

Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978

Fresno Historical Society

Mary T. Bigby

Mary Martha Thurman Bigby was interviewed on August 19, 1977. She was born on January 24, 1899 in Shelbyville, Tennessee. Bigby came to Fresno in September of 1910 when her mother was diagnosed with asthma. Her family was going to move to Los Angeles, but after a layover in Fresno, they decided to live in the San Joaquin Valley instead. Bigby recalls a memory of her train trip to California when the conductor told her family they could move to the front of the train once they got to the Mason-Dixon Line. Bigby mentions that the black community was very small in Fresno. She says that there were quite a few licensed black businessmen in the area. Bigby talks about how she came from segregation in Tennessee, and that she did not feel segregation in Fresno was too bad. If there was segregation, Bigby did not think much of it because that was how she grew up. Bigby describes that she did every activity she could when she went to Fresno High School, though she only ended up completing her first two years of high school. Right after school, Bigby got married.

Bigby recalls the time when the soldiers went off to World War I, and that there were a few black soldiers who went as well. She says that the white community responded very well to the black soldiers going off to war. Bigby vaguely remembers the Great Depression, she knew her family was fortunate during the depression but does not remember the time period which it occurred. Bigby's father worked on the brick buildings at Fresno City College. Bigby talks about her time working as a stock girl at millinery store in San Francisco. She also describes how she took care of some very famous customers, including the Queen. Bigby describes how many people knew of her work both in San Francisco and Fresno. Bigby remembers several black community workers in Fresno. Bigby recalls that the Ku Klux Klan was not as strong in Fresno as it was in Tennessee. Bigby also remembers where she was at the time of Pearl Harbor, as well as her interactions with Japanese-Americans who were in the internment camps in Fresno. She also talks about the Second Baptist Church in Fresno, and how she was still involved with it at the time of the interview. Bigby describes how the medical profession did not discriminate against black doctors, though she was involved in an incident where it discriminated against her daughter. Bigby notes that when black stars came to Fresno, they were often housed privately in her home due to their connections with her husband. She also says that there were several black woman involved in the growth of Fresno.

Interviewer: Vivian J. Jones
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FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

INTERVIEW WITH MARY T. BIGBY

AUGUST 19, 1977

Today is August 19, 1977. I, Vivian J. Jones, am interviewing Mrs. Mary T. Bigby, a black senior citizen of Fresno, California.

JONES: What is your full maiden name?

BIGBY: Mary Martha Thurman.

JONES: Where were you born?

BIGBY: Shelbyville, Tennessee.

JONES: When were you born?

BIGBY: January 24, 1899.

JONES: When did you come to California?

BIGBY: In September, 1910.

JONES: Why did you come to California?

BIGBY: The doctors gave my mother just a few months to live. She suffered from asthma. So, we came for her health.

JONES: Why did you move to Fresno?

BIGBY: Mutual friends of my father had written to him, and told him of all the possibilities of raising a family and so forth.

This is the reason why he came. But our tickets were bought to Los Angeles because he had never heard of the valleys here, until this man told us that Fresno was a better place to live than Los Angeles. We stopped over in Fresno, we had a layover. My father saw one or two people that he started talking to, and decided to stay in Fresno.

JONES: What were your parents' names?

BIGBY: William and Lula Thurman.

JONES: Where were they born?

BIGBY: That I can't say for sure, I do not know, but I think somewhere in Tennessee. My mother was brought to Tennessee by some Jewish people, some people from another country.

JONES: By what means of travel did you arrive in California?

BIGBY: We came on the train, and there were twelve of us. My mother and father, and my sisters and brothers. When we got to the Mason-Dixon Line, the conductor came in and told us all to move up to the

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front. It was around two in the morning and we were all asleep. It was quite exciting at the time. So it was the most enjoyable trip all the way.

JONES: At the time of your arrival in Fresno, how large was the black community?

BIGBY: There were a few. At that time, there were only two churches, a Methodist and a Baptist. I just don't know how many, but it was a very small community.

JONES: Where were you housed when you came here?

BIGBY: Well, by being twelve, we had to split up. But we were all within a four square block area. Some of them stayed on G and Tuolumne streets, and the others were on F and Tuolumne streets. There was a boarding house there, and that's where we had our meals.

JONES: Do you remember who ran that boarding house?

BIGBY: Yes, I do. It was Mrs. Jones, and her son. They had it for quite some time after we came, and they sold it out to a Mr. and Mrs. Jim Smith. He had a barber shop in the rear.

JONES: Were there any black businessmen here at that time?

BIGBY: Yes, across the street from the boarding house, there was a building that was formerly owned by Mr. Cooper, and was sold to ten people. They operated a grocery, and Ice Cream parlor, and a barber shop, in the building. Also on Fresno street, west of the now firehouse--that's on the corner of Fresno and E--there was a blacksmith shop owned by Mr. Harry C. Weeks. He employed two men and he had a booming business of shoeing horses.

JONES: Where there any other businessmen here?

BIGBY: Yes, there was a druggist in this building at F and Tuolumne streets also that did a big business. It was owned by a doctor, I think by Dr. Watts.

JONES: These were licensed practitioners?

BIGBY: Yes.

JONES: When you arrived here in Fresno did you suffer from discrimination?

BIGBY: I felt it wasn't too bad. Coming from Tennessee at that time where we were segregated, I didn't think it was too bad. I know in the theaters, like movie houses and such, we were segregated. But it didn't bother me because that's what I was accustomed to.

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But it didn't last too long.

JONES: What school did you attend?

