

Oral History Interview William Johnson

February 28, 2008

Beginning of SIDE A TAPE #1

Karen Van Eman (KV): This is Mr. Johnson on the 28th of February 2008 at his house on 15 Lata (misspelled/misunderstood??) So whatever we say from here on out it's just so that I've got it for history.

William Johnson (WJ): Ok.

KV: Umm, let's see... You were born, what's your birth date?

WJ: July 29th 1917.

KV: 29th?

WJ: Um-hum.

KV: 1917.

WJ: 1917. I was born in Greenwood, S.C.

KV: Oh, I know where that is, I've been there.

WJ: My parents moved here in November of 1917.

KV: Oh, really?

WJ: When I was four months old.

KV: And, why did they move? Do you know?

WJ: My father had been up here working at one time and he went back to South Carolina and then you know, they got married and he came up here to work, economic conditions...

KV: Oh, I see. Ok, yeah, thank you for explaining that. Were you ever married?

WJ: Yes, I was married to Willie Mae Jackson Johnson.

KV: Willie Mae Jackson...

WJ: Johnson.

KV: Johnson.

WJ: Um-hum. She's deceased.

KV: When did she die?

WJ: June 1984.

KV: Oh, wow, that's been awhile.

WJ: Yeah. I remarried again, but it didn't work out.

KV: Oh, really, ok.

WJ: So we separated but we still keep in contact you, my wife lives over in Newport, Tennessee.

KV: Oh, is she?

WJ: It was one of those deals, you know. I had known her for quite some time and hadn't seen her in about forty some years and she came here to visit a friend, a cousin, and, you know, got in contact with me and she was telling me she was planning on retiring from New York and moving back to this area so we started a relationship at that time and got married on the day after Christmas 1985. But, you know, personality and what not, it didn't work out with me, you know, she wanted to be too bossy.

(Laughter)

KV: Oh, oh!

WJ: So I just told her, at my age, she had one of those complexes where she thought she was much better than I and knew everything and what not—

KV: Oh dear.

WJ: At seventy years of age, I didn't need her and she had her own place in Newport that she had inherited and what not and built a new little house on, so...

KV: Oh, really?

WJ: Uh-huh.

KV: Oh, my.

WJ: She keeps in contact with me and what not. She sold her home over there that she built before she and I got married and she's living in an apartment.

KV: Oh, now she is.

WJ: Yeah. She had some physical problems I didn't learn about until after, you know...

KV: Oh, yeah. Did you have any children with Willie Mae?

WJ: Um-hum, I had five.

KV: Five? No kidding!

WJ: Plus a stepson, that's makes six. Three daughters and three sons. I have a daughter that lives in San Diego with Fred and daughter who lives in the Atlanta area.

KV: And what's the name of the daughter in San Diego?

WJ: Deborah.

KV: Deborah, D E B R A, or...?

WJ: D E B O R A H.

KV: And she's in San Diego.

WJ: W. F. Jackson is my son.

KV: W. F. Jackson, and where is he?

WJ: San Diego, he's retired from the Navy and living out there. He spent twenty years in the Navy. Adena.

KV: Adena.

WJ: A D E N A.

KV: A D E N A. And where is she?

WJ: I'm trying to think of her last name.

KV: It'll come, don't worry about it.

WJ: Yeah, ok. She lives in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

KV: Oh, really? Uh-huh.

WJ: And Sedale. S E D A L E.

KV: Oh, ok.

WJ: Johnson.

KV: And is that another daughter?

WJ: Yes, she lives here.

KV: Oh, she does?

WJ: Yeah, she lives here and works at Mission Hospital.

KV: And then the sons?

WJ: Robert.

KV: Robert.

WJ: Johnson, lives here in Asheville. Lee Otus, L E E and the O T U S.

KV: L E E.

WJ: It's two words.

KV: And then, O T I S.

WJ: No, U S.

KV: O T...

WJ: O T U S.

KV: U S

WJ: Instead of Otis it's *Otus*.

KV: Otus, oh, ok.

WJ: Washington D.C.

KV: Ok. And his last name is Johnson too?

WJ: No. He doesn't have a wife.

KV: Oh, ok, and he's in D.C. Some of this other stuff we'll get to later. You've got some pictures there, in your lap.

WJ: Yeah, these are some old pictures of some of the classes at Stephen's Lee, you know. And I don't know what school this was, if it was the Catholic Hill School that burned down or what. But there is a lot of these on here I recognize.

