

Interviewee: Lewis Peery  
Interviewer: Mary Bishop  
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

It is October 12, 2006 and Mr. Lewis William Peery is being interviewed at the Gainsboro Library.

MB: Mr. Peery, where and when were you born?

LP: I was born in Pearisburg, Virginia, on December 23, 1920.

MB: Have long have you lived in Gainsboro?

LP: I've lived 58 years in this area. I moved to Roanoke in May, 1948, and I've resided at 508 Rutheford Avenue all those years.

MB: Tell me something about how you came to live at that address.

LP: I moved to Roanoke because I met a certain young lady through my brother who had also married her sister. We started courting and I decided that what I wanted/we wanted to do is to get married. And prior to that, I worked at Celanese Corporation between Narrows and Pearisburg. So I left that position there because we wanted to get married in Roanoke and I came and I began to work at the VA Medical Center where I worked for 4 years. I moved in May of '48 and in June, 1948, we were married and that was a happy occasion for me to move from Pearisburg to Roanoke and get married. We moved to a home there at 508 that my aunt lived. She lived by herself. She was a nurse and she did practical duty/special duty. So we lived with her and she lived with us until she passed at 92. So, I've have a wonderful experience living in the neighborhood. My wife and I are the last two in the whole Rutheford Avenue – There are 8 blocks on Rutheford Avenue and we are the last two right now that was there when we moved there some 58 years ago. And we're still young. Did I say that?

MB: Tell me about your parents and your brothers and sisters.

LP: My mother was a homebound. My father worked for Lease and McVitty Tannery Company most of his life. There were 3 tanneries, one in Pearisburg, one in Salem and one in Buena Vista. And there were 10 children in our family and I was the second child. My older brother is deceased. Its only 6 of us left, 2 girls and 4 boys. That's the family. And in my wife's family, there were 13 in her family. There were 9 girls and 4 boys. All of 'em are deceased except 3 daughters, and my wife is one of those 3.

MB: And tell me about the marriage between your brother and Mrs. Peery's sister.

LP: My brother - His wife and another lady here in Roanoke graduated from Addison High School. They went on to Virginia Union and graduated. So he was courting my wife's sister. So I met my wife through them. So that's how we were connected during that period of time. Of course, they married in 1946 and they had 8 children and, of course, my wife always felt like those 8 children were hers too. So that's been the closest of the family during the better years. And it kinda tied us – We were connected through that type of program for many years.

MB: And you still have extended family members living nearby, do you not?

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LP: Yes, still here in Roanoke. See, my wife lived in Cave Springs. That was her home place out there. I still have nieces and nephews living here in Roanoke. Another thing, most all of my brother's children are away from the city except one. But he lived in Salem. They moved to Salem before we moved to Roanoke. They moved to Salem in 1946. We moved to Roanoke in 19 – I moved in Roanoke in 1948.

MB: And just for the record, I wanted to get your aunt's name because she was probably an important person in Gainsboro.

LP: When I moved to Roanoke in 1948, I had an aunt that I visited a lot. I had other relatives here in the city but she was kind of a special aunt. She was a registered nurse. There were not many registered nurses, blacks, back in those days. And of course some of them worked at Burrell Hospital but she did

private duty all the time. She was beginning to get aged but one thing about her, what she would do, if any of her brothers or sisters became ill, she would stop her work and go wait on them. And she came to Pearisburg. See, her sister was my grandmother also. That was a tie there. And when my grandmother came here, she would come to Pearisburg and wait on her too. So we just felt something – a closeness there as well as she had two brothers here in this city. They carried mail just like I did during a period of time. So there was a closeness of family relationship here in the City of Roanoke for me so I wasn't lost when I moved here.

MB: And what was your aunt's name?

LP: Her name was Annie C. Taylor and she died at the age of 92. And we looked after her during that period of time after we moved here. I can't remember the date that she died but she died at the age of 92.

MB: Can you describe your house for us which was her house too?

LP: My house is the 7 room house, 4 rooms downstairs, dining room, living room, kitchen and what I call – It used to be a bedroom, its my den now. There are 3 bedrooms upstairs. One thing about our house, its a house that has the boards on it. Its not a brick house and its not a complete basement. The houses on that street – There are a lot of houses in this area I'm sure they didn't have a full basement. We didn't have a full basement. I dug out a basement enough to have washrooms and things down there and be able to put a little shop down there. We've worked on it over the years and updated it and everything 'cause back then, we had a stove in the dining room and that's where we got our heat from. So actually we had to do a whole lot of remodeling in order to put in a furnace and washing machines and different things in the basement. So we remodeled a lot during the years.

