

INTERVIEWER: Good afternoon, Mrs. Hicks.

MRS. HICKS: Oh, good afternoon, Miss Shirley.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for participating in our oral history project, *African American Voices Between Two Rivers*. I am at Mrs. Carole Sawyer Hicks' home, at 1900 Washington Street, New Bern, North Carolina. And again, Mrs. Hicks, thanks so much for inviting me into your beautiful home.

I have a few things that I want to ask you and I want you to share as much as you can of your life and the life of your family and the city that you live in, New Bern, North Carolina. First of all, Mrs. Hicks, will you give us your full name, the date and place of your birth?

MRS. HICKS: My name is Carole Sawyer Hicks. I was born March 11, 1934, at Harlem Hospital, New York, New York.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. All right, Mrs. Hicks, the next question that I want to ask you, since you were in the world, I want to ask you some basic information about your family: your parents, children, brothers and sisters. Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

MRS. HICKS: Well, I am the daughter of Nellie Augustus Sawyer and Emma Pool Sawyer of New Bern, North Carolina. My mother's parents were Cornelius Pool and Annie Nunn. Her mother died when she was small so my grandfather, Cornelius, was married to Mary Wooford from Connecticut. He owned his own stable. He raised horses, he rented out horses, he did everything concerning horses, so I was told. His place was up on a street off of Bern Street. My father's parents were Richard Sawyer, Jr., and Lillian Parker Sawyer. Now, the Sawyers were a long line of tailors. I was told that my great-grandfather was a tailor and had a shop down on Craven Street. His tailor shop, they made clothes. My grandfather taught me so many things I'll never forget. His shop was on George Street, 512 George Street, which the house is still there, but we had the shop torn off it was onto the house but in the later years we had the shop taken off. I can remember so many things about my grandfather because I was his delivery boy. I used to sit in his shop while he was making his clothes, mending his clothes. One thing about him, he was so loving and kind. I mean, he taught me so many things. He introduced me to all his people that he did business with. I remember him taking me to lawyer Hancock and he told me to always go there if anything happened to him, everything would be mine. He told me to always go there and he

would help me with anything I needed help with. He also introduced me to people he did business with: at Penney's, Belk's, all those stores because I was going to be the one to deliver the clothes. He taught me how to do money orders. Everything I did for him, he had to introduce me to the people first. This is Ms. Carole Sawyer, my granddaughter. And he also told me, (this is something I have always remembered): "People may have more money than you, have more education, but never think anybody is better than you. On the other hand, don't ever think you are better than anybody else. You see, everybody is right. I mean I want you to always love all. Everybody you come into contact with, anybody, I don't care who they are, love them and treat them right". I have always done that.

INTERVIEWER: What about your children? You said you didn't have any brothers. You had a sister?

MRS. HICKS: Yes. She came way later in life.

INTERVIEWER: What was her name?

MRS. HICKS: Ann Sawyer , Moore now.

INTERVIEWER: You have given me a description in a sense, especially of the grandparents and some of the things that they have done in New Bern during their lifetime. Mrs. Hicks, can you tell me about some of the things you did as far as your memories of preschool and the games and kinds of toys that you had?

MRS. HICKS: I started West Street School when I was 7 years old. I walked to school. Our house was right in front of an alley that you just walked up and your were right there to school.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of the Alley?

MRS. HICKS: Garden Alley. I think it was Garden Alley. We just walked up that Alley and we were right there at the school. Okay, I loved school. I loved everything about school. Some of the memories I have; I didn't go to kindergarten. I started in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, at 7 years old. I just loved school. But there weren't many things did that I remember in grade school, other than my sister whom I had to take to school every morning when she started. And she would pretend, would tell me on the way there and say that she would get me out of class. I would tell her "Please don't get me out of class." "Oh yes I will". She would tap, tap, tap on the door. "Would you have Carole come? Her sister's sick and she



has to go home". Then she would get down the Alley and tell me, "Hah, hah, I told you I'll get you out of school." Okay, these were things that she did but we laugh about it now. Most of the things after school were the things that I liked to do during my grade school time. Oh my life was just full of fun and I had so many friends and we played many, many games. Some of the games we played at that time were ball, all kinds of ball, but we never played basketball, baseball mostly, and just throwing the ball; jumping board. That's when you put a board over another board and one jump on one side, and one jump on the other side jump up and down, jumping rope, and paper dolls. We liked to make our own grass dolls. We took pride in making pasteboard boxes for our doll houses. These were some of the things we did just for fun. And now my high school days, I met many friends and had more interests when I got to high school, like boys. I joined every club and organization that I could because there were more things to join in high school. I stayed very busy although I had many chores and homework. I had good grades and skipped the 8<sup>th</sup> grade so I got to high school a year earlier than I should. When the teenage shop opened up, it became my biggest interest. It was right in front of our West Street School and I had to drop in every day and get a dance before I'd go home.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know who owned the teenage shop?

