



Caroline Street neighbors

Herman Groves and his sister-in-law Christine Wray Hopkins

Today is Sunday, April 15, 2007, and Diane Hoffman from the Oral History Project is beginning an interview with two people from her Caroline Street neighborhood. Diane and her family live at 1413 Caroline. Next door at 1415 Caroline St. is Mrs. Christine Wray Hopkins (Mrs. Hopkins moved to Woodmont Nursing home in the fall of 2007.) Mrs. Hopkins' brother-in-law, Herman Stuart Groves, resides at 1601 Caroline St., and often looked in on his sister-in-law.

During the interview, Diane is asking about the "Sylvania Plant" where Mrs. Hopkins, her sister Lucy Wray and Lucy's future husband, Herman Groves, all worked. The plant is said to have saved Fredericksburg from the Great Depression--at one time employing as many as 2,600 people. Manufacturing cellophane in Fredericksburg beginning about 1929, Sylvania Industrial Corp. eventually became a division of the American Viscose Corp., and later became FMC (Food, Machinery and Chemical plant.) The Sylvania plant was not only the area's economic salvation, it was almost a legend in its own time. It influenced such matters as the closing time at Carl's--to accommodate the late shift. It apparently gave a name to a street--Sylvania and a subdivision--Sylvania Heights. There also was a continuing discussion about whether there was an aroma or

odor on certain days. Mr. Groves said it smelled like sulphur. The common comment among older residents was that “it only stank if you rented.”

The plant was a popular employer and the atmosphere was generally reported as happy. Then after 49 years and much to the shock of the community, the plant closed in March of 1978. During the 1980's A. Smith Bowman Distillery moved into the site .

First, Diane is talking to Christine (Mrs. Hopkins) about her milestone birthdays and gathering a little more history about Fredericksburg's downtown in those days. A copy of an essay Diane wrote on the occasion of Mrs. Hopkins' 100th birthday appears at the end of the live interview.

Interviewer: I'm interested in finding out about both of your lives. You're close friends now, and you have explained that you met through Herman marrying your sister. I was thinking that today, first I'd ask you about your early life and coming to Fredericksburg, and what you did in Fredericksburg when you came here, and then maybe talk with you, Herman, about your life after that.

You and I talked about this once before, Christine-- Remember when I wrote that article when you turned 100? That was a couple of years ago. But now you're

Mr. Groves: 102!

Mrs. Hopkins: Oh yeah! I've grown a little!

Interviewer: You've grown a little. And I remember you told me you were not born in Fredericksburg. Where were you born?

Mrs. Hopkins: Albemarle County. (Mrs. Hopkins was born on March 2, 1905, daughter of Joseph George Wray and Ella Claudine Wray.)

Interviewer: So how did your family go? There was a boy first?

Mr. Groves: Roy was first, wasn't he?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah.

Interviewer: Then you?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah....Virginia, Josephine and Lucy (who became Mrs. Herman Groves 1913-1988). And that ended it.

Interviewer: So that's one boy and four girls? And you were the oldest girl.

Mrs. Hopkins: (Nodded)

Interviewer: ...You were a little girl when you moved here?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah.

Interviewer: And then where did you all move to.

Mr. Groves: Didn't you come right on down to Spotsylvania then?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah, Spotsylvania Courthouse.

Interviewer: And, what kind of house did you live in when you were a little girl?

Mr. Groves: Just a frame wooden house? What was your house like?

A frame wooden house?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah

Interviewer: What did your dad do for a living?

Mrs. Hopkins: A horse trader! Okay.

Mr. Groves: And he worked on golf courses, too.



Interviewer: They had golf courses around here?

Mr. Groves: No, it was in Florida, wasn't it? Didn't he go to Florida?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah

Interviewer: Was he gone for long periods of times to work down there or just....

Mr. Groves: Backwards and forwards.

Interviewer: Back and forth? And then your mom was in charge when he went?

Your mom took care of you all? (Laughter)

Mrs. Hopkins: Yes, she was the boss!

Mr. Groves: She was in charge when he came back too!

Mrs. Hopkins: She thought she was the boss.

Interviewer: So, tell me about when you came to Fredericksburg.

Mr. Groves: How old were you then, about 15 or 16?

Mrs. Hopkins: No, I'd been married and divorced.

Interviewer: So, you were married when your parents still had the house in Spotsylvania.

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah.

Interviewer: So tell me the story about you getting married. You told me that once before. You all didn't get married in Spotsylvania, did you? Where did you go to get married?

Mrs. Hopkins : In Spotsylvania.

Interviewer: And you were young?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah, I was 21.

Interviewer: 21. Okay. And when you got married...

Mrs. Hopkins : And when I was 22 I got un-married.

(Laughter.)

Mr. Groves: Divorced.

Interviewer: Okay. I remember you told me that you all came back to live with your family.**Mrs. Hopkins :** Yeah.

Mr. Groves: And then they had a daughter.

Interviewer: Had a daughter. What's her name?

Mrs. Hopkins : Jeanette.

Interviewer: And then you decided that life was better off without him.

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah, oh yeah, much better. He just gave me a lesson... about what married life was like.

