Oral Histories of West Asheville
What Happened Here, page 6
In late 1940s West Asheville, a group of adolescent boys, one group black and one group white, fought over the use of a pasture near the French Broad River. This territory feud persisted until one winter when a snowstorm covered the pasture, and the two groups congregated around a gigantic snowball. This profile, crafted through the words of Phillip Snelson, explores how the children of West Asheville navigated racial barriers during a time of (forced and chosen) racial segregation. Included in this oral history is the story of Robinson, a black teenager who sacrificed his life trying to save city workers from sewer gases.

Antiques and Collectibles, page 8
This profile piece features Mr. Johnny Penland, retired owner of the Penland and Tuten Auction House. He relays a brief history of the lives and businesses lining the French Broad River in West Asheville, and Penland describes the auction house's changing roles in terms of its significance within the Craven Street area and Asheville's wider community.

East and West, page 18
Albert Fortune, a longtime resident of West Asheville, shares his experiences of growing up in the neighborhood and witnessing its changes during the Depression and World War II. Through his recollections, he reveals a neighborhood that was closely knit, but not without its share of problems and social tension. The West Asheville neighborhood is compared and contrasted with downtown Asheville's historically African-American East End community. Several residents of the neighborhood remember its businesses, its people, and its close sense of community, as well as the impact of urban renewal programs on the neighborhood. The comparison of the two neighborhoods creates a rich image of Asheville's vibrant but complicated past and a sense of hope for its future.

One Day at a Time, page 10
Considering a geographical space in a liminal context, the author reflects on the future site of the New Belgium brewery in an eastern West Asheville neighborhood on the bank of the French Broad river on Craven Street. Juxtaposing the colorful history of the space with a thorough description of its present appearance, the author contextualizes the future plans for the land and situates it in a particular social and historical frame. From Prohibition times to the heydays of traveling circuses, to the agricultural fairs held there and the auction-house and livestock yards of its most recent use, the author ruminates on the past, present, and future of the space by examining the variety of human activity that has taken place there through time.

Craven Street Baptist Church, page 14
This historical profile piece provides a closer look into the Craven Street Baptist church, as relayed through the memories of Mabel Crawford. West Asheville, being a town in the southern part of the United States similar to many in this area, carries within it heavy religious traditions and practices. Ms. Crawford regards the church as an anchor in her life, a life force bringing the people of West Asheville together as a cohesive and supportive community.

Last of a Dying Locale, page 22
Through the eyes of a retired firefighter, Mr. Philip Snelson, this profile piece explores the cultural history of the Craven Street area throughout the twentieth century. The lifelong West Asheville resident discusses the fading phenomenon of American craftsmanship, and he shares stories that document his mother's resiliency and determination. The essence of Snelson's childhood is told through an anecdote of being part of a magic show.

Hope in a Wound, page 26
This profile piece of place reveals immediate impressions of West Asheville, drawing upon images that speak to the ruin of this place in terms of the visible litter and graffiti. But also captured here is the antiquated beauty of this place seen through a lens of the Penland Auction House. The reader comes into an understanding of a place that has been abused and abandoned but they also leave this piece with a better understanding of West Asheville's vibrancy as a place and a community. The Auction House is a place that is both priceless and invaluable, a place whose past utters a renowned splendor.
In the early 1800s, Revolutionary War veteran Captain Edmund Sams established a ferry that crossed the French Broad River at Asheville, NC. The town of Silver Springs grew at the site of the ferry, mostly working class families attracted to a thriving business area. In 1834, James McConnell Smith replaced the ferry with a toll bridge, and Silver Springs became a tourism and distribution hub for western North Carolina for the next century.

According to the Asheville City Directory for 1883/84, the community then contained a good hotel, two stores, and several other industries including a post office, which was discontinued in June of 1885. The Silver Springs Hotel boasted “iron, sulphur, and magnesia springs.” This was the high point of the Craven Street area as a residential center.

In 1911, Smith’s Bridge was reduced to a secondary connection point once the West Asheville Bridge and the extension of Haywood Road between Beecham’s Curve and the river were completed. The land for the road was donated by West Asheville resident, W. E. Logan, a prominent landowner and businessman. In 1918, a Sunday School was established on the corner of Waynesville Avenue and Craven Street, and this congregation grew in 1924 to the Craven Street Baptist Church, which remains an active church even today. (Read Emily Hansen’s piece on page 14.) In 1961, Craven Street Baptist Church relocated to nearby Westwood Place.

The ebb and flow of seasonal activities characterized the Craven Street area from its earliest days. The 20th century saw an annual influx of area tobacco farmers to the Dixie Tobacco Warehouse No. 2 in November. Late summer and early fall brought at least one circus to Asheville each year; those arriving by rail paraded animals across Smith’s Bridge to the Craven Street floodplain where nearly all circuses set up. (Read Jacob Barker’s piece on page 10.) The site was also home to E. W. Pearson’s Western North Carolina Negro Agricultural Fair several times during the 1930s and 40s. Pearson’s Fair ended in 1947. Beginning in 1953, the Craven Street area became a busy regional center for livestock sales, and this legacy extended for over 50 years.

Present day Smith’s Bridge remains an important connecting point in the city, linking the oldest neighborhoods of Asheville to a thriving River Arts District and downtown. April 10, 2012, New Belgium Brewery announced it was building an east coast beer enterprise along the French Broad River, beginning at the base of Smith’s Bridge. The plans include a tasting room, rooftop beer garden, brewery, and distribution warehouse. Roads are to be widened and traffic permanently redirected through the surrounding neighborhoods as West Asheville attempts to handle the traffic of 125 tractor-trailers making daily deliveries. To New Belgium’s credit, they agreed to salvage as many materials from the building site as possible. Wood from Penland’s Auction House, for example, was to be repurposed into the tasting room. (Read about Penland’s history in Amy Borg’s piece on page 8.) Sadly, one year after New Belgium announced its plans to build on the old WNC Livestock Market land, arson burned all the existing buildings to the ground.