MRS. HICKS: Yes, it was owned by Benny and Emmaline Thompson. Oh, but we had plenty fun. But my mom would say "don't stop at that teenage shop." I wouldn't most of the time, but I did stop sometimes. I also joined the cheerleaders when I was in high school. My friends and I were cheerleaders. Although we didn't know a thing about football, we were cheerleaders. And my mother made us outfits to cheer in. We had black and white shoes, gold socks and gold blouses which she dyed so they would all look alike but she made navy blue skirts, short skirts like the cheerleaders now. We thought we were dressed up and we enjoyed that. We really enjoyed our cheerleading days. And, when the team went out of town, a friend of mine's father would get someone to drive us as my close friends and me couldn't ride the bus. We had to go in the car with them. Sometimes, when they knew who the chaperones were they would let us go on the bus. But that was fun, too. I also joined the dramatic club and acted in many plays. At that time, plays were big in this town. I joined the junior dramatic club that was sponsored by the Craven Terrace Center, by Miss Pearlie May Martin, and oh, it was so much, much fun. We had weekly meetings and many social events. And on holidays, they blocked off Roundtree Street and we skated from sunup to sun down. That was the only paved street. All our other streets were dirt.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, you're talking about some of the fun you had in school? What were some of the subjects that you took in school, other than the social subjects?

MRS. HICKS: Major things, English and Math. In high school, I took Biology, Physics, English, Algebra, Social Studies, History. I remember Miss Jones was my History teacher and, oh my gosh, her house was right next door to my grandfather's shop and, if I didn't make good one day, I would know it because she would go right over there and tell him "Carole was not paying attention today." Miss Pearlle Mae also took us on hikes up timbered roads, and she also had our Girl Scout troops. We were very active in Girl Scouts.

Some of the things that happened in the community that was fun in my day was the minstrel show. Do you remember the minstrel shows?

INTERVIEWER: Yes I do.

MRS. HICKS; My grandfather would always take us to the minstrel show, Ann and me. The carnival would come.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have homecoming parades during that time?

MRS. HICKS: Oh, yes. Oh, and something else we had during school. In May, we had May crowning, oh that was fun you wear evening dresses and you would wrap the May Pole. Oh, I liked that very much. On May 30<sup>th</sup>, we would have a big parade starting from Craven Terrace and you walked all the way down Queen Street, go up George Street all the way up to Glenburnie. And, as you walked up there, there were people different bands, all the way up, selling things.

INTERVIEWER: Well, Craven Terrace was sort of a focal point at that time, wasn't it?

MRS. HICKS: Craven Terrace was the thing. Everybody wanted to live in Craven Terrace.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Thank you so much. You've told me so much about your school days. What was some of the experiences that you had with discrimination in school or was there any discrimination in school?



MRS. HICKS: Well, we all went to our Black school and we stayed to ourselves and I had no problems with the whites, one way or another. I never had any problems with discrimination. I'll tell you about an incident I had with a white one time. This was when I told you I was like my grandfather's errand girl. He had fixed this pants for this man, and he told me to hurry and take it up there because he had promised he would have his clothes back in a certain time. So when I went up there, I knocked on the door and the lady comes to the door and she said "What do you want little girl, what do you want"? I said "My grandfather sent your husband's clothes as he promised." She said: "You don't come to the front door. You go around to the back door." So I got right back on my bicycle and took them back to him and he said "Why did you bring them back, they weren't home? I told him I would get them right back to him." He had to darn them. I said "Yes, they were home but she told me that I had to go to the back door, and you told me I didn't have to go to the back door, so I brought them back to you." The next thing I knew, the man was coming round to the shop, furious. And so my grandfather told him what had happened; that I didn't like the way his wife had spoken to me. He apologized to me. That's the only thing I had to confront with whites. I said that to say this. I wasn't intimidated. I wasn't afraid of them. I treated them like anybody else.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the African-American owned businesses that you remember during your time?

MRS. HICKS: Frank Pollock's store. As you went up Five Points, every from the corner of Roundtree Street up almost to where Rivers Funeral Home is, there were businesses owned by Black people: fish markets, grocery stores, drug stores, you name it.

INTERVIEWER: Were there Black doctors in that area?

MRS. HICKS: Yes, we had Black doctors. Dr. Fisher's office was on Queen Street. There is a beauty shop there now. We had Dr. Mann. Dr. Daves, a dentist, was down on Bern Street. That's all I can think of right now.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, we're going to talk a little about your religion. What is the name of your family church? I want you to tie your family in here because you never told me about your children.

