

Interview with Lee Van Allen by Ken Turino for Historic New England's 100 Years—100 Communities Oral History Project, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, July 14, 2011.

KEN TURINO: Okay, I think we're good. All right, so to be official, I'm going to ask you to state your name, and spell your name for us.

LEE VAN ALLEN: Okay, Lee, L-E-E, Van Allen, Capital V-A-N, Capital A-L-L-E-N. And actually my maiden name is Jackson, J-A-C-K-S-O-N. So Lee Jackson Van Allen.

KT: Great. And today, I believe, is the 13th? 14th?

LV: Today is the 14th.

KT: 14th of July, great. Well, good. Well thank you again for letting us come and talk with you. We appreciate your taking the time. So for this project, we're looking at African American tourism in New England. And your place plays an important part in that, from our research, so we're delighted to be here. So could you tell me just a little bit about your background? Did you grow up here in Martha's Vineyard? Were you born here?

LV: Well, I was born in May, and so my very first summer here was when I was a couple of months old. I've been coming every summer all of my life. This has been a family seasonal habitat for generations. My grandchildren are actually the sixth generation of our family that's been coming to Martha's Vineyard. And it all started with my great-grandfather and grandmother, Charles and Henrietta Shearer. Charles was born into slavery in Lynchburg, Virginia area, and his wife Henrietta was a free black from Lynchburg, Virginia. Her maiden name was Merchant, and there were a large number of free blacks in the Merchant family (The Merchant family were free blacks for

generations). They met, I believe, at Hampton Institute, where they both attended school. Hampton's history is interesting in that it was founded to, specifically to educate former slaves, free blacks, and Native Americans.

They met at Hampton, and they married. They taught—the lived in Lynchburg, and taught, actually, in the local schools for several years. And then they decided to move their family north for a better life. So they came to Massachusetts in the late 1800's, and they settled in Everett, Massachusetts. And Charles was a devout Baptist, and he belonged to the first integrated church in America, which is Boston's Tremont Temple. And he—he came to the island for religious retreats. That's how I believe he was introduced to Martha's Vineyard. And they loved the island, he and his wife Henrietta, who was black and Native American. And Charles and Henrietta decided to purchase property here. So in the late 1800's they bought a home, a different home than we have in the family today. And then in 1903, they bought the current property that's now called Shearer Cottage.

One of the reasons why he bought this property was because it overlooks the Baptist Temple Park, and many years ago there was actually a church, a Baptist Temple, in the park below us. And he would walk with some of his family and friends to worship in the Baptist Temple Park. In 1903, when they bought the property, they actually set up a laundry, and that was how they helped support their summers on Martha's Vineyard. Charles was the head waiter at several well-known hotels in Boston. One was the Parker House, and one was the York Hotel in Boston, I believe. And it became very apparent, as friends and family came to visit Charles, that the inns, the

other inns—and there were several on Martha's Vineyard—did not accept blacks, because of segregation.

So Charles, who was a very smart gentleman, saw a business opportunity, and in conjunction with the laundry, they opened an inn in 1912. So initially it (Shearer Cottage) was an inn, as well as a laundry. The inn became very popular in the early 1900's, and it was a place where African Americans from all over the country came to visit. We have had Ethel Waters (an actress) stay here, Paul Robeson, the famous political activist, has stayed here. And there was a large group of New Yorkers who came, as well as Bostonians, and people actually from other parts of the country. As Shearer's reputation grew, they (Charles Shearer) decided to close the laundry, and they (the family) concentrated their efforts on the inn. And there were twelve rooms with several shared bathrooms that were operating during every summer. And when Shearer was full, the neighboring homes, which were also owned by African Americans, would take in the overflow from Shearer Cottage.

And they served (delicious) meals. We could serve maybe thirty or so people in our dining room, which actually is this room we're sitting in now; this was the original dining room. And they were excellent cooks, and they had turkey every Sunday, and fresh fish, and you know, fresh chicken, and homemade peach cobbler, and homemade ice cream. And so many times, people, other African Americans who lived on Martha's Vineyard but did not necessarily stay at Shearer, would just come and make reservations for dinner, because their dinner was very famous.

But also, it was actually a cultural place to be. Because I remember speaking not just to my mother, Doris Pope Jackson, who is the granddaughter of Charles and Henrietta Shearer, but one of the Fuller's, Saul Fuller, and a gentleman who said he remembered as a child coming. And there was Harry T. Burley, who was a famous writer (and arranger), and he's credited with saving the African slave songs by putting them down (on paper), and arranging them. And Roland B. Hayes, who was a singer, African American singer (came to Shearer) at that same time. They all stayed at Shearer Cottage. And they would have impromptu concerts. And Mr. Fuller had said he remembers as a child, you know, being surrounded with these types of individuals who were very talented, very well-educated. And for him it was—it was a very special opportunity to be exposed to (African American culture and) people such as Harry T. Burley and Roland B. Hayes.

One of the families that also came was Adam Clayton Powell, Senior, who was a reverend from New York City—Abyssinian Baptist Church, I believe—and his son, the young Adam Clayton Powell, who went on to be Congressman from New York City. So young Adam came with his father and mother to stay at Shearer Cottage. They were my mother's generation, and they were very friendly, and hung out. And when, Adam Clayton Powell was married to his first wife, Belle Powell, they spent their honeymoon at Shearer Cottage. And later, they bought a home around the corner from Shearer Cottage.

