

Robert Wilkins
23 May 2007
Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Robert Wilkins was born February 14, 1923 in Putnam County. In the early 1940s, after working on a farm in Santa Fe (Alachua County) for several years, he joined family who had been living in the Largo area since the 1920s (Tracks 1 and 10). "I come down here to work, that's all I know," Wilkins chuckled. "I wasn't picking and choosing, I just wanted to work," (Track 10). Wilkins first lived at the Peacock farm, as he said it was known. The farm was located close to present-day Clearwater Mall (Track 1). Wilkins recalled free-roaming peacocks being raised on the farm, turkeys and flowers. "It was really beautiful," he said.

For several years, Wilkins worked at **Dave Cunningham's (name of ranch ?) hog ranch** hauling swill (Tracks 1 and 6). After his job on the hog ranch, Wilkins worked in the Taylor groves for about four years caring for citrus trees: his duties ranged from pruning trees to planting new ones (Tracks 1, 2 and 12). He made \$.60 an hour working about eight hour days, including half-days on Saturday; housing was included (Tracks 4 and 5). Wilkins talked about living in the groves with his wife, who was a cook in the Pinellas County school system (Tracks 2, 5 and 13). Wilkins said some women in the groves were housewives (Track 5). Wilkins recalled that his house was made of wood (as were others), had a tin roof, a front porch, and was raised on blocks high enough that "you could almost walk under it," (Tracks 2 and 3). Wilkins didn't have electricity or an indoor bathroom (they used an outhouse) in the home he shared with his wife, he said (Track 2). They used lanterns and a wood stove. His brother's home had electricity.

Willie Tellis, who grew up in the groves and participated in the interview, placed Wilkins' house east of 8th Avenue towards Seminole Boulevard (Track 2). Tellis estimated that the houses were torn down in the late 1950s and replaced by a trailer park (Track 5). Tellis and other children who lived on the groves attended two all black schools in Clearwater: Williams Elementary School and Pinellas High School.

Wilkins recalled having about ten co-workers, mostly African Americans; two white brothers from Seminole sprayed the groves (Track 3). Wilkins and Tellis recalled working relationships being good. "It was great, I mean there was no friction or nothing that I can remember," said Tellis. "We accepted each other for who we were."

Wilkins and Tellis named many of the workers, including a **Reverend Davenport (Sp?)** of St. Mary's Church (Tracks 3 and 8). The crew was supervised by **Henry Lizon (sp?)** of Germany, Wilkins said (Track 3). Wilkins recalled seeing grove owner John S. Taylor II, but said Taylor spent most of his time in the packing house (Track 4). Wilkins said he asked Taylor for a raise and electricity in his house, but got neither (Tracks 2 and 4).

Wilkins and Tellis recalled two doctors in Largo that grove residents sought when needed (Track 6). However, home remedies were common. Tellis recalled mumps being treated

with sardine fish oil. Wilkins mentioned the same remedy for chicken pox. Sometimes someone would sell from a car what Tellis called “Old 97” products such as liniment or cough syrup.

Tellis and Wilkins shared other memories of the groves: seeing beekeepers; hunting squirrel and rabbit on the groves; kids selling orange blossoms roadside to tourists; fishing for bass, blue gill and bream (Track 8, 14). Tellis also recalled grove owners east and north of the Taylor groves, directly across the street: the McMullens, Peachtrees, Arnolds, and **Fauls (sp?)** (Track 8).

Wilkins talked about being called for service during World War II (Track 7). He reported to Camp Blanding, but was told he was unfit for the Army. Later he would report to Drew field, where he said he was discharged.

During the mid 1940s, while still working at the groves, Wilkins bought a lot on 118th Street from a dairyman named Sellers and built his own house (Tracks 7, 8 and 11). “There wasn’t nothing in here but palmettos and cows,” said Wilkins, the first to build on the street (Tracks 7, 8). Wilkins and his brothers spent about two to three hours a day for a month building the white-painted wood house with a screened-in porch (Track 11). They worked late afternoons into the evenings.

Wilkins left the Taylor groves to work for **Crooker (?)** building supply (Track 1 and 11). Though his pay was only a few more cents per hour, he preferred his new job (Track 11). Wilkins hauled materials such as sheet rock, cement, mortar mix and steel. After about 12 years, Wilkins left Crooker for a landscaping job (Track 6 and 7).

Notes from June 5, 2007 follow-up interview:

Wilkins said he lived on the Peacock farm with his oldest brother Walter in a three bedroom, wood-frame house. Recalling the farm owner's name, it sounded like Mr. Wilkins said it was Mr. Pierce, or Mr. Pells. Wilkins described seeing all kinds of fowl at the farm such as turkey, geese, ducks and about 200 to 300 peacocks. He said the farm was about 4 acres. Wilkins did some work at the farm., but didn't work fulltime; he said the owner told him he couldn't afford to pay him. Wilkins' said his brother Walter took care of the birds and was one of about four people working at the farm.

Wilkins mentioned frying duck eggs (described flavor as rich) with honey and hen eggs as a remedy for headaches.

Wilkins worked and lived at the hog ranch. He said the house next to his on the north side was moved from the hog ranch to 118th Street sometime in the 1960s.

More details about the houses on the Taylor grove:

Wilkins said most of the houses had two to three bedrooms.

Wilkins said he and his wife lived in a two-bedroom house. He said the front porch door opened into the living room. The kitchen and one bedroom were on the east side of the house. The other bedroom was on the south side. He described the kitchen as being the size of the carport at his current 118th street home, about 15 (length) feet by 7 feet (width). Asked the dimensions of the house, Wilkins compared it in size to that of his next door neighbor one house to the south. He thought the reason he didn't get electricity in his Taylor grove house was because Mr. Taylor might have had plans to tear it down after he moved out.

Wilkins said his brother Walter and family lived in a three-bedroom house that didn't have a front porch. The front door opened into the living room and a hallway led to the kitchen and three bedrooms on the east side of the house.

Wilkins described the house for single men working in the groves as being set up like a duplex. Before he moved into a house with his wife, he lived with several single men on one side of the duplex. On the other side of the duplex lived a man named Ben and his family, which included about three children. Wilkins also said his brother Joe, his wife and his children (about 4) lived on the grove.

Wilkins said the Taylor grove houses were on site when he and family arrived, but were empty before they moved in. Wilkins said he thought the grove houses were moved there, not built on site.

Wilkins said he was living in Santa Fe when called to Camp Blanding for World War II service. He said Mr. Taylor got him a deferment when he worked on the groves. But

when he quit, he said Mr. Taylor notified the draft board and he was called to serve, again. He said he reported to Drew Field, was examined, and turned down.

Wilkins said his wife, Katie, was a cook at a Largo school for about 4-5 years. He said the school was off of 8th Avenue on Clearwater/Largo Road (directions indicate it was Largo Elementary, now known as Mildred-Helms Elementary).

After Mr. Wilkins left **Crooker** (sp?) building supply, he ran his own lawn service until about the mid-1960s.