T: This is Jessica Taylor interviewing J. Ellis Hall on July 27, 2013 at 2:00 p.m. Mr. Hall, can you please state your full name?

H: J. Ellis Hall.

T: Okay. When were you born?

H: Born May 15, 1918.

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

H: Ansel J. Hall, and my mother was Margie. We lived at Ordinary, was our post office. My dad was in the sawmill business, and farming, over thirty years. We had five boys and one sister.

T: What--I’m sorry?

H: I said, a lot of them have gone now.

T: What did your brothers end up doing?

H: Well, I’ve got one brother that was in the salesman business, and he was in Chicago for fifty-some years, and then he moved back to Gloucester a few years ago. But he was very successful in that business. I had another brother which was locally, and he ran old Cow Creek Mills for Mr. E. W. Noble. He worked for him for quite some time. Then I had a younger brother that was a Texaco distributor over in Middlesex County, and I had a sister that was ten years younger than the youngest brother. Of course, she lived in the home place and is still there today so that goes.

T: Wonderful. What are some of your earliest memories of Ordinary?

H: People were very friendly and they helped each other. If somebody had a problem—**boys** or fire or needed help or anything—the community was very friendly and would respond to their needs. It was very rural, community-oriented, and they were willing to help anyone. And that was the attitude of most of the neighbors.

T: Do you have a specific example of that that you have in mind?

H: Yes. I had in our--I come from a real broad family. My dad had sixteen brothers and sisters. He was married twice, and my grandmother had twins when he was seventy-five years old. [Laughter] Most of them are farmers, and in the summertime, when they’d go to harvest their crops, we’d all go to one place and help to harvest the crop. Of course, I can remember the good food that we used to get: the fried chicken and the butterbeans and tomatoes and all of that kind of stuff. That was something that they looked forward to, to get together at that time and help one another.

T: What is your earliest memory of Main Street here?

H: When they used to have the fair here at Edge Hill, I used to come to the Courthouse on fair days. A lot of times when they had court, because they’d have it open here, to know what’s going on, you’d come up and listen to what was going on. Especially those that were trying to run the county, you might say, they wanted to get recognition so they’d come up and expose themselves. A lot of times, people would question them on why they had certain things that they wanted to do. This was enlightening, to keep up with what was going on in the county.

T: Absolutely. So what were some of the issues that they were talking about at that time?

H: It was the election of the clerk and also they got to adding people to the county…I don’t really remember, because there wasn’t really too much going on other than they established the court so people could get their marriage license and pay their taxes. They’d have court days and people would have a trial and they’d have that over at the courthouse and sometimes out on the court green. They had a day as far as that goes. It was very interesting, and in order to keep up with what was going on, you’d have to attend these affairs, even when somebody was running for election. That’s the time they’d be in the court green. Most of the time, they’d give a little talk about what they would do and what they would for the county. To see it was very interesting.

T: Do you remember any of the festivities that surrounded court day?

H: Only thing I can remember really is somebody giving a political talk or a trial of someone. Some of them were interesting and some of them were pretty dull. [Laughter]

T: That’s fair enough. Where were the other gathering spaces besides the court green?

H: I guess at Gloucester Point. The steamer used to dock there and carry freight from Gloucester Point to Baltimore. We’d all go down and see the steamer come in and they would do their shipping from there. Then, it was a large building there at Gloucester Point built that they--I didn’t realize it, but the county owned it and it was kind of a hotel. The proceeds from the hotel would go to the county. I remember Robbin’s people ran it and of course, several people over a period of years. I remember that I used to go down on Sunday afternoons cause they had a drugstore there. All the kids would gather there and we’d go swimming, diving off the dock. So it was quite a get-together for the young people on Sunday afternoons. Then, of course, they had a dance hall there. We could have dances. When I got a little older, I would go down and get involved in that. That was a gathering place for people.

T: That’s wonderful. Do you remember when the Edge Hill Service Station came? Do you remember when the Texaco station was built?

H: No, I really don’t. I remember when it was built, but I don’t remember the date.

T: Okay. Do you remember going there to get gas or for other reasons?

