

Working on Tobacco: A Rite of Passage?

Carlton N. Parkinson
An Interview with Shirley Quintero

March 17, 2010

NARRATOR: Carlton Noble Parkinson
INTERVIEWER: Shirley Quintero
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Shirley Quintero conducted this interview for an oral history course that she took in the spring of 2010 at Bucks County Community College, Newtown, PA. The distance learning course was taught by instructor Connie Walsh. Both the narrator and the interviewer were active volunteers at the Windsor Historical Society, and hence the Society was designated as the repository for the recording.

NARRATOR: Carlton Noble Parkinson (CP)

INTERVIEWER: Shirley Quintero (SQ)

SQ: This is Shirley Quintero. I'm sitting here with Carlton Parkinson in the Windsor Public Library on Wednesday, March 17, 2010. What I'm going to do is to ask you a few questions about you, your father, and your mother. And a lot of this has to do with the tobacco industry, because I know your father worked on tobacco.

CP: I'll answer it to the best of my ability.

SQ: Okay. And you can keep going and going and you don't have to wait for my next question. When and where were you born?

CP: I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in Mt. Sinai Hospital in 1957, September 12.

SQ: Did you grow up in Hartford?

CP: I grew up in Hartford.

SQ: You went to school there?

CP: I went to school in Hartford, public school in Hartford, as well as West Hartford. I went to Barbour School. That's the name of the school. It was not a barber school. And I went to another school, Robinson School in West Hartford.

SQ: That was a private school?

CP: Yes, that was a prep school.

SQ: So, was it part of one of those outreach programs to get city kids into the so-called good schools?

CP: That was kind of... That was the idea, but it wasn't busing, because at the time, this occurred in [19]68. This was right after the riots and the urban activities of '68, so they were reluctant to send buses to come pick us up. There were a few of us in Hartford. It was a very small school. I would say at the most there were maybe 150 students in the entire school. And the school went from first to the twelfth grade, and so there were many, I'd say, 20 folks from Hartford that attended the school.

SQ: That's quite a bit, considering there were 150 students and you had 20 from Hartford...

CP: That was quite a bit.

SQ: There was good representation.

CP: It was a good initiative from John Robinson, who was the founder of the school, and his idea was to get folk from Hartford to go to West Hartford private school education. He was a doctorate of education. That was his thing. He implemented this program. He was one of the first, if not the first, in Connecticut to start this program, way before Loomis Chaffee, Kingswood, and so on.

SQ: Sounds like it was a good program. Do you have any siblings?

CP: Just me.

SQ: Just you?

CP: Me, myself, and I.

SQ: Okay. That has some privileges, being an only child.

CP: It had and it didn't. A lot of folks say that only children are selfish, but I was raised not to be selfish. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you a quick story. In going to school, I bussed. Both my dad and my mom both worked, and so they didn't have as much time to drop me off to school, so I took the public bus, since there was no school busing. So I either took the public bus or I had a bicycle and I rode my bike to school all the way from Hartford to West Hartford. That was from Hartford, Cleveland Avenue, to past Prospect Avenue in Hartford. The school was on Highland Street. And that was rain, shine, sometimes in the winter. So it taught me to be self-sufficient and not to rely on folk.

SQ: So, what was your father's name?

CP: My father's name was Fitzroy Henry Parkinson.

SQ: Fitzroy Henry Parkinson.

CP: Strong Jamaican, British name.

SQ: Carlton is sort of British, I guess.

CP: Carlton was the name of a soup company in Jamaica. As Campbell Soup was a well-known name of a soup company, there was Carlton Soup Company, but one of his good friends was named Carlton, so he named me Carlton. And my middle name is Noble, which was my grandfather's middle name. His name was Abraham Noble Parkinson.

SQ: Very strong names.

CP: Yes, yes. And he was from Scotland. My grandfather – my father's father – was from Scotland.

SQ: Was he African American, your father's father. I don't mean African American but he was...

CP: He was a black Scotsman. He was very, very dark, but if you were taking a census, and what block would he write in? Would he say he was white, black? I'm not sure.

SQ: Because he probably identified more with his nationality, that he was a Scotsman, more so than his race.

CP: That's a good point. And he married Rachel Sterling, who was Jamaican. She was an Arawak Indian from Jamaica.

SQ: Living over...?

CP: In Jamaica.

SQ: Okay. Interesting background. So, where was your father born?

CP: My father was born in Montego Bay, Saint James Parish, Jamaica, West Indies.

SQ: And when was he born?

CP: He was born on June 7, 1917.

SQ: How did your father describe his life in Jamaica?

