CARVER LIVING NEWSPAPER PROJECT: ORAL HISTORY

Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wood
Interviewers Sheila Waller, Carver resident and Laura Plybon, VCU graduate student
Date: January 8, 2000

(Interviewers Questions are bolded)

[No clear beginning]

Mr. Wood (MR): I will be 93 on the 17th. When we got married June 19, 1948, I moved to 2100 Graywood (someone is knocking the recorder, difficult to, hear the street name), where I had purchased a home as a single man. And when I had it furnished and renovated and bought the furniture, then we went to Dr. Gordon Baines Hancock's home on Virginia Union Campus. He was my pastor. And we were married there. And then after we left his home with the bridal party, then we went to my mother's home, 923, and had the wedding dinner, and from there I carried my wife to 2100 Graywood, where I lived for 19 years and 9 months, and then I had to move because they built that new expressway to downtown, the downtown expressway. Then we moved across the street from that school, West End Elementary School, which used to be the old John B. Caper School. Which is a new one way up above the boulevard. And then, after we had to move there, I was riding around after I got off from work, and saw the sign for this place. I signed the contract for this place December 3, 1967. I did not want any mortgage alone, but when they finished all the financials for the house in the west end, I would pay them off for this building within 60 days. They couldn't believe it. When the people moved out, I had my lawyer check everything to get all the paperwork straight, and he got everything straight, and on February 26, 1968, he called and said all of your papers will be straight because I'll be in court most of the day. This lady, my wife for the past 51 years, did not know what I had in mind. She was then one of the career shop salesclerks in Thalhimer's shop down on Main Street between 8th and 9th. I said do not get the bus, I will be down to pick you up and I will have something to show you. And I picked her up, I brought her here, I unlocked the door, I had the keys, and I said "I not only have the keys, I have the deed." Which means the house is paid for. She couldn't believe it. So we came in, we got everything straight, then we got a Mister Gillison, who was a reverend, but he had a team of cleaners to come in and clean everything. Then March 19, 1968, we had Richardson, that used to be at Belvidere and Main, that's the new Virginia Commonwealth Building for special sciences, engineering building, they used to be Richardson, they moved us here, and we have been here ever since. She's never had to pay a water bill, telephone bill, mortgage bill, just come in and be the wife.

MS – That's why I look so young.

MR – We are long residents, I am, of Richmond. She's from Taylorsville, that's between Danville and South Boston. But I am a Richmonder.

Okay, so am I.
I am an 80 year member of Moore Street Missionary Baptist Church. And that’s where the Carver area people meet, once a month, at Moore Street.

Yes, I am in that group. What we’re trying to do today Mr. Wood is just find out what Carver was like back there in the time that you live in it. Not that you have to share anything that’s going on now in Carver. But we’re trying to document the history of Carver, so we want to talk to some residents who lived there long ago, who can share with us what the community was like.

MR – See I was born when the doctor used to come out with the nurse and another lady and deliver babies in the home.

Yes, and believe it or not, I was born at home, too, back in 1950 on Jackson Street. Listen, I have here an interview consent form that I need for you to sign that its okay to interview you.

MR - I was telling my wife that I didn’t’ know what kind of permission you wanted. Did you ever know Helen Micky Smith? She lives in 506 Hancock, and she was the president of the Carver area for many, many years before she died.

I just moved into the Carver community myself in 1997. So you see, I’m real new. I just moved into the Carver community in 1997.

MR - You said you live at 700 Catherine? They have a lot of new homes out that way. See I ride around like. They have a house, 719 West Leigh, that sold for $58,000, and you don’t have no front hardly, and not much back either. For that kind of money. These are new times. These are changing time.

I have a really good job, but mine was in the $100,000s, and I thought maybe it should have been around $75,000. But the changing times, you’re absolutely right.

MR - My wife and my mother couldn’t imagine me coming over here, but they didn’t know that the 4 years I was in the U.S. Army Air Force I bought war bonds, and I saved my money, and you are looking and two people who have never smoked, never drank, never gambled. And we don’t dance.

Well, I don’t dance either, and I don’t drink or smoke, so I hope to live as long as you two have. That is wonderful.

MR - And I tell all the young people, if you manage what you make, even if its just $10/week, and you know where $8 goes, the other two can be for candy or ice cream, then you can get somewhere. You don’t have to make 50, 60 or 80 thousand to live. And you don’t have to be homeless if you want something. But you’ve go to have the desire to want.

It’s definitely about managing the money.
MR – My wife wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have the desire to want this type of home. Its only the two of us here, we don’t have any children. I’ve been planning now for the future. What’s going to happen when we leave? Because I’m 92 now, she’s 85, we have to make all the plans for the future, to know what’s what. Because a lot of young people don’t care for all of the things that we have. A lot of the things you see in this house is needlepoint. She did it. And that’s an old trade, needlepoint. Long hours, alone by yourself. But if you want these things, you can get what you want.

Yes, as a matter of fact, I received a book yesterday on this stuff.

MR – We have quite an unusual background. We are known as odd, peculiar. Because she goes to bed at 7 o’clock to rest herself. And since she hasn’t been well for the last ten years or more, I’ve been doing all the marketing. We decide what we want and I go up to Ukrops and make the marketing, pay for it and bring it home. And she gets the proper things she wants to eat. So we are a little different from most people you are going to come in contact with.

Well, I think that was what I picked up on when I walked you to your car that night. From the meeting. And I was just so looking forward to talking to you again because of that. What I want to show Mr. Wood here, I have an interview consent form, and if you would just read it and sign it, saying that you do agree to allow us to interview you, and we will be taping the interview. That will be really helpful. That’s how I need to get this started.

MR - Would you be better off at that table than here?

Would you like for me to read it to you? Is your next door neighbor Mr. Weeks? So you’ve lived at this house for forty years? Now, what I would like to do is to ask you a few questions and to get your thoughts on some things.

You’ll have to speak up so I can here you.

Okay, you told me you were born January 17, 1907. So in a few days you are going to be 93 years old.

Yes, 93. January 17th.

Now what school did you go to when you were in the Carver community?

I went to Moore Street elementary school. That’s the white building behind the Carver School. That’s the old Moore Street elementary school. You had to be 7 years of age to enter then, where they can go at 5 now, I think.

Right.

We walked to school. We didn’t have buses. We didn’t have parents with cars to carry us. Our parents had to work.
Right. I’m old enough that I had to walk, too. I didn’t have a bicycle. I wish I had. And you had always joined Moore Street Baptist Church?

I joined the Moore Street Church the 4th Sunday in May, 1919. This year I’ll be an 81 year member. I joined very early. I was a member of the drama club. The British, English and American plays. I was one of the leading men with the young girls at that time. I enjoyed those plays. I enjoyed public speaking at that time. I was a member of the Moore Street Male Usher Board for 38 years, for 37 I was the financial secretary. And after that, I joined the Moore Street Deacon Board. I have been a Deacon for more than 21 years. I joined Lambda Chapter on the campus of Virginia Union University, November 3, 1928. I am their only continuous active dues paying member in Phi Beta Sigma in Virginia since that time. It was April 13, 1997, Phi Beta Sigma had its Eastern Region, that is members from Maine to Virginia, at the Richmond Hyatt. I received an honorary plaque for longevity. And on receiving that plaque, I had to answer, I spoke to a crowd of more than 1500 on the ways to influence a man who was young enough to be my grandson who was international president, with headquarters in Washington, DC. He was so impressed, the conference coming up that year in Orlando, Florida, I am going to do something that’s never been done before. I am going to extend and invitation to Brother Charles Edward Wood and his family to be Phi Beta Sigma’s honored guests at the Orlando conclave, seven days and seven nights, all expenses paid. Some of the fraternity brothers live right here in Richmond, and they said No, you’ll never get that trip, because they felt that trip was only for medical doctors, and lawyers, other prominent Black Americans. But Charles Edward Wood got that trip. In North Richmond, by Foster Jet, from Byrd International Airport, which had only 59 people, that was a small jet. We arrived in Philadelphia Pennsylvania in 56 minutes. Four more minutes and it would have been one hour. And when we got there it was a wheelchair waiting for wife when we got there, because they had announced Mrs. Wood, arriving such and such a date, we will escort you to your other plane. We got on that large Boeing 747 direct going to Orlando. And in less than 3 hours we arrived at the Orlando International Airport, and there the Marriott World Center Hotel courtesy car was waiting for us and our luggage. We were carried to the Marriott Hotel, where some of the fraternity brothers were, and there we saw we didn’t get a room, we had gotten a sweet! On the 16th floor, Room 1669, beautiful, fabulous, and there we were the guests for 7 days and 7 nights at this palatial Marriott Hotel. I had to appear at all the meetings with all the 50 year brothers, but I was the only active one who had joined in November 3, 1928. And I paid my dues even though I lived in Detroit, I lived in New York, I went to school in New York, but I always saw that my dues were paid here in Richmond. So we had a fantastic time. We, my wife and I, have had 23 consecutive vacations. Three times to San Francisco, 28 days, twice to Los Angeles, 60 and 64, and San Francisco, 61, 65 and 69, then to her favorite city Denver Colorado, 57, 58, and 68. I love railroad traveling. I rose from private to staff sergeant on the field in Salina Kansas air field that had 36,000 men and women. There were only 600 Black Americans. I started as (?) boot clerk and duty roster clerk for my outfit of 600 men. I rose from there to become the chief clerk at the base post office for these 36,000 mean and women. I could only go as high as staff sergeant because the master sergeant and other sergeants were all career men. So we’ve had the life unusual to most average Black Americans. It is because we wanted to do something worthwhile with our lives.
And you did, and you have, and you continue to, I believe. Listen, when you lived I the Carver community, how many were in your family, you know, how many siblings, sisters and brothers, did you have?

In my family? My mother and father and myself. There were some brothers and sisters before my time, I think, but they died in childhood. But I was the only one that continued through. My grandmother said to my mother, Don’t worry Betty, he won’t make it because he’s so small. But you see, I’m still here. And when I worked at Doctor Chambers drugstore at Harrison and Leigh, at eleven years of age, and they were talking about the flu, they had the flu around at that time. And we used to deliver all the medicine up into new town, all around where you live on Catherine street, Harrison Street, Hancock, Goshen, all through there. Because we had a Doctor Jackson who had a drugstore at Goshen and Leigh. He used to call it another name, not Goshen. But Doctor Jackson was Black. He had the drugstore downstairs, and he and his family lived over top of the drugstore.

Well Mr. Wood, I’ll tell you what. You might have been the only child to survive, but you certainly are a tribute to your family. What did you do for fun as a child, especially since you were an only child?

What did I do for fun? Working at Doctor J.W. Chambers drugstore at Harrison and Leigh, we only got $3.50 a week. And from there I went to work for a man named Mr. Roper, delivering the cleaning, he was a cleaner, he learned me how to dry clean. And then after he pressed the clothes I delivered them. And then when I was a teenager I went to Ocean City, New Jersey, as a waiter. And during my years at Virginia Union, I went back and forth to Ocean City as a waiter. And that was the money that helped pay my tuition at Virginia Union, and my books, and my mother and father saw that I got my room and board at home, so I gave them whatever I had left after I paid my other bills. And then, I lived during the Great Depression in two great cities, and I saw depression at its worst, in New York City and Detroit, Michigan. And I worked odd jobs there, and when I came home, I went to Thalhimer’s Department Store. And there, I worked up to become one of the coordinators at the downtown store, 6th and Broad, of more than 200 Black and White employees. During that time, everything, Miss Waller, was segregated. And you had to conform to all the rules and regulations and all it took to make a living. I was informed by the Thalhimer’s what I was expected to do. I became the coordinator for all the maids, elevator operators, and porters at Thalhimer’s, and I was there for 11 years. Now four of that eleven I was away on military leave because I was drafted into the air force, and I remained there for four years, then I returned back to Thalhimer’s. But in returning back to Thalhimer’s, I would walk around to see the many changes that had been made for my people since I left. And this young lady I did not know when I left. And she was not there. But she went there in October of 1943. But I did not return until 1946. And so as I walked each day to see the many changes they had made, it was a Jewish firm, they would do things for our people that Miller & Rhoads wouldn’t do, because they were gentile, and you could not buy or try on anything at Miller & Rhoads, and when we got back until we got back in 46, only Maggie Walker, and the Wilsons, and a few Black families that looked like whites could go. And they had money. The rest of us, we could not. But Thalhimer had a way of its own. They wouldn’t turn you away if you saw a dress you liked. The buyer would let you come into her office and try on that dress. You’d make arrangements with her. She bought the dress, she could sell the dress. I knew that, I worked
there. I saw all of those things. But I had to keep mum about what went on. To give you an illustration, one day my wife was ringing a cash register on the first floor, paper for school children, a very prominent lady with money, lived in Windsor farms, asked to see the merchandise manager for the first floor. She was shown her office. She asked the merchandise manager if Thalhimer's had Black salespeople. She said no. She said, Well, I saw a Brown skin girl ringing the cash register. She said, Oh, yes, she is the monogram girl who did the monogramming on the things we're selling. And she is ringing the cash register to help speed up the customers. So you wouldn't have to wait so long. The next day, Mary Jane Carter Wood was in a booth ringing up the same cash register but you couldn't see her. A lot of people don't know that, but there she is. See I worked there.