Before New Belgium broke ground, before the fire, and before the city hung new stoplights, twelve creative writing undergraduate students and I began collecting oral histories in the neighborhoods around Smith’s Bridge. We worked with five informants ranging in age from 71 to 97 years to document a more inclusive, complex history about the area’s commerce, citizens, government, and everyday relations. Our research allowed us to create this digital and print-based public history artifact that we hope can be distributed through the local library system and made available to New Belgium Brewery patrons. The ground upon which the brewery will rest is rich with more than 200 years of success and struggle in the name of social progress, capitalism, and human living. The stories collected here offer a snapshot of West Asheville from several vantage points, none of which claim to be an authority on the diverse lived experiences of this place.

In peace,

--Dr. Amanda Wray
Department of Literature and Language
UNC Asheville
awray1@unca.edu

--Karen Loughmiller
West Asheville Library

Smith’s Bridge, 1883
courtesy of UNCA Special Collections
What Happened Here
The Place and The Shape

Written by:
Preston Brennan

If you find yourself in West Asheville, there is a good chance you took exit 2 on I-240. It’s probably hard to imagine this part of town before any interstate ran through, but the memories of a generation of boys were shaped because no highway existed. According to Phillip Snelson, the open pasture beckoned him and his friends, including Robinson, Eddie, and others, to get lost in childhood play. It used to be that two slight grades in the land met with a creek running through them. The slopes were not too steep to keep kids from playing, but they were not flat enough for games like football or baseball. A stand of woods sat around the field, letting them play all other sorts of games. Today, there is a group of storage units sitting on the land, and the creek was piped away, threatening to let the gases in the tunnel, Robinson went in to save them, but nobody made it out alive. On the surface, it could look like a pointless death; another young life who did not see the end of Jim Crow. In rescue, they tell you not to be the hero, because it is too easy to add yourself to the victim’s list. But, Robinson literally gave up his life for those of others. When Robinson died, people were in desperate need of a hero, the boys would be in their thirties when segregation started to pick up. While we do not learn about Robinson in classrooms today, he was that hero for a group of boys, black and white, living in a dark time.

From an Interview with Phillip Snelson

“How everything happened is not entirely clear, but a simple snowball made by the white boys made its way down the pasture, becoming a giant wheel of snow by the time it reached the bottom of the hill. Instead of fighting, the two sides ended up playing that day. Both groups were able to find common ground around the snowball that towered above most of their heads. The pasture became a different place from that day forward, and not just because of the snow. The size of the group to play hide and seek in the nearby woods doubled in size. New friendships formed, ones that looked a good deal different than many of those in the rest of the South, let alone the rest of the country. Robinson was one of the black boys in that group. He was also one of the older kids, and one worth looking up to. He made friends with white kids like Phillip Snelson and his brothers. They visited Robinson’s house on Fayetteville Street, and he would go over to the Snelson home on Vandalia Avenue. As is to be expected, the large group of boys grew distant, separated again by the divisive race system they had grown up in. The boys had always gone to different schools, but the pressure of having to grow up kept them away from the pasture and, eventually, away from each other.

“He was the type of guy who’d do anything for you,” Phillip Snelson said of Robinson. Within a group of boys who were ahead of their time, Robinson stood out even brighter as a selfless friend. He met his end at the bottom of a manhole off of Louisiana Avenue, about the last place his life should have ended. Some city workers had succumbed to gases in the tunnel, Robinson went in to save them, but nobody made it out alive. On the surface, it could look like a pointless death; another young life who did not see the end of Jim Crow. In rescue, they tell you not to be the hero, because it is too easy to add yourself to the victim’s list. But, Robinson literally gave up his life for those of others. When Robinson died, people were in desperate need of a hero, the boys would be in their thirties when segregation started to pick up. While we do not learn about Robinson in classrooms today, he was that hero for a group of boys, black and white, living in a dark time.

“He was the type of guy who’d do anything for you,” Phillip Snelson said of Robinson. Within a group of boys who were ahead of their time, Robinson stood out even brighter as a selfless friend. He met his end at the bottom of a manhole off of Louisiana Avenue, about the last place his life should have ended. Some city workers had succumbed to gases in the tunnel, Robinson went in to save them, but nobody made it out alive . . .”
As we enter the building, light filters through tall windows, spilling over an eclectic collection of chairs, arranged in neat, if somewhat uneven rows. Along the walls, boxes and trays labeled with little yellow numbers lie filled with miscellany that glimmers dully in the afternoon sun. An aluminum tea kettle rests next to a collection of woodworking chisels—a box overflowing with costume jewelry sparkles. Books, cookware, clocks, and treasure chests poke out, here and there, among the confetti. Right now, on this blustery Monday afternoon, the Penland Auction house is quiet and empty. But on Friday night, that will change. "It's a big family thing here, on Friday nights, " says Mr. Johnny Penland, retired owner. "Some people don't even come to buy, they just come to meet friends. " He laughs. "And then they make a mistake, they raise their hand, and they buy things." Back in 1955, Mr. Penland's father opened Penland's Used Furniture on Haywood Road in Asheville's West End. After graduating high school and spending a couple of years working for newspapers both locally and in Myrtle Beach, Mr. Penland attended Auctioneering school and started Auctions at the furniture store's Craven Street warehouse. The warehouse was repurposed from Civilian Conservation Corps barracks that had been abandoned with the advent of World War II and the disbandment of the CCC. The Auction House stood at the edge of the Craven Street Stockyards. The Craven Street Area was home to Logan's Showgrounds and the center of West Asheville's livestock trade before Patton Avenue cut West End into the East/West Neighborhood.

