

Interview with Keitha Daniels by Jacqueline Ferrerra, Alina Boyce, and Hannah Hayes

Interview conducted at 1:19 p.m. on February 24, 2020

Interviewers (I): We are here interviewing Ms. Keitha Daniels about the events surrounding the lynching of Henry Patterson that occurred in LaBelle, Florida on May 11, 1926. And so, um, we first want to, um, learn more about your childhood. Did you grow up here in Labelle?

Keitha Daniels (KD): I did grow up here in Labelle.

I: Can you tell us about some experiences from your childhood growing up here in LaBelle and what experiences you had?

KD: You just want memories?

I: Yeah, just a few memories of LaBelle.

KD: My background is my family has been in LaBelle since the late 1800s and we actually grew up in Fort Denaud area. That is where they settled, and then the other side of my family owned businesses throughout downtown LaBelle. My entire time growing up, we were farmers off of Fort Denaud and we were restaurateurs and shop owners in downtown Labelle.

I: Are there any businesses around that we would be familiar with?

KD: No, at this point, they're all just properties that are owned, no businesses really.

I: We know you are a big history person, were you raised learning about LaBelle's history or was this something that you became more familiar with as you were an adult?

KD: After I graduated from high school at LaBelle, I moved away from Hendry County for twenty years. And I came back a few years ago and started volunteering at LaBelle Heritage Museum. And I started learning more and more about our town, I started to appreciate our roots. And if you're from here, usually most people, their family has been here for a long time, and it's a great sense of community because your cousins are here, your aunts, uncles, grandparents, and as I started volunteering, I started to put more and more ties together of how we're all connected, what our history is.

I: So obviously, we are mostly here to talk about the lynching of Henry Patterson, when was the subject first brought up to you, when did you first learn about this event?

KD: I first learned about it when I started volunteering at the museum as a docent. Do you guys know what a docent is?

I: No ma'am.

KD: It is a volunteer guide. So, people who would come to the museum on the weekends or whenever they were open and wanted to learn about Labelle or the history, we would guide them through the museum and we would talk about different subjects or different artifacts or paintings and explain the history. That's where I first learned about it.

I: Do you have anything, I've never personally been to the heritage museum, but is there anything from that event that is connected to Henry Patterson or that time?

KD: The only thing that was there was an article. And it was actually, I think, written by Ms. Linda Rider Smith, which I believe would be one of your interviewees or she had a family connection to it and I didn't really think anything of it until your professor started asking questions. And when we started looking into it, that's when I really got more into the history. It was never talked about when I was growing up. It was just not a subject that anyone talked about.

I: It's always been a little bit quieter other...

KD: Other than people and crazy rumors around town about how it happened, where it happened, ghost stories, lightning strikes, weird things like that.

I: Have you seen articles and more things appearing lately or is it just that one still?

KD: Well the museum is currently under construction, so it's being renovated by a grant from the state, so right now everything is locked inside of a storage container. There's really nothing to be said about it until your professor asked a couple questions and we opened up some of the archives that we had, and started doing a little research.

I: Do you plan to see that grow over the next few years, the museum and the subject itself in the museum?

KD: I don't know, it depends on who volunteers and what their direction is. The museum is led by volunteers, so the story they tell changes every month and we got a lot to talk about. Whether you are talking about the river, the river today is not how it was back in the 1900s, you know, or do you want to talk about the farming community, do you want to talk about the cows that used to run loose on our streets, you know there are so many different stories and that one may not be the fore front, it depends on the direction of the volunteers.

KD: Can I ask you guys some questions which might help you?

I: Yeah.

KD: Did your professor give you a background on this subject, do you understand what happened?

I: We have a small idea.

KD: Do you have questions about it that may help you with your, I know you guys have questions in front of you, but maybe if you want to talk about it, that may spur on some more questions or thoughts?

I: I know of the lynching itself and what happened, like how he was tortured and dragged through town, but about the actual court trials and about what actually happened I still don't really get that, if anybody was really convicted or not.

