

JOHN BAXTER

Interviewed by:

Louis D. Silveri
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SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS RESEARCH CENTER

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

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John Baxter was interviewed on August 5, 1975 by Dr. Louis Silveri.

John Baxter: May 29, 1910.

Dr. Silveri: Nineteen ten. You were born in Asheville?

John Baxter: Well, no. In Buncombe County in a little place called Chunn's Cove.

Dr. Silveri: Oh, you were born in Chunn's Cove!

John Baxter: Chunn's Cove; yes. We'll be going over there, I imagine, before this is over. Lots of interesting things have happened over there as you will find out after we get a little further into this thing.

Dr. Silveri: Well, I usually do ask my interviewees what they can remember about their ancestors and how far back they go and so on. What's your memory of your grandparents, for instance?

John Baxter: Well, the grandparents on my father's side, I have studied them back to 1790; I have a record of them back to 1790, and they were born in and around Chunn's Cove. They were held by slaveholders in Chunn's Cove, namely Chunn. The cove was named after Chunn. He owned most of the property there, and then there was the **Baxters**, who were the last ones to hold my parents. **That's** where we get our name. So, they've been in these parts roughly (almost) two hundred years that I have a record of, and I'm still searching trying to get back beyond 1790.

Dr. Silveri: **That's** on your father's side?

John Baxter: **That's** on **my** father's side.

Baxter: (continued) Now, on my mother's side, it's a little different story. I don't have too much information. I have quite an amount, I would say, going back to around I'd say 1830--'39. That's when my grandmother on my mother's side was born, in 1839, and she was a slave of the Davidson family--well, they owned almost as much property. They were, I think, the next largest property owners, probably owned more than the Chunns.

Silveri: They were in the Swannanoa Valley, right?

Baxter: Swannanoa Valley. They owned everything from the Swannanoa Gap (I know you know about the Swannanoa Gap) all the way down into the valley, Buncombe County, right into Asheville, which it wasn't at that particular time. But they did own this--I think they were the largest property and slave owners in these parts, the Davidson family.

Silveri: I interviewed one of the descendents, Hardy Davidson, who lives out in Swannanoa.

Baxter: Sure enough?

Silveri: He had a fascinating story to tell about his family.

Baxter: They were big landholders and slaveholders, and they held my grandmother.

Silveri: How do you know about it? Are there written records or is this oral tradition?

Baxter: Well, there are some written records, and then most of it--a lot of it, I would say, is oral, having remembered these stories and what-have-

Baxter: (continued) you coming from my grandmother, and as I was always interested in tales of older times, I would just follow my grandmother around and have her talk with me whenever she could and every chance I got. Rob would be out playing like most kids; I'd be somewhere around my grandmother, listening to the stories she would tell me about the slave life.

Silveri: How about your grandfather? Was he still alive?

Baxter: On my--

Silveri: Mother's side.

Baxter: On my mother's side. No, I don't remember him too well. In fact, I don't remember him at all, but I remember the stories that my grandmother told about him. He was connected with this underground railroad. In fact, his house was used as a station for the underground railroad. I'm sure you're familiar with the underground railroad and how it operated. But his station was about, I think, the only one in these parts maybe between Charleston and possibly Wilmington or Durham or something like that. It was a long stretch.

Silveri: Where was he located?

Baxter: Out at Chunn's Cove.

Silveri: Chunn's Cove. O.K. Were any of your grandparents able to become free before the Civil War? Were they able to either buy their freedom--

Baxter: Yes, yes.

Silveri: Or they were let go?

Baxter: Yes, yes. My grandfather, he had bought his freedom, and he was instrumental in getting my grandmother, who was his wife, getting her freedom,

Silveri: These were the two that were in Chunn's Cove?

Baxter: Yes. Well, all of my people were in Chunn's Cove, but my grandmother and her husband on my mother's side was in a different section. This was just a new settlement, so to speak, then, that far back.

Silveri: It's quite a small cove, though. There wasn't too much agriculture going on in the cove, was there? There's not too much--

Baxter: It was quite a bit considering the time and the era in which this happened. It continued to grow as the settlers kept coming in, and it finally ended up quite a productive valley to the point it gained the name of Happy Valley. Yes. Indeed. People built up their farms and plantations to the point where it got to be well known, and that's how it acquired this name of Happy Valley because everybody in this valley was connected with farms, plantations, or what have you.

Silveri: Chunn was a fairly wealthy man, then, wasn't he?

Baxter: Quite wealthy. It was--I think it's either two or three brothers of them, and as we said earlier they owned most of the property. Oh, their acreage ran into the thousands of acres.

Silveri: What are some of the stories you remember your grandmother telling you?

Baxter: Well, she told me so many that it's pretty hard to tell them unless you really sit down and think about it, but there is one that I remember pretty clearly, is this story she told about two slaves that had broken away from their owners and had come to their station for help. That's the first place these slaves that had broken away and were running away wanted to get, to one of the underground stations. She says that these two fellows came there in the middle of the night. Their owners were hot on their trail.

Well, what actually happened, see, when they came in and told their story briefly. Well, they went right to work, see, and then this house that they had, this station, it had a dungeon. It was really set up for this type of thing. It was made to order for this type of thing because this dungeon had a wall, just like this wall here. It was more or less removable. See, they could slide it back, and it had a door there that led to the dungeon, and the dungeon had an outside exit. Oh, I guess fifty feet from the house, and this exit came out around a cluster of trees and all of that sort of thing. One would never realize that it was an entrance or door or anything there, and shortly after these slaves came in, they sent them into the dungeon right away because they knew that their owners would be there in a short while as a general rule,

Sure enough they did. Shortly after the slaves came, these men came there looking for them. Everything was orderly because they just slid this door right back and let them go in there and right back there, and

Baxter: (continued) put chairs and all of that sort of thing around. I imagine that's the way they did it. These **men** came in and wanted to know if these runaway slaves had come. They said, "No, we haven't seen any strangers or anything of that sort!" All at the same time these people were looking around, but everything looked so orderly that they said, "G-whiz, they **couldn't** possibly be here!" So, as a rule they said, "Go ahead and search. You look around and see if they're here!" They knew they wouldn't find them, but that was a good way to kind of convince them that they hadn't seen anybody. So, these men looked around and convinced themselves that they weren't there. In the meantime, they had gotten out and were well on their way!

Silveri: Did Mr. Chunn know about this? Was this kept secret from Mr. Chunn?

Baxter: Well, no. I don't think Mr. Chunn **knew** about it. In fact, my grandmother never related it to anybody other than right around the family, and I doubt seriously if anybody in the vicinity knew about it because those places were supposed to be kept secret, those underground stations.

Silveri: Well, they had a lot of courage doing that!

Baxter: Oh my! It was terrific, but when you look at it, the efficiency in which this underground railroad worked, one would hardly believe that they could work at an undertaking or make it successful to the

Baxter: (continued) point that these slaves did this underground railroad. Oh, just thousands and thousands of slaves escaped by way of the underground railroad!

Silveri: Were the ones who would come through Chunn's Cove, then they began to head north into Virginia?

Baxter: No, heading north trying to get above the Mason and Dixon and possibly into Canada. A lot of slaves went to Canada because once they got to **Canada** they were absolutely free, and a lot of times when they got above the Mason and Dixon, they were free, so to speak. That was the idea in their mind when they ran away **from, say, like** Charleston or any place in the South. They wanted to get above the Mason and Dixon.

