



Interviewee: Cassandra S. Roper

Place of interview: Mosquito Beach, Charleston County, South Carolina

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Interviewer: Michael A. Allen

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## **BEGIN INTERVIEW**

Michael Allen: Well, good morning, ma'am.

Cassandra Roper: Good morning.

MA: Can you tell me your name and your address, please?

CR: My name is Cassandra Lee Singleton Roper, and my address is 1426 Battalion Drive, Charleston, or James Island, South Carolina, 29412.

MA: Great. And when and where were you born?

CR: I was born here on Sol Legare, February 9, 1945.

MA: Great. You are native to the soil.

CR: Yes. Very much so.

MA: Tell me, if you don't mind, a little bit about your first memories or impressions of being here on Mosquito Beach, Sol Legare, on James Island.

CR: My first memory of Mosquito Beach. I lived here on Sol Legare for a number of years, not necessarily on the beach, but on Sol Legare. But my first memory of the beach itself was when I was a little girl. I used to live with my grand-aunt, Rosa Left, who lived down across from Mosquito Beach that way. And on Sundays we would come down to the beach and we were only allowed to come to Mosquito Beach providing that we did all of our chores during the week and after we went to church on Sunday.

If you didn't go to church, didn't go to Sunday School, no Mosquito Beach. So, my early recollection of Mosquito Beach is on Sundays when we were allowed to walk across the creek and come over here and dance.

MA: Do you know what age you perhaps were at that time?

CR: Oh, I was probably back then, probably about seven, eight years of age.

MA: So, you and other girls came?

CR: Me and my two other cousins, yes, who lived across the street from us.

MA: And this was more in the day or evening?

CR: It was more in the evening, afternoon, evening. We knew that we had to be back home before dark. When the sun started setting, we knew that we needed to get back across the creek. If the tide was too high to get across the creek, then we had to walk the road and then get into the pathway and head on back home. There was a path that led from this road to where our house was. So, we would take the path, not necessarily the highway, but the pathway.

MA: So, this was mainly on Friday, Saturday, Sunday?

CR: This was primarily on Sundays.

MA: Just mainly on Sundays.

CR: At that age, yes. It was only Sundays.

MA: Why do you think, for your age, Sundays were the principal time that you came out?

CR: Because primarily during the week we had other chores to do at home. So, Sunday was a day that was a day of freedom where we would be able to just relax and just enjoy whatever was left of Sunday after... Of course, the primary thing was to go to church first. And then after that it was just to relax.

MA: So, I suspect during the course of the week you looked forward to coming and being here on Sunday.

CR: Oh, yes. Lookie, I would do my chores and I would go shell the beans and make my five cents for shelling a quart of beans. And then save up my little money and look forward to coming to Mosquito Beach on Sunday afternoon to spend those five and 10 cents. And also not only that, but to come to Mosquito Beach to dance to make some more money. Because during the big one, we had the big boardwalk, which is the big pavilion. That was one thing that, I had the two girls with me, which were my two cousins. And I was the one doing the dancing and they would be the ones...

People would throw money at whoever was doing the dancing, and they would be the ones to pick up the money and we'd share it at the end of the day.

MA: Help me to understand... picture Mosquito Beach in terms of the buildings and the landscape.

CR: Okay. The building, there was a boardwalk that extended from wherever the driveway was out into the creek. I would say it was about -- I'm not sure about footage -- but I would say 15 or 20 feet, or either a little bit longer. And then the boardwalk, the building was square. As soon as you walk in, there were benches alongside. It was open. There were benches alongside of the pavilion and also to the back. On the right side there were also benches leading up to where the bedroom was. There was a bedroom on this end of the building.

In the center there were benches, booths, you know, where you could sit down in the booth, and that was the area where a lot of your customers sat there and also around the outside. Also on the back side there was also a little patio. And to the left -- the piccolo was on the back side of the building. There was an opening that you would go from the pavilion onto the back to the little porch. And then on the left side of that was where we called the piccolo, the jukebox was. And beyond that is where the kitchen was.

