

Interviewer:

Well, I'd like to begin by asking you what your full name is and why you were named your name.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, well, my full name is Leonard, L-E-O-N-A-R-D, Bluett, B-L-U-E-T-T. But when I began playing piano around 14, 15, early days of clubs and things, they thought I was older because I was always tall and had a mustache. I changed it to Lennie, in that game. He gave me some sort of a flip name. Lennie, blew it, so that's how it came out. But officially it's Leonard.

Interviewer:

How tall are you?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, 6'5" and shrinking. I think I'm about 6'4" now, but I was 6'5" at one time. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Where were you born and in what year?

Lennie Bluett:

Born right here in Los Angeles, in a place called Jefferson Park, that's West Jefferson, and Western Avenue, in 1919. January 21st, 1919. And the house is still there. I'd drive by because I'd go to church in that area, and I'd drive by once in a while and kind of reminisce. It was my grandmother's house, and it was just sold recently. And I'm sure it must have been sold for probably six or seven, a hundred thousand dollars. My grandfather built that house and probably for a fast a hundred dollars bill in those days. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Do you remember the address?

Lennie Bluett:

Yes. 1660 West 35th Street, right off of Western Avenue.

Interviewer:

And your grandfather built the house, was that your paternal grandfather?

Lennie Bluett:

My paternal grandfather. My maternal grandfather, yes.

Interviewer:

Yeah. What was his name?

Lennie Bluett:

His name is Henry Jones.

Interviewer:

Yeah. When did he come out to California, or had he been here already?

Lennie Bluett:

No, no, no, no, no. The Henry Huntington family brought him out as their gardener, I guess late 18 hundreds, or early 19... Well, whatever, as his gardener, because he had a green thumb. At the house where I was born, he had a lot of dahlias in the front yard, and oh my gosh, beautiful roses and stuff, as I recall as a child. He worked for the Huntington people in Pasadena, Santa Marino, wherever they had their house. I imagine he took care of their gardens there, and they brought him out as a young man. And my grandmother, I think they had just married at that time. Yes.

Interviewer:

What was your grandmother's name?

Lennie Bluett:

Her name was Mamie Jones. And she was a half Cherokee Indian and Black. And she was born and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee. My grandfather was from Georgia. Where they met? I don't know. But they met because they had my mother and my uncles all out here in Los Angeles. So they had just married, evidently.

Interviewer:

So, did you grow up with them in that house?

Lennie Bluett:

Yes, I did. I think my grandfather died when I was around seven or eight, and we lost the house through some business dealings. One of my uncles, my grandmother's son, my uncle, some kind of business dealing. I think he borrowed money on the house, got a mortgage, and because he was in real estate, and we lost the house. And from that time we just sort of moved here, and moved there, and moved, sort of. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Did you attend World War II? Were you in the Army?

Lennie Bluett:

Yes, in the Army. But I didn't have to bivouac and get up early in the morning and march and all that, because I was in the musical side of the thing, organizing quartets and trios to entertain the guys. And I was stationed in Hawaii at Scofield, Scofield Barracks. And I used to take, after the war, got very, very bad, I used to take a little piano around at Tripler General Hospital there, on wheels, the piano was on wheels, and entertained the guys who sadly came back with no arms, no legs, just body laying there, that's all they could do. But a lot of them, not a lot of them, but some of them could even smile. And that was a great thing for me.

Interviewer:

That seems like a very powerful memory for you.

Lennie Bluett:

It was. Yes.

Interviewer:

And I wanted to ask you to elaborate on the power of music in making the soul feel better.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes. Oh, it's a very powerful stimulants, I'm going to tell you. Fortunately, a lot of people, like my brother had a great brother, but he knew nothing. I don't mean knew nothing because he was a policeman, but music, he could take it or leave it. I mean, music hadn't meant nothing to my brother, who was a dear, dear man, and a lovely friend of mine. He was a policeman, but policeman, they think differently than... Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. They're all very pragmatic.

Lennie Bluett:

Very pragmatic. Oh, my God, yes. Yeah. But music has been a whole part of my life, most of my life. And thank God I got the talent that I could play the piano. If I heard a song, I could figure it out without music lessons because my parents wanted to give me music lessons when the teacher would come, and they were paying a dollar and 50 cents in those days. And I wanted to stay the playground and play around the games, robbers and cops and things like that, and I didn't come home to take the lessons. My dad said, "We're paying a dollar and 50 cents for the teacher, and if you're not coming home to take your lessons, we're going to stop the lessons." So they stopped the lessons. But I didn't feel a thing about it, because if I heard a song, I could kind of figure out the chords for myself. Being a stupid child, I should have really got down and learned all the technical things. But I've been fortunate enough to do okay without all that.

Interviewer:

So you learned at 14 that you had a musical ability, or dancing ability. When did you find out that?

Lennie Bluett:

Yes, around there, 14, 15. Yeah.

Interviewer:

How did you find out?

Lennie Bluett:

How did I find out? Because our kids sort of gather around and start in those days, The Eight Spots and groups like that, and The Mills Brothers, well, four or three or four of us would gather in the garage and start harmonizing and so forth. That's how I sort of started out with a quartet. We were called The Four Dreamers. We were dreaming, all right.

And we went into recording studio to do our stuff. And I'm at the piano, and the three guys are standing at the microphone, and the director said, "Lennie, he said, you're too loud with the piano and singing

too. We can't hear your part because the piano's too loud. We have to get a piano player and bring him in, and you stand with the other three guys, little bit better." His name was Al Jarvis, who was one of the big DJs of that day here. He discovered Frankie Lane, which doesn't mean a lot to a lot of people today, but Frankie Lane is still alive. He's got to be 99, or something.

But anyway, the director said, "Do you know anybody that can play the piano? We can't pay him very much." And I said, "Well, I know a guy, and he just got here from Chicago. And I met him, and he might be able to do it. Or I want to do it, but if you can't pay, he'd want some money." He said, "Well, we can pay him 10 or 15 bucks." That was a lot of money. That was around 1935, 1936, something like that. So I said, "I know a guy." I got on the phone and called a friend of mine that I had met, and he came, and he played the piano for the demo that we were doing. I'm standing with the three guys, and it was Nat King Cole. Yes. Nat King Cole. He was glad to get the money.

Interviewer:

Wow!

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Yeah. 10 or 15 bucks. I don't recall how much we paid him, but that was what they paid him.

Interviewer:

What was Los Angeles back then?

Lennie Bluett:

It was a much chancellor time, a much kinder time in a whole lot of ways, believe me. It was better than it is now.

I have to say that I don't have much respect for a lot of the policemen. I have a lot of respect for most of them, but some of them were not very, very kind, especially to Black people. They resented what they were doing, I'm talking about the police, they resented the money they were getting to police people. And if they saw a Black man with a white girl, even though maybe they're just friends, because their music brought them together, they would resent that, because they wanted to be with the pretty white girl. And they were home, married two or three kids, and no end job, or whatever, and they resented that. And several times I got stopped in my car because I had a white person in my car, woman, or we'd just been to breakfast or something, [inaudible 00:10:19] I gave you where I was playing piano. They would follow us.

And most of the time, the girls wanted to get out and walk over to the car and said, "Look, I'm with him because I want to be, he doesn't have a gun on me. He doesn't have a hat pin. He hasn't threatened me. I'm here because I want to be. Now, what is your problem?" But I said, "No, no, no. That would incense them and make them very, very angry. So don't do that. Don't do that."

Interviewer:

I just interviewed Tony Nicholas, who's the son of one of the Nicholas brothers.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, yes. By the way, now that you mentioned that, they just had a... At Debbie Allen Studio.

Interviewer:

Yeah. The Navy Golden Performing Arts Center. Did you go to that?

Lennie Bluett:

I heard about it because Jenny Lagan, one of the dancers that I used to work with Eddie Canter in a movie, they brought her down from Vancouver because she and Harold and Fayette, the Nicholas brothers were very close, and she was at the memorial. And she called me, let me know she's in town, she lives in Vancouver. You saw the article in People Magazine, or didn't you?

Interviewer:

No, I didn't.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh. When Judy Roberts had her twins, that was a People Magazine cover. She was on the cover. Well, they did a thing on Lena Horn, Jenny Lagan, Faye Nicholas, me, several other artists. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. Just blew my mind with all the people that you mentioned who are highlighted in people, and the cover is dedicated to something so unimportant.

Lennie Bluett:

Right. Julia Roberts, twin babies. Julia Roberts, twin babies.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Lennie Bluett:

She's on the cover. And there's a photo of it there. Yeah, you might want to get a copy.

Interviewer:

I will. I will. What high school did you attend?

Lennie Bluett:

Manuel Arts High School, which is still here. And we drove by at, some guys did a thing for On the Air, they want to talk about early days of Hollywood, early days of Los Angeles. And we drove by the old school and went in the sat on the bleachers and talked about the high school.

