

Interviewee: Helen Davis & Evelyn Bethel

Interviewer: Carla Lewis

Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

CL: My name is Carla Lewis and I am the Gainsboro Branch Manager. Today is March 15, 2007. I will be interviewing Evelyn Bethel and Miss Helen Davis. I will start with either one of you young ladies. When and where were you born?

HD: I was born on Patton Avenue Northwest, April 10, 1928.

EB: And I was born June 5, 1933, after my parents had moved to Patton Avenue Northeast which is currently the street that we live on.

CL: Tell me about your parents.

EB: As I remember my parents, they were very good parents. My father worked for the Roanoke Hardware and my mother worked at Rathskeller Restaurant and later on she did private household work.

CL: Miss Davis, tell me about the brothers and sisters that you have.

HD: We had 5 brothers, 2 of them are deceased and it was 7 of us, 5 boys and 2 girls, the two of us. One brother is living in Salem, Virginia, in Big Hill and the other two are living in Washington D.C.

CL: Can you tell me the names of your brothers that you are talking about?

HD: Herbert Davis, he lives in Big Hill. Clarence Davis, Curtis Davis, they live in Washington D.C. James Davis and Roy Davis are deceased.

CL: Did you have extended family living with you or nearby when you grew up on Patton Avenue?

EB: As I recall, we didn't have any extended family living with us on a permanent basis but my grandmother came down occasionally and she lived with us. I don't recall any extended family.

CL: No aunts, uncles?

EB: No.

CL: Describe your home life. For instance, did you gather around the radio in the afternoons or do you remember having your first telephone.

HD: We gathered around to listen to The Shadow. (laughing) "What evil works in the hearts of men." Of course, there was Joe Lewis. He was on the radio and we were all excited about that.

EB: And we listed to the opera that came on on Saturdays. We always listened to that. I didn't quite understand the language but the music was so beautiful. I remember that.

CL: Can you remember when you got your first telephone and did you have party lines or did you have just the one line coming into your home?

EB: We had the one line. Our telephone number was 4 digits, 8-2-6-2.

HD: That's right.

EB: And it was a private line. We didn't have a party line. At that time, people had gossip benches (laughing) because they had one telephone and it was stationary and our gossip bench was located in the hallway which was readily accessible to all rooms in the house.

CL: What was a gossip bench?

EB: Its a long chair and it has a armrest and a little table where you could put the telephone and that's where the telephone was and a pad. And it had room under the table to put the telephone book. Telephone books were very skinny then because not too many people had them.

CL: What kind of activities did you participate in?

EB: Before we leave the telephone, I have one incident. I was listening to the radio and it was some sort of quiz. I heard it and ran to the telephone and I was the first person to win the prize. I can't remember what the prize was but I was very excited about that. So, the telephone was a very good instrument that people used in those days. More so than a cell phone.

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CL: OK. What kind of activities did you two ladies participate in?

HD: We had the YWCA down on Commonwealth.

EB: Yeah, they called it Commonwealth.

HD: At that time it was Walker. It was very nice. The ladies taught us etiquette, how to do things, the proper way to do speak and dress. It was very interesting. We need that today.

EB: In addition to that, we participated or went to the basketball games and we had activities and we had activities. I can remember us jumping rope. They call it now Dutch I think, Double Dutch. That was fun. And during the other holidays, we had activities here at the library especially for Halloween. They had activities here, bobbing the apple. They had greasing the pole where the young men would try to climb up the pole and get the gift. Those were some activities that we engaged in. And, of course, for Christmas and the other holidays, we had neighborhood sing-a-longs out there. Getting back to Halloween, speaking of mischievous things, we got soap and we would put it on people's windows. That was the biggest mischief we had then was getting soap and marking people's windows.

CL: Were they the windows of people who did not give you candy or were they just -?

EB: They were just people and especially the Mosey's (??) store because they had the wider windows. We enjoyed that. (laughing) I don't see that it was anything detrimental because the next day, all they had to do was go out there and clean the windows.

CL: Do either of you remember sitting on the front porch, talking to neighbors after dinner, sharing the evening with people going by or correcting children as they walked by your porch?

HD: We played with the children in the neighborhood. We would sit in front of 19 Patton and we always thought – they said there were ghosts up on the Catholic (all laughing) and we would walk around it in the dark and my brothers would leave me. I would start crying but we didn't ever have any ghosts up there. But we would tell all sorts of tales. And we played pick up sticks and that's an interesting game. Kids don't do that anymore. And checkers.

EB: Monopoly.

HD: Yeah, we had that Old Maid game, card game. Nobody wanted to be the old maid.

CL: Chinese Checkers.

HD: Yeah, Chinese Checkers. (spoken simultaneously with EB)

EB: We had a lot of games that required thinking and some sort of dexterity with your fingers and it was just fun. I enjoyed it. And one thing we must not forget is the Claytor property. We would go up there and play in their yard and roll down the hill. Go down the hill, jump up, go up again, just roll down the hill. That was a lot of fun. And it was also fun looking at their fish pond. They had a beautiful fish pond with goldfish and other things in it. We used to like to look at that.

HD: And they had a huge attic and we would go up there and Miss Claytor would let us skate. It was huge. It was so much fun. We really had fun. And one game that's still around is Monopoly.

EB: Yes, Monopoly is still around.

HD: We played that. That's the only one that I can recall seeing recently.

EB: Chinese Checkers.

HD: Yeah, Chinese Checkers and the pick up sticks. And the little boys, they had the red wagons and the girls had the dolls but I never was a doll favorite but we just played and made little bracelets out of the flowers and the necklaces. We would do those types of things.

