Sandra: Today is September 3, 2014. I am with Sol Miller, who has agreed to participate in the Alabama Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. I want to thank you for being here today. My name is Sandra Berman. I’ll be conducting the interview. I’d like to begin by having you talk a little bit about your background, and when and how, or why, your family came to Huntsville [Alabama].

Sol: My grandfather . . . his name was Louis Miller . . . his name in the old country was Laibl Mishkind [sp] . . . came to America in 1913. He lived in New York [City—New York], where he had some brothers and sisters. He worked in the garment industry. He had a brother who lived in Paris, Tennessee. He went to visit this brother, maybe in 1916, and really liked the pace of life in the South a lot more than in New York, although he was from Minsk [now in Belarus]. He was from a big city in the old country. He liked Tennessee, and he heard of a business opportunity in Decatur, Alabama. He met at the Lyons Hotel, which was in Decatur, with the two brothers, Ike Denbo and Ben Denbo. They had another partner, Jake Bernstein, and my grandfather went into business with them. He moved to Huntsville around 1916, and they were in the scrap metal business. They bought and sold wild roots, nuts, poultry, [and] hides . . . a typical start-up business in those days among Jewish immigrants that didn’t require a lot of capital to get into. I guess around the time the United States went into World War I, Ike Denbo was drafted into the Army. I think he actually volunteered and he was sent to the trenches in France. Before he left, he didn’t know if he would return or not, so he sold their Huntsville
business to Jake Bernstein and my grandfather, Louis Miller. That was the beginning of Tennessee Poultry & Hide Company. That was the beginning of what later became L. Miller & Son, which operated . . . it was Tennessee Poultry & Hide from 1918, say, until 1948, when my father graduated from Georgia [Institute of ] Tech[nology—Atlanta, Georgia] and came into the business, Buddy Miller. It operated as a partnership between my father and my grandfather for ten years. It was incorporated as L. Miller & Son, Inc. In the year 2000, we merged the scrap metal portion of L. Miller & Son, Inc. into Tennessee Valley Recycling, which combined the old Denbo companies and my company. We put everything back together in the year 2000.

Sandra: That’s amazing. It came full circle.

Sol: Yes.

Sandra: Your grandmother . . .

Sol: My grandmother was married to Jacob Bernstein. She came to Huntsville . . . she could have been here in 1915. I’m not sure exactly when she arrived. Her name was Elsie Ratner [sp]. She was a country girl from near Minsk. Her husband died of cancer in around 1922 or 1923, and she married my grandfather at that point. Jake Bernstein and my grandmother had a daughter, Hilda Bernstein, who very sadly died at age 18 in 1934. She was an undiagnosed diabetic, and she went into, I guess, insulin shock and died. My father was born in 1926, Israel Bernard ‘Buddy’ Miller. He married my mother, Dolores Evelyn Katz [sp], from Columbia, South Carolina, whose father was in the scrap business, too. Solomon Katz. They were married in 1947 and moved back to Huntsville in 1948. My older sister, Joy Greenberg, was born in 1948. I was born in 1955, and my sister, Sara Miller Denbo [sp], was born in 1957. Growing up we were friends with Joel Denbo. My grandparents were great friends of Ike Denbo and his wife, Jeanette [sp], up in Pulaski, Tennessee, which was where his business was. My father knew Morley Denbo . . . knows . . . they’re both still living. He’s known Morley Denbo since Morley Denbo was born, and Joel Denbo has known me since I was born. The families do have a lot of history together. My sister, Sara, married Joel Denbo in 1980. It gets a little more confusing here. I married, in 1981, Elizabeth Dembo, with an ‘m’, not an ‘n’. They’re sort of related somewhere, the ‘Denbos’ and ‘Dembos,’ but we haven’t figured out exactly how. My wife’s parents came to Huntsville in 1968. Her father was with the [U.S. Army] Corps of
Her mother was a refugee from Vienna [Austria]. She was one of last children to get out of Vienna in 1939, without her parents. What else do you want to know about me?

**Sandra:** I have lots of questions. Going back, do you remember your family talking . . . Do you remember your grandparents?

**Sol:** I do remember my grandparents very well.

**Sandra:** Did they speak about their first reaction of coming to the South? Did they talk about what they . . .

**Sol:** I never talked to my grandmother about it. She lived in Cincinnati [Ohio] with her sister after she came to the United States. I never really talked to her so much. I don’t think I ever asked my grandfather, but my father tells me stories that he heard from his father. My grandfather, as I said, really liked the pace of life in the South and decided he would rather live here than in New York [City]. As I said, he did have a brother in Tennessee. He made friends with the Denbos and went into business with them. More than anything, I guess it was the friendliness of the people. It’s still true. In New York people won’t even look at you, much less talk to you. He found in the South . . . One thing he said, he was taking the train from Paris, Tennessee, to I guess Nashville [Tennessee] and down to Huntsville [Alabama], and he noticed that everyone who got on the train said ‘hello’ to him. He thought to himself, “They must be mistaking me for somebody they know, because why else would they be talking to me.” He realized later that it was just the friendliness of the people.

**Sandra:** What was the Jewish community like for them, your parents and maybe your grandparents?

**Sol:** I can talk about my grandparents first. When my grandfather came to Huntsville in 1916, the predominance of the community were the German Jews. They were the founders of the congregation and later built the Temple [B’nai Sholom]. It’s the story . . . in other big cities [and] small towns you had the influx of the German Jews who came to Huntsville probably in the 1840’s, became prosperous, and then all these upstart immigrants from Russia and Poland

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1 The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers is a federal agency and is staffed by civilians and military personnel. It is involved in public engineering, design and construction management. It provides engineering services such as dredging waterways, flood control, building locks and dams. It helps after disasters in the environmental sense. It builds and maintains military bases. They were established in 1775 when it had one engineer and two assistants. In World War II, the built bridges and built roads vital to the Allied advance across Europe. In the Pacific they were combat engineers who cleared jungle, prepared routes of advance and established bridgeheads for the infantry.

