

Shared Stories: African Americans in North Mecklenburg

Interview with Theodore Roosevelt Wilson, September 20, 2002

Conducted by Jan Blodgett

Summary: T.R. Wilson was a gardener for the town of Davidson for over 50 years. In this oral history he takes interviewer Jan Blodgett on a tour of the town, recounting how the buildings and the people of Davidson have changed over time. Wilson was born in Davidson at Crane and Gable Street, and he begins by remembering his early life in town, including the community center at the Ada Jenkins school where he and his friends would play baseball. Wilson then describes the different degrees of discrimination practiced by businesses he frequented in downtown Davidson during the Jim Crow era. He follows this by showing Blodgett the location of his childhood home, then giving an overview of how his parents decided to come to Davidson and their experience while living in the town. After briefly elaborating on significant locations in the Davidson/ Cornelius area that he remembers from his youth, Wilson concludes the interview by sharing the scope of his job history and where it led him before his eventual return to Davidson.

Jan Blodgett: I came here in June of 1994. So, not very long.

Theodore Roosevelt Wilson: This is off the tape for a little while ... At one time this was called Tin Top Road.

Jan Blodgett: So, we're at Crane and Gable but this was called Tin Top Road.

TR Wilson: Right. I was born in the fourth house, right here. That's where we lived until I was 11 years old. One time there was a big two-story house that sat right here.

Jan Blodgett: At the very end of the road. Who lived in the two-story house?

TR Wilson: The Twitties.

Jan Blodgett: That's not a name I've heard.

TR Wilson: Well, he was a Donaldson. Mr. Andy Donaldson; he worked at the College. This has always been a dead end. Now, to go uptown we went down through here and cut up over to Eden Street.

Jan Blodgett: There used to be a church over there, right?

TR Wilson: I think there was.

Jan Blodgett: Were there these many houses on Eden Street?

TR Wilson: That house wasn't there.

Jan Blodgett: So you could just cut through here? Go down the railroad tracks to get to downtown?

TR Wilson: Right.

Jan Blodgett: Now, how many brothers and sisters did you have? Were you the first?

TR Wilson: I'm the oldest son. I had a sister, Elizabeth, she still lives in Davidson. She's Elizabeth Cliff, now.

Jan Blodgett: Oh, I've met her.

TR Wilson: Ok, she's the oldest girl. I'm next. We had a sister named Brillia. And then I had a brother named Odare.

Jan Blodgett: Now, did you go to Ada Jenkins?

TR Wilson: I went to Ada Jenkins and Davidson Elementary, up to the 8th grade.

Jan Blodgett: Do you remember the names of any of your teachers?

TR Wilson: Well, there was Ms. Barkum. Ms. Brown was the first-grade teacher; she taught about three generations of people. There was a teacher by the name of Ms. Stevenson. Mr. Polke was the principal at one time. And when I was in the eighth grade Mr. Harrison came; he was principal.

Jan Blodgett: Was Margaret Byers there when you were there?

TR Wilson: No, she didn't teach when I was there.

Jan Blodgett: So, what were your classes like?

TR Wilson: There was Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, Geography, History.

Jan Blodgett: How many people were in your grade when you left in the 8th grade?

TR Wilson: I would say maybe 20-25.

Jan Blodgett: Did they have any kind of ceremony when you graduated the 8th grade?

TR Wilson: No. Now, the church was back there.

Jan Blodgett: So, the church was at the end of Eden Street.

TR Wilson: Mm-hm.

Jan Blodgett: Now, do you go to this church?

TR Wilson: No, I go to Davidson Presbyterian.

Jan Blodgett: Was there a difference in the community, whether you went to Davidson Presbyterian or [inaudible] Zion? Was one thought to be a more elite church than the other?

TR Wilson: Well, Davidson Presbyterian was the elite church. It was the biggest church, it was the most popular church. There used to be a big house that sat right over there. There used to be a path that ran down close to the railroad tracks down to Main Street. Those were wheat fields.

Jan Blodgett: Where the soccer fields are now?

TR Wilson: Mm-hm. From here down was a pasture. The guy had cows in it.

Jan Blodgett: Wow. So, Gamble down to Sloan was pasture area.

TR Wilson: I don't know when they put that addition to it. This is what they called 'the neck.'

