

Interviewee: Mary Jane Callahan

Interviewer: Alicia Sell

Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

AS: Today is January 10, 2007. I am interviewing Mary Jane Callahan here at the Gainsboro Library. Thank you for participating Mary Jane. We're going to start by asking some background questions about you. Can you tell us when and where you were born?

MC: I was born January 21, 1933, in Roanoke at Roanoke Memorial Hospital.

AS: We've gone over the streets that you've lived on and just for our tape recording, can you tell us what is the neighborhood that you most closely identify with?

MC: I identify mostly with Williamson Road because I have lived there off and on since I was 12 or 13.

AS: And your family has ties to the Gainsboro area. Is that correct?

MC: That's right.

AS: And where did they live in Gainsboro?

MC: They lived on Wells Avenue. I don't know whether you'd call it the first street or the last street, opposite the side of Hotel Roanoke. And there were 5 or 6 houses there. Of course, they're all gone now because they tore 'em all down and made that – if you look on the side, you can see where they fixed up a beautiful area.

AS: OK. Let's talk a little about your parents and siblings. Tell me about your mom and dad. What did they do and where were they from?

MC: OK. My father was originally from Greensboro and I think he was about 4 years old when they moved to Roanoke. He was the youngest of 4 and they moved to Roanoke and lived on Wells Avenue. They just lived there. They didn't live anywhere else let me put it that way. And he worked at Norfolk & Western for 46 ½ years and mostly in the real estate office and the accounting office, offices like that. When it was called the Norfolk & Western, not Norfolk Southern and the buildings were over here where the Tech Center is and the apartments. That's where they were. That's where he worked. My mother was born in Bedford County but I think they moved to Roanoke when she was 2 or 3. She was the youngest of 6. She taught school. Well, she went to Radford College and you could get a teaching certificate after 2 years and she had that for the longest time until they made a change and you had to, by degrees, get your degree you might say and she went to Radford in the summers and took courses in the winter. She taught for 28 years and I don't – maybe it was the 28 that she taught at Oakland School on Williamson Road. She taught there. She taught upper elementary.

AS: So she taught all of her 28 years here in Roanoke?

MC: Yes, she did.

AS: And that was all at Oakland?

MC: No. She taught – Let me see – Before she was married, she taught at Crystal Springs School when she was real young, like 21 and 22 'cause she got married when she was 22 and then she got pregnant with me, she was required to stop teaching.

AS: I didn't know that.

MC: Oh, yes. I'm talking about in the early '30s. And then she went back to teaching and it seems to me like she was at Mount Pleasant School and I don't know whether that's in the city or the county. At the time, it might well have been in the county and it might still be. I'm just not sure. And then she came to Oakland and she taught at Oakland. And I think I'm right when I say she taught 28 years altogether but almost all, all except for a couple were at Oakland School in upper elementary.

AS: Did you have other brothers and sisters?

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MC: I had a brother. A brother who was 2 years younger than me and he died in 1995 when he was 60

years old. And when he was in the 1st grade, still 6 years old, he was diagnosed with diabetes and the fact that he lived at all I guess surprised everybody. While he was growing up and everything, they said that the average life span of a diabetic, a juvenile, I still say juvenile onset until Type I – I can't remember to say that – was about 25 years. And he lived 'til he was 60, more than 53 years with severe diabetes. He even had his feet amputated and all that kind of thing. I think the last 10 years of his life, he was more living than really alive person and he died in 1995.

AS: What was his name?

MC: His name was Frank Jr. He was living in Oklahoma with his wife and they were both in a nursing home outside of Oklahoma City and I knew I just had to go see him. He had had a colostomy and things were just bad. He wasn't going to make it and I paid the way for a friend to go with me one weekend. We went on a Saturday morning and came back on Sunday evening and he died 10 days later. So, I've always been glad that I did that. Just the one brother.

AS: And what were your parents' names?

MC: Frank and Lucy.

AS: Did you have extended family member living here in Roanoke?

MC: Mm mm. Yes. My father's sister lived here until she died in about 1988, something like that and she had 2 sons and one of them still lives here and his children, they don't all live here. He had 4 children and 2 live away and 2 live here. So he's the one that I'm closest to.

