

Wiregrass Black History Project, RG 298

Delois Lee Interview Transcript

Date Span: October 2, 2024

Biographical Sketch: Delois Daniels Easley Lee was born in Dothan, AL, as one of seven siblings and lived in Dothan's Southside neighborhood until the city razed it for urban renewal. She attended S. Alice Street Elementary School, Montana Street School, and Carver High School until 1965 when her family moved to New Jersey (where she graduated). Married Jacob Easley (d. 1977) in 1968 with whom she had two sons. Worked at various jobs in the Newark, NJ, VA until moving back to Dothan c. 1975. Married Billy Lee, 1979, had one daughter, divorced c. 1987. She worked as an LPN for 32 years, retiring in 2017.

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: In this video interview transcript, Delois Lee discusses her childhood as a resident of the Southside neighborhood of Dothan, AL, prior to the city razing it c. 1960 for urban renewal. Describes mutual aid among neighbors, shelling peas and beans, attending S. Alice Street Elementary School, attending Bethel Baptist Church (tells a story about her new Easter dress), shopping at stores in Dothan, and socializing with her friends particularly listening to new music. She tells a long story about an "old woman" who predicted the death of Lee's baby brother. She describes life in her grandmother's home in Southside, including the physical layout and the chores she performed.

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.

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Transcript, Delois Daniels Easley Lee Interview, October 2, 2024

00:00:01 Mit Kirkland

All right. If you would, give us your name and spell it for us.

00:00:05 Delois Lee

OK, my name is Delois Daniels Easley Lee. Delois is capital D-E-L-O-I-S; Daniels, capital, D-A-N-I-E-L-S; Easley, capital E-A-S-L-E-Y; Lee, Capital L-E-E.

00:00:32 Mit Kirkland

OK, Mrs. Lee, do you give us permission to use this video and the archives here and other historical archives and that you give us permission to use it as a historical record in the media?

00:00:49 Delois Lee

Yes.

00:00:54 Mit Kirkland

OK, Mrs. Lee, you grew up in on Southside. Tell us about growing up on Southside.

00:01:00 Delois Lee

Oh yes. We all grew up on . . . everyone that has spoken up before, we all grew up on Southside. And I was born in 1946, and I am, I have, well, it was family of five children, my mother, and my grandmother. And my father occasionally would be in and out. So that's how many people were in our one home. Eight, seven sometimes eight.

00:01:36 Mit Kirkland

OK, tell me about what it was like living on the Southside.

00:01:40 Delois Lee

OK. When I was . . . when I was living on the Southside, as everyone had said, it was . . . it was like a big family or community. Actually, because, I think, there were only . . . we were so close, the houses were not . . . we couldn't reach out and touch, but they were very close and we only had maybe 3 or 4 streets in our neighborhood. So you would either live on one of those four streets. And we didn't venture out much past that area. So that's one reason we got along.

And if my parents didn't have something, there was nothing thought of "go to Geraldine's house and get a cup of grits. And you take this . . . these sausages to her, or take this cheese to her." And it was like more or less, I guess, on the barter system, not really on the barter system, but I guess it was, food wise.

And there was nothing said about it. There was nothing done about. We all just . . . we all, I guess, they, the parents, agreed this is how it would be and that's how it was. Kids didn't say anything about it. Parents didn't say anything, anything. There's no gossiping. We had no phones back then. I guess that was one reason that that wasn't much talking about . . . But parents did gather together.

I remember in the summer when it was, you know, harvest time for peas or butter beans or . . . I really didn't like it, but my grandmother made sure that we sat on the porch and she'd bring in peas one day, corn one day, butter beans something one day. And we had a garden now so that we had to plant, pull weeds, harvest . . . we even had . . . I forgot. we even had cane, sugar cane, and and . . . a couple of rows. She had a couple of . . . that was just for our pleasure.

So we even had sugar cane that we enjoyed, which was a pleasure because we didn't . . . wasn't much bought, especially like vegetables. We all kind of self-sustained ourselves like that.

00:04:03 Mit Kirkland

And tell me about your experience in school and church in in the neighborhood.

00:04:08 Delois Lee

OK, in school, we attended Alice Street School, and well, it still had . . . Alice Street School had two rooms and it was separated by a poor partition. First graders, all the first graders that lived in that area, went to the first grade there, Mrs. Robbie D. West was our teacher. She taught all the first graders.

On the other side of the partition were the second and third graders. And the second and third graders that one room was divided into sections by rows like maybe there was . . . there was 10 seats in the first row, there was 10 in the 2nd, and there was a space between those two for the third graders. So the second, the second graders sat in the first two, I guess, and the third greatest sat in the last two.

And our teacher was Mrs. Martin . . . at that time she was Miss Morrison. But then she later married and she became Mrs. Randall Kinney.

