SOHP Series: Listening for a Change
Davidson College Interviews

TRANSCRIPT - LEROY MAGNESS

Interviewee: Leroy Magness

Interviewer: Michelle Markey

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Location: Lincolnton, N.C.

Tape No.: (cassette 1 of 1)
(90 minutes)

Notes: Leroy Magness is a mainstay of the Lincolnton African American community, and has been a significant liason between the community and Lincolnton whites. He is one of the individuals to whom outside researchers interested in black life in Lincolnton are frequently referred. The interview offers a vivid account of his philosophical and personal development, and his non-confrontational approach to race relations and to life. The notes that follow are Davidson College student Michelle Markey's description of her encounter with him, and her transcript with comments.

I slowed down as I pulled off the ramp from the new black asphalt four-lane highway in frustration. I was supposed to be at my interview with Leroy Magness in ten minutes, and I saw nothing that resembled this place called Lincolnton, but just field upon empty fields. There was not even a gas station where I could ask for directions; plus, it was Sunday, and I hardly expected anything to be open in rural North Carolina on a Sunday. That was why the big barn-like antique shop caught my eye: "Open 7 Days," the outside wall read.

I walked into the dusty store and asked the man I took to be the owner where I could find Newcastle Drive.

"Newcastle? Never heard of it," he replied, and put out a cigarette in a filled ashtray with great concentration. I asked if he had a phone I might use, and he handed me a dirty portable. I called Leroy Magness, and proceeded to tell him that I was having trouble finding his house and had to repeat it

several times, for he had trouble hearing me. The connection was bad, and I could hardly hear him as he tried to give me directions. I found myself utterly confused, and I did not want to continually repeat my questions, so I gave up and decided to try to find it myself. Little did I know that I was to find it one hour and two gas station stops later.

As I drove around, I was extremely frustrated and angry; as I looked back at the directions, he had given me, I saw that they were nothing like the way that I would have had to take to get there. While beforehand his directions had seemed clear, he left out some very important bits of information which I did not pick up because I had never been there before. After I finally ran into a policeman who told me exactly how to get there, I cooled down a bit and started to think about why exactly I had gotten lost. Mr. Magness has lived in Lincolnton his whole life, and he had only left a handful of times. He assumed that I knew about certain landmarks and roads, but the place was so familiar to him he may have had trouble giving clear directions for someone who had never been there before. When one lives in the same place all of one's life, I imagine that it would be easy to take places and things for granted when one encounters them every day.

As I drove into the quiet subdivision where Mr. Magness lives, I saw that it was a small neighborhood of African-American families. It was a warm Sunday afternoon, and several families lounged on their porches while children played in their yards; a few people waved as I drove by. A handful of cars were parked in front of two of the houses I passed; I supposed that family and friends might have been gathering there. Two women walked along the road with two young children between them. A textile factory was down the road. The homes themselves were one-story ranches, brick or aluminum siding of various colors. This seemed to be a middle to lower middle class neighborhood. All the people I saw were African-American.

Mr. Magness's house was a one-story, light blue, and a shiny dark blue Buick was parked under the carport. The house and yard was trim and well kept.

He came to the door before I even knocked. He welcomed me inside with a smile and I apologized profusely for my lateness; he expressed that he had been worried his directions were wrong. I kept the secret.

Mr. Magness was a small man with light-brown skin. I knew that he was old, but he looked much younger than his age. He was impeccably dressed, in Sunday pants with a collared shirt and tie under a blue sweater vest. The inside of the house was thoughtfully decorated with matching rugs and furniture, some of which was covered in plastic. A chiming clock ticked unevenly on

the mantle, and a small tree sat on a table, and dainty Easter eggs hung from the branches. His wife greeted me from the doorway and worked quietly in the kitchen throughout the interview. The house was quiet and peaceful, a huge difference from the sense of anxiety I had felt for the past two hours in the car. I was a little tired throughout most of the interview, and I think that may have affected the way the interview went. After ten minutes, I put the questions I had prepared aside and decided to see where the interview would go from there.

As usual, I began by telling him about the purpose of my project and asked my now-customary first question about how long he had lived here. He talked in a slow, roundabout way, his voice rising and falling, sometimes louder, sometimes softer in which he would turn back to a drawl which I found difficult to understand at times. He jumped from topic to topic sometimes and I would not realize the connection until later. Nevertheless, his voice put me at ease, and I often found myself lulled by his lyrical voice.

[Begin Transcript]

"I've lived here all my life," he said. "I did leave here in 1933; I thought I wanted to go and live in Chicago but I found I didn't want to live there. I was in the wrong place. I left in October and in December I came back home. My mother had two sisters and a son and a couple of aunts, and I met a cousin and an aunt up there; I thought I wanted to go there but I found out that I didn't like it. It was too cold, for one thing, and I hadn't been used to . . .

