

Interviewee: George Rogers  
Interviewer: Mary Bishop  
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

This is October 12, 2006, at the Gainsboro Library and we are talking with George Rogers.

MB: Mr. Rogers, first, tell me your full name.

GR: George Edward Rogers.

MB: Where and when were you born?

GR: I was born at 604 4<sup>th</sup> Street Northeast, May 15, 1919.

MB: How long did you live in Northeast or have long have you lived in Roanoke? All your life?

GR: I've lived in Roanoke all my life with the exception of about 2 years that I spent in Washington, D.C.

MB: What streets have you lived on in Roanoke?

GR: I've lived on 4 different streets.

MB: What are they?

GR: I lived at where I was born, 604 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Northeast and then I lived – I married and moved to – Where did my wife and I move to? - 927 Fairfax Avenue, Northwest. And that was my first wife and then when I got married again, we lived at 1610 Gilmer Avenue Northwest. And now, I'm living at 1311 Orange Avenue, Northwest.

MB: How long have you lived there?

GR: I guess I've been there for 25 years, I guess, or pretty close to it. I moved there when my wife and I divorced. And then when my mother died, I had to buy the house from the rest of the children. I did that and did some repairs there so I'm still there by myself.

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

GR: My mother and father moved to Roanoke I guess eighty-some years ago. Well, I'm 87 so I was the first child born in Roanoke. My oldest brother -

MB: Where did they move from?

GR: North Carolina, Henderson. My mother went to Kittrell College. I don't think – She lived in Kittrell. I think my dad lived in Henderson and I think they got married down there, wherever. And when they moved to Roanoke, they had 2 children, my oldest brother was Charles Somer Rogers and my older sister was Ruth Marie Rogers. And – there's another question you asked me – You want me to go on from there?

MB: Sure.

GR: OK. But I was born here 87 years ago at 601 4<sup>th</sup> Street and then we moved from there to Patton Avenue. My father was a brick mason and as the family grew, we had to get another place. So we moved from 604 4<sup>th</sup> Street to 110 Patton Avenue Northwest where my daddy built a brick house. Then we began to filter out from there and I lived down there. I don't remember really what year it was when they decided to do away with Northeast. Everybody had to move out of the Northeast area and then they had to find other places to live and most of them decided to move into Northwest.

MB: So that's when your father built the house on Patton?

GR: That was before – This was after he built the house down there because the rest of the children were all born in the new house after me. I was the first one born in Roanoke and then the other 3 children were born in Roanoke too, but they were born – I think they were born on Patton Avenue. Because we were sort-of outgrowing the house on 4<sup>th</sup> Street. And so dad being a brick mason, he built this house for us on Patton Avenue.

MB: Describe that house for us. Is it still there?

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GR: Oh no, no, no. You see when they did away with all the properties in Northeast for the blacks down there, we had to have a place to live too so we had to move. We – What was the question you asked me?

MB: If the house was still there.

GR: No, no, no. Its been gone. Ever since the -

MB: Now that I think about the address, I realized there are no houses in that spot.

GR: No, the Civic Center is down there now. I could just throw a rock from the Civic Center and hit the house that we lived in just about. Close.

MB: Talk a little bit about – So your father was a brick mason and tell me about the work you've done in your life.

GR: When I was in high school, I worked – I was shining shoes downtown on Jefferson Street in a place where they worked on shoes and they blocked hats. Do you know what that means?

MB: Uh uh. Oh, blocked hats, yes, I do remember that.

GR: See, during those years, they had several of those places that they – See most men wore hats then. Not too many of them do now but they did then and they had these places where they could – if the hat got dirty, you'd take it to them and they'd clean it up and you'd come back and pick it up when they got it ready. So they had a shoe-shine stand there, you know, about 4 seats up on it. As you shined a person's shoes, then you'd go back to the end of the line. See, you had to cut the other guys in there. And then you'd – when they got someone else, they moved back to the end of the line. That just went on and on and it was – I did that until I guess, a little before I left high school. That's when I left the place down there because -

MB: And that was downtown?

GR: That was downtown. Remember Oak Hall? You're not a Roanoker.

MB: No.

