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David Harris

Kelli Johnson

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Kelli, "David Harris" (2019). *Oral Histories*. 10.
https://mds.marshall.edu/african_american_oral/10

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Oral Histories

Black History in Huntington, WV

Spring 6-16-2021

Harris, David - Oral History

Kelli Johnson

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Kelli Johnson:

Okay. So this is Kelli Johnson. And it is January 4th, 2019. And I am here with David Harris, who is going to take me on a little driving tour of Fairfield. So I'm going to hand that to you.

David Harris:

I got it.

Kelli Johnson:

And okay.

David Harris:

Just hold it?

Kelli Johnson:

Just hold it and ...

David Harris:

I got it.

Kelli Johnson:

... say what you want to say. So we're starting out ... Oops.

David Harris:

Yeah, there was a church here on this corner.

Kelli Johnson:

And we're on 10th Avenue.

David Harris:

10th and Douglas Street.

Kelli Johnson:

And Douglas Street.

David Harris:

Right. And there was a church here. And of course I grew up in the Holiness Church across the street here. And as you go up the steps to this church ... And I wish there was some way we could get in but there isn't now. As you go up the steps, there was a picture of the founder of the church or a long-term minister. And she was a female ...

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

... which was not really common.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah.

David Harris:

Mother Phillips. And the reason I asked you about Bethel Cemetery is because when I'd go up that step, her picture was just so grandiose. It always gave you pause. And I went to the Bethel Cemetery one time. The first headstone I saw was Mother Phillip's headstone.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

And I'll show you where Bethel is before too long.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay. Okay.

David Harris:

But there was a-

Kelli Johnson:

So is that church ...

David Harris:

It's the original Glorious Church of God.

Kelli Johnson:

And so it's still operating.

David Harris:

It's still operation, yeah.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

Yeah, it sure it.

Kelli Johnson:

I don't think I've ever noticed that before.

David Harris:

It sure is. Okay, if you go left here and go out to 8th Avenue. This was a Five and Dime store. Sharpe's Five and Dime.

Kelli Johnson:

We're on the corner of 16th.

David Harris:

Yeah, and 10th Avenue. There were shops all along here. On the corner here of this ally was a pie shop.

Kelli Johnson:

I've heard about that.

David Harris:

Peter's Pie Shop. And of course there was a Bonded gas station here, which is now Po'boy. It was a Bonded gas station. There were houses along here. And there were rummage sale places. There was a bar here and they would let us in to eat. But you had to take the food out with you.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh.

David Harris:

You couldn't eat it inside. Along here was all storefronts. Storefronts here.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

There was a pharmacy on this corner. Barnett Childcare Center was where the [inaudible 00:02:27] is. And, roughly, the black neighborhood, this is one of the corners of the black neighborhood here at 8th Avenue and 16th Street, [inaudible 00:02:36] now.

Kelli Johnson:

Just let me know if you want me to pull over.

David Harris:

Any time you want to.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

On the building here that you see, this was the Carver Theater, the only black theater in Huntington and the one that we went to.

Kelli Johnson:

I've heard about it.

David Harris:

We would go up and down the allies searching for pop bottles to sell to get money to come to the theater.

Kelli Johnson:

That's great.

David Harris:

And of course when integration came about, the theater folded.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh.

David Harris:

As did most of the other things.

Kelli Johnson:

So that's the building that says W.B. Fox 1930?

David Harris:

Yeah, yeah.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay. Wow. What were some of the movies you saw? Do you remember any?

David Harris:

Movies like King Kong. A lot of Western movies. Always a double-hitter, double-feature Western movie.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, do we want to stop here?

David Harris:

This is the Scott Center. And it was a long time ... When I was growing up, there were probably at least a half a dozen places that we'd go as community centers to do recreation, and some learning. Because they would make you sit down and do your homework. And the reason I have such a feeling for A.D. Lewis now, it's the only place left now that's really recreational and developmental for kids. There were five or six of these. Along this corridor there were adult clubs. Everywhere.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

The Bisons was a little further down. And the Bisons was a dress-up club. You had to have a coat, tie before you go in there. And all my life I thought, "Boy, I can't wait till I get to be 18 years old and can go in the Bisons." They closed it.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh no.

