

Interviewee: Fred Hairston, Jr.
Interviewer: Carla Lewis
Transcriber: Andrew Sterling

Good morning. My name is Carla Lewis and I am the Gainsboro Branch Manager. Today is April 5th, a Saturday, 2008. I am here to interview Fred Douglas Hairston, Jr. We will start our interview right now.

CL: Good morning Mr. Hairston.

FH: Good morning.

CL: How are you?

FH: I am good.

CL: Good. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

FH: I was born in Eden, NC. At the time, the name of the town was Wrightboro (??). The year I was born was and the month was August 6, 1923.

CL: OK. And how long have you lived here in Roanoke?

FH: I came to Roanoke in 1949 and, of course, you can figure that out. (Laughing)

CL: Where in Northwest did you live? Neighborhood?

FH: When I came to Roanoke, I lived on Gilam Avenue.

CL: Gilam Avenue. Do you know the address on Gilam Avenue?

FH: It was 801 Gilam.

CL: 801 Gilam. Very good. Tell me about your parents, brothers, sisters.

FH: OK. My father's name is the same as mine, Senior. My mother's name was Rosa Lee Hairston and what else do you want to know?

CL: I wanted to know did you have any sisters or brothers or do you have sisters and brothers still living.

FH: Oh yes. Six sisters and four brothers and all of them have passed except for 2 sisters that are younger than I.

CL: OK, your 2 sisters that are younger than you, are they still here in Roanoke?

FH: No, they're in North Carolina.

CL: In North Carolina. OK. Well great. Describe your home life for us. For instance, did you live in a brick house? Did you have a garden or landscaping around your house that you had to take care of?

FH: Uh huh. My father worked in cotton mills down in Eden and, in fact, I say Eden now but at that time it was Wrightboro, you know. He worked in the cotton mill and, of course, my mother she took in washings and stayed home and looked after us. We all had chores and we would get the wood in and the coal and water and whatever needed to be done. Working in the garden and all of that. At that time, times were very hard for most especially for the black people and all of us had to share in the working and providing for ourselves and we picked berries and (laughing) worked in the garden and in the orchards or whatever that we could do to help the family to survive.

CL: OK.

FH: But there was a lot of love in that home though, you know. We worked together and, in fact, we didn't even know we were poor but we was poorer than poor. (Laughing)

CL: Did you have a brick house or did you have a large house?

FH: No

CL: Did you have a lot of rooms in it?

FH: No, not too many rooms. We had 4 rooms. The living room was a living room and a bedroom and at that time, they had these big old couches that you can let out for beds, you know, and the main entrance, of course we had my father and mother. They stayed in the girls room. There were 6 girls that stayed in that one room. And the boys, there were 4 of us, and we stayed in the living room.

(Laughing)

CL: OK.

FH: We slept in the living room rather.

CL: What type of activities did you participate in? When you all went to play, what did you play, what kind of games?

FH: We played baseball.

CL: Baseball.

FH: Yeah. And we done some fishing and stuff like that. Wasn't too many activities that you could belong to at that time. Of course basketball, we didn't know anything about basketball until we went to high school, you know.

CL: Alright. Lets talk about your school life. For instance, did you attend school here in Roanoke?

FH: Well, yes. I got my GED at Jefferson High School. My daughter at that time, she was a Junior in College at Virginia Tech. Mm mm.

CL: Now did you have to walk there or did you have a car.

FH: You mean to school?

CL: Mm mm. Jefferson. To get your GED.

FH: Oh no, I had a car.

CL: You had a car at that time.

FH: And of course I was professional plasterer at that time because when I came out of the Army, I went to trade school and after coming to Roanoke and I worked for Johnny Tamsent's (??) operation and we worked commercial buildings and we worked 5 states. One weekend, I came home and was tied up working on the road and they was building the Civic Center and I went down and applied for a maintenance job at the Civic Center and they hired me as a maintenance person. When I retired from the city, I was the executive housekeeper for the City of Roanoke.

0.06.03.2

CL: Alright. Did you go on to complete any college courses?

FH: Yes, I took some courses at Roanoke College and I took some, I went through executive housekeeping school and I – a lot of different certificates that I have that's where I kinda advanced my knowledge in different areas.

CL: Mm mm . OK. You said your daughter attended Virginia Tech.

FH: Mm mm.

CL: Did she complete her education there?

