

Interview with Ms. Caldonia Edwards
Conducted by Monique Claiborne & John Halloran

For

The Chene Street History Project

June 6, 2003

JH: Today is June 6, 2003, and I'm here with Monique Claiborne, myself John Halloran, and we're here to interview Ms. Caldonia Edwards about her memories of Chene Street and that area. We're going to start off by asking her grandparents' names and where they come from.

CE: My grandmother's name was Mamie Love; She was from Savannah, Georgia.

JH: And your grandfather?

CE: I don't remember my grandfather, no, no.

JH: Your parents' names?

CE: Sarah James, Emmanuel James. My mother's from Savannah, Georgia and my father's from--

JH: South Carolina?

CE: South Carolina, yes.

JH: And they came to Detroit in the early '20s?

CE: Yes, 1923.

JH: And you were born--?

CE: I was born here in Detroit.

JH: And your father worked at?

CE: Packard Motor Company.

JH: And did you guys belong to a church as soon as you came up here?

CE: Yes. Calvary Baptist Church

JH: And where was it located?

CE: Joseph Campau and Clinton.

JH: And where did you go to elementary school?

CE: Duffield.

JH: And you went to Miller High School?

CE: Right

JH: Starting in 1940?

MC: When were you born?

CE: 1926

JH: And so after I left, now I'm back, do you remember anything from Miller that stood out? Teachers?

CE: Nahh

JH: Did you have a favorite teacher?

CE: Nahh

JH: Nah? What were the students like then? Do you remember anything about them?

CE: Nothing extra.

JH: No? So what'd you do after school, in high school? Did you have any, sort of, places that you would go with friends? Events that you can recall?

CE: When I got out of high school I had a job. I was working. I started working in the 12th grade.

JH: Where were you working at?

CE: I was working at Fort Wayne.

JH: Fort Wayne?

CE: Mhmm. Out on Jefferson.

JH: What was Fort Wayne?

CE: It was the government, army, well I guess you could say army base. Army barracks and stuff like that.

JH: And where was it on Jefferson?

CE: Jefferson and oh well I don't know. West Jefferson and it had a clock down there.

JH: And you, your first home in Detroit was on Monroe? And what was that address again for me?

CE: 2681-twenty-six eighty-one Monroe

JH: Twenty-six eighty-one. And that was between Chene and Campau. And how long did you guys live there for?

CE: 21 years

JH: 21 years. And you don't remember anything about the way it looked? Other than you lived upstairs?

CE: No.

JH: And how long of a walk is that to school?

CE: Let's see. We lived on Monroe. There was Macomb, Clinton, Mullett, Madison, Sherman, Maple, Chestnut, Antietam, and Jay. Nine blocks. That's how far I walked to school.

MC: You walk by yourself? Or with your brothers and sisters..

CE: Sometimes I walked by myself.

MC: What were their names?

CE: Alfred James, Maurice James, Jerome James, Beatrice James, well she's in Jackson now, or at least she was and uh--

MC: You're the oldest, youngest?

CE: I'm the second oldest.

JH: And on your way to school were there any stores that you would walk by? A corner store?

CE: There were lots of stores.

JH: Anything jump out at you?

CE: Uh uh (no)

JH: And after school, before you had the job, what type of activities were you into?

CE: I was into music. I took music lessons.

JH: What instruments? Did you sing?

CE: Played music

JH: What did you play?

CE: Piano

JH: So after school you'd have piano lessons some days of the week.

MC: You didn't do anything else? What else did you do in high school?

CE: I would play basketball.

MC: You were on the basketball team?

CE: Mhmm. And I sang in the Glee Club.

MC: Do you remember some of the other girls on the team?

CE: One of them I'm still bowling with, Martha Westman. She's still the only one that I know right now. I don't know where the others are. Oh, no she's the only one that I know now because I'm bowling with her now.

MC: Was the school mostly black or white?

CE: Mostly black.

MC: And the teachers?

