

Cynthia Farber Transcript

Stuart Rockoff: Today is August 30th, 2007. We're in Atlanta, Georgia. My name is Stuart Rockoff here for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Oral History Project. Would you please tell us your name?

Cynthia Farber: I'm Cynthia Farber.

SR: Before you begin, this is sort of the legalese. Do you willingly agree to take part in the Katrina's Jewish Voices Oral History Project in this interview?

CF: Yes, I certainly do.

SR: Willfully. Good. Well, we can start with sort of an easy question, and that's where were you born?

CF: New Orleans, Louisiana.

SR: What year?

CF: 1932.

SR: Tell me how your family came to New Orleans.

CF: Well, my father was born in New Orleans. I don't know exactly where they came from. I have to say I'm very remiss in having not collected a family history, or a genealogy. My mother and her family came over during the pogroms from Bialystok, in that vicinity, which was either Poland or Russia or—you know, the boundaries changed.

SR: Cynthia, you were telling us about your parents or grandparents coming from Bialystok. Was it your parents or your grandparents?

CF: Well my grandmother and my mother and her three siblings at that time came from Bialystok. It was around 1905. During the pogroms. Her father—my mother's father—my grandfather was already in Alexandria, Louisiana. And so they came over, they followed him. I have one aunt who was born in this country.

SR: So you would be a second-generation New Orleanian? Were your parents born in New Orleans?

CF: No. No, my [mother was] born in Bialystok.

SR: Bialystok. I got confused. I apologize. So you grew up in New Orleans.

CF: I did.

SR: Spent much of your life there. What do you love about—this is pre-Katrina period—what did you love about New Orleans?

CF: It's a culture all on its own. There are so many different types of people there. It's just a wonderful city. It's warm and welcoming and easy to make friends. It just was a perfect place to live. Nothing was too far away, and we had a very good life there.

SR: What was the Jewish community like—either when you were growing up or when you were an adult?

CF: I started out—I don't know if this is what you're looking for or not—but I started out—

SR: Looking for anything?

CF: —in the orthodox. My parents were kosher and we started at Beth Israel. Then I moved on to Temple Sinai because most of my friends from school seemed to be going to the reform synagogue. I think this happened to a lot of people. But the Jewish community was a very close community. It was a lot of fun growing up there.

SR: So how were you involved in the Jewish community once you were an adult?

CF: Well, my husband and I had lived away. He had his internship at Mount Sinai and then we came back to New Orleans. He started his residency, and then he went into the service. When we came back to New Orleans for him to finish his residency, of course, we had decided we were going to probably settle there once he got an offer. Several pediatricians, actually. We made a decision, well then it was time to really get out and make new friends. I say make new friends, because like so many women, they marry a man from out of town, and they live out of town. So many of our high school friends and my college friends had dispersed all over the United States. But we were New Orleanians, so I joined several organizations: The National Council of Jewish Women was one, and Brandeis Women's Committee, and for a time—I went to Hadassah the whole time, but I wasn't as actively involved with Hadassah. [Note: Cynthia was a member of Hadassah and still is.]

SR: What congregations did you belong to?

CF: I was confirmed at Temple Sinai, and Rabbi Feibelman married us, but then we moved to Touro Synagogue.

SR: Is that because Stuart, your husband, was a member of Touro?

CF: No. We both moved. Because at the time, we heard that that was the best Sunday School in New Orleans. It was an interesting time at that time.

SR: So let's start talking about Katrina. When did you first hear the word "Katrina?" When did you first learn about the hurricane? Do you remember?

CF: Oh, we learned about it very early. Sometimes I think it's even too early. Of course, my husband, wanting always to be prepared, his antenna goes up once it's a tropical storm. From a tropical depression, actually. So I would say—well, Katrina, actually, the

levee broke on August 29th, so we'll back up. We started hearing about it at the beginning of the previous week and I do remember that Friday I was in Slidell. This was August 26th. In Slidell at a bridge tournament, my husband called me on the cell phone and he said, "You'd better get home because there's a hurricane coming." Of course, I finished with the bridge tournament and then I came back to New Orleans. We left at 9 o'clock on Saturday morning.

SR: Did you have any hesitation in leaving or was it an automatic, "We're going to leave?"

CF: No, it was an automatic "we're going to leave." This was our second evacuation. I think for Ivan we evacuated and it was nothing, and we were prepared. We had a hurricane bag all packed all the time with important documents. And at 9:02, my husband went and put my jewelry in the bank box and some other things. We left for Baton Rouge. Our daughter, Shellye came about an hour and a half later and there was already terrible traffic. We got to Baton Rouge in about an hour and it took her about two and a half to three hours. This was before the mandatory evacuation.

SR: So why Baton Rouge?

CF: Well we have very good friends there. They were very good friends since college and so we stayed with them. With our three days of clothes, which you probably heard about, because everybody evacuated with three days of clothes. So we settled in, planning to return Monday or Sunday.

SR: Sunday, right. So what other types of preparations—I mean, what did you bring? What was the process of preparing and evacuating?

CF: Living wills, our Durable Powers-of-Attorney, our wills, our insurance policies, our checkbooks. I think that was about it. Drugs, medications.

SR: Clarification.

CF: We might have been able to use some drugs in the following week. So that's about what we evacuated with. And we still keep that kind of packed.

SR: So going to Baton Rouge—who were the friends that you stayed within Baton Rouge?

CF: Jean and Bob Eisenbach.

SR: Are they Jewish?

