

Benjamin R. Hunter, interviewed by Dr. Louis Silveri, July 8, 1977.

Dr. Silveri: When were you born?

Benjamin Hunter: August 17, 1886.

Silveri: Where?

Hunter: A little village known as MacNeill, South Carolina.

Incidentally, you possibly have heard of the famous Charleston earthquake which occurred in that year, and I never was quite certain as to whether I caused it or it caused me, but anyway, I preceded it by twelve days.

Silveri: Could you tell us whereabouts your birthplace is, in South Carolina?

Hunter: Well, it is on . . . it is located, generally speaking, in the Southern part of the state near the Savannah River, on the little railroad that ran on the South Carolina side from Augusta to Savannah. They both were Georgia points; not too far from Allendale, South Carolina. That's a bigger town.

Silveri: What do / ^{you know} about your ancestors? How far back can you trace your ancestors, in America?

Hunter: I have a genealogy of my maternal ancestors. They left Wurttemberg, Germany . . . there was three families, came together. . . they left there in 1751. They entered the port of Charleston in 1752. They were given grants of land up the Edisto River, about forty miles from the coast. There is an island just south of Charleston known as Edisto Island. It takes its name, of course, from the mouth of the river of that same name.

Silveri: What was your mother's maiden name?

Hunter: Rentz, R-e-n-t-z.

Silveri: Let's go back to the Civil War period. When you were growing up, did you have any relatives who fought in the Civil War?

Hunter: Yes, my father's brothers. He had, I think, three in the war. One was killed at Bull Run. The other fled West after the war and never was heard of since. I don't know whether he got into a friendly fight, or whether or not he was hung for cattle rustling, or what, I don't know, but anyway, he disappeared.

Silveri: Did your father then . . .

Hunter: Oh, no. My father was too young. My father was born in '52, so he was only nine years old when the war started.

Silveri: Did either of your grandfathers own slaves?

Hunter: Oh, yes. My maternal grandfather had thirty-five. And as a matter of fact, one of the interesting episodes: the family moved from where I was born to South Georgia when I was quite a youngster, but my mother always, without variance, would go back to visit her family in South Carolina every two years. And there were so many of us (you were talking about your family) my mother had eleven children. Two died in infancy, but nine of us grew up. Anyway, there were so many children that we had to take turns about who would go with her and who would stay home and keep the home fires burning. The trip that I was old enough to remember: my mother went to the cabin of her mammy. You know, it was the custom in those days for the colored woman to be the nurse and look after each child. She had an individual mammy. And

Hunter (Cont'd.): Mama's mammy, the one that served her when she was young; that was the first place she went to visit, and they greeted each other as if they were long lost sisters, and the affection that they showed was very delightful to see.

Silveri: What did your maternal grandfather raise?

Hunter: Oh, he grew cotton and rice. He had lands that extended down into the swamps of the Edisto River and he grew rice to feed his own slaves, and family, too. I'm a rice eater, myself.

Silveri: How about your paternal grandfather, did he hold slaves?

Hunter: Well, I don't know too much about that. My paternal grandfather was an only child, and his father

was not a plantation owner. He ran a . . . they called it a carriage factory, but actually what he did, I think he built rough country wagons, you know, farm wagons, and did blacksmithing, near Sunbury, North Carolina, right close to the Virginia line, just south of Suffolk, Virginia.

Silveri: You heard many stories about the Civil War?

Hunter: Well, I heard a great many, of course, but mostly what I read afterwards, because actually the fortunes of my maternal family were so drastically upset that the question was how to re-adjust to the new conditions that were existing at the time. No, I didn't hear, I couldn't go into detail, because after all I was born ^{twenty-one} ~~thirty-one~~ years after Appomattox. No, no, no. . . twenty-one years. Appomattox was '65 and I was born in '86. ★

Silveri: But your mother and father could remember the war?

Hunter: Not too much. Papa used to talk about the Yankees coming through southern Virginia and northern Carolina when they'd come, but Mama didn't. She was too young. She was born in '59. She was only two years old when the war started.

Silveri: What did your father's family do after the war?

Hunter: My father . . . I declare, I don't remember too much. I never knew too much of them. We never visited them when I was a boy growing up. They lived up in Virginia too far away. But I didn't see too much of them. I really do not know the intimate life of any of them. I only knew two of Papa's brothers who came South and worked for the railroad company, as he did.

Silveri: He worked for the railroad?

Hunter: Yes. As a matter of fact, I started out in life as a railroad agent and telegraph operator. This really might go into this picture: I left home, shoved off from home port, when I was fifteen years and three months old. I finally wound up, oh, about, that was and in November of nineteen and one, / in January of nineteen and three, which was about fifteen, sixteen months later, [here he speaks Spanish rapidly].

Silveri: Would you repeat that in English, please?

Hunter: [Again, in Spanish]. . . agent for a little railroad about a hundred and fifty miles southwest of Juarez.

Silveri: You couldn't speak Spanish, could you, when you went down there?

Hunter: Oh, I had not much to do, and I applied myself. I borrowed a textbook. Well, digressing for a moment, the only time I had a chance to test my fluency in the language was: Mrs. Guastavino, whose husband was one of the architects that built the famous Biltmore home and estate, you know, this thing you have to pay eight dollars to go through, now. When he died, he came out here to Black Mountain, and over here where there is a Christian assembly church, he bought about one hundred and sixty acres, or thereabouts, and built him a replica of the old Spanish hacienda, with an outhouse and a gate, and everybody had to pass muster before you could get in to see the . . . and he lived there until he died. The fact is, he's buried in the crypt of the St. Lawrence church in Asheville. His name was Guastavino.

Silveri: Is the house still there, that you describe. . . the Spanish hacienda?

