

Interviewee: Jeanette E. Willis  
Interviewer: Arlene Ollie  
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

Today is October 30<sup>th</sup>. We are at the Gainsboro Library.

AO: How are you today?

JW: I'm fine, and you?

AO: OK. I want to ask you some questions about yourself and about your life. I'm going to start with basic background questions. When and where were you born?

JW: I was born in Roanoke, Virginia, on September 28, 1927.

AO: Tell me about your parents, brothers and sisters and if you had any extended family living nearby.

JW: I was raised by my aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Jessie A. Tripp. We lived at 210 Harrison Avenue, Northeast. And I had no brothers and sisters that I was brought up with. I have a half-sister that passed. We lived down there on Harrison Avenue and then we moved out on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, out there near where Magic City Ford is now. We lived there for a long time and then we moved to Northwest.

AO: Did you have any extended family like grandparents, aunts, uncles?

JW: No, they lived in Rocky Mount.

AO: Describe your home life. For instance, did you gather around the radio in the evening? Do you remember when you got a telephone, refrigerator, that kind of thing?

JW: Yes, we used to listen to the radio a lot when we – Well, we always listened to the radio a lot because I can remember having a radio from the time I was very young. Then, when we moved from Northeast to Moorman Road, that's when we got a refrigerator, electric stove, electric refrigerator. We moved up there in 1936.

AO: What kinds of activities did you participate in as a child?

JW: Well, we used to play hide and seek, tag. I used to go to Sunday School at First Baptist. I used to go to the YWCA down here on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street when it was down there. That's where I started going. And that was right after they moved from over here on Wells Avenue. I used to come to the library when it was over there on – When it was across the street from where it is now, on the corner of Patton Avenue and Gainsboro. Just the usual activities that young people did at that time. We used to play with the Wallers (??) and all the other families that lived near us down on 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

AO: Did you sit on the porch in the evening?

JW: Yeah. (giggle) That was the main thing that we used to do in the afternoon after supper as we used to say. We'd sit on the porch.

AO: What family stories were passed down from one generation to another? For instance, did your family have stories about memories during the Civil War or about slavery? Did they have any family recipes that's been passed down through the generations?

JW: I wish I had known about those questions before I got here but yeah, my aunts used to tell a lot of stories about different things that happened in the country when they would go over there to visit.

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AO: What about recipes?

JW: Well, you know, my mother was a great cook and she gave me a book of her recipes for sweet potato pies and rolls and her turkey recipe and things like that. I really can't remember off-hand what the recipes consist of but I still have the book that she gave me.

AO: That's wonderful. What is your fondest childhood memory? For example, favorite holiday event, favorite family vacation, a favorite gift that you received.

JW: Well my favorite memories are of going over to Franklin County to see my grandparents and when my aunts and uncles and all, one uncle, were all there and my grandmother used to go out into the

garden and pick green beans and then she would take a chicken and wring its head off and pluck the feathers and fry the chicken and make biscuits and things like that. That's really my fondest memories.

AO: What chores did you have to do around the house and/or neighborhood?

JW: Well, I would have to wash the dishes and help my mother keep the house clean. Just the usual chores in the house.

AO: Describe your house for us. For example, was it brick? Brick encased? Single story or two? Did you have a garden?

JW: You mean the first house we were in or -?

AO: I guess the house that you would consider where you grew up.

JW: The one we moved to when I was 9 and we lived there until my mother and father passed. That was up on Moorman Road, up on a hill and we didn't have a garden but my mother raised a lot of flowers. She had several flower beds and she liked working in the yard. She would cut the flowers after they bloomed and bring 'em in the house and so that was nice. We used to walk down to the market every Saturday and buy fresh groceries, fresh green beans and corn and tomatoes and a chicken that we had to bring back and she would wring its neck and pluck it and soak it in salt water overnight and then fix it after we would come home from church on Sunday.

AO: Did you shop in the Gainsboro community any?

JW: Yeah, well on the way to church, they had a store that was on the corner of Harrison Avenue and Gainsboro and at that shop we'd stop at to buy different little things and there were other businesses on Gainsboro between Harrison and Patton Avenue.

AO: Do you remember the name of the store?

JW: No. I remember the name of the store that was on Harrison Avenue and 5<sup>th</sup> Street and that was called – we called it Rich's Store because when I went to school at Harrison, the kids would go up there during recess and buy different candy and stuff like that.

AO: How long have you lived in Gainsboro and what streets have you lived on?

