MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

JAMES GAVIN

INTERVIEW 1015.2

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This is Dr. Joseph Patterson representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 1000. I am interviewing Mr. James Gavin. The number of this interview is 1015.2. It is a continuation of an earlier interview 10/15/92. The interview is being conducted at my home at 604 East Front Street in New Bern. The date is October 20, 1992.

Dr. Patterson: Jim, it's good to see you again and I appreciate you bringing the minutes of the Good Neighbor Council by for me to look at. I sure do want to look at them and I will and I'll get them back to you. Continuing from last time, we talked about a number of very important things; the community college, race relations, the commission that you were on, the coastal progress program, and we decided this time we'd relax a little bit and just talk about how it was to grow up and things you remember. Do you have any comments to add to the last interview?

Mr. Gavin: I think some things will come out as we talk about it.

JP: Jim, looking at politics in New Bern for the time you remember, do you have any comments to make about the roles of black people in city government as far as you can go back?

Mr. Gavin: As far as I can go back, there were organizations in the black community that took issues with the city government or the county government or whoever was in charge. As I mentioned last time, Mr. Whitehead was quite active. Mr. Rivers was not under cover but sort of quiet. Some of the black professionals that their

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livelihood depended on the black community, were quite concerned with things that happened.

JP: Do you remember any names in particular of those black people?

Mr. Gavin: In the medical profession we had Dr. Mann who was quite active. His son played pro football in the late forties. We had a Dr. Martin who lived on George Street. Then there was a Dr. Munford who lived on Bern Street. He got sick during my era. He was always sick. I think he had a little drinking problem. Dr. Martin went around and made house calls in the black community. He would sit with a person all night. Dr. Mann was a baby doctor. If you were going to have a baby, he would go to the house. We had some midwives.

JP: Now, these doctors were active in the political area too?

Mr. Gavin: Well, yes. They talked about it. I'd see them talking to my grandfather about some of the things. They more or less accepted segregation because it was a situation you had to live with at the time. Later on, there was a Dr. Fisher. He was up on Queen Street. Dr. Munford, Fisher, Martin, and Mann were four doctors during my childhood that were active in New Bern.

JP: They were also actively politically to some extent?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah. I'm pretty sure they were active politically.

JP: You had this group headed my Mr. Whitehead who would discuss appropriate problems with the city government, is that correct, or county government?

Mr. Gavin: The county government. There was a city government, but things that affected black folks the most were the every day things;

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the courts and who to talk to. Later on I kind of remember people did mostly housework. If a woman was raising some young men and they got in trouble, they went down and saw certain people and they could call up to the courthouse and have the people released. In terms of this, a lot of the black property was lost. Because a woman could go down crying to a guy saying my son is locked up and he says don't worry, I'll call somebody. He'd call somebody to the courthouse and the young man would be home. In turn, the mother would go down and sign a piece of paper. She didn't know what she was signing. Say, well, it cost me so much money to get this kid out. It was a few dollars then; maybe, $25, $30. It was a little amount cause nobody didn't have anything. She'd sign this paper and then at the end of the week she'd want to pay on it, and he would tell her, "No, you don't have that money right now". This thing would run on and at the end of a period maybe she dies. So, this guy's got this paper where she signed the property over to him and he'd go up and claim it. I was wondering when I was working with some of the political groups in New Bern, how'd these people get to hold so much property they seemed to own. I finally figured out how they got to own it. It was well known that a white citizen or outstanding person could call downtown to Sheriff Berry or whoever was in charge at the time; I think Berry was mostly during my period of childhood, and say he wanted to let somebody go and I'll be responsible. It was a man's word of mouth rather than the money. It was your position in the community.

JP: Did this happen often?

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Mr. Gavin: Oh yeah! You see, black folks when I grew up; I was too young to know about it, but in the black community everybody worked but they worked in James City, say, the fertilizer factory, Dixie, or they worked at the VC factory, Virginia/Carolina, that's been moved with the new highway in '55. Then they worked at the lumber companies up North Craven Street, and at certain times of the year they worked at tobacco processing that was up North Craven. I know all this because my grandmother used to carry meals over. You couldn't eat at restaurants then. The only place you could eat is if somebody would bring you something or if you take it from home in the morning. So, my grandmother usually cooked meals and put them in the back of an old Model A Ford and she had ten or twelve people she used to take meals.

JP: At work you mean?

Mr. Gavin: They'd be at work. At twelve o'clock they would look for her to be there with their meal.

JP: She would come from James City to New Bern and deliver them around?

Mr. Gavin: She'd go up and park and they'd come. All the week, this is how she would feed them. Now, that was at the tobacco factory. Women that worked at the tobacco factory, that was seasonal work, and when they wanted a hot meal like when they were home, she'd bring it over and feed them. That's the way she got extra money. My grandfather, like I told you last time, few people that worked and cooked by wood, he'd fix their stove or sell them a toilet and put

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it in. Then at night, he ran a pool room, cut hair and sold sandwiches. That's what I had to do every weekend. In the middle of the week, I'd rack balls for the pool table. He had cooked a lot in life. There weren't any restaurants like Hardee's or MacDonalds. They were not restaurants in the black community in James City.

