
ROMANI ABNEY: Okay. This is May 24th, and I’m interviewing Mrs. Robinson. What’s your first name, Mrs. Robinson?

MARIAN ROBINSON: Marian.

RA: Marian Robinson. Okay. Now you were brought up in what part of the country?

MR: Bowling Green, Virginia.

RA: Bowling Green, Virginia. That’s nice. Was it a rural area? Like a farm, or what?

MR: Well, Bowling Green, yes, it’s a rural area. Bowling Green is the little town, actually, the home place the Hoomes built, a place called Hoomes built there.

RA: Did your parents farm? Or what type of work did they do?

MR: Yeah. My mother and father had a farm, and my father worked in the government in Washington. I can’t ever remember him working anywhere else. And, of course, they were here in the suburbs, out in Wayne, for about—I don’t know just how many years, but I know my father went into the service.

RA: What branch?

MR: He was in the Army.

RA: The Army.

MR: Yeah.

RA: So was my father.
MR: And he went to the service. Then he came back here, and I guess the only reason they left here to go back to Virginia was the fact that my mother was an only child—only daughter, and she had one brother. And her mother was very ill. And she went back to take care of her mother. And as a result, she never came back to the city again.

RA: How many acres was the farm, do you know?
MR: We had 25 acres. Most of it was timber, however, we did have about ten acres at that time, open—open.

RA: What kind of things were raised on the farm?
MR: They raised tobacco, cucumbers, tomatoes, in the garden, of course. The corn—the corn and wheat, of course, which people do now, but at that time, you shelled the corn, and took it to the mill, which was ground into meal.

RA: Did you have to dry all the stuff, then, before you took it?
MR: The corn—and you harvest it, I guess you would call that. You whip; you pull the ears of corn off the stalk,

RA: That always confused me. They grind the corn, but it seemed like they would have to dry it or something before they—
MR: It does. It has to dry out. Wheat, well, they had a—wheat was shoved out by a machine. Of course they cut the corn, which that part would to feed the livestock.

RA: Okay.
MR: And the hay—wheat would help make the hay, and they had clover.

RA: Does the family still own part of the land, or own the land?
MR: We still own the land.

RA: Now that’s real unusual. Most blacks end up losing their land.
MR: Well, my father went through the second or third grade, when he was in school. Even though he was raised by his aunts—even though he was raised by his aunt, it was almost as if he had to raise himself, because he wasn’t treated—he wasn’t treated too kindly.

RA: Okay.

MR: Or treated very well. And he always said that he would make sure that he had something to leave his kids. He always thought the city was no place to raise children. He always impressed on us that well, you always should have somewhere to come, when you’re tired of the city, or if you get so you can’t work, you know, you have a home. You get so you can’t work, and whatever fate that you come to be. And he worked hard towards that goal. He put himself through high school by going to night school.

RA: And this was back a ways, too. [Pause in recording] The family house life. You still own the family house.

MR: The house that [pause]—the house that I was born in—incidentally, my mother had ten kids, and they all were born at home, with midwives, and doctor and everybody.

RA: What’s your place—your birth position?

MR: I am the fourth child; I am the fourth child from the top.

RA: Okay.

MR: I am the fourth child from the top, and the third girl. The first house was a big house. Let me see, we had a big—a huge kitchen, big dining room. A living room, which at that time, we weren’t—I always remember this living room in particular, because the floors were mahogany, and it was always kept just so-so. It always shined. We weren’t allowed to go in that room.
RA: Mahogany is a beautiful wood, too.

MR: We weren’t allowed, because you know how kids; like my house is a bit disgrace on the mother’s. [Laughs] [Phone rings/pause in recording] Oh, oh, I was telling you about this living room, and the floors was always shined, shiny, and we weren’t allowed to go in there. We had a porch on each end of the house, and we could come out of the kitchen, onto the porch, into the hallway which led to the upstairs, or out the hallway to the upstairs, and you could walk straight through to the front porch. And the front porch was real gorgeous.

RA: Was it two stories?

MR: Yes, it was a two-story house.

RA: Wood house, or brick?

MR: Wood.