FH: Yes she did, not at Virginia Tech. She went to – She left Virginia Tech as a Junior and went to Minnesota, University of Minnesota and she got her degree in Minnesota and then she got her doctorate at the University of Oregon. And she was teaching at one of the colleges in Syracuse, NY.

CL: And what is her name?

0:07:13:8

FH: Her name is Freddie. She don't like to be called Fred anymore. Its _____ (??) Laverne Hairston. And, of course, now she's in Michigan.

0.07.26.0

CL: OK, very good. OK. Describe your home life. For instance, did you all have radio and television, telephone or any of those?

FH: Since we're talking about my daughter, can I tell you about my son next. OK. My son, he was born a month before I went in the Army. I went in the Army in March in '43.

CL: And what was his name?

FH: His name was Esseck (??) Hairston. And he's working at the trade in which I was trained in and so he's doing very well for himself, you know. He's an independent contractor.

CL: An independent contractor.

FH: Mm mm.

08.15.5

CL: OK. Very good. Thank you. Now we'll go to your home life and if you would describe whether you had a telephone or a television or a refrigerator or did you have to have the ice come in through the ice truck and put in the box?

FH: Yes. What you know about that? (Both laughing)

CL: I've heard a lot about that.

FH: We had a wood stove in the kitchen with a tank on the side of it and that's where we had our hot water and we bathed in tubs. You know, we didn't have bathrooms and this type thing. We had an outhouse and – What else you wanna know? (Both laughing)

CL: Did you have a telephone?

FH: No, no telephone. (Laughing)

CL: How did you keep your food cold?

FH: In that refrigerator. But with 10 children, we didn't have too much to keep cold.

CL: OK, OK. (Both laughing) And did you have a telephone?

FH: No, no telephone.

CL: No telephone. How did you get your messages, through letter writing?

FH: By mail, yeah.

CL: Mail and that kind of thing. OK. Very good. OK. Did you all sit on the front porch in the afternoon to listen to stories?

FH: Yes, we had a swing on the front porch, you know. In fact, we had a front porch and we had a back porch at that time and so we used to sit on the front porch and the porch wasn't large enough to hold of us and we'd sit down on the porch with our feet hanging over the end of the porch. You don't know anything about what I'm saying, you know. (Both laughing)

CL: Did you all have to shell beans and -?

FH: Yes, yes. We had to shell beans and everything pertaining to gardening, we done it.

CL: OK. Because a lot of people did theirs right on the front porch and I wanted to know if that was part of your heritage also.

FH: Yes.

CL: OK. What kind of chores did you have to do around the house?

FH: Well, cutting wood and bringing it in. Bring the coal in and feed the hogs and the chickens and all that kind of stuff. Work in the garden, you know, so we just done it all. And carry water.

CL: Where would you carry the water – inside your house?

FH: Yes. We had a pump on the corner, you know, and we had to pump the water and bring it in and I used to – that's the reason why my arms are so long. My mother used to take in washing, you know and I had to carry the water up for her to wash.

0.10.56.4

CL: Alrighty. When you were sitting around on the porch and listening to stories, were there any stories that you remember maybe about the Civil War or slavery or your family telling you something to watch out for as you grew older?

FH: Yeah, yeah. My father, he came off a plantation. His father came off a plantation up in Stokes County, NC, up near Winston-Salem. My mother, she came off a plantation down at Berryhill (??) VA out of Danville and both of them were Hairstons because the white Hairstons at that time owned 9 plantations. They had plantations in North Carolina, Virginia and Mississippi. So I'm a double Hairston. (Laughing)

CL: Did they ever tell you to watch out for certain things or to behave in a certain way or to do certain things in life?

FH: Yeah. My daddy was very strict and he would leave orders when he would go to work in the morning and he would leave orders for what he wanted us to do that day and, above all, "Do what your mamma say. If you don't, you're going to be in big trouble".

CL: (Light laughter) OK, thank you. Were you married? Did you get married later in life?

FH: Yeah, I got married in 1942 in May. Of course, before I got married, my dad got disabled to work and I dropped out of high school after 2 years in high school I dropped out because he gave me his job in the mill to help support the family.

CL: And which mill was that?

FH: That was Marshall Field and Company. It was a blanket mill. You can find that information in this book here.

0.13.29.6

CL: OK. So later you married. Now when you married, did you have children right at that point or did you have children later in life.

FH: I had one child before I went in the service. I was married in '42 and Esseck was born in February of '43.

CL: OK. You had mentioned in the service. Were you in the service?

