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## **U.20. The Long Civil Rights Movement: African American Credit Unions**

Interview U-1100

Amaza Byrd

25 September 2012

Abstract – p. 2

Field Notes – p. 3

Transcript – p. 5

## ABSTRACT – AMAZA MITCHELL BYRD

Interviewee: Ms. Amaza Mitchell Byrd

Interviewer: Rob Shapard

Interview date: Sept. 25, 2012

Location: Offices of Generations Community Credit Union, 302 West Granville St., Windsor, N.C.

Length: 81 minutes

This interview was a “pilot interview” conducted by the SOHP for a possible project on the history of minority-founded credit unions in North Carolina. The interview centered on Ms. Byrd’s life in Bertie County in eastern North Carolina, where she was born in 1932, and her experience working for the St. Luke Credit Union. She talked about her family, which includes four children and four grandchildren, and also recalled graduating from W.S. Etheridge High School in Bertie, before working as a secretary, farm worker, domestic worker, and agent for N.C. Mutual Insurance over the years. Ms. Byrd started part-time work for St. Luke in 1966, and she described her experiences as a teller, clerk, bookkeeper and manager at St. Luke during her twenty-two years there. Ms. Byrd discussed her strong belief in the value that St. Luke brought to the community, in particular as a source of loans for black citizens ranging from farmers to church leaders, who often struggled to get fair and equal treatment from traditional banks. She also recalled a rural/small-town society in the past in which a “person’s word was their bond,” an ethic which she feels is missing in current society, and her belief that the church has been a critical source of strength and togetherness for black residents in Bertie County and elsewhere for many years. Ms. Byrd told the story of her son, Thessie Mitchell, who was working for the Duke University police department when he was struck by a car and paralyzed. She said that, in spite of such hardships, she feels strongly that she and her family have been very blessed.

## FIELD NOTES – AMAZA MITCHELL BYRD

Interviewee: Ms. Amaza Mitchell Byrd

Interviewer: Rob Shapard

Interview date: Sept. 25, 2012

Location: Offices of Generations Community Credit Union, 302 West Granville St., Windsor, N.C.

Length: 81 minutes

THE INTERVIEWEE. Ms. Byrd is a native of Bertie County, N.C., and former employee of the St. Luke Credit Union, established in Bertie in 1944. St. Luke was merged into the Generations Community Credit Union in 2002.

THE INTERVIEWER. Robert P. Shapard is a doctoral student in U.S. history at UNC Chapel Hill and a field scholar for the Southern Oral History Program. He interviewed Ms. Byrd as a “pilot interview” for a possible SOHP project on the history of minority credit unions in North Carolina.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in a back office at the Generations Community Credit Union branch in Windsor, N.C. The building housed the St. Luke Credit Union before St. Luke was merged with Generations. The office was a quiet setting, and Ms. Byrd brought a number of documents relating to the history of St. Luke, including past articles and a calendar that St. Luke published in 2001 describing a number of project for which it had loaned money. Ms. Byrd described working for St. Luke for about twenty-two years, from the mid-1960s to the 80s, in a number of roles ranging from clerk to manager. Born in Bertie County in 1932, she graduated from high school there and worked a number of jobs, including secretarial and domestic work and selling insurance for N.C. Mutual. Ms. Byrd has four children and four grandchildren and was married to Edward E. Byrd, who passed away in 2009. She recalled that St. Luke had helped a wide range of people, from farmers to church leaders, in providing loans for cars, homes, small businesses, and church construction, in an era when black citizens often had a difficult time securing loans from traditional banks. Especially in smaller communities like Windsor and Bertie County, blacks often were out of luck when it came to bank loans, unless they had the backing of a prominent white citizen, Byrd stated. Asked if she felt that St. Luke had played a significant role for its members, who later included some white residents, Ms. Byrd said emphatically, “Yes, yes, yes, yes. I know. I don’t *feel* it. I *know* that.” Toward the end of the interview, she mentioned that her son, Thessie Mitchell, a former police detective at Duke University, had been paralyzed several years earlier when struck by a car. She mentioned that

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Mr. Mitchell had published a book about his life, and that she continues to feel she and her family have been blessed.

## **Transcript – AMAZA MITCHELL BYRD**

Interviewee: Amaza Byrd

Interviewer: Rob Shapard

Interview date: September 25, 2012

Location: Windsor, North Carolina

Length: 1:21:29.2

ROB SHAPARD: Okay, I think we're rolling, and let me just say at the start, I'm Rob Shapard from UNC-Chapel Hill from the Southern Oral History Program. That's the official name of the oral history office. Today is September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012, hard to believe. And I am very pleased to be here today with Miss Amaza Byrd, B-Y-R-D. Amaza is A-M-A-Z-A, and we're at the offices of what used to be the Saint Luke Credit Union in Windsor, North Carolina, Bertie County. It now has transitioned to be called the Generations, I think Generations Community Credit Union. I'll double check that name for sure. And we're going to talk a little bit about some of Ms. Byrd's experiences with Saint Luke Credit Union over the years. And this is part of some of the initial interviews to learn more about credit unions in North Carolina, some of that history, community credit unions in rural areas as well as some of the larger towns as well. Let me just say that Ms. Byrd has brought several documents that are, that we'll talk about during the interview as well, and I'm going to hopefully make copies to make that part of the record as well. But we have a lot of good material here on some of the early years of the credit union and its establishment in 1944 and some of the people who were involved over the years in founding and running the credit union. So let me ask you, let's get some of this on the record, so to speak, that we were talking about. Tell me again, tell me your birth date.

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AMAZA BYRD: September the 16<sup>th</sup>, 1932.