JW: Well, like I said, when we moved from 4<sup>th</sup> Street Northeast, we moved to Moorman Road, 841 Moorman Road and we lived there -

AO: (inaudible)

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JW: Uh huh. Until I got married and then I moved to Loudon Avenue.

AO: How has Gainsboro changed over the years?

JW: There have been many changes because Rutheford Avenue came all the way down the hill instead of the cul-de-sac that they have now. There was Gainsboro School. There was the AME Church, Mount Zion AME Church and then over as you went across Gainsboro, there were stores. Joe Muntz's Store and this man that they called "Bad Eye" had a shoe shine parlor over there. As you went up the hill, Hill Street Church was up at the top of the hill. The Hancock's had a store over there on Gainsboro. When you got to Washington Park, they had the swimming pool and the dance hall over there and there were a lot of picnics in Washington Park. People came from everywhere on Sundays and holidays to have picnics in Washington Park. Of course, we walked from Moorman over to Addison School even on bad days, snow days, whatever days. We didn't have anything like they call "Snow Days" now, because everybody walked and either they got out there and walked or they stayed at home when it snowed. School was never closed so we did walk a great deal. Everywhere we went, we used to walk down from Moorman Road to First Baptist Church.

AO: You've already answered probably number 13 which was talking about your school life. The part we didn't get was, "Were you ever allowed to stay home from school?"

JW: No. (laughing) You'd have to be almost dead to stay at home from school. My parents thought that that was very important.

AO: How much schooling did you complete?

JW: Well, I finished Addison in 1945 and I did a little bit of study. I did not go away to college but I did some courses at Roanoke College at Virginia Western mostly in Early Childhood Education.

AO: What kind of work did your family do?

JW: My father worked for N&W for about 40 years and -

AO: Do you remember what he did?

JW: The last job I remembered he worked at the foundry for many years.

AO: What foundry?

JW: The N&W Foundry where they have to build the engines.

AO: What kind of work have you done throughout your life?

JW: Well, I worked for TAP and the Head Start Program for 20 years and then when I retired from there, I worked at Roanoke City Schools as a bus-aide for 15 years.

AO: So pretty much around children?

JW: Mm mm.

AO: Do you remember the closing of the silk mills and the effect that it had on the community?

JW: Yes. The man that lived next door to us and his wife too, both of them worked at the silk mill and I think that the closing did have a kinda negative effect on people because they lost their means of livelihood. A lot of them went on to other jobs and some of them didn't.

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AO: What jobs were available for African-Americans?

JW: I think that the best jobs that they had were with the railroad and some of them worked as maids and there weren't too many real good jobs at that time.

AO: What are your memories of the Gainsboro Library and Mrs. Virginia Y. Lee?

JW: My mother used to go to prayer meeting on Wednesday nights and I would come down early and come to the library. That was across the street on the corner of Patton and Gainsboro and above that was the YMCA. I remember that Mrs. Lee would help me to pick out books. She was a quiet lady, very nice lady. And I remember on Halloween after the library moved over here where it is now, they used to have bobbing for apples and parties outside. That was real nice. We used to come to that.

AO: Describe cultural events that happened in Gainsboro. For example, do you remember entertainers who came to the Dumas? Do you remember performances? How many people attended? What time of year was it or where they were held and if entertainers were involved, where did they stay?

JW: There were a lot of dances that we attended at the American Legion building when that was down there and I remember -

AO: Where was that located?

JW: It was on the corner of what was then Commonwealth. It was a street that ran right into the station, into the N&W station that's there now. I think the Roanoke Hotel uses it for a parking lot now. It was right on the corner of Commonwealth and Wells Avenue. I can remember Ray Charles and Lionel Hampton and a lot of the bands of the era that came there. Some of them stayed at the Dumas Hotel. I don't remember where the ones that did not stay at the Dumas stayed but I know that a lot of 'em – Cab Calloway I saw him down there. Just most of the bands that were touring at that time stayed or played down there. There were big crowds of people that came. The black people would be on the floor and the white people would be in the gallery looking on. They liked the bands. They liked to see the people that came so they would have to sit upstairs and we could be on the floor dancing.

AO: That's interesting. I have never heard. That's kinda like a reverse American \_\_\_\_\_.

JW: That's true.

AO: And they were down near the stage and production and whites were in the balcony. I don't think I've ever heard anybody talk about whites coming to the black dances and sitting in the balcony.

JW: They did.

AO: That's very interesting.

JW: That's also like the Roanoke Theater. I don't remember going. I didn't ever go to the American Theater but I did go to the Roanoke Theater where you had to go all the way up into the balcony. In fact, it was up above the regular balcony that the black people would have to go if they went down there.

