

TMP-016

Interviewee: George Rhodes

Interviewer: Jessica Taylor

Date: June 21, 2013

T: This is Jessica Taylor interviewing George Rhodes on June 21, 2013 at 11:30 PM [Correction: 11:30 AM] at Office Supply on Main Street. Mr. Rhodes, can you please state your full name?

R: George Sinclair Rhodes, Jr.

T: Okay, and what is your date of birth?

R: January 26, 1947.

T: Where were you born?

R: Actually, in Richmond MCV. It was before the bridge, and the ferries weren't very good. My mother was from Goochland, which was on the other side of Richmond, of course. It was a natural spot, I guess.

T: Okay. So you were driven to the hospital-

R: Yeah.

T: -to- okay.

R: I guess my mother was driven-

T: Right.

R: -and I was with her. [Laughter]

T: You were there technically, yeah. [Laughter] What were your parents' names and occupations?

R: My mother is Merwin **Cathwright** Rhodes. She was a schoolteacher. Dad's George Sinclair Rhodes, Sr. After the Army, I guess, he was a stock clerk and a butcher for J.H. Martin and Company. He started in a dry cleaning retail men's clothing store: went into the Army, and that's what he did when he came back,

was the Gloucester Men's Shop. Then he became Deputy-Sheriff and was elected Sheriff and retired.

T: Okay. What about your mother?

R: She taught school, stopped for a number of years to have children, and she went back to teach, she retired. One of the things that—I don't know, for some reason—dates don't click with me. I just don't have a handle on when these things happen. I can hardly remember my birthday. [Laughter]

T: If you keep it in the decade, that's fine. I know we're sitting there right now, but what is your occupation?

R: I own an office supply store in the Courthouse. I've been here since [19]72, [19]73? I acquired it fully in [19]85. I finished high school here, and went into a Newport News apprentice school, left that, went into the Navy, came back, worked in the Yard a couple years—the shipyard—and then I started back here.

T: When and for what years were you stationed in the Navy? Oh- if you can't remember years it's okay.

R: I went in the Navy in January of 1970, and was on active duty—it was a special reserve program that I enlisted in—so I was on active duty for like thirteen months, came back, and married Martha Rhodes. Martha was from Danville, and we set up our housekeeping in the apartment above my parents' shop where my mom and dad started and where I was born- you know, lived the first six years of my life, which is a kind of neat thing, too. It was just a little apartment, but it's still a lot of memories. Mom and Dad were excited to see that happen.

T: Well, if there were a lot of memories, can you tell me some of them?

R: Just thinking about my growing up there? My grandparents coming to visit. It was a second-floor apartment; you could peek out the windows and see the Main Street. The old rattly windows were upgraded a couple of times. The apartment had a pull-down staircase, a huge attic, and we would wash clothes and hang them on the line up in the attic. Lots of things were stored up there cause there wasn't a lot of space in the apartment itself. This was [19]40s and [19]50s: we didn't have a shower. It was an old legged tub. Lots of the convenient things that we take for granted anymore have evolved over my lifetime, so it's lots of changes in that direction. Adjacent to the apartment were a couple of garages, and my brother and I would hang out in some of them a couple of times, you know- getting chased out of the service bays. It was neat growing up in the Courthouse. A lot of kids around to play with all the time. There was a building next door to it, but when we were growing up there it was a park, which made it really convenient. I remember my uncle bringing us some stick candy, and we were delighted to be able to play in the sand with them. We didn't get much candy.

T: What was in the park? Was it just a green space?

R: Just a green space. I don't remember any swings or- just a sandbox.

T: Fair enough. What is your earliest memory of Main Street?

R: Don't have too many real early memories of Main Street. There was an apartment building, where—what's it called—the *Daily Press* building, which is a yellow building on the corner of the circle. It was a two- or three-story wood-framed apartment building, and we had a couple of friends that lived in that.

There were some other wooden buildings going around this circle, next to the Botetourt Hotel. They're all gone now, but my mother had a friend that kept shop in one of them—it's like the **Legstool** Shop, I believe that's what it was called. Another lady that was a friend and church member—**Esther Haley**—had a shop in one of the buildings. It was like a boarding house, gone now. That was a neat experience for my mother. She enjoyed antiques and going to sales and shopping like that.

