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THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

SOUTHERN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Piedmont Social History Project

Interview

with

HARRY ROYAL

June 19, 1977

West Badin, North Carolina

By Rosemarie Hester

Transcribed by Rosemarie Hester

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The Southern Historical Collection
Louis Round Wilson Library

Rosemarie Hester: Did you know your grandparents?

Harry Royal: Yes.

R.H.: Where did they come from?

Royal: They were originally from Georgia. Dooly County, Georgia.

The name of the town was Vienna.

R.H.: What did they do there?

Royal: They was domestic workers. They worked for Senator George
Powells Busbee Slades
of Georgia. That was his hometown too and we did different work for
(My Granddad was a carpenter. My
various people most of the time. Dad a dry cleaner.)

R.H.: Is that where your parents were born?

Royal: Yes.

R.H.: When did they move to St. Petersburg? (Mr. Royal's hometown)

Royal: Some time in the '20s.

R.H.: Do you know why they moved?

Royal: For better work.

R.H.: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Royal: No.

R.H.: Did you have any relatives living close by?

Royal: Yes, On my mother's side (she's the oldest of thirteen), we
lived next door. I lived most of the time, when I was school
age, with my grandparents. Back and forth, you know, because they had
small children.

On my father's side, I was the only small kid in the family. He
didn't have any ^{small} brothers and sisters. I was the only child there.

R.H.: Did any of your relatives live in your home with you?

Royal: Yes, we lived in a home with my grandparents for quite
a while.

R.H.: Did they ever go down to St. Petersburg--your grandparents?

Royal: An uncle of mine did. When he got off and left Georgia, he stayed maybe ten years with us, at my parents.

R.H.: Before you left home, did your parents live anywhere else besides St. Petersburg?

Royal: No.

R.H.: Where did you go to school?

Royal: I went to school at Vienna, Ga (Dooly Co.) . I didn't finish high school there. What I know is from correspondence courses and help from the unions and different things. I finished about the eighth grade. I know about art, of course, from working for a company. They painted, back in my time, murals for theaters. By being a helper, I learned that job that way. They were Italian painters and they were great. I learned that way. I don't know how good I was but I was good enough to get a job with the Aluminum Company of America. I must have been fairly good.

R.H.: What did you do when you quit school?

Vet. Hospital No. V-63 Lake City Fla kitchen help.

Royal: Worked in an ice cream factory in St. Petersburg. The Florida Milk Company. It's still there now. I go visit every time I go home.

R.H.: Why did you leave school?

Royal: I just dropped out. Wanted to make more money. In my time, money was awfully scarce. I guess I was lucky to drop out.

R.H.: What did you do after you worked in the ice cream factory?

Work in a paint shop as a helper.

Royal: I left there and came to work here. Until 1929, I stayed there and then in 1929, I came here and started to work with ALCOA. ^{few} Worked three notices from ALCOA. Was laid off quite a /times because the company would cut out some of its works when the lake went dry/(we get all the electric source from this river) we'd be laid off for a while. I worked out three notices--thirty day ^{could} notice--so I /go to Fort Bragg to get a job painting signs. Every time I wanted to come back to ALCOA, they would hire me. ALCOA is a

fine company.

R.H.: Why did you come to Badin? How did you hear about it?

Royal: I left St. Petersburg to come to Laurinburg. Kind of a work scarcity. My wife had two cousins working over here and they was over visiting and told me to come over to Badin. I might get work to do. I was over here maybe a month before I got a chance to work for the company. Throughout the county, I was doing sign work anywhere I could pick up a job. Then I got a job

We only made twenty-five cents an hour back then. Twenty-five cents an hour. We'd work ten hours Monday through Friday and nine on Saturday. We'd make about fourteen dollars and seventy-five cents a week.

I would pick up some sign work up here. At that time the company had their own organized boarding houses. You'd get board and for five dollars a week.

R.H.: You didn't always work as a sign painter for the company, did you?

