

KK-CD-012-067 Ralph Parker

Ralph Parker

Recorded by Carrie Kline on 5-6-08

Ralph Parker was born in 1954 four houses down from his present home in Pleasant Grove on Highway 49 to a family of five children. The family raised hogs and tobacco on Parker's grandfather's farm, farmed in Parker's childhood by his grandfather, father and uncle. For many years, Parker worked second shift at the Burlington Mill and continued to farm in the morning. He learned to do body work on cars from his uncle Harvey D. Parker, who lives next door, a skill the younger Parker still employs on the side. Parker currently drives a truck, now locally out of Raleigh, previously long distance. He sings in the choir and is a deacon at Jeffries Cross. He provides a detailed account of the Mebane tobacco warehouse.

Parker describes his long-lived maternal grandmother, who did domestic work and was known for walking five miles each way to work and back from Glen Raven to Elon. Parker himself recalls carrying their corn to the mill for hog feed, riding in the truck with his father and grandfather. He later describes in detail the process of hog killing. Those were the days when people did not lock their doors. The Parkers had family members all around the neighborhood, including Aunt Lona who operated a local store peopled with storytelling elders who Parker names with their occupations, from relatives to the neighborhood plumber. Dr. Long operated his dental practice first out of Pleasant Grove School and then upstairs in the store.

Small farmers, including Parker's father, did shift work overnight at the mill in order to have insurance, and farmed during the day. The whole family, including Parker's mother, worked on the farm. For a while, Parker's father and uncle farmed together. Later Parker helped in his uncle's mechanic shop, working on cars or tractors and visiting neighboring farms for pickups.

Parker attended both Pleasant Grove Elementary and Pleasant Grove Union, spanning the years of desegregation. He recalls being called names by white students. Although he and many Pleasant Grove youth were fair-complected and perhaps indistinguishable from Caucasians, Parker says, "people knew" what color you were. Discussing the years of segregation and desegregation, Parker says, "What you see on TV on different programs, it was real." Parker recalls that when his father was ready to purchase his own land, he found a white ally to purchase it for him from a landowner who wouldn't sell to a person of color. The interview concludes with an account of sharing home cooked meals on Homecoming Days at Jeffries Cross.