JP: Did you ever become a pretty good pool player?

Mr. Gavin: Well, I could shoot pretty good at that time.

JP: Jim, looking at politics again for a moment, who do you remember as being the first black to play an active role officially in the city government; on the board of alderman or some high position in the city?

Mr. Gavin: We didn't have any until, this was later years, Lee Morgan got elected as mayor.

JP: Do you remember what year that was?

Mr. Gavin: That must have been right after the civil rights crisis.

JP: So, he was the first black really to hold a responsible position in city government?

Mr. Gavin: To hold a responsible position in city government.

JP: After that, did it become easier?

Mr. Gavin: I'm not sure that he held one term or two. We tried to get him re-elected. I don't think you could hold but two terms. He held the two terms at the time in city government and then had to step down. Then he ran for the board of alderman. I'm not sure he was successful that first time he ran or not. Then in later years,

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we had others try. Now I think the board is made up of three blacks.

JP: Robert Raynor, Julius Parham, Barbara Lee. There are four blacks counting the mayor.

Mr. Gavin: I think it's a seven member board now, but at that time, there were only five members. What we did in the black community is supported those people that would be for our interest or seemed to be for our interest.

JP: Are the blacks pretty happy about the situation now? Do they feel well represented?

Mr. Gavin: They feel well represented. The question is whether the guys are really looking out there for their interest. You hear individuals talking against the board.

JP: Jim, we're very interested in the library in this program. I know that there was a library for the black community somewhere. Do you recall anything about that?

Mr. Gavin: Yes. When I was in high school, there used to be a black library on West Street. I think the building is still there and there are some books there, but I think a private group has taken it over. Then there was the high school library.

JP: This was not a public library but a high school library?

Mr. Gavin: No. It was a public library, but there was also a school library. In the school system, they had a library.

JP: Do you remember whether that was a decent public library?

Mr. Gavin: It had a few books, really, based on what you were going to study. The teachers would assign you something that you could

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find in the library, so it wasn't a good library.

JP: Do you think the present public library is a step up for the black community?

Mr. Gavin: Since integration, the public libraries serves the schools throughout the three county area. Whatever the schools are teaching, it's like a college library, you had to go there to get certain assignments. Now, I don't know whether the school still has a library as such. Books are so expensive now, I don't imagine they do. But I think the public library is pretty good now.

JP: You think the black community is pleased about the public facilities?

Mr. Gavin: I think they are. People with kids in school are predominantly the people that use the library, the children. But, getting back to politics, in 1964, we had blacks very interested in politics. Lincoln Midgette worked for the Shriners cleaning up. He was kind of a nosey guy, so he listened to every thing that happened. In 1964, I was working for Stephen & Cardelli and we were interested in getting blacks registered to vote. The board of education in Township 7 wasn't open. Mr. Seifert, I think, was on the board and was head of the political school situation. He would determine who would keep the jobs as far as architecture firms. I hadn't even thought about my job. Lincoln said, "You ought to run for the County Board of Education." The next thing I knew, I had my hat in, paid my money, and was running. All these jobs are political. Stephen & Cardelli didn't fire me, they kept me. But they ventured, "Man, you running

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against your bread and butter. The very man that gives us jobs, you're politically...", they didn't make an issue. They kept me. They never said anything about it.

JP: Now, who were you running against?

Mr. Gavin: Mr. Charlie Seifert. He was the chairman of the board.

JP: You were running against him?

Mr. Gavin: Against him for Township 7. At that time, along the Neuse River was the other expensive land in Craven County. If you had money, you built a nice estate out there. He had a nice place out there. Mr. Parker was his neighbor and he was quite active politically in the community. I used to deliver papers to those guys. In my paper route, the Sun Journal had a boy to cover an area. One for down 70 East and for out at Country Club. I was one of the paper boys out there, so I knew the area. Mr. Whitehead and Lincoln and the other black leaders in the community at the time boost me up front for the Board of Education. We accomplished what we were trying to, and that was interest blacks in registering to vote because there was a black candidate running at the time. If I had better sense, I wouldn't have done it. We did pretty good. We got about forty, fifty percent of the vote.

JP: You lost to Mr. Seifert?

Mr. Gavin: Yes, lost.

JP: I see your point. Did you eventually become a member of the board?

Mr. Gavin: No. I didn't try after then because that was a four

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year term. That was in 1964, and in 1968 I was working for the government.

JP: Over the years, Jim, was it difficult for blacks in New Bern to register to vote or was it just lack of interest?