"I left home in about the sixth or seventh grade - about 13 years old - and I'd never been to a mixed school before, but I went to a mixed school in Chicago for a couple of weeks, and everybody was nice. . . but I didn't have any children to play

with where I was living. I was living in the west side of Chicago, and I only saw - in the section, you know, a big city like that, so big I couldn't tell you - I saw a little black boy and a little black girl going to school . . . I think they were going to the same school I was, but I never did see them once I got there. But that wasn't the reason, I just didn't like to talk. . .it was cold, and . . .

"But we didn't move up there; my mother had two sisters living there and an aunt, and I had a brother living up there. He went up there in 1926 but he liked it all right, but I didn't so I didn't stay. I went in October and got back home by Christmas, by accident. But Daddy didn't really want to send me the money to come back, because he said I was so hot to go he wanted me to stay up there, because it was near Christmas time and I had a brother and two sisters. Back in the thirties, nobody had much money, but I had been working at a store on Main Street, that guy on Main Street right there, and of course it's torn down now. And the lady and her husband found out about it and kind of wanted me to come back. So it was right funny, she told my Daddy if he would give me half the money, she would give me the other half and I could work to pay her back. Well, they sent me twelve dollars, I believe it was. And I was thirteen years old, but being small like I am right now, my aunt went down and bought a half-fare ticket and said 'don't you tell

nobody you're more than twelve years old.' So I came back from Chicago to Lincolnton for six dollars and fifty cents."

Oh my gosh!

"It was on the bus. Well, when I got back - I had always been taught to be honest - I gave my daddy six dollars and a half back thinking that he had paid the whole thing, but when I found out about it, I had to work to pay them people back at fifty cents a week and I didn't make but a dollar a week, so I had to pay them fifty cents out of my dollar a week before I could pay them back. But things . . . I don't know . . . children now are different; we were discussing that this morning. Children now are different, not what they were when I was coming up. If I offered my grandson fifty cents to do something around here, he'd laugh at that. He wouldn't accept that. But we took what we could get, and if we weren't satisfied, we'd pretend like we were, but now they'll let you know if they're not satisfied. However, I have something here called *Lincolnton Tales* . . ."

He pulled out a book from under a table in the room. I flipped through it; it was a compilation of stories from members of the Lincolnton community, and his was in there. There was also a yellowed picture of his class in school.

"And I wrote a piece in that," he said with a hint of pride.

I read bits of the story, and asked, *So tell me then - what was it about here that made you come back from Chicago?*

"Well, I had a girlfriend, for one thing," he laughed out loud.

He pointed to the school picture in the book.

"There's my school picture right there. We had nine."

What school was this? I asked.

"Oaklawn School. The building's still there. But it was a black school. And it went from the primary to the high school, and in Lincolnton at that time, the high school wasn't accredited. That was one reason I guess I quit. I dropped out of the tenth grade. I didn't finish school. Yeah, I quit the tenth grade. But I don't know whether I missed out on things or not, I mean, I'm getting along all right. I'm retired going on eleven years, and I'm still working some. How old do you think I am?"

Sixty-five?

"Seventy-nine years old," he said with a wide grin.

Oh my gosh! He truly did look much younger than that.

"If I live to see January twelfth I'll be eighty years old! I've been married sixty-one years. Sixty-one years. . .

He continued on about his school. "Well, see, we went to school, and that was the class. I think it was seventh or eighth grade, I believe.

That's everyone that was in it?

"In that one class, yeah."

It must have been a close group of friends.

"Well, that was all we had, that one class. Didn't have too many, and that day I believe there's one, two, three, four. . . there's ten there, but we had eleven; one must have been out on picture day. That was the seventh or eighth grade, in about 1936. But that piece, I wrote that piece . . ."

I'd really like to read it.

"Yeah, I wrote that. We had a good setup. But I look back and see a lot of stuff I could've gotten or a lot of things I could've done, and I didn't do. But we had a good English teacher over there. In fact, he's been retired now, I guess two or three years, so he'd be about ninety years old now. He taught - in '63 or '64, he was head of the English department down there at Southern University. I made a trip down there, and my cousins lived down there. And we went down there thinking we were going to see an old man, but we saw a super-young man. He had about two or three kids.

"A lot of that, I missed that, so some of that I kind of regret, but other than that, I don't regret . . . When you work, it's not what you make; it's what you do with it after you make it. I never made a whole lot of money in my life, but I managed to pay my debts, and I got along good."

What did you do when you . . .

"I worked as a hospital orderly for sixteen years. Then I worked over there at the ABC store where I told you to turn. That's my work. I worked over there for twenty years, and I've been retired for eleven years, and I still work over there some. Maybe a couple times a month. So I worked over there a while, and then I was on with Carolina Cameras for a bit. I've been to about every school in Lincoln County, too. Sometimes I go around there and I recite poetry. I don't read it, I recite it. Most of it that I have, I've already memorized it before I even write it. For instance, next Sunday's Easter, and spring means Easter . . .

