Interview with George Wyatt

August 9, 1995
Transcript of an Interview about Life in the Jim Crow South
Norfolk (Va.)

Interviewer: Mary Hebert
ID: btvct08072
Interview Number: 945

SUGGESTED CITATION

Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South
An oral history project to record and preserve the living memory of African American life during the age of legal segregation in the American South, from the 1890s to the 1950s.

ORIGINAL PROJECT

COLLECTION LOCATION & RESEARCH ASSISTANCE
John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture
at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library

The materials in this collection are made available for use in research, teaching and private study. Texts and recordings from this collection may not be used for any commercial purpose without prior permission. When use is made of these texts and recordings, it is the responsibility of the user to obtain additional permissions as necessary and to observe the stated access policy, the laws of copyright and the educational fair use guidelines.

http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/behindtheveil
Hebert: State your full name and tell me when and where you were born.

Wyatt: My name is George W. Wyatt, Jr. I was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1920.

Hebert: What did your parents do for a living?

Wyatt: Oh, let me see if I can go back that far now. My father worked for Rice's [phonetic]. My mother worked at a laundry.

Hebert: What were their names?

Wyatt: His name was George W. Wyatt, Sr. My mother's name was Lottie [phonetic] B. Wyatt. We lived in a very sparse
neighborhood, but it was a kind of neighborhood that I think you ought to have today. Everybody knew everybody, everybody was friendly, and if we did wrong, we would get spanked by the neighbor, and then spanked by our parents when they came home.

Hebert: What neighborhood was it? Did it have a name?

Wyatt: No, it was just--

Hebert: What section of Norfolk was it in?

Wyatt: It was in the, I would say, downtown section now. We lived on Nicholson Street at 332. That was the address, Nicholson Street. That's more or less like downtown now. It was downtown--well, it was not called downtown Norfolk. Jefferson Street ran through there. Kent Street ran through there, where the cemetery is on Princess Anne Road, that ran by there, just like it does now. It's still there.

Hebert: I'm familiar with that area.

Wyatt: Of course, when we moved out from there and moved to Uden [phonetic] Street, I guess I was about ten or twelve years old. We moved to Uden Street, and we lived there until, well, I got grown, I'll say that.
Hebert: Did your parents own their own homes?

Wyatt: No, they were renting. I doubt if they could have owned a home making six, seven dollars a week. That was basically their salary. There was seven of us; there were three girls and four boys. Of course, my youngest brother, he's dead now. I went to school at S.C. Armstrong, and from there I went to Booker T.

Hebert: Did you graduate from high school?

Wyatt: I did not graduate from high school.

Hebert: Did you have to go to work to help the family out?

Wyatt: Well, basically, at that time, it was a struggle. I don't guess I was old enough--I really didn't quit school until I got into eleventh grade, I think, twelfth, when I stopped school.

Hebert: And you went to work?

Wyatt: I went to work, yes, as much work as there was.
Hebert: This was during the Depression?

Wyatt: Was during the Depression. The Depression was what, '24?

Hebert: '29 to '40, until about World War II.

Wyatt: Roosevelt was elected in--

Hebert: '32?

Wyatt: Yes. Well, we--I'm trying to think back. I remember when Roosevelt was elected and he started the WPA. Of course, I was still in school, then. My father and mother struggled through the WPA, and my father was still working as a janitor or clerk or something in a department store. My mother was still working at Fairfax Laundry. We used to have to get up mornings to go to school and take the clothes to the laundry for her to wash them. Then we'd bring them back at night so she might press them, so we'd have--

Hebert: Your clothes? The family clothes?

Wyatt: The family clothes, yes. I worked at a grocery store on the corner. I think it was George--it was O'Brien. I don't
remember the man's first name, now. I think it was George O'Brien, but I'm not sure.

**Hebert:** A white man?

**Wyatt:** He was white. Yes, he was white. I worked there delivering groceries and whatever else I could do.

**Hebert:** How were you treated when you were going through these white neighborhoods delivering groceries?

**Wyatt:** I didn't have to go through white neighborhoods.

**Hebert:** You were delivering to black neighborhoods?

**Wyatt:** It was all in black neighborhoods. I did not have to go through white neighborhoods. Until I got, I guess I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, I was working at another grocery store, and there we delivered groceries and you had to go to the back door. They didn't allow you to come to the front door at all. You delivered groceries and you went to the back door.

