

Interviewee: Harold Bowman

Interviewer: Alicia Sell

Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

AS: This is a continuation of the interview with Mr. Harold Bowman.

HB: I remember I got to tell you about the Depression. I remember that. I was born in '28. The Depression hit the next year. And of course, the South hadn't even got over the Civil War yet and now the Depression comes along. My daddy worked at the Norfolk & Western and sometimes he didn't work but 3 or 4 days a week. And of course he was laid off completely sometimes. He got a job at the Continental Can Company. And another time, he worked at Walker Foundry in Norwich. I remember we had come back from the country, get off the train, go into the Roanoke Wienie Stand and he'd get a bag full of hot dogs. I think they were 5 or 6 cents each then.

AS: Wow.

HB: And we'd catch the Belmont bus, Belmont Hill bus on Church Avenue and go home and have hot dogs. Sometimes, momma would fix cornbread and milk and onion for supper. And I didn't know what was going on at the time. I do know now. She let everybody else eat before she would put a bite in her mouth. As she cleaned up the table, she would eat what was left. That's how close it was. We would have salt-fish for breakfast. Salt-fish was 10 cents a pound. Its \$1.70 a pound now. We'd have pancakes for breakfast and she couldn't make 'em fast enough. We'd have gravy and biscuits and sausage for breakfast sometimes. And there again, she didn't eat until everybody else ate. And I remember the Virginian Railway was run along the Roanoke River and that was about 1,000 yards away and I would play on the railroad and the river. I wasn't supposed to be there but that's where I'd go to play. I'd stand up on the bank above the railway and watch people climb up the coal cars and ride 'em down, throwing off coal as the train went down towards the Viscos. Then, they would get off there, take out a burlap sack out of their pocket and pick up the coal they had thrown out and filled up that sack to have coal to burn.

AS: Wow. Did you ever – You were obviously very young when the Depression was but did you ever realize that your family had struggled at all or -?

HB: I only realized in retrospect. I could look back and see what was happening.

AS: So you never felt hungry or deprived?

HB: Never. Never felt deprived. They took care of me. My father and mother were the best possible people. Didn't drink or smoke and saw to it that we went to church every Sunday and on Wednesday too to prayer meeting, 9th Street Church. In those days, I've got to tell you this, we dressed up to go to town and we'd go out the front door and walk to town which wasn't far off and leave the door open.

AS: Just leave it open or leave it unlocked?

HB: Leave it unlocked. We'd leave the screen door closed but the rest of the door open.

AS: Wow.

HB: I mean anybody could walk in at anytime.

AS: I meant to ask you this, after your mother had you, did she continue working at American Viscos or did she stay at home.

HB: No. She stayed at home. As a matter of fact, she only worked there before she got married.

AS: Oh, OK.

0.04.32.7

HB: It was just the – Life was so beautiful and I was in the Army and Navy and traveled the world, crossed both oceans, crossed the Atlantic 4 times, crossed the Pacific twice, saw 6 different countries. Any my uncle, evidently, he had been in the Navy too and I was in the Navy pure chance but I was following him. He was an electrician. I was an electronic technician. And as a kid, I used to look at his books and study his books. So, I understood streetcars and when I rode the streetcars in Roanoke, I

understood what was going on in the electrical end of it. And the power house was over there on Walnut Street. They made the power to run the streetcars, DC power. It was just – life was a beautiful thing and fascinated me. I had to know everything – how everything worked. I used to tear everything apart to see how it worked. But that's all I can think of at the moment.

AS: OK.

HB: Oh, I will tell you, there's another. There were lots of hobos when I was a kid.

AS: Really?

HB: When I played on the river, I'd find these hobo jungles. Sometimes they were in 'em. They weren't bad people, they were just down on their luck because of the Depression. And they would filter out into – Of course, a lot of 'em were drinkers but hobos would filter out into the neighborhood and people would give them something to eat. They'd do odd jobs. They didn't want a handout. They'd do odd jobs. They'd mow or paint or anything they could do to get the work in those days. I gotta tell you this. Have you ever heard of the Lance Furniture andirons, doorstops, carving sets, that was made at the Norfolk & Western?