MB: Do you have any idea when it was built?

LP: If we've been there 58 years, I think that house probably – I'm just gonna make a guess, somewhere approximately 80 or 90 years ago when the neighborhood was developed back in those days. A lot of the neighborhoods were developed back then. And another fact about that, you have to understand what happened here. In this area, in the Gainsboro area – Am I talking too far ahead of you?

MB: No, that's fine.

LP: By carrying mail, I learned a lot about Gainsboro. You see back then, they used numbers. Gilmer Avenue was 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Patton Avenue was 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Harrison Avenue was 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Rutheford Avenue was 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Madison Avenue was 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. But when you cross – You see this is a Northwest - When you cross Jefferson Street, as I've told you before, things kinda change but you had approximately the same numbers down in Northeast. They went by 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue and then you had an East Avenue in Northeast that kinda changed everything a little bit. But Rutheford Avenue in Northwest is the same as Rutheford Avenue in Northeast. So that's the way the city was scheduled or made up back then.

MB: In those days, were the numbered streets – Was Rutheford Avenue called both 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Rutheford or did it just change?

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LP: No, it was all 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. But see the post office, when they came in, that was confusing to the mail carrier. If you didn't kinda live around, it was – of course you had the same numbers. Harrison Avenue same number as Harrison Avenue – So they decided that what they would do is they would change and get rid of the numbers and then they would come back. I think they reused some like Rutheford Avenue but after that, they stopped using Rutheford Avenue. And when they brought out the telephone directories, then everything – They changed everything to Madison Avenue, Gilmer Avenue, Wells Avenue, just like over here. What's over here now? Wells Avenue was 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue I believe but its Wells Avenue now. But everything changed. This area changed a great deal back then.

MB: Back to your house, out in the yard, did you have a garden?

LP: Never had a garden. Didn't have room for one. Kinda had a little garden out at my wife's father's

house but I had a special garden and my special garden was down on the market. (laughing) I went to the market all the time. (laughing) And that was a big thing back then. You could ride the bus for 7 cents/10 cents, so everybody went to the market. My aunt went to the market. That was a big thing. I was just tickled to death over that when I moved here to go to the market to get my vegetables. OK, I better stop talking hadn't I? Go ahead. (chuckle)

MB: Tell me about the kind of work that your family did.

LP: My mother didn't work at all. My father worked for Lease and McVitty Tannery Company and they had one in Pearisburg. They had one in Salem and they had one in Buena Vista. When you talk about Lease and McVitty Tannery Company, what they did, they processed leather. Cowhides would come in and they carried the cowhides to the plant and, of course, they had boards where they would scrape the hair off the hide. And then what they would do, they put the hide in a vat and then they would be able to work it and work it around. And back then, what they would do, they would bring bark off the tree and they'd take that bark down and that would color the hides. Now what my father – As they would dry, they would hang 'em in a loft and they would dry out. And my father had a little gauge, he would pull 'em down and that's what he would do. He would gauge them and sort 'em and then they would ship them out to the companies that would -

MB: The gauge, was that on the thickness?

LP: The thickness. And of course he was able to observe and separate the hides in categories, you see. That was a very important job to be able to do that work. He did that most of his lifetime. Well, he worked there until he died. But a lot of people worked there, but that's no longer a company now because of synthetic \_\_\_\_\_ and everything came in so it made a difference. Go ahead.

MB: I want to be sure to allow a lot of time to talk about your many board memberships because you have been on so many. I don't know whether we should do that now or – Is that OK?

LP: OK.

MB: If you would start talking about that because you are one of the most -

LP: Well, you know, its stranger than fiction I guess – When I got involved in the Boy Scouts over at the First Baptist Church and I began to do training - I was a trainer for a period of time - I began to meet people. You see, you gotta know people and I got involved in that program a great deal and then people would from that point of view then I got involved in the Scouting program. And then I got involved in the Scouting program in my church for a long period of time. And then, people began to know you and then they would invite me to serve on boards and there was a fellow who was with an insurance agent. He recommended me to serve on the United Way Board. That was my first board in this city, United Way. And I served on that board for a number of years but I not only served on the board but I did a lot of extra work in their campaign and everything. And then you got to know other people just like Red Cross. People got to know me and said, "Let's bring in Lew Peery.", "Let's get Lew Peery on our board."

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MB: That first board membership with United Way, do you have any idea when that was?

