

Oral Memoirs
of
Sister Gail Grimes

An Interview Conducted by

Jared Muha

October 10, 2014

Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories

(RICHS)

University of Central Florida RICHS

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Jared Muha

Transcriber: Geoffrey Cravero

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of RICHES, History Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Richard Gunn

Project Detail

RICHES is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Jared Muha is an undergraduate student at the University of Central Florida, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in History. His area of interest is agricultural labor.

Sister Gail Grimes is a Roman Catholic sister from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who moved to Apopka, Florida, in January of 1975 to serve the farmworker, low-income and immigrant communities. Grimes works with Hope CummUnity Center, a service learning community dedicated to the empowerment of Central Florida's immigrant and working poor communities through education, advocacy and spiritual growth.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Sister Gail Grimes is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 10, 2014.

Abstract

An oral history interview of Sister Gail Grimes, a Roman Catholic sister from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who moved to Apopka, Florida, in January of 1975 to serve the farmworker, low-income and immigrant communities. This interview was conducted by Jared Muha in Apopka on October 10, 2014. Some of the topics covered include moving to Apopka, working for the Hope Community Center, the working conditions of Central Florida farmworkers, Apopka farms in the 1970s, relations between farmworkers and crew leaders, migration to Florida, early types of industry, the development of muck farms, shifting racial dynamics on Apopka farms, a history of racism in Central Florida, finding work after the shutdown of Lake Apopka, and the legacy of black farmworkers in Florida history.

Sister Gail Grimes

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Jared Muha
October 10, 2014
Apopka, Florida

0:00:00

Hope CommUnity Center

Muha This is Jared Muha. I'm here with Sister Gail [Grimes] on October 10th, um, and we'll be starting, uh, an oral history on black farmworkers in Apopka, Florida. Um, so Sister Gail, uh, could you please explain what the Hu – Hope CommUnity Center is and what role you've fulfilled in the organization?

Grimes Yes, the Hope CommUnity Center, um, is a nonprofit to serve the farmworker, low-income and immigrant communities, and it is the current name of an organization that started in 1971 – in the fall of '71 – called the Office for Farmworker Ministry. Um, we were asked to come by the Bishop of Orlando¹ to serve farmworkers. The number of farmworkers was large and the Bishop felt that there needed to be more people serving them in this area. They were already – people were already in Polk County, but nobody was up here in Orange County, Lake County – in the central area, so, um – and when we came, the agreement with the Bishop was that we would not just serve Catholic farmworkers – that we would serve farmworkers whatever – what their need – what their needs were, not based on establishing churches or establishing missions or – but that we would work with all farmworkers, so, um – but out of that, over all these years, up to 2005, um, that is what we did, and then in 2005, we incorporated as a nonprofit that is still connected with the church but separate[sic] nonprofit, and we still work with farmworkers and ex – we've expanded to also low-income people and, uh, immigrants. So, um, we – we serve through a – a great number of programs. I don't know if you even want to hear that, so – I can give you a paper that tells you what are the programs are...

Muha Okay.

Grimes But, yeah.

Muha So – so if I understand correctly then, s – from 1971 – fall of 1971 to 2005, your – the m – bulk of your work was farmworkers, uh, justice, correct?

¹ William Donald Borders.

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Grimes Yes, yes, mmhmm.

Muha So—so—and you said that the Bishop, uh, in the area is the one who invited you, but—and—and you said that was because there was a large farmworker population. Um, was that the only reason, though, or what—what—what exact—what about farmworkers, uh, occurred to him, and then—and you after coming here, that, uh, made him think this is a population that needs—that needs some support?

Grimes Well, he saw from, um, the work they did and everything—he was a very personable man, and he saw from the work they were doing that there was a need. Um, more and more Hispanics were coming into the area, and I think that's what triggered it for him. So that we—when we talked to him, um, about taking i—taking the position, um, we said it would have to be all people, 'cause we couldn't—we couldn't work in an area where there was like—some people were being served and others weren't, and they all had the same problem. So—so that was an agreed upon thing.

Muha Okay, and was your work mainly in Apopka?

Grimes Um, in the Central Florida area, so it was—it's Orange County—mostly West Orange County—northwest—um, Lake County—mostly south Lake County, and, um—and then we moved from that during the '80s to also include, um, uh, Volusia County.

Muha Okay.

Grimes Yeah, m—so, and then—that's when in the '80s, when we began to work with some of the farmworkers to establish the Farmworker Association [of Florida], which, um, began just in this area—Lake and Orange Counties—but then—now is a na—a statewide organization.

Muha Okay.

Grimes Yeah.

