



In collaboration with

**Randy James and Wanda Whitaker,
Piney Woods Free Union Community Members**

Date: March 26, 2023

Interviewer: Megan Corey

00:00	Megan Corey	Yeah, so could you guys both just tell us maybe a little bit about yourselves?
00:07	Randy James	Well, I work to the town of Plymouth, and been there about seven years and plan on retiring from there. And I'm 60 years old, I'll be 60 in August. And basically, I've been living here all my life. And like I said, my aunt – Douglas – his mama used to cook round potato pies and used to sell it to the community. And that been a long time ago, and I miss 'em. And, back then, we used to have a corn picker, that go in the field and pick corn. We used to go with a horse behind, and we used to break the corn and stuff off, and we used to take the corn and shell it with a sheller. We used to do that in the older days. That been years and years ago. And we used to play with Billy, what's his name that came down, Billy Barber? Billy Barber daddy. We used to go and play with them all the time right over here. Used to have a swimming pool. Billy, I hope you get this. We used to have a good time playing in the pool. That been a long time ago, and every time we'd get in, we'd fall over, all the water spill out, then we'd have to fill it back up. But, that's all I have. So, Wanda?
02:03	Wanda Whitaker	I am retired. I've worked most of my life. I've lived here most of my life. I have two kids and a husband, and what else do you want?
02:22	Megan Corey	That's great. We can get into more specifics, but that was a great start. So what is your guys' understanding of your family history?

02:39	Wanda Whitaker	Anything in particular?
02:41	Megan Corey	Honestly, as far as you can go back. If they connect or how it connects to the Piney Woods Free Union community.
02:52	Wanda Whitaker	My granddaddy was Joseph James and his wife was Honey, and all I know–
03:06	Randy James	See I never knew–
03:07	Wanda Whitaker	We didn't know them because by the time we were born they were gone.
03:13	Randy James	Right, but I knew my mama mama. I knew her–
03:18	Wanda Whitaker	Sally Whitehurst, she was our grandmama.
03:18	Randy James	They call her Ms. Sally Whitehurst. Right. I ain't never knew the one on the other side of my daddy but my mama mama, I knew her – Ms. Sally. But for anybody else, or whatever you call it, my mama, she used to get up, and my daddy, they used to get up early in the morning and go put in tobacco to try to make ends meet. And that been years ago 'til the generation started gettin' pretty good, and then he got a real job to like [inaudible], used to work there for a long time until that shut down. He went one morning, and found out the gate was locked, and they couldn't go in. So he left from there, and went and tried to make ends meet for us, and went back in Lorewood and started working and been working there ever since, until he got sick. And so my mama and my daddy, both of them passed. My mama passed first this month, and the next month, my daddy passed the next month. They were only 60 years old, and they had cancer, and that how that come about. And he did a good job by raising, how many heads? 13 heads?
04:41	Wanda Whitaker	13. Ten lived, one died in crib death, two miscarriages.

04:53	Randy James	But, like I said, we had a big family, and he had to do what he can to take care of the family, and he did all of that. And we tried to go out there and tried to do a little something, but we went out and on our bike, we would pick up cans or bottles. Back then, they were five cent for a bottle, stuff like that, that you try to keep the household – stuff like that. That’s it. We came a long way than where we’re today.
05:30	Wanda Whitaker	How about when we were small, Sodas didn’t cost but ten cent. Cookies weren’t nothing but a penny. One penny.
05:39	Randy James	Right, a cookie. It was like them big round cookies. And that all you’d see back then in the day. They were good. The sodas that they’re making now, it ain’t like it was back then. Back then, it was a lot better and a lot cheaper, but now since this generation now, things just going up. But back then, it was a lot better. We had, it was comin’ up but still hard for us, but we made it. Thank God.
06:15	Wanda Whitaker	As much crime as there is now, we didn't have any crime. You could go to bed, leave your doors open and the windows up.
06:24	Randy James	Back then, too, we used to have chicken, hogs, cows, and goats, stuff like that. My mama used to tell us, “Go out there are get that chicken.” We’d go out there and get that little white chicken runnin’ around in the yard, chop the chicken’s head off. Before we even chop the head off, he took off flyin’ in the woods. We could never get it. That were our supper. Start flyin’ in the woods, we could never get it. It never come back to us, so that was it. But my mama, daddy, they used to get up early in the morning, water the garden before the sun get up. Water the garden – cabbage, collard greens, watermelon, cucumber, cantaloupe, squash, okra. We did good back then. You got hogs and stuff like that. What we had for the table and what we don’t eat, that we call slop chow. We give to the hogs or the cows and stuff like that. And that what we done. We lived off the farm.
07:41	Megan Corey	Do you guys still have farm, live on a farm?
07:44	Randy James	Well we live on a farm but we don't have no animals and stuff like that anymore. All that is gone, so we don’t have that.
07:54	Wanda Whitaker	Yeah, we came home and were livin’ off the farm, livin’ off the land.

