

Blue Ridge Parkway (BLRI) Oral History Collection

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William Rudolph Wright
May 13, 2005

Interview conducted by Philip E. "Ted" Coyle
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WILLIAM RUDOLPH WRIGHT

An interview conducted by

Philip E. "Ted" Coyle

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for the

Blue Ridge Parkway

Oral History Project

for the

Ethnographic Overview and Assessment

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

Peaks of Otter, Bedford, Virginia

2005

START OF TAPE

- Philip Coyle: Let me check this level here. It is May 13th — it's May 13th, two-thousand-and-five. I'm here with William Rudolph Wright. And, uh, when and where were you born?
- William Wright: Uh, I've been around here for 87 years. I worked all the way from this point to 501. Started working right up the road there in 19-and-39. You goin' to hear that. And I worked up there until '41. Then from '41 went to Culpepper. That where they got me in the Army at '41, September '41.
- Philip Coyle: So, when you say — I should say that we're standing right now at the Visitor's Center at Peaks of Otter.
- William Wright: Yeah, and it's raining.
- Philip Coyle: And you pointed up the road to the lodge there.
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: Where exactly on the road did you work?
- William Wright: Just above the lodge before you go down to the maintenance area where the maintenance shop is. That's where we started to work at.
- [Motorcycle revving.]
- Philip Coyle: Hang on just one second. Okay, I'm going to ask you that question again. Now, where did you work up the road?
- William Wright: Up there in front of the maintenance area, that's where we started work at.
- Philip Coyle: And go on, what about the drill foreman?
- William Wright: Yeah, drilling holes and shooting — shooting them rock. That's, that's where I started — first started, um, cutting right of way. And after that give out, see... then I just come back, you know, come back somewhere else contracted get another job and keep on working... we were only making — they're only making but 25 to 30 cents an hour, that's all we's making.
- Philip Coyle: So, let me — go on.

- William Wright: And when they cutting right of way, they cut down through here like all those trees like to — like that there [inaudible] ‘cause they’s in the boundary. Now we had to bring all that stuff back up and put in this boundary before they could be disposed of. Logs. Brush and all piled up in there and burn it. All the logs people didn’t take — buy. We sold some of them, you know. That’s the way they did it. Everything had to be... couldn’t nothing be left out on the outside of the boundary. It all had to be brought back inside and disposed of.
- Philip Coyle: And so, the first job then was cutting right of way and clearing back trees.
- William Wright: Cutting right of way, and next job was, after right of way give out was —
- Philip Coyle: Here, you know why I’m stopping you is because these motorcycles are going by and it’s really loud, you know, and I’m thinking about the tape and I’m trying to make it so that it’s not loud on the background of the tape.
- William Wright: Oh, yeah.
- Philip Coyle: And so, we’re not in a great place right here, but I did just want to stop and, um, and, you know, get your memories of, uh, of this visitor center here ‘cause you said you also worked on the visitor center, is that right?
- William Wright: Yeah, I worked on it.
- Philip Coyle: Talk about that.
- William Wright: Worked on it in, let’s see, in the nineteen — in the ‘50s. When they built it. Dug the foundation, help dug the foundation, we poured that, and then they called me and went over and worked — see, I was working in labor. That’s all now I didn’t work — I didn’t work no, um, lead work until here lately I got to finish the concrete. That [inaudible] then [inaudible]. Other than that, I work for contractors all the time.
- Philip Coyle: You were saying that, uh, that this building here, the visitor center, was made out of pressure treated wood, but that was — but that was before you could just go to the lumber yard and buy your pressure treated wood out there.
- William Wright: Yeah, that’s right.

- Philip Coyle: Talk about that.
- William Wright: We had to dip it all right here. Had a, uh, had a vat and dipped every piece of it, cooked it in there for so long and then take it out. And, uh, I tell you the, uh, the contractor that built it: Overstreet.
- Philip Coyle: Overstreet, is it?
- William Wright: Yeah, Overstreet built it. Miller Overstreet. He lived down, oh, well I can show his house when I go back.
- Philip Coyle: Alright that would be great.
- William Wright: It'd be right on, it's right on the road.
- Philip Coyle: And he was the contractor.
- William Wright: He was the contractor. And when I worked for, uh, cutting right of way, old man Bobbie McGee was the foreman. He was a big old guy carried a great big old cane. He was the foreman. He had a whole bunch of us that, uh, worked with him. Saunders's and, uh, everybody. About — about, about all of them now that's living... I don't think none of them living much. A very few of them is living that worked in that gang.
- Philip Coyle: Yeah, I don't imagine so. It's been a while now, you know.
- William Wright: Yeah, see all the... all the, George Saunders had a son worked up here, Ervin worked up here. And then another Saunders; he had a cousin worked up — named Robert Saunders he worked up here. He got — he got hit right up there on a rock.
- Philip Coyle: Hmm. Tell that story. What happened there?
- William Wright: Dynamite just...
- Philip Coyle: And that hit — that was Robert Saunders.
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: Now was that —?
- William Wright: That was, uh, George Saunders's, uh, nephew.
- Philip Coyle: Mmhmm. So that's the same George Saunders as...

William Wright: Yeah, that's the same George Saunders we was talking about.

Philip Coyle: How interesting.

William Wright: Yeah, yeah. See, I knew all them people. Went to school with all of 'em. Now, see, George Saunders, I don't know how many children they had. Let's see — let's see if I started counting them then, let's see... have Mabel, Ervin, Cory, Elmer, Homer, Hilton, and Katherine. And ain't none of them living now but Katherine. She live in Roanoke.

Philip Coyle: Here, I'm going to pause this tape here for one second.

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING STARTS]

Philip Coyle: Here we are, uh, now... Now this is a little bit quieter, and — and I think we can get a better recording. Now you were counting the names of, uh, George Saunders, what are — what were his kids again?

William Wright: Yeah. His kids. Let's see there, uh, there was Mabel, Ervin, Cory, Elmer, Homer, and Hilton, and Katherine. Them are the kids. I went to school with all of them but Katherine.

Philip Coyle: Now where did you go to school?

William Wright: Well, the little one room school over here at, if you know, know where — you ain't ever been up 640 where Gross's Orchard is...

Philip Coyle: Uh, don't think so, no.

William Wright: One of — one of them schools there.

Philip Coyle: And what's it called?

William Wright: Gross's Orchard. The, uh, the Antioch School, right, uh — right beside, right in front of where our church is now, but they, uh, tore the little school down. I tore it down. I got some of the lumber over down at — at the house now. I built a little shed of it. It's just a one room school and — and, and the teacher had — had seven grades to teach. Some of them guys, you know, guys they were half-grown men. And, and after we moved — moved off the mountain down there where the old house was, where I'm livin'

now, we went over there — we went over there to the Saunders School. Mr. Sam Saunders... Mr. Sam Saunders was, uh, on the school board and he hired black help. But they didn't have no school, so, he built a little old one room school over there for the black kids to go to. And that was — that school, that was 1934, I believe. '34, '35. That's been a few days ago. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: Yeah, a few days, few weeks, few months. [Laughter.]

William Wright: Now, I finished the seventh grade. Well, I said I wasn't going to — I, I was grown anyway, thought I was anyway, so I said, well, I ain't going to no high school. So, one of us went to high school. My brother next to me, he went to high school. But they didn't have no bus or nothing. They had to board in city and go to school. So, he stayed in the city and go, you know, weekend, come home weekend, go back Sunday for, you know, to go to school. And well he had to walk back, now he didn't have no way of riding. All we did was — was walk then. But we didn't have no car until 1940. All of us was grown then. Me — when me and my brother bought the first old car. It was a Chevrolet, a '31. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: And you went in on it, I guess, you went in together, you and your brother.

William Wright: Oh yeah, we — we had some fun then.

Philip Coyle: Yeah. That must have been great to get a car. Now you would have been — in 1940, you said in '40 you got the car?

William Wright: 1940.

