

**Edith Melton**  
**Interview Summary**

Interviewee: Edith Melton

Interviewer: Jemal Harris

Interview Date: Thursday, December 13, 2012

Location: Mrs. Melton's home off of Old Buckroe Road, Hampton, Virginia

Length: 2 audio files, AMR Format; approximately 1:01:37 minutes

THE INTERVIEWEE: Edith Melton is the former First Lady of New Hope Baptist Church of Hampton, Virginia. Originally from the rural areas of North Carolina, Mrs. Melton moved around following her graduation from high school and eventually settled in the Hampton Roads area with her high school sweetheart, who became the pastor of a local church. In Hampton Roads, Mrs. Melton raised a family and served the community. Although her husband has since passed on, she continues to help coordinate various service activities such as angel trees, senior citizen activities, and teaching the children and sick members of the church.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jemal Harris is an undergraduate student in the Department of Economics at Christopher Newport University. He is currently assisting CNU's Hampton Roads Oral History Project to document the impact of the civil rights movement on Hampton Roads residents.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW. Substantively, the interview was organized around several major themes such as: growing up in the segregated South; regional differences; family and leisure time; education; the role of the church and faith; and the growth and breakdown of black communities.

**TRANSCRIPT - EDITH MELTON**

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Interviewer: Jemal Harris

Interview Date: December 13, 2012

Location: Hampton, Virginia

**START OF RECORDING 1**

JH: This is Jemal Harris, and today is December 13, 2012. We are in Hampton, Virginia, at the corner of Old Buckroe Road and Kelly Street [the house of the interviewee]. I am interviewing--.

EM: Edith Melton.

JH: This interview is sponsored by Dr. Laura Puaca, director of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project and professor of history at Christopher Newport University. Today we will be taking what is called a "life history." I would like to begin with a few questions about the interviewee's life, and then progress into further questions concerning the civil rights movement. So when were you born?

EM: January 23, 1931.

JH: Where were you born?

EM: In Oak Willow, North Carolina.

JH: Can you describe growing up in Oak Willow?

EM: It was nice. I always felt that I was blessed. My mom died when I was five years old. My grandmother had to raise five of us children almost all by herself.

JH: Oh, wow.

EM: Yes. But I still felt blessed, I really did. We didn't have much of anything, but with what we had we were able to make it.

JH: Can you describe the area?

EM: It was really country. There was a house here and a house there and there was lots of land because there was lots of farming done at that time.

JH: So was it just a big farming area?

EM: Right.

JH: So what did they grow there?

EM: Peanuts, cotton, tobacco, corn, you name it!

JH: How were your relationships there as far as friends and leisure activities?

EM: As I got older, I went to C.S. Brown High School, which is also the school I graduated from. C.S. Brown High School was in Winton, North Carolina, and, of course, we had to walk miles just to catch the bus. If you want to know about integration in that time, the white kids did not have to do that. We had to walk miles to catch the bus just to ride to Winton to go to school.

JH: How long was that walk?

EM: About three miles.

JH: How was the schooling?

EM: Wonderful! I liked my classes and the teachers. It was an all-black school and it was really nice. I thought the education part was excellent.

JH: As you began to travel, did you see differences in other students' educational experiences, in other areas? For instance, was it different for someone from your same area who maybe didn't go to your high school?

EM: Well, we didn't do too much traveling because we did not have a car. Now, we didn't stay in Oak Willow the entire time. We moved to different places. When we moved from Oak Willow we moved to Cofield, North Carolina, which was about two miles from Oak Willow. There, we only had to walk maybe a block to catch the bus to school. Later we moved down to Tunis, North Carolina, which was about a mile. And we would walk from there to our church. We walked to Sunday school and church. But we never thought anything about it. We just did it. But we never visited any of the other places because we did not have transportation.

JH: Now, growing up, I take it you lived in an all-black neighborhood.

EM: Of course, yes, we did.

JH: Was that an issue or was it something that was just understood?

EM: I never thought anything about it.

JH: Once you left high school, what were your next steps?

EM: When I left high school, I went to Norfolk, Virginia, and I got a job doing domestic work for about two years. While I was in Norfolk my late husband, who I knew from Cofield, went into the service. When he came out of the service, we got married and I left Norfolk. We went to Philadelphia for two years. Then we came back and moved to Hampton. And life just goes on from there. We had our children. He went into the ministry, and became the pastor of New Hope Baptist Church. He was pastor there for eleven years before he passed.

JH: I know you said that you bounced around a few places.

EM: Yes, we did.

JH: Did you see any differences--?

