

Interviewee: William (Hank) Highfill, III

Interviewer: Brian Clark

Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

BC: This interview is with Hilliam H. Highfill, Hank, at his residence at 4334 Kirkwood Drive, Southwest, on November 19, 2007. I am Brian Clark the interviewer. Again, thank you for agreeing to this today. I know you've lived in this area for most of your life now, so, where and when were you born?

WH: I was born at the old Jefferson Hospital in downtown Roanoke on May 9, 1947.

BC: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

WH: I grew up in BelAir Circle which is Southwest, it was Southwest County of Roanoke and now its in the city of Roanoke off of Lee Highway across from – used to be an Arlen's (??) there. Now, there's a steakhouse and a McDonald's, across Cakey Road from Lewis Gayle Hospital. Lewis Gayle Hospital was a corn field when I grew up. That's where I grew up in that neighborhood.

BC: How long did you live there?

WH: I lived there from birth until I graduated from college and went into the military. So, 21-22 years.

BC: Did you live there when it was annexed by the city?

WH: No, it was annexed by the city after I left and went in the military. Its been part of Roanoke probably since some point in the '70s.

BC: Talk to me just a little bit about your family, your parents, siblings.

WH: My mom was 1 of 11 children born to Dr. and Mrs. G.M. Maxwell. My grandfather was an MD and Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist practicing out of the old Medical Arts Building in downtown Roanoke. Its now the Professional Arts Building next to the Appalachian Power Company. She was 1 of 11 children. My dad -

BC: What was your mom's name?

WH: Caroline, Maxwell was her middle name, Highfill. She was as I said 1 of the 11 Maxwell children who all were born and raised there in BelAir Circle. My dad was born and raised in the city of Roanoke. His dad worked for the old railroad express agency in Roanoke and he grew up in old Southeast and then his parents moved to the Southwest part of the city. Both my parents went to high school. My mother went to the old Salem High School which became Andrew Lewis. My dad went to Jefferson High School. They both went to Roanoke College where they met. They were married and took up residence in Roanoke and raised 8 children there and my mom died 10 years ago. My dad still lives in the home on BelAir Circle.

BC: What was your dad's name?

WH: William H. Highfill, Jr. I'm the 3rd.

BC: I didn't catch the 3rd when I announced that. You are right.

WH: I'm the first son of 8 children. I have 2 older sisters.

BC: So it was all 8 of you plus your parents living in one house.

WH: And my grandparents lived next door. They gave my parents land when they married and my parents built a home next to my grandparents' home so I grew up with my grandparents and 2 maiden aunts living next door and then my family of 8 children and my mom and dad. So, we had a large family right there in BelAir Circle. It was a great place to grow up.

BC: I bet. Now you mentioned you lived where Lewis Gayle was a cornfield, did you guys have a family garden?

WH: We had – My dad had a garden but he and his brother, my Uncle Gordon who grew up in Roanoke also, at one point, tried to raise pheasants there in the back yard. It was rural at that point you gotta remember. My dad and my uncle, when I was probably in grade school, had a huge pen down in

the backyard and they raised pheasants and sold 'em to the Hotel Roanoke where they served pheasant for a number of years and then they gave it up 'cause it was too much trouble. Its hard to raise 8 children and not spook the pheasants. (laughing)

BC: I bet.

WH: We used to spook 'em regularly. My dad worked for the Federal Government.

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BC: What did he do?

WH: He worked for what is now the Department of Veteran's Affairs. It was then the old VA, Veteran's Administration, and he worked there for just about 40 years. He worked his way up from a clerk all the way to the manager, the top position in the regional office for the last 10 or 12 years of his career. So he was a federal employee and retired as such, as I did.

BC: Now where did you work?

WH: I started out while I was Roanoke College working for the post office as a 20 hour a week, part-time college student. From there, I went into the United States Air Force where I flew heavy jets for almost – Well, I was in for almost 6 years. I was a pilot. I left there and went with the Department of Labor, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in Roanoke and then, I went with the VA but I couldn't work in Roanoke because my dad was there. So, I worked in Winston-Salem, North Carolina for 3 years. And when my dad retired, I was able to transfer back to Roanoke and I worked the last 22 years of my career at the regional office in downtown as an Administrative Officer. I ran all of the in-house administrative functions for the VA.

BC: Did your mom work as well or did she stay home?

WH: My mom raised 8 kids and then, when we all reached school age and started going to college, she went to work as a teacher. And she worked as a teacher in Special-Ed, special needs kids, during the whole time that she and my dad were putting 8 of us through college. Then, she retired. So she had 2 careers. She raised 8 children then she went to work as a teacher and then she retired.

BC: What kind of activities did you participate in as a child growing up?

WH: (chuckling) We had 8 children in the house and we had a huge extended family because my grandparents had 11 children. So we had cousins just – So, we never lacked for playmates. And it was a rural area – Like I said, Lewis Gayle didn't exist. It was a cornfield. We just played in that neighborhood and invented our own games and had a ball. But it was a terrific way to grow up. But it wasn't anything like it – We would walk to – You know where the River Jack is, 419 and Lee Highway?

BC: Mm mm.