RA: Do you have any knowledge of when it was built, or who built it?

MR: I don’t have—I don’t know why I don’t know who built this house.

RA: But she did have it built?

MR: The house was built for—they had the house built while they were here in the North.

RA: Okay, and then they went back.

MR: Then they went back. Of course, in the later years, she had two rooms added on up and down. Two rooms. And that house was lost in the fire—and I’m trying to think of the years—about thirty-four years ago. With seven grandkids who was lost in that fire. Yes. I had three. And there were sisters and brothers, one who was married and had children who was in that fire. After that, they came closer to the road,
or the highway, if you want to call it, to build a home like a story and a half, which is the home that we have now.

RA: Yeah. That’s nice. And I think it’s a real important, real special that you still have the land, because so many blacks came from the south to the north, and it’s just a rarity to find someone who still owns that land.

MR: Yes, well, you know, we remember that my father worked hard, and he worked three jobs to take care of his family. He was a very devoted family man. He would come home every other weekend. My mother more or less ran things at home. And she was a very strict.

RA: Yeah. What were family meals like? Did you have a special room you ate in?

MR: We usually ate in the kitchen. The only time the dining room was used for eating was if we had—if there was company. In the dining room—the dining room was the place that we did our homework. We did our homework, and at night, of course we had heaters. We didn’t—when I was home, we didn’t have electricity or central heat, we had the heater stoves you put in there, you know, you burned them.

RA: Did the family have, like, favorite meals?

MR: I think dinner—oh, well, I guess all meals was favorite. Breakfast was like—breakfast consist of—they used to have—the staple food for breakfast was salt herrings, which you put in soak overnight, and you cook the next morning. They always had them

RA: How do you cook the salt herring?

MR: Fry them.

RA: Fry them. Okay.
MR: You always have cornbread biscuits. Well, you had preserve jelly, because they were things that people—you put up in the summer.

RA: Yeah, can.

MR: Yeah, the canned goods. And you had bacon, which people—which at that time, down there they called it “Millin”

RA: Really?

MR: But I guess for Millin’s products.

RA: Oh, okay. Then they would call it that.

MR: They call Millin bacon. And pork was your—I say your staple more or less, as far as meat was concerned. Because people—you had beef, or—people that had beef would either slaughter the cow, or went to the town shop. Like, my mother would buy hamburger, come back home and make meatballs—what they call meatballs now. I used to think that was the best stuff. I used to eat that.

RA: Mm-hm. How about the Saturdays and Sundays, and things like that?

MR: Well, Saturdays was a special day, because for us—because as children, after twelve o’clock on Saturday, we didn’t have to do any work. [Laughs] kids at that time worked. I mean, when I say you worked, you washed. When we got up in the mornings to go to school, we got up maybe around four, four-thirty. One would cook breakfast. One would milk the cow, and one would feed the livestock. If my brothers was sick—we had only two brothers—we’d have to feed the livestock until my youngest brother got old enough to do it.

RA: About how old would the child be before they started doing chores, or anything around the house?

MR: Well, from the time you could stand on the box, and reach the dishpan, to wash the dishes.
RA: [Laughs]
MR: We were taught, I’d say, pretty early. I would say around six.
RA: Sunday is church day?
MR: Sunday mornings was a must. You got up, you had breakfast; you went to church. You came home from church; you know that you had a big—that was the big meal. You may have two or three different kinds of meat. You had four or five different kinds of vegetables. My mother was an expert cook. Sometimes, most of the time on Sunday mornings you had hot rolls. And they were put down on Saturday nights, and people used to put them down in a warm place, more than likely by the chimney or the flue, as they would call it, they would rise.
RA: So they would rise.
MR: So you had rolls for breakfast on Sunday mornings some of the time, but you always had two different kinds of bread.
RA: Hm. Always.
MR: Cornbread and biscuits or rolls. And on Sunday mornings sometimes you would have fried chicken, or smothered chicken. You had smothered chicken, which I can’t do, because I don’t know how they make [laughs]—you know, I’m not—. Or they’ll have fried chicken.
RA: Do any of your sisters make that now? The smothered chicken?
MR: I don’t believe so. I don’t know, but I don’t think so. And you had fried potatoes. Well, you had fried potatoes almost any morning. And you had all these things—that I think was more or less taken for granted, because I came up here to work the first time when I was sixteen years old. And I remember standing out in my—somehow I think, was my great-great aunt. Anyway, we call her Cousin Onda [?]
and we were sitting out there the yard, on Sunday mornings, and crying her eyes out. [Laughs] I remember this one particular day, he walked in. She said, “John, I can’t remember what you look like, because I [several words unclear].