FH: Yes, yes. I went in the service a month after Esseck was born.

CL: Which branch did you - ?

FH: I went in the Air Force and I didn't like the Air Force because they had a lot of lieutenants, you know, pilots, and kept me saluting all the time and I never liked that so I started goal braking (??) and my sergeant told me that he was going to have me shipped out and another after it. (??) And so he did and so I left Kernen, Nebraska (??) and went to Boise, Idaho – Wendover Field, Idaho, rather, and still in the Air Force. So they said they didn't need any more service people and so they shipped me out of Idaho, out of Boise to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in the combat, not combat but in the field artillery. So they liquidated that outfit and I wound up in Columbia, South Carolina at Fort Jackson in the combat engineers. I went overseas with the combat engineers and that's where I got my experience as far as being a combat soldier.

CL: Which war was this?

FH: This was World War II.

0.15.06.0

CL: World War II. OK. When you were in Roanoke, where were you able to shop? Could you go to the grocery stores, five and dime and - ?

FH: Yes.

CL: OK. What is your fondest childhood memory? What's the best time you had?

FH: I guess the fondest memory I had as a child is having a loving mother.

CL: And a really loving family.

FH: Yeah, yeah. My mother definitely was out of sight. My daddy was a discipline and she would tell him when she thought it was enough, she said, "That's enough". (Laughing)

CL: I can understand. And when you went on a family vacation, where did you go? Were you able to take a family vacation? Were you able to go see your grandparents or your aunts and uncles?

FH: My aunt, one of my aunts. She just died a couple of years ago. She was 104.

CL: Where did she live when you visited her?

FH: She lived in Eden, NC.

CL: So was that a nice time to go and visit her? Was that a pleasant memory?

0.16.23.1

FH: Yes, yes it was, you know. And on my mother's side, of course, they were more close to the white Hairston because white Hairston fathered some of them and my aunt was real fair, you know and I visited her I guess about 6 or 8 months before she died and I was teasing her. I said, "You are getting so white I didn't hardly know you". (Laughing) I was teasing her about that. But I really enjoyed her and she loved me too, you know, and she didn't have but one child and whenever I wanted something extra, more so than what regular things that my mother had for the whole family, I would always go to her house. (Laughing)

CL: Did that include food or money?

FH: Food, not money but food. They made ice cream and stuff like that, you know. Nothing that I didn't get a home too often.

CL: I have heard a lot of stories about the snow, making ice cream from snow. Did your family ever do that?

FH: Mm mm.

CL: How did they make it?

FH: My mother would go out and she would always scrape the top of the snow off, you know, and get some that didn't have any settling in it. She would take the snow and milk and flavoring and all that and mix it together and then she'd put it in the churn, in the ice cream churn, you know, and make it that way.

0.18.07.8

CL: OK Very good. You talked a lot about what you had done through the years in terms of working. Would you like to tell us anything else about your work experience?

FH: Well, I've been blessed. The only thing I can say about my work experience because it afforded me all the things that I desired when I was young and growing up. I wanted a brick home and I wanted nice cars and I wanted my children educated and all this and this is what its done for me. And I look at my kids now and they're self-supporting and they're doing good in educating their children and it makes me feel so good, you know. So good, and I feel like out of this I've accomplished so much.

CL: OK. Did you ever use the public library when you were coming up?

FH: We didn't have a public library when I was coming up.

CL: When you moved to Roanoke, did you?

FH: Yes.

CL: Were you able to come to the Gainsboro branch?

FH: Yeah, occasionally. I worked so much and usually I read the papers and magazines and whatever classes that I would take. That was about the biggest time and of course I did a lot of praying and a lot of reading the bible and all that so I think that this is my life-thing now that I feel that I've gotten to the place now that I know that most important thing about living is the foundation, you know. Of course you can have all the learning in the world and if it doesn't have any common sense, it doesn't mean anything, you know. And I've seen people that are educated, I said educated fools because they didn't know what to do with it after they had it. Maybe you didn't ask for all of that. (Laughing)

CL: When you say you pray a lot, do you come to church here? In Roanoke?

FH: Yes, always. I've been a – I've been a deacon for at least 60 years, you know.

CL: 60 years. Has it been in one church or have you been to different churches?

FH: Different churches. The church I left in North Carolina. Of course I was a trial deacon when I was a young fella, 26 years old and I came to Roanoke. I've belonged to Sweet Union. When I came in 1979, I moved my membership to High Street, so that's where I've been. And so that's – Christianity is the foundation of my life and I just love it.

