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Interviewee: Garwood, Susan Clayton

Interview Date: March 15, 2013

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

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Place: Clayton House, 5300 Caroline, Houston, Texas
Interviewer: Alex Colvin
Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Susan Clayton Garwood, the great-granddaughter of Houston cotton magnate, William Lockhart Clayton, (1880-1966) begins by discussing her childhood memories of Will Clayton and the numerous dinners at Clayton House, 5300 Caroline, in Houston. She also discusses her father, former Texas Supreme Court justice, Wilmer St. John Garwood, Jr. and her visits to Austin with her grandfather, Wilmer St. John Garwood, Sr., also, a Texas Supreme Court justice. The interview explores her early interest in Houston architectural preservation, based on her experience with her inherited estate, the Clayton summer home in River Oaks, a miniature Mount Vernon, designed by Birdsall Briscoe. Her love of the property infused her with a lifelong passion for preservation. This later led her to try thwarting the demolition of a Birdsall Briscoe-designed home in her neighborhood, which had ties to her family. That effort, which was caught on camera by local news station, Channel 13, however, sparked her interest and drive to renovate Clayton House, in a three-year, multi-million-dollar private/public project that resulted in its restoration. In her quest to restore the gardens, which comprise a sizeable portion of the estate's block-wide lot, Susan Clayton Garwood researched the types of plants used in 1917 and likely flourished on the grounds when the home was built. The reintroduction of period fauna served as a capstone to the project's years-long restoration. Today, the home is part of the Houston Public Library's Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research. Garwood continues to visit the garden and plant flowers, demonstrating her dedication to the home she knew as a child.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Susan Clayton Garwood

Interviewed by: **Alex Colvin**
Date: **March 15, 2013**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **Houston, Texas**

AC: This Oral History is being recorded on March 15th 2013, at Clayton House, 5300 Caroline Street in Houston, Texas as part of the University of Houston's Public History Department's Oral History Project. The interviewer is Alex Colvin, a junior at University of Houston majoring in History; the interviewee is Ms. Susan Clayton Garwood, who is a lineal descendent of William Lockhart Clayton who built the home in 1917 where this interview is being conducted. In 1958, Clayton House was deeded to the City of Houston where it eventually became part of Houston Public Library system, and is today is part of that system's Houston Library Center for Genealogical Research. As genealogy libraries are concerned, it is considered third largest in the nation.

AC: Good morning Ms. Garwood. Would you mind introducing yourself?

SG: Sure. I'm Susan Garwood, Susan Clayton Garwood, and I was born in Houston in nineteen-sixty-one.

AC: And could you explain a little bit about how you are related to William Clayton?

SG: Will Clayton is my great-grandfather. He had – Will and Sue Clayton had four daughters, the eldest being Ellen Clayton, so Ellen Clayton is my... (garbled).

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AC: Let's talk a little bit about your earliest memories of Clayton House. There's a photo of you, that I'm sure you're aware of, in the vertical files here at the Clayton House. It shows you as a very little girl holding the hand of Will Clayton. Do you remember that day?

SG: Uh, vaguely.

AC: Could you talk a little bit about that?

SG: Vaguely. I know that...well for one thing I that I was wearing a blue dress and...when the Claytons, or actually, Sue Clayton, my great-grandmother she passed away before I was born. So, in the period after she died, Will Clayton was still traveling a lot abroad and still doing quite a bit of international business and so he was in Paris a lot and he would often buy these little dresses for me and bring them back from Paris. I was the first great-granddaughter and I was named for his late wife so he really did dote on me even though he did have some great-grandsons at the time. So he would come home from Paris with all these exquisite little dresses. So often my mother would put me in these dresses when I would come over and visit with him. And I think at one point we had a professional photographer come and so I was dressed in one of my little dresses from Paris and we had photographs done in the garden here with uh...we called him Daddy Will – with Daddy Will, and I can vaguely remember that. I definitely remember being here in this house when I was little. Having dinner here, things like that.

AC: Was that your first visit?