Mr. Gavin: I think it was more lack of interest. In my time, in the fifties and sixties, I don't think it was really a problem. I know that when I came south from north in the early sixties, I had been working for a black Republican in New Jersey, and so naturally he got me to register as a Republican. So when I moved south, I brought my registration with me, but I changed it to Democrat because that's the way things were. But it wasn't a matter of anybody giving me a hard time of trying to register. Nobody asked me any questions. I just signed my name.

JP: Easy. As far as you know in those years, were city elections pretty much on the up and up or were they rigged?

Mr. Gavin: When negroes, blacks, began to vote, there were some playing around changing the voting lines near their districts. I think they changed areas now where you can elect a black person. I think you elected from city-wide rather than by the precinct or district. After 1964, we had a campaign to try to register voters county-wide and then people got a little more interested in getting registered and voting. Before the time, we would have a big voter's registration. We had the registrars to come out here. It was convenient for people to register on Saturdays.

JP: Jim, as you grew up in James City and began to come to New

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Bern, how do you remember downtown New Bern in those days? What was it like?

Mr. Gavin: A Saturday was a day that everybody went to town. You probably worked a half a day on the morning and the afternoon you went to town. You came to New Bern. Like I said, my grandmother had an old Model A Ford. My grandfather had a pick-up and he drove his truck to haul wood and to do what he did and he'd drive the car a little on Saturday and Sunday's. On Saturday, my grandmother had three or four ladies of the community that she'd go around and pick up. These were women who worked sort of independent by themselves. They ran the little store or their husband hauled wood or they ran a garden or they did somebody's laundry in town; you know, they brought it to them and did it and sent it back. So, she'd pick these women up on Saturday early and they'd all go to the curb market. That's where everybody sort of brought their little gardens.

JP: Where was that located?

Mr. Gavin: That was up on George Street in the same area that the soup kitchen is. We used to come up to the curb market on Saturday morning. Saturday morning was like a social hour. You'd go there and you'd buy some people's goods and you'd talk about "Haven't seen you in a long time!" You heard that Saturday. Then they would explain why they hadn't been somewhere for a week or two. We'd buy chickens and the ladies would buy chickens at the curb market. Then my grandmother would fold the wings and tie the legs and put the chickens on the back bumper of the Model A Ford. You'd be going downtown and

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the chicken heads were hanging down. They had special parking places that they'd try to get. We used to park on Middle Street in front Kress's. Naturally, you could go in the stores or restaurants to buy things.

JP: You couldn't go in?

Mr. Gavin: Well, you had to go around to the back door of the restaurant.

JP: This is when you were a boy?

Mr. Gavin: When I was a boy.

JP: The black folks were allowed to go in the front door of Kress's? You had to go around to the back of the restaurants?

Mr. Gavin: Not Kress's. Kress's was a department store. You had to stand in line for white people. Say, you arrived and I am standing there, they would wait on you first, even though we arrived at different times. You got accustomed to that and you waited and you took your stuff and went on. As far as going into Dixon's, you didn't. I think Dixon's had a restaurant on the corner.

JP: It was probably Gaskins in those days. You'd have to go in the back door?

Mr. Gavin: Well, you didn't have a back door cause there was just a store front restaurant. He carried his supplies and garbage out at night I suppose. The restaurants had a back door, so you could go around the back and see the cook and order something and he'd bring it to you. But you didn't do a lot of that. What the ladies would do is they would buy crackers or you bring crackers and cheese. The

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merchants, every thing was sold individually. You could go, "I want a piece of that about that big. I want a half a pound of that." You could buy it loose. It wasn't packaged like it is today where you go in to buy a certain package of stuff. Cheese and every thing else, the guy would turn it around, I guess it was about twenty inches around, a slab of cheese, and cut you piece off. The size piece you say you wanted. We'd sit there and eat cheese and crackers and drink Pepsi-Cola and spend several hours there talking. It was a social hour on Saturdays.

JP: This would be on Middle Street? The socializing would be on the street?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah. Well then, you had your five and dime stores up Middle Street. Then you had down on the corner of Middle and South Front Street Guy Boyd's. He had a few little stores in there where the boat company is now. On down on the corner you had Lucas & Lewis and then the Pepsi-Cola plant and the Grapette. There used to be a little drink made here called Grapette in a bottle. The company was all the way down at the end of Middle Street. I don't recall where Pepsi was at the time. I think Pepsi was across from the school. You'd go down there and buy things wholesale in the morning. If they were open, you could buy whatever they had wholesale cause many of the people that were living out in the country were merchants too. So, they had to come to town to shop for what they wanted to sell the next week. Saturday was just a big social hour for the folks from the country. They'd be just like flies down here, thick, the people.

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It used to be going downtown, that's where you go to see everybody in the day time. There was an A & P in town but it wasn't the big thing nor was the big department stores. There used to be a Colonial store up, here on New Street. You went around to those stores, but most of the country people liked to buy a nickels worth of this and a dimes worth of that. The funny thing back then, I think the fellows that worked at the mills or the factories, they got paid I guess about ten or twelve dollars when it was all over with and every thing was taken out, if it was that much. But a guy used to take three dollars and he'd put a tow sack; that's where they had potatoes, he'd put it in his arms and he'd come to town to do his weekly shopping for his family.

