One Ashland, Many Voices Oral History Project
Transcript of Interview with Madge Carter

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Interview Date:   April 25, 2008
Location:  Ashland, VA
Transcribed By: Jessee Perry
Proofed and Corrected By: not yet proofed
Length:  approximately 36 minutes

JP:  Okay if you could state your name and birthday and I guess when you came to Ashland and if it isn’t your hometown, then what your hometown is.

MC:  Okay, alrighty. I am Madge Carter. I have A PhD in Educational Psychology and I have been in Ashland 50 plus years and we are going to have a group on the 50 year mark, we are going to be in a big picture I think. But at any rate, I came to Ashland as a bride really and I came from a very small town Bowling Green, Virginia which had like 500 people which also meant you had to be very good because everyone in town knew what you were doing. And it was a very quiet old town. When I came to Ashland I found that not only was it a quiet little town but It was also a very very active town. And one of the first things I became involved in was the Lancer Ball Club which was a horse club, a riding club. And we did fox hunting and we uh, and it was fine because there we no bars but now you can’t fox hunt because there is no place to really fox hunt unless you go up to Deep Deep Run which is a Richmond one and they have an area. And after all of these what we would do is go to Frankie and Ed Gilman’s and we had this huge black, I don’t know what you would call it but its and enormous thing, and made Brunswick stew. We had something you can’t use now because of various health things, we had squirrels and rabbits and chickens and a thousand-million vegetables and had a wonderful time with that and it was, unfortunately our last leader died with cancer actually and the club began to go apart and I happen to
be one of the ones who were left we where original, not trustees but one of the people there. But we decided to sell the land and out of the monies that came out of that we set up a fund with interest so the small course clubs, which we were too, would have monies in order to use for different activities that was really really nice. And the next thing I wanted to talk about was the, lets see what I put next, was the war memorial and this was dedicated to the veterans of World War two and it became an activity center for all kinds of things we had the different schools would have fundraisers and then the college had come out there several times. So we had really some very nice things just happen there. But the most notable thing was that Benny Goodman whom you all may at least know of, he was band leader and on his way to New York to celebrate New Years Day and make Bokoo money with it, but he stopped in Ashland. They had of course their train hitched to the other trains and he played for us for one night and we were absolutely in seventh heaven and anything we wanted played, he played. And the people who remember it remember it with a great deal of enthusiasm and memorable times. And the third wonderful thing in Ashland was the village theater and it was a very small theater and it was in the upstairs of what we call the old Henry Clay school and it was two stories and it was wood. So we had the village theater there and all of the thespians acted, all of us acted, did the sets did everything and just had a wonderful time. And one of the professors here, Marilyn Munyon who was quite a thespian loved it. But he was an interesting person, he was a bachelor and he was perfectly comfortable with married women, such as I was, but if they were single women, he was afraid. He was afraid so he didn’t do anything about that. Well we, I think we were about 4 or 5 years and one off the plays I remember, one of the best ones we did was Nightmas Fall. I guess it was about 8 years. So what we did was we bought seats in the Barksdale Theater, the old, the original Barksdale Theater needed to see it so we gave them all of our seats. And of course then we went there to everything that they had. Okay and one of the other things I thought was very very interesting was there were some of the women who were fairly good artists, they really were pretty good. And what they did was they made I guess what you call a scenic panorama of Ashland and all of our houses, the old houses anyway were in there and it’s now in the Town Hall. And it was lots of fun with those people