CARVER LIVING NEWSPAPER PROJECT: ORAL HISTORY

Interview with Allen Knight
Interviewers Sheila Waller, Carver resident and Laura Plybon, VCU graduate student
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(Interviewers Questions are Bolded)

We are going to start with your name, you want to record that so the transcriber will know who is on there.
This is Allen Knight Jr., 1620 N. Hamilton Street, Apt. 102, Richmond, Virginia.

And Mr. Knight, how old are you?
75 two days ago.

Praise God, congratulations.
Correction, 74.

74. Okay, well that is still a wonderful age to meet. Where were you born?
Richmond, Virginia.

And what schools did you attend here.
I attended the Elba Elementary School on Marshall Street through junior high and 6th grade, which was the Moore Street school which is the Carver area, and on to Maggie L. Walker High School. And then from Maggie Walker to Virginia Union. So all the schools were in the radius of ten blocks of each other.

Absolutely. Yes, Okay. What church did you attend?
Moore Street Baptist Church, and I still attend there, its on West Leigh Street.

Do you know Mr. Charles Wood there?
Yes.

I had an opportunity to talk with him last week.
You did? Good.

How many were in your family.
Let’s see. There were just my mother, my father, my grandmother, about 7 of us.

And what was your occupation?
Well, I’m retired now. But I started originally into the radio as a disc jockey, WXGI in Richmond. And my major was business administration in school. And from there, from college I went into the Navy for two years, as a yeoman, then I came back to Richmond, then I went into radio.
I really was aware of your radio experience, but I didn’t say. You were the first black DJ in Richmond, weren’t you?
Yes.

I didn’t want you to think I didn’t know that. Let’s see, were you married and did you have any children?
Yes, I was married to my first wife, and I had a kid named Joyce Knight, my daughter, and then I was married a second time in Washington, and my wife passed about a year ago, then I came back to Richmond. So I have a daughter now whose in Orlando, Florida, and my step kids are in Washington. There are 8 of them.

What kind of music do you like?
Particularly jazz, classic, and the modern jazz. That’s my field. But back in my radio days you had to play for the people, which was R&B and that type of music. But I really like jazz.

What did you do for fun as a child?
I played basketball and baseball, that was the major sports during those days.

Now, what stands out most as a childhood memory from the community?
Well, the biggest thing was the togetherness of the people in the neighborhood. Everybody knew each person. As an example, where I lived, in the 1200 block of West Clay Street, on my side of the street there were three families. One family, the Reeses, had 7 children. Another family, the Hills, had 5 or 6 children. So the idea that everybody in the family needed to play some sports or get some information, everybody on the whole block would come together. It was just the togetherness of the people in the area.

What was the hardest thing you ever had to face?
We had a terrific accident in my area once. During the time, street cars ran on the block. And we had a little fellow who lived next door to me who ran across the street to store, and thought after the streetcar had passed that everything was clear, and walked right out into the street into a car. That was a big thing for a little neighborhood. He was only 7 years of age. He was killed.

Can you tell me a birth story, or a marriage story?
Well, the most amazing thing from my first marriage, the young lady came from North Carolina to go to school here, and she worked at the hotel downtown, the Slaughter’s Hotel, as a waitress. She was a very popular young lady, and one time I was supposed to go away that weekend, and the whole neighborhood didn’t know I was away, and the whole neighborhood said I had gone with someone else, and my friend and I were together. So that was sort of funny.

What kind of jobs have you had, and did desegregation play a part in the type of jobs that you held?
Yes, it was during that particular era that AfroAmericans were delegated to specific jobs, you had to be a domestic for the ladies, and a laborer for the men. But World War II came up and things sort of changed. Like I was a yeoman in the service, and we had three black insurance companies in Richmond that hired quite a few blacks for clerical work and managers and insurance salesmen. So I was an insurance salesman when I was 16 years of age. It was called a
special writer. It was very exciting during that time because you got out to meet different people and you saw the conditions of other people in other areas, and I had a fellow who trained me, and he tried to get me to notice how conditions were wherever we went. And so in insurance that sort of helped me a lot.

