

INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Mr. John H. Harmon. Could you give me your address, Mr. Harmon?

JOHN HARMON: My physical address is 1017C Broad Street, New Bern, North Carolina 28560.

INTERVIEWER: This is June 12, 2009, approximately 9:20 a.m. This is an interview for the *African American Voices Between Two Rivers* Project funded by the North Carolina Humanities Council.

Mr. Harmon, I'd like to ask you some questions, first of all, about your family background. Where were you born?

JOHN HARMON: I was born in Windsor, Bertie County, North Carolina, on February 10, 1942.

INTERVIEWER: Who were your family members? Could you give me some early background on your family?

JOHN HARMON: My father's name is Henry Walter Harmon. My mother's name is Eunice Marie Harmon. I have 4 sisters; 3 still are living. My oldest sister is Eunice E. Harmon; my next sister is Barbara J. Harmon; my next sister is Betty M. Harmon; and my deceased sister is Evelyn G. Harmon. She died several years ago.

INTERVIEWER: And your mother's name?

JOHN HARMON: Eunice Marie Rice Harmon. Rice is her maiden name.

INTERVIEWER: Where were your parents born?

JOHN HARMON: They were all born in Snakebite Township, in Windsor. It's an area about 6 miles from Windsor, headed towards Ahoskie, on Highway 13 North.

INTERVIEWER: Could you give me some background on education and any special memories you have of your teachers?

JOHN HARMON: I attended public schools of Bertie County. Its name was W.S. Etheridge and at that time, it was an all-black school. I graduated from there in 1959. I remember a lot of my teachers. Turner Coggins was my physical education

teacher and football coach. I played football. There was a guy named Golden Roland who was my agriculture teacher. There was a guy named Dave Thomas who was my Physics teacher. Then there were some teachers in my lower grades: Mrs. Maude Ramsey taught me in the 3rd grade. Her husband was the pastor at the church. His name was J.W. Ramsey. The church is St. Matthews Missionary Baptist Church. It's about a mile from my family lives. My mother is still living. They live at 724 U.S Hwy 13 North, about 4 miles from Windsor, going towards Ahoskie.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned your church. It sounds as if it was very common in your upbringing; any early memories about your church and religious activities?

JOHN HARMON: I remember our parents made us go to church. We only met once a month, on 4th Sundays. It now meets twice a month, 2nd and 4th, but we had to go to church every 4th Sunday. I remember being baptized. We were baptized at another church, Sandy Point Missionary Baptist Church, which is about a mile past Windsor going towards Edenton, on Hwy. 17. I remember going to church every 4th Sunday, whether or not we felt good. We had a good upbringing in the church.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Anything you want to share about your family traditions and celebrations that you learned from your parents and grandparents? What was your early childhood like, celebrating Christmas, New Year's, and those sorts of things?

JOHN HARMON: We celebrated all the holidays. I know it was a long time that I thought Santa Claus was real. I don't know when I found out that Santa Claus was your parents. They used to come there before Christmas, guys dressed in red Santa Claus suits. We didn't know any better. But children now learn early who Santa Claus is. But we didn't. It took us a long time to find that out. I remember we used to have family reunions. My mother had about 7 sisters and one brother and my daddy had 7 so each Memorial Day we would have a family reunion. All the family would come. It got around to everybody so we stopped that about 5 or 6 years ago after people got much older, and didn't like to travel as much. I remember at those family reunions, we had about 100 or more people there out in the yard. It would be warm and we'd see people we hadn't seen all year.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your grandparents?

JOHN HARMON: I remember my grandparents on my daddy's side. My granddaddy's name was Louis Harmon and on my mother's side, I remember my grandmother was Elizabeth Rice but my granddaddy on my mother's side died before I was born so I never met him.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything your grandparents taught you about their lives that you remember that you want to share that was a part of family tradition? Do you remember any stories that you were told about them?

JOHN HARMON: I know my grandmother on my mother's side lived with us and she played the piano and could sew. All of our grandparents taught us to always honor your mother and your father, be nice to adults even if they are not your parents, not to steal, not to cheat, and things like that. So, I can say that I have never uttered a curse word in front of any of my parents or any of my grandparents. Children do that now, but I was taught better than that. We were taught at home, that when you go to school, treat your teacher like your mother and father. We never had any discipline problems at school, and we never had any at home, either. These children now, when they are bad at school, you can rest assured that they are bad at home, too.

INTERVIEWER: How about your parents and grandparents educational background?

JOHN HARMON: My mother dropped out of school in about the 5th or 6th grade and my dad dropped out before that. We just didn't have a lot of formal education.