One of my friends who comes in the coffee shop where I hold office every day, is a former art teacher there. Not when I was going there, but he's a retired art teacher at Emmanuel Arts, and that's how we began talking. And he sits with me most of the time, Peter, Pete, and he's a very nice gentleman.

So I went to Emmanuel Arts, a junior high, and we drove by with a guy, wanted to talk about 30 days, and we drove by there, and it's a magnet school now. And the principal was just closing the school. They had a barbecue because it was a Saturday for the fathers of the children to go there. And she said,

"What are you guys doing with the camera here?" We told them what we were doing, and she said, "Oh, please come in." She took us in. I saw my old homeroom. Oh, my God, my old homeroom.

Interviewer:

Was it as big as you remember?

Lennie Bluett:

No, it looked like a box. It looked like a box. And she took us through the school, and it was so sweet. It was so nice. And it was great.

Interviewer:

What do you remember about high school?

Lennie Bluett:

High school? Oh, high school was sort of a blur, because everybody was hero worshipping the football players. And I didn't play football, I was playing music. And some of the things were pleasant, some were not. I was a great dancer in those days. A lot of Black kids could really, were great dancers. A lot of white kids could dance too, and it wasn't just relegated to Blacks. I mean, a lot of white kids could dance like crazy. But being a musician, I was a good dancer. And one of the white girls in my class asked could she go to the prom with me. Well, I don't know what happened, but word got to the principal that I was going to take her to the prom. And the principal called me into the office. Well, you know the rest of the story.

Interviewer:

What did he say? Or she said?

Lennie Bluett:

She said, Eloise, or whatever the girl's name, "We'd rather you not take her to the prom. And we're requesting that you don't, because it would cause quite problems here at the school." So as a student, and I want to obey, I said, "Oh, well thank you very much. It's not a problem." But then it did something down here, like racial prejudice always did. But that's carried me all throughout my life where when people say you can't, and I say, "Oh, oh, yes, I can. Yes, I will." But in that instance, I didn't want to cause a rumpus in the school. So I elected not to take her to the prom, or even dance with her. And that's one of the things I recall.

I also recall when whites, Blacks started moving in the area around the 76th and Avalon, 76th and Main Street, where Fremont High School is now, and the Black children started going to that school, they hung a Black man, not really, but an effigy, yes, from the flag pole, to scare Black people from buying and sending their children to the school at Fremont, John C. Fremont School, high school. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Do you recall a public reaction to this?

Lennie Bluett:

There was no public reaction. All the Blacks, it was a big article in the Black newspaper, of course, the California Eagle, and the Los Angeles Sentinel about what was happening in the area. And Jack Webb, who was a friend of mine, if you remember Jack Webb from Sergeant, he was a Sergeant Friday in the movies and on radio, he went to Belmont High School locally here in this general area. And Jack and I became friends through jazz, and I introduced him to his wife, Julie London. And we all used to-

Interviewer:

Julie London. Oh, my gosh.

Lennie Bluett:

And her name was Gail Peck, by the way. She was a friend of mine, singer. She wanted to be a singer so bad. But she wasn't singing well in those days. But we were working at a place on Hollywood Boulevard when the war was ended. And we all ran out and jumped on cars and everything, 1945, jumping in convertibles and hugging the driver and everything. But Julie was singing with a little group there. And I was also working the intermissions and things at this place. And she and I became really present. And she had Earl Colbert, the band leader she was dating at that time, came to my first little house that I bought on Western Avenue, a house-warming. But later she married Jack. They had two children, two daughters. And Jack and I became fast friends, and he became very, very famous, as you know.

Interviewer:

Was that the divorce? Because I know he was married a couple of times.

Lennie Bluett:

Jack?

Interviewer:

Yeah. There was one that was really all over the papers. I think it was his first wife.

Lennie Bluett:

Julie was his first wife.

Interviewer:

Oh, maybe it was his second then.

Lennie Bluett:

Probably his second, it was probably his second, because Julie was his first, I believe. Probably the second.

Interviewer:

There were allegations of wife battering.

Lennie Bluett:

Well, I wouldn't doubt that. Jack was a very strange man. He grew up with a very stern father. I used to drive him home and I met his mother. She was a very sweet lady. But his father, I think it came that... I don't doubt that, I didn't know about that, but I can believe it. Yeah.

Interviewer:

What were your parents like?

Lennie Bluett:

Okay. My mother divorced my dad when I was about six, seven... No, five or six. That's when we moved into grandma's house. We lived over here in the [inaudible 00:18:51] park area where I live now at my grandmother. My grandmother had four little cottages over on Occidental Boulevard. And we call that the flats. How my grandmother found this place, I'll never know, because I was just a kid. But it was just a little section. And whites lived all around us. But this particular street and the environs in there, maybe four or five streets this way, and four or five streets this way was sort of Black people. And my grandmother, my mother and father, honeymoon, and one of grandmother's little cottages over there, and I used to drive my daughter by, I said, "That's where your grandmother and father first lived." And she was a sweet old lady.

And after my father and mother divorced and we moved over in Jefferson Park, well, we used to take the Vermont Street car, and then the H car, and two or three other street cars to get to grandma's house. And she wanted to keep in touch with us and she'd make cookies and things. But my dad was always absent, he was never there. That's why I guess today I'm always looking for a father somewhere.

He was a chauffeur for Buster Keaton, the actor. And he would drive Buster Keaton all over the states. They took like a bus, like the Western Avenue bus, or the Hollywood Boulevard bus, and he had the money to do it. And he converted it into two bedrooms, and a galley, and my dad was a great cook, he made the best chili in the universe. And a toilet and shower, like they have today. And he drove Buster all over Canada. And whenever he came back to LA and Buster wanted to reconcile with his family or whatever, dad would bring the bus home of my grandma's house, and my brother and I, we were kind of entrepreneurs, we used to charge the kids in the neighborhood a nickel to come through to the bus and go out the back way and see.

Interviewer:

I would have paid it. That sounds great. Yeah.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Right.

Interviewer:

What was your dad's name?

Lennie Bluett:

Fred. Frederick. Yeah. His name was Fred. And he was like an absentee father in my life as far as I was concerned. Later, when I was about 14, 15, and I started working in clubs and he could see the musical and I started making a few bucks, he kind of wanted to come around because he's losing his eyesight, because he worked for a chemical company. I think the chemical company moving that stuff affected his

eyes. And he finally ended up legally blind. And I used to drive him a couple of times, a week to Vermont and Melrose there, the eye...

Interviewer:

Eye specialist?

Lennie Bluett:

No, not the eye specialist. There is eye...

Interviewer:

Institute? Is there a university there for eyes? Ophthalmology?

Lennie Bluett:

No, no, no. Not a doctor, place where... Braille.

Interviewer:

Oh, the Braille institute.

Lennie Bluett:

Right near Melrose and Vermont. I used to drive him there, occasionally. And occasionally my brother would drive him there. We felt sorry for the old man, but when he died, we just felt it was somebody we knew down the street that died. We had no kind of feeling either one of us, because he wasn't there. He was an absentee.

Interviewer:

When did he die?

Lennie Bluett:

When? He died after I married, because I recall him holding my daughter when she was about one on her first birthday. So he died when she was two, and she was born in 61. So he died around 63, I would say. I lost my mother in 1960. She was only 63.

Interviewer:

Tell me about your mother.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, she was... Wonderful woman. I loved her dearly. She took care of my brother and I, and singles mother would. She had a couple marriages, but they didn't work out. And as I recall, when Bogart came out to California to make Desperate Hours, the film, she went through it, Beverly Agency in Beverly Hills, because she was a wonderful cook. She was a wonderful cook. And she got the job as his cook. I think I recall her telling me, and I'm sure that it was the truth that figure stuck in my head about what she was making. I think it was about \$15 a week. And that would be about 1935, 1936. But you could buy a loaf of bread for 5 cents. You could go to the movies for a dime and have chocolates.

Interviewer:

That's a lot of money for the depression.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes, yes, yes. Yeah. And you could get a couple loaves of bread. But then as she stayed with him, he would elevate her money. But I think she started out \$15 a week cooking for Bogart.

Interviewer:

What was her name?

Lennie Bluett:

My mother? May, Henrietta. Smith was her last name, because her last husband was a Smith. May Henrietta, yeah. And she was very tall and stalwart. That's where I got my height from, I guess. And she was a wonderful cook. Oh, she wouldn't measure anything. She would just go blip, blip, blip, blip, it's done. Bogart and Frank Sinatra loved cornbread. And every time Sinatra would come for dinner, she had to make cornbread for him because Italians, Italians love corn meal, they love the [Italian 00:25:21]. Then I guess my mother's cornbread would remind him of polenta. And he and Bogart were very dear friends until the day that Bogart died.

Interviewer:

What was your favorite meal that your mom made?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, how do you spell anything?