RS: And you were born right here in Windsor.

AB: Windsor, North Carolina, Bertie County.

RS: And I believe you said your husband has passed.

AB: Yes.

RS: Tell me, tell me, what is his name?

AB: Edward Earl Byrd.

RS: Okay. When did he pass? What year did he pass?

AB: Let me think. I'll have to come back to that.

RS: I should've told you I was going to ask you that.

AB: Yeah. 20—, 2009.

RS: 2009.

AB: Um hmm. A sad time.

RS: Yes, ma'am.

AB: 2009.

RS: Do you remember what year he was born? Do you remember his birth year?

AB: [19]32, [19]30, [19]32 I believe, [19]33. [19]33.

RS: Okay. And then tell me a little bit about your children. Who are they and do you remember what their birth years? We can come back to things as well if we need to.

AB: I can give you their names.

RS: Okay. Yes, let's do that.

AB: Angela M. Watson.

RS: Angela, okay. M. Watson, okay.

AB: Arthur L. Mitchell.

RS: All righty.

AB: Thessie L. Mitchell.

RS: B-E-S-S—

AB: Uh uh. T-H-E-S-S-I-E.

RS: Oh, good. T-H-E-S-S-I-E L. Mitchell. Okay.

AB: And Paula Smallwood.

RS: Will you spell her first—

AB: P-A-U-L-A.

RS: Okay. All righty. And what about your school? Where did you—

AB: Right here in Windsor. Bertie County.

RS: Okay. How far were you able to go?

AB: I graduated.

RS: Okay. What was your—

AB: Went through the twelfth grade, graduated.

RS: Okay.

AB: Then I took courses at home for a couple of years.

RS: Okay.

AB: And that's my life. I've worked as an insurance agent.

RS: Okay.

AB: Did farm work, quite a bit because that's what [there] was to do. Domestic work.

And I came to Saint Luke Credit Union.

RS: And tell me, and we'll get into this a little more if you're okay with it. Tell me again what jobs did you do with Saint Luke Credit Union.

AB: Some of it all.

RS: Okay, one of those places where you do a little bit of everything?

AB: Yeah, some of it all. Under the leadership at that time of James T. Mountain and James L. Gilliam.

RS: Gilliam

AB: James L. Gilliam. James T. Mountain was the—

RS: And Gilliam would be what, G-I—

AB: G-I-L-L-I-A-M. James Lee Gilliam. He was an undertaker, but he found time to work here.

RS: Okay. I think, is it correct that you were a teller at Saint Luke, and as well as then you became a manager? Is that right?

AB: Um hmm. Bookkeeper.

RS: Okay.

AB: Teller, bookkeeper, manager.

RS: Okay. What was, when you graduated from high school here, what was the name of the high school?

AB: W.S. Etheridge.

RS: And that was still segregated schools. Is that right?

AB: Yes.

RS: Okay. All righty. What do you think a good place to dive into this would be? We could talk about—

AB: About my life?

RS: Yes, ma'am. [Byrd laughs] We could talk about your, when you first started working here or what seems to be, what's on your mind right now? Where's a good place to delve into it?

AB: Well, before I came to work here, I was helping an insurance agent in the back of this, well, not this building but in the back of [a different] building. And I was working in there two days, and I worked as a secretary at Mary Hill School three days a week. So you had to, in my situation you had to work where you could work.

RS: When you say, "in my situation," tell me what you mean.

AB: Well, I should've said my individual situation, most of us, most of us. Of course, there was always farming. I worked on the farm some too. But after the door was opened to work in this type of setting so, and I even did some house cleaning because that was the main thing black folk were able to do at that time. Do what's called now, sophisticated name for it is domestic, but it was, but it was cleaning house. So I did that and I graduated from that.

RS: This would've been, I guess in the 1950s, right, if you were born in [19]32?

AB: Right.

RS: Was that always for white folks or, in terms of domestic work or--?

AB: Yes, yes. Because us couldn't hire, we [black folks] weren't able to do—we may get one once in a wonder, but it was in a while.

RS: Okay. And what kind of, what kind of farm work did you do on those times?

AB: Oh, chopped.

RS: Cotton or—

AB: Well, I couldn't pick enough cotton. That just wasn't my thing. I would stay out there all day, everybody would have hundreds, and I couldn't even get a—. So, but to survive, but I did, I didn't do too much farm work. And that's my story.

RS: Then about what time, do you remember around about what year did you come to Saint Luke to start work?

AB: Oh, I wrote that down somewhere. Do-do-do-do-do-do, where did I write that? [Looking at her documents] And that was only a couple of days a week though at the time. Let me see then I came up, well I had it somewhere. Wrote it down. I don't know where I put it. Boy, right here.

RS: Oh, there you are, okay. Great.

AB: Full-time clerk.

RS: We're looking at—

AB: Is that it now? Let me see. Because that's full-time.

RS: We're looking at some of the documents you have here.

AB: Twenty-two years in 19—what is this?

RS: That looks like, oh there you go, 2001.

AB: Is that right now?

RS: So that's a calendar from 2001.

AB: I had it. I had it. That's what calendar this—. Where's my sheet of paper? Well, it was in this—

RS: Let's see.

AB: I'll think now; let me see.

RS: Okay.

AB: Let me see. With the increase of business need for a full-time clerk, 1966 right there. I knew I had marked it.

RS: Okay. Oh right. Okay. There you are.

AB: That leads up to—

RS: We're looking at the, this is a short history of Saint Luke Credit Union that is part of the 2001 calendar that the credit union issued, and it states that, it says, "With the increase of business the need for a full-time person was evident. And in 1966 Mrs. Amaza Mitchell Byrd became the first full-time clerk of Saint Luke Credit Union." And tell me about that. What was that like? What do you, do you remember being excited of that opportunity or how were—.

