

Interviewee: Robert Hale
Interviewer: Mary Bishop
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

This is December 16, 2006.

MB: Mr. Hale if you would state for the recording your name and -

RH: Robert Monroe Hale.

MB: He's being interviewed at the Harrison Museum. When and where were you born?

RH: I was born here in Roanoke, October 8, 1924, at 612 Harrison Avenue.

MB: How long have you lived in Gainsboro?

RH: Well, I lived here until I went into the service and then came back here and then went to Boston in 1960.

MB: And how long did you stay there?

RH: 27 years.

MB: So you've been back -

RH: About, almost 20 years.

MB: '87 or so.

RH: Yeah.

MB: Repeat again the streets you've lived on here in Roanoke.

RH: This is Harrison Avenue, 6th Avenue and Patton Avenue which is 5th Avenue and when I say Roer Avenue Southwest and Lincoln Terrace. That's all I can think of now.

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

RH: My parents – My mother was a school teacher for several years at this school here.

MB: Her name?

RH: Esther Tallihale (??) and my father, he worked at the freight station for years but he became crippled so he was invalid for a long time. I think he died in '36.

MB: His name was?

RH: James Henry Hale. I have a brother who is James Henry Hale, Jr. He's in Hampton. He's a retired teacher. And there is the next brother, Nathaniel Hale. He's deceased since '01 I think it was. There's a sister, Esther Antonette Hale. She was named after my mother. Who else? That's it as far as the immediate family.

MB: Did you have extended family members living nearby?

RH: You mean cousins?

MB: When you were growing up?

RH: Cousins and such, oh yeah.

MB: Aunts and uncles.

RH: Oh yeah, a bunch of them. Uncle Bob and Uncle Harrison and its just a bunch of 'em. I think granddaddy had about 10 children. I think 5 girls and 5 boys so lots of aunts and uncles and cousins. The Hales just took over Roanoke.

MB: How about your mother's side? Were her people here too?

RH: They were from Richmond and my grandmother lived in Richmond. She was – she lived to 100, almost 101. Mother lived to 94. Her people, well, they were scattered about, New Jersey and in the country, down in the country somewhere outside of Richmond. They just all scattered about. Its hard to keep up with. Most of were in Virginia and so -

MB: Describe the house at 612 Harrison Avenue, what it looked like and - ?

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RH: Well, its still there now. It was double – In fact, I think my – We lived upstairs. I think my aunt

and granddaddy lived downstairs so it was pretty crowded up there at times. 'Cause you know with 4 people with almost 6 people so to speak 'til daddy died. We had the upstairs. And during those days, it was – you had rooms heated individually 'cause we had to heat water to take your bath and stuff like that. Everybody went to school didn't have far to go to school. We just walked down the street. We never really thought about being poor but we were poor. My mother worked in Bridgeport, Connecticut during the summer when school was out. She worked for some people up in Bridgeport and leave us here with the aunts and uncles 'cause daddy wasn't able to work. That's a long time ago – that you thought about these things. I had a paper route over on 7th and I think my brother had one too and we basically just – 'Cause all the relatives, the Scotts and all the people lived on the street and in the neighborhood. Everybody was family because everybody knew each other. The school teachers knew you and they were part of the church you went to. It was more of a community. The boys went to Hampton and the sister went to Virginia State, I think. Is it a university now? Yeah. All of 'em are. I think I had some cousins that went to Bluefield State. And that was always the exciting thing coming home for Christmas. And what were they, 20 years old or something like that, but you would look forward to them coming home for Christmas. And sending packages, you know, food packages and stuff like that. Then the draft – the Army came and World War II. A lot of people got scattered during that time. So they regrouped a little bit when they came home in '46. So much going on. (chuckling)

MB: Any other activities that you all participated in, church or clubs or anything that you all did.

RH: You went to church. Everybody went to church.

MB: Where did you go?

