

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

JOHN HAYWOOD ROBINSON

INTERVIEW 209

This is Dorothy Bryan representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 200. I'm interviewing John Robinson, interview number 209. This interview is being conducted on May 31, 1993. We are at the home of John Robinson, 1621 Lincoln Street.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Mr. Robinson, would you give me your full name please.

MR. ROBINSON: John Haywood Robinson.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And what is the date of your birth?

MR. ROBINSON: August 11, 1925.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Who were your parents?

MR. ROBINSON: John Robinson, Sr. and Marzolla Robinson.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Would you give me the names of your brothers and sisters?

MR. ROBINSON: Lillian Robinson, Sadie Robinson, Mable Robinson, and William Robinson.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Where do you fit in along that line?

MR. ROBINSON: Number 3.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Number 3. Okay. Would you give me the name of your spouse please.

MR. ROBINSON: Pauline Daniels Robinson.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And your first wife was deceased, is that correct?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What was her name?

MR. ROBINSON: Martha Robinson.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Would you give me the names of your children?

MR. ROBINSON: There's Paula, Jacqueline, Carolyn, John, Sharon.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What about grandchildren?

MR. ROBINSON: Well, we have several grandchildren. You want the name of the grandchildren?

DOROTHY BRYAN: Yes, it would be nice.

MR. ROBINSON: There's Greg, Tamaki, Kenya, Oman, Jarmal, Tarhedia, Rena, Tiffiney and Torrence.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay. What street did you live on as a child, Mr. Robinson?

MR. ROBINSON: Carmer Street.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Just where was that located?

MR. ROBINSON: Carmer Street is located in the Five Point section. It's one of the streets that joins Five Points.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Do you have any vivid memories of your neighborhood?

MR. ROBINSON: Well, a few. The neighborhood was very neighborly and friendly. The houses were built close together. Everyone knew each other. There wasn't too much activity in the neighborhood during this time. It was just a matter of making your own activity with other children in the neighborhood and also doing what we could do to help other people in the neighborhood. That's about it other than attending Church and school.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Was that a part of the area where the fire struck?

You wouldn't know. You weren't born.

MR. ROBINSON: The fire was before my time.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You remember the names of any of your playmates as a child?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes. There was James Pearson, my best friend. He lived just across the street from me. And there was a fellow by the name of Hicks, down the street from me. Izell Graham, down the street from me. Also Leonard Clark. That's just about it.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What games did you play as a child?

MR. ROBINSON: The activity was limited. Of course we had a recreation center right down the street from us we called the Grand Army Hall. The games they had down there, were table tennis and checkers. Outside was a basketball court. We played softball.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay, we'll come back to those. What about home entertainment? What would you do at home to amuse yourselves?

MR. ROBINSON: Very little entertainment at home. The main entertainment was the radio, and I guess that was it. We did have a piano. My older sister, Lillian, played the piano.

DOROTHY BRYAN: She entertained you.

MR. ROBINSON: She entertained me and the family.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What about the radio shows? Were there ones that you particularly enjoyed?

MR. ROBINSON: I listened to "Amos and Andy", Mysteries and the News.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What about characters, and when I refer to

characters I'm thinking about people that children would consider odd.

When I was coming along there was a person we called "Happy." I don't know if you knew him. There's another that we called "Prophet George."

Did you have any characters in your neighborhood?

MR. ROBINSON: Well, I remember "Happy" and I remember also "Prophet George" and also one guy they called "Crazy Bill." I remember him.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I don't know about him.

MR. ROBINSON: That's about all. They was about the only three that I can recall.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Well, there was another person, "Buddy." Do you remember "Buddy", a fellow that seemed to have some form of epilepsy or something? Do you recall him? He would turn around and around sometimes.

MR. ROBINSON: No, I can't remember him.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That probably was before your time also.

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Getting into the area of school now, where did you attend school?

MR. ROBINSON: West Street Elementary School and West Street High School.

DOROTHY BRYAN: At the time you attended, was there a cafeteria or gym or an auditorium?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, we had a breakfast and lunch.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How many buildings did you have on campus at the

time you attended? Do you recall?

