Karen Ferguson: Mrs. Woods, could you tell me where you grew up and a little bit about the neighborhood in which you grew up?

Effie Erwin Woods: I was born in Mecklenburg County, 1924. And that was in the rural area. My parents were sharecroppers and they raised mostly cotton, corn and wheat. And of course the children helped with the farm work and we had a small country school and of course it was segregated. The Blacks had their school and the Whites had their school and the Black children walked to school, but the White children had buses throughout school. And our school terms were split as far as I can remember. Do you want to go that far? You want something before that?

Karen Ferguson: Well, we could talk about earlier and later, but why don't you talk about you yourself, what you were doing when you were a child.

Effie Erwin Woods: Okay. As far as I can remember, a lot of my childhood I was small, I don't remember real small, but I do remember by the time I started school. But during the summer and winter after there was no farm work we mostly just played in the woods, the pastures, fished in the creek. There were no parks, no place for recreation for Black children. So the only places that we went for special entertainment or recreation would be at the church.

Effie Erwin Woods: Now our church would have gatherings, they would have picnics on Saturdays and the boys would play ball and they would have lemonade and make homemade ice cream and this sort of thing. That was our biggest entertainment, most people looked forward— and that always happened on Saturday afternoon because Saturday afternoon was when you had free time. You didn't work Saturday afternoon, maybe if you had something on Saturday morning to do, but Saturday afternoon you were always free and that would be picnic day. And of course Sunday was always church day. And of course we went to church every Sunday. The only Sunday I can remember missing going to church is if you were sick or it was raining too bad, or too cold, or snowing.

Effie Erwin Woods: And a lot of that time we walked to church and we lived about five miles from church. I remember having two pair of shoes, because you had one pair to walk in and you'd stop a little ways before you got to the church, take those dusty, dirty shoes off and put on your Sunday's shoes. And then you would go on to church and then when you get ready to go home, you take those shoes off and put back on your walking shoes, because the streets were not paved. They had rocks on them. And of course you could ruin a decent pair of shoes walking on rocks for five miles.

Effie Erwin Woods: But as far as I can remember, it didn't seem too long because when you start going to church, when you pass by other people's houses, other people joined in. So you just had a group and it was fun. Everybody walking and going to church and then it was the same way coming back, and the whole road would be filled with people, and as you pass your destination you would stop off and the rest would follow

on and so that is sort of what we did other than farm.

Effie Erwin Woods: But in the summer as I grew a little older, we always helped my sister. I had a sister that's two years younger than me and we were at home at the same time. Now, my older sisters and brothers, I don't ever remember living with them because I have one sister that has a daughter that's 11 months younger than I am. So I don't remember living in the house with her. And most of my older brothers, they were married and gone away from home. But we would help my mother can, we would can, we didn't freeze because you didn't have electricity. So during the summer we would can vegetables and fruit, we would pick blackberries and can the blackberries and peaches and apples, plums. Anything that you could save to have to use later on in the winter.

Effie Erwin Woods: So I learned a lot about that because we had to help do it. And I also learned to sew. My mother, I would say was a very thrifty person, I don't know how she learned to sew, but she could sew. She made most of my sister and my clothes and by the time I was in elementary school I was making my own clothes. They were not fancy, but I remember gathered skirts, that was very popular when I was growing up. So all you would need was straight piece of material, gather it up and put your band on. You didn't need to make a buttonhole, get your safety pin and pin it on the side.

Effie Erwin Woods: And I just made lots of them because I was a proud person and mine had to be right. I would starch them so they would stand way out. And of course that was with starch you made with flour, you didn't buy starch. You would use flour and mix it with water and let it thicken and then strain it to get all of the residue out and then thin it with water and it worked well. Beautiful. That's what we used to start our clothes with. And so I didn't learn to cook. I hate cooking, like now because my youngest sister always helped my mom in the kitchen. Me being the oldest, I would do most of, say, housework and other chores. And so since I didn't care much about cooking anyway, I didn't learn to be a good cook, I learned enough to get by.

Effie Erwin Woods: So now my school, from what I remember about school, our school had three rooms when I started at school. And then one room would be two to three grades, first, second, and maybe third because I skipped an entire class. I think it was third, second or third, because I was in the room with all of these other children. I learned everything they did, even though they were a higher class, I learned what I was doing. You see, they would take one class and do their work first and then the next class, and then the next class. If you've got to sit through that, then if you were observant then you just learned what the rest was doing. So that's what happened to me. And they realized that and instead of having to go through, I think it was third grade, going through the third grade, they just promoted me on to the fourth grade.

