

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA—FALL 2010**



**Interviewee:** John Rivers  
**Date of Interview:** October 29, 2010  
**Location of Interview:** John River's Home  
**Interviewer:** Kortney Lapeyrolerie

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**Lapeyrolerie:** Can you tell me your name, and how old you are?

**Rivers:** My name is John Rivers, and I'm seventy-nine years old.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Where were you born?

**Rivers:** Suggsville, Alabama

**Lapeyrolerie:** When did you come to Sarasota and why?

**Rivers:** Well, I came here in 1951, and I had a friend from Alabama that was here already, and I thought I'd come here before going to Detroit, other states up North as I had planned, but since I came and found it likeable, I decided to stay.

**Lapeyrolerie:** What was Sarasota like when you first moved here?

**Rivers:** Quite different. I mean, I came here directly from Mobile, Alabama, which is a large city than most other cities. And I was concerned once I came here because we were so far behind in Sarasota. We came here, and most cases no minorities in any positions. No policemen, no, nothing but schoolteachers and they was in segregated schools. So, this was a very different thing than we were accustomed to, and for that reason I love to challenge things and that developed a challenge for me to participate here, and it worked out real good.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Let's discuss your involvement with desegregating local beaches. Can we talk about your involvement?

**Rivers:** Well, everything was segregated at that time. And the beach was one of the top. The schools were segregated. But the schools, my kids were very small, I only had two when we came here and, with that, we had to talk about what was going to happen to them and I guess when my oldest daughter was about ten, twelve, something, along with some other students around. We talked about integrating the school system because it was so far away for many student, not necessarily our student, but we had students coming all the way from Venice and Laurel and that was a long distance for kids just starting to school, some six year old having to get up at four in the morning having to make it to school, and all that, and ride twenty miles or more to get to school. And that was not what we wanted to see, and I didn't want that for my kids here. So, therefore, we took action against that, and, but we didn't get the school integrated at that time. So, we had to move on with other issues. And, it's just, we had good teachers, they was all Afro-American, but they were good teachers. It was very, very good for us. And once I got involved with the action in the city, especially the neighborhood, it was quite fun.

**Lapeyrolerie:** How did you get involved with the NAACP?

**Rivers:** Well, when I came here, the NAACP was already organized at that time, but I went to a couple of meetings and they were talking about the things that I was concerned about and, therefore, I started attending that. And with that meeting, I became an officer and from that to the president of it.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Which was the first beach that you tried to desegregate?

**Rivers:** Yeah, well, when we first started going to the beach, it was in Venice because we weren't allowed to go here in Sarasota. And going to the beaches in Venice, we had no problem at all. And, but after going there, it's eighteen, twenty miles from here down there. And that was a long distance, unnecessary long distance. And we took issue with that and after going there for a while we then started to going to Lido Beach. And at that time, once we planned that, we had some problems. The reporters came, and they identified the cars, took pictures of the cars that was there, giving the tag number and all of that stuff. And from the tag numbers, the system could pick up the names of the people. And some of the people were fired just because they went to the beach, attended the beach there. But we didn't stop at that time. We went into the water the first time. And then the next day, they cancelled out everything, closed the beach on us. And, at that time, that time, I was leading the group. So, we had left Lido and was headed back into town on the second day that we were there. Then, I decided, I said, "You know, I just feel like that those people are in that water out there now." We was on our way back across the bridge. "So, let's go back." And, we turned around and went back. And, sure enough, the beach was full of people. And the policemen came back, and say, "Oh, the beach is closing again." I said, "No, no, you go on to town. If we need you, we will call you. But other than that, we don't need you."

But, by that time, there were people that was at the first gathering at the beach. And with the photos that the reporters had taken, some of the owners or some of the people in the city, they identified the people that was at the beach. That their cars and some of them was fired the next day because they was at the beach. And the remainder of us continued to go every week until it was a simple thing. But there was a lot being done before that because when they first started talking about it, there was a group called John Birch Society. Now, who they are and what their activities, I'm not sure. But they was very outspoken against us going to the beach. So, they suggested that they go out in the water, out in the beach waters, and then develop an island there, and then get a boat, and take us out to the island, and then bring us back on the boat. Well, that didn't fly. So, we continued to work on going to the beach. And, later, the lot of people got involved. The school system, people of the school system got involved, and they was talking about the opportunities by having your beach, going to the beach out there on this island and whatnot. And they stated that the stingrays was a dangerous thing, and you all are free from that and all of that stuff. I said, "That's simple. I don't like the direction you're saying here because if you're white, and you're out in the water, they ought to be able to see you more faster than they could see us. And, therefore, that doesn't fly with us."

So, sure enough, they finally came to the conclusion, they said, "Well, okay, we will build a pool in the Newtown area there if you all would accept that instead of the beach." It was about August, late August or sometime around then. And that kind of angered the people, especially leaders at that time. You had ministers and all involved. And they decided, no, no, no we don't even want to talk about that. So, I looked at it. I said, "Look, look, wait a minute, let's, let's think." I said, "We don't have a beach. We don't have a pool." I said, "We wait. We don't go to the beach that much in the wintertime anyway because we only had one winter. And, therefore, let's accept it. Let's accept that, and then we'll have a beach. And then when you all bring about the dedication of the pool, I will then take a group and we will go to the beach. And we'll have both." Then, that's exactly what happened there. So, and, we didn't have a lot of problems after that.

