have been--; this room must be about, um…

EW: It’s 12 by 20 something, I think.

BW: 12 by 20, you think it--; the house was about that big?

EW: I don’t remember the length of the house.

BW: How did you get water?

EW: Rain water.

BW: Mhm.

EW: Can you imagine that?

BW: Did, uh, you have a garden?

EW: Oh yeah, he planted a real good garden and lost it all in the storm.

BW: Was the, uh, s-, uh, was the dirt, uh, sandy?

EW: Just ordinary.

BW: Mhm.

EW: See we lived off of 50 dollars a month. You could in those days.

BW: Yeah.
EW: My brother worked on rigs till Sunday.

BW: Mhm.

EW: 50 dollars a month, while Papa was on this island building a garden and raising hogs and Mama had a lot of chickens.

BW: He did raise hogs out there?

EW: Well he was starting to, and, uh, Mama had a buuuunch of chickens, and uh oh there’s,

BW: You told me about some fig trees?

EW: Yeah, they were growing right on the brow of the hill towards the bridge,

BW: Mhm.

EW: The ol’ Market Street bridge.

BW: Mhm.

EW: And they were already leaning over, and we couldn’t get the figs off of it [laughing]. We’d pull around there in the skiff, which it was still, and the end of the island was so high and then the tree limbs too, we never did get a fig off of it [laughs].

BW: Well, uh, you said the island was pretty high, the elevation wa-,

EW: On that one end, yeah.

BW: Uh-huh.

EW: But not where the house was,

BW: Mhm.

EW: It just sloped right down.

BW: Uh, the,

EW: That end has been gone for years,

BW: The bluff, then, was up towards where Market Street crossed the San Jacinto River?

EW: Yeah, uh-huh.

BW: And uh then, the house was on the other end of the island. Do you have any ide-,

EW: No, we were just over this hill.

BW: Uh-huh.

EW: You know, it sort of swooped off the… and we had built in the flat place there. Papa had his garden up there on the open part.

BW: Were there many trees on the island?
EW: From back where our house was, there were nothing but trees and palmettos.

BW: Mhm. Do you have any idea how the island got its name?

EW: I don’t know. It’s always been Hog Island, far as I know. Probably somebody found some wild hogs on it once.

BW: Yeah.

EW: Well, you know, some people used to call this, uh, Hog Island too, this peninsula over here, you know.

BW: Uh-huh.

EW: Well then it became Sidney’s Peninsula. See, [Inaudible]

BW: There’s another Hog Island over in Tabb’s Bay at the mouth of Goose Creek.

EW: Yes, there’s another Hog Island.

BW: Too, maybe there were just lots of wild hogs rounding just around here in the-,

EW: There were.

BW: Do you remember whether there was much,

EW: Used to be a lot of wild hogs over there on-,

BW: Do you remember whether there was much, uh, fish and game…

EW: Oh, almost all…

BW: …in those days?

EW: …of ‘em made a living in town here, fishing…I used to crab, and we got 6 cents a dozen for mediums, 12 cents for the biggest one we could catch. And them fish were about 6 cents a pound. Speckled trout and redfish.

BW: So your father was also a fisherman, huh?

EW: Oh, he was a real good one. He made his own cast nets and hook nets and driftnets, and I could make ‘em as good as he could.

BW: Mhm. I have been interested in--;

EW: I knitted them casting nets for years, could make some more cast nets but I don’t want to [laughs].

BW: Have, did, did you make nets for a while?

EW: Oh yes, uh-mhm.

BW: But you’ve given it up now, huh?

EW: All through my married life, I knitted casting nets.
BW: Mmm.

EW: See, I lived right over there in New Orleans [inaudible] for 19 years after I married, right there on the waterfront. I raised my two kids there. We only got [inaudible]--

BW: When were you married?

EW: 1923. January the 10th.

BW: Who was your husband?

EW: Ed B. Williams.

BW: And what was his trade?

EW: Now he was ship’s carpenter, during the World War you know.

BW: During World War I?

EW: Two. No, one. Yeah, World War I, yeah, he wasn’t in World War II.

BW: And, uh, after you were married, where’d you live, where did you live?

EW: In his house, down in Old River, on the side road there.

BW: Is that where the depot is now?

EW: Mm-hmm. If you would like after a while, we can drive down there to the farm, and I could show you that old house.

BW: Good, okay.

EW: We’d just [Inaudible]

BW: I have been interested in, um, the ruins of what appears to be an old fort over on an island between Old River and San Jacinto River.

EW: Oh, I know where you’re talking about.

BW: Okay tell me about that old fort.

EW: Well now then, as far as I really know, it never was up there. That is just a new something that’s comin’ up in the last maybe 20 years that it got built. But Aunt Liza, now she lived there for all her life, I guess, just right up yonder, just over on the other side of Market Street, and she never told me there was ever a fort there, but she told me that Mr. and Mrs. Sadley had a grocery store. Well, I knew Mr. and Mrs. …[Inaudible] when I was a little kid. They were still living after I was married, and they were there in that, uh, 1875 storm, and they had a grocery store and if that wouldn’t be where this store was, then I don’t know.

BW: Have you ever been the store?

