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**4700.1687 T3340**  
**Session I**  
**November 21, 2003**

**[Begin Tape 3340, Side A. Begin Session I.]**

**LUCY THOMAS:** Yeah, they not caring, they don't care about nobody in the Lower Ninth.

**NILIMA MWENDO:** Is it recording now?

**THOMAS:** Yes, I got [?] put that with the file.

**MWENDO:** So they should have a plaque out on Claiborne Avenue or something.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. No, not on the building [?]

**MWENDO:** Oh, that building. We'll get to that. We're going to get to that. But what I'm going to do is ask more about, you know, your upbringing, your background, that kind of stuff first, so we get to know who you are inside of this big tragedy.

**THOMAS:** [0:35] My upbringing, you mean was how I lived?

**MWENDO:** Yes. Where you grew up.

**THOMAS:** We came from Algiers [?]. [15<sup>th</sup> Ward, New Orleans, Louisiana]

**MWENDO:** Where in Algiers?

**THOMAS:** And we moved in Chalmette, Louisiana. That's where I was raised. I was a baby when we came down here. But my brothers were all born over there. And they . . .

**MWENDO:** In Algiers?

**THOMAS:** No, they were born in Algiers, yes. They know more about Algiers than I do. My daddy had acres and acres of land, and they stole the land. The levee board stole the land. They took the land from us. And what they did was, according to Daddy . . . My dad said they took the land because they said they had to open the canal wider. And they never paid my daddy at all. And he had acres and acres of land, cows . . . We came up a farm. Cows and pigs and chickens and whatever. And then when we got on this side, we still had our cows and pigs and chickens and whatever. In other words, farm things. And then we had a horse they called Jelly Bean. And my brothers used to love that horse. That horse was so terrible. I recall myself trying to ride like my brothers did, and he kicked me. [laughter]

[1:58] We had an old mule, my daddy had. And he used to plow the garden, you know. And it was so funny. He used to plow the garden, so Papa used to tell him, "Old mule, I tell you, old mule, I say, I ain't got time to fool with you and time is given away." It was so funny. And we never forgot that. It was a little tune for us. [laughs] He was something with that mule, you know.

And then we had a sheep we called . . . on top of that, we had sheeps. But this was a particular sheep that was terrible. This was a sheep we used to call him Bear[?]. He was a beautiful male sheep, you know. And the girl sheep was [?]. So I'll never forget, my daddy made me milk [. . . ?] cows. My daddy made me milk Simian[?] to get the milk for whooping cough. In them days, you had whooping cough. And if you didn't know what to take . . . It sounds silly, but the rural people knew all kinds of things. Papa would make me milk the sheep, and we would drink sheep milk.

**MWENDO:** And that's for whooping, so that you wouldn't get whooping cough?

**THOMAS:** [3:04] Yes, yes. So you wouldn't get whooping cough. We never was sick. Like them people that have the whooping cough and they [?]. My daddy said, "You'll never be sick around here." And Papa would go get the horse milk from Jelly Bean. Oh, man! And then we used to have to drink . . . Well, at different times, you would have to drink that, you know. In other words, like this was the winter, you have to drink cow's milk. Or next winter, we didn't have much cow's milk, so we would take the cow's milk. We used to sell our milk to different people. They had farms down there and they used to sell, bring it to the city and sell your milk, you know, in cans. Do you remember those cans that they had?

**MWENDO:** Tin like cans?

**THOMAS:** Tin like can. And Papa used to churn butter. We ain't never had to worry about nothing! We had butter, anything you wanted. It was a farm.

**MWENDO:** Was that down here, or that was in Algiers?

**THOMAS:** That was down here. I remember that. I don't remember that.

**MWENDO:** Oh, okay. You don't remember Algiers. You remember Chalmette.

**THOMAS:** I don't remember Algiers at all. I don't even remember being there. But my daddy said . . . Well, I was a baby when I came on this side.

**MWENDO:** [4:14] What year about, what year about that was? Do you remember?

**THOMAS:** Twenty-three.

**MWENDO:** Okay.

**THOMAS:** Because I was born in '23, that's when it was. So Papa . . . Papa had . . . Abraham . . . I'm going to show you the boys: Abraham, Gable, Julius, Francis, myself, Augustine and Joseph. Joseph was my closest. Joseph and I used to always milk the cows. He was in the Marines.

By the way, he never got to be a hero in the whole United States where he should have. He was up there in Iwo Jima pushing that flag up. Did you see that black guy in the background? You can't see him. That's Joseph. I know he wasn't lying when he told me. Because he told me, he said, "You know, we pushed the flag up on Iwo Jima. Those people

don't really know who the black people were. Because they weren't worrying about it. But Joseph was the one who pushed that flag up. Him and another boy they called Joe Martin, and P Kat[?], there were five of them left with him, went in the Marines, volunteered. They didn't get no kind of recognition.

I told that boy, PK, that he should write a book about it. I don't know if ever did it. I don't guess he did. He lived in Chicago. He's the only one that's living, that I know. Out of all the whole five. Because Martin died something like five years ago, around the time that my husband died.

**MWENDO:** [5:49] I'm going to stick this in real quick. This is for, this is just for archival purposes. This is an interview with Miss Lucy Boyer Thomas, who is a long term resident of the lower Ninth Ward, living in New Orleans, Louisiana. She has lived through, and a survivor of Hurricane Betsy, that ran through this city on September 9, 1965. This interview is being conducted on November the 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003, at her home. [address omitted]

**THOMAS:** Okay.

**MWENDO:** And the interviewer is Nilima Mwendo. So, you were talking about what life was like in Chalmette. And see, I thought only white people were in Chalmette.

**THOMAS:** We were the first down there. Chalmette wasn't even built. When we went down there, they had a little place, you all don't remember the village, where the blacks used to live.

Well, you didn't even remember that. Right near the monument. You know where the monument is?

**MWENDO:** Where the battleground . . . the battlefield is?

**THOMAS:** Right by the river, yes. Battleground Baptist Church. They were out front, and we were back. So we used to call us the kids over the tracks. But we were the only blacks who was down there when my dad came on this side of, I'm telling you, I was small. Then we went, as I grew up, we went to the village school. They had this village school, one room, and this lady taught eight grades.

**MWENDO:** [7:38] And who was the lady, is this just somebody in the community?

**THOMAS:** Her name was Miss Cager, Miss Cager, the Cagers[?].

**MWENDO:** Okay. Because there wasn't like a public school system or anything like that?

**THOMAS:** No. It was just a country school. It's just like the red school house you've heard about? Well, that's the way it used to be. Well, I went there, just when I went there, I was in primer . . . what you call primer grade, first grade. I just went to primer grade there. But when I grew up a little more, I left from there. I went to McCarty School one year, left there, and I went to Holy Redeemer the rest of the year, until I finished. Then I went to Albert Wicker Junior

High, and I finished up to eleventh grade. That was the grade that they finished up there. Albert Wicker Junior High. I was supposed to go to a twelve, but I never did go.

**MWENDO:** Where was Wicker?

**THOMAS:** [8:32] Albert Wicker Junior High used to be back on Canal [Street] and Bienville [Street] . . . Iberville [Street]. Way back there. But I know where it was. It was back of Canal.

**MWENDO:** And why you didn't go to twelfth grade? What happened?

**THOMAS:** Well, you had to go to another school.

**MWENDO:** Oh, it end . . . It stopped at eleventh grade.

**THOMAS:** Yes. So I was finished, as far as I'm concerned. [laughs]

**MWENDO:** Then what you did?

**THOMAS:** Well, I was finished school. I didn't go back to school, naturally. I just stayed home and helped my father. Let me get the boys, while I'm thinking about it.

**MWENDO:** Okay.

**THOMAS:** Well, I can get them afterwards.

**MWENDO:** Yes, you can do this way.

**THOMAS:** [9:11] We lived in Chalmette. Chalmette was one big place with a lot of weeds. We had this little house way back there on a hill. They had another little house a little further back on a hill. This old lady name was Clenward[?], and we used to call her “The old lady from the hill.” We were so scared of that man. We would run every time we saw him. Because he would come out of there like in the storybook. This guy was sort of tall and hump back like. And he had pigs, So we had to go back there to get slop for the pigs. That’s how we knew.

This old lady also had cows. When we would run out of milk, she’d give us milk. Then they had this rich old lady who lived around the monument named Miss Varna[?], JC Vara[?] and she had five sons. She had Joseph, Dick, David, she had Joe, and I forget the other one name. She had five sons and she had two daughters, Lucille and Harriet. Harriet was the one we used to stick with all the time. You know, she had those curls. They would have this whooping cough all the time, always sick. My dad would bring them goat milk and stuff like that.

They were like . . . In country days it was not a few blocks, but maybe about a mile, twelve blocks. We used to have to walk there. We had this little wagon we used to push. We’d ride one another a ride, going on over to Miss Barnhuff’s[?], we’d sit down there, and she’d put us on the porch and we would eat [laughs]. I just remember all that stuff. It was so funny. Miss Barnum[?] was . . . Miss Barnum[?] was a nice old lady. She used to play the piano. She made this song up about Bibiana [the interviewee’s daughter] when Bibiana was born. I don’t know what happened to that song.