We went to Siesta Key Beach, after that. We got that one under control. So, we wanted to go Siesta, we did. And that was a very, very nice beach, nicer beach. And we only had one incident. Some guy came up there with a pickup truck. He had a lot of glass bottles in there. And he got out the truck, and he, how I guess he had, somebody to help him, because we had about twelve, fourteen cars. And, with that, he got out of the truck, got the bottles, and he put them under each one of the cars that we was there, that was ours, you know. And I was out in the water at that time, and someone called out to me to come, come hurry, you know. So, when I came out, he was still putting his bottles under the tires of the cars. And I walked right up to him and just nearly nose-to-nose, and I said, "Look, I want you to get every bottle you had out there and, put it under the, I want them out. And I want it out now." So, he looked over and none of his people were there to support him. So, he started pulling the bottles out from under the cars. And that was a victory.

And there, some people that didn't like what was going on, and one was an insurance agency. He, representative, he was out there on the beach. When he saw what was happening, he didn't like it either. But he was collecting the insurance fees throughout the

black neighborhood. So, when he disagreed with that and kind of acted up, I called headquarters, his headquarters the next day, and told them, "We don't want him back in our neighborhood no more, collecting money, when he objects to it, being part of the assistance of us being a human being." So, sure enough, they transferred him out of here, and we didn't see him no more. But, from then on, it was just, just fine. People go out to the beach for every little activity. We used to go there. Mason had an annual day that we would have for the Masonic. And we would go out there in the morning and round off an area. And then, go back there when all the people, two or three hundred people, would show up there, no problem at all. So, that was that part of it.

And the next issue was the school system, you know, when we integrated the school. And that was a little more of a hassle because going to school there are a lot of people who couldn't understand why we wanted to go, our children to go, to an all-white school. I said, "Well, why do white people want to go to an all-white school?" You know, I said, "That don't make sense." And some of the people were serious good people, you know, but they were saying, well, I couldn't understand, you know, you all don't, that "We don't want that to happen because your boys will be going to school there and the girls and all, mingling and all." I said, "But they're doing that anyway." I said, "And then just give us a little time, it's going to happen anyway." I said, "There are going to be people, white girls and black boys, and black girls and white girl, guys. People are going to be people." I said, "As long as they are having fun together, there don't have to be nothing wrong with it, but get to know each other." So, I then organized a group that, we had a hall up there, and had a dance on Saturday night for them, white and black, all came up. Boy, that stirred up a whole different thing. There was, some black people was against that, you know. But, nevertheless, we kept it up for a while, you know. And, then, they moved to other things. Then, when they went on to integrate the schools, we had some problems right on, you know. Because, we talked about, closing out the school here, and then transporting the kids. In a sense, we looked like we was going to get the integration anyway.

So, with that, we, I decided, at that time, to call a boycott of the school system because, you know, the schools were receiving their funds based on attendance. And, therefore, they just decided that they didn't want that to work, you know. So, when I talked some, they sent the principal, assistant principal of Sarasota out here to talk to me, he said, "John, you are going to get your brain beat out, you know. You know, you don't know what you are getting into." So, I just said, "Well, if anyone get close enough to beat my brains out, he's close enough to me to beat somebody's brains out, and that's exactly what will happen if you try to do something to me." So, we called the boycott on a Sunday afternoon. Monday morning we had ninety-five percent of our students out of school. And we had organized the churches to open cafeterias, classrooms and everything in the churches out there. So, the kids were going to school and happy with it. A lot of New College students was teachers and assistants. You know, just all the way. So, everything was just working in our favor, you know, all the time to make the changes. And it did work. It did work, you know.

So, but all in all, Sarasota was slow to get thing going. We went. People were going to school. I was working for public housing, at that time. And we developed, classes

through vo-tech school. We'd have them to come out to the premises and do mechanic things for the people, cars, you know give them training. And it worked out good, you know, because a lot of them turned out to be pretty good mechanic. But I guess they don't like that very much because didn't many of them stay with mechanics, you know. But it was good. I enjoyed it. We got a better relationship. I went back to school for plumbing. And my brother went back for electrical work. And it worked out beautifully, you know. And today, there are very few who stayed with it, you know. And they went into other areas, you know. Some went to doctor and all of that stuff, you know. But it was just good to see.

And people in Newtown then was united. We'd do a project, and they were ready. That's very different today. It's hard to get people motivated to do the right thing and to do it as well as it should be. And think you all may recognize that because there are a lot of things happening now in here that I think is very bad for us. So, basically, that was it.

Well, once we integrated the schools, then we got teachers, you know, white teachers and black teachers and all of that. And the problem of racism poked its head up again, you know, because, they then, most of that they were hired was white teachers. So, with that, we just had to continue battle and battle to get because they was busing the students from this area out to the neighborhood schools, white schools. As we said, wasn't white, shouldn't have been white schools. But that's what they were. And, with that, it just kind of motivated us to fight much harder at that time. So, then, they were going to move Amaryllis Park's school, which you saw part of Booker on this side. So, they was going to tear that down, not tear it down, dismember it, in other words, split it in half, or in three quarters, put it on trailers, and haul it down to Southside School to give more space for that, you know. And I came out there one day, and they was, had police all around the building, all up on the house, building, you know. I said, "You all are crazy." You know. "Why are you here guarding this house, building like that when we are out here fighting, trying to keep it? We're not going to destroy that." So, I said, "So, you're just really ignorant." So, with that, they didn't like that, but that kind of shamed them out of continuing with guarding it, you know. But they also cancelled the idea of transporting it to Southside. So, that was a winner. And then, but they never stopped. They just kept on, and I can't recall just how long after that that they decided that we would, would, you know, truly integrate the schools at that time. And that's when all districts that was white students that lived less than a block from Booker campus, but yet, they filed to keep them going to the school where they was going, and then bus out so many other blacks to that school until they got blacks in each school.