T: About how often would she go shopping?

R: That I wouldn't know. I can't remember shopping too much, just that it was an ordeal to drag two little kids out and keep us in line. My brother and I—and even to this day—the two of us get together and we start acting up. [Laughter]

T: Give me an example of what acting up means.

R: Well, we would just play, chase each other around, just having fun. Find something to talk about, or pick on each other a lot.

T: You mentioned church.

R: Oh, yeah.

T: Which church was yours?

R: Right up the street here is First Presbyterian Church. I'm not sure why that was our home church. I'm guessing it had more to do with my mother than my dad. The Rhodes side of the family went to several different churches. I don't know—something that never came up in family conversation. The logistics is entirely different then, because the church was so close, that could have been a reason

especially for my mother, because the church was further away than where they would go frequently.

T: Were there any social events associated with the church that you would go to?

R: I can remember washing—actually, drying—dishes during suppers. Biggest thing I remember about church and growing up was that when service was over, a lot of people stood around and talked. We don't seem to do that now. It's just a long time, especially for a kid that wants to get home and change out of his Sunday-get in some play clothes. But the community that we have in the church now is made up of people that come from a lot further geographic locations, and the area's changed. Maybe that has something to do with it. There was a- probably what I'd say was a tighter-knit community church. Every community probably had their own churches, and people would stay and worship closer to home, which made sense when transportation wasn't as reliable as it is today.

T: Right. Going further down Main Street, which drug store did you go to?

R: Morgan's. The Morgans were also church members. It was on the same side of the street as the shop that my father owned, so we didn't have to cross the street to get to it- not that the street was that busy. I worked there for a stint in high school. I think lots and lots of kids in the community worked there. There was a little confusing- they had a general manager, and it was owned by Mr. Happy Morgan. He had two sons that were pharmacists and a daughter-in-law, so they had all the pharmacists working there, and one person would tell you how to do it this way, and another one would say, I want it done this way. You'd go to the

general manager and find out what they- What's the best way to do this, Charlie?

[Laughter]

T: Growing up, what did the interior of the drugstore look like?

R: On the right was a soda counter, soda fountain. In the back, across, was the prescription counter. The cosmetics were over on the left-hand side. There were brass cabinets in there that had merchandise in them, and one of the responsibilities was to polish them. I'm still polishing them; I have them here now.

T: Do you really?

R: Yeah. When I was in high school, as a senior—I guess I was out of high school—that summer, the drugstore moved to this shopping center, and I was helping the drugstore move and helping a guy from the fixture company set up the fixtures in the drugstore. They probably sold them to the stationary store they were setting up here, and they're here now.

T: So when did you acquire this building?

R: **Bridges'** was the first Office Supply, and it was next door. I moved over here in 2000. So, I doubled the square footage, came up with computers, a new system because of the fear of Y2K [Laughter].

T: All right. What is your earliest memory of the Edge Hill Service Station?

R: It really never played a pivotal role in my life; went by it, but never paid much attention to it. There was a guy named Andy James. His father was- they had Texaco Oil down in Ware Neck. I would think about that, but never remember anything about the station. Growing up, it just wasn't part of where my parents went. I don't know why, but there was a station between the building that I grew

up in—this one—and where we eventually settled, which was about a mile up north.

T: Was it the Amoco?

R: Could have been an Amoco station. It was a BP station for a while. There was also one in town where the senior center is. It's a little one, station there. As teenagers, we lived up there where the Food Lion shopping center is. It was up there on the other side of Virginia Power. There was a station that's in the-property's in the middle of the bypass now. But, there was a station on the corner there. That's where we got gas.

T: Did you know Andy James personally?

R: Yeah. Andy's a few years earlier, but I think we were on the same football team for about a year.

T: Why is everyone in this town on the football team?

R: Well, the coach for the football team was also the P.E. coach, so if he saw someone running fast or strong- I mean, it's just the recruiting process that worked out well.

T: Just wondering. You knew kind of that family—the James and the Browns. What were they like? Were they active in community life?

R: Yes. **Watson** and his wife were friends of my parents through the fire department. My dad was instrumental with the fire department. Watson lived near the Courthouse, near the fire department, so. They went to meetings for that together. It's not something that my brother and I were really involved with, other than he stayed with the fire department. I didn't. I don't know Andy's parents very

well. I know them to see them, but not- don't remember that my parents really had time with them, spent time with them at all.

