

*Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2015*

Interviewees: Leesco Guster
Interview Date: December 3, 2015
Location: Port Gibson, Mississippi
Interviewer: Emilye Crosby
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: approximately 1 hour, 15 minutes

START OF AUDIO FILE 1

F1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

EMILYE CROSBY: This is Emily Crosby on December 3, 2015 with Mrs. Leesco Guster in her home in Port Gibson, Mississippi, and we're here with the Civil Rights History Project, which is co-sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, and also here are John Bishop and Guha Shankar, and thank you very much, Mrs. Guster, for joining us, for letting us come and interview you today. Could you start by telling us when and where you were born?

LEESCO GUSTER: Port Gibson, Mississippi. In fact, straight down on, they call it Main Street. I think the little house, it might be gone now, but I was born right across from the Health Department. [Laughter]

EC: That's a good location.

LG: That's all I can say. Down the hole, across from the Health Department.

EC: Did your mother have a midwife?

LG: Midwife.

EC: When were you born?

LG: March 26, 1936.

EC: Tell us about your family and growing up.

LG: Well, mostly I had a single mom. At the age of about six, she left and went to Vicksburg, so later she got me, and that's why we lived in Vicksburg. She and my father separated.

EC: What kind of work did your mother do?

LG: Pardon me?

EC: What kind of work did your mother do?

LG: Oh, domestic work.

EC: And what was your schooling like? What were the schools like you went to?

LG: Well, sort of like these. You started one and you go so far, like at Magnolia in Vicksburg I went to the fifth grade, then I had to go over to McIntyre and go to the eighth. Then you'd have to go back to Magnolia to go to the 10th.

EC: Really? Why did you go back? I mean, how did they -- they just --.

LG: That's how the grades was running at those schools during that time.

EC: Did you like school?

LG: I liked it.

EC: Yes, did you have a favorite subject?

LG: I was kind of lazy. I liked home ec. I never did any kind of sports or anything.

EC: What was Port Gibson like, in those days?

LG: Well, I didn't come here to live until 1953. I came down here then.

EC: So, since you were living in Vicksburg, when you came to Port Gibson did it seem like a little small town, to you?

LG: Well, it wasn't too often that I came out here. But I thought it was -- at that time, it was fine, but now it's kind of on the dead side. But at that time, I thought it was blooming.

EC: Can you describe what it was like in those days?

LG: In Port Gibson? Well, number one, they call it, back then they called it Negro Street. Joints was all up and down the street. People standing around. Stoves up and down the street, but all of that left.

EC: That's Fair Street, right?

LG: That's Fair Street.

EC: And it was just busy.

LG: It was busy. You could hop from one door to the next one.

EC: Did you like going over there?

LG: Yes. I was young at that time. [Laughter] I was young. [Recording stops and starts again.]

EC: You were saying, at that time?

LG: That street, the people were alive. You'd drink what you want, and I wasn't a big drinker, but I sure liked to eat, and then you go eat.

EC: Where would you eat, on Fair Street?

LG: We used to have one café called Peaches. She had good food. She had good food. Laura Killian's.

EC: What's your first memory of being aware of race and segregation?

LG: Well, really and truly, I guess all along. Just by instinct, but see, at that time it didn't bother me, because I [5:00] used to do domestic work and stuff like that, and I didn't--. But as I grew older and stuff, I just -- I've just felt like we need a change. Such as colored bathrooms, colored this, colored fountain and white fountain, and I don't think that should have been. I don't think it should have been. But mind you, I got along with them. I did. In fact, I lived in Skokie, Illinois, I lived -- well, that's been since then. But I stayed in the house, not the basement, with white people.

EC: You were working for them?

LG: I was.

EC: And when did --. You went to Chicago in the [19]50s?

LG: Mm-hmm, [19]55, because I came back here around [19]59.

EC: How did Chicago compare to Mississippi?

LG: It didn't. You worked yourself to death. You get up at night. I had to hop from the L to bus trying to get from place to place, and when you leave, it's dark. When you come back, it's still dark, so you had no time for nothing too much, because even on Sundays, they would pay something like extra, and if I had a chance to work on Sunday, I worked. That was at Montgomery Ward.

EC: So when you first went, you worked for a family?

LG: I lived on premises at Skokie, Illinois.

EC: And then you went to work for Montgomery Wards?

LG: For a month, I didn't work. Maybe two months, because I got sick.

Because I liked the job, but my nerve got on edge and I didn't know what was happening with me but I had to stop working, and that's when I started going, really, day work.

Now, that's where you work. [Laughter]

EC: You do a week's worth of work in a day.

LG: Everything be waiting on you when you get there. [Laughs] And then the nice one would have some kneepads, but you want to know something? I started cleaning floors on my hands, especially tile, myself, right here in Port Gibson. Nobody told me. I did it myself.

EC: You told me you started your first job pretty young, here.

LG: I did, I did.

EC: Did you like working, or was it a burden when you were young?

LG: No, I was about 16. In fact, I had a house. I had my own house, at 16.

EC: Did you really?

LG: She was getting my social security check. She'd bring that to me when it come. And Ms. Bear was the one who rented the house for me. She's the one who furnished the house for me. She was the one who bought me clothes and stuff. So I had no problem.

EC: When you say Ms. Bear, she was the mayor's wife?

LG: Uh-huh.

EC: Yes. And you may have even referenced that she--. You're talking about your sister, right, when you say she would bring you your social security check?

LG: That's who was getting my check, my sister. Lindsey Ruth.

EC: You've always been--. Lindsey Ruth?

LG: Mm-hmm, that's her name.

EC: You've always been independent.

LG: I have, I have.

EC: So were you happy to move back to Port Gibson?

LG: I was, but I guess I might have still been there. When I left, I left for a reason. I was leaving. The person that I came back married.

EC: [Laughs] You couldn't get away from it.

