

Interviewee: Couch, Rosalyn & Lower, Susie

Interview Date: February 4, 2009

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**  
**ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Rosalyn "Roz" R. Couch and Susie Lower**  
**Museums**

Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdés  
Date: February 4, 2009  
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes  
Location: Millard's Crossing, Nacogdoches, Texas

EV: Since you are going to be a part of this interview... First of all, give me your full name again please?

RC: My name is Rosalyn Rommel Couch I am the Assistant Director here at Miller's Crossing.

EV: Rosalyn and you go by Roz?

RC: Roz that's what most people call me.

EV: Okay. Since you are going to be giving part of this interview I need you to sign this release. This allows the University of Houston to... what we do with these interviews is we put them into the archives of the University, the special collections so that future researchers and historians can look them up. They also will put them on the internet through our special collections. So I need, both of us will have to sign this but you will sign on the right hand side of "Interviewee."

RC: Alright.

EV: You use whichever address you want; either here or your residence.

RC: There you are.

EV: Okay thank you. Now which one of the buildings... Millard's Crossing are we on?

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RC: Right, Millard's.

EV: Millard's?

RC: Millard's Crossing.

EV: We are in your office but which building is this?

RC: This building we call the Burrows House.

EV: The Burrows?

RC: The Burrows House. It originally sat about ½ mile south of here, down there were the Nacogdoches Medical Center is, over in that general area. It was originally built in the 1860's. That was the back part of the house and then the front part of the house was added in the 1870's.

EV: Let me go back a little bit. Where were you born?

RC: I was born in Houston, grew up in Dallas.

EV: Did you go to all your school in Dallas?

RC: Yes.

EV: Did you go to university, college?

RC: Yes I came here to study at SFA in 1990 and pretty much lived here ever since.

EV: What did you major in?

RC: Theater and English.

EV: What is your work history before you started working here?

RC: Well it's pretty varied work history actually. I worked there at the university for a while as a tutor and as a graduate assistant, when I started graduate school (which I didn't complete). Then later I became the manager of the Walden Books over in the Nacogdoches Mall, the bookstore. When that closed down I was very fortunate, this job

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opened up and I have been working here ever since and that was, this month, five years.

I've worked here five years.

EV: Your title here is what?

RC: Assistant Director.

EV: Keeping in mind that you are going to have hopefully some historians looking back on this at some point; explain what the complex is here at Millard's Crossing.

RC: Well all of these houses at Millard's Crossing were actually moved here from different places in Nacogdoches County by a lady named Lera Millard Thomas and she was born here in Nacogdoches, Lera Millard, which is where Millard's Crossing gets its name; but she was married to a man named Albert Thomas. They moved down to Houston and within a few years he was elected to the U. S. Congress and he served in the U. S. Congress for 29 years. As a matter of fact he died in office and she was chosen to finish out his term, so she became the first woman from Texas to serve in the U.S. Congress and she was from here in Nacogdoches. Well she moved back here in the late 1960's and at that time a lot of the beautiful homes and buildings in Nacogdoches were being torn down in the name of "progress" and of course "progress" meant fast food places, car dealerships and grocery stores, that was "progress."

EV: Parking lots.

RC: And parking lots, etc., etc. She thought it was a shame. She went all over town. She told everyone they were crazy, they had the oldest town in Texas and they were just destroying their history (and of course she was right). Well this was her solution to the problem. She began moving houses and buildings out here to preserve them and save

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them. The project was started in the late 1960's and continued on up until the late '80's I believe before she began to get fairly ill. I think she might have had a series of strokes.

EV: How did she acquire the funds? I assume she purchased these buildings or were they donated to her?

RC: Various ways, some of them she purchased; some of them were donated. I believe some of them were just going to be torn down and she said, "Let me take it." So she would just come and arrange for it to be moved. Most of the funding initially came from her. It was her project. You can imagine she and her husband, having been in Houston politics from the '30's on into the '60's, they made a lot of money. So she ended up...

EV: As politicians are wont to do.

RC: Well you know it sometimes happens. What she did is she used her money, for the most part, for this.

EV: For the sake of also future historians the Albert Thomas Convention Center in Houston was named after him.

RC: Absolutely.

