Teresina "Willow" Carter Frelix shares her powerful childhood memories of fear and confusion when the freeway broke up the Rondo neighborhood. She discusses the lost of security and extended family when she had to move at age ten years. She recalls her parents' hard work and money concerns growing up.

She discusses the difficult transition from attending a predominately Black community school at Saint Peter Claver to ninth grade at Central High School, a predominately White public school.

This is a transcript of taped interviews, edited slightly for clarity. A signed release is on file from Mrs. Frelix.
KHC: Kateleen Hope Cavett
WF: Teresina “Willow” Carter Frelix

KHC: Can you introduce yourself?
WF: My given name is Teresina Carter. I married. Now my last name is Frelix.

KHC: And you prefer to be called?

KHC: Beautiful. Willow, what are some of the early memories that you have growing up in the Rondo neighborhood?
WF: I remember having lots of kids to play with on Rondo. I remember particularly the buildings that were on my street, the houses on my street, because I was ten years old when we moved, so we weren't allowed to go too far away from home. But it seemed like there was always something going on with the kids. Like we made—my siblings and I made a play one year with the kids next door [Sandy and Cindy Williams] and sold tickets. We charged everybody a penny to get in. It was a Shakespearean play, Romeo and Juliet. We were doing something

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1 Teresina Carter Frelix was born January 17, 1947.
2 Teresina’s siblings are: Melvin Whitfield Jr. (b.1948), Paris (b.1952), Mark (b.1953), Matthew (b.1955), and Larry (b.1962).
with Romeo and Juliet and then some of our characters in the play got overwhelmed in the middle of the play and ran for home, so the adults were sitting there sort of wondering what to do next. But all in all, I think everyone had a good time.

KHC: What was the address that you lived at on Rondo?

WF: I lived at 717 Rondo.

KHC: So this was in Oatmeal Hill?³

WF: Yeah. Now, I never learned about Oatmeal Hill until after I left home and got married. I didn’t know we referred to ourselves then as Oatmeal Hill. But I heard about Oatmeal Hill and Cornmeal Valley later.

KHC: Was your neighborhood a diverse neighborhood? What was your sense of it?

WF: Our neighborhood was African-American. I think there was a structure on the corner, close to Dale, that housed old men or was like a rest home or something. But other than that on the block that I lived was African-American. I don’t remember any White families living there.

KHC: You said you moved when you were ten. And this was because of the freeway?

WF: That was because the freeway was coming through, yes. That was because they were buying up all the houses on Rondo and we had to leave.

KHC: What did your parents do?

WF: My parents were very concerned. There was the issue of—always the issue of money. My dad⁴ owned a lot of property on that street. However,

³ Oatmeal Hill was a term referring to Rondo west of Dale Street toward Lexington, sometimes known as Upper Rondo. More affluent residents tended to move into this area, giving the impression the residents had a higher social standing. This middle class neighborhood consisted of predominately single family homes.
he wasn’t working a regular job then. He was a musician and so mostly what we had as income were from the property that he owned and from when he would go out and play at night for different things. So he had to combine everything and move, and we had to settle on one house, one piece of property. That seemed to be an issue to them. Because they were worried about it, that sort of had a trickle down effect on us kids and naturally we picked up on that.

KHC: Was it scary?

WF: Yeah, it was scary. There was the sense that something happened that was going on that was out of even the parents’ control and that they just had to do the best they can to try to make it work for them. I remember my mom trying to make things easier for us by telling us—I guess she was pregnant at the time, by telling us we were gonna get a new baby after we moved. And the house we lived in, to me, reminded me of a big old Victorian house and we rented the upstairs out, but we were never allowed to go into the basement and so, naturally, that became a point of curiosity for the kids. So one of the promises that we got is that when we did move my father would finally take that skeleton key and open that door so we could go see what the basement looked like. Yeah, there was that feeling of being afraid.

The kids on the street—I can remember some of the kids talking about the end of the world and what it was supposed to be like with the trumpets

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4 Willow’s father Melvin Whitfield Carter, Sr. was born September 8, 1923.
5 Willow’s mother Billie Dove Harris Carter was born in 1927, and passed away in 2000.
and the bible and so forth. And so we sort of understood in a way that this was not just a move, but this was an event. This was a sort of a lifetime event and we were all [going though it]. I think as kids, we were trying to figure out how best to figure out what the move meant and what our lives would be like once it was over, once we had left each other, because that was all we knew was Rondo.

