

# Oral history with Geraldine Blessey

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## Biography

Mrs. Geraldine (Gerry) Blessey was born in Biloxi, Mississippi, on April 16, 1922, to Edmeé Thensted and Henry F. Fountain Sr. Mrs. Blessey is the eldest of four children, the widow of Walter J. Blessey III, the mother of Walter J. Blessey IV, Gerald H. Blessey, and Tamalane Blessey. She is grandmother to eight grandchildren.

Mrs. Blessey is a member of the Biloxi Council of Garden Clubs, the Biloxi Bay Chamber of Commerce, the Gulf Coast Symphony Guild, and the Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum. She also serves on the Board of Directors for the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art.

Mrs. Blessey retired as the Assistant Vice President of Bookkeeping from the Peoples Bank of Biloxi. She is a lifetime member of the Nativity B.V.M. Cathedral of Biloxi. In her spare time Mrs. Blessey enjoys oil painting, gardening, music, and travel.

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## Transcript

*This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program at The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Mrs. Geraldine Blessey and is being conducted on November 17, 1999. The interviewer is Deborah Lee Emery.*

**Emery:** All right, well, let's start with just the beginning. Where were you born?

**Blessey:** I was born in Biloxi. I grew up—

**Emery:** When—in what year?

**Blessey:** April the sixteenth, 1922.

**Emery:** OK.

**Blessey:** I grew up on Keller Avenue—

**Emery:** Oh my goodness.

**Blessey:** —back right across the street from the Barq's Bottling Plant.

**Emery:** Uh-huh.

**Blessey:** My parents built their house, I think if I remember correctly, I was about thirteen months old when they moved into that house.

**Emery:** Hm. And they built it—designed and built it?

**Blessey:** Right. Typical Biloxi type bungalow, you know.

**Emery:** Yeah. Did they live here before that time or were they always from this—

**Blessey:** Well, my mother was born in New Orleans, and her parents moved to Biloxi when she was a child. And my father was born in North Biloxi, which is now D'Iberville, but at that time it was called North Biloxi. The popular name was "over the Bay." And his, his mother's family, his mother was a Ladner, and her family came over with D'Iberville. Christian—Christian Ladner is one of—was one of her ancestors.

**Emery:** Oh my goodness.

**Blessey:** And then the Fountain family, well, the first Fountain came to this country probably in the late 1700s.

**Emery:** Wow.

**Blessey:** And they settled in North Biloxi. When my dad was five years old, my grandfather bought property on this side of the Bay. In fact, he owned the property right across the street from where—which is now the Old Brick House—

**Emery:** Oh yeah, where the garden club—

**Blessey:** Right, right. Well, all—he bought that property, and he had a shipyard on the waterside, and of course his residence was on the opposite side of the road.

**Emery:** Oh, how perfect.

**Blessey:** At that time, there really wasn't a road as it is now. It was no Bay View Avenue then. But he lived, let's see, he lived—they lived there—in fact, when my mother and father first married, they lived with his parents on the Bay and then moved from—well, let me back up a little bit—my grandfather sold his property on the Bay, and then he bought property on the corner of Keller and Howard Avenue on the southwest corner. And built a house right there on the

corner. And he and my grandmother moved in that house. Well, at that time they had streetcars going up and down, and he said—

**Emery:** Yeah, exciting living in the city, huh?

**Blessey:** Right. He said it was too noisy. So, there was—he had bought the property from the corner up to that little alley, which is now Jenkins Lane.

**Emery:** Right.

**Blessey:** So he had given my dad the corner piece on the corner of that alley, and that's where they built their house. And of course, there was an empty lot in between the house on the corner and the house that my parents built. So—

**Emery:** Hm. Is it now or—

**Blessey:** No, well, let me finish my part of the story.

**Emery:** OK, I'm sorry.

**Blessey:** My grandfather said it was too noisy on that corner, so he built the little house that sits there now in the middle from the house on the corner and the house that my parents lived in. He built a house right in the middle. It's still there.

**Emery:** There's three houses there?

**Blessey:** Yeah, right.

**Emery:** I was thinking there was only two, but—

**Blessey:** No, there's two—there's three. Anyway, and they lived there until my grandmother passed away. It was nice, you know, to live right next door to your grandparents.

**Emery:** Yeah. Um-hm.

**Blessey:** She died, probably I was about, probably ten years old, nine or ten years old.

**Emery:** Not too old.

**Blessey:** She was young.

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** And my grandfather lived until he was eighty-six. But when he was seventy-five he remarried.

**Emery:** Oh my goodness.

**Blessey:** And then he and his second wife moved back in the house on the corner.

**Emery:** Did he go with her?

**Blessey:** Yeah, yeah, right. (Laughter.)

**Emery:** (Laughter.) Who was living in the house—did he rent it out?

**Blessey:** He had rented it. And then when he—and we always called his second wife Mrs. Teeney. She was a very

sweet lady. And so—and [they] moved back on the corner. I guess he could probably take the noise better then, I don't know. But he was, he was a fine gentlemen. He was about six [feet] four [inches] and was very health conscious. You know, he went to bed early, got up early, may have had a drink of a glass of wine occasionally, you know. But he smoked cigars. And—but he stayed in good health, you know, lived till he was eighty-six years old. And what happened, he had built a house down on Hoxie Street, and he and Mrs. Teeney moved into that house off the corner again. And the house sprung a leak, the roof sprung a leak so he gets up on that roof and repairs it. And it started raining, it was cold—anyway, he caught a cold and he died of pneumonia.

