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-May 2015
T: So, hi, my name is Jennifer.

M: And I’m Brittney Mejia.

T: We’re here with—

O: Raymond Owens.

T: Raymond was born when and where were you born?

O: When?

T: Yes, when and where?

O: 1932 in Hudgins, Virginia.

T: Hudgins, Virginia. You can go ahead and tell us a little bit more about where you live now.

O: Well, I live on the property that was my grandfather’s. When he bought it, he bought it from Motchins. He was kin to the Motchins. I don’t know about what. As a boy growing up, my daddy went to sea and my uncle also, my aunt’s husband, he went to sea also so we lived with my grandmother in the old farmhouse. I was the only child, but my aunt had two children and we all lived together as a family for years. One of the girls, the only one that’s still living was a cousin of mine, but to me she's almost like a sister ’cause we grew up together. We lived there and then my aunt and uncle bought another place, another farm close by, so my mother and Daddy bought the whole place from my grandmother. And that’s where we live now.
Okay, and what did your mother do when your father was at sea? You mentioned that you and your cousins lived with your grandmother while your father and uncle were at sea. What did your mom—

They went to sea.

Your mom went as well?

No not my mother. She stayed at home. She never worked for anybody.

So she was a homemaker?

Yeah, she was a homemaker and my aunt was a homemaker also. But we lived there. We were a very close family.

What is your earliest childhood memory?

Going to church on a Sunday. I can remember as a little—must’ve been two or three years old and the church at that time had two stoves, one on either side of the room. And I can remember laying down on a bench. My mother always, in the wintertime, picked the side as close to the stove as she can get and I can remember laying out on a pew and laying my head in her lap and going to sleep during the preaching. I guess I must’ve been two. I could walk but she also stretched me out and I went to sleep.

Do you have any favorite lessons that your mom or your father taught you growing up?

Well, my mama and Daddy were awful good to me. And according to them, I never caused them any trouble. My dad went to sea on a ship on a passenger
liner, and I never saw him except—it's not like it is now where you go away for two or three weeks and come home for a couple weeks. He only got a month off. He always took it in the month of August. That was the month I was born in, so maybe that's why he took it off, I don't know. But anyway, every once in a while, my mother and I would go to whatever port: Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk, to see him. And on some occasions, we would take a trip with him on a boat from one port to another and come on home. I had good parents and we had a good relationship. I can remember one thing—that my mother said the only time I ever got in trouble was that Daddy was packing his suitcase to go away again and he asked me to hand him a flashlight and I picked the flashlight up and threw it at him. I got a beating for that. She said that's the only time she had to beat me.

M: Do you have any stories from your parents about your grandparents or how they got here, in Virginia?

O: I don't know about my grandparents. Well, I do know my grandmother was born in Eastern Shore Maryland and she came over here because she had relatives here in the county. She had three sisters and they all lived here in the county. Back in those days, I think the only mode of travel was by steamer: a boat that went from Mathews to Norfolk, Baltimore, maybe hit everything in the Chesapeake Bay. I don't know when my grandmother came here, I really don't. I do know that my great-grandparents are buried up at—what's the church in Gloucester?

U: You have to give me more detail.
The one there across the road from the school, Kingston? No, not Kingston.

In Gloucester?

Yeah on the left-hand side before you get to the Courthouse.

Oh, Ware. Ware Episcopal?

Yeah. My great-grandparents are buried there and I don’t know why. They could’ve been Episcopalians at that time, but predominantly my family has been Baptist. But I had a good life, good childhood. It was kind of different growing up in Mathews because you went to the schools that were in your area. I mean, like, I didn’t know any people from Gwynn’s Island or New Point or around Mobjack until I got to high school. I went to Lee-Jackson and I remember one time in Lee-Jackson, my mother and I were gonna take a trip with my daddy on a ship. We were going to Nassau in Florida, and our school was still in session. My assignment, since I would miss school, was I had to keep a diary every day and then read it when I got back to the class. And that was a fate worse than death, [Laughter] third grade stand up and read a diary. I think I conned the teacher into reading it, to you to tell the truth. But school was different then than it is now. I remember in third grade, one of the boys in the class—I don’t think he did too much to get in trouble, but anyway—he had to go to the principal’s office and I can remember my thoughts today, that I said, that’s a fate worse than death having to go to the principal’s office. And now I guess that’s nothing to kids nowadays.
T: Tell me more about how—you said that everyone went to school in their neighborhoods. Tell me more about how the classrooms operated when you were in school.

