RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH CLARENCE WILSON

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Alexandra McKinnon: This begins an interview with Mr. Clarence H. Wilson on March 21, 2011 in Montclair, New Jersey with Alexandra McKinnon, Sandra Stewart Holyoak, and Edward Bolden, Mr. Wilson's son-in-law.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Thank you so much for having us here today Mr. Wilson. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

Clarence Wilson: I was born in Mecklenburg County, Virginia [on] September 4th, 1919. …

SH: Let us begin by talking about your family history.

CW: I wasn't raised by my parents. My grandparents started raising me as their child. … For some reason or another, … my grandmother took me away from my mother. At that time, [she] started raising me as her child. … She told me that my mother was supposed to be my … sister. That's the way it went down. Now, she did it for a reason of reputation. She … didn't want to embarrass the family in any way. My mother and father, I didn't meet until I was, let me see, in 1970 when my mother acknowledged me that she was my mother. I was thinking that she was all this time, but she acknowledged me, because of her mother, which is my grandmother. My grandmother passed in … November 11th, 1930. … I was eleven years old. Four years later, which my grandfather which was supposed to have been my father--it's a little complicated--which was my father, he passed four years later in 1934. I was fourteen or fifteen years old. … That's when my life really started on my own. … I left Virginia. My grandfather, which was supposed to have been my father … he took sick. … In those days, it was not like today. … Being in the country, medical care was almost zero in a sense. So, he passed in June, I can't think of the date, in 1934. He had already told me, "If anything happens to me, I want you to go to Pennsylvania and live with your brother," which was supposed to be [my brother], but he was my uncle, and live with him. [He said], "If anything happens, I want you to leave Virginia." So, I did as he told me to do. When I got to Pennsylvania, which was Universal, Pennsylvania at that time, there was a small town. Universal Portland Cement Company, they had a factory there, and they had built these homes for their employees. Forty-five different houses they had because it was a little village. So, I started back to school, but I didn't like it after being out of school for a little while. … I was sixteen. When I turned seventeen, I had heard of the CC [Civilian Conservation] camp. I decided that I wanted to go on my own. … So, I walked from Universal which is now called Penn Hill, they changed the name. I walked from Universal to Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania to sign up for the CC camp. … It was eleven miles away--I walked one way, eleven miles. I signed up and turned around and walked back to Universal. When my uncle, which is supposed to be my brother, came home from work, because he was only working two to three days a week, came home, I had told him I had went to Wilkinsburg to sign up for CC camp. He said, "How did you get there?" I said, "I walked." … He was surprised, he didn't say nothing. The man told me that he'll call me in two weeks. … Before the two weeks was up, I got the letter to report to Wilkinsburg, and [he said] don't bring anything with me but my toothbrush. … So, I did. … My uncle, he took me down there to where I was supposed to go. … That was the first time that I had ever been away from my family. … They put me, not only me, there were others, not soldiers, I don't know what they called them in those days either, to where we were going. I didn't know where we were going. … When we got there, I had never heard of Fort Meade, Maryland. … They put us on the train and took us there, and when we got

there, I didn't see nothing but soldiers. … I didn't know what that was supposed to be. CC camp was … ran by the Army. … The only thing you didn't do [was] training. See, it was the same principle. … I must have arrived at night, I guess it was night. The next morning when I got up … I saw all these people. Some of them looked friendly, some them didn't look too friendly. … I said to myself, "What on earth have I done." [laughter] … I must have made a mistake, and for some reason or another, I met another fellow that he was in the same condition I was. So, he and I became friends, because I thought this was it. I thought this was the CC camp, but when they explained it to me, I had never heard of Fort Meade, Maryland. So, we were there for a few days then they loaded us up again. … I didn't know anyone, and I don't know who the fellow I got friendly with, I don't know where he went. … They put us on a train and I think … we were going to Renovo, Pennsylvania. … I had never heard of Renovo. We got to Renovo, Pennsylvania, that's when they took us off the train and there was a couple of trucks there to pick up. … Took us up in the mountain, I didn't know where we were going. … Up in the mountain there was a camp, that was the CC camp. … I was there for a few days, then they assigned me to a detail. Took us out in the forest, and they were "sounding" trees, and that's when I learned how they could tell the age of a tree. Trees I was familiar with because I'm from the country. … I didn't particularly like that because I just left the country, but it was a job. … What they paid was thirty dollars a month. You could have five dollars for yourself, and … they'd make us send the twenty-five to your family or to a bank or whatever. So, that's what I did, I sent twenty-five to my [uncle], which was supposed to be my brother, but was my uncle, to him and I kept the five. That was plenty. That was good money in those days, five dollars a month. [laughter] So, I was saving that. … I used to see this guy. … I didn't particularly like the forest work but that's what I had to do. What I wanted to do, I wanted to know where I was going to eat, what clothes to wear, I wanted to get that off of my head so I could really think for myself. So, I had solved the problem, where I'm going to sleep, what I'm going to eat, and where. That was the point, so I had solved that. So, I stayed there. I used to see this guy, I'm getting a little ahead of myself, I used to see this guy with this canteen, it was a tall thing and it had sections in it. Every day he would come down at noon time, he would come down to the mess. That's what they called it in the Army, they call it the mess hall, down to the kitchen, the mess hall, and get this food. I got interested in what he was doing, and I saw this little bungalow not too far from the camp, and he would go down there. I found out that he was serving the officers. … Word got around that he was going to leave, so I asked him, I said, "I understand you're going to leave when your time is up." And he said, "Yes." He had been there a couple of years. He said, "I'm going to leave." … I said, "Well, who do you see to get that job? I would like to have that job you have." … He said, "See Mr. Smith, I'll introduce you to him." That was his supervisor, he was a civilian. … Mr. Smith, he asked me, I said, "What does this job consist of?" He says, "In the morning you have … to fix the officers' breakfast." I said, "Breakfast?" He said, "That's just eggs, sausage, but eggs the way they want them, and toast." Well, I was familiar with that because my grandfather was a pretty good cook and he had taught me. … I knew how to cook. … I said, "That sounds pretty good." I said, "Well, how about lunch?" He said, "That's what that container is. You go to the kitchen and you get the lunch and the dinner." In the noon time you come down at eleven 'o clock, or whatever it was, and get their lunch, and then you take it, and you put it out, and you serve it. … He says, "You do the same thing at night, but the breakfast is the only one you have to do yourself." I said, "Well, that's no problem." So, I got the job. They had to give you eleven dollars a month over what you were getting, the officers, that was their thing. … It was a nice little bungalow, and he said, "You have to keep the place clean." … That

was no problem to me, so I liked that. … I never served anybody anything, but I knew what to do. So, the officers come in and they had their breakfast. I fixed their breakfast with eggs and bacon and however they wanted and the toast or whatever they were going to have, and cleaned up the place, kept the place clean, made the beds up, and so forth, and left. One day, this officer, he was from South Carolina, when he came in, I was coming out of the bathroom. He said to me, "Did you use that bathroom?" I was stunned. I wasn't even thinking that. I said, "Yes," you know, and he went off. So, I would always speak up when you'd push me. So, I wasn't thinking about segregation, prejudices like that. I wasn't thinking about that. That was the furthest thing from my mind. Then it started to register. So, I said to him, I said, "Don't I clean that bathroom?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, if I clean it, what difference does it make?" He didn't have an answer. [laughter] So, he never said nothing. So, then all I had to do was to work around him. … I knew what time he was going to come, but I never had that problem again. … I asked him, "What difference does it make?" … He didn't have an answer because he wasn't expecting me to challenge him, see, because of the racial thing. See, that was the furthest thing from my mind. I wasn't thinking that way, but he was. … I only stayed in the CC camp for a year. [Editor's Note: The Civilian Conservation Corps was an agency that was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which employed young unemployed males in outdoor conservation projects from 1933-1942.] So when my year was up, I got along all right, I did all right for myself. So, when the year was up, I had gotten a little tired of being away from my family. So, I didn't sign up, didn't re-sign. So, I came home and went back to Universal. It's not Universal now, it's Penn Hill. … Then, I got a job. I had to walk six miles from Universal to this little … town. Some lady saw me that lived in Universal, she's dead now, and she took a liking to me so she took me for a ride to this guy. His name was Jimmy (Loberta?). … I had never seen an incinerator for garbage. He had an incinerator and she took me out there to see if he could give me some kind of a job. So, she knew him very well. … When I got there he gave me the job burning garbage. … You had to separate different things out of the garbage before you burn because certain things wouldn't burn and then some of the stuff was good. So, this man used to come by every morning, and I didn't know what he would do with a stick and with a nail or something, or whatever he had, something like an ice pick to pick up what he wanted if he didn't feel like bending over to get it himself, … and he picked up stuff. Well, he was getting different metals and different things, you know, that he could sell. Because this was, things were tight, and he'd come by. … I think that job paid about, fifteen [dollars a week]. I don't think it was eighteen dollars a week because that was big money then.

AM: Did you still send money back home?

CW: No, I was home then. I was out of the CC camp, I'm home. This was in 1937. So, then I had to get Social Security. There was no such thing as Social Security, that's when they started giving you a Social Security Number, and I had to send away. … He asked me did I have a social security number--I didn't know what they were talking about. So, the lady that took me, she knew what he was talking about, she said, "Well, I'll get the papers and things and fill them out and soon you'll get your Social Security Number." So, I got my Social Security Number from Pennsylvania. … It came through and I worked. I'd walk that six miles each way a day. I don't know how long I stayed there, but it was a few months, then I got sick, and that garbage had to be burned. So, he had to get someone, and then he hired a man because I was just a youngster see, and he knew a youngster can't do work like a grown man can do. They're used to

doing heavy work … and he understood it better than I did, but he didn't fire me, it's just he had to have somebody when I couldn't come to work to take the job. So, the man came in and he took both shifts. … That garbage had to be burned. He took two shifts for twenty-five dollars a week I understand. … That was very good money, you see, at that time. So, he did the job, and then I really fell on hard times because my uncle's wife, … I can't say she disliked me, but she was Puerto Rican and I had never been around a foreign person before. … Maybe we didn't mesh too good, … so I became very uncomfortable with her. So, I wrote to my uncle here in New Jersey and he … put my money in the bank. He always took a lot of interest in me, and so I wrote him and told him what the situation was, and he sent me a bus ticket and three dollars and told me to come to New Jersey. This was in 1938. I came to New Jersey in '38. … In those days, they said, "If you couldn't find a job in New York, in New Jersey," and they were right. There was no need to go anyplace else, see, in those days. … I came here and I could use some the things that I had learned and that I already knew, and got here and did a lot of domestic work. … I always did have a job. I never collected unemployment in my whole lifetime. See, I always had some kind of a job.

SH: When you were in the CC camp, were there other African-Americans in your group?

CW: Oh, definitely, because there was segregation in those days.

SH: You were separated from the whites?

CW: The only ones who were white were the officers. The officers, they were always white. Your sergeants, from your first sergeant on down was black, just as me, see, but all of the officers that was the authority, they were white.

SH: When you got to Fort Meade down in Maryland, was this only for African-Americans?

CW: The division, the part that I was in was all [African-American], but Fort Meade, everybody was there, but they were separated, see. That's what they did, equal, but separated. That's right. … That stayed like that, we're going to come into that. We're on our way now.

SH: Where did your uncle live in New Jersey?

CW: In East Orange, the next town from here. … When I got here, everybody come along and asked me, says, "They didn't tell you," because as I said, they never discussed money. … If you want to work a day, you want to work an hour, you want to do this, or you want to do that, or you want to help me take this off this truck, I put something on the truck. … You didn't think about money because anything he gave you was valuable. That's the way it was. You didn't stand there and argue, "You got to pay me more." … If you went out and did what he wanted you to do, and he gave you a dollar, that was a dollar. If he gave you fifty cents, that was fifty cents. See, that's the way it worked. So, nobody argued about money, see. If you went into the domestic field, which was plenty, … because everything was cheap. See, when I came to Jersey, … people that made thirty-five dollars a week, that was quite a bit. The people that made thirty-five dollars a week, that was big money. That was a top-shelf job. Fifty dollars a week you had an executive's job. [laughter] That's right, that's the way it worked, see. … You could always