Jan Blodgett: 'The neck,' ok. It's an interesting intersection with about three streets.

TR Wilson: There used to be a house there and a house there. Ms. Edna Fall, she worked for the boarding house, she built this store.

Jan Blodgett: And a grocery store?

TR Wilson: Mr. Ralph Johnson had a little grocery store right there. All these houses were here. Ms. Edna used to live right there.

Jan Blodgett: What happened to her store?

TR Wilson: She and Mr. Johnson, people weren't patronizing [their stores].

Jan Blodgett: I had heard people didn't go to Ralph Johnson's store, but this is the first time I've heard about her store.

TR Wilson: She just had a little old store where she sold drinks, candy, you know, small items.

Jan Blodgett: It wasn't a real grocery, more like a five and dime?

TR Wilson: A snack shop. But anyway we [inaudible] were not allowed to come to her store.

Jan Blodgett: So how did you get there, after hours?

TR Wilson: There used to be a community center space.

Jan Blodgett: I know it sat on the Ada Jenkins grounds somewhere, but I don't know precisely where.

TR Wilson: Well, anyways, the community center was sitting probably about where that road is.

Jan Blodgett: Ok, Lock and Brandon.

TR Wilson: Ok, they used to have what they called the old school building sitting right in there. It had three rooms.

Jan Blodgett: Three rooms. And it looked like a house? Sort of just a one story [building]? Was it wooden or brick?

TR Wilson: Wooden. It had classrooms on each end and it had a stage in the center where they could have little shows. Once upon a time there was a house sitting right here. A lady named Ms. Smith lived in those house and we used to have ball games here.

Jan Blodgett: And who did you play? Did you just play each other, or were there other elementary schools that you played?

TR Wilson: Oh, we played the kids from Mooresville and Cornelius.

Jan Blodgett: And was this like 8th grade up?

TR Wilson: When I was talking about the ball field, that was just up in during the holidays that they would play ball. If you wanted to play, you could play.

Jan Blodgett: Oh, ok, like the neighborhood playground. Well, with all the pastures around they probably didn't want you playing ball in the wheat fields. What were the popular games? Did people play football? Or were you playing baseball?

TR Wilson: That was it. You played out there on the school grounds. We didn't have nowhere else to play, period. Sometimes we'd come down here and walk through here to town. All the houses are the same with the exception that the church used to be right in there. The Methodist church.

Jan Blodgett: Now, that is the church that got moved. I get confused, I know that is started out here. What happened to the church building?

TR Wilson: They tore it down, [inaudible]

Jan Blodgett: But they moved that church; that church is from a different place. Reed's Temple; they didn't build they picked up and moved.

TR Wilson: Ok, back up. The Baptist church.

Jan Blodgett: Ok, this is the Baptist church on Eden Street.

TR Wilson: The people there bought the church over here. And the people who had the Baptist church when on down the street. They'd be over on the corner.

Jan Blodgett: Yosemite Church is on Jetong, is that where they moved first? I get these confused. I've got a file up there.

TR Wilson: This block has turned from the White, because all of this was White.

Jan Blodgett: Yeah, this was the Unity Church. This was the mill church, right?

TR Wilson: Yes. I called it the mill church. Ok, Reed's was out there where I said there was no church at all. That's where we just came up the hill.

Jan Blodgett: Ok, so at the end of Eden? Or on the end of Crane?

TR Wilson: I'm not following you.

Jan Blodgett: Where did the Methodist Zion Church meet before they moved to this building?

TR Wilson: Nowhere.

Jan Blodgett: Nowhere, ok, they started here.

TR Wilson: After they moved from where we came up the hill and the houses were, they bought this church and tore that one down. And the Baptists, they bought the property and tore the church down over there and moved up here. Right here is where my sister lives, [inaudible]. All along here were houses.

Jan Blodgett: Back on Jackson Street. Now, did the streets go through? I have maps that don't show this road going through until about 1980. Was it just a dirt road?

TR Wilson: Just a dirt road. There were houses along here. Black people lived along here in about 20 houses, but eventually they moved them out. Up here on the corner at one time was cafe, and then Black people lived on the corner; the Boses and the Brights, and the Kerns lived right in here.

Jan Blodgett: Still on the parking lot side rather than the [inaudible] side?

TR Wilson: Right.

