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INTERVIEWEE(S): Hilda Simpson Harmon (HH)

OTHERS PRESENT: Senorah "Sunny" Harmon Popp (SP)

DATE INTERVIEWED: March 30, 2019

WHERE INTERVIEWED: Harmon home, Floyd, Virginia

INTERVIEWER(S): Alice Slusher (AS), Shaylee Hodges (SH)

TRANSCRIBER(S): Shaylee Hodges

DATA CHECKERS: Alice Slusher, Melinda Wagner

AUDIO TOTAL LENGTH: 02:44:07

FILE/TRACK: 0010 [mid-interview]

AS: Okay. Well, tell us about the cannery.

HH: Well, the canning factory had a hard start. Daddy, that's W.C., and Mr. Lewis Reed, was the postmaster. They decided to have – well I think Daddy pushed him into it – a canning factory there. I think they canned beans at that time. It was a disaster. It didn't work right. And Mr. Lewis Reed would not do it again. But this canning factory, Alice, was right in front of that little house where it's still standing, behind the store. Because there was that canning factory right here on the creek, and the store was in front of that little canning factory. It was a small one.

I don't know what happened, but they lost all their money on that one. Mr. Lewis wouldn't do it again, so Daddy went ahead with it. I must have been maybe three, four years old, because I was big enough that I could carry the cans to the ladies that were canning, that were packing. I worked in that thing since I was born just about, and in every possible way.

Then Daddy did well with it. And he canned blackberries; people would pick blackberries and bring them to the canning. And – I don't remember tomatoes over there. We canned tomatoes at the other factory, at the big factory. But we did can the green beans there, and we canned the blackberries that people picked.

I guess it was at that time that there was a garage across the road. So, he turned that garage that – Poff was twelve years old, and he had a garage across the road there. At least that's what they said, so I guess he did. I have a picture of him. There's a picture of Poff in mine somewhere in front of that garage. We moved over to there; he just grew and grew with it. I can't remember that Poff did anything – I'm sure he, when he was home, he worked just like I did. But he taught school for a while.

Daddy was making money at the canning factory. He didn't know; he paid a dollar a day for, I guess ten hours. I don't know how many hours we had to work. Anyhow, he bought beans, and you can see, he had contracts, but this [type of contract shown] came later because I

know that when he contracted the beans, he would get huge loads of them would come in. He bought cans from the Continental Canning Company.

I worked upstairs at that time; I must have been right much older. We put cans in the chute. There was a chute that went down like that [gestures] and around like that to where the ladies were packing beans. There was usually about six women down there packing beans. I couldn't have been too old at that time because I started to climb out that window. There was a window right beside the canning table that was – nothing in it, just a big old hole.

And when I started to climb out, two women grabbed me and pulled me off. The chain had caught my dress.

AS: Oh!

HH: I had a little skimpy dress on and it just ripped it off [laughs]. I know Ruby Rierson was one of them, because I always told her about it. They sent me home to put some more clothes on, so I went on back up to the house and got some overalls, I guess.

AS: Well, did you get paid?

HH: Oh, no. Not until Poff got out of service. No, I never got any pay, uh uh. But, I think Daddy would give me a – no, Mama would give me a popsicle once in a while. I don't think Daddy ever gave me anything.

Let me think, let me see – the canning factory. Poff got out of service and he took over and found out Daddy did not know how to pay his income tax. He went to a lawyer somewhere, or maybe he did it on his own. He sent in several thousand dollars thinking that would be enough to cover [chuckling] what his income tax was. He didn't even know what he'd made. But when Poff came home and they got it all figured out, they got it straightened out.

Poff took over everything and made everyone get a Social Security card. So, we all felt – and I know, I think I was fourteen when I got mine. Everybody was real pleased that they had that. And then they had to pay me; that summer I made seventeen dollars [others chuckle]. I worked all summer.

HH: Hm hmm. They didn't have anywhere to work before that time. They just lived on what you could make there.

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AS: Now, Poff [Hilda's older brother Poff Simpson] went off to war.

HH: He was drafted, I think.

AS: He was drafted.

HH: He went in as a private and then he got in Officers Training School, and then somehow, he helped R.O. [Alice's father Roger Oliver Slusher, Jr., who was Jim's first cousin] get in.

AS: That was my father. So, I know he was at Fort Riley when my father came out there.