H: Oh, yeah, because there’s only a few gas stations in Gloucester and that was the main one Gloucester had. Jack Brown was the first gasoline oil distributor that I remember what he was doing.

T: How did your brother get involved with the Texaco distribution?

H: His uncle, which was Herschel Shackleford, his wife’s uncle owned the Amoco distributor at Gloucester Point. He told Francis to check in to see. They had a Texaco dealer over in Urbanna, and he died. Herschel told him to check with the--well, in fact, he got in touch with the chairman of the board, which had a home over in Mathews. He was working for me in the business, and one day Mister…good Lord, I can’t think of his name. He was our customer, and Francis contacted him and told him that he was interested in it. The people of the family that had the distributor thought they could keep the franchise, but that wasn’t the way that Texaco operated. So, he told him, he said, you go down to Norfolk and put your name in. Well, when he got down to Norfolk and they said, man, you don’t have a chance to get the distributorship. [Laughter] Well he said, well anyway, I was told to put my name in. Maybe four or five months after that, Mr. A. C. Long was the one. He was the chairman of the board and the president of Texaco. He came in the store when we were down on 17. He said, where’s your brother? I say, he’s in the back room. He said, has he had any luck? So Francis came out and talked to him, and Francis told him. He said, well, they told me down there that I didn’t have Chinaman’s chance of getting the distributorship. So Mr. Long wrote a note and he said, you go down and see this particular man. Of course, he signed the note, and when he went back [Laughter] and they saw Mr. Long’s name on it, in two weeks’ time he had the distributorship. [Laughter] That was a big, big deal.

T: Wow. Did he ever have any dealings with Captain Jack Brown? I thought that he had something to do with Texaco distributing oil and gas-

H: Yeah. He was the distributor here at Gloucester Courthouse, and the service station. He supplied the oil and gas to farmers and everybody around here. Yeah, I knew Mr. Jack Brown. In fact, knew his son and his daughter--or, the son-in-law was what I knew.

T: Yeah.

H: I knew Andy, too, and of course, now he’s supervisor.

T: Yeah.

H: Andy went to school with my children.

T: Oh, okay! Do you remember any of them in the context of the gas station? When you would go there, would you see them? Or, would you see the one-armed man? Howard Brown was his name.

H: Who?

T: Howard Brown, the one-armed man.

H: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Howard ran the service station for years, and was a very good operator. Very concerned. In other words, he was very dependable. People would go there just because of him, because of his personality. That especially meant a lot in business, you know?

T: Yeah.

H: People come and deal with him because of the person that’s doing the work, not necessarily the owner of it. But Mr. Brown was very active in the community affairs, and people acknowledged that, too. He was a good man, and he was a good Christian man, I think.

T: Does the gas station now look any different than how it looked when you remember it in the [19]30s and [19]40s?

H: The what?

T: Does the gas station look any different now than it did in the [19]30s and [19]40s?

H: You mean the building?

T: Mm-hm.

H: No, it looks about the same. It’s been added on to, and they’ve improved it, naturally. Because when you first--all you had to have was one room, and then the pump’s on the outside. Now they’ve added for kerosene and for diesel and all that kind of stuff, but that stuff was added on year after year. They paved it around it and made it more attractive and easier to get to, to get service.

T: I didn’t know that. So it wasn’t paved at the beginning.

H: No, no.

T: Do you remember ever going inside of it?

H: Oh yes, oh yes. Of course, I used to deal there. I used to buy gasoline there.

T: Uh-huh. What was the inside like? What did it look like?

H: It was just an office. They did have, you know, the place on the side where they used to grease and change oil. They had a good business there.

T: When you went to high school- what year did you graduate high school, do you remember?

H: Achilles, 1937.

T: Okay. Did you have a car in high school?

H: Did I have what?

T: Did you have a car in high school, an automobile?

H: [Laughter] No, uh-uh. No. I think I was a year out of school before I got a car.

T: What was your first car?

H: Model-T Ford.

T: Really?

H: Yeah.

T: In 1938?

H: And it was a 1925 model. The next one was a Ford, a 1930 model.

