

Shared Stories: African Americans in North Mecklenburg

Interview with Ron Potts, September 21, 2016

Conducted by Jan Blodgett at Cornelius, NC

Summary: Ron Potts is a member of the Smithville Community Coalition and in this interview they make a passionate case for the preservation of Smithville, a historical African American community that they believe is being encroached on by the larger surrounding town of Cornelius. Potts can trace their ancestry in the area back to the 1860s, when the area was originally settled by people who had been recently freed from enslavement. Potts explains how the legacy of these original settlers continues in Smithville, best exemplified by the circle of original houses at the center of town having been passed down through generations of families. Potts also describes the schools that they attended in the area, including the then newly opened Ada Jenkins school, and how their own educational options differed from those that were available for Potts' older siblings and parents. Potts speaks about their family history of community engagement, including their father's membership in a Smithville civic group and their cousin, Nancy Potts, serving as mayor of Cornelius. Potts goes on to describe how their familial ties to the area brought them back to Smithville after previously moving around the nation for various professions. They conclude the interview by offering interviewer Jan Blodgett a tour of the town to show the deterioration of Smithville's historic neighborhood.

Interviewer: This is Jan Blodgett on September 21st, 2016, with Ron Potts at his home in Cornelius, North Carolina. So, let's start by just telling me about your family, where your parents are from. We'll start there, and we'll get to you born, and move forward.

Ron Potts: Okay. In Cornelius, but, again, I still call it Smithville, and so I was born here nearly 70 years ago. I was toward the last of my mother and father's children. There was eight children born. Six survived. And there was a gap between me and my next oldest. So, it was almost like my sister and I were the second family. So, you know, I grew up in the family with my mom and

dad and my older brothers and sisters. Interesting enough, I started first grade when my oldest brother started college. So, it was like he and my brothers and sisters were my parents. But anyway, we grew up in a close home.

Interviewer: So, tell me a little bit about Smithville, because now, I mean, the neighborhood exists, but was this more of a farming community, or did it coalesce around the school? How did Smithville get to be a neighborhood, that you know?

Ron Potts: From what I know, now, in terms of it being a farming neighborhood, not specifically for selling. You know, maybe—

Interviewer: People had gardens?

Ron Potts: Right, people had gardens. In fact, my house sits on the garden to this house right here. And so, everybody had gardens, but it was for their families primarily. But it grew up—now, and I really got some of this from Any Town—a book.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah, the Cornelius history.

Ron Potts: Right.

Interviewer: A Town by Any Other Name.

Ron Potts: A Town, right. In that—now, I can trace my relatives back to about 1860.

Interviewer: Okay, living in this...

Ron Potts: Living right in this area. The person who raised my mother and father, I know he was born in 1860, and I knew him. And so, this community, according to the book, was settled by released slaves. And the property was sold to them by a Mr. Smith. And I think he's from the Potts family, with Miriam. Miriam Potts' family. He sold the property to the newly released slaves. And so, that was in the 1800s, late 1800s. So, my mother was born here in 1910, my dad in 1912, right here in the community. There's a lot of other people—and a lot of the residents are all descendants of someone else from the community. Some people have never left. They've never left.

Interviewer: Has the house stayed in the same family? Because this is a newer house, but did you live in the house that maybe one of your parents grew up in? Or how did houses change hands?

Ron Potts: Well, now, the actual settlement—and I'll show you around. I'll just take you on a tour of the community, too. But there's kind of a circle of the original homes. And, yeah, they've been just kind of passed down to family. Now, this is a family home. My daddy's sisters built this home in the '50s. But, yeah, I could say all the other homes are—now, some—there are some homes that are being rented. And this development, this part of it down here—

Interviewer: So, the Smithville street that goes—

Ron Potts: Right, that was—for example, that was built in the '70s, I believe. And that's been the last new development in the area. Now, there's another section on the other side of Catawba, and it was built in the '60s. But, you know, there is an old Rosenwald School, you know, that most of the kids—you know, everybody went to.

Interviewer: So, is that where you went to school?

Ron Potts: No. Actually, it closed the year before I started school.

Interviewer: Okay. So, your siblings went.

Ron Potts: Yeah, my older brother and sisters and my parents all went to the Smithville Rosenwald School. And so, and I think the records show—let me think about that—that it opened somewhere in the '20s. I'm not sure. I may have something on that in here someplace, but that it opened sometime in the '20s, because I know my mother went there, and she was born in 1910, as I said.

Interviewer: Yeah. And I think that's the right timeframe.

Ron Potts: Right. Okay.

Interviewer: So, where did you go to school?

Ron Potts: I went to Ada Jenkins.

Interviewer: Okay. So, how did you get there?

Ron Potts: I was bused.

Interviewer: Because your siblings would have walked.

Ron Potts: Right. So, I was bused there. So...

Interviewer: Was it one of the students? I talked to David Beatty, who, as a Torrence Lytle student, drove the bus.

Ron Potts: I drove the bus. I did too.

Interviewer: Did you?

Ron Potts: Right, I did too.

Interviewer: So, how old were you when you drove the school bus?