**Outside of the togetherness, were there other things that you loved about the neighborhood at the time?**

It’s the most amazing now, I just realize when I walk through my neighborhood now, at the end of the block where I lived was a brewery that made Richbrau beer. And on one corner was the brewery, and on the next corner was the power plant, the power station for electricity for the whole area. And then about five blocks was the tobacco company, that manufactured processed tobacco, they’d sort tobacco for cigarettes. And then we had Kingman, who processed meats. So we had some type of employment for people who didn’t have to go too far to school or to work.

**Was there anything that you disliked about the community at that time?**

It’s amazing that when you’re young coming up you really thought that life was just within those boundaries. Everything always seemed to be there, and your parents always encouraged you to do the best you could under all circumstances, so you really had no fear, and you didn’t even know what was going on as far as not being treated correctly. And that was a great help.

**During the years that you played basketball and sports for fun, what did people in the neighborhood do for fun?**

One of the most amazing things, each neighborhood, we had what you call social clubs. My mother and them had a club. And they would meet maybe twice a month at different homes, and it was very outstanding because at the meeting they were served refreshments, and each club member would try to outdo the others preparing the refreshments for the people. And as a kid, you’d come downstairs and join them. So the social clubs that they had, and everybody had these social clubs in the area, I think that was a big thing that helped.

**Have you seen any changes in your church, and if so, what kind of changes?**

It’s something that, being in Washington ten years, I came back to my church, and I noticed that we had drink machines in the area, we had machines that snacks, and that was never thought of back in my day. So I was telling a young lady, last week I said Gee Whiz, we got soda machines, and she said a lot of other things go on during church, during the week, and if they come to the meetings, they have to get snacks and sodas, they have to serve the people, so I can understand. Kids would come with bottles of soda in their hands, and we weren’t even allowed to bring water into the church.

**How would you describe the community before desegregation and after desegregation?**

Before integration, Richmond had a system of segregation, for example the block we were in, the white population were originally in that area, they would move on, for example Clay Street over, going South to Grace and Franklin Streets, the whites moved there, and the blacks moved into their place. And I think that what really changed as far as the establishment was concerned was financing. We had Oliver Hill and a couple of lawyers who protest that black teachers weren’t getting the same salaries that the white teachers had. So they went to court, and won the decision that all teachers should be paid equally. It took about 4 years in the courts, so they made it
retroactive from the four years since they started the case, they gave them all the money up to that time. So now we have about a thousand new black residents in Richmond with 20 or 30 thousand dollars, so now the establishment has got to figure out a way for them to spend the money. So the housing thing was the thing. So they began to go to the white areas and say that we got some blacks that want to come in, if we sell one house to one, then gradually the others will move out. So that was a big change in moving from one area into another, and it improved a lot because a lot of the houses in the black area didn’t have indoor plumbing, they had outdoor plumbing, and they passed the law that all houses with a certain number of people had to have indoor plumbing. I think that if desegregation hadn’t started at the time, I would never have been into radio. But we found out that it wasn’t the matter of desegregation, economics played a major part in each phase of life in Richmond. For example, before I started into radio, I was doing, we had amateur shows at the theatres. And we had a white company downtown called the Dixie shops that ran a clothing store. So they had the talent shows for whites at that theatre. And blacks weren’t allowed to attend. So we had a black theatre in Richmond, so they had the black talent shows there. And they had me as MC, and that started that. And when I started into radio, I went to about four radio stations to try and get employment. I went to one and they said my voice was too Southern. And one they weren’t hiring blacks. So I came back I went to the four black insurance companies as sponsors. I came back to the four radio stations with the four sponsors and my voice changed all of a sudden and I was hired. So I figure economics was the main thing. If you had some type of financial backing, you could go into just about any type of thing you could get into. So I went into radio on that premise, and I started with just one hour a week, and ended up with three or four hours a day, and eventually a black station came in for black radio for all day, and I began to go to WANT with the all black station.

That’s really interesting. Can you think of three or more moments of change in the community when you were there? Any you know big events or anything that occurred?
In education, when during my time, when I first started in high school and elementary school, all the principals were white in the black schools. And when we got a black principal we thought that was very encouraging. So eventually we began to have black principals in the school. And I thought that was a very big change because it encouraged a lot of children to become teachers, and principals and executives in the schools.

