CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Mr. Argus Gene Parks

INTERVIEWER: James M. Denham

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Lawton Chiles Center for Florida History
McKay Archives, Florida Southern College
Lakeland, Florida

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M= James M. Denham ("Mike")
G= Gene Parks

M: My name is James M. Denham, and I am here at the Lawton Chiles Center for Florida History at the McKay Archives at Florida Southern College. And I'm here today, it's October 27th, 2009, and I'm here to speak with Mr. Gene Parks. And your full name, Mr. Parks, is?

G: Argus Gene Parks

M: A-R-G-U-S Gene Parks. And we're here today to talk about your life and begin an oral history of your life. We're not exactly sure how many days that will be but we want to get a full measure of your life. And I'm very glad you're with us today.

G: Thank you very much.

M: Yes.

G: I'm honored.

M: I have a pretty good idea of your chronological life but what I'd like to do is start by asking you where you were born, when you were born, and that basic information.

G: I'm from Newton County, Mississippi. I was born on June 2, 1929 in Lawrence, Mississippi. It is four miles from Newton, Mississippi. My family was raised on a farm in Lawrence.

M: And your parents' names were?

G: Harold Argus Parks and Lucy Mae Woodham.

M: And they were there, how long had they lived there before you were born?

G: I came two years after they were married.

M: And were they from that county, Newton County, Mississippi?

G: They were indeed.

M: They were both from that county?

G: Yes.

M: Do you remember your grandparents or elderly people that you knew as your relatives? Who were the oldest people you knew that were your relatives in 1929?

G: I knew my grandfather, my father's side. His mother was deceased. And I knew both of my other grandparents, the Woodhams, E. E. Woodham and Lucy Woodham were their names.

M: Do you remember in 1929 people that would have fought in the Civil War? Was there any evidence when you were growing up of Civil War veterans or was there any talk of that kind of thing?

G: No, not really.

M: Did your parents and your grandparents ever talk about their ancestors that were in the Civil War?

G: No.

M: What was the occupation of your parents, of your father?

G: Farmers.

M: Farmers? Did they own their own land or were they sharecroppers?

G: They were sharecroppers between the two grandparents.

M: Uh-huh.

G: We lived -- I was born on the farm of my mother's parents. And I was born in a little tenant house that was actually in a cotton field which was a stone's throw from the main house which was the family home. So that's the kind of environment that I was born into. My dad's family lived -- actually it was six miles from where my mother lived. And his family was nothing but farming.

G: My grandfather on my mother's side was a county supervisor. He was in that capacity from the time that I could remember him for many, many years. He was a beef supervisor.

M: When you say supervisor, was he a --

G: It's the same thing as a county commissioner.

M: And that was an elected position?

G: Yes.

M. Do you remember him running for office?

G: I do. As a matter of fact, I remember playing in the loft at the barn with a first cousin. I was an only child. In fact, I was an only child until I was 19 and a senior in college. But this cousin and I were playing in the loft of the barn, and we came across a box of, we didn't know what they were when we opened it. It was all of these cards, these political cards that they handed out.

M: Handbills?

G: Yeah. So I have that strong memory.

M: And you were probably only, how old were you then?

G: I was probably seven or eight, something like that.

M: Now when you were growing up, I guess you worked really hard on the farm, and what were some of the things that you did during the day that you had to do just about every day or pretty much every week?

G: My particular family, that is to say my parents and me, the three of us, were basically nomads. So I never in all of my life spent any real time working on the farm.

M: Okay.

G: When I was very small is when we went to Hemet, California.

M: Probably about the time you found the handbills – you went to California?

G: That's right.

M: Before we leave Mississippi for the first time, I want to ask you if you -- did you have a lot of playmates? Do you remember going to school in Mississippi at all? Were you old enough to go to school?

G: I was. I was in the first grade in Mississippi and then I went to California, and they put me -- I was supposed to be in the second grade and they put me back in the first grade because I didn't meet the standards at that point. There was that much difference in the educational systems. When we returned to Mississippi, I was a third-grader but they moved me up to fourth grade.

M: That tells you something about the education in Mississippi versus California.

G: That's exactly right.

M: Were there black people that lived near you, and do you remember growing up as a little boy having any interaction with black kids?

G: Very, very little. Adults, yes, but children, no. Where they lived was not close to where we lived but there were African-Americans always around the farm in various

capacities.

M: Okay.

G: My father went into the timber business and all of the workers there were African-Americans.

M: Now, how big was the farm? Was the farm owned originally by your grandparents?

G: Yes.

M: Your mother's parents or your father's parents?