David Harris:

So in the early '60s, along with everything else, they closed it. The corner of 17th Street and 8th Avenue, there was a black grocery store called Davis's. Four doors up there was another grocery store.

Kelli Johnson:

I'm going to go up that way.

David Harris:

Okay. Where you see the white building, this was a church. Ebenezer.

Kelli Johnson:

Ebenezer, yeah. Which has been there for a very long time.

David Harris:

Been there forever. I'm not even sure it's active right now.

Kelli Johnson:

It's not.

David Harris:

I didn't think it was.

Kelli Johnson:

It's not. No, my uncle, that's where my uncle went.

David Harris:

There was a grocery store here.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

And you'd go in this, where they have the panel there. That was the front of it. And you'd go in that store there. And it was called Davis's. There was another one where one of these little houses was, another little black grocery store. There were probably 10 or 11 black community grocery stores.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow. So this is the '50s and '60s, what we're talking about.

David Harris:

Yeah.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

Between 1950 and 1960, that's what this was. This was a Johnson's Carpeting.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh.

David Harris:

And the fellow that owned it was a black person. And he sold carpet to everybody in the black community. I'm sure other people too, but basically that's where we'd get out linoleum. We didn't have carpet back then. We had linoleum. That's where we'd get it from. And he'd come and install it for you. And he was also an insurance salesman.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

Yeah. There was a black grocery store on the other side. The Reeds lived here. And on the other side of this, there was another black grocery store.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow. Okay, I'll go here.

David Harris:

And so you could go anywhere to go grocery shopping. And 8th Avenue was filled with residences and businesses. There was a big grocery store here.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

In the '60s and '70s. Right over here on the right.

Kelli Johnson:

I'm going to turn or go straight?

David Harris:

No, you're going to turn.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

This is the second corner of the perimeter of the black neighborhood, 20th Street and 8th Avenue.

Kelli Johnson:

So it really was 8th Avenue to 12th?

David Harris:

Not even 12th. Over to [inaudible 00:06:36].

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay. Okay.

David Harris:

Yeah. It was four blocks. The streets, of course, the blocks are a lot shorter. But this would be the second one, 9th Avenue.

Kelli Johnson:

Keep going straight?

David Harris:

Yeah. Artison was the first one. This would be the second one. The third block would be 10th Avenue. I lived on 10th Avenue. And the last block, that housed most of us, was the next one. You're going to turn right here at [inaudible 00:07:01].

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

And probably 80 to 90% of black folks lived here. If you look over on 20th Street and going toward 21st Street, it was a skating rink.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh really?

David Harris:

Our recreation. That's where we would skate.

Kelli Johnson:

Roller skating or ice skating?

David Harris:

Roller skating.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

Yeah, and so we'd go skating twice a week. Tuesdays and Thursdays, you go skating. And that's what we did. If you weren't at the movies, you were at the skating rink.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

And during the months that you couldn't be outside.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

And most of this was all black. All the way from Dalton Avenue to 16th. Again, it's roughly a four block by four block. It wasn't a square because the streets were shorter than the avenues.

Kelli Johnson:

So did most people own their homes?

David Harris:

Yeah, most people owned their own homes, believe it or not. And our teacher, Miss Gordon, lived here. She was a math teacher at Douglass. And she lived in that house there.

Kelli Johnson:

[crosstalk 00:08:03]

David Harris:

Yeah. And she was one of the ones that I would come home and Miss Gordon would be sitting in my living room, "Oh goodness, what did I do now?"

Kelli Johnson:

I'm going to pull over and let that car go passed.

