

TMP-002

Interviewee: Fred Lee Brown

Interviewer: Jessica Taylor

Date: June 15, 2013

T: This is Jessica Taylor interviewing Fred Lee Brown, June 15, 2013 at 1:30 p.m. at the Edge Hill Service Station. Mr. Brown, can you please state your date of birth, if you don't mind?

B: September 21, 1954.

T: Okay. And where is it that you were born?

B: Well, I was born at the hospital over in Newport News, but my residence was here.

T: Here- Gloucester Courthouse?

B: Gloucester Courthouse, yes.

T: Okay. What were your parents' names and occupations?

B: Fred L. Brown was an [inaudible] stationed here in Gloucester, and my mother was Martha Fields Brown.

T: Oh, okay.

B: She worked for him.

T: Oh, wonderful. How about siblings?

B: No siblings.

T: No siblings. Okay. So what is your occupation?

B: I have been a computer programmer.

T: Okay. And that was in Florida?

B: It was mostly in Florida. The last ten years I worked out of my house here in Gloucester.

T: Wonderful. Okay, so where do you live in Gloucester County right now?

B: Zanoni.

T: Zanoni?

B: Yeah.

T: Okay.

B: On the Ware River.

T: Oh, wonderful. So just right off the bat, what is your earliest memory of Main Street?

B: Living on Lewis Avenue. We had a house on Lewis Avenue.

T: Okay. So what would bring you down to Main Street?

B: Just about anything.

T: Yeah?

B: Walking to school, any kind of shopping.

T: Okay. What were the shops that your parents or your grandparents went to?

B: Let's see. There was J.C. Edwards, I think, was the name of the five and ten cent store. There were a sequence of grocery stores- I think there was an A & P and a Colonial during my youth. Benny Lee's market-

T: Okay.

B: -well, Buckley's market- his father.

T: Okay.

B: The post office, the bank.

T: Okay. What was the change that your parents saw from your grandparents' time?

B: I just think that probably things were getting bigger, more populous, that kind of thing.

T: Makes sense. Is there anything that went out of business in between?

B: Oh, I'm sure they- there were. Can't think of anything that went out of business- during my childhood? Most things were probably pretty steady during my childhood.

T: Yeah?

B: But I don't- I'm sure there were things that changed hands.

T: Okay.

B: Plenty of times.

T: That's fair. And one of them was the service station, right?

B: Well, the service station was always in the hands of my great-uncle Jack Brown throughout my childhood.

T: Okay. So, did you spend a lot of time here?

B: No, because they were quite efficient. We would pull through and get the car gassed up and take off.

T: So what were some of your earliest memories of this? Is it just going through?

B: Just going through.

T: Really?

B: Charging the gas to- everybody had an individual account, pretty much, and you filled it up, told them who to charge it to, and drove off.

T: Okay, so about how many times a week would you come here?

B: Probably rarely.

T: Really?

B: Before I drove. [Laughter] I had very little reason to come here other than being- just being in the car.

T: Right. Right.

B: My father drove a lot for work, and he came through here a lot.

T: Okay.

B: Probably more often without me than with me.

T: Right. So I guess I should have asked, how often did your parents come here?

B: Well, my father drove a lot for work, so I think he was in and out quite frequently, and of course, he knew all the people here and enjoyed talking to them.

T: Where did he work?

B: He worked with Southside Insurance Agency.

T: Where was that?

B: It started on the courthouse itself. It's the building with the big white columns, which had been my mother's father's insurance agency.

T: Okay.

B: Dad took that over when my grandfather died. Eventually he built the little brick building that was across from what was then the post office near what has recently opened as Heron's Cove-

T: Okay.

B: -as a part of Sanders.

T: But he drove a lot for work?

B: He made a lot of calls to his customers, did a lot of inspections.

T: So who was the first person in your family to get a car?

B: My father had a car as a young man, and probably came here to get gas or perhaps got gas in Ware Neck where he lived across the street from Jack Brown's house.

T: Okay. Do you remember the make and model?

B: I do not.

T: No?

B: I was not yet born.

T: Yeah. I just wondered if you had seen old pictures or something-

B: I have an old picture of the car, but I don't remember now what it is.

T: Okay.

B: But I've seen it before. My father had- he was one of the first people in his- I'll say- in his age group or circle of friends to actually own a car, which made him quite popular. [Laughter]

T: Yeah. So did his parents buy the car for him or did he earn it?

B: Oh, he would've-

T: He would've earned it.

B: Yes.

T: What was he doing then that he earned it.

B: My father, who was the son of Jack Brown's younger brother, worked lots of jobs as a teenager. His father died when he was very young, and there were lots of kids. Lots of mouths to feed. My father was the second oldest. He worked jobs, from what I can tell, twenty-four hours a day when he wasn't in school.

T: Right.

B: And made money and helped with the family, what they needed, and had some left over.

T: To buy a car.

B: To buy a car.

T: That's interesting that he would- out of all the things he could choose to buy, he chose a car. It may seem obvious to us, but-

B: Well, he was down there in Ware Neck, and he needed to work. So I'm sure he- he used his car to get wherever he needed to be to go to work and get a job.

T: Right, right. And he would have gassed up here.

B: Probably, probably.

T: Probably.

B: I think Jack Brown, who had a pier on the Ware River, where he got whatever petroleum products he got- I think there was a gas pump there in Ware Neck.

T: There's a gas pump there?

B: Either at the pier or at the house- Jack Brown's house. Not sure about that.

T: Okay.

B: So it's possible my father could have gotten gas from there, but it would have been the same deal. It would have been buying gas from-

T: Yeah.

B: -Jack Brown's.

T: Right. No discount there? [Laughter]

B: I don't know. [Laughter]

T: Fair enough. Fair enough. I understand. So, as far as gas stations go, is this the one that your family came to most?

B: Oh, yeah.

T: Okay. Can you kind of describe the exterior to me as you remember it versus what it looks like now? You're giving me the eye.

B: It looks like a fresher version of what it looks like now from what I remember.

[BREAK IN INTERVIEW]

T: This is just the continuation of our interview with Fred Lee Brown. We were just talking about Freedom B. Goode, but we were talking about neighbors as well. Out of all your neighbors- so thinking within, you know, your immediate area- who were the first people to get automobiles?

B: Everybody had an automobile by when I came along.

T: Everybody, when you came along. Right.

B: Yeah.

T: Okay. So about what age did they get automobiles?

B: I couldn't tell you.

T: You couldn't tell me? Do you remember what most brands would have been or something like that?

B: Probably Ford and Chevrolet.

T: Probably Ford and Chevrolet?

B: Maybe Chrysler and Buick. Maybe- maybe Dodge. Carl [inaudible] had the car dealership at the end of Lewis Avenue, where- I guess it's Boutetourt Avenue on that side of the road. Buick, Ford, Chevrolet?

T: Makes sense.

B: Chevrolet, maybe. My father worked for him for a while, but my guess is that he sold cars to a large number of people around here.

T: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Because everybody has a car when you came along, did you notice that there's an increase or, I guess, a certain number of people that come in here seeking tourism? Or seeking something to do? Or were most people leaving to go elsewhere for the weekend or something like that?

B: A lot of people around here- if you're talking just about recreation, the water was the main recreation for everybody around here.

T: Okay.

B: So, people would get to one of the rivers and go boating-

T: Okay.

B: -more than anything else.

T: That's great.

B: And remember that Jack Brown had a pier with gas on it. People would gas up their boats at Ware Neck at his pier, among, you know, a number of other places.

T: Yeah.

B: You know?

T: That's actually smart. That's kind of an extension of this. Just, transportation in general. [Laughter]

B: Yeah. Yeah.

T: He's got it on lock.

B: Yeah, he certainly had more than just this gas station.

T: Right. Were more people coming to visit the water, or were people in Gloucester going to the water?

B: I couldn't say-

T: Okay.

B: -which means that it wasn't an obvious- you know, that one was more than the other.

T: That's right. But while you're on Main Street- so, you go to the water in your car. So, on Main Street, do you take your car around or do you just walk if this is the [19]60s?

B: Well, in my case, I would tend to walk. Of course, I didn't have a car because I was too young to drive. I would say that most people drove.

T: Interesting.

B: There was no gas shortage, no gas crisis. That came around in the [19]]70s. Gas was very cheap, cars were cool.

T: Yeah.

B: Get in your car. [Laughter] If you had things to carry- I mean, why else would you go shopping? So, if you're going to the grocery store, you would drive.

T: Yeah.

B: Now, surely not everybody did that. Not everybody does that today.

T: Yeah.

B: But I don't think there was any particular reason that people would shy away from driving.

T: Right. Did you shy away from driving once you could drive?

B: I walked around the village quite a bit, because I was used to it. I was within an easy walking distance of Buckley's Store, or even down here to Morgan's Drugstore across the street from here.

T: Yeah.

B: I had no reason to drive to the gas station- to walk to the gas station!

T: Yeah.

B: If I came here I usually drove. [Laughter]

T: Yeah. So, when was your first car?

B: I had a car by the time I was sixteen.

T: You did? What was it?

B: It was a Corvair.

T: Oh, okay! What color was it?

B: It was blue.

T: Blue. [Laughter]

B: Yeah. An old, old Corvair that we had bought from a woman that we knew who no longer wanted to keep her car, because she became elderly and stopped driving.

T: Okay.

B: So, my father bought it from her for next to nothing, and it was designated as my car for when I was able to drive a year or two after that.

T: Yeah? Okay. So where did you go in it recreationally- besides school?

B: Everywhere.

T: Everywhere.

B: I drove to school- despite the fact that you said besides school. [Laughter] Yeah, everywhere.

T: Can you be a little bit more specific with recreation? Was there something that-? You didn't drive to Disney World.

B: No.

T: Yeah.

B: No, we didn't make long trips.

T: No.

B: I would say mostly around here. Now, I sailed and I had a trailer hitch for my trailer with my sailboat, and I drove around and went to sailing races around Hampton Roads. That was my big recreation, I would say.

T: Okay. It's good that the Corvair facilitated that.

B: Yeah. It even could carry, or could pull the trailer, which- [Laughter]

T: That's great. When you're in high school, did the other kids have like a youth drag? Do you know what I mean when I say that?

B: No.

T: Like a street where you kind of go up and down, kind of carouse and make noise. No?

B: I didn't really participate in that so much, if that existed.

T: Okay.

B: I don't think there was any one place that people would do that. I think there were, you know, plenty of places that people would do that.

T: Okay. Okay. If I were a football player in the [19]70s, where am I going to take my car on a Saturday night? You can't help me?

B: No, sorry.

T: Okay. No, it's okay! I just thought, you know, that maybe- but you did make this really cool point about how Gloucester has become more populous as you grew older. Did the urban setting- did it offer greater freedom and, like, more outlets for enterprises like Uncle Jack's, or was there something kind of lost in how populous it got?

B: Well, you know, Gloucester is more of a residential community, I would say.

T: Yeah.

B: There were more houses, but not so much more stores. People would still go to Newport News to shop.

T: Okay.

B: Or to the movies, or whatever the thing was. Yeah- people would go to New Market over in Newport News.

T: Okay.

B: Now gone, I think- as a shopping destination.

T: That's really interesting, because I doubt they could have done that before there were vehicles widespread enough to be able to do that.

B: Yeah, but I'm sure that ever since the bridge was built in the [19]50s or so.

T: Yeah.

B: Now, we had- I mean, we were a bedroom community, and still are for a number of places that are on the other side of the river. I don't think it was that much of a

stretch for people to shop and do other things that were available to do in Newport News and Hampton and Williamsburg and Yorktown and something like that.

T: Sure.

B: Because that's where people were working from over here.

T: Right. Yeah. Right.

B: And even before the bridge, there was the ferry. So, a lot of people were working across the river and so it was not that much of a stretch as it might have been if the industry had been on this side of the York River.

T: Wow. Okay. Yeah. So, if the construction is more bedroom community-based, and honestly, a lot of the historic preservation efforts that happen here are based on the older houses that are kind of around, how do you feel about kind of the plan to revitalize the commercial part of Main Street, and kind of the preservation efforts accordingly?

B: I think all that's very great. It's great.

T: You're okay with it.

B: Yeah.

T: Yeah. Do you have any particular reason? Or you're just pro?

B: No. [Laughter] I think, you know, we do want to have some business around here, both for the shopkeepers and the shoppers.

T: Right.

B: And the more the better, I think. I think it should be, you know, concentrated in a couple of areas. I would prefer that to being stretched out for miles and miles down Route 17.

T: Right. But you did make this point about how- I feel like this is also the case, because I'm going to Williamsburg right after this- that people live here and go somewhere else. Can this place compete with places that aren't even near here, like Newport News and Williamsburg and Yorktown?

B: I think there are ways to compete; I'm sure there are. That's both the immediacy of getting things that you need, and getting things close to home.

T: Okay. That makes sense.

B: Nowadays, it's easier for me to buy off the internet than to go to Newport News.

T: That's true.

B: So, who cares about Newport News? [Laughter] It might as well be, you know, California.

T: That's true.

B: The way to compete it probably to say, yes, but if you can't even wait for the internet, you know, [Laughter] we need it now. There are places that you can get things now, or here are places that you can go and hold things.

T: That's true. So in a way, we're kind of constructing something that never really existed in that case, because we're competing with places like the internet.

B: Yeah.

T: Yeah. In light of all of these changes, what is the biggest change you've seen in Gloucester?

B: Oh, Gloucester hasn't changed that much. [Laughter]

T: You don't think so?

B: No.

T: Why not?

B: I guess there are more people, and the people know each other less than when I was a kid when everybody knew everybody, or so it seemed- especially if I was trying to get away with something. But other than there just being more people, it hasn't changed that much.

T: That's it?

B: Not to me anyway.

T: Not to you. Okay. Did you have anything else that you wanted to add?

B: No. I have no agenda for today; just answering your questions.

T: Okay. [Laughter] Sometimes that happens.

[BREAK IN INTERVIEW]

B: So this would be about the end of the [19]60s- let me see if I can think of what businesses there were. Ignoring the court circle, let's walk down Main Street from the court circle, down to here to Edge Hill and back. So there was, of course, the Botetourt Hotel, which was I think usually an empty building falling into disrepair around that time. There was the old bank building that had a few offices in it, beauty parlor- which may still be there, Grey's Drugstore, which is where the restaurant is now. Buckley's Market, which is now a parking lot. There was a house, which is where Sanders has a- has some property now. There was a house there. There was the Tucker House, which was next to it, and my father

moved the Tucker House back- and it's still there- but he moved it back and then built Southside Insurance, a small brick building there. There was another house, then- the avenue to the medical building- that was my Uncle Raymond Brown's. The fire station, an antique store or two- Mrs. Jones' maybe. A bank was built there; it did have a couple of different names. People's Bank, I think, was one of them. The ABC store, then the complex that was the *Gazette-Journal* office. For a while, they had some office space there that I remember as being partly empty.

[INTERRUPTION IN INTERVIEW]

On the other side of Lewis Avenue, which is the Edge Hill side of Lewis Avenue- let's see. The first building, I think, was the Emma Jane shop, which was a clothing store. Then in some order that I can't really remember there was a J.C. Edwards, five and dime store, a Western Auto Parts store. A couple of other things, maybe, were in there. I think late in the game, Lockwood Carpets was there. I wonder if they built the building that's now Timmy Lee's dentists' office. The Calvin Hotel, where I used to eat a lot, in Mr. and Mrs. Sutton's restaurant- and I think people lived in the Calvin Hotel. The Tri-County Furniture Store has been there forever, as far as I can remember. A couple of houses on that side of the road, then there was the gas station and the cleaners, and then Edge Hill Service Station. That's what I remember from that side of the street, and most of those places have stayed there. A lot of them are still there.

T: Okay.

B: So we'll have to walk back up the other side of the street.

T: Okay.

B: They built Edge Hill Shopping Center over there. The main store I remember was Morgan's Drugstore, which was a social hub of Gloucester County, probably. They had a fountain and burger bar there. A lot of the business people came and ate there. And also everybody else. Lots of people ended up at Morgan's Drugstore. There was an American Hardware. Let's see- a couple of markets. Boy, I don't really remember all the places that were there then- which buildings are there, and which buildings are much newer. As you left the Edge Hill Shopping Center and went up the hill, where is now the Thai Restaurant was a gas station.

T: Another one?

B: Robbins' gas station, yes.

T: Okay.

B: There were several right here, at different times. I think the Amoco station- I think it was an Amoco station on the other side of the cleaners' from here at the Edge Hill Texaco- and then almost across the street from there was the Esso station.

T: Why did they go out of business?

B: [Laughter] All of the gas stations have eventually gone out of business.

T: Right. [Laughter]

B: I think when the bypass was built, which was probably about that time- boy, I can't remember- I think that the gas stations in particular had a harder time, especially with there being so many. I can't remember whether the Esso or Exxon stations stayed in business longer than the Amoco, but I think it did.

Up the street from there was the Gloucester Restaurant, or Courthouse Restaurant- whatever it was called back then. Plumbing parts store. Across the street was the radio station, which was sort of a landmark, in the old Coke building. But for a long time, it was WDDY radio station. The farmer's market wasn't there. I can't remember if anything was there. Then, Doswell Dutton's hardware store, another big business- they were certainly influential in the county. Where the bookstore ended up being, I think was an old manufacturing place- factory. I think garment-making? Boy, I should know that. [Laughter] I'm sure I'm getting that wrong. Then there was Hudson South's gas station, and then Bell Motors- later, Housz Chevrolet. Then, Botetourt Avenue goes through there. A number of little stores, including Smith's Florist and some other stores. Now, they did come and go from time to time, a lot of them. A men's store was in there a couple times. There's a Ben Franklin in there, a five and dime store. The Tabb House, an old service station that I think was mostly- where is now county offices, I think that was a service station that was more of an auto repair than a gas station when I came home. Barber shop was in there, and a store, and post office. Let's see. I can just barely remember when Morgan's Drugstore was near what's now SunTrust Bank, which was Bank of Gloucester for many years. Morgan's Drugstore was in there, and I remember going in there, probably when I was in elementary school, buying comic books. They had a soda fountain in there- that was before they moved down to Edge Hill Shopping Center. I don't remember J.H. Martin's store. I think that was probably gone. Bank of Gloucester, the telephone company, some lawyers' offices. Then, lawyers'

offices largely around the courthouse circle, plus Tucker's five-and-ten-cent store, which was run by Brown relatives of mine.

T: Did you spend a lot of time in there?

B: Yes.

T: Yeah? [Laughter]

B: They had lots of good toys. [Laughter] Bert Smith ran Tucker's Store.

T: Okay.

B: Bert and Julia. Yeah, they had lots of good toys, and anything. They had everything in there, if only you could find it.

T: So, it's like a general store?

B: Yeah, they weren't so much called general stores at that point. I don't remember them selling any food, for example, and groceries. Snacks, candy, definitely.

T: Candy. [Laughter]

B: I think I can attest to that. [Laughter] Yeah, but they had everything. So that's my tour of Gloucester.

T: Okay, now that you're in the zone [Laughter] can you think of anything, any anecdotes that you can share about any of those businesses? Probably didn't spend a lot of time in lawyers' offices in the late [19]60s.

B: Well, they were friends of my parents and grandparents. I knew most of the lawyers, but that's not something I would have anecdotes about.

T: Okay, yeah.

B: No, I was, you know, a kid. I used to go to J.C. Edwards with my grandfather, who would take his grandchildren in there and buy them a toy from time to time, and that was always a big treat.

T: Do you have a favorite?

B: A favorite?

T: A favorite thing, or a favorite outing, that he took you on and got you a thing.

B: Not specifically, but in general I think the thing to give me was a little car, which did not need gas. I think that was probably what I would have bought at J.C. Edwards, but I don't remember specific times.

T: That's actually a beautiful note to end on.

B: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Transcribed by: Jessica Taylor

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