

Interviewee: Gilmore Perry & Lawrence Mitchell

Interviewer: Cheryl Ramsey

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Today is February 23, 2008. I am interviewing Gilmore Perry, Jr. And also I am interviewing Lawrence William Mitchell. We are at Jerusalem Baptist Church.

CR: I guess I'd like to ask first where and when were you born?

GP: I was born September 7, 1940, on Norfolk Avenue, 916.

CR: And you sir?

LM: July 1, 1939.

CR: And how long have you both lived in Roanoke? And possibly what streets and neighborhoods did you live in?

GP: I lived in Roanoke from 1940 to 1958 after which I went off to college and returned about 3 years ago.

CR: And you Mr. Williams?

GP: I lived \_\_\_\_\_ (??) during that particular time after college.

CR: And Mr. Mitchell, how long have you lived in Roanoke?

LM: I was born where there used to be apartment buildings \_\_\_\_\_. I was born right there, I lived there I guess about 15 years. Then we bought a house across the street over here. I lived there about another 3 years until I finished high school. I graduated I think it June 8, 1950. One of those days, \_\_\_\_\_. I finished school. Do you want to know where I worked at \_\_\_\_\_?

CR: Sure.

LM: When I was in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I was working at Sears and Roebuck putting on tires and seat covers and batteries from 5 to 9, 5 days a week and on Saturday all day which I guess is about 28 hours a week I guess, working part-time. I worked there until about, for about 3-4 months. When I left there, I went to the Catawba Sanatorium. You've heard of Catawba Hospital up there on the mountain.

CR: Yes sir.

LM: I worked up there for about 6 months 'til the day I went into the Army.

CR: OK.

LM: I went into the Army Wednesday, March 31, 1959. That's when I went into the service. I was in there for 2 years, came back here and stayed 45 days – Left here and went to Philadelphia. My sister hooked me up with a job up there in a factory, pressing brand new suits. I didn't like that. Stayed there about 2 weeks and left there and went to \_\_\_\_\_ (??), New Jersey. I have relatives over there, cousins and then I was doing construction work. I worked there I guess about 2 years. Then I left construction and went to a pharmaceutical place where they made cosmetics and pharmaceutical products. I worked there for 8 ½ years. Then I went to a dye factory. I left the other job after 8 ½ years. I like to supervise so I went to this dye place and I worked there about 2 years. Then they laid the whole third shift off and then I just came on back home. And my brother had a club called Buck's Playboy Club. He called me up.

CR: Where was that?

LM: 1113 Center Avenue. Its still standing. Its a daycare center now. He got a daycare center now. And then for a while, I got a job on the railroad. That job kept laying off so much. So I left there. Of course, I had several jobs after there but that's the only two – the City of Roanoke after that. I started working for the City of Roanoke. I was there for 22 years and 10 months until I was 62. I was about 38 or 40 days from being 62. So I stayed there until I retired and I've been here ever since. But I was in Jersey though for 13 ½ years before I came back here. Army 2 years.

CR: So do you have family still living here?

GP: Yes, I still have nieces and nephews and uncles and aunts that still reside in Roanoke.

CR: In this area?

GP: In this area. Well, not in the West-end section but in Northwest primarily, North County.

CR: Can y'all tell me a little bit about your education or your school life here in Roanoke?

LM: I didn't go to college but while I was in high school, I took 2 years of carpentry in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. 2 years of mechanics in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. I learned \_\_\_\_\_ since I've been back here and I did plumbing, brick laying – I had brick laying in junior high school. You remember that?

GP: Yes.

LM: \_\_\_\_\_ teaching me. \_\_\_\_\_

CR: What school did you go to?

LM: Booker T. Washington. First I went to Harrison. I went to Harrison for about 4 years and Loudon was all white and then you had your black. So I went there from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Then they opened up old Addison. They named it Booker T. Washington. We were the first blacks to go in there as a junior high school. You remember that don't you?

GP: Yes.

LM: So when they opened the new Addison, then the old Addison was made into a junior high which is an administration building now.

CR: Same for you?