KD: I brought some stuff with me, if you guys want to do further research, it'll send you in the right direction. Have you ever seen the genealogy shows where they start talking about their history and they point people in the direction they can go do their research, very similar to that. I'm not going to give you all the answers, but I'll tell you enough to get you in the right place. As it turns out, you know the story of how it happened and the false assumption made by the town, so the woman who was involved was my great-great aunt, and so my great grandmother, which would've been her sister-in-law, told the story to my mother who is a poor historian, meaning she cannot remember all the details. Everything we

have left is just from writing, just what was said at the time. At the time, the gentlemen entered her house, into the kitchen, looking for a glass of water. And it scared her.

I: So he did enter the kitchen?

KD: He entered the kitchen. I have some documents that have that written for you, so you can see it. I believe it was probably hot, as it is in Florida, and it was a very tortuous time to work in Florida, there were palmettos and brush and whatever, and I'm sure he was just instantly looking for water. The fact is, he scared her. She had a small child with her, and even in today's time, if someone just walked in your house, that's a little unnerving right? She ran screaming, which led people to believe there was something far worse than had happened. And so that mentality of a mob... I'm sorry I look like a true professor...

I: It's fine. I did not know that she had a child and that he actually entered, I just thought that he just knocked her on the porch...

KD: Yeah but you have to remember that houses back then weren't houses like they are today. Kitchens were always added to the back of the house. Why? Because things that could make heat were not inside of the house, so they were usually added onto the back of the house. I don't know what her house looked like but that's how they were built back then. And they weren't fancy homes, they were really more like shacks. They weren't the safest as they can be. The mob mentality at the time took over and there's a little back story to the whole leading up to that so for months prior to that there was a lot of tension in the city. And it was related to jobs, and I think there was already this hate mentality that had been looming in the city and I think the screams that she had really just kind of heightened everyone's insecurity and fears and anger and it just took off from there. From there, after everything happened, which you're familiar about, there was a lot of people involved in it, a lot. There was a lot of people who tried to stop it. And the people who were involved in it were high elected officials in the community. And businesspeople and people who had great reputations and others who were low life reputation, you know, it was a mix. And during that time, the sheriff couldn't get an answer out of anyone as to who actually was taking part in it, there was so many. The ones who tried to stop it and prevent it, woke up to find blood and notes on their doors the next day. Basically, the gang had also threatened them that they would be next because during this time there was a lot of lawlessness, I mean people were shot regularly back then. And so, that's when the national guard was sent in, to maintain order in the town because the people who were trying to do the right thing were afraid that the people who were bad would overcome them. The trial itself, it was very hard to get someone to stand up, I mean there were people who testified, and they tried to make it right, but those who were involved no one was speaking out against another, so in the end, the coroner even couldn't come up with... I mean there was a lot of brutality (unintelligible) that they couldn't decide what actually killed him. So, it was very hard to pinpoint one person who did it. There was a burden of proof. Even though people witnessed what was happening, they couldn't prove who actually was responsible for his death. So, what I brought to you today, I don't know what you are going to get from Ms. Rider, are you guys interviewing her?

I: No, we are all in different groups so we are interviewing different people.

KD: Okay, so let me ask you guys a question: have you heard any rumors about this, or have you heard of any of this growing up?

I: I didn't

KD: This is all news to you, too, right? This is a little bit of a mystery because back then, we didn't have cell phones and great reporting like we do now. I mean, news didn't travel very fast. What I brought to you, this is from Judge Rider's journal, so he had journals at the time. After the fact, so Judge Rider, tried to stop what was happening, unsuccessfully. And I think one man against 30 men or however many were involved is a little unlikely to stop him right? Especially, you know, when they have guns and weapons and there's no law in town. So, you'll hear, if you hear anyone talking about it, they claim the hanging was done at the courthouse. And the reason that the clock in the courthouse stops is because it continues to get struck by lightning as...

I: The article says it keeps striking and then one day it crashed down into the judge's bench...

KD: Yeah, so you have a lot of ghost stories that people like to say that that's what happened. But in reality, from everything that you found throughout different sources, he was not hung on that property. The courthouse was not even built at the time. The courthouse was actually not even finished, it finished a year or so after he died. So, it didn't happen there. That kind of is a mystery to us as to where it actually happened and we kind of have an idea of where it happened. So, Judge Rider, in one of his memoirs, wrote that... so here they're talking a little bit about the tension in town. What had happened was, this was during the Great Depression, did you guys learn about that? *Grapes of Wrath*, did you have to read that book?