Interviewer: Okay. And it wasn't what you wanted?

Mrs. Hopkins : No.

Interviewer: Okay. So then what happened? Was your dad still living when you came to Fredericksburg?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah. Daddy stayed in the county.

Interviewer: When you first came to Fredericksburg, it was you, and your mom and Jeanette. Is that right?

(Mrs. Hopkins was married, had her own car, and commuted to Fredericksburg and worked as a waitress. Then Jeanette was born. Later Mrs. Hopkins was divorced. When Jeanette was five years old they were thinking about school, so she and her mother and Jeanette moved to Fredericksburg. They rented 612 Caroline St. the first year, then bought it. She moved to 1415 Caroline St., on Oct. 31, 1967.)

Interviewer: So when you came to Fredericksburg, how did you make your living?

Mrs. Hopkins : A waitress.

Interviewer: Oh, you were a waitress? Where?

Mr. Groves: Different restaurants.

Interviewer: Different restaurants? Oh, I didn't know that. I bet you'd be a good waitress, you're friendly....

Mrs. Hopkins: Oh boy, I can dish out your food!

(Laughter.)

Interviewer: Were there a lot of restaurants in Fredericksburg then?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah, a whole lot.

Mr. Groves: Most of them were run by Greeks, most of them.

Mrs. Hopkins: And then the Sylvania plant opened.

Mr. Groves: In 1929.

Mrs. Hopkins: And I went over there.

Interviewer: So when did you start working there?

Mrs. Hopkins: I hadn't been to town very long, I started working there.

Interviewer: So what did you do at the plant?

Mrs. Hopkins: Clerical work.

Keeping records of things.

Interviewer: What kind of things did you have to keep track of?

Mr. Groves: Well, she changed charts for, you know, they had clocks, you know, and charts on them, and she had to change the charts and put the forms in the charts.

Interviewer: For, like, payroll, that kind of charts?

Mr. Groves: No, maybe to record temperatures and things like that.

Interviewer: Oh, recording temperatures and things like that. Because...what were they making at the plant?

Mr. Groves: Cellophane, for one thing. And then they had a bottle cap, she

worked at the bottle cap too...

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't know that.

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah

Interviewer: What did they make the bottle caps for?

Mr. Groves: For, what, for whiskey bottles, wasn't it?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah.

Mr. Groves: Plastic things that go around a whiskey bottle. They called them bottle caps.

Interviewer: Oh, the cellophane part, or the plastic or something...

Mr. Groves: Well, it's some material, I don't know what it was. You know, it's real thick, kind of thick.

Interviewer: So you recorded, you made sure the machines were on the right settings or something?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah, doing like they were supposed to do.

Interviewer: What time did you have to be there in the morning?

Mrs. Hopkins: 7:30.

Interviewer: Did you walk to work?

Mrs. Hopkins: Caught a ride. You know, other people picked me up.

Mr. Groves: Then, at one point in time they had a bus, she rode the bus some too.

Mrs. Hopkins: Oh yeah, we had a bus.

Interviewer: Was it just for employees?

Mr. Groves: Yeah, and sometimes the people she worked with, you know, had a vacant spot, and they'd carry her to work.

Interviewer: Did your mother watch your little girl when you worked?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah.

Interviewer: So where was the Sylvania plant?

Mr. Groves: Right down on Route 2

Interviewer: Where Bowman's is?

Mr. Groves: Yeah.

Mrs. Hopkins : And we made bottle caps

Mr. Groves: And cellophane.

Mrs. Hopkins : And did we make uh, we made like a rubber . ..no, I don't guess we did. We had a rubber department....

Mr. Groves: No, it wasn't a rubber department....

Mrs. Hopkins : Now, what was it? I guess the bottle capes were rubber.

Mr. Groves: Well, like rubber. You know what ...

Interviewer: I know what you mean. So, did a lot of people in town work at the Sylvania factory?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah.

Mr. Groves: Town and surrounding Stafford, King George and Spotsylvania, made up of the whole area.

Mrs. Hopkins: Oh yeah, we had people as far as away as Ashland.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Mrs. Hopkins: And we made, we had bottle caps...what else did we make?

Mr. Groves: Cellophane. Cellophane was the main thing.

Interviewer: And the cellophane, I think you told me it was for cigarette packets?

Mr. Groves: Well, that was one thing, and then they wrapped meats with it, and all kinds of things that you use wrapping for. And really what ran 'em out of business was when the Saran company entered the market, 'cause Saran is thinner and they could get more volume. They could wrap more

things with it, more per pound, you know.

Interviewer: It was stronger too?

Mr. Groves: Yeah. They kept four, we called them spinning machines making cellophane. They kept four machines on at 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You wouldn't believe it unless you knew it!

Interviewer: Wow. So there were some people who worked the night shift and some that worked the day shift?

Mr. Groves: Oh, they had three shifts.

Interviewer: Did you always work the day shift, Mrs. Hopkins ?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah.

Interviewer: So, if you got there at 7:30 in the morning, what time did you get home?

Mrs. Hopkins: I got off at 4.

Interviewer: So then you got home in time for supper.

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah.

