

TAPE LOG

Fieldworker's tape #1 (First and last tape of interview)

Name of person interviewed: Sidney Morris

Date of Interview: March 18,2004

Location of interview: Soup kitchen in downtown Valdosta

Other people present: none

Brand of tape recorder: Wollensak 3M

Brand and type of tape: RCA Normal Position Type 1

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF TAPE QUALITY (background noise, etc.)

Morris is clear and well-spoken. A refrigerator's hum can be heard for a period of time in the background, but this is not distracting.

SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF TAPE CONTENTS

The contents are an analysis of Morris's life as a Jew in Valdosta. The interview focuses on several aspects of Jewish life in the area, predominantly how Southern and Jewish traditions influence each other. Speech hesitations have been removed from all quotations.

TAPE INDEX

COUNTER NO.	SUBJECT
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(Opening announcement)

725	Morris explains that while the synagogue in Valdosta is conservative, most of the members would more likely be considered liberal. He proceeds to elaborate on how the presence of a single temple affects the observance of Jewish
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customs. In particular, he notes how observance of the Sabbath dinner has moved out of the home and is not primarily a matter of community celebration at the temple.

775 Morris then takes a moment to discuss how conversion to Judaism is somewhat common in Valdosta. He then explains some of the negative aspects of Jewish life in the South, including anti-Semitism and segregation.

810 Here, Morris recounts his father's move to the Valdosta area through business maneuvers and courting experiences. He details the growth of his family.

900 Morris discusses the lack of Jewish observance in the home. He notes that he does not observe the Sabbath meal tradition.

March 18, 2004
Sidney Morris

GB: What type of Judaism is practiced in the Valdosta Community?

SM: Our synagogue is conservative, but if you are a true conservative, I think you have a little bit more strict Judaism, maybe like keeping kosher and not riding on the Sabbath. But even though our synagogue is conservative, I think the majority of our members are a little bit more liberal than conservative. Myself, uh, I am not kosher. There's a lot of unkosher things that I eat, but there's a lot of unkosher things I don't eat.

GB: Since there's only one Jewish temple here in Valdosta, how is that negotiated? Are there any problems that arise because of this?

SM: Uh, no. Probably about seven or eight years ago, there was a group that was thinking about trying to change our conservative synagogue to a reformed, and we did some studying and found out there's a lot of reform synagogues that were moving more towards conservatism and a lot of conservative synagogues were leaning a little towards reform. So, in that case, we decided to just stay where we were, and it, I think, suited everyone.

GB: Being that the Jewish community is diverse but at the same time centered in the one temple, how would you say that factors into the observance of Jewish customs like the Friday Sabbath meal?

SM: Well, being so small, there's been a lot of assimilation with Jewish people and non-Jewish people. There are very few households that have what we call a Sabbath dinner before services. Most of the time, me and my wife will go out for dinner before we go to services on Friday night, or sometimes we'll eat afterwards. But we had been trying like about every two months to have a Sabbath dinner at the synagogue, followed by a service. Sometimes we do it on a regular basis; sometimes we don't, and it has been real good of trying to get the local Jewish people back into assimilation. But it's kind of tough, and we have had a lot Jewish people in Valdosta marry non-Jewish people. And most every one of the non-Jewish people who have come into the Jewish religion have converted to Judaism, and has worked out great. When a person converts to Judaism, they are Jewish. They are not a converted Jew; they are Jewish.

GB: Well, what is involved in converting to Judaism?

SM: I don't really know that much about it, but I know the first thing a rabbi will do if you came to him and said, "I want to become Jewish," he will basically try to talk you out of it, in order to make you understand what it is to convert. Uh, he gives you all the disadvantages. He'll tell you how hard it is, and he'll basically try to discourage you, but at the end of the discouragement, if you're still ready, there's an education and a ceremony. A long education. I don't know...you'll be able to get that from the rabbi.

GB: You mentioned attempts to discourage by pointing out all the negative aspects of being Jewish. What would you say, personally for you, are some of those negative aspects?

SM: There is still anti-Semitism around. There are a lot of people that don't even know what the word "anti-Semitism" is but have some resent for non-Christians, no matter what they are. There's, at the present time I don't know too much, but at one time we had a lot of restricted private clubs in Valdosta that did not allow Jewish people. It's kind of hard to think about it today, but when I was a young person, there were clubs in Valdosta that did not allow Jews. Of course, another advantage is, when all you're non-Jewish friends go to church, you don't have any place to go. One advantage is you have the golf course to yourself on Sunday morning. And Hebrew is most difficult to read. It is almost impossible to interpret. You can read it, but to learn what you're reading is most difficult.

GB: Could you tell me a bit about your family's move to Valdosta?

SM: No, I've got a good story about that. My father was born in Atlanta and he had an older brother that was in business in Birmingham, Alabama. And my father went to Birmingham to work for my uncle, for his brother. And this is back in the, probably the 30s. And when he was in Birmingham, he met another young man from Valdosta, and his name was Sam Lazarus. At one time there were a lot of Lazaruses in south Georgia. And my father had come to Valdosta with his buddy Sam Lazarus a few times to see Valdosta or come home with Sam Lazarus, his friend. But they were both in Birmingham, Alabama, and they were good friends, and someone informed them that there were two Jewish girls in Monroeville, Alabama, and they struck out from Birmingham to go down to Monroeville to meet these girls, because there just weren't any Jews in south Alabama. Well, they did go to Monroeville; they met the two girls; two buddies married two sisters. I don't know the exact date they were married, but my uncle and my aunt had two children while the two families were living in Atmore, Alabama. My mother and my father had two children almost the identical ages of the other family. And my Uncle Sam and Aunt Katie only had the two children. My mother and my father had one more girl while they were living in Atmore, and she was born in 1938 or 39, I don't remember. And in 39, they moved to Valdosta, and I was born in 1940 in Valdosta. The reason my dad moved to Valdosta is my father and my uncle were in business together and sometime in the 40s, they had a fire, and my uncle moved to Bruton, Alabama and my father rebuilt the store and he stayed in Atmore, and in 1939, he sold the store to one of the employees and decided to move to Valdosta. He had liked Valdosta when he had visited it, and then he moved over there in 40.