Ron Potts: 16.

Interviewer: That's what he was.

Ron Potts: Yeah, 16, driving a bus. And I'm not going to talk about my history as a bus driver. That's not going to be a part of the documentation.

Interviewer: That's perfectly understandable. So, when you went to Ada Jenkins, what grades were there?

Ron Potts: First through eighth. First through eighth was at Ada Jenkins.

Interviewer: Any teachers you remember?

Ron Potts: Oh, my goodness, absolutely. You know, in the black community—I don't know, maybe—you know, I don't know. But in the black community, the teachers were like gods, you know? And so, my first-grade teacher was Ms. Diamond. My brothers and sisters all had Ms. Diamond over here at—and so, Ms. Diamond was one of the teachers that came from the Rosenwald School and went to Ada Jenkins. And the other was the principal up there, who was [00:07:39 Mr. J.O. Harris], and he ruled with an iron fist, but everybody respected him.

Interviewer: Yeah, I've heard stories of people that if you acted up in school, your parents knew before you got home.

Ron Potts: Absolutely, absolutely. And then, you got a punishment, you got a spanking at school, and you got another one at home, because the teachers could not do any wrong.

Interviewer: Did they ever come to dinner? Did you ever have Sunday dinners either with ministers or with teachers?

Ron Potts: Most often with ministers. Most of the teachers, expect—now, there were two in Davidson, Ms. Baucom and Ms. Brown, that actually lives in the community, but all the other teachers lived in Charlotte, and they commuted here on Old 115.

Interviewer: When it was the main highway.

Ron Potts: Right.

Interviewer: 115 was the way you came and went.

Ron Potts: When it was the main highway, correct, right? But they still felt like part of the family, because my teachers all knew my brothers and sisters, which was not always a plus, thus the reason, perhaps, that I got all those accolades in the book, because my oldest brother, you know, had preceded me, right?

Interviewer: But how big were the classes?

Ron Potts: Maybe about 30 students, 35.

Interviewer: That's quite a few students coming around, I mean, to fill the Ada Jenkins school.

Ron Potts: So, Ada Jenkins—well, so, you know, it was also what we considered the rural community, too. We did not consider ourselves rural.

Interviewer: You have neighbors, you know.

Ron Potts: Right, yeah. But it included the rural communities, which are now Jetton [Street]—I mean, the Peninsula. Those were all—you know, that was true country when I was growing up, before the lake.

Interviewer: Yeah, oh, yeah. Even when I got here in 1994, there was nothing next to 25 or up to 28. But, yeah, in the '50s, '60s, there was nothing out there.

Ron Potts: Absolutely, it was nothing. So, it was a lot of farmland and things like that. And so, a lot of students came from those areas. And, of course, they went all the way as far as almost to Cabarrus County, you know, with students feeding into Ada Jenkins.

Interviewer: Yeah, because I talked to Odell Black, and he lived out by Columbus Chapel on 73, almost in Cabarrus, and came into Ada Jenkins as well. So, how did that work? I mean, did you make friends with students on the outside?

Ron Potts: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: Or because you didn't see each other after school...

Ron Potts: But, you know, the thing about it is, it didn't seem like any barrier. But, now, of course, there were plenty. When I was growing up here in Cornelius, in Smithville, there were plenty of kids. One of the families had nine children, all about my age, and they lived out on the dead end. So, even in the summertime, it was always plenty of kids, and we used to play in the roads. On the roads, we played softball, dodge ball, hopscotch, hide-and-seek, you know, all of those things outside. And some of my—a buddy of mine, we say that we had such a great childhood growing up here. I mean, we didn't really know, perhaps, how disadvantaged we were. We did not, because, you know, things were so pretty pleasant. Right. And we used to be able to play all over the community, ride bicycles, activities at the community center. Just about every weekend, there was something going on.

Interviewer: Now, were there Boy Scout troops here?

Ron Potts: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: I know that Davidson College, the YMCA guys did some Boy Scout troops in the area, and I think they had at least one in Cornelius.

Ron Potts: Okay. But now, in Smithville, there was a man that had a troop for—I mean, it was, like, one of the—Troop 17 was the number, Troop 17 or 18, something like that. And he was a member of my church, and my brothers, they had all been active in—but now, as I recall, the Boy Scout troops were all segregated. You know, when they used to go to camp, it was a segregated Boy Scout camp. But, yeah, we had Boy Scouts. Now, I wasn't as active as my

brothers were. But, again, it was rural enough. There was creeks and things like that, that we used to go out and dam and play in and swing in trees. It was—

Interviewer: You were expected to be outside.

Ron Potts: Absolutely, absolutely. And people talk about the streetlights. We grew up without streetlights. And I may be jumping the subject, but—so, I was born in '46. The Rosenwald School closed in '52, because in '53 I went to Ada Jenkins. And after that—so...

Interviewer: Okay, this is an article on the school?

Ron Potts: Right. Articles on it. But these men, these men...

Interviewer: Okay.

Ron Potts: Started...

Interviewer: Okay. So, this is a photograph of a lot of men in business suits.