07:58	Randy James	So the land that we own now, it was all farm, like the horses and all that. But now we just live on our land now. But it's all good, it's all good. Like I said, we came a long way. The young generation now, if they know what we were goin' through back then, they are blessed now. What they got now. We came a long way. How did we make it? God did that for us. He brought us through to where we are today. [Wanda Whitaker: Amen]. But the only thing I can say the new generation now, that the people is living now, and way back then you ain't got not bathroom, you got to go outside [Wanda Whitaker: outhouse]. Outhouse. We did all that. But now, we got bathrooms, [Wanda Whitaker: running water] running water – hot, cold – running water. We got refrigerator. We got all that. We are blessed.
09:07	Wanda Whitaker	When we was comin' up, we had to use an ice block in a burlap sack. That's how we got our ice – in a block. That's how we kept our food and stuff cold. But today, it's a blessin'.
09:24	Randy James	It's a blessin', yeah. But I gotta tell anybody. The kids grow up, they want this and they want that. Got be blessed by what God give you now. But where we come from, from way back then, we didn't have none of the stuff what we have now.
09:35	Wanda Whitaker	'Cause with the meat, we had to smoke it in a smokehouse to eat.
09:46	Randy James	Used to hang 'em up in a smokehouse, close the door, and the meat would taste good. You got to survive. If you want to eat, we got to survive in order to go out there and get your own food. And back then, you don't have no car – tractor and go and get your food. But we are blessed. [Wanda Whitaker: Amen]. We are blessed. Thanks to the good Lord all the time, and Billy Barber, and we love you too.
10:23	Megan Corey	Yeah, much different it sounds like, back then from now.
10:27	Randy James	It was tough. It was real hard, but we made it. [Wanda Whitaker: We made it]. We made it. and we all stuck together. All in Piney Woods, we all family, all cousins in Piney Woods. [Wanda Whitaker: Everybody family]. Everybody is family. What they need, if we don't have it, they have it. It's back and forth like that. And the same road that we live on now, it was Creek Road. It wasn't pavement. It was dirt. If a car passes, you ride on that road – [Wanda Whitaker: This road was dirt.] All this right here, it was dirt.

11:12	Wanda Whitaker	This church – our granddaddy built that. He built that, and then as years passed by, they added on, but our granddaddy Joseph James built that church.
11:21	Randy James	And the church wasn't like that [Wanda Whitaker: No it was not.] It was a wooden church.
11:29	Wanda Whitaker	It sure was. He built it with his own hands. It's a blessin'. We have come a long way.
11:37	Randy James	It was a blessin', but I wouldn't want to go back. I'm glad where I am now.
11:38	Wanda Whitaker	Amen.
11:43	Megan Corey	You guys also mentioned that you had a big family – a lot of siblings. Could you tell me a little bit about them?
11:53	Wanda Whitaker	Our brothers and sisters? Well, our oldest brother, he died at a young age.
12:05	Randy James	In front of our uncle Spruce house. His tire hit a ditch and flipped over, and he was 22 years old. And he had two beautiful girls, they're our nieces. And before he left, he must've knew somethin' gon' happen, he told them that he love them and gave 'em a kiss. And when he left that day, and I was comin' home, I didn't know what was goin' on. And they said our brother had a car accident, and later on that evening, he died. Broke his neck.
12:49	Wanda Whitaker	So we have a sister in Williamston, we have a sister in Raleigh, and the rest of us stay around here in Piney Woods.
13:07	Randy James	Right, but our oldest sister stay in Williamston. She our oldest sister. She 71. And then we got our older sister next to me, she stay in Raleigh. She Laverne. She 59 years old. And our baby sister, Donna, she stay–
13:39	Wanda Whitaker	And we got a sister stay over there Paulette. Then Mandy, me, Jenny, and Donna, we stay in a row on the Creek Road.