AS: No.

HB: During the Depression. Well, there weren't a whole lot of jobs. They'd had a skeleton crew down there but there wasn't a whole lot of work for them. These people made home items, knives, lamps, salt shakers, pepper shakers, door stops. My father made a walnut desk for me down there which I still have. A carving set, candlestick holders, brass candlestick holders, lamps, salt and pepper shakers. My daughter has these things now.

AS: Did the Norfolk & Western sell them for a profit or did the employees get to sell them?

HB: No. The employees made them. Every employee down there made 'em, took 'em home with 'em. It was just – The Norfolk & Western didn't make 'em, the employees made 'em and carried 'em out. It was an underground – It was accepted but it was an underground thing going on. Everybody made this stuff and took it home with 'em.

AS: Wow.

HB: And the museum in Roanoke is trying to get a collection of those items now. My father made a set of andirons for us and a set of andirons for my grandfather. I got both sets now.

AS: Wow. No, I had never heard of that. That's very interesting.

HB: If you talk to the people in the museum, they know about the 1930s manufacturing that was going on at the Norfolk & Western. They machined and cast all kinds of home items.

AS: Were they marked in any way so that you would know that's what it is?

HB: Well, they weren't – Some people may have marked 'em but I remember stuff that was unmarked. But you can tell what it was by looking at it. It was manufactured down there. Castings and machine worked. Beautiful.

AS: Wow. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

HB: Well, it comes slowly. (chuckle) I guess that's all I can think of at the moment.

AS: OK. Let's go back a little bit to when you were growing up in Roanoke. Can you describe your home life for me? For instance, did you have a radio that you would all listen to in the evening?

0.09.52.2

HB: Yes. And that was the most fascinating thing to me for somebody to be talking to me and music out of that box and I'd walk over and look in the back of it and see the tubes lit up and try to figure out what was going on in there. And that's why I made a life in electronics. Started out, I was building and repairing radios and at age 16 – Well first, at age 14, I was a bagger at Kroger's and then I went to Buybee (??) Supermarket at 15. And then at 16, I went to the Old Dominion Candy Company which was on Jefferson Street and I was a gopher. Do whatever they wanted, clean the machines or whatever. But, Sears Roebuck was right around the corner on Church Avenue right across from the Number 1 firehouse. I wanted a job there in the repair shop and I wanted to work on radios. They hired me and

they told me that as soon as I got all the washing machines repaired, I could work on radios. They didn't think I could do it. I got all the washing machines repaired so I could work on radios. And then, at – Incidentally, in high school, at age 17, I built a, my friend and I built radio transmitters so we could talk to each other 2 blocks away. We were so far advanced in our electrical class that the teacher, W.I. Brinkley, Wade Irving Brinkley, used me and Bill as teachers assistants because we came in there already a whole semester ahead of everybody else that was there. Anyway, it was a fascinating job and school and Brinkley was not just a teacher, he was a personal friend of Bill and me. We loved him. We used to go visit him at his home.

AS: That's wonderful. Do you remember the first time you got a telephone or a refrigerator?

HB: Oh, that's right, we did have an ice box on our back porch. There was a hole drilled through the floor so that the water could drip out of the ice box into the ground under the back porch. In those days, you put a card out on a nail on the front porch with a number telling the ice man how many pounds of ice you wanted. Incidentally, when I got out of the Army, I couldn't find a job anywhere and I delivered ice. I got \$26 a week and all the ice I could eat.

AS: I'd do it for the ice but you could eat it. That sounds like fun. Did you have air or anything at your house?

HB: No. No air conditioning. We eventually got a refrigerator and I gotta tell you about the washing machine though. It was a Maytag, square-tubbed wringer washing machine. And since my daddy worked at the Norfolk & Western, he made parts for it when it broke down. Kept that machine going for 39 years.

AS: Wow.

HB: And my mother got it from her uncle who was a washing machine, a Maytag Washing Machine salesman and Regina vacuum cleaner salesman. He had been in the Navy and was an electrician in the Navy. When he got out, he went to go to Ingleby (??) Electric, get a machine, put it in his pickup truck and go through the winding roads of Floyd County getting orders for machines.

