Interview with Georgia Hale
January 10, 2007
Interviewer: Barbara Dickerman

Dickerman: Good afternoon. This is Barbara Dickerman, on January 10, 2007, interviewing Mrs. Georgia Hale. And we're here at your house on Taylor Avenue in Springfield, and I'm looking forward to hearing your story. And I know a lot of other people will enjoy it as well. So, Georgia, what is your maiden name?

Hale: Webster.

Dickerman: What is it?

Hale: Webster.

Dickerman: Georgia Webster Hale. And so I'll ask, where were you born, and then move on.

Hale: I was born in rural Elsberry, Missouri, Lincoln County. October 15, 1922. The daughter of William Henry and Della Johnson Webster. And I am the third child of eleven children. We had a wonderful life, we had a beautiful farm home. It wasn't very elaborate, but it was a happy home. We had a beautiful large pond in front of our house that accommodated the ducks as they flew by. And we fished, the neighbors would bring their horses and cattle. The weather was very dry, if you remember the dust bowls. They would bring their cattle to drink, and we got to see all kinds of horses, cows, and sometimes, people would bring their ducks and let them float around in the water. We had a lovely time. My mother had a beautiful fruit orchard, we had lots of peas, pears, apples, a great big grape arbor where we had grapes to eat, grape jelly, grape juice. We had a wonderful life. At this point in life, someone might think we were in poverty, but I think poverty is a state of mind. My parents were very, as you would say now, uneducated. But they had lots of skills that caused us to have a happy home. My father would be considered a shoe cobbler. He could always sew our shoes, they never looked that way. And where he got all of this leather from I never knew, but I remember him putting them in a big pan and setting it behind the stove where the leather would get soft, so he could use it. My mother was a very good seamstress, she made our clothes, we were well-dressed. I think, if I remember back, she always had a tape measure around her neck, and a needle in her dress. So they both worked together. We had very little, if any, arguments. We were never allowed to be violent to anyone, and especially our household family, which was our brothers and sisters. We had family members, my mother's father lived there, not in our home, but he had his home. She had one of

her twin brothers that had a house neighboring to us. My aunt lived down the street where I spent lots of times. She had no children, so I was considered her daughter, and I thought, I hope there never comes a time when I have to make a decision between my aunt and my mother, because she was very, very nice to me, and taught me lots of things. And there was neighbors and friends who lived in the little village. We finally got a church, it was used as a school in the weekdays, and Sundays we had Sunday school and church. Church wasn't every Sunday, I think we shared a minister with three other churches, so you can see that we didn't have church services every day, every Sunday, but we did have Sunday school, and we had lots of fellowship and lots of fun with the other children. When the church was like going on, the pews were piled up, so – and they would set the desks down so we could have school. There was a stove, it kept the building very warm and very comfortable. There was a piano there that was played whenever someone would come by that could play. So I have a fond memory of my childhood life, and as I said, I am proud to say that – I am proud to be the daughter of my parents, as they would be considered now maybe illiterate, but whatever that means, I have never known to cause it to be offensive to me, because they were honest people, well respected, and had good credit, and good morals. And to me, that is what I have always tried to maintain, to be an asset to our family. My father lived on his grandmother Webster's, where we grew up, that was the Webster family home. When my grandmother got too old to live by herself, she moved into town and bought a house. My father and his family moved in the house. Finally, when he got the money and could afford it, he paid my uncles – it was two uncles and I believe two aunts, is what they paid them out, and they became sole owners of the property.

Dickerman: Was this like a farm, or just a few acres?

Hale: It was a farm, it was about forty-four acres that was farm, where my father would raise corn, he just wanted enough, he said, to be sure that he could feed hogs enough to feed his family. And we would have lots of vegetables. We worked hard, but we did it because it was required of us. And we didn't complain, and it was only at the, I would say, the request of our mother's that – she taught us that if you want anything in life, you have to work for it. And we – there's a lot of things that I could say that would seem funny, but it was true. When the weather was hot, they always kept these great big baking powder cans, and I could never understand why. But as I grew older and understood, and became a part of the use of them – they would punch a hole in the bottom of the can and put them at the base of each tomato plant or whatever, and we would keep the cans full of water, and that way they could always have vegetables, even though there was a drought. They came from the pond. We always had plenty to eat, and we were never allowed to beg. If we didn't have it, we didn't ask for it. And we would say to our mother, "Could we have this?"

