

Storer College Oral History Project
Harpers Ferry National Historical Park
Interview with Russell Roper by Elaine Eff
46 Fort Washington Circle, Charles Town, WV 25414
May 5, 2014

EE: Today is May 5, 2014. This is Elaine Eff, oral historian, and I am interviewing Mr. Russell Roper for the Storer College archive for the National Park Service. With me is our photographer, Edwin Remsberg, and he may join me in the interview and ask some questions as well. So, we're very excited to be here with Russell Roper of 46 Fort Washington Circle, Charles Town, West Virginia, 25414, and I am going to let him introduce himself. So, why don't you tell me, Mr. Roper, your name and a little about your roots, your family roots here and tell me where we are, and also tell me when you were born. We'll kind of work backwards, and then we'll work forwards. Is that okay?

[00:01:04.14] RR: My name is Russell B. Roper, and I was born November 25, 1925. I've lived in Charles Town all my life, and I lived in Jefferson County all my life. My father's name was Charles Edward Roper, and my mother's name was Willie E. Roper. I was born in Jefferson County and went to school here in Jefferson County until I went into the service, World War II, in 1942. I mean, I went in the Navy in 1942 and came out in 1946.

[00:01:55.21] My father was a dairy farmer, and we lived on a farm on Summit Point Road, which I still own. I milked cows. I had a peach orchard on the farm. I had a little apple orchard on the farm, a grape orchard on the farm, and a raspberry orchard on the farm. My mother raised chickens, sold eggs, and did all the farm work that a woman was supposed to do as far as the farm was concerned. I continued farming after I got out of the service for a length of time. In fact, they traded the—didn't trade but sold the milk cows and got dairy cows and got rid of the—sold the dairy cows in fact. Let me retract that. I sold the dairy cows and bought beef cows. And then I went into the hog business on that same farm while we was doing construction work, and we would raise six to seven—we had six to seven hundred head of hogs per day, not the year, but per day. And I stopped raising hogs in about '95, 1995.

[00:03:32.25] I've been in the construction business and the rental business and so forth and so on, and that's just the start of my story. I went to college at Storer College in 1946 and graduated in 1950—the class of 44, I think it was. Class of 44.

EE: What is the class of 44? The number of people in the class?

[00:04:00.18] RR: The number of people that was in the class. I think it was 44. Or 44 of them graduated. I forgot about how many people was there. Anyhow, I got married in 1946.

EE: Who did you marry?

[00:04:17.06] RR: A lady by the name of Betty J. Daniels from Elkins, West Virginia. She had graduated from Storer College in 1946.

EE: She graduated in '46.

RR: No, she graduated before that. No, she graduated in 1946; I graduated in 1950.

EE: Okay. We're going to back up a little. That was a nice summary. Let's go back and get some of the family history because it's very illuminating about your interest in education and your going to Storer. Why don't you tell me about your family, how the Ropers got to Jefferson County, and then about your parents and your interest in education.

[00:05:17.14] RR: Well, the Ropers basically, according to the history in the courthouse, two Roper brothers came over here from England and had a grant. They bought considerable land, considerable acreage of land in Jefferson County, which is now Route 340, and it extended from Route 340 to the river, and there's a road there that's a name road in the state, a name road in the county called Roper's Road, and they owned roughly around 2,800 acres from there to the river. And they owned slaves, and the two brothers had children, and one of the siblings married a mulatto lady, a woman, and that's how my father's father, my grandfather, came about.

EE: What was his name?

[00:06:25.01] RR: His name was Edward Roper, William Edward Roper.

EE: All right. So, tell me about what you know about that part of the family?

[00:06:40.12] RR: Well, I just know from what the history has in the county courthouse. Of course, we have searched the history since then, since that time. When slavery was ended in 1865, naturally progress on that, those farm and on those acres had to decrease because they didn't have enough money to keep it going, and my father's father had left that—I guess you'd call it a plantation, whatever the case may be, and he went working basically for himself. And then my father worked with him until he started his own farm. Then that's when I came along in 1925. He bought his first farm in 1907. I was born in 1925.

EE: Tell me a little about your father's or your parents' education. What kind of schooling did they have?

[00:08:08.17] RR: My father was not able—due to there was no school at that time for him to go to per se—they only went to school at a church where somebody at the church had some education, and he attended school in the season like in January and February and part of March because he had to go back to work to make a living and so forth

and so on, and my mother was the same way. But his education amounted to maybe—he was twenty-one years old when he even stopped going, attending school, and his education amounted to roughly the third grade. But his common sense outweighed all of that situation, and he knew how to plant corn. He knew how to plant wheat. He knew how to raise cattle. He knew how to raise horses. He knew how to farm and make a living out of it, and he knew how to count, and he knew how to judge seasons and so forth and so on. He used the almanac for some education. So, he probably worked out all his problems. And then I came along in 1925. So, we went from there.

EE: So, what would you say the value of education was or how your family considered education?

[00:10:09.19] RR: Well, we considered education, but we were deprived of it. They were deprived of education. I was deprived of actually having an education, where I should have gone, but we were deprived of it because of segregation.

EE: We're in a very interesting spot where we're having our interview today. I'm interviewing you—why don't you tell me where we are now, where we're located, and what this area has been historically?

[00:10:48.28] RR: Well, we are in a office building which the Roper family owns, and it was part of the elementary school, Eagle Avenue, which turned into Page-Jackson, but it was Eagle Avenue School, which was a elementary school. I really have forgotten the date that it was built, but, anyhow, this school was here for black students in this particular area.

EE: Is there a name of this area where we are now?

[00:11:38.05] RR: This area is just Charles Town on Martin Luther King Avenue.

EE: What did this used to be known as?

[00:11:45.06] RR: It was just West Washington Street, and there was the Middle Way Pike. They changed the name from Washington Street, this part of it, to Martin Luther King Avenue back during Martin Luther King days. The school was a elementary school to begin with and because students then didn't have a high school to go to, the only high school they had to go to was part of Storer College. See, Storer College had a high school to begin with plus they got into the graduate school, you know, which was a college.

EE: What era are we talking about now?

