

Interviewee: Gloria Jean Coan
Interviewer: Michael Blankenship
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

MB: My name is Michael Blankenship and today I'm interviewing Gloria Jean Coan. Is that the correct way to pronounce it?

GC: Yes, Coan, C-o-a-n.

MB: This is September 30th, and we are doing this interview at the Roanoke Public Library. Is it Mrs. Coan or Miss?

GC: Let's just say Miss, OK?

MB: Miss, OK. Miss Coan, where were you born and when were you born?

GC: I was born in Roanoke at the Berrill Hospital. Berrill Hospital at the time was the only place that an African-American could go. Roanoke Memorial was there and it was smaller but they didn't allow any African-Americans at Roanoke Memorial.

MB: When were you born if you don't mind us asking?

GC: I was born in 1950.

MB: How long have you lived in Gainsboro?

GC: Well, Gainsboro was sort of like – even if you didn't live in that area, it was the section where everything went on, you see. But, I went to junior high school and it was named Booker T. Washington Junior High School. Its still there but its an administration building now. But that was a junior high school then. And its one of the oldest buildings. I know that it was named after Booker T. Washington and it had a graveyard in back of it. The graveyard was really something because a lot of sunken graves were in that area at the time. So I think when Lincoln Terrace and all of that area was built over graves of – I don't know whether they were Black-American graves or White graves or what but they were built over graves. And another place that was of interest was the Black YWCA and that was the best thing - That was one of the Meccas there because it was a little marvel for black kids to go and they could do things and they would learn 'em things, things that happened overnight like I went over there and had those things where you stay overnight, you know. And it was really cool and so – Down the street a bit, that's where you would find the library that was the Gainsboro Library. At the time, that was the only library blacks could go to. We weren't allowed at this one. And so everybody would go to that particular library not wanting any trouble, you see. 'Cause they wouldn't allow them in that library. In fact, they wouldn't allow us in certain schools like Jefferson. Now, Flemming hadn't been built but I think they just had Jefferson then because that was the white school and so Addison, which was built for black people. Now this was the only school that wasn't a hand-me-down school. Loudon was a hand-me-down school. When the whites moved out, the blacks would move in and that school was not, you know – and they would give us their old books, you see. These old books and their old tables that we would sit at. And often, we were really mad because these tables had things that was written on 'em and scratched on 'em. They were nasty, had gums on back – The books were all scratched up and you couldn't half read 'em but that's the only books that we had, you see. So, I think it made me kind of angry. It made a lot of people angry. We wanted one school that was totally black built and new. So my mom was telling me that the whole community would get together and they would bake pies, they would sell everything they had, yard sales and everything, to get the government to go half in what they could raise to build Addison School. It was the Mecca of the black community as for schools and they had the Addison Bulldogs. That was our team and I'll never forget the team. I always would wear a bulldog tag on my shirt because I loved them. They were so good. Now the black team had all the best black players and the white teams didn't. So, the thing about it – when they would come up against the Bulldogs, the Bulldogs would mow them down. You see what I mean? Because they had all the best black players. And the white – it was the white coaches who really pushed for integration because they wanted those players. They wanted those players bad. So when they had the civil rights movement,

