

**CAROL MOHAMED IVY**  
**Daughter of Ethel Wright Mohamed, Stitchery Artist**  
**Mama's Dream World – Belzoni, MS**

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Location: Mama's Dream World – Belzoni, MS  
Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter  
Length: 1 hour, 32 minutes  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Project: Delta Lebanese

**[Begin Carol Mohamed Ivy Interview]****00:00:02**

**Amy Evans Streeter:** This is Amy Evans Streeter for the Southern Foodways Alliance in Oxford, Mississippi. I'm in Belzoni, Mississippi, on Thursday, July 29, 2010 with Carol Mohamed Ivy, and, Mrs. Ivy, if you would please state your name for the record?

**00:00:18**

**Carol Mohamed Ivy:** My name is Carol Mohamed Ivy. I'm the youngest of Ethel Wright Mohamed's eight children. I was born December 19, 1942 in Belzoni, Mississippi.

**00:00:32**

**AES:** Thank you. And we're sitting here in your family's home, Mama's Dream World, as you affectionately call it on the sign out front, but it's also now a museum devoted to your mother's work. Could you explain initially a little bit about your mother's fame and how she's known throughout the Delta and beyond?

**00:00:50**

**CMI:** Well Mama started embroidering just as a hobby after my daddy died in 1965, trying to capture memories that she had of events when we were children that she did not have photographs of. So these—these were memory pictures that she was creating. And she made about 135 little family pictures when she was discovered by the Smithsonian Institute in Jackson, Mississippi at a festival that they had—the Art Association had in 1972 where she was displaying some of her pictures just as a fun thing.

00:01:37

**AES:** And now, if we could—the reason I’m here visiting with you, of course, is to get your—your family’s history and highlight your mother and her work, of course. But we’ll also talk about your family’s Lebanese heritage and your father and his background. So could we start by you sharing a little bit of—of your mother’s—when she was born and her early years and maybe lead into how she met your father?

00:01:59

**CMI:** Well my mother was born in Eupora, [Mississippi,] outside of Eupora in a little community called Fame. It’s—she said it was about the size of a bird’s nest. And her daddy was a preacher. And they moved to Shaw, Mississippi, when she was about sixteen years old, and she worked in the bakery after school. And that is where she met my daddy.

00:02:26

Now my daddy’s name was Hassan Mohamed Shuman; he came to the United States in 1911 from Syria, and he was sixteen years old. He never—it’s the part of the country that is Syrian Lebanon [the Mount Lebanon region of Syria], but Daddy never said he was Lebanese, always that he was Syrian. And Mama said he came to the bakery every day to buy fresh-baked bread and eat the sample cookies that she had on the counter. And one day she said, “You must like those cookies.” And he said, “No, I really like you.” And Mama said, “Oh, he was so handsome, coal-black hair and big brown eyes, dark-complected.” She said he looked like Omar Sharif. But we know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, after all.

00:03:12

**AES:** Well and I'm—I'm looking at pictures of your father here in this front sitting room in the home, and he has such a great big smile. He looks like he was a—a friend to all.

**00:03:22**

**CMI:** He was. He was a warm, loving person to us children. But the pillars of the community had great respect for Daddy because he was a hard worker, and he was a friend to all and especially women with little children that might be widows or orphans that sort of thing. I can remember Daddy giving them clothing in the winter. If he saw a child on the street that didn't have proper shoes or a jacket or something, he'd bring them into the store and outfit them, and that was his pleasure to do that.

**00:04:02**

**AES:** Well can we back up and talk a little bit about how your father got to Mississippi and—and what he did when he arrived?

**00:04:08**

**CMI:** Right. Well Daddy came in 1911 from Syria, and they landed at Ellis Island. And he was with about twelve of his cousins. And they all started out peddling, as most of the immigrants of that time did, and, of course, they had connections here in the United States—distant cousins that helped them get their dry goods together in the suitcases. And so they peddled by foot for many years until they finally could afford their rolling store: the horse and wagon.

**00:04:43**

**AES:** Yeah. And the rolling stores are a great part of Mississippi Delta history and—and predominantly operated by Lebanese immigrants who came here. And I understand from the great history of your family that you have on the website [[www.mamasdreamworld.com](http://www.mamasdreamworld.com)] for your mother and the museum here and also the interview that Bill Ferris did with your mother in the [19]70s that he—do I remember correctly that he first arrived in Clarksdale, Mississippi?

**00:05:07**

**CMI:** Well he started out peddling from the New York area to St. Louis, Missouri, to Memphis, Tennessee, to Clarksdale, Mississippi. And then from Clarksdale on to Shaw, Mississippi, where he opened his first general merchandise store in Shaw, right down the street from the bakery where my mother worked.

**00:05:29**

**AES:** And so he's—you said, I think, on the website that he went from a suitcase to the rolling store to a storefront?

**00:05:35**

**CMI:** That's right. He and one of his cousins, Dave Homod, opened this—this store together and they were partners in Shaw. And then when they—in 1927, when the big flood came through the state, they had water damage to their store and to their little houses—apartments that they had. And they moved to Belzoni because it was the county seat of Humphreys County. The courthouse was here. People would be coming to pay their taxes. The population was greater. Trains came through, and Daddy began to build his store down near the courthouse at that time.

00:06:16

**AES:** And do you know what he was selling, initially, in the early days from the suitcase?

00:06:18

**CMI:** Yes, maybe needles and thread and elastic and underwear, yard goods, small things that you could put in a suitcase that women that lived in the rural areas might need, especially their sewing things.

00:06:41

**AES:** So his business was based on women who would be homebound, taking care of children and wanting things they might have extra money to spend on?

00:06:48

**CMI:** That's exactly right because they did not get away from home. Town was too far away, and they didn't have cars back then, so they would have had to go in a buggy to get there. And so they were always delighted to see Daddy coming, and he would spread out all his wares out on their front porch, and they were very excited to see him come.

00:07:10

**AES:** And what about the language barrier early on when—? I understand he didn't—he didn't speak any English when he first arrived.

00:07:14

**CMI:** Well, when he first came to the United States, of course, he did not speak any English at all. And so he was a self-taught person, you might say. And when he started visiting my granddaddy when he was calling on Mama, they would talk every night on the porch. And that was very good for Daddy's conversational English. And he never did read and write English, but he depended on Mama.

**00:07:49**

**AES:** And can you share if—if your father ever shared any stories of those early days peddling and—and people that he remembered or events that—that happened during that time?

**00:07:57**

**CMI:** Well Daddy was a wonderful storyteller, and he would tell great stories about his coming to America and his peddling and going into restaurants and trying to order from the menu. And Daddy did say that he was real hungry and so he went in—followed this big heavy man into a restaurant. And the man sat down on a barstool, and Daddy sat next to him. And the man ordered a Swiss cheese on rye—a ham sandwich—and so Daddy tried to say what the man said and could not. And the lady kept asking him questions, “Do you want mayonnaise. Do you want mustard?” And he said, “Just apple pie and coffee.” He could not order what the man ordered, so he knew apple pie and coffee. He knew that.

**00:09:00**

**AES:** Hmm. Well I wonder, too, if he ever had any stories about being a single man from Lebanon in—or Syria, excuse me—in the Delta with other men his age and how they maybe got

together and—and celebrated their—their homeland and—and had shared memories of home and experiences of home when they first arrived.

**00:09:20**

**CMI:** They were very close-knit, all of—Daddy and his cousins. We called them all uncles; they were not our uncles, but we called them uncle out of respect. And we would have great feasts every week. The men were the cooks because they had married American wives, and the wives didn't cook their food like they wanted it. So they were wonderful cooks. And my uncle, Charlie Abraham, that lived here in Belzoni had married my mother's sister. And so we would go over to Uncle Charlie's house, and there would be all of the Lebanese food that we all enjoyed so much. And then they would play Rook—cards—way into the night, so it was great celebrations every week. We were very close.

**00:10:13**

**AES:** Now is that Sunday supper something that the—the men also did when they were single and then that just transferred into the family life as they married and the family expanded?

**00:10:21**

**CMI:** Well I really think perhaps that when the men were single, they lived together. I think they shared the expenses and they cooked together and ate together and did things together. It was—they're very clannish. Yeah.

**00:10:36**

**AES:** And then now your mother, did she—did she cook at all?



00:10:41

**CMI:** Well, Mama cooked. She did. We always had a cook that cooked for us. But I can remember the time that Mama was making a big soup for supper, and she said, “Oh, I hope this is good.” And then as my brothers and sisters came with their children, she would say, “Oh, I just hope this is enough.”

00:11:10

**AES:** Yeah, you have a very large family. **[Laughs]** So you have seven—you had—you had in your family seven siblings. You're the—the youngest of eight. And then how many grandchildren would your—your parents have claimed?

