

Interviewee: Janice Hale  
Interviewer: Alicia Sell  
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

AS: Today is June 8, 2007, and my name is Alicia Sell. I am with Roanoke Public Libraries and I am here interviewing Ms. Janice Hilton Hale at the Gainsboro Branch Library. Thank you for coming out today Ms. Hale. We're going to start with some background questions about. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

JH: I was born in Roanoke, Virginia, June 11, 1928.

AS: Were you born at a hospital or at your home?

JH: Burrell Memorial Hospital.

AS: How long have you lived in Gainsboro?

JH: I lived on Rutheford Avenue Northwest which is I would consider very close to Gainsboro.

AS: Is that considered Northwest?

JH: Northwest.

AS: OK.

JH: And I lived there until I was married except for the 4 years I was in college.

AS: And when you were married, where did you live?

JH: After marriage?

AS: Mm mm.

JH: I lived on Patton Avenue which is still in the Gainsboro area. I stayed there about 4 years and then I moved back to Rutheford Avenue Northwest and stayed there about 3 years and then from there to Carroll Avenue Northwest which is in the Rugby Section.

AS: Tell me about your parents. When did they come to Roanoke?

JH: My father and mother came to Roanoke as children or late childhood. My father's family moved to Roanoke upon the death of his father. They lived out in the rural area, Blackstone. My mother came too as a child when her mother died. She came to live with an aunt. She was early adolescent when that happened.

AS: What kind of work did your parents do here in Roanoke?

JH: My father worked for Norfolk Western Railroad and my mother worked partially as a domestic, not full time.

AS: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JH: I have 2 brothers. One is a minister and lives in St. Louis, Missouri and the other is a lawyer who lives in Detroit, Michigan.

AS: What are their names?

JH: Samuel Wilburt Hilton Jr. is the minister and Kenneth \_\_\_\_\_ Hilton is the lawyer.

AS: And where do you fall, are you the oldest?

JH: I'm in the middle.

AS: Did you have extended family members living close by to you growing up, like a grandmother or aunts and uncles?

JH: Yes.

AS: Who lived close by to you?

JH: I had an aunt and her family who lived just up the street from us on the same or almost the same block. And then an uncle who lived on Patton, Northwest, with an large extended family. Both of them had large families.

AS: Did you do a lot of things with your extended family?

JH: Yes.

AS: Can you describe your house for us? You said it was on Rutheford, correct?

JH: Right, right.

AS: What was it like? For instance, was it brick, was it one story or two? Did it have a front porch?

JH: It was a, what do you call it, bungalow. It had 3 bedrooms and my father had the house built. Three floors with the basement with a front porch and a back porch and a fenced in yard.

AS: Did you have a garden growing up?

JH: Not really. We maybe had a tomato plant or two but not a real garden.

AS: What did your father do at the Norfolk and Western?

JH: He was a freight handler. After retiring from Norfolk Western, he worked for a senior citizens program there at the Melrose Towers and he was there about 10 years after having retired from Norfolk Western. And also, he was a minister.

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AS: What church did he preach at?

JH: He pastored a little church in Floyd, Mount Zion Christian Church in Floyd, Virginia.

AS: Did he do that after you were, still after you were born? Would you go out to Floyd to that church?

JH: He didn't do that until after his retirement from Norfolk Southern, Norfolk Western now and then. I was an adult then. I was married by that time. During the time that we were growing up, he was a sort-of like a lay minister at Loudon Avenue. At that time, it was 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue Christian Church down in Northeast.

AS: What kind of activities did you do growing up? Did you sing, for instance, in the choir or sports or anything like that?

JH: I was very active in youth activities at the YWCA and of course the youth program that were carried on at the church, Girl Scouts. I guess that's it.

AS: Let's talk about your education a little bit. Where did you go to school here, elementary and - ?

JH: I went to Harrison School Elementary and then to Lucy Addison High School.

AS: Did you have to walk to school or did you take a bus?