Jan Blodgett: And the jail at one time was here, but I guess by then it was gone. It was down at the town hall.

TR Wilson: There were restaurants down here. And Allison Kruse's store. Then we had Dolly's Donuts. And then Clayton Grocery store was in between at one time, then Allison Kruse's store. And right there was the first post office, in that building. It moved from there to down here. And now it's back down there.

Jan Blodgett: We have had the most mobile [post office]. I hate it when someone says that was near the post office, because you don't know where that is because you have to know where the post office was that year. Now do you remember the Maxwell Hotel at all? The one before the Village Inn?

TR Wilson: No, it was just rooms up there.

Jan Blodgett: It wasn't really working anymore?

TR Wilson: No. All of this was the Five and Dime, it wasn't there that long. Fanny Ray and the Five and Dime.

Jan Blodgett: Now did you go in the Five and Dime? Would you buy candy there?

TR Wilson: We would go in the Five and Dime. The places where Blacks didn't go very much, you weren't really run out but ... I worked for two weeks in a college restaurant when I was in high school. Now, he did not say Blacks out of the front. Not until some of the College students, well, maybe until I finished school. This was a drug store, this was the Copeland place. This was the barbershop. We had another drugstore right in here, called Pundits. They didn't care about Blacks coming in there. This used to be a soda shop; you could not go in and sit down. There was a gas station right there.

Jan Blodgett: Right, with pumps where the Bridal Shop is.

TR Wilson: Shoe Shop, the bank, [inaudible], and the fire station. This at one time was Woodard Electric. The Library. Ok, we'll back up a little bit. [Blacks] couldn't go in the drugstore and sit down. Couldn't go in the soda shop, they'd prefer you didn't sit down. They would serve you, but you couldn't sit down. That was the funeral home; my grandfather died and that was the first Black body they ever had. You know the old church. And Ms.... I can't think of her name right now, but she worked at the bank.

Jan Blodgett: Was this Marie Sloan's house that we just passed?

TR Wilson: Yeah, Marie Sloan's house was way down there. But anyway, the lady who worked in the bank. One time I was working for the trucking company and I came in the bank. Ok, my mother babysat all her children. She knew my father and she knew my mother. So I went in, she was working at the bank, and I had a check for \$300 and she said, 'We can't cash it.' They would not cash my brother's [either], [inaudible] We moved from the country down here. We bought a house and it was right there. Ms. Parker was an old lady, she had an [inaudible] she walked with an [inaudible], we called her a ghost.

Jan Blodgett: So, you lived down on Potts Street?

TR Wilson: Potts Street.

Jan Blodgett: Now, this must have been out in the country.

TR Wilson: When we first moved out here, this was a cotton field. Then they raised some com and then it grew up the way it is now. Ok, this is the house we moved into. And this house, my father ... it was all unattended. This front was like the street with a sprinkling of grass. He planted all these bushes, all these trees. He planted all the stuff in the back.

Jan Blodgett: Did you have a garden here?

TR Wilson: Yeah, we had a garden. We had flowers [inaudible]. There was a house built down there.

Jan Blodgett: On the other side of the road?

TR Wilson: Over by that building there. They built this house out of slabs. And you could walk by and see the people inside. So, finally they put this artificial brick stuff on it. The Richardson house got moved to right here. Ok, our Presbyterian minister sold my father this house.

Jan Blodgett: The minister at Davidson Presbyterian Church?

TR Wilson: Mm-hm. Reverend Peters sold him this house. But anyway, he cut the property line right there at the driveway, because that driveway is on this man's property.

Jan Blodgett: So, really, the property line is at the side of the house and doesn't include the driveway.

TR Wilson: Right. The property line runs at an angle. Where the truck is, I think is on this property now. That [inaudible] was built by the people who were living there. And after they died, my father told me he wanted to buy it, but he finally got it from the wife after Rev. died. The Rev. was a fixer. Actually, when my father bought it, he should have got this, this and all of this. But Rev. cut it up into pieces and sold it like this. This brick house wasn't his. And the big White house was so high up off the ground I could walk underneath it. And we used to shoot marbles under there. They had steep stairs and they had about five or six rooms. Mr. Crocket, he worked for the College, he retired. And after he retired he never worked another lick for anybody. He was 90 years old, or 93.

Jan Blodgett: And he lived in that house. Crocket Jonathan?

