

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN HARRISONBURG

Transcript 1: Interview with Mr. James Curry. Mrs. Peggy Curry
is also present.
Date and place of Interview: 2 August 1978;
Harrisonburg, Virginia
Interviewer: Inez Ramsey, JMU Faculty
Transcriber: Theresa Staropoli, September 16,
1992, Burruss Intern in Carrier Library Special Collections

Tape 1, Side 1

- IR: This is an interview with Mr. James Curry, done on August 2,
1978, at his son's residence on Norwood Street, in Harrisonburg, Virginia.
Interviewed by Inez Ramsey. So you traced your family back to
[unintelligible]?
- JC: Yeah, it's back to the 1800s. See, I'm 51 years old, and my great-grandmother
and grandfather, I remember them pretty well. And then I have two aunts that's
living. Aunt Stella from New York, Aunt Nana[?] that's from Bedford[?], New
Jersey, and then they filled me in that my grandfather was the oldest of
about, I think it was about nine children, and I remember him very well, in
fact, I lived with him. And then he had a brother that was next to him, so
when I started getting the family history, he came here, then I began to
question him and talk to him and talk about it and everything. Then the
Worleys from out in Pleasant Valley, they knew quite a lot about the people
and the background.
Now the Currys, like grandfather Curry, it was very little known about him,
but we knew a lot about my great-grandmother, you know, where she came from.
She was Nanie Ervin[?], and she came from Rothers[?], Virginia, and he was
Elridge [?] Curry, and he came from Port Republic. They were married
somewheres, let me see, I think I've got it down here. [He looks for the
date] It was in the 1800s.
- PC: [unintelligible] between 1850 and 1870.
- JC: About June the 10th, somewhere around 1873 they were married. The Currys are
real unique, they're very determined, and they're hard working people. Very
clannish, and they sort of have a tendency to all come together at a crisis,
regardless of what. They stick pretty close together. I think Nanie Curry, she
was the grandmother, I think she was the leader more so than grandfather
Curry. She was very determined, very hard working, and you couldn't tell her
that it couldn't be done, because in Port Republic, now these are my great-
grandparents I'm talking about, his father and mother lived right down the
hill from him, and in spite of hard times and maybe a little persecution and
very low pay, they were able to build an eight room home of their own. She
washed, and he worked around on the farms, but most of the money he
accumulated for his home was, he went to Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and he
worked in the steel mill, and then he would come back, you know, back to the
fort, and then to Harrisburg. When the work slowed down in Pottstown, he then
came to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and worked, and he came back. So then all the
family sort of began to move away and die off in Port Republic, so they got
rid of their home, and then they moved right over here, not too far. I would
say it's right across from 7-11.
- IR: Where the apartments are.
- JC: That's right. They bought the home there and he was still going away to work.
They bought the home there, they even bought some of the farm animals during
their time. You could have the pigs, the chickens and the cows. Right across
the street besides 7-11 the same house is there where the oldest daughter
lived. Mary lived right across. My grandfather, he was the oldest of all of
them, he lived next door. That's the house that I was born in. It has green
sidings on it now. I was born there and my whole family lived together.

When he moved to Harrisonburg, grandfather Curry would come over and he would always have stories and things to tell us. They had a project where they were working on the reservoir and somehow he became disheartened because they found out that they didn't really want a black to work on this project. Somehow I guess his pride or something was sort of wounded, so he sort of slowed up with his work. But grandmother Curry was very determined. She kept right on working. She washed clothes for Grimes, Hinburger, and she worked in their home and she worked for the Ney's. She took in washing and ironing and was able to raise her children. Another thing - she also, in owning this house she owned the house right on the corner at one time, and she owned three lots.

(Interview is interrupted to turn off fan)

IR: I think that's one of the things that has really impressed my students who have participated in this project up until this point. That is the fact that all these people are so hard working. They have worked all of their lives and they've saved their pennies. They're very frugal and obviously don't throw anything away. Their houses are filled with all sorts of mementos and such. And the strong influence of the church - they're very religious people, very good people, and I would say we probably have met some of the most wonderful people that we ever have met in doing this course. Most of the people we've talked to have been the ladies of the community who are older. Unfortunately I don't know what we do to you men that you die off so much earlier.

JC: (Laughing) It seems that way, I was just thinking...

IR: But really, most of the elderly folk are women by the time they get up to their eighties.

JC: (He agrees) As I was planning to tell you, we had eleven original Curry men, and at the present, I am the oldest, so they've all rapidly died off. Then we lost Roberta Curry's son, William Lee Curry, was it last year?

PC: During the fall.

JC: Yeah, during the fall of last year. He was very young when we lost him. So that cut us down to about ten, and some of them are very young. Another thing: their religious background, you'll find a few Baptists, and some in the Mennonite church, but basically they were all Methodists. I was out last year to see where the Methodist church is, out in Pleasant Valley, and I found it's kind of broke down, but it's still there. And I remember the funeral, the last time I was there for a funeral was when my grandmother, my mother's mother, passed away and we had the funeral in this church. The benches, I have some of the old song books that are very torn and raggedy, I gathered them. I have some of them. Some of the pews are still in the church, and I found out a little about that too, that I'd like to tell you a little about how the church come about.

IR: We're interested in that. I just met a gentleman today, and I don't know if you have met him or not. His name is Samuel Neesmith[?]. Have you met him? He gave me his card. He's the district Superintendent of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church. He's just come here to Harrisonburg, and he's very interested in the history of the Methodist church here in the Shenandoah Valley because this area here was the start of Methodism in this part of the country.

JC: Now, this is not a Wesleyan. This is an AMEs [African Methodist Episcopal] Methodist church, and it came from Bridgewater, and how this church happened to be out in the Pleasant Valley area, it was lots of black families out there and they didn't have a church. Mr. Speaks Diggs owned a lot of land out there. (Conversation on spelling of name). Now he owned all this land out there, out at Spader's church in Pleasant Valley, they had this building there, so they moved this church from the Spader's church over to this land that Mr. Diggs had given the black people for a church. Later, after he passed away, all the lots were sold off, and the black people were able to buy lots and build around the church. So they were all Methodists. As my grandmother used to say, "They had no choice because that was the only one there." They had no difficulty because they didn't have very many vehicles to go to many places, so they were there. Another thing they took great pride that stemmed from the Methodist church was what they called the bush meetings. They'd bake cakes and

pies and fried chicken, and that's how they kept up their church, they would sell. Then they'd have as many as four different preachers to come in, and the preaching service was outside. I remember a few of these because I went. The last preacher that preached out there that was of that denomination was Reverend Baker which died a few years ago. He was around here and there. I had the privilege of meeting him too. I knew him pretty well.

IR: Reverend Baker. Now, was he affiliated with a particular church in the area?

JC: Yes, he was in the Bridgewater area. That's where he was at the Methodist church in Bridgewater. This Methodist church is still out in Bridgewater. It's still active.

IR: There are a lot of black churches scattered all over the place, I have to admit. Most of them are pretty old - they go back fairly far. Did the church have any other old functions or any special things they did?

JC: They had a sort of revival, and then I think earlier it also served as some type of school, too, that they had in there. The seventh grade was the extent of the school.

IR: I've always wanted to go to a revival meeting. I'm northern Baptist and we don't give revival meetings up north. So I missed something there.