KHC: Did you have a sense of why everybody was going to be forced to move?

WF: You know, I didn't know that we [did]. I knew that we would be losing our house and that nobody else was going to be moving in the house. And it seemed to me there was already a gap on the freeway where they were digging it out. They had started digging out [the freeway] and all we saw was sand dunes and earth moving equipment on the way to school.

We went to Saint Peter Claver6 as children, and so we had to take the bus from Rondo to Oxford where Saint Peter Claver was and then walk to

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6 Saint Peter Claver Catholic Church began in 1889. A new building was erected for the segregated Black congregation at 322 Aurora at Farrington in 1892. After the new school and convent were built, a new church building was completed at 375 Oxford at Saint Anthony in 1957.
where the school was. But we didn’t understand it in terms of that we were being made to move. Just that we had to move, that we just didn’t have a choice. We were just trying to do the best we could as a family to figure out what to do next, what move to make next, where to buy property, where we wanted to move, what location we could move. I can remember my parents going on excursions to look at houses and coming back home a lot of times sort of down because they didn’t find what they were looking for. And also, we had to honor the color barriers. We couldn’t move past Lexington and so there were certain confines that we had to move within, too. I think that was for us as scary as moving off of Rondo.

KHC: Did they explain to you about the color lines or just you overheard things about it?

WF: I overheard things. I was the oldest. I just listened to my mother and father talk. But they never explained that to us. We just kind of knew that there was something going on that they didn’t say. And, of course, that had more power than what they did say. I can remember, because we looked at one house that was a block past Lexington and it was across the street from Central High School,7 which they thought would be a good area for us to live in. Well, we went to that house and looked around, and we were sitting outside [in our car], the kids and myself. I know my parents were like talking like, “Well, if we get this, if we even get

7 Central High School began in 1866 and consisted of two rooms in the Franklin Building, downtown Saint Paul. By 1872 it was known as Saint Paul High School, and moved to Seventh and Jackson. In 1883, a 27-room building was completed and the school was named The Saint Paul Central High, and located on Minnesota Street in downtown Saint Paul. Because of space needs, a new school was built at 275 Lexington Avenue in 1912. In 1977, the building was reduced to its structural form, expanded, and rebuilt to the current building.
considered.” To me it just felt funny. I wouldn’t have known how to articulate it, but it just felt funny. We went in and the people were nice. They showed us the house and we liked it. We decided that we liked that house, but come to find out later on we couldn’t move. We couldn’t even move a block past Lexington because Lexington was the color boundary. We couldn’t move past Lexington.

KHC: Where did your parents finally settle?

WF: Well, they finally found a home for us on Aurora, 1026 Aurora, which is Aurora and Oxford, and it was close to Saint Peter Claver School and it would have been also close to Central High School where I would go later on, so they were both in walking distance. So that’s were we ended up going. And that house was a very nice house. It had a huge yard, which we were used to because we had a huge yard on Rondo. However, it did not have the space in it that that house across Lexington would have had for five children. So we were a little bit crammed up in that house. There was room to build bedrooms upstairs in the attic, which is what we thought we might do later on. And the basement was big and the yard was big, but the bedrooms and the rest of the house wasn’t as big as the house on Marshall across from Central and it was kind of cramped for us, especially having moved from Rondo. So that was a little bit of a squeeze.

KHC: How many years did you stay in that house?

FW: Oh, gosh, you know it’s kind of like a blur because we built a house next door on that property, so maybe we were in that house two years. Two, three years, maybe, and that might be pushing it. And then we built a
duplex next door and moved into one side with the idea that we would rent the house out as well as the other side of the duplex.

KHC: Did your father get enough money from his various properties to make it worthwhile for the move?

WF: Now as I remember it—you have to remember that I’m remembering this as a kid. But after he sold his property and all the money came in, I think we paid [1026 Aurora] off. I’m not sure, or mostly off. I think we paid off most of it. I think we had to wait awhile before that money came in. My dad was out of work then, and I remember my mom looking very hard for jobs and asking do they hire Negroes. Well, I never heard her talk like that, so I wondered why wouldn’t somebody want to hire a Negro and what is a Negro, anyway. [Laughs] So I knew it was something she was very concerned about because she said, “If they tell me no on the phone, I’m not gonna bother to go down there.” And I remember her saying that one person she called said, “Well, we would hire them, but other people might get offended so we don’t.”

