

MARCUS WIMBY – HAUGABROOKS'S FUNERAL HOME  
ATLANTA, GEORGIA  
December 13, 2018, 12pm

*I am here with Marcus Wimby. We're at Haugabrook's Funeral Home, we're in Atlanta. It is December 13<sup>th</sup>, it's about noon and I'm Candacy Taylor and I'm here with Mr. Wimby. Thank you again for doing this. Can you tell us your name and spell it for me.*

Marcus Douglas Wimby

*Let's start at the beginning. I know you had this business in your family for a long time so can you tell us about the origin?*

The origin was started by Ms. Geneva Haugabrooks who was my grandfather's aunt. And she started it in 1929 so we're coming up on 90 years next year. She started it at this location, 364 Auburn Ave. and she started out with \$300. Now there's a building next door to us. It was a cleaners. The two walls separated the two buildings, so at that time, black people had to work together to get things accomplished so they put a hole in the wall and put a phone between the two buildings and shared a phone until each one became established enough to get their own phone service.

*About what year was this?*

'29, '30 and that was Lampkins [assumed spelling] Cleaners.

*And she was married, right?*

She was married and her husband drowned the year, I'm not sure.

*Do you know if he was still alive when she started the business?*

[phone call]

*Tell me more...a woman with \$300, that ambitious integrity to start her own business and all of the hurdles that she must have crossed to do that. Do you know anything about that story and why she wanted to go into the funeral business?*

[another phone call]

I don't know why she wanted to be in the funeral service. She was one of the first women to engage in the profession. And literally from the stories I've heard, she owned Atlanta, Georgia back in the day. She helped a lot of people, buried a lot of people free and they called her "Ma Haugabrooks" and they would go to church on Sunday and she had a speech called "others" and she would recite

that speech others. As a matter of fact it's on our calendar, [reading] *Others, Yes, Lord others...* She was just a remarkable lady.

I heard one story, she went to the Cadillac dealership, Capital Cadillac dealership when it was on Spring Street. And you know she wasn't well dressed or anything, so she went in and the salesman came up and talked to her. He didn't think she had any money, so he blew her off. The manager knew who she was, so needless to say, when she left, I guess he fired the salesman, [saying] *do you know who you just disrespected? That's Ms. Geneva Haugabrooks*, because she would buy a Cadillac, you know, three or four at a time.

I heard one story where, and you know back in the day, black people really didn't have a real precedence in Atlanta so one of her guys got in trouble and the police locked him up. I don't know if it was disorderly conduct or drinking, anyway the police asked the guy, "Who do you work for?" He said, "Ms. Haugabrooks." And this was a white cop. Instead of taking him to jail, the cop brought him here to Ms. Haugabrooks and said, "What do you want me to do with him?"

*How do you think she got that much power? Did she achieve that power after having this business for a while?*

She was a member of a lot of civic organizations. She has pictures here with the Mayor and Governor. I have one picture at home with her. She was sick in the bed and Jackie Robinson came to see her.

*How did that happen? Do we know?*

She buried a lot of people and I guess she developed a lot of repour with a lot of influential black people over the years.

*Did she just not have a lot of competition with other funeral homes in the area?*

Back then, there was not a lot of competition, but there were other funeral homes. But she just had that gift. She would call everybody babe...*Hey Babe*" I understand she would just sit on the porch and wave at people and literally tell 'em, "I'm gonna get you one day. I'm gonna get you one day." [laughing] And all the preachers and everything just flocked to her because she was just...the lady, she was the lady.

*Did she have any other businesses before she did this?*

Not to my knowledge. You know, she was burying 1,000 people a year. Well the building was smaller then.

*What was the neighborhood like then. Do you know?*

Well we're on "Sweet Auburn" and back in the early days this was the richest black street in America. All the entertainers...Royal Peacock was down the street all the entertainers came to Roy Peacock and you know you had your ladies of the night on Auburn and you had you had your racketeers on Auburn and lot of doctors and dentists were on Auburn.

*Almost like the Greenwood District in Tulsa? Was it that successful? Booker T. Washington called it "Black Wall St." because of all the doctors and it was just a vibrant, productive..."*

When I was little I would go to Dr. Davis down on Auburn. It was just a black mecca for black people.

