

# Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978

## Fresno Historical Society

### Ollie Rosetta King

Ollie Rosetta King was interviewed on August 11, 1977 at her mother's home in Fresno, California. King was born on July 20, 1918 in Fresno to Lantha and William Hamilton. King says that her parents came to Fresno in 1916 when they finally found better working conditions in the Valley. King explains how the work and school conditions were much better in Fresno than where her parents had migrated from. King attended Edison High School and she recalls that during her time there, she experienced segregation and eventually left to attend Fresno High. King tells a story about when she won a junior tennis cup at ten years old. After graduating high school, King went on to work at a black grocery store in west Fresno.

King recalls that the Fresno community thought of Dr. Henry Wallace as a very good doctor, and that everyone was upset when he was sentenced to prison. King states that she has been a member of the Democratic Party, but she did not take on an active role in politics other than voting. King says that black people in Fresno played a lot of baseball in Roeding Park for recreation. King recalls the Raisin Day Parade and how a Raisin Queen was picked every year for the parade. King does not remember there being any segregation or seating arrangements on Fresno's public transportation.

King says that the "ghetto" in Fresno consisted of several races, and that it was not only black people living there. King remembers that when the attack on Pearl Harbor took place, she reacted in horror and that other people in the community reacted similarly. She also says that the internment of the Japanese people was one of the most horrible things that had ever happened. King claims that she did not think the NAACP was very effective in its earlier years. She talks about "June Tenth Day" which is a celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. King says that she left Fresno in 1952 with her husband to go to Los Angeles because there were better job opportunities there. King stayed in Los Angeles until returning in 1975 to stay with her mother. King says she appreciated the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's and she wishes that she had the courage to join in on the marches. King recalls a white police officer from West Fresno who treated the black community horribly by talking badly to them and kicking them.

Interviewer: Vivian J. Jones

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FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

INTERVIEW WITH OLLIE ROSETTA KING

AUGUST 11, 1977

Today is August 11, 1977. I, Vivian J. Jones, am interviewing Mrs. Ollie Rosetta King, a black senior citizen, at her mother's home in Fresno, California.

JONES: Mrs. King, what is your full maiden name?

KING: Ollie Rosetta Hamilton.

JONES: When were you born?

KING: I was born July 20, 1918, in Fresno.

JONES: What were your parents' names?

KING: My mother's name is Lantha Payne Hamilton. My father's name was William Benjamin Hamilton.

JONES: When did they come to California?

KING: They came to California in 1916.

JONES: Do you know why they came to California?

KING: Yes, they lived in several states trying to find better living conditions for their family. This is why they migrated from North Carolina, to Ohio, to Oklahoma, to the State of Washington, and then to California.

JONES: Why did they pick Fresno?

KING: Well, when my dad came and found the good working conditions, so he thought. One, there weren't as many whites living here, southern whites. He decided to settle here.

JONES: What did your parents do for a living?

KING: My father worked at the railroad; he was an engine repairman. My mother was first a housewife, and then became a domestic worker. My dad used to work at the railroad office. It was called the rail yard, not office. The railroad yard is where he was a repairman. He had to go into the engines, when they were hot. He found out that things weren't quite what he had thought, as when he first came here. There was prejudice and the man, the foreman, was a very prejudiced person, and dad didn't like him. And he worked with him as long as he could. When he couldn't stand the prejudice

and discrimination any longer, dad quit. But after he quit, he went back to the job, and really gave him a good lacing out. After that, he then decided to do what he used to do in North Carolina. He worked as a garden e r for the Vanderbilt estate back there. So he became a gardener, working on his own. He bought a little Model "A" Ford, and with the help of some of his old friends, they made a little body to the back. Made a little pickup truck, it would be called today. He started doing yard work for himself. And that is how he earned his living until his death. My mother was basically a housewife. The conditions were so, that she could not keep things going in the family and stay at home. Dad did not want mother to work. That was one of the things he hated worst then anything on earth, for his wife to have to go out and work in the white kitchens, as he said. Because he didn't want her to do it. He couldn't earn enough money to support the family; so mother went out and started doing house work. I think she told me fifty cents an hour, or even less, I am not quite sure. But the wages were very low then. That is how she helped dad to earn a living. Plus we were children, we would go out in the summertime, pick figs, cut grapes, apricots and anthing we could do to help towards earning money for school clothes, school books, and whatnot.

JONES: Do you know if the living conditions were better here than they were from the places which your parents migrated from?