Ron Potts: That's their Sunday suits.

Interviewer: Sunday suits.

Ron Potts: Sunday suits. Sunday—okay. And that's a big emphasis, because they were not—right. I'm thinking my dad was probably the most professional, and he was a barber.

Interviewer: Yeah. They're all wearing carnations. So, is this their—do they have an official title? Was this a group?

Ron Potts: Uh-huh. And I also have an article on—you know, I had—

Interviewer: Let's keep the—I'll put the picture back in with its slot, okay.

Ron Potts: And I don't need to leave that in there. I'll just—you can just take this. So, somewhere—and by the way, there was also a women's group too.

Interviewer: Yeah, in Davidson, the civic group did a whole women's civic group, who were the ones who really pushed for streetlights, street signs, sanitation...

Ron Potts: And that's what these guys did. But see—and where is my article on this?

Interviewer: Is it inside, behind that?

Ron Potts: If not, I may have to print that off for you. Oh, okay, this is it. And, basically, they formed. I have no idea what their inspiration was. Oh, yeah. So, we didn't have services, because Smithville was not in the city limits.

Interviewer: Of Cornelius.

Ron Potts: Of Cornelius.

Interviewer: So, no water, no sewer, no electricity.

Ron Potts: Right. And so, in fact, I grew up with a toilet, an outside toilet. I mean, you know, it changed, but I remember going to an outside toilet. And these men formed for the purpose of doing improvements in the community, getting running water, because people had wells, and so they got running water. They got our own streetlights. And, again, they leased Rosenwald School and made it into a community center, which was—it truly was the heart of not only Smithville, but Davidson, Huntersville, you know, just surrounding black communities. And there would be a dance there just about every weekend. And the men, you know, they kind of took turns manning the center, even though there was one particular one that always did it on the weekends. But yeah. The women—now, this is my story. The women, I thought, were a little more social. You know, and you've got their names. And, yes, those are not business suits. That's interesting, that you would say business suits. Those are Sunday suits.

Interviewer: And they could also be—because I'm a Quaker, and no one wears that to church on Sunday.

Ron Potts: Oh, really?

Interviewer: Yeah, we come rather more casually dressed.

Ron Potts: Oh, okay.

Interviewer: So, I don't think of Sunday dress-up anymore as being my best.

Ron Potts: Yeah. And the women's things too. Okay, now, where did I go?

Interviewer: Okay. So, we got you at Ada Jenkins. So, you go to school through the eighth grade there, and then you get to go to Torrence Lytle.

Ron Potts: Right. And interesting enough, my class was the last full class at Torrence Lytle. The class after mine, they had a choice. They could go to either North or stay at Torrence Lytle, because that was the last year.

Interviewer: How many chose to stay? Most of them?

Ron Potts: You know, I'm not real sure. I think most of them decided to stay. But Patricia—Pat Stinson was in that class. So, I talked to her. I did talk to her.

Interviewer: Okay.

Ron Potts: Yeah. We'll talk about that. But, yeah, so, after that, then I went on to college at Fisk University in Nashville. And one of the reasons I went there, too, is because my oldest brother, by then, was in medical school, and he was in medical school at Meharry, and Fisk is the sister school just across the street. And so, I lived with him my first year, maybe two. And then, after that, I moved onto campus. And then he graduated, and then I moved onto campus, right.

Interviewer: So, while you were still at Ada Jenkins and at Torrence Lytle, did you have jobs? Did you have summer jobs?

Ron Potts: I did. I did.

Interviewer: So, how did this work? Were you expected to, or you just wanted extra money so you started mowing lawns or—

Ron Potts: My dad made me work. I shined shoes at the barbershop, as my brothers had. I'm hoping I might have a picture of the shoeshine stand somewhere. But, yeah, I started shining shoes probably when I was 11 or 12.

Interviewer: Okay. And then, you graduated to...

Ron Potts: Then I got a job at Davidson College.

Interviewer: Okay.

Ron Potts: I worked in the kitchen my senior year of high school with my buddies.

Interviewer: So, this would have been the student cafeteria that was, I think, in the Evans Building, the Union?

Ron Potts: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's not there anymore.

Ron Potts: It's not there anymore. Yeah. The first time I went to Davidson College, I said, "What happened? Where is everything?"

Interviewer: There's a big library building on top of that spot now.

Ron Potts: Yeah. But, yeah, so, wherever that old cafeteria was.

Interviewer: So, how did you get there? Did you bike over? Did you have a car?

Ron Potts: I used my dad's car, and I picked up the guys I worked with.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you just carpooled in. And so, what kind of hours did you...

Ron Potts: So, I think we went after school every day, just about every day.

Interviewer: You had to study to get into college.

Ron Potts: Yeah, but I did. I started working. Like I said, I started working there my senior year in high school. But some of the guys I worked with were sophomores.

Interviewer: So, they continued through.

Ron Potts: Right. They worked there for several years, too.

Interviewer: Okay. And how did you decide—okay, you picked a college because your brother was there. But was that an expectation at Torrence Lytle?