The building that had hosted the Auction House was already falling apart by the time the Penlands began holding auctions there. A long, low building with rotting rafters and permanent populations of wild birds, the Craven Street Warehouse hosted the Penland Auction for nearly thirty years. For two months out of the year, though, the Auctions were cleared out, and tobacco processors moved in, cleaning, drying, curing, and pressing Western North Carolina's major cash crop. The building, according to Mr. Penland, "was the greatest nesting place for birds. We had to cover our stuff on that side of the building with plastic tarps to keep the bird droppings off of it." By the time the tobacco pressers had been in the building two months, the tobacco scraps and bird droppings covered the entire warehouse. "And when they got ready to leave, they would sweep all the things up and put them in containers and ship it to where they made their chewing tobacco. So I wouldn't recommend chewing tobacco." Until recently, the building lay abandoned at the edge of the land where New Belgium will build their new brewery. Its wood walls were dark and water stained, and someone, perhaps a local graffiti artist, had spray painted the face of a tiger on its south wall.

Unfortunately, the entire building, which New Belgium had hoped to repurpose yet again, fell victim to the arson that occurred early in April 2013. But the ashes of the old building have little to do with the Auction House's current vitality. Moved into a new home in Swannanoa, the auction business, Mr. Penland assures us, is alive and well. "Down there," he says, referring to the Craven Street neighborhood, "there was a hesitation on some people to have their items sold . . . because of the location. Frankly, we're getting people coming here who would not go down there to buy or sell." He tells us that the Swannanoa community has been more than welcoming, and that new faces have joined the loyal attendees of the Friday night auctions.

When we ask him why he thinks people keep coming back, he laughs. "We had a good working relationship . . . We didn't play games with people, you know!"

written by:
amy borg

"people have told us we treat them like family . . . "

from an interview with johnny penland

antiques and collectibles
penland's auction house

spagnola's tiger on penland's auction house courtesy of amanda wray
The ambiguity of this road is now its most dominant characteristic. Just as there are no sidewalks, there are no lane markers on Craven Street. I trudge down the side of the neglected paved road or over dried and cracking tire ripples just off the road’s shoulder, especially when one of the eight cars I count drives by. Peering through a chain-link fence, the old livestock and storage buildings are covered in colorful graffiti, the only expressive or bright colors on the entire property. Tags of “Valet,” “Old Crow,” and “Roda” spread across the side of one of the decrepit storehouses facing the street, as well as other, less legible tags. Dried and dead weeds line the outer walls of the other buildings on the property, which number almost a dozen. There is much I cannot see, but notable over the crude graffiti tags is a technicolor mural of a tiger sprayed by local artist Dustin Spagnola. The mural is a curious kaleidoscope of color: A floral background from which the fierce yet benevolent-seeming tiger emerges. As Heraclitus said thousands of years ago, “Every newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers.”

In the very-near-future, New Belgium Brewing will break ground on their latest brewery right here on what is called a “brownfield.” A brownfield is a previously-developed area which has since fallen out of use, and New Belgium prefers to build in these places “to prevent taking agricultural land out of production or eliminating natural habitat, to lovingly bring what was once a source of jobs and industry back into productive use, and to find a location near other amenities, increasing density and walkability.”

These objectives seem studied and intentionally in concert with Asheville’s local culture. But how will New Belgium use the history of this land to engineer a dynamic present-space for the people who live here and the city which will be affected by its presence? This space has seen millions of footprints, some belonging to two-legged animals, some four. Known by those in the area who remember this space in use at all as Logan’s Showgrounds, this land was home to the largest livestock auction and market in Western North Carolina. But its use has varied over the decades, and besides hosting the well-known Penland’s Auction, Logan’s Showgrounds also hosted numerous nationally-renowned circuses, especially in the 1920s and 30s, as well as hosting at least three times the Buncombe County Negro Agricultural Fair. Today, it gives a pedestrian an impression of the liminal, of a place no longer what it was and not yet what it will be. As I begin walking north, it is ghostly quiet. There is an unpaved turn-around immediately off of Haywood Road, with small-dried-up canyons of tire tracks in the dirt littered with plastic bags, cigarette butts, and soda cans. Across from that sits Burger Bar, ostensibly open for decades now and unaltered in its outward appearance: a small, dusty-blue-colored house of an establishment, with simple, capitalized black lettering placed directly onto the faded white eaves of the road-side of the building. The windows are secured with black iron bars. Half a dozen cars are parked outside in the gravel lot, but I hear nothing from the open door leading inside.

It is difficult to imagine how differently this place has appeared over the last century. An article from The Asheville Citizen dated Saturday, October 5, 1929 announced “World’s Greatest Circus Again Comes to Town.” This was Barnum and Bailey’s “Greatest Show on Earth,” which visited Asheville at this location several times over four decades. The article describes the main tent’s dimensions as “700x550 feet, seating 13,000 people, five rings, six stages.” The sheer numbers of people who attended the performances from the surrounding area is an idea dissonant to the now over-grown landscape and decrepit buildings standing here. But if one is imaginatively-inclined, perhaps one can see Y asao the wonder elephant meandering in slow, heavy steps about the grounds, or Hugo Zacchini being shot from a cannon inside the Big Top toward a net hundreds of feet away with “...a loud detonation -a flash of flame...”

But there were also more locally-relevant events and gatherings at Logan’s Showgrounds. E.W. Pearson organized the first ever Buncombe County District Agricultural Fair in September of 1914 at Pearson’s Farm, and it was held each year during the month of September until Pearson died in 1947. On at least three occasions the Agricultural Fair was held at Logan’s Showgrounds, including the last fair in 1947. Pearson was deeply influenced by Booker T. Washington, and the slogan for the agricultural fair was “Plant early! Dig in now! Plant and hoe, make that home garden grow. Plant it, work it, day and night. So when winter snow is falling, you will sure eat right.” Booker T. Washington and Pearson shared the belief that the vitality of African-Americans living in the Jim Crow South depended on self-reliance and cultivating the skills to provide for themselves. This belief and tradition is now an essential element to Asheville’s culture, as the innumerable “Local Food: Thousands of Miles Fresher” bumper-stickers from the
In September of 1942, a West Asheville News advertisement for that year’s fair described the various activities and events at the fair as including “a brass-band concert, parade, jitterbug contest, greasy pole climb, and cash prizes for the best marching clubs.” Contests were also held for “farm exhibits, poultry, canned fruits, vegetables, and apples.”