EV: What about the land? Did she purchase the land, was it donated, how did you all get the land?

RC: Good question. Part of the land was purchased by her and part of the land was her original family land. Her family, the Millards, had been here since the early to late eighteen hundreds. Part of her family land that she had inherited and then she purchased some property that was right next to it and added it together to make the property that later became Millard's Crossing.

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EV: How much property is that?

RC: I believe at this time we have 17 acres. That's a good question for Susie.

EV: Which was say the first ones [buildings], say the first two or three that were collected and brought here?

RC: Susie knows better the order of the buildings than I do. Thinking back to the old pictures that I have seen, she rescued the Watkins house. The Watkins Victorian House I should say was I think one of the first as well as the Free Methodist Chapel. Also, Lera Millard's house, which she lived in right here on the property until she passed away; which we call Mrs. Thomas' house. It was actually several structures put together; two actual structures from here in Nacogdoches that she put together into one house and windows and doors from houses in Houston and Shreveport so she kind of picked and chose whatever she wanted and put it all together for her own house.

EV: The buildings that are here now are native to the region right?

RC: They are all native to Nacogdoches County.

EV: Are you all funded or run by a Board of Trustees, do you have a non-profit corporation?

RC: We are a non-profit organization, a 501c(3) and we have a locally controlled Board of Directors; all people who are here in Nacogdoches and that is what we are currently. For a good deal of time when Mrs. Thomas passed away, which was in 1993, about half of the buildings she left to a foundation out of Dallas called Communities Foundations of Texas and the other half she left to her family. So for about 15 years or so it was under split ownership, it made it very difficult for us to get large grants. Also, the fact that half the buildings were owned by a foundation and foundations don't

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generally give to other foundations, made it difficult. It frankly put Millard's Crossing under dire jeopardy because we couldn't get the funding without owning all the properties. Fortunately, the family last year agreed to donate their properties to us. The foundation in Dallas agreed to donate their properties to us so that all of it could be one local, non-profit run by local people.

EV: Okay and Dallas washed their hands of the whole thing? I mean you don't have any board members from Dallas that still have their fingers in the pot?

RC: No, not at all, it is all locally controlled at this point.

EV: Do you all receive funds just from private donations? Do you have government funds, federal funds?

RC: No we do not receive any federal funds. At this point our income mostly comes through tours, through rentals of our facilities for weddings, showers and other events, through donations of people in the community and Texas and other places in the United States, and grants from foundations.

EV: Is the furniture in these places period furniture and is it from the 1800's; is it also local?

RC: Good question. Yes and no would be the answer to it. Mrs. Thomas furnished the houses with items from her collection. So the furnishings that you see in the houses and buildings for the most part are not original. They came from Mrs. Thomas's really extensive antiques collection. As a matter of fact, I believe she used to joke that she had so many antiques she needed to start collecting houses to put them in. As a result you often see things, because she collected things, anything that she thought was interesting she collected. So sometimes you see things that aren't from East Texas and sometimes

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you see things that may not be historically accurate. For example, in this room that we are in right now, we have this wonderful bed and wardrobe which are both hand carved walnut from Germany and it was imported into the United States in the late 1800's so the time period is right; but this house that we are in is an old East Texas farm house and usually you didn't see furniture quite this ornate in your old farm house. But when people would criticize Mrs. Thomas about things like that; they would say, "You can't put that there." She just said, "I just did. What are you going to do about it?"

EV: Sue me!

RC: Because, exactly! Because of course when she started it, it was kind of her own project it wasn't really a "museum" so much as it was just her efforts to rescue antiques and buildings.

EV: Did she leave you all any of her correspondence or papers and all of that stuff?

RC: Absolutely we have a little bit of her correspondence; some of it is still in possession of her family, but some of it we do have.

EV: Is her family here in Nacogdoches or are they in Houston?

RC: Some of her family are here in Nacogdoches. One of her daughters lives here in Nacogdoches and her other daughter, I think mainly resides in Houston.

EV: Do they have some of their fingers in the pot, are they members on the board or are they pretty much...?

RC: Absolutely well her daughter, Ann Lassiter and her husband Ed, are I guess you would call them honorary board members, you know. They do occasionally check up to make sure that we are keeping things up okay. But they are not regular servers on the board, for every board meeting.

