

September 2007 and March 2008

Interview with Donald Walker Firebaugh
By Dick Barnes

[Items enclosed in brackets [] are editorial notes inserted for clarification]

Dick Barnes: I'm Dick Barnes, and I'm interviewing this morning Don Firebaugh, here in Brownsburg, Virginia, September 22nd 2007, on a beautiful fall morning. Don, I'd like to ask you how long you've lived in the Brownsburg area, or when did you live here in Brownsburg-- what years?

Don Firebaugh: My mother brought me and my brothers down from Baltimore in 1931, and I lived here till 1947, and then I went into military service, and returned to the area in 1967, when I returned from Vietnam, and have lived here ever since.

Dick Barnes: Where did you first live in the Brownsburg area, when you all came down from Baltimore?

Don Firebaugh: We lived on Hays Creek about three-quarters of a mile southwest of Brownsburg. We had a large, the McClung Farm, at the time. My grandfather was renting it, and he'd lived there from 1931 until the time he died in 1975.

Dick Barnes: What was your grandfather's name?

Don Firebaugh: Sam [Samuel Walker] Lotts.

Dick Barnes: And who were your parents?

Don Firebaugh: My father was Charles David Firebaugh and my mother was Nannie [Margaret] Lotts Firebaugh.

Dick Barnes: And what brought you all to Brownsburg, what was the reason you all moved, if I may ask, from Baltimore?

Don Firebaugh: My father was killed in an automobile accident and so we came back and made our home with my mother's grandfather, Sam Lotts.

Dick Barnes: And he was a farmer?

Don Firebaugh: Yes.

Dick Barnes: And you all helped out on the farm as you grew older?

Don Firebaugh: Yes.

Dick Barnes: Well what's your first memory of Brownsburg, coming from Baltimore to Brownsburg? What do you remember about those early years of living in Brownsburg? Working on the farm? No, you were a little young then I guess for working on the farm.

Don Firebaugh: Yes. As far as Brownsburg, the village of Brownsburg, I guess the first memory I had, Grandfather sent me to Bob Supinger's store, grocery store, to get him some chewing tobacco. I was about 6-years-old, and that was my first venture out by myself to Brownsburg. We only lived about three-quarters of a mile away.

Dick Barnes: In fact we're sitting in that store right now.

Don Firebaugh: That's correct.

Dick Barnes: Conducting this interview. This is the old store that you mentioned. Well I assume that when you became of school age that you attended school in Brownsburg.

Don Firebaugh: Yes. My first grade teacher was Mollie Sue Hull Whipple.

Dick Barnes: And where was the school then?

Don Firebaugh: It was then on the hill above Brownsburg, on the south side of the area, on the high ground, and it was in the old academy, the old Brownsburg Academy.

Dick Barnes: And what year would have been that you started to school, if I may ask?

Don Firebaugh: 1936.

Dick Barnes: And Mollie Sue Whipple was the first grade teacher?

Don Firebaugh: Yes.

Dick Barnes: Do you have any stories or any recollections of your years at the Brownsburg Academy that you'd like to share with us? Funny stories or serious stories?

Don Firebaugh: Well I used to-- we only had two years in the old school building, the old academy, till we moved to the new school building; in the 3rd grade we went to the new school building they built- started building in 1937. But I always enjoyed going out and getting coal to put in the old pot belly stoves in the old Brownsburg Academy.

Dick Barnes: And you enjoyed that?

Don Firebaugh: Yes, I got out of class.

Dick Barnes: Well any time we could get out of class that was some enjoyment to that wasn't it?

Don Firebaugh: Yes. But somebody had to do the fire.

Dick Barnes: And you went all the years of your schooling at Brownsburg?

Don Firebaugh: Yes.

Dick Barnes: And graduated 12th grade there I guess.

Don Firebaugh: Yes, in 1947.

Dick Barnes: Well after completing school what did you do after that, in the beginning of your adult life?

Don Firebaugh: Well I went in the military.

Dick Barnes: And that would have been--?

Don Firebaugh: Actually the last of June, in 1947; stayed for 23 years, and retired July 1st, 1947.

Dick Barnes: What branch of the service was that?

Don Firebaugh: U.S. Army Artillery, and I spent 11½ years in Airborne units.