0:04:30

Working conditions

Muha So, um, after having com—come in[sic] contact with, uh, the farmworkers in this area, uh, what initially struck you about, um, their conditions? What was perhaps different than what you—you may have imagined?

Grimes Well, um, I—I probably didn't know much [*laughs*] when I came. Um, I knew when I came, I came out of the boycotting area[era], uh, boycotting [E & J] Gallo Wine[ry] and, uh—and California lettuce, uh, and I was a teacher so I used to explain all of that to my students, and they'd come with me on the picket lines to different stores, and, um—and we'd go to—and it was also the Vietnam times, so

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we went to demonstrations in Washington and all. So I really didn't know an awful lot about farmworkers except what I heard when I went to big lectures, you know – Cesar Chavez came to our area twice – twice, which was the Philadelphia area, and...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Talked about the conditions and all. So it was all kind of theoretical, a – and so – so when I came here, I saw what the reality was, and, um, I went in – first time I went into groves, it was like, *Oh, it looks simple*, you know, *Just move this ladder*, and I went to move the ladder, and, of course, I couldn't. Then you'd have a 10-year-old move the ladder for you, and you were like "Oh, my," [laughs] and then to see people climbing up these ladders, which were very flimsy, or – I don't know – visually, I, uh – but they'd bend. You – they weren't straight ladders...

Muha Okay.

Grimes A – and – and they leaned against the, uh – the trees, but to be able to go up there and then to pick the fruit – and for me it was just, *I could just pick it*, and then I learned that if you don't pick it right, it won't regrow more fruit, you know, and the same thing out on the fields. We would go out on the fields to see the people, and, um, it was hard work you could see – backbreaking, um – sometimes some of the small planes that would do the, uh, spraying of the pesticides would follow our vans along the road and spray the vans, you know, um, a – and the people would be working on either side of the – of the road, and so if you were out there watching over a period of time, you'd see. They'd spray this part of the field, and, sure, they wouldn't spray the workers directly all the time, but right next to the place they were spraying, people were working. So when the wind shifted, they got it.

Um, so, you – you'd see that too, and then you'd hear people talk about the wages. Guess the wages maybe was the first thing that really struck me. How crew leaders, uh, which was the system in Florida – how crew leaders play Hi – black and Hispanic workers against each other. You know, like, "Look, I – I pay you all," he'd say to the black workers, um, "maybe 50 cents more," or n – no, he'd say – he – he'd say to them, "Well, I'd pay you more, but you know those Hispanics will work for so much less. So I can't really pay you much more than I'm doing now, because I – I'm – I'm paying you more, be – but they're working for less." Then he'd go to work with the crew leader from the Hispanic community, and he'd say the same darn thing. "Well, you know, I'm paying – those blacks will work for less. So I'm paying you really more than I'm paying them. So I can't keep going up," you know, and it – it was a lie in both cases, because if people didn't talk to each other, they didn't know the languages – so...

Muha Right.

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Grimes People were played off against each other, and, uh, when—when you began talking to people and finding that out, you were like, *Oh, well, if— if people could be getting together and talk, it'd be different*, and the same thing happened with government programs. There'd be a government program that would come in that because of the way it was structured, only really, um, citizens of this country could apply for, uh, but not even just citizens, like—like the black community and the poor white community could apply for...

Muha Right.

Grimes But then there'd be another program that, 'cause of the way it was phrased and everything, it was developed for migrants, and, of course, the other community was here all the time, so then they could apply for that, but the people who lived here all of the time couldn't. So you watched the government programs even play off against—play people off against each other, and, uh, I mean you saw what people were being paid, it was like, *You're kidding*, you know, um, and then, just even going out to—like we had a lot of carrot houses here. Vegetables out on the muck, and the carrot houses—the speed at which they had to work when the carrots came down the bell, and if you wanted to be fast you had to—you had to grab them, and people would get the carrots under their fingernails. It really hurts if you get stuff under your fingernails [*laughs*].

Muha Uh-huh.

Grimes And—and they would get that, and they—they'd sell them gloves, but the gloves were so flimsy that, you know, after an hour or two the stuff went right through the fingers, and—and so that continued. So a lot of the working conditions—people had to work on the fields, even if it was raining. I mean, you didn't get to stop if you wanted to make a decent wage.

Muha Right.

Grimes And if you were working in, um—when there was lightning, it was rare that you were told you could stop and get out of the way.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes So all of those kinds of things. It was like you were being treated as—as a—s—s—as someone said, "A discardable individual," you know? Well, if something happened to you, there's more behind you, you know? In fact there was a—a document—and I can't remember the grower who said it—but he said, uh—he said, "Our workers are just like paper cups. Um, they, um—they can be used and disposed of, and we can get another one." Yeah, and—and that kind of—for many of—of the companies, not all—you can never say all, because you can always find the one who's better than the others—but for many of the companies

and the crew leaders, the attitude was, um, *I'm in a better place than you, so I don't care what your conditions are.*

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And that was – so...