CL: What family stories were passed down from one generation to the next generation and did you hear stories about military or slavery or recipes or just anything that was passed down to your generation and then you continue to pass it to your children, nieces and nephews?

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EB: I don't recall any stories about slavery. I can recall that my father spoke – Its amazing when you're young, you don't pay any attention to your parents but, one year, when my husband and I came to visit, and we wanted to go to the movie and it was snowing and daddy wouldn't let us go. He said,

“Don't you go out there. You'll fall and hurt yourself.”. I thought to myself, “Daddy, we're grown. We'll take care of ourselves.”. I looked at my husband and he looked at me and we stayed at home. (all laughing) And that turned out to be a very informative and lovely evening because my dad told me how he used to work for the circus. And how they would get on the train and go from one city to the other and what his duties were with the circus. Of course, I knew that he always worked for Roanoke Hardware and that's about the most that I can remember. My mother worked for Rathskeller Restaurant that used to be on Jefferson Street. And when they closed, she started doing private household work. HD: Plus she had 7 of us. (both laughing) We were all very happy. We felt loved. EB: The things I can recall, a few – I can't bring them to mind right now about Grannies up in Dublin when Grannie lived right near the railroad tracks.

HD: I don't know any stories.

EB: I don't either. I can't recall 'em. We thought that was a dark house. (both laughing) But it was fun. I can't recall any stories.

CL: That's OK. You have probably hit on this before but what is your fondest memory of childhood? The very one that sticks out that you can tell us about right here and now without thinking about it. What is your fondest memory of childhood. You said rolling down the hill, but do you have - ?

EB: Probably Vacation Bible School. That was at First Baptist Church and we were close to it so that was no problem getting to it. That would be one. I guess the very fondest memory would be this library. Coming up here and talking with Mrs. Mitchell and Mrs. Lee. And this was always a place we could come and I had a vivid imagination so I loved to read. And I could just see myself floating around the places that I read about. So I think that would be my very, very fondest memory.

CL: OK. Miss Davis?

HD: I just always thought about the Claytor Complex I guess. Dr. J.B. Claytor was there and he was such a fine doctor. And I can recall that he was just a wonderful person. I always admired him and they had the drug store there and really whatever you wanted was in that complex and it was just really nice. It was a special place for me. I loved that drug store.

EB: I would say one of the reasons why it was so fond, is that that was our McDonald's. It was a drug store and they had the booths there with the sodas and ice cream sodas, with your little boyfriend or girlfriend, you could go up there and sit in the booth.

HD: I loved it.

EB: I don't know what young people talked about but we talked. (all laughing) And it was fun. And, of course, that was right across from the library.

HD: Yeah.

CL: What chores did you have to do when you were younger?

HD: I know the one I dreaded was washing those jars for canning. You know momma canned.

EB: What did she can? Cherries.

HD: We had to wash those bottles, those jars. It tastes good in the wintertime but in the summer it wasn't any fun. We had to wash those bottles. That's what I hated. (both laughing) I don't know what you hated but I didn't like washing those jars.

CL: Evelyn?

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EB: I just hate housework period. (both laughing) I hated washing dishes and pots and pans. I can remember one night, I was in there flinging those pots around. My mother said, “Gal, if you don't stop that noise, I'm coming in there to get you.”. (both laughing) And of course, I stopped the noise but I hated it. Still hate it.

CL: Describe your house for us. Was it a brick house? Was it a single story house? Did you have a garden outside? And I know you had a front porch so, describe in detail your house for us.

EB: Its a single story house, wood with a front porch. We had a back porch. At the beginning, we did

not have an indoor bathroom. Our bathroom was outside. I forget what you call 'em now.

HD: Outhouse.

EB: Yeah, outhouse. (both laughing) But eventually, we did get a bathroom with a tub, shower, commode, sink and so forth. And when that was done, we enclosed the back porch. Before it was enclosed, - no, that happened after it was enclosed – we had a coal stove in the kitchen, a dining room and a bedroom. And we had a hallway, a bedroom on one side and a living room on the other. I think that -

HD: The living room was used for a bedroom.

EB: Yeah. With all the children, you can imagine how it was. But with me being the youngest (laughing) I had a cot out on the back porch and I just loved it. (both laughing) I had my own little room. It was an Army cot. I just loved it. We talked about it not long ago.

HD: Mm mm.

EB: And then there was the kitchen and we had a basement where coal was stored and momma stored her canned goods down there.

HD: There was a trapdoor in the kitchen that you could go down in the basement.

EB: Right. Outside, we had two cherry trees in the yard. We had -

HD: Black Hearts.

EB: Black Hearts on one side and the tiny -

HD: Sweethearts.

EB: Sweethearts on the other side.

HD: We had a grape arbor.

EB: Yeah.

HD: And a peach tree in the back.

EB: Right, and a strawberry patch. We had all of that and it was so good.

HD: It sure was.

EB: Did you say grape vine?

HD: Yeah, grape arbor.

CL: Did you can food from each of those trees for the winter?

HD: Momma did. That's why I had to wash those jars. (both laughing)

EB: I don't recall washing any jars.

HD: That was my job. (both laughing)

EB: I must've been too small.

HD: That was my job. (both laughing)

EB: They did can. I enjoyed it. Eating it.

HD: Mm mm. It was nice in the winter.

EB: Mm mm.

CL: How long did you live there?

EB: I lived there until I went to college.

CL: OK.

EB: So that would've been what, 18 years?

CL: OK.