T: When did you get that?

H: I don’t know the year, but I think I was about nineteen at the time. In fact, the first Model-T I had, I went to Mathews. It took me all day to go over there and come back, and I had two flat tires. [Laughter] Going over there and coming back, but today you can be there in a half an hour.

T: Where did you buy it from?

H: George Lawson used to run the Ford place here in the county.

T: Did your parents have a car?

H: Yes, we had a car.

T: When did they get theirs?

H: They had that when…I don’t know. I was about five years old, I guess, when they got a car. Before then, we used horse and buggy and mules. We lived on a farm, and we had a team. My dad farmed and was in the lumber business with the sawmill. That was in probably--really, during the Depression, in the late [19]20s that I remember.

T: Do you remember how Prohibition affected the county?

H: Not really. I don’t think that I remember anything about that, other than I remember one man was desperately against it. When they put it up for a vote, he came down and voted for it and didn’t realize, thought he was voting against it. [Laughter] That was quite a shock when he found out that he voted the wrong way. [Laughter]

T: That’s wonderful. When you were a child, did your parents ever take you on trips to Richmond or Newport News or Williamsburg?

H: Oh, yeah. We’d go to Newport News quite a lot of times. We went to the doctor’s down there that I can remember. They have a place in Newport News, Museum Park? When they first built that, that was quite something for people to go visit. We’d do that on Sundays sometimes, Sunday afternoons.

T: Would you go there with the team, or would you go there in a car?

H: We’d go down in the car, but that was later on.

T: Okay.

H: No, we wouldn’t drive that far.

T: This may be a silly question, but how far could you go with a team?

H: Well, I remember my dad buying a team of mules. He had to go to Richmond to get them. He drove them all the way from Richmond, and it took him two days. He drove from Richmond to New Kent the first day, and the second day he drove and got here in Gloucester. That was quite a time.

T: Wow. About what time did your family get rid of the team?

H: I don’t think we ever got rid of them, because up until the time that I was…we all worked at the sawmill up until probably 1937. Then I went to Newport News to work in the insurance business, but my dad was still in the lumber business and he stayed in the lumber business until during the war. During the war, they come from Naval Mine over and hire everybody from the mill. He didn’t have enough to help him to run the lumber business, so the guy from Naval Mine came and said, Mr. Hall, we’ve taken all your employees. You might as well just come on over and work for us. So, that’s what he did. He went over at Naval Mine run the sawmill over there for years.

T: How did he feel about that?

H: Well, he didn’t like it because it’s hurting his business, but that was what they call the war effort, you know? Naturally, he wanted to support that. My dad is a very generous man. If it was right, he was for it and he worked towards it. A little incident: he was running the sawmill business over there, and his boss came out one day and told him, he said, Mr. Hall, you’re going to have to cut down on what you’re doing. He said, what do you mean? He said, you’re cutting too much lumber. He said, well, what am I supposed to do? [Laughter] He said, just do anything, he said, because you’ve got to cut down. And he said, well, I can’t. I’m not used to getting paid for sitting around or hiding from the boss. So, he did it for a while, and finally couldn’t stand it and he quit and come home. Because he said he wasn’t going to hide from any boss. He was proud of what he did, and he was paid for an eight-hour day. He was gonna work. He was going to do something. I remember that.

T: How else did World War II affect Gloucester?

H: Well, I think it helped Gloucester. It had a lot of volunteers, and Naval Mine and Fort Eustis and places like that, that’s where most of the people worked. It was a boost to the county because people were hired and had a place to work. It used to be a lot of the farming in Gloucester County; they kind of got away from that during the war. They went over to the Naval Mine and that was good for Gloucester in the years of the war and ever after the war, because it was still continued [inaudible 25:39]. In fact, I remember when they built the Parkway. My brothers worked over there and helped build the dams and the bridges there.

T: Wow.

H: That was in the [19]30s, I guess. May have been some in the [19]20s, because my two older brothers worked over there, and I remember they’d talk about they used to go down and take a boat from Gloucester Point up to where they were building the dams on the highway. It’s a beautiful parkway. They built it well, because still today a lot of people use it.