2 Founded in 1879 as a Reform congregation. The current building was dedicated in 1899. It is the oldest synagogue building in continuous use in Alabama. As of 2015 its current rabbi is Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar.
came in. My grandfather grew up in an Orthodox\textsuperscript{3} environment, but in Huntsville he had just one choice. He had the Reform\textsuperscript{4} synagogue, and he affiliated with it, as did all the rest of the Russian immigrants. It was a very small congregation. The Temple [B’nai Sholom] was built in 1898 and completed in 1899. We had a full-time rabbi that year for the first time, and we had full-time rabbis until 1913. I’ll just tell you something about the second to the last full-time rabbi we had. His name was Jacob Z. Lauterbach. When I was in college at Vanderbilt [University—Nashville, Tennessee], I had a professor Lou Silberman, who was a rabbi. I took a course in Jewish history from him. He found out I was from Huntsville. He said, “I’ll tell you something interesting I know about Huntsville. When I was at the Hebrew Union College\textsuperscript{5} . . . there was a very, very revered professor named Jacob Z. Lauterbach. He had a solid gold pocket watch. He would show it to his students. This was presented to him by the grateful congregation, [Temple] B’nai Sholom, in Huntsville.” He was a scholar even when he was here, so how did we get such a prominent rabbi here? He wanted a quiet community where he could write some books, so he was here for a couple of years. He did his writing, and then he moved on. Our last full-time rabbi left in 1913, and we didn’t have another one until 1963. For 50 years, we had lay readers. There was a man named Gustav Marx, who was a lay reader. [He] led services when my father was a kid. Starting in the 1950’s, as the Huntsville community started to grow, the Jewish community got an influx of people who were in the defense industry, worked for the Army, were in the Army, later worked for NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration].\textsuperscript{6} The congregation was able first to hire student rabbis who would come in every two weeks from [Hebrew Union College in] Cincinnati [Ohio]. One of those student rabbis was named Sherman Stein, and he later, in 1963, became our first full-time rabbi in 50

\textsuperscript{3} Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the written Torah and the oral law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

\textsuperscript{4} A division within Judaism especially in North America and the United Kingdom. Historically it began in the nineteenth century. In general, the Reform movement maintains that Judaism and Jewish traditions should be modernized and compatible with participation in Western culture. While the Torah remains the law, in Reform Judaism women are included (mixed seating, bat mitzvah and women rabbis), music is allowed in the services and most of the service is in English.

\textsuperscript{5} Hebrew Union College is the oldest Jewish seminary in the Americas and the main training seminary for rabbis, cantors, educators and communal works in Reform Judaism. It has campuses in Cincinnati, New York, Los Angeles and Jerusalem.

\textsuperscript{6} The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is the United States government agency responsible for the civilian space program as well as aeronautics and aerospace researched. It was established in 1958. Its missions have included the Apollo moon-landing missions, the Skylab space station and later the Space Shuttle. Currently, NASA is supporting the International Space Station.

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years. We had the Rabbi Sherman Stein. After he left, we had a wonderful retired rabbi from Chattanooga [Tennessee], Abraham Feinstein, who bar mitzvahed me. He was here for several years. He commuted every weekend. Michael Eisenstat, recently out of the Air Force, became the next rabbi. I’m trying to remember the name of the next one. We’ve had permanent rabbis since then. The community grew . . . I think we had maybe 170 families in the congregation. When I was a kid in Sunday school, we had lots of kids. There were 14 kids in my confirmation class. The demographics have changed over the years, and there are a lot fewer children in the religious school.

Sandra: What was it like being Jewish growing up in Huntsville? Did you associate mainly with the kids in your confirmation class, or did you associate mainly outside that group?

Sol: I want to mention one thing before I answer that. In 1962, a second congregation was formed. Fred Glusman, who you may know from Atlanta, started that congregation, Etz Chayim. My grandfather didn’t have a choice, but a lot of the new people who came in were Orthodox and Conservative, and they couldn’t get into the Reform practice. They started that congregation. In answer to your question, Joel was in my confirmation class. There was a girl from Athens, Alabama; a boy from Fayetteville, Tennessee, and the rest of them were from Huntsville. They weren’t really my friends, though . . . they didn’t go to the same . . . a couple of them went to my high school, but most of them didn’t. Meanwhile, there was a whole separate group of kids at Etz Chayim that we never associated with. I had known them in religious school in kindergarten and first grade, but after that we were cut off from them. I met a few of them recently, and I think, “I would have liked to have known you growing up,” but we were kept.

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7 Bar mitzvah is Hebrew for ‘son of commandment.’ A rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, puts on tefillin, and may be counted to the minyan quorum for public worship. He celebrates the bar mitzvah by being called up to the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday.

8 A coming of age ritual that originated in the Reform movement which scorned the idea that at 13 years of age a child was an adult. They replaced bar and bat mitzvah with a confirmation ceremony at about age 16 to 18. In some Conservative synagogues the confirmation concept has been adopted as a way to continue a child’s Jewish education and involvement for a few more years.

9 Etz Chayim Synagogue was founded in 1964 as a Conservative congregation. As of 2014, it had about 60 families as members.

10 A form of Judaism that seeks to preserve Jewish tradition and ritual but has a more flexible approach to the interpretation of the law than Orthodox Judaism. It attempts to combine a positive attitude toward modern culture, while preserving a commitment to Jewish observance. They also observe gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and bat mitzvahs).

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separate. My friends were just my friends in elementary school, junior high, high school. I didn’t really have any close Jewish friends.

**Sandra:** Was there ever an issue with you being Jewish?

**Sol:** I never had a single issue. When I was in elementary school, they said the Lord’s Prayer\(^\text{11}\) every day. My parents told me, “That’s a Christian prayer, and you don’t have to participate,” but it never bothered me. I was used to it. Everybody, I assume, knew I was Jewish, but I don’t remember a single instance of being singled out or antisemitism.

**Sandra:** What about your father. Did he ever talk about that? Was it a problem for him at all?

**Sol:** My father was very happy growing up here. I don’t think he had a problem with it, although I do know that he started wearing Jewish symbols around his neck or in his belt buckle. Maybe he thinks people didn’t realize he was Jewish back then, but I think everybody knew. I’ve never heard him talk about any antisemitic behavior toward him.