She can take she anything and make it, "Oh, my God." And she can buy what we call the worst part of meat, even though it was tough, and she would do what they do down south, because my grandmother was from the south, and she learned from my grandmother. And what she would do is put a little flower in it, like a round steak, and she would pound it little flower, and then put it in a pan with little water and let that simmer. And they call that smothered steak. And it was like butter when you put it in your mouth. But her macaroni and cheese the kids love today was awesome. And her potato salad. Every time I go to a restaurant, even though they have terrible potato salad, I will order potato salad because of my mom's potato salad. She did something special with that. I don't know what she did.

Oh, she was a wonderful cook. And when Bogart came back from England, he had made something with [inaudible 00:26:57], and he had spent some time in London and he learned the steak and kidney pie. And he had my mother make steak and kidney pie. She hated kidneys, but she did it anyway. She cut the kid kidneys up and put it in with the beef and make steak. But Bogart loved it, because that's a big thing in England, steak and kidney pie.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Lennie Bluett:

But she made great for him. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Bubble and squeak.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Bubble and squeak. Bubble and mash.

Interviewer:

Bangers and mash.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Bangers and mesh. You're right. Yeah.

Interviewer:

How long did she stay with Bogart?

Lennie Bluett:

Almost 30 years.

Interviewer:

So she was with him with Lauren Bacall, too.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, she was with Bacall for 11 and a half years. Prior to that, Mayo Methot, who was a former dancer on Broadway. Yeah. They were married quite a while. When they met, when he met Bacall, she was only 19. He married her at 20 and he was 46 when they married him. Yeah.

Interviewer:

You have one brother?

Lennie Bluett:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Would you tell me about him?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, he was a wonderful guy. He was taller than, 6'7" and a half. And they wouldn't take him in the army when the war first broke because he was too tall. They said, "You might get shot". They wouldn't taken him. But as the war progressed and the men were getting killed and they were short on Army recruits, they finally took him and he went to Germany. And funny story, he told me that the German people, a man would come up to him and say, "Oh..."

PART 1 OF 5 ENDS [00:30:04]

Interviewer:

Do you remember having a favorite teacher?

Lennie Bluett:

In high school.

Interviewer:

Or just in general.

Lennie Bluett:

In general, yes. Mrs. Life, of all people, my homeroom teacher. She was a little old lady that drove an electric car and she used to sit up like this, like a Japanese lady and drive. I think it was an electric car as I recall. But she was very sweet and she used to tell us to stand up straight. Sit up straight, and no matter who you are, walk tall, walk with your shoulders back. That's why I always, I walked like a young man. My brother, and he always was kind of with the shoulders like that, because he didn't want to be tall because they kidded him. They called us spider number one, spider number two, spiders, all arms and all legs in school. So, that affected him, but it made me want to walk tall. Mrs. Life told me, "Walk..." So I did. Mrs. Life. I remember her, and I went to my old homeroom and it looked like the size of my bathroom. Oh, my God. Yeah. 37th and Western Avenue. Yeah, it's still there.

Interviewer:

Before I go into your work history, I want to ask you about your brother. How did he come about becoming an LA PD officer?

Lennie Bluett:

Well, when he got out of the service, he came home from Germany. That's what he wanted to do. He always liked law enforcement, and he was big and he worked sort of private security at the Colosseum whenever they have a big game. And in fact, I have a nice photo of him at the... In fact, it's on my wall there.

Interviewer:

We'll definitely pan it on the camera.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah, he's got his uniform on it and he's... Then he used to go to Catalina when the kids would spring break because they'd go crazy in Catalina. And he used to, as a security officer, would go to Catalina and try to keep the kids in line over there. But, oh, my God, what a job. Oh, I wouldn't want that. And even the kids then. The kids today is awful. But they were bad then. Palm Springs, or when they used to spring break and I had a house in Palm Springs. I wouldn't even go near Palm Canyon Boulevard during spring break with those kids doing everything. But that's how he became a policeman. He just wanted to be in law... And he was very stern and he'd wear a suit, but his tie would either be blue or black, never red, yellow, green. He was just so, that tie-

Interviewer:

Conservative in his-

Lennie Bluett:

Very conservative in everything. He was just that kind of, like a lot of policemen are, but a lot of policemen have a lot like a boiling, boiling, oh, like that guy they caught just recently, they followed home. Did you read about the guy? Oh, they followed the blood trail home. They found the naked woman and-

Interviewer:

Oh, yeah.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes. And he's not a policeman, but he is the law.

Interviewer:

A fire-

Lennie Bluett:

A fire-

Interviewer:

Fire Chief.

Lennie Bluett:

A Fire Chief. Yes. They'd find the trailer of blood from his car to his house. A woman naked at Eagle Rock.

Interviewer:

Eagle Rock, exactly.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. But my brother was a great guy other than that, he'd come in the house. 'Cause my mother lived with me and instead of saying, hi, how's everybody, he would say, what's up? And go to the fridge and take the milk and drink from the, I say, Hey man, listen, this is my house. You don't go to my refrigerator and drink out of my, get a glass.

Interviewer:

Was he older or younger?

Lennie Bluett:

13 months older. My father had to be an animal. 13 months difference in our ages. My God.

Interviewer:

Tired mom.

Lennie Bluett:

Huh?

Interviewer:

Tired mom.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Really, really. But he was a great guy. I loved him. I loved him. I hate him when I lost him, but I knew I was going to lose him. So, I was working in Morocco at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Casablanca. And when his wife called me to tell me he'd had a stroke, I quit my job and flew home to, they were living in Virginia at the time, and I spent a week with him. We sat out on the old porch and talked about early days, and I knew I was losing him. And then, 'cause I told my boss I had to go. 'Cause I said, I'm losing my brother. So, then he'd had a stroke, but he got better. And then I flew back to Casablanca and finished my engagement. And then I went on another engagement in Morocco. And then his wife called me to tell me that he'd gone and he had a heart attack. And=

Interviewer:

It was good you had that week together.

Lennie Bluett:

Huh? Yeah, it was great. We talked about some of the things I'm telling you. Yeah. About we sat on the old porch and when he retired, I don't know why I said, you're moving where? He said to Virginia, I said, you born and raised in California and you're moving to Virginia. He said, well, Ethel from there, and they had driven back several times in the summer to visit her mother, the woman he was married to for 20 years, and his last wife. And he said, well, Ethel's from, and her mother's not well.

And her mother lives there and she's got a brother or two. So we'd drive back. And he said, I like that part of the, and so he bought a couple, about six acres, planted tomatoes and onions. Never, we live here in Cali. You don't plant nothing. You go to the market and buy it. Planted watermelons, cantaloupes and all that stuff started coming up all the way. You didn't know what he to do with. So, he loaded on his pickup and grabs the neighbors, knock on the neighbor's door. You want a pound of avocados, you want some melons, you want want some peaches? Here! Want some onions, potatoes? All that stuff. He didn't know anything about agriculture.

Interviewer:

But he must have inherited your grandfather's green thumb.

Lennie Bluett:

Well, yeah. As you have. But then everything started coming up at once.

Interviewer:

Too much.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh God.

Interviewer:

I wanted to ask you if you ever talked to him about, we know what, we talked about the discrepancies and how the LAPD treated African Americans.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, sure. Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Because when he was here working in LAPD, he would get back to, they'd changed their clothes and they have a locker, and he'd get back to his locker and he would find a sign on his locker and the sign would say, where's the nigger with the trigger? From one of his fellow officers. Yeah. Yeah. He went through that. Yeah.

Interviewer:

I'm going to ask you about the Watts riots, but do you recall his, was he on duty during the Watts riots? Was he a policeman then?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, let me see. That would be 1965. Wait a minute, let me recall. Yes. He hadn't moved back to Virginia then. I think he moved back around 67, 68. That might be one of the reasons he decided to move to get out of Dodge too. I don't recall that. But one of the guys that I'm in touch with today, who's my age or a year older, aren't at Hartsfield, was a retired fireman. And Arnette and I still talk. And Arnette retired from the fire department at 41 and became a lawyer. And the fire station was completely segregated. I don't know whether you knew that or not. The fire department, the white firemen didn't want to sleep and eat with the Black firemen.

Interviewer:

Well, I read in the LA Times about six months ago that that's still an issue within the LA Fire Department.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, I don't doubt it.

Interviewer:

That women and Blacks in particular are targeted and hazed and harassed.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, yes. I don't doubt that. It's done in a very low-key way now, but it was very rampant in those days. And the fire department was segregated, completely segregated. And now the one, the old fire department at 14th and Central is a museum. And you can go over there and see the old fire trucks and the old guys that were there and on duty. And there, my brother's photo was there. And-

Interviewer:

Wait, I met this person who knows cemeteries very well, and he knows Evergreen. And he actually discovered the first Black fireman who was killed in the line of duty is actually buried in Evergreen.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah, that's the oldest cemetery in Los Angeles.