O: Well, when I went to Lee-Jackson, we had first, second, third grades all the way up. It wasn’t split like you see sometimes in the movies, old days, you have about three classes in the classroom. It was a specific classroom that you went to. If you lived in the neighborhood that went to Lee-Jackson, that’s where you went and so they had a school in Gwynn’s Island, they had one in Cobbs Creek and that’s where you went, the closest school, I guess, that you was assigned to. So you didn’t get—due to, wasn’t much transportation back in those days, you didn’t get to know other children your age that lived in the county. And a lot of fellas—and girls too—I met in high school I had never seen before. They lived in New Point or Cobbs Creek or something, or down Bohannon, which is Mobjack area. To me as a child, Mobjack was like another country. Y’all are probably not familiar with that, but anyway, that’s where that was. Ask me some questions.

T: Okay. Question: when you were growing up, were there any kind of favorite holidays that you celebrated or any kind of family traditions that you guys had during the holidays?

O: Well, we celebrated Christmas but I can’t remember putting too much emphasis on how we . . . Easter was a big time because it was religious going to church. But Christmas—we had a Christmas tree. We usually went out in the woods and cut a cedar tree down and a lot of the decorations was homemade decorations. I think one Christmas that stands out into my mind, I guess I was probably five or
six years old, but my mother had spinal meningitis and she was in the hospital for twenty-some days. And it was like doomsday around our house then. I don’t think we even put a Christmas tree up, to tell you the truth. But she survived and everything was all right. She was in the hospital so long that she had to learn to walk again. She couldn’t walk when she got out of the hospital.

U: Why don’t you tell them about the time you went for the Christmas tree, you know with your uncle and Dad. You and Debbie, in the car. [Laughter]

O: Oh, yeah. My uncle, who lived with us, he went to sea also and he was home for prior to Christmas and my daddy was, too. We were going to get a Christmas tree, go out in the woods and chop a tree down. Well, my cousin and I, we started out one morning early and headed to Gloucester, and went down a farm and looking for a tree, never did get a tree. But back in those days, the only place you could buy whiskey, unless it was bootleg, was at the ABC store in Saluda. We ended up there. Of course, my uncle and my daddy bought a bottle for Christmas. I don’t know what happened, but it was dark when we got home that night. When we drove in the yard and had an old shed that my uncle put his car in. They caught the dickens when they got in the house, going all day long with those two children, going to an ABC store, getting a bottle of whiskey. [Laughter]

I guess growing up in Mathews was a fun thing to do, as far as I’m concerned. I can remember coming down here at the Courthouse on a Saturday night. I’m not exaggerating, people were like that. You go in the two drug stores, couldn’t hardly get in ‘em, and a lot of people who had an automobile would bring it down and park along the street, two or three o’clock in the afternoon. And then they
would get somebody to bring the whole crowd up at night and then they would have to car to have sit in to watch the people walk by. But Mathews at that time was pretty well self-sufficient. We had a department store, three or four automobile dealerships, and it’s not like it is now. I was telling my granddaughter this morning that we used to have a Foster’s, the store right on the corner. It used to be a real nice department store. They had a section for men, they had a section for women and you could get anything you wanted to. They had one grocery store here at the Courthouse, was an A&P. But most every neighborhood had a post office and in the post office, you always had a general store, but people didn’t buy much back in those days. They would just buy the staple goods that they needed. We had a cow and two horses, raised some hogs, my grandmother used to make butter and take it out to the store, and Mr. Dillehay would sell the butter. He had customers who wanted Miss Jenny’s butter, and I can remember going out and taking two or three cakes of butter with the pretty picture on the top—you’d have stamp them and bring them into the grocery store. You only bought from the store pepper and salt and things like that that was staple goods. Anybody had an old hen that stopped laying, they’d put it in a coop and they take it out to the post office and then a truck would pick it up and carry it to Baltimore. You never got any money. What you got was a due bill that you could spend it at the store. I guess as the years went by, Mathews progressed some. I guess some of it in the right direction and some of it in the wrong direction. We used to have, when I was a boy, we had a theatre right across the street here. We called it the B-Jo and that’s where you went to the movies. I
don’t think it played all week, maybe mostly weekends, Saturday night. I don’t know that it played on Sundays or not because this was a pretty so-called Christian area, and there’s a lot of things people do now on Sunday that you didn’t do back then when I was a boy. You never played baseball. A typical Sunday in our house was, all the food for Sunday dinner was cooked Saturday, except maybe the rolls. The rolls was put over on top of the wood stove to rise and then they would cook them when you got home from church. We ate dinner and then Sunday afternoon was a visiting session, which somebody, mostly my grandmother’s people, would go visit all day long. We never had a lock on the door. We had locks on the doors but we didn’t have no keys to the house, and it was just a wonderful way to live, you know? I remember one time, we were going to my aunt’s house—my grandmother’s sister was around Hallieford—and when you came home, you walked in the house and you could smell cigar smoke. Somebody had been in there, I guess somebody in the family waiting for us, we never got home early enough and they left. Nothing was just taken or changed or anything. It was probably an uncle or somebody that came in—