WH: That's about 2 or 3 miles from our home and we would walk to there and buy a drink and then get in an inter-tube in the Roanoke River and then float home. (laughing) I mean it was that – It was – Our parents didn't worry about us because it was just a different world and we just ran loose and had a ball. It was a terrific way to grow up.

BC: When did you start going to school and where did you start?

WH: My education took place in a 5 block area in downtown Salem. I went to the old Academy Street Elementary School for 1-3. I moved a block over to Broad Street Elementary School, which is the original Salem High School before Andrew Lewis was built, for grades 4, 5, and 6. Then, I moved 4 block or so down College Avenue to the Andrew Lewis Annex for the 7th grade. Across the street to the Andrew Lewis High School for 8-12 and 2 blocks up the street to Roanoke College for my college education. So, my entire education, grade school through college, took place in an area that you could walk in. Its really pretty amazing.

BC: That is pretty amazing. (laughing)

WH: Most of my brothers and sisters did that, 6 of us. 8 of us – we all got college degrees, 6 from Roanoke and 2 from King College in Bristol.

BC: So what was school growing up like for you at elementary?

WH: It was a totally different world than it is today that it was – I mean, I don't really know how to describe it except that it was very comfortable. More laid back than it is now. The teachers – I mean, I got a good education but there was a great deal more discipline than there is today. There weren't nearly the distractions and the problems that kids face today. It was a very easy time to grow up. We didn't have – I mean, there wasn't any such thing as a cell phone or an i-pod or – I didn't even know what marijuana was until I was almost a senior in high school. It was just a much more laid back, easy going and the discipline was much more strict if that's what you'd want to call it. It was a “No ma'am”, “Yes, sir” type education. You did what you were told or you got popped in those days.

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BC: Did you ever have an occasion to get popped?

WH: Never. Although, I had a 6th grade teacher who didn't like me. She gave me a pop one day when I was in the 6th grade 'cause I was – we were at the Roanoke – we were at the annex and the annex was across the street, 4th street from Manfred Lewis and she's teaching Health class and a truck, a big old 18 wheeler pulled up to the stop light and I was conversing with the driver (laughing) and I got – but no, I was not a bad kid. But it was really a good basic education with a lot of, what I would call, pretty strong discipline.

BC: Did you go on to any school after Roanoke College?

WH: I graduated from Roanoke in June of 1969, and on July 3rd of that year, I was sworn into the Air Force. I went to Officer Candidate School for 12 weeks and became a 2nd Lieutenant and then I went for 1 year of pilot training. And I would say that was the toughest year of education I've had. I think it would probably rival in intensity and just plain, old-fashioned hard work of any post-graduate degree. It was good, hard -

BC: What was your major at Roanoke?

WH: Business Administration. I always wanted to fly my entire life but I didn't have any interest in mathematics and engineering which – and if it hadn't been for the fact that there was the Vietnam War going on and there was a need for pilots, I would've probably never gotten accepted. But, I scored very high on the test that they give for pilot training candidates. My physical was perfect and I got put on the waiting list. They said, “You meet all the qualifications but we don't have a spot for you but we'll put you on our stand-by list”. I called my recruiter and said, “I'm gonna go join the navy.”. He said, “Wait a minute.”. A week later, I was in pilot training. Well, I was in the class to go to officer training school and I got to fly.

BC: Did you actually do any service in the war?

WH: Yeah. I flew heavy jets, C141, 4 engine jet transports and Jamie and I were married after I finished officer training school and before I went to pilot training. So she went to pilot training with me, one of the reasons I made it through I think, having that stability and someone there with me. We graduated pilot training and you're able to select the aircraft you're gonna fly based on your rating in the class. I was able to get the airplane I wanted so I could fly worldwide airlift. And then we were stationed at Dover, Delaware and we flew support missions in and out of Vietnam and Thailand. I was never stationed there. I would fly materials in and load whatever they had coming out which, in a lot of cases, involved hospital ship flights. We'd bring back wounded and fly them back out. I flew in support of the war. I didn't actually participate in the war. It was good. A good experience.

BC: I bet.

WH: I went in to – I used to go into Utapao, Thailand, and Saigon. The big base at Tan Son Nhut, you've probably heard of it – We'd go into there and go in just before light so we could get on the ground and it would still be dark. They'd load us and we'd take off just at sunrise just to get out of there before things got hectic if they were going to get hectic. It was – I had a great, great experience.

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BC: I know you were in support but you were still there.

WH: I flew some interesting missions.

BC: What was your interest in flying?

WH: I had 2 uncles that flew. I had an uncle who flew off of destroyer. He was catapulted off of a destroyer and then he would land – It was a sea plane – He would land on the water and they'd hoist him back up on. And then I had another uncle who flew off of carriers but he died in a training mission just before the war started. And then on my dad's side, my uncle Gordon flew military transport during the war. I always had a love for airplanes. I always wanted to fly one.

BC: And then you did.

WH: And I did. Once I got over being air sick. (laughing) It was awful. It was awful. But I was terribly air sick for the first 6 months but once I got over it, it was wonderful.

BC: Bringing it back towards Roanoke, if I say BelAir, Roanoke, from your childhood, what's the first memory that comes to mind that sticks out?

