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ORAL HISTORY

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Date Nov 4 1973

Graydon Hamilton
(Signature - Interviewee)

Stedman G. Cook
Address

Date Nov 4 1973

Russell W. Deal Jr.
(Signature - Witness)



An Interview With
Mr. Graydon Hamilton
by
Russell W. Deal, Jr.
November 4, 1973

Voices:

RD: Russell W. Deal, Jr.
GH: Graydon Hamilton

- RD: I'm going to interview Mr. Graydon Hamilton from Blackberry City, West Virginia. We'll be talking especially about his life as a small businessman. Here's Mr. Hamilton, and he will go ahead and tell some of his experiences.
- GH: My father came to this community about 1913 and established a business here, a general merchandise business in about 1916 or 17, and we continued on in this business until just a few years back. It was one of the first businesses set up in this community, and in those days, our merchandise we received came to the depot in Matewan, West Virginia, which was about a mile away, and we hauled it from there with a team of mules, brought it to the store, put it on the shelves, and then we sold it. We made deliveries in those days. It was rough country then. The roads were not much--just what they called sled roads or wagon roads.
- RD: What would you do when you went to Matewan to pick up your supplies?
- GH: We would, on the days the local came in and brought the goods, the groceries three days a week, we would meet it there, and we would line up the merchants all over the country with their teams and wait their turn to get up to load their merchandise. We got there about 9 o'clock in the morning and stayed sometime two or three hours. It came in on train, the N and W. Then we would bring the supplies to our business establishment.
- RD: How old were you at that time?
- GH: Well, I began helping when I was about 12 years old, I guess, when I first began to help. They was three or four in my family helped one time or another, brothers and a sister.
- RD: What was the store like--how big?
- GH: Oh, it was something like a 25 by 25 foot square.
- RD: How many customers did you serve?
- GH: Well, I just don't remember but just say right off hand maybe 40 or 50. They would come to the store to get supplies.
- RD: Could you describe what the store was like inside?

GH: Well, just a general early country store at that time. We had a scales. Shelving was built on the wall and the counter was built in a L shape. And, of course, the scales set on the counter. And, the items in general on the shelves. I remember the instances of the old tobacco cutter. Tobacco came in a case of 'bout five or six pounds. It was in plugs cut by the tobacco cutter. We have the tobacco cutter yet. And, in those days, beans came in hundred pound bags. We weighed them up--Carbide in hundred pound can. We weighed it up whatever you wanted. And, well, they's about the only two bulk things I remember right now.

RD: What would you do with your meat or produce? Did you have refrigeration?

GH: We didn't have refrigeration in them days. We didn't have any meat but salt bacon, bologna, and hung it on the wall. It kept very well.

RD: How would heat up the store during the winter?

GH: With an old Burnside stove similar to a pot belly. People would come in and sit around and spit all over the stove. They talked about life in them days, what ever it was before the, farming or winter time, or something else. Some about their work.

RD: Do you remember anything about what they would say about their life around that time?

GH: Well, no, I don't remember too much about that. 'Course people lived very well in them days up until the depression days. People at that time, they did a lot of farming, too. They had livestock, chickens, and so forth. We did a lot of gardening.

RD: Did your family just own that one plot of land or did they own a lot of land around this area?

GH: Oh, we had several plots, but they were small plots but enough to do a lot of gardening.

RD: Was your dad one of the original people in Blackberry City?

- GH: Yes, he was one of the first settlers in this community. He bought land and accumulated from time to time. He had about seven or eight plots and buildings, and he was considered a good liver in those days.
- RD: The crops you raised on your garden, did you sell those in the store?
- GH: Well, some, yeah, some, not too much. Our chief crops were just corn, and we had stock we put it up, too. Course just regular gardening, oh, like tomatoes, potatoes, and so on, we consumed during the season.
- RD: Did you sell canned food? Did you preserve your own food so you could sell them in the store?
- GH: No, just only what we bought or brought in for that purpose.
- RD: Mr. Hamilton, I want to ask you a little about your family. Altogether, how many were there?
- GH: They were 11 children and two parents, so there were 13 of you. I wasn't the oldest. I was down the line, I don't know, fifth, sixth, seventh.
- RD: And, tell us a little about your father and mother.
- GH: Well, they came to this country out of Kentucky in about 1903. The, they came from down here around Matewan from across the river in Kentucky there to Blackberry City in 1913. My mother's maiden name was Sparkmen, Nancy Sparkmen, and my father was William Hamilton--WM. And, they were 11 of us children, and we all helped around with the family life and the farm life and with the business from time to time. Course he didn't us all, but we did help and so in 1930 during the depression days, I went to the barber college in 1930 and began the general practice of barbering in November, 1930. I went to Cincinnati--Old Reliable Cincinnati Barber College. I set up here in Blackberry City in the building we were selling groceries in, and I carried on the barber profession ever since. That was during the depression days, though.
- RD: How come you got into barbering?