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EV: Are you continuing to collect things, houses and stuff or are you pretty much at the end?

RC: Currently we aren't really adding any more buildings; but we are on the lookout to make additions to Millard's Crossing; additions to the property in general so that we can have better parking, a better driveway that has a little more space for tour busses to turn around, etc. We have occasionally talked about getting an outhouse out here which we don't have, but we are kind of afraid somebody might really use it, so that's just a little bit of a debate up in the air.

EV: You don't have to dig a hole.

RC: Well we thought about painting a hole but we are still afraid that somebody might give it a go. We are mainly concerned at this point in preserving and restoring the buildings that we already have. We want to make additions in the future but keeping in mind that the family owned half of these properties for fifteen years and really did little or nothing with it. There is a lot of buildings out here that have sat up for fifteen years and weren't really cared for properly and need a great deal of restoration.

EV: Who did that restoration for you all?

RC: A lot of it we do in-house, restore where we can. Mrs. Thomas had several people that worked for her and helped her to move the houses out here and helped her in other areas in terms of, you know, decorating and stuff.

EV: Excuse me when you say she had somebody you talk about workers or professionals folks who knew what they were doing?

RC: Workers, professionals who knew what they were doing; but, for example, she had a gentleman and Susie will remember his name but I don't, who was responsible for

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helping her move the houses out here. She had her workers and Susie can tell you who they are.

EV: The restoration, as you probably well know, of houses is a real esoteric area of architecture...

RC: Absolutely!

EV: So do these guys just know it from experience, or you just said you had some trained folks right?

RC: Uh, huh (affirmative).

EV: You had some professional restorers?

RC: Well, not so much, not when she was initially moving the buildings out here and Susie can tell you a little bit better about the gentleman that worked for her. Mainly she would make do with what she could. Keeping in mind that she started these restoration projects in the late '60's and early '70's, they didn't have the cottage industry that they have today in terms of restoration. You know, for example, today you can get the actual replica wallpaper that looks exactly as it looked when it was sold out of Sears and Roebucks in 1902, they didn't have that back in 1970, so she had to make do with what she had. So a lot of the wallpaper in here, you see, aren't going to be historically accurate, they are not original. It was stuff that she could find that was close enough to what she thought was historical. Also, sometimes frankly, just things that suited her personal taste that aren't historically accurate at all but something, maybe she thought looked pretty.

EV: What has this done for you? I mean this wasn't your field of interest in education?

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RC: No it wasn't really. I studied theater and English but I've always loved history and I always said if I ever went back for another "useless" degree it would be in history. I can only make that joke as a theater and English person can. But what I really enjoy are the tours. I enjoy people, I enjoy history and that is what this job does for me.

EV: East Texas is full of 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> century settlements, do you all keep track of those just for your own sake or no? I guess that is a "yes" or "no" question.

RC: Well I would say that early 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> century, no.

EV: Okay.

RC: We cooperate and collaborate with other historical sites in the area. For example, the Caddo Mounds, we have a gentleman over at the... oh the name escapes me, it's a state park over there where the Caddo Mounds are, John Tatem is his name that runs that place and we cooperate and collaborate with him a great deal.

EV: East Texas was settled pretty much by southerners and the southerners brought their slaves. Are there any slave quarters around here or communities where African-American communities lived for any period of time?

RC: Hmm, I don't know about slave quarters but I know that there are portions in town that are currently under preservation projects which are quarters, of a sort, it was more servants quarters. It was more where the African-Americans lived, shot gun houses, you know that were kind of left to deteriorate and degenerate.

EV: Who would we contact to check those out?

RC: I would probably contact the Convention and Visitors Bureau and let them direct you to the proper person.

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EV: Now there have been... I think the Spanish, the Spanish have been here since the 1600's, in East Texas and I guess you have the same response for that, you don't know any communities, are there any of those that you all work with, together with?

RC: Not in particular. I know that we became an official Spanish Mission here in Nacogdoches here in 1716 and then became officially designated a town, a \_\_\_\_\_ (17.4) in 1779 by the Spanish government which makes us the oldest town in Texas. Without a doubt there are older settlements but we were the first one officially designated as a town by the Spanish government.

