FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees:	Zerlean Silas James Viola Gibson Randle
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Interviewer:	Pat Pollicoff
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	41 Pages

Viola Randle

Transcript

POLLICOFF: Welcome and thank you very much for agreeing to share some history with us today. Zerlean, let's start with you. Would you tell us your full name and please spell it out, your maiden name as well as your married name.

JAMES: My name is Zerlean Silas James.

RANDLE: My name is Viola Gilmore Randle.

POLLICOFF: Zerlean, tell me how old you are - when were you born?

JAMES: I'm 76 years old. I was born on August 17, 1937, in Fulshear.

RANDLE: I was born on July 26, 1924, here in Fulshear. I'm 89 years old.

POLLICOFF: And long-time friends?

RANDLE: Long time friends. I was born on W. J. Walker's farm, at home. At that time we had midwives and women had their babies at home.

JAMES: I was born on Mr. Huggins' place, just past the railroad track. They call it Fulshear Lake. My mother had a midwife also.

POLLICOFF: Do you have other brothers and sisters?

JAMES: My mother had one that she lost when I was about two years old. So I'm an only child.

RANDLE: I have two brothers. One older and one younger.

POLLICOFF: What I'd like to do is ask each of you what brought your families to this part of Texas and when did they arrive?

RANDLE: My mother was born and raised in the Foster area, between here and Rosenberg, where the Hines Nursery is now. My father was born in Brenham. I don't know too much about his history. He came to Fulshear and lived there until he died.

POLLICOFF: When did he come to Fulshear?

RANDLE: I don't have any record of that.

POLLICOFF: Do you know the names of your mother's parents or your father's parents?

RANDLE: My mother's parents were Jim Gibson and Mary Warren. I don't know too much about my father's parents. I remember my father's mother was Amanda but I don't know her maiden name.

POLLICOFF: Did any of them live in this area?

RANDLE: No, they were in Brenham.

POLLICOFF: Do you know when your parents came here?

RANDLE: It was before I was born! (chuckles)

POLLICOFF: What kind of work did they do?

RANDLE: They were sharecroppers.

POLLICOFF: When you say 'sharecropping', I assume that they rented land to farm.

RANDLE: It's supposed to be farming half and half (you give half the crop to the landowner and you keep the other half), but I guess you would call it like a rent. My father grew cotton and corn and leased the land from W. J. Walker. I grew up on that farm.

POLLICOFF: How far was that from town?

RANDLE: About 2-1/2 miles, I'd say.

POLLICOFF: Tell me what life was like.

RANDLE: It was good. The one thing I didn't like was chopping the cotton and picking the corn. I had to pick cotton, chop cotton, pick potatoes. That was the only way that you survived back in that time. You had your garden. You raised some of your food and the rest you were a sharecropper. And you didn't get paid until the fall of the year when you picked the cotton. Then you settled up with the owner. Sometimes you'd come out of debt and sometimes you were still in debt. But they would let you have food and then you'd pay in the fall.

POLLICOFF: How many acres did you farm?

RANDLE: I don't know.

POLLICOFF: Was this something the entire family worked on?

RANDLE: Yes. My mother, father, my brothers and I.

POLLICOFF: Were there any other ways that your parents tried to supplement their income?

RANDLE: Yes. With their chickens. We would sell the eggs and the chickens. The chickens was one of the ways. During that time, from spring until fall when you planted your cotton and your corn and then chopped it and plowed it, it grew up and you had to harvest it. In between we picked potatoes, beans and peanuts.

POLLICOFF: Were these the crops that you raised?

RANDLE: No, different people in the community would have them. So we could get extra money doing that.

POLLICOFF: They needed extra hands to bring in their crops. It sounds like it was a good life but also a hard life.

RANDLE: A hard life. You went to school. A lot of times we'd have to take our clothes and change and go back and work in the field after we got out of school.

POLLICOFF: It was hard to study, I'm sure.

RANDLE: Then you had chores to do after you got home. You had to get the wood in and prepare supper.

POLLICOFF: What kinds of chores were you responsible for?

RANDLE: You had to feed the chickens, milk the cows and help get the meals ready.

POLLICOFF: What did you like the best? You didn't like the cotton, for sure! (laughing) Was there anything that you liked?

RANDLE: Not really, but you had to do something, because I think that's what is the problem today. We knew we had to work. The kids nowadays think it's on a silver platter and all you have to do is hand it to them. 'We don't want to be raised like our mother and our father were raised.' But you know what? The jailhouse wasn't filled up like it is now. We said we don't want to raise our children like we were and we give them everything that their heart desires. And they think once they get grown, that you are supposed to do the same thing.

And if you don't do the same thing, they are ready to destroy you. Because we gave them TOO much love. I'm not saying be cruel to them, but you have to live by the sweat of your brow.

POLLICOFF: So, looking at your own parents, what do you think their greatest gift to you was?

RANDLE: That I HAD to work. I didn't get it on a silver platter. I had chores to do.

POLLICOFF: And they set the example.

RANDLE: They did.

POLLICOFF: Were you close to your siblings?

RANDLE: Oh, yes.

POLLICOFF: What are their names?

RANDLE: Edward Batts and Maurice Gilmore.

POLLICOFF: Are they alive today?

RANDLE: No, they are deceased.

POLLICOFF: Tell me the kinds of things the three of you would do for fun.

RANDLE: We played baseball. That's what I like today. We did the pole jump.

POLLICOFF: How high did you jump?

RANDLE: I can't remember now.

POLLICOFF: Did you jump into something soft, like hay?

RANDLE: No, the ground! (laughing) It was fun. And we had to make our own toys. We'd get stick brooms and they would be our horses. Nowadays they want the moon, and we give it to them. But we were satisfied with what we had.

POLLICOFF: How many children did you have?

RANDLE: One, a girl. Her name is Willie Jean Randle Sterling.

POLLICOFF: When was she born?

RANDLE: July 28, 1944.

POLLICOFF: Let me go back just a bit. You grew up, working with your parents on the farm. You said you went to school and come home and do chores. Tell me what school was like. Was it close by?

RANDLE: We didn't have buses. We had to walk. The only ride we'd get was when they had bad weather. My dad would come and get us in the wagon with an ass and the horse but it was a good 2-1/2 to 3 miles that we had to walk.

POLLICOFF: What age did you start school?

RANDLE: A little better than six years old.

POLLICOFF: That's a pretty good ways to hike for a six year old. What time did school start?

RANDLE: 9:00.

POLLICOFF: And it lasted until?

RANDLE: Until 2 or 3:00.

POLLICOFF: Were there a lot of kids in your school?

RANDLE: Yes, considering.

POLLICOFF: Were there several classes or how was the school organized?

RANDLE: We had two teachers. One was for 'Primer' - that's what they called the primary class, which was grades 1 through 5. The other taught grades 6 through 8.

POLLICOFF: How big a school was it? Did you have individual classrooms for each grade?

RANDLE: No, it was like this room. This was the lower grade and back over there would be the higher grade. I guess maybe 15-20 kids in each room.

POLLICOFF: It was a segregated school?

RANDLE: Yes.

POLLICOFF: Was that typical?

RANDLE: Yes. This was the white school here, right next door to the Methodist Church.

POLLICOFF: Where was the black school?

RANDLE: One was where I was talking about, down Bois D'Arc Lane and the other one was about three blocks further north.

POLLICOFF: What about high school?

RANDLE: Rosenberg.

POLLICOFF: So you had to take the bus into Rosenberg? Did you like the school?

RANDLE: Oh, yes, we liked the school because we had kids to play with, and study.

POLLICOFF: These kids were all from neighboring farms? Were most of the families back then sharecroppers?

RANDLE: That was life. We didn't have stores like we have now. We had Fulshear and where my grandmother lived, in the Foster area, but still it was close to Fulshear.

POLLICOFF: Was there a store to get other things, like dry goods?

RANDLE: Yes. In the later years, when I got bigger, it was a different thing altogether than what it is now. You'd go to the store on Saturday. Now we go to the store all the time, when we want to. But we only came to Fulshear and other places on the weekends.