T: Did you ever go to Rosewell when you were a kid?

H: Oh, yeah.

T: What did it look like?

H: Well, at the time I went there, they had had a fire there. The building was still standing. The people used to visit there, they would go there and because it was a historical, they would take--a lot of the time, they’d get bricks from there [inaudible 27:27] [Laughter] They had to stop it because people were carrying this stuff off. But they were using it for several years. Not that any of it was a lot of valuable, but everybody going in and taking up, getting a piece for several years, it was actually taking away from the building. It was a very prominent, prominent place there.

T: Yeah.

H: The governor used to visit. I think George Washington had people over there.

T: Did you ever hear anything about the Rosewell fire at all? How it happened?

H: No, I don’t. I don’t remember how it happened.

T: This is a long shot, but did you ever know anything about the Fairfield fire, the fire that burnt down the Fairfield plantation? No? Thought I’d ask.

H: No. I don’t know that.

T: That’s okay. So, when you’re in high school in the mid-[19]30s, you don’t have a car. How do you learn how to court women? How does dating work?

H: Well, when I was in high school, I even dated one of the teachers. But I had a car then.

T: Wait. When you were in high school, you dated a teacher?

H: Yeah.

T: Your teacher?

H: Yeah. That’s how I got through. [Laughter]

T: Okay.

H: No, I’m just kidding. But we did. Of course, that was my senior year.

T: Okay.

H: But a group of us--I had friends that had an automobile. I didn’t have one myself, but I would go with them. We’d date together.

T: Where would you go for dates?

H: Well, it would be somebody that’s in the neighborhood, and we’d go to shows and we even would go all the way over to Mathews or we’d go to Williamsburg, but very seldom we’d go across the river. We’d probably go to some entertainment here in the…then we had the Edge Hill Theater over here. We would go over there.

T: Yeah, absolutely. So you mentioned that some of your friends had cars in high school. Who was more likely to have a car in high school?

H: Well, I had a friend, J.T. Dunston, and his father was a blacksmith, and they had a car. He was able to use his dad’s car.

T: Wow.

H: That’s when we’d go. I had several friends that their parents had cars, but I…and then later on, remember my family had a car, but very seldom would I use the family car, because it was four brothers. They were using it. [Laughter]

T: Makes sense. Makes sense. So you mentioned that it’s important in business to be personable.

H: Absolutely.

T: How did that affect you going into your own business?

H: Well, I learned early in life, it’s not the business, it’s the one who does the business. How they treated the customer, and a lot of times, it’s how they dressed. I remember when I first went in business, this lady came in. She said, you know Mr. Hall why I come and deal with you? I said, I hope because we give you service. She said, no. I said, I hope that we give you a good deal. She said, no; I pay you more than I pay anybody else. But you always treat me as a lady. You always are neat in your dress. And she said, you treat me as a lady. She said, that goes a long way. I learned early in life that it’s not so much the business, it’s who does the business because your business is no better than the people that run it and how they treat the customers.

T: How did you choose people to help you run the store?

H: How did I treat them?

T: How did you choose people, hire people?

H: Well, it had a lot to do with how they treated people, because anybody will tell you your business is no better than the people that work for you. We tried to maintain that. The person had to be courteous and treat people like they should be, just like you deliver. Just like Jean has, and these people deliver now. They treat people like they wanted to be treated, and they was nice to them. You build your business on that respect, because people know and watch the way that you run your business. It’s just so many little things that people pay attention to it. A lot of times they don’t today. In other words, just like when I was running this store, when a person came in that door, I made sure that somebody—even if I was waiting on a customer—they acknowledged them. Good to see you, and I’ll be with you in a few minutes. You go in to some of the stores today and walk around, and first thing I know, I’ve seen people leave because they weren’t recognized. Even if you couldn’t wait on them, you can say, even in the restaurant. I was sitting in the restaurant up here the other Sunday, and a man and his wife came in and sat at the next table. I knew them, went over and shook hands with him. They sat there and sat there and finally they got up and left and went up the street to another restaurant. I saw them at the Rotary Club, and I said, what happened? He said, well, I like to be recognized. He said, we sat there for fifteen minutes and nobody paid attention, nobody even spoke to them. I can’t imagine that, because that’s very important. People like to be recognized.