00:11:21

**CMI:** Nineteen. Mama had nineteen grandchildren, and they are all fine young men and women. **[Laughs]** Of course they're in their 50s and 60s now and 40s, but mama loved all of the grandchildren. She really did. But Daddy died in 1965, so he really did not live to see them all.

00:11:46

**AES:** Hmm. Well, and if I could go back again to when your father was courting your mother, and your mother was working at the bakery. First, do you know anything else about the bakery and what she was doing there and—and who owned it?

00:11:57

**CMI:** Well, after school Mama worked in [Adolph] Schlatter's Bakery in Shaw, Mississippi. And she worked out front, like the salesperson. And she said that Daddy would come in every day to buy the fresh bread and eat the cookies, the sample cookies. But the Schlatters, I believe, were German [Interviewer's note: the Schlatter family was Swiss]; however, my sister has done some research on Schlatter's Bakery and found—finds that they had worked in France. So they had some excellent training, French bakery.

**00:12:36**

**AES:** How long did your mother work there?

**00:12:37**

**CMI:** I really am not sure.

**00:12:41**

**AES:** And do you know—you know, your father was very certain when he laid eyes on your mother about wanting to marry her. Do you—did he ever explain to her or to you as children what that was about your mother that charmed him so?

**00:12:53**

**CMI:** Well, I think first of all that—that Mama was working in a business. She—he could see that she took money and made change, and this was very important to him because he needed her in his own business because he wanted to open credit accounts for his customers that he had—had established. And merchandise was coming in and needed to be priced and invoices paid and checks written, and he needed her. Her English is what he needed.

00:13:27

**AES:** And so and you say her father [Elijah Wright]—your grandfather—was a preacher. And I know that—can you talk a little bit about religion in the family and how your grandfather approved of that marriage? And then I understand that you as children were raised Christian.

00:13:40

**CMI:** Well my granddaddy was a preacher, but, you know, he was not ordained. There would be several men in the community that just took it upon themselves to start their own church, and that's exactly what took place. And Granddaddy was quite a preacher in as much as his prayers lasted almost an hour. *[Laughs]* And he wrote several hymns, and it is published in one of the hymnals. And they were great singers. They played the piano. They all sang. All my granddaddy's people—it was the Wright family, and his name was [Elijah] "Lidge" Wright. And there were several of those Wright men, and they're all still in the Eupora [Mississippi] area. Those that have died, of course, their children are still there. But there is a Wright reunion that they have every year, and it is based around, of course, genealogy. You know, that's what it's all about.

00:14:52

But Daddy, of course, was Muslim, and he washed his hands and prayed five times a day and he—but he never said anything about us going to the Baptist church. We would go across the street [from our house in Belzoni] to the First Baptist Church when we were growing up. And Daddy would always give us money to take to put in the collection plate, of course. And then sometimes he would say, "What did you learn today at Sunday school?" And I'd tell him what I

had learned, and, often times, he would give me a comparable from the Qur'an, and I really felt like I had the best of both worlds.

**00:15:43**

**AES:** And do you think that by your father wanting to raise you Christian, that was just a matter of—of him being in a new place and wanting to—like, I guess, he, himself didn't adopt, you know, the religion of—of where he ended up but wanted to make sure that his children, you know, of course did, and was that anything, do you suspect, that your grandfather asked of him?

**00:16:10**

**CMI:** No, I really don't think so. I—Daddy never wanted us to speak Arabic. He wanted us to speak English. He wanted us to be American citizens. And he loved America because it was the melting pot, the land of milk and honey. And he wanted us to be accepted in every way because he had such a hard time carving his way into a community.

**00:16:40**

**AES:** Yeah. And—and I know that the—the Lebanese immigrants, while they, you know, at once navigated both the black and white communities as—as peddlers and merchants, did he also express some experiences that he had being discriminated against in those early days?

**00:16:56**

**CMI:** Yes, I think he was discriminated against. We once had—had—once had a Baptist preacher that, you know, constantly told Daddy if he didn't accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God, he was going to Hell. And Daddy did not accept that because there couldn't have been a

better man than my daddy. So it makes me be very broad-minded about every religion and—but Daddy always remained a Muslim. He never changed, but he never rebelled against us going to the Baptist church and being baptized, as we all were.

00:17:43

**AES:** And he did ultimately become an American citizen, yes?

00:17:45

**CMI:** Oh, yes, uh-huh, he did. He studied for his citizenship and passed the test. And he was very active in the Shriners. He belonged to Wahabi [Shrine] Temple in Jackson, Mississippi, and he loved that. [*Emphasis Added*] And, of course, you know, that is a religious fraternity, you might say. And it is based much of it on the Bible.

00:18:13

**AES:** Now if we could talk a little bit more about your mother's stitchery and her memory pictures—because I definitely want to capture that for the record before we move on to food—but a little bit about her background, with her mother teaching her the stitchery and how she came to that later in life again.

00:18:29

**CMI:** Right. Mama said when she was a little girl for—for herself and her sister, if they were a little noisy or something, the grandmamma would say, “Well, sit down now and draw your calf and embroider your calf.” And they would make little cloth books, and that is how she began her embroidery. But, as I was growing up, Mama never embroidered. She never embroidered. It was

after Daddy died that she began to embroidery again because Daddy would not want her wasting her time.

**00:19:05**

**AES:** She should be working in the shop [H. Mohamed's General Merchandise].

**00:19:07**

**CMI:** That's it, watching the customers, helping the people, so Daddy would not have approved of that.

**00:19:15**

**AES:** And how was your mother working the shop? She enjoyed that? She enjoyed being a part of—?

**00:19:21**

**CMI:** Mama loved the store business; she really did. We always had clerks that waited on the customers, and Mama sat at the credit book. Our business was predominantly a credit business, and everybody loved her and Mama loved everybody. And she did not discriminate at all in any way and never had. And many, many times people would come into the store and ask Mama to help them get set up on Social Security and Welfare and different things, and Mama would literally help fill the papers out for them, because they could not read and write.

**00:20:04**

**AES:** That's quite the community service. So I wonder if—well tell me what year your parents got married.

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**CMI:** I believe they got married in 1924. I'm not certain, but I believe it was 1924.

**00:20:20**

**AES:** And how soon after that was your first sibling born, their first child?

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**CMI:** Oh, I think just right away. They had three children by 1927 when they moved to Belzoni.

**00:20:33**

**AES:** Okay. And now if we could bring Mittie Price into the picture. Can you tell me about her and when she came on the scene?

**00:20:39**

**CMI:** Well Mittie Price was first generation African. Her parents were slaves. And she lived in the alley behind our little house that Daddy had rented when we first moved to Belzoni. And Mittie would come early in the morning and stay all day and leave at night after all the children were fed and bathed and so on. And Mama never interfered with Mittie's housework or her plans for a menu or anything, but Mittie was very frugal. If we had biscuits left over, she made bread pudding. If we had rice, it was rice pudding; vegetables always went into a big soup. Daddy appreciated Mittie being very frugal. And, of course, Mittie had her own house behind our little

house in the alley. But when we moved into our big house down the street, I was about six months old, and at night, when Mittie would go home, I would cry for her. And so Mama said, “Mittie, you keep your house and go there any time you want to, but you just move in with us and you and Carol have the back bedroom, and you just let this be your home.” And that is what I remember is her being here with me.

00:22:04

**AES:** Would you tell the story that’s behind the—the embroidered piece that your mother did about your birth and about Mittie? It’s a story about her not wanting to take care of another child but she ended up—you really endeared yourself to her.

00:22:18

**CMI:** That’s right. Well there is a picture that Mama made and it’s called—the first picture is called *Waiting on the Stork*, and it shows Mama in bed with Dr. Wallington and Daddy and my three aunts, and there’s seven pictures framed [in the embroidery]. And then in the other room there’s Mittie with all the other children, waiting for the stork to fly through the window. And, you know, there was no hospital in Belzoni; so that was no problem for us because the stork brought us anyhow, you know.

00:22:51

And so then the next picture was of Mittie standing on the side of the bed. Mama is in bed holding the new baby, and all seven of the siblings are crawling around, welcoming the new baby. And it shows a picture of Daddy bringing eight red roses, not that he did, but Mama thought it would look good in the picture.

00:23:12



And Mittie really did not want to take care of another baby, but Mama said that after I was born that Mittie would not let anybody touch me. She raised me herself.

**00:23:30**

**AES:** And Mittie being, you know, your caretaker and—and housekeeper and all while your mother was working at the store, that was—that was important for your parents both that she maintain her role at the store and—and that Mittie take care of things at home?