MR. ROBINSON: Four buildings.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Which ones were they?

MR. ROBINSON: That was the main building which was the elementary school and the high school building, Home Economics Department, one classroom building and a ten classroom building.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How would you describe the auditorium and the Monday morning assembly? Did you have a Monday morning assembly?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, we assembled every Monday morning. There would be selections from the glee club and band; also skits. The principal would talk; participation would come from each class.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Where was the auditorium located at the time you went?

MR. ROBINSON: The auditorium was on the upper level of the elementary building.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How many grades were there when you attended? Did they go to twelve at that time?

MR. ROBINSON: No. They went to eleventh grade.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay. Where did the elementary grades end?

MR. ROBINSON: The elementary grades ended at the seventh grade.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Did you take part in any of the extra curricular activities as a student in high school?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, I did. I played football. We didn't have a basketball team. That was the only activity we had; that was football

and basketball.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What position did you play?

MR. ROBINSON: I played End and Center.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Did you consider yourself an excellent player, a good player?

MR. ROBINSON: No. Just an average player.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay. What were some of the other teams that you played?

MR. ROBINSON: We played Kinston, Goldsboro, Washington, Wilmington, and Greenville.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Do you remember the name of the coach at that time?

MR. ROBINSON: The coaches at that time were Mr. Bell, Mr. Booker, Mr. Danyus and Mr. Boley.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Oh! What were some of the subjects that they were teaching at the time you were in high school?

MR. ROBINSON: There was English; there was American History, Math, Biology, Literature, Science and Algebra and that was about it.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Did you mention Science?

MR. ROBINSON: Science.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Science courses. Who were some of the teachers? Do you remember your elementary teachers?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes I do. I remember Mrs. O'Hara, Mrs. Styron, Miss Adams and Miss Scales.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What grades did they teach you?

MR. ROBINSON: Mrs. O'Hara was third grade I think. And Mrs. Adams, I think she was second grade. Miss Fisher, she was first grade.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Miss Adelaide Fisher?

MR. ROBINSON: Adelaide Fisher.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That was the first wife of Mr. Wallace Booker.

MR. ROBINSON: Right. And I had Mrs. Styron in the fifth grade. Sixth grade was Mrs. Scales. The seventh grade was Mr. Booker.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What about your high school teachers, do you remember?

MR. ROBINSON: The high school was Mrs. Smith.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That's Laretta Smith.

MR. ROBINSON: Laretta Smith. And there's Mrs. Danyus, she was a French teacher. Mrs. Danyus, did I call her?

DOROTHY BRYAN: Yes, I think you did. Mary Danyus.

MR. ROBINSON: And Mr. Danyus, there's Mr. Bell, Mr. Boley, and Mr. Lewis.

DOROTHY BRYAN: This was Earl Lewis.

MR. ROBINSON: Earl Lewis.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What year did you graduate?

MR. ROBINSON: '47.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And I think you gave me a reason why.

MR. ROBINSON: The reason for '47, all senior boys that were eighteen years old were drafted into service May of '44. The draft board refused to permit us to finish high school, to graduate, and so we were drafted into service and we had to complete our education



when we got out of service.

DOROTHY BRYAN: So, they had added the other year.

MR. ROBINSON: Yes. When we got back from service they had added the other year, the twelfth grade onto high school.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What did you do after you finished high school?

MR. ROBINSON: I enrolled in Shaw University. My major was social studies.

DOROTHY BRYAN: In high school, were there teachers that you remember, especially either as, for some reason or other, sometimes we remember the very strict teachers or for some reason these teachers stand out in our mind, were there any such teachers?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes. I would say all the teachers had a profound affect in my life. I think they were very concerned about your education and about you in particular and if you were trying and had the potential. They would put forth that extra effort in seeing that you would continue or stay on track in your education.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You mentioned a few minutes ago that you went to the service. This was for World War II?

MR. ROBINSON: World War II.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay. Where were you stationed?

MR. ROBINSON: I was in the Navy. I took my training at Bainbridge, Maryland. From Bainbridge, Maryland I joined the submarine part of the Navy. From Bainbridge, Maryland I went to New London, Connecticut to do my submarine training. We were down there for three months. From there we were shipped out to Mare Island, California. That's

in the Bay area. From there I was attached to the USS Finback SS 230 submarine.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Did you have any special experiences while you were in the services?