KV: Really?

WJ: Um-hum. This fellow here was William Jordan, used to live up around the corner here.

KV: And is that street named for him?

WJ: Jordan's family used to live all over there. And this fellow was a Mays fellow, son of the Reverend Mays, they used to call him Musie Mays as I remember. This was Norma Michael, daughter of Bethesda Michael that used to be a professor at the old Hill Street School.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: Um-hum. This is Vernon Colin. He was a teacher at Stephen Lee School. He taught me.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: He's deceased now. He has a sister, what was her name? Miss Kennedy Colin, someone told me she's in a nursing facility. Gladys Kennedy. There's a few others on here that I knew. This fellow here was Booker T. Sherrill, he died. He used to work at the old Battery Park Hotel, years and years ago.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: Thomas Lann. All the fellows I remember were all, you know, much older than I. But I remember, you know.

KV: Ohhh... And you knew them because you lived in the same—

WJ: Area, yeah, some of them, you know, lived in this area and went to school. The old Catholic Hill School, I think probably is what it is, it burned over here at the back of Stephen Lee School, that's where it was.

KV: Oh, that's where it was? Oh, I didn't realize that.

WJ: Yeah, cause I had an aunt used to live over here on Mountain Street and she said, you know, you could here the screaming and hollering when it burned.

KV: Oh no kidding?

WJ: Now this picture, I don't know where it was taken, in a school some place. Mrs. Pergel she was a school teacher. She lived up here. Mrs. Roy Kilpatrick grew up over here on Mountain Street. (Unintelligible) I did know one or two of them. That's the Bennett girl that used to (unintelligible) Baptist Church. She has a sister that finished school with me.

KV: Oh, really?

WJ: Um-hum. I think that was one of the Lipscomb boys that lived up here on College Street. And that is Thomas Lann that lived right down the street here for a long while.

KV: And what street were you living on about this time when you were playing with these, or socializing with these, were you...was Lata Street here then?

WJ: Yeah, um-hum.

KV: It was?

WJ: Um-hum, Lata Street was here then but my first nine years were spent on Proctor Street, right down here by the stop light. And we moved from there in 1926 down to what was called Short Bridge, just off of South Charlotte Street there across from T.K. Tripp's. I was nine years old, see, and then I went to Stephen Lee school and of course these older students, a lot of them I came in contact with at the school.

KV: Ok.

WJ: And ones that weren't in the neighborhood, that lived on the other side of town, I knew them from school. This teacher was miss Rinehart. I don't know what class this was but she taught me in the sixth grade at Stephen Lee.

KV: Ohhh...

WJ: See I went to Stephen Lee, I spent my first two years at Stephen Lee School and in second grade they moved me over here to an old school used to be down here at the parking lot was called Mountain Street School. It was a little red brick school, about, let's see... maybe ten rooms, about eight rooms on each side along a hallway and then I finished the fifth grade there and then I had to go back to the Stephen Lee School. I graduated in 1935, the eleventh grade.

KV: So in sixth grade you're back at Stephens Lee. And was Mountain Street School eventually serving for the first two years of elementary school? You had said you spent your first two years at Stephens Lee and then went to—

WJ: I was transferred over here because they built the school here in this neighborhood.

KV: The Mountain School?

WJ: Mountain Street School, um-hum.

KV: Ok, Mountain Street School.

WJ: Um-hum.

KV: Ok.

WJ: And it continued to serve until maybe it was demolished when they got ready to build the (Unintelligible) Street School.

KV: Ohhh...

WJ: I don't know exactly what year it was.

KV: Ok.

WJ: See here's another picture. I don't know who this teacher was but it's the (unintelligible) school and I remember this young lady. Next to where I lived on Short Bridge street, she was a Dillinger, Lilly Mae Dillinger. This fellow, I knew him, Thomas Lann. (Unintelligible) those that grew up here in the neighborhood, you know I had contact with them on the way to school or, you know, at church. Cause a lot of them went to the same church I went to.

KV: Sure.

WJ: And you got to play with them at church.

KV: I wonder what the school was.

WJ: I really don't know.

KV: Well, these are some interesting pictures.

WJ: I acquired these pictures from a lady that lived next door and she passed and her cousin was over there from New York—

KV: 1922 on the back, yeah, uh-huh.

WJ: Second grade.

KV: Yeah.