**Sandra:** What about living in a Southern community during the years of Jim Crow\(^\text{12}\) and that segregated South. As a child, did you think about it much?

**Sol:** My father pointed it out to me. I’ve got a couple of stories. One involves me and the other the Temple. I was riding on a Saturday morning . . . I was probably seven years old, and we were riding down the street. I was going to go to the office with him on a Saturday morning. We were stopped at a stoplight, and he pointed to a service station. He says, “Look over there.” What I saw was a black man and a young black boy. The dad had gotten a cup out of his truck. There was a faucet. He was filling up the cup from the faucet. He turned it off and gave it to this boy to drink. My father said, “Let me explain to you what’s going on there. He’s not

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\(^{11}\) The Lord’s Prayer, also called the ‘Our Father’ and the ‘Pater Noster,’ is a venerated Christian prayer that, according to the New Testament, was taught by Jesus to his disciples. The prayer begins, “Our father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.”

\(^{12}\) Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. The name seems to have originated in the song “Jump Jim Crow,” a song-and-dance caricature of blacks performed by white actor Thomas D. Rice in blackface in 1832. As a result of Rice’s fame, “Jim Crow” became a pejorative expression meaning “Negro” by 1838 and the later segregation laws became known as “Jim Crow” laws. Jim Crow laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities in the southern state of the former Confederacy, with a supposedly “separate but equal” status for black Americans, although in reality this was not so. Some examples of Jim Crow laws are the segregation of public schools, places, and public transportation and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants and drinking fountains for whites and blacks. Private businesses, political parties and unions created their own Jim Crow arrangements, barring blacks from buying home in certain neighborhoods, from shopping or working in certain stores, from working at certain trades, etc. In the twentieth century, the Supreme Court began to overturn Jim Crow laws on constitutional grounds. Rosa Parks defied the Jim Crow laws when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, which became a catalyst to the Civil Rights movement. Her actions, and the demonstrations that followed, led to a series of legislative and court decisions that contributed to undermining the Jim Crow system. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 officially ended Jim Crow laws.
allowed to drink from the water fountain, because he’s a negro. I think that’s terrible, but that’s the way it is here.” That really made an impression on me and, of course, then I started noticing that sort of thing. For example, at my doctor’s office there were two waiting rooms. One had a sign ‘White,’ and the other had a sign ‘Colored.’ Yes, I was real aware of that. Now in our congregation . . . my father was president of the Temple in 1957 and 1958. There was a man who was a technical writer for the Army named Coleman Balisok. A brilliant man. Spoke many languages. Very scholarly. In fact, he trained me for my bar mitzvah. He trained all the kids for bar [mitzvah] and later bat mitzvah.13 He asked my father . . . he says, “I’d like to invite a guest to Temple this Friday night.” My father says, “You don’t have to ask me. Just bring your guest.” He says, “Buddy, there’s one thing. His skin is a few shades darker than ours.” My father says, “It doesn’t matter. It’s a synagogue. Of course bring him.” It really hit the fan. At the next board meeting, everyone was irate. Not everyone, but a few people were irate. They said, “How dare he bring a negro into the Temple. What are the other people going to think of us? Besides, Balisok’s son, Leon, hangs out with the black kids. They’re going to find him at the bottom of the Tennessee River one day.” It wasn’t received real well, but that’s the way it was.

Sandra: Did that change you, those two incidents? Did you take a more active role during those . . .

Sol: I was pretty young then.

Sandra: What about your dad?

Sol: My dad took black employees down to the court house to register them to vote. They grudgingly registered these people, but I think they were afraid to go vote. He would do that, and I’m sure everyone talked about him after he left the courthouse.

Sandra: Did he ever get any hate mail?

Sol: I don’t remember him getting any hate mail, but I know the temple in Gadsden [Alabama] was bombed in the Fifties, I think.14 They were afraid that would happen here, too,

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13 Hebrew for ‘daughter of commandment.’ A rite of passage for Jewish girls aged 12 years and one day according to her Hebrew birthday. Many girls have their bat mitzvah around age 13, the same as boys who have their bar mitzvah at that age. She is now duty bound to keep the commandments. Synagogue ceremonies are held for bat mitzvah girls in Reform and Conservative communities, but it has not won the universal approval of Orthodox rabbis.

14 Congregation Beth Israel in Gadsden was firebombed on March 25, 1960. Its windows were smashed during a Friday service. Two members who rushed outside were wounded with a shotgun by the attacker, Jerry Hunt, a 16-year-old Nazi sympathizer.

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but didn’t really have any incidents here. What happened in Huntsville, in the early Sixties . . . I don’t know if it was President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy\(^\text{15}\) or if it was President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson\(^\text{16}\) . . . after November of 1963 [who] called John Sparkman, our senator,\(^\text{17}\) to the White House. He said, “John, we located this NASA facility in Huntsville, but we have black engineers coming down from the North to apply for jobs. They can’t stay in hotels. They can’t eat in restaurants. They’re not being hired. Huntsville is going to have to change, or else we’re going to just take the NASA facility out of Huntsville and put it somewhere else.” That got everybody’s attention. The mayor and the county commissioners and a lot of the business leaders got together and said, “We’re not going to have riots here. We’re going to integrate peacefully, and we’re going to change things.” That’s the reason that Huntsville didn’t have as a big a problem as they did in Birmingham [Alabama].

**Sandra:** That’s a great piece of history. A great story. I want to ask you a few more questions about yourself. You went to Sunday school?

**Sol:** I did. I went from kindergarten through confirmation. I had a *bar mitzvah*.

**Sandra:** Was there a particular spiritual leader there that had any kind of lasting impression on you?

**Sol:** Rabbi Feinstein especially, the rabbi that did my *bar mitzvah*, but more than anybody else was Coleman Balisok.

**Sandra:** How do you spell that?

**Sol:** C-O-L-E-M-A-N  B-A-L-I-S-O-K. Not every day, but most days, I’ll hear something and I’ll think, “I learned about that first from Coleman Balisok.” [He was] just a brilliant man.