CF: Yes, Jewish.

SR: So what was it like to be in Baton Rouge and to see what was happening—this was, even prior to Katrina? I mean, talk me through what was going through your mind during that period if you can recall.

CF: Well, you know Google Earth. We could watch the whole thing. We could see our home. We did have some phone contact with our next-door neighbor, who was in Florida. He knew somebody who went with him after the levee broke who took a canoe down our street and said how deep the water was. It was about five feet deep.

SR: And what was going through our mind?

CF: You know, everything was going to be washed away. But of course, the first thing we thought about was, we had each other and we were safe. It takes a while for other things to settle in. Then we started shopping for clothes. Baton Rouge was a zoo. An absolute zoo. Wal-Mart had sold out of pajamas. Clothing was very scarce, and we did buy some things at Dillard's and places like that. But it was just—the traffic was unimaginable. Unimaginable.

SR: So did you watch much of the television coverage of the storm and the aftermath that week?

CF: I watched it all the time. I watched it all the time. Yeah. As many times as we had the computer. You feel very disconnected. No phone service, no power in your home. You start laughing about silly things like—we had a freezer full of pastries that my daughter and I make for breakfast in our freezer. 52 of them. So we kind of laughed about that. Well, they were gone. To say nothing of everything else, you know. We had a real trauma because she could not reach her best friend who could not evacuate.

SR: This is your daughter?

CF: Yeah.

SR: So talk about that, who were you keeping in touch with? Who was it important for you to keep in touch with during this whole process?

CF: Well certainly our children. Our children in Atlanta. Scott Farber and Stacey Wronker and we kept up with them. We tried to reach other people. We knew cell phone numbers, so it was easy to reach our friends who had evacuated to other parts of Louisiana when we could get service on the cell phone. That was a little tricky also. We tried to reach the bank to find out what was going on. You know, to make preparations for moving on. I guess it was about September 1st or 2nd that we made the decision to go to Atlanta. Caravan with my daughter.

SR: Now when you say go to, you mean not to move there, but just to go there and—?

CF: I don't think at that point we had decided that we were going to move there. That took a few days to settle in also. It takes a while to start thinking about all the things that you have lost. Of course, the big major thing was my husband's grand piano. It was a 1934 Knabe grand and we knew that that was going to be gone. Then you spin your

wheels trying to find out if things can be repaired, and much of our antique furniture just fell apart. Because anything upholstered can not be used.

SR: How much water did your home get?

CF: It had about four and a half to five feet of water. But the mold was climbing the walls much higher than that.

SR: Yeah. Certainly. Where was your house in New Orleans?

CF: It was on Turquoise St. in East Lakeshore.

SR: Let's talk about Baton Rouge a little more. How long did you end up spending in Baton Rouge? You said about a week.

CF: I guess maybe so. Because our children were needling us to hurry up and come to Atlanta. I guess we were there for about eight or nine days, considering we arrived on the 27th.

SR: Were there people you knew from New Orleans who were also in Baton Rouge, who you saw when you were there?

CF: We did see some people as they were trying to go home. We had some friends who were in Mississippi, and they came through Baton Rouge, and they did come over, and we did see them—a few of our friends. One couple in particular, my husband's partner and our good friends, didn't have any damage. You know, I don't remember how long it took for us to get back into the house. But I think it was October before they would let people in.

SR: So going to Atlanta—what drew you to Atlanta? Why Atlanta after Baton Rouge?

CF: Our children and grandchildren. You know, we used to burn the highways up between New Orleans and Atlanta, so now we're doing the opposite. We go see our daughter who didn't want to stay in Atlanta, who's in New Orleans.

SR: Then how did you get from Baton Rouge to Atlanta?

CF: We drove. We had one car because we evacuated in one. Our other car was underwater, of course.

SR: And when you got to Atlanta, where did you stay initially?

CF: My daughter stayed with our other daughter, and we stayed with our son. As time progressed, in the five months that followed, we spent time with my daughter too, in Atlanta.

SR: What was it like living with your children for that period of time?

CF: We could not have gotten through this without our children. We could have never gotten through without them. They were wonderful. They really were very, very tolerant and understanding, and we felt very comfortable there. But we knew we had to move on. There was never any question. My daughter-in-law said, "You know you can live with us if you want." That would not have been good either.

SR: What was it like being in the position where your children are taking care of you? Was that something new?

CF: Yes it was. They became our parents for a while. Helping us with decisions and things like that.

SR: How was that for you?

CF: That was fine.

SR: Really?

CF: That was fine.

SR: Yeah?

CF: Yes.

SR: So how long did you spend living with your children in Atlanta?

CF: It was about five months until we felt we had to decide what we were going to do when we grew up. Were we going to buy a house, were we going to live near our daughter in Alpharetta, were we going to live near our son in Kennesaw? Where were the things that we wanted to do? So we spent a week in Buckhead at a Suites Hotel and decided that that's where we wanted to be. We were centrally located between them. We're close enough that we can take advantage of the things we like. The music, the art, the theater.

SR: So when did you decide to stay in Atlanta and not go back? Do you remember?

CF: Well, I guess that we knew we were going to stay because our daughter was on the fence, and she got lost one day in Atlanta, and she said, "Not going to stay."

SR: Which daughter is this? What's her name?

CF: Shellye.

SR: Shellye.

CF: The one who lives in New Orleans. She said. "I'm not going to stay." We knew we were going to stay.

SR: So was it a difficult decision for you?

