

Interviewee: B. Ray Phanelson

Interviewer: Pam Young

Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

This is Pam Young. Today is February 23, 2008. I am interviewing Baby Ray Phanelson here at Jerusalem Baptist Church.

PY: When were you born?

BP: July 27, 1945.

PY: And you were born in Roanoke?

BP: Roanoke. Berrill Memorial Hospital.

PY: And how long have you lived in Roanoke? All your life?

BP: Except for a few years in San Francisco. All my life, yeah.

PY: And what neighborhoods have you lived in?

BP: When I was born, I was living at 12 ½ Street. I moved to my paternal grandmother's house on 14th Street, across the street from my maternal grandmother and father where I live now. And from there, after my mother remarried, we moved to Grayson Avenue NW.

PY: Tell me about your parents and brothers and sisters.

BP: My father, Baby Ray Senior, my mother, Annie Laura Davis Phanelson Enoch. I had a set of twin brothers. One was accidentally killed by his best friend on 11th Street NW. The other died of Agent Orange complications. So I am the only child left. I have 4 step-sisters, 4 girls. My, let's see, like I say, I lived on 14th Street. It was like a family affair. My uncle, my mother's brother, lived next door, Othur Davis. That's him up there. And my uncle and aunt lived next door. My mother's mother and father lived across the street. Her sister was still at A&T so I guess she essentially lived there also and was the first secretary at Hurt Park. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was also the first president of the - What is it? What's the club that supports the school? - Parent Teachers Association. And my paternal grandmother with whom I was living then was Elder Ester Phanelson who was probably one of - She was the only female on the Minister's Association in the city and she was secretary of it. She was Minister of Mount Sinai Presbyterian Church which was right at the end of 10th Street Bridge. Its now at Salem Avenue and 14th Street and pastored by her daughter. On that side of the family, there were several ministers, one in Norfolk. They were my grandmother's daughters - And the one in Washington - Well, I guess there were two (laughing). When I lived at 12 ½ Street, my Uncle Cecil lived, we lived in a duplex. My father's brother lived next door with his family. My grandfather just died in 2000 at 97. His wife, Elizabeth Favors died - I'm not for sure but it was at least 10 years or more before, maybe 15 years before. Let's see -

PY: Do you have any happy memories growing up? Any -

BP: I have nothing but happy memories. I was -

PY: Where did you go to school?

BP: I went to Loudon Elementary, Harrison and Addison. If I'm not mistaken, I was the last segregated class to graduate from Addison. I don't remember any bad times. I am a musician.

PY: Do you have any favorite teachers that you remember?

BP: Oh yeah. I think my 1st grade teacher, Miss Morris, was - I felt like she cared too much for us. (laughing) So that reinforced my being spoiled I guess. I had a sister that was born before me so I see how - and she died of SIDS. So when I was born, as I look back on it now, I sort of see how I was probably spoiled a little bit even after the twins _____ (??) did a very good job. But Miss Morris was a very sweet lady. I remember her as being - I would be excited about going to school because all we did was play as I remember. (laughing) She also sent me to Addison, the high school, to sing a solo I remember. I was singing, I guess, before then. I remember that because my babysitter who also lived on the same street at 12 ½ Street, was in high school and she had to assure me that these people weren't

going to eat me. Loudon Avenue – I've always had a great affection for women of that, I don't know what it is – My grandmother was a tall slender full-figured woman and a perfectionist at keeping house and cooking. I mean she was, without getting a hair out of place, get it all done. And that's how I remember Miss Wheaton who later remarried and became Mrs. Buryl (??) and I was so upset about that that she lived down the street on Grayson and I was in high school but I came by her house. She was sitting on the porch one day and there were tears in my eyes and I said, "I just can't call you Mrs. Buryl". (laughing heartily) So she said OK. I really cared for her. She had taught my father also and she was a member of Jerusalem before she transferred to First Baptist, no, High Street, I'm sorry. I guess, I can't think right off, so I guess they really didn't – That's 1st grade. I'd known Miss Wheaton all my life. There were other teachers that I admired but I was not close with. I -

PY: OK. How about, describe the house you grew up in.