too go on and see what was there are point out their house and they had people walking down the street but who knew what person it was, we didn’t know. And the other thing I wanted to emphasize is the wonderful relationship we have had with Randolph-Macon. Its, they, you all really have allowed us to use the auditorium for so many of the things that are done here and one of the other things is that on Sundays if you want to see somebody, you might go over to the dining room because people go there from church. And they just really really are wonderful. And one of the wonderful things about this is you have the Cobb Theater and it is reasonable for college students and for people who are retired and the plays they have are magnificent, they do a good job. And way back, Jack Witt who was a sculptor and of course painter too, was head of the drama department so he brought some really, really good plays in. And how fortunate we are and we’d like to give a bow to Randolph-Macon for all the things they have done for us. Well, in every small town in the country there also are the real characters and the one I’ll talk about first it was “Jimmy Rake Leaves” and he was as you could tell by what he did, he was just a character. He did not care what he wore and he just loved everybody there was nobody... he was everybody’s friend in other words. Now the two that are most connected at Randolph-Macon, were connected... both of them have died were Wyth... oh what was his last name. But any way, Wyth and then Snookums. Oh I know, Wyth was, well I’ve
forgotten his last name. But anyway, they never missed a Randolph-Macon game and they would be right there in the front and they would say “Ho! Jackets Go! Ho! Jackets Go!” And I can hear them now, because they weren’t, you know, quiet in what they said. Now one of the meeting places in town happened to be at Maybury’s and it was an ice cream parlor primarily and they had sandwiches, that sort of thing. And they employed borderline mentally challenged people, educationally challenged not mentally challenged. And we, everybody went there. And one of the things they had and I happened to have a cousin from California, there is nothing she liked better than sundaes, banana sundaes, well any kind and they were a dollar or less. And I bet she had one everyday she was here for two weeks who knows what she gained, it was just amazing. Now, one thing, out town has changed tremendously. We call that area down there the “Nasty Mile” because it has nothing but fast food places, well the Hampton Inn does have nice things and we have motels spread from one end of there to the other. But the interesting thing is that we have of course a Paramount Kings Dominion. And I’ve forgotten how many people come in a week, thousands and we really here in town very seldom notice it. I know they stay at the motels and all but you really don’t see them. And I think that is fascinating really that you just don’t see them around. And of course any kind of food you want you can get. But the nicer places are in town on Railroad Avenue, they changed it to Center Street but I said too bad, I’ll still call it Railroad Avenue and I’m going to keep on. And we have four very very nice restaurants and then we have one number one which is of course the pig, The Smokey Pig and people love that. And whats happened with out little town even though its more people coming in, now I’m on the other side of the Railroad track and there are no houses for sale there, if anyone leaves they let everyone know that they are leaving ad we approve the people that buy it and move in so we have a very nice little secluded area. And the last thing I wanted to say, though we have grown enormously and there is a desire now for more industry because that’s what puts money into the town and actually into the county too but into the town and we are in the process of trying to get more varied types of things. We have the restaurants we have one very nice clothing stores and we have our little craft shops. And I think that was about all I had thought of to tell you without going into too much .I have a son who is a newspaper editor and so we were to do a family history and I did this 375 page and by the time he edited it, it was 175 pages and left out a lot of the things I wanted to say but that’s all right. And I thank y’all so much for asking me and any questions you want to ask me, I am right here. Thank you.