Well, you did what you had to do at the time.

So we know what goes on. And after that, Mary left Thalhimer's for more money, to became the first Black sales lady at the career shop on Main Street between 8th and 9th. And 1,000 people applied for the job down at the career shop. Why she got on? She was a fitter, she was a seamstress, and she was a saleslady. She had to do three or four things. Like I tell all the young people, when you look at your t.v. and you see all those Black football, basketball, baseball players, they have to be five times as good as any white ones to get there. They have to control their morals, their manners, but most of them can't do that. And they don't get help from those who know. With the money the make, they should never be broke. But some of them don't have anything when they hit 40 and 50 because four cars and you don't need but one, and ladies on the side when they have a good home and a wife, the mother of their children. They don't seem to learn that.

Mr. Wood, I think we can put you on a circuit to just go around and do some promotional speaking. You talk so good talk. You are absolutely right.

You know Mrs. Waller, that's why we are called peculiar. Because if you can work up the ladder, you can be somebody. Then you can be respected. Not whether they like you, but what you can. The Lord said "Show me your works and I'll tell you who you are." If you are homeless and don't want to be noboc'y, you are a nobody. You're not as good as Ms. Waller, who lives at 700 Catherine. You're not as good as this person or that person. A lot of my fraternity brothers are medical doctors, school principals, teachers, they got three and four college degrees, but I couldn't trust them from here to that telephone. My wife can tell you for years after we were married, I went to all the fraternity affairs because she did not like dancing. So she wouldn't go. And I had to stay. And all my fraternity brothers would say Brother Wood, would you dance with my wife? And then when I would dance with his wife, she would say "Well, Brother Wood, thank you for dancing with me. I know that my husband is willing to dance with that old high school or college girl chum of his, and I appreciate it. I said I love ballroom dancing, but since you don't go, and I have learned so much about my brothers that I though was A+, but they got an F when they wouldn't even dance. So I stopped going. I have not even attended a dance since 1964. I used to play cards, a sociable hand of bride and whist, but my wife doesn't play cards, so I don't play cards since 1960. So some of my coworkers at Saunders Station where I retired, I'm a retired letter carrier, with 37 years of honorable federal government service, four of them in the air force, the other 33 in the post office. And I don't know whether you read it in the papers if
you were in Richmond, but the Times-Dispatch, it was in the News Leader, the Afro-American, they all carried it, where the people where I served, in Oregon Hill, a tough area in Richmond, blue collar workers, policeman, fireman, street cleaners, city hall workers, what you call the blue collar workers, I managed to stay out there for twenty years. How did I stay out there for twenty years? I was off on Thursdays. I would go out to Grace Iron School and Madison School and lecture to the children about the important things to see in the city of Richmond. The US Mail would go to 10th and Main when the main post office was down there, then you’d go to the Museum of Fine Arts, I took 13 years of Thursdays, from about 10 until 2, eat lunch with those white boys and girls who had never been around a Black man, they had never heard our blessings we’d say before every meal, I’d say it out there with them. The teachers from VCU would come and practice teaching. They would have me to speak to them after every vacation when my wife and I would come back, because they had never met a man, white or black, who took five weeks of vacation every year with his wife. One week for traveling, then four in hotels on the other end. We were unusual. So I stayed out there for twenty years. Then I retired June 23rd, 1974. I have not made one penny in salary since 1974. They paid me a pension, I live off the pension. I bought war bonds, and the war bonds are what bought this beautiful building at 2100 Graywood. As I said, Ms. Wood didn’t know anything about either one of the building. But as I said, we are a little unusual. I’ll never meet another woman that don’t drink, smoke, gamble, dance or play cards.

Well, I have all of those but one, but I think that after talking to you I won’t play the lottery any more. I’ve been trying to retire.

My mother told me at five years of age that a bird in the hand is worth 25 out in the bush. Because that’s what you got. You can hold on to that. I got a letter this morning from the chairman of the Deacon board. I am a shepherd. There are about 40 people I am supposed to check on, they are my sheep. But I can’t be worrying about all their birthdays, all their anniversaries, help them with anything that isn’t the best in their homes, I have to look out for what’s in my home. And my wife isn’t up to par all the time. So I have to, like this morning I had to get everything straight, and she said why are you doing so much straightening, and I said Well, that lady is going to be here. Its just something that’s in me that my mother taught me. See, I was an only child, but I was not spared. I had to be up at 6 in the morning. Now I don’t worry. I get up when I get ready, at 10 or 11 or whatever. Since I knew you were coming at 11:30 I was up at 7 this morning to shave and get everything straight.

Well you look awfully handsome so I want to thank you.

As a matter of fact there were four coats hanging on that rack this morning but I carried them upstairs so they would not interfere with you coming in. But I told her she can live just the way she wants, but when you have people coming in, you have to do something a little different.

Well, Mr. Wood, I’d like for you to go down to the boys club right now and start helping some of our younger young men to have the values that you have. They are absolutely wonderful. And I’m glad that you’ve been able to hold on to the values that your parents passed on to you. That is absolutely wonderful. But you still have a lot that you can share.
You see the front yard, and we have a large back yard, if you come in April, the azaleas are beautiful in the front. The dogwood trees, the lilac trees and all the trees. WE planted them. The people who were here before us, they were professional people. But they had cottages down on the James River. And they had other recreational. And they didn’t worry. They said nothing would grow around those big trees in the back, but they should come back now, because you have to put topsoil, plant seed, but she loves to do it. She’ll spend half of her day out in the yard. That’s what she likes. And the good part about it, Ms. Waller, is that if you live the right way, you can do the things you like.

That’s true. I believe that. Well, let me ask you something. When you lived in the Carver community, what did you like best about the neighborhood at the time?

Oh, the togetherness. If you got sick, somebody would be over to see how you are. If your car remained out front for two, three days, somebody would say “Is everything all right over at the Wood’s home?” They don’t do it over here. You’re interfering. You’re in Ginter Park, one of the most prestigious areas in Richmond. And the people who live here have maids, butlers, chauffeurs, cooks, and yardmen. But the Black Americans who have moved in, some of them have two or three jobs. You can go on the job, and this young lady could go on the job, and they would pay her $50. They’d give you $25. Why? Because they say it costs more for her to live. And yet, if she got sick, or went on vacation, you would do your job and half of hers. That’s what I did at Thalhimer’s. I did my job, and two other white men that were over me. They made more money, but they had not had the training, but they were there because they had relatives in the store. So when I came back, in ’46 having made it to become chief clerk, having all the mail and bonded in the city of Salina Kansas for money mail, I said this is where I belong, with the United States Government. And then after I got here, I said there are 365 days in a year. Now if you are not a doctor or a lawyer, you can’t beat a federal employee. Why? There are 365 days, you’re off every Sunday except the day before Christmas, that’s 51, you’re off one day a week that you make regular, that’s 51, that’s 102 days from the 365. Then you get 13 sick leave days a year, you save them, that’s money in the bank. Then you get annual leave. That’s why I could take these 5 weeks vacation, because when I got back, my checks were waiting. That was the annual leave I had never accumulated when I was a substitute. See when you first when in back in the 30s and 40s, you substituted three, four, five, six years before you made regular. But as a substitute, you made far more hours than the regular man. That’s because they could call on you day or night, holidays or Sundays. But when you made regular, forty hours per week. So we, that group, said hold the money over forty while we were substitutes, and put it in a separate bank account. Because that was money because you were a substitute because instead of forty hours per week you may work sixty. So that was a lot of money. There were a lot of young men at that time that were college graduates, teachers, that did not make as much as government workers at that time. So when we worked five or six years as a substitute down at the main post office making collections, pulling the sacks from six to eight, going out on the regular mail route for the ones who got off that day, they’d work two hours putting the mail up, take 6 hours leave, a substitute work day. And if you had good superintendent, now all of them were not good, they were going a certain way, white with white, black with black, and they carried that, so you would know that. The first thing I would do when I walked into Saunders in the morning, “Good morning.” If nobody answered, that’s all right. And when I left in the afternoon at three o’clock, “Good afternoon.” I did that all through. I had no problem. They didn’t know what to say to me
sometimes, but just said, “Have a good day.” So I guess I’m letting you know you have an unusual two Black Americans. But we both think the same way, that’s how we met at Thalheimer’s. I liked what she was doing, I liked the way she did it. She didn’t talk, she did her job. She went there. She was hired to work 8 hours. And I’ll show you something before you leave. She did more than 8 hours in 8 hours. Above and beyond the call of duty. That’s why we are here today. The Lord has blessed us in a mighty way. See that’s why as I travel, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York. Now, New York, she didn’t care for New York. That’s the one place she didn’t like. Yet it’s a fabulous town. If you go to the right places. But her city was Denver. And mine was Seattle. We went so far as I was planning to transfer from the post office here to the post office in Seattle. Why? Because you could get jobs in Seattle, doing the same work that I couldn’t get in Richmond. You had Black men in the post office in Denver, superintendents, supervisors, you did not have in Richmond. Went I went to Detroit in ’41, I could ride anywhere on the bus or street car. I could pay my fare and go to any theatre. I couldn’t do that here in Richmond until 1960. So thirty years in those cities you could do certain things if you had the money. Here, I could pay the money and push to the back to ride from where I lived at 923 near Goshen, near your area, Graham is what they used to call it, Graham Street, now its Goshen. They didn’t care how well dressed you’d be, how mannerable, you were not white, and you had to go to the back. So I know all of that. And yet I didn’t get angry. It was the laws at that time. I knew, my mother always said, “Let’s pray we’ll have a better day someday.” And that day has arrived. Because this area down here is interracial. We have a white lawyer across the street at 3609. He’s just as nice as he can be. Anything he can do to help me and he’s over here. And that’s the way we operate. I have neighbors on that side and neighbors on that side. The men are lovely, the ladies are tough. They’re mad at me now because I won’t cut these limbs in the back, so they won’t fall on their grandchildren, and their grandchildren are grown up. And have children. I get along with the men, but the ladies are right tough, right tough.

Well, that leads to another question on what you were talking about, I was going to ask. When you were in the Carver community, how did you see it before segregation, and how did it hit you after segregation?

Well, a lot of the people have adjusted to the situation, the changes. Like some people have come here and said, “Mr. Wood, you all have too much furniture, too many things, papers and things.” I said, “Well, we read them, and then we dispose of them.” But the way I figured, Mrs. Waller, I’ve gotten on with no trouble segregation years and non-segregation years. Because I knew how to respect the law, and I know what I am and what I like. There’s trash everywhere, all kinds of trash. Yellow trash, white trash, black trash, all kinds. But I’ll treat you if you treat me right. Like I used to walk through Laurel Street and Pine Street in Oregon Hill for twenty years, they said everything. Then they’d say, “Oh, pardon me, Mr. Wood, I didn’t know you were so near. Actually help yourself, take what you want, then I know who you are.” And that’s the way it went. Because I used to tell them if there’s anything you don’t understand about your mail, then you tell me. Don’t call down to the postmaster at 10th and Main. You tell me, and I’ll consult with my supervisor at Saunders Station, 1635 West Broad. That’s where your mail comes from. Now that’s why I’m out here on Thursdays, to let your children know about how to be good citizens, important places to see in this great historical capitol of the city of Richmond, down where the South begins, and let them know that they don’t live alone. That if you go to the
hospital or if you get sick, you don’t care what hand, whether it’s a black hand or a white hand or a yellow hand, that gives you medicine. You want to get well and get out. And that’s how you ought to feel about everything. If I treat you respectable, then you treat me the same. I was the first black man to have “Mister” put on his name out in Oregon Hill where I carried mail. Everybody else was John F:enry or Ellis, but I was Mr. Wood. Because then I would tell their parents go and vote so you can be a good citizen. Pay your taxes. Be somebody. You don’t care what they say or how they say it, you know who you are.

