

Interviewee: Caralene Mathis Lewis

Interviewer: Nick Potts

Transcriber: Dorian Meekins

[brief unintelligible discussion]

NP: Did you start yet? Oh man. Well, my name is Nick Potts and I'm a student at Virginia Tech and today is the 15th and we are here to interview Ms. Carla Lewis, Mrs. Carla Lewis and let us start with— Could you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born?

CL: Okay. I was born in Bladen County, North Carolina on February 2nd, 1949 and I was born one of eight children to Henry and Otina Mathis.

NP: How long did you— When did you move to Roanoke, I guess? I mean, the first question—

CL: I moved to Roanoke in 1973 after graduating from Virginia Union University. This was my first job after college.

NP: What streets or neighborhoods did you live in here in Roanoke?

CL: When I first came here, I lived in Northwest section on Staunton Ave and the lady that I lived with was the assistant librarian to the Gainsboro Branch, the one that I was manager of for 36 years. And then I moved to Jefferson Street, right across the street from the library which was Dr. Claytor's house. They had converted it to apartments and I had an apartment there. And then later I moved to Roland Hill and still live [in] Northwest Roanoke.

NP: So did you grow up here in Roanoke with your family and all? Did you have family that lived here in the area or anything?

CL: I didn't have any family here in Roanoke. I grew up in North Carolina and Washington DC and later moved here because the Virginia Union University's librarian recommended that I come her to get the experience.

NP: So why don't you tell us a little bit about your first job and what type of stuff you did there?

CL: Well I worked at the library at Virginia Union University while I was attending Virginia Union and when I graduated, I came here to Roanoke to work at the Gainsboro Branch as the manager and I worked there for 36 and a half years, retiring in June of 2009.

NP: Long time. So why don't you tell us about your education before college and all that? Do you have any stories about that or anything you'd like to share?

CL: I graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in North Carolina and then I went from there to Washington DC to Federal City College. It's now the University of the District of Columbia and I transferred from there to Virginia Union in 1969 and graduated from there.

NP: How many other people in your family attended college or were you the first one or how did college education work in your family?

CL: No, I was not the first one. I have eight siblings so all of us went to college. It was expected of us. My father and mother did not have the opportunity to go to college so when we came along, I mean, that was expected of us. I mean, we had to make good grades, we had to go to school, we had to go to college and at one time there were three of us at the same college. So it

was pretty hard on my parents to keep us all in school, but we did it. Everyone went to school, went to college.

NP: So it sounds like it's a lot like it is today. I mean, your parents pushing it on you.

CL: Yes.

NP: What was your home life like? I mean you had a huge family, what was that like? Eight brothers and sisters, I can't imagine that.

CL: Well we had a large house and in the summertime we had to do chores. We had a garden and my father had a farm, but we had to do chores. We didn't just play. We had to pick cucumbers, tomatoes and shell beans and can food and do all kinds of good things. So everybody participated in my family and all of the children from Washington DC, my mother's sister's children would come down so we had a huge family. [We] had 23 people sometimes in the house and we had a great time. I mean we had to work, but we had a great time also. We had a lot of games and church and all kinds of things that we participated in.

NP: Where there any family stories or anything of importance that, y'know, you'd like to speak about? Family history or anything like that?

CL: My mother would tell us stories and my father would tell stories about how they used to ride a horse and buggy places when they were coming up. That kind of stories and we had recipes that we passed down from generations that we still use; macaroni and cheese and fried chicken and stuff like that. As far as the other stories, my father was one of the oldest in his family and he had to drop out of school to provide for his younger siblings. So education became one of his key points of telling us that we had to do; we had to go to school, we had to make sure. He was gonna make sure that we didn't have to drop out to help the other children in the family, but he was going to make sure that he provided for us so that we could. So it was a key point in our family, to go to school, to go to college.

NP: So did you meet your husband when you came here to Roanoke? Or how did you start your own family? I guess the question is.

CL: I married when I was in college and had one son, Cedric, and then I came here and married Peter Lewis who is the founder of Apple Ridge Farm. It's a camp and conference center in Copper Hill, Virginia. So we've been married quite a few years and we're still married.

NP: Did any of your— Did your spouse, siblings, or children ever serve in the military?

