

Interviewee: James Atkinson

Interviewer: Claire Hunter

Transcriber: Susan Hensley

CH: I'm sorry, your name again sir was...

JA: Jim's what I go by, no middle name, no middle initial, well, James is given, but in the service you always have to put something down, so it's either NMI or NMN, no middle name or no middle initial.

CH: I'm Claire Hunter and I'm interviewing Jim Atkinson at the second annual block party on Saturday, May 20, 2006. Ok, Jim, can you tell us where and when you were born?

JA: I was born at Jefferson Hospital, 1929, July 7th, and my family lived on Maiden Lane, I think at that time, and then moved in 1930 over to Arlington Road, and I lived there through high school, college, Army, and the company I was with transferred me quite a bit, but when I retired I came back into the same house I grew up in.

CH: Really, on Arlington? Ok. Where did you live on Maiden Lane?

JA: I'd have to go back and look. I was less than one, so...

CH: Oh, that'll do it...do you have brothers and sisters that are still around?

JA: I have a brother and a sister; both are dead. My brother just died in April. He was 82. My sister died about, I think it was '97. She had an operation and caught a staph infection or something in the hospital, so.... She would be the expert cause she knew a lot more about the area than my brother and I, after we were gone so much.

CH: Were your parents born here or had they moved here?

JA: No, my father was born in Pocahontas, Virginia.

CH: Where's that?

JA: Tazewell County. That's where the famous Pocahontas Coal Mines are, and his father ran a hotel up there, and they moved down here when he was still in junior high, I guess you'd call it in my time, and he later became the Managing Editor to the Roanoke Times. And he had that job for 30 some years. And he's a graduate of Roanoke College. My mother was born in Troutville, and she worked for the City for a while, but I don't think she worked after they were married. Well, she worked but not in a paying job.

CH: Now, when you left, how old were you when you left? You said you were transferred with your job...

JA: Well, I finished high school in '47, Tech in '50 and I was in the Army three years until about '55, and I came back and I was here a couple years, and then transferred to Richmond and later on, from there, I went to Winston-Salem and back to the Richmond area. I was in all four of the localities in the Richmond area.

CH: Who were you working for?

JA: Graybar Electric and they were at 6th and Salem when I first started and Jefferson High is at 6th and Campbell, so I would just walk two blocks over to Graybar and get a ride home with a guy that was employed by them. I had to get a Child Labor Permit, cause I was only 15, and, so anyhow, 45 years later I retired from that same company.

CH: What brought you back?

JA: Well, my mother was in bad shape and she didn't want to leave the house, and my sister was taking care of her, and Mom was getting a little hard to get along with, and so I just took early retirement and came back to help out, but she died the day that I was retired, so I wasn't much help.

CH: But you're back here now. What were the changes that you'd seen? Were there big changes when you came back?

JA: Quite a bit. We used to play all over this area.

CH: Where the church is? This area?

JA: Well, I'm in the Cradle Roll of the church here. My picture's up on the wall down there somewhere, unless they've destroyed it, and I was telling somebody, I'm with the class of '47 at Jefferson, and I handle all the reunions and so forth, and so I borrowed that from them to take it down, and I think we had something like 7 to 10 people who were in that picture, that were still in Roanoke, went all the way through Jefferson. And, of course, I went to Wasena. Nell Walters, was my first grade teacher, and Mrs. Smith was the principal. And you wouldn't recognize the school now from what it was then.

CH: How different was it? What was it like then?

JA: Well, it was much smaller. And we would line up outside and they would ring the bell and we would march silently into the classrooms, and they also didn't have a cafeteria; didn't have a gymnasium. If you lived within a mile of the city, you had to go home and eat. And if you lived further than that, you could bring a bag lunch and they would let you sit with one teacher and a desk and eat. Then the 6th grade moved to Virginia Heights, but because it was crowded, they took our 6th grade and just put us at Woodrow in one house. I mean, one room, and so we didn't change when all the bells would ring and they started changing class, we stayed in the same room the whole time. Ms. Layton was our teacher that went with us from Wasena. And then I went to Woodrow officially in junior high, and played on the basketball team over there, and one of the players a year ahead of me was Jimmy Slaughter, who played All-American at South Carolina. And Louie McClellan was on the team. Charlie Williams...Charlie's had a stroke recently. And then from there, down to Jefferson and I was on their junior varsity basketball, but then when I started work, I couldn't do that, so I never went but that half a year, as far as that team was concerned. And Hump Hurt was the basketball coach. Mr. McNish was the coach over here at Woodrow and about two years ago, I went up to talk to him with Bill Shrader, who's also from this area, and he went to Roanoke High School in '23, was his class. His mind was just as sharp as it could be and he hauled off and named all the players, and so forth.

