

Michael Kline: Maybe start off by saying, "My name is," and tell us your name.

Gladys Ashburn: Well, my name is Gladys Ashburn. I've lived in Irvington all my life.

MK: What was your birth date?

GA: My birthday?

MK: Your date of birth, yes. We never asked people their age.

GA: Well, I don't mind telling you my age. I was born [in] 1913, so that was a long time ago. [laughter]

MK: What was your birthday?

GA: September 21, 1913.

MK: Wow. Why don't you start off telling us about –? Is this house you grew up in here?

GA: No. I was really born down there in that field, behind that house. Then, when I was seven years old, I moved over down the street a little ways. Then, when we got married, we had this home built, my husband and I.

MK: Who were your people? Who was your family that you grew up with? Tell us about being a little girl around here and what all you saw as a child.

GA: Well, I was a Jones. I was Gladys Jones. Well, I think you wanted me to tell you a little bit about the steamboat, what I can remember.

MK: Yes.

GA: I think there are three things that I can remember.

Carrie Kline: Let's just wait until your clock finishes telling us the time. [laughter] You were saying there were three things?

GA: Yes. I had a really good friend that lived down – well, the house was still where the Tides Inn is right now. It was a real nice little home. I used to go down and visit her. They had an upstairs porch. We'd go out on the porch and watch the steamboat come in. It would come to (Williams?) Wharf first, and it would put off the people and whatever they had to bring ashore. Then it would go on up to Irvington dock. I can still remember the sounds that it made, and you could even hear people talking. I thought that was the most beautiful view I'd ever seen from that porch up there. I know any of you that have been to the Tides Inn you know what a beautiful view that is. But being upstairs on that porch, it was so nice to see the steamboat come in and to hear it blowing. That was my first memory, really, of the steamboat because I was very young then. There was another time that there was another steamboat that came in. I think it

was in *Middlesex*, I'm not sure, but it had the paddle wheel. You know the wheel? That made a lot of seas; it made it real rough. So, a couple of boys and girls got in a skiff, and we would go out there – the steamboat made a lot of waves, real deep waves, and we'd go out there in that skiff just to be able to rock in the boat. Sometimes, we'd almost get swamped. But we just thought that was the greatest thing to go out there, meet that steamboat, and ride those waves when it went by. Of course, it was coming into Irvington at that time. So, I guess the next thing I remember is when I rode the steamboat I went to Baltimore. After I graduated from high school, my sister told me something about being a nurse – going to try to get into nursing. It was a hospital up in Baltimore. My sister, some way or another, had gotten in touch with them. I wrote to them, and they approved me. They told me to come over. So, I went up there on the steamboat. Well, before then, I had just met my future husband, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to go. But after he'd gotten all ready and all, I decided, "Well, I'll just go ahead." My mother had made me the nicest lunch. When I got on the steamboat and started up the bay, I just got so homesick. I didn't know what to do because it's the first time I'd ever left home by myself. I was missing them, and I was missing my boyfriend, too. I didn't know whether I wanted to go or not. But I really got homesick, and I couldn't eat that lunch. I got so sick. After a while, I started thinking to myself – I said, "This is silly. I promised to go, and I'm going to go ahead, and I'm going to get over this." So, I went out on the deck, and it made me feel a whole lot better because I was watching the water and the boats. I've always loved boats all my life and the water. So, we went on to Baltimore. It was dark when we got up there. The first thing I noticed was that big McCormick building there. The one that has the mixed spices, all the different spices. So, there was someone there to meet me, and they took me on up to the hospital. I went in, and I met my two roommates. We got acquainted. The next day, I started my training. I stayed there – I think it was – three months. After that time, I decided that I was not cut out to be a nurse, and I wanted to come home. So, I got on the steamboat. I called my mother. I told her to meet me, that I was coming home. So, coming home, I really enjoyed the trip because I was so glad to be going home. They met me and brought me home. I think White Stone Beach is where the steamboat put me off that day. So, I was home two, three days, and my boyfriend found out that I had gotten home. In the meantime, while I was gone, he had started going with another girl. She was real pretty and very popular. I thought to myself, "Well, I know I've lost him to her." So, he came home one night, and we went out on a date. I said, "Now, I know you've been going with this girl. If you want to go with her, you go ahead. But if you want to go with me, you go with me. But you can't go with her and me both. If you go with her, you can't go with me." So, I know he never went back to see her anymore. So, later on, we got married, and we lived happily ever after. That's about all I can tell you. It's been so long ago. I'm sure there are a lot of other things that I could remember, but it has been a long time.

MK: You said you were a little girl visiting your friend at her home, and there was a porch, and from the porch, you could see the –

GA: It was an upstairs porch. I just loved that. I loved to go down to visit her.