G: Well, it's the same with both of them. Each of them had a farm.

M: Okay.

G: And they were owned by the grandparents.

M: Okay. What age were you when you decided or your family decided to go to California?

G: I was a second-grader.

M: How did they explain to you where you were going and why you were going, and what was going through your mind when you learned that you were going to be going to a place that you just couldn't believe what it was like.

G: It did not register with me. However, the trip over on the train made a great deal of an impact on me because there was a passenger unknown to me or my mother who took quite an interest in my mother. And I remember my feelings about it because he gave me a little glass lantern filled with candy and I simply did not want it because I sensed that he did not belong. At that age, it has always intrigued me that my feeling was so intense in that protection of my mother. That's a strong memory.

M: So obviously your father wasn't on the train?

G: No, no. He and three others, he and three others, that's right, he and three others went to Hemet from Lawrence. And how they got there, I never did know. Whether they had the money to go or whether they thumbed it. But once they had enough money to send for the families, then they did so.

G: They had learned that there was work available in the canneries.

M: And this is rough, hard times? This is 1936, something like that?

G: Hard, hard, hard times.

M: Right.

G: So that's why they went all the way across the country to get a job. The cannery

owned the area where we lived and they were called courts. The court that we were in had a road that divided into two parts and the Anglos were where we lived and the Hispanics were across the road. And my memory of the Hispanics is vivid, vivid, vivid. Because on Saturday evenings, they threw a party the likes of which you could never imagine. And so that's one of my truly vivid, vivid memories as well as the long strings of red peppers on the porches.

M: Now were they wild parties, drinking parties --

G: Oh, I don't know what they were because all I could do --

M: You could just hear them. Okay. Did you go to school in California?

G: Yes.

M: Were there any Asians there or just Hispanics and Anglos?

G: Anglos is all that I knew.

M: Okay. Okay. And you stayed there, your father worked there in the cannery and what --

G: My mother worked in the cannery.

M: Okay. What town was that closest to?

G: Hemet. It's close to Riverside.

M: So did you like it there?

G: Interesting, I did. I had one little friend and he and I took care of ourselves. As you can imagine, there were no babysitters, there were no services to take care of kids. Everybody was on their own. And he and I simply created our own world and picked up the beer bottles and took them to the store and got a little bit of soda pop or something for them. We decided one time that we wanted to learn how to put our heads under water so we got a bucket and filled it with water and held our nose and so on. And then, you know, it was just the two of us and we were completely on our own.

G: The lifestyle, I would like to tell you about one episode with my dad. Not with me, but about him. He was all his life compelled to work. That is to say he was driven. After he finished his shift at the cannery, for a few weeks, I don't know how many but a few weeks, he took another job which was a night job, and it was irrigating the fields that were close to the cannery, close enough he could walk to it. And what he would do, the way it was set up, the roads were like so (indicating) and at the end of the road was a ditch where the water was for the irrigation, one at each end of the field. He took a hoe or a shovel, probably a shovel and he'd break open the channel between the field and the ditch, and then he would run to the end of the field. And he would lie down in what we called the middles, he would lie down in the middle and he would drop his hand over in the row that would have water coming. And he would sleep until the water reached his hand and so that's how he was compensating somehow to make it. I have strong memories about all of that.

M: Uh-huh. So you would have been how old when you came to California first?

G: Well, I was a second-grader.

M: Second grade, so that's probably about seven or eight years old. And then you were there how many years?

G: We were there two and a half.

M: And then what were the circumstances under which you left California to go back to Mississippi?

G: They had accumulated enough that they felt like they could go home.

M: So this was almost like an immigrant experience? In other words, almost like what Mexicans might do today, they come to the U.S., and they earn a little money so they can take the money back to Mexico?

G: Very much so.

M: So it's almost like rural southerners in a poverty situation going to somewhere and they don't really intend to stay but just make enough money to maybe go back and survive and do better in Mississippi?

G: Exactly.

M: Okay. Good. I wanted to clarify that.

G: Yeah.

M: So they never really intended to stay in California?

G: When we got back, one of my memories is that one of my little cousins, he heard me say something and he said to his mother, he said, Argus Gene has changed his tune.

M: What did he mean by that?

G: He meant that I did not have my southern accent.

M: Oh, okay.

G: So I had been impacted somewhat by my environment.

M: Okay. You get back to Mississippi, and that would have been about 1938? And so you went back to school, you were put ahead in class because you had learned enough to go the grade ahead in the fourth grade?

G: Yes.