**MWENDO:** [11:15] You know it? You remember it?

**THOMAS:** I did. I wish I knew it my heart, but I didn't. I knew some of it. She said, "Bibiana, from Louisiana." That was all I remember. The song was really given to Fats Domino. I don't know what he did with that song. But the song was given to him when she first wrote it. We thought . . . At that time, Fats Domino was just beginning. We figured he would have the guts enough to have that song [?]. I never did hear it anymore. But she played that song "Bibiana from Louisiana." It was beautiful. She used to play this piano. She'd just talk about her eyes, how pretty they were, and all that stuff. Bibi was a beautiful baby. I'll show you some baby pictures of her later. Anyway, then I had another daughter whose name was Valerie. And she, too, was a beautiful child, but she's way different from Bibi. She's not as friendly as Bibi.

But anyway, getting back to how we lived. We lived in the country where we had . . . My dad had a field. You'd go out there and get anything you wanted. We had carrots, like this time of year. Beets, cabbage, turnips, greens. The middle fall you would have like snap beans, butter beans, red beans. All kind of beans, at the bean time. Papa used to put all that out. We used to have to sell all the stuff to live.

**MWENDO:** [13:00] Where did you sell it? You went in the French Quarter?

**THOMAS:** Papa used to go to the Quarter, yes. He had this man, they call him Mr. Waterman, I never did forget him. He was a fruit man. I don't know if you remember the mayor at that time, the mayor's mother and father, he knew them. They were French people. He would

go over there and sell everything to them. They would give him fruits for us. They would give him bags of fruit to bring home to the kids. So we had fruits.

Then they had this place a little further down from us, you know where Kaiser Aluminum at? It used to be a big land, nothing but property with a whole lot of stuff on it, just like paradise. In the fields you had all kind of fruit. You had pears, when it was pear time. We just didn't have apples. Pear when it was pear time, figs when it was fig time. You always had blackberries. You made blackberry jam and juice and stuff. Then you had all kind of peaches when it was peach time, loaded with peaches. Then we had lemons. You'd just go and pick a lemon off the tree if you wanted it. Mama used to go down there. We called it Deeaberdee[?], that's what we called it. We used to go down there, and now it's Packingham Drive, nothing but houses on it. But it used to be a place where it was nothing but fruits.

[14:31] We used to run through the field, and the field was called Colonne[?] Field. This man name was Mr. Colonne[?]. And Mr. Colonne[?] had cows. You had to be careful how you go out there in a cow field because you get run by a bull. [laughs] It was so funny. Even when we was going to school, we'd cut through that field, that same field, going to school. Boy, we used to be looking for them cattle. As long as there were cattle way down there, we could go through. But if they wasn't way down there, you couldn't go through there, you'd better go around, because we had to walk on a track to get to school. And I was scared of a train. Oh! When a train would come, I'd run in a ditch [laughs]. One day my brother said, "Why are you so scared of a train? You ain't supposed to be scared of a train! Get on the side, that's all!"

But anyway, I was raised mostly with my brothers because when we was very young, my mom . . . you know how they were with black people, okay? You know that they used to really hang them. So what happened, my mother, after . . . When we were very small, my mother, she

used to always go out through the cemetery, go to the river to get water and she would . . . She would bring her clothes on her head. She came from St. James Parish, by the way. My mother used to always take good care of us. She was a seamstress, she did her own clothes, she had her own curtains. I wish we had kept that stuff that my mom made. Boy, did my mom used to make some stuff! You wouldn't believe it. Boy, that's why I still think that my mama has stuff; I'll show you some glasses I got from her. When my mom had things she kept, and she didn't throw them away. And they were beautiful, too. Boy, they were stuff you can't even buy today.

[16:29] Anyway, my mom was living, we were all back in Chalmette. I was a little bitty girl going to school. Mom used to make us these long dresses. When you walk and your dress is touching the ground, and as you walk, you go through the dust. Man, this was something. Me and my sister, Augustine, Joseph . . . Joseph was always so close to us, would go to the village school while my brothers went to Holy Redeemer. Holy Redeemer was St. Louis School. I have a story of St. Louis School; it's in that book, in that paper I gave you, a story of Holy Redeemer. But anyway, they used to go to Holy Redeemer. I didn't remember them going there, but that's where they went. We went to the village school, because we were little. So my mom one day was fussing with my father and happened to break the glass of this store. The store, right on the corner at Chalmette, it's still there today, but the old woman's gone now, Miss Hassman[?], her name was. She was one of these Syrians.

**MWENDO:** She was what?

**THOMAS:** [17:46] Syrian. You know these Syrian people? They came down here to live. She had a son named Georgie, Agnes . . .and Agnes was terrible. So Aggie was the one who

started the mess. Aggie said that my mother was fussing and started with her, and it wasn't true. Anyway, she threw the brick at my father, not her, and the brick happened to hit the glass. When it hit the glass, they had . . . Aggie . . . the Hassmans[?] had the sheriff pick up my mom and bring my mom to Charity Hospital. At that time they called it crazy ward. They put her up there, they found out she wasn't crazy, they took her and brought her to Jackson. The Louisiana State Hospital at Jackson, Mississippi. Would you believe I didn't even remember my mama? Until she came back home. When she came back home, I was kind of big. I must have been about twelve years old when she came back.

**MWENDO:** How long was she gone?

**THOMAS:** She was gone for years. And the thing is, what used to get me, [?]. That's another thing about my mom. She used to kill a chicken and wring its neck. [laughs] And fix us food. She was a good person. She used to do everything for us. Patch my brother's pants and stuff like that. Then my brothers used to wear dresses, we used to kid them. You know how rural people make you wear gowns like girls. We used to kid my brothers about it.

[19:18] But we lived . . . It's so funny. Kids don't live like that anymore. We used to all live in one room. My daddy didn't have but a three-room house. Mama and Dad would live in that one room, and the rest of us would sleep in the room with the boys. But we had our own beds. We used to sleep in the room with those boys. All these people be talking about "What's happening to them?" now. We didn't know nothing about all that stuff. We lived good.

Except my brothers took care of us good. They were just like real like they're supposed to be. Brother and sister. They would help us, like when I made my communion, my brothers

helped me make my communion. They helped Augustine made her communion, and Joseph made his. Because me, Joseph, and Augustine made our communions together. In them days, you couldn't make a communion but every year . . . every year, once a year. Like this year, next year, you have communion. They would have communion this year, there would be the next year. That's the way they would go.

But anyway, my mother was gone until I was twelve years old. I must have been about, let's see, I must have been about five or six years old when my mom was gone. But you have to count that. She came back when I was about twelve.

**MWENDO:** Was your brothers, they kind of took care of you during that period of time?

**THOMAS:** Yes. My brothers and my dad took care of us during that time.

**MWENDO:** Who cooked, then? Who did the cooking?

**THOMAS:** [20:49] My dad! My dad, oh, he was a French cook. He was something. Man, if we wanted something to eat . . . I don't know if you heard of . . . something . . . I don't know you all heard of this. When we were very young, my dad used to fix a thing they called *couche couche potalosh*[?]. And then he would cook the . . . this bread that the old people used to make? Do you remember that? They used to make bread in the pot, a big, black pot. See, like that skillet? It would be a black pot. I've got a skillet like that down there.

**MWENDO:** Cast iron?

**THOMAS:** Yes, cast iron skillet. They would fix this bread in there. Boy, you'd eat your fingers. You'd have bread served in the morning, coffee or cocoa, whatever. Not coffee. He wouldn't give us coffee. We had milk. Always milk cow, we had to go milk the cow. "Go milk the cow, Lucy!" Then we'd have all the butter we want. We didn't have to worry about it. Papa was real French. But I wish he would have taught me French. I know some things. I could understand some things. Like we're sitting down and he said, "*De l'eau, s'il vous plait,*" that's water. Or he'd say, "*De sucre,*" that's sugar. Or he would say, "*salt*" or he would say, "*bonsoir*" or, "*au revoir,*" or stuff like that. "*Au revoir*" means goodbye, whatever.

**MWENDO:** Where was he from?

**THOMAS:** [22:14] He came from Lafayette [Louisiana]. He lived . . . He lived in Moreauville, [Louisiana] they called, Plaucheville [Louisiana]. That's where he was born, in Plaucheville. His daddy . . . His daddy was Amadee[?] Boyer. He came direct from France, and he married this old colored lady. In them days, these old colored ladies had their hair all down their back. My mom had her hair way down about here. This old lady, this old Creole lady had all these curls. I don't know what happened to the pictures, but I wish you could have had that. And Teliza[?], who was my great-grandmother. He married this old Creole lady up in Plaucheville there. That's where my dad had lived. They were Boyers[?].

My dad had five brothers, one sister, Aunt Cile[?]. Anyway, Aunt Cile was a very nice old lady. Well, I wish you could have saw Aunt Cile, she was a doll. She also was born on the Feast of St. Cecile. St. Cecile, which is tomorrow, yes, tomorrow is Saturday, St. Cecile's Day. She was born on the Feast of St. Cecile. They called her Cecile. Well, anyway, Aunt Cile[?]

was very close to us. She was the only one that would come down once in a while, see about us. She was lived uptown on Magnolia Street. She used to come see about us. Then I used to go see about Aunt Cile[?] sometimes.

