

INTERVIEWER: My name is Carolyn M. Bland. Today is Tuesday, March 4, 2009, and it is now 1:40 p.m. I'm interviewing Mrs. Helen Fisher Dunson, at 812 Smith Street, her home. Mrs. Dunson, what is your full name, date and place of birth?

MRS. DUNSON: Helen Fisher Dunson. I was born here in New Bern, August 7, 1924.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Could you give us some basic information about yourself, your parents, brothers, sisters, etc?

MRS. DUNSON: My father was from Pamlico Co and my mother was from Jacksonville, in that area, Swansboro. He worked and died. My father died in an accident at Bates Lumber Co., down where Union Point is now. That was a lumber company and my father had an accident and died. That was in 1940, I think; no, I think it was in 1941, World War II.

INTERVIEWER: How about your sisters and brothers?

MRS. DUNSON: Well, I was the baby child. And naturally they're a lot of them; it was a big gap between kids. I had a sister to live 101 years, in Brices Creek..

INTERVIEWER: Did she live here?

MRS. DUNSON: Yes, in Brice's Creek.

INTERVIEWER: What was her name?

MRS. DUNSON: Her name was Laura Stanley.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay. And who was the oldest, besides Laura?

MRS. DUNSON: Sister was the oldest. Laura was the oldest from my father's first marriage.

INTERVIEWER: Ok.

MRS. DUNSON: He had a set of twins and 3 [] and he married my mother in 1905. Papa died in that accident in 1941, I think. And mama died in 1946.

INTERVIEWER: What other brothers and sisters did you have?

MRS. DUNSON: Well, momma raised eight (8) children.

INTERVIEWER: Ok.

MRS. DUNSON: There was Mary Fisher Harris, Victor and Walter and Natalie and Melva and Sylvester who we called "Buster" and myself.

INTERVIEWER: Ok, what memories do you have growing up with your family, games and toys, places and things you did?

MRS. DUNSON: We had a great time. We always met in the dining room, around the dining room table. We played games, we read, we did everything. We listened to the radio with mom and pop. We had a good time in the dining room.

INTERVIEWER: Ok, have you always lived here in New Bern?

MRS. DUNSON: Not completely; I spent about 20 years in New York.

INTERVIEWER: Ok.

MRS. DUNSON: And during my school years, I went to three schools: Mothers' Nursing in Washington, North Carolina; went to Girls High in New York and St. Peter's [] in New York. So I went to three schools.

INTERVIEWER: So what streets did you live on when you were here in New Bern?

MRS. DUNSON: Queen Street, I remember and I was born on South Front right down where Tryon Palace is. I was raised up where Trent Court is, before Trent Court was built and Paster Street.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything about the great fire in 1922?

MRS. DUNSON: I wasn't born, not until 1924.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Who were some of your favorite teachers and your favorite classes?

MRS. DUNSON: At St. Joseph's there was Sister St. Hew and Sister Mary Lou. I went to all parochial schools

INTERVIEWER: What were your favorite sports and activities?

MRS. DUNSON: Oh, I loved myself some basketball and football.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did you experience any discrimination while you were in school?

MRS. DUNSON: I can't say that I did; going to a Parochial School, we all were people. I can't say that I had that kind of experience.

INTERVIEWER: What about discrimination in the cities, shopping, and the stores while growing up in New Bern?

MRS. DUNSON: I can remember that A & W place, where Country Kitchen is now; on Broad Street. I can remember that that was a "no-no" for the blacks.

INTERVIEWER: What about the movies?

MRS. DUNSON: Well, we had our own, you know. We had everything in Five Points.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of that movie theatre?

MRS. DUNSON: The Globe Theater, I think it was. I think it was the Globe; I'm not sure now about that. But it was a movie in Five Points and we had everything we wanted in Five Points, including the drug stores; anything we wanted, we had in Five Points.

INTERVIEWER: That was the center of New Bern for the African American and black people, wasn't it?

MRS. DUNSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: more people congregated there than anywhere else.

MRS. DUNSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the prominent African-American owned businesses, as you recalled?

MRS. DUNSON: As I go back to Five Points, Mr. Frank Pollock had the grocery and market; and there was a man named Steve Roberson who had produce and stuff; and there was Dr. Hill, who had the drug store.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the barbershops?