Effie Erwin Woods: Because I knew everything in third grade knew anyway. So that way you got to move to another room. So in the fourth grade, would be fourth, fifth, and then the other room would be sixth and seventh. And before my time there was no high school for Blacks at all. In the county there was only one high school and that was in the city. If you did not live in the city, you would not be able to go up to high school because there were no transportation to get you to the city and so you just stopped at seventh grade.

Effie Erwin Woods: Some of the children that had relatives that lived in the city would sometimes move in with a relative and live with them in order to attend the high school, if they were not needed at home. But most times they were needed at home to help with whatever was to be done there, because one of my brothers went to Second Ward for about two years and it was very, very difficult because they had to try to get their own transportation. About four of them would carpool and drive into town to the school. But sometimes the car wouldn't run and it was just difficult. So he didn't go but about two years.

Effie Erwin Woods: But there was two young ladies that graduated, they finished and went on to graduation from Second Ward High School. So before I finished seventh grade, the county had decided to build five Black county high schools. And when I graduated from elementary school, there was a high school that I was able to attend and by that time we had one bus. So that bus would pick up the children in my area and all between where I live and high school and take us to— It was one bus in that area, that wasn't the only bus, but it was one bus from our area. There were buses bringing children from other directions, other areas. So I graduated from high school in 1942, I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school. And— What else between then?

Karen Ferguson: Maybe we'll go back to your earlier childhood. Did you grow up just with your immediate family? Who lived in your house with you?

Effie Erwin Woods: My mom, my daddy, and just my immediate family, no one else.

Karen Ferguson: And you had how many brothers and sisters?

Effie Erwin Woods: There was eight of us in all, but they were not all there at the same time. I only remember four of my sisters and brothers living in our household, because by the time I could remember, they were already married or gone. A lot of time, some of my brothers, they left home before they were married because they wanted to go someplace to get a better job. They moved, left and went into the city where they could get a job and work on their own. But they were not living in our household.

Karen Ferguson: Could you talk a little bit about your neighborhood, about the people who lived in your neighborhood?

Effie Erwin Woods: Okay. In my neighborhood it was very— Where we lived, it was not very closely— There was not a lot of people lived close in one community, because say it would be according to the farms, where the farms were. So it would be several miles or maybe four miles distance between where one family might live and another family lived. So for that reason I did not have a lot of communication or involvement with other people because being young girls and my mom didn't let us wander away from home. And you would have to go a distance in order to— the people that I would meet would usually be when we would go to church, or when we would go to school, or to some picnic or something like that. And otherwise we were mostly around home, around our area. What else you want to know?

Karen Ferguson: Could you tell me a little bit about your relatives? Did you have any relatives who lived around your house, close by, other than your mother and father?

Effie Erwin Woods: Not close by. I had an aunt that had a family that lived about five miles from us, and my grandmother and grandfather also lived about same distance in the opposite direction. We had family— Well, I guess at that time that was about as close as you would be, by the type of neighborhood. And of course I saw these people, we would visit them but it wasn't a daily type of thing. Maybe my mother would get us and during the summer when nothing was— we would go and spend the day with Aunt Urie and maybe we would go one day and spend the day with my grandmother. And so it was just that sort of thing.

Karen Ferguson: What do you remember about your grandparents?

Effie Erwin Woods: I remember them very well. My granddaddy was a very smart man. He was the school teacher for the— It wasn't the first Black school in the neighborhood beyond us, farther down in the Steele Creek community. But I think it was about the second school that they built there. He taught school, he was the teacher and he was also the Sunday School Superintendent. He was Director of the Church Choir and he was just very active in the community. And I didn't think about asking a lot of questions. When I was young and growing up, it really didn't seem important. I don't know anything beyond that. I really don't know my great-grandparents because they were already dead by the time I was old enough. And I never questioned my mother, but I don't know their names or where they grew up, how many sisters and brothers they had. And for some reason my mother just didn't sit down and spend time telling us about them.

Effie Erwin Woods: I guess she felt that they were already gone, there was no need to tell you about somebody you don't know. But sometimes after you get older you wish you had known, but I don't. But after my mother died, my mother died very young, she was 55. I was 23 years old when she died. But then my aunt lived, she's been dead about, she's the sister next to my mother, for about two years. But before her health got too bad, I would ask her some questions. So I started thinking about my granddad. I said, "Now, they say he taught school. Where did he get his education? How did he learn to teach someone else?" I never thought of that.

