

**Interview with Winfield Lyle
Interviewed on April 23rd, 1979
612 West 34th Street
Baltimore, MD**

Interviewed by Susan Hawes

Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project

**Transcribed by Erin Kolski, Eric Steinberg and Brian Kretzschmar,
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Winfield Lyle – WL
Susan Hawes - SH

SH: The following interview is being conducted for the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project in the Hampden community. The informant is Mr. Winfield Lyle, the interviewer is Susan Hawes. Today is April 23rd 1979 we're at 612 West 34th Street

WL: Yeah.

SH: Mr. Lyle, could you tell me what you remember or what you've been told about your grandparents coming to Hampden?

WL: Well I was told that the mills in Ilchester tapered off and my grandfather was a carpenter by trade, my mother's father. So there was no work out there, in what they called the county in those days. They both were married young out there in Ilchester and came here and had their children and they thought there were better opportunities here than stay out there where the mills had closed down on them out there, in Ilchester.

SH: Ilchester is . . .

WL: It's down below before you get into Ellicott City. Its right down the bottom there, Ilchester is. And that's where a lot of people out there worked, in those mills out there. And of course as things tapered off they came to the Mount Vernon Mills and the Meadow mills. It was the upper Meadow and lower Meadow mill, Mount Vernon mills, lower Mount Vernon, upper Mount Vernon. Then of course the American Tobacco Company came and bought the Meadow mills out. And my grandfather worked all his life after he got here as a carpenter, in fact he worked on the Northern police station. He worked there until May, of course that was before my time. He put in over two years there as a carpenter. So that was quite a job. I mean back in those days, a building was all completed at one time. It was all brought along at one time, one piece added by piece. That's why Mary Pat Clark wanted the history of the Northern Police Station but she said "Well when I talked to you Mr. Lyle and found out stuff you knew, I was awful sorry we never came to you" she said, "because we just went to the Lieutenant." Of course he

probably knew things best but he didn't know about the track inside where they broke the horses in for the police to ride. My wife's uncle was sent all over the country to buy horses and he'd bring them here and break them in. Merion Anderson, he broke them in. He also worked there in the stables, Mr. Anderson did. Mr. Colther and Inspector Lures, who was an inspector and head of the mounted police department at that time, they took and moved the horses. When they did away with that they put a shooting gallery across the street here now. And they moved the horses downtown, I don't where they located but they got left downtown somewhere. Then of course they had the patrol wagon, that old time patrol wagon.

SH: In what period was this?

WL: Well, I was born in 1908, and this I'd say was when I was 9 or 10 years old. That would make it 18 right?

SH: Yes.

WL: And as I told you the other day, I was a second mascot for the Northern Police team. And each district, as they called them then that those days, had a team in the league. Each district like central and southwest or northeast and all that, they all had teams and they played each other.

SH: What did the mascot do?

WL: Like if the guy would strike out and leave the bat laying there, or if they needed other balls, I'd take them out of a bag and give them to them, just like the batboy does over here at Oriole Ball Park. I went every place they went, wherever they played. It was a good experience to meet different ones. Some of them were real good players and others were just has-beens if you know what I mean. Some of them got on the teams to get out of work a little bit too. But others really loved it, they really put out and tried, but it was a lot of fun, it really was.

SH: Were the players then good neighbors when you were there?

WL: Yes, as I told you the other day if you remember, we had respect for the police in those days and if the police told you to do something, you better do it. And I was over in Northwood one night and the police-- it's really bad over there now-- but anyhow they told a bunch of them if was Reed's at the time moved on we'll get you around the corner, we'll work on you. He got his walkie-talkie out and got a couple cars in there and reinforcements but we never thought of telling the police that. And another thing, if you did something in those days, your police brought you home or gave you a boot in the rear end and brought you home to your parents. He caught me up there swimming in Snakey and told my mother and I got a beating for that because I wasn't supposed to be up there.

SH: In Snakey?

WL: Yeah.

SH: What was Snakey?

WL: It was up there by the Tudor Arms, do you know where Tudor Arms is?

SH: Yes.

WL: Well it was not Snakey, Snakey was down on Falls River, it was the dog pond up there. We used to go swimming up there and of course the police caught you while they ran you. And they did, they ran us. And of course he knew who I was and came down and told my mother, "I saw your boy in there swimming and . . ."

SH: Why was it called the dog pond?

WL: I couldn't tell you why it was called the dog pond. I don't know that. But I know it was up there, practically filled in now. But we called it Doggy, that's what we called it, Doggy.

SH: You told me something about what it used to be like when the policemen were drilling.

WL: They would come out on that side and the Sargeant would be over here, Srgt. Sminkey. And the police would come down in a line, then they would face their horses around and as they would face around Srgt. Sminkey would say "Count off", well as they counted off they said "Hut Two Three Four," they moved out in position, you get what I mean?