She said, "When we get to the place we can afford it, when I can provide for you, yes, you can have it when we can afford it." And we accepted that answer. But I was always a lover of shoes, and each time my parents would get ready to go to town, I would say, "Can I have a pair of shoes today?" My mother would say, "No, dear, you can't have shoes today. You'll be lucky if you're going to have food." But that was not a problem; I still wanted my shoes. And they bought what we needed, and that we could not afford to buy, it was made by my mother or my father, was provided with their skills. We finally got a school in Elsberry, there was not enough children in this particular neighborhood to afford a school, so we were bused to Elsberry, Missouri, to a school. When busing started here, I thought, what is so strange about it and what's different about it? I grew up with busing, we had fun on the way. Sometimes, and to go back, I graduated and went to Louisiana High School. I passed five high schools before I got to go to the one I had to go to. There was no question.

Dickerman: Louisiana was the name of school in Elsberry.

Hale: Louisiana, Missouri.

Dickerman: Oh, Louisiana, Missouri.

Hale: No, Elsberry was just went to the eighth grade. And anybody else from there, you had to go somewhere else. Sometimes the bus or car whatever would break down and we'd be late for school or we'd be late getting home, but that's the way it was. That's the way we accepted it. And everybody was concerned when we didn't get home on time, and everybody put out a search warrant to see where the kids were and what's happened to the kids. And it became a big snow, we just did not go to school. So snow days could be two or three days if the country roads weren't open. So some of the things that is new to – it is old to me, because I had lived busing, I had lived segregation. But it was not a fight. It was just that the way it was.

Dickerman: The schools were all black that you went to.

Hale: They were all black. We had black teachers; I've never had a white teacher. I can say that I was well taught. When I went to Louisiana, we had a man who was a very, very good music teacher. He became a lieutenant in the Army, but he died at an early age. But he was a musician. He taught in the lower grades, but he would spend his time after school was out, if there was a play to be had, he was the musician and you knew he was going to be there, and it was a joy to hear him play the piano. And he'd done it willingly and very well, professionally. So I say that life sometimes does not have all of these advantages, but you make the best of what you have, and not complain and cause – and hope for the better. And

I think this is where hope comes in, and I think this is the reason why my parents decided that they were going to move from the rural country to a place where their children, the smaller children, could have a better education. And I think that is the vision that my parents had, and it's one that they fulfilled. We moved to Springfield in 1942, and I was out of school at that time, but since coming to Springfield, I went to Brown's Business College, and I took some course in statistics, I didn't stay too long, but I was there for about six weeks. Those things were not provided for us, but we had to know, as we moved on, we had to – I knew, as lots of other of my classmates, that if you're going to be a part of this society that has this, you'd have to prepare yourself. So that's what I did.

Dickerman: Was Brown's in any way segregated at that time, or...?

Hale: Well, I don't think so, because I was there, and there were other Afro-Americans there. That was in Springfield now. Brown's Business in Springfield. So I did not finish at Brown's, because I took a job with CILCO, and I felt like I could not learn what I had to do at CILCO, because it was all brand-new, and they were inputting different technology and everything at the time. So I dropped –

Dickerman: What was your job called? What was your job called that you took at CILCO?

Hale: I was a teller. I was hired as a teller. And I enjoyed it. It was a learning experience. And it was an experience to be exposed, as I was exposed to the – I guess I was probably the first black teller, and I was exposed to a lot of things, and they were exposed to me.

Dickerman: The teller meant they paid their bills to you.

Hale: Yes. And it was lots of money, and I could say I didn't learn it overnight, but I would say that the employees who were there were very, very nice or helpful. And I had no problems that was major problems. I had some people who refused to come to my window, and I accepted that. I was old enough to know that, and had experienced, read enough, talked to enough people to know that some things, it's not going to change overnight. And one particular person who was an employee, he would not even allow me to cash his check. And I said, well, that's fine; I'll just sit here and do nothing, and I'll do something else. But as it turned out, he wanted the teller next to me – she had already balanced out and had no money. And I was the last to balance out, because I would work Saturdays, and I'd have Thursdays off. So I was the last to balance this particular day. She says, "I have no money. She's the only one that has money." And his question to her was, "Well, can't you cash my check out of her drawer?" And that was a very strict law: you don't fool with the next cashier's drawer.

