

**Interview with Lester Merryman**

**Interviewed by Susan Hawes  
Baltimore Neighbor Heritage Project**

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at the address of 3618 Elm Avenue  
Baltimore, MD**

**Transcribed by Kelsey Hudock and Lauren Morrell  
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**SH:** Mr. Merryman, you told me that your mother came from Frederick and your father came from Westminster. How did both of them happen to come to Baltimore?

**LM:** My father came to Baltimore as a result of him being a wagon body and wagon wheel builder and a blacksmith. He came to Baltimore and set up a shop somewhere around Pennsylvania Ave and Presstman St. The date I don't know. My mother came to Baltimore. She was seeking employment as a seamstress, if you will, and worked for a company known as Earlander in downtown Baltimore. Later she went to work for Nothik Brothers at Hickory and Thirty-Sixth Street. How they got to be friends and then finally married I had no idea.

**SH:** What was your family's early relationship to Hampden? How did your parents become familiar with Hampden?

**LM:** The only way that I would know is the fact that my mother worked at Nothik Brothers at Thirty-sixth and Hickory.

**SH:** What was her job like. What was that company like? Did she ever describe it to you?

**LM:** The company was still in business up until a couple of years ago when it was disbanded, but their primary product was expensive pajamas for Saks Company of Fifth Ave New York. All materials were imported Japanese silk. Pajamas were their only product and Saks and Company was their only outlet.

**SH:** And the company was right here on Elm Ave?

**LM:** No! Hickory Avenue and Thirty-Sixth Street

**SH:** Did she ever tell you what it was like working there? What her job was like?

**LM:** No.

**SH:** Your father was a wheelwright. What was his business like? He had a business for a while in Hampden?

**LM:** (He breaks in) No! No association with Hampden! His business was with his brother on Pennsylvania Avenue near Presstman Street, where they built truck bodies and wagon wheels and wooden van type bodies.

**SH:** You came here and you lived on Wellington Street when you were about 14?

**LM:** That's correct.

**SH:** Tell me about the neighborhood then, what you remember about it.

**LM:** Very quiet and peaceful. No disruptions; it was safe to walk the streets and let the doors and windows open at night. No problem.

**SH:** Imagine that you are a kid again living on Wellington Street. Tell me what you might be doing during the day.

**LM:** At this period of time or that period of time?

**SH:** At that period of time.

**LM:** At that period of time. In the daytime I was going to school. As soon as I graduated from school, I had a job awaiting me. Full time employment

**SH:** What?

**LM:** During school when I got home in the afternoon...I had a shop down in the basement, and that's where I went and stayed until I went to bed at night.

**SH:** What did you do with other kids?

**LM:** Played softball.

**SH:** Oh yeah? Where did you do that?

**LM:** On the lot where the U.S. Post office is now located.

**SH:** Is there anything else that you can think of?

**LM:** Never went to Roosevelt Park to the [unclear], never.

**SH:** [Laughs] What was your street like then, and the people living on your street?

**LM:** All I can say is quiet and peaceful.

**SH:** Did you have many friends on the street or neighbors...

**LM:** Yes, we had a little group that would get together about once a week in somebody's house. We'd talk, fool around and that was about all.

**SH:** What do you remember about your feelings? You had moved in from the country when you were a lot older than a lot of the other kids. Did you...?

**LM:** No feelings as I can recall. No problems of any kind. I can assure you I didn't get lonesome or have nothing to do, because I was always busy.

**SH:** Do you remember where your parents did the shopping in the neighborhood, and how they did the shopping?

**LM:** Thirty-Sixth Street. [Pause] I would say primarily Thirty-Sixth Street, because there would be no point in taking a streetcar downtown. They didn't go downtown, even then in those days, they didn't go downtown. What little bit they purchased, they purchased here.

**SH:** What can you remember of some of the ideals and principles that your parents tried to raise you with that were real important to you and to them.

**LM:** Well, the most important thing was the religious aspect--going to church every Sunday and Sunday school and many times on a Wednesday night. Also, there were absolutely no playing cards and absolutely no alcohol in the home, whatsoever, at any time. Guess that's about it.