And this was an area, the highlands of Oak Bluffs, was an area where many African Americans did settle. For instance, Dorothy West, a well-known writer—her father (and mother) had a summer

home in this area, and she grew up here as a child, and retired and spent her last years here, full-time.

So Shearer Cottage has always been in our family, and it's been sort of—it's been not only the hub of our family for—on Martha's Vineyard, but the hub of the African American community in the early years, because so many people came and stayed. They were introduced to the island through Shearer Cottage, and they eventually bought property for themselves on Martha's Vineyard. So we feel as though, (Shearer Cottage) having introduced so many of the African Americans to Martha's Vineyard, and that they then went forward, bought their own (island) property. So we feel like we're an important part of that growth of the African American community on Martha's Vineyard, which of course, there is a substantial number of African Americans living on Martha's Vineyard as full-time and seasonal residents.

The one thing about Shearer Cottage that I think is very special is that after Charles and Henrietta opened it up as an inn, their daughter Lily Shearer met her husband, Lincoln Pope, who came with his father, James W. Pope, who was also from Virginia. A black man—we're not sure if he was free or a slave, but he was a lawyer, went to B.U., and he lived in the Beacon Hill area when Beacon Hill was a home for many blacks in the late 1800's and early 1900's. And he came to Shearer Cottage with his son—James W. Pope came to Shearer Cottage with his son Lincoln Pope, and Lincoln Pope met Lily Shearer, and they were married on the island. And that was one of the first marriages of the family that was really the result of people meeting on Martha's Vineyard.

Lily and Lincoln Pope had three children: Lincoln Pope, Junior, Doris Pope, and Elizabeth Pope. And Lincoln Pope, Junior met his wife, Gloria Downing, who came to visit Shearer Cottage with her mother in the—so, probably in the twenties, in the thirties (in the forties). The Downings, Dr. and Mrs. Lil Burn Downing, were from Virginia, Roanoke, Virginia. And they came to—Mrs. Downing brought her daughter Gloria Pope to visit Shearer Cottage. And at that time Gloria met my uncle, Lincoln Pope, and they also became married. And my mother, Doris Pope, met her husband, Herbert L. Jackson, who also came to Shearer Cottage as a young man to sell magazines to guests. He was from Massachusetts as well. So we have, you know, several generations of our family meeting their significant others on Martha's Vineyard, and if not on Martha's Vineyard, in some cases actually in Shearer Cottage. I met my husband, David Van Allen, at Shearer Cottage, because he worked for my Aunt Sadie, and we met when we were teenagers. And I didn't start dating him 'til several years later, but we were all friends at that time. And my son David met his wife (Angela Rue) on Martha's Vineyard.

So this has been sort of a pattern through the generations, where if not Shearer Cottage, certainly Martha's Vineyard, Oak Bluffs, has made for an opportunity for African Americans to meet other African Americans from all over the country, and many relationships began that way. So to me, that's one of the special characteristics of Oak Bluffs, having grown up at—a resort where African Americans from all over the country came, you had an opportunity to meet African Americans from all over the country. And most visitors were

professional blacks, and they were professional, and they worked in the same fields: doctors, lawyers, teachers. And so it was a very comfortable, welcoming place for African Americans to come and visit. And mostly they were professional African Americans who did that. Occasionally some young African Americans would come to work for some of these families as babysitters, or in the case of Shearer Cottage, as handymen, or chambermaids.

So you had certainly a mix of people, but one, you know, the children anyway, they hung out all together, and you really didn't know who was who, or who was the son or the daughter of a doctor, or who was the son or the daughter of a cab driver. It didn't really matter; we all had a good time together. And in the early years, when I was coming up, and when my mother was coming up, all the African American families tended to know each other. And if they didn't know you by name, they'd know which family you belonged to. That has changed over the years, because there's so many African American families now that it's very difficult to know all of them. But when I was a child in the forties, and when my mother was a child, the numbers of (black) families were much smaller, and you did tend to know all the different families on the island.

KT: This is, as you said, fascinating history! Well, let's maybe—you've touched on a lot of things that I was going to ask you, which is great. Let's maybe talk a little bit more about your growing up, and get some of your stories, too. You said you were born in Maine?

LV: No, I was born in Malden, Massachusetts.

KT: Oh, Malden! Oh, I went to high school in Malden.

LV: Oh, you're kidding! I was born in Malden, Massachusetts. My father was born in Malden, Massachusetts, in 1908, and he was actually the son of a slave, John T. Jackson, who came to Malden to get a better life for his family. He was a tailor, and that was his skill. And he taught other young African Americans to be tailors. He taught in schools down south that were set up to teach young African Americans different skills; that was his skill. And he came to Malden and opened his own cleaning and tailoring business, and his sons followed in his footsteps. And my father, as I said, met my mother on Martha's Vineyard, but they lived in Malden all their lives. And they had three children: my sister Gail Jackson, myself Lee Jackson, and my younger brother Herbert Jackson. We spent all our summers on Martha's Vineyard, either with my Mom in her house, or we stayed with my aunt, who had a large home here.

And it was very special, because I lived in, at the time Malden was, I would say, a ninety-five percent white community. And I looked forward to coming to Martha's Vineyard because I had an opportunity to be involved with an African American community that—on a daily basis, that I didn't really have that experience in Malden. And I think—I'm very thankful that I did have that opportunity, because I had an opportunity to meet African Americans from all over the country. And as I said, I met my husband here as well. And there was a group of young African Americans, and we'd go to the beach most every day. Some of us worked at Shearer Cottage, which did hire many of the, you know, summer youth, and other jobs that children had. But we'd get to the beach, and we'd socialize together.