*Yes, there were a lot of Green Book sites on Auburn St. and you're the only one that's still here. That's amazing. So how long did she run it? I know she passed in '77, right?*

From '29 to '77

*So she kept working until she passed.*

Yes. Now my grandfather, Charles Sherwood, he came in I guess in the late '40s and he came down here and worked. He was the bookkeeper. He kept the books and everything. But he worked along with her. Now as she got up in age, you always need some younger people in any kind of business to help you survive. But Ms. Haugabrooks, she called the shots.

*How old was she when she passed?*

We'd have to do the math.

*Was she maybe in her 80s?*

Oh, yeah. And she was in a wheelchair because she was in a car wreck. Now, don't ask me the year. She was in a car wreck. She and some other ladies were going to some kind of function. Because she was a member of a lot of organizations. A lot of women's auxiliaries.

*That's incredible. Did she ever have children?*

No, she never had children.

*And so when she lost her husband, did she get remarried?*

No, never remarried.

*So was she mostly single when she was running this business?*

Yes.

*Yeah, well maybe that's how she got so much done.*

She had relationships with Citizens Trust Bank, Mr. Milton [assumed spelling]. She could call down there and say, "I need some money." And he would bring it to her and to the paperwork later. You know, that's unheard of today.

*Was that a white bank?*

That was a black...

*Oh, that was a black bank, ok. Interesting. Can you tell me how you came into the business and what your process is.*

I came in around '94 because my grandfather died in '94. And I was working for Bell South so I never grew up in this business. I had my job at Bell South, you know, fat, dumb, and happy, my little corporate job. Never worked down here not one day, not even on a Saturday. So the same day he died, Bell South offered a package for people that wanted to leave. And you know people would always ask me and they would say, "If something happens to your grandfather, what's going to happen to the business?" And, my dumb self... *I don't know* and that was the farthest thing from my mind. And I don't have any brothers and sisters and my mom died before my grandfather did and my grandmother had Alzheimer's so I was the only one to carry on the business but earlier in my life, I never, ever thought that this is what I'd be doing. So in that year of '94, he died and Bell South offered a package, so I took the package, went to school and got my license and been here ever since.

*And how do you feel about the terms of your life path? Were you happy once you got into it, did you find that it was something you wanted to do?*

Like I said, I never had inclinations that I was going to do it, because I thought my life was corporate. You know, get the gold watch after forty years, sit down and retire. But I guess God had something else in store for me.

*It must mean something to have this kind of history behind you.*

It does. To sustain ninety years. We've served a lot of families in ninety years. A lot of families in this city.

*You know it's so rare for any business to have lasted that long. I don't know anything about the funeral business, so can you tell me what you think it is that maybe you think you did differently, or maybe it's because of longevity, you know your solid roots in the community...what do you think it is that keeps you going?*

Just good business practices. Treat people fairly. Don't try to overcharge somebody, just treat them with respect.

*What are the biggest changes you've seen in the funeral industry?*

Cremations. Cremation rate is rising. We're probably...the industry at a whole is probably at forty percent right now.

*How's that affect your business?*

It affects your bottom line because cremations are cheaper than traditional funeral services. Cremations also hurt cemeteries.

*Oh, because there's no burial.*

Right. They also affect casket companies. So it's not just the funeral home. It affects other industries.

*Do you have any feelings about that? Do you feel there's an argument for burial versus cremation?*

There's no argument. That's just the trend now.

[phone rings]

A lot of people just choosing cremations, so we have to be creative with cremation services. You know we can make them more memorable. Rather than just taking somebody to crematory, people have services with their cremation.

[12:15]

*About how often does that happen?*

We've had four in the last two weeks, with a viewing. Families have had a service like a traditional funeral. The only difference was there's no cemetery involved.

*But the body was embalmed...*

...dressed, embalmed, casket...and some families choose to have a direct cremation and a memorial service, maybe just a picture.

*How many people do you serve a week, or a month, roughly?*

Yearly we are going to serve probably 150 families a year. Now I say back in the day, '60s, '70s, '80s, this place was seven, eight, nine hundred a year. A lot of funeral homes have developed in the area, so people have more choices now. And the young people...young people don't care about tradition. I don't care if we buried everybody in the family for the last 50 years. The young people come in. They are price shopping. Young people, they don't have any values [laughing].