GP: Well what I can remember during that time, we didn't have school buses for one thing. And we didn't have a school in Southwest for us. We grew up during the time of segregation in the '40s and '50s. We had to catch the city bus to go to school and – The closest school to us during that time was Loudon as Lawrence mentioned earlier, Harrison -

LM: Harrison first.

GP: Those were the two closest schools to us so we had to be bused to those particular schools by way of city buses.

CR: Harrison?

GP: That was on Harrison Avenue. You know where the old Harrison Museum is?

CR: Mm mm.

GP: Now that was the first black high school that they had. This is where Miss Addison started. And at that particular point as he stated earlier we went to Booker T. Again, we were still bused. We still didn't have buses. We had to either walk -

LM: Wait a minute. After we got out of elementary, you was on your own. You had to get to school -

GP: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. We still had to ride the city buses.

LM: Not \_\_\_\_\_ Booker T. right?

GP: We still had to ride the city buses when we went to Booker T. But during that particular time, even though this particular area was primarily depressed, we didn't know. We didn't – We had no idea we were poor. We wasn't widespread as West-End or Southwest is today. We went – black folk – went from 5<sup>th</sup> Street to 15<sup>th</sup> Street, from Jackson Avenue to Salem Avenue. We did not live on Rorer Avenue until the middle '50s and then it spreaded out to Campbell and so forth and so forth and it was sort of a class thing even back then.

LM: You \_\_\_\_\_

GP: That made \_\_\_\_\_ because we were so close. We knew everyone and this was the way we were raised. Everyone knew everyone and if you did something wrong then everyone was right on your case. And during that time, and I can only speak for the first 18 years of my life before coming back to Roanoke – After I left Roanoke, I went to college.

CR: Where did you go to college?

GP: I went to 3 different colleges. I went to – I graduated and I went to Virginia State and I graduated from Bluefield State and I graduated from Temple University and I graduated from California State University. My law degree came from California State University. But I – we went back to

Philadelphia because that's who sent me to to get my law degree. After which I retired and I came back to Roanoke to live.

CR: When did you come back to Roanoke?

GP: I came back to Roanoke in 04.

CR: Do you have family here? Is that why you came back?

GP: I came back – I still have nieces and nephews. I have a son that lives in Richmond. I wanted to be closer to my grandchildren and so forth and so I moved back to Roanoke after retiring. Well, I've been retired for 10 years so I stayed around for my nephew for a while – my own office and so forth. But getting back to Roanoke itself, when I returned, so many changes had taken place because we – All of old Southwest was just about demolished and torn down as I knew Southwest. You see even where they are building, if you recall, its where they're building houses now – Even Hurt Park – I know when we left Roanoke, there was no Hurt Park school. That was our football field or sports field.

LM: Yeah.

CR: The whole area?

GP: Hurt Park.

LM: Which is where practice was.

CR: Even where the Hurt Park.

GP: That whole – you know where Hurt Park school is?

CR: Right but the whole part where the projects were was that there or -?

GP: See, the projects weren't there. You see, you have to go back to 1951 when they built Lincoln Terrace, there was a projects where Hurt Park is, school is, was. That was a project. You remember the old barracks? The old Barracks?

LM: Those were the OTI homes.

GP: Yeah, OTI homes but it was the projects.

LM: Right.

GP: You see they tore those down and made a football field for us.

LM: Crackerbox houses.

GP: Right, and when they opened up Lincoln Terrace.

CR: When was that, in the '50s? That was in the '50s?

GP: That was in the '50s, yeah, early '50s.

LM: I think before that.

GP: Early '50s.

LM: About '55 or '53 -

GP: No, it was before that. It was around '51. They opened up Lincoln Terrace and when they opened up Lincoln Terrace, they tore those down and made the field up there for us. But that was the only thing up there. But you have to understand that even at that particular point, we couldn't go beyond there. We couldn't go beyond because we didn't live in that area then, you see. We stopped around 16<sup>th</sup> Street.

LM: Right. I remember – that's where we used to go swimming, right?

GP: Right. \_\_\_\_\_

LM: There was a little white boy who had big dogs. I think he's still living in that house.

GP: (chuckling)

LM: I had a dog, Tip, you remember the dog I had?

GP: Yeah.