David Harris:

Okay. But it was a really close-knit community where you knew ... My friends lived in here and there were apartment ... Well, they're still there. I didn't know they were still there. That apartment building there.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow. I've never seen them before.

David Harris:

And we'd visit with each other at 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning. Nobody locked their doors so you'd just go in.

Kelli Johnson:

You'd just go in.

David Harris:

"Get up, get up. We're going to play ball today," or "We're going out," or "We're going to the creek to catch crawdads." And there were grocery stores on this corner.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

Miss Garrison, of course, lived on that other corner. This was a vacant lot for the Simms School.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

Now blacks didn't really go to Simms School until probably in the late '50s.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

And Simms was a predominantly white school.

Kelli Johnson:

That's interesting.

David Harris:

My kids went to Simms. And this was probably the fourth corner of the black neighborhood, the residences anyway. The gray building, that was the other laundry.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

And the odd thing is now if you go in this laundry, about half of the employees are black. When we were growing up, all white.

Kelli Johnson:

All white, wow.

David Harris:

All white. None of us could get jobs in those places. Didn't even aspire to get jobs.

Kelli Johnson:

Which way am I going?

David Harris:

You can go right.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

I'm going to just show you ... I don't know what ... I can just show you some of the things that have changed like the Barnett building, for instance. That used to be the Weed and Seed. That was the drugstore, Five and Ten store, and you'd go in there and buy clothes. You'd layaway toys for Christmas.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

It was a pretty big one. The fellow that owned it lived on 20th Street. And of course we all knew him.

Kelli Johnson:

So it was like the neighborhood department store.

David Harris:

Yeah, it sure was. And they had layaways ...

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

... and all kind of stuff that you see now days that people have. They had it back then, where you run a tab. If you go right and go down 10th, I'll just share with you 10th Avenue, some of the highlights of how I remember 10th Avenue.

Kelli Johnson:

I remember, when we were here at the restaurant, there was an ice house near here.

David Harris:

Right here where the barriers are here. There was an ice house there. It was right here where you see that little thing going up there. These were all residences. We had a teacher that lived in this little white house here. Mr. Slash's house is still standing. Not too much, but it was right here.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

That was where Mr. Slash lived. So obviously he lived close enough to the high school. 16th Street Baptist was one of the major churches. Probably had the largest black congregation in the city at that time before First Baptist took over down on 8th Street and 6th Avenue. And why they built that there, I'll never know. Why they built it that far away from the black community.

Kelli Johnson:

Well, some of the research that I've done ... This wasn't always our community.

David Harris:

Right.

Kelli Johnson:

So it started down there. Everybody lived down near where the railroad was so they could work.

David Harris:

This is Miss Garrison's house, of course. Miss Garrison was a long-time educator. And of course pretty well nationally renowned because she was on the NAACP national board and she was one of the people where I used to go up and down this street. I grew up on this street, on 10th Avenue. And I used to go up and down the street and I would stop and she was one of the people I'd stop at. Because right across the street, where the vacant lot is right there, was Powers Grocery. And I would stop and say, "You need anything from the store?" They would say, "Yeah, get me a loaf of bread." Now Miss Garrison lived

within, outside of her door, and was physically capable of going to the store. But she would give me a quarter for going to the store. And I did that maybe at 10 or 12 houses. And this grocery was close enough that anybody could of gone, but they would give me a quarter to go. I'd go for them and get bread and milk, whatever they needed, just right there at Powers Grocery. That's obviously gone now. But they were black businesses. There was a black business next to Powers that was owned by Mr. Coleman, who lived over there on the corner of Dalton Avenue and 17th Street. And he owned a little television repair shop next door.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

And everybody took their televisions to him. Everybody in the black community took their televisions to him. But this is my street.

Kelli Johnson:

This is your street.

David Harris:

This is where I grew up.

Kelli Johnson:

Is the house still standing?

David Harris:

No, it isn't.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh.

David Harris:

It's a vacant lot now. But Miss Justice lived in the house there. She was one of the leading ...

