

Interviewee: Ernell Glasby

Interviewer: Hazel Law

Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

HL: I am here interviewing my aunt, Ernell Glasby. We'll start with the first question, where were you born?

EG: I am Ernell Glasby. I was born at 624 8th Avenue Northeast, formerly known as Ronker (??) Avenue in my grandparents home. I have -

HL: And your grandparents names?

EG: James and Cora Martin were my grandparents.

HL: How many siblings did you have?

EG: I had 3 sisters and 2 brothers at that time. All were born in Roanoke except my younger sister, Virginia May. She was born in Bluefield, West Virginia.

HL: Were all of your siblings born at the home or were any of them born in the hospital?

EG: As far as I know, they all were born in the home. My second sister was born on Walker Avenue - I mean she was born at 547 7th Avenue Northeast and that was - That's got Northwest there doesn't it?

HL: On her birth certificate but it was actually Northeast. But this birth certificate does read Northwest, but it was actually Northeast? In the Northeast section of Roanoke?

EG: As far as I can remember, she was in Northeast.

HL: And you were saying that a lot of the streets were numbered streets but they also had names?

EG: Mm mm.

HL: So 7th Avenue was also known as -

EG: Patton. As best as I can remember.

HL: This second sister was actually my mother Estelle France and it looks like here that she had - There was a midwife. So were there doctors present or were there midwives?

EG: Midwives as far as I can remember. Now my brother, George, had a doctor I know because he was named after Dr. Moore.

HL: Oh really?

EG: Yes.

HL: So tell me more about that, how that happened.

EG: My baby brother was born at my grandmother's home and the doctor came one week and next week, two weeks later, they hadn't named the baby. So, he said, "Now I've got to have a name for this birth certificate. So name the baby after me.", which was George Alexander and that's how my brother was named George Alexander France.

HL: Oh, OK. That's great and the doctor's name was actually George -

EG: Dr. George Moore. George Alexander Moore.

HL: Oh, that's very interesting. And that - And around what year was that?

EG: He was my - My brother was born in '34 I think. Around 1934.

HL: OK. So, Dr. Moore was practicing at that time, around 1934.

EG: He was still practicing.

HL: That's very interesting because it looks like here on my mother's birth certificate Estelle France, that her - It says here on the birth certificate that - Of course, back then, on the birth certificate they were still saying colored.

EG: Mm mm.

HL: And the birth certificate says the doctor or midwife and at that time, the midwife's name was Fannie Dagner. She was a midwife and her address was -

EG: 625 8th Avenue Northwest. And back to Estelle, it was Northwest 'cause we lived on 7th Avenue Northwest for a short time.

HL: OK, for a short time.

EG: So her address would've been 547 7th Avenue Northwest.

HL: Tell me about your earlier days. Now, Gainsboro is Northeast Roanoke, considered Northeast Roanoke?

EG: Mm mm.

HL: And where you lived in Gainsboro, how does that area look today?

EG: Oh, its quite different. You can't imagine houses and things that were there when we lived there in Northeast section. Its altogether different. Now, they had Orange Avenue was Gainsboro Avenue at that time.

HL: OK.

EG: And we had houses all up and down. And where the Civic Center is, Greater Mount Zion Church was there. Then they had grocery stores but all through that area. Some blacks had small business through there. And my father had a barber shop on 4th Street.

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HL: OK. And 4th Street, did that have a name or was it just 4th Street?

EG: As far as I can remember, its 4th Street and I think it was Commonwealth Avenue. I'm not positive about that but it was 4th Street and he was in the shop with another barber named Streeter (??) and the shop was named France's Barber Shop.

HL: Oh, OK.

EG: The barber shop, for some reason, was set afire. They said it was intentionally done. The barber shop burned down so daddy started working extra in Northwest section with his cousin, his wife's cousin, Mr. Hines. So it was Hines Barber Shop that he later worked in. In between working for the N&W and the coal mines. The coal mines in West Virginia. Every time the coal mine – they'd all come back and work at the Norfolk and Western. So we moved quite a bit from Roanoke to West Virginia, back and forth.

HL: OK. And your father's name again was James Abe France and the address at that time was 547 7th Avenue Northwest and you were once telling me also that the other name for Orange Avenue or 460 in the Gainsboro Avenue was Old Lynchburg. What was - ?