[00:12:47.28] RR: I would say between the late thirties to forty, it got to be—no, let me think. It was elementary school here when I started here in 1936, and at that particular time in 1936, if you wanted to go to high school, you had to go to Storer College. And I

would say in '40—'38 and 1939—they built some rooms on to the elementary school, and then they used it as a high school. I left here, Eagle Avenue School in 1942 and went in the service, and when I came back out of the service, they had changed and I can't remember what year it was—I think it was in the early fifties—that they built a high school, and Eagle Avenue became vacant. After it became vacant, it accidentally caught fire and was burned down. And two years later, near that time, I purchased the ground and erected an office building on the ground. That was the old Eagle Avenue School.

EE: Now, first, I want you to describe the building that we're in and where it's located in relation to the railroad tracks, etc. So, why don't you describe this building? It's a rather unusual beautiful building.

[00:15:08.20] RR: Well, I built part of the building for the human services state of West Virginia and also built the downstairs for them to have their office in and rented to the State of West Virginia, and I used the top portion of it for my office because I was in the real estate business and the construction business, and I built the front of it, and it's all combined together. I built the front of it for a convenience store, and down through the years, then I decided not to have a convenience store. I was going to do something else with it. Now, it sits on the ground that the Eagle Avenue School had, and it takes care of a whole block, and it's on Martin Luther King Avenue, which is the Middle Way Pike, off of West Washington Street. It's not in the city of Charles Town. But it's in the Charles Town area, but it's not in the city. It's outside the city limits of the city of Charles Town.

EE: Tell me what feature we have going by.

[00:16:40.23] RR: Well, we have the Norwalk and Western Railroad, which goes by the building, and it's been there for--ever since I've been born. It's been there for years. This was where people commuted, if they wanted to go to Winchester or Roanoke or Harrisburg, Pennsylvania or down south. This is where they caught the train because it was a large train station here, and the train station had a commercial end of it where stuff was shipped into it, and it was regular. It had passenger accommodations on this rail. Passenger trains ran up and down here all day, every day, you know, all day a week, you know.

So, it was an outlet here, and they had another railroad station down Charles Town. I don't remember, I forgot the name of it, but, anyhow, it crossed the Norwalk and Western, and it went to Harpers Ferry and on into Brunswick [Maryland] and Washington, DC at that particular time.

EE: I think that's probably still an active railroad, isn't it?

[00:18:02.26] RR: It's still active, but they just use it now as freight, just as they use this one as freight now. It's not a passenger anymore but it is a—some large trains go by here. Whoo! You know, all that shipping from down south up here or from here, it's up

and down this railroad out here.

EE: Now, you haven't mentioned the high school that existed here. Wasn't there a high school on this property also?

RR: The high school was connected right to the elementary school.

EE: And what was it called?

[00:18:42.23] RR: Well, after they got to high school, they just called it Page-Jackson High School. They built four rooms on to the back of the elementary school, and then they called it high school. See, I went to high school here.

EE: So, you didn't need to go to Storer College for high school.

[00:19:03.25] RR: No, I didn't go to Storer College for high school. I think the high school here started possibly in—I'd say 1940, maybe, '38 or '40, between '38 and '40. And the kids then did not have to go to Harpers Ferry to high school. They had a high school here, which was small.

EE: So, you left high school. You graduated from high school.

[00:19:31.06] RR: No, I did not graduate from high school.

EE: Oh, tell me about that.

[00:19:35.24] RR: I left here in 19—well, my mother passed away, and it kind of upset me to a certain extent, which was, I was a mother's boy, I guess, and it kind of upset me to a certain extent. And in 1941, my mother passed away, and I was out on the farm with my father, which he had men that worked there by the month, and we was at a football game in December the 7th, 1941, when the newspaper boys came from Martinsburg down hollering, "Pearl Harbor has been struck!" or whatever what the case may be. So, I went home. My daddy, he had listened to it on the radio, and after 1941, people were being gathered up into Jefferson County that was of age going into the service. You know, they had the draft. I did not have to go in the draft because I lived on a farm, and I wasn't of age.

EE: How old were you?

[00:21:21.23] RR: I was fifteen, and I was not of age. So, I was at school here, right here, and we used to have maybe a half an hour, forty-five minutes for lunch, and a lot of the kids used to walk downtown, get some candy, just do stuff. So, I had to go to the post office to get some stamps. It was a neighbor recruiter in the post office giving those flyers. Now, you know, I just picked up one of them, and I was in a rush to the mechanics and all that kind of stuff. Anyway, because on the farm, you learn to do a lot of trades. And I just picked up one of them, you know, it was

telling me this and telling me that. So, I just thought about it and kept on thinking about it every now and then. So, I told my father one day that, I said, "You know, I believe that I would like to go in the Navy. I want to see what the other side of the world is doing." And of course, I knew all about Charles Town, Jefferson County, and all around it. It didn't make any difference. But, anyhow, he said, "Well, you know I'm here by myself, me and the dog, not remarried again. You'll leave me here by myself," you know?

[00:22:49.07] And that conversation went away. Another month, I guess, I came in and I got the notion again. And my father was very, very good to me. I mean, good to me. He bought me a car. I didn't have a driver's license, but I had a registration card. And I used to drive the car to the end of this railroad station up here and park it and walk downtown. And then when I got ready to go home, I'd walk back up and I'd get the car and go home. But, anyway, I brought the subject up again about going in the service. He said, "Well, if that's going to satisfy you, I'll see what I can do."

[00:23:40.20] So, anyhow, I made arrangements with the recruiting in Martinsburg, no, in Baltimore. That's where it was, in Baltimore. The recruiting was in Baltimore. I could go in the Navy because my birthday was in November. I could go in the Navy. I would be sixteen, and my daddy had to sign. So, he agreed to sign, and I left here in December of 1942 and went to Baltimore and left Baltimore and went to Great Lakes. I went to Great Lakes and spent sixteen weeks and came back home on a nine-day leave and left there and went to Seattle, Washington, and got in an OGU [outgoing] unit, and we got shipped out to an island later after I got back and stayed in the Navy like four years to '46. I got back out of the Navy in 1946 and decided with other guys that had got out of the army and Navy and so forth and so on, the guys that I had gone to school with, you know, around in the area, and I decided to go to college, and that's how I ended up down at Storer College. Plus, there was a lot of young girls at Storer College. And, you know, you just—and I used to go down there after football games when I was, you know, before I went in the service. And that's how I got to Storer College. And some of my buddies was there. So, that's how I went to—

[00:25:39.18] And I wasn't, I was interested in college to a certain extent, and I knew that you had to have some kind of education because I took an examination and passed the examination to go to college. I think I left here when I was—I was in the tenth or the eleventh grade. I was going into the eleventh grade when I left here early.

