

Narrator's name: Coy Armstrong  
Tape numbers: 1 & 2  
Date of interview: October 16, 1985  
Place of interview: Rt. 6, Mebane, N. C.  
Old Hillsborough Rd.  
Interview's name: Mary L. Dexter  
For: History 103 Oral History  
(Cane Creek Project)

COY ARMSTRONG: . . . was in the grocery store the other day. We were discussing taking them farmer's land out there. There was seven dairies in that district that they was a coming to mak'em do away with for the water running off their farms into that lake. Two of'em done had to sell out on account of this lake.

MARY DEXTER: Who was that?

ARMSTRONG: Stanfords. Adjoining land with me.

They was a discussing it and there was an old lady about seventy some years walked in the store there and she got in the conversation. Said it didn't make a damn to her whether they backed water over every dairy in Orange County, she'd go to the A & P store to get her milk. I said, "Why in the hell didn't you tell her that you'd been to many a A & P store and I've never seen they're a given milk." I says, "It costed a lot to put it on that [shelf]."

It's pitiful ignorant, how ignorant—I'm ignorant as I can be . . . .

Then students would come there, when they helped us fight that lake. They made a couple of thousand dollars to help us fight that lake. And they would come out there --I would be a canning, or planting, or a freezing beans, fruit, peaches and apples and so on, and they'd say, "Well, if I just only knowed what you do, I don't know what I'd...." I'll tell ya, [they] come out here--an old clod-hopper trying to put him up something to eat for the winter--college graduates and students talk like, they say, "That's it! All we knows is what a book says." They said, "You've had the experience. You know."

Was you raised in New York?

MD: Yes, sir. Upstate.

ARMSTRONG: What do you think of this part of the country?

MD: I like it just fine. I like the weather here better.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I'll tell you, whatever you say, we have our ups and downs, but I'll tell you the truth--old North Carolina is hard to beat.

MD: You [have] more of an equal distribution of the seasons.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. That's it exactly.

MD: We get six months of winter. I don't need that. A little bit goes a long way.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. I know what you mean. Well, I'll tell you right now--bein's how I have come along a ways--people

are changed, and the seasons have changed, and I'm glad most of my days are behind me.

MD: How old are you Mr. Armstrong?

ARMSTRONG: Seventy-one years old!

MD: Let's see, that makes you born what year?

ARMSTRONG: Fourteen.

MD: 1914. Where were you born?

ARMSTRONG: In Wilkes County [N. C.].

MD: Whereabouts there?

ARMSTRONG: In the western part of the state in between Elkin and North Wilkesboro.

MD: What was your daddy's name?

ARMSTRONG: Tom Armstrong. [Thomas M. Armstrong]

MD: And you mama's name?

ARMSTRONG: Diny Armstrong. She was a Gray and married an Armstrong. [Nancy Diana Gray Armstrong]

MD: Do you remember your grandparents?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, my gosh. I've got two bedspreads in yonder that my great grandmother planted the cotton, seeded it, spun the thread, and wove it.

MD: I'd like to see it before we're done.

ARMSTRONG: I've got two of 'em.

MD: What was your father's parent's names?

ARMSTRONG: Bynum and Carry Armstrong. My grandmother was a (Pinnick?) before she married a Armstrong.

MD: And how about your mama's folks?

ARMSTRONG: They were Grays. My mother's mother was a Armstrong but it was a different set. They were come from Holland and my father's folks come from England.

MD: And did they farm in Wilkes County?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, ma'am.

MD: Just their own small farm?

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

MD: What kind of crops did they raise there?

ARMSTRONG: Corn, wheat and tobacco.

MD: Did they have livestock?

ARMSTRONG: yes, ma'am. A family cow they called it. 'Bout two or three cows. And they had farm livestock. They had horses and mules.

MD: How big a family did your folks have? How many brothers and sisters do you have?

ARMSTRONG: There's three of us. I have one brother and one sister.

MD: What's your brother's name?

ARMSTRONG: Ray.

MD: He live next door?

ARMSTRONG: Well, that's how come [I'm] up here. I had no wheres to go and he says, "Come on. I got enough land. You get you a mobile home. You're down here by yourself and you're liable to get bad off sick some night and couldn't get to the telephone, and you've got to get you a trailer. Let'em have it."

I'll tell ya, I was the only one. I'll tell you right now, it's something to live in a community sixty-eight years--where you wasn't but eight years old when you moved there--and have to get up and leave all my neighbors. I'd be so sleepy but I'd set up til ten, eleven o'clock at night, maybe. I said maybe I can sleep tonight a sitting up this late. I'd go to sleep and wake up, hit the floor, walk the floor two or three hours, wondering where I was a going.

You ain't got no say-so over nothin no more! They stood over there--the lawyers stood on the Court House steps in Hillsborough and told the folks people in Drange County didn't own nothin! The federal government, the state would come in the county, run a road and do what they please. I said it wouldn't do for me to [have] been there. I said it wouldn't done no good. I says [to] a fella, "If that's the case, why in the world don't them town, federal, state government pay the tax on it?"

MD: I know it.

ARMSTRONG: (steps away from table) I got a bad habit. I use a little snuff.

MD: Why that's just fine. It's probably kept you young.

ARMSTRONG: Well, I'll tell ya, in nineteen and eighteen, when there was an epidemic of flu, I was

about five or six years old. I'd like to bled to death cause they couldn't get my nose to stop bleeding. My mother was down in one room with the flu and my sister was two weeks old.

MD: What's your sister's name?

ARMSTRONG: Virga. She married a Byrd [Edgar].

And my father was in the other room with the flu. And my grandfather—we lived about a little farther [than] from here to Ray's over there--apart. My grandfather was down with it, and his mother--that was my great grandmother--waited on him and my grandmother waited on us. And neighbors that didn't have it. They died

They died like flies. They come through our yard in one week with three out of one family. Folks don't know nothin about flu til it was 1918. Down there at Fort Bragg the soldiers died just like flies and there was no nothin what to doctor'em with. Wilkes County was known for its liquor. They make liquor. They said they'd send them army trunks up there, to Wilkes County, and load that liquor on by the barrel. That was the only thing they knowed to do for that flu they had. Had never nothing like it happened. Just like this AIDS business. I'll tell ya, they're a getting so many people that something has got to thin'em out.

MD: It does get frightening doesn't it when you got something that you don't know what to do with.

ARMSTRONG: And they don't know what's causing this mess. That doctor down there at Atlanta said they have come up with everything to be thought of. He says it's an epidemic just like this flu in 1918 and everything else. They just don't know.

Now they said down there in Florida, they're running a little experiment in a kinda swampy area in this kinda little village. There's one part of it they cleaned up, disinfected and so on to kill the germ; the other half they didn't. And they said thirty-six people in that section that they didn't clean up had AIDS, and in the other part there wasn't a case. They said it was mosquitos, mosquitos. They don't know what it is.

MD: That flu, anybody in your family die from it?

ARMSTRONG: Nope. No. And my grandmother used snuff and she died and never had it. And my great grandmother never had it.

MD: Did you know her?

ARMSTRONG: Well, I reckon so. She waited on me. I lived with her 'til I was seven. We all lived together 'til I was seven years old.

MD: What was your great grandmama's name?

ARMSTRONG: Nanks.

Listen, how did you get my phone number? Did you call information?

MD: No. I talked to Mrs. Carolyn Lloyd and she looked it up in a book I think she must have had, cause she went away from the phone a minute and looked it up. She gave me your brother's phone number and yours to see if maybe I could find you through Ray. Then she also found your number somewhere. She had it.

ARMSTRONG: Them people put up a hard fight. I'll tell ya, what hurts so bad. [They] took 36,000 acres [from] them people down there in Chatham and then come up here, in twelve miles and take seven hundred and fifty. I'll tell ya, we got some smart people, and in some cases they ain't so smart, I don't think.

You take over there, it's the Pickard place. When we moved down here in twenty-two. . . we're twelve mile from there, from my old home, to Chapel Hill; twelve to Mebane and twelve to Hillsborough and twelve to Graham. I was in the center. Well to hit the highway, we lived a mile and a half off the 54 Highway. I can tell you the families that lived on 54 Highway then. Was the Pickard place, and Mr. Charlie Durham, Mr. Ed Durham, Mr. Ed Eubanks and the Davis sisters, two old maids lived together, and Dr. Lloyd.

MD: Which Dr. Lloyd was that?