SH: Yes.

WL: I used to knock him and he told me--I had blond hair and all--he said "I'm going to come up there and get you one of these days blondie," just kidding me, but telling me to keep quiet, because I was interfering with the precision of what they were doing.

SH: This was all on horseback?

WL: Oh they were all on horseback, every one of them. And then after they would fall in line then they would go four, three abreast and he would pull away and get in front. Then they'd go on to their different sections of the city where they'd have to work. Then they'd come in the evenings. They didn't have drilling in the evening, they only had drilling in the mornings. And all the parades, they were always in the parades. I asked the police here couple of months ago about the horses, he said as far as he knew they only had about ten of them. He didn't know for sure, but they had the big vans you bring out here when they were having that trouble with all those students over there in Hopkins and down in the valley down there by the art museum. They had three vans over here with three horses in each van, took them out of the vans, and led them down the front way.

They tried to keep things in order, which they did, but that's the first time I'd seen horses about here since they moved them away. But you see them downtown a lot of times.

SH: I want to go back and ask you some questions about your mother. We talked about your grandparents. I wonder if your mother ever told you about her life in Hampden growing up. Since she grew up here also.

WL: She was a weaver in the mill. She worked a long time till she got that thyroid --I think it was Dr. Shelly--but anyhow that's when she stopped working. My father worked for the post office. He had a good job; during the depression we were very fortunate. He had a good job and the only thing I needed was a little help from him and of course he gave it to me.

SH: You grew up in this house here right?

WL: No, I was born in Gorsuch Avenue. But I didn't live there but about a couple of months. What block it was I can't tell you. All I can tell you it was over by the stadium somewhere.

SH: But you grew up in this house?

WL: Oh yes, yes.

SH: Can you describe what it looked like when you were little?

WL: Well, this house had two rooms added to it. It had three rooms added to it. We just had a shed where the kitchen is now. It was the kitchen put there, then there were two rooms over the top of the kitchen. My grandmother made her quilts in the sewing room and then the bathroom was next to it. In other words, the sewing room and bathroom is the same size as this room, but they're split in half. There is a partition there dividing them in half.

SH: Did you always have a bathroom?

WL: No. But we had an outhouse for years. I was about 14 when the bathroom was built, around 1922. But every house along here had outhouses.

SH: What about some of the other conveniences that you have now?

WL: We had oil lamps, or kerosene as some people call it. My grandmother, she used to take the scissors and when the wicks would burn down on a certain portion, she would take the scissors and trim them off. We didn't have a hot water heater. We had to take a bath in my mother's washtub as kids, my sister and I. We got our weekly bath whether we would need it or not in that galvanized tub and took turns. She'd wash my sister first or me, one way or the other. But that's how we performed for years until we got the bathroom.

SH: And did you have jobs that you had to do as kids?

WL: I carried the coal. In those days we didn't have any way of putting the coal in here. We used to have a pump, but we got a tank down there for oil now. But years before that they'd dump the coal in the backyard, and it was my job to carry it down in the buckets and then when it burned, it was my job to bring the ashes back up. And I went to the store. I had a paper route for Mr. Ford. He was quite an outstanding person here in Hampden. Arch Ford, he was a substitute minister at Hampden Church. And I worked for him about 5 or 6 years, serving papers. Had a paper route for him.

SHI: And did your mother cook in what's the kitchen now?

WL: Yes.

SH: And did she cook differently then?

WL: She had a cooker. And I had a wood forest stove. She'd fire them of course she'd use the coal naturally. We had a wood stove in the dining room. We used to burn that at nights too. It was one of those belly--you know you've seen them--anyhow they had that. They burned anywhere from six o'clock till the morning. Then they'd stir that one up in the kitchen, but they'd try to keep this one going with wood in the dining room all night. We didn't have heat in those days and of course in the summer we didn't have air conditioners or fans or anything like that.

SH: What'd you do to keep cool?

WL: Laid on these floors with very little on. My mother would bring us down here in hot weather and we'd all lay on the floor.

SH: What are the floors made out of?

WL: They're wood. Of course it was linoleum then. I have wall-to-wall carpeting put in now. But they had linoleum back in those days.

SH: Who lived with you in your house?

WL: Well, it was my mother and father. My grandmother and grandfather both passed on while we lived here. My uncle is going on 94 and lives on Berry Street now at 701. I'm sorry his faculties are bad or he'd be ideal because naturally he's got 22 years on me. But he can't, he asks you the same thing over and over. But it was him and then my mother and father and of course the kids. My mother and father had the bedroom in the front on the third floor. And us kids were in the backroom. My Uncle was in the front room here, and my grandmother and grandfather were in the middle room. That's how we presided.

SH: That's a house full.

WL: Yes.