RH: We went to Mount Zion AME which is now on Melrose. You just had to make your own fun. There were no computers or cell phones and TV and stuff like that so you were just a little more creative I believe. Flying kites, shooting marbles. We were quite musical too because mama had this old upright piano so we all learned to play just by ear. I think she played too 'cause she worked at the Y for a long time with kids. It was mostly musical, guitar, ukeleles then and guitars. I think somebody had a violin but we didn't go for that. Mostly I just learned the piano at home. My brother played trumpet I think. My sister took music lessons. So basically, if you think about it, the whole family was musical. Then we got into photography, taking pictures with your little Brownie cameras. It was a time of you just had to do your thing. You didn't have – We got little erector sets and chemical sets for Christmas and wagons and stuff like that. No Nintendos. (chuckling) It didn't cost that much either. Its a long time ago. We used to get Christmas trees. A man used to sell Christmas trees on the corner. They were about 35 cents or 50 cents and then we'd wait until he sold all he was going to sell and go home and we go down and pick up the ones that was left which was pretty scrawny. You fixed the tree up. Momma provided for us. She took care of the family and she worked and provided for us. So it was basically a single parent at that time when daddy was in the wheelchair. He couldn't get around so she took care of everybody. And we had family too. The aunts was downstairs. The aunts were up the street. The uncles – Uncle Bob had the Dreamland and he had a grocery store and he has Pine Oaks now. There's a street named after Hale up there. I don't know but it must still be there. It might seem like a dull life to some kids nowadays but nobody had a car. You walked everywhere you went and so you really just was living in an era that wasn't quite as advanced as it is now.

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MB: What kind of work did your mother do?

RH: She was a school teacher. She taught here, I think 1st or 2nd grade and then substituted once for 4th grade or something.

MB: Here at Harrison?

RH: Yeah, here at Harrison.

MB: And she also taught at the Y?

RH: Yeah. And in the summer, she taught at the playground. They used to have a lot of activities at

the playground. All the swings and they had pet shows and there was just a lot of activities. People were just out then. You were outside then. Everything went on outside. Even with the radio, there was one station. So everything really happened on the outside. A lot of activities were outside playing ballgames and stuff like that. But she taught for a long time over at the playground. And then she taught at the Y.

MB: What type of work have you done throughout your life?

RH: Not much. (laughing) When I came back from the Army, I worked at the City School Board for a little while and then, that's when I went to Boston in '51 to study Music for a couple of years and came back. Basically, what did happen? Where was I working? I was working somewhere. Maybe I was working for the School Board then too. But I had a couple – We were playing music.

MB: Where did you study Music in Boston?

RH: First there was a little school called Phil Saltman's School of Music.

MB: What is it?

RH: Phil Saltman. It was a school of music. Then there was another one I went to that's called Berklee House. It was called Schillinger House but the man who was the owner or teacher, his name was Berk and his son's name was Lee. His name was Lawrence Berk. That's how the Berklee School of Music came to be. There were about 50 students there and there's about 5,000 there now at least. It's a college now. So then I came home and started a family. And went back to school. I went back to Boston in '60.

MB: What did you do then?

RH: Then I did some more studying and I went into photography when I was there and worked with the Boston Redevelopment. I did a lot of work with them.

MB: Photography?

RH: Yeah, yeah, doing their photography work and worked for a small black newspaper something like the Tribune but it was called Bay State Banner and I worked for them about 10 years or so. Then I worked for Oxfam America. It's a relief program. I worked for them about 4 or 5 years. Mother left me a home and it was falling to pieces so it was just time to get back, reconstruct.

MB: The Harrison Avenue house?

RH: No, it's the one on Patton Avenue. That's where I am now. I've been there about 20 years.

MB: And that's the one she left you?

RH: Yes. She had 4 houses. She left everybody a house.

MB: That's great.

RH: Yeah.

MB: Tell us about the schools that you attended here in Roanoke.

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RH: Here, at Harrison and then Addison. They were the only 2 to attend I guess. I finished after I came back from the service. It was in the summer I think. You had so many units you had to make up. Each subject was a half a unit so I think you had to have 2 units each semester. That means you had to take 4 subjects. And I think when I left I just had only a unit or so to make up. So it was in the summertime. We finished here in the summer, just a small class. I still have a ring from 1946. What's that, 60 years? (laughing) And the funny thing about it was this was – you can't even see it, it's all worn down, but I think it said 1945 and whoever finished in '45 pawned it. So, I got the ring and they changed the 5 into a 6.

MB: That's great.

