



Roger Watson

High Point Funeral Home

Memphis, Tennessee

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Interviewer: Simone Delorme, Kelly Spivey, and Annemarie Anderson

Transcription: Jennifer Thelusma

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Project: Summer Avenue, Memphis

[00:01:59]

Simone D: This is Simone Delorme and I'm recording this interview for the Southern Foodways Alliance Summer Avenue Documentary Project. Today is April 27, 2021 and I'm here with Roger Watson on Summer Avenue. Could you introduce yourself?

[00:02:12]

Roger W: I am Roger Watson, pretty well I guess you could say I'm native, employed by High Point Funeral Home, 3788 Summer Avenue which is without a doubt the interest of your survey. I'm a licensed funeral director, typical funeral director functions.

[00:02:34]

Simone D: For the record can you tell us when and where you were born?

[00:02:37]

Roger W: I was corrected on where I was born while I was at army Bootcamp. I always thought I was born in Lauderdale county, Ripley, Tennessee. The army people corrected me. I knew I was born at Forked Deer Tennessee, Forked deer, f-o-r-k-e-d but the army corrected me, that's in Haywood County, it's six or eight miles east of Gates, Tennessee, on a farm in a cotton patch.

[00:03:10]

Simone D: And when was that?

[00:03:12]

Roger W: 1938.

[00:03:15]

Simone D: 1938. Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about this business?

[00:03:18]

Roger W: Funeral business-

[00:03:20]

Simone D: -Yes. When it was opened, have you always been at this location on Summer Avenue?

[00:03:24]

Roger W: Okay, I haven't always been-- so I don't know if we're talking about my experience in the funeral business or this location. This location was started by two funeral directors in 2005 who were kind of mavericks. They were tired of the system, the corporate thing. So they branched out and rented this building, or bought it I guess-- I don't know-- and

opened this as a funeral home in 2005. This building for what interest it may be-- I've been informed by a person a few years ago-- was originally built as a Kawasaki motorcycle place. I don't know what year. The man might have told me, I don't remember. Then after that it was a fine restaurant called Montes, M-O-N-T-E-S, Montes Restaurant, a really nice restaurant. I could remember eating there if you want to go to a nice place. I mean it was like going to Flemings or Ruth's Chris or something. It was a nice, upscale restaurant. Then, apparently, a group made it a church, they rented the building, had church. The baptistry's still up there. Those curtains behind the piano is actually a baptistry up there, it has storage in it now. And then in 2005 these two guys opened it as a funeral home, which was what? Sixteen years ago. Then the company that I work for, West Tennessee Funeral Associates bought it in December of 2011. I've been in the business pushing forty years.

[00:05:23]

Simone D: Forty years.

[00:05:24]

Roger W: Mh-hm.

[00:05:25]

Simone D: Have you owned previous businesses?

[00:05:27]

Roger W: No. No. Not at all. My original-- oh brother. How far back you wanna go? You want my life history? Is that where we're headed?

[00:05:41]

Simone D: We're headed there. We're definitely headed there.

[00:05:43]

Roger W: Okay [clears throat]. I tell people, half-jokingly, no not even half-intended to be humorously, but a hundred percent truthfully I started out in Memphis in 1947 on the southeast corner of Graham and Summer and it looks like I'm going end up on the northwest corner of Graham and Summer at this funeral home. [Clears throat]. There was a big three story building- wasn't four stories I don't think- three story building called Gailor Hall. The Southeast corner of Graham and Summer was a fifty acre farm all the way back to what used to be the railroads, a running track now, there was a railroad track. There was a fifty acre farm. Gailor, J-A-I-L-O-R apparently, was a prominent name in Memphis, there was a hospital called Jailor hospital back in the [19]50s and [19]60s I don't know where that went, but apparently that was their mansion. It was a mansion.

Had about a twelve car garage and whatever. But it was eventually turned into an orphan's home. My mother came from the farm where I was born to come to Memphis to get away from the farm in 1947, came to Memphis to get a job. There were no day cares in those days for children. She didn't have any choice but to put me in that orphan's home. So I was out there two or three years, she got a job at Memphis lab plant, out on Riverside, a division of general electric, made miniature lamps out there and she met a nice man out there and they were married fifty one years-- I buried both of them-- and got me out of the orphans home around 1950, late 1949 and from there went to half a dozen schools, White Haven in sixth grade, when I was at the orphan's home, we went to White Station School in the fourth and fifth grade. Went to White Haven's school in the Sixth grade. Fairview Junior High School the seventh, and eighth and ninth grade. Went to Messick High School ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. Got out of high school, I went in the army in 1956, I graduated from my high school in 1956. There were no jobs to be had, so I went straight in the army and was in the army for two years and-- the army active duty and reserve-- and about 1958 still job situation were difficult at best. I had a job at a truck line and got laid off from that job. I had a thirty-five dollar a month car note and I said well I could make thirty-five dollars a month in the service, so I went back in the service, went in the air force. I was in air force four years until [19]62 and then came home from the air force in February [19]62, got a job downtown in Sheriff's department. And the lady personnel director, Ms. Dorothy Parks said you need to be in the criminal court's clerk office, clerked for the judge since I could type fast. And so I was a clerk for Judge **Fayquinn** in division two of the criminal court for fifteen year. Went to law school, was going to law school at Memphis State. To kind of back up a little, during