AS: Did you write him very often?

HH: I didn't write him. I don't remember ever writing him. He wrote Mama. She got a letter every Wednesday and then he was sent to South Africa and he was over the food. Why

I don't know. But he did, after he got out of Officers Training School, he attained the rank of captain and was put in for the next highest but the war was over, and he got to come home and can kraut.

AS: Well, tell us about him finding the cans when he was in Africa.

HH: Oh, he did! Well, we had always labeled the cans and you got a dime for everything anyhow how much you labeled. And we labeled them by hand and Mama made the paste out of flour and water. She'd bring it over, each of us would get a cupful. And I liked to label cans; then we had one machine that would label cans if you turned the wheel far enough.

And Poff was in South Africa and he was checking the - - Let me think; we didn't label those cans. When the war was on, and we had to send so much or we did, anyhow. Daddy did that; he was home by himself. We had a stamp that was like a half-moon and we had to stamp the top of every can. Well, I loved doing that; I could just get them stamped in no time.

And when Poff was there looking through what he had gotten in that day, there were all these cans with stamps on top of them with the half-moons on them and he was so pleased. I know he wrote Mama about that. And he'd found it, so –

3:39.5

AS: Your kraut making? You were telling us about beans, but -

HH: Oh, the kraut?

AS: This cannery was known for kraut, wasn't it?

HH: Well, we had kraut. And the trucks would pull in up at the back. It was up on a hill like this and there was a big chute, about as, not quite as wide as the kitchen. And the chute went down like this, with sides up on it. Like a cattle chute almost. And my foster brother Johnnie and I had to sit up there and kick the cabbage [laughing as she continues] down the hill, down, down here, where they – there were things down there that they'd core the cabbage with. You could push the cabbage up like this and it would grind the core out of it.

AS: Oh.

HH: And there would be – there was a place for a man on each side that had it like this [gestures]. I know my brother was still home at this time. And he might have just been on vacation or something but he was accident-prone all the time. And he went to sleep, because they were working day and night.

I thought it would be wonderful to work at night. So, Mama let me work one night; I didn't like it too good [laughter]. And – but Poff went to sleep and fell over like that. And that coring machine went down his shoulder. And that woke him up.

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AS: I hope.

HH: They'd throw them over here. And then it would go to the chopper. It was a thing that chopped them up and then it would go down to the women that – for I had to throw the cans down to pack [laughing]. It was just a thing. Down here was a long, long, what did you call

it? I can't remember. It was a wooden box, like this. And that's where that chain ran that tried to pull me back out of the window. And they would pack the kraut, and I can see them yet. They would pack it but, but. No! I left out the part that you have to put them in the big keg, right? They had to put them in a great big barrel. And the barrel was made out of, what are those trees, Sunny? From down, cypress. Cypress.

SP: Cypress?

HH: Yes. I guess that's what they are. And so, we had enough for about three or four huge big things. They'd put that fresh cabbage down in there, reach down in there. And there's a man down in there with hip boots on, stomping it. He would stomp it down and throw some salt in it. And stomp it down some more. Till he got to the top, and there was a pole in the side of those big barrels like this, and they called them a bung hole. And they would knock the thing out of it to see how much juice was in it. And the women that were packing it would run down there and get them some to drink. They loved it.

And then there would be a man that would have to go down in there again and dish it out into something like a wash tub. And pull it up on a hoist and take it over there and pour it out for the women to pack it. And then it would put on that exhaust thing, go through there and that would cook it. Come down here to the capping machine. I liked that one; I liked to work down there. And it would put a cap on it. And if I was real, real tired, and I thought five o'clock would never come, I'd jam it! [all laugh]

AS: So, women did most of the finish work and putting things in the can.

HH: They did, yes.

AS: Then a few men worked.

HH: Men would here and cap them. And then we had what were exhausts; they were big things like a pressure cooker. So, these things were in a big iron thing that goes around like this [demonstrates] and we had a pulley and we had a – well if it was this long, it was long as this. It was a thing with a thing on the front of it that you could push that basket that was full of cans, and lined up real perfectly, over there to where the exhaust things were, and lift it up with a chain. I've done that, and get it up to where you could get it down in there. And you could get two in each one, and cook them for so many minutes and then get them out. And that was the end of it; they'd have to cool before you could label them.

AS: So, you did pretty much every step in the process.