LP: It was back in the early '50s. Maybe about '58 or somewhere along in that neighborhood. I started working/serving then. And then I got – You see the old Y was right here on the corner and I got involved in that and I served on that board for 40 years. And then what happened then when we merged, then I served on a \_\_\_\_\_ board 6 years. And then I got involved with the Council of Community Services. I served on their board – Served my time out on that board and then I got involved with the Red Cross Board and served on that board. And then I got involved in \_\_\_\_\_ extension board. I served on that board. Now, the other boards – I served on a lot of boards. One time, they accused me that I served on more boards individually than anybody else. But I spent a lot of time on those boards and working on the boards because I enjoyed doing that because, you see, I never had an opportunity. You see, when opportunity knocks, you have to take advantage of it. In my hometown, I never had an opportunity to do that. So when I moved here to Roanoke and people began to know

Lew Peery, well they'd say, "Well, let's get him involved." So that's how I became involved in so many boards here in the city. And I really enjoy it. And then something else happened that a lot of people don't know about. In working with United Way, I had a good white friend at the United Way. And we became close friends. He also worked in Scouting and one day he said to me, "Lew, would you like to be a member of the Lions Club?". And I thought a little bit about that. I said, "Yeah, I'd like to be but I've never been asked." He said, "I'm thinking about organizing a Lions Club." I said, "You are?". He said, "Yeah." I said, "You better tell me about it." He says, "What I'm thinking about organizing is an integrated Lions Club." I said, "Well, I'll tell you what you should do. I don't want you to be embarrassed and I don't want to be embarrassed. You check with the governor to see if you can get permission to do it." You have to have a club that sponsors you also. So he did that. So the governor told him, "You go ahead and set it up." Well, what he did, he recruited white and I recruited black. And that was the first integrated Lions Club in Virginia. 30 years – We're going to celebrate our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year.

MB: What's the name of it?

LP: The Roanoke Valley Breakfast Lions Club. But it worked just wonderful. But something else happened. You see, women were not members of Lions Clubs. Women were lionesses. My wife was a lioness back then. Well, what really happened was, the National opened up the door and said, "We're gonna bring women into the Lions Club." We were the first club to bring a female into our club. So we were making history all the time. Of course, we lost her. She worked for the City, she died. But right now, we have just as many women in our club and they have been really wonderful. But there are still some clubs that don't want to bring women in. So, I thought I'd let you in on that. But we did that in the City of Roanoke and it worked out beautifully. And we've had a good time. Now that's a good club, Lions Club is a really good club. OK.

MB: I want to back up and talk about your school life and then I want to talk about your work life.  
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LP: Well, in Pearisburg where I came from, we finally ended up having a junior high school that went to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Now, in order to acquire a high school education, we all blacks had to leave Pearisburg because they could not go to school there at the white high school. So, Christiansburg Industrial Institute by the Quakers and they had dormitories for boys and girls. About 5 members of my family attended Christiansburg and all we had to do was go there. We had such a good school at Pearisburg. We only had to go one year at Christiansburg then we were able to graduate. Now when I moved here, I had a brother and a sister who came here and lived with us and went to Addison. What a lot students – a lot of boys and girls, if you – you either had to come to Addison or Salem if you could get – live with somebody in Salem or in Roanoke or go to Bluefield if you wanted to get a high school education. So that was back in those days. Of course, when integration came along, everything changed and the concept and everything changed so that worked out. Now when you talk about education, the early part of my family – I have a sister who has a Master's Degree in Music. I have a brother who has his Master's Degree who has taught around in this area – Finished up his schooling in Florida and he is retired and he comes in and out of here – I think he kinda lives here in this Library but he is a great reader. He loves to read. And I had another brother who had his Master's Degree in German and English who taught at Howard but he didn't get his Doctorate Degree because he died at 47. And then I had a sister who went to college. She didn't stay there. She went along with \_\_\_\_\_. And then another brother who went to college in Music. So after the family began to move along, a lot of 'em – We got involved in education and we who were older than they, we helped them. That's how we were able to – Because my father didn't make a whole lot of money. So what we did, we would pool our resources and help them to get through college. So that worked out beautifully for them. And that was our educational background.

MB: Tell me about your work, your first jobs and then your first work with the postal service.