CF: Well it's a difficult decision—there were so many decisions. I mean there were so many things that we had to deal with. Insurance, meeting with adjusters, going back, getting what we could out of the house, and that was traumatic in itself. To go back to our house the first time, and see that orange lettering on the house. It just made me think of the Holocaust. Or Moses, or whatever.

SR: So when did you first go back to New Orleans?

CF: I think it was about—I would say that it was about October. The first part of October, to meet an adjuster.

SR: What were your first impressions when you came back to the city for the first time?

CF: Oh, it was devastating. It was a war zone. It was just absolutely—you just can't imagine how terrible Orleans Parish was. Well, you had trouble getting into your house. You needed special passes and things like that too—I guess to keep down looters. The National Guard was outside with their guns, and there was still no power, of course. We had to make arrangements for people to come in and clean the house. The floors had buckled. Of course, the carpets and the beds and everything were just a sight. And debris was beginning to bottle up. People had started cleaning out their houses before we did. So you'd see their front lawns with everything on it. Their carpeting, their refrigerators, their beds. It was piled up very near to where we live in this grassy area between West End Boulevard and Pontchartrain Boulevard, which you would think would be a very wide neutral ground. But it wasn't. It was just a large—as we call the neutral grounds in New Orleans. It was just a grassy area and the debris was piled 30 feet high. Just horrible.

SR: So did you drive back to New Orleans or did you fly?

CF: Oh no, we drove.

SR: You drove.

CF: We needed our car. We stayed with friends, very good friends who just let us come in and park there, and do what we had to do.

SR: Did you ever think about not wanting to go back, or did you feel like, “I needed to go back?” I mean, you know, to go see your house.

CF: Oh, I felt that I needed to. I felt that I needed to go back and see it.

SR: When you walked up to the house, what do you see? You described it earlier. Can you say again what you saw?

CF: The orange lettering on the house indicates that nobody was in the house and nobody was dead up there and the date, which was 9/11.

SR: Oh my goodness. When you opened the door, what do you remember seeing?

CF: Well our children who came down—our son and our son-in-law, and our daughter [Shellye] who ended up living here [in New Orleans], who came down—were able to talk their way into our house before we got there. We didn't know this. We had planned to all go together. But they wanted to act as a buffer. So they managed to get past the National Guard and the policemen and whatever and found a way to get back to our house. Of course, everything was warped, so they had to break the door open to go in. Then they gave us a report on what it was. They were overjoyed because I have wonderful photographs that my father took. He was an amateur photographer and in the 1940s he was taking pictures. There are photographs that are all over our house now, some of which I was in when I was about ten or 12. They were elated, and they called us on our cell phone and then they said Pookie—that's what we called my father—Pookie's photographs are fine and it just gave me chills. Gave me chills. So it was very heartwarming.

SR: So when you came back to the house, other than your father's photographs, what other things did you look for? What was most important to you?

CF: I guess things that were in my drawers. You know, maybe jewelry. Because there wasn't much that we could take out. Because even with the van, we piled it high with artwork and the things like that. I left the figurines and porcelains, and things like that. It was dark. You know, there was no power. You couldn't stay very long and I couldn't manage to keep those goggles on my eyes. It was—just didn't stand it very long.

SR: What was the smell like? Do you remember it?

CF: Mildew. Yeah. Damp, dank. Some phenomenal things happened though. Obviously. Wooden tables floated. And they floated up, and then they came down about six feet away. Still on their legs. Things were still on it. We had a candy dish on our coffee table, which is on our coffee table still, that had floated off of it, and ended up about ten or 12 feet away, not broken, candy still in it.

SR: That's amazing.

CF: It is.

SR: So what happened to the piano?

CF: Oh, it was ruined. It was ruined. We talked to the piano tuner who took care of it. We had already talked to some music companies here and talked about having it redone, and she said that we were not going to be satisfied with it. We would never be satisfied—the sounding board would never be the same. That was a big loss.

SR: Were you able to salvage any of your clothes when you went back?

CF: Just the clothes that we had with us. Just what we had with us. About that you could say an ill wind—there isn't an ill wind that doesn't blow some good. It forced me to

clean out a lot of clothes I had had for a long time, including the dress I wore at my daughter's wedding almost 20 years before that.

SR: So was that hard?

CF: Losing my clothes?

SR: Yeah.

CF: Not as hard as you would think. Clothes to go to temple, because it was the High Holidays. Close by, close to it. I lost some significant things, besides these sentimental things.

SR: How long did you spend in New Orleans on that first trip?

CF: I guess about five days. Five to six days. It's hard to remember exactly.

SR: Other than going through your house, what else did you do when you were there? That first trip?

CF: I guess we tried to line up with insurance agents and things like that. But there wasn't much we could do. There was no mail. There was no phone service in Orleans Parish, and there was no power. So you really couldn't stay around very long and it was all -- you know, you had to wear the hazardous material—hazmat gear. Things like that. Boots and throwaway clothes. We did go back on a second occasion. The whole time we were in Baton Rouge, we never could reach a business, we never could reach a stockbroker, we never could reach the banks. It was very frustrating. Of course, you would get them in Baton Rouge and they wouldn't know. Their computers were down, etc. On one of our trips to New Orleans, a friend of ours saw a full-page ad of the Hibernia Bank, that their bank boxes were going to be available. They gave the location, which was in Kenner, I believe. So we were able to go to our bank box, and that was

quite an experience.

SR: Tell me about it.