Effie Erwin Woods: So I asked her and she said he went to Biddle, which was Johnson C. Smith then, during the summer, so he was a farmer too. During the summer he would go there and take classes. And I think, now some of the information that I have been reading that they had before there was a high school in Charlotte that they taught high school, equivalent of high school, at Biddle also. And then they went on through the seminary. But people that had not received a high school education. So evidently this is what my granddaddy did.

Effie Erwin Woods: But see, when I could have really gotten more information from my mother, it wasn't important to me and I didn't ask him. But she said he would go to Biddle during the summer and take some classes, so that's all I know. But I know he was the only school teacher they had at his time. And most of the people learned to read, write and all of that because he taught my husband's dad and everybody in that community, he was their teacher. And as for my grandmother, she just stayed home, kept the house and the

cooking and this sort of thing. That was the role of all women.

Karen Ferguson: Now you said your family sharecropped, is that right?

Effie Erwin Woods: Yeah.

Karen Ferguson: So what was the arrangement there on whose farm were they croppers?

Effie Erwin Woods: Okay. This man— We lived on, his name was Ralph Grier. And what happened, you worked the farm, he supplied the materials, all of the work was done by horses and the plowing. So he owned the horses and he would supply the seed and fertilizer, whatever was needed to do this farm. You worked the farm and at the end of the year when all of the harvest was gathered, then after the supplies were paid for, you got half of what was raised. So that's how you made your living.

Effie Erwin Woods: And if you didn't have a good year, you didn't have anything. So mostly our income crop was cotton and say if we raised 10 bales of cotton, then five of them would be ours, five would be his. And then when you sell that cotton, then you use that money to buy clothes and food and whatever. But usually there were no other incomes, no permanent income, until another season.

Effie Erwin Woods: So that's why it was difficult. That's why you had to prepare from the fall to live through the summer until another harvest. And that's why we did canning and preserving whatever you could in order to live through the months when there was no steady income. And of course there was always some small income that you could— Well, say my dad or by working for someone else or doing what they call day work and this sort of thing. And there was a lot of, that I can understand hearing them talk about stuff, I don't know, that a lot of work was done for exchange for certain goods.

Karen Ferguson: What kinds of things?

Effie Erwin Woods: Say— Like wheat. Wheat. They use the wheat to grind, to make a flour. They use the corn and you would make corn meal or grits. And maybe if your supply run out, then somebody that had some of this, if he needed some work done and you needed some this, you could work in exchange for some of the goods that he had that you need.

Karen Ferguson: Was this only between African Americans, or would you do this with White people too?

Effie Erwin Woods: This was between White people.

Karen Ferguson: Okay.

Effie Erwin Woods: Because the White people was the one that had the goods.

Karen Ferguson: What kind of relationship did your parents have with Mr. Grier?

Effie Erwin Woods: Well, as far as I can understand, I think they had a pretty good relationship as far as relationships go. I heard some horror stories about abuse and this sort of thing. I don't remember any abuse because he was sort of a quiet, well mannered person. And as far as I can remember, there was not ever any confrontation between us. Now, I don't what happened between my dad and he, because I think a lot of times, or most of the times, most people learn what to do in order to keep that type of relationship.

Effie Erwin Woods: But as for children, being around them, they were always nice. And his wife, she always spoke kindly to us and she would invite us to come and give us flowers. My mother liked flowers and of course she didn't have money to go out and buy, but she had flowers. So in the spring when she would start separating her flowers and she would tell us to come and get some flowers, we'd go and get flowers and make our beds. And we always had pretty flowers and she would give us things that she didn't need and she would say, "If you can use this, you take this." And so that's the type of thing that I remember.

Effie Erwin Woods: So my dad was also a real handy person and he did a lot of work for them, other than farm work because my daddy was a carpenter. He could build things, he make things, he fix things. And of course they would pay him extra for doing these type of things. And a lot of times when they would ask him to come and do something for them, they would give him materials. "You take this home and you do this for yourself." Because I remember screens, a lot of houses had no screens, no screen doors and all.

Effie Erwin Woods: But Mr. Grier would go and buy screen and have my daddy repair his screen doors and then he'd give him screen, "You take it, now you fix your windows." And he'd fix screen, he could build screen doors, he'd buy the material and my daddy could put them together, put screen on them, make a door. So that was the type of thing that I remember.

Effie Erwin Woods: Now, as far as finance is concerned, I don't know about that because I do feel like there was a lot that a lot of people missed out on because they did not have hands-on involvement with everything that was going on. Because a lot of times you just had to take his word and so whatever his word was, that's the way it was. And I would not say it was always best, but that was the way it was. But after 18 when I graduated from high school, I did not live on the farm anymore. 17.

Karen Ferguson: Did you work in the field when you were still living there?