INTERVIEWER: How about your own education and your profession? How did you get started?

JOHN HARMON: Well, when I was in Bertie County in public school, we had a teacher named Sarah Jane Barnes and she would always bring us books in high school to read. I read this thing about lawyers could help for the people and make a lot of money, too, so from then on, I decided I wanted to be a lawyer. But my parents didn't have any money so, when it came time to go to school, we had some kind of brochure from North Carolina College (now North Carolina Central), so I applied to go to school. Back then the Veterans Administration had this National Defense student loan and I got one of those. I met Frank Ballance in the 8th grade and we became great friends after that and we still are friends today. We went to Central together, law school together, and he and I went to law school on a combined program. After 3 years of undergraduate school, we switched to the law

school, and, if you complete one year of law school, you would get your undergraduate degree then 2 more years to get your law degree, so you could save a year. We went to college and law school in 6 years and when I got out, I only owed \$3500 on the National Defense loan because when I first went to college it cost only \$480 for room, board, and tuition. I got a 7-year education for \$3500.

INTERVIEWER: So your parents couldn't afford to send you to school, and you had this burning desire to be an attorney, which you did. What happened after college?

JOHN HARMON: Well, after college, there was a recruiter from the justice department (Department of Labor) came down recruiting people to be in armistice program, so I got a job working for the Department of Labor, before I even passed the bar. I passed the bar the first time I took it in August 1965. I got sworn in in Durham in October 1965. I went to work in DC in Silver Springs, Maryland, in August 1965. In February 1966, I made an application for a job with Adam Clayton Powell who then was the Chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor. So, he had me to come over and he gave me a job. He said he wasn't giving me a job because of my degrees and things, but because I had worked for 5 years in Atlantic City to pay for my education and my daddy was a farmer. I worked there until he was thrown out of Congress the next year.

INTERVIEWER: So, in Bertie County your father was a farmer?

JOHN HARMON: Yes, he was a farmer. But he became tired to that and became a junk man. That's how I found out who Monk Harrington was, who at that time was a State Senator (white) from Lewiston. He had a manufacturing plant that had a lot of excess junk. My daddy became friendly with him and he would give it to my daddy; would load it on his truck, and my daddy would take it to Suffolk and sell it (sort of like Fred Sanford). We stopped farming when I was about 4 or 5 years old.

INTERVIEWER: So, you never really worked on a farm.

JOHN HARMON: Yes, but after that, I would prime tobacco (that's taking the stalk off). In the morning, it would be cold and in the afternoon, it would be hot. I did that for 5 summers.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you worked in Atlantic City.

JOHN HARMON: Yes, for 5 summers.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do in Atlantic City?

JOHN HARMON: I parked cars, and worked in restaurants. Those are the two main things that I did.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get the job in Atlantic City?

JOHN HARMON: Some people just wanted to go to Atlantic City and some just lived there. I just went up there one summer and I would go back every summer.

INTERVIEWER: So, after college you worked in DC for Adam Clayton Powell. How did you happen to come to New Bern?

JOHN HARMON: Well, there was a house party in DC one weekend and I had been fired from my job because the congressman had been turned out of Congress. And Reginald Frazier was up there, too. He said that I needed to come back to New Bern to work with him. That was in February 1967 so I came back to North Carolina and from April of 1967 through June 1968 I worked with him, right across the street next to the drugstore, at 1044 Broad Street. In that year, he got suspended from practice for the 1st time, I think. I moved out and set up my own practice, next door at 1042 Broad Street. I stayed there from June 1968 until November 1981 when I got Rev. Nix to build this building for me. I moved over here in November 1981, and I've been here ever since. This is 1017C Broad Street, right across from where I was. I have been in this area since April 1967, in this little area, 42 years.

INTERVIEWER: You've seen a lot of changes since you came here in April 1967. What kind of changes have you seen? I know you've been involved in politics and you've been involved in life in this community. Tell me some of the most profound changes you've seen, for the better.

JOHN HARMON: Well, when I first came here, there were no black elected officials. I saw that change. The man most responsible for that change, I think, was Dr. Barnwell, when he orchestrated changing the system in New Bern from at-large to by district. That way, we were able to get a black alderman, and we got a black mayor, Lee Morgan. At one point, we had a 6-member board of aldermen, there were 3 black aldermen: Barbara Lee, Julius Parham, and Robert Raynor (they still are on there), and we had Lee Morgan as mayor. So we actually had 4 out of 7

votes for a period of about 4 years. So, I've seen that change. Then we got blacks on the school board. I think the most significant thing we did was in 1990 when we got William Wainwright elected to the General Assembly in a district that was predominantly white. He had never run for office before. He was running against Ben Quinn who was the former superintendent of public schools, the choice of the establishment. But we did a single shot ballot in the Democratic primary and Wainwright one and it was easy to win the general election.