M: What kind of religious involvement and also social involvement did you have at that

time as a child? Did you have a church that you went to regularly?

G: My family was never church oriented.

M: Okay.

G: When we came back and Dad was in the timber business, we lived in Lucien, Mississippi, which had about four stores, and there was a little Baptist church. I went on my own to that church to a Sunday school class. I didn't go there many times, but of the times that I went, there was one time when the teacher asked me to pray. And that was my first public prayer.

M: Were you kind of nervous about that or kind of --

G: Oh, I don't really remember having a feeling about it. It's just that I remember that I did so.

M: What kind of social activities did you have, did you play baseball, play ball? Did you have a lot of fishing, anything like that or was it just work, work, work?

G: My dad and I fished all our lives. As far as interacting with other children ... And most of the time it was with very, very few people. You know, we would have a neighbor within two or three ... that sort of thing. Cousins, when I was back home, when we were back in Newton or Lawrence, but as far as social interaction's concerned, that was pretty much limited to those kind of things.

M: First of all, did you have radio in your house, radio?

G: I have to tell you that one of my most wonderful, wonderful vivid memories of my whole life is that it's almost dark and I can hear daddy whistling as he comes across the field. It's already dark and he's leading Old Bob, it's a horse. And I'm at the door or at the window, and I cannot wait until he gets there. And the reason that I am so excited is that I get the chance to turn the radio on. That was my privilege to get to turn it on.

M: And so that was kind of the understanding is that you couldn't do that until he got home?

G: No, no, no, no. The battery, you know, is this long and this wide (indicating) --

M: Oh, yeah, and you can't waste it until daddy gets home.

G: And you don't fool with that.

M: Yeah, okay. And so what would you listen to on the radio? What kind of shows?

G: Lum and Abner.

M: And what about ballgames or sporting events?

G: None. No, all we heard was the Grand Ole Opry or Amos and Andy or that sort of thing.

M: What is your first memory besides finding those handbills up in the hayloft, what is your first memory of political event or political campaign or political event as a kid?

G: I can't really say, other than my grandfather. And I knew that he was in politics and I was with him -- I stayed at these two places, these two farms are like six miles apart. And we sharecropped with one and then we sharecropped with the other. But when we were sharecropping with my mother's father, this is also where I was born, in his cotton patch. I was very much aware that he was not like anybody else that I knew because everybody else that I knew worked.

M: And he didn't work?

G: He did not work.

M: He didn't seem to work.

G: He never worked. But he was always off, you know --

M: Did he have a car?

G: Oh, he had a truck.

M: Yeah.

G: Studebaker.

M: And did he dress pretty well, better than the rest?

G: Oh, yeah.

M: Not in overalls?

G: Not terribly more but --

M: Yeah, but not like farmers?

G: No, no, no, no.

M: Did you look up to him? Did you say, well, that looks like a good deal, I want to be like him?

G: I never thought of it that way. He was --

M: Now, Franklin Roosevelt was president during all this time?

G: Uh-huh.

M: Did people talk about Franklin Roosevelt? Did people talk about the New Deal? Did you hear his speeches on the radio? Was there any real discussion of Franklin Roosevelt? Did you see his picture everywhere?

G: No.

M: When you went to high school, did you develop any interest in any specific subjects or did you just kind of go through the normal process?

G. When I went to high school, we now were no longer cutting timber. And you asked me about my chores. The one chore that I had was to peel pine poles.

M: Okay.

G: And when I was, you know, eight ... seven, eight, nine, like that, we had a supervisor of the workers. His name was Cliff. And he could never say Argus Gene. He was African-American. And so he always called me Ernestine. And I still consider myself Ernestine.

G. Because Cliff and I were absolutely family as far as I was concerned.

M: And he worked for your father?

G: He was the straw boss for my dad.

M: Okay.

G: And I would get $1.00 for peeling one pole. And at the end of the day or at noon, I would buy two RC Colas, one for me and one for Cliff. The next day, Cliff would buy. And so that relationship developed into as much of a family member as I've ever had.

M: Was he about the same age as your father?

G: Yes. I just want to say one other thing about ... When I came home from college the first time I was back home that he saw me, he looked at me and then he caught me by the shirt and turned me around like this (indicating) and walked around me, and he said, Uh-hmm, Ernestine's still got that schoolboy pack (inaudible). So that's the kind of, you know...

M: Right. Well, if you like, can you talk a little bit about the work that your father did. He was obviously in timber? Was it pulp wood or was it turpentine or --

G: Poles and pilings.

M: And how many people did he have working for him with Cliff?