CE: Mostly, they were white.

MC: No issues between the teachers and students, because of race or--?

CE: Not that I know of.

MC: What about at Duffield?

CE: Duffield?

MC: Mhmm

CE: The only thing I remember is the music teacher, Miss Taylor.

MC: Miss Taylor. What was she like?

CE: She was nice. It was nothing extra. Everybody was all right.

MC: So it was a majority black students? And a majority white teachers?

CE: You know I think it was.

JH: So, you graduated from Miller in '44?

CE: Mhm

JH: And you were working over at the, on Jefferson Ave?

CE: Fort Wayne

JH: Fort Wayne

CE: Mhm

JH: And how long did you work there for?

CE: Until after I graduated. And then I started working for, well, I stayed with the government. On Russell, 5711 Russell. That was the government too.

JH: Well what was it particularly?

CE: Umm, hmmm

JH: Do you know what kind of work you did?

CE: Clerical work, that's all I ever did, is clerical work.

JH: And at that time you're parents were still living over on Monroe?

CE: Mhm

JH: And your younger brothers and sisters?

CE: We were all living over there.

JH: How long did you live there for until you, when did you move out?

CE: I moved over here I moved out in '64 over here.

JH: In '64 to Huron.

CE: Yeah next door.

JH: What did you do for social activities after you graduated from high school? I know that there are a lot of clubs down in that area. Are there any places you recall going out to? To hear bands?

CE: Well there was the Graystone, which was on Woodward. Went to the [redacted] ballroom, dancing, which was on Woodward too. See I was still in school, I went to, when I graduated, I was working up to on Detroit Ordinance District that was the name of the government business. I went to Lewis Business College for one semester but before I went down to Wayne State for one year, and then I went to Lewis Business College, then I left there and went to Detroit Institute of Commerce D.I.C. and I graduated from there. I was still working, and well I was having fun, going out dancing, and what have you. To the Graystone, something like that.

MC: You talked earlier about clubs like the three sixes and Southwest?

CE: They were down, as we say, down in the Valley. You know. That's what they call down where YM--YWCA was downtown on St. Antoine and Elizabeth street. And down there the Three Sixes, Club Paradise, a bowling alley was down there. That's where I learned to bowl down there. And I didn't go to the clubs as much down in there as opposed to going to the bowling alley.

JH: So you met friends, went bowling? Stuff like that. Do you remember any friends, particularly, from down there. Or do you stay in contact with the people from high school?

CE: High School? Yes. Mary Washington. Her and I graduated together. We're still very much friends.

JH: And what were you studying at Wayne State, when you were there?

CE: Oh, let me see. What did I take up there? I know I took English. I was going to school at night so I couldn't take too many classes. English, what do you call--I wanted to get into clerical work. And after I went to D.I.C. I was satisfied there, and all of the, oh like accounting and teaching and that was more less of what I wanted to do. Because I had planned on being a C.P.A., but I never did get around to completing the rest of the courses, and I needed two more years. And I didn't go back to take the two years.

JH: And your father continued to work at Packard until?

CE: Well, he moved back to South Carolina because he had asthma real bad, and it was kinda better for him there.

JH: And but your mother stayed up here?

CE: Mhmm

JH: And do you keep in contact with these guys?

CE: Mhmm. Like every year.

JH: And did your mother get a job after he left?

CE: Oh she did, she worked in ____ homes, and stuff like that, day work as they call it

MC: Do you remember the Chene Street riots? In, the '40s I think it was '43?

JH: No, I don't remember that. I was still in school though. I don't remember too much.

MC: You were talking earlier about Barthwell's Ice Cream

CE: Yeah Barthwell was doing that. When I really knew Barthwell he was down here on, right here on the corner of Kercheval and Concord. But I knew I had heard about Barthwell down there you know, I can't tell you what street it was on down there.

MC: Sherman Bar?

CE: Sherman Bar yeah, I remember Sherman Bar

MC: Where was that?

