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**U.16 Long Civil Rights Movement:  
The Women's Movement in the South**

Interview U-0536  
Shirley Brooks  
10 May 2011

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## ABSTRACT – SHIRLEY BROOKS

Born in Gatliff, KY in the 1930s, Shirley Brooks and her family moved to Oak Ridge, Tenn. when she was a child. She discusses her family's history in eastern Kentucky, living in a boxcar house when the family moved to Oak Ridge, Tenn. and her grade school education. She graduated from Clinton High School in Tenn., and during the Education Association of Clinton v. Clinton Board of Education , she was called before the court as a witness. She describes the protests surrounding racial integration at Clinton High School in 1956. She then discusses her first job at Magnet Mills; how she longed to attend college but could not afford it; how she met her husband Charlie Brooks; and beginning work at Oak Ridge National Laboratory. She describes taking time off of work to have children; starting to work again when her youngest child was four; working for the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Conference of Christians, and the National Council of Christians and Jews. She describes the civil rights movement in Knoxville, Tenn. and discusses the role of the Tennessee Valley Universalist Unitarian Church. She discusses her involvement in the church; her participation in the Women's Alliance and Continental Women's Federation; and campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment in Tennessee. She ends the interview by discussing her marriage and relationship to her husband. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's project to document the women's movement in the American South.

FIELD NOTES – SHIRLEY BROOKS  
(compiled June 3, 2011)

Interviewee: Shirley Brooks

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview Date: May 10, 2011

Location: Maryville, TN

THE INTERVIEWEE. Shirley Brooks grew up in Oak Ridge, TN. She went to Clinton High School just before it was integrated. She was a witness in a court case to decide if the school should be required to integrate. Beginning in the 1970s, she became involved with the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, where she linked up with various social justice networks and activities.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jessica Wilkerson is a graduate student in the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently conducting research for her dissertation which will explore social justice activism in southern Appalachia, with special attention to women's activism in the late 1960s and 1970s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. Professor Jennifer Brooks (Auburn University) suggested that we interview her mother, Shirley Brooks, as part of the project on women's activism in east Tennessee. Ms. Shirley Brooks, while not a key player in 70s social movements, provides a window into the experiences of fellow travelers and people sympathetic to the civil rights and women's movements. There is one interruption in the interview when the phone rang.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used the SOHP's Zoom recorder.

## TRANSCRIPT – SHIRLEY BROOKS

Interviewee: Shirley Brooks

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview date: May 10, 2011

Location: Maryville, Tennessee

Length: 1 disc, approximately 1 hour and 35 minutes

### START OF DISC

JW: Okay. So I'll just say who we are. It's May tenth. Is that what I said? May tenth, 2011, and I'm in Maryville, Tennessee with Shirley Brooks. This is Jessie Wilkerson. Shirley, can you just say first of all when and where you were born? I'll check the sound.

SB: I was born in a coal mining camp called Gatliff and that's spelled G-A-T-L-I-F-F, Kentucky, on May four, 1935. At one time, it was the largest coal mining camp in the state of Kentucky.

JW: What county is that in?

SB: In Whitley. You go to Williamsburg and go eventually off to the right and go eighteen miles up into the mountains and that's where Gatliff was. My father was a coal miner to begin with and then he started working in the commissary, or the company store, and started out as a soda jerk and that's when he and my mother married. And then he advanced up in the hierarchy of the store and learned how to be a butcher. And so we eventually left Gatliff when I think I was two or three years old, I'm not sure exactly, and moved to Williamsburg, which was eighteen miles away. My father worked as a butcher there and, for some reason, left that field and was hired by the L&N Railroad as a clerk. And he worked in a lot of different places where

the railroad needed clerks and people to handle the mail and put the mail on the train and so forth.

And then when they were building Oak Ridge, he was sent to live and work at Oak Ridge, but there was no housing available in Oak Ridge and so the railroad took some boxcars and put windows and doors in them and had a bedroom, a living, and a kitchen. And they made a little spur track next to the regular railroad where all the trains were and we lived there. We lived in the boxcar, I'm not really sure how many years. There was a rash of railroad accidents all over the country and somebody was going by on the train and looked down and saw our little house. Because when the war was over and the railroad cars were moved, Mother and Daddy didn't have the money to go buy or even rent a house.

And so we lived in that same area and the way it was built was when big shipping cartons would come in for Oak Ridge, they would be opened and the sides of these cartons would be left there and other men who worked for the railroad would help my dad carry those to the place where we had lived and they'd stand it up on it's side and there would be a wall. We sort of camped out and lived in that house. They lived there even after I married and moved away in 1957. It was quite an adventure.

JW: What year did your family move to Oak Ridge?

SB: 1943.