**Emery:** Oh my gosh.

**Blessey:** And that was in—he died in 1938.

**Emery:** Otherwise he would have lived longer.

**Blessey:** Right.

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** He died in 1938. So, and that was the same year that I was married.

**Emery:** Oh yeah?

**Blessey:** Um-hm. I met my husband, he worked for Barq's Bottling Company. Drove a truck and sold, you know, the soft drinks. And—

**Emery:** Was Barq's working, I mean, were they in production when you lived across the street?

**Blessey:** Oh yes, yes. That was there, the original plant. And that's where they bottled, you know—first they bottled an orange drink called Moonglow, and Mrs. Barq Sr. would squeeze the oranges on her back porch to make this orange drink, which they called Moonglow. He made a strawberry drink and a cream soda, and then about, probably nineteen—I imagine '37, maybe '38 is when he came up with the root beer, the Barq's.

**Emery:** Did you meet your husband when he was—by seeing him come to the, to the job there?

**Blessey:** Well, yeah, well, at that time, you know, there was very little traffic down Keller Avenue, and I had cousins that lived across the street. They had, I guess, probably eight or nine children, and we would play tennis in the street. We'd put up, you know, the net—and every once and a while a car would come by, we'd have to drop the net, you know, let the traffic go by.

**Emery:** That's great. What a great idea.

**Blessey:** Anyway, we were out there playing tennis, and my husband, my future husband, he came out and, you know, well, he wanted to play tennis. And of course, at the time I had no idea that he was the Gulf Coast regional tennis champ at Biloxi High!

**Emery:** Oh goodness!

**Blessey:** See, and he pretended, you know, that he wasn't really good. Anyway, that, that's how we met.

**Emery:** [He] wanted to meet you.

**Blessey:** Right, right. I think he let me win the first game. So then, let's see—

**Emery:** Let me ask you a couple of questions that—because I'm curious.

**Blessey:** OK. Um-hm. Um-hm.

**Emery:** You said your dad, or your granddad originally had a shipyard. What—

**Blessey:** A shipyard.

**Emery:** Shipyard. When he moved back to Howard Avenue, back this way, did he sell that or did he continue to do that?

**Blessey:** Yes, yes. Well, in fact, along with the shipyard they had a factory, seafood factory, and he had a partner in that factory.

**Emery:** You know what the name of the—

**Blessey:** Um, wait a minute, Foster-Fountain was the name of the factory. And eventually he gave up, he sold his share of the factory and the shipyard. But then he—at where the Standard— not Standard oil—Shell Oil terminal is now at the foot of Holley Street—okay, where the Shell Oil plant is right now, he had, he put up another shipyard. And he built, he and my dad, my dad was building with him—in fact, my uncles were boat builders. They had the shipyard and built several shrimp boats, you know, pleasure craft, sail boats, at that particular spot.

**Emery:** Oh, that's great.

**Blessey:** And of course, that was what my, that's what my dad did all his life, build boats. And build sail boats, cat boats—

**Emery:** There's probably still some of his boats around, I bet.

**Blessey:** Well, there, there are a couple of shrimp boats around, I think probably in Galveston, and I understand there are a couple of his sail boats still around, his cat boats.

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** But, unfortunately, not anybody in the family owns one. Isn't that sad?

**Emery:** Yeah, it is.

**Blessey:** Let's see. Well, one reason we bought this property here was because it was just a block away from my parents, see. And we bought this in early nineteen—early 1940s. And built our first house—this is the second house on this same piece of property.

**Emery:** Oh, so you wiped out the first house to do the second one?

**Blessey:** Well, we had some damage in—during Camille. In fact, the house was knocked off its pillars, and we had the house put back and was able to live in it for several years. But everything started going, the plumbing and, you know, rust—we had six inches of water and four inches of mud in the house.

**Emery:** Oh my goodness.

**Blessey:** So it never really, you know, was the same. So, we finally decided that we would sell the house and have it moved off. But prior to that, my husband and I looked around for a couple of years before we decided what to do. He wanted to—we had some property out in Gautier on the water, he wanted to build out there. And of course I was working at the bank, the People's Bank, I worked at the People's Bank for thirty-two and a half years, and I was still working. And I said, "No, you know, I don't want to go out in the boon docks." So we looked over in Sunkist and Ancient Oaks and further up in Harrison County and every time we'd come back home and I'd say, "Haven't seen anything I want swap this area for." And—

**Emery:** Um-hm. You have a great spot here.

**Blessey:** Right. And—well, he enjoyed fishing. He went soft-crabbing, floundering. He went out on the bridge and fished off of the old Ocean Springs bridge. And so I told him, I said, "What are you going to do if you go out in the country somewhere? You going to come all the way back in to go soft-shelling and floundering and fishing out on the bridge?" So I finally convinced him that wasn't the thing to do, to leave this area.