**Hebert:** How were you treated by the kids in the neighborhood? Did they call you names and things like that—the white children in the neighborhoods?
Wyatt: No, no. I personally never came in contact with that. We were not--well, I guess I was so much in the black neighborhood, I was more in the black neighborhood than in the white neighborhood, so I never came in contact with whites calling us anything, calling me anything, I'll say it that way. I never had problems with them bothering me, because I was never in their neighborhood that much.

Hebert: Except to do your job.

Wyatt: That's all.

Hebert: When you were going to school, did you have to walk to school?

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: How far?

Wyatt: Let me say that when I was going to school, it was me living uptown. There were kids who lived in Lammots [phonetic] Point. There were kids that lived in Berkeley, they had to walk by the white schools to get to the one black school that they had for Negroes, and that was Booker T. Washington High School.
The school is the same now where the old school was.

Hebert: Out this way? Off of Park?

Wyatt: Yes. It was there then. It was not Park Avenue then, it was Childer [phonetic] Street and, I guess, Mulberry Avenue and those streets surrounding the school. That was in a predominantly black neighborhood. I played football for Booker T. at the time they had a football team. I played some football for them.

Hebert: The games were in the afternoon?

Wyatt: The games were all in the afternoon. That was a big thing for Booker T. and St. Joseph's. It was called St. Joe's then, it's called St. Mary's now. St. Joseph's and Booker T. played. There were all Jew stores on Church Street. They would close their stores all that day for that game, because it wasn't a rough and rowdy game, but it was real competition. The competition was real close.

Hebert: So there was a big rivalry between the two schools.

Wyatt: Two schools, yes. They did not have the enrollment that Booker T. had, and they would go out and get other boys to come
and play for them that day. They had other players that would come in and play for them. Their coach man then was [unclear].

Hebert: Would you travel to football games to other places, or did you all stay mostly in the Norfolk area?

Wyatt: We stayed more or less within the Norfolk area, and the one or two times we traveled, they had buses for us to travel by. We would go to Addison. Played Addison High in Roanoke. We went to Portsmouth and played Markham [phonetic]. Of course, then the ferry was running and we had to cross over on the ferry. You didn't get--well, it was a thing that if you went over to Portsmouth and won the football game, you had to run back to catch that ferry, to be sure you got that ferry to get back to Norfolk.

Hebert: You would have been in trouble if you won. [Laughter]

Wyatt: They were days that we wished that the whites and blacks could have had competition between each other, but that never matured until later years.

Hebert: Did you have to try out for the team or did anybody who wanted to play just join up?
Wyatt: No, no, you had tryouts. You had tryouts and it was pretty rough for the tryouts. There was a lot of competition there. They figured we were the best and they wanted to keep that macho feeling going.

Hebert: You mentioned that they closed the stores on Church Street. Was there a fear that there would be a riot?

Wyatt: No. No. They closed just in honor of those games. Most of the stores on Church Street, they were operated by the Jewish race. From, let me see, L. Snyder [phonetic] was way downtown. They were down by Main Street, and L. Snyder's and [unclear], I think they were the two stores. Anyhow, I would say from Market Street on up or back, they would close the stores. They would have a "This was the day we close, in honor of these two teams playing."

Hebert: Did the parents go to the game, too, to watch the different communities?

Wyatt: Oh, yes indeed. Parents were staunch supporters of the boys playing football.

Hebert: Did you have bleachers and things that they have at football stadiums for high school kids?
Wyatt: Yes, we played on High Rise Park [phonetic] High Rise Park was on Church Street, where the railroad track is, where that VEPCO is, the lights and telephone there. Well, that's where the High Rise Park was.

Hebert: That's where you played?

Wyatt: That's where we played.

Hebert: That wasn't on the school grounds?

Wyatt: No, no. That wasn't on the school grounds.

Hebert: Did you have any teachers that were very influential for you?

Wyatt: I had a principal, and his name was M.J. Green. He was very influential with me and with my oldest sister. He was one of those kind of principals that was close to the family. Every Thursday I could assure you that my father would come to the school and have a conversation with this principal. Every Thursday he would take his lunch out and come to the school, and they would sit in the office and have a conversation. It isn't like it is now when you can't see the principal. You know, you've got to go through rules and a regiment of people to get
to the principal.