Silveri: What kind of work did your grandmother do?

Baxter: Well, she was an expert cook, and that's what she did right up until she passed. She worked in these homes for wealthy white people. In other words, she just took over and took care of all the--in other words, she would be called a dietitian now. She served the same purpose: preparing all the meals, did all the buying of the groceries, and all of that. In other words, she looked after the food for the family right down the **line**.

The **people** she went with after freedom, after the blacks were free, were Reeds that lived at Chunn's Cove, the lower part of **Chunn's** Cove. Well, that was **more** or less **Haw Creek**, **but it's** more or less one section now. **Haw Creek** and Chunn's Cove are spoken of more or less as one place

Baxter: (continued) now. But these Reeds that my grandmother worked for were in this section.

Silveri: Now, was your grandmother held until the Civil War, or did she become free?

Baxter: No. She was freed before the Civil War, sometime during the Civil War, I think, or maybe immediately before, but I haven't been able to find out exactly. But I think she was freed before the Civil War.

Silveri: Did she remain with the Chunns then or did she move away?

Baxter: No. The Chunns didn't hold her. The Davidsons held my grandmother, but after she was freed, she did move away. Even before she was freed, before the blacks were freed, per se. Now, she was freed before the Emancipation, because she bought her freedom, and after she bought her freedom, **that's** when she **left** the people that were holding her as a slave, who were the Davidsons.

Silveri: O. K. This happened sometime in the 1850's?

Baxter: Yes. Around 1850, I would say. During the Civil War and right up until the Emancipation, she was involved in this work with her husband, When that was over, she went to work for these Reeds who had quite a bit of property and had some slaves and what have you in Chunn's Cove. She stayed with them--oh, around thirty or more years, and her children were born at these people's house.

Silveri: What did she have to say about the relationship between the master and the slave in those years? Was the slave system as usually

Silveri: (continued) portrayed in the books? In other words, --well first of all, the people who owned her must have had too many slaves?

Baxter: They didn't. They didn't have too many, and then they were the type of persons that didn't believe in treating their slaves like they were not human beings, which was a fortunate thing, I would say. They were very considerate of her and her family, after she started having children and that type of thing. The stories that I got from her didn't paint too bleak a picture of slavery--

Silveri: In the mountain area?

Baxter: Right.

Silveri: There was no cotton produced in the mountain areas, so you didn't have any extensive plantations--

Baxter: No. No. Most of the plantations back in this part of the country were tobacco plantations and corn and things of that sort. They weren't large plantations, but for the South that's where the big plantations were. The people in these immediate parts, they weren't as wealthy as the people in the eastern part of the state and the deep South. So, they could not hold that many slaves.

Silveri: Now, your grandparents on your father's side, where were they located?

Baxter: My grandparents on my father's side? In Chunn's Cove.

Silveri: Chunn's Cove. Your grandparents on your mother's side were with the Davidsons, weren't they?

Baxter: Yes. They were the Davidsons, and they were in a different section of Chunn's Cove.

Silveri: O. K. How about then, the grandparents on your father's side? Were you old enough to remember them?

Baxter: Yes. I remember my great-grandfather. He lived to be a hundred and something, but I don't remember my grandfather because he died an unnatural death somewhere between here and Chicago on the train. He must have suffered a heart attack, but that was in 1895, long before my time.

Silveri: Do you remember any stories from your grandparents about the Civil War?

Baxter: No. I don't. They didn't tell too many stories about the Civil War. My grandmother was the only one that did any talking what-so-ever that I recall about what happened during the last part of slavery and the Civil War.

Silveri: What did your mother have to say about Abraham Lincoln?

Baxter: Well, they didn't talk too much about Abraham Lincoln, either. They didn't, no. They talked more about this black guy that wanted to take all the blacks back to Africa. What was his name? Around the early '20's?

Silveri: Marcus Garvey.

Baxter: Yes. That's the guy. I heard more about him than I did Abe Lincoln!

Silveri: After the Civil War, your grandmother went and worked for the

Silveri: (continued) Reeds?

Baxter: That's right.

Silveri: She worked there until all through until she retired?

Baxter: No. She didn't. She left the Reeds and went with a pioneer family in the city of Asheville by the name of Webb, and they had a boarding house on North French **Broad**. See, that was a great business back shortly after the turn of the century, boarding houses. **That's** how most of the people made their--earned their **living**, so to speak. Because people were beginning to move into these parts in large number, and these people had a great-big boarding house on North French Broad.

My grandmother was in charge of all the--preparing of all the foods and what-have-you, and she stayed with those people until she retired. The descendants has--probably he and his brother have an insurance company on Church Street now.

Silveri: How long did your grandmother live? Do you remember about when she died?

Baxter: Yes. She died in 1945 at the age of 106!

Silveri: Well, I can see then why you were able to remember her and talk to her a lot!

Baxter: And she was relatively healthy right up--oh, maybe three weeks before she passed. She got around by herself. She did her own cooking and that type of thing.

Silveri: Were your mother and father born in Chunn's Cove?

Baxter: My mother was born with these Reeds that I was telling you about.
My father was born in Chunn's Cove.

Silveri: They were married after the Civil War sometime, right?

Baxter: Yes, that's right.

Silveri: Of course, way after that time. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Baxter: There was ten of us in the family.

Silveri: Ten?

Baxter: Well, it was more than that, but it's ten living now. It was actually twelve of us because we lost a brother and a sister, the first borns. But there is ten of us now. That made twelve children.

Silveri: What kind of work did your father do?

Baxter: He was just a common laborer, and he worked for--I know you know about the Grove Park Inn hotel. E. W. Grove, he's the builder of that hotel. My father worked for E. W. Grove in the quarry where he got the rock for the hotel. He worked for him through the years, and after all of that was over, he just worked where ever he could find work to do.

Silveri: Still living in Chunn's Cove?

Baxter: Still--that's where we lived all of our lives, in Chunn's Cove. Now, in later years--possibly the last part of my father's life, he lived in Asheville which was just across the mountain from Chunn's Cove.

Silveri: What kind of education were your father and mother able to get?

Baxter: My mother had none. She just learned to read and write after she was grown. Well, long after she was grown, I would say maybe twenty

Baxter: (continued) years ago, she learned to read and write. Of course, my father had a fairly good education.

Silveri: I want to put it in a time span. Your mother and father were born about when?

Baxter: My father was born in 1890, I think, as best I can recall. And my mother was born around the same time because this is '75, and she's eighty-five, so that would make her 1890.

Silveri: O. K. Well, was there a school in Chunn's Cove where they could go?

Baxter: No. It wasn't, Dr. Silveri: They didn't have a school in Chunn's Cove for blacks until--oh, I would say around--between the '20's, the early '20's, I would say.

Silveri: Where did your father go to school? Did your father have some education?

Baxter: Yes, my father had education. He went to school in the city, and they did have this school system. I read quite an article about it here some time ago. The Doles, they came here from up north. I believe New York City, and started this school around 1880, somewhere around the early 1880's. They were interested in blacks getting an education. They set up this school and made provisions for blacks along with the whites. From that system grew the system that we know today, the school system, in Buncombe County and Asheville. You probably heard of this old school. It was called Dole's School.

Silveri: Private school?

Baxter: It was a private school at first. Well, it was at the end, and she did a tremendous job pioneering along the line of education.

