

Interviewee: Brent Weigel  
Interviewer: Ruth Bennett  
Transcriber: Chelsea Seddon  
Date: February 23, 2008

BW: Okay. My name is Brent Weigel. The date today is February 23, 2008, and I'm here with Ruth Bennett from Hurt Park Neighborhood and we're at the Jerusalem Baptist Church. We'll talk about some of Ms. Bennett's memories of the area. So, Ms. Bennett, where did you grow up here in the neighborhood?

RB: My father bought a house up here, I was, I think, about sixteen or seventeen, something like that. And we lived on Salem Avenue, 1223 Salem Avenue Southwest, which...we tore the house down now, and I just sold the lot a couple weeks ago. I didn't get what I wanted for it, but I took what they give me because it just there, and I'm paying taxes year after year after year, and I needed the money. And my furnace went out when we had that storm...

BW: Oh yeah.

RB: And I had to have a new furnace put in my house and it took right much money so I just sold the land. Thank the Lord that I got enough to have the furnace put in.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And my children, my oldest child, she's fifty-five now; she started school at Loudon Avenue, on Loudon Avenue Northwest. This is before they finished Hurt Park. And Mrs. Esther Golding (?) was her first grade teacher at Loudon Avenue. Then she moved...they finished Hurt Park and she started in the second or third grade with Ms. Barbara Vann (?), she was her teacher at Hurt Park at that time. Then I got two more children, a daughter and a son that started at Hurt Park and went all the way from grade one to grade six, as far as Hurt Park used to go. Now I don't know what they go now, it's been a long time! But anyway, and then I had four more children and they started at West End, over here?

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And they had some kind of line, they say if you live on this side of the street, you go this ways and then...and we had to send our children where they wanted us to send them because they could have started at Hurt Park, too, but they didn't. And when you see all of this (?)...anyway, that's what happened.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And they all finished Hurt Park. They finished high school and I've got three graduates from college. My oldest daughter graduated from Hollins College. She's working on her master's degree now, she's a teacher. And her name's Robin Boyd (?), she's married. She has two daughters. My next daughter is Angela Bennett and she finished Northern State University in Maryland. She was a social worker. She took sick with a vertebra in her neck and she was paralyzed for two or three years and she had to stop

working, she's on disability now. She's not old enough to get social security. They like giving her five hundred and some dollars to live on and that's no money.

BW: A month?

RB: A month. Those apartments is three hundred, four hundred. She's having to get off Section Eight because she'd disabled, but at the time, they told us she would never walk again, she would never be able to do anything for herself, but that was a tale, because, now...when she first came home, we all pitched in and helped her...I have seven children, mother of seven children, and she's my second-oldest. And right now she lives in an apartment by herself. She cooks for herself, she keeps her apartment clean, and she's just...and she drives a car. They said she'd never drive, and she's driving 'cause she carries me to the grocery store! 'Cause I don't drive, you know?

BW: Yeah.

RB: And she's just a self-made person, to decide that she's gonna get better. Now she can't walk by herself, but she, she's in an electric wheelchair. She comes out, some of them grandchildren (?) help her get in the car, fold the wheelchair up and put it in the back. She goes anywhere she wanna go, do most anything she wanna do, so that's a blessing by itself. Now my husband is eighty, and he had a stroke ten years ago, and he can't walk, and the children help him, and I got some neighbors that come in and help us. But he'll never be able to walk 'cause it's been ten years now and he belonged to this church. He was chairman of the Trustee Board for a long time.

BW: Mmhmm. Did you meet here in Roanoke?

RB: My husband?

BW: Yeah.

RB: Yeah, uh-huh. And we been married over fifty years. But so far the Lord has kept us together. I look after him, he look after me. But we're doing fine. We own our own home. Then I got four more children under them! Way down the way. And one of them finished Moorestown...Tennessee, Moorestown, Tennessee. She's a nurse. And the others just finished high school, and they work, take care of their families. All of them are married but the one I told you that's in a wheelchair and my son, I have a son, he's never been married, he has two grown sons.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And the things that...mostly I can remember is when they had a housing place up here in Hurt Park that they just tore down? That was before that. And they looked like corn (?) huts. And a lot of people lived there, 'cause it was a low-income, you know, and I never lived there, but people lived there that I know of. But most of the older people that I can remember are just about dead and gone, you know what I mean?

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And that makes a difference. Sometimes we get to talking about different people that we knew and taught our Sunday school or went to Sunday school and you miss them old people! Because at that time, they were the old people and now we are the old people! You know what I mean? So if you're over seventy, you old!

BW: Yeah.

RB: So I remember a lot of history about things that went on up here. They try to tell me, you remember when this place was here and this place...and I say no, I can't remember all that.