Hebert: But they had this standing meeting every Thursday?

Wyatt: Every Thursday, the principal, Mr. Green, knew he was coming, and my father would be there.

Hebert: Was education important to your father?

Wyatt: Very important, yes. Education was very important to my father.

Hebert: And your mother also?

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: You just mentioned that you father went to see the principal.

Wyatt: Well, my father went because my mother couldn't go. My father was the man of the house. He did the things that a father should do.

Hebert: He made the decisions?
Wyatt: Well, it was between he and my mother. I guess they collaborated and made the decisions together.

Hebert: Was he responsible for discipline?

Wyatt: Yes, he was. You know, I don't have to tell you, but you know it wasn't the thing if you punished a child then, you had to go to jail and all this kind of stuff. You didn't have to bother with that. But they disciplined the children the way they should be disciplined.

Hebert: Did some of your younger brothers and sisters get to go farther in school than you did?

Wyatt: My sister graduated from Booker T.—my older sister. My younger sister, she also graduated, and she went to college. My brother next to me, he went to CC camp. That's where he matriculated, got his education that he got.

Hebert: And he'd send money home? [Tape recorder turned off.]

Wyatt: Then once they set it in the hold, then that's where you would take it from. It was sort of either to the port side or starboard side of the ship. It depended on which side we were going on.
Hebert: So they'd hoist it onto the ship?

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: What year did you become a longshoreman? Was it in the thirties?

Wyatt: No.

Hebert: Forties?

Wyatt: Before then. I became a longshoreman—no, no, no, it wasn't before then, either. I became a longshoreman in 1942.

Hebert: You'd already married and had children by then?

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: You started out earning ninety-five cents?

Wyatt: Ninety-five cents an hour.

Hebert: Were most longshoremen black?
Wyatt: Most of them were black. There were a few white longshoremen. When you were a longshoreman, you were the scum of the earth then. Nobody wanted to be a longshoreman because of the hard work, and it was hard work.

Hebert: All done by hand?

Wyatt: All done by hand, yes. We had to bring cargo to the ship. You had a few tractors that [unclear]. They would bring the ship's cargo up under the whip, and that's what we called it, the whip. From the whip they'd lift it into the hold and then from the hold. When they had these large airplane motors that I was talking about, they were hoisted on by cranes.

Hebert: You'd put the rollers under them to get them to a certain point and then the cranes would--

Wyatt: No. Well, if we weren't taking them out.

Hebert: I'm just thinking of loading and not unloading, but you had to do both loading and the unloading.

Wyatt: We did the loading and the unloading. Yes. We loaded the airplane engines going overseas. We didn't ever get any coming back. The few that we got coming back were broken down
or beat up.

**Hebert:** Was most of the business during World War II Navy, Army business, military?

**Wyatt:** No. I said no. No, no, no, because we did most of the--I guess they could have been maybe contracted. But they were commercial stevedores who actually did the work in the port.

**Hebert:** Now, what's the difference between a stevedore and a longshoreman?

**Wyatt:** The same thing. Well, let me see if I can clarify that for you. The stevedore was basically the company. The longshoremen were the workers.

**Hebert:** Did you belong to any unions?

**Wyatt:** Belonged to a union, yes.

**Hebert:** What union was that?

**Wyatt:** We belonged to the ILA. Of course, that was a union that was formed in New York. It was formed in New York, and, of
course, there's some stories behind that, too. During that time, the Pollocks and the Greeks started the union and they had a heck of a time actually getting it organized. When I got in the union here, it was well organized, but the pay was still at ninety-five cents an hour.

Hebert: Were the white workers paid more than the black workers, do you know?

Wyatt: No.

Hebert: They were all paid the same?

Wyatt: The same thing.

Hebert: Was the union integrated? Did you have white members and black members?

Wyatt: Well, in New York, yes. I'd say, yes, they would be integrated. In Norfolk, they were not integrated. There were two unions--two locals, and one was white and one was black. But they worked together on the job.

Hebert: So in the ILA there were two locals, two chapters of it here?
Wyatt: Yes. See, we were local 1248. They were local 970.

Hebert: But they worked together in negotiating wages?

Wyatt: Wages they negotiated together. Whatever was negotiated, there was always the committee of our peers who negotiated for us and for them, and whatever we came up with, they got the same thing.