**00:23:48**

**CMI:** Right. Well, Mama went to the store early every morning and didn't come home until the store closed at night. And Mittie ran the household just beautifully because she ran it like it was her very own. And she ruled with an iron hand. None of my sisters knew how to cook when they got married because Mittie wouldn't allow them in the kitchen. And, of course, my brothers, they—the boys were not meant to be doing housework in the first place, and so Daddy raised us all to hurry and come to the store.

**00:24:22**

**AES:** Well tell me about also that—that memory picture of the storm and when your mother came home to be with the family and what happened.

**00:24:32**

**CMI:** Well it shows a picture of Mama sitting in a rocking chair with one child, and Mittie in the other chair with the other seven children. And Mama said it was storming real bad one Saturday night, and she rushed home from the store because she knew how frightened we would

be of the storm. But not but one child would sit in her lap. All the rest felt more secure with Mittie. And Mama said she knew then that we loved Mittie best. She said it was two storms that night.

**00:25:07**

**AES:** Well can you tell me—if we could kind of hear [about] your relationship with Mittie and having Mittie in the house—to talk about food and what the kitchen was like growing up? And I know you mentioned earlier you had a woodstove and—and you've already mentioned a few things Mittie would cook, but, you know, food memory is such a strong thing and—and who we are and how we grow up and our memories of—of our youth, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that and how that—that kind of—the kitchen experiences of you as a youngster with your siblings and Mittie?

**00:25:37**

**CMI:** Well, our kitchen was very small, and of course we live in the house—I live in the house now where the kitchen is, and it's still like it was except it has been enlarged with a den on the back. But our kitchen then, basically, it was like a stove—a woodstove for Mittie to cook on. We had a gas stove, but Mittie was afraid of the gas stove, so she would not use it. So Mama kept the woodstove as long as Mittie was alive, and she died when I was ten. So that would have been 1952—we had the woodstove.

**00:26:20**

And of course there was a big porcelain sink. And I don't remember much countertop, but we had like a table in the middle of the floor and my rocking chair—Mittie would have a rocking chair in there, and I would be on a pillow in the rocking chair while she was cooking.

00:26:40

**AES:** There is a[n embroidered] picture of that also.

00:26:42

**CMI:** There is. And Mittie was good to all of us. And this one picture that you're referring to is when [my brother] Bubba had been out in the rain, and he came in to dry his feet by the old woodstove. And of course the puppy dog couldn't come in because the mama cat had little kittens. And all of this is shown in Mama's picture.

00:27:05

**AES:** Now Mittie—Mittie, excuse me, did she cook whatever she wanted, or did your parents ever have anything that suggested or requested that she make?

00:27:13

**CMI:** No, really we had a big garden in our backyard that Daddy—that was Daddy's garden and that was really his hobby and his exercise and we had every vegetable there was. And we had fruit trees, every fruit that there was. And I can remember Mittie making fig preserves and—and also cottage cheese. The tree outside the window had a low limb and we had a churn and all of that and I can remember the cottage cheese wrapped in a net hanging from the limb of the tree because my brother would get underneath it and let it drip in his mouth.

00:27:58

And of course I can remember turnips pickling in these churns, and I know Mittie made biscuits every morning for breakfast. We had cornbread at lunch; we really didn't have much

bought bread, light bread you might say, because she did all the cooking. And I can remember my sister, Joy, saying she went to spend the night with one of her friends, and she said it was the most unbelievable thing: they had toast for breakfast. So we do have wonderful memories of Mittie and her cooking, but I—I can remember mostly her cooking big pots of dried beans and peas and so on. And I believe that the potlikker is what I loved best of all, the juice off of the beans, because I can remember Mittie mashing up the beans with a lot of juice in it and her spoon-feeding me. And I—I was a big child then. **[Laughs]** I think that's why I'm so healthy now.

**00:29:09**

**AES:** Now tell me about—more about the garden. And I wonder if your father—if he grew things from his home—homeland that—that were used in the Sunday suppers when you would have Lebanese suppers like grape leaves and—and things like that.

**00:29:22**

**CMI:** Yes, we did have—on our fence, we did have grapes. And it was like a little vineyard. It was really nice. But really, we used the cabbage leaves more so than the grape leaves for our—we had the—the cabbage rolls. And Daddy would order merchandise from Barzizza Brothers from Memphis, and we would get the grape leaves that were already packaged in the jars and olives and wheat and all of that. He would order all that. But in our garden it—Daddy had the vegetables like the tomatoes and cucumbers and zucchini and all kinds of squash and eggplant. He raised most everything. Of course the lemons and limes we bought, but he—all of the other fruit, but figs were big for us.

00:30:22

**AES:** And besides the fig tree, what other fruit trees did you have?

00:30:24

**CMI:** Well we had plum and apple. Of course we had the grapes—and pears, mostly.

00:30:34

**AES:** And this is probably a question you can't answer, but I'm—I'm just in my mind imagining having a pantry—your family pantry being filled with olive oil and olives and all of these imported food items and what Mittie thought of those things if she ever experimented with anything or—.

00:30:52

**CMI:** No, Mittie was a soul cook. She only cooked what she knew how to cook. When all of the Lebanese dishes were done, Daddy did all of them.

00:31:03

**AES:** Did she ever taste any of the Lebanese dishes that you know of?

00:31:08

**CMI:** I think she did, but I don't really remember. But she—she liked turnip greens and cornbread and black-eyed peas and roasts and that sort of thing.

00:31:20

**AES:** Uh-hmm. Now tell me about your father cooking and what that was like when he would cook for these Sunday suppers.

**00:31:25**

**CMI:** Well I can remember that we had a meat grinder that he would attach to the table. And he would buy the beef, fresh beef with very little fat on it, and he would grind this beef to make *kibbe* [a traditional dish made with bulgur and minced beef or lamb]. And that—it—it was the choice meat, and he would not buy meat from the grocery store because it would have a lot of fat in it and it might—the—the grinder might not be clean. And a lot of the *kibbe* that Daddy served was raw, so it—we had to make sure that it was clean.

**00:32:07**

**AES:** And I remember, too, mention of some of the imported goods that your father would get were the sweets that you children looked especially forward to.

**00:32:15**

**CMI:** *Halawe* [more widely known as *halva*, a dense candy made from sugar and a nut butter, usually sesame paste] and *baklawaw* [more widely known as *baklava*, a layered pastry filled with nuts and honey], different—different types of sweets, dates, the stuffed dates, the almonds, the—covered with the candy. But basically, Daddy was diabetic, so we didn't have a lot of those sweets because Mittie made the best chocolate cake, and Mama made a wonderful one-two-three cake that we could eat at one sitting, you know. **[Laughs]** So most of the sweets we had were all the Americanized sweets.

00:32:53

**AES:** Can you explain what a one-two-three cake is?

00:32:55

**CMI:** Well, I think it's one cup of sugar, two cups of flour, and three eggs, and then she'd add like vanilla and different things in it. But she called it a one-two-three cake. And after all my brothers and sisters had left—had married and left home, Mama and I were home alone. I was almost an only child because there was eight years difference between me and my brother that was next to me. And Mama—of course it was before television, you know, and so Mama would copy the encyclopedia. I can remember her sitting in the back bedroom, and if there was something she wanted to remember, she would write it down because she could remember anything she wrote down. And so we always accused of her copying the encyclopedias. And I would say, "Oh, Mama, wouldn't it be good to have a piece of chocolate cake?" And Mama said, "Well, all right. So she'd get up and go in the kitchen and make a one-two-three cake. And she'd eat half of it, and I'd eat the other half with milk, and it was delicious."

00:34:03

**AES:** So what about growing up and your friends growing up and if they ever had any experiences with your family in the Lebanese part of what you would do as a family?

00:34:12

**CMI:** Well my friends were afraid of my daddy because he was so gruff and loud. And they didn't really come to visit here at my home. But my best friend, Margaret Ann Bridges, lived behind us; her backyard joined my backyard. And we would go to a BTU on Sunday night, the

Baptist Training Union. And I can remember this one Sunday night coming back home from church, and the front door was open. Of course we didn't have air-conditioning then, just the attic fans. And all the windows and doors were open, and Margaret Ann looked in, and Daddy was cutting up a sheep on the dining room table. And you could see that from the outside of the house. And Margaret Ann said, "Oh, is that your mama?" **[Laughs]** She didn't doubt it, you know. **[Laughs]**

**00:35:12**

But anyhow, Daddy would butcher the sheep and put it in the freezer and so on, uh-hmm, you know, so—but I had a different-type background than most children did because my very best friends were the Woos: Nancy and Ruby and Mary Lee and John. And their daddy was John Woo, and he had a grocery store two doors down from our store. So every day I would go with Mama and Daddy to the store—when I got old enough to go. I believe really it was after Mittie died.