**Emery:** Yeah, this is the place to be.

**Blessey:** So, we had the house moved off and, like I said, built this house.

**Emery:** Where'd you live while you were—

**Blessey:** In—we had, I had this duplex in the yard.

**Emery:** I was wondering if that was yours.

**Blessey:** We had built that in '53 just as a rental property. So—but at the time we had stop renting for a long time before we built this house, so we put our furniture in one half and stayed in the other half.

**Emery:** So, it's rented out now?

**Blessey:** No, no.

**Emery:** No?

**Blessey:** No, I haven't rented it. In fact, the north, the south side is still a storage/junk, and the north side, when my daughter and her husband went up to DC—they had moved to New Orleans, and he works, he worked for NASA at Stennis. Well, he got a promotion, but the promotion meant that he had to go to DC, they sent him to NASA headquarters in DC. So when they moved up there, they moved some of their—they had bought a house in New Orleans, and they still have their house in New Orleans, but when they moved from Biloxi to New Orleans, they put bedroom and living room furniture in the north side of the duplex. So when they, after they moved to New Orleans, when they came back here, you know, if—of course, they could have stayed with me, but then they still had a little, an apartment, really. So that's on the north side of the duplex. But anyway—

**Emery:** Now, when, were you an only child when—

**Blessey:** Oh, no, no, I'm the oldest of four. I have two brothers and then the youngest is my sister.

**Emery:** And their names are?

**Blessey:** Well, my oldest, the older brother—he's younger than I am—is Buddy Fountain, Henry F. Fountain, Jr., Buddy Fountain. He's an architect. He has Fountain Square Building, right across from Mary Mahoney's.

**Emery:** Um-hm.

**Blessey:** OK. And then Stanton is my other brother, and he's retired with the post office. And my sister Jean married an Air Force guy from Pennsylvania who was stationed out at Keesler, and they lived away from Biloxi for, up until four years ago. They moved back, bought a house over in North Country Club Lane. So—

**Emery:** That's nice to have everybody—

**Blessey:** So we're all—of course, Buddy lives in Ocean Springs, but Stanton lives over in Ancient Oaks.

**Emery:** Yeah, that's great. Nice to have family around.

**Blessey:** Oh yeah, right.

**Emery:** So where did you go, and where did you go to high school?

**Blessey:** Biloxi High. I went to Dukate School grammar school, which is torn down now, see.

**Emery:** On—that was a beautiful—I love the design of that building.

**Blessey:** They should have never torn that school down.

**Emery:** I know.

**Blessey:** I mean they claimed it was, it should be torn down, that it was, you know, dangerous, but after they closed the school itself, they had senior citizens projects down there. You know, like ceramics and all that sort of thing for like ten years! I said, well, if it wasn't safe enough for school children, why should it have been safe enough for senior citizens?

**Emery:** I went in there when it was still there.

**Blessey:** There was nothing.

**Emery:** It was beautifully designed. I love the way it was designed. Great school.

**Blessey:** And it was—see, the school probably was only a couple of years old when I started school because—

**Emery:** Now it's just an empty lot.

**Blessey:** Right. I have a—I went down and got a couple of bricks when they were tearing it down, you know. And then of course we did [not] have a junior high, it was Biloxi High was the only high school, see. And that's where Dukate Elementary is now, right across from the community center.

**Emery:** Oh, that was the high school.

**Blessey:** Of course, it doesn't look like it did then. They changed up the front and everything. They had built the [junior]—part of the school, the east side, was a junior high school, and that was built probably in early '50s. Let's see, maybe late '40s.

**Emery:** You could walk just to school and that was great.

**Blessey:** Oh yeah, um-hm. Well, you see that was another reason my mother and father built over on Keller, because they were between the two schools, you know. And we all walked to Dukate School, came home for lunch, walked back to school, and then walked to high school. So it was just, you know, it was really nice to have—I think it was a mistake to eliminate neighborhood schools.

**Emery:** Well, I think [it] keeps the community more—

**Blessey:** Viable.

**Emery:** Viable.

**Blessey:** Right, right.

**Emery:** And safer, I think.

**Blessey:** Oh absolutely, absolutely. It's, you know, times have changed so—and my three children went to Dukate

School, grammar school—had some of the same teachers that taught me.

**Emery:** Oh no.

**Blessey:** Then, of course, they did the same as I did. They walked to Dukate, they walked to junior high, and of course my daughter—well, let's see, I guess Tam went to the new—my oldest son, Walter, graduated from the old high school where I went. But then Gerald graduated from the new high school, and then of course my daughter went to junior high and then the new high school. But it was, it was nice, you know.

**Emery:** I'll bet, that's—(inaudible)

**Blessey:** So, and she was the only one that had to ride a school bus. And the school bus passed by right in front of the house.

**Emery:** Well, that's great.

**Blessey:** And we have a—it just so happens we knew the bus driver very well. He was supposed to stop at the corner and pick up the students, you know. Well, Tam, my daughter, was *never* on time. Lot of times she—the bus would be heading to the corner, and she'd be running after him. So, after that happened two or three times, do you know that he would stop out in front of the house and toot his horn.

(Laughter.)

**Emery:** Oh no. (Laughter.)

**Blessey:** And she'd run out and get on the bus. But he was just a nice, you know, a nice guy.

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** And that spoiled her. She didn't have to worry about running up to the corner.

