

Interviewee: Edward T. Burton
Interviewer: Arlene Ollie
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

Today is October 19, 2006, and we're about to interview Reverend Edward T. Burton and we are located at the Gainsboro Library.

AO: When and where were you born?

EB: Not in this area but I have been in this area such a long time. July, 1927, in Baltimore.

AO: How long have you lived in the Gainsboro area?

EB: In the Gainsboro area for 47 years, maybe almost 48.

AO: What streets have you lived on?

EB: Well, I haven't actually lived in Gainsboro. I lived in Rugby but my contact has been in the Gainsboro area because I serve the church that's located in the immediate area. So its been an everyday trip to Gainsboro.

AO: I guess we'll start with a little background for you. Tell me about your parents and siblings if you have any.

EB: I have one sister and we grew up in South Richmond. It has been interesting to compare some things of my growing up with things in Gainsboro.

AO: What kind of activities did you participate in?

EB: You mean activities as a child growing up?

AO: Yes.

EB: In elementary school, there were not a whole lot of activities other than playing in the fields and that type of thing. When I got to high school, there were such things as the debating team and the shop-work that I did and I actually played in a high school band. Those were some of the things that I did once I got to high school.

AO: That's great. What kind of work did your family do?

EB: My mother taught school before my father and mother got married and my father was a laborer and so after they got married, she did not continue to work and so, that was the kind of home that I grew up in, or started out in anyway.

AO: I've forgotten, what year did you come to Gainsboro?

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EB: 1959. I first had my first visit here in 1958 and actually moved in early 1959.

AO: Did you meet Mrs. Virginia Y. Lee?

EB: Of course, Mrs. Lee was very active and living when I actually moved here so I did meet her and see her in the library and sort of followed her through and visited her in her last days when she was over at Friendship Manor. And so, she was somebody that I may have not grown up with but somebody that I did know during some of her active days and her last days.

AO: That's great. Describe cultural events that have happened in Gainsboro since you've been here.

EB: Well, that's one of the things that I guess I could talk about all day. But when I moved to Roanoke, Roanoke was really a segregated society and I have been here long enough to see the integration of school and the other things that have happened. I remember Henry Street in full bloom when I came here and the Virginia Theater and I have been here to see a kind of change, I mean a lot of change from the redevelopment which was called urban renewal and the people who were actually moved called that "Negro removal". It has been through all of these changes since the '50s and through the '60s that I have been here long enough to see. It is very much a different place from the place I moved when I came here.

AO: Do you want to elaborate on perhaps some of the differences that you – anything stand out that you recall?

EB: I don't know if anything stands out but there have been just so many changes. The movement of the people further up into Northwest. It still remains a segregated city so far as I'm concerned but there has been a lot of moving out and there has been a lot of integration. I suppose the big thing has been the school integration but probably the thing that I've noticed more than anything else is public accommodations. We were very much restricted to certain restaurants and that type of thing and I remember the first experiences in going into some of the restaurants and hotels that we had not been able to go into. This is a kind of a thing of the past now but they stand out vividly in my mind because its so far different from the Gainsboro and the Roanoke that I moved to in 1959.

AO: Mm mm. Who were some of the strong community leaders during your time here?

EB: I can't call off-hand because I don't think that fast but some few names that come to my mind is Dr. Penn, who did a tremendous job when he went down and bought some tickets to the theater – not to the – to the stadium and the stadium was segregated and he bought the tickets. And he got 'em because he was light-skinned and he got some people in, in a kind of trick-thing like that. I'm sure that in the history of the movement here, Reverend R. R. Wilkinson who led the NAACP through the '60s is a person who stands out probably more than anybody else. He was really the leader in his day and time but he didn't do that by himself. There were some other people who worked along with him. There were some people whose names don't really stand out but – Some teachers who led in the first integrated schools that they went and taught in. But these are a couple of the people whose names stand out so far as I'm concerned. If I had a little time to think about it, I probably could just as easily name some others like Dr. Law and so on.

AO: As a youth/young adult, who were your role models?

EB: Well, as I grew up, the pastor of my church in South Richmond was really my role model. And I remember from a boy, even though I was not born in South Richmond, we moved there when I was about 6 or 7 years old and I grew up in that community and I'm sure that the preacher in my church, Reverend Ransom was really my role model. As well as my father who I am really proud of because he was not one of those dead-beat dads. I didn't hear about that until I got grown. He supported his family. It may not have been outstanding but he took care of me and my sister as a father would be expected so I suppose – My aunt actually raised me and she did well and I kind of admire her. These are some of the people who were closest to me.