CF: Our particular bank was in Lakeview, on the corner of Robert E. Lee and Canal Boulevard and they had ten feet of water. So it was a disaster and that's where our bank box was. So we went out to this place where the bank boxes were and they were lined up—there must have been 5,000. They were from every one of their banks. All over the city. St. Bernard, Gentilly, wherever they had branches. Most of them had been flooded. So we were able to—fortunately, my husband took the bank box key with him. It didn't matter, because they were breaking the locks. But it saved us having to give special identification and all that affidavits and what have you. So they had to break the lock on the bank side because of course, people don't take the safety deposit—employees don't take the bank's keys with them.

SR: Now how were they breaking them? Do you remember?

CF: Yeah, I think they had a little screwdriver or something, and a mallet. They weren't picking it like a criminal. So we opened the box, and they said stand back, and they brought this huge black garbage can. And they took the bank box out, and they—of course, it was closed—and they tipped it over and they poured out all this awful water. So they said, “Would you like us to help you go through it?” Of course, we said, “Yes, absolutely.” So they took us to a table where they had more hazmat gear. Gloves, masks, whatever and they went through it meticulously. Every piece of jewelry, every document, backups for Quicken, and things like that of course we threw away and bagged every single thing. We did have some cash and that was a different process. But they counted it, and then they deposited the same amount into our bank account. Of course, a lot of my jewelry was ruined. Some were repairable.

SR: Was anything salvageable from the—

CF: Bank box?

SR: Yeah.

CF: In terms of paper or jewelry?

SR: Both.

CF: Nothing in terms of paper and various amounts of jewelry. Some were able to be repaired. Gold things. Gold and diamond things. Anything that had pearls, or semi-precious stones like turquoise or coral. Those were all ruined. The one thing that mattered the most to me, was I had a watch that was my father's. A pocket watch, that had his mother's picture and my mother's picture and that was ruined. I don't know how that can be fixed. It's amazing that back in the 1920s they had that technique. So that was very precious to me. That was a big loss.

SR: What sort of papers did you lose?

CF: Probably copies of the will and things like that that we had with us. So that was not a big deal. That was it.

SR: Do you remember anything else about your stay in New Orleans during that period?

CF: Nothing much was open. Of course, nothing in Orleans Parish to speak of was open. We did not drive around a lot. We didn't go take the quote, "misery tour" down to the 9th Ward, or anything. A lot of people were having flat tires because there was so much construction going on and you were beginning to see FEMA trucks, and you would see signs all over the neutral grounds in Metairie—Jefferson Parish and some in New Orleans. "We buy houses. We demolish houses. We clean houses. We'll help you sell your house." It was like an election day for a president. From an election where they would have campaign signs just every three feet or so.

SR: That's amazing. When did you sell your house?

CF: We were very fortunate. We didn't have it on the market for a long time. The act of sale was in May—

SR: OK, so it was almost a—

CF: —of 2006.

SR: So when you came back to New Orleans, by that point, had you decided that you weren't going to come back? Or was there still a possibility of your returning?

CF: No, there was no possibility that we were going to come back. No possibility. We just didn't want to face another evacuation. Not even worrying about the loss, we just didn't want to face the anxiety of another evacuation and it was time to be with our other children.

SR: So when you settled in Atlanta, what helped you make that transition? Were there any people, or organizations?

CF: Oh, the Jewish Federation, and the Jewish Family and Career Service here, they were all wonderful. Help was coming into them also, from all over the country.

Synagogues and federations were helping in New Orleans too. It was just wonderful how fast they mobilized. I think it was in—it was early on that we had this—we went to this barbecue at the conservative synagogue.

SR: Here in Atlanta.

CF: Here in Atlanta. We saw a lot of New Orleans people there, which was good. You know, you want to connect and network. It was a wonderful opportunity to do that. I understand the day before, where they had had a similar event, but not a barbecue at the Marcus Zaban JCC and we didn't know about that one, but we went with our son and

daughter-in-law, and daughter and son-in-law, and our daughter. She was still here then. But that was very early on.

SR: So were there lots of people from New Orleans here in Atlanta?

CF: Yes. Evacuees, and then, you know, there are a lot of people from New Orleans that are here that were not here because of Katrina.

SR: They came earlier.

CF: I networked with a lot of people that were here.

SR: Talk about the Atlanta Jewish Federation. What was your contact with them? Did you have any contact with them?

CF: Uh no. I think it was mostly with the Jewish Family—

SR: Family Service.

CF: —and through Career Service, but it was all under the umbrella of the Federation, and they were very helpful with grants and things like that. They had social workers that you could talk to. Actually, we did have a few sessions with a social worker.

SR: So how did you hear about these services being available?

CF: Oh they had many displays at this barbecue. I got very tickled with the rabbi when he spoke because he said, "It's hard to say that this is a barbecue because there's no pork." But it was very nice. It was nice the way they reached out. I know that they helped other people who needed help. You know, many people needed more help than we did, because my husband was retired. So he wasn't looking for a job, we had no children to place in school, and they were very helpful. Very helpful.

SR: So when you came to Atlanta, who did you turn to feel rooted or to feel settled?
What helped you to feel settled?