CE: Down on Sherman and Chene. I remember that real vivid because I went in there one time and the one time I went in there, they had a big fight or something. And then I had to get on the floor out of the way of whatever was going on and I never been in there since.

JH: Was it a rough place?

CE: Well that was my only time in there. I just never went to visit the bars. That's all.

MC: You went by yourself?

CE: I went with a friend when we went, and she left me, and I went into a phone booth and sat down on the floor until it cooled off. Then I came on out, and I hadn't been in the Sherman Bar since then.

JH: When did you get married?

CE: 1947

JH: What was your husband's name?

CE: James Edwards.

JH: Was he from Detroit?

CE: What?

JH: He was from Detroit?

CE: Yeah,

JH: Did he grow up in the same neighborhood as you?

CE: No, not really.

JH: Well where was he from?

CE: He was from, he was from here.

JH: From the east side?

CE: Pardon?

JH: From the east side?

CE: Yeah, further on though.

JH: He didn't go to Miller?

CE: Yes, he did go for a little while.

JH: And what did he do for a living?

CE: Well he had various jobs. Not anything to speak, you know or anything like that.

JH: Now did he move in with you over here?

CE: When I married him I moved in with my cousin over on State and, over on Mullet between Dubois and Chene. And it was on Mullett ____ and I had my....my oldest son was born. And we moved over here when he was a month old.

JH: Do you remember the address on Mullett? Where you moved in with your cousin at? That was just for a short period?

CE: Right. I think

JH: And then you and your husband moved in over here with your family.

CE: Mhmm.

JH: And that house, what was the address of it?

CE: 2-4-6-5

JH: 2-4-6-5? That's over there?

CE: Mhm

JH: Can you describe what it was like though?

CE: Like it is now

JH: I didn't--I haven't seen it.

CE: Like it is now

JH: So how many floors is it? Does it have.....

CE: It's a two family flat.

JH: Ok, so you guys were upstairs?

CE: We lived downstairs

JH: Okay. And how long were you there for? Up until you moved here?

CE: No, I stayed there from '64 then I moved over on Goddard and 7 Mile Road and then when I retired in '84 I moved back over here, to this house, this is when I bought this house.

MC: Do you remember your neighbors who stayed below you when you were staying on Monroe?

CE: Thomas. That's the name I can remember

MC: So they stayed downstairs that entire time?

CE: Mhmm, We all went to uh Duffield and Miller together.

MC: So you guys got along? They were a black family?

CE: Mhm

MC: You were talking earlier about Lawry brothers?

CE: On Chene and Lafayette

MC: What type of store was that?

CE: Well a grocery store. Grocery and meat.

JH: Was it owned by Italians?

CE: Probably, they moved from there, they moved out on Gratiot

JH: We met other people who remember Lawry's

MC: Do you remember what it looks like? Or what it looked like?

CE: Like a regular store. Wasn't nothing extra.

JH: So like a corner store

CE: Yeah it was on the corner

JH: And there were a lot of Italians in that area? Or more up towards Gratiot? Do you remember?

CE: We lived next door to Italians. Italians was across the street on Monroe. And there was some. Yeah, in that neighborhood there was quite a few of them.

JH: Any places you remember, or where did your mother go out and get food? Was there any store you remember?

CE: Well like I was telling you we went to Eastern Market.

JH: And you got your meats and all of the vegetables you needed?

CE: Right, mhm.

JH: And did you have a doctor you remember going to?

CE: Yeah, Doctor Cunningham. He was up on Chene between Madison and Sherman.

JH: Did you have a dentist?

MC: Doctor Cunningham you said?

CE: Yeah

MC: Was he a black doctor?

CE: Mhm

MC: You went to visit him or did he come to your house?

CE: Went both ways. We left the house he came to the house.

MC: He had a large practice, he serviced—

CE: I don't know how large his practice was.

MC: Okay

JH: Do you remember going to the movies at all?