MR. ROBINSON: My title was a cook, officer cook. Well, submarines were sort of a challenging experience. I don't know, somehow I've always just liked challenges. The submarine I was attached to, USS Finback SS230, had a crew of 60 men. That's including officers. It was sort of like a family atmosphere. It was very close quarters. Everyone knew each other and everybody got along well with each other. And so we was just like a big happy family. In fact, I guess we had to live that way because of the close quarters we were living in and also the mission we were sent out to do.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Now, did you see active duty?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes we saw active duty out in the South Pacific. We'd usually go out on war patrols for about ninety days and most of your time we were out looking for cargo ships or any enemy ships. We were very successful in that. We sunk several ships. In the meantime out in the South China Sea, I think we were in a Wolfpack out there and I think we had several aircraft carriers and some battleships in the pack during the time. I think we were preparing to invade Okinawa. At that time we rescued some American flyers that got shot down. We happened to rescue a flyer by the name of George Bush.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Oh, you did?

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That is very interesting.

MR. ROBINSON: Uh huh. Of course I didn't know George Bush, you know, from anyone else at that particular time though. And so George Bush actually became the President of the United States. During the time of his inauguration I remember that most of my crew, the officers and some of the crew who were on the Finback the submarine that rescued him, and I recognized some of them at his inauguration. So I had a small write-up in the Sun Journal pertaining to that. Well, I always had it put in my mind that I was gonna write and tell Bush about this, but I never did get around to it. I said, I'll write him the second term and the second term he didn't win. (laughter)

DOROTHY BRYAN: Do you still have that article?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes I do.

DOROTHY BRYAN: It would be nice if we could attach that.

MR. ROBINSON: Okay.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You had no idea you were rescuing...

MR. ROBINSON: No idea we were rescuing the President to be.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How long were you in the service?

MR. ROBINSON: I was in service for twenty-six months.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay, was there anything else about the service that stuck out in your mind?

MR. ROBINSON: No, that's about the only thing I guess. Just that time, that was the most important, I found our most interesting time when we rescued the President, you know, President Bush.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I would like to ask you next before we get into your business about some of the businesses that were located in the Five Points. Do you remember any of those black businesses that were located there as a child or young adult?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, I remember quite a few businesses. Five Points was sort of the hub of black businesses. We had just about mostly anything that a person would want up in that area. We had barber shops, we had meat markets, we had grocery stores, we had vegetable stands, we had seafood markets. Also movie theaters; restaurants; you had some nightly entertainments. It was a thriving center in the black business area. It's sadly to see, you know what I mean, all those things to be have to deteriorate in Five Points like it is now.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay, now I'm going to come back and ask you if you remember the specific names of people who owned businesses out there at that time.

MR. ROBINSON: Yes I do. I remember George Downing, I remember Sarah Murphy.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay, George Downing had...

MR. ROBINSON: He had a restaurant.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Where was his restaurant?

MR. ROBINSON: His restaurant was on Broad Street. It's in the Five Points area of Broad Street that's right off of Kilmarnock Street. Between Kilmarnock and Carmer Street.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay, yes, I know where that is.

MR. ROBINSON: The Sarah Murphy Cafe was right across from George

Downing Cafe. We had several barber shops in that area; the Roscoe Barber Shop, we had the Vail's Barber Shop. My father owned a restaurant down beside of Vail Barber Shop. We had a shoeshine stand, and then there was another barber shop down there. There was Wood's Barber Shop. And the other area down there we had Johnny Clarence. He was down in that area and he had a shoe repair shop. And also was Frank Pollock. He had a meat market in that area and also a grocery store in that area. And of course we did have one or two white businesses up in that area also.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay, as I recall, and you might be able to help me with this; located there on the corner of Roundtree Street was a brick building with four sub-buildings. Before that building was put there, I can remember vaguely, wasn't there some vegetable stands along there?

MR. ROBINSON: Right.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You remember who owned them?