JP: And put things in the tow sack?

Mr. Gavin: Put things in the tow sack. When you see him come across the bridge walking; there were a few cabs but people walked everywhere or caught a ride on somebody's mule cart going to the country, he'd have his tow sack on his back going home. Now, the type of foods were mostly scraps. When I say scraps, I don't mean somebody throwing it away. What we consider scraps today, we wouldn't think about eating some of them; say, a side of pork fat, called fat back, or sour belly with a streak of lean and a streak of fat where bacon is made from. When you got that nice streak of lean, streak of fat or country cured bacon, that was high living. I consider myself coming from one of the better families, we had never known a meatless day at the table when I was boy at grandmother's house when we were having

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supper. There was always meat for us to eat. It might not of been what you want, but there was something to eat. Then everybody had a few hogs in the country. So, they would smoke their own meat and salt down their meat. The most things people would come to town to buy would be staples; rice, flour, not even potatoes. That's interesting, because somebody sold potatoes around the community.

JP: Jim, when these folks would walk home with their tow sack over their shoulders crossing the bridge, they were on the old George Street bridge.

Mr. Gavin: Yeah, they were on the old George Street bridge.

JP: What was that bridge like?

Mr. Gavin: When I first remember the bridge, I was with my grandfather. We had been over here to the mill or somewhere. He had an old Model T Ford truck. It was old. This must have been in the early forties. I remember breaking down. The truck almost stopped on the bridge, and then I realized I was on the bridge. I must have been three or four years old. That was my first remembrance of the bridge. The old bridge, like I said, there weren't many cabs, so everybody walked the bridge. Bunch of kids going to a movie on Saturday, we'd get our group, walk across the bridge down George Street, and cut down Broad Street by the bus station where the news stands were, go in the news stands and look at the magazines, and then we'd go on to the movie; or we'd do that coming back from the movie.

JP: Where did you go to the movies?

Mr. Gavin: Mr. Bowden was a white movie owner. He had a movie

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right there in Five Points. Tommy Davis, one of the recent alderman, had a little oil, gas, and wood place. This was all in Five Points where we went to the movie. We couldn't go to the movie down on Pollock.

JP: Or the Masonic?

Mr. Gavin: Or the Masonic.

JP: You couldn't go to the Athens or the Masonic?

Mr. Gavin: No. You couldn't go to either. We couldn't go upstairs either. We had our black movie at the old picture show uptown.

JP: There was just the one black movie house in town then?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah, just one. Then later on with the development of Broad Street as such, they backed places off some so they could put a decent street through there, and he built another movie house down further west on Broad Street.

JP: Beyond Five Points?

Mr. Gavin: Beyond Five Points. The movie house was across from Smith's drug store. As a matter of fact as our high school grew, we used to use the movie as an auditorium for the school. There wasn't anything happening in the day time, so he'd open it up. I imagine Mr. Bowden and Mr. F. R. Danyus who was the principal of the schools then had made some agreement and we'd have assembly there.

JP: Did these two movie houses stay open until integration came along?

Mr. Gavin: Pretty much so. After TV first came in, then the movies started dying. Everybody could see it on TV. It wasn't in color. But the things we walked over here to see at the movies, we

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could see it on TV now once in a while.

JP: Getting back to the bridge, this was a wooden bridge?

Mr. Gavin: Yes, this was a wooden bridge.

JP: Two lane?

Mr. Gavin: Two lane with a pedestrian walk on both sides. And you'd ride your bicycle up there too. We wouldn't be crowded. If somebody met with a bicycle, they'd ride around you. You didn't ride down in the traffic.

JP: How long a walk was it from where you were living, say, to these movie houses?

Mr. Gavin: About half an hour. You measured distance by time.

JP: Nothing big?

Mr. Gavin: It wasn't anything. You dated a girl over here, and you had to walk home at night. You couldn't catch a cab.

JP: Did many people have cars in those days? There were no cabs.

Mr. Gavin: There were some private. People didn't just haul people to work. Somebody living in James City, out-surrounding areas, worked for somebody who lived up on in Ghent or upper George Street, they had people to carry them to and from work. That's what my grandfather used to do. The cook for the (white) Teacherage, as they used to call it, down on Pollock Street, (I think Richardson bought the property and has the building) the lady that cooked in the Teacherage lived in James City. So, my grandfather used to bring her to work at six o'clock in the morning so she could fix breakfast for

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the young teachers.

JP: And she paid him for that?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah.

JP: How much did she pay him for that?

Mr. Gavin: I guess a dollar. I don't recall because we didn't handle that much money. They'd give you a quarter to go to the movie and that allowed you to go to the movie for fourteen cent and buy yourself a box of popcorn.