EM: The thing is, we were not in different places [in North Carolina]. The places we lived, like Oak Willow, then Cofield, and then Tunis, were only maybe a mile or two apart.

JH: Did you see differences when you went to Norfolk or Philadelphia?

EM: That was the only time that we really got out of North Carolina.

JH: And did people in those areas interact with you differently than did people in North Carolina? Did you notice any major differences in, maybe, the things that were available to you?

EM: No, I didn't.

JH: Around what ages were your children when you lived in this area?

EM: I had one child who was born in Philadelphia. The next two were born in Newport News. Then we moved out here, in 1960, and our last child was born. So, I have been right here since 1960.

JH: Did you see any differences between the times when you went through school and when your children went through school, as far as schooling, things that they had to go through, or any issues or problems? Race-wise, education-wise, or both, if anything.

EM: The education system was better by that time. All of my children did very well.

JH: Were there any race issues that they ran into, with integration?

EM: Never. I never experienced any of that.

JH: How relevant was *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), when they desegregated the school systems, to you personally? Did you get involved at all?

EM: I never got involved in the civil rights movement.

JH: I know you said your husband was in the military. For two years, right?

EM: Yes. Two years.

JH: And after his service, he worked in this area?

EM: Right.

JH: What kind of job did he have?

EM: My husband was a male nurse. While he was in the service, he worked at the Hampton Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and when he came out he continued working there. And then, after he left the VA, he went to work in the shipyard.

JH: How was it for him to work at the shipyard? How was he treated, as an employee?

EM: I never knew of any problems while he was working at the shipyard.

JH: You've been in the area since 1960. Did you witness any major social changes as a result of the civil rights movement, maybe even in your own neighborhood?

EM: Racial changes?

JH: Yes, for example.

EM: We have some white people in this community, although not directly in this neighborhood. We've never had any problems with the whites who are here. But, you know, this was the first house in this area in 1960. It wasn't until then that they started building houses here. And the people who moved into these houses were around my age, or maybe a little older. As that first generation died out, things started to change. When they died, the people who purchased their houses rented them out. And when people rent a house, they don't much care what it looks like, because they're renting. And that makes a difference in the neighborhood. We have two houses that are like that. The people who are in them don't take care to keep the yard nice, for instance. That was a big change from 1960, when this neighborhood was really nice. People had flowers.

JH: Was there a greater sense of community back then?

EM: There was, more so than now. Maybe it is because the people who are moving into these houses are not my age. We never have a problem, though. We all get along.

JH: You said that this was a newly developed area when you moved here.

EM: It was.

JH: How was it moving into this new area?

EM: Oh, it was nice, just really nice. There was so little traffic that you could hear a pin fall on the floor. Now it's ridiculous. The traffic is awful, just awful. The people were so nice, and they welcomed you. But we didn't have any problems.

JH: If we can just step back a bit, did the civil rights movement have a direct effect on your life?

EM: Oh, I'm pretty sure! Yes, indeed! It did have an effect, and still does have an effect. We can go anywhere--. I can go anywhere I want to, as far as, going out to eat or to the movies. When I was growing up, we went to a town called Ahsoskie. And when we went to the movies, we always had to go in the back way. I can see it in my mind right now. We had to go in the back way, and [white people] went in the front. And you couldn't go anywhere to eat. There's a big difference now from the way it was way back then. It is better. [pause] People now stand up more for themselves. Before, if people treated you like a doormat, then you just took it. You don't do that anymore.

JH: Do you think that's all good? With integration there was progress, but there was also a loss of community, in a way. Overall, how do you view integration?

EM: It was good. Oh, yes. Yes, indeed.

JH: Now, you told me that there were places you couldn't go. Did you find that everywhere you went? For instance, when you lived in Philadelphia or Hampton, did you experience something similar?

EM: Well, we didn't do that much going out, really, to experience that.

JH: When did you start to see that change? When did it begin to be okay to go to certain places?

EM: I would say that it was during the march. Yes, that's when I really noticed it. At that time, we didn't really go to the movies, so I don't know how it was as far as going to the movies here. But, as far as going out, yes. There was a change.

JH: Did you see any negative reactions to civil rights progress from white people in the area, or did you see different people in the area taking opposing stances?

EM: No, not really because we didn't have that many [white] people in the places where we lived. So, of course, that would make a difference.

JH: How did your children feel? Did they get active in anything like that, or participate in any movements?

EM: They didn't.

JH: When was the first time you saw the difference in racial equality?