Hunter: No, it's been . . . she's been dead now about thirty or thirty-five years. But I knew her, in her lifetime, because after he died she still lived out there, with a woman for a companion. Then in the wintertime she'd come down here and stay at the Monte Vista. . . the original,

Anyway, I got to know her once and she, herself, was
 . . . Mr. Guastavino's second wife and the
 daughter of a fellow architect from Madrid, España.

One cold, winter day, I remember when she was plodding along in this dress, black dress. (she never did mix too well) but she was just

Hunter (Cont'd.): plodding along this cold, bitter, wintry day, and I came up from behind her and I cried out: "Buenos dias, se^ñora. ¿comos esta dias, no?" She turned around and galvanized into life. She later told me I spoke such good language. Which was true. The textbooks that I acquired to study from were of the Castiliano type of Spanish, spoken by the elite of Madrid.

Silveri: You mentioned that there were eleven children in your family.

Hunter: Born, but nine. . .two died in infancy.

Silveri: Which one were you, the first?

Hunter: Fourth.

Silveri: That was a very large family. What do you remember about growing up? Where did you grow up---North Carolina?

Hunter: No, no. I grew up in a little town called Alapaha, South Georgia. There are no finer people in the world than they were, either. Good Samaritans. Whenever anything happened they all rallied around, and as far as money was concerned, never mentioned at all. As a matter of fact, when I was a boy, oh, six or eight years old, our house burned down, and our nearest neighbor lived about a quarter of a mile away, was a big farmer, had everything on the map, we just bundled the whole family up. . . there were about eight or ten of us at that time. . . down to his place, and he took care of us until the house could be re-built. We'd been down there about three months, and as far as board, or cost, or anything. . . it was never mentioned in the world. That's what you did for your friends.

Silveri: What role did the church play with your family? How important was the church?

Hunter: My parents were very religious people. Very religious.

Silveri: What church did they belong to?

Hunter: They belonged to . . . my father and mother belonged to the Methodist church, and I was compelled to go worship. . . let's see, they had about five services a week that I had to attend. The fact is, I was Sexton at our little church when I was about ten or twelve years old. I'd ring the bell; trim the lamps, fill them with oil, and then go to sleep when the preacher preached too long.

Silveri: Do you remember the first school you went to?

Hunter: Yes. My father sent me to a little private school. There were about six . . . an elderly "fille soule". . . comprenez fille soule? French, that is: unmarried lady. . . taught that school, and we went to that before we were eligible to go to the public schools.

Silveri: So you went to school as long as you were home, up until fifteen years old?

Hunter: Oh, yes, yes.

Silveri: What grade did you finish?

Hunter: We didn't have grades; we went by readers. I think I was about the sixth reader, or something like that. . . seventh reader.

Silveri: We're talking about the 1890's now, right?

Hunter: No. That was nineteen and one.

Silveri: Nineteen and one. Okay.

Hunter: Well, I didn't go to school for about a year before I left. . . That was about 1899. . . when I went to school.

Silveri: Then you took off?

Hunter: I took off, because by that time . . . I matured early,

Hunter (Cont'd.): really I did, because I became aware of the problem that my father had in providing for so many children, and I thought I was capable of getting out. . . and indeed I did, for the next eight years. I plowed back into the coffers of my family my little tid bit. When I came back from Mexico, as an example, even though I had been away from home for about a year and a half. That was such a tremendous move going West, I was sufficiently under the influence of parental domination that I didn't think I could make such a move so drastic as that without getting my mother's consent.

This is an interesting interlude: when I went home to spend my sixteenth birthday, my youngest sister was just about seven days old, and I remember kneeling by my mother's bedside to plead my case for her permission to go West. And finally I was successful in getting it, on the condition that I wouldn't be gone more than a year. So, when I got to Mexico and the dam was [Spanish]. . . I'd save my money, and I'd made a friend who was a telegraph operator in the Western Union office in New Orleans, so when I got back to New Orleans I bought a present and gifts for everybody (not men, no) and but all of my sisters and my mother / the family, with the money I'd saved while I was in Mexico.

Silveri: How much money did you start out with?

Hunter: Me? Nothing.

Silveri: Just took off without anything?

Hunter: Sure.

Silveri: How did you get along? What did you do. . .start walking along the road when you left home, or what?

Hunter: Oh, no, no, no. You see, I took my apprenticeship in the little town where I grew up, Alapaha, which was eighteen miles east of where I had landed a job. Oh, yes, I knew exactly what I was going to do. I had arranged for a job. I don't go off half-cocked; never have.

Silveri: At that town you learned the art of the telegraph operator, right?

Hunter: Yes.

Silveri: Then why did you go to Mexico?

Hunter: Well, because when I got to New Orleans, that was where we got our first jobs. The Southern Pacific railroad does not go into New Orleans. The terminus is at Algiers, right across the river. Have you ever been over there? Well, anyway, on the west bank of the Mississippi River they do have, did have, (I don't know what the situation is now) but they do have a passenger station in New Orleans, but they used to ferry their trains across to that station, but as far as the track and all, it began at Algiers and went westward. Well, anyway, my friend with whom I was traveling, we got a job, each.

I was sent to a little town called Jennings, Louisiana, and he was sent to Opelousas, and when I stayed there about three minutes I said, "Gosh, I'm just half-way west." So I took off and finally wound up when I got to El Paso, which is directly across the river from Juarez. My money was running out, so I had to replenish it some way or another, and I tried with Southern Pacific; I tried with ET&NE: no soap. I tried with the Mexican Central; that's the government-owned railroad that reaches ultimately to Mexico City: no soap. Then I heard about this little mining railroad that took off South West: Sierra Madre Pacific