What do you remember about the end of Jim Crow?
The most outstanding thing about that I remember, as a kid, when I first experienced getting on the street cars, it was during that time parents were busy with jobs and things, so if a kid asked something, the answer would be half handed, so we got on the car, and my mother was taking me to the back, and I said I want to sit here, and she said, “Come on, boy” and took me to the back of the bus. Eventually I found out that was the beginning of realizing that things were changing, things were different, and the person who really made that change was Martin Luther King, with his Montgomery bus stop affair. From then on the laws actually began to change. Then in Richmond, the establishment of the white and black was so ingrained for things to be the same, nothing happened in Richmond as far as picketing. They voluntarily, the establishment voluntarily made the changes and allowed people to sit where they wanted to sit and to go where they wanted to go. That was voluntary in Richmond.
Well, we’re getting ready to honor Martin Luther King on Monday for those great efforts of his. Can you think of a time when people came together in the community, in the neighborhood?

One of the biggest things in every community are the deaths and funerals. Whenever a funeral was held, everything broke down. People sat where they wanted in the churches, they came to your home, you came to their home. And at the funerals was one of the biggest things that brought people together at one particular time.

Can you think of any issues or things that happened that divided the community?
I think that the division came when the schools were desegregated and we had what you call massive resistance. The law of the land was that students could go to any school they wanted to. And the massive resistance people pulled the kids out of school. The only area in Virginia that had schools that closed was Farmville. And that had a big effect on everybody.

Can you tell a story that captured the Carver community when you lived there, and what time period it happened?
Carver, as I told you before, they called it the Carver community, but that area was actually Sheep Hill. And the reason why it was Sheep Hill was because the sheep would come up Leigh Street going to the slaughterhouse. The trains would come in on Main Street, and they’d come all the way up Leigh Street and they called it Sheep Hill because the grazing and the slaughterhouse were up in that area called Sheep Hill. And at Moore Street, the school was Moore Street, it wasn’t Carver, where the Carver development is now there were individual homes and on Moore Street there was the school, and we had, the fellow we had was the janitor, who was like a father to everybody in the area. And I think the influence of teachers was very effective back in those days. They had to be teacher and security, a psychologist and whatnot, and I think that had a big effect.

You may have just answered this question. Tell me about the role of men, I mean it sounds like they played varied roles, they wore different hats in the community, is that not correct?
Yes, the most important job a black had in those days was as janitor. We had several big apartment buildings on Grace and Franklin Street, and they were the janitors or caretakers for those particular areas. So they were very influential because they had jobs that not only took care of the apartments, but they were caretakers for quite a few of the families there, and they were looked up to as very important, because they were chauffeurs, and had the use of the family car at other times when other people didn’t even have cars. And they were looked up to be very important people in the area.

What would you say is one of the greatest problems facing the neighborhood today as you walk through it now?
I think the greatest problem now is good housing, and the affordable housing. The rate of income for the average person has not increased to the effect that they can afford the housing that they should have. And I think that’s a big concern now, getting affordable housing for the average person with a family.
Would you care to share with us some of your biggest triumphs? Do we have enough tape left for that? (Laughter)
It’s amazing how in those days the most influential person in the working family was the maid or the cook. They had all the information of all that was going on and everything. And I never forget the radio station, at my first job there, we had two or three whites who were very indifferent because I was working there. But the maid was black, and she could always tell me what was going on. Each year we would have a Christmas party, and this was the first year at the Christmas party that she said she was invited to the party, and the reason that she was invited to the party was so that I could have somebody to dance with. So at the party, I had one of the secretaries, she was white and she was very nice, and she was the first person I danced with, and they liked to have had a fit. So we used to have quite a few times. One time I was fired from the radio station because they said I wasn’t playing enough R&B music and I had to agree with them, because I was actually making the radio more personal, which was wrong. Because you’re supposed to be playing what the people want to hear. Billboard magazine would have a list of the things that needed to be played. And so eventually I began to have a regular R&B program, but I had a special jazz show on Saturdays.

Well, that kind of concludes my questions, can you think of anything, Laura, that you would like to ask?
No.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?
Well, I think that you are doing a wonderful community service in this, and I think you should get a cross section of different people to give different stories on different things that have happened. I think you are doing a wonderful job.

Thank you. It’s certainly been a pleasure talking to you.