BW: Who were some of the people you remember that you respected, back then?

RB: Let's see...Ms. Madge Wheaton, she's dead, she was a school teacher. And she went to this church. Ms. Grace Reynolds, she was an elder lady, she sung on the choir. Mr. Moles Younger, he lived on 12 ½ Street, he was an older man, he sung on the choir. Oh, just so many people, you know. I can't think about all of them, but those that were close, that lived closer to us...and Miss Davis...I can't think of Miss Davis' first name, all I know is "Miss Davis". She has a daughter out there and she also has a granddaughter out there that goes to this church.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: All of my children went on to this church, all but one. And just people that I grew up with, just about...are dead! You know? They're all gone.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: That went to this church and that I knew as friends and neighbors, you know. And that's just about all I can tell you about Hurt Park. And I was...I can't remember how old I was when we first moved to Southwest. We used to call it "The Old Southwest". But I don't know what they call it now, got different names now for this and different names for the other, you know.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: But just about all of my children went to start out at Hurt Park School. And Ms. Buelah Caldwell at that time...I think Buelah was the first principal that we had at Hurt Park, then I can remember James Robinson. He used to sell...the city government (?) selling apple butter at that time, and he used to go around and sell apple butter for the city. He was a Republican. I've never been a Republican. But he was a friend of ours, you know. Oh that's just about all I can tell you. I don't know whether I helped, or not.

BW: Oh no--

RB: Anyway...

BW: What was school like back then, when you went to school?

RB: Well, schools were segregated. We used to have walk past schools to go to Harrison School over here on Harrison Avenue, where the Harrison Museum is?

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: They didn't have buses like they have for kids now. We walked to Allison High School. They called it Lucy Addison High School at that time.

BW: Were you walking farther than most kids had to walk?

RB: No, some lived further than where we lived, you know. But that...it was segregation. We used to go downtown, to Kress's, we couldn't drink out the same water fountain that you drink out of.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And those kind of things, you know. We couldn't eat at the lunch counters where you all ate at.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: Now the ...it was some difference. They could eat where they want to eat. But that's been over fifty years, you know what I mean? So that makes a difference. But I can remember when we used to get on the bus and we had to sit in the back of the bus. We couldn't just get on the bus and take a seat where we do...like we do now.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And that made a difference in people growing up.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And different in the Republicans and the Democrats. So you don't know anything about this...how old are you?

BW: Twenty-seven.

RB: Oh, you young, boy. (laughs) And things like that that I can remember...we used to have a streetcar! Up and down Harrison Avenue. And we used to love to ride the streetcar when I was a kid.

BW: How much did it cost?

RB: I don't think it was more than about five cent a person, five or ten cent! We had a black movie. We used to go to the movie, and we couldn't go to none of them white movies. We only went to Virginia Theatre, which is on Hill (?) Street, it's closed down now. But I can remember, as a kid, we used to go on Saturday to the movies and most of 'em was Westerns. I loved Westerns! (laughs) I still like 'em. And it was like ten cent to go to the movie. We used to go downtown to Cress's, you remember Cress's? By...(?) And they used to sell rock candy cake and we used to take five cent and go down and get us some, what you call, scrap cookies. And you get enough cookies to last all day! And at that time, a nickel or dime was a whole lot of money to us!

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: 'Cause that's what old (?) people had to give you. I mean, wasn't no bundle of money like kids get now. I don't know what an allowance was at the time.

BW: Did you have any jobs, or your friends have any jobs when you were kids?

RB: Um, no, I never really had a job until I got grown. But, uh, we had to go to school, bring in the coal wood...at the time we had coal stoves, all these old houses up here didn't have no furnaces in 'em. House I live in, we put a furnace in our house. It's an old house.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: But it carried us all through. I had seven children, myself and my husband. And we've made it this far.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: Sometimes the going got tough, but we stayed right with it. And all of my children finished high school, every one of them. That was one thing I insisted on. Going to Sunday school on Sundays and finish high school. If you didn't go, night service...there used to be something called BYP, that was for the young people. Made 'em go back in the evening, long as they went to Sunday school at nine thirty on Sunday morning. That was something I insisted on my children doing and they did it. I used to give them all by hand, and march down Salem Avenue, come straight down Salem Avenue.

BW: See to it, huh?

RB: See to it that they got to Sunday school and I went with 'em. Now young people say...put 'em off on somebody else. I didn't put my children off on nobody. I was their mother and I took care of them until they got big enough to take care of themselves. And that's about all I gotta say. (laughs) I don't know whether that's any help to you or not, but that's some of the things that I went through as an adult raising my children.