JW: And what are your parents' names for the record?

SB: Everett Hale and Connie Hale, H-A-L-E. They were from Kentucky, in Kentucky. My dad, I think, went through the eighth grade, but my mother only went through the fourth grade. But she worked most of the time that I can remember, even if she worked as a waitress in Kentucky before we moved away, and then she came to Oak Ridge and worked as a clerk in the

retail stores such as Rich's. [Rich's] used to have a store there and Loveman's and so forth. She worked selling what we call now piece goods, material for making clothes, and so forth. I used to work there too until I graduated from high school. I'd work on weekends there. I had two brothers, two older brothers.

The house was very deceptive because when you looked at it, you didn't realize how big it was and we wound up having four bedrooms, a living room, a large kitchen, and a back porch. No bathroom for a long time, and then Daddy finally boxed in part of that back porch and put plumbing in the house and we finally got running water in the house. We didn't have that during all the war and so forth. I lived there until 1957 when I married Charlie Brooks and moved to Knoxville. And Mother and Daddy eventually wound up buying a little house in Oak Ridge and they lived there for the rest of their lives. Daddy died when he was about eighty-five, and Mother lived until she was after ninety. The last few years of her life, she lived in a nursing home in Oak Ridge.

JW: Can you describe what you remember about Oak Ridge in those years?

SB: A lot of mud. There were no streets. A lot of wooden sidewalks had been put down, but it was still difficult to get around. Now, even though we lived on the city limits of Oak Ridge, we couldn't go into Oak Ridge because it was so restricted. We had to have a pass from somebody before we could go into Oak Ridge. But that's where my dad worked. He went in all the time. We soon discovered a place where we could go in and not have to go all the way to the official gate. We went under the fence, and we'd go over into the East Village area and get on the bus and go downtown to do our shopping and so forth. We did a lot of our shopping in Knoxville. I had cousins and so forth who lived in Oak Ridge. A lot of the people who lived in Oak Ridge just thought they were going to the other side of the world and for them, they were.

JW: By going to Knoxville?

SB: They came from all over the world.

JW: Oh you mean, okay, the people who moved there.

SB: The people who moved there to start Oak Ridge. But mostly, I think the people who came from other parts of the country say, "Oh, it was just awful." When it came time for them to leave, they didn't. Most people who lived in Oak Ridge loved it. It was a small-town atmosphere and there were a lot of things that you could do if you wanted to. There were theaters. There was a nice house, which was like an inn. It's called the Alexander Inn, and it's in the Jackson Square area in Oak Ridge. One of my brothers went to Oak Ridge High School. He was supposedly living with our cousin who lived there and he wanted to take drafting. So he went to Oak Ridge so he could learn how to do that. But my oldest brother and I both went through the school system in Anderson County.

By the time I was up and old enough to be going around to places by myself, it was more like any other town, but we would still know if we looked: "Okay, that's a C house" or "that's a D house" or "that's a Quonset hut" or whatever. We knew and it depended on your standing in the list of importance as to what kind of house you had. And they were built when Oak Ridge were built, and they're still there. A lot of them have been remodeled and so forth.

JW: So were the houses, were they nicer if they were certain letters?

SB: Uh huh.

JW: Okay.

SB: And had more rooms, yeah. And that's where Mother and Daddy, after he retired and they had to move, they found one that they bought out in east Oak Ridge and that's where they lived until they both died and then I had to sell the house, which was traumatic. But I never

thought of myself as being an Oak Ridger. Always before I have considered myself as being from Clinton. I graduated from Clinton High School in 1952 and lived there until 1957 when Charlie and I got married. He was a UT graduate student. And we moved to Knoxville and lived there until 1996 when we moved to Sevier County in a small house that we had built there. We lived there until he died in November of [20]08. He was a professor at the University of Tennessee in material science and engineering. His specialty was metallurgy. When we got ready to announce our engagement, I couldn't even spell metallurgy. I had to learn how to spell metallurgy.

JS: And where did you meet him?

SB: On a blind date. There was a group of women that worked for Oak Ridge National Lab, but we worked in the Y-12 area and we always had lunch together and we were known as the Y-12 lunch group. One of the women in that lunch group, whose name also happened to be Shirley, had worked in the office of the chemical and metallurgical engineering office at UT and the graduate students were having a picnic. And so she asked me if I would go to the picnic with one of the graduate students, and I said sure. And I did and we met on a Sunday and went to Cove Lake and had a marvelous picnic and so forth. And that's where we met in July, and we got married in December of [19]57.