Philip Coyle: Yeah, and so you would have been like 22, I guess.

William Wright: I was 22 years old.

Philip Coyle: Yeah. Yeehaw, and suddenly you're free! You can do whatever you want, go anywhere.

William Wright: Yeah. We had we had some fun then. Saturday nights. What are you looking for buddy?

Unknown Person: Can you tell me how to get on Goose Neck Valley Road or something?

William Wright: Where you wanna go?

[Car engine running.]

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING STARTS]

William Wright: On the Goose Creek Valley Road, you turn off a little mountain there and come up the — come up the road you can go Goose Creek Valley Road comes up and hit the Parkway.

Philip Coyle: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Uh, now okay, well we before we [laughter] — I should say that there was a — there were some moving guys that got lost up here and we were just helping them find their way, but, uh, now you were talking about that Chevrolet that you got when you were 22 years old.

William Wright: It was a '31, gave 125 dollars for it. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: And so where would you go on a Saturday night in that Chevrolet? I'm just interested.

William Wright: Oh, just out clowning around like [inaudible]. Just trying to [inaudible] girls and just Saturday night parties and all.

Philip Coyle: See, those were the days, you know.

William Wright: We had some fun then. Sometimes we stayed all night Saturday, didn't come in until Sunday morning.

Philip Coyle: Yeah. So that was before you went into the Service, I guess.

William Wright: Oh, yeah. That was before I went into the service. That just messed it up when I went in the service, you know what I'm saying.

Philip Coyle: So much for your youth, you know, I mean being that teenager, young man, you know —

William Wright: Yeah, got [inaudible].

Philip Coyle: — and wild and like that.

William Wright: And now, see, after I got in the Service you just couldn't do nothing like that there. Get a pass maybe go to town or something like that. See, now you in a strange place you don't how to get to things, but you don't know. What, uh, what in the what.

- Philip Coyle: Yeah.
- William Wright: See, I've been all over, overseas, and everywhere. I've been all way across the United States from New York to California.
- Philip Coyle: And that was after you came, now that was during your service, or?
- William Wright: That was in the service. See I stayed in, uh... first left here and went on down to South America, went to, uh, Australia. Stayed in Australia a few days and left Australia and went to a little island called — called New Caledonia. It belonged to the British. With Natives, French, and every kind of nations on it. Stayed there two years and twelve days. And left there and come back up to — to Honolulu. Stayed down in Honolulu nine, for eight, nine months. Left there, went back down to Guadalcanal, and weren't nothin' there. And left Guadalcanal and went to Iwo Jima. That was that hotspot where they... killed so many Americans at. And then on the island — anything going on on the island you know down there where — were a radio station. It was about five miles long I think two to three miles wide or something like that. It look like a little rock stuck out on the ocean.
- Philip Coyle: That's what everybody was fighting for.
- William Wright: Yeah. So, we built an airport on that for landin' them big planes. And then over at the airport we built the, uh, extended that — here come few years after, the Japs bombed it, and you know what year that was in.
- Philip Coyle: Was it... I want to say '40?
- William Wright: '40, '43.
- Philip Coyle: I was going to say '43, but...
- William Wright: '40... '43.
- Philip Coyle: But you were there so, yeah, you tell me, you know. I wasn't born yet, you know.
- William Wright: I know. [Laughter.]
- Philip Coyle: That's only the history books for me you know.

- William Wright: Yeah. We extended that airport. Built one there, built two or three in New Caledonia. Built them in Guadalcanal. Built them in Iwo Jima. And the one built in Iwo Jima for them big planes to land on, see, them fighter planes didn't, and big planes, the bombers didn't have nowhere to land. And so, what they did, them airports is a type of rock they had just shell, rock, and grind — mashed up. So, what they do with that, grip — grade it off, put that rock down keep watering and packing that stuff got as hard as that cement over there.
- Philip Coyle: And that's how you would make those airports down there?
- William Wright: Yeah. You know them big planes come and land on it. If you cut it up and wet it and roll it back down, cut it, roll it, back down, cut it — cut it hard and tight. There was no cement on it. Lost two bulldozers there, too.
- Philip Coyle: Lost bulldozers, what do you mean?
- William Wright: What?
- Philip Coyle: How, how did you lose the bulldozers?
- William Wright: Bombs.
- Philip Coyle: Just bombed them right on them huh?
- William Wright: No, the guy runned the damn thing over, over the mine.
- Philip Coyle: Oh.
- William Wright: A D-4 and a D-8, D-7. And didn't nobody get killed. That D-7, you know, you know, it had right much power. Bigger the D-7 — we would blow the track off one side of 'em with all that powder. Uh, nitro... powder nitro, uh, nitrous. Something like that. Petric acid, what they used. They didn't have no dynamite like powder like we had. Petric acid is yellow like sulfur. That's what them Japs had. And they had them mines planted all around the beach. Out on, off the beach and all. See the morning were hard, had it [inaudible] we had a, we had, you know... You got a bunch go down like you here, go down with mine detectors. Pick up now, pick up all that stuff, pick up... That mine detector pick up all the metal. And they'd clear it out, see, but they'd clear it out so far and stuck a — staked how far to go. Our Lieutenant told a boy — he's only 22, 24 — to go down there and turn around, he went down

knock the thing and he turned right up on top of it. Knocked the track on top of it.

Philip Coyle: Hmm, mmhmm.

William Wright: I cut it off, but it blowed. It didn't kill him, but it bust the eardrums and all like that, just — just messed him all up, you know. Well, it kill, uh — killed, uh, kill, um, that, uh, bulldozer, that track and all that 'cause the — 'cause the, caught some of that explosion.

Philip Coyle: So, this is that — I guess the Japanese held that island first and then, uh...

William Wright: The Japanese had it first and the Americans took it from the Japanese. And you should see the, uh, cemetery there too. And them Japs weren't dumb. Everything they had — had was in the ground. Had hospitals, and barracks and everything in the ground like groundhogs. [Laughter.] Weren't anybody but working one day, uh, when one — one, uh, but for — but for, but further but that sign there, and one laid up on the cliff there watching us work.

Philip Coyle: And he just — he just was still there I guess, huh?

William Wright: Yeah. Well, see, them caught him but he couldn't get out and, uh, some of 'em — somebody spotted him.

Philip Coyle: And just captured him, I guess.

William Wright: Nah, then he went back down that cave, and he — he wouldn't come out. Then got a flamethrower, and he didn't come out. That thing goes off, you know, that ball of fire, know — it sets everything afire.

Philip Coyle: You're not going to come out of there at that point.

William Wright: No, you, uh, you not going to get out.

Philip Coyle: So, now, before you went off to the service, uh, you were working on the Parkway, I guess?

William Wright: Yeah, I worked on the Parkway.

Philip Coyle: Talk about that.

William Wright: I started right — I started work, uh, I started right of way back up Wilkerson Gap, cutting right of way, and worked on that. And

then, that gave out. We come back here and started drilling rock all through here, all around through here.

Philip Coyle: And where we are right now is at the turn off, uh, to the maintenance yard here at, uh, Peaks of Otter.

William Wright: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, um, after — after we did that, got through with all that, you see these curbish things like on the road right there? They made all the curbs, made all around here for the contractor we were pouring, uh, grading out and pouring them things. If you ride on down further, I can show you if you want to ride.

Philip Coyle: Alright, well, as long as we're going to have time to go to the Saunders farm.

William Wright: Oh yeah.

Philip Coyle: Maybe we'll go to the Saunders farm first. What do you say?

William Wright: No. We go — you can go up there, we got five of [inaudible], a long time.

Philip Coyle: Yeah. We got time. Here I'll turn this off here.

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING STARTS]

Philip Coyle: Yeah, that that sign here says, uh, "View: Headforemost Mountain."

William Wright: Headforemost Overlook.

Philip Coyle: Yeah. And now you were telling me a story about burning stumps up here when you were working on — on, uh, clearing the right of way. Tell me that story again.