Mr. Winter packed up all the sleet and snow
March winds came everywhere
but where, I do not know.
Birds are singing everywhere
Buds are showing here and there
Lots of people seem to care
Because the day He died is near.
On this special Sunday morning
Samuel will be loud and clear.
They'll be talking 'bout our Master
Whom we all should love quite dear

For as we enter this new season
Won't you try to change your ways
For the day is surely coming
When you must also face the grave.

I was completely taken by surprise as he recited.

"Those thoughts. . . I had them before I ever wrote them down. Just probably an act of God.

I'm not angry with being the color black
For only God can create this day.
I've been taught since I used to know
My soul can be as white as snow
For if I live from day to day
And conduct myself in a Christlike way
He will at some time call me home
To live with him upon the throne.

"It's no use going around, holding you head up, being angry with someone. I'm not angry with anybody. There's a lot of things that I didn't approve of, but the way I felt about it, we had a voice back in the fifties . . .being in the choir. We'd go around to different places and sing. But I told them, integrate yourself with the very best of people as much as

possible, but segregate yourself from those who are impossible. That's doesn't just mean white, that means everybody. There's plenty of black people that I don't want to be bothered with. I don't like their attitude and I don't think they're acting like they should act, so I don't want to be bothered with them. I dodge a lot of people I don't want to be bothered with. You see a lot of people you don't want to be bothered with. You ever seen black people you don't want to be bothered with? Same way, no different. There's only two kinds of people: good ones and those that are not so good. I told my wife the other day: 'I figured out what the problem is in this world.' 'What you think it is?' she said. I said: 'Well, respect, responsibility, understanding, love, kindness, friendship, and only God above knows whether or not they're going to go back to work or not.'"

The clock chimed four between each characteristic he named.

"Now I was in the Boy Scouts back when I was a boy, and if everyone would act like Boy Scouts, we wouldn't have a bit of trouble in this world. We had rules we'd go by, and oaths. . . but it's a whole lot easier to do good than to do bad, I think. But some people just, I don't know. . ."

What was Boy Scouts like for you?

"Well, it was nice. Here in Lincolnton, we didn't have enough black boys to carry out all the details, or all the things it took to be a Boy Scout, but we could do things at

home. But taking trips, we'd usually go with the boys from Gastonia in the summertime when we'd go to camps and stay on about a week. Now my son - I have one son - they had a pretty good little group, and they'd go up to King's Mountain for I believe what they called an academy with the boys from Gastonia, too. And they'd go to other places. . .

"We got along pretty good. I don't think . . . well, Lincolnton's always had a lot of church people and I think most of them . . . I think 95 percent of them wanted to do right, tried to do right. We had picture shows, and we had to go up and sit in the balcony, but that didn't bother me. Some other people, it might have bothered them. But I might have been one who had a little bit different attitude from some people. Some people didn't like certain things, but the way I looked at it, if you don't like certain things, you don't have to deal with it. I've been on a lot of boards around here - the human relations council for a good number of years, I've got it in a scrapbook somewhere - but the City Council named people, black and white, to be on that council, and during that time they still had segregation. But I called up the chairman, and - we had a hotel here, but it was being torn down; it was where the citizens' center is now, but - I went up there to the council, and nobody said anything; they all treated me right. I've been working for the Democratic Party I don't know how long, and I've

been in programs and there might not be but one or two blacks there, but everybody always treated me right. Of course back years ago when we went to the picture show, we had to go upstairs to the balcony, but if I wanted to see the picture bad enough, it didn't bother me. But like I said, I was just a little different from some people. You might talk to some other folks that have a different idea about it, but I just, I don't know. I didn't want to be a troublemaker. Some people didn't mind being a troublemaker.

"But I remember when I was in Chicago one time - I've been up there several times - the taxi driver told me that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, and I would agree with him there because if you try to treat people right, then most of them - maybe not all - will treat you halfway decent. But if you go and try to treat someone ugly, then that's exactly what they want. Yeah, that's what they want."

Do you think there's ever a time when being nice doesn't work?

"Yeah, I think being nice *does* work." He seemed slightly indignant. "But I always tried to be nice to people, and I got along with people most of the time. I worked up on Main Street for sixteen years as a hospital orderly and I met a lot of people there I guess. If you try to put some good into things, you'll get some good out of it. If you're not going to put

something worthwhile into it, you can't expect to get anything out of it; that's the way I look at it."

Have you enjoyed living here?

"Oh yeah. I wouldn't move. I'll be here until the Good Man takes me. I like to go out some. Sometimes I'd go up to Fort Washington. I met President [context later in the interview suggests he means Senator Edward] Kennedy up at Andrew Air Force Base. The first time I went up there I was just going to try to make arrangements to see him; after I made arrangements, I didn't get there soon enough so I didn't get to see him, but he did write me a nice letter to tell me he was sorry he missed me. The fellows over there where I worked - about three or four years ago, I guess - when the Charlotte Hornets were getting started, we all went in together and bought him a Hornets sweatshirt and we took it up to him . . . yeah. I had written a couple of poems about his brother, the last time he was in North Carolina, and the other was after he passed. My and my wife, when our son was going to school, North Carolina Central . . . so we went over there because a fellow had gotten us some tickets . . . I got a scrapbook with all that stuff in it. Big scrapbook with lots of letters; I've even got a card from Norman Rockwell."