U: Like Poppa.

O: Yeah. And this might be interesting to you, we had a black man that used to work for us on the farm. I never can remember any money was taken, exchanged hands. He helped us and we helped him, Sam Gwynn. He was a wonderful person and he worked on our place in—I guess in exchange for doing some work for us, he was allowed to take the two horses and go out and do work for other people. But come Saturday afternoon, he quit.
U: He quit?

O: He would go home, get all dressed up, put his three-piece suit on, and walk from Hudgins to the Courthouse. He was a fine man, I'm gonna tell you that. Everybody liked Sam. He had a saying—he wore long johns year round. He said the long johns keeps the heat out in the summer, keeps the cold out in the winter. But you could see him out in the field, ninety-five degrees, sweating and everything, and he'd have those long johns on.

T: [Laughter] So you did mention that your father and uncle lived out at sea. I'm guessing a lot of the men in your neighborhood also went out at sea for most of the year. So was it a normal occurrence to have African-American gentlemen work around the house and help with farm work?

O: I don’t know about a lot of families. I don’t know about African-American—I know Sam was. He was a great person. He was accepted in our family almost like a member. But I’ll tell you this: the big meal back when I was a little boy would be in the middle of the day, and Sam always ate dinner with us. Well, we had a kitchen sink that was probably as long as this, but half of it was just a portion. I can remember my grandmother trying many, many times to get Sam to come sit at the table with us, and he wouldn't do it. He said, my place is here at the sink. We just, we never forced him to do anything. He did what he wanted to do, but he was a real Southern gentlemen. Really was. I don’t know how old he was when he died, but he was an old man, he was an old man. He predominantly worked for us, but he would also help other people in the neighborhood. But come Saturday afternoon, he dressed up and he’d walk from where he lived in
Hudgins to down here to the Courthouse, and perhaps that night he got walked back or maybe he could get a ride with somebody. And we have another black man who fished all his life. He, what’d you call it, had a pound net out in the bay and he would come to our house every New Year’s morning. I don’t know whether you heard this or not, but he would be the first one to come to our house on New Year’s morning because he always said it was good luck for a black man to come to your house before anybody else did. Every week or so, he’d come down and bring us a nice fish to eat and everything. So I think back in those days, predominantly we had a good relationship with the Afro-American people. And I think we still do in Mathews. I take my car to a black man and he’s a hundred percent just as far I’m concerned. Terry Hearn, he worked for his uncle. Tom Hearn has a shop up Blakes and I wouldn’t take my car anywhere else. I take it, he’s just gonna do what he’s supposed to do, no more and he’s gonna do a good job.

T: You said that it was good luck for the first person to come to your house on New Year’s to be a black man.

O: Right.

T: Was there any bad luck New Year’s traditions?

O: No, I don’t remember that but I know Preston—his name was Preston Brooks, he said it was always good luck for a black man to come to a house before anybody else did. He’d show up at six o’clock in the morning. He was used to getting up early, going out, fishing pounds anyway so that didn’t bother him. In the country,
most everybody got up early. I can remember my grandmother saying that my grandfather went to bed when the sun went down and when the sun came up, he jumped out of bed and went to work. She also said that he would get his work done outdoors during the morning and when it got warm, he’d come in the house. So old people used a lot of common sense in what they did.

T: We haven’t talked a lot about what you did for a living. Can you tell me a little bit about—

O: When I got out of high school, first job I had was working at Sutton and Klein, the hardware and feed store right down the road here. But I had applied to the apprentice school in the shipyard and I was accepted there. So I went to Newport News and went to the apprentice school, and then I stayed there until I retired.

U: Now tell ’em what you did at the shipyard.