ARMSTRONG: Carrboro, Chapel Hill. He's been dead for several years. He use to be our family doctor.



MD: Oh, really?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, Dr. Brack Lloyd. And you go along  
And you go along that highway--great fields of corn,  
cotton, wheat. You go down that highway now--the last  
few years, I never seen a hill of corn, I never seen a  
garden. Nothing in them fields--mobile homes, great big  
homes. Fancy homes yet. With the way the population's  
expanding so, you can depend these very same  
things can happen in this country as it has in Africa.

MD: Gonna run out of food. Keep covering it up with  
houses and. . . .

ARMSTRONG: No place to raise it! I tell you right  
now, they call it industry and so on--it's a  
wonderful thing but you got to carry all parts along  
together.

MD: Where 54 is, you call it 54 now. What did you  
call it then?

ARMSTRONG: Back then it was 54 Highway.

MD: 54 Highway as long as you lived there?

ARMSTRONG: But they changed it since. Used to go  
around. Nothing but an old sand-clay road and [it] went  
all around. They straightened it out. It went around by  
Bethlehem, Bethel Church, and come to Calvander, and  
hit 86 over there. Then into Carrboro.

MD: I saw on the way up here where it said  
"Old Chapel Hill Road", down here, and it kinda stopped.

That must have been about where it came up and around, that way? Go right down over by Orange Grove?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. No, not Orange Grove, Bethel Church! Way down yonder, this side of Chapel Hill. Let me see where. . . .

MD: Down by the quarry?

ARMSTRONG: You know where that rock crusher place has been? Well the road right up this side of it, that highway goes through there, but that use to be 54 Highway around there and come into Calvander over there, into Carrboro. That's the way you went into Chapel Hill, Carrboro.

Did you get the history of the church over there? Cane Creek Church? Ole Cecil Crawford, he's. . . .

MD: Yes, we sat and talked to him. We probably ought to go back and talk to [he and his sister] just specifically about the church. Did you belong to that church?

ARMSTRONG: Absolutely. My people, my mother and father is buried there, grandmother and grandfather.

MD: They're all buried there?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, ma'am.

MD: When did they come from Wilkes County? What year and why?

ARMSTRONG: In twenty-two.

MD: Why did they move? Why did they come here?

ARMSTRONG: Well, Mr. J. K. Reynolds up in. . . we lived in Surry County seven year. We moved from there to here.

MD: You were born in Wilkes County ?

ARMSTRONG: I was born in Wilkes County. We moved from there to Surry, and Mr. Reynolds owned that mill tract down there and he got in with my father and grandfather to come and farm and run the mill. So that's how come they happen to know him.

MD: Did your father and grandfather have mill experience? Is that how they happen to know him?

ARMSTRONG: Well, I'll go back a notch. There were three brothers that come from England: John, Clem and Sam. They settled in the western part of North Carolina. They said one of them owned Wilkes County, one Yadkin and one Surry. Sam, the one in Wilkes County, they said he had twenty-seven grist mills on the Yadkin River and them tributaries. Now this is all I know, what I been told.

MD: And this was Sam Armstrong?

ARMSTRONG: Armstrong. Yes, ma'am. Old Uncle John over at Mount Airy, where that granite quarry is, they said he sold that land for fifty cents an acre. And had worked there for years and years. That's pretty granite. They said he had many a mill on them tributaries. My grandfather--by that [being]

handed down generations--had a little experience. But it don't take no experience. Common sense. The old fashion rock. I've ground many a bushel of corn and helped make many a bushel of self-rising flour.

MD: This mill down here that Mr. Reynolds had, had he been running it?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, he had had it run.

MD: He had it run? He owned it but he . . . .

ARMSTRONG: He did not run it.

MD: Do you know who ran it for him?

ARMSTRONG: No, I do not. I never . . . .

MD: When your daddy came he ran the mill?

ARMSTRONG: My grandfather and him together.

MD: And it was what kind of mill?

ARMSTRONG: It went by the [name] "Union Mills" then.

Dr. Wolcott, Dr. Jones, and old man Tom Odum and old man Mike Moore owned it. Scuse me, I'll be back in a minute. (tape off; he leaves room, returns with photograph of a painting of a three story mill; tape on) There's a picture of the old millhouse.

MD: Isn't that beautiful. Is it still there?

ARMSTRONG: No ma'am. It wasn't there when that picture was made. Me and--do you know Rachel Best?

MD: No.

ARMSTRONG: Charles Best's wife?

MD: Don't believe I do.

ARMSTRONG: Well when you come up the Mebane Daks Road, wasn't far after you turned off 54 you come to a crossroad. You remember?

MD: Yes.

ARMSTRONG: Well they live and run that dairy right across from that crossroad over there. She come down there one Sunday evening. She says, "Coy, I want you to go with me down here to the bridge and describe that millhouse like it used to be." Well we went and we worked. I described it and she drewed it off. We worked 'til [slam ?] dark. Old man Polk Teer--old man J. K. Reynolds bought that land from old man Polk Teer. And one of the Teers, Nelo Teer, [a] great grandson, wanted a large picture of that. So she made it. She come up here and she said, "Now I want you to tell me, is this exactly like it was then?" I said, "Yeah, except one thing." I said, "You left out a big sycamore tree that stood out in front of the millhouse where people tied their horses."

MD: That would have been right there? (pointing to foreground between building and water)

ARMSTRONG: That would have been right across the road. Right over there. (pointing to the picture's background to the right of the building)

MD: And this is what you called a grist mill?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, and a flour mill too.

MD: Could you describe some of that operation?  
People would come up right over here, over the bridge  
with their wagon?

ARMSTRONG: You see, they changed the road. Now where  
this road come around and went up in front of the  
millhouse, come out by the miller's house and up by  
the store house and back to the main road. And they  
changed that now, and that road comes straight,  
instead of going by the millhouse, comes straight up  
by my old place.

MD: What would they bring in their wagon?

ARMSTRONG: Corn, wheat.

MD: This was kernels of corn?

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

MD: What happened to it? Brought it in bags?

ARMSTRONG: They brought it in bags and had a corn  
sheller and it was run by power with the rest of the  
mill. Put them ears of corn in that corn sheller,  
shake it out in the hopper. Take it in a half a bushel  
and pour it into the hopper of the mill.

MD: Then where did it go from there?

ARMSTRONG: It went through the rocks and it come out  
in meal.

MD: So there were stones?

ARMSTRONG: One stone set still. The other revolved  
around and then [there] were burrs cut out of them

stones just like a pair of scissors would work. And we had to sharpen that stone every so often, with a pick [to] dig them little burrs out. [If you] run your rocks too close together it would smooth [them] you see. But you had to have them grooves in there so it would run cross-ways and grind that corn.

MD: What kept the distance between the two? What was there that kept the two stones [apart]?

ARMSTRONG: There was a lever that you adjusted your rocks with. If it got too coarse, turn the lever to run your rocks closer together, and if it was too fine you turned your lever the other way to raise it so it wouldn't be too fine.

MD: What was at the core, the center of the rocks? Was there a bearing of some sort that kept them [apart]?

ARMSTRONG: There was a shute to come out. A little shute run into a big chest and a sifter, run by power, sifted the bran out of the (pause) .

MD: What kind of power were you using for the . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Water!

MD: That wheel there that you can see (pointing to the picture of the mill)?

ARMSTRONG: That's the water over the water wheel. That [water] wheel there pulled the mill.

MD: Where did this water come from up here? (pointing to water in trough above the water wheel)

ARMSTRONG: A dam about a half a mile up there.

MD: Was it a pipe coming down?

ARMSTRONG: It was a ditch 'til it got to this. Just before it got to the millhouse there would be a box made. It was about that high (knee high). It had a gate that you raised to turn the water on that wheel. Had little notches; if it run too fast you raised for more water, and if you didn't want it to run so fast, cut it down. That [water] wheel was twelve [feet] in diameter.

MD: Do you know what it was made of?

ARMSTRONG: It was made of steel.

MD: The whole wheel was steel.

ARMSTRONG: The whole wheel! Now the other mill was run by wooden wheels. That was a steel wheel.

MD: Do you know what happened to that?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I do.

We come here in twenty-two and you'd stand out there in the yard at night and you could hear the water a pourin over that dam, just a roaring. The shoals--down there below the old millhouse [there] was a lot of rock--you could hear that water just a rollin. We run that mill 'til twenty-five when there come a drought. And it never rained from April [when] there come a little sprinkles. What wet the ground was the last week in November or snow.