EM: It is really hard to say. It would have to be since we've been here. [pause.] You know, I did domestic work. Working in homes, you know. And I only had one white family that I worked for, and they never treated me any different.

JH: If you don't mind my asking, how was that experience? Was it just a job, or did you have fun with it?

EM: Oh, it was a job! I needed a job! But I always enjoyed my work. I really did. I always enjoyed the people for whom I worked, because they were just that nice. And they knew what I stood for, and that they couldn't treat me just any kind of way.

JH: Let's target some specific instances in your life. What was high school like for you? Do you have any particularly vivid memories?

EM: High school was nice. I always loved going to school. I had friends. The teachers were nice. And I really enjoyed it.

JH: Did you have any sports teams?

EM: You mean at the school--baseball, or basketball? Oh, yes, they had those.

JH: Did you participate in anything like that?

EM: No, never. Even if I had wanted to, we didn't have transportation for after school or whatever. But [high school] was nice. As I said, my grandmother raised us and always saw that we went to school. She didn't go to school a day in her life, yet she always saw that we went to school. As we grew up she taught us. And we could understand everything that she was telling us.

JH: Would you mind describing your grandmother?

EM: [She was] a wonderful lady, a wonderful lady! Yes, indeed! I never heard her raise her voice. Never! But she really took care of us, always. And every morning and night, I would see her on her knees praying. Morning and night. I knew, within myself, that she was praying for us. And I carry that around with me every day. Every day, I see her face, praying for me. You know, there were a lot of things I could have gotten into, growing up, but it was her prayers that I remembered. That's what kept me going. And, of course, it was God that was keeping her [going]!

JH: How did your faith play a part in your growing up?

EM: It goes right back to my grandmother. Yes, indeed! Oh, my goodness. I'm going to let you see one of my books before you go. I wrote a book, and it is really about her. That is, starting off it's about her. I wrote about her and how she raised us. She was just a wonderful lady who lived a good life. And when she got down sick, God didn't let her linger. She just slipped right away. All those years that she lived, I never saw her on a sick bed until her last days. Every time I pick up a book to read, who is it that I think about? My grandmother! She was the one who kept us in school. Yes, indeed! And that is her, right here. [interviewee presents a picture of her grandmother to interviewer.]

JH: It is great that you still have that.

EM: Oh, yes. She was a wonderful lady.

JH: I see she sowed the seeds of your faith. How did that help you growing up, navigating life in this world, and with your husband becoming a pastor?

EM: It did help. And, for one thing, she always saw to it that we went to Sunday school. I mean every Sunday. People only had church once a month but we had Sunday school every Sunday. And we would always be in church. And she lived in such a way that there was nothing else you could do but follow in her footsteps. She would always tell us, "If you make your bed hard, you're going to have to lie in it!" And we were not so dumb that we didn't know what she was talking about. She never had an education, but she knew how to teach us. Wasn't that awesome? God had to have a hand in that.

JH: It's just baffling to me, how she kept you all in school even though she wasn't able to go, and without an education she was still able teach you things.

EM: No education. Isn't that something? Yes, indeed. I just think about it a lot, just how awesome that was. And I know it was nobody but God keeping us.

JH: How was it, being the first lady of a church in this area?

EM: When my late husband became pastor, I never put myself above the other ladies in the church. Never! I never did. I was always with them, talking and carrying on all the time. If you're in a position over a ministry, you never put yourself above the people in your ministry. I never acted like I was more than they were. Being a pastor's wife did not stress me out.

JH: How did your life change, or both of your lives change, after your husband become a pastor? Did you have to bounce around more, visit more people?

EM: Oh, yes. And it was never a problem. I always tried to do things here at home so that he wouldn't have to worry about them. That was my way of helping him. But as far as his preaching or his ministry, I never said anything about whatever he did or didn't do. It was his. And so, over our ministry, I just did whatever I was supposed to do. It was just not a problem. I remember that I would wash the car so he wouldn't have to wash the car, so he could concentrate on the ministry! I kept saying, God, that's my way. I can help him there!

JH: How was that ministry for him, if you don't mind my asking? What were some of the things he did, and what were some of the legacies he left.