them coaches were right in front, “We want those players”. (laughing) And so when they built Flemming, that was the only totally integrated school. Then the white coaches got those black players. They did everything to get them in Flemming but a lot of them wanted to stay with the Addison Bulldogs because then when they got the black football players, that's when they really started winning. I remember like we would go downtown, I think that the Jefferson Theater – That was a theater that they wouldn't let blacks in so we had our own theater called the Virginia Theater. You might remember it. Now the Virginia Theater was really cool. It had all the things that we would want to go to and everything like that. But the Mecca really was the Dumas Hotel and Fats Domino and they came to the Crystal Towers one time and I remember people were talking when big Fats Domino came there. He was it! When they had him at the Dumas, I think the blacks were in control of that 'cause Fats, he didn't want to play at any white place, “The only place I will play is at an integrated place”. This man had – everybody loved him, white and black wanted Fats. So he went into the Dumas Hotel, so they made a deal, they said the whites could go there on the rope part but the blacks would be there. You know what I mean? (laughing) But they would not allow them – The blacks would not allow them to sit in the chairs to watch Fats Domino because that's the way they did them over the years so they wanted to get back at them so they made them do that rope thing like they'd been doing them. And when that Fats Domino showed up, it was just like the sky rounding up (??). That's what my momma said. And that mad could sing and the whole town would buzz about that man even years and years later that he came. And another one who came was Cab Calloway. (laughing) The Cab was good, you know! I mean, everybody loved that man but either – you wouldn't understand if you wasn't there. But when Cab Calloway came to the Dumas, oh, it looked like the world had come apart because that man was the best singer and mmm that New York or any place had produced. And he was a really good entertainer. So when Cab came there, he went to Dumas. He said he would not play for a segregated audience. It had to be integrated, the same thing that Fats said. And so all those whites wanted to be in there, they just took, when he came there they was gonna mob Henry Street because they were going to see him, you know, Cab Calloway, ain't no way they gonna keep them out there. (laughing) The Dumas said, alright, you let 'em in, we'll integrate this thing and we gonna sing and you gonna hear Cab. And Cab he went – Oh, Lord, he went on all night. Now my mom seen this, she was there. And she said that was the biggest thing in the world when Cab Calloway came to Roanoke. Now these some of the things that mom had said to me. Because, it was something. I remember going on Henry Street as a girl. It wasn't bad then. You had hot dogs and you could go to the Virginia Theater. But beyond that point, that was it. Nobody went beyond that point because they know if they go downtown to Jefferson, they wasn't gonna let you in unless it was in the balcony. And a lot of 'em said, “I'm not sitting in that balcony. Either you let me in or you don't”. But we got all the best pictures at the Virginia Theater. And it was the Mecca. And they had barber shops, a lot of good businesses there and a matter of fact, the railroad used to come through there. The railroad used to come through Roanoke and they had the passengers would get out around about Henry Street, you know, that's where we'd get out and a lot of times the soldiers, there were a lot of black soldiers that would get out there too and they'd come right on up there to Henry Street and they would spend gallons of money. So, because all that money those soldiers spent on Henry Street, it was the most popular street there was. And there was nothing the white people could do about it because that was the established Gainsboro area. And so I think when those passenger trains stopped coming, that's when Henry Street fell off a little bit. And then, I think the town leaders at the time, they were Dr. Claytor. Dr. Claytor was the only town black physician and he set the standards for everybody and his family was the greatest family there was. Everybody loved them, you know. Then there was the – I think he's dead, I'm not sure, but the funeral home – What's the name of that funeral home? (mumbled)

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MB: The Phizer?

GC: No. (pause) I don't know how it escaped my mind. But anyway, that funeral home -

MB: Williams?

GC: William Memorial? No, William Memorial was there though. It wasn't that one it was the other one. All my people buried there. But anyway, William Memorial did play a part but all the elite, the lawyers, the doctors and everyone when the time would come and all of the stuff was over with, they came and integrated Woolworths because they wasn't allowed to sit. They would take their dollars now but they weren't allowed to sit in the section where you eat at. So when the big ones showed up, I don't think no police would dare arrest them because they knew that these people were so ingrained in the black community they thought that there would be a riot if they touched them. So, they ate and they ordered things and then when they got through, everybody was eligible to eat at those lunch counters. And then that Mayor Taylor came along and he was the sole – Whatcha call it? – He had such charisma, you know. That man had so much charisma. And he became mayor about around that time. Like when all this stuff was going on, I remember sitting at the little TV set – you know the television used to be black and white – and all the news would have those things on - stuff like “The Eye On The Prize” - but when I was a kid, I was looking at it first hand, you know, not second hand – and it kind of scared me. It scared me so bad that I used to not want to walk to school. See, I had to walk all the way from Hanover maybe 5 or 6 blocks to get to Booker T. because they didn't have school buses for us.

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MB: Did you grow up on Hanover?

GC: Yeah, I grew up on the 1000 block of Hanover. That little house there – It was an all black neighborhood but they did have white people there, you know. But the thing about it is, it was Lakeside. Lakeside was a segregated place when I was growing up. Can you imagine a kid wanting to go to a little amusement park and they wouldn't let you? So I guess the white kids on the block would go to the amusement park like Lakeside and they'd come back and tease us, right? So my brother would just beat 'em up. (laughing) There'd be a big fight. And my mom said, “Well if you're gonna throw the stuff in their face, what you think they gonna do to you?”. So, the fights stopped and everything. But at the time, it was segregated. But the first time it became integrated, they started integrating Lakeside and my mother got a job there. 'Cause my mother worked at Lakeside, my brother worked at Lakeside and all these people worked at Lakeside, we could go in and ride free. So the thing that was formerly segregated then, it was just like a Mecca. But the thing about it is, what made Lakeside Park was a big swimming pool. So rather than - they had the biggest swimming pool almost in the South. But rather than let those blacks and whites swim together, they took and cemented the whole swimming pool over, you see. But it was really good.

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MB: You mentioned your brother, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

GC: I had 1 sister and 2 brothers. One brother is deceased and the other one became a Marine. And he spent 20 years in the Marines as a drill sargent. Then he went to school to become a teacher. Now he teaches some kind of history. He teaches History, Government and things like that. And my sister-in-law teaches, she's a drill sargent. And their kid is now in the – April, my niece, she's now a Marine Lieutenant. And I guess maybe she'll go to Iraq, I don't know. But she's got a job in the accounting department and she trained at Quantico, Virginia.