high school-- I can't read music but I could always hum a tune and you could hum a tune I'd play it for you, on either guitar or base, whatever-- and so I got a job cutting sessions at recording studios in high school, radio jingles. I was fifteen years old and got a job playing guitar and my next door neighbor had a speaking voice, a nice bassy speaking voice, and he spoke and we'd cut radio commercials and I'd do sessions behind musicians over at Sun Records in Memphis, Tennessee. And that was up until [19]56, went in the army. When I got back to Memphis, I was in service at [19]62 then like I said I went to work downtown in the criminal court clerk's office, clerked for Judge **Fayquinn** and continued to play locally sessions in two or three different studios, couple of night clubs. And in 1964, a guy asked me to play in a four piece group at a real nice night club. I said what do you want me to play? Guitar or bass, I'll do the singing, I always did the background vocals or singing--doesn't sound like it now cause over the years I've got this COPD thing, but believe it or not, there was a day that I could sing. And I said, what do you want me to play guitar or bass or sing? He said, "neither one, I want you to play piano." I said, "Well that's going to be interesting, seeing as how I don't play piano, I said how we going to do that?" He said, "Well I've seen you play chords and so just play chords." And he played the saxophone and couple of other instruments and said, we'll make it. I said okay, so that got boring so I kind of started adding some things so from then on, any time anybody asked me to play anywhere I was doing the singing and playing piano. Doing sessions, working downtown, going to school-- law school. By [19]72 I didn't see any need to finish law school. I was already smarter than all the lawyers in Memphis anyway. I think I was the only one that knew that, but I probably was smarter than anybody in Memphis at that time. You know, I was what?

Twenty-seven, twenty-eight? [Phone goes off]--oh sorry I need to stop this thing.

Dropped out of school, still playing music at a couple of recording studios. And by early [19]70s, [19]72, [19]73, I cut a session behind a guy, a pretty good singer and he-- found out he's being produced by a country singer named Charlie Rich. There was a country singer pretty popular back in those days named Charlie Rich, and so he made entertainer of the year and said he's producing me, asked me to put together a group, if I ever did anything I told you I want you to play with me so we did. So we toured with Charlie Rich during that. I did some other gigs with some of the Hee Haw people, Archie Campbell. There was a tv program called Hee Haw and Archie Campbell was on a program one time and Barbara Mandrell was on a program and I played a gig-- it was a pick up job, and then a coupla other Hee Haw people. Shot Jackson was a dobro player, I did a couple of gigs with him. Kind of skipped over, while I was in service, I was in New York. I was stationed in New York, I skipped over that part. In 1959 and [19]60 we had a super band up there, a Western Swing type band, got Lee Holman who had played with Sonny James, was in the service with me and had a group called Dixie Cut Ups, there was about nine of us and-- not cause I was in it-- here I was from Memphis Tennessee, 1958, I went up there in [19]59 and I'm from Memphis Tennessee, I could do two or three voices, one of which was Elvis Pressley. I knew Elvis real well, I'd done some sessions with him, and so here's a kid from Memphis who could sing like Elvis so I got a really good job playing up there and we played all around-- Newburgh is about fifty miles north of New York city, we played from there, Newark, New Jersey, all around New York city, a lot of really good jobs-- played a job one time in all of Ms. Colgate, Colgate-Palmolive Pete, a Western swing band at some high falutin' place, if you can imagine. But anyway, a lot of

good things. Went overseas in the Philippines. I had fourteen piece band over there, a lot of fun. So let's get back to why I was so smart I dropped out of law school. So going with the Charlie Rich now, all along this period of time, I had developed a tremendous drinking problem, an alcohol problem so by 1978-- from [19]74, [19]76, [19]78 it tanked. I mean, it got the best of me, so I had no choice but-- and I was dying, according to the doctor I had two hours to live. I was under the Mississippi Bridge and literally dying according to-- I ended up at a hospital, according to the Doctors, I had two hours to live and went to Lakeside Treatment Center, the only reason I knew about that, I'd heard of it before. Went through the twenty-one day program and as of April 3, 1978, I've not had a drink forty-three years. Been sober and alcoholics anonymous, which led to-- the only reason I'll mention that-- it led to a real ministry in my life working with other men. Telling them with my experience, you know as smart as I was, and as cool as I was that you could bomb out, but you could lead-- you can stop drinking. You're not gonna die if you stop drinking, and you could lead a productive life. That was April 3, 1978. So if you get bored, wanna turn this thing off, you just tell me-- but I thought, well you know it wouldn't surprise me, I've got this new direction in my life. Now, when I was five years old they stand me up on pulpit in a Methodist Church in Ripley, Tennessee singing "In The Garden," a song, first song I ever learned. I did it at a funeral yesterday, I told the lady, "That's the first song I ever knew." So I was raised up believing in God and all but now a new found lifesaving experience and a spiritual experience, so it became a ministry-- nothing short of a ministry. I've held a meeting at the Harbor House for forty-three years, every Tuesday morning working with-- now this COVID thing I haven't been able to-- the meetings have been cut off for almost a year, but it became a ministry for

me. Telling other men you could be productive. So I said it wouldn't surprise me since I blew it, every opportunity. While I was in New York, RCA Victor approached me, offered me a seven year contract recording, and I turned that-- I blew that and I had three years left in the service they said, you do your three years left in the service in the air force, when you get out, you've got four years for us, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, I didn't do that. I said it wouldn't surprise me if God let me wait six months for he let me sing or play any music, but I've blown my life. Well I was correct, to a certain point, he let me wait six years before I could do anything musically. So in 1983, a beautiful couple, man and wife at church-- we were going to Christ Methodist Church at the time-- were preparing to sing at the church service, a song and they were rehearsing, so—"Fill My Cup" was the name of the song, I shall never forget it. Two of them, guy and his wife and so I said-- wait a minute, I kind of, "You want to sing with us?" Well, they were friends. I said, "Yeah!" Harmony-- if I ever had a gift [Phone Chimes] I could hear harmony as long as they were able to play, I could hear harmony parts, I could see-- this may sound silly to you, but I can see all of the parts in an eight note scale, I could see which notes harmonize and so I said, "yeah, buddy!" So I threw in that third part and made it a trio and frankly it sounded good, wow they said, "That's good, why don't you sing it with us at church?" I said yeah, okay, and so I did. They said, "Well that sounds good." And so they changed the-- they had a TV broadcast, they said, "Whoa, we're going to edit that. Let's put this trio on the thing." Also, the preacher was Dr. Beatty back then-- let's add this trio thing to it, you know, so we-- let's name our group. We began to get offers, request to sing, and we named our group Easter People, and we made recordings and traveled and sang many different places. We sang together for eighteen years, Don and