My grandfather and he talked one day, and they decided when I was 11 years old . . . I was ten years old . . . they would have me start reading through the *Torah*\(^\text{18}\) in Hebrew, learning the

\(^{15}\) Commonly known as ‘JFK.’ He was the 35th President of the United States, serving from 1961 until November 22, 1963 when he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. He was a Democrat.

\(^{16}\) Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908-1973) was the 36th President of the United States from 1963 to 1968. Came to the office with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963. Often called ‘LBJ.’ He was a Democrat.

\(^{17}\) The United States Senate is a legislative chamber in the bicameral legislature of the United States, and together with the U.S. House of Representatives makes up the U.S. Congress. Each state has two elected senators who serve as representatives in the Senate.

\(^{18}\) Hebrew for ‘teaching. ‘*Torah*’ is a general term that covers all Jewish law including the vast mass of teachings recorded in the Talmud and other rabbinical works. ‘*Sefer Torah*’ refers to the sacred scroll on which the first five books of the Bible (the *Pentateuch*) are written.
vocabulary, learning how to translate it. I started in the book of Genesis, Bereshit.19 I got through a couple of chapters, and then he had me continue there and start chapter one, verse one again. I had four sections going at the same time. When I finished the last chapter the last time through I had a little ceremony, a tsium [Hebrew: completion] where I completed the book. I’m really happy I did that, because my grandfather was there, and he didn’t live to see my bar mitzvah. I would say Abraham Feinstein, the very distinguished retired rabbi from Chattanooga, and Coleman Balisok were great influences on me, and to a lesser extent Rabbi Eisenstadt, who taught our confirmation class.

Sandra: What about as you got a little older and you started dating? Was it an issue for your family who you dated?

Sol: No, it wasn’t. The girls I went out with in high school were not Jewish, but my parents didn’t care because they thought, “This is not serious. When you get to college maybe you should think about seeking out some Jewish girls.” It was never an issue.

Sandra: Did you go to Jewish summer camp?

Sol: I never did. I wish I had. I went to a YMCA20 camp once, and then I went to a camp in Charleston [South Carolina]. It was not a Jewish camp. I wish I had had that experience. I didn’t. My children and my nieces went for years and years to Camp Barney [Medintz].21 They just loved it and are still friends with a lot of the kids they met. I missed out on that.

Sandra: Did you always know you would come back to Huntsville and Decatur [Alabama]?

Sol: Not really. Well, I sort of did. I went to Vanderbilt [University—Nashville, Tennessee] to college, and then I went to law school at Cornell [University] in Ithaca, New York. I practiced law in Nashville for a few years. I just felt there was a need for me to come back. I felt the pull, and I came back. It’s been 32, 33 years now.

Sandra: Are you sorry you came back?

Sol: Not really. I like Huntsville, and I like the scrap business.

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19 Hebrew: “in the beginning.” The first word of the first weekly Torah portion (parashah) in the annual Jewish cycle of Torah reading; from the Book of Genesis, the first of the five books in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh).

20 Young Men’s Christian Association, commonly known as the ‘YMCA’ or the ‘Y.’ Worldwide organization founded in 1844 that aims to put Christian principles into practice by developing a health body, mind and spirit. They offer recreational facilities, parent/child education programs, youth and teen development with after school programming, etc.

21 Camp Barney Medintz is a Jewish overnight summer camp located in Cleveland, GA. It is owned and operated by the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.

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Sandra: I asked your brother-in-law, Joel, that question a couple of years ago, and he said, “Who would ever want to live in Decatur?” I asked him if he was happy . . .

Sol: I agree with him. Huntsville is different.

Sandra: Different, yes. Did you have a hangout when you were growing up, a particular place where you went to meet friends?

Sol: No, not really. We were just in school together and then you just go to friends’ houses, go out on dates, and that sort of thing.

Sandra: What about your parents? Did they get involved in local civic activities?

Sol: My father did. Of course, he was president of the Temple, but he was involved in the Huntsville Rotary Club and he was a Mason. My grandfather was a Mason almost from the time he came to Huntsville and was treasurer of the Helion [Masonic] Lodge, which is the oldest lodge in the state of Alabama, for 35 years. He said he never wanted to be master of the lodge because he was self-conscious of his accent. When I was a kid, I didn’t think he had an accent. I thought Mr. Wilinsky [sp] had an accent, and the other older Jewish men. They had accents, but my grandfather didn’t. My father made a reel-to-reel audio tape of my grandfather telling the story of his departure from Russia, his escape from Russia. I listened to that and I thought, “My G-d, he sounds like Boris Badenov with a Southern accent,” because most of his English he learned here. It was wonderful to hear that again. I have it on a DVD now. My father was very active in different Masonic organizations and the Council for International Visitors. He was on the board of the Salvation Army. There were a lot of civic activities that he was interested in.

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22 A network of local clubs that form Rotary International, an international association of professional and business men and women founded in the U.S. in 1905 to promote community service.

23 Freemasonry began in medieval Europe as a guild for stonemasons, but lives on as a social organization. It traces its origins to the local fraternities of stonemasons, which from the end of the fourteenth century regulated the qualifications of masons and their interaction with authorities and clients. The Masonic Lodge is the basic organizational unit of Freemasonry. The lodges are usually supervised and governed at the regional level by a Grand Lodge.

24 A fictional character in the 1960’s animated cartoons Rocky and His Friends and The Bullwinkle Show, collectively referred to as Rocky and Bullwinkle for short. He is voiced by Paul Frees.

25 The International Services Council is a volunteer organization officially sponsored by city and county to provide international-related services to the community, e.g. information and referral in matters concerning countries, cultures, customs, embassies and consulates, and contacts with local international groups. The Council provides professional programs for international visitors sponsored by the United States Department of State, including necessary protocol, and establishes contacts with community families for international military officers and their dependents. The Council is affiliated with the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV) and the United States Department of State Office for International Visitors in Washington, D.C.