MB: Who were your parents?

GC: Lily Mae Coan. She used to work on Henry Street and when – That's before she got married and my daddy was in the Army. He stayed in the Army like 2 years and then he came back and I think that's when she had Carolyn and she had Carolyn at Berrill because she was the oldest but no baby was ever born at these other hospitals. I think when I had my child Angela, it was at Roanoke Memorial. Everything had changed then. And so it was really something.

MB: Did you have any other family members that lived nearby?

GC: Hmmm. No, I didn't have any family members that lived nearby but I had – We had moved – My parents had moved to Roanoke – My mom was in – She moved to Roanoke from North Carolina. She

lived in Durham. She was born in Durham. Her mother was a Native American Indian and her father was named Charles Austin. He was a contractor. I think my mom came from a very wealthy family because – I don't know whether to say this but – Anyway, her great-grandfather, Sciro (??) was the master's son and in his old age, he took care of him. And because of that, he left him so much land that he was considered very wealthy. He left him the land and just about everything that he could leave him except the house. And so he owned everything down there and he became a very valuable contractor and when they built Duke University, he was the one that built it. He did the architect work on it.

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MB: And what was his name?

GC: His name was Sciro, Sciro Austin. And so he did all the contracting work in that area so he was very wealthy. So my mom came from a considerably wealthy family but her mother was an Indian, a Native American Indian. But when he died, Charlie Austin who was the great-grandson of Sciro and was a contractor, he became an alcoholic. He couldn't take it, you see. And that's when the family went downhill. But my cousins down there, they're still very wealthy people because of Sciro. But I've been there and I've visited and they have beautiful homes and things like that in the country. One of my cousins, Frank, he had a big old farm down there. It was something. But my daddy came from West Virginia. I went into the Virginia Room and I traced his family back to 1850. They were named Susan and Robert Woutin (??). I think Woutin (??) is a Native American name. But there was probably some Native American on my father's side too. OK, I'm getting off the track here. (laughing) Anyway, they decided on Roanoke 'cause she didn't want to live in North Carolina anymore and he didn't want to live in West Virginia or any of those places, Ridgeway, or wherever he came from. So they moved to Roanoke and that was about 1947, right after the war, World War II. And so, that's where I grew up from 1950 when I was born here. But when I was born here in Roanoke, you know, it seems like I went through a normal childhood but my parents, they were the first one to own a TV on the block. It used to be radio. I think radio, when they had John, you know - what was his name? - Joe Lewis. Joe Lewis wasn't born in that time but my mother said he had an uncle who was in World War I and in World War I, my uncle, he was a veteran, he was a doctor and he worked in – he was a medic during World War I. He operated on patients and everything during World War I. So he was a doctor. But he had cracked up during the war and became kind of – What do they call that name? - Shell shocked! And he had a great big beautiful car.

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[Interruption by Alicia Sell with discussion about taking a picture.]

MB: If you could tell me about the house you grew up in. What sort of house was it?

GC: It was a two story house on Hanover and it was yellow and we had a big backyard.

MB: Did you have a garden?

GC: No, my mother wasn't into gardening at that time. But the thing about it is, we lived on Loudon, they did have a garden there in one big house. The house is torn down now but it had grapes and all that kind of stuff and my mom did a lot of canning. She knew how to do that old type of canning that would last a long time and stuff like that. And they said the house was haunted. It was really funny. (laughing) But -

MG: Why did they say it was haunted?

GC: Because it used to be a white person used to live there, a white family, and they said that the man had cracked up and killed the whole family or something. And then nobody would rent the house, you see. So my mom liked the house so much she said, she used to go, she talks to 'em everyday but she said she would rent the house. And so when we went into the house, you know, things, strange things did happen there. And one time, you know it would rain, it was raining all the way and my daddy was in the house. At the time, he always kept a gun up under the bed, under the pillow, and my mother didn't like that idea but she said you have to. So, when it was raining real hard and then somebody banged on the door real hard and so he went down there and he opened the door and he said it was a

white man who was drenched and he said that, he said the "N" word. He said, "N', get out of my house. This is my house and I don't want you living in it". Or something like that. And he said, "OK". And then he shut the door. "You stay here", he said. And then he went upstairs and got the gun with the intention to shoot the man but by the time he came down real quickly, he was running, the man had disappeared. And so he told the landlord and the landlord said, "Well you know, I told you the house had ghosts and you signed a contract so you got to stay there anyway". So we stayed there a year and all kinds of strange things. So my mom invited some guests to stay there overnight and so they stayed there overnight and then when she went to, when everybody went to bed, they said, the woman said, "Let that child", she was talking to me, I was a child at the time, said, "Let that little baby girl sleep with me because they say if you have a child with you, the ghost won't bother you". So, it was raining again and it was soaking and everything, the ground was soaked. And then, all of a sudden, there came a banging hammering on the door and the lady went down to the door to see who it was, right? And then all of a sudden, the door, you know, they seen the white people at the door, saying, "We're gonna get you. We're gonna lynch you". And stuff like that. And by the time she ran back upstairs to get the gun, they were gone and then she had a nervous breakdown and her and her husband ran out in the middle of the night in all that rain and they would not come back.

