

## **Wiregrass Black History Project, RG 298**

### **Elmaree Gordon Interview Transcript**

**Date Span:** October 2, 2024

**Biographical Sketch:** Elmaree Gordon was one of six daughters of James and Geraldine Gordon. Born in Georgia, her family moved to Miami then to Dothan, AL's Southside neighborhood after her father died. She attended S. Alice Street Elementary School, Montana Street School, and Carver High School. Her family attended Bethel Baptist Church on S. Alice Street. Her family picked cotton for extra money. When Dothan razed Southside, Gordon moved to the McRae Homes, a housing project on Dothan's northeast side, then moved to Ashford, AL, when her mother remarried in 1963 (Gordon commuted to Dothan for school). She lived and worked in Norwalk, CT, after graduation, returned to Dothan after securing an Engineering Tech position at Fort Rucker (now Fort Novosel).

**Organizational Sketch:** The Wiregrass Black History Project is a collaboration between the Wiregrass Black History Channel on YouTube (by David "Mit" Kirkland) and the Wiregrass Archives at Troy University Dothan Campus. Funded in 2024- 25 by Troy University and the Society of American Archivists Foundation through its Catalyst Grant.

The Wiregrass Black History Channel will host edited versions of the interviews. The Wiregrass Archives will make the raw interviews available on its YouTube channel and create metadata records and finding aids that link to the project and to individual video interviews.

**Scope / Content Note:** Video interview transcript in which Ms. Gordon discusses her childhood, particularly her residence in the Southside neighborhood of Dothan, AL, that the city razed c. 1960 for its first urban renewal project. Gordon reflects on her family's poverty, housing, her education at S. Alice Street Elementary School, recreation, life under racial segregation, and community.

**Provenance:** Interview conducted by Mit Kirkland and Marty Olliff. Provided to the Wiregrass Archives as part of the grant-funded Wiregrass Black History Project.

**Processing Notes:** Transcriptions made by MS Word AI, then edited by Dr. Martin T. Olliff. Revisions planned to update and correct transcriptions.

**Cite as:** Elmaree Gordon Interview, The Wiregrass Black History Project, RG 298, Wiregrass Archives, Troy University Dothan Campus, Dothan, AL.

## **Transcript, Elmaree Gordon Interview, October 2, 2024**

**00:00:00 Elmaree Gordon**

Can we see the YouTube of everybody? [laughs]. OK, I'm ready.

**00:00:04 Mit Kirkland**

Give me . . . give me your name and spell it for me, please.

**00:00:07 Elmaree Gordon**

OK, Elmaree Gordon. And it's spelled E-L-M-A-R-E-E, Gordon G-O-R-D-O-N.

**00:00:16 Mit Kirkland**

Now, Ms. Gordon, do you give us permission to use this at [the Wiregrass] Archives and other ways of promoting Southside and the African American community in Dothan?

**00:00:25 Elmaree Gordon**

Yes.

**00:00:29 Mit Kirkland**

Alright, Ms. Gordon, tell me about your experience growing up on the Southside.

**00:00:34 Elmaree Gordon**

When I was first . . . remember being . . . I was living on Southside. When my father passed . . . we were born and raised in Blakely, Georgia and when my dad passed, we moved to Miami, FL for a time. And I don't remember any of Miami.

But I do remember when we moved into what was, I think, was like a little mobile travel trailer or something [upon the family's move to Dothan]. I think it was the Wilson family that owned that little thing on Alice Street.

And I think one of my uncles, one of my Gordon uncles, they lived nearby or something. Anyway, I remember that little place. It was just big enough for . . . for us.

And then later we moved to the corner of Alice and Franklin St. It was a duplex. We didn't know that it was called that back then, but the . . . we lived on one side and the Austins lived on the other side. I think it was JT and Mabel Austin. She was called Tushu, if y'all remember.

We lived on one side and they lived on the other side and I don't remember the address.

And then . . . [unintelligible question in the background] I don't remember the address right there on Alice Street. It may have been. I don't remember the . . . the house number.

**00:02:03 Robert “Cookie” Potter**

I think was 610.

**00:02:05 Elmaree Gordon**

OK, I'll take your word for it. And then . . . I was small then and I think, trying to think, I guess I'd started school . . . yeah, when we lived on the corner of Alice and Franklin. And then later we moved to Mixon Alley, which was like the next street over, heading west, I guess, on Franklin.