CH: Wonderful. What kinds of changes have you seen when you come back, outside of...

JA: Well, we had a lot of vacant lots, where we used to play ball. This was vacant over here, the one across the street where the apartments are, was vacant. Uh, some on Arlington, some on Greenwood. The City had already bought Shriner's Hill. That was going to be the high school, this was in the 30's, and they finally built it in '63, something like that. Uh, had the street cards, ran right up and down here.

CH: Oh, you did?

JA: Year, they turned around, didn't turn around, they just reversed in front of Patrick Henry up there, and that was a big sand box and they would get sand in the brakes.

CH: Where did they run, downtown?

JA: Yeah, they went down across Memorial Bridge, over to, I guess it was Patterson and on down that way, and big interchange was right there at the corner of Jefferson and Campbell, and uh, in front of the, why Grandin Road is so wide is, that's where the one coming from up here passed the one coming from town and that was a double track; and during Halloween, we'd wax the tracks out in front of here and they couldn't get traction on the thing. And let's see, and I was in Troop 2 here, which was Barney Haley was the Scout Master. His son's still around town, a retired dentist. He may be able to give you a lot more information on that.

CH: Have you seen big changes in Grandin Road? Did you used to go the library when it was down there?

JA: Yes, the little teeny one down there? Yeah, it was used then. The Community Inn was there, but it was another name. Of course, Grandin Theater was there. The barber shop was there. Bryce's Drugstore sat there where the alley goes down. The Lutheran Church was sitting right across the alley on Grandin, and then Kroger's finally came....they moved the houses back into the back of Dr. Kirk's house and put Kroger, that was the first big supermarket. But at one time, we had about five grocery stores in that area. And the one across, you know where the fire department is, well, that building there

was a grocery store. The one of the corner of, let's see, it was North? On the other side, but it was, it wasn't Maiden Lane, what was the name of the other one. Anyhow, that was one sitting on the corner.

CH: Westover, maybe?

JA: Yeah, it was Westover. And then where the restaurant and all is, that was a grocery store. Then, the one down on the corner was a grocery store, but the Kroger was the first one you would say was a supermarket design, and I think Mick or Mack was, I forget when they opened over on the street that comes down, Brighton, there. Uh, the cemetery was one of our playgrounds. It has a fence around a lot of it now, but then it was hedges, so you could go in there and play and, of course, it was always in good shape, and it was nowhere filled up as it is now.

CH: What was your fondest memory, outside of the trolley tracks on Halloween?

JA: Well, I would say probably all of the sports we played out in this area. We had a sandlot team over here at Woodrow. We had a baseball team and softball during the summer. Recreation Department, um, and touch football games on the vacant lots all over the place. And, we'd go to Shriner's Hill some, but it was pretty wooded then, and we'd cut down trees to put backboards on in the backyard and that kind of stuff, and we camped out over there some, but not much. And um, cause as scouts, we would go to the various camps that they had. I guess Troop 2 is still here, isn't it? And Dr. Robertson's son was in my class; John, I saw him at our last reunion; he lives up in Connecticut, somewhere up there. He was our State Latin Scholar.

CH: You have a wonderful memory.

JA: When I asked him, I said, did you ever use your Latin, he said, "No, I didn't", but he was, what was that Holiday Magazine, wasn't that a famous one? He was editor of that and then he was with the Reader's Digest.

CH: What about Arlington? Have you found that's changed a lot?

JA: Well, it's changed quite a bit. When I left, it was mostly, well a lot of people my age, and of course, as the kids left, the ones that were left were the older folks. My mother was one of them, and Dad too, and anyhow, they started subdividing the houses, you know, to rent them out to people, and so forth, and like I say, when I don't know when the trend started, but probably around the early '80's, then the young people started buying the houses and remodeling them, and um, because of the schools primarily. And, so it was, Patrick Henry came in later, when did it start, '63, '64, something like that? Lakewood Colony, the Lake Park, we used to ice skate on that when it would freeze over and...

CH: Now where is that?