William Wright: Yeah. We burned stumps back there. There was a fire burned at night. We work — would work through the morning, would work all day, and then work all night getting the [inaudible] cleaned up. And it come a thunderstorm put the fire out and we had to go right down that holler. And you had no light now. And then come rain and it was dark as ever was, a guy walking in front of you, oh, you couldn't see him it's so dark. We had to cut a cane, everyone had a walking cane, just feel our way to get on down, get down. Go

down on that holler. Eagles used to have a sawmill up that holler, got an old Sawmill Road, and we got on the road we thought alright you could walk all the way back down.

Philip Coyle: So, I just can't, you know, I can picture you up here. I mean, you were working your second shift of the day up here burning stumps in the middle of the night and then this thunderstorm starts coming in.

William Wright: Burn all night. Burn all night. Stay all night.

Philip Coyle: And you're just up there. Now, you were saying that when you would come to work on this part uh on the Parkway here, how'd you get up here?

William Wright: Had to walk. Walked right up the way I was telling you. Come up Wilkerson Gap. Back there by Wilkerson Gap. That's the way we got up here.

Philip Coyle: That's, uh, that's amazing. How long would it take you to walk that way?

William Wright: It was short. It didn't take too long. Was 25, 30 minutes something like that. I was younger then; you could step further, you know. My legs wasn't — I couldn't walk that far now. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: Probably then you'd be like half running, you know. You can make it down quick. Um, but now, there's, uh, there's, uh, an interpretive sign here about this poplar tree. They call it a tulip tree here. Uh, but now, you remember that? You remember that?

William Wright: I remember that poplar. Great big poplar, I think the tree died or something. They cut it down, something happened to it. Called the Big Poplar. It was — that thing was wide as a car — as this car around.

Philip Coyle: And, uh, was it right in the — in the right of way?

William Wright: No, it was on the side of the road, on the other side of the road.

Philip Coyle: Alright. So, uh, let's see, shall we head on back to the Saunders farm now or?

William Wright: Yeah, you can head on back.

Philip Coyle: Alright. I'll turn this back off.

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING STARTS]

Philip Coyle: Alright. What — what were you saying?

William Wright: Right where you're sitting there, right, used to be the old church, right there. Right behind the old church right there a little further back was the school. That's the first school I ever went to. It was the Antioch School.

Philip Coyle: Yeah, I should say that where we are right now is at the Antioch Baptist Church, uh.

William Wright: Yeah.

Philip Coyle: And — and so, you say that little one room schoolhouse that you used to go to.

William Wright: Yeah. One room schoolhouse and the church had one room and it's just a old church and pulpit. Was, was — in other words, it's an old plain weather boarded church. That was before they built this one here. Now they remodeled this one here in 1969. And that — that part there, now, this other part was built since then.

Philip Coyle: Now tell me again the story about how that church, how that school got built.

William Wright: Huh?

Philip Coyle: How that school got built, the school which no longer exists, but that Antioch School.

William Wright: Well, the school has been here for a, for many years. My daddy used to go to it when was young and that was way back yonder. And he was, when he died, he was 94 years old. And he wasn't so — he could get around better than I do now. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: At 94. And so, um, so he had been going, he had gone to that school too?

William Wright: Yeah, he went to that school. My momma went to that school. My uncle and all. Well, there used to be a whole lot of black people live around in this area. See, that was the black church.

- Philip Coyle: And it still is a black church here, right?
- William Wright: Still a black church.
- Philip Coyle: Yeah, I mean, talk about that. You know, it used to be a whole bunch of black people that, 'cause, I mean, from where we are right now you can actually practically look up to where the Saunders farm is up on that mountain there, you know. I mean it's probably a direct, it's — I mean, there probably was some kind of, uh, a road or a trail that came down from there, do you think?
- William Wright: Yeah. Well, they — well, them kids up there at George's. You see — you see where the house was at. Uh, they used to walk them up that right down here to school. All of them would, you know, would all go to school.
- Philip Coyle: And how long a walk would that be?
- William Wright: Oh, that was back in the '20s, '29, '30, something like that.
- Philip Coyle: Uh, how long would it take them to walk that far?
- William Wright: Oh, it didn't, I don't know, uh, it didn't take them, uh, too long. Comin' down the mountain you could, uh, you know, young people you can run all the way down the mountain. The bad part you got to go back up there. [Laughter.] Now this here right here is Suck Mountain Trail. You used to go on horseback, you can drive up that now, but it, uh, private. It private now. People live on up there. On on top of the mountain, way on the top of the mountain.
- Philip Coyle: So, yeah, uh, here, I got an idea for you here. What I want you to do is — is go back in your mind, you know, to — to when you were a boy, you know, when you were young, and this was, uh, a lot of black people living here. This was a black community. Just describe it for me, you know. What was it like?
- William Wright: Oh, it was nice then 'cause you had plenty of places to go, you know. You know, all the different kids to play with, different families and all whatnot whatnot. Now see up in the mountains up there, the Saunderses lived up there and then the Coles lived up there. And, you know, there was black people lived all, all around in here. Now right — right down that road from where that, um, just about where that church, right at the corner of this lot right here, uh, was a blacksmith shop. Old man George Burrell used to own the blacksmith shop. He lived right over the hill there. He had the blacksmith shop. Well, his, uh, his kids used to go to school up

here. I went to school with them. He just walked from his house over here; they didn't have nowhere to walk.

Philip Coyle: So, we got, there's the...

William Wright: Now on top of the mountain, the blacks that lived on the top of the mountain were old Carl Blake and Neil Blake. They lived way up on top, of course the [inaudible] live up there now. They just bought the place. And, um, he had a sister, uh, Louise. She used to have to walk from up there down here to school. Well, she was about 15 years old then, before she, before they, uh, and she hadn't been to school. So, they moved to the house right across the road there. So, they moved off the mountain down here and she went to school here. She was grown, a big grown girl I suppose then. And Neil, he was her brother, he — he stayed on up on the mountain there. He was a deacon, yeah, just like I am.

Philip Coyle: He was a what?

William Wright: He was a deacon of here — of the church here.

Philip Coyle: So, he was there — he was there as a deacon. So, they moved down here just so she could go to school basically.

William Wright: Yeah. They just got off the mountain so she could go to school. She's dead now, all the — all them old ones dead. Now they tell me the church used to be up in the curve there, but I don't remember that. On the mountain, see, they moved it from up there to down here. But the only time I remember it, it was — it was, it was right about — right about where the backend of your car sitting at.

Philip Coyle: Right next to this big red oak tree here, I guess that's a red oak here.

William Wright: Yeah, yeah. Big white oak.

Philip Coyle: White oak, yeah. Um, alright, now, uh, what was your father's name?

William Wright: Charles Ray. My momma's name: Emma Tanner Ray.

Philip Coyle: And, uh, and now talk about where they lived. Where did they live?

- William Wright: Well, they — my momma lived up on that mountain where I was telling you about back on the manor. That where she was raised at. Now, my daddy, he was raised right down there at the old house, right where I showed you.
- Philip Coyle: Remind me again where your mother was raised.
- William Wright: Uh, up on the — on the Round Top from the Peaks there.
- Philip Coyle: Now, what's — what — sorry, um, I spaced out there. What was her name, your mother?
- William Wright: Emma. Emma, Emma Tanner.
- Philip Coyle: Tanner was her last name.
- William Wright: Yeah, well, Tanner was her last name. But it was, see, three boys that they had, and wasn't but one girl.
- Philip Coyle: And then, um, now, but your — your grandfather also lived basically on the slope to Sharp Top up there.
- William Wright: Yeah. Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: What was his name?
- William Wright: Bill Tanner. William Tanner. And my grandmother's name is Sally Tanner.
- Philip Coyle: And, and, uh, okay, now I'm — now I'm getting it together here 'cause when we were driving up to show — when we were driving up to Peaks of Otter you pointed to that ridge and you said, "you see that ridge up there —"
- William Wright: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah.
- Philip Coyle: "— that's where my grandfather was —"
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: "— where he had his house," and that's where your mom grew up, there.
- William Wright: Yeah. That's where she grew up at.