G: A crew would be two for sawing, one for limbing and one for peeling. So that's basically a crew. And he would have no more than a couple of crews like that. What his job was, he went through the woods and marked the trees to be cut. He was good at it. And that was his role.

M: So he would contract with other landowners to do that or was it all his land?

G: None of it was his land. And he was working, most of the time, he was working for

my uncle, which was his brother-in-law, who did have some resources and had a pole yard. So dad's timber was hauled to the yard. By that time, they had machines that peeled the poles. So that kept him in that business. And, you know, as I said earlier, we were nomads because, literally, for example, Newton and Lawrence were home but a little town up the road is Decatur, and so I lived in Decatur. And then there is Chunky over here, and I lived over there. And then there was Union up here, lived up there. And then there was Louisville, not Loui-ville (phonetic) but Louisville up here. Lived there.

M: You were on the road all the time, kind of with your father. That was probably kind of a neat thing or fun thing to do. Was this just in the summer or was it pretty much all year round?

G: Well, he worked, you know, all year round. And --

M: So you accompanied your father --

G: I fitted into it as, you know --

M: So you got to know a lot of different places and a lot of different people.

G: Oh, yes.

M: And see a lot of different things.

G: We did indeed. And --

M: A lot of good things, a lot of bad things probably.

G: The worst part of my life was the inability of my daddy to allow an African-American to be a real human being. I watched him like a hawk. And he never abused with language or with conduct. I was close enough to him to watch him. And I watched him. And he was never -- never did he cross those lines. He was not a cussing man and he treated everybody the same; however, if you were black, you never came to his front door. Never. As long as he lived.

G: Fast-forwarding when he is older and he's been running his dairy for years, he grew vegetables all the time. He had to do something all the time, and he did a wonderful job in growing vegetables. What he would do was to put all of the produce on a great big table and he would sort them. And we never got premium vegetables because they would all be sold. But here's the interesting dynamic, he would take his produce that he was going to sell, and he would take it and then sell it someplace. And I said one time, well, I want to go with you. And he said, no. And I said, well -- this is when I'm older -- and I said, I just really would like to go. He said, I know what you're all about. He said, let me tell you, he said, I sell my produce in the black community. He said, I know what you're asking. He said, when I leave the house, I go to Jitney Jungle and I find out what they're charging for tomatoes, and he said, that's what I charge. In other words, I'm not taking advantage of my customers. I know what you're thinking. But he would never let anybody go with him, except he had a grandson that he would let him go when he was very, very young.

G: But I was home one time and he had a little device, it was a pea sheller. Well, what had happened was that one of his customers gave him this pea sheller. But he would never talk about it, except he did say, you know, they gave it to me. Now, that's, you see, he had relationships and they were important relationships to him but he could never ever --

M: He couldn't function on an idea of equality then?

G: Right.

M: To him, it was just beyond his capability of accepting the fact that they should be on an equal basis entirely.

G: Absolutely.

M: Just couldn't accept it.

G: Not at all. And his -- I can just see him now, we were bailing hay, and we needed a can of gas. I took the can up to the grocery store that had a gas place as well, and there was an African-American came out. When I got there, I told him I needed some gas. You know, so he filled it. And I said, Will you put that on Harold Parks' bill? The man that owned the place was one of the men that had gone to Hemet with us. So they were like brothers, had been all their life. Well, this guy says, Say what? I said, just put it on Harold Parks' -- he said, no. He said, his credit is no good. So I couldn't wait to tell daddy when I got back to the field. Well, that was nothing but what I know, what I observed in the south. Was it Dick Gregory?

M: Uh-huh.

G: Remember what he said?

M: I know who you're talking about.

G: Dick Gregory said, In the north, they don't care how big I get. In the south, they don't care how little I stay. In other words, in my experiences, you know, with African-Americans, has for me also been a personal relationship. And I, from my father's story, I became acutely aware of just how awful that divide was. And in spite of recent things, still is. Maybe too much of --

M: The individual really gets along.

G: No. In the south, they don't care how close I get as long as I don't get big. That's what it is.

M: Okay.

G: That's what it is.

M: Okay.

G: That's the key.

M: In other words, you don't want to become too big for your britches.

G: That's right. And that's the south.

M: Okay. Right.

G: And what he said about the north, I'm kind of mixing that on myself. Was it in the north, they don't care how close you get nor how big you get, as long as you don't get close?

M: Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about your high school years? And what was it like to be on the road a lot and then try to at the same time go to high school? Did you go to a high school all the time or did you kind of move around?