WH: Just – We lived up on that hill above – and the VA hospital was across the way and we could sit up on the hill and watch the trains, the old locomotives, the steam-driven locomotives, going in and out of Roanoke and they still had the Powhatan and the Pocahontas which were passenger. They were two of the last passenger trains that ran in and out of Roanoke and I can remember from being very young sitting up on my grandparents' front yard. You could look down and watch those steam locomotives come in and out of – that's one of my earliest memories. The Lee High Drive In Theater was just across the river and we could sit up there at night and watch movies. (laughing)

BC: Right from your house.

WH: From my grandparents' front yard. It was just a terrific place to grow up. It really was. I was lucky. But that's some of my earliest memories. And just being able to – My mother never – We got up in the morning, she'd fix us breakfast – This was before I started school and all. We just ran loose all day long. It was – There wasn't any real trouble to get into. And we just played in the neighborhood. That's how I grew up.

BC: Did you all – your family or yourself – was there a focal point like a radio or TV or anything like that?

WH: We got a TV. I'll always remember when we got a TV because I was relatively young, probably in the mid '50s and we got an old black and white console television and my dad set it up with the antenna up on the roof. And the first program I ever watched was Walt Disney's – Whatever that show they had. It wasn't Disney World at the time. Wonderful World – It might've been called the Wonderful – I think it was just called Disney Land. And then, Davy Crockett, Paladin. You don't remember any of these. You're too young. Gunsmoke. Every – We all hated Sundays because that was the Sunda night – but on Sunday night, Liberace came on at like 6 o'clock and then at 6:30 or 7:00 was what became the Wonderful World of Disney. It was Disney Land. And then there was the Ponderosa and Have Gun Will Travel and Gunsmoke. I grew up every Sunday night watching those shows and dreading going to bed and going to school the next day. Our vacation one year – Our family vacation one year when my dad was still working his way up through the organization and they were just struggling to make ends meet was we went to the S&W Cafeteria down in Roanoke with 8 kids. We went to the old American Theater and saw How the West Was Won. That would've been in the '60s sometime. Everything revolved around the family because there wasn't money to do stuff with 8 children so it was all just family. And every weekend there were cousins on the hill visiting my grandparents and we'd just – It was all – My whole growing up experience was just that nuclear family. My family and the cousins and my grandparents and my parents.

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BC: Did you guys have a porch on your house at all?

WH: We had a small front porch where we played – Did you ever grow up playing Kick the Can?

BC: No.

WH: (laughing) It was kinda a hide and seek game but there was – We'd put a soup can out on the – and the front porch was “safe” and whoever was “it” had to go out – The can would sit out on the sidewalk in front of the porch and if you'd go out and find somebody then you had to race back and if you could – If the person who was “it” could run back and put his foot on the can and say the person's name, they were captured but if that person could beat you there and kick the can, then, they got to run and hide until the person found the can and reset it. (laughing) We'd play that for hours on that front porch in front of my house. And you'd be racing back and the person who was “it” was trying to put their foot on the can and you were trying – and it was called Kick the Can. We grew up playing that game. There would be 8 of myself and the siblings and then 10 or 12 cousins and you'd have kids all over the neighborhood.

BC: You guys practically had your own school.

WH: We had our own football games and baseball games. We played softball in the yard for years - and throwback football?

BC: Hmm.

WH: You don't have teams and you'd have one goal line and everybody stands out in the football field. You'd kick the ball and whoever catches it tries to run to that one goal line. Everybody else tries to tackle 'em. And when they're tackled, they have to stop, pick the ball up, and throw it back over their head, whoever catches it – So its a slow advance down the field until somebody finally scores. We played that for hours. Throwback.

BC: Besides the games and everything, did your family or siblings have any chores or anything around the house?

WH: My sisters had to work in the house doing the dishes and stuff and I, being the oldest boy, had to mow the yard. And things like taking the garbage out and that kind of stuff. But my job, because I was the oldest boy, the only one they'd allow to use a mower, I'd spend just hours and hours because we had a huge yard and I mowed all summer long. The yard was so big Brian, that if it was really rainy, I could mow the whole yard and just about have to start over. And I mowed – I still love to mow.

BC: Its a good thing.

WH: Yeah, that was my job. I mowed all summer long. During the winter, no. I mean, there were 8 children so somebody had to take the trash out but it wasn't like there were 8 jobs to be -

BC: Yeah.

WH: We got a quarter allowance for it and that's what I got for doing all the mowing too. I mean, there wasn't any – a quarter a week. That was pretty good money.

BC: Are there any stories that are passed down in your family or things that – recipes or styles of cooking or things that have come down from your parents?

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WH: My mother was a really an outstanding cook but the thing that was most amazing about my mom and the cooking was that there were 8 of us and every single meal, she, except for breakfast, but every dinner, she would cook 5 pounds of potatoes and serve mashed potatoes. 5 pounds worth of mashed potatoes or an equal amount of rice at every meal simply because she had 4 growing boys and 4 girls and she cooked all the time. So, our meals were a big deal because we had – we didn't have a formal dining room. We had a great big kitchen and the older ones got to sit at the kitchen table with my parents and the younger ones had to sit at the counter adjoining and meals were quite a production until we all got old enough to start doing stuff. We all started playing sports and all. And then, meals only became a big deal on weekends because it was just – there was so much going on that with 8 of us in school and the boys playing sports and the girls doing this, the only time once we got older that we ever ate together was on weekends because my mother was just feeding kind of a production line type thing. And we'd go over to my grand – Like I said, my cousins were in every weekend because we had cousins in town. We had cousins in Blacksburg. My uncle was a professor at Virginia Tech and there

was always a huge family meal on Sundays at my grandmother's. There could be 30 people there.