26 A Christian organization founded by William and Catherine Booth in 1852 in London, England. The Booths worked among the poor in the East End, seeking to bring salvation to the poor, destitute and hungry by meeting both

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Sandra: One of my big questions that I’ve been saving up to ask is . . . I know Huntsville changed when the scientists\textsuperscript{27} arrived. Did your father talk about the effect that had on the Jews living in Huntsville or himself?

Sol: It didn’t have much of an effect that I was aware of on the Jews in Huntsville. It had a big effect on the economy of Huntsville and the economy of our business. A lot of companies came in. L. Miller & Son was also in the steel business and welding supplies and gasses. All these companies and NASA and the Army needed that stuff, so it was good for our business. My father knew some of the Germans through the Rotary Club. There was one in particular who he really liked named Walt Wiesman, who came over here as a PR [public relations] man for the German scientists. He was very effective. He knew some of the others, but he was always leery of them. He was quite surprised when they named the civic center in Huntsville after [Wernher] von Braun.\textsuperscript{28} When my sister married Joel, they had the wedding, and the reception was at the von Braun Civic Center. He wouldn’t put ‘von Braun’ on the invitation. He just called it the Huntsville Civic Center. He had business dealings with some of them. Some of these engineers would come in looking for certain types of steel. They had these projects they were working on. My grandfather really had a hard time dealing with them.

Sandra: Do you remember anything?

Sol: I don’t remember any specific instances, although my father told me that when they would come in my grandfather would say, “Buddy, take care of these people.” I’ll tell you one thing. My grandfather . . . during the war, they had German POWs [prisoners of war] in Huntsville, at the Huntsville Arsenal.\textsuperscript{29} My grandfather had a lot of scrapping projects out there.

\textsuperscript{27} A German rocket scientist, aerospace engineer, space architect (1912-1977) and one of the leading figures in the development of rocket technology in Nazi Germany during World War II and, subsequently, in the United States. He is credited as being the “Father of Rocket Science.” Von Braun was the central figure in the development of the design and realization of the V-2 rocket which used slave labor to build the rockets and which killed 9,000 civilians in England and Belgium in late 1944. Some 12,000 slave laborers died in the production of the rockets. After the war, he and some select members of his rocket team were brought to the United States as part of the then-secret Operation Paperclip. He worked for NASA and served as director of the newly formed Marshall Space Flight Center and was the chief architect of the Saturn V launch vehicle, which took the astronauts to the Moon.

\textsuperscript{28} Today’s Redstone Arsenal was originally formed as three separate entities in 1941 and 1942 as part of the War Department’s ramp-up for World War II, Huntsville Arsenal, Redstone Ordnance Plan (later Redstone Arsenal), and the Huntsville Chemical Warfare Depot (later Gulf Chemical Warfare Depot). Once World War II ended, the focus shifted from production to the demilitarization and salvaging of munitions along with the deactivation of the huge manufacturing facilities at the arsenal complex. In the 1950’s, with the arrival Wernher von Braun and his rocket team, the arsenal became the center of Army missilery and rocketry. In the 1960’s, in support of the newly formed
The Army had the POWs load stuff, and he could understand German. He knew exactly what they were saying. They were talking about him, the Jew. He never let on that he understood, because he wanted to hear what they were saying. I remember that story, but as far as the Germans that moved here in as part of the von Braun team, I didn’t hear many stories about them.

**Sandra:** Did you go to school with any of their children.

**Sol:** I did. In first grade I was in a carpool with a boy, and his dad was a von Braun man.

His mother drove one of the days of the week. I remember she had an old 1951 Chevrolet. An old car . . . older than most of the cars you saw around. She was very, very sweet. A very sweet lady. I’m still friends with her son that I was in first grade with on Facebook. When I was in first grade, there was a German girl who played the violin so beautifully. Her father was a rocket scientist, and the von Braun children were at that school. I remember seeing them, real tall and blonde and nice looking kids. They were there. When I was in fifth grade, there was a boy whose father was on the team. This kid was born in the United States, but he had an accent. His momma dressed him in *lederhosen* and sandals. He’d bring lunch to school, and it was flat bread with German sausage. Kids made fun of him. He was my friend, and I didn’t, but I kind of felt sorry for him. Most of the Germans wanted their kids to be Americanized, but this one kid . . . His parents wanted him to be strictly German, I think.

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NASA, the Marshall Space Flight Center was established, focusing on putting a man on the moon. Space and rocket and missile defense programs have continued to grow since that time, and NASA and Redstone Arsenal remain an important part of Huntsville’s economy.

30 Facebook is an online social networking service headquartered in Menlo Park, California. It was launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates and fellow Harvard University students. The founders originally limited the membership to Harvard students, but later expanded it to other universities and then the private sector. After registering to use the site, users create a profile, add other users as ‘friends,’ exchange messages, and share videos and images. Facebook had over 1.44 billion monthly active users as of March 2015.

31 A private college prep school chartered in 1959 in Huntsville Alabama. It started in an antebellum home on Randolph Avenue in downtown Huntsville with just a few elementary classes. Later it moved to Drake Avenue, and kept adding grades until the 1970’s. They are currently expanding and moving again (2015).

32 German for leather breeches. They can be either short of knee length. Many had shoulder straps.

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Sandra: Did you ever find out what happened to him?
Sol: Yes. I’m not in contact with him now. I know he went to Princeton [University—Princeton, New Jersey]. I think he’s a physicist somewhere.

Sandra: Does it intrigue you or ever interest you to have those conversations with any of them?
Sol: If I could see them again, I would. In fact, if I ever see Hans, my friend whose mother drove in the carpool, I might talk to him about that, because I think he’d be really open to it.

Hans was . . . a lot of these German kids were regimented and very determined. Hans was a free spirit. His older sister was . . . she did what the parents wanted, but Hans didn’t. He was . . . I’m sure his mother probably liked the way he was, but I’m sure his father gave up on him.

Sandra: Did your grandfather talk . . . did he ever mention being upset that they were all here? So many of them were in the Nazi party, were in the SS, and here they are . . .
Sol: My grandfather didn’t like it very much. I wish I had spoken to him specifically about it, but I never did. He had friends and family in Minsk that didn’t survive the war. Yes, he wasn’t very happy about it.