EV: Yeah they get arguments from what you are talking about. I'm from El Paso so.

RC: Oh yes... Once again, you are going to hear different from people from Ysleta, is that right? You're going to hear a whole different story. But definitely there are older settlements but that is the East Texas "common wisdom" let us put it.

EV: Yeah you get away with it.

RC: (laughter)

EV: It's too far to argue with you.

RC: Couldn't get much further I don't think.

EV: Yeah really. Do you have any volunteers that work here with you all?

RC: Quite a number of volunteers, we are very dependent upon our volunteers actually. I always joked that I am the Assistant Director which sounds really impressive until you find out there are two people that work here. There are actually more than two people; there are three people who work here. So we depend very much on our volunteers. We have several groups who come out and help us with our gardening. We have a sorority here in town, Gamma, Kappa, Omega, who comes out and helps us with

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odd jobs. They are a service sorority so they help us with that. Many volunteers around the community and just individuals who are happy to come in and help us for our special events and for our school tours and the Nacogdoches Junior Forum is very involved.

EV: You say you have a sorority, like a college sorority or one of those older girl sororities?

RC: It's a college sorority. They are a service sorority it is Gamma, Kappa, Omega and they come out every couple of months and help us with really hard work.

EV: You know I've been meaning to ask several museums around the area that always tell me they need help but have you all ever tried AmeriCorp?

RG: You know someone had mentioned AmeriCorp to us but I don't know the details on that.

EV: I mean...

RG: I think Susie was talking about.

EV: Well you know when I retired I was sitting around like you with a useless... well it wasn't so useless I just got tired of it, but I had an English... I majored in English but anyway I was sitting there just staring at the four walls thinking, "this is not fun" so I went back to U of H, got a degree in Public History, and but in doing all this I had to go through an internship, which at my age I felt like an idiot, but it was kind of a neat one because I got to go work for the U.S.S. Texas which was neat.

RC: That's fantastic.

EV: Yeah. But the only way I could do it was AmeriCorp pitched it. So they paid me I think it was like \$1,200 a month or something to go out there and, which just paid my gas money pretty much, but they paid the guys for you... all you have to do (I don't even

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know if you have to do this) is offer room and board or something. But it is wonderful for them, or for you.

RC: That's worth checking out, absolutely.

EV: Yeah and the lady who was doing it when I was involved in it was from, I think she was just getting her degree from Rice. But if you would like I could check it out for you and let you know or just chime into AmeriCorp and say, "We need some interns."

RC: I'll check on the internet.

EV: Yeah because I think U of H is the only school around here that is teaching public history where you would get those interns. But you would probably get them from any walk of life.

RC: And when you mentioned public history that reminded me that I should mention that we have quite a number of SFA students who come over and help, involved in their classes. We have a public history course. As a matter of fact the person that teaches public history is on our board and we also... so they come over and help with certain events. The forestry students, in order to get your forestry degree and study, and work in the state park system and the national parks you have to do interpretive classes so the classes for the interpretive courses come out here and help and also when we do our large school tours for the entire Nacogdoches School District, we get 500 children out here in the course of two days and...

EV: I bet that's a lot of fun.

RC: Oh it's so much fun, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders which are the best.

EV: I don't know how you deal with them.

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RC: And the education majors come and help us set up living wax museums and all kinds of activities and stuff.

EV: Really how neat?

RC: So I should mention that Stephen F. Austin has a significant presence in helping us out here at Millard's Crossing.

EV: You didn't ever get to know Mrs. Thomas did you? She passed away...

RC: I met her actually one time very shortly before she passed away so, no I was never able to get to know her unfortunately, but I did meet her.

EV: Okay and when she and her family kind of dedicated this, they effectively turned everything over to the corporation right? Other than coming in here as consultants.

When you say the family comes out here and they want to make sure everything is on the "up and up" I don't mean this nasty but, what authority do they have to do that?

RC: That's right. Well one of the things that they said is that they said, they wanted to donate the properties to us but they wanted to make sure that it was going to last and endure if they did so. So they had us, they said, "If you raise up \$100,000," (I believe the figure was \$100,000) "then we will donate the properties to you." We didn't have to "buy" the properties we just had to show that we would have a certain amount of money in order to keep the place running for a certain number of years and I'm not sure of the particular details but I think that there is a clause that if something happens to Millard's Crossing, if, heaven forbid, we ever have to close down or shut down, these properties would revert back to the family. You will want to ask Susie about the details of that.

