



Interviewee: William Saunders

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

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Interviewer: Michael A. Allen

Transcriber: Home Row, Inc.

Length of interview: 37:43

BEGIN INTERVIEW

Michael Allen: Can you tell us your name and your address, please, sir.

William Saunders: William "Bill" Saunders, 6191 Chisolm Road, Johns Island. That's where I was raised, on Johns Island.

MA: And in what year were you born on the great island of John?

WS: You know, that's a good question. Again, I was not born on Johns Island.

MA: Oh. Okay.

WS: My mother was from Johns Island. And back in those days, Mike, and that has to be a part of some of your knowledge, that especially black young women used to go to New York to get jobs and work. And my mother was one of those who went to New York to work, her and some of her friends. And that's how she got pregnant with me while she was in New York. And I was born, and they sent me back to Johns Island. She sent me to Johns Island. So, I've never really been to New York but anyway. I was shipped here as a child and ended up being on Johns Island, River Road on Johns Island or Hut Road on Johns Island.

MA: Well, before we get into Mosquito Beach, can you tell us a little bit about the Johns Island you experienced when you came back here, what you remember as you grew up?

WS: That's what I started to do just now without letting you take me there, because it's about Johns Island. But in the end, what I would like for you to be able to do is to, when I tell you about Johns Island but before you all get through with this, if you could afford it, be able to hook Johns Island and James Island together, because the two groups got raised together. My grandfather was from Johns Island, and my grandmother was from James Island. So, that's how they met, and that's how a lot of people met.

And then, Wadmalaw Island was a part of that. So, there's a lot of history. This is real history in there. And there were certain things that grew over here that you didn't get on James Island. But there are certain potatoes and certain things that we grew and, Mike, to be able to understand that, that there was no electricity or no nothing. But they would plant stuff, and then they could bury it. That's what we did. We would bury sweet potatoes or white potatoes, and you can put them in the ground and have the seed to plant next year. And it was still right there, and they wouldn't rot.

And that's how I got into farming, was just learning from those things. And nobody has ever been interested in those things. If you wasn't educated – made some sense to educate to us – it didn't happen. So, a lot of folk were threatened by me, but there's a lot of people did some good writing with people that I introduced them to, and really did some serious looking back. Because I don't think you could ever look forward without looking back.

MA: Right. Well, and that's part of the reason why we're here, because we want to look at Mosquito Beach looking forward. But being here with you, we want you to kind of paint a picture of Mosquito Beach that you saw, that you experienced, that you remember, and that I think it's important for us to know when we think about this place today.

WS: Okay. Go ahead with your question then.

MA: So, tell me a little bit about your experience at Mosquito Beach. How does Mosquito Beach fit into the world of Bill Saunders?

WS: Well, again, you know, when this started, Mosquito Beach and going over there, it's one of the few places that blacks could go and be on a beach-type stuff. So, all of us on Johns Island, Wadmalaw, and everyplace used Mosquito Beach as a place to go party and to have a good time. But there was so much history there too that came out of that stuff, that there was so many stuff that they fixed, that they could cook that you couldn't get other places. So, there was a lot of... You talk about the young man that you just mentioned his name, from down there. What's the guy's name?

Male: Cubby.

MA: Cubby Wilder.

WS: Cubby Wilder, because I've met with him, got him involved with you about this bit.

MA: Yeah.

WS: But, you know, Cubby and them, relatives, really did a lot of the cooking and catching of stuff that made a difference. And what the white leadership of all of the neighbors are doing, Mike, I want you to really work with that because they had a methodology that they can make us jealous of each other.

MA: Okay.

WS: You understand what I'm saying?

MA: Yes, sir. I do.

WS: You know, that people from James Island were better than people from Johns Island. We lived through all of that. And then, none of us was as dumb as the people from Wadmalaw Island.

MA: Oh, wow, a pathology.

WS: Yeah. And it made sense because the way that people from Wadmalaw - their Gullah was so much heavier and worse than the people on James and Johns Islands. So, you'd be able to look at them. "They're dumb people from Wadmalaw." And that was the kind of stuff and going on to Younges Island and stuff like that. So, that's the kind of stuff that I wish that you were really looking at, and try to get -

MA: A fair contrast of the community.

