

Interview with Ms. Blondell DeCoursey featuring Jessica

Total Runtime: 38:20

[[00:00:00]] PG WATKINS: Thank you, great, OK, so... lovely. So... you said you lived there from 1942 to 1957?

MS. BLONDELL DECOURSEY: Yes, ma'am [sic], that's gonna be the, er... time zone that I'm gonna be discussing with you that, er, Brewster Center offered when I lived in that area, yes.

PG WATKINS: Oh, beautiful, OK...

MS. BLONDELL DECOURSEY: OK...

PG WATKINS: So, yeah... whatever... I would love to just hear whatever initially--initial thoughts you had that you wanted to share, any stories that you wanted to share about your time in Black Bottom.

MS. BLONDELL DECOURSEY (*overlap*): OK, I wanted to— (*pause*)

MS. BLONDELL DECOURSEY: Okey-dokey. So, I wanted to tell you that of course I was able to always walk there, you know, because—because it wasn't that—it wasn't that far from us... And, er... I wanna mention to you that I'm—I don't know if you've ever heard of him or not, of course... Joe Louis, a famous boxer. There's Sugar Ray Robinson; he was a boxer. And they had these boxing, er... trainers training downstairs in the basement at Brewster Center. We would have, er... erm... er... the auditorium that we would have access to and we had plays, (*indistinguishable*) fashion shows, movies. And not only did the residents in that area come, but people from different areas of, you know, erm... neighborhoods would come and share these programs with us. And we had, er, dancing, and, er... I used to work at the window as you'd come in to Brewster Center because that was for tickets for swimming, and also ping-pong ball, tennis in a special room; and gym. We had dancing, we had— 'cause we had three levels, I would think. We had the basement, the first floor, the second floor—I think counting the basement that would be three levels. They had cooking lessons, sewing lessons, we also had the large field that had four diamonds and we played baseball, football, and we were allowed to go in there if we were just gonna swing, or maybe come down a sliding board... Whatever it is, there was a certain place on the playground that you go in and you get to the chair that you needed. You would, er... you know, go pick it up or whatever. 'Course by that time we had Black, er... individuals who like— They had coaches for the girls' basketball team, which I played, basketball. And we also had, er... coaches for, erm... the gentlemen. Are you familiar with Will Robinson, who used to be the Pistons', er... coach? Will Robinson?

PG WATKINS (*pause*): I... I rec—I recognize that name, mm-hmm...

MS. BLONDELL DECOURSEY: Oh, OK. So Will Robinson was the basketball coach for, er... our basketball—

PG WATKINS (*overlap*): But I wouldn't know much about him...

PG WATKINS: ...but I can recognize him, yeah.

MS. BLONDELL DECOURSEY: OK, well that was for Sidney D. Miller High School, was the only Black-predominant high school in the area. And we had Will Robinson. We used to win the championships al—always. Erm... basketball and track and Aaro—I'm going so fast I know of so much. But, er... Aaron Gordon, he was a famous track star...

[[00:03:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: ...for years. That was from Sidney D. Miller High School, but anyway... But they would practice running, sometimes at Brewster, you know, on their field. You know, practicing it. It wasn't the school—which also, I want to mention to you, that Sid—I told you that was the only Black-predominant school in the city of Detroit, is that correct? Okey-dokey. So when all the Miller high— Our Miller High— would have a basketball tournament—basketball—but all our championship games, we would have to play at Brewster, 'cause we did not have the facilities at Sidney D. Miller High School. So at Brewster Center — which, keep in mind, that was also on Hastings and the corner of Brewster which, you know, now is Chrysler freeway... Hastings, OK? So, and all students would go over and whatever would always come there. We had these maternity—you call them, erm... er... 'frat—'... I think it was 'colleges'. You know? And they would come there and play their games there at Brewster Center. Sumn' else I want to tell you about— Oh, I told you about the movies, and the swimming...

PG: Well...

MS. DECOURSEY: ...dancing... Go ahead. Did you wanna ask some questions? Maybe I'm going too fast... We have cooking...

PG (*overlap*): No, I love what you're...

(*Pause*)

MS. DECOURSEY: We had cooking, sewing...

PG (*overlap*): No... I'm good to hear...

PG: ...Yeah.

MS. DECOURSEY: (*indistinguishable*) I mentioned to you that we had cooking upstairs, and we had, er... what was—? With teaching [?] up there, of course... if you wanted it. Cooking, sewing, and art. We also had someone there to teach that. And I would, er... I worked at the window as you come in the door. You had to get a ticket to go to swimming or to the teen—I'm getting too fast, I'm gonna slow down... We had *teen-age* dancing... erm... that was on Sunday. You know? We had to go over there, so that's what you'd get the tickets—to come to the dance. Saturdays we had roller-skating. That was in the afternoon—late afternoon. We had roller-skating; you had to get a ticket for *that*. And, so, lemme see what else did we have... Gee whiz, erm... I'm tryna think what else we had...

(Another voice is heard in the background on MS. DECOURSEY's end — JESSICA.)

PG *(to JESSICA)*: Oh! I—

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh, yeah, I grew up in the Brewster Projects. Erm... What were you saying, ma'am?