JA: As you go down Brandon, in that City Recreation, and I remember we'd buy, of course I had an older brother and sister, so you got the hand-me-downs on the ice-skates cause it didn't freeze every year, but if they did buy you one, it was about two sizes too large, so it would last a few years. You wore socks leading up to it. And, let's see, I don't, uh, I carried papers starting at Grandin Road and Windsor. That's where I picked them up and I went up Windsor and all the way down Arlington and over on Center Hill. Center Hill was only that little hump there, and I had Dr. Johnson lived on the road that's now filled up, and the old Persinger place, so I'd have to go through the field there to get to those two houses, and one thing I remember is, see I'd be on Brandon for a while, and you'd always, not always, but you'd see hearses coming through there; apparently that's when they transported the bodies between the different places. And they were, see it was 11, and they would, if they would see somebody, they'd stop and ask for directions, but that was, uh, I remember that the hearses all the time; I guess they wanted to travel at night for reasons, but anyhow. I did that for about three years and the hardest part of delivering papers is collecting.

CH: Some things probably don't change.

JA: The wife would be at home and she's like 'He's not here now. He'll be here after 5. You'd go back at 5, and then they weren't there and so forth. That was really the hardest part, and I think it was a quarter for the six days, plus the Sunday paper.

CH: Now, given that your Dad was so involved with the paper, what were the biggest events you remember, growing up? Were there really big historical events?

JA: Well, it was WWII, and of course, we had a lot of boys killed from this area. I delivered papers to about four of the houses that had sons were killed. Uh, and the big news was the war, from '41 on. I was in the service during the Korean War, but never left the states. And I remember going to the stadium when it was first dedicated. And the VPI/VMI game was a real big deal then. They would play on Thanksgiving Day and then all the stores would be open, start their Christmas stuff, and people would come from all over the place; Southwest Virginia, Richmond, Norfolk and so forth, and of course, that was the big game and the people from the newspaper in Norfolk and Richmond and Washington all covered it. And so there was gas rationing and meat rationing and sugar rationing and all that stuff during the war, but it was never a big hardship, I mean, you could always find something. You couldn't get tires and you couldn't get gas except the amount that was on the card. The thing that was unusual, we would go to Jefferson and we would come over to the corner down here, and people would stop and pick us up. This was back in the days when you thumbed everywhere. I went across the country three or four times when I was in the service and you wouldn't do it now, but they'd pull up and four or five would pile in the car and off you'd go and you'd still have ten left and the next car's pick up some more, and take them on down, because just about everybody worked downtown then, and so it was no problem getting a ride to school. When I was at Woodrow, I belonged to that; I don't know what you call it, that health club, the Fitness Room. Well, and Woodrow has really changed. We didn't have a gym and we didn't have a cafeteria over there either.

CH: When you say, it's changed, was it primarily the size?

JA: It's the size primarily. Well, and you go over there and there's 50 computers in the place, and we didn't know how to spell computer then, so.... And, the park was, we had days when we'd go by and pick up the glass and metal off of the field, cause it was filled in to make it level, you know. And of course, it worked its way up to the top and that sort of thing. And Raleigh Court football team was very successful and Virginia Heights, well I never got there, but Norwich was down the hill; that was a pretty rough area then, so you stayed out of Norwich. And when you got up to about where the English Garden Apartments are, that was the end of the road and on the field there, at Woodrow, the guy owned Lakeview Motel and everything, Ingram, was that his name? But anyhow, that was orchards and horses and stuff like that. And the area over here after the first two blocks of Avenel and the other one that was farm land. I think Mr. Adams owned that later on. The asphalt paving man. And, let's see, the Grandin Court area stopped right there too, at what is now, there was no Carlton then, as I recall. One thing that has always amused me about it is, our phone number is 342-6879 and I think it started out as 789 and all they did is add on because Dad had, was with the newspaper, we had a private line, which was unusual then and so a lot of the neighbors didn't have phones; they'd come to use the phone, and oh, I don't recall too much exciting going on. If we played one of the other parks, we'd get there the best way we could. Our parents didn't take us in the car. We'd go on bicycles or thumb our way over or something like that.

CH: Are any of the people you talked about, some of the older people on Arlington, are any of them still there? Are you still in touch with them?

JA: No. I used to kid Mother that people didn't move much then, so the Aldrich house or the Smith house or whatever, that's the way you referred to it. And I was at a funeral one time and a lady living down the street in the Aldrich house, and I was telling somebody that she lives in the Aldrich house. And she said, "I've been here for what, 20 years, and it's still the Aldrich house." That's the way you referred to all of them then, and I don't think there's a single old timer still alive, cause, see I'm 76, so they would have had to be 20 years older, and uh, we're getting a few older ones now. I might be the oldest one on the block, I don't know.

CH: Where are you on Arlington?

JA: 1855; it's almost dead center. Do you know any people over there?

CH: Not names, but we moved here two years ago and we looked at houses there. My brother lives on Greenwood so we know the area.

