Ben Parks

I came to Madison in 1953. I was born and raised in Georgia. The white kids had a brick school. But ours was wood frame, but it was a nice school. It didn’t have any runnin’ water, you know, back then. The white school, they had it I’m sure. Course I never saw jus’ the outside, you know.

When I come to Madison they were sayin’ it was about 300 black people. You could walk around the square pretty much three or four hours and never meet a black person.

I lived on Fisher Street, Baird Street, Koster Street underneath the viaduct over there. Capitol View Heights I think they call it now.

Everybody seemed to be happy back during the Greenbush days. It was better than where I came from, that’s for sure. But it was prejudiced here, just like it is now, back then. You couldn’t find a place to live. That was my main concern.

A white person had a house, had an apartment for rent. And they wouldn’t rent it to us. You’d call ’em, and when you go to ’em they see black, and that’s when most of the time you’d have a problem.

If people can get away with it they still won’t rent even today. I’ve come in contact with guys who say they had to get their white friend to go and get it because, you know, they say it’s just been taken if it were a black person.

They were scattered. Some of ’em lived on the east side. Some of ’em lived in the Bush. And Mr. John Hill had a store over there on Dayton and Blount. Him and his son and some black people in that area. And South Madison was the main area for black people. It seemed to have been. But it was still mixed.

The barber shop I worked in got moved out of the Greenbush area. He had to close it down. And then Reverend James Wright come along, and he was building a shop, so I decided to work for him.

Reverend Wright was a good man to work for. I learned a lot from him. I’ve seen him give his coat almost off the back to people. I was around him more when he was a barber then. You know he was the equal opportunity commission too. He was a good man. Madison miss somebody like him.

They were going to develop it, the Bush, I guess. And people didn’t want to move. The Jewish people, the Italian people didn’t want to move either. It was kinda’ rough on ’em cause we was set in our old ways, you know, wasn’t ready for changes...that type a change. But when I first come to Madison I recall that it’s still a few outhouses in ’53. And the streets wasn’t paved out here in South Madison. Lot of ’em wasn’t.

Penn Park was here. That’s the first thing I saw when I come to Madison. I was on the train, and it passed Penn Park.

I liked to play sports, basketball and baseball. Hardball. I thought I played fairly decent hardball. When I come up here we had a team (1953). We used to play against the white guys. All our team was black. And there was prejudice in that because the guys that was umpirin’ the game, they would deliberately be doin’ cheatin’ for no good reason. We used to play in Black Earth, all around, Dodgeville. After a while I stopped playin’ because when I was going to my apprenticeship in school they didn’t want barbers to play baseball. I caught a bad ball. It hit my fingers and I couldn’t use my shears.

I loved to play baseball, I did. I pitched. I caught. When I quit I was pitchin’. I pitched right handed. Penn Park, there was a big diamond there before they put that shelter house there. We played in Breese Stevens Field. I used to love to play in that field. Easy to hit home runs there for a left hander.

You could say it was integrated. The Bush was integrated, and I guess you could go to any bar and feel comfortable. I was a non-drinker so I didn’t go to the bar hardly ever. I’ve heard guys tell stories though that some bars that you went to and order a drink, they’d pour it in the glass and when they’d finish it, they’d break the glass. I’ve heard that story quite a few times.
The community underneath the viaduct wasn’t there, and then they built that up because I built the house underneath the viaduct there myself. Quite a few black people lived underneath the viaduct.

You know the truth about it right today probably be it is a problem. I don’t know whether it’s because the people payin’...or don’t have the money to pay properly, but it’s still a lot of problem with people findin’ housin’. I don’t know the reason why it is.

I’ve heard stories about when entertainers like Count Basie used to come to Madison to play. They couldn’t live in the hotels. They had to go in the community and somebody would give them a room.

The oldest child, she’s in the Army. She’s in Korea right now. And she loved it here. Loved it on the south side. They didn’t want me to move. They wanted to live out here. It was an advantage. Kids wanted to stay around some black kids.

I tell ‘em I ain’t sendin’ ’em to school to act the fool. I used to have a sayin’: I’m not sendin’ you to school to teach the teacher. I says, teacher got her education. You get yours. You go and pick her brains and get your education. And they are smart. Not a disappointment to me. They go to church. Well, the young daughter don’t go as regular, but she go.

I went to school for welding for one semester. I was doin’ real good. My instructor would never come by and check me to where I could go ahead. And I got angry and I quit. And I said to myself that I did just what the instructor wanted me to do. And that’s to quit. And I said, the next trade I take up I’m not gonna quit. And I took up barberin’, and my teacher here in Madison, when they be assignin’ heads to cut, there was 28 guys in the class and I was the only black person. And the instructor, he assigned the white guys to each other. When he get to me, well, “We don’t know what we’ll do with you. You can have somebody come and show us what you can do anytime.” I thought that was very cold. I called that playing God over people. Maybe he didn’t mean no harm. Maybe he just didn’t know any better. Hadn’t thought about it. Hadn’t put hisself in my boots. I know one a the barbers in the class matter of fact would have loved to cut my hair. All he had to do was just assign him. Sometimes grown ups, the people in charge, is the big problem. I never found out the reason why he didn’t assign me. Only the color of my skin. I say you easily lay that to that. It had to be that.

But I’m never forgetting that, how cold people can be, and maybe just wasn’t doin’ no thinkin’? You know, the onlyest thing I wanted to do is learn how to cut hair where I could make a livin’ for my family. Just as an opportunity, and they were trying to deny me.

You can ignore it. You could curse somebody out. Hit him in the mouth. If I hit you in the mouth it ain’t gonna do but make you hate me more.

And I always wanted, in my heart, always wanted to be the person that wanted to own something. Own it, you know. And I was wantin’ to get a GI loan to put down payment. And so I went to the office and the guy were working back on his desk. He finally looked up and saw me. He say can I help you? I said I want to apply for a GI loan. He said we don’t have any money available. Went on back to work. Never came up to talk to me. Those are the kind a things that happen to black people that shouldn’t happen. At that time they was up on Gilman Street I believe.

You got to know how to do something. And if you don’t learn how to do something, then you gonna be one a the problems. You got to make sure that you get in there and don’t let nobody throw you off. You gotta put representation in the area of everything. If you got barbering they should of had a black person up there as an instructor. It’s just normal.