GR: Oak Hall was a huge clothing store down there for men and – the whole family, big store down there. And I remember if you were going to buy a pair of shoes - I did, right next door to where we were shining shoes was a place called Thom Mccann and I would go before I got ready to leave work that day, if I had made \$2, I took a dollar and went over and put it on a pair of shoes. I did this until I got the shoes paid for. Then, I don't remember actually what happened after that but the only job, major job that I had after that was - I went to Hotel Roanoke and I was bellman over there for a little less than a year and I heard that they were hiring on the railroad. So, I went downtown in the dining car department where they were hiring and tried to apply for a job. They said, "Well, George, you know that the railroad owns Hotel Roanoke". I said, "Yes, I'm aware of that". He said, "Well, you have to get a release from the Hotel Roanoke before we can consider you". I said, "OK". So I knew I had to get before the superintendent of service to get permission to go down there and apply. But he was such an evil person, you know. It looked like he was just so full of himself or whatever, you know. He was just a mean man. And I bet you I passed by his door 8 or 10 times before I got nerve enough to go in there just to tell him what I wanted. So when I got up enough nerve, I went in there and I said, "Mr. Coleman", I said "I need a favor". I want to move down to the railroad and they told me I'd have to come up here and get permission from you before I could be considered for employment". And so, I said, "What do you think?". He said, "George, I think its a good idea. If you want to go down there, you go on down there and see what you can do. If they don't hire you, come on back, you got your job waiting on you".

MB: How old were you do you think?

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GR: I'm saying I was about – I'm making a guess now – somewhere around 20 or 21. And so I went on down there and started to work and the main line was from Norfolk to Cincinnati and we would – That was the main line but we had dining cars running from Roanoke to Bristol, Virginia, I mean going

to Birmingham, Alabama. The men in the dining car were making several dining trains going from Roanoke to Cincinnati and back to Norfolk on the main line. But that was the Southern Railroad going to Birmingham. The train leaving New York tonight, destination Birmingham, would leave there about 7:00 that night, pick us up here the next morning. Because when the train came in, you had the pullmans on the rear end, coaches on the front. They just split the train, stick us in there, and we served breakfast, lunch and dinner into Birmingham. And then the train leaving New Orleans, destination New York, leaving at night and they would come in and pick us up in Birmingham and we serve breakfast, lunch and dinner into Roanoke. You follow? Say that we did this on Monday and Tuesday, a day going down and a day coming back and then we were off Wednesday and Thursday and then on Friday, we had to go down to the commissary down here and put supplies on the car that the steward had ordered because he knew what we needed for to make the next trip. And we would put these supplies on the car and then we would take off the next day. That would be on Saturday. So, then that – stayed there until I guess maybe – I forget how many years we did that but I do remember that there were a lot of troop trains – this was during the war, you know, and I remember when we were coming out of Norfolk one day and by the time we got to Petersburg, somebody was coming down the platform there, “Hey, they just bombed Pearl Harbor”. Whew! “I’m sure glad we got out of Norfolk in time”. I didn’t have any idea where Pearl Harbor was. Never even heard of the place before but I just assumed we were leaving a harbor down there as big as Norfolk, it had to be somewhere near there. I was just glad to get out of there, you know. So, we got back home to Roanoke and come to find out, the place was 5,000 miles from here. Whew! But anyway -

MB: Before you go on, what was your job on the dining car?

GR: I was a waiter. That was a good question. And -

MB: It sounds as if you all worked as a team though and you went on Saturdays to the commissary. Did you help go get those things?

GR: Sure we did. Like I said, we went to Birmingham and come back. Leave on Monday, come back on Tuesday night. We’d lay over Wednesday and Thursday. Then Friday, we would go down and put supplies on the train and leave ‘em sitting there. This was not a thing that you did the same days every week. You see, it would depend on whatever day that you, it was your turn to go back. It wouldn’t necessarily be on a Saturday again, see?

MB: I see.

GR: You had another day during the week. And so we did that until I think – let me think now – put that question to me again now.

MB: Did you work as a team, the dining car crew?

GR: Well, in the dining car, we had 5 stations, a deuce and a 4-top. 1-2-3-4-5. And there were 5 waiters on there and 4 cooks. And you can imagine how much space you had on – especially in the kitchen with 4 cooks back there and you’ve got a stove back there and you’ve got refrigerators and all this kind of stuff. It was kind of tight back in there.

MB: Mm mm.

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GR: Of course, we all had different things to do. You had what you call a linen man. He had to take care of the linen. He’d go to the linen room upstairs and get the tablecloths and the napkins and things like that, whatever linen you would need for that car. And then the other fellows, you might need 4 or 5 waiters on there to put supplies on the car. So we would just put whatever personnel you needed to put the supplies on the car that took care of it. But on the trip itself, when we left here like in the mornings after they put us on there, you \_\_\_\_ to the back of the car because of the pullroom back there, you’d go up front and make a call. You’d go over there and say, “Good morning ladies and gentleman. The dining car is now open for breakfast, the dining car to the rear”. And so you’d go on back so you could be back there by the time people started coming in. That’s just the way it was for each meal. You’d go

and make an announcement that lunch was ready and dinner was ready, etc., etc., until you'd finish that day and they'd do the same thing coming back the following day.

MB: How long did you work on the dining car?