Kelli Johnson:

[crosstalk 00:13:48]

David Harris:

... civil rights people in Huntington.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay. Well, we're going to do a lot more about civil rights in Huntington.

David Harris:

Okay.

Kelli Johnson:

So we'll talk more about that.

David Harris:

This was a church. Didn't look nothing like this. But this is where our Boy Scouts met.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

It was just a little white, wooden church. Antioch. It was Antioch back then.

Kelli Johnson:

It was Antioch?

David Harris:

Yeah. And we would always meet here to have our Boy Scout meetings and run. And one of the recreational places too, because they would let you play. And we'd play tag, and whatever, in this building. That's a lot different now than it was then. The white building you see. I mean the yellow building.

Kelli Johnson:

Right here?

David Harris:

Yeah. A grocery store, Ferguson's grocery store. And we would go in there and get bread and milk and everything. And right here there was a mail drop. So I would always go down here and, of course, take people's mail as well. A teacher lived here. I grew up, if you see the yellow building over here, the vacant lot.

Kelli Johnson:

So right next to 1830?

David Harris:

Yeah, I grew up at 1828 10th Avenue, rear. I lived in the back. Our house was close enough in proximity to the house in the back there that you could go between the houses. And sometimes, when the door was locked, you could actually shimmy up to the second floor. I'd crawl in my bathroom window. From just crawling up without a ladder. It's a wonder we didn't kill ourselves.

Kelli Johnson:

Right.

David Harris:

Crawl up to the second floor and go into my house. In the front, my grandparents lived and grew up. There were 13 of them.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

And so I grew up with a lot of aunts and uncles who were more like brothers and sisters to me. They were older, most of them. I had an uncle who was younger than me. And my grandmother used to say, "Y'all go over to your aunt's house on 8th Avenue. You take Johnny. You make sure that nothing happens to him." And he was a couple of years younger than me so I would take his hand. We'd go up to 19th Street, walk over. And I'd have to make sure that everything was okay and that we didn't get hit. Because I was personally responsible for him. There was going to be some problems if anything happened.

Kelli Johnson:

Right.

David Harris:

But we knew everybody. And next door to us, the gray building, it wasn't there. There was a three-story apartment building.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

And at one time Hal Greer lived in those apartment buildings. So you could say for a period of time, before he went to Marshall, he was my nextdoor neighbor.

Kelli Johnson:

All right. all right. That's a claim.

David Harris:

And so he lived right there at 1830. I think it was 1830 or 1826. 1826 I guess. Yeah, because they went down towards 17th Street. The numbers went down. But this is where I grew up. One of the principals of Douglass High School, Mr. Hazelwood, lived in the brick house on the corner for a time.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh wow, that looks like it was probably very grand.

David Harris:

Yeah, it was. On this corner there was some white folks that lived, the Ishems. And Frank Ishem was the owner of the pharmacy that I worked at on 16th Street and 8th Avenue. And there's quite a story behind

Frank Ishem. Quite a story. His brother, Billy, and I were the best of friends. Now, there's a lady in town called Seton Taylor.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, that's sounds familiar.

David Harris:

She's an author, noted author. And she's doing some research now on Frank Ishem, his alleged involvement in a murder.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh my goodness.

David Harris:

And we did haven't very many murders in Huntington, as you well know. But during the time that I worked at the drug store on the corner of 16th Street and 8th Avenue, and I was a 15 year old kid, I didn't know. My job was to help out on the cash register and, via bicycle, deliver drugs around the area. Prescription drugs, not illegal drugs.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, I understand.

David Harris:

And so that was my job. I just had a big Peewee Herman basket on the front. I put the drugs in there and I'd deliver them all over, all over to people. Just deliver their prescriptions to them, get the money, take it back down there. And this one particular period of time, when Frank was running the drug store, he had a girlfriend. And they found the girlfriend in one of the clubs. Across from the J.W. Scott Center, there was a club there. And they found her one morning, and she had been bludgeoned with an ice pick.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh my gosh.