And it was very, very special, because someone like myself, who lived in a white community, didn't necessarily have that exposure. And this is true, I think, of a lot of African Americans, not just in my generation, but in later generations. I've been told by families that I've met that one of the reasons why they like coming to Oak Bluffs in particular is that they can expose their children that live perhaps in a primarily white community, that attend primarily schools attended by white children—that they can expose them to a middle class African American society that they may not have every day in their lives. And I think that is—to me that's one of the special things that Oak Bluffs offers young African American children. They can look around, and they can be proud of what they see. They see positive role models, positive images, black families, interracial families, see families that look just like them.

We have a very broad range of colors within the African American race, and you see that in Martha's Vineyard. You see the blonde, blue-eyed African American, as well as the dark brown skinned and dark haired African American, and everything in between. And it's a very positive thing to see people who look like you, to see people who have the same values as you do, and the same aspirations as you do. And I've been told by many, and certainly believe myself, that is one of the positive aspects of coming to Oak Bluffs and Martha's Vineyard, year after year after year.

KT: Now, when you started coming and summering here, how did you get sort of involved with the business of the cottage?

LV: Well, we—as I said, Shearer Cottage was sort of the hub of the family. They would have parties here; they would have fundraisers

here. As a child, you would come up and maybe get some dinner here. Certainly I worked here, as every member of my generation did, so I guess that's the how I became involved in the business. I was the dishwasher. I didn't wait tables, but I was the dishwasher in the kitchen. And my sister waited tables, and my brother may have done—cut the grass. We were all involved with the running of Shearer Cottage, as my grandchildren are today. And one of the things, I think, that was very positive about it for not just my grandchildren, but my children when they were younger: they learned how to take their money, and save part of it and spend part of it. And it was a very good learning experience for them to have jobs in the summer that they could then save money for school, if they were old enough to go to college, but have spending money. It taught them how to save and be responsible financially.

But every generation of the family has worked at Shearer Cottage, and been paid for their work. And so I sort of have always been involved in the business all my life. One summer, because I was a teacher by profession, I worked as the chambermaid, and then at that time Shearer Cottage was run by my mother, Doris Pope Jackson, and her sister Elizabeth Pope White. But after my Aunt Liz, Liz Pope White, passed away, I sort of stepped in to help my mother run Shearer Cottage. I was definitely the second in command, but I was the support for my mother. Now, my mother, who's in her nineties, still comes up and works at Shearer, but I manage the business. And it's a labor of love. We don't make any money at Shearer Cottage, but we meet wonderful people! Our guests—we have a multicultural clientele now, and we're very proud of our history.

And so we try to keep Shearer Cottage alive, because we realize that if it weren't for Charles Shearer coming here and opening the inn, you know, our lives would be very different, and we wouldn't have had Martha's Vineyard to look forward to every year. I perhaps wouldn't have met my husband as I did here, and my Mom wouldn't have met my father here. I mean, our lives would have been so different! It's very amazing, and we just say every year we appreciate the fact that we've had Oak Bluffs and Martha's Vineyard in our lives.

KT: For me to get a little sense of the time frame, do you mind me asking when you were born? [Laughs]

LV: No, I don't mind. I was born in 1943. I'm sixty-eight now, so every summer of my life I've been here, every single one.

KT: Wow, that's special.

LV: And every generation has bought property here, too. Not every single member of every generation, but every generation has also bought their own home. My husband and I have had a couple of homes here. We have one now that we've owned for over thirty years, that we've actually retired in. And so, that's also something—our family has grown here, and it's almost like every year you're having a family reunion, because you do see cousins that might be from New York, or from other areas. They always tend to come back to Martha's Vineyard.

KT: It seems like a wonderful community! So, tell me a little bit about how people heard about the cottage, and how your parents or grandparents sort of built the business side of it, so to speak. Or was it?—well, I'll let you tell it.

LV: Well, you know, I believe that at the beginning, when Charles and Henrietta Shearer started the inn, the Shearer family had a branch in New York. And one of the members of that branch, Lily Shearer, she was the one who brought Harry T. Burley—a large group of New Yorkers to Shearer Cottage: Harry T. Burley. I wouldn't be surprised if she was the one that brought Ethel Waters and some of those New Yorkers that came (such as Adam Clayton Powell). But then, because of the proximity to Boston, there was a large group of Bostonians that came. Boston area (Everett) was the permanent home, year-round home, of the Shearer family. And then I think it pretty much was word of mouth, that people heard about this inn on Martha's Vineyard that you could be welcomed at, that had delicious food, and that had people coming from all over, especially Eastern Seaboard, but really—really from all over the United States. I remember in maybe the fifties or sixties, they did some advertising, in *Ebony* and African American publications, the *Amsterdam* newspaper. But for the most part, I think it's just—it was the word of mouth that helped build Shearer Cottage.

And as people came and bought homes, and then their friends asked about, "Well, where can I stay when I come to Martha's Vineyard?" Shearer Cottage would always come up, you know, as an opportunity for housing and great meals. And I think it just built its own reputation, just by the mere fact that there were very limited places where African Americans were welcome. And that was good, in a way, because African Americans enjoy hanging with each other, and partying with each other, and socializing with each other.