GR: Well, I'll tell you about that. When the – It got to the point where they were only hauling more employees than anybody else. And they were paying – some were riding free on passes and some were riding half-fare or whatever, you know. The dining car stewards we had, I don't know if I mentioned it or not but, they took them off about 2 years before they closed down the dining car business. And what happened was a, like I said, they weren't making any revenue hauling employees. There are no big cities between Norfolk and Cincinnati that you could be drawing from that kept a lot of business on there. So they just decided – They did away with the stewards and I became a “Waiter-In-Charge”. I was doing the same thing the stewards were doing because they were white and we were black but other than that, we were not have been promotable. We did that and after I was cut off – after they stopped the dining car business, they didn't need us anymore so we could've stayed there -

MB: About when was that?

GR: I'm thinking somewhere – now this is just a guess now – I'm talking about somewhere in the mid-'70s or early. I remember I was still on the railroad in '41 and I don't know, maybe somewhere in the '30s. See because if I was on the railroad December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was, I had probably been there maybe a couple of years then. So that was back in the '30s.

MB: So you probably started in the late '30s?

GR: Yeah, yeah.

MB: And it went on to the mid-'70s.

GR: Right.

MB: Wow, that's a lot of years.

GR: So then what happened, I had – did I get to where I left the railroad?

MB: No.

GR: OK. I was the waiter-in-charge for about 2 years before they decided to go out of the business altogether. We could've stayed with the railroad but you had to go up to the general office and work for some of the bosses up there. You had to clean out these cuspidors we talked about a few minutes ago. And then you'd have to go out to their homes and cut their grass and wash their cars and all this kind of stuff. I didn't want that. So, I decided to try for the Post Office. And so I went and took the examination for the Post Office and passed that and a couple of weeks went by and I went down and talked with the Postmaster. “Mr. Raines, I don't have a job.” He said, “Mr. Rogers we just don't have a place for you right now. We've got people ahead of you but as soon as we get down to your name, you will be – you will have a job”. I said, “What about moving my eligibility to Washington D.C. He said, “OK”. And had I mentioned that – and would you believe in 3 weeks time, they called me to come and work in Washington. So I went to Washington in – I was staying with my sister up there. She was working in the Navy Department and she was living alone so I stayed with her but I'm traveling back and forth every weekend commute coming back home because I had a wife and 2 children here. See? So I moved them up there and then my shift at the post office, I was carrying special deliveries. At that time, they were using station wagons for special deliveries. I wasn't doing work like the carriers do here and so I had to work from 4 to 12:30 midnight delivering special deliveries. So I had to have another job so I got a job down at the Capital on the House side. Are you familiar with the Capital?

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MB: Mm mm.

GR: OK. Serving lunch. We served lunch from about 11:00 to 2:30 or something like that. And you wouldn't believe how these congressmen got along with each other. It was just like, (growling sound)

MB: Really?

GR: They would be hollering and screaming and cursing at each other all across the dining room. See,

there were no ladies in there see?

MB: Uh huh.

GR: And then you'd bring him a regular order or something that he ordered, you know, and it was never enough. Even down to the deserts. "What'd you bring me this little piece of pie over here for." It was a piece of pie, you know. "I want a bigger piece of watermelon than that." They had been given what they asked for and the meal costs them less than \$2. They got all kind of breaks up there.

MB: Do you remember any well-known ones that you saw?

GR: Naw, naw. At that time, I didn't pay too much attention to who was running the country or whatever. But, I would leave the Capital. Geographically, the Capital, if you are familiar with where the Capital is in relation to the Post Office which is right next to UN Station. I could just walk from the Capital over there because the car was already over there. And then it got to the point where I had to have another job. I got a job working at a place over on Rhode Island Avenue and that was a hotel very similar to the Holiday Inn, serving breakfast. Now that's breakfast, lunch and then the Post Office in one day. So I did that until I just got tired of that and I told my wife one day, I said, "Listen, we're gonna have to move back home because we can't afford to stay up here". So, she didn't want to leave but she never had been to a big city before so she was enjoying it up there so much. Never seen all these big businesses and all this kind of stuff. She said, "I don't want to leave". I said, "Well, I'll tell you what, I'm gonna give you 30 days and we're getting out of here". So in about 2 weeks time, she was getting boxes of stuff together to move back to Roanoke. And so we moved back to Roanoke and I got back into the post office here. And then, I was at the post office, when you first go in, you would jump on that this station, that station or whatever as a carrier. And that's what I did until I retired and I retired from the post office in 1984. I retired in September, about the first week in September. But the third week, I got sick of it, you know, being retired. I said, "Shoot. I gotta find something to do". At that time – How long have y'all been in Roanoke?

MB: I've been here 18 years.

GR: So you're familiar with when the Marriott Hotel was out there?

MB: Mm mm.