CE: Yeah, we'd see _____

JH: _____ picture houses

CE: There were two on Chene it was one across the street, one was called _____ I can't remember that...

JH: Was it matinee or night

CE: Yeah, yeah.

MC: Catherine?

CE: Eyy, you got it.

MC: And Savoy

CE: That's right Catherine was on one side, Savoy was across the street on Chene.

MC: Do you remember what blocks or?

CE: On Chene between Mullet and Madison.

MC: They were both in between Mullet and Madison

CE: Uh huh, one was on the side and one was across the street

JH: Do you remember any particular people in the neighborhood? Any characters on the street? _____ Police officers?

MC: Gangs?

CE: One named Ben Turpin [laughs]. He walked up and down Chene street. Ben Turpin.

JH: We've had a lot of people--

CE: Yep

JH: He wasn't a very nice man was he?

MC: Do you have any memories of him?

CE: Uh uh. No. I mean I just seen him, that's all

MC: He never bothered you?

CE: No, I never spoke to him

JH: You pretty much stayed out of trouble

CE: Oh yeah. Tried to. Anyway.

MC: Do you remember any of the movies that showed, were there like, did they have dinner there, how much did it cost to get in?

CE: I don't remember how much it cost. We'd go on Saturdays that was the only time we went to the movies was on Saturdays.

JH: Do you remember any restaurants? Diners?

CE: We didn't go out to eat at that time. Everybody eat at home.

JH: What kind of food would **your mom** prepare in the house?

CE: Potatoes, rice, grits, beans, things like that.

JH: Some sort of meat sometimes?

CE: Yeah, we had chicken, and hamburgers.

JH: Do you remember any gangs on the street? Any problems with crime ever? In those times?

CE: I heard of a Purple Gang, or something like that. On Chene Street. As far as me seeing them I don't know. I didn't know anything about them.

MC: In your end of Chene Street? Or--?

JH: More up towards

CE: Like Mullett and Madison. Up in there.

MC: Did you hear about anything they did or did you just know about them?

CE: I just heard about them, that's all. I don't know what they did. I stayed out of it. Gangs, you stay away from gangs.

JH: Did you have a time that you had to be home in high school?

CE: Oh, of course.

JH: Did you have to be home before the lights came on on the street.

CE: No, my mother didn't care about that. We just knew we had to be in I guess before 11 o'clock. My kids had to be in when the lights went on.

JH: So in that period of time, would you stay out till 11? Would you be out with your friends?

CE: Yeah, like I said you know we go to the Mirror **B**allroom, go to the Graystone well you know at that time, I was like 18 years old, or 19 going to a dance, so curfew wasn't really important. I went to the dance or something like that, yeah you know, something like that.

JH: Would you go out to meet boys?

CE: No, all of us, we danced, everybody knew if we see somebody at the dance or something like that, but as far as going out just to you know--

JH: You didn't have any boyfriends in high school?

CE: Not really

JH: Nothing serious

CE: No, not till I got out of school. I got married.

JH: How did you meet?

CE: I knew him in school. I mean I saw him. And after we I got out of school he picked me up--

JH: Did he go to church with you at Calvary?

CE: Mhmm

JH: And so you'd see him there as well.

CE: Oh yeah, because that's where I was. I was playing there.

MC: The piano?

CE: Mhmm. Yeah.

MC: When did you move to Messiah?

CE: Uh, we moved our membership in '65. My son started playing in '63 over there.

MC: What did he play?

CE: He played organ.

MC: Ok.

JH: And you were you there on Sundays? Wednesday nights too?

CE: No, we were just there on Sundays. I was playing up at Calvary, started playing over there so I made him play ___, then I stopped playing, and then we all joined over here. Because I played for Calvary, I was playing I don't know how long--

JH: Did you ever play the piano outside of Calvary?

CE: Yeah when I played at other churches yeah.

MC: You only played gospel music?