T: Absolutely. So how did you treat your employees?

H: Well, to give you an example, Jean was with us for thirty-five years. When I sold the business, the man agreed on the price, but I said, I have one more thing. You have to take the employees with it. He said, I don’t need the employees; I got my own employees. I said, well, that’s the only way you’re gonna get the business. I said, if you don’t take the employees, and I told him, I said, you can’t do without them. I said, Jean know everybody in Gloucester, Mathews, Middlesex, and around. I says, you can ask anybody in the community; they know who Jean is because she knows how to treat people. I said, she’d be an asset to you. That same man came back to me and he said, Mr. Hall, I want to thank you for insisting that I take your employee because she runs the place. He’s got a business in Newport News and seldom comes over here. I know they talk on the telephone, but he thought a lot of our employees. They were friends of ours. They went to church with each other. Anybody, if they had a problem, well then it was our problem. We helped them as much as we could.

T: So where was your supply coming from when you first opened your business?

H: Well, we had General Electric, and they had a warehouse in Richmond. We would go up and pick up our appliance. When we bought sometimes, we bought a trailer load and after we got to doing business, they delivered to us. We didn’t have to go after it. We’d go to Richmond maybe sometimes twice a week to pick up merchandise, although we had a large inventory. You kept building, so we didn’t have to go back. Like I said then, towards the last, we would buy a tractor trailer load at one time. You’d get a better price, and get it delivered to you, so we saved freight or saved gasoline going up there and picking it up. [Laughter] Besides, the time it’d take. It’d take you all day to go to Richmond, get a load, and come back.

T: When did you move? Did you start the business in Main Street?

H: Started in that gray building across the street over there. That’s where we started. Then we started to handling furniture, and it wasn’t big enough. So, we went down to 17 right down here. I forget what the building is now. Anyway, it has a beautiful front. They changed it.

Jean: Goodman’s, isn’t it?

H: They built a ten-thousand square foot- huh?

Jean: Goodman’s, isn’t it?

H: Yes, Goodman’s, yeah. We built a ten-thousand square foot store there. We were doing okay. Then they decided to add another lane to 17, took fifty feet off the front of our store. [Laughter] We were right back where we started at. Then we came over here and bought this lot here, and built this store, ten thousand square feet. I think we moved over here in [19]60.

T: Okay. So you’ve really experienced Main Street as businessman since the [19]40s.

H: Oh, yeah. We started across there in [19]40…I went in business with Broaddus in 1948, first of [19]48. Because when I came out of service, I came out of service in [19]45. I was in the insurance business for a couple years. I had my office over there. That’s how I got to know him. He wanted me to come and work for him. I said, no. I said, if I leave this business that I’m in now, the insurance business, I said, I want to go in for myself. He said, in other words, you want part of the business? I said, that’s the only way I’ll come. So he said, I’ll have to think about it. A couple of weeks, he came back and he said, I need somebody. We took inventory, and I paid him half and I borrowed money to buy half of his inventory, and then we rented here. When we went down there, we went as partners. Came over here as partners. Then we built the rest of the shopping center one store at a time.

T: How have you noticed that Main Street has changed over time?

H: Tremendous traffic increase. I mean, I live right on Main Street, right up there beyond the Presbyterian Church? Sometimes I have to sit there for two or three minutes before I can get out on the street. [Laughter] That was one thing. Business has grown tremendously all up and down Main Street. Main Street Association has done a lot to help, because they’ve encouraged the people to fix up their front and try to improve their business. They’re very well pleased with what we’re doing now. But the county comes up with new ordinances and new rules every day, so they’ve made it kind of tough on and slowed the business down.

T: I understand. Do you miss the grocery store and the drugstores that were up the street, things that were more practically-?

H: There was a grocery store here when we moved over here. A&P, that was owned by Fitch**.** Mr. Fitch, I guess, was getting old. He wanted to get out of business, so I knew that I wanted to expand and so I bought the rest of it from him.