CF: I think we felt settled when we found a place to live outside of our children's homes. Kennesaw is pretty isolated, off the beaten path. Alpharetta is a little bit more accessible. But we met people—you know, we knew people in our children's neighborhoods because we had visited them. When we'd come up in the past, it had to be equal time for both children, or they would squawk. So we would stay like ten days, so we'd split it right in the middle. So we did know some people and then we bumped into people. After we moved into our condo, we bumped into friends that are still our friends that—

SR: Friends from—

CF: Friends from Atlanta, that were from -- one went to Newcomb. She was not from New Orleans. Her husband was from New Orleans, and I knew him in high school and they didn't know we were here. Immediately they welcomed us, and... So it was just wonderful, once we got settled. We didn't have any furniture, nothing but a bed and a television set, and a couch and a card table.

SR: Just the essentials.

CF: I'll let you surmise which is the most essential.

SR: I'm not going to ask that question. So you spent five months—

CF: Looking.

SR: —looking.

CF: Looking. Deciding.

SR: Deciding.

CF: And looking.

SR: Deciding what?

CF: I think we looked at about 40 places. We looked at houses, we looked at retirement communities, we looked at townhouses. You know, different kinds of things. Then we looked at condos and then we looked for rental units in condo buildings. That seemed like the best option to us. So we were really kind of at our wit's end when we found this place and we are renting it.

SR: So was there a sense of urgency to find a place to live? To find a permanent place to live?

CF: Yes, yes. It was very urgent. It was not anything that was felt by our son and daughter-in-law, our granddaughter who we were spending most of the time with in their home. It was not on their part, it was on our part to put down some roots. I can understand that. I can understand that, having worked with resettling people who come from Russia and other areas. I can imagine how my mother must have felt.

SR: Wow. That's interesting. So, what are the similarities you think, between your experience and having to do that, and what your mother went through and with those Russian immigrants went through, you think? That's one of the hard questions. I told you there'd be a few.

CF: I can imagine that they were glad to get out and felt safe. Maybe that's similar to the way you feel about an evacuation. You get to a place where you feel safe and it was not an easy journey, of course, in those days. In 1905. It was my grandmother and four children and one was just a baby.

SR: Then how was your journey, in this case?

CF: The whole thing or just the evacuation?

SR: Define it any way you'd like.

CF: OK. Well, the evacuation was fine. We were very optimistic we'd be back home in a little while. The stay in Baton Rouge was wonderful and our friends were so welcoming and we had a good time. Jean, our hostess, said something about, "I always wished for sleep-in help and a cook." She said, "You have to be careful what you wish for," because we were the sleep-in help, and we were cooking the meals—some of the meals, we would take turns. So, anyway, that worked out fine.

SR: In terms of re-settling in Atlanta, how was adjusting to life here, you think, similar to other immigrants that you were talking about earlier?

CF: Except for the trauma of traveling from New York, which is where my parents first came in, and coming down to Alexandria, Louisiana which must have been a difficult trip, I think that they probably felt fairly secure, because my grandfather was already here and many of our relatives were already in Alexandria. Once we made the decision, we felt good about it. Before we made the decision, and during all the months that we were dealing with finding a place to live, anxious to find a place to live, having to have furniture, and all of that, that was all pretty stressful. Once we found this place, then it was, "All systems go."

SR: You mentioned a little bit about the people you'd see who you knew from earlier parts of your life. How has it been rebuilding the social network and your social life? Has that been hard?

CF: No, it really hasn't, because there are so many people here that we have connected with.

SR: How? Where?

CF: Well, for example, Millie Asher heard that we were here. As a matter of fact, I think I called her and she immediately said, "Come for dinner Sunday night." So of course, we did. She introduced us to another couple that she had at the same time and a lot of people did that.

SR: You knew her from New Orleans—Millie Asher?

CF: Yes, yes. I did.

SR: How did people kind of react to you as a Katrina evacuee?

CF: Very sympathetic. Very, very sympathetic, and very understanding. The trauma to most people was unimaginable. They just said, "Don't know how you ever survived the loss and fright and everything."

SR: I guess this is another hard question. What was it like to have to be on the end of people giving help? I mean, who did you rely on for that help and what was it like to do that?

CF: The receiving end of help? Well, different. Different. But I don't feel that it was—it was wonderful to have that feeling and that confidence that people were there to help you. Not just the Jewish community, but everybody you met. You know, all the stores in Atlanta were giving discounts, and things like that, and it did kind of make you feel funny, you know, to be the needy one.

SR: So how would you get that discount? Would you show them your ID, or...

CF: Yes, you'd show them your driver's license. We met a lot of people who were from New Orleans. Not social people but a lady from the post office, for example, came from New Orleans. As a matter of fact, I think she worked in the same post office that my

daughter used on the West Bank of New Orleans, where her job was. So a lot of small world incidences. I do want to tell you one thing though. When we finally found this place, and we had put things in storage that had been salvaged. Our silver, our porcelain. We had a very trusted contractor who cleaned out our house, removed all the sheetrock, and got it down to the bare studs and he put it all in storage for us. That was difficult to find a storage place.

SR: Here in Atlanta.

CF: Here in New Orleans.

SR: Oh, in New Orleans.

CF: There in New Orleans. In fact, we found one of the last ones in Baton Rouge, and we secured that just in case we would have to move stuff to Baton Rouge if we couldn't find anything else. So when we finally had this place, and we were ready to move on and get the storage—well, I think we did a very stupid thing. We hired a mover who had a half-page ad in the yellow pages. Of course, we didn't have a van of furniture. It had to fit into our schedule, because we were visiting in New Orleans, and we wanted to get this done, and it had to be between the hours that the condo would allow, etc. Unfortunately, either half of our stuff was stolen, or they put it in storage until they could get it to us—and the people who had it in the storage stole. It was on the north shore. But, half of our stuff didn't get here. It was a real double whammy.