[23:49] But getting back to how we lived, my dad was always there for us. And he . . . like I say about him being in the garden, he always had the boys with him. "Come out here, Joseph! You're going to go and milk the cows! Cook dinner." Whatever. But when it come around time for us to fix the food, we had to peel the peas, clean up the vegetables, and have that food ready. On Sunday, you had soup. If Papa would kill a pig . . . Would you believe he used to kill pigs? [laughs] Caught the pig by . . . They used to grab a pig, they had to hold that pig down. Grab a pig and kill it like that. They used to say it was crude, but that's what they did.

**MWENDO:** How did he did it? How did he killed it? Did he slit it down . . .

**THOMAS:** Oh, no. They would cut the neck, the throat. Then they know the pig couldn't move. [Imitating pig squealing] The pig just hollering. Then, first thing you know, the pig ain't hollering no more, the pig is dead. You cook . . . Take that pig and clean that pig. He would get all the parts of the pig off.

Isn't that funny how they kept meat? They would fix meat with plenty salt. Your meat wouldn't get bad, would never get bad. Then they had iceboxes. In them days, you put your ice in that icebox. Believe me, that food stayed cold. You saw old time iceboxes, haven't you? Well, they used to put all the food in the bottom that you would eat. Like if you're making a big pot of soup, that soup staying in that box till it was ready to eat. Stuff like that. The butter, naturally when you churn it, you put some in there. The rest you sell.

[25:37] We used to go sell most of our things like butter and milk and all that stuff from Miss Barnham[?]. And when . . . Like I say, when we didn't have milk, we'd get milk from her, too. She also had cattle, horses. They used to ride the horses. They were sort of, we used to call them the rich lady because she used to have everything that we didn't have. They would have tennis racket place for them to play tennis. Then they would have a place for them, they had fruit trees, also. During this time of the season, they'd have a lot of oranges and what do you call those things? Grapefruits, and the little, what do you call them?

**MWENDO:** Tangerines. Oranges.

**THOMAS:** Yes, tangerines, oranges, and all that. They even had persimmon trees in them days. See that persimmon? That's how big them persimmons were. Just like that. Boy, we used to go get persimmons from her, and go over there and get . . . When she'd have figs and we didn't have no figs on our tree, used to get in that tree. I'll never forget the time I went in that lady's tree and saw a snake in there. Flew out of that tree. I beat the snake down [laughs]. I was such a tomboy. I used to go do all kind of things. But anyway, I came back home and I said, "Papa, they had a snake in that tree! I ain't going back no more! Don't ask me to go!" [laughs] I was so scared of that snake. The snake was brown like the tree, and you couldn't tell. Only thing made me see him when he stuck his tongue out. God! [laughs] It was too much.

[27:25] But anyway, getting back to the food and stuff that we ate, we always had a lot of food. Like this time of year, we would have carrots and beets and stuff like that. We ate a lot of carrots and stuff, and fruits. I was never sick a day in our life.



This is something that none of you all knew what it is. There was some kind of stuff that the old people knew about. I wish I could find it. I don't know it no more. I used to remember. When I was young I went to the woods with Papa many times and couldn't remember. But we had the blackjack. He would go in the woods and get this blackjack, bring it home. It was a vine like, but you got to know exactly what kind of vine it is. He would boil this vine and he would give this vine, this blackjack, to the older people. Like they be sick, they didn't feel good; they had arthritis and all that. Give them that, and they was walking around like you and I.

And then there was some *l'hèrbe à malot*. I'll give you a piece of that, you can take that with you. There was *l'hèrbe à malot*, they call swamp root. You also drink that. You put it around the baby's neck, and the baby never had trouble with teeth. So then . . . You know how a long time ago how they used to give you castor oil to clean you out, with syrup and castor oil and stuff like that. You got that right after the winter was over. I used to hate that. I said, "Papa, don't give me that stuff. I can't drink it." [laughs] Boy, that was something.

[29:05] But my dad, I always . . . I always thought of my dad as . . . we looked at Papa as head of the household. Always, Joseph was head of the household. His name was Joseph like Joe, my brother. They had two Josephs in the house. We used to call them the two Joes. [laughs] They made a song about the two Joes. Anyway, it's just like you were saying . . . what's that little . . . what you call them you was just reading about? That little funny cartoon? That used to be out at that time. What was the name of that little cartoon you was talking about?

**MWENDO:** I don't know. I think the big paper. Do I have the big paper?

**THOMAS:** No, I think it was in there.

**MWENDO:** It was in this little paper?

**THOMAS:** Yes. What was his name?

**MWENDO:** In here?

**THOMAS:** Oh, no, no, no. The little . . . the little book.

**MWENDO:** Oh, the magazine!

**THOMAS:** [30:01] Yes. What was his name?

**MWENDO:** Oh, you was looking at, there was a cartoon . . .

**THOMAS:** It was a cartoon in there that they used to always . . . We used to always watch that thing. I forgot the name of it.

**MWENDO:** This cartoon kind of thing?

**THOMAS:** It's what you call them time?

**MWENDO:** I don't know. Howdy Doody!

**THOMAS:** Howdy Doody!

**MWENDO:** Howdy Doody!

**THOMAS:** It's Howdy Doody time.

**MWENDO:** Yes.

**THOMAS:** [30:30] We used to listen to that all the time. That was during the time, there was always stuff, this stuff, too, this funny paper stuff was always up. Maggie and Jigs[?] and, you knew about that.

**MWENDO:** Yes.

**THOMAS:** Maggie and Jigs[?] and all these people. All this junk here. Whoops and Poops and Betty Boop, and all that stuff. We used to [?], because my brothers used to draw Betty Boop. You know Betty Boop, with the little short dress. They thought it was so funny, with those big eyes.

It was so much . . . my brother was an artist. I had a brother who one time when we were really young, he drew a cross on a canvas about as big as that. I wish you would have saw it. It was so beautiful. I could never forget that. He drew that cross. He used to keep it in the house. Everybody would look at that. I wish I had that today. I bet I'd . . . people would be a millionaire just to look at it. But he had real . . . almost real. That's the way he used to draw it.

In his mind, he knew exactly how Jesus looked. He had this cross, and we had it, all the time we had it at the house.

**MWENDO:** Which brother was that?

**THOMAS:** That was Gabe. He was a good, he was a beautiful artist. Yes.

**MWENDO:** [31:49] So eleventh grade, you finished school. You're still . . . you all still living in Chalmette?

**THOMAS:** Yes, we were still in Chalmette.

**MWENDO:** So you spent your time working on a farm? Or did you go get a job?

**THOMAS:** Oh, no! We had to stay home and help Papa.

**MWENDO:** All the time.

**THOMAS:** We stayed on the farm. I stayed on the farm until I got to be about eighteen years old. My father died when I was nineteen. I left here, I went to California, took up nursing, went to Charity [Hospital]. I stayed home after that. But you know, it was so funny, when I left here and went to California, I was supposed to be going out there by my uncle whose name, Uncle

Ed. They all passed for white, and beige. Uncle Ed would let me stay there, but I couldn't stay in the house. I had to stay outside.

**MWENDO:** Because you're too dark skinned?

**THOMAS:** [32:46] Yes. I had to stay outside like I was the serving girl. When I wanted something to eat, I just come to the door and get the dinner, and I had to go back. It was so terrible in California! I was living [?]. [laughs]

But anyway, when I went to California, I went out there to take up nursing. I went to the University of Los Angeles, California, UCLA there. I went to this nursing school to learn how to be a nurse. But we wasn't a nurse in them days. We'd call us a nurse's aide. But I did pass the test, and I got way up there, because I was even doing chart and everything. When I came to New Orleans, do you know they wouldn't let me use it? They told me they didn't care what I knew, I had to go through it all over again. Do you know what I told them? I said, "Not me." I didn't go. I just worked for the sisters, and that was it.

**MWENDO:** You worked for the sisters where? Where were you working?

**THOMAS:** [33:44] At Charity. Them sisters that you see in there with the big bonnet. At that time, Sister Stanislaus was still living. I could remember her coming down the hall. You'd move when you saw her! She was coming down the hall, boy, and we had to get out of her way when she was coming. Then I used to work for a Sister Ann who was in the accident room, and that's where she put me. [phone ringing] I'd work in there when all them people getting shot,

killed, slammed up and everything. It was so funny, when Friday would come, you could tell that today's Friday. [phone ringing] Everybody's guts was cut out. I was ready to go, and I went to California.

**MWENDO:** Oh, what's that we dropped?

**THOMAS:** I don't know. We got to look. Oh, that's nothing but papers, I guess.

**MWENDO:** [34:35] You want the phone to ring, Miss Lucy, while we doing this?

**THOMAS:** Oh, it doesn't matter. I don't need it to ring anymore. It ain't going to ring. It's just . . . I could have answered it in the back. But that's just [?]

**MWENDO:** You want me to turn the sound off or what? Or leave it.

**THOMAS:** We'll just leave it. Okay. We'll just leave it.

**MWENDO:** Okay.

**THOMAS:** This little girl here, you don't know her, but this little girl was Lynette.

**MWENDO:** Lynette? Oh, she's pretty.

**THOMAS:** She was a Spanish girl. She used to live over here. Now they were up here with us. Her brother still live there.