Interviewer:

Yeah, second oldest. Yeah.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah and where my parents are, my grandparents, my mother and my sister-in-law are buried at Washington and Normandy. Okay. That's the second-oldest cemetery. Yeah. And I have to tell you that when Hattie McDaniel died, do you know the story?

Interviewer:

No.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, okay. She wanted to be buried in Hollywood. Hollywood forever, which was called something else then. That's where Tyrone Power is, who was a dear friend of mine. There's a photo photo of Tyrone there and Jack Warden, Cecil B. DeMille. And she had won her Academy Award. And in her will, she requested that to be buried with her peers. They would not take her Hollywood Forever. She had to be buried over where my grandparents are. And about 15 years ago, her nephew, McDaniel, I guess his name, I guess it was Sam's, her brother's child didn't have her moved, but he had a pink tamer chain marble stone made and said, aunt Hattie, at least we know you have arrived and at least you're here now. And he had it put at Forever for it is there now. 'Cause I drove over to see it at Forever Cemetery there on Washington, on Santa Monica Boulevard. Right at Wilcox there. Yeah.

Interviewer:

It's near Paramount, right?

Lennie Bluett:

Huh?

Interviewer:

It's the one next to Paramount.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes. Yeah. By near the Paramount Studios. Yes. And he erected a stone for her, but they wouldn't bury her. They would not take her at, forget Forest Long. Oh my God. No, no, no, no. Even in death.

Interviewer:

I wanted to ask you about World War II.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Did you recall what happened? Do you recall what happened during internment?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh yes. Because you see in my neighborhood, every other house was Japanese and Black. Japanese, Black-

Interviewer:

In the West Adams District?

Lennie Bluett:

And white too, but predominantly Japanese. And I had a lot of Japanese friends going to school. And I even learned to speak Japanese. I still do today, can speak some Japanese, because as a kid you absorb languages. And I used to walk by the [foreign language 00:56:30], which is Japanese school, and listen outside the window and learn some of the words they were learning. And one of my best friends today that I went to school with, we walk once in a while. He lives in the general neighborhood. We go get tamales. He loves tamales. And we go get a tamale once in a while. And I'll be 88 in January, and he'll be 90 this year, I think. And because of the earthquake, when he graduated high school at Manual Arts, the school was so in rubble, unsafe that he had to graduate over to USC. They had the class graduation at SC when he graduated from high school.

But we're still friends and he's still here. But I got off the subject talking, oh, World War II. So, I had a lot of Japanese friends, and one of the things I like to think I did is to give a little party for my close Japanese friends and had a couple bottles of scotch around because they were all leaving the next morning for internment camps. And these guys were just as un-guilty as I was. And they were American citizens and born and raised here and going to school with me. Yet they were taking them all away in trucks to internment camps. And I've never gotten over that.

And these guys, some of them had property. They had to leave their houses, and refrigerators and radios and cars. And some of them couldn't that fast. They couldn't get rid of stuff and they just had to go away, leave it. A lot of them lost their property. Bean fields out where the airport is now. They lost that property. Some came back to nothing because the white person had put money in and did something with the...

Interviewer:

Taking it over.

Lennie Bluett:

Taking it over, yeah. And so my heart went out to these guys that I went to school with. And I've never gotten over that. I really, really what America did to the Japanese, and they were just as loyal as I was or anybody else. Just because they were Japanese.

Today, she must be around 97, 98 if she's still living. And they gave her a party on her 90th birthday. She hadn't seen me since I was 19. And they had me there as a surprise when she walked in. She almost had a heart attack seeing me as I look now. And when I was 19 and I'm playing Happy Birthday. And her daughter had, because I felt so strongly about the Japanese, some people didn't give a damn. They didn't care to say, oh, they're Japs or whatever. They're fighting us. What the hell? But I had a stronger bond with Japanese people than most people did because of my close association with them and with friends that I'm still with friends today. They all came to see me. Five of them came to see me when they read the article and came out in the LA Times at the coffee shop. They couldn't believe I was still alive. They bought their wives and everything at the coffee shop.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Well, you're a star.

Lennie Bluett:

That I grew up with. Well, no, but anyway, it was fun. But it was a whole different ballgame. And after school, we used to go to a Chinese restaurant and eat pork noodles before we went home-

PART 2 OF 5 ENDS [01:00:04]

Lennie Bluett:

Chinese restaurant and eat pork noodles before we went home. We still had to have dinner when we got home, but we liked the-

Interviewer:

Camaraderie.

Lennie Bluett:

Camaraderie, yeah, and a lot of them, the Japanese guys were always either terrific in sports or up here, or a lot of them both. They had it up here in sports and up here too. The black kids, well, some of educationally, because a lot of them wanted to get out and get jobs because they wanted to marry early and they wanted to have cars.

Interviewer:

Some of their families needed them to work earlier.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah, and their families needed to work early. They had babies. Like when I was on *Gone With The Wind*, they asked me, don't rock the boat and go to Clark Gabriel and ask him anything because they might fire us. We're getting \$30 a day here, and they might send us home if you say something about the black situation. I said, "30 bucks a day. What about your dignity? What about your dignity as a man? You can't go to the toilet because they got a sign up there that says, colored white. Colored white." What do you know?

Interviewer:

Would you tell me that entire story on tape? Because we talked about it before I turned the tape on.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh.

Interviewer:

So you got a job as an extra on *Gone With the Wind*?

Lennie Bluett:

Yes. I was working as a glorified extra on *Gone With The Wind*, and Vivian Lee came up to me, as you saw in the film, and asked, "How could she get back to Tower? She had to find Big Sam. Where's Big Sam?" Director said, "Lenny, don't answer. Don't answer her. Just shake your head you don't know, because if you answer her, I'm going to pay you \$300." Well, so I just shook my head. That was the scene that I was in with ... Then I did a lot of the singing when Mamie went up to knock on Clark Gabriel's door to tell them to put the little girl down on the ground that had broken her neck. Bonnie died because Bonnie died, and you got to let Melanie in and knocked on the door. That's when she won her Academy Award for that scene. But the question you asked me was-

Interviewer:

About the segregated toilets on scene.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, yes. Right. Okay. When I got on the set at six o'clock in the morning to change into our costumes, and I had sort of raggedy costume because I'm a confederate soldier coming back from the war, and I had a head rag on and a hat. So I was changing and the costumes in tents, and I had to go to the bathroom. I walked out where the porta potties, as they called them today, were all lined up. They had about 300 of them because they had 700 whites and about 400 blacks on this film at that day, for that day because we were all laying out in the railroad.

Interviewer:

In Atlanta, right?

Lennie Bluett:

In Atlanta before the sacking and burning of Atlanta-

Interviewer:

Amazing scene.

Lennie Bluett:

Dr. Meat is raising up legs to see who was alive and who's dead and all that. I'm in that scene also. Well, okay, so I got on this and I had to go to the toilet, and I walked up behind one of the props and I saw all these toilets with signs on them. Colored, white, colored, white, colored, white, colored, white. I could not believe. The war sounds were looming then. I knew we were going to have to go to war. This was in the late thirties, as you know. I said, oh my God, I can't believe. This is not the south. This is not where they have segregated toilets. You expect that down south at railroad stations and department stores, drinking fountains. You can't even drink from the same drinking fountain in a park. You can't go swimming in the swimming pools. Maybe on Thursday you could go if you protested enough. But that's the only day. Then they cleaned the pool and the white kids could go the next day.

So I said, I could not believe they had segregated toilets on the set, private property, Culver City. So I went back to the tent and I told the guys about it. They said, "What? Oh man, we don't care. We're making 30 bucks a day. Don't complain." I said, "Complain my, what's the name? What about your dignity?" So I talked to a couple of the young guys and they said, "Well, Lenny, whatever you decide to do, if we all stick together as one." I said, "That's what I wanted to hear." So me, Carl Jones, who's still alive, Cliff Holland, who's dead now, went to Clark Gable's dressing room. I knocked on the door and his

dresser said, "Who is that?" I said, "I need a speak to Mr. Gable. This is Lenny [inaudible 01:04:49]. I'm one of the extras on the film." Gable said, "Let him in." So I said, "Mr. Gable, I got a big problem." He said, "What's your problem, son?" Or whatever he said. I said, "Mr. Gable, please come with me." He was the Brad Pitt of that day, Clark Gable.

Interviewer:

He's the eternal Brad Pitt.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh yeah. Right. I said, "Please come with me. I'll give two minutes of your time." So we went out, crossed the cables and went out in the back where those toilets when I showed him, and he cussed like a sailor. He got Victor Fleming on the phone, the property master, and he said, "If you don't get these signs down, you have no Rhett Butler on this film." All the signs came down. So that was the name of that tune.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Yeah. It must have been, I don't want to say gratifying, but sort of vindicating.

Lennie Bluett:

It was vindicating and gratifying.

Interviewer:

The talent.

