

Interviewee: Gloria Wilson  
Interviewer: Alicia Sell  
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

Today is February 23, 2008. My name is Alicia Sell and I am with Roanoke Public Libraries and I am interviewing Ms. Gloria Jean Wilson and we are at Jerusalem Baptist Church today for the Hurt Park Neighborhood Collection.

AS: Thank you for being with us Ms. Wilson.

GW: Alright.

AS: I'm gonna start with just some background questions about yourself. When and where were you born?

GW: I was born in Roanoke, Virginia, June 29<sup>th</sup>, '43.

AS: OK. And have you lived in Roanoke your whole life?

GW: No I haven't. I've lived in several places during my time.

AS: Can you tell me what streets and neighborhoods you have lived on here in Roanoke.

GW: Oh, OK, I first was on Patton Avenue Northwest in the 500 block and then I have lived on 5<sup>th</sup> Street Northwest, um, Fairhope Road. That's Northwest also and uh, Florida Avenue.

AS: OK. Let's see. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents? What were their names and where did they come from.

GW: OK. My parents names, my mother's name was Lillian Nemo Wingfield and my father's name was Earnest Wingfield. And they were both from Vinton, Virginia. I think my father he came from Truevine which is a little outskirts of Vinton. So, but anyway, both of them they were raised in Vinton, Virginia.

AS: Why did they move from Vinton to Roanoke?

GW: Well, my father, he passed, he was killed in a car accident. I was only a year old at that time.

And my mom, well we were living in Vinton with my aunt and my grandmother. I really don't remember the year but I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade when we moved to Roanoke. And they were just selling out in Vinton so that's basically why we moved to Roanoke.

AS: And, um, let's see, did your mother remarry after your father died or did you - ?

GW: No, she didn't. She didn't remarry.

AS: Let's see. What kind of work did your father do?

GW: That, uh, I really don't know what he did because like I said I was a year old when he passed and so I never talked with my mother about it.

AS: Did your mother work?

GW: Yes she did. She did domestic work.

AS: And you say that you lived with your aunt in Vinton?

GW: Yes, uh huh.

AS: Did you have extended family living in Roanoke as well? Aunts or uncles or grandparents?

GW: Uh, yes. I had an uncle living in Roanoke and, yeah, my uncle and my aunt was living in Roanoke.

AS: And were you very close to your extended family?

GW: Yes.

AS: Did they play an important role in your life?

GW: Yes, they did. Mm mm.

AS: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

GW: I had one brother.

AS: And is he older?

GW: He's older, yes.

AS: When you moved to Roanoke in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, can you describe your house for us? Was it brick or did you have a garden, those kinds of things?

GW: It was wood frame and we did have a little garden out in the back. Just a little small one like tomatoes and green beans, something like that. But, uh, it was on Patton Avenue. That's where we first moved.

AS: What kind of activities did you participate in as a child in growing up here in Roanoke?

GW: Well, we played ball a lot. I played softball and I didn't cheer but I was very active with the Y teams. Skating, that type of thing.

AS: Where did you attend school growing up, Elementary, Middle and High School?

GW: OK, um, like I say, when I first started in school, I went to Craig Avenue School in Vinton. That was the elementary. When we moved to Roanoke, I went to Harrison Elementary School. After that, I think they only went to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. We went to Booker T. Washington Junior high and then, of course, to Addison and I graduated from Addison.

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AS: Did you walk to school or did you take the bus?

GW: We walked in Vinton in and Roanoke. (Laughing) We walked.

AS: Did your brother walk with you or did you have friends who you would walk with?

GW: Well, my brother walked with me, yeah, when we were in Vinton and then – 'Cause my mom, she, sometimes she'd walk with us and then when we were in Roanoke, yeah, we walked together my brother and I.

AS: Were you ever allowed to stay home from school?

GW: No, not unless I was really sick and then I had to be real sick for to stay at home.

AS: Was school important to your mother?