Dick Barnes: And were you an officer or were you an enlisted man or--?

Don Firebaugh: Well I went in as enlisted and was commissioned in 1953.

Dick Barnes: And retired as a--?

Don Firebaugh: Major.

Dick Barnes: As a Major. Any particular thing you'd like to describe as far as your days on the farm during your high school days? I assume you all still lived on the farm?

Don Firebaugh: Yes. My granddad [Sam Lotts] was a very particular farmer. He always wanted to get the most out of his crops because that's where we made our living. And the way, to praise my granddad, the military seemed easy. He took very good care of his horses. His horses got the first care in the morning and the last care in the evening, and they came before we did when it come to caring for and feeding them. We'd wash them down; after a hot day's work they were washed down. And his harnesses were always cleaned in the spring and oiled before the harvest season began.

Dick Barnes: What did he produce or grow mainly?

Don Firebaugh: Well back then we had general farming, which included cattle, sheep and we had hogs, of course, and chickens, things like that. And the chickens supplied most of the money for us to buy things at the store because of the sale of eggs. Then the cattle were sold, and the hay crop we had, part of it was sold and the remainder was kept to feed the cattle and the horses. And then we raised corn and the same with it, part of it was retained for the feeding animals and the rest sold. And the wheat that we raised it was all sold, except for what we kept for ourselves for flour.

Dick Barnes: So it was pretty hard living on the farm then, there wasn't much time to relax, and you said going into the military was a lot easier than living and working on the farm.

Don Firebaugh: Yes, or as easy.

Dick Barnes: When you all moved to Brownsburg I assume that you all had your own automobile and means of transportation, or how did you travel back and forth from the farm to say Brownsburg, to the general stores?

Don Firebaugh: We walked. We had-- of course my father's car that he was killed in, it caught on fire and burned him up, and of course we hadn't-- my mother didn't know how to drive and my grandfather didn't have a car, and so we walked, to church, to school, to Brownsburg; and of course if we had to, my grandmother would call in for groceries and Mr. [Elmer] Huffman would deliver them to her.

Dick Barnes: From Huffman's store, right up the road here.

Don Firebaugh: Yes.

Dick Barnes: You mentioned church, where did you all attend church?

Don Firebaugh: Well we went to New Providence Church, and we would walk to church, out at New Providence Road now, which was all dust, dirt, back then, and a lot of potholes.

Dick Barnes: How far would that have been from where you lived to New Providence?

Don Firebaugh: About a mile or better.

Dick Barnes: Did you ever use any of the transportation that ran through Brownsburg? There was a train that came through here. Or you remember of course there were automobiles of course.

Don Firebaugh: Yes.

Dick Barnes: If you had to go to Staunton or you had to go to Lexington how did you get there?

Don Firebaugh: I remember my mom would hire someone to take us and pay them, or we had a weekly, actually twice a week, cream truck that would haul cream to Staunton, to the Staunton Creamery and we would-- that had a cover on it-- and we would ride inside of the truck [bed with the cream cans].

Dick Barnes: Hitch a ride.

Don Firebaugh: Yes. And there was never any charge for it, it was always free. And during the latter part of World War II, we had bus service that would come into- around by New Providence Church, that you could catch a ride and then come through Brownsburg, but that was mainly for people who were working in the factories and things in Waynesboro and Staunton.

Dick Barnes: Do you remember, does any person stand out or persons stand out in your mind here in Brownsburg that, male or female, still stick in your mind as being leaders or citizens that you remember?

Don Firebaugh: Oh, probably the first and most favorite person, Mr. Walter Dice.

Dick Barnes: And who was he?

Don Firebaugh: He lived here in the grey house (brick) that's up there where Mr. Driver lives [22 Hays Creek Road]. He was a retired farmer, and he and his brother Charlie [Dice] retired from the farm over in Dutch Hollow when they were about 40-years-old, and came to Brownsburg and lived. He was a real strong leader in the church and in the community. As far as at that time I can't remember anything very much political except Ralph Landon. I remember the little sunflower buttons that they came out. I don't know how I got one but I probably traded some marbles for it. I do remember Ralph Landon. So that's the only thing. Otherwise supervisors and things like that were just like the good old boys, they just went ahead and done it.