EV: You know I think they kind of had the same thing about Memorial Park in Houston with Memorial Park that has to do with the Hogg family.

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RC: Oh yeah.

EV: At one point somebody tried to drill oil out there I don't know if you knew that, that was within your lifetime, they caught them setting up to drill for gas and oil. They said "You do that and we lose this everything goes back." As a matter of fact it was in the Hofheinz, the young Hofheinz administration.

RC: Oh really.

EV: Yes, they are very, very strict about that. And you know Houston without Memorial Park would be... I don't know if you know Houston that well. How far are you from where the El Camino Real used to run from San Antonio?

RC: Oh well about four miles, five miles.

EV: North, south?

RC: Five miles north? Well let's see. That would be downtown, that's Main Street is where the El Camino Real was. I think it would probably be maybe about five miles. I'd have to get the map and count it out.

EV: Okay I'm kind of ignorant about Nacogdoches. Main Street in Nacogdoches so to speak...?

RC: Was part of the El Camino Real.

EV: Part of the El Camino Real?

RC: And the North Street in Nacogdoches was part of the El Paso Del Norte.

EV: El Paso Del Norte, I've never heard of that one.

RC: Yeah.

EV: Is that another part of the trail, another part of?

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RC: It just intersects with it and I think it is the one, it's a question of north and south and east and west.

EV: Okay, alright. Because I know in Houston part of the, you've seen maps of the Camino Real haven't you?

RC: Yes.

EV: And they just kind of go off in a different direction.

RC: Oh absolutely.

EV: Some go way into West Texas somehow. But all these around down here start spreading out a little bit more. Let's see...but no part of this property touches on the Camino Real does it?

RC: Not to my knowledge.

EV: I understand from interviewing other people that there are old Spanish communities whose families, whose residence date back to the 1700's; do you know who they are, have you heard of them?

RC: No I wouldn't know in particular except for you know Nacogdoches "founder" would be Antonio Gil Ibarvo and descendants of his still live in Nacogdoches so that would be the only place that I would particularly start. But I may have a newspaper that I can dig out for you because we had some people, like I said we rent this place out for events, such as family reunions, weddings and conferences and some people did a Hispanic Genealogy Conference here several months back, sometime last year.

EV: I was a speaker there yeah it was in August.

RC: Oh well then you know more than I do, you know the right people to talk to.

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EV: So many of them were from other parts of Texas. To narrow them down to one or two and I didn't have much time, it was just a weekend. But they are going to have the conference again in Dallas and I'll speak at that one. I mean I speak on how to conduct an oral history because we are trying to do all kinds of things with oral histories. So do you all have a set of conditions or for buildings to come here and be used, placed on, what criteria does it have to meet?

RC: Well it has to first of all pass our board. Our board fortunately has a lot of knowledgeable and experienced people in the areas of history and restoration. Currently because this transfer just happened from the family and from the foundation to us, we are just now in the process of developing our policies on collections and acquisitions and those things. So it would have to pass whatever the board says qualifies to fit in Millard's Crossing. Our buildings out here currently date anywhere from 1837 on up to I guess the most recent thing would be the caboose, 1914.

EV: Was that caboose just kind of an afterthought? I mean besides the date what do you need to have it or was there really a railroad that ran through here?

RC: Well no there was a railroad it didn't run through, well let me, that particular caboose did not run through Millard's crossing specifically. The railroad tracks actually are just 200 yards I should say north of here. As a matter of fact the reason this place is called Millard's Crossing is because Mrs. Thomas's father had a cotton gin up in that area and where his cotton gin was, the railroad and the creek and the road all met and that area was called Millard's Crossing so when she started her village which was just 200, 300 yards away she called her village Millard's Crossing. Now this caboose in particular came from the Nacogdoches and Southeastern line which was part of a logging train that

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ran between Nacogdoches and this little logging community nearby I believe it was called Hayward Mill (Hayward, I'll have to check on that) in 1914. It later became part of the passenger train that ran between here and San Augustine and eventually, when the railroad, that particular railroad closed down, this gentlemen bought it and put it on his farm and used it as a playhouse for his children. It's precious it is an old wooden caboose and there's not a whole lot of those wooden ones around anymore. He was acquainted with Mrs. Thomas, or perhaps was a friend of hers I'm not quite sure what the relation was, but when he passed away he made sure that it came to us. We were really happy to get it because it is a part of Nacogdoches history. It was part of that M.S.E. line and because it is wooden and there's just not a whole lot of those wooden cabooses around anymore so it is really exciting.