We have three children. Tim works at TVA, works on their computers, keeps them running and repaired and so forth. Jeff, the next one, is a teacher here in Blount County. Right now he's teaching fifth, but he'll be teaching sixth grade math and science at Montvale School next year. Our daughter, Jenny, is a history professor at Auburn University and her husband is a history professor at Columbus State College in Georgia, which is about forty miles from where they live at Auburn. I forgot to say that Jeff's wife, Cathy, is a professor at Maryville College.



We have eight grandchildren and, I'd have to count, it's either five or six great-grandchildren now.

JS: So can you say a little bit about your experience in grade school in Clinton?

SB: I went to a school called Shinliver. That's S-H-I-N-L-I-V-E-R. I started fourth grade there and rode the school bus, of course. We were always the last stop on the school bus route. During that time, the communities around Oak Ridge were growing so much because of Oak Ridge that there were not enough classrooms in this school. And so there's a stage and performance area at one end of the building and classrooms at the other end of the building and there was a big gym in between, and they put up partitions, walls, and made classrooms in that gym. And so from grade, let me see, five, six, yeah, grades five and six, I went to school in the gym and then seven and eight had regular classrooms and so I was in a regular classroom from seven to eight. And there were a lot of people moving in, but still a lot of native people in the area.

After I graduated from eighth grade, I went to Clinton High School for four years and graduated from there in 1952.

JS: Do you want to say on the record the story you were talking about earlier?

SB: Oh well, a lot of people are not aware of the fact that the actual first case brought to require integration in the schools was not *Brown v. [Board of Education of] Topeka*.

JS: Board of Education.

SB: But was [*Education Association of*] *Clinton v. [Clinton Board of Education]*. A friend and I were seniors. I believe it was our senior year and because we both rode school buses for long distances to get to school, we were called as witnesses for Clinton High School to testify to that. We thought it was a lark. We got out of school all day. So we both appeared in the court,

and I was asked some questions by the Clinton High School attorneys and then I was asked more questions by the attorney for the African-American community who had brought the case. I had not had any exposure to African Americans at that time. It just didn't happen. And I had difficulties sometimes understanding the questions, but he was very patient, but got his point across. I found out some years later when I was thinking about it that that must have been Thurgood Marshall, who went on to become a Supreme Court judge. And indeed it was. I felt somewhat honored to have been able to be a part of that, although I was a member of the losing side, so to speak.

And then I think it was in 1956 when there was a lot of trouble because it was time for the schools to be integrated and there were some rabble rousers who came into town to get people all riled up and there were riots and so forth in Clinton. I remember my parents and I being in the car and going to Clinton from where we lived out in the country to see for ourselves what was going on and just after we got there, the National Guard troops rolled into town and it gave me such a weird feeling. I felt some reassured and some very apprehensive about what might happen. But they were there for a number of days, I'm not sure exactly. I think about a week or so.

The minister of the First Baptist Church in Clinton gathered a group of men from the church and my brother happened to be in the group of men. And on the first day of school when the children were going to be walking down the hill where they lived to Clinton High School, these men from First Baptist Church went up to the top of that hill and walked down to protect the children as they walked to school. And when they got there, I don't have a clear picture of exactly what happened as they went into the school, but the white men who had taken the step of accompanying the children were attacked and the minister, Paul Turner, was severely beaten.

It was a scary time. And then I'm not sure exactly when, I'd have to do some research, but somebody came in and dynamited Clinton High School. It just broke my heart. I loved that school so much. Paul Turner eventually left Clinton and went to teach in the seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. I don't know too much about his circumstances after that, but he killed himself in some later years and I think probably he was just so upset and conflicted by his emotions and so forth that he wound up doing that. But he was a lovely man, and I was sorry to see what happened.

JS: Had you been attending that church as well?

SB: Yes, yes, I had. I started after I got in high school. A lot of my friends lived in the town and we had a car and my dad would take me to church. Then when I got—no, that's not it either. I didn't get a driver's license until I was eighteen, but after I did that, I bought myself a small car and was able to drive myself around.

JS: Now had that church, was there consensus among the church members that they were going to support these African American students and the integration process?

SB: I'm sure there must have been because I think some of the men who went up to walk down the hill were deacons in the church, but I really don't know for sure.

JS: Do you remember what you thought at the time about integration? When you were in that trial, did you have an idea?

SB: I didn't have any problem. I didn't have any problems with it. I felt that it should never have been separated. I just happened to think, my father told me one time that his grandmother or his great-grandmother, I forget which, who lived up in an area, it's now called LaFollette, but at the time, it was called Cotulla, and that's where he lived part of his life. And he said that his grandmother or great-grandmother opened a school and taught the first black

children to attend school after the Civil War, but I've never researched it. So all I know is what Daddy said, but Cotulla is now LaFollette. And that's all I know about that. I've always felt that might be interesting some day to try to see what I could find out.

JS: Is that something he shared with you when this integration process was occurring?