KHC: What did your mom do? What were her skills or what type of work was she looking for?

WF: Well, at the time she was working at one of the Snyder’s Drug Stores for awhile, and then my father wasn’t working so he was supposed to be watching us kids, and she wanted to stay home with the kids. She didn’t want us running all over the neighborhood so she stayed home. But she ended up working at St. Joseph’s [Hospital] as a nurse’s aid. So she

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8 Snyder’s Drug Store was located at 412 Wabasha Street and 403 Robert Street in downtown Saint Paul.
9 Saint Joseph’s Hospital is located at 69 W. Exchange St., Saint Paul, and was founded in 1853 by the Sisters of Carondelet.
wasn’t really skilled in one particular area, but just entry-level kind of a situation where she’d have to learn.

KHC: Do you remember your father working as a redcap?^{10}

WF: Yeah, I remember my father working as a redcap when we lived on Aurora. He would be on the road for a while [during the time he worked as a waiter]. He would bring us gifts home. So he might be gone for a few days and come back in. I remember that. Mostly I remember when he worked as a musician.

KHC: When he was on the road, then he may have been a musician?

WF: No, he worked on the train on the road and then he would bring us gifts. I think it was the World Fair [in Seattle, Washington].

KHC: Was there a lot of music in your house, if your dad was a musician?

WF: Oh, God, there was music in that house from the time you woke up in the morning until the time you went to bed at night. And I was so accustomed to it that when I finally married and moved away and it was quiet, it was so strange to me that it really took me awhile to adapt to that. There was always a piano blaring or a trumpet blaring or music on the radio. There was always something going on. Or sometimes my dad would have his friends over and they would be practicing in the basement. Oh, it was just music all the time. I had no talent whatsoever, so this could be overwhelming.

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^{10} Redcap Porters worked at the Saint Paul Union Depot. The uniform included a red cap, so as to be easily identifiable by passengers. Redcaps’ salaries were minimal and they supported their families mostly through tips. Responsibilities included carrying baggage for travelers, mopping floors, polishing brass, parking cars, and cleaning offices.
KHC: I have a friend who is a musician who talks about being a highly sensitive person. She said, “Can’t take all the music.”

WF: I can’t. Now my husband didn’t understand for a long time. He likes to hear the radio and most the time he listens to talk radio, but a lot of times he just likes to listen to music. And when I come home, I’ll turn everything completely off. It will be so quiet you can hear the birds and everything, and I love it. I never knew I had a choice.

KHC: Now when I talked to your dad, he said that he’s not a very good teacher, so then he really didn’t teach his kids music. So it was mostly just there in the background. You weren’t encouraged to take lessons or try to learn anything?

WF: Yeah, I was, definitely. He tried to teach me to play piano. And, oh boy, would we fight. It just wasn’t one of those things that I picked up on. I did sing in the choir at Saint Peter Claver when I was small, but I couldn’t even hold a note if somebody was standing by me pointing. It seems to me that he took a couple of my brothers under his wing and would sit there and play with them. I do recall that my dad actually taught. He would go to houses and teach music from time to time, to kids.

KHC: He shared that he had done that, but he said, “I’m not a very good teacher and they just wanted me to baby sit, so I didn’t do it for very long.”

WF: I think he did it when we needed the money.

KHC: You went to Saint Peter Claver to school, so most of the kids in your class looked like you?

11 Husband William Frank Frelix, Sr. was born May 26, 1941.
WF: Exactly. The nuns were African-American. Well, there were only about four kids in our class that were White, I think. So yes, out of this whole Saint Paul area I think we were the only kids who went to school where everybody looked like us. We didn’t have White teachers.

KHC: What was that experience like for you?

WF: You know, we didn’t think about it. I had nothing else to compare that to so it was just a given to me. And the nuns were—oh man, they were strict! They were very strict. If you didn’t get your lesson or do what you were supposed to do, the family definitely was called in and was involved in it. It was a different environment than I think the other kids or my husband had.

KHC: And that was through eighth grade and then you went Central?