CP: Wow. He was the eldest. Well, actually, he was the oldest boy. He had two other brothers and an older sister. And his sister passed away when they were young. And my father kind of helped raise my two uncles. He had a ... it's interesting. We didn't talk about this a lot, but he fixed bicycles as a kid. That's what kind of gave me my bicycle, I guess, knowledge and an awareness of bikes. He did a lot of the cooking as his older sister was not around to cook for the boys as well. And that's about it, as far as I know about his upbringing, his childhood.

SQ: Did he work at all in Jamaica?

CP: No. I believe they cut sugar cane, but to the extent of their schooling, I'm unclear of that. Give me pause, and I'll think about that. I'll have to go through my records.

SQ: So, your father ended up in the United States.

CP: Yes. He came over in 1944.

SQ: And what was the purpose of that?

CP: That was on a . . . Well, during the War [World War II], a lot of the [local] labor was lost because of the War. The soldiers of the United States had to go off to fight, and so a lot of the industries, not just the tobacco industry, but other industries, were short, and so a lot of the

labor, they got a lot of labor from Jamaica from what I understand, Puerto Rico, and the South, came up into the Windsor area to work in various industries. So that's the main reason why he came over, was to work in tobacco.

SQ: So, did he come directly to Connecticut from Jamaica, or was there a stop before?

CP: They stopped in, from what I understand, Florida, Louisiana, and then to Connecticut.

SQ: So that was to work in the tobacco fields in Florida and Louisiana and in Connecticut?

CP: Now, I'm not sure if they had tobacco in Florida. I would think they didn't. I know they had tobacco in Virginia. But just crops, you know, helping with the crops in these various places in Florida, Louisiana. But there was boom in the tobacco industry in Connecticut.

SQ: So, he worked for a while in Florida and then somehow he got to Connecticut. Did he work for a particular company that was contracting for workers in Florida and these different states and also in Connecticut?

CP: I believe there was a government contractor, I'm not sure, but there was a fellow by the name of, the last name [Ralph] Lasbury, from Windsor Locks that contracted. He kind of fought for the labor to be brought over on the various ships. There were a few ships that brought the labor over. One was the *U.S.S. Shank*, and that's one of the ships that my father came over on. So, that's why they arrived for tobacco. That's how they came to be in Windsor Locks.

SQ: Which company did he work for?

CP: Oh, my gosh. I know in the course of his life he worked for various companies. He worked for Huntington Brothers, Thrall... Actually, Shirley, there was a company in Portland. A lot of the guys came over and they worked in tobacco in Portland, Connecticut. That was Buck Tobacco. I believe they are still around. Because of my travels, I've met a lot of kids my age that worked, not in Windsor, but they worked in Portland.

SQ: What did your father do? What sort of job did he have?

CP: Well, he eventually came over and picked tobacco. And the story that I've been told was that a cook got sick and he started cooking for the men in the tobacco camp. They sent him to a school in Pennsylvania, I think at the time it was called Culinary Institute of Pennsylvania. Now, that could be, being kind of a historian myself, I try to do a little fieldwork and research to find out things about this school and I couldn't find anything, but I did find a diploma of his and it was a correspondence diploma. So, I'm not sure if he, in fact, did go there. I just found that this week.

SQ: So this was to teach him how to cook?

CP: Teach him how to cook, and more so he knew the flavor, as they say. He knew the flavor of what the guys wanted. At the camp you had to have, if you were going to be a cook, you had to do some things the right way. So, he had to be a sort of a certified, if you will, cook, a licensed cook. So, this, in fact, got him a license to be able to cook for the guys there.

SQ: How long did he cook? Did he do that for most of his career in tobacco?

CP: Yes, just had a quick sneeze as a migrant worker, I think, and then he cooked for, gosh. He came over in '44, and he was born in '17, so that made him what?

SQ: Twenty-seven.

CP: Twenty-seven when he came over and he passed away in 2003, so that made him 85 when he passed. And he worked more or less up until... probably, maybe, about 40 some odd years, maybe 50 years.

SQ: As a cook?

CP: As a cook. And, of course, that title had changed from chef/cook to food service manager. Back then they called them stewards and that changed to food service manager. So he had people working under him, other migrant workers working under him.

SQ: That's interesting, because when I typically think of the tobacco industry, I think of workers who work in the field. I think of people who work in the sheds, but I never think that there are different types of jobs within the industry for migrant workers. It's interesting that your father was a cook and then he rose to some sort of a managerial position with other migrant workers reporting to him.