MR. ROBINSON: Steve Roberts.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That's the one I was remembering.

MR. ROBINSON: Right. And also I forgot about the drug store down there. We also had a druggist by the name of Mr. Anderson, Anderson Drug Store. Then after Anderson, he left, I think Dr. Hill, he came in, Leonard Hill.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You mean Joe Anderson was located...

MR. ROBINSON: Well, this is a black druggist named Anderson.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Oh, I see.

MR. ROBINSON: Uh huh. He was down in that area. These are in the wood structure buildings.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That's what I thought. As I remember Mr. Steve Roberts' place, there seemed to be a little shed that came out, over the sidewalk.

MR. ROBINSON: Right. Most of that area down there, all those wooden buildings, the sheds ran all the way down.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay. Well, I remember his particularly. He was a member of my church, First Baptist. Wasn't there a movie in that area too, The Palace?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, there was a movie in that area also, The Palace Theater. It was in that area also.

DOROTHY BRYAN: One other question. Was there a black business originally in that building where Carolina Cleaners is now?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes there was. There used to be a wooden structure building before that and that's where most all your black doctors offices were, and also Dr. Hill's drug store. He was in that building also.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Before he moved to the brick structure.

MR. ROBINSON: Before he moved to the brick structure. There was a Dr. Martin, Dr. Mann, and Dr. Munford. They had offices in that building.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What about Frog Pond, do you remember anything about that? There were some businesses there I believe.

MR. ROBINSON: Yes there was. They had a pool room down in the

Frog Pond area, Saunders Pool Room. I think there was a restaurant, Johnny Gardner's Restaurant, and also the service station down in that area. The service station down there and a barber shop.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You mentioned the shoeshine stand. Who owned that, do you recall?

MR. ROBINSON: In the Five Points area?

DOROTHY BRYAN: Um huh.

MR. ROBINSON: Lightening Shoeshine. We also had a beer garden up in that area also. That was beside of George Downing Cafe. It was sort of a social spot.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You recall other black businesses that existed in New Bern in earlier years, aside from those in the Five Points as they called it?

MR. ROBINSON: Let me see. There was Governor Rhodes and I think there was a Holley...on Main Street.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Holley's Grocery Store.

MR. ROBINSON: Right, on Main Street. And Miss, I can't think of her name, the one that had the car, that drove the Plymouth over there on William Street...

DOROTHY BRYAN: Daisy Oden.

MR. ROBINSON: Daisy Oden, yeah, Miss Oden. She had a place over there. Those are about the only ones that I know, or can remember that was over in town, that was across town. I can remember there was a bakery out in the Five Points area too. There was a black bakery. My father, he was part of it. And he had another partnership with

Ambrose Hargett and George Hargett. He was on delivery truck so he used to carry me around Saturdays, I mean during the day on school days, after school or either on weekends around with him delivering bread to various stores.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How long was he in the bakery business?

MR. ROBINSON: I imagine he was in that bakery business about seven to ten years, because after that business he went in the restaurant business.

DOROTHY BRYAN: All right now, your father never worked for Kafer's Bakery.

MR. ROBINSON: He worked for Kafer's Bakery.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Oh, he did?!

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah. And I think this is where their bakery came from. All the guys that worked for Kafer's Bakery, they opened this bakery up uptown.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I remember Ambrose Hargett worked and of course...

MR. ROBINSON: His brother, George Hargett, was Ambrose's brother.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay. And of course, Guy Howard. But then I think Guy Howard got sick anyway.

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Do you recall the names of any businesses that were located on West Street?

MR. ROBINSON: West Street, there was Mr. Franks. Didn't he have a business down there?

DOROTHY BRYAN: He had his store on the corner.



MR. ROBINSON: On the corner of Cedar and West. Yeah, I remember he had a business there.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Were there any others? Of course, I guess, Best (Dan) Upholstery was actually on the corner of Queen and West.

MR. ROBINSON: Right. He was located on Elm and Ash, I think, before he moved on West and Queen.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Yes. His house, as I understand, was taken from the projects I believe. Was Godette Funeral Home, located along there somewhere?