WF: Then I went to Central High School, which was a different thing for me because they had men teachers. So not only did I have White female teachers, but the men teachers bothered me more than the females. And I just wasn’t sure how to react around them. It was just different than the nuns. And then from coming from such a rigid environment, Saint Peter Claver, where everything was so structured and they told you what to do, to Central where you didn’t have to do anything and you didn’t get a whipping. I stayed in trouble most of the time! [Laughs]

KHC: What were some of your other reactions in going from a private community school where there was support in being a Black child to Central?

WF: What were some of the other what?

KHC: What were some of your other reactions?
WF: You know, I don’t think that my parents were able to guide me through in the way that I wanted, that I would have needed just to make that transition. Because for one thing, here I was going into this high school into ninth grade, where most of the kids from Marshall were going in there at tenth grade. So when I got in there in ninth grade, most of the Black kids I hung with were older than me. I ended up hanging around with older kids. And it was such a different environment. You went from one class to another class to another class, where at Saint Peter Claver you were just in one class all day long. And then, of course, I wanted to fit in. I wanted to make sure my makeup was just right, and that my clothes were just right. And we just didn’t have a lot of money at that time. So I got by the best way I could.

KHC: And Central was predominantly a White school.

WF: It was a predominantly White school. I had White friends, but hung mostly with African-Americans. When we moved to Aurora then there were other White kids around. There were White kids around and so I just interacted with them like I would anybody else, like the ones that were at [Saint Peter Claver]. We had four in our class.

KHC: You had four?

WF: Four White kids in our class, four or five [at Saint Peter Claver].

KHC: As a teenager, where would you go and listen to music? There was music at home, but did you go out and listen to music with friends?

WF: Well, the music I listened to at home was very different. I can remember when rock and roll started and the twist came out. And my dad used to take me to dances when he would play for community centers like Hallie
Q. Brown and that. And I remember one case in particular when he was playing the music that he normally did and the kids were demanding something like rock and roll and he wasn’t familiar with it. And they wouldn’t dance and they wouldn’t get up and I felt kind of caught between because here was my dad up on stage playing what he usually played and here were the kids demanding rock and roll, and I got mad. I got kind of angry at him because he couldn’t do it. At the same time I was kind of angry at the kids because they weren’t enjoying his music, so it was kind of like in between, because they were telling me, “Well, tell your dad to play this.” Chubby Checkers or something like that. And I think my dad had a hard time with that. I feel that he had a hard time with that transition from when the big band thing to the combos to playing rock and roll. I don’t think he ever got comfortable with it.

KHC: Did he transition then into the rock and roll, the kids’ scene?

WF: You know what, I think he did what he had to do and maybe played some. First of all, there wouldn’t have been that much money in it for him to make, I don’t think. And second of all, the places he usually played for were like weddings or like the golf clubs or organizations that would have been closer to his age. So while he was frustrated because he couldn’t make that transition to rock and roll, it seemed to me that he still had something to fall back on, looking back on it.

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12 Hallie Q. Brown Community Center was opened in 1929 as a community center specifically to serve the Black community when the Black YWCA closed in 1928. Hallie Q, as it is affectionately known, has served all ages through child care, youth and senior clubs, athletics, music and social events. The original location was in the Union Hall at Aurora and Kent Streets. In 1972, Hallie relocated in the Martin Luther King Building at 270 Kent Street at Iglehart in Saint Paul. The center’s namesake was an educator who pioneered the movement of Black women’s clubs in the late 1800’s.
KHC: Did you and your friends go other places and listen to music where they did have the rock and roll, or was it mostly records?

WF: Yeah, it was records. A lot of 45's. There was one place that opened up a little bit. It was on Concordia, where the kids would meet after school. I can't even remember what it was. It could have been the Pivot, where we had hamburgers and they played rock and roll and we thought we were the coolest things in the world with the bobby socks and so forth. I didn't really hear a lot of rock and roll inside the house, so I would have had to hear it at parties that I would go to, or friend's houses or something like that, unless I brought something home to play. My mom always tried to keep up to date on what was current, because she was kind of young thinking.

KHC: What were some of the other things that you remember doing as a child and as a teenager, in and out of the community?

WF: Let's see, I remember at Saint Peter Claver I belonged to a group called the Sodality, [an organization centered around the Virgin Mary]. Girls were invited to be in that. That wasn't something that you joined, that was part of Saint Peter Claver. At Central we went to dances and I often went places that I was told not to go and got into a lot of trouble. Roller-skating, there was a big roller skating rink across Lexington. Coliseum. So roller skating or ice skating was part of it. Dancing was a big part of it and I love to dance.