SH: Who helped raise money for the family?

WL: Well, when my grandfather was out of work, my Uncle was a big brave man. My father had been sick for years and they thought he was going to die. In one case the doctors were wrong because they told my mother to go home and become a widow. He had a brain tumor removed. But he had such a good mind that after the operation that he went and took the government examination at the post office and passed it. People that knew him couldn't believe that he had that much left, and he was only late once in 42 years. That was because I was working in the mill, Ralph Marsh and myself went up to snakeheads, Snakey, where I fell asleep, and we were swimming on our lunch hour up there. Then one of the police from the railroad--they called them bulls-- he came up and he said "How's the water boys?" He grabbed our clothes and naturally he had us. They called the patrol wagon and I never forgot Mr. Snyder, the policeman on the wagon, who knew me well. Anyhow, to make a long story short, my father was late that one day because he had to go over there and bail us out, twenty dollars apiece. That was the same day that Jack Hart got out of jail and Judge Schroder, said "You can have your money back, I'm dismissing both of these boys and dismissing the case", he said "These detectives from the railroad..." Now, he wanted to do something for the good of this country, go out and catch Jack Hart, who broke out of jail. He said "These boys weren't misbehaving or doing anything wrong other than swimming, so I want you to let them go and forget it, I'm dismissing the case." Of course my father was late getting to work, the only time he's ever late in 42 years.

SH: Jack Hart? Who is Jack Hart?

WL: Jack Hart and Sokolove and all of them down there on Howard Street killed that... I don't remember the person's name, but they held that bank up. But he was serving life when he broke out. They killed that person in the bank and they caught Sokolove out there on Park Heights Avenue later on, but Hart was in jail and broke out, and they got him later.

SH: There were lots of different people in the house bringing money. What happened during the Depression?

WL: My father was a big winner there. He had a job with the government.

SH: Did you work?

WL: I worked in the mill and I had that paper route too for a long time. I've worked ever since I've been around 12 or 13 years old, as soon as I could work down at the mill, my aunt got me down there.

SH: And did your sister work during the Depression?

WL: She got a job at Murphy's, and she had to have a diploma to get a job in those days during the Depression. She got the diploma. That's why they took me out of school, as I said I didn't finish. I went to the 8th grade but didn't finish the 8th. They took me out of school and my mother felt that it was more necessary for a girl to have an education in those days than it was for a man. She knew I was going to go to my uncle's eventually to learn my trade, and she thought that was the proper thing to do. My sister graduated from Eastern, which gave her an opportunity to work and then stay in school at the same time.

SH: How did other families get by during the Depression, as people moved around...

WL: As I said before, and I think I told you, it was the Hansons, the Fords, Balers, Gardeners, Wiggins ... It always impressed me, just how they would help each other. If anybody had little more they'd hand it over, and vice versa. It seemed like there was so much harmony in those days that what it is anymore. What I'm trying to say is it was great for me in that they wouldn't hate you like it is today. Harmony prevailed, as far as I'm concerned.

SH: People didn't have food, for instance?

WL: Well some of them were on the... welfare? Yes, they were on the welfare. Go down and get flour and stuff like whatever they could get. Lot of them did. I know the family next door to me, the Greelys, they had five children and they had a tough time. He worked on this WPA, where they fixed the parks and everything around it, and he worked on that, he did all he could. You couldn't get work honey, you couldn't get work.

SH: What did you think about the New Deal when it began, when Roosevelt...

WL: Oh, when Roosevelt... we thought it was the greatest thing in the world. I always felt--until Eleanor got in the thing and formed those Eleanor clubs--that Roosevelt was the greatest thing going. That sort of turned things around when he... the good they done, well they undone it as far as I'm concerned. As I told you the other day, I'm not prejudiced but I'm like that guy in Chicago. He's cosmetic, and he came from Africa as a shine shoes. I remembered listening to his television one night and he said he doesn't feel sorry for the colored race for the simple reason they did not take and help themselves like they could. He says "I've been criticized for hiring white people." He said "Because the white people are dependable," he said "they know when to put the bottle down and when to stop playing" but he said "my race don't." He said "and I'm going to continue to hire white people as long as I can." He said, "That's what I'm fighting, my own race is trying to give me a hard time," he said "but they won't wake up" and he says "an opportunity," he said "I come here in this country as a shoeshine boy when my mother and father brought me over here." He's a millionaire today, so he said there's opportunities for anyone regardless of whether white, yellow, purple, green, if they want to take advantage of it.

SH: You said that you were 12 years old when you started to work summers in the mill?

WL: Yes, in summers.

SH: What did you do?

WL: I used to be a bobbin boy. I would have a long wagon that had bobbins in it so you could service the weavers with them. Whatever amount they wanted, we'd take out of the wagon and give it to them. It was cord on the bobbins and they'd make the duck or whatever material was being made. That's what we'd give them.