David Harris:

Now, in there was another fellow, black fellow named Stevenson, with the ice pick in his hand, drunk. Of course he ended up in prison for that. But during that period of time, I always noticed Frank and he had scratches all over his face. And Billy and I were best of friends, his younger brother. I don't know where Billy is now but we used to catch the train out here in the morning and go to Cincinnati. Newport, his aunt lived in Newport. And we'd go down there and go over to his aunt's, eat lunch, go to the ball game, and then take the train back that night.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

Take the train back to Huntington. And so he gave me a job. And I always wondered, "Why is he all scratched up?" So when they started investing it, and his girlfriend, I thought, "He used to tell me, 'Watch the door. If my wife, Celine, comes in, ring the buzzer because I'll be downstairs.'" And downstairs he wasn't always alone.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

So, anyway, Seton's ...

Kelli Johnson:

That'll make a good book.

David Harris:

Yeah, she's writing a book about it.

Kelli Johnson:

So now he was white but the girlfriend was black?

David Harris:

That's right. That's right.

Kelli Johnson:

And the ...

David Harris:

The fellow that they got was black. And he always said, "I don't know what they're doing now." One of my friends, Tom Baker, who just recently died, his dad was an attorney. He represented the Stevenson guy. And he always said to Tom, "He didn't do that. I guarantee he didn't do that, but they just wanted to have somebody and it was a lot easier to say the person with the ice pick. But he didn't do that. He was too drunk to do that."

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

But that's just one of the [crosstalk 00:20:24]

Kelli Johnson:

I'm looking forward to that book.

David Harris:

On this corner was a church. It wasn't a black church. It was a white church.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

But we used to play hide and seek up through here.

Kelli Johnson:

Which way?

David Harris:

You can go left. And we'll go back down 9th. There was a church on this corner. Church on 9th Avenue. And it was a black church. After I got out of the Army, I lived here. After I got married, I lived here. Where the lot is. When my mom passed away, she owned the house, and still owns it. We own it. The little house with the awning, with the yellow awning.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

The yellow with the red. We own that house. It's in disrepair and probably should be torn down. These were all residences along here.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, they're really starting to tear down some of the [crosstalk 00:21:36] that have fallen into disrepair.

David Harris:

Yeah, yeah. One of the hubs, not because it was a place to hang out with or anything, but the funeral home. Williams Funeral Home.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, yeah.

David Harris:

Art Williams owned it, ran it. His dad owned it and then bequeathed it to him when he died.

Kelli Johnson:

So now it's [crosstalk 00:21:54]

David Harris:

Now [crosstalk 00:21:54]. But it was an active place for us. This little church was here for most of the time. And it was always a little, small church. But this was one of the major black churches in Huntington.

Kelli Johnson:
16th Street Baptist.

David Harris:
16th Street Baptist. My mom lived here in her later years, before she moved up.

Kelli Johnson:
[inaudible 00:22:21]

David Harris:
Yeah. We're going straight.

Kelli Johnson:
Okay.

David Harris:
We're going to go out of ... This was the general outline of the black community that we've just been through. And now we're going to go out of what I would characterize as a black community and go to places that we frequented. And we frequented ... Obviously there were a lot of black Catholics so they went to the Catholic Church, which was unofficially outside of the area of the black community, but close enough that you could walk.

Kelli Johnson:
And they had a childcare or Kindergarten or something for a while.

David Harris:
St. Peter.

Kelli Johnson:
Yeah.

David Harris:
Yeah.

Kelli Johnson:
Or a grade school maybe.

David Harris:

Yeah. And they did, in Barnett, they had a childcare which was on this corner. [inaudible 00:23:10] Barnett lived here, where the U-Haul Center is, had a big house. And it was always a big, grandiose house. But this was the Catholic Church. And a lot of blacks went there. Most of this was just houses. We walked, about every day, from our community down here. If you look to the left, the Barnett Motel.