TR Wilson: Mm-hm. That was the pride and joy, that big house there. I think I mowed that lawn and raked the leaves once or twice. All of this is still the same, same houses or whatever.

Jan Blodgett: South Main hasn't changed much.

TR Wilson: Well, you know about the sawmill.

Jan Blodgett: Did you know people who worked at the mill?

TR Wilson: Yeah, I knew a few people. Clord Donahue.

Jan Blodgett: Why didn't you work at the mill?

TR Wilson: I wasn't old enough.

Jan Blodgett: And then did you go into trucking [right] out of school?

TR Wilson: I got out of school and then I got a job at Marita Bakery. I worked for Marita until we got the Union in and then all the present workers got fired. Ok, once you get a Union in the place then someone's got to go. They got a guy from [inaudible] Georgia. I'm the only guy from Davidson working there. What I'm saying is, people resent people sometimes. Some people are prejudiced against their own race. But I wasn't very well liked, so they kept picking on me and picking on me. They put up a new oven, and he told me I had to lift one loaf of bread and go on to the broom closet and get back up to the oven and put that bread in. I guess I had to go about from here to that sidewalk. And he came back in and said, 'Ok, you're fired.' I had a hearing in Cornelius. I got the letter at home and it said to be there at 1 o'clock. They had the hearing at 12 o'clock with the people from Marita and some security. When I got there at 1 o'clock, they said, 'Well, look, you're an hour late.' Oh, by the way, I was telling you the guy who lives by the post office, this is his place. And they would not have Blacks working at the post office. I don't know if they do now or not. [inaudible] but he said there'd be no Blacks working at the post office as long as he was there. Because Hal Houston, he was in Charlotte and wanted to transfer up here and they wouldn't let him.

Jan Blodgett: Did you live in Davidson when you worked at Marita; you drove back and forth?

TR Wilson: I drove, I had a car. My mother always said that if you have a job you need a car. So, why work without a car? They ran buses, but the hours that I worked there, you could hardly take the bus. I mean you could, but you'd be spending 15 hours on a 9-hour day.

Jan Blodgett: What were the roads like?

TR Wilson: Ok. I thought about living here, buying a lot.

Jan Blodgett: Ok, on Lakeside.

TR Wilson: This is where I would go to get to the upper mill. So, I'll show you the lot I wanted to buy. The man said, 'In order for you to buy that lot, you need to have nine children.'

Jan Blodgett: They could tell you the number of children you were supposed to have?

TR Wilson: I said I wanted to build a two-story house where the kids could have a room upstairs and a room downstairs. But I really blew it, because being a veteran, I could have borrowed money and got what I wanted. I borrowed money and got this house. The economy was that they didn't want you making more money than the people in Davidson.

Jan Blodgett: So, because you were working in Charlotte, they were afraid of you making more money than the people at the College?

TR Wilson: Right. People worked for the College, they didn't really get a lot there. I didn't know they added all of this.

Jan Blodgett: Yeah, it's low-income housing. I think they designed it for people, they rent it to them so that they can save up enough money to buy homes.

TR Wilson: You know where the church is, right?

Jan Blodgett: Yeah, Yosemite is right here on Potts. T.R.W: [inaudible] People have their way with churches. It's no use going to different churches looking for what you want because you won't find anything different. What can I say, I mean, Davidson has improved, in a sense, in the way Davidson wanted to improve. Davidson is a College town, always will be a College town and that's just it. [inaudible].

Jan Blodgett: Yeah, I've lived here since the lake was here, so it's hard to imagine that the town used to have a different boundary.

TR Wilson: So, what else did you want to know about?

Jan Blodgett: Tell me a little more about your family and what it was like living in Davidson. Did your father or mother have family here? Did you have lots of cousins?

TR Wilson: No, we had no relatives in Davidson. Our father, he was born and raised in Bowling Green, South Carolina. His mother died when his last sister was born. His aunts took the girls but they didn't want the boys. He had two brothers, Uncle Andrew and Uncle Frank. A lady my father called Aunt Haddie took them and she started migrating from South Carolina along Gastonia and Cane Mountain and Statesville until they came to Wood Leaf, North Carolina. And up in Wood Leaf, I guess my father was about 15 years old, so my father said one year they had an acre of cotton. She gave them an acre of cotton, so he sold his cotton and bought a car, a T model. In the meantime, Aunt Haddie bought her a T model, so she told him to take his back. She thought the White folks would think they were big shot Negroes with two cars. So after that—

CD ends, new CD begins. Part of interview may be missing.