So, you would go... there was an opening there leading to the kitchen, and that's where my mother would prepare the fried chicken. She was known for her fried chicken. Mosquito Beach was known for the famous fried chicken. So, on Fridays we would clean about a couple cases of chicken, and on Sunday she would fry those chickens up and people would just... the just seemed to have had a different flavor. And like I said, and also there was a bar. The kitchen was here. There was an opening, then there was the bar. And then on the back side of the bar was the bedroom, where a bed was for sleeping at night. That's where I slept many nights.

MA: So, tell me a little bit about your personal experience of working in that pavilion. I know you were related to, I think, to Mr. Apple.

CR: Yeah, Laura's my mother and Apple was my stepfather.

MA: Right, so talk to us about your experiences with them, and what you saw they did in terms of making that pavilion what it became, what it was known for.

CR: Okay. Well, you know, Apple was the one who instituted the building of the pavilion. Laura as a mother provided the support, the moral support. For whoever they had coming doing the construction of the pavilion, she was the one who did the cooking. Cooked the food and made sure that the men were fed who assisted with constructing the pavilion.

In addition to that, they also were the two who actually operated the pavilion. And I say operate the pavilion in the sense that they were the ones who did the... I don't know very many people, in my opinion, when I was there, who actually assisted with the operating. When I say operating, that is being behind the counter, serving the customers, and I guess that's where I come in. And that's where I was --

MA: Yeah, talk a little bit about your being involved.

CR: Yeah, now that's what I did. Oh, my. On Friday afternoons, that's when everything started really at Mosquito Beach. Because the crowd started coming on Friday. So, my place was... This was at a little later age now, not during the six or seven years old. But later in my years.

Can I digress and say that between the time that I was coming here initially as a little girl, I went to New York City. Lived in New York City for a number of years, and then came back here. In the seventh or eighth grade I came back to Charleston, and it was then that I started really assisting more with being a part of the beach setting. And that is in the sense that on Friday evenings, I'd help my mother Laura, help her clean the chicken and prepare whatever else needed to be prepared for the weekend.

So, she was the primary cook in the kitchen, and I would be the one out there serving the customers. If somebody called for... wanted an order of chicken and fries or chicken and whatever. Chicken and macaroni and red rice or whatever. And you would holler to the kitchen to her. She'd prepare it and then we'd serve the customer.

Also, those who may not necessarily wanted food but they wanted beer. And I won't say what age I was, but anyway, they wanted the beer. You know, it was also my place to go behind and get the beer and serve them the beer. And there was also -- moonshine was a big thing during that time. So, to be honest with you, moonshine was a big thing. And sometimes they would come with a little... We would serve moonshine in a small glass, what we called was a quarter shot. So, you know, go underneath the counter, pour that little quarter shot.

Somebody would say, "Can I have a shot?" And give them that little quarter shot. Collect their money. But that was my role.

MA: So, you would say that Mosquito Beach and the pavilion and this whole environment here provided a respite or escape from the rest of the world?

CR: Yes, yes, it certainly did. And for everyone who came here. Because African Americans at that time did not have anyplace else to go to entertain. Other than on Mt. Pleasant at Riverside. Or either Hollywood. I mean Peter Miller. Mosquito Beach, when those two places were the only place that African Americans were allowed... They were not allowed to go to Folly Beach, of course. So, Mosquito Beach became the place.

And I say in looking at it now, compared to what it used to be then, it's just amazing when you come here. To me it's sort of depressing. Because I knew what it used to be versus what it is now. And it's only because of the fact that the culture has changed and there's not a need to come to a place like this anymore because of all of the opportunities that are available to go elsewhere.

But I mean during that time, Mosquito Beach used to be crowded. Cars used to park all the way around down the road. And I mean it used to be jam-packed with folks of all ages.