LG: I didn't come right away. I gave him a year to think about it. [Laughs]

EC: And tell me about your husband who you married.

LG: Well, he was something like 24 years older than I was, but he's a handsome man. Nothing short about him. He was the head contractor in the lumber field here in Claiborne County, Louisiana, Vicksburg, everybody knew Harry. He's a contractor.

EC: So when you came back and you married Mr. Guster, did you all stay? Was this your house then?

LG: It was. He had the house when I came, you know.

EC: Did he build it?

LG: No, no. It really wasn't a house when I came. [10:00] It was a shack. He paid something like \$2,500 for it, and when I came, you just, you wouldn't believe. You could stand on the front and look up under the house all the way back. OK, this hall goes straight on back. Wasn't no bathroom inside. He stuck it where he could, because

with having no money or anything at that time, we had to put it close to where the pipes and stuff were. So I would never have thought that --. And it didn't get like this when he was living there. It's been since he's been dead that I did a whole lot of work.

EC: It's kind of ironic, since he was a builder, right?

LG: The only thing about it -- he did some -- but the whole house, it was just one house you know. But the lumber and things are still good and whatnot, and he did what he could with the finances he had.

EC: And so, I think we were just looking at your birth certificate. You got married, not birth certificate. Marriage certificate. You got married in like 1959? And when you came back here and married Mr. Guster, were you working then?

LG: Montgomery Ward. I came back here on a three-week vacation. And I told him that I wasn't, you know, he knew what he had done. Told me he was already married, and wasn't married. I was 19 when I left him, and I told him I wasn't coming back here unless he married me, and if he didn't marry me, I was going back. But then those three weeks--. I was going back, because my job was waiting on me. He had told me he had put in for his divorce. Hadn't done anything. He had gone and talked to a lawyer. Hadn't paid nothing, and I told him, I said, "Now, if you don't do something, I'm going back to Chicago." I hate that I did, in a lot of instances, because he had a son and that caused friction. And he was an underage child, so his ex-wife was so sure that he was going to take her back like he did before. They weren't married at that time.

They didn't marry till I went to Chicago, but he didn't do it, so I had problems with that.

EC: Did his child stay with you all?

LG: A lot, a lot.

EC: That must have been a challenge.

LG: It was a big, big, big change. Especially when the mother put the child up to do things. But anyway, he got busy, when I told him I was going back, and I bet you he went to see a lawyer then. [Laughter]

EC: He did enough to convince you to stay.

LG: He did. And he was always fair with me about his child, too. He saw what was going on. Didn't nobody send a cent but me to her, every month.

EC: Did the courts require that back then, or did you just do it because you thought it was right?

LG: Oh, her lawyer. Her lawyer. Way back then, \$25 was a lot of money. That was a lot of money. And see, he couldn't guarantee no work in the wintertime, and there wasn't any decree where he didn't have to pay if he wasn't working. You ever heard of such. He still--. We were borrowing money to pay, even from my sick mama. You know, everything. And finally, we had to pay a lawyer to change it around where he didn't have to pay. If he wasn't working. So she changed the \$25 per month. I told him, "I'm not going to be around here while you're fighting no lawsuit." I said, "You better do it." I was just pushing him on. And the lawyer came back for \$30. [Laughs] I said the same thing. I pushed him, and he did it.

Then, the next time, they wanted \$30 in advance, and what she did, she took [inaudible] over [15:00] to Jackson, to his brother's house, left him, and went on to Cleveland, Ohio.

EC: With that \$30?

LG: But ask me this. She didn't get the next \$30. That was it.

EC: She wasn't taking care of his son, she wasn't going to get the child support.

LG: That's right, that's right.

EC: Well, you told me at one point that he worked for Mr. [F. S.] Wolcott?

LG: Oh, yes.

EC: Can you tell us about--. I bet a lot of people don't know about rabbit's foot. Can you tell us about that?

LG: I can tell you anything about rabbit foot. Harry used to work around Mr. Wolcott, and also drive him around. That's how I got appointed. He wouldn't let me work, but he'd let me work for Hillary. When she moved here from Adena, Ohio.

EC: What was her name?

LG: Hillary.

EC: Hillary? OK. So, because of his relationship with Mr. Wolcott--.

LG: He let me work.

EC: And she was his sister?

LG: No, his daughter.

EC: His daughter? Oh, OK, I forgot that. And you were doing domestic work at her house. Did you all get along?

LG: Very much so, until her friends got to her. [Laughs] She was driving my car. I had a 1965--. It had been a long time--. They stopped making them -- Catalina Pontiac. And I had a key to the house. Now, mind you, I was not even a member of the N[A]ACP. My thing was, I wanted to vote. I wanted to get people registered to vote. I wanted a little recognition and a better job. I may not get it, but somebody else come

along. So, every evening, when I get off, I would go up there by the, what's that drug store name? McFatter's. That's where Rudy Shields and all of them hung out, because I wasn't even going to the meetings, but I got acquainted with Rudy and we used to go all over Claiborne County canvassing after the federal. People came in for people to vote. People would see me standing out there, so they got to her. It wasn't no secret. I had done my work at the house and everything, so I don't think you take your job home with you.

One morning, I was there. I noticed a change before that particular moment. She didn't know I was there, because I didn't drive but I walked. And she come in with a, saying a few choice words. I don't even remember who she was talking to. And I can't use the terms she used. [Laughs] And then she saw I was there, she said, "Well, Lee, we don't need you anymore." I said, "Well, thank you," and I left. I left walking, because I didn't drive up there that day. And that was it. But she came from Ohio and joined in with the people here in Claiborne County.

EC: So she had a different attitude until she started getting with them? So you're not going to use her words, but what was she basically saying? What was her point, to her friends?

LG: She was tired of all the damn shit. That's what she said.

EC: And she's talking about the voting?

LG: She was talking about them coming to her and me, I never stopped going up there. You know, every evening I would go up there and we canvas, bring in people to-- I wore out a set of tires, I can tell you.