POLLICOFF: On the weekends, to go shopping, did you go to Rosenberg?

RANDLE: No, we went to Fulshear. We had to get our commodities, our groceries. Rosenberg was a special treat. That was going to another city and we didn't do that often.

POLLICOFF: When you did, what was the occasion?

RANDLE: Sometimes we would go to the movies and sometimes we'd be going to shop. But not too regular because we didn't have all the money to spend.

POLLICOFF: When you look back on growing up, what were your parents like?

RANDLE: I loved my parents. They were hard workers, loving and kind.

POLLICOFF: Were there any special things that your parents did with you or any special lessons that they taught you, other than working hard.

RANDLE: My dad would read the Bible to us. My mother would do the usual - quilting and cooking.

POLLICOFF: Was she a good cook?

RANDLE: Yes, she was.

POLLICOFF: What were some of your favorite things that she made?

RANDLE: So many I can't remember. But she could take nothing and make something out of it that would be a delicious meal. I was telling my daughter the other day, I would like to have some [of my mother's] soup. And we didn't have soup bones because we didn't have beef. We had hogs that we'd kill and preserve. And she could take just plain bacon and make the best soup you ever tasted. I've tried since I've been grown to make it taste like it, but can't do it.

POLLICOFF: You raised hogs as well?

RANDLE: Yes, we raised hogs. That was our meat. In the fall of the year, when the norther would come and it would get cold, we would kill our hogs. We would make our sausage, our hams and all of that. That would take us through the winter months to the summer months.

POLLICOFF: Did you smoke the meats?

RANDLE: Yes. We made our sausage. We had a room we called the smokehouse. You would make the sausage and hang it on a stick, and hang the bacon up there. Then we'd make the fire and smoke them to cure them. You didn't take big hunks and waste them. You cooked so much and then it had to last

POLLICOFF: Ms. Zerlean, let me ask you some of the same questions. Tell me what some of your earliest memories are, growing up here in Fulshear. You were born at home as well?

JAMES: I was born at home but it was Mr. Heard who was a midwife. Dad and Mom farmed for the Huggins and when they left that place, they moved about two blocks right down Harris Street. That was my grandmother's home place.

POLLICOFF: How far back does your family go, here in Fulshear?

JAMES: My mother and father go back to the 1800s.

POLLICOFF: Tell me how your family first got here.

JAMES: I don't really know. My grandfather lived on Hunter Harris' farm, which is right across the highway from Weston Lakes, between Weston Lakes and Crutchers Ranch. Back then they called it The Quarters, because there were quite a few homes back there. He and my grandmother had nine children, and my mother was the youngest. I guess, as the kids grew up and got old enough they married and started sharecropping for the Harris'. Most all of my uncles and aunts farmed the property.

POLLICOFF: Do you remember how many acres each of them had?

JAMES: I don't remember how many acres but it was a section. My Uncle Dave, farmed about 8 acres and right across the road, my other uncle farmed about 8 or 9 acres. It's probably more than that because I'm just estimating. My aunt and her husband back then were on the right of the railroad track and that was a big strip that they farmed over there, about 10 acres or so. My youngest uncle had a plot over there. They all split up into different sections. That's how they raised cotton. The corn wasn't with the cotton. They raised both, but the cotton patch was different from the corn patch. You might have 15 acres of cotton and you might have 15 acres of corn. They had a cotton patch and a corn patch.

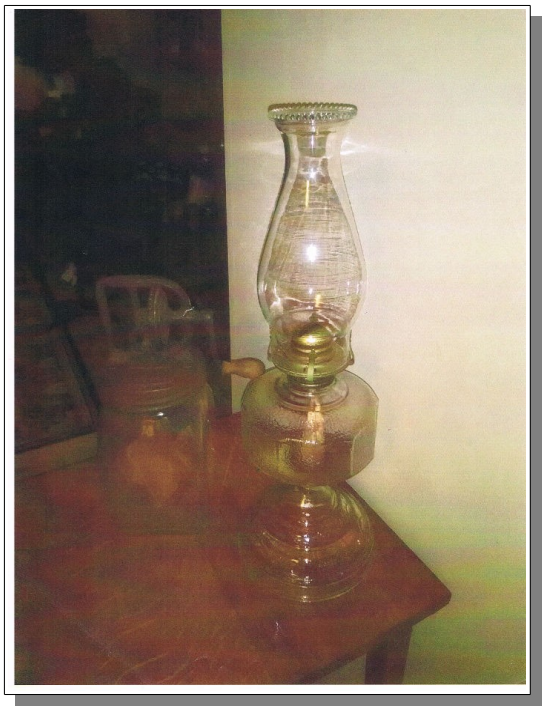
POLLICOFF: Do either of you recall if they rotated the crops? Or was it pretty much always cotton and corn.

JAMES: Sometimes where the corn grew this year, next year they would put the cotton there. The next year they would switch it around.

POLLICOFF: Tell me what life was like for you, growing up.

JAMES: It was sweet in some ways, and it was bitter in so many ways. Because by being the only child, I had to do all the chores.

POLLICOFF: That would be the bitter part! (laughing)



JAMES: (chuckles) Yes. At an early age, I walked down Harris Street to walk to Walker's Grocery store because I had to keep up with the kerosene. We had lamps. The lamps were full of oil and you had to be very careful to clean the globe so it could shine brightly at night. We had a wood stove. I had to collect the chips in one bucket, and carry it in, and carry the logs in and stack them up; every day, especially in winter. And then I had chickens to feed, eggs to collect and I had to help my dad feed the hogs. Being the only child, I had to do a lot.

POLLICOFF: So you were the right-hand-girl?

JAMES: Right. When the time came to butcher the hogs, I was right there. I was the handy girl. If they needed something, I had to go get it. When they through butchering, and processing the meat, I was the delivery girl. In those days, everybody shared with one another. We didn't have to go to school to learn how to share. They taught me how to share at an early age. In the evening, I would carry a package of meat here and there. When I got home I would be SO worn out. It was the same way when the vegetables were harvested. They would put up vegetables from the garden, year-round. [Note: To 'put up' means they were canning the vegetables.] They put up tomatoes and I had to help with that. I had to help with the okra and it would sting you. They put up okra and tomatoes together. They put up pickled okra and corn, okra and tomatoes together in Mason jars. At berry time, I was always afraid of snakes! They would beat the weeds around where I had to pick berries. They put up berries in jars, they made berry jelly and plum jelly. This was our food for the winter months.

POLLICOFF: So all of this was done in the fall?

JAMES: Yes, this was fall work. In the summer you got a little break. You didn't have to bring much wood and chips in as you did in the fall and the winter.

POLLICOFF: You had wood stoves as well?

JAMES: Yes. Wood stoves and wood heaters. And kerosene lamps.

POLLICOFF: I know the importance of keeping those lamps clean so they don't get so black.

JAMES: Yes. We called it 'smut'. I couldn't leave it smutty. I had to clean it and then get a clean rag and shine it. I still have the lamps. I love antiques.

POLLICOFF: Do you still use them?

JAMES: Yes, if there's a storm. I keep oil in them so if I have to, I can use them. We made butter. My dad had milk cows. I was the one to carry the milk in. I couldn't strain it; my mother had to strain the milk in the crocks. It was so heavy and I might spill it. They weren't taking that chance. I couldn't spill anything.

RANDLE: We wouldn't waste anything.

JAMES: She always told me, 'Waste makes want'. I'd carry a dozen eggs downtown to sell, and sometimes I had two dozen and I had to be VERY careful not to crack them. That was maybe 30 cents, and she would tell me what to buy out of the egg money. I had to get kerosene and a box of matches. Back then that little money went a long way because everything was cheap. And maybe a box of salt or baking powder or whatever she needed, I would buy using the egg money.

POLLICOFF: And you got by.

RANDLE: We're still here! (laughter)

JAMES: We even put up watermelon rinds. I guess that's where I learned how to preserve things. Just a few years back I stopped preserving. The only thing I preserved this year was figs. We made everything. And I have the churn that I churned butter in. I have the mold that we used for the butter. I saved all of that. And we had a wooden icebox.