CL: Okay my son Cedric served in the Navy for two years and was discharged honorably. My brother was in the Army. So we did have a military background.

NP: Were there any businesses or shops here in Roanoke that you and your family would frequently visit? Anything that stands out?

CL: Well when I came in 1973, we could pretty much go to any business or shop that was here, but my— I remember going to Henry Street because they had restaurants and newspapers and stuff right there. So I remember walking because I didn't have a car when I first came and we had neighborhood grocery stores so we walked a lot.

NP: What was the fondest memories of your childhood growing up?

CL: I think sharing with my sisters, six sisters. I had five sisters, six of us, and two brothers. And the fondest memory I think came when my baby brother was born. There was so many girls, when we saw a boy we were just happy to see a boy in the family because the oldest was a boy and the baby is a boy and the girls are in between. So we kinda fused over my brother. I mean, he was like a jewel to us. We had a boy!

NP: Did you have any holiday stories or did your family go on any vacation to any spot in particular frequently or—?

CL: We would go to Washington DC quite often because my mother had sisters there and we would ride the train. In the early years we would ride the train everywhere. I mean, if we were to go to Ohio or New York or any place, we would ride the train. In later years we started traveling by car, but [the] train was just important. I mean, it was the transportation of the way and we enjoyed it and we could take the whole family pretty reasonably.

NP: Could you tell us a little bit about your career once you got here in Roanoke?

CL: Once I got here in Roanoke I had one job and that was the branch manager of the Gainsboro Branch. They didn't have storyhours then and so we had a lot of community daycares and schools right around so I started having storyhours and bringing the kids into the library to share the experience of books and reading and puppet shows and all that good stuff. So that was one thing that I remember doing. Another thing is this oral history project, this is one of my latest projects. I had a student to come to me and ask for a biographical sketch of a person right here in our community that I didn't have information for. So I got the information for the child, but it gave me the idea of why not have people come in and tell their stories so we could have information that not only could we give to the students to do reports, but we could share to the community as well and with others and Virginia Tech. You're here so we could share with you as well.

NP: So you worked there for a long time so you must have seen a lot of development within the public library system, yeah?

CL: Oh I did. We had a lot of growth. When I first came there, there was one lady working; Louise Bolden was the assistant librarian and I was the branch manager. Two of us worked for many many years with just two people in the branch, which was quite a bit of work for two people, but we got it done. In later years we were able to hire other people and more people to come in and help and volunteers and that kind of thing. So with the growth came more people.

NP: Could you describe some culture events that's happened here in Roanoke in the time you've been here? Like entertainers who have come to perform or fairs, sports games, going to movies. Anything cultural like that.

CL: Okay, oh boy, there have been quite a few. The Harrison Museum has a festival every year and we participate in that. I've seen entertainers come, speakers, authors, children's authors, adult authors. The Jefferson Center has hosted a lot of different programs that we've attended. It's just been such a tremendous amount of people coming and going. Not only entertainers, but like I said authors and puppet shows, programs for— nutritious programs. We hosted a lot of nutritious programs to teach people how to read the labels on the can, from canning, if you

wanted to freeze food, the proper way of washing and handling that. If you had any kind of ailment or disease, we shared information about that. We shared information about financial growth. Oh boy, it's been so many many programs.

NP: Who was some of the strong community leaders here in Roanoke in your time here?

CL: Oh boy, strong community leaders, we've had a few. I have seen Mrs. Bethel. I'll say Evelyn Bethel has been a strong community leader. She was instrumental in getting the Historic Gainsboro designation for the library and that was a great deal for us because she worked really hard on that project. So that was that. The renovation project was another project that I'm kind of proud of because we were able to get that done under my leadership. And we have a teen center. We have a community meeting room that the capacity is 125. We have the African American Virginia Y. Lee Room which houses African American materials, community materials, and worldwide. And the teen center I'm proud of too because we had so many teenagers, it was kinda— One day a person came in and said “Y’know what, I walked into this library and I see a toddler doing a puzzle, a senior citizen reading his newspaper, and a teen at the computer; and they were all there together.” And they said “Y’know we don’t see this quite often.” I mean, y’know, from the toddler to the senior citizen and they were all in unison getting along. I mean he was reading his paper, the teenager was on the computer, and the toddler playing with the puzzle and it was a sight and they said “Oh my gracious! Look at this, y’know, you have all age groups here.”