AS: And what's his name?

MC: His name is Frank Murphy.

AS: So there's lots of Franks?

MC: Yes. In fact, 2 of his grandsons – Its really Francis like St. Francis – have Francis as their middle name. One is Michael Francis. I brought pictures 'cause I just got 'em. (papers shuffling) This is Michael Francis. Isn't that wonderful?

AS: Mm mm.

MC: And he's in the 4th grade and he won't be 9 until April and when they took the SOLs in the 3rd grade last May, out of a total score of 600, he made 598.

AS: Wow.

MC: We're like “Aahh”. (laughing) And these are his other grandchildren.

AS: Very handsome.

MC: Yes. He's in his second year so he's got 2005 there. He graduated from Salem High School and he's at Roanoke College playing basketball 'cause he's 6'6” and this is his brother who will graduate from Salem.

AS: So this is the son – These are the children of -

MC: These are the grandchildren of Frank Murphy.

AS: Its Curtis, Mark and -

MC: Mick or Michael. And this is Mark Francis and this is Michael Francis. His father is John Francis. And Frank's name is Francis John. He was named after my father and my father's brother.

AS: Oh, OK.

MC: Yes, I like that. But aren't they wonderful?

AS: Yes.

MC: (Woop) Goodness. (laughing) And those are the newest pictures that I have.

AS: You said that you had moved around and you had rental properties. Is there one -

MC: They rented homes and then they finally bought a home in '61.

AS: And the home they bought in '61, where was that?

MC: That was on Old Mountain Road.

AS: Do you -

MC: They died in '85 was when they died.

AS: What's the house that you remember the most growing up?

MC: It would have to be on Burton Avenue, Williamson Road. That's the one I remember the most because I was 12 or 13 when I moved there.

AS: Can you describe the house for me? Was it brick or was it - ?

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MC: Yes, it was a brick house.

AS: One story or two?

MC: Two with a basement and an attic. All of that.

AS: Did you have a garden?

MC: I don't remember that we did.

AS: What kind of activities did you participate in growing up?

MC: I mostly read. (laughing) I was not a sports person or a cheerleader or anything else. I was pretty shy and pretty small and everything else and so I didn't do anything like that really.

AS: So you read a lot. Did you go to a particular library when you were growing up?

MC: Let me tell you what I did to show you how different things are. On Friday night, I would walk 2 blocks and get on the bus, go downtown. Get on the Williamson Road bus, go downtown to Campbell and Jefferson. Walk to where the library was up on the hill in a house.

AS: _____ (both talking simultaneously)

MC: No, no.

AS: The one that – where the now the main library sits.

MC: Yes, but it wasn't sitting right there. It was up on a hill in Elmwood Park. Is that what the name of it was?

AS: Yes, it was originally the Terry House.

MC: I couldn't remember that. I would go there, get books and then it would be dark. I would walk from that building back down to Campbell and Jefferson and get on the bus and walk back 2 blocks to my house and nobody thought anything about it. My family – you know, my mother and father, so what.

AS: So you did that every Friday?

MC: Just about.

AS: Wonderful.

MC: I'm talking about in the dark on Friday night.

AS: Do you remember who the librarian was?

MC: No. I cannot. In fact, I may not have known 'cause I was about 17 maybe 18, something like that. I can remember too that I had saddle oxfords and we wore our jeans turned up like this.

(laughing)

AS: And we talked about what your mother and father did so let's talk about your education now. Where did you attend school growing up?

MC: I attended old Our Lady of Nazareth School from grades 1 through 12 and that's over over on the corner – was over on the corner of 8th and Campbell. It's now the Ram House. It's been the Ram House for at least, what, 30 years, 20 years, something like that. But it was a church and the school was up over the church. And that's where I went to school. And then, when I graduated from high school at 16, I went to St. Andrews at a post-graduate commercial school, typing shorthand, bookkeeping and I got a degree from that and then I worked at First National Exchange Bank when it was downtown at the corner of Campbell and Jefferson and then I worked and I can't remember the name because I saw silk mill in here somewhere and I can't remember the name.

AS: The Viscose plant.