Carla. Unfortunately in, November 29, 1999 Don died suddenly, forty-seven years old, heart attack and the next year his wife died. And so that was the end of our trio. And so, I've done nothing musically since then. Now let's go kinda weave back in this story. Back in the [19]80s, late [19]70s, early [19]80s I had developed a group called Career Support Group at Christ Methodist. I said look, in Alcoholics Anonymous we meet, nothing magical happens, we tell our problems with each other, you know, and we recover from our illness-- a sickness, addiction, divorce, overeating, alcohol, a tragedy is a tragedy, whatever it is. And we had a lot of people out of work and I said we need to form what we called a Career Support Group, where we meet, people are out of work, we meet-- wasn't necessarily gonna get you a job or anything, but you're out of work, can't buy groceries, can't pay the phone bill to encourage people and that grew- I think every church in Memphis now has a career support group. We had a national convention, we had people from about thirty eight states came. We did a seminar on how to start a career support group. The reason for mentioning that, the guy that was the manager at Memorial Park over on Summer stopped me one day, I was coming out of the choir loft that was - by then, that's my musical gift to the world is singing at the choir at church-- and he said now you're in that career support group, he said, "I need a salesman in my business and said you might be good for the job." I said, really, I said, what kind of business you in? He said, well he's the manager at Memorial Park. I said, "Really?" I said, "Is there a morbidity factor in that?" He said, "No just go out there and spend the day." I had already experienced three or four funerals while I was back in the service. I had helped them, washed the dishes in the kitchen, I enjoyed trying to help the family, so I said let me go out there and see about that, so I went to Memorial Park and they offered me the job

selling prearrangement and cemetery lots and everything and so, are you sure you're not completely bored with this?

[00:23:13]

Simone D: No.

[00:23:14]

Robert W: Okay. So I said now look, I've got to consult my family with this, you know I don't want to tell my wife, my kids I'm gonna work at a cemetery and a funeral home, you know? So our children then were, whatever's that eighteen, seventeen--they were teenagers, they were in high school and I told them about it and my son said, "Dad, you're just right for this, you'd be great at that." And the family was all for it, and I said well that's my answer so I went to work at Memorial Park. Now, hope I hadn't lost you, I'm encouraging other men that they could lead a productive life and they've got an issue, whatever, they could trust God to turn their life around, I said, "If you got anything really bugging you, name it, God will help you get through it." Hmm, I got something that's bugging me, I never finished college, this is a great part of the story-- If I don't say anything else important, you'll love this. To be authentic, I'm telling these guys, tell God about-- it bugs me I never finished college, you know. I need to practice what I'm preaching. Okay, so I went out to Memphis State, how many hours, all of my hours, what will it take. They did me a program, it would take this much for you to graduate and get a

degree. I said, "Okay, I'll start with one class." Five hundred and fifty dollars for one class. No GI bill this time, no law enforcement education grant to put in my pocket because I'm working downtown in law enforcement with the government. Five fifty. So I wrote them a check. You're not going to believe this part. So I went back to work, I've signed up for my one class, Mrs. Smythe, may she rest in peace, the owner of Memorial Park called me in her office which later became my office incidentally, she said, "I want to hear about your educational interests. I heard you're going to Memphis State, signed up for class,," Yes ma'am and I told her, "I love my job here I'm not trying to better my education and go somewhere else. I love what I do here." But I said, "I'm telling these guys God will help them to get their life in order," and I said, "I never did graduate and it bugs me and I said I've got to do that for authenticity." She smiled at me and she said, "That's wonderful. I'd love to sponsor you in that." She wrote me a check for five hundred and fifty dollars. She paid every penny for four and a half years of-- probably about twenty five thousand dollars until I graduated in the first class at the University of Memphis in December of 1993 or 1994. I'd have to look at my thing. 1993 or 1994. So I have the distinction of being able to go to Memphis State under three names, Memphis State Teacher's College, 1956 I went there one week. Then it went to Memphis State University, the next week I went in the army, now I graduated from University of Memphis. So I'm probably the only guy in Shelby County went to University of Memphis under three different names. So she came to me and said later-- she said, "Now I need you to start the training, get your funeral director's license, because after all," she said, "I can't ever make you manager of the funeral home without a funeral director's license." I said okay, so I did that, went to the school--whatever process to get my funeral

director's license than the acquisitions came and went, this that and the other and then I left there in May of 2001, the big corporate came in and they didn't need me. Whatever. She sold the funeral home and cemetery in 1995, December of 1995. We closed in 1996. I stayed with this particular company five years and they didn't need me anymore, so they said bye, said you can use the water fountain, parking place, telephone. There was two or three things I could do, but there was no money, I said that don't sound like a good deal to me so I called it retire. So I left and I was retired for about a week and a friend of mine asked me to manage his financial office, so I did that for three and a half years. Then a friend called me from Forest Hill, we're working over at Forest Hill now, we're having a good time over here selling prearranged funerals, you wanna come over here? I said, maybe, okay, he said now we're being sold, I said thank you, bye. So I kept on. Then they were sold. Then in February of 2006, I went to work at Forest Hill, Selling Prearranged Funerals, the manager called me, it was on a Friday. He said, "I know you're coming Monday to sell pre-- but he said we need a funeral director." I had let my funeral director's license expire, I didn't renew them in 2002 cause I wasn't gone be a funeral director anymore and so he said, "If we paid all the fees, would you get your funeral directors license?" and I said, "Okay." And so they did and the board made me take a-- by then I was over sixty-five- exam from these continued education classes but the board told- I've got to do something, slap your hand, so he made me take a continued ed class, and I think I had to take the law exam again. So became a funeral director and then we noticed there's been no markers ordered, things are really looking squirrely at Forest Hill, wow and then my son lives in Dothan, Alabama. He and I, we love to fish, we were fishing over in Florida on Saturday morning April 7, 2007 I got a phone call from the