Muha And – and how did you come to learn about all of this? Was it – was it what you were noticing and observing, or was this what the farmworkers were telling you, or a mix of both?

Grimes Both.

Muha Both.

Grimes Both.

Muha Okay.

Grimes Yeah, 'cause people, you know – when you just get to talking to people, they tell you stories, and, um – and, uh – and they'd show you their paychecks. You know, you could see, uh, um, what they were being paid, and – and then if you were around and noticed what was happening, either in the groves or out on the muck or even in the nurseries, um, which were not as prevalent at that time – but, um – but if you – you just observed, you could see what was going on.

0:12:48

Apopka farms in the 1970s

Muha Right, so you mentioned earlier that, um, you know – so you came to, uh, Central Florida in 1971. At the time, there was a – a population of Latino, uh, folks coming from the South to Florida, um, a – and that – that is what prompted, in some way, your coming here, um, and I'd like to pick up on that now. Uh, so – so could you explain what a typical farm on – in Apopka – in the area looks like in the early 1970s?

Grimes Okay, I came actually in '75. A group came in late '71.

Muha Right.

Grimes But I was not in that group. I came in '75.

Muha Okay, my apologies.

Grimes My personal – no. It's just – I didn't say it. So...

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Muha Okay.

Grimes Yeah, but, um – well, um, it depends on what kind of i – i – i – crop you were talking about. The groves were enormous. In fact, you could drive from here on [Florida State Road] 436 all the way down to the [Orlando International] Airport, and it was just groves and groves and groves most of the way down. Same thing on [U.S. Route] 441. There was no traffic light until you hi – hit Lee Road, and, um, Apopka had one traffic light, and all the way down the road was groves – groves, and, um – and then you had the – and those were mostly bigger companies – although there were small versions of the, uh – people had some acres from their family and, you know, so – so there was no – there was no one way it looked, um, and some of those countries ha – companies had housing and some didn't, so, um – and that complicated the issue, because if you wanted to strike about the – your wages and you were living in their housing, which was not anything to write home about – trust me – um, that you were hamstrung to – to do it.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Um, and then there was the fields. Um, fewer workers worked out on the fields in carrots and radishes, but there were a lot of other crops out there. Um, all different kind[sic] of leaf vegetables. Um, all different kinds of, you know, like cabbage and, um, kale and – I mean, just every – you know, all kinds of stuff, and if you were out on the fields, um, you – again, there were maybe – I'm just guessing this – I don't know the exact number – but I think maybe like around eight to 10 bigger companies out around Lake Apopka, and then there were some smaller ones.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And, um – and they started after World War II – what they started during World War II with German prisoners of war – producing vegetables for the troops.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And they learned during that time how to vaporize the water, you know, when they – after they were done cleaning the vegetables – a – I don't know if “organic” is the right word – but vaporize the water so that, um, they wouldn't be getting, uh – starting to rot, which enabled them to be kept for a longer period of time, and so those – so I'm guessing eight to 10 companies around the Lake [Apopka], and maybe some more smaller ones. Then, um – and some of them were huge, like A. Du – A. Duda & Sons, I[?] – and – which I – I heard it say[sic] that if you did A. Duda & Sons' property in agriculture, at that time, uh, and strung it around the – the world, it would, um – at the Equator, it would match –

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I mean it would meet. I mean they had enormous[sic] amount of, uh, agricultural property...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Throughout the state.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes And other places. Australia...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Other places.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes So then, um – then there were small nurseries for, um, houseplants and, uh – and landscaping. So there was all that, and then there were fern – fern, um, companies, w – where, uh, the fern that you put in cut flowers, when you get bouquets and stuff, you – I know you don't, but – uh, when – when they – they always put the little ferns in...

Muha Right.

Grimes You know what they are?

Muha Yeah.

Grimes So, um – then there were some of them. Now, over the years, the number of nurseries went up through the roof, and even the ferneries increased here, but the biggest ferneries were over in, um, Volusia County in a place called Pierson. Pierson is the "Fern Capital of the World." That was – that's their title actually. Apopka is the "Indoor Foliage Capital of the World," um, and so those were big thi – things. It became so big here. I mean, you could just drive up 40 – 441 and see, on either side of the road, signs for[sic] one company after another, you know, and, uh, the recession has hit them hard, but other than that, you know – so – so that's a – a general idea, and, uh, just the different kind of crops that there were and the s – size of the companies.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes Yeah.