MB: That's really interesting. What kind of work did your parents do?

GC: My daddy worked for the city. He was a, you know, where they collect garbage. But a garbage collector then when everything was segregated, it was the biggest job in town because you couldn't do anything. (laughing) You had to be limited. You had people who did things in their house like some people had a house where you go for food. So when the men come off the work, they would fix the food for the men and they ate the food, you know. Everybody did their own thing. Like on Henry Street, they did the little restaurants but everybody had their own little illegal thing. Like they had one man who would clean up other people's houses for a certain amount of money. And one black man would do this and one black man would do that. But at that time, they patronized their own people 'cause they knew they couldn't get jobs anywhere else. So in the community, they had their own jobs. They patronized everybody and they wouldn't hire a white person. But if you had to move, we had a certain person who did the moving. So they patronized that black person who did the moving. If a person, a black person was selling ice cream, they patronized that black person selling ice cream. And by patronizing their own people, it was guaranteed that everybody had a way to make a living.

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MB: What sort of work have you done throughout your life?

GC: Well, I think - I like to write plays. Of course, none of them have sold right now but I'm still working on that. I'm writing a book. I've got to do it over for Doubleday because they want it done properly. And I worked at Bailey's Cafeteria for a while and I liked that. _____ (??) and S&W. I worked at S&W. Then, I went to Richmond during the depression, got me a job at Hot Shots. But I did mostly food work. I worked at Crystal Towers for a while as a maid too. And so, I've worked at a lot of places. But mostly just food service work. I couldn't name 'em all.

MB: What's the book about that you're writing?

GC: Its about living in Roanoke and growing up – you know, the African-American myths that you hear. The myths that people tell ya. It used to oral. They never wrote it down. There are a lot of myths that people tell that they never write down and I remember all those little tales they told me but they never wrote down so I just said, "I'll write it down in a book". Because people – you know before television, before radio and all that stuff, you had very little entertainment and so stories were the thing and every time you ask a person for a story, you give them a little something and they'll give you a story. (laughing) Right in my neighborhood. So, like a man once told me a story. He said - This one black guy said, "I'll tell you a story but steal one of your dad's cigarettes and give it to me". So, I stole one of my dad's cigarettes and gave it to him. That was really bad and my dad caught me doing that. And he would tell me stories about things. He told me a story about this guy named Hog John that

started the Soul Food craze. I said, "How'd he do that?". But I go on in the book to explain it. And then he would tell like you go to the lady up the street. Those people were really hungry some of 'em and they ask you to bring some ham biscuits so I brought 'em some ham biscuits and they'd tell me a story. Stuff like that. And then it got to the point when they were just begging to tell stories and my mom told stories at night. Everybody would tell you a story because that was the thing. It was very little entertainment back in those days.

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MB: That's wonderful. Tell me about you school life. Like, where did you attend school? Did you have to walk to school?

GC: Everybody walked to school. They didn't have any school buses I think. I walked to Loudon School. That was my first school and they didn't have any school buses. I walked 5 or 6 blocks to school but nobody even considered kidnapping then because it was an all black neighborhood. When you walked, you walked past everybody had little shops and things, you know, the barber shop. You just walked past everybody and they would holler. People would be on their porch anyway so you weren't scared of nothing. And I walked all the way to Loudon School about 5 or 6 blocks. We had a 1st grade teacher and you went there until the 5th grade right there. I never, ever caught a school bus. I don't remember why. I don't even think they had 'em. A school bus back then was low priority for black kids – everything local. Just like Forest Park, you just had to do something in that area. And so the teachers though – they were – I think most of those teachers didn't have a college education because then, if you finished the 9th grade, you was a teacher. You see what I mean? Or if you finished school, you was a teacher. I think if you had an Associate's Degree you were a teacher. But the white people, their teachers did finish college. That's why we were behind and I didn't know that we were behind, I was that behind. You see what I mean? But that was why. And a lot of people don't want to admit it and a lot of teachers – but those teachers were very old and everything. One teacher that I really remember was Eunice Poindexter. She taught my daddy when he was in Ridgeway and she was telling me that I would appreciate the school lunch program because she said when she was young and my daddy was going to school that they didn't have school lunches. The parents had to bake cakes and stuff and bring it to the school so when the kids come, they would have a lunch, you see. And that's when he was in Ridgeway, Virginia. And then, he graduated from Addison as a mechanic, my dad did. He was one of like the first graduates there. Later on, they gave him a job at the post office because he was in World War II. And also, -

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MB: After the 5th grade, what school did you go to?