MRS. DUNSON: Oh we had a barbershop there in Five Points, also; Rev. Roscoe, I remember him.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes.

MRS. DUNSON: He had a barbershop. And, Edwards', Bells, they had barbershops and beauty shops.

INTERVIEWER: What is the name of your family's church?

MRS. DUNSON: St. Joseph's, but now St. Paul's, Roman Catholic

INTERVIEWER: How often do you participate in religious activities?

MRS. DUNSON: I don't do it as much as I should, but I'm still affiliated.

INTERVIEWER: Do you participate in any special activities there?

MRS. DUNSON: Not really, but I have the outreach thing, I may participate.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. When you were growing up in New Bern, what were some of the traditional customs that we as African-Americans or blacks or other people enjoyed? Do you remember anything special happening on certain days?

MRS. DUNSON: No, not really.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the 30th of May?

MRS. DUNSON: Yes. We used to have parades and things and the Elks used to have their little thing going.

INTERVIEWER: During the 30th of May parades what were taking place, what were they doing and where were they going? Who were in the parades?

MRS. DUNSON: I didn't participate really so it doesn't bring back any memories.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. When you were growing up, (we talked about the movies), what clubs or sporting events took place that you remember? When I say growing up, I say as a young person or as an adult. Did they have any special football games or basketball games?

MRS. DUNSON: They had their homecomings and things like that?

INTERVIEWER: Were any of your members or you in the military service?

MRS. DUNSON: My sister was one of the first WACS.

INTERVIEWER: And what was her name?

MRS. DUNSON: Melva

INTERVIEWER: What is her full name?

MRS. DUNSON: Melva Elnola Fisher. She went into the WACS soon after the war, the second war

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember where she was stationed?

MRS. DUNSON: Well, in Iowa; in Long Beach, California, Spokane, Washington.

INTERVIEWER: How long did she stay in?

MRS. DUNSON: The full enlistment time, which I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: Was she still in when the war was over?

MRS. DUNSON: I think she was out by that time.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember when the war started or ended or anything about the war years?

MRS. DUNSON: Not really. My brother Lester was not old enough at that time and he enlisted the next year. And when it ended, I don't know anything special about that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any of the blackouts and the food rationing?

MRS. DUNSON: Yes, there was a food rationing. My momma used to have food stamps or whatever was needed to get sugar, coffee, and cigarettes probably.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother and have a garden?

MRS. DUNSON: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: What vegetables did they grow?

MRS. DUNSON: Okra, tomatoes, and lots of flowers. Boy, mama loved flowers.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any athletes from New Bern that went on to play professional sports?

MRS. DUNSON: Yes, we had Robert Mann, Dr. Mann's son. He was in football. That was my brother's friend. I can't remember anybody else, right off hand. Robert Mann died not too long ago.

INTERVIEWER: Does anything stand out in your mind about growing up during the 30's and 40's, the Civil Rights movement, the sit-ins, or demonstrations? Were you here?

MRS. DUNSON: I was here when Dr. Martin Luther King got killed.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So, do you remember the assassination of Malcolm X. Were you here during that time or in New York?

MRS. DUNSON: I was here in New Bern.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me how you felt when you heard about those deaths.

MRS. DUNSON: Oh, that was something you didn't think you would witness, something like that. It didn't make a big difference around here in this town, but we called everybody to do what they could do.

INTERVIEWER: And what type of work did you do, have you done, during your life?

MRS. DUNSON: Here in New Bern, I was a beautician.

INTERVIEWER: When you worked where?

MRS. DUNSON: Well, I had my own shop on Queen Street and I worked with my sister.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Did she train you?

MRS. DUNSON: Oh yes! I went to the A & M Beauty College.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about your sister. What was her name?

MRS. DUNSON: Well, now, Mary Harris Devon. Well, I can go way back. She finished beauty school in '46, but before that.

INTERVIEWER: Where was she in school?

MRS. DUNSON: At Scotts, in Raleigh but before that, she was doing other things. She had a taxicab company. She had a fleet of cabs. She used to get people, especially domestics, get jobs with them in New York. They used to call them sleep-in jobs; take them to New York and get the jobs for them, and take them right to the door, as a cab driver, and she did that. She had a midwife business going on.