(New side of tape, conversation is discontinuous)

...around city hall, with old dirty clothes on. They have thrift shops in Richmond that sell pants a dollar a pair, suits, coats like this that came from a thrift shop for 45 dollar $50, $75 brand new. Now Mary [Mrs. Wood] is the only Black woman in Richmond that is a continuous member of the national council of Jewish women? Why? As a Jewish doctor/athlete offered by many Black organists, I said yes. But the Jewish people have both of us over the hump. Because in New York city I became the first non-white stock clerk for a prestigious millionaire firm by Adam Clayton Powell in New York sent me down as one of his proteges, he said you are going to get a job there, go there every day. They said be there at eight, you be there at seven. And if you get the job, you still be there at seven even though you couldn’t hit the clock til about ten minutes til eight or until about ten minutes after. But you be there. I did that. I went down. I became the first Black in that big firm, and in a short period of time I became a dress designer specializing in women’s coats for a New York firm. As soon as I had gotten a few others in, she sent me to Detroit to the Ford industry to work on the assembly line. I have had a tremendous experience. I’ve had many people to say what you said, I should write a book. I don’t know, I’ve never had that desire, but we have had a fabulous time. My wife’s the same way. She had a lot of girls that didn’t want her to be a saleslady, they said she couldn’t make it. But she made it. In fact, she made it so well that there was a buyer at the career shop that so many of the girls on their coffee break and their lunch would come to get Mrs. Wood. She said “There are other girls here”, they said “But we want Mrs. Wood”. And you know what. She wouldn’t let them have certain clothes down there because Mary would go down the main store at 6th and Broad and get during her lunch hour walk and bring these dresses back down, and they would come in later when she would say “I have a dress I think you might like.” Oh, we know what it is. You’re talking about segregation? We know what it is, but it can’t hold you back! You can make it. Thalhimer’s had me behind the scenes some days from 8 in the morning until 5 making out the schedules for those young men and women, white and black, that worked in the downtown store. And in order that the people in the payroll didn’t know what they was paying me, they would give me what they call a payroll salary, and then I would get a bonus this month, January, for service above and beyond the call of duty. You see, that’s the way the Jewish people operate. They are the merchants of the world. When Hitler pushed the Jews out of Germany, he was pushing out trade. You can’t beat them. They are masters of business. They know what’s going on. The two Thalhimer’s, William and Charles, are brothers by the same mother and father, but they are as different as New York is from San Francisco. William is the old fashioned Jew merchant. Sell downstairs, live upstairs with your family. Charles is the modern day. But they worked together. That’s what life is all about, togetherness. You talking about that era, wonderful Carver era, and least everyone looked out for his or her block. If they didn’t see you at church, they would find out what’s wrong. Can you get there? Do you want me to stop by and pick you up? Over here, oh
no, they have these big jobs and Reynolds Metals, Phillip Morris, making $20 or $30 an hour, they hardly say good morning. But that's the way it is. See you have to adjust to all of that. I'm just giving you all of this to let you know there are some people who believe in helping everybody. If I can help this young lady, or if I can help the Chinese over there, I will help them. Because it would be like the story we used to hear when we were in the 3rd and 4th grade on how the great lion was saved by the little mouse who gnawed on these little ropes that held the lion. He gnawed them, and the lion got away. So you never know when you are going to need somebody white or black. Some of the best people we have ever known were not black. A lot of white Jewish doctors wanted to know why my wife was a member of the National Council of Jewish women. Because it was before she met me that she dealt with the National Council of Jewish women thrift shops. In which you would get slightly used clothes from these rich people. But you couldn't afford that brand new. But you could wear that and feel good because you had the clothes on of somebody that made a million out of the year. There's a way to do all kinds of things.

You mentioned something earlier about the church. Have you seen, tell me some of the changes you've seen within your church, some of the differences or changes you've seen in your church over the past years.

Well, I have encouraged all the young people that I have come in contact with to stay in school, make the best marks you can, if you don't think you can make it in college, learn something to use your hands. Some of the highest paid men are the plumbers. $50, $60 dollars and hour. And if you can't live off that, 8 hours, four hundred and something dollars a day? A plumber? That's what they make. It may be dirty work, not the most pleasant. But you're making what you want to live - money. Money is the root of all evil, but money is good to get the things you want. You can have the clothes you desire, you can get the education you desire. If this young lady is from VCU, a lot of black people in Richmond are jealous because our little black school, Virginia union, is private. American Home Baptist Society. The good white people from New York came down to make sure the black people had a chance to learn in this area. When they were freed, they had no education. They even accepted the names of their masters. A doctor a met in Detroit, Churchill, their family was from the Churchill Inn in Kentucky, where you had Churchill Downs. See, that's accepted. That's all Black history. But its not taught in the schoolbooks in Virginia because the books are written by white editors. Not black. But Carl G. Woodson, a black man, wrote history about what we did. Some of the good things, some of the unpleasant things. There was handsome black men, what they called stud men, that went from one plant plantation to another to have relations, both with the black girls, and the people who were in prison in England, men and women, who were sent to work in Georgia and all through the south. So they worked just like our people. They were slaves, too. But they aren't going to put that in the books. But you read Woodson's book. It tells it all. And so these black men were fed, roped, they went from plantation to plantation. Why? To have children. For these masters. And then you have right here in Richmond that used to live at Hancock and Leigh, the Randolphs. They were never slaves, but they were Black people. Real light, blue eyes, sharp nose, thin lips, could speak well. They were the master's children. Cause those that came from Africa was Black. They don't say particularly they had thick lips, they said full lips. And flat noses. Those are the ones that originally came from Africa. And they didn't come because they particularly wanted to come. The white slavers couldn't get them if the old African chiefs hadn't sold them. Our people sold
our people. They don’t put that in. And our big black people in Richmond don’t want to hear that today. But all of that’s history. See they don’t like to talk with me, they say You know too much, and you keep it in too long. They thought it should have gone in one ear and out the other long ago. But if there’s something you don’t want me to know, don’t tell me.

Do you remember the end of the Jim Crow era here? You know politics, Jim Crow seemed to have been running things in Virginia?