MRS. HICKS: Oh about my children. Now that [ ] My religion is the most important thing in my life. I was baptized in the Catholic Church because my



father was Catholic. After a while, he moved back to New York. Well, my mother came home because her daddy got sick and she came to take care of him. But he didn't leave his business, he was tailor to in New York and my uncle was a tailor in New York. He was working under him until he got his own place. So he didn't leave his business to come home. I grew up going to the Episcopal because my mother was Episcopalian. So, by my father not being here, I went to church with my mother. I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church on April 27, 1947. I took my first holy communion in the Episcopal Church and I continued to go to the Episcopal and also to a lot of other churches. I never missed going to church on Sundays until I was old enough to go alone and take a lot of little children to Sunday school, and I went back to church again. I would go with Mama Pool, my grandma, to St. Cyprian, then with My Boo, my father's mother, my grandma to St. Peter's. Mother would go sometimes. When I became a teenager, I went to church at St. Cyprian and, afterwards, whenever I could, I would also go to other churches, with my friends, especially during Revival times, because I loved going to other churches. On September 2, 1951, I was married to Earl J. Hicks of New Bern, he was a Catholic and so I started going to church with him early morning and then I would go to St. Cyprian. Until one night Thursday Adoration Service whatever came upon me that made me say yes I'm going to join the Catholic Church. I needed to join the catholic church anyway cause by now I was having my own children. Earl went in service July 1952. He was stationed at Camp Pope, Louisiana. I joined him at the alter September 2, 1951 as I said I was married to Earl Hicks of New Bern at St. Josephs Catholic Church, by Father Peter Quinn. November 1951, Earl enlisted in the Army, stationed at Camp Chappe, Arkansas. I had to stay in New Bern. March 2, 1952, our son, Michael Earl Hicks, was born. Earl got a furlough and came through and had to be back the 1<sup>st</sup> day of May. Michael became sick in June and died June 6, 1952, at Duke Hospital, of Menengitis. Earl returned on emergency leave. July 2, 1952, I joined Earl in Camp Pope, Louisiana, where he was now stationed. The military at this time was segregated, so we lived in a little town called Leesville, our first home, after staying in the guest house. There were so many experiences that I am not going through in Leesville, the prejudices that we experienced even though we were in service. In 1953, Earl was stationed at Ft. Louis, Washington.

Let me go back because some things happened in between there. My family wanted me to go to college. I had other plans. I wanted to travel and have a big family of my own. I know I hurt them by not going, but when Mother, Daddy, and Jean, my uncle, consented, and gave me their blessing, I knew I still had their love, I was all right. I knew the others would get over it. Mother did say to me "Carole,



how can you have a lot of children and travel too?" Something inside of me told me I would and I did.

In 1953, Earl was stationed in Ft. Louis, Washington. I met him there. Debra was conceived there, but we came home in time for her to be born in New Bern. I wanted to be near mother at this time and I had taken Earl's sister with me. While stationed in Camp Pope, Louisiana, Earl got orders to go to Korea so we had to come home early. On the way home, I went into labor but I didn't tell him. I started hurting in Mississippi. I wouldn't tell him because we were on the bus it was Christmas time and everybody was traveling at that time. When I got in Raleigh, oh, I really got sick but I still didn't let him know. The minute I got home, and saw my mom, I said "Mom, it hurts so bad." Then, he said "What's up"? And I was telling him and they were crying and everything. So Oscars was around the corner. He was a good friend and he lived around the corner. So, they got him and he drove me to the hospital. And Cynthia was born that night. After coming home, he had to go back because he was scheduled to go to Korea. My friend was giving him a going away party that night, and while we were at the party, they came and got us and we went back to the hospital and little Miss Cynthia had died because the nurse had fed her and she \_\_\_\_\_ the way she was feeding her, she \_\_\_\_\_. They took her to Good Shepherd, they were trying to get her into a hospital in Wilmington where more notice was taken in taking care of preemies, but she died that Friday night. That Monday, an opening was opened for her. Earl didn't go back. He wouldn't go back. He stayed here. We had the funeral and everything and he went AWOL. He was AWOL by now. He said he would take his chances. For some reasons, he was here. He loved that baby. He named that baby. And, so, when he did go back, they didn't punish him. He made rank. He got his first stripe. Now, when he left there, he went to Ft. Louis. We had to come home early, because I wanted to come home. We also had to bring his sister back where I took up there with me without telling him, so I had to bring her back because she was in school. After that, Earl was sent to Ft. Richardson and Anchorage, Alaska. When he sent for us, Debra was about 6 months and I had to make the hardest decision I ever had to make. I never let her out of my sight, I loved her so much. But Mother and his Aunt Cynthia kept telling me I didn't need to take a baby to Alaska. It was too cold. So, I left her here. In 1955, in Alaska, our son, Deondra, was born. And, also, during that time, I got word that my granddaddy had died, and I couldn't come back home at that time because he had just been born. When we came back to the states, Earl got out of the Army and transferred to the Air Force, stationed at Seymour Johnson in Goldsboro. He came home every weekend and at other times, when he could. So we stayed in New Bern. He was there approximately 4 years. in 1952, our