BC: Boy. Puts a new thought on Thanksgiving.

WH: So it was a big deal. Yeah, we kinda grew up around meals because there was such a huge number of people. Meals were such a big deal. And when we were younger, the whole family would go camping at Catawba on the 4th of July and Labor Day and that was a humongous deal. There'd be 30 of 40 of us camping on the creek at Catawba. Those are unbelievable memories. That huge crowd out there. The women spent the whole time cooking and feeding all those people. So, yeah, when you're that big a family, everything kinda revolves around feeding 'em all. Most of my memories of the group revolve around either sporting events where we all were or meals where we all were. And then, as we got older and older – There were 4 of us at college at one time and the other 4 were in grade school and high school so, it would seem like to me sometimes I could go a day or two and not see the whole family. It just became such a big – It was the initial growing up phase. Everything was all about – It was great. It really was.

BC: Were there any shops or businesses in BelAir that you guys particularly hung out at?

WH: When we were young, the closest place was Charlie's Market which I told you was at the River Jack and we would all find a way to get a dime and – this was just the boys – We'd hike up there and we'd call it “going to Charlie's”. They'd say, “What do you want to do?” and we'd all say, “Let's go to Charlie's.”. We'd all scrounge up a dime and we'd hike all the way up to Charlie's and we get a soda and a Moon Pie or something and we'd either float back in the river or we'd walk back home. But that was the closest business until the BelAir Lawn and Garden Center opened which is down at the intersection of Keagy Road and Lee Highway. Its now a McDonald's but that's where the BelAir Lawn and Garden Center was. That was the first business that was – I mean you could hit it from up on top of the hill and we did on occasion with a walnut or an apple. (laughing) We used to stand up on top of the hill. The whole side of the hill was an apple orchard and at night, as young boys, we'd sit up on top of the hill and try to hit cars going down on Keagy Road with an apple. (laughing) I mean, they weren't big apples. They were those old yellow apples. But every once in a while, we'd hit one. (laughing)

BC: Did they stop?

WH: Yeah they'd stop. (laughing) But we were clean up on the hill and we were invisible. But that was the only kind of mischief that we ever got into was hitting cars with apples. That business opened and then they built that shopping center across the road. One year, before that – That was an airport by the way. When my mother was young, they lived up on top of that hill above – BelAir was up on top of the hill up above Lee Highway and across the road was a field where there's now an Appalachian Power substation and a shopping center with some medical offices and a Chinese or Japanese restaurant.

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BC: Sakura.

WH: Yeah. That was all an open field and at one time, it was an airport. On Sundays, the bi-planes would fly and there would be parachute jumping into that field and my mom watched a guy whose chute didn't open. She's always talked about that as one of her vivid childhood memories was a guy that jumped off the wing of a bi-plane and the chute didn't open. But there was an airport down there. Then they built the substation and an Arlen's. Do you remember Arlen's?

BC: No.

WH: Arlen's was a precursor to Kmart and that kind of stuff. It was kind of a discount department store. When I was in the 7th grade, the circus came to town and set up in that field. That would've been 1959 maybe. So that was the last time that that field was a field. And we went down at 5 o'clock in the morning and got jobs putting up the big top and working the circus all day for free admission. After that, they built that shopping center there which would've been 1960, 1961. There have been

businesses there ever since. But before that, I was 12 or 13 years old before any type of business other than Charlie's Market which was 3 miles away. So that's how rural it was. And the only reason we got to go to Salem schools was we were in the county and Salem had county schools at that point. It wasn't a corporated city, it was a town. And the kids on either side of us – My grandparent's house faced Lee Highway up on top of the hill. My dad built next to 'em facing Lee Highway. Everybody else in the neighborhood who built over the years, built facing the other direction which is basically south. They were all Cave Spring people but we lived on Lee Highway technically because we faced it. So, the kids next door and behind us went to Cave Spring High School. My family went to Andrew Lewis High School because we lived on Lee Highway and they lived on BelAir Circle.

BC: Was there any contention because of that?

WH: Well, yeah. When I was growing up, there were like 5 houses in BelAir. Its now a huge development. There were like 5 houses and 4 of those houses had kids growing up who were basically my age and they all grew up going to Cave Spring schools and my family – There might have been 8 or 9 of them and there were 8 of us. It was a pretty fair fight. But we were good friends as youngsters but as we grew up, they grew up in Cave Spring and we grew up in Salem. So, we kinda drifted apart that way. I always considered myself more of a Salem person than a Roanoke person because I was educated there.

BC: All the way through?

WH: All the way through.

BC: That's interesting.

WH: Yeah it is.