Kelli Johnson:

And what is that?

David Harris:

There was a fellow at Marshall not too long ago. And he talked about the green book.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah.

David Harris:

Okay. In Huntington, there were several places that we could stay. There were three houses, that were residences, that were open 24/7 to any black person coming through. And you could stay there. But you just had to call and say, "Hey, I'm on my way. I'll be there at 1:00 in the morning." These places. And I knew all the people. When I looked at that green book I said, "I know those folks." I knew them. That's amazing. It tells you how old I am. But two hotels you could stay at. One was the Barnett Motel. And it consisted of those little buildings there on the corner.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay. I always wondered about that.

David Harris:

Yeah, it was a motel.

Kelli Johnson:

It looks like a little motel.

David Harris:

Yeah, it was. The architect, Mr. Barnett, designed and put them up and ran it.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

And on the next side was the hotel, which is the big two, three-story building. It still stands. There's someone that lives in there now. And it was part of the hotel/motel chain.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

But that's one of the places that you stayed if you were coming through Huntington. Now, a lot of people in Huntington stayed at the little, one night, check-in, check-out motel too. They did. That's just a fact.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh yeah, they ...

David Harris:

Yeah. But that's one of the places.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

I'm going to show you the other place called the Ross House.

Kelli Johnson:

[inaudible 00:25:06]

David Harris:

And this is all through the '50s and '60s primarily. There are people in the ... Unfortunately, we haven't done a good job of capturing our history.

Kelli Johnson:

Well, that's what you and I are trying to do.

David Harris:

Right. But we walked this every day, that school was in session, to walk past Douglass to get down here at Huntington High. Just amazing. Why they thought pretty much a brand new school that they took care of, kept it clean, structurally it was sound, and they closed it instead of saying, "We're going to integrate this school and this school." They closed it.

Kelli Johnson:

So this was Nick's neighborhood?

David Harris:

This was primarily white.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

This was outside. And every once in a while there was a black person stayed here or there, but this was all white. There were restaurants. There was a supermarket over here, where the Dollar Store is, that we didn't go to very much. But it was there. Like a Tradewell or something. And this was the high school over on the left. And of course this is where I graduated from. The one thing that was strange about this high school is they never had a cafeteria.

Kelli Johnson:

That's strange.

David Harris:

So you'd always have to go out to eat. There were little places you could eat along here. Little sandwich shops that you could eat. There was a Wiggins barbecue place or a hamburger place over here that you could eat at, that we would go out at lunch and eat at. You can turn right here. I'm sorry.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh.

David Harris:

Get me to talking about old Huntington, I just ... Because I remember all those things.

Kelli Johnson:

I think that's great.

David Harris:

Yeah. And Davis's has been here for time memorial, I just don't know when it was founded.

Kelli Johnson:

It says established 1950.

David Harris:

Okay. But it was there. We, of course, could not go in there when it was first opened. Friends of mine own it now. But certainly it was a hub.

Kelli Johnson:

Turn here?

David Harris:

No, go straight?

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

The Ross House was two blocks down.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay. And that was the other hotel?

David Harris:

Hotel. It's no longer there. [inaudible 00:27:47] As a matter of fact it's a carwash.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh. Keep going straight?

David Harris:

Yeah. And you want to turn right. Because this is the edge of downtown.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, I've seen some cool maps. So when you look at the maps, the history ...

David Harris:

Of course they build First Baptist. And always as a kid I went, "Why did they build it way down there?" Because almost everybody, and back then I think it was 100% black. And they built it outside of our area and made it tough to get to. Now people walked. People rode. People took the bus. Our primary means of transportation, you rode the bus or you took the party cab. Mr. Lindsey's party cab. The only black cab company in Huntington.

Kelli Johnson:

I've heard about the party cab, yeah.

David Harris:

And most of us took the party cab.

Kelli Johnson:

How much was it to take it?