But to the beginning of it, it was tough because the kids that was coming from Venice and Laurel, we was concerned about them because here's this little old six year old getting up four day in the morning to get a bus and ride twenty miles away to get to school. That was tough, and disgraceful really, and rude. So, we pushed that, pushed that very hard, and we finally met with the superintendent at a meeting. I went to Venice, went to Laurel, met with the people there. Then, I invited the superintendent to come down there to get with them in a meeting. So, we talked about it. And he was pretty decent, but the system itself wasn't too friendly to him when that was coming about. So, he decided that he was going to test it, you know. I said, "Well, test or not test it, but

come September, when school is open, if you do not have a system that those kids in Sarasota County can go to school there, you'll be in court, federal court. Get it done." So, when school opened, we was able to get the kids down there, to go to school down there, which was good.

But it just was so many things that was bad, you know, just bad. They had segregated parts of the hospital. Blacks were not able to eat at McDonald's, weren't able to go into McDonald's. They had to go around to the back door. But I guess that I was the most vocal one doing that. So, I called, one day, out there, to McDonald's, and talked to them about it, you know. He said, "Oh, yes, we're integrated." But yet, I had talked the day before to, they call them, what they call guys that transport people, drivers for them. But, anyway, he had some white people that he had brought down there. And he was out front to the table out there eating something, and I wanted to know, "Why are you out here doing this when you could go inside?" He said, "We can't go in there." So, then, I went and talked to the manager there. And he said, "Oh, yes, we could do this." So, so, I didn't even dress as well as I'm dressed now. I just went out there as a normal working person would've gone. And when I got there, the young lady at the front window, she said, "You're going to have to go around to the back. You're going to have to go around to the back." I said, "Is the owner or manager here?" He said, "Well, it won't make any difference, you're going to have to go around..." I said, "Well, get him out here, wherever I have to go, if I have to go to Hell. Get him out here." So, when he got out there, and I gave him my name, he liked a flip because I had already called him on the phone, and he promised that that was all taken care of and it wasn't. So, he then had to, and he offered all kinds of service, some hamburgers, and all that to distribute to some of the kids. So, with that, we solved that problem.

And, but yet, we couldn't go to all of the other private places. So, we had a, some type of rally or something that or parade by the schools, marched down, you know, the street, Main Street. And, with that, we had this riot, this parade. When we got downtown, we couldn't even get into the drugstore to buy a drink, or what have you, or couldn't sit there. So, I got real upset about that, and I said okay. So, we went out to a place out in Ringling Shopping Center out there, and we gathered around the benches there, and all around the counter. And so, they didn't, wouldn't serve us. And yet, they supposed to have been non-discriminatory. So, with that, they had walking around with the flags, you know. I call them John Birch flags, but whatever it was. You know, the segregated state flags, at that time. The Southern states still had them. So, with that, I went out there and they wouldn't serve us. So, I went to New College, and I talked to them. I said, "I need you all. I need three or four of you all to come and be with us, and then when we gather around the counter there, we have already told you how many plates we need, and you're going to have to buy them, and then slide them down the counter as get them to us, you know. So, sure enough, they agreed and they bought and we were sitting there eating. And some of these people walked in there. Man, their eyes were bug. They couldn't even get to the counter. It was something else. But and some, you know, was ready to take us on. But when we stepped up, I had a couple of guys that were larger than I was. So, when they saw that, they backed off. And from then on, we just kept on going, going wherever we wanted to go. And it was good. Some people was nice. I had the children going to school out here. I didn't have to worry about food or nothing. And people, and white

people on that island out there, they provided money for that, for all of the food and everything. So, they was a lot of nice people. So, that's about, I guess, I don't know. Unless that question you want ask me...

**Lapeyrolerie:** No, that's good. So, Newtown didn't always exist, right?

**Rivers:** Beg?

**Lapeyrolerie:** Newtown didn't always exist, did it?

**Rivers:** Didn't always?

**Lapeyrolerie:** Didn't always exist?

**Rivers:** It was here when I came here, though. It was Newtown then.

**Lapeyrolerie:** But people were working together better then?

**Rivers:** Yeah, I think. Yes, yeah. Because they weren't allowed to go everywhere, you know. And people was more willing to fight. I mean, the day that we made a decision to boycott the school system, we met on a Sunday afternoon. About four o'clock, about five o'clock, we had the organization authorization to go ahead and make it, make it a reality. So, we left their organized that day with knowing what school our kids were going to, I mean, what church our kids would be going to, and all of that, and which was good. People were motivated. We were closer anyway because people didn't have daycare and all of that stuff to send their children to. So, there was people like someone at home, not working, but not. They became babysitters and then, from there, it just grew. It just kept growing. So, but all in all, it was better then than now in that area, you know.