AB: Nervous.

RS: Nervous, okay.

AB: Because I wasn't sure I could accomplish the job, but under the leadership of that time Mr. Mountain and Mr. Gilliam and of course I was working in the back of the credit union. Let's say this would be the front and it's an office in the back. Insurance company was in the back. I was working there, a couple of hours a day. And that moved up to a day a week and Mr. Mountain said looked like I could be the person who worked for Saint Luke so they agreed that I could start with them for two days a week.

RS: What was the name of the insurance company?

AB: North Carolina Mutual.

RS: Okay. And was that, was that African-American owned as well?

AB: Um hmm.

RS: Okay. And you may have already told me this but was, who owned the agency?

Was that Mr. Mountain or—

AB: No, no, no.

RS: Not him.

AB: It wasn't associated with Saint Luke Credit Union at all.

RS: Okay.

AB: All I know is North Carolina Mutual.

RS: Okay. And when you started for Saint Luke—

AB: And another lady was working for North Carolina Mutual, Barbara Bond.

RS: Barbara Bond. Okay.

AB: So that wasn't what you call full-time either. But we worked and we managed.

RS: What, tell me a little bit more. What kinds of things were you doing?

AB: Keeping whatever was collected in the field, and it was brought to the office, transferred from the receipts to the ledger.

RS: Okay. What do you mean, you mean like payments collected in the field?

AB: Yes. Right. We have a payment, they would have a sheet the same as Saint Luke would have after I started working with them, and you write the amount and who it was from and for.

RS: Okay. One of the things I'd like to learn more about is what Saint Luke Credit Union meant to the people in the community. What was the value that it provided that was important to people?

AB: They could borrow money, and it wasn't as difficult to borrow money from Saint Luke as it was to borrow from the bank. Banks in those days required quite a bit, and I'm sure you heard in the history of us borrowing money from banks. So you know just about as much

about that as I would know. That's, that is really the reason Saint Luke decided to come on board—so they could make loans to us because it was difficult to borrow money from banks.

RS: And you're talking—when you say “us” you mean black folks?

AB: Right. Unless you worked on the farm. Now if you worked on Mr. White's farm, he could be responsible for you, but you couldn't go in and get a loan on your own because you didn't have the right color, and I'm sure you've heard that before.

RS: Oh yes, yes ma'am.

AB: That's history.

RS: Yes, ma'am.

AB: So that is the reason Saint Luke decided to pool together and help people to get homes, automobiles, send their children to school. That's what sitting around this stove was all about, sitting around the stove.

RS: And when you say sitting around the stove, let's talk about that. This is another document that Ms. Byrd brought in. This is part of a newsletter that describes some of the origin history of the credit union and it says that Saint Luke Credit Union grew out of a group of men who met once a month in the Saint Luke Elementary School. James T. Mountain, spelled like the geographical element of a mountain, he was a principal. It was J.T. Mountain and William Martin Cooper—

AB: Which is this ninety-two year old. [pointing to article]

RS: Right, we also have a newspaper article about Mr. Cooper here. Mr. Mountain and Mr. Cooper suggested the idea of pooling resources, which led to the idea of the credit union. Mr. William Cooper was the first secretary-treasurer. Mr. James T. Mountain was an adviser to the credit union. There were about twelve men during this beginning time in 1944. The total

asset was \$500. That's—they started out, but in 1944 that would've been a decent little chunk of money.

AB: Yes, yes.

RS: Now this write-up was provided by Mrs. W.A. Mountain. She was J.T. Mountain's wife.

AB: This is what it was called at that time.

RS: Oh great. Okay. So this is from, this write-up is from the Saint Luke Credit Union's newsletter. And again I will make copies of this to include with the record.

AB: And that's how it came about.

RS: I'm interested in some of those experiences in terms of seeking loans and do you think that, let's say if you were a white person under, living in certain circumstances. Maybe you were, you didn't own any property. You came in for that loan at the bank and let's say if you were black person, same circumstances, not a property owner, this is kind of a dumb question, but I want to explore it a little bit. You're saying that, are you saying that it came down to color?

AB: Yes.

RS: And it came down to race. It was a question of—

AB: How old are you?

RS: I'm, I was born in 1967.

AB: See, you don't have the full picture. Go on.

RS: What I'm wondering is you think the white person, a white person in the same circumstances might be able to get that loan whereas—

AB: From the bank.

RS: Right, from the bank. Whereas the black person, because of—

AB: [They would be told] Get your hat—

RS: The racism of the time—

AB: Get your hat and go.

RS: Yeah, right.

AB: The answer is no unless your, what would we be called, tenants—

RS: The landlord.

AB: Unless the landlord spoke. If the landlord said yes, then you could get it, which made you not able to, well, it was helping, but it was helping you more to be dependent on the landlord. You still were not dependent on yourself, and these men that you just read about decided that they would try to do something because the story goes, one of them wanted to buy a Model-T. I don't guess you're old enough to know what that looks like and they—

RS: I saw Mr. Bazemore, he has an old 1930 car. I don't know if it's a Model-T, but it's pretty old.

AB: Well, I've heard of them. So they said let us pool our moneys together and see if we can help each other. That is the beginning and the purpose of Saint Luke Credit Union, trying to help each other. And all, then the rest of this came about, and he was a teacher of it, and he lived to be ninety-two years old.

RS: Mr. Cooper.