Effie Erwin Woods: As long as I lived there. Yeah.

Karen Ferguson: Did Mr. Grier live near you all?

Effie Erwin Woods: Mm-hmm.

Karen Ferguson: So he had a house on that land?

Effie Erwin Woods: Yeah. Our house was about as far, it was about as far as from here, the traffic light up

there, to his house, I think, that's as far as I can remember. About that distance. But that was the only house I remember living in. A lot of people would move from place to place, but we didn't. They said that I was about two years old, I think, when they moved there. I was not born there, but I don't remember them moving there. But that was the only place I remember living.

Karen Ferguson: Did Mr. Greer have children?

Effie Erwin Woods: He had two boys.

Karen Ferguson: Did they ever play with your brothers?

Effie Erwin Woods: They played with us.

Karen Ferguson: With you?

Effie Erwin Woods: Because the youngest one was younger than I am, and the oldest one was about two years older than I. But my brothers were much older so they didn't have a lot of connection with them. My youngest brother was four years older than me, and the next one was six years older than me. So they were much older. But we had to carry water from their house. We did not have a well at our house. We had to carry water. Maybe it wasn't that far, I don't think I carried water that far. Maybe it was as far— Almost, I don't know.

Effie Erwin Woods: But anyway, we would go to get water and when we would go and get water they would follow us. They went, "Can't you stay a while and play? Let's play." Well, my mom would say, "You go get the water and come back." And sometimes they'd follow us home. Well, we really had a good relationship with the children because they were lonely too. There was nobody around them to play with. And so they just enjoyed talking to us and we did not have any problem with them, except that oldest one. When he got older he got a little fresh.

Effie Erwin Woods: So we finally had stopped dealing with him. But the younger one, he was still— when we moved from there, because he's at least four years younger than I. He was almost a baby because I remember his little tricycle, his first tricycle and then he couldn't ride it good. And he wanted us to push him, "Push me on my tricycle. If you push me, I'll let you ride." So he was much younger.

Karen Ferguson: Could you describe the house you grew up in?

Effie Erwin Woods: It was a small, four-room house, with a fireplace. And in the kitchen, there was no fireplace in the kitchen. Some houses had fireplaces in the kitchen, but it had just a— What'd you say? A flue. Okay. I don't know what you call it, but it would be where the stove pipe would go up through the ceiling. So I think you call that a flute. I heard people talk of things like flue because it was not a visible chimney where you could see inside the house. Because I remember those round black pipe and if you had fire in the stove, you touch it, you'd get burned.

Effie Erwin Woods: And let me see. My sister and we had a bedroom, we slept in one room and my brothers that were at home, they slept in another room. My mother and dad slept in the front room because we had no living room. And then we had a kitchen.

Karen Ferguson: How old were you when you stopped being friends with the White boy?

Effie Erwin Woods: I was an early teenager because he wanted to start touching me and this sort of thing and so I had to let him know you don't do that. So then I just stopped associating with him.

Karen Ferguson: Were there any other White people that you were friends with when you were growing up?

Effie Erwin Woods: Not really. Because they wasn't around. Yes, yes. There was another family, the Freemans, because he and my dad had a good relationship because my dad did a lot of work for him. And well, of course, my dad did work for everybody in the community because they knew he could fix things, he could do— So they was always coming to get him, "Come and do—" He could even put soles on your shoes. He had one of these shoe, what you call it? Shoe lass, whatever. And he would buy a big piece of leather and he would cut it out and take the other sole off and put a new one on, for everybody in the community. Wanted him to fix the shoes, White and Black.

Effie Erwin Woods: And if something went wrong in somebody's house or they needed something to fix, they'd come and get my dad. Well, my dad had a good relationship with this White man. He had two daughters, he had some much older children, some of his children's much older than I am. Well, in fact all of them are. But there was two girls that were still at home and one son and I grew up knowing them. I would go to their house and they still ask about us. The youngest one worked with my husband until he retired and he was always asking him, bugging him about me, "What's Effie doing?" And all of this. So yeah, I was friendly with them but not a lot because I had no association with Whites.

Karen Ferguson: So what kind of things would you do when you went to their house?

Effie Erwin Woods: Just talk, because these White girls, they were older and when we would go to the store, we had to walk to the store and there was a shortcut. We could go by their house and go to the store. And a lot of times if they were out in the yard I would stop and they would talk to me. And I mean we were friendly. And of course this young boy, the only thing, I didn't have a close relationship with him, but he knew me and he would come to our house and he was always coming there for my daddy. His daddy sending him there and this sort of thing.