**Lapeyrolerie:** So, I think you said you went sailing at New College once. Did you tell me that?

**Rivers:** Did what?

**Lapeyrolerie:** You went sailing at New College once?

**Rivers:** Yes, we, well, it was a group of New College students with us because I don't know what it is about me, but I'm very attracted to people, you. So, they, some of them that were doing the march with us, you know and all that stuff and chaperoning the students, and teaching some in the classroom. So, they were very cooperative and very happy to do it because a lot of them, you know, some of them didn't know, had never associated with blacks and they were very good. And I liked it because it gave us communication, you know, with each other and made it much easier for the transacted. And it, it just was good. It just, everything we tried was just working, you know, just working. But it was still segregated and discriminated. You didn't see nobody downtown working in any meaningful positions. So, and, if you were downtown and had to go to the restroom, you had to go up to the train station from wherever you were to go up to use the restroom. Just silly stuff, you know. So, but as we exposed that, we had nobody working

out there. And nobody trained to do it. So, I was upset about that and got with the city commissioners and talked to them about that, you know. And one of the commissioners, he said, "Well, I understand why you're mad, you know, but if you can get me some people that want to be clerks or want to be mail deliverers or want to be whatever in that sense, you know..." I said, "You said nothing but a word. We'll have that tomorrow." And sure enough, we got them. We made announcement; they were there. Tellers and bookkeepers and all of them came right out of the woodworks.

I had one group there for this horticultural thing, you know, this doing the lawn, flowers, and all of that stuff. And when he said, well, said, "We could start tomorrow. Maybe." He said, "Through horticulture." I said, "Hell, man, we know more about horticulture when we were born than you know now. So, what are you talking about? We don't want that. We want some real jobs. We've got a bank. You know, we could go to the bank, put our money in the bank. So, why can't we have any bankers or, you know, and tellers?" So, sure enough, they called, and one of the guys at Citizen Bank down there, he spoke up. You know, he was against that type of thing, you know, because he didn't want to hire no blacks. So, that bothered me.

So, I then called out press and brought them out. I said, well. I said, "You know what I want? All you good, kind white folks and black folks, tomorrow when the bank open, I would appreciate if you get there to draw every dime that you have in it out. That we may get some recognition." And sure enough, the bank called me from the owner, I guess he was the owner or president somewhere out of Miami, called me and said, "John, what in the heavens is going on up there?" I said, "Your, your guy spoke out, and he had nothing to do with this issue we was talking about. But he took it on his own to do that." I said, "I objected to that, and I'm asking everybody, white and black, to do an end with this bank." He said, "Please don't do that. Don't do that. What would it take for you to satisfy you, that could get you happy if we didn't do it?" I said, "I don't mean to be mean, but if you will have him to come to me and we'll set up the TV thing, let it be nationally known, that if he apologized to me, in the open," I said, "then I'll forgive him." So, sure enough he said, "Same as done. You can set it up for it tomorrow. We will have it ready for you." So, that did a lot for us. That moved us a long way because a lot of people, white people, wanted to see things to be 5, but they didn't want to get involved.

And then, New College was good. I used to go up there and meet with them and evening parties and stuff like that. So, it was just beautiful. So, then, some group, they took out after me then. They were really going to get me going, you know. And, but we got farther along, and they lost whatever little thing that they had gained, they lost that, because people, we stood together. And, but I dislike where we are today, you know, with the younger group now. They, well drugs, when they came into play, that, that kind of made things worse. So, we have a lot more people.

We have people in the sheriff's department, people in the city police department, which they had none of that. And I was with the police auxiliary sheriff department, and where all of that group was black. But they didn't want black arresting white, you know. So, we did that. Then, later, he came up with the next thing. And this was during the time they had the riots here and, you know, throughout the country. And the sheriff came up with



another idea, he said, "Well, we would like to change this to a riot squad." I said, "Riot squad?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, there are so many things on in these groups." I said, "Let me tell you something. As of this day, if that's put into play, I'm out of it," I said, "because there's a riot that means you're opposing somebody. And I know I have to be with this community if it is because we're the ones that you're opposing right now. There wouldn't, wouldn't be no need for this riot squad if it wasn't for racism." I said, "You're as racist as anybody else." So, I left being there. But there were some there; they stayed, which was good. They stayed on there. But they never did take it as a real riot thing. They went on basically the same activities that they were doing before. But some of them stayed there, and resigned, not resigned, but retired from there, which was good. But, I just, no, I didn't want to be associated with anything that discriminated on support of rioting. No, I wasn't going to do under no circumstance.

So, one of the deputy sheriff, when we integrated the beach, he got involved with it. And with that, his daughter, I guess she's six, seven year old, somewhere in there, and out on the west side, east side of the city. And she saw me come out there, when I went out there, once a week out there. And she'd come running over to where I was at, you know. She said, "John, my friend," she says, "I've got something to tell you!" She says, "My daddy was mad yesterday!" I said, "What your daddy was mad about, darling?" He says, "He said that all them n\*\*\*\*\* that was out in the beach out there, he could kick their pants off." He said, "But you're not a n\*\*\*\*\*, you're my friend." I said, "You're the brightest young lady I've seen since I've been in Sarasota, but I have one thing that I want you to do. I want you to run back over there and tell your daddy that he's the dumbest man ever lived." And so, she took off. I heard her screaming, though. He must have spanked her pretty good. But then I met him down, I was down at the courthouse down there for something. I met him down there, and I told him, I said, "You know, I'm glad to see you because I have something that I want to talk to you about." I said, "Your daughter was telling me about, brought the real racism out of you, when you're talking about kicking some pants off." I said, "Don't you wear pants?" I said, "It come more like you getting your pants kicked off." I said, "But I'll tell you what, you start with my pants and you won't want to see a pair of pants anymore because I am going to try my best to take you out." So, he said, "Well, John," he said, "you don't have to be..." I said, "It's not rude. Rude is you teaching this little child here to be discriminatory when she don't want to be because I'm her friend." And, boy, he didn't like that. So, with that, it got a little better and a little better, you know. One thing to another thing, groups, you know.