BIGBY: I attended Columbia School, when I first came. I was in third or fourth grade in Tennessee. After the teacher reviewed the work that I was doing, they put me in the sixth grade. The only thing I didn't have was music. We only sang, they didn't teach us the notes. But that didn't keep me back. I completed Columbia, Emerson and the old Fresno High.

JONES: Did you graduate from high school?

BIGBY: No, no I did not. I only went two years.

JONES: At the time that you were in school, did you participate in school activities?

BIGBY: Very much so. I was quite an athlete. I played volley ball, baseball, basketball, and I would say social in high school. I forget those little clubs names that they had in high school. I participated in everything I could.

JONES: Was school segregated then, or did you go to school in the district in which you lived?

BIGBY: Yes, that's exactly the way it was. I went to school in the district in which I lived. But it was by choice, due to the fact that my scholastic records that I was permitted to go to Washington Grammer. I think that there was three colored girls at Washington Grammer and my husband. I think there were just six that attended that school.

JONES: Where was that located?

BIGBY: It was where the auditorium is located on Fresno and N.

JONES: After you left high school, what did you do?

BIGBY: I got married.

JONES: What is your husband's name?

BIGBY: Carthon Bigby.

JONES: What was his profession at that time?

BIGBY: He was a salesman, private secretary, and he worked in a jewelry store here, A.S. Shaddows.

JONES: Where was that located?

BIGBY: It was on Fulton and Mariposa.

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JONES: Do you have any children?

BIGBY: Yes, I have one daughter. Just the one girl and a grandson.

JONES: What's your daughter's name?

BIGBY: Luetta Ray.

JONES: When your husband was employed as a salesman, did he basically sell to the black community, or was it Fresno County?

BIGBY: No, he sold just in the store.

JONES: Was the store owned by a black proprietor?

BIGBY: No, by a Jew.

JONES: Do you remember when the soldiers went off to World War I?

BIGBY: Yes, I do. Very much so, because my brothers left, my brother-in-law, and loads of friends. I was there at the station at the time that they left. It was a sad occasion.

JONES: Do you remember how many black soliders went off to the war?

BIGBY: No, I don't remember exactly how many, but I imagine it was at least twelve or fourteen.

JONES: Do you remember what the white community's reaction was to these black soliders going off to war? Did they give them a reception, a send off, or what?

BIGBY: Yes, yes they responded very well. The mayor at that time gave a dinner for them.

JONES: Do you remember the mayor's name?

BIGBY: I think it was Mayor W.F. Toomey. Yes, he gave a very wonderful talk at this particular dinner. It was very well received. It wasn't a hilarious affair, of course, it was a sad affair because we thought the boys were never going to come back. But they all did.

JONES: Did you have friends and relatives both to serve in that war?

BIGBY: Yes, I did. I had the two brothers, a brother-in-law, and all the fellows that went away. Some of them were neighbors, but they were all friends.

JONES: What were your relatives' names that served in that war?

BIGBY: One brother's name was William Horace Thurman, the other one was Andrew Patterson Thurman.

JONES: Do you remember what it was like when they came home from the war?

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BIGBY: They didn't all come back together. Some stayed longer.

Both of our brothers were ill, and they didn't come back till later. Because, when the Armistice was signed they were in the Argonne Forest, and one brother had contacted pneumonia. He was very, very ill. He wasn't found for a long time, he was among the missing. I remember when he did get home. They sent a cable that he was ill, and was all right. When he did come home he was in good health, both of them.

JONES: What type of reception did they receive when they came home?

BIGBY: Well, I don't know. I think my father was ill when we received their telegram from my brother saying he was some place in New York, and that they would be home soon. Now when they all came back I think there were several affairs given for them, and naturally they all went to church together. Then they formed a post which is still active, American Legion Post. All of us were charter members, we all joined.

JONES: Do you remember what post number it was?

BIGBY: Yes, it was post 511.

JONES: Did they have an American Legion before that time?

BIGBY: No, because of the fact that it was organized after the war.

JONES: Was this an all black legion?

BIGBY: Yes, they formed their own charter, and they still do. They participate in the same programs and they're free to meet with the other posts. There's no segregation there, you can join with a white post if you wish.

JONES: At that time, there wasn't any segregation?

BIGBY: No, no there wasn't. But they stayed to themselves. They formed in 1919.

JONES: During the depression, how did your family make a living?

BIGBY: Well, I can remember that my father was fortunate enough to always find work. I know that the table was a little more scarce than usual. My father had odd jobs, I believe, at that time. I don't remember the year that all the depression was.

JONES: What was your father's profession?

BIGBY: Brick mason.

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JONES: Did your father make any specific contributions here in Fresno that you know of.

BIGBY: Not especially.

JONES: Did he work on any special buildings?

BIGBY: Yes, he worked on the university, it was Normal School at that time. Yes, he worked the fancy brick, the colored brick and the fancy brick. He was working at Cray Craft Company, 2301 W. Belmont. He burned all the brick for the windows and the doors, and the front of the building that is now standing. He worked there for many years out to the brick company. He made a lot of beautiful brick, he also built most of the kilns that are out there today and still in use.

JONES: What is the present name of the campus that was Normal School?

BIGBY: I think it's Fresno City College now.

JONES: When did you begin to work?

BIGBY: I began to work after my daughter was born. I left Fresno and went to San Francisco.

JONES: What year was this?