People planted their crop. A little corn go about that high (four feet by his hand indication). My grandfather and father cut their corn and shocked it to feed their livestock through the winter. Teers had four cows and four horses, I believe. And we had two horses and two cows. Well they had to sell two of their cows, they couldn't raise enough to feed'em.

And that water--had to quit running the mill on account of there wasn't no power. Didn't have no water. That pond cracked open. Was so dry it cracked open [and] you could put your hand down in between the crack. There was two springs. We had to carry our cows and horses about a mile for water'em and we had to carry water to my grandfather and grandmother. And my granddaddy had to carry water. They lived a little further from us than where we lived. We had to carry that water from the mountain spring. All the water there was [was] in that creek. One of the mountain springs got half way to the creek bed and the other one would run about from here to that back step and go in the ground, the ground was so dry.

MD: Just disappeared?

ARMSTRONG: That's right exactly. And that water 'til today ain't. . . .you know seasons ain't like they used to be. In the winter time it would rain two or three days, a steady rain and that would soak in the

ground and get that clay wet and then when these dry spells would come on in July and August that'd help the crops over. But you know, we didn't have no rain last winter!

MD: Got right cold.

ARMSTRONG: You're darn right. I'll tell ya, I can't take it no more. Use to, cold weather didn't bother me but when you get old you cain't take it.

MD: You say you also did up flour at this mill?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. It was a rolling mill too. Three stands.

MD: I don't know what a stand is. Would you explain that to me.

ARMSTRONG: It would be so interesting to you if you only knowed. They were big rollers about that big around (8" to 10" diameter; he held his hands up to show me - not touching thumbs and index fingers); and about that long (2' or 3' indicated by spreading his hands). This stand set up about that high.

MD: About four feet off the floor?

ARMSTRONG: I'd say five [feet]. Up this high to me (standing; his hand held shoulder high). They was pipes. There's one down on each side; [one] this side of the roll and that side of the roll.

This side was the breaker. Them rolls were corrugated, right fine, rough. That was the breaker

rolls. It went down through them stands, through them rolls, back under the millhouse. Elevators took it back upstairs and brought [it] back up on the other side which ground it a little finer. It went back under the millhouse. Then elevators carried it to the second stand, then rollers. It went through them and [it was] beginning to go into flour then. Went back up to the conveyor into a big sifter. Then sifter cloths was pure silk.

MD: Whereabouts did that come from? Do you know?

ARMSTRONG: We ordered it for mills. For all these rolling mills. It was made for them. Well what was ready out of flour, it come down on the other side [and] went into a bin. This other, what was too coarse, went back up through this stand, back up and into the last stand. If it wasn't fine enough then on that side it went back to the last rollers on the third stand, and then a lot went into the sifter. It sifted. A bran come down one shoot over here in a barrel, and the flour in a big bin.

MD: So you ended up with a fine [flour]. What color was the flour when it got done?

ARMSTRONG: (Spoken softly, emphatically) Just as white as you get at the store over there today.

MD: And then you had the bran?

ARMSTRONG: Had the bran and the short. You don't know what "short" means but that was the heart of the wheat. (Agin spoken slowly, softly for emphasis) And that made the best pancakes you ever seen!

You know what? You can call me old-time or whatnot, but I like the old time. Now a lot of this modern convenience is mighty nice, but folks seen more satisfaction back there in them days than they do now. Folks use to raise their corn crop, their cotton crop, their tobacco. And they raised what they eat, their beans ...

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

Note: Mr. Armstrong observed me turning the tape over and asked "Are you recording me?" I told him I had been (the recorder rested on the kitchen table, within three feet, but he apparently had been unaware that I had turned it on).

I again explained the Southern Oral History Program, and the purpose of my particular interview as part of an oral history project. I assured him his story was worth telling and being heard. He said that he had told these stories many times recently-over and over. (tape turned over; tape on)

ARMSTRONG: Well I'm no talker. I'm telling you when you get old you can't get it all. . .you have to tell it (pause) as it is in your mind.

MD: That's the way anybody should. If they were to tell it any other way it would have a kind of fake feeling for it. You ought to be able to just recall it out of your mind, just the way you feel.

ARMSTRONG: Well, that's just what I do, but sometimes things will hit you. You could be talking about one thing and maybe something else will . . . (laughs).

MD: That makes for good conversation.

ARMSTRONG: Well, when we moved down here my mother and grandmother sold about fifteen or twenty bushel of dried beans.

MD: What kind of. . . ?

ARMSTRONG: We brought enough beans, ice potatoes, sweet potatoes to do us and Mr. Reynolds, [who] run the store there when we moved down here. And they sold him ten or twelve bushel of dried beans and we had beans and peas all the winter. But you know, after that, them beetles hit the country and up there where we was raised, all that stuff. . . . Just like it tells you. The Bible said every generation gets wiser and weaker and it's a fulfilling it just as fast as the days roll on. Now you may not believe in what I believe in, but it's a comin. The day's a comin. If you watch and read,

it's just a fulfilling it just as fast as it can. A lot of folks say there ain't no God. They gonna wake up one of these days. . . .

MD: Gonna be right there isn't it?

ARMSTRONG: How was this world created if it wasn't created? It just didn't happen here.

MD: That's true.

ARMSTRONG: We were all put here to die and the Good Book plainly tells you your days is numbered. And when that day comes you're a going and no doctor or hospital, nor rest home, nor nothing else is going to save you.

MD: Time's up.

ARMSTRONG: It sure is.

MD: Did you stop using the mill after 1925?

ARMSTRONG: They run it with power there with a tractor but grain was so cheap, and fuel [so expensive], they couldn't make nothing so they discontinued it and sold the metal wheel and everything for junk.

MD: Oh, they just sold it for junk?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

MD: Were the elevators. . . ?

ARMSTRONG: That millhouse was three stories high. you poured that wheat up in a bin. It had a cleaning machine, a smutter. You know grain used to have smut in it. You don't know what that is but it's bastard heads of grain that ain't nothing but soot. And they

had this cleaning machine. You pour that wheat into that bin, it carried it up to the that smutter. It blowed the smut out and it come on back and run through.

You don't know what cockrel is but it's a weed that grows in bad growing wheat. The seed is like a morning glory. That machine would separate that cockrel from the wheat. The wheat would come out down there and the cockrel, little black seeds, would come out over there on that side.

It would have been so interesting if you could've seen it. I can tell you 'til I fell dead and you can't understand--realize how it looked. That millhouse was three stories high.

MD: What was it built of?

ARMSTRONG: Wood. The sills was hewed and put together with pegs and old homemade nails. And I've seen the water--I was in there when the water was that high in that millhouse--half way up.

MD: Right up to the top of the window on the first floor?

ARMSTRONG: To the second floor (he counts the full basement laid up in stone as the first floor). [There was a cloud[burst] one Sunday morning about three o'clock, when my grandfather was in Yadkin County. His sister was dead and he had to go up there to the funeral.

Mr. Will Reynolds lived there in the house where I lived when I come up here. My father and mother bought it after Mr. Reynolds died; that was the brother of the man who owned the mill. And Mr. Reynolds come over there and said, "Tom,"--it was just a pouring rain. We didn't realize, never had to experience a water getting up in the mill. He says, "You better get that flour, and corn, and wheat upstairs fore that water's goin to get in that millhouse." Well, we started in to carrying that stuff upstairs and that water come in a gush.

Gaston Teer and Tom Teer pulled up under the shed --right there (points to mill shed in picture), in an old Chrysler automobile. They come to help us. Water was running over the bridge when they crossed it, and they pulled up under that shed. Daddy says, "Tom, you better get that car out from under that shed the way the water's comin'!" Got out there and stomped on the starter. Wouldn't start. They had to go up to the barn and get a horse, hook it to it, and when they pulled that car out from under that shed that water was half way up on that horse's side.

MD: Just from a right heavy downpour?

ARMSTRONG: That's it. I reckon you'd kind of call it like a cloudburst. (phone rings) Scuse me.  
(tape off; his sister Virga Byrd called; tape on).

MD: Where does she live?



ARMSTRONG: Up here on 54. You ever been to Graham?

MD: No, sir.

ARMSTRONG: Well, you wouldn't know if I was to tell you. She lives there the other side of Alexander Wilson School.

MD: She calls every day just to check on you?

ARMSTRONG: [To see how I] was doing.