CP: That's interesting, isn't it, for folks to have faith in someone and to teach them how to be a manager. Not just going to the school, but he had to have some training more than just observation from the folks that hired him. I don't know if anything was formal, if he had formal schooling, although he did go back to school, which was a requirement. He took courses at UConn in food service management. This was back, gosh, back in the '70s and '80s. You know, this was more of a dietary kind of thing. Health.

SQ: Like code...

CP: Yes.

SQ: To make sure that he meets code.

CP: Right. And there was, not to interrupt you. Because there was a multi-cultural component to it too, because you had workers from various regions, not just Jamaica, but various islands, not so many, maybe the Bahamas and Puerto Rico, and from the South. They had various diets that they were accustomed to. So different flavors that he had to adjust in his cooking.

SQ: So he had to be very versatile to know what they liked. This multi-culturalism. Did he ever tell you any stories about things that happened on tobacco, any interesting occurrences or conflicts or...

CP: Yes. Conflicts with Hispanic workers who thought they may have been underpaid and ill-treated. Fighting that went on there as well. There was, probably still is, the sense of different

cultures in the islands treat each other differently. Jamaica, folks from the Bahamas, folks from Barbados, and for lack of a better word, some can be more arrogant than others. And maybe that was from necessity, I'm not sure. But he would sometimes say, you know, 'those darn Bajans' or... [laughter].

SQ: And you wonder what they were saying of him.

CP: We're going to edit this, right? [laughter]

SQ: No. Whatever is here, goes. Would you like for me to pause? [laughter]

CP: No. It was a problem for him to adjust, too, because he wasn't accustomed to dealing with black Americans from the South, folks from different islands, Hispanic brothers, as well.

SQ: That was one of my questions, too. I know often there is some sort of conflict between, say people from the Caribbean and maybe the African American community. And I was just curious whether there was some sort of tension between the two.

CP: That was a good question, because knowing that migrating over here, knowing that if you worked hard you can have that American dream, and not understanding why folks are not working hard. And from what I understand, a lot of Americans didn't want the job working in tobacco. That was more reminiscent of slavery, and so, from what I understand, they didn't want to take those jobs, those gigs. They were left for the newcomers to take. And I'm sure not just West Indians, either. Any newcomer. That's the history of the country.

SQ: So, your father came here in 1944. Did he live in a camp at the time and working?

CP: Yes. He lived in the camp.

SQ: What did he do after the season was over?

CP: Social life.

SQ: Where did he live?

CP: They had a choice. They could either stay in the camp or go back home, because they were migrant workers, or go to another part of the country and work. And he stayed in the camp and lived. Now, that money was taken out of their salary to be able to stay in the housing of the camp, and the medical care as well. I don't know if we've gotten there yet, but that's where he met my mom. She was a nurse.

SQ: Is your mother Jamaican?

CP: She [Mildred Derr Parkinson] is from North Carolina. Charlotte, North Carolina. And that was another... getting back to the heart-wrenching problem of co-habiting with Native American women with West Indian men. They thought that they were taking the black American women from American men. That's where they met. They met at the camp. She was an infirmiry nurse. From what I understand, there were two infirmiry nurses there at the time. My

Mom graduated from Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing in Durham, North Carolina, and she drove up here with my godmother, who also graduated from there, and who was maybe ten years older than my Mom. She's still living. She's 93. She lives in Philly. That's my godmother, Aunt Marian. Aunt Marian worked at Camp Buck in Portland. My mother worked at Camp Windsor. That's the name of the camp, Camp Windsor. As a matter of fact, Camp Windsor is now the... is it the National Guard camp? The DUI camp. In talking to Mom, because they kind of wanted me to go into the medical field... We had talks about the different problem areas that migrant workers had, and, without a doubt, there were a lot of folks that she was an infirmary nurse with that had respiratory problems at the camp.

SQ: There were quite a few of those with problems because of the tobacco and chemicals that were used in tobacco?

CP: Yes. The chemicals and the weather. They weren't accustomed to the weather, because, I keep in mind that they had some who were there year round and they stayed at the camp. So they weren't accustomed to snow.

SQ: So those were some of the problem areas. One was respiratory problems. Any other kinds of problems?

CP: Various social diseases? [laughter] [unintelligible]

SQ: So, where -- she came up from North Carolina?

CP: Yes.

SQ: And where did she live, before she met your father?

CP: She lived at the Y downtown in Hartford. As a matter of fact, when they got married, he moved in with her at the Y. You could do that then, from what I understand. And I think it was maybe nine dollars a week there during that time. And they were married in, was it 19, probably [19]50, 1949? 1950, New Year's Eve.