WJ: Sixth grade.

KV: Sixth grade.

WJ: October 1922.

KV: Yeah.

WJ: As I said her cousin was there disposing of stuff and, you know, he was from New York and he gave me all these photos.

KV: Ohhh... I see.

WJ: This is another picture of Miss Rinehart.

KV: And this is a brick school building here.

WJ: Yeah, that's Stephens Lee.

KV: This is Stephens Lee?

WJ: Um-hum. This is one of the Petty boys, you hear them talking about Petty (unintelligible) down in the Petty building. (Unintelligible) Garfield White.

KV: Are you in here?

WJ: No.

KV: Oh.

WJ: That's Alma Young, used to live right down the street here.

KV: And that's Miss Rinehart you said.

WJ: I don't remember anymore what her first name was. (Inaudible)

KV: Oh, yeah. I can tell that's Stephens Lee in the background there.

WJ: Um-hum, yep.

KV: It looks like there were a lot of girls in this class, like there are more girls than boys.

WJ: Yeah, there are, see there are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven and there's twice as many girls. In fact all of them, see the boys down in the front here (unintelligible), one, two, three, about four or five round the top and back there. There's more girls in there. Of course this is pretty much equal.

KV: Yeah it is and this is the picture we think is Catholic Hill School, right?

WJ: Right, um-hum. I don't know anyone here that might be able to identify these, you know old enough to identify these. This is a picture of (unintelligible) Chapel Church, the big church over here. It was taken on an Easter Sunday morning and I think it was nineteen twenty something. I had a full, larger one than this and I had taken these pictures over there to the church when they was talking about getting ready for the anniversary and one of the persons that was in charge of, you know, getting together for the anniversary told me when he gave them back to me a young lady came to me and said, "Dr. Oldrey (misspelled/misunderstood?) told me you had some old pictures." I said, "Yeah." He had given them back to me that Sunday morning and all so I was showing them to her and pointing out different ones on here that I knew and all and her

mother was on here and so she asked me to let her have it to have a copy made and I said, "No, I'll have one made and give it to you." And she persisted and I let her and I never got it back.

KV: Oh, really?

WJ: Uh-huh, that was Miss Virgin the organist, this was Dr. Walker, have you heard of black Doctor Walker?

KV: Yes.

WJ: That was his wife Miss Walker and she taught school at Stephen Lee School. This was Carley Patton. This is Janie Patton her sister, no, this is Janie here. And this is Mr. Rellis and this one is Pearl Jointan. And this was Mr. Brooks, he had a barber shop down on College Street about where the old Kress Building is.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: Um-hum, he had a barbershop there. He catered to white trade, Mill Brooks (unintelligible) and went to Washington D.C.

KV: He did?

WJ: Yeah, and I used to see some of the Brooks when I lived up in Washington D.C.. I think that was Ernest McKissick.

KV: I've seen that name.

WJ: Floyd McKissick, instrumental in , you know, civil rights and he started that black community down there I heard it went busted. That was on Easter Sunday back in nineteen twenty something, I think twenty four or something like that.

KV: That's interesting to me that there's a black barber that caters to the white trade.

WJ: Yep, yep. This picture is Miss Lucy Sanders Harry which is the school's name.

KV: Oh, school's name.

WJ: Black educator. And this picture was taken down here at the back on Poplar Street I think it was, no, it was taken in her home down on Hill Street down there way down Hill Street below where Isaac Dickson School is, down there now.

KV: Oh.

WJ: She was a close friend of my mother's sister. I remember when I was a little boy, Nancy used to go over there and take me. We'd walk all the way from where we lived over there to visit and all.

KV: Lucy Sanders Harry...

WJ: Harry.

KV: Taken in the nineteen twenties.

WJ: Yep, this is not the original I had a little, about a one ten black and white that Nancy put on it "My Friend Lucy Harry" and so I was showing it to Miss Harry and she asked me to let her have a copy, which I did and so she had it copied and she kept the original and gave me this.

KV: Oh, she gave you the copy.

WJ: Um-hum. See this is back in '88 when she had it done.

KV: Nice picture.

WJ: Um-hum ,yeah. She retired, you know, from educating here and she had a son Asa who lived out in Arizona so she left here and went to Arizona and she passed away out there.

KV: Had the school, had Harry School been built by then?

WJ: Oh, yes, um-hum. She taught at the old original Mountain—

KV: Mountain Street School? Oh, she did?