SR: So when did you learn that? When the van pulled up? Or no?

CF: The day after—the day that they moved stuff in was raining, they were late, and it was 10:30 at night. They said, “We're finally through.” Of course, they couldn't unpack everything, which was part of the agreement, because we had no place to put everything. The next morning we woke up, and we started looking around and saying, “You know, there aren't enough boxes here, and where is this? And where is that?” I'm still

discovering things. I'm still discovering things, though. On New Year's Eve, I wanted to use my China, and I had 12 cups and no saucers. It's been that way all the way through. I had half of a sterling silver set—spoons, no knives, and no forks because they were in a different box. So that was kind of a double whammy to have that happen.

SR: I guess I was trying to get at that with the question about community, but talk about the role of the Atlanta Jewish Community in this process of your resettlement. What role did the Jewish community of Atlanta play in that?

CF: Well, I think they were very welcoming. We received grants from the Federation and things like that and we immediately joined the JCC.

SR: Why was that?

CF: Because we really wanted to be a part of the community, and I was already a member of the National Council of Jewish Women, both in Atlanta, and in New Orleans, because my daughter was the president here, and my daughter of New Orleans the president there.

SR: Weren't you president at one time in New Orleans?

CF: Yes, I was. You know, I had always been a community activist. So I wanted to get involved in those kinds of things. We have not really tied into a synagogue yet. We were welcomed at The Temple. Of course, we went on the High Holidays, and this was another decision. Our son and his family go to one, and our daughter and her family go to one, and it's near where they live. So we didn't know where to go or what to join, so we were just kind of shopping.

SR: For that first High Holidays after Katrina, you were in Atlanta, and you went to the temple. Were you welcome there, was it hard to get in?

CF: No, we went with some friends who live in Atlanta, and we were given guest tickets anyway. No, it was not and these friends introduced us to a lot of people, and then even when we went when they were not at that particular service, because we went to an early one, and they wanted to go to a late one, we saw people from New Orleans.

SR: Really?

CF: Yeah, that had moved here.

SR: Well, what would you say to them when you saw them?

CF: Oh my gosh, it was hugs and kisses. "What are you doing here?" You know, "And where are you living?" And all this, and, "How are you doing?" I guess somebody came up to us I never expected they would have been here, my gynecologist and I realized that they were in a section that flooded too. They were uptown.

SR: How did it feel to see people that you recognized at that moment?

CF: Wonderful. Wonderful to see them.

SR: So, how is the Atlanta Jewish community different from the New Orleans Jewish community in terms of organizations or people? I mean, because I think there's a real difference. What do you think?

CF: In terms of Federation?

SR: Well, in terms of—

END OF AUDIO FILE 1

SR: Tape two with Cynthia Farber. What are some of the very special things that you were able to salvage from your home that you have here?

CF: There were three things that we were able to salvage in the way of furniture. One was a grandfather clock, which my father gave to my mother the year I was born, 1932. A jardinière that's porcelain and then has like a marble base and you can still see that in our house. And an oak table that we used every single day practically, a 250-year-old pub table.

SR: Wow. How'd you get that?

CF: How did we get it here or how did we get it?

SR: Oh, did you buy it or was it handed down from family?

CF: No, no. We bought it. The jardinière—I call the porcelain thing on the marble base—was my parents and the grandfather clock was theirs.

SR: And those were in your home in New Orleans when it flooded at the time?

CF: Yes.

SR: So what was their condition when you first came back to New Orleans after the storm?

CF: You know, actually the clock wasn't in such bad condition. You could see the water line. And neither was the table. It was full of mildew. Really full of mildew. Before we got it here, though, that had been cleaned off. The mildew was cleaned off of everything. I told you about this contractor that we knew and trusted and he cleaned about 100 of our 350 CDs and put paper towels between them, and that was, you know we salvaged those. He cleaned the mildew off of the clock but didn't do anything else. Of course, the clock didn't run, but the clock didn't run before either. So we found a clock man.

SR: Here in Atlanta?

CF: Here in Atlanta, yes. He came and he took the cabinet and he had to rebuild a leg. A leg had fallen off. So he was able to do that and clean the wood, and he actually got the clock working, which is amazing. It's a very special clock because it has three sets of chimes. Not just two, but three. It has nine—I forget what you call it—gongs. Whatever you call those pipes.

SR: I'm wondering, are those sorts of items, that obviously have strong, personal meaning and history for you—does having them here help you, in any way, kind of adjusting to life here?

CF: Absolutely. Yes. Yes, it is helpful. Oh, and I forgot we had a coffee table too that we were able to save. The glass we were using, the glass top, we were not able to do anything with the bottom because the man who was going to refinish it for us sprained his back when he was picking up the glass from the coffee table. So we found some little pedestals to put under it, and we're still using the glass. We still have the frame but haven't done anything with it.

SR: Let me phrase that question a better way, because I answered it. What is the importance of things? I mean, has your experience with Katrina changed your thinking, or you know, thought about the importance of things like that? Or are they not important?

CF: Oh no, they're important. They are very important.

SR: Why?

CF: You think about every piece of antique furniture that we lost, not so much for the value, but because we picked them out together, we had many things we brought back from traveling, and they all had significance. At the time, we were married for 52 years, so we had a big collection of things. Clothes were not important, but these things were important to us. We lost every photograph of our children, their weddings, and our weddings. Movies when they were children and videos of our grandchildren. So we

have no photographs at all, except those that were hanging on the wall. That's tough. Can't go back and redo those. So, you can never capture those again.