[Gap in taping when the tape was not recording]

SQ: Did you work in tobacco?

CP: Yes. I worked in tobacco. Huntington or Hutchinson Brothers. I was, what, 14, 15, and I think I was 16. Those summers. I was working at... I was at a day camp my younger years. I remember one day my father pulled up... We were bused to the day camp, and I believe I was 14 or 15, and he picked me up at day camp. And I'm like 'Why is he coming to pick me up at day camp?' And he talked with the camp, the owner of the camp. He said, you know, 'My son is not going to be coming back.' This was in July. So, I... and I was a mainstay at that camp for years, you know, I was a counselor in training, you know, that type of junior counselor. So I enjoyed myself, it was enjoyable. He said, 'It's time for you to get out there and work.' So he snatched me out in the middle of a softball game, and took me and said, 'You're going to be working in tobacco.' He said... this one I remember because it was on a Thursday and the next

day was a Friday...and he said, 'You have to go back and tell the folks at the camp, summer camp, that you're not going to come back. And come back to me and tell me what they said.' Well, I was on the bus to go to camp, and they picked up quite a few... This is interesting: they picked up quite a few folks in Hartford, black folk in Hartford, and I knew the streets in Hartford. So they kind of used me to go around the area to pick up... they kind of felt safe. Mind you, this was [19]69, [19]68, [19]69, [19]70. And when I told the owner of the camp that... he had a gasket. 'Why don't you, why did you... this is not fair.' And I was a young kid. I didn't understand what he was... I went back and told my father and he just laughed. He said, 'Yeah, I'm sure they'll miss you.' [laughter]

So, I started working at the camp. I was getting up at five in the morning. I walked down the street to Main Street, and there was a bus from the camp that had picked up all the Hispanic folk in the area. They had folks from the South from the camp who wanted to ride into Hartford. So the bus left from the camp and a lot of the guys from the South got on the bus just to see what Hartford was like, and they would pick up the guys from Puerto Rico. I was the only kid being picked up. I was with the men. I was kind of bulky then and I was playing, started playing high school football. My father thought this would be good to build up muscles and stature. So they picked me up and they'd drive in. And it was back-breaking work.. It was very hard work...

SQ: Out in the field?

CP: It was out in the field. I was, I was doing the men's work. You know, the picking. I started picking for one day and it was easy work. I said, 'This is...I can do this. This is nothing.' And the next day they, he wanted me to see all the industry, the tobacco industry, you know the different jobs in tobacco. So I became a dragger. They would drag these boxes down the rows of tobacco and fill them up and then drag them back up. And that has hard, arduous work. And that's what I did. But it was really building me up. So, that job I did, and I took the bus back home, and I think it was what from seven to five. And by the time I got home, I was so tired I couldn't get into any mischief out there in the streets. I went right to bed smelling like tobacco. I had one pair of jeans and I would wash the jeans, you know, every two days, and the same thing I'd do the next day. So...

SQ: So, that was character building?

CP: That was a character builder and on top of that, Shirley, when I missed the bus, there was a Rainbow Road bus at the time, a public bus, and if I missed the... If they didn't see me, if the tobacco bus didn't see me on the corner, they would keep on going. They would keep on going, so I would have to get the tobacco bus or bicycle. I would ride that bicycle from Hartford to Windsor.

SQ: And you did this during the summer?

CP: During the summer. All summer. I did it for maybe three, only three summers, two and a half summers. And then on the third summer, before the school, they did it the third summer and then the next summer. I – there was a group called ACES, Area Cooperative Educational Services, out of New Haven, and what I did was I recruited migratory students whose parents worked in tobacco for summer school day camp. So, I had a little bit of knowledge of Spanish back then, much more so than I do now, and so I was able to go in areas that they were living in

Hartford, some of the Hispanic folks were living in Harford, and I would recruit their kids for Metacomet School out in Bloomfield so their kids could go to day camp/school during the summer while their parents worked there. So, I recruited them and then I went door to door to recruit them in Hartford, and then when summer school started, I was a teacher's assistant in the summer school.

SQ: And this sounds like you were 14, 15, 16 years old?

CP: Yep, I was 14, 15 and 16... 14, 15 and then at 16 that's when I did the recruiting, started doing the recruiting and then in summer school teaching.

SQ: And from there you didn't work in tobacco any longer.

CP: Nooo, my sister!

SQ: And I'm sure you were very disappointed that you were no longer working in tobacco [laughter].

CP: I got \$119.37 a week when I was 14 and 15. That was big money.

SQ: Yes.

CP: I was disappointed with the money, yeah . . .