WJ: Yeah, um-hum, yeah.

KV: Is this your yearbook?

WJ: Yeah, this is my yearbook (unintelligible)...

KV: Yeah, the Stephens Lee—

WJ: Principal at that time that I graduated and Stephens Lee and Professor Lee.

KV: That's Professor Lee.

WJ: Yeah, um-hum. (Unintelligible) from my class. These are teachers...they've all gone on, as far as I know.

KV: Is there someone who's still around? I wouldn't imagine that they would, it makes sense that they would all be passed by now.

WJ: They all passed, um-hum, I think. And see out of my class of seventy there is only about five of us that I know of that's still living.

KV: No kidding.

WJ: Yeah, um-hum. Now this fellow here, he was a retired school teacher that lived at Monroe North Carolina last I heard of him, and of course that's been several years ago.

This one's still living as far as I know, Arthur Woolworth. He lived up in Michigan.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: He left here and went to Michigan and he and his wife lived in Michigan. This fellow, Ralph Worthy he died in Washington D.C.. George Jones died in Washington D.C.

KV: Oh.

WJ: Um-hum. And all these teachers, all gone on, as far as I know. Thelma Martin, she died out in California. There's Martin, there's Walter, there's Smith, there's Jerome, there's James, that must be Erwin.

KV: Oh, you think it is?

WJ: (Unintelligible) storm door.

KV: Oh, I didn't pull it tightly shut enough.

They get up to shut the door...

WJ: (Unintelligible) he was nephew to one of the school teachers. We had our class reunion in 1986.

KV: Oh, you did?

WJ: And he came and all. These are some of the older pictures, you know, of the senior class.

KV: Nice picture, oh and the juniors.

WJ: There's my sister there.

KV: Oh, is it?

WJ: Um-hum and there's some others here I can show you too.

KV: What was your sister's name?

WJ: Katharine.

KV: How...I didn't ask, how many sisters and brothers you had.

WJ: I had, one sister and two brothers. Both brothers are deceased and my sister's outside Washington D.C. in a nursing facility, she had a stroke about ten years ago.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: But, you know, she's doing fairly well for the condition she's in, you know, and all. Her left arm, you know, is puffed up and swollen and she's in a wheel chair and all but, she calls and we talk, you know.

KV: Oh yes?

WJ: Her speech is pretty good. The last time she wrote me I think her penmanship was still pretty good.

KV: Oh, wow, that's something.

WJ: There she is back there.

KV: Oh really? She's good looking. How does she spell her name? K A T H—

WJ: Yeah, K A T H A R I N E. Umm, let's see...

KV: These look young, some of these look like younger students than seniors.

WJ: They might have been. This was a library class in here. Of course this was (unintelligible name) and he was the smallest thing in our class and the school just about and last time I saw him at a reunion he was a big old fellow about six feet and two hundred and some pounds and he worked with a, what's the name, a group some place, law enforcement.

KV: Oh, did he really?

WJ: Yeah, he had a job in the prison system.

KV: I see some people are holding what looks like awards or trophies.

WJ: Yeah, trophies. The (unintelligible) club, you know...

KV: From contests or something?

WJ: Yeah. Every year they used to go down and compete.

KV: Is the director in the picture here?

WJ: No.

KV: No?

WJ: No, no, she's not in it. (Unintelligible) was the director, I'll show you a picture with her. And you remember Treva that played the piano?

KV: Yes.

WJ: That was her brother in law.

KV: Oh, really? Her brother in law.

WJ: Um-hum, yeah.

KV: Debating society and a public speaking club.

WJ: That's me.

KV: Ohhh... So you were in the debate society.

WJ: Yep, um-hum. We had tennis—

KV: Tennis team.

WJ: Well, it was more or less that we had a tennis court built by a minister over here and that's where we used to play tennis. A lot of these hear that got in the picture, they didn't bother about coming and playing tennis. I played tennis and this is my tennis racket there. I still have that old racket.

KV: Do you really?

WJ: Yeah, it was aluminum frame and I still have the frame down here, you know.

This is Thelma Porter's—

KV: Husband?

WJ: Husband.

KV: Oh, ok.

WJ: I don't see Thelma though, no, she's not there.

KV: And the basketball team.

WJ: Yeah, basketball team.

KV: And that's gotta be the mascot I guess.