And umm . . . the school that you've already heard about grades one through 3. Mrs. West was the principal and 1st grade teacher, and Mrs. Morris was the 2nd and 3rd grade teacher.

And they had a partition between the 1st grade and the other two. And I think Miss Morris had . . . just had the second graders on one side of the room and the third graders on the other side of that bigger big room.

And I have warm memories of that. And . . . my oldest sister started school first. She's older. And when she started first grade, I went with her. And because I was learning like the other kids, they put me in first grade. And I think it had to be 4 ½ because I turned 5 the following year in March.

And . . . I had such wonderful memories of that. I guess I was kind of a precocious kid and could speak well, and so first grade I was . . . had the lead in the 1st grade play . . . as Mary, Mary Quite Contrary. And I was on stage the whole night. And, you know, all the parents were there. And, umm . . . Cookie Potter was one of my schoolmates in first grade. And, umm . . . then from there I went to Montana Street School. The building is still there for grades four through 6.

But in the meantime, there was our church, New Bethel. I understand it was just called Bethel back then, I think my mother told me. And the church was so much part of our life, you know, we were involved in all of the little organizations at the church, like the Sunbeams and whatever else was there.

And I remember the smell of honeysuckle growing around the church. I always have that memory, and I can almost smell the honeysuckle because when we'd go up to the church for practice or whatever, and I guess it was in the spring and the honeysuckle flowers were in bloom . . . in bloom.

And also remembering meeting my best friends, one of whom is sitting over there [four narrators were in the interview room listening to each other], Delois and Linda Daniels. When we were probably preschool – we didn't have pre-kindergarten back then – but our mothers became best friends, and later they moved into the other side of the house on Mixon, in Mixon Alley., so we were even closer then.

And, umm . . . when I got to Montana St. I guess my reputation preceded me because Miss Morris, she later became Mrs. Kinney -- until the day she passed away some years ago, she always, I said, was my best cheerleader. She told everybody about Elmaree and how smart she was.

And so, when I went to Montana [Street School], as I said, I guess my reputation preceded me, but then I was in a bigger pond. So I'm just *one* of the smart kids over there, but I I remember being in the 4th

grade play there and I guess, you know, fifth and sixth grade, I don't remember. But I do remember being in the 4th grade play.

But looking back, I kind of thought well, you know, I thought I was all of *that*. But when you get into the bigger pond, you're just, you know, one of the great kids.

But Southside was great, it was community. I remember people just, just felt loved by all of the adults in the neighborhood, at your church. When people started getting television, we could go to homes and watch television at night, because when we didn't have a TV initially.

And, uhh . . . people were just . . . it was just a village . . . the village that you . . . that people talk about now.<sup>1</sup> But we really had a village. Everybody knew everybody. You would run errands for the older people.

And you always spoke. That's the southern thing but it in our community, even now, it's very meaningful. You have to speak to each other. Even if you really don't know each other, you greet each other with a . . . now, you know . . . with the nod of the head or whatever, but you always [said] Good morning, Good evening, whatever it was.

And older people you had respect and reverence for them. You never disrespecting your elders.

And I don't remember being whipped by neighbors, but they would tell on you.

When we moved to the house on Mixon Alley, the Pope family lived . . . There were only two houses on Mixon Alley . . . the Pope family . . . Mrs. Emma Pope was the matriarch of that family. And she was home all day, like summertime, most of the parents were at work and we would play on the opposite side of our house so that she couldn't see what we were doing.

And . . . I think in that house we had . . . initially we had a fireplace, but at some point, I think we got . . . had the iron wooden heater. And we would get go to the Williams-Vorris Lumber Company with our little wagon and get wood to use in our wood stove or fireplace, whatever it was we used for heating.

And so we had a lot of those pieces of wood that were in cut, like, in blocks maybe, 6 inches long, 4 inches wide, something like that. And so I can remember one day we decided to build a house out of those blocks. So we laid it out. We have the kitchen, the living room and the bedrooms and all and I was always daring so the kitchen had to have a stove. So I built a stove out of those wooden blocks. It was square and then I decided, well, let's try it out. So I built the fire in the stove. And, dummy, the wood caught on fire. And that was like, "Oh my goodness, you know, this is burning." I should have known that.

But anyway, what . . . had to get rid of the stove because knew we would be in trouble by playing with fire.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to the title of the book *It Takes a Village* (1995) by Hillary Clinton. The adage "it takes a village to raise a child" existed for much longer, but Clinton's book and her 2016 presidential campaign brought the adage back into common parlance.