LP: Let me go back a little bit and tell you about my first job. When I graduated from high school in

1938, I couldn't find any work. I tried to obtain work at my father's tannery where he worked but I never could get there, never could get a job. I finally ended up – A good friend of my father who worked for Norfolk & Western on the rail gang. He came in one weekend and asked my father and mother to let me go back with him 'cause he had a position, a job for me there on the rail gang. You know, you travel \_\_\_\_\_. So I went back with him. And my job was a special job. I worked in the kitchen. And I laughed about that over the years when I did some work for the postal service. I said, “You know what my first salary was?”. They say, “What?”. My salary was \$30 a month room and board and they couldn't believe it. (laughing) But that's how I started out. But I never stayed out there too long because I went on and came on back home and I worked for Norfolk & Western out on the rail gang for a little while but then I went with Celanese Corporation there between Narrows and Pearisburg separate to this place that closed down here. It was yarn back then but they still \_\_\_\_\_. So I worked there prior to the war, prior to my service and in 1943 I went into the Navy. I don't think I told you that.

MB: No.

LP: I went into the Navy in 1943. I stayed in the Navy 33 months and then the war was over and then I came back from the Navy. I went back to my job at Celanese and I stayed there until 1948. But I worked at Celanese – You see, you have to understand what people go through with. I'm gonna be honest with ya. I grew up – I didn't have any problems growing up as a youngster in Pearisburg. All of us, white and black, we played softball together, football together. We had a lot of fun together. We didn't talk a lot about race and everything like that. We just had a good time. Although, I couldn't – When I went to Celanese, I really couldn't get a good job. I was a janitor when I started working there. And when I used to do that work for the postal service, employment \_\_\_\_\_. I used to tell 'em when I came back from the service, I received a promotion and they said, “Mr. Peery, what was your promotion?”. I said, “I was promoted to a - just an ordinary employee.”. I never was able to move up. I tried to move up but I was never able to move up. So I just accepted it and went on. I was happy I had a dream that one day that I was gonna live here in Roanoke and one day, I was gonna carry mail in this city. And I never lost that dream. And what happened, a fellow gave me a little paper on the examination and I studied that and I was able to pass the examination. So that was how things happened for me over the years.

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MB: Tell me again about your career with the Postal Service.

LP: I carried mail for 18 years. For 4 years, I carried mail all over the city. I was just a substitute carried. I worked by the hour. When I left the VA, I had a regular position and the Postmaster here told me, it was a lady, said, “Mr. Peery, you know what you're doing?”. I said, “What do you mean?”. “You are leaving a regular position to come here to work in a part-time position and you're gonna work by the hour until you move up to become regular.”. I said, “I'm aware of that. But, I'll tell you what, I want to work for the Postal Service.”. So she says, “OK.”. Then she hired me. I worked that position – I worked as a carrier for 18 years as a carrier, strictly as a carrier. Well, things began to change. That was Post Office Department. You gotta know how time changes things. It was the Post Office Department back then. From 1965 to 1970, I still carried mail but I was an Ad Hoc Hearing Officer and Investigative Officer for Adverse Action. What they did, the employees who had trouble or suspension or whatever, they would just get rid of 'em or whatever it was, I would go out and conduct a hearing. And what I would have to do, I had to tape it, I'd come back to the office and sit down and write it up. I had to write up the case. I had to write a summary. I had to write the finding of facts and I had to make a decision – What would happen to that employee. And that was real challenging. I did that to 1970. Then, they abolished that job and brought in the Affirmative Action Program. They kinda knew me in Washington to a certain extent by working up there with Ad Hoc and I travelled a lot all over Virginia, Washington, Baltimore as a Hearing Officer. So then I went out when they opened up a new program. They called it the US Postal Service. See how they changed? Post Office Department

to the US Postal Service and then they brought in what they called the Affirmative Action Program. So then they decided that employees who filed discrimination complaints regardless of race or creed, color or national origin or whatever it was, they would send me in. If they filed a complaint and requested a hearing, requested counseling, then what I would do, I would put down my mail bag and tell the Postmaster I had a request to go counsel somebody. And I would go in and listen to their complaint and then I – both sides, Postmaster's side or his officer's side and then I would come back and write up the case. But I had to give them an opportunity. I couldn't tell 'em they didn't have any complaint. I had to just write the facts and let them do what they wanted to do and if they weren't satisfied with the results of mine. And then one day they said they wanted to have also place EEO, a specialist in the position. In Virginia, we had two district offices, one in Richmond and one here in Roanoke. So I moved out of the post office to the district office and I worked under the District Manager and that's who I worked for until I retired and they abolished my position. But then I'd put together all those reports and things and send 'em in. And what happened, I would have to send them in under the EEO program. I'd have to write up my reports and send my reports in to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and they would review them and then they would take it from there. On 3 occasions, I had to go to those offices that was a 3 month detail. So I gained a lot of experience working in the EEO program but its no longer the program that it used to be. But, it was a good program for employees who felt that they were discriminated against. I found a lot of things that needed to be changed. So, we did a lot of good work in that area.