BC: What – I don't know if there's anything additional to what you've already added, what type of things were important to you in the actual physical area where you lived?

WH: You know until I was high school age, my whole world revolved around my family because there was me and my brothers and sisters and my cousins. We didn't really have outside friends. It was all that – because it was such a big thing that it was all family. We didn't play much with other kids because we didn't need to. If we got involved with other people it was because they came to us and it took until I was in high school before I started developing friends and all outside of that very tight family-type group. So, until I was 12 or 13 years old, my whole world revolved around BelAir Circle and the “Maxwell Clan” as we were called because my grandparents were Maxwells and my mom, of course, was a Maxwell, so, I kinda grew up a Maxwell rather than a Highfill. It took 'til high school for me to start seeing the world outside of my own family because it was such a huge thing. There wasn't any need for - other kids grew up running around with the neighborhood kids. I grew up with my family.

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BC: What was it like – You were away for the military, Air Force and you were away in North Carolina – Was it Winston-Salem?

WH: Winston Salem.

BC: Did you experience anything different when you returned to Roanoke after those times away?

WH: Yeah, Roanoke became a totally different place for me after I grew up as opposed to those first formative years. Roanoke was my grandfather's medical practice at the Medical Arts Building and the rare occasion when I went downtown to my dad's office – because he worked in downtown Roanoke – and an occasional trip to the S&W Cafeteria which was a big deal in those days and the Roanoke Christmas Parade. That was – It was a place where we went but it wasn't really a part of our lives as much as Salem was in our family. But after I grew up and came back home, particularly from the military, I mean that's where I worked. Roanoke became more of a focus than Salem really did.

BC: Did you notice any differences in your perspective coming back?

WH: Yeah. I mean the world changed in the 60s drastically at least from my perspective. It was really

– I grew up in what I would call kinda an innocent age. I mean I really didn't think much about anything other than just that little world I was growing up in. But the 60s changed everything. I think '63 when John F. Kennedy got assassinated changed me dramatically and in '68 my whole world kinda changed in '68 because when – That year Martin Luther King was killed, Bobby Kennedy was killed, the Vietnam War was extremely divisive thing and it was the first election I voted in. The whole world kinda – and I became, and the people I grew up with, those late 60s changed us from the innocent kinda world we grew up in to a pretty cynical. I became pretty cynical about things from '63 is when it started with that first assassination but '68 really – I think it was a watermark at least in my life and the way I viewed the world because those 2 assassinations and the War and the Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey election and subsequent Watergate. I served during the Vietnam War. I saw all that divisiveness. Roanoke was all part of that. I mean, you know, my view of things – Roanoke was an idyllic place when I grew up and during the 60s when I really did grow up, everything, my perspectives on everything changed.

BC: Was it any different at that point or do you think you just noticed it?

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WH: I think I just – Well, I think the world changed during the 60s. I really do. I think the way we looked at the world – I'm just talking about we the people who I grew up with – The way we viewed the world in the 50s was drastically different than the way we viewed it by the late 60s and it wasn't just because we grew up. Its because of what we grew up seeing and experiencing. The political situation, the assassinations and the Vietnam War and then serving in it. I didn't serve in the war but I was there. I went in – I would go in, fly into Tan Son Nhut like I said and just outside Tan Son Nhut was a huge mountain. There was an outpost on that mountain and they would put troops up there at night and we'd land in the morning and those troops would be coming down and I would walk into the Mess in my nice clean flight suit and my shiny boots and my Captain's bars and I'd walk in and those soldiers who had been up on that mountain all night long with the Viet – We'd walk in and they would look at me and I could tell the way, it wasn't just that I was an officer. I was the guy who was bringing the shit and taking the shit out and I didn't have to stay there. It was different. I will remember sitting in those Mess tents and eating with those guys and I could just feel 'em looking at me like, “(whispered) He's coming in and he gets to leave”. The hollow look in their eyes. It changes – And I was taking out – I had one whole airplane full of burn victims and the airplane smelled like it. And we picked 'em up in Japan and they were stacked like cord wood. I didn't think you could have this many guys who were that badly burned but they would stack the litters up in the cargo hold of the airplane, the nurses all around 'em. And they'd stack 'em in there and we'd take off and we'd fly 12 hours, 12.3 hours, land in San Francisco. They'd unload 'em all. We'd go get 8 hours of rest and then load those poor sons of bitches, sons of guns back on there and I'd fly most of 'em to the burn center at San Antonio and then a few others would go to Illinois. And I also brought home an entire plane-load of drug addicts, kids who had gone over there and gotten hooked on heroin and they would be so sedated that, you know, that changed you. So, yeah, Roanoke was a different place after like I said the mid to late 60s everything – Roanoke changed just like everywhere. I think a lot of it was my view of the world but, yeah, Roanoke was a different place.

BC: What was your first memory coming back after the war? Stepping back into home or Salem or Roanoke?