And, but many very positive events happened at Shearer—it wasn't just partying and socializing. The first meetings of the Martha's Vineyard branch of the NAACP were held at Shearer Cottage. Many fundraisers that supported the Martha's Vineyard Hospital were held at Shearer Cottage. The Cottages, which is a philanthropic organization of African American women on Martha's Vineyard—their initial meetings were held at Shearer Cottage. So, many, I think, important—the history of Shearer Cottage isn't just that it offered a place for people to stay, and people to eat, but it also gave people an opportunity to gather, and to discuss how we can improve our community, as The Cottages did. You know, their focus was on—on doing, providing opportunities for young African Americans to get to know each other, and they had parties and dances for the younger generation. So, Shearer Cottage also, I think, offered that—that aspect of—of community for the African Americans on Martha's Vineyard at that time.

KT: When the guests came, how long did people usually stay for?

LV: Years ago, people tended to come for weeks, or even several weeks. Harry T. Burley would come for several weeks at a time. There were other guests that came for several weeks, but that's changed over the years, because now people who come to Martha's Vineyard—they may stay a week; they may stay just two days. I believe at one time this may have been the primary vacation for many African Americans, but now African Americans are going all over the world.

So they come to Martha's Vineyard, but they don't necessarily come for weeks at a time, unless they own property here. Our inn has certainly guests that come for a week at a time, currently, but many

people just come for a few days. And that's changed a bit. I know the—the gentleman who was the stenographer for the Sacco-Venzetti case, and his name is escaping me now—I'll probably think of it—he came with his family many, many years in a row, and stayed for long periods of time, and they could arrange to do that. But that's changed a bit, in terms of staying at inns. I think when people want to stay that long today, they rent homes,—or own homes.

KT: Henry Robbins?

LV: Henry Robbins, a nice person.

KT: I see. So that was one of my questions, and you answered it, about: how has it changed? And that's one way.

LV: And one way it's changed—we don't serve meals anymore. You know, that was quite a responsibility—to run the inn and to serve breakfast, which were hominy, and homemade corn bread, and eggs and bacon, and also to have dinner meal. That meant that you really worked here all day, every day. And I think as my mother's generation took over the business, they decided they didn't want to work all day, every day. They wanted to relax and go to some of the cocktail parties, you know, that were very common on Martha's Vineyard.

So that's when my mother's generation updated Shearer Cottage. They took the twelve rooms that we had at Shearer Cottage, and the shared bathrooms, and they created six efficiencies, each with a kitchenette, each with their own private bath. They converted the dining room that could sit maybe thirty or forty people into a great room or common living room all our guests could use, and they stopped serving meals. And that's when, you know, you find that

Shearer Cottage had to adapt to the changes that were coming about over the years. You know, it just—it would have been very difficult to keep Shearer as it was a hundred years ago.

KT: Do you remember what years that change happened?

LV: That was in maybe the seventies.

KT: Seventies.

LV: I would say in the seventies. It's been a while. Because in the sixties, I believe—maybe late sixties, early seventies. I know when I was a child, they still served the meals, so well into the fifties. But by the time the sixties came, they made that change.

KT: And I think you've given me some idea about this. What did the guests who came here sort of do during the day?

LV: Well, they'd all have their delicious breakfast at Shearer Cottage. And then they would go to the beach, many of them. And as time went on, and more and more African Americans did buy property on Martha's Vineyard, there were always many social events that they would attend to. And then they'd come back and have dinner at Shearer Cottage. And then again, there would be many parties or activities at night. The African American community on Martha's Vineyard is very active socially, and has been; I think that's been true for generations. So, you'll find—I think you'll find that there are many opportunities, whether it be club meetings, or they might have conferences here. They might have special, all sorts of special events where people come in. They might have plays.

One of the things that Shearer Cottage was responsible for, I guess in a way, the Shearer family, was the Shearer Summer Theater. My mother's sister (Liz White) had a Shearer Summer Theater. She

organized a theater of African Americans who spent their season, summers, here. They had a theater, and they did many different plays every summer. And Anna Lucasta was one, and they did *Othello*, which my Aunt Liz, who herself worked in the theater professionally—she actually filmed *Othello*. And all of the cast—all the cast was African American, even the—some of the characters who were supposed to be white. They were African American; they were just fair-skinned African Americans. But we had one professional actor, and that was Yaphet Koto, and he played—that was when he was a young actor, and he played *Othello*. But Desdemona was a cousin, and all the others—Iago was another cousin. And all the other actors in her production of *Othello* were professional African Americans. They were promoters; they were doctors. They were dentists; they were teachers. They were business men and women. And that's the kind of activity that was looked—looked forward to every summer, you know, to be involved in.

KT: That sounds wonderful! Yaphet Koto?

LV: Yaphet Koto, actually, yeah, he was. And we have the film now. We played it just recently. My aunt traveled around the country to various universities with it, because it was unusual to have an African woman produce her own movie. And she traveled around to some of the schools, colleges in the United States. And we still have that film in the family. It was donated, I believe, to—a copy of it is in one of the—a library in New York City. But if we needed to have it, you know, we have a copy of the video.

KT: Was that in the seventies, then?

LV: She did that in the sixties, really. Because I remember I wasn't—I was married in the sixties, and she started maybe in the late fifties and early sixties. And as I say, many of the people in the play were family members and friends. But Yaphet Koto was the one gentleman who was a professional actor, just starting out in his career. My cousin Benny, who was a promoter, he was also in Othello. Benny Ashburn—he discovered, or became connected with The Commodores very early in their career. And The Commodores actually stayed at Shearer Cottage many summers while they were polishing their acts, and performed at Shearer Cottage, and other venues.