Mr. Groves: Actually, they had day workers, they had shift workers work 7 to 3, 3 to 11 and 11 to 7. Day workers worked, well, 8 to 4, 7 to 4, 7:30 to 4, different hours for day workers.

Interviewer: (to Herman) Now, did you work there too?

Mr. Groves: Yeah.

Interviewer: And what did you do?

Mr. Groves: Mostly supervision.

Interviewer: How old were you when you started working there?

Mr. Groves: Let's see, I don't think I've ever been asked that, I'm not really sure...



Interviewer: Had you worked other places first, and then you started working there?

Mr. Groves: No, not really, that was my, right out of school that was my first job. So I guess I was 20, 21, something like that.

Interviewer: So did you both work there until it closed? When did you stop working there?

Mr. Groves: Didn't you retire before it closed?

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah, I retired when I had to.

Mr. Groves: I'd say, before the plant closed. You wasn't there when the plant closed, were you?

Interviewer: And how old were you when you retired, do you mind if I ask?

Mrs. Hopkins : About 65, wasn't it?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah.

Interviewer: 65? That's a long career. So you worked there about 30 years?

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah, I guess I did.

Interviewer: You must have made a lot of friends there.

Mrs. Hopkins : Yeah, the whole plant.

Interviewer: So, then it was still functioning during World War II?

Mr. Groves: It closed, I believe it was 1979, I believe it was. (FMC as the plant was known at the time of closing in March of 1978 was still a major employer. An advertisement in the *Free Lance-Star* at the time called attention to about 1,100 who were about to be unemployed. They included people in supervisory, administrative and skills categories. A news story noted that workers were not going to have access to their credit union accounts for 60 days. Local bankers stepped in and offered assistance with mortgages and loans. Mr. Groves recalled that the plant management called the workers together to announce the closing which took them by surprise. There had been no forewarning—like layoffs. And yes, Mr. Groves said, it was scary because there were people there--like him-- who had been working there all of their adult lives.

Mr. Groves took about a year off and then found new employment. Mrs. Hopkins had retired earlier and Mrs. Lucy Groves had not worked since marriage in 1944.)

Interviewer: 1979. So it was in business a long time.

Mr. Groves: Yeah, from 1929 to 1979

Interviewer: Fifty years?

Mr. Groves: And, it was a lifesaver, it came right here about the time of the Depression.

Mrs. Hopkins: When that opened up, we didn't have anything, you know, it was just a little old one horse town. That really made our town.

Mr. Groves: We didn't even feel the, people in this area I would say didn't even hardly feel the Depression at all.

Interviewer: Isn't that something. That was really great.

Mr. Groves: It was a lifesaver.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's right, because people in some towns suffered so terribly. So, during that time, I guess there were lots of businesses in town because there were people that had jobs and had money to spend.

Mr. Groves: That's right

Interviewer: So you had all kinds of stores downtown, didn't you?

Mr. Groves: Oh, we had factories, too. G&H, ever hear of G&H Factory?

Interviewer: Is that the pants, the polyester...

Mr. Groves: No, that's the pants factory and G&H were separate. G&H made suits and things like that. They operated up until just a few years ago. G&H and then you had the pants factory, and had a shirt factory,

Mrs. Hopkins: And shoe factory.

Mr. Groves: And shoe factory. The shoe factory was right on Caroline Street here

Interviewer: Further up from us?

Mr. Groves: Yeah, just past the corner, past Herndon Street, past where I live

Interviewer: Okay, I know where you mean. What was the name of the shoe factory, do you know?

(Pause.)

Mr. Groves: Only thing I believe I ever knew was shoe factory!

Mrs. Hopkins: Morgenstern's was the pants factory.

Mr. Groves: Yeah, Morgenstern's, and then the G&H factory, and, what, Pritchard shirt factory was it?

Mrs. Hopkins: And the egg crate factory.

Mr. Groves: Yeah, they had the egg crate factory...

Interviewer: The egg crate factory? You mean like the kinds of things our eggs come from in the grocery store?

Mr. Groves: Uh huh. And then you had the farmers creamery.

Interviewer: Farmers what? Oh, creamery, like a dairy. Where was that?

Mr. Groves: You know where the post office is?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Groves: Then it's about two blocks over from that. It's still standing, it's not operating, the creamery. See, they used to go out in the country and pick up milk, and bring it here in town. Yeah... they hired a few people too.

Interviewer: Right, that's a lot of jobs here. Well, from the beginning, Fredericksburg was a place where they did a lot of trade and ships used to come up, way way long ago

Mr. Groves: Yeah, they used to bring the sugar and stuff up, up to Falmouth, they had a dock up there. They, the farmers would ride the wagons down and meet the, pick up the sugar and different items.

Interviewer: When was this? When did they do that?

Mr. Groves: Oh, I think it was before my time. But I just heard people talk about it, you know, how the farmers used to come down to Falmouth, with horse and wagons, to pick the sugar and whatever.

Interviewer: Well, I know you told me there used to be a Sears in town, grocery stores, and everything...

Mr. Groves: Oh, you'd see Sears and Safeways and A&Ps, and a number right over here on Princess Anne Street, we had Johnson Grocery Store, which was private owned, you know, family-owned. And when Christine moved here 40 years ago (to 1415 Caroline Street), we had a Safeway over here where the ...