TR Wilson: They were called 'bum jackets.' You know why they call them 'bum jackets'? It was a denim jacket with a lining in it, and people bumming around wore them. [inaudible] They moved in a 'santy car.' I bet you don't know what 'santy car' was either.

Jan Blodgett: No, would it be a car people lived out of like they do now?

TR Wilson: It was a boxcar.

Jan Blodgett: Ok, a railway car.

TR Wilson: Painted gray with a window and a stovepipe in it.

Jan Blodgett: And where was this boxcar?

TR Wilson: It was sitting on the side up near Wood Leaf [inaudible]. But anyways, that's when he met my mother, right down the street. He had a 'bum jacket' and a bent bucket, and that's all he had. So, he slept there on the floor until he could make a payment, or whatever. So, finally he

started dating my mother, going to see her, and they got married about 1931, I think it was. They decided to close up the section; Dad was working on the railroad. They said the only work to be had was down here in Cornelius. So that meant he had to come to Cornelius. So, they came to Davidson and moved in with a woman who rented a room. They stayed there a while until that house became open. They moved in and started progressing up. Their sisters stayed with them a while; I think both of their sisters stayed with them at one point. Then Uncle Price stayed with them for a while because he was working at the sawmill. And the man used to take dimes and things like that and would make rings out of them; that was pretty popular back then. Then Uncle Price went to war. But he left and he never came back; he came back to Davidson but he never lived with us. He lived on what they called [inaudible] up where Betty Johnson had that brick house built. My father worked for the railroad, something he didn't like. So, he told the guy he was going to quit. So, they had the right-hand Davidson and Cornelius. So they said if he quit they would put him in the service.

Jan Blodgett: Oh, the draft people. For World War II?

TR Wilson: For World War II. And my father was 33 or 34 years old. But they had 1-A classification, so he went up and went in the service. He was [enlisted] in the Army. And he asked what bus he was on and they said the Navy bus. So, he ended up in the Navy. They said the guys called him 'old man' because he was the oldest man in there. But he ended up being a steward or captain. Anyway, all he did was kept the dining room, the room where they ate, he kept that in order. That's all he did, the whole time he was in the Navy.

Jan Blodgett: [inaudible] At least nobody shot at him.

TR Wilson: He was in the Philippines and he stayed there about 23 months, then came back home. Then he was based at the Great Lakes, then - what's that Naval base in California? I did know what it was, but anyway, he got out and said, 'If I had been a single man, I would never have come back to North Carolina.' But he had a family here and he came back and they put those houses up for sale over there, I would say about a couple months after he got out of the service. And he said he wasn't buying because there wasn't enough property. He wanted too much for them. Back then they were renting for \$8 a month [inaudible].

Jan Blodgett: But how much were you making per hour? That could be expensive rent.

TR Wilson: You know what they were making? I asked him one time, I said, ‘Dad, what were you making back in those days?’ And I think he said 40 cents an hour.

Jan Blodgett: I wouldn’t be surprised.

TR Wilson: Because I know, I worked for Mo Reed, who owned the Exxon station; I worked for his wife. She loved Azaleas. I used to work for her for 6 or 7 hours, rake leaves, cut the grass, whatever.

Jan Blodgett: Was this while you were in school?

TR Wilson: Yeah. And I used to work for the Flabels. I used to work for the Woods.

Jan Blodgett: The doctor?

TR Wilson: Not the doctor, a professor Woods.

Jan Blodgett: Doing yard work, mostly?

TR Wilson: Yeah. Well, Ms. Flabel would have you washing windows, waxing the floor - put the wax on then take it off, use a cloth and a brick to polish it. Wash the windows with newspaper. Ms. Flabel was from one of the islands, she was a splendid woman.

Jan Blodgett: So, what did you do with all the money you earned on these jobs?

TR Wilson: Oh, what money? You didn’t make more than \$1 or \$1.50. We went to the movies. The movie in Cornelius was 9 cents, popcorn was a nickel, ice cream cone was a nickel, and soda was a nickel.

Jan Blodgett: So, you could go to the movies if you worked a couple of hours.