BIGBY: It was in the early '20's, I think it was '24. I always liked hats and I decided, well, my mother was my inspiration about hats. Because when we came she was still delicate, and the doctors didn't think too much about her living too long. So, she decided to have a picture made. She didn't like the hat that she had. So I tore it apart, and trimmed it over for her. I took a feather of an old hat and a buckle off of a cape that she had, a jet black buckle. I draped the ribbon around the hat, put the buckle over the feather and she loved the hat. That was the hat that she wore to have her picture made. So, from that point on, I started doing things for people in the neighborhood. When I went to San Francisco, I made a little beret, and I thought it was very lovely. I had very close friends living there. The second morning I was there, I said, "Well, I'm going to find a job," I walked for thirty blocks looking in the shops and places in the downtown area. I saw a millinery store that attracted me. The window was just

beautiful, it had a beautiful chandelier and one hat in the window. The hat was so outstanding that it appealed to me. I was standing there looking in and a beautifully dressed woman came and unlocked the door. She looked at me and she said, "Well, do you like that hat?" I said, "I just love it!" So she said, "What brings you out so early in the morning?" I said, "I'm looking for work." She said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I would love to make hats." She said, "Have you had breakfast?" I said, "No." So she said, "Come on in." So I walked in this beautiful shop that I had never seen one quite so elaborate. She took me upstairs and she had a secretary up there. And she told her, "Put on another cup because we have guests." She asked me something about my background. I told her I had a letter of recommendation. I had worked a short time at Rich Lievers which was located on Fulton Street where Zuka's was formerly, between Tulare and Mariposa. I worked there as a stock girl. I worked there after school and even after I married. That was really and truly the first job I had. But I was there and they gave me the key to the store and I used to take the money and bank it every day. They gave me a beautiful recommendation. So Mrs. Brownely read the recommendation and tore it up and threw it in the wastebasket. She said, "Well, you may have been honest there; maybe the clothes and the money didn't tempt you, but maybe my beautiful things in this shop might tempt you. I don't know if you're honest till it's proven." So she said, "I'm in need of a stock girl; she's leaving me in a couple of weeks. You can learn from her what to do." I said, "Well, that's fine. When would you like me to start?" She said, "Right now." So that's how I got started. And I had on spike heels and I worked that day. Being a stock girl, you had to wait on four designers, and they would call and tell you what they want you to get, materials, flowers, ribbons or whatever. And you'd have to bring them to them. I proved to be so good at it, and admiring everything, that Mrs. Brownely said she thought that I would be good. I started working there as a stock girl and observing everything that they were doing; then I learned how to

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block hats. Then Mrs. Brownely saw that she could use me at the Fairmont Hotel, and she dressed me very, very beautifully. She would have me go in and take care of customers on the floor. I was very, very petite, I only weighed about a hundred pounds. She schooled me on how to walk, how to talk, how to act in this beautiful salon. This was because we took care of nothing but the carriage trade. Of course, I had taken care of Sophie Tucker, and different movie people like Natacha Ramova, who was Rudolph Valentino's wife. I had seen him many times and sat at the table with him and his wife in Mrs. Brownely's suite. She lived at the St. Francis Hotel at the time. So I went to work at the Fairmont. On one occasion, I was called out to drape a veil on a customer. She had two ladies with her, and her clothes were just horrible, I thought. Unbecoming, ugly gray suede shoes, and the hat that she wanted me to drape the veil on was horrible. So I took the hat back to the work room, and I threw it up in the air and kicked it and made fun of it. I cut the veiling and pinned it to one side, and was going to walk outside and show her how it would look. Before going out, one of the designers called me back and said, "Mary, do you know who that is?" I said, "No." She said, "That's the Queen Mary, Mother Mary." I think I fainted, it scared me so bad. Anyways, I went back and gave her nice service and pinned the veil on her. So I was cured there of royalty. Because after that, there were so many, a princess from Japan, oh, I could go on and on.

JONES: What year was this?

BIGBY: This was in the very early '20's because Rudolph Valentino died in '26, and it was before that.

JONES: Had you draped the veil on the Queen yet?

BIGBY: Oh yes I did, she was very pleased.

JONES: What year did you come back to Fresno?

BIGBY: I came back to Fresno when my father passed in '45. I helped here with my mother and got all squared away and went back. I went to Sacramento where I worked for the State for three months in the motor vehicle department. I disliked it so much I didn't stay.

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So coming home that morning after I left the motor vehicle department, I saw in a window where a milliner was wanted. That was right up my alley; they hired me immediately. It was just to do trims, it wasn't a custom-made shop. That was Anell's Millinery Shop in Sacramento. I stayed there about five years until my brother, William, passed away here at Veterans' Hospital. That was in '46. I went back to San Francisco after that, in '47. My daughter was living there then. I went up there to see her. She said, "Why don't you stay in San Francisco?" I said, "Well, you know I have to work." She said, "I need a hat." I said, "I haven't anything to work with." So, I went down to the wholesale house, and they were all happy to see me there. Mrs. Roosevelt said, "Mary, what are you doing back in San Francisco?" I said, "Oh, I'm going to have to find a job." She said, "Well stay and help us out today. We need for someone to cut veiling and fill orders wholesale. We just need help." So I stayed and stayed and stayed. Of course, wholesale was so different than what I had ever done. But it was nice meeting all the buyers that we read about. I would have 15,000 and 20,000 dollar days. No money passed through my hands, but just write-ups. I was called the "Floor Lady". I was supervisor. I stayed there until 1958. That's when I lost my mother. I lost a sister and mother both in '59. August 19, is the day I lost my mother in '59. Then I started work for Gottschalk's in 1970, and I'd say I just retired last month.

JONES: Was your name well-known throughout the millinery circuit?

BIGBY: Yes, very much so.