KING: Yes, basically I would say that they were. Because when mother was able to work here, when she wouldn't have probably found anything to do back from where they came. Dad was able to make more money here working for himself. And then we children were able to help during the summertime. I think the conditions were somewhat better too here as schools was concerned.

JONES: What school did you attend and when did you start?

KING: Well, I started at Columbia School in kindergarden when I was five years old. But I only went to the kindergarden one-half day. I was transferred from the kindergarden to the first grade. I don't know what I did. I don't know what the teacher saw, but what I remember, I was in the first grade at five years old. Then I was,

what you call skipped. We used to call it skipping in those days. I must have skipped from third grade and then again the fifth grade. Then I went on to Edison, from the seventh to the ninth grade. Then I left there and went to Fresno High School. But, while I was at Edison, one of my main things that I am very proud of, I went up to the finals in a spelling bee. Just before I left Edison, going to high school.

JONES: At Edison High School, was there any segregation in the school at that time? Was the school segregated?

KING: In a sense, I think there was some segregation. That was one of the reasons I wanted to leave Edison and go to Fresno High. I knew that the educational system was not as good as it was in Fresno High. I don't think it was even accredited in those days.

JONES: Did you participate in any school activities, like sports or music or anything?

KING: At Edison, yes. At Edison, I did participate more in sports and more in music than I did at Fresno High. Because there were more blacks at Edison. But I was thinking about my own educational advantages; that was the reason why I wanted to transfer to Fresno High. I left Edison and went to Fresno High School from the tenth grade.

JONES: Did you graduate from Fresno High School?

KING: I graduated from Fresno High.

JONES: What year was that?

KING: In 1935, June 1935, and there was some prejudice there, if I can remember. I participated in some of the sports, but when it came to joining in the social activities, I was never asked to join. I was asked to sing at some of their programs.

JONES: Also, earlier you had mentioned to me that you had won a tennis cup when you were ten years old. Would you care to tell us about that?

KING: Yes, when I was ten years old, I had a very good woman that was interested in my playing tennis at Fink-Smith Playground on the Westside. She saw my potentials in playing tennis; so she encouraged me, and even went so far as to buy me a tennis racket. I'll never

forget her; Mrs. Gentry was her name. And Mr. Raymond L. Quigley, also had a part in my career. They both encouraged me. I entered the tournament, and it was called a junior tennis tournament because of age, and I won that year. I can't recall the exact year, I wish I could. I got the gold cup; there were clippings in the paper. They have since been lost, and the cup has been lost. I am hoping that I can find some traces or be able to find out exactly what year I did win the tournament because I would love to have those clippings.

JONES: Do you recall what newspaper it was written in?

KING: I was thinking it was the Fresno Bee, but it could have been the Republican. Because there was a picture of me in the paper; I remember the caption. I was called a poker face because I didn't have any expression on my face. They couldn't tell if I was winning or losing. I guess it was more fright than anything else. But I would love to find out what newspaper it was.

JONES: What was your occupation after graduation from high school?

KING: My first job was working in a black grocery store in west Fresno owned by Mr. Howard. I enjoyed it, I loved working there. I didn't work too long, oh I guess about six months. Then from there into domestic work. That seemed to be our lot.

JONES: Do you recall a Dr. Henry C. Wallace? Do you know who he was?

KING: Oh yes, very much so, He was one of the first black doctors who ever came to Fresno. And a very good doctor.

JONES: How was he regarded by the community?

KING: I think, as far as I know, very highly; he had a very good reputation. I know he delivered my baby sister, my mother's last child. He was certainly called upon. My dad, he was with my dad on his death. So, as far as I know, Dr. Wallace was considered a very good doctor.

JONES: Do you know if medical help was readily available to blacks before Dr. Wallace came?

KING: No, I don't think it was. I think that was why we were so happy when Dr. Wallace came. Because it wasn't too easy to obtain medical help. I know that the doctor at my birth failed to put down my

name on my birth certificate. And I was told by my mother that he was a drunkard. So we were very happy with Dr. Wallace when he came to Fresno.

JONES: Who delivered you when you were born?

KING: Dr. Blaine. He's the one I just mentioned.

JONES: Are you familiar with anything about Dr. Wallace's imprisonment?

KING: Yes, I understand that this is what he did basically; I think it was an abortion-type thing. This is what I understand, this was why he was sent to prison.