Ron Potts: Yeah, it was, as well as it was an expectation from my parents. I always knew that I was going to go to college, and that's what my parents promoted. Now, my oldest sister went to college. She didn't make it. And then, my brother, and he was the valedictorian of his class, just that path set for me. And he went to North Carolina Central. And, like I said, by the time I went to college, he had worked a couple years, but he had always wanted to be a doctor, so he went back to medical school, and then, the next year, I went to Fisk there. And I'm really thinking that it was Fisk primarily because he was there, because otherwise, before that, I didn't know anything about Fisk until he went there. And he kind of encouraged me to go there. Of course, then, my one sister—my oldest sister and my oldest brother, then Mickey, he's the barber. Of

course, dad may have wanted all of us to be barbers. But I knew that—from working at the barbershop and working on Saturdays—oh, I hated working on Saturdays. I was determined I wasn't going to do that.

Interviewer: You wanted your weekends.

Ron Potts: I wanted my weekends. I'm not going to be working on Saturdays. And so, now, one of my sisters, she is low performing, so she's always lived at home, and she still lives in a family home. And then, my younger sister, she also went to North Carolina Central, but she was more interested in getting married. And so, she went for two years, then she got married. And she lives in Hickory.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you went to college. How was—I mean, because you had your brother, so that gave you some context. But what was it like coming from Cornelius to Fisk?

Ron Potts: What a culture shock. It was. It was absolute—so, from being that superlative that I was in high school, I got lost in college. I truly—and then, I think—now, my personal opinion, hindsight, I think not living on campus, you know, I always felt like I kind of lost those initial college experiences and some bonding that most of the other kids developed. But, yeah, it was a true shock. Now, maybe it was good from an academic standpoint, because, again, those first two years that I lived with him, I did pretty good.

Interviewer: Oh, because he kept you studying, and he was studying.

Ron Potts: Right. Yeah. So, but after he left, I became—

Interviewer: You began to enjoy college.

Ron Potts: I became a typical college student late. I became that typical college student late. But, so, I did it. It wasn't the greatest experience for me, but you know...

Interviewer: It must have been interesting meeting people from different states.

Ron Potts: Absolutely, right. Absolutely. And I'm glad I did. Then, after college, originally, I wanted to major in psychology. That was always my intent. My brother didn't think much of that. He didn't. Like I said, he was my parent.

Interviewer: Yeah, he was like a parent to you.

Ron Potts: Right. And he didn't think much of that. And so, as a result, those last two years in college, I really just kind of floundered.

Interviewer: If you don't have a major you really want, it can be hard to stay engaged in it.

Ron Potts: Right, so I didn't pursue that. And so, he says, "Well, why don't you try law?" Well, so, I ended up majoring in political science, but I hated it. I mean, even though I'm fairly interested in politics now. But I wasn't interested, and I wasn't interested in law. So, as soon as I finished college, I went to work. I was able to get a job. I got a job with a grain manufacturing company right out of Nashville. I went directly from Nashville, you know, with—yeah—to Minneapolis.

Interviewer: That one must have been a culture shock.

Ron Potts: Absolutely, absolutely.

Interviewer: But you were young and wanted an adventure.

Ron Potts: Oh, right. Yeah, I did. And so, I started grain merchandising. I didn't get it. I didn't get it. But I was there. And—let me think. How did that work? I graduated in—but I got drafted. I got drafted in September of '69, while I was working in Minneapolis. And then I went to Vietnam. And so, when I left Vietnam, I went back to Minneapolis, and then I was transferred with the grain merchandising outfit to Omaha, Nebraska.

Interviewer: Been there.

Ron Potts: Oh, yeah? If so, why do your eyes cross?

Interviewer: Actually, I lived in Lincoln, Nebraska. So, I grew up on Air Force bases, and we moved to Lincoln, and we were there when the base closed. So, it was not really a good time to be there if you were affiliated with the base. But it was also—Nebraska was a culture shock for us. We had come from Arizona and we'd been in Europe, and it was just a little different.

Ron Potts: Right. Well, interesting enough, for me, to this day I still go back to Omaha about once a year, because I did make connections in Omaha. I mean, I found Midwestern blacks different than Southern blacks. I mean, you know, I said, 'Oh, I thought we were the owners of Southern hospitality.' But these people are much more hospitable than Southerners, to me. And

so, you know, I consider Omaha my second home and I still go back there fairly often. I still have really, really close friends there. But after I had been in Omaha with the grain, I left there and went to work for Mutual of Omaha, which is where I ended up developing my career background. I was, quote, 'the first group underwriter—first black group underwriter in my department.' And so, I started underwriting, and so that ended up being the basis of my career. And I did enjoy it.

Interviewer: So, what drew you back to Smithville? The winters?

Ron Potts: No. Before that, I ended up in California. So, I went to California, still in insurance, with another insurance company. And I was out there for 12 years. And then, I started working on the corporate side, handling the insurance for corporations. And then, the company I was working for in California was acquired, and I ended up moving from there to Houston, Texas, from there to West Palm Beach, Florida, but then, while I was in Florida, my mom died. And I was home visiting. Sometimes after that, my dad cried when I left. And so, I moved back. So, that's why I'm here.