GW: Yes, it was. Mm mm. Because at that time, when she was growing up, I think she only went to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, uh, and she was very adamant about us going to school.

AS: So how much schooling did you complete?

GW: Well, I finished the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I went to business school for a year and then I did, went to nursing school. I finished nursing school as an LPN.

AS: What schools were those, what business schools?

GW: National Business School and then it was Burrell Roanoke City Nursing School.

AS: Do you know Sarah Scruggs?

GW: Sara Scruggs? I believe so. She was a Barry. Yeah, I think I know her when I see her.

AS: Yeah, she works at the library now but she went to Burrell Nursing School.

GW: Yes, I think I know her. (Laughing)

AS: Did your brother attend college or did either of your parents attend college?

GW: No and my brother didn't either. He went into the Marines and he spent 4 years there.

AS: Describe your home life for us. For instance, did you have a radio that you'd listen to in the evening? Do you remember when you got a telephone or a refrigerator?

GW: I don't remember but, I can't even remember being without a refrigerator. As far as I remember, we've always had a refrigerator. As far as the telephone, I don't remember being without that either.

AS: Were you allowed to talk on the telephone a lot?

GW: Well, not a whole lot until after I had homework. If I finished my homework, I could talk on the telephone for a while but then - I don't remember, but it was a certain time we could not receive calls.

AS: Did your house have a porch on it and if it did, do you remember if you sat on the porch in the evening and did you know your neighbors and talk to them a lot?

GW: Yes, yes. We had a porch, yes, and I knew my neighbors and we would talk and fellowship. It was really nice.

AS: Were your neighbors important? Did they watch out for you as well?

GW: Yes, yes. Because at that time, we had neighbors on both sides and they looked out, well, at that

time, we'd look out for each other and they would look out for our family and, of course, we would look out for theirs.

AS: Did you have chores around the house or around the neighborhood?

GW: Well, I had some chores at home. Mom wasn't real strict about the chores but we had to keep our rooms clean and then we had certain times to wash dishes. There was just me and my brother so we did do them. So it wasn't bad.

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AS: Did you get along with your brother?

GW: Yes, very much so. The only thing that (laughing) I would say, he did a lot of things and he could go places and I would say, "Well, why can't I go?". Because Russell would go. So my mom would tell me that he's a boy and I can't do everything that he do. So, but we got along real well. Yeah.

AS: Did your mom, did he have to do a lot of chores?

GW: Well, no, he didn't have a lot to do. He would do, what did Russel do? Not a lot. To tell the truth, I don't remember what he actually did. But, uh, he, 'cause when he was old enough, he did have a paper route and so that's about it.

AS: What paper did he deliver? Was it the Tribune?

GW: No, no. He did the, it wasn't called the Roanoke Times at that time. It was World News, I believe it was and he would deliver that.

AS: Did you have any family stories that were passed down from generation to generation? For instance, recipes or stories about the Civil War or slavery?

GW: Mmm. Not that I can remember, no.

AS: And you said your brother served in the Marines. Did he ever serve during active war time?

GW: Um, no, because, let me see. He was, he went in in '60 and I think he was out in '64 or '65. So I don't think he was in any active problem.

AS: Did your husband or children ever serve in the war?

GW: Yes, my husband, let's see, Jack, that's my second husband, he was in the Korean War. And my son, he was in the war in Saudi Arabia. What was that? Desert Storm? I believe it was and because he, at that time, he was in Kansas and so my second husband and I, we drove to Kansas City to see him before he left going to Saudi Arabia.

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AS: Going back a little bit, what businesses and shops did your mom and you shop at? Like, for instance, where did you go grocery shopping? Where would you go to get your clothes or a record store or anything like that?

GW: At the time, there was a grocery store downtown. It was called A&P and we went down there a lot. At that time, we were riding the bus so we went there a lot to do grocery shopping. And for clothes-wise, there was a store called Kanns and we shopped there a lot because, I'll never forget. I was in the debutante ball and we went there and got my Mouton coat, which I still have. (Laughing) I wore it in the debutante ball and my daughter, she wore it also when she was a debutante.

