

Interview of Paul Wilson, Born in Buxton, 1992

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Paul Wilson, who was born in Buxton, Iowa and grew up there before moving with his family, to Haydock, Iowa and subsequently to Des Moines, Iowa where he spent the rest of his life. This interview was done by Francis Hawthorne, Project Director for the African American History Project, financed by the Iowa Humanities Board, and done on Thursday, May 13, 1992.

Frances Hawthorne: “What was it like growing up in childhood, in Buxton, Iowa...? What were your earliest memories of being there, as a child, not only as a child or at school, or what was it like on a general day? What did you do for passing the time?”

Paul Wilson: “It was very exciting! We had a fellow, by the name of Walter Hutchinson, who was the secretary of the Y.M.C.A., I don’t know whose place he took when he came there. He told me that he wanted me to have a Boys Glee Club and he had me to go out and look for boys I could get to come and be in the glee club. I got quite a few. Two of the fellows wher (sic) of that group, Charles Taylor and Nathaniel Atchinson, (he’s dead now). He had a sister that lives in Waterloo, Iowa. I got all the fellows together and they made a lot of good music, but the most embarrassing thing that happened, was that i was the only one that couldn’t sing. All I was doing was hollering and they thought I was doing good. I did this to keep them from thinking I had made a mistake.” “We came up to Des Moines, and I use to go to the summer camp, (the Crocker Branch, Y.M.C.A.). At camp we use to do singing ... What they called ‘community singing’. One of the members was named Claude. He had a brother that use to sing that lived in Chicago, Illinois. “Do you remember George Dewey Watson?”

Frances Hawthorne: “I’ve heard of him.”

Paul Wilson: “Dewey was to be singing with Horace Height, out at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, (on the north side), and had gotten into the ‘spirit, but the wrong spirit’ and was unable to sing, so he got Claude to sing. I was surprised to know him, but I was a friend of Claude and his brother Harold. (Harold lives in California now). We were out to a camp and singing, and this big fellow was singing, and Harold touched me by the arm and said, ‘if you will keep quiet, the rest of us won’t get off key.’ I knew that I didn’t drink, and I couldn’t understand that statement.” (I don’t know if the group had voted to get rid of me or what, but I know that I stopped singing.)”

Frances Hawthorne: “Was that the group that sang in Buxton, Iowa?”

Paul Wilson: “No ... that was the group that sang from the Crocker Branch Y here in Des Moines. Singing with the group maybe was a reminder or fact for me to recognize that I couldn’t sing. But nobody wanted me to sing!”

Frances Hawthorne: “One way of saying, “stop singing.”

Paul Wilson: “Yeah, yeah.”

Frances Hawthorne: “You were telling me that your dad, Jacob Wilson was agent for the Company.”

Paul Wilson: “Yes ... the Buxton Coal Company. I don’t know if that’s what they called it or not, but Buxton is the one that sent him out to get workers to come out and work in Buxton and mine the coal, and he did. He got a lot of people.

Frances Hawthorne: “Did he go out of state to do that?”

Paul Wilson: “Yes. I don’t know where he was in the south, but he went through the south to get workers. On one trip he got a man to commit himself to come (and that same night ... or maybe it was the next night), the man told him that “they were planning to do bodily harm to him, because he was taking the cheap labor out of the south.” Dad cancelled his plans, got some women’s clothes, and that was the way he got out. He dressed up in women’s clothes and got out of the south.” (don’t know when it was, and I don’t remember where, but this is what he told me.)”

“I have a brother-in-law of mine, Tommy Mitchell. I was telling him this story one day; (about dad putting on women’s clothes). He said, ‘your dad brought us out of the south’, and I don’t know where they came from.”

Frances Hawthorne: “You are talking about the tommy Mitchell’s family?”

Paul Wilson: “Yes. Tommy Mitchell’s family.”

Frances Hawthorne: “So, your dad went down south, and a whole family would come back.”

Paul Wilson: “Yes, they would put money into the bank, (now I didn’t see anything, but I was told it was \$50,000 and that was a lot of money in those days) but that was to take care and for bringing a family and their belongings, on the train. I don’t know if any men came out of the south and then sent personally for their families, but dad went prepared to bring them all up. It was quite a thing!”