RH: Isn't that something. This was the big thing during those days, pawning things. People were just poor. People used to pawn their winter clothes in the summer and they'd have to get it out in the wintertime. (laughing) A lot of us worked downtown - _____ stores were in town. Steins, and Opio and Oak Horn. No malls so everything was in town. A lot of us worked there for about \$6 or \$7 a

week. But you could go out – like we'd go to Henry Street on a Sunday with \$2. And that's what you did just dressed up. They had dances down at the Roanoke Auditorium. They wanted 85 cents – the big bands, all the big bands too.

MB: Which ones do you remember?

RH: Duke Ellington came here and Erskine Hawkins and Benny Goodman – just all the big bands that you can think of during those days. I remember they were making \$25 a night and the leader got \$50 and they was traveling all over the country. When you look at these documentaries about these big bands and these people, just remember that they were traveling but they were doing these things but they weren't making but something like that. I've seen some of 'em on Henry Street go across the street where there was a rummage sale. They didn't stay overnight at the Dumas but they just stayed there to eat and to freshen up. I've seen 'em go across the street to the rummage sales and get some clothes. 'Cause once they finished playing, they would hop on the bus and go to another town. And Duke Ellington used to have a Pullman Coach and I know – That's how he traveled. But I know that once they didn't want to bring it up from North Carolina or something, he had to miss a gig or something 'cause he was always elegant with everything. But he would either rent one or – so the whole band could travel by train and not by bus. It was exciting times. It really was.

MB: Kinda backing up a little bit, do you remember when you all got a telephone or a refrigerator or any of those things?

RH: You always had to go down the street and ask somebody to use their telephone. We had an ice box. You had a big sign you put on the outside and it had four corners to it. One would say 25, 50, 75 or 100 which lets the ice man know how many pounds of ice you wanted. And he'd bring it around the back. Had this little rubber thing on his back so when he carried the ice. He had the little tongs that you picked the ice up with. Sometimes, it would be heavy and he would have it on his back and its so strange, the ice box and the biggest problem was make sure you change that water in the ice box 'cause the ice would drip and it was always running over if you forgot about it. It didn't hold much. With the piece of ice in there and you try to squeeze a watermelon and a bottle of milk in there, that's all you could get in there. That's what we used to keep things cold. I can't even remember when we got the telephone. I don't even remember when we got a telephone. Isn't that something? I do know we had the ice box and the man would bring up – most of the time it was 25 pounds. But, we'd buy peaches by the bushel so mom could can some. I'd get 2 bushels and we'd be eating one while she's trying to can. My aunt made dandelion wine. We used to pick dandelions. I look at these dandelions and I said that they're just going to waste. We used to to pick dandelions in a little gallon bucket that you got, a lard can that you got the lard in and we would pick a few pails for that and make dandelion wine.

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MB: Did you all have a garden?

RH: I don't think so. My granddaddy had 2 horses and he did plowing. He went out and did plowing at the fields. I think he plowed fields for people. I don't remember. I know we had chickens.

MB: In your yard?

RH: Yeah. And my brother raised rabbits. I wouldn't be able to watch him kill one. He raised rabbits. We all had pets, the guinea pigs and stuff like that.

MB: Do you remember some of the stories that were passed down in your family from one generation to another? Any you could tell us?

RH: Hmmm. Off hand, I can't really -

MB: Any memories of the Civil War or before that or reconstruction or anything at all?

RH: Momma would've been the one to know more about – Its just probably going back before our time and how they had to survive. I can't remember off-hand them saying anything. I know we have talked about when she was coming up as a little girl and stuff like that. I think she was teaching somewhere down South. There are some things on paper somewhere I guess. I'd have to look it up.