Silveri: Well, back in those years that we're talking about, during the '80's and '90's, the period in which there was quite a development in the South with respect to the future of black people, Booker T. Washington in the 1890's talked about the way in which blacks should look towards their education and so on. I wonder if you ever remember your father or your mother talking about Booker T. Washington?

Baxter: Yes. Yes.

Silveri: Did they help? Did they hold him in high esteem?

Baxter: Oh yes. He was the most well thought of black man, I think, that's ever been on the scene in America. He was loved both by blacks and whites, and in his day they didn't make any major move one way or another unless they did consult with Booker T. Washington. Now, that was from the blacks or the whites. They made no major moves without having consulted with Booker T. Washington. He was a great leader.

But there came another great leader that was a little greater than, in my opinion and a lot of other blacks' opinion, was this W. E. B. DuBois. He was a great intellectual, and he and Booker T. Washington were great friends. They did a tremendous amount of good work toward preparing for the blacks to get an education, like setting up schools in the South. Tuskegee is a perfect example, and what's this other school in Virginia?

Baxter: (continued) Hampton in Virginia. So, they did yeoman work along that line.

Silveri: You probably remember also through that there was a conflict between the two as far as how race relations were going in the country?

Baxter: Yes. Well, they came to the parting of the ways somewhere along the end of their relationship because Booker T. Washington saw it one way as the best approach to the blacks' problem, and DuBois saw it altogether differently. That's where they came to differ one with the other. DuBois believed in preparing the mind to work along with the hands to develop the black man. I think Booker T. Washington believed in just technical training, **period**. Learning to use your hands and learn a **trade--**

Silveri: And **don't** try to go out and vote and be equal with the whites!

Baxter: Right. Right. Right.

Silveri: Well, which approach do you think was best for those years?

Baxter: Well, it's a little hard. I think at the outset Booker T. Washington had the right idea, but as things started to develop and as time went on, I think there was a time for this type of thing that DuBois was advocating. But I think it came at the right time. Now, it probably wouldn't have worked earlier in the picture. So, you will have to look at Booker T. Washington's approach as the better approach for that particular era.

Silveri: During those years, it was **very** difficult for blacks to get along. There was the Ku **Klux Klan**. There were a lot of lynchings and so on. Do you remember your grandparents or your parents talking about that?

Baxter: Yes. I remember that distinctly! Yes, it was a frightening thing!

Silveri: Was much of that going on in the mountains?

Baxter: Quite a bit of it. Well, didn't too much of it happen in this immediate vicinity. **When** I say immediate, I mean in Asheville and shortly--

Silveri: I understand not much went on in this immediate vicinity.

Baxter: No, not that-much. But like maybe twenty miles out, like what you might say Burnsville now and Madison County and the out-lying places, that's where this action more or less took place. But it was a very frightening thing. Those people would raid at night and set your homes afire. Oh, it was a terrific, frightening **thing!**

Silveri: I noticed in the paper that there's going to be a meeting of the **Klan** up in Madison County--

Baxter: I read about that, but I haven't heard any more about it, and **I was** just wondering what the **outcøme--**

Silveri: It's supposed to take place Saturday.

Baxter: Saturday past?

Silveri: No, this coming--

Baxter: This coming Saturday?

Silveri: Yes. Up at Mars Hill.

Baxter: Oh, I thought it had already happened!

Silveri: No.

Baxter: Oh, gee.

Silveri: Well, they were, as you say, quite frightening times for the blacks in those years, but in Asheville, itself, the City of Asheville, how would you classify it with respect to race relations? Was it better than other parts of the South?

Baxter: I would say so. That's one of the things that I think has played an important part in the development of Asheville and its surrounding area is the relationship between the races which has always been fairly good compared to some of the other sections of the South.

Silveri: You say you were born in 1910?

Baxter: Yes.

Silveri: Where were you among the ten children? Were you one of the youngest or oldest?

Baxter: I'm the oldest--next to the oldest. Now the two that passed were older than I. I was the next after--I was the third child.

Silveri: You were born in Chunn's Cove?

Baxter: Born in Chunn's Cove.

Silveri: Where did you first go to school?

Baxter: In Chunn's Cove.

Silveri: By then they had a school there?

Baxter: Yes, they had a school there.

Silveri: Was it elementary school?

Baxter: Well, it was just a little one-room schoolhouse, and you know just about what they had. They taught--you learned your ABC's, and you learned

Baxter: (continued) to spell and to read, and you **didn't** have classes in the strict sense of the word then, It was one teacher.

Silveri: Short term, too.

Baxter: Short term.

Silveri: Wasn't it five months or so?

Baxter: Something like that. Just more or less the first part of the fall and the winter months that they could make it. They **didn't** have buses and that type of thing. The teachers had to get to and from their schools as best they could.

Silveri: This was a public school?

Baxter: Well, I guess you could say it was a public **school**. Everybody in Chunn's Cove, all the black children, went to this school. Yes, it was a public school because the Board of Education funded it.

Silveri: Now, the County Board of Education--

Baxter: The County Board of Education. **That's** because this was in the county.

Silveri: Yes. Of course, it was a segregated school? You had a black teacher?

Baxter: Yes. No whites there.

Silveri: Do you remember how many there were in the first year of school?

Baxter: No. I **don't** remember exactly, but it **wasn't** too many because there **wasn't** that many blacks in Chunn's Cove at this time. The Baxters--

Silveri: You were mentioning the Baxters were there in Chunn's Cove.

Baxter: Yes. The Baxters, the Reeds, and the Andersons were the only blacks in Chunn's Cove at the beginning. Of course, some of the others came later.

Silveri: How many grades? Well, first of all, what was the name of that school? Chunn's Cove?

Baxter: Chunn's Cove. Yes. Just Chunn's Cove School.

Silveri: How many years did you go to that?

Baxter: Oh, I went about--I guess possibly three years.

Silveri: Three years?

Baxter: Something like that. Later on they built a large school in what was known as South Asheville, at the time, and it **wasn't** too far from Chunn's Cove. So, all the kids that had gone to this little school in Chunn's Cove were transferred to South Asheville School. It had--I think it was four rooms, possibly five, and a teacher for each room. In other words, it advanced to that point, and that's where I got my grammar school education, from that school.

Silveri: Were there any opportunities to go further than graduate school in the black school system then?

Baxter: Yes. Yes. It was. You could go when you finished this grammar school in South Asheville. All the students that cared to went to what was known as Stephens Lee, Stephens Lee High School, and took it from there.

Silveri: Did you go beyond that?

Baxter: Yes, I attended Stephens Lee, but I didn't finish there. We had a large family, and my father being a common laborer, and this was during the Depression years and leading up to it and what have you. I just had to give up going to school and try to help make a living for the family, which I did.

Silveri: What was your first job? Do you remember?

Baxter: Yes. I remember my first job. I was always doing these little chores at people's houses. My mother took in laundry, what they called washing and ironing then.: ~~She was~~ an expert at that, so we learned a lot about the better class of people, people that could afford to pay for this type of thing, and they were always wanting little chores done around their houses and all.

I remember very well the first time I went out to work for pay was at a judge's house that lived on Merrimon Avenue. My mother did the laundry for them, and that's how--and I would take the laundry to them when it was finished and pick it up. This judge's wife took a liking to me for some reason. She called me in when I would bring the laundry and all. She taught music along with a lot of other things, and she'd sit me down on the piano stool and talk with me. She was the finest, one of the finest persons I've ever met. She didn't make any difference between my being black and her being white. So, she gave me--she told me she wanted me to come to her house and rake leaves or anything so I could make a little money. That was the first time that I had gone out to

Baxter: (continued) work for pay.

