

Interviewee: Sarah Showalter
Interviewer: Pam Young
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

Today's date is February 23, 2008. Today we are interviewing Mrs. Sarah Hodd Showalter. We are at the Jerusalem Baptist Church in Roanoke, VA.

PY: Ms. Showalter, when and where were you born?

SS: I was born in Roanoke, Virginia, July 16, 1936. In fact, I was born on Salem Avenue, right behind this church.

PY: How long – so you've been here all your life? Have you always lived in this neighborhood?

SS: I don't live in this neighborhood now but I grew up here. I lived here, up here, for 30 years.

PY: Can you tell me about your brothers and sisters and extended family you have in the area?

SS: I didn't have any brothers or sisters. I was a foster child and I grew up in this neighborhood and I was everybody's child. They nicknamed me "Babe".

PY: What kind of activities did you participate in Roanoke?

SS: When I was small, my foster mother owned a grocery store. We had the only black grocery store, just about, in this neighborhood. So, I got a chance to meet a lot of people. The lady who raised me had infantile paralysis during that time, and now its called Polio. Therefore, she was crippled. She took me when I was 3 years old and I grew up working. I worked most of the time. I used to like to roller skate but I had very little time for that because by her being crippled or paralyzed, I stayed there and I was sort-of her right hand. Her name was Ms. Irene _____ (??). She's my mentor because she taught me that you can do anything that you want to do in spite of adversity.

PY: Lets see, what about education?

SS: You mean where I went to school?

PY: Yes.

SS: During those years, it was segregated so we had to be bussed over to Harrison in the Northwest area. We didn't have a school up here at the time. And I went from Harrison, then they opened up Loudon, which was on Loudon Avenue. I went back to Loudon for my 6th and 7th grade then I went back to Harrison for my 8th grade. Then I went to Addison for the 9th grade and then they built the new one which is now on Orange Avenue. I went over there and graduated and I also went to MCV for 2 years in Richmond, Virginia.

PY: Do you have good memories?

SS: Very fond memories. During that time, we had a lot of elderly people, 'cause I'm elderly now myself. (Both laughing) Some people consider me elderly but I don't. During that time, the lady that raised me, she did not have – she had a car but it wasn't used to transport grocery so within a radius from 15th to 16th Street down to Norfolk Avenue and 9th Street, I hand delivered most of the stuff when I was a girl. So, I met a lot of people and a lot of people that I carried and delivered groceries to were elderly. So, I grew up really liking and having a real love in my heart for the elderly and I enjoy talking to them and I learned a lot about life.

PY: I bet they had a lot of good stories to tell.

SS: They did. A lot of good stories. A lot of good stories. Some of them, during that time, I guess I was 10, 11, or 12, some were 80, 90 years old and they still had all their factors. Therefore, I learned a lot about what happened a long time ago. 'Cause I grew up in some of that myself. (Chuckle)

PY: Um, describe your home life. You sort of did a bit but - .

SS: My home life was based on business, a grocery store. Um, everything centered around the store because during that time, I don't think the Blue Law was in effect but it was for a while where you weren't allowed to sell groceries on Sunday. However, if someone needed a loaf of bread, we would sneak them a loaf a bread. However, I grew up in the back of the grocery store – did not have a living