get hold of something because at that time--put it like this. You could take a girl, because as I said I'm speaking of myself or my race because as I say, I don't know how the white people were doing. They were doing a little bit better, but not that great … because it was on a different level. You could take five dollars and take a girl to New York … because the men in those days, wasn't like it is today, and bring back money. [laughter] … If you had ten, you were rich. [laughter] That's right, that's the way it worked. Movies, top-shelf movies, were say thirty-five or forty-five cents to get in, that's about it, see. They had movies from ten cents up, certain pictures, but the top-shelf movies like, I would say in those days, I know you haven't seen, you heard of it, *Gone With the Wind* (1939), that was with [Hattie] McDaniel, she was a black star. [Editor's Note: Hattie McDaniel became the first black actress to win an Academy Award for her 1939 portrayal of "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*.] That was a top-shelf movie. Well, it didn't cost you a dollar to see that because a dollar was a dollar--because that's the way it worked. So, you could always get a hold of something. … As I said, I never turned down anything. … I painted the building, it's still there that I painted on Route 23. … I don't know how I started, somebody recommended me to the job, and I got the job. … I had to stay out there, that was the only drag that I had. He had a night club, and it was a white place, but he needed somebody in the kitchen. He said, "You have to stay." … I think I only had one night off. … I didn't stay there that long, and a fellow, a friend of mine that knew me, … because I had just got to Jersey, and he came out to see me. He said, "You don't have no business out here." I said, "Well, it's a job." He said, "I'm going to see what I can do." … He had quit a job in Irvington, and he had called the people that he had left, and the guy wanted a chauffeur. I left there and went to him, but I'm a little bit ahead of myself, see. So, I waited tables, … I think it was William Street, I think the house is still there. I know it was a hotel there right across the street, I don't know if that's there, I doubt whether that's there or not, the (Marbury Inn?). She had a boarding house, and that's where I started waiting tables. Twelve dollars a week, and the people only tipped you on Christmas. … If a guest came in and had dinner, a meal or something, they might leave you ten or fifteen cents--that was money. A quarter was very good money, you see, they'd leave you a tip. Anything that you got your hand on was good, you didn't frown on it. … I worked there for quite a while, then I left, and a guy came along. This is what they would do in those days. … Slick guys that were smarter than me come along looking for a job, and I was stupid, and didn't know it, and he asked me what I was making, and I told him and he undercut me. Whatever I told him I was making, which was twelve, maybe fifteen dollars a week at the most, he took the job for two dollars a week less and the lady let me go. Now, he only stayed there two or three weeks, … then he left and she called me back. That's the way it worked. … Then, they had a storm, they had a bad storm here in Jersey at that time and this landscaper, his name was Simpson. [Editor's Note: The New England Hurricane of 1938 caused six billion dollars in damage to the Northeastern United States, and caused much damage and flooding in New Jersey.] He had two trucks and he worked a lot of men, … thirty-five to forty men. They pulled out a lot of trees and different things, and he was coming here, and I went there and I asked him for a job. … He gave me the job because cutting wood and stuff like that, that was my field, I had learned from the country. … He kept me. He didn't let me go and the war had started brewing then. He had a truck driver that was driving his truck and he was a type of a guy, he was a nice man, but he'd holler at you. He did a lot of hollering, that was his way. … He never hollered at me because we wouldn't have a hang-up. That's right, he never hollered at me, and when the guy started leaving, his main truck driver left to get a factory job as a way of making more money because he was making, I think, twenty something dollars a week, but the

factory job was probably … paying him thirty, see, something like that. So, he left and the war was heating up, I'm still a little ahead of myself, because I chauffeured for a guy in Irvington first. … I had chauffeured before they had the storm. I had chauffeured a guy. The house is still there, it's still there because he had it fixed that they could never tear that house down on (Nine Avenue?), (59 Nine Avenue?). He was the wealthiest man in Irvington at that time. … He had the house fixed that it could never be torn down because he was born there and he had no family. His wife had family, but he didn't have any family, and he had it fixed and that house is still there. It looks the same way it was when I worked for him whenever I go through there, and I chauffeured for him, because I'm a little ahead of myself, and we went to Florida. He went to Florida. I drove him down to Florida, he and his wife. He was a very nice guy. Mr. Martin, he paid me fifteen dollars a week, and well he was nice to work for. All I had to do was drive him. I didn't have to do any house work, because he had a maid, and the house wasn't that large anyway. …

SH: Did you have to stay on the property?

CW: No, I could stay if I wanted to, but I didn't have to stay. The only bad part about that job, in the summer time I had to go to the seashore every weekend. See, that was the only thing I hated about it. On the weekend, I used to go down to, three miles from Point Pleasant, Metedeconck, I think they called it. … He had a boat and that was right on … the Metedeconck River. … He had a boat, and he used to go down. They went every weekend, and he'd come home on Sunday afternoon during the summer. … He would say, "Do you want to go out on the boat with us?" I said, "No, I'll be right here when you come back." [laughter] … He and his wife and maybe another couple would get on the boat and they would go out for the day on the boat, and I … fiddled around, but I hated it because I was a young man and I don't want to be … down on the seashore. … Three o'clock on Sunday afternoon we'd be back home. You get home before four o'clock in the afternoon in the summertime. In wintertime, I didn't have to go down there. … His maid didn't have to go, she never had to go down unless they had something special that he wanted to do. Then, I left him and that's when I went to the guy … Simpson. So, after the storm was up, and as I say, … his driver had left and I became the main truck driver. Then, the war started, and people were asking you, "Why aren't you in the service?" See, that was another thorn. The first time I went to take a physical, they found something and they rejected me, but they called me back. … Even Mr. Martin had asked me, because he was the head of the Irvington draft board. He said, "Why aren't you in the service?" I told him, I said, "Well, I went … but they rejected me … temporarily," and so one day he asked, "I want to go to East Orange to the draft board. I want you to take me over to the draft board," because he knew where it was, but I wasn't sure. So, I took him, and I put it together, he went over there to see why I wasn't in the service. [laughter] … It was miserable, it was very uncomfortable in World War II for a young man not to be in the service. See, everybody was on your case. They wanted to know why weren't you in the service. … Finally, they called me and I went in and the doctor examined me. He looked at me, he said, "Let me tell you something." He said, "If there wasn't a war going on I would reject you." … I only weighed 135 pounds. He said, "If there wasn't a war going on I would reject you because I don't think you can handle those packs." I didn't know what he was talking about because I had never been in the service. … He said, "I'm going to pass you." I didn't have any problem with the pack, you know, because I was strong for my size, but I never weighed 200 but one time in my life. … I weighed 135 pounds, when I came out of

the service I weighed 165. Then, after I got into civilian life I went up to 199. … I never weighed exactly 200 pounds, you see. … The only camp I was in in the United States was Fort Dix. They called me, I passed, I went to Fort Dix and they told me you'll be called on July 17, 1942. That was the day that they took me to Fort Dix. Now, from there, was Army routine because I was in CC camp.

SH: I want to backtrack a little bit. Did the Great Depression impact your family in Pennsylvania differently than your family in New Jersey?

CW: … Everybody was in this. Well, in New Jersey it might have been a little easier than in New York because as I say in those days there was more work in New Jersey. Baltimore was one, … because they had the steel mill, and Pennsylvania had steel mills too, some of them, but there was none in … the part I came from at the time. … Pennsylvania is a very large state. … You couldn't make any money on the side because there were no rich people. I wasn't around any because that's where the money is. See, the wealthy people, you have to be where people had money to spend. … They may have all the good will there, but if they didn't have no money, it ain't going to help you that much. … You got to go where the money is. … That's the key. … In Jersey, in New York, and maybe a couple cities around, there were millionaires. … So, that's where the money is. … The entertainment world and everything like that, people come in New York, you're right at New York, so you can always get something, see, but if you're in a group where everybody's poor, what are you going to get? There's only so much meat on the bone. [laughter] That's right, that's the way it worked, but it's not like that now, but that's the way it worked. … Montclair, I couldn't have come to a better place for that type of work. … I had heard of Montclair because Montclair was the next town from East Orange. … When I came to Jersey, I lived in East Orange, but it wasn't Montclair. East Orange was all right, but it wasn't Montclair, you see. … There were a lot of wealthy people, very wealthy people in East Orange. Now East Orange, you take Harrison Street if you came through there at night. If you walked through there at night, a policeman was going to stop you. Wanted to know where you're going, where you're coming from, and you might as well tell him the truth because he knows. You see, that's the way it worked. See, Mountain Avenue, they were the wealthy streets. 32 Mountain Avenue was very wealthy people, which is still there now, but it's not like it was in those days, … because there were a lot of insurance companies in East Orange. … Montclair, there was a lot of domestic work of all types, but no factories. … Montclair never had any factories, because it's not that large, but that's where the wealth was, see. … I don't know how it is now, but in those days if you walked, I'm talking about us now, walked down Ridgewood Avenue in the daytime, policemen were going to stop you. Wanted to know where you're coming from, and where you're going. … There's no need to lie because he already know. … Harrison Street in East Orange were the same way, Mountain Avenue, see. Mountain Avenue, one little part of it had … people who weren't too wealthy, just a short part of it, but the center part of it, that's where the money went. See, and you'd be surprised, that the people, the girls, especially the women. … The average woman was in domestic work. Most of the men that had jobs, the jobs [were] chauffeuring and things. They were chauffeuring for some millionaire. I don't know if he was a billionaire, but it was a millionaire. Or had a lot of thousands of dollars which carried a lot of weight in those days. See, that's the difference. … They had homes down the seashore. … The people that did domestic work, that's where they went in the summertime, because that's where all the wealthy people were going to the beaches. … You had to go with them, that's the where

you get the jobs. That's why they said, you can find some kind of work in New York or New Jersey, … no need to go anywhere place else.

SH: What did you do for entertainment?

CW: Well, entertainment--I'm a music lover. Always was, I think if my parents had raised me I think I would have been in the music world in some form. I didn't definitely have to be a musician, but I always liked music since I was seven years old, see.

SH: Did you play an instrument?

CW: No, I always wanted an instrument, but I never could afford one. … If I had played an instrument, coming from the country, … I would … if someone gave me an instrument. … I made enough money to buy instruments, but I never wanted to waste the money to go into that field because it became an expensive field. It would have been a guitar. A fellow in Virginia, when I was a kid growing up, he just played guitar for the fun of it, and he used to play for what they called barn dances and things and I wanted him to teach me. … He would have been glad to teach me. I asked my grandmother--which was supposedly my mother--about letting him teach me, and she would never. … People in those days, the older people, they hated music because they were so religious. … They hated music and the music world, I'm talking about our world, you know, a lot of people discouraged their kids because musicians hadn't always had it easy. … People used to look down on the musicians. … It was a rough world for music. … It wasn't all parents like that, they had a lot of families that would encourage it. Some of the guys just overruled their parents and left home and went on their way. … I look at the stuff that was on TV now, it was just a copy of what people used [to do] when we were coming up, because they're making millions of dollars off of this music that they have, kicking people off, singers, that's not the basic way of doing it when I was coming up. When I was coming up, if you wanted to be a musician, you went out and you work at it and you had some kind of a job and a lot of the guys, they didn't have it easy because they couldn't afford it, didn't have no support, and the doors weren't open. The doors weren't open, see. Today the doors, they aren't fully open today. See, but they're opening large enough for you to get through them. … They aren't fully open today in the music world, because a lot is going on. Now, you take the Apollo Theatre in New York. … The Apollo Theatre, that opened up a year before I came to New Jersey, the Apollo Theatre. That was for our race of people. That was the background. If you could stay on the stage in the Apollo Theatre, because they'd boo you off, or pull you off. In the Apollo Theatre, a musician could stay on the stage, he was ready for the road. That's right, he was ready for the road. In fact, all these guys that you see, that you talk about now like James Brown and all those guys like that. They … came through the Apollo Theatre. That was the background for black musicians. … Some good guys came from there and that opened up in 1937. [Editor's Note: The Apollo Theatre, located in New York City, used to be a dance hall, but was rebuilt into a theatre in 1914. In 1934 it received new owners which directed variety shows and revues toward African-Americans. It remains today and is a National Historical Place.]

SH: Did you go into the Apollo Theatre?

CW: … [laughter] When I was young, I used to leave work--I worked in Harrison. I'd get off from work at four o'clock; five o'clock I'd be in the Apollo Theatre. [laughter] … This was a long time ago, that's when you could park on 125th Street. [laughter]

SH: That was a long time ago.

CW: That's right, that's right. … That's one of the reasons, … because I never had the money to do, and I had to have support. … I had to know where I was going to sleep, and where I was going to eat, and if my grandparents hadn't raised me, I would have been able to mention music in the house, but that was the thing.

SH: Would you go into New York for your entertainment while living in New Jersey?

CW: I would go to the Apollo, and I used to go to a few shows over at the Apollo, but I never liked New York. I wouldn't live in New York, because when I got married when I came out December '45, we couldn't find an apartment. They said, we can get an apartment [in New York], I said I'm not going to New York. I never liked New York, see.

SH: Where did you go for entertainment in New Jersey?

CW: I used to go to Newark to see some of the top musicians. I always followed them, I used to go to Newark. I've seen all of the musicians because ... a lot of good musicians came out of Newark. See, Newark is the place. Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington--which was my favorite musician--Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, all those guys used to come to downtown Newark. See, that's where I'd see them, better than going to New York because Duke, he stayed on the road. He would come to the Apollo, but … he wasn't as often as some of the other bands, but I've seen all of the bands. Now, Frank Bailey, the building is still there on Route 23, we couldn't go there, but they used to broadcast it on the radio. This was … way before TV. They used to broadcast it on the radio, I used to listen to it. I wasn't no one-sided musician, I used to like white musicians as well. I wasn't one-sided. I used to listen to Tommy Dorsey, Bennie Goodman, [and] Glenn Miller.

SH: Were you a good dancer?

CW: I could hold my own, but I wouldn't say I was a great dancer. … It depends on the music, it depends on the musician, and it depends on who your partner is.

SH: When you went to Newark, where were the venues that the bands were playing? Where did Duke Ellington play in Newark?

CW: … That was where, some of the race thing, he could play just about anywhere he wanted to play. I think when I saw Duke, I think he played at the … Capitol Theatre, I think that's where I saw him, and that was one of the top theatres in those days in Newark.

SH: In Newark, could an African-American go to any of the venues that were there?

CW: You could go, but you had to go upstairs in a lot of places. You couldn't be on the first level, you had to go upstairs. See, the blacks, or African-Americans, they went upstairs, even if they're in a Chinese Restaurant. … They used to have a big Chinese Restaurant on Mulberry Street where we used to go and get food. We … had to go upstairs. They'd still serve you, but you had to go upstairs. Even in East Orange, if you went to the movies, all of them, in Montclair, all of them. If the theatre had an upstairs that's where you had to go, or you didn't go, period. See, that's the way it was.

SH: When you would use a bus in New Jersey, were you able to sit anywhere you wanted to?

