



In collaboration with
RHONDA WOOLARD,
Resident of Piney Woods Free Union

Date: March 26, 2023

Interviewer(s): Rachel Kamis

00:05 Rachel Kamis Well, hello, Miss Rhonda.

00:06 Rhonda Woolard Hi.

00:07 Rachel Kamis My name is Rachel, and I'm going to be collecting your oral history today. Before we get started, do you have any questions for us?

00:17 Rhonda Woolard No.

00:18 Rachel Kamis Okay. If you could please just start by telling us about yourself?

00:26 Rhonda Woolard My name is Rhonda James Woolard. My maiden name is James. I am the daughter of Allie Hardison, who is a family member of Piney Woods. My grandfather is Livery James, Sr. I have two children, Anthony and Michael Sherrod, and one grandson, Solomon. My husband is Richard Woolard, and I grew up in Piney Woods. I loved it as a child. Everybody was connected together. As a child, I went to church to Uniontown, but now I go to a church down the road, Promise Land. Our yard was the community yard. All the kids used to play in our yard. We used to play kickball most days. You could ride your bike down the road and didn't have to worry about getting hit by a car or anything. We didn't have a lot of supervision. My parents worked, and we were home alone, which is

interesting because I'm a social worker, and I worked in child welfare for several years. So, it's really ironic how now children aren't able to be left home alone like when I was a child. People were close-knit. There was actually two stores in Piney Woods. One was Mr. Andrew Pierce's store, and then there was another store. We used to go over there and play the pinball machine. The pinball machine used to be in Mr. Andrew's store. We used to go buy those big pickles. It was just community oriented. If somebody was in trouble or needed help, a lot of the men congregated, to the stores so you could go and ask them for help. Everybody kept an eye out for each other. My stepfather, Felton Keyes, grew a garden and also tilled the land for other individuals. So we had gardens as a child. I didn't plant the stuff in the garden, but sometimes, I had to pick the stuff in the garden. But predominantly, we ate what was in the garden, pretty much.

- 03:41 Rachel Kamis** **What did you grow?**
- 03:43 Rhonda Woolard** He'd grow cabbage, collards, squash, zucchini, string beans, watermelon, tomatoes, cucumber, corn.
- 04:05 Rachel Kamis** **Wow. That's like a whole garden, a whole supermarket in your backyard.**
- 04:10 Rhonda Woolard** Yes, so that was a staple when I was a child. Now, people don't garden. A few people do, but not like when I was growing up. As an adult, I've lived in several parts of Piney Woods. I've lived on the back side of Piney Woods, on Creek Road. I've lived on Piney Woods Road. But as a child, I grew up on Free Union Road. I'm trying to think of anything else I want to tell you.
- 04:59 Rachel Kamis** **I have some questions that might spark some of your thoughts. So, you mentioned that you grew up in Piney Woods, right? And that you have a lot of family that's lived here for a while. Could you tell me a bit more about that family history and your understanding of it?**

- 05:16 Rhonda Woolard** Well, I really don't know a lot. My grandfather was Livery James, Sr., and we call him Tuck. I really don't know a lot about his parents, Moses and Naomi James. And on my mom's side are the Hardisons. My mom was Allie Mae Hardison, and she died when I was 12 years old. I did know some of my aunts, like Aunt Iredell, and Aunt Dorothea, and Aunt Betty, and different ones. And then I had a great-grandmother, Maxine, and I had a great-great-grandmother, Sally. So, I'm related on two sides of the family. I'm related on the James side and the Hardison side. And of course, all in between are the Keyeses and the Pierces and the Smiths and the Whitehursts. All of us are related, and sometimes more than one time.
- 06:36 Rachel Kamis** **A lot of connections. You started to talk a bit about your childhood here, and it sounds like you have a lot of treasured memories of playing in the backyard and having that community-centered environment. When you think back on it—I want to pull on your senses—what do you smell when you think of your childhood?**
- 07:03 Rhonda Woolard** My mom fixing pineapple cake. I remember the pinecones falling from the trees. I remember the raking of the pine straw in the yard, the raking of the leaves. Not a lot of smells, more sounds.
- 07:38 Rachel Kamis** **What are some of the sounds?**
- 07:40 Rhonda Woolard** Like I said, the raking of the leaves and things like tractors riding down the road, because a lot of people rode on their tractors. Yeah, that's it.
- 07:58 Rachel Kamis** **Did you ever jump in the leaves when you were a kid?**
- 08:02 Rhonda Woolard** No, that wasn't for me. That wasn't for me. I was a tomboy, though. My uncle, Livery—he's Livery Jr.—I used to hang with him a lot as a child. I used to try to do everything he did, so I was a tomboy. But I didn't jump in the leaves. I was more, riding the bike. I liked to play school, so I did that a lot. Actually, at first, I didn't live in Piney Woods as a younger child. I didn't move to Piney Woods until I was five years old. Where I lived before, there weren't

children around, so I had to learn how to socialize with other children.