**00:35:54**

And I would go immediately to John Woo's store because they lived behind their grocery store, and I grew up eating Chinese food and loved Marilee and Nancy and Ruby. They were my very best friends and still are. We are still very close. And at that time, the Chinese children could not go to the public schools. And so they had a private teacher here, and it was not until junior high school until they were allowed to go to the public schools. But they are all very intelligent, brilliant people.

**00:36:38**

And I think I understood more Chinese than the Arabic, actually. **[Laughs]** So it's just I had a very interesting childhood. But my friends, as I say, did not come to visit my house.



00:36:54

**AES:** So I'm—I'm—I'm just so struck about being, you know, a product of that generation and—and this family and having—living in the Delta that is, you know, such multi-cultural Delta and having those experiences. And did you think anything of it at the time? I mean did you—did it—did it feel different or just seemed the, you know, daily life here in Belzoni?

00:37:16

**CMI:** No, I felt I was very lucky. You know, I could hardly wait to get to the store every day so I could go to the Woo's. And we had wonderful times. We would play with cardboard boxes behind the store. Daddy had gotten merchandise in, and we'd have rubber gun wars, you know, with the rubber bands and the carved wooden guns and we'd make mud pies out there, and we just had a great time.

00:37:44

**AES:** Did your family—the Woo family and your family—ever have meals together outside of the store?

00:37:48

**CMI:** Never. Uh-um, no. They were my friends. Mama bought a lot of her groceries from Mr. Woo but they—socially, no. The—the Woos kept to themselves, and we kept to ourselves.

00:38:07

**AES:** What about the community at large at that time and kind of, you know, their perceptions of the—the merchant class here in Belzoni, the Woos and your family and those kinds of interactions? I'm not sure that there's a specific question there, but if you get my drift.

**00:38:25**

**CMI:** Well our customers were predominantly black, and the Woo's customers were our same customers. And Mama had helped so many of them get their credit established with her in our—in our store. And basically we—Mama didn't socialize, really. She didn't go to PTA meetings and things like that. She never did, and I never thought anything about it. Other mothers went and it just—it really didn't matter.

**00:39:03**

**AES:** So what did—what did you all sell at your store, your parents' store, and what did the Woos sell at their store?

**00:39:09**

**CMI:** In our store, we had men, women, and children clothing, and Daddy would have, like, men's hats and handkerchiefs and things hanging from the ceiling, you know, just—but it was basically dry goods, general merchandise. But we did have fabric and lace and sheets and pillowcases, and that's really what Mama used when she started making her pictures was what we had in the store.

**00:39:41**

And then the Woos, theirs was all groceries, canned goods mostly, but they did slice meat there. They had a bakery there and, as a matter of fact, my—my children grew up knowing John Woo bologna is the best in the world. And—and we still have John Woo bologna all the time.

00:40:06

**AES:** Well and that takes me back, too, to the—the image of your father butchering the sheep on the—on the table in your house. And I wonder, first, how often he did that, and then also where the sheep came from.

00:40:21

**CMI:** Well, actually, [*Laughs*] that's the only time I ever remember Daddy doing that. But we did have that sheep in our backyard. It was staked out, but I think that we had goats and other things out there, too. And but I remember that something ate the sheets off the clothesline. I think it was the goat, so I don't think we had much of that, so—. [*Laughs*]

00:40:50

**AES:** Well and I remember reading a story about the pig that—that ended up on the dinner table. Can you tell that story?

00:40:55

**CMI:** Well really that's my older brothers and sisters because we couldn't really raise our pigs and then eat them. We just couldn't do it. So Daddy saw that he would ever do that again, you know, to butcher one of the pigs, something we had raised. It was just not a good thing.

00:41:17

**AES:** But then past—past the pig being a pet, you—you say on the website that you did corrupt your father, and he eventually ate bacon?

00:41:25

**CMI:** Daddy did begin to eat bacon and, actually, I—I don't think it really was until Ollie got married and we started having ham and things like that at Christmas time. It was basically all the Lebanese foods and we might have roast or something like that, but our Christmases were meat pies. I loved the meat pies.

00:41:51

**AES:** Are there any Lebanese holidays that you would celebrate as a family?

00:41:55

**CMI:** No, not really. None at all. We'd celebrate every chance we got with birthdays and anniversaries and, of course, all of the holidays—Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving—but not any of the Lebanese—the Ramadan, none of that—no.

00:42:18

**AES:** Can you remember and describe some of your—your favorite things that your father would make or that you would have at these Sunday dinners with other people from the Lebanese community?

00:42:26

**CMI:** Well I love cabbage rolls and meat pies and of course *kibbe*. I liked the—the *kibbe* that's stuffed with the pine nuts. I really like that. And one of my daddy's cousins, the Farrises that live in Clarksdale, Mike and Money Farris, she was the most wonderful cook. Now she was Lebanese herself, and she was beautiful, just so attractive, but she was a wonderful cook. And I can remember her making those *kibbe* balls and stuffing it with the pine nuts and—and actually, her daughter, Louise, is the one that really taught me to make cabbage rolls.

**00:43:20**

**AES:** Okay, so you still cook traditional Lebanese food, then?

**00:43:23**

**CMI:** Oh, I do. Uh-huh, I do. The cabbage rolls and meat pies, but my children prefer the meat pies. I usually use the inexpensive canned biscuits. I don't make my dough from scratch but, honey, you know there are ten biscuits in a can, and there's eight in a package. That's 80 meat pies. Those girls could gobble them up while they're hot, you know. This is—this is something we love to do and still do.

**00:43:52**

**AES:** So is—is that something that you do because you have a taste for those things growing up on them, or that it's part of your heritage or a combination of both?

**00:44:00**

**CMI:** Well, first of all, they're so delicious. I love them. They're absolutely delicious, but it's fun to do because it is part of my childhood growing up, yes.

00:44:15

**AES:** What do you think your father would think about you maintaining those culinary traditions?

00:44:18

**CMI:** Oh, I think he would be very pleased—very, very pleased. And Daddy was not a—fancy person. But he liked good wholesome food and I think that was very important to him that we all ate good. And I can remember him saying, you know, “Eat everything on your plate. Clear your plate. There are people hungry in other countries.” And so that’s why we clear our plates today. *[Laughs]*

00:44:50

**AES:** Now Belzoni is close to Vicksburg, and I know that there’s a—fifty years of an annual dinner there that the Lebanese community puts on. Did y'all ever have anything to do with that?

00:44:59

**CMI:** I think perhaps my brothers might have, but I lived in Florida thirty years, and I have just been back home about twenty years, so all this was going on when they were young with their families and all. But I—I never participated in it.

00:45:16

**AES:** And tell me about the Lebanese community today and your perception of it relative to when you were growing up.

00:45:22

**CMI:** Well they have all died. We have—I have one Lebanese cousin that lives here in this town. His name is Mohamed Shuman and he came to the United States when I was in high school and worked in my uncle's store. And then he stayed here all these years, but he worked in a—in the factory. And then after Daddy and all the men of that generation died, Mohamed Shuman's family and our family is all that's left.

00:46:03

Now I have cousins in Indianola[, Mississippi]. Danny Abraham is my first cousin. And then in Sunflower[, Mississippi], the Isom family is there, and their daddy's name was Mike Isom. And he had a store, and they grew up in their daddy's store just like we did. And we would visit often, and they would come here to Belzoni because we had a swimming pool in Belzoni, and they didn't have one in Sunflower. But every year they have the Isom family reunion. And I always go to that and—because they have cabbage rolls and meat pies and so on, and those girls have continued to cook their daddy's recipes.

00:46:50

**AES:** Now do your children and—and grandchildren—do they consider themselves Lebanese? Do they celebrate that part of their heritage or they just consider themselves Mississippians? Deltans? Southerners?

00:47:03

**CMI:** Well both of my children—my two girls—were born in Fort Myers, Florida. And so they are Floridians, you might say. But when I came to Belzoni about twenty years ago—came

home—they followed me. And I have one daughter that lives here in Belzoni and one lives in Indianola. And they really have never expressed anything about the Lebanese background, other than they love the meat pies.

**00:47:42**

**AES:** Well, and that's definitely saying something. I had a question that has since escaped me. Gracious. Well I know that I did want to backtrack, and I'm sorry to lose this train of thought, but I did want to backtrack and ask you if you knew anything about your parents' wedding and any kind of food-related stories from that.

**00:48:07**

**CMI:** No, I think they were married at City Hall in maybe Cleveland, I believe Mama said. I'm not sure. I don't think they were married in Shaw. Somehow I think they might have been married, which is very close to Shaw. I don't know that they had any food or reception of any kind.