So Logan’s Showgrounds has traditionally been a place where people came together for entertainment as well as for the exchange of materials and ideas, it has also acted as a showcase space for the dramatic ebb and flow of urban Ashevillians and rural farmers meeting each other, for residents of the region to interact with outsiders from far away such as tourists, performers, and other merchants. These interactions create Logan’s Showgrounds and the site of the future New Belgium Brewery as a particularly symbolically-charged location in space, and as varying rhythms a melody, sometimes accompanied by harmonies, sounded by time flowing over and through it like the adjacent French Broad River through this valley.

Another article from the Asheville Gazette News appearing on June 6, 1911 details the Prohibition frenzy that gripped the city and the nation during that time. The headline reads “Liquor Will Go in the French Broad.” The article describes how Judge Adams of the Municipal Court ordered “wet goods seized and confiscated” and to be “taken to the new high bridge across the river tomorrow morning and there poured into the historic waters of the French Broad.” The bridge referred to is now known as Smith’s Bridge, and crouches over the French Broad River at the north end of where the future New Belgium Brewery will produce its own “wet goods.” The historic irony will not be missed by Asheville’s drinkers.

The prevailing sentiment among the breweries relocating to the Asheville area seems to be that the mountain water here is of a superior quality, and the city’s renown as “Beer City U.S.A” is desirable for a host city. It would be right for a responsible and informed citizenry to ask what a large-scale operation like New Belgium’s brewery will be doing to help us protect that water. In the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of their website for the Asheville brewery, the company lists some steps they are planning to take in the direction of sustainability: “an anaerobic process water treatment plant to pre-treat wastewater and produce methane to use on site in place of either utility provided electricity or natural gas;” “graywater harvesting and reuse;” “rainwater harvesting and reuse on site;” and “river access.” They are also requiring all of their contractors to certify through Clean Air Carolina.

Exciting future changes planned for this space include an outdoor performance space for concerts and other community events as well as a connection to the city’s proposed bicycle and walking paths along the river. New Belgium’s brewery promises to reconnect the land with its historical uses, to revitalize an area whose strategic geographic location will act as a unifying nexus between the River Arts District and the East-West neighborhood, further coalescing Asheville’s disparate and fragmented locales. It will be up to Asheville’s residents to ensure that these developments meet and exceed the needs and vision of the community to which this brewery will become an integral part and also that the rich history of the land itself and the integrity of the river are honored and respected.

*Logan’s Showgrounds have since burned to the ground due to an act of arson. While the author is not responsible for this travesty, he does feel somewhat prophetic.*
Craven Street Baptist Church  
A Life Force of West Asheville

Written by: Emily Hansen

A silky, ornate couch, royal blue with caramel stitching, sits in a well-kept living room. Objects from her ninety-seven years reside neatly here in her warm home. Little cherubs on the cherry wood sing to me, vases splashed with emerald leafing and art nouveau gold linings. A water color, the silhouette of a couple holding hands, becomes another world within hers. I wonder to myself if the couple is actually Ms. Crawford and her husband, walking to church together down Craven Street, a memory of their life together. Ms. Crawford leads the way through the open door only a few feet into her den. Bible verses christen the hallway and their stitching reflects the etchings within her heart and mind, a lifetime of prayers and Christian declaration. For Ms. Crawford's entire life, Craven Street Baptist Church was her second home. “For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son and into the arms of her family to meet friends and loved ones in praise and prayer.

Ms. Crawford discovered her second home with her brothers and sisters in 1920 as a very young girl. When her father passed away, Ms. Crawford and her siblings were left with a single mother to support the family. Her overwhelmed mother was grieving and prayer.

West Asheville was an industrial hub. Transportation was evolving, city planners were expanding and factories were exuding sweat and steam. Ms. Crawford’s father spent his days at the ice factory and his evenings resting lackadaisically in a white wicker chair on her porch down Hazel Mill road. Ms. Crawford and her brother would take their little red wagon down to the plant to watch the ice slide down into their “radio flyer” and lumber back home to keep their family’s groceries cool in the icebox. With factories lining Craven Street and the surrounding area, the center for experiencing life outside of the drudgery of work was the community formed because of Sunday school bible teachings and familial gatherings. They all walked hand in hand, laughing and singing songs of the gospel, on their way to meet friends and loved ones in praise and prayer.

Ms. Crawford discovered her second home with her brothers and sisters in 1920 as a very young girl. When her father passed away, Ms. Crawford and her siblings were left with a single mother to support the family. Her overwhelmed mother was grieving and prayer.

The church became the backbone for their entire family, beef casseroles and barbecue dinners wafting the pungency of unconditional love into their home. Every Sunday, without fail, Ms. Crawford was wrapped in bear hugs and lit up by smiles.

The anchor of Ms. Crawford’s life, like those of many in this area, became the Church. Hill’s Chapel was originally formed as a Sunday school in 1918 and became a solid support system for many people in this town. As Ms. Crawford has conveyed, those ties have lasted generations and throughout decades of upheaval and change. The church became a life force of sustainability that tied many families together. Ms. Crawford told me of walking to this quaint cottage every day; her home located not far away on Hazel Mill road where a few folks adopted a small wooden home to meet and study the good word together. The image of her and her sisters holding hands and walking to church beside the meanderings of the cool river becomes a catalyst for my own memories of that kind of communing. Eventually the church was brimming with life and loving brothers and sisters in Christ.

Due to the coming together of so many, Crawford and her brother would take their little red wagon down to the plant to watch the ice slide down into their “radio flyer” and lumber back home to keep their family’s groceries cool in the icebox. With factories lining Craven Street and the surrounding area, the center for experiencing life outside of the drudgery of work was the community formed because of Sunday school bible teachings and familial gatherings. They all walked hand in hand, laughing and singing songs of the gospel, on their way to meet friends and loved ones in praise and prayer.