EC: So, when the--. You said, at first you weren't an NAACP member and you weren't even going to the meetings, you were just doing voter registration. Were you aware of it? Did you know it was going on?

LG: I knew about the meetings and stuff. I knew all about that, but like I said, I was interested in getting people registered [to] vote, because their vote and their dollars were what matter, as far as I'm concerned. And that's what I was about, and I wasn't about no all-white, and I wasn't about no all-black.

EC: When she came up there talking to you--.

LG: She didn't tell me. Uh-huh, I don't even remember who it was. I don't know, but I heard her. So I said, "Might as well get ready to go." [Laughs] [20:00] You could tell, it was fired up.

EC: It wasn't going to work out. When she said she couldn't use you anymore, after that--.

LG: Well, she was polite in saying that, but I had heard all she had to say.

EC: So you would go around by Mr. McFatter's and that's where the federal registrar was, right?

LG: And they were upstairs where Dr. Barnes used to be.

EC: And how did you meet Rudy Shields?

LG: On the street, in front of the drug store.

EC: Did he start talking to you?

LG: Mm-hmm.

EC: Tell us what he was like.

LG: Brave. [Laughs] Wasn't scared of nothing. I don't know how to explain Rudy, except he just, he wasn't radical. But he just spoke up for the things that he knew, and he was doing what I wanted to do, trying to get people registered. So I volunteered my car. And my husband's old 45. [Laughs] An army gun or something. We'd need to shoot. It skipped. I didn't know that.

EC: You relied on it. It's not even working.

LG: Well, he was relying on it.

EC: Your husband?

LG: No, Rudy. My husband, he was living, but I didn't let him--. See, he was sickly, and I didn't let him march or anything because, you know, if he had gone to jail then that wouldn't have been good for him.

EC: He wanted to be involved, didn't he?

LG: Hm?

EC: He was interested, he wanted to be involved?

LG: Oh, he was involved. He went to all the meetings. The people stayed here in the house. He slept back there and I slept up here, with a shotgun. [Laughs]

EC: Staying up, making sure.

LG: Yes, it wasn't comfortable at all back then. Looking back, I wouldn't do it again.

EC: No, you wouldn't.

LG: I wouldn't do it. Number one, I'm old and I don't have a husband. I wouldn't take it on. Then, you don't have anybody to back you up, now, like in a legal way. You get in jail, you could be sure you're going to get out, because they want to

their lawyers and things, and the people to come up -- but nobody's going to trust putting out property and stuff off of what? Maybe I better not say this. But we don't have anything, anybody to back us here in Claiborne County, believe me.

EC: But at the time, did you hesitate? Were you--. Did you have any hesitation back in the [19]60s?

LG: About staying here?

EC: About them staying here, or about doing voter registration?

LG: No. No, no, no. I don't know where it came from, but I was brave.

EC: What about Mr. Guster? Was he working when you were doing the movement?

LG: Well, for a while then, he was Vicksburg, Louisiana, and Port Gibson, those were the places, mostly, where he worked. Wouldn't nobody hire. We lived out of VA check, \$114 a month. Back then, that was a lot of money. [Inaudible] I had to go to the bank on the car. [Laughs] And \$43, I don't remember the cent, social security check, because he really hadn't paid into it. He paid for his workers, but he hadn't paid anything into it, too much. So he lost all his work, I lost all my work. The \$20 week was what I was getting from [inaudible] Wolcott.

EC: Was that a hardship for you all?

LG: Hm?

EC: Was it a hardship?

LG: Back then, you know, you could take little or nothing and make it, if you knew how to do it. You could do it. It was good -- well, to us, good money.

EC: So, Rudy Shields. I know he came into the area, the Charles Evers, from Chicago. Did he talk about Chicago at all, or why he came?

LG: Rudy didn't have time to talk about nothing but what he came here to do. We didn't have conversations. Now, he stayed here long enough to sleep, [25:00] and that's about it.

EC: What would he say about why he was, you know, what he wanted to do here? What he was trying to accomplish?

LG: What he said was said at different meetings and things. It wouldn't be a personal thing.

EC: Was he quiet?

LG: Like I said, he slept here and I'd feed him in the morning. I wouldn't see him no more until night. He was somewhere else.

EC: So when you and Rudy would go out canvassing for voter registration, tell us what that was like.

LG: Well, we had people, older people and things, who didn't understand. They weren't worried about voting for anything, because we had never done it before. We had never done it, and some would go with us and some wouldn't. But that didn't stop us. We were going to keep going.

EC: Did you try to convince people?

LG: Well, yes. We tried. But mostly the people who lived on plantations, they were afraid. They were afraid. Does he need --. A chair. [Background dialogue.]
[Recording stops and starts again.]

EC: Did you ever run into any trouble or any problems when you were registering people?

LG: Oh, yes. Roger Spring, I never will forget that. We went out there -- it was two trails right together. I'm telling a story, it was one trail, but it was kind of long, and they told us to come back the next day. Well, when we got back, the owner of the property was in a pickup truck, was parked up on the hill. And he had a shotgun; you know, how they have it across the back of the truck? And I told -- I called him Mr. Shields -- I said, "Mr. Shields, he's got a gun." He said, "That's all right, Ms. Gusto." That's what he called me, Ms. Gusto. He said, "We're not doing nothing wrong."

So the man got out of his truck and came over where the people were standing. We don't want to lose what us got. Mr. Shields said, "Well, what do you have?" "Well, us got -- we got what us want." And they all said what he said. Then that's when the owner approached and he cited something from the law that we had a right to go on private property and ask people to go register to vote, and when we left there, he beat us out in his one-way bridge. I never will forget that, and he was parked right on the side. Rudy was in the back of my car with the [Laughs] skip in his--. Shooting pistol. And I said--he wasn't sitting straight up. I said, "Here they are, here up here by this bridge." I said, "What're you going to do?" He said, "Ms. Gusto, you just drive." I said, "Well, don't I have to duck if they start shooting?" [Laughs] I was scared to death; I'm not going to lie. But he didn't do anything. We went on by. He was still sitting up in his tuck, but that was my scariest time. I was scared.