0:19:03

Relations between farmworkers and crew leaders

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Muha And – and as for, uh, you know, the relations among the workers on – on these farms, I know you said that there wasn't – there isn't like a standard kind of model for how, uh, a farm looked, but could you – could you speak to – to what you noticed and what you heard from the farmworkers about, um, you know, the relations among different people, different populations, and – and how they, uh, perceived what – what their work condition was like [inaudible]?

Grimes Mmhmm, not sure I understand totally what you're asking, but, um – so if I don't answer it you can say that, but, um, as I said before, people didn't really know each other...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And they – the operations went through crew leaders for the outside work, um, and, uh, they were the ones that negotiated with the companies what the pay was – all would be, and[?] in the – in the groves, people had little – I don't know what I can say – little – not knowledge, but little ways to get the information as to really what did the crew leader and the boss say in the negotiation?

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Because, I mean, we've heard from people that they found out that the crew leader, for example, had negotiated the company for, let's say, 40 cents a bin of oranges or 45, and then for the crew leader, he negotiates himself another, let's say, 10 cents a bin. When he'd go to the people, he might say, you know, um, "All I could get for you was 40 cents," but he was going to be getting – take – he took the 5 cents away that would have given people 45 [cents]...

Muha Right.

Grimes And he added it to his own.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And there was no way of anybody ever knowing...

Muha Right.

Grimes What – what did he negotiate, you know? So there was that.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes It was less of crew leaders' style in the inside work, but people were not happy many times with what they were being paid. Um, eh, even – even if, like, if – if they were in groves, you might go to the grove at six in the morning, but if the

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bins weren't there yet—if it was a new grove, the bins weren't there yet—you might wait two hours for the crew leader to come with all of the equipment.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes You don't get paid for that.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes You only get paid for the bin that you pick, and it's been proven that what they say is a full bin is really the equivalent of two extra bins. So instead of being—I think it's 10 or 12—instead of—it was really two more than that.

Muha Right.

Grimes Um, so people knew they weren't getting paid properly.

Muha Right.

Grimes You know, but they didn't have many vehicles to deal with it. Um, they'd have smaller strikes of a crew in the field, you know? They'd just say "No." [*claps*] "I'm not doing any more today until you change it." Maybe it's bad—bad trees, and so, you know, you're not gonna get as much fruit out of it. So they'd say, "No, this is a bad grove. You've gotta raise what you're paying us for that." Um, [*inaudible*] I've lost any more of your question in my head, so...

Muha No, that was—that was good. Thank you, um, and you know—I know you said earlier too that crew leaders often pitted, uh, racial populations against one another.

Grimes Yeah.

Muha Um, well, I'm wondering does that—after that story, um, did the way the crew leaders treated[sic], uh, different, you know, workers of different ethnic backgrounds, did that vary? Was that different between black and Hispanic farmworkers?

Grimes You'd have to ask farmworkers that.

Muha Okay.

Grimes Eh, my observation is they treated them all pretty bad[sic] [*laughs*], you know? Um, maybe in some cases where people lived in a community together, um—like in the black community, maybe the crew leaders were a little better, 'cause they had to go back and live next door to people. Maybe in Hispanic community[sic],

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where they came from the same village and, therefore, you could go home and ruin their reputation, maybe that was – they treated them a little better.

Muha Okay.

Grimes But really, I don't remember ever hearing people say, "You know, we really got a good" [*laughs*] "crew leader," and we – and I'm sure they did, but, you know, I – I didn't hear it, you know?

Muha Right.

Grimes No, there was[sic] always complaints about, you know, the way they were treated, and sometimes actually, much of it was the company too, especially in the vegetables, you know? Even if the crew leader tried to get better stuff, company'd[sic] just say, "That's it" [*claps*], you know, "You want your crew to work?" [*claps*] "That's it."

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Yeah, so...

0:24:21

Migration to Florida and the development of muck farms

Muha Cool. Um, so yeah – so as far as black farmworkers in Apopka and broader Central Florida are concerned, um, uh, how did – do you know how much of them came to that line of work? How they came to be farmworkers in the area?