T: You're a member of the football team, and it's high school, and it's a Saturday night. What do you do?

R: Well, most of the games were on Friday nights. Saturday night, if I was dating some of the time, go to the movies. There was a drive-in here for a while, and we figured out how to get across the river and go to the movies over there. I didn't dance. There were some dances after the football games.

T: Why didn't you dance? Just not your thing?

R: I don't really know. My mother wasn't musically involved. She had to teach the recorder in the fourth grade when she was teaching, but I don't really think she enjoyed teaching that. We just didn't- I don't know. It didn't come very natural to me. I don't guess there were that many dances.

T: Did you have a car in high school?

R: I'm sorry.

T: Did you have a car in high school?

R: No. I shared one with Mom and Dad. Dad would drive a company van that delivered dry cleaning home, and we had a family car. So, we all took turns with that. Most of the time in high school, my brother was away. So, it's not like brother and brother were competing for the car a lot.

T: So, if you had the car would you go on trips with it, or would you just stay inside the county?

R: You mean me personally or as a family?

T: Both.

R: Well, my mother was from Goochland, so the trips we took would be to Goochland County. She'd take us up there in the summer for a week or so. We'd go up there for major holidays, especially Christmas. That was a big thing, because there were lots of cousins- I mean, a number of aunts and uncles with lots of cousins to play with, big house, a lot of food, a lot of desserts.

T: What about you personally or with friends?

R: Didn't drive much; never could afford the gas, I guess, to even go riding around to see what's on the other side of the county line. We were, I guess, destination-oriented: go to somebody's house, picnic or something.

T: You mentioned going away for Christmas. I noticed that, you know, depending on the generation I'm speaking to, different people had different traditions around Main Street or around the county broadly, like holiday decorations contests. I talked to a guy who was alive during Prohibition, and they would go around to each house and have cherry bounce—that kind of thing. Do you remember any traditions based on holidays or anything like that?

R: Let's see, there was a Main Street Association during the [19]60s. They put Christmas trees outside all of the store fronts. They were all lit. Trying to keep bulbs in them was tricky sometimes; kids would swipe them, or some other merchant might have gotten a bulb, or- it's hard to tell where they went. It really was kind of a neat ride through the town to see all of the merchants up and down the street with their little Christmas trees. They were all about the same, so the

Association had supplied the trees. It wasn't a real competition there, it was just real comfortable-looking.

T: That's wonderful. Someone had also mentioned that, you know, there might have been something related to Halloween? Does that sound familiar?

R: Don't remember much about Halloween. Trick-or-treating. Let's see. When the time I'm thinking about—[19]60s, [19]70s—Gloucester hadn't had its growth spurt start so there weren't any real subdivisions. People just lived down the road somewhere. [Laughter] Gee. But the subdivisions are so dense, but at that time, people would come from their homes into town to trick-or-treat, because you've got house next to house next to house up and down two or three of the main streets. It was a lot more activity in town. Then the subdivisions started popping up, the traffic started moving out. The last few years we've opened up Main Street and all the merchants are giving out candy. The place is getting swamped: thousands of kids coming in. Lots of free candy. [Laughter]

T: Speaking of attracting people to businesses, did you find that, like, the revamping of the Daffodil Festival, various summer things that they do here—does that help business here?

R: Depends on the type of business. It really doesn't help my particular business, because being in- having a parking lot in front of me, people tend to think of it as a great place to park. Everybody comes in early in the morning, fills up the lot, and leaves. Most of the regular customers of mine do their shopping in advance or they don't come in on Saturday. They just know that they can't get in, they can't get out, they don't want to get stuck in the parade. For us, it's not a very

profitable day. The restaurants: there are a few activities, groups, and some of the charitable organizations do food vending and stuff. Probably doing real well.

Somebody that's up on Main Street might, but down here we don't.

T: How do you feel about it? Do you kind of weigh the community and the restaurants versus your business?

R: It's just being part of the community, to support and give back to the area that supports you.

T: Yeah. Makes sense.

R: We lock the doors and go up and watch the parades. I mean, you know, it's one of the neat things about having this store here that it gives us an opportunity to enjoy the Christmas and the Daffodil Parade, the Homecoming Parade. My children are grown now- my grandchild's in in the parade now.