O: Yeah, I was wood patternmaker. I don’t know whether y’all know what that is or not, but the shipyard had a foundry, and any castings they made like the anchor, the rudder, the propeller, even valves and things like that, you had to make a wooden pattern for it. Then they’d take the pattern and put it in various-sized boxes and put cement around it. Then they would pour it and pull the pattern out and that would leave a void space in the concrete and that’s when they would pour the hot metal into it and come up with a casting.

M: So like molds?

O: Mold, yeah. We did everything from ship propellers to small valves. Particularly did a lot of work when they first started the submarine program, because it was a
new program and other companies really hadn’t gotten into making the fittings and everything that went on a sub. So we made just about everything that was cast out of metal to start with. It was very interesting business, very interesting. When I left the shipyard, retired, there was only five people left in the shop and at one time, there had been seventy-five. So it had dwindled down, but now they’ve started the apprentice program back up and the shipyard has a new apprentice school. They really know that the only way they gonna get people to know how to build ships is to train them themselves.

T: When did you retire?

O: Twenty-one years ago.

T: Oh, wow. I’ve been gone a long time.

U: The year I was born, he retired.

T: He retired to spend more time with you. [Laughter]

U: I don’t know. I’d like to think so.

O: Well, I’ve had a good life. When I retired—I always had, in my everyday, I never thought about anything except building a nice home on my grandfather’s property. At first, I gave my daughter and son-in-law a piece of land adjacent to the old house. At first, I guess the first job after I retired was to take care of my granddaughter here, ’cause I used to take care of her every day, and then I built my daughter and son-in-law a house. During the time I worked in the shipyard, I also was a general contractor. I built homes, which was really my love. I loved
building homes for people. I built my daughter and son-in-law a house next to me, then after I finished that house, they moved in and I used to take care of her every day. My daughter taught school and my son-in-law was an electrician, so I would get there at their house before they went to work and I would cook breakfast for her and we’d have a good time. She wasn’t, what, two years old?

U: Not much.

O: I used to take care of her. When we finished breakfast—some mornings we’d have eggs, other mornings we’d make pancakes. What was the mold we had?

U: A bear.

[Laughter]

O: A bear-shaped pancake and we would finish eating and cleaning up the dishes. The next thing she would say was, I want to go see Grandma Evy. Grandma Evy was my mother and she was still living at the time.

U: So she was actually my great-grandmother.

O: They were just buddies. One way, we were over there and I was doing some things in her house and she had a heart attack. I called the rescue squad and they were there in five minutes and took her to Gloucester. But she was just wored out, I guess. She passed away that night. It’s been a big void in our life since then. We got over it, but she was there when she had the heart attack. I guess you remember it.

U: No.
O: You don’t?

U: No actually I don’t. Not that particular day.

O: I remember you and I got there and when they took my mother to the Walter Reed Hospital in the ambulance, she and I drove up there in the truck. There was another lady up there, a Mrs. Buchanan here in the county. And I don’t know why she was there, but she took care of my granddaughter until I called my wife and the rest of the children. Somebody took care of her until we went home that night.

M: What year was this?

O: I really don’t know. When was this?

U: Let’s see. What year did we move into the house. I think it was [19]95.

O: 1995, so the boss says. [Laughter]

T: How old was your mother when she—

O: Eighty seven, I think she was eighty-six.

U: She lived a long life.

O: Yeah she had a good life. Yeah, she was a firecracker. But she had a good life. Then after she died, my wife and I lived in her house for a year or two while I was building my dream home that I dreamed about all my life. Then when we moved into our new home, I tore her old house down. She never liked it. She never liked the house ‘cause she liked the old farmhouse that we were all raised and born in and everything. It was my daddy’s idea to build a new house, but my mother never liked the new house. It wasn’t the same: big rooms, big windows, you
know? But the old house, let me tell you, didn’t have conveniences of the new house. When I was born, we didn’t have running water in the house. They’d have a pitcher pump at the kitchen sink and that was it. Then when my daddy built that house, it was a nice home, warm and everything. But she always grieved for the old house. In fact, my cousin’s wife said that when she found out I was gonna tear my mother’s house down, she said, well, Evy never liked that house anyway so I know it won’t be missed. Worked two years building that house that we live in now.