MR. ROBINSON: Along West Street, yes, and also I. P. Hatch's Funeral Home. I. P. Hatch was in that area off of Five Points. He was located in that area of Ash and Cedar Street.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And if I'm correct, I think Rivers was started off on West Street.

MR. ROBINSON: West Street, right.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Now, have you always been involved in the restaurant and catering business?

MR. ROBINSON: I think I first went in business in 1949. That was the year my father died. My father, had a little small place on Kilmarnock Street. I came out of school and went into that because I have always been interested. That was my main concern, my main interest was business in a way, so I came out and started in there.

I stayed there until the sixties I think. Forty and fifty, yeah, into the sixties. That's when I opened the Robbie's Rib House. From that, I was in there about twenty years.

DOROTHY BRYAN: So in other words, this is all you have done since you finished school.

MR. ROBINSON: Right, right, um huh.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And you have already told me how you got started. That was my next question. And you have had only two locations.

MR. ROBINSON: Well, I started out in another location. I started out on Broad Street. I think it's in the big building. The building that Johnny Clarence owns out there is a Burger King, not Burger King, Burger Town, USA. This was in the early sixties, no, this was in the fifties. I think it was in the middle fifties. I think it's before the McDonalds and the Hardee's and all came to this area, in the New Bern area, in this southeast area I think. Because I think it was some time, I guess, they were just getting started. I think most of them were out on the West coast and probably in the mid section of the country and the midwest. It was an idea that came, I had in mind about putting Baby Burger, Mama Burger and a Papa Burger and I called it the Burger King, USA. I started out there on Broad Street in that.

It just didn't take off too well. I guess because one of the reasons it didn't because it was there and it was something new and exciting, but I guess the location and the parking area and whatnot, I guess that had a lot to do with it taking off. I had quite a few comments about it. Most of them thought it was a chain and it wasn't. They didn't think it was local owned. So that wasn't successful. I was running also the Biggest Little Place in Town on Kilmarnock Street.

I had both of them at the same time. That didn't take off like I

wanted it to and like I hoped for it to take off. So after going back in the other business on Kilmarnock Street, I just decided to launch out in the restaurant businesses, and so Robbie's Rib House.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Were there any other problems that you faced in the early days, special problems that you remember?

MR. ROBINSON: Well, the most important thing was financial problems. You know, just couldn't get the loans and whatnot like that, guarantee. Just couldn't get the finance behind me and new ideas.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What were your specialties in food preparation?

MR. ROBINSON: My specialty was barbecued ribs, barbecued pork ribs. Then later into beef rib and the chopped barbecues.

DOROTHY BRYAN: All forms; barbecue chicken and all I guess.

MR. ROBINSON: Right.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How many people did you employ at Robbie's Rib House?

MR. ROBINSON: Six people.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You could eat in or take out?

MR. ROBINSON: You could eat in or take out.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Aside from the ribs, what were some of the other items that you had on your menu? Aside from barbecue, did you sell anything else?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes we did. We sold seafood and also the different types of the chops and all. We had a full menu of different types of food.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How were the prices when you first started out,

I'll say for a barbecue plate? What did you usually charge?

MR. ROBINSON: About three dollars.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Could you get a barbecue plate for three dollars now?

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You could?

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I know the churches do this.

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: But now, if you were in a business...

MR. ROBINSON: Well, during that time you could, but you couldn't do it now.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That's what I was thinking. Did the fast food businesses that came to New Bern affect your business greatly?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes it did.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How did it?

MR. ROBINSON: It affected in quite a few ways I guess, during that time. I guess location had a lot to do with it and then I guess they became so well known by having money to put into advertisement of their products, and I guess it was just the sales. And at the time, people just began to eat the fast food. I guess time had something to do with it also. Time consuming. Most of them felt like they could go and get a fast food or sandwich or burger or soda or milkshake or whatever in fifteen minutes or twenty minutes, within thirty minutes of an hour dinner time. And when they'd come in the restaurant, they'd

have to spend a little more time in there waiting for the food to be prepared and eating it, you know, and this type of thing. Then too, the children had a lot of affect on it also because this advertisement really gave a lot of excitement to the kids and all and everything and they sort of embedded their minds and everything about these different things and that's where they wanted to eat. They wanted to go to McDonalds! They wanted to go to Hardees! I've had experience of parents coming in with bringing their kids in, you know, meaning to have probably a plate of ribs or something like that or some other type of food or whatever they want. They'll ask their child what they want and stuff like that and he refused to eat, you know. He wanted to go to McDonald, you know, this type of thing. We had to go up against things like that and all those things taking its toll, you know.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Did you offer breakfast meals or just lunch and dinner?