EW: No, it was not in existence since I’ve been grown even. They had it in 1875, that was 25 years bef-,
BW: I know, but I wondered if you had ever been over to that uh, uh area where the store was,
EW: No,
BW: If you’d ever seen this place.
EW: But my son has been over there. Anyway, [inaudible].
BW: How long ago do you think it was when your son was there?
EW: Well it’s probably when he was 12, 14 or 13.
BW: How old is he now?
EW: My grandson had been there, his son. See, my son lives in Baytown.
BW: Yeah, what’s your son’s name?
EW: Clayton Williams. And his son James likes to do things like that. And see you wouldn’t believe all the money that kid found down there in New Orleans, [inaudible].
BW: Really? Old money or--?
EW: Old money.
BW: Really?
EW: I mean back in the 1800’s, the early 1800’s.
BW: S-, coins?
EW: Coins. Pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters.
BW: Really? Uh, U. S. money or foreign money?
EW: It was U. S. money. Never found any foreign money. [Inaudible], and I lived all them years, and I never found any [laughs]; there weren’t any.
BW: Maybe you just didn’t know where to look [laughs]?
EW: Well that’s what I told him; I used to threaten to go down there with him. He and my great-nephew, you know, [inaudible] one of ‘em just wasn’t having it. Um, that was my nephew when he was alive and their two kids and then my great niece and a few nephews. But, uh, them boys would go down there in gangs and so they couldn’t find any money hardly, just now and then. But James, I imagine he got about 50 or 60 pieces of money he found down there.
BW: Goodnight! I bet cha’ it’s worth a lot of money now.
EW: Well he and his daddy been [inaudible] all along the coast.
BW: Was it corroded?
EW: Not badly, no.
BW: Mhm, hm.
EW: See he probably has about two or three thousand dollars worth of old money, face value, he keeps in a safety deposit box.

BW: I imagine so, it’s a good place to keep it.

EW: He’s don’t want to keep it in his house [laughs].

BW: No. Have you ever heard of Lost Lake?

EW: Yes, ma’am.

BW: Have you ever been there?

EW: No, see that’s Lost River over there. That’s what you’re talking about.

BW: Lost River and, and Lost Lake.

EW: See there’s San Jacinto River, Lost River, Old River. There’s three of ‘em right there in a row.

BW: I think they’ve closed Lost River up now, and they’ve dumped spoil in there now.

EW: Probably, there’s San Jacinto, Lost River and …[Inaudible]

BW: Did you tell me that your husband had driven a truck over to th-,

EW: Yes ma’am.

BW: That si-,

EW: That’s the time,

BW: When was this?

EW: We had cattle down there.

BW: Mhm.

EW: And, uh, we had--; well, I still got some of those, uh, leases.

BW: Mhm.

EW: That I could find out about …[Inaudible]. We paid 100 dollars a year to lease eleven hundred and forty-five acres over there. The storm blowed us off the map.

BW: Uh-huh. Well was that out there in the, uh…between Old River and San Jacinto River where Lost Lake is? In the area of Lost Lake?

EW: Well that whole area yeah.

BW: Mhm, in the, in the Lost Lake,

EW: There was a small bridge that …[Inaudible]

BW: And he did drive a truck over there, was it about 1928?
EW: Oh and, I should get them--; [laughs], I don’t try to keep up with stuff like that. I’ve got some…

[Tape cuts out.]

BW: I have some copies of, uh, some leases,

EW: There over three years, one from D. M. Garret.

BW: This one is dated September 25th 1930 and ending September the 26th 1931, and this is land uh on the waters of Buffalo Bayou and San Jacinto River, part of the eastern one-half of the Harris and Carpenter League of land. See begins on the south len- of, of line of the J. T. Harrell Survey where [Inaudible] intersects the San Jacinto River, down the west back of said San Jacinto River with meanderings to Buffalo Bayou at a point opposite of Lynchburg heads up Buffalo Bayou with its meanderings to the mouth of Old River at Zavala point. Ends up Old River with its meanderings to the south line of J. T. Harrell Survey. Fence east with the said south lines of J. T. Harrell’s surveys the place from beginning. There’s 27 acres of land, more or less.

EW: And that was over there on Buffalo Bayou; we used to lease a big tract up here called the [inaudible] tract.

BW: Uh-huh.

EW: Uh,

BW: And did you uh raise cattle there?

EW: Mhm. That was our main thing we did, was raise cattle.

BW: Let’s see hm, [thumbing through papers]. Um, on this map, here, um, now here’s the San Jacinto River.

EW: Mhm.

BW: Over there is Lynchburg, across the river and I guess your land would’ve been over on the, would it have been around Market Street, on the Channelview side?

EW: You mean the island when we used to--?

BW: No, where the part-, yeah, oh you did lease all of that island over there?

EW: Well on that island there’s eleven hundred and forty-five acres there.

BW: Boy, it’s not that much now.

EW: [Laughs.] I don’t imagine.

BW: A lot of it was marshland, wasn’t it?

EW: Yeah, mhm, the cattle liked that marsh.

BW: They liked the marsh land, yeah.
EW: They liked till 1929 when the hurricane got ‘em [laughs].

BW: There was a flood in ’29, huh?

EW: Yeah.

BW: And that just about--;

EW: Now that was just tidal, no rainwater.

BW: Mhm, um...

EW: You know, it was really high.

BW: Hog Island, it doesn’t, it-, I don’t believe it’s still out there, is it?

EW: I don’t know. It was last time, that I--; I believe it is, but it’s such a little thing now.

BW: Uh-huh.

EW: Unless you actua-, it’s in the main part of the, of the river, you know.

BW: Mhm.

EW: And unless you’re really looking for it, you probably wouldn’t even notice it.

BW: You wouldn’t find it.

EW: No.

BW: I wanna show you some pictures. Let me stop this.

[Tape cuts]

BW: Mrs. Williams, do you understand that this material that we have taped today will be used in the Baytown Oral History Collection for historical research, and it will be released to the public for people who would like to study some of the historical background of this part of the country?

EW: Yes.

BW: And do I have your permission to use it?

EW: Yes, ma’am.

BW: Thank you.

EW: You’re welcome.

[END]