M: What kind of materials did you use? Like bricks or—

O: No, just brick foundation but the house is somewhat of a Southern Colonial. I used cedar siding on it. Regular-sized house. But I enjoyed building houses. I really did. When you’re young and you got children, you have to do everything you can do to make enough money to send your kids to school. I had three daughters and nobody in my family had ever gone to college. We were determined that my three daughters were going to college. They had their choice, but I give them that if you go to college I’ll pay for your college education or if you’re gonna get married, I’ll pay for your wedding, but I’m not gonna do both. They went to college, all three of ‘em. You had to work to do it, I’m a tell you. There really wasn’t many grants or things like that back in those days. I had a funny episode with one of my daughters. She went to Virginia Tech and she never took chemistry in high school. She took biology. The course she was taking, she had to have chemistry. Well, the first football game, my wife and I went up to Virginia Tech for the game and walking around the campus there, you
see all these little signs like if you need help or if you need a tutor or you need this, call this number, call this number. The first marking period, my daughter call me up and she says, Daddy, I’m failing chemistry, and she started crying. And I said, well, I don’t understand it because I told you if you needed extra help or anything you could get a tutor. That’s just part of your education. She never did that. But then I told her, but I’ll tell you this Debbie: the money’s there for four years and if you don’t finish it in four years, you’re on your own. Well, she finished in four years. She went to summer school three summers. She never got a chance to work during the summer and make spending money or anything, but she did graduate in four years. So you know, I think sometimes it’s good to lay the law down and let your children know what to expect. They’re all doing very well. I think in a way, thinking back, I’ve had a good, blessed life. I’m eighty-two years old, and that’s not saying I don’t have some health problems, but I’m still here. If you think of any questions, you can ask me. I’ll be glad to—pretty hard to pull things out of your mind. I can remember things fifty, sixty years ago but I don’t know what I did yesterday. [Laughter]

T: Selective memory.

O: I guess, I don’t know. Loss of memory. [Laughter] My daddy was the same way, everybody I know that gets old have had mental medical problems. They know what they did childhood on up.

M: Did you guys have any community traditions?

O: Say that again, ma’am.
M: Did you have any traditions within the community? Like church suppers or did you guys do anything for Christmas and New Year’s?

O: Well yes, our family’s always belonged to the Baptist Church at Hudgins and my wife and I are very—I guess, due to our age there’s a lot of things you can’t do but we still go to church every Sunday and we have Wednesday night dinners at church in the fellowship hall. We go to them. My wife is a little bit more active than I am. I’ll go when I can and if I can’t, I don’t feel sorry. I mean, I don’t feel bad about staying home if I don’t feel good. But here in Mathews, most of the churches in the county have a prayer breakfast early Sunday mornings. I usually go to them, and so I have said that I can probably join most any church in Mathews and be welcomed because I know a lot of people that go to all the different churches. Right now, our Sunday school class started up for Tuesday mornings. A few of us go down to Hardee’s and eat a biscuit together, but just started last Wednesday. Salem Church, a Methodist church around Moon, has a prayer breakfast at eight o’clock on Wednesday mornings and that just started up and I enjoy going there. It’s remarkable. I think this first time we had forty people come. Men and women of all ages, all color come and it’s very—right now we’re blessed by having one of the retired ministers, he’s gonna preach the first four times and then he’s one of these people who go to Florida when he gets cold. [Laughter] We have a lot of them. But I couldn’t do that ’cause if I lived half the year in Florida and half the year here, I would feel disconnected somewhere. You’re always trying to catch up with something. I enjoy living in Mathews. I don’t think you can have any better life than living here.
T: I don't know anything about your—well, you've mentioned her a few times but how did you meet your wife? Who is she? Tell me about her.

O: My wife? My wife is from Norfolk and her godparents lived here in Mathews which was friends of my family and—

[Interruption in interview.]

T: Sorry about that. You were telling us that your wife is from Norfolk.