POLLICOFF: You would put a block of ice in there?

JAMES: We would go to the store, with my red wagon. The man at the store was named Mr. Russell and we'd put that block of ice in the wagon and I would pull it home. My mom would wrap it up in a burlap sack and put it in the ice box.

POLLICOFF: How long would that last?

JAMES: If you didn't open that part up (it was separate from the part where you stored your food), it would last at least four or five days. Mom put the milk and butter in the ice box and we would share with people who didn't have milk and butter.

POLLICOFF: Obviously that was an important part of life, sharing with your neighbors.

JAMES: You shared with your neighbors.

RANDLE: Everybody.

JAMES: Right over here I picked mini sweet potatoes. My dad farmed sweet potatoes. I was a curious child so I would watch and ask him what he was making. They would dig a hole in the ground, put hay in the hole and then put the sweet potatoes on top of the hay and then cover them with hay. Those sweet potatoes would last well up into the spring. But that was my job.

POLLICOFF: And they were harvested when?

JAMES: Before fall. I was the one who had to go get the sweet potatoes out of the sweet potato pond, when they got ready to cook. The hole was deep but was well built where the rainwater would drain off. I did so many chores. And then I would walk to my godmother's house and help her do the same thing. Whatever they needed me to do, I did it. Wash her dishes and then come home and wash my mom's dishes.

POLLICOFF: You just knew it had to be done.

JAMES: HAD to be done. We didn't have time to be idle. We had to work.

POLLICOFF: You didn't have a lot of time to just hang out and play with your friends?

JAMES: At times my mother would let me go play with my friends. I had a curfew. And when you get to this friend's house, you be sure to tell Miss Lizzie or whomever I was playing with, that you have to be home at 3:00. You didn't go and stay at anybody's house all day. You had maybe three hours and then you had to be home. And if you weren't at home, you'd WISH you were home!

POLLICOFF: What was the punishment if you did not get home on time?

JAMES: She'd ground me. Now they put the children in time-out. Back then we called it 'grounding' you had to stay home.

POLLICOFF: I was grounded a few times myself! Do you have a favorite memory of growing up in Fulshear?

JAMES: My favorite memory was meeting the Dinky. It was a train that came through Fulshear. We could hear it blowing at Flewellen. And that was a treat on a Saturday. Most of the families were farmers and went on horses and wagons. They'd have to pull the wagons in there and tie them with a long rack or board or whatever they would tie the horses to, while they shopped. In the evening, a lot of people would go down there just to meet the train.

POLLICOFF: What was coming in on the train?

JAMES: Different people from Houston or wherever, who used to live here or were coming out here to visit. We would meet the train on Saturday evening. That was special to me. And Mr. Adam Branch, with a little make-shift cart, would meet the train every evening. They would toss the mail bag on his cart and he would go across the street, pushing it to the post office. The little wooden post office was right there where Timewise Shell Station is now. We didn't go to the post office except on Saturdays. When I got old enough, mom would trust me to go to the post office maybe on Monday. I can remember everybody out here would get General Delivery (Gen Del). We didn't have such things as post office boxes that I can recall.

POLLICOFF: With General Delivery you'd still have to go to the post office to pick up your mail?

JAMES: Yes. You had your name, Fulshear, Texas and General Delivery. That's the way the mail came. And I had to iron. I learned how to iron at an early age. I WORKED! I was an only child but I wasn't spoiled. I worked at two houses.

POLLICOFF: When did you start doing that?

JAMES: When I was a girl I had a godmother and godfather and I had to do chores for them. They were my mom's best friends. I worked at our house and then do work at her house. She was a seamstress. We worked hard. And then we found work to do outside the home, like picking peas on Mr. Walker's farm. My godmother and my mom would give me a row between them and I would keep up with them. They would help me out a little bit because I couldn't go as fast as they could. We were picking beans in a bushel basket.

POLLICOFF: You said your family grew cotton and corn. The beans and other crops were things you grew for your own garden?

JAMES: No.

RANDLE: That was where you earned money?

JAMES: My family left the farm when I was young, before I started elementary school. That's when we moved to town.

POLLICOFF: What did your parents do after that?

JAMES: He worked at Briscoe, Huggins and Mayes grocery store. He was a butcher. I would sit in the back on an apple box. They let my dad keep me when my mom had to go somewhere and I sat behind the counter on an apple box. I was a little girl. And then he stopped doing that and went to work for the lumberyard. As I grew older, he started going out of town, getting jobs on pipelines and things like that. That's the way we survived. There wasn't a lot of money. Most men around here had to leave in order to send money back home to the family, for groceries, etc.

POLLICOFF: How long did your father work on the pipeline?

JAMES: Oh Lord, he worked on the pipelines for years. Most of the black men from around here worked on the pipelines. They would stay three and four months at a time. Then they would come home for a while and then they would go back wherever somebody needed them. After he stopped working there, he started working for the railroad.

POLLICOFF: And what were your parent's names?

JAMES: My father's name was William Silas, Junior. My mother was Eliza Rogers Silas.

POLLICOFF: You told me that they were born and grew up here in Fulshear. The family history is that your family came here in the late 1800s?

JAMES: My grandfather is the furthest we could go back to.

POLLICOFF: Tell me your mother's parents names and then your father's parents names.

JAMES: My mother's parents names were Josephine Clark Rogers and Frank Rogers. My father's parents names were William Silas and Fannie Spears. They all came from Brenham. Her sister settled in the Sealy area. So I didn't know much about my father's family, other than that she had twin sisters.

POLLICOFF: You were an only child. Did your parents have a lot of siblings?

JAMES: My mother had 8 siblings. My father had 4 siblings.

POLLICOFF: Viola, what about you? You had 2 brothers. Did your parents have a lot of siblings?

RANDLE: I can't remember. It was a big family but I don't remember how many. Those Gilmores (my dad's side) had a lot of children. My mother came from a big family. I guess I could count fingers and toes and get the amount but right now, I can't remember.

POLLICOFF: What are your fondest memories of growing up in this area?

RANDLE: I loved Fulshear. We had things we could do. After I was grown, I wanted to leave Fulshear. I was married and my husband didn't want to leave. So I was STUCK with Fulshear. Now I'm SO proud I didn't leave Fulshear!

POLLICOFF: You went to high school in Rosenberg. Did you go to college?

RANDLE: No.

POLLICOFF: How did you meet your husband?

RANDLE: We went to school together. As children, we lived near each other. His name is Lloyd Randle. I've known him all my life. He lived maybe a mile and a half or less, from me.

POLLICOFF: Were you sweethearts early or did this happen later?

RANDLE: It was early! We played together and then we married.

POLLICOFF: How old were you when you married?

RANDLE: 17-18. We'd been married almost 50 years when he passed away. He was four years older than I am.

POLLICOFF: He went to high school in Rosenberg, too?

RANDLE: No. You couldn't do too much back in those days. You had to do your work and your chores. You married at a young age and you had a family to take care of so that was out of the question.

POLLICOFF: He went through the 8th grade here, but didn't go to high school in Rosenberg? He went to work because he had to.

RANDLE: That's right.

POLLICOFF: When you married, what was he doing?

RANDLE: He was sharecropping and that's what got us on the move. We had to do something better than what we were doing. We were farming and made 800 pounds of cotton and he said, 'I can't take care of a wife and a family with 800 pounds of cotton. I've got to get a job.' He started working on a rice farm and worked there for over 20 years.

POLLICOFF: Which rice farm was that?

RANDLE: The Carters, in Katy.

POLLICOFF: What did he do there?

RANDLE: Everything that was necessary pertaining to the rice.

POLLICOFF: He liked that better than the other sharecropping?

RANDLE: Yes, because we got money. With the cotton we got money only once a year, in the fall.

POLLICOFF: What year were you married?

RANDLE: 1941.

POLLICOFF: Did he have to go off to World War II?

RANDLE: He didn't have to go.

POLLICOFF: So you stayed here. Did you have children?

RANDLE: One girl, born on July 28, 1944.