Everybody's on their own. So I became kind of upset. So what I did, it was time for me to go on break; I locked my drawer, took my key, went on break for fifteen minutes. And that was a very – he was very upset that he could not cash his check. So when I came back, he had gone to my supervisor, and the supervisor said, "Well, I don't even have a key." And he proceeded to say, you know, this is – you should have a key, you should be this, you should be that. And he said, "Well, that's something you'll have to take up with the officials." So it passed over, and I think the word got around that she will stand her ground. And another person came by and says, "Why didn't you cash his check?" I said, "Because he didn't want me to." And I said,
"I never push myself on anybody," and I said, "Well, you know, the bank is right down the street."

Dickerman: Oh, where was CILCO at that time? I don't know.

Hale: We were at Fourth and Capitol.

Dickerman: Fourth and Capitol. Oh, sure.

Hale: Fourth and Capitol. Yes. And I said, "Well, you know, the bank is right down the street," and I said, "We are in the process right now of getting our money for Brinks to pick up the money." But it never happened again. Not saying that there wasn't incidents, but sometimes we have to learn – my mother always taught us that you can't fuss and argue and fight with yourself. It takes two. So we were never brought up with violence, and I knew nothing about it. Not saying I didn't fight with my brothers and sisters on a small scale, but with other people, we were not allowed. That was just not a part of my upbringing. And I thought it was very unladylike, but I did say, the bank is down the street. If he don't want me to do it, and I have the money, this is fine. It's his choice. And I was there eighteen and a half years, and I had a wonderful experience. And I would say that life is what you make it, whether you have much or little, you only live in the bounds of what you have. And I married a wonderful man, and we had a wonderful life; we were married thirty-three years.

Dickerman: I want to hear a little bit more about how you met him. May we go back to that? Were you still working at CILCO?

Hale: No, I was not working at CILCO at that time. It was a Sunday afternoon, I was planning to move to Chicago, and I had written my aunt a letter, and I discovered I didn't have any stamps. So I walked to Fifteenth Street, Fifteenth and South Grand. At that time, Herter's drug store sold stamps, or it had a stamp machine. And on my way back, I met my husband. It was my cousin, his – my cousin's husband and he were very, very good

friends. And they were there, and we met, and finally we got married, lived together for thirty-three years.

Dickerman: I have to stop – where were you living when you lived in Springfield and worked at CILCO? Did you live with your parents, or...?

Hale: No. I was married. We had gotten married.

Dickerman: Oh, while you were still at CILCO.

Hale: Oh, yes.

Dickerman: Oh, okay. So where did you live when you first came to Springfield?

Hale: When we first came to Springfield, I was with my parents. And we lived on Kansas Street. Then we bought a house on Clay. And we lived on Clay until my father died and my mother sold the property and she moved into the high rise. But I had already been married and was living on Stuart Street at that time.

Dickerman: Third Street.

Hale: Stuart.

Dickerman: Oh, Stuart. Oh, okay.

Hale: Stuart Street, yes.

Dickerman: All in the same neighborhood. Near Eleventh Street, or near Eighteenth?

Hale: No, it was off of Eighteenth. Everything was east of Eighteenth Street where I lived. It was mostly in the Twenty, my mother was – 2044 Clay is where my family bought. And then after we lived on Stuart Street for about, oh, maybe about twenty-nine and a half years –

Dickerman: You and your husband.

Hale: Yes, and my son. And he had a son when we got married. Wonderful relationship. And we built a house at 2500 West Lawrence, where I lived for eleven years, eight years after my husband passed, I stayed there. And then I decided that it was getting a little more expensive, I had retired, and I decided that I – well, one thing was the yard work. It was very expensive. And we lived on one of those corner lots, so the yard work was just extreme, and I decided I'm not going to hassle this. I'm going to move.