Interviewer: So, you've had quite a—you missed Maine and Vermont, but...

Ron Potts: Right, right. I went all the way across, but I never went north—well, not northeast anyway.

Interviewer: So, when did you come back?

Ron Potts: I came back here in '97—well, in December of—'98.

Interviewer: Okay. And then, when did you get involved in the whole Smithville community?

Ron Potts: And I went to work here.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, you were still working.

Ron Potts: Yeah, I did work, but I was, you know, taking care of my dad.

Interviewer: You were working out of Charlotte?

Ron Potts: I was working in Charlotte, still back handling the insurance for Carolina's health care. But, you know, I still kind of started getting involved in the community, because, again,

that's what my dad did. And so, when I came back, it was obvious to me how everything had grown right here around the community, except my community.

Interviewer: So, Cornelius is spreading across the lake. I-77 has come through now.

Ron Potts: Right. Right. And as all these developments just squeezing Smithville in, and, you know, I see all this prosperity outside of it, but I don't see any of it here. And so, you know, this was area that my dad took pride in. So, I didn't feel like I was just going to lay down and see it happen, even though I'm at that point now. I'm very discouraged, because I do feel there's such—I don't know if I want to call it kind of a head-in-the-sand attitude. And people don't want to change.

Interviewer: And it's always been interesting. You know, there was a student who did a thesis for a history class before I got here on Davidson and the town and the African- American community, and why during the Civil Rights Era there was almost nothing happened. And a good part of it is that people worked for the college, and nothing was happening at the college, and so you didn't—and there's never been sort of the personality minister in town. Logan Houston was the closest—or, no, I'm getting the name wrong. Calvin Houston. But there weren't really people—you know, there never seemed to be that level of civic engagement. And there's sort of this very low-key approach, so that every once in a while, groups form, things happen, but there's not an overall sense of agency, of sort of taking—standing up and saying, "Wait, we can do this." And there's never—I think it may be different here.

Ron Potts: Different where?

Interviewer: In Smithville to Davidson, in that there have not been new families moving in. You've seen the black population—you know, families, kids grow up, they move, they go to Atlanta, they go someplace, and they don't come back.

Ron Potts: Right. They move out.

Interviewer: They move out, and you're not seeing a whole lot of people moving into the neighborhood to—I guess, because you said that was the '70s, because that's when Lakeside was built in Davidson. In the '60s and the '70s, there was housing built on the west side of Davidson,

but those have just kind of stayed there, but there's not been—and there's not been a middle-class black population.

Ron Potts: Right.

Interviewer: There's not many working for the college, working on the faculty, all of that, that might bring in another community that could piggyback on. And the same thing, I think, happens to the mill workers as well. You know, the population of people who were white mill workers. And so, mills went away. They just sort of disappeared.

Ron Potts: Right. Well, now, in the '70s, when this neighborhood was developed, that's where most of the people worked. They worked at the mills, with the exception of—now, I have a cousin down the street. She's a schoolteacher. Of course, Nan was a schoolteacher. But, you know, I mean, there's not—there's not any other really professional people around here, because people, they don't come back. They move out. They move out, and they don't come back. And, you know, if I talk to my brother too long, I can get annoyed with him, because his attitudes and values are so different. "What? Wake up. Wake up." And the thing about it, Nan was—

Interviewer: This is Nanny Potts. She was mayor of Cornelius.

Ron Potts: Absolutely. She was—

Interviewer: Is she your...

Ron Potts: She's my sister-in-law. Right. Yeah. And she was, she was really outspoken in her own way, but at the same time, were respected. But, again, I think that was in her blood. Calvin is her brother. Logan, her dad. And they were kind of the movers and shakers in Davidson. You know what I mean by that.

Interviewer: Yeah. They were the most visible. They were respected.

Ron Potts: Right. And so, I think, when that's kind of a part of your family, you know, some of the children growing up...

Interviewer: You inherited the mantle, and you took it on.

Ron Potts: Absolutely. Right.

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit about your dad. So, he ran the barbershop in town.

Ron Potts: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: So, he had one of the—and I'm curious about black-owned businesses and also sort of the entrepreneurial spirit of, you might not own a business, but you might be doing hair in someone's home, or—what was it that someone was talking about just last night? What was it? This one mentioned just a little business on the side, but they weren't necessarily—you didn't have your own building, but people had small businesses, small—

Ron Potts: Well—

Interviewer: How did your dad get the barbershop? Was it here before him? How long is that...

Ron Potts: Okay. So, now, again—

Interviewer: There's the barbershop book.

Ron Potts: But I think I have it in the—what book do I have, again? Oh, yeah, it's in this one. So, in this one, I really try to give some dialogue on that. You know...

Interviewer: So, sort of at an early age, he owned a shop.

Ron Potts: Right. So...

Interviewer: Okay. So, he started barbering in 1926.

Ron Potts: But there was an old section of Cornelius called Brick Row. You ever hear it?

Interviewer: Is that's what's on Catawba where the barbershop is now?