JC: Well I've been to a few now. We're Mennonites, but I've been to a few, and to me, they really get carried away. The singing is very good and it makes you feel very good, and the patting[?] of the hands and things. Some of the songs they sing really has a deep meaning to them. Then the preacher, I mean he really gets fired up and it really comes across. You really know what he's saying. I noticed that a lot of this revival-type thing is not so much of, it's just real good basic, something that anyone would be able to understand. The flair of words just come out, I mean they're not placed in categories, but they really come out and they really have a meaning and I think they really do something for the people, especially the very down dirty[?].

IR: I'd like to get out there someday. I really would like to go to a revival meeting. How is it that your family is Mennonite? Can you trace back your association with the Mennonite church?

JC: Easily enough. My great-grandmother that lived across the road, Nanie Curry, she opened her home. The Mennonites, when they first came in the area, they were mainly trying to get acquainted, and trying to have a little Sunday school or a little prayer in the homes. She opened her home, her lovely parlor that no one ever got into unless it was for special company or some special reason, and they began to have Sunday school, and we went. And I was always impressed because when they had Sunday school everything was like flannel graph[?] or in picture form; something that was tangible, something that you could touch and you could see, and it really meant so much. They could say, like reading out of the Bible, who was who's son. That was impressive, but that wasn't something that you could see. When they put up and they'd say, "Well, this is Moses' son, and like that, flannel graph worked out[?] and it was just wonderful. They had a way of really being kind, and I spent quite a lot of time in some of the homes.

When I could see daily Christian living going on daily, this was the same as getting up and washing your face and drinking water. I was highly impressed. I always had opportunities to go to their Sunday school. When I lived with my father's mother, she was Baptist and she said, "Alright, you go to church and you behave yourself, and then you can go to the Mennonite church if you want to." I behaved myself, and I went because that's where everything was, where everything was happening. That's where the excitement was. The songs they'd sing; they'd go ahead and teach you a song that you'd keep in your mind all week long. So then I realized when I was old enough to choose for myself that this was the way of life for me, and it's really been wonderful. Our church is on Broad Street. It's just a little small church on Broad Street. It is a lot going on in that little building. You'd just really be surprised at the things going on - love, and sharing and caring for one another.

IR: How about children? Are you drawing children into your church?

JC: We have a lot of children, but I'll tell you one thing, small children come, but the teenagers are not impressed with denomination. If you've got

something's good and that's impressive to them they may come. If you want to talk or show church structure then they don't want any part of it. I think there are a lot of fine young people and a lot of bright and intelligent young people. The thing that impresses me most, they don't just reach out and grab things. They gotta feel things and sometimes see for themselves to see if this is what they want for their life. For example, just because we're Mennonites and we have a lot of good things to say about our church, and all our documents and stuff, we can lay out, and everything, but the children don't just say, "Mom and Dad, this is great for them and everything, we want this." They're gonna sift through it and see what it's gonna mean for this day.

IR: Just like you did when you were growing up. You did the same thing.

JC: That's right! You gotta see what's gonna fit into this day. And I like today's Christianity; something that meets your needs today, your daily needs as you go along. I think this is what we're all about at Broad Street. The sharing, it's no limit to the sharing that goes on, whether someone needs to borrow your broom, whether they need money, whether they need help, whether they're hurt and whether they're having problems or anything. Richard Weaver's[?], our pastor, he is just a tremendous fellow. He really is, he and his wife.

IR: As an outsider I've been very impressed with the values and the lifestyle of the Mennonite community. They obviously seem to be very wonderful, very loving people towards each other. It would be nice if more of us could share in some of those values. It would be a better world, I would say.

JC: I think another thing that's so broadening and so good, is that it's really opened up until, it's not a closed denomination. They're opened up now so that they work with others, realizing that all working together as a total group, regardless of what denomination, all Christians working together as a total group effort, can really accomplish something. It's really getting across the church, which is very good.

IR: Changing the subject a little bit now, what is the first thing you remember about growing up in this area? Is there anything that sticks in your mind?

JC: Yes, very much so. What really impressed me about growing up, I was born and I lived up here on the hill, and I know a lot of segregation and a lot of disadvantages and things, but somehow I didn't realize it until we had moved downtown, because everybody up here was sort of like a family. We had cows and chickens and pigs right over there.

IR: Is that where Spottswood school is now?

JC: Right across there. You know where 7-11 is? I lived right along there. We had these things, and if we had milk, we gave the milk and maybe some of the people that were living down in here then, they traded the eggs. If we were eating and someone come and they wanted to eat, they eat. I remember very distinctly when I started school, Effinger Street school, and we had to walk down. Somehow we were told[?] and we walked to Franklin Street as you go up Reservoir Street. That was the dividing line. Your friends went up that-a-way, and you went on down to Effinger Street school and they turned left there and went down to the Main Street school together. And then that's when we began to notice the difference. Conflicts and action, they don't make any big difference, it never was. They were just good, really kind people, very poor, and everybody sort of needed everybody. And when the Mennonites came, a lot of white people from the neighborhood came to my grandmother's too, and we worshipped together, exchanged ideas and thoughts, and they butchered together, and ate apple butter together and cut wood together and everything.

PC: Did it make a difference with your friends when they went to school, when they went to the white school and you went downtown?

JC: Somehow, now that you say somehow that was something that we just didn't talk about. When we were anxious all to get home we used to meet up there. Sometimes they'd be coming and we'd be coming. We'd come on down together and change into our old clothes, and what times after we'd done our chores, what times we had to play we would all flock together and play. In fact, it's the fellow that is right across over here that I grew up with and played with that's still up here.

IR: It's interesting, it's just something that is, and kids don't really realize

what it's all about. I grew up in Ohio, and we had a very small black population in Ohio, and even as far north as Martin's Ferry, Ohio, which is up across from West Virginia, we all went to school together and that kind of thing. The one thing that they did was the black children used the swimming pool on Monday, and the other kids, the rest of the week, which was grossly unfair. Yet as kids, I used to think, since there were so few black kids they had the whole pool to themselves. I used to think, "Boy how lucky they are!" I didn't realize at that point in time that those kids were denied access to the pool six days a week. The one day they did have it, they had the whole pool to themselves. But as a child, I don't think you understand what the whole thing is all about. It's not until you get older that you really begin to understand why there are the differences in there. Kids are kids, and kids get along if you leave them alone. You went to Effinger Street school. Did you have Lucy Simms as a teacher at Effinger Street?

JC: Yes, I was just starting in her class and I had her just a short while, and then Jeannie Francis[?] took over. She died, Miss Lucy passed away, and I remember we had the short white pants on, and the white shirts, and we all carried a flag and we went to the graveyard. Our whole entire class went to the graveyard. She didn't teach too long before she passed away.

IR: I thought probably, you couldn't have been around too very long, because she died in the early... we're trying to figure out what year she did pass away. Do you know? Was it '33 or '34?

JC: No I don't know, but Miss Willie Nickens should know because she was living right on the street when she passed on.

PC: She died the first year you went to first grade, and you were born in '27. She possibly passed away in '31 maybe.

IR: Now, you go to first grade at age six, so that would be '33. Her tombstone says '34, and the Daily News-Record, I think says '33, and I figured the newspaper is right.

JC: I figure 1933 too now that you say it. I didn't go the whole year to her, but I learned to know her and she had started working. But then one morning, just suddenly she was gone.

IR: Oh I see. I was thinking she passed away in the summertime. It was actually during the school year, then.

JC: It must of been during the school year, because I remember Jeannie Francis, that was our next teacher, she was a local girl too, and she took over her class.

IR: What was Jeannie Francis like as a person? Did you know her well?