**Emery:** Got my own taxi.

**Blessey:** Right, right.

**Emery:** Well, were you involved much in high school in activities?

**Blessey:** Well, I was, I played the trumpet. In fact, when I was in grammar school, I wanted to play an instrument so I could be in the band. And so when I was in fifth grade, my mother bought this [trumpet]—brand new Conn trumpet; it was a beautiful instrument. And there were, oh, probably—at that time the band professor would go to all of the elementary schools like once a week and give band lessons.

**Emery:** Right. Even when I was in school it was that way.

**Blessey:** Right. And, so this band professor was really a nice old guy. He was Italian and still had an accent. He'd been in this country a long time, but he married a Tremmel, a local girl—woman—and anyway, we—he, there were, I guess maybe three or four students at Dukate School. And so one day we were having our band lesson, he said he was going to give us a march, and if we memorized that march, whoever memorized it, could play in the high school band. There was no junior high band or grammar school band. There was one band, that was the Biloxi High band. So, I learned the march. So I—when I got to sixth grade, I was in the Biloxi High band. And at that time, there were like maybe five or six other *girls*. It was all boys.

**Emery:** Especially trumpet, that's really a male instrument—

**Blessey:** Right, right. And there was a—one girl played the trombone, one played the piccolo, one played the flute.

And there was a clarinet player, and one played the bells. You know, the—

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** And but—it was a lot of fun. We went on band contest trips and of course, played at all the football games and all the parades, you know, and that was a big thrill. Yeah, I really enjoyed that. I took part in—well, I took home economics, and we had fashion shows and things like that. We had drama clubs, so it was a lot of activity going on. But the band took up a lot of time. You know, practicing and—and we had a good band. We won, you know, like superior ratings in marching and concert and had snappy uniforms. It was a lot of fun. Let's see—

**Emery:** Did your husband stay with Barq's, or did he—

**Blessey:** Well, he stayed with Barq's for—he was also a musician. He had his own band when he was in high school. And even after we were married he played music for a while. But it was too hard to play music at night and worked in the day. And you couldn't make a living playing music. Not that kind. (Laughter.)

**Emery:** Well, you still can't—(inaudible).

**Blessey:** So he stayed with Barq's, I guess probably three or maybe four years after we were married. In the meantime, he takes the Civil Service exam to go to work at the post office. And then during World War II, he was manager of the Keesler post office.

**Emery:** So he didn't go—you didn't actually go—

**Blessey:** No, in fact, he was exempt because—well, to start off with, he had a very high selective service number. And he was a, what they call a pre-Pearl Harbor pappy.

**Emery:** Which means that—

**Blessey:** Well, see our oldest son was born in 1939. So, he was a father when World War II—when we went into—when war was declared against Japan. So he was working at the post office then, see, and all these guys were being drafted, you know, their numbers were coming up. So, the postmaster had him deferred because number one, they figured with his high order number it would be very unlikely that he'd be called up, but they wanted to—since they were losing so many guys, you know, they needed somebody at the Keesler post office. So he was sent out there, and he'd open up the post office in the morning and close it up at night.

**Emery:** Well, how [lucky], how fortunate.

**Blessey:** Yeah. But it was long hard hours. And when he was working out at the Keesler post office—see, Gerald was born in 1942, and I never shall forget—I guess Gerald must have been probably five or six years old, and my husband said one day, he said, "You know, I can hardly remember when Gerald was a baby." Because when he'd leave in the morning, Gerald would be asleep; he'd come home at night, he'd be asleep, you know, and—

**Emery:** Aw, yeah. Felt like he missed out on that.

**Blessey:** Right. He said, "It's just hard to remember when he was a baby." But then after the war was over and they transferred him back to the main office, he could have been a clerk, but he wanted to carry the mail because he like the outdoors. So he was as mail carrier for thirty years. Made a lot of friends, you know. Everybody in Biloxi knew him.

**Emery:** Oh yeah, I bet.

**Blessey:** And then while he was still at the post office, he took real estate courses and took the real estate exam and was a salesman. And then he was a salesman for a broker. He decided—

**Emery:** He quit mail—

**Blessey:** No, no, this was—

**Emery:** He did both?

**Blessey:** Yeah, he did both like on his day off and on weekends. And then he went and took the broker's exam and became a real estate broker. So when he retired from the post office, he had already established his real estate business, see, so he just went on to real estate full time.

**Emery:** Oh, that's good.

**Blessey:** And it was almost like a hobby for him. I mean, you know, he didn't, he wasn't, he wasn't one of these push, push, push, at all costs.

**Emery:** Right. Well, he had the luxury of his retirement.

**Blessey:** Right, right. And he could, you know, pick and choose what he, what people he wanted to represent.

**Emery:** Yeah, that's a nice luxury there, really.

**Blessey:** Yeah, right. (Laughter.) And he really, he enjoyed doing that. We were very active in carnival organizations because we both love to dance. And that's one thing I *really* miss. See, he passed away in '87, and he was ill for two years before that. But a lot of Saturday nights we'd go out, you know, have dinner, and always go someplace where they had an orchestra or music, live music. And the Broadwater was one that always had live music. And during the carnival season, we didn't miss anything. Friday and Saturday night, practically every week, we had a ball to go to. And really had a good time. I had—I belonged to one lady's organization whose—it went out—it folded up after about ten years. But he was a member of Les Perot and the Revelers. And then of course when these private, like the Elks Club would have a ball, the Young Matrons would have balls, different—private organizations, not carnival organizations, but just like clubs would have their carnival balls at the community center.