EV: You hall must have a hellacious maintenance cost?

RC: Absolutely! Maintenance is the name of the game, absolutely.

EV: I know that there is a bunch of old... I mean when I have driven through central Texas, I see a bunch of barns leaning over and old buildings. Do you get wood from them by any chance, do you use authentic wood to replace some stuff or have you received that kind of damage?

RC: No now that's one of the things that Mrs. Thomas always did is she always kept a look out for stuff like that. As a matter of fact I believe the Country Store that we have here; part of the country store was taken from an old double corn crib. Part of it was old used found lumbar. I do believe that our log office here, beams that go across by the ceiling actually came from an old barn like you said. So yes we try to look for stuff like that but also newer things that we can make authentically. For example, after hurricane

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Rita, one of our board members had a whole bunch of cedar trees blew down on his house. So he brought the cedar out here and we got forestry students and John Tatem that I mentioned before, to come out here and we had a log splitting and we split rails.

EV: Oh really?

RC: With wooden wedges and home made mallets and throws. So, it is a new fence, but we did it the old fashioned way.

EV: That was neat.

RC: So we try to do the best we can.

EV: Do you all document all this stuff while you are doing it?

RC: Absolutely, it seems like we did some videos and pictures of that log splitting I guess you could call it.

EV: Do you all keep those here or are they?

RC: I'm not sure if we have those log splitting videos here at Millard's Crossing I think they might actually be on my computer at home.

EV: Okay. Did you take the pictures?

RC: Yes.

EV: Are you one of the ones that took the pictures?

RC: Yes.

EV: Those will make a fine addition to your oral history.

RC: Absolutely. I'll see if I can get them to you.

EV: Yeah because we could, you know we've collected; this is something, if you still have love of the theater, that you would really like. We are negotiating right now with Hobby Center, to get TUTS has all their stuff stored in there from day one; every play,

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musical stuff. They have it on film up until it became unionized. But they have all the papers and correspondence and stuff from theater and it is just fabulous. I mean and he kind of threw a hook out to me and said, "Well we don't have anyplace to store it." Then I thought... and the more interested I sounded the more he began to recede on me. So now we are trying to do the same thing with Sixth Ward. As a matter of fact are you familiar with Houston with Sixth Ward?

RC: Somewhat.

EV: Do you know where Sixth Ward is?

RC: Yes.

EV: So they have restored that and they finally have historical standing or something.

So...

[interruption as someone enters the room]

EV: May I get you a chair?

SL: No that's fine because she needs to do something.

RC: Certainly.

SL: Will you look up the minutes and see if our meeting was it on the first...

EV: Okay now we are with the head of the Millard's...

SL: I'm the Executive Director.

EV: And your full name is what?

SL: Susie Lower.

EV: Flower?

SL: Lower, L-O-W-E-R. It's spelled like the word lower but it is pronounced Lower.

EV: I'm going to need to get closer to you I think. Okay. Where were you born?

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SL: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

EV: How long have you been down here?

SL: I've been down here almost 40 years maybe a little bit longer. We came in 1965 you do the math but it's been a while.

EV: Were you educated up north?

SL: Yes I went to school in New Jersey. I was educated in high school and then I went to the Midwest to college. I went to Beloit College.

EV: Which college?

SL: Beloit in Wisconsin, it's a small liberal arts college. Then I got married after I worked in New York City and then I came here.

EV: So you came from the big apple to here, to Nacogdoches?

SL: Well that's because my husband got a job here and it was his first job and we thought, "Texas why not?" You know, two years we won't be there long and we stayed.

EV: What did you study when you were in school?

SL: My major was writing actually, creative writing.

EV: Really?