AS: What chores did you have around the house or did you have chores in your neighborhood too?

HB: I didn't have chores in the neighborhood but I had to pull weeds in the yard, mow the yard, wash dishes, dry dishes, mostly dry dishes. My mother would wash 'em and I would dry them and that was a wonderful time of communication, talking to my mother. I remember one time, I gotta throw this in, I got mad at momma for something, for disciplining me probably. I said, "I hate you". And she was at the sink washing dishes and I remember she immediately dried her hands, came over and sat down in a chair and pulled me up close to her and looked me right in the face and says, "But, I love you".

0.15.22.7

AS: So she was a good mother?

HB: Oh, the best and I have never ever seen her mad except maybe one time. She was out in the yard sweeping the walk and I was out there too. A car parked in front of the house. Two men got out and told her that she was delinquent in her Poll Tax. You know about Poll Tax?

AS: Yes, for voting?

HB: Yes. And if she didn't pay it, they would have to prosecute her for it. And she says, "I'd just like to see you try". They didn't say another word. They got out. They walked away, got in the car and left. And I remember, I never paid any Poll Tax either. When my taxes were due and I got the tax, I went down to Salem Courthouse with the exact amount of money that I owed them, minus the Poll Tax, and paid 'em. And they told me, "We'll just have to add it to the delinquent tax.". And I said, "Go right ahead.". And eventually, the Poll Tax was declared illegal and we hadn't paid any Poll Tax and it went away and I started voting.

AS: That's amazing. When did the Poll Tax go away? Do you remember? Was it in the 60s?

HB: I don't remember. I guess it was in the 60s but it was probably in the late 60s because it was the 60s that I was paying taxes and not paying my Poll Tax. Oh, I gotta tell ya, at that house on 6th Street, it

didn't have curb and gutter when I was a kid and it was a rough gravel road. And when they paved it and built the curbing and gutter, I can remember the steam, it was a coal-fired steam roller which was old at that time. But that's what rolled the street down flat and my brother and I were kids out there when the work was going on. We threw a tack out in the street in front of the steam roller and for some reason the operator lost control of his steam roller and ran over against the curb and we thought we had caused it and we ran and hid. (chuckling)

AS: Did you have to take care of your younger brothers? Were you responsible for that or not as - ?

HB: I somewhat assumed responsibility. And my brothers – and my greatest fun was to put him in a red wagon and I'd push him around and around the house as fast as I could and he would just scream.

AS: Was that your youngest brother or your middle brother?

HB: My middle brother. Oh, I gotta tell ya, the Clover Creamery at that time delivered milk to the house in a horse drawn cart. And one winter, after they paved the street, there was ice on the street and the horse came up the hill part of the way, slipped and fell. Feet went out from under him and the wagon and the horse all slid back to the foot of the hill.

AS: Oh my goodness!

HB: And I remember working at Clover Creamery one summer. I must've been 14, 13 or 14. Yeah, I worked at the Clover Creamery. I worked at the ice plant and Buybee Supermarket. I remember going to the market shopping with my mother. And of course in those days, they sold live chickens on the market.

AS: This is down on Campbell?

HB: No, the market was on – No, the market is right where it is now.

AS: Right.

HB: But there was an arcade market down there too which is no longer there. People backed up to this wooden structure with their trucks and loaded it into bins and you could walk through the middle and shop both sides where the vehicles were backed up. Very interesting place.

0.20.02.8

AS: So would you go to the market often? Is that where your mom shopped for her groceries?

HB: Yeah. Farmers Market, always went to the Farmers Market for everything 'cause they were fresher.

AS: What other businesses did your family use in Roanoke?

HB: Well, I remember going shopping at Pugh's and Heironimus with my mother. I remember wooden floors that creaked when you walked. And I remember being kinda testy not wanting to be there and fussing and she would squat down beside me and tell me in a very soft voice, "Now if you don't behave, you're going to get a spanking when you get home." And I knew that was the truth. She never made a scene and she never screamed at me in my whole life. When her voice got soft, I knew to pay attention because she was delivering the real goods that I knew was going to happen.