MD: The elevators in the mill, were they wood or were they metal too?

ARMSTRONG: The elevators were on a                      with little cups fastened to them, and a pulley up in the top of the millhouse, and one in the bottom. These pulleys turn and carry that grain and stuff. Them little cups was about that big (joins his thumbs and index fingers), fastened on that belt. Runned from the bottom of the millhouse to the top. Carried this grain to these stands, and to the smutter, and all parts of the mill.

MD: How big was the cup again?

ARMSTRONG: About that big. They were metal. They were something about like that and fastened about that far apart on that belt.

MD: They were like a big cereal bowl?

ARMSTRONG: That's right; carryin that grain and flour.

MD: Did you ever get married?

ARMSTRONG: No, I ain't old enough!

MD: You aren't old enough?

ARMSTRONG: Are you married?

MD: No, sir.

ARMSTRONG: I'm not. I'll tell you, it's all I can. . . well, it's like this. My mother had asthma for forty years. She had heart trouble and she had arthritis. I told my father, and I told my mother, I said, "Listen Mama, you've had a hard time all your life." I says, "I'm a gonna stay here. There'll be some way for me. I don't know what it will be [or] what'll become of me before I have to leave this world," but I says, "I'm a gonna to stay here and do all I can for you all as long as we can get along." I says, "The first fuss, I'm gone. I can't stand that."

I had a couple thousand hens. I was in the poultry business, "layers," and a farm. When it came the day to crate the eggs, my daddy, my mother, we all sit down and worked together. When it comes to gardening, freezing, canning, we all picked the beans, snapped them, all helped. What daddy wanted done, me and mama was ready to help him, and what mama wanted done, me and daddy were ready to help her. What I wanted done, they were ready to help me.

MD: When did your daddy pass on?

ARMSTRONG: He. . .I'll tell you in a minute  
(tape off; walks away into other room; returns; tape  
on). I don't know which I got whether it's my father's  
or mother's. No, that's my father's [obituary].

MD: (reading) Mr. Tom M. Armstrong?

ARMSTRONG: Um-hm. This one's my mother's. She died  
in seventy-seven.

MD: They said here your daddy was from Efland. (phone  
rings) Scuse me.

ARMSTRONG: Efland, you see, that was our mail route.  
That was the end of the mail route. And the creek, on  
the other side of the creek was Chapel Hill.

MD: So he died in 1970.

ARMSTRONG: He was seventy-nine years old.

MD: Then your mama?

ARMSTRONG: She died in seventy-seven, the fifth day  
of March.

MD: So after the grist mill closed, you just had the  
farm?

ARMSTRONG: The farm, that's right.

MD: And you raised chickens.

ARMSTRONG: I did, yes.

MD: You did. Your daddy didn't do that?

ARMSTRONG: No. He helped me but I was the chicken  
[farmer].

MD: How did you get into the chicken business? Most of these people out here (in Cane Creek) are dairy farmers. How did you happen to get into chickens?

ARMSTRONG: Well, there were a lot of people. The Teers over there. Lord, there were a lot of people in the egg business then. I messed with chickens ever since I was big enough to know what a chicken was. When we lived at Mount Airy, I was five or six years old. A bunch of little boys down there at give me--one Sunday come a bringing me--five Banty hens. I kept on raising them until I had twenty-five. My mama and grandmother would take the eggs down there to Mount Airy and sell them to Mr. Bowman, and he would give me half as much as for their big eggs, and I about clothed myself all my life off my chickens.

MD: What kind of chickens were they?

ARMSTRONG: They were Bantys to start with. Then after I got grown I went into the other larger chickens, egg producers.

MD: What kind would they be? What breeds?

ARMSTRONG: Leghorns. White leghorns.

MD: Did you keep them out on the ground or did you keep them in a chicken house?

ARMSTRONG: Kept them in a house.

MD: Did you have to keep the light on all the time?

ARMSTRONG: No. In the winter time I'd get up at four o'clock. That was before we got the power. I had six lanterns I used. Get up at four o'clock, go down there, and the spring was between the two chicken houses. Folks say, "Why don't you put a pump in there? Pump water to the chicken house." I says them chickens wouldn't get any water, [if] them pipes froze up and busted. It's a job to keep 'em a layin in the winter time. So that water would just be. . . I'd go carry that warm water out of that spring every morning. Light them lanterns. My hens would lay right on through the winter. I had them curtained up too.

MD: Curtained up? What do you mean by that?

ARMSTRONG: Over the front, a cloth, plastic, glass, and so on. Curtain, thin curtains.

MD: That kept the drafts out?

ARMSTRONG: That kept the COLD out! The heat from them chickens all together kept them warm.

MD: I'd never thought about it. I know that cows produce heat in a barn. . . .

ARMSTRONG: (laughs) And chickens does too if you put a bunch of them together.

MD: About how many? What kind of producers were they? Did you measure [by] so many dozen a week? How would you measure what they were producing in eggs?

ARMSTRONG: Well that was a million dollar question. It was owing to the luck you had with them. If a disease hit or a sudden change in the weather, that's something you couldn't predict. That poultry farming is one of the biggest gambles there is.

MD: You said before electrification came through you used lanterns?

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

MD: What kind of fuel in the lanterns?

ARMSTRONG: Kerosene.

MD: And when did electrification come in? Do you remember?

ARMSTRONG: I ain't a going to say. Now that's one question I don't remember. It was. . . I ain't a going to say.

MD: It was after the first war wasn't it?

ARMSTRONG: Oh gosh! It was after the . . . .

MD: Second war?

ARMSTRONG: Second war I reckon. Now I ain't a going to tell you a lie for I don't know. That's one thing I can't remember. I could go back I reckon and find the first light bill but it would take me a month. I got them all back to back.

MD: Really? You keep all those things?

ARMSTRONG: I got the first box of Valentines, [from] the first school I ever went to in Surry County. I was

looking through them the other day. Near about half of them children are all gone on.

MD: That was the first school you went to . . . .

ARMSTRONG: (reflectively). . . I ever went to. . . first.

MD: In Surry County, was it a one room school?

ARMSTRONG: Absolutely, and they taught from the first to the eleventh grade.

MD: How old were you when you moved to . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: I was eight years old when we moved down here.

MD: How old were you when you started school?

ARMSTRONG: About six years old.

MD: So you spent a couple [school] years down there. Then where did you go to school when you got here?

ARMSTRONG: I went back of that mountain over in the pine thicket (laughs).

MD: What's the name of that mountain over there?

ARMSTRONG: Mitchell Mountain.

MD: Mitchell Mountain. Who was the teacher, do you remember?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, ma'am, I do. Mrs. Lillie Montgomery was my teacher. . . the first year. Elsie Pratt was the second teacher. Then they done away with that school and we went to Orange Grove.

MD: Did this school over behind the mountain have a little name? Something that you knew it by?

ARMSTRONG: Mitchell Mountain.

MD: Mitchell Mountain School.

ARMSTRONG: Two rooms.

MD: Two rooms. Were there black boards?

ARMSTRONG: Painted on the walls.

MD: Painted black on the wall. What did she write on it with?

ARMSTRONG: Chalk.

MD: Regular white chalk like today?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. Same kind of chalk.

MD: Did you have slates? What did you write on?

ARMSTRONG: There was paper. Some of them had [slates], but I didn't like a slate. I wouldn't have [one]. They're nasty. I've seen them little ones spit on them. Made me sick. I told my folks I'd use paper. I [didn't] want all that mess.

MD: They closed the Mitchell Mountain School?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

MD: How many grades were there before they closed it?

ARMSTRONG: I would say the tenth or somewhere along there. Cause Lillie Montgomery taught the first, second, third, fourth and fifth and sixth. Jeannette Stanford taught the seventh and eighth and ninth and on up.

MD: Mr. Stanford? What was his name again? Or was it a woman?



ARMSTRONG: It was a woman. She married a Wen.  
Elizabeth Wen. (not sure if he meant Jeannette Wen  
or ?)

MD: Elizabeth?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

MD: Then you went to Orange Grove School?

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

MD: Was that a wood building too?

ARMSTRONG: It was a brick building when I started.  
They had school in the wooden building 'til they got  
that brick building. Then after my grandfather died I  
had to quit school. Help my daddy farm.

MD: This was your daddy's father? The one that came  
to the mill?

ARMSTRONG: Uh-huh. My grandfather on my mother's side,  
I reckon he died before my mother was even married.