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MB: I was wondering what you learned about the working lives of people here in Roanoke from all those years of work.

LP: I learned – I'll tell ya – I learned a lot of things about that work. In my position as an EEO Counselor or EEO Specialist, in my district, if somebody raised a complaint of discrimination – For example, if you took the examination and you got your grade and they were hiring and hadn't called you and you called and found out that Lewis Peery's the EEO Counselor, you would call and say, "Well, what I'd like to do, Mr. Peery, I'd like to have an interview with you. I'd like to file a complaint." And you'd come in and tell me, "You know, here is my grade." You'd bring your grade. "They're hiring. What about my grade?" I had the authority in my position – All I had to do was call the ski (??) man. "Bring your report in here. I want to see your hiring practices." When that came aboard, the Postmaster had to be awful careful because I could just go in and ask for the records and they couldn't deny me giving me the record. And then, that's one thing that would help change things back in those days. When I started working at the post office, wasn't a female working on a workroom floor. But times began to change things. Everything began to change. We gotta be careful. But then you had to go back and look at if you were a ten-point service connected veteran, they couldn't bypass you regardless of your score to bring somebody in that was not a ten-point veteran. So, I learned a lot about the make-up and what you had to do and what they had to do in order that they'd be honest in their hiring practices. Same way with promotions. All that changed over the years and it made it better for everybody. I would've never had my position, like I told you earlier, if somebody in Washington hadn't have called this post office and told them, "We want a black man to come up here for this interview. The Postmaster would've never sent. That's just a fact. That's facts you see. Back in those days you see. Of course, things have changed now a whole lot. Alright, go ahead. (chuckle) I don't want to take up your whole time. I should – Everything going alright? OK. (chuckle)

MB: I thought we'd talk a little bit about your home life on Rutheford Avenue and over the years just the things you all did in the evenings and your community life, your neighbors and -

LP: My wife and I took a lot of interest in our neighbors and we would help them when we were able to help them because she was community-minded too. And we had a neighborhood group there, Rutheford Avenue Block Club and we'd bring the neighbors in together and we'd talk about what we could do to improve the neighborhood. Same way here. Oh, there was one more thing I forgot to tell

you or that flipped up. I was part of the Roanoke Neighborhood Partnership for a long time. I forgot about that. I served as its President. That was an excellent program here in the city. So we did a lot of work in the community, both of us, 'cause we were kinda community-minded.

MB: So the neighbors were really close on Rutheford.

LP: Oh, yeah. Like I told you, we are the last two in the neighborhood of the whole block that was here when we moved here 58 years ago.

MB: Are there still homeowners on that street?

LP: That's a problem. We have a lot of rental property there. Most all – So many of the problems – Well, we still have some homeowners but everything has changed. Everything has changed and a lot of it - people are buying 'em and renting it and remodeling and renting it to the people. So, its changed a lot.

MB: Back in the old days, were there businesses that you and Mrs. Peery would – favorite businesses in your neighborhood?

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LP: We had a lot of stores. Back in those days, the Syrians had the store. There was a black family right here on Harrison Avenue that had a store, a grocery store, and there was another store up at the other end of Rutheford Avenue. We would go to – The Syrians were very nice. We didn't have any problems. They had things pretty reasonable. If we didn't want to go downtown. We didn't have an automobile you see. We'd go to those stores, patronize those stores. And we got along fine as far as that was concerned, supporting them. And now all of that is gone. All those stores are gone in the community. Everything changed, see how a community will change.

MB: Did you use some of the businesses on Henry Street? Insurance or whatever, cleaners?

LP: Yeah. \_\_\_\_\_ Cleaners was our big cleaners. They was right over here. And then we had a drugstore we patronized and they had some stores on Henry Street. We had an insurance agent which we were part of. Had barber shops. Had shops down here on Gilmer. So, there were a lot of businesses over there where you could go in and get a beer. And, of course, they had the Dumas Hotel and they served \_\_\_\_\_. And had a number of businesses over – And they had hotel. There was another hotel there on the street there too. Dumas Hotel was a big hotel. Now something else came up in mind when you talk about the Dumas Hotel back in those days. We had a lot of bands that would come to town and play at the Civic Center and they would stay at the Dumas Hotel. They couldn't stay at any other place but later on, Hale had a – opened up a place up in Salem but most of the people, those bands, musical people who came to town or they have to come to town to stay, they did stay at Dumas Hotel.