MA: Well, let's have a conversation about civil rights just because many folks whom we've spoken to have said that this was an area where it felt like an oasis in the middle of Jim Crow. What were the things African Americans were experiencing from a Jim Crow perspective? Maybe [00:10:01 unintelligible] community that made this place so special as a respite.

CR: To be honest with you, I didn't... After my years in between coming to Mosquito Beach initially and coming back to Charleston, I lived in New York City. So, in New York City, there was not the segregation that there is here. And I didn't know what segregation was until I came back here. When I went to school --

MA: [00:10:30 unintelligible]

CR: When I came back to James Island and I went to school the first day. And at the end of the day, the teacher, Mr. Mack, asked me, "Well, Cassandra, how was your experience today? Your first day?" And I asked him, I said, "Well, where are the other folks? Where are the white folks?" And the kids burst out laughing in class. And I said, "Well, why are they laughing?" And he was saying, "because there are no white folks here. They attend a different school." And I couldn't understand it. I said, "why?"

And he pulled me aside and he explained that blacks and whites do not go to school together. And I mean that was the hardest thing for me to accept, after living in the city like New York City and going to school with all races, and then to come here and then just be surrounded with nothing but African Americans. People of my same color. It really just -- it took me hard to digest that. Several weeks, really, to accept that there was...

So, that was my first incident of segregation. And to be honest with you, from my perspective, I just learned that from that point on that there was a separation of blacks and whites in everything. Riding the bus there was a separation. Like when we would go to the city to shop on King Street, the blacks had to sit in the back of the bus. And that was my experience with that. Whereas in New York City, you just sat wherever you wanted to sit as soon as you got on the bus or the train.

So, I guess all of those are things that I experienced here that I had not experienced elsewhere, which introduced me to segregation.

MA: So, in some respects Mosquito Beach, as we shared earlier, provided an opportunity to African Americans for self-determination, to really have control of their destiny.

CR: Yes, in a sense. Destiny in a sense that they were only allowed... Destiny in a sense of those who had businesses here, okay? Not necessarily destiny in a sense that they could go wherever they wanted to go and establish a business. That was not the case.

MA: So, we've heard [00:12:46 unintelligible] that Folly Beach in effect was off limits.

CR: Yes. The only time I went to Folly Beach was when I had me a summer job, and I went there on Saturday morning to clean this restaurant. That was the only time that I was allowed on

Folly Beach. One other time I was allowed on Folly Beach was when I went there with a friend who was doing housekeeping. A neighbor who was doing housekeeping. I don't want to share that experience. I won't share her experience.

MA: So, was there signage on Folly Beach that projected I guess a statement that African Americans were not allowed there unless they were there only in a working capacity?

CR: No, there was no signage because we knew automatically that we were not allowed there. So, there was no need for them to put up a sign like you would maybe in the city of Charleston. Maybe the water fountain would say "White Only" or "Black Only." Because there was no reason that blacks went to Folly Beach other than to work.

MA: So, somehow, that was conveyed to you. It was off limits unless you were working there even though you didn't see a sign.

CR: Exactly, exactly. I don't recall seeing any signs the times I worked there. Now, others may have. But for the area that I worked in, which I was on Center Street, the building where I worked was right on the Center Street. The home that I went with this young lady to help with the cleanup, that was about three or four houses off of Center Street. So, really to say that I didn't mingle and travel all around the beach. Just in that particular area. No, I never saw a sign.

MA: So, were you aware of any young men or anyone from this area who made some attempts in maybe the late '60s, early '70s, to integrate Folly? Were you aware of any activities like that?

CR: No. And I may not have been here at the time.

MA: Can you maybe describe some of the other buildings that were here on Mosquito Beach in addition to the boardwalk.