MK: Now, you are an accomplished artist. You said that standing on the porch and looking down was a beautiful, beautiful sight.

GA: It really was.

MK: What exactly did you mean? If I was blind and could not see it, how would you describe that sight to me?

GA: I can't tell you. It was just a beautiful view from the Tides Inn, or where the Tides Inn is now. Have you been to the Tides Inn, either one of you?

Diane Rabson: I have.

GA: Do you remember that big eagle that's in one of the rooms?

DR: Yes.

GA: That was up out on the outside of that house. I can remember that so well. When I was a little girl, they used to tell me – they said that every time that eagle heard the church bells ring, it would flap its wings. [laughter] It was the longest time before I could figure that thing out. I used to love to go down there and go and swim. That's the first place I ever went swimming, right down by the Tides Inn. So, I don't think I've told you very much [inaudible].

MK: Nice stories. Did you ever paint any pictures of steamboats?

GA: No. I didn't really take up painting until all my children were grown, my husband retired, and then I started painting. I've always loved to do it.

MK: Diane, do you have any thoughts about what else we could talk about here?

DR: Well, I just wondered if you remembered on your trips up and down the bay if you remembered anything about the boat itself, where you had lunch or where you stood when you were on your way up, and what you saw.

GA: It's hard for me to remember, but when I did first get on the boat, like I said, I was homesick, so I went in this little room and I know there was just a hard bench there. I was in there by myself, and I was homesick and feeling terrible. I had that lunch that my mother had fixed for me. It was around lunchtime, but I could not eat it because I was too homesick and I was just feeling too bad.

DR: Were there a lot of other people in there?

GA: No. I was just in a little room by myself.

DR: Did you spend the night on the boat? Was it an overnight trip?

GA: No. I started early in the morning, and it was dark when I got to Baltimore. I can't remember what time I got on steamboat, but we went to White Stone Beach, and that's where I got on.

MK: What was the wharf like in Baltimore? Do you remember?

GA: The only thing I can remember is that big McCormick's building there, the mix of all the spices. I remember that. Then I had someone there to meet me [and] take me home up to the hospital. I guess maybe I would have stayed there at the hospital if I hadn't met my future husband. [laughter] I wanted to come back and see him.

DR: Did you know any of the captains?

GA: No, I really didn't. I didn't know any of the people that were there. No one.

DR: Now, I do not know if this is the right time period or not, but do you recall the Adams Floating Theater?

GA: I surely do.

DR: I think that is so exciting.

GA: Yes. I used to go to that.

MK: You went to what? What is that?

GA: The Adams Floating Theater that used to dock down here in Irvington. That was wonderful.

MK: It was an actual theater?

GA: Yes.

MK: Wow.

GA: It was a floating theater.

MK: Tell me all about that.

GA: Huh?

MK: Tell me all about that.

GA: Well, that's a long time ago, too, but they had put on good shows. I can't remember any of the shows, really, but they were good. At least, I thought so, too, when I was just a child. They had good actors. I don't know exactly how many it was that traveled on the boat with them. They had colored people, and it was just great.

MK: It had colored people acting?

GA: I believe they were white people, but they were dressed. Their faces [were] all black, how they used to do – and sing and dance. Then, just a little play as well. The theater would always be filled up by the people. They come in, bring candy and stuff for you to buy, and they had intermission. It was great.

MK: Not much else going on, I guess?

GA: No, not a whole lot. I never got to the movies in a place like that. Well, I thought it was great.

DR: Was there a country store down there near that wharf?

GA: Yes.

DR: Tell me about that.

GA: We didn't go to [inaudible] to get our groceries when I was a child. There were a couple of stores in Irvington that we used to go to and get all our groceries.

DR: Was that near the steamboat dock?

GA: Yes. One of them was. It was run by Mr. (Southworth?). He and his wife ran it. We'd go down there and get our groceries. I remember one time my husband and I went down there to get our groceries, and we got ready to leave. We parked our car right at the store. We went out, and the car was gone. We couldn't find it anywhere. Someone had taken our car and drove it up the road somewhere. I think it was found way up the road in the ditch. So, that was one of the experiences I can remember.

DR: Were there a lot of people at the store? Was it a really busy place?

GA: Yes. It was right across from the old post office used to be. It's an art gallery now, just a small art gallery. It's right across from there. The whole store was gone a long time ago.

MK: What kind of things came on the steamboat? Do you recall what they unloaded or what they shipped?

GA: Oh, lord. [laughter] I really don't know. I think they had lumber and potatoes and all the things that people usually ship at that time.

MK: Was there a lot of excitement when the boat was about to come in?

GA: Yes, it was.

MK: Talk about that a little bit.

GA: Well, like I told you, we'd go in that skiff. We thought that was the greatest thing. I think

it was the *Middlesex* that came in and made all those waves, and we'd go out and ride the waves in the little skiff. That was a lot of fun.