LM: A brown dog. You had to across Patterson and 11<sup>th</sup> Street and every time we'd go across there, he had rocks and throw 'em and call us all kinds of \_\_\_\_\_. My dog caught him in the butt one time. (all laughing) We learned to swim right out here. I almost got drowned when I was 5 and you almost got drowned. My brother saved both of y'all.

GP: Even those were the days. But in terms of progress, I imagine you would - Lawrence may have

been around then but like I say, I left after that time and with the changes being made and everything. In fact, this 10<sup>th</sup> Street bridge wasn't even here when I left Roanoke. We still had a little small, little bridge we had to cross – almost a one-laner when I left Roanoke. But I do remember this was my church and I was a member of this church. Your church too, right? Its been a church for over 50 years.

LM: I used to go to Boy Scouts here. He did too. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ Younger, \_\_\_\_\_ Franklin, Joyce Betty, Scott – Paul Scott. They were our Scout Masters.

GP: But now this is, you know, this has changed completely. You can live wherever you want to in Southwest but during my time, we could not, you know like I said, we did come up during the years of segregation where we had to go in the back of the Commodore Inn.

CR: The Commodore Inn, where's that? Or where was that?

GP: Over on 13<sup>th</sup> Street.

LM: That's still standing.

GP: Yes. 13<sup>th</sup> Street. I was born on 13<sup>th</sup> Street - 12<sup>th</sup> Street, I was born on 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

LM: You were raised up down there -

GP: Yeah, but I was raised up down there. I spent 5 years on 13<sup>th</sup> Street. But that was a -

LM: A nice little house down there

GP: A family cluster. My grandmother, grandfather, uncles, aunts and all of 'em lived in the 900 block.

LM: My uncle lived next door.

GP: Yeah, in the 900 block. So I grew up in a cluster of family. But it was great. Even though we still experienced those hardships and everything, and seeming we're still experience some hardships – progress I guess.

CR: Are there any stories or something that stands out, something memorable that you remember from when you were here or during that time?

LM: There wasn't no work here at all – dishwashing, you can't even hardly get a dishwashing job. If you had an education, you couldn't get nothing here. So you didn't have any, so everybody had to migrate North, DC on up, see , to get a decent job back in the day. That's why I left. \_\_\_\_\_ I was working for Charlie Sanders doing dishwashing jobs, that's it. Couldn't find no work. You remember?

CR: How old were you when you left?

LM: When I left Roanoke, I was 19. I went in the Army when I was 19. I got out when I was 21 around February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1961, stayed here 45 days and went to Philly.

GP: I came back after college to seek employment and I was just married and I was offered a contract with the Roanoke City Schools at that particular time. The year that I graduated from college, the starting salary for teachers was like \$2,900 which I felt was (laughing) was a bit low. So I sought my fortune somewhere else. But I went with the Boy Scouts of America and became a District \_\_\_\_\_ Executive serving the southern part of Virginia which transferred me to Philadelphia at that particular time. But salaries and job availability was at -

LM: Chaos

GP: It was at an all-time low for blacks and this is when they were just opening up General Electric. I think they started hiring people at General Electric and places like that.

LM: \_\_\_\_\_ I didn't do it myself. \_\_\_\_\_

GP: (laughing) I don't know whether \_\_\_\_\_

LM: I went for a plastering jobs and they weren't hiring no brothers. Now Neil Bennett, he retired but he's out there now. He know more about it than I do. He said the only way we got on was when there was a strike up there one time. Whites went on strike and they hired brothers. They got that “right-to-work” law in Virginia. Yeah, so, \_\_\_\_\_ they started hiring after they settled the strike and they kept some of the brothers. That's what he told me. He's out there now. He's about 76, 77.

GP: But through it all, I think growing up in Roanoke and especially Southwest because its all I can speak on in terms of people and how people responded to us, was very good. I, like I say, we didn't

know – we were so happy with what we were doing until we didn't know how poor we really were.

LM: \_\_\_\_\_ west \_\_\_\_\_

GP: West-end (laughing) during that particular time and this is not a negative thing I'm saying but y'all call it West-end, we just purely called it Southwest. As a result of that, people sold a whole lot of liquor in Southwest.

LM: We sold it ourselves.