JC: I knew her very well. We've known her all through the years, and it hasn't been too awful long ago that she passed away, and every year when she home I always made a special... A lovely person. Very sweet and children just loved her. Someone who could really handle children and children just flocked to her. She was not only a pretty woman, but she was the kind that you like to be around because she was always entertaining. She lived on Broad Street, her home place is still there, and she'd always take you down to meet her father and mother, and always have goodies to give you. And her dog would go along with her and the schoolchildren.

IR: You all must have been totally blessed then. I remember my teachers and I liked my teachers when I was growing up, but it just seems as though the way you all talk about your teachers, they must have been remarkable people.

JC: Our situation is a little unusual and sometimes it's almost unbelievable. We have six children, and we can't really, like some people say, "Oh I was pressed down, this was that and everything," and we really had a very good time. We were very poor and we were able to accumulate and have a beautiful home in Keezeltown. We just had it painted and all fixed up, and we rent it out. It was necessary for us to move to town. And out of our six children, they're all working, and they all have pretty good jobs. Some of them have been in college.

PC: We have one girl that's in Indiana, she goes to Goshen, Indiana. She went last year and she's going back again in September.

JC: I'll start off with my oldest girl. Now, she works in a bank. She's sort of

like a secretary, and she works in a bank. My oldest boy is a supervisor. Well he just got promoted, moved up again, over at the Merck plant. The third boy, he's in security. He lives in New Jersey and he's a lieutenant in security. Our next one is a registered nurse in Atlanta, Georgia. The other girl is in her second year at Goshen, special education major. Then we have a little boy that just finished Spotswood School and he's moving over to Thomas Harrison. They've all worked and helped each other in their going to school. A very close knitted family. We maintain the Curry spirit. I think you'll find all the Currys mostly own their own home and it's because they've worked hard and the Lord has really blessed them in many ways.

IR: I was gonna say, it seems like Mom and Dad have rubbed off on them a little bit, wouldn't you say?

JC: Yes, and with a strong determination to better themselves and not bother so much with unfair practices, is meeting people, and being yourself and trying to elevate yourself so that when the opportunity presents itself, you'll be ready for it. We realize that even though the home is very nice, and it's in the ski lodge area down there and it's very valuable, but we figured with six children, by the time they divide it up it wouldn't be much. So we try to help each of them to get an education and get established, and just be a good person, and be the person that they are, and they should be able to really fit into the world. I really stress that the world is real big, and it's like a puzzle, and you can elevate yourself and work and strive to fit in as a piece, instead of being an outsider and always struggling along. So, there, it really worked out.

IR: It sounds like they've had good models here. With that kind of a background, how could you possibly go wrong?

JC: People have been very kind, and I've worked very hard. I worked at the school for twenty-some years, and I worked at Holiday Inn extra for about eight years along the side, and I have little extra jobs now. But now my jobs are slowing down, and we were able to take a vacation last year, we plan to take one this year. It hasn't always been easy, but anything you want or that's worthwhile, is necessary to work for. I don't mind working, we come from a working family, and it just so happens that work really doesn't bother me.

IR: Growing up, since you were brought up by your grandmother, did she ever tell you any stories or things about her childhood? Do you remember any stories that she used to tell you?

JC: Yes, I remember especially a story that my grandmother said that they had a real large family. They all worked in the field or somewhere, and she said it was so strange. They had what they called Sunday clothes and Sunday shoes, and they never got them out, or only to shine them or clean them up, and they only wore them on holidays and special occasions. She said if they were having a program at the school, that was one of the highlights, when the children were memorizing verses. She always would tell us how everybody just wanted to memorize your verse, and then when the night would come, and they would have the lights burning bright and all the parents were there dressed in their Sunday best, and then you'd get there and she said and then your verse or whatever it was would just flee from you! She said you'd have to stand there, and nobody laughed, everybody was very silent until you could compose yourself and get yourself together and go again. She said that was one of the highlights, and if you'd done well, you got three pink larces[?]. Now this was on a Saturday that you only got them. These larces, peppermint larces, they had some white and they had some pink, and if you'd done real well, then when Saturday come, three, that was your reward. And she said never when, like if your father would come out and he said, "Whup[?] in your corn." And the whole family came out.

(End of side one)

Continuation of Interview with James Curry, August 2, 1978, Harrisonburg, VA:
Tape one, side two (transcript 1B)

[Side 2 begins in the middle of a conversation]

IR: ...German, and his Daddy was that way. All the money the boys made belong to Daddy.
JC: Well, that's the way she talked. I asked her, I said, "Didn't you ask?" and she said, "Why no, you never question the father, the head of the house." She said you never questioned him and you never had any money, so therefore it wasn't something like you had money and someone had taken it away from you. Then she would say quilting was a grand time for the ladies, and the girls, too, when they'd all come together and quilt, work on a quilt together, or a dress together.
IR: You wouldn't have any old quilts or anything like that around that she made, would you?
PC: [Unintelligible] in the basement at home.
JC: I think we've gotten rid of them. I kept so many old things, dishes and things that I plan to give to the children at sometime or another.
IR: Do you think your kids will want them?
JC: Well I wonder if they won't be graceful or not to accept them and put them away.
PC: Were those dishes that were your mothers, were they her mothers?
JC: No, those were given to her, Dr. Duray[?] in town. My mother worked for Dr. Duray down on East Market street for a long time when we were small. They went to Warsaw, and when they came back, they brought her these real heavy cut glass dishes. And I hung on to them and I still have some of them. Since my wife and I raised my youngest sister when my mother passed away, my older sisters didn't feel like they wanted to come and take everything away. So whatever I had, I offered to divide it with them, so my older sister took two pieces and she said if anything ever happened to her, they were to be returned back to the set.
IR: Well you just tell your kids, later on, if they decide that they don't want them, don't throw anything out, but give it to the historical society. If you don't want it tell them don't throw it out.
PC: Tell her about the box you have where you keep all your stuff.
JC: Oh, I have a box, it was a green box originally, and it belonged to my grandparents. And I always wanted this, but never figured it would ever come that I would get it, so finally, there was a sale when my grandparents died, the girls, three sisters had a sale. For some odd reason my mother just bought this box. A lot of other people bought things too, but she just bought this old green box 'cause they had it way before her. As long as she can remember they had it. About a couple of years ago, I decided to take this box and see what it was really like, have all the paint and stuff taken out, and it is simply beautiful.
PC: It's like a cedar chest, opens with a lid. It's about as high as one of these chairs, and maybe that long.
JC: It was done, and the fellow that helped me do it, we done most of the work ourselves. He filled in some of the cracks, and some of it was badly beat up. We fixed it and got it back in good shape.
IR: It would be interesting to try to date it.
JC: Everything was done by hand with it cause you could see how...