“My nephew was asking about, ‘how in the world could his grandfather have \$50,000, in the bank, in his name, to bring laborers out to work in the mines, and died without a penny in his pocket. (they talk back and forth about this in the family ... They’re strong!) That’s where I got that story, but dad didn’t tell me anything about that \$50,000.”

Frances Hawthorne: “That would be a tremendous amount of trust, wasn’t it?”

Paul Wilson: “Yes. But you see in Buxton, (and I guess that’s why I am so hipped up about it) ‘if your word isn’t any good, then forget about the rest of it.’ Now they did that! Dad didn’t have anything, but they put that amount of money into the bank (in his name) for him to bring out the families, (and didn’t know how many,) but he was to bring out the families, (and didn’t know how many,) but he was to bring them up north, and that was to face the white miners. They had a union, and they already had threatened to stop work or something, so these people already had black workers then; but there weren’t enough of them to make any difference. So, when they start bringing all the black families to Buxton, and the company had 200, maybe 500 or 600 acres ... they gave you about half an acre, or something like that, for you to have a garden, so you can grow your own garden. This lady, Mrs. Tate, called me, (till her dying day,) ‘her boy’. She had beans, and she needed bean poles. She put me into business when she told me she needed some bean poles. I went down into a reservoir

and cut down those willow trees, came back and sold them to her for bean poles. And of course she told others that I sold bean poles, so ... "I was in business at an early age."

Frances Hawthorne: "That's great!"

Paul Wilson: "I think that is one of the things that stuck with me, because one of my strengths' is in selling. I like selling! I was selling at a very tender age, bean poles, newspapers and magazines. I believe that magazines was at that time called, 'Liberty Magazine.' That's been a long time ago. I was always able to sell these things."

Frances Hawthorne: "Did they have a newspaper then, with reference to...?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes, there was a family there by the name of Baker, and I think they published a paper, but I don't remember if they had a paper or not. It was printed elsewhere, (just like the Bystander). I sent it to Brother Wilkinson; because I was working then with them trying to establish their history in the background; (my brother-in-law is one of the founders of the NBA.) There was a paper that had a story in it (of a girl here,) stating that she was the first black woman pharmacist in Buxton, Iowa, but she wasn't."

Frances Hawthorne: "Who was it?"

Paul Wilson: "I can't think of it now, but this article was in the paper, and she was the black pharmacist in Buxton, Iowa."

Frances Hawthorne: "So, you are saying, the lady in Buxton, Iowa was the first black pharmacist?"

Paul Wilson: "That's right!"

Frances Hawthorne: "Yes, I've seen that, but don't ask me where, but I said, 'my goodness, it was very impressive. A woman pharmacist at that time!'"

Paul Wilson: "But the things, well, I guess ... is when I look at a lot of things happening now ... we had three schools there, and we had black teachers in two schools, and two black principals, and here in the capital city, you couldn't get one black in the schools at the lowest grade. You see, that didn't make sense."

Frances Hawthorne: "So, technically, they would be considered as the first 'black teachers in Iowa'?"

Paul Wilson: "I would think so, as I don't have anything to back me up on that. But when you go back then, (the high school burned down in 1907), and they had some black teachers there..."

Frances Hawthorne: "And did they replace them?"

Paul Wilson: "No ... they didn't replace them."

Frances Hawthorne: "What happened to the students?"

Paul Wilson: "I guess they had gone to Oskaloosa or Albia, I really don't know. But then they say... That ... they had three grade schools, one high school. They had two grade schools where they had black teachers, principal and one white school. They had a lot of swedes that came in, and they

settled in a certain area. They wanted a school, but they didn't stop the blacks from entering there. One or two went to the school, because it was convenient where they lived."

Frances Hawthorne: "Where there many of the differences in where stores were operated and owned by blacks?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes ... They had a drug store, 'Thomas's Drug Store', but that was owned by whites. I don't remember having but one drug store. No, in Coopertown, they had a black drug store, and I'm almost sure it was Cooper's." This was a little area they called, "Coopertown."

Frances Hawthorne: "You said, that you dad was an agent, do you remember how long he was, also that meant he was away from home a long time, is that right?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes ... that must have been ... (I was pretty young and dad was sick most of the time they were getting ready to move, as the coal mines in Muchikanock was playing out, as they had used up most of the coal. That could have been one of the reasons the union had decided to set up some requirements for the company. I knew that dad was made an agent and they put this money into the bank for him, and he went out and brought in blacks."