MD: So you quit school when you grandfather died to  
help your father and. . . .

ARMSTRONG: I was in the ninth grade.

MD: You went [to school] through ninth grade. What  
was your daddy's crop to raise money? You raised your  
own food but to raise money?

ARMSTRONG: Cotton down here and tobacco. This land  
down here wouldn't make good tobacco, wouldn't suit it.  
You want grey sandy land for tobacco.

MD: This here has got a lot of red in it around here?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. It won't make tobacco. It'll make it but it [doesn't cure good] - dried up just like old oak leaves.

MD: So he raised cotton here?

ARMSTRONG: For several years. Then they quit that and went to public work.

MD: What did they consider public work?

ARMSTRONG: Well my father worked up there at Swepsonville [N.C.] [Virginia Mills] for about ten or twelve years. In his last days [he worked] in a textile mill building shipping crates 'til he retired.

MD: So when you quit school you came and helped your daddy with the cotton. Were you raising chickens then?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I had two or three hundred, but I didn't have as many as I did later on.

MD: What was your mama like? She did the housework?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. And worked in the fields too when she was able. Woman worked back then! They went to the fields with their husbands just like they went. Let me see if I can't find mama in a picture.

(tape off; he went to get a box of photographs; tape on)

ARMSTRONG: I keep all my special. . . where I can get a (pause) oh golly (looks through the box).

MD: She did go out in the fields and everything. Then she also took care of the house?

ARMSTRONG: Yes sir. Just like I said, we all worked together.

MD: Did you work in the house?

ARMSTRONG: Lord, yes. She never washed that I didn't and I do my own washing until today.

MD: How about your daddy. Did he work in the house or wasn't he one to. . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Well, now, he left that up to me and mama. I got her picture here somewhere, I know. (pause) There's the old home. That was made the April I had to leave from down there.

MD: When did you leave, Mr. Armstrong?

ARMSTRONG: Eighty. [1980]

There's mama's picture. She was eighty-seven years old when she died, and me and her was a canning, getting along as good as she had been a doing 'til they come in there to survey, and mama begin to go down.

She had her cats. I'd come from tending my chickens every evening, she'd be coming across the yard and she'd say, "I have lived here sixty-eight years and I am too--I think well of all these people. They all been good to me. I'm too old to be drug about in my last days."

MD: If she had continued to live would you . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: I believe she would have lived longer.

MD: Would you have stayed down there?

ARMSTRONG: I shore would!

MD: That was part of your decision, after she died. . .

ARMSTRONG: Sure. I stayed on there. She died in seventy-seven. I stayed from seventy-seven til eighty by myself.

MD: Was this house built when you moved there?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, ma'am. That house is about right near a hundred years old.

MD: Is that right near the mill?

ARMSTRONG: Right up above it. The old millhouse where the miller lived then was tore down.

MD: So you had a man who was like a professional miller? Your father just had the miller. . . .

ARMSTRONG: Well, now, when my grandfather and my father was sick they had a neighbor over there that did the milling for them.

Every one of my good friends from Chapel Hill come out there. (points to photo of the abandon house)  
That's where they knocked the window lights out and they cased it up. (plywood covers the windows of the two story, white, clapboard house now)

MD: That must have hurt you bad to see them do that.

ARMSTRONG: It hurts me so bad to have to go back down there.

Now that's the store house (photo of garage size building hidden by heavy overgrowth).

MD: (looking at a view of the Armstrong house) There are [fireplaces] on each end of the house.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, there was three fireplaces. One upstairs in one room, and then a flue for a stove in the other, north room.

MD: And you heated by. . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Wood.

MD: All the time?

ARMSTRONG: All the time.

MD: Right up until you left?

ARMSTRONG: Yes sir. I'm still heating with wood. I got a fireplace in the trailer here.

MD: I see a right smart amount [of wood] you got out here already.

ARMSTRONG: Oh shoot, that's my brother's. My wood's back here. You ain't seen no wood (laughs).

MD: Where did you get your wood every year? Did you buy it?

ARMSTRONG: No, I got it off from my place there.

MD: You took care to cut it?

ARMSTRONG: I cut it myself.

Now this is down below the bridge there (color photo of creek in the fall).

MD: Oh, that's beautiful. Is this all going to be under water?

ARMSTRONG: That water they claim will be up to the eaves of that house there.

MD: They going to leave the house there and let the water fill [it] up?

ARMSTRONG: No. They'll burn it or set. . . I don't know. That crazy bunch. . . don't you go down and tell them what I said! But they have been offered money for it and they won't sell it. They're gonna let it stand there and let the termites eat it up and do nobody no good.

MD: Who owns it now?

ARMSTRONG: The water people, OWASA!

MD: They're not going to do anything with it? Just let it sit there?

ARMSTRONG: They ain't done nothing with it! They been offered--I been told--four thousand dollars for it and they never would . . . .

That makes the end of the house (looking at photo of the house).

MD: That's an awful big house! Right big. What is that, a kitchen at the back?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. Kitchen and dining room.

MD: How about this right here (pointing to small cinder block enclosure)?

ARMSTRONG: That's the pump house.

MD: What kind of well is in there?

ARMSTRONG: Dug well.

MD: Laid up in stone?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

MD: That's a right smart looking fireplace too.

ARMSTRONG: It was a great big fireplace.

And that's down below the dam (another photo of the creek).

MD: This is below what was the. . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Old dam.

This is the house up on Tom's Creek, right below the other Apple's Pond dam. That's where Grandma and Grandpa Apple lived.

MD: Who were they? I never heard their name before.

ARMSTRONG: Well they're good old people. They lived up there. You ought to [have heard of them] as long as they've lived in there. . . in Hillsborough. They ought to know. That lady is always wanting to take pictures of old houses and I've told her to be sure and take that one. I've eat plenty a good meal in that house.

MD: This is not too far from where you lived?

ARMSTRONG: Right up above me on the Creek that runs into Cane Creek. They fork right above the old dam place.

MD: What did these folks do for a living? Did they farm?

ARMSTRONG: They farmed then. Mr. Apple used to be a millwright years before we come down there. He used to help my grandfather sharpen the mill rock when the (pause).

MD: That's a beautiful house too. I love old houses. That's a log house too, isn't it?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

MD: Right here [at] the front.

ARMSTRONG: It's a log house.

You through with these (points to photos on the table we've looked at)?

MD: It's still standing? (reference to the log house). Why don't you leave them here for a minute. (reference to photographs) I haven't had the pleasure of walking down by the creek yet. I guess they've got a temporary dam already put in there, up above Teers?



ARMSTRONG: Yeah, and it makes me sick. I got a patch a land left there, they didn't take quite all my land. Folks tell me--[they] say, "Coy, why don't you have your house moved up there on the side of that mountain?" I said, "You are crazy as you look. Do you think that I'm a gonna get up every morning and look across that body of water where my poor old dead mama and daddy had worked and slaved, and my grandma and grandfather." I said, "You got another thought a comin!"

MD: That really got to your mama, didn't it?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. I'll tell ya, you'll find it out too. I've done find out, the older you get you can't throw things off like when you're younger. You wait. When I'm laying over on that cold clay and them years roll around--you think about it.

MD: It gets harder to make those adjustments doesn't it?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. Things that use to didn't bother me at all, now I can't throw'em off. Things are a whole lot . . . When I was a going to school--[it's easier to remember what] happened back then, than [it is] things happened yesterday--I can remember them better.

MD: I'm hoping that some of the older people that I do talk to are like that [and] can remember those things. I want them to talk to me and tell me the detail of it because, like you said, I won't have an opportunity to know what it was like. I can only know it from your description.

ARMSTRONG: One of the Armstrongs over in Yadkin County, Creek Baptist Church, oldest church in Yadkin County. I think it's the oldest. All them Armstrong ancestors was buried at the end of the church there with pine [or] oak palings around the grave. They was a getting up a history of the church several years ago. Mr. Adams, that lived up there to Jonesville, he said they was a going back to . . . .

[END TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1]

Note: Mr. Armstrong did not falter in his story-telling while I changed the tape; tape resumes at a point where he is explaining about a relative, in another county, who lost land due to a highway]

ARMSTRONG: . . .they set their price and they paid them. They got well paid. Them that still fought it to the last, they went in there and condemned it and just give them what they wanted to. He says, "Coy, don't you set here and let them condemn your land, give you what they want [to] for it." He says, "You set your price and don't you budge." That's what I done.