Yeah, I'd love to look at it.

"Let me see if I can get it right quick . . .." I heard

papers and books shuffling in the next room, and he returned with a thick scrapbook.

What's this. . . I pointed to a letter from the army. *Did you serve?*

"Well, I've got a brother that served in two wars, but not me."

It looks like you saved most all your letters here.

"Yeah."

I saw a letter where "Oaklawn" was printed at the top. *Is this from your school? Could you tell me a little more about your time in school? What was that like?*

"That was nice, I enjoyed it."

What were classes like? A typical day in school?

"Well, good, but some of them wasn't too good for me because I wasn't doing my French and English quite like I should have. We had about six or seven teachers though. We had one who was a professor, a very good mathematician. And we had a very good English teacher who I told you about named Faggett, Henry Faggett [sp?]. And I believe Juanita Baker [sp?] was in charge of the seventh grade. . .and we had some others but it's been so long, I can't remember most of them. But I enjoyed going to school. We had all our friends. I didn't play ball; I loved to watch it, but I didn't play it. We had football and basketball and baseball, but I didn't have any part because I was working

in the store before school and after school, so I didn't take any part in it . . . didn't take no part in it. Trying to make a few nickels. See, back when I was in school, we didn't have money much. That was back during the Depression."

What did most people do for a living?

"Well, most of them worked when they could, but the common laborer wasn't making but ten or fifteen cents an hour till Roosevelt came in. He was working about twelve hours a day, sunup to sundown; when Mr. Roosevelt came in, I think he changed it to eight hours and raised the minimum wage to twenty-five cents and hour. Yep, that's what he did."

And what did your family do?

"We had Social Security. . .I don't know if I've got that card in my pocket or not. I got my Social Security card in 1937, and they only took out a penny on the dollar."

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and searched for the card. He pulled out one and showed it to me.

"Well, that's the second Social Security card I had. I know I've got the original around somewhere. . .no, actually that's what that is - says 1937. Yep, they took out a penny on the dollar."

I again asked him what his family did, for I do not think he had heard me when I asked the first time.

"My daddy worked at a powdery [sp?]. My mama didn't work - she stayed home. We were discussing that in Sunday School this morning. She stayed at home and cooked good meals - beans, biscuits, and stuff like that. But everybody now wants to keep up with the Joneses, and the mothers work and the husbands do too, so I think that's why the children aren't getting the attention they need. Not getting the attention they need." He shook his head. "If they're not getting the attention they need at home, they don't get it in school, then they don't get it at all. You can't expect the teachers to do it because they're there to teach, not to tell them what to do. Now, everybody wants something . . . money to buy a car and this and that, and I had to save up my money just to buy a bicycle.

"You see, we had a couple of theaters here in town - I think I told you about all that - at one time, you couldn't go in the front. And we had cafes, and we couldn't go to through the front of them for a long time before they changed things. We had to go to the back. But we was lucky in a way. We had our own cafes. I think they had one on each end of town. And then they had a place out there called Midland, and you could get treats sometimes on a Sunday night. It was a white place, and you would go get a cone of ice cream and they had a little place to sit down; of course, they didn't have much of a place to sit down for anybody."

I began to ask a question, but he cut me off and pointed to the open page in the scrapbook I had been looking at.

"That's Kennedy right there. During that time we had this boy's cousin . . . he came here twice."

Really?

"Those two are dead, but I don't know about the other one."

They came here to Lincolnton?

"Yeah, we had them down here twice. Down at WBTV."

I tried to get back to the question I had begun to ask: *You were talking earlier about when you had to go to the back of the theaters and cafes, and then all that changed. What was that like for you? What were you thinking at the time?*

"Well, like I told you, you can't compare me to other people because I had a different attitude than some. But . . . you had to get used to it. Beause when things change you got to get used to things, but like I said, some people wanted to change things worse than I did. And they were willing to make sacrifices to do it. But I wasn't willing to make sacrifices to do certain things. I was pretty well satisfied with what I was doing. But after everything changed, people did what they wanted to do, about going to cafes, sitting where you wanted to sit. We had buses here in Lincolnton - you had to sit in the back - we couldn't sit up front." I thought I sensed a little indignance in his voice.

He continued. "All this was changed. In fact, I think I read a piece in the paper yesterday where they were giving Rosa Parks a plaque or something to say what she did. At that time, maybe it didn't seem like it was right, but in the final analysis, they figured out that that was the thing she should've done. Because what they were doing was taking away our rights when they really didn't have any reason to do that."

What did you think at the time when Rosa Parks did that?