EE: So, you took some sort of exam?

RR: I took an exam.

EE: An equivalency exam.

RR: Yeah, and I got accepted.

EE: And did you go right into college? Did you have to finish some high school classes and then start college?

[00:26:17.06] RR: No, no, no. I just went right on into college. I went to college in September.

EE: So, were you familiar or aware of any other colleges? Had it ever crossed your mind to go anywhere else?

[00:26:29.14] RR: No, just because I just wasn't interested. You know, I was familiar with Storer College. Now, while I was familiar with Storer College was this: in high school here and in graded school here, Storer College would have a program that are called May Day, and all of the little schools was invited to that May Day, and we would go down, and they would take you around the campus, and they would have food. You know, they'd play games and this and that and the other, and it was the thing that went on for years, you know, and we looked forward to it.

EE: How old were you when you started going up there for May Day?

[00:27:19.11] RR: Oh, basically I started school when I was four years old because there was no walking to school then, out in the country. I guess I was seven, eight, nine years old, and we'd go to May Day. That was a big thing, you know. They had it, you know, put all of the elementary schools or whatever the case would be. I don't remember whether the white kids, if you want to call it that, participated in that particular day. I don't think so. I think it was all just, you know, it was just something that happened. I don't know.

EE: So, what kind of activities? What did you do on May Day?

[00:28:09.04] RR: Oh, they played games and played volleyball and played, had baseball, you know, a softball game and an outside tennis court. They had everything.

EE: Did they have a maypole?

[00:28:24.17] RR: I would think so. I mean, you know, they had just everything that correspond with May Day, you know. But, as boys, you know, we'd be out there playing football, touch football or something. Some of them would be playing softball. And, you know, some of them would just be looking around. You know how it was. You would be entertained, and I've forgotten how we got there. Did we get a bus and go there or what? I just don't remember. It was just exercise. I guess they had the merry-go-round. I don't know what all they did now. You know what I mean. And they had people talking to you, and it was—you could see the older people. They wasn't much older than you. If you was eight, nine, ten, eleven years old, they was in college. But I mean, it was just something that a lot of these kids around here would never be able to participate because they never got out of the county, and it was something that was classified as a privileged day.

EE: You don't remember how you got there though.

RR: I just don't remember. I don't remember if we got there by bus or by carload. I just don't remember. I've forgotten that.

EE: Do you remember any music or did people dress up? How did you dress for that?

[00:29:55.12] RR: Well, you know, you dressed—they had shorts on. It was just regular, like we were going to a picnic, like we were just going to some picnic.

EE: Was there a picnic?

RR: Yeah, there was food and everything, the whole works, hot dogs and hamburgers, soda. You know what I mean? Ice cream. It was just everything.

EE: Tell me how you remember, like describe your early memories of Storer College. What did it look like? What are your memories?

[00:30:32.29] RR: Well, you know, it was like big buildings. You could see a lot of people, young people. I mean, you know what I mean. It was young people. The grass was green, and it was like you was going, it was like you were going to a different city, you know. It was just something that you hadn't been used to. And, of course, the ones that had been going there during their elementary school days or what the case would be—I don't know exactly when it started. I've forgotten that. I know I went four or five times, three or four times, or four or five times. And we had chaperones. I do remember that. I just now don't remember just how we got there. I don't think the county furnished buses, but maybe the schools or people would take them. I just know we got there. I just know we were there.

EE: Let's fast forward a little to 1946.

RR: Yeah.

EE: And you decided to go to college, and I'm assuming you went on the GI Bill.

[00:32:00.26] RR: I went to college on the GI Bill because all the other guys say, "Well, man, I'm going to school. I've already been in the service. I spent my time. I did this. I fought in World War II. So, this is my reward. So, I might as well take advantage of it." That's all. And I still helped my daddy on the farm. I mean, you know, some days, I didn't have a full schedule, and I had to go to the library to do this or do that. I got all my lessons, and I did this. I mean, I passed all my subjects, and I just took a business course because that's what I was interested in. I was interested in business because my father, he did not only farm, but he had investments. My father had investments in different places. He raised stuff to sell. He sold apples and peaches and grapes and all this stuff to these downtown stores here.

Regardless of all of that, he sold hams and all that, and my mother sold eggs. My mother had five or six hundred chickens, and she sold eggs commercially. They'd come and pick up the eggs on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. So, you know, we just didn't live on the farm just to live on the farm. My daddy lived on the farm to make whatever money there was to be made, and we was independent. I'll put it like that.

EE: Did your family supply any goods to Storer College?

[00:33:58.07] RR: No, no. My father went down there several times and talked to a group when they asked him to about raising corn and wheat and all of that sort of thing because he used to tell me about it. I know he went down a couple of times. I forget now who had him call down there, but he went down, I don't know, two or three times.

EE: Where did he go?

RR: Storer College. He just went there and talked to a group or something or other who was interested—I don't know what subject it was containing to, but he told me he had been down there a couple of times.

EE: So, what do you remember about your classes at Storer? Do you remember what you took besides business?

[00:34:47.01] RR: I had to have a foreign language, and I took Spanish. Of course, I've forgotten all of that now. We had accounting. We had business law. We had psychology. We had religious courses. You had to take some religious courses. We took that. And I went to summer school. Most of all of us that was GIs, we went to summer school. In other words, we went four years straight. We took a break after the classes were over, like in May or June, and then we'd go back to summer school until classes start again, about two weeks before the classes start again.

[00:35:32.29] And in the summer school, I'd say, because I was reading that book, I'd say it was around fifty or fifty-five of us, we went to summer school because, you know, and some of them had jobs that they worked at night. Some of them just—and I enjoyed going to Storer College. It was a clean little college. It wasn't no big college. It was a clean little college. The ground was kept clean. The buildings on the inside were clean. Now, they were old, but they were good, and they were warm. I mean, they weren't so that the wind was blowing through them. But they were warm. Cook Hall was the new building. That's where the girls had home ec and stayed. And everybody just about knew everybody on the college. I'd say, during the college years, when I was there, it was probably between I'd say maybe 245 to 265 kids. Summer school, it was around fifty to sixty guys, people there. Some of the girls had to make up courses. They would go to summer school.