AB: William Martin Cooper—

RS: Do you know—

AB: A very respectful man. People had a lot of confidence. You know you don't, you like to deal with people that you believe in and have confidence in. That's why I'm talking to

you for because—. I don't want to be on TV tonight now. [Both laughing] I'm not lying about what I'm saying, but that just happened not to be my thing.

RS: I do not have any hidden cameras in here. I promise you that.

AB: But you understand what I mean.

RS: Yes, ma'am.

AB: All right.

RS: Do you think, what kind of people when Saint Luke got started and over the years maybe even you came in twenty years later, what kind of people turned, relied on Saint Luke. Who came in? Who needed loans? What range of people would you say?

AB: You mean what would their occupation—

RS: Yes.

AB: Farmers, people trying to send their children to school, domestic workers, a person that wanted to own an automobile, and they would get help. There's always some [customers] that make you promises that they don't keep, but the majority of them did. The majority of them did. And Mr. George Ed Peele was another strong man. He was a little better position-wise to be helpful. George Ed Peele, James Mountain, M.W. Coleman and who would another one be? They were, some more of them right now that won't register. But they were able to help teach and work with those that was a little less fortunate and—

RS: And George Peele, his last name is P-E-E-L-E.

AB: Uh huh, and he has passed. And there were some, those could talk to Mr. White Man, and I don't know if you're old enough to hear the [phrase], your word is your bond?

RS: Yes, ma'am.

AB: They say help Jack Jones. I'll be responsible.

RS: Okay. Does that, what does that mean? Does that mean they might have to pay his debt if he didn't?

AB: Yeah, look to me. And then they would talk to the person that they had signed for. Sometimes it would fall through the loop, but the majority of the time they would respond.

RS: Why was Mr. Peele, for example, how did he get himself into that position where he had a certain amount of credibility or authority like that?

AB: In his neighborhood, I suppose, and Mr. White saw him, see his style of living. He had dealt with him, and he kept his promise. When you went to First Union Bank or Windsor Bank and if Mr. X doesn't pay, then George, I'm looking to you. You have my word. Some for a long time in those days, a person's word was their bond. But that don't work too well now. If I gave you my word, you could depend on it. You've heard of that, too, a person's word?

RS: Yes.

AB: It's just like if I told you, you came from Chapel Hill, you say? Came here today and I told you I'd be here. You came believing I would be here. But had you gotten here and I wasn't here, you call and let's say, number one, you couldn't reach me. If you reach me, well something else came up and I couldn't make it today. Well, now when you call me next week, aren't you going to be skeptical?

RS: Yes. [laughs]

AB: You know you promised me you'd be here today. Now and you're not coming from Williamston, and of course gas wasn't as expensive then as it is now. So I think you'd think again before you just up and come. That's the situation. That's the only way I know to explain it to you.

RS: And in the earlier years people relied on that a lot more as I—

AB: On your word.

RS: Is that part of what you're saying?

AB: On your word. On your word. And there are some now. But it takes money now along with your word. So—

RS: I have heard my father say that from time to time. From time to time somebody didn't honor their word, and he was kind of, he was a little bit shocked.

AB: So you know what I'm talking about.

RS: And upset. Whereas today I might have been thinking, well, of course they didn't honor their word. But for him, when somebody said they were going to do something, he took them at their word.

AB: That's right. You didn't sign as many documents then as you have to sign now. So now I think the word is, isn't the word, put your name on the dotted line?

RS: Right.

AB: Because Mr. Joe Blow will have something to show what you said. Because we've learned to have lapse of memories. I didn't tell you. I didn't tell you like that. You misunderstood. It's not I lied, but you misunderstood what I said.

RS: Seems like it would've been even more important going back a little bit in time when you're in a, a rural county. Windsor is a small town.

AB: Very. Comparing.

RS: And everybody probably, everybody probably knew one another or knew their families. What do you think about when these gentlemen, Mr. Mountain—

AB: He was a schoolteacher.

RS: Mr., Mr. Cooper, sorry. When they first got together and they started, established the credit union, was there any pressure against them, do you remember, or do you know about. Was there any resistance among the white people of the county?

AB: I haven't heard them say that. It may be some. I don't know. But I never heard them dwell to that too much. I'm sure it was because people were people then; it's like we can be jealous of each other now. So I imagine, but the majority of them because I remember the time the majority of folks just haven't always been as, haven't always been just like they are in these later years. And different situation and expressions, different strokes for different folks. And that makes me evil. You keep—

RS: That makes you, makes you what?

AB: That would make you evil, not trustworthy. It's like going to the doctor and you don't get any relief. You're not going to keep going. Unless you just cannot go anywhere else. Hoping you'll find one. So that's that.

RS: How many years did you work for Saint Luke?

AB: When did I, see that's a good case. I don't know, rely on my memory anymore. I came out in [19]88. When did I start? It was somewhere.

RS: Let's see, this talks about, you started in [19]66.

AB: Okay, so [19]88, I stopped in [19]88.

RS: So about twenty-two years.

AB: Seems like, yeah.

RS: Okay. Did you, did it feel like a job—I know it felt like a job, but did it feel like, was it a job that you felt good about because you knew that, that y'all were helping people?

AB: Um hmm, and I had a good teacher, Mr. Mountain, Mr. Gilliam and Mr. Cooper. They were good teachers for me.

RS: Tell me a little bit more about that. How so? What did you learn from them?

AB: To be [dependable], number one, if you were supposed to be at work at eight-thirty, don't get here at quarter-to-nine unless the circumstances prevented it, and their thing was, you don't hear that in these days now, when you make a promise, keep it unless everything is beyond your control. Don't just make a promise, to just get you out of my face. So let's say your, you called me twice, and I told you I'd be here this morning. Had you come from, where?