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GR: OK You know where the Windham is? That was built as a Marriott Hotel. The man that built that hotel was a local person. He lived in Salem and he was an architect. He designed it and had it built. And I retired in September and they opened the hotel in November. So what I had to do, I had to go over there and see about getting a job over there because I was a waiter before and I felt like I would be doing something in that hotel as a waiter or whatever. So I went over to the hotel – They were just about through with the hotel and I went into personnel and talked to the lady. I said, "What do you think my chances are?". She said, "I think your chances are very good". I said, "OK". Well, to make a long story short, I got the job. I was the first Employee Of The Year that the hotel had. And there were a lot of employees then, you know. But I've always been a dedicated person as far as a job is concerned. I did as good a job as I could while I was working there. I'm still there.

MB: Oh really?

GR: I'm only working 2 nights a week though, Mondays and Tuesdays.

MB: And what do you do?

GR: I'm a host now in the gourmet restaurant at the Windham, Remington's. Did you ever hear of it?

MB: Yeah.

GR: I am the host there on Monday and Tuesday nights. That's all I want to work because I've got other things to do. I belong to this and that and volunteer here and there. I belong to Loudon Melrose Neighborhood Organization which is – They do things in the community in certain areas. They've got several of them in Roanoke. I just happen to belong to the LMNO which is Loudon Melrose Neighborhood Organization. And then I volunteer over at RAM House every Wednesday and I've been

down there for about 15 years.

MB: Wow.

GR: I started out in the kitchen. I enjoyed it but – we had to do, going around doing the things that you needed to do to get the food ready for the homeless people. So I've been doing this about 12 years and they hired this girl. She is a manager. Something happened to the other person. It was a man. They finally got this lady to come in and of course we worked together for a pretty good while, several years. So they had this dining room over there that seated 32 people, 4 tables of 8. And before you'd open the dining room, you had a meal sitting at all 32 spots. So once you opened the door, it would fill up. Then the guy with the clicker, he started at 32 on there. OK, if 2 or 3 people finished, they got up and left and 2 or 3 people will come in. And then they – They've changed it now you know where they have a buffet. The people come through and help themselves. Then you had to serve them. You serve them and when you set the meals down, you had to come back and get the deserts for 'em. You'd come back and – When someone else came in, you carried them a plate and I had a tray for the deserts to carry them. I noticed something that looked like they were not going back out carrying deserts on time. They'd be sitting there, sitting there, you've got all volunteers in there you know. They weren't professional. And so the – I said, “Wait a minute. Have y'all carried any deserts out to those 3 people that just came in?” Here comes that manager. (Said meanly) - “I have told them everything they need to know. They don't need any different information from you”. I said does this woman realize that I'm a volunteer down here and she's talking to me like she's paying me a salary every month. But they've been trying to get me to come upstairs in the office anyway. And I just enjoyed doing what I doing. But this gave me an opportunity to go upstairs with these people upstairs. There are 3 girls working up there now, the director and 2 other people. And I'm up there on Wednesdays and I just enjoy going over there so much. I'm always putting on some nice cologne before I leave home because they want to hug you. “Oh George. You're so special.” Rubbing my back. Have coffee made for me when I get there and always peanut butter and crackers back there and sometimes you bring stuff from home. And I just enjoy the job so much. I like doing that better than anything that I've done because the girls are so nice to me and they – I do things for them as well. But I enjoy what I do over there.

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MB: And what do you do?

GR: Well, downstairs they have a lady down there that has this office that you come in. They will give you money to pay electric bills, rent, water bills, all of your utilities. They'll give you bus passes. They will give you money if you need some kind of a thing that you get from school if somebody is going to or whatever. They have to give me some information about where they're going to school or whatever. They do all these different things for 'em. Sometimes, 3 or 4 sheets will come up for each person, sometimes 5 or 6 sheets. It depends on how much they have asked for and the information you have to get. But when these forms come upstairs to me, then I have to look in the file to see whether or not they've been there in a year. You're only entitled to come there once a year. I have to go through and find out if they've been there before in the same year. It depends on what it is. If its something that costs \$20 or \$25, no problem. Sometimes, the little things that they ask me for from the city or from the schools might be \$10 or \$15. Then you're entitled to whatever else you want. They will – when these forms come up, I look through the file and see if they've been there and if they haven't, then I have to fill out this form or finish filling it out. And there's another sheet that I have to put in all the names on there, what area of the city they're from, what they wanted like rent and electric bills or whatever they asked for and the amount over here. Then I have to fill out this form that came up from downstairs because sometimes there's 3 or 4 sheets in there. I do very little work with that but I have to write checks for Appalachian, I have to write checks for them. I have to write checks for rent and write checks for all these other little incidentals that came from the city, sometimes only \$2. These people come down and ask for something that even \$2 they don't have the money for. But anyway, that's what

I do upstairs and once I get those forms filled out and the checks written then I have to write, address the envelopes going to wherever to this place, rent or whatever. I have to write the checks but I don't sign 'em but I just write 'em.

MB: Tell me about your school life, early on and whenever.