- Philip Coyle: And then, um, so, now, what's the name of that place that your grandfather's house was at?
- William Wright: Well, it's, they called it the Round Top. But it's right down on the — it comes off of the peak. The ridge come off the peak. There, there, well, you can — it ain't far, you can drive up, up part of the way if you want to. I think you can get all the way up there, get part of it anyway. I can show you some of it.
- Philip Coyle: Mmhmm. Yeah, maybe we'll go up there in a little while. Um, and now, that's part of the Park do you think now? You think that's in the Parkway now?
- William Wright: No. Oh no, no. Where the Park, the, uh, the government line... my grandfather's place is on the government line across this side of the mountain.
- Philip Coyle: I get it. So alright now let's talk about that, uh, Saunders farm, alright. Now we just got done walking through the brush to get through there and everything. [Laughter.] And, uh, so we got all sweaty and — and everything. Now, uh, uh, talk about that farm.
- William Wright: Well, see, it wasn't too much of a farm. I don't know how many acres it was in it. But, uh, they, uh, they made a living off of it. They worked with — they worked around for different white people, you know, different like that. And, um, used to raise tomatoes and stuff like that, the canning factory [inaudible.] They lived! You know, better than people living now.
- Philip Coyle: Yeah, you said that before. Say, now, now why do you say that? Go on.
- William Wright: Why I said that, okay. Then, things weren't high. You work, you only get about 50 or 75 cents a day. And maybe — maybe you'd get your dinner, or now, you could go to the store. Most them old people had chickens, they had hogs. They had cows. They had the butter, and milk, and eggs. Well, see, they'd take the eggs to the store or take chickens to store and trade them for coffee and sugar. And — and, and they raised wheat. Now granddaddy, I tell you about granddaddy, granddaddy Bill Tanner. In the fall of the year granddaddy Bill Tanner would get about two or three bags of flour — flour. That's for the winter. Of course, it gets bad up there. You couldn't get out with the animals, get out with horses. You couldn't get out. Okay, and then he'd buy maybe a hundred pounds of sugar and coffee. And he raised three or four hogs and they had all — had their meat. And that's what they eat. And now — and

now potatoes, I guess — I guess we had to have potatoes. They used to get them and dig a hole in the ground and put the potatoes in there and put over something on top of them and cover them up and they — they stayed all the winter. They wouldn't freeze. When they wanted potatoes, they go down there and get them. Turnips. They'd go down and get all that stuff, see? And they canned a whole lot of food. See, they don't — people now don't — don't — they don't can much food. Now they canned a whole lot of food. Then grandma, she dried a whole lot of apples. Had a great big old rock and she took the rock in there, big old rock, she'd peel them apples and put them out on that rock and the sun dry 'em. Them some good eating apples. Then they had a bunch of peach orchard above the house, them old fashioned peaches. She used to make some the best preserves and everything. Man, I'm telling you. We used to love to go to grandma's 'cause she, you know, they didn't make no biscuits, made them old big cakes of bread. And them peach preserves, man, them things was some kind of good.
[Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: Well, you were saying that people weren't so mean back then too.

William Wright: No. They wasn't — it wasn't like they is now. You could have done — now when we come along, when I come along, they might have a fistfight or somebody throw a rock something, now, get out there, first thing a guy going to do now is he going to shoot if you don't do it to him. And that gun law that got passed ain't worth five cent. More of them killed now and getting killed now than — than ever been killed. They killing now every week you hear. There's somebody getting — in Lynchburg or Roanoke or Danville that gets shot every week.

Philip Coyle: Well, I guess back then you used to hunt a lot too?

William Wright: Oh, yeah, I used to hunt. Was hunting alright, I'd, uh, I'd still hunt if I able to get around. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: You were telling me you went rabbit hunting last year, so. And then, uh, coon hunting five or six years ago, I guess you said?

William Wright: Yeah. I used to coon hunt on top of this mountain. Me and my daddy, dad... Papa used to coon hunt 'round here. He used to like to coon hunt. That's what got us started out hunting. I started hunting at 13 years old. Back yonder at granddaddy's old place where we lived up there. I had a — I can tell you what kind of shotgun I, uh, I had. He had to borrow it from a guy. I had an original single barrel 12-gauge shotgun. I had the first shotgun.

Man, me and him would go out on the mountain and kill more squirrels in there. He — he'd shoot at 'em, now I'll tell you the truth, he'd shoot at 'em while — while them running. I'd wait till it stop. If it'd stop, I'd get it. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: But now about that Saunders farm, now, Sanders farm, excuse me. Uh, tell me about that, uh, that — that smokehouse again.

William Wright: That's where — that's where they kept the meat and things like that. You know you didn't keep those in the house. That's where they keep the meat, potatoes, and things like that in it. Now — and now the meat, you see, the meat — they kept the — they kept the meat down there now. See, a whole lot of people smoked the meat. But you just had a ground floor in it. Just had a hole in the floor and they put the — take sass root and cut it up and some and — and, uh, build a fire, and let that smoke cook the meat. And some of them would smoke it with hickory. Them was hickory-smoked meat and that — that sassy-smoked meat, smell, smelled real good, you know.

Philip Coyle: Uh, what's that? What kind of smoke is that first one that you're talking about?

William Wright: Sasswood, hickory.

Philip Coyle: And sasswood you said?

William Wright: Sasswood, yeah. They — they'd smoke with that.

Philip Coyle: And, uh, okay so, there's that smokehouse. And then, uh, and then there was that other building down below. What was that?

William Wright: That old house that was probably the old, uh, the old barn they had down where they kept things in. You know.

Philip Coyle: But now, you remember what kind of animals Mr. Saunders actually kept, do you not?

William Wright: Mm, I don't think he had nothing but hogs, he had nothing but hogs.

[Glass bottles clinking. Philip Coyle takes a drink.]

Philip Coyle: Ahh.

[Glass bottles clinking.]

- Philip Coyle: So, nothing but — nothing but hogs and chickens and small animals like that.
- William Wright: That's all. Think that's all they had.
- Philip Coyle: Well, talk about those, um, rock, he's got those rock walls there going up.
- William Wright: See, they just part of 'em up at the wall — wall. Now see they, around the mountains they used to tend between them rock walls. Now you'd be surprised if you'd seen it, how, how they plowed horses and things up there in them rocks. When I first started plowing up on granddaddy's old place, had, uh, had two horses to a plow and was a huge size plow. I wasn't big enough to lift the plow around. You know what I mean? I'd let the horses turn, turned — the horses turned it around. [Laughter.]
- Philip Coyle: But, so, they would, uh, they would go up there and — and, and plow between those rocks?
- William Wright: Yeah. Plow 'round them and raised crops all the way up in that mountain. Tomatoes, best tomatoes and stuff you've ever eat grew on that mountain. Mmhmm, tomatoes and, um, corn, that's the biggest thing they did up on that mountain. When they got down here in the flatland, and they raised wheat and rye and stuff like that. But now back on the mountain, that's what they raised back there.
- Philip Coyle: Tomatoes?
- William Wright: Tomatoes. That was the — that was the fall of the year crop was tomatoes.
- Philip Coyle: And I guess that was because they would sell those tomatoes to the canning factory?
- William Wright: Can them — to the canning factory. And they can 'em and over the year that's — that was the money crop for Christmas.
- Philip Coyle: I see. And, so, it's funny because I would have imagined that they would have just used a hoe to — to cultivate up there, [inaudible].
- William Wright: No, they didn't. No, they didn't. They used a plow and a horse. 'Cause I know because I've used 'em. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: But now, but now, uh, Saunders himself did not have a horse, so...

William Wright: Huh?