GC: Harrison! That's where we have that museum now. Harrison was the only school that you could go to. It was like – It was all black. At the time, they had the hand-me-down books but I think Harrison used to be a white school and so was Loudon. But when we moved in, they moved out and they gave us their old stuff. And so from there it was Booker T. And at Booker T. Washington, that's when I started walking to the Gainsboro library. I had to go everyday. All us kids we went to that library. That was everything to us. Back then, that black library was everything. You feel depressed because you weren't part of the regular life. You were in a world of your own. You couldn't go anywhere. Everything was segregated back then. You were so much in a black world that when you seen somebody white, you wondered, "What is that?". I didn't see anybody white. The only time I saw a white person was the insurance man. You see what I mean? And I used to stare at that guy and he said, "Why are you staring at me?". "Cause I never seen nobody like you." (laughing) That's the way it was. You'd never see 'em. Everything was black. Everywhere it was black. Every person you would meet was black. You didn't really see any white people because they were in their section there.

MB: Do you remember Virginia Widely at Gainsboro?

GC: Yes! There was a lady there and she had white hair. She was old then. I used to go there and this is the experience that I had. They had a little section back there and they kept it locked. I asked her,

“Why do you keep that locked? I want to see what's in there.” She said, “Well, I'll show you what's in there if your parents agree. I think its time people know what's going on in this world. We got to keep things hid from you. I think you're old enough.” I was in Booker T. I didn't know. She said, “Ask your momma, 'Can I see that private stuff?'” And I asked my mom. And she said, “She can do it. She can do it. You can do it. You can go and see what's in there.” So I went there and she unlocked the door and there were books in there that I'd never seen. There were very old books. These were her private collection books. She collected those books on her own. And so when I went back there and I looked in those books, I seen, what I seen almost drove me to tears. I seen the pictures of them lynching black people and the white people were looking around like they were smiling and having picnic lunches. When I went, I saw picture after picture and I think I started crying. I think I started feeling, “This is hate. How can I deal with 'em if they hate us that much?” To do this. I think I had a nervous breakdown after I'd seen all those books. And then I just cried. I just kept on crying. The tears would come out of my eyes and then at the time, I think, they were electing John F. Kennedy so I went up there home and I cut on the TV and I see John F. Kennedy and I said, “He's gonna stop this. He's gonna stop this”. And my daddy said, “John F. Kennedy, you see that man, he's gonna stop everything”. He was a senator then. He said, “He's a prince. He's a prince amongst people. That's where some of our hope lies is right with him.” And so he came through Roanoke as the senator and when my daddy got there, he put me on his shoulders. He said, “This man is a great man and you should see him”. And John F. Kennedy walked through there and he said a few words about Nixon and then he walked back and he had this orange hair and freckles and I seen him and I never forgot it 'cause I knew this man was a great man. Somewhere inside, I knew he was. That he was going to change all this stuff. And then I seen Martin Luther King on TV too and I heard his speeches and all his stuff and the dogs being put on people and stuff like that. I said, “Somewhere, this is gonna change. Something's gonna change”. And it did. It did about in the '60s when he got assassinated. That hurt me so bad. I thought the whole world was gonna come to an end 'cause I'd seen it in Dallas. And they had all this stuff in the paper. And I was like in high school, junior high or something like that. I liked to cry myself to death. And then I remember a teacher came into the room. Her name was Miss Cooper. She was a very old teacher and she was a history teacher and she came into the room and she said, “This is something, a great moment in time.” And she said that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. And everybody started crying. Everybody started crying. The teachers were crying and I remember walking home that day after being told that John F. Kennedy had died and this was the man that I seen and he was a great man to me. To me, he was the man, you know, who was everything and then I walked home and I said, the dream is going to be over. Its all its going to be? Its gotta change. And so, when I walked home, I was crying, my mother was crying, my father was crying. And so many tears were shed for that man because the whole world to them he was everything. His wife was so sweet. She was like, she wasn't a dull woman. She was so exciting. She had this beautiful air about her, you know what I mean? And it was like Camelot. You see what I mean? He was like King Arthur and the Round Table. He was justice, he was gonna be like total justice to us. And now, King Arthur was gone. And we thought at the time, everybody thought it was the end of justice. Camelot was gone. The beauty that could be was gone. And he was a beautiful man inside I thought. And so, then we had Martin Luther King and we listened to his speeches and they put him in jail and stuff like that. And then, when I went to high school, I was in high school then, they had assassinated Martin Luther King and the whole school rose up and they were rioting in the schools. That was our school, see? I don't see how they would riot in our own school. But they was rioting in the school, throwing their books on the ground, you know? And they would sit down and weep on the ground. The students were so unhappy. And the teachers were unhappy. They didn't even try to stop the students from rioting. Everybody was throwing their books down. And they were crying, throwing their hands up. “He's gone! They killed him!” And everybody was so sad. And then so then the teachers, to keep the kids from rioting any more, they said, “Y'all go on home, just go home”. (laughing) “We're upset too.