GP: This is not a negative thing I'm saying, this is a survival during that particular time and bonded and un-bonded.

LM: Right.

GP: And this is how a whole lot of people in Southwest made it. Now that's not a negative thing I'm saying, I'm talking in terms of survival.

LM: I'll tell ya. You talking about whiskey? That's the only time I ever had anything. My daddy's working \_\_\_\_\_ and my mother was selling whiskey in that little house over there. And we sold over there. That's the only time I ever had any money. She was making more money than he was then.

GP: You know its not a negative thing and it was open. It wasn't a closed issue. You met in church every Sunday.

LM: Mm mm

GP: The same people that – people that were selling and after which you went and you made them happy. But I thought it was good, now that I can reflect back on it.

LM: Now he came up in a family of two, two people, I had five. His daddy worked two jobs. He worked \_\_\_\_\_ and he worked in that club, back of the Rorer Theater at night. It was Mr. Perry. And I remember one time he said, I want a job over there \_\_\_\_\_. You talk about some hard work. I lasted about 2 weeks. Pulling the clothes out of tub. You worked it one time too didn't you?

GP: I worked there every summer when I was in college.

LM: Man, that was some hard work.

CR: What was that, doing what?

GP: The Roanoke Linen Service. They had these tubs where they washed the clothes and you had to pull clothes out of the tub, you know, with your hands, with your bare hands – It would swell up, you know because so much water would feed into your fingers.

LM: I had about 8 sandwiches, a quart of milk. I was so tired, I lasted about 2 weeks. I said, “Mr. Perry, I can't take no more”.

GP: Those were the days.

CR: Did y'all ever go to Gainsboro and the Dumas and all that stuff?

GP: Well, we had to, I mean, because that's where all the happenings was around the Gainsboro area such as – This is where the Y was located. The Young Mens Christian Association. Henry Street – This is where all the activity was - the movies. It was the only movie that we had was the one that was up there – unless you wanted to go downtown and go upstairs to the balcony. But this is where all our activities were generated from that particular area, the Gainsboro area. This is why we were so close throughout the city because we all grew up together. We all had to go to the same schools so therefore, we met up at a certain time and that was our life. There is hardly anyone that's my age that lives in Roanoke that I don't know and that's Northwest, Northeast before they tore Northeast down to – The city realized that they needed to expand and they tore Northeast down and the people from Northeast moved to Southwest. This is when Rorer Avenue opened up. Rorer Avenue and Patterson opened up. Those particular streets housed the people that were displaced from upper Northeast. That interesting -

LM: You had the projects back then. There wasn't no drugs in it back then like it is now. 'Cause I used to ride about two tanks of gas out looking for women, me and John Lewis. You know John Lewis? I got some pictures here of the house I was born in. I showed my daddy. I ain't showed my mother's picture.

CR: I think we would like to get copies of those if you like. What was your home life like aside from – or any stories passed down from generations or your parents grew up here or - ?

GP: My parents grew up here too. My parents grew up, like I said, my grandmother and grandfather – Well my father was from North Carolina but my mother grew up a half a block from where I grew up because her parents grew up there. Parents from back grew up there. So I go all the way back to about 1885, Southwest.

LM: Were your parents born here?

GP: Huh?

LM: Your daddy born in Roanoke?

GP: No, my father was born in North Carolina but my mother and her mother was all down around 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

LM: All the way down to 5<sup>th</sup> Street, those apartments -

GP: Right, but my grandmother actually – and this was sort of a class type system – my grandmother was real fair. Her skin was real fair and she grew up over on Patterson Avenue because her father was white. She was on the lower part of Patterson – Was it Patterson Avenue or - ?

LM: Campbell.

GP: Campbell.

LM: Campbell past this street.

GP: And she grew up in that pocket right there and so they've been up here -

LM: Was she real white?

GP: Yeah.

LM: When they're light, they treat them better. Let me tell you something. My mother had some clips of it from the paper \_\_\_\_\_. They had – If they needed somebody to do domestic work around the house, they had – they wanted a light-skinned colored person to work. You remember seeing that in the paper.

GP: Yeah.

LM: A light complexion. Now my driver's license had your complexion on there. Mine was light brown and there was dark brown and I guess some of 'em so light, they don't know to say so whatever. You remember seeing that on your license? When I was about 15.