CE: Yeah. Mhmm. Well hymns, well I don't know if you should call it that because now everything is different now, you know, because I grew up in a different era of music than it is now.

JH: Um.

MC: So, Calvary was that a sanctified church?

CE: Baptist.

MC: A Baptist church?

CE: Mhmm.

MC: Do you remember the Freehouse of Worship of God? You were telling me about that earlier being a sanctified church.

CE: I don't know if that's the name of the church or not. It was one down there on Chene and Monroe.

MC: Chene and Monroe?

CE: Mhmm.

MC: What do you remember about that church?

CE: [REDACTED] hear music, and we'd see the people dancing. I called it a sanctified church.

JH: What did it look like on the outside?

CE: It looked like--

JH: Was it wood frame, or was it brick?

CE: No, it was like a corner--

MC: Storefront church?

CE: Yeah, like a storefront.

MC: Where did you get your hair done?

CE: My mother did my hair. Once in a while I would go to Miss [REDACTED], you know, she lived on Chene, she was a beautician.

MC: Where at? Or where at on Chene?

CE: On Chene. Between Clinton and Mullett.

MC: And were there other women in there doing hair or it was just her?

CE: I don't recall whether there was anybody else. There might have been somebody else in there. I don't recall.

JH: Where did you go out and get clothes?

CE: I went down to Sam's Cut Rate down on, downtown.

JH: Downtown?

CE: Mhmm. I used to walk down there.

JH: You walked out there?

CE: Mhmm. A little streetcar ran right pass I said, "Woop, let me catch it," and I paid 6 cents to ride the streetcar right down--downtown, but we walked downtown.

JH: Mhmm.

MC: Did you ever go to Belle Isle?

CE: Uh, yeah.

MC: You would walk to Belle Isle?

CE: Yes, we did.

MC: You never caught the streetcar?

CE: Uh uh. When we went to Belle Isle, we walked across the bridge and came back.

JH: You remember Chene-Ferry Market?

CE: Nope. . Quite a ways up.

JH: You didn't go up that far up Chene much?

CE: No, that's quite a ways up. Way up.

JH: Yeah.

CE: Uh uh, I ain't go up that far.

MC: Any poolhouses?

CE: Poor houses?

MC: Pool. Pool, shoot pool.

CE: Pool. Oh, poo rooms.

MC: Mhmm. Oh, pool rooms.

CE: Yeah, there was one I remember on Chene, on Chene and Mullett.

MC: You used to go there?

CE: Uh uh.

MC: Never went there?

CE: Uh uh.

MC: You weren't allowed or you just wasn't interested.

CE: I wasn't interested. As a matter of fact, I don't think I was allowed in the pool room.

JH: When did you have your first child?

CE: First?

JH: Child?

CE: Child?

JH: Yeah.

CE: December '47.

JH: And how many kids do you have?

CE: Three.

JH: Three--

CE: Two boys and a girl.

JH: What are their names?

CE: Roderick Edwards, Reginald Edwards and Georgina Davis.

JH: And they were all born kind of within the same time, there all pretty close to each other in age?

CE: Yes.

JH: And, after you had children did you continue to work at the same place?

CE: No. I worked for the government, I worked for the Wayne County, I worked for the city.

JH: Mhmm.

CE: I ended up with the city, stayed there for 31 years.

JH: Really? What job did you have? Where was that at? Was it downtown?

CE: No. In housing. Detroit housing.

MC: Do you remember the Sojourner Truth Hous--the housing projects?

CE: Mhmm.

MC: Do you remember uh, any race problems when they first built them?

CE: I don't--I was working in the central office, which was right down here....

MC: Ok, so you don't really--

CE: Uh uh. I wasn't at the projects.

MC: Ok. Do you remember any confectionaries? On the street? That you guys went to?

CE: There was one down on Monroe and Chene, on that, but I can't recall that name ____ it was right there on ____.

JH: Do you ever remember stores selling numbers? Lottery numbers? Anything of that sort?