Everybody's upset. Y'all go home early today". And we went home and I remember seeing it on TV and my parents were crying, everybody was crying, just weeping all in the neighborhood. I didn't think anybody would ever get over it. I know I never did. When you hear him speak, it was not like just anybody speaking. It was like he would pull you into his self. He had the way when he spoke, everybody who listened to him was pulled into him like an aura. He could pull people into himself. He could make them feel what he felt. He had this thing called empathy and that empathy was so strong that people felt like he was a prophet that had come from God. I felt like that too. He was a God-like man. And when he died, it was like a something was missing that would never be there again. Mmm (sigh)

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MB: You were talking about your school before. Were you ever allowed to stay home from school?

GC: No. You know my mother, she didn't have the opportunity to go to school because of her mother dying so early. So to my parents, school was everything that led to advancement. Missing school and making poor grades was like giving up their dream. They had to work. To get through school, they had to go through so much and here we was, able to just go right to school. They couldn't see it. They couldn't conceive of us not wanting to go, what they worked so hard to do. Like Miss Lucy Addison who the school was named for, she had to take a ferry boat and go down the river. My mom would say, "Look at Miss Lucy Addison, Do you think she - you walk right into that school, right into that classroom and you've got that privilege that Miss Lucy Addison had to go on a ferry boat about 20 miles. They didn't walk 20 miles to get to school". She said, "All those people back there and all those slaves, you are their hope, you are their dream. Don't let them down. Don't fail them". You see what I mean? And that's what the teachers would say to us. She said, "You are the hope of the slaves. They never got to do this thing. They died and you are their dream. You are the future".

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MB: How far did you go with school?

GC: 12th.

MB: Did anyone in your family ever attend college?

GC: My brother. My sister, she went to nursing school. But my brother – and I went to school some. But, it wasn't the same. I wanted to go to an all-black school but -

MB: Well, I was just wondering, like in the evenings at your home, did y'all sit around on the porch in the evenings and talk or -?

GC: Oh yeah. We were really porch people. (laughing) You know, back then I think, there was very little entertainment. They had radio, TV, it was black and white and everything on the TV was depressing. But they had all these white programs like Father Knows Best. And these white folks – everybody was white and it was like we didn't exist. You see what I mean? Everything was white. I think we looked at Amos and Andy and that was really amusing. (laughing) But everything else was just white until you look at the reruns of Amos and Andy and it was like looking at a family of people outside yourself. And I said, what is it? Who are these people and why is there not somebody like me on there 'cause I'm part of this America too and so to me I stopped looking at the TV until Star Trek come on. And Star Trek was different. It opened up a whole new world of probabilities. Here they had these characters like, you know, these different people from different galaxies and stuff like that. And they let you open up a world where you could be just like these people from different galaxies and they all came together. You see what I mean? I mean everybody was Star Trek, everybody was futuristic then and I think that show opened up so much possibilities and so much probabilities that – I think its one of the things that really broke racism was Star Trek.

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MB: Well, I was just wondering if there were any family stories in your family that got passed down from generation to generation?

GC: Oh yeah, it was about how we got to Roanoke. I asked my mom and I don't think it was the truth