CW: As far as the buses are concerned, I'm pretty sure you could sit anywhere you wanted to. I didn't do that much bus riding. Yes, you can sit anywhere you want. … They had the trolley. … When I came to New Jersey they had more trolleys than buses. Bloomfield Avenue was trolley, Central Avenue, Main Street. … There would always be somebody on the trolley or the bus that may not want you and they may say something, and that's where the fights would start. [laughter]

SH: Were there ever any fights?

CW: Oh, yes, I never witnessed any but I knew of them. … If somebody wanted to know "Why aren't you in the back?" … Restaurants, you just knew better, so you didn't even bother … because you wanted to go out to eat. Here in Montclair it was the same way, not even too long ago, … certain restaurants you just didn't go in. … I did a lot of catering with the caterers. I worked for, in fact, every caterer. … That's where I ran into Mrs. (Camp?). … Mrs. (Tweed?), which is where I started, up here in Montclair, she was a small caterer, but she was good, and I worked with her. The building is still there, but I don't know the place, it's a traveling agency now, right on the corner of Bloomfield Avenue and South Fullerton. She had ordered something, and she was on her way to the job and she asked me to go in there to get it, pick it up, whatever this order was. When I went in the door all the waitresses … went to the back. … The newest one, she got to stay up there to see what you want. I told her, I said, "I just came to pick up an order." … She said, "For who?" I said, "Ms. Tweed," and she went and got it and brought it to me, but they ran in the back because they didn't want to wait on me. See, that wasn't too long ago, … in this town. … Anywhere you go, that was it. Like when I was in the service, I was getting ready to go overseas. … I never forgot it. … Colonel Warren was the battalion commander, he spoke to us in Fort Dix. He said, "You colored troops," they didn't say black troops in those days. They said, "You colored soldiers are going overseas and you already have two strikes against you." You see, that was his words. He was either from North or South Carolina, that's where I was told that's where he was from. He says, "So, when you get over there don't strike out." … This was in October of 1942.

SH: Were you aware of the war in Europe prior to the United States entering the conflict?

CW: I knew that war was brewing. Yes, I knew when the war was brewing. I knew something was going on, but Poland, that sounds like … a foreign country, you didn't pay too much attention, because age had a lot to do with it.

SH: What about when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

CW: I had never heard of Pearl Harbor. I'll never forget that. I had never heard of Pearl Harbor, because in those days communications were very poor. … When you hear something it may be six months old, until the bombs went off. I didn't know what they were talking about. I was home with the measles, I didn't have the measles until I was twenty-one years old. … I heard it on the radio. I didn't know anything about Pearl Harbor. That was December 7th, 1941. … That's when everything started. … They had drafted some people because the fellow that used to live next door to me, he was older than me, … I didn't know his age then, but I had knew him, so he went in 1941. They drafted him. Then, some law was passed, I think it was '40 or '41, and then they let him come home. Then, when he came home all the guys that went in, I was too young, I wasn't in that age bracket that they were drafting at that time. When he came home he wasn't home too long, then they bombed Pearl Harbor. That's when they called him right back. … That's when it started with me. Now, everybody got on my case, why wasn't I in the service, because that was a serious thing. Everybody wanted to know, because my cousin, he went in before I did. … They had found something that they didn't particularly like, and as I say, the guy told me … when I was drafted if there wasn't a war he would reject me because he thought I was too light. … You know where I was the next December 7th?

SH: Where?

CW: In Casablanca, North Africa, … the next December the 7th. See, I got over there.

SH: When you trained at Fort Dix, were you trained separately from the white soldiers on another part of the base?

CW: Yes, that's the way it was. … I've forgotten the name of the road that I was on … in Fort Dix … that the black troops were in. … Wherever you were, there was nothing there except the officers. … All the officers were always white, in my unit--I'm speaking about my infantry company--and they were always white. There were plenty of white troops within Fort Dix, but you were separated from them. … When you went overseas it was the same thing.

SH: What was your training like at Fort Dix?

CW: They give you regular basic training, things that you should know. … I didn't get all of it, because I went in July the 17th which my records show, the 17th, and in November, the last week in October of '42, that's when this colonel made this speech that we were going overseas. We already had two strikes against us, and when you get over there, don't strike out.

AM: How did you feel when you learned you were going overseas?

CW: I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid. [laughter] Because some soldiers say, "Oh, I wasn't afraid," because deep down [I was]. We'll get into that. You're nervous. So, we woke up on Saturday morning, and they had guards everywhere, all around the barracks, everywhere. … The only place you could go was to the bathroom. … They marched us up, and put us on a train, brought us … into New York and when you got off after, disembarkation, where they're going to

load you on the ship, that was it. The next morning we woke up, it was on a Sunday morning, when they took us from Fort Dix to New York and I imagine it was Brooklyn. … They loaded us on the ship the next morning. All the colored troops were below the water line, and the white troops were up over you. … November the 1st was when they left New York.

SH: Do you remember the ship's name?

CW: USS *Monticello.* That was the name of the ship. … That ship was supposed to have ten thousand troops on it. … From then on, the only time you could come up on deck was when they tell you. They'd make you come up, whether you wanted to come up or not, for exercise. You stayed there a certain amount of minutes. I don't think you stayed as much as an hour, maybe, whatever it was. You had to go up to that area every so often for exercise. I was seasick anyway, so it didn't make a difference. [Editor's Note: The USS *Monticello* was an Italian passenger ship that was transferred to Brazilian registry after Italy attacked France in 1940. The ship was bought by the United States on April 16, 1942 and was converted to a troop ship. The ship was decommissioned in 1946.] … I was on the water eighteen days, and I was sick eighteen days. … The only thing I can eat really was fruit, that's right. … Some days the water was so rough … I didn't eat period--just fruit. … You always got good friends somewhere, they ask you, "Want me to bring you something from the mess hall?" They'd bring me whatever fruit they had. … When we did go up, I don't know how many days, they didn't tell you, we didn't know where we were going. … They didn't tell you where you were going. One day we went up there and all that I could see was ships ahead, destroyers and things ahead, and in the back they had all the troops I imagine in the middle. … At the time we went over, there weren't too many ships crossing the Atlantic. See Patton, this is where he comes in at, General Patton. He was in charge of the invasion fleet of North Africa, see. … As far as you can see, ships all around you, in the back of you, on the side of you, everywhere. … We didn't know where we were going. … Some soldiers knew more than others, you know, and you figured that out after a while and I think we were like that … eighteen days. … I think on the sixteenth … it might have been the fifteenth day, … they told us where we were going. "You're going to North Africa," and they gave us some books and stuff for the language barrier and all of that. … We didn't need any of that stuff they gave us because this country really wasn't ready for war. They really weren't ready for war.

SH: What were some of the things they told to be aware of?

CW: … A lot of the stuff they told us, it wasn't like what it was, because everything was copying from World War I. … A lot of this stuff, practically everything was a copy from World War I. … The soldiers once they get where they are going, they do their own thing, see. They can communicate. … About two days before we were supposed to land they were fighting, we didn't know, they were fighting in Casablanca. … They just prepared us with obsolete rifles because we had the bolt-action rifles. They issued us 105 rounds of ammunition, each soldier, just in case, because Patton was having a little trouble landing. … They had been preparing you in the service for--if it happens, we are ready, if it don't happen, we just go in the other direction. So, 105 rounds of ammunition, and they gave us the boxed food in case you get stranded, ... because they knew they aren't going to be able to go into any kitchens. … They know that, so

they give you the food you're supposed to have. Everything you're supposed to have when you got off that boat, you had it.

SH: They gave you food rations?

CW: Yes, that's right, you had it, and plus the rifles. So when we got there, the day before we landed, we were sitting at the dock. They told us we didn't have to [fight], we expected to fight them. … The resistance in Casablanca, [there] wasn't any. So, when we got there, we pulled up into the dock, … and we got off the ship like people should. … That's where we stayed. Now, there was still fighting going on, but it was fifty miles away. … The first enemy plane I saw was New Year's Eve of '43. One bomber came over. … We didn't have our artillery, our artillery wasn't strong enough to reach it, the Germans knew it wasn't strong enough to reach it, so they just stayed above the range of the gun, see. It wasn't but one, just one bomber. I guess he was doing surveillance, and they shot at him, … but he wasn't worried because he knew he was out of range of the 90mm that they had on the ground. … Then, he left, and he didn't come back. So, I stayed in Casablanca from November of '42 until September of '43.

SH: You were there almost a year.

CW: Yes, almost a year. In September of '43, that was when, the first time they said it has ever happened. The United States and Roosevelt and Churchill, they knew each other, … and they worked some kind of a deal that Montgomery, which was the head general, he was like Eisenhower, and I don't know what you call him, they cut some kind of deal where a certain amount of the black troops, not particularly black troops, they would take over certain parts of the United States Army, see. I was in that group, see. I didn't know that at the time. So, when I came in September of '43, they told us we were going to leave. So, they loaded us on a ship. … I was on a British ship from Oran. … Oran was fifty miles from Casablanca. … I came from Oran, Africa, to the Salerno beachhead in Italy. … The British brought us. Now, I guess, I didn't tell you what kind of work we did in Casablanca. [Editor's Note: Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery was a British commander who was in charge of the Eighth Army beginning in August 1942. He commanded the Eighth Army in Africa, Sicily, and Italy. He then helped plan for D-Day and commanded all Allied troops in France until September 1944.] … In Casablanca, … they didn't want colored troops to have any recognition, so if they happened to put a camera on you and they realized that you were in the camera, they moved it. … They couldn't cut it for the film. … If you went to the movies back here in the States and saw it, you only saw it for a minute. You could never see it long enough to figure out anything, because they didn't want you to have, us to have, get anything good. … That's the way it was, but we worked the docks, we unloaded ships, and when we got done, that's where I learned to drive a tow mower, and a couple of them other machines I learned to drive. … When the dock work was finished, I don't know if it was finished, that's when they moved us. … Then we did ration dumps.

SH: What is that?

CW: Ammunition. Ammunition, food, and gasoline, that's what we had, see. We'd get the ammunition ready for it to go to where it was going to go and get gasoline, the barrels or cans, or whatever it was, to go for supplies, because we were in supplies. It was the 263rd Quartermaster

Service Battalion. See, that was my outfit. I was in A company, to get that stuff ready. So, that's what they did until the Kasserine Pass. … I heard about that, that was from North Africa, but see I wasn't in that group. The men that went with Patton, on the first fleet, see Patton was in the first fleet because he was the leader. They went with him, see. … I don't know who else took over, because it wasn't just him by himself because he was in charge of the tanks, that was him, but he would have used us if he had needed us in the second fleet. … He was the first fleet, we were the second fleet. We were his backup, see that's the way it was. [Editor's Note: General George S. Patton commanded the US II Corps in North Africa, which won the Battle of El Guettar. He went on to command the Seventh Army in Sicily, and the Third Army in France.]

SH: What did you do when you were not on duty?

CW: They'd give us some time to go to towns and to sightsee, but I was never a type of soldier, I never got too far from my outfit. … I only went with soldiers that were a friend of mine, two or three, we'd all hang together because in the organization, you don't know who you're dealing with, and you might end up in something you don't want to be in. See, wartime rules and orders are different than peacetime. Whatever you are charged with, when the whole country is at war, you're in deep trouble, because they go strictly by the book, … different from peace time, see. They're supposed to read you the articles of war, I didn't know, I think it's every six weeks, I think of it now, if they can. They're supposed to read the articles of war, it's a ruling to soldiers what they can and in combat, you don't know what's going to be going on, but you're supposed to read the articles of war to them every so often, so they know what the articles of war [are]. See, peacetime is a different rule, but when the whole country is at war it's a different thing. You get in trouble, you pay the penalty. So, when you went to town or wherever you were going, you tried to make sure who your partner is and if they're on the same track. See, because I'll tell you the reason why, … one of the main reasons why, because we were lined up, I don't remember how many times. … That's why I never got too far from my outfit. If a women comes in and says she was raped, the company commander would call the company and she walked around and picked out the soldier that she think did it, see. See what I'm talking about? Now, if you were in the area, and can't give account of yourself, and she happened to pick you, you're in trouble, see. You're in serious trouble, see, that's wartime. You're in serious trouble, so this is why you never get too far from your outfit, and be able to give an account of yourself where you were because when you miss roll call, that's serious, see. That's serious, and we had a very good chaplain, you could talk to him any time. … He was serious, no nonsense. You would go to him, he would look into your case. I never had to do it, but I didn't know how to do it … until I got, asked for a transfer, but that's it. A lot of us people don't know, wartime rules and peacetime rules, there's two different rules.

SH: Was your chaplain white?

CW: No, he was black. He was well-educated. If he's living now--which I hope he is, but I have my doubts, he could be--he would be about 100. I think he was [older], he wasn't thirty-five years old, because I'll you why. … Some of the soldiers that went over to Casablanca with us, while they were over there a few of the older men, they got to come back home right from Casablanca, because Roosevelt and the government, they changed the rule, and they shouldn't have been over there in the first place … if you were thirty-eight years old I think. I know he

was in the late thirties, I think it was thirty-eight, they sent you back home. … They shipped everything that was moving to where they wanted it to be, and if you were in that age bracket they wouldn't respect the age, but when they got over there and figured it out, these men weren't supposed to have been over. … They sent them back home. So, I knew he had to be on this side of thirty-five but he was older than me. He would be 100, 101, if he is living today, yes sir. …

SH: Did you travel by truck from Casablanca to Oran?