"Well, in a way I wasn't too thrilled over it ëcause we had to take a lot of abuse - well, you didn't have to take abuse, with your hands - but, in places where we were working . . . there wasn't but two blacks where I was working at that particular time. And so you always have a few around that didn't agree with what she was doing, and they would make remarks you didn't like. . .but the best thing you could do was be quiet and not say nothing about it and let it go at that, because if you did, you might get in trouble with a fight, or you might lose your job.

"So you just had to look over things like that, and I found out that all through the years when I did that, things began to change. Like the old Negro spiritual says, let God take charge, and things'll come. They may not come when you want them to, but right'll always come when it's supposed to come. But you'll meet many other people out here in the community who will tell you

they see things differently. I'm just the kind of person who doesn't want to get into a whole lot of stuff. I'm just not that type. Never was. Too old to do it now." He chuckled.

"But I'm glad things are working out like they are. They actually have something this week where black churches and white churches are having holy week services together. Like tonight the service is at the white church, but I think the next night it'll be at a black church . . . and that'll go on all week. And I had a man make the remark when they were just starting to integrate - he said, 'Leroy, if we had more people like you, I reckon we wouldn't have trouble.'

"'Listen, there's a lot of people better than I am, but you just don't know them.'"

"Now see [addressing Markey] if your teacher or whomever hadn't recommended me as being the right type of person for you to come visit, you wouldn't have come, would you?"

Well, I guess I wouldn't have known -

"See, that's what I mean. I think that how we conduct ourselves - that's the way people begin to learn us a little bit. And then some people you think are all right aren't what you think they are. But I say 95 or 96 percent you would expect to have good dealings with, I think most of them would be all right.

"Now I was telling someone the other day that I had a good mother. She died . . .if I could keep my right mind, I wouldn't

do a thing today to make her wish she wasn't here. I respected my mother. She taught me how to do, how to live - try to live, and I want to try to be that way. Because I know that sometimes I get a little disturbed at my wife, and I know sometimes she gets a little disturbed at me." He laughed. "But we really get along pretty good. And we're just two months and a week from sixty-one years, so that's a long time to live together, ain't it?"

We both laughed. I asked, *What kinds of things do you hold on to from your mom? What do you remember about her?*

"Oh, I just remember, she was almost too good to me in a way. Even when I was getting up to be a pretty good size of a boy, about ten or eleven years old, and we didn't have no bathtub, just a tin tub to bathe in. My mama was still washing my back. She'd cook something, and even when I wasn't around, if she thought I'd like it, she'd save me some. And she'd save me a lot of it - a piece of white meat or the breast of a chicken - and I never did tell her, but I really didn't like white meat that good, but I didn't want her to feel bad." He chuckled. "No, I didn't like it that good. I'd eat it, but I liked the other part of the chicken better than I liked the breast.

"And there are so many nice things that parents - good parents - do for children. Like seeing them to Sunday school. And we were poor and didn't have too many clothes, and she would see that they were always clean, and sometimes she'd have to put a

patch on top of a patch. Things like that were good because it taught me how to live . . . and to try to have something and be somebody. If you don't teach children when they're young . . . we had a preacher several years ago who said you've got to start walking with them when they're two to three years old, teaching them how to be. Beause when they get to be about four or five years old they'll be out of reach. I think there's a whole lot to that.

"Some of these young people now, I don't think they know what they want. I got one grandson who's already been married twice. Got three children by one and two by another. I don't know," he shook his head and sighed. "They just don't seem to be like what they used to be."

Why do you think that is?

"I just don't know. I guess it's the times." More forcefully, he said, "Well, I guess it is the times, because I know I was reading a couple of weeks ago, when they were carrying Jesus Christ to the cross to be crucified, some lady began to cry and didn't sympathize - of course, nobody sympathized, but this lady broke down and somebody said, 'you ain't got to save them for yourself because the time would come when a barren woman would be considered fortunate.'"

What?

He repeated what he had said louder, as if I had not heard the first time.

"When a barren woman - a woman who couldn't have kids - would be fortunate. Wouldn't have all this mess to go through. I think me and my wife are ready to turn that. I've got this little book to read, and me and my wife read it every day. Like a book of inspirations, tells you what passages to read in the Bible to read, and I read that. In fact, my sister who lives across the street there, that's what she gives me for Christmas every year.

"I have two sisters, one lives across over there and the other one lives down the street. I had two brothers and two sisters, and I think I was the puniest one in the family. One of my brothers served in World War II and then the Korean War, and then he came home and had an accident. My older brother who's about ten years older than me died in '56. So I outlived my mama and my daddy too. He died not quite seventy and my mom died when she was 72. And my wife's 75 . . .

The clock struck the half-hour at four thirty and continued to tick incessantly.

"But I think all in all we've got a pretty good place to live in. Everybody might not agree with that, but that's just my feeling about it. We've had some tough times, but I think things have improved for everybody."