GP: Yeah, I remember that. Now my grandfather was from Lynchburg. My mother's father was from Lynchburg and they owned a lot of property in Lynchburg, houses and stuff like that. So when they built a house down here, they built a big house. You remember that big house on the corner with the pillars and all that.

LM: Mm mm.

GP: My grandfather -

CR: Where was that?

GP: This was a block down.

CR: Is it still there?

GP: Oh no, its since been demolished because they passed an ordinance or something that you can't – that its only commercial from Norfolk Avenue – Norfolk Avenue, right? - All the way down so no one can live beyond 10<sup>th</sup> Street. And they tore all those houses down.

LM: There are two houses somebody living in down there, I think.

GP: My uncle's house is still there.

LM: I think there's two people \_\_\_\_\_

GP: I go back on – My family go back around 1885 in this area.

CR: Did they pass any stories down to you or you pass down to your children?

GP: They were not historians in terms of – I think I know more about my father's \_\_\_\_\_ than actually what they would pass down as it relate to Roanoke, Big Lick at the time. But they do go all the way past the Big Lick era. Same thing – Because I think I can recognize myself in terms in what they were

able to do just from listening to them – quite naturally during that particular time – I don't think that they experienced much in terms of the Depression because they had a few things going for 'em. So I don't think that they experienced a whole lot during that particular time. In fact this particular area I don't think even experienced a \_\_\_\_\_ Depression.

LM: My daddy always had a job but he worked as a cook in the Virginia railroad. He left there and went to work \_\_\_\_\_. He worked there until he retired. When he retired, he came and lived with me and died with me in Jersey.

CR: Did you have any or did they have any recollection of slavery or anybody associated with that?

LM: My mother's mother – my grandfather and them – them people were slaves. I guess my niece \_\_\_\_\_ She \_\_\_\_\_ her history. She done looked it up in the library.

GP: If you know anything about slavery and how it affected this particular area, it just didn't affect this particular area too much because it was, what would you call it, what would be the term? It was nonessential. If you go beyond Rocky Mount, Franklin County or somewhere like that. What was this area good for?

CR: Really?

GP: The railroad back then, Norfolk & Western did not exist. When the Army would not trample in this particular area simply because of the hilly terrain and everything. It was very, very minimal. I mean plantations, no plantations. Anyone would say, "Let's go and see this plantation". They didn't have any plantations in this area. Where we gonna put a plantation at? What were they going to grow? Is that something to think about? I guess - But, no, I know mine didn't and I know my grandfather was or should – I think my grandfather was born in I think it was 79 so he was a bit beyond slavery. His father I know and like I say in Lynchburg and to this day I don't know how he was able to accumulate all the land and houses and things that he had. My grandfather used to go down to the \_\_\_\_\_. But I know that he – probably its possible but there wasn't too much of that here in the Valley as they would call it, slavery and so forth. They'd hang ya.

CR: And why would they do that? For what reasons would you – I know -

GP: If I looked at you in the wrong way, I mean, they would find a reason to do that. Are you from this area?

CR: I am.

GP: You are? OK. 'Cause they would hang you, no problem. They'd probably hang you.

CR: Was that common?

GP: During the '40s and '50s, they had no problem hanging you.

CR: If you crossed the tracks I guess.

GP: If you crossed the line, the line that had been established in any Southern state. This is a Southern state and they had no problem doing that. See, but there's one thing I think we knew what our boundaries were.

LM: Oh yeah, and it ain't over.

GP: Because we were having so much fun within those boundaries so that didn't bother us. It didn't bother us at all. But, yes, they would do that. They could find a reason to do that.

CR: I guess white people come over to this side often for like your whiskeys or the women, entertainment.

GP: Yeah, all of that. I mean – All of that and we have those type of clientele coming into this area but we couldn't go into that area and do that but they could come here and you know, that applied to law enforcement or whatever.

LM: Let me tell you about this. My brother's wife, Elsie, she died. She had a kidney transfer operation and she looked like she was white. Do you remember her?

GP: Yeah.

