

Harley Elmer Ownbey

Tape I, April 1, 1994

Side 1:

He was born in 1921 in East Asheville, attended Rose Hill School (see Albert Sorrells for photo) until 10 and then North Asheville, the Ira B. Jones (then called Grace) finishing in the 11th grade. He did odd jobs until 1942 when he went into the service for 3 years, eleven months in active duty. When he returned he, and two friends, bought a construction company but because of ill health had to leave.

[I/1/16] He retired from 32 years of service with the Post Office on Aug. 22, 1976. He was called up in 1949 to serve in the Korean War and after 1 year was discharged and used his G. I. Bill to go to Biltmore College, graduating in 1954. [Virginia Ownbey]

[I/1/29] He is happy to be retired. He plays golf at the municipal course three times a week. He likes gardening and is a car race fan.

[I/1/36] He bought a racing car in the 50's when there was a track at McCormick Field. He kept it one year but couldn't break even so decided to watch. He had a driver. [Jack Sprinkle]

[I/1/57] The race track ran around the McCormick field, not interfering with the baseball field, but the noise bothered the neighbors.

[I/1/64] The new speedway is near the Amboy Bridge by the river. He goes to races in Atlanta, Charlotte, and Bristol and knows the drivers. Two were killed in plane crashes and the third is one of the racers. [David Allison, Alan Chickie, Neil Bonnett]

[I/1/85] He came from a poor family. His mother, when he was six, told him to work for the US government when he grew up. He took the exam for the post office and drove a city bus while waiting for an opening.

[I/1/115] He had two deliveries a day and found dogs a big problem. There was a population explosion in the city in 1947. People had money and were building houses.

[I/1/134] For 20 years he delivered parcel post in the morning and mail in the afternoon. Parcel Post is going out and UPS is taking its place. It is privately owned and cheaper.

[I/1/166] He said the Grace Station (north office) isn't well run and even though petitions have been signed and the senator contacted, nothing can be done. Service is too slow. [I have checked and found that the office is the busiest in the city].

[I/1/193] In 1947 his car had a bumper sticker saying he was proud of the US Postal Service - now he is ashamed and tells about a man leisurely having coffee while delivering a \$8.50 priority letter. He feels that no one cares and quitting time and pay check are all important.

[I/1/227] The people on the route become like family and it is hard changing locations even though you often make the choice to move. He tells of an experience when a woman in the Princess Ann Apartment left money for him for a postage due package. [Mrs. Orr]

[I/1/343] He delivered a package to an apartment house which proved to have some dynamite in it - a jealous man intended to kill his brother. He went to Cincinnati to testify at the trial (see enclosure). When asked for his address the audience laughed at "Spooks Branch Road." The man was sentenced to 5 years in jail.

[I/1/409] He tells of strange deliveries - one letter with needles for drugs. One Christmas unsealed unstamped envelope containing \$10's and \$20's were found in boxes on Lookout Road, Hi Vu, Horizon Hill and Ivy Street. This was traced to a man on Edgewood Road who had brain damage and wanted to be nice to his neighbors.

[I/1/469] Post boxes are considered Federal Property whether they are on the street or the door of a house. When the price of stamps went up some people tried sending checks for utilities without stamps. This was stopped. The postal inspector has the right to open mail. Many interesting items have been found in pick-up boxes - dead mice, live snakes, pocket books.

[I/1/519] When postage is due on a letter or package, the mailman pays and collects from the recipient. One carrier kept his collection in a piggy bank for his daughter's college. Ninety-nine percent of the amount of money is paid. [Rubin Mendaias]

[I/1/545] The mailman has a right to sue for any damage done by a dog and must go to the hospital for a shot if bitten. A container of HALT is carried - the advice is to spray or run. One time he kicked a dog that was aggressive and when he went back with another delivery he saw a shotgun in the doorway.

Side 2:

He tells about the postal delivery system. Mailmen pick up the bundles, marked for delivery according to addresses and deposit part in a relay box (olive drab and same shape as postal boxes) when they run out of mail they return for more. On cold days he has sat inside a box to keep warm while eating lunch.

[I/2/22] When he drove a delivery truck the truck held all the mail to be delivered and he used a system known as "park and loop." He would move the truck after returning to it 3 or 4 times. He could go to designated lunch spots - for Horizon Hill route he could go the Athens Restaurant (just closed). Grace Restaurant (no longer there) or Lords (now closed). They were all on Merrimon Ave.

[I/2/47] The supervisors knew the routes and rode with the drivers once a year to count mail delivered and adjust routes as the neighborhoods changed. When he serviced Beaverdam one man was needed - now there are 3.

[I/2/115] In 32 years he has been bitten 4 times. His adviser told the men to use HALT or run. There is no such thing as non-delivery - even in the (1993 Blizzard) though men were told not to deliver if there was danger. [Mrs. Nipper (dog named Nipper, too)]

[I/2/165] He told a story of a young man hired as temporary help at Christmas who returned for more mail to deliver in one hour when it should have taken three. Ten days after Christmas a storm sewer was blocked up - and there were thousands of pieces of mail.