In what way?

"Well, we have better facilities. We have, if you qualify, the chance to get a better job, not as many as like Charlotte, but I think most places around here, if you qualify you can get a better job. And that was something you couldn't do years ago, because if you were qualified, maybe the job was filled with someone else who was white, but I think it was all right generally.

"What I'm saying is you've got to get out there and work for something. You can't expect people to come and just hand you something without working for it, because that's just not going to happen. Like I told you, I quit school. I could've been a teacher; I had the opportunity to go to Southern University if I'd have finished high school. But I chose to get married, and I'm not dissatisfied by it. I'm happy. Maybe I don't have as much money as I would've had, but I don't think money's everything anyway. Being happy is what really counts. I know plenty of people who have plenty of money but they're not happy. I mean, I try not to get down and out, but I'm a little. . . not exactly depressed, but. . . my wife's not feeling as good as she'd like to, and I'm hoping that she'll get to feeling better. She fell and broke her hip about four years ago, and before she did that, she could do some things I couldn't do. She could bend over and touch the floor without bending her knees - I can't!" He laughed. "But I hope she'll get better. We had good days. We've been on

some good trips, and we've got grandchildren and great-grandchildren, so I'm happy now."

What are some of your best memories?

"Oh, well. . .I guess there's been so many good ones I can't . . . Well, she was with me - I enjoyed going to Senator Kennedy's office, that was one, maybe not the best one. He had the nicest secretary. A lady from Boston, Massachusetts, and she loves to take pictures, took our picture. We had a nice day there. I don't know where they are now, but I've got so many photographs here I can't sort them all. And we made a trip to Florida, right before Disneyland opened; we were down in that neighborhood. Went to the World's Fair in New York. Then Chicago. And we've got friends in Columbus, Ohio, so we've been there a few times. And Wright Air Force Base where we got to see all those nice old antique air force planes, and then the Langley Air Force Base. So we've enjoyed it. I don't have many regrets. No regrets."

What have been some of the most significant events or people in your life? I had to repeat the question and he strained to hear.

"Well I don't know. . . when I met her, I guess." He laughed out loud. "I guess. And I was a mama's boy, so Mama was next to her. I guess between the two of them, that was the most wonderful things that happened to me, being associated with those two. Of

course, I enjoy my grandkids. But children, like I told you, they're just not like they used to be. I thought the world of my granddaddy, and I try to be good to them because back when I was coming up, we didn't have much. But my granddaddy, he was a pretty good house carpenter, so he had a lot of stuff around. House carpenters, now I know they didn't make what they make now, but he made a little more than the average common laboring man. A lot of things that we didn't have that we needed - I wouldn't say wanted - he would help us get. So that clock up there, that's my granddaddy's clock."

He pointed to the clock up on the mantle that ticked incessantly throughout the interview (and was the background on the tape) and struck the hour and half-hour.

"But it won't run eight days like it's supposed to without winding it. I don't know what it is, I guess the springs are weak or something. If I don't wind it, it won't run eight days.

"So I don't know. Like I told you, I could give you some other names you could contact that might give a different story, but I never was one to be a troublemaker. I kind of stayed back, didn't like to be in front like some people. I'm satisfied with the way I got along. Not angry with anybody. Satisfied."

I pointed to some letters in the open scrapbook before me. *What are these letters from?*

"Oh those are from doctors where I worked at the orthopedic hospital. There was a little boy down there. He didn't have anybody, and I would try to be nice to him and do things for him because he had nobody to ever come see him. Now what do you think of somebody being in the hospital and nobody ever coming to see him?"

I can't imagine.

"Yeah, our son had some trouble when he was an infant, and he had to go to the orthopedic hospital for about six or seven months, and me and my wife would go twice a week to see that boy too and bring him things. Like he didn't have a radio. . . yeah, we just kind of divided with him."

I flipped to some letters from the church pastor. *I guess the church is pretty important to you? I see some letters here . . .*

"Oh yeah." He nodded his head emphatically. "Very important. I used to be an elder in the church, but I stepped back a little bit, but I go. I go to Sunday school every morning at ten o' clock. We're not in the same church; she's a United Methodist, and I'm an African Methodist Episcopal. So we went to her church today. She goes down to church out there in the country on [Hwy] 73; you probably passed it."

What's it called?

"Tucker's Grove United Methodist Church."

I remember that. They have the camp meetings there, don't they?

"Yeah, they had the camp meetings there in August. About two weeks."

Do you go to that?

"Yeah, we went there today." Apparently he thought I was talking about the church service. "That's where she goes, but I go in town here on Main Street. But she never asked me to quit and join her church so I don't ask her to quit. So what we do is go to my church first for Sunday school and the service and then we go to hers. Her church doesn't start till twelve because their preacher preaches at two churches. So that gives us plenty of time to get down there before they start. Now you told me one time, but what part of Virginia are you from?"

A place called Rockville. It's kind of a rural area about 20 miles from Richmond.