Attorneys General Office in Memphis, asked me to be in Memphis Monday morning. My name had floated up, you know. I said okay, so Forest Hill had been bought by a person who had scouted with the funds, Forest Hill was in receivership, Funeral Home and Cemetery over on Winton Road, so I was appointed with the court to work over in that receivership, my boss was the lawyer downtown in attorney general's office to help straighten that out over there you know. Seven years. The good news is that no tax payer and no family lost a penny. By God's grace we were able to recover all of that, all of those companies-- the three-- I had about twenty funeral homes and cemeteries in four states and they were all made whole. So by the last year I was there, my job was selling all those-- my boss downtown's job was selling all those and I had to do all the paperwork, meeting with prospective buyers and showing them due diligence and financials and all that and so one of the players was a man that we thought was going to buy Forest Hill but he didn't, so we had ended up, Forest Hill was sold to another company, XYZ company in October 4 of 2011 and then I was there another twelve or fifteen months just cleaning up, you know, because they weren't gonna need me. They were going to bring their own people in, so when that was over, the guy that we thought was going to buy it and I, we had become friends, guy named Chris Mayberry who is the owner of West Tennessee Funeral Associates which is the owner of High Point Funeral Home. He has about thirty or thirty-five funerals in West Tennessee, Memphis, Covington, Dyersburg, Jackson, all over up from Nashville to here. And offered me a job. And I thought, I'm retired, thought I was going to be retired again. My two grandchildren were starting-- two of them were starting the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, 2013, he made me an offer that I couldn't refuse so I said appreciate it, I'll take the job,

so here I am, what eight years later. So I'm still here, then I get to meet nice people and wait on nice families. That's my story.

[00:32:47]

Simone D: Can I ask you to think back a little bit to your experiences in Memphis, specifically Summer Avenue. How would you describe Summer Avenue, what was it like when you first came to Memphis--

[00:32:58]

Robert W: Two lane country road, Highland was the city limits and the street car came out Summer to Graham and made a circular U-turn on the northeast corner of Graham and they've torn down those apartments now and they're building something there, and then the bus turned around and went back to Memphis. Reason I remember so vividly was my mother came to Memphis we were on the street car out there, finally get off and walked another-- to a seven year old child it seemed like twenty miles-- I'm sure it was a hundred feet to the orphan's home Gailor Hall, so that was what was going on there. I don't know whatever else, I've watched the various buildings like the pawn shop across the way-- years ago at the penal farm, on the west side of the street, there's a put-put golf driving place, but there was a little Y corner thing, there was an absolutely delightful restaurant that the rolls were to die for. What did she call the restaurant? I never forget anything. I can't think. Doesn't matter, but it was a great eating place. This place where the pawn

ship is originally was open, was a Blaz'r steakhouse, like Roadhouse and some of these others, it was a Blaz'r, B-l-a-z- apostrophe R, Blaz'r steakhouse. They, the roll place rented that and made a really nice steakhouse, rolls and all else that was there and I don't know when they absolved, I was in other parts of town then, then it became a pawn shop. I've watched various offices open down Summer, close. I remember going there and I remember going there. Im afraid I don't have much, any valuable historical information to give you about any of the buildings other than where Gailor Hall used to be. I have no idea what year this was built. The guy, a person five or six years ago at a funeral who had been a Kawasaki dealer came here is the man that told me that was built as a Kawasaki motorcycle place and my office used to be there and they sold the motorcycle over here and whatever.

[00:35:59]

Simone D: Was Summer Avenue always a place for entertainment? For restaurants and other types of things or have you seen change over the years?

[00:36:10]

Robert W: Well, the one place, out there Wells Station in Summer was, there was – the four piece group that I mentioned, the guy that called me to play in 1964 when I did the piano thing and the vocals was a place called the Wonder Bar. And it was owned and run by a guy named Leon **Roulette** who was an excellent restaurateur. He had originally owned

the old Silver Slipper which was out at Poplar Pike or somewhere out there which was a fine- I think 1930s and 1940s place, before my time even. I think in the 1950s it was still open in the 1950s I think cause I remember hearing Silver Slipper was one of the places to go to find dancing and steaks and all that and it was a fine-- one of our-- was a very clean, properly run, nice. It served food and ,of course, drinks. It was a bar and live music. We played there on Wednesday night, Friday, and Saturday and a couple of other places on Sunday and whatever else, yeah.

[00:37:28]

Simone D: How would you describe Summer Avenue in the present day to someone that's not familiar, that hasn't been here? What is it like?

[00:37:36]

Robert W: Hmm. Well it's not Walnut Grove Road or Poplar Avenue, but I don't know how much you can say about Poplar Avenue anymore. I see a lot of vacancies up at Poplar and Highland, the first suburban shopping center was at the Poplar and Highland but on the northwest Corner. That was a Lowenstein's. That's the first suburban, by in the early 1950s if you went shopping you went downtown, there were no clothing stores or anything anywhere in Memphis, all the grocery stores were local community grocery stores and that was the first shopping center. I don't know by the [19]50s what was going

on on Summer Avenue. Oh, by 1963 the first Shoneys was between National and **Homes**, is that Holmes where The Cottage [Restaurant] used to be?

[00:38:56]

Simone D: I think so.