JONES: Did they give you full credit for your work, did they label your name on your work? How was your name known throughout the circuit?

BIGBY: My name was just Mary in San Francisco and locally. I was working at Gottschalk's and many customers would come in and say, "Oh, you made my daughter's hat" or "you made my wedding veil". Some way they never forgot that I was a milliner. The designers who taught me every thing I knew were wonderful people. Because I

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did have an imagination. For instance, the Zellerbach daughter, the paper manufacturer, married in San Francisco. I helped and suggested how to make this wedding veil, which had thousands of beads on it. We had to sew each bead on by hand. It was the most outstanding veil. I think the wedding was one of the most outstanding in San Francisco I'd ever seen. Here in Fresno there's a lot of Fresnoans that would come to San Francisco that I would take care of.

JONES: Did you work in any of the hotels here in Fresno in their millinery shops?

BIGBY: Yes, I did. I worked for Irene. On vacation time, I would have a month or two months vacation, sometimes three months, in San Francisco because millinery was seasonal. When I came home, I would always work for Irene or Madam Josephine's. I would make patterns for the makers. Then I sold on the floor. I still have customers who ask me if I would do certain things for them, or for their daughters, or do I remember certain hats that I made for them. So, they never forget that I was a milliner.

JONES: Was it unusual for a black woman to do this type of work?

BIGBY: During that time, yes. Of course, it's a lost art now, and they're trying to bring it back. But I don't remember even in San Francisco, not custom made. They worked wholesale, which is entirely different. They were machine operators. Yes, there was a few but, not very many. I think I could count on one hand the Negro women that worked in millinery. There were quite a few men because blockers. I remember there was one outstanding one in San Francisco. Of course, it took strength for that.

JONES: What does blocking entail?

BIGBY: The shaping of the hat. It takes strength if you're making them by hand, even by machinery 'cause you have to pull them down over a mold. That's the foundation you start from, the molding of the crown of the hat.

JONES: Did you have any problems with customers because you are black?

BIGBY: No, no I never had any drawbacks. Only one occasion here in

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Fresno, I did. It was that I was asked to come and work at this particular store. They offered me more money than I was making. He showed me where I would be working. In fact, I did a lot of work at home on the side for the store. Expensive hats like Lilly Dache and all of those hats. I'd cut them down retrim them or whatever. I worked for them for maybe two or three years like that as an accommodation. Time came when they felt as though they could expand, and they needed a milliner. They called me one day and asked me to come in on my lunch hour, which I did. He showed me where he would set up the place. I was just about ready to accept when he said, "But, now I want you to know, Mary;" everybody called me Mary. "I want you to understand this. You are not to go out on the floor to wait on customers." It took me by surprise, I said, "Why?" He said, "Perhaps the customers might object because you're colored." Of course, it angered me when he said that. I said, "Of all people, you should understand what prejudice means, you being a jew." And I did not accept the position.

JONES: What was his name?

BIGBY: His name was Sam Rodder. He was one of the Rodders from Rodders Mademoiselle. He is deceased now. I said I could not make a hat for a woman unless I took care of her personally. I wouldn't know what she wanted, the saleslady couldn't tell me what she wanted or anything like that. This is the reason why. But, after he always treated me with the highest respect. He said when I wanted to reconsider and on my own I could come and do as I wanted to do. Because he felt that he was losing money. Because at that time it was the thing to have something hand-made. But I never did.

JONES: Do you remember if they had any black community leaders here in Fresno?

BIGBY: Yes, we had several. My brother-in-law, William Bigby--Bigby Villa, is named after him. He was with the state board of equalization--my brother-in-law Ray Hunter, who kept the records at PG&E for a number of years. Roy Calhoun worked for the Owl Drugstore from the time it opened in Fresno until they closed the doors.

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We had several ministers. But in these later years, after World War I, I mentioned those three especially. Because the public respected those people and they were instigators in organizing various organizations which some are still going.

JONES: At that time what did people do for recreation?

BIGBY: Well, around 1912, that was one time that the young men would rent horses and buggies for a Sunday ride in Roeding Park or Zapp's Park. They'd drive down the highway, they rode to Fowler, various things like that. But that was customary. The boys used to play ball at Fink-White playground. The Fink-White playground is in my neighborhood, same neighborhood that I was raised up in.

JONES: What neighborhood is that?

BIGBY: It's Trinity street. When we came here we lived at 223 Magnolia, which is Stanislaus street now. I lived on Trinity after our house burned in 1915. Because I was going to the World's Fair and all my clothes burned. My brothers got together, they were sorry about it and bought me enough to go anyway. So I went to the 1915 World's Fair, where I had a school picture entered in the fair that was entered in school art work. I got first prize, blue ribbon for art. It was a charcoal painting, and I never did get my picture back. That's why they wanted me to go so bad. My sister, Eva Hunter, was living there in San Francisco. She was working and this was the reason why my brothers got me ready to go.

JONES: Then you bought this property after you left Magnolia?

BIGBY: Yes, yes my father bought this property after Magnolia. Let's see, Papa bought this property in 1917, and we've been here ever since.

JONES: Where was Zapp's Park located?

BIGBY: Zapp's Park was located on Blackstone. I think Dudley Avenue today, I think that was the location. A big ditch going through there was like a canal that we used to go rowboating on. It was a recreation park, they had a ferris wheel, and quite a few things there that we used to ride on. We enjoyed it, especially

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on moon-lit nights in the summer. We'd go and rent these boats.

JONES: Do you know if the Ku Klux Klan was very strong in Fresno?

