Elizabeth Saba: Crossroads to Freedom, I'd just like to thank you for doing this interview. For the record, can you state your name and when you were born?

Mrs. Wiley: Wila Mae Wiley. 10th month, 10th day, 18th.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, where were you born and raised?

Mrs. Wiley: Memphis, Tennessee.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, and you told me before the interview that you were raised by your grandparents.

Mrs. Wiley: I was raised by my grandmother, ___.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, can you tell me their names and what they did?

Mrs. Wiley: Alice____ and John_____. They raised me.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, and do you remember what they did for a job?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, I as really very small when ____. My mother was sick. _____ and my baby brother was born at that time-

[0:01:00]

-somewhere in Arkansas. I don't know what place it was. She was in bed sick and that was in the open country. _____. And you know how mothers love their children. She got up by her bed. I can remember that. And went outside and made a great big pot and tried to fix us some food to eat.

And I think I was sitting on a base. _____my brother and the heater was next to it and he fell on the head. I remember that. I was scared. Also, I didn't know. You know, _____ and he fell off and they called my grandparents and they came and got us. So he was hungry. My mother was feeding him. But anyway, I think she had tuberculosis.

[0:02:00]

I could hear my parents talking and she died and my grandparents were living Memphis and my mother, I could remember I think I was maybe four or five years old, when people died, they had the wake at the house. And they pick me up, you know, near the body.

I can remember that. Won't ever forget those just took us in.

Elizabeth Saba: So Alice and John were your mom's parents?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, and you never knew, did you know your father?

Mrs. Wiley: No.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay.

Mrs. Wiley: The only time I met my father I was around 16 years old. I don't know how they found him, but they came by and said he wants to see his daughter.

Elizabeth Saba: What was that like meeting your father when you were 16?

Mrs. Wiley: I don't know, well, I didn't, he was just another person to me.

Elizabeth Saba: Yeah.

Mrs. Wiley: I think I was about around 16 or 17.

[0:03:00]

His mother said, this is your dad. Isn't you gonna hug your dad? Well, I didn't know ___. I kind of shied away from him. I didn't know anything about my father.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: Neither my mother because my mother died. I guess you know, I was four or five years old.

Elizabeth Saba: Tell me about your brother, what's his name?

Mrs. Wiley: Alonzo. _____that was my maiden name, Willa Mae ____.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay.

Mrs. Wiley: That was my maiden name.

Elizabeth Saba: And do you remember the house that your grand parents raised you in? Where was it?

Mrs. Wiley: Oh, it was North Memphis Skuttleville. Three room house. That was everything, living room, dining room, kitchen. Um-hum.

That is and at that time, we didn't know they have wood at all around. And coal to burn you know, heat the house.

[0:04:00]

Elizabeth Saba: You heated it by coal?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum. We have wood stove and wood heater. And we have oil lamp that was our light.

Elizabeth Saba: And what was then neighborhood like that you grew up in, do you remember?

Mrs. Wiley: IN those days, it was just fine because everybody knew, at that time in Memphis, everybody knew everybody. Everybody _____ see after each other. That was love then.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum, what kind of things did you do for fun when you were little?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, in the morning we went to school. Play a __basketball, baseball. And whatever, we sit around laughing, talk. Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: Where did you go to elementary school?

Mrs. Wiley: To Manasseh High.

Elizabeth Saba: Manasseh High, oh, what about, so Manasseh High School?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum. Well, I could remember Manasseh High School at that time.

[0:05:00]

Elizabeth Saba: What was it like?

Mrs. Wiley: It was just really, really, _____. We had a because of Manasseh, there was a railroad right between Manasseh and _____. But anyway _____ on this side of Manasseh, we had to cross the street to go to the other side, to the high school. Because see, there was grandma's school. So I press on. That was in a stucco building, you know, like they got now. Manasseh has a stucco building so that I can remember when they start building the auditorium.