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** And it was a great time. Really enjoyed it.

**Emery:** OK, your son ended up, as most people know—

(End of side one, tape one. The interview continues on tape one, side two. There is repetition on the transcript and the tape which occurred in changing tape sides.)

**Blessey:** —one lady's organization. It went out—it folded up after about ten years. But he was a member of Les Perot and the Revelers. And then of course when these private, like the Elks Club would have a ball, the Young Matrons would have balls you know, different, private organizations, not carnival organizations, but just like clubs would have their carnival balls at the community center.

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** And it was a great time. Really enjoyed it.

**Emery:** OK, you know your son ended up, as most people know, became mayor of Biloxi. How did he get interested, how did your son get interested in that?

**Blessey:** Well, Gerald was always politically minded. When he was in junior high he ran for student body president and was elected. In high school he ran for student body president and was elected. Then he went to Ole Miss. He was in the student senate, ran for ASB president up there—he didn't win, but he ran. He was always running for something. (Laughter.) And of course, his major in undergraduate school was political science, and then he went on to law school, got his degree in—let's see—'67, I guess. And he was in ROTC, both of my sons were in ROTC. My oldest son went

to Ole Miss; his undergraduate degree was in accounting, and then he went on to law school and majored [in tax law]. He was a tax attorney.

**Emery:** Oh, so both of them are—

**Blessey:** Yeah. And they both served in Vietnam. They were both in ROTC, and of course, at that time—see the Vietnam War was going on, and it was compulsory that you—all male students had to go into ROTC for their freshman and sophomore years. Then they could elect to go into what they call advanced ROTC for the last two years and be commissioned. Not all of them did that. Of course, Walter and Gerald both elected to do that. And Walter—in fact, they were both in the Army ROTC. [Section deleted.] After they got their law degree, they each had to serve their active duty two years. And then they were [in the] inactive reserves for like six years or something like that.

**Emery:** So they did go to Vietnam.

**Blessey:** Yeah, in fact, Walter was in what they called a civil affairs group. But first he was sent to Germany and he served on the, right on the border, the Czech border at that time, of course, you know Russia was still—I mean the communists were still there, and he was over there six months. They sent him back to this country and the civil affairs group was organized. They had an attorney, a doctor, engineer, and there was just one, like a small company, sent over to Vietnam. He had four months left of his enlistment, of his two years active duty enlistment, and they sent him to Vietnam. But the commander told him that the day that he was supposed to be discharged he would be back in this country, and sure [enough]—I didn't believe it, you know, I said they're not going to send him over there for four months and then bring him back, but they did. Then Gerald was, see, three years behind Walter. So, of course, he had to go to Fort Gordon, you know, for training and all that sort of thing. Then they sent him to El Paso to Fort Bliss to language school to learn the Vietnamese language. And they sent him—but Gerald was in Vietnam sixteen months. He was there for the Tet Offensive, you know, really in the thick of things. But thank the Lord he came back safe and sound. They both did, without any impediments, emotionally or physically. And I—we felt real fortunate.

**Emery:** Yeah, no kidding.

**Blessey:** But the sixteen months that Gerald was over there really took its toll on both my husband and I.

**Emery:** Yeah, I bet.

**Blessey:** Because there'd be weeks would go by, and we wouldn't hear anything. And of course, you'd be glued to the TV, you know, and to the news, constantly.

**Emery:** Afraid of getting any phone calls.

**Blessey:** Right, right. But then when Gerald came back he taught—he went—oh, he went up to Ole Miss and taught in the law school. And then he got married in '69, and I'm trying—I guess [it] was—September of '69, he goes to Harvard to get his master's. He applied for a fellowship and received a fellowship to Harvard and got his master's up there.

**Emery:** Oh, I know you're proud of him.

**Blessey:** Yeah. And then he ran for the legislature. Was in the legislature ten years.

**Emery:** Oh, I didn't know that.

**Blessey:** Um-hm. And then he resigned from the legislature two years into his third term, I guess. Was it second term? Anyway, to run for mayor. Was there eight years. In the meantime, Walter, my oldest, after he got back from Vietnam, he went to work for Arthur Andersen in Houston as a tax attorney. And when he gets over there he takes the CPA and gets his CPA license. So, he stayed over there about twenty-seven years and then came back to Biloxi in '87. [Section deleted.] He has never had a private law practice, but of course he uses his law knowledge in—he's Jerry O'Keefe's—you know, chief of his operations, Gulf National. And so he still uses his knowledge, and of course, his CPA training. And then my daughter, she went to Ole Miss for two years. Went to LSU for one summer session, then she got married. Trying to think what year—anyway, right after she and her husband were married, her husband finished

Georgia Tech; he's an engineer. And he went to work for Lockheed, and they moved to California, and they were out in California three years. Their oldest child was born out there. Then he was transferred from Santa Cruz, California, to Marietta, Georgia, with Lockheed.