**00:48:34**

**AES:** And your—your parents traveled to Lebanon in the—is it the late [19]'50s?

**00:48:39**

**CMI:** They did. They went for six months. They cruised over and stayed six months, and then they flew home. But Ollie had already married, and he could take care of the store. And of course Mittie was here to see about me and my brother and sister. And—but it would be



impossible for people to leave their business and family six months today. You'd have to have very responsible people, for sure. *[Laughs]*

00:49:10

**AES:** Well what kind of stories did your mother share about that trip and her experiences over there?

00:49:13

**CMI:** Well, Mama was a great writer. She really [was]. So, she kept a journal, and she had pictures of her trip, and she literally wrote what she did every day and what she thought and how much she missed us and this and that. And we do have that, that book.

00:49:32

**AES:** Do you still have also the—the books that her mother made, the storybooks?

00:49:37

**CMI:** No. No, I don't have anything of Mama's childhood at all. I don't.

00:49:43

**AES:** Well I do—I do know that I want to ask you more about the store and its—specifically, two things. One, being that the stories about the [Great] Depression and—and bartering for goods, and people bringing chickens and whatnot to the store to trade, and then also what happened to the store? If it still—is it still in operation?

00:50:02

**CMI:** Okay. Of course I was not born until 1942, so the Depression was over. But I—my sister talks about the Depression and how things were scarce and rationing and this and that. And, of course, the War [World War II], you know, that was a big part of things, too.

But the store is not operating at this time. The building is still there. And when Mama died, she left that building to my three brothers. And, of course, they all three have died, but it has never operated as a business since Mama's death except, for a short time, my nephew operated it. And with the Wal-Mart and K-Mart and all the department stores, it's just so hard for an independent merchant to survive because they're buying and—and selling cheaper than the independent merchant could—could buy wholesale.

00:51:11

**AES:** Well and I remember, I think in Bill Ferris's book, talk about your nephew, your mother's grandson, who loved the store as much as she did. And what that—like, if it was kind of a—an immediate closure of the store, kind of a slow decline, or how—how it eventually—you know, how the doors eventually closed.

00:51:33

**CMI:** Okay. Well David was probably about eight or nine years old when Daddy died. And of course his mother and daddy just lived right around the corner. So Mama was afraid in this big house by herself at night. So she felt lonely, so David would come and spend the night with Mama. And then the next thing you know, he's helping Mama in the store and living here with Mama. And he loved Mama. He was more like a little brother [to me] than a nephew.

**00:52:04**

And so when he did graduate from Delta State [University], Mama, of course, was still operating her store, and David was working in the store. And his daddy, Ollie, told him, “Get out from under Big Mama’s umbrella. Go somewhere you know and create a life for yourself.”

**00:52:25**

And so anyhow, David came to visit me. I lived in Ft. Myers, Florida, and I had stores there. And David began to help me in my stores. And then years went by; I mean he came to visit and stayed five years. **[Laughs]** He loved it there, and we loved having him, too. And he did create his own life there, and it was a beautiful life. It was very progressive and prosperous, and it was a resort island. You know, it was beautiful—so different than Belzoni, Mississippi.

**00:52:59**

But then when Mama got ready to retire, she asked David, would he like to have her store? And so he came home and took Mama’s store and operated it a while. And so I don’t know how long, but maybe two or three years after Mama retired that he decided to close the store. And it has been vacant because he does have a life estate in that store. That was the way Mama had left it to my three brothers, with David having the option of operating a business there.

**00:53:34**

**AES:** And so when—when he came back, what—what, then, inspired you to come back to Belzoni, also?

**00:53:40**

**CMI:** Well Ft. Myers, Florida, where we lived, my children had both—were grown and married and my husband and I were divorcing, so I decided to come back home. And Mama, of course, was having these wonderful tour groups that were coming to visit Belzoni, and so they really didn't have a restaurant in Belzoni. So I had a little bit of money and a whole lot of courage, and so I bought the old funeral home and renovated the funeral—funeral home. And the tour buses would stop and eat at my restaurant, and so that is how that all came about. I was riding on Mama's coattail.

**00:54:28**

**AES:** My goodness. So here we are; we're about an hour into our interview, and I'm just learning that you had a restaurant. So, and tell me, too, what kind of stores you had in Ft. Myers that you mentioned briefly.

**00:54:36**

**CMI:** Clothing. Resort shops. It was strictly swimsuits and cover-ups and beach hats and thongs and—but then I would have slacks and tops—casual things. Pantsuits. It was strictly ladies' apparel.

**00:54:56**

**AES:** And that was something—did you see a market for it there, specifically, in Ft. Myers, or did something click and you said, you know, "I come from a family of merchants. This is what I need to do"?

**00:55:03**

**CMI:** No. Actually my husband and I had a supermarket and bakery and deli on Ft. Myers Beach in Florida. And I of course worked in my—in our store. And next door was the Sun Shop, which was this resort-clothing store. And the gentleman—the lady's husband had a stroke, and she needed to sell her store. So she came over and was just telling me this, and so I decided to buy that store. And it was right next door to our grocery store, so it was very convenient.

**00:55:42**

**AES:** All right. Well were any of your other siblings in—did they have stores or [were they] in that kind of business at all?

**00:55:49**

**CMI:** My brothers did. My three brothers all had stores. Ollie had a real nice ladies and gentlemen apparel here in Belzoni. They had children's clothing, too. It was a real nice department store. And my brother, Joseph (Bubba), had a store in Inverness[, Mississippi], and his, too, was a smaller-scale general merchandise. But Buddy had, like, auto parts and tools and things like that. White's. Auto-type things, not clothing.

**00:56:26**

**AES:** Did all of your siblings go to college?

**00:56:27**

**CMI:** No. Actually, I think Hazel did and maybe Sonny, but none of the rest of us went to college. I didn't need to go.

00:56:40

**AES:** Why do you say that?

00:56:41

**CMI:** Because I knew I wanted to be my own boss and have my own business, and I had all the self-confidence in the world.

00:56:53

**AES:** Even being the youngest, huh?

00:56:55

**CMI:** I think that's why I had the self-confidence—confidence, because I can remember Daddy saying all my life, “God bless my baby, you know.” [*Laughs*] I really—I had a lot of self-confidence. And when I came back to Belzoni and wanted to create a business for myself—and I needed a home for myself, so I bought the old funeral home because I could have an apartment upstairs and have my restaurant downstairs. And it was a tearoom-type restaurant. And my brother, Ollie, said, “Why in the world would you buy the funeral home?” And, of course, now, years later, I have made apartments over there, and I laughingly said to him, “People are just dying to live there.”

00:57:42

**AES:** Now tell me what year it was that you bought the funeral—funeral home and opened the tearoom.

00:57:47

**CMI:** I think it might have been like [19]87 or '88, somewhere in there.

00:57:53

**AES:** Okay. And your mother was really getting recognized in the [19]70s for her work, but this—this really continued on?

00:58:02

**CMI:** Oh, yes. From the time Mama got the national recognition from the Smithsonian [Institution] and she was written up in magazines and in books and on TV and this and that, the Department of Tourism, we were just on the tour circuit and we had tour buses that came. My sister, Joy, lived here in the big house, and Mama had built a little studio out back that she moved into with her clutter, she said. And people would come unexpectedly, but then they started making appointments. And then they needed a place to have lunch, and there would be fifty people on the bus, you know.

00:58:43

So it—it just was the thing to do.

00:58:48

**AES:** So how did you go about doing that—creating a menu and figuring out what kind of food you would serve? And—and also, share what that was.

00:58:54

**CMI:** Well I just decided to serve catfish, first of all, because this was the Catfish Capital of the World. And all my favorite things, tearoom-type things that I thought ladies would enjoy, because predominantly there were ladies on these tours, and so I did not have butter beans and cornbread. No, it was a tearoom-type restaurant, and the people in Belzoni didn't quite understand what that was—especially the farmers. They—they didn't understand [why] you don't have pot roast and potatoes and gravy and so on.

**00:59:36**

**AES:** So how did—how well did that do, and how long did you maintain that?

**00:59:39**

**CMI:** Well I operated that about two years, and then I leased it to two ladies for a year. And then, when their lease was up, I just decided—well, I had remarried, and I decided to make apartments there.

**00:59:59**

**AES:** And what was the name of the—the tearoom when it opened?

**01:00:03**

**CMI:** The Delta Restaurant.

**01:00:05**



**AES:** So tell me—tell me some of the reactions of the people who would come visit during those days—reactions to your mother and her work and to the tearoom—and then to also the last name Mohamed, if that's not too much to ask in all one—one question.

**01:00:22**

**CMI:** No. Of course the name Mohamed, our name—Daddy's name was Hassan Mohamed Shuman, and his name was transposed as he came through Ellis Island, giving him the last name of Mohamed. And that is how that came about. And people have always asked, "What kind of name is that, Mohamed?" And so you—I tried to explain as best that I could.

