

**Interview with Mr. Carl Burke**

**Interviewed by Susan Hawes  
The Baltimore Museum  
Heritage Project**

**Interviewed on May 11, 1979  
at 3545 Hickory Avenue  
Baltimore, Maryland**

**Transcribed and edited by Samuel Seligman, ANTH 440, University of Maryland, October 2005**

The following interview is being conducted for the Baltimore Museum's Heritage Project in the Hampden community. The interviewee is Mr. Carl Burke; the interviewer is Susan Hawes. We are at 3545 Hickory Avenue. Today is the eleventh of May 1979.

**Susan Hawes:** Mr. Burke, what do you remember about your Grandfather? On your mother's side...

**CB:** Ok, I remember very little about him because I was very little when he died. I know things that my mother had told me about when he owned the printing shop. He had a printing shop here on Hickory Avenue. He began I believe, around 1911. He had printing and pad items and also had a general store in the other part [of the store] where probably you could [find] almost anything during those days. You [could] find things you'd [need] around the house or patent medicines, and these types of items [in addition to] printing things like booklets and pamphlets and supplies and anything that you would want. Actually, [this] was her step father because her mother would bring her over there when she was a child to get ice cream; they made homemade ice cream there. Her mother was divorced at the time and the owner of the store and her mother became friends and later they had a little romance going. I believe my mother was probably five or six years old at the time and they'd come over almost every evening to eat ice cream. They probably married in about 1915. He carried on a printing shop until he died and after he died, my grandma took it over, and after my grandma took it over, my father took it over.

**SH:** Do you know how your stepfather got to Baltimore, to Hampden? Yes, your step grandfather.

**CB:** Oh yeah, I think he may have [been] born in Hampden. I believe [he had] one brother and a sister. The brother became a doctor and I'm not sure what the sister did. They used to come to the printing shop. I believe [my step grandfather had] his printing business already here. I believe he spent most of his life in Hampden. He made some of his own patent medicines and [had] patents [for them]. He was probably really one of the first ones to start that 'buy something, you get a coupon [buy x-amount of something, get something in return system].' You know the coupon systems where you save up coupons and then you got a toy or something. [In addition,] he made a hard type soap. It was a brownish soap and I remember they came in very small bars,

but they lasted and lasted and lasted. I'm trying to remember his other items. Everyone claim[ed] that it kept your skin looking good. So this must have been about 1940.

**SH:** Is there anything else that you remember?

**CB:** Yeah. The stylish thing was to part people's hair really stiff, and [my step grandfather] made a compound which was called "Black and White" because both black people and white people were doing the same kinds of things [with their hair styles]. You had the long hair and you had the short hair and on the short hair you almost had it pasted down. And he had customers all over the place- [he] also made a cream for complexion. It cost something like twenty five-cents and it would last for a year.

**SH:** Is there anything else he made or that he did as a storeowner, or that you know of now?

**CB:** Most people back then made their own products and he had a huge business [with] homemade ice cream. Of course at that time, there were very few printing places and a lot of the people who would come to have something printed would bring their children. [The children] could get the candy, or they could get the homemade ice cream, homemade ice cream was a really big item. Now there are very few people who have homemade ice cream and the ones that do have homemade ice cream...it's nothing special. It's all full of artificial ingredients. [These were] the good old days.

**SH:** Do you remember anything about when your grandmother ran the store?

**CB:** Yeah, after they got married, which I would say [was] actually 1915, or a bit earlier, she helped out some in the store and a little with the printing, not to any big degree. She ran through a war [inaudible]. [My grandmother] was probably one of the first lady mechanics in the General Motors [manufacturing plant]. I don't know how much she weighed, but she was big. But with it, she was probably very physically fit and could keep up with the guys and she took a job and could do it like any of the men. When [my step grandfather] died around 1934, she took over the printing shop and she ran it and the store until probably around 1939. Not only was it a printing shop, it was a place, a country store like place, where everyone would go and just sit and talk. There [are] a lot of people still around who probably remember being there. It was probably open all the time, from early to late. In those days you didn't have TV and probably a lot didn't have radios, so you did a lot of visiting. You went to see a lot of friends and family and I guess it was a form of entertainment.