WS: Right, but try to get some money that you can do it without trying to raise money. You have to have somebody that has the willingness. And we've got people around now that can give you the money if you do the right proposal and what you want, and you can put it together to get people involved. And I need to shut up now, but that -

MA: No. That's fine. That's important for us to know. So, when you did go over to Mosquito Beach, do you remember anything about the buildings, the landscapes, what people did, how they'd congregate? We want to make sure that we have a good, accurate picture of Mosquito Beach ...from your memory, sir.

WS: Okay. What have you all got that was there when it began?

MA: Well, I have, I think it started in the early '40s with Apple Wilder building that first pavilion over the little waterway, marsh area that's there.

Interviewer 2: And King Pin.

MA: And King Pin. They worked together. I want to say either Gracie, one of those hurricanes, took it out, and they built a second one, which pretty much remained there through Hurricane Hugo. There were eventually other clubs, as you call them clubs, were built. So, we were asking people, "When you went, do you remember going into the pavilion over the waterway or going into any of those clubs that were there? And how was that like?"

WS: Well, again, when I started on over there, there was not only one of the guys that I introduced you to, but the place was owned by Jack Wilder -

MA: Mm-hmm. Right, Apple.

WS: - I mean Apple Wilder. But also, God, there's another guy that used to own the place right down on the right as you're going down there, down to the water. And most of those guys had relatives on Johns Island. So, there was a connection between them and the way that they built. And the thing that – what I really want you to put into this thing also – every one of these guys had some kind of building background, that they built everything that they ever needed. They were a group of black folk that could build everything.

MA: Self-sufficient entrepreneurs.

WS: Yeah. That was not a name then, but, yeah. But they could make stuff happen, and they can get stuff built. If you need something built, you go to some of those guys that couldn't read or write, but they can build. You can tell them what you want, and they could build it.

MA: Well, you know, just saying that, you know, the fact... I guess I'm looking from a modern perspective of building a building over a creek or a waterway and the dynamics of doing that with the pile driving and stuff. But the fact that, in the early '40s, Mr. Wilder built this building on stilts on the marsh or however you want to say it out there. And so, I think that is –

Interviewer 2: They could accommodate hundreds of people.

MA: Yeah.

WS: Yeah. I mean –

MA: And it didn't fall in, at least not to my knowledge. [laughs]

WS: No. I'm one of those ones that used to go out there when they first built that. So, there's so much stuff that black people built that never got any credit for. And that's one of the things that I'm hoping that, again, I'm still looking for you to get some real money and hire some folk to take a real look at put it together, because there's some real deep history there. And everybody went through it. I mean all of the white community used those people to do the building for them most of the time that they did it. They'd come and get them. And what they had to do was just tell them what they want. There wasn't nothing written or drawed out.

MA: Right, no blueprints. Just do it.

WS: No. "Just tell me what you want," and they would do it. But you had another question, or she had a question.

MA: Well, one of the focus that we were looking at also besides entrepreneurial capacity, the building capacity, you know, just the ingenuity capacity, that Mosquito Beach in many respects was an oasis where African Americans could gather in a free environment absent of Jim Crow. So, I know in the depths of your work, you have worked through this process -

WS: Yeah. On –

MA: Talk about that.

WS: Don't say it after the Jim Crow, because they were able to do it during Jim Crow. That was the only place that we had to go, basically, that was not in the City or that you could really get into trouble. So, it was really – you know. And I'd like to give the Wilders and some of them that did that some real serious credit, because they were the beginning of we having some freedom. And freedom came out of that.

That's where we'd go, and we could get away from the white man. And very rarely police would even go down there unless they had two or three of them. So, we were free. What we had to do most of the time is to stop us from fighting each other, because there were some bad black guys that would go down there and mess with stuff. So, we had to settle some of those stuff, that we would have bad black guys on our side, that would stop those things. And I know you probably never heard of that, but there was a lot of stuff happened that's caused us to be free.

MA: Well, you know, some of the other people who we interviewed talked about the fact that they were less than two, three miles from Folly Beach, but that was a lifetime away. And probably for many people who will read this report or see it, however, speak to us about being near a place but not being invited to the place. Because I think that that's important. Yeah, I just got in the car and just drove from Mt. Pleasant to Johns Island. I didn't think about anything, just coming to your house. Didn't have to think about anything. Just showed up here.