I: Like high school knowledge...however much that is...

KD: The Great Depression was when there was, we went through one recently, the Great Recession, where the economy failed. And people were starving, and they had no jobs, and they couldn't support themselves. And you saw a migration of farmers who, you know, couldn't work as farmers, they were looking for other jobs. When the city was being built, one of the promises in campaigns was that they would create jobs by offering roadwork. They were building roads, they were coming in and out of the town. These people could have jobs, they could help feed their families, have rent money, whatever they needed. People voted in these elective officials based on those campaign promises. Well, once the jobs were given out, they were given to contractors and these contractors brought their own crews in, so no one local got any of those jobs. And it just so happened that the people they brought in were African American. So that's sort of what started this whole aggression towards them. I honestly, I don't know anything I've read, nothing points that it was racial, it was just that they took their jobs. And they began to hate them because they took their jobs. And, so, this is just a little background where they're talking about the tensions were already high. And then here, he writes that he was hanged to a pine tree and his body was filled with more bullets, so he was hung from a pine tree, which back then there was a lot of them, but it says that it was just south of Labelle, so near courthouse. South of it would be behind it, basically. So, I mean, this is coming from Judge Rider, it wasn't at the courthouse, and now you hear the stories. This is the one where Ms. Crawford who would've been my great-great aunt and the lady who had complained, she claimed that he had done nothing, but that he had framed her. And she tried to, and there's other accounts of local papers that she had tried to stop the mob during the times, saying that, you know, this was a misunderstanding and all that. This out of the book, you could look at, and it has all where it came from. And there's another book that you can actually get in the Barron Library, have you guys seen this one?

I: No.

KD: This is written by a lady named Alisa Dewing and she went through and she summarized all the newspapers of the time about what was happening in town. And these are just a few of the papers that she had come up with. She was saying that during the election, which came up right after all this happened, was that those involved in it weren't reelected and so she makes a point to say here that Mr. Doty was an example. The lynching had taken place on a tree in front of his home, well Mr. Doty owned a business and a home across from the courthouse where the dollar store is right now. And then you have 20 acres all down Main Street where Missouri and what's those other streets...Lincoln all of those, so, he had 20 acres down there, he was building a subdivision. And there's another article I'll show you, this is the when he was dragged to the outskirts of town. At the time, the town ended somewhere before Cowboy Way. So, you know, that's kind of where that mystery is, where did it actually happen? And I know this may be one of your questions, a lot of the old timers I've talked to said that that it was somewhere near the Labelle drive through, from what they know of it. I mean we're talking about people in their 80's, you know from their younger days, that's kind of where they experienced it. Here's another one that says he was taken south on Bridge Street to a nearby subdivision. So, you know, when you hear the stories of the courthouse, it just didn't happen there. Everything that we're seeing in different places doesn't seem that. This is by Mr. Doty and here's some of the articles about what you were asking. These are from different newspapers that talk about what happened at the time and how no one was convicted because they couldn't claim it. Does that aid for some of the questions that you guys had or does it give you a little bit more?

I: Yes, definitely. It most definitely helps, quite a bit.

KD: You have in this town something horrific that happened. And you have people who tried to do the right thing and they tried to step up and say, you know, this is awful. Going back to my ancestor, who was the woman who was involved, as we started looking a little bit deeper, it turns out her first husband was killed and there was a lynching around that. So, this is something that, you know, I don't know, take it for what it is. This was his death certificate. She was born here on Fort Denaud, married this gentleman, and they moved up to northern Florida. And they lived near a state penitentiary at the time. He was a farmer there. Well he was killed somewhere around 11 o'clock at night. I don't know if someone broke into their house or what happened but he was killed. From that, the gentlemen who did it, he was African American, his family who was supposed to be hiding him, was taken out and lynched. Very unfortunate, right? She moves here to Labelle, restarts her life. All her family lives here. She remarries, has two more children. And then an African American man walks into her house. What do you think was going through her mind when she thought she had cleared this entire situation, she was moving on. I don't know. This is where I say my mom's a poor historian. Does she feel like there was retribution? Someone was coming after her? Did she just simply get scared?

I: I mean I would've been scared, if I see anyone just walk in the house, I'd get scared.