GH: Well, it was kindly a do-it-yourself job to start with. My father bought a chair in 'bout 1920 or 22, and one of my older brothers did the home work, haircutting, and so on, for the family, and he went away to the service, so it fell on me. I picked it up about 1925 or 26 and in 1930, I went to barber college and been at it ever since. I had the barber shop and the grocery combination combined, and we operated for years and still am operating the shop there with the post office. I discontinued the grocery business four or five years back.

RD: How did you take over this business?

GH: I took over the store business about 1936. My father passed away, and I'd been helping with it all these years, so I was just there. It was easy for me to take over--just took over and carried on until four or five years ago. I was 26 when I took it over.

RD: Were you married or single when you took it over?

GH: I was single.

RD: Are you married now?

GH: Yes, very much so. I've been married 35 years now. I married Frances Oakes. I dated her about 11 months before I married her. She was probably 16 when we met. I met her through a niece of mine. We started courtin', and I'd go over to her house about everyday to start with.

RD: What did you do on a date?

GH: Oh, just regular dating, you know--sit around and talk. We got to going to the movies later on and taking short drives. I had an old pick-up truck then.

RD: Whenever you started going over to her house, did her dad and mom just let you sit in the living room, and they went off someplace?

GH: Well, sometimes, maybe, but lot of time, we all joined together. I stayed 'till midnight or 2 o'clock sometimes. I came over about 8:00 after a days work. Sometimes, we went to church,

but we never went dancing. We did most of our courtin' in Matewan, but there wasn't much to do in those days. We dated for a year and got married.

RD: How come you went ahead and got married?

GH: Well, I just don't know other than we just went ahead and got married. We went to a preacher's house down in Kentucky. We didn't take a honeymoon. We've just been on one for 25 years.

RD: Did you have a house by then?

GH: Well, not exactly but roughly we did. We sit up in two room in about a month or so. We owned that building. We lived there from '37 to '40. It was located down by our store building on Route 49, Blackberry City. We then built this home and moved here. I helped build on the building, but we hired it built. We had four rooms originally--living room, bedroom, dinner room, and kitchen. We didn't have a bathroom at that time.

RD: Where did you go?

GH: John house--outside about 25 feet away.

RD: Was that pretty comfortable?

GH: All right in them days--was all we had.

RD: How did you take a bath?

GH: Used a tub. We didn't have running water to begin with, but we did later on. We had a well at the beginning, dug the well, and drawed the water.

RD: How long was it before you got the bathroom?

GH: Oh, I don't know; It wasn't too long.

RD: Was the house adequate for the two of you?

GH: Yes, we had one child at that time and have had three since. We had a daughter 22, daughter 10, a son 29, and the oldest son is 34. After the second son, we were making an addition

when he was born--two more rooms. So, now, we have six rooms and a bath and hall. We added running water a couple of years after that, about 1940.

RD: Have electricity all the time?

GH: Oh, yes.

RD: Mr. Hamilton, what kind of job are you doing now?

GH: Well, I'm now postmaster of Blackberry City and the barber there, and I also drive a school bus.

RD: How did you work that into selling at the store?

GH: Well, in 1949 we already had the store and barber shop, and we established the Post Office there. With the aid of my wife, we've worked it ever since. Sometimes, I'm there alone, though. If I've got a customer in the chair and someone comes to the office, I gotta leave my chair and wait on the one in the Post Office which don't take most of the time, just a minute or two. So, they're all three businesses in the same building. The building isn't large. We just cut a section out in the corner wherever we wanted to put something else in.