Interviewer: Where the Goodwill is, right across the street?

Mr. Groves: Goodwill, yeah, it used to be a Safeway.

Interviewer: So you had a grocery store right across the street.

Mr. Groves: Had a laundry mat right around the corner from it, on Princess Anne Street.

Mrs. Hopkins: Yeah, we've always had a lot of stores

Mr. Groves: Then, that grocery over there (Johnsons on Princess Anne Street), they made home deliveries, all you had to do was call up and tell 'em what you wanted and they'd deliver it.

Interviewer: Oh, that's a good thing.

Mr. Groves: And then, we had two or three in downtown, Jones' down here on William Street, I think I told you vaguely about that, that was family-owned too, and they made deliveries, call them up and they would deliver. And we had, of course we still have Belman's, but it's not run by the Belman family, they just have the name, down there next to the railroad you know....

Interviewer: Oh yes, Nader's?

Mr. Groves: Yes, I think it still goes by the name of Belman's, doesn't it?

Interviewer: Well, if it's the one I'm thinking of it's called Nader's, but that's the one you mean, the one on the corner?

Mr. Groves: Yes, that's the one. Anyway, it used to be run by the Belmans down there. And then farther up Caroline Street had the WZ Market, that was private owned, too. And , let's see, then we had a Safeway, and another Safeway at a different time, up almost to the corner of William Street, William and Caroline, had a Safeway there.

Interviewer: On Caroline?

Mr. Groves: Yeah. It was right just before you get to William Street, not adjoining. Of course at one time they had a High's Ice Cream there, on the corner.

Mrs. Hopkins : And the Main Grocery.

Mr. Groves: Yeah, they had the Main Grocery. It was before the Main Grocery, no it was after the Main Grocery they had, the Woolworth's. Woolworth's used to be on the other corner of William Street.

Interviewer: Is that where the Ben Franklin is now? Or on the other side?

Mr. Groves: No the Ben Franklin is on the lower side, Woolworth's and Main Grocery was on the other side of William Street. Main Grocery was our first, and then Woolworth's took it over for a while, and then they went on over to Spotsylvania Mall. So did Leggett's. Leggett's used to be up there next to the theater, you know, the Victoria Theater, which the Fredericksburg Baptist Church bought, you know.

Interviewer: Were there two theaters in town?

Mr. Groves: There was three I think.

Interviewer: Really?

Mr. Groves: There was two right together down there next to Goolrick's. Goolrick's an old landmark, they been there for years and years. Now, can you picture Fredericksburg as everything being two-way streets?

Interviewer: It's hard to imagine that there's enough room for it, but I guess there is....

Mr. Groves: Two, a double lane and parking. Yeah, up until not too many years ago it was, everything in Fredericksburg was two lanes. And William Street, from Caroline Street to Princess Anne Street, was cobblestone.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Mr. Groves: Cobblestone. And....Oh, now, can you shut your eyes and visualize before 95 and before the bypass, the Fredericksburg bypass....everything from Maine to Florida has to come through Princess Anne Street. Everything from Maine to Florida, trucks and everything. Can you imagine that?

Interviewer: That's right. I know my father, when he was a young boy, made a trip with his father down to Florida, and I picture that he must have come right down here..

Mr. Groves: He had to. That was the only road. There was no 95 and no bypass.

Mrs. Hopkins : And we had laundries.

Mr. Groves: Yeah, the Fredericksburg Laundry, and then the Steam Laundry, they had the Steam Laundry on Caroline Street and they had the Fredericksburg Laundry out on William Street. You know where you go up the hill to the college? They use it for a college parking lot now, the space I mean. And, the Stratford Hotel used to do a big tourist business. Now it's been renamed the General Washington in later years, but it used to be Stratford, then they renamed it the General Washington. And, of course everybody had to spend the night somewhere, so between there and Princess Anne (Hotel), why, the tourists spent the night. And, up to the General Washington, they had men there in uniforms who met the tourists and took their luggage in and greeted them all, and they had a fine dining room.

Mrs. Hopkins: And we had a funeral home downtown.

Mr. Groves: Yeah, up around where Christine used to live at 612 Caroline St., right across the street had the Elkins's Funeral Home.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's where the, there's a hairdresser (Elle) there now, I guess.

Mr. Groves: I don't really know what's in there now, it's not a funeral home any more. And across on the General Washington, it was almost like a mini truck stop. They had a restaurant across the street, ran by Pearl and Hattie Cox. They had a 24 hour restaurant across the street from the General Washington, and they had a big trucking business. They knew a lot of the truck drivers by name, and they got to know 'em, you know. And they'd stop in, now, it was just like a truck stop, only they didn't sell gas and it didn't have a garage, they just had an eating place.

Interviewer: So, would they pull their trucks in to eat, and would they rest there?

Mr. Groves: Oh, momentarily, but not all night or anything like that. But they would pull in there for food because they served plenty of food, and it was good food. And not only trucks, not only truckers stopped there, but local people went there too. They had a good business, and it was right next to Carl's Ice Cream, right across from the General Washington, and then of course they had the Princess Anne (Hotel) down here, which was a flourishing business too. They had a lot of dignitaries that stopped at both places, especially the Princess Anne.