Ron Potts: No. It's actually—it ran along the railroad track. It truly looked like Gunsmoke. I will kid you not. Yeah, it truly—I may have—I'm sure I may have a picture. That's where it is now. But I think I have a picture in here of what—oh, I thought I had a picture in here of what Gunsmoke looked like.

Interviewer: Yes, because Odell told me he wasn't allowed to go to Gunsmoke. That that was his one—

Ron Potts: No.

Interviewer: That's different?

Ron Potts: Yeah.

Interviewer: That was in Davidson.

Ron Potts: Yeah, Gunsmoke is in Davidson.

Interviewer: So, each town has their own Gunsmoke.

Ron Potts: You know what, I'm calling it Gunsmoke, but it was called Brock Row. And actually, by the time I was growing up, my dad was one of the last businesses in this row of brick businesses where he had a barbershop, but actually, it was owned by a white man. Now, I'm not sure. I might have to have you talk to my brother. But the white man hired dad to cut hair. What I can't remember is that they cut hair together. That part, I don't know about. But I think he's the one who trained dad, I think. And so, somewhere in the '50s, he sold dad the business on Brick Row. And so, then, it became—but I don't know, back then, it had the name Potts Barbershop. But, you know, it didn't have Potts Barbershop until it moved to the current location. That was in 1960.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what happened to Brick Row? Was it demolished?

Ron Potts: Yeah, demolished, right.

Interviewer: And how easy was it for a black man to get a business on Main Street in Cornelius in 1960?

Ron Potts: Well, as far as I know, because—

Interviewer: People already knew him from the other shop.

Ron Potts: Absolutely. They all knew him. The banker, Mr. Boone was the president of the bank, who we all knew, and he knew Wilson. You know, everybody called him Wilson, even the kids. The kids all called him Wilson. It wasn't "Mr. Potts" until much, much later.

Interviewer: He got older, he gets some dignity.

Ron Potts: Yeah, it was much, much later before they started calling him Mr. Potts, but it was always Wilson. I remember him getting the business. I remember him and my mother talking

about it. But I don't remember that there was any difficulty with it. Yeah. Now, in terms of other black businesses back then, you know, there have been other people that tried some things, like the Rivens Barbershop.

Interviewer: Little barbershop on Catawba.

Ron Potts: Mm-hmm. You know, it hasn't flourished, but I don't know what that's—

Interviewer: Were there grocery stores here? Did anybody have a small store?

Ron Potts: Yeah, there were. You know, they weren't the main places, but there were two stores here, right here in Smithville. Mr. Clem Caldwell had a store, and it was, you know...

Interviewer: Yeah, but you got bread and milk.

Ron Potts: Yeah, right, and sodas, cracked his peanuts, you know, those things. And another one, right down here. But, yeah, so—but still, people went, quote, Uptown, because that's what we called Cornelius. We called it Uptown. I still call it Uptown. Uptown. And most people used to walk it. A lot of people used to walk, because, you know, we always had a car, so sometimes we'd see people walking, "You want a ride?" I mean, it's like it was something major.

Interviewer: Yeah. I'm trying to remember, because when I got here, there were still mills there. So, they tore down the one, like, where the town hall is now.

Ron Potts: Mm-hmm. And Food Lion.

Interviewer: Food Lion. So, where were the stores? Were they around the mills?

Ron Potts: Mm-hmm, across the street. So, there was—now, Harris Teeter has always been around.

Interviewer: Yeah, one of them was in Morrisville originally.

Ron Potts: But there was one right here in Cornelius, too. There was a Harris Teeter. What's there now? You know where the ice cream—

Interviewer: Oh, Carolina Cones?

Ron Potts: Carolina Cones. Just down the street, you know, that structure that's on the end, right there, that's where Harris Teeter used to be. And then, there was a Mayhew's. I don't know if

you've heard of the Mayhew family. They had a store. And there was another store, but I can't remember the name of it.

Interviewer: So, where did you go for movies, for all of that?

Ron Potts: So, when I grew up, right there in Cornelius across the railroad track was one of those theaters where the blacks sat upstairs and—then the blacks were upstairs and the whites were downstairs. But it closed real early in my life. But my older brothers, that's where they used to go. But I did go there, but it didn't last long. So, then we ended up going to Morrisville. But you'd have to get a ride there.

Interviewer: I was sort of wondering if you had focused toward Charlotte or if you went Morrisville more. And of course, you did have the community center here, so that was...

Ron Potts: But we didn't have movies there. Yeah. Right. It was just mostly dances and things like that at the community center.

Interviewer: Did you remember anything at all about the relationship with the people who worked in the mills, particularly the white mill kids? In Davidson, there was a real divide, actually, within the white community between the college kids and the lint-heads.

Ron Potts: The what now?

Interviewer: The lint-heads, what they called the—and this was in the '40s, before the mills all started closing down. So, you're a little bit young for that.

Ron Potts: Right.

Interviewer: Were you guys aware of each other at all?

Ron Potts: Yeah, aware, but there was not a lot of interaction. And the thing about it is, at the same time, I can't recall a lot of overt hostility. You know, things would happen sometimes, but I don't remember it being something constant.