MC: Yes. Viscose. That's the trouble with turning 74. I worked there for about a year and half. Wait a minute – That was the 3rd place I worked. The second place I worked was the Department of State in

Washington, D.C. And I came back and worked for Viscose and then I went to college in Indiana for 2 years.

AS: And what – say the name of the college again.

MC: St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. It was formed in the 1940s.

AS: And that was the female version of Notre Dame.

MC: Version of Notre Dame (speaking simultaneously) which was right across the highway outside of Southbend and then I came here and I taught school and went to Radford in the summer and took UVA extension courses at night.

AS: Wow.

MC: Then graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Education. I think the only Education degrees now are Bachelor's of Science but I got a – 'cause I majored in French and then had minors in Latin and History. Then, the first place I went to teach with a degree was Martinsville and I went there 4 years and taught in a high school there. And then I went to Norfolk and taught at Maury High School which I think has been there since 1910. It was “the” high school and the oldest by far and I taught there 13 years. And then I came back to Roanoke and then I taught at Roanoke Catholic for 18 years.

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AS: And you said you got your Master's degree as well?

MC: Yes. I'm skipping the most important thing which I got my Master's at Old Dominion University in History, in Medieval History.

AS: Wonderful. So you completed up to your Master's degree and you said your mother also completed her -

MC: Not Master's, Bachelor's. She had a double major in English and Elementary Education. I don't know if you can even do that now or not.

AS: Did your father have a college degree.

MC: He did not.

AS: Did your brother go to school.

MC: No. Well, he went to Tech for a year and then he just did other things. He moved around a lot.

AS: OK. Now, we're just going to talk about growing up with your family. If you could just describe a little bit of your home life for us. For instance, did you gather around the radio in the evening? Do you remember when you got your first -

MC: Oh, yes we did. I cannot remember. I can remember the first phone number we had but I don't know where I was living. It was just 9744. That was all it was. If you wanted to call somebody long distance, you dialed the operator, you know, way back then. (laughing) I don't remember whether I was living on Burton Avenue and Williamson Road or I was living – I'm sure we had a telephone when I was living on Day Avenue,

AS: Did you listen to the radio?

MC: Oh yes.

AS: Was there a favorite show?

MC: No, not really but we would listen to certain things.

AS: Did you sit on the porch in the evenings and interact with your neighbors at all?

MC: Yes, we did because no house was air conditioned. I mean, not one while I was growing up. Yes, we did a lot of that. But it wasn't in Gainsboro. That's what my problem with doing all of this is.

AS: Its good to know about all neighborhoods in the city. The neighborhood sitting on the porch and interacting with your neighbors seemed to be a major community event here in Gainsboro.

MC: It was.

AS: Was it like that also where you were growing up.

MC: Yes, it was. Had friends on the block so to speak.

AS: What chores did you have to do around your house or in your neighborhood.

MC: I had to do a lot of chores and I had to do 'em on Saturday because the week was school and homework and I can remember how I hated running and playing. I would fuss. I would say, "I wish I could go to school on Saturday." (laughing) And then when I got to my mother's room, I would shut the door, the cleaner was running, I would shut the door and I would sit down at her boudoir and try on her rings. (laughing) Things like that. I can remember that. Its funny how you can remember certain things and other things you can't even remember like Viscose.

AS: Were there stories that your family passed down from generation to generation about either your family's history or about -

MC: Yes. Now more of my family's history I got from – let me see – I guess he would be a cousin of my father and my aunt in Tennessee and he started this genealogy business down there and I had stacks of materials but I gave 'em all to my cousin who lives in Wilmington, Delaware, the summer before last because he was way into it and even going to places in Pennsylvania and Maryland trying to find birth records and things like that. And I thought, I have no one to give this to, no one and I gave it all to him. And I did and he was very excited although he's about 80 - 79 or 80 years old. He was just so very interested in that.

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AS: Did you have any family recipes that were passed down through your family? You don't remember that?

MC: No. I don't like to cook. I just cook vegetables and chicken and fish and that's about it. I am not a cook. I don't want to be a cook ever. (laughing)

AS: Did you or anyone in your family ever serve in any of the wars?