KD: But she went through something really traumatic, her husband was killed. And then the people were nothing to do with his murder, were retaliated against. So how traumatic is that, to go through that? After that whole thing she tried to stand up with this man and say that he didn't do anything wrong and the crowd pushed her aside. So, how many people in their life go through two traumatic events like this? This family, so now all these families have been disturbed. My family, and I know at the time she didn't stay in town after that. She moved to Fort Myers, probably I'm assuming for another fresh start.

Just to get away from what had just happened. This poor man's family, Mr. Patterson's, lost their relative and the people who tried to do the right thing in the years coming, they created a rift in the town. And there's a lot of articles that state that in our local papers. The politics got nasty after that and there was a divide in the town. I guess a question to you is if you have something that bad in your history, you think people like to talk about it?

I: I understand the older generations not wanting to talk about it because they could've been part of it but the younger generation might be, you know...

KD: We're curious right? The older generation, they didn't have diaries and I think they probably just said we're not going to talk about it and let it go, which is probably why I never heard about it growing up. I mean I never heard any inkling of anything bad that had happened here.

I: I understand.

KD: I mean is it something that, knowing that it happened, does it make you... how do you feel about it?

I: I mean it (unintelligible) part of our history and something that like didn't only happen here, once. It happened all over Southern America, even all of America. But that's very unfortunate that it happened.

KD: And the other questions, what happened to Mr. Patterson's body?

I: They say they don't know where his grave is, where they buried it.

KD: We don't know. I mean that's a question that, in no point... so during this time that this happened the gentlemen sought refuge at the local paper, which is now the *Caloosa Belle* but there were actually at Bridge Street way back then. And the editor in time did her best to block the door and try to save him and her door was beat down and they came in and they removed him and she shamed the town for weeks and months after the fact. She shamed them everyday in paper and she could, you know, she did the best she could. We only really have her voice to listen to in the paper as to what, you know, how we should be ashamed of ourselves and um I think that took a toll on a lot of people here as they realized how awful it was. And then not long after that, some of the people who were involved supposedly in this, left town.

I: Yeah, I heard that most, like, I think all African Americans got scared and left.

KD: And that was said in some of the articles that the work camps went down on lockdown, they were guarded. But I did bring to you a little timeline taken from the newspapers. And you have to apologize, there is the word, or I apologize, the word "negro", you know at the time that was the common nomenclature and I just simply copied it from the book. Today we would say African Americans so if you see that in the papers, it's just taken from the time. But this will guide you, if you want to go and find this book. You can see it sentence by sentence and read a little bit of the articles before. This is at the library. Basically, there was a club that was in town and I would probably guess that it was similar to a Rotary or some community club of that nature. And a year, maybe six months prior, they had recognized that there were a lot of hoodlums in town. You know, no-good hoodlums or up to no good. And they had come together and actually started talking about the protection of black workers even though, you know, these crews were brought in and took jobs. This group recognized that it wasn't their fault. They were simply looking for work just like everybody else was. And they deserved protection under the law. And about this time, Labelle had only been a city for a year. They really had no established law

department. They had an appointed marshal. They really trying to get their stuff together and this group was trying to help, you know, bring protection. And not only them, like these hoodlums are throwing rocks into peoples' windows and their houses, there was a band director who was Italian and he was here and there was that in the local paper that he had enough of the hoodlums on the street causing chaos and shooting off their guns, that he left for a while. You know, so it wasn't any one particular group, it was a lot. So, it's this kind of a timeline but here you see construction begins on the courthouse, this was in January 1926. At this time, you see KKK starting to come in and starting to have some talks in Labelle. That's something I never heard was ever here, in my entire growing up here. I never heard they had made an appearance. Um, but at the time they would come in and do some revivals and they were really revving up the negativity that was in town, so they were doing their best to stir it, which is what hate groups do right? Then their get together club addresses hoodlums, trying to do the best they can to address the bad elements in town. The corner stone was laid in the courthouse. The corner stone is just like a foundation piece where you put a time capsule and just stating it was laid on this time. And then there's just a little timeline of other things that happened like tempers are beginning to flare safety against hoodlums. You are starting to see there's that bad element in town.

I: Tensions are starting to rise.