EC: Did you worry about going on and going out the next day?

LG: Oh, we went out. We went out. We didn't go back there, because those people wasn't going to go with us.

EC: When you said people were staying at the house, who was staying at the house? Were they--.

LG: Well, we went.

EC: No, at your house, when you would keep people at your house.

LG: Civil rights lawyers. It was an African girl stayed here, oh, for months. Tut [?] Tate. She was so sweet. Did you know Tut?

EC: Uh-uh.

LG: She was so sweet. And just different people. I had nothing to do with being the housing chairman. They had all of that organized. Lily May Williams was the chairperson. Thelma Wells; I know you remember her.

EC: Yes ma'am, I sure do.

LG: She was the co-chair. But any time somebody need somewhere to stay, we don't have any room, [30:00] you know. They didn't ask anybody to take them. So, we took them. We have had as high as three--. Had to put a daybed up--. Civil rights lawyers. So I said, "My husband was for it." So, we did it. And we didn't get any money for it, now. Although you know how people talk. They said that--. We were getting called "O'Hara, Uncle Tom." After we went through all that, so he was snipping around to George Ellis. I think that's where the shoe store we closed up --. Now, the shoes had been there for years and years and years, but Harry snipping around there, buying shoes. I was getting paid for hauling people to the poll. You know how people talk.

EC: I do, unfortunately.

LG: So, it didn't bother me, because I knew it was a lie. And now, after three weeks, I did it for three weeks on my own. Different ones would give me a donation. When we go to the meeting, I would stand up and read the names off, who donated to our guests. They had me getting paid.

EC: Because you were getting gas money, for some of your expenses?

LG: Mm-hmm. A few dollars. [Laughs]

EC: Not a whole new set of tires, either. So, I know you said at first you were just interested in voter registration. Had you ever tried to register before, or thought about it?

LG: Didn't come about. Didn't come about in my mind. Being around --. I hung around a barber shop a lot. Being around, I hung around the barber shop a lot, and you remember Mr. Collins, and I'd be talking. Mr. Jesse Johnson. But I never would have made it if I had gone up to the courthouse, tried to get registered, I don't believe.

EC: Did you know anybody who was registered before the movement started?

LG: Mm-hmm, yes. Mr. Collins, Ms. Collins, Nate Jones, Jesse Johnson, what is the Johnson man out -- another Johnson man out there at Patterson. He was registered.

EC: Oh, I know. Roscoe.

LG: That's him, that's him. Julia Jones. So, all those people were registered. But you know, you could almost count on both hands how many blacks was

registered. [Recording stops, then starts again.] I can't remember everybody, but I'm sure of those.

EC: You said when the lady you worked for, when she was talking about she wasn't going to stand for this mess, you said at that point you weren't going to mass meetings, but did you start going to mass meetings?

LG: I did, and join.

EC: And join the NAACP?

LG: And I did wrong in one way. Our choir practice would be every -- twice a month on Tuesday nights. That's when they had the meeting, so I didn't go to choir practice. Therefore I couldn't fulfill my duties. I wouldn't do it now. Because that's wrong and I know that's wrong.

EC: But at the time--.

LG: I didn't care about choir, and nothing else. I didn't.

EC: Can you explain, you know, why it was--.

LG: I didn't want to miss it. After Rudy organized the youth, then he put me over and so therefore, I had to be there with the children. I didn't worry about the choir or nothing, so I put the Lord behind then, but I'll never do it again.

EC: What were you doing with the young people?

LG: They were the young people singing the freedom songs and stuff like that. And then I even took them to church several times, let the choir sing.

EC: What were they singing? What were some of the songs?

LG: The freedom songs? [Sings] "I ain't gonna let nobody turn me around." Then, "Oh, freedom." And what else. "He's got the whole world in his hand." I can't remember all of them.

EC: Was James Miller and Carolyn--.

LG: Well, James, I remember James well.

EC: What was he like, then?

LG: Well, they were just children under me, so you know.

EC: Did everybody like the singing? Was that a highlight? [35:00]

LG: Well, I mean, that was part of the meeting every Tuesday night. Vera Groves [?].

EC: What else besides the singing? What else was going on in the meetings?

LG: Well, with my group, there wasn't too much of anything, but when I asked Ms. Alberta Colmer, do you remember her? I asked her to help me. Then A. C. Garner came in, later, wanted to change the thing around to, I don't know how to say this. Wanted to have dances and stuff, which I didn't go for. Those people entrusted their children to us and they said what was going to be happening then, with that stuff up there, they call it. But they wanted to have the dim lights up there, cars, plays, all that stuff, and I moved out.

EC: What were the mass meetings like, in addition to the -- what else would happen besides the singing, at the mass meetings?

LG: Well, what I didn't like, and one of the things that kind of pushed me aside. They took the pulpit for a play place. I didn't feel like it should have been that

way. They'd get up there, the youngsters now. Do you remember, I called him--. He died not too long along, Buck. What's his real name? I don't even know his real name. Everybody called him Doomie [?] but he'd stop you from calling him Doomie. But he got up there one night--up in the pulpit. Now, I was over him. [Laughs] Over him. He got up there in the pulpit and boom, going to get beating on the Bible. And I wasn't doing right myself, but I didn't go up in the pulpit. [Laughs]

EC: But you wasn't doing that. [Laughs]

LG: Yes, no, that was just plum out of order.

EC: Who were some--. Oh, go ahead.

LG: Then, Reverend Dawson didn't feel comfortable about it. That's when he stepped down, and that's when I followed. And Ms. Wells, old Ms. Wells, she talked about how Reverend Dawson stopped going. I said, "He had better stopped, or else he would not have been respected in his pulpit, from none of the churches." You don't play that stuff in God's house, no, I don't like that.