SL: Political science, I love political science and art.

EV: Did you do much writing?

SL: I do writing all the time. I am always doing grant writing and...

EV: Creative writing?

SL: Creative writing? Yes I write short stories I really like that yeah but that's just for myself, when I decided I couldn't make a living out of it I kind of quit. But I like to write.

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EV: Can you let us know when you were born or is that?

SL: Oh sure 1940.

EV: Okay and can you give me specifics maybe you'll get a teddy bear or something in the mail, the date?

SL: Oh the date, October 10<sup>th</sup>!

EV: Okay. Then you wound up in Texas. What work experience did you have before you got here?

SL: Very little I just worked in New York City in a variety of jobs, a real garden variety; some office work, I worked in New York University for a while. I even worked in a department store for a while; I worked in a mental institution for a while. I was young I just did whatever.

EV: Whatever.

SL: Then after I got married I raised children. We had children and that's what I did. Then I decided when they were in their teens we needed to make some money to send them through college so I got a teaching certificate here at SFA and by that time I had decided after I had substituted for awhile, I decided I was maybe too old for that. So I was looking around for a job and there aren't many here in East Texas and I saw this thing that said, "Tour Guide." That sounds like fun! So I came up here. I was warned not to. Mrs. Thomas was a person of a very volatile temper. She is probably what we call Bipolar today. But anyway, she actually had a cane that she would stomp on the ground. After I had been here for a while, they did hire me, but after I had been here for a while she had been through at least 30 tour guides and I'm still counting because they didn't last long. But I did survive her. I worked with her for four years and she died and

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they made me director. I have no museum background at all. However, I did attend Winedale, the Winedale School for I don't know what they call it. But it was for people who were not museum trained professionals and it was very intensive so I have that.

EV: Was that Winedale at Winedale?

SL: Yes at Winedale. The University of Texas used to do it and then I believe. I think they discontinued that program but they did it for.

EV: They are still there.

SL: Winedale is still there but whether they still do that seminar or not I don't know.

EV: Well the seminar I don't know about the seminar. But we used to have one of our students go interview the folks out there for their oral history.

SL: Yes.

EV: We also went to a place in Benton, Texas or Benson, Texas where that old cotton gin, the Cotton Gin Museum that is a little bit north of here. So we are going to cover the territory.

SL: Well it used to be here in Texas, well everywhere, there just weren't many museum courses to train professionals and so almost everyone, house museums have some nice little old locals, you know, who didn't know anything about it so they were trying to train.

EV: Well that is what we do at the Center for Public History we train for museums and stuff. There were a couple of things that I was asking Roz about, lets see if I made my notes so quick here. Did you all keep all the papers from Mrs. Thomas in terms of the purchase of the properties and the purchase of the homes and all that paperwork?

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SL: We actually located a trunk that had this information in it but it does not belong to us, it still belongs to the family. The family has almost a room full of documents and trunks and trunks of stuff because Mrs. Thomas never threw anything away. She at one time tried to get a Rice graduate student to go through all this stuff and the student took one look at that room of stuff and said, “forget that” because it really would take many years to do it, but I think they would be open to having a professional do that. The daughter has macular degenerations and she cannot read these documents herself.

EV: She has what?

SL: Macular degenerations, she is legally blind.

EV: Oh really, oh my.

SL: So that adds to the problem. I would be glad to help on a project like that if I weren't doing this job.

EV: Are they just her papers or are they also Albert Thomas's papers?

SL: I think mostly hers. You know they were going to do an Albert Thomas museum in Houston and a lot of the stuff was taken down there to the Albert Thomas Convention Center and it disappeared they are not quite sure what happened.

EV: Yeah the place closed down. I mean it's been there for...

SL: But we don't know what happened I don't think the family knows what happened to the stuff that was down there but you can contact Ann Lassiter if you want to find out. She is very intelligent; she has all her buttons... I have her telephone number and you are welcome to call her if you are interested in pursuing that, she can tell you more.

EV: She lives in Houston too right?

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SL: She lives in Houston. She did live up here for about two or three years after her mother died because she was getting the property in order. She sold a good many things at auction. It took her like two or three years just to go through all her stuff it was so extensive. Mrs. Thomas actually had to move out of part of her house because her antique collection kind of pushed her out it was really funny. But there was just piles and piles of stuff to go through.