EB: 18 years. I'll tell ya one thing I remember. It was during the winter and it snowed. Childlike, I got a piece of cardboard and I went from the steps to the sidewalk. It was a pretty good distance. And it was slippery. I was having fun. My father came home and he slipped on it. And the next thing I knew, he had ashes all over my playground. (both laughing) But I didn't dare say a word. It was fun.

CL: How has Gainsboro changed over the years? And that's gonna take a little while, I know.

EB: You don't even want to hear that Mrs. Lewis.

CL: I would love to.

EB: No you don't.

CL: I would love to hear how some of it has changed over the years.

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HD: This is a new millennium and things like – the City of Roanoke doesn't appreciate the black history. As we say back in those days when we were coming up, we were close. Neighbors were close and everything. And we knew each other and we could go this place, go that place but we lost our connectivity and most cities realized what urban renewal has done and are being more sensitive to the black community. But here in Roanoke, they just want to take, take, take, take.

CL: Evelyn?

EB: Roanoke has changed from where I can sit, and it has not been for the better because they have built roads indiscriminately and roads destroy a community, just like here in Gainsboro. This Gainsboro Road widening has just destroyed our neighborhood because it has cut us off from our neighbors to the west. We have steps that older people have difficulty negotiating. Or the children and older folks coming to this library. The traffic makes it inconvenient for them to get over here and they do not have any indication that there's a library close by or the seniors and children are trying to get across the street. We mentioned it when we were working with the Gainsboro Steering Committee but it hasn't been done yet. They do not have benches over there for our older people to sit in or our young people with children who are waiting for the bus. I saw a young lady not long ago sitting on the curb and that's exceptionally dangerous, waiting for the bus. So, this area has changed negatively. Bringing the road, realigning Wells Avenue did a great deal to disconnect our community.

HD: And another thing that's so disheartening. We all know the history of Northeast. They closed Gilmer School, Gainsboro, Harrison, Loudon and Melrose. And when you strip a community of your schools, that's so bad. And now they're talking about they may want to close a couple more in Northwest. So, schools are a part of a community and when you close schools like that, it sends a message that you don't care. And then to even think that they would think about doing it again.

EB: That's true.

HD: And we lost our churches and homes and businesses and everything. And then to add insult to injury, to think that they would want to come up on Henry Street the last tiny block that we have left of our history where the Burrell Hospital started the black doctors and worked so hard up there because we couldn't go to the white hospitals. It started on Henry Street and there's rich history up there. And now they're talking about putting a Social Security Building up there on that last tiny block. Most cities are trying to be more sensitive to what has happened in the past. People keep saying, "Forget the past. Forget the past." You learn from the past and you improve. Its like you have a record. If you want to apply for a house, the first thing they can do is check your record and if you ain't got no good credit, you ain't gonna get no house. You're not gonna get a house. So when we look back at Roanoke the way it has treated its African-American citizens, they have a failing rate and they're continuing to do the same thing. We met here for, what, a year a two, Gainsboro Steering Committee?

EB: Yes.

HD: We couldn't even get the benches. We couldn't beautify. We couldn't get any. Sometimes – And people say, "Well, don't come to me." They're calm because they hear all of this good stuff and nothing ever becomes of it. We wanted a play area. There's gobs of kids here in Gainsboro. You see 'em just rolling off the buses all over. Gainsboro Southwest Organization worked hard with Tech, students from Tech, police officers and city officials, some of 'em, and it was just a play area for the small children, say from 6 to maybe 10. I don't know what the ages were. It was all set to go. Thumbs down. We can't get anything and you come to me. "Ain't no need in going to the meeting 'cause they ain't gonna do nothing." I said, "Well, we gotta keep going 'cause we gotta let 'em know we're there." But its so disheartening. You know it really is. So, Roanoke (sigh) -

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EB: Its changed and its on a downward spiral. Anytime your education system is in the decline our system is in, how are you going to build – How are you going to build your community when you don't educate your youth. Your youth. And it seems they have as their priority, putting a hotel on Mill Mountain. Now, how many citizens are going to use a hotel on Mill Mountain? And how many citizens have asked for it? We have petitions from citizens to save Victory Stadium. They didn't do it and now they don't know what they're going to do with the land out there. Roanoke lacks good solid honest leadership. And I don't see it. And another thing, talking about Gainsboro specifically, the neighborhood did not want that new house in the 300 block of Gilmer Avenue Northwest but it was put in there anyway. So, whenever we have opinions, they just (clap) walk all over us as if to say, “You don't count. Don't even come down here and bother me. We're going to do what we want to do. I listened to you because I have to but I'm really not listening. My ears are closed.”. Remember that old song, “What's that you say, I've got beans in my ear?”. They've got beans in their ears because they're not listening. They don't want to listen and they don't realize that we work, we pay taxes, probably more than the wealthy. We pay taxes. We have property. We keep it up. We would like some assistance from the city. The city came in and tore our community to pieces. Just to pieces. Got rid of the businesses, the schools, the churches, the homes. Now if they want to rebuild this area, which I doubt, they could come in and say, “Look, you get together. Tell us what kind of businesses you want. We're not going to build them for you but we will assist you in locating some businesses to come in. We will put out request for proposals and see who we can get to come in and build and work with you.”. It hasn't happened. It happened when they wanted to put that Wells Avenue alignment there. They brought everybody together and they had plans, making cul-de-sacs and everything. But it didn't work out that way because the citizens said, “No, we don't want that. We don't want you to close off our streets.”. But they kept working and working and working. Eventually, they got City Council sitting up there like – I won't say – Approving the plans to close the streets. Same difference. When you close a street, you are eliminating a line of communication and a feeling of togetherness. If you have a one way street, you don't have any togetherness and that's what this community overall lacks. Not just in the black community but in the white community too. The difference is, in the white community, most of them have money and they get things done. But over here, we have a little money but it should not depend upon your wealth. A city is for all people.