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13 The Pivot was a teenage malt shop with a juke box located at 820 Rondo. It was owned by Royal Godden and Jesse W. Miller.

14 A roller skating rink was part of the Coliseum Pavilion located at 449 Lexington and University. The Lexington Baseball Park was the home of the Saint Paul Saints baseball team from 1897 until 1956. The original stadium was rebuilt in 1916, and a dance hall was added just east of the baseball stadium.
KHC: When you would go to house parties or to hops or to Hallie, was this predominantly with records?

WF: Yeah, they’d spin 45 records. You know, we had a lot more bands too then they do now where they have DJs and so forth. A lot of times, most of the time I think, we had live bands from kids who would just get groups together and do something around the neighborhood.

KHC: Do you remember any of the names of the kids that were playing in these neighborhood teenage bands?

WF: One was Hubert Eves. His dad was a friend of my father’s. Hubert was about a year or two older than me. I had a little ole boyfriend back there, who—he sang for a little bit. His name was John Lee Birch. Off hand, I’m trying to remember, but they were groups. They were local, definitely local groups from our area, Saint Paul area.

KHC: Do you remember the Emeralds? Now they would have been older than you, probably graduated from Central in ’61?

WF: I don’t remember them, but I definitely remember the Amazers. Did you ever hear anything about the Amazers? Well, they played quite frequently and they’ve got another group they call themselves now, but they sing mostly spiritual and gospel. But the Amazers were quite hot when I was a kid and very good singers.

KHC: They’re still around?

WF: Well, some of them. I think most of them are. But they sing church songs. They don’t sing like they used to sing, you know, when we were kids.

KHC: Do you remember anybody that was in the Amazers?
WF: There was a guy named John. My husband Bill knows. He knows their names, but I can’t think of their names off hand. But they were definitely the hot group.

KHC: What was your sense of the community when you were a child, before ten, before the freeway went through, and then afterwards?

WF: As I look back on it, before ten it was like an extended family almost. We went outside and played on the sidewalk. The kids around there were like—they felt closer somehow. And when we moved and were at these other addresses, there just wasn’t that cohesion. There wasn’t that familiarity with your neighbor that I had when I was on Rondo.

KHC: How did that feel different? Did it affect your growing up and who you were?

WF: You know now that I look back on it, it was a feeling of difference in how you may have interacted with other people. On my block, on Rondo, I kind of felt like I ruled it a little bit. Like putting that play together. I could get together with the other kids on the street. Kind of like the Little Rascals or something. But then when I left, there was a sense of boundaries, stronger sense of boundaries with kids in the other places. I didn’t grow up with them, so I just wouldn’t have had that background with them to feel free for me to just interact and kind of be creative like that.

KHC: Boundaries, like you couldn’t go places. More of the restrictive boundaries?

WF: No, I’m thinking of boundaries more in just getting to know a person and feeling comfortable sitting around talking to them and saying stuff like,
“Oh, what do you want to do today?” The day is yours and you make of it what you will. As to the other kids, there was a feeling of loss of like a familial tie. And that’s ironic that you brought that up because I never thought about that before. I never thought about that, that loss of that feeling.

KHC: So the extended family that was a safety net before ten seemed to have been lost at that point?

WF: Yeah, and I don’t know that I would call it so much safety as I would call the known and familiar kind of thing that you would just take for granted in that kind of situation.

KHC: Being raised in a family where economics was stressful in the 1940’s and ‘50’s, if you were Black there were many jobs that you couldn’t have and so it was harder to make a living. The Rondo community is certainly known where everybody worked hard, but it was harder to get the better paying jobs. How did that affect the children, or you as a child, where there was a lot of financial stress in the home?

WF: I’ll tell you one of the biggest ones was when I left Saint Peter Claver. I definitely did not want to go to a public school. I wanted the same environment, a safe environment that I felt that I had in Saint Peter Claver. I did not want to go to Central and I begged my parents to send me to one of the other Catholic high schools, and there just wasn’t the resources for it. And I just could not understand that. I could not understand that there wasn’t the money for me to do things. I wanted to be part of the small groups that they had within the neighborhood, the little cliques. We never had the money, and I couldn’t work because I had to stay home and help
raise the kids. My mother needed help, because I'm oldest of six kids. So I was always limited in things that I wanted to do. You know, taking a trip or getting involved in a group where maybe the girls were all buying the same dress or the same sweater or something like that. I wanted to take ballet like some of the other girls, but there was never, ever any money.
When I got grown and married and was raising my kids, I enjoyed my youth from the things that we were able to do for them that I didn’t get to do because of the financial resource situation, so I was fortunate.

