



## **Marvin Dunn Interview**

**Kathy Hersh:** This is March 9, 2017. We're interviewing Marvin Dunn for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs project. My name is Kathy Hersh. So let's talk about, I was interested in what you are talking about, about a lot of blacks actually owned plots of land on Miami Beach before it was developed. Can you tell us how that happened?

**Marvin Dunn:** Well, Miami Beach was isolated. You couldn't get out there. And there were white folks who owned land, great stretches of land on Miami Beach and in the attempt to clear this land, to clear the beach or the mangroves and all of that they had of course black workers. So a lot of white folks had a lot of land but not much cash. So it was not unusual for a black worker on Miami Beach to be paid by being given a lot or two for the work that he did.

So by the -- early 1900s, you had a lot of black folks with land on Miami Beach, owned outright, because they have been given them for pay for the labor. Then come Charles Fisher, Carl Fisher, and he developed Miami Beach, gets the causeway going out there, all of a sudden that land is no longer invaluable. It's very very very valuable and the blacks who owned that land lost it in the course of being convinced to sell it or otherwise trading it for land in Overtown, so the black ownership of land on Miami Beach sort of disappeared, but it was significant at one point.

**Kathy Hersh:** That is amazing.

**Marvin Dunn:** Yeah. It was not uncommon in the South for land rich white folks but cash short to give land to blacks for working for them. So after the Civil War you had a lot of black families that owned land, considerable amounts of land that had been given to them through labor.

**Kathy Hersh:** So even though there were some wealthy black men in Miami at the time Miami Beach was developed by Carl Fisher, they could not have bought a lot over there?

**Marvin Dunn:** Oh no, no, not so. Mr. Dorsey owned land on Miami Beach. Dana Dorsey, Miami's first black millionaire owned land on Miami Beach. He had owned land that he had bought from Julia Tuttle, Flagler. Mr. Dorsey invested in land from Key West to Fort Pierce, so you could buy it. You couldn't live on it or you couldn't just put a business on it, but yes, you could own land if you had the money to buy it. Folks will sell you land.

I, as a matter of fact, the deeds to a lot of his properties were donated to me by his daughter and are now in my archive in the FIU Libraries. His papers with Flagler, Tuttle, the Brickles, Carl Fisher, and others.

**Kathy Hersh:** So, would he lease it to businesses or flip it?

**Marvin Dunn:** Well, now basically the land was eventually sold to a developer as things areas were developed. Mr. Dorsey was a very shrewd businessman so he knew how to make the best of his land, but I think he also intended as a



part of his legacy to leave land for blacks or at least to donate land for schools and churches and what have you. So through his generosity and that of others like him you had black institution, churches and schools, and what have you, able to develop with the land that had been given to or sold very cheaply to black business people and black residents.

**Kathy Hersh:** Okay. So in trying to establish some kind of black experience at Miami Beach, we've interviewed 94 people and there's scant stuff to deal with, except employer relationships -- employee employer relationships.

**Marvin Dunn:** We'll keep in mind every city in Florida, and town that has the word beach in its name, all of them, had what they called him sundown towns. Meaning at sundown black people could not be in those towns. So from Daytona Beach, Vero Beach, Miami Beach that basically was how things worked. So you'd didn't have blacks owning land in these communities and unable to be even present after dark in places like Miami Beach.

**Kathy Hersh:** What do you know of any kind of agitation? Obviously there was Virginia Key experience, but on Miami Beach per se that was it just accepted that you weren't going to be able to go over there and enjoy yourself. You could only work there.

**Marvin Dunn:** I think that's how the beach, I think that's how Miami Beach was perceived. It never occurred to black people to go over and try and swim up on Miami Beach in the 1940s and 50s. The issue over Black Beach developed over Virginia Key, and not on Miami Beach. Miami Beach was a white bastion intended to be for white people. They intended not to have Jews out there actually in those early years and there was kind of an understanding in Miami Beach was not place for open for social experimentation. So black folks didn't really go over there until the burgeoning 70s, when hotels and what have you became available to blacks to go to the beach.

My mother, I had my mother's ID from Miami Beach. My mother was maid on Miami Beach. And she got a job in the 30s on Miami Beach and the police, the Miami Beach Police Department issued her her ID card that had her fingerprint on it. And in order for her to go and come on Miami Beach she had to have that card. Now some people told me later that even some in white employees also had to have cards to go on and off Miami Beach, but that was certainly of black employees and then the fact that they were issued by the police department with a fingerprint suggested that they were concerned about theft and honesty therefore they could track you down if there was some allegation that you took something where you worked or what have you.