Ms. Waller, way back in the 20s and the 30s, you had to pay a poll tax. You couldn’t vote unless you paid a poll tax. And a lot of our people said they weren’t going to pay it. But then they didn’t vote. You didn’t have any voice. And then, when we came back from World War II, they had a man who was in the police department, Dooley. Dooley became a high man in city hall, the old city hall that’s down there now. And he found out the only way to keep his city hall job was to have the vote of Black people. So he learned how to receive them down there. He didn’t mean it, but that was a part of it. He got away with it. So I said that to say this. We came a long way, and we have a long way to go. Now over where this lady is from, VCU, there are very few people in Richmond who remember, that trains come here from Washington DC would cross Bow & Marshall, and right where that beautiful new parking deck is they would come right out to Broad Street. Railroad trains, running on Broad Street, and go down to Belvidere, where they have a station known as Elva. I was 5 or 6 but I remember the people that got married and was going away, and they’re throwing rice on them at Elva Station. Now, you’ve got those beautiful buildings, VCU. Now having worked in Oregon Hill for 20 years, when it was Richmond Professional Institute, now VCU, they wanted to go down to the James River and beautify the Oregon Hill area, Cherry Street, Pine Street, Laurel Street, all the way out to Belvidere. But somehow they got money to fight VCU. And they got VCU off at Cary. That’s where some of those girls dormitories come up to Cary Street. I’ve walked out there for 20 years. I’ve looked and saw everything going on. Those people would have been better off to allow VCU to come South. But you know what they say? Go North, to VCU. Go North to Broad Street. To Marshall Street. To Clay Street. To Leigh. So they’ve come North. You ride on Broad Street now from about Bow all the way down to Belvidere, and right at Harrison and Broad they’re going to build that new high rise for upper classmen and their families. I keep up with what’s going on. I tell people keep up your property. If VCU gets it, they’ll pay you according to how your property looks. They don’t want the property, they want the land. I had a lady who lives in the 1100 block to call over and tell them she was willing to sell her house, they told her they didn’t want the house, they wanted the land, not the house. That’s what I’m telling my people now all over this area. Keep your property up. VCU is not going to hurt you. And I said to the older ones. Did you know that if you’re 65 years of age, and they have classes at VCU that are not full, then you can go free. They will help you and you’ll be helping them. Did you know, Ms. Waller, that in the 300 block of Marshall and the 400, and the 300 block of Clay, there are young white people who have bought those homes, young men, tore the inside out, fixed it up the way they wanted, and when they finish VCU, they lease it to another group. When I was over in Oregon Hill and I had the special deliveries and they had to sign the registered mail and I had to go in. Sometimes they had inside 6, 7, 8 beds in one room, but they wasn’t going to be there all their life, just 4 years. When they finished that 4 years they lease it to another group. I learned a lot as a letter carrier that you don’t learn in books getting your Master’s or PhD. Now we have a young lady here who calls us, my wife and I, her Richmond mother and father. She’s from West Virginia. And she is
over at VCU working on her PhD, in administrative education and management. Dale Myers, a small brown skinned girl. She had been going to William & Mary for 2 seasons, and I told her why drive 50 miles down and 50 when you can get it right here at VCU, and when you finish, they might keep you if you wanted to be a professor. Because her brother, just May of this year, got his earned PhD from Virginia Tech. Dr. Lawrence Harrison Myers. And the young lady I’m talking about was living out there in Henrico and paying $400 for a beautiful apartment. I said as young as you are, why not put that into a home. Then if you do not want to live in Richmond, you can still get your equity out what you put in and some more. December 1, 1985, we all had dinner out at Morrison’s, now Piccadilly’s, and she said I have something to show you. And she carried us to 3609 Edgeton Circle right off of Laburnum. And she unlocked the door. She said I have signed the contract for this building. A beautiful big bungalow. That was 14 years ago. She owns the building now. She had us to dinner New Year’s along with a few of her other friends. And she is a student on Monday and Wednesday at VCU. And she says its going to take three years. I said No, its going to take you two. Because you are going to make it. She’s going to winter school and to summer school. And she’s single and she’s 45 and she’s going to make it. And she said all of that to tell you that we have encouraged again in Oregon Hill it was a young white girl who lived at 616 S. Laurel. She was ashamed of where she lived in Oregon Hill. Because when Thomas Jefferson was all white, her friends were from Park Avenue, the Boulevard, Kensington Avenue, she didn’t want them down there. Her mother was crying one day when I came down there with the mail and I said what’s wrong. And she told me. And I said don’t worry, she’s going to get out of there. Just tell her to study hard. She was at the school Longwood here in Virginia, in Farmville, I said tell her to make good. She can get what she wants later. And you know what? That girl went from Longwood and got a job in Boston working for the army, she told her mother I’m being paid for 8 hours and only work 5, I don’t like this. Her mother said well things will change. Then she wrote us, my wife and I. I told her go out and intercede at Northeastern University, they have classes up til 10 at night. You can work in the day, go to school at night. And in the meantime, she met a New Engander, a lawyer, Harvard college graduate, Yale law school graduate. While she was the manager of a chemical company, personnel manager in Boston in the day going to this school in the evening. He began to flirt around. Being a southern girl, she wasn’t used to that. She said if he didn’t stop she was going to have to make a change. He didn’t stop. So she picked up and went back to Chicago where she had served four years as an airline hostess. And she wrote us that she was making up her mind. I said why don’t you be a lawyer since he was one and she liked what he was doing. They confirmed that requirement in Chicago. That girl went to UCLA, graduated with honors. And today is a labor lawyer for Hollywood firms out there making pictures. She’s making big money, big money. Yet she was a poor little girl at Grace Arts(?) School when I met her, six years of age. Now she’s a full grown lady and has had many experiences. And she’s white. And she’s doing well. She’s in California. But I feel good that I knew her. She grew up living where she didn’t want to live. And today she’s a lawyer. Practicing in the civil and federal courts in the state of California. And if you ever have a change to go to California, go there. It’s the melting pot. People of all races. I use to think Chines and Japanese were short. Some of them are long, tall looking people. Oh yeah, a melting pot. And I have to laugh. If any colored people go to California, they got a dialect, and then they are something else. Then they’re Black Americans. Trying hard to be what they are not. Don’t let them fool you. But I was telling you about that family that lived on Leigh Street. They were free Americans. The men were handsome, and the women were beautiful. And yet they didn’t turn out to be no doctors or lawyers, Mrs. Waller.
Some of the best teachers I ever had were black and ugly. And some of the smartest men I met in New York were ugly. They would be like Grace Matthews Pleasant here in Richmond. She had a beautiful voice over the telephone. But when you meet her...She wasn’t anything to look at. But she’s gone on now. She was a good friend of Miss Hattie Harris, who was also a good friend of ours. Miss Hattie was a teacher. And she liked Grace. But you talk to Grace Matthews over the telephone. (everybody talking at once here, can’t discern distinct conversation). So when you come to talk about the race, when you know where you are and you use the best manners and English that you possibly can, you can get by. I had no problem. Mary was a seamstress and we had an explosion in our home November 15, 1952. One Friday I had a new hot water tank put in, and the plumber made the mistake of hooking it up to a laundry stove, which was a small stove which heats the kitchen, and you could put something on top and it would be connected, that blew up. We were in the kitchen I was reading the paper. She was preparing the meal with her back to the stove. The Richmond Times-Dispatch said if the owners had been in the kitchen, they would have been killed. We were in there, but we were not killed. But what it did, November 15, for the next 10 years, she was at home, she couldn’t work. Her leg, from here to the ankle had to have two veins moved that were ruptured. Her back was injured. My hearing, that’s why I don’t hear as well today, from that. WE sued, took 2, 3 years, but when colored people go to court, that’s where the segregation really showed itself. But we wound up with an out of court settlement. And it wasn’t much, but she spent 49 days in the Medical College in ’52 with the leg, again in ’54 with the back, 39 days. And it was only when I asked the doctors what they planned to do, that Doctor Dolan, one of the fine doctors at that time at MCV, said we want to operate. I said can you tell me what you are going to operate for? He said no. I said well then I cannot give you permission to operate on my wife. He said Mr. Wood, then she’ll just have to live with it. She’s been down here 39 days, we’ve given her the spinal and everything, I said well if you don’t know what you are going in to her back for then I don’t want it, because she could be in a wheelchair the rest of her life. She may not make it off the operating table. He said well I’m just telling you the facts. I’ll discharge her tomorrow. You can come pick her up. He said well I’ll tell you, she’ll just have to live with it. That was 1954. She’s been living with it forty something years. She’s had the board under the bed sometimes, I see that she gets her rest, there’s no loud noise, I like music of all kinds, but I don’t play it as much as I used to because it disturbs her. She likes gospel music. Spiritual music. Life is what you make it. You can be a millionaire. You can be like all the ladies in the movies. Beautiful. But then read their past. How sorry their life has been, some of it. Those girls that used to be on the stage in New York, I couldn’t go in the front way, I used to have to go in the back with the doorkeeper, looking at the show from the back. Beautiful. But 15 or 20 years later, they were in poverty. They didn’t have anything. You have to live within your means. The people in Oregon Hill in Carver area which you were discussing, they lived that way. From Belvidere Street back to Lombardy, and from Broad Street over to the railroad tracks, that’s known as the Carver area, and in that area, some of the mildest people have come, especially from my church, Moore Street Baptist Church, we had a Randall O. Johnson who was there for 30 years, then we had my pastor. Gordon Blaine Hancock, professor, lecturer, teacher, theologian. Thirty eight years at Moore Street, he married us, June 19, 1948. Then he lectured to us for hours, the wedding party. And then came the gentleman pastor, Gilbert Godfrey Campbell Senior. He lived right over here, 401 Patrick Avenue. That’s in Providence Park. He was there for 30 years. He’s the one that suggested that I become a deacon, because when they had 9 men April 9, 1978 to stand up to the front to be deacon, and I was not there, he came up to me after that the same Sunday, and said to me, Well I don’t know why you
weren’t there with the 9 men. You should have been up there because you’ve been in this church all your life. He said go on and talk it over with your wife and talk it over and let me know. So I did. And I came back and I told him, Well Dr. Campbell, I love ballroom dancing, I always have, I like to play cards. He said well I did that too when I was in college before I decided to become a minister. So he convinced me. And on April 3, 1978, at the morning service, he said he would like for all the members to remain, and he brought my name up to be a deacon. Not a man said a thing. It seemed like an hour. And then a ladies voice from way back said “Second the motion.” And that was Annie Wolf Jackson, a retired Richmond school teacher whose husband was assistant principal of the (?) School in Church Hill. James Jackson. But she said Second the motion. I’ve often wondered since then, that with all the men I knew at the church, not one of them, maybe it was because they were taken by surprise. I don’t know. My wife said by the surprise. She always brings up the good things, everybody is good. The Carver area itself, I would have to get with Ms. Abernathy, she knows, she went out and got all the information she could about that. And she has a committee at Moore Street, because they meet at Moore Street once a month. And Dr. Alonzo Lee Lawrence wanted it that way. Every Sunday I have to pray for the money, to pray that those gifts that are given are given to the outreach program, the community programs, and the programs within the church. Moore Street is doing very well, and they’ve helped many people. We have a clothes store right there that’s open 10 to 12 that’s loaded with beautiful clothes. Everybody, white or black, yellow, brown, or red, can come and get them, no charge. Like my wife said last night, there are some people that don’t want to wear secondhand clothes. But in this life, sometime you have to take secondhand to get firsthand. If the Lord continues to bless you, then you can become first hand. My mother and father would be elated. My father, if he was alive, because he was an auto mechanic and chauffeur for A. D. Williams, 800 W. Franklin, which is a part of VCU today. One of the buildings there. And you have the A.D. Williams Memorial Clinic down at the Medical College. When he died, he left 13 million, 3 million down there to that. And he left 3 million to the Museum of Fine Arts. That’s why I specify that young people go up and see what you have there at that beautiful museum. And then T.C. Williams, his brother, you have the T.C. Williams School of Law, University of Richmond. I haven’t lived here in Richmond for nothing. I want to know what’s going on, so I get out and go. And I always told my wife when we were traveling, we would always change clothes three times a day. Casual in the morning, semi-casual at noon, but in the evening we would go out, and you’d wear your gloves and your hat, and Los Angeles had the Biltmore Hotel, and the white bellhops would be holding the door for us, say Hope you enjoy the show, or wherever you’re going. So we have really lived, we have enjoyed it. So, Mrs. Waller, my deacon Richard Waller Jr. jewelry shop a few weeks ago had a 100 year anniversary from 6 to 9 of a Black-owned business. His father Richard. And his grandfather Marcellus before him. And his father, but I didn’t know him. But Marcellus was a deacon at Moore Street, and he was always there on Sunday at the BYP from 6 to 7, Baptist Young People’s Union, every Sunday from 6 to 7. That’s where the young men would meet the young girls. And later, like Helen Mickey Smith and Thomas Waller married Marie, they were all BYPers. So Richmond has some fascinating, like that little paper you wrote tells a story. All kinds of stories, beautiful stories.

Yes, you have shared some wonderful ones with us.

And there’s a whole lot more that I’ll be able to tell you from time to time about the Carver area. Wonderful people. But I don’t know how to go about it. But they’re charging the people too
much for those homes down in back of you. Over on Leigh. You can see the back from your area.

Well, if you want to see if you can get a reduction in the price, start with my home!

They’re charging too much. Look at the front. See, all them houses are built right up off of Leigh Street. And Leigh Street is very busy. And now you got the interstate coming out there. That hasn’t always been there. I drive by some days and stop and look at it and make notes. I know some people wonder what I’m doing. I make notes of the changes. Now I say, most of these houses are being bought by women who lived in the area and don’t want to leave. And they’ve got these trifling husbands. Who can’t take care of themselves, much less their families. My mother taught me if you’re going to be the man, doesn’t matter about your size, you do what a man’s supposed to do, that is, take care of your family. So this lady, she has yet to pay after 51 years a telephone bill, water bill, electric, gas, notes on the house. She gets the things like carpets or furniture, things for the kitchen.

Seeds for the flowers, right?

Crestar and Wachovia are sending out the letters this week. Of the money you have in the bank, then you know to keep up with it, keep your receipt, because with this new change, they don’t know if the computers, or programs machines, are up to date, but keep everything. She thinks all people are good. I don’t think that. Some are, some aren’t. And the only way to have it the right way is to keep them all in line. Because, as I often tell all the young people, there are certain things you have to do. A lot of the ladies take it as a joke, but its true. I tell the ladies keep your heads high and your dresses down, and you’ll keep out of a lot of trouble. If you live long enough, you’ll know what I’m talking about. And for the men, if you want to get in trouble with a white man or black man, yellow, brown, or red, don’t mess with his money or his women. His mother or his wife or his girlfriend. You just keep out of their way. Let them get their own business straight. See you have to use what you call good common sense. I have a lodge fraternity brother whose got two, three degrees. But when they go to the meeting, and its over, and they get a couple of highballs or cocktails, and they forget who they are and where they are. And they will be like, when I was in the barracks on the base, some of the fellows would get to arguing and cursing, they’d say We’d better wait until Brother Wood gets out of here so I can tell you what I want to tell you. They didn’t want me to hear what they were going to say. So I was happy because they respected me. And where they ran in groups, I was a loner. I would go a lot of places by myself just to see what was going in on these different towns where I was stationed. Walla Walla Washington, and Oregon, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and all through there. I learned a lot, it was a lesson in itself.

Mr. Wood, do you have a computer here?

No, I do not. I tell my wife I don’t know anything about computers.

But you keep up with so much information I just knew you were hitting the buttons and getting some of that.
Well, I read a lot. I get all the papers, and there’s just as many upstairs, and my bedroom is loaded with books.

That is wonderful.

Because a lot of nights, my wife likes to go to bed between 7 and 8. I like to go between 10 and 11. So I read after that. Then I’ll come down here where the television is and look at the different things at night that she’s not interested in. But I told her in order to know what’s going on you have to be interested in everything. And she thinks most people are good but they’re not.. I told her out of 100 85 are not.

Your husband’s right.

I have all of my fraternity brothers. They’re good men, college men. Good jobs, beautiful homes, 2 or 3 cars, children in college. But I wouldn’t trust them to that door. With a cocktail and a fine looking lady, I don’t know what would happen to them. They couldn’t be trusted. And yet, they want me to dance with their wives. But I don’t mind it because the lord has blessed us so. We have as many good white friends as we do, in fact more. Because I told a Jewish doctor it was a Jewish firm in New York City that gave me the break. And I had to earn it. When you work for a Jewish person you earn it. They don’t mind paying you, but you got to give a little more than normal. But if you want the job, you don’t mind doing it. Some people say when I leave the job, I leave it there. You can’t always do that. A good teacher, when she goes home, she prepares what she’s going to give the next day. If we could just get a lot of our people to understand that. I worked with so many men, and every other Friday we would get paid. It would be a shame to see a woman, principal of a school in Richmond, waiting for her husband, a letter carrier, to get off the clock and go make market. Because if she didn’t, he would hang out [can’t understand] or somewhere, and when he got home, half that check would be gone. I’ve seen that at Saunders Station and looked. I thought this is a shame. A wife, two college degrees, principal of a school, good lady, she’s standing there waiting for her husband. And then a lady, a very important lady, Marie Hunter Goodman, her husband, she would be there waiting for her husband, that man Hunter, and he was a good man. But she was waiting to spend some of that money he had to pay her bills. And she was very important in Richmond. Highly respected. But she stood down there at that platform waiting for him. I’ve seen it. I asked who she was. So I know. My wife never had to come to Saunders looking for me because when I left Saunders I either went by my mother and fathers at 923 to see how they were doing, then I would go to 2100 Graywood. And talk to all the teachers over there at West End School, and I knew all the ones like Gladys Swan, that used to live down here on Montrose, she’s dead now. But her friend, Miss Coles, I mean her niece, is still there, but Gladys Swan one of those dedicated teachers. When she would come out at 3 o’clock, she would stand and talk to some of the mothers about their children. There were some of those other young teachers that would come out with their after 5 dresses in a hurry. It was over. I’m leaving my day. And they would say “If you don’t get it, I got mine.” See that’s the bad part. That’s why all those little black children don’t do so well today. Nobody to mother and love them and say You’re good. Don’t worry about your color, you can make it.