JA: Well, you know where Nat Patterson lives on Greenwood?

CH: Yes.

JA: Ok, well Nat was with me through all of this stuff. And he used to live in the house at the corner of Grandin and Brandon. That's where he grew up and he had a huge house and we could play basketball in his attic. His grandmother didn't like it, but anyhow, if you went directly out my backyard, you'd run into Nat's house on the other side of the street, and that was a corner lot there, at Shirley and Greenwood. What's the yellow house, pretty nice looking one still. And, let's see, where was the other one? They didn't have as many. Greenwood was developed before Arlington, and of course, the development was cause of the streetcar, that's the way, they put the streetcar in and the developers would come because not many people owned cars then.

CH: What, the streetcar basically went up Memorial and over on Grandin?

JA: Year, it came across Memorial Bridge. That was Virginia Avenue back then, and I think my original address was 555; it's now 1855. When Roanoke annexed around '47 or '48 the Williamson Road area, well they had to rename some of the streets cause they had duplicates. I think that South Roanoke had a Virginia Avenue, see, so that's when it became Memorial, and of course, the bridge was to memorial the WWI, and the one I like is out in Grandin Court, uh, Livingston Road was originally Stanley.....Stanley and Livingston. And if the guy, Hildebrand was the City Engineer, and he hired a bunch of the boys from Tech to go over and start renumbering because the 555 didn't mean anything. Now I'm 18 blocks from the middle of town, see, so they did all that, I think before 1950, or right around that time. And they left your last two usually, but instead of the 500 block it was the 18. And let's see, like I said, I left here in '55, and I was back here for a while and I lived over on Fairway then, and I went to Harrisonburg from here, and I went to Richmond, and then to Atlanta, and then back to Richmond.

CH: You just kept coming back.

JA: Oh, yeah, see when Mother and Dad were still alive, it wasn't that bad a thing. And when I was covering the Shenandoah Valley as a salesman, I went all the way up to Front Royal and US 11 was that famous three-lane thing. And we didn't have the interstates then. I think they may have had part of it before I left up there in the '60's, but, so that was a thrill. And, you talk about something that's changed now, go down 11 now and look at all the old places that I used to know are boarded up and closed on the thing. Around here, I.....Oh, one thing that I would like to ask somebody to tell me, everybody refers to Woodrow Wilson as Woodrow; they never say Wilson and I wonder why. So I've asked people that have their high schools as Woodrow Wilson, and they say, no, we call it Woodrow Wilson. And I ask them, "Do you ever just call it Woodrow?" and they say "No, I don't think so. It's just always Woodrow Wilson." But anybody that ever went there never called it Wilson. Just Woodrow. And, so I don't know if we should call Jefferson, I guess Thomas. I've got, I was telling a girl, I had the memorabilia room down at Jefferson. I helped set that up and we have plenty of good photographs that they may want, because Jefferson started in '25; that was the first graduating class and we go all the way back through 1896 on Roanoke High School, I think. The first class that graduated from Roanoke High School was all girls. I think it was twenty some of them. I've tried to ask and find out why and the only thing I've been able to come up with is boys went to work them and if you were from a rich family, they sent you off to a private school, so, not a single boy in the graduating class. Wasena Bridge was built in my lifetime. The other was a wooden structure. Memorial Bridge, part of that was still there. What used to be a filling station sitting down there, where right before you go across the bridge where Deyerle or Driscoll, Driscoll, I think it was. And that big stone house that's beautiful, I once knew who built that thing, but they didn't stay there long. That should be preserved. That's quite a house. Old man Tudor, that owned Magic City Laundry there, his sister, lived next door to me, and he couldn't read or write. And he

owned the ice plant and the laundry and everything; he could count money, but he came up from Franklin County I think, and never went past the 2nd or 3rd grade. And his sister was educated and then one of his brothers lived there too, in that house.

CH: This has been so interesting. You know what I'm going to ask because I know; I think the group that's doing this would probably like to come back to you with more questions. Would that be ok?

JA: Yeah.

CH: That would be great because I think that you're just a wealth of information. It would be just....

JA: Like I said, I was around the area, and at that time, you stayed in the area.

CH: Uh-huh. Absolutely, you didn't move around, except it sounds like you moved around.

JA: Well, that was later on, though, and Graybar it's now at 12th Street, the branch here.

CH: That's terrific. Would you mind if I took a picture? Just a quick photo because they've asked us to. Just take photos of everyone that we can.