Royal: No. I worked also in the construction department. I worked as laborer. I was a rigger helper. I worked at sandblasting and I worked as painter number two. After the union here^{was organized,} I started the sign working. I worked sign painting until they rebuilt the plant^I and then I went in the plant as excrusion worker. From there/learned work in Room R-214. That's a place I have a lot of respect for.

(Note: R-214 is a process department.)
Take average metal and make white gold out of it. Aluminum, we call it white gold.

You see, on a company job they have what you call a line of progression. You can work on a job but always take a chance on a higher job if you can qualify. So I never did miss anything. When I did retire, I was a furnace

operator number one. I would get top pay. I didn't/^{not}like my present job but I knew it paid more money and I wanted to retire and get the maximum social security. Well, that didn't make any difference then. Then, the only thing that counted was the work. The company would give you so much per year for every year you worked for a retirement fund. I think I did about thirty-two years. Now it's more. I got about nine dollars and a half a year. Now, I think it's more--about eleven to thirteen dollars a year.

R.H.: Did you enjoy all the different jobs that you did?

Royal: Oh yeah, /laughter/ I still think that ALCOA is the greatest thing I ever met. They're good people to work for. It's not a place you can come in here and lay out. They want you on the job so you can work. They are very particular about accidents. You can get fired for being careless a lot more than you can for not working. That's their main thing--safety. I enjoyed working. They have the twenty-five year club. They have that twice a year. They take part in that. I think (Christmas and summer) ALCOA helps in any activity. The village is clean. I did have a picture (the first street we painted the name showing where we first named the streets. /They had the names of streets but they didn't have no signs up. The first street--I was putting up a sign. /^{They}made several pictures. I enjoyed the company photographer showing the work I was doing. I knew I was pretty well-liked because I could put my ideas to work. I just had to talk to the foreman.

R.H.: Do you think most people who work in the company have the same good feelings about the company?

Royal: Yes, I do. I tell you what. They can be laid off and I know them to go as far as California but when that time come ^{any place} to go to work /and they're notified, they always quit where /they are and come back to ALCOA.

R.H.: I understand that also when people were laid off (and this is before the company sold the housing) that they would still let people live rent free in the housing. Is that true?

Royal: Yeah, I lived in one. I say the average house was maybe twelve or fifteen dollars a month. Way back in the days when I was talking about how things was cheap, you could pay whatever rent you wanted to. And I know people that didn't like to pay rent, not even enough to pay the water bill. They paid just about what they wanted to. Nothing. Some in our village and no doubt in the white part too. But they went up to several hundred dollar back rent. They may mark it down but nobody was put out because of it. And the nice thing about it is you always have a garden space and a yard. Talking about old pictures--did you see one where the company had watermelon cuttings and other entertainment. They had dancing halls free. I was told some years back that people were paid to play music on different shifts for entertainment. Of course, there wasn't much money back then. The union stopped all that type of stuff and But I can't say they was doing just to blacks that way because I helped cash my foreman's check back when I was making fourteen seventy-five. He was only making seventeen something. In other words, there just wasn't any money. The fellows in the potrooms was making practically five a day. The work was hard then. The old years were tough. People would fight and cut-up. Some of them would go to church and step out and the second go back to being tough. /laughter/ I was thinking about so many years back, all we know was going to dances, do a lot of drinking, a few of us would go to church, picnicing. Of course, the street wasn't paved in the model-T days. You'd ride some and fix tires and push through the sand and mud.

R.H.: Were there meeting places in the town where people used to go?

Royal: Yeah, they would go to church or pool rooms. Eating joints on the street, places to dance. I told you the company had that dancing hall. They had two big dancing halls and of course they had this building over here that they called the MacDonald Church. That was a recreation hall that the company give them. They had shows in that one until people just stopped going to shows. That old fellow Robinson started having meetings in there. Luther Thompson

And then too the company built these churches here free of charge.

R.H.: Did everyone know each other?