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HD: The struggle continues because on Henry Street in its heyday, it was whites and blacks. Whites and blacks. And when people say, “Forget the past.”, we need something to record our history so it will be there and we need to let them know about our doctors and what they did. And we're not saying we definitely don't want the Social Security Building up there. The land sat there. Our people went to court to try to save that land 'cause it was theirs and they said, “No.”. They went to court and they lost it. They sat on that property for I don't know how many years and then they come up with this. What we're saying now is, “Open that plot of land up there and have a request for proposal, black or white.”. Put something up there that blends with the Dumas Artistic Guild, the Culinary School and Higher Education Center. We don't need that Social Security Building up there. And the struggle goes on and on. We had to fight so hard. They had made plans to give Washington Park over to the Catholic Church and our kids could not play in prime time like they had always been doing. Well, that's one battle. We did win that one. So, you know, it continues and just when we think they've done all they can do, they pop up with something else. Methadone clinic. The county didn't want it. We didn't want it up there right next to Dr. Shadrach Brown's Church and a community center that's he's trying to build. But, they did it. So you see, just when you think they can't do more, they keep doing things. And it is so wrong.

CL: Miss Davis, elaborate a little bit on the businesses and Miss Bethel on Henry Street when you were growing up. Can you tell us about all of the different kinds of businesses in that area? Now, you

see that they're trying to build the Social Security Building there. What was there? Can you give us a general idea on all of the businesses and the places that you all visited?

HD: They had the Star City Auditorium which was a place that had bands and dances and things. That was real nice. And they had a grocery store on the corner of Wells and I guess it would be Henry Street, Weebees (??). We had the 308 Club which was real nice. We'd go up and it was just real nice. You had your drinks or special parties or something. And then we went down the street. We had Nick's.

EB: Palace Hotel.

HD: Yeah, the Palace Hotel. And we had Nicks and -

EB: The Atlantic

HD: He was Greek. I think he was Greek. Was he Greek?

EB: I think so. The Atlantic Sandwich Shop.

HD: Yeah. And we had, of course, the Dumas Hotel.

EB: There was an ice cream parlor, wasn't it? Jack and Jill's Ice Cream Parlor?

HD&EB: It was still in the Dumas Hotel. (simultaneously)

HD: We had a record shop up there. We had Dr. Penn's drug store. I called it his drug store. We had two drug stores up there. Mr. Brooks and Dr. Penn. And we had the Virginia Theater. And we had the Morocco Club which was later changed to the Ebony Club. And what else did we have?

EB: The doughnut shop. How can you forget the doughnut shop. (both laughing) I thought of that right away.

HD: Dr. Griff had the little cozy booth in the back and I remember I used to love cherry Cokes and I would always sit back there with my husband and whisper sweet nothings. (both laughing uproariously) It was nice. And we had dances and we had everything.

EB: There was a car repair shop to the west of the Virginia Theater. Remember that family with 3 boys?

HD: Yes.

EB: And they always dressed alike and it was like little stair steps.

HD: I remember that.

EB: And they went to the Catholic Church.

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HD: I bet Ed Hollowin (??) would know their name.

EB: I bet he would too.

CL: The Ragsdales?

EB: No, that doesn't sound right.

HD: There was a barber shop up there too.

CL: Shoe shop. Did Mr. Reenie (??) have a shoe shop that early or was that later on?

EB: That was later I think. The shoe shop was later.

HD: Kaiser? There was a shoe shop up there. Yeah, there was a shoe shop up there.

EB: Was it?

HD: It was just bustling with activity and, of course, they like to say that it wasn't nice up there. It was in the later years when it started to deteriorate, you know. But people wouldn't bother you and men would always tip their hats to the ladies you know. We don't see that anymore. (laughing) It was just nice. And I remember a girlfriend of mine, she lived down in Northeast. Arlene, you probably remember the Powell family. Lived across the street from that fire station down there.

AO: Mm mm. (Arlene Ollie)

HD: She would walk home at 10 or 11 o'clock at night with her friends and nobody would bother you. Of course, they had the undertaker parlor down there. And I can see that fire station in my mind now. It was just nice. Mr. Hydrona (??).

CL: It was a community.

EB: It was a community.

HD: It was a community.

AO: Equal to Grandin Court.

EB: It was. It really was. And a part of Henry Street is Jordan's Alley where people lived back there too.

HD: Mm mm.

EB: Off of Henry Street.

HD: And they had a restaurant here on the corner up at Harrison. I think it was Dew Drop Inn was the name of it. And then later, we had the Pfizer funeral home there.

EB: I thought Dew Drop Inn was on Gilmer and Henry Street.

HD: It was a restaurant there. I think it was the Dew Drop Inn.

EB: Oh, OK.

HD: And then there was another lady down here that ran a sandwich shop. I forget her name. And we had that complex with all those doctors in it on the corner. See, they tore that down. Uh huh. Its sad history.