O: She's from Norfolk and she used to come up to Mathews quite a bit because her godparents lived up here, and her godparents were very good of friends with my family. Well, it's a very unique situation 'cause I went to church one Sunday morning, and back in those days when church was over, you just milled around and talked and everything. I was out in the front of the church and I see this girl come out of church, and I looked at her and I said, who is she? And to my sister, this is the truth, I said, I'm gonna marry that girl. Well, that afternoon, I got a phone call from her godparents, said Raymond, you've got a sailboat and I've got a girl visiting us that wants to go sailing. And I said, yeah, I'll be glad to take her. I didn't know who she was talking about, 'cause I didn't know who this girl was. Anyway, she says, well, I'ma tell you: the family's having a picnic tomorrow evening and I want you to come and you'll be able to meet my friend and I want you to go sailing. Well, we met her at the picnic and we got along real good together. So one day—might've been the next day, I don't know, it was during the summer—we went sailing. I've always had a sailboat, one way or the other. I like sailing and we went sailing 'cause we lived on the water. It's easy, you know. So
we went sailing all the way down to an area called the Hole in the Wall, which
one side is the bay and the other side is Stutts Creek. We got down there, having
a wonderful time, and the wind died out and the mosquitos came out and then we
were just sitting there. Eighteen-foot sail boat not going nowhere, and we just sit
there for a while. After, I guess, thirty minutes, I heard an outboard motor coming.
It was embarrassing because my daddy had to get in the boat and come down,
and he pulled us back home. We started dating and just . . . carried on from
there. We started dating and that was in the summer of 1954. I was drafted to go
in the army that fall. We became engaged, and I went overseas to Germany and
she waited for me. We wrote letters back and forth as often as we could. At that
time, she was going to college over in Norfolk, but after she come to the
conclusion that we were gonna get married when I got out of the army, she quit
college and went to work. If she had continued going to college, she probably
wouldn’t have married me because she’s exceedingly smart, and if she’d have
gone to college, she’d been too smart to marry me. [Laughter]

U: Aw, you were meant for one another.

O: I don’t know. But, yeah, we became engaged. Before I went in the army, I went to
the jewelry store in Newport News and bought an engagement ring. I gave it to
my mother to keep for me. Back in those days, nobody had any money and I
think I bought it and paid ten dollars a month or five dollars a month or something
from Mr. Allen at Allen Jewelry Store. But anyway, I was stationed, taking basic
training in Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. Mother and Daddy came down one
weekend and brought my future wife with them, and I gave her the ring down in
Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. And then . . . I got out of the army in fall of [19]56. It was around Thanksgiving, and we got married first of the year, January . . . So I've been very happy. I don't know how to—we've had a good marriage. Fifty-seven years this January. I remember that.

U: Getting close to sixty.

O: Uh-huh. I remember . . . everything for me happens at church. I was at church one Sunday and this man that was predominant in church, he came up to me and he says, Raymond, you're about ready to finish your apprenticeship, aren't ya? And I said, yeah, in a couple weeks. He said, I know, I got my eye on you. He was on the draft board. He said, I got my eye on ya. Well, the day I finished my apprenticeship, I got my card in the mail. My boss where I worked in the shipyard wanted me to get a deferment because it was a critical trade. I said, no, I'm going in the army. I don't want to be looking over my shoulder the rest of my life. I don't regret going in the army. I was in Berlin, Germany for a year and a half, and very educational. Very educational.

T: Tell me a little bit about—you said your experiences in Germany were very educational—maybe a little bit about your time while you were in Germany.

O: In Germany?

T: Yeah.

O: Well, I was in the Sixth Infantry Regiment which was—in reality, we were in Berlin to keep the Russians out. That's when they had the wall and they had barbed wire and the Russians had towers all around West Berlin. The only way
you could get to West Berlin was fly in or take the night train. So we went in on
the night train, and it’s a zillion little train stops on the way. It was during the night
when they go through the stops, and I guess it’s because of rules and
regulations, but there was always Russians soldiers there and they had their
tommy guns, **standing** and everything. It was a very dangerous time. When I first
got into Berlin, it bothered me for about a few weeks but then after that, you get
used to it. What I remember distinctly was—which is scary—when we first got
into Berlin and they had a meeting of us new troops, and they said that we were
there only to protect the senior officers and their families, and if the Russians
decided to take over Berlin, we were on our own. They were saying, hey, you’re
expendable. From then on, I’ve always kept in my mind that the big boys in the
government and the army and them, they don’t care nothing about the troops.
They’re expendable. That’s the feeling I got that. We used to train a lot for
escape and invasion so if the Russians did come in. But we only had one scary
time over when we were in Berlin. Russia did some stupid move in one of the
smaller countries, and we went on alert for it. We thought they were gonna move
us out but it died down. I guess the diplomats settled it some way. But every
company had an alert team and all the time, we had what we called a deuce and
a half truck: a two-and-a-half-ton truck with a trailer on it loaded with equipment
and ammunition. Every company had one on alert and we would pull alert duty
twenty-four hours. We had to stay by in case they called with the . . . but other
than that, it was a good tour of duty. I didn’t communicate too much with the
Germans. But the German people, those that I did meet and talk to in pig Latin
more or less, [Laughter] were very nice, very kind. But they had a hard time in that time because—one thing that I thought that you need was most of the German people, unless they had a business or store, they worked at cleaning up the city 'cause it was bombed out everywhere. And they would go to work. You would see 'em leaving, and they would be dressed up in a three-piece suit and they carried their briefcase. Well, in their briefcase, they had their lunch. It was a sort of a status symbol. I don't think they really wanted to admit they were in the condition they were. But then they would walk the street or catch the bus and go to the particular building that they were tearing down and clean the bricks up. I guess they rebuilt the city with bombed-out bricks, to tell you the truth. But I enjoyed being Germany, traveled all over Europe, saw a lot of things that I wouldn't have seen otherwise. Another friend of mine was a Jewish boy from Hampton and I guess because we didn't live that far from here to Hampton, we became friends. We took the twenty-day leave and went all over Europe. We went to France and Italy and England, Switzerland. Very educational. You see what the other side of the world is like.