BW: What were some of the jobs you had when you were older?

RB: Well, I didn't have...I worked in domestic work, working for white people, housekeeping. I worked in motels. I worked at several daycares as a cook for the daycares we have now? I worked up until last year in October when my legs started to fail me. And I worked...the last job I had was over here at this new daycare across the bridge...gray building? You can see it from 10th Street, I can't think of the name of it. But I worked as a foster grandparent after I got older, helping with the children, taking them to the bathroom, teaching them how to eat, how to eat proper. Yeah, things like that. It didn't pay a lot of money but gave me a lot of experience helping somebody else's child. 'Cause you'd be surprised that children now, they don't know how to sit down and eat a meal.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: These younger parents, they take their children to McDonald's, Burger King. We never took our children to places like that. I cooked, and I fed my children, we all sit down at the table, at a certain time, and ate dinner, breakfast, and lunch.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: So it's a whole lot of difference, now, and then when I was raising my children.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: So...

BW: What were some of your favorite recipes when you were cooking at home?

RB: Oh, I'm a sweet potato casserole person. I can make sweet potato pies. I can make poundcakes. I could cook some good turkeys. We always had turkey at Thanksgiving and Christmas, we didn't have anything else, we had a turkey. And we fed nine people. We sat down at a table that was almost as big as this one! And all nine of us sit down at the same time and ate as long as my children was at home. And now at Christmastime, they all come to my house. They call my house "The Big House" and they come to my house and on Christmas morning, we have what you call a "seafood buffet". All of the children, grandchildren...I got eleven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren and they all come to my house and we don't serve anything but seafood all day. We don't cook our turkeys for our Christmas dinner, on Christmas, we wait until after Christmas where we go to one of the children's house and that's where we have our Christmas dinner. And everybody will bring the gifts to my house. And we'll exchange gifts, now that we got a little money now, we got more now than we had, we stopped giving individual gifts 'cause they got so high, children and grandchildren started coming, so they, all the children, myself, my husband, we pull a name. And we make our gifts a hundred dollars. If my oldest daughter got my name, she would give me a hundred, she would ask me what I want, and we put down on paper what we want. Now I'm a person, I like money, 'cause nobody can please me, I'm very hard to please (laughs) and find things for, so...when they get my name, say "Mama, what you want? Whoever got your name, what do you want?" I say, "Give me money," because I like to buy what I like. Everybody can't please me, I'm very hard to please, so they all give me money. And we do that all, stay together all day Christmas, and we go over things that has happened in the past when the children was growing up. They tell their tall tales. (laughs) And we just have a blessed day on Christmas. That's what we do at MY house every Christmas.

BW: Do you know...do you have any stories or any knowledge of what your family was like before you, like your grandparents, where they were from and however they came to Roanoke?

RB: Now my mother died when I was five. I can just barely remember my mother. And my grandmother, which was her mother, I can't remember her much. And my father died at an early age, you know. I mean, back then... My aunt raised me and my brother, there's two of us and he's deceased, he's been deceased over twenty-some years. But as far as remembering them way back, we were just children, you know.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: But we had a good life. I've had a good life all my life. So I'm thankful to still be in the land of the living.

BW: Mmhmm. Did you have a garden at home?

RB: Oh lord, yes. (laughs) Yeah, I had a garden. I used to raise some of the biggest sweet potatoes you ever seen! Right on Salem Avenue. I just sold that lot. We lived there and the house got burnt down. We went to fix it up and at that time the city come along and tore it down. We had just had a new roof...we didn't have a lot of money, we didn't have house...fire insurance, you know, on your homes like we do now.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And they tore the house down and I still kept the property. Me and my husband, we paid the tax on up until, always paid up 'til now. And they came along and somebody wanted to buy it. And at first I didn't want to sell it 'cause it was for so many reasons, and we had kept it so long, you know. And I talked to my husband, he said, yeah, go ahead and sell it, it ain't doing us no good. We done got too old to garden now. (laughs) But I still got, in my front yard the prettiest tomato plants you ever seen tomatoes, we still raise tomatoes. I used to have a nice garden there on Salem Avenue.

BW: Did you have any chickens?

RB: No, I never had chickens!

BW: No?

RB: No I never lived, like, in the country, you couldn't...'round here you couldn't have no chickens! Somehow or 'nother. There's a man way up on Salem Avenue where they built, where they built the BMW dealer now. He had a chicken farm, he used to have chickens. Okay, Mr. Williams was his name, I think it was. But that's been a many year ago, honey. (laughs)

BW: Were there a lot of stores in the neighborhood that you'd go to to buy things that you needed?