WS: No. Nobody went to even on the white beach down there, James Island, or all that stuff right on Mosquito Beach. We couldn't go past that Mosquito Beach Road. You know, there was law. And they would have police officers out there to stop us from going past to the white area. So, those are all reality.

MA: And during the course of our research and conversations, we've talked about black beaches in general. And I know, between Mosquito Beach here, Riverside, in Mount Pleasant, Peter Miller on 17, Atlantic Beach up above Myrtle Beach, these are the ones that at least I know of personally. If a person asked you, "Why was it so important that you could go to Mosquito Beach?" what would you say to them? Why was there such an effort to go there?

WS: Because that's the place I was free. I was free, and, you know, we could do stuff that we wanted to do. And it's just unbelievable, the difference between going to Mosquito Beach or even going to Riverside Beach, because you had to go through the white area to go there. But you had freedom, and you could do stuff. And the other thing that you know better than anybody, we like to cook. And you could cook on those beaches. You couldn't do it in the white areas. They had controls and laws and stuff like that, what you can do. Don't let me mess with your mind. Now, go ahead.

Interviewer 2: Was there a black beach on Johns Island near where the Rural Mission is now?

WS: Not a black beach in that sense, but there were places that we could go, especially going towards Kiawah. And all that whole area was black going towards Kiawah. And so, that's where

we'd go. And that's a good question because my grandfather and them used to – where we lived on River Road, they would go down that area, like, one day. And they would stay for two days down there and just fishing. And then they would come back with all of the fish and shrimp and stuff to sell. And that was Mosquito Beach or other places right down there by the water.

MA: Talk a little bit about the seafood industry, because I think Mosquito Beach is significant with Bachman's. Unfortunately, they're not in existence as they once were, but how did Mosquito Beach really become an important place for seafood, I mean just for gathering, cooking it, having it available?

WS: Well, and you started off at the right place because it started off with the Wilders and them having seafood down there to sell. And blacks and white people also used to go down there to buy seafood from them before there was a Mosquito Beach. So, they always had a business there. And Wilder even had boats that they used to go way out fishing and come back a day or two later. And that's what I was telling you.

A lot of the folk used to go right off of Johns Island, going down towards Kiawah. And blacks would go down there and stay out there fishing for a couple of days and come back with a lot of stuff. And then they would go through the community and sell those stuff. And so, the black community always had access to fresh seafood all the time coming from the community. And that was just a beautiful thing.

MA: In some of our conversations - and this is going a different direction here – we talked about seafood, and we talked about cooking, and we talked about the clubs and things there, but we heard a lot in our conversations about moonshine as also a central part of understanding and experiencing Mosquito Beach to the point, I guess, where some people said some of the structures may have been financed through that. And so, there's no statute of limitations to worry about here. So, anything you want to share with us from that perspective -

WS: No, I'm, not... I share that. I've been talking to some folk last week, and they had some problem because ...and, of course, these are educated black people. So, they were ashamed because their grandfathers and folk were a part of this moonshine. And I was trying to tell them that that's the only reason you got a damn education.

MA: Well, that's true, yeah. And some made it very clear. Without that, there wouldn't have been a building.

WS: Not only that. I mean, there are some black folk around here got fabulous homes. And the home came out of moonshine.

MA: Okay, Yes, sir.

WS: And a certain group in our group that I can't talk to because I embarrass them, and they want to say that their parents or grandparents was not involved. And that's how the hell they made their money, you know? And they sold the moonshine to blacks, but they were also selling it to whites. And whites came to them and bought moonshine. But they were able to do

moonshine and make a lot of other stuff out of moonshine. And nobody really want to talk about that because everybody that's black and you got some education, you can't go there.

MA: Well, I'll be transparent. I talked to Katherine when this first came up last fall in some of the interviews, I felt a little way about it. I talked to a couple of my historian friends around the country about it, and they said, "If that's the chapter, that's the verse, and that's the story." And so, with that being said, I'm glad that you're willing to acknowledge that. In some of the other interviews I already spoke to, they didn't run away from it. They didn't hide it.