[00:36:55.05] I mean, you know, they had religious—they had a choir. They had a basketball

team. I played on the football team. The last football game we had was up in Cheyney. That was the last football game I remember playing on in Cheyney. We beat Cheyney that day. It was on a Saturday.

[00:37:15.16] But, anyhow, I mean Storer was a neat little place, and I mean, you know, it was religious to a certain extent. I mean, more so than what colleges are now, and a beautiful lawn, a beautiful campus. You know what I mean? You didn't have no rowdiness or this or that and the other. I mean, you know, a lot of people used to come up there and sightsee on it.

EE: Tell me where you played football.

[00:37:56.11] RR: We played football at the Harpers Ferry High School grounds until they built this football field, but they never got it down to pat. We'd practice on it, but we had our games at the Harpers Ferry High School right up the street, three or four blocks, up in Bolivar. See, Harpers Ferry and Bolivar was there right together.

EE: Did you ever play on the campus? Was there a place where you played?

[00:38:26.23] RR: Well, we practiced on the campus, but we never had games on the campus. Now, they had basketball games on the campus because they had a barn. See, Storer owned a great big barn, and the girls, my wife—she wasn't my wife then. She was just a lady. She liked to play basketball, and I used to go down and watch them play basketball on the nights that they played basketball. I imagine mostly it was Friday nights and Saturday nights. I don't remember.

EE: So, you had men's and women's basketball.

RR: Yeah.

EE: So, do you remember homecoming at all?

[00:39:05.03] RR: Oh, yeah, yeah. I remember homecoming.

EE: Tell me about that.

[00:39:09.05] RR: Well, it was just like an ordinary thing. A lot of people would come, and a lot of mothers and fathers would come, and some of them, the mothers would stay in the dorm with their daughters or some of that nature or something of that nature. Some of them would stay outside, and a lot of kids went to school that lived out in Bolivar and Harpers Ferry, and they would stay different—I mean, some of them would probably stay uptown in Charles Town. But it was homecoming, it was just like any other homecoming. It wasn't as large, but it was homecoming.

EE: Was there a big dance? Was there a big party?

[00:39:52.02] RR: Well, yeah, they had according to the rules and regulations. You know, the college had rules and regulations. It was founded by a Baptist situation, founded by a Baptist from up north. They're the ones who started it, the college. And it was dressed—you didn't see no bums hanging around. You know what I mean. It wasn't that. They had rules and regulations, and everybody was—I never heard of any rowdiness or fights or anything. There was none of that. I never even heard of that.

EE: So, what did you think of the rules? Since you were an adult at that point, you'd been through the army.

[00:41:01.29] RR: Well, I mean, it was, I mean, if I'm going to the school, it's just like when I was going to high school. They had rules. I didn't disobey the rules. I mean, I wasn't into that. You know what I mean? Ninety-five percent of the kids that went to school, you just did not have the enormous ruckus then that you have now going to any college or high school.

[00:41:23.20] RR: You respected the professors. You respected the instructors, and in school here, you respected the teachers, and you respected the principal. And if you had a problem with the principal, when you got home, they knew about it. But in the college, you didn't have that. You know, a lot of kids might have been called bad, but not like it is now.

EE: Where did you live when you went to Storer?

RR: I lived out on the farm on Summit Point Road

EE: So, you went in though for activities pretty often.

[00:42:10.25] RR: Oh, I drove the car. I drove my car. When I got out of the service, my father bought me a brand new Buick. So, you know, I was going to school.

EE: And you spent a lot of time on campus.

[00:42:30.13] RR: Oh, yeah. When my class was over in the evenings or whatever the case may be, I'd be out there helping my daddy. And also we had some outside jobs, and, you know, when I first started college, Sunday or something, my father would take off. Me and another man would do the milking in the afternoons, in the evenings or something.

So, I didn't stay there just because, you know, when my class was over, if I had a late class, maybe three o'clock or something, I don't know, as soon as that class was over, I was home.

EE: Tell me about how you met your wife.

RR: I met her—well, she—

EE: Tell me her name and tell me about her.

[00:43:32.26] RR: My wife was going to college when I started. Now, I used to go to some of the basketball games. I had some friends that I grew up with here that went to the college, and I asked one of the ladies or girls, whatever you want to call them, I said, “What's that girl's name?” You know, how you do it. I said, “What's that girl's name?” They'd say... And I was introduced to her or something like that, and then I just talked to her, you know. I had this little conversation, you know, this, that, and the other, and found out where she was from, and she was from Elkins, and she had eight of them in the family, four boys and four girls. The mother and father came from South Carolina and was living in Elkins, West Virginia. They came up to Elkins, West Virginia way back before World War II. [clears throat] He was going to work in the coal mines, and he didn't work, he started to work in the coal mine, and he got a job in the post office p in Elkins. And he educated all his kids, all was all educated.

I met my wife—

EE: And tell me her name.

[00:45:12.23] RR: Her name is Betty Jean Daniels, and she was a senior ready to graduate. I met her while she was playing basketball. I was at one of the games one night, and I asked a lady who she was and so forth and so on. She told me and I told her I want to meet her. We went from there. And then I started to, you know, taking her to the canteen. You know, we exchanged notes and exchanged talks and so forth and so on. Her mother and father came down to see her one weekend, and I met her mother and father. And then she showed me the pictures of her sisters and the brothers. She had one sister at West Virginia State and then she had one brother going to New York, and then she had another brother, two brothers, going to A T & T [North Carolina A&T] down south.

So, then I was going to this thing, you know, and then I decided to go, you know, was going to school, started going to school. I used to go down there every evening or every day, weekends or something, and talk to her. Then I talked to her father and asked her father that I was interested in marrying his daughter. And he met my father and they got along all right. So, I popped the question, and she agreed to have an engagement, and we got married.

EE: So, were you still in college when you got married?

[00:47:34.25] RR: I was still in college. She was out.

EE: And tell me, what did she study at Storer College?

[00:47:42.22] RR: Home economics. She studied home economics, and after she got a degree in home ec, she went back to college and took courses at Howard University and got to be in elementary education.

EE: So, where did you live?

[00:48:05.25] RR: I lived out on the farm with my father because the house was big, a big house, plenty of rooms. I mean, a big house, a big farmhouse, and we lived out on the farm. We lived on the farm.