PG: Oh, I'm sorry. You know, the way the phones are working... It's like... But the...

(Something rubs against mic—loud noise)

PG: I was just wondering how old you were, when you were saying you worked at the—

MS. DECOURSEY: Right and— Oh, I must've been... Oh, my God, my lifestyle— I would say, maybe— Oh, gee whiz... Hmm... ten... eleven. It was my lifestyle, let me tell you, 'cause I lost my mother ver— I knew of my mother, you know. She passed away at thirty-two. So I must've been... Oh, I dunno. I wasn't no nineteen or twenty, I know. Eleven, twelve, or whatever. But the one day my dad said, "You're not goin' nowhere from here unless you eat something." But I used to always just run over there, as— Every chance I got, I was out that door and I was there all day long and I was involved in *anything— everything*, honey. But, er... you know... All the schools came there for the championship games. You know? 'Fraternity Beat' they called it. It was a fat— It was a fraternity. And... fr— It started with an 'f'. But they had these teams and I can't name all their—the names of the schools, but... All these teams, there for the championship...

[[00:06:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: ...games we did, everyone did. 'Cause we did have the bleachers and all of that. Oh! We also did that— I don't know the name of it, but our gym teacher... I can't think of her name... I can't think of her name... but, you know, they teach you... You get in groups, and when you— They learn you to do certain things and you form different kinds of, erm... What's that word? When you have these, erm... These marching bands or— not marching bands, but it... She'd tell you what it is and you— you make... What would you call it? It'd form these figures and whatever... *(JESSICA says something indistinguishable)* I dunno what it was called, but it—we—it had to do with marching. And everyone had a certain group, and when she said certain things, you'd do this, you'd do that... and you formed something, I can't think what it was called. We had that on Saturdays, we did. Then you'd have people come in with different—other group—

PG *(overlap)*: *(indistinguishable)*

MS. DECOURSEY: What was that again?

PG: *(pause)* I'm sorry... No, you can continue. My bad...

MS. DECOURSEY: And I—I'm sorry I don't recall the name but anyway you got through, you need all types of forms or—I dunno what it is, I can't think of the name of it. But you ended up... makin'... Can't think of it—I gotta think of the name of it...

JESSICA: Formation?

MS. DECOURSEY: Formation! It was formation, yes, but a different type... It...

JESSICA: Oh...

MS. DECOURSEY: It...it...it has to do with formation...

JESSICA: (*indistinguishable*)

MS. DECOURSEY: You know, cert— certain group go here, she called that group to go there, and you make up some type of—whatever, I can't think of how to describe it, yet. But we were taught that. But we had some very good, er... coaches there. Women for the—for the females and, you know, gentlemen for the male—whatever. And it always had a—a—a coach—you see—of some kind, for the plays and the, er... for the movies, and —I dunno—modeling. We'd have modeling and—well, everything, you know. I'm just tryna think of this—of anything I'm leaving out. Oh! I know what it was... Oh, I almost forgot that... We learned for that to—I believe... I think we had this at Brewster, because I knew we were learning how to draft— At the time, it was Detroit News and Detroit *Times*. But there was a craft journalism, like they were teaching you, yeah, Mr. (*indistinguishable*) ... And he used to teach us, but he w—he... taught us how to... put a paper together... You know, what you do—with your articles? And how you determined, you know, where to put it and whatever in your titles and all that. And then they took us to where they printed news... Detroit Times and the Detroit News. We did all that too, we did... Mr., er... Kin— Kin— What's his name? Mr. Kinnard. Yeah. Anyway... So we had—we had that. I'm tryin' to think of something else, there was so much goin' on, my goodness...

JESSICA: (*indistinguishable*)

PG: So... so what else did you... did you do? Erm... I hear you talking about the Brewster recreation center. Did you... go other places? Were there other places that you liked to go, while you were living there, or—?

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh, yeah! We—we—like, they came to our facilities and we went to theirs as well! Yeah, we'd always go... all the city of Detroit, whatever it was, we'd always... They came to our facilities...

[[00:09:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: ...we went to *their* facilities, we did. So... I'm tryin' to think, was it anything, erm...? Hmm...

(*Crosstalk with JESSICA and PG*)

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh! Right... oh, dancing! Oh, well, well, hold on, darlin' ... Yes. Well, we'd leave Brewster Center on Sunday. We would go to what they call the "Fourth Club". It could've been Greystone Ballroom... It could've been—What's the other one, honey? Another one... There was like a— Woodward Avenue! Yes... We'd all go— Everybody'd meet up and go there. Mad— Did I say Madison Ballroom? There was Madison Ballroom, Greystone Ballroom, and there was another one. That's what we did for activity, yes-indeedy. And all the theaters down there on Sundays, oh yes. Anyways, every kind of theater you could think of was on Woodward Avenue and Adams down there, dear. On Adams downtown? The Adam, the Fox, the Colonial, the— oh, what's the name of 'em? Oh, sure, we'd go to— I can't think about them. Colonial— Fine Arts Theater! Oh yes! Yeah, we'd wait up till everyone meet up at either one of those places, you know. And then we'd go out eatin'... Where was that place where they had those, erm...? What's that man's name on Linwood, had those—? He was known for his corned-beef sandwiches. We'd all meet up there, honey, after the dances, late at night, 'cause they didn't close until about two or three o'clock! And we had these... they had these roast beef—we called it... roast-beef sandwiches. I can't think of his name! I hate that... Very famous. We'd all leave the rec centers or wherever we went there for dinners or whatever... I... What's that Chinese place on John R? You remember that? You ever hear of it?