**MWENDO:** Lived where? Where did he live?

**THOMAS:** Across the street.

**MWENDO:** Right across the street from you?

**THOMAS:** Yes. He was raised with Lynette. Lynette was her sister.

**MWENDO:** [35:19] Oh. So what year, about . . . what this . . .

**THOMAS:** That was in '51.

**MWENDO:** And she's in a . . . oh, she's in a [?].

**THOMAS:** Yes, she just in the [?]. And she [?]. I had so many friends.

**MWENDO:** So you were working at Charity with the nurses.

**THOMAS:** With the nuns.

**MWENDO:** With the nuns.

**THOMAS:** With the nuns, Sister . . .

**MWENDO:** That was . . . What year that was? You must have been in your twenties then.

**THOMAS:** Yes. I must have been about twenty, twenty-one, something like that.

**MWENDO:** Because you stayed in California how long?

**THOMAS:** Yes. A year, just a year, eighteen months. I was ready to go.

**MWENDO:** After being treated like that.

**THOMAS:** After being treated, I was ready to go.

**MWENDO:** [36:00] You were about eighteen or nineteen when you went out there, right?

**THOMAS:** Yes. Yes. Nineteen. I was eighteen when I was still in [?]. After my father died, that's what made me leave. Thought I would get out there and live good and that's the way things are. Anyway, so . . .



**MWENDO:** You could go with that. That's the way things are. Tell us how things . . . Tell us how things are.

**THOMAS:** That's the way things were. They didn't care about you. You would go to their house and you would stay there and if you'd come there and you were black, you couldn't come in. They had every door locked. You couldn't go in their rooms. Like this door is open, that door isn't open. It would be locked. That would be locked, that would be locked, that would be locked.

**MWENDO:** Oh, inside the house.

**THOMAS:** [36:52] Inside the house. The only place you could go is in the bathroom. There would be a big hall like, not looking like this, but big hall. You go down the hall to the back room, go back out. You live like a servant out there, boy! Them people are something else! Then the people weren't too friendly. They were kind of terrible for me. I don't know, I remember that was way back in '47.

I remember one time when I was out there, I lived . . . After I left my uncle's place, I lived with this girl who was a friend of my sister-in-law. My sister-in-law name was Corrine Boyer. And she . . . They moved out there, too. But when they moved, they came out there and moved, I was ready to go home. They was moving, I was coming back[?]. But anyway, I lived out there with her sister-in-law. The people that she knew, this lady name was Gladys.

Then they had another lady that had . . . they had apartments. Big house with apartments and let people stay there. One of them people was terrible. They'd have these guys living in

another room, and they'd send these men to your room. I'll never forget the night when she sent a man to my room and I'm like . . . I heard the footsteps coming up the steps. I'm like . . . I was acting like I was sleeping. I heard somebody coming. I saw that man walk in the door; I kicked through the door and kicked through that man's legs, went on downstairs and was gone. I heard the lady say, "Catch her! Catch her! She's going to the police!" I had no time to worry about the police; I was scared.

[38:37] And honey, I left out of that place in the middle of the night, about two or three o'clock in the morning with nothing on but a nightgown. [laughs] Left out that lady house, I never went back. I called my . . . My brother was living out there, Gabe. I called my brother Gabe and I told Gabe, I said, he was a disabled veteran, by the way, and he was out there. I really went out there to see him, also. I called Gabe, I said, "Gabe, you come over here and get my clothes. I'm not going back no more."

I went on back to my work at the Los Angeles County General Hospital. When I was out there at Los Angeles County General, those people were terrible. They were terrible people. Not the ones where I was going to school. I'm talking about the ones where he lived. They were just terrible! If you fell on the ground, you stayed there. They didn't care about you.

**MWENDO:** [39:30] That was your relatives?

**THOMAS:** Yeah, well, they was supposed to be distant cousins and all that stuff. But I'm talking about after I left my uncle, they were terrible people, too. I stayed with these people and they had this room . . . that was Corrine people, I was telling about my sister-in-law, Jimmy's wife, stayed with these people in this . . . I'll never forget they had . . . In this room they had this

bed. You had your bedroom and your food stuff right in, in the same room. The refrigerator was in there like this refrigerator. Then the bed was here. Then you had all your things over here. Those people used to go in your mattress, look for your money, take everything. I don't care what you had. Then they would swear they didn't see it.

Now how could somebody . . . Think about it, how could somebody come in the house, take your things and go about their business, and they weren't there? That was the stupidest thing I ever heard of. They had a pass-key and they used to come in. How I knew that, one day I fool them. They thought I was going to work. I could see a man walk way out in the street to see which way I was going. I turned around, I turned around and I looked, I saw that man walk up to the corner to see which way I went, because I used to have to get the J-car on the corner. The J-car would bring you way out to Los Angeles County General Hospital.

[40:59] This man, then he went back in the house. When he went back in the house, he was going right in my room. Then I asked him, I said, "What are you doing in here?" He said, "Oh, I was looking for something." I said, "How did you get in?" He said, "We have to keep out pass-keys." When he told me that, I didn't tell him no more. I left out of that place, and I was gone. That man had pass-keys to go in your room! Take what they want, and leave. My icebox, it had all kind of food in there, milk and stuff. When I got there, the milk was gone! Next day I got in there, the ham was gone! The next day, this was gone! I said, "Yes something's funny." That particular day when I was off, I stayed home and I caught him. When I caught that man going in my things, I just left. I left out of there.

I said, "You'll never come in my room and take things and then talk about you don't know where it's at." I couldn't even find the underwears! [laughs] I was little; I was about small like you. I don't know what they were doing with my clothes! I mean, them people, they

stripped me of my clothes! They didn't take the uniform, but they took my clothes. Boy! I used to wear pants like you all the time. Pants was gone. I couldn't find nothing. I had to leave out that place. I said, these people is too much. I had to call my brother. I said, "You better come get these clothes, because I ain't coming here no more." I took them clothes and left out of there.

Then Gabe came by there and jump on the lady. "If I ever catch you saying anything to my sister again, you're going to answer to me!" I bet you she ain't fool with me either after that. She was working the same place I was working, Los Angeles County General Hospital. But she was on a different floor. I was on a different floor. I was with the babies and mothers. It was so funny. One day a big . . . how you call it? What you call them? They shake up the whole building. And here I was . . .

**MWENDO:** Earthquakes. Earthquake?

**THOMAS:** [43:12] Earthquake! Man, the earthquake made you feel like you was in the sea somewhere. I was drunk. I said, "What's the matter with me? What's the matter with me?" A lady said . . . she said, "You don't know what's happening?" I say, "No, what's happening?" She says, "That's an earthquake." I said, "An earthquake!" She said, "Yes." She said, "You're supposed to get behind a . . . between a door when that happen." I say, "Get between what door?!" [laughs] I didn't know what to do. But I laughed. It was so funny, because I was so dumb about everything, going out there, boy. Then after that, I got used to that when they had these tremblers.

Then after that one day, they had a trembler and this lady saying, "Oh, I'm getting out of here." She said, "This earthquake could kill all of us." I said, "The earthquake ain't going to do you nothing." I said, "I'm telling the ladies upstairs." That lady knew better. [laughs] It was so funny working with those ladies. But then one day they had me floating on a floor. I had to take care of an Indian. You know how they used to have to . . . you would bathe the patients. I told the sister, they had sisters up there. I said, "I ain't bathing this man. You going to have to do it, Sister. I ain't fooling with him." That man was terrible! [laughs] He said, "Oh, I sure like you." He was an Indian. I said, "No, you don't like me!" [laughs] I was ready to get out of there. But it was so funny when I worked.

**MWENDO:** [44:35] Then you got . . . you got back down here.

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** You started working at Charity.

**THOMAS:** I got back down here and I went to work at Charity with the sisters.

**MWENDO:** And how was the treatment . . .

**THOMAS:** Until I got married.

**MWENDO:** How was the treatment there?

**THOMAS:** Oh, that was okay. It was nothing excellent. They treat you better. In fact, I was what you call a genius around there. She would come and get me. "Lucy, come on, we're going to clean the chapel." I used to go clean the chapel. I used to like that better than being in a hospital. We'd go clean the chapel, me and her. Then after we'd get through cleaning the chapel, we always would go to church. Remember St. Catherine's? St. Catherine is in that book, too. Did you look at this book? I'll let you use it. Just don't get rid of it.

**MWENDO:** Oh, it's right there?

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** Okay.

**THOMAS:** [45:18] It's got St. Catherine in there, St. Catherine Catholic church. That was our church. It used to be a black church. We used to even have to go clean St. Catherine for them. They used to keep it clean . . . chapel. Me and her would go clean the chapel. When I would get ready to eat, Sister would say, "Come on, you ain't got to buy no lunch. Come on down and eat with us." They used to eat, which was like the basement floor. They had this lady that went out, would go down there and she had cake like that! I used to sit there and eat my good cake, pound cake, real good, French cooked cake. That lady was a good cook. I never forgot that. I used to tell Sister all the time, "Boy, you all eat like queens here!" They had cakes, all kind of chicken and stuff. Anything you wanted. Real food. But then after that, I got

married . . . when I got married, I moved up here. When I got married, that's when I moved here. Fifty years ago, when Bibi was a baby.

**MWENDO:** Was it in this house?

**THOMAS:** This house, I moved here. This is what happened. They were building my house when I was still down there. When I got married, I was down there. I was in the room where the kids used to sleep . . . where we used to sleep. But then I had to move because it was too crowded . . . too small. I told them, I said, "I'm fixing to get . . ." [46:48]

[End Tape 3340, Side A. Begin Tape 3340, Side B.]