And, oh, talk about Maine to Florida. You know, of course they had to go on to Richmond. So, they didn't have 95 (and the Fredericksburg Route 1 Bypass) and everything else, so when they got to Four Mile Fork, they had to take 208?

Interviewer: 208, Courthouse Road?

Mr. Groves: They had to go to 208 to Spotsylvania Courthouse, and I don't know if you've ever been there or not, but then you had to go on past Spotsylvania Courthouse, down to a little place in the road called Snell. And then they had to keep on going, and then the next place I believe of any size they had was Partlow, a place called Partlow, and then Beaverdam, on to Beaverdam, and they'd come out at a point down past Ashland. It's either Gum Spring or Gum Tree, I don't know which, it's still marked there and still got a sign, Gum Spring or Gum Tree, come out and then go on down to Richmond.

Interviewer: It's hard to believe, it's just a little road, but that was the main road.

Mr. Groves: Oh, then, back then, most of them was gravel. You'd go around these curves, and, uh, with all the traffic they had then, it was like a washboard, just like a washboard, and some of the cars, when they, of course they wasn't heavy as they are now, when they'd go around a curve they'd bounce like that, almost half turn around going around the curve from the washboard road, of course it was gravel, you know, a gravel road. Very few blacktops back at that point in time. It was a wild trip from Washington to Richmond. Then from Richmond they had to go to Petersburg. And then from Richmond to Petersburg down the middle of the road they had street car tracks, right in the center of the road, dividing the road, they had street car

tracks, a street car. And they'd go clank!clank!clank!clank! down the middle of the road.

Interviewer: When did you get a car? Did you always have a car?

Mr. Groves: Not until after I graduated.

Interviewer: Graduated from high school?

Mr. Groves: Uh huh.

Interviewer: What high school did you go to?

Mr. Groves: Stafford. It was the only, at that time it was the only high school over there. Well, they had the Falmouth High School and then they had the Stafford High School which was over to Stafford Courthouse, which is still standing, you know. That was all they had in Stafford, and that's the only one they had in Falmouth, the Falmouth High School.

Interviewer: Where did you grow up? Where were you born?

Mr. Groves: Born in Stafford. (Son of Joseph Groves and Maggie Groves, Mr. Groves was born Oct. 1, 1918, in an area of Stafford known as Roseville, a grocery store and post office about five miles from Rock Hill. Ruby Post Office was nearby. Mr. Groves said Ruby Post Office was about the size of an outdoor toilet.)

Interviewer: Was your dad a farmer, or what did he do?

Mr. Groves: He was a farmer, and of course we had I believe it was 270 acres I think, all together on the farm. So he farmed and then, actually, by trade he was a sawyer. He sawed lumber. He sawed trees into lumber, you know, two by fours and two by eights and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: Now where was that in Stafford, where he had that?

Mr. Groves: About 15 miles from Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: And did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Groves: I had one brother. He was older than I.

Interviewer: And then so did you live at home until you graduated from high school and then you worked at the plant?

Mr. Groves: Yeah.

Interviewer: When did you move to Fredericksburg?

Mr. Groves: I actually moved to Fredericksburg in 1948.

Tape 3, June 24, 2007

Interviewer: What about the years after World War II and then you go through a peacetime era, then you had all the complicated things that happened in the 60s, with Vietnam and the hippies and the racial tension and segregation ending in Virginia – are there any stories or anything you can tell me about – those were turbulent times – what it was like in this town during those times?

Mr. Groves: We never suffered too much. It was mostly in Washington where most of it happened. Of course, I wasn't there, so I don't know too much about it.

Interviewer: So, how those things affected you all here in Fredericksburg, the changes that took place in this country, I just wondered...this wasn't a sleepy little town, there was a lot going on here with active people.

Mr. Groves: I know at the drug store downtown we used to have "sit-ins" or something, where they come in and sit at the counter where they didn't used to be allowed, and things like that, but nothing major, really. And they didn't amount to a whole lot, they did it, but it wasn't a bit deal, not like a riot or anything.

Interviewer: Because they did have riots in Washington in later years, and protests, but nothing big like that. It seems to me that still pretty much black families and white families don't mix that much, you know, they have their own neighborhoods, you know what I mean? It's always been like that.

Mr. Groves: Friendly, but don't mix as much.

Interviewer: What about at the plant? Did black people work there?

Mr. Groves: Yes, it wasn't a big deal.

Interviewer: Tell me more about what you did at the plant.

Mr. Groves: Mostly just supervised.

Interviewer: Like what? Like, how did you spend the day? When you got to work in the morning, what were you looking to do that day, or what kinds of things did you do?

Mr. Groves: Well, it wasn't a private office, but I had my space, where I supervised the people.

Interviewer: Mostly office staff?

Mr. Groves: Yes.

Interviewer: So did you have secretaries that worked in there?

Mr. Groves: Oh yes.

Interviewer: So did you work on contracts, or making sure people out in the factory were doing what they were supposed to do?