Sandra: Von Braun, his whole past was white-washed. It’s well known now. The fact that he was a major in the SS. That was brushed under the carpet, and it wasn’t really until Arthur Rudolph, who lived in Huntsville . . . the Justice Department, Elliott . . . Rosenbaum, I believe it is . . . Eli Rosenbaum . . . brought the case against [Rudolph]. There was a real strong reaction

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33 The National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP), commonly known as the Nazi Party, was a political party in Germany active between 1920 and 1945. The party’s leader was Adolf Hitler. Initially, Nazi political strategy focused on anti-big business, anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist rhetoric. In the 1930’s the party’s focus shifted to antisemitic and anti-Marxist themes. Racism was also central to Nazism. The Nazis aimed to unite all Germans as national comrades, whilst excluding those deemed either to be community aliens or of a foreign race. The Nazis sought to improve the stock of the Germanic people through racial purity and eugenics, broad social welfare programs, and a disregard for the value of individual life, which could be sacrificed for the good of the Nazi state and the ‘Aryan master race.’ The persecution reached its climax when the party-controlled German state organized the systematic murder of approximately 6,000,000 Jews and 5,000,000 from the other targeted groups.

34 The SS or Schutzstaffel was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. It began at the end of 1920 as a small, permanent guard unit known as the “Saal-Schutz” made up of Nazi Party volunteers to provide security for party meetings in Munich. Later, in 1925, Heinrich Himmler joined the unit, which had by then been reformed and renamed the “Schutz-Staffel.” Under Himmler’s leadership, it grew from a small paramilitary formation to one of the largest and most powerful organizations in the Third Reich. Under Himmler’s command, it was responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during World War II. After World War II, like the Nazi Party, it was declared a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal and banned in Germany.

35 Arthur Louis Hugo Rudolph (1906-1996) was a rocket engineer who played a key role in the development of the V-2 rocket and a former high-level Nazi given sanctuary by the United States government following World War II. He worked for the Army and NASA where he managed the development of several important systems. In 1974 he was investigated for possible war crimes, and he agreed to leave the United States and renounce his American citizenship in return for not being prosecuted in the United States.
in Huntsville. “How dare they? He’s a hero,” not mentioning that he was in charge of getting the workers for the Dora-Nordhausen rocket plant, which von Braun was also at. There were a lot of letters to the editor, and my father could never let a negative letter to the editor be unanswered. He would write letters . . . wonderful letters. I remember one time, I was in high school, I guess. It was a Saturday afternoon and got a phone call. This angry man was on the phone. “Is Buddy Miller there?” I said, “He’s not here right now.” “Yes, he is. You let me talk to that kike right now.” Whoa. I guess I must have gotten a number. He must have given me a number, but I hung up and I told my father when he came home, “You got this call. You’re probably not going to call him back.” He said, “Yes, I’m going to call him back.” I didn’t want to listen to the conversation. I thought it was going to be not very pleasant. I went back in my room, and 30 minutes later I came out. My father was laughing and talking to this guy. “Yes, we’ll have to get together sometime.” Then he hung up the phone. I said, “What was that all about?” He said, “He was just angry. He didn’t really mean it. We got to talking, and I explained my position. I said, ‘You really shouldn’t have called me that.’ He said, ‘I feel really bad I did call you that. I’m sorry.’” They had that conversation, and that little scene really stuck with me about how my father . . . I guess there’s some proverb in the Bible about ‘a kind word turneth away wrath,’ or something like that. I thought that really embodies that.

Sandra: Now that we’re in the year 2014, has there been any change of opinion in the Huntsville community about the past of these guys? I know they were lauded for so long.

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36 Nordhausen was also known as Mittelbau-Dora, Dora-Mittelbau or Nordhausen-Dora. This was a camp system with about 40 sub-camps around the main camp of Mittelbau (or Dora). It was established late in the war on August 28, 1943 to manufacture missiles and rockets. The assembly place for the V-1 and V-2 missiles was actually inside a mountain for protection from air raids. The prisoners worked underground building tunnels. The workers were mostly miners and construction workers. At its peak over 40,000 prisoners worked in the camp system. They lived and worked underground, although at the end of 1944 some barracks were built outside the tunnels for the additional workers. The conditions were catastrophic and the mortality rate was very high. In early 1945 trainloads of weak and exhausting prisoners from Auschwitz-Birkenau and Gross-Rosen began arriving. The dead were burned on pyres and the rest were separated into those who could still work a little more and those who were simply dumped in airplane hangars and left to die. Some were shipped on to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and left to die. On April 3 and 4, 1945, the Royal Air Force obliterated the city of Nordhausen and after that the evacuations began with senseless death marches to Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbruck and other camps and places as far away as Austria. Nordhausen was liberated by the United States Army on April 11, 1945.

37 ‘Kike’ is a derogatory word used to refer to Jews. It appears to have originated on Ellis Island when Jewish immigrants who were illiterate were asked to sign the entry forms with the customary ‘X.’ They refused as they associated the X with the Christian cross. Instead they drew a circle as the signature on the entry forms. The Yiddish word for ‘circle’ is ‘kikel’ and the little circle was called ‘kikeleh.’ Before long immigration inspectors began referring to anyone who signed ‘O’ instead of ‘X’ as ‘kikes.’

38 Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”
Sol: No. People still glorify them here. This is the one place where they’re still glorified. I’ve got some English friends who actually started out as pen pals when we were 10, and back in 1998 they came to Huntsville for the first time. They were trying to find our house, and they stopped at the visitor’s center, which was in the von Braun Civic Center. They got to our house, and they said, “What’s this von Braun Civic Center?” I said, “Yes, they named it after him.” He said, “My parents were bombed by that guy.” He was shocked, but in Huntsville it’s . . . he’s still a saint here.

Sandra: Because he brought the industry . . .

Sol: He brought it all here. It’s not like the people here know about his past and think he was a bad guy, but he did do a lot for Huntsville. They don’t want to hear anything about the bad stuff.

Sandra: He was very charismatic, from what I hear.

Sol: Very charismatic. Yes, he was. I never met him personally.

Sandra: Did you meet his kids?