**01:00:54**

And—but as far as their reaction to Mama's work, the tours and all, they loved it. They loved it. And, of course, Mama's work here in her pictures have a lot of the Middle East background because when Daddy was sick, Mama read to Daddy, and he loved the *Arabian Nights*. And so, of course, that's the stories of Scheherazade. And so on Mama's pillowcases and sheets that she had for daddy's sick bed, these are all Scheherazade [a Persian queen and the narrator of *Arabian Nights*]. And so some of them are framed. But, getting back to people's reaction about Mama's work, they're all charmed because people can relate to Mama's work because it starts with very primitive-type work, and her background in Mississippi—rural Mississippi—and—and everybody seems to enjoy it. Still, to this day, they do enjoy it. And it's like stepping back into time because this house is furnished just like Mama furnished it. When I moved into this house, I didn't move a thing. I dust or have people come and dust, but I don't—I—I hadn't changed a thing.

**01:02:30**

**AES:** And you have so many beautiful carpets throughout the home. I wonder if anyone—any of them were brought back from their trip to—to Lebanon.

**01:02:37**

**CMI:** No. No, actually, after Daddy died, Mama started creating her own museum because people were beginning to come. And she wanted it to be furnished very nice. And so she bought a few things from antique stores that she loved—pieces of furniture—but a lot of this furniture was here when I was growing up, and some of this furniture belongs to my sister, Joy. When she moved here, she brought her furniture and, of course, she has died, and so it has all remained here.

**01:03:12**

**AES:** Now I wonder about, you know, your mother receiving people in her private home and— and what that meant to her, being recognized for something. I know in—in one of the things I read—I'm sorry I keep confusing what information I read—but her talking about how nobody ever told her she did a good job raising eight children, but when she started making these memory pictures, people started, you know, congratulating her and really admiring her talent, and what that meant to her later in life to have people coming to her doorstep to—to meet her and see her work.

**01:03:40**

**CMI:** Well Mama was a wonderful mother. She really was. And she was very intelligent because she studied with each one of us, all eight. So you—eight-times the subjects, you can imagine what you can absorb. And Mama loved history; she really did. And, as you could tell,

she was a very intelligent person. But she never—after she got the national recognition, it never changed a hair on her head. She was always sweet and gentle, and she just could not believe that her work was so valuable.

**01:04:21**

**AES:** And what did you, as children, think about the work that she was doing and her recognition for it?

**01:04:30**

**CMI:** Well, I don't really think that my brothers realized what it was all about, you know. Just like Mama is going to Jackson for an auction or something, and I—they didn't come. They didn't participate. They—they really were not interested. But my sisters, of course, it would have just been Hazel and Joy and I, the three of us, because the other two sisters had died by the time Mama got her recognition. And Joy was—she retired from the State Board of Health at—after thirty-five years or whatever and literally moved into the house to help Mama with her tours and to take her to other towns to exhibit her work.

**01:05:22**

And—and, of course, Hazel lived in Alamo, California, and still does. And she would come when she could to visit, but Joy truly was the one that was the most help with Mama's career. And Joy's husband, Jim, is the one that really started having cards made from Mama's pictures, you know, and the [Mississippi Department of] Archives [and History] printed the first book, and just one thing led to something else. But people would come to visit our home and want to buy something. Well, all we had would be the little note cards, and so that was just really wonderful.

01:06:07

But they were able to do three limited-edition prints, which we still have. And the last picture Mama made, *The Homecoming—Happy Homecoming*—was—she was watching the Desert Storm war on television. And so we have a big picture of that, but that is not a limited-edition print, but it is honoring the servicemen as they're coming home from war. And isn't it ironic that we're still doing the same thing?

01:06:36

**AES:** Isn't it, though. I wonder if we could walk in that—that bedroom where there are so many pictures and just kind of walk around and talk about them a little bit informally.

01:06:45

**CMI:** Sure. Would you like to start in the room with the pictures Mama started with?

01:06:48

**AES:** Oh, yes. Yes, by all means.

*[Interviewer and subject walk into the west bedroom at the front of the house]*

01:06:53

**CMI:** These—when Mama first started making her pictures, she made them about the size of a quilt block because she was going to make a memory quilt. And these are the pictures that she started making. And, as you see, she quilted them, but she never really sewed them together because she kept having wonderful little ideas and memories and so on. So these are her very first pictures.

01:07:20

**AES:** Well and I—are there any reproductions of these? I don't recall ever seeing these anywhere.

01:07:25

**CMI:** No, I don't think so. I don't. Here's Mittie cooking on the old woodstove. And Mama didn't have a picture of her wedding dress, so she made one, and she said soon, she felt like—like the little old woman that lived in the shoe. And there, here were are, our pets and things that we had. And then there's school days and college days. And then Mama made the picture of herself and Daddy. And Mama was a heavy woman, and she saw how big she looked in that big picture, and she said, "It's my needle and my thread, and I'll never make myself that big again." So you will see pictures of Mama slender, but Mama was never slender.

01:08:05

And then the trip to Lebanon, going back to the Old Country in 1949, they cruised over [on a ship] and then flew home.

01:08:10

**AES:** And then would that be your grandparents in the top right square?

01:08:13

**CMI:** No, that's the way she thought that she and Daddy would look in 1986, had they been living on Social Security and dividends.

01:08:25

**AES:** Oh, I see. I couldn't make out what it said underneath there. [Stitched at the bottom is "Social Security and Dividends."] That is hilarious.

01:08:27

**CMI:** Uh-huh. Right, right. And this picture is one of the ones that toured with SITE, the Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibit—promoted Mama's work.

01:08:38

**AES:** Wow, these are wonderful. So do you know when and how she made the jump from the quilt squares and—and to this, just the strict embroidery?

01:08:47

**CMI:** Well, actually, Mama kept having such wonderful little ideas and memories that she would draw it off on paper and then she would transfer that picture with carbon paper onto fabric. And then she would embroidery and appliqué because with the appliqué, it moved real quickly. Like this picture right here is basically appliqué and then these—this is all stitches. That's a backyard scene. This is one of the first pictures that Mama made. And you see she didn't sign it or date it or anything. She had no idea that anybody would ever see her pictures.

01:09:32

**AES:** Uh-hmm. And so, you know, these being memory pictures and her capturing, you know, specific memories that she wanted to—to keep and have and hold, were there ever many photographs taken during her younger years or of you as a family growing up?

01:09:49

**CMI:** Oh, yeah. We had lots of pictures. We had an old Polaroid camera, and we just have albums full of holidays and memories and so on and backyard eating watermelon and that sort of thing and—and Mama, of course, and Daddy in their younger days.

01:10:10

But this [photograph] is Mama when she was sixteen—excuse me, when she met Daddy. See how beautiful she was? And this [photograph] is Ollie and Hazel, of course, on the front porch in Shaw before they moved to Belzoni. And then my brother Buddy and his wife, they were in love from the time they were little children. And he just died just a couple of years ago. And these pictures are reproductions of the—the lithographs, pictures of the picture that she made and donated. And this is the one that hangs in the Smithsonian. It is the picture that was on the cover of the bicentennial program book, and it is of all the artists from Mississippi.

01:11:00

**AES:** Uh-hmm. Tell me about these two paintings of the storefront that are over here. And what room are we in, by the way?

01:11:05

**CMI:** Oh, well, we call this the Gold Room simply because it has gold curtains and the—the bedspread and all but we—and the carpet. We just call it the Gold Room. But these pictures were painted by our sister, Sonny. She was very artistic, and she died of lung cancer years ago. But this is Daddy watching Mama dress the window, and that is exactly how he stood with his hands

behind him. And this picture on the left, as you see, Daddy is standing out in front of the store, talking to some of his customers.

**01:11:44**

**AES:** Uh-hmm. Wow. So what year are—are some of these first quilted squares? Do you know what—?

**01:11:54**

**CMI:** Well, Mama started embroidering in 1965 when Daddy died, uh-hm, and my brothers would come over every Sunday afternoon about three o'clock and drink coffee with Mama, and they'd talk about their businesses and their stores. And she'd talk about hers, and then she'd show the boys what she was working on, her little memory pictures. And they'd laugh about her pictures and then say, "Oh, Mama, you ought to make a picture of this" or "you ought to do that" or "remember when so-and-so did this?", really inspiring her and encouraging her to go on with her—her new hobby.

**01:12:26**

And she was not lonely when she was working on the pictures. She said when she—after Daddy died, she was busy in the store, so the days were fine. It was at night when she would come home to this empty house. She felt so lonely. And that is when she started embroidering. And then she could hardly wait to get home at night to get on to her nightlife, she called it.