Hebert: So you all worked together on those things.

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: So the committee of peers was a group of black and white people working together.

Wyatt: Yes. Together. I guess there was ten or twelve unions at that time in the port. I think there's eight or nine now. I've got to think, because I'm not really sure. I think they are eight or nine now. When they negotiate, the president and one or two persons from each local come in to make up the--

Hebert: So all these unions would get together. It was just the ILA that would get together and negotiate?
Wyatt: Just the ILA.

Hebert: During the course of the war, were there a lot of negotiations to increase wages and that kind of thing?

Wyatt: During the course of the war, I guess they would meet once a year, and whatever they came up with during that time would be what the employers would agree to.

Hebert: Did you also negotiate for employee safety and those kinds of things?

Wyatt: Safety and everything was involved, was included in their negotiations, and they talked more about safety than wages.

Hebert: It was a dangerous job?


Hebert: Did you have any kind of workmen's compensation for people who were injured?

Wyatt: No, the federal government, I guess, instituted the
compensation, and it still stands now, based on where you're working. Now it's a little different than back there. Where you're working, whether you're working on a dock or whether you're working on a ship, wherever you're working, there's a difference in the schedule of payment. They pay you based on the amount of money that you made last year. Your compensation is based on how much money you made last year, and it's negotiated on that.

**Hebert:** Did you work along with white longshoremen or were you all separate?

**Wyatt:** No, we worked together, because in longshore work, they are set up in gangs. The whites did not want to go on the ship, they wanted to stay on the dock. So you would have a black ship gang and a white dock gang. They would make up the number. If you had twenty men in a gang, then whatever was required on that ship and whatever was required on that dock, that would be one gang. The white would be on the dock and the blacks would be on the ship, because the danger was on the ships. But I've seen fellows killed on the dock, and they were on the dock. They were part of the ship gang, because they were the slingers. I do know of two instances, a lift was going up and something fell off and killed this other fellow on the ground.
The ships were more dangerous because things could fall?

Well, that had something to do with it, but it was based on how it was stored on the pallet that was lifted onto the ship. It could fall off.

Did your union ever go on strike?

Yes, indeed. Up until '89, I guess, or '87. They would go on strike almost each year. The basic reason for a strike was wages, but safety. They wanted more safety on the dock.

How did that work? Did your family not have any income coming in when you went on strike?

That's right, no income. I would say, back in 1942, '44, they were on strike almost every year, but there was always cargo that demanded to be shipped. Military cargo was one, and they did a lot of military cargo shipping during that time, which means that you could be on strike—we'd just be on strike for sixty-one days one time. We moved the cargo with it being no restrictions on that. You were able to carry home some few dollars.
Hebert: So that cargo had to be shipped out.

Wyatt: Had to be shipped. In fact, the union did not require you to strike against the military.

Hebert: How did management and the owners respond to strikes? Did they try to bring in scabs?

Wyatt: No. No. They negotiated with the union. I guess at that time they figured if they tried to bring in scabs, they would have a war.

Hebert: There wasn't any attempt to try to break the union?

Wyatt: No.

Hebert: Would safety conditions improve with each strike?

Wyatt: Safety conditions were improved, yes, with each strike. Safety conditions were improved, the method of handling cargo was improved. Of course, until we got the [unclear] cranes now, that they have now, that's the thing of new coming. But the handling of cargo was improved greatly. I think the working conditions were improved.
Hebert: Did you all strike for shorter work days and those kinds of things?

Wyatt: No, we didn't strike for shorter work days. Basically, our strikes were better conditions. We always struck for more money. Money was involved. But the conditions were the primary interest, the primary strike issues.

Hebert: When did you decide to become a longshoreman?

Wyatt: After I came out of high school. That's when I stopped high school.

Hebert: Were there jobs there? Were there jobs available as longshoremen?

Wyatt: At that time, work was real good as longshoremen. Even the pay wasn't--they went from ninety-five to a dollar and a quarter. But the pay wasn't that horrendous, but there was a lot of work. You could go to work and you made $150 a week. That was a lot of money at that time.

I remember the first job I went on and worked. It was a night job and we went to Newport News, handling canned goods. The next morning, I couldn't raise my arms this high.
Hebert: You couldn't raise them above your shoulder at all?