T: Do you notice school traditions like that that last throughout generations?

R: I guess almost all schools have homecoming parades, and we still do: firetrucks and dogs and horses, bands. It's been hard to keep bands here. A friend of mine from the radio station and I were talking one day, and he says, you know, it's a shame we didn't have a Christmas parade this year. We got together with Carol Steele and Georgette Hurley, and founded a Citizens' Christmas Parade Committee, started putting on Christmas parades for a few years. That's been picked up by the Chamber and a couple of other organizations now. Neither of us are actively doing it, but we started the current Christmas parade.

T: Where did you get the idea to do that?

- R: Well, our children, I guess, was the main thing. I mean, we could have gotten along without it, but we wanted to do this for the kids. It's just, you know, what's Christmas without a parade?
- T: That's the interesting thing about it. Not to push you, but you also could just go to New York City or go to Richmond and see the Christmas parade there. So why here?
- R: Well, this is where we are, and this is where the local people can enjoy and participate both, in two ways. It's a festive time, and it just keeps a neat, good feeling at that time of year.
- T: When you're kind of, like, creating events like this, what's the role of people that have more recently come here, like in the [19]80s, [19]90s, 2000s? Do you consider them part of the community?
- R: If they get involved. Getting involved in the community makes you part of it. If you don't come out and- you know, it's like it's easier with children, because there's always an activity. There's all sorts of scouting activities; if you choose a church, then you get into churches, you meet different people, and then you find somebody that you like. Then you just say, let's go to a ball game, let's go do this, let's go do that. So that really doesn't make any difference whether you just showed up, you know, last year or have been here for thirty years or all your life. If you're involved, then you can become part of the community quickly, and be accepted.
- T: Has that always been the rule?

R: Well, we always had this, they're come-heres. What do they understand? There is some stigma to that, because we did have a growth spurt that brought in a lot of people that didn't grow up here. They don't understand. Some of them never make it their home, because they know they're only going to be here two or three years. I had a lady who worked for me and that was their mindset, that they didn't care to make it their home. It's just a stopping spot. I thought that was a little bit, you know, sad. But it makes leaving easier. When you know you're leaving, then it's self-preservation. Say we were buying stuff, you know: if you've got more collectibles, that's more stuff you have to pack up, and they were moving every two or three years.

T: How does that mindset affect the rest of the community? Is this, oh, well they don't know anything mindset a response to suburbanization or is it something that's always been there?

R: That's probably there in every community. I think that, you know, there's little idiosyncrasies in every place you go, whether it be the one-way street or you know, there's so many little- we don't have a St. Patrick's Day parade here.

T: Why would you? [Laughter]

R: If you moved into an area and, all of a sudden, everybody's getting ready and you're not Irish and you're not thinking about it, it could take you by surprise. Not every community, but there's lots of that going on everywhere.

T: When people decide not to make this place their home, how do you respond, for example? You said it's sad, but-

R: Oh, I think it's sad because I'm a people person more than- so, if you don't get involved with your neighbors and enjoy being part of a group to work to make an area better, then I think you're missing out on the response to that. It's fun to work with people on a common cause. If you're not getting involved in anything, whether it be a social club or a civic organization, a church, anything, then I think you're missing part of what life has to offer.

T: Just in your experience, when, out of all of the come-heres, who comes out and says, I want to be part of this?

R: Well, the lady that's out here that works with me today is a great example. Mary Jane and Sandy moved here a long time ago. [Laughter] I don't remember when. I met Mary Jane when my son was in Cub Scouts. She's got two boys and Sandy was in--her husband's in--the Coast Guard in Yorktown. They live in the Courthouse. She became a den mother, and I became a pack master. So we had some interaction there, and one day I needed an employee and Mary Jane- we were up here with a couple of our- we had a staff meeting in a restaurant, and Mary Jane was up there with a couple of people. We were just chatting around, and I brought up the fact that I needed to hire somebody and she said, well, my daughter is a senior now, or something. Kids are going to college; I've got some free time. I said, well, come on down. We'll talk about it. She's been here about fifteen years now. They're active in a number of different organizations in the community. Sandy is active in his church, plays softball with the church. They have an organization that puts on some athletic events for schools. Mary Jane's

involved in the local theater group called Courthouse Players. She dragged me into it a few years ago. She's from Florida.