(End of this tape)
And then they would become your best friend, just because you had something they wanted. You could interpret to them what the professor said, something they didn’t get from the professor. And sometimes you would help them get through the class, because they didn’t need to work, their father already had a job lined up for them, they just needed the college degree. So, its so many opportunities for our people, but as I often tell my wife, Black people want a job where they can go to work at 8 o’clock in the morning, 15 minutes for a coffee break, an hour for lunch, take a little more than an hour, come back from eating and you have to chat with somebody over the telephone, and at five o’clock he’s ready to go and he hasn’t done anything.

Five minutes to five, I’ll tell you.

And see, when I’m in town I pay bills at city hall. My wife says you can mail the bills. But I want to go to see the changes. I remember when there were no black faces down there. Now the black faces are in charge. But I’ve got to tell these black faces, Don’t be eating while you’re waiting on me. Don’t have all your girlfriends or boyfriends call you while you’re on the job. Because they want to help you and give you a job. And if you don’t like working on the first floor, there are openings every month like it was in the post office upstairs. Watch the board. Check the examinations. Know what you know. Don’t go there scratching your head and looking all around. Look the person in the eye. Then you’ll make it.

Did you read the book about the Delaney sisters?

What church are you a member of?

Thirty-first Street Baptist.

Well now, you’ve got a brilliant man over there. When he was at Union he did some brilliant lectures.

Didn’t he?

He’s had a lot of sicknesses and operations, some of them serious ones.

(undistinguishable chatter about some other member of the church)

And then she has a sister Edith. See, Edith got married recently. And then the father married for the second time, but he carried his wife into that din, those two hard daughters of his. They’re good ladies but they’re tough. See the father bought the house, and then had to get rid of his own house. Because Betty, his second wife, sat right beside my wife at church every Sunday. She’s a little different than they are. (the daughter, whose name I can’t figure out) has had ten or fifteen different jobs, and you see, she has her Doctor of Divinity, now you can’t do nothing with her. You go to Union when they had all their different sayings and all of the members of the faculty had to march in their caps and gowns, well she’s in ermine. And I been knowing her all my life, but she wouldn’t speak to me hardly if she didn’t have to. But her father is a lovely man. So you see, you know some of the people. But your pastor, he did something that I didn’t approve of when he was pastor of 31st Street Baptist Church, that he accepted to be in charge of Charles[]
School of Divinity. Each one of those jobs requires the entire presence of the individual. But he communicated back and forth. But he got away with it. Because he had so many ladies who like him.

A lot of members were upset with that.

Now, you know, if it was me, there wouldn’t have been any need for that modern service. See, I don’t belong over there, but I know. All these ministers, you can’t do nothing about them. I understand that CC Scott was at 4th Street Baptist, he was there 55 years before he came to Moore Street. CC was something. Because see, he met the older Ward sister, and then fell in love with the younger one and married the younger one. Yeah, CC Scott. And you couldn’t tell him nothing, because he was about 6 feet two, and weighed about 240 pounds, and he’d know them down. All about ladies. That’s why, on Sunday mornings, its good to have the bible, but you’ve got to tell them how to live, not only on Sunday, but on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And every day. Now you live that every day, and you’re all right. Whatever they say, next day, around, that’s all right. Because you’re living the good life. And the Lord will bless you. As you sow, so shall you reap. Another part says it rains on the good as well as the unjust. So, as I often tell my wife, all the operations she’s had, all the hospitals she’s been in, the Lord has blessed her. We made it. We have good white friends who have helped us all the way. The black ones were jealous.

See, I have some good white friends too. They sent me a Christmas picture from the Seattle Washington area. I met this girl about then years ago, and her husband has retired from work, and she came to the east coast to visit me. There’s some good and bad in everybody, in every race.

To get all the facts about the Carver area, you have to get some of the people, like Miss Abernathy, and others, who can give you all the facts. As I told you, I lived at 1400 West Leigh as a child, and everything was segregated. The Jews, who ran the stores, had the stores downstairs and a home upstairs. Their children played with us, studies with us, but when the girls got around 12, 13, then they moved to other parts of the city. That was the tradition at that time. And if you are a Black, I don’t like to say African American, I say Black American, because those who did come from Africa, that was long ago, and they didn’t come of their own will. And there are very few all Black people. But as I tell them. Just look at the colors. Some look like white. Those are the high yellow. Those are light brown. Those are brown-skinned. Those are baked brown. And those are dark brown. Don’t like to say black too much, because you can run into trouble. Some people know they are black but they don’t want to say the word Black. They can’t help it. You can be what you want to be regardless of the color of your skin. You have white professors at the University of Richmond and other places that say You want to pass my class, you’re going to have to be one of the best. That’s good. You finish, you made it at the top. And that means that you can get a job somewhere else. Because you’ve got a good background. You can’t build a good house on a sandy bottom. Got to be on a good foundation. So the fact that we had to tough it out, we made it. I found out the four years that I was in the Air Force what you could really do if you wanted to do it. Because I met men from all walks of like, black and white, who have all different ideas about everything. But those days that were dreary and rainy and you wished you were at home, then you could find out look at all the things they’re doing
here to make us happy. They would bring ladies in from Wichita. 98 miles away. They would bring women in from Newton to entertain the soldiers at special places for us.

Yeah, I used to do that at the YMCA down at Franklin. I used to come down and entertain the soldiers. We used to play the piano and try to dance.

When I was at Thalheimer’s, that’s the thing that bothers me. When that Grace Park was not a building then, it was just level L. See and they went up and the store was above. But I had to work early til night. They’d call me and I had to come in at 5 o’clock and give me the blueprint, and tell me where the buyer on the third floor wanted this and that, and I’d have to go down there and figure out what to do, and then get with the buyer and talk with her what she wanted, and then when the men came in, what I called my main head of the bull gang, to place these things around where she wanted them. So you know what’s going on. And when I came home on some of the furloughs I saw all those new buildings going up around Thalheimer’s, I had Mary down last week showing her, “Now this is old Thalheimer’s.” They still have that delicatessen there at 7th and Broad. That’s some of the best food in town. The last time last year we were out at Hecht’s, which is a child of Thalheimer’s, and Hecht’s is of the May Company, because my wife gets a check every month from the May Company. Now see what happened Thalheimer’s sold out to Seth, Harley and Hale, headquartered in Los Angeles. They changed everything around. So then I was down there and I said now Mary qualified to get a pension from this firm, because you have to have ten or more years of consecutive work in good standing with the firm. I said Mary is now working with Scott and Stringfellow down on Main Street. Well, I went down there, and I told Mr. Charles Thalheimer, who was then the Vice President. He said talk to my brother Williams because he’s chairman of the board. I talked to him Mr. William said we never bothered. I said But she qualifies, Mr. William. We made Thalheimer’s what it is today. Low salaries, hard work. We didn’t complain. We worked. He said Let me think about it. And that was early January. That March he called here, and said Charles, I talked with the Board of Directors. Your wife qualifies. She can get a pension. What type do you want. I said Mr. Charles, we want the type that gets the most. The only survivorship I got here is my post office survivorship if I should die. All right. April, 1977, she started getting a pension from Thalheimer’s. And then Seth, Harley and Hale sold to the May Company, headquartered in St. Louis. They wrote all the retirees that we can give you a paid lump sum or a pension. You be friends with us, we be friends with you. I said to Mary, no we won’t do that. We’ll still take our little monthly amount and you still get the discount when you go out there with this little plastic charge card. And that’s what we did. And I was out there to Hecht’s last week to get some after Christmas cards at half price. All I had to do was present this little card, and now I’ll get the bill next month, and get what you call after back office discount. And what we pay will be $3 or $4 discount off. I prefer it that way. So, I was showing her the other day. I said See, here’s all your little receipts from April, 1977, that they’ve been sending you. And then one of the girls told Mary at the career shop, she said Ms. Wood, you work so hard there’s an opening at Scott & Stringfellow for a filing clerk, and you’ll make more. Now I don’t know how long you’ll be there because those firms fluctuate. If things are going well, you up. Mary said we’d go by tomorrow and get an application. I said No, we’re going by today. We got that application and brought it home, and I sat at that table and filled it out, then I wrote on a plain piece of paper “To Whom It May Concern, My mother, Betty Trice Wood worked for the Frederick Scott family at 907 West Franklin which is now part of VCU. Multimillionaire stock broker. She was called the
next morning to come to work. And stayed at that for 2 1/2 years until stocks and bonds went down. Until the last ones hired go. But here’s what they did. Since we got to cut you off, who would you like to work for. Some of the banks? Virginia Electric and Power? Or Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Company, which is now Bell Atlantic. I said Mary, the best is going to be Virginia Electric and Power Company. She went there. She stayed until she retired from Virginia Electric and Power Company. Now, Virginia Electric and Power Company every Christmas sends a check for $50. Annabel Lee down there, when they have things down there for the retirees half price, you can go down the river and have your dinner if she wants to can do that. Mrs. Waller, the only way you can get these things is by making yourself available and taking advantage of the situation. The last time we saw Charles Thalhimer out at Hechts, you would have thought that Mary [can’t make this out], because he remembered what she did. And during that time she was sick from the explosion, she would go out to the Thalhimer family, and do some sewing for the children, and the little boy out there like her, Charles Thalhimer III, he would take scissors and make holes for her to sew them up. And then there was a lady, Mrs. Valentine here that lived in the Prestwould in the same area of VCU. Millionaires lived in that Prestwould, then they moved down to the Berkville a little further down, but Mrs. Valentine used to have Mary to come and eat in the morning, to sew embroidery around handkerchiefs, to fix umbrellas, and at the end of the day, she would tell her how many hours, and all Mary had to do was to take it to 5th and Franklin, where her husband had his office, and he’d give Mary a check. She loved to talk to Mary about dressing and clothing. So we have been blessed in so many ways that many people don’t know about. But I’ll tell you what helps, you have to know how to talk. You can’t be quiet. You have to talk up. Don’t hurt nobody’s feelings, but you have to talk. You can make it. Adam Clayton Powell told me all that. You read about him. His last years were his worst. But he was a good man.

I remember him when I was in middle school.

He was pastor of the largest Black church in New York. They had 15, 18,000 people there on Sunday morning.

I got a letter from him, I wrote a letter to him when I was in middle school. And he responded. Do you remember a man named Summer Madden? It was a school project and he kept my letter, and I realize now how valuable that letter is. He sent it to my home, and I took it to school and I said, “Look, he responded, I got a letter from Adam Clayton Powell.” And we read it in class. But he wound up keeping my letter, and now I think I wish I had my letter, I could have had that framed.