CR: Okay, in addition to the boardwalk there was Apple and my mother built what they called was a hotel, which was a two-story structure that was on the left. But in addition to that, there was also a little small enclosed building on the left of that. But they built the hotel because I guess people just wanted to come and shack shack. (laughter)

MA: They could not stay at the Francis Marion, right? Are you saying that?

CR: Thank you. They could not stay at the Francis Marion. So, that little hotel was really a refuge, okay?

MA: Just as Mosquito Beach was.

CR: Just as Mosquito Beach was, right. I remember many mornings on Saturday mornings and Sunday mornings, my mother would strip the beds and take the laundry home and redo the laundry and bring them back the next day and she and I would remake the beds and put out the towels and whatever else. But yeah, that was a... yeah.

MA: Well, you know, there's a recent movie that's out now called "Green Book." And the green book highlights African Americans' spots and places across the United States, particularly here in the south where people could go in safety. And I'm not sure if Mosquito Beach is in the green book, you all have the definition of green book.

CR: It should be in there.

MA: I'm sure in your travels when you went north, did you go by car or by train?

CR: No, it always by car. There were several family members who would either drive from New York here. Primarily they came from New York. There were those who resided in New York, and they would come home... What they would do is they would come home, they would bring people here to Charleston, and then they would also take them back to New York. And that was really how I got to New York from here several times, traveling back and forth. It was in the car. That was the only mode of transportation.

MA: Do you think that the same notoriety of Mosquito Beach has created a James Island in terms of people who came here? Came to experience, I mean all around the low country came, just not from James Island.

CR: Oh, yeah, yeah. It was not only James Island.

MA: Talk about that.

CR: Yeah, people came from Mt. Pleasant. People came from throughout the tri-county area to Mosquito Beach. And some even came from farther away than that because of the fact that they had no place of entertainment. So, they came here to Mosquito Beach. You may find people beyond Goose Creek who came here to Mosquito Beach because there was no other place for them to come.

MA: Do you think that the music was a draw? It's my understanding that there was live entertainment or acts that performed here.

CR: I don't think that that was the primary... Well, there was one person who was a key figure. He was disc jockey named Bob Nichols. He would draw the crowd now. People would go wherever he went. I mean he was the primary... And he was probably on Mosquito Beach almost every weekend. So, I guess that would answer your question, yes, yes, yes. People would follow him from wherever they lived, if they heard that Bob Nichols was going to be at Mosquito Beach, they came to Mosquito Beach.

MA: Let's go kind of maybe before the pavilion. It's our understanding that there was an oyster factory that was here. Do you recall any knowledge of that, or any conversations you may have had with family members about the oyster factory that was here?

CR: Well, I think Joe Sable, I think, operated the oyster factory. But as far as my knowledge of seeing it, now. I think that was a little bit before I was allowed to come here, or either my time.

MA: So, in many respects, Folly Beach I guess being less than 10 minutes away was like a lifetime away or a world away.

CR: Yes, yes. Off limits, off limits.

MA: But Mosquito Beach offered an opportunity for people to live and to experience. And how was it in terms of meeting people here on Mosquito Beach?

CR: I guess you could call this the meeting place. And I say that because this is where folks met. Girlfriends, boyfriends, husbands, girlfriends, wives, boyfriends.

MA: Okay. I guess this was a dating scene.

CR: Yes, that's the right term. This was the dating scene, right. Yes, you used the right terminology.

MA: You know, with this being a natural area with the waterway here, did you all ever experience any disasters? Hurricanes, floods, things of that nature here? And how did people deal with that? I'm not talking about global warming or sea level rise, but just how did people manage themselves when they had massive disasters?

CR: Well, I remember the only hurricane that I vaguely remember is Gracie. You may have heard of Gracie. And that's where the creek here met Holly Creek. The two waters were across this peninsula.

MA: It was inundated.

CR: Yes, with floodwaters. Chickens were swimming in the water and everything. But I was young at that time, so I'll be honest with you, I don't recall all of the details of it, okay? But that's one thing I remember about Sol Legare being inundated. You look out the window and all you could do was see nothing but water. I was here for Hugo, but I wasn't here on Sol Legare. I lived elsewhere.