Silveri: Do you remember the name of that family?

Baxter: Yes. The Moores, Judge Moore and his family. He was a great judge here at that time. Then I just started going around doing that type of thing then. I made quite a bit of money going around like that.

Silveri: You were still in your teens?

Baxter: Oh, I was still in my teens. Yes. Yes, I was quite young,

Silveri: I want to stop here for a minute and ask you about what Asheville looked like back in the '20's when you were growing up.

Baxter: Oh, it was far different from what it is **now!** It was much more beautiful then than it is now. They've torn down all of the beautiful spots that existed in the early part of Asheville, the early days of Asheville.

Like the one particular thing that they removed was this old City Market Building. You have probably heard about it, and the old Court House. Oh, that was a beautiful building!

Silveri: That was right on Pack Square, wasn't it?

Baxter: The early one was on Pack Square, but the one I remember was on College Street, right where the Court House is now. It had a dome similar to the--what I would say was the dome where Big Ben is, and that type of thing. Had a big clock. I guess that clock was four feet across or maybe three and a half, something like that. It was a huge clock facing east, west, north, and south. Oh, I just used to love to--and they had this big old bell up in the tower that would ring for certain occasions, and I just

Baxter: (continued) loved the tone, to hear that bell ringing.

Silveri: Do you remember the old Battery Park Hotel? Or was that gone?

Baxter: No. I don't remember the old Battery Park. I remember when they were taking down the hill, but I don't remember the building itself.

Silveri: They just took that whole hill down, and they put up the new Battery Park Hotel?

Baxter: That's right. They're doing the same type of thing over here on-- between Asheville and South French Broad right now that they did when they graded down that hill the old Battery Park stood on down Coxe Avenue. That was just a big ravine, and they took all this dirt from that mountain that they cut down where the old hotel was and put in this ravine which became Coxe Avenue. They are doing this between Asheville and South French Broad now. The Urban Renewal is doing this. They are going to build condominiums over there and some single housing units, and all of that sort of thing.

But getting back to Asheville in its earlier days, it was a beautiful place. All the colonial buildings more or less were standing. Like the old Swannanoa-Berkeley Hotel and that type of thing. It was just so many fine buildings that I can't even explain. But I have a tape that was done by a man that's deeply interested in Asheville in its early stages, and he has done a tremendous job on collecting and getting all types of information, pictures, and what have you, about Asheville from the turn of the century. I have him on a couple of tapes. You might get a chance to hear him briefly

Baxter: (continued) or at least some of it. But if you could get with this man, he can give you almost a picture of Asheville just like it was then right up 'til now.

Silveri: You mentioned the Great Depression before. You were about fifteen years old?

Baxter: Yes. During the Depression. That's right.

Silveri: It was pretty tough --

Baxter: Pretty tough! I'm telling you I've never seen anything like it, Dr. Silveri! There were just no jobs to be had regardless to who you are or what ~~have~~ you. You just couldn't find the work. If you did find work, you got very little for it.

Silveri: How did your family get along?

Baxter: Just by a miracle! I was fortunate to have a job all during the Depression. I was working for some Jewish people which were very nice to us during the Depression. Had it not been for them, I really don't know what we would have done. Besides paying me a salary, they would take food from their table and all of that sort of thing, and put it aside for us. My sister worked for them in their home, and I worked for them in the store. Between the two of us, we would always take home enough something to eat for possibly supper, dinner, tonight. We called it supper, and that type of **thing**, but it was a meager **living** at that.

└End of Side I, Tape I┘

[Side 11, Tape I]

Silveri: Did your parents own land in Chunn's Cove?

Baxter: Yes.

Silveri: Where they could grow some food?

Baxter: That was our mainstay there. We had land there, very rich land, and my father was an expert gardener, and we raised most of the food that we had, that the family called for.

Silveri: Did you have animals, too?

Baxter: Yes, we had a cow. We had a horse. We did the plowing and all with this horse. At one time we had two cows which furnished the milk and butter, and we raised chickens which furnished the eggs. We lived pretty well at home.

Silveri: Better, perhaps, than the people who were in the city that didn't have a chance to get ahold of the money or food.

Baxter: That's right. Then it had been handed down from earlier generations: the art of preserving food, preparing food, and making a lot of the things you needed like chairs, ax handles, and the handles that went into the hoes and all of the tools like that. We made them like that, my father, and I learned the art of making ax handles, and hammer handles, and all of that sort of thing.

Silveri: How much land did you have there?

Baxter: Oh, we had--well, at one time the Baxters owned six hundred and sixty acres in Chunn's Cove. We still own some land over there.

Baxter: (continued) The land that the old family home was on, we own that. The land where I was **born**, we own that. Of course, the house is gone. The land that my great-grandfather was on when he was a slave, we still own that. See, the slave quarters was on this particular tract of land, and he built a log cabin on this property. His children were born in this log cabin. He lived in this log cabin until he passed, and then we rented it to whomever might come along up to 1936. I was the last one to **live** in the house in 1936, the old log house.

Silveri: That's been torn down now?

Baxter: Oh, it has. But I wish so much now that I had had the foresight to preserve that house some way or another, but during that era, we did well to make a living and to exist.

Silveri: Do you remember when they built the tunnel through the Beaucatcher Mountain?

Baxter: Yes, I remember it very well.

Silveri: That opened that whole area for development there, I was told.

Baxter: It did. Well, it was opening up even before that, but that gave it a big boost, opening this tunnel. Mentioning the tunnel, myself and five more boys from **Chunn's** Cove were the first ones to go through that tunnel when the hole was just big enough for you to crawl through. Five of us one Sunday decided we were going through that tunnel; just go up there and peep through there. We entered on the Chunn's Cove side and came out on the town side, and we turned around and went right back through there.

Baxter: (continued) We had to just wiggle ourselves to get through that hole that we came through. But from that point on after the tunnel was built, that's when this Tunnel Road business started to develop.

I remember very well when all of that was a cow pasture. We would go through there going down to the river to fish: my father, myself, and the other people from Chunn's Cove area that liked fishing. We would go through that property which was owned by the Hildebrands. They still own quite a bit of property there. This open cut that's going through there now is going right through quite a bit of the property that the Hildebrands owned.

Oh, it's a terrific story behind all of this! I've been pretty involved with it right through the years. Now, the Department of Transportation did a lot of negotiating with me on that property over there in Chunn's Cove because I know the property almost inch by inch from one end of the cove to the other, just by having lived there and being interested in the property through the years. Well, in recent years I've done a lot of research on the property in Chunn's Cove, the people who lived in Chunn's Cove and that type of thing. So, they found out that I knew a lot about this property over there, and quite a bit of it is in limbo even now. They are going to have to have any number of acres of property for this open cut. So, I've been working right along with them on this thing.

Silveri: Let's go back to the 1930's.. How long did you work for the Grands?

Baxter: These people that helped us such tremendously during the Depression, their names were Grands, and they had what was known as the Vogue Furriers.

Silveri: How do you spell that last name, Grands?

Baxter: G-r-a-n-d. I worked for them about ten years, maybe.

Silveri: They had a fur--

Baxter: Fur shop on Haywood Street. They still have it. In fact, I was in there Friday. I go in there, and we sit around. We have a real ball, so to speak, talking about the old times.