EB: That's how Gainsboro has changed and we hope that its on the upswing now. I have often asked people when I meet them, "Why don't you move to Gainsboro?". They don't give an answer but I can see their faces. (both giggling and laughing) Every community has to start somewhere and if we could get most of our young black professionals and white professionals to move to this area, it would be a diamond. It would be a diamond in the rough. Most people want to wait until something is complete before they move in but I would rather be in on the beginning and help build it and then look back and see how complete it is. We have a couple of friends who have bought lots on Gilmer Avenue. They want to build. That would be a very, very expensive house, over \$200,000, but they haven't built because the property on Gilmer Avenue is standing, its deteriorating and the owner will not fix it. We have taken the owner to court and they only fined him \$200. That was about a year ago. The house is still standing, dilapidated. The city claims it can't do anything to make him tear the house down or fix it up. So the people who bought the property refused, rightfully, to build until that shack is removed.

HD: And they want to build.

EB: And they are anxious to build.

HD: They left Jefferson Eight (??) in the county but they got that piece of property over there and they're waiting for that house to be -

EB: They were living in Jefferson Eight (??) before they bought the property but the city won't do anything to help us. We had a business. We met in this library.

HD: That's right.

EB: We had a couple of people who wanted to buy the car wash area down there. The city sent 'em over to tell 'em to talk to the neighborhood.

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HD: They had a meeting right here.

EB: They explained their plan to us and the neighborhood approved it. When they went back to the city and told the city the neighbors were in favor of it, the city told 'em, "We want the property.". So the city turned around and bought the property.

AO: Is that not what happened on Henry Street?

EB & HD: That's right.

AO: Is that what happened on any property of any one in the black community has the gall to say, "I want to put a business or a home here.". So why can't they use that same power and get rid of that house?

HD: They wouldn't have it in South Roanoke. That house would be gone. And then they talk about -

They're not using common sense because with all of the positive things, we know they can't undo the past. We know that. But you're improving. You make the future brighter. With all the positive things – The Dumas Artistic Auditorium is very nice. We've been there several times. Higher Education Center and the Culinary School that's a comp (??). Martin Luther King Jr. Bridge is supposed to be coming. If you – If that bridge is finally done and its Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Bridge, why in the name of heaven would you put a huge, that's going to take up the whole block with a Social Security Building? That's poor planning. You don't do things like that and to come in on our last block of our history after we'd suffered all this much in Northeast, Northwest, and they still keep at it. It doesn't make sense.

EB: The building is oversized, inappropriate in design. Its like trying to fit a size 14 into a size 10, really. Plus, because of the security requirements, the community won't be able to use the first floor. You see, all of these things are going on and when we mention the past, we're told, "Oh, forget about the past." But when people talk about the Wiener Stand, "Oh, that's nostalgic. Oh, that's nostalgia. We love the Wiener Stand. That's nostalgia." Now, what is the difference between nostalgia and the past? What is the difference?

HD: They don't think.

EB: They think – I told one city employee when they were discussing that Social Security Building, I said, "You know what? The city thinks we are fools and that we don't any sense at all." He took exception to it. "I don't think you're a fool." I said, "I didn't say you thought we were fools, I said, the city, the administration, everybody." "No, I don't feel that way. I work for the city. Blah, blah, blah." He was taking up for 'em. And I said, "And you should take up for 'em because you work for 'em but I still say they think we're fools." I don't think I've seen him but 2 or 3 times since then. Roanoke has changed. It has changed and they don't like to hear the word racist but if you look at the record, one person at City Council told them, "One side's looking like heaven and the other side's looking like hell."

HD: That's what he said and its the truth.

EB: You look at the Southside and you look at the Northside.

HD: No amenities.

EB: In order to correct a problem, you must first admit that there is a problem. Even with the park study. Northwest is grossly misrepresented. The only park I think we have of significance is George Washington Park. No, not George Washington Park, Booker T. Washington. Booker T. Washington. Get away from here George. (all laughing) Its Booker T. Washington Park. We had to fight to keep it away from the big white establishment.

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HD: And Roanoke Catholic.

EB: And Roanoke Catholic. So, we had a committee approved by Darlene Burcham to work on Washington Park and we worked on that committee for over a year diligently. We came up with a comprehensive plan for Washington Park. We asked, "C'mon, when are you going to have the community meeting to show people what we've come up with?"

HD: Because they were at the first meeting, the kids.

EB: The kids came, the seniors came, everybody came from all across town about the first meeting for Washington Park. Haven't heard a thing about it. They will not post a community meeting. Now, why they won't do is beyond me. Darlene looked at the plan. She said it was a good plan. That's as far as it got. Washington Park is significant to this community for many reasons. But one is, that during the time of segregation, we had black people coming from Lynchburg, Bedford, and everywhere else to go to Washington Park. Washington Park had a swimming pool. They came by and got rid of that with the new Orange Avenue thing. Moved the pool up there near the dump site. A friend has told us that the dump is leaking and it shouldn't be up there. That the pool is contaminated. I do not know that for

a fact but, you see, then after the Washington Park committee, we heard that the city wanted to put in a water park. You know those parks where – They wanted to put that over at Washington Park. But we haven't heard a thing about that since either. People volunteer and they work, they put in their time and as far as I know, I don't know any volunteer who has received any type of stipend from the city.

HD: And adding to this Evelyn, the set-up was, after Darlene had approved it, the plan that we had worked on, she was to come back to the community at large and present it to them. She went to City Council and got permission. We didn't used to have to do this. It seems like we're moving backwards instead of forwards. Councilman Wishneff and Councilman Lea, said yes, we recommend that you come to City Council meeting and give a report. She had requested that she be on the agenda because it would take more than 3 minutes or 5 minutes to present what she wanted to tell City Council about it. Well, when the deal went down, it went to the Mayor and he didn't know what was going on and he called Darlene and then, one of the park workers called Evelyn, "Did you call Miss Burcham?". She said, "No, I didn't call Miss Burcham. I'm just trying to get on the agenda.". She was denied.