room. I wanted a living room so bad when I was kid so my company, my friends, could come there and sit. However, we sat in the grocery store. She was open from 6 am in the morning to 11:30 at night. Um, I had a little small bedroom to the left and her bedroom was right there, right in the back of the store. She had a big old chair. She sat there and a big old potbellied stove. We had a kitchen and a bathroom. I mostly, when I got up in the morning, I went to school. When I came back at 3 o'clock, the girl who worked in the store, she got off. And then, when – I'm getting ahead of myself – when I was real small, I used to give a penny, they had an apple or orange or whatever and I had a – she had a big old stool there and I would stand up to get the food off the shelves and I would carry her the money. She would make the change and I would bring it back to the people. As I became older, I just about took the grocery store over when I was out of school. And, in the evening, when I came home, I would change my clothes, 'cause everybody wanted to make sure you had brown and white saddle-locks with (??). We kept our shoes shined in those days. (Laughing) And I would get my books, sit behind the counter and study my lesson and wait on the customers as they came in until about 11 o'clock and then we closed up. And you didn't have to lock – we didn't even lock the grocery store up although she had plenty of money there. Half the time, we left the grocery store doors open and nobody never broke in or tried to harm anyone. And then, we had one of those slide latches on the side door – we used to put an ice pick in it (laughing). I have very fond memories. Miss Irene, the lady who raised me, Ms. Irene Houb (??). she was not a hero. No one never knew her but she was my hero.

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PY: Did she grow up here also?

SS: Um, no. She migrated – she came here from Farmville, Virginia, at a very young age apparently around 30 she got infantile paralysis, the same thing that Franklin – she always said that she and Franklin Roosevelt had the same type of illness. And I was 3 years old. In fact, her son used to date my mother and that's how I got to know her and I went to stay one night and ended up staying the rest of my life there, my young life there. (Laughing)

PY: Very interesting. Um, so people would come and visit in the store?

SS: Yes. And on Sunday, on Sunday was a very special day because most of the people leave the church, come by and get a Coca-Cola and (laughing) a 5 cents cake or something. Everybody congregated there even during that time, you know, with segregation but a lot of the salesmen who were white and all of us congregated in the store. Mama might call them a name and they may call her a name but it was all in love and joking and we got along real well. And I don't know too much about prejudice because I always grew up around a lot of whites and a lot of blacks living in an environment of business, the grocery store. And all the insurance agents and the mailmen would come by and stay for lunch and she was an excellent cook, didn't use any recipes. They would come back and say, "Alright Miss Irene, or Irene, what you got cooked today?" and she would have maybe some beans and cornbread or sometimes she'd do something special, string beans and a beef roast and hot rolls which she made and they would rise about 5 or 6 inches high. She was known for her cooking and sweet potato pies and pound cakes that she would bake – she would make with a wooden spoon and a bowl and I don't know how she did it. (Laughing) She would take and sit there in the chair – You know when people lose their lower extremities, the upper extremities become twice as strong so she could sit there and she was happy. She did not see her handicap as – She didn't let it handicap her. She was a very active, motivated person.

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PY: You talked about delivering groceries around, and, um, do you remember any of the stories the older people told you about?

SS: During that time, they talked a lot about how – yes, I do remember some – how that on Christmastime that they didn't have money for gifts. If they got an orange and a candy stick, that was nice, that was Christmas. And how they walked miles to church and they would take their shoes off because of the red dirt and put them on when they got to church. And, um, they talked a lot about how

they raising hogs and killing hogs and cows and milking the cows and how they would store the milk down in the spring and they talked a lot about – You know what? In spite of the times, there still was a lot of love and a lot of laughter. They weren't bitter. They weren't bitter like people are, a lot of people are now, weren't angry and there was a lot of humility. They talked a lot about their spirituality, about God and they focused on education. “You need to get an education”. We called them illiterate but they were very smart people, they had a lot of mother wit (??). And, uh, I miss the – right now I live in Northwest area but I miss – I often snicker thinking about how neighborly they were, like a family. If one was sick, everybody was sick. And how certain families would come in and help you when somebody was sick with no charge. I often think about – I always go back to Miss Irene Houb (??) how she had a grocery store and sometimes, people laid off from work, couldn't get work and she would fix them a grocery box and just give 'em. And how blessed she was and she could've been real rich but she was such a giving person and, uh, make me cry. (Laughing) (A little emotional) I often think how she raised me. During that time, we didn't even have the dasher-type washing machine, how she would get in there and soak my clothes and then wash 'em. They would be snow white and iron 'em on up on just - She could afford and ironing board, she just never bought one - on an old like bench and how I've seen her get in a wheelchair and - the store was real long. It wasn't very wide, real long and I've seen her take that lye soap that sometimes people in the neighborhood made and gave her and scrubbed the floors until they were white in a wheelchair! And how she would cook and make all these rolls and I would get up on the shelf and get her yeast and get her milk or whatever she needed and I myself am a pretty good cook too and I think it all came back. Because she didn't measure. People said, “Well how do fix your sweet potato pie Sarah?” They want the recipe. There is no recipe. You just do it by – I try to sort of fake a recipe but I didn't need one because I just watched her. You washed your hands real clean and scrub 'em with a brush. Nobody wore nail polish too much during that time and you put a little here and put it in there. I had a real good childhood. Although, my mother, my biological mother was living. She left me and went to Boston but I was in the best place for me. That was God because I was in a good place for me. Now, I didn't meet my father until – This is not about me, its about Southwest (Laughing) – I didn't meet my dad until I was 50 years old.