They said the same. That's how money was made. That's how finances came about. And, yeah, that's the reason... And that's a part of, you know, the work here of civil rights, because you've got to be open to be able to say, "How did people make it, and what did they do, and what tools did they utilize?"

WS: And that's why I don't use civil rights, because I deal with human rights.

MA: Okay, human. Okay. Yes, sir.

WS: And I want you to make sure you can go there one of these days in your head.

MA: Okay.

WS: Because what our struggle was, for us to have human rights.

MA: Okay.

WS: And that's what we got out of that whole movement, was the right to be a human being, to be treated as a human being. And if you look at the Hospital Strike and one of the ladies that was a leader of that strike, they asked her when the strike was over, "What did you all gain out of the strike?" And she said, "To be treated as a human being, to be treated as a human being." And she got emotional about it. And so, I want you to remember that.

There were no black human beings up until after that Hospital Strike, because anything that... You know, I got the police officer over here. They call him Chief Henderson. And I think you need to take a look at him also from the County Police. And he killed over 18 black men over here on Johns and Wadmalaw Island and James Island. And he would kill them on their knees, begging him not to kill them. You know, he would shoot them.

And that's really a part of my growing up and religion and stuff like that, because I got so upset, one black man he killed. And I guess I was about ten or eleven. And I told my grandmother, I said, "When I get to be a man, I'm going to kill him." And my grandmother said to me, "Son, you leave him and people like him in the hands of the Lord." And she said, "Son, there's going to come a time that he wants to die, and he can't die." She said, "You're going to see those same people again that try to kill the same people again. And he's going to suffer. He's going to want to die."

And she said that, and I had some serious problems with that. And I went into war and came back. And when I came back, he had retired. They had him doing some police work on Maybank Highway and stuff. But he used to shoot up his house at night. And my grandmother said he was seeing those same people. And I know you all, you young folk can't understand that. But that he was seeing those same people again that he killed, and he was trying to kill them over again, and began to – so much stuff.

And that's what I like to talk about, being educated, because it doesn't come out of the book all the time. You got about being involved and being able to witness and for me to witness my grandmother and for me to see Chief Henderson doing that stuff as a county police officer. But after that, he really suffered before he died. You know, you won't find that written nowhere.

MA: Well, you probably wouldn't. Well, you know, again, for me, being involved with this for as long as I have since the last – and I'm having trouble because my wife is from James Island – you know, there have been some chapters that have been opened up to me through you and others about the history of this place I probably otherwise would have never known. And so -

WS: It's not never known, but you would not accept.

MA: Well, that could be.

WS: And so many of the blacks I know don't accept any of these things because they were educated and they've got degrees. So, if you've got a degree, you don't know this kind of stuff. You can't accept this stuff that I'm saying.

MA: Right. And that's part of the reason why we're working hard to uncover, you know, to make available so these things will not continue to be hidden in plain sight. And so, when individuals drive to Mosquito Beach, yes, it's not the Mosquito Beach that you saw as a child. It's not. But we want them to have that feeling and that thought of what people did. And I think you hit it on the head, as the other four individuals hit it on the head. This was a place of freedom.

WS: Yeah.

MA: And opportunity.

WS: And even right now, Mosquito Beach, all you have to do is get somebody like me or the guys down there and ask them to go and... I do some tours now with folk coming from New York or other places. And they have a bus, and I will take them on tours and show them what was happening in those places at that time. And they would end up getting upset. A lot of times, a lot of blacks just end up crying because they believe that people were treated –

MA: In that manner.

WS: - in that manner. But I've been able to do a lot of tours down there and on Johns Island. And that's one thing I wanted to do for a while, but I ended up trying to do both of it. So, I made enemies of the white controlling power. So, they shut me down in being able to do those things.

MA: Well, one of the things we've asked consistently to all the individuals that we've interviewed – two things. What made Mosquito Beach special or unique for you? And then, the last question: what would you want a future generation to know about Mosquito Beach?

WS: Well, I think Mosquito Beach got to be so important to us because of the Wilders and some of them that really stood out. And they did some building and stuff like that. They set up a place that we could go and talk to each other. And that's the thing that I tried to do, and I really got involved in it from that, because that's how you educate people.

