

**Roosevelt Whitfield: Living in Conway**

RW: Well, growing up in Conway, I think there was about 16 families there. Everyone knew everybody. Conway has a lot of names, it was called “Three Corners”. It was called the n-word, you know. And back in those days, it was called “Anderson Curve”, then Bud Wilson, it had several names.

ECS: Anderson Curve?

RW: Anderson Curve. What I’m saying is, when you go up in there you’ve got two curves. About three quarters of a mile from the highway, and you go up in there about, oh just about 200 yards, and then you’ve got a curve to your right—that’s Wilson’s Curve—then about a few feet left you turn back to your left, that’s called Anderson Curve. I don’t remember Anderson, but I do remember Bud Wilson, he was my uncle because he was married to my daddy’s sister at one time. And back then, everybody knew about everybody, everybody was friendly, and it wasn’t nothing. We didn’t have much, we raised cotton and corn, and my dad raised chickens and hogs. We milked cows and that was something I hated to do, with a passion. And he’d always tell my mother, he’d say “leste, that boy isn’t going to be worth the sorghum on his bread.” And that’s what enticed me to go on and try to go to school. And my brother, he would go to school, but he hated school but he loved the farm. And we would have to get up early in the morning and go milk the cows believe it or not before we went to school.

**Roosevelt Whitfield: Going to School**

RW: We were back up in the hollow. And we had kids that walked from what you’d call in the day back then as Tucker Bend, where people walked from Bryson over to the school.

ECS: Yes, there was a school at Bryson, right?

RW: Yes, there was a school at Bryson, Indian Creek is what they called that. They had people to walk over from Tarpley Shop, through the woods, and luckily we lived there.

ECS: You didn’t have as far to walk.

RW: We didn’t have as far to walk. My brother and I, our first five years of school, never was tardy, never did miss a day. We were awarded a Booker T. Washington half dollar and it hurts my feelings today to think about that because my daddy, we didn’t have no where to put those, so I’ll tell you what I’d do, I’d take a plank up out of the floor. And I put it down under the bottom of the floor, on the ground. And he would over talk himself one day, and was telling some of his friends where we had our little half dollar and someone went and broke into our house one day—there was no breaking in because we never did have no lock, we’d just walk on into the house—he walked into the house and new and pulled the plank up and got our little Booker T. Washington half a dollar. We little boys would cry and cry.

ECS: That had to be sad because you had worked so hard to earn it.

RW: Yes, it was, and after the school shut down, back then the Greyhound bus cost a quarter for us to ride from Conway to Elkton, and.

ECS: That was expensive from Conway to Elkton.

RW: We didn’t have that kind of money, we had to walk. Five of us walked, all the way from Conway to Dixontown. They had a little school they called Holt’s Elementary.

ECS: Holt’s?

RW: H-O-L-T-‘S, Holt’s Elementary.

ECS: Oh, Holt's.

RW: Holt's Elementary. And we went there until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Roosevelt Whitfield: Joining the National Guard**

RW: After I got out, we lived in the Dixontown community then because my mother and them moved, they were already here, and I went into service just as soon as I finished high school. And then I was sitting at the house one night, and a jeep pulled up, it was in the summer time, about 5:30 or quarter to six, my mother run to the door and she said, "Boy, what are all these military men doing out here? You done got into some trouble?" I said, "No, I'm an honorable discharge from the army." And one of them said "We'd like to speak to Roosevelt Whitfield." And she said, "What you want with him?" And he said, "Ma'am, we don't mean no harm, we just want to talk to your son." And so I go out and he says, "We need a black man in the National Guard here in Pulaski." I said, "I just got out of the army." He said, "I know you did, that's why we come to you. We want, schools are just beginning to get integrated, we're having protests and problems," he said. It hadn't really hit Pulaski yet, but we had a lot of sit-ins there in Pulaski. James Brown at that time was in charge of the sit-ins and trying to get everything organized in Pulaski. I said, "Well, I served three years in the army." He said, "Well, we know that too." They had my records, they had my file, they laid it out on the hood of their jeep.

ECS: They knew all about you.

RW: I think the Captain, Lieutenant and Sergeant. I said, "Yes, I'll join." He said, "Come on up Monday and we'll swear you in." And I was the first black to join the National Guard there in Pulaski.