RS: Chapel Hill.

AB: Chapel Hill.

RS: Yes.

AB: And you didn't force me to tell you'd I'd be here. And you got here, and they couldn't tell, I hadn't said a thing to them and you're going to, maybe you would've stayed here thirty minutes, and when you left and you decided to call me tomorrow and I told you I was, told you I just couldn't, just didn't make it. Are you going to be so interested in coming?

RS: I'd be a little more cautious.

AB: You've got my point because I didn't, you would've liked it better if I said, "No, I'm no interested. I don't do that." Then you could plan your day to do whatever else. So you know you make promises. I think you ought to keep them the best you can. Everybody can't keep them. Situations, circumstances, but tell the individual, "I just can't get there today." It makes a little difference, but folks now just tell you stuff and get rid of you. Get you off, get off the phone. "Okay, I'll be there," knowing, you know what I'm—. I told my age so I'm from the old school. I'm not this modern stuff. How old are you?

RS: Let's see I'm forty, forty-five.

AB: Well, you're in the modern age.

RS: Yeah, I guess. I'm starting to feel old but—

AB: You're in the modern age so all of that made a difference because you wouldn't keep trying to deal with somebody if they kept getting promising, promising. It still is important but the modern age it isn't, but it's important.

RS: What else do you remember, what else do you feel like you learned working here and working for those gentlemen or working with them?

AB: Well, I learned to, one of the things you learned, a lady came in to get a loan, and she, I reckon, what's a good word to you. The criteria for getting it, maybe, that's not a good word but—

RS: Qualifications.

AB: Right.

RS: Okay.

AB: And that's a good word, but sometimes folks say you're not qualified and you are. But you sign all the note, then when it's time to make payment, "I didn't understand it that way." That's tough. But it's not the truth. You, whatever you didn't understand, you understand that you promised to make a payment. And you didn't make it. And "I'll be back next week," you still don't come back. So use something else, but that was some of it. That was the reason they will give. But overall some you just—. We think, and I thought everybody's not the same so you have to, if you dealt with them and talked to them long enough, you tried to work out a situation and help them.

RS: Was it always, was it always black folks for customers or—

AB: No, after a while, after a while, and I believe now couple of them that came in just wanted to see what it was all about. But it worked out that they became good members, and maybe they liked what they saw, and it wasn't because they couldn't get it from the bank, either. But they wanted to see what it was all about. So that worked out very well because they could go and tell somebody else. That helps some. After a while we started getting some [white members]. It wasn't as many of you all as it was us, but it was some and they could tell the story. So that worked. That's what this man was teaching about. He said there's nothing important about hate. And not—

RS: This is William Cooper.

AB: Yeah. He was the first president of the credit union.

RS: And what we have, one of the things, documents we have here is the program for the funeral services for Mr. Cooper. He passed in 1978.

AB: He was that old.

RS: When he was ninety-two [sic]. Let's see, he was born in 1877, according to this program.

AB: Speaking of hate, he didn't like that word, that subject matter. He didn't like that.

RS: This is the newspaper article. I wonder what year this is. Well, he was ninety-two [sic] so it must've been right around before he passed.

AB: *Bertie Legend* is the name of the paper.

RS: *Bertie Legend*. Okay.

AB: He preached against hate.

RS: Preached against hate. “If hate could be erased, communities could get on with the business at hand,” Cooper says with conviction. “Hate is not limited to open hostility,” he explains, “but takes such subtle forms that often it is mistaken for politeness.”

AB: He didn’t like that word. He preached against it. So because he said he had some very, very pleasant white friends, all of them. So—

RS: One of the names we’ve talked about is Gilliam or Gilliam and it’s G-I-L-L-I-A-M.

AB: Um hmm, James Lee Gilliam. He was a funeral director.

RS: Okay.

AB: He passed. You might want to look at that sentence right there.

RS: Now this is an article, “Saint Luke Celebrates Fiftieth Anniversary.” This is in the *Carolinian* magazine—

AB: That (unclear) at that time was putting out.

RS: Published by the North Carolina Credit Union Network out of Greensboro, North Carolina and let’s see. Okay, this is what you were showing me here. “In 1959, Saint Luke had managed to enroll 400 members and had \$59,000 in assets.”

AB: That was some money then.

RS: I believe it. [Both laugh] “At this time the credit union moved to the town of Windsor into a building on Granville Street.” And that’s where we are today, is that right? Okay. Now tell me again where was it?

AB: These are some of the people. Right here.

RS: Where was it before?

AB: Right up, uptown. But it had no parking. You had to park wherever you could park and walk. You had a lobby about like this and two small rooms. And when somebody wanted to

see the manager talking about business, you had to go, if you were in there, then you had to go out. And then they moved here. This was a bank. This was Southern Bank. And they built a big bank uptown. And they sold this to Saint Luke Credit Union, and that's how we came here, with parking and all of that.

RS: I see. Now—

AB: And this is the day we moved here, and these are some of the older members and so forth.

RS: And we're looking at a photograph that goes along with this article.

AB: That's right.

RS: This article was published in November slash December 1994 edition.

AB: The Credit Union League was printing those books. They came down. And now this is Generation, and I haven't to ask why they still have Saint Luke out there [on a sign].

RS: I saw that sign out there. I thought that was kind of neat really. Now this article says, "In 1943 the leadership of the savings club composed of sharecroppers in the Cooper's Hill community in Bertie County decided to start a credit union." Now where is Cooper's Hill?

AB: Deep in the country. [Laughs]

RS: Okay. Okay. How far south of Windsor is that? I think it's south of Windsor.

AB: It's not so far. That's where this man lived and family and most of these folks.