BP: Well, 12 ½ Street where I was living when I was born. I remember being bathed in the sink. Some people question that but I can just see myself now laying, looking out the window, just enjoying being rubbed and playing in warm water. That was a duplex. I lived next door to my Uncle Cecil who even at his funeral people were – His father was – I can't think of it, Indian blood – Its a Florida tribe - 0.09.48.2

PY: Like Iroquois or -

BP: No. Anyway, even at his funeral, people were saying that was one handsome man. And at his son's funeral which was about 5 years ago, they were saying the same thing. He lived next door and when my parents – Was it before? - Oh, my mother and father and my brothers and I moved to 14th Street to live with his mother and she was Pentecostal. So, once a week, there was a great noise in her parlor. We eventually – My mother and father divorced and – First, my grandmother moved and we had the whole house and then my mother and father divorced. And my aunt divided the house into a duplex and we lived there. My mother remarried a widower with 4 daughters and up until that time, as I was saying, my grandmother and grandfather were living across the street. I remember my uncle lived next door. He did move to Danville in the later time that we was there. Then we moved to Grayson and that was a – Let's see, I think we had 1, 2, 3 bedrooms, 1 bathroom, a kitchen and a living room and 7 kids and yet, I still, to this day, that's why I was dumbfounded when someone at work once said, "You left the toilet seat up". I said, "What did you do, back in with your eyes closed?" I've never understood it. I've never understood it. Like, I was always told to lift the seat and you'd think I would be doing a service (laughing heartily). I never understood and refuse to because it makes no sense to me. Now it seems as though the fewer people there, the bigger the house gets. We have a full living area and kitchen downstairs, extra bathroom. My younger sister lives there now with her daughter. Her son just went to college and her daughter's two kids. I guess they have a little bit more space.

PY: What did your family do for a living?

BP: My father worked for Norfolk and Western. He was being trained as one of – to be an engineer, to drive but he died of complications from alcohol. My mother was a domestic. She worked for the Schwartz family for several years. She eventually – When she remarried, she went to Veterans. I remember her, she started in the kitchen washing pots and pans on a split shift. She retired as manager in the dietetics. So that shows you how industrious that side, my mother's side, of the family and my father's side, not as consistently. My step-father worked at Valley Cadillac and Oldsmobile all his life. He was known as "Mr. Cadillac". People would come into town from - usually on business trips or whatever, once a year, twice a year. They would always call him for extra work. When he died, I think there must've been 7 or 8 Cadillacs donated to the family for use. My grandfather never stopped working. I think he fell off his garage roof at 87 after – because he wanted to fix the roof. But he didn't hurt himself. He was a strong man. My grandmother worked for the Koefer (??) family. Her grandfather worked for Koefer Industries. I think they eventually changed the name or merged or sold the business or whatever. But that was about his 3rd job. He also worked at the mill. He retired from there. He retired from Koefer.

PY: Viscos? (??)

BP: Yeah, uh huh.

PY: Do you remember that at all when he worked there or was that - ?

BP: Yes. I wasn't aware of where he was working but he had a friend who had a farm out near 419, in that area when it was still residential. We used to get whole milk from – I remember making butter and hating when the cows got in the clover. So he was working there then and would give us whole milk. And even today, I love milk but pasteurized milk is just a side of water to me. For a domestic, I have to say that because of my grandmother's insisting everything being done exactly right, of being a perfectionist, and my grandfather's steady, constant working. He only bought 2 new cars, '72 or '71 Chrysler New Yorkers are the only cars he ever bought. Up to that point, he always bought Chrysler New Yorkers that were 2 years or 3 years older. He always paid cash and didn't understand when I bought my brand new, the only new car I've ever had, '72 Volkswagon convertible. He came out on the porch and said, “Where is it?” He said, “That's not a car, that's a lawnmower.” (laughing) And he asked me how much it cost and I told him and - “If you can't afford to pay cash for it, you can't afford it”. My grandmother, even though she was a domestic, once showed me a closet full of dresses. She said, “Every one of them dresses cost \$500”. They were industrious, you know, like I say, she'd bake pies. I mean she'd get up Saturday morning and she would have – I can't say how many sweet potato, coconut cakes. She was a member of Jerusalem also. Poppa was an usher. I called 'em Poppa and Momma. It's really strange that even when my mother and she were in the same room, I don't know how they could tell, inflections or what, but I could say “Momma” and the right woman would answer each time. Same with my brothers. My mother's sister also was – She worked as – She graduated from A&T in North Carolina, Greensboro, and she worked there for several years as a secretary. She was the first secretary at Hurt Park School and died at I think in her early 40s from complications from Sickle Cell. My uncle, who lived next door, was not quite as industrious but he worked for an insurance company here in Roanoke and then he continued that and worked for a factory in the Danville area.