But they did everything they could to keep it, keep it separated. They didn't want blacks dealing with whites, especially if they were with their, you know, lady people. They didn't like, which, was, I could understand it, you know. They've been discriminating all this time; they didn't want to change that. But there were some good people, a lot. I mean I had people I met in 1952, when I came here. I met them, and I was just out there this week to one of them. Going out there to see him, he had an eightieth birthday. And we were there to cheer that on, and we're just like, you know, white, black. It doesn't make any difference. So, it's improved a lot.

And I'm concerned right now with all this building that's going on out there. I'm wondering where, what's the end results with that because they put a lot of money out

there, and normally we had to fight to get money out there. Because when, I can't now recall what year it was that they built that first section of the Newtown recreation center there. But we was meeting Sunday after Sunday talking about the condition of the community. And, somehow or another, it came up about the Rec, you know, they had this army-type, barrack-type building there. And, so, we thought about that. So, they was floating a bond issue, out there. And someone later said, "Well, what can we do to get in on that? This old army barrack has been here since we've been here. And it should be building something new, you know." So, they said, I asked them after, I said, "Let's go down and find out about this bond issue that their floating. What is that for?" So, we did. We went down, and I asked them, "Well, what's in it for us? You float this bond issue, and you all get it passed, and that means there's going to be some money. And what's in it for us?" And they couldn't name nothing. So, they then finally said, "Well, we could build a recreation building." I said, "Well, when it's allocated in the budget, and the money is available, then we will back down and we will support that, you know." So, sure enough, they went on and they built that first section of that. Well, the front out there now, you know, is still standing. They tore down all of the old army-barrack building down, and built that. And, later, they came back and built the gym on the back of it, and they tore the gym down. And that was much older, newer than the front. But I guess the front, I don't know what they are doing, whether they're tearing it down. I have to get with the guy that's over it to see what the real thing because it goes to cover that whole area out there now.

So, but, yeah, the frightening part of it is that the, I guess, they have the money to buy, purchase, property out here. So, they are buying up all around. And they already, we already on the ten, thirteen percent of the population. And we can do nothing with them with that, except to find a way to frighten or do something into doing right. But how, we going see, we going see. But they could, you know, we have a single member district. You're familiar with that, aren't? Yeah, well, this district one is the majority black neighborhood, and we are majority. But with all these people buying, and not necessarily moving themselves. But they got tenants that come in and some of them white, and we have no objection to that, but we don't want the number to outnumber us. And then they could come in and change over. And they talking about it right now, is to nullify that single member district. Because, see, this street, all the people in this district, was allowed to vote. So, and we elected a black commissioner. And we aren't as [inaudible], we'll be, you know, they change at about four. Then, Fredd Atkins, there now, well, I guess he'll be out at the end of this term. So, it's just many things that took place and we just want to see the thing continue to improve because otherwise I just, I don't want to be in Sarasota. Although, I'm treated very nice, very nice.

I used to go out a lot with the judge's daughter, and we went everywhere. We went, had a issue with the school system, but we wondered how we could get the foot in the door. And the chairman of the school board was a preacher, and he was pastoring a church out on Bee Ridge, I can't think of the street now. But, anyway, he was pastor at that church, and something ran through my mind. I said, "You know, he is the preacher out there, and he is fighting us to no end." I said, "Well, let's go, let's get a whole group of people and let's go to church tomorrow." So, sure enough, we got, and this girl, white girl, she had two kids. I said, "You bring the kids, and I'll take one, you take one, and we'll walk in

together, holding hands and all that stuff.” So, sure enough, we went in and we sat. I said, “Let’s get there early where we can get the center aisle, and up front where we can say amen to the preacher.” So, sure enough, we got there and we were saying amen and all this stuff. And so, here the people then, members of the church said, “What brought you all out here?” I said, “You don’t know?” I said, “You haven’t been reading the paper?” I said, “Your pastor brought us out here.” I said, “He was against everything we wanted to do and anything that benefit the black. It was that.” I said, “You brought us out here.” And they talked for a little. I knew then we’d hit the lucky spot. That next week, I think it was two weeks after that; he had an office downtown because he was realtor. And, so, he had, I don’t know. You met Ed James since you? The one that has the show every Sunday morning on channel seven at seven o’clock. But anyway, we walked to his, and he was in there by himself. We waited until twelve o’clock to be sure nobody else, everybody else had gone to lunch. He was still sitting up in there. When walked in there, boy, his eyes got so. I said, “Don’t worry, we not going to bother you today.” I said, “But we still didn’t like the way you did things.” Then, the next week or so, he was history. They got rid of him at the church. So, that kind of woke some people up, if you know what I mean.

And I was, I’ve always been, the devil in a sense. We developed an organization called SURE [Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity]. I don’t know if you know about it. But that’s an organization that people, all races, get together and work for the, a building of the communities. And so, we did that. And we, and I was very, somehow or another became kind of a friend person that the whites, especially women folk, they would like to get my opinion and all of this stuff. So, and, we met all around here. And then, but I went back to Flint, Michigan one time, and Detroit once. And, you know, they was all anxious to get with me because they wanted to find out where I get the nerve from to do the thing that I was doing. Because it didn’t bother with me none. I worked until five o’clock, and then I’d come home. Within thirty minutes, I was showered and dressed and I’d go on again to do the other works that needed to be done in the community. And it was very, very good then, very good.