Ms. Crawford discovered her second home with her brothers and sisters in 1920 as a very young girl. When her father passed away, Ms. Crawford and her siblings were left with a single mother to support the family. Her overwhelmed mother was grieving and forced to work even harder so she could provide for all her children. Her mother refused to let Mabel take up a job and her warm encouragement propelled her child to finish school at Asheville High. Ms. Crawford's mother was a rock for her family and the church became a pillar for all of them, a holy comfort to bring her through this dark time. Every day prayers flooded their home, wrapping them with the warmth of support and strength to help them through. “The church became the backbone for their entire family…”

From an Interview with Mabel Crawford

“The church became the backbone for their entire family…”
a second location was built to make room for the growing number of kinfolk who held fast to their traditions, beliefs and societal responsibilities. From this little Sunday school, Craven Street Baptist church was born. Before Ms. Crawford’s marriage and during the courtship with the love of her life, she spoke of long walks and talks with him, their main destination being the church. West Asheville provided a warm and safe place for two people to gather and know each other in the name of the Lord. This was a healthy way to grow as a couple and one of the few social options in this area.

This church remains a beacon of sustainability, fueling a source of vitality and connectivity between those in West Asheville. Now located on Westwood, this Baptist Church exists a place for philanthropy and coming together.

Craven Street Baptist is the life of this parish, facilitating relationships and bringing the community together through acts of generosity and communion. Ms. Crawford’s husband became a deacon of Craven Street Baptist Church and dedicated himself to the town through his service to the church. During the times her husband met with other deacons, she met with other ladies who planned offerings up for the community. After Ms. Crawford lost her husband, the people of this church held her and her children; they became a second family and a place to be vulnerable. Ms. Crawford was able to give up her suffering to God, while her church family carried her through another dark time with boundless love.

Though she would never have referred to herself as a social worker, that kind of service was what she helped facilitate and infuse into the community around her. Because of this institution, Ms. Crawford had somewhere to gather with like-minded Christians and strategize about how to meet the needs of those around them, within their neighborhood and beyond. During holidays the ladies combined forces, the honey-baked hams and slow roasted turkeys intermingled with fresh cranberries. Even with no special occasion in mind, the support continued to flow out to shut-ins and others in need. Many of those throughout her life are no longer beside her on the pews, but they remain in her heart and her stories. Those that remain continue to do what they can. Charities are still formed and counseling in the shape of prayer helps to permeate this place with an even greater strength. Even the simple kindness of picking up a ninety-seven year old woman, so she can praise and feel the fellowship and support of the town around her, is a small act for a church-goer to do but carries huge weight for Ms. Crawford.

This community shared produce and prayers, created an incredible outlet for togetherness and love. Westwood Baptist Church has been a rock for the community, creating cohesion between families and providing citizens of West Asheville with food, support, and kindness. Ms. Crawford’s life has been an extension of the church’s ideas and in her ninety-seven years she has become a reflection of the impact of the church and the way in which it has kept this community together.

“Time passes and it goes. A lot of my people from my church are gone.”
East and West

Voices from Asheville Neighborhoods

Written by:
Caroline Ketcham

Eleanor Roosevelt arrived by train. It was snowing on that November morning in 1956, as John Boyce had worried; he’d urged Mrs. Roosevelt’s secretary to avoid making travel plans by plane. He worried for good reason. Mrs. Roosevelt was scheduled to speak at the YWCA that night, and a large turnout was expected. Eight hundred people showed up.

“‘When she began,’” Boyce, a founding member of both the first Unitarian fellowship in Asheville and the Asheville chapter of the United Nations Association, says in a 1993 interview, “‘I thought: oh, my goodness. . . . She had the audience in the palm of her hand. You could have heard a pin drop for about an hour. And she spoke as though individually in the audience. I’ve never seen anything like it.’”

The United Nations Association, says in a 1993 interview, “I thought: oh, my goodness. . . . She had the audience in the palm of her hand. You could have heard a pin drop for about an hour. And she spoke as though individually in the audience. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Mrs. Roosevelt came to Asheville to talk about the United Nations. She addressed her speech that night at 13 Grove Street to the newly formed chapter of the United Nations Association. But her very presence ultimately wound up in the [YWCA] . . . downtown.”

Mrs. Roosevelt left Asheville with the impression that it was a “charming place to live.” Many visitors since then have had similar experiences in this vibrant and friendly city. Scratch the surface of its history, though, and a picture emerges of an entirely different Asheville: a picture much more painful, but also much richer.

Driving through the congestion of Patton Avenue in West Asheville, it seems unlikely that a neighborhood as peaceful as the one where Albert Fortune lives could be within a street or two. However, the tranquility of Fortune’s neighborhood and home belies the turmoil and change he has witnessed throughout his 93 years in Asheville.

Fortune has lived in this area nearly his whole life, having moved to West Asheville from Old Fort when he was four. By the 1920s, West Asheville was thriving. Fortune’s neighborhood, Malvern Hills, was built during that time, as were many other middle-class developments. It was a place, he says, where people moved in and stayed for their whole lives.

The neighborhood where he grew up was a quiet and close-knit one where people took care of each other. When the Depression hit Asheville, this community support system was vital. Doctors, Fortune recalls, would provide care even when they were on the brink of being forced out of their homes by foreclosure. “The food stores,” he adds, “were able to feed people out of work by selling to them on credit, and the neighborhoods were small enough that the store owners were acquainted with nearly everybody who lived within miles of their store.”

As they do today, Haywood Road and the small businesses that lined it formed the central artery of the West Asheville neighborhood. One of those was Fortune Hardware. Fortune’s father built the hardware store and opened it in 1919. The trolley line that connected West Asheville with downtown Asheville ended in front of the hardware store, and it became a community center that, Fortune says, “the kids all talked about.”

The hardware store remained open for 76 years. Fortune took over when his father retired, and the store became Davis Ace Hardware when Keith Davis bought it in 1985. By the time it closed, it had become a fixture in the West Asheville community. “The customers we served over so many years in effect created an institution,” Fortune recalls in a 1995 interview with the Asheville Citizen-Times. Lifelong customers remembered the store as a place to find toys that provided childhood delight and a spot for friends and neighbors to meet. Fortune Hardware was another place where people could go for support during hard times. Fortune says his father never turned anyone away during the Depression and always took care of his customers no matter how dire their financial straits.