And they of course, as you know, at that point one of the families that was known to the Shearer family was the family of Dr. Brown. And his granddaughter was Suzanne De Pass, and she worked for Motown. That's one of the things that was very good about Martha's Vineyard. Early on, you did know most of the black families. So Suzanne De Pass certainly knew our family. And Benny went to her and said, "Look, I have this group. Can you help me get a song, and you know, help introduce me to Berry Gordy, and get me involved with Motown?" And so through Suzanne De Pass, Benny Ashburn was able to get the first song that was the first hit of The Commodores.

And of course then after that, they became big stars, and they stayed together actually until my cousin Benny died. And it was right after his death—that's when The Commodores broke up as a group, and Lionel Richie went on his own. But that's just an example of the

networking that can happen on Martha's Vineyard within the African American community.

KT: Were you a Commodores fan?

LV: Oh, of course. Of course! I went to the concerts.

KT: That must have been exciting, when they were here?

LV: Yeah, yeah. They were here. They lived right here; stayed right here, played at the various venues down here. and after they became—when they became famous and were appearing in Boston, my cousin Benny would send a limo out to get our family, and we'd go—we'd go see them perform, and meet them backstage. It was very special—very special.

KT: That sounds very, very special! That's nice. Did you have a favorite Commodore?

LV: Yeah, I did have a favorite Commodore. That's Lionel Richie; he was my favorite Commodore!

KT: [Laughs]

LV: But they were all very fine young men. Very, very, very nice. They were a fine group of young men from Tuskegee.

KT: Yeah, interesting. This is great. Can you say that—I mean, you obviously interacted with the guests quite a bit?

LV: Yes, I did.

KT: Did you feel that you learned anything from your guests?

LV: Well, you know, I think one of the things that as a young person, that you could learn—again, especially if you grew up in a white community, a predominantly white community—so much of the news, you know, depicts African Americans in a negative light, that I think as a young African American, you saw so many positive

examples of African American community on Martha's Vineyard that you could learn, you know: I could be a doctor, or I could be a lawyer. I could be a teacher. I think that's one of the best things, living within an African American community like we did in Oak Bluffs—being exposed to so many positive role models led you to believe: “Yes, I can do that. I can do that.” And because there was the generation before you that did that!

And if you grew up in a white community, you don't always have that exposure. You don't—you know, much of what you see is what you read in the newspaper, or maybe saw on television early on, and very often it was a negative side. So, to me, when you're learning from the guests, when you had Dr. Stiles come, or some of these other professional African Americans come and stay at Shearer, it was very positive growing up. And as a young woman, having my children exposed to that same very positive role models was very important. And I think that's not only what Shearer Cottage did for us as a family, but what Oak Bluffs did for us as a family.

KT: Great! Now, do you—do you have any special stories or memories of the cottage that stand out in your mind? I mean, you've told me some great ones so far. But is there—is there anything that always comes to mind?

LV: Well, I think that we consider Shearer Cottage a part of our family. I think this is something that my great-grandparents did, and the next generation, my grandparents, and my mother's generation, as well as myself. We try to welcome our guests, and let them be part of the extended family. And when I think of Shearer, I've always thought of it as being a family. And I hope, and I believe, that most guests who

come here feel that way. They feel like it's a home away from home, where there's a level of comfort there.

They're also—because of the history, many people say they feel something spiritual about Shearer Cottage, just because—well, it's a wonderful atmosphere: the trees, the flowers, you know, Oak Bluffs in itself. But sometimes people come, and because of the history they feel something very special about the rooms, and the site of Shearer Cottage, and I guess I do, too. You know, when I think about generations of my family being here, it gives you a very warm feeling, that we've been here; we've shared it with so, so many people. And it's been a positive experience for all of us.

I think one of the best things, you know, that I remember was that I did meet my husband here when I was thirteen. And that was good. I didn't start dating him until several years later, but I mean, that's when I first met him. And I think probably I fell in love with him when I was thirteen! But to know that my parents met here, and my father is actually seven years older than my Mom. And he met my mother at Shearer when she was around thirteen years old, and he said, "I will wait for you." And he did! And so, you know, I think that's some of the relationships that have evolved from being part of Shearer Cottage. To me, that's very, very important.

I would say those are the most important things that Shearer has offered all of us, each generation: this opportunity to be on this wonderful island, where once you cross the waters, you know, you seem to leave your troubles and worries behind. And it's just, you know, all of a sudden you start to relax. And you feel good, and you meet other people who have that same positive feeling as you have.

And it's—it's part of the island, what the island, I think, offers not just African Americans, but all people who come to the island. Someone said to me—a guest said to me, "You know, a rainy day on Martha's Vineyard is a wonderful day."

KT: And why?

LV: Well, just because of those feelings that you have. You go around, and the island is a beautiful island. It's really a very beautiful island. And it has some areas are very busy in the summer, and yet you can still drive several miles up island, and you have, you know, the tranquility that you might be looking for. So I think that because it offers you that, as well as beautiful beaches and good restaurants, and beautiful people, I just think that, you know, everything is positive about it! And I believe that, too. Even a bad, rainy day on Martha's Vineyard is still a very good day—gives most people a very positive feeling, you know. I'm very thankful that my family's been here, and that I've been able to be here.

KT: I can understand that. You did live here when there was a very, obviously, turbulent time in the country, going on?

LV: Right. We're having a tour right now. Hi, Bob.

ROBERT HAYDEN: Oh hi, Lee!

LV: This is—come on in! Is that okay? I've being interviewed right now, but I'd like you to meet Robert Hayden.

KT: Oh, Robert Hayden!

LV: Have you met him? Is he part of your—?

KT: No, but we've looked at his material. You've talked to my intern, Jacob Barry?