**Lapeyrolerie:** So, what year did SURE start?

**Rivers:** Huh?

**Lapeyrolerie:** What year did it start?

**Rivers:** The movement?

**Lapeyrolerie:** SURE?

**Rivers:** Oh, SURE. I can’t remember what year it was, but it’s been now probably ten, twelve years ago. And it rose to the height, and then it fizzled out, and they’re trying to get it back going now. But it can. But, I’m like, you know, get thing going. If it’s good, keep it going. I can’t do that same stuff. And that’s some of our people have gotten that way now. When we was fighting for certain things, they was there because we didn’t know. Wherever we went, when the issue was hot, we went to Sarasota High School,

couldn't even get all the people in there. They were standing around the windows, looking in the windows, and all of that. We'd go to a meeting. We'd overfill the building. We had to leave that building, go to another one, because the code. So, we was, we was there. We were, whatever it took then. And then, a lot of women folks, especially white women, you know, they helped me out a lot because, there was one guy there arrested for rape, a white woman, supposedly. But I got into that because I didn't believe it. I talked to him. I went to jail and talked to him. And he said, "No, I'm not guilty. I'm not guilty of that." I said, "Okay, lay it out to me." So, he... And, so, I got this judge's daughter to go to this white woman that was supposedly raped. And she worked as a clerk in a shoe store. So, she went over there and talked to her, and got her to elaborate on what it was. And she told her, she said, "Yeah, I used to," they lived in like a mixed neighborhood. She said, "I used to see this guy with all these muscles and all come around. He was something to see." So she started, I guess, opening the door for him or something. But her husband worked at a milk company, and he had to leave home, I guess, two or three in the morning to get there and get the milk delivered, you know. So, they had thing going on there. But she squealed on him. I don't know what she did to make him mad or he did to make her mad. I'm not sure, but they didn't have nothing only but then her words, you know. So, but I got that, and then I went got with the state attorney's office and told him about it. And he said, "Well, John," he says, "you need to go to the grand jury hearing." He said, "You did some stuff there you probably get the guy out of there if he's not guilty of that."

So, sure enough, I went to, I had to fight with some with us about that because they didn't want me to go to the grand jury hearing by myself. Well, you can't go in there. Somebody has to invite you. Everybody can't go to the grand jury. So, so, I had two of the three of those guys come to me, and they want come in and talk about that. They don't want you to go down there by yourself. And I knew one of them was just out of jealousy, and that type of thing. I said, "Well, I can't help you. If you want to go, then do what I did. I spoke with the state attorney, and politely invited me." So, sure enough, they tried. They didn't make that. But they, he came, the one of the guys that were, you know, because he says, "I don't trust nobody, behind closed doors. I don't trust nobody. I won't trust my mama." I said, "Get up, get out of my house. Now!" I said, "Don't bat your eyes until you're out of here. You can't trust your mama; you don't need to be sitting in my house. Because as far as I'm concerned you're a nobody." So, he stopped. My wife came out, said, "Mister, you'd better get going. He don't play." So, sure enough, he got going. But we got to be friend, but he called a meeting the next day. That was on Saturday. Sunday he called a meeting at the church out there to get enough support to try to keep me from going to the grand jury. So, I let them talk. But I said, "Listen, who is president of this branch?" They said, "You're the president." I said, "And I will be until someone else is elected. So, what that scum brother over there doesn't mean anything to me. I'm trying to make it helpful and he's trying to hurt. But if he wants to be something go out there and do what I did." So, after that, I was invited to whatever they had, you know. And he finally came through. He came through, came back and begged pardon. But, to me, that didn't bother me. I'm above that, but I didn't want us to be standing in the way. And that's what was happening. So, it's just so many thing that took place that probably half of it I don't remember. But it's, it's been a long hard job, you know.

**Lapeyrolerie:** So, you work for vote, like you're working for elections right now? Making sure the voting goes okay?

**Rivers:** Yeah, I plan to on tomorrow get something together, a system. I hope my PA system, our PA system, I don't know. I haven't used it in some months, and then wasn't working when I checked it the other day. So, I have it checked out now, hope that they get it ready. And then we will go announcing, telling everybody to get out. Although, quite a few has ready, have voted already. But, and we used to do that all of the time, and know we'll get back to it because it's going to be a thing we need together on, on one accord.

And, but I got to get back out to New College, though, because there's some, I know the students that were there then are not there now, but, you know, but they hadn't much fear and everything the same. So, but we used to come to meeting. They did, as I said, teaching and all that for the, when we had to boycott, they was teaching the schools and everything, got my kids involved. You know, they was, they'd go out to white people's homes and live with them for the weekend, and they'd come over here and live here with us for a weekend. You know, it was a good relationship. But that one, no, had trip out there, I didn't pull that one no more. When we went on the boat trip because, and I guess it was a normal situation, but I guess the blacks felt I had kind of separated from them, something. Because, I just was there, and they all gathered around me to talk and ask question and all of that, you know. And then they got a little worried and disturbed. So, I had to let them know that, yes, you're part of it and we're going to make the trip and you're going to be part of that. But we're all going to do it together. We can't separate, you know. And it worked. Yeah, so, are there any questions that you need?