TR Wilson: For a couple of hours. We only went to the matinee, which was on Saturday. 12 or 1 o’clock to about 3 or 4 o’clock. And that was it, I mean, there was nothing else to do.

Jan Blodgett: Did you have cars then to go down or did you have to walk to Cornelius?

TR Wilson: We walked.

Jan Blodgett: Where was the movie in Cornelius? Can you describe where it was to me? No one's ever told me where that theater was. I know where it was in Davidson. Oh, you have to drive me, you can't just say on the corner where Food Lion is?

TR Wilson: No. I think the building is still there. As you're going to Cornelius, where the railroad cuts across there's a laundry that sits down in that flat. I think a guy had an antique shop.

Jan Blodgett: Yeah, like Mayhew's antique shop used to be there. I think it's something else now. Did you know that James Raeford has his barbershop now in Cornelius?

TR Wilson: No.

Jan Blodgett: I think it's right behind that. Was the fire department where the Cornelius fire department is now?

TR Wilson: It has always been on the right side. The movies have always been on the left across from the railroad tracks, because they have a station there. Because on the corner at the red light used to be a drug store. And on along was a great big grocery store. The movie was two stories; the Blacks sat up in the balcony and the Whites down. There wasn't anything for the guys to do. The Parson boys down on Ronny Circle would play basketball with tennis balls.

Jan Blodgett: It's crazy, but if you don't have anything else ... Sad that they couldn't even get a basketball.

TR Wilson: The schools didn't. When we were in the 8th grade we only had 2 basketballs.

Jan Blodgett: Now when you went to Torrence Litel or Huntersville Negro School, did you play other teams from Charlotte?

TR Wilson: We didn't play West Charlotte. We weren't in their caliber. We had to play the country schools like [inaudible] Clear Creek, Monroe. We didn't play West Charlotte because, in the first place, those guys went to school until they were 23 or 24 years old. And the guys only came back to play sports and then they were allowed out of school.

Jan Blodgett: When my dad went to high school in Texas they would have guys who never graduated come and play football, so they had 24 year olds playing football on high school teams

against 15 and 16 year olds. But they would sometimes keep them in school so they'd be on their teams.

TR Wilson: But we went to Torrence Litel, we went to Huntersville. Our senior year was the finest football team.

Jan Blodgett: Did you play?

TR Wilson: I played. We had some of our equipment from the College, they gave us their used equipment. We had to buy shoes. They gave us their pants. We had a baseball team, we had a basketball team and we had a pretty fair team [given] the conditions. We didn't have a gym. We didn't have one in Davidson and we didn't have one in Huntersville. So, if it rained, the game was canceled. The ground was wet so you couldn't practice. We had a track team, and my first year at Huntersville, the guy came there from the agricultural department. We hauled grass and dirt to make the fields. We didn't have a lunchroom.

Jan Blodgett: So, did you eat lunch in the classrooms? Or, I know at some schools they didn't eat lunch, they would go from 9 to 2 o'clock and then you would go home and you just got lunch at 2 o'clock.

TR Wilson: At Davidson, they had lunch when I was in the 8th grade. But at Huntersville, you could buy milk, peanut butter sandwiches, hot dogs, hamburgers, and salmon croquettes.

Jan Blodgett: So, they had a little cafeteria that sold things?

TR Wilson: They had a little place backstage; a little room where they prepared all this and brought it around to you on trays. You had to sign up for what you wanted. So, maybe there would be a time you couldn't buy but one milk. Or maybe a time when salmon croquettes, they sold like crazy, they were always sold out. And going our senior year, you got to sell lunch either one day or two days to raise money to pay for our rings. Because our class rings cost about \$23. We had white gold or yellow gold. I looked down at our 50th [reunion] and one guy had his ring and we all wondered what had happened to our rings. Some of them don't even know what happened to theirs. I know what happened to mine. That ring now might cost \$400-500 dollars.

Jan Blodgett: So, how did you do dances?

TR Wilson: We had a junior, senior prom. Normally, 2 or 3 schools went together. Only juniors [up] could go or you could invite someone from another school. We got two new buses my junior year in high school. And we only had 2 guys who drove those buses. We lived out in the country and the first bus we called 'bread wagon' because it looked like, not a regular loaf of bread, but the one that comes over like this [inaudible]. To get to school at 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning, it wasn't no big thing. To start home and not get there to 4 or 5 o'clock, well. That was just it.