RA: Yeah.

MR: Here are these people talking [unclear].

RA: [Laughs] You’re starved.

MR: You know, eleven o’clock in the country. Your day has been started a long time! And she used to come and get me on Sunday mornings until I found how to walk around. I just was not understanding, and having been so used to going out and shaking apples off the trees, had fried apples, and fried tomatoes.

RA: Yeah, my mother fixed that for me, fried tomatoes, fried apples.

MR: And having to wait until some—it was just awful! I used to cry to go back home.

RA: How long did you stay here?

MR: I’ve been here—well, that first time I stayed, I was a senior in high school. And I decided that I was not one that loved going to school. Of course, you know my—[laughs]. Everybody had quit working—[unclear] “When are you going back to school?” “Oh, I’m not going back to school.” I was at a dance one night, and my mother kept saying, Marian [several words unclear]. She says, “Come on, Miss Moon.”

RA: [Laughs]

MR: “Couldn’t I take her home, and have a coke with her?” She said [several words unclear]. She said, “oh, yes, I heard you told him he couldn’t, and that was [unclear].” [Laughs]
RA: Mm-hm.

MR: Because she’d tell me, “I’m going to make a liar out of you!”

[Laughs] And you know, you did not give—

RA: Back-talk.

MR: You didn’t even look as if you wanted to talk back, right? If you felt anything, you kept it to yourself, because we weren’t even allowed to look miserable. [Laughs] Like I said, my mother was the strictest [unclear].

RA: Yeah. Well, I would think she had to be with ten children, you know.

MR: I understand that now, but you know, when you were growing up, I think you just don’t understand—well, I think it’s in all generations, kids don’t understand. I know when I came home and said to my mother, “Mom, Bran Dylan asked me to the prom.” And she said, “Oh, yeah, you can go, but I’ll be right in the backseat.” Well, then I didn’t want—I needed to figure out how to sneak out the window.

RA: [Laughs]

MR: I think with my younger sister, she was easier with.

RA: She loosened up a little bit.

MR: Oh, yeah, she loosened up a little bit, but when you’re older—the older of us, she was very strict. But I don’t regret it; I think it made us all better.

RA: Ten children, you know.

MR: And when you have eight girls, you can imagine.

RA: Mm. Yes.

MR: I had worries.

RA: The worries.
MR: And with my daughters, the worry was every weekend, “This one is having a party. Can I go?” Or, “Can we have a party?” Or, “This one is having a party. Can I go?” I said, “Well, who is going to take you? Who is going to bring you home?” We had a give to history before we got it.

RA: You have four daughters? Any sons?

MR: Well, I have four daughters. Actually I had six—no, I lost both of my boys—I lost three in the fire, and one in a crib death about two years—two or three years after I lost the others.

RA: You had seven children all together?

MR: I had eight.

RA: Eight.

MR: And of course, I have two olders that I helped raise here in the city. Even though [unclear] with what’s going on, you know. But I’ve known—you know, I know how hard it is. That’s when you really realize what your mother went through.

RA: That’s when you realize. That’s the truth, because they can tell you over and over again that you’re too young to understand, but you can’t see it then.

MR: When your children began to rebel—well, see, and all of this was so new, simply because we didn’t rebel. Not every way that they—

RA: Yeah, do now.

MR: We weren’t allowed to even go around angry with one another. We weren’t allowed to pout.

RA: Yeah, yeah.

MR: And it was unheard of, not speaking to your sister. Because my mother used to say that the saddest thing on earth was mother and
daughters not speaking, sisters and brothers not speaking. Because, although it was going on, those—mothers and daughters not speaking—but of course, they were grown daughters, but nevertheless. Don’t care how grown a child is, it’s still your child. You don’t think of that child so much as being grown as you think of it as: this is my daughter, or my son.