Mr. Groves: Yeah, we had supervision over that, to see that everything was going all right. Answering questions, things like that. (Mr. Groves said later that he scheduled the spinning machines according to the orders and was in an administrative department call Production and Planning. He and all the other salaried employees were on what was termed the New York payroll which meant funds to pay them came from the corporate office—not the local plant.)

Interviewer: Did you have salesmen who went out and sold your goods, or was that all taken care of someplace else?

Mr. Groves: It was all taken care of.

Interviewer: Who owned this company, FMC, was it local people?

Mr. Groves: No, the main office was in San Jose, CA. And they had plants all over the United States and foreign plants too, and they still do. They closed this down because they went out of business in this particular line of product. It wasn't something that people bought any more, they were getting away from it. Saran took it over, actually. But they make all kinds of farm equipment, lawn mowers, and they own a lot of stuff, they're big business. I think they went out of business in some areas. They used to make box cars, but I think they went out of that business when it's a product they don't do well enough with.

(Sylvania was founded as an industrial company in 1929 and later became a division of American Viscose which was a good-sized American company manufacturing rayon. Dr. Frank Reichel came from Germany to establish the Sylvania plant. Dr. and Mrs. Reichel built a home, Framar, which is now part

of the Mary Washington campus. American Viscose had at least two “rayon” divisions in Virginia and Sylvania which manufactured clear cellophane and colored cellophane in different weights. Later Sylvania was bought by FMC the “Food Machinery and Chemical” Corporation. Once a year, in September, a number of the plant’s former employees meet at a “reunion” at a local restaurant. Over the last several years, between 50 and 100 people gathered for the event, according to Mr. Groves.)

Interviewer: How did you get trained for your job? Were you young when you started there?

Mr. Groves: Somewhat. I guess I was about 21 or so. I guess you’d call that young!

Interviewer: Who trained you?

Mr. Groves: Some of the employees that were already trained, people who had already “been through the mill”!

Interviewer: Did you wear a suit and tie every day?

Mr. Groves: Mostly semi-formal, you might say, you didn’t always have a coat, but sometimes you did.

Interviewer: Did you wear a hat?

Mr. Groves: No! (Laughter)

Interviewer: People dressed different then, I mean, look how people go to church now, practically dressed in shorts and sandals, they used to dress up a little more then.

Mr. Groves: I don’t think or ever recall ever wearing shorts at that time to work.

Interviewer: Different now!

You should see some of the people who come in to interview at my company now, they way they’re dressed... Well, what else have we not talked about? What else should I know about what it’s like to live here now, what about the



changes now in recent years? What do you think of how the town has changed, the traffic...

Mr. Groves: Well, the main thing I guess we've got now is the traffic is a problem here, and the good stores that we used to have are gone. The shopping malls have taken over. I guess the biggest changes we have is the stores moving out of Fredericksburg and the traffic. I don't know of any other except, of course, prices of houses have gone up.

Interviewer: I know, you told me about your house up the street, the assessments went up and everybody got a big surprise. This block of Caroline Street is very nice, a beautiful place to live. Some of the neighbors have told me it's gotten better the last few years, that there was a period of time where it started to get a little run down. Is that true?

Mr. Groves: I don't agree with that.

Interviewer: That's okay. But now things are getting really nice. One by one some of the houses that were getting run down are getting fixed up.

Mr. Groves: We used to have a dance hall across the street! I guess you heard about that.

Interviewer: I did, where the old Safeway was. It's kind of like around the corner....

But now we have this lovely office here, we don't have any problems with that (Goodwill building).

Mr. Groves: Yes, it could be a mess.

Interviewer: Yes, it could be. Well, when the laundry ran there I guess there were trucks and buses coming in and out all the time.

Mr. Groves: Well, we never actually had a laundry across the street.

Interviewer: Oh, it was one of these – not in that building but over this way more.

Mr. Groves: Yes, on Princess Anne Street. It was never a problem. It was just a homeowner laundry. Christine used to go there when she first came here. She didn't have a washer when she first moved up here, and so she used to take her laundry up there. It was just down the street and around the corner.

Interviewer: When I first met her, she very proudly told me that she still gets up the steps all the way up to the attic and all the way down to the basement to do the laundry. She was just turning 100 around that time, she wasn't 100 yet. But you get around yourself.

Mr. Groves: Slowly!! (Laughter)

Interviewer: We may have run out of things to talk about for the tape. Do you want me to shut it off?

Mr. Groves: I think so.

Tape 4 November 25, 2007

Interviewer: The things I would like to talk about: when you were a boy, living on the farm, who lived in your house with you, what life was like with your dad doing the work he did. He was a sawyer and a farmer. Did you have cows? What kind of farm was it?

Mr. Groves: We had horses and cows.

Interviewer: Did you grow the food that you all ate?

Mr. Groves: Most of it, yes. The wheat made the flour and the corn made the corn meal, and then we had hogs that made the meat. About the only thing we had to buy in the wintertime was coffee and sugar.

Interviewer: Wow! That's really amazing to me, because I'm a city kid, and I've never lived in a place where you grew all your own food.

Mr. Groves: We had meal; we ground the corn up and made meal. Same way with flour, you turn the wheat to the meal and come up with flour.

