

TMP-008

Interviewee: Elizabeth White

Interviewer: Jessica Taylor and Christopher Gottschalk

Date: June 17, 2013

T: This is Jessica Taylor and Chris Gottschalk interviewing Betty White on June 17, 2013 at 10:15 AM at the White residence. Mrs. White, can you please state your full name?

W: Elizabeth S. White.

T: Mm-hm and what is your date of birth?

W: February 7, 1923.

T: Where were you born?

W: Dayton, Ohio.

T: Okay. And what are your parents' names and what were their occupations?

W: Ridley Stripling and Alice Stripling. My father was a career military officer and my mother was a housewife.

T: Okay. Do you have any siblings?

W: I have one- I had one sister, Alice, who passed away last year.

T: Okay. And what is, was your occupations? It seems like you've had several.

W: [Laughter] Yes. Right out of college I worked. It was during World War II. I worked for the Army Security Agency. I was recruited while I was still in college. I think they just needed warm bodies, you know. [Laughter] And when the war was over I worked for the army historical division writing, helping to write a chronology of, of the World War II in China-Burma-India Theater. And then, after that, I...went to the Philippines where my parents were and went on a trip to India and then worked as a reservation clerk at a golf resort and it was an Army rest and recuperation center in Baguio in the Philippines. Then I came back to the States

and worked for CIA and then I went to Austria and worked for CIA and I came back to the States and worked for CIA until I married in 19- until I had a child in 1960.

T: Wow. What did you do for the CIA?

W: Well, I can't tell you but...[Laughter] My title started as a research analyst and I ended as an intelligence officer. And it was an interesting career.

T: Especially as a woman in the [19]50s.

W: That wasn't so unusual as people think.

T: Really?

W: No.

T: Why not?

W: Because there were many, many women who worked during World War II and continued to work.

T: Wow. Wow. What was that experience like? Being so young and...

W: Well, we thought we were saving the world. You know, from those Communists.

T: Yeah. [Laughter]

W: It was interesting. It was the height of the Cold War and it was an interesting time to be working.

T: But you felt strongly about it.

W: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

T: Wow. That's incredible. So, when did you move to Gloucester?

W: 1976.

T: 1976, and since you moved here- well, why did you move here, first of all?

W: Because my husband became a professor at the law school of William and Mary, in Williamsburg.

T: Okay. And since moving here, what did you end up doing?

W: Well, basically I was a housewife but I joined several groups and women's groups: Gloucester Women's Club and the Garden Club of Gloucester and active in the Ware Episcopal Church.

T: Mm-hm.

W: And I helped organize a foundation to preserve the Gloucester Women's Club building.

T: If you don't mind me asking how did you get involved in these groups?

W: Through friends.

T: Through friends?

W: Mm-hm.

T: Did you find it sort of facilitated the move to a new place? Or did you know people here already?

W: Knew one couple here, who were friends of my husband's- Fred Getler was a friend of my husband's as a bachelor in Washington before World War II and during World War II. And they moved here to Ware Neck and invited us to come visit them one weekend and showed us this house and said you should come live here, and [Laughter] this is where we wound up.

T: Wow.

W: Several years later.

T: Mm-hm. So, keeping in mind that early visit, what is your earliest memory of

Gloucester?

W: The water. The wonderful [inaudible] [Laughter]. My husband was a great fisherman and a boater so we really enjoyed being on the water.

T: Mm-hm, Absolutely. What about Main Street specifically? Do you remember during the [19]70s what it looked like?

W: Oh, there were many- there was a grocery store, Leigh's market, which we frequented. It was very nice. There was an A&P grocery store which we enjoyed. The gas station was defunct. It wasn't in operation even then.

T: Mm-hm.

W: As I recall...the courthouse is exactly as it was.

T: Yeah. When it was defunct what did the gas station look like?

W: Pretty much what it looks like now. Except that it was not cleaned up as it is now. [Laughter]

T: So you didn't really notice any differences?

W: Well I don't believe there was a car wash there when we first moved here.

T: Mm-hm, okay. Did you notice in the [19]70s whether people walked or drove up and down Main Street?

W: I don't think I noticed. I think that more people are walking now. There was no sidewalk around the Women's Club. We had to petition to get that built.

T: When was that built?

W: I can't remember.

T: That's okay. [Laughter] How often did you come down to the Main Street area either for Women's Club events or just for the grocery store?

W: Oh, probably at least every other day.

T: Every other day. What would your routine kind of look like?

W: Grocery shopping, meeting friends, going to a meeting, passing through, going elsewhere.

T: When you passed through where were you going?

W: Oh, usually south. To Williamsburg. Or other places. Or north to visit my mother and my daughter, eventually.

T: So visits, like, recreation.

W: Mm-hm.

T: When you were on Main Street where would you meet friends?

W: At restaurants.

T: Can you think of any specifically?

W: They've changed so over the years. Some are no longer there, some are still there, some are new ones are coming, which is nice.

T: Mm-hm. Which ones are still there that you remember being there in the [19]70s or [19]80s?

W: Oh, the Kelsick Gardens used to have a restaurant along with their wine specialties shop. That was very attractive. They no longer have a sandwich part to that.

T: What was the car that you drove in the [19]70s?

W: Uh, a Rambler? [Laughter] Goodness, Plymouth and an old Dodge and an old Buick. They died successively.

T: [Laughter] Yeah. Where, where did you get them from?

W: Those all came with us.

T: They came with you?

W: Yes. And then I think we got a Plymouth, we had a van, a minivan for a while. And lately we've had Toyotas.

T: Mm-hm, obviously. So when you were going north or going south did you often go with friends or did you go with your husband or alone?

W: With my husband or alone going to DC to visit my mother and then eventually when my daughter married, she got out of college and married and lives in Arlington. I go there frequently.

T: Beyond Main Street where in Gloucester did you either spend time recreationally or gas up?

W: Gloucester Beach, when Sally was- when my grandchildren were young...Ware River Yacht Club, people's homes playing mahjong.

T: Did you find that your friends lived in your immediate area or that they were scattered?

W: Scattered county-wide.

T: Wow. Did the Women's Club bring people together from different areas of Gloucester or-

W: Yes. Yes.

T: Okay. That makes sense.

W: Yes.

T: Can you tell me a little bit about the history of the Women's Club?

W: Well, it was founded in 1913; we're celebrating our one hundredth anniversary

this year. It was probably the sole gathering place for women other than church gathering during that time. I understand. King's Daughters I believe was founded a little bit earlier and that was a great gathering spot for women as well.

T: What is that?

W: It's a charitable organization that supports a children's hospital.

T: Oh.

W: It's nationwide.

T: Mm-hm. So, the purpose of the club was social?

W: No, it was really to preserve the building and to provide a place for civic meetings and the Women's Club was very instrumental in doing things like- they provided the first library for the county and they provided mobile- well, not mobile libraries in those days, but they provided libraries for different schools in the area and...during World War I they provided a place for Red Cross people to have meetings- in World War II as well.

T: How about now? Or how about in the [19]70s? And then now?

W: They've continued to try to preserve the building. A charitable organization was founded in the [19]80s called Lawnbridge Ordinary Foundation to maintain and preserve the building and the site and that has helped tremendously. Because public donations and a private donor who was a daughter of one of the founders of the Women's Club- she established a trust to benefit the foundation and that has really kept the building intact. [Laughter]

T: Yeah.

W: And the site as well.

T: Where do you see the Women's Club going forward in the next twenty, thirty years?

W: Well that's a very good question, because there's so many new organizations that have come up for younger women, and so many women work now that it's a challenge. I think there will always be people who are interested in history and who want to preserve the building but there're also an equal number are not the slightest bit interested in history. [Laughter] And don't have time, you know. They're working for other volunteer organizations, or they're working for, or economic reasons.

T: Do you see the mission changing at all?

W: Hopefully. Hopefully, I will. I hope that it will be more relevant to the current community.

T: Yeah.

W: How is the big question.

T: Well that's what I was gonna ask! [Laughter] Do you have any thoughts on that?

W: Well, we try to support- right now, we're supporting the medical free clinic financially. We contribute books to the library in memory of members. It's difficult. It really is difficult. Other than historical interpretations.

T: Yeah. Plus, you've also had to sort of cope with the way that Gloucester has become very populous as a bedroom community.

W: Yes. Yes.

T: Can you comment a little bit on that?

W: Well, you've said it all. It has become a bedroom community for the shipbuilding

industry and other entities across the river. It's just a real challenge that we have to try to meet.

T: Beyond the Women's Club how has that changed your experience?

W: Well, it's become less of a country place. You know, the young man who sold us this home- I was asking him about the mosquitoes and he said, oh, we don't want to spray here, we hope the jellyfish will stay because we don't want other people to come.[Laughter] We like it just like it is. [Laughter] And you know, as I come here I like it just like it was when we first came. And now it's getting more and more built up. And the Walmart and all the fast foods- I mean that was not here. It's very convenient. And I must say I go there, some people will not but I do.

[Laughter]

T: How would you, how would you like to see it? How would you visualize sustainable growth?

W: I would like to see better zoning of the area. And I believe that Virginia is such an individual rights state that it's difficult to ask people to surrender their- well, their rights to build whatever they choose and put up whatever signs they choose to put up, you know. I think that Gloucester's doing a better job of landscaping the new buildings along the Route 17. But they continue to grow and grow and grow and I just hope that it won't wind up being like US 1. You know it's a difficult challenge.

T: Do you see preservation as playing a part?

W: I do. I think that more young people are becoming interested in preservation, and the environment. And I'm hopeful. I'm very hopeful. And I think that more people

are interested in preserving the Chesapeake Bay than have been in the past.

T: So it's tied to environmentalism?

W: I think so. Hope so.

T: What in Gloucester do you feel could- some people could pay more attention to it and preserve it?

W: I think everyone in Gloucester should learn not to discard trash out the car window.

T: [Laughter] Are there specific buildings or places that come to mind?

W: That need restoring?

T: Yeah.

W: I think that the courthouse is such a gorgeous place and I hope that people will continue to preserve that.

T: Mm-hm.

W: I was saddened when... there's a home down on Hickory Fork Road, I believe, and it's a beautiful old place and there's a gas station next to it and shops all around it and it's sort of disappeared. And that was unfortunate.

T: Mm-hm. I understand that.

W: I think Rosewell is a wonderful site and I'm pleased that that's being taken care of. I think the Fairfield Foundation is doing a great job in what they're up to.

[Laughter]

T: On Main Street specifically what's the biggest change you've noticed in the last thirty, forty years?

W: The Edge Hill Shopping Center has just now turned around, but it was a decent-

looking place and then it deteriorated greatly and now it's- fortunately they're coming back up. There's the Booker-owned furniture store is a disgrace.

[Laughter] And the storage building next to it which used to be a hotel they're using as a storage place. I believe it still has boarded-up windows. The mother of my friends who persuaded us to move here lived in that hotel and the Sutton Restaurant ladies worked there as the chefs and it was a renowned hotel.

[Laughter]

T: Wow.

W: I think that Jimmy Williams' produce stand is a great addition. And everyone welcomes his opening in March and sorry to see him go at the end of December.

[Laughter]

T: Well, that kind of begs another question. Do you see a difference in the people who own buildings or businesses on Main Street since you've--

W: I think so. I think the new owners are much more aware of the environmental concerns. I think Bangkok Noi has done a great job, the Thai restaurant- and landscaping. Beth Haskell, the Kelsick Gardens store, she's very interested in what's happening on Main Street. I would wish that the Southern States would do a little more with their enterprise. [Laughter] That's not changed one bit since I've lived here.

T: [Laughter] To what would you attribute a kind of earlier lack of interest in the way the buildings are presented?

W: Economic reasons I suppose, and also just several individuals: they just don't care. I mean, the pawn shop- you can't tell individuals that their buildings have no

taste. You can't tell people that they have no taste.

T: [Laughter] I mean you can, but--

W: But that's sort of counterproductive.

T: That's true. How about the people that frequent Main Street? Is there a difference in the clientele?

W: Well, I wouldn't know about that.

T: No?

W: But I see a lot of people from out of the town. And Gloucester Village used to be a place where everyone knew everyone and now it's gotten to be much more...of a population. It's probably because of my age because I'm ninety and my friends are dropping off. [Laughter] So... there are a lot of people I don't recognize in town anymore, who are probably very well-known.

T: Mm-hm. Do you keep up with certain families? And that kind of thing? Do you notice that the same families kind of circulate on Main Street or that it's all new people?

W: Well, my friends had favorite restaurants. We used to frequent Olivia's a lot. We still, some people still do. There was a restaurant that came and went very close, very fast, it was Rosemary and Wine. There was another group coming in there I understand. There used to be a wonderful Fiddler's Green antique shop that I frequented when I first moved here and that's gone. That's now where Olivia's is.

T: Yeah. You couldn't attribute- is that just businesses failing or is there something that you could say, like, that's why that business failed?

W: Oh, I wouldn't know about that.

T: Yeah. Thought I'd ask. Are there any kind of specific anecdotes, you know, moments that were really funny or ridiculous or something that happened on Main Street that you remember? Or something momentous, like when the carnival comes to town or something like that?

W: I think the Halloween parade is a great addition.

T: Okay.

W: And I am grateful that the police restrict access. And I remember being at a restaurant, watching all the youngsters and the adults parade up and down and they're- everyone is so cheerful about it. It's a neat custom I think.

T: When did that start?

W: I can't remember.

T: Okay.

W: And I think the Main Street girl's night out is a super idea. I think what the...I can't remember her name. The lady who started the symphony concerts has done a wonderful job. I can see her face, I can't remember her name...

T: If you think of it later, you know. Did you notice any traditions like that in the [19]70s and [19]80s?

W: No.

T: No, there was nothing like that?

W: I don't remember anything like that when we first arrived.

T: Okay. Outside of Main Street, were there social hubs, gathering places, and things like that, watering holes where people go?

W: There used to be River's Inn down on Sarah's Creek that was very popular, and

that has changed hands several times.

T: What went on there?

W: It was a very nice restaurant in the marina. Beaverdam Park has been a great addition, and it's a great place to take grandchildren. [Laughter] And my niece who lives with me takes her dog to walk there. I guess that's a big asset.

T: Absolutely. You know, you have grandchildren now and you sort of pass on stories and that's part of the family life, what would you want your grandchildren to know about Gloucester?

W: Oh my. They visit here frequently, they've come here since they were infants. One of them has volunteered at the animal shelter with me. And they love it here. They love to come and fish and boat and swim. I would want them to know that it's a wonderful place to live. That they're very kind, Southern people here. [Laughter] The Daffodil Festival is another tradition that is a marvelous one. And one of my daughter's college classmates at University of Virginia is a painter and she painted glass which she sold several years at a booth at the Daffodil Festival. And she couldn't get over how much friendlier and more polite the customers were here than elsewhere where she has sold her wares. So, that's a big plus that I think my grandchildren have already recognized, how friendly people are.

T: Mm-hm. That's a nice note, can you think of anything you would like to add for the record?

[Phone rings]

W: I'm sorry.

JT: Oh, it's okay.

[End of Interview]

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