JESSICA: Mm-mmm...

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh! I hate it. Oh, dear... It was a Chinese place on, er... John... Was that John R? ... Oh, I hate I could think of it... What I'll do is if I could think of the name of it, I know someone I could call and I'll let Jessie... er, Jessica know what it is. We'd all meet up there. Chinese— What was his name...? It was a Chinese— Oh! And I want to mention to you, dear— Almost forgot the important thing. Back in those days, just about *every* business was *Black*! Pawnshops, grocery stores... er, supermarkets, fish markets, and, er... Oh, my God... Oh, whatever! I just can't think of all of 'em. They had theaters on Hastings: There was Castle and the Arc— Castle and the— What was it? There was another one... Two or three of 'em on erm... Hastings. Yes. Mayfair? What was it? The... Mayfair? But we had a lot of theaters. Let's put it like that. OK? It went from... Fourth Avenue...

PG: When you go...

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh, yes?

PG: When you would go dancing at the clubs that you mentioned, how old were you then? Was that still when you were like, eleven or—?

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh! I would say, because before I was married, because I was maybe about eighteen. Eighteen years old. But of course I put my age up when Douglas was takin' me to the... the bars and places and the... nightclubs. Oh! Wait a minute. What's that club down—? Oh, I... can't think of it... Adam...

[[00:12:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: Oh, that... I'm gonna have Jessica call you back, darlin'. Because those the *days*. But down on Adams was *two* of 'em... And they're from Sunday. We all went to the *ballroom* dancin'... Oh, I gotta call you back in case... (*laughs*) And ballroom

dancing! Yes-indeedy. That was on Adams and Hastings, I believe it was. All up and down Hastings, honey, was nothin' but entertainment—you name it, they had it. And they were Black-operated—they had it all... I can't think I had... Zalaznik [?] Fishery was on the street I lived on— Division between St. Antoine and Hastings. Zalaznik Fisheries, I— My brother— bro— brother worked there, Rudolph Louis [?]. Baby, I gotta find out those other names. Imma ask you, erm... Paige, Imma have to have Jessica call you back 'cause I want to get that gentleman's name that had that Chinese place... He was very famous— *Everybody* knew about him... Where did we work—? Oh, there was another one. What was that club? Oh, girl... Oh, my goodness! I'll have to call you back, darlin'! What was that club? I'll have to call...

PG: It's OK! I'm totally open...

MS. DECOURSEY: I'm gonna have Jessica call you back. Be—because they had this nightclub down there, and I mean— Oh, honey, I got to call you back... I must... I'm about to call Winnifred and somebody that we hung out—and Betty Jo may know... But I was eighteen, ma'am... 'cause like I say, to go into some of the clubs I had to put my age up... and that was with no ID. So I'd tell maybe nineteen or twenty or somethin' like that so I could get in, 'cause everybody else was three years older than I was... You know what I'm sayin'... I didn't hang around with them young boys from the high school or whatever. But anyway... Imma have Jessica call you back and give you this other information, so I can gather it. What's the name of that Chinese place? But I—Imma give it to her and have her call you back 'cause I forgot all about that. Gotta get that club down there on Adams, honey! And that was owned by Blacks...

PG: Can I ask you one more question real quick before we— get off the phone?

MS. DECOURSEY: Yeah, yes. Please do.

PG: OK. Erm... when... You said that y'all lived there till 1957? Where did y'all go after—after that? Where did your family move or where did you move?

MS. DECOURSEY: Erm... where did we move to? Here we go, so... Douglas and I met when I lived on Division... 'cause, er... the first—where I met Douglas was at the Madison... I think it was the Madison ballroom 'cause there was two across the street because people wanted another... because I came with Betty Jo and she told— I was jealous, I didn't have no money to get in. But I must've been... hm... Well, I was out of school. I'd have to be eighteen.

JESSICA: Mm-hmm...

MS. DECOURSEY: I'd have to be eighteen 'cause I was out of school. But I was thought— The clubs I would go to I'd raise my... my, erm... you know, kinda lie about my age. You see? To get into nightclubs. But I'll get back... But I was erm... I was eighteen. 'Cause I met Douglas, I was just...

JESSICA: (*indistinguishable*)

MS. DECOURSEY: I— I was in high school. As a matter of fact... Yeah, I think I was out of high school when I met Douglas. *(Pause)* No I didn't! I thought he didn't go to the— no. I must've met Doug when I was seventeen or eighteen...

[[00:15:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: ...at some dance, that Betty Jo and I went—didn't have my money to get in.

JESSICA: Where did you—where did you move there, from Black Bottom...?