EB: That's right.

HD: You know you – You know. So they can always find something to come over here and just continue, continue, continue – I don't know what they're going to have planned next but that Social Security Building, we're still trying to stop it because its wrong.

EB: Its got to go. Especially when they have so many other places they can put it. Orange Avenue where they had planned to put the stadium, have plenty of parking. Its already graded. Its already owned by the city. They have Reserve Avenue site which they have lots of land. First, they said were going to put soccer fields and now they're talking about putting a waterway where people can use a kayak or whatever. They don't know what to do with it. But, they insist, so far, on putting the Social Security Building on Henry Street.

HD: And to add insult to injury, putting those little -
0.49.58.7

EB: Oh, yeah, we forgot to tell you that. They proposed if the building goes up, they will have a sidewalk museum and that will consist of the little statues like you see in shopping malls of prominent people in the area. Oh, they're very durable. They're very durable. Plus, they will have an indention in the building and they will have some things inside the building that people can look at as part of our history.

HD: And that's supposed to be a Social Security Building. We're supposed to approve of that and that's an insult. That's an insult.

EB: I told 'em I didn't like the idea and most people in the meeting did not like the idea but all they needed was one person to like and they run with it.

HD: Its been a struggle.

EB: And plus, they said they would get the money from the city to do that stuff. So you know how far that went.

HD: And they don't have money to buy our kids school books but they're gonna come on with some junk like that.

EB: Right.

HD: I mean -

AO: You must have your priorities.

HD: They don't have their priorities right because looking at the city as a whole, the first thing you do is educate your children. And you pay your teachers and you go from there. All of this other stuff that they're talking about, its secondary. And I saw – Did you see the news last night where they cut the \$7,000 fund from William Flemming – What's the proper word for that? Where they -

EB: The arts.

HD: The arts.

AO: And the kids are being _____.

HD: Yeah. Uh huh. We had our priorities wrong and its a lack of leadership. So many things gone wrong in the city. We have taken and continued for over 40 years economic development and this city has been born on black neighborhoods.

EB: Mm mm.

HD: And its time to stop. Right now.

AO: 53 years.

HD: 53. OK.

EB: OK. And its time for it to stop.

CL: Where did you go to elementary school Miss Bethel?

EB: Gainsboro School.

CL: Miss Davis?

HD: Gainsboro.

EB: They had pot-belly stoves in there.

HD: Sure did.

EB: And I don't know who made the fires. I guess the young men or the teachers but they had pot-belly stoves in there. I don't ever remember getting cold. I remember the teacher telling me if you don't know how to spell a word, look it up in the dictionary. I said to myself, (both laughing) "How can I find it in the dictionary if I don't how to spell it.". Myself went back there and found it. (both laughing) I remember we had fire drills and we would run down those old wooden steps and run out in the yard and we would stand there and do that Pledge of Allegiance. And we believed it too. (both laughing) Oh, we believed. "I pledge allegiance."

HD: And you know what turns your stomach. Roanoke is celebrating our 125th -

EB: Mm mm.

HD: Down at the Civic Center. They had a beautiful church down there, Mt. Zion AME Brandon Church. And you know -

EB: All those businesses.

HD: Homes and all of that stuff down there, that was our homes and businesses and they just – Have you seen the -

EB: Looking Back.

HD: Looking Back on Channel 9. Its gonna be on tonight at 5:30 and again at 10:00 tonight. So watch it.

EB: You need to see that.

HD: It breaks your heart.

EB: They burnt our homes just like the trash. I didn't know they burned 'em. I knew they knocked 'em over but when I saw the burning, I said, "This reminds me of Germany, Nazi Germany.". When Hitler burned all the books. That's what it reminded me of. I felt so bad.

HD: It was beautiful down there. I remember it.

EB: I remember some of it.

HD: And they took a picture before and after and they took it up to the JFK Center in DC and they said that when they showed it, the audience just gasped. They couldn't believe it. What was there before and afterwards.

0.55.01.1

EB: Mm mm.

HD: Most cities have been more sensitive to black neighborhoods but we've seem to want to keep on going.

EB: I think I'll get a black armband and go down there tomorrow.

HD: Evelyn told me, she said, "We ought to go down there - "

EB: And just walk up and down and then they'll put me in jail but that'll be alright too. Just walk up and down the street with a black armband. "What's the black armband for?". "Would you really like to know?". (all laughing) I can tell you.

HD: They'll say Miss Bethel and Miss Davis have gone crazy. (both laughing) That's what she said, "We ought to go down there."

EB: I'm serious. So if you hear about me being in jail, you'll know why.

CL: Miss Bethel, when you were going to elementary school, did you walk or did your father take you or did you ride in a car? How did you get to school?

EB: We walked. Our Lady of the Valley. There was a hill with nothing there and we walked. Our home at 19 Patton, about ¾'s down the block from Jefferson Street and we walked from there to Gainsboro and I think I spent one year at Harrison. We walked. We did not have a family car and no matter how much snow was on the ground.

HD: We had to go to school.

EB: We had to go to school. There was no such thing as a snow day. We didn't know what a snow day was.

HD: We walked to Addison, Gainsboro and Harrison.

EB: Yeah, we walked. And sometimes, we didn't have boots. We had shoes and we had shoes that had cardboard in 'em.

HD: But we went to school.

EB: We went to school. (all laughing)

HD: No snow days.

EB: No snow days.

CL: OK.

EB: And schools were warm.

CL: Do you remember the closing of the silk mills?