Lennie Bluett:

And as a young man, it did a lot for me to have instigated this because I was always an instigator. I got to go where people don't want me. I started buying houses in white neighborhoods, and I'd go in and look at a house and I'd send somebody else who was white or looked white, and-

Interviewer:

They would buy it.

Lennie Bluett:

They would buy it. Then I'd move in two or three months later, have my brother drive up in his police car and kind of walk around.

Yeah. I did all that.

Interviewer:

Yeah, of course.

Lennie Bluett:

So I broke a lot of neighborhoods down. I want tell you the Baldwin Hills, I was the second black person up there to buy a house in Baldwin Hills. I did it all of a subterfuge because the woman was not selling to me. Several of the people put in \$200 a piece to keep me out or all black people out in Baldwin Hills.

After I bought the house, moved in, about four months later, one of my white neighbors came up, walked across the street, and he said, "Hi." I said, "Hi." He said, "Gosh, you keep your lawn so nice and pretty, and you're home during the day. I was sort of wondering what you did for a living." I said, "Well, I'm a musician, so I work at night."

I started to say ... you know what I started saying to him, but I said, no, no, don't do that, Lenny. So I said, "I'm a musician and I work at night, so I'm home during the day." He said, "Well, I got to compliment you on your lawn." I said, "Thanks a lot." I started to reach out and shake his hand and ... no, he offered his hand first, I want to shake your hand. Then I reached out to shake, and then he pulled his hand back and said, "No, first I got to tell you, I am one of the ones that put \$200 in to keep you out of here. And before I shake your hand, I got to tell you that." He was a Jewish guy, and we are friends today.

Joe. Joe, I can't think of his last name right now. Joe Gorman. We're still friends. He lives in Palm Springs. We're still friends. He said, "Before I shake your hand, I got to pull my hand back and tell you I'm one of the ..." and Mary Actress the actress had a little house down the street and she refused to sign and put in the \$200. She said, "If he's good enough to buy the house, he's good enough to live in it." And Mary Actress is an old woman that worked with Humphrey Bogart films, the Maltese Falcon.

Interviewer:

Gorgeous. Gorgeous woman.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah, gorgeous woman. He pulled his hand back and he said, "I'm one of the ones that lost my \$200 to keep you out." I said, "Well, you're a man enough." We shook hands and we've been friends ever since. I played at his daughter's, when she got married, his daughter's a wedding out in Ventura. Joe Gorman lives in Palm Springs today.

Interviewer:

Do you recall your address?

Lennie Bluett:

Yes. 4335 Don Diablo Drive, LA 90008. Yeah. I remember every address I lived that. I play those in the lottery.

Interviewer:

That's hysterical.

Lennie Bluett:

I won \$5 last week.

Interviewer:

You got to play to win.

Lennie Bluett:

If you don't play, you can't win. Yeah. Right. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. One more thing I want to ask you about World War II was the Battle of Los Angeles. Do you remember this supposed attack that occurred in LA in 1943 that turned out to be a weather balloon?

Lennie Bluett:

In '43? Oh, I think ... wasn't that up by Santa Barbara?

Interviewer:

No. They actually did have a Japanese submarine shoot on Santa Barbara.

Lennie Bluett:

That's right. That's right.

Interviewer:

But they had a thing called the Battle of Los Angeles where they thought Japanese were bombing LA and they [inaudible 01:09:57]

Lennie Bluett:

Oh no, I think that was a misnomer. I don't really ... I think I would've remembered that. I think I would've remembered that. But I did remember that myself, Lena Horn and several other actors and musicians would drive up to [inaudible 01:10:13] and do a show, but we couldn't have the lights on in the car. In the room where we did the show, it was all blacked out so people from the sea couldn't see us. We thought of submarines, could see us if we had all the lights on. We had to do the show by practically candlelight. I also remember that Betty Davis and Lena Horn, Rochester and my quartet and several showgirls drove up to Bakersfield. There was a big base up there to dedicate the swimming pool for the soldiers that were up there because it was so hot in Bakersfield.

When we arrived, the colonel came out and greeted us. Lena Horn was gorgeous in those days. Well, she still is. She's a year older or two than I am. She's still beautiful and never had anything done. Just good genes. So we all got limos and not trucks, but vans and things. Betty Davis was very Betty Davis, and she was so happy to be there, entertain the soldiers. So then the commander said, "Oh, so happy to have you people and Hollywood up here and blah, blah, blah. We're going to dedicate the pool around one o'clock." We got there, I think 12:00, 12:15, 12:30. The second pool about three o'clock or four o'clock this afternoon. So Betty Davis said, "Second pool?" And Lena Horn said, "Second pool?" And the commander said, "Yes. Well, we have one pool for the white soldiers, and then we have the second pool that we're going to dedicate." So we all got in our cars, turned around and came back. No dedication. Betty Davis, the actress, Lena Rochester that was in [inaudible 01:12:01], and several dancers and things.

Interviewer:

So it seems like from-

Lennie Bluett:

Bakersfield, California.

Interviewer:

It's still pretty, pretty bad. A lot of the memories that you have, they're interesting because while you might talk about something that was horrific, you always talk about someone stepping up and being right about it.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes. Oh, one was Dr. Somerville, who was one of the investors in the club, he hotel.

Interviewer:

He was a dentist, right?

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Yes. Huh?

Interviewer:

He was a dentist.

Lennie Bluett:

Dentist, yes. Not we, because it was a little before my time, had a wade in Santa Monica because the beach was segregated. Yeah. Saying you couldn't go in the water and surf cause you contaminate the water. The cops would actually patrol and menacing looks. So you stayed where you felt that you would be okay. I have a photo of my mother and father that's on the wall there sitting along a wall in Santa Monica when they were first married. So one day, Dr. Somerville got several black people today and we all did a ... not we. I was maybe 15, 13, 14 at that time. They did a wade in and they just walked in the water in Santa Monica, what they call a wade in. That broke the segregation thing down in Santa Monica. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Did you ever go to Val Verde?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh yes. My dad bought a little property up there. I don't know what happened to it, but yeah, Val Verde was the thing where black people built little cabins and things because you couldn't go to Arrowhead. I went to Big Bear with some friends of mine, and some guys came out to our car. We stopped for hamburgers and they said, 'You guys, get out of here. Get, we got guns.' They drove us. We drove Big Bear, California. Yeah. Went in the thirties. Yeah. Yeah. They thought we were going to either buy something up there or maybe buy some property, or maybe because we had a nice car. They knew we weren't bums. Oh yeah. Oh, God. I went through all that. I went through that in Palm Springs, where you won't believe this.

1949, I was on my way to do a job called the Sun and Swim Club in Palm Springs, but I was late for the job. I was playing piano and I wanted to stop and get a hamburger so I could eat it when I took my first break because I was hungry. So I drove into a drive-in and sat down at the counter and the waitress was fumbling. She kept fumbling. I was wondering, aren't you coming down? Cause I was in a hurry. I had to get to work. So finally she was talking to the boss of the cash register. Finally, she came down and she

said, "I can serve you, but you have to take it out." I said, "Take it out?" I was going to take it out anyway because I was going to take it to work and eat it on my first break. But when she said that to me, I said, "Oh, I'm going to take it out anyway." She said, "Fine." I could hear him say ... the guy shook his head and said, "Okay, serve him."

So they made the hamburger, brought it down, and I said, "I'd like a milkshake to go also." She made a chocolate milkshake for me and put it all in the bag and folded the bag. Here you go. So I took the bag, tore it open, cut the hamburger in half with the knife, proceeded to eat the other half, and started sucking on my straw. The boss came down, he grabbed the other half. Now you're not going to believe this, but I hope my mother's turning in her grave if this is not true. He took the other half off the counter and threw it in with the dirty dishes. Threw it in with the dirty dishes. "Didn't she tell you you had to take this out?" I was shocked. I could not believe that inhumanity to man.

I got up and I said, "Thanks," because I didn't want to lose a job. I said, "Thanks a lot." And I started to walk out. This was the drive-in. As I got into the parking, go to my car, he came out really quick and I thought maybe he was going to attack me or something. Oh, by the way, the guy in the kitchen came out with a tin pan that you'd put on the garbage top, because he thought maybe I was going to attack either the waitress, and he had a knife about this long. Like kids play when they're going to play mountain.

Interviewer:

Saber or something.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah, he had a butcher knife and the tin of a garbage tin, the garbage thing. He was just standing there to protect his boss. So the boss put his arm around my shoulder. I said, "Don't put your arm around my shoulder." He said, "Listen, Mr. I'm a Jew from New York." He said, "I went through this or my parents went through segregation. I know what it's all about." He said, "I got all my money invested in this place, and if you come, there will be other black people who will come. And I don't really need that. Every dime that I brought from New York, I've put in this place." I said, "I don't ..." I hate to tell you what I said to him, but I said, "Listen, I'm down here alone." But I said, "I got a band and there's 20 of us. Tomorrow night ... They all have wives and there'll be 40 people for dinner in your place. Okay?" And I drove off. I said, "Make reservations for us." Palm Springs, California, 1949.