SB: You know, I don't remember. My dad was a great storyteller and he was good to listen to and you learned a lot if you just listened to him. He was, as far as I'm concerned, the best-educated man I ever knew, who only went through the eighth grade, and I think that's very remarkable. And even in his later years, he could take a picture of all the students at the Gatliff, Kentucky school when he was there and it was a large camp, and he could tell you who each of these people were and he was in his 80s then. So his memory was marvelous. It was just marvelous.

JS: Were your parents very political?

SB: No, I don't think so, not after they moved to Oak Ridge. I think they knew and did a lot more politicizing, I suppose, in the area in Gatliff and in Whitley County, and Daddy knew who was serving in offices as representative and senators from that area and was acquainted with a lot of them, and a staunch Democrat all of his life.

JS: Was Gatliff organized by the United Mine Workers, do you know?

SB: I was born there. I don't know when they moved there. The brother that was next to me, was almost three years older from me, was born in another coal mining camp and so there was some moving around. But we lived between two railroad tracks. One railroad came this way and one railroad came this way, and then they met and became one railroad to go the rest of the way, and our house was right in that little V there. And Mother would put a list in my brother's bib overalls to send to the store to tell Daddy what she needed him to bring home for some

reason. When we went back to visit some years later, I couldn't believe how small that area was. None of the houses were left. It's just a coal mine there now. But we knew where things had been and it was just like no distance at all from where our house was to the commissary and we used to think it was a big trip.

JW: So when did you start working at, let's see, you have Magnet Mills?

SB: Yes. I graduated from high school in May of 1952 and a week later got a call from the Magnet Mills, which was a hosiery-making business. It was quite large and they had a need to hire a couple of people to work in the office. And they called the high school and the principal recommended that they call a girlfriend of mine and me to see if we would come and take tests to see. As it turned out, the job they were looking at for me and the job they were looking at for Erma, my best friend, got switched. She was supposed to work as secretary for the office manager and I would be keeping track of statistics, data, and so forth of the workers and how the production was doing and so forth. But when it came time to hire us, they hired me for the secretarial job and Erma for the other job, and I was only seventeen at the time and I couldn't work overtime because it was illegal until you became eighteen. But I worked there and I loved it. I just loved it.

I wanted to go to college, but if I did go to college, I was going to have to work for a year or two before I could go and I knew that because Mother and Daddy weren't able to send me. One of the women who worked in the office had been there for years and years and she was very resentful about the fact that this young whippersnapper, me, came in and took this job and as a part of my responsibility, it was to see that the work she did was correct and sent out as it was supposed to be. And I did the routing for the trucks that were carrying the stockings. As I'm sure you've heard before, all the stockings were made together and then they were taken out and

given different store brands. They were all exactly the same. I felt that was very funny. She was not a very friendly person and was resentful and I started having migraine headaches and so I finally decided that I had to leave.

My dad had met somebody who worked at Oak Ridge National Lab and spoke to this person about how I would go about getting a job and the man said, "Send her to this office right away." And so I went down and took the test and they hired me that day. And so I went back to the mill and gave them the two weeks notice or because I had to be cleared, I had to have a security clearance, I said, "I'll either, I'll leave now or I'll give you two weeks notice or I'll work until the clearance comes through." And they said, "Oh, work until the clearance comes through, please." So I did. For several weeks, I would work in Oak Ridge Monday through Friday and then I'd go into Magnet Mills and work on Saturday, and I just got exhausted and finally decided I couldn't do that anymore. So I went to Oak Ridge and I worked there. I got married in 1957. I worked until spring of 1959, in the meantime having gotten married, and I left just before our first baby was born. Magnet Mills is now closed down and has been out of business for years. I still think about it. It was my first real job.

I didn't work again until I had three children and the youngest was four. And one of my friends at the Unitarian church that we attended called me and I recommended somebody from the church to do secretarial work for the local ACLU office. And that worked for some time and then her husband graduated and they moved away. And he called again to see if I could recommend somebody else and I said, "Yes, me." I enjoyed working and being with other people a lot and so I took a job at ACLU and then when they decided to move the office to Nashville, it was a couple of years later, I think, I went to work for the National Conference of Christians and

Jews local office and I worked there for about three years, I think, until the director of that office resigned to take another job and so they hired me then to be the executive director, NCCJ.

That was a tough job because I was expected to raise the money to do the programming, do the programming or get somebody else to do the programming, and keep the office going. I finally said, "I can't do it all and I'm not good at raising funds. I'm just not." That's when I took a job—the second time, I forgot I had worked for Tennessee Valley Unitarian Church when my baby was six months old. I worked for six months at the church as secretary. This time when I took the job, I was a full-time employee and I was the church administrator. I worked there until 1996. I think I worked there for about sixteen years. We moved to Sevier County in July of '96 and I retired at the end of that month. And I didn't work again professionally because my husband became ill in 2002 and I took care of him for the rest of his life.