Philip Coyle: Saunders himself, George, George Saunders didn't have a horse, you said, right?

William Wright: No. I don't think they had no horse.

Philip Coyle: So, now they were using horses for the plow.

William Wright: That's what they used.

Philip Coyle: Not — not an oxen or anything like that.

William Wright: No, didn't have no oxen then. They had the — they used horses. I know plowed, all I'm sayin' plowed — the horses and mules, that's all I know about. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: And, uh, so, but, um, but they would — they would use plows and not hoes up there?

William Wright: Yeah. Man, you'd be surprised. They made good crops and things up there too. People lived good up there. Money, well, them work [inaudible]. They weren't making much money, like I said 50 or 75 cents a day, maybe their dinner. And a whole lot of them sharecropped. And then when they wanted they crops there they work for the other fellow, you know, get the extra change. That's the way they made it.

Philip Coyle: Now, who were the main, uh, you know, white employers of, uh, of the people in this community at that time?

William Wright: Well, had a — had a bunch of them. Around here, Sam, Sam Ahern — down below there used to be the Aherns, and, um, oh what that guy live on the hill there... Mack Conners, Aherns, Jennings, and on there down toward town: Saunders, Russells, all them farms, all of them were farms. Now, the Ahern farm, they splitting that up, going to build houses on part of it. Now, right across where I — I was telling you, that belonged to Lynchburg College, and there's four-hundred-and-fifty acres in that farm. Lynchburg College got that; it's been housing them there growers. 'Cause I know 'cause we lived on it for two years, sharecropped that one for two years. Now where that little house is out there, where I showed that little building, now the last one had a hootin' there in the '50s. That was in the '50s.

Philip Coyle: That's there on — that's on Woods Road right there.

William Wright: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And I was farming in there. Well, I couldn't make nothing in farming so I just... I had five kids and I [inaudible] you know, went to con — worked for contractors.

Philip Coyle: Um.

William Wright: And then, see, I worked for contractors and well... that little old house up on there. The house I live in now. The first house got burnt up, everything I had. I had just dug — I had just dug the basement in the one that we're living on now and put the first [inaudible] block. And I had — well, I had to go from that. And five kids now, everybody going to school.

Philip Coyle: Now, where — where was that house, uh, that burnt down?

William Wright: Above where I live. Go through the yard and keep on going up. It wasn't nothing but a little three-room boarded house. I was working when it caught fire, weren't nobody home.

Philip Coyle: And it just burnt to the ground.

William Wright: Nah, what it burnt up for, I think, my daddy said he heard it. Heard some shooting going on. Well, I had a hunting coat hanging behind the door and the boxes over here. And that, uh, evidently, caught from that juice and them shells going off in my hunting coat. That's what made him notice the fire. Them shells got hot, and they got to going off you know. [Laughter.] [Inaudible.] When I got back to the house, ain't nothing there. I was working down here at the — at the Ebenezer Church, uh, down laying the, uh, foundation for the church, laying down the rock, working for Paul Osteen. Gee, I'll tell you, Paul Osteen that's who [inaudible]... Paul Osteen and Miller Osteen were brothers, but both of them was contractors.

Philip Coyle: And you worked for...?

William Wright: I worked for both of them. I've worked for both of them.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[START OF SIDE TWO]

William Wright: Yeah, I've worked for both of them.

Philip Coyle: So, now, you were saying when we were up there, you can take a drink, uh, when we were up there, um, you were saying, when we were up there at the Saunders farm, you were saying that you actually remember going to that farm when George and Bettie Saunders were living there and their kids and everything. Talk about that.

William Wright: Yeah. We went there. Yeah, we went there. My momma carried me when I was, well, I don't know — was a kid. She carried me down by Mrs. Bettie, carried me down to eat dinner. 'Cause we walked from our old home place over there across the mountain over there. Walk, come on out there and, where I told you, where that dam was, come out there and walk up. Walked up that.

Philip Coyle: So, can you remember a specific time having dinner there at — at, uh, Mrs. Bettie Saunders's house there?

William Wright: Yeah, I can remember having dinner there.

Philip Coyle: Alright. Tell me about it. What — what happened?

William Wright: Oh, she was a good cook. Them old people cooked good then. It ain't like they cook now. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: What did you have for dinner?

William Wright: I don't remember what they had for dinner, but I remember — remember eating there. Now, right here there was a fellow down here named Ross, Jesse Ross. He was the caretaker of the church. And his wife was the clerk of the church until she died. Uncle Jesse, [inaudible] — a great big ole guy. Everybody was always saying he had a mouth and of course he was funny, you know. He 'bout to [inaudible].

Philip Coyle: Well, how was it here? Was it — was it just all black people that were living here or was it a, you know, mostly black with some white people living in, or how was it?

William Wright: No. White people lived all around, they just dipped in between here. A lot of 'em lived on the black people's farms sharecropping and what not.

Philip Coyle: Well, that's different, isn't it? So, now, you're — that's, uh — that's not — that's not the normal story you hear, now, is it?

- William Wright: Nah. Yeah. Whole lot of 'em, we did the same thing until we bought that, uh, that old house down there. We bought that; my daddy bought that. He didn't buy that until, um, after I got out the army.
- Philip Coyle: After you got out of the army is when your dad bought that house down there.
- William Wright: Yeah. Yeah. When they bought that old house down there.
- Philip Coyle: But now, talk with me some more about that. So, you're saying that there was white people that were sharecropping on black owned farms in here?
- William Wright: Yeah. We used to sharecrop on them.
- Philip Coyle: Now, now wait a second. Now, black people were sharecropping on white farms?
- William Wright: Uh-huh, yeah, see, we'd, uh —
- Philip Coyle: Or would it go both ways?
- William Wright: Well, we did — I tell you what it was. The black people rent sharecropping for a year from them — from one them farmers, you see. Now he'd stay there a year and if he didn't like, why, he'd go find another one to go to. That's the way they worked, that's the way it worked. Some of them stayed there two or three years. And the Blakes's down the road here stayed there until they died. Down on this old — where the old store burnt down. That road, uh, road that come down from the Peak, I think is 'bout where that house was, over here then. The Blakes stayed there until they died. She didn't pull 'em out.
- Philip Coyle: And that was a — but that was a white-owned farm that they were sharecropping.
- William Wright: Yeah, that was a white owned farm. Yeah, all — all them farms that they worked on was — was, uh, white farms.
- Philip Coyle: Okay. But then, um, but then there was also some, uh, black farmers who owned land around here too?
- William Wright: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Now if you take, um, Sharps down there, on there in, uh, down there where we lived by the old house, see, my uncle owned that. See, all that in there — all that down in there where I

lived used to belong to black people. On that — on, on the side of the road that my — where I live on. All the way up here to where this road ‘round where that old store burnt down here. One side of the road was all black. And the other side was part of ‘em black. My uncle lived there. My great uncle lived there. And — and another was two black family lived there on the other side of the road, but on the side I lived on was, uh, black owned all the way down from Peaksville to that old store up there.

Philip Coyle: Now, were there any black farms that — where the black — where the black man, black person was owning that farm and that white people would sharecrop on their farms?

William Wright: No. No.

Philip Coyle: No. That never happened. Yeah.

William Wright: Ain’t know — ain’t knowing about that part of it. But all — all the black people did was sharecrop on white people’s farms. You know how that works. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: Although it would be interesting to see it the other way around one day, you know. [Laughter.]

William Wright: Yeah.

Philip Coyle: Uh, so, but I — I’m interested to know, you know, now your — your, uh, grandfather, uh, Mr. Tanner, now, when would he have been born?

William Wright: Well, he had — he had a farm up there [inaudible].

Philip Coyle: Right. And he owned that farm, right?

William Wright: Yeah, he owned that farm.

Philip Coyle: But, I mean, he must have, I mean, uh...