AS: That is so neat. When were you in the debutante ball?

GW: I was in the debutante ball in '60 or '61. I guess '61, Christmas, 'cause usually you're in Christmas – Well it was Christmas of '60 because its usually there at Christmas and you're a senior and graduating in '61, yeah.

AS: Did you have to get picked to be part of the ball or how do you get into it?

GW: Uh, yeah, um, at that time, they were picking girls and – I think they was, I mean, I really don't know because at the time, oh, you just signed up to be in the debutante ball. And, of course, they go around and, you know, ask questions and things to see if you qualify to really be one. So, I was one, yeah, and my daughter was to.

AS: Did you love your dress?

GW: Yes, I did. At that time, you know, you could pick your own dress out and, as long as it was

white and then you had your white gloves and it was real nice.

AS: That's wonderful.

GW: (Laughing)

AS: Was it a special treat – Did you shop in the downtown market and was it like a big deal to go downtown for your family?

GW: Well, yes, because I liked to go with mom downtown to shop and I would help her and pick out a few things but as we got older, you know, I went with her, but my mom, when she got older, she still had to go downtown. Of course, there wasn't an A&P there anymore. But, uh, on the market. People would bring in fresh products and vegetables and everything, and she loved to go. She had to go to the market every Saturday whether we needed anything or not. That was just her task, to go to the market every Saturday morning.

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AS: What would you do for entertainment?

GW: Well, for entertainment, we had, like I say, I was involved with the Y teams a lot and we would, uh, we would have socials, as you called a little dancing and you'd have a disc jockey and all. Or either we'd have stay-in parties and at home, we had television and basically. that was most of our entertainment.

AS: Did you ever shop at the stores on Henry Street?

GW: Well, yes, I had - We used to go to the movie on Henry Street which was Virginia Theatre and then we had the Dumas Hotel. We'd go there to get milkshakes and ice cream, things like that. And, of course, I did go several times, they had a Brooks Pharmacy there so I had been there a couple of times and, yeah, I have – and as I got older, that was our entertainment center, going up Henry Street. They had the clubs there and...

AS: Did you go to the Ebony Club?

GW: Yes I have. (Laughing) It was, at that time it was nice. Yeah.

AS: Did you see good entertainment? Were there dances?

GW: Yeah, I remember, well, was this at the Ebony? - I believe it was a recording star called the – what is it? - He do, I forget his name - "Do The Dog". But anyway, whatever his name was, I saw him there. And, of course, it was the Star City on the, it was right on Wells Avenue off from Henry Street. So I went there quite a bit to see some of the recording stars – Of course, James Brown was there, I saw him. Little Richard and I also saw Otis Redding there, Jackie Wilson – So it was really nice at that time, mm mm.

AS: That's wonderful. Do you have a favorite childhood memory? For instance, a favorite holiday, vacation or gift that you ever received?

GW: Uh, well, Christmas was really a favorite holiday because, see, like I say, my dad died when I was a year old and my mom seemed like she just tried to, you know, just give us all she could. Well, between she and my aunt and my grandmother, they made a very good Christmas for us and it was just so exciting for my brother and I to tip-toe down the stairs. We would try to wait 'til – first thing in the morning, I'd say maybe 5 or 6, go see what Santa Claus had brought us. It was very exciting to go and see the different gifts and things that Santa Claus had brought us. It was just a joy.

AS: Would you have a family gathering on Christmas? Would you get together with your grandma and your aunt and family?

GW: Yes, at that time, yeah. And then, even it continued as we got older, you know, we would get together on Christmas - well after I got grown and we all had children, we would, of course, be at our own homes at that time, but later in the day or the next day, we would still have a family gathering. Now, basically, my aunt that lived in Southwest, she, uh, as we moved on, she was the one that always fixed the dinners and had all the families together.

AS: Would you get together regularly at her house.