MK: Was that encouraged by your parents?

GA: I don't think my parents ever knew [laughter] because we almost got swamped a couple times. We still thought it was fun.

CK: Got what?

GA: Swamped. The boat almost capsized.

CK: So, what was it like when the steamer was coming?

GA: It was great. Right now, I can close my eyes and see that boat and hear the noises that it made. When it came in the creek, it would blow the whistle and black smoke would come from it. It was just great watching that steamboat come in.

MK: Beautiful.

CK: Can you talk more about your mother and father?

GA: My mother and father? Well, my father was a waterman because, like all the other people that have lived around here about that time, it was all waterman. He used to oyster fish, and that's all they could do around here at one time.

MK: Did that run in his family?

GA: Yes.

MK: Way back, I guess?

GA: Yes. Well, at that time, almost all the men around here were either watermen or farmers. There weren't too much farm – I mean, they don't have farms in Irvington, but up the country, people used to farm. Just a waterman. They'd go fishing, crabbing, catching oysters. My father used to go on a fish steamer. He was a pilot on the fish boat.

DR: What is that? I do not know what that is.

GA: You don't know about the fish boats?

DR: No.

GA: Well, over Reedville, they had the fish boats over there. My father was a pilot on one of the boats.

DR: Was he gone a lot?

GA: Yes, all summer. My first husband worked on fish boats, too. He was an engineer. That was my first husband. Then, in 1982, I remarried. I married Hubbard Ashburn. He passed away in '89, 1989. So, I was lucky enough to have two real good husbands. [laughter] And I had two sons.

CK: These fish boats, when they harvested fish, can you talk about how they distributed or sold the fish, where they went, how they traveled?

GA: They caught fish in these big nets, and they'd take a bid to the factory. Then, they would process them and make oil from them. Are you taking all this down?

DR: No. I am just making a little note, so if I need to go back and find something, I can find it on the tape.

GA: Are you recording what I'm saying?

DR: Yes.

MK: You are doing great.

CK: Yes, it seems commonplace [inaudible].

GA: It don't seem like to me I'm doing great.

DR: Well, to you, it is just an ordinary everyday routine. But [for] us, it is very exciting because we do not know what you did then.

MK: That is the truth.

GA: I've never been in the spotlight before. [laughter]

CK: You act very natural.

DR: The nice thing about telling us about what you remember is you can't do it wrong.

GA: No, I told my son. I said, "I don't know what I'm going to tell them." He said, "Well, then you can make up something." I said, "That wouldn't be right if I did."

MK: There must have been farm wagons and farm traffic coming from all over the county to meet the boats. Wasn't there?

GA: Yes, there was.

MK: Can you talk about that a little bit how the traffic would pick up?

GA: I don't know a whole lot about that. Because, like I said, I was just a young girl, and I didn't know. I didn't go down around the boats very much to even know what was going on until I went myself. I know there was a lot of people going in and coming out and off the boat. I really can't remember a lot about it. Like I said, you know how old I am? I was born in 1913, so you could figure it out.

DR: It is a long time.

GA: Huh?

DR: That is a long time ago.

GA: Long time ago. I'm ninety years old.

DR: I think your memory is pretty good.

GA: In September, [laughter] this past September.

CK: You have very vivid memories.

GA: I can remember better than I can tell you about it.

CK: You can see it in your mind. Is that what you mean? You can picture it?

GA: Yes, I could. Well, some things.

MK: Well, this has been very, very helpful.

GA: I hope so. If I had known you're going to do all this, I would've practiced.

CK: There is probably no way to practice or prepare. It is just what comes to you at the time. All we know about Irvington is what it's like now, and you know, when it was a very different place, I guess.

GA: Yes, it was. Well, you asked me about the stores. This place up here next to the Irvington Baptist Church, that little variety shop that used to be a store. My mother would send me up there to [the] store every day after school to get groceries. I used to love to go. She would always send me up there for different things, and I always loved cheese. I can remember that Mr. (Horace James?) had that real big round cheese you cut, and he'd wrapped that up. Before I could get home, I would eat part of it because I always loved cheese. Today, I feel really guilty when I eat it because I know that's not too good for me. But I still love it. Well, that's just one thing I did when I was a child. I went to store a lot.

DR: So, they had a big round of cheese, a big wheel covered in wax?



GA: Yes. My mother would order maybe a pound of it, and Mr. (James?) would go in and take his knife. He would cut that and get [inaudible], and he knew exactly how much to cut it and wrap it up.

DR: What kinds of containers would you bring things home in? Because I know there were not that many paper bags really early on. I have always wondered how people brought all this stuff home, especially if they were walking.

GA: I know. I must've had a bag because I used to bring many things home. Sometimes, my arms would be breaking before I could get home.