**01:12:47**

**AES:** What year did the family move to this home?



01:12:50

**CMI:** Into this house? In 1943. I was six months old.

01:12:55

**AES:** And tell me about—do you know anything about the quilt square that is their first date?

01:12:59

**CMI:** No, not really. I don’t think that was anyone in particular. Mama was just capturing the moment there. But we had a drugstore here Belzoni called Turner’s Drugstore, and it had a little soda fountain and it looked like that, you know, tile on the floor and so on. You’d go down and get a milkshake. That’s how you spent your first date. *[Laughs]*

01:13:23

**AES:** And now Mittie, who is in the quilt square next to the first date, when did she pass?

01:13:28

**CMI:** She died when I was ten years old. That would have been in 1952.

01:13:33

**AES:** Hmm. So she never got to see any of her life captured in stitchery that your mother—?

01:13:38

**CMI:** No, no, Mama never did any of this handwork until 1965.

01:13:45

**AES:** Hmm. All right. And then we have some photographs on this other wall of her actually working on some pieces.

**01:13:50**

**CMI:** This is the *Sacred Harp Singing*. This is the first picture that Mama made and sent to the Smithsonian to see if she would qualify to be a participant in the Folk Life Festival of 1974, honoring Mississippi. And so she's sketching it out there, embroidering there, and then this is a limited edition of that picture. And, of course, mama remembered the Sacred Harp singing as a child. She remembered attending the all-day singings and dinner on the grounds with Granddaddy, but she remembered how horrible the music was. She said it was more for the singer than it was the listener because it was like a chant. They literally sang the Fa-So-La, and, you see, she has the singer sitting in a square and the listener is off to the side. But she said the dinner on the grounds was what was so wonderful.

**01:14:41**

**AES:** Uh-hmm. And I remember reading, maybe it was in Bill Ferris's book [*Local Color*], her—her describing some of the personalities of some of the characters in this piece, and the boy who just can't wait to get his hands on the dinner and the person sneaking a drink behind the tree.

**01:14:54**

**CMI:** That's it. Right here. Well in all of Mama's pictures, every character has a personality and speaks in all of her pictures. And we children are in all of Mama's pictures, too—the eight of us. We might be limbs or leaves or twigs or blades of grass, but we're usually in her pictures in some way.

01:15:17

**AES:** Can you point out an example of where that's true and—?

01:15:20

**CMI:** Well let me show you in this other room one that's very clear.

*[Interviewer and subject walk across the hall and into the bedroom on the east side of the front of the house.]*

01:15:25

**AES:** Okay. This is your father's room, you say? Okay.

01:15:30

**CMI:** It is. See right here? This picture, Mama called it *A Dream*. When she started having people come on tours, she built her little studio out back and literally moved herself and her clutter out there, and, that way, she could keep the main part of the house neat and clean all the time. And anyhow she called it *A Dream*, and, you see, she's asleep under the trees, and the trees have smiling faces and a Chihuahua is in an orchestra, and here came a band of ants and the birds had a nest, and the spider had a web and the man in the moon was so jealous, he crawled down to join the fun. But, see, here we are, five pink birds and three blue birds.

01:16:12

**AES:** Huh. I've never seen that one reproduced either that I can think of. That is really spectacular. I love that one a lot.

01:16:20

**CMI:** It is. And she had a great imagination. Of course, we grew up before television, so it was only storytelling. And Daddy, of course, had stories from his country, like we have fairytales and nursery rhymes here. But all of his stories had morals. For instance, this picture right here is about an old man on his death bed. And he had eight children. And he told his oldest son to bring him nine sticks. And he did and he said, “Now take one stick and break it,” and he did. And he said, “Now hold all eight sticks together and break them.” And he tried and couldn’t. And Daddy said, “Let that be a lesson: you eight children stick together and nobody can break you.”

01:17:11

**AES:** Tell me about this small square picture.

01:17:14

**CMI:** Okay. Well this—Mama said that’s the reason that babies wore long dresses, so if the stove was hot and the Mama had to go out to see about the wash, she could put the coattail under the bed post and give the baby a toy, and it wouldn’t get burned. But if we did that today, it would be child abuse.

01:17:33

**AES:** That is a wonderful image, though, and the stitchery is so dense in that, really blocks of—solid blocks of color.

01:17:39

**CMI:** Uh-hmm, it's beautiful. It is. And this was another picture that toured with SITE. And, of course, Mama, on the back of the store—see how thin she is? And then Daddy is bartering, exchanging chickens for shoes there.

**01:17:54**

**AES:** And that picture reminds me, too, I wanted to ask you about the water pump behind the store.

**01:17:57**

**CMI:** Right. Well [*Laughs*] people would come from the country, and they would use our water hydrant behind the store and fill their containers up to take back to their house, and Daddy let them do that—his customers.

**01:18:16**

**AES:** Tell me about this—drying—it looks like drying your underwear by a woodstove—picture.

**01:18:23**

**CMI:** Oh, well, actually this was a picture that Mama said really happened. It was about—I don't think we ought to talk about that picture on this because it's a little bit—

**01:18:37**

**AES:** Okay. [*Laughs*]

01:18:38

**CMI:** —risqué and I wouldn't want them to think Mama was risqué. But this is definitely what that was, warming by the fire.

01:18:46

**AES:** Okay. Okay.

01:18:47

**CMI:** And this is one of Mama's drawings. See how beautiful it is? It's—it is one of her patterns that she drew out, and she actually colored it in to see what colors she wanted to use. And it was one of the pictures that she donated, so I don't have the original picture here. But we have all of Mama's patterns of every picture that she has—the drawings.

01:19:13

**AES:** And what would she have used to—to color that in? Is that paint or marker? I can't tell?

01:19:19

**CMI:** Those are just little pencils, uh-hmm. And then this was a song, *To Reach the Soul of an Invalid*, about the Kuna Indians in Panama. She saw that picture in *National Geographic* magazine, and so she tried to give them personalities and clothing and so on.

This was our trip to Switzerland. My husband and I were in the grocery business in Florida, and it was the year that both of our mothers were seventy years old. They went with us on our trip. We stayed at the Palace Hotel in Lucerne, and we had lunch on the Rhine River. And those are all of those grocers and their wives with the names on the flags at the top and at the

bottom. And, you know, Switzerland is Heidi and her grandfather’s country and William Tell and his daddy’s land. And the Black Forest in Germany is Hansel and Gretel’s country.

**01:20:16**

And we saw Mount Titlis and the cog train and the covered bridges and all of the historical sites that there were to see. And see in the right-hand corner? See the stork delivering a puppy? Well anyhow, Mama’s dog had a puppy while they were gone, and she named that dog William Tell.

**01:20:36**

**AES:** That’s so wonderful. How long would it take her to do something like that, a large detailed—?

**01:20:40**

**CMI:** She would work weeks and weeks and weeks, but she might have two or three others going at the same time. So she didn’t just finish one before she started another one.

**01:20:51**

**AES:** And she did this pillowcase, I imagine?

**01:20:54**

**CMI:** She did. That’s the men smoking *Our Daily Pipes* and it was just one of the little Middle East background pictures that she had. We had *Our Daily Pipes* in this case here, but, after Daddy died, we gave our brothers some of Daddy’s things.

01:21:12

**AES:** Hmm. Are there any treasures in that case that we need to talk about?

01:21:18

**CMI:** Well this [picture] was Daddy's first store in Shaw, Mississippi. Daddy standing here and Dave Homod here, and you can see the type merchandise that they carried and all.

01:21:31

**AES:** Wow, yes, quite a lot of inventory there.

01:21:32

**CMI:** Yeah.

01:21:34

**AES:** Wonderful to have that photograph. Oh, and his certificate from Ellis Island?

01:21:40

**CMI:** Uh-hmm, that's the Immigrant Wall of Honor, you know, when they built that and all the names were there, and I took my children and we did see his name there.

01:21:53

**AES:** And what are your—these things in this corner here under the monogram H.M.?

01:22:00



**CMI:** Well that’s the handkerchief, of course, and then these were, like, little cases that you keep your money in, you know, little carrying cases.

**01:22:08**

**AES:** Did your mother embroider that handkerchief?

**01:22:10**

**CMI:** No.

**01:22:12**

**AES:** No?

**01:22:14**

**CMI:** No, I don’t think so.

**01:22:15**

**AES:** All right. We’ll pass through to this next room.

***[Interviewer and subject walk into the adjacent bedroom.]***

**01:22:21**

**CMI:** Now this is Mama’s room, and this is the last picture we had made of Mama before she got sick, and she was really beautiful inside and out. And this is Mittie and Mama and me, of course, and Mittie and me is in the center. But that could be any one of us because Mittie raised us all. And then, of course, Mama and Daddy.