Silveri: What do you remember about those Depression years? What did you see around you in Ahseville? How were people getting along?

Baxter: I saw a tremendous amount of suffering and that type of thing. It's just almost indescribable. It was so much hunger. I mean people were just hungry, and they couldn't do anything about it. We did, as meager as our means were, we helped a lot of people like that get at least one meal a day. If it didn't consist of anything but milk and bread, they could at least survive. But it was the most pathetic thing I've ever lived through, and a lot of times you really wondered if you would live through it.

Silveri.: Well, when Roosevelt came along in 1933 with the election in '32, he began the New Deal in '33. Did any of your family work on any of those New Deal projects?

Baxter: Yes.

Silveri: W. P. A. ?

Baxter: My father worked on W. P. A., and my brother was on the CCC, (the Civilian Conservation Corps). That was the first thing that I think Roosevelt did to make a little money available to the poor. I think that

Baxter: (continued) program was before, in fact, it was ahead of the W. P. A. My brother got with this C. C. C. camp, and he had a little money coming in.

Silveri: Where was that camp located?

Baxter: Camp Holly. I don't know exactly where that is or where it was, but I remember him saying it was in Camp Holly. But I believe it was in--I'm not sure if it was in North Carolina or Virginia. But anyway, he was affiliated with that program, and I remember very well the money he got from that helped tremendously because we had the burden of trying to keep the taxes up on the property and all of that sort of thing. It was a real problem.

Then the W. P. A. came along, and my father was able to get on that, and that was another source of income to some extent. It was still a nip and tuck battle, so to speak, right through the '30's, but it did start to look up after the election of Roosevelt because he started to implement these various programs that would put a little money in circulation.

Silveri: Do you remember your father or mother talking about Roosevelt? Did they like him?

Baxter: Oh, yes. They thought there was nobody like Roosevelt! After all, he came to their aid when they really needed somebody like him. So, naturally they would think a lot of him. Well, I would say he was one of the best-liked of our presidents. I don't know of any other than Washington.

Baxter: (continued) Washington was probably liked a little more for other reasons than Roosevelt, but **there's** never been another president before or after Roosevelt that was as popular as he was. Maybe it was more or **less** from the working people's standpoint, but after all, if it were from that point, he was still the most popular because **it's** more of those people than any other kind.

Silveri: Right. Was your father able to vote in the 1930's?

Baxter: I don't think so. See, we were in the county and all city elections-- the county vote he could vote, and he did vote, but he couldn't vote in the city elections because of being in the county. Of course, now Chunn's Cove is in the city, within the city now and has been for some years.

Silveri: Were any of the other brothers and sisters able to become employed or join any of the New Deal programs like the National Youth Administration or anything like that.

Baxter: Yes. My sister was involved in a youth program which was funded by this program, and it had to do with social studies and that type of thing. It was administered by an elderly lady who had been in charge of the Y. W. C. A. here in Asheville through the years, the Phyllis Wheatly Branch of the Y; W. C. A. through the years, one of the greatest persons you'd ever meet. During this Depression, the Y. W. C. A. was just practically nil, so, she had to look around and make it the best way she could. But once this program came on the scene, she was made to order for it, and she became the director of this program. She did a beautiful job in

Baxter: (continued) this program.

Silveri: Did the blacks live in a particular section of Asheville?

Baxter: Mostly, yes. They have always had their respective neighborhoods, so to speak, like in East End. That was the eastern part of the city. That's always been black, and that took in from Valley--well, it took in from what is known as Biltmore Avenue now. It was South Main then. But from Biltmore Avenue back to Beaucatcher Mountain up near the old over-head bridge, all of that section over in there was known as East End.

Nothing but blacks lived in that section, and it extended down Southside between--well, from Biltmore Avenue over to Clingman Avenue down to the river was all more or less blacks. Now a few whites lived in that section, but it was mostly populated by blacks. Again on the other side of town, which was known as Stumptown, all blacks lived in Stumptown. That was to the left of Montford Avenue now.

Silveri: What about Woodfin?

Baxter: Woodfin? Oh, that was all whites. Whites lived in that section.

Silveri: I could never quite understand. Woodfin is an incorporated area?

Baxter: Yes, it is.

Silveri: It is in Asheville?

Baxter: Yes. Yes. It's within the city, but it's its own city. It's just been incorporated here in the past five years, I would say.

Silveri: They have their own board of selectors?

Baxter: Yes, **that's** right. Yes, they do. Well, you take Biltmore Forest. Biltmore Forest is on ~~the~~ same order. **Woodfin** is the same, and they are trying to make three other sections of Asheville and Buncombe County that type of government like Fletcher, and two other places I don't recall right now. But anyway, they want them to become cities governed by their own government.

Silveri: Did you know the **Woffe** family at all?

Baxter: Well, I knew of them. I didn't know them too well 'til maybe recently. I knew of Tom, ~~the~~ writer, and I had seen him any number of times. But I was too young to know that much about the contribution he was **making** at the time and stood to make in later years, so, I just passed him off more or less lightly. But I've been to their house when his mother was running this house as a boarding house there on Spruce Street. I was **working** at the City Market at the time as a delivery boy, and I had to deliver everything on Spruce Street from the market in which I worked.

This particular street was just lined with houses, boarding houses, on both sides of the street at that time. Now, there's not even a house on the street. **That's** the street where the Landmark Hotel is. You know this big hotel that's empty over there?

Silveri: Yes.

Baxter: Well, **that's** Spruce, and it's **not** a house standing on that street between College and **Woodfin**, and at that time it was just lined with houses.

Baxter: (continued) All of them were boarding houses. Tom Wolfe's mother had this boarding house, which is still standing there. It's a historic site now. I have a tape of Tom's brother that we made last year. This Western North Carolina Historical Association had this Oktoberfest. Maybe you don't know anything about it.

Silveri: I've heard of it.

Baxter: You've heard of it. Well, it was a great affair, and they did a lot of historic things that will be around for the next hundred years, like naming two mountain peaks out here in Cherokee. Any way, Tom's brother was here to make the awards, the Historic Association's award, for the best novelist, the best novel of the year. He was here to make that award.

I taped the talk that he made, and we had a little session after that. I taped some of that, but I didn't get nearly what I wanted from it. But we have an appointment to go to his home in South Carolina in the not-too-distant future, and do some taping with him. So, I'm anxiously looking forward to that. . . .

Silveri: I wanted to get back to the beginning of the Second World War. What were you doing? Were you still working with the Grands?

Baxter: Beginning on World War II? No. I had left them, and I was with the Coca Cola Bottling Company at the time, and I worked for them right through the war. I was deferred any number of times because of working for the company because that was designated defense work at the time. Now, I don't know just how they went about doing that, but it

Baxter: (continued) was in that category, and myself and quite a few other workers were deferred any number of times for that reason, but they were finally getting to us. The week that we were supposed to go for induction the war ended, and we didn't have to go, but they had deferred us as long as they could, and we actually signed up to do service.

Silveri: Were you married by then?

Baxter: Oh, yes. I was married.

Silveri: When did you get married?

Baxter: I married, I think, about forty something.

Silveri: How about the other members of your family? Did any of your brothers fight in the war?

Baxter: Yes. My brother, the one next to me. Well, both of my brothers, the one next to me and the one next to him, were veterans of World War II. The one next to me is a veteran of World War II, and the one next to him is a Korean War [veteran].