MR. ROBINSON: We offered breakfast also.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What was a sample breakfast that you offered?

MR. ROBINSON: Usually bacon, eggs, and grits or sausage and a piece of ham.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Robbie's Rib House was located on Broad Street.

MR. ROBINSON: Broad Street.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What was the number?

MR. ROBINSON: 1020.

DOROTHY BRYAN: 1020 Broad. What about the catering part of the business? Did you do much of that?

MR. ROBINSON: Well, yes I did. We did right well in the catering business at the time we got in, because I guess it was a time that when we came into the catering business there was very few caterers around and we put a lot of emphasis on that, you know. Then it finally became a very competitive thing and so, you know, it's just happen like everything else in that you have to get out there and compete. The larger businesses, they got into it also and so I'm imagine they would give them a better price than what we could or whatever. It's just one of those things that happened to us. Another victim, you know, sometimes.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Now, did you cater to large groups, small, or a mixture?

MR. ROBINSON: We catered to large groups. We catered to as much as 300 people and small groups. It didn't matter what the number was, we catered to them.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I recall that you did the meal for Mr. Fields when he retired from New Bern High School.

MR. ROBINSON: Right.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And another specific time. Did you cater for the senior citizens one time?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes.

DOROTHY BRYAN: But that was a regular basis.

MR. ROBINSON: That was on a regular basis, yes. We had that for three years, a contract.

DOROTHY BRYAN: A contract for three years. That's when they

were first organized. I thought I remembered that. Did anyone take over your business, that is the restaurant business?

MR. ROBINSON: No. Well, after closing our Robbie's Rib House down there, I went down to Jacksonville and went in partnership with a fellow down in Jacksonville, Randy Green, in sort of the rib cage business. We went down there. He wasn't doing too well with his and he probably thought with my expertise and whatnot, it could probably give him some support and it probably could help, so we went there and tried it down there. We tried that for a couple years and wasn't successful in it.

DOROTHY BRYAN: So what have you done since that time?

MR. ROBINSON: Since that time, I was thinking about retiring, or relaxing, whatnot, but I found I wasn't too good at that and so I decided to open a convenience store and that's what I'm doing now.

DOROTHY BRYAN: So where is your convenience store?

MR. ROBINSON: It's located on Kilmarnock Street, 508 Kilmarnock Street.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And what is the name of it?

MR. ROBINSON: Five Points Variety.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I was not aware of that.

MR. ROBINSON: Is that right?

DOROTHY BRYAN: Um huh. So, how long have you been in the convenience store?

MR. ROBINSON: It's in our fourth year now.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Are you enjoying it do you think?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, I am. I really am enjoying it.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What are the hours for the store?

MR. ROBINSON: Well, we have some pretty late hours. We open from nine to, well, usually about two o'clock. From nine a.m. to two a.m.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I could see if it's a convenience store, you would have to be open when you think about all the other convenience stores being open all night.

MR. ROBINSON: Right.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How many employees do you have now?

MR. ROBINSON: Have three.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Because when you said someone could not come in Friday, I didn't realize that you were still in business. So you just retired from Robbie's Rib House to something else. Have you had any interesting stories to develop from your patrons? You told me one about the little boy. Do you have any others?

MR. ROBINSON: You learn a lot from people, from the clientele and everything, cause things are so different now, you know. Their interests and concerns are so much different and I think it's a little more violent clientele out there now. I have been in that area just about, I guess, since 1950 and you're saying just about forty years up in that area in there. I guess it's sort of an unpleasant area to be in as some people would say but because of the clientele and I guess because a lot of violence up in that area and whatnot. These type of things like that. But yet still, I have no problem up there.