MS. DECOURSEY: Yeah, she tell me— I'm tryna think, erm... Douglas and I got married in 1950. We stayed with his mother for a while, we did...

JESSICA: *(indistinguishable)*

MS. DECOURSEY: Yeah, I—

JESSICA: She was on the West Side, right?

MS. DECOURSEY: Yes, she was on the West Side. That's right. So then Doug was going to Northwestern High School. And that's why we stayed with his mother after I got married. And then that— 'cause I remember my dad said, "Well, you—" I paid mine back home, but I wasn't... blah, blah, blah... He'd say, "Get on back to home with your husband." So I was about seventeen or eighteen, I believe I was. I think I was— I was outta high school, yes. I was outta high school.

JESSICA: So you moved to the West Side?

MS. DECOURSEY: So I moved to the West Side, yes. I moved to the West Side because Douglas was going to Northwestern. And that's how I met all his friends, and that's when we started hangin' out goin' here, goin' there, whatever. Yes.

PG: OK. And you graduated—

MS. DECOURSEY: West Side... The West Side on— I'll tell you what street it was... Northfield, darlin'. Where Northwestern High School was— what street was it, I can't think. But it must've... He went to Northwestern High School so it was in that area. And I went to Bishop Elementary which was right off of Hastings. Bishop Elementary School...

PG *(overlap)*: OK, then...

PG: Bishop Elementary and then where'd you go for middle school and high school?

MS. DECOURSEY: I went— I went to Wayne County Community College, as a matter of fact I took subjects that I thought that I would need to work for tally girl services. So... I would take subjects at Wayne County— I went to UofM for a while, 'cause I was... So I finished that up, but I got two years of, erm... community college, I did, you know?

JESSICA: You went to Miller High School, though?

MS. DECOURSEY: Was it—? Miller High School! Sidney D. Miller High School's where I went. I also went to Wayne State University, UofM, takin', you know, subjects that I'd— maybe for two years. You know? From Wayne... erm... wherever. But I had children. I was married then.

JESSICA: You remember the middle school you went to?

MS. DECOURSEY: Yeah, Bi— I went to only Bishop. That's the only school I went to.

JESSICA (*overlap*): Oh! OK...

MS. DECOURSEY: Bishop Elementary School off of Hastings on the—

JESSICA: (*indistinguishable*)

MS. DECOURSEY: At 15th [?]. It had K through 8.

PG (*overlap*): Oh, OK.

PG: So this is going back to eighth grade.

MS. DECOURSEY (*to JESSICA*): What'd she say?

PG: That was until eighth grade— you went to Miller High...

MS. DECOURSEY: Miller High! Exactly. And after I finished Miller High School and I had two ki— had children, then after I was working, because I worked for tally girl services and I worked for every place you could think of— banks, lawyers, IRS... I-don't-know-who, all downtown. I went to virtually every bank downtown and whatever. Wherever tally girls sent me, honey... That's what I did. Then, actually, I took some subjects because I, erm... What did I do? I'm tryna think... My main job was—what a minute, lemme concentrate—B&W Interstate... in Allen Park. I was... It's a place they had for trucks— Of course, I di—did the payroll for... Each one had a certain amount of drivers. And I worked there for five years, for B&W Interstate in Allen Park, Michigan. I did the payroll, and we did all the— You know?— profits and checks and all of that, you know. Then after that, I retired after five years. I— Actually, that's the first job I had...

[[00:18:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: ...for— for, you know, for a long time. 'Cause the only other one was those tally girl services. I worked and I *felt* like working, you know. If I decided I wanted to take it— I worked for banks, and I-don't-know-what all... Yes. There you go.

JESSICA: Alright, now you...

MS. DECOURSEY: Tell me... (to Jessica) Yes, go ahead...

JESSICA: Start when you were growin' up... in Brewster Projects... You had a big family, some of them—

MS. DECOURSEY: Yeah, there was nine of us in the Brewster Projects. We crossed the street from Cole's Funeral Home on Mack Street, right off of Hastings, honey. Cole's Funeral Home, darlin'. I even worked in there for a little while. It was right across the street from us. That was in the Projects, yes. But I didn't stay there long, and when I met Douglas and we started rooming and it carried on... That's when we got married, 'cause I got *pregnant*. And that's what it is. And that's when I left the Projects, yeah. But we lived there for about, I forgot how many— Honey, we lived at... My dad used to move all the time. And we were on Division a *long* time, now, on Division, dear. With an ice hoc [?]*—* whatever. We lived on there... It was all kinds of stuff, but anyway... My—my dad was always moving, and he said... The last time I remember moving before we got married, he said he was gonna move out. I was so happy. Here we'd moved four streets down and that was when we, er... It was on Division... It was the Projects, and then... I'm tryna think, after we left Division, where did we go? I dunno where it— I don't recall, can't remember that. But anyway, it was just... always, most of the time, I lived on the East Side until Douglas and I met, and then we— we lived with his mother on the West Side. So Northfield, between... I forgot, what was that? Can't think of those two side streets, but then it was on Northfield, but in the area of Northwestern High School. And that's where I met his... friends and whatever. And it went on from there.