JP: Well, I was kind of wondering about like, you said you had been here for 50 plus years give or take. I was wondering like was the Civil Rights Movement big around here, did you notice any differences about that... or...

MC: No because Randolph-Macon uh had uh, Randolph-Macon had black football players and a number of, so we didn’t have that at all. The biggest thing that happened wasn’t the blacks, you know what it was?

JP: The girls?

MC: Yes admission to girls and I was working at the time on my doctorate and they said we just want you to write, we just want you to write papers about the reaction of Randolph-Macon itself and the town so I just breezed through a lot of the thing before I did my final dissertation. But we uh, in the
town itself the relationship between the black and white has always been good. We’ve never had any demonstrations, anything like that and all of us have been on committees or things of that type, like I am very active with the Mental Health Commission and we’ve had black people always on things of that type. So I think the nicest relationship in Ashland, though it may not be in my very small hometown because there is sort of a real distinction there but there is not here. And a lady is running for the town council, a black lady and she is very verse and very very educated as to the needs of the town. I don’t know if she will be elected or not but she would be very good if she were.

JP: And like going with that, I know that there are like different sections of town I guess, like Berkleytown and everything like how is that based, like how are the schisms I guess you would call them.

MC: What had happened there was where the black people settles original which was Berkleytown it tended to perpetuate itself. In other words, Sigh who was a, who worked for me lived there and had a lovely little place on Berkley. And of course what happened was her daughter, when she lost her husband; her daughter came there and bought a place. And they are very happy with themselves. Now we do have Shiloh church and that is the black church and we have I guess in the last 5 or 6 years tried to really get a, you know, get together with them. And not for services because they have their services and I happen to be Episcopalian and we have ours but we have been able to set up a free clinic in my church, the Episcopal church and Shiloh is taking the people who uh, have the optomologist see people at Shiloh. And we have had about six people who haven’t been able to read, to see enough to read and they have gotten glasses and are now reading books and the paper. And the clinic that we have at my church is primarily, you know if we have 100 people about 74 or 75 who come in and we had one leave Wednesday who had come in and she had all these teeth gone. She literally had fangs I’ve never seen I that before but she took it, and stuck out like that really, really bad and we sent her off this past Wednesday, beautiful mouth and a beautiful smile. And so that is done by all of the black and the white and the Chinese and the every, what read, white read black and so forth. So I don’t think, I think that we are a well integrated community because there is no real, no real difference and the town council you see that ‘cause we always have at least one black person and that is an elected thing.

JP: Another thing I was wondering about, I know the railroad and the train has brought in a lot of different people to come into the town and everything and I know there was that movie made, the Christmas everyday one, what do you think the effect that has had on the town, or any at all.

MC: Well I don’t think particularly. We’ve all had our houses used and I had the swing set up and you know, we just go with the flow really. But it hasn’t had any unusual effect. We’ve had two movies done here. One was not a movie it was short and they are leaving the Richmond area because they are, Richmond is asking for so much money so they have gone, I don’t know where they have gone, wasn’t Williamsburg, I think it might be Roanoke but they said they were not going to pay those humongous fees. And that was too bad because it was income and work for people but that was Richmond. We just let them come. We just let them come and we loved that.

JP: Also with like Ashland being right off of 95, obviously a big interstate are you surprised it hasn’t grown more or are you surprised it hasn’t had more of an affect on the town?
MC: Well we were very much concerned about that in the beginning because so often hobos and tramps follow an interstate or a railroad. But I have seen only one hobo and I’ll never forget it because he was under one of the freight trains, but now they are not made so they can ride on them. But it was a Y and that’s where they put their head on the Y and then stretched and they were not a foot from the track itself on those things. And I thought about their hearing so often you know as to what it must have done ot them. But an interesting thing about that and this goes into some of my training is that large numbers of those, I cant give you a percent because I don’t know, but are paranoid and felt like someone was after them, chasing them and that is one of the reasons you saw them moving on. Now it really, its really been an eye-opener because we thought we would have very undesirable people coming but we have not had that much trouble. The crimes that have been committed have been really by the local residents not by somebody coming in. We’ve had robberies, and those have been the local residents, and those have been the local residents, they have not been people that have come off. And people ride by, I can think of four families that rode on the train, they were on their way to Florida somewhere and they just loved the town and they come back and live here now. So its really, its interesting to see how these things go it really is.

JP: Well, speaking about why people come here, why exactly did you choose Ashland when you moved from your hometown?

MC: Alright, I married and Ashland boy who had been here all of his life and all of his family and all of that kind of thing. And I had, I was a medtech before I went into education and I was in Richmond and I stayed wit ha doctor and his wife with whom, for whom I worked after I got my training, and I didn’t like the city. I really didn’t. And I had a good time there and it was wonderful to be able to go to the museum blah blah blah but that’s just 20 minutes from here, 20-30 minutes. So, I just, I am really a small town person, not a city person at all. And I was just, was so glad to be I in small town. I drove into Richmond every day to work because there wasn’t any real call for trained medtechs here. We did you know all of the, well everything that a medtech does. And there was really no reason to have one here to do a blood count or a blood pressure check. So anyway, until I went into education I stayed in Richmond working. Then I was walking down the street and the then superintendent of the school said “Madge, you come on and work for us, you would be a good teacher” and that is how I started. I had already started my masters, but then I just went on.

JP: And I know there was a big fight to not let Walmart come, what was your opinon on that whole...