Let me tell you something. This day and time you ain't got no certainty. The government--this government we got this day and time--can do anything and get by with it.

MD: Have you seen government change? Government didn't use to do that?

ARMSTRONG: No, gosh! There wasn't no such thing as the income tax.

MD: Think that's what started the whole thing going in the wrong direction?

ARMSTRONG: Well, it's just like the Bible [says], every generation gets weaker and wiser. You may not fall in line and believe it. I can't help it.

MD: Oh, I do. I've no arguement with that. No sir.

Were you involved at all with the organization around Cane Creek?

ARMSTRONG: Oh yeah. I reckon I tied a right smart little pocket change up, me and my old mother.

MD: Ran you up a bit of money to get into that didn't it?

ARMSTRONG: Them lawyers, they didn't give a darn who won. All they was after was their money. You know, they ain't no justice no more.

MD: I was reading some of the newspapers [from awhile] back and I noticed that the lawyers weren't even from this area. They were from Raleigh?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah!

MD: Whose choice was that? [Isn't] there anybody in the Orange Grove [area] that's ever had a son or daughter be a lawyer?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, Chapel Hill governs Orange County. Rules Orange County.

MD: They run it pretty much?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. I told them County Commissioners over there when we was fighting that thing, I said, "It's a queer thing to me, everything (stops speaking abruptly) Don't you put this down. You cut that thing off. This I'm a tellin you now I don't want that bunch down there to get ahold of.

[tape off]

Note: Mr. Armstrong proceeded to tell me of his personal feeling toward the County Commissioners as he recalled some of his conversations with them about the taking of his property, and the planned reservoir

location. He became so agitated that he stood up from his chair at the kitchen table, and walked around it as he spoke. When the subject changed, at his time and choosing, he sat back down and the recorder was turned on again.

[tape on]

ARMSTRONG: . . . famines, drought, hailstorms, windstorms.

MD: Pretty iffy business isn't it? They're going to cut enough of it out to. . . .

ARMSTRONG: Well, they claim the way the population's growing they're going to have to go to eating seaweed. They better be a planting a pretty good crop! (laughs)

MD: They've taken [land]. It's the urban sprawl, spreading out and taking up the farm land. What they don't build on they cover over with water.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. And highways!

(looking through photos) Let me see if I. . . .  
You through with these? (photographs)

MD: Yes, sir, if you want to put them away.

ARMSTRONG: I just want to get them out of the way  
(walking into the other room) (returns with a small-  
about 2x2-black and white photo in a red covered,  
embossed, wood case) There is my great grandmother!

That's my grandfather, and there's my greatuncle and that's my great aunt. My grandfather's daddy died when he was six years old, Uncle Jim, five, and Aunt Emma, six months old. My [great] grandmother couldn't read and write and she raised them children.

MD: What a beautiful picture.

ARMSTRONG: Lord, ain't no telling how old that thing is.

MD: Now this is your grandma Armstrong?

ARMSTRONG: Great grandmother! My grandfather's mother.

MD: She was the McBride?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. I don't know where I got them other pictures of mama and daddy (pause). . .that box. . .(sorting through photos).

MD: Do you ever put names on these pictures?

ARMSTRONG: No, cause I know'em.

MD: What are we going to do when you aren't there to tell us?

ARMSTRONG: Well, that's all right. If they ain't enough interested to find out--alright.

MD: Isn't there anyone in your family that's interested?

ARMSTRONG: No sir. They ain't none of'em. [They] ain't never paid no attention. Never was interested. And what I know so much about, my great grandmother told me about her ancestors when I was six and seven years old.

MD: It was right fun to listen too, wasn't it? You paid attention.

ARMSTRONG: And it stuck with me too. My niece's husband [was] here the other day. We was talking about our ancestors. He says, "Coy, I don't know nothing about mine. My grandmother and them all died." He says, "You ought to have somebody make a recording of all that." I says I ain't a making nothing. I said if they ain't anymore interested in asking me about it they can go [without] it. I says I don't care. . . I loved my folks. This day and time this younger [generation], they don't care about them folks.

MD: Some of them don't. I care a lot about mine.

ARMSTRONG: I do too. I sure do.

I don't see what I have done with them other pictures. Let me go back. They ain't no telling how old that thing is (refers to the photo in red case).

(Mr. Armstrong walks into the other room; tape off/on)

I'll run across them one of these days.

(Shows a recent photo) Now this is my sister [Virga Armstrong Byrd], that was my mother [Nancy Diana Gray Armstrong], that's my niece.

MD: She lives up toward Graham?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. She has two children. The girl, she works up there at Dr. McFarland's office, dentist

office. My nephew, he lives in Albemarle. He's manager of the K-Mart store up there at Albemarle.

MD: It says here [obituary] that your mama was at your sister's home when she died?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

MD: She didn't go to a hospital?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, she come from the hospital. She was getting along very well [then] she took bad off.

MD: From the hospital she went to live with your sister or was she just visiting?

ARMSTRONG: She went to stay there [because] Virga said it would be a whole lot better if I let her stay up there than it would [be] for her to run back and forth down to the old place. So we were taking turns about looking after her.

MD: She ever learn to drive a car?

ARMSTRONG: No.

MD: Could she drive a team?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, she could drive a horse.

MD: How long did you keep horses to drive?

ARMSTRONG: 'Til I moved up here. I had me a mule. I'd have one today if I had room for it. I had to get up every morning before I went to school--when I was eight years old--walk a whole lot further than from here to where you turned off the highway over there, to



the barn to feed them horses 'for I went to school. Come back and eat my breakfast and get ready to go to school.

I had horses all my life. Worked with 'em. Wasn't nothing for [me] to get up some pretty morning, after a shower of rain, just a good [soaking], [harness] that old horse or mule to a four-foot walking cultivator, and put that dirt up to that corn just about that high (hands spread about 16").

MD: You could throw it back a foot couldn't you?

ARMSTRONG: Them good old days. (reflectively)

MD: Was it good plowing down there?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, yeah.

MD: You don't have any rocks around here. Where I come from we got rocks.

ARMSTRONG: We got rocks here, too, bet your life.

MD: They do a job on your plow. Do you use the mule to plow instead of horses?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. We had a tractor too, but shoot, I cultivated stuff with a walking cultivator. That there tractor it would drag over. . .you'd want to get ahold [of] that plow and shove that plow down in the ground. Break that ground up [so] them little feeder roots from them plants can take hold when they start growing. That ground's hard and they'll just ballup there and your plant will dry up.

MD: You didn't plow with the horses, you just used the mule?

ARMSTRONG: The horses and mule! I used horses most of my life. I kept them 'til they died, and then I couldn't get a horse. Go out and work the mule, and it broke it's leg before I moved up here, and I had to kill it. They come on with this lake business, and I didn't need me another one.

MD: Get kind of attached to them do you?

ARMSTRONG: Lord, yes. It never gets out of you either.

MD: Your mule, [did] it have a name?

ARMSTRONG: Yep. Called her 'Beck.' 'Brit' and 'Zeb' was the horses, and 'Annie' was one of the horses names.

MD: What was the other ones name?

ARMSTRONG: 'Annie', 'Brit' and 'Zeb'. Them horses was the age that I was. We kept them 'til they died.  
(pause)

Plow that grey horse, old Zeb--hook him up, not put a plow line on him, and start a row of corn. That horse would walk right up the side of that row, put that dirt right, get to the end--"Gee here, Zeb"--turn right around in the next row.

MD: How about your milk cows. How long did you keep them? When you were young you hade some?

ARMSTRONG: Keep them 'til mama died.

MD: You were still milking your own cow? You do that?

ARMSTRONG: Yep.

MD: Could she milk?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, yeah. She milked as long as she was able.

MD: Did you ever use an electric milker?

ARMSTRONG: Shoot no. Didn't need it [for] one or two cows.

Was you raised on a farm?

MD: I spent most of my weekends on a farm. I lived in a small city, and my best friend, she was from a dairy farm, and so I used to go out there and ride. I've helped on farms, baled hay, fed calves, worked in the barn, fed insulage. While they were milking we'd get the wheelbarrow and put the silage down the front while her folks did the milking.

ARMSTRONG: Do you know what the only difference [between] what they used to call the chain gang, [and] a dairy farmer, and a poultry farmer--the only difference [is] they ain't got the stripes. That's day-in and day-out work. When four o'clock comes today you got to milk them cows. Four o'clock the next morning you got to. That evening at four o'clock--it's pitiful how ignorant folks are to [not] realize what it costs for juice and milk.