JONES: What was the community's view on the imprisonment of Dr. Wallace?

KING: I think we were all saddened by the fact that a man as great as he, thought of as much as he was, that he would have to spend his last days in prison. I think that we all felt very sad.

JONES: Did you know Mayor Leymel?

KING: No.

JONES: Are you interested in politics and if so when did you become interested?

KING: Well, I voted here when I lived here in Fresno. I guess I became more interested later, as I grew older, and later in life. I didn't take any real active part in politics, but I always did vote.

JONES: What party did you follow?

KING: Democratic. I've always been a Democrat.

JONES: May I ask why?

KING: Well it was something I think that was handed down after Roosevelt, and what he did; so it was sort of a tradition.

JONES: Did most people vote?

KING: When I would go to vote there was a pretty good turnout. I don't say that most, I can't really answer that.

JONES: Do you know a William A. Bigby, Jr.?

KING: Yes, I know him.

JONES: What was his role in the community during the '30's and '40's?

KING: Mr. Bigby was considered sort of as a leader. I think he knew quite a few white politicians. I think this is why he was looked up to, sort of as a leader in Fresno.

JONES: Do you know how Mr. Bigby was regarded in the community?

JONES: What did people think of him generally?

KING: Well, I think we considered him somebody that had a very good job and we were happy for him.

JONES: Did you know Leroy Calhoun?

KING: I certainly did. I knew him quite well. He was a very great musical entertainer. I think everyone knew Mr. Calhoun.

JONES: Did he work in any particular spot, here in Fresno?

KING: Oh yes, he worked at the Rainbow Ballroom for years.

JONES: Have you ever heard of Zapp's Park?

KING: No, I have never heard of that park. Is there another name for it?

JONES: The reason I asked is there was a reference to Roeding Park, and I was curious if you had ever heard of Zapp's Park before?

KING: Never heard of it, but I do know Roeding Park. I know it quite well. Mother used to take us, nearly every Sunday, from church to Roeding Park.

JONES: What did the black people basically do here for recreation?

KING: Baseball, they played baseball, They would go to Roeding Park after church. And we looked forward every year for the Raisin Day Parade because at that time, the blacks always had an entry and they would have a black queen and we would get our part in the parade and be very proud to enter the Raisin Day Parade; that was something we really looked forward to. We had local dances, we had a particular place, I am trying to think of the name, where they used to have Saturday night dances. They were like parties during those days because the community was just small enough that when you went to a dance it was like going to a party. I can't think of the name of the hall, but, anyway, that was something that we looked forward to, going to these dances on Saturday night. That's about all I can think of.

JONES: Have you ever heard of a place called the "Black Broadway"?

KING: No.

JONES: What church did you attend?

KING: The Church of God.

JONES: Where was it located?

In the Eastside of Fresno. I think it was called Washington and Howard. I'm not quite sure, but we used to have to go by street-car and then we would have to walk several blocks after we got off the streetcar. It was quite a distance to go.

JONES: Was the subway running then? Did Fresno have a subway at that time?

KING: Yes, there was a subway running then.

JONES: Where was it located?

KING: On Fresno Street, between G street, I believe and H street.

JONES: Was it an underground subway?

KING: Yes, they used to let us go skating down the subway many times.  
(The pedestrian side)

JONES: Was there any segregation as far as transportation was concerned?

KING: No, I don't recall any seating arrangements, nor in the street-cars and buses later.

JONES: Did Fresno have a black ghetto?

KING: A ghetto, as I termed it, when I was a child. There weren't just blacks, there were poor Italians, Mexicans, Japanese, Chinese, and Armenians. The Italians and the Armenians migrated out of the ghetto, and that just basically left the blacks and Mexicans. But I say, yes, we had a ghetto to begin with, but there were many races to begin with at first.

JONES: How did black men and women, do you remember, how they made their living during the depression?

KING: Yes. From what I can remember, working in the fields, picking cotton, cutting grapes. A few worked in the city yard, on the garbage trucks and some did some hod carrying, construction work. A few, a very few may of had some key jobs, such as working at some drug stores, janitor, basically they were finding what they could. And the women, all that I knew did house work.

JONES: How did the black community react to the attack on Pearl Harbor?

KING: Well, I can remember that I reacted to it with horror, and I think that the rest of the blacks, well, I can't really speak for them, but I am sure that they hated the thought of it too.

JONES: Did the war have any affect of blacks on the Westside?