13:51	Megan Corey	So you guys are all very close. That's wonderful.
13:56	Randy James	And we keep in contact with each other every now and then. You can come up on the porch, and you can say, "Hey, how y'all doin'?" we all love each other. We still together and keep in contact with each other, so that's still good. So we got how many heads now?
14:23	Wanda Whitaker	Nine.
14:24	Randy James	Nine heads. Six girls and three boys.
14:31	Megan Corey	What are your some of your favorite parts of the community – now and from your childhood? I know a lot has changed from when you guys were young, so maybe if your favorite parts of the community from when you were a child have changed, and now they're different – What do you cherish about this community?
15:07	Randy James	Well, I like it, but way back then we used to ride bikes. We used to play hide and go seek.
15:22	Wanda Whitaker	Hopscotch. Climb the pear trees. Knock the pears down, and climb the pear trees, it was so fun.
15:35	Randy James	And we used to have a pony named Fury, and we used to get in the cow pasture. I think the pony, he was kinda a little older, and he used to chase us.
15:50	Wanda Whitaker	What about the goat – the billy goat when get off the school bus. When we get off the school bus, that goat know when we came home. He'd be waitin' for us. Time we get off that bus, he'd chase us all the way to the house. That was so much fun.
16:08	Randy James	And then we used to get off the bus, we used to play basketball. You don't see that around here no more like that. We'd play basketball, either ride the bikes. You might see a few ridin' the bikes, but you don't see a whole lot back then. But back then, we really didn't have no bikes because way back in the day, we didn't have no bikes way back then. We didn't have no bikes back then.

16:40	Wanda Whitaker	But the thing about it was that all the kids was here, and we all had fun. Now that you're older and married and grown, the kids gone. And ain't nobody but us old folks.
16:56	Randy James	Right. Back then, it was a whole lot of fun. You ain't even got to worry about a whole lot of killing and shooting and all that going on, but back then, we would play tag or, like she said, hopscotch, hide and go seek. You don't see that now. They don't get together and do all that stuff right now. They don't do that. We go separate ways and, like I said, years go by and things change. They don't do that now. You used to play marbles. You loved to play marbles. Get out of school, used to play marbles, get together, and "Imma take your marble, imma beat you." You don't see that now. That's it.
17:54	Megan Corey	Did you guys play a lot together as children?
18:01	Randy James	Yeah, we used to have fun. Like I said, we walk around the house, and with other kids too. We get along real good, we get along real good, yes ma'am. I can't think of nobody than our family to have a good time. We used to have one playin' out there in the yard. But when the time reached, you better wash your hand. You gonna wash your hand or you might just get a slap on the hand. You got to wash them hands. It was nice, but, like I said, now this generation is totally different from back then. But like I said, now, you can't has your windows up now and think that nobody ain't gone come in. You can't do that. You gotta lock your doors. Back then it was more safer, but now you can't do it.
19:06	Wanda Whitaker	Our granddaddy house is out there on the farmland. Where y'all was at before. That's where my daddy and his brothers and sisters was raised.
19:20	Randy James	My uncle, Happy Jack – It was a bar. Have y'all seen that bar over there on the side? [Megan Corey: Yeah]. He used to bring some cans over there, and when he had enough of them can, he used to come over there and get us and help him load it up. And we used to go sell them cans, and when he sell them cans, he give us a little taste of money, said, "Y'all just go and buy y'all a little somethin'." There was a big farm out there, and you see that great big tree – all the trees out there, the pecan trees. Every year, when the pecan bear, my mama, or my daddy, mostly my mama, "Y'all go out there and shake that pecan tree or either throw a stick up there and get the pecan down." We used to go out there with a great big tub and go out there and get them pecans and bring 'em to the house and shell 'em. You talk about some cold water? Good God almighty. Have you seen a pump out there? It was a pump by itself, and back then, that was the coldest water in Piney Woods. It was like iced