CW: … See, Oran was only fifty something miles [away]. I may have, I don't know if I drove, I may have driven a weapons carrier from Casablanca to Oran because it was only fifty something miles away. I think I did drive a weapons carrier that they were going to ship somewhere. I think I did, and not only me, other soldiers did too. … When I was leaving Oran, going down to the dock, to get on the ship to come to wherever it was they were going to take us, happened to be Italy, I met a guy, I couldn't say anything to him and he didn't see me, he didn't recognize me, that I was in CC camp with him. He was coming into Oran wherever he was going, and I was leaving Oran. [laughter] … We passed right by each other, but when you're in formation, you know, you're not supposed to say anything. I might have said something and got away with it because, you know, we were friends. I started to holler at him, but I said, no, I better keep my mouth shut and went on. I was in CC camp with him. He was coming in and I was going out. … When we got unloaded on the ship and came, I often said [I would but] I never did it. I was going to look at the map, the little map and see how they varied, because coming from North Africa into Italy, they would tell you every time you changed bodies of water because we had to change different bodies of water in that route and they would tell us what sea we were going on. … The only one I remembered and that stood out was the Mediterranean. … That was the last one. … Now, when I was in Casablanca, they had a sign up on a building that said New York was ten thousand miles from Casablanca, which is about right. … When I got to Italy, it was five thousand miles. We were five thousand miles from New York. … That meant that Casablanca was five thousand miles from Italy, see. When I got into Italy they told us we were going to be landing. I landed at the Salerno beachhead--it's on the discharge, it should be. We didn't know it, so. When we got out, … they gave us these belts to put on in case, because they told you there weren't going to be any docks, see. So, you had to get off in the water. … They give you those things, you push the capsules, and if you couldn't swim you'd push them and they would inflate, and then you could wade in. … When I got off, I didn't need mine, and we waded off the ship through the water into Salerno beachhead with your rifle up in the air over your head. That night when we got there, we had landed in the afternoon, and then we--you and your partner--because now you're in pup tents. A pup tent is a tent that you pitch right on the ground. Your partner has half and you had half, and that's your … pup and we put up our tents and got everything ready. The Germans broke through that night, and they called everybody to different battles. … Fortunately, we didn't have anywhere to go but back to the Mediterranean because that was the only thing in back of us--the Mediterranean Sea. So, fortunately, they got them turned around. …

SH: You were with the same company?

CW: … The 263rd Quartermaster, with the same company. … Some of the officers may have changed. The noncommissioned officers, all of them were there, but the officers that really were

in charge, … the company commander and so forth, we had a different, because … when I was in Fort Dix he was our company commander. … (Tilsom?), … the tennis star in those days that was his niece.

SH: Oh, really?

CW: Yes, he was our company commander, but he didn't stay with us once we got to North Africa. They changed for one reason or another. I don't know what the change was. … I don't know whether he left on his own or whether they just transferred him, … but he was our company commander in Fort Dix and they broke through. … I know you never have smelled dead bodies. … That was on Salerno beachhead. … I spent a lot of time in Italy, a lot of time, and that was right out from Naples … in what we called the (Grape haul?), … because that was where they used to make wine. … We didn't see the bodies to the rear because they had a special crew that cleaned them up. … "Ooo," what an odor. … They finally got it cleaned up and everything. We were stuck there for quite a few months. We were on one mountain, I'll never forget that, we were on one mountain, and the Germans were on another mountain. The Germans were on higher ground and we were at the foot of the mountain. … For sixteen days and nights, the Germans, they would fire. We were fortunate that by being at the foot of the mountain. … They were on high ground. I don't know if they could see us or not, I'm pretty sure they could, but anyway, when they would shoot, they would shoot over us. … Once in a while, one of the big guns would hit a tree limb and cut it off just like you did with a saw. … We stayed there for sixteen days and nights.

SH: What were you doing during this time?

CW: Praying to God that they didn't hit you. [laughter] That's right, that's right. … You have some soldiers, a guy from (Bristol?) telling me he wasn't afraid. I didn't believe a word of it.

SH: You did not believe him.

CW: They weren't steady firing--they had intervals. It wasn't steady firing. The Germans would start the firing around four o'clock in the morning, see. … You hear the gun go off. They had a lot of that, you hear the gun go off, and then you wait a few seconds for the shell to land. … When the shell would land, then you know it went past you, it went over you. See, now I had a buddy, if he hadn't went to breakfast that morning, he would have never came home. We had a Paramus tent, the Paramus tent is the one you can walk around in, because they figured we were going to be there for a while. He went to breakfast that morning, and I didn't go to breakfast. … I would eat if I was hungry. … If they had pancakes that's the morning I would go to breakfast because I like pancakes. … If he hadn't gone to breakfast, he wouldn't have came home because a piece of shrapnel big fell right into the center of his bed. He brought it home with him. It fell right in the center of his bed and that's the only thing that saved him. They would shoot off. Then we stayed there.

SH: What did they have you doing while in Italy? Were you still supplying the troops?

CW: Yes, you still went to do whatever detail because we were a service battalion. … You didn't have to worry too much. The only thing in the daytime, or even at night, but in the daytime you had to know your airplanes. See, you had to know your airplanes, see, and when you look up and see that's a German plane you try to get out of the way and hope he didn't see you because he's not going to strafe one man. He's trying to get as many people as he can. … So, fortunately, at night, we can tell airplanes, we can tell American planes, … what type of plane it was, and you could tell the German planes. The Germans had a lot of diesels.

AM: Did you learn the type of planes by being out there or was it something they taught you in training?

CW: … No, you learned that. You learned to know your planes. That's safety, looking for yourself, see. To know your plane, know the sound of your plane, and know when it was enemy, or try and know when it was enemy, because the Germans had some planes that looked almost like ours. … If you look up and see them planes, … you get the heck out of the way … as quick as you can. … That's in the daytime. At night, the only trouble you had at night was guys that smoked. See, you find hard headed people or people that don't care anywhere you go. … From the air they can see a cigarette five miles away. … When you draw on it, and it lights up, like when your smoking, they were hard on you if they caught you smoking at night if you're outside. If you're going to smoke, smoke in your tent, see. Don't be out because you don't know who's up there. … They were right. … We were on the ground now, we ain't in no Paramus tent, you hear them planes come over, that's a German plane. Because you can tell from the sound, see, you had to know. … You're just hoping that he didn't drop a bomb because you don't know what's on his mind. See, those are the things that you must do for your own safety. One afternoon, I was coming from somewhere and I saw these planes coming in and they looked like ours. … When I realized I was near a building, it was an empty building, I ran into that, they were strafing because it was the enemy plane, they were strafing, and they flew over, and I ran into this building. They did what they had to do and got moving, you know, because it was in the daytime. You see, that's very important. Now, we stayed in the (Grey Harbor?) for quite a while and then moved, stayed in Florence, Italy.

SH: That is quite a bit north of Italy.

CW: … First time I went to Rome that was really something to me because this is something I had read about or saw in the Bible, Rome. Because coming out of the South all the older people they talked religion all the time, and they knew the bible. Rome, boy that was something. There was no fighting in Rome. I don't know whether I went with a group or whether, I went there for some reason or another because Rome is before Florence. That's the first city after Naples, and I really enjoyed that site. There was no fighting in Rome, and Hitler respected that. … They came to some kind of an agreement.

SH: Were soldiers able to tour Rome?

CW: Yes, you could there as a tourist, something like that. … You just couldn't go to Vatican City, … you couldn't go there. So, that was very interesting then when we got to Florence. I stayed in Florence. That's where they bogged down at. I stayed in Florence for six months.

SH: Okay.

CW: They had almost written Italy off. They were having trouble. We were wondering what was going on, we didn't know what was going on because we had to move. We stayed one place in Florence [for] three months. We're not in the city, you're in the suburbs, see, because they don't put any troops in the city. … Then, we moved and we were still in Florence. We were bogged down. … That's where they started to get troops for this mule pack. … That's when I started thinking, another soldier and myself started thinking. … Mule packs, they were looking for guys from the country, but I wasn't registered as country because I went in from Pennsylvania. … I just didn't take any chance. We said, "Let's get out of this so and so outfit," because I always wanted to get into trucking and see if we can get into a trucking outfit. So, that's when we went to the chaplain and went to the chaplain and told him what we wanted. … He said, "I'll see what I can do." In about two weeks the transfer came through. … I used to call this guy "Shorty" Williams because he was short, he was from New York and he and I, they loaded us to wherever we were supposed to go. When I got there, there were a whole lot of soldiers that had gotten transfers. … They called the guy I went with, because Shorty Williams, that was his name, that wasn't his real name, but that's what we called him, and that was the last time I saw him. … Then, they sent me by myself. … I thought about when I went in CC camp. I said, "Lord, I messed up again." They sent me by myself. So, when I got to … the trucking outfit, I had never heard of it. The 24th I knew about and the other trucks in the bigger trucking outfit, but I hadn't heard of the 115th. When I got there, the sergeant said to me, he almost had to bend his head … he was so tall, big guy, and young. He was younger than me. … He said, "Soldier, how long have you been in the service?" … How long you've been overseas?" I said, "I've been overseas twenty-three months." [He says], "You've been overseas twenty-three months?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Where were you?" I said, "I was in North Africa." So, he says, "You've been overseas longer than I've been in the service." I said, "Yes." So, he told the orderly there, he said, "Take this soldier," he had to run me through it, he knew I knew it. He said, "Take this soldier to the orderly room and get him … his cot," and whatever I needed, was supposed to have. … He said, "Read the bulletin board every day." … He let me stay in that tent. He said, "Only go to the mess hall." That's what they called the dining room in the service, the mess hall. He said, "Only go to the mess hall to eat and if you leave the area, get permission," and stuff like that. I said, "Okay." That's no problem. He made me stay there three weeks. … He was giving me a rest. Then, he says, they assigned me to a truck--eighteen. … I was supposed to have been the assistant driver. … The guy he assigned to me was from Richmond, Virginia. I was assigned, I was glad to have the truck, and he was glad to have me because that's where I wanted to be. … Then, they run you through the details of the truck and when you drive a service truck that's all you do is put the tailgate up, and let it down if necessary and drive the truck. … You have the wrenches that you're supposed to have, and a 6X6 has 2,700 bolts in it. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Did we forget to cover any of your experiences between Salerno and Florence?

CW: … From Salerno I was coming out, and I went to Rome. … Mussolini was killed after I had gotten into the trucking outfit. In the trucking outfit, the war was coming to an end at that time, I hadn't covered that. So, now I'm in the 115th trucking outfit where I had gotten the transfer. This is when, this was in '44 … because the war ended in '45. … I left North Africa in September of '43. I was in Salerno beachhead from October '43. … … From North Africa, Rome, through Salerno and up into Rome, I don't know if I was a truck driver when I went to Rome or not. That was after we came back so I meant '44. '45 was when Mussolini was hung. The war was phasing down, it was coming down. … [Editor's Note: Benito Mussolini was captured and shot by Italian partisans on April 28, 1945.] I was with the 115th when I went to Rome, I'm pretty sure I was. I was with the 115th there. I had gotten the transfer out. … I don't know exactly where when I joined the 115th. See a lot of towns, you don't worry about the name because Italy has so many villages in different places. … I know I wasn't too far from Viareggio. … When they brought the 92nd Division over, that's when the black soldiers had, started thinking, that started the clock there running, because the 92nd Division was a fighting unit. … If they're going to draw [replacements], they're going to draw from the service unit, and you know they're going to have to draw. So, whenever they brought the 92nd Division in--because the Tuskegee pilots, I knew of them one time. [Editor's Note: The 92nd Division was an African-American unit that served in World War II. They were nicknamed the "Buffalo Soldiers."]

SH: Did you really?

CW: Yes, the Tuskegee pilots, I knew a guy, but I had forgot I even knew him that was in the Tuskegee pilots because he lived around here. He just died last year I think it was. … Eldridge Woody--he was one of the Tuskegee guys. I knew him from civilian life. [Editor's Note: David Eldridge Woody was a native of Orange, New Jersey. In 1941, he enlisted in the Army and trained as a Tuskegee Airmen and served in the 99th Fighter Squadron. He died in 2010.] See, that was when soldiers like me and those other fellows with me started stirring because now we got a fighting unit. … We had to really keep our eyes open because we could be drawn into the infantry. See, that was when we started … and the ministers back here, every time we could get a paper, … the Afro paper or something like that, they would give us a little history, the ministers back here would start squawking because the black soldier wasn't getting any recognition, see. They weren't getting any, what you call it, which we thought was awful because we were receiving those shells and things coming over here. They were right, you see. When they brought the 92nd Division, that's when the movement started, guys were thinking, when they brought the 92nd because you didn't have too much to worry about and they started coming around getting these mule packs to go into places with guys that had been used to handling animals. See, in the country they would be more familiar than a guy from New York City that's born and raised in New York City, they would be more familiar, so they're going to get guys that had this knowledge. … This is when the mule pack came in there and that's when we got busy, … and that's when we got the transfer, and I went to the 115th trucking outfit. That's the way that was. So, it had to have of been in '44. … When I started driving trucks, all of my driving was at night with no lights. You did some local driving in the daytime, but my main driving was at night over those mountains and you know when you go over one mountain in Italy. Have you ever been to Italy?

SH: Yes.