EG: Lynchburg Avenue.

HL: Lynchburg Avenue.

EG: That's now Orange Avenue.

HL: And I do remember my mother, if you can remember also that your family eventually once your father did work for Norfolk and Western Railroad and you did say he also had his own France's Barber Shop.

EG: Yes.

HL: Do you remember the circumstances around which they burned the barber shop? You said it may have been set intentionally.

EG: No, I don't. But it was proved out that it was intentionally set. So somebody – After they investigated.

HL: Was your father, at that time, a licensed barber? Maybe you think that was – Of course, that's speculation.

EG: Oh yes. He was licensed because he finished the 3rd grade but he passed his state Barber from Illinois and Virginia and Missouri. He passed all those – He had his licenses. When we moved to Illinois, he had a little shop there. But back to being in Roanoke, before we left, we moved away in 1937 but – I went to school –.

HL: That was another question – What were the schools that you attended here in Roanoke?

EG: I attended Gregory which was on 9th Avenue Northeast. It was a great big old gray building. I can remember that. And then we'd go to school, we'd have our prayer. We'd say the Pledge of Allegiance

to the Flag.

HL: Oh, at that time you were allowed to say prayers in school.

EG: Prayer in school. Uh huh, we'd say a little prayer and then we would have recess and so forth. And for lunch, all we would have would be a bowl of soup, a sandwich, a cookie and a little thing of milk and a lot of times a piece of fruit. But everyday, you knew you were going to have a different type sandwich and soup which was very filling and I think now how the kids waste food in the schools.

HL: OK.

EG: And then, I went to Gilmer School. Now we marched from Gregory School which was on 9th Avenue and, at that time, they called that Apeyard (??). The houses were in rows, brown houses in rows. And we marched with little flags from Gregory School to Gilmer School one morning.

HL: Was that like a graduation ceremony or -?

EG: No, it was going to the new school.

HL: Oh, so Gilmer replaced Gregory?

EG: Uh huh.

HL: Oh, I see.

EG: It was on 4th Avenue Northeast, Gilmer School.

HL: Oh, so they gave all the children flags and went to Gilmer School.

EG: Right.

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HL: So how long did you attend Gilmer?

EG: As best as I can remember, about 1 or 2 years and then we left.

HL: Do you remember any of your teachers in Gregory or in Gilmer?

EG: I remember Miss Nelly Reed in Gilmer but I can't remember those in Gregory. Now Miss Reed might have been with us there 'cause the school was a white school and it was opened up to blacks and all the teachers went with the students to this school. So eventually, Gregory was made a day care center I think they said for a while and then they finally tore it down when the redevelopment came through there.

HL: Now Gregory, was Gregory an all-black school?

EG: And Gilmer too.

HL: And Gilmer was as well?

EG: Uh huh.

HL: OK, but you just said something about one of them being a white school or -

EG: It was a white school that was gave to the blacks.

HL: Oh, when they built the new school for the whites -

EG: The blacks got Gilmer.

HL: I understand now. So, then Gilmer became the school, the elementary school or the school for all blacks.

EG: Mm mm. And Gregory was all-black.

HL: OK, I see. So, do you have any other remembrances of living in Northeast before moving, before your father moved you and your siblings away to West Virginia and then Illinois? Were there any other incidents that you could remember from your - evidently you were very, very young at that time.

EG: Very young and I don't remember but I do know that Northeast where the Civic Center is, all on that side, was the Greater Mount Zion Church, then a grocery store, some Jews or Syrians had a grocery store there. Houses was all up and down on 9th Avenue.

HL: So the Civic Center now and the Ford car dealership, the post office, all those buildings now, in other words, that was your home place and your growing up place?

EG: Mm mm.

HL: That's where you were basically born and grew up for a younger period of time in your life and

now, like you said, the redevelopment came along and I think you were relating to me some of the incidents that you can remember when redevelopment came through and how they bought up the homes and how it affected the people. Could you relate some about that?