AO: Where was the Roanoke Theater located?

JW: It was right in the middle of the block between Jefferson Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Street. It was near Woolworth's.

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AO: On Campbell?

JW: On Campbell Avenue. We could not go into the front door. We would have to go around to the back on Kirk Avenue. The back entrance was on Kirk Avenue. We would have to go up the stairs.

AO: (Inaudible)

JW: Uh huh.

AO: Who were some of the strong community leaders and what role did they play?

JW: There was Reverend A.L. James, of course, he was the pastor of First Baptist. Reverend Powell who was pastor of Hill Street. Reverend Gilbert who was pastor of Sweet Union and there was Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Dean who lived over on Wells Avenue. There was Dr. Paxton and his wife and his mother who was a probation officer at that time. Mrs. Sly who was a nurse. They lived on Gilmer Avenue at that time. R.W. Clark and his wife. He was the undertaker or mortician or funeral director or whatever you call 'em and they lived down on Patton Avenue right after you cross this creek down here. There were my teachers, Miss Watkins who lived up on Harrison Avenue near where we built and Nelly Wise Reed. They lived up there. Miss Sarah Brown who was principal of Gilmer School and Miss Queen Williams who was principal of Gainsboro School. Miss Helen Skipper who was principal of Harrison School. Coach Lawson and his wife, or his first wife Sally Lawson was one of my teachers. Miss Beatrice Beale (??). She didn't teach me but she was a teacher at that time. Miss Lucy Stratton who was a member of First Baptist Church. Dr. L.C. Downing and his brothers E.D. Downing and -

AO: Gardner?

JW: Yeah, Gardner. I think he was the dentist. Dr. H.T. Penn and his wife Laticia who was a pianist for First Baptist and she was also an organist at First Baptist. David Trantum (??) who was an organist at First Baptist. Dr. Moore, Dr. George Moore and his wife Alice. There are many others. Right now I can't think of a lot of them.

AO: You did a great job. Who were your role models?

JW: My mother of course. And then there was Miss Madge Wheaton. That was a teacher and I just loved her because she was such a good speaker and she was a beautiful lady. And Miss Rose Butler-Brown. She was a member of Jerusalem. Miss Sally Lawson of course. I just mentioned her. Miss Sadie Lawson. I thought she was a beautiful lady. There were several others that right now I can't think of them.

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AO: How was your life effected by segregation and the Civil Rights Movement?

JW: I was born during segregation and I can remember having to go to the back of the bus although I hated that long seat and I would never sit all the way in the back. I didn't ride during the peak hours because I really did not want to go all the way to the back. The buses and the streetcars were segregated during that time that I was growing up. Of course, none of us liked segregation and whenever we got a chance to move closer to the front or to not go places that were segregated then we would not go rather than go and be segregated. Some places you had to go but -

AO: Give me a for instance. When you say you had to go.

JW: You know, like downtown. There were some places that used to would not let black people try

clothes on and I never went to any of those places that I can remember but I used to hear people talk about not being able to try their clothes on.

AO: If you didn't try them on and you took them home and then they didn't fit, could you return them?

JW: Well, they told me that they could take them back but they just couldn't try them on in the store. I know a man that used to live up the street from me. He worked for N&W and he had 2 cars and he said he had 2 because he could not take his nicer car down to his job because if he did and his car was better than the foreman's that he would lose his job. I don't know how true that is but I've been told that.

AO: Sounds reasonable to me.

JW: There were people that had to go out of town to buy their cars because the car dealers here would not sell them the nicer cars. They would go out of town to buy their new cars.

AO: Did you have any thoughts about the Civil Rights Movement here?

JW: I was here during that time and the people that went down to Woolworth's and the Grant store that was here and McClellans, those places that had lunch counters. We would go down during that time and some of the men would go sit at the lunch counters and then we would come back and then some others would go down. Finally, it didn't take too many times before they integrated them and then some of the places like Shulte's they just closed up rather than

AO: What was that?

JW: Shulte's. That used to be down on Campbell Avenue. That was a department store that closed up during that time. McClellan's closed up during that time and Grant's. Kress's stayed open a little bit longer. And Woolworth's stayed open longer than that. But some of them just closed up rather than integrate.

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AO: Did you have a spouse, sibling or children that served in the military?

JW: Oh, yes. Both of my husbands were in the military and my oldest son was in the Air Force. His son was in the Army and the Air Force and I have a step-son that was in the Army. A grandson that was in the Army.

AO: Did any of them serve during war time?