SG: Well, we would have dinner here every Friday night. With my parents and my brother... (garbled) it was probably just the four of us and we would have dinner with him. So I was say, three, four, five years old, around in there, (garbled) I'm sure that was not my first visit. I had been here many times. He would come and too visit us in our house in Briargrove.

AC: You said you had dinner quite a bit, correct?

Interviewee: Garwood, Susan Clayton**Interview Date: March 15, 2013****SG:** Yes.**AC:** Were those enjoyable dinners?

SG: Oh yeah, it was great fun. It was a formal dinner served in the dining room. And...but amazingly, he [Will Clayton] was happy to have the little bitties join at the dinner table. I would sit on telephone books at the dinner table so I could reach the table. And, you know, we were served a formal dinner and (garbled) then we would retire to the living room afterwards and have coffee. And he just let me run around. It was all...I have very happy memories of being here. Nobody was admonishing me or telling me to stop it or don't touch that or anything like that.

He also had a lovely older lady who worked for him, Cora, an African-American lady. I just loved Cora and she loved me. She probably kept me out of trouble.

AC: Did he [Will Clayton] strike you as being very tall?**SG:** Oh yeah. Of course I was tiny, so he seemed very tall.

AC: Let's talk a little bit about your more immediate family. Your father, Wilmer St. John Garwood was a distinguished Texas jurist.

SG: Well, let's see: my grandfather, and it's Wilmer – Wilmer St. John Garwood, Sr., he was a lawyer in Houston and then he went on the State Supreme Court about 1950 and they moved to Austin. He had Ellen (garbled) [and] Wilmer St. John Garwood, Jr., and he was a lawyer here in Houston and (garbled) and Will -- Will Garwood, [Sr.] recently passed away (garbled) and he [Wilmer St. John Garwood, Jr.] was a lawyer in Austin and went on the state Supreme Court like his dad and then ultimately was a judge on the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals.

AC: You touched on; you touched on your grandfather, Wilmer St. John Garwood Senior, who was on the Texas Supreme Court. Do you remember anything about him?

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SG: (garbled) very well because we would often drive to Austin and stay there with my grandparents. Sometimes I would stay there by myself for a couple of weeks at a time. And he...smoked a pipe, and it was really cute with the grandkids, he would let his granddaughters clean his pipes for him so he would spread out newspaper on the living room floor and make this enormous mess with all the greasy tobacco and pipe cleaners. We'd be in charge of cleaning his pipes. [laughs] He was very sweet. (garbled)

AC: I'd like to talk a little bit about your preservation interests. Um, let's start with how you got interested in preservation here in Houston. What was it that really kicked off your interest in that?

SG: Well...it's probably based on the house I live in now which is the Will Clayton summer house...and that house (garbled) was built in nineteen twenty-three, twenty-four... (garbled) had this house where we are now on Caroline Street... so they didn't really need to build a new house...but my sense is that River Oaks was this new real estate development the Hogg's were working on and I think just to help out really his friends, Will Clayton probably thought, 'Well, let's buy a lot over there and they're trying to get this going,' and then (garbled) a summer house. And that's what they did. They built a house that was just intended to be used in the summer only. So it had sleeping porches and of course no air conditioning at the time... (garbled) the golf course, so they had the benefit of having the [River Oaks] Country Club there. And they had a tennis court and a swimming pool and access to the golf course. So it really functioned as their summer house and they ended up going out there just as you would out in the country, they would pack up the car and the kids and the china and the servants and they'd move out to River Oaks for the summer. (Garbled.) to believe nowadays but at the time the roads...wasn't paved it

was oyster shell. Anyway, so I inherited this house, [the Summer home] and it had so much

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history and it's unique in many ways in its design and (garbled) it's designed by Birdsall Brisco. He also designed the house we're in [Clayton House.] (garbled) so the idea of it being a summer house is unusual. But for many reasons it is a very special house.