**Kathy Hersh:** World War II brought about some changes in even predating what we know about the civil rights movement, but a certain attitude of I've served this country and I've experienced, well, you've heard the stories probably.

**Marvin Dunn:** Yes, yeah. That didn't impact Miami Beach, though. The fact that you had blacks coming in, going back after the Second World War, more active as

well, more determined to press for civil rights what have you. But those kinds of things happened around Miami Beach, Haulover Beach was where the black wait-in was held, I think 1947 blacks went up to Haulover Beach and had a wait-in as a part of demanding of Black Beach which ultimately led to Virginia Key Beach being made available for blacks.

But Miami Beach was not considered a target of integration, of desegregation efforts and by the time it really did get desegregated on Miami Beach, and Beach High had to accept black students from Overtown, it was bad. There had been so little interaction between blacks and whites on Miami Beach and Color Town by the time that they were forced to go together to school there were a lot of problems.

**Kathy Hersh:** Do you remember any of those specific incidents?

**Marvin Dunn:** Yes, I worked at -- when I came back to Florida in 1972 to work at FIU the first work I did had to do with race conflict in schools in Dade County including at Beach High and Edison and several other schools that were having serious problems. At Beach High it was the fact that black students coming in from Overtown were isolated, had difficulty competing, had problems getting to social clubs, there were issues over athletic participation, so they had a lot of problems and then of course black teachers and principals had lost their positions in the black schools because blacks now went to Miami Beach High so we had some real problems in the 60s and 70s with Miami Beach High School being desegregated. White parents simply would not send their kids across the causeway to go to school in Overtown so you had now this divisive issue in school attendance between white and black students in Miami Beach and Overtown.

**Kathy Hersh:** Was there an opportunity for -- where there school options then where a black students if they felt really discriminate against in going to Beach High could opt out and go back to the home school?

**Marvin Dunn:** Yeah. I think they had several attempts to allow school choice so that a parent could choose to not be forced to send their child but there were also mandated attendance levels at the court required. It couldn't just have all white and all black there had to be some integration shown. So that meant somebody had to be bused and essentially that meant black students being bused to white schools rather than the other way around.

**Kathy Hersh:** Of course, entertainers.

**Marvin Dunn:** Oh yes. Oh yeah.

**Kathy Hersh:** Could come in and black entertainers could entertain but they couldn't stay on the beach.

**Marvin Dunn:** They all came to Miami Beach. When the beach started accepting its role as a tourist destination they had every major black entertainer you could mention come to Miami Beach and perform and then go to Overtown to sleep because they weren't allowed to take rooms on Miami Beach and

that continued for a long time into the 1960s and early 70s.

**Kathy Herish:** The first story I heard of was Frank Sinatra insisting that Sammy Davis Junior stay at the Fountain Blue or Frank Sinatra wouldn't stay there.

**Marvin Dunn:** What happened?

**Kathy Herish:** Do you know anything about that?

**Marvin Dunn:** No. No. What happened?

**Kathy Herish:** Well, they weren't going to let Sammy Davis Junior stay there, and Frank Sinatra said he doesn't say, I don't stay and he stayed. They gave him a room.

**Marvin Dunn:** I had never heard that story.

**Kathy Herish:** That we've heard several times so I think it really is true.

**Marvin Dunn:** Yeah. It probably did happen, but as famous as Sammy was he didn't have -- having Sinatra on your side certainly didn't hurt him being able to break that barrier, but you know, I was -- I worked as a lawn boy on Miami Beach. My brothers and I cut grass on Miami Beach in the mid-to-late 50s. The first contact I had with Jews was on Miami Beach. I had been associated with white people from the South in Central Florida in Dade County now going over to Miami Beach cutting the grass at these hotels and people, in Jew's homes. I began to appreciate that there was a difference in Jews and other white folks.

Jews sent food home to my mother. They gave us presents at Christmas time. They refer to my father as Mr. Dunn. I had never heard my father referred to as Mr. Dunn by anybody coming up. So there was a certain amount respectfulness that I saw coming, and generosity frankly, coming from Jews on Miami Beach in the 50s when we are cutting grass in people's yards over there and what I also saw in other parts of the south that I had experienced as a young boy. I was always curious about that. Why are the Jews different? Why do they respect us a little bit more than what we see otherwise? I was a grown man before I appreciated the suffering and confrontations the Jews themselves had in their own right.