MD: They complain at the store how much it costs. They haven't any idea what goes on.

ARMSTRONG: They shore don't, and what it costs that poor man that's producing.

Do you know what? I've got folks, one of them come by here in January-my birthday-from Chicago, helped fight that lake. I've got another friend in Seattle, Washington, she writes me every once in a while. I've got one, my friend who's in the Peace Corps in, ah (pause) Nepal. He's spent several years there. (walks away into living room) When he come home he brought me this lock from India. Now open it for me. (hands me a good sized brass lock; chuckles while I fiddle with the lock). You'll never open it so I'll have to show you.

MD: There's a punch-in [mechanism]?

ARMSTRONG: No. I'll show you (works a while to open the lock).

MD: Hope I didn't break it for you.

ARMSTRONG: No.

MD: Spring loaded?

ARMSTRONG: You see this here releases it. He says them things sold for a dollar and a half apiece over there. That's handmade. You can see where they filed it. See the streaks of the file on it?

MD: Not a lot of craftsmanship in what's made any more. They don't take the time. (returning the lock to him) That's marvelous.

ARMSTRONG: I got a card from one of my friends from Chapel Hill, all the way to Australia; in the South Sea Islands the last time I heard from him.

MD: Where do you meet all these people?

ARMSTRONG: Come out--them students-- from Chapel Hill. They've graduated now and they still write to me and come and see me. Some of them say, "Coy, you have learn't me more in some ways than I learned down there in Chapel Hill."

MD: That's true. More of them ought to come out. Send their kids out. There would be something for kids to do. All these kids that don't know what to do with [their time], send them out and put them on a farm and let'em work.

ARMSTRONG: I don't know where I put them pictures, in a special. . . that picture [of where] the road went by the house. I don't know where I put it. But these special things I put up. I run across them sometimes. . . thinking about it.

MD: Well maybe that's one of the few good things that come out of all this. You meet people, and got a chance to show them what living on a farm...

ARMSTRONG: And I got another one in Texas. She's married now. Her and her husand, I get a letter from them every once in a while. They come every Christmas.

There is a picture of the old dam. (black and white photo; waterfall about 8/9' high)

MD: Do you know any of these folks here?

ARMSTRONG: I reckon I do. Them is some folks that come visit from Mount Airy. That's my mother; that's Mary Lee; that's me (boy sitting cross-legged in front); that's Lillian Gordon; that's Minnie. They're all dead but me.

MD: You said this lady standing next to you is Miss Gordon?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

MD: That was a right good size dam. Is that just built up with rock?

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

MD: What holds it together? What kind of mortar? Cement?

ARMSTRONG: It was rock and then dirtage on the back.

MD: Dirted on the back?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Did you ever see them dudes? (photo of adult, male, siamese twins) These siamese twins.

MD: They came to live here in North Carolina didn't they?

ARMSTRONG: Up there above Wilksboro. One of their great niece and nephews lives right down the road here. Bunkers. Gladys and Fred.

MD: I've heard of them. I knew that they lived here somewhere in North Carolina.

How far across was this dam? I can see [that it begins] here. How far [to the right did it go]?

ARMSTRONG: [About as far again as what] you can see there.

MD: Are little bits and pieces of this dam left? [Can] you still see where it was?

ARMSTRONG: Come a freshet one night and washed the center of it out. It's down to the creek bed now.

MD: Do you remember other mills that were up the creek farther?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. I remember. What I know about them was what I've been told.

MD: Were they grist mills too?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, and a saw mill run by water.

MD: Who ran that?

ARMSTRONG: Mr. Apple. Now, Thompson's old mill was a grist mill. All I know is what I've been told.

MD: There still Thompsons living around here?

ARMSTRONG: No, they're all gone. All dead. Ed Johnson owns that old mill tract over there-- Thompson's Mill. Your professor down there at Chapel Hill, do you know him?

MD: I know who he is.

ARMSTRONG: He's a good friend of mine. Old Ed's a good one. I think a lot of Ed Johnson.

(Looking at another photo) And this here is a tobacco barn raising when we lived in Mount Airy. Put that tobacco barn up in a day. My mother and my grandmother had to cook dinner and supper for all these men. (Another photo) Here's the women they had to feed.

MD: I was trying to see how many it took [to raise a tobacco barn] in a day. About thirty men here. About thirty, is that true?

ARMSTRONG: Um-hmm. Them was good old fellas back then I'm a telling you. Many of them gone on though.

MD: This was in Wilkes County?

ARMSTRONG: Surry.

MD: Oh, this is in Surry [County].

ARMSTRONG: Above Mount Airy.

MD: Are you in this picture any where? (photo of women and children)

ARMSTRONG: I'm this one.

MD: You're the one with your hand up to your eyes right there in the front row?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

MD: Which one here is your mama?

ARMSTRONG: Right there is mama. Right there (pointing to photo).



MD: The second one in from the right. Did they have the logs cut ahead of time?

ARMSTRONG: Had them cut and hewed with a axe.

MD: Then what did they put it together with? Is it just laid up?

ARMSTRONG: They notched'em at the corners and fitted the logs in them notches.

MD: Did they caulk it with anything between the logs?

ARMSTRONG: It had chinking with pieces of wood, then dobbed it with mud clay.

(Another photo of young boy wearing suit jacket with white stiff collar at the neck) There was my grand daddy when he was twelve years old. I got my daddy's picture somewhere.

MD: He looks like a preacher.

ARMSTRONG: Ten, twelve years old.

MD: He looks like a clean cut preacher.

ARMSTRONG: That's my grand daddy. I don't know what I've done with that. . . my daddy's.

MD: That's a good tintype. Usually tintypes aren't that good. They can be reproduced. You can get a picture of that instead of having the metal one. Get it lightened up too.

I won't take up any more of your day. I'd like to just sit and talk to you. I'll think of a hundred things I didn't ask you for sure.

MD: Would it be inconvenient for you to show me those quilts you were talking about?

ARMSTRONG: No. I'll show'em to you in a minute. Let me get this junk all back in here. (Collected and returned all the photos to the box and returned it to it's proper place).

MD: Sure, let's put it all back so you know where things are. (looking at photo of grist mill painting) You said the lady who painted this...Rachel Best?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. She painted one that large. . . she said, "Now I want to know, was this exactly like it was?" I said, "Yes, except we left that tree out over there," but I says that don't hurt nothing.

(General non-pertinent conversation while he gathers up photos)

I've got stuff brought up here. . .and I've hunted and hunted for [it], and I ain't found [it] yet.

(pause) (Looks at photo of his mother) Old mama. She was a good mama.

MD: I'm sorry for your trouble cause I have a real love for land myself. I own a hundred acres. . .a camp. It's not that I'm unneighborly, or don't like people, I like people fine, but they move right in on top of you and take away the open fields.

ARMSTRONG: Taken away all the beauty of nature!  
That's what I say about progress. I like the old ways  
best. A lot of this new dang fangle business. . . (walks  
away into the other room to put away box of photos).

(From a bedroom) Come on in here.

MD: Okay. (tape off)

(Mr. Armstrong first showed me numerous Christmas  
Cactus about the bedroom and an adjoining room. One  
had bloomed; he called it an "October Cactus." Said  
the others were Thanksgiving Cactus, Christmas Cactus,  
and Easter Cactus. He had brought them in from  
outdoors due to a threat of frost. All were very  
healthy and moist.)

(He opened the bottom drawer of a dresser and  
removed a coverlet with tassles.) (tape on)

MD: These are white. What do you call them? A  
bedcover?

ARMSTRONG: Bedspread. My great grandmother, Nancy  
[McBride] Armstrong planted the cotton seed, picked  
the seed out of the cotton, spun the thread, and wove  
it into this bedspread.

MD: You go through a carding process?

ARMSTRONG: You spin the cotton into thread and . . . .

MD: She had a spinning wheel of her own?

ARMSTRONG: She had the spinning wheel, she had the carding machine, she had the loom, and everything.

MD: This is just beautiful. She picked out her own pattern?

ARMSTRONG: That's right, herself.

MD: The trim on this?

ARMSTRONG: [It's] what we used to wind tobacco with years ago. And she made that lace.

MD: Is that also a cotton thread?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. It's all cotton.