My interest in preservation probably began with that. (garbled) At the time, I began noticing how in River Oaks many of the original homes built in the twenties and thirties (garbled) probably just because they were too small and people wanted larger, newer houses. It really was effecting the character of the neighborhood, and at the same time of course when you tear down a house you're probably going to tear down some mature trees to go with it, to make room for your big foundation, so the shady, leafy quality and the charm and the scale of how the neighborhood was originally planned is being lost and (garbled) that began to really bother me. So that's how I got started.

AC: You mentioned the design of the home on Inwood in River Oaks. [The Clayton Summer home.] That was modeled somewhat after Mount Vernon, right?

SG: That's right. It's a miniature version of Mount Vernon, so it has...the kitchen is in a separate building, just like it would be in George Washington's time, separated from the house. [Garbled] an outbuilding. Then on the other side is this grand porch, a little bit different from Mount Vernon. And then the golf course side would correspond to the Potomac River at Mount Vernon and...(garbled) it's actually, it's smaller and it's actually much more symmetrical and I think pleasing, more pleasing, architecturally than Mount Vernon. 'cause Mount Vernon is so big and it's kind of sprawling, with these funny doors (garbled) all over the place. I mean it's a beautiful estate. But, but, I think actually the design of the Will Clayton summer house is a little more...it's compact. (garbled.)

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AC: Do you think George Washington would be pleased [laughing] with the Birdsall Brisco (garbled)?

SG: [Laughs] I am sure there are miniature version of Mount Vernon... all over just not in Virginia but the entire United States, probably in all kinds of odd places... you know, North Dakota, whatever...it's a design that's been mimicked hundreds and hundreds of times. Of course he was such a popular president. So I think he'd be astonished that his house has become such an icon. I mean, you know, there are probably furniture stores that are modeled off Mount Vernon.

AC: Is there a particular reason you think that Birdsall Brisco picked Mount Vernon to model the summer house after?

SG: That's a good question. I'm pretty sure he was directed by his client who was Susan [Ada Vaughan] Clayton. And she was from Kentucky originally and loved all things southern and her family home in Kentucky was also a white southern columned home. I can't...I would have to see a picture of it to describe it exactly but... Anyways, so that I'm sure that she directed the architect to do a little Mount Vernon. She was a huge client of Birdsall Briscoe's. She not only hired him to do this house we're in, [Clayton House] [and] the summer house, but also she had many nieces and nephews and she hired him to do some of their houses. And then another of her daughters, he [Birdsall Briscoe] also designed a house for. For Burdine. So she was a big Birdsall Briscoe fan and a big architecture fan and loved all things southern so I think she probably gave him a lot of direction.

AC: Now I want to follow up a little bit with this business of preservation and this business of newcomers coming along and tearing down these houses and replacing them with the new things. In 2010, you appeared on camera with Debra Wrigley with Channel 13, who is one of our local news stations, and for that particular news piece you were very adamant about something

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that was happening in your neighborhood in River Oaks to a home that was designed by Birdsall Brisco. Could you talk a little bit about that particular day and what was going on?

SG: Sure. So that was one of the houses that Susan Clayton commissioned for her daughter Burdine. And, she again went to Mr. Briscoe to design it. And it was in good condition, it was well maintained from the previous owners (garbled) As is often the case, you know the buyers who are lot shopping as I call it, they move in quickly because they are very interested in buying a lot and they know some people may be unhappy that they're going to tear down an important house, so there were some other people who would've provided back-up contracts to this particular buyer and they would've taken the house and probably designated it on the city's preservation program. This particular buyer just wanted a lot. And they actually bought it without even going inside [the house]. So it was very clear what their intentions were. Anyway so they tore it down and built a new house. It was just...it was so unnecessary because the house was in good condition; there were other people who would have saved it if the seller had, you know, had really made more of an effort to find a friendly buyer. And then it could have been designated and saved permanently. So it was just a shame. It was an important Briscoe design. There are not that many of them. And once they're all torn down they're gone forever.

AC: Do you remember what you did that day when you saw the backhoe out there?