*So when you say "young people" you're talking about the millennials?*

The millennials, the millennials, they are a different breed [laughing].

*I'm getting to the point where I don't understand it either...*

They'll say, "I understand you've buried everybody in the family Mr. Wimby but you know we are working on a budget and so and so and so and so is doing it a hundred dollars cheaper than you." There's a lot of a...how can I put it...a lot a funeral homes, well in any business, they're marketing lower funeral services.

*Well there's always somebody who is going to try and undercut.*

In any industry but there always has to be a bottom line, at some point.

*I know, I feel the same way. My industry is different. I've been an artist for twenty years and a documentarian, there's always willing to do something for free, and how do you compete with that. You get what you pay for but at the same time...*

You get what you pay for. Because if they're doing it a lot cheaper than you, they are cutting on something. We've had families that have come back and said, "We made a mistake."

*There's something to be said to...especially since this is an established community. I do believe that longevity matters and some... maybe it's not the millennials, but I think it matters and people should care that you've been helping the community for this long.*

They should, but they don't. And the area is changing down here. There are so many condos going up. They're trying to do those multi-use facilities where the merchant is downstairs and living facilities upstairs. It's all over the area, on Auburn, they're trying to do some of this stuff.

*But you own the building?*

Oh, yes.

*So what does the future hold?*

You know it's going to be really challenging, especially in downtown Atlanta. It's really going to be challenging, because they've got the street car coming down Auburn. And you know we've got parking restrictions. There was a time when we could park on Auburn without having to go through all this parking and meters. There's a bike lane across the street. People used to be able to park across the street. Now they have a bike lane. [Sigh] It's challenging.

*What about the next generation to take over the business?*

I don't know if my son wants to do it. I have my son that works with me and I have two daughters and both of them have careers, one at Delta, one at PricewaterhouseCoopers so honestly, I don't know. These young people, they may get it and sell it [laughing], you know?

*There's no way to really, I guess, judge, you just have to wait and see, but you didn't know that this was what you were going to do, so you never really know until the day comes.*

You know there was a study that was out. [About] third generation children, they don't want to do what great-granddaddy did. They don't want the same thing. They don't want it.

*Yeah, I think it's hard. How many hours do you work in a day, how many days do you work?*

We get stretches where you might have to do seven days. You get stretches where we can do 8am-5pm for a couple of days. But I'm here probably six days a week. If we're slow I might come in until 11 o'clock. It just depends.

*Yeah, there's no way to know when you're going to be needed.*

No.

*So talk about the Green Book. What you did know about it as a child, or anything you know about the Green Book.*

I just remember, I had to be seven or eight, nine, ten, my grandfather, he had a *Green Book*, and he showed it to me once. He said, "Now this book right here is where colored people can go." And he went through it, and I remember seeing it. I remember seeing it. He said, "This is where colored people go when you're traveling, you can stay at these hotels." We went to Miami one year and I was about 11 or 12, and we stayed at a Holiday Inn, so I went swimming, and there were some other white kids in the pool. All the white kids got out of the pool, except one. A little boy from Alabama. So his parents and my mother and my grandfather, they started talking and having a conversation. But all the other kids got out. So the manager of the hotel came to our room and said we had to leave. Not because I was swimming in the pool, but some doctor wanted to stay another night and they was asking us to leave. And naturally the doctor was white. But then they came back later and said that was ok, he decided to go.

*Did you remember how you felt at that time? Did you understand really what was happening?*

I didn't. My parents said "We may have to leave because this doctor wants to stay another night." I thought, *ok, that's the way of life.*

*When everybody got out of the pool did you know why?*

I didn't even notice it. I didn't even notice it. But my grandparents, they noticed it. But this one little white kid stayed. And we swam and played, so who would have thought a black kid from Georgia and a white kid from Alabama would be playing together. Children don't know prejudice. That's taught.

*Well those kids left the pool and you guys had to it to yourselves.*

Yeah, we had it to ourselves.

*About what year was that? Do you know?*

Let's see, I'm 66, I was probably 11, I was born in '52...early 60s, early 60s.