POLLICOFF: Were you working at this time?

RANDLE: I was doing domestic work. That's why I say some of these people don't appreciate what they have now. Fifty cents a day is what I made. We talked about what we did, chopping cotton and corn. Then it went to $1 a day.

And I don't mean eight-hour days. I mean "can to can't, sun up to sun down". For ONE DOLLAR a day! Today, they don't want to work for $5 an hour and we worked for $1 a day!

POLLICOFF: Did you live in town at the time?

RANDLE: Yes. We had moved off the farm because we couldn't survive on the farm. We moved to Fulshear and he worked on the rice farm in Katy.

POLLICOFF: It sounds like a lot of families moved off the farm.

RANDLE: Yes, they did.

POLLICOFF: Was that mostly after WWII or before?

RANDLE: Long about that time. Because they wanted to make more money than what a sharecropper was making.

POLLICOFF: That was a pretty significant shift in everybody's lives at that time. Was it because of the war? Because there were more opportunities afterwards?

RANDLE: More opportunities. And Fulshear was a big town, then. There was a lot of growth.

POLLICOFF: Zerlean, did your husband serve in the war?

JAMES: No.

POLLICOFF: It was considered important for him to stay here?

JAMES: Yes. He had a mother who had quite a few children and some way or another, he didn't have to go to the Army because he was their sole provider. He was born here in Fulshear but he was raised in Waller County.

POLLICOFF: How did you meet your husband?

JAMES: I met him by dating. I knew him when we were growing up. But we didn't have any way to get around. About once a year we saw each other. His grandmother lived here and he was visiting his grandmother. Then we starting talking and then started dating.

POLLICOFF: How old were you then?

JAMES: I was 15.

POLLICOFF: But you had known him for a long time. Your families knew each other?

JAMES: Yes. His mother and my mother went to school together. So they all grew up here in Fulshear.

POLLICOFF: And what was his name?

JAMES: Willie James, Sr.

POLLICOFF: And when did you get married?

JAMES: I got married in 1955, when I was 17. He was almost 20.

POLLICOFF: And what was he doing at the time?

JAMES: He had started doing construction work.

POLLICOFF: What kind of construction?

JAMES: He built curbs and gutters. He would help float the curbs. He did this in Houston and mostly in Brookshire. Then he left there and started working for the railroad that comes through Brookshire. He worked there for quite a while and then he deciding to go back to doing construction work.

POLLICOFF: How many children do you have?

JAMES: I have six. I have four daughters: Maggie, Willean, JoAnn, Eliza Beatrice. And two sons: Willie James, III and Michael Ray James.

POLLICOFF: Are your children still in this area?

JAMES: Just one daughter, the second oldest, is here. My youngest daughter, Beatrice, died two years ago. All the rest of them have moved away. Not far. I have some in Houston, one in Needville. All but JoAnn and Willean live in Houston.

POLLICOFF: You were a busy mother!

JAMES: Yes, I was. I came to be a mother at an early age. If I had to do it again, I would do it again. I had time to have fun with my children even though I was raising them. I made them mine. I could just look at them and they would know when I was pleased with their attitudes. But you don't see people do that anymore. I think they all came out good. He was young and I was young. But I had a lot of help, from my mother and father, helping me with them. When my husband and I could both work, I didn't have to have babysitters.

POLLICOFF: So you had to work in addition to raising your children.

JAMES: Yes, after Michael got old enough to go to school, I drove into Houston and did domestic work.

POLLICOFF: All the way into Houston!

JAMES: All the way into Houston, off of Gessner.

POLLICOFF: You worked for a family there?

JAMES: Several families. They were all friends. I lived there a week at a time, taking care of their children when they went on vacation. And then I would clean house, do the wash, drive the boys to the Dad's Club, off of I-10. I did all sorts of work. I worked on Memorial Drive for a couple. They were friends of the others. I worked for the Williams, the Oliveras and I can't think of the other names. I worked for 4 different people in Spring Branch. I worked some Saturdays.

I worked off of Clay Road out here in Katy, for 10 years, at Houston Greenhouses. I worked five days a week in the greenhouse. I cleaned house every other Saturday for my boss. Then I left there and I started working for Lamar Consolidated. I worked for the school district a little more than 20 years. They called us 'Head Custodians'. I was the only person in the daytime. I took care of opening the school and closing the school, and stayed until the night shift came on.

POLLICOFF: Viola, does your daughter still live in this area?

RANDLE: No, she lives in Houston.

RANDLE: I worked for the Helwigs. He was a county commissioner in Fulshear.

POLLICOFF: How long did you work for them?

RANDLE: 10 or 12 years or more. Until the 1970s. After that, I went on my own, into business for myself. I was an operator for a Texaco gas station. I had a trash service.

POLLICOFF: You started a trash service? Did you have a truck?

RANDLE: Yes, I had a truck.

POLLICOFF: You were quite an entrepreneur!

RANDLE: And my husband was working for Uncle Ben's Rice. I'm still handling the garbage service.

POLLICOFF: How did you get started in that?

RANDLE: Well, I told you, from a dollar a day, I HAD to do something! It was time to wake up and do something, and that's what I did.

POLLICOFF: How did you decide that that was a good business to get into?

RANDLE: I got a trade. I went to school and learned to do business work. It was just a blessing.

POLLICOFF: What year was that?

RANDLE: In the 1970s. Then Fulshear incorporated in 1977 and I said I believe I'd like to be on the council board. So I ran for that. I was elected to the City Council and then from that to Mayor.

POLLICOFF: I know that you were the first black mayor here in Fulshear. So you started your business, you got very active in the community - you probably were always active.

RANDLE: Right. And still am.

POLLICOFF: Tell me the kinds of things you were involved in?

RANDLE: I think it was the need to be interested in the city. That's the reason I ran for City Council because it would help our race and our community.

POLLICOFF: Were there many black council members at that time?

RANDLE: Oh no! I was the first, in 1977. Since it's been incorporated, maybe 6 blacks have been on the council. I was in there for 25 years, one thing to the other. There were three: Arlene and her daughter and me. Jerome was fourth. Then JB and Laverne. So it has been six.

POLLICOFF: How long did you serve on council before you ran for mayor?

RANDLE: Ten years.

POLLICOFF: Were you part of the effort to have Fulshear incorporate?

RANDLE: Yes. Jamie Roberts was part of that.

POLLICOFF: Why did you all decide it was important for Fulshear to incorporate?

RANDLE: I think there was a need because of the potential growth from Houston and we didn't want Houston to incorporate us.

POLLICOFF: Was that a grass roots effort to make that happen?

RANDLE: Yes, in a way.

POLLICOFF: Who else in the community worked on this?

RANDLE: Judge Bentley, Francis Smart and Carl Utley worked on the incorporation.

POLLICOFF: Was that a hard process to have that done?

RANDLE: Not at that time, but it is too much dog-eat-dog now.

POLLICOFF: What made you decide to run for Mayor?

RANDLE: Concern for the city. As it was incorporated, there were no blacks on council, and I thought we needed some.

POLLICOFF: What was the demographic breakdown of Fulshear at the time and what is it now? In the 1970s, wasn't the population about 750 or 1,000? I've seen different numbers. Were there mostly blacks or mostly white or split?

RANDLE: Mostly white. WAY back it was more black than white. After the war, many blacks moved away.

POLLICOFF: When you ran, the biggest issue was representation, to make sure the black voters had someone representing them?

RANDLE: That was the major thing.

POLLICOFF: And you won!

RANDLE: Oh yes. I served two terms, each term being 2-1/2 years.

POLLICOFF: I want to hear more about what you did as Mayor, but tell me how you've seen the community change.

RANDLE: I don't have the words to explain how it has grown. As I go down FM 1093, I think about my husband's passing and the other family members and friends who have passed, [they wouldn't recognize Fulshear]. It is unbelievable how it has changed. If you could talk to them now, and tell them how the growth is now, they'd say, 'No, it can't be. Not Fulshear.' This was a rice farm and a cotton farm and a corn farm and a cattle farm.

POLLICOFF: And it had a railroad that came through.