SR: How has the storm and your movement affected sort of family traditions? I think Thanksgiving was a big family tradition for you prior to the storm.

CF: Our whole family got together.

SR: Now “whole family” means what? Like what is the whole family?

CF: The whole family is, well, my first cousin, who lives in Bogalusa, Louisiana—Sally Rosenblum. Her father and my mother were brothers and sisters. So we're basically the same age, and even though she lived in Alexandria, we've remained close. We did celebrate holidays together, seders, and break-fast, and Thanksgiving was her holiday in later years. She has family that live in—well they live in Mandeville now, which is very close to where she lives. Her daughter and her daughter's family live in Fort Worth, Texas. Now they all had children that are spread all over. Two of them are out working and two of them are in college still. Last year we got together and she did have damage. She had big-time damage from the hurricane.

SR: In Bogalusa?

CF: Yes. About 200 trees were blown down on her property and some on her house, and she was also scammed by the first people that came to put a roof on. So, we did go there for Thanksgiving in 2006. So our kids would come in from Atlanta, and they would all stay in our house, and it was just a wonderful time. Then we'd go to Bogalusa for Thanksgiving Day, and stay all day. But this year, she decided that it was time to make a change. It was just too hard. So we decided that we would get three—they decided, actually—my son-in-law, her daughter-in-law, and the younger generation—their generation decided that they would pick three places and everybody would have a vote. It's wonderful to have email. So we voted between Charleston, South Carolina, Atlanta,

and Mandeville.

SR: So why Charleston?

CF: Well we wanted a place that they hadn't been, and they could be tourists, and we could all be together. So, Charleston won out. So we're going to spend Thanksgiving in Charleston.

SR: Was it close or was it a landslide?

CF: No, it wasn't a landslide. No.

SR: I'm not going to ask how you voted because that's a secret ballot.

CF: I asked if it was going to be a secret ballot, but they said, "No, it's not going to be a secret ballot." We voted for Charleston.

SR: So each year, will you choose a different place, or will you do it in Charleston every year?

CF: Just this is the first year. No, I don't think we'll do the same place. We're going to do a remote place, that's remote to all of us. Probably a different place.

SR: So you're maintaining that family tradition of getting together, it's just—

CF: Absolutely, absolutely.

SR: —occurring somewhere else.

CF: Yes.

SR: Why is that important to you?

CF: Oh, my family is very important to me. I mean, family is very important. There's very little family left, actually. I think I have one cousin only left on my father's side. My first cousin was an only child, and I have a sister in California, and who's not able to travel. Her children are all in different places.

SR: That's wonderful. Well, I'm interested that leaving New Orleans, being in Baton Rouge for a week, coming to Atlanta, and finally finding a place, all this transition and change, what does home mean to you? That idea of home?

CF: Well it's interesting, because we go to New Orleans for these regular visits, and we stay, I guess about ten days, maybe and it's always good to come home. It's very interesting because now this is home.

SR: So when you say always good to come home, you mean home to New Orleans, or coming home back here?

CF: No, coming home back here. New Orleans is depressing to us. It's very sad for us to know what's going on. In our hearts, that is always going to have a special place, it's always going to be home. But when it comes to going on a vacation, and coming back and unpacking, this is home in Atlanta. Being with the friends we've made.

SR: So what has made this place home to you? I mean what makes it home?

CF: This place in particular?

SR: Or Atlanta. Anywhere. Any way you want to interpret it. Like what made it home? What makes it feel like home to you?

CF: Well now what makes it home is the fact that we have some of our things from New Orleans and we have bought all new things, and we're making new memories in this physical home. It also means coming back to friends. But it's also leaving friends. So

you know, when I say coming back home, it's coming back home to Atlanta, but you're always leaving something behind.

SR: It sounds very complicated.

CF: No. It's like having two homes. People say to us—and I talked to somebody just the other day—“You've got to come back to New Orleans. Why don't you come back?”

SR: What do you say to them?

CF: I say, “We're not coming back.” But we're still involved in New Orleans, we're still involved in the community of New Orleans. We still keep in touch, still very interested in it. Of course, we miss the food.

SR: What food do you miss?

CF: All the wonderful New Orleans food. The oysters, the poor boys, the...

SR: Things you can't find in Atlanta?

CF: You can't find a decent loaf of French bread in Atlanta. They just don't make it the same. And I can't find my particular kind of coffee, so I am importing it.

SR: What kind of coffee is that?

CF: CDM. Decaf.

SR: So other than coffee and bread, what do you miss the most about New Orleans?

CF: About New Orleans?

SR: Yeah.

CF: My friends and daughter, you mean?

SR: Well you can include that.

CF: Besides that?

SR: You can include them if you'd like.

CF: OK, go with that [side?]. What do we miss?

SR: Yeah.

CF: We miss going to a concert and seeing almost everybody that we know is there. Chamber music series that my husband was involved in for probably 30 years, and on that board for probably 25. It's a wonderful series and so many of our friends would go to that. My husband, I know, misses seeing patients, who we would see in restaurants. They would come over to him and they'd give him a hug, and they'd say, "Dr. Farber, you may not remember, but you saved my child's life."

SR: Wow, he's a pediatrician for many, many years.