CW: … You go over one mountain, you think you got it made, and the one in front of you is higher than the one you just came over, see. In an Army truck, in those days I don't know about what they have now, you had to be a good driver to drive one. … If you were smart, if you could--if you were in a convoy you tried to get behind a good driver … because when you start climbing those mountains, now they had governors on the truck they gave me. … Being mechanical minded, because my family had cars in the family and I was familiar with cars, I loved it and knew how to do this. I took the governor off, because it only took a few minutes. I took the governor off because the governor was underneath the carbonator. You take a half-inch wrench, loosen those four bolts, pull the carbonator up, pull the governor, and set up the carbonator back in tighten it down because you couldn't pull those mountains with a governor on, see. You couldn't pull those mountains because you couldn't get any more [than] minimum. … Every other soldier did that too because you couldn't get over them mountains with a governor, see. … You're driving at night with no lights. You're bogged down. I know you never did, there isn't any sense in me asking, you drive across the river, the Po River I think it was. I drove across, had to go across, and you got to, because the bridge had been knocked out. … They don't have that now, they got real bridges that they put down now, but in those days they had a pontoon bridge. … When you get there, you do what the officers tell you or whoever is in charge of that bridge. You got to keep those intervals and the speed down. … The truck is just crawling … and you go across that bridge, on that pontoon bridge because pontoon bridges inflated and you got all this moving and everything because you don't want to make no mistake because that'll be the end. That's the way you do that, see. When you get to a mountain, if the guy in front of you wasn't a good driver, if you couldn't get around him when you see he's in trouble and get into the right gear, at the right time, you have to start all over again. … Starting all over again, in the middle way of those mountains isn't easy because that truck got to start from zero and you hit a gear when you get it. Fortunately, I never had that trouble because I always managed, and most of the guys in that outfit could drive anyway. … You had the double clutch, if you know what the double clutch is, you have the double clutch--that's working the gears and the clutch at the same time. When you hit it you got it, see. … Then, you just go on over it.

SH: If you do not, you stall.

CW: That's right, that's right, they're not easy to shift, those Army trucks in those days. They're not easy to shift, they were good trucks, but you had to know how to drive them.

SH: How did the weather impact your driving conditions?

CW: The weather in Italy was just about like here. Yes, just about. The only thing--over there, it rained for about six months. That really bogged us down plus the Germans, see. Now I'm not, the outfit that I went over there with, I was always, … even in CC camp, I was always in A Company. I didn't know if this was luck or not. The company I went over with, the 263rd, the D Company of that outfit, that whole outfit I went over with, went to the Anzio beachhead, and all those guys got killed. That's what I heard, because the Germans let them in. When they got there they thought they had it made, see. So, I understand, I wasn't there. … After they all

unloaded everything, the Germans opened up on them and most of those guys got killed. See, this is after the 92nd had came over, see. So, my move that I made at that time was the right move, see, because I was forgetting the transfer. [Editor's Note: The US Fifth Army landed at Anzio, Italy on January 22, 1944.] The 92nd, I would take them up to the front occasionally, see, and some of those guys up to the front and let them off, but we didn't, I saw some guys after I got out of the service that I had recognized. That's when the black soldiers, when they came over there, because they had to have replacements and you could go there, but I did it right. Now Mussolini, I know exactly where they caught him at because I used to go from, I used … to take gasoline, not a convoy because we didn't travel in convoys all the time. Either one truck, two trucks, or three trucks or whatever it was at the time. I used to drive from Italy … to take gasoline, you see. [Editor's Note: Benito Mussolini was caught by Italian partisans in Lecco District near Lake Como.] … I went there twice. I took gasoline, see, just myself and maybe one other truck, yes.

SH: When you went out in your truck, was it just a day trip or would you stay overnight?

CW: No, we'd go ahead and drop the load and come back.

SH: Okay.

CW: … They didn't check us, they just let us through, but they had one checkpoint between where I was going. … I didn't have to stop, and just go ahead. … A truck I think held eighteen drums, I think, of fifty gallon drums. … Drop them off and come back. It was a one-day trip and I did that at the end of daytime.

SH: Were there any accidents that happened when you were in Italy with the trucking outfit?

CW: Well, I can say I never had an accident and I don't if any of the guys that had it, but there were plenty of accidents because what they would do, they would give some of the guys trucks that couldn't drive them. … It was too reckless doing … something like that--because we used to see them tractor trailers wreck, more so than the 6X6, yes.

SH: Did you ever have to drive a tractor trailer?

CW: No. … In the service you are only allowed to drive what you are authorized, what you are licensed for. … Just because you got a government license [doesn't mean] you can jump from one vehicle to another. Now, I could drive a jeep, weapons carrier, 6X6, see that's what they called them in those days, 6X6. … Anything in that line I could drive, see. I was licensed to drive. See, whether you could drive or not, some guys they could drive tractor trailers, but you didn't run across that many in those days because tractor trailers weren't really that popular. …

SH: What about the Italian people? How did they treat you? Did you see them?

CW: The Italian people?

SH: Yes.

CW: I never had any problems, see. … The way I'll put it, anywhere I went overseas, unless we ran into some of our own white soldiers in the wrong place then they had that advantage. … They had the advantage, they would attack you, you know, if you got caught. That's why, another reason you didn't go too far. You didn't go anywhere alone, you wasn't supposed to anyway, but you didn't go [too far] … because some of them would attack. I know I was in a rest center. … They sent me away a few times for a rest.

SH: Did they?

CW: Not only me, other fellow soldiers. In one area I went, I went to Venice, but I didn't particularly like Venice there, because you had to go everywhere by boat and all that water, I didn't particularly like that. … One area I was in, this soldier, I was right at where I was staying. He was getting ready to get after me because he thought I was by myself because of just because what I was. I didn't even know it, but I didn't even realize, and one of the soldier's buddies stopped him. You had to be careful with that, see. Now, in Africa, most of the, not all of them, but most of them, I can only talk about what I know. In Africa it was a little different because, see, that was darker race people in Africa. Most of our soldiers, we went to where our own color was, see. It didn't happen. We could do things in Africa that a lot of the white soldiers couldn't do. … We could go anywhere, practically anywhere we wanted to go, at night. That's when soldiers make their move because their on duty during the day, make their move. … The white soldiers couldn't do that unless they had an Army because they didn't like them. That's right, but we could get away with it.

SH: Did you go?

CW: As long as you didn't bother their wife. That was it, that's right, because they knew you're looking for women. … You bother their wife, you're in trouble. That's right, but other than that, they didn't bother you. As long as you act like you're a gentleman, see, that's right. That's the way it was in Africa, but in Italy … I didn't have any trouble. I never had much trouble anyway in my lifetime that way, but in Italy it was a different thing … if some of the white soldiers caught you. … I'll tell you something else--if you were hitchhiking or something like that, if they figured you'd been to town or something like that, they wouldn't give you a ride. See, that's right. A lot of them, some of them would stop and pick you up, but you found more that wouldn't then you did that would.

SH: Really?

CW: Yes, that's our own soldiers. Now the only time, when things get hot, see, when the shells were falling, and different things like that, that's when everyone united together like brothers. [laughter] That's right. That's the way it was, then it would cool down, it would go back to the whole thing, not everyone. Now, there's lot of guys, I remember a guy in Africa, I was at a rationing dump. There was a moon shining at night, and I can see him before he got to, a white boy, and I can always talk on that stuff, see. He came, the guy, I let him get close enough, … then we got to talking, and he said to me, he said, "You know, my parents had lied to me." I don't know whether he was pulling on a leg or not, but he talked serious. I said, "Lied to you

about what?" [He said], "About colored people." I said, "What are you talking about," and we talked for maybe an hour about race.

SH: Really?

CW: Yes, and he said, "I found out a lot of things since I've been in the service that I was told by my parents which was altogether different." … I told him, "Well, you know, there are good people in all races." I said, "No matter who it is." I said, "There's good people in all races." I always looked at it like that. I said, "Because if we wasn't we wouldn't be on earth if there wasn't some good people." … I was just starting to think about this; if Hitler had been successful with the Jews, where do you think we would be? I wouldn't be here sitting talking to you. You see what I'm talking about? We were next. See, we were next. If he was successful with the Jews, and he won the war, he would have wiped out all of us because he couldn't stand black people. See, so that's right. We weren't too far from where he had all the Jews in the concentration camps and all that stuff. We weren't too far from that. … His aim was the Jews. … That was his game, that was what he was going to do, so there's all races of people, and there are some people in our race, … the same thing. That's the way you have to look at it. There are good people in all races.

SH: How long were you in Italy?

CW: I was in Italy from '43 to '45.

SH: Until the war ended?

CW: Until the war ended, yes. …

SH: When did you first hear about the concentration camps?

CW: … When I was in Africa. Well, I had probably heard it here in the States, you know, the concentration camps, but it hadn't got that big. … As I said, news in those days wasn't like it is now. It didn't sink in, but you see, when you're over there, when you're near something like that, or any, it registers right away, you see, but the Jews, the way that Hitler was doing the Jews, we knew about that over in Italy.

SH: Did you really?

CW: Oh, yes, because that was our conversation and if he had won, if he had won the war which he thought he was, we would have been next. …

SH: Did anything change for you when Mussolini was hung?

CW: In the Army, … we were just glad. … I know where he got caught at, because I used to pass through there. … As I said, I could have gone to see him hanging on the scaffold, but I didn't want to see it.

SH: Lake Como?

CW: … The name doesn't register with me because as I said when you're in the service in the war, you're not interested in, you don't pay too much attention to names.

SH: Were you anywhere near Monte Cassino?

CW: Yes, that was a tough fight. Monte Cassino, yes, I remember that like it was yesterday. That was a tough fight. … We were bogged down there. They cut that all the way down to the ground. See, all the way down to the ground, because I came through there when I was on my way home after the war ended. See, everything was even. I understand its back together now, yes. It's back together at Monte Cassino, because they had trouble. … Hitler had the railroad gun there, he used to roll that every so often and they had a lot of trouble there. A lot of trouble breaking through, and that's where we were bogged down at Monte Cassino, yes.

SH: You said you made one run over to Nice in France with the trucks.

CW: Yes, with the convoy. We took a convoy, a convoy is fifteen to eighteen trucks, twenty or some odd trucks, but most of the time it was about eighteen trucks.

SH: Were you transporting troops?

CW: No, the refugees, people.

SH: Displaced people?

CW: We took them back to France, civilians, yes. We had a whole convoy there.

SH: How long were you in Italy after the Germany surrendered in May 1945?

CW: It wasn't that long because when the war ended '45, I was home. I got out of the service in October, the 2nd or 3rd.

SH: Did you know where you were going to be sent after Germany surrendered?

CW: I didn't know where I was going to go because a whole lot of the guys, even the chaplain that I heard, that took us over there, went over with us, a lot of those guys went to the Pacific. I didn't have to go to the Pacific. I didn't know … I had enough points to come home. See, because I had been in all those battle zones, that's how you get your points.

SH: Yes.

CW: A lot of guys that I went over with … in '42 had to go to the Pacific. I came home, I had enough points. I had eighty-seven points, see, that's what kept me from going to the Pacific, you see. … I didn't know I had that many points because as I say the discharge showed more things than I really knew, see. Because a lot of stuff in the discharge, I didn't know I had been in all of

those places because as I say you just do what you're told and go where they take you or tell you to go. … You aren't registering I was here or I was there. See, but whoever was keeping my records, … it's on the discharge. I found some stuff in there I didn't know. See, that's the way it was. See, I had eighty-seven points, and I was single, didn't have any kids or anything to come home. Some of the guys that I went overseas with, I met a lot of them, most of them are gone now--in fact, all of them. They had to go to the Pacific.

SH: What was your reaction when you heard that the war was over in Europe in May 1945?

CW: We were happy.

SH: What did you do?

CW: I don't know. … But as I say, I wasn't sure until I knew that I didn't have to go to the Pacific. Then, I was real happy, see, to come home, see, because … they told you that was one month out on the ocean, from Italy to the Pacific, the way they had to go. That was a whole month, see.

SH: You would have been in trouble with your seasickness.

CW. … That's right. When the company commander, the first sergeant more likely, told you, shows you, and they call your name, there were some guys that left, who had more points than I did, a few that left maybe a couple weeks before me, because they could have been on the same ship I was on, but I had enough points to come home.

SH: What was the reaction when you heard that President Roosevelt had died?

CW: Oh, that was very sad. That was very sad. Yes, that really was very sad because Roosevelt was the one that turned this country around. … In the other Depression, real depression, I was a kid, I was only a ten years old in '29 when they had this crash. I was ten years old, you just hear about this stuff when it got to you. He was the one that … got rid of Prohibition, Social Security, the CC camp. … Now, suppose there hadn't been a CC camp. See, I would have had to take a different route, see. Roosevelt was the man. They can like him or dislike him … but he was the one that did it. [Editor's Note: The stock market crashed on October 29, 1929. President Franklin Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945.]

SH: As a soldier, did you have confidence in the new president, Harry Truman?

CW: Oh, yes, Truman was a good man, see, Truman was a good man. … Roosevelt didn't respect him because when Roosevelt died from what I read, … he had never sat down with Truman and told him anything because he didn't like him, but that was the way it was, but Truman, you know, as far as I was concerned, he was all right.

SH: Were there any Red Cross programs for your unit when you were overseas?

CW: Oh, the Red Cross? Yes, they were over there. … The Red Cross was there, but the only thing about it, you being in … a combat area, they come in with doughnuts and different things like that if you wanted them, but a lot of that. But you see, when you're in a conflict, and racial things, you'll be surprised how sometimes that turns soldiers off. … Soldiers … they weren't that interested. They would go with the Red Cross, the Red Cross come in and had doughnuts and coffee and stuff like that, and talk to you. Like, Bob Hope came over. I guess he was over there, I knew he was over there, but a lot of the black soldiers didn't go to see him. Not that they had anything against Bob Hope, but if you went to see him and by being segregated, you couldn't do better than trying to remember what it was because you wouldn't be that close to him. See, you always had to be in the back. [Editor's Note: Bob Hope began entertaining troops in combat zones in 1943. He continued his USO tours with trips to Vietnam and the First Gulf War.]