BIGBY: No, it wasn't. I don't recall too much about it. I know it was horrible in Tennessee. I remember that because Papa didn't call them Ku Klux Klan then, he called them "Night Riders". I remember when Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries fought. It was on the 4th of July, and there were a lot of picnics and home gatherings and so forth. A man came riding on a horse and told everybody to go in their houses, turn out the lights and to close their doors. The music stopped in the neighborhood and the lights were put out, and everything. Jack Johnson had whipped a white man and we knew it 'cause the night riders were coming. Now whether there was anything happened that night, I don't recall anything about that.

JONES: In Fresno, do you know any political leader that was highly regarded in this area?

BIGBY: Yes, I do. There was a man named Bill Page. He had a social club for men on F street between Merced and Fresno street. He was there for many years, and he was considered quite a political boss. Also, a Mr. Sheffield worked in the sheriff's office. I just can't remember any others.

JONES: These were black men?

BIGBY: Yes, they were. They would stand at the polls at that time. They would pass out cards, and tell you to vote for certain men. There were tongue lashings and fist fights a lot of times at these polls because it seemed to me that people were changing from Republicans to Democrats, and these were staunch Republicans. But people payed attention to them.

JONES: What political party did you join?

BIGBY: Democratic. My reasons for changing was because of my father saying that any time that the Republicans were the haad of the country, we always had hard times. So, that was the reason I stayed a Democrat.

JONES: Are you still a Democrat?

BIGBY: Yes.

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JONES: What was the role of William A. Bigby Jr. in the black community?

How was he regarded?

BIGBY: Well, Bill held a good position. He was always an outstanding citizen. He helped many senior citizens. There were a lot of people that migrated out to Fresno that were uneducated, and he helped them in many ways, business ways, buying their homes and so forth. He helped them in many, many ways.

JONES: You married into the Bigby family. How did you meet your husband?

BIGBY: I was in Fresno about three days and was sitting out in front of the boarding house when he passed by on a bicycle and flipped a note that said, "You are my girl." So, we went through school together here. He used to carry my books and things of that sort. That's how I met him.

JONES: What role did he play in the community?

BIGBY: Not active in political or social affairs very much. Entirely different than his brother. He just liked to socialize, that's about it.

JONES: What was your reaction to America's entry into World War II?

BIGBY: I had my two nephews, my sister's two boys. They went in the service, I was very much afraid for them. At that time, I was having a little domestic worries of my own. So, I was very much confused at the time. I worried a great deal about the boys. But they came home safe too.

JONES: Do you remember the attack on Pearl Harbor?

BIGBY: Yes, that was December the 7th, I never will forget. I was in San Francisco, and I never will forget it. I was coming home, it was on a Sunday, and I was having breakfast at a friend's house. I was going to leave early on the six o'clock train, coming back to Fresno. They said, "If you want to leave, you'd better get ready now." It was around the noon hour. It so happened that one of the guests there worked for an outstanding man in the community there in San Francisco. Dr. Shumate had a string of drugstores. He said, "If you want,

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me to, I'll take you now in time to catch a train or bus or whatever to get out of town." If he hadn't been well-known to these officers on the streets, we would of never gotten through because they were stopping people. We had to pass through the Japanese district in order to get to the Ferry Building. They were turning the cars over, they were throwing rocks, breaking windows, beating up Japanese people on the streets. It was a bloody mess, and I was right in the middle of it! But I did finally make it. I crossed the bay on a ferry, and caught a bus and came home.

JONES: Do you remember the internment of the Japanese families here in Fresno?

BIGBY: Yes, I remember one girl in particular. After she left the camp, she came to work for Irene as a maid in her home. She told us all about how she had suffered in this camp. She was a Fresno girl. Then in later years I did come in contact with a few that had been in camps.

JONES: During World War II, were there more jobs, same amount, or less jobs here in Fresno for black men and women?

BIGBY: Now I'm going back a little bit. Cooper's Department Store hired colored stock girls. Kress's hired one stock girl and she stayed there thirty-six years.

JONES: Do you know her name?

BIGBY: Yes, Inez Burns. She worked there till they expanded and till they closed the doors. In between these times, I always worked. I'd come home and stay awhile and go back and get a job. But, I always had a job. I went to work at Cooper's. I was the first Negro woman to have a salesperson job in Fresno. My daughter came at sixteen and did gift wrapping at Christmas time at Cooper's. After that they hired, like maids in the theaters, maids at packing houses, public rest rooms, the fairgrounds, Courthouse Park. Jessie Mooris, was a maid for many years there at the courthouse. It seems to me that there wasn't that much unemployment after that.

JONES: So it was mostly in the domestic field?

BIGBY: Yes.

BIGBY

JONES: After the war, did the people keep the jobs they had?

BIGBY: Yes, yes indeed. Of course, some of the boys got their jobs back where they previously worked. My two nephews, they got theirs back, they only had one job, the same job in their lives. One's with the Coca-Cola Company, he's been there forty years.

JONES: What's his name?

BIGBY: Billy Hunter, that's my sister's oldest boy. Raymond Hunter, he worked for Parker Pipe and Tobacco Company, which was located on Fresno Street. He's still at the Parker Pipe Company on the mall which he bought from Mr. Parker.

JONES: At that time, was there a lot of segregation in Fresno?

BIGBY: No, I wouldn't say so. Not at all. It was just, I don't know if it was the law or what it was, nobody thought about it. Because we went to the schools in the area in which we lived.

JONES: So the communities were intergrated?

BIGBY: Yes when I came in 1910, Columbia School had Italians, Caucasians, Japanese, Mexicans, Negroes. Now there was lots of whites that lived here on the Westside, and they went right here to Columbia School.