So the house was on, I guess you'd call it brick pilings. You could go . . . as little children we would go under the house. So what I did, brilliantly, was to throw those charred wooden blocks under the house. And luckily, thank God, it didn't catch it, didn't catch on fire. It could have. Well, I guess because it was dirt under there that put out the . . . the smoldering fire. That was one of the stupid things, you know, that as a child you did . . . I did.

But we played and we had a good time, but if Mrs. Pope saw us, she would, you know, she would yell at us and she would tell on us. So that's why we played on the other side of the house where she couldn't see us.

And we made our own toys because we didn't get a lot. We got things for Christmas. Maybe you get a dollar and maybe some fruit or a book. I always loved to read, so . . . but during the rest of the time, we made our own.

And we had iceboxes back then. And . . . I think it was Mr. Lokey was the ice man, he would bring the ice, the big blocks of ice for your refrigerator, your icebox. And it would have this twine around it. He would pick it up, you know.<sup>2</sup>

And so, we would take that twine and put it inside of a soda bottle, put the cap back on it, and that was a doll. We could twirl that twine like it was hair. So we did that. That was one of the creative things that we did.

And the other thing that we did, we would make grass dolls. And I don't know if this was wiregrass, but we would pull up a clump of grass . . . er, grass . . . and the root was sometimes long enough to braid and we'd make a grass doll out of that. We did all kinds of creative things because we didn't have other things to do.

And we had to stay at home, we couldn't just roam around the neighborhood. We had to stay pretty much in our own yard. And a lot of times, you know, most of the parents would be at work and sometimes the other kids would come to our house because we couldn't go, you know, to other people's houses. We had to stay home and I had to watch my younger siblings, too.

Until you know, my mother had to tell the other parents, look, you have to keep your kids at home because Elmaree was watching . . . supposed to be watching the other kids. And I was young myself but I was responsible for them.

And I can remember one day, she left the three little ones on what I guess they call a pallet, they put a quilt down and put the children, the young children, or babies down for a nap. And, uhh . . . she left and I . . . the kids in the neighborhood came to play, and it seemed like it was just like that she was back home, my mother was.

I think about it now. I don't know how long a day it was, but I think now, with those three little ones, they were probably not changed or not fed because I was outside playing with the other kids, when I should have been watching them as I was supposed to, but I was a child myself . . . myself, you know, 7

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<sup>2</sup> Vester C. Lokey, Lokey Ice Co., 200 S. East St.

or 8 years old with that responsibility. And so that's when mother had to tell the neighbors not to allow their kids to come to our house because I was distracted, not doing my duty.

**00:13:04 Marty Olliff**

[What did your mother and father do for work] when you were living live in Southside?

**00:13:07 Elmaree Gordon**

Yeah, my father had passed away.

**00:13:18 Marty Olliff**

So, you said your mother worked when you lived in Southside. And do you recall what she worked doing?

**00:13:25 Elmaree Gordon**

She did house cleaning . . . housekeeping for white families.

**00:13:30 Marty Olliff**

And do you remember whereabouts she worked?

**00:13:34 Elmaree Gordon**

I don't remember the people that she worked for or where they lived, they . . . I, I don't. I don't remember specifically.

**00:13:46 Marty Olliff**

And . . . and can you describe the house that you lived in?

**00:13:51 Elmaree Gordon**

OK, both places were what we would call a duplex. Two families, one on each side, on Alice and Franklin .as well.

**00:14:04 Marty Olliff**

Can you describe the inside of either of those or both of those?

**00:14:08 Elmaree Gordon**

OK, Alice Street, I think it was just two rooms. You walked in and that was your bedroom and living room combined.

**00:14:18 Elmaree Gordon**

And then there was the kitchen. If I remember correctly.

**00:14:22 Marty Olliff**

Indoor plumbing or outdoor?

**00:14:25 Elmaree Gordon**

I think the bathroom was atta . . . was attached to the building, but you had to go outside because, I believe, both families use that . . . well, it was just a toilet, I think. Now you had to . . . we had the tin tubs you had to heat water to take baths in.

**00:14:45 Marty Olliff**

And where did . . . where did you get water from, was there a faucet?

**00:14:48 Elmaree Gordon**

There was a faucet, we called it the hydrant, which I think was outside as well, and you had to bring the water in and heat it. You have the iron . . . cast iron kettle, I remember. And you would heat the water in [it] for your bath and the big tin tub.