IR: No hand pegs?
JC: Uh-huh... how crude it was...
IR: It's old then!
JC: Yes it's old.
PC: There are no nails in it are there?
JC: I don't think so. There's a couple that we might have did.
PC: Yeah but it looks like the corners might have been put together with pegs.
JC: But, it's very old. The curiosity, I couldn't let it stay green any longer. I had to take the green to see what was under there.
IR: It sounds beautiful. It would be really interesting to date it, to find out how old the thing really is. And those kinds of things are treasures. What happens, all these things that you save, very often your kids come along and they throw that stuff out. When my grandparents died, that's exactly what happened. I wasn't home, and they just went through and threw everything out. My grandfather had a picture of my great-grandfather and things like that I'd give my eye tooth to have, and they just threw it out.
JC: Now, I'm very fortunate for that. My Aunt Nana, that's still living, she has a picture of my great-grandmother Curry, Nanie Curry. And they have some small ones and she said she's gonna see that I get one. Then the other Aunt, Aunt Stella, who lives in New York has a picture of my great-grandfather Curry. Grandmother and grandfather Curry, they still have pictures of them. And then of my grandparents, my mother's parents, I have a picture of them too.
IR: See, you're fortunate. I don't have anything because they threw all that good stuff out. What did you do when you were little, around here to keep yourself busy?
JC: When we were little, Sunday school was quite a time, we had chores, and then horseshoes, we pitched an awful lot of horseshoes. Checkers - we gathered at Dixie William's store, it's a little store or something right along there, but Dixie William's store was across the street there. Everybody gathered there on Saturday night, and with my grandfather I'd go up to the store to get our larces[?] too. He was sort of a larces man too, but we could have more, maybe, than three. Dixie William ran a store that sold groceries and gloves and tobacco and flour and just about everything you wanted right at the store. He took great pride in his store. He and his wife run the store, they was a black couple. Then he'd come along and you'd be in your yards. That was another thing, children weren't free to come and go as they wanted. If you were going to the store, you had to go directly to the store and come back. We had a big fence, and we stayed inside this fence until it was time to go to school or someplace special. He'd come along with great huge pockets of candy. That was the highlights of a Sunday. And he would throw them in each yard and the children would just yell. You could just hear this yelling and dancing for joy when they'd see Mr. Dixie Williams coming with these big pockets of candy kisses.
IR: The candy man, literally!
JC: Yeah, and Sunday then he'd come down our street, Reservoir Street, and then he'd come down Hawkins Street, and he'd come down Norwood Street.
PC: Was that Norwood Street then?
JC: No, they didn't call it Norwood, then. We just called it the alley, because it came off Reservoir Street, and then there was Hawkins Street and you could come all around and come up this street here.
IR: Where exactly was the William's store?
JC: It's the little store you pass when you come down here.
IR: Is it the one that's still there?

JC: No, it was across the street, right opposite there. They had a store there and he had these pigs and cows and stuff in the back. There was a saw mill, Mr. Tom Awkard[?], some of the Awkards live over here now, that was a black family, that run a carpenter shop. Up above it was a carpenter shop.

(Conversation interrupted to verify spelling)

JC: A-W [unintelligible]...his son Leon is still living up here.

IR: Do you say he had a carpenter shop?

JC: Yeah, he was a carpenter.

PC: Did they have any other black businesses up here? They didn't know that much about them.

JC: No, these were the only two they had. Mr. Tom Awkard was a carpenter, a real carpenter, most all of his sons. In fact, Leon is sort of retired, and he has one named Hampton that lives out in Bridgewater. He was a carpenter too. He still is. That was about the only business they had.

IR: And Mr. Dixie Williams with the candy man up there. It's amazing, really, the number of black businessmen that have had successful businesses and that within the city of Harrisonburg. I'm from the north, and when you think of the south you don't think of tradesmen and businessmen. Just from what we have seen here there have been many prominent black businessmen in the city of Harrisonburg.

PC: For some reason, it was sort of, kind of like part of the south. They almost had to have their own because they couldn't frequent the other businesses cause things were so high in them.

IR: So they literally had their own businessmen that supplied their needs.

JC: I remember too that you could trade things. You could take eggs to the store, and maybe exchange it for something else. Cause we used to do things like that.

PC: But then you couldn't do that downtown.

JC: No, no, you couldn't do that downtown, just up there. He would accept eggs for maybe a loaf of bread or something.

PC: Then we had a black doctor at that time too.

IR: It wouldn't have been Dr. Dickerson[?] would it? Did you all know Dr. Dickerson?

JC: Yes! He was my high school teacher. Something happened, was it during the war, or something happened. Our young teacher had to go away and they couldn't find anybody to teach Chemistry, and Dr. Dickerson taught Chemistry. And then my father's mother lived right beside Dr. Dickerson, so I know him real well. I used to run errands for him. He delivered me. My grandmother sort of delivered me, but Dr. Dickerson came and put the final seal on.

(The interview briefly pauses to verify Dr. Dickerson's name.)

Yeah, I knew him, and knew his daughter. I knew one of his sons, I didn't know his other son very well, but I knew his daughter.

PC: We had another one at one time, too, for a little while, didn't we?

JC: Yeah, Dr. Stratton[?]. He came, I think maybe from New York or somewhere, but he didn't stay too long.

PC: I remember him.

IR: We had heard that Dr. Dickerson was very successful in treating the flu when they had the big flu epidemic, about the 1920s, and none of his patients died.

JC: He practiced a long time. In fact, people I think thought that maybe he should have stopped long before he did.

IR: I wonder how old he was when he finally stopped practicing?

JC: He was very old. And he was crippled, too. One leg was shorter than the other.

PC: He wasn't a very tall man.

JC: No, wasn't a very tall man that stuated at all. He used to walk a lot. You'd see

him with his bag and he'd walk a lot.

PC: I don't ever remember seeing him drive a car.

JC: No, he never did. I think maybe a taxi. Razz Stevens[?] had a successful taxi, that was another black man.

(The interview stops to verify the name.)

IR: At what time was this? You were little then, right?

JC: Yeah I was little, but I was, let me see, during the time I was going to school so I was...

PC: You mean when Dr. Dickerson was practicing? He was practicing before you were born to be delivered.

JC: Yeah. I guess I must have been a junior. Well, Mr. Razz, that was when I was a grown man. We had our children when Mr. Razz passed away. He had an old taxi.

PC: His wife still lives in Bridgewater.

JC: Yeah, Lena Stevens.

IR: Oh, alright! I know the name. Somebody told me I ought to call her up and see if she'd talk to me.

JC: She probably will. I'll tell you, a beautiful lady that was instrumental in helping in educating, in helping the older blacks to learn to read and write, Roberta Webb. She's in the Mennonite home. She is a tremendous lady, a good friend...

PC: She'd love to be interviewed.

JC: Yes, and a very good friend of ours.

IR: Now I have Mrs. Webb, but your telling me that she taught older blacks to read and write.

PC: Yes, she also taught in the school system.

JC: Yes, because my grandfather couldn't even write his name, and she used to bring lessons around and she remembers it very well. She would give him lessons to do, and I helped him to do his lessons. He learned enough to sort of sign his name. He was older at the time and pretty well set in his ways, and he thought it was a waste of time after he was pretty well set up in everything. He thought education was a waste of time. He wanted me to go, but he said it was just too hard for him.

IR: Too old to teach an old dog new tricks.

JC: He did manage to be able to sign his name and that was really a thrill to him.

PC: Mr. Westover[?] wasn't there at school when you were, was he? Or Mr. Newman[?]?

JC: No, Professor Newman wasn't there. He was there way before my time.

PC: That's what I thought because it was way before my time.

JC: But I remember Miss Webb. She's a good friend of ours now. We go out to the home to visit her.

IR: I understand. Unfortunately, I haven't met her yet. I have a student who's been talking with her, but I haven't had a chance to get out there at all. There's a Mrs. Stephans out at the Virginia Mennonite home as well, that we have talked to, who was just marvelous. She was involved with the Staunton area, Stuart Hall, which was a women's school. I've decided the teachers live to a ripe old age because most of these elderly women that we're talking to have been teachers at one time or another. It's amazing. I guess teaching does that.

PC: The guy [unintelligible] I talked to this morning, said he was going out to talk to Mr. McGuire[?].