INTERVIEWER: All of the babies around here that she delivered...

MRS. DUNSON: Oh, my goodness, I wish she was living so she could see some of them.

INTERVIEWER: How did she learn those skills? as a midwife?

MRS. DUNSON: As a midwife, she went to Fayetteville State College, a course she took there at the college. And she worked for many a years around here before Dr. Littman came. The two of them got together; she was the first one he contacted about that

midwife thing; but, before that, she was on her own. She was with the health department here, and everything. But she went to beauty school in '46 and she put a beauty school together in 1950.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Where was that school located?

MRS. DUNSON: On the corner of George and Queen Streets, used to be the old Elks building.

INTERVIEWER: Upstairs or downstairs?

MRS. DUNSON: She had the downstairs. That's where the school was; on that corner; for a good 8 years, and then she moved the school to Bern Street, 705 Bern. That building is still standing.

INTERVIEWER: Is that near where Mr. Evans' Real Estate Office is?

MRS. DUNSON: Yes, a couple of doors from there.

INTERVIEWER: How many people do you think graduated from her class because she trained quite a few people.

MRS. DUNSON: In the 10-year period, I couldn't tell you that.

INTERVIEWER: So you said she started in 1940 what?

MRS. DUNSON: No, I want to think it was 1950 and continued for 10 years because she died in 1960.

INTERVIEWER: I remember wearing her cape and diplomas people had here. So she caused a lot of people to open their businesses and be employed here?

MRS. DUNSON: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did she and her husband also transport people to New York out of town?

MRS. DUNSON: No, not Mr. Dunson; Mr. Harris, Mr. John Harris, her first husband. That business was back, before the 50's. She had this taxi business and they used to transport people back and forth to New York and Mary used to get jobs for the domestic people..

INTERVIEWER: I remember them having their taxi service. Where was it located?

MRS. DUNSON: At Boyd's Alley; that was between Queen and Broad Streets, near Broad Street; they had this big house, I remember.

INTERVIEWER: What have you done since your retirement?

MRS. DUNSON: I have retired period, and do as less as possible.

INTERVIEWER: Have you done some traveling?

MRS. DUNSON: Very little, very little.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Tell me about your husband, Mr. George Dunson.

MRS. DUNSON: Well, now, he was one of those go-getters back during that time. Most of those people back then were pioneers; they'd do things on their own. He grew up in James City.

INTERVIEWER: Who is his family?

MRS. DUNSON: Rosa Samuel Dunson, they were out of James City. They still have quite a few people on that side. Well, he worked for the Boyds as a young person. The Boyd's had the produce market on South Front Street, where the seafood market is now.

INTERVIEWER: I remember that.

MRS. DUNSON: He left there to go into Service.

INTERVIEWER: Which service?

MRS. DUNSON: The Navy. And when he came back, he went into business for himself in the Five Points area, seafood and produce. And when they cleared out Five Points from what it was before, when all of the blacks cleared out of there, he went down to the Frog Pond area and opened a service station. He bought that corner in later years and continued to do business there until he died.

INTERVIEWER: I remember his service station. He was involved in the community a lot.

MRS. DUNSON: Oh, a lot! He formed the Black Businessmen's association and he volunteered for everybody, the chamber of commerce.

INTERVIEWER: He was in the Chamber of Commerce. Was he involved with voter registration?

MRS. DUNSON: I can't tell you everything he was involved in. He was on the hospital board. I really can't think of all of the things he was involved in.

INTERVIEWER: He was involved in the voter's league and the NAACP?

MRS. DUNSON: Oh yes!

INTERVIEWER: What else did he do? Was he a bondsman?

MRS. DUNSON: Oh yes, definitely a bondsman.

INTERVIEWER: How many years did he work at that?

MRS. DUNSON: Well, he died in 1996 ... at least 20 years as a bondsman. The council of government board, he was on that; the United Way.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's remarkable. I knew he was involved in a number of things.

MRS. DUNSON: Yes, he was busy, busy, busy.

INTERVIEWER: What was his church?

MRS. DUNSON: Pilgrim's over in James City and First Baptist in New Bern

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about the pictures you have there.

This portion of the tape covers conversation between the two ladies as Mrs. Dunson shows Ms. Bland pictures. That is the conclusion of the interview.