SG: It made me very angry, of course but there wasn't anything you could do at that point. You know, once they get the demolition permit it's too late. But you know, it's...getting some press sometimes send a message to people down the road who might be thinking about this, and might prefer that they not get any bad press about tearing down historic houses. So a friend of mine...somebody alerted me that the bulldozer had arrived so a friend of mine called...contacted Chanel 13, I didn't do that. Anyway, Channel 13 quickly jumped on it – must have been a slow

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news day or something – and they actually sent a helicopter over to film it from the sky. So they filmed the bulldozer scraping the house which, you know, is very upsetting to watch for me and probably for the buyer as well. It's kind of embarrassing for them. And I didn't set out to be you know, I didn't mention... (garbled) the public could see that people do that willy-nilly without giving it a second thought. So I was pleased it was on the news and hopefully it sent a message to buyers down the road.

AC: You had mentioned before that it was a niece that had been the previous owner. [garbled.]

SG: The Clayton's daughter Burdine Clayton lived in it for most of her life and then they retired out to the hill country. Her daughter lived in it for a while but then another owner who is not a relative was the actual owner of the house at the time it was purchased and torn now.

AC: I want to move forward a little bit in time and I want to talk a little bit now about the Clayton House renovation itself. I believe in 2006 something special began happening here at Clayton House. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

SG: Well I can't remember exactly what exactly precipitated all this but the house was in bad shape and it just...there must have been something a roof leak or something that really got our attention and it was clear that it hadn't had any work done in some time and rather than continue with just patching here and patching here it really needed an overhaul. And so I got together with some other people and with my cousins and we thought well we can all put in substantial finances and we can raise some other money from some friends and other community minded folks [garbled] and we can do a serious renovation and get it in good condition so that it can be viewed and the library can get more use of it for programming and other events they would like to hold here. So we started on a big capitol campaign and raised a lot of money and it was a long

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process because it involved so many different players. Since this does belong to the City of Houston but it also is part of the library department we had many different players involved and it required a lot of meetings and a lot of agreements and actually Mayor Bill White was one of our biggest supporters and he kind of ... we could go to him when things would stall and he really pushed it along. I'm indebted to Andrea and Bill White.

AC: Now the family did raise quite a bit of income on your end but then there were other income sources that came from the city that was something of a ... it was a mutual aid society if you will in terms of trying to get the renovations done. Could you talk a little bit about that?

SG: It was definitely a public/private partnership. And, so, most of the funds were privately raised either from the family or from other individuals or from the private foundations and then it seems to me we agreed to put in up to a million dollars of interior furnishings and equipment.

Now [garbled] since this was a multi-year project and I think various administration people changed during this time [garbled] exactly to what extent the city participated but they certainly did participate and helped us get it completed.

AC: How important do you think it is to you -- not simply because you are related to the former occupants -- but how important do you think it is that you and your family were involved and had sort of hands-on approach to the project rather than simply saying, "Well here's a check have at it?"

SG: Well I think they saw that we had, my family, my cousins and I, had a real love for the property and fond memories and feel a real obligation to see that it is cared for and used properly and kept [garbled] in ship shape. They know that we have a vested interest in it and they know that we really care for it and they know that we are not just going to walk away from the project.

And [garbled] probably that was an incentive for them to participate knowing that the family

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cared so much about it and is willing to, not just financial but you know blood, sweat and tears into it. Probably gave them some comfort level. This was a doable, a long term project that they should participate in.

AC: It took roughly what three years or something?

SG: Something like that.

AC: I know that there was some signs and so forth out in the front, up until, I seem to remember, 2009. It was quite a lengthy project.

SG: It was.

AC: It was very involved. Almost as long actually, if you think about it, as long as it took to redo the county courthouse downtown and that was a major, major undertaking.

SG: Right.

AC: So it was a considerable amount of time and effort and expertise went into the renovation. It wasn't just a few plastic sheets over it and throw new paint on the walls.