RANDLE: And now, there are all the houses . That's growth. There are still more to come.

POLLICOFF: Tell me the things you did as Mayor.

RANDLE: I'm just going to say one. It's the Community Center. We needed one. We didn't have a place to meet, a park or a playground. We just kept talking about how we needed it. We have to go to Brookshire, or Sealy or Rosenberg for recreation. I said, 'Why not have one here in our own community? We need one!' Some of the children still have to play in the streets. So that's my pet peeve, the center. And at that time, was to help decorate Fulshear, and clean it up.

POLLICOFF: And what did that involve?

RANDLE: Getting junk cars and that sort of thing out of sight.

POLLICOFF: Passing ordinances to get them off the street and off the property?

RANDLE: Right.

POLLICOFF: You clearly love this town. Do you love it more because of the time you served as an elected representative?

RANDLE: Yes. I'm not just blowing my horn, but one day I said, I'm going to be off the scene and my children can say, 'that was my grandmother or that was my aunt that did that'.

POLLICOFF: She made a difference in this town.

RANDLE: Yes, I made a difference. I am proud of Fulshear.

POLLICOFF: And Zerlean, how about you? How have you seen this town change?

JAMES: So many ways. I hate to remember how we have changed. We only had sand streets. So many streets didn't have gravel, just sand. From here to Brookshire, it was a different route. In 1950, they put this highway through here. I often tell my children and grandchildren about the old way to Brookshire. Now they've changed it and they are building up going toward Brookshire. They are building west, south, north - everywhere! And I'm just a country girl. I did move to Houston for six months and lived there when we first married. And I got a taste of it. My husband didn't like it and I didn't like it, so we came back to the country.

POLLICOFF: What year was that, when you were in Houston?

JAMES: That was in 1955. We didn't have a car, so he bought a car. He drove from Fulshear to Houston and all over Houston for work. He was working for this construction company and he worked so hard that we saved up enough money to get a backhoe. We didn't have the trailer to pull the backhoe. I would get up with him at 3:00 A.M. to go to Houston. He had to drive that backhoe all over Houston. Gradually we bought a trailer and the second backhoe. Then he hired somebody to run it. That's when we went into business. The first business we had was a James Construction Company. It was based in Houston. Later on our work increased and we bought more trucks.

POLLICOFF: And how long has that been in business?

JAMES: We were in business about 10 years. Due to complications in our marriage we got divorced.

POLLICOFF: Does he still live here?

JAMES: No, he lives in Houston.

POLLICOFF: But this was home for you, so you stayed here.

JAMES: This is home for me. And I look around, and yes, at an early age, I wanted to leave, but now, I thank God I didn't. My prayer is, 'Lord, make me content.' So here I am and I guess I'll be here because my great-grandchildren are the sixth generation, from Frank Rogers to my great-grandchildren.

POLLICOFF: You said your children are kind of spread around but you still have one daughter here?

JAMES: I have one daughter here. Willie Lean.

POLLICOFF: Do you remember the address where you lived?

JAMES: There wasn't an address it was just on Harris Street. I have lived at my current address since 1968.

RANDLE: I've lived at the same address since the 1950s.

POLLICOFF: And what about you, Zerlean?

JAMES: I've been at this location for 45 years.

POLLICOFF: I'm sure the church played an important role in your lives. So what church did you attend?

JAMES: I attend Greater Zachary Missionary Baptist Church.

RANDLE: When we grew up, we attended all churches. But our membership was at a certain church. Mine was at Mount Calvary. In the 1950s, lightning struck the church and it burned up. After it burned up, I moved my membership to Greater Zachary, so I've been there for about 60 years.

POLLICOFF: You say you attended all the churches, so if anybody had an event, everybody went? I

RANDLE: Yes. We would have church one Sunday a month at your church. The next week, it would be at my church. You didn't have but one Sunday at your church.

POLLICOFF: Why wasn't there just one church if everybody was so unified?

RANDLE: I don't know why they had service at the church for just one Sunday.

POLLICOFF: How many black churches were there?

RANDLE: Sanctified, Mount Calvary, Zachary and Pleasant Hill. That's four churches in the area, within five miles. So three Sundays of the month, I would attend another church. But now we have church every Sunday. But we still can visit with the other one.

JAMES: I was trying to count them up. I would say Zion Chapel, Zachary Baptist Church, Pleasant Hill, Sanctified Church, and Lively Baptist Church.

POLLICOFF: So you have five churches and five ministers. Are they alike or do they have different messages?

RANDLE: They are all Baptist churches except Sanctified Church (Church of Christ). They had similar but different messages.

POLLICOFF: Were these ministers full time ministers or did they have other jobs as well?

RANDLE: They worked. They just had that one Sunday.

POLLICOFF: But everybody got along. It wasn't like your beliefs were different. It was just different locations. When you got together, what did you do?

RANDLE: You'd have the service, preaching and singing and testimony.

POLLICOFF: Was there a gathering afterward where everybody shared lunch?

RANDLE: Back then, they did. Now we don't serve it - we go out now. (laughs) One would bring a dish - we called them baskets back then. She would bring a basket, I would bring a basket, and we would put our baskets together and make a meal.

JAMES: A feast!

POLLICOFF: I'm sure everybody had special dishes that they shared.

RANDLE: That's right.

POLLICOFF: Tell me about the churches within the community. Were there only black churches? Were the churches segregated or were they mixed?

JAMES: They were segregated.

POLLICOFF: Is that still the case?

RANDLE: No, we have fellowship now.

POLLICOFF: When did that change?

RANDLE: I'd say in the 1980s.

POLLICOFF: When did the master-planned communities start coming in?

RANDLE: In the 1970s.

POLLICOFF: It was mostly rural and now you have so many businesses and neighborhoods. Fulshear's population has grown to 3500, I think. How would you describe the community now?

JAMES: It's getting humongous. It's changed so much.

POLLICOFF: Has it changed too much for you?

JAMES: Yes it has. I know this growth is coming so we just have to buckle down and endure it.

RANDLE: Accept it.

JAMES: There's nothing we can really do about it. I like improvements but not THIS much improvements. I could take a nap and not worry about my door being locked, but you can't do that any more. It's because of the growth. There are so many people coming in. We needed some improvements, like gas stations, stores and things like that, but it's overwhelming.

RANDLE: Traffic, traffic, traffic. It's really gotten bad.

POLLICOFF: Driving in, I can see the changes. I hadn't been through Fulshear in several years and there has been amazing growth. When do you think it has changed the most?

RANDLE: It's been gradual over I'd say ten years. But in the last three to four years it has grown tremendously.

POLLICOFF: I know that as a city council member and as mayor, you were very proud of the Community Center and helping clean up the city. What do you love most about this place now?

RANDLE: I didn't mention the cemetery!

POLLICOFF: I want you to talk about that. I know history is very important to both of you, and know you both were instrumental in working to preserve the cemetery. Tell me about the cemetery.

RANDLE: I'm just SO proud of the cemetery.

POLLICOFF: You said there were a lot of churches but there was only one cemetery?

RANDLE: Yes, for the blacks.

POLLICOFF: This cemetery has existed since the 1800s.

RANDLE: It was here when I got here.

POLLICOFF: Was it on the Fulshear Plantation?

RANDLE: I think so.

POLLICOFF: So probably slaves were buried there?

RANDLE: Oh yes, I'm sure!

POLLICOFF: It's been around as long as anyone can remember. Where is it located?

RANDLE: Going toward Simonton, it's about three blocks from City Hall.

POLLICOFF: I know it was a long-time effort to try to get that declared an historical Texas cemetery. Tell me how that started and how you accomplished that.

RANDLE: It's like, this is Zerlean's family, this is your family, this is my family - your relatives were buried there. And we'd fence off our little spot. If we didn't fence it off, we go & clean the area. You'd clean yours, she'd clean hers and I'd clean mine, but all in between it was all-overgrown. When I was growing up, we cleaned our family area like that. But when I moved to Fulshear, she would go down and say, 'Let's go visit the dead.' We'd go down and clean off mine and she'd clean off hers. But all the other parts were all grown up.