But I did a lot of things such as I served as director of NCCJ, I served on the board of the community action committee and actually served as chair of that board for, I think it was three years. That was where I really had my first exposure to more than just one or two African Americans at a time. Through that organization and through my membership at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, I got to know a lot of people and knew that we were all just people. As a part of my membership in the church, we would help in whatever ways that we could when the integration marches and so forth started up.

JS: In what year did they start?

SB: I can't remember, but I know it was before I went to work at ACLU. My husband would go and march in the groups and picket and carry signs and so forth.

JS: And where these interracial groups that were marching?

SB: Uh huh. That's him up there. But I would take care of the children and that's sort of the pattern that we had. I supported the movements, but there was no way I could physically take part in them because somebody had to be there for the children and so that was my job. But we made sandwiches, I remember making sandwiches on top of sandwiches for people who were coming through going to the Martin Luther King speech in Washington, DC, the People's March. And so we took care of them as they came through Knoxville.

JS: Where did people stay? Did you house people too?

SB: They stayed in the church and they stayed, some people were able, had rooms in their homes to take people in, but I think mostly they stayed in the church. I don't know how many nights they stayed. It might have been two. It might have been one. (phone rings) Excuse me.

JS: That's okay.

(break in conversation)

JS: So were those interracial groups, mixed race groups that were staying at the church?

SB: Yeah.

JS: And how did the community--?

SB: Well, most of the problems that had to do with that had happened before we became connected with the churches, but we heard stories. There was one absolutely delightful couple who came and he was apprehensive about going to this white church and this was just not as a part of a march or anything. Joe and Charlene Michaels, the first time he came to the church, he took a gun with him. He just didn't know what might happen.

JS: And this was an African American man?

SB: Uh huh. Charlene was a professor at Knoxville College and they were both very active and just lovely people, but every once in a while, some of the members of the church



would catch Joe and would say, "You got that gun on you, Joe?" They made fun of the fact that he felt he had to do that, but they understood why he was scared because there was no telling what might have happened.

At church, we have, not a large African American membership, but we do have some people who still come and we, every so often, will have, will switch pulpits or will have a choir from another church and sometimes African American. Everybody is welcome, and I served as a part of the hierarchy in the church on different committees.

My favorite saying was I had done everything in that church but preach a sermon and I wasn't going to do that, but eventually I did. I eventually became a member of what they called at that time the Women's Alliance, the women's church group as you see in all churches, and eventually became a member of the Continental Women's Federation, which was people from all over the United States and Canada who went to represent the districts and churches in the women's organizations and we supported a lot of things that worked toward women's rights and put out a lot of curriculum materials and so forth for that. And I served on that board for two two-year terms and then was a member of the nominating committee at the last.

I saw so many women who were doing things that inspired me. I learned how to speak up and what I wanted to say and how to go about learning from the people in my community. Some of the women I will absolutely never forget. When I went to the first board meeting and the time came to vote on something and we were discussing it, and I said, "Well, I'm just not sure what to do." I said, "I don't know how the women in my church would feel about what we were going to do." And they just looked at me and said, "Shirley, you don't represent your church. You represent all of the women in the Unitarian Universalist churches in the United States and Canada. That's how you have to think when it comes time."

And they broadened my perspective an awful lot. When I came back from the meetings, I was able to use their suggestions and their examples and be able to speak to groups and get the messages across, especially for the community action committee, at the board meetings and how to run a board meeting and how to make sure people were getting heard and that all the sides were getting heard. That was a great learning experience for me because I had never had any training. As I said, I came right out of high school, but I'd never had any training in doing anything like that before. But the women that were on that board were just absolutely fantastic, just fantastic.

JW: What kinds of issues were they working on?

SB: We ran, owned a camp for girls with diabetes that had been going for a number of years and we were the board for that as well. It was located in Worcester, Massachusetts, and people applied and we had somebody who ran the camp and so forth, but we were responsible for making sure that they had the money to operate and that the laws that needed to be enforced were enforced and so forth. One thing that I did as chair of the community action committee was serve on the planning committee for the state of Tennessee for the White House Conference on Families. So I used to have to go to Nashville several times in that year to make plans about what was going to happen and so forth, and I enjoyed that very much. Somewhere I've got a big poster I was given in honor of my having served on the committee, but I haven't run across it yet.