INTERVIEWER: What was the single shot ballot?

JOHN HARMON: It means that you can vote for 3 but we only voted for 1.

INTERVIEWER: So, your vote wasn't diluted?

JOHN HARMON: No, your vote wasn't diluted. That's exactly what we did.

INTERVIEWER: Who came up with that idea?

JOHN HARMON: Somebody in our organization. I don't know who it was. It could have been Ben Godette who then was the Assistant Superintendent, I believe. But he was in our []. Ben Godette, attorney Calvin King, Ben Watford, who was at one point the Democratic Party chairman here. It was about 5 of us all together, and we put money together. Then the one thing that happened that year that really clinched it for us was when G.A. Stallings, a Roman Catholic priest, came and spoke with us over at H.J. McDonald School in April 1990. We had a \$50 a plate and they said that black people were not going to pay \$50 a plate. We had 300 people there that night and we cleared over \$9000 and that's what helped to win that election the next month.

INTERVIEWER: The dinner was to help finance the election?

JOHN HARMON The last month of it which was the most crucial time.

INTERVIEWER: So you think that was your best political idea?

JOHN HARMON: That was our most important political victory, I think. Wainwright is still up there, the second most important man in the House. He is Speaker Pro tem of the House.

INTERVIEWER: New Bern has been known for its lawyers back from Reconstruction. Have you seen the tradition carried on today? What do you think the difference is during the Reconstruction and the visionaries we had then here in New Bern and present day state of affairs with our professionals?

JOHN HARMON: Well, we don't have the same obstacles today. We have easy access to the court. We have a black judge here. We have black DA's here and black magistrates. We just have more blacks involved in the system that there used to be. You don't have that rancor that you used to have, that resistance.

INTERVIEWER: You've been very active in the social and political life here in the city. What in your life made you such a pro-activist politically?

JOHN HARMON: I don't know how I began doing that. I just like to see things done and the best way to make sure they are done right is to get in there and help do them yourself. I used to be the executive secretary of the black bar association of North Carolina and I developed a knack for planning meetings, etc. My Christmas party used to be one of the biggest events in the area. I'm getting a little old now, 67, so I can't run around like I used to. I'm kind of slowing down. I've cut back my hours in practice. I cut them first from 40 to 30. Now I've cut them from 30 to 25. I work from 9 to 12 and take a 2-hour break, then work from 2 to 4.

INTERVIEWER: What is the biggest legal case that you have been involved in?

JOHN HARMON Well, Calvin King and I have been involved in 5 Capital murder cases since 1980 and we've never lost one to the gas chamber. We've always gotten life sentences or less. That's our biggest accomplishment, I think. In fact, the Sun Journal wrote us up a couple of times about these Capital cases. That's the biggest thing, I think.

INTERVIEWER: We've talked about your biggest political contribution was the election of Wainwright and the single shot. Your biggest contribution has been your representation of the 5 death sentence cases that you represented. Culturally, how have you contributed to the community? I know other than your famous parties (I have been going to them since I was in college) there have been some other ways that you have contributed to the community.

JOHN HARMON: I think that your brother started the Craven County Voters League, Rev. George. When Herbert Dawson was the chairman of the Voters League, he and I worked with Dawson for years and we planned these affairs. In

fact, we had a banquet each year. We brought in Dan Blue (he was the Speaker at that time) a couple of times. We brought in congressmen, L.C. Hastings, Major Owens to speak right here in New Bern. We had an affair at the Sheraton, a banquet. Their ballroom would hold 340 people, but we put 372 people in there for a banquet. The Voters League helped to get a lot of blacks elected. I think that is the biggest thing. We helped to make the Voters League what it is, your brother and I.

INTERVIEWER: Since 1967, you've been here. Are there any other areas that you would like to share about the development of New Bern, even currently? I think we've got some things going on; development of the bridge, the 300th anniversary, the Broad Street renovation is probably having some effect. How do you feel about the current state of affairs in New Bern?

JOHN HARMON: Well, I was just like to see something done to improve this area, Five Points. There is a Five-Point Plan. We need to get on that. A lot of people are complaining about the narrowing of the streets. Once it's completed (in November), it'll look a lot better. There is a lot of frustration not being able to turn in your driveway. You have to go up the street and make a U-turn. I think that once we see these trees out there and the dirt is removed, we'll have a different idea about it.

INTERVIEWER: What's the difference between New Bern (you talked about it earlier) when you cam in 1967 and New Bern today in the areas of health services?