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GR: Well, I remember one day coming to school, there was a fellow that lived right across the street over here and the side street coming up, the school faces that way, the side street over here and another street over here and I was on my way to school. "Hey, come here a minute". I said, "What do you want?". "Got something I want to sell ya". I said, "What is it?". "I got a gun I want to sell you". I said, "How much do you want for it?". He said, "Two dollars". I looked at it. I thought that was a pretty good deal so I gave him \$2 for the gun and put it in my pocket. So when I went into school, I saw one of my buddies in there and I said, "Look at what I got for 2 bucks". I bet you it wasn't an hour passed before they called me to come to the office. This monkey had ratted on me. So when I went down to the principal's office, he said, "George, I want what you've got in your right pants pocket. I want you to put it on my desk". I said, "I can't do that". I said to myself, "How does he know what I had in my pocket?" He said, "Well, I'm gonna tell you you're either gonna put it up there or else you're gonna have to be suspended from school". I said, "Well, I tell you what, I'll do that if you give me the \$2 that I paid for it on the way to school". He wasn't going to do that either. I said, "Alright then you do what you have to do". (chuckle) So he told me I was going to have to go home. I said OK and I went on home.

MB: How old were you?

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GR: I guess I was about 16 or 17. 17 I'm sure.

MB: And what school was that?

GR: Lucy Addison High. So I just stayed out of school. What happened was my momma and daddy had to come over to the school and talk to the principal about getting me back in school. One night, they had a basketball game. So I went to the basketball game. They charged me not a student price but a regular adult price. I said, "What's going on here?". I said, "I'm a student here". "You're not in school now". I said, "OK". It just got crazy this is now. I came one back outside and I saw 2 or 3 guys back there. Said, "Man, we're gonna break in the back". On the back, they had a chain that went through these two handles. You know you have a handle on this door and a handle on this door, chains run through there. They got something and pried that chain off of there. And we started in. And just about that time, somebody said, "Here come the principal". The other guys ran that way and I ran this way. I ran right into the principal's arms. I'm the only one that he saw. He knew there was somebody else back there but he didn't know who they were because he didn't see them because it was dark. Basketball game was at night. So, he said, "OK, George Rogers, I saw you, I saw you.". So they called my mom and dad and they had to come over and see about me. And I'm sitting up on the hill because something said to me, "George, you better just stay here. You better go back down while your mom and dad are down there and see what's going on". Because when my mom and dad leave, I'd have to face this man all by myself. What they did, they carried me down to the – it was not a jail, but you were behind bars.

MB: Detention Center?

GR: Detention, that's what it was. So, they had some coming up the next day for me. So daddy never did come down but momma came down and I think the fine was something like \$10 or something like that. He said, "It'll be \$10 or 10 days in jail." 10 days would've put it through Christmas. Momma went on and gave 'em the \$10. \$10 was a lot of money to them then. She said, "I'm not gonna let my son be in jail during Christmas". So that was the end of my schooling. I decided not to go back to school. I was just a few months from finishing. But since that time, I'm not sorry that I didn't because I

have been fortunate enough to have decent jobs from the beginning. I bought 3 homes in my life. One for my first wife and one for my second wife and the one that I'm living in now. And I've got some money saved up and I bought a little stock here and a little stock there, whatever. I don't think I could've done it – Maybe I could've done better but I'm satisfied with how my life has been because I have lived a life where I know just about every biggie in Northwest and you couldn't hardly go through Northwest and say something about George Rogers and the person didn't know me unless they're people under 50 years old. The people that are my age or maybe 20 years younger, they all know me because I've been involved in so many different things from time to time. I guess one of the reasons she had me down here. I have enjoyed my life and I have no regret for not finishing high school. Now, I've made sure that my children got grown, I told all of 'em – All of 'em went to college but one.

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MB: How many children do you have?

GR: Five. And so, that one child decided she wanted to go in the service and so she went into the service. She put 10 years in and she got out, she has been one of the best children. She's the only one that I have that has never asked me for a nickel. Not one nickel. She put 10 years in the service and she started working down here at Eli Lilly, I think it was at that time, and she's been down there for 17 years. My oldest daughter got married and she moved to Washington. She has a son and he's thirty-some years old now. That's my grandson. And then I have my other son and he has a son which is my grandson. And my other two children don't have any – my other two daughters don't have any children. And – But, what I did, I went down and had the home put in my daughter's name. So if anything happened to me, I don't think they can take my home now because its not in my name, its in her name. I'm leaving her the house because she's the only child I haven't done anything for. The rest of 'em had their hand out like this. You know you would think that once you have children at home, that you have fed them, clothed them, give 'em a place to stay and all this kind of stuff while their – buy books for 'em, papers and all this and by the time they get grown, you would think they were on their own. But it doesn't work that way. My daughter told me the other – My son's wife, I don't know where he ever got her from. She wanted to borrow some money for something and I let her have \$2,800. All these bills that she said that she had. She called up there to the house at 1 or 2 in the afternoon, "Hello". She's still at home. I bet she's had 20 jobs in the past 2 years. She just doesn't like to go to work. But they have a son. You think they've got any money saved up for him to go to college? I'm putting money in the bank for him every month and I've got about \$20,000 saved for him to go to college when he finishes high school. That's been a little tough.