So it was Bishop Elementary School, and like I said, er... I think that school, it might've been mixed, I'm not sure. But, er... we... I, er... I know Miller was predominantly Black. You know? And... but we had all white teachers, all Caucasian teachers and whatever... but they were very *good* teachers. And they used to take— I told you they took us downtown, so when there was sometimes, they had journalism, didn't I? And learned how, just... you know... what's the word you gonna do? Set up a *paper*, like Detroit New— well, at the time it was the Detroit News and the Detroit Times. And they taught you that, so... that's really all I can remember right now, (JESSICA is heard b.g.) yes... I'm tryin' to think... But we always went to the dances! Greystone Ballroom, met up— (JESSICA heard) At the— huh?

JESSICA: What music did you like?

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh, my gosh... What music did I like? I think at that time, it was— What's his name? He's a Black—Oh, what is his name? (Pause) Well, sumn'—It was on the tip of my tongue. What's his name? Hm... (Hums tune) That was— What was that song that man used to sing? Was it Nat King Cole? It might've been Nat King Cole at that time, if I'm not mistaken. But Nat King Cole... (hums) Ooh... I can't think of that man's name... What you call—? He died, that fella...

JESSICA: Yeah, Nat King Cole, or Sam Cooke, one of the two...

MS. DECOURSEY: Ah! Sam Cooke? Yeah, it wasn't so much...

[[00:21:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: Sam Cooke? And what's that Black— Jackie Wilson!

JESSICA: Oh! OK...

MS. DECOURSEY: I think his name was Jackie— Was it Jackie Wilson? Yes, Jackie Wil— There you go. We used to go to those concerts. And I can't think of the lady's name... Er... It's on the tip of my tongue, what's her name? Oh, Lord have mercy... Can't think of her name, that Black singer... Oh...

JESSICA: Billie Holiday, or...?

MS. DECOURSEY: Not Billie—

PG (*overlap*): Yeah, maybe—

MS. DECOURSEY Ella Fitzgerald! Go ahead...

PG: Oh, I'm sorry, you can go ahead, continue...

MS. DECOURSEY (*overlap*): And they—

MS. DECOURSEY: Well, that's OK, 'cause I can't think of, er... of that right now, but even if I do, I'll give it to Jessica before you finish it up or whatever. Tryna think of a—

PG: OK, so...

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh! And... lemme say, erm... That would be—that was Dorothy's gran— That was Dorothy's grandmother that had that... Sweet Potato Place, restaurant... (*indistinguishable*) is a doctor... Yeah, we... we... And—and most of the doctors were Black. They were on Hastings. All those doctors were on Hastings, we had all Black physic—

(*Crosstalk between MS. DECOURSEY and PG*)

PG: Oh, sorry. Yep, go ahead...

MS. DECOURSEY: Do you want me to tell you about some of the doctors? Oh, that Lackey— Oh, was— Dr. Lackey, Dr. Milton— he owned that Black hospital on Visitor [?] Road, but that wasn't, erm... that wouldn't be part of this... No... Yeah, that's how it was in Detroit. So that wouldn't—that wouldn't suffice... No, no... We were just concerned about, er... Brews— being able to visit between Hastings and whatever. Okey-dokey... I'm tryin' to think... Oh, dear...

PG (*after a pause*): You were saying—

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh! Whoa, whoa... hold on, honey... Hold on. Now there were three brothers. Whitney Cleaners, on the corner of Hastings, right around the corner from Brewster.

Whitney Cleaners. They had one on, er... Hastings. And, er... Brewster. They had one on, er... Forrest. Hastings... and then they had one on, er... Vernor and Hastings. It was a dad, Mr. Whitney, and three sons. Yeah, and I worked for Gene. Eugene Whitney. Yes. I worked with all three of the cleaners, that's right. I was going to school there 'cause I promised I was going [?] to college, but I had to take it during that period. I was tryin' to work to go to college, 'cause my dad told me I could not work two jobs. 'Cause I was working at the cleaners, and must've worked... Worked at the cleaners, and— Where else was I working? I can't recall. But—the cleaners and someplace—I had two jobs. I don't know where the other place was. It might've been Wayne County... you know? So... it would be... The big health center was Wayne County, and I was working there. But my dad told me I could not work with two jobs, so I just stayed at the cleaners, where the name was Eugene Whitney. Yes. So the brothers—there were three... They had another one someplace, I can't think of where it is, but they had three on Hastings there. The first one—

PG (*overlap*): Do you remember the name?

MS. DECOURSEY: —the one I worked at, was right around the corner at the Brewster Center. Yes. (*JESSICA says something.*) Mm-hmm. Yep. The Whitneys...

PG: Do you remember the name of the Cleaners?

MS. DECOURSEY (*pause, then*): Whitney's. Whitney's Cleaners.

PG: Oh, OK...

MS. DECOURSEY: Right across from the (*indistinguishable*)... And around the corner to...

(*From [[00:24:00]] to [[00:24:11]] there is a signal problem.*)

PG: Er... you're breaking up. I can't really hear what you're saying...