RD: How did you get into bus driving?

GH: They just needed a bus driver, and they hired me. I just went to work as a bus driver. So, I had four jobs at the time. I got up at five in the morning, leave home about 6:30 on the bus run and get back about 8:30 in the morning. Then, I'd go to the business. Then, about 2:30, my wife comes down and relieves me and I go on the bus run and get back about 4:30 in the evening. She takes care of the place while I'm gone--all except the haircutting, and she has them to come back.

RD: So, she doesn't give haircuts. She only has two hats.

GH: Yes, been thinking about getting her trained as a barber, though. I was gone yesterday for half a day, and I lost about 10 haircuts. If I'd had her trained, I wouldn't lost them.

RD: When you first started your barber shop, what did you charge for a haircut?

GH: Twenty-five cents.

RD: What else did you give with a haircut?

GH: Oh, general--a shave was a quarter, tonic was a quarter, facial was a quarter, singe was a quarter--everything was a quarter in the depression days if you got 'em.

RD: When you first started the Post Office what was the price of stamps?

GH: First class stamps were four cents. Airmail was six cents.

RD: Was the pot-belly stove the only means of heat for the whole store?

GH: Yes, it was coal fired. We hauled our coal in from the mines. We used to go pick it up ourselves. Then we'd hire it done sometimes. Our house is heated with fuel oil now. But, we heated it with coal up until last year.

RD: What was the price of coal when you first started putting it in?

GH: \$2.55 a ton. I paid \$20 a ton for it last year. It's gone up about 17 dollars and a half worth! In the early days, we could and have picked up coal for the house, but as time went along, they tightened up on that, you know, so we had to buy it and hire it hauled in the last several years. They would dump it in your coal house or wherever you kept it. I built a coal house about 12 by 14 foot. It will hold 20 ton at one time. We usually bought about a two ton load.

RD: How come you switched over to oil? Is it cheaper?

GH: Well, it was I believe at the beginning of last year but during this oil crisis--now it's gone--I paid 25 cents a gallon for it about a month ago and when I got it, it was 19½ cents. I'm afraid it will keep going up, but I hope not.

RD: Is there any reason why your wife wanted oil instead of coal?

GH: Well, she had to carry in the coal all the time, and now she won't have to carry in no more coal.

RD: You mean you kept her carrying in coal?

GH: Oh, yes, yes, that's what a good woman's for. She'd carry it from the coal house every evening. No, we'd carry it down to the furnace, you know, and we'd fire the furnace maybe two or three times a day--one or two times at night. Coal kept the house pretty warm at first. The temperature was never stable with the coal. Sometimes it would be 80 sometimes 75 or even 70. After you first threw in a bucket of coal, it got hot. Then, it would cool off, you know, during the night, maybe get down to 70 or below 70.

RD: Want to ask you a little about the prices of food. What are some prices when you first were around the grocery store?

GH: Well, in general--take for instance, take canned food, canned items, you take a can of corn the same size that we've got today. They were 10 cents a can or three cans for a quarter, or pork 'n beans were the same thing. Any 15 cent item, canned good, they were 15 cents or two cans for a quarter; 10 cent items were three cans for a quarter. For instance, now, you take canned vienna we have today or potted ham, vienna was 10 cents a can or three cans for a quarter. Potted ham or potted meat, it was 5 cents a can or six cans for a quarter. Crackers at that day and time--we had what was called a fourth of a pound box. They were a nickel a box--six of them for a quarter. And, well, just so on down the line. We didn't carry milk in them days. Bread was 10 cents a loaf and eggs . . . I just don't remember about eggs. We didn't handle many of them in those days. I just forget the price of eggs. In them days, everybody had their own chickens, had a calf, had a hog, and many had a mule or a horse.

RD: Want to ask you something about Thanksgiving. What would you usually do around Thanksgiving? Would the family come in or what kind of time would you have?

GH: Yeah, some would--wasn't nothing more than another day. Most of us, we usually had a hog to kill along that line. We'd have fresh meat maybe pumpkin pie. We have had turkey. My family didn't do the traditional things too much. It was just another day in general to me--full of work.

RD: What was Christmas like?