PY: Let's see. What, um, were there any family stories that were passed down from generation to generation that you remember?

BP: Probably but I don't if I can remember them now. I can say that I did meet my grandfather's mother. I remember her who was I think had been a slave or her parents were slaves. I know her parents were slaves. But she was about 100 then and in that same area, that's the Lumberton/St. Paul area of North Carolina. I once met a lady that my grandfather, who didn't show a lot of emotion all his life. He missed his wife. He and I lived alone at the house on 14th Street for a while and frequently I would pass him and he would have a tear or two on his cheek and once he told me. He said, “You've never been married, you'd never understand.” She'd been dead for at least 10 years by then at that time. I met his mother. And once we were in North Carolina, he said he wanted to go by to see this lady. He was probably in his early 80s. The lady was - 116 keeps coming to mind but I'm not sure. Her daughter was 72. She had sent her daughter to the store. Her daughter came back and as I watched them exchange money and whatever, _____ was like a child. And shortly afterwards – or she also didn't know that my grandmother had died then. She also didn't know that my grandmother had died. She said, “Now Walter, I'm sorry to hear about Elizabeth”. And shortly after, she said, “I'm sorry but y'all have to go. Its time for me to go to bed.” It was like 7:30/8:00. But she was an old woman but she was still kicking. Well, -

PY: And you said you were in the military too?

BP: I was in the Air Force, yes. I was stationed at Missouri and went to Vietnam - in Saigon.

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PY: Were you drafted?

BP: No, I volunteered for the Air Force. I volunteered to go to Vietnam. Not out of any patriotism. It was just the thing that everybody did at my base. It was investigated several times because everybody wanted to get out, even if it meant going to Vietnam because of being in the Air Force and having being

in SAC, Strategic Air Command. It was a dual commitment. One had to be aware that if an investigation or an inspection came, of who was giving the inspection because the answers could be totally different. The response could be totally different. We had Minute Man Missiles. In fact, I was never around airplanes until I got to Vietnam. I was in Saigon in Vietnam. I enjoyed that too. In fact, basically, I enjoy most of what I do. And I enjoy doing nothing. (laughing)

PY: What do you do now?

BP: Nothing. (laughing heartily) I'm on Social Security Disability and I haven't been driving for the last year so I'd like to get back to my singing. I used to sing with the symphony choir. I've sung here. I've always sung. But one needs transportation to get to rehearsals and things. I sang consistently at Second Presbyterian for a while. That was one of my favorites. I also sang at St. Andrew. In fact, I was a member of the First Processing Choir at St. Andrew. My roommate was the choir director. I'm a member of Christ Episcopal. I used to sing there. The organist and I don't have a clear view of what really is music – The same view of what music is. So I don't. And that's hard for me because I joined the Episcopal Church when I was in San Francisco and 90% of why I joined was – That particular denomination was because of their respect for music. Although its not a guitar type thing with him its French. And although I'm not anywhere near an authority on music, I really – I love organ music, pipe organ music. And he loves French pipe organ and like I say, I'm the first to tell you I know very little. I just know what I like to hear and which means his French and his improvisations – I mean I'm learning the whole time I'm listening so don't improvise on me and call it music. (laughing) I knew well enough when he was throwing in improvisations and I don't need to hear that.

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PY: Let's see. Do you have any fond memories of childhood or favorite holiday event or any thing like -?

BP: Well, every traditional family holiday – Like I say, my grandmother was a perfectionist so we have to this day family meals on Sunday at my sister's house every Sunday. Its like a holiday as far as meals go. Christmas, Thanksgiving, as much as in the teens to 20 people, mostly family I guess you could say and neighbors, on 14th Street. It bordered on being common except for visually it was so spectacular and tasty. I even remember a disappointing thing when at some point my grandmother or someone suggested that we spread out the one Thanksgiving at one – Christmas at my grandmother's house, Thanksgiving at her sister's house in Northwest and I think once or twice my Uncle Othur and his wife who was way down on the cooking scale but everybody contributed but – That was sort of like a disappointment. But holidays, yes, I remember them as being big family affairs.

PY: Since you're into music, do you remember any entertainers that came to perform and seeing them?