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean, you probably didn't interact much. Your sport teams did different things. Your schools did different things. So, you didn't—

Ron Potts: Right. And so, again, the whole integration thing happened after I left North Carolina. But I don't remember any real racial tension here in Cornelius. The time that I was visiting with Miriam Whisnut and Dave Yoakum was with us, and so I think Marion has a little antagonism with Dave. She thinks he's a Yankee and that is always going to paint things one way or the other. But I think we were emphasizing that it was just the way it was.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, not a whole lot happened here. I mean, short of the picketing of Ralph Johnson's barbershop, no Davidson students got terribly involved in civil rights or Vietnam, although other than Joe Howell, but he did the march from—you know, he organized the march from Johnson C. Smith to downtown, so some Davidson students did it. But I don't get a sense that, in this area, there was anything, constant conflict or people sort of raising—if they wanted to, it wasn't happening.

Ron Potts: So, Nanny, on the other hand, in 1960, got picked up by the police.

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't know this.

Ron Potts: Yeah. She was protesting. She went to Barber-Scotia.

Interviewer: So, what else would you want people to know about what you've seen in your lifetime, late 20th century, early 21st century, for this community and this area, including your church, you know...

Ron Potts: I think I've already expressed what my concern is, is—my personal concern is the fact that it's still—it's the same here as it was 40 years ago. I mean, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah. How did the employment opportunities not change? How has it been that—

Ron Potts: Right, dead. Like, when the mills were here, I thought, when I used to visit, when I used to come back home to visit, and, again, this community was new, and there was life in the community. Now there's not much life.

Interviewer: Is the community aging?

Ron Potts: It's aging, and the young people—and we've talked about them who inherited their homes—they are, you know, Millennials, and they clearly don't have the same values. A lot of them are renters, or they just don't have the same appreciation for the community that I kind of

grew up knowing. And so, it's just a deterioration that I'm concerned about. And, I mean, I don't know if I feel a lot of hope for the community.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Ron Potts: And everybody thinks, you know, if you talk—now, the coalition did a survey, Davidson College students. I told you about that, right?

Interviewer: Unh-uh.

Ron Potts: Davidson College students conducted a survey for us. We've been waiting on the results of that survey.

Interviewer: Do you remember who the faculty member is? I can find them, and...

Ron Potts: Actually, it was those students, right.

Ron Potts: You know what, actually—in my notes somewhere, I probably have who it is. But we never actually met an advisor. We always dealt directly with the students. But they were part of some authorized—they were operating under the auspices of the college, so they had to get permission to do these things, right. But, so, we conducted this survey, and I'm anxious to see what the residents said, what they feel. But my opinion is that they think that the town is just going to come in and take over and wipe their community out. It's just going to happen. And so, it's almost like they're afraid of any type of—I'm saying "intrusion" for the lack of a better word, that the town makes is going to disrupt—

Interviewer: And the attention might actually bring you in more trouble.

Ron Potts: Right, right.

Interviewer: Because you just got a water park, right? Or didn't—a Rotary group was trying to do something for the kids, or a little bit of a small park?

Ron Potts: But, now, we don't feel that that was for them, personally. We were involved. You know, we promoted it, but I continue to say it's not that many kids in the community that it's for. That's for the East Side. That's for Cornelius, not so much Smithville, but it's in the Smithville Park. But, again, the Smithville residents don't use the park.

Interviewer: They don't feel comfortable there?

Ron Potts: Yeah.

Interviewer: And what has happened to the Rosenwald School? Is it still a community center? Are there any activities out of it?

Ron Potts: No. Yeah, it's just dead. Again, the family that bought it, none of them live here. They don't seem to have a lot of interest. And it's deteriorating itself.

Interviewer: Yeah, you have to have one person who loves it to keep it going, and when you lose those people, it's hard to...

Ron Potts: Yeah. And so, Lisa and I are really the only ones who have been trying to do it. And unfortunately by the time that I started working, Nan's health had already started to decline. Because, you know, she maybe had been able to be more effective than Lisa and I have been to do, but we haven't been able to get the community to rally behind us. When they want—I mean, seriously, it's almost toxic from the standpoint, when they want something, they'll come to us. But in terms of just being proactive about things, that's not the case. So, those are my concerns. You know, the fact that these men, that they had a vision.

Interviewer: Yeah, and that they tried to create a community, resources for the community, and they were successful.

Ron Potts: Absolutely.

Interviewer: I mean, a lot of your classmates went to college. I mean, they created this piece, but, yeah. And I think—I know in Davidson, you could see a shift when Ada Jenkins closed and when the schools, you didn't have that cohesion, you didn't have the family connections. And it's like, with that empty building there, something dissolved. And the next generation wasn't going to colleges at the same rate. There was just sort of a—not what you would have expected to have happen or what anyone intended to. But communities needing to have some kind of social core, some kind of identity and shared aspirations.