CF: Many years and he remembers all of their names. He remembers their sicknesses and talks about it, you know. Of course, you don't have that here. However we did go to a performance somewhere with our son and daughter-and-law, and we were sitting down in the orchestra, and someone from behind us said "Stu!" Here we were in Atlanta, and our son says, "You know everybody. This is incredible. Everywhere you go, you see people." Of course, they're convinced now, we have more friends in Atlanta than they do after 20-some-odd years. Or we've eaten at more restaurants than they have.

SR: Well if they have kids, it's probably true. So, and this may be obvious from what you've said, but I want to sort of kind of pull it together. What have been the biggest changes to your life after the hurricane?

CF: This is going to seem silly, but one big change is being on Eastern Time. It's very hard to get adjusted to that. Especially when we're trying to reach my sister in California. That is monumental because I have trouble staying up until 11 o'clock to call her. I want to call her at 9 o'clock in the morning, and I don't think that's appropriate. 6 o'clock in the morning there.

SR: Time zones are hard.

CF: But other than that, adjusting to Atlanta traffic. Traffic is a big deal. Our children say we're directionally challenged. So we do get lost.

SR: I think Atlanta is a very hard city to drive in. So I wouldn't blame you.

CF: It is. Even with the GPS, we still get lost. So adjusting to that. But even with the traffic, it's OK for us, because my husband's retired. So we don't have to punch in. You know, the time clock and we don't have to be in rush hour traffic.

SR: How has Katrina changed you?

CF: How has Katrina changed me? You know, I'm not sure it's changed me very much. I mean, sure there's some post-traumatic stress, and I expect that that'll go away eventually, and maybe not. Maybe we will never forget the sights that we saw when we went back there. I will never forget those. Of our home and of the debris, and of the utter devastation of whole neighborhoods. You don't forget that. You really don't forget that. I also find that people who have not been through this don't understand. They're sympathetic, and they say, "I can't imagine it." But if you didn't have water in your house, and you just had a minor roof leak, it's not the same. It's not the same.

SR: What are you grateful for?

CF: Oh, my children. I am so grateful to my children and having my grandchildren nearby. I am grateful that we're here, this is a wonderful existence for us. We do, you know, everything we want to do, we're making friends, and I thought that would be a challenge, but it has not been a challenge. You know, it's been very gratifying to us. I even had one of my friends say, "You know, you have changed my life since you're here, and since you all are our friends," because they're doing more things with us.

SR: What sorts of things?

CF: Oh, going to the concerts together, going to the theater together, going out to dinner together, using our Entertainment Book coupons together. Those sorts of things.

SR: Is there anything that you would like to add? Anything that we didn't cover? This is your last chance.

CF: Well, the reunion that we had last night.

SR: I completely thank you for reminding me. Tell me about how you got involved with the reunion, and tell me what it was.

CF: Well, how I got involved was Carol Wise in New Orleans, called me up, and told me about the JWA, and what they were trying to do, and was I interested? I said, "Very interested." And of course, she called Millie Asher too, and we've had a committee that Carol formed and Jayne Guberman, from the JWA. We had a meeting, and I think out of that meeting sprang the idea for having a New Orleans reunion in Atlanta, of people who were here. She asked Millie and me if we would co-chair the event and that was great. I liked to get my hands on challenges like that.

SR: What about it drew you? I mean, like why did you want to get involved in the reunion?

CF: Well, basically to network with all these people who are here. The people that I knew, and people that I didn't know. Also being involved in something that I thought was going to be a success, trying to make it a success, and finding people.

SR: So the process of planning, and then the event last night—what are your impressions? What were your thoughts? How did that process affect you, if you know what I mean?

CF: First of all, let's just say what the event was. It was a New Orleans reunion, and it was very much about New Orleans. We had special desserts, Doberge cakes and bread pudding and Mardi Gras beads, and things like that to entice people to come. We worked for months—probably six months on the list, finding people, gathering names, and getting emails.

SR: How did you find peoples' names? I mean, what was that, did you just...?

CF: We got people together that we knew people. We put people on the list that were impacted by Katrina, who were not necessarily from New Orleans and may have housed evacuees and so we had a sizable list. Then we decided to have it on the second anniversary of Katrina, which I think is a very good decision to make. Now I forgot your original question.

SR: Me too. Well let me just pleasure this and get your response to it. I mean, it sounds like while you're building a life here in Atlanta, there's still a big piece of New Orleans in your heart.

CF: Definitely. Even people who visited New Orleans say they can't get it out of their hearts. There are so many traditions in New Orleans that are so unique to the city and I do want to go back to the reunion and the stories for just a minute, because one of the purposes of this was to gather stories from Katrina victims for the people who were impacted by Katrina and it was a difficult thing to do to write my story. It was kind of like

a catharsis, but I wasn't alone. Some people had not yet been able to come to grips with writing a story. It was too painful for them. I will say this: It surprised me that I would have this reaction to that, but it was difficult to go through this reunion. I mean, planning it was one thing, but the reality of it—there were good sides and bad sides. It made me sad.

SR: It made you sad.

CF: Yes.

SR: Why?

CF: I don't know. I guess just, you know, going over the whole thing, thinking about all the people that had suffered, and are still suffering, and a lot of it is people trying to pull you back to New Orleans, and a lot of it is knowing that it's—things are just not getting done fast enough. We're at a point in our lives where we feel that we, you know, may not live to see New Orleans the way it was. Or may not know we are living.

SR: Well, Cynthia, thank you so much for taking the time with us this afternoon.

CF: Thank you for your interest.

[END OF INTERVIEW]