**MWENDO:** In a minute, in a minute, in a minute. All right.

**THOMAS:** [46:58] When I got married, we got married at St. David Church. My husband name was Francis Thomas. And I'm Lucy Thomas. We got married at St. David Church. And my babies, I had a first baby, her name was Bibiana, B-I-B-I-A-N-A, Bibiana Thomas. She was born, and I was living in Chalmette, Louisiana. Then we moved [address omitted] and we've been here fifty . . . fifty-one years, ever since. I went through Betsy and everything right here in the Lower Ninth Ward.

**MWENDO:** How you met your husband?

**THOMAS:** I met my husband, we used to go to a school they called Grunewald. Grunewald School of Music. He was at a wedding and I was at a wedding and I saw him. Then after that, he kept coming around, picking me up with my music. He had a big horn. He used to play a tenor sax. He used to carry his horn and carry my books. We would go home together. But he . . . That's how I met him. I met him at Grunewald School of Music.

Grunewald at the time was on Camp Street. Then they moved from there and they went on Canal. Then from Canal, they went around the corner on, I guess, Bienville, where . . . Bienville Street. Then they moved there. Finally they moved way in Metairie [Louisiana]. But Grunewald used to be one of your famous and best schools in New Orleans. So we went to music there.

**MWENDO:** [48:49] And what . . . Did you play an instrument?

**THOMAS:** I sang. I used to . . . I took a vocal music. That's what I was doing. I was taking a vocal . . . I still sing, I sing in church. I could sing some beautiful melodies for you.

**MWENDO:** We ready. You want to sing one right now?

**THOMAS:** Well, I say you all need to sing this, because we need to keep this with our subject, the "Our Father Prayer." I'll sing the Our Father for you. [singing] Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors, and lead us



not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

**MWENDO:** [applauding] Wonderful!

**THOMAS:** [50:54] We sing . . . I sing all the time in church. Sometimes I sing solos, when they ask. But that’s . . .

**MWENDO:** You still at St. David?

**THOMAS:** I’m still at St. David, and I sing over there. I sing at eight o’clock mass. So that’s how I met my husband, singing. Anyway, Bibi was born here. She was a very nice little girl. She was very sweet. She knows how to do different things. She was brought up very kind, very nice and very humble. She knows how to live. One day you’ll meet Bibiana. Bibiana . . . and I have Bibiana, Rodney, Peter, Valerie, and Alonzo, five kids.

I got twelve grandchildren, twelve! Janea’s[?] my favorite. She’s at Loyola University. And then Bianca is in Lafayette. She is . . . both of them graduating this May, by the way. That’s my favorites. And they something, them two girls. I’m telling you. They wonders for me. In fact, they keep me happy. [laughs] When they home. Right now, they in college. They’ll be out in May.

**MWENDO:** [52:35] So let’s go back to where . . . you got married. You had Bibiana in Chalmette. Then you all moved here, fifty years ago.

**THOMAS:** Fifty-one years ago today.

**MWENDO:** Fifty-one years ago today. What kind of work your husband did?

**THOMAS:** Oh, he worked at Kaiser Aluminum. He retired during that time. But then he got sick, and he passed on. But I'm home by myself.

**MWENDO:** What year did he pass?

**THOMAS:** Excuse me?

**MWENDO:** What year did he pass on?

**THOMAS:** Oh, that was in '95. So that's about five years ago?

**MWENDO:** Five, six, seven, eight . . . more like eight years ago.

**THOMAS:** [53:17] I know he's been gone five years, though. He died five years ago. I'm back. But it was five years now. The one who really helps me a lot in the house is Peter. He keeps my grass cut, he keeps the place looking good. He's the one who takes care of everything. He has a power of attorney, and he knows exactly how to handle things. He's not just power of attorney for me, he's power of attorney for my sister-in-law, too. She depends on Peter. Peter's a good person. He's really the only one here. Rodney lives in South Carolina. Valerie lives in

Tennessee. Bibi is here. Alonzo lives in Harvey, Louisiana, in Harvey. They live over the river. He's my baby son. He's the baby . . . baby of the whole family.

**MWENDO:** Peter is, you say?

**THOMAS:** Not Peter. Alonzo.

**MWENDO:** Oh, Alonzo.

**THOMAS:** Alonzo is the baby. He also has a family of five. [laughs] I don't know how he handles that. But I had five kids, too, so I handled it. I guess he can do it. His baby about, let me see, that little boy must be about twelve years old now. I haven't seen him in a while, but he's about twelve.

**MWENDO:** [54:58] So what was it like living down here before Betsy? What was the community . . . talk about when you first moved here. What did it look like down here? This is in '52. This was about '52.

**THOMAS:** Well, when we first . . . Yes, about '52. In '52, when we got settled around here, it was more like the country. The man across the street had a horse in a field right there. That was a field. Didn't have no houses on it. Finally, Citizen, Good Citizen built there. That's a different houses from there. This is the government houses. These are the veteran houses. Over there is Good Citizen Houses. Good Citizen was here in New Orleans.

**MWENDO:**    What's Good Citizen?

**THOMAS:**    That was the name of an insurance company that built down here. The man name was Mr. Johnson who ran the place. He used to have this house down there on the corner, that brick house. You know where that brick house is? Not far from your friend. Well, he was the one that built all those houses. Then there was Mr. Simon, Paul Simon. Paul Simon and, let's see what his daddy, Mr. Simon, I forgot what Mrs. Simon name was. All I know we call her Mrs. Simon. I don't know whether her name was Marie or what. But they used to live over on that corner. They used to live on the corner. Good Citizen . . . All of them was Good Citizen people.

**MWENDO:**    [56:30] Meaning that they had the insurance with Good . . .

**THOMAS:**    Yes, you had insurance with those people. But they sold the houses through Good Citizen. That's how those houses got built. Your friend's house and all those houses were on one vicinity. These are the people I was talking about that were in Betsy. Before that, when we moved, like I say, it was like the country. They had a little bridge right here on Roman Street. You had to cross that bridge to get over on the other side.

It used to be a canal here. We used to catch fish out there. [laughs] Turtles, frogs, even snakes up in there. I used to be scared them children would go play out there. The canal was something that used to kind of frighten me. But the kids knew how to act with it. The only time it would get filled was if it rained. So it'd always stay a certain length. They'd go in there and get their crawfish. Take their crawfish out of there. I don't know how they eat that stuff.

[57:32] But anyway, we didn't have . . . We didn't have toilets like they've got today. We had septic tanks. When we first got back here, it was septic tanks. It was no sewage . . . so everything went in the septic tank. It was so funny. This little boy was crossing the septic tank, it was open and he fell in. Valerie saved him, my daughter. She caught him by the hand and she said, "Pookie, what you doing in that?" A little Spanish boy. "Pookie, what you doing in that?" Valerie grabbed him up and pulled him up. "Come on out of there, Pookie!" She thought it was so funny. She was a kid. She picked him up and brought him inside. His mama still thanked her; she never forgot to thank her for that, for saving his life. She didn't know he was drowning. He was drowning in that mess. You know, the septic tank was open? It just goes to show you how bad it was.

Anyway, after that . . . after that little boy accidentally . . . They got rid of all the septic tanks. There were no septic tanks back here. Because even in my yard, I had a septic tank, but I always kept it covered. They used to have it covered, with like a barrel or something. But big enough, I guess, to let the waste go in there. That's what used to happen, them days. They really didn't have no waste in that canal. They had . . . It was clean. You really could eat stuff out of there. And they would sit there and eat them crawfish. But I couldn't eat them.

[59:08] Anyway, they would go catch the little fish out there. We had frogs in the yard. We had turtles walking around. We had all kinds of animals and birds and stuff. We've still got birds out there flying. Man, this place used to be full of birds. You just sit down and enjoy listening to them. I've got a little thing in there that you used to put out in the yard to sing like the birds. I've still got it.

**MWENDO:** And a lot of trees must have been here, too. What kind of trees?

**THOMAS:** Oh, yes. It was a lot of trees. This was, like I told you, a field. There were two or three trees out there, and the man used to put his horse on that.

**MWENDO:** That was in that field that was across the street?

**THOMAS:** Yes, right there where, where that brick house at, that was a field. Well it was wide before they built those houses. This man used to keep his horse in there. His name was Willy Merit. He used to live across the street from me. Then they had property down there a little further. Their grandfather name was Mr. Felix. It was just like the country. Mr. Felix used to live just two blocks from here. He was right down Derbigny [Street], where they building that house at right now. That's where he lived, Mr. Felix used to live there. Too bad you ain't got a camera to catch a picture of that house. That's really one of the oldest houses back there.

**MWENDO:** [1:00:37] You know what? I do have a camera, and I didn't bring it this time.

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** But maybe one time . . .

**THOMAS:** Yes, you better get it before they . . .

**MWENDO:** . . . we could drive around, and you could tell me which ones to . . .

**THOMAS:** That house, and that house was the oldest house back here. That, Mr. Felix house and Mr. Merit's house is the oldest house back there.