One time, a woman in the church came up and said could she ask me a question and I said, "Sure, go ahead." And she says, "How did you learn to speak in public?" I said, "I don't really know. I think I've always just been able to do that. I've always tried to be prepared with what I wanted to say and I've always had a voice that I could project so that I didn't have to use a microphone." And I said, "It started in high school when my class would be responsible for the

chapel program that day or whatever. I didn't have any talent like dancing or singing, but I sure could talk and so they always made me the emcee. There was a huge, big auditorium and I always spied somebody in the back that I watched to see if they could hear what I was saying." And I said, "People who use the microphones who are nervous about it, you just have to forget about it." And I said, "You use the voice that if you were a mother calling your child into supper who stood on the back porch and called for Johnny to come in, that's the voice you use when you're trying to project to a crowd."

As I said, I have not been on the really taking part in the marches and that sort of thing. I've been an enabler more than I have an activist in some ways. But that counts, too.

JW: Did you ever long to be out there marching when you had to be in making the sandwiches and taking care of the kids?

SB: No, not really, because I was always busy helping in other ways. One of the problems that I've had in my life has been a trouble sometimes in losing my balance and falling or very weak ankles, frequently would turn an ankle. I knew I couldn't do that sort of thing. I couldn't walk that far. And so I tried to do the other things to back up people or drive people to where they needed to be or take food or that sort of thing. There are things that, I guess, I feel proud of because I was a part of them, but in the ways that I could be. Now as you can see, I use a walker for balance. I have a wheelchair that if I'm going to something that requires a lot of walking, I will have to use the wheelchair because I'm no longer able to walk for far distances, which is very disappointing, but seventy-six is not bad, I guess.

JW: No, it's not. So you said that you wanted to go to college when you graduated high school. What was your idea of college and what you would do there? What was your career aspiration?

SB: I guess only two things that I thought of that I would like to have done. One was to be a librarian and the other one would be a lawyer and I actually started, when my little girl, the youngest one, was four years, I decided it was time for me to get started and do some. So I left the two boys at home and took the four-year-old with me and Charlie was not there. He was working late at his office, which he did frequently. I got ready and I had gotten some credits. You know you can get credits for your life experiences and one of our friends who was a professor had helped me get through that process, and so I was going to start out as a freshman and go through as fast as I could, and then I was going to go to law school. I had my mind all made up.

We lived in an old farmhouse and I had Jenny by the hand and I stepped off the porch onto the first step and I don't know if the heel came off my shoe and caused the fall or if I fell and then knocked the heel off my shoe, but I went down hard. I sat down on the concrete step. I broke my coccyx, which I don't ever recommend. I had to be in the hospital for about eleven days or so and then I was a number of months in getting over that. And I never got up enough nerve to do it again. By that time, it was just too late for me to do that, and I really felt I missed my chance.

So I've had some just little funny experiences. Well, they weren't funny at the time, but they are now. Our oldest son got married and they had a baby and one night, I got a phone call from him saying, "Mom, can you come get me out of jail?" I said, "Why are you in jail?" And he said, "Well, we needed milk and I was going to the store to get some and I got stopped and charged with reckless driving." And they put him in jail. So I had to go and bail him out and get him straightened out, of course, but he had to appear in court on a certain date. And so I went with him and when he was called before the judge, the judge looked down and read his name and

looked up at him and said, "Son, are you Shirley Brooks' little boy?" And my son said he could have died. He just knew he was sunk and he said, "Yes, sir, I am." "Alright," he said. "I'm going to let you go this time. Now don't you ever do that again." So I never let him forget it.

JW: So you were saying that you were thinking about going back to school and working toward a career. I wonder what was sparking that drive in you. That would have been, what, about '69 or '70? What was it that was making you think that that was a possibility and that you wanted to try to do it?

SB: Well, one of the things was I was doing some traveling with my husband when he would go to technical meetings to do papers and so forth and I just felt more confident about myself. And I was serving on the Continental board and saw that I felt I could do this if I really wanted it bad enough. And I decided there's no time like the present and so that's why I started was because I recognized the fact that I was an intelligent person. Even though I raised a family of teachers, a lot of times I said, "Hmm, I've got more horse sense than all of them put together." I just felt that I needed to do what I wanted to do. But I, soon after the fall, I decided maybe some day I'll start again, but that day didn't come. My husband became ill in 2002, and I started taking care of him and I took care of him for six years until he died.

JW: Do you want to talk about your relationship about him?

SB: Do I want to?

JW: Yeah.

SB: Sure. As I said at the beginning, we met on a blind date and our children do not understand how we knew within a month that we loved each other and we were going to get married, but we didn't tell anybody for a couple of months. Finally, in October, I think it was in October, we officially became engaged and set the wedding date for December twentieth.