JOHN HARMON: Well, health services have improved. You know Dr. Barnwell. Each year he sponsors a prostrate test. The hospital does it. It's open to everybody. It's free. Dr. Barnwell tells me it has cut down on the instances of prostrate cancer a lot. It has saved a lot of lives Dr. Barnwell has done a great job. I think he's still the medical director for the Craven County Health Department. The health of blacks has improved quite a bit.

INTERVIEWER: What are the social or service clubs, organizations that you belong to?

JOHN HARMON: I belong to the Omega Alpha Psi Fraternity, Craven County Voters League. My fraternity meets once a month. I've been with the Fraternity since 1961. I went on line on campus at the college at the time. That's the main organizations I belong to. I belong to Craven County NAACP. I don't go to a lot of meetings, though.

INTERVIEWER: One of the last things I want to ask you is that you were born during Jim Crow years?

JOHN HARMON Yes, in 1942.

INTERVIEWER: 1942. Right at the beginning of the war.

JOHN HARMON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What are the greatest improvements in civil rights that you have seen in your lifetime, that you can see here in New Bern?

JOHN HARMON: Well, you can eat anywhere you want to now. You can go to any hotel, any restaurant. There are no signs up any more, black only or white only, or going to back doors. It's pretty much an open society now. That's the biggest improvement that I have seen since I was born in 1942.

INTERVIEWER: As a living legend, what words of wisdom do you want to share with our younger generations coming up?

JOHN HARMON: Well, you need to make friends in this world, and not enemies. Too many of our young people now think that talking bad and getting people mad at us is going to help us in the long run. I try to tell them that my pastor in Greenville, Bishop Randy Royale, said something two things that I want to repeat: "the things that you do to people in life will ultimately come back to you". That's so true. You may do something today and think that you've gotten away with it. But somebody will get you tomorrow, and you wonder why this is happening to me. You reap what you sew. I know teachers who talk about how disrespectful a lot of these young black people (8 or 9 years old) are, talking about how they are going to get the teachers. If they act that way in school, they probably act that way at home, too. It all starts at home. It's a big responsibility on these parents to bring these children up right so that when they go to school, you don't get calls from the school to come and pick up your child. Robert Raynor says this is a lost generation. I certainly hope not.

INTERVIEWER: Last of all, I thank you for those words. Do you want to add anything about economic development, entrepreneurship, business is so important in our world today? What are some of the changes you have seen in New Bern over the past 40 years in the business world as far as African American businesses are concerned?

JOHN HARMON: It's always been my thought that you ought to own your own stuff. I've never leased a car. I owned my cars. When you lease something, you don't get anything out of it. When the lease is up, you don't have anything. That's why I built this building. When I built this building, I tried to get other people to come in with me, but they didn't want to take a risk. A lady named Hattie Hill, when she worked at Wachovia, she got a bridge loan for \$30,000 to start on this building. Credit Unions loaned me money. I thank the Chairman of the Craven Community Board of Trustees (Dan Prichard). He's been my personal banker for 25-30 years. I've always been able to get money. But, you've always got to be able to get capital. That's what helped me a lot. You got to also keep your word. If you say you're going to do something, you got to do it. If you promise something for a couple of times and don't do it, people will not believe in you.

INTERVIEWER: As we end this interview, is there anyone or any experience here in New Bern that has really influenced your life? Is there a person or an event that had a major influence on your life as John H. Harmon, the man and the attorney?

JOHN HARMON: I've listened to Dr. Barnwell more than anyone else because, when I first came here, Dr. Barnwell was here. He was here right across the street. And Dr. Littman was here. Dr. Barnwell has always been a friend. Then, I want to give credit to L.C. "Buckshot" Nixon. He was one of the first people I met when I came here. He did all of the work to this building and I've never had any problem with this building in over 25 years. L.C. Nixon, Dr. Barnwell, and I have to give Reginald Frazier some credit, too. He had a lot of faults but he had some good points, too, when I worked with him.

INTERVIEWER: As we close out with Reginald Frazier (who no longer is with us), what do you think his contribution has been, as a man and as an attorney, to the city of New Bern?

JOHN HARMON: He represented the first sit-ins down here, like Dorothy Dove. He didn't mind speaking his mind. He was like Adam Clayton Powell. There were no doors closed to him. He would push them open. In his later years, he fell back some, but when I first came here, he was a strong force in this community.

INTERVIEWER: I see those are some great people that you have named that have influenced you. I see they've had a positive influence on you because you have been such a great contribution to this community. I appreciate having the opportunity to interview you.

This is the end of our interview and I thank you.

JOHN HARMON: You are quite welcome.