So when this particular lady passed away, Hazel Jones. I had heard that they said we couldn't bury anyone in the cemetery any more. And I said, 'Good. No one cleans up but just their little spot. Maybe they will do something now.' So when Hazel Jones died they wanted to bury her in the cemetery. And they said, 'You can't bury her in the cemetery.'

POLLICOFF: Who was in charge of the cemetery?

RANDLE: No body at that time. It was just the community saying we couldn't bury in there. So I said, 'Can't bury in there? We've got to do something.' And at that time, I was on city council. So I brought it up, and we got an attorney and we won the case. The cemetery was surrounded by private property. Well, those dead people weren't coming out of the cemetery. You had cows in the unfenced part.

POLLICOFF: So this was on somebody's private property?

RANDLE: No. That was ours. It was surrounded by private property.

POLLICOFF: How big is the cemetery area?

RANDLE: 3.9 acres. It was fenced, but it was old fencing. I didn't have the money and no one else was interested in the fence.

POLLICOFF: And it wasn't owned by a church?

RANDLE: The church that I belonged to was the owner, I think. But when it burned down, nobody was looking after the cemetery. I thought we ought to do something.

POLLICOFF: Who did you have to sue and who brought the suit?

RANDLE: I brought the suit and sued Mr. Michael Wells because it was his property that was surrounding the cemetery. And it was his cows in the pasture and he wanted us to fix the fence. And we weren't able to fix the fence so the cows would get out on the road. I told him we weren't able to fix the fence. Besides the dead people weren't coming out – it was the cows who were getting in! So we won the case. I knew we were going to have to do something. So I spent my money and my husband's money and we cleaned it up. After we got it, I said we need to put a fence around it.After he lost the case, Mr. Wells put a fence up to fence his cows in. The front fence was falling down, the gate was falling down.

POLLICOFF: Was there was a road that led to the cemetery, or did you have to go through Mr. Wells' land?

JAMES & RANDLE: No.

RANDLE: (Drawing imaginary lines) Here is FM 1093 and this is the cemetery. So we had complete access to it. We didn't have to go through his property. So then I took it upon myself and got an attorney and got it all straightened out.

POLLICOFF: So who owns the land now?

RANDLE: I guess ME! (laughing)

POLLICOFF: And who would have ever thought, in your lifetime you would now own the cemetery!

RANDLE: I know!

POLLICOFF: The community was involved in all of this.

RANDLE: Yes. And the McCanns and Bike for Mike donated a fence. OH it is beautiful down there. I had it cleaned up and it looks like a cemetery. I was a member of the Lions Club and they built a gazebo in it. It is just beautiful now. I just thank God for that.

POLLICOFF: Did you have to purchase the property?

RANDLE: Miss Sethora Withes family gave the cemetery to Mount Calvary. I say the church owned it but you know how we are. No one knew where the deed was. We own it but we don't have the deed. Well, he knew we didn't have the deed so that's when he said we could not bury there anymore. He said it was his, but it wasn't his. After we got the lawyer and he got everything appraised.

POLLICOFF: And what year was this when this legal battle was going on?

RANDLE: I'd been trying to get the fence in the 1990s, so I guess it was in the 1980s.

POLLICOFF: So you won the right. The town came together and different people donated things.

RANDLE: When I joined the Lions Club, they pitched in and gave donations. Different ones built the gazebo.

POLLICOFF: It is truly a beautiful resting place.

RANDLE: Yes it is. They are happy.

POLLICOFF: How many people are buried there now?

RANDLE: I'd say about 200 and some.

POLLICOFF: And they date back to the 1800s?

JAMES: Yes.

RANDLE: Yes.

POLLICOFF: There is capacity now for more years?

RANDLE: Oh yes. There is plenty of space. But at first, when they had the fence around it, that would take up a lot of it. But you have plenty of space, with 3.9 acres.

JAMES: They had taken the fence up, after she was trying to get it straight. When he did put the fence back in, that left some of the graves on the outside of the fence. That was disturbing to the whole community.

RANDLE: He put the fence across my mother's feet, and that wrapped it up.

POLLICOFF: So this is when Mr. Wells put the fence up. Zerlean, do you have family buried there as well? Is all of your family buried there?

JAMES: Not all. A great grandbaby, my father, mother, grandmother, two uncles and a host of cousins are buried there.

POLLICOFF: Is that where you think will be your final resting place?

JAMES: Yes. By my mother and father.

POLLICOFF: Viola, what about you?

RANDLE: My family is there. My husband, my mother and uncles. Mine is already there. All they've to do is put the date on the tombstone.

POLLICOFF: I know to some that might sound odd but in a way, I think there's a peaceful feeling, knowing that things are taken care of.

RANDLE: Yes.

POLLICOFF: Zerlean, tell me what you did to help preserve the cemetery.

JAMES: I've been visiting that cemetery since I was ten years old. Like she said, everybody would go down and clean their little spot where there people were buried. And this old lady named Willie Pierce didn't want to go by herself, so I would go with Willie Pierce and help her. I don't know why we carried water but she had a beautiful yard, and she cut roses and stuff. She would put them in a bucket and I would help her carry the water with the roses in the water. She'd clean the grave and we'd put the roses on the grave and she watered them.

POLLICOFF: Viola's gone to get something in the car so we can talk about it Zerlean and I are talking.

JAMES: I went down with her and cleaned several graves, and we would come back. That was quite a walk for both of us, to go down there and do that. And as I grew older, I would meet up with Viola and different people, and we would do what we could. Some of the men would cut the underbrush. We would pile it up and burn it. Then it just got out of hand and we couldn't do any better. So then Viola got someone to cut it with a tractor.

We were poor - we didn't have tractors. We started gradually cleaning it up and the Lord just blessed us to do a little more, and opened the hearts of people to come in. Like Viola said, the Lions Club came in, and different ones, and Miss McCann and all them, they really helped us to get the cemetery in a good condition. It is beautiful.

POLLICOFF: Why is it so important to you that the cemetery was preserved.

JAMES: It's important to me because I have some ancestors there, and I want that to be my final resting place.

POLLICOFF:. How many grandchildren do you have?

JAMES: I have ten grandchildren and sixteen great-grandchildren, ranging in age from 38 down to about four months.

POLLICOFF: That's wonderful. It's great to see those babies coming.

Viola is back and she has brought with her a poster about the cemetery. It received its historical marker in May 2013. So tell me about this poster.

RANDLE: This is the celebration showing the Fulshear Black Cemetery and the markers and the dedication. (Pointing to people on the poster) This is Linda Wooten, Viola Randle, this is her husband, this is the historical marker that we celebrated on May 29, 2013.

POLLICOFF: Tell me about that day.

RANDLE: That day was the happiest day of my life because I always wanted a historical marker and through God's blessing and the Lions Club, we were able to get one for the Fulshear Black Cemetery.

POLLICOFF: Why is that so important to you?

RANDLE: Because I didn't want any more trouble at the water. It is legal now and it's a historical place and it cannot be touched. And everything is straight.

POLLICOFF: I think that the inscription on the historical marker is pretty interesting. Can you read that to us?

RANDLE: "Oral tradition says that this cemetery began as a slave cemetery of the plantation of Tennessee native Churchill Fulshear. Many early burials are unmarked and the oldest headstone is that of Rebecca Scott in 1915. In addition, midwives, a chief, a horse trainer and a cowboy, the first colored school house founders, businessmen and women, two local entrepreneurs, religious leaders, and veterans from WWI to the Vietnam War are buried here. A rural landscape of rolling hills and trees surrounding a variety of headstones made of fieldstone, granite, marble, steel, homemade concrete, wood and resin, the cemetery is evidence of the rich heritage of the people in this area."

[Reading from article: Fulshear.com would like to express appreciation to Nick Garcia as well as the other dedicated Boy Scouts and other volunteers who helped make this project a reality. The Fort Bend Historical Commission will sponsor a dedication service for the Fulshear Black Cemetery's historical marker on Saturday, July 27th at 10:00 at the Bob Lutts Fulshear-Simonton Library

POLLICOFF: It looks like it was a beautiful day.