AS: I was going to ask you a question about – Did you use the streetcar system? You said you had an automobile.

HB: We didn't have an automobile until some time in the '40s. We caught the bus. The bus passed right by our house. My daddy had an annual pass to ride the railroad and we'd take the train to Cambria, Virginia. You know where Cambria is?

AS: No.

HB: Cambria is right outside of Christainsburg.

AS: OK.

HB: That's where the railroad station was and we'd go up there and my grandfather would come over from Floyd to Cambria, meet us at the railroad station, take us back to the farm and we worked on the farm. We hoed, picked bugs off of the beans, picked fruit, fed chickens, slopped hogs. I helped put up hay, wheat, pulled corn, beans, everything that they did. And I appreciate what the farmers went

through more than anything. There is nobody better than a farmer because they have to make their own time. Their scheduling, nobody makes them punch a clock and go to work. They have to be self-driven, motivated.

AS: That's so true. What did you do? You said you sold the ice when you came back from the Army. And then what were you able to do after that? Were you able to get a job in electronics.

HB: I eventually got back on at Sears. See, when I came out of the Army, they didn't owe me a job because I had quit. If I had been drafted, they'd have been obligated to hold the job for me. But, they didn't have a job for me when I came back so I delivered ice right after that, the next summer, I got a job at Porterfield Distributing Company, Schlitz Beer Distributor. And when I went out there and spoke to Bittle and Bob Porterfield, I asked them if they happened to know Annabelle Porterfield that taught school at Morningside. They said, "She's our mother." And I said, "She's my favorite school teacher." And they said, "You're hired." (laughing)

AS: That was the perfect job interview.

HB: So I was a warehouse person, to keep the warehouse clean and load the trucks. They said – They showed us a little closet where there was a refrigerator and a couch to sit and they said, "This is the break room." and "There's beer in the refrigerator and you can have all you want but if you're ever drunk, you're fired immediately." So I learned something.

AS: They wouldn't do that nowadays.

HB: But they were good people to work for. Oh, and then, the next year, I was hired by Sears Roebuck.

AS: Was that down here in town?

0.24.48.7

HB: Yeah, on Church Avenue. And I worked in the shop where I had been before repairing radios. The next time I quit, I went in the Navy. Oh, when I got out of the Army, I joined the Air Corps Reserve. I was in that a few weeks and they moved the unit to Langley Field and I'd have to have gone down there to maintain an active connection with the military so I joined the Navy Reserve instead. The Navy Reserve, I got 2 years of electronic training in the Navy Reserve and a man that I had been dealing with at HC Baker selling me radio parts when I was working at Sears and also as a kid – Oh, when I was 17, I went to HC Baker and bought a short wave radio and a meter, a test meter for pretty close to \$200. Warren Davis, the proprietor, gave me credit at age 17 when you're not accountable for a debt.

AS: Wow.

HB: And when I joined the Navy Reserve, Warren Davis was an ensign there and my electronic instructor.

AS: Had you paid him back the debt?

HB: Sure I had. But I want to point out that here's another man who was my mentor and helped me through life. I met some of the nicest people in this town that helped me and were my friends and mentors that helped me be a success in life and Warren Davis was one of them. So he taught me electronics and then I was drafted in 1950 and sent to Korea on the Battleship New Jersey. And so I looked up Warren when I retired from General Electric, well when I came back from the Navy, I'm getting ahead of myself. When I came back from the Navy after 2 years in Korea, I went back to work at Sears and they sent me to TV school. And I stayed with 'em 3 more years as a TV repairman. And I didn't mention the man that hired me at Sears. Jay Madison Nace. Another mentor. A wonderful man and a practicing Christian who was not only interested in my welfare as a repairman and an employee, but also my spiritual health. A good man. Anyway, when I left Sears and went to GE and spent 33 years with them, I went back and looked up Warren and Madison Nace and thanked them both for helping me along in life. And I spent an hour and 45 minutes in Mr. Nace's home and he was retired too. And I found him and told him how much I loved him and what he meant to me. And I told Warren

Davis the same thing and Warren Davis invited me, he and I found out we both had February as a birthday and we had our drink together in his apartment every year until he died after I retired from GE. And of course I met with Madison Nace in his home and told him what he meant to me and 3 months later he died of cancer. Merle MacNutt, I looked him up after I retired from GE. He was the shop foreman at Sears Roebuck, told him what he meant to me and he died of cancer a few months later. So I was lucky to get back to those people who were my friends and mentors in life.

