

Interviewee: Laura Toliver
Interviewer: Alica Sell
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

My name is Alica Sell and I'm with the Roanoke Public Libraries and today is February 23, 2008, and we are at Jerusalem Baptist Church. I am interviewing Ms. Laura Marguarite Toliver. Also sitting in with us today is Anita Louse Ollie.

AS: Thank you for being with us today. I'm going to start the interview by asking you some background questions about yourself. Can you tell me – this is a slight repeat of what I asked you to fill out on the form - Can you tell me again when and where were you born?

LT: I was born August 25, 1917 in Botetourt County, Virginia, Buchanan, Virginia.

AS: And when did you come to Roanoke?

LT: To live, I came to Roanoke in 1954.

AS: And why did you come to Roanoke?

LT: My husband and I moved here from Forest, Virginia, and we came here to get a job to work. And we got a job.

AS: What job did you do?

LT: I worked for Shenandoah Life Insurance Company for 24 ½ years.

AS: And what did your husband do for a living?

LT: My husband was a chauffeur for Dr. E.G. Gill.

AS: Dr. Gill?

LT: Yeah.

AS: So he drove him around town?

LT: Yes.

AS: Let's see. When you moved to Roanoke, what streets and neighborhoods did you live on?

LT: When I moved to Roanoke, I lived in Rorer Avenue, SW.

AS: Do you still live in the same house?

LT: Still live in the same house.

AS: Did you and your husband build that house?

LT: No.

AS: Or was it already built?

LT: It was already built. That was built in 1927. That house was built in 1927.

AS: Can you describe your house for us? For instance, is it brick, does it have a garden, does it have a front porch?

LT: Its a square built house with a big, pretty front porch, front yard with the hedges near the porch and in the back, its a big back yard, with boxwoods down the walk.

AS: Did you have a garden in it ever?

LT: No. Never had a garden, just had flowers.

AS: We'll talk a little bit about your early childhood even though its not in Roanoke.

LT: OK.

AS: Can you tell me your parents names and what did they do for a living?

LT: My parents names were John Barnett and Mary Barnett and he was a sharecropper for a long time but he bought his home and he worked hard sharecropping and also worked for the Highway Department of Virginia.

AS: Did your mother work?

LT: No.

AS: Did you have brothers and sisters?

LT: Yes, I had 2 sisters, Dorothy Barnett Cowan and Blanche Barnett Ferguson and they both have

passed.

AS: Where did you fall in the order of girls?

LT: I was the second girl.

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AS: Did you have extended family members living by you growing up? Like your grandparents or aunts and uncles?

LT: No, I don't remember any grandparents. I had an aunt and an uncle that lived about $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile from us and the aunt was a Mrs. Waldron and she had 2 girls and they have both passed.

AS: Did you play with your cousins a lot?

LT: Yes, and we went to school together.

AS: Where did you go to school in Buchanan?

LT: Lily of the Valley School. Its about 6 miles, uh, 6 miles south of Buchanan.

AS: So how did you get to school?

LT: We walked to school. We walked 3 miles to school every day.

AS: What kind – you said your dad was a sharecropper, correct?

LT: Yes.

AS: Did you have chores growing up around your house?

LT: Yes. We always had to work in the garden. We always had – I had to milk the cow. Things like that. Work in the garden and help with the farm.

AS: Did you enjoy it?

LT: I guess I did. At that time, we didn't know any better. (Laughing) Yes.

AS: Were you aware of Roanoke when you were growing up? Had you heard of it?

LT: Oh, yes.

AS: Did you ever come into Roanoke?

LT: Yes. We had relatives here.

AS: Did you like - What was it like when you came to visit Roanoke growing up.

LT: Very seldom I came to visit Roanoke. When I did come, I come to go to the store or something like that and we thought going to the 5 and 10 cents store was something grand. (Chuckling) That's where we went. Very seldom we'd come to Roanoke to visit.

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AS: Did you have a car growing up or what kind of transportation did you have available?

LT: We would ride the Greyhound Bus to Roanoke.

AS: Let's see. So you said you went to Lily of the Valley for education. Did that go into high school too?

LT: No.

AS: What high school did you go to?

LT: I did not go to high school.

AS: Oh, OK. How many years of schooling did you complete?

LT: Seven.

AS: Did you or anyone in your family attend college?

LT: My younger sister attended Bluefield State and she had a degree, Bachelors of Science Degree, I believe that's what it was. And she taught school.

AS: Wonderful.

LT: Mm mm.

AS: So you said that you and your husband moved to Roanoke for jobs.

LT: Yes.

