

Methodist University Community Oral History Project

Methodist University

Fayetteville, NC

**Ulysses Davis**

Interview Conducted by

Stephanie Wall

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Davis Memorial Library- Fayetteville, NC

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Interview of

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0:01

**WALL:** This is Stephanie Wall, and this is Mr. Davis. Would you go ahead and state your name—

0:05

**DAVIS:** Now, what was your first name again?

0:06

**WALL:** Stephanie.

0:06

**DAVIS:** I thought you said Jennifer.

0:07

**WALL:** [Laughs.] Stephanie.

0:08

**DAVIS:** I'm sorry.

0:09

**WALL:** That's okay!

0:11

**DAVIS:** Stephanie.

0:12

**WALL:** Yes, sir. Would you go ahead and state your name, date of birth, and where you were born, please?

0:18

**DAVIS:** I am Ulysses Davis, born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 8/12/30.

0:26

**WALL:** Could you tell me what your parents were like?

0:33

**DAVIS:** Yes, I can. In that I came from a single-parent environment, and my mother was extraordinary. Very talented. And my father was there, in the city, and of course he was employed at RJ Reynolds tobacco company. And my mother was a cook, a seamster, she was a Christian. My brother-in-law married my sister, and she was his first convert in his church. And she [Davis's mother] was very organized in so many ways, in terms of how she maintained the home environment, and very sociable with the neighbors. But at times, you know, she was very expressive in terms of the situation we were

having. We lived in a very good-size house, maybe not good size, but I'd say about a five-, six-room house, that we were renting. And it had a half-around porch and a basement—this was back then. Well, somebody bought it from us and we had to move. So, being a seamster, she was sewing for various people, and one of the persons she was sewing for, the husband was an insurance man. They owned the property next door to us. So she told my mother, she said, "Miss Sally," she said, "we would have to move these folks because they tore the front door down, and you can have this house. In fact we can sell it to you and you can pay me so much a month." Now, I don't recall the amount, but the initial price of the house I found out later was \$4,000. And it had two rooms and a bath, and [indecipherable.] Basically, she was industrious. And she took care of her family. And she thought a lot of me, 'cause I could get away with a lot of different things. [Laughs.] Yeah, so, that's the kind of person she was. Very neighborly, in actuality. And she worked in many of the upscale hotels as a cook, and some of the least upscale, likewise as a cook. And she sewed for herself and for the community. Her skills in sewing—if anyone wanted to buy a dress or have a dress made, they would bring her a picture of the dress and she would use paper bags, brown paper bags. She would cut those things out, cut 'em up, and measure the person and make the pattern. She would make the pattern herself.

3:54

**WALL:** Wow!

3:58

**DAVIS:** And she'd have them return, at which time she would have made the pattern and cut it out, and then when they came back she would pin it on them, and make adjustments in terms of size, et cetera. The styles of patterning are much like a dress pattern is today, I guess, to some degree. But that's how she made her money, fed her family. Of course, she was a gardener and I was one of the attendants. The

house that she bought, the lot was 50 feet wide and about 75 feet back. Can you imagine? In those days? And to have a bathtub was an idea. Because previously we would have to bathe in a tub, a big old round tub. And she saw to that. Every so often, everybody got a bath. She was that type of person. So, basically, she was an ideal mother, and I appreciate her even now when I think about it. And my wife thinks a lot of her, too. Of course, she passed on now, she died in '77.

5:25

**WALL:** Wow. How many siblings do you have?

5:29

**DAVIS:** I had four—three! Wait a minute, three, four including me. I was the youngest, the youngest of the family.

5:38

**WALL:** What was your first experience with racism or racial identity?

5:42

**DAVIS:** Oh my goodness, my first experience, I guess it started when I was very small. In terms of going to school, there was a white elementary school across the railroad track near my neighborhood where we lived, but we weren't allowed to go in it. So our school was four or five miles from the house, where we walked, back and forth every day. And knowing us as boys, they had a basketball court up there. They had a swimming pool, and they had a football and baseball field. And if we were caught there, anytime the policemen saw black boys out there playing, they came and got—they ran us off. They ran us off. And of course we had a way of getting off right quickly. It was fenced in, but we had provided a

means of escape. But we kept going. And at nights we went swimming in the pool. [Laughs.] So, that's one of the earlier experiences that I've had. It moves beyond that, but that's one of the earliest ones I had that I remember very vividly.

7:08

**WALL:** Do you remember ever having any white friends as a child?

7:12

**DAVIS:** Well, let's see. Did I really have any white friends? I did not. No, I didn't.

7:21

**WALL:** What was it like to travel during that time period, during the Jim Crow era?

7:25

**DAVIS:** Well, travelling basically was on foot. Unless you knew someone who had a vehicle. Of course my brother-in-law didn't have one until later. But we had a bus company, owned by blacks. It was called the Safe Bus company. [The Safe Bus Company was founded in 1926.] The first black bus, I think, in North Carolina, maybe [anywhere], but in North Carolina. And of course it may have been in some other states. But it was owned by blacks and we would use it going to school. You know, it cost us ten cents back in those days, I think, ten cents to ride the bus. But anytime my mother gave me a dime, I spent it and walked to school, no matter how far. [Laughs.] And then we had a cab company owned by blacks, called Camel Cab—you know RJ Reynolds had the camel cigarettes, and of course I think they got that emblem from the RJR. [The Camel City Cab Company operated in Winston-Salem from at least 1938

through the 1980s.] And of course quite a few blacks worked at RJR, and of course their lifestyle was, you know, a little more elevated because of their income.

8:46

**WALL:** Did you guys get to travel around a lot throughout the state or the country, even?

8:51

**DAVIS:** I travelled out through the country when I was younger. Mostly when I went in the military. I was able to move around a lot, then, especially, you know, going overseas and et cetera. But it was still Jim Crow in the military. And of course we encountered all kinds of obstacles, you know, because of our appearance. It was difficult. And I was not one to really condone it. I was difficult in terms of accepting the situation. And of course I'd avoid getting in trouble.

9:41

**WALL:** Right.

9:46

**DAVIS:** But one of the experience I've had was when a young friend of mine, we would walk to his grandfather's confectionary, we were young boys—eight, nine—and we started smoking early. We walked the street and [would] pick up the butts off the street and have a box of matches in our pocket. And of course we'd light it. So one particular day we were doing so and the policemen saw us smoking. And they stopped us, and called us whatever, and called us to the vehicle and made us throw the cigarettes down and get in the vehicle. Said, we're going to take you to a police station, or somewhere. And they—you know, young boys. I'm sure we cried and had some kind of physical emotions. I can

recall what but I don't want to state that one. [Laughs.] But, well, I urinated all over myself, really, I was so frightened. But they put us out a long way away from the house so we had to walk back to our community. So that's one of the experiences I had as a young boy.

11:05

**WALL:** Did you go to church as a child?

11:05

**DAVIS:** Did I do what?

11:05

**WALL:** Go to church.

11:07

**DAVIS:** Yes. I attended my brother-in-law's church. And we had a wonderful—small—. And it still exists. My nephew is the preacher there now. And of course his father was the elder, we called him elder. And he was named after his daddy, and he still ministers there. It was small. Maybe a little larger than this area [referring to a room downstairs in Davis Memorial Library], a small house—about where those tables are, in that area. And we had a membership of about ten or twelve, I think. There was a well behind, where we got our water. An outside toilet or restroom that we utilized. But the ladies were outstanding. And the gentlemen, men, as well. And they did a lot of nurturing for us, and teaching us various things. In fact, I learned how to sing out there. My momma was surprised when I sang a solo one Sunday. Of course I've been singing ever since. And we had little parties during different seasons of the year, and fellowshiping and playing baseball and softball. Down the dirt road, there was a school

down the road, where we spent a lot of our Sunday evenings after church, and of course we'd go down there and play.