Other West Asheville residents also recall the closeness of their community. In a 1995 interview, Robert Branson, a retired police captain, remembers the safety and freedom of growing up in West Asheville. His mother, he says, would pack him a lunch and then let him roam all over the neighborhood and up in the hills. Everything one needed was in West Asheville; the grocery and pharmacy were close, and the trolley ran to downtown for those who needed it. Driving anywhere was uncommon. West Asheville was not always an idyllic place to grow up. Fortune recalls tensions that simmered under the surface. He grew up in a “sheltered environment,” he says, “in which sex outside of marriage was [forbidden] and anybody who got involved in a tryst outside of marriage was ostracized.” This burden, he says, fell particularly on the women: “Generally the female suffered because the guys were accepted as just being boys. But the girls who got pregnant had to go off to have their baby with Grandma.” Children who were born out of wedlock were considered bastards with “sluts for mommas” and denied opportunities throughout their lives. Racial inequality was part of everyday life.

Fortune’s father employed a black man as a truck driver for many years and considered him a close friend, but would have never thought of promoting him past a manual labor position. It was a warm and friendly community, but not for everyone.

Other neighborhoods in Asheville had a similarly close yet conflicted atmosphere. Looking at Andrea Clark’s 1970 photographs of Asheville’s East End in a 2008 interview, Willie May Brown reminisces about her old neighborhood. Feldman’s Grocery was a “congregating place for young people in the community.” Like Fortune Hardware, the business was passed from father to son. The barber shop next to Feldman’s had a “booming business,” Brown recalls, “because when the men...
got paid on Saturdays, they always went to get haircuts and some even got shaved there." Mr. Albert’s café and Ms. Minnie Grant’s cafeteria served neighborhood residents who could not eat in white-only restaurants in downtown Asheville.

Since the 1880s, and dating back perhaps even farther to the height of slavery in the mountains, the East End has been a black community. Segregation separated the neighborhood from the rest of downtown Asheville, and it developed as an independent community. Residents had their own gardens, businesses, and churches within the neighborhood. "We had cab stands, we had Beland’s Fish House, we had barber shops, we had everything," Brown says.

Brown grew up in the East End, and she remembers its past fondly. "When people say 'it took a village to raise a child,' it didn’t take a village. It took a community; it took caring neighbors and friends."  

"It was a peaceful time, and it was a happy time," she adds. "And it was a time that made people strong."

But the East End, Brown says, was also a place of poverty. Substandard housing was common. "Houses did not have electricity; houses did not have any central heating components available; they did not have closets. City leaders did not see a vibrant community, but a blight on the city. As the fever for urban renewal swept the country, many homes and businesses in the East End were razed to make way for new housing, public buildings, and parking garages. The neighborhood was transformed into a place its former residents barely recognized. Most of them had no voice in this process."

For many, the pain and anger have not faded. "You don’t want to talk to me about that," says Minnie Jones in a 1994 interview. "Cause it goes way back and it goes very deep and it can get very nasty." Jones, a longtime community advocate, witnessed the damage to these communities firsthand. "See, Eagle St. used to be for black people, all businesses and houses, people had places to live. . . . That’s a sore spot with all black people, especially those that have been here any length of time." Brown agrees. "Sometimes we wonder about why Asheville [hasn’t] renovated some of these homes and eliminated the crunch they have for low-income housing. Question for me. I tell you, unbelievable." . . .

Fortune left Asheville to spend three years in the Navy during World War II. After the war, he and other returning veterans came back changed. "I came home from the Navy much less naive than when I went in, and so did a few thousand other Ashevilleans," Fortune says. "The guys and a few gals who had gone to war, when they came back home, they were no longer parochial. They were more ambitious, more tolerant of other people." Fortune went to college at Cornell and served as a communications officer on the Lewis Hancock, and his exposure to different people from all walks of life gave him a more worldly perspective on the values held at home. Through the people he met, he encountered moral, social, sexual, and religious values he had never seen at home. "I had been exposed to guys from all over. I had a roommate from Texas, I had a different roommate at Cornell who was Jewish, and I'd been raised as a Protestant, so that helped me understand other cultures a little bit. I had another friend who was a Mormon, I had another friend who was the son of a rich banker down in Alabama and it was customary in that family for all of the husbands to have – what can I call them? – second wives." He didn’t agree with all of these values, but he had learned that the world was a much bigger place than his West Asheville neighborhood. A significant push for integration began after the war, and Fortune watched as integration took place in Asheville over the following decades. He recalls that resistance to housing integration was "especially a West Asheville problem." At times, he believed, people were "unwilling to make things happen faster than they could," and the road to integration was a bumpy one. His wife was a third-grade teacher at Vance Elementary, and she often came home with first-hand accounts of the tensions resulting from integration at the school. He listened to these stories over the years and found his views changing: "Well, the black kids still have an uphill fight, and I am very sympathetic to any minority group in high school or in college at this stage. They have the job of learning when they are being trampled on, and when it's intentional." . . .

The East End was not the only historically black neighborhood in Asheville. Stumptown, Hill Street, Southside, and Burton Street were all thriving communities before urban renewal took place. In its aftermath, residents lost jobs, neighbors, history, and their sense of place. Neighborhoods now don’t look like they did in 1920 or 1950. Gone are the Depression days when grocers would advance staples to needy families and everyone knew each other by name. Much has been lost since that time. Conversely, much has been gained as Asheville and the wider world undertake the messy process of building a more accepting society.