Interviewer: Who did all that work?

Mr. Groves: Well, my father and some neighbors who would help him, you know.

Interviewer: Did he have employees? People that he paid?

Mr. Groves: No, sometimes they changed jobs – he helped them and they'd help him. They'd help each other.

Interviewer: So, how long did he have the farm? Did he start the farm or did his father have the farm before him?

Mr. Groves: He had it ever since I was born, so I don't really know.

Interviewer: What about the sawmill? The lumber mill?

Mr. Groves: He sawed for other people. They would hire him. They would buy a tract of timber, and then they'd move the men in and he would be the sawyer. Of course, can't everybody do that.

Interviewer: Yeah, you have to have the right equipment, for one thing.

Mr. Groves: No, I mean, to saw the logs up and get timber from it, they have to know what they're doing. Two by fours and two by eights and things like that.

Interviewer: So, when you were a kid, you just had one brother? Did you all have chores?

Mr. Groves: Yes. We helped get in wood and things like that. Of course, back then, we had to burn wood for the fireplace to stay warm. And we cooked on a wood stove. And we had heaters that I had to supply wood for. Of course, we had plenty of wood, but we had to process it.

Interviewer: Did your mom do all the inside-of-the-house work?

Mr. Groves: Yeah. She would have help to come in and do washing on Tuesdays or Mondays, whatever day they decided on, and she would do most of the washing. And hog killing time, they would come in to help. We usually had at least two hogs and sometimes more, two or three. We had our own meats. We killed one day around Thanksgiving, and the weather would be cool and we'd put it in the meat house and have it firmed up and it got a little chilly. Then they'd put it up in hams and shoulders and side meats and whatever.

Interviewer: That's just fascinating to me because I've never seen that.

Mr. Groves: They'd cut the feet and have hocks and all, just like you buy in the stores.

Interviewer: I thought it came wrapped in a plastic thing all the time!

Laughter

Interviewer: Did you used to help with that as you were growing up? What kinds of things did you do as you got older?

Mr. Groves: No, I never really did a lot of work on the farm. I was going to school. I never really had too much work to do.

Interviewer: What about school? Where did you go to elementary school?

Mr. Groves: It was two or three miles from the home. Concord School.

Interviewer: How many kids were in the school?

Mr. Groves: Well, when I first started they had a two-room school and they taught seven grades, and they had a teacher in each room. So they'd have the students from, I forget now, maybe grades four to seven in one room and the smaller children in another.

Interviewer: So, did they have boys and girls in the same class?

Mr. Groves: Yes.

Interviewer: How did you get to school? Did they have a school bus?

Mr. Groves: No, at that period of time they walked. Either that or some few might have had their parents bring them in the car or something. Most of them just walked.

Interviewer: How far did you have to walk?

Mr. Groves: Two or three miles. Had a pond on the side of the road and we'd ice skate!

Interviewer: What about lunch? Did you bring your lunch?

Mr. Groves: Yes, we had an hour lunch period. We would eat and play ball or whatever.

Interviewer: Any of those kids that you knew growing up in that first school, have you seen any of them in recent years?

Mr. Groves: Some, yes.

Interviewer: Because every now and then I see a picture in the *Free Lance Star* and they'll show an old picture of a class and I always look for you!

(Laughter)

Mr. Groves: I don't recall seeing any pictures yet.

Interviewer: So then when you finished, that was seventh grade. After that you go to high school?

Mr. Groves: Yes, Stafford High School. And at that time we had a school bus. So they would pick us up at different points, you know, and then we'd ride the school bus. That was about 10 or 12 miles.

Interviewer: Did you take your lunch then or did they have a cafeteria?

Mr. Groves: No, at the early stages we had to take our lunch. Later on they had a cafeteria, but that came later.

Interviewer: What subjects did you like and which subjects did you hate?
(Laughter) I'll bet you were a good student, though.

Mr. Groves: Well, I don't know, I got by, anyway! We had a good English teacher and I liked that. I couldn't do much with algebra and things like that. I couldn't ever get the hang of it too much.

Interviewer: Did you play any sports or have any clubs or anything like that?
Mr. Groves: No, of course during that period of time we didn't go into sports like you do now. In high school, they had basketball. They didn't have any football to speak of, mostly basketball. But they didn't go school-to-school like they do now, it was entirely different.

Interviewer: Well, you're pretty tall. Did you play basketball?

Mr. Groves: No, I didn't.

Interviewer: What year did you graduate high school?

Mr. Groves: 1938 I believe it was.

Interviewer: And then is that when you got the job at the plant? I learned about all that when we talked before.

Interviewer: When did you meet your wife? When did you get married?

Mr. Groves: March 1944.

Interviewer: So you were a single man for a while then?

Mr. Groves: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was life like for a single man working as a supervisor at the plant. Did you have your buddies, did you go out and play cards, what kinds of things did you do in your free time?



Mr. Groves: I don't know, we didn't have too much to do, to tell you the truth. Of course, we lived 15 miles from Fredericksburg, and we'd come into town and look around and shop and so forth. Go to the movies.

Interviewer: So you still lived at your parents' place until you got married. How did you meet your wife?