JONES: Do you know when they started to move from the Westside? How did this area come predominately black?

BIGBY: Well, now you take the Southside of town. They called it Armenian Town, German Town, Russian Town, China Town, Jap Town, seemingly the races kind of stuck together. And this is how all of this happened. Nearly all the blacks came here. Now my oldest sister was married to a man, Joe Wellhorn, that worked for Thompson Brothers. They were construction workers. They paved most of the streets here in Fresno. Now they lived across town on H street and Calaveras. So did the Burns family. They lived on Calaveras street. There was another woman, Stella Lewis, she lived on Hardy, that was way over. Reverend Lindsey founded that Baptist church there on Merced and F street. I think his family lived near the church, within a couple of blocks. Then the others came in, they stayed over on this side. So, this is called the Westside, and most of the Negroes lived all around the same area.

BIGBY

JONES: Do you know why Reverend Lindsey founded the Second Baptist Church?

BIGBY: I think that was the only church, but I don't know. But I do know that when we came, in 1910, there was a foundation of a church there. There was nothing there but a cement floor and benches there. That's where he helded our services and Sunday School and everything.

JONES: Do you remember the other churches that were formed here? What caused the AME church to be built here?

BIGBY: Not exactly, but I do remember there was a Methodist peacher that came here and founded a Methodist church on the corner of G and Tuolumne. That was a AME church. I think at one time-- we may have that many here now--fifty or sixty churches of all denomonations.

JONES: Do you still belong to the Second Baptist?

BIGBY: Oh yes.

JONES: How was Reverend Lindsey regarded in the community?

BIGBY: It's been so long ago. They honored him, they looked up to him. He was quite an elderly man. Oh, yes they just practically worshipped him.

JONES: Was there much police brutality here in Fresno?

BIGBY: It was known, yes. Chinatown, it seems was the mecca for all Negroes to go, they played pool down there. They finally had prostitution and gambling, things of that sort. Of course, they had what's called the vice squad. They raided these places in days gone by. And some of them resented that. Sometimes the police had to protect themselves, because they fought them quite a bit. Until, I think the thing that stopped them was this one officer, Sergeant McCreary. A Negro felt that he did not deserve what he was getting from McCreary, so he beat him up and took his gun away from him.

JONES: What was your opinion of Officer A.B. McCreary?

BIGBY: He was very well-known during those years because he was head of the vice squad, and he was in the newspapers every day seemingly. Now I found him different than what most of the

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public said about him. Because I had two brothers, they've never been arrested in all their life, But after they came home from the service they would drink. But they very seldom wandered to far from home. But if Officer McCreary would find them on the streets and see that they had been drinking, he would bring them home. Mr. McCreary would probably bring my brothers home because he didn't want them to be seen. But they never were arrested or anything like that. He would bring them home, and try to avoid my mother seeing them. We had a small little room outside where the boys used to stay. Now they would never let my mother see them smoke a cigarette, or take a drink. They would come through the back gate and go in their room. Then my mother would never see them. Till the day they died, they never smoked in front of my mother.

JONES: So, in other words, Officer McCreary was respectful of this family?

BIGBY: Yes, he was. Of course, people did dislike him a lot.

JONES: Do you know if he was good to anybody else? Do you think he was really good to this family because he knew you or because of the position your family held in the community?

BIGBY: Perhaps that, because my father was respected in the community. I guess that was it, I don't know. There was a few others that respected him too. Because he was very good. For instance, you take somebody in the community, colored person that died, or anything, he would always come and give them a hand, instead of sending flowers or anything. I know positively there was one person that passed. I went with the widow to St. Alphonsus and she was telling Father Kaiser her predicament. Mr. McCreary was a devoted Catholic. At that time, he was looking for her and someone told him she was over to St. Alphonsus. So, he came and I was present, and he told her in the presence of Father Kaiser that she had nothing to worry about, that he would help her financially to bury her husband because he was a friend of her husband.

BIGBY

JONES: Did they have black morticians here at that time?

BIGBY: Yes, Matthew B. Thomas who is married to my niece, my youngest sister's daughter. He had a place on F street between Tuolumne and Stanislaus. There was a Cooley, Jesse Cooley, he was on E street. That was the first place that he owned, and he was the first mortician in Fresno. No, we didn't have Sterling at that time. At the present time, we have three.

JONES: How was Mr. Cooley regarded in this community?

BIGBY: Mr. Cooley was a very fine person, but he ran into a lot of obstacles here. He did a lot of good but he was from the odd school. He was very well-liked.

JONES: Did you know Dr. Henry C. Wallace?

BIGBY: Yes, he was our family physican after came here. Yes, I knew him. He built a home here, and he was never too tired or the hour too late to make a call to the home. Yes, I knew him very well.

JONES: How was he regarded in the community?

BIGBY: Well, everybody loved Dr. Wallace, everybody loved Dr. Wallace.

JONES: Were you aware that Dr. Wallace was imprisoned?

BIGBY: Yes.

JONES: What was your reaction to that?

BIGBY: My mother saved some of the clippings at that time, I wasn't living here. But I felt very sorry for him because whatever he did, was out of the kindness of his heart. He just couldn't say no to someone that he thought he could help.

JONES: Do you remember what the reaction was when Dr. Wallace died in prison?

BIGBY: Oh, everybody worried about it. I came home during that time because I felt very bad. I adored his little wife, Ruth. I felt very sorry for her.

JONES: What happened to Dr. Wallace's family?