U: Why don't you tell them about your sergeant, what happened to him?

O: Oh, yeah. I was a platoon radio operator, and the top sergeant and the staff sergeant of the platoon was—they had a platoon, their room was a nice and good-sized room. Me and another boy, we were platoon radio operators so we slept in the platoon headquarters. Our sergeant in there was a master sergeant and during Second World War, he had been a captain in the army. But after the war—and it probably still do—they will cut you back to your permanent rank. And
his permanent rank was master sergeant, which is still top dog in the army. But he resented that. I mean, he’d talk about it some. But he was always good to me and I think treated everybody in the platoon very good. I guess several months before I was to come back home, his time was up and he said he was coming back home. He was from California and he was going to open up an ice cream shop in California. He bought a new automobile. He had an Opel, but he bought a new sports model Opel, German car. It was his time to go, so he left. Well, several months after that, I got out and I went back to my job in the shipyard. We’d go, get there twenty, thirty minutes before time and we’d usually start reading the paper in the morning. Anyway, this particular morning, I picked up the front lines and it says, “Army Sergeant Arrested for Espionage,” and it says Sergeant Mintkenbaugh. He had gone to California, he had opened up his ice cream shop, but also at the time I was with him in Germany, he was a Soviet spy. Which worried me [Laughter] because I said, man, they’re gonna come get me next thing, find out what was going on. But we didn’t know nothing about it. I mean, he had a girlfriend who lived in East Germany and he used to, half the nights he’d spend with her. He came back one time with a little cup and saucer that he gave me. I can’t remember the name of it, but it’s a very rare piece of china. The factory was bombed out during the war. But he was arrested, and he had been a Russian spy for any number of years. In fact, at one time he had gone to Russia. But they sentenced him to life in prison and I often thought about, is he still living? Is he dead? I guess by now he’d be a hundred years old, whether he died in prison or something. I guess if I was knowledgeable, which
I’m not, about a computer, I could—maybe you can go on a computer and find out what happened to him. It sort of shook me up ‘cause I thought for sure the FBI would be coming to ask me questions about him. But I guess they knew enough about him. But it’s unbelievable. You would’ve never suspected what he was doing. I guess he was in a good tour of duty to do a lot ‘cause he could get into contact with the Russians very easy, being in Berlin. I don’t know. He said he had a girlfriend in East Germany; he could’ve been going over there to do dirty business, far as I know. But strange things can happen to you all the time, all the time. Think of anything else?

U: Well, you can tell ‘em about Uncle Bubba during World War II, some of the things he—

O: Oh, yeah. I had an uncle who was a captain of a tanker, and he was from Mathews and he went to sea. All the people in my family went to sea. And he was captain of a tanker and he used to run to Europe on a regular basis. His ship would come into Hampton Roads, which was Norfolk, the port down there. He never left in a convoy. He told me I never go in a convoy ‘cause the Germans know when the convoy’s leaving. He says, nobody knows but me when we’re leaving. He’d always pull out at night and head to Europe. He was in the invasion when they invaded France, and he told me one time he saw seven ships torpedoed in one night in the distance. But he never was under fire or anything. He survived and he was living in Pennsylvania, and he was gonna take his last ship to the far east to get oil, and when he went up the gangplank, he had a heart
attack and died going up the gangplank. So you never know when something’s gonna happen to you. But going through the whole war, never did nothing.

U: Talk about Spain.