JA: I volunteer down at the History Museum quite a bit, just on the desk. Of course, I know George Kegley really well, everybody does. George worked for my dad for 30 years, I guess. There's Helen Chewing who is Judge Fitzpatrick's wife. She worked for the newspaper back in the early '40's.

CH: That's terrific. It's interesting how many people; I have a neighbor whose husband works for the paper now. I think he's in the production end of it, though. But this has been just so helpful, really, and we're really glad that you came in.

JA: The little girl I was talking to said she's never been to the Memorabilia Room at Jefferson, and I told her to give me a call some time and I'll take you down there and open it up for you.

CH: I think that's great. You know, I think there's probably all sorts of things like that around, and I think this is a sort of concerted effort to try and.....

JA: Well, that's where we've got the good pictures because every high school had a photographer assigned and he had a good camera. As a matter of fact, the one from the class of '46, Simms that just died, he was the photographer for the class of '46 and he furnished me with a lot of pictures and I just wonder what his wife's going to do with all of those pictures. She was in my class in '47. Her name is Virginia. I'll call and ask her.

CH: That would be great to know because I know they're really working on building up the Virginia Room down at the library and I think they're really....

JA: The Virginia Room needs about three times the size cause it's a real asset to the city. I love going down there and just looking around.

CH: Well, I've only been here two years, and my husband is really into history. And until I did, I didn't know about it; I just didn't know about it.

JA: Is your husband involved with Civil War history?

CH: A little bit, yep.

JA: He ought to come to our Civil War roundtable. We have probably 150 members and we have speakers every month and it's Friendship Manor Recreation Building, and we average 60 to 100 people attending. And Dr. Robertson, Bud, he talks to us at least every other year. And, as a matter of fact, I'm going to one of his classes up in Staunton next month. He has a week-long thing that I've been going to for some time. But if he likes history.....Incidentally, I guess it was the Morning Show today, some little town in Pennsylvania, and the guy asked what's this town famous for, and the guy answered, "We had a general in the Civil War." And the guy asked "What was his name?" and he said "Anthony Wayne, or something". That was Revolutionary War. He didn't know it and she didn't either so it didn't make any difference.

CH: How did you get so interested in the Civil War?

JA: Well, um, I guess I've been interested in it forever. My dad was quite good at history and so I guess I got it from him, but he wasn't too much into the Civil War, as a matter of fact, when I got in the Sons of Union Veterans, I found out my ancestors fought for the North, which is not too good, you know. But,

and by the way, that guy just died, who was heading it up. I don't know what they're going to do now. I didn't attend that one too regularly, but I sent them money cause I think they had 15 members. Bob Eck headed the thing up, and I think he must have taught at one of the schools. His wife's a nurse out at here Brambleton Clinic, but I don't know what's going to happen to that one, but the Sons of Union Veterans of which I'm not a member of, they are more into griping than they are into history. There's always something going on that they're trying to correct. Now the guy that heads it up has done a great job of keeping a lot of the rednecks quiet, and the reenactors, I don't deal with them. They have a lot of fun, and they're history conscience as far as food and stuff like that, but as far as knowing what the Unit did or anything like that, they're not too good at it.

CH: Well, it's been wonderful talking to you, Jim. So thanks so much.

JA: Well, I've enjoyed talking to you and if there's anything that you want to pin down, I can, like I say, I volunteer at the History Museum, and I usually go back and get two or three directories out and try to verify where people lived and so forth, that kind of stuff. And it's very interesting. I think they go back to 1890 something. Matter of fact, I found my grandfather. He was living at the, what later on became Clover Creamery. It was a boarding house and the dairy and so forth, and there's a Knights of Pythias; it's right there at the corner of Franklin and Jefferson, and they own the building, and they're on the third floor. And I went down there to follow up on some of the stuff and it's.....they're not very active, but they've got a bunch of stuff that somebody ought to get their hands on and put in the Virginia Room because all the dignitaries in Roanoke at one time were presidents or chief council or something to that degree.

CH: Well, thank you very much, Jim.

JA: Did you say you're over on Maiden Lane now?

CH: Yeah. We really appreciate your coming by.

JA: I used to know a bunch of people over there, but it's a new crowd over there now.

CH: It is, but you know, it's interesting that six months after we moved in, a woman knocked on the door and they were up visiting and she had grown up in the house. So we had this long weekend with her and actually, I'm going to contact her about this.

JA: One of the ladies that moved in across the street said that that was the Hyman's house and she said that some girl knocked on her door and said I used to come here and visit my grandmother and she said she showed her around and while she was digging in the back yard, what do you call it, friendship bracelets, found one from one of the boys that lived there.

CH: Thank you, Jim.

JA: Ok.