KHC: This one group that they had at Saint Peter Claver that you joined…

WF: Sodality or something like that.

KHC: What did you do with that?

WF: If I remember correctly, we had meetings maybe once a month, and maybe some religious lessons involved with it. And once a year we always went to Excelsior Park, which was a big thing, because that was an all day thing. Get out of school and we packed up lunches and they had the biggest roller coaster anywhere around, so we’d get on that roller coaster and just ride it all day long.

KHC: Did you travel a lot out of the community, to downtown Saint Paul, out to movie places, other places?

WF: No. That community, it was like that was it. That was the earth, that was the globe, that was the town in our little Rondo Dell Community. I remember one time a girlfriend and I went with my dad to one of his gigs, as he called them, when he was playing out at Excelsior. And his band was playing rock and roll that night and there were a lot of kids in there. It was all White kids and I think me and my girlfriend were the only Black kids there. And we really didn’t know about racism. But when we were there—I can remember when we went to the bathroom that girls were throwing things at us and talking real threatening towards us. And we couldn’t figure it out, because we were just dancing with each other and having a good time. And so I said, “We gotta get out of here.” And so we
went back and we stayed real close to the bandstand the rest of the evening. So I think excursions out of the neighborhood would most likely have been like that.

KHC: How old were you when this happened?

WF: I probably had to be like about twelve or thirteen, something like that.

KHC: So that was about 1959, ’60?

WF: Yes, right.

KHC: It sounds like there were very few excursions out of the neighborhood, that the community was always there for you. Did the family take any trips? [Did you find] it was a surprise and that you weren’t used to being discriminated against?

WF: Yeah, that was a surprise. Now, we went on a couple trips as a family when I was younger. We went to Texas to my mother’s family reunion. When I lived on Rondo, I went with my grandmother15 [Mary Carter] to Gary, Indiana. I went by myself with her to Gary, Indiana, and was just really shocked. When I went there with her, she went to visit her siblings and there were so many Black people there I

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15 Grandmother Mary Whitfield Carter was born July 7, 1886 and passed July 14, 1982.
couldn't handle it. I mean, between that and Chicago I never knew there were that many Black people in the entire world. It just wasted me, yeah. So that was different.

KHC: Can you talk about your grandmother?

WF: My grandmother was Mary Whitfield first, and then she married Mym Carter. And she and I got—I don’t know that she wouldn’t have maybe considered it close. But I was really close to my grandmother and sort of looked to her and her relatives as a big source of comfort for me. And then I was the oldest kid, the oldest girl, too, so I don’t know if that had anything to do with it. But I just kind of gravitated towards my grandmother and she just became a big thing to me.

KHC: What was her personality like? What she like?

WF: For me, my grandmother was strong. She had her feet firmly planted on the ground. She was very practical in her dealings, always thinking of sequence of events, how you take care of things. And no-nonsense and had a strong sense of things that should happen. My grandmother wasn’t afraid of anything. She wasn’t scared. It was like she’d seen everything and nothing moved her. She just took the reins and did what she had to do. I loved the secure feeling that I got from her because she was like that.

KHC: Sounds like she was an incredible role model.

16 Grandfather Mym Grundy Carter was born September 30, 1877, and passed away November 25, 1958.
WF: For me she was an incredible role model. Her and my mother got along like cats and dogs, and they were two very strong [and different] women. Two very strong Texas women. I said if I could survive through that, I could survive around anything. But I never want to be caught in between two Texas women again in life. I love them both.

KHC: And the sense I have from your father is that your grandmother worked very hard and that your grandfather had gotten injured and so your grandmother kind of held that home together.