[I/2/188] Carriers have a rotating day off. During this time a substitute covers - this enables him to know the route when a carrier is ill.

[I/2/205] Magazines have become a back-breaking job. Two or three men put them on tables. Southern Living was the heaviest. People knew when the various magazines were due and expected them to be on time. They required that same delivery as 1st class mail.

[I/2/233] The carriers have a high profile in the community and, when he dropped off his sister-in-law and son, someone complained to the office. [Rowena Ownbey, Larry Ownbey]

[I/2/295] Carriers have been known to steal from envelopes (they can feel the cash and one man filled his bag at Lords Drug Store. He was caught by camera. Every imaginable scam has been tried.

[I/2/405] He has delivered broken open packages that were badly packed. One contained human remains with a note to scatter over Beaver Lake or Mt. Mitchell.

[I/2/441] He discusses changes in attitudes and feels that the pride in work, where every piece of mail was promptly delivered, has deteriorated. He feels that this came about after WWII when people were so busy making money they didn't have time for children. Now we have robberies, rapes, drugs and no morals.

[I/2/478] He has two daughters who are nurses. His son is married to the daughter of the President of Champion paper. He was advised that the Pigeon River problem may cause the plant to close. He has gone into selling used cars. [Dianne Lyda, Karen Wolfe, Larry Ownbey]

[I/2/549] He was operated on for lung cancer and gave up smoking on August 22. He insisted that smoking was a habit, but he was not addicted. He had to have a goal to stop smoking - he didn't need any assistance - just made up his mind.

[I/2/603] Regarding Beaver Lake - he reviewed what was said before that it was closed because of a drowning.

Tape II, April 6, 1994

Side 1:

[II/1/6] The years during the Depression were very trying. He lived on a farm in a log cabin with 2 brothers and 5 sisters. He walked to the one room (three grades) school house, sometimes with cardboard in the soles of his shoes and having corn bread and coffee for breakfast and at times nothing more until the next morning. He thought everyone in the same condition.

[II/1/33] His father worked for a man whose steer was killed and his cousin went to prison. Because he was afraid he would lose his job he refused to sign for the parole. Later, when he was intimidated by his cousin he shot - but did not kill him. Ownbey wrote about this when he was in Biltmore College and chosen #1 in his class.

[II/1/54] Early in the Depression there was no help for the people. In the late 20's food was available in the basement of the courthouse. He lived in Fairview and he walked 10 miles to get cheese, flour, etc. His father, working with shovel and wheel barrow, helped build the air field.

[II/1/95] He attended a one room school house between Biltmore and Fairview - Rose Hill - later a Shriner meeting house. Later he went to the Grace School now called Ira B. Jones. This school had champion basketball (see enclosure) teams for boys and girls, a football team and fine teachers. The grades ended after the 11th. He worked for the Post Office after war service. He was called back during the Korean War and when he was discharged went to Biltmore College on the GI Bill.

[II/1/120] For a short period he worked with Western Union. This was the fastest way of contacting people without phones. An 8-month pregnant woman lost her baby when she was informed of her husband's death.

[II/1/155] When his father was growing up there was no money to buy books and he was needed on the farm. He had only three years of school.

[II/1/171] Today people receive food stamps and he believes that 90% of these people could work, they trade food stamps for drugs.

[II/1/191] He repeats the story of his father's working and education but feels that the Habitat (Habitat for Humanity) is a good example of some people who do want to work. He would be willing to pay more taxes to support schools.

[II/1/244] He considers the airport an asset to the city. Most of the big companies fly in and out. People protested the ending of train service.

[II/1/260] When the Tunnel through Beaucatcher Mountains proved inadequate to carry the traffic many protested the cut. Some said the flow of air would change from the West to the East. It was also said that the BB&T building would change also.

[288] There was a ruling that businesses had to convert from coal to gas (see George Coggins tape) but while homeowners also changed over this was not mandatory and they could use soft coal if they wanted to. There was no marked price difference between coal, oil, or electricity but coal was hard on furniture and drapes.

[II/1/347] As a boy, he and his friends made a dam on the stream that runs parallel with Beaverdam Road and swam under a bridge. Beaver Lake pool was reserved for Sunday. Most of the boys worked during the week. [According to Terrell 5/1/75 enclosed there was a change house].

[II/1/363] When he was older he went to the YMCA. Food and movie tickets were provided for them. The Y was where Clyde Savings is today. There was a basketball court, and sand lot for fastball and football. (see enclosure) [Seth Perkins]

[II/1/400] His parents didn't sell their farm produce in town but he worked for two families who did. He and his cousins caught and fattened opossums to sell to the blacks. In the early years wagons were used to bring produce in town. The 13 miles from his uncle's house meant that they had to start out early but their loaded trucks were empty by afternoon. They had regular customers.

[II/1/445] He felt country life was rewarding. He got up at 7, worked until 5 or 6 and then spent the evenings playing games, pitching horse shoes, singing and dancing.

[II/1/513] With the radio, phone and TV there isn't much of this kind of life left. He tells of corn shucking, taffy pulls, and group singing. "Kissing a girl was ultimate in romance in the late 20's." Sex was not heard of.