Frances Hawthorne: "In other words, even tho the union set up requirements, they still couldn't staff a black man in that position?"

Paul Wilson: "That's right! Because this kind of order of plans, they didn't have the company over the barrel... because if they wanted to work, they would 'have to straighten up and fly right.' They had enough blacks coming in there, and that's why you will find in many instances, there were more blacks living in Buxton than whites. Not to stir up any problems, the whites were in a very awkward position, because slavery hadn't been too far behind everybody. Then, living with the blacks 'don't start nothing, because they had nothing to lose."

Frances Hawthorne: "Did you have anyone besides the company officials who where in charge of the town, or did everybody work together so well that they weren't needed?"

Paul Wilson: "No, they didn't have anything going for them, other than, you doing what they told you to do, (then) in the mines, so everybody acted accordingly." They had 'constables' in town ... black and white. Ed Peterson, was the last constable I remember, (he was white)."

Frances Hawthorne: "Were any black constables?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes, there were black constables."

Frances Hawthorne: "Did they do much of the patrolling, and solving problems?"

Paul Wilson: "Yes. They were also, the 'justice of the peace.' I don't remember if they had black 'justice of the peace' or not."

Frances Hawthorne: "Was that before the days we had radios, or did you have things like that then?"

Paul Wilson: "No. I don't remember having those things either. But when I came here from Haydock, having one of those little ... (can't remember what they called it) but wait a minute ... they did have ..."

Edward Peru had a small portable radio, that was operated by batteries. We didn't have any at the time, but ... back then in 1925 we had a little thing called..."

Frances Hawthorne: "Was it like a gramophone?"

Paul Wilson: "No, it was like a ... 'crystal phone set'.

Frances Hawthorne: "Now-a-days, Iowa is known for its tornado's. Did you have anything like that then, and what did do?"

Paul Wilson: "Lord yes! We tried to stay in the house. They tell the tale of, 'the cooking stove being in the sky' and I didn't see anything like that. However, they tell me of (and I don't remember if, because I was pretty young) of this cooking stove!"

Frances Hawthorne: "Going back to Buxton, and I know you are quite proud of your dad, being an agent...what other things in Buxton you can say you were really proud of and looking back, you were glad they happened and etc."

Paul Wilson: "Well, what I see today, I was proud of everything that we have in Buxton. I couldn't believe it, my brother Joe, worked very hard trying to get black teachers down there. He talked to a fellow, (who was white) who he worked with and went to the show with. They came here in Des Moines, and decided they were going to go to the show, and was shown a sign telling you where you set at in the theater. Now, that didn't make any sense ... no kind of sense at all!

Frances Hawthorne: "I remember you saying, 'if you got the people from Buxton, they would fill up a theater and there wouldn't be any place for the white folk to sit."

Paul Wilson: "In Buxton, there two ladies, they called them the 'Landlord Sisters' (both French)...and they ran the theater ... and had everything on the second floor of the Y.M.C.A. When you go in there, whites and everybody else went in there, and didn't interfere with you. It would have been a nice thing if they had brought the KKK into Buxton."

Frances Hawthorne: "Why do you say that?"

Paul Wilson: "They wouldn't be around today. Never! Never!

Frances Hawthorne: "What ... would you have done to change them or gotten rid of them, or what?"

Paul Wilson: "Well..."

Frances Hawthorne: "When you were living in Buxton, around the year 1900 and 1923 ... there were riots happening in other parts of the United States, was there any special reactions with people in Buxton?"

Paul Wilson: "Not unless they came to Buxton. We didn't have any time to get out of line in Buxton. Those people were so appreciative of the fact that they were permitted to live a normal life..."

Frances Hawthorne: "What kind of hours did the people work then, any set hours?"

Paul Wilson: “Yes, I don’t remember. They had a train (because the mines wasn’t in Buxton ... in another area) that picked up the miners at certain times, dropped them off and brought them back. I don’t remember what their hours were. They were regular ... (like you go down and work so many hours and ... you could do that if you wanted too) but you wouldn’t have any transportation until that given time, because it was too far to walk.”

Frances Hawthorne: “So no matter how long you worked, they kept track of the amount of coal you had mined?”