Royal: Yes, only time you wouldn't know...maybe somebody come in that's strange because you know people drive back and forth from nearby towns to work here in the plant. And out of Charlotte, Rockingham. All over. But back then, of course we knew everybody. Course we had so many nicknames...that's a custom that black people have. You come up and ask for somebody by his name and they'd hardly know what you were talking about. But if you identified what you wanted with him, then they would probably

Mrs. Fickes, construction superintendent ~~supervisor~~, she got a list one day and marked every nickname she could find of everybody around here. And I don't believe there were a few on there that I didn't know who the person was. I had more contact with everybody up here and I just about knew everybody's name.

R.H.: Has it made a lot of difference that a lot of people commute from outside Badin to work in the plant?

Royal: No. Everybody get along fine. This plant is kind of like a big family. I know ^{every} / fellow I worked with twenty-five years on every shift.

I know maybe when he got married, when his first child was born, when his first grandchild come in. I'd help in the bad days and he'd feel the same way because weren't much money and we had to help one another. Before some new person would get acquainted, maybe there'd be some words but then we'd get along fine. I'd say on account of that. We knew each other very well.

R.H.: You've left Badin since 1929 when you came, haven't you?

Royal: I went to Fort Bragg over there as a sign painter about three years. But what happened, I worked out a notice and when I left for Fort Bragg I called back in here. Wrote a letter to Mr. Devereaux-- he was a tough man--and got my job back. In little bit of time. I left here like on a Saturday, went to work at Fort Bragg on Monday, left Fort Bragg on Sunday, and got back here in Badin on Monday. I always worked.

R.H.: What was important to people in West Badin when you first came?

Royal: Important?

R.H.: Yeah. Was it working, the people that they knew, the community, the church?

Royal: I feel the job was most important cause all we did work three shifts and usually we'd get out and in the older years Laborers all through the county was brought here by transportation. Most of them was the older type. Some of them may have had a wife or some of them was unmarried--what we call now shacking, living together. Tell you the truth, about the best place an uneducated person can make a living. All you needed down there was as you say a weak mind and a strong back. If you did the job, at that time. Things have changed now at know how to use ALCOA. You have to have / the equipment unless you been there a

long time. Of course, most of those old-timers have retired now.

I would say that work was important. Nobody worried about paying no high rent. Everybody cared about getting a garden or going to church or going to the pool room or going out on the mountain picnicing. There was always something to do here.

R.H.: What about the schools? Was it important that Badin have schools?

Royal: Yes, they had a nice school. The company even paid the janitors to keep the school up and the yard and everything. If you look on that old picture, it was dedicated. That was something the company did. They was trying. Quite a few went to school here and went to college.

R.H.: How did things change after the union was established?
seemed

Royal: Well, at first it/a little better. And then, you know anything like a union at the time...different talk. Some wanted to remain as they were with the company and some enjoyed it. I think the union changed a great deal in pay rates and equal opportunities for both races. Until the union we had two sets of jobs. What they say, a black man's job and a white man's job. But after the union took over, I don't think the company cared so much about it. By trying and finding out, you could just qualify for a job and go to work. We have blacks on jobs now that

on the power plants down there. They just figured we was too stupid and might get into something with that high current and get killed. But now we got black in there operating.

R.H.: How many blacks were there who were interested in establishing the union?

Royal: Practically all of them. We had quite a few. Right now I would say we have about ninety-seven percent of the workers is union workers. Even more but at least that many. It's not a closed shop here but, of course, you can't have a closed shop in the state. We won a lot of times but other places around don't have a union. We have our children, daughters working there and we'll fight it.

I figure right now I get about twenty-three dollars a day. That's what I get to stay home. /Mr. Royal is retired. / In another town, you make twenty-three dollars a week.

R.H.: Were whites as interested as blacks in the union?

Royal: Yes. We had everybody of both races. We was just in there together, ironed it out together. I would say it was kind of like playing the piano. You got the white keys and the black keys and you got to play some of both of them to get the melody you want. In other words, you got to play the whole keyboard.

R.H.: When you first came was there any talk of a union?

Royal: No.

R.H.: What were the causes for people getting together and talking about a union? Did people from the outside come?