BIGBY: Well, he had a sister that lived in the block here and she passed away. He had a nephew, Gene Clayton, who passed away just about three or four weeks ago. So, I don't know anything else about any of his family. His widow still lives, she moved to

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Los Angeles. She's living there now. She was my grandson's music teacher when she was here. She taught piano lessons.

Now as far as Dr. Wallace's family, I don't know if he has any.

JONES: Before or after Dr. Wallace, was medical help readily available to the black community?

BIGBY: We had white doctors that were just wonderful, just wonderful to the community. We all loved them. Like Dr. Oscar Bland, he was a caucasian. He was the one that brought my daughter into the world. Oh, he was a favorite among all of us. There was a Dr. A.A. Calaway. I can't remember all of them. Oh, they were just wonderful.

JONES: The medical profession did not discriminate?

BIGBY: No, they did not. I did have an occasion at St. Agnes Hospital many years ago. I had surgery when my daughter was about ten or twelve. I had to be rushed, and doctor was Dr. Gerald K. Nider. It was a rainy day, and I had no one to go to the hospital with me. It was in the morning hours, and the doctor rushed me to the hospital in an ambulance to St. Agnes. My daughter was in school, she was going to Columbia. I left a note for her to tell her where I was. My mother was ill at the time. I told her where I had a certain amount of money and to bring it to the hospital. I was alone with a white woman. So, when she came to speak to me, Mother Superior said, "Where's your mother?" She told her the name and she looked it up. She looked at me and she said, "Is that your mother?" And she said, "Yes." So Mother Superior spoke to the nurses, "Well, she can't stay in this room with this woman." And they moved me. So when Dr. Nider came that night to see me, 'cause I was scheduled for surgery, he found out about it and he was very angry. He said, "Put her in a room by herself, and the price will be the same as the room where she was." So they did. After seeing my daughter, who was darker, that was it. But after that, they treated me right because he was the house doctor at the time. That was the only thing I ever had.

JONES: After the treatment that you received in the hospital, with the segregation of the rooms, was anything else ever said about it?

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BIGBY

BIGBY: No, we just dropped it right there. No, there was nothing ever said about it.

JONES: Did Fresno have a local black newspaper?

BIGBY: I think they did have a small one here at one time. But I can't remember too much about it. Because the other newspapers printed our news in the later years. There were two newspapers, The Herald, The Republican, and later The Fresno Bee. Then they started, if something happened good or bad, they started printing it and they let it be known that it was a Negro, always it was a Negro. I remember because I was a member at that time of the Federated clubs. We protested about them publishing pictures of Negroes at the happenings in Fresno. Violence of any kind they would have the headlines and the pictures. It would only cause the people to pay more attention to it, and cause differences in the streets and schools and so forth. So they stopped that. Of course, in the later years, naturally, when you read something, unless your acquainted with the person, you don't know whether they are black or white.

JONES: Do you remember if there were any songs or stories or things of that nature handed down from your ancestors of slavery times?

BIGBY: No, because my parents knew nothing about slavery or anything like that.

JONES: Do you remember after the newspaper articles whether the white community had a better understanding of the black people?

BIGBY: Yes, I do because they would know so much of what's going on in the community whether it was black or white. Fresno is a little town, a little city. Well, I would call it a town in those days, it's a city now. They highly respected those that were trying to better themselves, and they had it in their minds that there were only a handful of Negroes doing it. They always said your leader or your leaders, and they only could name a very few. We've come a long way in Fresno, a long way.

JONES: Do you remember when Ethel Waters was playing the Orpheum Circuit?

BIGBY: Definitely I do because she stayed at my house. She was the first black female performer on the Orpheum Circuit. They played here every week. Of course, there was always a new star, she was

BIGBY

one of the first.

JONES: Why did she stay at your home?

BIGBY: Because the hotels were prejudiced and they didn't allow Negroes in the hotels at that time.

JONES: Most of the black stars that came to Fresno, they had to be housed in private homes?

BIGBY: They did.

JONES: Were these arrangements made in advance?

BIGBY: Through my husband who was downtown, he's well-known. And I think through him there were many people who stayed at my house because of that. There were the Nicholas Brothers. The William Four, who were my oldest brother's stepchildren. They appeared on the same bill with Ethel Waters. The William Four. They stayed at my house, and since I was such a terrible cook, my mother would feed them. She would board them.

JONES: Do you remember a street that was referred to as "Black Broadway"?

BIGBY: Definitely. That was F street in west Fresno. Because all the action was on F street. From Fresno street north to El Dorado. 'Cause there were residents and business along there.

JONES: Did a lot of people go to F street? Black people, white people, or was it basically black?

BIGBY: Yes, basically it was black. Of course, the building on F and Tuolumne streets, which was the grocery store—the Twentieth Century Elks bought the building—that's where the action really was. Which was, well, they called it a saloon in those days. It was a bar, and they had a place of entertainment. They brought in entertainment from out of town and locally too. It wasn't just all blacks, because whites from across town, professional men—doctors, lawyers, businessmen. At one time, there were so many whites that they said they didn't even want too many blacks because there were so many whites. Well, they had the money, and they were spending the money. The blacks would have to make reservations. This only lasted a short time, it didn't last too long. They tore it down the last couple of years, and rebuilt. When the

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old buiding was there it was always . . . We had plenty of action there.

JONES: Do you know what happened to most of the blacks that owned those places?

BIGBY: Well, like the Twentieth Century Elks, they're all deceased, they are all deceased. Of course my husband--This was after our separation--had a part in that, but it didn't last too long.