LM: She couldn't get married in Roanoke because she was white. They had to go to Tennessee or somewhere. Somewhere, he said \_\_\_\_\_. One guy said well why don't y'all marry with a black

preacher. \_\_\_\_\_ got married. He thinks she white. I tell ya, Robert and her was together one time and he had two \_\_\_\_\_. She was chasing him in his car. He had momma's car. They was going out to \_\_\_\_\_. They got married around about the same time. She was chasing him in the Chevrolet. A white cop riding behind them on a motorcycle, stopped 'em, gave both of 'em a ticket and he said, "Wait a minute. What you doing chasing that nigger around". She said, "That's my husband".

GP: I experienced similar things in West Virginia with my wife. She was fair, very, very fair and I got stopped several times. But like I say again, during that time we knew our boundaries and it didn't bother us because we had nice young ladies.

LM: What state was that?

GP: It was – It didn't bother us.

CR: Did y'all have anyone here in Roanoke to look up to, any leaders or anybody active, activists or that type?

GP: I know during the time that I was coming along, there were families and some individuals such as the Claytors down in Hamlet, I know he sort of influenced me. He was a frat brother of mine. Dr. Cumming who just died. I go way back with him. In fact, he was my first dentist. He was also a frat brother. But -

LM: Dr. Pinkett.

GP: We had a whole lot of – and teachers. Many teachers were influential in terms of molding a whole of people.

LM: Especially Miss Lawson, Mr. Poindexter.

GP: That was all we had to turn to really.

LM: Remember Miss Lawson and Miss Poindexter? They were the best English teachers. \_\_\_\_\_ Miss \_\_\_\_\_ was good. Do you remember her \_\_\_\_\_?

GP: Probably so.

LM: She say, you say "get" 500 times a day and he said the next day he would go up to 1000. \_\_\_\_\_ get, get, get.

GP: But right here in Southwest, George Franklin – I grew up on 12<sup>th</sup> Street with him. He was about 5 or 6 years older than we were but he was – I know he was my mentor. I love the man.

CR: I remember him. I knew him.

GP: Him and Melvin

LM: Best football players that ever came out of Southwest.

GP: Yeah, but beyond that, beyond that he was – he had so much that if you listened to him and many times when we were growing up, I would listen – he picked me up and took me to college.

LM: He's a good mentor.

GP: And stayed right with me.

LM: \_\_\_\_\_

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GP: Yeah but he first of all and there are other men right here in this West End side that were good mentors. My minister, Reverend Hunter -

LM: Ben, his son graduated with us, Ben Hunter

GP: A lot of men, a lot of men. Men that many children looked up to and that you respected. I thought that was good.

LM: I don't remember Dr. Pinkett. They had he had a \_\_\_\_\_ years ago. Had a \_\_\_\_\_ too and then he moved out to Pinkett's Court. He's in this book right here.

GP: I remember Dr. Pinkett, Dr. Rawlings.

LM: \_\_\_\_\_

GP & LM: [Both talking at the same time and over each other]

LM: You guys used to go down there wrestling.

GP: Yeah.

LM: Man, that wrestling was fake, nobody won. You'd get so sore. I said, I'm tired. Just give it up.

GP: But they were never – but those type people were never my inspiration at all. And just the people in general. If you'd do something wrong, your mother and father knew about it before you got home.

LM: Tear your butt up.

GP: And, hey, you walked a very, very narrow line.

LM: \_\_\_\_\_

CR: Well, I hate to cut this short. We had a half an hour increments and we'd love to get these pictures.

GP: These are the men \_\_\_\_\_ men that should be – 'cause they perceived it – they were before us.

LM: This is where the, uh, what's that, the Tuskegee fighters?

CR: Airmen?

LM: They came back to Roanoke and we was over there at the First Baptist Church \_\_\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_\_\_. That's a good picture there.

GP: People look like Popeye.

CR: Well, is there anything else that you all would like to say before we have to switch off.

LM: I can tell you where my people came from. My mother, she came from Farmville, Virginia.

CR: My mother's from Farmville.

LM: My daddy came from Lynchburg. I got a picture of my daddy when he was 15. Wanna see it?

CR: Sure. (rustling papers) I'm gonna stop the recorder and thank you all for participating.

GP: I guess this is all about the library - [recording stops]