but I asked her, “How did we end up in Roanoke?” And she said, “Well, I'll tell you the story”. She said, “Well, you know my grandmother was a real, real dark woman and she always say, “My gracious to life” and she was jet-black and one day she went to this white person's house and she had done her laundry and she didn't want to pay her the money. So she took the laundry and she through it on the ground and then the white woman got mad and somehow she smacked her. She said, “You ain't gonna live past this moment”. She said, “You go home, we gonna come get you”. They were talking about the Nightriders. And so, the Ku Klux Klan Riders. When she went home, and you know the house that lived in was a little cabin by the woods. And so, she told them, “I'll go out the back door in the wooded area and I'm gonna stay here and I'm gonna fight 'em”. So they wanted to see if anybody was in the house that they could drag out to hang. That was the “Klu Kluckers”. So they came in the door and she hid behind there. She took an ax and cut off his head and she threw it out and she threw the body out. She slammed the door and ran into the woods. And then they thought they were all still in the house so they just set the thing on fire. But all of 'em was gone. She said, “That's how we came to Roanoke”. (laughing) I knew it wasn't true but that's the way she would say it. They were always telling me things that weren't true. (laughing) This guy told me that – you know we had pig's feet and chittlins all the time. Chittlins were real good but he said, “You wanna know how the first black Christmas came?”. I said, “How did the first black Christmas came?”. He said, “Well, you see them chittlins you eatin'. You see them pig's feet your momma always buy you.”. I said, “Yeah”. She said, “Everybody likes pickled pig's feet”. I told him, you know. He said, “Well, it was Hog John who done it.” I said, “Who's Hog John?”. “Well, I'll tell ya. You know back in those slave days, right? The Christmas was a white thing and they gave all the presents and stuff to them and they would rejoice and eat up all the food and black folks didn't have and they'd be hungry for a week until they stopped celebrating. And so, this little ol' guy named Hog John, he used to like to slaughter the hogs, right? So he slaughtered that pig and then he took out the intestines. You see the white people didn't want the intestines. They thought they were nasty and really they were. So he soaked 'em all in salt water until all the fecals came out of it and then once you soak it, he took it and boiled it. And then he made the little ol' hot sauce that he made hisself and then he said the feet, they didn't want the feet either. So he tried to – He took 'em – He had some vinegar. He put all those feet in a vinegar jar and cooked 'em a little bit and then put them in a big vinegar jar. And they'd also have the taste of pickles and so he said the people that was in the cabins, they could smell the food from the white people's house and they just didn't – They was just hungry. And so he said that he'd come in there to each and every cabin and gave them the chittlins and the _____ and the pickled pig's feet and they just feasted the whole week. And he told him the true story of the first Christmas about Jesus and he said, that was the first black Christmas”. I knew that wasn't true but you know – (laughing)

MB: That's a great story.

GC: I hear all these things from people back in those days. They would just make up things. (laughing) And I'd listen to 'em.

MB: Great story. What kind of businesses and shops did your family frequent?

GC: I tell you the truth, at the time, we had a lot of Jewish people in there, in businesses. And they would give black people credit. That's something nobody would do at that time. They knew who they were. So she would go to their place and she would shop at the Jewish store. You know, I think they called him Moses, ol' Moses. He called himself Moses but nobody knowed his real name. Anyway, he'd go over to ol' Mos' store and we'd make a credit application. It was in a black neighborhood and he would give us chicken and everything you'd want and we ate so good. So, my mom ran out of money 'cause daddy wasn't making enough so she couldn't pay Mos fast enough so she would make little payments but it wasn't enough. And so, Mos threatened to take her to court. And my mom told 'em that my daddy worked for the city. He just didn't have enough money to pay ol' Mos on time. And that she has 4 children and what was she to do. And so, the judge took sympathy on my mom and said didn't have to pay ol' Mos but \$1 a month. (laughing) So ol' Mos was so mad. The judges, when

they'd take 'em to court, they would just do the same thing. You don't have to pay ol' Mos nothing but \$1 a month because they were anti-Semitic. That's what it was. (laughing) And so, by that time, ol' Mos, he moved out. He moved out of the neighborhood. He just couldn't – That's the way it was. You had these little foreign people who would give 'em credit when nobody else would, clothes and all. (laughing)

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MB: Do you have any favorite childhood memories?

GC: Well, I can't – I think so. You know there was this guy – I'm not going to say his name since its gonna be on tape but, anyway, his name was Earl. I'll just say that. And so we went to St. Gerard's Church because it was all black, right? When we went, we would kneel down – and priests and stuff like that and everything and we'd see the statues and my mom said, "I just don't like these Catholics, you know, so why can't they go to that other church. And so anyway, she said, "I like the Protestant church better". My dad said, "At least people won't have to be sliding around, you know to different churches". It was OK until Earl brought a statue of the Virgin Mary in the backyard and we all danced – He had on these fake robes and things and we were dancing around that statue and _____ to it and kneeling before that statue and my mom said, "Leave that thing. No more Catholic Church. No more." I think that's when we started going to Loudon Church when we was kids. But you know, when I went it was Reverend James. He'd dead now. I think his son is still a preacher. But, I don't know, I think his wife – but it was way back then. He was one of our preachers at Loudon Church. OK, they used to have an ice cream parlor. You know where you could go and buy and ice cream for a dime. But that was so far back but that dime was a whole lot back then. They would give us – I'd tell my mom, "We had to have something for the offering". So she'd give us the dime and so we'd go to the ice cream store, eat up the ice cream and then when we was ready, we'd go back and we'd go to church, right? And Reverend James, he had baptized all of us in the church. I was baptized. And he said, "You know you kids, y'all have been baptized and all of this and you cannot even bring a dime here or a nickel because you go down to that ice cream place. I seen y'all go down to that ice cream place. (laughing heartily) You're robbing the church. Those dimes are meant for us!" It hurt so bad because I wanted that ice cream so bad. That ice cream was so good. For a while, I just stopped going because I couldn't get the ice cream.