IR: Could that have been Ickey [Hollins]? And isn't he a gem! He really is a nice young fella. I'm not sure if he was going to get down to Mr. McGuire or not, but he said he was going to try to get down there and see him. So let's see, we have strayed back again. You played checkers and horseshoes, and...

JC: And ball...

IR: Baseball?

JC: Usually everybody picked up in the softball game.

IR: How about you? Did you play baseball when you were growing up Mrs. Curry?

PC: Yes. I remember playing kickball. Ickey was asking me about that this morning and I don't remember.

JC: Well, they do now, but we never played much kickball. It was always baseball, picking up sides.

PC: Baseball and volleyball.

IR: That's funny, because it really has just killed us to find out that all these girls were playing baseball. I thought that was supposed to be unladylike.

JC: We had some that played too, but in the Elkton area, now the girls down there could play pretty good ball. When they came up to Harrisonburg to go to high school, we were surprised at how well some of them could hit, but they had been used to playing ball down there.

IR: Boys and girls just went out and played baseball?

JC: Yeah, just anybody. Some boys and girls on different sides.

PC: Then the school had basketball. They traveled.

IR: Well, things are more modern than I thought they were, I have to admit. I suppose the big thing was your Sundays. Did you work at all as a child? Did you have any chores to do?

JC: Yes, as a child we had a back porch they have built in now. I helped saw wood that we got from the railroaders right down the hill there. It still goes across there but it's modern and real nice now. And they would work and they'd throw the ties out, and we were able to get the ties. My grandfather had an old truck, and they were able to bring the ties up. He had this saw horse and you'd put the tie on there and then you'd saw. And when I was too small to saw, I remember well, he was very glad when I was able to saw because he had what they call a one-man cross cut saw. As soon as I learned to saw a little bit he said, "Stop riding the saw." My legs and arms would get tired, and my hands would drop down and you had to stand and step in a certain way. We'd saw and stack wood, getting ready for winter. That was a big thing. You'd gather all the corn cobs up, you gathered all the chips up. Everything you think you could burn, you gathered it up and brought it in to dry. We stacked wood on the back porch. And then, my grandfather would come out and if he could lay his hands up on the wood, blump, and it would go down and we'd have to stack it all over again. We had to stack it so it would stay.

IR: You actually had to cut all your kindling wood to last you all winter?

JC: Yeah, it was wood that would last long. Coal was a very rare thing. Towards the last, when we were home, I guess before my grandparents passed, we began to burn some coal, which we were real thankful for, because he'd gotten kind of old and he wasn't able to go and get the ties anymore. He wasn't too well, so we bought some coal. And then the coal, I remember one of the oldest coal places here was Kelly's coal. They brought your coal with a horse. It was a big, white, horse drawn wagon and had the man on there, and they had the coal in the bags that he carried on his back. He'd stop the horse, and we were amazed at such a huge horse. And he'd carry so many bags of coal in to you if you wanted it.

IR: What about water? Did you have running water up here at that time?

JC: Not on the inside of the house. You had, I think it was a hiding[?] in the yard, and you went out and drawed your water out of the yard and brought it into the house. You had no running water in the house.

IR: By that time they had lain a piping system. Did you have a hydro-pump in your backyard?
JC: Yeah, the water was good to drink.
IR: How about in the winter time? Didn't that freeze?
JC: In the winter time you had to take great care. I remember them taking sacks and wrapping around and putting strings around it and then turning a big bucket or barrel or something down. That was a precious item and they took very good care of that. They turned it off real tight and then they'd take the top, he had a top that you hung up, and then you put this top back on this big iron hiding when you got ready to turn it back off.
IR: So you carried all your cooking water and everything?
JC: Everything, yes. Everybody looks to have what they call a wash house, where you put all your water. You had a big kettle and you'd build a fire under it, and Monday morning was a chore and that was when you washed. You carried all the water and things when you washed.
IR: Well I'm just gonna tell you, they can talk about the good old days but I wouldn't want to do the washing and ironing back in those days.
JC: You are very right. My grandmother would be trying to get enough bread, she baked bread maybe once a week, and she tried to bake enough that would last all through the week. And then pies, and getting everything. And then the wash too.
PC: Did she do it all on Monday?
JC: No she didn't do it all on Monday, but that was her starting point, on Monday. I remember clothes and how you could fold. She washed clothes for other people too. Ralph North[?] had a big clothing store in town and she washed clothes for years and years for them. This is my grandmother. And I've seen her put clothes up and a lot of times, when she got ready to take them down, some of them would be dirty again. You washed by hand.
IR: Oh and those old scrub boards and they're so sharp.
JC: That's right. They had these arms sitting on the back of the stove, and she had one thing that would just fit down, lift up and she'd iron with that and then she'd put that back on and it would release some way and then she'd get another one, and iron too. And apple-butter was a big time when a lot of families got together and they prepared their apples. They had this huge kettle. The children always put new pennies in the bottom, they say to keep it from sticking. That was a highlight for us, to look forward to maybe getting a couple of those pennies when the apple butter was finished.
PC: Did you ever have to stir it good?
JC: After I got bigger, they'd let you stir it a little bit, but there was always someone there to take turns to stir it. They had this big paddle that had holes all down through it. It was more like a rake or something. It was huge and they'd stir it back, you had to stir it and watch it real close in order that it didn't burn. If it scorched or anything, it takes through the whole batch of apple butter. Very good.
IR: Did you hear the little verse "around the pot?" Did you ever hear anyone say that as they were stirring? "Around the pot, and twice through the middle" or something?
JC: I've sort of heard that.
IR: They used to say it as they were going. You weren't any good if you scorched it, so...have you ever made apple butter Mrs. Curry?
Did you do things like that when you were growing up?
PC: No, I lived down in town. He lived up here on the hill. It was like two different parts of town.
JC: It was just like two different parts completely.

PC: Up here was called Red Hill and all the kids lived up on Red Hill and we lived downtown. The only time I'd see him was when he came down to school.

IR: And you weren't going to go with that country bumpkin out there on Red Hill, right!

JC: Well we'd do whatever business we had downtown and we'd hurry to get through and get back up this way before night set in.

PC: When we were downtown we couldn't come up here, because it'd be too dark up here after night.

IR: Isn't that funny? So you really lived in two separate worlds in that particular point in time. That is really funny. Well to hear these ladies talk in their eighties, they were right in the heart of downtown Harrisonburg, and they were living the way you were living up here in Red Hill, that many years later. I guess downtown Harrisonburg got a little more modern when she came along.

PC: I can even remember people talking about Harrisonburg having wooden streets and wooden sidewalks. I remember people telling me about that when I was little, but I didn't ever see them. Did you?

JC: No, the only thing I remember about the streets I remember that they had the brick. I had the brick streets. You'd try to ride skates on them and you'd bump bump bump bump. They took those out right along there where the child store used to be. That used to be down there.

PC: What do you call those kinds of bricks?

IR: Cobblestone?

JC: Yes.

IR: We were laughing today talking about Pittsburgh. They still have those little cobblestone streets and we tried riding on them in a car and they're terrible. Someone said "How would you like to drive along one of those cobblestone streets in a horse and buggy?" And I said "No, I couldn't imagine." You'd just be bouncing all over the place. How about the animals? Did you have animals?

JC: We had cows. We always kept maybe sometimes as many as two cows. We had a stable right in back of our house. And we had hogs, we had our hog pen that was separate. We had chickens that we kept in a big yard, because everybody else had chickens too, so you couldn't let your chickens out in the garden.