Wyatt: No. No. They would ache. I went home and took a bath and got a rubdown, and I was ready to go the next night. The next night. I think I worked five nights on that job.

Hebert: You said you went to Newport News for that. Would you travel around to unload the ships or load the ships?

Wyatt: No, basically the [unclear] in the piers were basically in Norfolk. They had one in Newport News that we'd go to. Every now and then, we would go to Portsmouth, where the Portsmouth Marine Terminal is now, we would go over there.

Hebert: So you've unloaded just about everything in your career as a longshoreman? Canned goods, airplane engines.

Wyatt: Automobiles, trucks. They were shipping all the trucks overseas. I've loaded everything that--

Hebert: The civil rights movement and the changes in the segregation laws, did it impact your job at all? Did the unions combine into one rather than having two locals?

Wyatt: That has never changed.
Hebert: So you still have two locals?

Wyatt: Still have two locals.

Hebert: Is one predominantly black and the other predominantly white?

Wyatt: Yes. Well, no, we have more than two now.

Hebert: But you still have that separate--

Wyatt: That separation was started way back. I think the white local was first. The blacks didn't come on until later. But the whites did not want to go on the ship, and the blacks didn't mind going on the ship, so that generated into two locals there. I said there are eight or nine locals now, because you've got 1624 that's predominantly white, and they do the checking, weighing, or whatever of the cargo, that the longshoreman has little to do with. But the longshoremen, all they do is take it and put it on the ship and take it off the ship. The 1624 is a white local, and they were always paid additional to what the longshoreman got, even though they negotiated together. The checkers get an eight-hour day whenever they go to work.
Hebert: So even if they don't do any--

Wyatt: If the ship doesn't get in, they're going to get eight hours. A longshoreman is guaranteed four hours, and if the ship doesn't come in, he will get that four hours. But the checkers are going to get paid eight hours whether the ship comes or doesn't come.

Hebert: Was there any intent to equalize that?

Wyatt: No, there's never been any attempt to equalize that, because in most cases, four hours is basically as long as the ship would stay in. Now the ships stay longer, but at that time, four hours would be basically the time for the ship.

Hebert: So it was loaded and unloaded in four hours?

Wyatt: Whatever cargo they had, yes. When you asked about equalizing the pay, and I said no, of course, there was some friction, because the checkers would always try to get the longshoremen to do their bidding for them, because that's the only way they could really get, is to have the longshoreman to side with them. If the longshoreman didn't side with them, they would not have an eight-hour day. Checkers and clerks and delivery clerks. Of course, with this change, I don't know how
Wyatt: It's working now, because I haven't been out there. I haven't been really tied into that system since '82.

Hebert: Is that when you retired?

Wyatt: No. I didn't retire until '95--'94.

Hebert: So you went onto another job afterwards?

Wyatt: I was secretary/treasurer for Local 1248 for twenty-eight years. The fellow that was in there, I was elected in 1956. I held that job until 1980--twenty-eight years. What is twenty-eight years?

Hebert: '84.

Wyatt: Okay. I kept that job until '84. Then when I left that job, I went as an insurance clerk for the union in another department, and I stayed there until '94.

Hebert: So when you were working as secretary/treasurer, you didn't work on the docks?

Wyatt: No. But, see, working as secretary treasurer of the local, I was involved in all of the inroads--the negotiations
and everything. I sat in on all of those.

**Hebert:** What were your duties as the secretary/treasurer?

**Wyatt:** Well, my duties as the secretary/treasurer, I took orders for gangs, I kept a log on each gang that went out each day. I kept the finances of the local and we were audited twice a year. At one time I was two or three cents off in my figures in what the auditor found.

**Hebert:** That's not bad, a couple of cents. How were the dues collected? Were they withheld from checks?

**Wyatt:** No. Well, at first, the person paid their dues individually. Then they went to checkoff, where out of each hour you worked, so much went in for your dues. At the end of a month, the people sent the dues to us.

**Hebert:** What were the negotiations like when you were involved in that? Were they heated and lots of arguments?

**Wyatt:** A lot of them were heated, yes, very heated. Then they weren't that heated either. They were heated to a degree, but they never got out of control. Let's say it that way.
[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

**Hebert:** Between the locals or--

**Wyatt:** No, between the management. There were things that the union was asking for and some things that the management asked for that they couldn't agree on.