SQ: And did you make that money doing piecework, sort of you had to ... No? It was by the hour?

CP: No. It was straight up.

SQ: Oh, this is not tobacco. This is the other job.

CP: No, no, no. This was tobacco. Yeah. Because I was working like the man's salary. I wasn't picking. A lot of the young kids, they were picking, they were doing piecework, and I did that for maybe a sneeze, maybe a week. Then – not even a week – maybe a couple of days and then I was making more or less kind of their salary, I was told. Now, I'm sure those guys were making much more money, I don't know, than I was, but that's what I remember what I was making. And I would go to Windsor. I would deposit that check in Connecticut National Bank.

SQ: And I'm sure that money came in handy when you had to buy your school supplies.

CP: That's right. That's right. So many kids in the neighborhood were going to CRT at the time – Community Renewal Team – and they made their money working there, but I had that 119 bucks.

SQ: Well, Carl, it seems that we are coming to the end. It's almost 3:30 and I know that you need to be out of here . . .

CP: Oh, shucks!

SQ: But, I know . . .

CP: Time flies when you're picking tobacco. [laughter]

SQ: We're going to have to resume this. I'll listen to the tape. But, is there anything before we close, is there anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to talk about?

CP: No. Do you have anything that . . .? I can't think of anything.

SQ: Well, one thing. You did make a comment. You thought it was important for people to hear the stories of children of migrant workers and I was just interested in knowing what you meant by that.

CP: Kind of like, where are they? Because migrant workers sacrificed so much and in retrospect didn't know it as much. I think they were having just as much fun coming to the new land, you know, making new money. But in retrospect that was labor-intensive, hard work, and the question is, 'Where are the children of the migrant workers now?' because so much was given to them. What are they doing now? Are they still in the state? Some of them were not kind of privy to that. Some of the workers didn't want their kids to be involved in that. You have a better life, so we don't want you to know so much about that. And I'm glad I got a little bit exposure to it and now as I get older I'm searching back a little bit and finding out, because there are not a lot of migrant workers left around. So the question is: Where are they now? What are they doing? You know, have they gone on to school? Have they graduated? Productive members of society? Do they know about their history? Do their kids, do the grandkids of the migrant workers know about their history? You know, kids who are 17, 18, 19 now. You know, they have the Luddy Tobacco Museum. Have they been exposed to that history?

SQ: I guess one question I didn't ask you. Do you have any children?

CP: I have a daughter.

SQ: Okay. And did she work on tobacco?

CP: She's never worked on tobacco.

SQ: She's never worked on tobacco.

CP: She doesn't want it. Has nothing to do with it. No. And as a matter of fact, when I ask a couple of my peers, folks my age, some of them didn't work in tobacco. And I know their parents came over from Jamaica and they say – we sit down and talk – and they say, 'Carl, I'm glad you did it, 'cause I wasn't about...' And I talk to my nephews and I suggested to them, you know, you need a summer job. Why don't you go work in tobacco? They're always hiring. No, I'll try Walmart. They don't want to touch it [working in tobacco].

SQ: And I suppose that when you worked in tobacco you didn't have as many options as far as jobs, job options – Walmart and the McDonalds – so I think tobacco was more of an option for young people then.

CP: It was an option as well as a rite of passage. Kind of like if you were a football player or a professional basketball player, maybe you'd want your son to kind of get a little taste of Little League or Pony League or Midget Football. Well, I think a lot of the migrant workers wanted their kids to get just a taste, indulge a little bit in tobacco to see what really hard work was like. You don't have to work it all your life. We did this for you.

SQ: So, is there anything else you want to say? Is that about it?

CP: No. I don't think – just to kind of follow up your questions about social life of West Indians. I think that's important, you know, what they did in their spare time. There must have been more positive things that they did. I know they created soccer leagues. I don't know if you are familiar. They called them Trojans . . . [laughter] a play on words, but that was their soccer team, West Indian soccer team. And so the guys got together and even to this day they, I think – and that was camaraderie of the islands – I think today they are still doing that. I know they're forming all types of other leagues – soccer leagues and whatnot –and [unintelligible] gather around . . .

SQ: So, this is... and these are primarily the Caribbean community who are doing soccer, who play soccer?

CP: Play soccer. Right.

SQ: Okay. I think that that's it for today. And I thank you very much.

CP: Well, I hope that I was helpful . . .

SQ: Thank you. You were very helpful. And we will transcribe this and we'll give you the opportunity to look at the transcripts before we hand it in to the Historical Society.

CP: Oh, good. Good.

SQ: Thanks a lot.

CP: My pleasure. Thank you.