O: Well, yeah, during the Spanish War he was running oil to the rebels in Spain. Franco, who was the opposition caught him, caught the ship. They caught the ship and put him in prison. The only reason, the only way he got out of being in prison was the Secretary of State of this country finally worked a deal and got him out. And he was ready to go back, take another load of oil there. He was just never worried about nothing. He was just a go-getter. When he was sixteen years old, my grandfather asked him to go down to Cricket Hill. I don’t know whether y’all know about Cricket Hill or not, but it’s down on the water opposite Gwynn’s Island. He said, go down there and get me a plug of tobacco. Well, you know what? He came back two years later. He got a skiff and rode to Norfolk and that’s when he first went to sea, when he was sixteen. When he came back two years later, he had that good plug of tobacco for my grandfather. [Laughter] And he worked his way up from nothing up to captain. He had another brother that also ended up a captain of a ship. My daddy was chief engineer and none of them had more than an eighth grade education, which, you can’t do that now. Now you almost have to be master’s degree and a doctorate and everything to get good jobs. But back in those days, they worked and they got it. I guess good common sense went a long way. Anything else?

T: Do you have anything else that you think that we should know or anything that you really want—
O: No, probably I get home, I can think of ten different things, but right now, I don’t know of anything. I’ve enjoyed life. I’m eighty-two and I have serious health problems, but I get up every morning and I’m grateful. I ran for Board of Supervisors at one time and I didn’t make it, but then they put me on the Planning Commission here in Mathews. I was on that for eight years, which I enjoyed. But everything is getting too controversial now in the county. You getting a lot of people moving into the county now that when they get here, they want to change things like it was where they came from. I think there’s a little opposition to that. I personally would like to see Mathews stay like it is. I know you can’t buy some things here but if you could buy it, they would still go to Wal-Mart or Newport News or Richmond to do it.

U: He’s been real sick the last few years. Maybe he can just tell you a little bit about how medical care was a lot different when he was growing up. Doctors—

O: Yeah, when I was a boy, I was born at home in the house and Dr. Haynes was my doctor, old-time doctor. He was just a general good old family doctor, but now the doctors are all specialist in something. I’ve been in the hospital quite a lot in the past six years, I guess. In fact, this month I’ve been there eight days already, so I guess I’m living on borrowed time but I don’t think about it because it doesn’t bother me. But last time, I was in Walter Reed for five days straight and I couldn’t have been treated any nicer. The nurse—everything in our hospitals around here has really done a hundred percent switch to good. I had nurses that I would’ve brought home with me if they’d come to tell you the truth. Just as nice as they could be. I’ll give you the example of going to a hospital here and going
somewhere else because I had one nurse since last time that—I always ask them where they took their training at. Some of ‘em took at different hospitals, Richmond and Norfolk and so forth. This girl, I said, where’d you get your training? And she said, Big Riverside in Newport News. And I said, well, why aren’t you working for Riverside down there? Of course, Walter Reed is part of Riverside, and her comment to me was, I don’t want to be down there with that bunch of scallywags. [Laughter] She chose to drive from Newport News every day to be at Walter Reed. They treated me wonderful when I was there, and I’m sure they do that to everybody. I wasn’t no special case or anything. My doctor, he come see me twice a day, and even his wife, who is a P.A., she came in to see me. I’m very grateful that we have a hospital that close that you could go to. Now, our rescue squad here in Mathews is next to none. I mean, they’re wonderful. Time up? [Laughter].

T: Well, thank you so much for speaking with us today.

O: Oh I was glad to do it. I didn’t know what I was gonna be in for [Laughter], whether I had to come up with stories. I like asking. I can remember things but it’s hard to come up with ideas. It’s much better when you ask me a specific question you know that I can—it’s like I said, I can remember seventy years ago but I can’t remember what I had for supper last night. That’s kind of strange but I think it happens to everybody. If you’re fortunate enough to live old enough, you’ll have problems. Take care of yourself. Eat the proper foods, get plenty of rest and exercise. I used to run a lot. I used to run three miles every day, and her mother was a cross-country runner in school. Sometimes I’d run with her. We’d run eight
miles a day. But when I was in the hospital with heart trouble, the doctor said I’d probably be dead if I hadn’t exercised like that. I guess I’m pretty good for eighty-two.

U: He worked all his life so that the fifth generation of his family could live here on the same property. So, thanks for your time.

O: I thank you.

M: Thank you.

O: Thank you for this. When I called up, I didn’t know what I was in for.

[End of interview]