SH: Okay.

CW: See that's the thing, and that discouraged a lot of people. … If somebody famous came over, they would gather--like Joe Louis was over there. I never saw Sammy Davis Jr, I didn't know too much because he wasn't that popular at that time, but he got to be popular. Ezzard Charles, I was in the service with him, the fighter. … Ezzard Charles, he was a very nice guy. … My truck number was eighteen and his was twenty-four, but he didn't do too much truck driving because when Joe Louis came over, … they took him and put him with Joe Louis as a mate. He stayed in Florence, he was in Special Services. I didn't see him after that in Special Services because he didn't work because he had something to do and the guys that could better themselves, they did what I did, try to make a move. ... Ezzard Charles, he wasn't a true heavyweight to start with, and people hated him because he beat Joe Louis, but he beat Joe Louis when Joe Louis was on his way out. See, he would have never beat Joe Louis in his prime. … I remember him well. He's dead now. … [Editor's Note: Ezzard Charles served in the military in 1944 and 1945. He defeated Joe Louis for the Heavyweight Title on September 28, 1950. Charles died in 1975.]

SH: So entertainment was segregated too.

CW: Yes, they were segregated. Yes, that's right.

SH: Did Special Services have any acts or shows?

CW: Special Services did things, like entertainment and things. They entertained the whites, see. They entertained them, they had to because that was their orders, and they had to do it. … I the service, no matter where you were, the whites were always ahead. … You could be there, but … that's the way it was. Well, they took it from here because like I told you, the soldiers kind of warned, told us. "You're going overseas," I never forgot that. "You got two strikes against you," he wasn't lying. He was telling us the truth, you might not have liked it, but, "When you get over there, don't strike out." That's the way it was. … Overseas, it was a different atmosphere. The pressure wasn't on like it was on here. … I knew when I left the United States and I remember when I entered the United States coming back. No sooner you got here, everything fell right back in place. See, that's the feeling that you get, see. Everything fell right back in place right, that you know where you belong. See, that's the way it is. …

SH: Did you expect racism when you returned to the United States? Was it really "just the way it was?"

CW: Well, you have to take it like that, and try to do what you could do about it, see. This is the way of life. … Now, I'll tell you how it started. I heard a guy say the same thing in some interviews, because I used to listen to a lot, I still do, listen to a lot of stuff on TV, interviews and different things that I heard on TV. When I was a kid growing up … in the country, we had eighty-one acres of land which we still have it in the family, eighty-one acres of land in Virginia. My father was a farmer. Mr. Floyd had an adjoining farm, which was about a mile down the road. His farm and maybe a smaller farm in-between Mr. Floyd's farm and our farm. They were friends, so-called friends, and Mr. Floyd used to go … with his kids, his oldest son went to Washington, he became a policeman and the daughters, they grew up until one of them got married and left home. … They were little girls at the beginning of this, I was a little boy. This was before his kids bought him a car. … I used to call them a two-seated buggy. It had front and back. … His two daughters would be in the back seat, and he'd be up front taking care of the horse and then going where he was going. … My father used to see them, because in the country, at that time, you can see a mile away, you know. … He'd see him coming, and they were friends, he'd see him coming, and he'd go out there, and they're going to talk. … The two girls, which I had two aunts which were supposed to have been my sisters, around the same age, and my grandfather used to get up to the buggy to talk, and they'd talk. He would take his hat off and tip it to the girls, them two kids. … One day, I had to look at him to see what kind of mood he was in before I said anything, because he was no-nonsense some of the time. So, one day I asked him, I said, "Pop, can I ask you something?" He said, "Yes, go ahead. What do you want to ask me?" I said, "When Mr. Floyd comes up the road, and his two daughters stand up in the back of his buggy, sitting,… and when you get up to the wagon to talk to him," I said, "Why do you take your hat off in front of them?" … He said to me, he says, "Oh, I just do that, boy, son you don't know." Like that, that's all he would say, you see. That's all he would say because he was embarrassed. Here's a kid noticing that, see, because now down South if they respected you, which my grandparents they respected them, they used to call my grandfather Uncle Richie and call my grandmother Aunt (Elma?). You see, they're not going to call you mister or misses. … That's the way we used to do. That's the way it went. So, you sort of get used to it, you don't like it, but you sort of get used to that, see. That's the way it is. …

SH: Did you think there was a chance that segregation and racism would lessen when you came back from the war?

CW: Well, I thought that it would. … Maybe in some people it did, see, in some people. But the ones that were in the driver's seat, it didn't. That makes the difference, see, because in the driver's seat it didn't, because your government and all the politicians, they had to line up behind something like that, if you really want to have a change. … Don't nobody like everybody, see, so you take Roosevelt. When you asked me about Roosevelt, and he was a good president, I said he was, but Mrs. Roosevelt did things that he couldn't do because he had two battles. … Mrs. Roosevelt … stepped in where he couldn't and it didn't do him any harm. That's why he stayed there four terms, see, up to until he passed. See, because she could do some work that he couldn't do. Certain things he couldn't say, because there were certain things he had to do as

President. … Truman did some of the same things. … I saw him on television when he denounced the Ku Klux Klan or whatever it was on television, see. He did that and lived. You see, that's what I'm saying. Like a lot of stuff like going on now, it's the same thing. It's just a different day, see. It's still here, but it's not nowhere near as bad. … It's going to be around for a while, much longer. See, but it's still here, you see, in a sense, you see. Because as I say, there's always some good people and sometimes the good people outweigh the bad people. [Editor's Note: Executive Order 9981 was issued by President Harry Truman on July 26, 1948. This order desegregated the military.]

SH: When you come back to the United States, what ship did you come back on and how long did the trip take?

CW: I can't remember, I don't know the name of the ship that I came back on truthfully.

SH: Were you seasick again?

CW: No, coming back I was more relaxed because everything I saw I sort of gotten used to, but I moved around because we were free to move around, coming back. … The Mediterranean was nice, you see, because some places you can see the bottom of that, on the Mediterranean, but the Atlantic, I'll tell anybody, and everybody knows, they don't care how big your ship is. When it gets rocky then it gets rough because going over the swells, and that was a big ship we were going on, and when all that water come … and you hear that propeller shaking, that's the propeller out of the water.

SH: You were down under where you could hear it.

CW: Yes, sure, that's right.

AM: When you came back, where did your ship land?

CW: New York. Yes, New York, yes. We were so happy to be coming back home, because I'll tell you that day, I'll tell you something else that was a handicap. … I did it a lot of it when I was over there. … Many people couldn't read and write. … Overseas, in my day, if you couldn't read and write, you were in trouble, and there were a lot of people who couldn't read and write. My sergeant, … he was a staff sergeant, he couldn't read and write and I could. That shows you how they did it, see, but I give him credit, I used to write his letters and read them to him when they came back when he get the answer because he had compliments in it. Some soldiers would let you write their letter, and then they get the answer, they get somebody else to read it to them, see, but I give him credit. His name was (Gil Austin?). He was the big heavy guy. … The officer had him for a reason. You know what the reason was? He could protect them, he was big. [laughter] … I give him credit because he learned how to print. He couldn't write long hand, he learned how to print and he learned how to read. … He got into a little bit of the black market stuff and he was raking in a little money. … His money that he wanted to save, he wasn't no dummy, but he learned, he would send it to a bank, see, to somewhere where he knew he would have it when he got home. Now, his girlfriend or his wife, he told me, he said, "I'm going to send her what I want her to have, in case she don't have it when I get home, it won't be no

problem, but if she saves some, it's better for me, but the money that I'm going to keep for myself, I'm not going to send that if because if she don't have it, then I might have to go to jail when I come out." [laughter] You see here how that goes.

SH: He definitely was a smart man.

CW: He wasn't dumb, but a lot of guys, they couldn't read, and I used write home for them, and then read the letters to them. Then, I had another guy, he was a gambler. His name was Henry T. (Whiteson?) from Brunswick, I think it's Brunswick, Georgia. He was one of them guys, I'd write letters for him, and he'd have someone else read it to him. Now, he gambled a lot, he used to send money home gambling, see, but now I would write his letters, but he wouldn't let me read them.

SH: Was he sending money home to pay off debts in the states?

CW: Well, … I don't think he had any debts because our race didn't have too much credit. [laughter] See, that's the way it is. His money [was] for him to have something when he came home. See, that's the way it worked.

SH: Who did you write letters to?

CW: Well, the girl I was going with, she was off and on, off and on. The first two years I was over there, she wrote me. … This is another distinction, when you're away from home like that, in those days, you don't need to do this now. In those days, if a girl wrote you a letter and wrote it on real paper, like a letter, you knew you were still in the ballpark, but if she kept writing you V-Mails, which is a form thing--you fill it in [with] what you wanted to say--you didn't know how to take it. See, so the girl I was going around with when I went in the service, I didn't know where I stood because I didn't hear from her in two years. So, I always thought maybe she found [another], because she was young, I was young. When I met her she was seventeen years old, she just got out of high school. … She had told me, because I was a guy, that when I was there, I had one girl at the time, see. There wasn't two or three girls because you didn't have no money anyways, you know. [laughter] So, you take what you could figure you can handle and I had just the one girl, and she told me, she said she didn't want to get too serious because she wants to look around and make sure, … there's nothing wrong with that, so I thought maybe when the letters slowed up, stopped completely, I either wasn't receiving them or she had found what she was looking for. … She hadn't, I didn't know that, see I didn't know that, but that's the way it was. … You can tell when you're waiting for a long time for that, even with your wife. You take guys who got the wives, they can tell when something isn't right by the mail. … How you started it and how you end it, see it's an answer. … You can tell when something isn't right, that's right. You got to figure, and the men the same way, the same way, see.

SH: Were there educational opportunities for soldiers when they get out of the service?

CW: … When we went overseas, everything was strictly, I don't say there wasn't some program, I can't say that because I wasn't with the whole unit, but as a rule, it was strictly business.

SH: Were you told about the GI Bill when you got home?

CW: Oh, yes, I bought this house on the GI Bill, yes, when I came home, … because they made it easy for you. … I could have gone to school, but see, I got married shortly after I came home. … Then, I had other things, I had to get a different job and everything. I had to get a job. …

SH: Was it hard to find a job with so many GIs returning home?

CW: I'll tell you what. When I came out, see, I had been doing domestic work, which was my main job all my life. … When I came out, the guy I was working for in Irvington, he was in the insurance and real estate business. … He didn't tell me this, I learned it later, that when I came out I went back to him for a short period of time and it was a good move because he didn't live too long after. He died in '48. He was planning on setting me up in the insurance business and in the real estate business. You know, because that's when colored people or black people started to move into that field in a big way. Some of them was in it, but in a big way, there was a lot of money to be made, a lot of business to be started, because people that's in charge of things, they know what's going to happen thirty years from now. … The poor, the smaller people don't know, see, and they know what's going to happen. So, he could see the future that progress was going to be good if you came in here. So, he had planned to put me in the real estate and insurance business. … I finally would have … if I would have stayed single, see, and I would've listened to him. … He had four cars. He had a limousine, a seven passenger, it wasn't a limousine in those days. … A seven passenger was the big car. He had a Packard, it was a nice one. … He only drove that when he went out with somebody or some of his customers … that should ride in a car like that. Ordinarily, he'd drive a Ford and I talked him into buying a Chevy. He bought a Chevy for his sales person. … His sales person thanked me the other day, he said because Ford was a good car, but it only had two springs in those days, and it didn't have that ride. So, he had one sitting in the garage and I tried to get him to sell it to me before I went in the service and he wouldn't do it, but that's what he was saving that car for, for me to start out in. I left him, and two years later he died. … That's the way that worked out, but to get a job now, I went down to, my uncle told me because he worked for National Oil at that time which became NAPCO Chemical, and then, Diamond Shamrock took it over, in later years, in Harrison. … He told me, he said, "I can get you a job, but the work I do is too heavy for you." … When I came out of the service, that's when they offered me a job. … I went down there to interview. They were opening up … a new department, … fine chemical, and they were hiring young guys. … They didn't know what was going to happen. So, they were getting all of the colored boys that they could get to start off in there. So, I could have gone in there in the beginning. So, I said, "No, I'm going to try to do something else." Then, I went back and … it wasn't long, a couple of months, I went there and asked the guy, had an interview, and he asked me where I worked. I said, "Yes, I have a job … but I wanted something better. I'm married and I want something a little better that's going to pay more money." Because I started there and that was less than what he was paying me, what Mr. Martin was paying me. So, he said, "Well, you can have a job." … I didn't know anything about chemicals, nothing. I had never been in a factory. … I went there and I started working with this guy, Oliver Brown was his name. … They were just starting it up and you had to carry water. I was just his helper, get water like this and stuff, and doing things, different things. … I was helping him, I was doing what he was telling me to do. So, he left and then moved to Florida. … All the skin on my hand came off. You know, just peeled off, you