RB: No, there wasn't anything but grocery stores. Kroger's used to be up here, Mick-or-Mack was out on 13th Street Southwest, and now they got Laundromats out there, they got two or three stores out there. But I can't afford to go to those stores 'cause they too high. I have to go to Walmart, Kroger's...we only get a pension a month, me and my husband. And we have to live on that. Lights, water, gas, telephone bill, insurance, medicine. And you have to economize. You have to go where, I go where the sales are. If there's a sale, you'll see me. (laughs) Find me, okay? (laughs)

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: But it's been good.

BW: Was the Kroger pretty small that was in your neighborhood?

RB: Yeah, it was sort of small, but they had most everything you wanted.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And they got a Thriftway out on Patterson Avenue, still got that. That's still out there, I shop out there sometimes. Wh--

BW: Wha-- Oh I'm sorry, go ahead.

RB: They got these, whatcha call these people, umm, I can't call their names, but they foreign people, they got a lot of stores around.

BW: Oh okay.

RB: And there are two right here. Right on 13th Street and Patterson. They're foreigners and they come in and open up anyplace that they can get.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And they make a living. Because a lot of people don't have cars to go to Kroger, some of them. Walmart, Walmart is a good ways from here.

BW: Mmhmm. What did a lot of people do for jobs back then, in the neighborhood?

RB: Well, now my husband was lucky to have a good job, he worked for Norfolk and Southern, and he worked there for forty-seven years. And he made a decent living, you know what I mean, I mean a good salary. And that's what took care of his seven children, me and him. But now a lot of people didn't have good jobs, the silk mill used to be a good place for black people to work at. I never had nobody work at the silk mill but I knew about it. And that was in Vinton. And my brother-in-law worked at GE. He's the one they took to the hospital this morning. His sugar went low. And that's where he retired. And my husband retired from Norfolk and Southern. And the pension that I get comes from when he worked, because I never worked, I stayed at home and took care of my children until they got old enough to, one look after the other, you know. Back then, people didn't work that had children. You had to stay at home and take care of your children.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: I never had real good jobs, you know what I mean?

BW: Right.

RB: But I did what I could to help after my children began to go to college.

BW: Mmhmm. What did your husband do at the railroad? What was his job?

RB: He sorted mail, loaded mail from the...like another train come through, put it on another car. I can remember one time my husband worked at night and they had a dead body on the train. And they



unloaded him (?) out to put it on another train that came through, and they left the dead body out on the train platform. And the train had to come back and get the body. And we laugh about that thing there sometimes. (laughs) I mean, the man was late going to his own funeral. (laughs) But that's one of the things that had happened when he worked at it, he worked there for forty-seven years.

BW: Wow.

RB: And he retired from Norfolk, it was Norfolk and Southern...now N and W, that's Norfolk and Southern.

BW: Right, right.

RB: Mmhmm. I get them mixed up 'cause it's been so long, you know?

BW: Yeah, it changes.

RB: And uh, things change.

BW: What do you miss most about the neighborhood, the way things used to be?

RB: Well, we didn't have a lot of crime like we do now. We have young folks, that sells pot...I don't know about pot 'cause I never even seen it! When I was young, we didn't have no money to buy no pot. You lucky to get five cents for soda pop! (laughs) Crack and all that kind of stuff that the young people go through now.

BW: Mmhmm.

RB: And I miss a lot of the older people. And when my children was growing up, if an elderly person saw my child out doing something, they had our permission to correct them. You go out here now and try to correct somebody's child, you might have to fight. That's the way things get...different and things have changed. Older people would come and tell me, "I saw your child doing something," I said, "Well, you got my permission to whip 'em if they need it." You don't whip somebody's child now. Even if...the law run our children! They got to the place the mothers and fathers that you can't whip your child...that was one of the worst things that the law could ever have done. I spanked my children, every one of them. They did wrong, didn't do what I tell them to do, they got it. And it made good human beings out of them. None of mine ever been in jail for robbing, stealing, nothing like that, 'cause I didn't put up with that kind of stuff. But now, kids do...kids are raising their mothers, that's just the way things are. And that's not only in the black section, that's in the white sections too.

BW: Mmhmm. Does Roanoke still seem kind of segregated to you now, even though it's not officially that way?

RB: In a way it is, but not like it used to be. We can feel free to go where we want to go, we used to couldn't go to Hotel Roanoke, or Patrick Henry Hotel, or none of those places like that. We wasn't allowed in them. Black people, now. So that has changed, because now we go where we want to go. People might not want us there but we go. (laughs) As long as you paying, they let you in, you know?

BW: Right.

RB: So, uh, that's all I got to say, I'm getting out of here. (laughs)

BW: Okay, okay. (laughs) Well, thank you.

27:34.7