JP: Jim when you were growing up, what was the role of the black people in downtown New Bern? What sort of jobs did they have? What did they do in the downtown area?

Mr. Gavin: There were no black clerks as such. They were mostly stock boys or wash dishes in a restaurant or janitorial work. There were no high skill jobs as such.

JP: During that time, was there a separate black business area?

Mr. Gavin: In Five Points but not downtown.

JP: What was out at Five Points? You mentioned a theater.

Mr. Gavin: Well, there was a theater and there were restaurants and there were grocery stores. The necessities. There was a Dr. Hill who ran a drug store. We had four black doctors and there was a drug store. I don't recall any of the doctors offices being up there. We had four medical doctors and had one dentist. Dr. Daves was the dentist and he had his building down in the Frog Pond, not down in the Five Points. That's down Queen Street from Five Points. Most of the doctors were down in the Frog Pond, but they were older men

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that would serve the twenties and thirties and forties. When I came along in the fifties, they were sort of dying out and getting out of practice. In Five Points, you had the grocery stores, you had the shoe repair shop and restaurants.

JP: This was when you were a boy?

Mr. Gavin: When I was a boy.

JP: About what year was that?

Mr. Gavin: I would say the late forties after the war in '49, cause I came and went to high in 1949 and all through the fifties. In the early fifties I was about fifteen and that was my second year in high school. Our entertainment was going to the movie, hanging out at the drug store after the movie, and then going home. We used to have a lot of house parties and that type of thing. Somebody would give a house party and we'd go there and we'd hang around.

JP: Did you have dances?

Mr. Gavin: Yes, at school. During my early childhood and along in that time, there was a big hall in James City that some of the big bands of the forties (they sort of died in the fifties after the war) used to come to the James City building over there. That was run by Mr. Charleston Robinson. He ran a little cab stand. Then there was Ransone Robinson. Those two brothers owned the building and they used to have these big bands come in.

JP: Do you remember the names of some of those bands?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah. They were big bands. Louis Jordan was popular about that time. Duke Ellington never came but some of the people

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in his organization came.

JP: Did Cab Calloway come?

Mr. Gavin: No. At that time, they were just introducing some blacks like Cab Calloway and Stormy Weather in the movie. They were a little too big. But the general run of the popular bands used to come there.

JP: These were big dances then?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah, they were big dances.

JP: Did any whites come? Would you let them come?

Mr. Gavin: Oh yeah, some whites would come. We didn't have a special area for them. They'd just mingle. They'd come and they would stand around in a group and listen a while.

JP: When you grew up, Jim, do you remember the waterfront down on South Front Street? Were there a lot of piers and businesses over the water?

Mr. Gavin: It was mostly commercial. You had the fish house like Mack Lupton's fish house. He was the mayor of New Bern at that time. Down at the end of Middle Street, I never did go in there so I really don't know what they did, but it was all commercial. There wasn't any restaurants. Guy Hamilton had a restaurant over near the bridge.

JP: The old George Street bridge.

Mr. Gavin: The old George Street bridge. There were two or three restaurants along that way. We didn't go in them because we weren't allowed to.

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JP: Was there much shipping going on?

Mr. Gavin: The tankers that used to come in to bring oil, that's all I remember. The mills as far as shipping lumber and that type of stuff from that area, they had railroads. I remember when we used to have the passenger train through New Bern. That was a big thing. All the houses in James City, the important people lived on the railroad because the railroad was the main street cause everybody travelled by rail then. There were a few big trucks. The big trucks took it over after the war and the railroad sort of died for shipping.

JP: Jim, tell me again what year you were born.

Mr. Gavin: 1935.

JP: Now when you were growing up over in James City as a boy, do you remember much about the medical care the black folks were receiving in James City and in New Bern?

Mr. Gavin: Everybody participated or had one of these black doctors and they used to go right to the house. If you had asthma, Dr. Martin used to sort of be an asthma specialist. They used to go right to the house everyday and make daily visits. They had an office but their main practice was making daily visits. If you got real sick, or hit by a car or something like that, then you went to the hospital.

JP: Which hospital?

Mr. Gavin: Good Shepherd.

JP: So, Good Shepherd was in operation then all throughout that time?

Mr. Gavin: All throughout my time Good Shepherd was in big

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operation. That was the only medical facility that we had. Naturally, there was the health department as such. They had nurses go around to the schools and give you vaccinations for measles, and there is one old shot that really hurt, typhoid shot. They usually go around giving you that.

JP: What did the black folks think of Good Shepherd Hospital?

Mr. Gavin: Well, it was a place to work cause my aunt used to work there. They thought of it highly. I think it was started by an Episcopal church pastor over here. But it was highly thought of. It was for the black community.

JP: The blacks were satisfied with the care they got there?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah.

JP: At that hospital, of course, they were treated by white doctors and black doctors I suppose.