know. It didn't hurt or nothing like that, but I stuck there, and kept learning, kept working at it as a process helper. … There wasn't but two white fellows in the department. One was old--not because they wouldn't hire them, they didn't want to work there. … We heard later that when they would come for a job, some of the guys would tell you. … They told us when we came there and look for a job, "Don't ask for a job in fine chemical because that's an experimental job." … They don't know what's going to happen and so that's why they had so many black guys over there. … I could look at something a lot of times and then catch on. … The guy would take a day off and hoping you can carry on and wouldn't tell you nothing, you know. Stay home sick, and you learn, so this particular guy, … he's dead. He said, "Stay at home," one day. I was his helper. … I was learning, he was teaching me, you know, I was learning. … He wanted to see how I was going to make out. So, I said to my supervisor, … Rosenberg was his name. He was a guy that had some authority. He had authority. He said, "Name the product we were making," they called it (Dipisel?). It was a dangerous thing. … I had watched him and I knew how to handle it, but being in the service I knew how to handle dangerous stuff anyway. … I said, "I don't know that job all the way." So, Rosenberg told me, he says, "When you get to a point where you don't think you know, you come in the office and I'll come out and see what it's all about." I said, "Okay," because the office was on the same floor where they did the separation. … So, I worked the batch up until I got up to where you make the split. Where you separate the good, with the parts you're going to save, and the parts you're going to throw away or recycle. … I said, "I got up to this point and I don't know what to do." He said, "Didn't Wesley show you?" I said, "No, he didn't show me." I said, "Because whenever he would get to this part he had always sent me to get something." See, that's the way they would do it, he would always send me to get something and I never knew what he did. By the time I'd get back, he had already done it, see. … He showed me. He says, "That's all he did," how you make the split. See, that's all. I got that. Then I went on, the next day or the day when he came in, he said, "How did you make out?" I said, "I made out all right." I didn't tell him, though. I said, "I made out all right." Then, he left me alone. Then, I became, [in] five years, I became a chemical operator, and then, I learned how to do--they made a lot of products. In chemical plants, most of the time, whatever they start you with, that's what you end up with. For the simple reason that it is, they don't want you to have too much knowledge because all chemical plants, I understand, was like that, because that knowledge is valuable. See, you know, because you could give away a whole patent on how stuff is done. You know, or sell it or whatever you were going to do, but that wasn't my thing. … I learned how to do everything in the department. I was there thirty-five years. I learned how to do every batch in the department that they made. See, but some of it I didn't bother, and didn't push to get into it, because it was so dangerous. … I became an (A-plus?) operator. … With the ether house, they had a place called the ether house, that was an easy job, but it was a dangerous job, see, a very dangerous job. … I never wanted to get in there because I wanted to live, see. [laughter] Fortunately, … nobody got killed, but they had a bad explosion down there, … I forget what year it was, but it was in the middle '50s I think it was. They had a vessel because … everything was experimental and they had this vessel that went through three floors, that's how big it was. … They had been working on it all day, the chemical operators and supposedly the engineers. … There were engineers, … but when five o' clock came they went home, which they shouldn't have done. They went home and left it up to the operator and the guy came in, he was going to correct it, and a guy that I went overseas with, and another guy. They came over, and he was going to correct it, because he was good, he was very good at what he did. … It was a big thing. … It was put together in sections, and … it took

about seventy-five bolts, heavy bolts, to hold that thing together, and that thing exploded. Half of it went up. … It fell near the ether house, and the other half went down. … It upset the whole … five-story building, that offset that whole building with that explosion. One guy, he got burned very bad, and the guy I went overseas with, he was never the same, but he lived. … The head boss, he wasn't there too long after that. … They didn't fire him, but they put him in a position that they knew he would quit, but see somebody didn't do their job, see. … The next time when they started it back up and did what they were supposed to, they put the right thing on the outside and it was a thing that they should have had on there … to release the pressure, and they put it in and did it right. … (Niacine?), that's what they were making, and they made that product until they couldn't sell it anymore. … That guy that got burned really bad, he lived a few years. … The guy that got hurt and was never right, he's dead now, but he was never the same, you see. That's why it came about. … He just died in his late nineties, see. He didn't die from that, but he was never the same, see. That's how dangerous this was. … We were told not to go in there because they wanted to see what was going to happen, but we never had another explosion like that, see.

SH: When did you meet your wife?

CW: I met her when I first came to Jersey, but I … never thought that she was going to be my wife when I first came to Jersey in 1938. … She started writing to me while I was overseas so then when I came home we got married. … We've been married sixty-five years.

SH: Congratulations.

CW: Yes.

SH: Were you involved in the Civil Rights Movement?

CW: On a small scale, I supported King, you know what I mean, the donations and different things. … I didn't get tied into it because people with more knowledge than I had, you know, better education and everything--let them have that, yes.

AM: Have lived in New Jersey all sixty-five years you and your wife have been married?

CW: … Yes, my wife was born in Montclair. That's how come I'm here in Montclair, and bought a house in Montclair, because she was born and raised in Montclair. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Was there a chance that you would have been called up for the Korean War (1950-1953)? Were you still in the service?

CW: Well, I thought I was, … because Korea was right after World War II. I thought I was because I was eligible, see, but they didn't. I guess … they didn't need me. … Some of the guys did get called, see, but they didn't. I guess they look at your records. … I was a little nervous there for a while. ...

SH: Had you thought of staying in the military at all?

CW: … No, no, … I had enough of that. It's not a pleasure to be shot at. I don't have nothing against the service if you're shot at, but there isn't any pleasure being on the receiving end, you see.

SH: While you were in the service, was the standard of living a little better for you after Germany and Japan surrendered?

CW: Well, the only thing, you didn't have to worry. See, when the war ended we figured we were going to get home, but I'll tell you something. At times, you didn't know whether you were going to make it or not because one of the worst things in the world is a gun. See, you can give a person a gun--see a lot of people don't believe it--in five minutes time, if their personality isn't right, they rely on that gun. See, that's what you had to be worried about because I was in the area getting ready to come home. I was in the staging area, getting ready to come home, and one night I had to get out of my bed, cot, and get underneath, because soldiers had guns. They hadn't taken the guns. They had guns, now the war was over, you see, and they got ammunition in the gun, and they're shooting. That's right, that's what makes you wonder sometimes, you know, whether you're going to make it or not, see, they're shooting. … The war is over with and they just hadn't taken the guns. … You can give a person a gun and if it's the wrong person, I've seen it happen, in five minutes time or ten minutes time, their personality changes if you make them mad because that's what they rely on the gun. A guy would tell you, … "I'm going to get my rifle," and be meaning it, see. They ain't joking, and they meaning it. So, that's why you had to be careful, see, so this is why … people get killed. … I don't know if you know this or not, you know, legally I think, these people keep up with the laws I think. You can have a gun now and all this stuff. That's dangerous. … So many innocent people are being killed because if a guy relies on his gun that's why they getting shot so much, see. … In my estimate, the intent of the Constitution, and I always said before the end of time, they're going to change the Constitution, a lot of things because the intent, was when the forefathers wrote the Constitution, they weren't talking about big firearms, they were talking about a shotgun or something like a pistol. …

SH: Now they have machine guns.

CW: … Some people can't handle it. I don't have a gun, never owned one. I haven't had in my hand a gun--to my knowledge--since I left Fort Dix. I left my gun over in Sicily, Italy. I never had any interest in guns, see. Because the personality change, you make a person mad, or they see something they don't like, a lot of them will go get their gun, see. … Now, when I was in the country, living as a kid growing up, … we always had a shotgun because we used to do a lot of hunting. … If I lived in the country because they got snakes here, but I don't need no guns for them, … but some people will kill a snake with a gun, you know I mean, because they're afraid of a snake. Which I am, that's the only way I would ever kill one, with a gun, but I never owned … any one, but that's the way it is. See, the gun law that these people … talk about the Constitution like that, I don't think that was the intent when the forefathers wrote for you to have whatever you want to have in your house, see, because not everybody can handle it. They use it before they think. …

SH: What are you most proud of?

CW: Well, I'll tell you the truth. … I only went to elementary school because when I graduated from elementary school in the country, my grandfather told me, he said, "I can't send you to high school because I can't afford to pay to go to high school" … because we had to have a bus, and in the country it was twelve or fifteen miles away and he'd have to pay, and he didn't have that money. So, I was satisfied. In those days, it wasn't for the black man or the colored man, there was no incentive or any way for him to have all that education. See, I'll tell you the reason why. … They had educated reading and writing like that. I got a nephew that's a lawyer, and I understand he's a good one. … If he had came along in my time, and had the same education that he had today, he wouldn't have got a job. So, what good was an education? See what I mean? That's why a lot of the black men didn't have educations because there was no incentive. All of the black men, really educated men, that had a lot of education, if they didn't have something behind their back to throw something to them, they wouldn't have made it anyway. You take, and I'll tell you one, Thurgood Marshall. See, if it hadn't been for the NAACP, been a lawyer for them, he would have never made it to where he made it, see, because nobody was behind him. He could have been a janitor or some kind of clerk in the lawyer's office. You see, the next thing about it--who was going to hire you, see. The doors are open now. … That's why now you've got to have an education or you better have one, see, because the doors are open. They're open, not all the way yet, but they're opening, see, that's the difference. … My mother was a college graduate.

SH: Was she?

CW: Oh, yes, she was a school teacher. … That's the part I didn't tell you. See, I didn't get to know who my mother was until I had heard it and I believed it, but I didn't get to know who my mother was until … in the 1970s. … I'm going to go back and fill you in on that now. … When my mother, … she was twenty-five years old when I was born because I know the year she was born. I know when I was born, and she was twenty-five years old when I was born. My grandmother, … she was very aggressive. My grandmother could read and write good. Her favorite book was the *Reader's Digest* and the *Richmond Times Dispatch* and both of them is still in business. The *Richmond Times Dispatch*, I was surprised when I asked my brother, he said, "Oh, yes, that paper is still there." … She could read and write--my grandfather couldn't. He wouldn't know his name if you put it up [to his face]. … He couldn't read, he didn't have that opportunity, but he had good hard sense, see. So, my mother told me--she couldn't of did that today. She was very aggressive, my grandmother, from the little that I know of her. She was a very smart women and … a hard worker. She knew what to do, … how to make money, see, because we had a farm down there, and we had every fruit that she could raise on that farm, which … is still in the family, had eighty-one acres. … She would work on that, she would go away, and come up to Philadelphia, and would do domestic work, working, and in the winter time … would come back around this time of year … and tend to her garden and everything and canning and doing this and that. … If you couldn't sell it, you'd take it to town and trade it for what you want. … Some of the stores, that's the way they did business. … She did that, and she stayed gone all the time, but she kept me dressed good when I went to school, see. She could sew and patch and … sometimes she'd patch the patch. … I see kids now buy brand new clothes

and colored polos, and … I said in my day, [laughter] all you have to do is patch it, because that's the way they did it. … She did that, she was good. All of my aunts, which were her daughters, except one, I had my one aunt who was a nurse, a registered nurse. … I had two, my mother was a school teacher, she taught school forty-five years. My one aunt, she used to teach … and she was a seamstress. She was good at it, and one was a nurse, see. As I said the other one, she was a very nice looking woman, so she says some man was going to take care of her, and I don't know what happened. She's gone now, she lived to be ninety-six. She's gone now, but that's the way it was. The boys, they left home early … and got jobs, because in those days you didn't leave home unless you couldn't get along at home until you were twenty-one, see. … Then, sometimes if the mother and father had direct control, if you got a job and you got paid, if they put it in an envelope you didn't open that envelope until you give it to them. … Then, they open it and give you what they want you to have and they keep the rest. That's the way it went, and they'll tell you, … "Now, if you don't like this, the door is wide open." [laughter] So, the one that didn't like it, I had one aunt and an uncle, James. That was the one I called when my grandfather got sick. I did all I could do for him, and I told him, "I think you better come home," and they were there, see, them too. The others you didn't hear from them until they figured he was on his way out, and then, they came, but that's the way it worked. … Now, getting back to my mother, she told me, she says, "I had bought my gown when I found out I was pregnant, and me and your father were going to get married." Somebody told my grandmother that she was pregnant because that's why I was born in Mecklenburg--Farmville--the town that I was closest to is in Cumberland County, Virginia, that's where I was born, in Mecklenburg. It took me a long time to get my birth certificate. I didn't get my birth certificate until … just before I retired, because I never knew where I was born. … She says, "My mother came down when you were born," and the birth certificate proves it, and took you away from me and brought you and was going to raise you as her child, which wasn't going to work because the age difference was different. See, but that's the way she did it. … So, I said to her, and I was talking to her, this is in the '70s, because my mother died in 1980. So, I says to her, I said, "Well, how about my father?" Now, I even knew my father, but I didn't know he was my father [then]. See, one day I was in school, it was the first time I was in school, a country school, a two-door school, right on the highway, right on … Route 45. … This man stops by, I didn't know he came in. … The teacher's name was Ms. Kate. That's what everybody called her, and she was a no nonsense teacher, asked me to stand up. … I didn't know what it was all about. … Then, she told me I could sit down and that afternoon when I went home at three o'clock she called me to her desk and gave me this bag of candy, hard candy, in February, wrapped up in twine, and says that, "You see that gentleman that stopped by the other day." I said, "Yes." … She said, "He left you this package." I said, "Yes." She said, "Now you take this home and don't open it until you get home." … In those days you did what a grown person told you, that's what you did. I took it home at the dinner table and told them, I said, "Some man stopped by the school and left me this bag of candy, and Ms. Kate gave it to me and told me not to open it until I got home." I was happy, I didn't hardly want to eat dinner, I wanted to get in that bag of candy. … Nobody said anything. … I paid it some attention, but I didn't know what was going on. … That was my father. … I remember Christmas I got this brand new wagon. … I asked my grandfather, "Who gave me this wagon?" and he told me something to satisfy me and when they speak you don't contradict them. … When I left Virginia at fifteen years old, I still had that wagon. … I'm like that today. Anything that I have, I take care of it. I left that wagon down in Virginia, it was old, but it was still there, see. I had it fourteen, fifteen years, see. … That was my father. So, then, I

remembered after my … grandmother died, my father took me to his church. You know, not your country church, because they didn't take me … nowhere that much and of course I was being hid. … So, I went to church and this guy kept playing with me, kidding me and like that, and he said to me, "Boy, I'm going to take you home with me." … I could look at him and tell--he acted like he meant it. … So, I went to my grandfather and stayed with my grandfather because I was a little afraid. That was my father, see. … It never had dawned on me. … My grandfather … only lived four years after my grandmother passed. He told me, "If anything happens to me I want you to go to Pennsylvania to live with George," because the man that my mother married, somebody had told him that, told him … about me, see. … He held it against my mother until he died, and he was offended because my sister eventually kicked in and told me after she got to be grown. He said, "If I ever find out that that's your son, that that's your child, I'm going to kill you." … That's what my sister told me, and how I come to know who my sister was, and that's why my grandfather told me to go to Pennsylvania and live, because he wanted to get me out of Cullen because he knew that my father was going to connect with me, and that was because my mother's life was in jeopardy. In jeopardy because he didn't know, he had said he was going to do this, and he might have did it. … That's how that all ties in, see.