Dick Barnes: You mentioned coming to the general stores. There were several other general stores. Do you recall the owners of any of those stores? You mentioned the Huffmans.

Don Firebaugh: Of course I mentioned Mr. [Bob] Supinger and Mr. Elmer Huffman, and of course Mr. Bosworth who had a small store and the post office was located in his store [2707 Brownsburg Turnpike]. And then we had the farm store which turned out to be the county farm store but it was [run by Mr. Engleman before that time] which began its business here in Brownsburg. And Mr. [Tolerace] Wiseman was one of the clerks. Mr. Wiseman who lived here in Brownsburg worked in that store for many years, even after they'd moved to Lexington. He moved to Lexington and lived

in Lexington and continued working for them, at the Farmer's Co-op. And of course the Whitesell's store, and that was also a funeral home. It was probably the second location of the post office, in Brownsburg. And of course now the post office has a third location, which we all know [in the Charlie Berry home].

Dick Barnes: Did you all have- when you first moved down from Baltimore and were living with your grandfather, did you have electrification, electricity come to the country at that point in time, and the telephone and all, was that something that Brownsburg had?

Don Firebaugh: Well we had- on the farm we had the telephone, and it was the old crank telephone and that call ring was a long and two shorts. And you had to ring that by pressing a button for a long period and then letting up and then ringing two shorts. And of course it was a party line and you might have four or five people, and everybody on that line knew what you was eating for breakfast. But we didn't have electric-- the ERA came in and began in 1936 and '37, and of course Brownsburg had electric but then the countryside, the rural area, began to get electricity, but we didn't. We had lamps; we studied by lamps up until just before I graduated from school. My grandfather was a little bit leery of electricity and we just didn't have it put in; we could've had it put in but we didn't have it put in until the last years that I went to school. We always studied by kerosene lamp. It was a chandelier type and my grandmother would pull it down for us to study by; when we got through she'd run it back up. [I have the lamp now over my dining table.]

Dick Barnes: Do you remember paved roads coming to this part of the county?

Don Firebaugh: Well the roads in Brownsburg stopped on the south end and at the north end at the bridge over Hays Creek. They started paving the roads around about 1940. I walked to school on Hays Creek Road. They came by and started with tar and sprinkled the gravel on it. And they went down the road a couple of miles and stopped. The county didn't go very far but it was kind of a- the beginning of what we have today.

Dick Barnes: What changes have you seen, good or bad or both, since you came back to the Brownsburg area after you retired from the military? Good and bad.

Don Firebaugh: Well the road networks are better. And of course everybody has electric power now. The whole concept of the way we lived in the thirties and forties has changed, it's gone forever, I guess because of the--. I would say that- I call it the- they say the automobile age but I call it the oil age because without the oil the automobile wouldn't exist. But they did away with the stores and all, the doctor's office we had and the bank we had; in other words that's the sad part. But the village doesn't have the congregation of people on say in the evenings or during the day;

but particularly on Fridays and Saturdays they came to the village, they didn't go to Lexington, because they didn't have the transportation. So I guess the transportation end of it is a big thing.

Dick Barnes: Have you seen better restoration and that sort of thing in Brownsburg? It kind of went down hill for a long time, I think, and it has- that part of it has improved with the restoration of a lot of the old buildings and homes in this area.

Don Firebaugh: Well yes, all the buildings in the community and many other places in the country, particularly on the farms, are now painted and they're cleaner and they look newer. Restoration and you might say, and preserving old buildings has been at the forefront.

Dick Barnes: Do you have any of the memories that are significant that were- or stories or tales of Brownsburg that, I'll put it this way, that we can record? I understand there are a lot of them.

Don Firebaugh: There are. Some of them are fact and some of them are-- what we think is fact-- and some of them are other, grey areas. But I remember my grandfather [Sam Lotts] and an old friend of his, Mr. Bob Reese. Mr. Reese would come and visit my grandfather just about every evening in the wintertime and sit by the fire and they would talk about the old times. Both of their fathers were raised in Pisgah, and they would talk about some of the things that happened, and about other people. So I remember when the Whipple boy [Goodrich] was shot, I just barely remember that, but everybody was all upset about that. [I also remember hearing about the Blackwell and [John W. Wade] boys that were shot, and the fight was started right in this store here. And of course they were shot on the road, going down to [Hays Creek], to his house, the man that shot them. I would listen to these stories winter after winter when I was a kid and I had them pretty well set in my mind. Sometimes I would even correct my grandfather.