RA: Any family triumphs that you could tell me about?

MR: Well, I guess it was lot, but I guess, like you said, we take so much for granted. My older sister, who I said died with a brain tumor—I think she was like—I think she was brilliant. She was an A student all through school and through college, and she died after she was married seven years.

RA: What did she study at college?

MR: She had a major in college was Medieval History.

RA: How about your other brothers and sisters? What professions are they?

MR: Well, they are—They don’t have any particular professional stuff.

RA: Just, what did they work at, you know?

MR: My oldest brother is retired from the post office. My youngest brother works out to the media, courthouse maintenance, for the maintenance group. And the one sister worked for Get Set. She’s been with them; she’s a teacher with Get Set. And my sister that died—she finished Virginia University in Richmond,

RA: Virginia State?

MR: No.

RA: University of Virginia.
MR: University of Virginia in Richmond, she’d been—so did my oldest sister. The rest of us—I guess it was from choice; it wasn’t that we couldn’t have gone to school. But with me, I wanted to be a nurse. And of course, like so many young people, you make the mistake of getting married before you finish your degree.

RA: Same here. [Laughs]

MR: And I wanted that very, very badly, and well, after you get married, it’s not that—[laughs]

RA: It’s not as easy.

MR: And you can’t—and when I was out of school, they didn’t have all these programs that they have today, that you can get grants, and you can go to school.

RA: But you’re still—you’re working as a nurse now?

MR: Yes. Well, I’ve been—of course, I’ll be hopefully—I’m really looking forward to retiring next year. My birthday in April, so I’m looking forward very, very much to retiring. And I’ve been out there about eighteen years now.

RA: But it’s nice when the things that you wanted to do, you actually achieve and do.

MR: I love—I like nursing. It’s depressing in a lot of ways, but it’s rewarding when the patients say to you, “well, oh, you’re so nice.” Or “Thank you so much. You’ve been so helpful to me.” I mean and, we do get patients once in a while that, who are—really—that if you can go to someone’s bed and put a pillow behind the back of them and change their position, give them a backrub, or a cup of ice or whatever, and they say, “Oh, this feels so much better.” Then you feel like, well—
RA: Yeah. But it’s hard being in the hospital.

MR: Patients when they’re sick, or like you run into all personalities. And not only that, co-workers that you [unclear].

RA: You’ve got to deal with your co-workers, yeah.

MR: A lot of times the co-workers are harder to deal with. You know, so.

RA: I wanted to ask you about the family disasters. I know, before I began the tape, you were telling me you had a family fire.

MR: Yes, we had a fire. Like I said, it’s been 34 years ago. Yeah, it will be thirty-four years ago. We were in the house, caught fire, and my mother said—she said within a half-an-hour [unclear] the whole thing was—seven children, three boys and four girls died in that fire. The oldest one was six-and-a-half, and she was mine. And then one four-and-a-half, and one two-and-a-half, a little girl. And the sister had her only two kids, two daughters, at that time. Another sister who had brought her boy from her house to come [unclear] and a brother who had a boy who was living with my parents. And the house had been converted to electricity. And being a wooden house, the fire marshal said that happens more within the walls. And I guess somebody—by the grace of God, I guess, if you want to say that, that the adults were up and out of the house.

RA: Yeah.