WJ: Um-hum, yep. He was a Robinson boy, he flew with the Tuskegee Air—

KV: Airmen, did he?

WJ: Um-hum, his father was R.T. Robinson.

KV: Um-hum.

WJ: The insurance men he worked for, Mr. Newsome I believe it was. He was the only boy, he had three or four sisters as I remember.

KV: The fellow on the left back there, is this John Teemer?

WJ: That is John Teemer.

KV: That's John Teemer.

WJ: Yeah, um-hum. Yep, that's John Teemer.

KV: And is this Thelma Porter's husband again?

WJ: Yeah, that's Thelma Porter's husband. Ralph, Bo, Eddie, Martin... And this fellow here got killed in Italy in the war.

KV: Oh.

WJ: He was sitting near a building or something like that and it was bombed and it fell and crushed him.

KV: There are some tall muscular men on that team.

WJ: This fellow here—

KV: Oh really? McKendrick—

WJ: (Unintelligible). These are the Holcombe brothers. There is a picture of my sister taken back in the twenties.

KV: Ohhh...

WJ: She's a (unintelligible).

KV: Uh-huh. And this is the King and Queen of the senior class.

WJ: Yeah, Rodney (unintelligible) and Mary Bass.

KV: A joke page.

WJ: Yep, um-hum. (Unintelligible) Eagle Street, Finkelstein's, the pawn shop used to be up on the square, Southern Dears, I think Southern Dears used to be on Clingman Ave where the auto place is now. It used to be, I think, Carolina Creamery and then it was changed to Southern Dears and this was back in the twenties. My mother went to a black hospital there on the corner of Clingman and Patton Ave. just as you turned into Clingman. It was called Blue Ridge Hospital.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: She went there as a kid to have her appendix removed and I don't know exactly how old I was...

KV: So this would have been in the twenties you're saying?

WJ: Back in, yeah, when my mother was young and went to the hospital—

KV: Are any of these black owned businesses?

WJ: Ummm...the Wilson's Undertaking.

KV: The Wilson's Undertaking.

WJ: (Unintelligible)

KV: Breeland and Greer taxi.

WJ: Yeah, um-hum. This was black, George Rich—

KV: George Richards Shoe Company.

WJ: In Asheville down on Hill Street and I think there was one grocery store (unintelligible) right below Thelma's store, Mountain—

KV: Thelma Porter's store or would have been Porter's.

WJ: It was right down here. (Unintelligible) was on Valley Street and so was Thelma.

KV: Oh was it?

WJ: Right at the corner of Valley.

KV: Oh, ok, I remember now, the pictures, yeah.

WJ: (Unintelligible) on Eagle Street right below (unintelligible), Central Market...

KV: Yeah, that was black owned, wasn't it?

WJ: Yeah, uh-huh. (Unintelligible). House Grill was black owned.

KV: And Stewart's School of Beauty Culture.

WJ: Beauty, uh-huh. Ball's up on the square, the same Balls that have Ball's over here at Innsbruck Mall.

KV: Was that white owned or black owned?

WJ: White.

KV: White owned, ok. Eagle Theatre, that's the one that was on Eagle Street?

WJ: It was the old building right below the, uh...

KV: The church?

WJ: The church, yeah—

KV: Mount Zion Church.

WJ: Mount Zion down on Eagle Street there.

KV: Where you were allowed in the front door, it says “Where the Front Door Welcomes You.”

WJ: Yep, um-hum.

KV: That’s neat. How many, or let’s put it this way, do you remember if many of your classmates left town when they graduated or did they stay around here for work?

WJ: A lot of them left here. I used to see a lot of them up in Washington D.C.

KV: Oh, did you?

WJ: Um-hum.

KV: Well you named some, yes.

WJ: Yeah, some of them went to Washington D.C., some of them went on farther up, you know, Philadelphia and other places and some, you know, hung around here. It all depended on their desire, you know, maybe to better themselves. I was working here for twenty four dollars a month at the Grove Park Inn and in Washington I went to work for forty dollars a month.

KV: Yeah, yeah, I remember you saying that. And so that was when you first graduated that you worked at the Grove Park Inn?

WJ: Yeah, my father took me out there, put me in the hotel under him and I only worked part time when, you know, the business is up, you know when they were expecting a convention or something like that and they needed me. Cause see, back then, they only ran one elevator. The elevator at the north end of the building at the dining room entrance, they’d close it down in September some time and wouldn’t open it up until March or April. See the north end of the building, they used to close it down.