**SH:** That was because they were what religion?

**LM:** Protestant

**SH:** Protestant. [Shuffles Papers] You went to Grace Hampden Methodist Church?

**LM:** Grace Hampden.

**SH:** What kinds of things did your family do there?

**LM:** My father was on the official board, taught Sunday school, and on occasions my mother taught Sunday school.

**SH:** You went to Sunday school?

**LM:** Oh yes, Sunday school, sure, and the one or the eleven o'clock service, and many, many times at nighttime. The Sunday night service was at seven thirty or eight o'clock,

or whatever. Many times against my opposition, but I did it because, lets say, I had to do it. [Clears throat]

**SH:** So how did you feel about church?

**LM:** Well, up until I was, I don't know fifteen or sixteen years old it was all right. When I got to that age I had other things that I would want to do, and I could remember it was hard for me to sit through Sunday school then sit through the hour service at eleven to roughly twelve. Then I would get fairly disgusted knowing that I got to go back and listen to more of this shit tonight. But, that was the way of life then. The Sunday schools had many, many, many people in them. At that same church today-- I looked at the roster, which was down stairs during a time we had a meeting-- there are eight children in the Sunday school. This is ridiculous.

**SH:** Did everybody on your street go to church, usually?

**LM:** Well they went to some church, yes. Yes.

**SH:** Do you remember when you looked around the church, were there people from different economic levels?

**LM:** I couldn't determine that.

**SH:** The people that lived on your block or in your neighborhood, did you have any idea where they worked, or what kinds of the jobs most of the people had?

**LM:** No nothing beyond the Woodberry Mills people, that is, people that worked in the mills. Now, there were other people that worked other places, obviously, but where I wouldn't know...a lot of them worked for the mills locally

**SH:** None of them worked for the Railroads? [Unclear]

**LM:** Now wait a minute. Yes, there were a couple of men that worked for the railroad. Yes.

**SH:** Where Pool or Bellmar--I guess it was then it would have been called Bellmar...

**LM:** Bellmar was a machine shop that made railroad locomotives. There were men that worked at Bellmar, and also at the other one, Pool foundry, which is right near Bellmar.

**SH:** Did you know of any girls or women that worked at Maryland Casualty? Did you notice if anybody around that time? [Unclear]

**LM:** Yes. There were some ladies, middle aged people. What the girls or such did I have no idea.

**SH:** You went to School here in the Hampden area?

**LM:** No, Never.

**SH:** It was all...

**LM:** They put me down at Fifty-Two School at Oak Street, which is now Howard, and Twenty-Fourth.

**SH:** Did you find many kids in the area who shared your interest in radio and in...

**LM:** None at all. No I was a loner.

**SH:** Was that hard? Did that bother you?

**LM:** Because I had no friends with this capability? No, it didn't bother me at all.

**SH:** Do you remember the local parade? When you were younger?

**LM:** No.

**SH:** Well, the Halloween parade?

**LM:** None.

**SH:** Or when you got older? You mentioned that there were some later on in Hampden.

**LM:** Oh that, later on in Hampden, but I'm speaking about, say, twenty years ago. That means roughly 1956, '55, or maybe 1950. But I don't recall anything before that in the way of parades. We didn't have any associations, as far as I know, that did anything [Unclear.]

**SH:** You mentioned that WWII was the first time that you had ever been removed from your family.

**LM:** That's right.

**SH:** What effect did this have on you, do you think, now?

**LM:** None.

**SH:** Well, I mean now in thinking about it, what effect did it have on you then?  
[Chuckles]

**LM:** It disturbed me, for maybe six months after I was away. Then being away for three years, it slowly dissipated and didn't make a whole lot of difference.

**SH:** Do you think you learned anything from the experience? From being away from your family?

**LM:** [Pause] I learned to take care of myself, not having anybody around to do anything for me, yeah. I had nobody to do my cooking and laundry and all those sort of things, and I had to get this together and get it done. I ate in restaurants, which I'd never done before, ever in my life. My laundry I had to take to the Chinaman or somebody else when I was down in Norfolk, to do it. Of course, I didn't have to do that before, but that didn't affect me one way or the other.

**SH:** Did you learn anything from the war itself, that you might not have ever known if you had...

**LM:** I learned a lot of things [Chuckles] from the war itself that, had I not been as close to it as I was, I would not have learned. Yes, anybody that went in the war learned things that if somebody would have told them about what happened in war, they would not have believed it. It would have been hard for them to believe such things happened and existed. Yes a lot of things.