NP: How has the community here in Roanoke and Roanoke itself— How has it been— How has it changed over the years and what challenges has it faced?

CL: Oh boy. I would say the community has changed to welcome all races of people. I have seen a diverse group of people since I've been here. When I first started out, it was basically African Americans. Now you walk into the library, you see four or five different races. Such a diverse library system. I mean it's all over now. So it's— When we started out, I think the first Gainsboro Library was 1928, the Gainsboro Branch was for African Americans and the Main Library was for everybody else. So it started out segregated and now it's—

NP: What jobs were available for men or women in Roanoke in the time you've been here and in employment?

CL: When I first came, a lot of people worked at Hotel Roanoke, the railroad, the school system. A lot of people worked [at] churches, daycare centers.

Unknown: [unintelligible] Oh I was just asking to ask a question after that.

CL: Okay. Daycare centers— I mean there were [a] wide variety of jobs here and people seemed to be making it very well. I mean they educated their children. We had one man to tell me that he had never lived in a rented house, but he didn't have a car. When I first came here, he said “My father said he would not rent a house.” He would have to buy a house and they walked and biked and did a lot of that kind of stuff to get around. He said they rode the buses and stuff like that, but he would not live in a rented house. I lot of people owned their homes and they sent their kids to college on the salaries and the jobs that they had and a lot of the jobs that I just mentioned provided enough income for them to do that.

Unknown: Oh, well my question was, building off of that, how did race affect what jobs you were able to get and how your life was when you've been here in Roanoke?

CL: I think race played an important part in certain jobs. Like I said, the railroad had a lot of different jobs and I'm not sure. [By] not growing up here, I'm not sure how it affected a lot of the people, but a lot of the people were able to make a great living working and a lot of teachers— I mean, then they had the Harrison School, Addison was a high school so you had teachers, principals, and the works. The Hotel Roanoke had such a variety of jobs that blacks, African Americans, could work there. So I think, right around in our community, those were some of the major jobs that they had in the community. Didn't have to go out of the community to raise their family, that kind of thing.

NP: When you first got here in Roanoke, what was the situation between the races like? Was there a large divide or was it better than other experiences you had?

CL: When I first got here, it was divided quite a bit. The library was very open, I mean it was very open, but Henry Street was up and running and so they had coffee shops, well I'll say sandwich shops, they had a newspaper, they had restaurants, they had a barber shop, they had— it was either a pharmacy slash grocery store right there. So it was a lot of different neighborhood kind of businesses. So you didn't have to go that far to get anything you wanted. I mean it was in walking distance and the community thrived on those particular— I mean you would go out Downtown, you could go Downtown and go to Sidneys and— I'm trying to think of all the other shops they had down there. Woolworths was there and that kind of shops, stores were there. But I can't remember— I lived with a lady that lived in Northwest and we didn't branch out that much. I mean we could go to the grocery stores and I'm trying to think— Was it Food Lion or Kroger or I'm not sure exactly which ones were there then, but we could go to grocery stores and that kind of stuff, but that was— I guess that was about it. It wasn't that segregated.

NP: So, from what you've seen, how had the urban renewal here in Roanoke affected the community?

CL: Okay, I think when that's, for instance, the Civics Center— I was told that a lot of the people had to move out of the community to make space for the Civics Center and when they moved, that the amount of money that they got was not enough to buy a house elsewhere wherein their homes were paid for when they were living in Northeast there. So I've seen it grow, I've seen the city grow. I think for the better, I mean sometimes I think it was for the better because people were able to get jobs elsewhere in grocery stores and teaching in public schools, the hospitals. So I can see the good and the bad on both sides there.

NP: Another question is; how has the tension between races— how has the tensions kind of lessened over the years? Or was never that bad to begin with?

CL: I didn't see it as being that bad in the beginning. Like I said, when I came here, it was in 1973. Integration was already in progress and the schools— I heard a lot of stories, but the schools were integrated. Some of the students that came to the library went to Jefferson, Patric Henry; so it was already there. I don't know quite [how] to explain how the tension was there. They didn't seem to have a lot of the tension that some of the other cities had because I think, when

integration started, I think Roanoke kind of jumped in and said we're gonna go ahead and start integrating, we're not gonna wait for all the sit-ins and all that kind of stuff. I know Rev.