[Pointing at photos]

RS: A few miles or something like that?

AB: Uh huh, and the schoolhouse, I should've brought you the paper with the schoolhouse, because they were talking about tearing it down, and the people in the area don't want that. But I guess you can get there in about six minutes or something, Cooper's Hill. And

that's the story. And these folk were Mr. Cooper's family, some of them in that picture and James T. Mountain, you read about him here. He passed, but his son is in that picture, and he's representing his father.

RS: Right here perhaps?

AB: Um hmm, yeah. And that would, then the League came on, and they started auditing and doing—. That helped Saint Luke continue to grow. Do their auditing, come twice a year. If it was wrong, you had to get it right if you wanted to stay in business. And these ladies in this chair were Mr. Cooper's family. Where was something else I wanted to show you, I don't know if I showed you. [looking for something] You probably looked at this one, didn't you?

RS: Yes ma'am.

AB: Okay. Did you look, you looked at this too, I think?

RS: Is this the school building they want to tear down, the Saint Luke Public School or no?

AB: Um hmm, yeah. But it doesn't look like that now.

RS: Okay.

AB: Doesn't look like that now.

RS: Does it look better or worse?

AB: Worse.

RS: Oh lordy.

AB: Worse. Somebody said they were going to try to work on it, improve it. But I don't know if the county or whoever's in charge will let them do that or not. But, and you see this is the kind of wood they had and it's all—

RS: To keep the fire going.

AB: Yeah. Windowpanes are out of it, so I don't know.

RS: Now which—

AB: We went to Williamston in 1986. Our Williamston Credit Union opened over there, but it's not there anymore. The building is there, and I think it's Plymouth, I think it's Plymouth warehouse or something like that. But it's not Saint Luke Credit Union. But this is what it was. And all of these churches you see is what they helped build. [in photos]

RS: Different.

AB: It wasn't as difficult to get money to build a church. Our fore parents said, they allow us to go to church and get happy and become emotional. And I'm not throwing water on such as that, but that was—. We had one white person here suggest, just let them go to church, get happy and shout, and you can handle them.

RS: I'm not following you. Tell me more. I'm really, that sounds really, I'm interested in what you're saying.

AB: When you get excited, they say you don't think as well. So keep the Negroes in church. Let them get happy and shout. Nothing wrong with that, but something else goes along with shouting because when you leave church, most time you want to go home. But if you haven't tried to get you one, you don't think as well when you are as emotional. I didn't make that up now.

RS: Now who would be thinking that? You're saying, what would the white person be thinking about that? They would want black persons to go to church so that their, that way they can be—.

AB: So it was said. Yes. So it was said. But in my day, all of us have changed. Blacks have, and you can attest to that, they learn better; they're trying to do better. And it's a

togetherness with the black and the white. All of us have our different opinions but it just isn't like it was in the years ago. Maybe somewhere, [but] I just happen to not be in that community. I don't know. But, and so many people were going to the bank. These folks on here, they couldn't get loans to do their business. And they came to Saint Luke, and the League, they would come and audit our books, and they would find what the loans were for. They would need proof, is that what the person did? And they would check that and suggested that we make some records to keep because—. You know the situation and thoughts of people change, because Southern Bank didn't have to allow us to get this building because they have a very large bank up town.

RS: I think I saw that.

AB: Very, so through the years people change. And it isn't always for the worse. And they've been quite helpful when I was in it, and the lawyers were quite helpful because sometimes, you help folks, they'll learn to help themselves. And you won't have to carry all the load. You're not that old yet so you don't know what I'm talking about. [Both laugh]

RS: Do you feel like Saint Luke Credit Union did a lot of good to help people to help themselves?

AB: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. I know. I don't feel it; I know that because these people, every picture on here—

RS: We're looking at the calendar.

AB: Yeah, some have helped these folks. Now this group is from Williamston, and when we moved over there, we helped them. All every person on here, on these calendars has gotten help from Saint Luke. So yeah, we've been a help. It's been a help. What did I mark this for? Okay, that's when we went to Williamston, 1986. Yeah.

RS: I'm thinking about the churches and a little bit about what you said, and I wonder if in Bertie County if it was true like it was in other places that when it came, when the civil rights era came about, the churches were a source of strength for the black community.

AB: It was.

RS: And they weren't, instead of being a place like you said some white people thought the church would be a good distraction, instead it was a source of strength.

AB: It was a distraction, but it was a distraction from weakness to strength and "I want to have," because the persons that were talking were teaching and preaching such as that. They found out nothing wrong with singing and getting excited, but sing and do some teaching, and that's what they started doing. And it made a difference, made a difference. But as I say now, all whites were not—because they were helpful to Saint Luke Credit Union. If I help you, then you won't have to be a burden to me. So we had those thinkers, which to me was good, which to me was good. And when these calendars came out, I'll tell you, that's since they came down here, it was the talk of Windsor. Go by the credit union and get a calendar. Go by the credit union—

RS: [Laughs] What did people like about them?

AB: Just see the progress, who's who. Who got a loan? What did they do with theirs? How was it spent? Because people were testifying to the effect of what it had done for them other than just, just a pretty building. Help build churches that were coming down and torn down, and that's a medical complex that was built. So all of that helped. This person has these, this kind of stuff to help them to get about their business. That's a beautiful church they built.

RS: And we're still looking at the photos on the calendar.

AB: Beautiful, beautiful. So this lady said what it did for her. That's what I was telling you when, it makes a difference when you can come up and help yourself.

RS: Is this a hard county to make a good living in, to build yourself up?