JH: Yes, walked.

AS: Was it very far for you?

JH: Well to Addison, it was a pretty good distance but all of us walked. (chuckle)

AS: Were you ever allowed to stay home from school?

JH: Not unless I was sick. I don't remember losing any days.

AS: How much schooling did you complete?

JH: I got a BA degree from Talladega College and then I was certified in Special-Ed after I became employed with Roanoke City Schools.

AS: So you have a BA, what is it in?

JH: Its in Sociology and my certification is in Special Education.

AS: And you said you went to Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama. Did anyone else in your family ever attend college?

JH: Yes, both brothers. My older brother has a Doctorate of Ministry. He finished Morehouse College and then went to seminary in Indianapolis. My younger brother, he finished Talladega and then went to Boston U where he earned his law degree.

AS: Wow. Did your parents attend college or was education a priority in your family?

JH: They didn't attend college.

AS: Did they push you and your brothers to go to school?

JH: Oh, yeah. That was understood from the moment I can remember, that was our goal in life. (chuckle)

AS: Let's talk a little bit about your life at home growing up. Did you have – What kind of activities would you and your family do together? For instance, did you have a radio that you would gather

around in the evening? Would you get together with, you know, on Sundays with family and have a big lunch kind of a thing?

JH: Yes. Radio I guess was our main media entertainment. Of course, our life was based around the church. Every activity at the church we attended.

AS: What church did you attend?

JH: That was 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue Christian Church. While I was in college, the church relocated from Northeast to Northwest and then now, Loudon Avenue Christian Church.

AS: What kind of radio shows did you listen to? Do you remember any of them?

JH: Well, of course all the church services that were aired at that time. And I can remember some talk shows.

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AS: Did you look forward to listening to the shows with your brothers and mom and dad?

JH: There were a couple of comedies like Amos and Andy. (chuckle)

AS: Oh, OK. Did you sit on the porch in the evenings?

JH: Yes.

AS: Would you talk to your neighbors and socialize that way.

JH: Yeah. I tell you one thing I remember now. My mother would go shopping and she could leave us under the guardianship of another neighbor who lived just across the street.

AS: And she'd watch over you?

JH: Yes. (chuckle) She was, at that point in her life, she was a widow and she stayed home a lot. I mean, she was always home. And she took care of the neighborhood. (chuckle)

AS: And did you like her?

JH: Well, yes. (chuckling)

AS: Do you remember when you got a telephone or a refrigerator?

JH: I think, as I recall, I think I was in college – I'm pretty sure I was near college age when we got a telephone. Now the refrigerator, I can't say exactly when that was. I can't.

AS: Were they nice to have in your house?

JH: What?

AS: Was your mom happy to have the refrigerator?

JH: Oh, yes, yes. The only way I can date was when I remember – My mother used to make ice cream and she made it somehow using the refrigerator ice trays and all that. My mother was a good cook and loved to cook.

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

JH: Well, I did the cleaning at home. My mother basically did all the cookin' and I took care of the cleaning.

AS: Did your brothers have to help out with chores.

JH: Yes. Of course keeping the yard. And at that time, the furnace was coal and there was a coal house and they had to bring in the coal.

AS: Did you have any family stories that were passed down from one generation to another? For instance, did your family talk about the Civil War or slavery or did you have like a favorite family recipe that was passed down from generation to generation?

JH: Maybe recipes. My mother, as I said, like to cook and she received and passed on recipes. But I don't remember any – My father didn't go in the service. His brother did and I can remember my uncle telling stories about the service but not my dad.

AS: Did you or a spouse or sibling or any of your children serve in the military at all?

JH: No. Oh! My husband did. Yes, he served.

AS: What war did he serve in?

JH: I don't think there was a war. (pause) I can't remember if there was a war but I know that he was

in the military service prior to my dating him, knowing him.

AS: What businesses or shops did your family frequent or go to? Did you go to the city market?

JH: Yes. There was a Saturday thing with my mother and shopping.