And we lived . . . where before she . . . her husband passed. Basically, when I'm adult in the same neighborhood, I could look out my back door into her back door. But she and her husband has passed now, but they were great pillars of community in that . . . in that time . . . at that time.

00:05:38 Mit Kirkland

OK. What church? Tell me about the church you [attended].

00:05:41 Delois Lee

Church. I attended the Bethel Baptist Church, one of the three, one of the three churches in the neighborhood. If you were Baptist, you . . . everybody that was Baptist attended New Bethel Baptist Church. And I remember, I think, we had a pastor, I think his name was Reverend Phils [Possibly Rev. George R. Pugh].

But anyway, he was the only pastor that I really remember being . . . maybe we . . . I'm sure we probably had another one. But he was one of the pastors there. He preached . . .

I remember, like on special holidays like Easter my grandmother had made my sisters and I dresses for Easter. I had this nice, I remember vividly, it was an orange dress. We had gone down to a store downtown called Bloomberg's. I remember going to Bloomberg's, and we didn't go that often, but I liked going to Bloomsburg's, it had an escalator.

And she would get like these big candy cane slips. She made our dresses out of material called organdy. It was a light fabric, real pretty. And she put collars on it, lace after lace after lace. So one Easter went to church and I wanted to spread my dress out so it could just be . . . I was just so proud of my dress and all my lace.

And we went to church [correcting herself] *Sunday school*. So when my parents came, my grandmother came, and my mother came, and all the rest of the family came to church, I had my dress all sprawled out, my legs crossed. I was just sitting like a little young little lady. So my grandmother came in and some of the adults came in, she [said], "move that . . . move that dress in because Miss So-and-So has to sit here." That was not really nice with me, but I had to . . . so I had to move my dress in . . . and so, this, I don't know who it was, but she had to sit next to us. So. And so I really wasn't happy that Easter, because that dress had to come in.

And, but basically, she did all this. So . . . and my grandmother was named Letha Sistrunk. And she could not read. All right. As a matter of fact, later on we found out . . . we really never found a birth certificate, a legal birth certificate, but we did found . . . find out in by way of census report, the census report that we found that she was born in 1900. We're not sure if that's correct. But that is about as close as we could find of her age.

But like I said, she could not read, she could not write, but she could count her money. When she sent us to the store for something she knew we had to walk to, to A&P. I remember the A&P being on West Main Street on the corner of W Main St. and South Oates, I believe that's where it was. And she gave us a list. She didn't write anything down. We wrote very little now, but we brought back exactly what she told us to bring back. And then she knew if she had change and she would say, "where is my change?" And she knew . . . she knew exactly how much she was supposed to have . . . her change should have been.

We had a ice box at our house, and sometimes we would get ice from the iceman. Then sometimes we'll have to take that, the red wagon that we had, and go across town and pick up the ice.

And I remember the ice plant being somewhere on . . . right off E Main St. and . . . can't remember the other street that it was.¹ But we took that . . . we had some material, burlap or something that we had to cover the ice, and the ice made it back! It wasn't ice cubes. It was a big chunk of ice. I think it came in

¹ Lokey Ice Co., 200 S. East St., Dothan.

pounds, maybe I'm not sure, but the ice made it back home when it got used in the ice box. And that's how we had ice.

And also I remember we had this garden. I don't like corn, but my grandmother she . . . evidently, she loved corn. She planted a lot of corn. So she . . . she would can some of the corn when it was fresh. Then she let some [of it] get real dry and we had to cut the corn off the cob and we had to take the corn that we took off the cob and take it back over, oh, maybe not far from the ice plant. And they made meal. Took the meal [correcting herself] took the corn and they made meal. And that was our meal that we had and we did not go to the store to purchase meal. So I remember that.

And I also remember walking from . . . after we had finished first, second, and third grade on Southside . . . on the 4th grade, 5th, and 6th, we had to walk, I'm going to say -- I was a little kid then -- I'm gonna, think I'm gonna say, it was about maybe a mile and a half, maybe 2 miles, from where we lived on 605 W Franklin St., to Montana Street School.

We had to walk. But usually we walked, we did it as a group.

It was usually everybody that was in the 4th grade had to walk, so we all were together and we all walked and normally we all came back unless someone was . . . didn't have homework or was tardy or something happened at school. Then you had to because you had . . . we had chores to do after we finished school.

So we all walked together. That was another way of becoming very close with our neighbors and friends. And [we] talked and had . . . sometimes we sang, had games, or whatever that made the journey a little better.

But I have one other thing that I would like to say. We had one particular day. I was alone, I don't know why I was alone coming from school that day, but I was alone. I had problems with my eyes. Maybe I had an eye doctor appointment. I'm not sure why I was alone that day. But we had, I had our baby brother, his name was Byron Charles Daniels. I'm 10 years older than him. I was born in 1946. Byron was born in 1956. And when I'm on my way home, we had to walk through -- I called a field but maybe it was a pasture -- they had, like, a little small little dip in it. And we walked past that little dip to come up to South St. As I came up out of the field to South St., there was this one lady, she sat there every day, and she said "your brother is dead."