William Wright: What he did, he owned that farm and him — and the boy — and he had some sons. He and his sons worked it. Then he would rent land from the white farmers. That’s the way they did it, rent land from the white farmers to — to make it. Well, he had to give them a fourth or — or third of whatever, you know, for rent. A half, well, depending on what they planted.

Philip Coyle: Okay, talk about that, depending on what they planted.

- William Wright: Yeah. Now, they —
- Philip Coyle: Like, how did that work, like, when, depending on which crops what would happen?
- William Wright: Now, now, see, the money crops, I think they give them about half of that, see. Like the tomato crop and things like that. Other — other, like, corn and stuff like that they'd get about a third or fourth of it, see. And this mill down here, used to carry wheat and all down there to the mill. And — and they grind it. And the miller take a total of it, so much.
- Philip Coyle: So, how much land would you say that your grandfather actually owned?
- William Wright: I think it was about 59 or 60 acres in the thing. Back in the mountain, rough just like it is up there at the Saunders farm — it was no different, but just further across the mountain, that's all. Now up on top the mountain here Uncle Harvey Blake owned a farm up there where Neil — Neil and his sons lived there. They sold that. What-you-call-it bought that. Uh, [inaudible] got that. He don't farm it. He don't farm nothing up there now, may have a little garden or something like that. That's all.
- Philip Coyle: Now, uh, yeah, that's just interesting. So, there was — there was really, basically there was black people all living along the slope of that mountain there, up there, back in, uh, back when you were a boy.
- William Wright: Yeah. Well, see, the Sweenys lived over on top of the mountain there where I was talking about, when I was talking 'bout where you go around over there, and Parker lived back 'round that-a-way. Sweenys lived around that-a-way. That was the one on top. Coming on down were the Saunders farm, the Saunders's lived there. They down at the — at the, um, Bob Vaugh farm right there, George Saunders's brother lived there, but he didn't — he didn't own it. He just lived there, see.
- Philip Coyle: Now were the Vaughns white or black?
- William Wright: White. See they runned the canning factory. They had two canning factories. They had one up there and they had one down here in the — in the flatland. Now there was the canning factory up the road here above this orchard, and Jimmy McClarey owned — runned that. He was a white guy.

- Philip Coyle: Yeah. You know, I — I should have asked you about that Lon Swain's farm when we were up there on the Peaks.
- William Wright: I don't know about that — too much about them. I know Lon, know Lon. Lon and Juden, it was two brothers. Both of them they were two great long, tall guys. That light skin fellow was real tall.
- Philip Coyle: Yeah. You know what — that's a good question, you know. What was — what did George Saunders look like?
- William Wright: Oh, he was a darkened fellow, brown skin fellow with a long head. Gray-headed; when he got old, he got gray-headed. Mrs. Bettie, uh, his wife, she was real dark. She was, uh, Uncle Jesse Ross's sister.
- Philip Coyle: Uncle Jesse Ross, who's — who's that?
- William Wright: Uncle Jesse was the one that took care — took care of the church here. He lived right up there on that rock from the church in that orchard there. See, he owned that. That's where he lived there, where he lived there. He raised, he had three children, two boys and a girl. But what happened, the girl was, um, she was a nurse and, uh, the boys all died and then, well, left it to the girl. She was a nurse and she gone over — over to school and she got down sick and all and had to go in a home. And the home sold that place. And that's the way Gross got a hold of it.
- Philip Coyle: Hmm, I see, yeah.
- William Wright: And of course, he done put the orchard in there.
- Philip Coyle: Hmm. Interesting.
- William Wright: Now there used to be a place on the other side of the road over there, might even see the house. That belonged to John Meadow. And I tell you about Meadow Mill Road. He used to run a mill there, used to run a mill 'round down the store too.
- Philip Coyle: Man, it was really different, wasn't it?
- William Wright: [Laughter.] Yeah. 'Cause we used to come by the store over near the school, and momma wouldn't let us, you know we were smoking, and we'd get over a nickel and get a pack of that old White Horse Tobacco. The make 'em, roll your own. You can't

take it to the house — you had to hide it down the road somewhere. [Laughter.] Had to [inaudible]. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: That's funny. Well, uh, well I hesitate to ask once you start bringing up about smoking and all that, I hesitate to ask about drinking and all that kind of stuff. But, uh, I mean, there must've had — must have gone on, you know.

William Wright: Oh yeah. I'd drink some. Used to drink a whole lot but see, after I got married, I couldn't do it. Of course, even these men'll tell you, you got a bunch of kids. [Inaudible.] You didn't have the money, by the time you worked hard all week and buy groceries and things and took care of the kids you scared to have enough money to buy you a pint of whiskey. Of course, some of them went to store and go buy it, some people would. But, you know, I wanted to see that, uh, everybody had something to eat, and nobody went hungry. I like to eat myself, you know. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: Eat rather than drink, I guess. Five kids, too, I mean.

William Wright: Drink a few, got out once and that's it. And then sick afterwards. [Laughter.] Now, in the army there, that's all we'd look for then. Something to drink and a whorehouse.

Philip Coyle: In the great tradition of the military around the world, right? Now, uh, now talk to me about those, uh — when we were up at the Saunders farm you were talking about, uh, the orchards that he had.

William Wright: There's a bunch of nice pear trees out from the house. When — when you're looking — when we were looking upside the mountain, was nice pear trees out there, but last time I was up there the bears had done torn them all to pieces. Bear climb that tree and tear all them — them pears off of there. Reach out and break the limbs off or they give way.

Philip Coyle: That's too bad.

William Wright: [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: So, was it just pears or did he have other fruit trees?

William Wright: Well, he had, too, peach trees and apple trees too. But he didn't need the apple trees, there was an apple orchard right down below that. Watson had a orchard of Red Johnnies. He got all the apples he wanted. [Laughter.]

- Philip Coyle: So, here I'm going to ask you a question. I'm going to really try to go back in your mind now. Your, uh — but, uh, when you walked in the house, you know — describe the inside of their house, back in those days.
- William Wright: Well, as far as I can remember it was just a ceiling — with pine ceiling. Know what I mean, the old fashion pine ceiling that's the way it was. They didn't have this board and stuff like they got now, the sheet rock and all that stuff. And see we'd pointed up — we'd point them things up, go down... get that lime and sand — get lime and sand and go down there and find that old gray mud and point it up, point it up with that gray mud in them logs.
- Philip Coyle: That chinking between the logs.
- William Wright: Chinking, yeah, put chinking between them, point up. And them fireplaces all they laid up out of — out of, out of rock most of 'em. Some of them had, uh, had brick chimneys, you know.
- Philip Coyle: Yeah, I don't remember. It looked like it had a brick chimney actually.
- William Wright: Yeah, it had a brick chimney. That was the kitchen, but that rock chimney you see that was the — that heated the house.
- Philip Coyle: Now, uh, so, yeah, that brick chimney in the kitchen were they cooking on a wood —?
- William Wright: Cooking on a wood stove, they didn't have no electric stove. They didn't have no electricity up there. They didn't know nothing about no electricity. Cooked with a wood stove.
- Philip Coyle: And so, what other — what, do you remember any furniture in that house, maybe even specific, uh, you know —?
- William Wright: No, they just had the ordinary wood stove and — and beds, you know, and — and tables and chairs. Had nothing fancy 'cause they couldn't afford it.
- Philip Coyle: Any pictures on the wall or magazines or anything?
- William Wright: Well, they probably — they probably had, I think they had — I think he had his daddy's picture, maybe his momma's picture, or some of his brother's pictures on the wall. Pictures on the wall, yeah. That was it.