EB: No, I don't.

HD: I do.

CL: OK, you do Miss Davis?

HD: I remember reading about it.

CL: What jobs were available for poor African-Americans during the time that you were coming up?

HD: Well, a lot of the men worked at Norfolk & Western and there were cab drivers and -

EB: Hardware drivers.

HD: They had black businesses, you know. Mr. Hizona (??) had that beautiful tailor shop down there and we had morticians and just about everything.

EB: Mr. Bean had his electric shop.

HD: Yeah, right across the street.

EB: Mm mm.

HD: And so there were a lot of businesses.

EB: And there were groceries on Gainsboro Road.

HD: And Harrison. And Henry Street.

EB: Mm mm.

HD: So, there were businesses.

CL: Who were some of the leaders during the time when you were coming up? Who did you consider a leader?

HD: Dr. Harry Penn and Terry and Rubin Lawson and Reverend – What was the minister's

CL: James?

HD: Yeah, Reverend James and the one at Hill Street, Reverend Wilkinson.

EB: Reverend Powell.

HD: I didn't know too much about him. And Reverend Greene, Reverend Charles Greene. And, uh, -
EB: We had photographers and newspapers too as businesses that black folk worked in.

HD: Yeah.

EB: Grocery stores.

HD: We had the Tribune.

EB: Mr. Clark, the photographer.

HD: Mm mm.

EB: His number was still listed as late as 2 years ago when Jackie called.

HD: Yeah, she found it. She said, "Mamma". I said, "Jackie, that's an old number.". She said, "Its in the phone book.".

CL: Have we omitted anything that you all would like to tell us that happened during childhood? I know the way you spoke about it, it was a pleasure to be living and growing up in the time that you did. Is there anything that we neglected to ask? Urban renewal we hit on, the military.

0.59.35.2

EB: Urban Renewal. Oh, speaking of the military. During that time, I guess it was World War II, if you had someone in the military, you had a little flag and it had a star in it and the star would represent the numbers of people in your family that were serving in the military. And at one time, we had three, didn't we? We had 3 stars on our flag because I had 3 brothers in the military. I don't know if we still have that flag. Big Ed might still have it. I don't know if we still have that flag or not but that was something that was done and I can remember my daddy serving as a warden. I guess that's what you call 'em. And he would walk the neighborhood and make sure that nobody's light was on and nobody was smoking a cigarette because he said, "No matter if it were just a flick of light from a cigarette, the enemy would be able to see it.". So I can remember that. I can also remember the day the war started because my girlfriend, Mary Ann Blake and I were walking across Peach Hill I guess it was. And we heard all this noise. "Extra! Extra! Read all about it!". We said, "What is he yelling about?". And, of course, we did not understand the significance of it being children but I will always remember that. "Extra!". They don't do that now. CNN comes on with – What do they call it?

HD: Breaking news.

EB: Breaking news. Developing story. That added something to a neighborhood that this whole country is lacking now and children get on a bus. They go to their school. They stay there. They come home. They don't have a chance to develop a love for the neighborhood because they're gone all day and when they come home, they're either doing their homework or they should be or they're sitting in front of a computer. I think this country is losing its sense of connectivity and concern for others and its so sad. I was speaking with a man last night and I was telling him when I got the information about the election, I would bring it to him or send it to him. He said, "That's alright. Do they have a website?". I said, "Yes, they have a website.". "I'll get on the website and do it.". Well, getting on a website is not the same as face to face communication. It really is not. Getting on a cell phone. Somebody told me, "Some people have a cell phone rather than a land phone.". I said, "Yes, they do.". I thought to myself, "When I'm out, I don't want to be bothered by anybody calling me. Call me at home. If I'm not there, leave a message. If you don't leave a message, keep calling 'til I'm home.". Then you go out. The other day we were walking and somebody said something and we looked and we thought they were talking to us. They were talking on the cell phone. Talking so loud. This country, this city, has got to stop and give people time to think. We've got to have time to think and discard the bad information and keep the good but as long as you're on that cell phone or the computers. The little kids playing on the computers. They might think I'm saying that because I don't have one but computers are nice. They can do a lot. But there is nothing to compare to the human mind. When we were small, we made up games.

HD: Mm mm.

EB: Had a little Tiddly Winks and stuff. But our minds were creative and now, with the computer, you're doing what somebody else has created. You don't have time to sit down and think of something different. So, Roanoke City has got to stop and find a leader, black, white, man or woman or child that's going to say, "Look-a-here, we have got to do better in this city. We're losing population. Every year it goes down. And then they give a park report that's based on the city's estimation that in 2010, we will have gained about 5,000 more people. How are they going to gain the people? You want young people. They're not coming if the school system is no good. If the library system is no good. All of 'em can't come to Gainsboro library. (all laughing)

1.05.20.5

CL: I want you to elaborate on Gainsboro library since you were instrumental in getting it made a historic site so I want you to elaborate on that part before you close out please.

HD: Somebody turned it down one time.

EB: Yeah, they were talking about tearing this library down at one time.

HD: Had to fight.

EB: And we said, OOOOOhhh no, not Gainsboro library. This library has been a pillar of our community. Let's see, I'm 73, for at least sixty-some years. At least. And I think we've only had 3 librarians. Miss Lewis, Miss Lee and Miss Mitchell. So you see, its stability. Its stability. Its a genuine concern for people. There was an article in the paper several weeks ago about how teenagers were acting up in one library. I forgot where it was but it wasn't Gainsboro. I said, they need to come up here to Gainsboro.

HD: There were teenagers too.