SC: That's right. And we were hampered a little bit by slow fundraising. Of course the downturn of 2008 did not help. That was kind of right in the middle of it. And so I think in some cases maybe that slowed us down and then probably there were some staff turn-over at the general services department at the city. We got a new library director at one point. So there were some things unanticipated and out of our control and then some of it was just purely construction and unanticipated problems. I think the foundation had shifted and they weren't expecting that. And some of the exterior brick work needed to be repaired and we hadn't anticipated that. So it's just the nature of the construction.

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AC: I know that the gardens around Clayton House were very similar to its appearance to when it was originally built. What I'd like you to do is to talk a little bit about how the design of the grounds then compare to the design of the grounds in the renovated Clayton House.

SC: Well we didn't have much luck finding any kind of original landscape land or the original photographs. I mean there are some photos, there are some early photographs of the exterior showing the landscape but those aren't dated and it's just anybody's guess as to know when that was taken and the landscape was mature so it certainly wasn't 1917. So we didn't have much to go on at all. And then of course the whole field of landscape architecture was just barely underway anyway. So my great grandmother being one to make a lot of decisions herself probably directed it all herself I would imagine. So having nothing to go on except some later photographs, we really had to start from scratch. So one idea that had come up was to use plantings that would have been found in the nursery trade at the time the house was built. Even though we didn't have any design or photographs we could at least figure out what was sold in the nursery trade in 1917 and just plant those things. So that was a really fun project. So I started in on this research and went to Teas Nursery which is unfortunately out of business now and they had lots of wonderful archives. And they had all their catalogs from the early years. So they were kind enough to share with me some plant lists and catalogs from this time period from [garbled] and there are some other wonderful sources from Houston's early history. One is a book called *Houston's Forgotten Heritage* and it has a whole section on the landscape. But that book and my Teas Nursery lists I came up with a big list of plant choices and so we worked from that list. And, for instance, nowadays we all have Saint Augustine grass and azalea and ligustrum hedges. Well in 1917 nobody had Saint Augustine grass or azaleas or ligustrum. So instead we used Bermuda grass and Privet hedges, no Azaleas, and things like fruit trees and old fashion

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bulbs and bedding plants and things like that we think of as old fashioned choices. So that's how we came up with the plantings. Now the design is really just was based on the bones of the garden, the beds that are in place and the driveway that is in place but it was tweaked a little bit by Keiji Asakura who is a Houston landscape architect and so he created some new beds but pretty much mimicked the bones of the garden as they were, the curve of the driveway and the entrance, the brick walks and the raised beds affect. So that's how we came up with the present design and the present plant choices.

AC: Do you think Susan Clayton would be pleased with what you've done?

SG: Oh I do absolutely. An also just as an aside she was a member of the Garden Club of Houston which belongs to the Garden Club of America. And they have annual meetings in certain cities around the country and they chose Houston for the annual meeting I believe in 1939. So the ladies flew into Houston from all over the country and the Clayton House and garden was one of the homes they visited. So I know she was very proud of her garden and probably very involved with it. I think she would be very pleased that I'm maintaining that tradition.

AC: I remember when we met the first time you were in the back doing some planting. And you are very hands on kind of...

SG: Well I am a gardener and I love to work in the garden. And so there's nothing I'd rather do than come over here to Clayton and to work in this garden. Honestly I can't even walk up the front walk and leave a weed without pulling it. It's partly my nature and partly that I want the Clayton House looking its best.

AC: Are you pleased overall with the finished product now that it's had a chance to mature a little bit?

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SG: Absolutely. And that's true but also with construction with old houses it doesn't take long before it's time to do some patch work and [garbled] renovation job I was so proud of and pleased with but also now it has been four years and I'm starting to see some places where we could do some new work.

AC: You just did the spring planting in the back. Are you looking forward to seeing how that turns out?

SG: Oh yes absolutely! And my goal would be to come here once a week and work in the garden. Sometimes I get distracted. [garbled] But I will take, I took some before pictures but when the annuals grown in a little bit I'll take some after pictures and see how they look.

AC: I want to talk a little bit about Clayton's interior, Clayton House interior. You and your cousins helped prepare a guide for the docents to help with visitors to understand the history of the house. On that guide each was given a separate historical tidbit. I'd like to hear a little bit about your experience preparing the guide. Did helping to create it, for example, bring back fond memories of the house?