**Emery:** What a difference. (Laughter.)

**Blessey:** And their second son was born in Marietta. And he continued on—went back to, well, he graduated from Georgia Tech, but then he went [to] the University of Georgia and got his master's degree, and [I] think he got a couple of other degrees. And right now he 's just about to finish his doctorate. He went up to [Mississippi] State. Well, he went to work for Stennis at—I mean for NASA—at the Stennis Space Center. And they gave him sabbatical to go to Mississippi State to work on his doctorate.

**Emery:** Wow, that's great.

**Blessey:** Paid for his schooling, and he got his salary right on.

**Emery:** Oh my gosh. Can't beat that.

**Blessey:** Yeah, I guess not.

**Emery:** Really.

**Blessey:** And then—and he's done real well, like I say, he got this promotion and got transferred to D.C. [Section deleted.] Right. So they moved back to Biloxi. And I guess the youngest one, Paul must have been about three. And she decided she was going to go back and get her degree. When they were out in California she took some hours out there but never did finish up. So, she went to Gulf Park at night taking the courses and then the last, I guess the last semester, she went up to the campus in Hattiesburg. Got her degree in English. And taught English, I guess probably eight, ten years, something like that. She develops a virus, or has a virus that settles in her ear, and she loses her hearing in one ear. A hearing aid wouldn't correct it, surgery wouldn't correct it. She went to all sorts of specialists and whatever this was, it just, it's damaged her ear. So she could not, she couldn't handle the classroom teaching, the noise. She said it was like cymbals clashing in her head. So she goes back to Southern and gets her master's in library science.

**Emery:** Where it's quiet.

**Blessey:** (Laughter.) Right. So then she's a librarian, see. And she was a librarian at Biloxi High and then at Nichols for about, probably ten years.

**Emery:** But they're in, but they're in Washington D.C. now, right?

**Blessey:** Yeah, and she's working at the Library of Congress.

**Emery:** Oh, how wonderful.

**Blessey:** But when they moved to New Orleans, she sent out her résumés, and she went to work at Xavier University. And then of course when they went up to D.C. she did the same thing, you know, put out resumes. She has a great job at the library. She's in cataloging, cataloging music and, you know, which is right down her alley; she just loves it.

**Emery:** That's great. Talk a little bit about growing up in Biloxi and the changes that you've seen and—

**Blessey:** Well, at the time I was growing up, everybody knew everybody else. In other words, my parents knew the parents [of] my friends, which were school friends. And we had, we were very close to our neighbors. As I said, we had, I had [an] aunt and uncle [who] lived across the street and they had eight, nine children, you know, and of course, I had cousins around all the time. On Sundays, my grandparents, living right next door, every Sunday all of [their] children and their spouses—she had nine children, my dad was the youngest of nine—all of [their] children and their spouses and grandchildren would come to their house and visit.

**Emery:** Hm. Small house. (Laughter.)

**Blessey:** And visit. Well, for a long time they were in the house on the corner, it was a little bit bigger. But we would play games in the street, you know. And in the summertime, she would always have two or three ice cream freezers going, you know, we'd have homemade ice cream. She [would] make what was, what she called a teacake, which looked like a biscuit. It was about so big. But they had nutmeg flavoring, and she would make a dishpan, like this, on Saturday, of teacakes for Sunday. And of course, all of us kids look forward to the—all—we did, look forward to the cousins coming, having somebody to play with. Of course, the adults visited, see.

**Emery:** Yeah. That was a great kind of gathering because you really don't have anything like that anymore.

**Blessey:** Oh yeah. No, no, no. And holidays, like Christmas holidays. Then everybody visited. You know, you went from one house to another. [It would] start like everybody had their Christmas dinner in the middle of the day at they own house—or combined, you know, grandparents and aunts and uncles. And then you would visit, maybe spend just thirty minutes at everybody's house.

**Emery:** How nice.

**Blessey:** But that was a, you know, was—

**Emery:** Made more meaning to our holidays. Yeah, I think you definitely miss—

**Blessey:** Right. But we had, of course, we had very little traffic. We had streetcars going down Howard Avenue that—it went down Reynoir Street all the way to the Bay and then all way down to Point Cadet, streetcar. And—

**Emery:** Don't we need that now.

**Blessey:** Oh. And of course, the buses replaced the streetcars. But I think they ought to bring the streetcars back.

**Emery:** I do too. They're much better. Less pollution.

**Blessey:** And look what it would solve, I mean, of course, we weren't that far from town where we lived on the next street. There were periods when we didn't have a car, like during the Depression. We didn't have an automobile so we walked to church. And there were always neighborhood grocery stores, see. And my mother would call the grocery, the corner grocery, and order her groceries, and they'd be delivered. You know, you didn't have to worry about going to a supermarket. Well, even after we moved here in '41, there was a grocery store right at the corner. And [a] lot of times, especially when my children were little and the weather was bad, I would call up the grocery and order my groceries, and they would be delivered to the back door. During the nice weather I'd walk up to the corner pushing the stroller or baby carriage. And get—you could go everyday. You didn't have—buy weekly.

**Emery:** Right. You took—it really—that's still the way it's done in Europe a lot, which I really enjoy that. I miss that.