EG: You have to remember back when I came back to Roanoke in '54, they were in the process of redeveloping the Northeast section and they went up Lynchburg, up Orange Avenue. There was a graveyard – They took a lot of the graves – All of this was still on Lynchburg and all the way up there was houses. They took houses and at that point, the people weren't getting grants. That first group that they went through there, the people, a lot of 'em just died of heart attacks. It upset 'em so.

HL: It affected them so greatly.

EG: Mm mm. They didn't give 'em a grant or nothing. The next group that went through when they went over, they got Lizzie's house, my Aunt Lizzie. They gave them a little money. But that first group, they didn't get anything.

HL: And your Aunt Lizzie your speaking about is Elizabeth Martin?

EG: Yeah. Now she was on 6th Avenue. That was Harrison. And they went all – There were grocery stores all down there and houses all down there and I do remember the – When I came back, they still had black and white signs for -

HL: Segregation.

EG: Segregation.

HL: Things were still segregated.

EG: Still segregated. And then growing up here, when I came back and I think that had stopped but growing up before I left, in the streetcars, you had to go in the back door of the streetcars. They had a black curtain up. The blacks sat behind that curtain, the whites sat up front. You had to go into the back and they had conductor on the white, you know on the front and a conductor on the back. And you had to go in the back, pay your fare and go in the back and sit behind that curtain.

HL: So you went up to the front of the bus and you paid your fare up there but then you had to get off and then come back and get on the bus through the back door?

EG: No, you'd go in the back door and pay your fare right there.

HL: Oh, there was a conductor back there collecting.

EG: Uh huh.

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HL: You did say there was a conductor back there.

EG: Uh huh.

HL: Collecting the fare from the blacks and then a black curtain was separating the black section from the white section. Right, OK, yeah. That was some of the remembrances that I was getting at earlier that you do remember about the time that you did spend here. So you do remember riding and there were streetcars back then in Roanoke?

EG: Mm mm. Yeah, streetcars ran down through Northeast.

HL: What about the movies and that type thing? Did you go to any movies?

EG: No, we were too – didn't have any money to the movie. But when I came back to Roanoke, they had the Virginia Theater and a theater downtown and you had to – I don't know about that one. I know that only blacks were going to the Virginia Theater. Then they had one downtown. But the hospital, Lewis-Gale, I'll never forget that. I went over to see one of my friends and had to go upstairs to the attic.

HL: That had the blacks -

EG: The blacks was upstairs in the attic. I said, "Well, this don't beat it all".

HL: Because, I guess, it was kinda different from growing up when you were living in Illinois somewhat.

EG: Mm mm.

HL: And I think you related a real interesting story to me about when you did move back to Roanoke and as I understand it, you moved back to Roanoke basically to take care of your mother?

EG: Well, yes.

HL: And to live.

EG: To help take care of her but basically, that was my first divorce and I brought my children back.

HL: Back home to raise 'em here in Roanoke. And it was an interesting story that you did say your father worked for at that time Norfolk and Western and so when he did move to Illinois, he also worked for the railroad, Illinois Central there? So tell me about the incident of how you were able to ride the train from Illinois - from North in Illinois to South to Virginia.

EG: I (chuckle) decided to move back to Virginia. So, I told my father. He said, "Well," - I was living in southern Illinois so I had to go up to Chicago to get the train and at that - I rode the train from Carbondale to Chicago. I had to change in Chicago. So, at that time, my father was a porter on the train so he said, "Well, you come on up and I'll get your ticket". So he went to the window and got the ticket and he came back and he said, "Now don't you move. I'm gonna give you this ticket but do not move.". When we got down to I think it was West Virginia line, I forget where you had to - all the blacks had to move to the back. They had a coach for the blacks. So the conductor came and woke me up and he said, "Miss, its time for you to have to go back to the back coach.". I said, "How far is it back there?". He said, "Its about 7 cars back.". I said, "Well, I've got these children and they're asleep. I'm not going to wake up my children to go 7 cars back to get in the black coach back there.". "Well, that's the law. You've got to move.". I said, "Well, I'm not moving.". I sat right there and I said, "I'm not moving.". So I turned on over and went on back to sleep. Pretty soon, here come the two of 'em _____ on the shoulder. "Miss, you've got to move.". I said, "I am not moving. I am absolutely not moving.". And he said, "Well, where did she get this? This is a first class ticket. We can't make her move.". So I stayed on there and rode into Virginia. Well, when I got off the train in Virginia -

HL: Here in Roanoke?