**MWENDO:** Back in the Lower Nine? The whole Lower Nine?

**THOMAS:** Yes, and that pink house that they're fixing to knock down? That was also there. They had an old lady that used to live there named Miss Shep[?]. She had a daughter who was, she's still living, but she's in the home now. That's how your friend Clarence got that house. She was living in that. She lived in there; then she lived in there until she got to be an old lady. But she was kind of crippled . . . so they put her in the home. She didn't want to go, but they put her in the home. That old lady couldn't stay in the house by herself, because you're talking about a mess. It wasn't like this. No, this is a palace. You couldn't even get in her house. [laughs] She was worse than me. But anyway, Miss Shepherd, poor soul, she was a good old lady. Now that old lady used to make pies, boy, and make you eat your fingers. Some of them old people knew how to cook. And Miss Maris[?], too. She was a good cook, and she was a good seamstress. She used to do all my clothes for the kids.

**MWENDO:** [1:02:05] So what made people come down in this area? Was this . . .

**THOMAS:** What made us come down here is because we had government houses here. See, these are government houses, on this side of the street.

**MWENDO:** Including this one?

**THOMAS:** Yes, including, this is the one, from this house to the corner. From this corner to that corner, to Prieur [Street], that's government houses. These were the people that were all in that place over there.

**MWENDO:** So from like Tupelo [Street] . . .

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** To what?

**THOMAS:** To St. Maurice [Avenue].

**MWENDO:** Tupelo to St. Maurice.

**THOMAS:** Yes. Tupelo to St. Maurice.

**MWENDO:** And Roman [Street] . . .

**THOMAS:** Roman. Roman to Prieur [Street] . . .

**MWENDO:** [1:02:42] . . . to Prieur was all government houses.

**THOMAS:** . . . was all government houses.



**MWENDO:** Why the government was building? Was the population growing?

**THOMAS:** Well, they were building, yes, the population was growing. If you were a veteran, you could get a house cheap, nine thousand dollars. That was cheap compared to today, nine thousand dollars.

**MWENDO:** That's how much you all paid for your house, because your husband was a veteran?

**THOMAS:** Nine thousand dollars, yes. Then, we have paid for this house three times. When Betsy came in, we went and got a small business loan, and paid for it again. Because you had to pay for it again to do this. See that work in front? He did that. That work? He did that. That's his work. The house was really like this, just plywood all through.

**MWENDO:** And so who . . . Your husband did that, you say?

**THOMAS:** [1:03:30] Yes. He was an artist. He was the one that did all the tile work out there. He was an artist. He knew how to do a lot of things.

**MWENDO:** So he added this room? This front room that you have right here?

**THOMAS:** No, he didn't add the room. What he did was did it over when Betsy came. He had to redo, take a whole wall down. Since he had the wall down, they did that plastic cement work. That's plastic cement.

**MWENDO:** Oh, I see.

**THOMAS:** See, that's plastic cement.

**MWENDO:** Yes. The design that's on the wall.

**THOMAS:** The design, yes, the design he did up there.

**MWENDO:** And he did the trim up along the top.

**THOMAS:** [1:04:00] Yes, he did the trim up above the top and the trim up here. The guy that told me that if he fix my kitchen, he's not going to move that trim. Because he said, "That's excellent art." He know what he's talking about, because he's an artist himself. He said, "Don't let nobody take that off of your wall." Because it's really art. It takes time to do that. He used to get up on a ladder and do each one of them little things every evening when he come from work, until he finish. Then it was so funny, these kids, they didn't think it was nothing, because they don't know nothing about art in them days. "Daddy, what you doing?" Come to find out, Papa would tell them, "This is real art." He said, "People pay a lot of money to get this." This is true. He did most all his own work. He did this, this shelf.

**MWENDO:**    Yes.

**THOMAS:**    Well, the rest of the stuff was in the house except [?]. Naturally the washing machine and stuff you buy.

**MWENDO:**    Right. But he built these shelves.

**THOMAS:**    He did the shelving. He did all the tile work on there. All that tile work, made with ceramic tile.

**MWENDO:**    Ceramic tile around the sink and on the wall.

**THOMAS:**    [1:05:17] Yes. On the sink, yes, and in the bathroom. You should see the bathroom when you go in there. The bathroom got these little butterflies in there and stuff. It's real pretty.

**MWENDO:**    So mostly veterans, then, bought these houses around here.

**THOMAS:**    Yes. You just did what you want with them.

**MWENDO:**    What kind of . . .

**THOMAS:**    He put all of them cabinets up himself. He did that.

**MWENDO:** He was good?

**THOMAS:** Yes. Then he did this little cabinet, you see? You know what they've got in this cabinet? You'd be surprised. Glasses that you wouldn't dream of with gold rims. Nobody knows they're in there. They're just there. I told them, "Why don't you all take the dishes?" "I don't want that." They don't think it's nothing. Wish you'd seen them glasses. I'm going to show you. I can't reach them. You have to look at them. But . . .

**MWENDO:** Up on top of the refrigerator.

**THOMAS:** [1:06:08] Yes. He has . . . He fixed the refrigerator so it would fit in there. Because he had to cut this. See this? This was closed in. You had a door here, so he cut this. Why don't you come this way, and Miss Brown [?] fix the same way. He did hers. Opened it up . . . the kitchen, so that she'd have an arch like, for you to have the kitchen apart from the kitchen. But otherwise, you had to go through this little door and go down the hall. That's the way they had the kitchen cut off. He did all that. He was an artist. He did all his own work. He just put trims all in the house, in the rooms.

**MWENDO:** What kind of work did people do after the veterans came from war and stuff? What kind of community was this in terms of . . . was it mostly the women staying home?

**THOMAS:** Yes. In my time, women stayed home to take care of the kids. I didn't have to work. Maybe I'd get up and babysit sometime, and that's it. But I didn't have to work. I'd do it

if I'd want. Sometime I used to go baby sit after the kids got big. Then I start working for these ladies . . . when I felt like.

**MWENDO:**    The sisters at Charity?

**THOMAS:**    [1:07:30] Yeah. I used to go out and work. Just work for different people that they know. They had a lady called Yvonne. She was French. I worked for Yvonne twenty-three years.

**MWENDO:**    Was that in her house?

**THOMAS:**    Just after school. I would work. Yes, in the house, housework. I used to take care of this old lady they called Mare. And Yvonne was working at the Trademark[?] Center. I would work for her family, and I worked for their family for twenty-three years. I raised a couple of kids for them. Pierre, Jerry, what was Jerry [?] . . . Phillip. Phillip and Jerry and Pierre, Kurt Duchenay[?]. They were the children of the Duchenay[?] family. That's what was left of them. The only one I know that's left now is Pierre. He lives now in France. Oh, no. Jerry's living somewhere, too, in Dallas, but I don't know where.

**MWENDO:**    So you still keep in touch with the family?

**THOMAS:**    Well, I haven't talked to them for years now. But they . . . the aunt just died something like . . . Now, she died eight years ago, the aunt, the one that owned the house on

Esplanade [Avenue]. She used to have parties there. I used to go serve her party, stuff like that. I kept busy when the kids were small, and when they got big, I still kept busy. I'm still keeping busy.

**MWENDO:** [1:09:05] You were saying after school you'd go over there.

**THOMAS:** After school, I would go over there and take care of Mare. Mare was the old lady.

**MWENDO:** What school? You were in school?

**THOMAS:** No, no, no. After the children would get out of school, I would go so somebody would be home. Okay? Sometime I had babysitter, but later, not right away. I didn't go to work unless I wanted to. And I would go to work for Mare after school. At that time, my kids were in high school. I'm talking about when Rodney and them was at Holy Cross. Bibi was over at Nicholas . . . Nicholas High. They were at Holy Cross, then I would work, you see? When the kids weren't home, I didn't have nothing to do. Anyway, the rest of the kids all was most of the time, their grandma was living out on [?] Street, so they would go there anyway, and wait for me till I come home, or their daddy. It wasn't hard for me. The only hard thing about it was raising them. [laughs]

**MWENDO:** What was the, what was the community like? We getting closer to Betsy now. What was the community like? Like what was this neighborhood? Were you all like real close to each other? Also, what was like the racial makeup of the neighborhood?

**THOMAS:** [1:10:26] Yes, well, when we lived in the neighborhood, everybody was very friendly. Everybody was like family. Everybody played with one another out there. Everybody knew one another, and everybody would go to one another house. We would go . . . I would go to this lady across the street I'm telling you about, Miss Garcia. She was just like my sister. Me and her would go to church together. Poor soul, she's dead now. But this Spanish lady was very, very kind. When I would have my trouble with my kids, she'd come and help. Or if she had trouble with her kids, "Lucy, come mind the kids, I've got somewhere to go. I've got to go meet my husband." I'm in the house watching them.

We live like sisters and brothers. We lived good. So Miss Garcia was a very sweet person and I never forgot her and still don't, because she was very close to me. She was like a sister. She would, if I wanted to go to church, "Come on, Miss Garcia, we're going downtown." We'd go to cathedral, sit down and have beignets together, and come back home. Me and her was like sisters. I was sorry when that lady died. But anyway, she was very close to me.

They had a fiftieth anniversary. They saw their fiftieth anniversary. Well my anniversary would have been like the next year was like '49, going on '50, when my husband passed. So I didn't get to the mark that they did. They give you, at the cathedral, a scroll, the ones who get married and live fifty years as partners, you get a scroll. It's wrote down in English or Spanish, whatever you want. They had theirs wrote in Spanish. It's real pretty. You ought to see that. And then they got their picture inside of the scroll. It's beautiful, you should see that.