EB: Yeah, they were teenagers. They should come up here to Gainsboro and write an article about how well disciplined the children are when they come in this library. Had the children that they highlighted in that article been up here at Gainsboro, they would've said, "Tear it down. Tear it down. Its no good. They don't know how to act." They would. They wrote one article and these were teenagers as you said, going in and acting up in the library. But the teenagers that come to this library know how to act. And as sweet as Miss Lewis sounds with that nice voice and lovely smile, they know they better do right.

HD: And pull their pants up too.

EB: And pull their pants up too. She won't let 'em in here with those baggy pants. (all laughing) So you see, in more ways than one, this library is one reason Gainsboro is still here as a community.

HD: Mm mm.

EB: It pulls people together. Those who live in the area and those who live outside the area. It pulls people – when they come visit to the area, they come back. "Let me go see what the library is doing." And the walk in and say, "It looks the same." They're so proud. It looks the same. Miss Lewis, I don't know what else I can say about this library except it should be here forever and you should too. As one lady told us in church about her grandson, he said, "Granny, I want you to be here and raise my children." She said, "Honey, I've got to get out of here." (both laughing)

HD: He was serious.

EB: He was serious too. He wanted his grandmother to raise his children.

HD: She said, "I won't be here. I've got to get out of here one day." (all laughing)

EB: So that's why Miss Lewis says she wishes she could stay but she's got to get out of here one day.

HD: It was in danger of being gone. _____ We went to Richmond and talked and they were in favor of keeping it. But it was on – They wanted it but it didn't happen.

CL: And thanks to you two, we are now a historic library and these two ladies were instrumental in doing all of the work that got us on the map. And I am just thankful.

EB: Let me tell ya, we put in for that historic designation, right? And about a year later, we still had not heard anything. We were at City Council and they mentioned the Hotel Roanoke was getting its

historic designation. I stood up. Bob Herbert was Mayor then.

HD: Mm mm.

1.09.54.8

EB: I said, "Do you have different procedures for different institutions? Hotel Roanoke applied maybe about 3 or 4 months ago and it already has its designation for historic recognition. We put in for Gainsboro Library about a year ago and we haven't heard a thing about it. So are there different time lines?". I forgot what his answer was but within the next month, we had our historic designation. So you see, those are the kinds of small things that we have to be alert to and fight against and try to see if the playing ground isn't level, as level as it can be. And speaking of that, with the Social Security Office, they had certain procedures that they should have followed with consulting parties. Section 106. Did they do it?

HD: No.

EB: No. We wrote several people in the community, asked to be a consulting party and they agreed to it. So, we became consulting parties. But, the decision and everything had already been made when we became consulting parties. The city and Harwood don't want to respond to the fact that they did all of that before checking with the community. We are fighting them and we explained to them, "That Section 106 was put in to prevent just what Roanoke City did with the Social Security Office."

HD: And if they hadn't been called on it -

EB: It would've been gone. It would've been built. So, see those kinds of things, we have to be mindful about and if we just had missed that City Council meeting that day, we wouldn't have known about it.

HD: Mm mm.

EB: But we go to practically all of them anyway.

HD: We have to 'cause we can't trust 'em. We just have to be there because they can do some things at the 9:00 session which is off camera and they've got the beautiful _____. They could go upstairs but they do it downstairs, off camera, so you know, you never know what they're going to come up with.

CL: Arlene Ollie, would like to ask any more questions. You had some comments during the interview and I appreciate you being here. Would you like to say a few words or ask a question?

AO: No, I think I pretty much did that with my notes.

CL: OK.

AO: I really appreciate the things that you said. I stay in trouble constantly with this mouth and I'm about to take on a new plan so that I'm sure I'll be in more trouble but see I'm OK. I don't have a job. They kept me from working most of my adult life and now I'm disabled so I get a Social Security check so they can't take that. The only thing I have left is my life. So, be that as it will, we're all here for a purpose. This may be mine. So I do appreciate the history that you've added. We need more of this because what I intend to do, I don't know if anybody will pay any attention to it or not, is to try to write this by putting it in focus for people to understand that each time a new disappointment comes, we've got history to base this on.

EB: Yeah.

AO: You know, we're talking about the Social Security Building now but in 1954, with the Commonwealth Project in Northeast, it was about replacing a neighborhood. You see any houses down there at the Civic Center, Magic City Ford, Sheetz? Where are the homes? So, Roanoke City has always gotten away with doing whatever it chooses, however it chooses no matter what the black community says. So its up to the black community to stop relying on Roanoke City.

HD: I agree.

AO: We need to learn to take care of each other, respect each others property, help one another and try to stay abreast of what they're doing so that we can beat 'em to the punch.

EB: There ya go.

AO: That's the only way we're going to make it.

HD: Mm mm.

AO: They have proven in 53 years that no matter what we say, how many of us say it, how reasonable it is, how well thought out it is, they're going to do it.

EB: That's true.

AO: Like I said, I appreciate this because in the future, someone can come down and listen to this and think, "Oh, they said that when?"

EB: Exactly. (all laughing)

AO: So, thank you very much again.

EB: May I say just one thing. The consultant who gave the report about the parks, gave our city a very low score. But what astonished me was, he said he was here 7 years ago and gave a report about the parks and nothing has been done in 7 years. One man in the audience said he had been away from Roanoke and come back 3 times and nothing has been done. So, this is why we're saying Roanoke doesn't have any leadership and what you say is very true. Today its the Social Security Office. Tomorrow, might be Eureka Park. I don't know. You just have to keep watching. Get our black armbands out.