IR: Do you have a garden as well and put up a lot of vegetables and things like that?

JC: We put up a lot of vegetables. That was the highlight. Everything you could possibly get in a can, beans, dried apples, dried beans, you dry a lot of them and then the apples, you cut them up and they'd call them snitz[?]. Everything possible that you could put in a can, we did.

IR: That's amazing because you're not that old. Really, he's a young man.

JC: We lived with my grandparents, and they had their own way of doing things, and I got to see an awful lot. Cause I was with them until they both passed away, while we were living with them. Then after my grandmother passed away, I lived with my grandfather, and he passed away.

IR: So you really were living in the old. No wonder half those people thought [the people on Red Hill] were a bunch of country folk! That really very much parallels the older, like eighty years ago, the way people lived.

JC: I wore knickers, and you'd have the long black stockings that tucked up under the knickers. Oh, I dreaded to go near school because I was the only one, except the others up here, but I was most miserable. I got along well in school and had a lot of friends but it was just this. Then I had the tendency to have my knickers bloused down, but then I'd roll my socks down, but when it was time to come home I'd put my socks up again. That was kind of miserable. Children are really...you know.

IR: Do you know something? I lived with my grandparents, too. I was brought up by my grandparents. My grandmother used to make me wear the knee-high socks, of course girls in this day and age wear them all the time, but when I was growing up girls wore bobby socks; you didn't wear knee-high socks like that. I used to have fits because that was so old fashioned. It was funny and kids make fun of you. I used to roll them down, but then when I went home I had to roll those dang things back up.

JC: When summertime come, my grandfather say, "It's time for a haircut." When you went, you had your hair all cut off, you didn't dare complain about it. You had your hair just as short as could cut and then you didn't go back no more until it was time for school.

IR: Did they have any medicines or anything that they used to make up for you when you were little?

JC: Yes, they would make cough syrup and they'd take this hore hound[?] candy. And then they'd put what they call an asfetida bag, when you'd have trouble the little bag they'd put on that. My grandmother was forever taking hog lard and things and making stuff to rub you with. When you had the croup they'd give you coal oil and sugar. The coal oil that you use to make kerosene, they'd take that and mix sugar with that and oh!

PC: [Unintelligible - talking at the same time as Mr. Curry]

IR: Well if that didn't kill you, you had to get well! (Laughter) I never heard of that.

JC: If you had an earache they'd blow smoke in your ear, and put in drops of sweet oil. They'd warm it and put it in your ear.

IR: Did you ever hear of putting urine in your ear?

JC: Yeah, I have.

IR: One of the girls from Woodstock said that her grandmother used to put urine in the ear.

PC: We used to get it so bad, everybody had to take castor oil.

JC: Then Sassafras tea played a very important part, too. When your stomach was kind of upset, they'd take these roots from the Sassafras and make a tea out of it. We drank mint tea a lot. We used to spend a lot of time drinking mint tea.

PC: Did you ever wear an asfetida bag?

JC: Yeah, they put it on me.

IR: I'll share this with you. Somebody was telling me they asked the doctor, "Were those asfetida bags any good?" because they were supposed to ward away disease, and the doctor said they certainly were. He said you stunk so bad nobody would get within ten feet of you so you never passed along your diseased germs. (Everyone laughs) You know how kids are, they pass things one to another, which I thought was a very good point. What is asfetida any way, is it a plant?

JC: It must be some kind of root or something that's chopped up and put in this bag. It would have to be, you know.

IR: I hear it stinks.

JC: It does. Everybody's aware of it, but when you have it on, you're not aware of it.

IR: Your nose is dead by that point, I would suppose. So your grandparents made you wear knickers to school?

JC: Yeah, my grandmother was, I remember her. She was always, she was a fine lady. My grandfather wasn't near as religious as she was. She was always praying, and always thankful, and always happy, most of the time. Regardless of what went on, she always worked to smooth it over and see that everybody was happy. Even a lot

of times when grandfather would punish us, she would never oppose him in our presence, but then she'd always sort of make it better for us, which made us happy and able to hold on better. She'd tell me, she'd say, " One day he won't holler at you about riding on the saw, because one day you'll be big enough to stand up and pull the saw." And sure enough that time came when I could stand right up and pull the saw across there and stack bricks in the back of his old A-model Ford truck. And to stack brick, it was almost impossible to get them up there and get them lined to put up there. She said, "you'll grow gradually." And she'd always comfort you, always concerned about God.

IR: How'd you get punished?

JC: Well now, the way he punished you, he would just say, well now you do something or maybe you'd have two chances. If he said you're gonna get a licking, you could plan for it. You didn't know when it was gonna arrive, but he never said you were going to get a licking and you don't get it. Or if he says, "You're not gonna get candy. You could do all the good things up at the surrey[?] you want, but the other children got candy and you didn't get any. Then he wouldn't allow them to give you. I had a sister who was always at odds with him and I felt so sorry for her. She was younger than me. I always wanted to, but then I'd be in terrible trouble, but I always wanted to, sometimes I'd give her a lick of the candy, but I couldn't give it to her because he...

End of tape 1, side 2

Continuation of Interview with James Curry, August 2, 1978, Harrisonburg, VA:
tape two, side one (Transcript 1c)

[Tape begins in mid-conversation]

- JC: ...somehow made it easier and made you not be angry with her at all. I'd be very hostile toward my grandfather because a lot of times, times had elapsed and I really didn't know why.
- IR: Oh all right. He'd wait, right? He didn't punish you right away. He would wait. (Tape is briefly cut off)...teacher would tell you you're not supposed to do that. (Tape is cut off again). Yeah, I'm with you. If you're gonna be punished I would think you punish right away rather than wait. That's what they say when Momma says, "Wait until Daddy comes home," and Daddy comes home and by that time the kid's forgotten what it was he was doing anyway. Did you ever get spanked?
- JC: Some. Not very often. I was the older one and I had quite a lot of responsibility, and I always had something to do and I was very aware of my duties so that I wouldn't get punished. I had a certain amount to do, it was quite a bit expected of me because I was the oldest.
- IR: I suppose you had to take care of the animals and that kind of thing?
- JC: Well, I helped take care of them and as always gather eggs and things, and be careful not to let the chickens out, not to let the cows out. To be sure the pigs' food would go down in the trough, things like it. You had to be exact, and my mother explained to me one day exactly. I'll show you after awhile a picture of my little uncle. He passed away and my grandfather had three girls and one boy and the little boy passed away while he was little. And he always wanted a boy but he was sort of angry. This always stayed with him, and he just, I think, expected too much out of me. He was just delighted[?] with my presence but he expected too much.
- So as I was telling my wife, I think I was old before my time, you know, with the responsibility and explaining things to them. "And don't forget this Billy, because it's necessary for you to do this." When we finally got lights, "Be sure to turn the lights off in the back woods. Be sure the wood's stacked. And the chicken house is locked up at night that a skunk don't get in and kill the chickens," and things, until I always was so scared that I had left something undone. "It's gonna snow today, be sure to get all the chips in." And then if I fooled around and wouldn't get the chips in, looked like he'd be sure to snug[?], which just kept me very upset.
- My wife has really been an inspiration to me because I was old almost before we got married. I'd had a lot of responsibility in my time and out of that a lot of responsibility had made me be very cautioned and very tense with my own children.
- IR: You have a tendency to treat your children the way you were treated, and that would be the case, that you probably would expect really too much from your children, if you were treated that way.
- JC: After we talked about it and worked over it and through the help of people at church and reading good literature and reading from the Bible helped me a tremendous lot. Everything to the letter, and we have a beautiful relationship with all our children.
- PC: I sure remember when we were first married, and he goes, "Wash on Monday, and do this on Tuesday, and do this. You have to be sure and wash early Monday morning, and get your wash on the line." I had to explain to him I was his wife not his mother.