Well, Adam Clayton Powell was in Congress for more than 22 years representing Harlem, black Harlem, see because 125th and 7th Avenue up to 145th was known as black Harlem. Mostly black people coming from the South. Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, all up that way. Then you had Spanish Harlem, people from Puerto Rico, the Phillipines, from there from 125th down to 112th. See, I lived in New York for a while. I went to city college while I was there, and I wasn’t supposed to go to city college, because that was only for New York people. But Adam Clayton Powell could get you anywhere you wanted to go. No problem at all. Brilliant minister. He finished Colgate, and during his first four years of Colgate they didn’t know who he was. Tall, handsome, well-dressed, brilliant speaker of the English language. And they thought he was
white. It was only when his father came to speak to the class at Colgate that they realized Adam was Black. And when he came down to Congress, the girls in all those buildings in Washington oohed and aahed when he passed in the hallways. He was just a great guy that way. But his last years he wound up taking too many secretaries to Europe and other places and drinking a little too many highballs, and he called his lady a bad lady, and that's all he said, but she worked with the cops because she was a number runner. She was one of the ladies who financed what we call the lottery now. It was the numbers. It was illegal then, its legal today. Lottery. I explained all that to my wife because she didn't understand. See there are a lot of black people in Richmond who made good money, and church people, but they were backers of the numbers, but the police didn't bother them because the police got a rake off too. Everything was crooked all around. In Detroit the same way, everybody looking for the extra dollars. Police having swimming pools and living in fabulous sections that his kind of money would not let him. And a lot of people wonder how Mary and I, just the two of us, have lived here 31 years, just two, but this is how I wanted it. And I pay the bills. And I say what it want. But it pays off. The white boys and girls, the black boys and girls, if you want to be somebody you can. You may not think you're getting so far. Now your pastor over there, Rollins, he was a brilliant man at Virginia Union, he went to all those big schools. My wife and I was in Seattle Washington and we had a beautiful place there to go because we went to Seattle five times until they got to know me. And here's something I did that made me unusual for this young lady, she hadn't heard it. People treat you the way you carry yourself. One morning, I always sleep late when I go on vacation. My wife always gets up early and reads her Bible that you see right there, 365 days she reads it morning and night every day. And we had to get a dentist downstairs at the hotel. They couldn't get a dentist, somewheres out to dinner. Then they said it's a young man whose moving in the medical dental building seven blocks from here, he might be able to take you. So they call and they said bring her down. Louis Ishkovitz, Jewish, born in this country, but his mother and father from Warsaw, Poland. He's a Polish Jew. Carried her down there. He was the nicest person, just moving in. While his receptionist was getting his drawer ready, we talked. And he explained to me that he worked in the Post Office at night and went to school in the day. And how a lot of the gentile students ostracized him because he was Polish. So like they use the dirty word to call your people, they called him a certain word. But he made it. That was in 1971. I have not seen him since, but we have corresponded. Every year he sends a Christmas card with his children. He had one child when we met him, he is now the father of eight children. Six girls and two boys. And they all have gone to different colleges. One girl graduated last year from Syracuse University School of Law. He has one girl that attended my favorite school Brown University in Providence Rhode Island. She finished there with Women's Sciences, went to New York for two years, and now she has a big job at a hospital in New York. There's another girl, the oldest one, is a speech pathologist, she finished Northwestern in Illinois, then got her Master's. She married a dentist. Now we've been keeping up writing about these children, and we met them on vacation in 1971. And we have been corresponding ever since. And we met quite a few other people like that. Doctor, there's another doctor at the University of Pittsburgh, I was riding in the dome car, I like to view the countryside as the train moves along in those dome cars from Chicago going out west to all those different beautiful places. And there's so many nice people you can meet, wonderful people, good people, live the better life. This slipping and sliding by don't pay, it never will.
Can I ask you a question? When I first met you, I thought you were white. Have other people seen you as white before?

I’d like to tell you what some of them say. They say keep your hat on and they’ll think you’re white. That’s what some of them tell me. When you’re driving with your hat on, if the police are stopping all black men, you will not be stopped. Well that comes from my mother, a lot of her relatives are on the other side of the fence. That’s what I was telling Mrs. Waller earlier. We are a flower garden, all colors. Now a lot of the colored men who finish college go around with light complexioned girls to take them to dances. But when he gets ready to get married, he goes back home to the little country girl, whose going to be his wife and the mother of his children, and he don’t care what color she is. He goes back. That happens quite a bit. Now the only advantage there has been, every year there used to be about 75,000 black people who pass for white. They did not want to be white in the sense. The only way they wanted to be white is that if you worked on the job with me and they paid you $50, they paid me $25. They thought that was right. Because you were white. But I was doing the same work. Having lunches, and when you were sick, I was doing your work. But other times in other places, they didn’t see it that way. That is one of the great advantages I am so happy about VCU in this area. I don’t know whether you know it but I was reading they have almost 24,000 students, and out of that 24,000, 4,000 are black. Now you have my school Virginia Union, which has about 1,500. But it is an independent school. VCU is state supported. So you get money from the taxes. Medical college used to be separated. It was Medical College and Richmond Professional Institute. Now, Virginia Commonwealth University. And you have buildings all the way over here on Harrison and Broad, and you got buildings Belvidere and Cary, that new engineering building. And they wanted to go down into where I worked, Oregon Hill. But those people in Oregon Hill wanted to be to themselves. They’re always segregated. Black people, even today, are afraid to go down there after 8 o’clock. Now what happened in my case, they liked me so well, and because I went for 13 years lecturing to their school Madison and Grace Harris, that they accepted me. I became a representative for that area and the Randolph Street area, which is up above Oregon Hill. I would go down to City Hall to the City Council meeting for more classwork for students, that were retarded out there. I worked with Jewish councilman to get better lighting and better streets. They liked that. So I was accepted. Here’s what they said about me – “He’s different.” So they treated me different. Yet, when I went to a meeting in that area at one of the churches, I would park my car 2 or 3 blocks for that area because the boys were mischievous, they’d let the air out of your tires. They did it to the teachers. Things like that. And so whenever they were sick, we would go to the hospital. I would read the scriptures, or versus of the psalms. My wife would quietly sing a song that I knew they liked. We were different. And whenever they died, we made our appearance at the visitation. Signed the book. And on some occasions we went to the funeral. So we were classified different. But we lived the way I hope that most of the people would live. Regardless of your color. If you show greatness, somebody will see it and like you for it. You see, when I went to Orlando, and I told them, I came through the roaring 20s, I made it, I came through the depression 30s, and I made it. I came through the war-torn 40s, I made it. I came through the get back together 50s, and I made it. I came through the college revolution of the 60s and 70s, when everything happened on the campus. I made it. I’m here today. And you, young men now, the door was closed in my day, don’t care how hard I knocked on it. But today, its open for you. If you qualify, go through that door. And when you get in there, conduct yourself as a first class citizen, and say as little as possible. Listen, and you will learn, and you will make
it. And now, it's the 80s and 90s, and we're going into the new century and a new year, 2000. Entirely different, things are changing. But if you learn and know what's going on, you will make it. We live here, my wife has never worried about the bills, because she knows I'm going to pay them. And when they took my house at 2100, I went down to the mutual building and told them that there are a lot of things in this house that I wanted in that house. They were going to tear it down, and the people were going in and taking out what they wanted. Send somebody out and give me a price on the things I had put at 2100 so I can bring them over here. And very few of the black people did that. But I did. And they gave me the figures to get what I want at a very minimum price. I had northside electric to take different chandeliers out at 2100 and put up just a little light so we could see the last few months over there. And over here I had northside put them back. Because Mr. And Mrs. {} liked shade lights, not overhead lights. But I liked overhead lights. So, I told my wife in as much as we don't do this and we don't do that, we'll have some of the things we wanted. Because we pull together, that's why we've made it together for 51 years. It is not always easy, not always pleasant sometimes, but if you want to do what's right, right will follow you. And I told her like now, you don't have to worry about me leaving home, because I'm going to be here. So, it has been, this is a good life, this is the best country I the world. You can study all the geography you want, but there's no place like the good old United States of America. And don't care where we have gone, in San Francisco, we would go down to this museum. I see young people like you in a lot of the museum settings reading on the marble or cement floors of those great buildings studying. I've never seen anything like that here in Virginia. But they're all the students. And if you would look at a picture and admire it, they could get up and tell you all about that picture. Wonderful. On Sunday evenings, we would go in Los Angeles down to the art galleries and we would be the only two black people there. Because some people would say You know, we never see any of your people at these things. And I'd say Well it all depends on what you like. I like to see these beautiful pictures because they represent the painting of some young person, the way that he saw things. Sometimes they look like the took the paint and threw it up there on the wall. But its art. And then, where a lot of people went to the nightclubs at night, of course I would have liked to go but my wife wouldn't let me, because you can always go right downstairs to the lobby and buy your tickets and the bus would come and pick you up if there's just a few people there and take you to the large hotel where you can take a bigger bus. And you could have dinner and see the show, or you could just go see the show. But she didn't care for that. She would go to see the conservatory of flowers, like in Denver, they have all kinds of flowers. Things of that nature. Spend a whole day there looking at the flowers and looking at the beautiful Pacific Ocean flowing out there. Things of that type. See, just whatever you like. So, a lot of times when we would come back people here would say What show did you go to? I'd say I'm sorry, we didn't go to that show. So its just what you like. And most black people are all mixed up. The young lady that's over there going to VCU on Mondays and Wednesdays, she cannot go the rest of the week because its a lot of money, that school is very expensive. See, my wife has done a lot of things that a lot of black women don't do. Mrs. Waller. Needlepoint of all kinds. We have a lot of needlepoint in this house. We have what's known as the Blueboy. And some people have come and said we should make sure that art gallery down at East Clay should see that because its very unusual. Mary did all the work, you get your design, and then you get your different wools and work them in, different things like that. But the reason for a lot of that, that explosion we had February 15, 1952, she had to have a lot of six days at home. And the doctors due to the fact that I'm a major in biology wanted to know about everything that happened to her and why, and we would try to see that she would get
the best medical attention possible. And we were fortunate through the years to have the best medical Christian doctors. All of them are not Christian doctors. Those are the men who accept what Blue Cross pays, or whatever your insurance pays, some of the others just say you’ve got to get a loan and pay me the balance of my money. But there are a lot of good doctors. They were all white, but they were good Christian men. And we have outlived a lot of them. But as I often say, the Lord has just blessed my wife and I. Because at the Post Office, I had good superintendents that I would start. Here’s the way I would do it. I would start January, February and March, and said Mary we’re going to San Francisco this summer, I’m going to write to the commerce department in those cities that we will be in that city for 28 days, and we would like to get all the information about the city. They would then start to send me papers and bulletins about everything in San Francisco. And having been in the Air Force for four years, and chief clerk at the base post office, I learned how the officers travel on different trains, and where they want. And one officer told me Charles, he was white, he said you write to the Chicago, Burlington and Quincey Railroad Travel Bureau. Tell them what trains you want to travel, what direction you want to go, and how long you want to stay on the other end, and whether you want the low, medium or deluxe travel plan on the other end. That’s the hotel. I would always take the medium. In between. And the reason for writing to the Chicago Burlington because they would know who I am on this end. The first two years I started dealing with them they would say we have your tickets, we have your meal tickets from Chicago to Seattle or to San Francisco or to Los Angeles or to Denver, at your earliest convenience send us your check, we will send you your ticket. After two years, the letters came Dear Mr. Wood, We are mailing your tickets. At your earliest convenience, please send us your check. That is, you establish credibility with them. Now they didn’t know who Charles Wood was, but I learned living in the South when you’re going North, we would never take a Southern vacation. We would go north or west. Why? Because the money we paid we would get the service, but going South, I would pay 3\textsuperscript{rd} class salary for the room, but get a 3\textsuperscript{rd} class room. Because they did not have the money. But that’s the way things operated in the South. So out of all the vacations we had we never had a Southern one. But this all free one was to Orlando. Now I don’t know anything about the city of Orlando. I was in the hotel. Seven days and seven nights. I was treated as Prince Charles. And Queen Mary. I wanted to go, but there was always some meeting I was forced to be in to speak to the young men the way I’ve been talking to you as a young lady. That if I could make it during the segregated years, if I could make it when they gave me less than the other man, you know with your education, telecommunication, computers, you got that, you can get the same salary. But once you get it, please, watch what you say, know who you are, and you know where I worked in Oregon Hill, down below VCU, I knew when I carried mail for 20 years down there, anything could happen if I didn’t control myself and watch what I said. A lot of times the women got CODs the women said Mr. Wood, would you pay it and I’ll pay you later? I said sorry, we’ll hold it for 10 days. They said all kinds of things. But I knew, it takes you 30 years to get up, but you can come down in 30 minutes. All you would have to do is to go out there and say Mr. Wood tried to say this or do this to me, the white police are going to believe what you say. I never touched them. So you have to be very careful. The only job where I had to go out there 5 days a week, I knew from the time I left Saunders Station and got the bus and got out there I had to conduct myself as a member of the United States Postal Service, and I was there to help them with their mail, but that was it. And yet, when I retired, they got with my wife for about two months before my retirement, and they had the biggest program on Laurel Street, where there used to be the old Laurel Street Methodist Church, 300 people. And they presented me with a
certified check for over $500. And they were working people. And I have some of the greatest IOU resumes that I man can have for where he works, because I worked with their children, I told the men you can have your weekends, but pay your bills first. You got 4 children, a wife here, see that she gets the money out of your weekly check first, then you can go to Pine Street Confectioner, and [,] but take care of your home first. That’s how I won respect. That’s how I stayed out there.

[End of this side of tape].

Channel 6, Channel 8 and Channel 12 tv stations, and some of their older white men at Ginter Hall North. But you know, this is something about Mrs. Wood’s son. And they asked one another how did he stay out there. And I didn’t hear it, but my wife heard it. They said he stayed out there because he didn’t drink with them, he didn’t gamble with them, and he didn’t bother their women. That’s why he stayed out their 20 years.