Silveri: So you had a steady job throughout the war?

Baxter: Oh, I've had a job all of my life! I've worked since the time I told you I started working for Judge Moore. Shortly after that, I got this job at the City Market. I was just a school boy, so to speak. I'd go to work in the afternoon after school hours and all of that sort of thing, but that was the first regular job. I did that every day, and I was never without a job after that.

Silveri: When you got married, did you continue to live at home, or did

Silveri: (continued) you move to your own place?

Baxter: Well, I had my own place then. That's when I left Chunn's Cove, and I moved to the city. We had our own house. Well, we lived with my wife's mother, and that type of thing.

Silveri: What's your wife's maiden name?

Baxter: Miles.

Silveri: Miles. Does her family go back far in the mountains, too, or did they come from--

Baxter: They came from South Carolina, but they have a deep history in South Carolina. Their roots are very deep there, and they probably go as far back in South Carolina as my people do here in North Carolina, maybe further. It all depends.

Silveri: Your wife was born and raised in Asheville then?

Baxter: No. She was born in Saluda, South Carolina. I think, Saluda. She came here shortly after and been here ever since.

Silveri: What did you do when the war was concluded? Did you stay with the Coca Cola Company?

Baxter: Yes. I stayed with the Coca' Cola Company 'til around '49, I believe it was (something like that), and I resigned from the job to go to school again, which was in New York. I wanted to become a mechanic, automobile mechanic. I always like tinkering with automobiles and that type of thing. I had had one since I was eighteen, and I was one of the first black teenagers in these parts to have an automobile of his own. I always liked them.

Baxter: (continued) So, I wanted to become a mechanic. There were no schools at that time around here. So, I had to go to New York to take this mechanic course.

Silveri: Oh, it must have taken a lot to just pull up and go to the city!

Baxter: It did! It really did! It took courage along with a lot of other things because it's just like pulling up stakes and starting all over. But I was determined to get this course and kind of upgrade my status as a citizen.

Silveri: How long did you spend there in New York?

Baxter: Oh, about thirteen or fourteen years.

Silveri: Oh, you did! Really, that long!

Baxter: Yes, I was.

Silveri: Did you like New York City?

Baxter: Yes. I learned to love it. I didn't when I first went there, but after I got there and got into the main stream of things and started working with various schools and what have you, I just loved it. I stayed with it. The whole time I was there, I was affiliated with the Y. M. C. A. Trade and Technical School, and I stayed with them about five years, I would say. I finished all of their courses. I ended up as assistant instructor with that school,

Then I left there and went with the Board of Education of the City of New York.. I was affiliated with the technical school in Brooklyn, Brooklyn Automotive High. I stayed with them from around '55, or something

Baxter: (continued) like that, 'til I left New York coming back here. But I loved every minute of New York.

Silveri: Why did you come back?

Baxter: Well, I wanted to come back and open a business of my own in my hometown, and that thing kept getting larger and larger in my mind to the point where I just couldn't resist it **any** longer. So, I started to make plans to come back and open a shop, and I felt that I could make a contribution to Asheville and its citizens along the line of the automotive trade because it was far behind other places at the time. It's still far behind in some cases, not as far as it was, but I felt to do this, I would be making a **contribution** to my city and the people in my **city**.

Silveri: You must have come back around the early '60's?

Baxter: Yes. I came back around the early '60's, and I opened this shop. I kept it open.

Silveri: What did you do? What kind of a shop was it?

Baxter: Automatic transmission shop. I specialized in automatic transmissions. That's what I studied the whole time I was in New York aside from general mechanics, but I got interested in automatic transmissions because they were so technical and hard to handle. It was one of the greatest challenges I've ever taken on, and the more I got into it, the more I liked it. The whole time I was there I was either in school, or I was teaching the trade, automatic transmissions. I just loved it. I really learned to handle them.

Silveri: Where did you open your first shop?

Baxter: Down on Southside. At the intersection of Southside and McDowell.

All of those buildings have been torn down, even the garage that I had at that time, but I have beautiful pictures of the garage and the shop.

Silveri: Did you have to go and get a bank loan to start the business?

Baxter: No. I had saved up money for this purpose, and I had been making good money in New York in this trade. I'm not saying *it* because *it's* me, but I was expert that barred none, no expert, and when it came to automatic transmissions, I had a very good reputation in New York. All those big dealerships like the Cadillac dealerships. I specialized in General Motors' cars. Money was no problem because I could work all day and all night if I chose to. So, I was making ten and twelve thousand a year.

Silveri: So you were able to put something--

Baxter: I put something in the bank. I built me a home while I was in New York. I'm living in it now. Some time I'll take you out and let you see it. *It's* not that much to look at, but *it's* comfortable, and I've just got it running over with books. My wife's on the verge of chasing me and the books out!

Silveri: When you started your business, was it essentially just you, or did--

Baxter: No. I was in business with another guy.

Silveri: How long have you continued in that work?

Baxter: Oh, about four years. But it came to the point, Dr. Silveri, where, as I said before, it wasn't too many good transmission men around. It was a lot of people claiming to be transmission men. The minute they went to work you would know right away, if you knew anything about them, that they weren't. That's the problem I ran into after I got into business, and you had to pay those fellows at least a hundred dollars a week. It would take you at least a week to find out whether or not he was really a mechanic or whether he wasn't, because he would have to do at least two jobs. He might be lucky enough to make it on one, but seldom ever he could do two jobs without bouncing if it wasn't done right. When I say bouncing, that means coming back on you. That was the problem I was running into, too.

Silveri: In other words, you needed help, but you couldn't find any help?

Baxter: That's right. I couldn't find help that was qualified to do these transmissions, so I ended up paying a hundred dollars a week for a guy to do the transmissions, and I would end up, in the final analysis, doing it myself plus having to put in new parts and all of that sort of thing.

So, I said, "G-whiz, I'm just sticking my neck out for punishment that way! I'm better off to do fewer transmissions and not have them come back than I am to do a number of them and half of them come back, and I have to do them over. I mean put new parts in them plus I end up doing it myself. So I would be better off, instead of doing five transmissions a week for argument sake, I would say, I'd just do two. I could handle that

Baxter: (continued) myself, but the transmission would stay out if I did it because I knew what I was doing. I would end up making more clear money than I would the other way. So I started to, but it was working me too hard. So I had to start thinking in terms of doing other things because the fellow that I went in with to help me do this, he turned out to be the biggest fake. I couldn't have done worse if I had come to town looking for the worst man to go in business with! So it was a trying experience. I don't regret having done it, but I probably would have been better off had I not done it. But it was a great experience, and I had to get this thing out of my system. Once I got it behind me, I was satisfied. Then I went to work for the Cadillac company doing transmissions.

Silveri: Where? Here?

Baxter: Here in Asheville. Yes. The man that owns the Cadillac company is a very good friend of mine. He's a Jewish fellow, one of the finest men in Asheville, if you understand him. I happened to understand him. He understood me. I had no problem with him when it came to getting a job, and that type of thing, as a mechanic. See, it was no black mechanics in this town at that time, and none of the other dealerships would hire me as a mechanic, but he did. He put me right in there with the rest of his mechanics, and we got along fine.

Silveri: How long were you at that work?

Baxter: I left him in '66 and went with the people that I'm with now.

Silveri: What is this? Who are you working for now?

Baxter: The Asheville Lighting Center on Asheville Avenue. . . .