So, I would take a group of people down there and just look at the area and let people raise questions, like you just did a while ago, with them. And that's how you learn. Because if you've got a question, then I've got an answer. I can give you an answer. So, we did that in teaching. And then so, there's been so much teaching from Mosquito Beach and other places, you know, that we've been able to teach people.

I'd take people to Wadmalaw and have them sit with a group of blacks who were drinking and stuff like that and let them listen to the blacks from Wadmalaw talk, and then bring them back to Johns Island and let them sit and listen to Johns Island. And then we'd back to Mosquito Beach and listen to the talking. And the language are altogether different, but we can understand each other. And that was the real beautiful part about it. We could understand it although it sounds differently.

MA: Variance.

WS: The variance, yeah. It was different, but we understood. So, I would take black folk around a lot of the islands there where we needed to have a discussion. And I would just start a discussion, and we could talk about stuff and how white people or blacks in some places don't understand a damn thing we're talking about. They will say, "Do you understand a damn thing those people say?"

MA: Well, Katherine and I, we're not young folks, but if we were -

WS: Compared to me, you're young.

MA: Well, okay. Yes, sir. Thank you very much. What would you say to a millennial about Mosquito Beach?

WS: What is a millennial?

MA: Oh. That's a young person, 20-ish, 20, 25, 29, 30, yeah, in that angle. When they walk up, they don't see the landscape that you saw. They might just see where pilings once were for a building. They may see four structures there, and that's all they see.

WS: Well, it'd really depend on their background and their family background, because if they're black and they're from these areas, they would have access to some of this stuff that we're

talking about. But if they're brand new, then, you know, we've got to talk to them about that. And most of the time, they would not believe us, because most folk don't believe those kind of stuff could happen. In America, they could treat you that way? And, you know, folk were treated real bad and killed on these islands.

But we developed this language that... Again, I used to get a group of us blacks, and we would go someplace, and they were doing something. And we would start a conversation about something that the folk couldn't understand what we were talking about. And these would be black folk not understanding because it depended on where you were from and where your family was from. Because most of us learned what we talk about from our ancestors – our mothers and fathers and grandfathers. And that's where a lot of this stuff comes from.

MA: During your radio days, as I shared earlier at the outset, some of your individuals who, staff folks, you know, DJ'd with you, were consistent – I'm using the Frankie "The Big Bopper" – was consistent over at Mosquito Beach. How did you all – or you may not have even thought about it – as an institution, figure that you were contributing to that place by having your people there there...building there on a consistent basis?

WS: Well, see, that's one of the things. God has helped me to look at some of this stuff before it got to that point. So, I was able to begin to educate. And Frankie got real angry at me at some point. Matter of fact, I heard that he died. I don't know.

MA: Well, he did. Yes, sir.

WS: But, you know, he had stopped even talking to me.

MA: Oh. I'm sorry to hear that.

WS: Yeah. Yeah, because he came through, and everything he had came from me with the radio and everything. But it made him better than me and everybody else. So, he stopped learning. And that's the danger that I would like for you to teach. If you stop learning, then you're dead. You can walk around. You can talk a little bit. But if you stop learning, you're dead. And I'm so proud of you with some of the stuff that you've been able to do and accomplish and still be here now to talk about it, to have an interest, and got an interest in it still. And that is good.

MA: Well, yeah. In talking with many of the folks, they talked about the music and so forth. And I realize that, as the proprietor as you were, you gave an outlet and an opportunity for people throughout music and for part of that oasis of Mosquito Beach.

WS: Right. Yeah. We taught about the difference between jazz and blues on the radio. I did that from the radio and got involved in so much of the gospel and stuff like that, and made sure the folk understand there was very little difference between gospel and blues. It's almost identical because it always talk about people catching hell or having problems but being able to do something about it.

And we would teach that the jazz and stuff grow out of religious – from religious background. But nobody had really written about it, and I did some writing. I've got stuff scattered all over this place that I don't know where it's at. But that's what I did, because I talked about the difference between religion and blues. And both were the same thing, even sometimes the same words. Or you just change some words.