**SH:** Do you know where your grandmother's people came from?

**CB:** Okay most of them were from around Hampden. She was \_\_\_\_\_ when she got married. [If] they weren't born in Hampden, they went really far back in the community [they had lived in the Hampden community for a long time]. I didn't know her mother.

**SH:** You remember her from when you were young?

**CB:** No, I mean I barely knew her when I was so little. But I remember it always [clears throat] being a big treat to go over her house and go shopping with her. Hampden in general, with Hickory Avenue, [had many place to] shop. But I just remember her being a big woman.

**SH:** What do you remember when your dad would drop you at school?

**CB:** We were living in Woodberry and when my grandmother died, the house and the printing business was left to my father. He didn't really have that much knowledge [regarding the business]. At this time it was a full printing place. It went from being a saloon to being a printing shop [with my step grandfather still alive]. My father's dealings before this with printing came from working for the Sun Paper for thirteen years before stopping. He decided to take the business. He needed to do some work on the side of the house. He had a small house in Woodberry and this was much larger than his old house and I remember him fixing it up. I remember him doing all the fixing and painting. He worked late and I remember he worked from very early to very late. [In] about 1940 he took over the printing business and kept it until 1953. From 1940 through 1953, his was probably the most popular shop. There were some others, but his was the largest. His was the largest and sometimes he wouldn't handle the smaller type jobs. Another thing which he really had going for him at the time [was that he owned] the largest collection of hand compositions in Baltimore and that still may be [the largest currently]. When people wanted artwork created into a sign, they would come and say I want this type letter and he would be able to give them what they wanted because he had the largest selection of paper in the printing shop, which my grandfather had bought a number of years ago.

**SH:** Did you ever help him in the shop?

**CB:** My help in the shop [was] very limited, but my brother Howard who went to printing school was taking up printing for the printing business. He helped him quite a bit. My help in the printing shop was almost [laughs] what I didn't want to do [laughs]. It might be straightening up some letters or [something else]. I was a child and I was more interested in going out and playing, and [my father] had the idea that [I would] to do some work for our house or the business. My brother Donald for a while helped in the printing shop. After my father's death my brother Donald took over the shop for a year until he found out that he [could] go out and work in the same business for someone else and make more money. [This was] mainly [due] because the unions demanded [higher wages] for the people. So [Donald] gave it a shot. I [worked at the printing shop] for a while, but I did it for more of a hobby than anything. [It was] for my own amusement and for some of my friends. It was nice to know how to do. But after my brother gave it up, I just stepped down like everyone else.

**SH:** What do you remember about your mother?

**CB:** Well my mother married very young and there were lots of children [in the house]. But, [sighs] after the last child, which [I suppose] was born in 1939, when my father took over the printing shop, she helped a lot with it and with the book work. She could do anything in the printing shop with my father himself. She ran the machines and was a proofreader. Any mistakes, she could spot them very fast. [They] had three [printing] presses back then. One of them was an automatic press and that was around 1932-1933. At that time it was the latest press

and luckily my grandfather was able to afford one. We still have [the printing press]. You would set down a piece of paper and [the press] would grab [the paper] and automatically lay it down and then put it out on the other side and you would just have to watch that it was dropping ink. They're what you would call the Job Press and you would see these done by hand and they would be silver. Now in the later years, they also have the automatic press that you just [inaudible]. Now [with] the Job Press, you really had to be careful with and pay one hundred percent attention to it or else you would get your fingers smashed in it. You really had your fingers going in and out of that thing all the time. And then you'd have to sometimes cut things out of it. It was just a mess some of the time. You had to be very careful with [the] blade when it would come down because the blade was very sharp and very fast. So [my grandmother] did quite a bit of work. At one time [my grandmother and step grandfather] did eighty percent of all the printing out here [in Hampden]. [In] 1940 he started putting out a little newspaper of which was in a booklet form. It became very popular, and almost all the business around here would advertise in it. [His circulation was] somewhere around five thousand copies. During the war it got so hard to get any help doing anything that they just had to discontinue [the newspaper] and concentrate on more of the printing job.