Dickerman: Did you build that house? Those are fairly new houses out there.

Hale: Yes, we built the house.

Dickerman: Well, what I call new, which means after the war.

Hale: Right. I lived at 2500 West Lawrence, it was at Lawrence and Oxford.

Dickerman: Oh, ok.

Hale: And I was there eleven years, before I moved to Taylor Avenue in the condos, which I have enjoyed, because I don't have a lot of outside work, but I do miss the outside activity to some degree. But I guess that life goes, you can't have everything. And I like the condo because of the security. And I live in the neighborhood near my church, and there's lots of advantages of living here.

Dickerman: Where is your church?

Hale: I go to Grace United Methodist Church. When we first came, we joined Grace Church, we were on Brown Street. We moved from Brown Street to Edwards Street, 1440 East Edwards. And our church was sold, and we built the church, the present structure, our sanctuary, at 1612 East Capitol is where we are worshipping at this time. And I have always been – well, the church has just been my life. I've never – I've had a lot of outside activities, but the church has been my priority. And at this time, I am now vice-president of the United Methodist Women, and I had been president, and at one time I was treasurer for about three years. And right now, I'm involved in a Wednesday Bible study, and the second Monday of the month, I'm involved in a senior ministry, which we do a lot of nice things. We visit, and mostly it is in the form of mission. And we had a kit made from the senior ministry that would accommodate someone that should fall ill that might be in the diabetic – that might be a diabetic, where we had things that would help to assist them, and we called it the kit, the emergency kit.

Dickerman: Oh, I see.

Hale: Emergency kit that would help and aid a person who might be having some kind of a problem with their diabetes. And our church is in the – you might say the east side, which is fine. We were fortunate to have had ministers of both races, which was a wonderful experience. We had Revered William "Bill" Burton, he was assistant under Reverend Sylvester Weatheral. To my knowledge, I think everything in that area has been a blessing. I've never heard of no problems. If there was, I didn't know it, and thank the Lord I didn't really need to know.

Dickerman: I'll give you a breather, Georgia. Should we stop for a minute so you can – this is a lot of talking, it's wonderful to listen to. Do you want to keep on going?

Hale: That's okay.

Dickerman: Fine. I love hearing it.

Hale: Okay. For a while, I sang in the choir, and then I kind of got sick and I stopped, so I never went back to the choir. But for years, I attended Sunday school, which I just dearly loved. But now that I have my sister with me, who is on oxygen around the clock, so I make the sacrifice to be home with her, so I don't go to Sunday school anymore, because she sleeps late, and I want to be sure that she is properly cared for, that she has her breakfast, and is situated before I leave. And I don't drive anymore. As I gave you my birthday earlier, so you can see just about how old I am.

Dickerman: No, I forgot it already.

Hale: Okay. But anyway, the van takes me to and from church, and when I need to go shopping, I have the use of the senior van. And I also have the use of caregivers. And I have a couple of young men who are friends, very good friends of my son. Whenever I need to go someplace, I just say, "This is Mrs. Hale, and I need..." "Okay, I'll be there. What time do you want to go?" Very, very young men who I call my sons. And they have been very, very helpful. So I'm blessed, even in – I'm not able to do some things for myself, but I still get done for me and for others what I need to do. And that is, if I need to go grocery shopping, it's no problem. If they can't go today, I go tomorrow. So it is just what you make life, out of life what you want. And we cannot go through life being really demanding, and that's what I try not to – with the young men that assist me in taking me places, I always say, "What time can you – what is your schedule?" Not what I want, but it's, "What can you do for me?" And it has worked beautifully. And I am sure that this will be a good relationship that I have built with them, and I do say that I don't have them to do it for me for nothing, I do pay them, which is no more than I think I should, because gas is high and I'm not sure of what their financial – and I'm sure they are not on public aid, I know they're well worked –

Dickerman: But it helps.

Hale: Yes, it helps them, and it helps me to know that I'm still able to provide for myself. It gives me a sense of independence, to know that I could still take care of myself. There's one thing that I am a member of the Coordinating Council, which is a part of the women from Frontiers International, I was a charter member of that. But the joy that I get out of

that is I have been able to assist two young men in getting scholarships, and to aid in vitiligo, which is a skin problem. And I'm sure most people have either had some or have some knowledge of what it is.