CK: What would be in the bag?

GA: Well, mostly cheese. She'd order sugar, flour, milk, and potatoes, things like that.

DR: Could you buy material? Could you order material or buttons?

GA: No, not at that store, but down the other store – we called it downtown. You could get all those kinds of things down there.

CK: All of what?

GA: Material, buttons, dress material.

DR: Did your mother sew, or did you get somebody to sew?

GA: My mother never did. Of course, when I got old enough, I started in, and I used to make all my clothes. Used to love doing it. Now, I can't see how to do it.

DR: Did you order patterns?

GA: Huh?

DR: Did you order patterns, or did you make your own?

GA: Yes.

DR: Did they come in the steamer with the mail? How did you get them?

GA: Well, I used to go to Kilmarnock and get mine then.

CK: You what?

GA: I didn't start until I was almost grown when I started sewing.

CK: What else was different about Irvington then?

GA: Like I said, I don't know too many people in Irvington anymore, I don't know what to do. But when I was a child, I knew every family in Irvington. I knew all the children. Very often, I went to a lot of the homes and visited. But today, I just don't know people. I'm sure they're just as friendly as they can be, but I just haven't got up with them yet.

DR: What kinds of things would you have done as a young girl on, say, a Friday or a Saturday night? If you got together for something, a party, or – I have no idea what kinds of entertainment went on in that period. My mother never talked about it.

GA: Well, I really never wondered much. I stayed home a lot. I know that they had dances around. At White Stone Beach, there's a place down there that you could go and go swimming and dance. A place down there.

DR: Like a pavilion?

GA: Yes, a pavilion. I used to get down there occasionally, but not very often.

DR: Did you ever go to any of the camp meetings?

GA: Oh, yes.

DR: Because I have not heard much about those. Tell me about the camp meetings.

GA: Wharton Grove over in White Stone – over to Williams. I used to go there.

MK: What was there?

GA: Huh?

MK: What was there that you went to see?

GA: I don't know. People would go there and just walk around. They had a big tavern there where they had service; they would preach and sing and things like that. But most people would go there, gather together just to visit with each other, and just walk around. Then, of course, they had the big steamboats that came in and brought people. All other kinds of boats came in and brought people.

DR: Did people stay a long time?

GA: They'd stay all Sunday afternoon, and there were places there that you could go in and get something to eat.

DR: Was it just white people, or was it Black people, or did they take turns?

GA: No. They were all white then.

DR: Did the Black people have camp meetings also in another place?

GA: They may have. I don't know. They had a beach where they could go and swim.

MK: This is great.

GA: Bet I haven't told you all much.

CK: Just take a little break here. Let you off the hot seat. Is that better?

GA: Oh, dear. I know that's terrible.

MK: No, it is fine.

CK: It is quite wonderful, really.

GA: Really? [laughter] When am I going to see it?

CK: I don't know.

DR: As soon as we finish the project, we are going to apply to the state for some more money to add to our budget, and then we will make copies of everything that we have done and get a copy of it to everybody that did an interview with us, but it will probably be in the spring.

GA: If it don't turn out right, just don't show it.

DR: I think it is going to be fine. I think it is going to be fine.

MK: Yes, you said some nice things.

CK: The museum is about the whole steamboat era. It takes people like you to bring that era to life.

GA: Well, like I told you, I'm not a very good speaker.

CK: You didn't convince us of that. You were good.

DR: A lot of the things that I wish I had asked my mother when she was living – you know how children are – your mother tells you things, and it just goes in one ear and out the other. Now, she is gone. I have pictures of relatives and places that they went.

GA: Where was she?

DR: She was from Mathews County. The information is gone, and I really am sorry I didn't ask her more questions.

GA: I know. I feel that way, too, about my own mother. I wished I had paid more attention to what she told me.

DR: Because once it is gone, it's just gone.

GA: That's right.

DR: This is something that your sons and your grandchildren will just be so pleased to have, your memories as a girl.

CK: May I photograph some of the paintings on your walls?

GA: Sure.

CK: Thank you.

DR: This street out here in front of your house must have been a mess when it rained.

GA: Huh?

DR: When it rained, wasn't that a mess because wasn't it dirt when you were growing up?

GA: Yes. [inaudible]

DR: I bet that was awful.

GA: Yes, it was.

DR: I do not know about you, but when I was growing up, I lived barefooted. I don't think I ever had a pair of shoes on all summer.

GA: I did, too. I went barefooted until I was real [inaudible].

DR: It is a wonder we did not catch everything in the world.

GA: I guess, sometimes I'll think maybe that's why my feet are so big today.

DR: Mine, too. Children today, I don't think, would go barefoot at all, and you don't see them playing outside in summer very much.

GA: No, you don't. No. No indeed.

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