Royal: People from the outside. The International...you know, like they organize the police department and the fire department...they see the need for it and they go ahead and try. I have help in trying to organize

We tried to organize the Company down in Laurinburg. We got run out. /laughter/

R.H.: How did your union get started?

Royal: There was some fellow here that married a lady in this town

and the union workers talked it over and different ones got together in secret meeting. Finally we got it together and put in for negotiation with the company. The company couldn't . We had a vote on it, you know. I disremember whether we got it the first time or not.

I do remember very well the first strike we had here. That was fun.
/laughter/

R.H.: What was it like?

Royal: We had like a big picnic. Everyone got off. You see, we'd never had a strike here and never had everybody off the same time. Usually when I'd go to work, somebody'd just come off. When I come off from work, somebody's going on.

BEGIN SIDE TWO TAPE ONE

We had time to go fishing on both sides.

R.H.: What did the company do?

Royal: This is a subsidiary here. We're with Pittsburgh, of course. Our contract going in with Reynolds, Kaiser, and ALCOA and maybe several others. We had to wait and see what the was going to do about it. But we did get food.

I wouldn't buy no ham back in them days. /laughter/

R.H.: How long did the strike last?

Royal: About three weeks.

R.H.: Then you went back to work and there was still not a union?

Royal: We went back to work with what we asked for. More pay. We didn't negotiate here not long ago. We got a full package, about eighty percent. That's what I worry about. They can get money here. These people make from \$12,000 to \$27,000 a year. I didn't see what benefit

with more money. They got a package with another holiday. Right now, every five years we get a ten-week vacation with thirteen weeks pay. After twenty-five years, you can get four weeks vacation. Now you've got what they call a on that. Every fifth year, a ten week vacation with thirteen weeks pay. You can draw it all or you can get it one week at a time.

R.H.: When you first struck was it also for improved working conditions?

Royal: The working conditions was not so bad. We wanted certain things. We got our work started in job grade one to go up to fourteen. And there were some job grades that weren't paying enough. Some through laboring to electrician in our wage work. They have salaried workers. Salaried workers are not supposed to join the union. They are company people and even the janitors are under the company. Anybody getting paid by the hour can negotiate through the union contract.

A lot of times we had different things. We had health. For instance, you could be a family man with ten or twelve. Well, this company'd take care of all your hospital bills. You and the kids. Spouse and all. Everything. I don't know about putting in a color TV set /laughter/ but anything else. Now medicine and everything else is just tops with ALCOA. I reckon that'd keep you happy.

I think mine is shrunk with \$18,000 when I retire. Of course the older I get, the more it drops off. But anyway, they have these policies for \$18,000 or \$20,000 insurance. With ALCOA, if you get killed or die, his wife would be eligible. If you're building a home, you can be sure she can keep it up. I would like to make a comparison with the old houses years ago in that old book I showed you and look at some of the houses here now.

There are some beautiful houses over on the white side and over here too now. It shows how much the progress has been. Of course, ALCOA has this picnic area with the lake down here and all around. It's good to work down there because it's a happy place to live.

R.H.: Why did you strike a second time?

Royal: Same thing. We could've started a strike every day. Every three or four years for negotiation...they don't mean to strike. You got to ask for something, you know. I think it was maybe more money. I disremember now. When you get a national union in, they going

I was in Atlanta when Abel was talking about the ten-week vacation. I was sitting up there. I said they ought to be ashamed. We'll never get a ten-week vacation. But that time we did. You never can tell.

These four hydroelectric dams here, I was told here, (our works manager was making a talk)...Accidentally, they made over a million and a half dollars on power. Energy is one of the things that grew scarce but this company gets their energy off their hydroelectric, their water system. When it rains, that's money. They had more than they could use. They sold the power to other companies that had to have some source of energy such as coal or fuel or something like that. You see, ALCOA doesn't have to worry about that, about the fuel bill. They just hope it rains. /laughter/

R.H.: Did the company try to suppress any efforts to establish the union? Did they try to keep the union out?