KD: And you know a week later, the lynching happens

I: Okay. Do you think even if it wouldn't have been personally from your family, from your great-great aunt, it would've happened to anyone else, because of the tension?

KD: I think it was an unfortunate time. The fact that it was my great-great aunt is just coincidence that it was her. But you know, like I said, the one gentleman who had left, it was unfortunate that he had left because he was the band director. And at the time, that was a form of entertainment. They had dances, they had music, and they would get together in the park. And the town actually rallied around him and his partner to build them a building. He had a partner whose name was Guzman and they were making Cuban cigars and they were selling them. The town was actually raising money to have this cigar factory and then their band hall, practicing area, so the town was very supportive of him. And he just said I can't handle these hoodlums, I'm leaving for North Florida. He left for a while and the town lost their cigar roller, they lost their band, you know and it totally change the whole mood of LaBelle. You know that was their pep rally, you know their community orientation, and he's like I just had enough and left. I think that the lawlessness of the time, and the sheriff, you know and you can read all you want to know about the sheriff, you know there are questions as to his intentions, you know was he a good guy, was he not a good guy, you know he had that many professions. You know did he cover this up, did he you know do all he could? I don't know. You just have to meet that assumption for yourself. But did it have to go this far? I don't know.

I: Here is um, this is just another like, a few more questions or whatever, it's like, do you think that this event should be taught in history classes in LaBelle or do you think that it shouldn't?

KD: You know, that's a question I'm sure of. So, you know your professor and I had great conversations about the same thing. LaBelle has worked hard, I don't say that we're perfect but we worked really hard to be an inclusive community. You know when I was growing up it was tough if you weren't from here. You know it took a while for people to really understand you and your intentions and why you were moving here because like I've said earlier, we're all close knit, we're families, you know we're a

supportive community. There's just a little mistrust of outsiders, right? And, so, is it a reputation that we tried to live up to, is LaBelle being a family-oriented community, was this tarnished? You know I mean think about how horrific this event was. I mean horrific. And you think it would be something that would happen in a larger city or a more disorganized town. And it happened here, not even 100 years ago. You know and do you think that have we come very far? Have we done a good enough job of integrating communities or are we still there you know? And I don't know the answer to that. And your professor had a great view on it, which I'm sure he shared with you, and after hearing his perspective, I understand where he's coming from. You know in all of the communities where this has happened, we're one of the only ones who tried to do the right thing, by the individual. After the fact, Judge Rider reached out to one of the civic groups that were just forming at the time. It would be like the NAACP now but back then I don't remember what they were. And he went to them and said I want justice for this man and I want these people prosecuted. And they funded his prosecution. You know trying to get these criminals brought to justice. You know so that was one of the most uncommon things where people still try to do the right thing. And it wasn't...it wasn't just swept under the rug like this guy deserved it. It was people saying we want justice for this man. And till this day, if you go in front of the heritage museum, they've put bricks out in front of the museum. People have purchased bricks, you know, to support the building itself. Someone bought one in honor of him. His name is on a brick. People have actually tried to remember him and stand up and do the right thing so you tell me, you know, is it something that you know we look at as a blight on our history, black stain or do we do the honorable thing and we try to make it right. Do you think it's a conversation that someone would understand without knowing the context? You would have to teach the whole history of LaBelle or at least the lead up to it to understand its significance. And then if you're going to teach it, how do you move forward to make sure we don't repeat ourselves? Because that's obviously the objective of learning history, and so it doesn't repeat itself, right? The question is very debatable in a way. It is a difficult question. I mean maybe at your level, maybe its something at your level. But in middle school? Do you think that they would understand?

I: It maybe that, maybe high schoolers will probably get it. But I would think that towards the end of junior or senior year.

KD: without learning your rights and civil rights history, women's' rights you have to remember women couldn't vote. When my great-great aunt tried to stand up and do the right thing, she didn't have rights at the time either. Women's lib hadn't happened. You know, so I mean they were just coming into the right to vote. I mean she was also of that minority at the time.

I: Do you guys have other...

I: I just want to, like ask you one more question, have you heard like different versions of this story?