Interviewer:

It's so horrible. We live in this capitalist country. Yet this kind of hatred can stop people from pursuing their own best interests.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer:

Think about the clientele you would've brought him.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah, exactly. I think he went out of business. I'm sure he did. I'm sure he did because there were Indians living down there and black people that worked for the rich people down there.

Interviewer:

And Mexicans.

Lennie Bluett:

Place is full of Mexicans. Oh my God. Yeah, Palm Springs. But he just saw it that I was going to just interrupt his business if I bought black people in there or if black people were his patrons, that's all he could see. I told them, I said, "You're a Jew and you're from Brooklyn, and you're going to put me through this?" He said, "Well, my parents went through this being Jewish. Jews, all the years they've been pushed and shoved and blah." Well, I knew all that. But I mean, today's just a new day. Come on.

Interviewer:

And just because one group suffers doesn't mean another group has to suffer.

Lennie Bluett:

Exactly. Exactly.

Interviewer:

Oh, that makes me very upset. I want to ask you again about during the war, if you recall, the Zoot Suit riots?

Lennie Bluett:

The Zoot Suit? Yes. Yes, because I was in that new year where I wore those peg top pants. And in fact, I worked in a movie with Hattie McDaniels called Thank Your Lucky Stars, where I was dancing with her and I had a zoot suit on. They wrote up a nice article on at Warner Brothers about it. I had the pork pie hat. It was out to here with a feather sticking out. But I didn't dress like that to go downtown because a lot of that stuff started around the Orphium Theater because that was a big movie house at that time.

Interviewer:

What you live through.

Lennie Bluett:

You were talking about the Zoot Suiters. Yeah. A lot of blacks were turning on Mexicans. The Mexicans were turning on blacks because they couldn't see any way out too. They were living in Ramona Gardens and those places that they lived. Some of them were into crime. A lot of the black guys were into crime selling marijuana and all that stuff. They had pockets of gangs here. Just like today, Jefferson High School, they're having ... and in jail, they hate each other. This is something to do.

Interviewer:

They have to segregate jails now.

Lennie Bluett:

Huh?

Interviewer:

They segregate jails now.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer:

For safety.

Lennie Bluett:

Well they did. The blacks want to eat cornbread and grits and stuff. And the Mexicans want the tamales and their beans. So they hate each other anyway because they're in jail.

Interviewer:

They hate everybody.

Lennie Bluett:

They hate everybody. They hate the world. The riots of '65 when our city was burning, I was living in a high rise near here. I couldn't believe that my beautiful city was burning like that. I had a girlfriend who was black from Germany visiting me, and her husband was white. They were driving in a convertible to come and join me for dinner at my condo. I said, "Oh my God, don't drive, especially with your top down, you got a white husband." I said, "They'll pull him out." So they couldn't come for dinner. That blew up the dinner thing for me.

Interviewer:

What do you remember in addition to that about the Watts riots?

Lennie Bluett:

Well, besides crying a lot, because it was so unnecessary. Of course I can understand all the frustrations that the blacks were going through about police and fire department. That's why they shot at the fire department. When the fire trucks came to put out fires and things, they would shoot at the fire. And the fire department didn't want to come put out the fires because people were shooting at them and stuff. The police and the reason that they were so against the police today because a lot of corruption. Have you read about Rampart right here, and all the corruption?

Interviewer:

Exactly.

Lennie Bluett:

Plant stuff on guys. That reminded me of myself years ago. One of the big lawyers, he was the Johnny Cochran of today, only he was white. His name was Jerry Geisler.

Interviewer:

Yeah, Jerry Geisler.

Lennie Bluett:

All right. He was Bogart's attorney and everybody's attorney, law attorney and everybody's attorney.

Interviewer:

Marilyn's attorney.

Lennie Bluett:

Everybody's attorney. Well, they saw me coming out of a nightclub on Hollywood Boulevard with two white girls. The police, they stopped and we were just going to breakfast. All right. So they stopped and pulled over and they said, "Hey, come here." So all three of us walked to the police car, "You girls go on home." They took me to the police station, which was near there, near the Greenwich Chinese Theater. They had a little substation in there. They said, "Sit down there." There was a Life magazine. So I picked up the Life magazine. I said, "I don't know what I'm here for." They said, "Nevermind. We know what you're here for." They take off my clothes, strip down to my shorts. They examined everything that I had on for marijuana. That's what they were ... I didn't know what they were looking for because I never smoked marijuana in my life. I didn't even smoke.

So I'm reading the Life magazine and they said, "You're pretty cool and calm, aren't you?" I said, "Well, yeah, I'm trying to read the magazine while you're going through my clothes." And they said, "But don't be so smart because we got a whole drawer of marijuana in that drawer, and we could say we found it on you." I said, "Well, if you have to do that, then that's what you have to do." But I said, "I'll tell you something. Jerry Geisler is my attorney. You might want to call him first before you do." They got me out of this so quick.

Interviewer:

Was he really your attorney?

Lennie Bluett:

No. He worked for Bogart. He was Bogart's attorney. No.

Interviewer:

[inaudible 01:24:24] going with you the whole way.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Right. Well, they believed it. They let me go. The only reason they stopped me, because I'm with these two white girls. They thought I'm selling them marijuana. It couldn't be a friendship. You understand this?

Interviewer:

All these shows of force as well too. Just this, we can pick you up. If you don't have anything wrong with you, we can plant stuff. We can do anything we want to.

Lennie Bluett:

Exactly. We can do anything and say anything we want. We could say you had a gun and we couldn't find the gun and we could shoot somebody in the leg and say you tried to get away. They do that.

Unfortunately it's very sad and it's so wrong. It is so wrong. Police that you look up to. I looked up to my brother because he was a policeman. That was chosen profession. I looked up to him as a brother, but I looked up to him more because he's a peace officer.

Interviewer:

I'm going to ask you some questions that are about national events that may have affected you. One of the things I want to ask you, if you remember Emmett Till? Emmett Till? Emmett Till.

Lennie Bluett:

Emmett Till. Oh, of course. We used to sing about him and talk about him in church. We still do, the church I go to.

Interviewer:

What church do you go to?

Lennie Bluett:

I go to FAME at first African Methodist Episcopal at Ron Adams, West Adams and Western Avenue. Adamson Western. I'm a 30-year member. My mother was married in that church, not at the physical plant where it is now because it was on eighth and Town downtown Los Angeles. My mother was married there. My brother was married there. So I'm a member, but I thought ... he was only 15 years old. He smiled at a white woman in the market. From then on, the rest is history. You're not even allowed to smile at a white woman. You don't even walk on the sidewalk. You get off the sidewalk in those days. He was from Chicago. He didn't know all that. He's down visiting his uncle or his aunts or something and so forth. Then the voting rights and Schremmer and the other two guys that were found in the pond made in the film, Mississippi Burning.

Interviewer:

But they just prosecuted, right? They just recently-

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, right, yes. Recently. Yeah. Right. Yeah. We all talked about it in church and among ourselves. She said, "Well, that's the way it is. What are you going to do? What are you going to do about it? That's the way the world is." That's turned a lot of black people against white, the white authority and white people and just a lot of white people I guess. Then when Martin Luther came along and taught people to say, black is right, black is okay. It's okay to be black. Because the worst thing I could say to my brother when we would fight, "You black SOB." The worst thing I could say to him, but then Martin Luther King turned the whole thing and said, "Black is really beautiful if you're really thinking this way."

But then a lot of black people couldn't get it out of their guts and they just hate the status quo and the way it was. They remember because they're dying off. Then their kids remember a lot of that stuff. Because when I got married, my wife who's still living ... I'm divorced from her, but her grandfather was killed by a black man in Georgia. She was from Georgia. She hated all white people. When she married me, she found out that half of my friends were white. She would say, "Lenny?" But then she knew that musicians always had a different thing about each other. But she was afraid of white people when we were married. She was actually afraid of them because of the stories that she heard from her parents. You understand?

I got to tell you something funny today. My best friend is in a rest home. He's 91 and I call him WT. That means white trash. I called him the other day in the rest home, he's in Pasadena. "How you doing?" He said, "Oh, I'm fine, but I hate this place. The food is ..." you know what people would say about a rest home. I said, "How's white trash doing?" And he laughed. The reason that I call him white trash, and I still say it to this day, is because when I brought him home, when we were both in our early twenties, my grandmother looked at me and she said, "Lenny, who's that white trash?" I didn't realize it then, but as I grew older and I learned a lot of things, my grandmother was from that gen genre from the south that if you had a white friend, he had to be trash in order to be a friend to you. Because that's self-hatred. That's self-hatred.

PART 3 OF 5 ENDS [01:30:04]

Lennie Bluett:

... Because that self-hatred, that self-hatred thing. My grandmother, I loved her dearly, but I'll never forgive her for saying, "Who's that white trash with you?"

