

Mr. Parks, is? with Mr. Gene Parks. And your full name,

G: Argus Gene Parks

M: A-R-G-U- oral history of your life. A ow many days that will be but we want to get a full measure of your life. A very glad you're with us today.

G: Thank you very much.

M: Yes.

G:

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: ?

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:

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,
hat 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

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:

G:

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

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

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 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: --

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

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 the ditch, and then he would run to the end of the field. And he would lie

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
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:
they d
survive and do better in Mississippi?

to somewhere and
maybe go back and

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 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 --

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 ed, 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 addy whistling as he comes across the
A
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 could come home?

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

M: Oh, yeah, and

G:

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 , 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 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.

G: He did not 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.

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. H

my uncle, which was his brother-in-law, who did have some resources and had a pole
me, 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-
running his dairy for years, he grew

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, , you see, he had relationships and they were important relationships to him but he could never ever --

then?

G: Right.

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: 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,

, 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.

ke this way our

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

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.

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 cousin.

When we began, we were married, we were still at the four-D 2000 EMC P M/CID8005090011-0003600

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

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

M: Uh

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.

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 -- Kathleen

come to Florida. And that was fine with me. We made a drive down one time just to

M: Uh-huh.

lot of beer.

M: Uh-huh.