I guess one of the problems up there because I guess from the times I've been up there and I guess I'm known by all, just about everybody, all of the clientele up there. I've seen just about three generations up in that area, mostly up in the Craven Terrace, and whatnot, and so they take me for I guess a father or something, you know this type of thing like that. An elder statesman or someone they can come in and talk with when they have a problem or just different things or whatnot and so I get a lot of respect. So that's one of the reasons I don't have any trouble with them up there.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You've been up there all the time. They perceive of you as one of them.

MR. ROBINSON: Right.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Was there anything else about your business that we may not have talked about?

MR. ROBINSON: No, I think we just about covered everything.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I understand you were involved in this Civic League. Would you tell us something about that organization?

MR. ROBINSON: The Civic League was sort of a political organization. One of the concerns was trying to recruit the blacks into voting, voting education. During this time in the early fifties, in the early fifties the organization was headed by I think W. T. Lewis and several others. Charles Sparrow, he was one of the leaders of that also. It was the only black political group we had, organization around at the time, trying to utilize and also to stress the importance of voting. During this era, I think we didn't have no type of black

representation on the different aldermans or county commissioners and this is one of the reasons I guess we were trying to get ourselves so involved and trying to get the people in the community involved and voting. We tried to put a lot of stress and a lot of work in this and I think we did right well with them, but not as well as we thought we should have done. And so now, just like any other organization it finally went out of existence. Some of the members got sick and some of died and I guess most of them just lost interest in it. Then I think during this time, and I'm a few years older, a few years later, the NAACP and their organization began to spring up in our area, and also Dr. Martin Luther King's group started springing up and I think this is the era during the Civil Rights Era. That's where I think the Civic League just died out.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You remember anything about the Civil Rights Movement that occurred here in the sixties?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, I remember a little something about it, cause I was in business during that time. What had happened, mostly whoever got the votes, the biggest laws, happenings was in the black neighborhood during this riot. But I think after that a lot of good came out it. We could see some good results came from that because I think that everything began to sort of open up for us and before this time most of the leaders and the people in the community, the folks in the white community was saying that they could see all these things coming in time, but they couldn't see no time limit. They could see in time. During the Civil Rights Movement I think all this order

and other things like that just sort of bought the time, time came a little quicker. Because I think a lot of us was saying we would never see it in our life time the things that would happen, the things that came from that, but thank God we have lived to see it and still around. But there's still more can be done.

DOROTHY BRYAN: You mentioned rioting before. Did we have riots in New Bern?

MR. ROBINSON: Maybe I used the wrong word. We probably had disturbance. But I think there was some breaking of windows and breaking of glasses and a little looting. But most was done up in the Five Points area.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Was that when Martin Luther King...

MR. ROBINSON: Martin Luther King, yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What were you doing on that night, do you recall?

MR. ROBINSON: I was just trying to protect my business.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Okay, well, I guess you were. Do you remember any of the businesses that were boycotted?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes. I remember the Gordon's Food Center was boycotted.

DOROTHY BRYAN: That later became Foodland?

MR. ROBINSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Later, but at that time it was known as Gordon Parrott.

MR. ROBINSON: Gordon Parrott, yeah. And they boycotted several stores downtown at McLellan's store, and this type of thing. But I

would say all this boycotting became very effective. Because after then, it served its purpose because then they began to hire blacks in various positions as clerks or either cashiers and whatnot. I mean, it served its purpose I think.

DOROTHY BRYAN: The next area I would like to cover with you, John, is church. Where do you attend church?

MR. ROBINSON: St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Have you always attended there?

MR. ROBINSON: Always attended there.

DOROTHY BRYAN: From a small child.

MR. ROBINSON: From a small child. My father was an Episcopalian, my mother was a Baptist.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What has the church as an institution meant to you?

MR. ROBINSON: It has played a great part in my life, you know, spiritually and socially. It's sort of a guidance and discipline.

I guess I just wonder what would things be like or what would I do or where would I be I mean, with the things, with the problems I've had in life and things like that if it wasn't for the church.

DOROTHY BRYAN: What was the extent of your participation in church life as a child or growing up?