Grimes Um, probably not, but – but I can tell you what I think. Um, people came here from Alabama, Georgia, m – maybe some Mississippi, but mostly a lot of the people that I met came from Alabama and Georgia...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And the Carolinas, and, uh – and people came here – some people came here to do turpentine – you know, Tap the trees for turpentine. It was a big industry at one point in – early on. People came here for the railroad, and I think, even as I've read books, the orange industry was a gradual, you know, um, thing.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Um, but it came before the vegetables and the other stuff. The vegetables really came during the[sic] – World War II, when they decided to drain pieces of the lake that[?] was like a – the leavings of a prehistoric, um, glaciers[sic], you know, and, I mean, everybody always says you – you look at the – the soil o – on the

muck and all you have to do is tr—throw a seed in it, look at it, and it grows. I mean it's like very fertile soil.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Um, and um, so the, um, uh—but in World War II, as I said, when they needed food for the troops—fresh food—they decided to do that—I don't know any dates—but—and so they, um—so they drained part of the lakes...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And they—and I don't know if the companies ever paid for these or any of tha—but the reality is they started to grow lot of vegetables.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And then, when they found a way to keep them from rotting, it just became a bigger and bigger industry, and initially, as I said, German prisoners of war worked out on the—Lake Apopka.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes And, uh, when the war was over, then, um, black farmworkers took that over, and, uh—and there would probably have been some Hispanics—mostly Mexican Americans—who came here. Um, a—a—what the percentage is, I don't know, but I know there were for years, uh, Mexican-American bars a—a—you know, around to cater to that community, and, uh, so—but mostly, it was black farmworkers. Um, not just from here, but people came from, um, South Florida and other parts of the state to do—to do that work, and they lived in rental housing, if they didn't own their own housing.

Muha Mmhmm.

0:27:47

Shifting racial dynamics and pesticide exposure

Grimes Um, so, uh—i—i—and as—it wasn't until the—I think, really the '80s that a large influx of Hispanics, um, came, and I noticed that you did say something in there about, um, Hispanics replacing African Americans, and I think one of the issues was—the last generation that I saw that really worked out on the fields, um, was a generation that probably, uh—let me see—I'm trying to estimate age—but, like probably would now be in their 60s. Um, most of the younger people didn't want to work out there, although some did. Some did, but a large percentage of them found other kinds of jobs.

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One thing happened a—a—a juice plant a—um, developed in Plymouth, which is right next door, and it was, uh, uh, better pay, indoor work, not so backbreaking. So, uh, when that, um—when the juice plant opened, a lot of people in the black community went to work there, and, uh—and they were paid better, as I said, better working conditions. So that—one of the things that diverted the—some of the black community from working out in the fields. Um, eventually, through some, eh—well, I won't say this on tape, um—but the juice pant[sic]—plant closed, um, and, uh, a—and a lot of those workers lost their jobs. M—few went back into the fields or the groves, but most sought other kind of work, um, with different companies, 'cause by then, [Walt] Disney [World Resort] was here. Disney came in '71. So by then, different companies were here and different places had opened up to work—not just Disney, um—tourist industry, but also in other companies that came down here, because it became like a purple place for industries to—to relocate.

Muha Okay, so if I'm following you correctly, I mean—one of the reasons you think there was a shift in—in Rachel[sic]—racial populations was because there were no opportunities?

Grimes Mmhmm.

Muha And...

Grimes Yeah.

Muha That—and that many of the black farmworkers, or many of the people that would become black farmworkers, uh—perhaps before you came here—likely got into that line of work because it was a good opportunity for them you think?

Grimes Yes, be—the—the new kind of work.

Muha Right.

Grimes Yeah, yeah, and so it wasn't just—wasn't just that people came and replaced them as much as—there was a vacuum and they filled that vacuum.

Muha Okay, and—and do you think that—do you think that, um, former black farmworkers today, or perhaps, uh, if there are still people, uh, you know, perhaps in their 70s or 80s who are still farming today or acting as farmhand—farmhands, do you think they would say the same as what you just said?

Grimes I don't know. I really don't know. Um, they may feel that their jobs were taken. I don't know.

Muha Mmhmm.

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- Grimes** But the reality is that even if you went to the carrot houses, they were working together. I mean, they were – th – there – there weren't crews like there were outside. They were mixed, you know? So there were Hispanics and African-Americans all working on the – on the lines in the carrot houses and stuff. So I don't know if it – I don't know if any of them ever thought of why, you know, 'cause I don't think I ever asked them.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** Um, but, uh, I think a – for a lot of them, they'd say they don't want to work that hard. They don't want to be – that it's too hard of work.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** And also because of the pesticide exposure...
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** I think many families discouraged their youth from working out in the fields, because a number of them have had children who have had debilitating diseases. Um, [systemic] lupus [erythematosus] is very prevalent around Apopka area, and, uh, that can come from exposure to pesticides, and a number of other diseases. They've done research on Lake Apopka on the alligators there, and, uh, their, uh, reproductive organs are – are sh – shrunk or ruined. Uh, their – their new alligators were m – malformed. Uh, a – and they apparently have one of the closest – closest, um, biological network that we humans do. So – so there was a lot of, um – of that kind of, um, stuff – of people discouraging, I think, their children from – "I don't want my children doing hard work like I'm doing." One generation always wants the next generation to do better, you know, and it's true for everybody, and so I would guess they encouraged them to stay in school, 'cause a lot of the farmworkers – the older ones that I knew – hadn't finished high school. Some of the younger ones had, but, um, not a lot of the older ones. Maybe like – maybe they were lucky if they finished elementary, you know? So...
- Muha** Right, right. So, I mean – so you think there were, uh, a few causes of, you know, the shift in the – the dominant population...
- Grimes** Mmhmm, yeah.
- Muha** Of farmworkers?
- Grimes** Yeah.