JC: See, I was programmed, I was really programmed to this, that everything had to be to the letter. You done the thing at a certain time. You didn't get up and eat, and pile the dishes and go out and talk. We do now, we did later on, but it was never that way. When you got through eating, the dishes were scraped up and everything was cleaned up and the food and stuff was put away, and then if [unintelligible] you got prepared for the next morning so you could right get up and go right into there. She said, "This routine is not..."

PC: It's too rigid.

IR: I was married to one like him too and he almost drove me crazy until I trained him better. (Laughter)

JC: It's really not that we mean to be that way. It's just from your raising, it's drilled into you [unintelligible] it's just that.

IR: I don't know how those women did it. To be so regimented like you wash on Monday and you do this, because somehow when you've got kids around, children never let me work into what I would call a really good routine unless you just had to do your work and ignore the kids.

PC: They had hard times. They had to have their children in the morning and get supper in the evening, that sort of thing. I don't see how they did it.

IR: I don't either.

JC: But I really learned to love, and relax, and really enjoy myself. I worked so hard to get a home, because this was in my mind: if you want to be anybody and you want to fit into things you've got to strive and work and struggle to get this home. And by the grace of God, we got a real nice home in Keezletown. She was helping too. She saved, and took care of the children, and sacrificed and done without a lot. But we were able to acquire a nice home with all the modern convenience, and the children really appreciate this.

IR: It seems to me as an outsider that blacks and whites in this area seem to get along very well, shall we say?

JC: I can tell you one thing and it's hard for you to ever even believe this. Most all my friends are white, and I have never had any trouble to amount to anything. We've been fortunate. Our children have been fortunate. We've heard about a lot, and we've seen a few things, but to actually happen to us, there's been very little that's ever happened to us, because I've always tell my children this, "You don't go looking. You're going to school for education," I said. "You're not going looking for trouble, and you will get along. You treat people like you want them to treat you," and I said, "You will more than likely get along, unless it's someone that's deliberately rude or something." And I said, "You don't want that person to be your friend or any part of them anyway." And things have gotten along well and things have come out real good.

IR: It's interesting from the way most people talk that families have been very intertwined in this type of thing, and over the years and so on. As one of our ladies would say, even back in the Civil War days, when blacks were living on the plantations and that very often there was so very, a close relationship between them that the blacks actually tried to protect the family homesteads and that kind of thing. I think that's one aspect that we don't think about at this particular point in time, that we know that it's bad.

JC: And one thing that has really helped the relationship a lot, and that has brought things about. For instance, when the black people that were real old sat down and they were honest and told that some of them were treated good and this is what they were trained to do and this is what they wanted to do. Not the side of it where they were always mistreated because all of them

weren't always mistreated. If that would have been the case there none would have survived at all. And some of them were treated, and some of them enjoyed doing what they were doing. And if you would've went and said, "Well now, you can come away and go away," a lot of them wouldn't have even tried to go away or anything. So I looked at both sides of it and it was misfortunate that some were. But then you find today the same way. When you're working at a job, regardless of who you're working for, sometimes you'll find who you're working for a very pleasant person to work for. Then you'll find a person tell you to learn their ways and things, and are a little difficult to work for.

IR: There's a lot of those. I've had those too, I have to admit. It's just human nature. When would you say this area up here started to change so much? Was it a gradual thing or did it change pretty rapidly?

JC: It was a gradual thing, cause it looked like to me, you know I was really concerned and really worried about this after we moved downtown. I never thought about my surroundings, I never thought about the settings, until I moved downtown. Then I said to myself, well this seems to be unfair. Looks like they have completely forgotten about that area. You come out and get what you want and go back and we'll never come to look about your streets, your lighting, or nothing. Always, in working in the school system, I know how people used to always say, "Well these people are from Red Hill," just like they were from out of the complete country. And, "You can expect this of them because they're from there." And then I really began to feel sorry and really noticed. So, it's been changing gradually all along. So when my son said, "Dad, what do you think about, building the house up here?" He was really skeptical about it. I said, "Let me tell you, and you listen to what I'm telling you, and I wouldn't tell you anything wrong." And I said, "These people up here are very poor, but they are some of the kindest and some of the nicest people you will ever run into." I said, "Because I've had the privilege of knowing some of the people. Remember when I was a boy, the lady across the street from here was here when I was a boy, the man who lives in the little red house up there remembers, when I was a boy, and these are good people." And I said, "You can build your house and live in your house and mind your business and be nice." And I said, "You'll find that you'll get along fine." So then he felt comfortable. So then he put his house here, everybody almost knew him before he got here. They said, "Curry's boy, you were born over there, you and your grandmother, and everybody."

IR: So he was really coming home.

JC: Coming home. So I really felt good about it and he does too.

IR: But this area up here really was neglected?

JC: Yeah and it was. Now where Spotswood school was, that man was named Bill Shover[?]. Very well to do, running water in his house, a lot of black and white people working for him, just very wealthy. Had a daughter, she trained to be a singer, and then all of a sudden he went down, down, down. And poor health got onto him, and he just used up all the money and everything, and sold the land. He just kept selling and selling until that was all. I remember when the shopping center down there was a huge field and horses, just big droves of horses, used to run in that field down there. We used to go over there sometimes to play, and I'd walk down to the railroad track. And then his big house, let me see, right where the tennis court is, that's where his big huge house sat. He had geese that swam on the pond out there, and the house was very tall with white poles out front and everything.

IR: Oh, and it's gone?

JC: Gone. The city owned it. Bobby Landis[?] lived in it for awhile, and then

finally it got a little run down, and he moved out and the city pushed it down.

IR: What did Mr. Shover do, do you know? Was he just a farmer?

JC: Oh, he was a farmer, and he sold grain. He sold cattle and horses, and he was at the stock sale.

PC: [Unintelligible]

JC: Yeah he used to drive big droves of horses through the street and take them to his farm, too. They'd bring them up over, down by the store, down Reservoir Street and into his big field. I have a uncle, and my grandfather, too, at one time helped bring them in.

IR: There are cowboys in your family!

JC: I don't know where they'd get these horses from but they'd just bring loads of all different size horses along. Sometimes the little colts would be running along side them too. He'd buy them in big lots like that, then he'd sell them off.

IR: They've done a lot of work with the downtown area about what was where, but I don't know about these surrounding areas out in here.

JC: No, up in there, that's what it was. Now we used to go from my grandmother's house over here where the project is, it used to be a low alley way going down by her house, and we used to go down there, and that's where the spring and all that was. That's where Myers Avenue[?] and down in there where...

IR: Oh there was a spring up there?

JC: Yeah, where Dr. Green and all of them live in there. All that was a big field and that used to be our play area. We'd go and look for groundhogs, flyers. That whole area one time was so beautiful, I remember. They had these cactuses, and they'd all bloom these big yellow blooms, and just a mass of these sticky cactuses out across, and all these yellow blooms. And it's just amazing to see how Madison College come in there and build up and everything.

IR: Do you remember when they built the college? You don't remember that. That was years...

JC: No, not all of it, just the new part. See, it was the Normal School before, and they used to ride horses by my house from over at the college. But it was small then, and all ladies went. I remember that.