KD: So many. So many. And I want to commend your professor because I think he's got you going to different people because you'll hear those different versions. Had I not have done my research to know some of the stuff then I would probably just say it happened here or this and that. But I think you have to be truthful to history. And like I just said a few minutes ago, you have to know your history to it not to repeat itself. I think it's false to say it happened at the courthouse. You're tainting a building that has a great history to LaBelle so the courthouse was built because we were Lee County. Did you guys know we were part of Lee county? LaBelle was actually Lee county and the people who were here felt like we didn't have the representation that we needed. We were a different community. We were not Fort

Myers. And they fought really hard. They went to Tallahassee. They proved that we could be a great community on our own, we didn't need them. And then they fought to get a courthouse built, which at that time, during the 20's, it was in the Great Recession, or Great Depression excuse me. They got this thing built. You know so I mean they really worked hard to make this a county. And one of the speeches at the time, which you will find in this book, one of the gentlemen gave a speech saying years from now when people look back at Hendry county, they will say that we are this and we are a great community. And they truly believed that and they worked hard to get there. By tainting it with a story that's not true, I feel like is an injustice to it.

I: Alright well thank you so much.

KD: You are welcome. I'll leave all this with you and I wish you guys well and I don't know when your presentation is due. But this is a really good one to look at and I left you some newspaper clippings that I found. Maybe that will guide you. I have questions still of my own, so if you come up with them, I'd love to know. I'd love to know why my great-great aunt's husband was killed at 11 o'clock at night, did someone break into his house? This is an interesting story too, he was located near a federal prison, or state prison and they were doing turpentine farming back then. Well the turpentine farming was basically, um, contracted out to those prisoners, and the people who were doing it later came under investigation for illegally using prisoners to basically work camps. What was happening in these work camps was the prisoners were escaping. So, was he an escaped prisoner or was he doing something he shouldn't have been doing? I don't know. Where did they bury Henry Patterson's body? Where did that end up? You know where did it actually happen?

I: All very interesting questions.

KD: If you come up with those questions, I'd like to know. And, so, let me ask you guys a question, going forward what you've learned from this, how will you share the information? Will you be...tell your children? Will you tell your parents? Will you ask them, what do you know, did you ever hear about this?

I: I've been telling my mom ever since I started learning about this, I tell her everything.

KD: And did your mom grow up here?

I: She moved here when she was fifteen so around like the 1985.

KD: Okay, did she ever hear?

I: No, she's never heard.

KD: Okay.

I: My parents probably don't know anything about it because from Clewiston yeah... but I have told them.

I: We're not from here so we had no idea until recently.

KD: So, I would assume that you guys will probably be a part of our community, whether or not now. You know young people like to spread their wings, and they should, and go out into the world and come back. You know I guess think about what you will say, and how will you tell this story. I'd be interested to hear that.

I: I've been telling it to my parents when I go home. I've been telling them like we learned this really cool thing and then we told them about the lynching and how we're learning about it. Like when I first signed up for this class, I told them about it. And they were like why would you go on to take this class? And I'm just like because I like history.

I: I got judged like that too. I mentioned taking this course to my cousins and they're like why would you want to learn about that? Like why not? It's such a big part of history and like you know people still argue today, there are African Americans still being horribly mistreated and you know.

KD: Well the interesting I think I found is I read this book from head to toe and the reason I did is because all those original newspapers are being stored at FGCU in a controlled environment. So, there's access to them but you can't just walk in and read it like a normal paper. This kind of sums up what is happening and as you read this book, everything, not just lynching, everything that is happening in the town is happening today. And it's really interesting to see the history does repeat itself over and over and over. And when you start looking into it, you wonder is it just the way it is in politics or is it human nature.

I: That's an interesting way to put it.

KD: I will invite you to read it. I think your professor has it electronically and he can share it with you.

I: Yeah probably.

KD: But as you start reading it, you will see the things that happened are happening today. Arguments are the exact same. Promises the exact same. You know entertainment the exact same. How far have we come in 100 years?

I: Not very, apparently.

KD: Or maybe we have, maybe it is just that we had to make minor changes to our daily schedule. I don't know. But you guys are our future so you know the fact that you guys are understanding this now is very important. Because maybe it will change your interactions as you move forward in your life. You never know, one person you interact with, how that outcome will change their life. So, I'm going to go see your professor now, he just texted me.

I: Thank you.

KD: Thank you as well.