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- Muha** And you would say that many of it was – m – much of it was because of, you know, exposure to pesticides and unfair work as well as an opportunity to – to – to do better?
- Grimes** Yeah.
- Muha** Right.
- Grimes** Mmhmm.
- Muha** Um, and that...
- Grimes** And with the increase of other companies coming here...
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** People had – had more options.
- Muha** Okay.
- Grimes** ‘Cause in the beginning, you know, th – there just weren’t that many options here.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** And, you know, the other thing is, um, eh – eh – Central Florida has a history of racism – very strong history, um, of the [Ku Klux] Klan. We have a county – Lake County – um, where the, um – the sheriff was elected for whatever – 10 terms or something – Willis [V.] McCall, eh, controlled a lot of the mentality of the white owners. Um, I mean, it was the Klan there. So even if you didn’t subscribe to the plan, you had to be a hearty individual to buck something that they wanted...
- Muha** Right.
- Grimes** Done, and so people who worked there – for companies from there had, um – were not only controlled by the company, but the Klan saw that your worker did something, was too uppity – or whatever the words are, you know – didn’t toe the line, they – they would go to the companies, um, and say, “We’re taking so-and-so to teach him a lesson.”
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** You know, “It’s your worker, and you better see that this is” – so they’d either take the owner and the worker or whatever, and, uh, they had a place called “the Stomping Grounds,” and – and they stomped people. So – not to mention the

other things they did – whip them and stuff. So, you know, that – I don't think we can underestimate how strong the racism wa – is here, um, that controlled, uh, um, what some owners – how some owners may have treated their workers.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes You know, and I think that could have easily discouraged some people from wanting to do that kind of work.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes Yeah.

0:37:04 Shutdown of Lake Apopka

Muha So it seems like from what you're saying – I mean, there were a lot of forces discouraging black farmworkers from staying in – in that profession, and from their kids wanting to – to inherit that – that type of position. Um, I'm wondering – do you know of, um – a – and what do you think about, uh, black farmworkers who perhaps didn't pursue that though – who – who stayed in – in that line of work and – and who, you know – and for as long as the – the farms opened in – in Lake Apopka, um, you know – what do you think – how do you think that the – the shift occurring among – among racial populations affected their work and their attitude?

Grimes Mm, I don't get it.

Muha Okay.

Grimes Mm,-mm.

Muha Um...

Grimes Well, let me – let me just...

Muha Okay.

Grimes Say something and then if it's not what you meant – some – some people liked what they did.

Muha Right.

Grimes They didn't like what they were paid. They didn't like how they were treated, but they liked what they did. So even when the farms were starting to close, you couldn't convince some people that they were gonna close, because the owners

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would say, “No, I mean, why would we close this? We’re making money and all this,” and they – I think it was what they knew to do. It was they[?] – what they liked to do, and they – and they really didn’t have the skill to do other things to start with. So – so for many of them, they did stay in the jobs for, um, let’s say, in the – on the muck for a long, long time. Up until they got their pink slip [*claps*].

Muha Right.

Grimes Surprise, surprise.

Muha Right.

Grimes Alright. Right before Christmas. Thank you very much. Um, so, um, is that what you meant?

Muha Yeah.

Grimes Yeah, uh-huh. They’ll, um – eh, but then the state did a – what[?] they got pushed to do – a retraining.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes Do you know anything about the sale of the property and all that?

Muha The sale of the...

Grimes The...

Muha Of Lake Apopka?

Grimes The muck land and all that.

Muha I don’t.

Grimes No? Jeannie [Economos] will tell you a good deal about that, um, and get her to, ‘cause it – it’s a context in which it all goes – and, uh, some of them did take classes afterwards to try and upgrade their skills, but for some of them, they had so far to go it was discouraging, you know, and they weren’t – they needed an income [*laughs*] while they did that, and the income that was presented to them wasn’t really a real, live person income, you know? So, uh, again, discourage people from learning new skills and everything else. So...

Muha Right.

Grimes Yeah.