MC: Did your family have a car?

CE: Nope.

MC: No? No car. So while you were working in high school, you were walking and taking the streetcar everywhere?

CE: Mhmm.

MC: When you moved onto Mullett, did you have a car then?

CE: Nope.

MC: No? When you moved to your cousin's temporarily?

CE: No, we didn't have no car.

MC: Still didn't have a car?

CE: Uh uh.

MC: When did you get your first car? Or did you ever?

CE: When I was

JH: When you were living in that complex?

CE: Yep.

MC: So you went and got a license?

CE: Mhmm.

MC: What were you saying? You learned how to drive when?

CE: When I was on Monroe. That was before I got married, I learned how to drive but we never had a car.

MC: Who taught you how to drive?

CE: Um. Let's see. Hmmmm....

MC: Was it a relative? A friend?

CE: No, a friend.

MC: He had a car?

CE: He had a 720 car, and I learned to drive then. About 18 years old when I learned how to drive.

JH: So, when did you move off of Concord? You said you moved off somewhere off 7 Mile? Yeah--

CE: I moved--I moved from here in '64.

JH: In '64?

CE: Uh huh.

JH: And, you moved here to where?

CE: Over on Goddard.

JH: Goddard?

CE: Uh huh between 7 Mile and Nevada.

JH: Okay

CE: Mhmm.

JH: So, you came back here in '84.

CE: In '84 I came back here.

MC: Did you have any friends outside of school and outside of church that you met elsewhere, or that's where most of your friends were from church and school?

CE: Uh, yeah. I met friends bowling. Yeah

MC: Bowling?

CE: Mhmm.

MC: Did you have any friends outside of your race or you just mainly like have any Polish friends, any Jewish friends?

CE: No.

MC: Romanian?

CE: Um. I don't, well I don't think so, but I was in their company a lot of times you know in different places that I went out to, like at the bowling alley and things like that you know. But as far as me having them as friends, no.

JH: Do you remember when your father died?

CE: Yeah. He died in '60, '60, '66.

JH: And he was down in South Carolina?

CE: Yep. Yes.

JH: And he was buried down there as well?

CE: Mhmm.

JH: What about your mother?

CE: She died in '95.

MC: How old was she?

CE: 93.

JH: Where is she buried?

CE: 13 Mile and Ryan.

JH: Ok.

MC: Do you remember when everyone started moving out of the neighborhood when they built the plant? What's the name of it?

JH: It's far from her.

MC: Far from her.

JH: If that's what you're talking about.

MC: Oh okay.

JH: She's talking about the plant over up 94 and the Boulevard.

CE: Oh yeah.

MC: Where? Oh, the Poletown plant.

CE: Yeah. It was on Conant, they were on Conant because that's where my brother worked over there. So, they moved there in Detroit and down it was on Conant. Dodge Main that's what it was.

MC: Mhmm. Do you remember when the freeway came through? Or when they said they were going to build the freeway and, because that kind of destroyed Black Bottom.

CE: Yeah. Let's see. No I don't remember. Ain't no point in me even trying to wrack my brain.

JH: Now you moved back down here in '64—no, '84. So when the riots happened in '67, you were up on 7 Mile by Nevada.

CE: Mhmm. Yeah.

JH: So, you don't remember anything going on? In particular?

CE: I didn't go see anything, and I didn't let my kids go out. We stayed right at home.

JH: And I take it there wasn't any sort of disturbance over--

CE: Nope. Over here, no.

JH: So, most of your social activity after you got married was bowling, things of that nature?

CE: Well, I guess so. Bowling and playing for the church is all

JH: Uh huh. And what did your husband do? Did he do anything other outside of work?

CE: Not with me.

JH: And is he still alive?

CE: No no.

JH: When did he die?

CE: In '85.

JH: '85.

JH: Any more questions Monique?

MC: I'm going to take pictures of your yearbook.

CE: Okay.