Well, it's still sitting there empty now.

[0:06:00]

Yeah, that was Manasseh school.

Elizabeth Saba: Do you remember at all when they integrated the schools?

Mrs. Wiley: No, I don't.

Elizabeth Saba: Did you go to school before that?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: Before integrations?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah, so anyway, our principal was Ms. Cora Peach Taylor and she died. And my home room teacher was Mrs. Hays. She became the principal after Ms. Taylor died. Mm, so we had _____ at that time. It would be so cold. We walked to school. We didn't have bus. They didn't bus. We didn't miss school.

When it was snow and rain on the ground, we walked, but it wasn't two minutes here we're at the school.

Elizabeth Saba: How long did it take to walk to school?

Mrs. Wiley: Not to long. 'Cause we enjoyed walking.

[0:07:00]

You know how children are at that time. We enjoyed it. We'd walk to school. Yeah, _____ to school, everything. They have football, basketball, um, played at, but anyway, it was really, you know, and enjoyable going to school. _____ it's boring. They don't like to go to school.

Elizabeth Saba: What did you left high school? What did you do when you left?

Mrs. Wiley: I got sick. Had, you know a problem with my eyes. I was at school one day and my eye was read and running. So my teacher wrote a note to give to my parents told them to keep me at home. And so I had eye problems.

[0:08:00]

And you know, _____I was in the 10th grade, _____. So, I enjoyed that.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, and then, um, what about the job that you did after you, into your 20's and 30's, do you remember what you did?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, at that time, we used to go to, you know, chop cottonwood.

Elizabeth Saba: Uh-huh.

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum, we would get up early in the morning and walk over to Manasseh and you know, get on this truck go, it would take us over to the house. See, that's the way people ____. They was chopping cotton or picking cotton.

Elizabeth Saba: Oh, and you'd go over to Arkansas?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah.

Elizabeth Saba: On a truck?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah, on a truck. We'd get ___ truck. And we_____. I didn't pick about 100 pounds of cotton all day.

Elizabeth Saba: Yeah, what was it like?

Mrs. Wiley: It was swell to us. That was our spending money.

Elizabeth Saba: Yeah.

[0:09:00]

We want some money, we'd get to the truck and either go work in a private home and babysit, something like that. At that time, that's the way life was. So, we have, it was all right. You know, we have some spending money.

Elizabeth Saba: What would you do with your spending money? What would you do for fun?

Mrs. Wiley: Oh, go and get some shoes and spend it on food or whatever. You know, decide where we were going to eat.

Elizabeth Saba: Where would you go shopping?

Mrs. Wiley: We'd go downtown. We'd go walk the town at that time.

Elizabeth Saba: You'd walk downtown to Beal Street and—

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum. Um-hum. That was the town and there was one way out then, so everything was downtown. And we had, ____ almost like downtown. So that's the way it was.

[0:10:00]

That's for the men who went, yeah.

Elizabeth Saba: Did you belong to a church growing up?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: What church?

Mrs. Wiley: I don't know whether it was Trinity ____ or the church on Wells Street.

Elizabeth Saba: What was it like?

Mrs. Wiley: We would go to Sunday School. Yeah, you actually go to Sunday School and church. You didn't cook on Sunday. We cook on Saturday, didn't do anything on Sunday at that time. But now, everything change. So I don't say ____. And our water was out on the street. Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: You're water was out on the street?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah, _____ all of us go there and get the water.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, you go out to get the water.

Mrs. Wiley: We have to boil it our water. No way to take a bath _____.

Elizabeth Saba: What else—

Mrs. Wiley: Get up and go to church on Sunday. That was out ____.

[0:11:00]

That's the way of life it was at that time. So it was all right.

Elizabeth Saba: Did you ever get married?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah, I got married. My husband, you know, _____ course he had to run me down. Took him five years to get me. Yeah, it took him five years to get me.

Elizabeth Saba: What did he do?