- Philip Coyle: Here I got a question for you. Did anybody up here play music?
- William Wright: Hmm?
- Philip Coyle: Did anybody up here play music?
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: Did people make music around here?
- William Wright: Yeah. Robertson did. Henry Robertson. Henry Robertson's daddy used to, old man Erik Robertson. He played the banjo, his son Henry did too.
- Philip Coyle: And that, and he was a black man, or?
- William Wright: Yeah. Ah. He was a black man, Erik Robertson...
- Philip Coyle: But did people have that whole musical tradition back, uh, in that community or not?
- William Wright: No, they — they didn't have nothing then but a — a, a banjo and a guitar, that's about all they had.
- Philip Coyle: So, the Saunders didn't — they didn't, they didn't play music or anything up there?
- William Wright: Yeah. Um, one of 'em did. Robert did. That was the eldest son, uh, old man George's son, I mean Elder's son. George brother's son. George had a son named Willie, played. Willie used to play.
- Philip Coyle: All banjos?
- William Wright: Played guitar.
- Philip Coyle: Play guitar. Well, let's see, what else should I ask you about that farm. Uh, let's see we talked about those terraces. Here let me. We talked — we talked about your uncles there coming down, um. Well, I'm going to turn this off for now.

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING STARTS]

- William Wright: Over here, on [inaudible] farm, and they had a — here at that time they have school — [inaudible] school, it's small, so they'd have a program at the school at night. And we'd been coming up through them woods one night, one night coming — going from, uh — up to the school. And all of a sudden, a bear run right out at momma. Ahh, you know. [Laughter.] And my uncle — my uncle he shot and scared it. Went on to the house and “what happened?” Mr. Ahern up here had sheep. And they had been in the sheep, and he done got them scattered, and they just ran right through here.
- Philip Coyle: Here, I have a question for you. Maybe this is the most important question of all. You know the National Park Service is going to fix up that house, supposedly, you know.
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: Talking about fixing it up. Now, when visitors come to that house, what should they know about the Saunders family?
- William Wright: Well, they just could know how he lived. All — all I think to know how they lived, what they raised, how many children they had and all. I think that'd be the important thing.
- Philip Coyle: Uh, but, you know — one of the things is that he was a black man —
- William Wright: That's right.
- Philip Coyle: And a black family living in that.
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: So, I mean, what can you tell people about that black community at that time, you know?
- William Wright: Well, see, they — they worked for diff — different people and all, you know, worked to make a living. Ain't nobody give you nothing more than that. Well, I used to work with one of them. I used to work with one of the boys, Ervin. We worked on the mountain up here and all around. Then he went — he went in the army and Elmer went in the army. Willie was in the army. So, three of them I know was in the army. Went in '41. When they was grown like I was, you know. 'Course some of them older than I was, but still. They was in the army. And the rest of them was at home.

Philip Coyle: And now, um. [Clears throat.] Do you remember the time when the — when the government bought that land out from under them?

William Wright: Yeah. I remember when the government said, tell you what happened. After Saunders's... The government bought that land and the Saunders's, old man George Saunders had moved down next to Thaxton, off 460 — off 460 next to Thaxton. And that left the house vacant, 'cause the government had bought it. The government bought that part mostly. Now Amos Burris, I don't know whether they got that or not. They wanted to get it, but I don't — I don't think got that. That was a white guy's land right below that. And right there in front of where I showed the Vaughn's house was, on the side of the road, it's a house back in there. Old Mrs. Thurston owned that. I reckon she still living, I don't know if the old lady is still living or not. I used to go up there and work for her. Clean up around there, do the pointing up and doin' a little cement work and rock and stuff, you know, just piddling around. Excuse me. The old lady had a bunch of cats up there and she's so nasty. [Laughter.] I didn't like to fool around there. You wanted — didn't do nothing to hurt them cats. [Inaudible] full of cats.

Philip Coyle: So, uh, now, you say old man George Saunders, so had his wife died by then or, uh, did she move off there with him?

William Wright: Yeah, she moved up there with him.

Philip Coyle: And so, then they lived — they lived out their lives over there.

William Wright: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Philip Coyle: But their kids had already moved off by then or was there, was there —?

William Wright: All the kids was gone. All the kids had done left home, grown and left home.

Philip Coyle: And now, uh, if I was going to try to find that Katherine, uh, Saunders, you know, whatever — Cole, I guess you said her last — she married somebody named Cole, I guess?

William Wright: Yeah.

Philip Coyle: Uh, how would I go about trying to find her?

- William Wright: I don't know. I ain't seen Katherine for years. I'd know her I see her, but I don't where she's living at this point, in Roanoke.
- Philip Coyle: And then that Mabel — that Mabel, uh, Saunders.
- William Wright: Mabel's dead.
- Philip Coyle: She's dead.
- William Wright: All of — ain't none of them living but Katherine. She the only one living. She was the baby. All the rest of 'em dead.
- Philip Coyle: But then that, um... but that Mabel married that Lon Swain, didn't she?
- William Wright: Lon Swain.
- Philip Coyle: So, now did they have kids that are still around?
- William Wright: They had one — they had one kid. One boy. And he was in California. I don't know where he is now or if he's still living or what. See, them people leave out from here and you don't never see them no more. Oh dear. [Inaudible], it's just going down there — it gone leave right down that trail. Coles. Bunch of Coles used to live around here too.
- Philip Coyle: Yeah, that — have we gotten all the names of the different black people that lived in this community? We've got, uh, Blakes.
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: Coles, and Saunders, and, uh, well, Tanner, I guess you could say, and Wright, and, uh, now, uh, Burris was white you said, right? And, uh, is that what you said?
- William Wright: Yeah. That's about — yeah, that's about all, about all of them. You got the Blakes. The Coles — the Coles was a big family.
- Philip Coyle: Were they?
- William Wright: Yeah. Blakes was a pretty good size family too. You know, different one. And the Wrights wasn't too — wasn't too large. 'Cause my uncle lived down there named Tom Wright, and then he had a brother named, uh, Albert Wright and he had a sister, my daddy's momma, named Katie Wright, but she — she died when

he was born. So, he never did see her. My uncle — my Uncle Tom raised — raised my daddy, see.

Philip Coyle: So, why's that?

William Wright: Yeah. My uncle, Uncle Tom, raised him, see, he was his sister's kid and he raised it. Daddy, he left home when he was 18 years old. [Laughter.] Went to West Virginia. That's where he was when he got married, working in West Virginia.

Philip Coyle: Here I got a — so this is a — I wonder if you could answer this question. I don't know. But, you know, you're 87 years old, right?

William Wright: Yeah. I was born in 1918.

Philip Coyle: 1918 alright. Um, uh, here, you grew up in this area, uh, farming, working —

William Wright: Yeah.

Philip Coyle: Uh, in, uh, in this black community.

William Wright: Yeah.

Philip Coyle: How — you know, um, how has it changed, uh, being black in this area over that time, or how has it stayed the same, you know?

William Wright: Well, it was about like it is now. Ain't much different.

Philip Coyle: Is that right?

William Wright: Now it ain't much different.

Philip Coyle: Why not?

William Wright: Of course, now, I'll tell you one thing about it a little different because black people own a little more now than they did then. That's the only difference I seen in it.

Philip Coyle: But do they own as much land, you know?

William Wright: Uh-huh, yeah, they own quite a bit of land, and they own more of other things like, uh, stocks and things like that.

Philip Coyle: 'Cause, yeah, I'm just — I have to say, I'm thinking, you know, that the — that the Saunders's and — and your family and

everything, seemed like they — they had a fair amount of land that they owned, you know?

William Wright: Oh, yeah, they had a farm. See, they didn't have to work the white man's farm. They worked their own farm on their own — their own thing, you know. They had horses, cows. If it hadn't been for that, they wouldn't have made it. I know a time we used to, uh, go up there to that store down here. I'd catch a couple of old hens and canned stuff for momma, she'd get sugar. Coffee, maybe lard and stuff.

Philip Coyle: Well, I guess it — go on. [Laughter.] I guess it's a lot easier these days, I mean, in the sense that you can drive around wherever you need to drive and stuff like that.

William Wright: Oh yeah. Well, see, we didn't have nothing to drive then, but walk or ride a horse. We had a horse, a big black horse. Great big black horse. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: It's so funny, you still remember that horse, don't you?