**SH:** You had a big family. What was your household like?

**CB:** My oldest brother died when he was very young [around] a year and a half [old], so that made my sister the oldest. [She] had the job of tending a lot of us because half the time my mother was expecting another child [pauses to laugh a lot] and she [was ill] herself. Back in those days you had a simple[r] type [of] life. All the children would get together and play childish type games. I think we had closer families. As families were growing up in the hard years, the Depression years, you really had a hard time making a living. Another big difference now than back then is that a lot of people had to go on welfare. They stayed on welfare and once you got off welfare [inaudible] but most of them stayed on welfare. They gave you just the bare necessities, [almost] nothing, just food if you really needed it. You had better be looking for a job and if you found a job, [your family would]leave [welfare]. For a short period of time, we were on welfare. [When] you start out with not a lot, you start to appreciate the [inaudible] more than the silver spoon in the mouth type. I think you really s[aw] the worth of something [during the Depression] [evidently explaining how people today take material items for granted]. And that is why my family, I think my family turned out successful. I think we did appreciate what we did get. I would say my father did work most of the time, but it was kind of a struggle. Actually, I believe he had a bad accident one day with the tar [while working the printing press]. He came home looking like a mummy [with all the bandages]. He wasn't ever all that scarred.

**SH:** Did he get any compensation [for the accident]?

**CB:** Well, I guess it was only what the company wanted to give you. But they were responsible for what happened, so therefore they paid him some amount. But they laid him off every few months because they didn't have work. When you had a family, you had to work just about all the time. During the war he also took a part time job. He had a very hard time. Companies had a very hard time finding people because all the young boys w[ere in] the [military] service. So my father took one of their jobs. [During] the Second World War, during the air raids, everyone had to put their stuff down and turn off the lights when the air raid [sirens] went off. [Officials] go

around the street and look for anything that would light up and [might] attract the air raids. If any lights were on they would go around and the enemy might see these lights and then they would attack. Everyone took these raids very seriously and they would report you [if you did not]. Everyone took it serious and they obeyed the law and [there were only a] few occasions where they had to report anyone and most of those occasions were accidents. They didn't realize that a certain light was shining through or if something was on.

**SH:** Do you remember thinking about the war?

**CB:** Yeah, we actually did discuss [the war]. Looking back now, I realize that it was Japan that people mainly worried about here. [We thought] there was a possibility that [the Japanese] would be here in the neighborhood and would fight. In a very unmilitary manner [we discussed what we] would do [to] protect [our]selves. We discussed that we would get up on the top of the steps and if anyone came up the steps we would push these paint cans on them and that would not do too much good. It was a situation where you really didn't know too much about what was going to happen, if they were going to blow the place up...

[tape skips]

**SH:** I wonder if you can recall when you first started to be aware of how things were done in Hampden? How things happened?

**CB:** How [I] found out what I was interested in [happened] in this park right down the road. It was more like a playground. So you start wondering what is this all about [the playground scenery]. [The park] had the reservoir over here, so you would ask someone older than you how they do this and that and how did this reservoir get here and where did it come from and they would tell you that and other things. When I was young and I was going to school, I guess a teenager [at the time], I was working for a drug store and I was running errands and the boss had a lot of the answers I asked about. There were books he'd put out and I'd read those. He'd tell me quite a bit. Older people I got to talk to loved talking about [old times]. They would say, "I remember so and so worked there and they made [inaudible] at the mills." They said they would work sixty or seventy hours a week and at the end of the week they would get twelve dollars or something like that. There were no child labor laws and kids twelve years old or even maybe nine years old worked. Of course anybody who worked in the mills might be able to get along with twelve dollars a week, [but] it was hard to maintain your house in your neighborhood. I doubt you had water bills at that time, but you know it was sometimes hard. Everything cost so much less [than it does today].

**SH:** When did you start to notice any leaders around you in Hampden and who were they, do you remember any[one]?

**CB:** [clears throat] Back when my father and mother got married they came to [inaudible] is a charity [type] group. I guess people don't realize, but back in about 1922 the local...

[tape ends]