MB: Tell us about your military service, when it was and where you went. You told us a little bit.
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RH: That was in '43. I think it was '43. I was 18. I think first we went to Maryland. They called it a staging area. Then we went to Louisiana. Then we went to Liverpool, I think it was, England. I think it was about 11 days crossing the Atlantic. And the thing about it was it was an English ship Britannica, I think. It was an English ship and they boiled everything. The whole troop got sick from the way they cooked. Then, of course, it was a little tight too because the Germans had U-boats and stuff like that so as the whole convoy went, you had a lot of air protection. Then, after we left there, we went to France. A little after D-Day, I went to France. We stayed there until the war ended. Well, actually, we were going to the Pacific 'cause they had planned to try to invade Japan rather than – They felt that there were enough casualties invading France because thousands and thousands – the beach was just red with blood. And so, I guess, and, of course, this was an occupied country, France was. Not the enemy's country so to speak. Whereas there were enough casualties there where if you tried to invade Japan, it would've been a massacre 'cause they were well protected. We were ready to go to France. After the war ended in Europe, we were going to the Pacific but it just happened to end. We were at the Mediterranean. We were going through the Panama Canal to go to the Pacific but we were in the Mediterranean coming that way and it just so happened that the war ended while we were making that approach. So, they figured – the government did something smart once but they figured it would be cheaper to just let us come on home than to go. We just happened to be some of the first soldiers returning. That \$10 suitcase I had (laughing) made out of cardboard. But I lost a lot of good things because we thought we were going all the way back to Louisiana and so all of our duffel bags they went there too. 'Cause I had collected water from the Atlantic Ocean, from the English Channel and all those places. And a lot of guys had gotten some of the German guns and so a lot of that stuff was lost. Never got back to it. Takes me back. Through the years. We were in England and then we went to France, just went through Paris. Don't let 'em off here, we'll never find 'em again. (laughing) We'll never find 'em again. They'd all go AWOL. We had come right after the invasion, the city was just leveled. One thing I heard that somebody had planned, I think even Hitler had planned to blow the Eiffel Tower and all that stuff. And some general didn't follow the order which – I think I was reading in some history lesson, because I was always wondering why they didn't. When you're retreating, usually when you retreat, you just blow up everything as you retreat. So that was a fortunate thing that the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triumph, they could've just blown that away. But somebody wanted to spare it. And then we just came back home. Then I started doing some studying of – Well you had the GI Bill of Rights that you could study. I think I studied everything. Typing and shorthand, that's what went together and brick laying. Then I was going to music. I decided to go back to music. There was a Professor Gorham, he was teaching. I had seen this ad in the paper, in the Down Beat I think it is of the school in Boston. So I wrote to it. The thing about it that was really ironic was I wrote to it and they sent me this brochure and it was 1 black fellow in there, in this old brochure. It looked like a band practice or something. So, to apply, I had to go down to the VA office. Its where the Times building is now. I had to go down to the VA office. So the guy who was interviewing me, he said – I had to get the approval of them that the government would be paying. So he looks in this book and he says, “I see you can go to this school.”. Sometimes you think about what would've happened if certain things else had happened in your life. If you did this or if this hadn't happened and it was so strange. He said – Well I guess if that picture hadn't been in there, he might've just assumed that I couldn't. So, we wrote to the school and it was approved. Then the second bombshell that was – the GI Bill was gonna end that September. We had it for about 5 years, it was '51. So I think it must've been from '46 to '51. And it was the end that September. So when I got in school – when I went to school, it was like July or August and they said the school was closed for the summer. I said, “Well I gotta get in here. When its opened again, it'll be too late.”. So they just registered me anyway to make sure that I was in there.

And that was another quirk of fate. I guess if I hadn't gone to school in Boston, I never would've _____. So you never know what twists and turns happens in your life because of certain things. And then my children wanted to be there. Wouldn't it be something if say I'd never gone to Boston. (laughing) But life is supposed to be like it is.

0.30.04.2

MB: Back here in Roanoke, what were some of the store and businesses that you and your family went to?

RH: I think on every corner you had a grocery store. Usually it was Syrians. 'Cause we had one on this corner and one across the street, Ferris. We used to call it Ferris. They were poor. They were really poor. (laughing) I think they had a baby every year. We were watching that flat, unleavened bread that they used to give out. These were the neighborhood stores. But usually there was a store everywhere. There was one down on 6th here. There was one up on Loudon. I mean a grocery store was on every corner just about. But then, of course, you went to town to really get what you needed. We used to go there on Saturday nights and I always wondered why momma bought me a wagon for Christmas. I'd pull the wagon down on Saturday night. You bought things in pecks and bushels and pints. They had those peck cans. The first time I heard something about it, spinach by the pound. I said, "You buy it by the bushel or the gallon". But momma used to go there last thing and like you had one of these gallon cans and she bought a gallon of potatoes. If he had about 2 or 3 potatoes left over. It wasn't enough. So she would strategically be at places like that. There wouldn't be enough left over to make another sale so the man would put the few in there. Then you bought peanut butter out of a big can and you scooped it up. And little things like that.