Mr. Gavin: I don't recall any of these doctors being surgeons, but I'm sure if they were general practitioners, they must have done every thing that had to be done.

JP: Right. As you grew up and as you became older in New Bern and James City, what would you say the role of the church has been in the life of the black community in New Bern? Has it been an important factor?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah. Not only the church but the schools and teachers. Like I was telling you, in my second grade, we had Miss Nannie Holland Martin. That was my second grade teacher. She was a little disappointed she never got appointed principal. But she ran the school. She was

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a predominant factor in the school system. When you left the second grade, she was second grade teacher, you not only knew your ABC's but you knew the names of all your teeth in your mouth and why you had to keep them. She taught these things. We wouldn't consider them important now, but the things you should know about to survive. And she taught the little Bible. You had to say a little Bible verse or you had to know the Twenty-third Psalm and this type of thing. All through elementary school, they were pretty strong on the Bible. We were all religious when they taught the Bible. Like in Sunday school yesterday, we were singing a song and I could hear Miss Hawkins my fifth grade teacher singing that song in the hallway right now. You asked me why did I remember all of these. All of them made a profound effect on your life, the way you live.

JP: You've been a pretty ardent church goer?

Mr. Gavin: Well, you get along in your middle ages and your church is not that important to you. You go, but you don't really participate like you should. It's only been in my latter years that I've really enjoyed going to church.

JP: But the black churches have been well attended from what I hear.

Mr. Gavin: The black church now seems to be sort of dying. They'll come together; like, this woman that was killed in Oak City. The men of the black churches tried to form a protest about it to see if it was racially inspired and why were the SBI in such a hurry that you got to clear that up. That had nothing to do with New Bern history,

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but these are the kind of things that the black churches did in the black community. It was the only organized group. Sometime it would frown on it because it would get to controversial where they didn't want to get involved.

JP: Would you say that the churches, one of the main roles was to respond to situations like the Oak City situation?

Mr. Gavin: Any situation that came up and affected the congregation, the black church would be in there talking about it and finally decide to do something about it. Just like the whole civil right movement started in a church in Alabama with the black preacher that first got involved. So, the black church in every community, they are separated by denominations, but then you'll find somebody in the church that's quite active in something. But he's got his training from being a member and participating in organizations in the black church. And that's about all we have now, is the black church. Everything else is integrated.

JP: Looking at something else, you were just a boy when World War II started.

Mr. Gavin: Yes.

JP: As it progressed, you became a teenager.

Mr. Gavin: As World War II started, I didn't become a teenager. I didn't become a teenager until '47 and the war was over.

JP: The war was over then. Do you remember much about what happened in New Bern, or to New Bern and James City during those years? Was there much effect on the city? Was there much effect on the black

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community? Did blacks leave in great numbers to go in service or come home disappointed?

Mr. Gavin: My grandfather, as I said, he ran a pool room. This was more like a social club for teenagers. Somewhere to go.
He didn't allow any cursing or gambling in the pool room. So, we went to Uncle Doc's pool room. The parents felt pretty good. He didn't allow you to get into a fight. There were some fights started in there, but it was a good place, it was a good atmosphere. As the war started, each of these black youngsters, male predominantly, needed somebody who could write. My grandfather had about a third or fourth grade education, but I imagine that was equivalent to high school now because you could write and read pretty much. He had to write a letter for these guys; that he's been good; a pretty clean life; I know his parents, and they all got in service.

JP: They wanted to do this? They were anxious to do this?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah. Quite a few blacks in James City had gone into World War I. The only reason my grandfather didn't go is he worked for the railroad and got his foot cut off. I told you that. These World War I veterans came back and was telling the guys they went to Paris and the first time they had been places they would be seen as equals. Nobody looked down on them because they had a dark complexion. They told all these young boys, and when the war started up, it was opportunity for them to go. They would volunteer. Like I said, the education requirements were different then from service today. Most of them were lucky if they'd finished the eighth grade. That was

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generally in both white and black communities. If you got through eighth grade, you had enough to make a living. You had enough education to maybe you could read and write. In the eighth then was probably equivalent to the tenth, twelfth grade now if you stay in school that long. Most of these guys had gone through five or six grades and they knew how to write their names and so forth, but they had to have a letter of reference to volunteer. My grandfather would always sign those letters because he knew them all. He got a bunch of guys that are coming back now retiring from jobs up North that I remember him signing and getting them in service. As the war progressed, we would hear about it on the radio. The big thing with the black youth was they had gone barefooted so long over there, they all were flatfooted. The feet eventually lose their arch enough to set down on the ground. Sometimes your feet would be so flat they wouldn't accept you in the service. You'd have a problem wearing shoes.

JP: Just as a sideline to that, I was a medical officer during that time in the Army and we were told to discharge soldiers already in service if their feet were flat to a certain degree. So, we used to have clinics out at the Mohave Desert examining these soldiers as they would come in. Of course, they wanted to get out. We discharged a lot of soldiers because of that. These are white soldiers.