Royal: No. Maybe some of the foremen. Our foremen did. He didn't know. He was working for the company and he figured it was his duty to.

A lot of companies try to block it before they know. This company

I have been over there on a grievance too in the department.
The company on one side the union on the other side of the table and we squabbled. Sometimes it'd get pretty warm-- arguments in there about different things. If you can't get it through there, we send it through the arbitration board/ ^{in Pittsburgh.} It's like the umpire in the ball game. Their decision you got to take. You may not like it all the time but it happens.

There have been several cases here that folks have been working too cheap on different jobs. My job was like that. I was working as a painter's helper and doing sign work. Of course, I got a raise. Other fellows... one black boy here was a plumber. He was working as a plumber's helper. We got back pay for different things like that. When they find out they're wrong,

It happens two ways. If they find out that some guys getting too much for his job like that, he'd be cut. I don't remember anything of that type but I do know jobs that underpaid.

R.H.: Do you remember who were the people from the outside, from the International, who helped organize?

Royal: No, I don't.

R.H.: Do you remember the people from inside Badin who helped?

Royal: Yes. Ackeridge, Bob Baker, there was a gang of us. Most of us... Joe Kirk and his son. (Joe Kirk, Jr. now is still with the International. Ackeridge just retired.) J.C. Blair, Carl Culp, Richard Culp, Culp, Alan Culp. (That's a family I wish you could interview. You talking about interviewing a whole family in Badin that works at ALCOA, why don't you interview Mr. Culp? He got grandchildren that all their jobs

has been here. Bet you'd like to meet him.)

R.H.: Do you have any idea what the reaction was from people outside Badin in the surrounding areas to the union activities?

Royal: You mean the workers at the plant or...

R.H.: Yeah, the workers or...

Royal: See, we have a big union hall here. If you're here, if you go in the plant and you don't have a green card, somebody's going to report you and ask you why don't you join the union. I don't say all the time but usually if you don't belong to the union, you got to be by yourself because nobody's going to mess with you. If you're a union worker, usually somebody will come along and talk with you and help you with your work. Course you don't have to join. It doesn't make any difference where he lives. If he works for ALCOA, he got a privelege if he's a union goer. It meets once a month and any complaints you have...if you're working there and you have some difficulty with your foreman or technician, you got a plant steward to go to. Each department got somebody that you can go to and talk to about disagreements, about trouble. The first step--what I would do--I would get with the foreman or the technician or whoever may be that the careless person's working with and say, "Can't you get it straightened out?" If he couldn't, we'd go into the company office and carry it to the second step through the personnel department at the company. Then with the union executive board. If we couldn't iron it out there, as I said a while ago we send it to Pittsburgh to the arbitration department. Let them check it out. Course, whatever decision they would make, that's what it would be.

So I think everybody that work for ALCOA

These foremen are very particular about how they act or what they say. Nobody don't want trouble. The company's not looking for trouble but sometimes

they curse. Anything will set someone off just like that. Generally, they have a lot of respect for each other in the plant.

R.H.: And you think that is mostly a result of there being a union?

Royal: No. The biggest thing about the union here is in order to control working conditions. I would say, if it wasn't for the union, I don't know what would happen. I know what happened before the union. They'd work you day in and day out. Doing anything, any job. I got out of a ditch at laboring back in the old time, using a pick and shovel, and then get over there and balance a quarter-made brush to do a sign. I didn't mind it because was higher paid work yet still it was less work than it would be for this job. Now see, the union cut all that stuff out. If you was a first operator which you were already doing but maybe you was a painter, they could take you out of there and put you on a mold iron which is pouring this metal by hand. It's hot, real hot, so hot it's white like milk. They can't do that now. Everybody's qualified for a job. The union, I'd say, straightened out these kinks in different things. Each man got so much to do now. Job one, two through fourteen and so forth--each one has certain things that that person supposed to do. It used to be (I don't know about this latest contract) that a man could work ^{under} a job but he couldn't change his pay. Cause a man under...if I was your helper, you could do my work but you could still get your pay. But now if you was laid out or on vacation or something and I would do your work, then I would get your pay. The union takes care of things like that. The union is a great help.