Silveri: Let's go back awhile to 1955. Does anything strike you when I mention that year, 1955? The year of the Supreme Court School Desegregation Decision?

Baxter: Yes. Yes, I remember.

Silveri: What impact did that have on Asheville?

Baxter: Terrific impact, and I followed it very closely. I'm surprised even now that the progress along those lines has been so slow and frustrating. That the type of thing that has existed since then up to now was the farthest thing from my mind. I did not in my most farthest line of thinking or trying to look into the future, see this type or the type of thing that has happened. I just couldn't see it happening after the decision, but I don't know. We haven't made too much progress, in my opinion, along the lines for which this decision was made.

Silveri: Well, are all the schools desegregation in Asheville?

Baxter: To some extent, yes. But I'm wondering if it has really been for the best of the systems one way or the other. I mean in all the aspects of the--to me it looks as though we have advanced in some areas and have taken a backward step in others. So, I don't know. It looks like we are more or less at a standstill now. In other words, we are not progressing in the strict sense of the word, and I don't know. They say if you're not progressing enough, you are not going forward. You have to be going backwards because there is no such thing as standing still. That being the case, we are more

Baxter: (continued) or less going backward because we certainly aren't making too much progress along those lines.

Silveri: Can a black student get a good education in the City of Asheville?

Baxter: Yes. Now. It's better now than it's ever been. All of a sudden we are making progress. I don't know just what has happened, but what I'm beginning to think has happened: the right type people and the right thinking people, have gotten involved, and they are doing something about it.

Silveri: Did you know at all, or know of, Charles "Buzz" Tennent?

Baxter: I know of him.

Silveri: He was a member of the Board of Education of the city when the Supreme Court decision was handed down. He was the one that urged them to issue a statement that they, the Board of Education, would obey the law.

Baxter: Yes. I think that's been one of the problems. They haven't obeyed the laws that were handed down, or they were expected to observe and to obey as a result of this decision. They have taken every possible step to evade the issues and get around them however they could. It has just caused an enormous amount of frustration, misunderstanding, and just a slowing down of the program in general.

Silveri: What impact did Martin Luther King have among the blacks in Asheville when he became known in the 1950's?

Baxter: I think it was a great impact. Everybody, blacks and whites, especially the blacks, had a tremendous amount of respect for this Dr.

Baxter: (continued) King, and they believed in him. I think as a result of his having done what he did, did considerable amount toward bringing the blacks around to seeing the situation more or less as it really was and not like how they had wanted it to be and had hoped it would be. They could face facts like the facts really were. I think he played a tremendous part in bringing them around to that point. From that point on, things have tended to be better in Asheville and its surrounding communities between the two races.

Silveri: Did he have a local organization of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Asheville?

Baxter: I don't know if he had. I'm not too sure, but I don't think he did. In fact, at the height of his activities and what have you, I was in New York City. You just couldn't very well put the two together in terms of reaction from what he was doing, there and how it affected the people here. You just couldn't think of it in terms of comparison.

Silveri: Is there a local chapter of the N. A. A. C. P. in Asheville?

Baxter: Oh yes. Definitely. I'm a member of it. I just became a member recently, but I am a member of it. Why I wanted to become a member of it: In this black studies course that we had in history here at the campus last fall, I got interested in black history and this W. E. B. DuBois. I found out he was the founder of the N. A. A. C. P. I had always been a great advocate of this fellow, but I didn't know that he had founded the N. A. A. C. P. So, after I found that out, and he has this paper. I

Baxter: (continued) believe it's ~~the~~ bi-monthly paper that they have, this Crisis. We did quite a bit of work out of that Crisis, looking for information about the blacks and all of that sort of thing. I developed a great respect, even greater, for this DuBois. So, right away I went and joined.

Silveri: Earlier on this tape you mentioned remembering your grandmother talk about Marcus Garvey.

Baxter: Yes.

Silveri: What do you remember? Did she like him very much?

Baxter: Well, I would say so. A lot of blacks were interested in the type of thing that he was doing and wanted to do. Of course, he had some objectors, too, but my people, more or less, were in favor of this type of thing, and I'm not sure that I wouldn't have been in favor of the same thing had I been large enough to know what it was all about.

But I had heard a considerable amount about this Marcus Garvey, but I hadn't seen too much in writing about him until I got into this black history class last fall. I did quite a bit of research on this guy, and I found out that he did have a pretty far-reaching program, and he was a pretty influential guy. He had done a lot for the blacks, especially in and around New York. So, I think that's one of the reasons why the people in Asheville knew so much about him because of what he had done along the lines of helping blacks in New York.

He organized this Negro industrial organization which hired blacks and gave blacks this, and saw to it that they got jobs in a lot of these places,

Baxter: (continued) most of the places that were not hiring blacks then. So, he had done a lot of good work, but everybody wasn't in favor of the thing that he was talking about. I would say it was pretty evenly divided between the pros and the cons, during that time.

Silveri: Let's jump up to a later period. I wanted to ask you: Have you gotten involved in politics at all?

Baxter: Slightly.

Silveri: Would you call yourself a Democrat or a Republican?

Baxter: Yes, I'm definitely a Democrat!

Silveri: And have been ever since you can remember?

Baxter: That's right! Of course now, my people and most of the other blacks that I have dealt with before I was large enough or old enough to make my own decisions said we were supposed to be Republicans.

[End of Tape I]

[Tape II, Side I]

Baxter: ...But I never did see it that way, and I couldn't say why, but after I became old enough to know, I made my own choice. The reason for which most blacks think or had thought through the years that we were supposed to be Republicans, in my opinion, is untrue and has no foundation whatsoever. On those grounds I chose the Democratic party.

Silveri: What did you think of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy?

Baxter: I think they were great guys, Dr. Silveri, and it's just a shame

Baxter: (continued) that the type of thing that happened to them had to happen. I would never dream that the type of thing that happened to them would happen in this country.

It just surprised me to no end when this type of thing did happen to John Kennedy, and then it turned around and happened to Robert. I haven't felt the same about it since. I just can't bring myself around to forgiving the country, and I have to blame the country for it. I might be wrong in doing it, but I have to. I have to blame our system, I would say, maybe, because had the system done, in my opinion, what it should have done at the outset, this type of racism (I guess you would call it) would never have existed to the point where they would want to kill a man that was trying to go about bringing about better relations between the races and that type of thing.

Silveri: Do you think there was a connection there? Do you think that was the reason why--

Baxter: Yes, yes; definitely. That was one of the reasons. It might not have been the major reason, but it was one of, maybe, many reasons.

Silveri: You are speaking both of John and Robert?

Baxter: John and Robert. I feel for Ted Kennedy, the Senator. Now he's beginning to think in terms of running for the presidency.

Silveri: Would you support him if he did?

Baxter: I most certainly would! But I feel that the same thing would happen to him. See, this type of thing that existed when John Kennedy was on

Baxter: (continued) the scene still exists to some extent. It might not be as prevalent, but I wouldn't want to see him run for the presidency. I think we would be better off to have him as senator and have him on the scene because he still could make good decisions, help other people make good decisions, and that type of thing.

Silveri: You remember the early '60's when John Kennedy was president, and they had the confrontation in Mississippi and Alabama?

Baxter: Yes. Yes. Yes. But even now we need strong-willed men like Kennedy, like the Kennedy brothers.

Silveri: What about Lyndon Johnson? How do you feel about Lyndon Johnson?