EC: Who were some of the good speakers? I know you were quiet.

LG: Very quiet. [Laughs] Well, Thelma Wells. That's what she did, spoke. She could speak. Ms. Julia Jones. Geneva Collins. You were talking about right in here in the town, right? Now, Mr. Nate was, he tried to talk but he kind of stumbled, like I would.

EC: You two were the workers.

LG: What's his name? Calvin, Calvin Williams, he was a good speaker, but he was on the radical side.

EC: What was he pushing for?

LG: I thought we were pushing for the same thing, but I found out on the second go-around, like I've told anybody that had seen anything, I was in Jackson with Harry then. Had I been here, I wouldn't have gone along with a second boycott, because I didn't feel like it was fair to the people who had done what we asked. Now, what they should have done was tighten down on Claiborne Hardware, Piggly Wiggly, and folks who had not done. I wouldn't have followed, and the stuff what Reverend Walls done, standing out there with a sign, and people walking in the store anytime they wanted to walk, that wasn't effective. Now, in the first go-around, didn't nobody go to no store.

EC: What happened if they did? [Laughs]

LG: Well, you know, didn't nobody go.

EC: What were the issues for the first boycott?

LG: Hm?

EC: What were the issues for the first boycott?

LG: I wasn't one of those people who made the plan. But it was [40:00] a list of them, and they included like what I was talking about, about wanting to vote, recognition, and put your daughter, sister out of the store, and put one of us on the cash register. [Laughs] Lo and behold, when we got ahold to it, that's what we put on our house. [Laughter] Head Start came in as friends. When Head Start came we said that all the jobs, low-income mothers and things--when I looked, Thelma Wells, whose husband had a good paying check, because he was service connected. My husband's not. Thelma Wells had a social--I could have got a job, matter of fact. Rosella had a store and about four workers, all black. You just look around, and it's just not right. I don't care who it

is. And I don't think that they liked it too well, when I would say how I feel, but that's all right.

EC: Did you ever have any threats at the house?

LG: Oh, yes. It was on--. We were supposed to have a banquet here, for Medgar--.

EC: Evers?

LG: Evers, mm-hmm. He didn't make it, though. And somebody called here and asked for Harry Guster. And I could tell by the accent it was someone white. I said, "This is his wife, may I help you?" Because the house was full of people. And he asked me, was I tired of living? He identified himself. He said he was a member of the Ku Klux [Klan], and was I tired of living? And I said -- I can't say what I said, but anyway, he got the message.

EC: Were you afraid?

LG: Well, later on I was kind of, after the threat, because they threatened to bomb this house, and the Methodist place down where Rudy was staying, and I didn't know what was happening. We had, it was just one of the law here that night. [Laughs] And so, they were sitting out there. My car thing wasn't fastened in then, we were sitting up under the shed, and that old building, full-stamp building I bought? I didn't realize folks was up on top of it. Then I looked--. This lawyer wanted to go out to join the others, and so I gave him the old pistol and he went out like this. [Laughs] Like he was going to shoot right then, and while we were sitting out there, I saw somebody. Rudy, he had a hump, when he walked. Looks like Mr. Shields. And he went to the corner, made

about, come back down. See, he didn't want me to know it, that they had threats out on us. So, but he had to tell us.

EC: He didn't want to worry you?

LG: Mm-hmm. A truck came along, or something came along, that acted like it was going to stop, that night. I was up here; Harry was back there with that old shotgun. I guess I didn't give it a chance. [Recording stops and starts.]

EC: You were saying that the truck came by the house, that day, when you were--.

LG: That night.

EC: That night.

LG: So I thought it was stopping, and I started getting my gun ready. So, the next morning, well, I shot the gun, I tell you. But it was aimed down at the mattress, and he always put a bullet in the barrel, and I forgot it was in there, so I said, "Well, I can," -- and the gun was still cocked. I said, "I can let it down, now." But I had it aiming at the bed, which was good, and it went off. Boom! And my husband come creeping out. He was scared to come. He said, "Lee, I thought [45:00]," he said, "[inaudible] woman, I thought you had killed yourself." They say I did. [Laughs]

EC: So, the only fatality was the mattress?

LG: That's it, that's it.

EC: Were you out at Alcorn when they had the marches out there?

LG: Yes, I was. When they shot the gas on us?

EC: Yes. Can you tell us about the marches out there?

LG: I can tell you this. Now, I only went one time. That one time, that was enough. I took the quilt and everything, to stay all night, but we didn't get to stay all night because they put the gas on us, and that burned your eyes up. Charles was telling me, "Put your" -- told Rudy Shields, "Girl, you stay over here." "Put your head down in the ice cream box." Said that would stop the burning. Yes, it was something that night.

EC: Did anybody get hurt bad?

LG: Well, I tell you. After all that happened, we went home. Came home. Harry wasn't there. I didn't let him go.

EC: You were worried about him.

LG: No, I just know that he was sickly, and he was on medication, and I didn't want him to be locked up or anything.

EC: What was Mr. Evers like?

LG: Right to the point. Right to the point. Would come up, right to the point. All he did, too, was talk. [Laughs] Rudy was the main one.

EC: We talked to Mr. Nate this morning, and he said that you and Rudy Shields and George Henry Walker did most of the registering.

LG: True.

EC: We didn't talk about this today, but a number of years ago, Mr. Nate told me that some people thought Rudy was too radical.

LG: They did. They did.

EC: What were they talking about? What did they think?

LG: Because he wouldn't, he wouldn't take stuff, and like Charles, what came up.

EC: You told me one time that you heard Mr. Hudson talking, you were going on a march maybe, or something, and you overheard him?

LG: Well, what happened--. No, they were meddling us. My husband, actually, my husband used to have his store right up the street there. This is where the Country Crossroads is.