JONES: Now in Fresno at one particular time people came here to make a better living. They were cutting grapes and picking fruit, doing domestic work, and things of this nature. Was the community closely nit regardless of one's occupation?

BIGBY: Oh, definitely. Yes, indeed. More so than now. The neighbors were really neighborly, they helped one another. They helped each other to find jobs. They were closely associated. They would socialize, ask you to join to make a better association. Yes, they were close, very close.

JONES: What did you think of the civil rights movements of the '60's?

BIGBY: I don't know, I can't say too much. I just accepted what was going on and didn't think too much about it.

JONES: What was your reaction to the Reverend Martin Luther King?

BIGBY: I adored him, I adored him!. I knew that he was a great leader. It was unfortunate that he had to go at such an early age.

But he did pave the way for many others. He was a great man.

JONES: What was your reaction to the death of President John F. Kennedy?

BIGBY: Well, I like him too. I liked him for his fiery sprit and his respect for all mankind.

JONES: Would you say that the death of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King has made the community better, worse, or is it at a standstill at this stage in time?

BIGBY: It's hard to say. To me it seems that it's at a standstill. I don't think they've made too much progress.

JONES: Would you say that the community is better now than when you were a child?

BIGBY: Well, there could be many, many things I could say. During my childhood, conditions were entirely different then. We walked

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almost everywhere we went. We went in groups, say, sisters, and brothers. In my teenage days, I couldn't go anywhere without my brothers. We'd go in groups, there never was any problems. On Saturday night my family it was a must—my father took us all out to dinner. It usually was Chinese food or Mexican food. We never bothered to lock our doors or anything. We would just leave the house as is and walk and just enjoy ourselves. That was every week, every week, we'd have this outing, my mother and all my family. It was very beautiful. Of course, now I find that the community has changed. The crime rate is so bad. We can't do that any more. We can't go out and water the front yard without the house locked up. I find in the community there's such a big change. Our homes are better, their homes are better. We have more recreation, more professional people in our neighborhood. We have so many of our people in good jobs in our cities and our government. I would say that that part is much better, much, much better than when I was a child. Of course, conditions were so different then, it didn't take so much to live. Of course, if we had carpets on our floors, and electricity and running water in the house, we were all very happy about it. Now we have air conditioning and central heating, all these things. Now we're unhappy if we can't have it. I feel as though now we are doing a whole lot better. I'm very happy that I'm back in Fresno, and this is where I intend to stay. I don't anticipate going back to work any more. I just plan to enjoy myself. Although I have promised Gottschalk's, if they need me, get in a pinch during the holidays, I will come back.

JONES: Mrs. Bigby, we have commented a lot on the men's role in the black community. Did any black women play a role in the development of Fresno?

BIGBY: We had a number of Negro women that were interested in the growth of this city. Most of them are deceased. I had an older sister, Eva Hunter, who was very, very active in the War Mothers and the Eastern Stars. There was Etta Mae Kennedy, who is Etta Mae Sheffield now. Mrs. Elizabeth Jones, who was an aunt to

BIGBY

Mr. Bigby. Oh, there was just a number of women who I don't remember because so many of them have passed on.

JONES: What exactly is the Eastern Stars?

BIGBY: That's an affiliation of Masons, Prince Hall Masons.

JONES: Do you remember how they started the Eastern Stars here in Fresno?

BIGBY: Now when we came here in 1910, they were organized—Prince Hall Masons. I don't recall who was their master, or who was what. My brother-in-law, had been a grand lecturer of the Prince Hall affiliation. I had a brother who belonged in Tennessee and hadn't changed his membership. My father was a thirty-three degree Mason in Tennessee, and he kept his membership in Tennessee. They were organized when we came here. They are still a very strong organization here in Fresno. They own their own building here in Fresno. At the present time, I have a nephew who is attending the National Grand Lodge in Miami Beach.

JONES: So the Eastern Stars did play an important role?

BIGBY: They did, they did. All their members, both men and women played a large part in making the black community of Fresno.

JONES: Do they have an auxiliary to the American Legion?

BIGBY: Yes, it was organized shortly after the state center was organized. My mother, two sisters, and myself were charter members of the auxiliary in 1919. There were nine members in charter of the auxiliary, and I'm still a member, and I am president of the auxiliary.

JONES: What about the Daughters of Isis? Do they have a charter here?

BIGBY: Yes, they do. I have a niece who is a member, Betty Thomas. There's only one in my family. The only one I do have here.

JONES: They aren't as popular here as the Eastern Stars?

BIGBY: It's affiliated with the Eastern Stars. I just don't know, not being a Star myself, I don't know what part they play. I do know that you have to be any Eastern Star before you can be a member of Isis.

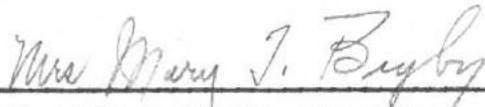
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JONES: Mrs. Bigby, I want to thank you for your time and cooperation in taking part in this program.

BIGBY: Thank you, it's been most enjoyable. Only thing, I wish I had more to offer because I think it's worthwhile. Thank you very much.

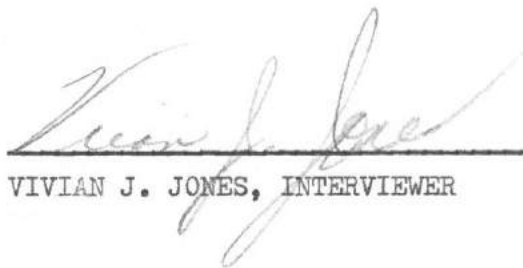
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VIVIAN J. JONES, INTERVIEWER



(DATE)