Charlie, I always swore I'd never marry a teacher or a short person, and I married both. Charlie was about the same height as I was and was an instructor at the university for a long time. And I helped him do a lot of proofreading for him. He wrote textbooks and studies on various metallurgical topics and recently when the airplane that was in the air lost part of its cabin, you remember that, my reaction at that time was, "Oh my, and the two best people to study that problem have died." My husband and his professor both specialized in metal fatigue and that's what they were looking at, at one time, although I hear later they changed it to welding. But I didn't know a lot of the technical procedures and words, but I worked on it and I would know by reading the sentence if that sentence was not structured properly or if it needed to have something changed to another place or whatever.

So I was a proofreader and I typed his master's paper and his doctorate and I did that for other people at UT when I was not working professionally. And I loved to type tables, pages full of figures. One time, I typed one for one of the students that had two hundred tables in it and when we got through, we only found five typos. We had to read them. And then when Charlie starting writing his and putting out his books, I really appreciated how hard he was working on that and tried to be helpful in every way that I could by typing them and by doing the proofreading.

He was always so supportive of me. He never objected to anything that I wanted to do and we never fought. Our kids think that when we bickered at each other that we were fighting, but we were playing.

JW: Did you have friends, women friends who their husbands didn't support them? Did that seem—

SB: I've seen that with men who didn't want their wives to work or go outside the home or whatever, made fusses and demanded. As you can tell by looking around here, I am not a housekeeper. I never did want to be, and I never was a good housekeeper. But some people who would insist the house be absolutely spic and span. Well, Charlie Brooks could have cared less. If I was happy, that was fine with him. When we got ready to get married and went to get our marriage license and we were filling out the forms, my friend was the clerk who gave us the forms to fill out and Charlie wrote down his age. He glanced over at the one I was filling. He was twenty-six and he looked over and he said, "Twenty-two? You're just twenty-two?" He didn't know. He didn't know how old I was when we went to get our marriage license, and I [was] embarrassed to death because here was my friend who was hearing all of this. So I teased him about that.

But we agreed, I don't know of anything, any social issues or how to treat children or discipline the children or where were we going to do things, I don't know of anything that we ever really fought about.

We went to China twice and the first time, I think our oldest son, Tim, was taking us to the airport and so he came to pick us up and, of course, in the last few minutes when you're trying to get your luggage out and everything, the house that we had had a stairway that went up in the hallway. It had a landing where there was another bathroom and then you turned around and you went up four more steps. And I was down at the bottom in the hallway and Charlie yelled something down the stairs. He was standing on that landing. No, Tim was standing on the landing and Charlie was up here and Charlie leaned over and called something down to me, and I just stopped and turned around and said, "Oh, shut up, Charlie." And I thought Tim was going to

drop his false teeth. He'd never heard anything like that in his life in our house. We just didn't have any reason to fight.

He was a funny man and so good with the children and the grandchildren, and I am grateful for what time I had with him. He died one month of our fifty-first anniversary. I'm grateful that our last grandchild got to know him when he was still able to interact with her. Before you leave, if you'll be sure you remind me, I'll show you the pictures of our family.

JW: Oh yeah.

SB: They're on the wall there.

JW: Well, so was there ever a point when you started to think more about gender, gender issues, or the women's movement? You seemed to have been, you were right there with the civil rights movement seeing it unfold in Clinton and with the marches and what-not.

SB: Yeah, I did. In fact, that was one of my first experiences in speaking in public was about whether the ERA was going to be passed or not. I was attending a general meeting that was called General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists. I forget what city I was in. But the thing that was being discussed at that time was whether they should meet in the state that was campaigning the Equal Rights Amendment. The discussion had gone on for quite a while and I got up and went to the microphone and stood in line and when I said, "My name is Shirley Brooks and I'm from Knoxville, Tennessee," you could hear this little titter go through the audience of attendees because of my southern accent.

JW: And were you in the North, a northern city?

SB: Uh huh. And I stopped and just let it go from one end of the room to the other. And then what I said was, "That's okay. I don't mind if you laugh at the way I sound. I have a southern accent and I came by it legitimately. But what I'm saying to you now is don't hold this



meeting in a state that hasn't passed the ERA. Just don't go there." I said, "We want you to come and meet in the South, but not under those conditions." And then we got wild applause because I had spoken up about an issue that would really affect me and in that southern accent, people heard how we felt about it, so strong.

JW: And you were a supporter of the ERA. And why did you think it was a bad idea to meet in a place where there was resistance?

SB: Because we'd worked so hard in trying to, we didn't want to support and take our meetings and our money into a state that wouldn't support all the members.

JW: So what kind of ERA campaigning did you do locally in Knoxville?

SB: Just what I said before. I did some typing for people. I kept track of calendars and when things needed to be done and so forth. As I said, I'm not a marcher, but I could stuff envelopes and support in other ways. I did a lot of envelope stuffing in my career.