**Kathy Herish:** Any questions?

**Male 1:** Betsy?

**Kathy Herish:** Oh, the Betsy Ross Hotel.

**Marvin Dunn:** What about it? I never heard of it.

**Kathy Herish:** It's now called Betsy, and in the 50s they had the first black convention.

**Male 1:** That was after -- it was between '46 to '48.

**Kathy Hersh:** Forty-six to '48?

**Male 1:** Somewhere in that area.

**Kathy Hersh:** Okay. Sorry.

**Male 1:** Right after the war they still – they got the contract in '46 so they -- it's early on '47, '48 somewhere.

**Marvin Dunn:** The contract to do what?

**Kathy Hersh:** They had a black convention. A black Baptists or some church...

**Marvin Dunn:** Oh really?

**Kathy Hersh:** Or organization. And it was the first black convention to be held in a hotel on Miami Beach.

**Marvin Dunn:** Oh, all right.

**Kathy Hersh:** And we did an interview with the guy who was – his family was managing the Betsy Ross, it was called then. And they were a little concerned about security, but they had a bookie operation going on in the downstairs part of the hotel and they just asked them, the bookie guys who had Mafia connections said, no problem. And they did their whole setup in the lobby of the hotel.

**Marvin Dunn:** Oh.

**Kathy Hersh:** And some of them were armed. And they said if there any problems we're here. We'll take care of it. And there were no problems.

**Marvin Dunn:** I bet there were no problems. I didn't know that. I had never heard that story.

**Kathy Hersh:** Now, he didn't have any ephemeral or anything from that period. We would have loved to have seen something on paper about it but no, this came from the horse's mouth so very interesting.

**Marvin Dunn:** Believable.

**Kathy Hersh:** Very interesting. Anything else?

**Male 1:** I'd like -- I think I'd like to go to some of the jobs that were available on Miami Beach for blacks and...

**Kathy Hersh:** Right. Did you did your mother ever comment much about her work?

**Marvin Dunn:** Of course, every day.

**Kathy Hersh:** What kind of stories did she tell?



**Marvin Dunn:** Well, my mother refused to live on premises, as it was called, when a black woman would live with the white family. They come home on the weekend and then back on Monday. She refused to do that. She had five sons to raise. My mother always felt, and my father did too, that they couldn't show their -- what they had to white people. That my father liked nice cars. He like Buicks and at one point he liked Cadillacs and my dad was longshoreman. He had a union card. He had money. He could buy what he wanted. But when my mother would be brought home from her job on Miami Beach they would park the Cadillac across the street because my parents didn't want the white folks to know that they had a nicer car than was bringing my mother home. So I mean I found that -- move the car, move the car, mom is on her way home the white folks are coming so we'd move the car. Never let the white folks know what you have, my father felt.

Don't let them know that you have more than them because it will make them turn on you. So it's kind of an ethos that I grew up with, which really came out of slavery and when the Civil War was over a lot of black folks had clothes and things that were damaged by the war and some of them dressed better than the folks who had previously owned them. So there was a kind of a thing, don't let white folks know that you're doing well or they'll stop you from doing as well as you let them know that you are doing.

**Kathy Hersh:** Very interesting. Did she ever feel mistreated?

**Marvin Dunn:** No, I don't think my mother ever related to me an instance where she felt mistreated or disrespected even though she worked for a maid as some 20 years or so. She complained of being overworked. She complained of people checking behind her in ways that made feel she was not trusted. Like someone would put a dime under the carpet and then at the end of the workday if that dime was still there then Corinne didn't clean that room properly.

When we would be allowed to go to work with her or required to go to work with her we couldn't use the bathroom in white people's houses. You had to go outside or use the bathroom before you left.

And there was always something a little bit degrading about taking leftovers home. And we were not poor family, we weren't starving. But my mother never declined anything that was offered, also part of the ethos of the time. You don't decline anything they give you. If it's a rag you take it. Otherwise, it'll cause suspicions and then they will think that you think you're too good to take what they want to give you. So those kinds of psychological undercurrents in the relationship between whites and blacks were pretty common in the South, in Miami, in Miami Beach and in my own home growing up as a kid.