MB: Tell me about your community life, your home life at your various houses here. What the neighborhood was like, what your home life was like.

GR: Well, I don't remember – You talking about going all the way back or in later years?

MB: I guess, either one that you feel like talking about.

GR: Well, the only thing I remember about from years back was when we lived next door to – Well, there's a Catholic school up on the hill. St. Andrew's?

MB: Mm mm.

GR: Well, right down at the bottom is a creek that runs down through there. Do you know where that is behind the Civic Center?

MB: Yeah, mm mm. Long Lick.

GR: We lived – Big Lick – Maybe it is Long Lick, I don't know what it is, but we lived about a half a block up from the creek. The houses were along the creek itself. We used to get out there and we didn't get along with the boys up on the hill because they were all in an orphanage up there. They had an orphanage up there.

MB: Oh, I didn't know that.

GR: Not St. Gerard's its St. Andrew's. And they all wore uniforms, blue and white I think it was. And



they used to go out there and throw rocks at us and we were throwing rocks back at them. How stupid it was. They're throwing down the hill and we're throwing up the hill. I don't know if a rock ever got up there and hit one of 'em. (chuckle) But we just kept throwing rocks. We'd get hit every once in a while, "Owww". We couldn't get rocks that far up there. Dumb kids but we know we just did it. And then there was a croquet vacant lot right next to us. These men used to work for the railroad. They would come through there on their way home in the evening and they had cleared that lot all off and they put a croquet set out there. And these guys would come down and they took – what they used for balls were – they made these balls out of bowling balls down at the railroad. They had some kinda way that they could grind these big balls down and make 'em the size of a croquet ball. And they just tore up the fences around there when they hit them balls. And they had made their own -

MB: Mallets.

GR: Mallets. And they had a rubber thing put on one end, and a big piece of leather on the other.

MB: Made their own. How interesting.

0.44.54.8

GR: Made your own, see. And see they – All the fences they had around there had holes in 'em because them guys hit them balls and missed and then "Boom!". Over time, the fence was all messed up. (chuckle) It stayed that way until we had to leave from down there. There was a big boulevard type thing. We used as a skating rink because that was the only thing we had to ride on, no bicycles, couldn't afford 'em. We got skates and we just skated around – the guys in the neighborhood. Girls didn't skate then. We just played baseball. That was the only sport we got into was baseball and skating and things like that. And I – coming up, I don't remember – I remember going to the Y and the Y was in a house. And you can imagine running that house – it was in the neighborhood.

MB: That was right near here back then wasn't it?

GR: It was right over here on Wells Avenue. Do you know where First Baptist Church is now?

MB: Mm mm.

GR: On that same street, there was a church on that corner. I don't remember the name of it, but right across the street was Dr. Paxton's house. And he had a sister, I think it was his sister. She was a truant officer. And she was an old great big thing you know. During school hours, she would be walking the neighborhood and she'd see these kids out of school. She'd carry their buns right back to school. (laughing) And that was her job and she did a good job at it. Kids would see her coming and then – (zooming or revving sound). And she'd see which way they ran. 'Cause some of 'em she'd just grab 'em when she saw 'em and take 'em back to the school they belonged to and then she would report them and all this. But she got the job done. Now I think she probably did a much better job then than they're doing now. Because the schools are so diversified now that you have to have, I don't know how many people they have in the city to do the same job that she was doing in Northwest. Put it this way, she was handling schools that we had in Northwest. What they did in other parts of the city, we had no idea.

MB: One of these questions I think is very good is, did your family have stories about memories during the Civil War or about slavery?

GR: I never heard anything about it.

MB: And what about the businesses and shops that your family went to in your neighborhood. Do you remember them?

GR: Wasn't in the neighborhood. The only thing I can remember was a – In Northeast, right around the corner from where I was born was an undertaker. That was called – Can't think of the name – Citizens Undertaking Establishment.

MB: Yes.

GR: And Roy Clark ran that and across the street from Roy Clark was a building there, I don't remember now what was in it, but the trolley car would come down – up Commonwealth Avenue and

make a right turn on Commonwealth Avenue going down toward the gas house and would end up down there at the end of the line and then the motorman would get out. He would take the trolley down from – You know what a trolley car was? You got an electrical wire here that runs up and down and when you come down in one position and when you get to the end of the line, you take that down and put it up down here to use to go back. I don't know why that was why they did and why they didn't use the same one but they didn't. Now he would have to get out and go back there and hook the thing up to the electrical line up here and there was a Jammerson (??) store. Did you ever hear of Jammerson (??) ?