RANDLE: It was a beautiful day, yes.

POLLICOFF: And people from all over town and the county came?

RANDLE: Yes.

POLLICOFF: This took a lot of work to get to this point.

RANDLE: And I am a happy soul!

POLLICOFF: This is a shows what a critically important a role that every one of these people, including yourselves, have offered to this community.

RANDLE: And I do thank Linda Wooten and also Mrs. McCann for Bike for Mike, for the participation that they gave to us, the black cemetery.

POLLICOFF: Is anyone else buried in the black cemetery other than the black families here in town?

JAMES & RANDLE: Not that I know of.

POLLICOFF: Anything else in your personal histories? Zerlean, anything about your history here or that you've experienced that you would like to share, that I didn't touch on?

JAMES: No, I can't think of anything. Now when I get home, I'll be thinking of all kinds of things! (laughs)

POLLICOFF: You can add that later! But you are SO proud of this community.

JAMES: I AM. I'm proud to say that I was born here, reared here and from where I'm living, I can look right across the street to where I grew up, mostly. Me and my husband bought property on Wallis Street and I grew up on Harris Street. They are back to back.

POLLICOFF: So your roots are firmly entrenched.

JAMES: I'm firmly rooted here. Rooted and grounded! I have precious memories of my ancestors. I remember when my uncles and my aunts and I used to walk from Fulshear to Pool Hill Road. We would walk up there to the church, just a group of people, and get together through the week. Like Viola said, we'd go to a different church every week. We would walk on the gravel road. We would leave early in the morning carrying our water and food and go up there and have a good hallelujah time. And then we'd come back home, getting home just before nightfall.

Everywhere we went, we walked. I remember going to church with lanterns. Everybody couldn't afford a flashlight so we had lanterns. The men would get in the front, the ladies and the children behind, and we'd go from church to church with lanterns. That's a precious memory to me.

And we had singing quartets. We had different people from around here, grouped with quartets. And we would meet at different houses at night. I was there because my mother carried me everywhere with her, and I had to go. They would sing and practice. Sometimes we would get on a program as far as Victoria. We would get a guy from Houston to drive us to Victoria because we didn't have cars. And my mom, godmother and her friends would sing up there in Victoria. They'd go to Needville andall around. Then there would be other quartets from different places to come out here, from Houston and around. And we'd have a good time.

POLLICOFF: Did you sing in a quartet?

JAMES: No. I didn't sing in a quartet. I sang in the choir in church but not in a quartet.

POLLICOFF: What kinds of music did they sing?

JAMES: Christian music. Gospel music. And then, after I got to be a teenager, we had one little favorite spot to go to, to have fun; Virgie Lee's Café. It was right across the tracks, like you were going to City Hall. The old brick BBQ pit is still there. And that lady had two little rooms there and there was a big jukebox in the corner and some benches around the wall. And she had a little counter where she made hamburgers. We had soda, hamburgers and peanuts, and sometimes, popcorn. That was our outing for teenagers. But you couldn't stay until late and you only went on Saturday evening or Sunday. That was our outing.

POLLICOFF: What time was your curfew as a teenager?

JAMES: Oh my God! It was before the sun would go down; you'd better be home.

POLLICOFF: Nothing good ever happens after the sun goes down!

JAMES: Uh huh. But my curfew was different when I was younger, just going house to house to play. 3:00 was my curfew then. A row full of girls and boys, walking and talking - she would let me go down there. That was the most fun.

And I got a chance to go to Rosenberg maybe twice a year. That was to go to Robinowitz's store (laughs) - that was expensive clothes there. And then we'd go to the Five and Dime store. And then we would go to another clothes store there. Then we would go to a place where they made good hot sausage. We would save our money up to pay somebody to carry us over there. And we would bring our sausage back home to eat and that was a wonderful time for us. Occasionally, early in the morning we would get Mr. Ruffin Dixon's wagon with his team of horses. A lot of people would get in the wagon and we would go to Brookshire. We'd go up there and buy shoes or material and stuff like that. We had a poor way of getting anywhere.

POLLICOFF: Why did you go to the Robinowitz store? Was there something special about that store?

JAMES: You could find most anything you wanted there. The men found all their work boots there, rubber boots, Sunday shoes - you name it, they had it.

POLLICOFF: What was the store like?

JAMES: It was a big store, but it was cluttered with all kinds of merchandise. I can remember the shoes in the back.

POLLICOFF: I've seen pictures of the outside so that's why I'm curious about what the inside looked like.

JAMES: The shoes were in the back, and it was two-storied. If they didn't have the right size, they would go upstairs and bring it back down. You could find most anything you wanted. We could always find material and different threads and fabrics to make clothes. But for the major things we had to go to Rosenberg.

RANDLE: There weren't many ready-made clothes available in Fulshear.

POLLICOFF: So you made your own clothes?

JAMES: You made your own clothes. And then, if you wore a dress and it was worn out in the front, you saved the back of it. We didn't waste anything.

POLLICOFF: So that could end up in a quilt?

JAMES: That would go to the quilt. And if it was raining and cold, they would have quilting horses they would put up in the house. You'd sit up and quilt. That's where I learned how to quilt.

POLLICOFF: Do you like to quilt?

JAMES: I do, but my eyesight is bad now. I have a few that I've made.

POLLICOFF: I'm sure those quilts could tell a story!

JAMES: Yes. (RANDLE chuckles) I have this quilt that I told Mrs. Wooten about, the family quilt. All four of my daughters' graduation dresses are in that quilt and I put some fabric of my son's shirt in the quilt. Also I had part of one of my dresses, my mother's dress and my husband's shirt sewn into that quilt. So I call that my family quilt.

POLLICOFF: And you still have it. That will be a precious gift to give to someone.

JAMES: Yes.

POLLICOFF: Viola, is there anything else that you can think of in your history that you want to share?

RANDLE: Right now I can't think of anything.

POLLICOFF: We briefly talked about segregation. What was the community like, to grow up in, as far as how people got along. Were there strict differences where you weren't allowed to go into certain stores or places?

RANDLE: Oh yes. At that time, we didn't know any better.

POLLICOFF: And by that time, you mean the 1920s, '30s and '40s?

RANDLE: Yes. You couldn't go in to certain places. You could come to the door but not go in. There were little hamburger stands.

POLLICOFF: The place you were talking about, Zerlean, was that open to everybody?

JAMES: That was a teenagers' café for blacks. I can't ever remember seeing any white or Hispanic there, when I was growing up. My godmother and godfather helped raise me. I can recall Jess Allen Café. Now THAT was a café that the white, Hispanic and blacks went to. But it was divided. My godmother and goddaddy did the cooking in the kitchen. I could come in the back door and sit in the kitchen part, at the counter. When the wagons and all the people would come in from the farms to get groceries, they would go in on their side. The blacks had a side. My godmother would serve chili and crackers. We couldn't see on the other side. That's the side where the whites would go. I couldn't understand why it was like that until I grew older and they could sit down and explain it to me. And there weren't very many Spanish people here.

POLLICOFF: Were the Hispanic people allowed to eat on the white side?

JAMES: They came on the black side. But once in a while, you'd see them there.

POLLICOFF: Where was the café?

JAMES: It was a little past the store on the corner, Country Mart. It was next to a boarding house Mr. Clem Huffman owned. It was like a hotel. That was in the 1940's. I wasn't allowed to go in there.

I got a chance to go inside when Mr. Huffman died and they sold the boarding house. Me and my mom went there and bought tables and some chairs. It stood right behind this café and Walken Meyer's store - I remember the old store, when the post office left from the side over there by the railroad, it moved on the corner of Mr. Walken Meyer's grocery store. The next post office was built where the bank is now. And then they tore that one down and put the bank there and put the post office up here.

POLLICOFF: What about other stores besides the café, were they were divided?

JAMES: That's the only place that I can recall that was divided.

POLLICOFF: When did that changes?

JAMES: That was when I was a little girl of 8 or 9.

POLLICOFF: So finally everyone ate at the same place?