MC: Well I will tell you exactly, I hated it. I just didn’t want to see the big box come and I fought it and I paid a lawyer with a lot of people in town. And I still don’t notice the effect that I thought I would but they have very very strict security and when the store closes no one is allowed to loiter there and they have the usual people that steal from the store but I don’t think it’s a big number. I have not been in there because I fought it so hard for so long and I, the things they have are not the things that appeal to me. I did send my son in though after a member of the garden club, and they had this oasis which was, they had the flower preserved in it. I couldn’t, there was no place else to get it so I didn’t go in by I sent my son in to get it. So I have a confession, good for the soul so I did that really.
JP: Well like, also with the Walmart thing, I’ve seen a Starbucks go up this year and now an Arby’s being build up route 1. Why aren’t people fighting these things, have they just given up or...

Well, I think that just it was a long fight, it was expensive because we paid for it. It wasn’t very…… So that I think now what’s happened is it cost so much more to fight it than its worth. And I think eventually and with the economy as it is, well Arby’s and one other are joining now. I can’t remember what the other one was, there are two of, somebody is buying Arby’s or Arby’s is buying somebody. One of the fast foods. Which makes you realize that probably they aren’t doing as well as they thought they would. I’m surprised with the number that we have that do as well as they do very honestly. But they do get a lot of the McDonalds which is right off of number 1 and there is something called kettle something, I’ve forgotten. They get a tremendous amount of traffic because it’s just an on and off kind of a thing. But there, the people are so nice and I will say the manager of Walmart has just done countless things for the town, as has Randolph-Macon. They really have they have been wonderful they really have.

JP: Alright, and I guess one thing I have to ask about is like the Strawberry Faire and the history there and any good stories there.

MC: Right well, I’ve been in the Strawberry Faire from the beginning and I’ve always had the mental health booth ours is just for PR, public relations, for people to know where they can go if they have a need. So I’ve been in it since it began and I happen to be on the board for two of the daycare centers here, president of one so that I also have those and we have done anything from the Strawberry Shortcake. That is the thing that has really made the money and I think Kitty Kingdom did a strawberry-lemonade which my mother used to make and I’ve never forgotten that because it turns this beautiful pink and it smells really good and it is and people just participate beautifully from all around. Now I’m just hoping we don’t have a rainy day. Last year it rained during the night and my tent blew down, all the way down. And one of our member’s wife, husband, she talked to him “I don’t know what Madge is going to do” and he went and got that tent and put it back up and I didn’t know until later that he had done that. So it’s just a wonderful community thing and, you know, we have all, anything there. We have crafts that are made, beautiful clothes that are made, jumpers, I want to get a jumper this year. Then the food of course, that’s what draws people, the food. And about 6 groups from Richmond, we have the Italian Sausage group, and then we have the local Hanover county churches will bring baked goods which by 11 is all gone, it goes like mad it really does. And they try to use the strawberry theme and have strawberry shortcakes, strawberry cakes, strawberry cupcakes, you know all that kind of thing. So about anything you want there you can get. The only thing I can’t find there are wooden toys, it takes so long to make them so that is what I do look for.

JP: Are there any other traditions within Ashland that you have participated in, like annually Christmas or anything big like that?

MC: Well, we have, oh I left that out. Yes we have a Christmas parade very year and the shriners come with the cars, and then we have all the merchants and we have floats and we have Santa Claus and lots of horses now, you see more horses than you used to. And then our other parade is the Fourth of July and everybody in town can enter. I usually represent mental health in a 1935 truck I believe. So
everybody can enter and everybody does too. And Christmas what I do, what I’ve done, I found these wonderful glasses. I’ts just great, red white and blue glasses and that kind of thing and I use that for the Fourth of July parade and I take candy and have godchild and her brother and they come pass the candy out. But we have wonderful times with out parades and everyone is just as excited you know, you think after awhile they get bored, no indeed, everybody’s there. And you see people that you don’t see from one year to the next. And have absolutely beautiful horses, beautiful horses. And we have one lady that brings a couple of her llamas so we just have a great variety. Anything you can name we probably have had it in one of the parades anyways, so we just, we love our parades, we really do.