"Oh yeah. My nephew's in Richmond right now."

What does he do there?

"Well, he's a lieutenant. Oh, he told me. . . they buy things for the government? He went to Utah this month, and he just got back yesterday, I think. But his home - where he's got his wife and house and a baby - is in Fort Washington, Maryland. But he'll go down there in the morning and go back home Friday evening. So he came down here with his wife and they picked us up

to visit them up there and then they drove us back here afterwards. Now at my age, I don't do a lot of driving. I drive, but I just don't make those long trips. I did drive to Pittsburgh, because she's got a sister there, and a niece who's a retired schoolteacher . . . but things are really better now. If you want to get out and do, you can do. What are you planning on doing? Journalism or something?"

I replied that I was unsure, but I thought I may have been interested in doing something with writing.

"Well, you might get a news desk, get on TV!" He chuckled.

I really don't know.

"You might get on TV."

My eye caught the names of Ruth and Ed Dellinger in the scrapbook and I asked him about it; I wondered if by some chance he knew Gail Dellinger [another person Markey interviewed for the project].

"She's dead now, but she was a white lady I worked with up at the hospital. They're both dead now, but they were the nicest people."

I mentioned that I had spoken with Gail Dellinger, but he replied that he was not familiar with her.

"Well, I don't know if there's any connection there, but there's a good many Dellingers in Lincoln County."

You've really collected a lot of stuff here. The book was a good six or eight inches think and bulged with letters and photographs of all types, formal and informal. Holding on to every bit was clearly important to him.

"Yeah, I reckon I'll leave it to my great-grandson when I'm gone."

I pointed to a photograph of a man who looked similar to him.

"Oh, that's Pat Taylor. He was running for governor. I was the chairman of a program, yeah. Patrick Taylor. He was a nice fellow. Skipper Bowles beat him out, though. They had some kind of a conflict, Skipper Bowles beat him out, and that's how he got to be governor. The Democratic party split. One got angry, and I don't know who was right and who was wrong. I was a Pat Taylor man, but I could have voted for Skipper Bowles, and I guess I did at the final analysis, but a lot of Democrats didn't vote for him on account of Mr. Taylor. That's how you get beat, though; when you've got one side of a party against another, and get them angry, that's what gets them beat."

What happened?

"I don't exactly remember. Just politics."

Well, what would you say have been some of the biggest changes around here in your lifetime?

"I'd say the schools when they integrated. You mean through the years, is that what you're saying? Yeah, I guess the schools."

What were you thinking when desegregation occurred?

"What did I think about it? Well, I guess I didn't think about it as much as some people because I wasn't in school and when they started going, they had a little trouble at first, but I don't think it really amounted to much."

What was the trouble specifically?

"Well . . . I don't know . . . like I told you, maybe one or two of the whites and a couple of the blacks didn't see eye to eye on something - schoolchildren. Yeah, schoolchildren. I don't think any grown people were involved; I don't really remember. But I do remember hearing something about some of the schoolchildren getting into a ruckus, but they got it straightened out pretty quick and there wasn't any bad results out of it. I think some of the NAACP offices went and straightened out some of the black children, but I can't say about any of the white children or who looked after them. They did get it straightened out so it wasn't too bad."

Do you think desegregation was worth it?

"Well, some are discussing it now, but I don't really know. What they're saying is that is wasn't equal and that the blacks weren't getting what they were supposed to be getting. I know

back when I was in school, my mother and some other ladies - we didn't have a principal connected with it; but we didn't have a bus to ride home. And they had some children down at the other end of the county who didn't have a way to get to school, so I think they finally bought an old bus to transport the children up here to school. And I think one of them might have been in my class. And I don't mean any harm for saying it because you couldn't help it and I couldn't either, but these buses were running up and down the road hauling white children and some of the black children had to get to school the best way they could. Now I don't know whose fault that was and I'm not laying the fault on anybody, but it wasn't exactly right - you know that too, don't you?" He laughed and I nodded. "I'm not putting the fault, unless it was the state, because it was segregated. I know a black fellow who worked at a mill around here. They say he did it for devilment, but he went and drank out of a white fountain, and they fired him. In the courthouse, they had restrooms for blacks, water fountains for blacks, restrooms for whites, water fountains for whites. But like I was telling you, you might meet somebody tomorrow or the next day who would say, 'I went and got some water out of there, I did this. . . ' but I didn't force myself to do anything about it, and maybe you say I'm chicken and maybe I am, but I won't admit to it because I just don't like to get in hassles about things. I don't like to do that. And that's

the way I've tried to tell my boy, not to get in things when you don't have to get yourself in trouble. Even now, out on the highway, me and my wife are out there driving. I'll be doing the speed limit which is 45 or 55 and somebody'll be behind me and they're just dissatisfied because they want me to break the speed limit. And I just hope that we'll get to a place where they can go around me so I won't have to deal with that. I know that some fellows got in a fight right down here at Gastonia. Man was driving a truck, and he said he was pushed out off the highway, and he got off at a ramp and the man followed him home, and they got in a fight. So you don't know when you're right or when you're wrong now. So I just don't like to get in things like that. And when I say something, I want to be honest and tell the truth about it, and they can believe it for what it is. If the truth hurts, now I can't help that. That's just the way I am. I don't want to be involved in certain things. Because I love my family, I love my wife, I love my children, my grandchildren, my neighbors, and I try to love my neighbors in other families. I don't want to go around here with someone shooting at me, because you can't tell what people will do to you know.