daughter, Belinia, was born at Good Shepherd Hospital. 1958, we had a stillborn. But all of them were baptized. 1960, Daryl was born. 1961, Debra, Deondra, Belinia, Daryl and I met her in Paris, France and we were there for two years before we went to London, England. In 1964, that's where our daughter, Carole Denise, was born. Back in 1967, when Earl was in Viet Nam, we were here, and then we left in 1958 for Omaha, Nebraska. In Omaha, Nebraska, was where I had my very first job. I worked as a Nursing Assistant at St. Catherine's Geriatric Hospital. And that's where I really fell in love with nursing. Although, when I was in high school, going back, I remember volunteering at Good Shepherd's Hospital, like a candy striper. So, now it's almost time for Earl to retire after 20 years. So, I came back home and I enrolled in nursing school at Craven Technical Institute. I graduated with top grades in my class in spite of taking care of my elderly grandmother, whom I really came home to take care of, and my children. I passed the State board with flying colors as an LPN.

In 1972, while working happily and thinking I'm all straight, Earl Deon was born at Cherry Point Marine Base. So from 1971, through 1994, I worked at Guardian Care Nursing Home and then I retired. I am a widow with the best children anyone could ask for and 14 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, Mrs. Hicks, could you tell me something about your political experience, whether it was with your family, members of your family, Civil Rights movement, and Jim Crow laws, especially in the South? You might have experienced some in your military travels, also. Could you tell me briefly about some of your political experiences?

MRS. HICKS: After retirement, Earl devoted his time to politics. He ran for Alderman in 1975. He didn't win. But at that time, he and another, William Bells, who was also devoted to politics, they, together, established the Craven County Voters League. And that was on September 16, 1975. I worked along with him at that time from this Democratic meeting to that Democratic meeting to everything that was involved in politics. Mrs. Myers, Mrs. Hill, Mrs. Lewis, and Mrs. Vales, were also instrumental in helping him when he started this Craven County Voters League.

INTERVIEWER: Mrs. Hicks, could you tell me about some of the segregated facilities that you experienced, I guess this was during the times of Jim Crow when Blacks were not allowed to use, or if they used them, they were not allowed to be



seated around certain facilities, like lunch counters, and what have you. Can you explain that to me, or riding the bus?

MRS. HICKS: Oh yes, if you were around town, and was in McClellan's, you didn't sit at the lunch counter.

INTERVIEWER: Could you order food and be served.

MRS. HICKS: Yes. The bus station, I know they had fountain for blacks and a fountain for whites. About every public place in the blacks couldn't go in, you had your own water fountains white only black only.

INTERVIEWER: How about seating in the bus station? Was there a side for the blacks and a side for the whites?

MRS. HICKS: Yes, they had a side for the blacks and a side for the whites. The same was in our church, the Catholic Church. We had our own Black Catholic church and the whites had a white Catholic church until 1960,,, during the early part of the 60's.

INTERVIEWER: During the Civil Rights Movement.

MRS. HICKS: Yeah. When the two churches were merged and a black Priests were put over the two churches.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't that Father Hackney?

MRS. HICKS: Yes, that was Father Hackney.

INTERVIEWER: I remember him.

MRS. HICKS: And then my time goes back to one time while sitting on the bus, every summer after school, my grandmother and I used to visit our aunt in Norfolk. One morning she and I were going shopping, going down to the market to shop. I was just about 8 or 9 and we sat on the front seat. And the bus driver said, "Ma'am, you're going to have send that little girl back in the back but you can stay up here." "Indeed I won't. This is my granddaughter." Well, my grandmother was a mixed race. She was more white than she was black, in appearance. And she laid him out. So I stayed up there, but I was so embarrassed.



INTERVIEWER: Mrs. Hicks, I know you have been elated since Barack Obama was elected as President. I have been elated. But not only elated to see the President, but to see a woman take the highest seat in the state of North Carolina, as first woman Governor of North Carolina. How did you feel about that? When you found out that Barack was going to run for President and Beverly Perdue was going to run for Governor, what were some of the thoughts that came to your mind?

MRS. HICKS: My thoughts, then and now, is that it's all in God's time.

INTERVIEWER: Very good, very good. I feel the same way. Mrs. Hicks, do you have any words of wisdom that you would like to leave with us during this interview, or any words of wisdom, period?

MRS. HICKS: Put God first in your life and everything will work out.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much, Mrs. Hicks, for sharing your recollections. Your voice has been an empowerment for this project and for our community in New Bern. I know there were many, many other things that you would like to talk about but our time was limited. I appreciate the information that you have shared with us today. Again, thanks for inviting me into your home.

MRS. HICKS: Thanks for asking.