KV: Oh really? Oh, cause there just wasn’t enough business.

WJ: So in the spring of the year, I'd go back out there and work when the conditions were necessary to have extra help to operate the business and all. I'd work for maybe a week or two and then be cut off for, you know, a few weeks and then it'd pick up again.

KV: Ok, uh-huh.

WJ: And that's why I left here and went to Washington D.C. and all.

KV: And it was when you were working part time that your pay was twenty four dollars?

WJ: Yeah, uh-huh.

KV: Twenty four a month?

WJ: Twenty four dollars a month.

KV: The picture you had of a house, that one, what...?

WJ: It was a new house my father bought in nineteen twenty six.

KV: Uh-huh.

WJ: And he paid thirty five hundred dollars for it. He bought and the bank crash came on and he had to remortgage it and remortgage it until finally he got it paid for.

KV: Ohhh...was this the house on Poplar or the one on Brick?

WJ: On Short Brick. The house on Poplar Street was a big old two story. My mother's mother and my mother's sister and brother stayed there and all and we had four rooms upstairs, I think it was, and downstairs was two rooms. We had a long porch on the front and a long porch upstairs. The cooking was mostly done upstairs, in the kitchen upstairs cause we had, lets see, a bedroom upstairs and bedroom and kitchen. It came up for sale (unintelligible) that area over there.

KV: Is that your dad's car?

WJ: No, that was someone else's. The car parked in the back of the house out on Brick Street. See Short Brick Street was more or less a little alley back in there where this fellow had bought the property and was building these houses back there, this was the second house built. The first house, the contractor and his family stayed in it and this was the second house and there were two others built back there by a black contractor, John Smith.

KV: Oh, I've seen that name.

WJ: Along came the Depression and everything crashed.

KV: And you said your dad just periodically remortgaged the house.

WJ: Yeah, um-hum, um-hum.

KV: But he was able to continue working at the Grove Park Inn?

WJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah, he worked and continued to work there until, you know, he was a bell man up until later some changes were made in the management and he came downtown and worked uptown there at Peterson's Grill on the square, bussing dishes and what not for a year or two—

KV: About when was this, was this still in the thirties?

WJ: No, back in the fifties.

KV: Oh, in the fifties.

WJ: Then he went back to Grove Park Inn in the late fifties and worked with the house keeping department.

KV: Oh.

WJ: Up until he pretty much started having problems, you know, and all. It was in the sixties when he left.

KV: Oh, and when did he die?

WJ: Nineteen seventy seven.

KV: Seventy seven. So did he, was he able to enjoy a few years of retirement?

WJ: Oh, yeah, he and I used to get out and we'd rabbit hunt.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: Yeah, rabbit hunting, (unintelligible) the sixties when, you know, he was unable to walk in the field with me and go rabbit hunting.

KV: You were starting to tell me about Lata Street and how it got it's name when I—

WJ: Thomas Lata.

KV: Thomas Lata.

WJ: And he was known as Tom Lata, yep, he owned the house there and then owned across the street from me at that time, back in the twenties. My grandmother, when we moved from Poplar Street to Brick Street, she moved in that little house and stayed in that little house for about three years, I guess, or so and then a house became vacant next door to us down there on Brick Street and she moved into it and that was back in the, oh I'd say, early thirties.

KV: Was this street, or were this street and Jordan and Clemens affected by some of the East End Urban Renewal?

WJ: Oh yeah. It was.

KV: That's what I thought.

WJ: That little house that my grandmother used to stay in—

End of SIDE A

Beginning of SIDE B

WJ: late forties and he died and what not and then it changed hands two or three times, but you know, a lot of changes made in it. And (unintelligible) take my place here, doing the redevelopment. I went to one of the meetings. I told them, I said, living here as long as I've been living here and what not, I wasn't gonna give up my place. They only offered me eighty five hundred dollars.

KV: Oh, really?