How old were your parents Mr. Wood when they passed away?

My mother was 92, and my father was 77. But I was their only child. Now, my mother had 11 brothers and sisters, her father was white, her mother was black. And some of the children looked like white, and they went away to all the cities, and we never heard from them because they passed for white. But they all lived long lives. And they’re all either nurses or teachers or good housewives, and my mother I often said would have made a good nurse or a good social worker, but my father likes his meals at home. He didn’t eat breakfast lunch and dinner. He at breakfast dinner and supper. Three meals every day. So she stayed at home and she was able to make it that way.

Did they grow up in Carver? Your parents.

Oh yes, 923 West Clayton. Not far from your University. That’s why I was so interested in the school, because its in the area where I grew up. See that’s between Hancock and Goshen, 923. The 900 block and the 1000 block are joined. If you go over to Leigh, or Clay or Marshall, all of those are joined. That’s why I pass by that area quite frequently, where you got all those beautiful buildings now. I’m happy that they own Broad Street. And I’m sure the people that live down in Oregon Hill wish they were down there, too. But see, what happens, Ethyl that’s on Belvidere, that beautiful building, they own that land, the 700 block South Pine and South Laurel. And with old houses down there. And the people in Oregon Hill thought that some rich person was going to pay the 2 million or more for that. But they couldn’t see that. So, Ethyl tore those houses down. And leveled it off. Its sort of a park right now. But, then you have that scaffold on the Belvidere side looks like its separating Oregon Hill. And that shouldn’t have been like that. That wasn’t good at all. And see, I had 422 S. Belvidere, that was coming near the end of my route, and one of the last places was the War Memorial, and that’s still down there. That’s where I could always refresh myself, at the War Memorial. And my last block was the 600 Block S. Laurel and the Grace Arents School, which is a junior school, it goes up to the 5th grade, and then they go to Madison School, which goes up to the 7th grade. And the reason now it was a Miss Ann Celestine Jones, white, who was the principal of Grace Arents and Madison. And she had an assistant principal, and the only, of about 5 different assistant principals, the only black
lady. All of them 5 became principles because Miss Ann Celestine recommended them to it. And the Richmond School Superintendent at that time, white, he stayed in that office 25 years. And he was a good friend of Miss Ann Celestine Jones. And every teacher she recommended became a principal in a Richmond school. So it pays to know the right people. And I got to know all those people. See what I would do was, they were going to take children to Washington, and some of the mothers said, Mr. Wood, I’d like for my daughter to go, but we don’t have either the money for the tickets and we don’t have the proper dress for her to wear. And I would get out paper, I always carried a notebook, and I would write down the size the color that she wanted in a dress. I’d bring it home to this lady. She would go to Thalhimer’s, but the thread, the cloth and make the dress. Then on Saturday when the man was home, we would both go out there after I got off from the Post Office and carry the dress and say No Charge, whatever I do for you, I do not want any money, and I do not want any favors. That was known for 20 years. And I did not have any problems. And Mary would make the clothes. And I would tell Ms. Jones, the principal. And she would get shoes and get the ticket. And that child would go with the rest of the children to Washington on that trip. So for 20 years that’s what we did. That’s how we made it out there in an area where most black people in Richmond today are afraid to go. Even I had a fine white doctor who said he would not go in Oregon Hill after 6 o’clock. Because the children would let the air out of his tires. I stayed out there because I told my wife, they do not get the Christmas presents that was getting in Windsor Farms, where the millionaires live. But, I am establishing something that has never been established. That there are good men and good women of all races and backgrounds. You just have to get to know them. So I became the first Black man out there that they really respected. And then some of the mothers would go with them on the trips down to the main post office, which was then 10th and Main. And the children would come back and write letters. Mr. Wood, we love you. We enjoyed our visit. I’ve got the letters upstairs now that they wrote me. They were 5 and 6 and 7. Today they’re grown and got children of their own. But I established something that I feel good. And some of them have been here to visit us. They’re so happy we’re still alive and carrying on. And some of them I still send a card every Christmas. Because they were nice to me. Good morning, how do you do. If you need an umbrella, let me know. Things like that. But I was out there to help the United States Post Office. Then, some of them did not understand about his social security. So I said I get off at 3 o’clock. If you meet me at 4 o’clock at the federal building at 8th and Marshall, I will take you to people there who I know that will help you. No charge to get everything straight. And I did that. And I enjoyed doing that. But I would always tell them whatever I do, no money, no favors. But all I would like for you to do is sometime in your life, when you get up the ladder that you help somebody else up. Then you will have repaid me. That’s the way I live, that’s how I made it. And my wife is the same way. At Thalhimer’s, a lot of the buyers that sold all of the clothes out of the lot and made the money. Now she has these dresses she can sell at any price. She said Mary, I got about 10 dresses. Do you know somebody at your church, or somebody in your community that can use them, I will sell them to you at dirt price. And we have an attic full of those. That was purchased that way. And through the years that’s what we have done. And that’s why if you sow good seeds, good seeds will come back to you. See all those flowers book there? They represent things she has planted through the years. It means a lot. Now everybody is not going to do that. They are not going to live that way. I tell you what happened at the post office. My day was Thursday. If the regular man that worked for me on Thursdays was off, and Mr. Applewhite, superintendent, said I have Charles Wood’s route open today, a lot of the men said I’m going to take annual leave. They didn’t want to go there. They wouldn’t. They would get
some new substitute who had never been out there and didn’t know the area. People weren’t going to hurt you, but they were just afraid to go out there. See because if you lived out there and you see somebody out there that tried to say something to you that was unpleasant, the Post Office had the privilege of using just these words: “For the good of the service, we hereby fire him.” And he couldn’t get any more government jobs. Nowhere. That’s why I had to be so careful. See the men who don’t stick to the rules are those who don’t care. The man who wants to be somebody, he knows what’s what. Now, across the street there’s an interracial couple, and for years we thought they were married. The man that lived there before we came here had a black wife and two little black boys, 4 and 5. Then they separated. Then he had a beautiful white girl that we thought was his wife. We didn’t know. She gave him a beautiful child, beautiful color, smart, the girl on February 21 of this year will be 17 year’s old. How I know? Because my wife baked a cake every year after the 2nd year because we didn’t know the first year because we didn’t know that the girl was pregnant. And they lived over there for over 20 years. Her grandmother left money, this white girl. They had that house built over on the inside and the top, beautiful. But he was a Philip Morris worker, got early retirement, dark brown, smart dresser, didn’t have much to say, and very short talking. But something went wrong and she’s not over there. Now I see her every other Friday at Ukrops Brook Run. Fine looking girl. And those are the things that happen that you see right here on your block. Now over there now is one of those little boys who is about 35 or 36 in a wheelchair, and he’s over there by himself. Now I don’t know why that is. But this girl is not over there. But she is a college graduate, she’s from New York, and I think that she and this fellow work together. No fussing or fighting and carrying on, its just he’s a man that likes a lot of ladies. He needs to be in one of the foreign countries that you can marry as many wives as you can support. So that’s the way it is. And yet, she’s just as happy because I was telling her how was her daughter. And she said Oh, Mr. Wood, she’s driving now. She talks very proper. I said That’s wonderful. So I said Have you seen Larry recently or How is he? She said All I know is that he has another girlfriend and he’s living with her. Now you know that goes on a lot over there at the school. A lot of the young people live in. That is a pretty tough way. But that is the new day. You have to get adapted to that. Because as I told her, I said Roxanne, I know you’re not lazy. All those flowers and how you used to cut the grass. She said NO, I never have been. But when you can take life in stride, then you can weather the storm. As my wife said a lot of times when I tell her things, don’t tell me that because that’s not pleasant. I said most things in life are not pleasant, but you have to live above that. That’s the way it is. I’m just happy that VCU went north, as they said, to Broad Street. I see the young people on Clay Street, Leigh Street, we had some people coming to our church that I think are North or South Korean, they’re welcome, they seem to enjoy the music, and we have Virginia Union right there. But I think VCU is going to get closer to the people of the Carver area because already from the Carver area elementary school, the teachers have been taking those children right up Harrison Street to VCU to different musical programs in that building on Park and Harrison that used to be a church. It was a church 40 or 50 years ago.

VCU has really partnered very well with the Carver community.

That whole era is dear to me because as I often tell my wife, when I was 5, 6 and 7, I would pull a little cart with clothes that I had picked up from the ladies in the area who did washing. Pick those clothes up on Monday morning, and carried them back on Thursday and Friday. I never lived as a child. I had a tough father.
I noticed when I asked you what you did for fun that everything you listed was work-related. It wasn’t like you were jumping rope or playing baseball. You really were working.

Oh no. That area was a beautiful area for me. And then I was also in high school. In this city, I don’t care if you’re in southside or in the far west, all blacks had to go to one school. Oshon (?) High School. The building is still there now, but its an adult center. 1922, 23 and 24, it was a new school. We all had to go there from everywhere. You met children from good families, bad families, all.

And wasn’t that, is that the building that’s now in the Jackson Ward area, isn’t that, the Oshon building, now in the Jackson Ward area? On Leigh Street?

Yes. All that’s called Jackson Ward, but it wasn’t then. It was Central Richmond. Jackson Ward was back over near St. Paul’s. St. John’s. St. James. All through there. But Central Richmond ran all the way down where the Richmond Centre had bought all those black people’s home, the 300 block of East Clay. You look in the paper’s on Saturday, they give them good money for those places. 300 block East Clay. 300 block Leigh. They’re gone. You drive down there they’re gone. And already the city of Richmond, with the new city manager whose just been there a year, and got a $5000 raise, and now, I think next month. He’s not the way that some of them like. They made an arrangement with the Marriott at 5th and Broad, and they took their parking lot, and they’re going to give them so me of this space in those already built parking lots. They’re going to give them a 200 room area right there at 5th and Broad, which used to be the old bus station.

Yeah, I remember. It was greyhound, wasn’t it?

All that wasn’t Jackson Ward, it was Central Richmond. But when they could get this government money, they tied it in. That’s the only way they could get them to rebuild some of those homes. Now Belvidere Street, on the other side of Belvidere on Clay and Marshall, they are fixing up those homes. Now, from Belvidere coming back, they been all around your area. See, they’ve been doing a lot of work through there. We’ve got a lot of church members that live used to live in the 700 block, cause it was a Miss Malloy whose son is Doctor Malloy, a dentist.

Anthony Malloy, yes.

Cause see when I was a substitute I carried mail all through that area. All that was out of Saunders. And I didn’t just carry the mail. I learned as I went along. Got to know the people. Because I was a great one for telling all the young girls You have a new opportunity, the doors have opened for women, make good. And what has happened? Over at the Richmond Post Office is a lot of the men retiring early because women are going in, pass the examination, men have been there thirty years, women have been there 15, and they are the supervisors. And they can’t take it. So they’re all retiring. See, every body used to way back when I was young in the 20s and 30s, send the girls to school. The boys go to work. So that his sisters are in and the boy is mad. That’s the way it is. Its a lot of history. They’re all over. And the man Reilly is over there where you are. They’re building over there by your church. There’s a group up there, now I haven’t been there in a long time, there’s a lot of new houses, beautiful houses. See, I’m one to
go to see the advancement of the underdog. The Black man. You can make it, but you can’t get the desk job today if you can’t even sit at the desk. You don’t hardly sit there, much less be the president. You will in time. Just like Bobb, remember Bobb, the city manager, well he was Phi Beta Sigma. Because this pin I’m wearing, he presented me with this pin in 1990, and he said well I want to shake your hand because I hope that I can live at that time I was in my 80s, that long, much less being a member for so long. Because there were 10 of us, 9 of us were there to get the pin. And about 4 or 5 of them had passed on. That’s why I got the trip to Orlando. Because I was the oldest active dues paying. Because there’s a Dr. William Williams who was a druggist at the Williams pharmacy on 3rd Street down there near Bliley’s. He is still living. He’s a Phi Beta, but he’s delinquent. You’re either active or delinquent. You’re never out. He got tired of paying the dues cause he didn’t come to the meetings because he ought to be about 97. But he is the oldest living man, but delinquent. I’m the oldest living active. I paid my dues, that’s why I got the trip. That’s what they told me in Orlando. And the lady who was the Mistress of Ceremonies after all the 50 year men had walked around and we had our say on the roster, she said will the man who joined November 3, 1928, please stand again. And I had to stand and hold up my hands to receive a rousing ovation for having been a colored man that paid his dues. Well, I believe in paying your bills. We don’t get any ordinary bills, we get the regular ones, water, gas, that you have to have. We get all kinds of information telling us how to buy CDs because we pay our bills. But we can’t make other people pay their bills. We just can tell them. Now, I hope Dr. Rollins is saying all the good things over there at 31st street that he used to say at Union, because he was a brilliant speaker at Union.