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MB: Do you remember urban renewal and what effect it had on the community?

GC: Urban renewal?

MB: Urban renewal.

GC: I remember back in those days they didn't have housing – not housing - they didn't have apartments like for Section 8. You just lived in old, old houses that caught fire and were very dangerous, you see. I think the city when they took – before they built that Lincoln Terrace, they took those people's land. You know those people lived in the place where the gas company used to be. They had old, really old dilapidated housing but it was theirs and it was paid for. But the city took their land and they had nowhere to go. They were homeless. So they built Lincoln Terrace for the black people and they built Landdown (??) for the white people. So that was the first one. But even though Lincoln Terrace was in much better shape than those old shacks that they had, the city probably would've condemned 'em anyway 'cause those shacks were really bad, fireboxes. But, it was theirs and they didn't pay them for the land, very underpaid for the land. And that land is worth like billions now. So a lot of black people got hurt because they did not get paid for they land but they went to Lincoln Terrace and they lived. But it wasn't the same because you had to go through all these rules and regulations. Get a job – I mean I lived in Lincoln Terrace and you'd get a job and your rent would go up. They cut off your food stamps, no Medicare. You can't live off of what you got. Minimum wage was like \$1.60 or \$.85. Most people and I know I did, and its a shame, but I said I would rather stay home and take care of my own child than get out there and they gonna take all your money. They take all your profits.

So that's why a lot of people didn't work on welfare when they did have it because they said, "What's the use of doing this when they gonna take everything". I think that in a way, caused a lot of black people to, a lot of black men to desert their families and a lot of black women to just have no hope. A lot of black men left they family because if they stayed with 'em, they would put 'em out.

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MB: What sort of jobs were available for black folks?

GC: Cleaning, what most white people would call jobs, they'd call 'em black jobs – Cleaning, food service work and anything they didn't think there was a future in it. Only thing that an educated black man could get was a job at the post office. The post office became the – I think they called the "plumer" or the educated job 'cause at the post office, that's where the real money was. If they'd get a job at the post office, they were fixed for life and then I think N&W. They let them do their dangerous work like untying those things and tying them back but you get a job at N&W you were fixed for life. You work on choo-choo trains, you got it. And those were the most advanced jobs and then the VA hospital for veterans. Now if you got in those three, you were fixed for life. You had benefits and everything like that. But the rest of the jobs was nothing.

MB: Were there a lot of folks that owned their own businesses like over in the Gainsboro area?

GC: They did once. When they integrated, those businesses went _____ (??) Integration – It helped the blacks but it destroyed them at the same time.

MB: So it destroyed the community?

GC: It destroyed the community and it helped 'em. It helped 'em when they could go out to these white places and get jobs and stuff but they were making so little, such low pay, it wasn't nothing. And it helped 'em when they could go to any theater and go anywhere they wanted in town but it destroyed the blackness. It destroyed the black businesses. I think it destroyed their pride. You know what I mean? They didn't have pride anymore. Not like they used to. But they did integrate. I did have start having a lot of white friends but my mom never did like those white friends I had. You know most of 'em were Christians. We used to meet at this place when I was grown, this place called Sister Potter's. And all those people – That's when I got – I moved in with Sister Potter, that white lady and a lot of people in the neighborhood, a lot of white people, didn't like it. She would go visiting around the white neighborhoods. She said, "You better stay here 'cause they're prejudiced. They don't want you here. And they don't like ya". I couldn't understand that. But I stayed there at Sister Potter's for about a year 'til I got tired of it and I was working at Bailey's. And then, we prayed all night long and everything like that and all my friends were into it. We was called – I think we would call 'em Jesus freaks then, into Jesus and everything like that. So I brought my friends home and my momma took one look at 'em and she said, "Don't you ever bring those people home to me.". You know, to her it was just like an insult. She said, "What are you doing around them for. You be with your own kind". A lot of black people who was post – were that way. Not only her. But they were so hurt back in those days that they just couldn't see it. They couldn't see the whole picture. And a lot of black people are that same way. If you bring a white person around them, and you bring 'em to dinner, they's out. "Get out of my house. What you bringing that person in here for?" You bring a black person, they happy. But that's the way a lot of the older women, now, say in their 80s or 70s, that grew up in all that Jim Crow, they never healed. I think I healed more because I grew up in sort of like a half-way integration section with Woodstock and all that.

MB: I think our interview is just about over. Is there anything else that we didn't discuss that you would like to talk about?

GC: Well, no, but I kind of think that the churches holds everything together. That's the Mecca of the black community, the churches, the black churches. That's the only thing I see. If we didn't have them, we wouldn't have nothing.

MB: Well, Gloria Jean, thank you for your time.

GC: OK.