**SH:** What kind of things? Could you tell me what some of those things were that you think you learned?

**LM:** Well one of the things I learned was to get along with completely strange people and people from entirely different nationalities, not only this country, but people that were brought into this country from overseas as prisoners of war. I talked to many of them, and I don't travel, so I got a lot of interesting things from what they told me. They told me of their life in their countries, this may have only been a period of thirty days since they left home till the time they got here, so whatever they told me was right up to the day. It wasn't something that happened forty years ago, it was something that happened thirty days or two or three months ago. The way they lived, the food they had, and the things that they had were interesting. This may have seemed discouraging and a waste of time, but when you are sitting around and have nothing to do you want to keep talking to somebody. At that time, what they said didn't mean anything. Now, if I had these people and I could talk to them, boy, I could get a wealth of information. But, it wouldn't do me any good; it would just be a matter of interest.

**SH:** Do you think any of the things you learned affected your attitude about your life, Baltimore or Hampden? Maybe about your job or what you were doing or how you were living?

**LM:** Um um. [Disagrees]

**SH:** When you got back and you came to live in Hampden, did you see any changes as a result of the war or changes that happened around the end of the war?

**LM:** No, we're only talking about a thirty six month period. I was away thirty six months. [Pause] ... The war was over sometime, roughly in 1945. I came back here in the latter part of forty-four, and, as far as I can recall, there were no drastic changes. There couldn't be any drastic changes really, because there were no changes being made. I mean, there was nothing being rebuilt, no huge buildings. There was no tearing up of the streets or nothing, because there wasn't enough money for this kind of foolishness. All the federal money was going right into the war effort, and there was nobody to do it.

**SH:** Maybe more women working...

**LM:** I can't answer that.

**SH:** Did you notice the different people here in Hampden or in Baltimore who had come to work in war industries?

**LM:** There were a great number of out of state people, yes. Because, at the latter of 1944, I was with the federal government working at Fandex Radio and I know where a lot of those people came from

**SH:** Where did they come from? Did you notice?

**LM:** West Virginia, all down south, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and a lot of people from East Baltimore, and all parts of Baltimore, but many, many from the eastern section.

**SH:** Did they stay in Hampden when the war was over?

**LM:** You mean these people who came specifically for the work? I can't answer that.

**SH:** Did you notice a lot of different people, after the war, living in Hampden that weren't here before?

**LM:** I can't answer that.

**SH:** In your job, were there still a lot of different kinds of people from the south?

**LM:** No, not in my job.

**SH:** Well in the places that you knew...

**LM:** No.

**SH:** Would you explain your experiences with politics and politicians in Hampden, since you began to be involved in trying to get things done for the Hampden area? Maybe that would begin with the filling

of the levy, where many people were concerned. Wonder what you were...[fades off]

**LM:** I guess that was the beginning. I became concerned, because I learned at that time that the residents and the property owners in Hampden had no say, whatsoever, when Baltimore City officials made up their mind to do something. It made no difference whether they were going to tear a street up, whether the residents wanted it or didn't want it, the street was going to go. Even with considerable opposition, with legal help...with paid legal help, Baltimore City did what they wanted to do. The beginning was the Hampden reservoir, which had been there for many, many, many, many years-- way before the 1900s. At first, it was water being used as an emergency supply for the fire department. Primarily, it was drinking water in its time. But, since they built Druid Lake, Druid Hill Park Lake, and Montibello, they cut the Roosevelt Lake off and used it for the emergency fire department. The first time that anyone from Hampden, the residents, knew that the lake was being disposed of was when the fence was torn down and there were dump trucks and dirt being dumped in along the edge by Potts and Callahan, who were under contract by the city to build the Jones-Falls Expressway. See, dirt had to be disposed of, obviously, but the residents did not know of the plans for the disposition of the dirt from the causeway, when they level it off and fill it out. So the contract was left with Potts and Callahan with the understanding to fill in the Roosevelt park lake, because it was closer to the excavation of Jones-Falls expressway. In that sense they wouldn't have to haul the dirt as far so the city agreed to let them fill in the lake, and that's exactly what they did. From that time on I swore to stay as knowledgeable as I could with what was going on around Hampden. Later on, I started to attend the Baltimore City council meetings every Monday night, the Zoning Commission on Tuesday, and the Liquor Board hearings.

**SH:** What did citizens of Hampden do when they saw the reservoir being filled in?

**LM:** They called a meeting at the Methodist Church on Falls Road. Now we would call it a town hall meeting. But then it was just a meeting. And there were many, many, many, many people—packed to the doors.

**SH:** Who called that meeting?

**LM:** I don't know.

**SH:** Well, who ran it?

**LM:** Well, let's say the civilian from this area, I really don't know. But I know that Baltimore City had a lot of their people out there, politicians and otherwise, trying to answer all the questions. And there was deep concern and very angry people when we left that place because of what the city had done.