Dick Barnes: They were the same stories in other words.

Don Firebaugh: It might be somewhat different from what he had told the last time. But Brownsburg was I guess a wonderful place then, I believe.

Dick Barnes: Well it was a good place to live then and a good place to live now.

Don Firebaugh: Yes, it is. For a young person you had so much freedom of movement. I mean there was no such thing as a trespass sign and people got along really good together. I think, back in those days, the worst thing we had to put up with was somebody stealing the chickens.

Dick Barnes: That, and I remember sometimes that the-- well the story's been told that you also had to put up with a pretty strict principal up at the school.

Don Firebaugh: Oh yes, [Ocie Trimmer.

Dick Barnes: That school was a little different then than it is now too I think.

Don Firebaugh: Yes.

Dick Barnes: Anything that we haven't covered this morning Don that you'd like to mention or tell us about regarding life in Brownsburg? Family history or any events or any stories that come to mind?

Don Firebaugh: Well it was a strong community at one time. And we were- we had a doctor, we had a bank, we had a telephone office, and we had probably more stores than we really needed, but they were all making a living at it. And I'm glad I grew up here, I'll put it that way. Some of the people around the- we had some colorful characters, like Clint Troxell, was one of them. And Clint was a farmer and later he become a plumber and a very successful plumber at one time. My grandfather and grandmother both always said when Clint got his first car that was his downfall, because he finally stayed on the road and Clint couldn't afford the money to keep gas in his car. It was hard times. We didn't have anything. We were- the kids, most of us, were all poor. We had plenty to eat but we didn't have money to spend and there wasn't nothing to really spend it for, other than maybe a bicycle or something like that. So I look back at it as a real plus for me. It was much better that what it would've been if I had grown up in Baltimore, I'll put it that way.

[End of Tape 1]

Dick Barnes: This is Dick Barnes, and I'm sitting here today with Donald Firebaugh in Brownsburg, Virginia. It's March the 15th, 2008 and Donald is going to share with us today some of his grandfather's and friends' stories that he was a part of and listened to as a young boy growing up on Hays Creek. It's good to have you with me today, Donald. Do you want to share some of your stories with us?

Donald Firebaugh: Yes, I do. I have two in mind. The privilege of being able to sit around the fire in the wintertime and listen to my grandfather, Sam Lotts, and his old friend Bob Reese, that was a next door neighbor of ours. We'd sit by the fire in the winter and eat apples, chew tobacco and talk about all the old things that moms and dads had to put up with, and some of the other local citizens that did different things during their lifetime.

The two that I have that I'll always remember was the Walker and Miller confrontation or affair, which was a domestic type of affair, and the other was one of reluctance to put his life on the line for the Confederacy because he felt that he didn't have the need to because he wasn't a slave owner and didn't believe in it. And he was very difficult to get into uniform, and that was one of the stories that we loved to listen to and we lost a lot of this telling that we would hear these stories every winter during our younger ages and we remembered them pretty well, and sometimes we were not quite correct. If Granddad didn't tell it right, we would say, "Well, you told this the last time," so we'd get him back on track, you know, and that was the fun part of it.