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PY: Had he been in Roanoke?

SS: I didn't know him. I didn't know who he was until I was 50 years old. I wasn't raised with much family but I have 7 children of my own and I'm a widow twice and I have managed to survive and give my kids a good life. And, uh, through what Miss Irene instilled in me and the older people in the neighborhood where I grew up.

PY: Very good. Do you have any other stories you'd like to - ?

SS: Oh, let me see.

PY: Did you keep the grocery store? How long did you - ?

SS: Being so immature in my life, I let it go when I should've hung on to it. I made some bad choices with relationships myself. I was looking for love in all the wrong places. But, I'm OK. (Laughing) Um, what other stories can I tell you? (Pause)

(1st dictation ends)

SS: As the old proverb go, “It takes a neighborhood to raise a child”. This church was here. This was the largest church. It still is in Southwest. And school, because my school was across the bridge and everybody – a child in a neighborhood was everybody's concern. I remember I used to, when I, you couldn't date until you was at least 16, 17, and the lady that raised me was very strict and during that time, I don't think I had but maybe 2 friends in school that got pregnant in all my 12 years. Because your greatest fear was having a child because that was really a disgrace (Laughing) during those days. And, um, I used to like to hold hands or I used to like to neck on the corners (Laughing). But, I remember one time, this man who was a friend of the lady who raised me came in everyday for a Coca-Cola, he saw me kiss this little boy and I was so afraid that he was going to tell it but he didn't but he

talked to me about it which I thought was real good. And everybody's concern – You could correct somebody else's child and it was OK. We were there for each other and I just thank God for the type of neighborhood and the relationship we had. I think it really helped me to be a better person. We didn't have very many professional people. Miss Golden was the only school teacher up here and that was considered, “Oh, she was just so smart” (Laughing) because most everybody was just laborers, common working people. You had some people on Social Services but everybody worked hard. A lot of the mothers would stay at home and those that stayed at home sort of looked after the kids. And I was blessed because during that time, Miss Irene, she couldn't walk, and we was in the grocery store, somebody was always home with me. I didn't go home to an empty house. And, uh, almost all my girlfriends, their mothers were at home. No one was out. The only night that you could stay out until after dark was Halloween and we all looked forward to Halloween. You could stay out a little bit that night. And I remember the playground, I can't think of its name. Anyway, there was a playground over here on 10th and Salem Avenue and we would go over there and have the sac races on Halloween and, I don't know what you call it when you have apples in tubs and you take your mouth and try to get them out -

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PY: Bobbing for apples.