MD: When they were raising tobacco and raised some cotton to make something like this, did they make their own thread for [all the] tobacco?

ARMSTRONG: What they raised cotton was for theirself to spin to make clothes. Spin flour sacks, meal sacks, and bedspreads.

MD: There's a couple more here.

ARMSTRONG: That's the pillow cases there. There's the other [bedspread].

MD: These are beautiful! They'd fit on a double bed wouldn't they?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, lord, yes.

MD: They are beautiful, Mr. Armstrong. And so are your flowers. You certainly have a talent. They seem to be quite moist?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, you got to keep them moist. Don't let 'em get too dry. There's when the buds fall off.

MD: People told me my buds fell off cause they were too wet.

ARMSTRONG: If you listen to what somebody else says right the opposite to get 'em to grow. I tell you, so much of this stuff is published is just for the money racket. I tell you experience is worth more. I like to experiment myself.

(Leaves room; returns with a quilt.)

This spread my grandmother pieced for me when I was a little fella.

(Other quilts were then removed from a closet and discussed.)

[END TAPE 2, SIDE 1]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2]

MD: This is one that another grandmother made?

ARMSTRONG: My great grandmother made this one [long pause].

MD: Can I help you with that [as he struggled to get quilts from the closet shelf]?

ARMSTRONG: No, I'll get it. I got more junk piled up here.

ARMSTRONG: Now I pieced this quilt myself.

MD: Did you?

ARMSTRONG: About nine years old. I fell on my head and I was out of school for three months.

(opens a quilt made of one inch triangles, multi-patterned/colored, but predominantly blue; backing is a bluish-grey color.)

Now my great grandmother. . .look down. You see there's a row of little square blocks and there's a row of three corner. Look down (we hold the quilt out flat, shoulder high, between us). You see it?

MD: Yep. A pattern within a pattern; [forms] the border. I can see the rows coming around. You don't see them [when] looking straight down. Isn't that beautiful. They are little tiny triangles, probably about one inch on the long side. I wonder how many triangles.

ARMSTRONG: She pieced that thing when she was about seventy-eight years old. She pieced it and quilted it herself. You know what that thing's colored with?

MD: What?

ARMSTRONG: Laurel leaves. That was cotton [muslin] and they just dyed it with laurel leaves. White like the cloth.

MD: It came out kind of a bluish grey.

ARMSTRONG: It's faded a lot. That thing is so old.

MD: Now this was [made] by your great grandmother Armstrong. This was the lady who was a McBride?

ARMSTRONG: Wove the bedspreads.

MD: Think some of these pieces were feed sacks and some where regular clothes?

ARMSTRONG: I don't know. They didn't know what a feed. . . the only thing back then they knowed as a feed sack was an old rough cloth sack; a hundred pound salt sack [that] a hundred pound [of] salt used to come in.

Now I pieced three tops. I had a spell with my head. I had a fever that kept me in bed two months.

(Shows another quilt.)

MD: This one has a bright green back on it. Oh, look at the bright colors! You did this one?

ARMSTRONG: Sitting up in bed, I pieced three quilt tops. My grandmother told mama, "That young'un is running us crazy. Won't let him out of bed. Give him something to do." Her and mama went [searching] scraps half the time for me. That's why I can't hear so good out of my right ear.

MD: That's when you were sick with a fever?

ARMSTRONG: Yep. The doctor said it was a bad infection on my ear drum. I went to Duke Hospital for I don't know how long down there.

MD: How old were you at the time?

ARMSTRONG: Nine years old.

MD: You were living here in Orange County?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

MD: Who was your doctor that took care of you?

ARMSTRONG: Dr. McPherson was our family doctor till he died. Then Dr. Lloyd in Carrboro was. Then he died. Then Dr. McLamb in Mebane. So that's the last three doctors I been to. They're all gone. I ain't been to a doctor in thirty-eight years.

MD: You haven't?

ARMSTRONG: No ma'am. I may have to go 'fore night. Last doctor I went to was Dr. McLamb thirty-six years ago last August.

MD: I've heard about Dr. Lloyd.

ARMSTRONG: He was a good old doctor. You may not believe it but them old family doctors tried to help you. I hate to say, but in this day and time (not audible). Folks use to try and do something for you but this day and time this country's gone money crazy.

MD: I can agree with that. I stopped that a few years ago. Life's too short.

ARMSTRONG: Ain't it the truth.

MD: I've got too many other things to do with[out] having to [earn a lot] of money. Got me a small part-time job, take some courses at the College. I manage



to get by on a little bit. I got a piece of land I go to in the summertime. You don't need a lot of money.

ARMSTRONG: How many acres you got?

MD: Hundred.

ARMSTRONG: A hundred. Well whatever you do hold on to it. How many brothers and sisters you got?

MD: I've got two brothers and a sister, younger than me.

ARMSTRONG: You know down at the told place I was in between three mountains: Mitchell Mountain, Crawford's Mountain and Ward's Mountain. It was all level all in that valley there where my home was. Every day I'd take the blues I'd hit this mountain one day, next day that one over there. I enjoy walking in the woods and talking to myself wondering about the different kind of trees and how on earth this happened, and that.

Like the old fella, colored man went to the mountain and [he was asked], "Uncle Sam, what did you think of the mountain?" "Well, for the, for the, just for the tell you, for the Good Lord had so much rock and dirt he had no where to put it. He just topped it up."

(Talked about local storm the previous night.)

MD: I appreciate very much your talking to me about the mill..

[tape off]

[tape on]

MD: The post office at Teer, N.C.?

ARMSTRONG: I cancelled many a letter and stamped many a letter.

MD: And your daddy?

ARMSTRONG: [He] was the postmaster.

MD: [For] about what years, do you remember?

ARMSTRONG: I reckon he was [from] twenty-nine up into the thirties somewhere.

MD: Where was it located?

ARMSTRONG: In that store building down there. Was [in] a room over to one side. [You saw the] picture a while ago. (Refers to small garage sized building now overgrown with foliage.)

MD: The storage building? (He had referred to it as a storehouse and I misunderstood the reference.)

ARMSTRONG: In the store. It was a store run there. Sold flour, meal, hardware, everything to be thought of.

MD: The little [building] down in those trees.

ARMSTRONG: That's what I said.

MD: That was right near the mill?

ARMSTRONG: Was up on the hill above the mill. I run the store there for five years myself.

MD: I didn't know that. What kind of store? Was there a name on it?

ARMSTRONG: Reynolds owed it. There was "Reynolds" on it when we come down there.

MD: That's where the post office was?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, Teer Post Office.

MD: When did it stop being a Post Office?

ARMSTRONG: Thirties.

MD: Where was the post office after that? Where did you have to get your mail?

ARMSTRONG: Well you carried it to Chapel Hill. People on the other side of the creek had to get their mail from Chapel Hill and we got ours from Efland.

MD: Did they bring it out?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

MD: Didn't have to go get it?

ARMSTRONG: Old man Hodgings up there at Greensboro...Post Office Inspector come in and told my daddy, say, "We're gonna have to close this post office. You're gonna have to go over across the creek to Teers to get your mail." [His daddy replied], "You come here and you done this and you done that, but you ain't a gonna take our mail route [so] we've got to get mail from Chapel Hill!" "Alright, Tom, we'll have to let it stand like it is." So Efland was the end of the route. The Efland man come around there, turned

around there, bring the mail, and go back. The Chapel Hill man come around up here and hit 54 Highway and down through Chatham and back.

MD: They could wave to each other across the creek.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, on this side of the creek where I live [was] the Mebane Phone Company; on the other side Chapel Hill [Phone Company]. If I was to call Chapel Hill I had to go way around to Hillsborough and Raleigh to get to Chapel Hill. I wasn't much further than from here to the highway.

MD: You could almost shout across couldn't you? Wouldn't have cost you anything either.

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Well, when you reckon you'll see old Ed?

MD: Sometime this week.

ARMSTRONG: You tell him I said I think about him a lot of times and if he gets a chance, to come and see me.

MD: Okay, I will.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Note: As I exited Mr. Armstrong's home he took the time to show me the greenhouse arrangement he has constructed at one end of the trailer so that he can store some of his plants for the winter. He also took pride in showing me his freezer where he has obviously

been busy putting up fruits and vegetables for the winter and the neatly stacked cords of wood that border the property, ready for cooler weather. I complimented him on his domestic skills and he told me that he worked closely with his mama over the years and learned by watching, listening and working with her.