MB: Did you ever see any of them or go to hear them?

LP: Yeah, I would go to the Civic Center sometimes for like Count Basie, Cab Calloway are some of 'em that would come to town. We'd go to them sometimes. My wife didn't care about going but we'd go.

MB: Were they at the City Auditorium?

LP: Yeah, the City Auditorium, right down here – Well there was Commonwealth but its no longer Commonwealth Avenue. And then later on, they'd be up on across the street here over here but that's gone now. A fellow put up one and they used that a lot for music things and activities. Things began to bloom a little bit as the years began to pass by.

MB: Did you ever go to the Club Morocco or the Ebony Club?

LP: I never did go to that. Now we had a black theater. When we went to the theater downtown, we had to go in the back off of Kirk Avenue up the stairway, the Roanoke Theater. And later on, as the years passed, the theaters opened up. You could go to any of them. As time passed, you know. When things began to change, discrimination began to take off, began to look at very carefully and things began to open up. Just like Addison High School was the only school you could go to back then as far as high school. Of course, you could go to \_\_\_\_\_ public two high schools here, Addison and Jefferson

and then they had Carver.

MB: In Salem.

LP: Where my wife lived, in Vinton, went to high school in Salem. But see how things were back then. But you just got adjusted to it. You couldn't ride the buses up in front. When you got on the bus, you had to go to the back. Same way for the trains and different things. When you'd go downtown to drink water, the water cooler, I tested it up. They had one for black and one for white. I didn't find any difference but they said there was a difference I guess. (chuckling)

MB: What were your memories of the Gainsboro Library? Did you know Mrs. Lee?

LP: I knew Mrs. Lee. Mrs. Lee was a wonderful lady. Mrs. Lee was a member of the First Baptist Church and she was a devoted member over here and over at the First Baptist Church. She was an excellent Sunday School teacher. She taught ladies and I'll tell ya what happened to me. Mrs. Lee gave up that Sunday School class. The Superintendent came one Sunday and asked me if I would hold her class 'til they got somebody to teach. I shook my head. I said, "How can I do that?". He said, "It's just temporarily." That temporarily position lasted 33 years. All women, but I learned a lot and had a wonderful experience. But she was a good teacher and a good librarian and good citizen in this community, just lived up the street here too.

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MB: So did you come into the library?

LP: Yeah. Sometimes when I carried mail, I always came by here 'cause I delivered the mail. So I got to see her. She was a super lady.

MB: Who were some of the community leaders that you admired the most?

LP: I thought about that. Reverend A. L. James who pastored this church here for 38 years.

MB: First Baptist, right?

LP: First Baptist Church for 38 years. He was kinda my mentor. I joined that church and went on that official board under his leadership, I thought the world – He did a lot for this city that a lot of people didn't know what he was doing. But he worked with the people across town. He knew how to do that. Dr. Harry T. Penn who was a dentist was another one of my mentors. I thought a lot of Harry T. Penn. He did a lot of work in this community in those years. And then Reverend - There was another minister over here at Hill Street that I liked very much -

MB: R. R. Wilkinson?

LP: R. R. Wilkinson. I thought a lot of R. R. Wilkinson. He did a lot of work through the NAACP and for the community. We had another young lawyer, Rubin Lawson. And then we had a doctor, E.D. Downing. So we had some people that were kinda working hard back in those days for the city and I just thought a lot of – those were some of my mentors in the city.

MB: And the things that they did for the city were they – What do you mean? Were they helping individuals or were they - ?

LP: They were helping the city. They were trying to help the city come together and maybe look at each other and respect each other and maybe job opportunities and different things like that. Because the job opportunities were kinda scarce back then for minorities anyway. Norfolk & Western was a key factor back then and the service tracks and things you know, a lot worked in the office down there, that big office you know. So things were moving, began to move a little bit as time passed by.

MB: I was wondering what you remember of the desegregation of the businesses downtown.

LP: I'm gonna be very honest with you. When they desegregated, I don't know what it was. I had no problems. I had no problems myself.

MB: You mean before they desegregated?

LP: After desegregation. Now before, I knew where I could go and where I couldn't go. Now there was one place I always wanted to go was S&W because I thought that was a super place.

MB: That's a cafeteria.

LP: A cafeteria.



MB: Down on Church Avenue.