MR: Well, they weren’t out, but they had some downstairs—which my fourteen-year-old sister; at that time she was fourteen—fixing breakfast. And my mother was out the fields, my brother was out in the fields. My father was in the kitchen, and he just heard this rolling sound, and he says, “Oh, Phyllis, go up and see the kids. They must be awake.”
RA: Yeah.
MR: And because he loved his grandchildren, because he just—
RA: I know, from what you told me, a very close family.
MR: It was still—his heart, to see all those grandkids laying. He loved those kids, and well, it was nothing anyone could do because you couldn’t see the stairway, and you couldn’t get up to see.
RA: Well, I think that it’s a family triumph in that you rebuilt, built the house again.
MR: Yeah, I think I would say our greatest triumph is that, thanks to my father, who was a man that had [unclear] for his family, that he had maintained things, you know, financially—the insurances and all—that he was able to build.
RA: Yeah, rebuild.
MR: And have everything—of course, it’s never the same. It’s never the same, because it was like it’s not the money alone like that, it’s the sentimental values that you put into things that you never can—and I don’t think my father ever got over that tragedy, and you know, right behind that my oldest sister came down with the brain tumor.
RA: Yeah.
MR: They were married seven years before they had any children. And she was his heart. And I don’t think he was ever quite the same after that. Of course, my mother was very strong woman. Well, you have to be strong, something like that. And I think even though—even though we say Daddy never got over it, I imagine—I know it left this [unclear].
RA: Yeah.
MR: But, she just able was able take it better.
RA: How about military service? Anybody—?
MR: My father was in the First World War. He spent a lot of time in France. He could speak French fluently.

RA: He did? Oh, goodness!

MR: I used to love—

RA: Did he teach any of the children—?

MR: He tried. But I used to love hear him and my older sister with the French and stuff. They would speak it together and that would make him feel so good, that he could, you know.

RA: Yeah, my father was in Germany, and he speaks German. And I remember him trying to teach one of us, and we just could not get away fast enough [laughs] when he wanted to teach us German.

MR: It’s funny. And you know, now you look back and you wish, oh, if I had only—

RA: If you only learn. Yeah. That’s such an asset, to be able to speak another language.

MR: Another language. You look back and you say, oh, if I only—

RA: How about the schools in your town? What were the schools like?

MR: When I first started to school, it was like a two-room school. We walked to school. I guess you say it was about a good mile, mile-and-a-half, we walked to school.

RA: Segregated school?

MR: Oh, yes. Blacks went to black school, whites went to white. Then when I went to high school, this elementary school was the whole Hoomes district. You went there from first to—first to seventh grade. And the high school, Union High School we went to, which we got bussed from there, it was from seventh to eleventh. You graduated out of the eleventh grade.
RA: Did most people graduate from eleventh grade back then?

MR: Mm-hm. Yes, you did. Graduated from the eleventh grade. Unlike the school that they’ve got now, they did not have up to the twelfth grade.

RA: Schools were a little bit different, too. I know my mother told me there was a school that you could go to, which she wasn’t sure what the equivalent was, here in the city now, because things are just so different, and it wasn’t expected that you go to high school. You know, high school was a long ways off.

MR: Well, the schools were—like, you didn’t have that type of transportation. And I know a lot of—we had a teacher who used to substitute a lot, and she went to what they call a normal school.

RA: That’s it, a normal school. That’s what she called it, yeah. And she said after you went to normal school, you could teach.

MR: And we had a substitute teacher all the way through that elementary school who went to a normal school. [Pause in recording]

RA: How about, family entertainment. I know you told me now the family gets together on Thanksgiving. Your family really has a close bond.

MR: Well, our entertainment—well, I would say we didn’t—I don’t remember any special entertainment, because—

RA: My mother used to tell me you used to get together and eat. [Laughs]

MR: Well, yeah, that, but that was a—

RA: Play games.

MR: Now, I know that when my father—my father loved to sing—

RA: Did he play an instrument?

MR: No, but he had a good singing voice.

RA: I see.
MR: And we used to sing with Daddy, and he would bring us all of the new records—the player was called the Victrola. He would bring us all the records. And he would tell us about these songs. And see, at our home we had radio, and I can remember all these white people gathering at our house to hear Germany’s plight because we had the only radio.

RA: Oh, okay.

MR: We had the only radio. See, that was the thing about our house.

RA: Does anybody still have that radio?

MR: I don’t know I know it was in the house in the fire.

RA: Oh that’s right. Do you have any family heirlooms?

MR: We used to have the batteries. You know, they had the batteries, and they had a pole, way out. Because we didn’t have—

RA: Like antenna.