Today, many residents of these communities refuse to let them die. From the Burton Street Community Association to the YMI Cultural Center in the East End to other community groups throughout Asheville, people are working to keep the histories and identities of these neighborhoods alive and remembered. These communities cannot be rebuilt as they were in 1920, nor should they be. But if we want to emulate their closeness and warmth, we can begin by valuing our neighbors and looking at our city with a deeper eye for history. "Albert Fortune passed away six weeks after this interview on May 12, 2013. He was 97 years of age."
Last of a Dying Locale
The Cultural History of Craven Street

Written by: Skyler Lawes

As Preston Brennan and I walk into the room we reserved with Mr. Philip Snelson at the West Asheville Library, we realize it is an absurdly large room for the three of us to have a simple conversation in, but it will do just fine. We begin to amble toward a unit in the phalanx of tables arranged throughout the room until an old wooden rocking chair in the far corner catches my eye. As I make my way toward it I ask if either of them have any interest in using it, and they simply reply no as they seat themselves. I find myself entranced by its old hand-made craftsmanship in the sterile sea of white made-in-China stock tables and plastic-fused-with-metal burgundy chairs illuminated in the pale fluorescent light overhead. I lift it, and sparing my back no mercy, lug it over to the table we had chosen. I then seat myself probably the only thing in the room that was made in America, other than the three of us. Preston and I rummage though our packs for pen and paper and place our recorders on the table as Mr. Snelson clears his throat and paper and place our recorders on the table as Mr. Snelson clears his throat and

Philip Snelson's story is a wonderful piece of typical twentieth century Americana in which he sees countless highs and lows in the ongoing evolution and regression of West Asheville for over three quarters of a century. And yet it all started with a bizarre, if not tragic beginning. Philip was born in 1937 right on the cusp of The Great Depression just prior to the beginning of World War II. He was the youngest of five children, born at (what is now) Mission Hospital and raised at number fourteen Meers Avenue until the age of five. His father was a distant man, who wasn't particularly happy and had only one passion in life; he loved to read. Ironically he lost his life in 1941, in the midst of the greatest war mankind has ever known. For all his love of wars, though, he didn't lose his love of life, but he didn't live his life on the battlefield; he lost it to a .32 revolver held in his own hand in his own life. Philip's oldest brother joined the Navy and his brother with their mother. In the meantime Philip was beginning his schooling and starting to meet some fellas that would become his nearly life-long friends.

Philip's mother has the air of a woman who wasn't particularly happy and had only one passion in life; she loved to read. Ironically he lost his life in 1941, in the midst of the greatest war mankind has ever known. For all his love of wars, though, he didn't lose his love of life, but he didn't live his life on the battlefield; he lost it to a .32 revolver held in his own hand in his own life. Philip's oldest brother joined the Navy and his brother with their mother. In the meantime Philip was beginning his schooling and starting to meet some fellas that would become his nearly life-long friends.

I say nearly life-long, as Philip is sadly bearing the burden of being the last living member of his childhood group of pals. One of his oldest and closest friends, Eddy Teague, passed away just two weeks prior to our interview. Philip has fond, albeit fading memories of his time at Acock Elementary and Hoffletcher Junior High. Some of his friends he made in classes at these schools, but many of his connections in youth came from his time as a Middle Flethcher Mighty Mighty. The Mighty Mights were formed as a combination of Hoffletcher and David Milnard junior high, to allow for a large enough class size to create a regional football team. Here he met Eddy Teague, George Landers, Bobby Lovett, and many other pals that have faded into memory.

While Philip enjoyed his time at school and playing football, his fondest memory from his youth was when Bobby Brown came to town. Mr. Brown had a science fair show he used to take from school to school, awting the kids with his magnificent feats and sleight of hand. One day he was to do his show at Acock, and beforehand he moneyed on down to Philip's house and asked him to volunteer
to come up on stage when the time came. His reason for asking the young Mr. Snelson this request was that he and his son, a boy about Philip's age, had a seven foot long snake; a snake that Philip had actually gotten to play with before in the company of Mr. Brown's son. So Philip agreed that he would, and Bobby Brown instructed him that he would pick him out of the auditorium. When the time came, and the show was finished, Mr. Brown asked for a volunteer. Philip then raised his hand amidst a sea of others, and Bobby Brown scanned the crowd until he found his accomplice, beckoning him toward the stage. Well Philip went up on stage and Mr. Brown said he had a very special project he wanted him to do. He wanted Philip to open up this case and reach in there and bring out whatever it may be. Young Philip then mocked his surprise as he pulled out the massive reptile to the gasps of his peers in the crowd; he tells me he got quite the kick out of that.

When Philip Snelson was twelve years old, he was grocery shopping down at Brown's Market with his mother. Back then there weren't any big chain stores, and all the grocers and residents of the area knew each other on a first name basis. While shopping with his mother, Philip was approached by another Mr. Brown, the store's owner, and asked how old he was. When Philip replied twelve, Mr. Brown said to let him know when he turned thirteen. And he did. Philip started working at age thirteen and hasn't stopped since. While working at Brown's market, he delivered groceries on bicycles to both black and white communities, and hardly ever got tipped from either; he did however meet his wife by way of working there. Not necessarily by delivering groceries, but because he worked with her two brothers and delivered groceries near her house often. When Philip was working his last year at Brown's market, he married her at the age of twenty-two; she was sixteen. When he tells us this story he laughs and says he "robbed the cradle." It seems to be part of a common theme of cultural relativism that comes to light throughout our interview; a theme that is rather pronounced whenever gender or race comes into play.

Later in our interview I inevitably ask Mr. Snelson about the elephant in the room. The giant elephant that's in any room when discussing virtually the entire history of a small city in twentieth century Appalachia: Did he experience much racial tension throughout it all?

"Not what you'd say real racial tension," he replied. He then explained with one of the most interesting anecdotes on race I have ever heard. There was a pasture in the shape of a valley near where Philip lived out his adolescence that he and his friends would go and play in, with a nice creek dead center at the bottom. A perfect battlefield it proved, as all the black kids from Burton Street would come in and run them off with their slingshots when they had the higher ground. Well, Philip and his friends were quite fond of that little valley they called Meers Hollow, and would soon return with even greater numbers and even more slingshots to run the intruders off.