WH: Well, Janie and I were at Dover and then at Charleston, Dover, Delaware and Charleston, South Carolina and then I came back to Roanoke after I got out of the military and it took 8 months to get a job. So, we were on unemployment. I had unemployment benefits built up and we were on unemployment and I spent 8 months trying to find a job in Roanoke. My first memory was there – I just didn't think I was ever going to get one. Then, I really got lucky. A guy that worked at the VA was, where my dad was the head honcho so I couldn't work for the VA, was playing poker with a guy who

had just been transferred to Roanoke with the Department of Labor and he was establishing an OSHA office and he told him he had to hire 6 or 8 new guys and train 'em to be Safety and Health Specialists. This guy says, "Hey, I know this guy who just got out the -" - He was a retired Army Colonel. He said, "I know a guy who just got out of the Air Force and he's looking for a job.". He said, "Send him to see me.". I walked in the door and we hit it off right away because we both were military. I had just - He hired me and that's how I got into the, got to stay with the Federal Government 'cause I had been an employee of the Post Office for 2 ½ years, 6 years in the military and then I just got to pick right on up with the Department of Labor and I put in a total of 35 years. By the time I was 55 years old, I had 35 years in the Federal Government.

BC: That's incredible.

WH: From age 20 to age 55.

BC: Wow.

WH: And most of it was in Roanoke. The 3 years in Winston-Salem and the 6 years in the Air Force. The rest of it was in the old Carlton Terrace Building where I was drafted. I was drafted after my freshman year at Roanoke College because Roanoke College, bless their hearts, didn't send my status, you were deferred. They didn't send my grades and my deferment in and I was drafted. I called the draft board and they said, "I'm sorry, you've been drafted.". I said, "I'm deferred. I'm a student.". They said - So I had to go take my draft physical at the Carlton Terrace Building at downtown Roanoke which is just up from Kirk Hospital, community hospital. And I took my draft physical there and was processed and then my deferment came through so I didn't have to go. I came back from the Air Force, landed a job with the Department of Labor in the Carlton Terrace Building 1 floor below where I took my draft physical. That was my first job after - That was - I came back to the place that I had taken my draft physical 8 years earlier. But I worked in downtown Roanoke from that point until I retired.

0.45.20.5

BC: Wow. I know that you've done a lot of work in the community at least with Roanoke College and Habitat -

WH: Since I retired.

BC: What other types of organizations or civic groups or community projects have you been involved in?

WH: I was never - My dad is a big civic type guy. He belonged to the Kiwanis Club and he's always trying to get me to join and I was never a joiner. I did - Janie and I since we were married have always had a foster child with Save the Children and we've always adopted at least one family or more at Christmas and tried to make sure that they got same Christmas that we gave our kids. But, until I retired, I didn't get a whole lot of involvement 'cause I, I don't know. I'll be honest with ya. I was just working and I didn't get very involved.

BC: There's no harm in that.

WH: No. But once, except for that one thing that we've always done which is great because our girls grew up doing it with us and now they do it. And my sister is a social worker with the Roanoke City and she's always giving us families that really needed something so we always felt like we were really doing something good for - But that was it. I wasn't much of a joiner.

BC: Do you remember growing up in your neighborhood or Roanoke, you had mentioned the parade, were there other cultural type events that you attended as a child? It doesn't sound like there was much in your neighborhood but -

WH: There wasn't much in our neighborhood. The annual Christmas parade was always a big deal and there was one in Roanoke and one in Salem and I remember there was a - I think they called it the American Legion Auditorium or maybe the Roanoke. It was the major auditorium and it burned down. It was a big deal when it burned. But I remember my dad taking us there to see Gene Autry. But, like I

said, my parents had their hands absolutely full raising and educating 8 children so we didn't do much outside the family until we got older.

BC: It sounds like your family was a cultural event.

WH: We couldn't afford anything else. So those things that stood out were those things that we did get to do, going to the parades and stuff that didn't cost my mom and dad any money.

BC: You worked in Roanoke for a good portion of your employment.

WH: I liked working in downtown Roanoke.

BC: I know there were a few things that impacted the community like the silk mills when they closed.

WH: My dad worked there.

BC: No kidding?

WH: Rayon. You're talking about – What was it? - What was the name of that huge plant in downtown Roanoke that made Rayon?

BC: I can't remember.

WH: But anyway, that was his first job before he finally – before he got in with the Federal Government. I remember when that – that was really an economic disaster at the time for Roanoke because it was a huge plant and it was probably the largest producer of Rayon in the country if not the world. And then Rayon lost its favor in the market. Better synthetic materials came along. Rayon was a big deal and Roanoke had a huge plant. That plant is still – Its in old Southeast right on the Roanoke River and when that plant closed, I remember the – it didn't affect me but I remember that it was really a big deal with the impact it had on Roanoke.

BC: Were there other similar types of economic events that you remember?

0.49.32.6

WH: Roanoke was a railroad town. My grandfather was with the Railroad Express Agency and when my dad grew up and when I was young, everything revolved around the railroad. And the N&W shops just dominated downtown. That changed and I remember it happening. It seemed like to me when the GE plant came to Salem, that was a huge thing. But Roanoke changed from a railroad town to a banking town. I've watched that happen. I mean as I remember Roanoke growing up, there was basically one bank and that was the First National Exchange Bank which was down on Jefferson Street and Campbell. That was – There was a Colonial American across the street but FNEB and what it became was it. Roanoke has just become – well, its the banking center for this part of the state.

BC: Sure.