KING: I know that some of them did migrate to the bay area in the North,



and down to Southern California to work in the naval shipyards. As far as jobs here in Fresno, I can't recall that it really had any affect on the jobs here. Although it may have now because we did, we had some army bases here. So, I am sure that some of the men might of been employed at the army base.

JONES: Well, how did the black community react to the internment of the Japanese during the war?

KING: Well, let me tell you how I reacted to it. I thought it was one of the most horrendous things that had ever happened to a group of people. I remember an incident, I happened to go out to the cemetery at the same time that a group of them were cleaning graves because they knew that they were going to be sent away. They wanted their graves to be taken care of. They were reacting to it with a lot of cheerfulness. It didn't seem to make them bitter. But I thought it was horrible if that was done to a group of people. If it could be done to them, then what would they do to the blacks? That's exactly how I felt about it.

JONES: Was there a NACCP in Fresno?

KING: Yes, there has been one for a number of years, but I really can't pinpoint just when it was started, when it was originated in Fresno.

JONES: How effective was it?

KING: I don't think it was effective. In the earlier years, I don't know how it is now.

JONES: Have you ever heard of "June Teenth Day"? Was it celebrated in Fresno?

KING: I know what it is. It is the Emancipation Proclamation celebration. But we celebrated, as far as I can remember, on the first of January. It was done very quietly in the churches. Now that is my first recollection of that. When I heard of it later, it was called "June Teenth Day". I heard of it being celebrated in other cities around, like Bakersfield, and whatnot. My first knowledge of any observation was on the first of January.

JONES: Do you remember where June Teenth Day originated?

KING: Yes, I understand that the Texans got their Emancipation later, or news of it later. This is why it was celebrated in June.

JONES: Mrs. King, you mentioned your birth certificate. Was there a problem with this document?

KING: Yes, there was. When I had to have my birth certificate--I was living in Los Angeles at the time in regard to my job--I wrote back for it, my birth certificate to the hall of records. They sent me back the document saying the day I was born, where I was born, but there was no name.

JONES: Did you have a problem with this document in correcting it?

KING: Yes, luckily my mother, still living, was able to go down to the hall of records, and verify the fact that I, indeed, had a name and that my name was Ollie Rosetta Hamilton. Then, therefore, duly recorded the fact that I had a name, and was given a name at the time. It was just that the doctor did not record my name. Sacramento sent me the corrected document.

JONES: Were there any black businessmen in Fresno?

KING: Well, let's see, my father had a very small little store.

JONES: Where was it located?

KING: On the end of our property; we had four lots. Right on the corner of F and Eldorado, my dad opened his store. He tried his best to stay in business because he wanted to work for himself. He hated the idea of having to work for anybody. He was so independent. It existed as long as he could, I would say, the late '20's into the early '30's. He struggled along and lasted until he just had to give up. He had given out so much credit that he couldn't go on any longer.

JONES: Was your home always located here on Poppy? Were you always living here on the Westside?

KING: Oh, I was on the Westside, but not always here on Poppy. My mother moved here in '57, but the old home was at 2005 F street. That is where I was born and where my mother lived until 1957.

JONES: Why did you leave?

KING: Mother left because a man came along, a speculator, who knew that they were going to redevelop that part of town, and bought the home.

JONES: Was she paid a high price for her property?

KING: Not really, she wasn't given a fair price. Mother got ten thousand dollars for her house that my dad built, and four lots. I

understand that the property went for thousands and thousands in in that area.

JONES: When did you leave Fresno?

KING: In 1952.

JONES: Why did you leave Fresno?

KING: I moved to Los Angeles with my husband because the opportunities for jobs were better in Los Angeles than in Fresno. While I was there, I went back to school. I went to Los Angeles State University, and graduated from there with a B.A. in education. I taught school in Los Angeles. The first school I taught at was Ritter School, a grammar school in the Watts area.

JONES: How long did you reside in Los Angeles?

KING: From 1952, until I came back here in 1975 to stay with my mother.

JONES: Is there any significant difference in the way blacks were treated between Fresno and Los Angeles?

KING: Yes, quite a bit of difference. My husband got a much better job down there than he had here. The education system was better there than here, also job opportunities. I had no problem at all going to work, as soon as I got out of school.

JONES: What was your husband's name?

KING: Benjamin King.

JONES: What type of work did he do?

KING: He went into industrial photography in Los Angeles. He had a very good position as a plant superintendent.