		water comin' out the ground. And that was good. And I miss that water. I know I can't get it now because it ain't mine. I don't want to go out there in [inaudible]'s property, ain't it. So, you can't mess with it. But back then, it was nice.
20:59	Wanda Whitaker	And the pecan trees, they still there. They don't don't bear every year, but they bear.
21:04	Randy James	Yeah, right. Right. When hunting season come, when you really want to go kill a deer or something like that, my daddy always be driving down the road, and he see a deer, and he had a gun. He'll jump out of that car and the light on it, and he'll kill the deer. And we had a feast for the next day. But you gotta soak it, you just can't eat it like that. That's wild meat. You got to soak it.
21:39	Janelle James	Did you all tell who your mom and your daddy were?
21:43	Wanda Whitaker and Randy James	Frederick James and Carrie Dell James.
21:48	Janelle James	So Frederick James is the brother of Sylvester James, which is my father. So that's how we are first cousins on her father's side. Her mother was a Hardison, Carradale Hardison, who was Miss Sally Whitehurst's. And who was her daddy?
22:18	Wanda Whitaker	Mama daddy? Isaiah Hardison.
22:23	Randy James	So this is my first cousin. We're first cousins.
22:26	Janelle James	Yes, we're first cousins. These brother and sister here.
22:29	Randy James	I said, "Billy, remember that time that we was at there to your house and played in that pool. Don't you forget." Yep, we had a good time.
22:42	Megan Corey	You did mention that everyone in this community is kind of like family.

22:46	Wanda Whitaker	We all family.
22:48	Janelle James	Related either on one side of the family or on both sides of the family depending upon who.
22:57	Wanda Whitaker	All the brothers and the sisters all stay around here in Piney Woods.
23:03	Janelle James	That's exactly right, but exception of Aunt Vera, who went to farm, but she didn't get far. All of us are related – family ties on top of family ties. Anything else?
23:27	Megan Corey	My last question is, what does the legacy of Piney Woods Free Union mean to you? Very open ended, but you can take it in multiple ways.
23:42	Janelle James	What does it mean, y'all?
23:44	Randy James	It mean a whole lot to me. I've been here all my life. It means a whole lot to me.
23:56	Janelle James	It means a whole to you because you grew up here. And your mom and daddy were from here. And you learned the stories about the community bein' settled by free people of color, free Black folks, no slavery in Piney Woods. You heard those stories comin' up, right? [Randy James: Right. Yeah.] And the land has remained in a lot of our hands. There are some folks that have sold land away, but a lot of us still maintained the land in some kind of way, form, or fashion. Either through farms, or homes, or whatever.
24:37	Randy James	Yeah, but I love it. I wouldn't change it for nothing in the world. But I'm glad it's a new generation. I would like to go back to that. But we did what we had to do back then, and, like I said, now we here. We now growed up, and we can talk about the old times. It's good to be here. If it weren't for God, we wouldn't be here. But we gotta put him first.
25:02	Wanda Whitaker	Amen.

25:06	Megan Corey	And you have talked a lot about how the community has changed a lot and so that makes sense that the legacy is also kind of changing too. Lastly, we touched on a lot, but is there anything else about you guys or your family or the Piney Woods Free Union community that you'd like to share that we didn't really talk about?
25:36	Wanda Whitaker	I think we talked about everything.
25:40	Randy James	Well, I think that's it to me. Yeah, I think that's it.
25:45	Megan Corey	Great. Yeah, no. Thank you guys so much.