Sol: They were older than me. I knew who they were, but I didn’t meet them.

Sandra: Do any of them still live in the area?

Sol: No, they don’t. One lives in Washington . . . one of the girls . . . I’m not sure where they all live, but they’re not here anymore.

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39 He is referring to the ‘V weapons,’ which were the V1 and V2 rockets that were used by Germany at the end of World War II. They were the world’s first cruise missiles. Although the research and development was done by Nazi scientists (including Dr. Wernher von Braun, who later was allowed to come to the United States and work in our space program) the actual work assembling the rockets was done by slave labor under murderous conditions at the Dora-Nordhausen complex. Both rockets carried one ton of high explosives and neither could be aimed with much precision other than launching them in a general direction and preprogramming the engine to stop at a certain point so that they would fall into a general area. The area of destruction of a V-2 was 800 to 1,200 yards wide. The lack of precision was not a problem though as the weapons’ premier purpose was as a terror weapon. There was no time for air raid sirens or to take shelter, they appeared at all times of the day or night (some 70 to 100 V-1s fell each day), and they fell randomly. No one was safe anywhere at any time of the day or night from random death. London and southern England was the premier target with nearly 8,000 V-1s falling on them, so much so that the period of time from June to August 1944 to was called the “Second Blitz.” The V-2 rocket was more sophisticated. The V-2 was the world’s first long-range ballistic missile. It was developed during the Second World War in Germany as a “vengeance weapon,” designed to attack Allied cities in retaliation for Allied bombing of German cities. It looked a lot like our modern drones—a small airplane with a T-tail with an engine in it. Nearly 1,000 V-2s fell on London and the surrounding area (as well as in Belgium) after September 1944. In total the rocket weapon killed or wounded over 6,000 people and seriously injured and maimed another 18,000. If they could not be shot down before they arrived there was little anyone on the ground could do about them, other than hope that when the noise of the engine stopped, it wasn’t right above you. You may hear this sound at: http://www.flyingbombsandrockets.com/V1_into.html.
Sandra: How would you describe Huntsville today and the Jewish community? Connected? Disconnected? Are they a cohesive group?

Sol: I have not really been active in the community for about five years now. That’s another story, but I was very active. I was on the board for many years. I never wanted to be president. I was treasurer for a number of years, and I held other offices and committee chairmanships. The Huntsville community has changed since I was a kid. When I was a kid, it seemed like there was more active involvement in the Temple by congregants. There was an active Brotherhood, an active B’nai B’rith, lots of kids, as I mentioned before, who were in the religious school. There just doesn’t seem to be that level of involvement anymore. I guess that’s because, it’s probably true everywhere, people are busy, and they don’t want to spend their time in the Men’s Club and B’nai B’rith. Huntsville is not unique there. There’s a core of people who are very involved, and I believe they get pretty good attendance at Shabbat services, although I haven’t been. High Holy Day services are well attended. Etz Chayim, the other congregation, seems to be thriving. I guess you know we have a Chabad rabbi in Huntsville, Laibel Berkowitz.

Sandra: Who knew?

Sol: Who knew. Why is he here? I’m not sure, but everybody says he’s a nice guy.

Sandra: Do any of your children . . . have they stayed in Huntsville?

Sol: No. Well, yes and no. My daughter married a Brazilian fellow.

Sandra: What’s her name?

Sol: Isabel [sp]. She went to college at Northwestern [University—Evanston, Illinois]. He was at the Kellogg School [of Management—Evanston, Illinois] getting his MBA [Master of Business Administration degree]. She met him probably 10 years ago. They got married four years ago, moved to Sao Paulo [Brazilian: São Paulo]. We see them several times a year. Our

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40 B’nai B’rith International (from Hebrew: “Children of the Covenant”) is the oldest Jewish service organization in the world. B’nai B’rith states that it is committed to the security and continuity of the Jewish people and the State of Israel and combating antisemitism and bigotry. Its mission is to unite persons of the Jewish faith and to enhance Jewish identity through strengthening Jewish family life, to provide broad-based services for the benefit of senior citizens, and to facilitate advocacy and action on behalf of Jews throughout the world.

41 Shabbat [Hebrew] or Shabbos [Yiddish] is the Jewish day of rest and is observed on Saturdays. Shabbat observance entails refraining from work activities, often with great rigor, and engaging in restful activities to honor the day. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday night and is ushered in by lighting candles and reciting a blessing. It is closed the following evening with the recitation of the havdalah blessing.

42 The two High Holy Days are Rosh Ha-Shanah (New Year’s) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

43 Chabad-Lubavitch is a Chasidic movement in Orthodox Judaism.
daughter comes up twice a year for extended periods, maybe three weeks or so. We’ve been
down there a couple of times. They’re very active with their synagogue in Sao Paulo and with
the Jewish club there, which is the most amazing place I’ve ever seen in my life. It is several
city blocks, with a large wall around it. It’s like an oasis. Twenty thousand members. They’re
active in that. I hope they come back. I don’t think they’ll come back to Huntsville. The work
he does . . . he’s an investment banker. Huntsville is not the place for him, but anywhere in the
United States would be better than what we’ve got now. My son is Louis Miller, named for my
grandfather. He went to IU [Indiana University] in Bloomington. When he was a freshman or
sophomore, he went on a Birthright44 trip. My daughter went on one, too. He was really taken
with Israel, and he took a semester off. Fortunately, he had enough AP [Advance Placement]
credits where he could do that and still graduate on time. He went to Israel for six months for an
ulpan,45 and the next summer he went back as a volunteer on an ambulance. In December of
2010, he made aliyah46 and went back to the kibbutz47 where he had been on the ulpan. He was
drafted and served two years in the sanchanim, the paratroopers. He really enjoyed it. Last
January, he came back, and he’s working with us now. I still think his heart is in Israel. He’s
going back in November for reserve duty. We’ll see if it’s permanent here, but it wouldn’t
surprise me if he went back. He’s got so many friends there.

Sandra: So you don’t have a next generation.

Sol: If Louis stays, he’s the next generation. Other than Louis, we don’t have one.

Sandra: Does that make you sad that your family will not have a . . .