SG: Well I was 5 years old when Will Clayton died in 1966 so to talk about the rooms and how they were used we really needed a group of cousins from who remember different time periods in Will Clayton's life. It couldn't possibly all fall on me because my memories are pretty slim. So when certain cousins were in town visiting from around the country it just so happened we had maybe six of us all here at once. And one of my young cousins it was her idea she is a clever young woman and she, I don't know if she videoed us or maybe it was just an audio tape but she said, "Let's just go around room to room and talk about the memories and I'll record it."

So really the only way this worked as well as it did was because we had a variety of ages representing different time periods and different memories of Will Clayton in the house and all

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of us combined had more of a conversation together and that's how we created the document and it was great fun. And gosh I learned all kinds of things I never even heard before because being in the library or in the dining room jogged everybody's memory and so they would tell a story that I had never heard. It was wonderful for us. It was wonderful to document it. It's wonderful for the docents when visitors come and they are so curious and the docents and they don't have anything to go on and if the docents don't have anything to go on now they have got this document and they can say, "This is where the family gathered up for dinner, or for coffee." Or for whatever it was.

AC: Is there a particular story that you would like to share that you heard that day?

SG: I was most struck by my mother's memories. My mother who married into this family. But she remembered all kinds of things about the cars and I know my great grandfather loved cars, always American cars. I guess everybody had an American car. But anyway. And but she had all kinds of stories of the Pierce Arrow the giant Pierce Arrow and how they piled all the family in the giant Pearce Arrow and drive to Kentucky or they'd pile in the Cadillac and all go somewhere. There were many, many stories that I'd never heard my mother tell and I was delighted to hear. It was great fun it really was and I hope visitors will enjoy it as well.

AC: Are you pleased with how the guide turned out, the way it is now?

SG: It is drastically edited but I guess it had to be because it simply would have been too long. But I know there is a copy of the audio tape somewhere and it's [garbled] I know each person is identified and exactly what their memory is. It's summarized. But for the docents' purposes it's fine. I do hope somewhere -- and maybe I've hid it -- someone has a transcript of it with all of the full tale and not the summary.

AC: Of the day you did the walk through?

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SG: Yes.

AC: Yes. That would be quite fascinating.

SG: It seems to me...

AC: Is there anything in the guide that you wish you had included now that it has been all put together or is there anything that you wish hadn't been put in it? [Laughs]

SG: I loved that it was so thorough. There wasn't anything that I could possibly add at this point. Because see we were combining with three generations of cousins. And relatives and I guess the only thing I regret is that we hadn't done it a few years earlier when we had even the older generation around. That's really a real...that's a huge regret actually that why didn't we do this when one of the four daughters could have walked around and remembered exactly what was going on? But at the time that we did the recording the four daughters had all passed away. So it was, you know... it could have been more complete if we had thought to do it sooner.

AC: The room that we are sitting in was originally built as William Clayton's office. Would you like to talk a little bit about the room and what's here?

SG: I remember this room as a library and where all the books were kept and this was at the very end of his life but I don't even recall it being an office. It seemed to me...and I don't recall the desk being in here. I just remember all the books and some of the furniture that was in here. [garbled] that I loved. This enormous heavy book with colored pictures it was called [garbled] "... in the Sea." It was just a book with sail books and I always pulled it off and looked at it. So I don't recall Will Clayton sitting in here doing work.

AC: It looks a great deal more like a library more than an office.

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SG: Yeah. Somebody seems to think that his desk was sitting here and it could be. But of course we would be here and served dinner in the evenings. So there would be no reason for him to be in here working anyway. That's what I remember.

AC: I think that's about all the questions that I have. Is there anything that I hadn't mentioned that you would like to talk about?

SG: No. No, I can't think of anything.

AC: This has been educational and enlightening and enjoyable.

SG: Well good. Thank you so much.

AC: Thank you.

End of interview.