Mrs. Wiley: He worked for the city, sanitation department.

Elizabeth Saba: Oh, he worked in the sanitation department. Was he involved in any of the sanitations strikes when Dr. King came?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah. No he had retired after that.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay.

Mrs. Wiley: That _____.

Elizabeth Saba: Do you remember—

Mrs. Wiley: That was in the 60's when they had the sanitation, he had already retired. He had lost his health.

Elizabeth Saba: He lost his health by then?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum.

[0:12:00]

Elizabeth Saba: Do you remember what he thought about the sanitation strike? Did he have any strong feelings, or you?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, at that time, the city wouldn't take out no social security. That's what it was all about. And they ___. They had to tote the tubs on top of their head. Go in and, you know, the garbage was in the back and they had to go in the backyard and pickup the garbage, but they ____ top of their head.

So after we marry and we was sleeping together, he was just toting garbage in his sleep and come right out on top of my head. And I said, "Whooo." I said, "Uh-huh, I can't sleep with you. You still toting the garbage." Yeah, so he'd be raising it up and don't throw the garbage in the truck. That's the way they had it. _____never saw a whole lot of change.

[0:13:00]

So their lay off was about, but Dr. Martian Luther King came there, you know and tried to settle it. There was a lot of riot.

Elizabeth Saba: Right, do you remember that time? Can you tell me about it?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: What was it like when Dr. King came?

Mrs. Wiley: It was crazy. They tore up business downtown. Taking stuff out of the stores. Out of stores like everything. And all neighborhoods, they were just tearing up everything.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: That's the way they were.

Elizabeth Saba: Do you remember when the riot police came in?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah. That's where the riot started.

Elizabeth Saba: Oh, what was that like? What—

Mrs. Wiley: It was kind of scary.

Elizabeth Saba: Yeah.

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum. For any, you know, ___. It really was, you know.

Elizabeth Saba: Now, did you have any children? No? Okay.

Mrs. Wiley: Always did want children, but have been scared. Um-hum.

[0:14:00]

Elizabeth Saba: Do you remember any other stories from the 50's to the 70's during this, that you'd like to share? Either about the civil rights or Dr. King or—

Mrs. Wiley: Well, he had his speeches, talking, I think it was a _____. When he was speaking, you know. _____ just like you see on TV now. You know, that's what he talked about.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: So he was at a _____ shot came from somewhere and they didn't know where it came from. All we got to hear is Dr. King had been shot and he was dead.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: That's when the bribes started coming in. People ____. It was really sad.

[0:15:00]

It tore up the store downtown. All the stores, everything. Then they stared going out, way out east.

Elizabeth Saba: So, can you tell me at all about Memphis as a segregated city?

Mrs. Wiley: Well—

Elizabeth Saba: How did segregation affect your life?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, it didn't effect my life, but you know, we have to be in the back and, but you know, that's the way life was. So we took it. And try to see now what they got now and that's why we grow. _____.

[0:16:00]

And sometimes we didn't have, couldn't even sit in the back. They had to get up. A lot of times, the whites take the whole place.

Elizabeth Saba: Yeah.

Mrs. Wiley: And we had to stand up. Till Rosa Parks, a lot of this.

Elizabeth Saba: Do you remember when that happened? Rosa Parks? That was in the 50's and she was, you know had worked that day and was sitting down. And this white guy got on the bus and he wanted a seat. And she told him, no I'm not getting up, and she didn't so she broke the barrier for all of us. Black and white, sit where you want.

Elizabeth Saba: Uh-huh. Do you remember when things started changing in Memphis?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah, it started in 60.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, and what changes did you see?

Mrs. Wiley: And I had been over in Arkansas, I think it's Little Rock where they started segregating the school, that was ___. You know.

[0:17:00]

And a lot of chaos over there. Everywhere he went was chaos and I can remember we ____ we'd go shopping and they had a colored and white side. White here, colored there.