MB: Was that down on the market?

RH: Yeah, down on the market.

MB: And you all would take it home on the wagon?

RH: She'd ride the bus home and I'd pull the wagon home. (laughing) 5 cents.

MB: That's a lot of food.

RH: Yeah, and it was about a dollar. We had relatives out in Slate Hill (??) too which is just about Tanglewood now. And we used to go out there and they had everything, hogs and chickens and guineas and all kinds of fruits and stuff. I used to walk out there, about 5 or 6 miles, and give the bus driver a handful of cherries and he'd drive us back. Isn't that something? I don't know what he probably was making. It didn't cost but 5 cents to go out there and he'd just let us in. We'd pick a whole thing of cherries and he'd just get a handful of cherries and let us ride the bus home. (laughing) Isn't that weird. I wonder what was he making. I worked with people who made \$11 a week and they were taking care of their family. Tight, tight, tight. It's just all about money now anyway. You really don't get any more. If a loaf of bread costs a dime then and it costs a dollar now, we'd rather have that dollar to buy that loaf of bread than to have the dime. It's the amount of money you have. It's not what it will do for you. I think that's what we're into now. People would give you 2 cents to go to the store. 15 cents to clean the snow. These kids want 5 and 10 dollars to clean the snow off. But you can't blame 'em too much because everything costs for them. They have to pay a dollar to go on the bus just like everybody else. I saw 2 kids going out to I think it was Crossroads. They must've had to pick up something for their mother. I think it was a party or something. Maybe the cups or something. Well, she had to pay \$4.80 for them to go out and come back. It was \$5 for them to go out and come back just to pick that up. So that's why everybody wants a car or something. It was just things happening. The grocery stores were mostly where you dealt.

MB: The corner grocery?

RH: Yeah, the corner grocery. They had 'em on just about every corner.

0.35.05.3

MB: Did you go up to Henry Street very much?

RH: Oh yeah. Lived there. (laughing) That was where you would go for the movies unless you went downtown to the Roanoke Theater. You'd go to the Roanoke Theater around the back on Kirk but you had to up about 10 flights up in there to get to it. The Virginia Theater was the one we went to. I think the highest was 35 cents for the movie on Sunday. And you could make the day with about a dollar. The 5 cent hot dogs, 5 cent sodas, stuff like that.

MB: Did you have some favorite businesses on Henry Street?

RH: There were 2 or 3 restaurants and 2 or 3 pool parlors and Mac and them at the hotel had the Barlows who had the Dumas there, I think they had an ice cream parlor named Jack and Jill Ice Cream Parlor. Mostly, it was just hangouts and I think Wagstaff had his TV – later on when TV came and the guys in there had a record shop and – The business was probably a pool parlor. That where we would hang out. And the barber shops and pool parlors and some taxi stands there. I think a couple of restaurants. And then you came on down the hill. I think later on they put the Star City up there, the dance hall. _____ moved up there a little later on. And another pool parlor and I think barber shop.

MB: Did you go to the Gainsboro library?

RH: Oh yeah. Miss Lee.

MB: When you were little?

RH: And the Y too, right across the street.

MB: The old Y?

RH: Yeah. Over to the Y, a lot of time.

MB: What do you remember about the library? Mrs. Lee, do you remember her?

RH: I remember that I went down there, I don't know how long ago and we were going to get the complete works of Shakespeare. (laughing heartily) They were probably saying, "What's the point of letting him have this? He's not going to be reading the complete works of Shakespeare". I think I was more in the Y than I was in the library. And then they had something on Henry Street, a Y or a Boy's Club on Henry Street.

MB: Tell us about some of the people you looked up to in those years.

RH: Well, I guess we thought more about the teachers and the ministers. Those were the people that you -

MB: Any in particular?

RH: I can't remember anybody in particular that I actually looked up to. I don't guess we ever thought about we were looking up to somebody. Unless it was somebody just a little older than you. Maybe like your older brother or something like that or one of their friends. I used to copy them – Those that knew a little bit about music, I would try to steal what they had played. And plus I think those that were in the same thing, photography – The looking up to was just trying to copy them more than a real admiration. 'Cause you got to realize you were in a segregated situation where everybody was – I don't know whether you thought about looking up to anybody 'cause during that time, you probably had white movie stars, you know what I mean? You were programmed more to look up to people outside of your race. Well, maybe like the Rockefellers or something like this. But I never thought too much about – You got the barbers and you got the ministers. I never even thought about looking up to anybody. You know what I mean? It never carried that way.