Mr. Gavin: Cause if you don't wear shoes all your life, your feet get flat. There was some guys didn't serve because of flat feet or some other medical condition. They just wouldn't accept them. But the normal youth that's just grew up, he was in fairly good health

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and they'd accept him.

JP: So, a fair number of young blacks from the New Bern area went into the service?

Mr. Gavin: Yeah, they went into the service. When they were discharged, they came back, got their mustering-out pay, and they were able to for a few hundred dollars, build a shotgun house. You know, look in the front door and you shoot out the back. All the rooms were on one side, or you got a hall straight down through the house with rooms on both sides. Nobody at that time in James City had indoor plumbing, and very few houses in New Bern except the middle class white, had indoor plumbing. The sewage was predominantly right in downtown area. So, they were able to build a little A-frame house and put the rooms in it. They were able to take their little six, seven hundred dollars they got mustering-out fee and build a house.

JP: With plumbing?

Mr. Gavin: No. They didn't have any plumbing. Indoor plumbing didn't come to New Bern, Craven County, until the fifties. It wasn't completely eliminated, the outdoor plumbing, until the late sixties, because part of the poverty program was building out houses.

JP: Yes, you told me that. Jim when these young men came back from the war, what were they like? I've been told that a lot of blacks who went into service because of patriotism and other things and saw the world and they had help free the world for democracy, they came home and met Jim Crow again.

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Mr. Gavin: Yeah. But now, let's look at it this way. It wasn't until 1950's that the Army completely integrated. The Army changed "the separate but equal" policy. You know, the blacks over here and the whites over here. Like Camp LeJeune built brick structures for the white soldiers and Marines, and then in Mumford Point they built wooden structures. Segregation was still there until the fifties when they integrated. So, even though they had seen the world; and probably they were still segregated as far as their company when they went out in to Paris and came back, they came back to a black outfit or white outfit, whichever. I don't think it made any difference. If somebody's shooting at you, who cares what the guy's color is next to you. The World War II veterans, when they came back, they would talk about these things, how they were called the integration men's particularly. That's a late word for them, integration. A young guy would talk about how many women and what kind he'd had and so forth. They talked about that. They could see things a little different, but the World War II veteran was not as outspoken about it. The Korean War and Viet Nam war, at this time they had integrated. They hadn't integrated as far as career, but the late fifties they integrated the services. Then when they came back, things were still segregated but they weren't afraid. They had lost that fear of a guy because he was white. When I was a boy, if you were walking down the sidewalk and met a white, you'd step off the side and step in the gutter and let the white by and you didn't think nothing of it. On Saturday downtown, it was predominantly black, so the whites didn't go downtown on Saturday.

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JP: They sat in their cars.

Mr. Gavin: Yeah. If they needed something, I'm sure they went down and got it. But I'm saying that they knew on Saturday that the merchants would depend on the black country community to try to make some money, so they respected that. They'd go downtown Monday, Tuesday. It was right down anyway.

JP: Jim, during World War I, if you can recall, was there any migration of blacks northward because of job opportunities?

Mr. Gavin: Even in my time when I was going to college, somebody had made some provisions for me to go. But when you finish high school on a Monday or Friday or whatever, the next day you caught a bus going to New York. In this area, there was a big migration north. They had segregation there. They didn't realize it, but they had it. Because you were segregated by your pocketbook in the North. There wasn't no need of race segregation. If you didn't have the money to spend to go to the Stork Club or some of these other fine places that I had an opportunity to peep in because of the type of job I had, you didn't go. The guys always going to take me somewhere thinking a poor old country boy had never been. They'd take you out to lunch and you'd be the only black guy in there because of the money they knew you'd spend. They'd have it on the charge accounts. They knew that I did not own anything special, so they weren't too worried about too much money I was going to spend. During that time after World War II and the kids start trying to get a little education; about my generation in the early fifties, even if you tried to finish high school after

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the war, when they did, they went north. All my class, predominant members in my class that didn't go to college, went up north. Some managed to peck out a pretty nice living and they're moving back. But they were trying to move where they would have a better opportunity than their parents had.

JP: Jim, we have talked about many things about the black role in New Bern. Let me ask you this general question and just see how this strikes you. What has it been like being a Black in New Bern?

Mr. Gavin: Well, I came along sort of on the end as my work-life started, on the end, and moved back here in 1960. So, I was in my late twenties. Since the sixties, everything has been integrated. You can go most any place you want. There are still places that don't welcome you, but they'll tolerate you if you got the money to spend. My kids have been started at an integrated school at Brinson and they went through high school and they probably had, with things settling down, about the normal high school. For me personally, I've been able to enjoy a pretty decent life. I guess one of the roles that's been tossed as a leader. At certain times you had to lead and stand up at what you thought was right and being able to look at people that are less fortunate than myself. That's why I got involved in the program. I got a chance to see how people really live. That's one of Mr. Bush's complaints, he doesn't know how the little man lived. To find out how people really live, he got to look in their back door, see what they're having for supper. There's been some really bad situations here in New Bern, and there still are that people don't

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talk about. Cause nobody talks about what he's gonna have for supper unless he's bragging. The guy hasn't got nothing, it's a bad situation.