MA: The inflections -

WS: Yeah, or you'd change some word from "love" to something else and then to caring and stuff like that.

MA: And, Katherine...

Interviewer 2: Well, when you all used to have... I guess, did you use satellite kind of to set up at Mosquito Beach?

WS: Did you hear her? Satellite.

MA: She means set-up.

MA: Well, did you have set-ups at Mosquito Beach, and you would have a DJ out there and play music? Or did you record bands that were playing out at Mosquito Beach and put them on the radio?

WS: Well, again, there would be bands out there that would be playing. But very rarely you did any recording of any band or anybody, because you couldn't record music that sound right.

MA: Right. Equipment wise...

WS: Yeah. But we had the people to come out and play. So, they used to have bands on Mosquito Beach every week.

Interviewer 2: Do you remember some of those groups?

WS: Oh. When you was talking about that, I was thinking about that because there were quite a few of the bands that I used to bring out over there. And I got some recordings somewhere by some of those guys. And I really need to go back and take a look at some of the stuff.

Interviewer 2: When we collected stuff at the History Harvest in October, we had a guy who brought one of his T-shirts, and it had artwork of a mosquito drinking a Budweiser. And it was from WPAL. It looked like a music festival.

WS: Yeah. So, those are the kind of stuff that we did, a lot of stuff. But also there was so much religious stuff that they did. Some of the religious groups used to sing at WPAL. That's what we did all Sunday-long, I used to remember. We would do it Sunday, all Sunday-long. We would do

religious music, and we used to have live groups. They got the Friendly Four and some of those groups. And their records by the Friendly Four are still around.

MA: Yeah. That's why we wanted to have some conversation about music, because of how the station was a part of the growth and movement of Mosquito Beach. And these are probably the little things that people probably will remember about their experience.

WS: Yeah. We did everything. But what I tried to do, that everything that touched the black community was on WPAL, whether it was political, whether it was music, whether what kind it was, what was going on. We had it all on WPAL. And we would bring all of those people on. The one that was good in their field, we would bring them on, give them a half hour or an hour and then have it where people can call in and raise questions. And I caught a lot of hell for that too, but we were able to do it.

And what I realized at a point, that what the black community was doing most times is trying to change the whole entire black community. And what that whole thing did to me is that all I need to do is change a few people. And they'll go out and teach. Having this conversation with you guys here, now this is going to go someplace else. When you all get through here, you're going to have some questions that you're going to have to go and ask somebody else.

MA: Right.

WS: But you can also teach or research some of the elders that you can ask questions. And that's how I use in teaching. You don't have to have 100 and 200 people to teach one time. All you need is a few.

MA: Well, that's what we wanted to be able to do here today. Again, on behalf of Katherine and myself and all the group, we thank you. I guess just in one closing, if there was anything that you want to be able to say about Mosquito Beach and its history, its legacy, its importance for future generations to know, what would you say to them?

WS: Well, one of the things Mosquito Beach did, it also connected people, black people from the other islands. And that was a place that they could go to meet. So, whatever was going on, you can go to Mosquito Beach. And Wilder and them was really ahead of their time in some of the things that they did, and we've never given them any credit for the kind of stuff that they created. Because they took a hell of a chance, and they caught hell with police and everything else. But it got a lot of people. People came from New York just to go to Mosquito Beach and to hang out.

MA: Right. We've heard that consistently from people during the interviews. People in the service, in the military, other parts of the world ran into someone who went out to Mosquito Beach. Or we're learning, I guess, and you might know this as well, people came from all over South Carolina in some shape, form, or fashion.

WS: Yeah. You know, wherever you were from in South Carolina, Mosquito Beach was the place to go and to meet people. And it really did so much for our history in terms of where we

were and what we were capable of doing. And Wilder and them sort of brought out that we could do so much more. And I still think we owe them something.

MA: Out of those two. Okay.

WS: Yeah. I think that we owe them something.

MA: Well, sir, we appreciate you for your time and your attention and the use of your home and sitting with your family. And we're grateful for what you've done.

WS: Byron, you had a question?

[discussion about physical therapist]

Interviewer 2: All right. Thank you, Mr. Saunders.

MA: Well, we're good, sir. Thank you.

WS: All righty.

END INTERVIEW