EC: Next to it, I think.

LG: Mm-hmm. Before we joined the NA[A]CP, well, that's where we got our roles and stuff and he was talking to my husband, and he was telling us, "Well, Harry, I'm going to do what they ask because the colored people is the one who support me." And he was the one who got out there and meddled us. And I didn't go in a new store until years after they built it, and everything was old. Because he didn't have to say nothing. He and this man, discount store man, he never did get a chance to open, because we put him out before he ever opened.

EC: Was that Jones?

LG: I think so. Around that corner, mm-hmm.

EC: I heard he was the one who was trying to bring the Klan in. Jones?

LG: Don't mistake yourself. Someone was with him, right from around here. That's my belief. Now, I don't know that.

EC: They didn't have to come in from anywhere, right?

LG: I'm telling you. I remember, we were upstairs, where the federal registry was. Bobby Gage, he came up there and made the federal register go and move all the cars off the lot, back there. They had parked back there. It was on his property, true enough, but wasn't nobody using it.

EC: He was the president of Port Gibson Bank then? So he made them move those cars?

LG: And not in a nice way. Very impolite.

EC: What was it like during the boycott?

LG: Well, you get used to it. I tell you what happened to me. Matt had the store up there, and I was getting my gas and everything up there.

EC: That's Matt Ross?

LG: Uh-huh. And he didn't put no water in my car. I was on my way to Jackson, the car caught on fire, so I had to buy a new motor, [50:00] because they checked and saw that that's what was happening. That's one thing I dreaded, but the rest of the things, we did all right. We'd go to Vicksburg anyway.

EC: Oh, I know what I wanted to ask you. Can you tell us about the Deacons, the Black Hats?

LG: They were organized. There used to be an--. No, the oak tree was here. No, it wasn't, it was out here, and we had an old green picnic table, wooden picnic table. They were organized right out there. Well, they took care of the business. You know, when people disobeyed. One part of it I did not like, and I didn't go for, was shooting in people's houses. I never liked nothing like that. I don't mind you giving a good scare, but don't shoot.

EC: And that was if people didn't--.

LG: [Inaudible] mm-hmm.

EC: They'd go into the store and ignore the boycott, that's what would happen.

LG: Mm-hmm. They'll warn you. But they knew not to go there. Some of them did it just--. They wouldn't mess with people like Benji or Ms. Cullins. We didn't bother her.

EC: How come?

LG: Because she wasn't black. She wasn't black. Kate Bailey, on the corner down there, on round Flower Street. I don't know what she stood for, but she stopped. She didn't go back. What's this woman named? She stayed in Russell, had a pink house and a beautiful glass showcase window. Priscilla Duck. That's who it was. [Laughs] And Medford Allen, the president from down in Jefferson County, N[A]ACP, we were standing up there and she was heated. I said, "That place is boycott." "Don't nobody tell me where to spend my money!" I said, "All right." So I kind of passed it around. Next thing I know--. I didn't know that she was going to send no letter with my name on it. [Laughs] Said that she told Ms. Guster she was sorry. She sure did. Nobody telling her to spend her money.

EC: Nobody telling her, right?

LG: Yes. And I did tell on her, but I told them, I said, "Don't you hurt her."

EC: What'd he say?

LG: He didn't hurt her. But he scared the devil out of her.

EC: Did you all ever talk about that?

LG: She don't know it. I wouldn't tell her I did it. But see, if she was defeating my purpose. She's still letting the candy man come to her house, and Thelma Wells would call me every time, because she stayed right across from her. "The candy man at your sister's house." So finally, the last time I said, "Thank you, Ms. Thelma."

“This is not Thelma.” And I went over there and there were the [inaudible]. I said, uh-huh. I told her over and over not to do it. So, that stopped her bitching.

EC: So, when the boycott, the first boycott, was stopped on most of the stores, what did they agree to? What made the boycott end?

LG: They put workers in there, black workers, and gave them privileges. And that’s the reason I said it was wrong, them boycotting the people out of business who had done what we asked. You know? You don’t boycott hate out, I didn’t think. But see, that’s what Calvin seemed to have been, because I said, after the first time, we just accept who said they would run for office. And I said, “Well, why don’t we ask a white person?” And we get behind them and support them. They give it to you, we going to take it. I didn’t go for that. Because the whites can’t do no more without us, and we can’t do without them. [55:00] So when I built my school onto my house, I went to Bobby Gage. Robert. You know, the old man. The old man with the--.

EC: The one that was--.

LG: Messing with the -- uh-huh. And he approved it. OK. He told me, “Leesco,” he said, “I’m going to be out of town on a meeting, and if cat woman gets sighted, you could do your own, help yourself then, but you could go to the one and ask for money, and they’d give you, they’ve got all this paperwork and stuff.” Said, “Go to Mr. Drake and pick the papers up,” and whatnot. I went down there, to Drake. He told me it was a question to whom my property, since I was in the lawsuit. And--.

EC: Go ahead.

LG: --they didn’t give them to me. So that Monday, when he came back, I went up there. The material was still on his desk, why, he hadn’t written it up. I thought

he was going to back down. He said, "We going on with the loan." Number one, he used his head, because he knew if I didn't pay, they had the house. You see what I'm saying? And then two, darned if, that time, Oglareen Wild [?] was in the bank, and heard them talking about, they were going to take our house. And we was behind, and I knew that was a lie, because I was keeping up with it. Because we ain't gotten behind. And sure enough, about two or three days later, I received a letter from the lawyer saying that, you know, wanted to see me. I went up there with all of my receipts and something I must have misplaced, because I didn't owe as much as I thought I owed.

EC: So, which lawyers called you up there?

LG: Hm?

EC: Which lawyers did you have to meet with? You said they called you in there?

LG: Bobby Gage.

EC: So it was his--.

LG: Bobby Gage. He was a lawyer too, you know.