**SH:** Who was the loudest voice?

**LM:** I couldn't answer that. [Interviewer starts to say something, Lester mumbles]

**SH:** What did people decide to do as a result?

**LM:** We decided to get an attorney to fight the case, and we paid him. He was a paid attorney. Who he was I don't know anymore, but we might as well have thrown money down the gutter. He didn't do a bit of good, because the contract had been signed. The lake fence had a hole torn in it, they started dumping dirt in it, and, that's it.

**SH:** Do you think that the city would have done that if it had been another area involved?

**LM:** Another area?

**SH:** Yeah, if it hadn't been Hampden, if they had to dump....

**LM:** That would depend on the community in that area. Maybe some community would care less about where they dump the dirt. But I believe that any community in the city of Baltimore, living near a lake like that, would have strongly opposed it because it was a beautiful lake. It had fish in it. People used to walk around it, ride bikes around it. It was beautiful. There were plenty of green grasses and trees around it.

**SH:** Can you think of any reason why the city would have thought that they could do that?

**LM:** I don't know. Perhaps it was a strictly political reason between the city founders and Potts and Callahan. Like I mentioned, it was closer to the excavation point, and Potts and Callahan wouldn't have as far to haul the dirt. Consequently, it wouldn't cost as much money. That was the reasons that they gave.

**SH:** Do you think that there are other occasions when the citizens of Hampden are successful in getting things done, and making their voices know in City Hall?

**LM:** We make our voice known at City Hall constantly. As far as getting some of the things done, absolutely not! We tried to save the Cedar Avenue Bridge. The city said that they were going to tear it down. It was the only architectural structure of its kind in the United States. The city tore it down. We asked the city not to tear down the walkway from Woodberry over into Druid Hill Park, which had been there for years. The city tore it down, after promising us that they would not tear it down.

**SH:** Why do you think that happens? [Unclear]

**LM:** It happens because the city wanted that bridge out of there, and they told the contractor to “accidentally” tear it down and we’ll blame it on you--which is what the city did, they blamed it on a contractor. Any large projects around here, I don’t know of any, but Baltimore City has given the people what they’ve been fighting for and what they can prove. A good example is the traffic light at Thirty-Fourth and Chestnut Avenue. It’s always been said, “You have to kill about two people at a crossing before you get a traffic light.” Thirty-Fourth Street had one person killed, another person half killed, and one child struck. Today, there’s no traffic light at 34th and Chestnut. Schaffer came out here with a half a dozen other people from City Hall. They looked it over. There was a large group of maybe 200 people down there that day to present this bad situation to [Mayor William Donald] Schaffer and company and they didn’t do anything about it. Still, there’s no traffic light. So, if somebody asks me, “What does Baltimore City do for this section?” I’d say, “You show me or tell me and I’d be glad to listen.”

**SH:** Do you think there are other places where the city does do something? Why do you think?

**LM:** Well, I don’t know. I can’t say anything else. They don’t do anything for Greenmount Avenue, and they don’t do anything for Highlandtown. Highlandtown hasn’t been changed for the past hundred years, and I’m down there frequently. With Broadway the city did them a big favor, which they’ll never forgive the city for, and that was tearing the front of the Broadway Market down. Took the big, it wasn’t a marquee; it was a design that you saw on structures years ago, the face of a building structure. They tried to save that. No, no way. The city chopped it right off, so all you have now is a big, flat building. It seems now, that all the money and everything they see, is in the Downtown Harbor. Which is nice for a lot of people, but there are a lot of people that never go to the place, because when there’s anything going, it’s next to impossible to get there unless you want to walk. That’s the only way you can get there. It’s not at all safe to come out of that place at nighttime. If you want to come out, at let’s say, nine thirty or ten o’clock, it’s not at all safe. It’s the same with Druid Hill Park. When I was a kid living around here, every Sunday we’d walk through Druid Hill Park. Even up until I got married, which was in 1936, we’d use the little old bridge that the city tore down or we’d use the Cedar Avenue Bridge to go cross, and walk all the way up to the zoo. Today, I wouldn’t put my foot down on this side of the Cedar Avenue Bridge.

**SH:** Is there anything else that you used to do here or that you remember?

**LM:** There were theaters here. We went to the theater now and then. Not frequently. On Thirty-Sixth Street...[tape ends]