Jan Blodgett: And students drove the buses, right? I've talked to Joe at the Barbershop; he said he'd pick up the Ada Jenkins kids and deliver them and then drive himself and other high school students into Huntersville.

TR Wilson: Claire, my niece, said that she was the first female and the only bus to drive 77. She was living in a little house and she'd park above Sawdee Road, she went from there to around Mount Moore, pick up the kids, come down 77 and pick some up and then go wherever she was going. And Claire is no bigger than a flea. I was surprised when, we were talking about this about a week ago or two weeks ago, my cousin came out and they were talking about all the things that went on in school and whatever. But I didn't know they didn't have buses on 77, [and she said,] 'I was the first person who ever drove a bus on 77'. And she talked about how our father bought her a car and made her change the tires three times so that she'd know how to change the tires. She said, 'I'm so glad. I was mad but I don't have no problems changing tires, I can change my own tires.' My father had his ways.

Jan Blodgett: Now, he lived in Davidson most of his life? Did he ever leave, I mean other than when he was in the military?

TR Wilson: Went around the country for two years. Then back in our house in Cornelius.

Jan Blodgett: So, he stayed in that house in Cornelius until he died?

TR Wilson: Mm-hm.

Jan Blodgett: And when did you leave Davidson?

TR Wilson: I went in the military in 1956. After I lost my job, I bummed around for a little while. Couldn't get a job, so I went in the military, [inaudible]

Jan Blodgett: When you left the military, you came back to North Carolina, too?

TR Wilson: I got out of the military. I got married while I was in the military. And then we got our own place; I never went back and lived with my father. We lived up in Shelltown, we lived out in the country, and we lived on Kannapolis.

Jan Blodgett: Oh, so you've moved around a bit.

TR Wilson: How many different places in Charlotte? This is the third place we've lived in Charlotte. We were living up on Coal Mine Street and I told my wife, 'Look, our daughter's gone in high school, she's staying with your mother, we need to get a three bedroom house where all our children can stay together.' So I was riding along in the [inaudible] community and I saw this house and Shirley Black, she used to live beside us, she said, 'Y'all want to buy a house?' I said, 'Yeah.' She said, 'Let me call the man now.' I said, 'I'll be back tomorrow,' and she said, 'No, let me call the man now.' And it was the only house out there with three bedrooms, a den, a living room and a kitchen. All the rest of them had been sold. So, I got the house with my G.I. bill, payments were \$154 a month. I worked for a trucking company, by then I'd had about 9 - 11 jobs. People were saying maybe I had an attitude. Sometimes people just don't like people when they speak up. I moved in the house by about a month. I had an operation before I had to make the first payment. I didn't know how I was going to make the first payment. I scrounged around and made it some kind of way and then I decided to go to school on the G.I. bill. I went down to Central Piedmont to see if I could go to school. I was still working for the trucking company. And then I started taking classes; I wanted to go into air conditioning and refrigeration. And he told me to go into auto mechanics. And I said, 'Look, man, I don't want auto mechanics.' And once he saw he couldn't talk me out of it, I started taking air conditioning and refrigeration classes. They sort of discriminated against [me]; they didn't really want Blacks in it. But anyway, I got in and a few more Blacks got in the class. I thought about going into nursing but it was a three-year waiting period so I forgot about that. We had one instructor who said, 'If you apply for a license' - he was on the board in Raleigh - 'you'll get a phone call.' His name was Faust, he later died, probably from inhaling Freon over a period of time. He said, 'We have a test in Raleigh, and if we don't want you to get a license, you'll never get a license, because there's no solution to it. We only put people where we want to put people.'

Jan Blodgett: He told you that?

TR Wilson: Yeah, he told the whole class that.

Jan Blodgett: So, did you get a license?