I'll never forget the time that we had in our bylaws that orders had to be in by a certain time. In order to keep the union from staying open all night, they had a certain hour that you must have your orders in. If you don't have your orders in, you don't have enough labor for the next day. Being the secretary/treasurer, and knowing the rules and they were not abiding by those rules, I brought it to the attention of our superior. He went in there at that time to get it that it would be as a negotiable item to get it into the contract confirmed.

**Hebert:** And it was?

**Wyatt:** Yes.

**Hebert:** So the management, whoever, would call into the union and say, "We need so many men to come in on this day to unload this ship."
Wyatt: No, they were set up by gangs. They would call in and ask for John--

Hebert: They used names?

Wyatt: They called them by name. They would take that and post it. Of course, at one time we would write the names on a board outside. Then we got sophisticated and started doing it a little differently. Now, they were really sophisticated, because they call the gangs, and they are called in, computerized on tapes, so you can't make a mistake. There were times, there were many mistakes made doing the verbal negotiations of the gangs. One person would say, "I ordered this," and the [unclear], she didn't order that. They would have disputes.

Hebert: Oh, between gangs?

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: Did your enjoy your work?

Wyatt: Very much.

Hebert: Then when you became an insurance clerk, you were
Wyatt: No, no, I did not—I kept records on persons that were injured, and claiming to be injured.

Hebert: So you were keeping track of the people who were injured and making claims?

Wyatt: Yes, and persons who said they were injured and weren't injured, doing other work, working maybe on the job or something and collecting compensation. That was my job at that time.

Hebert: You made sure that the people who were making claims were injured?

Wyatt: That's right.

Hebert: Was union membership required of the longshoremen working on the dock? Was it like a closed shop where you had to have union membership to get the job?

Wyatt: Yes, you had to have union membership to get the job. Yes. In Virginia they don't have a closed shop, but the employees would not deal with outsiders.
Hebert: So to join a gang, you had to be a union member?

Wyatt: That's right.

Hebert: Did you belong to any kinds of organizations outside of the union--the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]? You belonged to union-related organizations?

Wyatt: None. No, I belonged to the--well, my church is one thing. I belonged to the NAACP.

Hebert: When did you join the NAACP?

Wyatt: In the forties. I don't remember the date.

Hebert: Why did you decide to join?

Wyatt: Because of the magnitude of influence that it had on many black people at that time.

Hebert: This was when they were starting to file court proceedings.

Wyatt: Yes. Yes. It seemed that the NAACP was a force. I
said a force, because it was helping so many people who were being discriminated against to get jobs and to maintain their jobs in certain areas.

Hebert: Did you feel discriminated against in your job?

Wyatt: In my job, no, I did not feel the discrimination per se. There was some discrimination, but it didn't personally affect me.

Hebert: Were there some others that were working with you who were discriminated against?

Wyatt: Well, in this white/black, there was some discriminations there, because at one time the whites would not hire blacks to work with them. The blacks would not hire whites to work with them.

Hebert: But you never experienced that yourself?

Wyatt: No.

Hebert: Did you ever feel, just in general, not only on the job, that you were treated as a second-class citizen because of the Jim Crow laws?
Wyatt: Well, there was many feelings, even though it did not affect me personally, there were many feelings of discrimination that affected me impersonally, to see how people would treat some people on the jobs and they were employed. Even in the longshore industry, there was the kind of discrimination that I mentioned earlier. There were those who were discriminated against by virtue of, "You're black and I'm white, so you stay over at that side and I'll stay over at this side."

Hebert: Did you ever experience it in society as a whole, not being able to go to restaurants, having to use back windows at restaurants to order food and that kind of stuff?

Wyatt: Let me say this here. I've always said that God has been good to me as an individual, because going around to back windows and things like that, I've never had to face that. When I rode the train, it was only short distances. I never went long distances on the train, so I would never face that. I never went long distances on the bus.

Hebert: You never had to face any of that?

Wyatt: No.
**Hebert:** Did you choose not to have to face that?

**Wyatt:** No, I did not choose that, but it was just something that just seems it happened.

**Hebert:** Did you not shop at certain stores because they were segregated lunch counters and things like that? Say, Woolworth's?