MC: No. My brother, of course, was disabled, severely disabled and then my father, when World War II came, he was about 35 years old which was the high end. He wanted to serve so bad. He was a small man but he wanted to serve so bad but they declared him, for reasons I'm not sure of, 4F which means "No way". He still worked, even during the depression, he was lucky he kept a job. Engineers were cut off and everything. People had degrees from Tech and all of that and he never was. He managed to maintain his job at the Norfolk & Western but he kept up with everything. He knew more about what went on in World War II than anybody I ever knew and because I taught World History, I maintained a lot of information from that and used it.

AS: Wonderful. What kind of businesses and shops here in Roanoke do you remember shopping at?

MC: All the shopping was downtown. Every single bit of it. There was not such thing as a shopping center. There might've been a couple of little stores over on Grandin Road, things like that and theaters. There was the – The Grandin is still there but it closed a couple of times. And the Lee Theater on Williamson Road and they did kids stuff and regular movies. I remember going to see "The King and I" there and then it became – what do you call it? - R&X rated movies. Oh, it did. And then it just closed completely and became. I don't know what was there. There was nowhere to shop. You got on the bus and went downtown.

AS: Did your family have a car?

MC: Not until the first year after World War II. Daddy bought a second-hand car and it was a 1946. In those days, you put your name on a list and it took 2 years to get a car because all of the car makers were making tanks and airplanes and this and than and the other. And there was no such thing as a car from 1942 to 1946.

AS: Were you excited when you got your first car?

MC: Mm mm.

AS: Did you learn how to drive?

MC: It was later that I learned how to drive.

AS: Would you shop downtown on the city market for groceries or was there a grocery store that you would go to?

MC: One of the most interesting things down there. You know where the city market building is was a meat market. That's all it was. Mother would call. There must've been 8 or 10 meat markets on each side and she dealt with one and she would call and say what she wanted and I would leave when I left school over to Old Nazareth. I would either walk or ride the bus downtown, pick up the meat that he already had ready and get on the bus and come back over to Williamson Road.

AS: How often would you do that?

MC: At least once or twice a week. Because refrigerators had these little freezers that were about this size. Like that. That was it.

AS: And you talk a lot about riding the bus. Did you ever ride the railway, streetcars?

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MC: I sure did. When I went from – When I lived over on Day Avenue and when I lived on Williamson Road, my aunt lived in South Roanoke, daddy's sister. All that time and I would ride the streetcar over there. And when I would do that, now this was just me, you would get on the streetcar and I always sat on the left-hand side. And the reason I did was when the streetcar went behind – not behind but before it got to where Roanoke Memorial Hospital was, it went down Hamilton Terrace and here was the river over here. Here was Hamilton Terrace. And I knew the guy wasn't going any faster than he was supposed to but it felt like 100 miles an hour down that hill. And I held on because I was so afraid it would toss us into the river. (laughing) I can remember that so easily. Isn't that funny. Then get off and walk just a block 'cause that was definitely a streetcar. It went from Patterson Avenue. I even did that I think.

AS: Was it less expensive to ride the streetcar or the bus?

MC: I don't think so. I think it was the same. You could get a transfer. And I always kept the transfers in case - I met a friend at the corner of Campbell and Jefferson. She lived in Philamont (?). If it was raining, we would ride the streetcar up to school. If it wasn't raining, we walked. (laughing)

AS: Well, that's smart.

MC: But I mean I always had an extra transfer. (laughing)

AS: What is your fondest childhood memory? For instance, do you have a favorite holiday event? A favorite vacation you would go to? A favorite gift you ever received?

MC: I can't remember that. I would have to think about it and all of a sudden, something would come back to my mind. I can't think along those lines right now. Just don't remember.

AS: Are there big events that you remember happening in the city that you remember attending like the fairs, the Roanoke Fair, that they had.

MC: I know I did a couple of times. The Victory Stadium Fourth of July. I think we went to that 2 or 3 times.

AS: What would they do for the Fourth of July at Victory Stadium?

MC: There was some kind of band or orchestra before the fireworks. And I always hated listening to the music from West Side Story. I was driving over here and they said something about the music from West Side Story and I thought, "No, thank you." I just got so tired. You know they played bouncy music and wonderful music and all of a sudden it was West Side Story music and I know why. Because Leonard Bernstein and the gangs of New York but I just hated that music. And then they would play stuff and the fireworks were wonderful. Just wonderful.