G: No. We were fixed at points long enough for me to put roots down. When it comes to high school, well, junior high, I was in Joppa, Illinois. That's when, in your information, you know already, they probably do not, but we were living in Joppa, Illinois. And my father was in charge of -- had the responsibility of unloading crossties from barges that had come up from Tennessee. These were being shipped to the Chicago area. He had a brother who lived in Clifton, Tennessee, who was buying the crossties from farmers along the banks of the Tennessee and he would put them on the barges. Dad would then send them ... my aunt, they lived in Tennessee, was from Illinois. And she wanted to go home. So my dad and his brother made a job switch. So I had already gone into junior high when I was in Joppa. My experience in Joppa was really quite an interesting experience because I was labeled as being a below the Mason Dixon Line, the other students.

M: So you were obviously in-equipped to handle academic work?

G: Yes. They did not like me. The result was that when it snowed and I rode my bike, I got clobbered all the way home.

M: Snowballs?

G: Uh-huh. And on occasion, they would take my bike and tie it to the flagpole rope and raise it rather highly and let's see what would happen if you dropped it. So I was never accepted by certain elements in the school. I had little girlfriends that, you know, buddied with me. But the guys never did really look too kindly on me. So that was my experience with that. When we did the job swap and moved to Clifton, Tennessee, that was the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. And the reason that it is, is that the Methodist church was across the street from where we were renting housing from a little widow lady, and they -- in Clifton, the church was there. My dad wouldn't go but he insisted that I go. And I came home one time and I didn't stay for church, and he had a fit.

M: Your mother, what about your mother? What did she --

G: She was very quiet about it all.

M: Did she go?

G: No. Nobody went but me.

M: Did you think that was kind of peculiar, kind of strange?

G: I had been with it all my life.

M: Okay. So it had been kind of like that a long time.

G: But the reason that Clifton turned out to be such a monumental part of my life, of what was number one, stability because we were there, you know, long enough for me to actually be a senior. We moved when I was a senior. At the end of my junior year, we moved back to Newton. So I graduated from Newton. But Allen Hardison was the preacher, and he taught typing and Bible in the public school. My dad, we were in California, my daddy bought a car, I sat in his lap and steered. We were out one Sunday morning picking up walnuts in a walnut grove and he told me to bring the car. I went down and got in the car and drove it up a tree. And the result of that was he would never teach me to drive. Allen Hardison taught me to drive. Allen Hardison had eight churches, eight little churches. I signed on to be his chauffer because I wanted to drive. End result was that he took a great interest in me and Julius Montague.

G: And he took the two of us to Asbury College for a weekend because that's where he wanted us to go to school. Well, the idea of going to college was so totally alien to me because I had absolutely no ambition to do that whatsoever. I mean, you know, school had been nothing but hassle for me my whole life. Because I can remember that we moved so often, we moved to Forest and mama and daddy just dropped me off at the door and I went in and enrolled myself in school, and I'm a fifth-grader, sixth-grader or something like that. So education just wasn't my thing.

G: When we moved back to Newton from Clifton, I graduated from high school and then I went to work for Brooke's Ice Cream Company in Meridian. And I weighed 130 pounds and my job was lifting ten-gallon cans of milk all day long and scrubbing the vat. All of a sudden, by the end of that summer, it occurred to me that I really ought to go to college.

M: Scrubbing vats and lifting ten-gallon, you know, yeah.

G: So I got the idea of going to college at that point. And the only college campus I had ever been on was Asbury College. And I don't even know now how it was that they accepted me. But they did. But Asbury College is a very, very religious institution. Back then it was so much so that if you went to a movie, you were very close to hell. Very close. I got on the train and went to Asbury and I can't believe this but I did, I got off the train, I went to a motel, I went to a movie and caught the train the next morning and went to Asbury because I knew it was the last movie I was ever going to see in my life. Anyway, the Asbury experience was unbelievably good for me. The most important thing as I indicated to you is that I met Ms. Kathleen Hendricks from Jay, Florida.

M: So it was a coeducational --

G: Yes. We had about 900 students. Most of the students were going into mission work.

M: Okay. Was it half and half men and women?

G: Pretty close.

M: Now, did most of the kids come into that school with a strong idea that they wanted to be ministers or missionaries?

G: I'm sure that most of them did. I did not.

M: You just kind of stumbled upon it because of your close relationship with that minister?

G: That's correct. I did not see that at all at that point.

M: Did you, as time went on, kind of get -- on that idea?

G: Oh, yes. It became very clear to me that it was the only thing that I would be comfortable spending my life doing.