Dickerman: This is one of the charities of the Coordinating Council.

Hale: Yes.

Dickerman: The Yokettes is also the name for that.

Hale: Right. It is called the Vitiligo Fund. And we have our fundraiser, and we've been very successful, and we have – and we give away two scholarships each year, and it's not a whole lot of money, but it is a help. And I think that is what is important, that is when we help someone. Not that we give them everything, but it lets them know that if you want something, someone will help you to help yourself. And I think this is what I get out of doing this scholarship. And I'm –

Dickerman: I was going to say, the Coordinating Council, when that began, I think it was 1978, when – that's in my mind. They were – was that your husbands were mostly Frontiersmen? Was that necessarily true?

Hale: It was true. It wasn't until about 1974, I think it was. We did not have – it used to be the Ladies Auxiliary, we were in the umbrella under the Frontiersmen. And finally, with the national, we got where we could kind of be on our own. But there's been changes, and I guess that's necessary, because when we first became a part of it, only wives and daughters could be members of the Women's Auxiliary. But now that has changed. Anyone who is willing to be guided by the bylaws can become a part, which I think you get that where you get a variety of talents, of women who have lots of skills, lots of ideas. But that is what we have encountered in these years, the change. It makes for a broader membership and more talents. And that is in the Coordinating Council. We have one fundraiser in the local chapters, and we do quite well. And the Frontier Breakfast is a big fundraiser for the men, and they have a wonderful, wonderful speaker each year, and it's just a joy to be a part of such a wonderful organization that has lasted, that was organized and has been successful all these years.

Dickerman: And that breakfast is a commemoration of Martin Luther King's birthday.

Hale: It's in – yes.

Dickerman: I just want to put it into the tape.

Hale: Yes. It is called the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Breakfast, and it's always the Monday of his birthday, or the closest to his birthday, I would

say that. And I do work with the Golden Circle, which is a part of the Masonics. And again, my point there is scholarships. I think that we have a responsibility to our children to help – we can't give everybody a scholarship, but those that do apply, and they are granted the scholarship, I think they are all very appreciative. We usually have about two – because it's about four different cities, so the scholarships have to be divided among each town.

Dickerman: This is the Masonics, the Golden Circle.

Hale: Yes, the Golden Circle. So we usually, when we get, we can usually get two, and I think for the last year, we've only had one. But sometimes the message may not get around, that people know about it. But anyway, we do try to assist in the form of scholarship. Of course, education is so high, and who's going to be able to afford to send their children? I think when my grandchildren become – so those who are in college now, it is really a struggle. I have a grandson, a great-grandson in Atlanta who's going to be graduated in 2007. His father passed when he was just about eight or nine years old, and he has great ideas, great hopes, and he has been accepted to three colleges, I'm not sure where he's going to be going, but –

Dickerman: He'll just be starting college.

Hale: Yes. September of 2007, he'll be going into college.

Dickerman: Is the Golden Circle just women connected with the Masonic organization?

Hale: Yes. It's all women. All women. But we are under the umbrella of the men, we kind of have to be, you know, you understand what I'm saying.

Dickerman: Yes, I do.

Hale: Okay.

Dickerman: Most organizations have said they would do away with that.

Hale: Right.

Dickerman: But tradition.

Hale: Tradition, yes. And we understand that, and it's not a problem. When you – as I say, you have to learn how to respect authority, and this is what it is. Not that they are demanding or don't go along with us, but it's just the way it is set up.

Dickerman: Do you meet monthly? Or how –

Hale: Yes, we meet monthly. I don't make all meetings, but I try to do my part.

Dickerman: Where do they hold those meetings?

Hale: It's at the Masonic on Adams Street. The Masonic temple on Adams Street is where we meet. Now, when we go back to the Coordinating Council, we meet in homes. And that's always a joy, to go to somebody else's house, have different foods.

Dickerman: I know that from being a member at one time.