**Roosevelt Whitfield: Meeting a KKK Member**

RW: Of course you know, the Ku Klux Klan used to have their meetings there, and I had one face to face, and that's the only contact I, of course I was in the National Guard then, and posted uptown, and I was coming up by Best Theater.

ECS: Well did they really still meet, the Ku Klux Klan? Did the Ku Klux Klan really meet in Pulaski during that era of time?

RW: Well, they did, but we knew what they. They told us what they would look like. They didn't congregate like they did in the later years. They would maybe be riding around in cars and.

ECS: But they weren't covered.

RW: No, they wasn't covered like that, but we had suspicions that there would be some come into town. One asked me one day, I took him to be one, and he says, "I'm from", he says, he's from Georgia. And I said, "I don't care where you're from. It's good to see you," just like that. And I said, "I'm in the national guard." He said he had never seen a black dressed the way I was. I was dressed in fatigues. And I shook his hand and said, "Congratulations."

ECS: So you feel that the people that were associated with the Ku Klux Klan were more people coming in, rather than.

RW: Oh, yes, most of people coming in.

ECS: Just because of the name of Giles County had that name.

RW: That's the birthplace of it though.

ECS: Yes.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Segregation and Desegregation**

RW: Back then we had the poor whites and poor blacks and we were all in the same boat, we just didn't live together. We worked, we chopped cotton together, when school was out during the cotton season.

ECS: Everybody was poor and those that had, they still lived a frugal way of life.

RW: That's right, but now everybody is equal and everybody, we just go our separate ways, we don't come together like people should, and it's, it may take a long time to come, but it's going to eventually come, I see, where our churches today are still somewhat segregated. It was that way then, it's that. You've got the black churches here, you've got white churches here, and what you find is some churches are mixed every once in a while. I don't think nowadays, if you went into a white church, they would ask you to leave. I've been to that.

ECS: Hm. I hope they wouldn't.

RW: I've been to a white church and I was welcomed better than I was at my own church. But the time, the times have really changed. I think education will play a big part, in regards to race, creed or color. There are some things you'll find where there is some politics in hiring, but if you qualify, I don't think they would turn you down, regardless of your race or color, it's just your qualification that you have. But I find that since I've been in the school system, I look at the little kids, as they go down the hall and they, as Martin Luther King used to say, there will come a time when you'll see a little white girl and a little black girl walking down holding hands. I saw that yesterday at school.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Going to Church**

RW: And where we lived, we had to walk about two miles to the church. And we would go through the woods, go on the cow paths, and she used to drag my brother and I . . . She used to make us go to church. And we had this big branch we had to go across, and she had this plank she had hid in the woods.

ECS: Now, a branch for people that don't know, is a little stream of water.

RW: Stream of water.

ECS: Very small.

RW: Yeah, and she would throw that plank across it, the branch, and she led me and my brother across there, and she would pull the plank on the other side, and when we'd come back from church. And that's one reason I don't have no hatred in my heart for no human being.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Homemade Wallpaper and Parents' Love**

RW: You know, I could sit and talk to you guys all days, but you know, the house that we lived in, and this is the truth, it was put, what we had for wall paper was newspaper.

Mother taped, she made that homemade glue, made out of starch and flour and stuff like that, and glued that newspaper across there, and if I wanted to know the news, I'd just read the newspaper up side the walls, as we got a little older and could read the newspaper. And the house had a leak in it and she put an old pan up under there to catch that leak, and I always tell my boys it would play a tune, "ding,ding", until it would get so much water and then quit. And she used to heat old smoothing irons and put it in the

bed with us to keep us warm, keep us warm at night. We had that love, and that love carried with me. I still have that love. I still have my mother with me, my daddy with me.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Used Books and Taught to Love**

RW: I go back up to the Conway community where I was born and raised, from time, and look around, and it's all grown up, in the woods.

ECS: Well there is a building up there that I know of, as Conway School, it's on Vonda Jones' place, is that the school you're talking about?

RW: No, no, we, ours was back up there in the hollow.

ECS: Oh, that's right, you were in the hollow.