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- Muha** So for those that did stay – what you’re talking about...
- Grimes** Mmhmm.
- Muha** Um, did you see, or – or have you seen how, you know, the higher proportion of – of Hispanic farmworkers in – in the groves or on the – in the fields – um, how did that affect their work? Do you know?
- Grimes** Well, once they decided to close all the fields, there was nobody[sic] gonna be working.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** So people had to go find other things. Um, for the groves, when we had the three freezes of the ‘80s – 8 – ‘83, ‘85, and ‘89 – I think that’s what the years – um, the owners of the groves sold them for development around here and moved south. So unless the black farmworkers wanted to leave their families and go south, there weren’t that many groves left. There are groves, but compared with before, very small, very small. So that was another th – thing that changed. So even though a lot of black farmworkers w – worked in the groves, when they all went away – I mean, we’re talking about really south. Down in Bonita Springs – that whole area down there – Immokalee, and that whole area.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** Um, we are the – we were the north end of the oranges and grapefruit. Well, actually, we didn’t have grapefruits up here – very few of the oranges, and so, when all the groves went, you know [*claps*], you didn’t have an option of other work to do up here.
- Muha** Okay.
- Grimes** Except for the few groves that remained.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** And some workers still work over – they work over on the, uh – on the beach near Cape Canaveral and stuff. – some of the older pickers that – that’s still going on.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** But it just is way down from what it used to be. Way down.
- Muha** Mmhmm.

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- Grimes** So...
- Muha** Okay.
- Grimes** Is that— is that what you were asking?
- Muha** Yeah, that's a fine answer.
- Grimes** Mmhmm.
- Muha** So, um...
- Grimes** So there were a lot of other factors, I guess, is what I'm saying...
- Muha** Right.
- Grimes** That went into the black community leaving farm work here.
- Muha** Right.
- Grimes** Um, weather [*laughs*]...
- Muha** [*inaudible*].
- Grimes** And, um, pollution [*laughs*].
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** You know, 'cause it was the w— way the growers polluted Lake Apopka. Lake Apopka used to be the premier bass fishing lake in this state. People came from all over the country to fish Lake Apopka.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** Now, if you put your hand in— here's the surface, and you put your hand down here, you're lucky if you see your hand.
- Muha** Oh, yeah.
- Grimes** Uh-huh. I mean they ruined the whole lake, and it was them not doing anything with the runoff, and it was the state not knowing to do something...
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Grimes** To force them to do...

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Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes The runoff.

Muha Right.

Grimes But companies have a lot of power in Tallahassee. So...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes It's also got[sic] something to do with it.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes Mmhmm.

0:43:13 **The legacy of black farmworkers and *Dowdell v. City of Apopka***

Muha So, I mean, having looked back on all this now, do you think black farmworkers have been included or remembered in Florida history?

Grimes Well, they've been remembered, but[?] by those of us who pay attention to them. Um, there is a, um, eh – do you know about Crealdé School of Art...

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes In Winter Park? Well, um, we and the Farmworker Association have worked a lot with, um, eh, [Peter] Schreyer. Um, I don't know. I've just lost his first name. David?² Yeah – is it?

Muha I'm not sure.

Grimes My God, I can't believe I don't remember his name. Anyway, it'll come to me [*claps*], but, um, anyway, he's the director, and he's done a lot of photography projects out here. In fact, the ministry has done probably four with him, and in conjunction with the Farmworker Association, they did one called "The Last Harvest," and they interviewed workers, they took pictures of families, et cetera, and they – it's now in the archives of the state, and I understand that "The Last Harvest" is showing in Winter Garden, at this time. So you might want to go there and see it. I'm not sure exactly what buildings, but they're there – which is kind of miraculous for W – Winter Garden 'cause like all the other cities here, they wanted the people to work, but they didn't want 'em to live here, you know, like, 'cause they're disruptive people and, you know – we don't – you

² Correction: Peter Schreyer.

know, they ruin – they ruin the – the city – meaning for the white people and you know.