EV: Does anybody live here full time now?

SL: Not now. We do have a house over here that we are negotiating with somebody. We need an onsite manager and the family did leave us that part of the property when we had the property change. So far we haven't found the ideal person and there were things that needed to be done to fix it up. But part of our master plan is to have...

EV: I might have a real good candidate for you, with a major in public history.

SL: Really who?

EV: How much does it pay do you know?

SL: What it is, we haven't worked out the negotiations yet. Probably the house would rent for about \$600 but then you could work it off. The person we are negotiating with now would be actually doing a lot of the repair work that the house needs and I don't know if the student could do stuff like that. The guy that we are talking to now works for us presently but they are just not quite sure whether they want to move in there or not or what the deal would be so we are still.

EV: It's not really a salaried position?

SL: Oh no it's not a salaried position at all it's just here's a house...

EV: BYOB.

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SL: Yeah that's exactly right. The perk would be you might not have to pay very much rent if you did some work for us like doing closings for instance, after rentals and things like that.

EV: Okay. Let's see the other thing that we brought up, the order of the buildings: do you have kind of an idea of how, what order they were purchased in?

SL: Yeah although it seems to be contradicted because the funny thing is our source for that is newspaper articles and each newspaper article says something different. So just when I thought I have it right I read another one and I go, "Ah." But Mrs. Thomas herself often would bend the truth and so she often said what she wanted to say which wasn't truthful at all. But I can, we do have our walking tour packet and I can kind of give you some idea of what I think the order is.

EV: Okay. Do you have a staff? I had mentioned to Roz, or asked her that Mrs. Thomas, she had some gentleman that worked for her to put these buildings together.

SL: Yes there was a pretty good carpenter, a local carpenter who was used to doing things the "old way" as they say and he was an on site carpenter, he actually had his own shop here and everything. His name was Mr. O. A. Buchanan.

EV: O.A.?

SL: O. A. Buchanan.

EV: Is he still with us?

SL: No he has passed. His wife is alive and she gave us, they kept a scrapbook of this and they gave it to me and then Ann decided she wanted it and asked for it.

EV: Ann did?

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SL: Yeah so Ann has it right now. You never say no to a Millard so I passed it on to her but I kind of hated to do it. It wasn't that great a scrapbook but it did show some of the construction things that were going on at the time. It was done mostly with Polaroid shots and it was faded and it was just kind of a scrapbook and that's all. But anyway I did talk to him before he died because there were just so many questions I had. So he came over and we walked through all the buildings and he told me the "whys and where fore's" in how...

EV: Did you write all that stuff down?

SL: I have, let's see... I made some notes. I also have some videos taken of some of my comments.

EV: Would you let us have copies of that stuff and explain it to us?

SL: Yes I do have videos of... yeah I have gone through, somebody videotaped me. People said I ought to do it and I did and I had a videographer follow me around all the houses.

EV: Gosh you have enough stuff for a little documentary don't you?

SL: I have a mother load yeah I really do. People say, "If you get run over!" But the family does too and they just don't know what to do with it it's just sitting there in limbo. It is waiting to be...

EV: For some dummies like us to come by and pick it up I guess. Well actually our problem is we'd love to have it of course but our problem right now is since we took off on this is we find these things but that we don't have the space. It's like the dog chasing the car. Once you catch it what are you going to do with it?

SL: All you can do is document this stuff.

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EV: Exactly. But the room, I was telling Roz that folks at Theater Under the Stars, I interviewed the Hobby Center personnel and they've got this room maybe a little bit bigger than this one but the walls and they have center isles, portable shelves.

SL: Where are we talking about where?

EV: At the Hobby Center, downtown for the performing arts?

SL: Oh The Hobby Center I was thinking Hobby Lobby or something I go "what?"

EV: No they've got all the films, I mean everything. It is just a treasure trove for theater but where do you put it?

SL: Where do you put it?

EV: So that's our problem right now and I think we may have to launch a campaign to some of these people who don't have money for anything else... if anybody even has that right now.

SL: Yeah right I know even the rich are getting poor!

EV: Yeah. Well you all are supported primarily by donations?

End of Transcript