JESSICA: I think you gotta...

MS. DECOURSEY: Oh... what's happened?

JESSICA: I'll put you back on speakerphone...

MS. DECOURSEY: OK, where did we leave you off?

JESSICA: On...

PG: You were... Yeah. Go ahead, Jessica.

MS. DECOURSEY: (*indistinguishable*) There's people... did you hear that?

PG (*pause, then*): No...

MS. DECOURSEY: Did you hear about the Whitney brothers?

PG: Yes, I heard about the Whitney brothers, and then you started talking about the—

(Crosstalk)

MS. DECOURSEY: And how about the three star—How about the bars up and down Hasting—? They were all, you know... Black owners. But it was, erm... the—the Whitneys—you heard they had three cleaners? Whitney Brothers?

PG *(overlap)*: Yes, I wanna know...

MS. DECOURSEY: —and their dad?

PG: Yep. Where it cut off for me was where you were talking about... It was... what was around there. You said that the Whitneys cleaners was right on the corner down the street from—Streetcar?

MS. DECOURSEY: That's right. ... No. Star Bar. Star Bar, which was right across from the cleaners. *(PG says something.)* Three Star Bar it was called. There you go, the Three Star Bar. But— yeah, Three Star Bar. Right on the corner of Hastings and Brewster, the bar was— and the cleaners. Yes, ma'am.

JESSICA: And then Mrs. Peoples.

MS. DECOURSEY: Peop— And then Mrs. Peoples. It was— Those days, prostitution was very popular, whatever, on Hastings. But they were very dignified people. Mrs., er... Peoples lived in the ar— Well, southwest Detroit. Won't get into that, because she wasn't in the area you're talkin' about. But they, you know, they didn't— You just—they... They just... Whatever they did, they got in and it was very popular. They weren't people showin' this and showin' that, whatever. They were dignified women, you know? She was there for a long time. But I used to walk home sometimes, you know, and they had the pimps. Oh, yeah. They had the pimps too, dear. But they didn't bother anyone. Maybe you had to pass 'em— one of 'em might be on the corners or something like that or whatever. And they might say something to you or whatever, 'cause I had to go on Division right off of Hastings so they were— I'd be walking down, and I'd— They'd see me but they would talk, and— They knew everybody, you know. So... 'cause I lived right off of Hastings, I did. Right off of Hastings. So there was never any problems. And my dad had *all* these accounts, 'cause there was a bunch of us, you see. And he'd take that suit to this here pawn shop, and he'd take it— The suit had half... whatever, you know, then— and this time it was time to go get it, he'd send one of us to go get it, and whatever. *(Laughs)* It was wonderful. Really. Yeah. But anyway, if I think of anything else, I'm gonna give it to Jessica, if I could come up with somethin' else, OK? That'd be OK?

PG: I mean, yeah... That's... that's good... I would, er...

(Crosstalk)

MS. DECOURSEY: And I'll give her something else I can think of. Yeah.

PG (overlap): Well, OK, yes... for sure.

MS. DECOURSEY: Now you wanted to say some— Oh! Oh! Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. I forgot the Paradise Valley. Did I mention that? The Paradise Valley?

PG (overlap): No. I... I don't believe you did...

PG: ...talk about it.

MS. DECOURSEY: That's it. Now *that's* where all the stars came in, and— *Whoa*, who was singing—? I forgo— I gotta find out who they were! Yeah. Paradise Valley— that was on... Woodward. And when you walked there— Paradise Valley! Yes, ma'am, honey. Had all those big—

PG (overlap): What was—?

[[00:27:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: It was where they had all the entertainers during the time. *All* of 'em. Jackie— our world was, honey... *All* of 'em. All of whoever was singin' during that time, you hear about 'em and, boom-boom-boom, and... whoever it was, honey, we talked to. Fats Domino, all of 'em, honey, all of 'em used to come there and sing. Yes, ma'am. Paradise Valley, yes indeedy. It was a peace— You could go there for just— For just, live entertainment. It was live entertainment. And I'm tryin' to think of the place where we used to go and eat... Mm-hmm. I gotta think— There are a lotta things I gotta think of. Later on, you know—

PG: Yeah, for sure.

MS. DECOURSEY: And *all* those— and United— Did I mention the—? And the big-time theaters were *United Artists*. You didn't wear just anything to the United Artists. We'd go on a Sunday, we did, you see. And you had to be— We—we— we dressed up. You know, our little gang, but it was— Nobody— Everybody dressed up that came. You didn't come just lookin' like anything. United Artists was on Adams, around the corner there, on er... from Woodward. Madison Theatre, the Artists, and the Fox. There was another one... Those were good old days, dear, let me tell you... Shoestores and I-don't-know-what-all, honey... It was really somethin'. You could just get— It was wonderful. I'm gonna have to think of some more things than I can tell you, it's comin' to me, we did. But even Fine Arts—

PG: OK...