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MB: What do you remember about the Civil Rights Movement?

RH: I was in Boston during that time and they was really carrying on. But there have been a lot of instances of racism while I was here.

MB: Can you tell us about some of them?

RH: I know one thing that I kinda resented. They had these young white salesmen downtown and they would call mother "Esther". They'd just call her by "Esther". This always bothered me a little bit. I had a lot of white friends – A lot of kids down at the hill there and we just got along fine. We never

really did think about the separating. We knew when we went down to the Roanoke Theater, they would go to different theaters. But I had a little band here in the '40s and it was 2 white guys and 2 black guys.

MB: What was it called?

RH: Well this particular group – The big band that I had was called the Sharps and Flats and one was called the Chromatics. But I know that we would go to the train station after we played and they had to go on one side to the restaurant and we had to go to the other side. And then, I had this one guy who was, Johnny Hayslip (??), he's gone now. I had to hold him down 'cause so much racism that he just wanted to show off. (chuckle) I think we went to one place that maybe his girlfriend who was white and when we were taking a break, we all sitting in the same booth and I know the managers didn't take too well to that. I don't know whether – It was just a general – When you grow up in it, its so much a part of your life that you don't think too much about it, racism. Unless its overly done. But you just – They lived over here and we lived over there. It was just separate and you knew about it. We had a lot of – Well one thing, they were more welcome here – because I know of a place called the Elks Club. We used to go up to Elks Club with this white guy. There were a lot of things going on. There was a lot of mixture there. The feeling of togetherness between the races was much better than the actuality 'cause even white people had been programmed and so were we. We didn't experience any real – like in the deep South, I don't think.

MB: How did Roanoke seem to you when you came back? You came back much later. Did you see many changes?

RH: No. (both laughing) They ain't done no changing. They still the same. Except for the physical change you know of the city. And of course there were advances. You had a black mayor and you got black people on City Council. I think they used to appoint somebody. I can remember C. C. Williams wife. I think back in my days, they didn't have that particular election for people on City Council. It was a token thing. They would make sure they had one black on there so they really didn't have to work that hard to be on there because they knew it was going to be a token thing. That's the big change because now – It was because of integration but to see all these people in higher offices. I mean, you got police chief and you got all that type of stuff. That makes a big difference.

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MB: And you saw Gainsboro change a lot after urban renewal.

RH: Oh yeah, from Northeast? Oh yeah. 'Cause I used to work for the Roanoke Housing. There were a lot of changes. Everything is gone, totally gone. But I don't say that it was really all that bad because some of the areas were pretty bad areas anyway because of the poverty level of people. Some of them moved on which makes it better. That was the big sweep to do that. And then the highway coming through and all of this. So, there's just been fussing about something all along but change has to come.

MB: You were probably coming back to visit from Boston so you would see it.

RH: Yeah, you could see it. You could see the changes especially on Henry Street. Little by little, the buildings fell to pieces, stuff like that. You could see the changes. But its a new day. That's what it is. Its just a new day and we couldn't expect it to be the same things going on.

MB: Anything else you want to tell us. Anything at all.

RH: I'll whisper it to you. (both laughing) I kinda hope that they will just bury Henry Street. You can't revive something that during that time there was no TV, very few people had cars. It was segregated. You couldn't go anywhere else. And now the young people now are not the type of young people as we were young people, you know, 15 ½ gotta have a car. Things like this. That's why I wish we would just bury it and go on and let it go rather than feel that somebody has taken something from you. Its just time has taken – Time has changed things. I heard once they were trying to – they were going to make these space stations and someday there will be interstellar travel and all that kind of

thing. But as human beings, will we be any better you know with all the progress and all the electronics and all the convenience. We still just – People still got their problems and so we gotta do some changing on the inside instead of trying to run from it. Anyway. (laughing) C'est la vie.

Alicia Sell: Thank you. Thank you very much.

MB: It was wonderful. I could listen to you 'til next week.

RH: So much has happened.

MB: There's so many (recording stops)