[00:38:58]

Robert W: It was on the North Side of the Street. The first Shoneys in Memphis because I remember Johnny Weissmuller played Tarzan in the movies was one of the owners and came to Memphis in 1963 at that opening, had his picture on some kind of brochure so that's a little historical there. That was the first Shoneys and now I think there's only two Shoneys left, one in Millington, and I thought the one on Summer and Sycamore view but someone told me the other day its closed. So there's the one in Raleigh at Covington Pike and Stage Road I think is still open, Shoneys. Shoneys came and went. So I'm not able to go much more than that. I remember there's a company down here own a dozen buildings down on the left called JD Marks. It's a real estate management office. I could remember in 1965, living in a flea trap apartment in South Memphis, paying rent, going over and paying the rent to that Marks place, so that's how old that is. I remember they were managing these over in Lauderdale and Parkway back in the hood down there but I used to go and that place is still there. Every time I travel I say Marks, that's the same place, I used to pay my rent in there. Can't think of any other, uh Mendenhall and

Summer, Hart's Bread where Family Funeral Care is now. Of course you know the original first Holiday Inn that they tore down which should've been a federal crime. Are you aware of that?

[00:41:03]

Simone D: No, do tell us.

[00:41: 04]

Robert W: You know where Family Funeral Care is? Funeral home.

[00:41:08]

Simone D: Okay.

[00:41:09]

Robert W: At Mendenhall and Summer.

[00:41:11]

Simone D: Okay.

[00:41: 12]

Robert W: It's on the Southeast corner there. Immediately the other side of that Funeral Home was the first Holiday Inn on the planet. Kemmons Wilson, they were good friends of mine, Mr. Wilson and Dot but their sons, their children were good friends of mine. Where did I start off with that? On this side of the street, the building is still there, but it was Hart's Bakery, H-A-R-T-'-S, Hart's Bakery, Hart's Bread. They had a very, not amusing, interesting advertising program on television. There was a guy named Bill Killebrew, I went to high school with his son Kenny Killebrew at Messick. Bill Killebrew was an artist, a cartoonist, a Hartoonist-Hart's Bread, Hartoonist. When they would do the add on television, he would do a reverse drawing on a big white screen with a black marker and draw a cartoon, apparently while they talked about how wonderful Hart's Bread was I guess but you know, what's he drawing? You'd watch him and he would draw a Hartoon, Bill Killebrew, a little history there. Ethan Allen used to be down on Summer on the right, just past where Mullins Methodist that they tore down? Yeah. Ben Farnsworth was the last minister there that I know of, a methodist minister. His son Mike Farnsworth played bass on all of our recordings and with our trio for years and years. Good friend of mine. So just the other side of Mullins was Ethan Allen, very totally upscale furniture store. To my great sorrow, it was one of my wife's favorite places to buy furniture, so we won't talk about that very long. Matter of fact, the dining room table that we have now came from Ethan Allen, yeah fifty two, fifty years ago it was five

thousand dollars, solid cherry. Who in their-- how much would it be now? We've been married May 31, we'll be married fifty-two years. Yep.

[00:44:03]

Simone D: What do you recall about your childhood in Memphis growing up?

[00:44:06]

Robert W: Childhood?

[00:44:07]

Simone D: Mh-hm.

[00:44:08]

Robert W: Park Avenue and Highland, I guess it goes--if you don't mind I'm going to take a swallow of my coke. The first thing I think about in my childhood centers around music, and yeah without a doubt not making plays. But at Messick High School they did do a play every year. One year we did Hansel and Gretel, one year we did another one, Wizard of Oz, we did that one year. But it always centered around music, Fairview Junior High School, we lived on Nelson, 2091 Nelson. One of the two best guitar players that ever

lived on Oliver, a guy named Reggie Young. You can look him up on the internet. Reggie died January a year ago. We went all through seventh grade through the twelfth grade at Messick together. I was with Reggie when he bought his first guitar down on Beale Street. Reggie was an outstanding, unbelievable guitar player. We remained friends in contact up until I had not seen him in twenty years. He moved to Nashville. He recorded with everybody, Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra. He was in such demand that one time he doubled his fee to kind of slow his business down, his business doubled. Another one, Bill **McManus**, one of the greatest guitar players along with him, he made two or three Clint Eastwood movies, played on all of our records-- Easter People records. Bill died three or four or or five years ago, outstanding master's degree in music, taught at PDS. I always joked that it was no joke, I told Bill-- Bill and I were very close friends. He and Michael all played well together. You know, they put up with me. I played piano loud enough it sounds like I can play and I told Bill, I said you're my claim to fame, because Bill, master's degree, a real musician, I said I can tell everybody that you're a very close friend of mine. He was first call at the Orpheum. Oh yeah. Lion King, whatever play came to town first call. I said I could tell everybody that Bill and I are good friends you know [Laughter], you gotta be kidding. He fools around with people like you? So music is the first thing that comes to my mind from way on back seven and eighth grade Fairview, Messick ninth grade. By a miracle, they used to have what they called an all-state chorus, a second choral, glee club at Messick High School, a wonderful lady named Carola McCullough was the director and prior to that only seniors went, but I was at ninth grade qualified to go to state chorus and so I was young and wild then too, I didn't take it serious you know and I remember there was a group of us, five or six

around the piano. My mother was a wonderful person but always very-- we were very poor, very very poor. And my step dad was a good man, typical day job, you know pile ride the bicycle, get the groceries come home and give him the money. But this lady came around from somewhere- -I know where she's from and we're singing and-- hold it [singing], fa-da-da we're singing-- it's you, and she pointed at me, okay. I thought I hit my note right. Yeah, you have an alto tenor voice, she said some kind of voice and she wanted to meet with me later and I would start taking voice lessons and she wanted a scholarship for Julliard for me. I said that's mighty nice for you to offer that but we don't go to the dentist much less take voice lessons you know. So my mother's sister used to lend me her suitcase to go to all state chorus, you know. But God's been so good to me, I've had a wonderful life. I don't say those things despairingly, but we sang. I began to meet a lot of wonderful people. Surely you're getting totally bored now. Some of this high school stuff. My next door neighbor could sing bass. Fifteen years old, the guy's a bass singer. There was a famous quartet in Memphis called the Blackwood Brothers and there was a famous quartet called the Statesmen Quartet. I don't know if you're followers of gospel music and quartets or not. They were very famous. The Blackwood Brothers even they won Arthur Godfrey's Talent Show one time by singing "Have You Talked to the Man Upstairs?" but Kemp was the bass singer and sang in the quartet, I'd tag along with him, they let me sing every once in a while and that was along the line where I first met Elvis Presley, I was over at Sun Records, cutting a record and there was a real good. I went to high school with a guy, outstanding, great singer named Ed Bruce, he had a wonderful career, Ed died. He died about three or four months ago I saw, but was a terrific singer, had a wonderful career, he made movies with James Gardner, Maverick