Ron Potts: Right. I agree. And we have tried. You know, we've actually talked to Wells Fargo. We met with their community outreach about them purchasing the center for us and helping us

revitalize it. And they kind of expressed some interest, but nothing has come of it. And realizing that if we could get that revitalized, too, that that would help.

Interviewer: Yeah. And focus to the community something that would keep them going.

Ron Potts: Let me show you the Smithville Community Coalition's objective.

Interviewer: All right.

Ron Potts: That's—

Interviewer: Okay. "Vision: revitalize and transform our community into a vibrant, safe, and attractive place to live and work that builds pride in our residents and attracts new developments of affordable homes, businesses, focusing on empowering all individuals and strengthening families. Mission: to serve as a focal point to rally the community, local faith-based organizations, and nonprofit entities to achieve the vision and put God's love into action." Now, when was this formed?

Ron Potts: This particular restatement of it was in 2011.

Interviewer: Okay. But this is 2007, so there was an association working at least then.

Ron Potts: Again, that's when we kind of started it again. But, again, it didn't make it. So, then we started it again. But, again, the original organization, which was started by these men, was—now, it was incorporated in 1968.

Interviewer: Wow.

Ron Potts: Yeah.

Interviewer: But clearly that's before 1968.

Ron Potts: Right.

Interviewer: Yeah. And I see this as an archivist. There are a lots of organizations, like the civic organization in Davidson. The women were very active at the turn of the century, the turn of the century up through, and by the 1930s, they had sort of evolved into more social, and people were engaged in their schools, because they had kids in school, but they weren't looking at the community as a whole, so you saw that sort of fragment in the group just disappear. And I don't

think there's anything—you know, there's the Garden Club that keeps Davidson's downtown looking pretty, and there are people who are active, and now there's Davidson Lands Coalition and there's PTAs, and you just don't see overall—

Ron Potts: Oh, but are there PTAs now?

Interviewer: There are still PTAs.

Ron Potts: Okay, okay. Well, again, those are the things that our parents were involved in.

Interviewer: But the other thing, in Davidson, in the last decade, the number of elementary schools has just grown exponentially, all sorts of private schools and charter schools. So, at one time, Davidson Elementary practically had a waiting list, and now they're down, but there are just dozens. And kids live on the same block and go to different schools.

Ron Potts: I see.

Interviewer: I know at least two faculty children who grew up in the same school, went to the same college, and they didn't know each other.

Ron Potts: Oh, really?

Interviewer: Because they had gone to different high schools or different schools all through their lives and never really interacted.

Ron Potts: In Davidson?

Interviewer: Yeah, even in Davidson, they could live in the same neighborhood, but one of them is going to Providence Day, one of them is going to Cannon, and they just...

Ron Potts: And none of that existed, you know, when I was growing up.

Interviewer: Yeah. You had one school, and then you had two with North Meck, but you didn't have—so, there are lots of things that pull communities apart and not as many things that pull together, bring us together. And it's like, hey, let's do this activity.

Ron Potts: Right. And I guess—and again, coming back to—even my church, you know, we do have a new minister, and I do—you know, I feel like he has the potential to help us to—

Interviewer: Mm-hmm, because you're at Torrence Chapel?

Ron Potts: Torrence Chapel, right.

Interviewer: And that's sort of the mother church for around here, right?

Ron Potts: Right.

Interviewer: They certainly founded Reeve's Temple and some of the others.

Ron Potts: Right, Union Bethel, right. And people came from our chapel. And now, do you know where it is?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ron Potts: Okay. Now, do you want me to show you around at all, the Smithville community?

Interviewer: Yeah. Let's turn this off, so we're not going to—it's too weird when you're recording it and going, "This house..."

Ron Potts: Oh, yeah, right. No, it'll take five minutes, if that long. I just want to show you how it's deteriorated. For example, there are lots, vacant lots now where there were homes when I was growing up.

Interviewer: Yeah, and no one's turning them into gardens or using them for anything.

Ron Potts: Right. Plenty of vacant lots, several vacant homes. Again, a part of that deterioration. And then, homes. Like, this home is probably—I bet that home is well over 100 years old. I know it's at least 100 years old. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Could have been built in the 1910s.

Ron Potts: Yeah, right, right. In fact, I've seen the deed on it. I have no idea where it is now. A long time ago, I ran across it, because that was also a relative's.

Interviewer: Okay. So, thank you very much.

Ron Potts: I'm sorry. I know I've been all over the place.

Interviewer: Well, that's perfectly normal, and that's—while it makes it difficult for anyone who's listening to this—that's why we do transcripts, so that other people can find them—it actually, for me, shows how things tie together.

Ron Potts: Okay. How can you organize all that? I'm talking about you.

Interviewer: It's not easy. But, actually, that's what I do. My job is to gather up stuff and sort of find ways to describe it and make it available, and then have people use it in different ways.

Ron Potts: Maybe you can help me, because I love it. I mean, you know, that's why I've started collecting these binders. But I'll go at it for a while, and then I'll kind of lose interest or get involved in something else. But, yeah, maybe you can help me figure out how to start archiving and collecting it from history.

Interviewer: Oh, absolutely. No doubt. Okay. End of recording.