**Lapeyrolerie:** What did you think of New College students back then? What was, like, your opinion of them?

**Rivers:** I thought they was great. They was great. You know, we would go out and survey this whole Newtown area in a day. Take a Sunday, and put by street by street. And they'd take some, and they wasn't upset or nothing. They just took it and went with it. I was with them, and some of the male teachers that was out there, they was with them. You know, so, I know it did because one time they had kind of got on my case there. They disapproved of my force that I was putting up, you know, because black people couldn't go to the clinic and be seen, you know. They could go there in the morning and stay there all day and not get to see nobody. So, I broke that up. I went down and registered them, and made an appointment for them. And then told them that they will be here tomorrow by this appointment. They had an hour in the day that they was, was supposed to be there. And I saw to it. I had people driving transportation. They'd be sure that they was there. So, they felt that was just giving me too much power, and I was personnel director for HUD, Sarasota United Need, OEO program. So, they kept bringing, get some of my help, get them, take them to dinner, whatnot, gathered data on me, you know. And so, sure enough, they came in that I was overstepping my bounds and, you know, and trying to get people to, to be forceful in beginning their appointments. So, with that, I guess, let them, you know, come by and pick up my, some

of my help and take them out for dinner until they got where they had things. They thought they could make something more. They came public with that.

Then, I filed a civil rights case against them in Atlanta, and they came down and told them, "You all are silly for even thinking about what you all have done. This man has done nothing wrong." And they terminated my position, but, until a hearing. But they didn't have the hearing, you know. So, that was permanent, I guess. So, what we did is, during that period, I knew that I was going to get it because the civil rights department was handling the case. So, I got my camera, and I knew that the boss, that was the chairman of the board, and his secretary, I think they had a little thing going on. And that gave me the opportunity to rebuttal. So, they would go to the Baja Hut, and have their little drinks and chat and true. I guess make plans, but, and I sneaked in there with my camera and I took pictures of them sitting up there and all. So, I had somebody else come in there and do the same thing. So, when they did finally have my hearing, then I had all these pictures, these photos, you know. And when I got by them where they was sitting, I dropped them, and they slid and spread it all out there, and everybody's looking at the pictures. Boy, they likely had a fit then. So, sure enough, he got that and he said, "Well, there won't be no hearing for John today. He's a good guy doing good work. So, let's just put him back on his job and then pay him for all of the time and all of that promotion he would have gotten during that period." He said, "Whatever it is. He's a good guy." But that taught them not to try that, not to try that again. So, then I became a free person in a sense.

**Lapeyrolerie:** So, that happened because of a report from New College students?

**Rivers:** No, no not because of New College students, but New College students were part of our activities. If we had someone looking for a job, we had some of them working at the center. And some of them, you know, was teaching the kids, you know, on that break time or whatever it was that had to be done, they was willing to do it. Or, I guess because of my attitude too, you know, I was very forceful and they wanted to see some changes and it should've been changed. So, but, that's the way it was, but Sarasota is, well, you've been here long enough to see that it's different now. That, I think that it's more mixture of race now than ever before. Not that that's altogether good, you know. But it's, it's much better than what it was. So, are there any other questions?

**Lapeyrolerie:** Do you have a favorite place in Sarasota?

**Rivers:** Favorite place?

**Lapeyrolerie:** Yes.

**Rivers:** What? To visit?

**Lapeyrolerie:** Favorite beach?

**Rivers:** Oh, oh, yeah, I think Siesta Key Beach is a very pleasant place to go. Down there, I was a master for the Masonic group, you know, and we have our annual day there. And we used to go out there in the morning, had to, and rope off space because it

was so full of people, you couldn't get in there. So, we did that. And when we first, first time we did it, and out there early morning by daylight to rope it off, you know. And one of the guys, white guys, there said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm just roping off space because our organization going to be here." He said, "How many you have in your group?" I said, "About two hundred." He said, "You won't have no problem. Just come on down. You got that many blacks together." So, it was an education and fun, you know.

And to see people in time, you know, because I was on my way to, we was on our way to Orlando, to a reading, and my secretary was a white girl, daughter of a judge here. And we was riding on the highway, and I saw these people jump, as they'd pass me. And she waved at them, they didn't do that. So, when we got to Orlando where the meeting was, these people would come up to me, some were reporters come up. They said, "How long have you all been married?" I said, "Who told you we were married? Why'd you come to that conclusion, we're married?" I said, "We're just friends." I said, "All of us should be friends, you know. But here you're putting it up to marriage just because I'm with her. I treat her like a lady that all ladies should be treated that way, you know." So, she backed down, and after that, some of the blacks did the same thing.

And, I went up to Perry, Florida, that's near Tallahassee, went to a meeting up there. When we got up there, it was all black in a sense. But when we got out the car, well, I had about five, four people, with me. But this white girl got out of the car. Here come one of them black guys out there scared to death. He said, "Mister, is she with you?" I said, "She certainly is." He said, "Well, I have a problem with you. I wouldn't take her in the meeting in there." He said, "Because, man, this is a dangerous place up here." I said, "Well, maybe, today, after today, it won't be dangerous." So, sure enough, he said, "You need to give her your car, and let her go on downtown." I said, "Well, what are you talking about?" I said, "Those days are over. We're not, you're not, there no more. We go where we want to go, when we want to go, with whom we want to go." But on our way back, we stopped in Ocala and, you know, white bar was very close to the hotel. And we went in there, and ordered a drink. And then they start to singing, some type of racist song. I says, "That's alright." So, then, because we was, you know, we was just friends, but then I just told her, I said, "Come on over, sit right close to me," you know. Because of what they anticipated, you know. And some of our people when we was at the meeting up there, they were so scared that something was going to happen, you know. But I, well, up there, I understand they had some real problems too. You know, a lot of people had some real problems. But I never had the problem. I've gone here, there: Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, all around Southern states, you know. And I didn't have no problem with them. But it could've been.