WJ: That's right. Um-hum and (unintelligible) supposed to come up off Lincoln down there and come up across here, take a portion of my house, improving the streets and what not. And I said, no, uh-huh. The lady next door over there one day, she was having some work done on her house and I said, "How come you're gonna have work done on the house when they're supposed to run the street through here and come right down through your yard?" She said, "Oh, that's been changed." And I said, "It ain't been changed." So when the next meeting came, I went to the next meeting and I said, "I understand that there is gonna be a change made on Lata Street and all." And they said, "Yeah, they have changed that." And they said that I would have to make some improvements on my house and all. I moved here in 1944, I wish I had taken a picture of this little old house at that time. I spent many hours working, of course I had a day labor come in here and help me do work and all. I built that porch, built the bathroom out here on the back and all and I had just a regular old weather boarding (misunderstood?), you know, a little old house and all. So when I started improving it, I bought and put what they call roll brick siding on it. It's siding that looks like bricks.

KV: Oh really?

WJ: It came in rolls about that wide. And it came in red and a buff color they called it and so that's what I put on it. I put a new roof on it and what not and about four years after I worked on it along came a fellow, a friend of mine , and told me he was having his house insulated over here on College Street, up there right above the (unintelligible) and what not and he said he thought he was getting a good deal on it and said he thought I ought to have mine insulated. So I had it insulated—

KV: Insulated.

WJ: —through Bank of Asheville. And then came in here with that blue insulation, what they call (unintelligible) wool insulation, up over head and all in the side walls and what not. They bored holes about that big around in there, they cut out a brick and bore holes in it and blew it all in and all. So like I said, I spent a lot of money and all. Having a nice big place with a full garden like I used to when I had my family here, raise a big vegetable garden and what not and I had my dogs out there in that back, you know, so... There's two lots, this place over here, belonged to my brother who lived in Detroit and all, so, I said, if I could buy my brother's lot, you know, it was two lots, my lot ended right along side the house here just about. So I wrote (unintelligible name) and called him about it and he said yeah, said for what they wanted to give me for it, said yeah, you can have it, you know. So I bought it from him and he deeded it over to me and I went about doing some of the improvements on it and after my wife and I got married, second marriage (unintelligible), we had that steel siding put on it. And I had an area under the enclosed back porch here dug out and made deeper and all. Back in the forties when I built that front porch and enclosed it I had a fellow to come over here and I knocked a hole in the brick wall down and I started digging out under there and got a deaf and dumb

fellow, he lived up there near the (unintelligible), to come over here and he'd roll dirt in the wheel barrow off down in the back for me. He built it out for me and blocked up and put a room under there, space (unintelligible) washing and ironing, come to find out it was too expensive to run the water over there because of the fact that I'd put a concrete floor in there and I'd have to bust up the concrete floor to get the drainage in there. So we just started using it for a storage area, switch one thing to another... I've spent a lot of money on this place (unintelligible). They kept after me and kept after me about selling a piece off the back end here—

KV: Of the lot, you mean?

WJ: Of my lot back here, when they was getting ready to build Martin Luther King Park. There's a house down there on the park and (unintelligible) lady and her husband to stay and at the back end of my property was a little L shaped lot. And they needed another piece off of mine to make it square, so I sold them a strip about twenty five by something off of my back end of my property, twenty five by a hundred and eighty I believe it was.

KV: Oh, uh-huh.

WJ: And of course they only gave me five hundred dollars for it.

KV: No kidding?

WJ: That's right, um-hum. You know with the eminent domain and all that stuff, I said well you know, if I don't sell it to them they could take it, so...

KV: Oh yeah.

WJ: They built this house back there for this lady.

KV: For the other lady that they were displacing—

WJ: Yeah.

KV: —off of her—

WJ: Yeah, see and they burnt her house down.

KV: Oh, they did.

WJ: Yeah, they burnt it down, you know to get rid of it and built the park down there.

Of course the park it was just an old field out across town, (unintelligible) a portion of it off down , used to run around the end of the park and come into Houser Street around there. And Branch Creek ran off down the mountain here and around the edge of it.

KV: Was that a part of (unintelligible) Branch.

WJ: No, no.

KV: Oh, it wasn't?

WJ: No, no, just the drainage from the reservoirs up here, you know, with heavy rain, just drainage.

KV: Oh, I see.

WJ: They put culverts in down there and fill it in, built it up.

KV: And they called it Martin Luther King Park?

WJ: Um-hum, yep.

KV: So how many of your neighbors had to sell their property to the city? Do you have any idea? Would you say it was most of them?

WJ: All down on this here back street, back down through there most of them were displaced. I'd say, oh, roughly guessing, I never thought about this area over here, but I'd say it was a dozen of them off down through there and in here, now over there coming up Poplar Street and all (unintelligible) I've often thought about it and it was long before