M: Okay. Can you kind of go through that a little bit and talk about some of the relationships with maybe professors or other students that made you think that? Did it come on gradually or right away?

G: No, it was gradual. But it was environment, pure and simple, environment. And it just was accepted. It was accepted by particularly all of the students that they would go into some form of ministry. And I found myself comfortable in that environment although I had not made a commitment on the subject. But as the years went by, it was more and more of this is where my life is. The end result of that was that I had the student appointment in Tennessee, the Tennessee Conference, many of the students had student appointments. And then whenever they had the school on Mondays because everybody was coming back from the weekend on Mondays. So ...

M: And they were out into the Tennessee area --

G: All over. Indiana, Kentucky. . . .

M: Now, was that pretty soon after you got there you were doing that kind of thing or was it your junior year or --Now, how did your parents relate to the fact that you were at this religious school and that it looked like you were going to be a minister? Were your parents happy about that or were they ambivalent about it or how did they respond to that? Glad to have you out of the house or what?

G: Never did actually express anything either way. Now, this is not related in any way to me but I will just quickly tell you that my brother -- my mother still was not going to church, had never gone to church. She had a sister who lived in Texas. She moved back to Newton. She was a member of the Church of Christ. She persuaded her church in Texas to start a little mission church in Newton. She got mama to go to church. Mama went to church there until she died. My brother went to that church every Sunday and every Wednesday night.

M: Your brother who was almost 20 years younger than you?

G: That's right.

M: Right.

G: The church never thrived. It never had any size to it. Could not support itself. And so the sponsoring church stopped its support and so they no longer had a pastor. And so they said to my brother, would you be our preacher, we don't have one. He's been their preacher for over 20 years. And it's quite an amazing story. Because he and I, and this is another interesting thing, I can see my mother, I can hear her voice, Son, I want you and Brent to be close. And I can just feel it. It's been that way. We have never had one, not one single disagreement or problem. And we've been just like this way our whole lives. And it's been the biggest blessing in the world. That's Argus Gene Parks.

M: Okay. When you graduated, I guess your parents would have been really excited. Did they come to the graduation?

G: No.

M: No?

G: I graduated from the eighth grade. I graduated from high school. I graduated from college. I graduated from the seminary. Nobody's ever been to anything.

M: Tell us about meeting your future wife, what experience that was. It was at the college?

G: Yes.

M: And how did you meet her, and what were the circumstances, and how did you know she was the one?

G: Yes. We, you can imagine that when you have 900 students instead of 50,000, that you know, you get exposed to the people that are there. And she was an outstanding young lady. She's very beautiful. She was elected to class positions. And she was also the first cousin of my roommate, who also turned out to be a Methodist minister. And that, you know, he pushed me a little bit there in stages he didn't want me going with his cousin. But it all worked out extremely well. Kathleen is a wonderful person and I've been extremely blessed to have her as a partner in ministry. That's not an easy role. When we began, we were married, we were still at the four-point circuit and the money was very meager. It's always meager. But she taught school so that we did have enough, you know, to survive on. When we left there, they sent me to a two-point circuit, which was White Bluff Burns in middle Tennessee. Again, she taught while we were there. I was going to seminary in Nashville. And we, as you know, I became the first resident chaplain of the Tennessee State Penitentiary in Nashville.

M: Now, when you accepted that position, were you in graduate school yet?

G: Yeah, that was my last year at Vanderbilt.

M: Okay. How many years before you went to Vanderbilt after you graduated from

Asbury? Did you go right into Vanderbilt or did you --

G: I had two years between.

M: Okay. And then you decided to go on?

G: Yes.

M: What was your thinking as far as going to Vanderbilt? What inspired you to go to seminary? Because you probably didn't need to go to seminary; did you?

G: Yes, I did. It was an essential.

M: Uh-huh.

G: And I was extremely pleased to get to be at Vanderbilt. However, at that point in my life, I had some reservations about the theology of Vanderbilt in comparison to Asbury. And I said after a period of time, I said to one of my professors that I had observed that you can have a closed mind if you are a conservative or a liberal and that I had experienced both of those. And I found that to be really true. It's very difficult to keep an open mind. And then a few things as differently as they might be viewed. My time with my two-point circuit was a time in which that I was -- I told you in writing that one of my members told me that a friend of his had become the warden at the Tennessee State Penitentiary and that he, the warden, had said to this member of mine that he would like to have a full-time, young chaplain for the penitentiary. And my member said I want you to meet my pastor. And so the warden and I met and we clicked and he made arrangements and I became the chaplain. That was an experience that brought dimensions to my life that would never have surfaced. And again, there was a great deal of opportunity in this case to be with and to work with African-Americans, because a very large percentage of the population in all of our prisons these days are African-Americans.