SS: Yeah. (Laughing heartily) And we had a lot of games and stuff going over there for the kids in our neighborhood and everybody looked forward to Halloween because other than that, the girls mostly had to stay at home. Um, also, Garst Brothers Dairy was right over here on Salem Avenue between 10th and 11th Street and that was a treat to go over there and get you some ice cream. Another thing we did on Sunday, the trolley, streetcar we called it, it ran on Patterson Avenue and we'd get in it and ride all the way around to Raleigh Court and ride all the way back. Going downtown, window shopping was something we did on Sunday evening just to look in the windows because during that time, there wasn't all this thievery so everybody could go down and just enjoy yourself looking in the windows, the simple things in life. And, of course, at this church, we had the Y teams. We had the Girl Scouts, the Brownies and Bible School lasted, like most churches have it for a week now for 2 or 3 hours, it was 2 weeks from 9 to 3 and some of the ladies here could sew and they taught us how to make skirts and do a lot of things and then we had BPYU on Sunday afternoon which was for Christian youth and we'd go out there and meet and have bible study and have activities. So, it really did take a community to raise a child and all of us grew up happy, no fights, no nothing. Everybody lived peacefully. (Chuckling)

(End of Part 2, beginning of Part 3)

PY: What's your fondest childhood memory?

SS: (Pause) My fondest childhood memory really is.....being with the lady that raised me, helping her cook, working in the grocery store and greeting people as they came in.

PY: What's your most favorite gift you've received?

(Long Pause)

SS: As a child?

PY: Yeah.

SS: A birthstone ring. (Laughing) When I was about 8. It was a ruby. I was born in July. (Laughing)

PY: What kind of work have you done throughout your life?

SS: I've been a nurse all my life. I worked at Burrell Hospital for about 10 years. I worked at TAP for about 5 with the children. I've been with Blueridge Baby Healthcare for 35 years. I'm still working part-time. I work with substance abuse and mentally ill in dual-diagnosed people.

PY: Who were your – you've talked about your role models – How has Roanoke changed over the years?

SS: Mmm! (Long pause) Well, from my perspective, its gotten colder. Or maybe I've gotten so busy, I really haven't taken the time. I think its gotten colder. Um, with integration, we are supposed to submerge and be one, that's what its all about. But I think we've lost a lot of our culture and the things

that we've believed in as black people. I don't necessarily blame anyone for that. We've gotten so materialistic and the fathers are out of the home. We have lowered our moral – we haven't been good mentors for our children. We have – Our children in our neighborhood has not been a priority for us. I don't blame it on integration, I just blame it on the times and I know – I go back to the prom, when I was a senior. Oh, I looked forward to the prom. I had such a good time. And now, you almost have to beat kids to get 'em to go. I think they do too much, too soon. I think my mother still, Miss Irene (Laughing) had me to come home at 12 and that was late for me. And, uh, you know, I felt like she loved me and she didn't have to raise me. I didn't come off her income taxes. I didn't come off anything. But, she loved me and I felt like she took me because she loved me. She didn't have to keep me. She did. And as a kid, I was always very obedient. I never got a whipping as a kid. Never got a spanking because I knew she was in a wheelchair and I feel like – I was going to do everything I could to make her happy. When I was 12 years old, and she had a big old Packard car and she would go downtown to the market and get all these eggs and stuff and bring 'em back to the store, I would clean up and try to do things to make her happy. Kids don't do that anymore and I don't blame the kids, its just the way they're raised. As parents, we have to screen our kids playmates at a very young age and don't you think because “Mary's running around with Jane but Jane is having sex and smoking but my child's not” - Birds of a feather definitely flock together. And then you need to go back to the neighborhood whereas if you see my kid doing something, you can correct him. You can call me and you won't get cursed out. We just changed our values and everybody's so angry and the fathers are out of the home. Fathers back then were doing some of the same things that they're doing now I guess (Laughing) but if they did, they did it discreetly. It wasn't blatant and out and nobody knew anything about it. And then I think girls being able to go the Health Department and get birth control. I guess they're going to do it anyway but we've got to start when they're young, teaching 'em right from wrong. And don't be so desperate for the attention that you're willing to just go ahead on and let it all go. We've got to start somewhere and if one child's in trouble, regardless of race, color or creed, all kids are in trouble. Its not a white issue or a black issue or a Mexican issue, its a human issue.