**Wyatt:** Well, let me say it this way. I never ate at the places. Well, let me change it around. If they had lunch counters and I knew the lunch counters were white, I didn't go there. I didn't go to the lunch counters at all.

**Hebert:** But you went to the store?

**Wyatt:** I went to the store.

**Hebert:** So you didn't want to have to be treated in that manner.

**Wyatt:** No.

**Hebert:** Did you ever have problems purchasing clothes, trying on shoes?
Wyatt: No.

Hebert: Do you remember the civil rights movement coming to Norfolk, the sit-ins, those things?

Wyatt: I remember my son, although he's dead now. I remember when they had the burning and the looting in Norfolk, yes.

Hebert: There was burning and looting in Norfolk?

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: When was that?

Wyatt: In the Berkeley section. It must have been in the--

Hebert: Late sixties?

Wyatt: Early sixties, I would say. They were burning and looting in the Berkeley section of Norfolk.

Hebert: Why were they doing that? Do you remember why?

Wyatt: Because of the conditions that the people were living in
in Berkeley, and the people were not [unclear]. Where Bell's [phonetic] Diamond is now, that section was deplorable. Bell's Diamond and along Liberty Street, Berkeley Avenue.

Hebert: So people were protesting the conditions?

Wyatt: Yes.

Hebert: Were they burning down businesses or homes?

Wyatt: Both.

Hebert: Were they young people?

Wyatt: They were young people.

Hebert: You mentioned that education had been important to your father and your parents. Was it important to you? Did you want your children to have a good education?

Wyatt: Yes. At first I wasn't that interested, but in later years I found the value of education and what education can do for you and cannot do for you. Same with my grandchildren. Of course, there were my children. I have a daughter who works for the city of Norfolk now, who went to Booker T. She didn't go to
colleges. She has two daughters. Both of them went to college and finished college. My daughter here, she finished Hampton. My son finished school in Washington. Of course, my son is educationally programmed.

**Hebert:** That was important.

**Wyatt:** Yes.

**Hebert:** Did you see that as a way for him not to have to do manual labor?

**Wyatt:** Well, my two sons, both of them were longshoremen.

**Hebert:** Oh, they were?

**Wyatt:** Yes. One's dead. That one there, he's dead, but my oldest son, he's working as a longshoreman, and he's enjoying it.

**Hebert:** Did you enjoy it also?

**Wyatt:** Yes. Yes. The only thing, that people used to look down on longshoremen as a degrading thing. Well, now they look up at longshoremen as an upgrading.
Hebert: When did that change happen? When they started earning more and more money?

Wyatt: I'd say it happened, I guess, in the eighties. It started happening during the eighties when people began to look up to them. People now will go to the longshoremen for many things that they wouldn't have thought about going to them for earlier.

Hebert: Were you looked down just by people within the community, saying, "Oh, he's a longshoreman"? Was it people within the community?

Wyatt: In the community, yes. At one time, schoolteaching was the primary source of income for blacks, but then the longshoremen started to be appreciated and accepted. They left the schoolteaching jobs to become to be a longshoreman. There are many teachers now who were teachers at one time, that are not teachers now, they are longshoremen.

Hebert: So the position of longshoreman has risen within the community.

Wyatt: Yes, and it has some advantages, too, I'd say. Some of
the advantages it has, it upgrades your income. I think the thing that really attracts people now, that you can make $100,000 a year and you don't have to work every day.

_Hebert:_ You only have to work for a few days a week.

_Wyatt:_ You can make $100,000 a year. It all depends on the job, the type of job that you--

_Hebert:_ And how many hours.

_Wyatt:_ Yes.

_Hebert:_ Well, at $21 an hour, I can see how that would be easy to do. Is it a specialized job that requires a lot of skill?

_Wyatt:_ Well, it is being specialized now. I don't know if they have to go to school, but you have to go to training to become an operator of cranes. At one time you didn't have to do that. You could operate a crane with by a little skill. Now you have to be skilled because of the magnitude of the machinery and, I guess, they say the cost of it. There are a lot of people that are highly--not highly educated, but are educated. They want people that they know are not on drugs, and they're real hard on drugs there.
Hebert: They do testing?

Wyatt: Oh, yes, indeed. They're really hard on the use of drugs out there.

Hebert: Were you ever taught how to load a ship, how to set the cargo inside of it, in order to get the best possible use of the space, or is that something you just learned along the way?