Wilkinson and Margie Jumper were some of the people who rode— I mean Margie Jumper said was not gonna ride in the back of a bus and she didn't ride in the back of a bus. She made sure that we was gonna sit where she wanted to sit and she told that story to me a while back. So I didn't see a lot of it. I think I was right in the middle of the transition, y'know, going back and forth and— Because we had teachers and they integrated, the hospitals integrated, the schools integrated gradually. So I didn't see a lot of the tension that some of the other people saw.

NP: I guess another question would be— Is, from what you've seen working at the library and stuff— I guess it would be a little bit before you got here, but were there any prominent civil rights leaders here in the community in Roanoke?

CL: I would say there were. I would say— I just mentioned Mrs. Margie Jumper and Rev. Wilkinson, Rev. Carl Tinsley, Rev. Burton, Noel C. Taylor; were some of the prominent people. So, like I said, I don't think they encountered some of the racial hatred that some of the other cities had encountered.

NP: So Roanoke itself was maybe a little bit smoother of a transition than other cities maybe further south or?

CL: Yeah I think so. I think they saw what was happening and decided that they didn't want that kind of tension here. And not that they didn't have any, they did have some, but with the leaders that we had, I think it was clearly stated that we were going to integrate.

NP: Well, we're running out of questions, but is there anything else that I haven't covered that you would like to speak on?

CL: I would just like to say that I came up in a time where— When I got here, my director Ms. Nancy Hines met me and brought me around and I was introduced to the library system. [I] worked at the Gainsboro Branch which, when it first started out, had an African American— one, two, three librarians and the lady that worked before me worked 43 and a half years. So she had been there for quite a while. Then there was another lady that came in for a few months and then I came in and— So we worked with all races of people, but, y'know, we didn't have— I didn't have a lot with [them] and I was glad of that. And I mean, I've seen transitions and people coming and going, but I was just fortunate I guess and I think a lot of it is the way you look at it; as we're all human beings and I feel that I'm just as important as the next person and I'm going to treat you with respect and I'm looking for respect in return. So I think it was that kind of way with me from the beginning. I had a very wholesome upbringing and we traveled a lot and we never encountered a lot of racial tension that some of the other people did and my father just didn't tolerate his children having less than anybody else. And so I think I think as much of myself as I do anybody else. I was kind of raised to be that way. So, that was it. Any other questions?

Unknown: I don't have any, no.

CL: Do you have any questions? No? Okay. I love my job. I worked for 36 and a half years and the time just went woosh! I couldn't believe I had worked that long, y'know, but I had a great time. We had a lot of programs that I was glad we had and the community— The thing that I

would like to talk about [at] the very end is the community. I had a great, supportive community and the things that I wanted to do— I mean, all I had to do was pass it by a few people and they went “Oh that’s a great idea,” or “No I don’t think that will work,” or “Have you tried this?” or “Can we try this program?” or “Can we try this?” And we ended up having a Cafe Night where we had poetry, older people, seniors, young people would come together and we did all kinds of things. We had poetry slams, we had people telling about the stories when they came; integrated stories, segregated stories, how they felt at certain activities and some of the things they had encountered. We would sing, we would have— we would eat food, we would discuss movies, current events, all kinds of things. So it became more of a community center than just a library. It became the hub of the community and every age group was important and they knew they were important and they had a piece of that library. So that part I did feel good about because we welcomed everybody and they felt like they had a part of that library regardless of their race. We had a very diverse group of people come in to share with us and it was a great experience, that was. And I tell young people to continue to be encouraged, not only by living in Roanoke, but surroundings and be the kind of person that you would want to be and don’t let anybody tell you couldn’t be this or you can’t be that because of your race or anything like that and I mean that goes for all people. So I’m pretty proud of that.

NP: So you’d say Roanoke has been a pretty close-knit, supportive community?

CL: For me, it’s been that way since the beginning.

NP: Alright well, I’d like to thank you.

CL: Thank you.