[1:12:25] But I could tell you that we lived good down here. I had naturally . . . all of us always have troubles, ups and down. I had . . . the only trouble I had was when my last child was born. That's the trouble I had. Because I had . . . I had to go to the hospital all the time, stay in the hospital. I had cancer of the breast. Still working with a support group. See, my hand's

swollen. I have lymphedema in it right now. I got that from not . . . This wasn't from having them breasts or nothing, it's because I don't have lymph glands. When you don't have lymph glands, the doctor told me, your hand will swell if you have a trauma to it. What happened when I had this wreck and it broke my collarbone, that's what caused this lymph edema in my . . . I never had it before. Forty-five years, forty-six now.

**MWENDO:** Having your hand swollen up like that?

**THOMAS:** Yes, it never swoll. This is the first time it ever swoll. I couldn't understand it. I've been going to the doctors for it, and that's two years already, ever since I had it. He told me that it don't just go down like talking, you've got to work with it. I have a machine back there.

**MWENDO:** So two years ago, that's when you broke your collarbone.

**THOMAS:** [1:13:52] Yes. Two years ago, I broke one collarbone. That, so far, is the only trouble I had. But other than that, thank God, I'm fine. For Betsy, all of us was in . . . on Derbigny Street in this building. I can't tell you the name of the building, but it is a brick house . . . brick building, two stories. Everybody that was in this vicinity from [address omitted] to Prieur Street from around the corner, was all over there in that building until a boat came and took us out. And when a boat took us out, we went down to the . . . they brought us down to the auditorium. Some of the kids got out, some didn't. We was on a boat with some kids where a bunch of them drowned. They were taking mothers and children out first. I had ten kids with me.



**MWENDO:** Well, let's go back then. Let's go back. Because I want to build up there. I want to get the whole story of everything that happened. What happened like, okay, Betsy hit September ninth.

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** What was going on like September seventh, September eighth. Did you know the storm was coming? Did you all know, what did you know?

**THOMAS:** [1:15:07] Yeah, we knew the storm was coming because of the winds that was very high. Then what made us know also was the rain. When it was raining, and I saw the water coming up step by step. When you saw that water rising, you knew something was really wrong.

**MWENDO:** Did you hear any reports on the radio? On the TV?

**THOMAS:** They did have it on the radio, but a lot of people didn't have radios in them days. You had them, but you didn't have TV. There was no such thing as a TV. But the radios, some of us had radios and some of us didn't. Like the time Betsy came up, I didn't have a radio. But my husband had a little thing that he could tell what happen.

**MWENDO:** Like a transistor? A transistor radio?

**THOMAS:** Yes. I think my son has it locked up or something like that, I haven't seen it since. But he used to have that thing, and that thing would tell him exactly what the weather was saying.

**MWENDO:** [1:16:08] So you all knew. So you heard from the radio.

**THOMAS:** We heard from some kind of transition. Yeah. It wasn't even the radio. It was just a little box that tell you just the weather.

**MWENDO:** Oh, I see.

**THOMAS:** Nothing else.

**MWENDO:** Like a CB or something like that.

**THOMAS:** Yes. Yes.

**MWENDO:** Did you get any kind of verbal warning? Did anybody say . . .

**THOMAS:** We just heard that . . . everybody . . . Nobody warned us. But we heard like from neighbors. Like my neighbor next door said, "We'd all better get out, because that storm is really coming bad. We better get going." So Miss Brown and them, they left first. I didn't leave, because I had all them kids in here. My husband was out there on a mattress, trying to get out.

He's the one that went out to tell the people that people was back here. Then he came back and he told us that he didn't see anybody. He saw some people on a boat and he told the, what do you call them? National Guard. So the National Guard came back here and picked us up over there. Not here, over there.

**MWENDO:** What's over there?

**THOMAS:** [1:17:22] The two story brick building.

**MWENDO:** What street?

**THOMAS:** That's Derbigny.

**MWENDO:** Derbigny and Tupelo.

**THOMAS:** I don't have the address right now, but you have to walk over there and get it.

**MWENDO:** Okay. But that's Derbigny and Tupelo?

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** On a corner?

**THOMAS:**    Yes, right on the corner.

**MWENDO:**    So how you all got there?

**THOMAS:**    We walked in the water.

**MWENDO:**    How high was the water?

**THOMAS:**    Oh, the water was, what was it, ten feet? Well, high is about all I can tell you. As high as my shoulder. I was five feet, so it must have been five feet. Five feet high.

**MWENDO:**    And how you all got them ten children. Who were the ten children?

**THOMAS:**    [1:17:53] Well, the kids were on a mattress. They rolled them out and my husband threw them all on a mattress and brought them to that building. Then I followed, because then the boat came and they got us. But we didn't go, a lot of people went to McCarty School, used to be McCarty School.

**MWENDO:**    Where Martin Luther King is?

**THOMAS:**    Where Martin Luther King is, used to be McCarty School. A lot of people went there, but we didn't go there because we couldn't get so far. Some of us were still walking in the water. Like Miss Garcia and them was walking. I was out there helping Miss Garcia and her

family get over there. What's the name around the corner? This lady they call Miss Brite[?]. Her daughter and her children, we was walking out there, and the water going that way. I said, "You all come on. Let's go!" I got them all out of there. But the kids, the little ones was already in the building. I had to follow, naturally, go over there to the building, stayed there until all of them got on.

**MWENDO:** [1:18:54] Now what was that building, was that somebody's house?

**THOMAS:** No, no, no. What happened, they was just building that building. Nobody had moved in yet. It was just finished. It just happened when Betsy came, they were finished with it and we didn't have nowhere to go so we all went in that building. It was already open.

**MWENDO:** How high did the water come up when you all were in the building?

**THOMAS:** Two stories. Two stories.

**MWENDO:** And that's a two story house.

**THOMAS:** Two story, yes.

**MWENDO:** So you all had to wait until the National Guard comes.

**THOMAS:** Until the National Guard come and get us. It was about two stories high, yes.

**MWENDO:** They brought you in what? What kind of vehicle were you transported . . .

**THOMAS:** In one of these boats like they'd use for the army. That's all I can tell you. You know these boats that like the Marines have? Look like . . . I don't know what you call that. They came and got us.

**MWENDO:** And so how you all got there? Because on the other side, it was dry.

**THOMAS:** [1:19:46] Yeah. Well, they got everybody; the other side was more dry than this side. But everybody that was in that building I was telling you about, they didn't take us all at one time. They took all the ladies and children first. Then the men, there was naturally some that came after. But Francis wasn't with us, come to think about it. He was . . . he had went to another place. They had, on Poland [Street], what you call it?

**MWENDO:** The police station?

**THOMAS:** No. On Poland?

**MWENDO:** Oh, the Port of Embarkation?

**THOMAS:** The Port of Embarkation. Yes, they had them there. They had a lot of people from St. David over at the Port of Embarkation. Where we went to, because we was in the boat. They brought us straight to the auditorium.

**MWENDO:** You all must have went on a river? They took you all on a boat, and then they went on a river.

**THOMAS:** Went that way, yes. St. Claude way. Yes, you couldn't go up Claiborne. You couldn't find nothing, because you didn't know when you'd hit a house or not. The houses were all under the water. So you couldn't tell. Poland Street was more deeper than anyplace, because a lot of kids drowned right there. That's where they drowned, very deep.

**MWENDO:** Kids that lived over there?

**THOMAS:** [1:21:00] Even if it rain, after it rains now, the water is very deep at the end of Poland. You can go through there. Boy, when it really rains down hard, you can't get through that water, that water be so high. The cars have to sort of float through the water. But it was very deep. That's where most of those kids got drowned. Getting out of the boat, going from the boat into the . . . kids just got drowned.

**MWENDO:** From the boat into the Port of Embarkation?

**THOMAS:** Yes. Yes. They were just transporting us on the other side of the bridge, you see. When they got ready to transfer us on the other side of the bridge, that's where a lot of them got drowned. I'll never forget the kid that got drowned. I thought sure it was one of mine. I was screaming. Oh! That was something.

**MWENDO:** Did you know any of the children that drowned?

**THOMAS:** I didn't know them, but it had a lot of kids that naturally, everybody was coming out of there, and you couldn't tell who was who. You didn't, you just watched to see if your kids were all all right. But it was a sad day for everybody. But most of us, that stuff you see there will tell you the whole story.

**MWENDO:** What you were feeling like then? What was going on?

**THOMAS:** [1:22:16] Oh, well, I was much younger and I had more energetic then. I was much younger. I didn't worry too much, because I had all the kids with me. When we stayed up there at the auditorium, by the way, they were asking people to take us in. We went by this lady house for that night. We stayed there with her for a whole week. I didn't know the lady that good. But she offered to take us. They were asking people to take us that lived uptown. We stayed in there, me and the five kids. Then after that, we left and came on home when it got clear. That was it. We came in this house. It still wasn't finished.

**MWENDO:** How long did you stay by the lady's house?

**THOMAS:** About a week. After the week, the water had went down.

**MWENDO:** So it took a week for the water . . .



**THOMAS:**    Yes. About a week, yes.

**MWENDO:**    When you walked back into this house, what did . . .

**THOMAS:**    When we walked back in the house, everything was gone. We couldn't stay here.  
We stayed by my mother-in-law.

**MWENDO:**    What you mean, everything was gone?

**THOMAS:**    [1:23:21] All my furniture was floating around in here. I didn't have no  
furniture. I had a lot of beautiful things when I first got my . . . the silver and the chairs and all  
that. The kids' uniforms and everything was floating in the water. Everything was gone.  
Because that water was that high in the house. See where that mark is?