Movies, but I cut his first record with him over at Sun Records. And why am I telling that story? Oh, he had a guitar. I didn't have one but I knew a couple of chords on it, so if I showed him what little I knew on the guitar, my reward would be I'd get to play in the band. So we played on Saturday, the one thing I remember, we okayed on Saturday downtown at the old Goodwin Institute, and I was seventeen years old. Sixteen, I was sixteen years old cause I was in eleventh Grade. I was always younger than the other people in my class. Anyway, at the Goodwin Institute on Saturday, a program called Dance Party, Wink Martindale was the host. Wink Martindale moved to Hollywood, became a famous, broadcaster, announcer, jockey, whatever he does out there. So we're singing. Doing our thing. I got kicked out of the band. So he came to me and said, we're gonna try to make Ed the star, people are asking you to sing, this ain't working, we can't have them asking you to sing when we're trying to build up his career. Which I now understand, but Kemp sang base, Songfellow's Quartet, Statesman, Blackwood. I'd tag along. They took me to church with him, his family to the old Nazarene Church over on South Parkway. Always a lot of music in Pentecostal churches. In 1954, two members of the Blackwood Brothers Quartet died in a plane crash, the bass singer and the baritone singer, R.W. Blackwood and Bill Lyles died in a plane crash. Kemp, sixteen years old, sang a few programs with them until they got J.D. Sumner to Memphis, he was singing with the old Sunshine Boys, Kemp, sixteen years old sang quartet, can you believe it? So I got to meet all those people, you know real well and Big Chief Jim Weatherton, a bass singer with Statesman Quartet, wrote a song one time for them one time. They never did record it but they said they were going to. J.D. Sumner came from the Sunshine Boys, sang with the Blackwood Boys, they bought the old Stamps Baxter Music Company out

of Dallas, Texas, this is after I got home-- you talked about high school. This is after I got home in 1962. Playing music, it was always music in the clubs, always stopping by the music room for Ms. McCullough between classes, always managing to get my name on the tardy list at the whatever the next class was. And in those days Shelby Counts was the principal at Messick High School. There was a lady named Ms. McCall who was the assistant principal. Mr. Counts called me in his office one day. And I had stopped by the music room and we all did whatever we did and I'd be late to class, they've already turned in the attendance report. The next time that your name comes in on a tardy to class, you're going downtown to Juvenile Court. Guess how many times I was late after that? Nada! Those were the days that you believed. Another singer, a great singer, I mentioned that I was overseas, I had a fourteen piece band, and I did. Can you believe we had a gospel quartet in the Philippine Islands on the Island of Luzon? I went straight to the Airmen's Club which is where, everywhere I went you'd go straight to the club where the music is, you know hey, let our boys sing. You want to sing, you want a job, play in the band. That was my routine. You know, get to where the music was. In high school-- I'll tell you another thing, let's get back to high school before I tell that story. I feel sorry for any girls who ever dated me because usually you go on a date, you take girls somewhere, any girl whose ever dated me went with me to whatever program I was on. That had to have been boring, you know I never thought about that. Any rate, there was a sho nuff gospel playing piano player named Lamar Dinky Taylor in the Philippines, a tech sergeant that could sing baritone, I sang tenor, my running buddy Jerry Patterson lived in Athens, Tennessee, was a Chaplin's assistant, he sang lead and a guy named Kenneth Turner was in the army, was a bass singer. I'd go to the club, he sang in sixteen

tongues. You've never heard of it, I'm so much older than you, Tennessee Ernie Ford cut a record back in the [19]60s, [19]50s or early, I think in the [19]50s called Sixteen Tons it was a big, major hit. Ken the bass singer, he's running the band. He said I really like gospel quartets and I said hey, I do too. He had a song with Palmetto State Quartet in South Carolina, I said me too so we formed a gospel quartet, we sang all over the Philippine islands, they couldn't have understood a word we said, but they all clapped and we had a great time. Ken came back to the states before I did and sang for eighteen years with the Blackwood Brothers. Oh he's outstanding singer, yeah. That's about it. I could go bore you 'til dark.

[00:57:40]

Annemarie A: No, I think this is great, I'm curious as to your experience at Sun Records. Oh, I'm curious to know as to your experiences at Sun Records.

[00:57:50]

Robert W: Okay the first time that I was over there-- we started doing jingles, back then there was a radio station called KWEM Radio station. It was over in West Memphis then. The Sun Fellows quartet that I mentioned earlier that my friend sang in, it wasn't a quartet, that was the Stirling Ranch boys. That was the hillbilly Bband, I left that part out of my story. Ten years old, my mother's living in a boarding house, I'm at an orphan's home. At the boarding house had a hillbilly band and so I knew a hillbilly song and they would