JP: Are the blacks having it pretty tough in New Bern?

Mr. Gavin: I would say if it wasn't for welfare, yes. Now, they're misusing that. In fact, everybody does. When I say everybody does, when you don't have to work for something and it's given to you, then you're not taking care of it like if you had to work and sacrifice for it. The one thing I learned in the poverty program is that you just can't fix a nice place and put a guy in it who has not done any sweat or tried to earn it. He doesn't know how to appreciate it cause he doesn't realize what sacrifice was made for it to happen. You give him a brand new car and he'll run the wheels off it and won't even repair the little things that go wrong with it to make it run right. He just won't do it cause he's got no investment in it.

JP: He's got no stake in it. Jim, what do you think is the future of race relations in New Bern?

Mr. Gavin: I think we still have a long way to go. I think the last twelve years with this trickle down, which you hear a lot of today on TV, economy-type thing, is not working. You got to put people back to work and, I don't mean people just looking for jobs to eat. Even in your prison system, you keep hearing it brought out that you got more young male blacks in prison than in college. That's because they don't have anything to do. When I grew up and you grew up, assuming your father was a doctor, you had certain things you had to do to earn your keep. I was just thinking about some of the people I grew up

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with; Fred Carmichael, Jim Sugg. I don't know about the background, but he worked at the Sun Journal, not delivering papers, but stacking them. That's Freddie Carmichael. He earned his keep when he was young. He was pretty boisterous and loud then like he is now being a lawyer. I haven't been socializing with Freddie, but I know what he was when he was a kid, and I don't think he's changed. But those kids, David Ward, Freddie Carmichael, and all that crowd came along in my time and those boys had to work. I'm sure their fathers could have given them anything they wanted, but they had to earn their keep and peer pressure made them work. Cause they talked about what they made and what I made for myself and what my father gave me here. That type of thing. That's what we don't have anymore, white nor black. The only way a young black kid can get ahead today, he sees, like he sees others, selling dope, handling a lot of money, and everybody wants to do that. Buy a fancy car. A guy sixteen years old, owns a new Thunderbird.

JP: Jim, do you think that the way things are going in New Bern between the races is about the average for the state? Are we about average, are we better, are we worse?

Mr. Gavin: I would say it's about average. It's all over like this. There's nothing to do with kids. If they'd go out and make a few dollars or find something to keep them busy, they'd be a different group.

JP: Do you think that the CCC camps would be a good thing to bring back?

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Mr. Gavin: Yeah, I personally think they would. I didn't go to a CCC camp. That was before the war. But when I go into the mountains and visit some of these places that CCC camps built, I think a kid not only gets the chance to appreciate some nature, how things are done, and why things are done, but they need that training. I was standing around a guy in the one of the grocery stores and he was saying, "Every kid needs a certain amount of discipline in his early life, that he'll know how to discipline himself and living by the rules." See, there aren't any rules in the youngster's life that they have to live by. You live by it and then you suffer by it, so you learn to live by it.

JP: Jim, I'm gonna switch again. This is an area we've already covered, but I forgot to ask you one specific question and it's an important question in this town of two rivers. When you grew up, where did you go swimming?

Mr. Gavin: I went swimming in the Neuse River.

JP: Was there a special place over there in James City where you went swimming?

Mr. Gavin: You remember I talked about the Robinson brothers?

JP: Yes.

Mr. Gavin: Well, they not only did they have dances at this place, but they had the little place you'd go swimming down beside it. It's right over the water.

JP: Did that beach have a name?

Mr. Gavin: We used to call it James City Beach.

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JP: That was there when you were a boy?

Mr. Gavin: That was there when I was a boy.

JP: We have covered so many things and it's been wonderful getting your viewpoints about lots of things. Now, before we stop let me ask you, are there other things that you think are important to talk about that you would like to talk about? I can't think of all the things to ask.

Mr. Gavin: No. I think in a round about way, we've covered quite a bit. There might be some things I'll think of later that I should have talked about. I'll sort of make a note of it and we'll come back and talk about it.

JP: But for right now, you think we've covered it pretty well?

Mr. Gavin: Pretty well.

JP: Well, I think these two interviews have been special interviews. They've been great. It's been nice to talk to you for many reasons. I've gotten to know you better and I've seen what a wonderful career you've had. You've given us a lot of insight into the black community and the way blacks live and think, and that's very important to the history of New Bern. So, for the Memories of New Program, and you're part of that program, I want to thank you for talking to me like this.

END OF INTERVIEW

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