T: Where are the gathering spots for locals, and how have they changed over time?

R: Well, we didn't used to have a Wal-Mart. [Laughter] There's little places that people used to gather. Of course, the population is four, five times what it was. The community softball teams were different, still school athletics brings a group of people together. Restaurants.

T: Which ones?

R: All of them. I mean, Olivia's is up the street here. Courthouse Restaurant is another one. There's so many people that come in at Courthouse Restaurant that sit there and they have their little coffee fellowship in the mornings. There's another group that meets down at Hardee's. I mean, these are retired people. When I grew up, Morgan's—the drugstore—had a soda fountain and there was a group that was meeting in there. Of course, Morgan's is closed now. I think they went to Hardee's or somewhere. I would expect Damon's—it's a restaurant out here on 17—seems to have a good morning breakfast crowd. I don't- I eat breakfast at home. [Laughter]

T: How have the reasons that people congregate at these places changed?

R: I'm not sure. I want to guess some of it has to do with the expense and where each family is with their financial resources. As we have, you know, our children, we find it more difficult to go out and eat because we've got two or three more mouths to feed. Takes longer and harder when they're small; when they're bigger, you're running them all over the place. Once you get- finish school or

something like that, you find that you've got a little bit more free time on your hands so you can enjoy going out, getting up with that other couple, and enjoying a quiet meal. Sort of slows down the pace of life. I don't know that much of that has changed. Women in the workplace has probably made a big impact on who eats at home, bringing people home to dinner, because the way people cook has changed. This is an interesting part.

T: Yeah. How do you feel about that change?

R: Having come from a family that grew a garden and had- were able to buy larger quantities of food and freeze it and can it- it's not something that my wife and I are doing at this time in our lives. We're really busy. She commutes further to work, and I've got my own business that requires more than a short day. We're both involved in other activities, so we've chosen not to raise a garden. We don't have a pantry to speak of. We can stop by the grocery store anytime.

T: Yeah. Yeah, that's true. There isn't one on Main Street anymore.

R: That's a sad thing. But that's just the way it is. The last one, I guess, was Wallace Foods, and it burned. Not sure if it burned before or after the IGA out here—where the library is now—is, but they've all been replaced by these big stores. That's a shame in a way. I guess the variety is nice. Competition does some of that; you lose some convenience for the selection.

T: As a competitor to some, I guess the term is, wholesalers, how do you feel about the change over time in Gloucester getting larger stores that can compete with yours?

R: It's more difficult than it has been. People are shopping more convenience, I think. I have a lot of things that you can pick up in almost every store. I mean, I go in a drugstore. I'm amazed at the number of writing instruments that they stock and all the different things. I mean, a drugstore- wait a minute: is it a grocery store? What is it? You know? Everybody's wearing so many hats. They've lost their identity. So, now if you go in a drugstore, you're not sure if you're in a grocery store, or if you go in a grocery store, you're not sure if you're in a drugstore. They're all crossing over a lot. You go into Big Lots, and you wonder what the name has to do with anything [Laughter] because they're making product. I thought Big Lots was a store that bought big lots of stuff that they couldn't sell somewhere else. I think it's not what I thought it was. Where **Oilly's**, I believe, is just picking up a lot of product from other manufacturers. I don't see where they have their brand on things, where Big Lots does brand items.

T: Absolutely.

R: Of course, Wal-Mart's the worst for that. They've taken so much of our American manufacturing to other areas.

T: That's true. So where does your customer base come from? Do you find that you have loyal customers that are consistent?

R: I do. That's an interesting observation, because it's changed over the years. We have, like, in-house accounts, so I have charges for lots of different stores. Fifteen years ago, I was sending out like two hundred statements, but mail-order and the internet sales have increased, the product lines have changed

somewhat—we don't sell typewriter ribbons anymore—and the number of commercial accounts I have is diminished. Some of it is because the individual merchant may decide to use credit card, so they'll issue credit cards and just- they can just track on a daily basis easier than waiting for a statement at the end of the month.

T: More specifically, how do you keep up with the increasing pace and change in technology?