Interviewer:

Just internalized it.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes, internalized it.

Interviewer:

Well, Carter G Woodson, the first African American historian, first African American who did African American history, talked about if you tell someone that they're only allowed to go in through the back door, and then you get rid of that rule, they'll still go in the back door.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, yes. I have friends that, today they're gone now, dead, but they were raised in Texas, and their mother used to do laundry, and their mother said, "Now you're sure and knock on this so-and-so's door, but you go in the back, you go around the back." Even Nat King Cole, even when he got famous and became famous, in New York they had to go up the service elevator to go up to the Rainbow Room to entertain.

Interviewer:

Tony Nicholas talked about the Nicholas Brothers headlining in Vegas.

Lennie Bluett:

In Vegas, yeah.

Interviewer:

With Frank Sinatra, and having to enter through the back-

Lennie Bluett:

Right, yeah. Sinatra changed a lot of that, and I was with Louis Armstrong, not playing with him, but at a hotel, Velma Middleton, his girl singer, huge girl, wonderful singer though, and she jumped in the pool. They drained it the next day at the Riviera, they drained the pool the next day and said it was closed, in Las Vegas. They put that in the Dorothy Dandridge story, but see, that was not true, that Dorothy put her foot in the pool and then they drained it. But that's not true, she might have put her foot in, but Dorothy was a big star in those days and they wouldn't drain it. But Velma Middleton is the one that dove into the pool and Louis said, "Girl, don't go in that pool, because you have to sing tonight, you might catch cold."

She went upstairs and got in her ... Because she knew that they didn't want her to use the pool, and they drained it the next day. Velma Middleton was her name. Las Vegas. Sinatra was a big factor with Sammy Davis and Lena Horne to break down segregation, because you see-

Interviewer:

And the Nicholas Brothers.

Lennie Bluett:

And the Nicholas Brothers, and the Delta Rhythm Boys who were dear friends of mine, they're all gone now except one, he's the one who knocked on the door about the Clark Gable thing. He's still alive, he just had his 87th birthday about a couple weeks ago. They signed the contract, they were the biggest Black quartet other than the Ink Spots and Mills Brothers at that time, but they were doing fantastic business. They signed a contract with Jack Entratter, the owner of the Sands Hotel, that they had to eat in the dining room, they didn't have to eat where they were staying, and they were staying on the other side of town in the Black section.

But they could eat their dinner at the hotel, not in the kitchen, but in the dining room. That was in the contract, Entratter signed that contract. They were served in the dining room, but they put a three-quarter screen around them so the guests would not see. I can corroborate that by Carl Jones, my dear friend who is still alive today. Isn't hard for you people to realize that really went on? It didn't affect you, so you say ...

Interviewer:

Well, no. I think that we all ... It did affect-

Lennie Bluett:

I don't mean you, I don't mean you. I'm just talking about the general. A lot of people, when I tell them things, they can't believe it. I tell my daughter, who's only 40, she said, "Oh, dad. That can't be true." But she knows I'm not lying, so she knows it's true. All these things went on, and people just went on with their lives like nothing. But we went through all that, I went through ... I could spend four hours, many hours telling you all the things that I went through as a youngster doing this and doing that, and going places and entertaining.

I went through a lot of that because I was entertaining, and I had to go in places where White people were as guests and things. Oh, yeah. Oh, I could give you many hours of stuff that I went through. A lot of good things, yes. I went through a lot of good things, but a lot of bad, bad, bad things that could have made me so bitter, but bitterness consumes you when you keep it here. It consumes you, not the person your bitterness is against.

Interviewer:

Let's switch gears a little bit and talk about maybe something that is less sad and less horrific, and that's dating. Dating, do you remember when you started dating?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, sure. Yeah. Oh, well, musicians always date.

Interviewer:

You're notorious for it.

Lennie Bluett:

17, 18. Oh, yeah. Sure. Oh, yeah. I dated, and sometimes I dated White girls just to make the cops mad.

Interviewer:

Those poor girls.

Lennie Bluett:

I put the top down on the car, or make people mad, and as we pulled up to a stop sign and the bus, people sitting on the bus, you know how they look around? When I knew they were looking around, I put my arm around the girl and pull her, blew a kiss to make them madder. I'm at the Paramount Theater downtown and my date was a White girl and we came in the theater together, and she went to the restroom and this woman happened to see us together, and she went in the restroom, and so this girl applying her makeup, whatever she was doing, and this woman got up to her very close and she looked at her, little old White woman, and she said, "Are you half Black?" This girl was blonde, blue eyes, but the fact she was with me she had to be half Black. So Loretta didn't even answer her, she just finished her makeup and just walked out of there. But that's so stupid, so stupid, so stupid.

Interviewer:

Well, what did you do for early dates? You took the girls to movies?

Lennie Bluett:

To movies, just what they do today, the beach, Santa Monica. I've got to turn on the air.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Lennie Bluett:

You want to turn this off for a second?

Interviewer:

Sure, I'll pause it. How did you meet, were you married once?

Lennie Bluett:

Just once.

Interviewer:

How did you meet your wife?

Lennie Bluett:

She was married to a pianist, a friend of mine, and I used to visit both of them and they decided to divorce. So then I decided to marry her, and we have one daughter, Nicole, who is now ... When she graduated from Cal State Northridge with a major in communications, radio, television, her first job when she was 19 at the CBS. She kept the job for about 10 years, but she couldn't see any ... She saw the glass ceiling, but couldn't see any advancement in that field, and she quit and walked down six blocks to Channel ... They're based in Atlanta.

Interviewer:

Oh, TBS? CNN?

Lennie Bluett:

Atlanta.

Interviewer:

CNN?

Lennie Bluett:

CNN, walked down to CNN and did there six years doing what she was doing. She was the news, the rewrites and things and stuff. Then a crew came out from Atlanta and she was out of that job, because they brought their own crew out here. Now she's in retail, of all things, retail, ladies garments at the Grove.

Interviewer:

Oh, okay.

Lennie Bluett:

At Chico's.

Interviewer:

At Chico's.

Lennie Bluett:

At Chico's, the Grove, yeah. She's been there three or four years now and she loves it. She sells clothes, sales lady.

Interviewer:

That's a place that's changed a lot.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, my god. That's the hottest place in Los Angeles for retail and for shopping, and just going and having a good time. Have you been there?

Interviewer:

Yes, it's beautiful.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, it's gorgeous. Have you been there? It's gorgeous.

Interviewer:

I still prefer the farmer's market though.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, you can walk to the farmer's market from there. She does for lunch every day.

Interviewer:

The best food-

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, yeah.

Interviewer:

What was your wife's name? Your ex-wife's name?

Lennie Bluett:

Justine, and she's still alive, but she has health problems, like we all do at this age. But she was a wonderful woman and wonderful, wonderful mother. She really raised my daughter, because we divorced when Nicole was about six, seven, and she did a wonderful job with my daughter really.

Interviewer:

Were you an absentee father like your father?

Lennie Bluett:

Well, not so much, I didn't really leave town and go and work, start playing in Europe until she was about 15 actually. Even when she was growing up, if I was working in Vegas, I would fly home and get her on Sundays and go to the park or the beach or something on Sundays and stuff. I was gone a lot, because in the music field you are, but I was home a lot too. When we divorced, her mother started working and I would take her to school early in the morning and sleep for about two hours. One time I almost crashed my car because I didn't get enough sleep, and I fell asleep on the freeway trying to get home, because I knew she was going to be knocking on my door at 7:00 to go to school.

My wife at that time was going to be going to work somewhere, and keep the home fires burning. So I'm glad I didn't die on the freeway, but I almost did. But as I say, I was gone a lot, I was in show business,

what do you do? I tried to make enough money so she wouldn't have to worry. Today, when I went to the great piano bar in the sky, hello.

Interviewer:

I know that you identify yourself as a piano bar player, but I also know you have an affinity with Casablanca.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Would you tell me about that?

Lennie Bluett:

Okay. In Casablanca, Bogart wanted me for the role of Sam, because it called for a piano player who could also do a little acting also. So he brought me out to the studio with Mike Curtiz and the producer and introduced me to them and had me play, but Mike Curtiz took Bogart aside, he said, "Bogie, this man's only 22, 23 years old, and the character calls for a man that's known you for a long time. He's your [inaudible 01:41:11], he's known you long enough to take care of you, he's known you, so it's got to be somebody in their late 40s." So the guy they hired, Dooley Wilson, was in his late 40s and he could sing, but he couldn't play the piano.

I could do both, and they [inaudible 01:41:30] the piano is a mock-up, and then a guy by the name of Ernest Wilkins I believe did the recording, "You must remember this ..." I could do both, but it just wasn't to be. It would have been a great annuity for me, believe me, if I had been able to do that part in the film, because it's now a cult film.

Interviewer:

When you started touring after Nicole was a little older, 15, where did you tour?