So – so, uh, there have been a number of things that happened in Winter Garden where even – there was one – you’ve[?] met Sister Ann [Kendrick] – who you met when she made her final vows. She wanted to have the reception in the city, um, auditor – not auditorium, but this – in – in the thing on the lake where they used to have a lot of the receptions and stuff, and we actually had tapes of their meeting – of the [Winter Garden] City Council meeting that said, “Oh, Sister Ann asked for the reception for, uh, a big thing she’s having. Um, what do you think we should do?” “Well, you know they’re going to bring those farmworkers in, and we know we don’t want them. They’re so rowdy and they’re blah blah blah blah” – all this stuff about that, and, uh – and they actually said it on the tapes of the city council meeting.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes So, I mean, that’s been the attitude of – and the attitude here in Apopka has been, um – ‘cause we did – [City of] Apopka lost a major federal lawsuit,³ um, brought by members of the black community, um, to improve sewer, water, eh, paving, lights, and, uh, that – you know, they – and they even [*laughs*] lied about the stuff that was on – that – on the – uh, what do you call it – um, the designs – the engineering papers that – that – just at the very end of the trial, it was – you need six-inch pipes down the street, and then the small pipes go off of that, and, uh, people would say, “Oh.” We used to have local store – food stores here and they’d say – they’d meet each other. “Well, I guess I better be going now because” – as they’d talk to each other – “Cause I turned the water on for a bath before I left town, so by now there oughta be enough in there that maybe I can get a bath,” and – and one of the people in the city happened to say, “Oh, well, that’s ‘cause they only have two-inch pipelines down the street,” and the lawyer said, “But it shows six-inch pipelines.” No, no six-inch pipelines in the black community. Um, so they were two-inch, and there’s the – so – and – and most of the black community there were in farm work. So it – it all influences how people felt they were treated.

Muha Okay.

Grimes You know, it’s – it’s not – it’s not separate, you know – the way they were treated, and – and the towns have a lot to do also with how they, um – how they felt about not being people of importance. Yeah, may seem like it’s irrelevant, but to me, it’s all a package, you know? So...

³ *Dowdell v. City of Apopka*.

Muha Mmhmm. Well, thank you so much. Is there – is there anything you want to say about the past, or anything you want – pertain – pertaining to this topic?

Grimes Um, I think it – it might be nice for you to go to the Apopka Museum.⁴ I’m trying to work up enough courage that I’m not nasty when I go in, but, um, apparently there – the entire room is all what the black – what the white people have done, and then there’s like a piece of the wall – they tell me about this – about – like from here to here, that’s – even alludes to the black community.

Muha It’s a small portion on a wall?

Grimes Yeah, I mean, just – it just gives you, uh, a glimpse, and when we had demonstrations here in town for the sewer and for the water and all that, and, uh, I remember the mayor saying, “Sister, we were going to do those things, but y’all just wanted us to move too fast.” I said, “Well, Mayor, this is the ‘80s, and civil rights came in the ‘60s, and I think 20 years is not moving,” [laughs] but – but it’s – and it’s people – people coming from the outside who see there’s a difference – thing.

0:49:51

Segregation

Grimes The other thing happened[sic] here was people moved into Apopka, and – and this is just – of – of the black community. Th – the [U.S Route] 441 divided the white and black community, literally. I don’t know if you’ve ever driven on the black side of town, but literally. After the railroad tracks, there were two blocks where there were businesses, and then the railroad tracks, and for – most of the city got divided white from black, um, and in fact, in Apopka in the ‘30s, people were starting to integrate, and at that time, the [Apopka] City Council passed a whatever – ordinance law – I don’t know what it was called – that any whites who owned land below the railroad tracks – I’m sure they phrased it differently – could rent it, but they couldn’t live there, ‘cause people were living side by side.

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes And any blacks who owned land on the white side of town had to sell it, ‘cause neither could they live there or rent it. So it totally segregated Apopka in the ‘30s, and, uh, you can see that segregation still going on, and, again, it’s – it’s all a piece of the same thing. It’s – you know, you do farm work – people would say, “Oh, I lock my doors when I drive through South Apopka to get to Winter Garden,” ‘cause in the old days, that’s the way you used to go. “Really? Why?” [laughs] “Well, you know, it’s a dangerous part of town.” “Really? I live there.” “Oh, well, aren’t you scared?” “No,” you know? It’s, eh, eh – the whole – so

⁴ Correction: Museum of the Apopkans

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when you're treated like that way for a long time, I don't know, you begin to get, uh – maybe, you begin to get the impression that that's the way it's always gonna be, and young people didn't want to take that. A lot of young people left this community – a lot of them. A lot of the young kids that were in – as I said, we lived in the black community – a lot of the young kids on our street left.

Muha Yeah.

Grimes And the ones that stayed got into drugs, got into other stuff. Not all, but too many.

Muha Right.

Grimes You know?

0:52:41 **Closing remarks**

Grimes So – so it's another reason, you know? Kids wanted to – they didn't want to do the hard work that their parents did with nothing to show for it, and they wanted to do something that would give them more dignity, you know? Although farmworkers sometimes say that, "I have the most wonderful job in the nation. I feed you."

Muha Mmhmm.

Grimes "Without me, what would you do?" You know, so – but – yeah, so that's it for the most part.

Muha Great. Well, thank you so much. Uh, this is concluding the interview. October 10th, 2014.

End of Interview