MB: No.

GR: Very similar to a Kroger store. That was between the undertaker and our house and then as you come down the street, there was a drug store that was operated – a brand new building that was operated by 2 people that I knew their children.

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MB: Was that Brooks?

GR: No. Brooks was in Northwest.

MB: Oh.

GR: This was Northeast. And it was called a modern pharmacy. And it was operated by Sam Reed who was a business man and a Beverly Adams. Upstairs over the drug store, they had a Dr. Yancey and a Dr. Hilton, I think. Yancey was a medical doctor and Hilton was a dentist. \_\_\_\_\_ (??) There was a tailor called Hetsona. He was from overseas or somewhere. He had a big family and he was a mean man too 'cause his children were all afraid of him because he would – if they'd say something to him that he didn't like or whatever, he'd throw coat-hangers and things at 'em, hit 'em in the head or whatever. But he did a good job in tailoring clothes. Then right there around the corner from him was a place called W.D. Powell, a grocery store. And there was a hotel down there too called the Clark Hotel and there was a shoe shop down there. The Clark Hotel only catered to white people who were in that neighborhood. And then there was a shoe shop over there that catered to anybody. And those are the only ones that I can remember in Northeast. Of course, as you come on up toward where you are here now, coming up the street, you know all the people lived over there because the principal of the school that I went to when I first started school lived in that block right below here and her name was Sarah Brown. I remember when – I just never did think that girls could whip boys. The teacher wasn't in the room right then and so we got in a little argument, me and a girl, and I said, "She don't stand a chance". She grabbed me, "BOOM!" and I was on the floor. I said, "I can't believe this". I got back up and where is the girl, "BOOM!" on the floor again. That taught me a lesson. I said now girls can fight too. Anyway, he carried me to the office. I don't remember what I did but Miss Brown, she had a strap about that wide and about that thick. "Alright George, stick your hand out there". So I hold my hand back like this, you know. "Put that hand out here." "WHACK" But you know, whatever I did, I don't remember what it was but I know that I never did it again. But I never wanted my hand held out like this for a strap to be hitting it like she did my hand. But you know, when you have to discipline children, you have to do things to them that they won't ever forget because you don't want 'em to do the same thing that they did to get whipped this time for. And I learned that a long ago.

MB: How old were you when your father built the house on Patton?

GR: I don't know. I'm saying I was quite young because I was still at home. Maybe 10 or 12 years old. Something like that.

MB: So you all moved up to Patton from 4<sup>th</sup> Street, let's see, that was before Northeast was torn down. So and then, what do you remember about urban renewal in that first wave of urban renewal in Northeast?

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GR: The only thing I can remember about it was I remember I went to Gregory School which was down on, I think it was Gilmore Avenue, no, it wasn't Gilmore Avenue Northeast – I forget the name of

the street. 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue I think they called it and it was a pretty good sized school and they had different rooms and Sarah Brown, like I said, was the principal down there and we were – I'm trying to get it together here now – We – There was another school down there called Gilmer's School which is on Gilmer Avenue and I don't remember ever going to Gilmer but I remember going to Harrison which is up on Harrison Avenue where the school is still there but its not a school anymore. That's where Harrison museum is up there in that building. I went to that school and from there, I went to Addison and I remember Sarah Brown was the principal down at Gregory School. I don't remember now who was the principal at Gilmer because I didn't go there. I don't remember who was the principal at Harrison. But the next one I remember was Mr. Parker. I don't remember his first name. He was the principal at Addison at that time. But, when they had – everybody had to leave from down there, they had – caused one heck of a mess because I remember we had to – I know daddy didn't want to give up this house because it wasn't that old. He had built it. But we all had to leave.

MB: Do you remember seeing houses torn down as a child?

GR: Yeah, yeah. And you see, my mom – I don't remember whether daddy was still living when we had to move. I don't think daddy was dead by then. I think my momma came up and picked out this house where I'm living in now. But I'm glad she picked out that house because it could've been a whole lot worse because the neighborhood – well, right across the street from me is a church parking lot which I have no problem with at all. There are only 3 houses on the block that are lived in and they try to keep their places up. 'Cause I try to keep my place up. As a matter of fact, the guy just finished putting a new fence up around my house today. That's why I was a little late getting down here 'cause it only took 'em 2 days to – they took down the old fence that I had and replaced it with a new fence and they did an excellent job on it. But, I don't remember now some of the houses that were torn down. It looked like to me, once I left from down there and moved to Northwest, I never went back down there to speak of because there's nothing down there. See 'cause once we left from down there, they started working on the Civic Center and where the Ford Motor Company is now and Sheetz down in that area, right behind St. Andrew's School. I belong to an organization now that we got money from the government – I don't know how they did this thing but it was called – What's the name of that organization? I can't think of it now. I'll remember in a few minutes. We got money to buy that property back there behind – You know where the Holiday Inn is down in there on Gainsboro?