Baxter: Well, Lyndon Johnson wasn't too bad a president, He had his faults like most other presidents, but he did some good along with some bad. He ~~wasn't~~ the worst president, and he wasn't ~~the~~ best one.

Silveri: Think he made a bad mistake in Vietnam?

Baxter: Definitely! That was one of his big mistakes, in my opinion.

Silveri: Some people have criticized him because, in the matter of race relations particularly, when he gave a State of the Union Address, and said in his talk about "we shall overcome," some people claimed he raised the expectations unrealistically in respect to race relations.

Baxter: Yes,

Silveri: I was wondering if you felt that way. In other words, he was proposing such great progress for blacks that they realistically couldn't be

Silveri: (continued) realized in the near future. Did you feel at all that way when he was president?

Baxter: Well, in some instances I did because some of the things that he led, maybe, people to start thinking in terms of, just couldn't be done, couldn't be had at that particular time. Maybe somewhere along the line, yes, but that early in the stage of the game, so to speak, those things just couldn't have happened, in my opinion. But I think he was an advocate of good relationship between the races. He was more or less for the improvement of the blacks' status. That was pretty evident, I think, among the blacks as well as the whites.

Silveri: I wanted to ask you some questions about race relations in the country in general. What do you think is at the basis of this racism in this country?

Baxter: Well, I think we have to go back to the early part of this country. Well not the early part. I would say we go back to early slavery and take it from there. Now you know the whites held the slaves (the blacks as slaves), and they used them to do all of their drudgery, and hard and laborious work, and all of that sort of thing. They felt that the blacks were an inferior people, and they weren't supposed to be treated like human beings. This thing existed all through the early part of slavery, this business of buying and selling blacks just like they did cattle, and that's what they thought of them then, as stock. They sold them as stock.

Baxter: (continued) They bought them as stock, not even thinking in terms of them being human beings on the basis as they were human beings. Now, that's the type of thing that existed for, I would say, the first hundred years, or possibly more, of this country. Well, anyway, it existed long enough for the people that inhabited this country to get the idea that blacks were just not human beings, and they weren't supposed to be treated as human beings, regardless, and that type of thing has existed through the years, and it still does, to some extent.

Now, we've come a long way since emancipation and since the Civil War, but some of that superiority complex that existed among the whites to blacks being inferior still exists. I think that is the basic reason for this racism that we find in this country today, and I've looked at it from every angle, the good ones and the bad ones. I happen to be one that believes that slavery wasn't all bad. That's the way I feel about it.

If you look at it and study it, you can find some good did exist, and there were good people even in slavery, but when you look at from all angles, and even now, there is too much of this thing, this type of thinking, that existed during slavery is existing now. They still want to see the blacks in what they called then "his place, " and what is "his place, " as a human being? He has to make a living for his family just like the other groups have to make livings and take care of their families, and what have you. So, that being the case, he can't be too much different, but that type of thinking does exist. It exists to the point where it's causing a lot of the

Baxter: (continued) problems that we are still wrestling with now.

Silveri: In your own life have you encountered a great deal of discrimination?

Baxter: Oh yes.

Silveri: Personally?

Baxter: Terrific amount of it! Much more than most people know about. I happen to be one of the, what you call the opposite of a militant. Anyway, I don't have the name right on my tongue now, but anyway I don't feel too badly about this thing that has existed through the years. I don't blame any particular person for it, and I don't altogether blame the whites for it. It's a thing that has existed since America was America, and I think, when these people were doing these things, they thought it was the thing to do.

If you don't know any better, you can't hold a person responsible for what he actually doesn't know. So, I think some of the people figured that this was what was supposed to happen, the way it was supposed to be. It has just spilled over and has been handed down from generation to generation 'til we end up with it now. But I think it's on its way out once and for all. Of course, it's not going over night. It didn't happen over night, and it's not going to disappear over night.

Silveri: In other words, you have seen improvement during your lifetime?

Baxter: A great improvement. I just wish that some of these younger

Baxter: (continued) ` people could see and realize the progress that we really have made through hard struggle and what have you. I know from self experience because when I first started to work and meet the public, and I've always been in public work one way or the other dealing with the public. Oh boy, the attitude towards blacks was far different from what it is now! I've just watched it improve from year to year 'til I feel pretty good about the whole thing. The foreseeable future looks good!

Silveri: How about the black community in Asheville? There's been a great improvement in their standards?

Baxter: Oh yes, yes. Very great improvement, and as I just stated, things really look good from the standpoint of the blacks and the whites. The relationship is better than it's been, that I can remember, ever. All signs point to it getting even better! It's going to be a matter of keeping some of these hotheads cool.

Silveri: John, I wanted to ask you before, do you belong to any church?

Baxter: Oh yes. I belong to Brown's Temple; that's Methodist. I've been a Methodist practically all of my life, all my adult life.

Silveri: Were your parents, too?

Baxter: No, my parents were of another denomination. Well, it's Methodist, but it's another system of Methodism. They were originally, I believe it's M. E., which means (A. M. E.) African Episcopal Methodist, I think that's what it is.

But the church to which I am a member now' is going to be torn

Baxter: (continued) down in the not-too-distant future, and **that's** in this urban renewal area. But I've been affiliated with the churches in Asheville since I was large enough to know anything about going to Sunday School and that type of thing. I've always been one to like people, like to be associated with people. Church is one of the places that you could always find--

[Side I, Tape II ends]

[Side II, Tape II]

Baxter: ...and associate with people. That's where I've been: this church, that church, even though I belong to one over here, I just didn't confine all of my time over here. I would like to work with this one over here. In fact, I worked with all of the churches in the city, one way or another.

Silveri: The church you belong to now, does it have an entirely black congregation?

Baxter: No. **It's** a few whites in there, not too many, but there are some.

Silveri: Has the church played a significant role in your life?

Baxter: Yes. Definitely. In my opinion, no community is complete without a church of some sort, and the church plays a terrific role within the community. In fact, I would say the community depends, more or less, on its schools and its churches. Everything else, in my opinion, revolves around those two institutions.

Silveri: You've lived in Asheville most of your life. Is there any other part of the **country** you would like to live in?

Baxter: Not preferable to this. No, I prefer these parts or this section to any place I've been so far. Now, New York, in my opinion, is the closest thing to this section when it comes to, let me say, the water and the air. Once you get out of the city of New York, like up state and in the mountains of New York, the atmosphere, ~~the~~ air, and the water, is very similar to the air and the water in these mountains. So, I think that's why I developed this taste for New York.

Silveri: Well, we've been going on for almost two hours here. I've really enjoyed it.

Baxter: Yes, I've done most of the talking, but I would like to get to your side some of the things I have in mind which is not a part of this thing that we are doing now. I'm the one that's supposed to be interviewed.

Silveri: I want to thank you very much. Do you have any more comments you would like to make before we end?

Baxter: Well, I would like to say I think we have finally hit on the right thing. I think we are striking the iron now while it is real hot, and that's when you do your best work with iron is when it's hot. I'm saying that to say this, now this type of thing that you're doing, along with the schools here and the other professors, is a step in the right direction, and it's a step that should have been taken long ago, but it's better late than never. So, I'm just going to be anxiously watching what happens from here on in, doing everything I can to help along the lines of bringing the type of thing around that you and your co-workers are attempting to do.

Baxter: (continued) It's a beautiful thing!

Silveri: Thank you very much;

Baxter: Thank you!

[End of interview]