EE: And what did she do with her Storer education?

RR: Oh, she taught school for thirty-some years, thirty years.

EE: Where? What did she teach?

[00:48:38.15] RR: She taught in Winchester, Virginia. She taught in—it wasn't in Romney. I've got to think of the name. Well, I'll say in Romney. It was Romney. And then she taught in Wright Denny Elementary School here in Charles Town. And after she passed away, they named the auditorium after her, Betty J. Roper Auditorium. You should have went down and took the pictures of. So, she taught there for I don't know how many years, until she retired.

EE: When did she retire?

RR: Just before two years before, I guess she retired in possibly '98. 2001, she died.

EE: So, let's go back to Storer a little. Tell me, do you remember any of your teachers or any of the administration?

RR: Well, I remember Dean Johnson.

EE: What kind of a man was he?

[00:50:02.25] RR: He was a very intelligent, very nice man. His wife was a teacher here in high school. She taught me here in high school, right here, right, you know, over there. She was a Storer College graduate. I remember the women's dean of Storer College was Dean Jacobs, and I remember the other lady that took care of the ladies' dorm was Miss Bird.

EE: What do you remember about these people?

RR: Very, very fine, classy people. And Darius was the football coach.

EE: How do you say that name?

RR: Darius, D-a-r—Darius. I don't know how you spell it, Darius.

EE: So, were the teachers black or white or both?

[00:51:13.18] RR: A lot of them black and white. There was a teacher there by the name of Dr. Schumaker and Dr. Wolfe. Let's see. I think Mrs. Darius taught math, business math, I think, and George Lewis taught accounting in the business administration, and I can't think of—I forget the lady's name that was teaching Spanish, foreign language, and Dr. McKinney was there. Of course, he didn't teach. Dr. McKinney was there.

EE: Tell me who Dr. McKinney was.

RR: He was the president. See, I wasn't there when Dr. McDonald was there. I knew him, but I wasn't there.

EE: What did you know about Dr. McDonald?

[00:52:23.14] RR: Just by word of mouth. He had been the president of Storer College. I just forget their names. I can't think of all their names.

EE: I think you did a pretty good job. Tell me about how you remember Dr. McKinney.

RR: Oh, I'd meet him. When they'd have some kind of program or something, he would address the program. I'd see him on the campus every day, when he would come and go in his office. He lived right across the street at the front gates of the school. He was a heavyset man—he wasn't too heavy, but he was a tall, heavyset man, a nice appearance, you know, just one of them things. Dr. Briscoe. I do remember Dr. Briscoe. Now, I forgot what he taught.

EE: Now does that mean they were all PhDs?

[00:53:33.13] RR: Well, not all the teachers, not all the professors were PhDs, but they were—well, they were above, they were next to PhDs. You know what I mean. I tried to remember some of their names, but—it will come to me after I leave here, I guess.

EE: Was there any sense of difference between the black professors and the white professors?

[00:54:03.01] RR: Oh, no, no. All of them would work with you to get your subject matter, and if you had a problem, they would work with you to get what you needed and to guide you as to the way to go and help you and bend over backwards. There wasn't any segregation to that extent, like if you had a white student in there

because I think there was a few white kids that were going. There wasn't that, it was some towards the last, but my first years, I don't remember two or three or maybe that much. I just don't remember. And a small campus, everybody knew everybody, and everybody knew all of the instructors. You know, you didn't have no problem. They was upfront. They would help you. If you had library work and didn't understand it, you could go to them personally and they would sit down and help you. If you had a problem, you'd get it worked out. There were no problems. There was no problems. Never, unh-uh.

EE: Were you aware of any kind of racial tensions in Harpers Ferry?

[00:55:39.01] RR: Not on the campus, no. Not on the campus, not in the school, no.

EE: What about in the town?

[00:55:45.00] RR: Well, you had, I guess, you had—we were young, and we knew what the way of life was. Everybody knew that back in those particular days what the life was, in other words, what the rule of life was. [clears throat] And most of the population, most of the white people knew that that was the college there, and they respected it to that extent. Now, there might have been some backlashes that wasn't very important or you never heard of—you know what I mean. It wasn't anything to be upset about, if you—but you knew, you knew how things were in those particular days. You just had come out of a war, and people were generous, and you didn't have—I don't think you had uproars of anything. I mean, I don't remember that, anything.

EE: Do you recall that there were places in Harpers Ferry that you weren't welcome or places that were off limits to you?

[00:57:05.12] RR: Well, you see, there wasn't too many places that the college kids would go. They'd go down to the drugstore. They was welcome at the drugstore. They'd go in the drugstore and buy a soda because they had a canteen at the school. I don't remember about the accommodations. I just don't remember about the accommodations. To tell you the truth, I don't think they had any—let's see. You had motels. I just don't remember of any actions of not being able to go into the motel. Of course, the motel was outside of Harpers Ferry. You had one big motel there in Harpers Ferry. At one time, the black people built it and owned it. I don't think you had any segregation there. I mean you might have had spots of this and that and the other, but nothing to be really upset about that I remember.

EE: There were no incidents.

[00:58:25.02] RR: No, no incidents, no, no incidents.

EE: When you were there, John Brown's Fort was on campus, right?

RR: Well, people used to come. That was a historical [land]mark. And, you know, visitors and stuff would come. You could see visitors on the campus looking to see what it was or something of that nature.

EE: Did you ever have any jobs on the campus?

RR: No, I never did any work on the campus.

EE: Tell me what football teams you used to play. Do you remember?

RR: I played on the Storer College—

EE: Who did you play? Was there any rivalry?

[00:59:06.24] RR: No. Princess Anne [Maryland], we played Princess Anne up on the campus and up there in the school ground of Harpers Ferry High School, and we went up in New Jersey, played, what did I tell you it was? Cheyney. I know the boys played basketball. We went down in South Carolina at a college and played basketball. I took a load down, and another friend of mine took a car and took a load down, Adam Craven and I took a load down [clears throat] and they played basketball, and then they played different places around, you know. They played some places in Pennsylvania.

Then the school had a good choir. The school had a choir, and they sang different places.

EE: Yeah, tell me about the choir.

[01:00:11.13] RR: Well, now, I didn't pay that much attention, but they had a choir. They would sing at some churches or some places up in, out of town like in, I think in Frederick [Maryland] in Pennsylvania someplace. They had a nice choir.