Karen Ferguson: I'd like to know a little bit more about your family and maybe you could tell me the kinds of values that your parents instilled in you. What was important to them that you do?

Effie Erwin Woods: Well, what I remember most was from my mother. Men didn't spend a lot of time at home and there was not a lot of association with my dad, except I knew he was going to be there, because

during the day he would be away somewhere, doing something, but he would always be home at night. But my mother was a very religious person and she taught us that whatever we did, "Do the right thing and do the best." You know what? There's a poem that I learned when I was small, and I think she taught me. But she never allowed me to half-do anything. "You do it right or you do it over." But this poem was "If a task is once begun, never leave it until it's done. Be the labor great or small, do it well or not at all."

Effie Erwin Woods: I can remember— Now, we washed with wash boards on our hand and almost everything was white. There was no such thing as colored bed clothes and all this sort of thing. And living on a farm, you can imagine how you could dirty up a white sheet. But do you know when those sheets go on the line, it better not be a spot on it. And if there was a spot on that sheet, you take it down and wash it again. Now, that's just the way we did things. And honest to goodness, I am like that, right? My husband says I'm a perfectionist, "You want it your way." I was taught that way. If it don't meet my satisfaction, it's not good enough for me. And I can't just throw that away. And it has worked for me.

Effie Erwin Woods: I'm a retired nurse. I went to school and I always had ambition of getting an education, but I knew it was not possible at the time I graduated from high school. But in the back of my mind, I always felt like someday I'm going to do something different. I'm not going to stay where I am. I'm going to do something different. It don't have to be the biggest thing, but it can be something better. I don't know if I'm going too fast. What else you want to know before I get to that?

Karen Ferguson: Well that's fine. Maybe we can talk a little bit about school. But first I'd like you— Are there any other adults, either other adults in your family, or teachers, or someone like that whom you looked up to as well, or who had a big influence on your life?

Effie Erwin Woods: Yes. My grandmother. Now, she was one of the same, I guess, as my mother. And I think that was mostly why my mother was like she was because of her mother. I did not have a real close relationship with men in my life, because the men were always gone. Now my granddaddy, I admired him. He was a very outgoing, outstanding person, but I didn't have that much time to spend with him. He was always busy doing something in the community. He was doing this and he was doing— I don't know if you want to know anything else about him, but this was told to me, I don't know anything about this. A lot of people his age could not read and write and that included some of the Whites as well.

Effie Erwin Woods: But when they would have elections, Black people could not vote. But everybody in the community knew my granddaddy could read, he could write, he could figure. So he would be assigned to help count the votes, help set up the voting and all this, even though he could not vote. That was one of his responsibilities, one of his duties. And they would do it at the Country Store, the General Store, that's where the election was held. Everybody would go to the store and vote. So he would be there 'til way into the night counting the votes and getting them all together and all this type of thing.

Effie Erwin Woods: So he was a pretty outstanding guy, in my eyes. But I didn't have a real close relationship with him because I didn't spend that much time with him. Most of my time was spent with my mother and my grandmother, as children do. You get up in the morning and Daddy's gone, but Mama's there. And so

whatever Mama tells you do, that's what you do.

Karen Ferguson: How did your parents teach you, or your family teach you about how to treat White people or to deal with the racial situation in Mecklenburg County?

Effie Erwin Woods: It was— they did not do a lot of teaching. It was something that you grew up with sort of an understanding from a child. You don't do certain things. You grew up knowing what you do and what you can't do, regardless of whether you liked it or not. This is the way it was. And of course, I never remember my parents sitting down and telling me, "Well, you have to do this or you better do this, you better—" It was just understood because you see what they did.

Karen Ferguson: Do you remember people ever getting into trouble for not following the rules, or for defying the rules, or for even being mistaken by White people as having somehow broken the rules?

Effie Erwin Woods: No. No, that was before my time. It would have to be a little older, I guess. And I think my husband might have something that he can tell you about what his family had told him, but no one told me about. But I know how I felt within myself and it was sort of like a quiet journey in my life, was that I was determined one day I'm going to make a better life for myself, some kind of way I'm going to make this better in whatever I have to do. And I did a lot of things that I did not want to do it, but it was to my benefit.

Effie Erwin Woods: The first job, no it wasn't the first job. One of the jobs, this was after World War II, that I accepted was at 5 & 10 Cents store downtown. And we had to eat in the kitchen. We had to go to a bathroom in the stockroom. And you didn't like those kind of things, but I could have refused to work there because of the situation. But where am I going to find anything different? So in order to have an income of my own, I worked with it and follow the rules, because there was, at that time, not anyone that was willing to stand up against it because—