MB: Mm mm.

GR: All that property down there belongs to the organization that I belong to.

MB: Is it Southwest Virginia Redevelopment Fund?

GR: That's it. Yep, that's exactly what it was. And they came in and developed all of that land down in there because you've got Old Standard Seal. You've got another place down there that sells lawn and garden stuff. I don't know what these other places have. And then we also had a place, a corrugated box factory over on Cleveland Avenue. These were the good days. We had a furniture factory over in Craig County and some other little businesses. But since that time, we sold the property and we don't have any income from it now anymore because they bought the property and whatever we did with the rest of the money, you had to try another business over here and the business failed. We didn't know that much about operating a business to start with. But I've been in that organization. I'm still on the board down there and I've been on that board for 25 years I guess. And they're still over there in the Lawson Building. You know where that is?

MB: Mm mm.

GR: Well, you know where it is then because you mentioned it. Stan Hale?

MB: Mm mm. Do you remember coming to this library in your youth?

GR: Not really.

MB: Do you remember Mrs. Lee?

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GR: Sure, I remember Mrs. Lee. You see the old YMCA over here on Wells Avenue, we got off of that, was right across the street over there over by Dr. Paxton, right up the street was a house that we went to for the Y. You can imagine the size of a backyard that we had to play baseball in, in a neighborhood like this. And all the balls and bats and all, There was a pretty good sized fence around it to keep from knocking the ball out the -. And then we had played dart-ball inside. You know what a dart-ball thing is?

MB: No.

GR: A diamond shaped thing with all the different bases on there and you throw darts up there and play dart-ball.

MB: Oh, OK.

GR: Then, subsequently, they had – they moved over onto right across the street over here was the new Y. It was a much nicer place.

MB: What do you remember about Henry Street and the Dumas Hotel and did you ever go there and the Ebony Club and all the businesses and entertainment – Did you go to any performances?

GR: Not really. I remember when they had functions and things going on over there. I can't remember one that I went to but I was always a friend of the Barlows that owned the hotel and his children. And we would go over there to different things and meals or whatever. I don't remember when all these biggies were coming, these big entertainers?

MB: Yeah.

GR: I don't remember them – going to any of their functions at all. But I remember going to the movies because you'd pay 10 cents to go in and I remember I always liked to sit on the front seat, front row. So I had to be pretty young at that time.

MB: We're running out of time. I just wanted to ask you one more question. How has Gainsboro changed over the years?

GR: Gainsboro has changed a lot for the best because you take all the old homes that were over here on Wells Avenue. They're all gone because First Baptist Church is over there now. And the educational center is over there. There has to be some more work done over here because I think that the Claytor place, something needs to be done about that. You know the clinic and the property where the old homeplace used to be. Of course, Stan Hale's office is down there which is OK. But the other changes that have been made and just like this place behind us here, Lily of the Valley. We have some people that did not want them to do anything to Gainsboro and I wrote an article in the paper, I remember that. And I told them that I thought it would be a good idea to do something about it because it was all run down buildings over there. The old YMCA and all of that was over there. And all that stuff needed to be out of there because there were a lot of empty building and whatever. But look at it now. You'd never know it was there. People like Helen, I'm not going to call their names on this thing. These two sisters and another group of two sisters, they were always negative about everything. They looked like they didn't want to see any progress made. It was just what they wanted. They figured that they knew everything about everything. And I wrote an article to the Tribune just a few weeks back and I told them what I thought about it. When they had an article in the Tribune about Henry Street, then I wrote an article about how I felt about it. I told 'em that I felt that the Social Security office would be an asset to Henry Street. I said these people have been over here – its been vacant for 50 years. If they want to do something about it, why did they wait this long. 50 years and nobody has even driven a nail into a 2X4 but they don't want to put this building over here. Well, what are you going to do with the space? They can't afford to put anything up here so what they gonna do about it. And I told 'em in the paper, I said, "Let the City Manager have her way". And I said, "Let whatever she can do to have them put the Social Security building up there, let 'em do it". And I was very adamant about that because I felt that it was necessary. I would like to see 'em put a nice restaurant on the first floor that could be for the employees or people in the area or whatever. Whatever they want to do upstairs or whatever it took for

the Social Security building, let's fill up the rest of it. And I put it all in the paper just like Lewis Perry was saying a few minutes ago before we left, "George, that article that you put in the paper. I meant to call you and tell you what a wonderful article I thought it was and just hadn't gotten around to it".

MB: Well, thank you so much.

GR: You through with me?

MB: Yeah, this is great.

GR: (laughing)