MS. DECOURSEY: —I think, might've had live ... every now and then. They might've had live... entertainment there too sometimes, but, er... I'm not sure. But theaters all over the place in that whole area. And on Sundays, everybody went to either United Artists or the Fine Arts. And then there was the Madison Theatre on Broadway. All downtown they had Ad— down there

we see Adams Theater—I mean Adams Street. And all that by there and Woodward and Adams and—

PG: Mm-hmm...

MS. DECOURSEY: I don't know what all those little side-streets are anymore, but there's always something that you could go to in that area. There's probably another—There was a—Gotham Hotel, honey. We used to go to the Gotham Hotel on— around the corner there, probably on Adams somewhere... Broadway. And we had dances and stuff there. Oh, we had... honey, we had a good time. A lotta places to go. And we didn't— You dressed up... This was the most I could think of. (*Laughs*) I can't think of it all...

PG: Yeah, it's...

(*Crosstalk*)

PG: Can I ask you...?

MS. DECOURSEY: Whatever. Go ahead, dear.

PG: (*pause*) Mm-hmm. I was just... curious 'cause when you were talking about, you know, walking down the street and the folks that you encounter on the street in terms of, like, the prostitutes or the pimps or other folks. How safe did you feel in your neighborhood? Or, like, what contributed to making you feel safe—?

MS. DECOURSEY: Honey, lemme tell you, darlin'. During them days— and it was an old house, 'cause there was so many of us. And we lived on the— must've torn it down, the house, but anyway, but then— And I felt very safe... because they looked out for you. It's not like it is today. We knew everybody in that block, the next block, and they said, "We know so-and-so—" Well, they'd point you to your deck. They knew my dad. My mom had passed away. She died at a very early age. I knew *of* her, but she didn't get to raise us. She died at the age of 32, you see. But very safe, 'cause you know what, darlin'? We used to sleep on our porch at nighttime, all night long, honey.

[[00:30:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: Laid there all night, woke up in the mornin' and whatever, and do what we got to do, walked the streets and walked Hastings and every— I even walked and used to get— I used to smoke at that time, and I used to go at nighttime, honey. I would go and start smoking whatever, and I had my house— whatever— up there too. Well, he was a, er... er... Cau— Caucasian gentleman. He had a store. I think it was Margaret, her name was, she had a grocery store right on the corner of the street I lived on, Division and Hastings, and I was smoking then. I had— I had me a cigarette, so I got on my housecoat and walked on down there. It was dark too. Oh, no, very safe, honey. We'd sleep— hey, we used to sleep in the street, when it rained. You know what I'm saying? We'd all lay out there, let the rain just fall on us, honey. Ping-pong, all kinds of games... pom-pom (*indistinguishable*) and run away, tag and all kinds of stuff, honey, we had a lotta fun. Everybody— you knew everyone in your *neighborhood*. You hear me? Very safe. As a matter of fact, we had our problems, and you'd never guess what. On

Hastings, you had two officers on each side. Oh, did you ever hear of Big Ben? There was four of ‘em...

PG: No...

MS. DECOURSEY: Four cops.

PG: I haven’t heard of that.

MS. DECOURSEY: OK. Almost forgot it. There were cops that walked up and down that— whatcha call the word? — They’re always walking. Always on Hastings. Two’d be going, let’s say east, and there’d be two’d be going west. On each side of the street, darlin’. And there were four of them. And Big Ben, he was Black, and the other three were white. They called ‘em the “Big Four”. And there— They’d walk up and down that Hastings, baby... Oh, yeah, honey, but don’t— We were never afraid. Mm-mmm. We used to sit on the— We’d go to maybe the store down there with the records. There was a place you’d buy records out on the corner of Division and St. Antoine where we lived there. And she had the music playing— They had every kind of music, I guess, honey. And we’d be sittin’ on the steps *all* night long, honey, just sittin’ out there, we’d go in there, maybe buy summ’ to get at the store, come back and sit on the steps and whatever. Miss Gutsy, she had— She’d make sweet potato pie. My favorite friend, Dorothy Franklin, used to live behind the restaurant, they did, and she’d make some sweet potato pies. All of this is right off of Hastings, honey. And Division and whatever them other streets— St. Antoine and whatever. It was *wonderful*. No, I was not afraid, ‘cause we used to sleep on our porch at *night*, you hear me? No, never. People walked the street— I tell you, the pimps didn’t bother you, nobody bothered you. Nobody bothered you. We were— Could go anywhere— I’d walk from Forest all the way to— You don’t know where it is, though. But I was walkin’— never in any danger. And we had everything up there that we needed: Shoe shops, wheat, pawn shops, I-don’t-know-what-all... clothing shops, Sher- Sherman’s, right on the corner. It’s this, er, clothing place called Sherman’s, right on the corner by Hastings and Division where we’d leave. We’d go—We’d go there, we’d get our little suits and stuff, that was a... Girls, they had all... It was five girls and four boys. And then we’d always go in there, you know, ‘cause you had to *count*. And it’d be the same style, but different color. But the— It was wonderful. I mean, we’d go to New... (*laughs*) Oh, it was so wonderful. I could tell you so much! (*laughs*)

PG: (*laughs*)

MS. DECOURSEY: (*laughs*) I could tell you so much... but we were never frightened, no ma’am. *Never*. Mm-mmm. Never frightened. We never— We was never frightened...