RH: Yeah.

LV: He's doing a tour right now. He does tours of Shearer.

RH: I'm seeing him at one o'clock today.

KT: Yes, I know. Hi, Ken Turino. Nice to meet you.

RH: Okay, yeah. He's coming to see me.

LV: Hi!

TOUR FOLKS: Hello!

RH: This is the great-granddaughter of Charles Shearer.

LV: Pleased to meet you. Pleased to meet you; welcome to Shearer.

TF: Thank you.

RH: These are all Bostonians.

LV: Oh, really?

RH: Now living in Quincy.

LV: Oh, yes, I'm familiar with Quincy.

RH: I just wanted to say: this was the dining room. You can see how spacious it was. [Unclear]

LV: No, that's all right, no.

KT: Nice to meet you.

RH: How's my friend doing?

LV: He's doing so-so. No great improvement. I'll keep you posted.

RH: Okay, I'll see—

KT: You'll see Jacob, yeah.

RF: At one o'clock.

KT: Right, very good!

LV: Nice to meet you. Thanks for visiting Shearer.

TF: Thank you.

LV: We have many tours that come up here. Bob brings them up, and the African American Heritage Trail tours come up. They come up quite

often to see our property. Which is great; I love it. And you get business from it, so I welcome people. Normally I would show them a room, you know, that's open, and invite them back.

KT: Yeah, I read that, you know, actually in his book that this was part of the Trail. That must—can you tell me maybe a little bit about the Trail? Jacob will ask.

LV: Sure, and George will ask him. But the African American Heritage Trail was actually started by Elaine Weintraub, who was a teacher in the Martha's Vineyard School System, and Carrie Tankett, who is a member of the NAACP, and a local resident. I don't believe Carrie was born here, but she's lived here much of her life. During Black History Month, one of Elaine Weintraub's students said to her, "Well, we don't have any history. Why do we have to celebrate black history on Martha's Vineyard? We don't have any black history on Martha's Vineyard." At which time, Elaine Weintraub, who knew some of it, said, "Oh, we have to change this perception, that some of the young African Americans who live on the island full-time feel that they do not have any African American history on the island."

So they went—they went on to research, and to develop the African American Heritage Trail. And this, Shearer Cottage, was the first site inducted into the African American Heritage Trail, and they had a very big party here. They hosted it to, you know, signify the beginning of the African American Heritage Trail. And then every year after that, they would introduce other sites to the African American Heritage Trail, one being Adam Clayton Powell's home, one being Dorothy West's home, one being the home of the Overton, Mr. Joe Overton, who was a well-known New Yorker who had people

like Joe Louis stay at his house, as guests and friends, as well as Martin Luther King. And they also inducted into the African American History Trail the Wampanoag Reservation, because the Wampanoags were known to have harbored runaway slaves. And there are a couple of other sites; all of the history I'm not familiar with, or can't really recall off the top of my head. But that's why, really, they started the African American Heritage Trail, because they wanted people to know that we, as African Americans, have a long and strong history, not just in Martha's Vineyard, but in Nantucket as well.

KT: Well, I was starting to ask you, when Robert came by, about the civil rights movement in America, and what was going on, late fifties, early sixties. Did you see a change with what was going on here in Martha's Vineyard, or at the college, or in the discussion of guests?

LV: Well you know, in the fifties, it was very interesting, because when we grew up as kids—and as I said, I was born in the early forties. When we were teenagers, we—our crowd was all African Americans, with a few children of native families from Martha's Vineyard. They were Portuguese families, and Cape Verdean was their background, and they maybe hung in the crowd a bit. But for the most part, we were all African Americans, and it wasn't because we were forced to be together, but we were very happy to be, and we wanted to be. So, you know, you might say it was a self-imposed segregation, but you know, it was fine.

We went to a beach, the Oak Bluffs beach, which was called the Inkwell years and years ago. And the young white kids at the time, they went to the pay beach, and that was fine. They went to where

they wanted to socialize, and we went to where we wanted to socialize. There was very little trouble racially on the island that I can recall. I remember one year before I was married, so it would probably be in the late fifties there, a couple of kids had a fight, and one was black and one was white. And they—afraid something would come of it, racially, but it was squashed, so it wasn't anything too bad. I think it had a little publicity, but it really wasn't anything too bad.

For the most part, on Martha's Vineyard I think we've been somewhat protected from some of the things that happened other places in the country. And you know, everybody may not have the same opinion I have, but I think we just didn't realize all that turmoil. On this island, blacks seem to have been able to live with whites quite comfortably.

And as I said, there's a population of Cape Verdeans who—they're people of color, and maybe some of them are not people of color, but they have the background of being from the Cape Verde Islands. So their skin color would be brown in some cases; in some cases, they're white. But the point is, they lived on Martha's Vineyard, and they seemed to get along very well. So I think that sort of carried on when African Americans came as well, in the late 1800's or early 1900's.

I'm not saying there wasn't any prejudice here; there were certain areas that blacks could not buy homes. There were times when African Americans would make arrangements, say, to have a wedding, and then the minute they showed up, and the people of the property where the wedding was going—say, the reception was going to be saw they were African Americans they made excuses about the

date: “We can’t take you that date.” So there’s been discrimination on the island, but I don’t think it’s been as bad as it’s been other places.