EE: Did you ever go to the Sunday vespers? Do you remember those?

RR: No. No, I went after, but I never went—because I went to church in Charles Town.

EE: So, tell me, like when you think back about the college, were there places that you really enjoyed going or places that you would go with your girlfriend who became your wife? Any special places around campus?

[01:00:54.04] RR: No. We'd just go to the drugstore or go walking sometimes, and then we'd get permission to take them to the movies, you know, maybe two, three couples. We'd get permission from the school to take them to the movies and be back at the time that we had to have them back in, like nine o'clock, I think it was, or ten o'clock. Nine or ten o'clock. You had to check them in and check them out. I mean, you

know, you didn't just walk off. You know, you didn't do that now. You know, unh unh, no, no, you didn't do that. We'd take them to the movies up in Charles Town or Martinsburg. No, unh unh. And you could take them out maybe during the, not during the week, but the weekend, maybe one day, maybe on a Saturday or something, just to go and come, but you had, you know, you had certain times to go and certain times to be back. No, you didn't. It wasn't that. No.

I mean, they had strict rules. I mean, it was definitely according to the rules of the college. Do you know what I mean?

EE: Who enforced the rules? Was there any consequences?

[01:02:12.27] RR: It was just the rules. Dean Johnson was the man, and the lady was Dean, Miss Jacobs, Dean Jacobs, and they had the rules. You went by the rules.

EE: Do you remember anybody who broke the rules?

[01:02:41.21] RR: Not necessarily, no. I don't remember anybody breaking any rules. No, not necessarily. I mean, they had rules. I mean, it was just rules. I mean, you treated everybody—you know, you didn't, and you didn't dress like a bum. I mean, you know, you—

EE: What did you wear?

[01:03:01.03] RR: Well, you wear regular clothes, but it was neat. You didn't go sloppy. You didn't go like you just out and on the campus. You didn't go that way. You went presentable. You didn't have to have on a suit, but you had on desirable looking clothes. You know what I mean.

EE: Was there a dress code?

[01:03:30.07] RR: I think so. I'm quite sure there was because the women had a dress code. You didn't go around in a bathing suit or something. You know, I mean, you had a dress code, sure. It wasn't, unh unh, no, no, no. It was a strictly religious, school, and you acted accordingly. No, you didn't, unh, unh, no, no, no, no, it was, it was like it was supposed to be.

EE: So, tell me how Storer College prepared you for your career. You clearly didn't go into education and had never planned to. Tell me how it got you ready for your profession.

[01:04:15.00] RR: Well, my father prepared me to a certain extent for business, but the college prepared me for the legal aspects of education or college. In other words, you need some book learning to know where to put what when the time comes to do what and not. What I mean by that is you take courses like business law and psychology and economics and learn more about contracts and accounting and profit/loss

statements and sort of those kind of things. This is what business is all about. And then also you know about how to treat somebody or how to introduce yourself or how to write a résumé or to read one or how to accept invitations to this or that or to how to get information on what you want to do or what you want and just like being in education. If you wanted to be a teacher or a home ec teacher, then they would show you how to cook and make things or do this and how to sew. In the education, you had to practice teaching. You had to go to a school and watch a teacher in a school how to take care of the pupils and this sort of thing. It's the same thing. And you learn from your instructors, if in business, you learn from your instructors about how to prepare a statement and how to send a statement to somebody that, you know what I mean, to do business or owe you money or do this, and how to approach people and how to present yourself and all of that sort of thing. That's the refinement that there has to be.

[01:06:39.17] But my father, of course, when he came up, it was more or less a different world, not a different standard, but you had to present yourself the same way. If you had a product to sell or had this or that, you still had to have some sort of schedule. And he was taught that if you was gonna tell somebody that you was gonna be there at a certain time, then that's when you was expected, and promptness was the main thing, you know, and it all acted in together. I mean, and the college was giving you a course, and college was trimming you. In other words, it was giving you what was expected out in the world at the age that the world was in, and that's just that simple.

EE: How would you describe the era, you know, '46 to '50.

[01:07:51.08] RR: Well, the '46, I was in the service, had been in the service, and you had some segregation in the service, but we had, our company was white and black, and I met all kinds of people, and I was interested in this and that, and I would ask questions, and we was in a segregated world to a certain extent, and you knew what it was, and you knew how that you wanted to act to get by or to get through what you were doing. You couldn't upset everything all at one time, and you know where segregation was, and you was feeling within yourself that one day things would be settled more than what it was, and you had back in that day in '46, and you had sit-ins and you had seen—I was in Jacksonville, Florida, where I went to Naval aviation school, not to fly a plane, but to work on planes. I worked on B-24s, which was PB4Y2As and F6Fs and F4Us and all that. I was familiar with ammunition, and I was familiar with turret guns, and I learned all of that stuff.

[01:09:19.06] When you got on the buses down in Jacksonville, Florida, it had signs in it that said, “All colored to the rear,” but you knew that coming in and coming out. It wasn't any different from any place else. Now, out in Seattle, Washington, it wasn't as segregated as it was back here. They weren't used to black people in Seattle, and they would stop and talk to you. Of course, there was some Chinese already there, running stores and running laundry business, and there was a lot of Indians there out in Seattle, and they weren't used to you. I mean, you didn't run

into any segregation to that extent. You didn't have any signs up there. The only sign that they had up out in Seattle, Washington is that you couldn't commit yourself to giving an Indian liquor or beer or any of that. You see what I mean? In Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Canada, we used to go to Vancouver, Canada, and it was just an open place. I mean, there wasn't no segregation.

[01:10:46.23] So, when you got back here, you know, it was a little different. Chicago was a little better, different. They had the black side and the white side and this, that, and the other, and you learned all the people's, all nationalities, most nationalities, the way they lived and so forth and so on. They had Chinatown—in Seattle, Washington, they had Chinatown. Most of the Chinese lived there in that particular situation. And I remember you could probably count the blacks on your fingers and toes up in Seattle, Washington in that particular time, in '43.

So, you know, we was used to it. I mean, you came from a place—and all the people that came to Storer came from down like, down in Maryland.

EE: Just different.

RR: Not just segregated, but we, people, kids that were going to Storer College were down from Virginia and Maryland and Pennsylvania, and some from New York. Maybe New York, it might have been different, but everybody knew what segregation was. You came from a segregation society. You was in a segregation society, and you accepted it. And once you accept things to a certain extent, even though you don't like it, you work with it, and that's what you have to do.