AB: Depends on what your idea, depending on what you want to do. But overall there are places much worse than Windsor. But it is better here now. We still have, you find evilness everywhere, but I mean just staunch going out to do harm, it's a great improvement.

RS: Can we backtrack a little bit to the 1930s when you were a child? Which part, were you outside, were you out in the country? Tell me a little bit--

AB: Um hmm. We had to walk to school.

RS: Okay. Tell me a little bit about that.

AB: We walked to this, there's no longer a school there now, but we walked to school. There was a school in the neighborhood, but after integration came about, then it improved and we started coming to Windsor. And we walked a mile and a half for about two years. And then buses after the school came to this road out here. You passed it. But now it's converted to a community, and that old school, people is turning that into a department. And people are living out there, but it began to get better because you didn't have to walk in the cold or the hot.

RS: Now I wonder, I'm just thinking about the timing, by the time when you were in school by the time you finished high school, it still would've been full segregation, no? Or am I wrong?

AB: Uh uh.

RS: Okay. And so—

AB: It started to change, [19]55, started making a difference in the later part, about the middle of the [19]50s.

RS: Okay. And I wonder if what was going on before then; they may have been trying to improve the school facilities while keeping them—

AB: Maybe so.

RS: Still segregated.

AB: Maybe so. Now I can't verify that.

RS: Okay and did you, were you in a large family? Did you have a lot of brothers and sisters?

AB: I had one sister.

RS: Okay, and were y'all on a farm?

AB: No, we didn't farm, but my daddy worked in the log-wood, but my momma would go and work in the field days, but I never—. I thought I'd like to pick cotton. But I found out I was lying to myself, because folk go up with their hundred pounds; I just couldn't make it. And it's discouraging, so I never worked a lot.

RS: Did they give you a hard time?

AB: Um hmm. So—

RS: Pick on you.

AB: So I never, because my parents didn't farm. My daddy worked in the log-wood. But my momma worked on the farm, but we didn't farm per se. So I thought I might would want to farm, but no.

RS: Where did you live? Were you in a house?

AB: No, we had our house. We had our own, and my daddy would go to work in the log-wood and Momma would work on the farm. And they didn't leave the children home. People took the children in the field. So me, along with other parents' children, would play out

there at the end of the row, but we didn't, I didn't work too much. I tried to pick cotton as I say, but that didn't work.

RS: Was there a name, were you in a certain community?

AB: Um hmm.

RS: What was that called?

AB: Springfield.

RS: Springfield. Okay. And is that, if you're in Windsor—

AB: I'm still in Springfield.

RS: Okay. Is that north of Windsor?

AB: What would this part be, south. Going that—. I don't know. In the country. I'm in the country.

RS: I'm trying to see if I have a map. I don't really.

AB: In your traveling down here, do you know where State Employees Credit Union is here?

RS: Yes.

AB: The new one out here. Well, I live about a half of a half a mile beyond that. Springfield community. And we, I've been there all of my life because I'm—. And that's where when we were going to school walk from there up town. That's country.

RS: [laughs] Are there things in life that you wished you could do that you were not able to, or how do you feel about the things that you've been able to do?

AB: You mean as a child or since or since I've grown?

RS: Or just—

AB: Since I've grown I've been blessed to accomplish some things. I've been blessed because I wanted my home, and that is a blessing. Wanted my home, and neighbors living beside me, their parents passed, and their children didn't want what they were left, and I was afraid (unclear) would get over there. So we were able to do that, get that. So every Tom, Dick and Harry wouldn't be able to get over there. So in my later years I've been blessed. Of course, I've been in the past five years, I've spent in and out of the hospital. But I'm still blessed. Got quite a few conditions. Whatever they are, I'm blessed. I'm still blessed because it's not like it was.

RS: Do you, what I want to ask is, what's your church?

AB: Pleasant Oak Missionary Baptist Church.

RS: Okay.

AB: But we never, out of the folk in the church that I'm going to, my family, the Ward family, and the Speller family were able to pool their resources, and they were at one time the story is they thought they were going to lose it. But all of them got together and saved the church. So, we don't have that to worry about. So I'm, some of what I wanted came through, and my parents lived to— in fact my oldest child was sixteen when my parents passed. So they were able to be a help to me while I worked. So we've been blessed.

RS: What was your husband's occupation?

AB: Fixing automobiles. Body shop. Body shop. [Laughs quietly]

RS: Did he have his own—

AB: Um hmm.

RS: Body shop?

AB: Yeah.

RS: Okay.

AB: Had his own.

RS: What was it called?

AB: Earl's Body Shop. We, as I say we've, I'm blessed with all of whatever it is. I'm still blessed. I didn't read this and talk. Let me see what it says.

RS: How did, how did you and Mr. Byrd meet? Was he from Windsor as well?

AB: Yeah, in the area, in the neighborhood. We didn't have to leave home to go with another town. Didn't have to go in another town. Mmm-mmm-mmm.

RS: Now there was a couple time you mentioned, you said Mr. White?

AB: I was talking about the white man.

RS: Okay. [laughs] I was thinking you were but I just wanted to make sure. I like that. That's pretty good.

AB: But now don't get me wrong. All, it's just like us—we have some in our race too, but all of them have not, is not and was not bad because with this credit union, they were most helpful because, as I say, the bank did not have to work with us. And I don't know how it is now because I've been out since what, I came, I retired in 1988. So—.

RS: And you retired from Saint Luke.

AB: From Saint Luke Credit Union in 1988.

RS: Do you have grandchildren?

AB: Um hmm. I have four.

RS: You want, here, you want my pen or do you want—

AB: I'm all right. Am I supposed to give this back to you.

RS: Yes, ma'am.

AB: Oh. So I won't have to say you did what I didn't ask you to do.