R: Well, I have my computer systems. We've switched from more retail-based to more service-oriented. I'm not obviously fixing typewriters like I used to, but we do a lot of especially copy work. We offer pack and ship, faxes, a lot of little services for a lot of people. We go the extra mile with the delivery and helping out clients. It's a little bit more than, say, Wal-Mart would. We've got them to call us up and we meet them at the front door with the package or we come out to their car. We've got a paraplegic that comes by all the time, and another lady that can't walk, you know. So, we go out and meet them at the car, talk to them on the telephone, figure out what they want, and get it for them.

T: That's exactly what general stores used to do.

R: Yeah.

T: How does that- how do you feel about that kind of comparison?

R: I love it.

T: You love it.

R: Yeah.

T: Why?

R: I've always- and I just like I said, it's the- [Crying] You can go through the day- and just now, when you said that, you smiled. When you smile at somebody, most of us receive a tremendous effect from that smile. When you go out and you give somebody a package that they know they couldn't have gotten without your help, they smile and they thank you and it makes you feel good. You know, that gives you a real sense of purpose.

T: Okay. I really like that. I know that you've also owned buildings and leased out to other businesses. Do those businesses share your same ethic?

R: I think they do.

T: What ones did you have in mind?

R: Well, Fields is a craft shop up the street here. Robin is- she's done wonders with the building. She's got a successful quilting business, and she's got a nice-looking facility and she treats her customers well. I don't quilt. [Laughter]

T: Yeah, I would be surprised if you did. You were talking about, you know, doing wonders with the building. How do you feel preservation, preservationists- what can they offer Gloucester Courthouse?

R: Well, I think one of the other buildings we have is a beautiful example of that. We owned an old garage—my brother and I owned it; Thank you, Dad!—and it was a fire sale. The building had had a fire, and it was a landlocked car dealer. They moved out on 17 where they could get their property, and he had this old building. He rented it out for antique shops, two or three of them, a bookstore for a while, and finally the last antique shop closed and it sat vacant for a few years. My parents passed, and my brother and I sold it to Kay Van Dyke who is

Gloucester Arts on Main. That's- she has kept the historical significance of the building and created a complex there that's a strong attribute to the community. I think- [Crying] this is not fair, I'm getting all- I think Mom and Dad would really be happy to see what's happened to that building.

T: Talk a little bit more about that. Or am I pushing you too hard?

R: Well, you know, the emotions are there. My mother especially would enjoy the art aspect of it. She was an artist, and she loved to paint and sculpt and she taught it in school. She would just be having such a time with Kay in there. They have classes and all sorts of evening events, and I think that they'd just really be happy to see the building being used for something that benefits the community.

T: And you made it happen.

R: Well, I can't say that we can get any real credit for it, but I think it's Kay's doing, and the fact that it's just timing. Lynn and I can't take any credit for it. We helped Kay get the building, you know. We saw that she had the potential to do it. We worked with her on the initial purchase and stuff. It was a good thing to do.

T: Absolutely.

R: Yeah.

T: What's your vision for Gloucester's future?

R: Gloucester has some problems with its geographic location, because we have an industrial park that I never felt like was gonna really take off because we don't have a rail system, we're not a port, we don't have an airport. Manufacturing is going to be difficult to really do much here. We have a Canon plant that deals with print cartridges, but that's pretty light and easy to handle. I think there's

some trucks in there, and most of it's handled by UPS. Commerce, the commercial side of it, I just don't see where- You know, the seafood industry is just real rocky. There's still demand for some of it. I don't follow the seafood industry, but I see the trucks riding around. It's got a struggle. They're concerned about pollution. My first wife worked for VIMS; she spent a lot of time fighting pollutions in the streams and run-off issues that farming creates. The cattle and dairy farms or just agricultural: they all produce a certain amount of chemical waste that may find itself to the water. Retail stores: most of the people here still work out of the county, and they will naturally have time coming and going. Most of them shop. Mass transit was never prevalent here; we have a little service but it's not very dependable. They're getting better. I've got a worker that comes in and assists the gentleman in the back, and that's what she uses to get around.

T: That's wonderful. Do you have any other anecdotes you'd like to share?

R: No, I think **that's it**.

T: Okay. Well, thank you, sir.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Transcribed by: Jessica Taylor

Audit-Edited by: Jessica Taylor