AS: So would you go weekly to the city market kind of a thing?

JH: Weekly, maybe even biweekly for vegetables.

AS: What other businesses did you shop at? Did you shop on Henry Street?

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JH: No, downtown. Now the earliest I can – There used to be a Shoops (??) downtown and a Montgomery Ward. And of course after I was an adult, I remember Pugh's and Heironimus.

AS: Did you enjoy going shopping downtown?

JH: Yes.

AS: Were there grocery stores and stores over here in Gainsboro Northwest that you would go to?

JH: There was a grocery store up on Patton Avenue and my husband's uncle and father had run that grocery store. We shopped there until they closed. In later years, when A&P came into business.

AS: Do you have a favorite childhood memory? For instance, like a favorite holiday event or a favorite gift that you ever received?

JH: You know the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, my father used to – He worked at Norfolk Western, so he got passes on the train and we had little excursions on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. We always went to Washington DC to visit his brother and we'd just go up I think the night before, getting into Washington early morning on the 4<sup>th</sup> and then that night, we came back.

AS: Would you see fireworks while you were there?

JH: Yeah. They took us out to parks and so forth. And also, working for Norfolk Western, they had an annual picnic and the families were invited to go to these picnics. That was another.

AS: Was it fun?

JH: Yeah. And of course, the church had a church picnic.

AS: What kind of work have you done throughout your life? You said your degree was in Sociology.

JH: After leaving college, I worked for the YWCA as an office secretary. And when I left there, I worked for Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority and that job was office management. And then I started working for Roanoke City Public Schools and I was a trainable Mentally Handicapped Teacher. I did that for 24 years.

AS: Did you enjoy it?

JH: Yes. Very rewarding.

AS: What schools did you work at?

JH: I worked at Tinkle Creek West End and Fishburn Park Elementary and then I retired from Addison Middle School.

AS: Did you use the Gainsboro Library here? Do you remember Virginia Y. Lee?

JH: Yes, very well. Mrs. Lee – See, we grew up on Rutheford and Mrs. Lee lived there on Harrison and her husband was the manger/Executive Director of the YMCA and my father was very active on the YMCA board. My brothers attended all those activities there at the YMCA. And of course, I came to the library here quite frequently. I knew Mrs. Lee very well.

AS: And did you like her? Was she nice?

JH: Lovely person. Mr. Lee was outstanding too.

AS: Describe some of the cultural events that happened in Gainsboro? Do you ever remember entertainers coming to the Dumas or like any other major events like that that would happen? Like going to the theater?

JH: I went to the theater but I did not go to the activities at the Dumas 'cause I was young. I guess I would have finished college before I frequented the Dumas that much for any activities.

AS: Did your parents go to the Dumas or no?

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JH: My parents, most of their activities were church related. Or YMCA, as I mentioned about my daddy, he was on the board there. He went to Y for everything too, all activities but the other activities, no, we didn't get to go.

AS: Who were some of the strong community leaders?

JH: Of course, I mentioned the Lee's. The YWCA, there were several directors there that were strong. There was a Mrs. Lemay (??), Mrs. Christine Williams who was the director of the Y, Elizabeth Jordan and Mary Gates. All these are people who worked at the Y. The principals in the schools. Mrs. Fanny Estella Watson. She was a principal at Gainsboro school and a neighbor, so I knew her very, very well.

AS: Did the community work together to encourage you to succeed?

JH: You know, life was based around the school, the Y and the church. That's how people knew each other from church affiliation, the Y activities.

AS: How has Gainsboro changed over the years?

JH: Well, its no longer residential. This area is not residential now like it was 'cause people moved out in the suburban area, extended way out. And Roanoke has grown. At one time, if you went out to an activity, you knew the people who were there but that's not – Many more people here now and living farther away and other avenues of service and so forth, its different.

AS: How was your life affected by the Civil Rights Movement and segregation? How did it change Roanoke?