David Harris:

Maybe a quarter from my house to down here. Because if you were late for school, and of course we had to walk to school, there weren't any buses. If you missed it ... Why don't you turn right here. I want you to see the ...

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

And then we're going to go left at the corner. Because this was all the edge of downtown and just businesses that pretty much did not cater to us. That was a train station. My daddy worked at the railroad. And so we rode the train free.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

Yeah. My granddaddy worked at the railroad station so he'd also help us to ride the train free. Now inside, in the early '50s, and again, it wasn't because of any protest or anything, the colored, divided [inaudible 00:29:53] quarters went away.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh.

David Harris:

But basically there was a little place off to the right where we'd have to go through and sit and wait on the train, which we didn't think anything of it because that's the way it was. That was just the way it was. But we'd ride the train. I rode the train every summer to Georgia, getting a lecture before I left on how to behave when I got to Georgia, in order to survive. I didn't realize it at the time, but my mom was telling me, "In order for you to do well down there, when you see a white person walking on the sidewalk, get out of the way. Don't look them in the eye. There's no sense in that. I don't care if it's raining or not and you have to step in a puddle, step in the puddle. It'll save your life." But she didn't put it that way. "Just do. What I say, do." And so we'd do it.

Kelli Johnson:

It's interesting because people think of West Virginia as a Southern state but there was a huge difference between here and the deep South.

David Harris:

Oh yeah. And I never, ever knew about Marshall, for instance, until I started working there and started doing some background checking. I didn't know that Stewart Smith, who was the president, had went downtown to the newspaper, "Don't y'all dare put anything in the newspaper about us integrating. We're going to do it. We don't need a whole lot of fanfare." The building that you see here was a club.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow. [inaudible 00:31:18]

David Harris:

And it catered to gay folks.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

If you want to stop here. You know what this was?

Kelli Johnson:

Barnett Hospital?

David Harris:

Barnett Hospital. One of the Barnetts, again, the doctor who said, "We need a place so that we aren't embarrassed when people are coming through Huntington, who live here, they can have their babies." Now, I was born at the hospital for C&O.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

C&O had its own hospital that they owned, the railroad company. Of course Huntington was never a mining or a railroad town. But it had a railroad. And the railroad had its commissary, its hospital. We'd go do our shopping at the commissary, which was right up here on [inaudible 00:32:07]. As you come up under the [inaudible 00:32:09]. And if you go back through this little alleyway, the commissary sat back there.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

And so we would walk to the commissary, get groceries, and then walk back home to 18th Street and 10th Avenue. We'd walk with the groceries. And now there were eight of us so it wasn't any strain on anybody.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, yeah.

David Harris:

I was always near the youngest so I didn't have to carry a lot. But I'd have to help. But the Barnett Hospital was here. And they trained nurses, black nurses.

Kelli Johnson:

I've heard that, yeah.

David Harris:

A lot of them over the years, from 1925 or '26 until 1939 ...

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

... when they closed. And I don't really know why it closed, whether it closed because it was purchased by a business person or it was closed because the business went down or whether it was incorporated into the hospital. I don't know that. Karen Nance might.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, I definitely need to talk to her.

David Harris:

That's who owns the building.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, I do know that.

David Harris:

She owns the building and they're renovating it. I don't know what they're going to do with it, whether they'll have apartments or they're just doing it for the ... The building is on a historical site as I understand it. They've done so much work. And I've been in there.

Kelli Johnson:

It's amazing.

David Harris:

Yeah. But Barnett's still out there.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, that's cool.

David Harris:

Yeah.

Kelli Johnson:

I want to ask you about ... So you said back, what?, about a block or so there was a club. Now this was in the '50s and '60s?

David Harris:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kelli Johnson:

That catered to gay folk in Huntington?

David Harris:

Yeah. The '70s and '80s.

Kelli Johnson:

70's. Oh, okay. Okay.

David Harris:

'50s, '60s, 70's, '80s, '90s.

Kelli Johnson:

Wow.