TR Wilson: No. Ok, you gotta go to Raleigh, you gotta spend two days. Pay for your motel, your food, whatever. And if they don't want you to have a license, why spend all this money and time? And then too, what happened during the training, they started bringing in guys who were working in the field. They knew how to work and the instructor started skipping over the details that I needed. And see, sometimes these guys would - the last test I took, these guys out in the field, they made up the test. I didn't pass, I don't know if I didn't study or what, but I went to the school dean and I accused them of discrimination and said it was wrong. I said they gave all the White guys the answers, there were only three of us [Blacks] in that class, they didn't give us the answers. So, ok, they said, 'Well, retake the test.' So, they gave us a simple test of ten questions and they gave us our degrees. But you'll ask me why I didn't work at the sawmill in the first place, but if you'd seen those guys, they worked 12-hour shifts. Most of the time those guys had on those shirts; there was a spackle on them, they were greasy and yellow from that cottonseed oil. [inaudible] The guys used to stay out of school and unload boxcars. Well, I felt like I didn't have the strength to load up all those handcarts with 500 or 600 pounds and then go and sling those sacks and load up boxcars. Now, my father did when he worked for the town of Davidson, he drove the garbage trucks. The garbage collectors got paid \$5 a day. They picked up garbage on Tuesday and Friday. So, my father got to the place where he took the guy aside and said, 'Why not pay them for the full day on Friday? I could go and work somewhere else.' So, the guy saw you could hardly get it done in half a day. This guy stayed back from school and he had a flat bed truck, with sides on it but nothing behind and you had to put the garbage up and pack it down. There was a guy we called Big Bill, he weighed about 300 pounds.

Jan Blodgett: Was he a student at Davidson Elementary School?

TR Wilson: Yeah, he was a packer. This time of year, they would get a 55-gallon steel drum and with a rain like this they would pull 'em.

Jan Blodgett: Wet garbage?

TR Wilson: Right, [inaudible] And you always had to take your clothes off before you went out after you worked.

Jan Blodgett: It sounds like you worked the garbage detail some.

TR Wilson: I worked it. That was when I got out the military. That was \$20 a week; they were giving employment. But anyway my father asked for a raise and they said, 'Look, we can't give you no \$5 a week raise.' So, he quit. Then they had to go and buy a new garbage truck, they got a White guy to drive it and it took him all week to get the garbage. And they still had four people. Ok, my father was cleaning the streets, then the cemetery. If you came to town and wanted a water connection or an electric connection he would set it up. He did all that, and still picked up the garbage.

Jan Blodgett: Wow.

TR Wilson: They always said, 'Well, that Roosevelt has too much, where is he getting his money from?' Well, my father was at the Davidson Presbyterian Church. He would trade cars, there was a guy in Mooresville— Shoo, who talked him in to buying a new car every 2 or 3 years. I never paid for a car. When I got called back in the service, we had a '52 Galaxy Ford, burgundy. It was pretty. I had to go to camp, and I was in a mercantile outfit from Alabama. You know what that meant. There wasn't but one other car I was equal with. This guy was a schoolteacher and he had an Oldsmobile '88 convertible. We were G.I.'s, but I came to the gate one night and I only went from here to maybe that red light and they stopped me and the M.P.'s said, 'You all are speeding.'

Jan Blodgett: Because you had a good car.

TR Wilson: The M.P.'s were from Alabama, too. So, I had to go to school. But my father had a '57 Ford, turquoise and grey. It was a badass Ford. It was hard to keep the tires on the rim. Every time I had something wrong with my car he would say, 'Well, take my car and I'll see what's wrong with yours.' He was a good father, [inaudible] but he expected a lot out of us. That's just the way he was. 'Don't stay in the bed past 8 o'clock.'

Jan Blodgett: That's just like if you chose not to work in the mills, but he gave you enough ambition to say there were better things to do than just be a physical worker.

TR Wilson: Mm-hm. My father wanted me to get a job digging ditches, but after the military I told him I didn't want to work outdoors. In the military, I was in the signal outfit, and I had spent as much as a month out in the rain on what we called a maneuver where you step on a bomb one time, [inaudible] you slept in pup tents, you slept in squat tents. You had to take your socks off

and put them in your pockets so you'd have a dry pair. We didn't have the military equipment we should have had. I would not work outdoors once I got out of there. One day I was in the military call-up, I got broke, and I said I would never be broke where I had to ask somebody for money. You were broke, payday was once a month. I had my class-A allotment because I had a child by Betty. I was on about \$74 a month. So, you figure I was going around on a pretty day eating hamburgers, drinking milkshakes, drinking sodas. And you can't.

Tape ends abruptly. More of this interview may be found on the original cassette recordings.