William Wright: Oh, Ole Dan, yeah, I still remember.

Philip Coyle: That's like, uh —

William Wright: I used to work him many a day. Plowed a garden, plowed corn all that stuff with him. Used to work him to the buggy; I used to wear him — used to — to work him to the buggy.

Philip Coyle: Is that right?

William Wright: That's what we rode in, in — in the buggy. We come to church there, and most time we would walk.

Philip Coyle: So, uh, so like, um, how can I ask this question, but, like, what were relations like between white people and black people back in that day?

William Wright: Oh that, there wasn't much difference between that and there is now. No, it wasn't much different. 'Cause some of 'em now, some of 'em — some of 'em is pretty nice and some of them ain't. Some white people is real nice to you. Now, this old white lady live right over in front of me there, the nicest old lady. I used to work for her husband. Used to work for her father-in-law, used to work for her husband, and, uh, now she want anything done, she just holler for me to come; if she wants her garbage carried off or something. Uh,

something she want, she tell me — call me and tell me to come over there. She want something take off. And, uh, I work in the garden. Now, I always can something out of the garden. She said, well, she — I know, I used to work for them, they used to bring all kind, kind of tomatoes and all that kept there. She said they boiled it. When she got down there plantin' the garden, she don't plant nothing, nothing but maybe a few tomatoes or something like that. You see, I plant beans, potatoes, and all that, cabbage and all that stuff. See, I always can — can some. She's glad to get it.

Philip Coyle: So, back in the, back, uh, in — in the days when you were living — when there was more black people living over here and you were living over here, was it the same way that you could expect some white people would be, uh, nice to you and —?

William Wright: Yeah. Some of 'em are still nice to you.

Philip Coyle: But others are not?

William Wright: And some — some of them wasn't. Some of them just called you a black, they just didn't — they didn't, didn't like you. Well, they ain't got nothing to do with you. You can't help how colored we was. You didn't have nothing to do with that part of it. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: So, I guess it hasn't that changed much in 75 years?

William Wright: Huh?

Philip Coyle: It hasn't changed that much in 75 years you're saying?

William Wright: No. It ain't. No. I couldn't help it because I was black. You couldn't help it 'cause you was white. You didn't have nothing to do with that part of it. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: Yeah. I know it.

William Wright: Now, um, I mean I can tell somebody nice or nothing', but, but now the way I've made it. I been here this long ain't never been in jail. Only, so I maybe pay some tickets now. [Laughter.] But see now, the way I do, if I see somebody, and you know somebody in with the [inaudible] I don't mess with him, that's the way you stay out of jail, you see. Just going on by and have nothing to do with him see. And — and you stay out of jail, 'cause... nine times out of ten, if you hang out with him, he gonna make you mad and you going to do something you ain't got no business doing. [Laughter.]

- Philip Coyle: It's hard though, you know. I tell you that's a hard thing to do.
- William Wright: Oh, yeah.
- Philip Coyle: 'Cause, you know, 'cause you — when somebody, uh, is mean to you like that, you — you know, you get that feeling in your stomach —
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: When you're mad, you know, and you want to fight. And it's hard to not fight, you know.
- William Wright: Yeah. It's hard to not fight.
- Philip Coyle: To turn the other cheek as they say, you know.
- William Wright: Yeah.
- Philip Coyle: Here we are looking at this.
- William Wright: I never — I never did do much fighting. I never did like the fights. I never did much fighting. The only thing I would do, I would shoot. [Laughter.]
- Philip Coyle: Don't mess around. [Laughter.]
- William Wright: I use that. Now they got a law if you shoot somebody, got a law, three dollars for having it — three years for having it, three years for having the gun, and what time you get and all that kind of stuff. It ain't worth 5 cent! Like I said, back [inaudible] more people are getting killed now than ever. Than ever been, in Roanoke, Danville, Lynchburg, all out there somebody's gettin' killed every week.
- Philip Coyle: Well, you know, they learn how to be so vicious like that in jail, you know.
- William Wright: Huh?
- Philip Coyle: You — you lock people up in jail and what they learn how to be in jail is criminals, you know.
- William Wright: Oh, yeah.

- Philip Coyle: And — that's my opinion anyway. So, then — then they come out of jail and they're worse than when they went in, you know.
- William Wright: And some of 'em don't care.
- Philip Coyle: They don't care.
- William Wright: When you get them kind of people that don't care they're kind of mean to deal with. [Laughter.]
- Philip Coyle: And then they learn to not care when they're in jail. They send them off to jail.
- William Wright: Oh, yeah.
- Philip Coyle: They come back worse than when they went in.
- William Wright: I know it. It's like them — like them, uh, Iranians over there. I mean, they didn't have no business over there messing with them people in the first place. Let them people... All them people ever done is fuss and fight among their selves. See, I always said the United States didn't have no business over there in the first place. You know, them kids there for nothing. And they don't care 'bout folks they're killing their own people. [Inaudible] they don't care nothing 'bout killin' they own people. [Laughter.] It's like them Japs. Them Japs had them suicide planes. They'd just fly right into a ship or anything. When — when they send them out, they — they wasn't looking for them to come back no way.
- Philip Coyle: Yeah, it's kind of like these suicide bombers they have over in Iraq now.
- William Wright: Yeah, them in cars.
- Philip Coyle: Or yeah, the cars. Or they'll put like explosive vests on them and stuff like that.
- William Wright: Oh yeah. Well, the Japs had explosives — put explosives on the dead bod — man's body.
- Philip Coyle: Is that right, I didn't know that.
- William Wright: Soon as you move the bodies the thing go off. Them old, um, pressure bombs. Five pounds of pressure puts off. You step on it puts off. See we was trained all that. [Laughter.]

Philip Coyle: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I'm going to turn this off one more time.

[RECORDING STOPS]

[RECORDING STARTS]

Philip Coyle: Now — now we were driving, uh, on the Peaks Road here and we went right by the — the, uh, the old CC camp and — talk to me about that.

William Wright: Yeah, well, see they used to live there — see, a bunch of them, see, right there, some these were messy people living down the road and all that — that — some of them was board and some of them wasn't. Now this house right here, that's an old house.

Philip Coyle: Now that probably goes back to the plantation days, huh?

William Wright: Yeah.

Philip Coyle: And then there's like an old cemetery here, too.

William Wright: Yeah, that's the old — old Kelter cemetery. That's the old Kelter house there. Them were the people that owned that they owned that that mill down there and owned the farm here too.

Philip Coyle: So, you — so you said those CC boys were some ornery bastards.

William Wright: Some of them was, some of them were nice boys. But now, after — on the — after them black boys got up there — on the air force base up there, they wasn't bad — they wasn't bad, you know. They had to do right.

Philip Coyle: Now, what base are you talking about?

William Wright: Up on the Parkway.

Philip Coyle: Oh.

William Wright: On by Sunset Field, with — uh, on past Sunset Field used to be a air base. Air force base.

Philip Coyle: I didn't know that.

William Wright: You didn't?

Philip Coyle: No.

William Wright: Yeah, used to be an air force base all — it had all black up there on that.

Philip Coyle: Now describe to me now where was that exactly.

William Wright: On the air force base. On — at the Apple Orchard Mountain. I should've took you out there but [inaudible] you weren't too far from it. Would have took you 'bout ten minutes to get up there.

Philip Coyle: Yeah, well tell me about it though.

William Wright: Yeah, well, see — well, I helped — worked on that, uh, shop on the building thing up there at the air force base.

Philip Coyle: Well, now, but it must've been for like radio or something like that.

William Wright: Radio, yeah.

Philip Coyle: And now, but it was all black up there you said?

William Wright: Yeah, it was all black. I know — I know where one of 'em live now. I was over at his house here the other morning. He married a girl here and left from here and come back and bought a house over on Valley Mill Road, built a big house.

Philip Coyle: Interesting. Thanks. Just thought I would stop.

END OF TAPE