[[00:33:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: ...And we used to walk all the way from school— from Division over to Miller, up through the Eastern Market. And goin’ and— We didn’t catch no bus. It was years before I found out that maybe I could catch the bus. You know? And go through—you can get— boom-boom-boom-boom-boom and with— My dad just, you know, be the only one and no mother— No one *knew* it, I don’t know, but anyway— We finally got tickets. But we used to walk from Division over to where the Eastern Market *still* is to go to Miller High School. Yes, ma’am. And we—

PG (*overlap*): How is Eastern Market...

PG: ... like... What was Eastern Market like then? Was it the same? As it— Has—

MS. DECOURSEY: Honey, I know! Honey, honey... (*laughs*) It was... *wiiiiide* open. *Wide* open. When I went out (*indistinguishable*) they had only two little spots open. I said, “Lord, have mercy.” Eastern Market was fabulous. And first you’d go on the outside, with everything *wide* open, and then you’d cross over on the other side of Gratiot.

(*From [[00:33:58]] to [[00:34:30]]*, MS. DECOURSEY and JESSICA discuss groceries and JESSICA getting back to PG later.)

MS. DECOURSEY: Gettin’ back to that Eastern Market, honey. I mean, that whole area was at St. Aubin and... First, you know there’s Rivard. The Rivard is where you’d go in if you wanted to buy rabbits and, er... fish, and whatever. They were on the streets of Rivard and I forgot the other street’s name, but in the middle, that was— I mean, every door... It was just like walkin’... It was just like if you were to come to my home, say about two blocks or three blocks of a certain distance, and everything’s *wide* open. They had *everything*, darlin’. When I walked over there— When I— One day when I went that way years and years ago, there wasn’t but two places you’d go to the Eastern Market, and baby they sold *everything* in that (*indistinguishable*)... I mean, they sold everything. You could sit down and er... eat. You can go over there and get this or get that or— Honey, it was *fabulous*. I mean wide open, cause they would close those sheds all at nighttime, they would. And they were on, erm... What is that street? Oh, Jesus—Gratiot... but what’s that—? Oh, Lord I can’t think of it... I gotta find out those streets...

PG: Russell or...?

MS. DECOURSEY (*overlap*): Oh, it was...

MS. DECOURSEY: Rivard! Rivard... I’ll find out somebody to get the—

JESSICA: Russell?

MS. DECOURSEY: Russell! That’s right. Russell, then it’s another street... Well, they got fish markets all up and down, the same side, across from the market. Honey, it was everything you could desire. People came from all *over*. All kinds of cities and whatever. They’d all come to Eastern Market. You know what I’m saying? I mean, it was fabulous. On each side, forks— Oh, it was something. Wish I had a picture of it. Yeah, that Eastern Market was...

[[00:36:00]] MS. DECOURSEY: ...really something, ma’am. I wish I knew somebody who had a picture of it. Now, over here, they had two little spaces... Oh, my goodness, I can’t believe it... And that was *junk*. Bread— Oh, but ma’am, they had everything you could— My dad would send us over there, like I said, to get the rabbits and, erm... the fish and the... Oh, they had everything you wanted. The—the co— (*pause*) Anyway, I got— I gotta think of another word to tell you... what it was it consisted of... I gotta find out another word for that Eastern Market, and

how many blocks it took up on the way to Dorothy Franklin's you'll remember, I think... But you know how m— How far that— market went, 'cause you could leave out the— See, that was the open market, but actually what it is now, as I say, you can only go inside. There's no such thing as "outside". Over the years it was just "inside", and they closed *it* up eventually. You see what I'm sayin'? All that shit was the shed. 'Cause you could see the door— At nighttime, they closed all the doors down, you know what I'm saying?

PG: Mm-hmm...

MS. DECOURSEY: You could walk from one end of the block to the next block to find what you want. See, I'm—

PG: Yeah...

MS. DECOURSEY: —That's the street I live on. From one end of the block to another, and probably further than that, and then on the side and across from it. You could go through these...places and find things. And some people sold clothing in it, or shoes, they had all kinds of stuff in there, darlin'. Yep. So I'm gonna have to get some more stuff together so I can, er... some of— recollect some of that, whatever it is...

PG (*overlap*): OK...

MS. DECOURSEY: ...but over the years, like I said, they closed all of that, and everything was on Gratiot, and then after a while all Gratiot was closed down. It was very disappointing. Yeah...

PG: Yeah, that's what I was...

(*Crosstalk*)

PG: I was curious, when you started—

MS. DECOURSEY: Go ahead...

PG: —listing that it was— When they started... You remember when they started construction of the freeway?

MS. DECOURSEY: Yes.

PG: That process? Like, what was happening during that process?

MS. DECOURSEY: I'm trying to think... See... I'm wondering if I went that... I don't know... I... I can't recall... I know we had to take another route to get to it because of what they put in there when they was doing all of the construction and stuff.

(*Long pause, phone goes dead*)

PG: OK... Phone call disconnected... I'm gonna pause the recording... and see if they call back.

END

[[00:38:20]]