[II/1/549] Newly married couples did not take long honeymoons. Their friends would find out where they were spending the night and serenade them. At Halloween the young men put wagons on top of houses or in trees.

Side 2:

When he was growing up he had to carry 2-10 quart buckets of water from the well for cooking, laundry, and once-a-week bathing. He carried wood from a mile away for cooking. Everything changed overnight when electricity came in. It was a welcome change but the visits and get togethers were lost. With the phone and TV people stopped visiting.

[II/2/45] Integration was a "trying time" when Martin Luther King Jr. was killed the blacks wanted to "take it by force." They wanted to change the name of the Edwards High School to Asheville High School.

[II/2/62] On Sunday a deacon would stand in front of the main door of the First Baptist Church and, if a black appeared, would say, "Your church is up that street." One black woman insisted on admission and she was let in. In his church on Beaverdam the policy was that, if a black came to worship they would be welcome but if he came to cause trouble he would be stopped by any means. There is a black couple attending the Beaverdam Baptist Church now and he visited with them last week.

[II/2/88] He feels that peaceful integration is a matter of education. Students from the Ira B. Jones school (white) were transported to the Randolph School (black) to reflect the racial

population (22% of the population in Asheville was black). [Today this is part of "magnet system" - elementary school students attend the school of their choice].

[II/2/106] He heard about blacks going in to churches and disrupting services.

[II/2/112] When he was delivering mail he was involved in racial conflict. A group of high school students blocked the street threatening to overturn the mail truck but he drove on through. He was blocked by the sidewalk a number of times. His supervisor advised him to give way.

[II/2/132] There are still groups that won't give in. He feels the blacks tried to get too much too soon. There are solvable problems in the city. There are mobs and security turns its head.

[II/2/145] As a mailman he knew every street in the cities. During the redevelopment the "changes were unreal." The blacks lived in rental houses and when the owners wouldn't repair them they would either take it or move out. With redevelopment they moved into the complexes or into the white community. When blacks moved in the whites moved out. Blacks moved into the Arlington and Vernon area and into Montford. The Historical Society wants to preserve houses, new streets, and sidewalks were put in when buildings bulldozed.

[II/2/185] For many years Asheville was a tourist city - now condo complexes are going up for retirement people.

[II/2/194] "Spook's Branch" road was originally "Spoke's Branch" after a factory making spokes for wagon wheels. It was changed over the years - somehow - and after WWII a group decided to change it to "Sunny Side Lane." One lady wouldn't sign so after much discussion they went back to "Spooks." New neighbors moving in like it (greatest thrill) but when he appeared for the court trial in Cincinnati (see enclosure) people laughed so hard when he gave his address the judge called for order in the court.

[II/2/255] As a mailman he knew every street. The blacks had their area and stayed there. The last man hanged was in Witchwood (south on Merrimon to Spears to dead end across from Mt. Claire by Morris Funeral Home.) "One house had dirt floors but didn't realize others had more." The Historical Society stopped the destruction of houses.

[II/2/286] When he was young travel by car was slow and one expected 2-3 flat tires on a 15 mile trip. With a jack, repair kit, and pump repairs were made.

[II/2/310] Water Street was off McDowell Street. It no longer exists but Depot Street is still there. There was a brothel on 27 Water and bootleg liquor was sold. The madam ordered her clothes by mail sent C.O.D. and he often had to deliver on Saturday afternoon [1955 Directory: p.170, 27 Water Street, Raymond Washington]

[II/2/340] He heard Bailey at various meetings - church, Lions Club, Post Office [I told him the stories I learned from Charles Sluder and Marjorie Maxwell] (see Bailey interviews by Louis Silveri) [Jesse James Bailey]

[II/2/364] Every morning a group of men calling themselves the "Liars Club" meet at Eckerds [he tells me some of the yarns.]

[II/2/423] He tells that Weir was a good city manager who took the city to heart but he was irritated that he had to deliver his mail to his door when everyone else had a box on the street (this was a "mounted route") especially after Weir obtained the bulldozer he and his partners had ordered saying "That sure is a real nice bulldozer I just bought. Have you heard the name "eminent domain,"...you ordered it, I'm taking it and the city is paying for it and it goes to the city dump."

He feels Weir made a big mistake on the placement of the Civic Center. Fisher said he would sell his "Heart of Asheville Motel" for \$150,000. Coggins offered land if he could have the parking lot. Negotiations went on for several years and, the day before Weir retired he bought Fisher's land for \$250,000 [this does not fit with other stories - see other interviews]. [Weldon Weir, Sam Fisher, George Coggins]

[II/2/486] In 1937 Dermid was appointed Chief of Police (see enclosure) - the youngest in the country. He tells tales at the Liars Club about the differences in crimes today and his time when there were no rapes or drugs. The problems then involved gambling, shooting and drinking. He became Supervisor of Public Works. [Charles Dermid]

[II/2/515] In the snow of 1937 [It was 1936] he went to work in an old model A with 4 others - In the last snow he depended on electricity and was stuck. [Lucius "Craggy" Ingle]