So even though some of the other big cities in the United States had, you know, great polarization, I don’t think it was as bad here. And it might be because the size was smaller, and it might be because people of color seemed to live together in harmony for many, many years. Again, not to say there wasn’t segregation, because that’s why Shearer Cottage started: because blacks couldn’t stay at other inns. It certainly existed, but I don’t think there was a lot of hostility, you know, at that time. We just did what we wanted to do, and could do, and accepted it, I guess.

KT: Well, tell me—I understand Spike Lee made a movie, a documentary, about the Inkwell?

LV: He maybe did, and you know, I haven’t seen it.

KT: Yeah. Actually, I just learned about it from my cabdriver!

LV: Really?

KT: And I’m saying, “How did I miss this?” Because we’ve been trying to do our research. So I’m going to go home and rent it.

LV: Oh, yeah. He may have; I’m not familiar with it.

KT: Yeah, this young fellow said he saw it. He said it was really good!

LV: Really? Really.

KT: So, I think it was made for television, not a commercial movie, because he’s been doing a lot of documentaries. So, do you have specific memories of the Inkwell?

LV: Oh, that’s where we socialized. And it was called the Inkwell, and I’m not sure the history of the name. Someone said, you know, it was

not my generation, but maybe it was the earlier generation, who gave the name. The story goes that it was given by blacks. It wasn't given—white people didn't call it the Inkwell. It was the blacks who called it the inkwell, because that's where the black kids tended to gather. And that's where you did tend to gather. You could go down there, just find out what was happening, where was the party going to be tonight? And when were we going to go up island to Gay Head as a group, or whatever? So it definitely was a social gathering spot for the young African Americans. Not just young. I would say the young African Americans, but also families gathered there as well; it wasn't just young. And even today.

Now, the Oak Bluffs beach, you know, it's grown. The Inkwell was a small section of the Oak Bluffs beach, and next to it was the pay beach, and that's where the young white kids tended to go, whereas the young black kids went to the Inkwell. But now it's all open; there's no pay, and so people spread all over; people of color spread all over that beach. And the person next to you might be a white person; the person next to you might be a black person. So it's—that isn't quite like it was when I was a kid. But the Inkwell was a place where you always went, every day, to find out what was happening. That was the place to go.

KT: Right. Now, were there places that—well, some of your guests, the guests that came earlier, before the Commodores and all—like Ethel Waters. Were they performing here, or were they just vacationing here?

LV: I think they were vacationing here; that was my understanding. And they might have done impromptu performances, say, at Shearer,

which is what I was told would happen, but that's just because if you had a party and a gathering, and someone might play an instrument, and someone might sing, and it was part of the fun. But I don't know—I know they certainly vacationed here. Maybe if there was a performance; there might have been. But basically I would say they came to Shearer because they vacationed here.

KT: And now, when you were growing up, you know, you mentioned going to the Inkwell and finding out what was going to go on at night.

LV: Right.

KT: Were there certain hot spots in Martha's Vineyard that the kids hung around in?

LV: There was a drugstore; I guess it was Freddie's Drugstore. I think it was a Rexall drug on Circuit Avenue, the main drag. And that was another place that you'd sort of gather to find out what was going. And he was very nice. I mean, this was owned by, you know, a white gentleman. And it had a soda fountain, and you'd go in and you'd maybe have something to eat, a soda or something. But the kids tended to hang out there, and he didn't mind it at all.

And then there was another. There was a shoeshine, cobbler and shoeshine store called Mr. Frye's, and his son was one of the group that I hung out with. And sometimes you'd be—you know, you'd always check out what was going on. That would be another place that you might gather, at Frye's shoeshine and cobbler store. It doesn't exist there anymore.

KT: So if you had—if you were here at that time with a guest, you told me how everyone really sort of intermingled, which sounded really nice.

Would you maybe take a guest along with you at night, if there was a kid, like, your age?

LV: Right, right. That was [laughs]—that was one of the things that happened. I'm not sure if it was a positive happening, or a curse. Every generation of our family, when a child came down as a guest about your age, you would be introduced to that child, and you would be asked to take that child to the Inkwell, or you know, to some social event. And they did it when I was young, and I did it to my kids, my children. They would come, you know, and they'd say, "Ugh, I have to take this person!" that they didn't know, and may not even like, under normal circumstances. But we always used to say, "Just take them out, just to show them. And let them—take them down the basketball court so they can meet the other children." That's another gathering place for the kids, the basketball courts.

And so you were called upon, as a member of the family who spent their summers here, because you knew people here. You were called upon to help introduce newcomers to the group, or you know, the Oak Bluffs activities. That happened a lot. It still happens; it still happens now. I'll do that with my grandchildren. I'll introduce them to young kids who come, and do the same thing. Say, "Just take them down to the tennis courts, and then they'll go on their own. But just help out a little bit."

KT: Yeah, because kids can be shy, especially someplace new. So, did your mother, who ran this for many years, have any—have any advice, or did she tell you any of her stories that you might want to pass on to us?

LV: Hm, let's see. One of the things that my mother has said is that—and when she was young. Now, my mother's ninety-six, so we're talking many years ago. Number one, she always remembered her grandfather, Charles Shearer, as being like over six—like six foot four. He looked like a white man. He was the son of a slave and the slave master, so he was very fair with light eyes, and very tall, very handsome, had custom-made suits. He—and I think maybe a lot of successful blacks that perhaps either were born into slavery or even if they were free during the time of slavery—he went to Hampton, and he would sometimes bring young college graduates from Hampton; he would sponsor them up in Boston, giving them opportunities to work. And he, as I said, was the head waiter at a couple of the big hotels in Boston, and he would find jobs for them. And he might bring them up here for the summer to find jobs for them. In other words, it was giving back, his way of giving back.