This tug-o-war for Meers Hollow went on for some time, before a fateful snowstorm came in and buried the entire area in several inches (back in the 1900s when snow used to stick). Of course, like any good teenage boys, Philip and his friends decided to make the most of this snow and see if they could create the world's largest snowball. They began at the monstrosity of the snowball. From their creation, and sure enough so did all the black kids from the other side. Instead of running each other off all the kids, black and white alike, stood around grinning and exchanging whistles at the monstrosity of the snowball. From that point on they all became friends and shared Meers Hollow as equals. Funny what a little snow can do.

After the good ol' days at Meers hollow faded away and Mr. Snelson started his family, he worked at Sealtest Dairy until he was so disgusted at the cowardice of his superior that he threw his uniform at him and left. Philip then ended up at the Asheville Fire Department, with his old childhood friends Eddy Teague and Evan Ballard. He would work there for nearly half a century until old age beckoned him to take it easy at the West Asheville Parks and Recreation department, where he works to this day.

"Bobby Brown had a Science Fair show and he would go from school to school..."
If one were to hover above West Asheville they would see rolling shades of green mountains where high and low peaks fold into each other. In the valleys, one can spot flat metal roofs and long straight away roads. My converse shoes pound across the River Link Bridge and I see a place resting below. A place of ruin and brokenness. Tumbling down the banks of the river are mounds of white plastic bags, brown paper sacks and aluminum cans. The trash has become comfortable here, clinging to the moist dirt and hiding away under long sharp rocks. The river bank has become the home of this abuse.

I walk further down the bridge. The metal guardrail is sketched with initials and dates. I stop and wrap my fingers around the cold metal, my thumb traces the inscriptions “JR,” “9-11-91.” The French Broad River flows beneath me and cars rumble behind my back. The river runs wide; its fullness stretches broadly, like a coal miner’s back. I look around and follow my footsteps back over the bridge and I find myself on Craven Street. A narrow curve slithers around a baby blue building. Its front says “burgers.” Simple, to the point, there’s no denying what this blue square box is famous for. The curve straightens to a black top straight away. A fence, long metal threads laced together into perfect triangles, locks away the Ashevile Stockyard and the Penland Auction House.

The auction house comes into view. Cattycornered on the left side of the stockyard. One can step up onto the cement block leading into the auction house by two sagging pieces of wood. The pieces are supported by a metal railing, it curves around itself, its own sleek blackness. A wooden roof held up by the tall sticks shelter those people who once came to the auction house. Not to buy antiques but to catch up with their best friend or to note exactly which woman their husband keeps bringing up at the dinner table.

Past the wooden porch the building stands as a jumble of panels of metal. It can already hear the rain from the inside. It chatters, ting, ting. It reminds people of the past, how everything inside once belonged to someone else.

The door is an antique itself. A red wood stripped with rusted pieces of iron. The door reminds passersby that they’ve moved to a new location.

Before a clamon of voices could be heard behind these doors. Every Friday night. 6pm sharp. Inside people slithered around rows of metal chairs. Regulars staked claim on the few seats with plush cushions. People mingled and touched hands, lifted their ball caps to say hello. A bell rung out and the soft manner of voices halted. Time for the auction.

Velvet couches with glossy wooden trim are carried out of the back. Next come tall vases etched with pink roses, choked by deep green vines. Each item that is brought out brings more noise from the crowd.

The auction house is just a memory now. It settles here and waits. Waits to be occupied again, by a stray cat or a lonely dog. It waits to be pillaged and devoured.

If one were to stand down here, down below in the stockyard, they would see shades of gray ash and deep black. They would see nothing new, only the used and scorched. Consumed in a flame, now all that remains are burned panels of wood and metal. Evidence of this place only exist in feeble memories.

Still this place, West Asheville, stands as an antique, something from long past traditions, something precious and kept by people. This place, this ruin, clings to its past. In these old wounds there is no hope of transformation. There is only reverence for what has already been accomplished.

Hope in a Wound
Impressions of West Asheville

Written by: Chelsea Ensley

From an Interview with Johnny Penland

“The very first meeting of RiverLink was held in our building...”
Acknowledgments

In order to produce this Oral History Public Artifact, UNC Asheville Creative Writing students and I collaborated with two community partners—Chris Joyell at Asheville Design Center and Karen Loughmiller at West Asheville Public Library—in addition to the indispensable support of five oral history research informants.

This project began with Asheville Design Center’s desire to create a bus stop on Craven Street that would represent a more inclusive, complex history of the ever-changing West Asheville neighborhood. Asheville Design Center is a non-profit organization that facilitates human-centered design within urban neighborhoods, and human subjects research is a vital component to their work. Chris invited me (and by extension, UNC Asheville students) to join the West Asheville Bus Project research team. Other members of this team included Jasper Adams, Alex Cole, Susannah Gechhart, Nic Goodman, Susanne Hackett, Scott Hubner, Yuri Koslen, Megan McGuinn, Collin O’Berry, Alesha Reardon, and Yeager St. John. Collectively, we represented city government, the transit authority, local artists, graphic designers, historians, and community activists.

Local historian Karen Loughmiller identified reliable research informants who could speak knowledgeably about the rich history of West Asheville’s commerce, citizens, government, and everyday relations. She made the initial contact with all oral history informants and provided invaluable historical documentation in the form of images, newspaper articles, and personal stories. Karen has worked at the West Asheville library for twenty-five years, and her enthusiasm and support of this project proved immeasurably valuable.

Amy Borg, an aspiring graphic designer and creative writer, enabled this Oral History collection to go digital. She was gracious enough to see the project to completion, even though she graduated from UNC Asheville the semester before it was ready for press.

Finally, this project would be impossible without the generosity of our five oral history informants. Philip Snelson, Albert Fortune, Mabel Crawford, Johnny Penland, and Minnie Jones offered us their time, stories, reflections, and photos so that we could better appreciate how lived experiences shape the realities of a community.

—Dr. Amanda Wray, UNC Asheville Literature and Language Department