**Blessey:** Right. Oh yeah.

**Emery:** I would have enjoyed that period in time, I know.

**Blessey:** Well, really, you know, the late '20s and '30s, and even most of the '40s, even during the wartime, it was a calm time. It was—nothing was hurried, you know, you went to the movies on Saturday afternoon. Fifteen cents to go to the Saenger Theater, for a long time the Saenger was the only movie we had. And then there was the Roxy that was built down on East Howard Avenue, right next to where the Avenue Bake Shop is now. [Section deleted.]

**Emery:** Oh yeah?

**Blessey:** And then in town, I guess it was right next to the building where the upstairs/downstairs is, that empty lot right there? There was the Avenue Theater.

**Emery:** Hm. It's been wiped out.

**Blessey:** Oh yeah. And then there was a—let's see, [section deleted] on the [corner] of Division and Lameuse Street was the Meyer Theater. Then later on, I guess this must have been in the '50s, early '50s, there was a theater built on Bayview, which is now Boomtown parking lot on the corner of Lameuse and Bayview, was the Bayview Theater. So we had one, two, three, four—five theaters back then.

**Emery:** I'm surprised they could be supported.

**Blessey:** Well, you know that, there was no—

**Emery:** Nothing else to do.

**Blessey:** —no Edgewater Mall, and that was the big thing, you know.

**Emery:** What was the racial situation like when you were growing up?

**Blessey:** Well—

**Emery:** Were there very many blacks in the area?

**Blessey:** Well, in fact, just one block north of Howard Avenue, my husband's grandparents bought property on the corner of Washington Street and Keller and built a house. And that's—and they retired over here. And that's how he happened to be in Biloxi when his mother died when he was six years old. They lived in New Orleans, and I know you're familiar [with this,] a lot of New Orleans houses are double houses. They lived on St. Peter, and they had a two-story double house. Well, his parents lived in one side, and his grandparents lived in the other. So when his mother died, of course, the grandparents—he was six, his sister was three, and his brother was six weeks when she died—

**Emery:** Oh my goodness. What did she die of?

**Blessey:** Well, she had had what they call pivot teeth, it was something unique way back then. Apparently, the nerve was taken out of the tooth, and the tooth itself was put on like a nail and screwed up into, you know, like a base. They called them pivot teeth. Anyway, infection set in. And back in those days, you know, a pregnant woman couldn't go to the dentist, that was a no-no. It would do something to the baby, which was, you know, bizarre. So the infection went through her whole system, and she was so weak from having the baby that she just couldn't overcome it. And there was no penicillin or sulfur drug or, you know. She died. Anyway, the grandparents raised the three children, and then when my husband's grandfather retired, they wanted to move to Biloxi. And he was like probably fifteen, and so they moved over to Biloxi. And he went—I think he went to eighth grade at Dukate and then went to Biloxi High, and so did his sister and brother. That's how they happened to be here. But what I was leading up to, they, right in back of them on, I guess that little street's called Jefferson, were black families.

**Emery:** Can we stop for one second?

**Blessey:** Yeah.

(There is a brief interruption in the tape.)

**Blessey:** Well, right—Jefferson Street, which is right, first street between Washington and the railroad is a street called Jefferson Street. Well, there were black families that lived there. And they were neighbors of my husband's grandparents. When they grew up, and they played with them, you know, they were in and out of each other's yards. And even though they didn't go to school together, they were friends.

**Emery:** Where did they go to school?

**Blessey:** Well, they had a black school, black grammar school and high school. And it was over on Division Street in the, in very much the same locations that Nichols High School is right now, in that area somewhere, you know. [Section deleted.] But I guess that is one reason that my children, myself, my family, we were not prejudiced against the blacks, because my grandfather had [black] people working for him in his shipyard, in his sawmill, on the boats, you know. And it was just part of their way of life. So, we were brought up to respect them and recognize them, and there was no race question whatsoever. And my children grew up, you know, in the same way. Even though what I'm trying to say, even though they weren't in school with them, they would, they were tolerant. They were—I'm trying, searching for the word—they respected them. Yeah, as a race, and didn't feel that there was anything—

**Emery:** No animosity.

**Blessey:** No, no. There should [not] be any ill feeling towards them.

**Emery:** What about the—you lived here so many years, and your family too—what about the gambling era that occurred here in the '20s and '30s even into the '40s?

**Blessey:** Yeah, right. That was all done behind closed doors, I mean you knew that it existed, but for instance, the nightclubs on the beach, they had the Plaza, the High-Ho club. And they had the bar, and they had live music and dance for us. And of course the gambling would be—I never saw it, but it was probably in the back room or upstairs. The Broadwater had gambling upstairs, you know, everybody knew that it was going on, but they just turned their head. Anyway, it didn't affect us at all because my family weren't gamblers. And my father belonged to the Elk's club and, of course, they would—they had slot machines in the Elk's club.

**Emery:** Really?

**Blessey:** Yeah. And they'd have their card games and their domino games and betting. But it was nothing out of the ordinary. We didn't think it was, anyway.