And my mother would always remember that he—he did do that. He supported other African Americans who maybe came from the south; he supported their activities, and often found them employment. She also said that, again, in the twenties and the thirties now, you're having Adam Clayton Powell's family, Solomon Fuller, who was recognized as the first African American psychiatrist in America. Their families stayed here, and many of them would go down and worship at the Baptist Tabernacle just below us. And she tells me that some of the white families who lived in the area would say, "I've never seen such a group of handsome African Americans, that came from Shearer to go worship," at this Tabernacle, which people of all colors came to.

So, I think that—that's a story that she impressed upon me, that at Shearer Cottage there were—everyone was African American, but the African American—again, it was the spectrum: very fair, very dark, and everything in between—middle class, upper middle class African Americans, and that were educated, dressed beautifully, and that when they came and they were seen by white families, it wasn't what they normally thought African Americans were—looked like, or were, in terms of—it was an education, I think. I think it was an opportunity to educate some white families about the African American community, because unfortunately so often you have the negative picture presented by the press and the public of African Americans on the whole, especially in those days. So, you know, to have people that—the doctors and the lawyers, the professionals, that came to Shearer, it was an opportunity to educate white families who lived in the area, who lived on Martha's Vineyard, about: this is an African American community, too, that we're all very proud of.

I remember my mother talking about that: what a beautiful group of people, what a tall, handsome, strong man her grandfather was, Charles Shearer. And how well-educated the people who came to Shearer. And you had to believe. In order to take vacations you had to realize—in order to take vacations you had to have money. So naturally, most of the families who came to Martha's Vineyard and either owned property or vacationed here—they were solidly middle class people. And that's—that's what you saw on Martha's Vineyard. And that's one thing I think she felt that was very positive about Shearer Cottage, and being involved with it—that it presented a very positive face of the African American community.

KT: Well, I really appreciate your taking all this time. I know this has been just absolutely great, and what I need. And I like to end with asking you if there's anything I forgot to ask you, or if there's any stories that we should get down? We will be giving you a copy of this, so you'll get a typed transcript.

LV: Yeah, I appreciate that. Well, I think I've said it mostly, how important Shearer Cottage has been to our family, in that every generation someone seems to have met, you know, their significant other. And to me, that's—that's one of the most important stories, I think, of Shearer Cottage. And it's not just my family, but it's other families have done the same thing on Martha's Vineyard, in Oak Bluffs, African American families. And I'm sure it's not just the African American community; I'm sure that happens with other communities on the island. But I'm the most familiar with that.

I feel one of the most important things is the positive role models that the African Americans who come to Martha's Vineyard have, for young people. I remember I was in the Caribbean once, and I met an English couple who had adopted two black children. And they loved—somehow we happened to mention Martha's Vineyard. And they said they loved to come to Martha's Vineyard because their children—now, their adopted, black children—could see people that looked just like them. I think their children were interracial, but they were black children, and they could see other people who looked like them.

So I think that's one of the important aspects of Martha's Vineyard—especially for people of color, when they come to Martha's Vineyard they can go down the street and they'll see

interracial couples; they'll see mixed families. They see every color of skin—they see people that look just like them, that have the same aspirations they have. And that is one of the positives, I think, of being brought up on Martha's Vineyard, you know, just sort of being part of that. And I'm proud that my family has been—myself individually, I'm proud that my family was so involved with the development of the African American community on Martha's Vineyard. Because at one time we were very small, but because we afforded some place for African Americans to come visit, who then went out and bought their own properties, you know, we feel as though we were part of that development.

And I'm also very proud of the fact that my mother's generation, especially my mother, Doris Pope Jackson and her sister, Elizabeth Pope White—when some members of the family said, “Let's sell Shearer Cottage,” that my mother and her sister Elizabeth Pope White said, “We are not going to sell Shearer Cottage. We are here because of Shearer Cottage, and Charles and Henrietta Shearer, and we are going to keep this property in our family as Charles had wished.” He had wished that his property would stay in his family. “We're going to do that for our grandfather, because that's the reason why we're here.” And that's the reason why so many important happenings in our lives have taken place, really based around being on Martha's Vineyard.

And so, this is something that is a goal of mine: to keep Shearer Cottage going. It's a labor of love. We don't make any money. Each year we put money in, our own money in. But it's for when people come and tour, just like you saw—people come and tour

and say, “Oh, how wonderful!” This has been in the family for—this piece of property’s been in the family for generations. It would be easy to sell and go buy a new car, but the history is so much more important! And that’s one thing that was impressed upon me. And for members of our family who weren’t going to work Shearer Cottage, we bought them out—so my mother, Doris Pope Jackson, and I now own, and it will be passed on to my children.

And I think my children feel that same sense of pride that I feel, and that other generations before me have felt, that we need to keep this property in the family, and do our best to keep it going, so that the legacy that Charles and Henrietta Shearer have given to us doesn’t die. Because if Shearer had been sold two generations ago, you would never have heard of it, even though that history, that early twenties history is still very significant. You may not have ever heard of it, and this may have been torn down, and another new modern home been put here. And that’s—that’s what’s important, that we keep that history alive. And that’s what my goal is: to do that, as long as I live, as my mother’s goal was, and as the other generations. And hopefully my kids will do the same thing, because we’re very proud of it.

KT: Well, I can hear that in everything that you’ve said, and I can see that in your face. This has been—this has been great! I’m going to turn that off.

LV: Okay.

KT: Wow, we spoke for a good long time!

[End of Interview]