GW: Yes. Pretty much so. Mm mm.

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

GW: Well, I have, um, first I started off after I finished high school, I worked at a hospital in the dietary. At that time, I think I was going to business school, National Business School. After that, I have worked in, um, a factory. It was Kriss (??) Uniform factory in the shipping department. I worked there for several years and I worked, uh, - I went to Youngstown. I worked in, um, not a, it was a cleaning, pressing shirts and then when I did come back, I went to nursing school. I think that was in the '70s and I've been in nursing since then.

AS: Which hospital did you work at? Did you work at hospitals here in Roanoke?

GW: Yes, I've worked, it was old Camelot at first, now its Salem Rehab. Then I worked at Burrel, Old Burrel Nursing Home and then I've worked at, let me see, Roanoke Memorial briefly and then I retired from the VA.

AS: Who were some of the strong community leaders in this area and what roles did they play? Like for instance, ministers or bankers or a few people have even mentioned Dr. Penn.

GW: Let me see. Dr. Butler - He was a dentist. OK, and ..... (??) for being - and let me see, who else? Community leaders? Uh, I'm trying to think. Now my pastor, he is very good in the community, of course. He is not really very active but when he, Reverend Ivory Morton. He's, you know, a good person.

AS: Who were your role models growing up?

GW: Well, basically, my mom. I really tried to be a lot like her. She was a good Christian woman and she was for the right thing and in a lot of ways, she was just settled in her ways and, you know, I never will forget - see mom - like I say, my dad died when I was a year old. And she never remarried and sometimes, I regret this. She never remarried because I, you know, I don't know whether she felt because of me and my brother or what, but she had a friend and they were - I would see they would go to formals and things and they looked so good together. I often wonder but she said she would never remarry while we were young, while we growing up. And she didn't. They were a pair up until the end. Now when I, my brother was in the service, I was getting ready to graduate. I graduated from high school and I think she might have gotten married then but her friend died. And you know, I think about that often, just like - now I divorced my children's dad when they were, let's see, I guess JC was about 7. Tanya was 3 and I said that I would never remarry while they were young. And I don't know whether I got that from mom or what, but I just had that feeling like - I said, "As long as they had a good relationship with their father, I didn't want to jeopardize that". And so I didn't. I did not get married again until my daughter, she was getting ready to graduate from college and then I remarried. And then, by that time, OK, my second husband, we had been dating for about 10 years and so after they graduated, you know, they were grown, we got married and we didn't have a good 5 years together and then he passed. So but we did have a good 5 years together as man and wife.

AS: That's wonderful

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AS: How has Roanoke changed over the years?

GW: Well, it has changed - crime has really been increased. It has really changed because at one time you could walk the streets by yourself, leave your doors open. I mean, you wouldn't dream of anyone saying anything to you or bothering you and now you are afraid to even go to the corner by yourself. I don't know what it is, but the children, they just don't have any respect for their parents or anyone else. And you can't say this all the time is the parents fault. Its just the child, himself. And, uh, now that they have the law of child abuse, a lot of children, if your parents, if the parents speak out to the child, the first thing they say, they'll get you for child abuse and all that. At that time, when we were growing up, you didn't have that. But, uh, its just a big change and, like I say, a lot of these children, they don't want to be corrected and see, even then, at one time, parents, this couple over here or across the street or behind you or whatever could correct you. (Knock at door)

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(Beginning of second recording)

AS: OK, its going again.

GW: They could correct your child and now, some of the parents, if you correct their child, they are ready to lay you out or whatever. So, you just can't do like you used to.

AS: So there's not the neighborhood bonding like there used to be?

GW: Right, that's correct. (Softly) Its not.

AS: Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you'd like to share with us?

GW: No. I've just enjoyed working with the West End neighborhood really. Because, now, even though I'm in Northwest, my friend, Christine, works diligently with the West End and I enjoy that and its just been a joy to work with them.

AS: Well, great, wonderful. Thank you for allowing us to interview you today.

GW: Thank you.