WH: And that's what I – I watched it change from a railroad town to what I would consider a - banking has got to be one of the major – I don't know that for a fact but it seems like to me I watched Roanoke change from a railroad town to a banking center and then the VA hospital and GE plant.

BC: Big difference.

WH: Huge difference.

BC: Did anybody, any of your friends, neighbors or anybody, not that you had a whole lot of neighbors but did anybody own their own businesses?

WH: The guy next door was an architect and he had his office down at the foot of the hill and tried to make a go of it as an architect and finally had to give it up and went to work for my dad at the VA and the Loan Guarantee and the neighbors down the street, the Cook family, ran the BelAir Lawn and Garden Center which was a privately owned business. And one of my neighbors ran the Buya (??) Hardware Store. The other neighbors were professional people, several doctors in the neighborhood and a guy that sold drugs, not illegal drugs.

BC: I was getting ready to ask, a pharmacy? (both laughing)

WH: He sold pharmaceuticals. But I mean, the only people that I grew up around or knew that had their own businesses were the Cooks who had the BelAir Lawn and Garden and Dick Grant who, I don't know if you'd call it a business but he had his architect shop down there on Lee Highway. And

the hardware store. But, no, nobody else that I knew that ran their own businesses.

BC: Suppose if you were to maybe take a step back 5 years to today and maybe take a step outside of Roanoke, and if somebody came up to you that was maybe from Montreal or London or Atlanta, how would you describe Roanoke to 'em?

WH: Well, I've always kinda felt like Roanoke and Salem both were a little bit of a closed society to – You were a Roanoker or a Salemite and that made you part of the “in” crowd and then if you weren't, you weren't. I've always kinda felt like when I was growing up and it still is a whole lot that way in Salem I think. I think you're a Salemite or you're not and I always felt like Roanoke was the same way but that has changed as I've gotten older. I think the population of Roanoke has changed drastically. When I was growing up, everybody kinda felt like they were Roanokers or Salem people. And now, I don't think its nearly – Yeah, I felt like we were a little bit in the other places I've lived, the societies I thought were more open and receptive than Roanoke and Salem were if you weren't part of the “in” crowd, at least my feeling was when I was growing up, you were either one of us or you weren't. You were part of the Roanoke-Salem community or you were an outsider. I don't think that's the way it is today but that's the way it was then.

BC: If you were to imagine back all these long years (laughing) and or even today actually, if you were to imagine a walk, a favorite walk or a favorite drive in the Roanoke-Salem area, what might that be as a child or as an adult?

0.54.39.9

WH: The walk I spent twenty-some years taking a walk around downtown Roanoke everyday at lunch. I mean that's what my boss and I did is we walked and I've always kind of enjoyed just – you walk from the Federal Building down Franklin, through Elmwood, the City Market, across the bridge over to the Hotel Roanoke – I always thought that was a terrific place just to walk. As far as driving, Mill Mountain and the Parkway. If I was going to drive, my two favorite drives would be to go up Mill Mountain and look out at the valley from the star and then go up the Parkway to Peaks of Otter or go over 311 to Catawba, get the old Blacksburg Road and ride all the way back up through the valley, Ellett Valley and all that all the way into Blacksburg and then down 460 back to Roanoke. I think those are terrific drives particularly in the fall.

BC: They are. What are the biggest changes that you have – that really stand out in your mind if you were to think of this area as a child to now? You've mentioned a few I know but is there anything else that really stands out?

WH: Well, its – Yeah, its, - Roanoke, and I shouldn't – has more of, to me, has more of a congestive big city feel than it did when I was young. I mean, there's just more people and Roanoke is land-locked and I – back then, I felt like there was all kinds of room and it didn't take you any time to get out of civilization and into the country. And now, I feel like Roanoke is just basically a land-locked community that is growing up the mountains. Its become uglier than it was in those days because the mountains were gorgeous and now the mountains are becoming developments. Roanoke has just gotten a whole lot bigger, a whole lot more crowded and its not nearly – its still a beautiful place but its not nearly as pretty as it used to be. Because now, particularly if you're going this way -

BC: Going towards Bent Mountain or?

WH: Yeah, Bent Mountain. They're building everywhere 'cause there's no place to go. And if you – My brother's the football coach at William Byrd and he's been the head football coach there since 1981 and we've been playing in the same stadium every Friday night during the fall and I go out and we sit on the back row at the top and the view that you see from the back row at the top of that stadium now compared to 1980, you wouldn't know you were in the same place.

BC: What's different?

WH: Its – you now look over the visitor's stand back up towards the mountains and you see nothing but houses and you can now see traffic on the Parkway. And just 30 years ago, it was just mountains.

You couldn't see the Parkway. Roanoke – I love Roanoke but Roanoke is, like I said, its locked in. There isn't but so much room in Roanoke and we've now reached a point where its a bowl and we're building right up the sides of the bowl to the rim 'cause there's no place else to go. That's my biggest disappointment in Roanoke. That and the fact that 419 – I mean I used to be able to walk that route. That's how we went to Charlie's Market and now I wouldn't. Its a different world. But I wouldn't even think about allowing my kids to do that when they were growing up. My parents didn't think a thing about it.