And so . . . [becoming emotional] he was he was just a baby. But not knowing, not having much money, he passed away from something very simple *now* that people don't pass . . . babies don't pass away from that. All she [their mother] had to do was stop giving him the milk or diluting the milk, and I think he would have been OK.

I don't remember this . . . I didn't know the name, but I forgot 'cause I was a nurse, but. I can't remember right now, but. And that was one of the things that I remember that . . . I think I don't, I won't forget that. And it's been several years ago, over 50 something years 50 something years ago. But I still remember that. And I remember that words still hurt.

Back in the day, adults usually, sometimes adults were very kind, some weren't, just like now. And they would say most anything to you, not really thinking that "well, he's just a kid, she's just a kid," you know? It doesn't matter. The words . . . words hurt.

So we need to be careful what we say to our kids, grandkids. I have great grandkids. And I think I kind of spoil them somewhat.

But to sum it all up, living on Southside was a great experience, like I said. We were close because there was a need to be close. You know, there was not much choice not to be close. We shared practically everything, like I said, that we had.

Dad was in and out in my home . . . it was . . . so my mom did housework. I will never forget. She was a housekeeper for one of the Lieutenant governor of the state of Alabama. His name was Guy Hardwick.²

And my grandmother did housework for, I don't know, I can't remember. All I remember is his name was Mr. Marley. I don't know what his first name, but anyway, I don't know. It's just Mr. Marley. Both of them did housework and it was very good because sometimes my mom, when she worked for the Hardwicks, she got the opportunity to go to the beach with them. She would go down and they would have, I guess, company over, guests over, and she would . . . she would go down and prepare all the food, she would clean and, whatever they needed at the beach.

And we have an opportunity then to bring . . . she would bring some of the things back from the beach because I don't think, prior to that, we ever went to Panama City Beach, even though it was only a short distance. But we did enjoy some of the . . . some of the . . . partake of the meals that they had there. She would bring it home when they finished whatever was left, she would bring it home and, then it was just, you know, that was how life was then.

So . . . it was . . . it was fine. Then, you know, everybody did what we did.

Eventually there was an uptake of everybody having to move from the Southside and we went [to] several areas. My family moved over to the east side of town now, well I guess it was the east side of town then, but and we had the opportunity to move in one of the housing projects on the east side, Martin Homes. And it was upstairs, downstairs, inside, you know, facilities. And there was no, there was no A/C. Well, we didn't have any on Southside either, but that these big fans and I remember when we moved over there, that was our first actual TV and I think we all kind of enjoyed that.

I never forget, we were all, on Sunday, well, we only had so many channels that you could watch. I may think it was rabbit, rabbit ears, but I'm not sure if y'all know about the rabbit ears that you put on top of the TV. And then maybe someone not familiar with that, but it's a little set and they look like rabbit ears.

And I never forget, we watched Ed Sullivan show. And sometimes our favorite entertainers would come on, and we had a great time watching them.

² William Guy Hardwick, (1910-1993), was a Dothan attorney who served as Lieutenant Governor of Alabama under Big Jim Folsom, 1955-1959. "William G. Hardwick," Wikipedia, accessed July 14, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_G._Hardwick.

But we did had . . . have a radio. And I do remember my grandma. We had one radio, but I remember my grandma . . . grandmother allowed us to watch . . . listen to them. I think it was called Randy's Market . . . Randy's³ . . . it was a show that they played all the latest records coming out of Muscle Shoals. Muscle Shoals is in Alabama. But, uhh. And occasionally we had a chance to go buy some of those little 45 [rpm] records that we enjoyed and we had a great time listening and dancing to some of the . . . some of the little 45 records that we . . . that we purchased, we . . . we could only hear the music when Muscle Shoals was coming out.

I forgot this guy's name. He was a great guy. He was a great announcer. He would make everything sound so good. And we, my sister and I said, "we going to go to Muscle Shoals one day." but I don't think we done went to Muscle Shoals one day. But . . . I don't think we well, we didn't go to Muscle Shoals.

But we did purchase a lot of the music from Muscle Shoals. There was this place. It was called Dixie. Well, it still is called Dixie [neighborhood in the E. Powell / N. Headland Ave area of Dothan]. There was a music store there that you could go in, and sometime we would buy, well, we had to always have the latest. And sometimes we bought something that wasn't the latest. And we just enjoyed dancing and having good times, listening to the music and we all practiced the latest . . . latest dance moves. It was, I guess it was the Twist. Maybe y'all don't know anything about the Twist, but that and several other dances that we . . . that we would practice.