WF: Yes, looking back, yes, she did. My grandfather was more like somebody to play with. I was always trying to figure out what he would do next. He’d sit there and play the harmonica and he would hit certain notes and stuff on the harmonica and he’d peek out at me at the corner of his eyes, and I was just amazed at how he could make music off this. Or he was whittling something with his knife. And I don’t even remember what he made, but the man just fascinated me. He was always coming up with something. So he was a playful person to be around, where my grandmother was stoic and strict. But my grandfather died when I was quite young and so I got to know my grandmother more, because she lived to be ninety-six years old. And she was strong. The year before she died she was taking a bus downtown to pay her bills. She could take care of herself and that’s what I loved about
that woman. Her and my aunt, too, her daughter Leantha. She kind of reminds me of my brother’s younger daughter. Her name is Alana. Real little women, but you better not mess with them because they could definitely take care of themselves and I just kind of like that about them.

KHC: It sounds like they felt safe?

WF: These women to me had a strong sense of themselves. They had a strong sense of who they were and what they could handle and what they couldn’t, and you know they just weren’t phased by anything else.

KHC: How would you go to them to get answers for some of the confusion that you were feeling at home with all the up-in-the-air-ness?

WF: You know, they wouldn’t have been people I got answers from. I would get answers from my mother. I would go talk to her. She was the most verbal and the one who could explain things to me in a context that was meaningful for me. My grandmother would likely say, “Ah, don’t worry about that,” or something like that. But she wouldn’t have known how to go in depth, to talk about it. They weren’t great talkers. Or my Aunt Tubie, she was just strong, but

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17 Leantha “Tubie” Carter Zeno was born July 21, 1909, and passed away May 16, 2002.
she wouldn't have been a person I would look to for answers. But I loved her in her strength.

KHC: So the Carter side of the family are not the talkers?

WF: No, they are not talkers. My mother is a very chatty person and she knew everything about the Carters and about herself. It's only been since later in life when I started doing my genealogy that I actually started going to them, the Carters, and asking questions. And I always felt safe with them, the Carters, like my grandmother and them. So when I was interviewing them, asking them questions, I think they really tried to be helpful, but it was going beyond their comfort level. They wanted to really be helpful, but I didn't start to get answers until I was a grown woman and talking to [the Whitfield side of the family]. In fact, great aunt, [Georgia Whitfield] that tried to tell me everybody else in the family was dead. I had happened to go to visit her at the funeral. Her sister, [Rena Winslow] had died, and somebody had called from their hometown, Paris, Texas, where she claimed everybody was dead. And there was no use talking to anybody, don't look any farther for information, and she went in the kitchen. She had written down something and I went and got the telephone number to this person who had called her up from this place that was supposed to be non-existent, with these people that were supposed to be non-existent. And I knew I shouldn't have done it, but I

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18 According to Mary Carter's account, Paris, Texas burned March 21, 1916. Leaves were being burned and the wind quickly spread the fire. A large portion of the town burned to the ground. Mary Carter reports two men died, and many lost all their belongings, including Mary and her husband Mym Carter. Few had insurance to help them rebuild and many left town. In June Mr. Carter joined his brother in Saint Paul and Mrs. Carter and the children followed in August. This was the second great fire to destroy most of Paris, Texas. The first was August 2, 1877, when three quarters of businesses and many residences were destroyed.
did it anyway and contacted them later on and found a whole slew of relatives who were more than happy to talk and get involved with it.

I loved my grandmother and her sisters, I loved them, but this was a call above and beyond me. Later on, [Aunt Georgia] said, “Yes, I know what you did.” But she forgave me for it. And her relatives started contacting her. They were originated from a family called the Morgans. [The Morgan’s originated in Columbus, Mississippi, and were relocated to Paris, Texas at the height of the Civil War.] They came out of slavery together, and some got into trouble in land deals. It was for survival, buying property and stuff. There was a split when people came out of Paris, Texas in the early 1900’s, in my family. Some of them went to Gary, Indiana, to the steel mills to work. We gravitated towards Minnesota after the second great fire in Paris, Texas. We ended up here. And then there was a group that went out to California, and so that’s how that went.

KHC: And then your grandfather played in the circus bands for a while.

WF: Yeah, I didn’t really know that as a kid, but I knew that he had friends who were musicians. He played in a circus, Forepaugh Sells Bros., and he traveled with the circus. Now I went to Baraboo, Wisconsin, and tried to research that. I found my Uncle Mack, Mack D. Carter, who also traveled with the circus from different years. The people there were helpful in giving me information about the years that they were able to verify that he traveled with them in their circuit that they would make, and I think I

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19 Mack Dade Carter was born 1879 and passed away May 3, 1943.
found my grandfather on maybe one or two of the brochures that they had.