MA: Were any buildings damaged or inundated during Gracie?

CR: I don't recall. I'll be honest with you.

MA: You know, one of the things that we want to ask [00:21:13 unintelligible]. The current generation and the future generation, what would you want them to know about [00:21:23 unintelligible] and why [00:21:23 unintelligible]? The current generation and future generations?

CR: The current generation needs to realize that we were not as privileged as they are today. When I share my story with some people as to some of this generation, it's hard for them to grasp and to accept that things were not always as they are now. They cannot envision it being the way that it is described. Because it's just hard for them to understand that the privileges that you all are enjoying today were never even allowed during my generation.

So, the privileges that you're reaping today are a result of the hardship that we endured during the earlier days. But I'm grateful for it. And I think that more of this generation needs to take advantage of those opportunities that are available to them, which were not available during my generation, or the generation that preceded me.

How do you explain it? I don't think that this generation realizes just how privileged they are in the sense of the opportunities that are available to them today.

MA: And to the future generations, what would you say to them?

CR: I would say try to preserve this place and the history of this place. And which is what you all are doing now, which I do appreciate you doing. Because the future generations will not even be able to grasp what it is that I'm saying. Or even the current generation. But by you documenting it, I think that they will have a better picture, because they can't see the picture that I'm painting. So, I appreciate what you all are doing. The effort that you are doing to try to capture the history of this particular place on Sol Legare. And not only this, but Sol Legare has so many...

Not only Sol Legare, but James Island, have so many historical places that just... the world does not know about. Our children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren will not know about unless it's documented as what you're doing now.

MA: And in closing, as you look around this landscape here this morning, and look at the creek and the [00:23:59 marsh] and the boats there behind us, what feeling does that bring to you?

CR: When I look around, I recall in my memory that the marshes were not here. It was all water. We had little marsh, but the marsh has grown up now all over, nothing but marsh. But as I look around, I say, I still give God thanks for the land. For the opportunity to be here and to observe what's here, and the opportunity to speak to you, and for you to be able to capture and to share the story. Not my story, but all of our stories. Though you were not here, it is still your story because it reflects us as African Americans, with our African American ancestors. What they endured, what they've accomplished, and what they are still accomplishing. Look at you. You're standing on the shoulders of those who, like Apple and Laura, who had Mosquito Beach. But look what you're able to do now.

MA: Well, we thank you for your words and for your recollections and for your encouragement.

CR: Thank God, thank God for you.

Female Voice: Could you just talk about how you remember Apple and Laura Wilder [00:25:38 unintelligible]?

MA: [00:25:46 unintelligible]

CR: I remember, and I'll speak about Laura first. Laura was loving, kind-hearted, and would give you her soul. She fed people who -- I wouldn't say that they were homeless -- but if they came to the beach and they didn't have the funds to buy something to eat, she would just give it to them. Graciously just give it to them, you know? She was hard-working. This is oyster season; she would open oysters all day. And then at night she would come and operate down here at Mosquito Beach.

Apple would go in the creek and pick oysters and Laura would open the oysters. And once the oysters were open and jarred, he would hustle them in the city of Charleston. Apple had a lot of contact with the city of Charleston. And he would take his oysters and sell them to different customers in the city of Charleston.

But they were both hard-working people. Not only this Mosquito Beach they had, but they also had a store, which was directly across from the house that they operated also. And they also took a small loan from the Small Business Association where they were building a road to supposedly connect to the end of this [00:27:11 Tail] Island. But you can see the road from here. You can probably see the road where they were building.

So, they were both hard-working entrepreneurs, yes. They just had that gift for entrepreneurship. And I must say that they worked together. And that was essential a key for everything to be as successful as it was. For them to be.

**END INTERVIEW**