Paul Wilson: “Oh yes! They always taken an empty mine car to the entrance rooms where you mined the coal. If you wanted to sleep all day ... you could sleep all day, but then ... you did not get any money. It wasn’t like giving you so much money if you were there. You made the money yourself, depending upon the amount of coal you had dug. Some of the fellows would go in and use the dynamite, put it in the wall, and that would blow the coal and slate out too. The company was paying you for the coal, not the slate.”

Frances Hawthorne: “Did they wear a mask or anything?”

Paul Wilson: “No. I never heard of any of them wearing masks. It was dusty, but you were not in the mines when they set off the dynamite (that was usually done at night). They were called the ‘night firemen’, or the like, and they would go in and blow out the coal, and the next day when you went in, that’s when you would do the mining. You wouldn’t have too much dust to contend with, then you would start digging into the wall with pick.”

Frances Hawthorne: “I recall you saying, your mother didn’t want you to work in the mines. Did you work in the mines some, or did you just happen to hear your father talk or someone else talk about what went on?”

Paul Wilson: “That’s right. All the miners and others, would come in and tell you about what had happened. Back in the days when I was living in Buxton, we didn’t have family conferences like we today. We had ‘family directions.’ You were told early enough; (in your childhood, for you to understand), ‘you were to be seen, and not heard.’ Don’t you break into an adult conversation, because you didn’t have to be in line with ‘Fallworth’ to get hurt, they hurt you right there. They didn’t always look for a room that they could take you (to do whatever they had to do), do whenever you made a mistake, they would back it up! Yes, they would tell you, ‘be seen and not heard.’”

Frances Hawthorne: “Where there any there any accidents, and if so, how often were they?”

Paul Wilson: “Oh yes. The accidents were mainly where slate had fell upon the workers. Then, they had the mule drivers sometimes they would fall off and cut their ankles. They tell me that the mule drivers had nothing to help them but their hands. He had ‘one hand on the rump of the mule, and the other hand on the coal car.’ If the railment went bad, then you were in bad shape. In 1925 or 1926, I had a book called, ‘Colossal’ but mother with her education, (which was very limited) she brought it to the table one night. As I recall, it cost \$25.00 or \$35.00, (which was a lot of money in those days).”

Frances Hawthorne: “Do you remember a book written by your brother-in-law, Attorney S. Joe Brown? I’ve reference to it once or twice, not knowing if it’s a book or a booklet you’d call now, and I thought it said it was written around 1900 or shortly after. It was mentioned that he had written about ‘Blacks in Des Moines.’”

Paul Wilson: “I do have a book here that was (my sister) Sue in it, and the history about her, but that book doesn’t have anything about S. Joe. That could possibly be it.”

Frances Hawthorne: “it is amazing of how the photographer worked and what they had to use of the old pictures for them to come out as well as pictures today ... detailed and all. On this picture, (Hotel Buxton, where they are standing) is it owned by whites or blacks?”

Paul Wilson: “Blacks! If I recall, that was the hotel that James had, I’m not sure.”

Frances Hawthorne: “I notice a fellow on horseback, was that the way they were traveling, or just coming from somewhere on horseback, or is he a ‘constable you think?”

Paul Wilson: “No. They had horses, as that was their only mode transportation, basically. There were some that had cars, but not many.”

Frances Hawthorne: “Did they have buggies or wagons, then?”

Paul Wilson: “They had white fellow they called “George Ross”, and he would go to Hamilton and get the mail. If someone had come in on the train, he would bring them over to Buxton. ‘George Washington’s Hack’, that’s what they would call it.” “They talk about throwing things away, but this is a picture of Gertrude North! She was Brandon Hyde’s sister.” “Here is something! They didn’t have electricity in the home, but they had electricity ... at such places as the store, Y.M.C.A.. We had a lunchcar. I was the last to operate the lunchcar (I wasn’t but about 13 year old) but I had a good rapport with the students, and I would open up the lunchcar in the backyard, and sell hot dogs to the students. This niece of mine, (from Chicago), would come down and look, and I would put one hot dog on a bun, and she would say, ‘you know this isn’t right, the hot dog doesn’t fit’... and she would bite off the end of it.”

Frances Hawthorne: “Yes ... and the white’s, called him uncle Jake! I recall, somewhere dad had bought a horse for one of my older brothers. Dad didn’t work in the mines, (he had ‘miners asthma’ as he had to stop working in the mines).”