David Harris:

Probably into 2000. And they used to have these contests. And there were some kids who went to Marshall who would dress up drag and go in and win contests. One guy named Rufus. And Rufus used to win all the time. He had trophies. He'd have trophies. And, as a matter of fact, he lived in Lexington and Lisa Allen would say, "Dominick needs to go to see his dad in Atlanta." And there was bus. And I'm talking about 10 years ago. There was a bus and it would come from Atlanta to Kentucky. And it used to stop in Lexington. So I'd take him to Lexington and we'd stay at Rufus' house waiting on the bus. And then I would come home. And Rufus would always welcome you. And there's nothing. I don't give a darn what your persuasion is. And Rufus would always say, "Look at my trophies. I used to win those when I'd dress up on drag night." Okay.

Kelli Johnson:

I just didn't ... It's surprising that there was [crosstalk 00:34:40]

David Harris:

It hadn't really been that long ago when it was actually closed. But it sure was.

Kelli Johnson:

That's crazy.

David Harris:

Now there were restaurants along here. There was at least two restaurants that I know. And I don't know exactly where they were. One was called the Rainbow Club, that my mom worked at.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

And she served meals out of the Rainbow Club. And it was either in this block or in this block up here.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

And I'm not sure which. I've never been able to find out. But this was all white.

Kelli Johnson:

You want me to turn up 16th?

David Harris:

Turn back, yeah.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay. So the commissary was just ...

David Harris:

Commissary was back ... See the blue building?

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

Back behind there.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

You'd go down that walk, that little narrow, and the commissary sat facing this way.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay. And where was the railroad hospital? C&O Hospital?

David Harris:

It's the parking lot at 6th Avenue and 18th Street.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, okay.

David Harris:

Marshall parking lot now, C&O Hospital where I was born. I think all of us were born there. I'm not real sure. But I think all eight of us were born in that hospital. So what I've tried to do today is just give you an outline of the black community and where we basically lived and where we did business and where we went to the school, where we went to store.

Kelli Johnson:

This is amazing.

David Harris:

Probably our major way of getting fruits and vegetables, we didn't go to the store, was a truck that came twice a week. And it would go up and down. And so we would buy off of that truck.

Kelli Johnson:

Was it black owned or white owned?

David Harris:

No, it was white owned. But he would cater to the black. I'm sure he went other places too. We didn't know that. But he'd come by twice a week to do that.

Kelli Johnson:

So he was a farmer [crosstalk 00:36:49] selling the stuff?

David Harris:

Yeah, yeah. And he'd sell produce.

Kelli Johnson:

[inaudible 00:36:52]

David Harris:

Yeah. I'm about finished for today.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

And what I'd like to do is just talk about how life really was back then and the things we did. Maybe even about [inaudible 00:37:15].

Kelli Johnson:

That sounds perfect.

David Harris:

Is that all right?

Kelli Johnson:

That's wonderful.

David Harris:

I hope I didn't bore you too much.

Kelli Johnson:

No, not at all. Keep on going.

David Harris:

You can go left.

Kelli Johnson:

I know I always do this wrong, but I'm doing it wrong anyway.

David Harris:

It's all right. 99% of the people that do that do just what you did. But this was all white.

Kelli Johnson:

Okay.

David Harris:

And it's now largely black. It just goes and shows you the infiltration on the black community and it's expanding. There were, until probably the '70s, [inaudible 00:37:56] that I know that lived on 12th Avenue.

Kelli Johnson:

Oh, wow.

David Harris:

And later on it became predominantly black. Yeah, I'd like to share with you things we did as kids. And we can sit down for more and do that.

Kelli Johnson:

Yeah, this will be perfect. Yeah, let's do that. [inaudible 00:38:26] right here and do that.

David Harris:

Yes, ma'am.

Kelli Johnson:

Right here. All right. Thank you. We're going to stop this recording and start another one. Thank you, Dave.

David Harris:

Okay.