PC: I remember when it was all ladies, too. My mother worked up there then.

IR: Oh did she? Where did she work?

PC: At Madison. She was a cook in what they used to call the tea room.

IR: Oh all right. Mrs. Wells worked over there, didn't she?

PC: Yeah. My mother worked there 16 years.

IR: What was your mother's name?

PC: Elizabeth Harris[?].

IR: Elizabeth Harris. Now there was a Harris who was the Principal over at...

PC: Yeah, Vivian B[?]

JC: We live in his daughter's house and we live right beside their old home place. We knew him very well, he was [unintelligible].

PC: I was telling Ickey this morning that if he would talk to Nelson he might let him look through Mr. Harris' memoirs and stuff.

IR: What, you've got Mr. Harris' memoirs?

PC: No, I said there might be some at his house. He just died last year, he was ninety-something years old. And I just thought probably he has a lot of memoirs and stuff that could be interesting to look through, if they had them. IR: Oh we ought to look. To see if there's anything.

PC: I told Ickey to ask Nelson, Mr. Harris' son.

IR: Yeah, if he at least got anything of his Daddy's, if he doesn't want it, let the historical society look at it, then if they don't want it throw it out.

Too many gems of history in that premier era are lost.

PC: He was the principal here at Harrisonburg for a long time.

JC: When they went to Simms school I had been going to school out in North Canova Ohio, and I was in the sixth grade when I started with the school up here. The new school.

IR: At Lucy Simms'?

JC: Uh-huh. Then I finished up here in 1945.

IR: So you finished just about the time the war was over. What difference did it make in your life, the war, would you say? Did it really make any difference in your lives here, or did things just sort of go on as normal?

JC: Well, things sort of went on normal.

PC: I remember the soldiers would come through town. When the army came, so on maneuvers they'd come through Harrisonburg. That was a great thing to get out of school and see them going through.

IR: All those handsome soldiers going by.

JC: I was so worried about being taken out of the school. I know that constant fear was the war is gonna get worse, and you're gonna have to come out of school and go, because it's almost time for you to go, but they let us stay.

IR: Were they talking about conscripting high school boys?

JC: No they weren't, but they were saying just as soon as you're eighteen, unless, you have to go, so you have to try to finish your education and be ready to go. And then all at once, it began to change in '45.

IR: Did you know any local area blacks that might have been killed in the war? Do you remember any?

(Mr. and Mrs. Curry try to remember)

JC: I'm sure there were some, but I can't...

IR: Oh, I'm sure there were several.

PC: [Unintelligible]

JC: I don't know whether they passed away after they came back. They maybe were wounded or something and stayed in the hospital, and they passed.

PC: But they were veterans. Well I remember one difference when they left school life[?] though. Remember the school play we were getting ready to have? Cherry Blossom?

JC: Yeah, a Japanese play we were getting ready to have and it got canceled. We had to cancel that after we put hours and hours of practice in.

IR: And they wouldn't let you [unintelligible]?

JC: No, no, you can not have that. (Curry's voice fades)

IR: In World War I, they renamed sauerkraut "liberty cabbage", I remember, and German was the second language in the Cincinnati school district, so they wouldn't let them speak German and all sorts of things. I guess that's when Liberty Street got it's name down there, wasn't it? During World War I it was German Street. Liberty Street was German Street up until World War I, and then they changed the name to Liberty Street. They wouldn't let you do your little play because it had to do with Japanese.

PC: We had ration books too, I remember that.

JC: Yeah now I remember those books. Sugar [unintelligible], sugar and shoes. I remember that very much.

PC: Sugar and shoes. [Unintelligible] whiskey books.

IR: Whiskey? You mean they rationed whiskey?

JC: Yeah they had some kind of coupon to get whiskey.

PC: You had to stand in line to buy cigarettes.

IR: I didn't know that. I knew there was sugar, and I remember...

JC: Whiskey too.

IR: ...some things. Coffee, wasn't coffee rationed?

PC: Coffee was something that we couldn't buy.
IR: I think it was rationed at that point in time. It probably would've been, but I never knew they rationed off their whiskey.
PC: I remember my mother trying to get her shoes fixed [unintelligible].
IR: How did they give them to you? For example, your shoes, did they give your Mom one for each child, or how many?
PC: I think they were based on your income, weren't they? How many children you had.
JC: Yeah, they call it social service now but I think it was down to the welfare office that you got these, got this stuff.
IR: Because you had lots of kids, you need lots of shoes.
PC: Well our children didn't. We didn't have it, but our mothers, my mother, his mother. We didn't ever have to use it for our children.
IR: Oh that's interesting. Well this has been fascinating, but you poor folks must be tired.
PC: Do you want to show her the pictures now?
JC: Yeah I want to show her.
IR: Oh yeah, let me see. Oh you're so fortunate, you really are, in case you don't know it, that you have all your family mementos.
[Mr. Curry shows various pictures to Mrs. Ramsey]
IR: Did you ever tell your kids stories when they were growing up?
JC: Yes, I used to get flannel graphed[?] at church a lot and they used to always like the stories about that.
IR: You really like that flannel graph, don't you?
JC: I've done a lot of it myself at church.
PC: He used to make up stories and tell them, too.
IR: Oh you did? What kind of stories would you make up?
PC: Remember one time you made up a continuous story [unintelligible].
JC: Yeah, every Sunday. Well, I had read some of it and then I put the rest together, and then I'd leave just enough going `til next Sunday they'd be just crowded there to get it.
IR: I wish more people would do that, I really do.
[Mr. Curry shows another picture]
JC: This is when we were in Christian Service. These are some boys that are men now that we took care of when we were in Christian Services.
IR: What was that?
JC: They had a farm, the Mennonite church had a farm, and you went and served to the church, and you took your children. Their homes were disturbed or something and people couldn't get along, until they got rehabilitated, we'd take care of the children, take them in.
PC: We had four of our own.
IR: Oh well look at all of the kids.
JC: All of them are grown. Everybody there is grown.
IR: (Mrs. Ramsey counts) I see eight children in that picture. Where was the home? You actually stayed in the home and cared for the children?
JC: Down in Keezletown. We stayed in the home, and I strip farmed, and learned them to help me bring in the wood and things.
PC: He did the farming and I did the housework.
IR: Oh bless your hearts, you have worked, haven't you?
JC: Yes, we've enjoyed it though, because really there are ones worth sparing.
IR: That's one of the things that impresses me about the Mennonite church, and that is the giving of your life, or some part of it to this kind of thing.
[Mr. Curry shows more pictures, including one of him as a deacon. He was the first black deacon in the Mennonite church in Virginia]

IR: And you were one of the first ordained?

JC: I was the first, and I will be ordained for life unless I resign or for some wrong reason I don't seem fit [unintelligible].

IR: Let's see, so you were ordained at the Broad Street Mennonite Church, October 8, 1961, [unintelligible]. So that's an unbelievable honor. You must be very proud.

[More pictures are shown]

IR: Where did you grow up? You were in Harrisonburg.

PC: But I was downtown, and he was here on the hill.

IR: So did you have a garden, and all that kind of stuff?

PC: No.

IR: Where exactly did you live downtown?

PC: I lived on Effinger Street, right near the school.

IR: Across from the school. And so you were city folk and you didn't have cows, you didn't gardens and that kind of thing? What would you do when you were little to keep busy?

PC: Played in the street. Played jacks, and baseball, and jump rope.

[More pictures are shown, with occasional mention of names and places]

End of interview with James Curry