MR. ROBINSON: I have always been a full participant in church because it's one of the things I had to do. I was told by my parents it was a must. It was just like anything else. I had to go to church on Sunday, Sunday School on Sunday mornings, and I just had to

participate in the church and also any of the church activities. It was just a must for me to do.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How have you participated as an adult?

MR. ROBINSON: Well, I think that's mostly been carried on from my childhood. I've been very active in church affairs.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Well, I was looking for specifics. Weren't you a member of the Vestry at one time?

MR. ROBINSON: Right, I was a member of the Vestry. I've been a member of the Vestry several times. And I've also been the Junior Warden. I've been the Junior Warden two or three times. I have been the Senior Warden once.

DOROTHY BRYAN: And I expect they rely on you quite a bit for food preparation.

MR. ROBINSON: Yes.

DOROTHY BRYAN: How has your church been involved in community life?

MR. ROBINSON: It always has taken a great part in the concern in our community. If they would go back in years past, it has played a much more important role in the past years than it has in the present time. One of the things that I think is they say it's the center of the black cultural whole thing. Of course everyone wouldn't agree with that, but that was a title that was given to it. Because one thing, I think during that time, out at church we had during the time of the fire I think they served as some type of a hospital, hospital ship, or some of this type of thing in the area. There was assistance

in that. There was a great inspiration doing help in the fire, during the fire. Also, the Good Shepherd Hospital, it came up from the church.

We have been very active in the community. Quite a few more things I could name, but just can't come to my mind right now about the participation in the community. We're still striving, trying to find ways and means to get back and be more effective in the community in our ministry.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Do you recall the names of some of the ministers who served that church?

MR. ROBINSON: I recall R. I. Johnson real well. That was during the era of my childhood. He was very inspirational in me and I guess in helping in my development and whatnot. I can remember him real well. I can also remember Father W. A. Wilkins, and Father Adolphus Carty, and Father Francis Johnson, and also Father Marlon S. Portier.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Father Portier was last, before your current minister is...

MR. ROBINSON: The current one is Dwight Johnson.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Do you remember any of the members? Who were some of the members?

MR. ROBINSON: Yes, I remember other members; Mrs. Esther Powell, she was the organist. There was Miss Charlotte Rhone. She was the head of the Social Service. Back then in those days they called it Welfare Services. I remember Mrs. Issac Smith, the Rev. Staten, Dr. Hunter Fisher, Dr. William Mann. I can remember the Fred Jones'. I can remember Mrs. Richardson, and the present members

that's up now that's still there, Mr. O. T. Faison and all. It goes back for many years.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Have you anything else that you would like to talk about that we have not covered?

MR. ROBINSON: No, Mrs. Bryan. I think we have covered just about everything that I would have any type of input.

DOROTHY BRYAN: I have one final question then. How has New Bern changed over the years?

MR. ROBINSON: There's been a great change in New Bern. The progress of New Bern is changing very rapidly and I think it's doing it in a positive way. I think the leadership has been good and I think the growth is good. It seems like they're making preparation for the future growth is good. It seems like everything is in line that's on time in things like that. But maybe to a lot of the citizens I think the growth might be too fast and the pace that they're going or the direction they're looking forward to going and things might be a little fast for them. I think if we had had the type of leadership we have now, if we had had this years ago, people that really didn't have the foresight to see the things that they're doing now or some of the things that need to be done, I think the town would be, New Bern would be much better and a much more progressive place. But it just seems that the leadership now has to catch up on and do a lot of the work they're doing is from the past leadership that just didn't have the foresight to see. I'm very grateful of the accomplishments they're doing and the things they're doing. I really think we're going

in the right direction. I think this is what we gonna have to do because everybody is competitive. Everything is getting competitive now. Even your towns, your villages, and your countrysides and everything, it's getting competitive now. In certain areas is trying to get prepared or whatever might come in the future, whatever the future might hold. I think New Bern's on track.

DOROTHY BRYAN: Well, thank you, Mr. Robinson, for this interview.

MR. ROBINSON: You're so welcome.

DOROTHY BRYAN: It's been an enjoyable evening.

MR. ROBINSON: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW