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An Interview With
MRS. LYDIA E. DAVIS WILLIAMS
July 24, 1977

Interviewed by
Daisy Greene

Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
and the
Washington County Library System
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Interviewee: Lydia E. Davis Williams

Interviewer: Daisy Greene

Title: An interview with Lydia E. Davis Williams, July 24, 1977 / interviewed by Daisy Greene

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

MRS. DAISY M. GREENE: This is Daisy M. Greene, interviewing Mrs. Lydia E. Williams, of Greenville, Mississippi, for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The date is July 24, 1977. The place is 833 Central Avenue, the home of the Steve Davis family, in Greenville, Mississippi. The subject is the business enterprises of Charles Reid and Steve Davis in the early part of the Twentieth Century.

Mrs. Williams, would you please state your full name, age, and place of birth?

WILLIAMS: I am Lydia E. Davis Williams. I was born in Greenville, Mississippi, on December 18, 1909.

GREENE: Give me your father's name, his full name, and your uncle's name.

WILLIAMS: My father's name is Steve Davis, and my uncle's name is Charles Reid.

GREENE: Mrs. Williams, I understand that your father and your uncle had a dairy.

WILLIAMS: My uncle, Charles Reid, had a dairy on Broadway Extended. I don't know exactly the year that he operated this dairy. He had customers, that he delivered milk to and all the grocery stores in Greenville, and then had regular customers that he delivered milk to every morning.

GREENE: Do you have any idea how long he was in business?

WILLIAMS: No, I do not, but I am sure he was in

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around twelve or thirteen years - in the milk business.

GREENE: Was that his only means of support?

WILLIAMS: His only means of support.

GREENE: Were you old enough to help in the dairy?

WILLIAMS: No, I wasn't old enough to help in the dairy.

GREENE: After the dairy closed, your father and your uncle operated a restaurant?

WILLIAMS: Yes, the restaurant, the one that my father operated, was on Nelson Street, and the one that my uncle and father together operated was on Walnut Street.

GREENE: What was the name of the restaurant on Nelson?

WILLIAMS: The name of the restaurant on Nelson was "Steve Davis Restaurant". And Charles Reid, during that time, operated a restaurant and an ice cream factory at 226 South Walnut Street.

GREENE: Do you have any idea how long your daddy was in business on Nelson Street?

WILLIAMS: My father did business on Nelson Street for about twelve years. He was on Nelson Street for about twelve years, I am sure.

GREENE: What caused him to close the business?

WILLIAMS: The business burned down on Nelson Street, and he had a tendency to close it down, and went in

with his uncle.

GREENE: Do you remember some of your daddy's specialties?

WILLIAMS: Well, my father specialized in oyster loafs and ham sandwiches, coconut pies, steak and rice, ribs and rice, ice cream, cokes, and pop.

GREENE: Do you remember him saying anything about the parades that were on Nelson Street?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. My father would be in all of the Labor Day parades. On one Labor Day my father had the Greenville Ice and Coal Company to put into a block of ice a large fish, a watermelon, and some chickens. On this particular parade he bought a sign and put it on the side of the car. The sign read, "Steve, don't cut your ham so thin!"

GREENE: I forgot to ask you who did the cooking.

WILLIAMS: My Aunt Clara Reid did the cooking.

GREENE: Were you old enough to remember the prices of the ham sandwiches?

WILLIAMS: At that particular time, ham sandwiches were 15¢, and a slice of pie was 10¢. I know you could get steak and rice for 35¢, and roast beef sandwiches were 25¢, and pork sandwiches were 25¢ at that time.

GREENE: Did your daddy prepare the hams inside or outside his place?

WILLIAMS: Outside. My father had a large black wood-stove, and when he would go to prepare his pork roasts and hams he had a large ten-gallon can, and he would just drop those hams in those cans and make them cook until they'd get tender.

GREENE: Would you say that Nelson Street was booming when your daddy was in business?

WILLIAMS: Yes, Nelson was booming at that particular time. Next door to my father's restaurant there was Mr. Harris, who had a barber shop and grocery store. Across the street was Mr. G. C. Rowe. He had a tin shop. Right next door was the Pythian Hall, where everybody went to dance and have a nice time.

GREENE: You were telling me something about breakfast dances.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes, they had breakfast dances that started from 12:01 Sunday until about 3:00 o'clock in the morning. So this particular time - they had several dances - my aunt would come down and ask my mother if we could go to the dance with her and Lavinia. She was going to be our chaperone. But our mother didn't allow us to attend breakfast dances, so we would sit around and just cry and whimper. However, she said, "There's no need of you sitting around crying, because you are not going to a breakfast dance, and there's no need for you all sitting around trying to be mad. You had just as well get up and go to bed or get your lessons."

GREENE: Did the dances give much business to your Dad?

WILLIAMS: Yes, at that particular time, because my father would stay open all night.

GREENE: What about the condition of the streets on Nelson at that time?

WILLIAMS: Well, at that time the streets were pretty muddy.

GREENE: Full of holes, and there were ditches on the side?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

GREENE: Now, you were telling me about your daddy opening a business on Walnut Street, wasn't it?

WILLIAMS: On Walnut, yes. After my father's building burned, my uncle insisted that my father come in the business with him, and there they operated the Greenville Ice Cream Company and a restaurant.

GREENE: Where was that?

WILLIAMS: That was located on Walnut Street, 256 South Walnut.

GREENE: Is that building still standing?

WILLIAMS: The building was torn down, and, of course, after that building was torn down, my father and uncle operated the Delta Ice Cream Company.

GREENE: And did he have another partner?

WILLIAMS: Yes, Dunlap. Lawrence E. Dunlap, of Columbus, Mississippi, was my uncle's partner.

GREENE: What about the second building? Is it still standing?

WILLIAMS: Yes, the second building, 231 Walnut, is still standing.

GREENE: Now, what about his customers?

WILLIAMS: Oh, we had the customers. We'd ship ice cream to Metcalfe on the C & G, Benoit, Rosedale, and then on the C & G we would ship as far as Columbus, Mississippi.

GREENE: Now, there were no refrigerated cars. How did you ship it?

WILLIAMS: Well, at that particular time he would send it by train. Yes, he would send it on the train to different customers.

GREENE: How did he pack it?

WILLIAMS: In the back he had a large box refrigerator, and then with the refrigerator he would put ice and salt in there to keep the ice cream hard, and the same way with customers it would be in smaller containers, for instance, one gallon, three gallons, five gallons, and two gallons, and it would be packed in ice and salt.

GREENE: Did he have many customers with private businesses?

WILLIAMS: Yes, he catered to all the customers with

private businesses around Greenville, and at that particular time he had a horse delivering ice cream in the city. Later on, he got his truck, and would go as far as Indianola in the truck to deliver ice cream.

GREENE: Did boys help him to deliver with the horse and buggy?

WILLIAMS: Yes, he had some young men working for him.

GREENE: What about inspections from the Health Department?

WILLIAMS: They would come in probably once a month to inspect the building and to see if containers and what-not were kept in perfect condition. During the 1927 flood, my father ran some planks from the banks of the river to the cafe, and people would come in and get ham sandwiches, and my father made about five or six tubs of lemonade. People would come from the levee over there and get lemonade and a ham sandwich and a coke. They did a thriving business during the 1927 flood.

GREENE: The flood didn't put him out of business?

WILLIAMS: No, the flood didn't put him out of business, because my father had boards all around the cafe. There wasn't too much water down there on that end. And they stayed open all night and all day and could hardly keep enough food, because different people who were living on the levee at that time would come in to buy food.

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GREENE: How did he make his ice cream?

WILLIAMS: He made his ice cream with cream from Columbus Ice Cream and Creamery Company, and he used gelatin and would make Tutti Fruity Ice Cream, chocolate ice cream, vanilla ice cream, lemon, and all flavors, just any flavor you wanted. You could get it from him. He had a thriving business.

GREENE: What about eggs?

WILLIAMS: No, he did not use eggs in the ice cream. Just cream and the gelatin.

GREENE: Were there ever any instances where people got sick from eating the ice cream?

WILLIAMS: No! No!

GREENE: Do you think you could make some of that good cream now?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I believe I could.

GREENE: Why did this business close?

WILLIAMS: This business closed during the depression. Business got bad. At that time people didn't have too much money, and he just closed the business down.

GREENE: I should have asked you if your daddy had many calls for his products?

WILLIAMS: Oh, we sold a lot of ice cream and cakes and pies, and, you know, for picnics, especially on the 4th of July. They would deliver ice cream for different picnics, and they served cakes and pies.

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GREENE: After the business closed, what did your father do?

WILLIAMS: After the business closed, my father started working for M. L. Virden Lumber Company. That's where he had a heart attack and psssed.

GREENE: And what about your uncle, Charlie Reid?

WILLIAMS: My Uncle Charles passed in 1928. I think that is right.

GREENE: I should have asked you where Mr. Reid lived. Did he live with your father?

WILLIAMS: No, he lived in the upstairs apartment over the cafe on Walnut Street. He lived upstairs over the business.

GREENE: Tell me, how did your mother fit in with your father's business ventures?

WILLIAMS: She was never in my father's business. She was a housewife and the mother of ten children. Sometimes she would have parties for different things, for her church on July 21st; and at that particular time she had so many children she had to call in somebody to help take care of some of them. Sometimes she would dress us up and carry us down to the cafe of an evening, and walk us on Nelson Street. When she would pass by Mr. and Mrs. Taylor's house with us, he would always stop her and talk with all the children.

GREENE: What Taylor was that?

WILLIAMS: That was Lawyer Taylor who was here.

GREENE: Skinner Taylor?

WILLIAMS: Yes, and Mrs. Johnson and all of those. She would say, "Here comes Nellie Davis!"

GREENE: Let me see, that was Mrs. C. A. Johnson, the wife of the black assistant to Mr. Hatch, Superintendent of County Schools?

WILLIAMS: Yes. We would pass by there and they would come out and look at all of us, and our mother was walking up to the cafe then.

GREENE: Did your daddy and your uncle like the jobs they took when they closed their business?

WILLIAMS: Yes, they loved their work.

GREENE: They did? I thought they might have been homesick for making ice cream?

WILLIAMS: No. They loved their work, and liked what they were doing.

GREENE: About how many years has the Davis family lived on this site?

WILLIAMS: We have been on this site since 1901, just about, because I think my oldest brother was born here.

GREENE: Did you tell me that your father and his mother lived here before he married?

WILLIAMS: Yes, they lived here before he married, right in the same spot. His father and his mother and my

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grandmother. I was named for my grandmother, Lydia. My grandmother left home one evening on her way to work, and had a heart attack and passed. I was named for her, Lydia.

GREENE: Your family, your immediate family, have been here since 1901, haven't they? And your mother and father and their parents lived here. That makes your family having occupied this site for more than eighty years?

WILLIAMS: Yes, probably one hundred years, I'm sure. Yes, because at that particular time, I think my mother said it was just a three-room house - three bedrooms, a hall, and a kitchen - at that particular time, and, as of today, we have eight rooms.

GREENE: And I understand when your brother Steve comes home to retire, he plans to make additional rooms?

WILLIAMS: Yes, he plans to build a larger kitchen, a game room, another bath room, and put in some walk-in closets.

GREENE: That's unusual for a family after they reach maturity.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

GREENE: How many children have moved in and out of this house?

WILLIAMS: There were ten of us, and we had a lot of nieces and nephews all around.

GREENE: And from time to time they were in and out?

WILLIAMS: Yes, they are in and out. That's why we

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always have to keep a large place, because there will be so many to come in every summer.

GREENE: I forgot to ask your mother's maiden name.

WILLIAMS: Nelly White.

GREENE: Where was she from?

WILLIAMS: From Mounds, Louisiana. It's not too far from Vicksburg, across the river. We visited over there in 1959.

GREENE: I know your daddy had many different businesses, but what was your mother's real pride and joy?

WILLIAMS: Working and making a garden and a flower garden. She made nice gardens and always kept her yard spick and span, and had beautiful flowers all around.

GREENE: I see that you are carrying on the tradition of having lovely flowers.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

GREENE: Which of your brothers is called "Chicken" Davis?

WILLIAMS: Charles Davis, Jr. He is working at the University of Maryland, in Princess Anne, Maryland. They called him "Chicken" Davis because he loved raising chickens.

GREENE: When do you expect him here?

WILLIAMS: Charles is supposed to come by next month. He and Steve both will be down next month.

GREENE: When he comes, tell him I would like to tape some of his "chicken experiences".

WILLIAMS: Yes, I will be sure to tell him.

GREENE: You have a sister here visiting from Chicago. Which one is that?

WILLIAMS: Yes, that is Celestine Dunn.

GREENE: What does she do?

WILLIAMS: She is supervisor at a hotel, The Oxford House, in Chicago. She is over eighteen young ladies. She goes around to see if all of the rooms are in shape, and to see if they are spick and span and well dusted and what-not.

GREENE: Well, Mrs. Celestine Dunn was supposed to have told us about the ice cream factory, but she doesn't feel well today.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Alice C. Nagel)

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