Elizabeth Saba: When you went shopping?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah. And the white had a place to sit down and eat, but we had to stand up. Um-hum. ___ all the stores was downtown. Everything was downtown.

Elizabeth Saba: Were you, did you join any kind of organizations or go to any rallies during the civil rights era?

Mrs. Wiley: Hm-mm.

Elizabeth Saba: Not really, okay.

Mrs. Wiley: ____.

Elizabeth Saba: How did you feel about people getting involved?

Mrs. Wiley: I felt all right. Um-hum.

[0:18:00]

So, anyway.

Elizabeth Saba: Was your husband involved? I know he was retired after—

Mrs. Wiley: No, 'cause his health, you know_____.

Elizabeth Saba: His health was poor, okay.

Mrs. Wiley: So I was working. I had to carry the whole load, take care of him.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: And working and that's just being on my feet a lot of time. That's why I got this arthritis, kind of from being up on my feet the whole, see, I would work and then come home and see after him, round the clock till he's ___.

Elizabeth Saba: Do you think your involvement, or experiences changed during the civil rights movement depending on if you were a man or woman?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: Did men and women have different experiences or—

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: How so?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, just by _____. So that was like we would just took life as they come.

[0:19:00]

That's all we could do. Yeah, that's the way life was so you had to accept it. Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: What about, um, were there any big events in Hyde Park that really changed the community?

Mrs. Wiley: No, ____ Hyde Park. _____.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay, so you met your husband in Big Hampton and did you move back here later?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum. Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: Well do you have any stories to share about, do you remember when the Hollywood dump started?

Mrs. Wiley: No, I don't.

Elizabeth Saba: Not really, okay, or um, what about the closing of West Drive, have you heard of that? When they closed West Drive?

Mrs. Wiley: Closed the drive?

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum, West Drive.

[0:20:00]

Mrs. Wiley: West drive, well, the buses, let's see, no I can't remember.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay. Um, well, tell me about—

Mrs. Wiley: _____ all the working place was in North Memphis and South Memphis.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay.

Mrs. Wiley: Like uh, they have a _____.

Elizabeth Saba: Okay.

Mrs. Wiley: And _____ all the others in ____. _____.

Elizabeth Saba: What happened when all those companies left? How did that—

Mrs. Wiley: ____ went down.

Elizabeth Saba: How did that change the area?

[0:21:00]

Well, they just did what you could, the best they could. Yeah, _____ all the businesses in North Memphis, in the working place.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: And that _____ was in South Memphis.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum. Now, how do you think that Memphis today compares to Memphis growing up, when you were little? What's changed in Hyde Park in Memphis?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, the people's changed. You know, we's got together and brought ____. Everybody know everybody at that time.

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: But now you don't know your neighbor. 'Cause you know, we got all this air condition and air vent. Everybody then they all ____. Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: I was going to ask you why you think things have changed?

Mrs. Wiley: Well—

[0:22:00]

_____ they didn't like the way things were. That's the reason they want to change. So different folks, different strokes. That's what it is.

Elizabeth Saba: Yep.

Mrs. Wiley: Different folks, different strokes.

Elizabeth Saba: What is your proudest moment? What are you most happy about in your life?

Mrs. Wiley: _____ I like people. I like to get involved. When they were starting a program for seniors to work. I think it was in this 60's, I did a lot of volunteer work.

Elizabeth Saba: Oh, were would you volunteer?

Mrs. Wiley: Well, I volunteered at a, as a senior citizen, I volunteered there.

Elizabeth Saba: At the senior citizens?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah, in Memphis.

Elizabeth Saba: Oh, okay.

Mrs. Wiley: And then I volunteered working at ___ to deliver meals to the home. I got involved in that.

[0:23:00]

Elizabeth Saba: Um-hum.

Mrs. Wiley: And then I volunteer at the school, Grant School. I was the teacher aid.

Elizabeth Saba: Oh, you were?