M: So you actually had a place to live close by to the prison in Nashville.

G: We actually lived on the second floor over the warden's office.

M: Okay. So you lived in the prison?

G: In the evening -- it was terrible for my wife. In the evening when they came in from their tasks, it was a hubbub. You could hear. And we could see them --

M: You mean like chain-gang kind of stuff?

G: Yeah.

M: Coming in from the road-gang?

G: Well, no. This particular institution, their job was making furniture and paint for institutions for the state. So they were -- we had a small contingent that was on a farm basis but very -- but the -- I've forgotten where I was with. We could look down into the cell block.

M: That was your view out the window?

G: Uh-huh, right. We had a group that called themselves The Prisonaires.

M: The Prisonaires?

G: Yeah. And they were absolutely awesome musicians. In fact, they had a record that was on The Hit Parade. It made it almost to the top. And anytime the governor had visitors in town, The Prisonaires were the ones who entertained them.

M: Were they white or black?

G: All black. And they were good.

M: And did they play instruments or did they just sing?

G: Sang. They also wrote music. And one of them, one songwriter, was Robert Gibbs. Fast-forward and I'm social pastor at First Church in Clearwater, Florida. Yeah. But the phone rang and Robert said, Chaplain, this is Robert. I want you to know I'm out.

M: And you knew exactly who it was?

G: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

M: And you could probably almost hug him over the phone, huh?

G: Absolutely. Absolutely.

M: That's great.

G: Yeah.

M: So that was 25 years later or a long time ahead.

G: Yeah.

M: What were most of the fellows in there for, just everything?

G: Everything under the sun.

M: And were there lifers there? Were there death row people?

G: I presided over three executions and I'm in my early 20s. I had Billy Graham out and we had a lot of things happening and going on in my life in those days.

G: We got married in '50 and this was after '50, probably '54, '55, in that generation. The only reason that I left was that the warden's term was over because the governor's -- it was a political appointment, the warden's was. His successor had zero willingness to accept what I was doing and continue the program.

M: And the governor that you served under was named?

G: Frank Clement.

M: And can you talk a little bit about his political ideas and ideology and why was it that he thought this was a good idea and he supported the prison ministry.

G: Frank was a distinguished individual and very much sensitized in ways that no other person involved in prisons had that I could ever imagine matching him. For example, Kirkendoll was going to be executed. The governor called the warden and he said, I want you to have Mrs. Kirkendoll and her children brought to your office. I want to talk to them. And he came and he sat at the warden's desk, and this little woman, three little children, absolutely petrified I'm sure, he explained to her how he did not have grounds to stop the execution of her husband. He just did this and cried. You don't see that anymore.

G: We had a man that he reduced his sentence from life to 99 years and he came out to tell him.

M: The governor?

G: The governor came out to tell him, the warden, and the prisoner, and the governor, and I. The governor was as happy as the man was. He was the -- I don't know what year it was but he was the keynote speaker at the Democratic Convention. So that gives you some idea.

M: Uh-huh.

G: Loved him. He was awesome.

M: Now, that would have been 1950. The other leading politicians in Tennessee would have been Estes Kefauver, probably, senator.

G: Uh-huh. That's right.

M: And Al Gore's father; correct?

G: Uh-huh.

M: Al Gore, Sr.

G: Uh-huh.

M: And so Clement would have been among those gentlemen. Now, he left the governorship, what did he do after that? Did he continue in politics?

G: No, he died from a car accident or something. I've forgotten how we lost him.

M: Uh-huh. Pretty close to after the time he left office?

G: Yeah.

M: Okay. So how many years were you there in Tennessee, or at the Tennessee State

Penitentiary?

G: I was at the prison three years.

M: Okay.

G: And would have stayed for a long, long time except that --

M: Political situation.

G: Yeah, right. Interestingly enough --

M: And was your wife -- did she want to stay?

G: She did not want to stay. Understandably. By now we had our first child. In fact, she was pregnant with our second child when we left there. But the whole thing about how we came to Florida is really a very -- to me, it's just a gift from God. Kathleen wanted to come to Florida, back home. She's from the panhandle but she wanted to come to Florida. And that was fine with me. We made a drive down one time just to look around, and I talked to Dr. Bob Holmes, house across the road.

M: The Holmes' house.