KHC: You’ve got some real serious genealogy work. Your brother Melvin has said that it was Mack Carter that owned the land [on Rondo].

WF: Yeah, Mack came here and he worked with the trains and he was a redcap, I think, up in Canada. Now this is the way I heard it. Up in Canada and back. And so he married, but he never had kids. And so he acquired this land and I guess my father and him were—I’ve heard this two different ways. That the other kids, [Leantha and her son Henry Moore] were provided for in terms of land and money, so that left my father, and that’s why my uncle—it was just expected that he leave his holdings to my father. And then from my father’s perspective, he said that he used to run errands for Mack and so forth when he was younger and that’s how it happened. But in my grandmother’s side of the family and my grandfather’s side, it seemed to always be passed down that you left something for the kids, to the best [of your ability. You leave] your property or something for the kids. The best that you can do, and I got that really strong. Like I have things now that I make sure that—it’s not much, but just so that the kids have something to give them a sense of family continuity. Like with Melvin’s kids or my sister’s kids, I’ve tried to make sure each of them got something from me or something that I had, maybe, from the family.

KHC: So you got some things from your grandmother?

WF: Yeah, and it wasn’t much, and other kids got things from her, too. There was a couple of things that I thought were important because they were so
personal, like my grandmother's dishes that she liked to serve company on when she belonged to groups. And a pendant that she had that she gave to me just before she died. Then I have a carving of an elephant from my grandfather's circus days. So I mean, those aren't big things, but to me they're powerful things.

KHC: What does it mean to be part of this Whitfield/Carter family that had strong women and playful men?

WF: For me it's an identity issue. I feel that since I can trace my family to slavery and up to now—for me, I have a sense of belonging. Not only for a family, but in this country, of being able to point to people who helped build it, like in the South. And actually, when I was doing my research, I was able to contact the owners of the plantation who owned my ancestors. And there is one house still standing that they helped build. And so it's given me a feeling of being connected with a family, a community, and a country. And so nobody can come up and say, "Well, Black people weren't involved in this or that." There weren't any doctorates or big name people, but they were all working people who had families and contributed and lived the way families lived. They weren't perfect. They got in trouble and they did some good things, so that just gives me a feeling of a place and identity in the whole drama, the whole family scene, the American family scene.

KHC: What else should I ask you?

WF: I don't know. Maybe if I could say anything I wanted to, I would just encourage—I believe so strongly in roots and identity that I would just encourage everyone to do that, no matter what you're descendent from.
Because by researching myself and the African American roots, I want to know if I meet somebody Swedish or somebody Italian or Irish or something, I want to know about them, too, because I have something to share about myself that I think is wonderful. So I would encourage everybody to just get a sense of who they are from the roots from their family. That’s all I have to say.

KHC: Well, I really like what you say about the fact that they didn’t have to have fancy titles. You found that they were important because they were hard working people that made a difference in the world.

WF: They were landowners, mostly farmers. But they were hard working and had dreams, bought into the American dream like any other would do and contributed, paid taxes, bought land. I love them. I think some of my relatives were the most colorful people I’ve run across. I went through the genealogy to the American Genealogy group when they came here about eight or nine years ago and everybody was talking about their family and, of course, Minnesota is considered a “Johnny Come Lately” because our records don’t go as far back as the east coast goes back. But, oh, man, I made sure I met some of everybody, and everybody was talking about their ancestors and so forth, I’m like, “Well, I’m trying to find one of mine,” and blah, blah, blah. I felt like I belonged. I felt like this was heaven, too, and don’t discount me. [Laughter]

KHC: How has this community that you were raised in made you who you are today?

WF: Well, just the diversity within the community itself. People doing different things. My mother was a big impact on me. There was nothing she wasn’t
interested in. Whether it was politics, whether it was hobbies, whether—anything was fertile ground for her to talk about and be involved with and to learn about. And family was a big topic for her, her family and the lineage. The communities for me made me want to broaden my horizons, to peek around the corner, maybe take risks. Some of the risks that I’ve taken and found I enjoy being African American. I enjoy being part of the community and I enjoy making friends and meeting new people.

KHC: Thanks, Willow.

WF: Thank you. I never thought I’d be interviewed.

Willow, Bill, William Frank Jr., Jamie Patrice Frelix c. 1980s