And the first one of the stories was Dr. [Zachariah] Walker and Mr. [Henry] Miller had a confrontation in Brownsburg. This was a domestic thing over Dr. Walker's wife and Miller, who was not married. And somehow or another they got into a fight in Brownsburg over Dr. Walker's wife, and there was charges brought against Mr. Miller. A court date was set in the old Brownsburg Academy up on the, I call it the "red clay hill" up above Brownsburg. A lot of this information at the school part of it where they had the trial came from the Reese side of the family, because one of the Reeses, George, was a young man about 11 years old, as I was told. And he and Bob, his brother, were holding the horses outside the old academy while the trial got started. And my grandfather at the time was working at the same day on the Miller farm carrying wheat away from the threshing machine and he was about 15 years old. So this was in the year, I could be off maybe a year, but it was 1896 was the year my grandfather was 15 at that date. And he always referred to it as he was 15 years old. The court proceeded, and during the testimony things got out of hand and there was knife play and gunplay and anyway ended up with three people being killed or knifed to death. And the Millers came out of the academy, one of their friends came out of the old academy building and got on the horses where the Reeses were holding and left and went back to the farm [Bellevue, 952 Hays Creek Road], which was just west of McClung's Mill [803 Hays Creek Road] about a half a mile. And they made note to the Walkers when they left the academy that they'd be waiting for them on the way home, because the Walkers had to go by the county road past the Miller's home to get to their farm over on Walker's Creek. Of course Dr. Walker, he had an office in Brownsburg, and that's the reason why there may have been reason for this get-together between Mr. Miller and Dr. Walker's wife. However, when the Millers got to the farm, they told everyone that was there on the threshing machine doing the work, the laborers, that there was going to be a shooting scrape, they was going to kill every one of the Walkers when they came by, and they got themselves all situated in front of the house under the porch, and they had their guns ready waiting for the Walkers to come by. My grandfather was carrying wheat away from the machine, as I stated before, and he got scared and left and went home. Of course his home was in Pisgah, right where I'm living at now [743 Pisgah Road], you know. Course the people up in Pisgah, there was as lot of poor families up there and none of them owned slaves or anything, and the Millers were living down at the, you might say the termination of the Pisgah Branch into Hays Creek, and they had a close assimilation, so that's the reason why they had worked together and everything, they were neighbors. Anyway, the way they told the story to us kids is the Walkers rode by and they says "Just hold your fire, we'll be back with our guns and we'll make it worth your while," and the Millers said, "Okay," and the Walkers rode on and no one ever

returned, and that was the end of the affair. No one was ever prosecuted for the deaths or anything. It was just dropped more or less, it was over with.

And I used to hear my grandfather and Mr. Bob Reese talk about all the felony deaths that happened, or violent deaths that happened in Brownsburg. There was somewhere between 13 and 15 of them and only one person ever was incarcerated because of killing someone, and that was Mr. Sam Carter, a black man. And he shouldn't have probably never been incarcerated because he was in fear of his life because a guy was going to, a white man was going to go and beat him up, and he was incarcerated and I don't know for how long.

The other story that I have, we always really got more excited about it probably than the Walker and Miller affair and was Mr. Bob Reese's daddy didn't like the requirement, wouldn't abide by the requirement to join the Confederate Army, because he said he wasn't a slave owner and he didn't owe anybody anything and he was a free man, and he thought it was wrong. And of course most of the people in the high ground here in the Pisgah area at that time, none of them owned slaves because they didn't have enough land to afford slaves or the money either. And Mr. [John?] Reese, they would come, the sheriff, seems like the sheriff of Augusta County, since their farm bordered right on the south Augusta line, sheriff from Augusta County was always the one coming trying to pick him up. It would always be more than one, several of them come to get him, but they always had lookouts, family and friends, and when they'd see the sheriff coming down the road, they knew the posse was coming for him, and they would alert him. And it was from ridge to ridge, and he'd be working in the field or something with his horses and he had a little black mare they always talked about. He'd pull the harness off of her and take off to the mountains, to North Mountain and of course they never did get him, you know. However, they caught him near, it was shortly after I think Christmas, they caught him in the wintertime, dead of the winter, and they tied him on the saddle on the horse and they headed back to Staunton with him. It was at nighttime. And they got to Arbor Hill, the watering station there for the horses. And there was quite a few of the people in the posse at that time and they got off to water the horses and take care of the other body functions and Mr. Reese said, "Ain't you gonna let a poor white man get off and get a drink of water, too, and go to the bathroom?" And so someone said, "Okay, but we're gonna take your shoes off, 'cause you're not gonna get away from us." It was cold that night, there was frost on the ground and everything, and probably, well it was freezing. So they took his shoes off and they untied his legs and he said when his feet hit the ground he was running, and they never did find him. They shot at him but they didn't get him. Of course it was dark, and someone asked him later, said, "Well, how in the world did you keep from freezing with no shoes on and not many clothes?" you know. And he said, "Well, I found a field that had cows in it, and where the old cows were laying down," he says, "I'd get one of them up and I laid down in the warm spot, and when that got cold, I'd get another one up." He said, "That's the way I stayed warm until it got daylight and I took off and went home, and they never did come after me no more." And I'm not sure what his first name was. It could've been John, I'm not sure. But anyway, Mr. Reese as far as I know lived to a ripe, old age. He had a large, large family of boys and girls, I think there must've been about 10, 11 of them.