EM: He did a lot of things. One thing he always did was visit the sick. He always went to workshops and went to school. He graduated with a doctorate, his doctorate of divinity degree. He never used the title. He was always so humble. He would always visit the sick and get different people going in different ministries in the church. And it just worked out

fine, it really did. And when they built the new sanctuary onto the church, while he was pastor, he would leave work and go out there and help them. But he died before they finished the church. So when our next pastor took over, we finished it under him. Yes, my late husband was very humble and tried to do his best. I tried everything I could do to keep him from having to worry about things here or whatever. It was a good life, it really was. I remember the kids--. You should be interviewing my daughters! Later on, after he had passed, the kids would say, "Oh, Mom, every time the church door was open, we were at the church!" We went to Bible Study and prayer services, and sometimes there would be nobody there but my family. What we did was, we had prayer, read the scriptures, and then we came back home. Yes, the kids said that we were always there, but they also said, "Mom, we are so glad, now!" They are thankful now, because they have been through some things, and they're glad for that foundation. And so they continue to say how thankful they are. But it takes them to tell you!

JH: Do you feel that the community where you lived or the church was at any time put at odds, or maybe threatened, in a sense, whether it be by civil rights, segregation, or anything like that?

EM: No.

JH: Do you feel at all that you were limited by race? Are there things that you wish you could have done that you weren't able to do because of your race, at that time?

EM: No. Money-wise would have been my [reason] for not doing some things. But it's okay. I'm still thankful. God has been good, so I really cannot complain. No, I really can't.

JH: What did you see in the community that you loved so much?

EM: In this community?

JH: In this community or in any other in which you lived.

EM: Even where we were in North Carolina? The people were just so nice. They would bring my grandmother clothes for us. And we wore those clothes! When I went to school, I thought I looked just as good as anybody else in those hand-me-down clothes. I sure did! That never bothered me. And the people who had gardens would bring us food. Of course, my grandmother would try to have a garden, too. That's one thing she did. She tried to have a garden and in the summertime she would can up food. So, people were just so nice. Everybody was like family, growing up there.

JH: Did you ever have that feeling of being part of a family or community-type place again, after leaving North Carolina?

EM: Oh, yes. When we moved back here, people were so nice. Now, they still call out, "Hi, Sister Melton!" and I wonder, "Who are they?" They know me and I don't even know them! I have one neighbor, she used to tell me, "Sister Melton, I never go to bed at night until your car is in that yard." Now that's a neighbor!

JH: That's a neighbor!

EM: I don't think there's anybody in this community who wouldn't do anything for me if they knew about it. I can't think of anybody who wouldn't. And the next-door neighbor, she always just comes over here and knocks on my door and says, "I just wanted to check and see if you're okay." And every morning, if I'm in here in the kitchen, she comes outside in her yard and throws up her hands. I know she's praying for this community.

JH: You said that there was a little shift when some people passed away, in the area, and then some people moved in. You noticed a shift. Did you see any shifts as far as time

periods? My grandfather, for example, is in his sixties, now, and my great-grandmother is in her eighties, and I can see that her time span is different from his. As the years progressed, did you float around with the different time spans, or were there certain things that you saw were prevalent during, say, the 70s or the 80s? Or even just in your family. Were there certain things that you loved to do, anything memorable from certain time periods?

EM: We used to have cookouts in the backyard all the time during the summer. But as time went on, it just didn't seem the same. I don't feel safe now, going out. Not that anything has happened. I just don't feel safe going out there, sitting out in the yard or having a cook-out or something. Things have changed.

JH: Is that just because of the change in the times, or the community isn't as close as it used to be?

EM: It's not safe. It's really not safe anywhere. You're not even safe sitting in your own house. It has changed. I can feel the change, see the change, even though nothing drastic has happened.

JH: Do you have any ideas about what brought about the change?

EM: One thing is that parents in this day and time are not raising their children like we did. When my children came along, if somebody in the neighborhood saw them doing something wrong, they could speak to them. Nowadays you cannot do that.

JH: My mom talks about that change as well.

EM: I cut my grass for years, until last year when I couldn't anymore because of arthritis. When I was cutting it, a lady came by here in her car. She passed by, and then she turned around, came all the way back, parked her car, and said, "Ma'am, can I cut your grass for

you?” And that really did something for me! She was going to cut my grass for me. A lady! I’ve had young men ask me if they could cut my grass, and I’ve said, “No, thank you. I have grandchildren and son-in-laws who would cut it if I would let them, but I do it for the exercise.” But they’re nice in that way. They’ll come by and see you doing something, and they’ll ask if they can help. They’ll speak to you! People come by here, and I wonder if I should speak to them or not, and then they speak to me. So, then I speak, you know. They’re really nice. But still, things have changed.

JH: I know we talked about civil rights, in particular, but how were you affected by the general course of events in America, for example the shooting of JFK? What was that like, for you?

EM: It really did have an effect on me, to think that someone would do that. It really did. And Martin Luther King, too. There’s one thing about him, though. I think he always knew that something could happen but that did not stop him.