GB: You've already touched on this a bit in one of the previous questions, but maybe I could get you to elaborate a little. What's been the general reception to the Jewish community by the greater Valdosta community? Do you think that the Jewish community has been welcomed for the most part, or...?

SM: Uh, probably somewhat. You know, a lot of young people never realize there was any kind of distinction, but when I was growing up, I knew that I was Jewish and I knew there were things that I did not...places that I did not belong. It didn't seem to bother me that much, but I ran around with non-Jewish friends of mine, but a lot of the friends I ran around with were not members of some of the clubs that did not allow Jewish members. And then, later on, I think it was all the way into the 60s, might have been late 60s, most of the private clubs in Valdosta started accepting Jewish members. And it's not so much of a difference today as it was, as it used to be.

GB: Has living in South Georgia changed the way that you observe Jewish traditions?

SM: I don't know. It'd be hard to say. We've always maintained a synagogue here, and of course when I was young and single, I did not go to synagogue very much at all. When I got married, we would go a little bit more often. But I think that the synagogue in Valdosta has more people percentage-wise attending services on Friday night than big cities do. We're talking about some of the big cities that have a thousand members or two thousand members. If you look at the percentages, we probably have a larger percentage of members on Friday night attending services than they do in Atlanta.

GB: How would you say the customs practiced in the home compare to those at the synagogue? Do you feel it's possible to separate the official practices of Judaism from the private, family customs of the home?

SM: Well, in Valdosta, it definitely is kind of separate or different because we maintain a kosher kitchen at the synagogue and we don't bring anything into the kitchen that's not kosher, and in my home, there's unkosher things in my home. Of course, if you invite me into your home for dinner, and you don't know about what's kosher and what's not kosher and what could be kosher, I will eat anything that's on your table.

GB: I would like to ask you some questions specifically related to the Sabbath meal. In your own words, what is the Sabbath meal?

SM: It's a meal to usher in the Sabbath. There's some rituals at the meal. Usually, there's singing at the Sabbath meal.

GB: Yeah, in research, I read a little about the singing rituals..

SM: Yeah, it's supposed to be a very joyous occasion, because that is the prelude to going into the Sabbath weekend.

GB: Why do you participate in this meal when you do?

SM: Well, I can't say that I do very often, because my mother, being raised in a town that her family was only Jewish family, I don't know that they celebrated a Sabbath meal. Uh, growing up in Valdosta, I don't remember us having a quote Sabbath meal, because we just, we didn't do it.

GB: In general, how do you think the observance of this meal varies from family to family throughout the community? In general, do most families not observe it regularly?

SM: I would say that most do not, because in today's world, most of the families are working, and most of the time they don't have time to complete a full Sabbath meal and go to synagogue, because if there was a Sabbath meal in every one of the homes, more than likely, those families would be in synagogue. And we probably don't have more than 20 people at a Friday night service. So if you take 20 people and divide it by, say, three, which may be an average sized family, you don't have that many families there. Now, I'll guarantee there's a Sabbath meal at the rabbi's house, because he's kosher and he's on a pedestal.

GB: Do you have anything else you'd like to add about anything we've talked about, being Jewish in Valdosta, the rituals that you observe or don't observe?

SM: I don't know why it is, but my family never pushed me to say you should marry within your religion, but I don't know, it was just in the back of my mind that I should marry within the Jewish faith. Through all my dating career, high school to college, back when I was single (I was single all the way until I was 35), I dated as many non-Jewish girls as Jewish girls, but, I think that maybe I was leaning towards finding a Jewish mate. It's kind of hard to say, but I did marry into the faith. But if I didn't, I would have liked for that person to have become Jewish through conversion, because we have a lot of that in Valdosta, and every one of the marriages seem to be as solid as they can be. Coming up, I knew that I was a minority in Valdosta, and I think the other Jewish students and other Jewish kids knew that too. At one time, we had a much larger Jewish population in Valdosta and it's dwindled some. I knew I was Jewish, I knew there were some differences, and I knew there were a lot of things I wasn't going to participate in. I bet we don't have more than twenty, maybe...see, I don't know exactly how many students we have. We probably don't have more than twenty students, or young people, in Sunday school, because most of the children of the Jewish people who lived here have migrated away. It seems like a lot of the young folks have moved to Atlanta, and I'd say the average age of our member here has got to be 70 because we've got a few young people, but we've got people in their 80s that are members. High 80s. So, the average age of our congregation is high, and when we lose some, usually the older ones are the ones that make better, or higher monetary contributions. You can imagine a small synagogue like ours with a small amount of members, it's very difficult to support a full-time rabbi, and we are having a difficult time. But we have a great rabbi and we're able to pay him a decent salary. It's not a good salary, but it's a decent salary. We wish we could pay him more, but we haven't found the pot of gold yet.

GB: I think that about wraps it up. Once again, thank you so much.

SM: You're certainly welcome.