

This interview is part of the **Southern Oral History Program** collection at the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**. Other interviews from this collection are available online through www.sohp.org and in the **Southern Historical Collection** at **Wilson Library**.

U.19 Long Civil Rights Movement: Breaking New Ground

Interview U-0650
Curtis and Dollie Harrison
21 July 2011

Abstract – p. 2
Field Notes – p. 3

ABSTRACT – CURTIS AND DOLLIE HARRISON

Interviewees: Curtis and Dollie Harrison

Interviewer: Catherine A. Conner

Interview Date: July 21, 2011

Location: Timmonsville Public Library, Timmonsville, SC

Length: 81:48

This double-interview reflects on the lives of Curtis and Dollie Harrison, two African Americans born in the late 1930s. Both spoke about life in Timmonsville in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly their recollections of farm life and their family. This interview is notable for their accounts of why they left and why they returned to a small town in the rural South. Mrs. Harrison's family owned a home but not a farm, while Mr. Harrison's father transitioned from a sharecropper in the 1930s to an owner of a few acres in the early 1950s. Both still own the property of their fathers. Topics include: work in a tobacco warehouse; black sharecropping on land owned by whites; renting land owned by blacks, particularly family relations; buying small tract of land; race relations; differences between whites in attitudes toward black farmers/sharecroppers; gardening for family sustenance; postwar changes in farming practices; Works Progress Administration; World War II; the Second Great Migration; labor in northern steel mills; army life in the 1950s and 1960s; experiences as a southern African American living in the West and working in the Army; working in the civil service system; black women's opportunities for a career in the 1950s and 1960s; health decline of parents; "reverse" migration of African Americans back to the rural South; and pride in seeing children and grandchildren go to college.

FIELD NOTES – CURTIS AND DOLLIE HARRISON

Interviewees: Curtis and Dollie Harrison

Interviewer: Catherine A. Conner

Interview Date: July 21, 2011

Location: Timmons ville Public Library, Timmons ville, SC

Length: 81:48

The Interviewees: Curtis Harrison lived the majority of his adult life in the Berkeley/Oakland, California area. After a career in the army, Mr. Harrison worked in the local Department of Social Services. He retired in the early 2000s. Voters in the town of Timmons ville elected Mr. Harrison to the town council in November 2011. Mr. Harrison is a distant cousin of Juliet Wilson and Thomasene Mason, two other interviewees for the Breaking New Ground project. Mrs. Harrison lived the majority of her adult life in the Baltimore, Maryland area. She worked as a nurse. She moved back to Timmons ville in 1999. The Harrisons met in December 2002 when Curtis returned to Timmons ville for his father's funeral. Shortly thereafter, and many large phone bills later, the two married and settled in Timmons ville. Both had sworn that they would never move back to their home town.

The Interviewer: Catherine A. Conner was a research associate for the oral history project, Breaking New Ground, and is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She worked on the project from May to August 2011.

Description of the Interview: Conner met Curtis and Dollie Harrison at a seniors' lunch at Bethel Baptist Church in Timmons ville. Mr. Harrison agreed to speak with Conner about the small town of Timmons ville (pop. 2315 according to the 2010 U.S. Census), its race relations, its postwar history, and potential contacts in the community. Mrs. Harrison accompanied her husband to the designated meeting place, the Timmons ville Public Library. After Mr. Harrison provided possible contact names, he began to talk about his experience as a hired hand in a tobacco warehouse. As the conversation progressed, Conner asked the Harrisons if they wished to participate in the Breaking New Ground project, as they originally declined because their families did not own farmland before 1965. Conner explained how the interviews would be archived and available to the public. Mr. Harrison agreed to go on the record, while Mrs. Harrison requested that her portions of the interview be closed to the public for ten years. The official interview began with Mr. Harrison continuing his discussion of the tobacco warehouse. Mr. Harrison talked about farm life until he asked about his family. He attributed the changes in postwar rural farming to the Second Great Migration and changes in farming practices. He related his father's experiences to these larger changes, and Mr. Harrison (senior) eventually left Timmons ville for New Jersey in 1956 and worked at a steel mill. Mr. Harrison also explained why he left as well as his experiences in the U.S. Army and California. Mrs. Harrison remained relatively quiet throughout the majority of the interview, interjecting a few thoughts or answering clarifying questions her husband asked. Both lived in Timmons ville at the same time, but neither knew each other in their youth. When Conner asked how the two interviewees met, Mr. Harrison suggested that his wife answer. In her answer, Mrs. Harrison also revealed why she had left Timmons ville. The interview ran for 1 hour and 20 minutes, while the meeting lasted for about 1 hour and 45 minutes.