JAMES: No, they tore it down. The hotel and the Jess Allen Café - they cleaned that all up and they put a gas station there. It lasted for some years. Next to that was a welding place in a tin building. Mr. Helway ran that. When the rice farmers had equipment that broke, they would bring it in and have them fix it. I've seen a lot of changes.

POLLICOFF: Viola, what about you? I know it was separate for many, many years. But growing up, did the groups get along? Was there a lot of racism?

RANDLE: They got along. You stayed in your place and they stayed in theirs. The first changes that I can recall is when we first went into business with the service station. My husband said, 'This man wants to sell out and I want to buy it.' I said, 'Oh, we can't buy that because they just want to get our money and we're not going to make it.' And that's when I saw the changes because we didn't have any blacks running a business at that time in the Fulshear area. It was all whites.

POLLICOFF: What year was that?

RANDLE: In the 1970s. That's when times began to change. They treated us nicely. We didn't have that 'this is white and that's black'. It was beginning to change.

POLLICOFF: But until then, it was different.

RANDLE: Yes. This was black and this was white and we knew not to bother.

JAMES: You stayed in your place.

POLLICOFF: Viola was a big reason for a lot of that change? Her leadership in the 1970s?

JAMES: I think she enlightened us and gave us courage that you could make it.

POLLICOFF: That you had a voice.

JAMES: Yes! That you could be somebody. That's what me and my husband saw. That's why we ventured out and got a construction company. We felt we could make it, too.

POLLICOFF: Inspired by a lot of what Viola had done?

JAMES: That's right. She was the pioneer for us to go by. You would think, 'If she can make it, so can I.'

POLLICOFF: When did you get to be friends?

JAMES: I've known her all my life.

RANDLE: As a little girl, she liked my brother, who was a grown man, for HER boyfriend. She was a little girl now - not thinking about being grown. And he was grown and already married! But he was her boyfriend. She was real mad because he married this other lady.

JAMES: Married my cousin!

RANDLE: And she was my sister-in-law. And that's what I called her when she was little girl all the way up to when she got grown. Still she was my sister-in-law because she liked my brother!

JAMES: Back then, it was not like now. He was a nice person. He would come by my mom and dad's, and they were crazy about him. He was just a gentleman. He would buy me candy or whatever. He was working and he would give me some money and tell me, 'Now you take this money when you go to town and get some ice cream and soda water.' Well, back then, we didn't have any funny stuff and our momma didn't spend the money, because it was clean. In other words, he was dating my cousin. They just had me spoiled. So when she married him, I went berserk! I said, 'That was MY husband!'

POLLICOFF: Did you ever forgive him?

JAMES: Oh yeah. I didn't even know what married meant! I didn't know what 'in love' was. All I knew was she took my husband.

POLLICOFF: You were afraid the candy and soft drinks were going to stop!

JAMES: Yeah! All of them teased me and said, 'Zerlean doesn't have a husband any more'. You know how they tease. That was a long life story. Her mother used to call me daughter-in-law. I was so crazy about her child. We're not related, but in our hearts we feel like we are.

There were a lot of good things that happened here in Fulshear. Back then we had respect and dignity for each other. The old people saw that. They would tell you to respect that person. They had RULES and we had to abide by them. I think that's what made it so much better. You tend to your business and I'll tend to mine. And that's the way we all got along, here in Fulshear.

POLLICOFF: Obviously your friendship goes way back. What would you say was Zerlean's greatest contribution to this community?

RANDLE: She has been a help to me, and a friend to me, and a daughter to me. I just love her! If I need help, she comes to the rescue. She's there.

POLLICOFF: So she's family.

RANDLE: Yes she is.

JAMES: I feel like I'm family.

RANDLE: And the same with our children. She raised her children, and you know you can say, 'don't do this' and they will mind you. They won't be saying, 'I'm going back and tell my mama'. Her children respect me, like I'm REALLY their aunt. I'm Nee-ne. to all of them.

JAMES: That's what they call her – Nee-ne. Even the greats call her Nee-ne.

RANDLE: And you can tell how one was raised because of the respect given to the elders. 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am', not 'yes' and 'no'. I know that's the proper word they use nowadays but it's not respectful to their elders. She has a beautiful family. The one that passed on was my helper. I love them all but she was the one out of the family that you were closest to.

JAMES: Viola taught my daughter a lot. Like going to school - she got her a book on high school. She would go with her to work. She showed her how to earn money. My husband and I did not keep our children's earnings. Whatever kind of work they did, they kept it. So she said, 'Mama, I want to work for Miss Viola.'

Viola and her husband were just like family. I told her she could go but don't stay too late. I was brought up around here and my mom did a lot of domestic work for people and I had to follow her to people's houses. My godmother worked for the Walkers. She was born on their farm. I had to go to the house. My godmother was the cook and my mom washed and cleaned up. Sometimes in the big house, they would clean together. And then when I got older, I started washing dishes after dinner to earn money. My godmother moved into the servant's quarters.

POLLICOFF: What were your godparents' names?

JAMES: Maggie Flowers and Cornelius Moses.

RANDLE: We had to.

JAMES: I was so angry with my godmother. I would make the bed and she would snatch all the covers off the bed and throw it on the floor. I would start crying. She would say, 'You can cry all you want, but you're going to do it right. Practice makes perfect.' I had to do it again. And let me tell you what, when I went to Houston, I thanked her. I thanked her for being tough on me because I feel like I can go anywhere and make it. I knew how to make a hospital bed when I was ten. I knew SO much that I learned from older people. How to survive in life. It just grew up in me. And then I tried to pass it to my children. They didn't want to do a lot of things that they had to do. I made them do it. I told them they didn't know what they had to do in life.

And I told a man that I knew how to butcher, I know how to make sausage, I know how to cure the bacon. I know what it takes to hang them up. And when I would get through smoking that bacon, you can reach up there and get them, and they are already cooked because I smoked them. And he would just laugh! I have SO many memories.

When we would get through processing the sausage in the smokehouse, and take it down but keep it during the summer. They would make cracklings. We had big black wash pots and we would cook the cracklings. I had to cut the skin and the fat in blocks and start it in the big wash pot. We would cook that down. When all the cracklings cooked down with baking soda …

POLLICOFF: So those were the little pieces of meat that just got really crisp?

JAMES: Yes. Now they sell them in the store in a bag, but these were a little different because they had a little lean meat to it, too. We would take that and put it up in a secure place. We would buy a special can for the grease and when the grease got cool enough to pour it in the can, we would poke that sausage down in the grease. It wouldn't rot, it wouldn't smell. It was safe for us, year-round. They call that rendering the grease. You let the kettle get cool, then dip the grease and put it in a crock. Then when it got cool enough, you took the smoked sausage links and poked them down into the grease.

POLLICOFF: Did you cook with the grease as well?

JAMES: Yes. Daddy always kept cardboard boxes when we could get them. Mama had the old sheets - we didn't throw anything away - and we put the sheet over the cardboard box and get Morton salt, and real hot pepper and on the 9th or 10th day, he would lay that bacon meat out and pack it with salt and take it up in so many days. We would take that meat outside and in boiling hot water and pepper, and you dipped that whole piece of bacon in that water. And let it stay awhile. Then when you'd bring it up out of the water, it would have changed color. Then you carried it back into the house and put the Morton salt on there, and every other day you had to flip it from side to side. And that cured it. You didn't have bacon like you go to the store now. When you sliced the bacon, it sliced smooth. And it wasn't a whole big mess.

POLLICOFF: And I bet it tasted better than the stuff you buy at the store now.

RANDLE: Real good.

JAMES: I learned how to do all kinds of stuff. And I'm proud of it.

RANDLE: Oh, yes. We had to learn. We couldn't go to the store and buy all these things because we didn't have the money to buy it. So we raised it. Cured our meat - that's what she was doing. And it didn't get rancid either.

POLLICOFF: And it lasted year-round.

RANDLE: Yes.

JAMES: Homemade sausage. Yes.

POLLICOFF: Thank you for sharing that. Wish I had had some!

Interview ends.