SH: Did you ever do anything else?

WL: I worked in the rope room, I told you that. I was older then though, about maybe 15 or 16, when I worked in the rope room.

SH: What'd you do there?

WL: Made the bundles of rope. I guess it was for awnings and stuff like that, and we'd make coils of rope, and they had to gage when you had, say, 50 yards on there. When that gage would show 50 then they'd cut it off and take it off of the spool and put another spool on and start the spool up.

SH: What did you think about working in the mills? Did you like it? Did you...

WL: I liked it to this extent: it was something. I had never had money in my pocket before. I brought my money home, gave it to my mother and she'd give me money back. I like to work myself, and I always have and been very fortunate to be able to work, to be able to be occupied.

SH: Thinking back on that, what do you think conditions were like in the mill?

WL: They call them sweatboxes honey, I've been told that, and I know my mother... I got an aunt, 85 years old. She worked there as a weaver all her life and she's been out and they didn't get nothing. They didn't get redress, that's the only thing, and now today I think some of these young ones are going to far. Of course, I was born and raised as a union worker and raised my two daughters as working in a union making my wages, but I don't agree with all these big industries trying to hurt little people like they are. And its labor fighting management, that's what it is. Anybody with ordinary common sense can see that.

SH: Did you think the mills were particularly dirty, or...

WL: Oh they tried, but they had their problems with help too from what I can remember. Some I remember were told were very good workers and others had to keep behind them and if they didn't do it, they would eventually fire them. But down in the rat hole, down

at the bottom of Mount Vernon mill, that was really infested with rats and all, but they couldn't help those things because it was off of that river down there.

SH: What was the rat hole?

WL: That's where they had the baller. They take the cord off of the bobbins and put on regular spools. They had five of them down there. The rats didn't bother anybody, but you can see them. You'd have to put your lunch up high so where they couldn't climb to get it, I remember that.

SH: Did you work there?

WL: Yes, I worked down in there too.

SH: Then you took up plastering with your uncle?

WL: Yes.

SH: How did it get to be decided that you were going to take that trade?

WL: Oh no, I took up cement work with my uncle, in '27 I went there and in '31 I come out of my time as a journeyman. Then there was a recession, which was nothing to do with construction. So I went to work. The Folk brothers were into painting automobiles, but the man said he didn't have the work so he laid me off there so I just went from one place to the other, wherever I could get work. And then World War Two broke out and I had my card to submit. I went for instructions as a plasterer in '45 and had three men to take and examine my work and they signed it. They transferred me from cement mason to plastering, and in 30 years I put in plastering and finished up there.

SHI: What was your training like? You were apprenticed to a cement worker?

WL: Yes.

SH: What was that like, and how long did it take?

WL: We served four years, and that's a joke. You hear about these people now telling you about this colored guy, [Laughter] this Sunday porter. I couldn't help but laugh, he thanked his stars that he was able to learn two trades in six months time, he's a painter and a gardener. My father-in-law was a plasterer too, but it was a coincidence I got there, I was working at it after he'd died. But anyhow, you could go into someone's house. A woman developed the roller used in painting and my father always told me "If you go into somebody's house and they tell you something, don't get antagonizing with them, just listen to what they have to say, because they might be of help to you and be a shortcut too."

SH: Can you describe the training that you had?

WL: You didn't have the training that they have today. Today they have offices. They hold so many hours a week in a school like down here at Barkley and 20th Street for the cement masons. The plasterers don't have the work to train anybody, so that's why they cut their training out. But right now, I think they have to put 10 hours a week in on paperwork in that office down there. That's Seesa, isn't that what they call it?

SH: But what did you? [Loud noise] That's alright.

WL: I learned from the top to the bottom. I learned how to make concrete with a shovel, cut with a batch, with a colored tiller. After I worked at that about 6 or 8 months, we got that down and knew the formulas of all the mixes. Then they put with me with a finisher and brought a floor out, and then after I been there about 4 months, they gave me a hawk and trowel. They made the trowel to go and learn to finish the work, but I don't think they do that much today. They get better breaks and they get the stuff on a paper and they get books and everything else to go along with the classes, which is a big help to them. We didn't have nothing like that. We learned it the hard way, as far as I'm concerned.

SH: Why did you become a Mason, and how did you become a Mason?

WL: I had one uncle on my father's side and going to church, it impressed me to see him with the round fit and the white aprons and white gloves. And when I found out what a Mason stood for, I thought if a man would live up to his obligations you'd be so damn good that he wouldn't have to go to church. But that was always my desire to be a Mason, after I saw them turn out a couple times at Mount Vernon church, and my father's brother-in-law was one. My father didn't believe in any of this, he wouldn't. They never asked you to join. Don't get me wrong, Masons don't ask you to join.