R.H.: When you came to Badin, were there any political organizations at all?

Royal: Not for blacks, no. I got in trouble about arguing about the poll tax. They used to take out poll tax. In Florida, we could vote and never heard that a black couldn't vote. We always would vote whenever we

wanted but here the blacks wasn't allowed to vote unless you I think some of the teachers back then were allowed to vote but since then we have been training them and begging them, black and white, and doing everything we can to get them organized to vote. I'm going to a political meeting this afternoon.

R.H.: What kind of an argument did you give about the poll tax?

Royal: I told one of the big men, the chairman of the board, about the poll tax. I spoke up, I said, "I won't pay. Pay and you don't get nothing for it. to vote.

That's just money you're taking away from them." He called me a smart so and so and started an argument then.

R. H.: When did that change? When was the poll tax removed?

Royal: Some twenty years ago. Nobody pays the poll tax in this county now. But you paid, some years back, until you got to be fifty years old, I believe it was. I been doing county tax for quite a while here and I'd ask the person's age. If fifty years old, I would mark out the poll tax. I don't know quite what year but now they don't take poll tax at all. Back in then poll tax was for the privelege of working

. Course, they had several definitions I don't know. I just didn't think it was funny. Coming from Florida, I was just about as strange here as you are from New York. Because St. Petersburg is made up with northern people. And we had...I didn't vote for Al Smith. I voted for Hoover. I wished I had. /laughter/

R.H.: So did you vote then when you came to North Carolina?

Royal: I didn't vote until...I don't know what year that was but I was voting in Florida back in the time that Al Smith and Hoover ran. I voted Republican ticket because my daddy was Republican but I never was.

I voted for Herbert Hoover.

R.H.: Did people try to do anything to get the poll tax removed?

Royal: No. No, maybe a few like me talked among ourselves. No issue in the county or state I don't remember. Just finally went out. I don't know why.

R.H.: So all that time until the 1950's blacks didn't vote?

Royal: I don't say they didn't vote but I don't know. There weren't lot of us because lot of them don't vote now. At my job now, I get a record at the school. Find out when one gets old enough to try to get him interested. We have a lot of blacks now that just won't vote. That's the trouble I have but I, so far...we have this system here, this West Baden system here. We know everybody and take them to vote. Soon as they get off from work, give them free rides. If they want somebody to take their kids, we babysit for them.

R.H.: Were there ever any political issues talked about?

Royal: You mean here? Yeah, we talk over now different things. We know who we want for commissioners, county-wise. We know who we want for sheriff. Who we want for clerk at court, register of deeds, and everything of that type. Some want one, some want another. There are two parties over here divided between the Democratic and Republican. Lot of times we have a primary run-off and we get to pick out who we want.

R.H.: When did you start to do your political work?

Royal: From 1945 or something like that. I been now for the last sixteen maybe twenty years active in it. I'm Vice Chairman of this precinct and I've just completed two terms. I was on as one of the Vice Chairmen of the county. I will turn that loose today. Ain't no telling what else I'll pick up though. I'm active in it and they all know it. Usually, I get letters from Governor Hunt and all the way down the line. They all know

me by name.

R.H.: Why did you become involved?

Royal: I don't know. Just something to do. /laughter/ I feel I could...You, know alot of times the blacks fear the whites. I never feared to talk. I have nothing to fear to speak what I thought about something. I haven't been strange to you because I'm used to being like that.

After I retired from ALCOA, the company and the union recommended me to take a job with the state as a social service board member. I ended up being treasurer of the board. ALCOA thought enough of it to get a photographer to come from Pittsburgh to take a picture to put in that. /Referring to a picture of himself in the Tarheel Alcoan, the company monthly publication/

R.H.: Is there anything else you'd like to say before we end the interview?

Royal: I don't think so.

R.H.: Do you think we could have another interview sometime?

Royal: I guess.

R.H.: Thank you.

/end of interview/