EG: Uh huh. Here in Roanoke. They took my picture. I said, "Well, I wonder why they taking my picture.". And when I got off, my aunt was way down at the end of the train and she was just a hollering, trying to wave me to come down there. They finally got up where I was at. She said, "How in the world - You in the white section. How'd you get on this train?". So I told daddy about it and he just laughed. I called him back and told him. He said, "That's why I told you not to move 'cause I knew you was going to be made to move."

HL: OK. That was very interesting.

EG: Uh huh.

HL: That sounds like a Rosa Parks story actually on the train. That was very interesting. So, you did come back to Roanoke and that was in 1954?

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EG: Mm mm.

HL: And then you did notice, like you said, how things were changing, the redevelopment were coming in down in the Gainsboro area and taking up all of those homes, buying up all those homes for what was eventually the Civic Center and now the car dealership.

EG: Yeah, it was Holiday Inn over there.

HL: That's exactly right.

EG: And then all through there, the businesses there, the post office and its hard to - Unless you were raised here and saw it, you would never imagine how the homes were down in there. How the people -

HL: How blacks actually, what you're saying basically how the blacks or African-Americans now were actually homeowners had homes all down through there.

EG: That's true.

HL: And of course when they decided to redevelop as it is or as it were, to improve supposedly the

community, the blacks are the first to be effected. And as you said, they bought up the homes and paid little to nothing and the people could not afford to – didn't have enough money to buy other homes and things so you said, it literally killed 'em. A lot of people died of heart attacks.

EG: Mm mm.

HL: And were there other incidents – So you actually were a member of the Greater Mount Zion Church that was in Northeast?

EG: Yes. Our family was really – We all started out there. It was then Mount Zion Baptist Church and in later years, I don't know whether that church burned or what happened to it but they had service at the YMCA over there on – I can't think of the name of that street – for a long time and then they built Greater Mount Zion. They named it Greater Mount Zion. But originally it was Mount Zion Baptist Church.

HL: And what was the original one? 'Cause I can remember Greater Mount Zion over here sitting up like on a hill, a little bit elevated.

EG: Mm mm. Yeah.

HL: And it was on – What was the name of the street that Greater Mount Zion was on at that time?

EG: I think that was 4th Street or Commonwealth Avenue. I'm not positive.

HL: Was that the older one? Now was that the original one before it burned down? Did they rebuild it on the same site?

EG: Yeah.

HL: Oh, OK. I see.

EG: They built on the same site. I think it burned but I'm not positive. Its been so long.

HL: But now the one that they rebuilt, they tore that down, the redevelopment people.

EG: They tore that down and relocated it in Northwest on I think its Grayson Avenue.

HL: Where the Greater Mount Zion Church is. And your minister at that time over at Greater Mount Zion – Who was the pastor at that time?

EG: I don't know who the pastor was. When I moved back, I just went a couple of times with my mother to take her down. I went a couple of times but then I had to pay cab fare and bus fare to get to Greater Mount Zion. Then I just – Jerusalem was up in Southwest and was closer so I could take my children and walk across the bridge so that's why I joined Jerusalem Church 'cause it was closer to me. And then when I went to several churches when I came to Roanoke. Just kinda searching for a church home. But when I walked into Jerusalem, I felt a warm feeling come over me and I knew that was the place for me to stop at. So then I joined Jerusalem. And at that time, Reverend Tonton (??) was still our pastor and then he retired. Then we had Reverend Boyd and then he split our church and a lot of members went with him. And then Reverend Young came to our church. So when my sister Estelle moved back to Roanoke, she joined Jerusalem. So that was her home church in Virginia.

HL: Here, I think you have a little – You were saying here – (papers rustling) This is where you were saying you do remember back in Virginia when you rode the streetcar which was seldom and you did say you did get on at the back door and sat behind a black curtain which separated whites from blacks. And again, being small, you didn't realize what was going on at the time. But there was segregation. Here are some other things here if you'd just – You said you walked to church.

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EG: Now that was after we went – That was when we were in Illinois.

HL: Oh, OK. But you do remember in Virginia where you did get on the streetcar.