"Just like Charlotte. I don't go to Charlotte. I went to Charlotte one time several years ago because I wanted to see about getting me a suit. I went to the store and went in. But then I came out and my wife said, 'Where's your suit?' And I

said, 'We're going home.' I'm scared of Charlotte. Yeah, I'm scared of Charlotte."

What scares you about it?

"They've got so much hell raising going on over there wouldn't you be afraid? I'm afraid of it, and I don't mean any harm telling you. I'm scared of Charlotte. I don't go, not by myself. I go with somebody else. It shouldn't be that way. Just people have got so mean. They'll take your car. I heard people bumping cars with folks over there. Man down the street said someone bumped his car.

"I don't know what it's coming to. What do you think about this 2000 millennium? I was talking to a white lady who I used to work for last night. The way she was talking last night, it's scary."

You mean about the computers?

"They say if the computers go down, everything will go down."

I hope they're wrong.

"Yeah, I hope they are, too. How would we get along? If you had a generator but no gas to run it, you still wouldn't have no lights. She said they bought a wood stove just in case. Well, as high as wood is, a pile from down the road there is fifteen dollars and that would hardly last you three days. I don't know what it's coming to. Sad. The thing about it is, young folks like

you - at my age, I've lived my best days and I'm gong downhill, but you folks are going uphill, and that's who it's going to hurt. They keep saying we'll be ready for it, but I don't know whether we will or not. I hope so."

I was becoming tired and losing my focus. The clock struck five. *Well, I've kept you a while. If there's anything you'd like to add that I haven't asked yet, feel free to mention it. Maybe something that I didn't ask that you feel it would have been important to discuss . . .?*

"You might have asked me something that I could have answered, but I don't know anything in particular. Maybe you know something you want to ask me, so feel free to ask me and I'll be honest with you. I won't tell no story; I'll tell it like it is, the truth. Like I said, I've gotten along pretty good. Except during the Depression, we had financial problems. But even back then, there were white people in this town - if they knew you, they'd help you if they could. You always had some good people around here in Lincoln. Good church people, and I think that made a difference. I know some of my white friends would say, 'Leroy, now that I'm grown I know better. A lot of things my folks told me, I don't agree with any more.' So I'm not holding anybody responsible. We're supposed to be good Christians, and that's what I'm trying to do. We're supposed to love everybody, and

that's what I'm trying to do. If they don't love me, that's their problem." He chuckled.

"Like there were several folks around here who, if they knew you, they'd give you some bones and even leave a little meat on them so you could make some soup. And that was white giving black something. So there's always been some good people. If there wasn't the world wouldn't stand. As many good people during segregation as any time."

I had thought he was speaking metaphorically about "leaving meat on the bones." I asked if he remembered any specific incidents or people who were particularly generous and what they did.

"Yeah, Mr. Harley worked in a meat market. He was nice about giving you meat bones and things. If they knew you, they'd try to help you out. Even during segregation. I was brought up in the Presbyterian Church, even though I go to a Methodist Church now. Well that Presbyterian Church is having a mixed service tonight. Every Christmas they give all our children nice bags. If they needed books, they'd give that. But I can't help but like them because there were a whole lot of Christmases when I was a boy when I didn't get as much as I wanted. So I've got a place in my heart for that congregation because they were so nice to us. The reason I got in to the Methodist Church where I'm going now was because one of those girls I liked started going there and I just

sort of followed the crowd. My mother would still be happy if I was going there, but they don't have services but twice a month. You get used to going to church services every Sunday, you don't like that twice a month business. I don't anyway. You want to go every Sunday. So I go every Sunday unless I'm sick or something. I don't miss.

"I'll tell you what - do you have a piece of paper or something so I can get your phone number and address? I'll just stick that in my book so I can keep it. I enjoyed talking with you. I hope I helped you."

Oh definitely. This has been great and I've enjoyed it.

"I hope so."

I appreciate your taking the time to talk. And to put up with my lateness.

He offered me a Coca-Cola and I accepted it, I wrote down my address while he got the drink. The room was quiet.

He brought back the drink in a tall glass with square ice cubes that chinked against the sides of the glass. He filled out a few forms while I drank the soda. As I was leaving, the middle-aged woman whom Mr. Magness introduced as his neighbor knocked on the door. I walked out into the unusually warm March air and drove home. This time, I did not get lost.

End of Tape