And I think on Alice, we had a kerosene stove in the kitchen, and I think it was the . . . the cast iron heater in the living area.

And the kerosene stove sticks out because one time, somehow, I don't know what happened, but the flame from that kerosene stove went up to the ceiling and left a circle of like coal, you know, fire up there. And I don't remember all the details, but I think I remember, I think my mother throwing water up, you know, to put it out. That . . . because it was a wood . . . wooden house.

And so that was one of the things on, on Alice, and then in Mixon Alley, I think it was the same. I think it was just two rooms. That big room you had your bed in and that was your living area as well. And then the kitchen. And I think the toilet was outside but attached to the building. So you went outside your back door to go into the toilet to use it, but I think we also had to heat water on the stove and I don't remember exactly what kind of stove it was in the kitchen there on Mixon.

But I think we had a fireplace for heating in that house, in that living room, living, living/bedroom area. Because I just remember, it seems like we had, again, we'd go to the lumber company to get the wood to put in the fireplace.

**00:16:51 Marty Olliff**

And you said that you had to look out for your younger siblings. How many people were in your family?

**00:16:58 Elmaree Gordon**

At the time, there were five of us, 5 girls, and a mother.

**00:17:04 Marty Olliff**

Yeah, I was going to ask that. Five children and a mother. When you left Southside, where did you move to?

**00:17:14 Elmaree Gordon**

We moved to the Martin Homes on Tuskegee St. and I think our address was 736 Tuskegee Street. I think they've changed the numbers over there now, but I think it was 736 Tuskegee St. at the time.

**00:17:31 Marty Olliff**

And the Martin Homes were, were they apartment-like buildings or were they individual houses?

**00:17:38 Elmaree Gordon**

They're the same buildings that are there now.

They've, you know, done some, you know, remodeling or whatever. But they were just red brick. I believe when we lived there, and there . . . I forgot how many units were in each row, but it's the same buildings that are there now.

And we were close . . . Tuskegee, there . . . I think we were in that last group of apartments. And we were on the end. There was a big parking lot that you would turn into. And our building faced another building. Our friends Delois and those, they lived on the end of that building, we lived on the end of this building and there was a sidewalk in between.

We had the living room, and the kitchen, and three bedrooms.

And I was de facto oldest because my oldest sister is, umm, special needs, and so, I guess, my mother was giving me a little extra. I had the back bedroom, the middle bedroom was . . . was big. I think there were two beds in there so the girls were in there and then my mother had her own room, the front bedroom.

**00:18:52 Marty Olliff**

Very interesting. When you were in the first grade play, where was that play held?

**00:18:58 Elmaree Gordon**

It was held at the school. The first grade play was held at the Southside Elementary School that I was attending and it was in the school. There was a partition between the 1st grade and the 2nd and 3rd but you could push that back and open it up. So they opened that partition up, so it was big enough for parents and . . . yeah.

**00:19:26 Marty Olliff**

So parents attended that . . .

**00:19:27 Elmaree Gordon**

Oh yes. You know the kids, right?

**00:19:33 Marty Olliff**

I think that's it for me.



**00:19:36 Mit Kirkland**

Is it any one thing you want to tell us about your experience living on the Southside?

**00:19:43 Elmaree Gordon**

I think I've pretty much covered it. You know, as a child, a lot of things that I've learned since I didn't know then, but it was just . . . it was just wonderful as far as I was concerned. We didn't know that the places that we lived in were substandard housing at that time. What we knew [was] that some . . . some of our neighbors had better homes, but it didn't seem to matter because we were all like family, like, you know, together.

So, there were no . . . as far as I knew as a child, there were no differences between any of us, where, you know, some that had nicer houses or whatever. We all attended church together we went to school together and all that. Just a warm, wonderful feeling.

And by the way, my family was the last family to move from Southside because we were waiting for a place. And it was kind of scary because it was dark over there [in Southside without other families in the neighborhood].

And later my mother was telling us, you know, how she was afraid because she's a woman alone with these children, and there were . . . and everybody had moved. And finally we got the word that we got an apartment in the Martin Homes, so.

**00:21:07 Marty Olliff**

Let me ask you this about moving since you were the last family to move out: had the city or any of the contractors already been tearing down any of the buildings before you moved?

**00:21:19 Elmaree Gordon**

I don't remember them tearing down anything before we left. I don't.

**00:21:26 Marty Olliff**

I'm only asking that because . . .

**[Audio and video batteries failed at this point in the interview].**