EC: So, because somebody started that rumor, he wanted to make sure?

LG: No, he was talking about taking my house.

EC: He was talking about taking your house?

LG: Mm-hmm. Because see, I had been working with the woman.

EC: So he's trying to--.

LG: Put us out. But--.

EC: And you had all the receipts.

LG: I had all--and must have didn't have one where I had paid, or something. Because I didn't owe as much as I thought I owed when I got there.

EC: So they didn't go anywhere with that.

LG: I mean, it was to my advantage. To my advantage.

EC: So they thought they were going to get the house.

LG: But had it not been that I pushed my husband on, because see -- he didn't go to the bank to borrow the money. Norine Schillig —Ms. Acker, that's her sister, Ms. Schillig. Gave him the \$2,500. That's all it cost, and Harry hadn't paid nothing on it when I came from Chicago. Not one copper penny, and I told him, I said, "You've got to start paying." So that's what happened. And before long, she got where she couldn't be with her own stuff, and Ms. Schillig came along, her sister. Ms. Acker hadn't given Harry--he had been in an accident, and she had given him some money. She went back and brought that check up. Harry had to pay for it, and I told him, I said, "See? They'd be putting us out for real if you hadn't started paying on your house."

EC: You mentioned about your property in the lawsuit. What was the lawsuit about? Can you tell us?

LG: The lawyers said we made them lose money! During the boycott.

EC: They sued you because you made them lose money?

LG: Uh-huh, in the boycott. And if you weren't in it, they were in it anyway. When I had to go to court, over to Jackson, there was Buster Barber, who worked for Alley Motor. He was selling cars, and he didn't have no dealing with us. There was Big Charles Davis, who was buying the cars. He was over there. He didn't have no deal; if you were black, they make no deal. You might as well go head on.

EC: It's like people who were in the movement and people who weren't.

LG: That's right, that's right.

EC: Somebody told me that [1:00:00] they thought they looked at everybody that had property, and put their names on there.

LG: Look, they did. Now, some of them they looked at, like, John, Mr. John Ellis and his wife. They stayed out. Kept away, I think. Two old people who didn't do anything, but they'd help go bonds for us.

EC: So they had them for that. They put them on the list for that.

LG: Mm-hmm, I guess so.

EC: You know, in all those years when the lawsuit was going on, did you ever think you were going to win that?

LG: Gonna win it? You know what, I didn't really give it too much of a thought.

EC: You didn't?

LG: I didn't. Because I didn't see how they could do anything like that.

EC: How did you feel, when it went to the Supreme Court and you won?

LG: Well, to me, it was just a little wrong, with the judge sitting up there. It wasn't really a big thing. Mr. Dan Curry was over there, too, when I went. And they asked him what race was he. "Are you of the black race or colored race?" Or whatever. He said, "No. I'm Ethiopian." [Laughter] [Recording breaks and restarts.]

EC: You were describing Mr. Wall's testimony in the Claiborne Hardware case when they asked him about his race, and he said -- what'd he say?

LG: Oh, Mr. Curry. Dan Curry.

EC: Mr. Curry! Why did I say Walls? Yes, Mr. Curry.

LG: He told me, Ethiopian. And he was proud. I mean, he was in honest.

That he felt that way.

EC: Did you go to a lot of the trial? Did you go to--.

LG: No, I only went when they sent us. You know, they didn't have everybody come in at one time.

EC: Did you testify?

LG: Mm-hmm.

EC: What was it like, to testify?

LG: There wasn't too much to say, really, if you want the truth. How can you sue somebody because they lost money that they wouldn't be getting anyway because people wouldn't spend it?

EC: Were you going to say something?

LG: Mm-mm.

EC: Can you tell us what--were you in town when Dusty Jackson was killed?

LG: I was.

EC: Can you tell us about what happened?

LG: I can tell you. We did march. But it's something I really had to understand and all, because they weren't affiliated one way with us. So I don't know. And to tell you the truth, I didn't see having a march, but they did it, so. I hope I'm not saying -- I'm saying what I believe, so that's true.

EC: That's all right. What happened to him, for people who don't already know? What happened that night? With Dusty Jackson? What happened that night?

LG: All I know, he got killed.

EC: He got killed?

LG: That's all I know.

EC: Yes. Were you--. Did you have anything to do with the school desegregation? Did you work with any of the children?

LG: No.

EC: So, what are some of the things you think are most important about the movement, for people to know?

LG: Well, for one thing, we learned that we could be together as one, at least for a while, anyway. I feel like we did accomplish something, and I also feel like we've lost a lot. And it's not, nothing to do with the white people. It's to do with us. We don't get along. Too many blacks. We need black and white together. Because, I mean, we're doing the same thing that they were doing to us. I don't believe that they actually would want to come and work with us because there's so much mess going on. We can't get along with each of us.

EC: What were you hoping--. What are some of the things that you hoped would happen? What did you, when you set out, what were you working towards?

LG: Well, not so much for me, but there are young people coming along and they wouldn't have to go do things [1:05:00] like we had to go through. More for the young people. I mean, we've had -- just about had our day. Even back then, I was old, because I was old when I went to school, went up to Utica.

EC: What was it like when the first group of people got elected, the first group of African Americans got elected to office?

LG: It was fine. People, anybody, anybody could've gotten elected. Everybody was scared. [Laughs] Some of them didn't have the expertise and if they did, they fear there, and the other ones didn't have it, then they got in because we were going to put them in because they were black. But that's the reason I was trying to, I really had thought about Thomas Russell, and I had mentioned that to Mr. Williams, because they knew that they couldn't win unless we backed them, at that time.

EC: What was it about Thomas Russell that made you mention him?

LG: He was just so kind, and everything to everybody. I'm saying that because I believe that's the type of person he was. He was my backbone in a lot of things. He was.

EC: And Calvin Williams, he said no.

LG: Well he said, "If they're going to give it to us, we're going to take it."