MR: You didn’t have electricity. You had this long wire, and we would put it on a pole, and you’d put it way out of the house. You got all your stations coming in. I will always remember that, how we used to sneak into the living room when Mom wasn’t home to hear the soap operas, which at that time was on the radio. They had Ma Perkins, Our Gal Sunday, Portia Faces Life. Oh, it was a lot of women in the house. And it was good because, you could use your imagination. You just fantasize; your imagination ran away with you, where you could just imagine these stories, and you’d just listen, but when my mother wasn’t home. [Laughs] And my mother was—she used to listen, so that was one of their forms of—what they have now, you know, people have soap operas now, which is completely different.

RA: Yeah, I know. Tell me about the family get togethers again.

MR: Well, usually the family get togethers we have—well, now.
RA: Now.

MR: Well, my sisters, at Thanksgiving time, one may furnish the turkey, one may furnish the ham, or roast beef. We all get together, and decide who is going to furnish what.

RA: And you get together during the summer, and when you reopen the house for a couple of weeks.

MR: Yes, and we have—

RA: That sounds nice.

MR: We have a lot of fun. We go down to Tappahannock, Virginia, and we usually go down and get a bushel of crabs, which, that’s our midnight snack. [Laughs]

RA: While you’re talking.

MR: Sitting around the table and talking crap.

RA: That sounds fun. That’s a lot of fun.

MR: Well, when we get together on the holidays, we usually have our feasts, they would say, and sometimes we play cards. Most of the young people now don’t play cards. And listen to music, especially—I like the old music.

RA: Yeah.

MR: And we listen to records. And we talk. We do a lot of talking. [Laughs] An awful lot of talking!

RA: I could imagine. I could imagine.

MR: And usually we are showing pictures of what—if someone went to this place during the summer, we’ll show them pictures of that pictures, or pictures from here.

RA: You said you get together on Easter, too? You do the same type of thing like on Thanksgiving?
MR: We get together on Easter, mostly for the kids, because we like to see the kids dress up. And then I think, too, with cousins, it’s keeps them close.

RA: Yes. They need to know each other.

MR: It keeps them close to the family that they can—that they can know each other, and it makes them friends. I mean, they become better friends with the cousins, which is as it should be. Because see, my father left this [unclear] property. And one person can’t decide, oh, I want it so. It’s not that way. In order for it to be so, everybody have to agree. So not only does everybody have to agree, you have to get the spouses, too, you know. So that’s why I said my father was a real—a man who thought about the right thing.

RA: And the future, a lot of thought and a plan for that.

MR: Thought about everything, because only after Daddy passed did we realize he had gone and made his will. When my mother passed, she didn’t have a will, but my father left a will. And I think all of us have copies of that will, which we [unclear]. I don’t know. I would say that we have a very happy family life, and I think—

RA: It sounds very much.

MR: And I think that it shows, because—it shows because we are not sisters and brothers that are always at each other’s house. We either go two, three months without seeing each other. But if someone is sick, everybody knows this. If something is going on, pertaining to the family, everyone knows. And of course, you know, there is always the telephone.

RA: Right.
MR:  We sometimes—one of my sister’s husbands was saying to her—she’s in Washington, now, for her birthday, which is March the fifteenth—either the weekend before, whichever that date is fallen, we’ll all go down and spend that weekend with her. Let’s be there for her birthday.

RA:  That’s really nice.

MR:  It’s something like, it’s an annual event that happens every year. And now the grandchildren, the children, are getting into the act. You going down Aunt Thelma’s? Oh, I think I’ll go.

RA:  Yeah. They don’t want to miss it.

MR:  And her husband will say to her, “Oh, un-huh your sisters coming?” “You gonna jump and stomp this weekend” [laughs], it had become a regular joke. So when we go down to Virginia, everybody comes down. And everybody tries at least one weekend, because you know, with jobs and things.

RA:  Right.

MR:  One weekend everybody tries to get there. And then we go to our Revival, everybody, which I hadn’t been to for a good number of years, and I got to go last summer.

RA:  What religion?

MR:  Baptist.

RA:  Baptist. Yeah.

MR:  And at the church, the sign in front of my church was donated by my father, the sign that tells you the time, whatever it is. So we keep that [unclear].

RA:  Yeah. Okay, then. Thank you very much.
[End of recording]