BP: Well, as my brothers used to say, they ran the streets and I ran the alleys. As far as Henry Street goes, I know very little about it. I was not – My music was not – My music was my life and there was very little of interest to me on Henry Street. So as far as entertainers coming, Mahalia Jackson came and although I didn't get to see her. Little Richard came. I didn't want to see him. So, any traditional – I can't think of anyone else – BB King came and I took my aunt, my grandmother's sister to see him because she was into blues and she was a pretty good sized woman and was very nice. I had that '72 Volkswagon convertible and we would run all around town. (laughing) I took her to see BB King. Oh! At Roanoke College, I saw this A Capella male group – Can't come up with the name now but that was really, really – I really enjoyed that. I think I saw them twice, I'm not sure. Jeff Sanborg is head of Music at Roanoke College. He's also the Director of Choir, Second Pres. His wife is the organist. They were a great influence on me as far as it was a period of being relaxed and I'm constantly learning. I told him – I was taking voice lessons from him for a while and I stopped. I said, “I get enough in rehearsals”. (laughing) I can't think of the name of that group. It was really, really, - I think it was about 6 guys and the harmony was so close and it was beautiful.

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PY: How do you see that Roanoke has changed over the years?

BP: Just recently, it seems that it might be coming out of a coma as far as growing. It wasn't a part of me to think so much about segregation and whatever but I think to spite itself, it just set around and did nothing when it could've grown if it had – even after integration if it had just truly from the heart did it. Violence is much worse. I remember when we lived on Grayson. Frequently – Well it was - What we did was we'd leave church here in Northwest and walk across the 10th Street bridge after service if we wanted to or we waited and caught a ride with her parents. But the door was always open, at least unlocked. And if it was accidentally locked, that was a very disturbing thing. The lack of – To me it sound like an old person 'cause I heard it when I was young – the lack of basic respect even within my own family now 'cause some of the kids - its just unbelievable. I have – One of my step-sisters, well, her daughter. She only has one but she has 3 daughters. They all live with my step-sister. She lost her house recently. Just common decency of “Good Morning”. In fact, in the last month, I have stopped saying “Good Morning” first and only one of them, infrequently, will say “hi” when we first come in contact with each other and that just bugs me. But, this apple never separated from the tree 'cause the momma is barely much better and she's always lived with her mother so I guess that's one box of apples that will probably be like that all along but I find that even other people's kids, depending on if they've had any raisin'. In general, I find kids and young adults to be rude and parents indulgent and I think it has contributed a lot to the violence and the – In general, I've recently been riding the bus to get from Veterans as usually my sister takes me and just the people on the street – on the buses. I used to love to ride the bus in San Francisco because usually people either ignored you or something interesting was happening. Here, its just boring because its usually something dis-interesting that was being forced on you because they were talking so loud or cell phones or whatever.

PY: Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you'd like to talk about?

BP: Probably. (laughing) Probably. I guess I could say that when I was in high school, I was part of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in cahoots with some kids from Hollins and, at the time of the organization forming, I was the only black so they made me president. (laughing) I'll never forget. We went downtown across from Patrick Henry. You know that little restaurant that they closed on the corner. And we didn't expect to get served. So we sat down and we ordered hot dogs 'cause we didn't have any money. They went to serve us and one of the girls had to go to the bank and get some money. But, that was, I think that was my senior year or junior year.

PY: Do you remember the name of the restaurant?

BP: Mm mm. I think it was the Downtowner. You know where the motel - ?

PY: Yeah.

BP: I remember sitting right up front. We made the paper a few times. Glad they didn't put in that we didn't have any money. (laughing) I remember asking my mother, “Why do they call these people white?”. I don't remember the answer being satisfactory but I said, “That's not white to me.” That was my perception. This is white and that's not white. I wasn't into much of anything but music. And I really can't – Other than the fact that my – the musician here, Miss Woodson, Evelyn Woodson, who used to live across the street, was a traditional musician. She played music. No improvisation. Jimmy Cook took Music from her. I did. I took piano but I'm a perfect example of no talent at the keyboard. However, I absorb music well and they say I can sing. But I never had a conscious awareness of – Like I said, I graduated from high school, I had already been singing all my life - of being with white musicians or non-white musicians or entering into a group like that. Yet, after high school and college, the little bit that I was there, the music that I enjoy has been generally and traditionally white churches. I haven't had any problem except for St. Andrew. I did have a priest meet me as we were going, I was going – coming around the building. He approached us from the front of the church and I ran into him coming around the building and he said, “Why do you come here?” I'm in my choir robe so even though he wasn't the head priest and he was, I think, Filipino or something like that. “Why do you come here? St Gerard's is right down the street.” I said, “I'm not Catholic, I'm Baptist.” He said, “Why do you come here?” I said, “To sing in the choir”. And it took me a while after that