Wyatt: Something that you learned along the way. When I was working as a longshoreman in the hold, I was a good longshoreman. That I know. It's a whole lot of techniques. There are some techniques. You find out how to keep from straining yourself. That's important, to keep from straining yourself. The things that you do, the things that you can do to keep the strain off your back, off your legs. When I worked as a longshoreman, these were important to me, that I take care of myself. They were important to me and the men that worked with me, to learn how to take care of themselves. I've seen people get fingers cut off.

Hebert: So you have to be careful.

Wyatt: That's right.
Hebert: Were you trained or did an older person take you under his wing when you started working and showed you the ropes?

Wyatt: No, at the time that I became a longshoreman, the older people—I don't say they didn't care about you, but they were trying to make a living like I was trying to make a living. They didn't have time to try to keep you—they would tell you, "Watch out, boy, don't go getting in certain places." Of course, you become aware of the fact that certain things could happen to you if got in certain places.

Hebert: So you learned to be careful really quickly.

Wyatt: Yes. There was something called a [unclear] block. It's a block that was put on in the side of the ship to pull big cargo in. There was a fellow working with us who was standing in the [unclear]. When I say standing in the [unclear], he was standing there. That [unclear] would come back and it did kill him, but nobody saw to it that he was not standing there. This [unclear] pulled out and that [unclear] came back in and hit right in the side of the face, killed him.

Hebert: Were the families compensated at all for these accidental deaths?
Wyatt: Well, such as it was.

Hebert: Did the union work to increase that kind of compensation?

Wyatt: Yes. Yes, indeed. Your compensation is pretty good now.

Hebert: But when you first started working, it was--

Wyatt: Oh, wasn't any compensation.

Hebert: If someone died accidentally, that was--

Wyatt: That was it.

Hebert: The family didn't get anything?

Wyatt: They got nothing. They would maybe get enough to bury the person with and that's about all.

Hebert: What about injuries back then? We talked about the workmen's compensation. Did they have that back then when you first started?
Wyatt: It was very minimal. Very minimal. You see persons get injured now, and, of course, they still have the thing that you had to go through a long process to get whatever you want.

Hebert: But then it wasn't much at all in the forties?

Wyatt: No. No, it wasn't much at all.

Hebert: Those are about all the questions that I have. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to mention, your involvement with the church or other things?

Wyatt: Well, I'm committed to the church. I'm committed to the Order of Eastern Star. I'm committed to the Masons. These are organizations that I take a lot of pride in because of their earlier associations. In the church, I happen to be a steward in the church that I am a member of. I attend all of the meetings at the [unclear] Church, biannually, monthly. I'm a member of the Finance Commission.

Hebert: Have you always been active within the church? Is it mostly in more recent years when you--
Wyatt:  Well, I'd say in the last twenty, thirty years, I've been that.

Hebert:  So you have been for a long time.

Wyatt:  Yes.

Hebert:  I have a question.  What is the Order of the Eastern Star?  Is it a service organization?

Wyatt:  It's a service organization.

Hebert:  Do men and women join?

Wyatt:  Men and women join, yes.  Of course, to become a member of the Eastern Star, your husband, brother, son, has to be a member of the Masonic Order.

Hebert:  I just heard people mention that they belonged to the Order of the Eastern Star, and I'd never heard of it before, so I was curious about that.

Wyatt:  The son, husband, brother, father who are Eastern Stars, you can join under either classification--mother, sister, daughter.
Hebert: Do you have to be asked to join?

Wyatt: It's an organization that you seek. You seek and you ask, and you can become a member. If you have the right affiliations, yes. If you have no affiliations, then no.

Hebert: And you provide scholarships, work within the community, things like that?

Wyatt: Yes. There are different lodges. In Norfolk, there are nine lodges. There are ten chapters of Order of Easter Star. Of course, we have some chapters in Virginia Beach, we have lodges in Virginia Beach. We have them in Suffolk, we have them in Williamsburg, we have them in Carrollton. We just have them all around. In Norfolk we have nine lodges and ten chapters. The chapters are the Order of Eastern Star and the lodges are Masons.

Hebert: Okay. That clears it up for me. I've just been curious and I've never asked anyone. They usually mention it at the end after the tape recorder's off. Well, that's about it. I'll turn off the machine now.
[End of interview]