- GH: Have a little extra for Christmas. In them days my parents didn't go in for too much. They would buy something extra--like a bushel of apples or chicken for dinner, but they didn't go in for buying the kids toys and things like that. We didn't get none of that. We didn't have a Christmas tree.
- RD: Did you have any decorations or talk about Santa Claus?
- GH: On--just the general run. It would be talked about, you know. Christmas time, Santa's coming, no decorations, no other holidays were special--we didn't celebrate. Most of the people in the area didn't go to too much trouble about it in them days.
- RD: At the store, did you have hammers, nails?
- GH: We sold nails and mule shoes, but no other hardware. We sold mostly staple groceries. There was another general store here at that time.
- RD: Could you compete?
- GH: Yeah, you might say.
- RD: What kinds of stores are in Blackberry City now?
- GH: They's, oh, one general store and one tavern--Post Office and barber shop, which I operate. I reckon that's just about all there is. Yes, there is one battery shop here, too. So there are about five or six businesses.
- RD: How many families live in this area now?
- GH: Well, they's about 100 families in Blackberry City, now, about 300 people. When I first came, there were four or five houses.
- RD: Your father came from Kentucky. What was his reason for moving?
- GH: It's just across the river from Kentucky. He just--well wanted to get out a little more and property here was available. Found some property he liked and bought it and moved over.
- RD: Mr. Hamilton, you didn't work all day when you were a boy. Did you go to school?

GH: Yes, I'm a high school graduate. Most other boys fell by the way side. I went to Magnolia High at Matewan, West Virginia. It's enlarged now. It's a big school. The first school I remember there was a four room building, but I don't think it had originated to a high school then. The old original high school building there was eight rooms plus a small gym and a small basement. There might have been ten rooms in that one original high school building. I don't remember how many teachers they were in that high school in them days, but we went from room to room for classes. I walked to high school about a mile or mile and a quarter to and from school. School started at 8:30 in those days. We got out at 2:30 at first and later it was 4:00. I got up about 7:00 and left the house about 8 o'clock.

RD: Did you have any chores to do in the morning before you went to school?

GH: Yes, bringing in the coal, slopping the hogs, feeding the chickens, feeding the cows. We had two cows and eight, ten head of young cows--a mule.

RD: Is there any difference between schools now as far as education goes?

GH: Well, I don't guess there is any difference in the education. They teach many different subjects and the methods have changed, I guess, but it's the same old thing, learning is learning. Kids learn much more nowadays, much faster, much more educated, but I got a good education.

RD: What did you do after school?

GH: Chores--slopping hogs, feeding chickens.

RD: What kind of recreation did you do?

GH: Oh, well, in the summer time, would go swimming, did a little fishing, ball playing. Winter time it was sled riding and when the Tug Fork River froze over, we would skate on the ice.

RD: Did you have a swimming pool?

GH: No, we didn't have a swimming pool. We swam in the river.

It was a lot cleaner then than it is now. They still go swimming in the river. Still fish in the river. Did a little hunting, like squirrel and rabbit chiefly. Lot of hunting around this area. Like possum, coon, and fox hunting. We had our own dogs. I hunted mostly with a 12 guage shot gun.

RD: Did you hunt just for sport or as a means of getting meat?

GH: Mostly just for sport.

RD: What kind of ball playing did you do?

GH: Mostly baseball. My favorite position was field. Was a good hitter. We didn't have any organized teams, and didn't do much playing in high school. Just played in the afternoons or on Sundays.

RD: Were you involved in any activities at school?

GH: No, we didn't have anything in them days to begin with. It was basketball and later football. That's about all they had for years.

RD: When you first started dating, how old were you?

GH: I don't know how old I was, started before I was 13. We just would hand hold.

RD: What were the churches like here?

GH: We had some churches here. None here in the beginning but later there were. Was two here, now there is only one, a Baptist church. I attend church some. Most of the youngsters used it as a place to go. My family didn't go too much. Just on regular nights chiefly on weekends. They might have had church on Wednesday, too. Had revival sometimes.

RD: What experience over your lifetime stands out as the greatest? Good or bad.

GH: I just don't recall anything. No bad experiences, really. Good ones would be my general life, what I've done. I feel like I've had a good life. We have lived fairly well all

these years. Been fortunate along many lines. No tragedy has really struck us. So, I got a lot to be thankful for.