JW: What other sorts of women's movement activities did you support in that way?

SB: I'm trying to think and I really, right off the top of my head, can't think of anything else that I would need to add. Bee DeSelm is one of my close friends. She's a Republican and she's very, very good-natured about the fact that she's one of the Republicans in our church and most of us are Democrats. I've contributed financially and did some looking up of papers and articles and so forth that people were interested in. That was about it.

I guess one of the biggest things I did was raise my children to allow freedom for everybody, not just Caucasian men of a certain age. I have three children. Two of them are very active in their Unitarian Universalist churches, Jenny in Auburn and Jeff here at Maryville. They've started a new church here in Maryville called First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, which they call "FUUF." And Tim is not involved in a church right now, but he doesn't seem to

have any prejudices that I can see. We always welcomed any and all of their friends to come to our home if they were black or white or Indian or whatever. We just, whoever anybody was, that's who they were.

JS: Were you involved in Fellowship House?

SB: No, that was before we started going to a Unitarian church, not too long before. We started going to a Unitarian church in 1958 when I was pregnant with Tim, who was born in June of '59.

JS: And why did you decide to go there?

SB: Mostly because of Charlie. I was fairly content, I thought, as a Baptist and was active in Baptist Church. In fact, the first date that we ever had was this picnic up at Cove Lake State Park and so they said, "Let's do something afterwards." We were with this other couple and I said, "I have to be at church at seven o'clock. I'm singing tonight." And for the first and only time, I sang in public. I sang a duet with this friend and member of the choir. And so what they did was they took me to church and waited until church was over.

Charlie started out saying that he was an atheist and then a few years later in conversation, he said that he was probably more of an agnostic than he was an atheist, but he was not comfortable in the more Christian-oriented churches. He'd been raised as a Methodist and I think it was one of those families that every time the church doors were open, they were there, and he'd had it by that time. But he heard a radio broadcast done by the Unitarian minister at that time named Dick Henry and was fascinated by what he heard him saying. I don't even remember what the topic was, but he felt it was just great. And then Dick Henry took another church somewhere and this young man came to Knoxville who, the minister was Bob West. He was

from Lynchburg, Virginia. They were having a series of broadcasts and so he'd been listening to him on the radio and mentioned to me about what he had heard and learned.

I'd never heard of the Unitarian Church, absolutely never heard of it. And so I went to work and asked one of the men that I worked for did he know about the Unitarian Church and he said, "Oh yeah. It's perfect if you want to go to a lecture hall every week." Well, I didn't really have any desire to do that and then we decided to get married and, of course, we went to meet with my minister, Paul Turner, the one I told you about, and he refused. And then we found a Baptist minister in Oak Ridge who said he would be glad to do the wedding for us and he came to Clinton and did the wedding in my church. And Paul Turner was sitting there during the wedding, and it made my mother so mad. She said, "If he wasn't going to do your wedding, he shouldn't have attended the wedding." And I agreed with her. I said, "Yes, Mother, I think you're right." But this man from Robertsville did it.

I loved [Charlie] dearly. Over the years, he became the sort of, he was the sort of person who wasn't gushy or who didn't say "I love you" all the time, but I felt so loved and so cherished and he knew that I felt that way about him. He is very fondly remembered by the people he worked with and the people that came in contact with him. For a while, when I was active in CAC and NCCJ and so forth and I'd have to speak in public or so forth and somebody would come up to him and sometimes he would introduce himself as "Mr. Charlie Hale." He said, "I felt like Richard Burton all the time." (laughs) But he was supportive of whatever I wanted to do and I can only hope that my children, and I think they do, have as close a bond as Charlie and I did.

And I got involved in a number of ways with his travels. When we went to China, I was with him, of course. And the graduate students where he would be giving his talks, lectures,

would make sure that I got to go sightseeing and they took good care of me. And then once, they asked if I would come and let them ask me questions. They wanted to know about what it was like to go to school in the United States and what was the United States like, and they wanted me to come because Charlie talked so fast that they couldn't keep up with him. That was on that first trip to China, and he learned to slow down some.

I miss him so much sometimes. He was a good man.

JW: He sounds like it.

SB: These are his photographs.

JW: Those are lovely.

SB: Over there.

JW: The flowers?

SB: Uh huh. He specialized in flowers. I told him he crawled all over the Smoky Mountains. He wanted to get down where he could. And we have many, a zillion more, but I don't have anywhere to put them right now.

JW: Well, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything else you want to add?

SB: Not that I can think of. Do you want to step around the corner and I'll show you my family?

JW: I do.

## **END OF INTERVIEW**

Transcribed by Emily Baran. June 2011

Edited by Jessica Wilkerson. March 2012