let me sing my hillbilly song on their program and they passed around a magic bottle when they got through playing you know. Songfellows Quartet. So we're doing KWEM Radio Jingles, Kemp and I. He's speaking, I'm doing the guitar thing, and then my friend cut a record over at Sun Records, his first record. I was over there with him to cut that record, that was my first experience over there, [19]56 I believe it was. He always said it was [19]57, we were still in high school, maybe it was. But Elvis Presley came in, he had this little girl with him named Yvette Mimieux, a movie star with him, I'll never forget that and so we sat there and played and carried on. And then there was a guy at Sonic Records, Roland Janes that would cut in and out so I cut a few others, oh what was the guy's name? What was that guy's name? pretty good singer. Can't think of it. Billy Lee Riley played harmonica, I remember that. I cut- he cut some records- Jimmy, Jimmy somebody. Payne, Jimmy Payne was the guy's name. I cut some sessions with him over at Sun Records and two or three others. I never did cut any sessions with the ones you would probably ask, Orbison or guy from Jackson, Perkins, Carl Perkins, I never did play with any of those people. They were all a little bit older than me. We would go downtown. There used to be a place called O.K. Houck Music Company on Union just off of Maine Street between Peabody Hotel and Main. A guy named Sid Lepworth managed it, he was a bass player. And he would let us come in there— I didn't have guitar, but he'd let us come in there hook up and play with the guitars and he told us. I saw a story-- no I read this on a website, I believe it was Carl Perkins guy, one of them had hawked his guitar and came in there and he let him borrow it to play a gig over the weekend and he promised to bring it back Monday morning cause had hawked it. But that-- lesser names, Ed, and Jimmy Payne, and two or three other unknowns over there

and I cut some records over at Sonic with Roland. I played with Roland. What other studios, I'm trying to think of-- but that was in the mid-[19]50s, I was at Messick High School then with that. I never did travel on the road with Elvis Presley. We were acquaintances. The- I'm not going to tell that story. We meet our acquaintance back in [19]62. When I got home on the service, he was on the service. So I got a job at a truck line, Gordon's Transports which went kaput and I'd get off at 11:30 at night. We had a phone number, went to First assembly of God church. We had a phone number we'd call out to Elvis's house. Where's the party? And it was always a bunch of good lookint girls wherever the party was so we'd call out to and we'd go out to Elvis and said we're all gone meet at the fair grounds or here or there and that was a lot of fun, I've ran into Elvis a dozen times downtown. One time I ran into him on main street, let's go shopping, yeah let's go shopping. So we went shopping. We went in a jewelry store, fifty of those to twenty of those, thirty of those watches and diamonds, you know. I'll tell you an interesting thing that involves Elvis. In about May of 1977, there was a restaurant called Panchos next to the liquor store at Poplar and Highland, and I was in there eating lunch or Supper May of 1977 I was married. Gail and I married in 1969. Okay, doesn't matter where I'd been, so I was eating. I ran into Sonny West, a guy named Sonny West, one of the mafia, the hang around gang with Elvis and he said when's the last time you've seen Elvis? We got to talking about Elvis Pressley naturally. I said I hadn't seen him in four or five years, I really hadn't. My wife had talked me into buying tickets. He had a concert coming up and I've always wondered what I ever did with those tickets, I have no idea. I know what happened to my shoebox full of pictures. But anyway, when's the last time you'd seen Elvis? I said I hadn't seen him in four or five years. He said if you ever want

to see him alive again, you better go out there and see him, said he won't be alive ninety days. He died in August. I've never forgotten that. I had a box of pictures. Every time I would hang around, or go to the party or place or wherever, people would make pictures. I said, hey, do me a favor, I'll give you my name and address, would you mail me a copy of that picture? As irresponsible as I was, I knew that someday I'd have children, and fifty years from now those pictures where nobody's ever seen them, they'd be valuable. My mother died Mother's Day May of 2000, then my stepdad died October. He was her caregiver. People can decide to die. He said take me to the hospital, he died. So I said okay, I need to sell the house. Go up to the crawl space, it was no attic as such and get my old air force uniform down, and my duffel bag, and my box of pictures. I looked up there and it was completely clean. Apparently when my mother-- I'd save those pictures for forty years and apparently when my mother died, he had cleaned out the attic and thrown everything away, yeah. Life goes on. God has been so good to me, I've had a wonderful life, my wife has been diagnosed with leukemia and she's in remission. She'll go in today for her labs and so we're thankful. I have a wonderful daughter who's assisted, not a caregiver, but she's been wonderful. So she has two children, wonderful children, Caleb and Chloe and they graduated from UT and Chloe gets her master's next month, May 15th and can you believe it, to my-- the way I understand it, you can edit this out, but I know its correct, she's got a job with UT as a counselor so real excited about it. And Caleb he works his dad in the restaurant business. Our son was forty-two before he found the perfect woman, they got married, we have a little almost eight year old grandson in Dothan, Alabama so we're blessed and we're not complaining at all. The people I work for, they're in their forties. My boss and the owner, they both call me Mr. Roger, they

treat me like a king and every time I ask them something they say, whatever you think, so I could-- how can an eighty-two year old man find a job like this? Any job that people will have him, you know. But I have a good job, I get to meet with the families, serve them at their greatest point of need and I have no complaints.

[01:07:43]

Simone D: Thank you so much.

[01:07:45]

Annemarie A: I have one more follow up question.

[01:07:47]

Robert W: Yeah.

[01:07:48]

Annemarie A: When you were talking about Summer Avenue you were talkin a lot about the restaurants here. What sort of food did they serve?

Robert W: Of course Shoneys, you know Shoneys, big boy of hamburgers and all. Montes was a fine restaurant, steaks, the typical fair. I can't think of the name of that, the Blaz'r Steakhouse was a typical place where they cooked steaks on the open grill, you could see 'em smoking like the butcher shop you know, it wasn't that classy, but it was not a dump, I don't mean to say that. What are some of the, like the Roadhouse and what's the one Longhorns and some of these places, it was just a great Steak place, you know the Blaz.r that was across the street. The Japanese place was at its heyday, Nagasaki was really at its heyday. Give you a little history about where Bryant's is and you know Bryant's of course just reopened under new management. That entire little strip, Bryant's, the little grocery store, the three or four things that were there, in the 1960s there was- the Loeb family, L-O-E-B and Henry Loeb was the mayor at one time which I knew him well, I worked downtown-- they were in the laundry business, the Loeb family, the Loeb fortune shall we say was laundry business. In the 1960s they built many, I don't know how many, a dozen or more around town little strip places. It had a barbecue pit, see there's a barbecue place in Browns that's never used, a laundry cleaner, and a little 7-11 convenience store, those three things. All over town, there was one at Lamar and Walker, every time they would find a little triangle piece of land -- not everywhere, many places- - they would buy it and build those three things, a little Loeb's Barbecue, laundry, and a 7-11 convenience store. That originally was one of them, Loeb's Barbecue. There was a guy who had a hamburger place, somewhere I believe around, I don't know where, around on Macon Road or somewhere and I think he called—I'm not sure, I want to say Jack's, but I'm not sure that's true. But he was well known for cooking. He got the job with Loeb's cooking barbecue in this one. His name was Clyde Gridley. I'll let you catch