[01:12:18.05] What I was saying was that the kids came from all parts, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Washington, DC, Baltimore, New York, and they were used to—the places where they lived had segregation. So, therefore, it wasn't nothing new. It was something that you had to wrestle with and try to make the best out of it with the intentions of trying to make it a better places to better live someday, and this is all it is. We all were aware of that. I mean, you know, and you got treated in different spots with different people. A lot of different people treated you differently, regardless of whether or not that somebody before them had given you a hard time, or what the case may be.

[01:13:14.23] And it's different. I found out that it's different, the way that you are treated to a certain extent is because of your position in life. If you are a little bit independent, you get treated differently than if you're not so independent. And you see, I lived on the farm, and it really didn't make any difference whether my mother and father had a job or not because we didn't depend on outside work because our living was made on the farm, and, therefore, we were independent to somebody saying, “Well, if you don't do this this way or that way or this or that, then I don't need you.” Well, my daddy was in the position to tell them or somebody else, you know, but my father wasn't that type of person. Everybody knew us—you could go in this town, and everybody would tell you about Ed Roper or Russell Roper

because that's the reason you were known, and we were just more or less more independent because we made our own living.

EE: But it's also interesting that you are an independent man and always have been, but yet you functioned well in the atmosphere of Storer College.

[01:14:53.23] RR: Because I was, I mean, Storer College was a spot in any young person's life. It was an upbringing. It was an uprising. It was an upgrade from going to high school or elementary school into a college of that nature of which it had a beautiful scenery. Do you know what I mean? And people, where you had white and black instructors, and that's a different situation. Most schools always, elementary schools always had black teachers. But when you moved to Storer College, you had black and white. So, therefore, it was different. Do you know what I mean? And a lot of people came from homes that wasn't exposed to that type of environment.

EE: So, tell me how you reacted when you learned that Storer College was closing.

[01:16:14.04] RR: Well, I didn't want it to close because Storer College helped a lot of kids that got out of high school that did not have the ability and the money to go to another college that could not help them. Storer College helped a lot of people, and Storer College owes, owed a lot of money. Some of the parents could not pay like they should, and it was a college that, if you did not have the resources for clothing or this or that, you didn't go raggedy, but you didn't have to have Fifth Avenue living to get an education. And it was a college that helped a lot of people, and a lot of people was paying bills after their kids left the school, you know. It was an inspiration, and it was an example of the county, in other words, of the state here. Storer College was known.

EE: Yeah, what was the reputation of the college, as far as you know?

[01:17:44.14] RR: It had a good reputation. A lot of these teachers that was teaching only had something above a high school education, and they went back and prepared themselves again to teach more modern than what they did when they first went to school someplace. And they did it, you know, on the weekends or did it at night or did it in the summer, and it was a help. And, you know, people, I mean, it was a help. I don't, anybody can tell you that.

EE: Do you think there was any fallout in the community, Harpers Ferry, Charles Town vicinity, when Storer College closed?

[01:18:32.22] RR: No, it wasn't a fallout. It was just a thing that just normally happened because people took it as moving times. Do you see what I mean? And they figure, "Well, if it can't operate and continue, then Shepherd College will take up the slack because it was integrated, and, therefore, you didn't lose anything, but you just lost

an institution that was basically black.” And a lot of black people, I mean, most black people, 99 percent of them, didn't want it to close. They wasn't interested in it closing, but times were moving on. So, how can you fight it and how can you walk around with a chip on your shoulder because, you know, things have changed?

EE: So, how do you feel about the Park Service's role at Storer College?

[01:19:56.23] RR: Well, the Park Service is keeping it up. I mean, you know, of course, they can afford to keep it up because they're using taxpayers' money. I mean, there's no question. They can make it look like Palm Beach because they're using taxpayers' money. You can do anything when you've got money. But the college did keep a nice place. Do you know what I mean? And time just moved on. Time just came in and things changed. If they had had the money, we could have still been there, but due to whatever—I don't know what whatever was, people thought they was moving in the right direction, this or that. You know, a lot of black colleges all over the country had to close. I don't know whether you would call it politics or you'd call it, you know, people not being in the know to remedy a situation, but it was just one of those things.

EE: When you tell people you went to Storer College, how do they respond? What do they say?

[01:21:18.04] RR: “Oh, you went to college?” or something. You know, people just say, “Did you go to college?” I just tell people I went to college. I was proud of going to Storer College. It served my purpose, and it enlightened me, and I found out—just like when I went in the Navy. The reason I told my father that I wanted to go in the Navy because I wanted to see what the other part of the world was doing. Do you see what I'm saying? I wanted to look and see what the other part of the world was doing, and how this was doing and how that was doing, and I wanted to meet people and, you know, curiosity. That's all there is to it. I mean, my daddy was interested in politics. I mean, voting and all that stuff as far as it went, you know, and he had good common sense, and he passed it on to me. He talked to me all the time. I mean, he talked to me. I mean, he just talked to me, period. He'd tell me highs and lows and what to expect and what not to expect. That's it.

EE: And what do you tell your children about what Storer College meant to you?

[01:22:42.14] RR: Well, I tell them, they know. I mean, you know, of course, my wife was a college graduate. She wasn't satisfied—she was satisfied with home ec, but, you see, each high school has only got one position, and, therefore, jobs is kind of limited, and she liked kids. She's crazy about kids. So, she furthered her education, and that's the reason why she took elementary, took and got a degree in elementary. It's just like my daughter now. She married a basketball player from Fairmont State, when she graduated from Fairmont State. And then she furthered her education from a school up in Pennsylvania and also she taught over in Paris,

over in France, over in Holland for a couple of years while they was over playing basketball with the Boston Celtics' foreign team. Well, he was playing with them. Of course, she took administration in education there, what it is, I don't know all—I could give you a résumé on her. And so, she runs a tight ship, one of the up-to-date schools in the state of West Virginia.

EE: Tell me where she teaches and what she teaches and where she does it.

RR: She's an elementary principal in Ranson, one to sixth grade.

EE: And what school is it?

RR: Ranson Elementary School. Anybody can tell you, I mean, you ask anybody, you stop them in Ranson and ask what they know about Debbie Roper Battle Corbett and see what they tell you.