EG: I did walk to church here in Roanoke across the bridge to Jerusalem.

HL: To Jerusalem but at Greater Mount Zion – Jerusalem was in Southwest but Greater Mount Zion was here in the Gainsboro section.

EG: Yes. I rode the bus down and the cab when I had the money.

HL: OK. But that was after you came back to Virginia.

EG: After I came back.

HL: And when you came back to Roanoke, you lived down on Gilmer Avenue.

EG: Yeah. At 1326 with momma.

HL: 1326 Gilmer Avenue.

EG: Uh huh.

HL: I understand.

EG: Northwest. And then I bought that little house across from her.

HL: Right, right, right. OK. So back over – Those were your best remembrances however of your Gainsboro days but those were very, very young.

EG: Uh huh.

HL: When you were very, very young, and then when you came back, you did see how the redevelopment had taken over, basically, your birthplace.

EG: Mm mm.

HL: Down in Gainsboro on 7th and 8th Avenue and all of that. So those were your remembrances of Gainsboro.

EG: Mm mm. Yeah, 'cause I didn't remember too much after I came back that they were taking – They took the land and everything. The houses.

HL: Right and when you relayed that to your sister who was actually born Estelle, my mother, who was actually born also down in Gainsboro -

EG: No, she was born in Northwest section.

HL: OK. Northwest. 7th Avenue Northwest.

EG: Northwest. 'Cause we lived there for a short time when I was too small to really remember.

HL: But you did state that there were some black businesses down in the Gainsboro area.

EG: Mm mm.

HL: Before they tore it -

EG: They had a drug store on Henry Street and restaurants. After I came back, I remembered some black businesses all up and down Henry Street in the Gainsboro area. They had a drug store. I was new coming back and I didn't get involved in a whole lot of things that was going on. But I knew they had had a drug store on Henry Street. They had the _____ Cleaners was there.

HL: OK.

EG: And that had restaurants and the night clubs. Then they had the Elks Home and that was around the corner on, I think that was Patton. I can't remember. Northwest. But its kinda foggy.

HL: Right. You're saying the night clubs up on Henry Street?

EG: Yeah. They had the – What was the name of that club?

HL: 308?

EG: Yeah, 308 and it was one of the nicest – It was the best nice night club they had. They had real good bands and always order in there. They didn't have a lot of fighting and carrying on. It was -

HL: It was a place where you could go and enjoy yourself and not worry about a whole lot of fighting or shooting.

EG: Then there was the Morocco. That was a nice club. That's where my brother met his wife in Morocco. Ann and _____ met at the Morocco.

HL: OK. Do you remember anything about the Dumas Hotel?

EG: It was there and bands that came to Roanoke would stay there. Couldn't stay in the Hotel Roanoke. Now they had the Star City Auditorium and then they had another auditorium that - it burnt. I can't think of the name. That's where they used to have the dances and the big bands. The whites would sit up in the balcony and the blacks would be down on the floor.

HL: Oh, the whites were up in the balcony of that club. (both laughing)

EG: At that auditorium.

HL: OK. It wasn't the Star City Auditorium?

EG: No, it was another auditorium over – It was a great big brick building. I can't think of the name of that.

HL: Well, that was a reverse that the whites had to sit up in the balcony.

EG: It was spectators they called 'em.

HL: They called 'em spectators?

EG: Uh huh.

HL: It was a black club but -

EG: No, it was an auditorium. It was a city auditorium. I don't know what the name of that auditorium was.

HL: City auditorium.

EG: Now the Star City Auditorium was – I think that was mostly black I think. Mostly blacks went to this other auditorium but it was – the whites would be spectators. But sometimes, they'd come down on the floor and dance to the tune of the big bands.

HL: But you do have a little remembrance of the Dumas as well?

EG: Mm mm.

HL: Well, is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would like to share with us?

EG: I remember – Now this is way ahead or behind or something (chuckle) but I remember the first refrigerator that I ever saw. You had to put 25 cents in it. 25 cents to keep it running and that went toward the \$8 payment a month. It was at my grandmother's house. They had – If you didn't put 25 cents in there, you didn't have no cold food.

HL: Well, we thank you so very much for the interview and once again this is Ernell Glasby who was born (recording stops)