**Emery:** More, really, more a free enterprise, really.

**Blessey:** Right, right.

**Emery:** If you want to do it, do it, and if you don't believe in it then don't.

**Blessey:** Yeah, and they had, they had horse track betting. You know, they had places where they bet on the horses and all that kind of stuff. And nobody paid any attention to it.

**Emery:** What about all the—you've been through—I mean there are at least—I have read that the Biloxi government for so many years was notorious, and so history of leaders and so forth—

**Blessey:** Well, we've had some colorful leaders, to say the least. (Laughter.) In fact, there was one, one man, Mayor Hart Chinn, who was very intelligent, good looking man. And had charisma like you wouldn't believe. And he could stand up and give a speech that would just, you'd be spellbound.

**Emery:** Charm, yeah. Charmed the crowd.

**Blessey:** Yeah. Anyway, he led a very colorful life. And at one time he lived in the Old Brick House. And he was mayor, and then he was defeated in the election, but he wouldn't leave the city hall; he wouldn't give it up!

**Emery:** (Laughter.) You're kidding.

**Blessey:** Anyway, supposedly now—I don't know whether—I don't have anything to base this on. But the gossip was that he burned some of the papers in the fireplace at the Old Brick House.

**Emery:** Yeah, but which papers?

**Blessey:** Well, you know, city papers. Records and stuff like that.

**Emery:** You think it was records that might have been—

**Blessey:** Well, who knows?

**Emery:** Yeah.

**Blessey:** But anyway, he had to give up the office, but he did it reluctantly. Let's just say he was very, very colorful. And you know, down the line we've had some colorful sheriffs. And of course Biloxi was, always had a mayor and three commissioners, that type, form of government. When Gerald ran for mayor the first time, was the first time to have a city council. That was when he was—they had a referendum, and the public voted to have the council form of government. And that was one reason Gerald ran for mayor, because he felt that it was a good form of government, but it had to be done right. It had to start off on the right foot. And he felt like he was the one that had to do it. It was just his attitude that if it's going to be done, I want it done right, I'll do it. But I think it's a good form because—see back then before that time, the mayor was a part-time mayor, the commissioners were part-time commissioners, you know, they didn't stay in their office all day. And you meet them on the street. They would have meetings and nobody knew anything about them. They weren't like council meetings that you have every week, that the public's in on it.

**Emery:** That they hope you won't go to. (Laughter.)

**Blessey:** (Laughter.) I know they hate to see me coming. I know they—

**Emery:** Well, I know you are—you want to talk a little bit about that? You've been involved in the community and—a long time.

**Blessey:** Well, I've always been interested in politics. My father was always interested in [politics]. He didn't miss a political rally. And if he felt strongly for a candidate, I mean, he'd went all out for that candidate. In fact, he was an admirer of Mayor Chinn. He thought he was, he thought that in most instances he was falsely accused, you know. He—because he was such a smart man he was the envy of a lot of people. His political enemies just envied his brilliant mind. But, like I said, I couldn't wait till I got old enough to vote, and I had always been in—

(End of tape one, side two. The interview continues on tape two, side one. There is repetition on the tape and the transcript which occurred in migrating the recorded interview on to two tapes.)

**Blessey:** —rally. And if he felt strongly for a candidate, I mean, he'd—went all out for that candidate. In fact, he was an admirer of Mayor Chinn. He thought he was a—he thought that in most instances he was falsely accused, you know. He—because he was such a smart man he was the envy of a lot of people, his political enemies just envied his brilliant mind. But, like I said, I couldn't wait till I got old enough to vote, and I had always been interested in the political spectrum, you could say. And of course, while I worked for thirty-two and a half years, I couldn't attend the council meetings because they were held in the afternoon, but that didn't stop me from campaigning for candidates and organizing functions for campaign purposes. You know, fundraisers, that sort of thing. And then once I retired, I decided I was really going to get active. Because—

**Emery:** Thank goodness. What do you think about the latest development with the Tullis property?

**Blessey:** Well, at—of course, I feel that it should be a park. But, I think that, in fact, I suggested—at the council meeting Tuesday, and Jim Compton's going to introduce a resolution at the—I think at the next meeting. I suggested that the council urge the mayor to form a committee of all interested parties in this piece of property and the George Ohr Museum. And include of course the Garden Council ladies, the merchants of the Vieux Marché, the Tullis Board, the Boys and Girls Club, the neighbors, the residents in that area, the George Ohr Museum Board, and the council. They should sit down at a table and work out a workable solution so that everyone's happy and content, you know, satisfied. I—of course, nobody has seen any plans for this new George Ohr Museum. I don't think there are any plans available. I don't think any plans have been drawn up, so how do they know that it can be put on this piece of property? Number one, without destroying the trees, without taking out any trees. I don't think it can be done.

(End of the interview.)

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## File Description

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**Description:** Mrs. Geraldine (Gerry) Blessey was born in Biloxi, Mississippi, on April 16, 1922. Mrs. Blessey is a member of the Biloxi Council of Garden Clubs, the Biloxi Bay Chamber of Commerce, the Gulf Coast Symphony Guild, and the Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum. She also serves on the Board of Directors for the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art. Mrs. Blessey retired as the Assistant Vice President of Bookkeeping from the Peoples Bank of Biloxi. She is a lifetime member of the Nativity B.V.M. Cathedral of Biloxi.

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