EC: So he didn't want to work with any white officials?

LG: No.

EC: Did you ever think about running for office?

LG: No. Not for dog catcher, because I'm telling you now, you can't satisfy us. When I say us, I mean blacks. You've got to-- You know, there are things that you can't do without the others. You can only do what you can, but you don't have one vote. But they'll be thinking you can do everything and that'll be the biggest mess you ever seen, like it is now.

EC: If you were talking to young people, what would you want -- what advice would you give them, in terms of what you learned in the movement, or what you think they might want to know?

LG: Speak up for yourself, but you can't just sit there and talk. You've got to work. And you are somebody, anyway, but you can make it better. Get out there and help.

EC: Are there things that I haven't asked you about that I should?

LG: Hm?

EC: Are there things that I haven't asked you about that I should?

LG: I don't know anything--.

EC: Have I forgotten anything? Any of the important things?

LG: I don't think so. You can look back. You've got my oral history from your daddy--.

EC: You know, Mr. Nate asked me that. My dad never gave me copies of those. I need to get one.

LG: Well I've got, I've got one.

EC: Well, I'll bet he still has it. I could get it--. I don't want to take your copy, but I'll get it from him, but I was looking back at the one that you and I did together, and so that's how I--.

LG: You can mail it back to me. [Recording stops and restarts.] Would not have known anything about me had it not been for Nate Jones.

EC: That's true.

LG: All those pictures on the wall up there? They know who was out there and who was doing what, and I'm not one to get up there and flounce and tell them nothing. It's just like, when Kenneth called me and asked me about the mural up there. He said, "Would you give me 10 names?" I went way back, because of the people that I

knew, but there weren't no women on there. He said--. I gave him the names; he said, "Well, what about a woman?" I said, "Kenneth, I'm not going to put no lie up there." I said, "Most of the women that I know was there, just talk." They'd get up and make good speeches at night and talk about what we ought to do and what not, but that was it. And he said, "Well, what about yourself?" I said, "Well, I don't know nothing about myself either." He said, "Well, you don't have to." I can't say nothing about me. He said, "You don't have to. Somebody else did." And today, I don't know who did.

EC: It must have been Mr. Nate, don't you think?

LG: I don't know, he didn't tell me.

EC: Actually, you know what, I think my mom did. [Laughs] I think my mom talked to him, at one point. I bet a couple people told him, though.

LG: I don't know. But--.

EC: Do you like the mural?

LG: Hm?

EC: Do you like the mural?

LG: Oh, it's nice. It's nice.

EC: Is that you, right there with Mr. Nate?

LG: That little head [1:10:00] sticking up there. Don't look like me. I saw when they were painting it. [Laughs] Don't look like me.

EC: Did you ever think there would be a civil rights mural in Port Gibson?

LG: No. Let me tell you. When--. That was for something else. But he had us meeting, talking about a museum and all that kind of stuff, and even got money. You know, churches give him money, because I took \$100 from my church, and come to find

out, after he didn't go through with it, he turned it over to the NA[A]CP. Which, you don't do stuff like that. You give it back to where you got it from. And I never thought we'd have a mural, but Kenny Ross is smart. He's very smart. He is.

EC: What about the exhibit, over in the county building?

LG: Where?

EC: The exhibit, the civil rights exhibit?

LG: Inside the courthouse?

EC: Yes.

LG: Well, they doing what, like Ms. Thelma's singing and talking. Doing the same thing they did at the meeting. George Henry very well deserved, Reverend Dawson deserved, you know, those people worked. And Reverend Dawson went out there when it was hot. When you went home, it had cooled down. Ms. Thelma told me one time, over at [inaudible] house, she said, about the reverend--. I think I mentioned this, though, "Reverend Dawson stepped down," and I said, "Well, he stepped down because of all the mess that was going on." I didn't mean the NA[A]CP was a mess, but the mess going on in his church. And she said, "Are you calling it a mess? And look what that mess got you." I said I wasn't talking about the NA[A]CP. I'm a life member. I said, "Well, it didn't give me job, or nothing, first." Then she thought about it. "It got me a job, first." Talking about Head Start, which she did not need. So, I found those people out to be selfish.

Now, Carl was my friend, close friend. Marguerite wasn't nowhere around when it was going on. Soon as she got in town, because of who she was, they appointed her president over our mart. You know? Why can't--. I mean, we were here during the

struggle. Why couldn't they get somebody from around here? We had some people know something, because she didn't know. Had to bring the folks from Jackson, Mr. Smith and all of them, and I never did--. It was \$25 a chair. I had \$25, but I didn't buy one. I didn't buy one.

EC: Did you used to shop over at Our Mart?

LG: I'd go in and buy small items, but it was so high. People were trying to go where they could get it cheaper, but I'd go buy there, some.

EC: So, are you proud of what you did in the movement?

LG: I'm proud. I am. But I didn't do it for no show, now. I didn't do it for no show.

EC: I was talking to somebody recently about Rudy Shields. I can't remember who it was. I was trying to remember.

LG: Lately?

EC: Yes.

LG: George used to talk about it all the time. George thought when Rudy got sick that I should take him. I said, "George, I can't do that." I said, this was during the movement, I had a husband. I said, "I can't have nobody sick on me, and I'm working, too." I had a school. "I thought y'all were good friends." I said, "We were good friends during the movement," but I couldn't go out that far.

EC: I know who it was. It was a man in Yazoo that he used to stay with, and it's his daughter. He's trying to write something. She's trying to write something about Rudy Shields so she was asking me, so that was good. Well, Ms. Guster, thank you so much for visiting with us and sharing your story. We're very happy to have it.

LG: And it's the same story. Same story. [Laughter] I don't know any other way to tell it.

EC: Thanks, Ms. Guster. [1:15:00]

LG: No problem.

F1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Audio Transcription Center

Date transcribed: 3/16/2017