09:04 Rachel Kamis How did that go?

09:05 Rhonda Woolard It was an adjustment because—this is the woods, but I lived several miles into the woods at another location, and there was no houses, no children. It was just us. I just didn't have the socialization skills, so I kind of had to learn. It was a challenge.

09:30 Rachel Kamis I bet it was. Something like what all those COVID kids are probably going through now. I can't imagine that, but it seems like you got through it, and you were able to...

09:42 Rhonda Woolard Yeah, I made a lot of friends. I went to Jamesville Elementary, and in middle school, I did leave Piney Woods to go live with my grandparents in Williamston.

09:59 Rachel Kamis So, you were here from five through eleven, or...?

10:03 Rhonda Woolard About eleven or twelve, somewhere along there.

10:06 Rachel Kamis Okay. And then you moved to Williamston until...?

10:12 Rhonda Woolard At least until my oldest son was born. When my oldest son was born, then I moved back to Piney Woods.

10:25 Rachel Kamis And you've been here since?

10:26 Rhonda Woolard No, I've been back and forth. Then I moved back to Williamston. Then I moved back to Piney Woods for several years. My children predominantly grew up in Piney Woods. I think I moved to Piney Woods when my son was in kindergarten, and he graduated from Jamesville High School. My youngest son, he graduated from Jamesville. He was the last class to graduate from Jamesville High School. I think that was 2009.

- 11:04 Rachel Kamis As in it shut down?**
- 11:07 Rhonda Woolard** No, it didn't shut down, but what they did is they consolidated schools. So then, they started having to go to Williamston.
- 11:18 Rachel Kamis Okay, I understand. Since you've moved back several times, I'm curious to know, what keeps bringing you back? Why do you keep moving? Why do you want to live here in Piney Woods Free Union?**
- 11:35 Rhonda Woolard** I like the smallness of it, but it's still not the same as it was when I was a child because a lot of people have...their children have moved away and don't live here. And there are a lot of people that live here now that aren't related to us. So, the atmosphere isn't the same. But the crime is lower. You still have people that still help each other. And then you have the church as the centerpiece of the community.
- 12:23 Rachel Kamis Do you feel like your sons who grew up here had similar experiences (that you did) growing up in Piney Woods? How do you think their experience differed, because you've noted that it's changed a bit?**
- 12:40 Rhonda Woolard** They didn't have all of the experiences that I had, but they did have more freedom to roam around without supervision and family watching out for them. They had, growing up in Uniontown Church, the activities, the trips, the Sunday School, Vacation Bible School. Oh, that was a highlight. As an adult, that was a highlight for me, Vacation Bible School.
- 13:20 Rachel Kamis Vacation Bible School?**
- 12:21 Rhonda Woolard** Yes.
- 12:21 Rachel Kamis So, you'd travel and do Bible School? Where'd y'all go?**

- 13:26 Rhonda Woolard** No, here. It would be here every summer.
- 13:29 Rachel Kamis** **Oh, okay.**
- 13:30 Rhonda Woolard** And that makes me think about when I was a child, —this was years ago—we used to have a summer program here at the church. And all the kids used to come. And the kids from Dartons, they would come here also. And we would play games, we would play Uno, we would play checkers, we would play kickball out here. This part of the church wasn't there when I was a child. This annex part, it wasn't there. And there used to be some trees. We used to play kickball, they used to feed us lunch out here. What else did we used to play? I know we used to play Uno, and we used to play checkers, and mostly kickball. Mostly, everybody played kickball. And that's how we, both communities, interrelated together. And also back then, Bishop Boston, he was the pastor here and to the church at Promise Land. So, two Sundays he preached here, and two Sundays he preached at Promise Land. And we used to go to each other's churches.
- 14:50 Rachel Kamis** **That sounds really nice. I bet you were great at kickball.**
- 14:54 Rhonda Woolard** I actually was.
- 14:56 Rachel Kamis** **Yeah, I believe it. So, you mentioned your uncle, I would love to hear more about your family. Was there anyone else who was particularly impactful for you growing up?**
- 15:09 Rhonda Woolard** Yes, my Aunt Flora. She was very instrumental in my life. She worked in tobacco, and she would always help buy my school clothes and give me money. I used to go to her house all the time. I remember one summer when she worked in tobacco, I kept her kids for her to work, and the truck used to come pick me up in the morning and drop me off to her house, and then she would get on the truck and go to work.