Mr. Groves: Through friends.

Interviewer: And then you dated and then you got married. So where did you get married?

Mr. Groves: At Fredericksburg Baptist right here on the corner. The pastor at that time married us.

Interviewer: Was it a big wedding? Did you have a lot of people there?

Mr. Groves: No, we just had another couple. Matter of fact, my wife's brother and his wife and the preacher.

Interviewer: Was Mrs. Hopkins there?

Mr. Groves: No, her brother Roy.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Mr. Groves: 1944.

Interviewer: ... you were single, lived here and worked at the factory. You all were working here keeping things going here.

Mr. Groves: We had government contracts so we were exempt from the draft at that time.

Interviewer: Where did you and your wife first live when you got married?

Mr. Groves: We bought a home down in Sylvania Heights, which is off Route 2.

Interviewer: Are those houses still there? Are they the brick houses?

Mr. Groves: No, ours was frame.

Interviewer: Do you remember the address?

Mr. Groves: Not really.

Interviewer: I'll bet if we drove by you'd know it.

Mr. Groves: Oh yes.

Interviewer: So then you moved from there to where?

Mr. Groves: To the college, on Dandridge Street.

Interviewer: So how come you all moved? Just a nicer home?

Mr. Groves: Yes, different location.

Interviewer: Well, you're close to everything up here. So when did you buy the house on Caroline Street?

Mr. Groves: We didn't live up at the college too long. We moved from the college to 1601 Caroline Street. I forget offhand what year it was.

Interviewer: Was it before Mrs. Hopkins moved here to this house?

Mr. Groves: Oh yes.

Interviewer: So she was still living at 612 Caroline St. with her mother.

Mr. Groves: She didn't move up here until around 1960 I think.

Interviewer: So you were in that house before 1960. Now, that's a much bigger house. And it sits even on the river. So tell me about that house when you first bought it. What kind of condition was it in, did you have to do work on it?

Mr. Groves: At that time it was rented out and had right many apartments, so after a period of time it dwindled down to where we didn't take anybody.

Interviewer: So you let the people stay there that lived there for a little while, you got that rental income from that?

Mr. Groves: Yes, after we bought it.

Interviewer: Well, it sits there like a grand old big hotel or something! That's what it makes me think of when I see it.

Interviewer: And then Mrs. Hopkins moved here, so she and her sister lived nearby each other...

Mr. Groves: and her mother too.

Interviewer: One of the things you were telling me one time and it didn't make it to the tape was the trips you used to make up to Washington to do things.

Mr. Groves: Oh yes, at that time, of course all the stores we had in Fredericksburg were down on Caroline Street, and they had a couple of shopping malls up in northern Virginia, like Seven Corners...

Interviewer: Yes, Seven Corners, that was the first one...

Mr. Groves: I think so. Then came along Springfield. And then Landmark, that's the third one. We used to go to all three of them over a period of time. And then sometimes we'd go to Richmond. Downtown Richmond was fabulous, they had some nice stores down there.

Interviewer: And you went into D.C., too, didn't you, to go to shows and theaters? Tell me the story about when your car changed colors...

Mr. Groves: I think that was on Constitution Avenue, Loew's Theater I believe it was. We drove up there one night, I think it was a Saturday night, to go to the movies. That theater, they would have a band there, some prominent band, like...I don't know...

Interviewer: Like Tommy Dorsey? Oh somebody big like that!

Mr. Groves: Yeah. They'd have a famous band there, and then a movie. So we went up there one Saturday night, and when we got almost in front of the movie, there was a parking space. And I thought that was almost unreal, because you know how parking is up there. So I pulled in and parked. And I had a black Plymouth at that time. So we went on to the movies, and when we come out we couldn't hardly recognize the car! It was almost white!

Interviewer: So you found out why they didn't park there!

Mr. Groves: I found out! It was a mess! You couldn't hardly put your fingers on the car, there wasn't a place. The birds had just swarmed all over it! Then I knew why they hadn't parked there!

Interviewer: Now with the traffic to go up to D.C. for a show, it would take forever to get up there and get back.

Mr. Groves: I wouldn't ever think about it.

Interviewer: There's a lot of people do it every day to work, too.

Mr. Groves: Of course, a lot of them have commuter buses.

Interviewer: Did you all ever go to New York or other places like that entertainment, or you pretty much went to D.C. and Richmond?

Mr. Groves: We went to the World's Fair in New York in 1964.

Interviewer: Oh yeah? What year was that? The early 60s?

Mr. Groves: Whatever time it was!

Interviewer: I went to that one! I was a little kid, so I think it was in the early 60s.

Mr. Groves: That sounds like it. Well, it was the World's Fair in New York.

Interviewer: One time when I was talking with Frank (Ayers), and he said he'd been friends with you for many years, he said you worked with him after your job at the plant. What other career did you have after the plant? closed in 1978. What did you do? that?

Mr. Groves: I took off about a year, and then I guess that's when I went to work for the government. I think I was with the government about 10 years.

Interviewer: So, you've had a long work life as well as a long, healthy life.

Mr. Groves: Yes.

Interviewer: You are very fortunate.

Editor's Note: This interview has been edited.



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