EE: That's a great place to end. You've really passed on a wonderful legacy in education through education, from your parents right down to your children. I think that's wonderful. Now, is there something I've forgotten to ask you? I want to make sure that we've talked about everything that you want to say about Storer College.

[01:25:03.21] RR: Yeah, you asked me about Storer. I told you that it was fine. I mean, it wasn't a dirty school. The campus was kept clean. It wasn't, you know, it just wasn't that. It was clean.

EE: Do me one favor. Let's sort of close our eyes and imagine Storer College and just sort of describe it to me physically. You're in the building trades, and you know construction. Just tell me about the buildings and sort of what the place looked like.

RR: Well, Cook Hall was the last building, and it was a nice building. It was built nice. I mean, it was a very nice building. The other buildings were older buildings, but they were structurally sound.

EE: What kind of materials were they built with?

[01:25:51.27] RR: They were brick and stone, and they had basements. You know, they were structurally—it wasn't no windstorm was going to bring them down. You know what I mean. And it was just big buildings and structurally sound.

EE: What about the view?

[01:26:13.20] RR: A beautiful view. We had a beautiful view, overlooking the mountains and a beautiful campus. I mean, people used to come up there and visit, you know. I mean, it was just a nice setting, that's all. It was just that. You know, I'm sorry to

see it had to leave, and other people felt the same way. I mean, you know. Now, you've got people, you've got a lot of people that way, "I don't need no education. I'll just get a job," but I mean, it was something to be proud of. Do you know what I mean? You had a little community there that had professors and all walks of life. You had professors that had been at other places that earned their way through education.

The one professor that we had was George Lewis that taught business administration in the country. I mean, he was smart. I mean, what I mean is, he was valuable. You could learn something from him. I mean, he didn't have any, he was straight down the road. You had to get his stuff. In other words, you had to get his subject matter. He didn't want you to come in there with no excuse. What I mean is, you could see that this is the way he was. I mean, if he gives you an assignment, go do it. Do it the best that you can. Do it. If you had a problem, come to him. Do you understand what I'm saying?

[01:28:15.06] I mean it was like the dean, I remember Dean Jacobs. She was a nice attractive lady, stayed attractive and was upfront. You didn't say, "Well this happened" or that. It was nothing of that nature. It was just on the line. I mean, you just didn't have no problems. You know what I mean. Some people had to maybe get out of college, I mean, stop because of maybe some family problems at home or had to go back home and go to work and take care of mama and daddy. So, you didn't have all of these agencies back then like maybe welfare or food stamps, and some people had to work. And, see, a lot of people came from the coalfields up here in West Virginia. You know, it's just different. You had all kinds of different environment, places where people come, and it's different.

But you had clean-cut kids. You had no sloppy kids walking around, looking like a stray dog or that thing.

EE: Well, I think you're a lucky, lucky man to have been there, to meet your wife and have so many good friends.

[01:29:48.08] RR: Yeah, I've got friends all over the place. And, see, that's the reason why I don't know what got me into having intuition that I wanted to go out in college, and I didn't exactly want to get away from home. It wasn't that. And, you see, my daddy was close. My mother was close. Oh, my god. My daddy was close. We were close, and that man would do anything in the world for me, but he also wanted me to pay attention and to learn. He wanted me to learn and to pay attention to him. I remember one day he told me—and you know how kids are when you get to ten, eleven, twelve years old, they get to know it all—and he said to me, and it was at the supper table, well, you call it the dinner table, but back in the day, you called it the supper table. He said, "Russell, I'm going to tell you something." He said, "You know, you're growing up now." I was probably about twelve or fourteen. And he said, "I'm your father, and I want you to be a good man," and all this kind of stuff, and he said, "If you don't smoke until you're

twenty-one years of age,” he said, “I’m going to give you a gold watch.” So, I said, “Okay.” You know, it wasn’t going to make any difference. I wasn’t interested in smoking to begin with. But he said, “There’s one thing I want to leave with you” He says, “As long as you’re living under my roof, I want you to pay attention to what I tell you and to do some of the things that I ask you to do because I’m not going to ask you or tell you something that’s wrong. I want you to grow up to be somebody that, you know, won’t get in trouble, this, that and the other. And if you don’t want to do that after you get maybe sixteen or whatever the case may be,” he says, “Then I’m going to show you where the road is.” He said, “There’s one road going north, and there’s one road going south, and there’s one road going east, and there’s one road going west,” and he said, “You can take your choice.” Just talking like that.

[01:32:43.07] Now, whether he meant it or not, I don’t know to the extent, but, you know, he just sit and talk, and he was just that way, but he’d do anything in the world for me. I mean, you know, I knew right from wrong before I even got out of the house, and just like you was saying, college, that was dressing up everything, you know, just dressing up everything when you go to college like that, you had a chance to go to college, sure. And it gives you the other side of life, and it gives you—and you get a lot of experience from the professors or the instructors because they went through things, and therefore you’re living then off of somebody else’s experience, and you can get both sides of life and both sides of what you expected to do and not expected to do. So, it suited me fine. That’s the reason I enjoyed it.

And my wife came from a religious family. Every family’s got problems if they’ve got a bunch of kids or kids or something, but, you know, I mean— [train with whistle passing outside].

EE: [aside] This is Elaine. I’m leaving in the ambient sound of the Norfolk and Southern Railroad going by—it just passed Mr. Roper’s property—since it’s such a really important part of his life and where we are. So, we’re going to continue as soon as it passes. So, that was nice.

RR: That was nice.

[01:35:29.00] EE: That was nice to get it on tape. So, I don’t know that there’s an end to this conversation. I just want to make sure that we covered everything, and I think we pretty much did, and I feel I’m very fortunate to have the opportunity to talk with you today, and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it, and I think your family and your dad and your mom would be certainly proud of you if they could hear this conversation.

RR: Storer College, in ending this interview, Storer College was just a loss to the population or to the area or to the black community. It’s just a great loss.

EE: Well, it lives on though in people like you.

RR: It lives on.

EE: In the people that we've been lucky to talk to. So, may I say thank you. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

RR: It's been a pleasure to have you. I'm sorry that I wasn't dressed accordingly because I didn't know I was going to have to take pictures.

EE: You look great, and thank you. It was a wonderful afternoon. I appreciate it.

[01:36:41.15] [End of File]