CL: OK. Describe some of your cultural events. What do you do for entertainment? Or what did you do then for entertainment? Could you go to the activities that they had then or did you have to attend the Dumas? Where did you go for entertainment?

FH: I went to movies.

CL: Movies?

FH: Yeah.

CL: Were they downtown Roanoke?

FH: Yeah, you had to go up in the attic, you know. (Laughing)

CL: OK so you had to go upstairs in the movie theater.

FH: Yeah. Of course they had the Virginia Theater on N Street, you know. So we went there and they used to have dances at – I done forgot the name of the place that they had over there.

CL: That was downtown Roanoke?

FH: Yes.

0.22.15.9

CL: Who were some of the strong leaders during that time?

FH: I would say Harry Penn, Dr. Penn, and CT Green and about all of the ministers at that time. They didn't only preach but they taught, you know. It seems like to me, we as a race used to be more serious about our religion than we are now and so -

CL: OK. Can you name one role model? I'm sure you had more than one but can you name maybe one or two role models that you had?

FH: Well, I would say that my first role model was my older brother named Charlie. He came up and he was 12 years older than I and he was working in the mill. He opened up the first black grocery store in my community and he had a grocery store and he owned a barber shop and he had a restaurant and, you know. And he owned a lot of property. Out of this, I wanted to be like my brother, you know. He did very well for himself.

CL: Was that here in Roanoke?

FH: No.

CL: That was in Eden?

FH: Mm mm.

CL: And his name was Charles Hairston?

0.24.08.0

FH: Yes, Charles. Of course, when he passed, he left a scholarship there at St. Pauls for children that was eligible to go to school. I haven't quite got there yet.

CL: How has Roanoke changed through the years? What kind of changes have you seen?

FH: When I came to Roanoke, Roanoke was a hick town. We had the bathrooms on the back porch, you know. And they had chickens and cows and pigs and (Laughing) in the community.

CL: In the back yard?

FH: Yes. Yes in the community. They had all these things and they had wagons and vendors with wagons hauling coal and wood and all that kind of stuff, fish and whatever that they had to offer. They do it by wagons, you know.

CL: They would bring the fish in on the wagon?

FH: Mm mm.

CL: With the ice to cool it?

FH: Mm mm.

CL: OK, that's a big change from now isn't it?

FH: Yeah and even the vendors when we were shopping clothes. They would come into the neighborhood to sell clothes and I think the first suit my father bought for me that I can remember was from a vendor and they had nickel pants, you know. You know what nickels are don't ya?

CL: Mm mm.

FH: And my long legs (Both laughing) I can laugh about it now, it wasn't funny then. (Both laughing)

0.25.55.2

CL: Do you remember the closing of the silk mills?

FH: Mm mm.

CL: Did any of your people work in the silk mills?

FH: No. That was in Roanoke.

CL: So that didn't affect your family at all did it?

FH: No, it didn't affect. Because when I came to Roanoke, of course I was a professional plasterer and went to trade school after I got out of the Army and so that's how I started making a decent living for myself and for my family.

CL: What kind of jobs were available when you came here? Do you know any of the other type of

jobs that were available to - ?

FH: The railroads were the main jobs for black folks.

CL: What was that? Railroad?

FH: Yes, railroad. I would say that 80% of the trades was blacks. Blacks was plumbers, they were plumber helpers. They were bricklayers, carpenters and also plasterers. So we were very much in demand in the trade field. Mm mm.

CL: This is going to end our interview for today but I want you to tell me anything that you would like to tell me about yourself right now.

FH: (Chuckling) Well, one thing I'd like to say that I just been so blessed. I'm 84 years old and I can still run. I still have joy - not plagued with a whole lot of sickness and this type thing. And I'm just so appreciative, (quietly) so appreciative.

CL: I know you are.

FH: And I know that too. I've seen so many people that felt that they were better and had more and all that and they're somewhere now in a grave, you know, and for some reason I'm still here. But I've lived long enough to know now that whatever comes, I'm not afraid. (Pause)

CL: Thank you so much for participating in the Gainsboro Branch Oral History Project. This will be housed in the Virginia Y. Lee Collection. And I'm hoping to get some more interviews but I do appreciate yours and if there is anything else you would like to say, I would love to hear it.

FH: The only thing that I can say is that you should've got me much earlier when I was much sharper.

CL: I think you did a great job. (Both laughing) And thank you again Fred.