JONES: Where was he born?

KING: He was born in Oklahoma.

JONES: When did he move to California?

KING: He came to Fresno in 1942.

JONES: How did you react to the Civil Rights Movement in the '60's?

KING: Naturally my reaction was, why should we even need to have civil rights movements, but then I was glad that they were on the move. I thought they were very brave to do the things that they were doing, and I wished I had the courage to join in the marches and sit in on the lunch counters and do what the young people were doing. What was her name, Rosa, the woman that started this action in

Alanta, Georgia with Martin Luther King. It was her courage that really started things. Yes, it was long in coming, but when it came, I was happy for it. Just too bad that the movement just didn't keep going, and that there weren't many more significant things done. Oh yes, there have been changes, and lots of changes, but it seems to me that things are sort of slipping back, and I don't know what it's going to take to make things really come out as they should. Because here we are, all Americans supposedly equal yet we have to have such things as civil rights movements. Why?

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

KING: I cried. I think that all of America cried. I was driving home in my automobile when I heard this announcement about his being shot. I was so horrified I could hardly contunue on to where I was headed. The rest of the night I stayed glued to the televison set, listening to all the news that I could and, as I said, all America cried. I can just now just by thinking of the thought that such a great man lost his life because he was trying. But I think it is something that just had to be, that from him, from his death great things did come. I think that it is something to look back on. From his death, something did happen.

JONES: How did the police force treat the member of the black community?

KING: There is one police officer that really stands out in my memory as a horrible creature. He was located here in West Fresno. He treated blacks with the greatest contempt. He would talk to them horribly. He would even kick them. He did as he pleased and nothing was ever done. Itwas reported, but nothing ever happened as a result of his mistreatment. He did so much of this until a black man took as mush as he could take from him. I don't even remember his name. But, I am sure it's in the records. He was able to get his gun from him, and he almost beat him to death. McCreary - he was almost beaten to death. As a result of this, they removed him from the Westside of Fresno, and the rest of the time he spent behind the desk. He was no longer effective as a police officer because the colored man had really worked him over well. But everybody

hated him. I was glad when that happened.

JONES: The police officer's name was what?

KING: A.B. McCreary.

JONES: Was there any basic reason for officer McCreary's actions as far as it was concerned with black people?

KING: From what I understand, he was a southern white who hated blacks with all of the contempt that a person could hate.

JONES: How did the community regard the incident that this black person had with this police officer?

KING: Well, honey, I can remember what I said: "Hurrah!" I was happy that it happened to him. It should have happened before.

JONES: In the '30's, were there many black people to graduate from Edison High School? Are they now, or were they then predominate members of the community? Do you know any of these people?

KING: Yes, just off hand, I can name some that did graduate and that are now contributing to the community. I can think of one in particular, Dorothy Etheridge, who had her own floral shop, beauty shop and had a beauty school. At one time, she was a member of the city council. Her sister, Addie Mae Berry Williams, who I think is still teaching school. Leonsya Morris Williams, Lula Morris Marzette, her sister—they are still contributing, I'm sure. Claudia Simpson Ayers, who is still teaching school. And I can name others, Naomi Young, who lives in Fresno County, who is a teacher. A younger one, Betty Jewell Thomas, who is a teacher, and I feel that by my graduating from Fresno High School in 1935 as a lone black member of a class of 400, I, perhaps, in a meager way contributed to the development, so maybe others might go on and continue their education. Hopefully, and that my winning the tennis tournament as a youngster, I hope that others have the incentive perhaps to follow or to participate in other sports.

JONES: Mrs. King, thank you so much for your time and effort you have given me for this interview. Is there anything you would like add, before the conclusion of this interview?

KING: Oh, yes, I would like to say that I can think of no other thing that I've enjoyed any more then doing what I've done today.

KING

It is something like the civil rights movement. Coming late, but glad that it came. For us to be able to sit down today, and go over some of the events in my life. Knowing that perhaps I did contribute in some way to the growth of Fresno, is something that I will never forget.

JONES: Thank you, Mrs. King.

"BY MY SIGNATURE, I MAKE THIS TRANSCRIPT AVAILABLE TO RESEARCHERS IN THE FRESNO CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES."

Ollie R. King  
MRS. OLLIE ROSETTA KING, NARRATOR

1-18-78  
(DATE)

Vivian J. Jones  
VIVIAN J. JONES, INTERVIEWER

1-18-78  
(DATE)