And while we were living also on the east side of town in Martin Homes, there was . . . there was right . . . we lived right next to the railroad track and on the other side of the railroad track was Lincoln Community Center. Maybe it's not called Lincoln Community Center now, but anyway. They had certain nights . . . they had . . . they had dances over there. My mom would allow us to go over there because it was just, it was only walking distance, really. It was, maybe just a few feet.

But we were allowed to go. We got all our chores to do, everything to do. You had to work so hard to to get that pleasure, to . . . to go over there. All the ironing had to be done. The curtains had to be put back up to the window after it was washed. They were washed and cleaned. And floors, walls, back then you didn't put your hands on the walls, the walls had to be washed.

But when all that was finished and it met my grandmother's inspection, you could go to the . . . over to Lincoln Community Center. You could dance with your classmates and always had a good time over there at Lincoln Community Center.

00:22:06 Mit Kirkland

Let me ask you this. [Aside] Marty, did you have a question? [To Marty Olliff] On the type of house they lived in, the type of house they lived in, how many people?

³ Possibly "Randy's Record Shop" broadcast from Nashville. Sampson, "We Interrupt This Broadcast to Bring You: Radio Waves . . . WLAC, Randy's Record Shop and the Birth of the Mail Order Record Biz," Spontaneous Lunacy – The History of Rock 'n Roll, Song by Song., May 8, 2021, <https://www.spontaneousslunacy.net/wlac-randys-record-shop-and-the-birth-of-the-mail-order-record-biz/>.

00:22:18 Marty Olliff

Could you describe your house in Southside?

00:22:20 Delois Lee

When we . . . when we lived . . . we lived two places I remember. I was born at 605 W Franklin St. That house was a big house because it [the family] was five siblings, my dad when he was there, my grandmother, and my mom lived there. We had a full function [bathroom]. We came up on the porch, the bathroom was on the outside of the kitchen.

You came into the kitchen. It was a huge kitchen. I remember, there was this big stove. And we had this huge table in there, I guess yeah, it was a table and we had maybe 2 chairs, but there was this bench that the kids sat on. One . . . two or three of the kids sat on one side of the bench and the other kids . . . the other kids sat on the other side of the bench. But it was a . . . I never forget. It was a big room. It was a big kitchen, had this big stove, and I liked going because we had my grandmother made tea cakes and all kind of good, sweet cakes.

And then there was about two bedrooms. And then there was another room that was supposed to be, ah, yes, a living room. But it was never used like that. My grandmother had this big huge . . . and they had big beds, that they were huge beds. I guess they were like king size bed now or whatever. But anyway, this one room it had this one it had this pretty it had all lace, she had little dollies on everything. And I thought, "well, I'm gonna have me some dollies when I grow up." But, uhh. And it had this big bed in there that had chenille bits. But it was just . . . I thought it was real nice.

And [when] we had company. They slept in the big room in there. So I said, you know, "I'm going to . . ." We had family members to come visit. They would sleep in the room with the big . . . with the pretty chenille bedspreads and the dollies on the dresser and pretty lamps and . . . and things like that.

But it was a big house, had several rooms, and it had a big yard because we had to . . . there was no grass in the yard. We had, we had brooms. But it wasn't brooms that you go to store and buy brooms. It was brooms that we made, that my parents made, I'm not sure. And the yards had to be cleaned every day. Summer, it didn't matter when, the yards had to be cleaned. And that was somebody's job. They wanted younger kids to to clean the yard. And she [mother or grandmother?] would come out and inspect and, "Ohh, that's really did a good job on both sides of the house."

And everything was spotless, there was no . . . there were no dishes left unclean, tucked away, put where they were supposed to be put. Every . . . there was a place for everything and everything had to be in its place. Kitchen, bedroom. Even though we shared bedrooms, my sister and I shared a bed and I think my brothers shared one, but everything was in its place.

You know, there was nothing out, sometimes a little bit too much out of place. I think my grandmother was a little bit . . . my mom lived there but, basically, my grandmother was matriarch of everybody. She took care of . . . I think she had a little OCD too, but uh, you couldn't leave anything out. Sometimes you forgot toys or whatever. Oh, no! That had to be put away. Whatever. The kids going to be kids. But noooo, no, no, everything had to be in its place. So that was just about how the house was.

And like someone else had said, there was actually no visiting, you know, or we could only visit some people in the neighborhood. We couldn't visit everyone in the neighborhood, even though we went to school together, went to church together. But you only visit certain, certain homes in the neighborhood.

00:26:56 Mit Kirkland

Do you have another question, Marty?

00:26:57 Marty Olliff

No.

00:26:58 Mit Kirkland

OK, alright, that's good. What I want to do now is get y'all at a table.

00:26:59 Delois Lee

OK. Yes. Is that too much.

00:27:04 Mit Kirkland

No, no, that's fine.

END OF TAPE