**Lapeyrolerie:** So, had you been to the beach before you moved to Florida?

**Rivers:** Yes.

**Lapeyrolerie:** You had?

**Rivers:** I had gone to Mobile beach, was open then.

**Lapeyrolerie:** What was that experience like?

**Rivers:** Well...

**Lapeyrolerie:** First time?

**Rivers:** Oh, it wasn't a problem with me. I've always been, see the guy that I came down to visit, when I came here, his daddy was white, but his mama was black. So, I'd been around white folks a whole lot. And then, his mother got, this boy's mother, got involved with a black guy, you know. And Henry was his name. He, well, he looked like a white kid but, and with them being mixed, you know, and his mom married a white man. You know, so it was all mixed up there, but we had no, no animosity against them. That's what they want, that's what they want, you know. Yeah, but Alabama was quite racist, too. They didn't put up with too much of that. But why I never cared about it, it never bothered me.

**Lapeyrolerie:** So, there was a different kind of racism in Alabama than there is, or was, in Florida?

**Rivers:** Yes, in a sense. And I think because the population is a more equal population, in other words. You could go in a certain area, and there were more black there than whites. And there was a certain area you could go there are more white than black. But yet, you could see them together. Not male, female, but just groups together. So, it's different. Yeah, I almost got into trouble down here because, I went to work for Florisota Garden at that time, and blacks was working out there, and one of them, he just kept agonizing, and criticizing talking about that I'm from Alabama, you know, like you're scared of folks and all like that. So, I said, "Man, we're in much better shape there than you are here." I said, "Because you, down here, you can't even go to the beach. We can go to the beach." So, they kept on playing around there. So, I said, I see I'm going to have to straighten him out now. So, sure enough, lunchtime, I pulled out knife and said, "Boy, open your mouth again about that and you're going to wish that you were never born." I said, "Because I'm going to eat you." I said, "Because I'm not for that nonsense that you're talking here."

We're talking about changing. When I got the job there, because we were working for Florisota Garden, that's a housing complex there, and he was the boss, I guess or whatever he was because he was nuts as far as I was concerned. So, he came up there one morning and he was talking to all of us. He said, "Well all of you guys are making too many hours now." He said, "I want you to cut it back." So, sure enough, we all agreed, you know. So, but at four o'clock, they had a pool there, and he came over, picked me to go to the pool at four o'clock, you know, supervise that. And I'm saying, "Well, you just told me this morning that we were making too many hours and here you come now about to go to the pool." So, he started to cussing. And when I knew anything, I'd done struck him and he'd done landed in the bushes. And there were some white people standing around, sitting out there, you know, airing in the sun, but they say, "You did him just right. He was cussing you, cussing you. He should respect that." But I know one thing, my boss called after that, he said, "Well, John," he says, "come on back, I want to talk



with you.” I said, “No.” I says, “I won’t be back.” I said, “Because I used some words I shouldn’t have used, but you people, you all will get together. And you all are white and I’m black, and who knows, and I don’t want to get in no serious trouble than I’m already in.” So, sure enough, I got him and he said, “Well, you come back and I’ll fire him.” And I said, “No, I won’t be back.” So, sure enough, I never went back.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Okay, can you tell me a little bit about your wife?

**Rivers:** Wife?

**Lapeyrolerie:** Yes.

**Rivers:** Yeah, well, we’re from the same city up in Gosport, Alabama, got married when we were very young, and had kids when we very young. We ended up with seven, and we decided to come to Florida. Well, guess, I decided, and she came, willing to come with me. And so, we came not planning to stay, but we got here and met people and found a church that we liked. So, we decided to stay. And we’ve gone everywhere because we wanted to go to Michigan to live, but I’m glad we didn’t go up that way because it got bad up there. So, but we’ve gone there, our grandkids have gone everywhere we’ve gone. When we go we take them. Every year we have a family reunion in different places. So, we’re, we’re together.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Did she work with you with desegregation?

**Rivers:** Yeah, she worked, but she had all those kids...No, she wasn’t a violent person. I wasn’t violent, but I was aggressive. And she was worried about me all of the time. But when we had some type of gathering or whatnot, she was there. But she took care of the kids. So...

**Lapeyrolerie:** How many grandchildren, great-grandchildren do you have?

**Rivers:** Well, let me think, last count, I’m not sure now, but think we had about fourteen great and then I think about seventeen, no, grandchildren, fourteen of those, and then about seventeen, eighteen of the great-grand. And, yeah.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Do most of them live in Florida?

**Rivers:** Huh?

**Lapeyrolerie:** Do most of them live in Florida?

**Rivers:** No, most of them live, well most of mine live in Florida: Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, and Sarasota.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Do you ever go to the beach together?

**Rivers:** Oh, yeah, we used to do a lot of stuff together. Yeah, but, and I, you know, being in all of these organizations, sometimes I’ve gone like you go to, we could watch the

springs, all that type of stuff there, you know. And then, come to the weekend, when they was all out, they come back the day before and pick them up and take them wherever we was at. And deal with that. So, they were well aware. I have a daughter in Fort Lauderdale, a granddaughter in Fort Lauderdale. And, but other than that in Florida and Tampa, Orlando, that's about it as far as the location of relatives.

**Lapeyrolerie:** Okay, well, thank you for the interview.

**Rivers:** Yeah, yeah.