- 15:49 Rachel Kamis **Is your aunt still with us?**
- 15:54 Rhonda Woolard Yes, she's still.
- 15:57 Rachel Kamis **What about her do you love?**
- 16:00 Rhonda Woolard She's just always been in my corner. It's just something that I never forget. It's nothing for me to just give her money. She likes Captain George's; I'll take her to Captain George's. Because I just never forgot how she was always there for me.
- 16:28 Rachel Kamis **That's really beautiful. It's special to have someone like that in your life. My family always says like, the kind of person you can call at 3 AM, you know? So, next question: What does the legacy of Piney Woods Free Union mean to you, and where do you consider home?**
- 16:52 Rhonda Woolard Well, it's my roots. And it's always been interesting to me that we were never slaves, and also that it was an independent community. And also that our heritage is a mixture of African American, Caucasian, Native American. So, we're a diverse community. And also, there's a lot of speculation about where we originated—if we are part of the Lost Colony and different things. And that mystery hasn't been solved. For it to be Eastern North Carolina, not to have been slaves. That's a rare statement.
- 17:55 Rachel Kamis **Oh, definitely, and that's one of the reasons why Piney Woods Free Union is so special, right? Do you mind telling me a bit more about what you've learned or that process of growing up? Did you grow up hearing a lot about your community's history or did you learn about it more through self-learning and self-discovery? What was that process like?**
- 18:20 Rhonda Woolard Well, she's not alive now, but Carolyn Smith-Reyes, she used to do a lot of talking about our Native American heritage. And growing up, I really wasn't really interested in that. As I'm getting older, I'm more interested in our history and where we came from. One of my cousins, Ruby Whitehurst-Thigpen, she does a lot of research on

our ancestry, and she posts a lot of it on Facebook. And she's posting old pictures of individuals that I've never met and tracing our line, and that's fascinating. But growing up, I wasn't interested in that. And now as an adult, for example, Ruby Whitehurst-Thigpen, she published some books, and I've just purchased those books. And it's about Piney Woods and stories of Piney Woods. And I've just purchased those. And I also wanted to get William's grandfather's book—that's the Barbers' book—, but it's not in print. And I've kind of reached out to family to see if anybody has a copy that I can have, but they don't. But I really want those things, more so, to pass on to my children. Because our history, we're losing. A lot of the elders, the older ones that knew the history, are gone. And this is great because this will help to preserve our history.

- 20:20 Rachel Kamis** **Yeah. That's what we're trying to do. I can get it after, but I want the name of those books. I can look it up on my cell.**
- 20:29 Rhonda Woolard** I know one of them is *Pine Needles*. I can't remember the other two. I probably can message Cameron with it.
- 20:42 Rachel Kamis** **Okay. That'd be perfect.**
- 20:45 Rhonda Woolard** But one is *Pine Needles*. I know one is *Pine Needles*. And like I said, the author is Ruby Whitehurst-Thigpen.
- 20:59 Rachel Kamis** **Thigpen?**
- 21:01 Rhonda Woolard** T-H-I-G-P-E-N.
- 21:03 Rachel Kamis** **Cool. Thank you so much. Another question that I have for you is if there's anything else about yourself, your family, Piney Woods Free Union that you'd like to share or talk about?**
- 21:28 Rhonda Woolard** I guess, more so, I know an interest that I have. I would like to see more of the lineage researched. But other than that, I think that's it.
- 21:47 Rachel Kamis** **And learn even more about your roots? You mentioned that you know a bit about your mom's side, but not as much with**

your dad's side, right? I understand that. Okay, well, that's all I have for you, Rhonda.

22:02 Rhonda Woolard

Okay!

22:03 Rachel Kamis

I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with us. It's absolutely an honor and a privilege to sit down on this picnic bench with you. Thank you.

22:10 Rhonda Woolard

Thank you.