Lennie Bluett:

I went first to Copenhagen, Denmark, at the Sheraton Hotel. I was there for quite a while off and on. I'd fly home, but I'd do stints for two or three months, then I'd come home. Yeah. So she says today, "Dad, you weren't there when I needed you." But I said, "Well, I had to do my profession, I was gone quite a bit, but I was home a lot too." Then I had to stay working, and I'm a dinosaur now and I can't, nobody wants to see a bald-headed old man sitting behind a piano, thank you very much.

Crew:

I would like to see that.

Interviewer:

I would too.

Crew:

I'd pay a lot of money to see that.

Interviewer:

Yeah. I can't wait for the 25th.

Crew:

Me too.

Interviewer:

Really, really. But I know that you have, on your card you have the piano, and I thought it was tied to Casablanca, but I guess it's not.

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, no. Not really, no, no. A lot of people think that, and because I worked in Morocco, Casablanca, Morocco, and the room is designed like in the film and I'm sitting behind the piano playing, they think that I'm Sam. Especially the tourists that have come, the Italian tourists, French tourists, Japanese, Taiwanese come through there. They've seen the film, they see a bald-headed guy sitting behind, a Black guy, because all Black guys look alike to them, so they think that I'm Sam from the film. We don't say, the hotel doesn't say no, because they want their business. But no, I didn't play the role. Dooley Wilson. Dooley went on the Orpheum stage singing As Time Goes By with a band playing behind him, because people did not know that he could not play piano, and he didn't want them to know that wasn't him playing.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah, right.

Interviewer:

So you toured in Copenhagen and Europe?

Lennie Bluett:

At the Sheraton Hotel, I was there many, many months. Then I went to Stockholm, Sweden at the other venue, the Sheraton Hotel Stockholm. Then I started working at a little hotel along the waterfront in Sweden, in Stockholm, right near the castle. I saw the king, the king came in a couple times, sneaked in, and people are in such awe of royalty. The minute you walk in, they go, they're eating and the fork is here. But he was very low-key and stuff. Then I started working on a cruise ship, the Royal Viking, one of the early cruise ships, the Crystal Harmony, Crystal Symphony, the Whisper, and all over the world. All over, I did that for about 16 years.

Then I began working in Morocco, Casablanca, and as I told you the room was designed like the film. But prior to that, I worked in Marrakesh, which is inland, like Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Casablanca, Marrakesh. It's very hot there. But this hotel was to die for, it was like the Bel-Air Hotel twice over and over, it was so gorgeous. Just land, land, land, because it's all desert, but then a beautiful flora and fauna and orange trees, and you look out of your window and you see these orange trees, lemon trees and

grapefruit trees, and this beautiful swimming pool and a big barbecue and the whole thing. Everything a hotel should be, walking paths for honeymooners in their places.

They still have the same room that Churchill lived when he was visiting Casablanca with his wife, Lady Churchill, and the English with their chintz curtains, their chintz everything, chintz toilets, it's still there. They haven't changed the room. At that time, they were getting \$4000 and \$5000 a night for the suite, because they rented it to Elton John and they put a piano in there so they could charge more. The room is still there at the hotel, it's called La Mamounia, and it's one of the ... Robin Leach has said it's one of the third or fourth hotel on his list as the finest hotels in the world.

That was my first experience in Morocco, and I loved Morocco so much that I saw them build it all over the city, that I bought me a condo there and my accountant says, "Lennie, you're 72 years old, you buy a condo in a third-world country? What if you die? Your daughter would have a hell of a time, she doesn't speak French, she doesn't speak Arabic. She'd have a hell of a time, she'll probably get your estate. Why did you buy a condo? If you die ..." He died six months after he told me that. That was when I was 72, and now I'm 86, 87.

Interviewer:

Do you still have the condo?

Lennie Bluett:

No, I sold it about seven, eight years after I bought it. I wish I had it now. Oh, my god. If I had known how prices were going to rise, everywhere it's happened, everywhere all over the world, prices, real estate is crazy. But it's a lovely condo, it'd be nice for a second home, my daughter could enjoy it if she got married and had kids, they could go. All the floors are marble like this, wonderful marble. Would you believe I had three bedrooms, two baths, elevator up to the fifth floor and it was on the fifth floor, and mine was the only condo on that floor, \$70,000.

Interviewer:

Wow. Is that why you wear fezzes too? Is that from Morocco, the fez?

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, no. No, I just like wearing the hats, I have several. I also have several [inaudible 01:48:22] that I wear, the men's clothing that I wear. I wear shirts, and a lot of the churches today the men are wearing African garb because they want to feel their African-ness, their Blackness, and they wear these hats and African gowns.

Interviewer:

You see that a lot at graduations.

Lennie Bluett:

Huh?

Interviewer:

A lot at graduations.

Lennie Bluett:

Yes, yes. They want to feel akin to Africa, there's a lot of African shops that sell clothes that are very African, out of material that is made in Africa and stuff. It's very reasonable, this stuff.

Interviewer:

What was the difference in how you were treated as a musician, or just as a person, on Marrakesh and Morocco versus-

Lennie Bluett:

Oh, wonderful, wonderful. Except when we first went into the war with Kuwait, I was there in 1991, and I was at this big hotel as I told you, La Mamounia. The bar had four or five people on a night come in, because everybody was afraid to fly in, everybody was afraid to fly out, all the tourists, the French tourists, because they speak French, that's their first language there. It used to be French Morocco. They were afraid to fly, so we did no business. My agent called me and said, "Lennie, you want to stay there, you want to go home? I've got a good job for you in Spain, if you want to go to Spain."

So I went to Madrid, and I speak Spanish and I sing in Spanish too, so that was perfect for this club. I was there until the war was over, which was three months. I run up to my room that night, I couldn't finish my gig because I wanted to go up to the room and see the war, what was going on. I'd go up to my room and watch the television, these scuds going from Israel, wherever. Finally they finished, three months later the war is over and I went back to Casablanca and finished my contract. People started flying in again, flying out, they thought it was safe to fly.

But that's when I started working Morocco, then I started working in Casablanca and Fes, which is a wonderful city. I sing in French, so I was quite an attraction there, a Black guy singing. They don't realize that a lot of Black guys from Sierra Leone and some of those French counties speak French better than the French. A lot of people don't realize that, especially Americans, because they speak one language, that's it, and badly, okay? English, that's it.

Interviewer:

What songs do you sing in French and Spanish?

Lennie Bluett:

La Vie en Rose in French, and [French 01:51:15], which means, "What now, my love?" [French 01:51:21], which is their On Leaves. Parlez-vous Francais?

Interviewer:

Oui, oui. [French 01:51:29]

Lennie Bluett:

And Spanish, Cuando Calienta el Sol, and [French 01:51:37], a couple other things. The marijuana song, everybody knows that song. But it was fun, it was great, a great career. I'm sorry it's winding down, because I've had such fun. But now I'm doing occasional things for Rupert Murdoch, who owns the building at Wilshire, on the corner there of Wilshire and Westwood Boulevard, he owns the building there, on the 17th floor is a private club. It's his toy, you've got to belong to it, you've got to pay

thousands a year to belong to it, but you can go there and have your private parties there and drink, and nobody's going to take photos if you're famous.

Interviewer:

Like the Skybar.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Huh?

Interviewer:

Like the Skybar.

Lennie Bluett:

Yeah. Oh, my god. Yeah, like the Skybar. Wow. I get a lot of that now, because I look a lot like, especially if I wear my African hats, they think I'm Jim Brown and people stop me and wave to me, even people at my church bring their little boys up to me and say, "This is Jim Brown, the great football player." I say, "How do you do?" Say a little prayer, okay. I was with two girls eating some soup and this guy's staring at me, so I went to get another soup and he came over to the table and asked the girls, "Isn't that Jim Brown?" The girls said, "Yes, it is."

So he went back to his table, I came back with my soup, and he came back on his way out, he said, "I hate to disturb you, sir, but you were great in that run that you did." I don't even know what he's talking, I'm not a football player. I go, "Oh, thanks a lot." I'm trying to get busy with the soup, "Thanks a lot." Looking up at him. That night we were going to the play on Sepulveda, they've got two or three little houses all in one big complex there, it used to be a Bud factory or something, on Sepulveda in West LA. They have little small venues there, a little theater.

So I'm waiting for the doors to open, we're standing in the lobby, there's a guy staring at me from where my bar is, and I said, "Oh, my god. He must think I'm Jim Brown. Why is he staring at me?" So the girls, "I don't know." So finally I can see him starting to come over and walk toward me, and I said, "I'm not Jim, I'm not Jim Brown." He said, "No, no, no. But aren't you the guy at the coffee shop in West, on Franklin Avenue?" I said ...

PART 4 OF 5 ENDS [02:00:04]

This segment could not be transcribed due to issues with the source file.

PART 5 OF 5 ENDS [02:27:24]