Mrs. Wiley: Grandparents teacher aid. So they tried to get a new ____. Oh you still _____. I said, "Nah." I was working at Burger King ____. The _____ started yelling at all the people 'cause the ____ didn't have time to worry. So they give the older folks something to do.

Elizabeth Saba: Did you ever have any difficulties when you were a teacher's aid? No? No problems?

Mrs. Wiley: Hm-mm. All the children looked lonely. Um-hum. You know, ___.

Elizabeth Saba: And were you ever a teacher's aid during, when they integrated the schools?

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah.

Elizabeth Saba: What was that like?

[0:24:00]

Mrs. Wiley: That was like no, no, ____ they integrated at ____, you know, started volunteer work. I was downtown. And I had to retire. I was sitting at home, you know, looking at the TV, reading the paper, this ad was in the paper. And I kept, you know, _____. I didn't know what it was, so curiosity, I called. And they answered. And I said, "I see where you all hired." And she said, "Yeah. You can come out here and fill out an application, we hiring."

Out of curiosity, I wasn't doing anything. But anyway, so I did I went up there and got the application. She looked at my application and said, "Oh, you very good, you very active. You'll be ____." _____. She said, "Well, I'm going to take the application down to the school and see who needs, you know, wants you."

[0:25:00]

Well, I was just sitting around the house, you know, still sitting up there looking at the TV and the telephone rang and she said, Ms. Wiley?" I said, "Yes." She said, "This is Burger King. I have your application. Would you come out and have an interview." And I said, "Oh yes, you know." Still, I didn't even want to think nothing about the job.

So I went on down there, there's _____ to the _____. And went on down. This was a young, young guy. And he said, "Oh, I'm so sick of the young folks. They don't come into work." I had everything filled out. Social Security card, he said, "When you get that social security card, will you come on here? And get your uni-, you can go to work."

[0:26:00]

And when my social security card came, I called. He said, "Okay, come on down. And he gave me the paper and thing to write on and so I get my uniform.

Elizabeth Saba: Now, if there's any advice you could offer to young people in Memphis, what is your advice?

Mrs. Wiley: Stay in school. You can do what you want to do. Get your education. You got to have something to go on. You can't go on and get a job here, you got to have something to go on. Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: Is there anything else that you'd like to say that we haven't talked about?

Mrs. Wiley: So they hired and I went there and got, they said, "Whoo." 'Cause I worked at a diner.

Elizabeth Saba: At a diner?

Mrs. Wiley: In the dining room. You know, I was the hostess of the dining room, that's what I did. So I worked at Burger King 15 years.

Elizabeth Saba: Oh, you worked at Burger King for 15 years?

Mrs. Wiley: Um-hum, and everybody came-

[0:27:00]

- whoo, this looks so good and it smells clean. And one day, I don't know why they did it. They had to clean the bathroom, you know, the dining room. They had it caked on the table and chairs and they had been so long, you couldn't even clean them. And so one day, the owner came in and I was ____ it was outside.

I said, "When you get through I want to show you something." And I took him all around in the dining room and showed him what. He goes, "Oh, I didn't notice that it was like this." So he went and ___ the whole dining room. He said, "I'm gonna go get everything out of here and I'm glad you told me."

It was just filthy.

Elizabeth Saba: Really? Huh.

Mrs. Wiley: It was filthy. And then the customers were going, starting to give me problems. Because I was older.

[0:28:00]

They wanted to make it, you know, hard for me.

Elizabeth Saba: Right, right.

Mrs. Wiley: So, I straightened them out so they started calling me mama.

Elizabeth Saba: Mama.

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah, ____ Um-hum.

Elizabeth Saba: Well, thank you Ms. Wiley for doing this interview.

Mrs. Wiley: Okay, well I'm really glad to do it.

Elizabeth Saba: We appreciate it.

Mrs. Wiley: Yeah.

[0:28:28]

[End of Audio]