T: That’s great. Can I ask you about your time in the service? Is that okay?

H: Yeah, I spent almost three years in India. In fact, I was drafted in Newport News when I was in the insurance business, and I was sent to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri for my basic training. Then I went from service and barracks to Salt Lake City for training, and then I was sent to Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho for the rest of my training, and then I was shipped from Boise, Idaho to Hampton Roads. That’s where I went to Oran, North Africa. That’s where I landed, and went from Oran to Algiers, and I went from Algiers to Bombay, India. From Bombay, India to Calcutta, India, then from Calcutta. Then Calcutta, India--that’s where we extended the runway so a B-29 could take off to go to Burma there. Then I went from Calcutta to Myitkyina, Burma. I went from Myitkyina, Burma to Kunming, China. That’s where I had enough points to get out. So I got out. [Laughter]

T: What branch were you?

H: 930th Engineer Aviation Regiment. What we were supposed to do, we built runways. What we trained our battalions to do was build fair-weather strips in between the artillery and the front lines. That wasn’t a very good place to be, because they were shooting over your head. That’s what we did.

T: Were you involved in any action?

H: We were in Myitkyina, Burma, and that’s where the Merrill’s Marauders were. But our main thing was to maintain runways. We were subject to raids all the time until we got--we didn’t have any raids over when we got to Kunming. In Myitkyina there, we were constantly raided because that’s where Merrill’s Marauders were. The Japanese were after them. In fact, I wrote my wife and told her I didn’t think I was going to ever be able to come home, because all we heard was Tokyo Rose. The Japanese had the air more or less--we couldn’t get anything through because their broadcasting was so much stronger than what we had there. All you had, Tokyo Rose, would come on and say, you boys over here, fighting over here, fighting there, you’re snakes and all the problems over here. Said, your wife is probably at home going out with a 4-F. And when you know you hear that all the time, and we had so many, really--one guy went nuts. I’ll never forget that. He just lost it. He couldn’t take it.

T: What happened?

H: Well, they sent him back, but I understand that he never did regain. Last I heard from him, he wasn’t doing too well. He just lost his mind. It just preyed on him night and day.

T: Yeah. Did you have trouble adjusting, coming back?

H: Not really, because I had my boss in the insurance business. I knew that I had a job. I didn’t worry about that. The biggest thing in the whole thing--I never got wounded or anything like that—I was under raids quite often. I never got hurt. But just being away from the family for three years, that was rough. When I went in service, my youngest boy was only about six months old.

T: How did your family receive you when you came back?

H: They was glad to see me. [Laughter] I was awfully glad to be home, cause we have a large family over on my wife’s side as well as on my side. We’re still family-oriented.

T: Yeah. I’m sorry to ask- when were you married?

H: 1941.

T: 1941. Was that just before you went in?

H: Yes.

T: Okay. What did your wife do?

H: She was a teacher here. She taught here a couple of years, but she would bring all the problems home and I told her, I said, this isn’t working out. [Laughter] She left the teaching business, and she had something to do with the finance over at NASA. She worked there until we started raising a family.

T: Wow.

H: We moved to Newport News, and lived there until I was drafted.

T: You were drafted. Did you have any other family members that were involved in the military before World War II?

H: Oh, yeah. My grandfather was in there…I can’t remember him. I remember my grandmother, but he came here actually from Baltimore, and [Laughter] he was supposed to be mustered out, and it took so long. He was actually what they call now…I can’t remember. Anyway, they never did anything about it, but he came here and started to buy land and he owned land from Gloucester Courthouse down below…where used to be Lambert’s Mill. I don’t know whether you remember about that.

T: Is that near Belroi?

H: They call it Glebe. In fact, the place used to be called Hall Town. All that back there was my grandfather’s, from there clear up to Gloucester Courthouse.

T: Wow. So was he in the Confederate Army? Is that what I was-?

H: I think evidently that was what it was.

T: Okay. Okay. I think that’s all the questions I have.

H: Okay, well that’s- [Laughter] I’m sorry I haven’t been much help.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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