AS: And you moved to Rorer Avenue. What was your home life like? Was the community – Were you actively involved in your neighborhood? Did you know your neighbors?

LT: I knew my neighbors but they were – well, we lived about a half a mile from different ones.

Wasn't nobody close up together but I knew them all.

AS: Do you remember sitting on the porch in the evening?

LT: Sure.

AS: Would you talk to your neighbors then?

LT: Well, if they would come by but we were - I knew them all.

AS: Did you or a spouse or children ever serve in the military?

LT: My husband did.

AS: Did he serve - Which war did he serve in?

LT: Two, World War II.

AS: This I'll ask you is when you – after you moved to Roanoke. What businesses and shops did your family go to?

LT: What business?

AS: Mm mm. Like for instance, where did you go to buy clothes or groceries? Did you go to the market building downtown to go grocery shopping?

LT: Most time, we raised the garden in the country down at my home in Botetourt County. We raised a garden down there so we didn't have to go downtown and hunt vegetables and things 'cause we had a garden down there.

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AS: But when you moved to Roanoke, did you go to the city market.

LT: Sometimes, not often.

AS: Where would you go shopping for clothes or just things you needed around the house?

LT: We would go downtown and shop at – I had an account at Sidney's, Lazarus, Heironimus.

AS: So tell me, you say you had an account. What was that like? You would charge - Is it - ?

LT: If I wanted to charge I would.

AS: OK. How did you get downtown? Did you have a car or did you take the city's transportation?

LT: Take the city transportation downtown.

AS: Was it a big deal to come downtown?

LT: No.

AS: No. OK. Do you have a favorite childhood memory, holiday event or vacation?

LT: Hmmm. I used to visit my aunt that lived in Bland Country and I would go there maybe in the Summertime and stay 2 weeks and then I'd come back home.

AS: And you enjoyed doing that?

LT: Yeah, I enjoyed doing that.

AS: How would you get down to Bland County?

LT: My aunt would come down. They had a car and they'd come and I'd go back like, that's how I'd go.

AS: Was it a special treat for you?

LT: Yeah.

AS: Did your sisters go with you too or did you go by yourself?

LT: I went by myself and when they went, they went by themselves.

AS: Did your aunt have children?

LT: She had one son.

AS: That's fun.

LT: (Chuckle)

AS: So you said you worked for the Shenandoah Life Company?

LT: Mm mm. Shenandoah Life Insurance.

AS: And what kind of work did you do for them?

LT: I was the cook in the cafeteria.

AS: This has to do with Hurt Park in the Roanoke area. Who were some of the strong community

leaders here in Roanoke when you moved here, just living here throughout the years?

LT: Hmmm. I can't remember that.

AS: Like ministers or doctors or some people have even mentioned like the undertaker was important to them, to their community. You don't remember?

LT: I don't remember.

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AS: What would you do for entertainment in Roanoke? For instance, did you ever go to the Ebony Club or to see entertainers perform or to Kaiser's Record Shop or anything like that?

LT: Kaiser's Record Shop. We would buy records at Kaiser's Record Shop.

AS: Did you ever go to the movies or anything?

LT: Yes.

AS: Where would you go to the movies when you - ?

LT: On Henry Street.

AS: Do you remember the name of the theater?

LT: Virginia Theater.

AS: How has Roanoke changed over the years?

LT: It has changed quite a bit. Hmmm. Like the movies, the movies have changed. Like the schools have changed, school has changed and everything from downtown. My daughter went to – Where did Lavin (??) go to high school?

AO: She went to Jefferson?

LT: Jefferson. No, she didn't go to Jefferson, she went to Addison. She went to Booker T. and then she went to Addison. She graduated from Addison in '60.

AS: Did your children go to school during the – when they were integrating the schools?

LT: No.

AS: No. That was after they went to school.

LT: Mm mm.

AS: Do you remember when integration happened and how did it - ?

LT: Oh yes, I remember but my daughter was out of school by that – Was she out of school?

AO: Mm mm.

LT: Yeah.

AS: Was it a big deal in Roanoke when that happened?

LT: I don't think so.

AS: They didn't make a big deal about it?

LT: No.

AS: It went pretty smoothly?

LT: Mm mm.

AS: Was it easy for people to find jobs in Roanoke?

LT: Yes. Its more people out of work now in Roanoke than it had been. Most time, people had jobs.

AS: When you and your husband moved here, was it very easy for you to find work.

LT: Yes. Oh yes. Mm mm.

AS: Well, those are really the questions that I have here. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you wanted to share with us?

LT: No. OK.

AS: OK. Thank you for allowing us to interview you Ms. Toliver.