RS: Well, I can, maybe we can make a copy.

AB: I don't have a problem—.

RS: We can make a copy of that too. That might be good. We're looking at the release form.

AB: I was going to ask you that. I hoped I've answered some questions.

RS: Oh yes. How are you doing? It's twelve-fifteen. How are you looking on time?

AB: I've been talking to you since—?

RS: It's twelve-fifteen.

AB: Well, I know you're tired.

RS: No I'm not. I'm—I talked to Mr. Bazemore for three hours.

AB: Whoo. Tim Bazemore, Senior?

RS: Yes, ma'am. Senior. Let's see what we've got one minute.

AB: And you were able to get him done in three hours?

RS: Well, we could've kept going but I think I felt like I probably had gotten enough of his time at that point anyway. He had some, he needed to get on his tractor. He had some work he was going to do.

AB: Yeah, that's what he's been doing ever since I've been knowing him. And he's not a teenager, but he goes on about his business. So yeah, and the reason I asked you about TV, that's just not my thing, talking a lot on TV because these folks—

RS: Oh yes, I understand.

AB: Misquoted and so different from what you said, and that's just not my thing.

RS: Well, that's what I like about this. The whole thing is on here [on the recorder].

AB: What all, what I told you?

RS: Yes, ma'am. And I'll send you a copy. I'm going to send you a disk that has a copy. And this, that allows me to put it in the archives. It allows a researcher or anybody who wants to listen to it or if they want to—

AB: Check out what I've said.

RS: Right. Right. But it's—you can—

AB: So interviewee, that's me.

RS: That's you. Yes ma'am.

AB: This is you, -viewer.

RS: Yes, ma'am.

AB: Okay. Some folk are TV-happy as far as getting up there talking, but I'm not. I'm not.

RS: Now, I don't know when we first started, when we were just chatting I think before I turned on the recorder, you were asking me my age, and you said something, I think you said that I might not have experienced any unspeakable moments in my life. And I wondered if, do you want to say anything about that? Do you want to, is there anything, I guess in a way I'm asking you if you want to speak about unspeakable moments?

AB: No, no. I'm, I've been treated very well. I've been treated very well. Before when I was doing, it was called in my day domestic [work], and when I was doing it, good Lord just allowed me to work with people that I could work with. Very pleasant. Some of their visitors weren't, and I said, "Lord, I'm glad I don't work for you."

RS: [laughs] Like with somebody like that, were they—

AB: Oh, you don't want to know.

RS: Like disrespectful towards you.

AB: You don't want to know. But they, see I didn't have to be with them, didn't have to stay around them and didn't have to deal with them. So it was all right. Wasn't all right, but my point is I wasn't with—. The people I was with were no ways like that. Worked with the people that were human.

RS: Did you feel like people who treated you well, did you feel like they wanted you to have equal opportunities?

AB: Yes, yes, I sure did. I sure do. And they may would speak about that person, just say don't pay them any attention. But they didn't talk about them, just said pay them no attention. And I said I didn't because I don't have to be with them. So you learn to do what you have to do how and the best. So—

RS: Well, let me ask you one more thing, kind of relates to that. What kind of lessons would you say you've tried to pass on to your children and your grandchildren about life here or life in general?

AB: Please, please learn when you go to school. Use common sense that we, I've tried to [use] and the grandparents and your family because in my day it wasn't just parents, the family helped rear the children. The neighbors, some of them helped rear the children because you raise animals. You don't raise children. [Laughs] So that's what I tried to instill in mine. There is a difference, and there's always somebody, but you just try to ask the man upstairs, which is God Almighty to help you know the difference. Doesn't mean everything is going to work like you want it. But sometimes you have to bite your tongue. Not forever, now. Don't get me wrong. What's that expression? Know when to fold? If you can learn that, it will help you

in life. So mine are doing quite well. One had a wreck five years ago, and he's a quadriplegic. But since he's been in a portion of Duke's hospital he has written a book. And he's done quite well. He's selling it.

RS: Who's this?

AB: My son.

RS: Is this Arthur?

AB: No, that's Thessie Mitchell.

RS: Okay. Oh, wow.

AB: He has written a book and the name, he calls it, *One More Dance*. He's done quite well selling it. And that was tough for me for a little while. The car hit him. They tell me it threw him on top of the car. Broke his back.

RS: Well, he was walking? Was he walking?

AB: Um hmm . And he was a detective for Duke University because that's where he graduated from [North Carolina Central University]. When he left Windsor, he moved to Durham. But one time, he said he wanted to ask to get rid of him. But then, he decided he would write a book about his situation because of the attention and the help he had been given. So he's done quite well. And I go up there, try to get up there at least once a month and spend time with him. So that has made me stronger, too, made me stronger. Because I didn't want to be giving out in front of him, and he, and he would say to me. "All right, momma. Don't collapse now, because I haven't." So what else are you going to do? But I'm—your name again?

RS: Rob.

AB: Rob, I'm blessed. I'm blessed. I really am. I'm blessed. So that's my story, and Saint Luke involvement, worked here for quite some time. Um hmm. It was James Gilliam,

James Mountain, Amaza Byrd and Clemmons and another lady. Then when they, when they moved down here, I stayed here about what, two years. Then I retired [at] sixty-six because I left in [19]88, yeah.

RS: Okay.

AB: So I retired, time for me to go home and seemed like that's when I gave out health-wise. So maybe I was giving out anyway, just refused to stop. But I'm doing well. And I'm glad Saint Luke is still doing well. I understand it's still doing well.

AB: Sign these in pencil?

RS: I reckon maybe we'll stop there. Let me turn this off. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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