up with me. Doesn't hit you? When am I ever gonna get, what are y'all your teens? Clyde Gridley had Gridley's Barbecue. He built them all over town, where Gailor Hall used to be, wherever The Cottage Restaurant moved to, right there was the first Gridley's barbecue. Now hold that thought, in 1947 when I was in the orphan's home there was a swimming pool behind that mansion that I told you about. As we speak, there are some apartments there called French Village Apartments. That is the same swimming pool that was behind that house when I was a kid in the Orphan's home in 1947. Some years ago I took my children over there and showed them that that's where I learned how to swim. Clyde Gridley had the barbecue in that Loeb's barbecue place. Clyde Gridley opened Gridley's, very successful, great barbecue and ribs, had a breakfast thing, biscuits and gravy, it was a fine restaurant. I'd happen to be in there eating one day and he's sitting in the next booth talking to some guy about franchising and they began to franchise and then he died in a head-on car wreck and it seemed to me like it doesn't matter but I think he either had a heart attack and died but he had a head-on car wreck and died. Then the business Gridley's Barbecue went down. Then I don't know if there was anybody between it or not, but I don't think there was. A guy named Bryant bought that place and started Bryant's Breakfast place. He was a super nice guy, if you've ever been in there they've got a picture of him in there behind the counter, it was very simple, very biscuits and gravy and whatever but then he died and his two children took it over. You probably know their names, I don't know their names, it was a girl and a boy and they ran it for years up until the COVID til they were forced to-- they were closed, and open and closed, they found out I think he became ill and then obviously they made the decision to sell the place, and so I went down there this morning, I was going to buy me a biscuit but now

they're only open Wednesday through Sunday. They're closed Monday and Tuesday. Which is fine, they got new orders. The girls in the office said they thought that I would buy the place and I said-- my son in law's in the restaurant business but they live in Collierville, I'm eighty-two. Back when Forest Hill was open, why didn't I throw my hat in the ring and get in the funeral business but you know it's neither here nor there whether I could've got the backing. I think I possibly could have, doesn't matter. My children neither are interested in. My son lives in Dothan, Alabama and my daughter's a counselor. She works at a church and my son-in-law's in the restaurant business, nobody in my family's interested in funeral, you know, if I was fortunate enough in the first place. I'm not implying that I'm well enough to buy but if I had I would say in my seventies, even than that was 2013, eight years ago, yeah. But that's the story on that building where Br-- he was a really nice man. Had a mustache, I forget, he was a super nice man, Bryant. That's about. I can't think of any other restaurants, Wonder Bar. There was a steak place also at Summer and White Station on the left corner up in there and I can't think of it. Do you know the name of it?

[01:15:53]

Annemarie A: I don't.

Roger W: I don't remember it was a good buffet steak place and I can't remember the name of it to save me but it was really a good place to eat.

[01:16:07]

Simone D: Thank you.

[01:16:10]

Annemarie A: Is there anything you'd like to add that we hadn't talked about?

[01:16:13]

Roger W: Hmm?

[01:16:14]

Annemarie A: Is there anything that you'd like to add that we haven't talked about?

[01:16:17]

Roger W: I don't know unless it'd be something to bore you, I really don't. We're just making it one day at a time right now. I have no regrets, I know my salvation, I know where I'm going when I die. When I had this COVID thing, I'll tell you this, I was convinced that I was dying. It's the worst thing that ever happened in my life and I'll tell you what I did for two weeks. I lived on water and orange juice. The church recorded this and played it

this past-- you could look over on YouTube and see this story probably. They played it on YouTube this past Sunday, they played it at church and it's on YouTube. I sat there, I don't know what your faith is but I'm not trying to impress you that I'm a religious guru or anything, but I'm telling you the facts. I was convinced that I was dying, I lived on water and orange juice for two weeks from Monday November 16 until Sunday the 29, awake for two weeks. Fever, chills, I moved upstairs with my wife in her condition, stayed up there for six weeks. During the night, that was the longest part. At least during the day time I'd get up and make it 'til night, watch TV or whatever, I prayed as though and it's not really prayer, I had a conversation with Jesus and I said I want to thank you for this – for allowing me to have this amount of discomfort that I'm going through because you went through so much more for me and I'll see you soon and if it's your will for it to be in the day time, so when they come and get me so all the lights don't wake up all the neighbors. Ain't that ridiculous, why would I care about the neighbors? [Laughter]. That's what I did for two weeks and my fever broke Saturday the twenty-eighth or Sunday the twenty-ninth. I've had no symptoms since November the twenty-ninth of the COVID thing. So you know you could say, I never thought about this, that's the second time that now I'm on borrowed time because I had two hours to live April 3, 1978 and did what I could to improve things during that forty-three years and I'll leave it at that.

[01:19:38]

Simone D: Thank you.

[01:19:39]

Roger W: No I thank you for having the interest of a poor old country boy like me.

[01:19:44]

Simone D: Fascinating.

[00:01:46]

Annemarie A: You've lived an interesting life, Mr. Watson.

[01:19:50]

Simone D: I know, I can't even imagine being in that music industry.

[End of Interview]