Hale: Uh-huh. And you look forward to what they're going to serve, and it's just a joy and a pleasure, and it gets you out of the house. And of course, I'd say I am one of the charter members, and I guess I'm old enough, I really should be staying at home, but they said, "Oh, no, we want you to come," and I do enjoy the younger women. And I'm having a great time with life in my senior years. And when I go back to my childhood, I often ask myself, what would my life be like if my childhood had been different? And I've never came up with an answer to that. Maybe it might have been better, and it might have been worse. And some of the things my parents, especially my mother, would have us do, I thought that just seems so odd, and why, but now I understand. We used to have these great big calendars, and that's where we would do our arithmetic homework. And then we would transfer to the book or paper, whatever we was going to turn in. And she would say –

Dickerman: _____(??) was written on the blackboard, the calendar.

Hale: The calendar. And she said, "You cannot take all of these erasures to school looking like this." It had to be neat, it had to be clean, you could not have a whole lot of erasures on your –

Dickerman: So you copied it fresh.

Hale: You copied it fresh, you'd be sure you copied right. And that way, I think it taught us to be neat and clean. And she said she cannot do justice to your paper if you have all of these erasures and all of these black marks on it. So we would always be doing our arithmetic or whatever we had to do on a separate sheet of paper, then transfer it to whatever we was going to turn in. So I think that these are some of the things that have stayed with me, to be neat, and whatever you do, make it look as neat and right as possible. But at that time, I thought, Why do I have to do it two times? But it's because if you make a mistake, and you have to do an erasure, then your paper will look very, very ugly. So that's one of the things I can

remember very vividly, that we were not allowed to turn in our work that didn't look right.

Dickerman: Now, Georgia, we didn't – you got married, and we didn't say how many children you had or what – did you work after you got married, or –

Hale: Oh, yes. Yes. I have one son. He's in Chicago.

Dickerman: Oh, just one son.

Hale: Just one son. He's in Chicago. And I had a stepson, who I lost five years ago, it'll be five years. And I had a stepson, but he was very – well, he was my son. I would say that. He has eleven children, out of the two sons, I have twelve grandchildren. And I stopped counting great-grandchildren. I heard a lot of people say they don't get along with their grandchildren, but I have a wonderful relationship with my – if you would use the word step-grandchildren. My granddaughter sent for me, she flew me to Atlanta. Whatever I need. I try not to bother them, put a demand on them, but I'm sure that if I needed something, I would not be denied it. I have that confidence in them. And they have proven this to me, that you are our grandmother. And they say, "Are you doing all right? Don't do this, don't do that. You don't have to do this, you can do this." But as long as I'm able, I plan to live in my home, so I don't have to be a burden – not a burden, but to take a part of their life away from them, because they have their families. And they're all over, in Minnesota, Arizona, Texas, and Georgia. I have one great-grandson who is in my home most of the time. But it gives you somewhere to go, and you hear from different places what's happening, and I enjoy hearing from then what's going on in their life and their towns and their state. And I'm kept up to date on lots of things, and I was in Atlanta, and I had a wonderful time. They just took me all over, and I saw beautiful plays, and lots of good Southern food. My grandson, when I saw him, he was about eight or nine years old, and he was about the age or size of a child that age, but when I saw him when I was there two years ago, when he came to the door to open the door, there stood this 6'1" figure, and I thought, Who in the world is that? And he says, "Oh, hi, grandma!" And I said, "Oh, my goodness, I can't believe it." And after he – I was there a few days, and he says, "Grandma, you looked kind of startled when you saw me." I said, "Yes, and I was as startled as I looked, because I was not expecting to see you so tall and big." He said, "Well, I guess I have grown some, haven't I?" So family and friends is a wonderful thing, and when I hear people say, "Oh, I don't get along with my family," it just breaks my heart. And you know, when you grow up and have brothers and sisters and they get married, you have a lot of different personalities. And when you can cope with your in-laws and your family, then I think you can go out and face the world and deal with most anybody, because it is a family relationship, and I can say that

of all the brothers and sisters and in-laws that we have, we've always had a wonderful relationship. My mother said, "They're human. They're part of the family, and we will treat them as such." And that was the rule. You treat them as part of the family.

Dickerman: I think this is the end of this one.

Hale: Okay.

(end of interview)