**MWENDO:**    That look like about what, five feet?

**THOMAS:**    Yes. That water was that high. As tall as me in this house. I'm floating around  
here, and the furniture's floating around. We had two stoves since then. But that's computer  
stove. You put some food in that stove, you can cook till you get back.

**MWENDO:**    [laughs] Really?

**THOMAS:** Yes. If you know how to compute it, you computer that stove. You put . . . I've cooked for people in there . . . lately. Poor thing, when Miss Garcia died, I threw a roast in there while we was going out to the church. When we came back, that roast was cooked. Yes. You let it cook a certain length of time. You have to know how to run it . . . computerize it.

**MWENDO:** [1:24:25] When you were living over by the . . . you went over to the person's house and you stayed there for about a week.

**THOMAS:** About a week.

**MWENDO:** What kind of help did you . . . Was there any kind of assistance?

**THOMAS:** Well, she was really supposed to assist me, but she never did. I did it myself. I did it my own self. She had an upstairs and downstairs. She had a two-story house at that time.

**MWENDO:** So what kind of help did you get?

**THOMAS:** She was on . . . what street she was on? She was on . . . what is that? That's Galvez [Street] where the bus goes down, or Miro [Street]?

**MWENDO:** Oh, yes, I get them confused, too.

**THOMAS:** I think it's Galvez.

**MWENDO:**    When you're going toward Canal Street? Or coming back down here?

**THOMAS:**    Coming back.

**MWENDO:**    I think it's Galvez.

**THOMAS:**    That's Galvez. She was on Galvez, right around the corner from St. Peter Claver [Catholic Church], because I remember going to church that Sunday at Peter Claver.

**MWENDO:**    That's like around St. Ann Street?

**THOMAS:**    [1:25:18] Yeah, right there. She . . . She kept us there for about a week, and that was it. I couldn't stay with that lady long, because that lady . . . Every time I'd put something down, that lady would take it. She was another one.

**MWENDO:**    She was another one?

**THOMAS:**    Yes . . . in other words, they had gave us like instead of getting food stamps, they give you stipends. You went to the store to get your stipend. If you would put groceries down, that lady would take them groceries and swear she didn't see them. I didn't say anything to her, I just left. I said, "Well she was nice enough to keep me [?]" and I left. But they kept up with us a while after the storm was over, and that was it. I don't know what happened to the family since.

**MWENDO:** You have . . . When the storm happened, you said you had ten children. That was children from the neighborhood other than your children?

**THOMAS:** [1:26:14] Yes. No, yeah. Children from the neighborhood and my three, five nieces. I mean, five nieces and nephews. I had three girls, let's see, Geralyn, Ava, and Cherie. Cherie was living then. Then I had Thaddeus and Paul and Gerard. My sister had five kids herself. I kept her five kids. What happened, they were just up here visiting before the storm. When the storm came, they couldn't go home. They had to stay here with us. That's how they got here.

**MWENDO:** How many were your kids? How many kids you have . . .

**THOMAS:** Five of my own. They were all small.

**MWENDO:** You had all five of them?

**THOMAS:** Yes. They were small. Bibi must have been how old? I don't know. Maybe about . . . I guess she must have been about eleven years old, something like that. Because I remember when they killed the president she was what, twelve? Was Betsy before . . .

**MWENDO:** Betsy was the year after the president was shot.

**THOMAS:** [1:27:20] After the president was killed? Yes, because she made twelve years old. When she made twelve years old, I'll never forget. She said, "Mama, we not going to have no cake or nothing because they just killed the president." And she knowed it.

**MWENDO:** How did the . . . How did the other children get to their parents? Because you were bringing all the children.

**THOMAS:** Oh, well they stayed with me until it was just time to bring them back, that's all.

**MWENDO:** So they stayed with the lady, too, that week.

**THOMAS:** Yes. All of us did together. Yes, all of us. Oh, yes, I had them all with me.

**MWENDO:** Their parents must have been all scared and worried, because they didn't know.

**THOMAS:** Yes. Augustine, at the time, was living. She was looking for her kids. She knew they were here, but she still didn't know where they was. I had all the boys with me, Gerard, Thaddeus, and Paul. She had three boys and three girls. That's six. She had Ava.

**MWENDO:** It sound like you had more than ten children with you.

**THOMAS:** [1:28:20] I had . . . yes, eleven. I had Geralyn, Ava, and Cherie. They stayed here with me a long time. Yes, until their mom came and got them after the storm. But they

didn't know where we was. Her mother-in-law knew it all, because her mother-in-law lived around St. Ann. I think she got in touch with them and she told them that the kids were all right. Because when we got up there and we were looking for a place, I had first went by her. Then this lady came and she said that she would keep us. I didn't know the lady. She was strange to me. But the mother-in-law said she didn't have the room. She had other children to keep herself. She didn't keep the kids. I had to keep them all.

**MWENDO:**    What was that like?

**THOMAS:**    What?

**MWENDO:**    Having the kids, having to deal with . . .

**THOMAS:**    It didn't bother me. I was just used of it. It was just something I figured I had to do.

**MWENDO:**    Did your husband know where you were?

**THOMAS:**    [1:29:25] He was with us. Yes, I told you. But he went to the port. He wasn't with us when we went to the auditorium. He . . . When we got to the end of the bridge, he went the other way, and we went this way. So he wasn't with us. It was just me. The reason why he went that way, because he was helping the National Guard with them people, you see? He knew most of them. I went the other way. I didn't wait for him. I just got on a . . . They had big

trucks. They threwed us all in a big truck and they brought us to the auditorium. Like I told you, some they brought down to the port. So that's where he was. He was at the Port of Embarkation with most of the people from St. David.

**MWENDO:** So people would . . . was the energy . . . all these people getting on all these trucks, what kind of trucks? Like big old . . .

**THOMAS:** Big trucks, army trucks, the army trucks.

**MWENDO:** Oh, the army trucks. Okay.

**THOMAS:** [1:30:20] Yeah, because they had to go through that water.

**MWENDO:** Okay. And so there was crying and . . .

**THOMAS:** That water was high.

**MWENDO:** Yeah. So like people were crying and scared and screaming?

**THOMAS:** Oh, yes. Yes, they were, kids were. But I don't know. Somehow, I wasn't really scared. I just watched them. As long as they were all right, I was all right.

**MWENDO:** It was at night, wasn't it? When all this was going on?

**THOMAS:** It happened at night, but we didn't get out till morning, none of us. Nobody got out here, from out there . . .

**MWENDO:** You were in that house over there.

**THOMAS:** [1:30:48] We got out morning. That's what I was telling you. We was walking in that water in the morning. Then Miss Garcia, poor thing, my husband jumped on a mattress and he was transferring them babies over there to that building. He would put them out. He really worked with them. They had a store down there at that time. It was a two story house, too. But nobody went over there to the store, because it was private. Nobody bothered Vivian, that was her name. Vivian and them had a store. He used to go run into the store to get everything that people need, like bread. They were charging you a dollar for bread then. But guess what, bread wasn't high at all at that time.

**MWENDO:** It was what, like twenty, thirty cents?

**THOMAS:** I think you paid something like twenty-five cents for bread. They was winding up making you pay a dollar. Everybody was hollering, "A dollar for bread?!" [laughs] They thought it was terrible. They were charging you a dollar for bread, because they knew you couldn't get it. He would go get the bread and stuff and bring it over. That's how we ate . . . sandwiches, peanut butter and jam and stuff and meat, sausage, like that, until we got out.



**MWENDO:** [1:32:03] Okay, Miss Lucy, I'm trying to get this picture in my head, okay? So the storm, the water starts coming, and it's at night. Y'all were sleeping, or . . . ?

**THOMAS:** No, we wasn't sleeping.

**MWENDO:** You all were up.

**THOMAS:** We was up. We didn't . . . the kids were sleeping. We didn't go to sleep, me and him. We stayed up. I stayed up because I was scared. I was afraid because I was wondering where the water was going. Every time it would get to the steps, then I would tell him, "It's time to go."

**MWENDO:** Okay. It got to the steps, and then you all started moving over to the . . .

**THOMAS:** No, we didn't leave. We stayed in the house. The kids were up in the attic. I threw the kids in the attic.

**MWENDO:** Before they went to sleep, you all put them in the attic. Just in case the water would come high.

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** [1:32:54] Okay. And so the water starts coming, and it's coming up. So did you all just all go in the attic?

**THOMAS:** Yes.

**MWENDO:** And you spent the night in the attic?

**THOMAS:** Spend the night in the attic. Yes.

**MWENDO:** And just prayed the water wouldn't get up to the attic.

**THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah, right.

**MWENDO:** Then, the next morning, you all stayed up probably all night.

**THOMAS:** All night.

**MWENDO:** And the children slept all night.

**THOMAS:** The kids slept, yes.

**MWENDO:** Then morning comes.

**THOMAS:**    Yeah. Then we start getting out.

**MWENDO:**    About what time in the morning you all start moving?

**THOMAS:**    Well, as soon as it got daylight, daybreak. I don't know what time of the day it was at that time, but I guess it must have been like this . . . [tape ends abruptly]

[1:33:32]

[End Tape 3340, Side B. End Session I.]