JH: Did you ever get a chance to see him?

EM: No, except on television.

JH: What kinds of things did you do for music? Did any of those things play a part in family life?

EM: Music? Oh, yes.

JH: Or just culture in general.

EM: We played marbles and jumped rope and played hide-and-seek. We played all of those games. And we really had fun! And now, how many kids do you see out there playing marbles and jumping rope? Nobody. They’re in their houses with their click-click, whatever it is. And I think we were more healthy then, too, because we stayed

outside and we played and exercised. You know, that was exercise. I feel like we were more healthy then than they are now.

JH: Now you have to kick them out of the house.

EM: I know! I never see children out playing, not even riding bicycles. Skating--. Oh, that's another thing. We used to skate all the time, out there on the highway. I never see anybody now. You have all of these nice sidewalks, and you don't see anybody skating.

### **END OF RECORDING 1**

### **START OF RECORDING 2**

JH: This is the continuation of the interview with Ms. Edith Melton on December 13 at the corner of Old Buckroe and Kelly streets. Once again, this interview is sponsored by Dr. Laura Puaca, director of Hampton Roads Oral History Project and professor of history at Christopher Newport University. Now I'd like to ask you a bit more about your role in the community, your activity in any kind of service projects or anything you might have taken on. Did you get involved in the community in any way?

EM: You mean like--.

JH: Yes, even just helping out, doing any kind of service, missionary work, or anything like that.

EM: Well, right now our missionary ministry is part of the Newport News and Hampton Missionary Council, and we go down to Freedom Outreach, down Jefferson Avenue, and help feed the hungry once a month, on a Saturday. And, like I said, the missionaries go to the nursing homes once a month. We go to a different nursing home, we don't go to the same nursing home all the time. And I help with the angel tree, which is helping children who are in need and might not receive anything for Christmas. I visit the sick and the

shut-in. I was having Bible study in the homes of the sick and shut-in, and now I'm starting that up again. And I think that's about it, as far as in the community.

JH: Did you used to do anything in the past?

EM: Years and years back, I worked with the Boy Scouts because my son was in it and the Girl Scouts when my girls were in school.

JH: How was that experience?

EM: It was wonderful.

JH: My little brother is in Scouts now. Did you think that helped your son out, helped him grow?

EM: Yes, I believe so!

JH: I believe you mentioned something about helping people who have a hard time reading. What did you do for them?

EM: I would teach them how to read. That was at the main library here in Hampton, and they furnish you with the books and materials. And you teach them just like you're teaching a child to read for the first time. You go by the materials. And I did it for a couple of years. It was really enjoyable. And it brought to mind my remembrance of my grandmother and my knowing how to read. I'd say, "God, I just thank you, because I could have grown up not knowing how to read," and that's why I just feel so good helping them.

JH: I know you said that your grandmother really helped you and kept you all on the school path. Did everybody read? Or were you some of the few people who stuck with reading and stuck with school?

EM: In my family?

JH: In the area where you grew up.

EM: There were a lot of people who finished, who graduated. Some of them went on to college.

JH: Did you experience any issues with voting or being active politically? Is being active politically something that you were interested in?

EM: I did some work for Obama doing voter registration. That was the only time I really participated in political affairs. But as far as voting, I've been voting ever since you could vote. I sure have. I make sure that I go and vote. And I tell everybody else, and my grandkids, too, "You need to vote!" And they do. They vote.

JH: Has it always been a fairly simple process to vote? Were there times when you ran into some issues as far as actually trying to go cast your vote?

EM: Oh, no. I never ran into any issues. No.

JH: Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

EM: I can't think of anything else.

JH: Okay. Well, I know you want to show me some things, so we can wrap it up for now, and if anything else comes up, we can talk about that next time. But thank you for the opportunity of letting me interview you.

EM: I just hope I've been of some help! I am not good at this.

JH: Oh, you're great at this! You shared a lot, and you opened my eyes about some things, and you told me about some new things. And I think this would be great to have in the archive as well. Your experiences, showing that it wasn't all people getting beat up and chased and--.

EM: Oh, no, no! I don't remember anything like that! I haven't been through any of that, not even with my children. Life has really, really been good. I thank God every day that he has brought me this far all these years.

JH: That's remarkable. And, once again, I thank you for your time, and for helping us out by participating in the project.

EM: Let me get you one of my books, so you can see it.

**END OF RECORDING 2**

**Transcribed by Jemal Harris and Krista Rogers**

**Edited by Laura Puaca**