Sol: In a way it makes me sad, but I want Louis to do what Louis wants to do, to do what
makes him happy. If I knew he was doing something he wasn’t happy with, it would greatly
outweigh any sense of sadness I had about the company not continuing.

Sandra: Right. I suppose I should ask you, before we get to the end of the interview, how did
you meet your wife?

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44 Taglit-Birthright Israel is an organization that sponsors 10-day trips to Israel for young Jewish adults age 18-26,
with the vision of strengthening Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and solidarity with Israel.
45 An ulpan is an institute or school for the intensive study of Hebrew. The Hebrew word means “teaching” or
“instruction.”
46 Aliyah is Hebrew for the immigration of Jews to Israel.
47 A kibbutz is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture, although today they
are also based on industrial plants and high-tech enterprises.

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Sol: Good question. I knew her in Sunday school. She was three grades younger than me. Her older sister was a year ahead of me. I knew her in high school. It was . . . at my sister’s wedding . . . Sarah and Elizabeth’s mother, Regina, got to talking. They said, “We really ought to put Elizabeth and Sol together. Give them an opportunity to meet each other.” This was in 1980, on July Fourth.48 [Elizabeth] had been living in Chicago, and she was in town. We went over . . . Sarah, Joel, and I went over to see her, and that was the start of it. She moved to Nashville while I was there, and we got married in 1981. That’s the story.

Sandra: A couple of other things. You mentioned that you’re not so active in the synagogue anymore, but growing up was Judaism an important part of your home life, like Passover seders49 and all of that?

Sol: Yes, it was very important. I may have been the only kid who really enjoyed going to Sunday school, but I really enjoyed it a lot. My father . . . on Friday nights, we would have a service before dinner, light the candles, drink wine, break the bread, and bless the children. I have such warm memories of that, and Passover50 at my grandparents’ house. It was a small group of us. There weren’t many of us there, but just very happy memories of my grandfather doing the seder and then later my father officiating at the seder. Then the family grew, and it got to be . . . now we’ve got the Denbos with us. We weren’t real regular synagogue attenders for a lot of years, but then we would go through periods where we would go all the time. In the summers, typically the rabbis would take off, and my father would lead the services and I would help him. I have very good memories of that.

Sandra: A lot of families that we’ve talked to over the years said that their religious observances in the home were sometimes—the culinary part, the cooking part—a combination of Jewish cooking and Southern cooking. Do you remember any of that?

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48 Independence Day, commonly known as the Fourth of July or July Fourth, is a federal holiday in the United States commemorating the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, declaring independence from Great Britain (now part of the United Kingdom).
49 Hebrew for “order”; the ritual family meal eaten at home on the first and second nights of Passover, accompanied by the retelling of the story of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. 50 Hebrew: Pesach. The anniversary of Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days. Unleavened bread, matzah, is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they had not time to wait for the dough to rise. On the first two nights of Passover, the seder, the central event of the holiday is celebrated. The seder service is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life. In addition to eating matzah during the seder, Jews are prohibited from eating leavened bread during the entire week of Passover. In addition, Jews are also supposed to avoid foods made with wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats unless those foods are labeled ‘kosher for Passover.’ Jews traditionally have separate dishes for Passover.

TRANSCRIPT ID: OHC XXX
Sol: No. My mother was a wonderful cook. My grandmother was a wonderful cook, but there was no Southern aspect to it that I recall.

Sandra: Did you have help in the home?

Sol: When I was a small kid we did. We had a lady named Evelyn, who I was really, really fond of. We did have help, but later on we didn’t.

Sandra: Do you remember any of the interactions you had. I know there’s all the . . . ever since the book The Help\(^5\) came out, but was she . . .

Sol: One thing that I remember in particular . . . She died when I was maybe nine or ten years old. She had cancer. I remember her sitting . . . she would come to work, and she felt terrible. My mother said, “You just sit on the porch, where it’s cool,” and she would just sit all day and read. I can remember one time, and I didn’t understand this at the time. We would go to Columbia [South Carolina] in the summers to visit my grandmother and my cousins and my uncle and aunt, the Katzes, and Evelyn came with us once. I think she went . . . I just remember this one time in particular. My father went to Columbia to pick us up, and we drove back to Atlanta. I can remember we had lunch at the Heart of Atlanta Hotel or Motor Hotel, and she wasn’t there with us. She had to find another place to eat. I remember that, but didn’t understand the significance of it until much later. I can’t remember any other interactions with her, since I was so young when she died. I just remember that Sarah and I were very fond of her.

Sandra: If you could sum up your life in Huntsville in just a few sentences, what would you like to say for posterity’s sake?

Sol: I think it’s been a very pleasant place to grow up in and to live in. I have such warm memories of my family and the home life, of my friends. I still am close to a number of my friends from throughout my school years here. Some of my best friends are those friends. It’s been a good place to live. It was a wonderful place to bring up our children. Our children went to the same school that I went to those first four years. They were very happy growing up here. We took them out of town a lot, took them [to] lots of different places, because you can get

\(^5\) The Help (2009) was first a novel by Kathryn Stockett and then a film in 2011. It is about a young white woman, Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan, and her relationship with two black maids, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, during the Civil Rights Era in 1963 Jackson, Mississippi. It is actually about a book being written inside a book because it is written by Eugenia Phelan but is from the point of view of the maids (referred to as “the help”), exposing the racism they are faced with as they work for white families. The film received four Academy Award nominations.
pretty stagnant just staying in Huntsville. We made sure we traveled quite a bit with them from a very early age. They have happy feelings about Huntsville, too.

**Sandra:** Do they come back for the holidays at all? I know your daughter is in Brazil, but . . . Did your son try to . . .

**Sol:** No. We didn’t insist on it. No. I didn’t want to be a drag on him. I figured he had things he needed to do.

**Sandra:** Is there anything we haven’t touched upon that you’d like to . . .

**Sol:** No. I think I’ve blabbed quite enough.

**Sandra:** I’d like to thank you very much. It’s been a real pleasure.

**Sol:** Thank you very much for coming.

<End Disk 1>

**INTERVIEW ENDS**