LP: Church Avenue. But I'll tell ya what happened. Time tells ya how things changed. When we organized our Lions Club, Breakfast Club, that's where we went for our meetings. Now, they had an upstairs, you know, they served upstairs too, you know. And that's where we would go and have our breakfasts until they closed. No problem. We'd go through the line downstairs and go right on upstairs 'cause a lot of times they didn't have a line upstairs, serving upstairs. So that was some of the things we did. Of course, we shopped downtown and everything with all the stores. Everybody had their special stores. Ladies had their special stores. Men had their special stores. So that was a big thing downtown. Davis' is the only store down there now for men. All of 'em are gone. But I didn't have any problem. But I certainly checked that drinking fountain to see if there was any difference in the water. (chuckling) Didn't find any. (chuckling)

MB: How has Gainsboro changed?

0.44.33.3

LP: Its not the same anymore. All the businesses are gone that was once here. Henry Street is gone. Its gone. But you gotta understand it. It served its purpose back in those days. That's the only thing that we had was Henry Street, a place to go and to get some food and everything. Go over there if you wanted to go to the Ebony Club or go to the theater. We all participated in that. When desegregation came about, then it changed. Then what happened, we could go where we wanted to. You could go to any of the restaurants. I remember the first time. We couldn't go to Hotel Roanoke. But I remember one time, I had a good friend who worked in Scouting. He – Gave him the Silver Beaver Award, the highest award in Scouting in 1952. He had to sit in the kitchen over there before they would bring him in to present his award. Now, I got the Silver Beaver Award in 1964. My wife and I went in the Crystal Ballroom. You see how thing begin to change. You gotta look back. I know what it was but then you got to look farther. You see some negative parts but then its all so positive. I looked at both sides of it, the positive part and the negative part. When I was in the Navy, I got on a train here in Roanoke or I'd catch it at Pearisburg, I had to sit back in the segregated car. When I got to Bluefield, moved anywhere I wanted to. When I came home, I could ride anywhere I wanted to until I got to Bluefield and then I had to move back. Those things you had to look at and adjust to them. You don't know anything about that young lady. (chuckling) I'm just talking history, what went on. You see you never know if you don't hear anybody talk about it. You'd never know. And the young people in this day and time, they don't want to hear about that. They don't want to know how, what we really went through in order to survive. When we went somewhere, we had to be careful. If you wanted to buy gas somewhere, if you want to use a restroom – What's that program they had, that guy was driving Daisy? Did you see that?

MB: Driving Miss Daisy.

LP: But you know, it was something to that. It was something to that. Now you'd go to ask somebody, "Sorry, our restrooms out of order." So you had to – It was something to have to go. But we survived. OK, you go back to your questions. (chuckling) I get caught up in it and start talking.

MB: Its wonderful. What are your memories of Urban Renewal?

LP: I'm gonna be honest with ya about Urban Renewal. A lot of people may not agree with me what I'll say about Urban Renewal. I'm gonna go back in Northeast for Urban Renewal. I carried mail down there. There were some good houses in Northeast but there were some houses that were not good. Now, my thinking on one side, I thought it was good. A lot of people got good homes when they moved to Northwest. You see, back then when I moved here, there were no minorities beyond 10<sup>th</sup> Street. No minorities. But now they are beyond 10<sup>th</sup> Street. They moved out of Northeast and they got nice homes. I know some of them suffered. I know that. But it was better. I have talked to some of them and they said, "Well, we suffered but we're living better." 'Cause some of those houses were not so good down through there and I know that. All that over at Pocahontas Avenue, Gregory Avenue, I know all about because I carried the mail down there and I saw the conditions of some of those houses.