AS: Absolutely.

HB: And I loved 'em.

AS: Its nice they know how much a role model they were for you.

0.29.54.4

HB: I feel so blessed to have found them and told them what they meant to me and we all hugged.

AS: That's wonderful. Do you have a favorite memory, a favorite childhood memory or just memory of growing up here in Roanoke?

HB: The whole thing is so beautiful for me I can barely stand it. I went to the library which was an old house like this in Elmwood Park.

AS: Oh, the Terry Building.

HB: The Terry Building. And I remember walking up the spiral staircase to the little room at the top of that place and looking at arrowheads there and the steps would creak as I'd walk up. I remember – I used to look out into the park and enjoy the view. Incidentally, did you know there is a tree in Elmwood Park right now that blooms that was brought back from Japan by Commodore Matthew Perry.

AS: Actually, I do know that and the only reason is because I just had to do research on that tree for someone who was looking for information about it, a Japanese Magnolia.

HB: That Japanese Magnolia. That's one of my favorite trees. And when I was in Japan in 1950, I found a monument on the beach to Commodore Perry.

AS: Really?

HB: Who had been there just 100 years before and it meant something to me simply because Ms. Penn at Jefferson High School told me about Matthew Perry going to Japan to initiate an open door policy with Japan. And then I got to see it 100 years before and remembered her teaching me that. And that's just the connection.

AS: That's wonderful. That is one of my favorite trees because of where I work in the Virginia Room, I get to look out and see it. It is wonderful.

HB: And for all that stuff to come together for me, in my trip to Japan, it just – It means so much to me. I didn't really think that what she was teaching was sticking until I got over there. (Clap and chuckle) I didn't like history but things stick whether you want 'em to or not sometimes.

AS: Did you have a drug store or anything that you would go to?

HB: Yes, there was a drug store a block away, Saunders Drug Store. And on Sunday, when I got a nickel, I could go out there and get ice cream or a soda and I remember one time – See my daddy started a bank account for me, a savings account. One of his brothers gave me a silver dollar and that started my bank account. So, when I'd get a nickel or a quarter, I remember one time getting a quarter and I was going to the store to spend it and daddy says, "Now you're going to spend that quarter or put it in the bank so you'll have some money to buy a house with someday." I didn't go buy the ice cream, I saved it.

AS: Oh my goodness. Not most kids would do that.

HB: So, when I built my house, I had \$5,000 to start my house with that I'm living in now.

AS: Wow.

HB: I saved a lot of money because I never got an allowance but occasionally I got money. And sometimes I would spend it and sometimes, I'd put it in my savings account.

AS: That's wonderful.

HB: So I've been saving all my life.

AS: Its a good habit to have. I've gotten through the questions that we have designated to ask. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me that we haven't talked about?

HB: Well, about Roanoke? I remember going to the Academy of Music to see a show. I don't remember what the show was but I sure remember the building. Gas lamps on the walls and creaking boards as I walked down the aisle and a musty smell from a carpet and all that's good stuff. I have some gas lamps at home right now that came out of houses on Patterson Avenue as they were torn down.

AS: So you salvaged them?

HB: I salvaged gas lights.

AS: Do you use them still?

HB: I don't use them. I had plans for putting them in a room but I never even finished the room. But I made a living in electronics my whole life and I used to run the alleys looking for junk. And as a kid, if I found an iron or a toaster or a fan that didn't work in the alley, take it home and repair it and sell it and that's how I got money.

AS: Thank you Mr. Bowman for meeting with us today and allowing us to do this interview with you.

HB: I appreciate it.