Well, you’re going to have to come visit. Unfortunately, I was thinking well I’m going to come to Moore Street to see you, but 4th Sunday is our convenience Sunday, so its hard for me to miss a convenience Sunday at my own church. So I’m going to have to find another way to get there to see you on the 4th Sunday.

Now did you get anything that you wanted for the young lady today?

Yes.

Because what I mostly talked about is things I see.

That’s what we wanted. Your perspective on what the Carver community was like when you were growing up as a child.

See the school that I went to, Moore Street Elementary School, that building is painted white. Its behind George Washington Carver. And that’s was named for George Washington Carver, the great scientist, who was at Tuskegee and made all those things out, the peanuts and things like that. Brilliant. We were trying to get him into Detroit to make rubber for the automobile tires. He wouldn’t leave the South. He was dedicated. He could have been a multimillionaire. But no, he didn’t. He was a very odd person. He came to Virginia Union when I was there. Full dress. Tails, coat, odd. But he was a brilliant scientist. See, I like to tell people there was a professor at the University of Alabama when everything was segregated, and he had a black boy that used to come work in his home. This boy was very smart. And he knew about developing chickens, and the genes of chickens, and things like that. That white professor sent that black boy to the
University of Iowa, where he graduated with honors. But the same white professor couldn’t have him at the University of Alabama. Because see during that time, George Wallace stood in the door and said you should not come in here. He died not so long ago. But he admitted that he was a dyed in the wool segregationist. All those things are in the paper, but some of our people don’t read the paper, so they don’t know what’s going on. Now we had a Miss Sally at our church, and her husband Deacon Sally, they left recently and joined Ebenezer, and Miss Sally has been here on two occasions to talk with me about Moore Street because I am one of the oldest members. Four hours each time. Came at 12, left at 4. And she got that for the church. But its just how you want to live your life. I was just so thrilled when I went to New York that you could go practically anywhere that your money would pay, but there was segregation there, too. Oh yeah, right there in New York City. I didn’t think that there was any poor Jewish people until I saw in the depression ’32 and ’33. And then in Detroit, oh yes. I know, I know. My wife says I talk too much. She has a right to say that. I told that in the Deacons where we recount money that a lady is coming to my home and her name is Waller, and I asked her if she was any kin to you, Deacon Waller, and she said she wished she was. He was at that meeting over there next to you. About 2 weeks ago we had that 100th anniversary from 6 to 9 on a Saturday, and he told me there was wall to wall people there. A lot of them did not know his jeweler was black. They thought they were working I there for a white jeweler But what they didn’t know, he did have the backing of Schwarzchild at 2nd and Broad, which had been for years a Jewish firm, one of the finest in the state of Virginia. A lot of times when Schwarzchild had more jewelry to be repaired then he could handle, they would sent it to Waller. Helped him out. Just what you’re talking about now. Getting together. In New York, the Jews worked with the Blacks. We got somewhere. They were white, they had the money. But in the last 40 years, the Black people all want to be black. They used to call us colored and then Negro and then Black. Now Afro-American. I don’t know what else they’re going to call us. But I’m like Reverend Doctor Jones, retired pastor of Providence Baptist. Miles Jones. He was a schoolboard man. He used the words Black Americans. I like that. And then, one of the young men from my church, Jerome Ross, was Reverend Doctor Professor Ross now, pastor of Providence and professor at Virginia Union, graduated from the school of theology. Ross was a little boy in our Sunday school. But now he’s in those big jobs. Ross often said that Doctor Jones and Doctor Campbell helped him get into that job. Because Ross finished Virginia Union, what he did he won a scholarship to Randolph Macon in Ashland. That’s a Methodist School. And when he finished he came to Virginia Union for his three years of graduate school, Master of Divinity. Then he said he wanted one more piece of paper, that is to get his doctorate. He went to the University of Pittsburgh. My wife told his wife Shirley I will do all I can to supply you with clothes the three years you have to be there. When Ross finished and wrote his dissertation, they did not agree what he had in there, the New Testament discussions. For 13 years they couldn’t agree. Then he changed from the University of Pittsburgh, which is privately owned, to the University of Pennsylvania, which is state-owned. He got his PhD in new testament studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Jerome Ross, pastor of Providence Baptist Church, and associate professor of theology at Virginia Union University, where he is now. He’s been here many times. Because we told him we would do all we could to help him and his wife because he was one of the boys from around Harrison and Catherine. You live in the 700 block, I’m talking about the 1100 block. Dr. Hancock used to pass and see the men outside playing craps. He’d say good evening men, how do you do. Come to church, then keep right on. The police would come, all white, run them away, take up the money,
and go on. That’s what happened in the Carver area, that’s the other part you don’t want to know about.

We want to know about all of it.

See, I started working for Doctors Chambers and Brown, and they were 2 black pharmacists, they couldn’t get lost, Chambers stayed at 1200, Brown moved up to 1214. Then Brown died and Chambers got all the rest of the business. It’s a great area. Good people. Some good. Some not. You can’t make a person do what they don’t want to do. If you were going to get married and the young man liked to drink, if he liked to drink before you got married, he’s going to like to drink after. Now unless he loved her so well that he doesn’t want her to be angry, then he might cut it out. But Dr. Hancock smoked 70% out of 100 are wife-made men. I belong to the other 20%, mother-made men. Because when my wife married me, she didn’t have to tell me to hang up my clothes, my mother had told me. She didn’t have to tell me Charles, this bill has got to be paid because I’m going to pay it or mail it or she’ll mail it. So, life is what you make it. We don’t get many calls over the telephone. We don’t have many people to come in because we don’t talk their language. Women who come here, my wife talks about dress-making, hat-making, tanning, cooking and those kinds of things and they don’t want to hear that. But they’re welcome. We have those two young women, one of them is an ordained minister from Georgia, she’s around 50, she graduated from Virginia Union graduate school of theology. Magna Cum Laude. That’s 97 to 100. “Greatest of Praise”. That’s Latin. She comes in here and we see her about once every 3 or 4 months. ‘Where you been? Oh, I just been around.’ She works for the state of Virginia helping the children. But she just likes to move around. But whenever she wants a good meal, she knows just who to call. But she’s welcome. And the young lady that’s going over to VCU right now, Vanessa Dale Myers, is very very highly intelligent lady, a little too intelligent for the average black man, because she criticized their English. She said a lot of the black men have degrees but cannot express themselves when they get down there at the Marriott. They ramble. So I said well you’ll have to open a school of speaking. Because she opened her own business known as the Lawrence Group. (?) And then she does the paperwork for Doctor Elliott James Thelma, President of Virginia Union University. He’s the head of the double O culture center, she’s his secretary. And then for Virginia heroes, she works for them. And the round table. All of those places. She’s got her own business. And for people that get money and don’t know how to manage it, she’s just supposed to help them with it, not be Leonidas Young. You know what came out of that? Dr. Leonidas Young might get 10 months off of his sentence for cooperating with the federal authorities. Stool pigeon. They want to know what goes on at city hall. That came a few months ago. But you see, he, a minister. Reverend Doctor Leonidas Young. Hung around this block, at the corner, as a young man. He used to take Ms. Ruth’s daughter over there to dances. They were always in John Marshall together, high school. And yet, he used the money of poor people in his church for high living. Hotels, restaurants, lady friends, fine clothes. When you go above your means, you’re taking from somebody else. He was making enough money, over $70,000 per year, you can’t beat that. Something is wrong. That’s why I tell all of them you can make it, it just depends on your lifestyle.

Yes, that’s the key there, to live within your means.
And then, you don’t come here to live our way. Like I was telling my wife, we have to get our house in order. Business. Because you never know the days and all they hold. We’ve seen them come, we’ve seen them go.

Like Alex James son.

Doctor Campbell used to tell new Dr. Lawrence that anything you want to know about Moore Street ask Brother Wood, he would say. But our pastor is a young man. And he’s going to do things his own way. I got a letter today from the church in which its stated that the Deacons are shepherds. Now I have about 40 or 50 people, and I am their shepherd. They have my telephone number, my house number, if anything goes wrong in their home, they are supposed to call us. If we can help we will. If its beyond us, we will relay it to the pastor. Now, the letter stated today that some of the Deacons are not living up to that. And I’m going to tell you why. Some people said that if there’s anything wrong in my family, I’m going to get a lawyer. If there’s anything wrong medically, I’m going to get a doctor. And I don’t need the deacon to tell me what I should do or shouldn’t do. Because some of the deacons that you can’t tell them all your business. Even the pastor, sometimes you can’t tell him everything. Because they are not like some good dyed in the wool ministers that are good men, even doctors. A beautiful patient comes. Well he’s a man, you know. So. You never know, because some women never pay for any dental work.

I wish.

Well, you know, there are so many things. See, you’re young. You got a long way to go. You will learn. You stay at VCU and get all the good knowledge you can. And if the professors try to get a little too fresh, just tell them you’re the wrong professor for me. And if you’re going to grade me on what you think you want, you won’t get it here. No indeed. See, a lot of girls go to universities and want to get As and A+, and some of these young professors will see that they get that. But what they have to go through. It isn’t worth it. Because if you live as long as I have, you will know that good things last, things that are not good don’t last. Because as I told you in the beginning when you first came here that some of my fraternity brothers, if I had not been there to dance with their wives, and go back to another dance and she tells me some more, I wonder why she stays with him. I came home and I told my wife I thought doctor so and so was such a good man, I know he didn’t come to the fraternity meeting until late, and a lot of the telephone calls that came in were asking if the husband was there, and whether he was there or not the brother who answered would say Oh he’s been here, I don’t know where he is, he must be somewhere around, and he hasn’t even been there! See they would do those things when we had a fraternity house on Chamberlayne Avenue. And a lot of the doctors and specialists wouldn’t get there until 10, 11, and 12, they’d been where they wanted to go before they got there. And these fellows would always say he was here, I don’t know where he is, he may have gone out to get some food because he’s the host tonight. That’s why I told my wife I’m going to stop going to these dances even though I love ballroom dancing. Like if you ever looked at Lawrence Welk, I was like Lawrence Welk.

My grandmother loved Lawrence Welk.
Especially the waltz, which they don’t do today. It was a beautiful dance. I like dancing with your feet. I don’t like that bumpity bump and all that sliding. A lot of places you go now they have food and cocktails. And by the middle of the dance you’re getting a little woozy. And you have to be careful. I came home and told my wife, she was talking about dancing, if you’re going to dance, do a real dance. The one step, two step or the waltz or whatever you’re going to do. The waltz is the prettiest.

Yes, and when I was coming along, they taught us how to waltz. But of course you know because they don’t do it anymore, its hard to find a waltz.

And then during the 20s and 30s, the jitterbug. They were doing all that turning around and catching the girl. And when you left there you were tired from dancing. So I’ve seen it all. I’ve enjoyed going to the churches in New York, and I’ve enjoyed going to the basketball games in New York, and after basketball games then they would have the dance. And I lived on St. Nicholas Avenue, if you’ve ever been to New York. They called it Sugar Hill. That’s where you paid the highest rent. But you got a room you could see outside. Most of those apartments you can’t see outside. Especially if you’re downstairs, first, second or third floor. And see most black people, they didn’t care for the operas. But somehow, I got a lot of tickets to go to the opera. At the Metropolitan Opera House, and Carnegie Hall in New York., that I would get from these firms I worked with, these dress firms. And then they didn’t want to go. That’s how I got a touch of what I call classical life. See, in the opera, you can go, I didn’t understand it all, but I enjoyed all the voices and the singing. But sometimes my wife hears me yelling up here and she says you must be in the opera. I just hope that our black students will do well everywhere. Virginia tech had a 10-0 season. They went to New Orleans to play Florida State. There were a lot of black men on both teams. There was one man from Florida state that caught a ball...

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