There's one other story I would like to say, and this is in Dick Barnes' home now -- which is his shop [Old South Antiques], he spends more time here than he does in his house. Mr. Supinger's store, of course it wasn't Supinger's store at the time. Before that I believe, I'm not sure of the name of the people now who owned it, whether it was a Lucas or a Wright. But anyway, they ran this store that Dick owns now and his shop. People who used to come to the country store in the evening to talk and buy a few things, and in most cases they either rode horses or walked home. Of course this was in the later years, this was one of the last _____ near the end of the horse era. And in fact they had automobiles then. Two young men were sitting here in the store, and Mr. Wade, Mr. Lud Wade was his name, lived out towards Bustleburg. And he said something to somebody about something and he was in the way of something and the clerk in the store grabbed the axe handle and cracked him on the hand. Well, Mr. Wade was getting up in years and he told his boys about it. So the young Wade boy [John W.] and his friend, a Blackwell boy [Arthur], took it up and they confronted the clerk that hit Mr. Wade on the hand with the axe handle and said, "We're gonna get you when you go home. We're gonna beat you up." And so they waited for him down the road here, at the gray house down there [2766 Brownsburg Turnpike]. I don't know who lives in it now, but right on the corner.

Dick Barnes: Sterrett Road, near Sterrett Road.

Donald Firebaugh: Yeah, right there at the entrance to Sterrett Road on the north side. The Wright family lived there. Somehow or another he had gotten out of the store and sneaked home and got a gun and he started back up the road, and the boys confronted him and he shot both of them and killed them. And he left here, he was never prosecuted for anything. And there was, well you could say, those two, the three at the academy, that's five, and there was quite a few more that I can't recall right offhand. But my grandfather and Mr. Reese could count up the -- best I can remember 13, it could've been 14 or 15 violent deaths. They could name these people, but no one was ever brought to trial for anything except for Mr. Carter.

[End of Tape]

Donald Walker Firebaugh Index

A

Automobile · 5

B

Bellevue · 10
Berry, Charlie · 7
Blackwell, Arthur · 8, 12
Bosworth's Store · 6
Brownsburg
 Bank · 7
 Doctor's Office · 7
 Post Office · 7
 Saturday Nights · 8
 Stores · 6
 Violent Deaths · 8, 11, 12
Brownsburg School · 2
 New Building · 3
Brownsburg Turnpike, 2766 · 12
Bus Service · 6

C

Carter, Sam · 11, 12
Confederate Army · 11

D

Dice
 Walter · 6
Dice, Charlie · 6

E

Electricity · 7
Engleman's Store · 6

F

Farm Store · 6
Farmer's Co-op · 7
Farming · 4
 General · 4
Firebaugh, Charles David (father) · 1, 5
 Died in automobile accident · 1
Firebaugh, Donald
 Baltimore · 1

Graduation · 3
Military Service · 3
School · 2
Firebaugh, Margaret "Nannie" Lotts (mother) · 1

H

Hays Creek Road, 803 · 10
Hays Creek Road, 952 · 10
Horses · 4
Huffman, Elmer · 5, 6
Huffman's Store · 5

L

Landon, Ralph · 6
Lotts, Samuel Walker (grandfather) · 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11
Lucas Family · 12

M

McClung Farm · 1
McClung's Mill · 10
Miller and Walker Affair · 10
Miller, Henry · 10

N

New Providence Presbyterian Church · 5

P

Pisgah Road, 743 · 10

R

Reese, Bob · 8, 9, 11
Reese, George · 10
Reese, John · 11

S

Slavery · 10, 11
Staunton Creamery · 6
 Means of Transportation · 6
Supinger, Bob · 6
Supinger's Store · 2, 12

T

Telephone Service · 7
Trimmer, Ocie · 9
Troxell, Clint · 9

W

Wade, Harrison Love · 12

Wade, John W. · 8, 12
Walker and Miller Affiar · 10
Walker, Zachariah · 10
Whipple, Goodrich · 8
Whipple, Mollie Sue Hull · 2
Whitesell's Store · 7
Wiseman, Tolerace · 6
Wright Family · 12