Now, over here in Northwest, that's beautiful over there. Nice homes. Of course they \_\_\_\_\_ more money than they did down in Northeast but that's a price you pay, you know, for better living. So, I thought it was good. It had its negative parts of it but it had its pluses you see. So, I thought it was good \_\_\_\_\_. Now back then – You gotta look at things – Lincoln Terrace was nice. A lot of the people moved to Lincoln Terrace but that changed. Its better now. But see these things changed and then they come back you see. So, that's just my concept of the city. And you know what? I love Roanoke. I'm kinda like Noel C. Taylor. OK, go ahead. (chuckling) You get me caught in this and I get to talking about it, but that's my concept of it. But not a lot of people agree with my concept of Urban Renewal. You know something else when I came here, Henry Street was a nice street. My wife told me that they always went – They had to walk – See my wife and her father – My father-in-law never had a real job. He did furnaces and things back in those days. He had special families that he worked for. So what he would do, they would get up early in the morning and come in and help here. You see they had to work. He had those girls and all of 'em did that. They would help him with offices and everything early in the morning and then they'd go on to Addison and go to school or whatever they had to do. Back in those days, that's what would happen to them. They had to work. They were closely knitted. And sometimes they had to stay with the white families in order to go to school in the city. See there was a lot going on back in those days when you look at the history of what has happened and, of course, Henry Street was there and that's all we had. So we had to make \_\_\_\_\_. But there were some good businesses over there and some fine people over there. Dr. Brooks had a fine drugstore over there. And Green had a shoe shop. And Dr. Downing had his office over there and they had an offices up there, Dr. Brown and Dr. Penn. They had all that over there on Henry Street. North Carolina butrum (??) was on the corner of Wells Avenue and 1<sup>st</sup> Street. And shoe shops and barber shops here and barber shops over here, funeral homes and everything. This was really the heart of Gainsboro as far as the businesses were concerned back in those days. So you accepted it to the best of your ability and moved along. OK, go ahead, I'm sorry.

0.51.46.3

MB: Oh no, this is so good. Before I forget, I wanted to make sure that we talked a little bit about your Navy service, where you went and what you did.

LP: I served – I was recruited here in Roanoke and I prepared to go into the Army. I thought the Army would be wonderful. But I came here to Roanoke and took the examination – They examined me and they put on my form, “Navy”. And I was just disgusted. It also said I would qualify for submarine duty. But once I went into the Navy, I went to Great Lakes, Illinois, and stayed there 6 weeks training, I learned something. And through the years - I stayed in the Navy 33 months - I always said, I wish I could see that doctor who put me in the Navy. I'd give him a big hug because I had a good Navy career. I went to Great Lakes, Illinois, for my training, came back home and I went to Hasting, Nebraska. We opened up a Naval Depot there. We made ammunition for the fleet. That's what I did for 2 years. I stayed right there in Hasting, Nebraska, at the Naval Depot. And something else too. There were not many minorities in Hasting, Nebraska. We had to go to Omaha, Nebraska, for liberty every other week.

MB: How far?

LP: 150 miles. 150 miles. And the buses were kinda like cattle, no heat and wintertime was really rough, really rough. Well, my time ran out at Hasting, Nebraska, and they sent me to – I went to Hawaii. I still worked with ammunition in Hawaii but I didn't stay there too long 'til the war was over. But they always called something about “going down” to go down to some of the other islands but I stayed there at Oahu for the rest of my time in the Navy and then I came back and was discharged on December 29, up in Tennessee.

MB: So you were in Oahu after Pearl Harbor?

LP: Mm mm. I was there after Pearl Harbor. I was there during Pearl Harbor – No, after Pearl Harbor. I wasn't there during Pearl Harbor but I went there after Pearl Harbor. But when I went back on

vacation, I saw the change in that island. All those hotels and everything – I couldn't hardly find the old Halelua but its still there. So I stayed there about 6 or 7 months before I was discharged.

MB: I'm glad you went back.

LP: I've been back a couple of times on vacation 'cause I love it. Its really nice. I better not say this on TV but I got a deeper suntan there too. (laughing) They didn't record that did they? But I love the water. I love the beach. OK, go ahead, I'm sorry.

0.55.07.0

MB: I guess we're about done. There are so many more things we would love to talk with you about.

LP: You know something happened that I want to tell you about. I want to tell you something about the libraries. I'm going back to my wife. As I told you earlier, my wife did a lot of work here in the community. She was all over the city. Everybody – All these businesses for the ad for Halcon (??) Company, they just really loved her. And she traveled around and pick up the ads for different places or Halcon (??) Company because that was the only ad (??) company back then. Well, one day, the lady in the office sent her across – Told her to go to the library across town and she went across town for the library. She had called and told her what books she wanted. So she went in to pick up the books and the lady said to her, “What are you doing coming here, picking up books here? You need to go to Gainsboro Library.”. My wife was very disappointed. She just said to her, “Well, I'm sorry. The lady from the office called me and told me to come here to pick up these books and that's why I'm here.”. She gave her the books but when she went back to the office, that lady called her up and told her, “You don't do a thing like that.” She gave her a little \_\_\_\_\_ about it. But those things kinda happen sometimes. That shows you how some people think back in that time. Of course, this was a good library but they felt like that library is for blacks so you go to your library \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_. So those are some of the things that occurred back in those days but time changes a lot of things. I'm through. I hope I haven't talked too much.