G: The Holmes' house. He was the superintendent of the St. Pete District at that time. We introduced ourselves. Told him that we would like to be considered to be able to come to Florida Conference at some time. And he said, I'd be happy to talk with you about it. And so time goes on, we're now having to leave the position, and where do we go, well, we're going to go to Florida. That's where Kathleen's home is, and that's where we're going. So we called.

G: And in the meantime, Kathleen had met Dr. Holmes' sister in the Methodist church in Nashville. And so when we, you know, tried to get in touch with him, I thought, well, I'll call her and see, you know, if she's got a phone number for him. She said, he is in a meeting in New York today and they will be at the airport Saturday. I'm at the airport Saturday. I explained the whole situation to him. He said, all I can promise you is minimum salary. I said, that's all I want. He said, I'll take care of it. The end result was that we moved from the prison, went to my home in Mississippi and waited out the time. It was several weeks before I had to go to conference, and he called and let us know that we were going to -- I was going to be the pastor of Friendship Church in Clearwater. And then before we actually got there, they had called back and they said there was a change in your appointment last night and you're going to be the associate at First Church Clearwater. So that's how we started out in the conference.

M: And that was in 1956?

G: I would think so.

M: Okay. Okay. So you were there -- how many years were you in Clearwater?

G: Half a year.

M: Only half a year? And then this strange exotic call comes, right?

G: Yes. Well, you know, that's when Bishop Branscomb called. And he came by the church and asked the secretary to have me come in. And he said, I wanted to meet you because you weren't here at Annual Conference time. And I wanted you to know that we don't like people to come and take associate positions and not stay with it. And I assured him that I was happy to be the associate at that church as long as ... what he really was saying was, well, I just wanted to meet you. What he really was saying turned out to be known just a few days later because we got a call about 11:00 at night, and he says, Brother Gene, this is John Branscomb. And he said, I'm in New York with the Director of Personnel for the Board of Missions. We need a pastor for the English-speaking congregation in Havannah. Call me back in the morning and let me know if you'll go.

M: Now, was that about the most unusual, unbelievable call you ever got in your life?

G: Yes, sir, without a doubt. The next morning --

M: Could you speak a word of Spanish?

G: No. The next morning -- and I knew it was English-speaking. The next morning, Kathleen and I, neither one of us could eat. We simply were horrified at the whole thing. And so I called him back and said, Bishop, we can't go. And then the hunger strike got worse. And I realized, you know, that we can't do this. So I called him back and said, We'll do it. Well, he called me back and he said, The Conference Board of Missions has told me that missionaries volunteer for mission ministry. We're not going to approve his going unless you send him and his wife to Havana, have them look it over and decide if they will go, if they want to go, if they feel that they should go. And he said, you know, I can't start flying my missionaries all around the world to find out if they like where they're going but he said I want you and your wife to go down there. And he said, while you're there, make arrangements to move. Now, that wasn't what the Board of Missions had in mind. But the bottom line was that the mission had already made his mind up as to what was going to happen.

M: Bishop Branscomb.

G: Yes.

M: Well, before we go into Cuba, I want to get your impressions of what Florida was like to you. When you first came, when you first got down to Clearwater, had you ever been to Florida before? Had you gone to visit your wife, for example, her family before?

G: I had been in the panhandle.

M: Uh-huh. What were your impressions -- well, that's a lot different than Clearwater.

G: Yeah.

M: What were your impressions of Clearwater when you first came to Clearwater.

G: Well, keep in mind who I am at this point, okay?

M: Uh-huh.

G: Keep in mind that Asbury does not go to movies, and Asbury doesn't drink a whole lot of beer.

M: Uh-huh.

G: We went to Clearwater and we couldn't find a restaurant that didn't have, didn't sell whiskey, only beer. And so we were just flabbergasted. We were totally, you know, see we've been in a cocoon, you know. And we just didn't have those --

M: That's kind of what I was driving at, and also the weather and the different kind of plants and the beach and all of that. It must have been just an amazing new world for you.

G: Well, it was. And my anxiety about the worldliness of the community, I got over that pretty soon. And the small town that we had in Clearwater, the congregation was just marvelous to us. Our second daughter was on the way. Kathleen was really, you know, big. The only place they had made arrangements for us to live was the second floor of an older building on the property of the church. There was an attorney in the congregation, his last name was Smith. I've forgotten his first name. But he was very prominent in that congregation and he put his foot down. He said there is no way that I am going to let this young lady in her condition be trudging up and down those stairs. You all find a place for them to live. And so they moved us into an apartment. And then they bought a house. The house is where we were living when the bishop called and said let us have some fun.

M: Yeah. So you're just settled in and then all of a sudden, here we are. Let's continue this next time.