BC: Have there been any positive changes to this area that - ?

WH: Well, yeah, there's a whole lot more to do. Its a great place to live. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I mean I've said a lot of negative things about – But that's just a fact of 2008 versus 1947.

BC: Big difference.

WH: Totally different world. Roanoke's a great place and there's a whole more to do but its just a different place, a whole lot more people. Although, if you do the census I don't guess it – When I first started remembering – I remember when Roanoke broke 100,000. It was a big deal. Well, now, they're still struggling to, you know -

1.00.07.1

BC: Still right there at it.

WH: And it won't ever get – Because they've annexed everything they can annex. Its everything else that's getting bigger. Salem was 10,000 people. I remember that Roanoke was 60-70-80,000 people in the whole metropolitan area and Salem was 10 and it stayed that way. And now, Salem's probably 30, Roanoke's 100 and 4, 5, 6 or whatever. But the county's – I really can't – Unless you've been here – When we stood up there on that hill up – 'cause I grew up on a hill and you could look all the way over to Fort Lewis Mountain across the VA hospital and out to Salem and you didn't see anything. And now, you just see nothing, nothing but civilization.

BC: And that's a lot of the reason why we're doing this is to help preserve some of that process.

WH: Its phenomenal. And, I, you know, we'd sit up there and watch that train go. It was neat 'cause those were neat old trains, those steam engines. You'd wait for traffic to go down Lee Highway. You know a car would come and you'd wait a while and you'd see another car. Now, you can't cross Lee Highway. Different world. But I love it. I'm not knocking it. Its just a fact of life. We used to sleigh ride down my grandparent's front driveway all the way down the hill and come out at the bottom of the hill at Keagy Road at Lee Highway and my sister and several other people on a number of occasions would go on across the highway. (laughing)

BC: Oh my gosh.

WH: I mean they couldn't stop and I mean, there wasn't any traffic. You just shoot right across Lee Highway and into the field. Now, you know.

BC: Won't do it now.

WH: That's the environment I grew up in as opposed to – except for my Aunt Emma Hunter. Don't you tell her I said that. (laughing) She would drive us to school 'cause she was a teacher and we'd get – She got this from my grandfather. She'd stop at the foot of the hill and if there was traffic, you know, GE had opened and there was a lot more traffic. She'd wait what she figured was her allotted time. She'd say, "I've waited long enough" and she'd pull on out (laughing).

BC: Even if somebody was coming?

WH: (laughing) And I've heard my grandfather was the same way. My turn. (laughing) If you interview her, don't you even dare. That's another memory Brian. I can remember my parents – there were 8 of us and there were no seatbelts in cars and I grew up standing in the front seat between the driver and whoever the passenger – and every time we'd go down the road to the stop light, whoever was driving, the arm would come out to hold the child who was standing in the middle. And I

remember. I would be standing. And I remember every time we came to a stop, my Aunt Emma Hunter or my mom or dad, whoever it was, would reach over and -

BC: Swing that right arm out.

WH: Swing that arm out. You know, I grew up and finally realized what an absolute futile effort/attempt to do anything that was. I mean if – But there were 10 of us in that car, my parents and 8 kids and there wasn't a seatbelt in the thing. And we were stacked like cord wood 'cause we had a station wagon. There were 3 people in the front seat, 4 people in the second seat and that left at least 3, sometimes more, who were in the back of the station wagon. (laughing) Can you imagine what would've happened if they had hit a tree. (laughing)

BC: That would've been bad.

WH: And if they had had the requirement for child safety seats that they do now, my parents wouldn't have been able to take us anywhere but we just – They just stacked us back there, take a pillow and drive to Myrtle Beach with 10 people in that station wagon.

1.05.03.4

BC: That's incredible.

WH: The first time I ever saw the beach, this wasn't a station wagon, 10 of us drove to Myrtle Beach in a Ford Fairlane and I mean there were kids all over the place. (both laughing) And back then, that was almost a 10 hour drive. Those are memories buddy.

BC: Oh, I bet they are. It sounds like it. Well, speaking of that, I'm at the end of my questions Hank. Is there any other things like that that you, I've prompted or anything else come to mind?

WH: Oh, I'll tell you one thing. I rode the last streetcar that ever ran in the city of Roanoke. My grandfather worked for the Railroad Express Company. He called my dad and said, "The last streetcar is going to run whenever and I'm coming out to get a friend" who could get him on the last streetcar run who worked for the city somehow. He said, "I'm gonna take him on the last run of the streetcar". I was too young to remember it all. I've just been told this. He came out and got me, took me downtown, and my grandfather and I rode the last streetcar that ever ran in Roanoke. And I don't know what the date was, I don't know anything about it. But if you ever went back and found out when the last streetcar ran in Roanoke, I was on the sucker. (laughing)

BC: I'll know where you were. That's great.

WH: I guess. I don't even know where it ran. I know it ran down Campbell Avenue and up Jefferson Street.

BC: Maybe they'll bring 'em back. We'll see. Well, Hank, thank you very much.

WH: I don't know if it did any good.

BC: It was great.

WH: It was a hoot.

BC: That was very good. Thank you very much.

WH: You need to talk to – (recording ends)