SH: Wow, what a story.

CW: … Then, after, I went down to Virginia, I was on vacation. That was in '70 or '71, I was on vacation, and I went down to Virginia, and this is her husband now which would have been my stepfather, this is her husband. … They had taken him down to Petersburg, he wasn't crazy, but he had gotten to the point that … she couldn't handle him at home, and he was down there in the mental [area]. … I took her down there every day. Now, this is going to show you how things worked. Every day I took her to Petersburg to see him. Or every other day, Petersburg is about fifty some miles from where she lived. … I talked to him, and he would treat me nice, … he would talk to me, we would let him talk, but I never [knew] … all of this stuff, I didn't know, and so he died there. … That's when she, before she buried him, that's when she acknowledged me that she was my mother. See, that's how it that came about. Then, my sister, my uncle that I'm living with, … was living in Newark. He went to Virginia to visit me, asked me to look after the furnace while he was gone. … I'd do anything for him because he was good to me, see. … I said, "Yes, I'll do it." I went down there … because I knew his wife before he did because her parents and my grandparents were friends. So, I went down to the basement … and Mildred, my sister, she died last year. I went down in the cellar to check the furnace and Mildred followed me downstairs, and we got down there, she said, "Clarence." I said, "Yes." She says, "Aren't you and I brothers and sisters?" I looked at her, and I laughed. I said, "What are you talking about?" She says, "Just answer the question." I said, "Well, I guess we are, you're my sister, you're my half-sister." That's how we met. Then we talked, and then she told me. … That's how I got my birth certificate because she told me, when I got ready to retire I needed my birth certificate, and I said, "I can't get it." And I said, "Because every time I write they don't have any record of me." … She said, "Clarence, you weren't born in Cumberland County." I said, "I wasn't born in Cumberland County? Well, where was I born?" Because I asked my grandfather, had asked him that, and he told me he didn't know. I figured he was lying but I wasn't going to tell him that. [laughter] So, I wrote to Richmond and they told me to send them three dollars and they'll send me my birth certificate, and that's how I got it. You see, and that's when my birthday changed. You might see on the discharge there, March the 15th, it's not [that date]. I was born

September. … I asked the lawyer when it came out, and he said, "Well, it don't make any difference as long as it's the same year." … I asked the lawyer and he told me, he said, "That's all right, don't worry about the month." … They sent me my birth certificate. I was born nine o'clock at night, on September the 4th, 1919. …

SH: That is some story.

CW: My mother told me, she says, "Clarence." She and I talked. … I said, "What did my father look like?" Because I hadn't connected it all together, and getting it from her now, I'm getting it right. … She said, "Go ahead and look in the mirror, you'll see him. … You're just like him." That's right, and that was my father. … I've been doing some checking on him up to now because I'm curious. I know he's dead, because I met a guy in a bar in the late '70s down here in Bloomfield. … I asked him, where was he from, and we got to talking, and I only saw him that one time. … He said, "I'm from Cumberland." And I asked him a couple more questions because … he had had a couple drinks. I ain't saying he was drunk, but he had a couple of drinks, and he says, "I'm from Cumberland," blah, blah, blah, and I talked. … I never saw him anymore. … I put it together he was my half-brother, but I never saw him again.

SH: Unbelievable.

CW: That's right, that's right.

SH: Well, I think you really should be proud.

CW: … My experience, the stuff I had been through and witnessed, I wouldn't trade it now for college. … I'm most fortunate that my memory has held up this long, because most of the people, in fact all of the people [forget]. … I'm the type of person now I wish some of the people could come back because, you know. I have always been against smoking. That's right, always been against smoking. … Drinking, now my father, grandfather, a pint of whiskey when I was a kid. … Prohibition, everything was bootleg, you'd get caught.

SH: Prohibition.

CW: Prohibition, yes, Roosevelt took that off, that's right. … My uncle James, the one that I came here to live with, when he'd come home, he'd always bring his father, my grandfather a pint of whiskey for Christmas. He would come home around Christmas and that pint of whiskey would last him two years. So, that goes to show you what a drinker he was. [laughter] … He would mix a toddy, he would never drink it straight, and the toddy is in the bartender's book--a little sugar, water, and some, whatever amount of whiskey you want to put with it. That's a toddy and he'd always gave me a teaspoon full, let me know what it tastes like. See, and that's a good thing. I'll tell you the reason I think it's a good thing. … I used to like beer, and I still like beer. … I never liked straight whiskey anyway, I always put it with something. … I used to drink, but I had always had a limit, and I drink most of my drinks in orange juice, I used to drink it in ginger ale, until it started reacting, the sugar, I started reacting. Then, I went to orange juice. … I never was that much of a drinker. … I didn't start drinking until after I was out of the service … around twenty-seven years old. I used to do that to go out, you know, and people

sometimes, they don't know how to entertain yourself because you don't drink. … Now, I got whiskey, I haven't had a drink of hard liquor in twelve years. Now, my daughter, he's married to my daughter, I still have some of the whiskey we served at that wedding, almost twenty years now.

HB: You still don't have that whiskey do you?

CW: Yes.

HB: Give it to me, I'll take care of it for you. [laughter]

CW: See, I like beer, but I don't bother. … I haven't had a beer, well, I had one the other day, that agent brought me for Christmas. … Now smoking, I have always been against it. My uncle, used to roll his own, … because cigarettes used to be, when I was a kid, about fifteen or twenty cents a pack, name brand, Camels was … one of the main ones, and Philip Morris, and all like that. I have always been against that. Guys used to ride with me, and I'd tell them, "You can ride with me home, but you're going to keep that cigarette out until you get where you're going," and they'd get mad, and wouldn't want to ride. Well, it's my car. I said, "It's my car, I don't like smoke." I have never cared for smoke and I wish some of the people could come back now that's gone because all of my friends were heavy smokers, see, and I never smoked. I tried it down in Virginia a couple of times. My uncle was the one that taught me, one of my uncles, he used to roll his own and … he died in his fifties. He used to roll his own if he couldn't afford to buy a pack. I don't know how he did it. He would take the cigarette, draw the smoke, … hold the smoke down, drink a glass of water, and then let the smoke out. [laughter] One day, I got something, and nobody was home with me down in the country. I got me some of that home-cured tobacco, and rolled it up, got some dried papers, … and I was going to try it because I got a kick out of that. I swallowed that smoke, and took some water, and I thought I was going to go. [laughter] … I decided that day, that's right, that day, and I laugh at it. … I never smoked [after]. I tried it, but that was the end of it. They used to give us cigarettes overseas--I'd sell them. … Adrian, this is his wife, I don't think she is that much of a drinker now. … Whenever I made a drink, I'd let her have take a sip of it. She'd be like, "Dad, can I have a sip?" "Yes." … I think people are against that. … I don't know how Adrian drinks, but I don't think she's a big drinker. [laughter] … I would say it's the curiosity part that caused people to do things. You could bake a cake or pie and sit it on the sill, anything, and tell a kid don't touch it. … You'd be better off if you didn't say anything. See, curiosity, see, makes you do things sometimes, or your friends. Now, if she goes somewhere, and somebody wants her to drink, or tries to force her to drink, and she don't want it, she already know what it tastes like, see. … Somebody asks you for something, … and you don't like it, you said, "No, I don't care for any," like that. You may not tell them you don't like it. … See, it ends there. … But if you tell a person, "Oh, I don't want you to have this." … Why? … It's just like raising a child. … You have to have control. … I think a lot of the things that the police have gotten into are wrong, see. Because when I was growing up, I never, my grandmother, [if she] caught us, started whipping me, once, she wouldn't hurt me, once. It's the control, see. There's nothing wrong with a person correcting their child, as long as you don't abuse them. Now, I'll tell you something, maybe you never heard of it. When I went to school, started at school, the teacher could whip you if she had the parents' permission.

SH: You are correct.

CW: Sure, if she had the parents' permission, she could whip you and Ms. Kate, the one you hear me talking about, she would do it. She would do it because she got the parents' permission, and then tell the parents. Now, when my mother's grandmother went to town and my grandfather went to town, that's where they would meet. … She is going to tell him the truth, see. … You don't need that many whippings because you're raising your child, I'm raising my child, you don't know what they'll do to the child. Sometimes it's the threat, you don't have to kill him … just let him know that you're the boss and this is what you mean. That's the thing, but now, some kids tell their parents, "I'll have you get arrested." Now, you couldn't stay in my house and have me arrested. … Sometimes the police are wrong. … The parents, I'm not going to say you have to kill him, but let them know that this is what you mean, see. … Most of the time when I was a kid growing up in the country, the little jail there in Cullen was empty, see. … They built a brand new jail--them farmers--in those days. … My half-brother was the first one in it, and he says that was the longest weekend. … He was in there by himself. There was nobody in there but him. That's right, it ain't like that now … because the kid, when he got out, because I asked him one time, "How did you come to go to Massachusetts?" He said, "When I got out, when they let me out that weekend, I had done something." He said, "And the judge told me," or whoever it was, the police or whoever, told him to "stay out of town for three years." … That's right, they meant it, he knew they meant it. … He said, "I only live two miles from town. Now, how am I going to stay out of town for two years? So I left home and went to Massachusetts." See, because he knew they meant it, see. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

CW: I was supposed to have graduated from … elementary school in '33 and I didn't pass. … I went home, my grandfather asked me, he says, I told him I didn't pass, and I said to him, "I don't know why." … He didn't say anything. So, when him and Ms. Kate met at church in town, he asked her. She told him the truth and I admire her for it. She says, "The reason I didn't pass him is because he's not working up to his potential. He's supposed to do this, … I know he can do it, and he won't do it, and that's why I didn't pass him." … Pops come home and told me, he said, "Ms. Kate." I didn't tell him, I didn't admit it to him. Told me, he says, "She knows you can pass, you're qualified. … That's why I didn't pass you because you're not working up to your potential," and she was right. I didn't tell him that, but she was right. … I was weak in mathematics. I was working, and when I went home, I didn't have anybody to help me, see. That's where my mother was necessary. If my mother had had me I would have been all right because she was a school teacher, see. It wasn't that simple. … Now, Ms. Kate, she didn't take no nonsense, and the next teacher, they was over me, but Ms. Kate was the principal of the two-room school. … The other teacher was under her, and she was nice, and she took her time and showed me, but I couldn't under pressure, I can't work under pressure. I'm like that today, see, I can't work under pressure. … It bothers me, I have a nervous tension and like that, but my mother would have, it wasn't no big deal. Somebody that knew fractions could have straightened it out in five minutes. Like when I went in the service, I never forgot this guy, I was down in Fort Dix and the soldier was, the soldier corporal, you give somebody some stripes, … the worst two people in the Army that you can run into is a PFC and a second lieutenant, that's right. A

PFC is a Private First Class, and a second lieutenant, he's the lowest one on the totem pole and he's trying to move ahead, see. That's right, and so he was trying to get me to stay in the march. He was hollering. His name was Graham, from the North. … A sergeant, a guy from Ohio, Alvin Johnson, he said, "Ernie," he could talk because he knew, I didn't understand it. He said, "Give me that soldier, you're teaching him wrong." He said, "You're teaching him wrong. First thing, you're hollering too much." … He took me--within ten minutes I had it, that's right, you see. He talked to me like I was a human, see, and I picked it up. I can't work under pressure, see, take your time and explain to me and I'll understand you, we understand each other, and then go. Like now, if I have somebody helping me, … I said, "I'm doing this." I said, "I may not know exactly what I'm doing." I said, "If you have a better idea, tell me, and I'll use your idea." See, I put him on the defensive, see, and that's the way you do it.

SH: Sounds like good advice.

CW: … I'm like that now, if you got a better idea, I'll do it, I'll use your way, because I don't have to have the last answer. I don't have to be right, see, there's always a better way, see. I often rarely mention the song, to come back to music. I don't know who wrote this song, … "Take a bad song and make it better."

HB: "Take a sad song and make it better"--it's The Beatles.

CW: Yes, The Beatles, "and make it better."

SH: You have been listening to lots of different music.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Well, thank you Mr. Wilson for having us here and thank you Mr. Bolden for contacting us about your father-in-law.

CW: Yes, I told Ed, I said I don't have any problem with that. I like to talk and talk history. … Anything I can talk on, I can talk on--it doesn't bother me.

SH: Well, great, thank you so much.

CW: You're welcome, sure.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Jesse Braddell 03/15/2012
Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 04/5/2012
Reviewed by Clarence Wilson 05/15/2012