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AO: How was your life affected by segregation and by the civil rights movement?

EB: As a boy, I really did not understand that I was living in a segregated society because all I saw was – the only people I saw were the people in my community. As I got a little older, I began to realize that there was a real separation where I grew up and of course that same kind of separation existed here in Roanoke. As I began to really see some differences not only in the community but once I went in the Army, I became more and more aware of a kind of inferior society in which I was living and it made me want to join in and maybe not lead the movement but really give as much support as I possibly could to those people who were leading movements to make it a much better society in which to live.

AO: You've already touched on urban renewal, “Negro removal”.

EB: Yeah, that was what they called it. And there are some negative and positive things to say about it. Many times, people who were homeowners were reduced to renters because what they got for their homes was not not enough to start and buy again. But on the other hand, it did get rid of some of the slums that we had too. So, there were – I think its a good thing, its just the way that it was carried out.

AO: Would you talk a little bit about your school life. For instance, where did you attend school? Did you walk to school? Were you ever allowed to stay home from school?

EB: Well, as I said, I did not actually attend school in the Gainsboro area but its interesting that I should kind of be a part of this because I can kind of compare what I did with what went on here in Roanoke. We lived in South Richmond and I lived about 6 blocks or something like that from the elementary school that I attended. Once I came to high school in the segregated society, then I had to

travel across town to the high school. We did not have access to school buses so special school tickets were issued to the children to ride, at a reduced fare, the regular city buses across town. So, this is the kind of public school situation that I – Its interesting that I grew up in a time when things were moving. I always had African-American teachers but in high school nor elementary school did I even attend the school that had an African-American principal. I can remember the books also that we used were handed down from the white schools. I knew that because everybody who had a book had to sign for it and those signatures were in the books and so we used the books that were passed down from the other schools. I'm sure that that's different now but that's much of what – and even though I grew up with that in the capital city, I'm sure the same process went on here in Roanoke and the Gainsboro area.

AO: I can assure you of that. How much schooling did you complete?

EB: I spent almost all of my life in school and sometimes when I think about it, I'm embarrassed to tell it but once I came out of high school, I went to Virginia Union for a little while, dropped out to join the Army – Later came back to do my college and seminary work at Virginia Union. I completed a degree from the Rice Seminary in Jacksonville, Florida. As well as doing some other studies at the Lutheran Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. As well as taking some courses at Virginia State College and Roanoke College. So, that's been just about all of my life in school, one way or another.

AO: Did anyone else in your family attend college?

EB: Yeah, my mother attended and its a question of how I could answer that, “Did my mother actually attend college?”. She came along at a time when Virginia State University was an industrial, normally an industrial school and so she completed that at that particular time and that's what people did in that time. My aunt who raised me went to Heartsong (??) Memorial College. And my sister and I finished college. My sister attended Lawrenceville – St. Paul is the name of the school and she did her Master's at Howard. We came from a small family and that's all of my family.

AO: You did say that you served in the military. Did you fight in a war?

EB: Not only did I not fight in a war, I'm convinced that I would not have survived fighting in the war. I came into the military at a time when World War II was coming to an end and at that time, Japan had gave its surrender and I went overseas with the occupational forces. So, I was part of the occupying army in Japan. By that time, except for maybe small skirmishes, the actual fighting was over. Had I been there, I think I would not have actually done any fighting. My experience in that line was standing guard duty but my major responsibility overseas was playing with the 15th Army Ground Force Band. I played in high school band and when Japan surrendered and the troops went there, they formed the Army Bands to play in Japan and I was a part of that.

AO: That's interesting. I don't think I've known anyone else who has ever done that. Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you'd like to share with us?

EB: I really think not. I just feel like its an honor to be a part of this interview. I kind of think that its for people who have grown up in the Gainsboro area but I occupy a kind of peculiar position in the history of how churches in the Gainsboro area – No preacher has ever preached at one church for 47 years as I have done and that means that I came here a long time ago and have watched many of the people who would talk about how they have grown up. I have watched them grow up and so, I have a kind of peculiar position so far as being identified with Gainsboro people. I've been among them so long and I've said that I want to buy one other piece of property while I'm here and that's a grave plot which means that that's where I intend to be the rest of my life.

AO: So we have permanently adopted you into this community. And you have been an asset. And I truly appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule to let us interview you.

EB: And I thank you and I apologize again for just overlooking – I had that written down and the secretary had that on the book and she should've reminded me. So I apologize to you and thank you for not being angry for having to wait an hour for me.

AO: I appreciate it. I truly appreciate the time.