JH: Opportunities opened up for jobs. At one time, the only thing a college graduate could get would be a teaching position but that's not true now. There are many, many other opportunities for job placement.

AS: When you went to school, it was segregated but when you were teaching, - Were you teaching during segregation or were the schools desegregated by then?

JH: They were desegregated.

AS: What kind of jobs were available for African-Americans when you were growing up? You said teachers but what kind of jobs could men get for instance?

JH: Factories, postal service. That came into being – Or places like – I remember when it opened up so that black men could be employed at ABC stores and the post office and some factory positions. Of course, railroad – certain jobs on the railroad were available.

AS: Was that a good job to have in this area?

JH: Yes and according to the pay issued. My husband, when I married him, was a water on a dining car and all of the people who were over him were called stewards in charge and they didn't have a black one. But that finally worked up to where a black man could be a steward on a dining car. And then, when – he was promoted from being – I think they cut off a lot like waiters and such on the dining car and he got a job at Norfolk Southern's general office as a – I don't know what they would call that position - But anyway, he worked there as a clerk.

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AS: So that must've been a good job.

JH: That was a better job and with advantages like hospital insurance that came with that. Better hospitalization program than he had before.

AS: Did people in the Gainsboro community, did they own their own businesses?

JH: There were some, yes. There was one – There was a pharmacy. You know where the old Y was?

AS: Yes.

JH: OK, right across from there on that corner, there was a pharmacy owned. That little section there, there were several black businesses. There was a realty. Johnson-Reed (??) Realty.

AS: What was the building right across here from the library? Is it the cleaners?

JH: Claytor Clinic?

AS: Is that what it - ?

JH: That's the old building. That house, let me see, there were 2 doctors and a dentist. They were brothers. That's where I went. He was my physician. He delivered my children. There was a dentist office too but that was over at Henry Street. You know where Henry Street was?

AS: Yeah.

JH: There were a couple of dentists over there. There was a shoe shop there on Henry Street. A theater.

AS: And you went to that theater?

JH: Yes. 'Cause see it was segregated. We couldn't go downtown except there was a movie downtown called the Roanoker and it had a back entrance with stairs that you would go up and sit in a balcony like.

AS: But you would just usually go to the one over here.

JH: Yes. The Virginia Theater.

AS: I've gone through all the questions that I had written out here to ask you but is there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to mention or share with us?

JH: No, I don't think so. I think the opening up of the colleges, Hollins and Roanoke College meant a whole lot. My daughter went to Hollins and was one of the first black women to go to Hollins.

AS: Really?

JH: Hollins honors her in wonderful way now. She's on the board of directors there and they have done several tributes to her.

AS: So it was a segregated college? Or was it just not -

JH: At first, black people didn't have – I don't know whether they would've taken them or not. But they were sought after after integration set in. The way she got interested, she met Chutlin Beardsly (??). When she was there as a student, he started working with her as far as theology. She's a minister. He encouraged her to go into the ministry. She was a music major. She worked at Hollins a year before she decided to go into the ministry. She went to Duke.

AS: Duke Theology School?

JH: Mm mm. Yes to the seminary there and when she finished her term there, she was ordained and worked as a chaplain in the prison system for 3 years and after that, she was commissioned to start a church by our denomination. So she has a church, Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, Georgia, 3,000 members.

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AS: Which daughter is this?

JH: This is my oldest daughter, Cynthia. So that was one of the advantages that grew out of – And my second, no third daughter, received a scholarship to UVA through Norfolk Southern.

AS: Wow.

JH: In fact, she went to Norcross. She was selected by Norfolk Southern to go to Norcross and she finished high school and then she got the scholarship to UVA. So a whole lot of good things came out of the Norfolk Southern context.

AS: That's wonderful. Did they do that for a lot of people? Did they give out scholarships a lot like that.

JH: I don't know how it turned out to be. There were at one point, but I don't know what's going on now.

AS: That is impressive that she got the scholarship. OK, I guess we're done with our recording. Thank you for participating.

JH: OK.