AS: So that was a big event to go to.

MC: That was a big event for anybody to go to.

AS: Was it free to go to that?

MC: Yes.

AS: Would your whole family go?

MC: I mostly went with my cousins over in South Roanoke, went over there and then there was no problem with parking or anything like that. And one other thing that I loved to do when I was in my

teens and later teens. My daddy and I loved to go to Mar Field which was down the road. Here's Victory Stadium and then down the road, towards Franklin Road was a baseball field and we liked to go watch the Roanoke Red Sox. And we'd get on the bus, go downtown and transfer, ride up there and then have to do the reverse and we just loved doing that.

AS: So you liked going to the baseball fields?

MC: I did then. Now I wouldn't care if I ever saw one again. (laughing)

AS: And they were called the Roanoke Red Sox?

MC: Yes. They were a farm team of the Boston Sox and they were like not 1st, not 2nd, I think they were – I can't remember the word. 'Cause they all had farm teams even now. But we loved to do that, my dad and I. So we would eat supper and get on the bus by 6:00 and go over and watch that. We loved to do that.

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AS: Wonderful. Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you'd like to share with us?

MC: I don't know. One of my memories of Gainsboro Library – I said I taught up there on the hill and that's what we called it, on the hill for 18 years. For about 2 or 3 years, I had an Advanced Placement American History class that I taught and when we got to the research paper. And, of course, research was a lot harder back in the '80s than it would be now. We would come down to this library and whatever the subject was – I had about 7 or 8 students in that class.

AS: Who was the librarian then? Was it Miss Virginia Y. Lee or was it Carla?

MC: I don't know if it was Carla or not 'cause I don't know when she started here.

AS: She's been here for 35 years.

MC: Well then it was Carla. At that time, I did not know her or remember and we would come down here 1 or 2 days, just during the class period and if you know how you have to sign your life away to get on a bus or do anything at a school anymore, we just said, "We're going over to the Gainsboro Library" and back up the hill we went, down and back up. That was it. Like I said, there were only 7 or 8 of us.

AS: What church do you attend?

MC: Now?

AS: Mm mm.

MC: I go to St. Elias over on Cove Road. Its a Maranite Catholic Church which is Lebanese and they have had for about 7 years now a Lebanese Festival in June. You ought to go to it. Its the most wonderful food you've ever eaten. Remember the Greek Church did it for the first time, just this past, what, October or November. Same type of thing. I just love that church. Its more - I don't know – I'm not a conservative, I'm a liberal. But its a conservative church and I love the liturgy and I just love it. I've been going about 6 or 7 years there.

AS: Did you attend church anywhere else?

MC: St. Andrews. For probably 20 years or something like that.

AS: Were you a member of any organizations here in the city?

MC: I don't remember. I just can't. Doesn't come to me.

AS: I think we're at the end of our interview and I just wanted to tell you thank you for participating.

MC: Oh, I'm so glad. And if we had those pictures, I could tell you more about -

AS: We can definitely follow up.

MC: 'Cause I've got a picture of the house and I've got a picture of my dad standing, he's facing the house but behind him is old Hotel Roanoke when he was about 20, 18 or 20. And behind him was the old Hotel Roanoke with awnings because it was the old one before there was any such thing as air conditioning and stuff like that. And my cousin, Frank, out in South Roanoke, was born on the 2nd floor of 50 Gilmer Avenue which is right behind where Evelyn Bethyl (??) lives. She lives at 35 Patton. I've got a picture of my grandmother and grandfather and my father and he looks like he was about 5 or 6

years old in the picture. But the house where he was born, I think its still there. Although the ones on Wells have long since been torn down.

AS: We will take a look at those pictures then and have you talk about those.

MC: There was at least one if not two Greek families that lived – There were, like I said, only about 5 or 6 houses on there and they lived on that street too and I don't know who they were or anything. And they might all be gone for all I know. I'm taking up your time now.

AS: You're fine.

MC: I'll give this back to you.

AS: OK. Thank you.