conversation to realize that was racist. At first, I was thinking – Well I sort of thought of it as racist but I didn't have a great platform. Because, when I was in high school at Addison, we were the best at everything. Most of the teaching staff had Master's, more than any other school in the city. The football team was undefeated 5 years. The choir was notoriously the best in the city and one of the best in the state. I was nominated and won 2nd, of course, it was in the black groupings, best supporting actor for my – in my senior year in drama. So, I guess I assumed we were doing the best we could and that was really good. (laughing) I may have stretched myself with the symphony choir but I got some solo action out of it. Sanborg was director of that at the time and yet, he accepted me in his church choir which is a smaller, more compact group, I guess so he can keep more control over me. Also, I did a musical with – I can't think of it – “HMS Pinafore” with the Showtimers. And yet, so, racially, I really don't care because if I can't perform or be my best worrying about what you gonna think about me – so I let you worry about me and I'll just go ahead and do what I gotta do. I had, at Christ's Church, there was a bass who I knew was racist. In fact, I had seen him on the street – My mother had taken her car to Valley Cadillac for whatever reason, and in a small waiting room, he wouldn't speak. And actually the hurt was not my feelings, I felt sorry for him. He died later and that's what I always felt would happen to racists anyway but they keep breeding. (laughing) Another reason that its not on one side or in one race, people generally, even within their own races have low opinions of people. In fact, my grandmother, although I found it amusing and nothing anybody could do about it, was – there were few things she tolerated and if they couldn't help it, it was their business. I always heard her on the telephone. She was a great gossip. There was my grandmother, Grace Reynolds, who also sang in the choir here with her and lived on our street, and a lady named Miss Vice(??), I can't think of her first name on my street. We, as kids, knew that if one of them didn't know about it, it didn't happen. But I heard my grandmother say on the phone once, “Well, if she didn't want it talked about, she shouldn't have done it”. And she meant it. And she'd have told the woman that. As long as she was right, it didn't matter where she told it. (laughing) And actually, as I think about it now, she was very pleasant but to say that she was “kind” – I wouldn't put “kind”, I wouldn't put a word like that. She was very pleasant and very social. My grandfather once asked me, my roommate was white, “I don't understand”. Yet, he never mentioned racist things. He said, “I don't understand where you get this love for white folks”. But it really didn't matter to me. My grandmother never mentioned it because, “If I got \$500 dresses, I don't need you anyway”. (laughing) But she was beautiful. I can't describe her. She was tall. You remember the days when the women had these big fur and then there was just a straight coat. The first time I saw her in that, I thought it was just – because she was so tall and she didn't look like a bear walking down the street or something like that. She was, um, gentle, none of that comes. I don't know. (laughing) I don't know what I can say but she was a great woman in the city. According to my grandfather, she had our street, 14th Street, she was the first one to request pavement. It was one of the first streets as I understand, off-streets, side-streets in Southwest that was paved and my grandfather had, since we were talking about the race thing a little bit, I was saying that he brought his Chryslers usually 2 years old. Well, it took me – my stepfather took me to college in his '56 Chrysler and some I've known all my life – Oh course, we used to go to Peaks of Otter for picnics and things, 4th of July and something like that, again, a great family affair. We had family that would come from New York to go with us to Peaks of Otter. But we all knew that we had to tiptoe through Bedford and, sure enough, we were pulled over. Said the steering was loose and my stepfather said – that we were weaving – but my stepfather said he did check it when we came back and there was some looseness in the steering. We never assumed that's what it was. My grandfather, he said he used to be stopped all the time because, like I say, he always had a semi-new car and a big one at that and he smoked cigars. He was as dark as they came. So I guess he was the traditional nigger driving a big car on a side street. He said that he would frequently get stopped. In fact, he paid a fine for me when I came from California. I was very good at a California roll at a corner. I rarely slowed up. I slowed up but I rarely stopped. After about the 3rd or 4th ticket and I had beat 'em all. My grandfather said, “Naw,

boy, they're gonna get your name down there and they're gonna be all over you''. So he made me promise to slow up. But I don't know where I was – I just roamed there for a moment. I think the ego kicked in and I realized I hadn't talked about myself enough. (laughing) But I think that's about it and I understand if we get more information, we could come down.

[Recording ends]