JP:  And I know there was above Ashland there was a horse track, or Ashcake I mean somewhere up there, do you know?

MC:  It used to, yeah we called them the Camptown Races. And it was just wonderful and the thing that really ruined it for us was one of the jockeys fell off of his horse and he wasn’t particularly injured but he sued for over a million dollars and got it and that just really, from then on we just made it. So it is no more. But it was, and college students loved it and they came in force. Now, I am a horse woman so I watched the horses but a lot of people just partied, they figured it was a big big party and it is too. And that was so fun, I hate to think that it had to stop. So now I just look at the Derby, the Kentucky Derby, I have to satisfy myself with that... I can’t think of anything else.

JP:  Well, I know there are well-established restaurants like the Ironhorse and Ashland Coffee and Tea is a little bit newer though...

MC:  Oh yes! The Ashland Coffee and Tea, and two of my very close friends were really concerned because we had to have a lot of stuff done and they were concerned they weren’t going to be able to keep up but as soon as the construction was done and every Friday or Saturday night we have wonderful, wonderful people come in. Any kind of music you want, jazz, beet bop, country and if you want a particular song they will always sing it. And that is really nice and you can have dinner there or drinks or whatever you want so it has become very popular, it really has. And the Ironhorse on I think Thursday, Friday and Saturday has either a pianist or guitarist so they have someone there too. And the Club Car across the street, you can get sandwiches and they have peppermint ice cream and it is my favorite so I always get the peppermint ice cream. And what the other one, Suzzane’s. Suzzane’s and that is a real meeting place but if you need to see somebody about something, go by Suzzane’s because they will be there. And one of the girls, she is currently a junior here maybe, the mother stayed at the house because she had some leg problem and she would, I went over saw her several times at Suzzane’s and I saw her there and she has a horse out here and wanted it desperately. Now she is able to ride it and just a really really sweet girl, she’s from Richmond not from away. But her mother is the best seamstress I have ever saw in my life so she said “what can I do for you” and I said “Oh boy! Don’t ask me!” So that was and I really got to know a lot about the college just by her being there and her mother. And that was about it about town, have I left any restaurant out. Oh our little pub didn’t make it, it is closed. So I am sorry about that, I was hoping it would but maybe someone will open, do another one. But all the restaurants there are thriving now that are open; Suzzanes, The Horse... Ironhorse and Henry Clay has wonderful Sunday brunches that people have begun going to. And then after church group if
I’m not going into town to dinner, I go Randolph-Macon with them. And I am not a big eater though so I don’t get a whole lot but I enjoy everything I get, I really do.

JP: And speaking of Henry Clay, I am not sure when it burned down but do you remember, where you around here when it burned down?

MC: No that was long before I came and for awhile it wasn’t rebuilt And when they rebuilt it the only thing that was different, my husband’s mother was living at the time that happened, in fact they were ten minutes out we had a big dairy farm, 95 took care of that. But anyway, they came into Ashland from about ten minutes out in the country to winter. That’s the truth. And not only them, but numbers of people came to the Henry Clay Inn and wintered. They came in November and stayed until March. And of course I tell people and say, “What?” but they did really did. A great group of them and two of them happened to be in the House of Representatives which my father-in-law was, and they caught the late train and they all took the train or the trolley but usually the train had a section where they could play poker or cards or whatever they wanted on their way, but they took the late one. They took the 9:30 to get into Richmond at about 10. And we’d like to have that back really. We are going to be lucky and we are very, very concerned about the fact that we might lose the stop here and also at Staples Mill, those two and then you go all the way down to Main Street, which that station is beautiful it really is. I’ve taken that one to go skiing, just go right on up there. So I, whatever happens I hope will be for the best for everything.

JP: And I guess that is about all of the questions I have, is there anything else you want to say?

MC: I can’t think of anything else, well thank you for asking me. I enjoyed thinking about the things and checking on some of the things because I wanted to be sure I was saying the right things and that I haven’t misplaced information.