RW: You're talking about the white school out there on the hill. Yes, that was the white school back then. Yes, yes, that's where the, and you know, getting back, we had determination to go to school. Because everything we got back in those days were hand-me-downs. We got the old books that the white kids had used, and we could see the names in the back. And I remember seeing, I got an arithmetic book, now, of course they call it mathematics today, fourth grade arithmetic that I used when I was in the fourth grade. Whitt, it was some Whitt was back in the 40's, and I be trying, trying to find out exactly who that was. But the books were good back in those days, I mean, like I say, we were young and we wasn't taught in school to hate, even the teachers didn't teach us how hate. They taught us nothing but love. And Miss McClure and Miss Bridgeforth [Agnes Bridgeforth] always, they always taught us regardless of what you do in life, be good at it, if you are a ditch digger, be the best ditch digger that ever dug a ditch. But never hate nobody, because hate is like a cancer, it will eat you up.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Woodmen of the World Barbecue**

RW: And the Woodmens of the World, Doug [Turner] maybe you remember, they used to have a barbecue right here on this bank.

ECS: A barbecue?

RW: Yes, a barbecue. And people would come from miles and miles around, for barbecue. That's how they raised their funds, called the Woodmens of the World. And we, black and white would turn out then, we didn't see no color then, the black would stand in line, black or white folk would stand in line to get their barbecue.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Learning to Cook and Old Iron Skillet**

. My mother taught me how to cook, and Mrs. Aline Thompson taught me how to cook. But see, Aline Thompson taught me how to do, how to make caramel icing out of that old black skillet.

ECS: Now, was that the Thompson family that your mother worked for?

RW: Yes. Charles Thompson, that's right, Steve Thompson, of Elkton.

ECS: Elma and Mrs. Aline Thompson.

RW: Mrs. Aline. I keep referring back, I was up in Conway one year, and I was looking at the old place, my mother used to, we used to call them ash banks back in those days, that was what Daddy used to put on the garden. And I saw this handle sticking out of the ash bank, and I said what in the world is that? And when I grabbed the handle, it was an old black iron skillet.

ECS: Oh.

RW: That I remember when I was a boy, my mother used to cook chicken back in those days, and I don't know how it got, but I know I got it and I brought it home and I burned it and right now I've got it hanging up side the wall. And that's what I make my caramel icing out of and everything.

ECS: Tell this tape how to clean an old iron skillet.

RW: Burn it.

ECS: But how do you burn it?

RW: Just take it and make a fire, pour you some, we called it grease, some old burnt meat grease in it.

ECS: Out side.

RW: Out side, burn it until it gets plumb, it will have a, I don't know what color you'd call it, but you'll feel, you'll see stuff popping from it when it gets real hot.

ECS: The stuff that's built up on it will pop off.

RW: Then you take a metal object and hit it and all that stuff will come right out of it. Then, after you get it down, you get a piece of sand paper and sand it the best you can, and keep it oiled all the time, to keep the rust out of it. It took me about a month or two to get it where I wanted it to get, but once it, that's why they call it a black skillet, it's got to turn black, black iron skillet.

ECS: Even if you purchase a new one, it's got to get black before it's good.

RW: It's got to get black, that's right.

ECS: The old folks always burned their skillets that way.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Old Stores and Cutting Baloney**

RW: Right here we used to have Mr. Harold Taylor's grocery, used to go in there and get 15 cents of baloney, get a Moon Pie and a drink for a quarter.

ECS: Was it on bread or crackers?

RW: He said, "Get you that box with three or four crackers," and then Buddy Birdsong used to run the store.

ECS: Do you remember when the crackers were four to a section? You bought the.

RW: Yes.

ECS: And that's what I remember baloney being on, instead of the little individual.

RW: But he never did cut a whole slice of baloney, always cut them halves, there was some way he would slice the baloney, it would be half a slice, half a slice over here and half a slice over there, but he never cut a whole. But the baloney would be hanging up in the ceiling. You can't do that no more.

### **Roosevelt Whitfield: Going to Conway Store for Mother**

RW: Matter of fact, I've got one of them old almanacs we used to have in Conway. I think it was 1949, old almanac, back in those days, my mother's writing, and then we had a country store. I've got a list, that my mother wrote a list out there, to mail to Mr. Butler, Mr. Butler will you please let me have four pounds of lard, five pounds of sugar, 25 lb bag of flour.

ECS: Yes, Conway was, the Butler store was just above Conway.

RW: Yes, give this to my boys and we'd trot back across the hill with it. We'd be so tired. And I, you know, I was just wondering, we were young back in those days, I said

“Wonder what it’s going to be like when we get grown?” My brother said, “I don’t know.” We just, I call them the good old days, back in those days, the good days.