**01:22:40**

Now this is the last picture Mama made before she died. 1991. This was honoring the service men when they were coming home from war.

**01:22:55**

**AES:** Wow, just so much to look at. I'm kind of overwhelmed, but every—I mean these pictures are so wonderful to see in person and I really love—I have to tell you, the one of the bath, the picture of the bathroom—.

**01:23:04**

**CMI:** Isn't that sweet? When we first moved into this house, we only had one bathroom. And Mama said she just wasn't—who to be upset with, the one crying to get on the pot or the one that had sat on it too long.

**01:23:18**

**AES:** And here we have some of the pictures we were talking about earlier, the stork and the new baby that are about you that are—.

**01:23:27**

**CMI:** Right. Now these pictures that are framed in the blond frames were the ones that the Smithsonian chose to travel with SITE, the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibit promoting—promoting Mama's work, and I'm happy to say that these are my pictures because they are about me. *[Laughs]* And our picture show here in Belzoni at the Crescent Theater, you see, there we are on the front row of the picture show. And then Mittie here with her switch. The eight of us at

play—things children did before television like fly kites and jump ropes and build forts and chase chickens. We even read books.

01:24:08

**AES:** [*Laughs*] Imagine that. And I noticed that in this picture at the top, *The Girl with the Iron Hand*, that the border there is—is grapes with grape leaves.

01:24:14

**CMI:** Right. Well and—and, again, that’s one of Daddy’s stories that he told us from his country, “The Girl with the Iron Hand,” and what that is—is a girl—little girl that was born and she had to have an artificial hand, but Daddy called it an iron hand.

01:24:31

**AES:** So I guess it’s—it’s easy to say that the pictures about you would be your favorites. Is that true?

01:24:34

**CMI:** Of course. Of course. And all of these scrapbooks and albums are filled with news—newspaper clippings and letters that Mama received in her lifetime. My sister made those and put them together. And this is one of Scheherazade’s stories here; it’s a pillowcase that we framed that part. And Cora came to work for us after Mittie died, and so Mama has her an African queen there.

01:25:04

**AES:** Hmm. So what is—what is the response to and the popularity of your mother's work now? Has it maintained—her popularity maintained [itself]? Do you still get a lot of visitors here at the museum?

**01:25:15**

**CMI:** Oh, we do. Yes, in the spring and in the fall, but mostly in the spring when our azaleas are blooming all around town, we—we have lots of tour buses that come—big groups.

**01:25:25**

**AES:** And you host them all, I imagine.

**01:25:26**

**CMI:** I do. I do. My daughters help me. And we enjoy it. When we have fifty people on a bus, we'll divide them, and Amy will take twenty-five and I'll take twenty-five, and Mary is just like the—she walks around to assist people that have not stayed with the groups.

**01:25:47**

**AES:** Now when you—when you guide people through the house and you—you share your mother's story, how much is—how much of that is about your father's Lebanese heritage? Is that part of the narrative that you share?

**01:25:57**

**CMI:** A little bit. A little bit. Because I literally tell the story of how Mama and Daddy met and then the pictures that have Daddy in it, I talk about Daddy, but most of these pictures are

historical things. This picture right here the year, that Jimmy Carter was elected President of the United States, we, as a country, were invited to go to Russia to tell them about agriculture in America. And of all the artists in the United States they chose Mama's picture for the cover of the book. And that's called *Reflections*. That's early settlement Mississippi. The spring creek water was so clear the animals could—could see their own reflection in the water. And the only thing that dated the picture is it was made the year that Elvis Presley sang about his dog, Old Blue [who is illustrated in the scene].

**01:26:58**

**AES:** Wonderful. Well, tell me about this picture with the book.

**01:27:02**

**CMI:** Oh, now that's the credit book at our store. And Mama said she felt like the credit book would swallow her whole, some days. And you see on one side of the page it's the good accounts, and on the other side it's the drags, slow pay. *[Laughs]*

**01:27:22**

**AES:** Oh, my goodness. And this is your mother's family, yes?

**01:27:25**

**CMI:** That's her family tree. When Mama started doing her genealogy, she wanted to get her DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] papers, and, you know, you have to establish Revolutionary War of Patriots, and it's hard to just prove one line. Well Mama has about twelve lines now. And these were all of her family, the children of Wally Wright and Mariah Cartlidge that married in 1851. And Mama could tell from the wills that she ordered that the Cartlidge

family has—was more wealthy than the Wright family, so she gave them four horses and the Wrights, only two.

**01:28:04**

**AES:** Hmm. And then below both of those we have your family tree on the—the *Cedar of Lebanon*.

**01:28:10**

**CMI:** Right. Now Mama did that. That was her—her design.

**01:28:14**

**AES:** And Mohamed over there, the name.

**01:28:17**

**CMI:** Right, coat of arms, you might say, uh-hmm.

**01:28:20**

**AES:** So it’s just wonderful to be in this room. I just love this work so much. It’s fabulous, a great, great story that your family has.

**01:28:28**

**CMI:** You asked about the grandchildren.

**01:28:29**

**AES:** Yes, ma’am.

**01:28:30**

**CMI:** Now these are the nineteen grandchildren here [in the hallway in the middle of the house, where all of their photographic portraits hang].

**01:28:33**

**AES:** Oh, my goodness, all framed portraits in this middle hall.

**01:28:38**

**CMI:** Right. Now these—and it’s by age of my brothers and sisters. Ollie’s six children and Hazel had two and Sonny had two and Joy one; Bubba had two, June had one, Buddy had three, and then these are my two girls.

**01:28:55**

**AES:** Wow. Wow, surrounded by family. So did all of your siblings stay in the Delta? I mean, you moved to Fort Myers eventually, but how did that work out?

**01:29:03**

**CMI:** Well Sonny’s husband, Foy Dismukes, worked for Smith Bakery. He was Comptroller of Smith Bakery in Mobile, Alabama. They lived there, and her two children still live in that area. And then Hazel lives in Alamo, California. Her husband worked for Foremost McKesson out of the New York office and they were sent to—to San Francisco. And anyhow, she still lives in that area.

01:29:32

**AES:** And you and Hazel are the only surviving children?

01:29:37

**CMI:** Right. And in here, these are pictures that Mama made and donated here.

01:29:44

**AES:** Okay. And this would be—this would be the dining room we're in?

01:29:45

**CMI:** This was our dining room. This is where Daddy was carving the sheep. [*Laughs*] And as you look out the door, here that's Mama's little studio that she moved into and made most of the pictures in that studio.

01:30:00

**AES:** And did she call it a studio at the time?

01:30:02

**CMI:** We call it the little house.

01:30:05

**AES:** And now, here on the dining room table, instead of a sheep, we have reproductions of a lot of her work and the wonderful book *My Life in Pictures*, which is great. And we're not going to get a peek at the kitchen because it's being remodeled.



01:30:19

**CMI:** It is, and I'm sorry. It's just disarray, but it's—but I want you to come back and see it. We had some water damage, and so, as you see, our ceiling has got to be replaced. And so anyhow, I just want it to be seen at its best.

01:30:35

**AES:** Okay. Well we've visited for a long time, and I definitely want to be selfish and have time to look at all these pictures, and I don't want to keep you more—longer than you have time to share with me. But might there be anything that you want to—a thought you want to leave us with or something I didn't ask you about that you want to make sure to add?

01:30:52

**CMI:** Well, we've never really had the money to advertise and promote Mama's work. It's all been word of mouth, really. But I'd love to have people come and see Mama's things. But they just have to call ahead of time because I don't stay home all the time.

01:31:09

**AES:** I know you're the—the realtor for the county, too, you told me. *[Laughs]*

01:31:11

**CMI:** That's right, slim pickings. *[Laughs]*

01:31:13

**AES:** Well now and you mentioned, too, when we spoke on the phone, that there's no place to have good Lebanese food or Middle Eastern food around here. Have you ever thought about doing that?

**01:31:23**

**CMI:** No, I—in Clarksdale, the Rest Haven on the highway is *the* best, you know, and it is the closest. But I don't really think that the people in this area would appreciate the work that goes into the preparation of the Lebanese food, the stuffing and the rolling and all of that, because it has to be done by hand.

**01:31:47**

**AES:** Do you eat at the Rest Haven very often?

**01:31:48**

**CMI:** When I'm that way I do. [*Laughs*] I sure do.

**01:31:53**

**AES:** All right. Well Mrs. Ivy, thank you so much for spending time with me and sharing your family's—

**01:31:55**

**CMI:** You're welcome.

**01:31:56**

**AES:** —story. I appreciate it.

**01:31:57**

**CMI:** Oh, you’re welcome, and you’ve been so sweet.

**01:32:00**

**[End Carol Mohamed Ivy Interview]**