JW: My son was in – He went to Turkey and he went to Spain and he served in England but this was mostly after World War II and the Korean War. My first husband was in World War II. He served in the Philippines during World War II, John Coleman. Jimmy Willis had served in World War II and in the Korean War. Both of them had medals that they had on during that time.

AO: Tell me about your memories of urban renewal and what effect it had on your life.

JW: I can remember when we lived in Northeast then. A lot of people had really, really nice homes and the Rose's that used to live on Rutheford Avenue and the Water's that lived on 4<sup>th</sup> Street. The Harston's. Just a lot of the people that lived around, not only those people but a lot of other people had just beautiful homes and they worked hard to get them and to fix them up the way that they wanted them. They just came and just took everything and they gave them little or nothing for their homes and then when they offered that land back for sale, they charged so much an inch for that property and it was just, it just wasn't right that they did that.

AO: Is there anything else that we did not cover that you'd like to share with us?

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JW: I do know that on Henry Street, there were a lot of buildings, a lot of businesses. I remember Eugene Calloway had a cab stand up there and it was the day and night taxi and Everett Hunt had a cab stand up there. Mr. Young who was Mrs. Lee's father had a poolroom up there. Harry Franklin had a poolroom up there. Dr. Brooks had a service station. In fact, we lived right off of Henry Street on Wells Avenue. They were getting ready to close up Henry Street during that time. Dr. Moore had an office up there. Later, there were clubs up there. Harry Russell had the 308 club up there and there was a Dining Car Club and Wagstaff had a business up there and he also had the Continental Club that

had opened on Henry Street and Wells Avenue. Dr. Penn had a drug store up there as well as his practice that was upstairs with him and Dr. E.D. Downing and Dr. Gardner Downing. Of course, the Barlow's, Mac and Mac Sr.. Jack and Jill were the daughters of Mac Jr. and they had a little ice cream stand, Mac, Jack and Jill. They had the hotel. They were running the Hotel Dumas at that time. And the clubs used to have dances up on the third floor. They had a cafe downstairs. Some of the people that worked in there was Avis Alexander and Mud (??) Scott. And there were other people that worked in there. They had another club in Northeast called the HP Club that Hershey Steptoe (??) and another guy, I can't think of what his name was right now. They had one down there. The Wine store that was on 4<sup>th</sup> Street. Nick's started out on 4<sup>th</sup> Street and then it moved to Henry Street. And when the clubs used to have the dances at the Star City Auditorium, they would leave there and go to Nick's Place to eat after the dances. A lot of the clubs had formal dances at the Star City. Some people that came to the Star City like Little Richard and Solomon Burke and people like that came. Joe Munsty (??) had the Star City built. There were a lot of different people, famous people that came there as well as the American Legion Auditorium.

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AO: That's very interesting. I'm curious about Dr. Penn having an office and a drug store.

JW: Mm mm. The office was right there at where Henry Street bridge starts now, there was a big building on that corner that Dr. Penn owned and he had his offices and the Downings had their offices upstairs. Dr. Penn had the drug store downstairs. We used to go over there in the evenings sometimes, summer evenings after church and buy ice cream and they had sodas and hot dogs. Mr. Neighbors that used to be the manager of the theater, Virginia Theater - That was across the street from the old High Street Church was – had a drug store. He and Dr. Robinson was the pharmacist and they had a drug store on the corner of Gainsboro – In fact, right across the street.

AO: I was just kinda curious when I heard you say Dr. Brooks.

JW: Yeah. Dr. Brooks had a drug store up there too. He was a pharmacist.

AO: OK. He had the one right on the corner of Wells Avenue?

JW: Well, it was right next to the building that was on the corner of Wells.

AO: Just as a point of interest, what time frame did you just describe?

JW: That was during the early '40s. From the '40s and '50s.

AO: That was wonderful. \_\_\_\_\_ businesses on 1<sup>st</sup> Street that I truly appreciate. Is there anything else you'd like to share.

JW: Well, I can't think of too much more than that. There are a lot of things that I could tell you about but just to -

AO: Bring it all to mind right now -

JW: Yeah, right off the top of my head.

AO: I want to thank you for participating and giving us a wealth of information that was delightful for me to hear. And I'm sure that whoever comes behind me and listens to your oral history will be just as appreciative as I am.

JW: Thank you and there was one more thing. My husband did work for Nick's and he worked at Atlantic Sandwich there. People that know the Atlantic Sandwich know that they had hot dogs for 10 cents and people just flocked in there for those hot dogs.

AO: I'd like to have one of those myself. (both chuckling) Well, thanks again for your time and for your participation.

JW: Your welcome.