*Do you know if your parents used the Green Book on that trip?*

Evidently not, if we stayed at a Holiday Inn, in Miami [laughing], Miami Beach. I'm sure that Holiday Inn was *not* in the *Green Book* for colored people. [laughing]

[21:00]

*The Hampton House was a big Green Book site that had a pool in Miami. When your grandfather said, "This is for colored people," did you understand?*

No, all I knew was this was for colored people.

*'Cause you were living in a black neighborhood and you had access to whatever you needed...*

Right. 'Cause I went to school at ...two blocks, a Catholic school up here.

*What was it called?*

Our Lady of Lourdes. So I lived in the neighborhood and I would walk home from school, ten blocks. And I experienced some racism. There was a white trailer that was on the boulevard across from Atlanta Medical and we would walk from school and get a hotdog over there. So you'd walk in the trailer, to the right were the stools and to left was just an open...you'd just stand there. So the first time I went in there I didn't know, so I went in there and sat on the stool and the white cook [said], "Get over there with the rest of them colored people!" So over time as we would stop by there, finally he said one day, "Y'all can sit over here. Ya'll can sit over here on the stool."

*What happened? Just times had changed?*

I don't know...unless he felt...I don't think he felt sorry for us, we were just good kids. Are you familiar with the Varsity?

*No. What is the Varsity?*

The hotdog place over here by Georgia Tech. Varsity...you could work there but you couldn't go in there.

*If you were black.*

*No, the only other big Green Book site that I saw [in this area] was the Silver Moon Barbershop down the street?*

I used to go there.

*Oh did you?*

Dan Stevens [assumed spelling] would cut my hair. They recently closed. The last five years, the sons closed...but that's where I used to get my hair cut.

*That was listed in the Green Book and I was hoping to interview somebody there, but when I came here a couple of years ago I could see the façade was there, but I could tell it wasn't operating.*

I would leave school, go down to Silver Moon and Mr. Stevens, he'd cut my hair, come back up here, my grandad would take me home.

*Wow. But you don't know how...there's no paperwork or anything, because you didn't even know that this was in the Green Book, but I'm just wondering how Ms. Haugabrooks decided to get into the Green Book.*

Unless they solicited for funeral homes, black funeral homes, for the *Green Book*.

*The way that Victor Green spread the word about the Green Book was through Esso gas stations, because Esso would have Green Books there and they marketed the Green Book. But also different union postal workers because*

*they were a big... Victor Green was a postal worker and he worked for the union and so he had other union members throughout the country help solicit the Green Book advertising, so if you knew the postal worker, you might say "Oh well you should think about listing in this because it could increase your business" and as far as we know it didn't really cost you anything to be in the Green Book unless you wanted to buy bigger ad space.*

So it was a paid for subscription?

*Yep. Some of the estimates say by the '60s about two million people were using the Green Book. And it was in publication for almost three decades...*

And I'm sure when I cleaned out the house when he passed [gestures throwing them away]. I'm sure.

*Tens of thousands of dollars in the trash. Yeah, but who has their AAA guide from 1985? People just don't save those things. And a lot of times, in that respect, it's like "we don't want to remember this when we had to only be able to go to certain places." So a lot of people throw them away.*

And I'm sure there was one around here at some point. It had to be. I don't know if I run across a Green Book around here or downstairs.

*Yeah, let us know. What would be great too is if you have any three-dimensional objects or any historical documents, or any marketing materials... because I have an exhibit that I'm working on with the Smithsonian and we would be traveling the exhibit for about three years, so any three-dimensional objects that you would like to put on loan...*

What are saying "three-dimensional"?

*Anything. I don't know, maybe with the funeral business, I'm not sure what that would be, but you know, if there were old instruments that you used, along as it wasn't sacrilegious, I guess, or any old letter head, anything from the past that was part of your business.*

I do have a copy of an old contract.

*Do you know if it's here now?*

It is, I think it's down there.

*Yeah, if we could make a copy of it? The exhibit... we'll have about a year before... and if in the next year if you think of anything, I believe I have your email.*

You do, I apologize for not responding.

*Oh, that's ok. I'll give you my card too and we'll be in touch. Is there anything else you want to say for the tape?*

Just thank you for the opportunity to have my recording in the Library of Congress! That's special. That's special.

*Good. I'm so glad.*

[27:47] END