ORAL HISTORY

THE OLD FOUNDRY

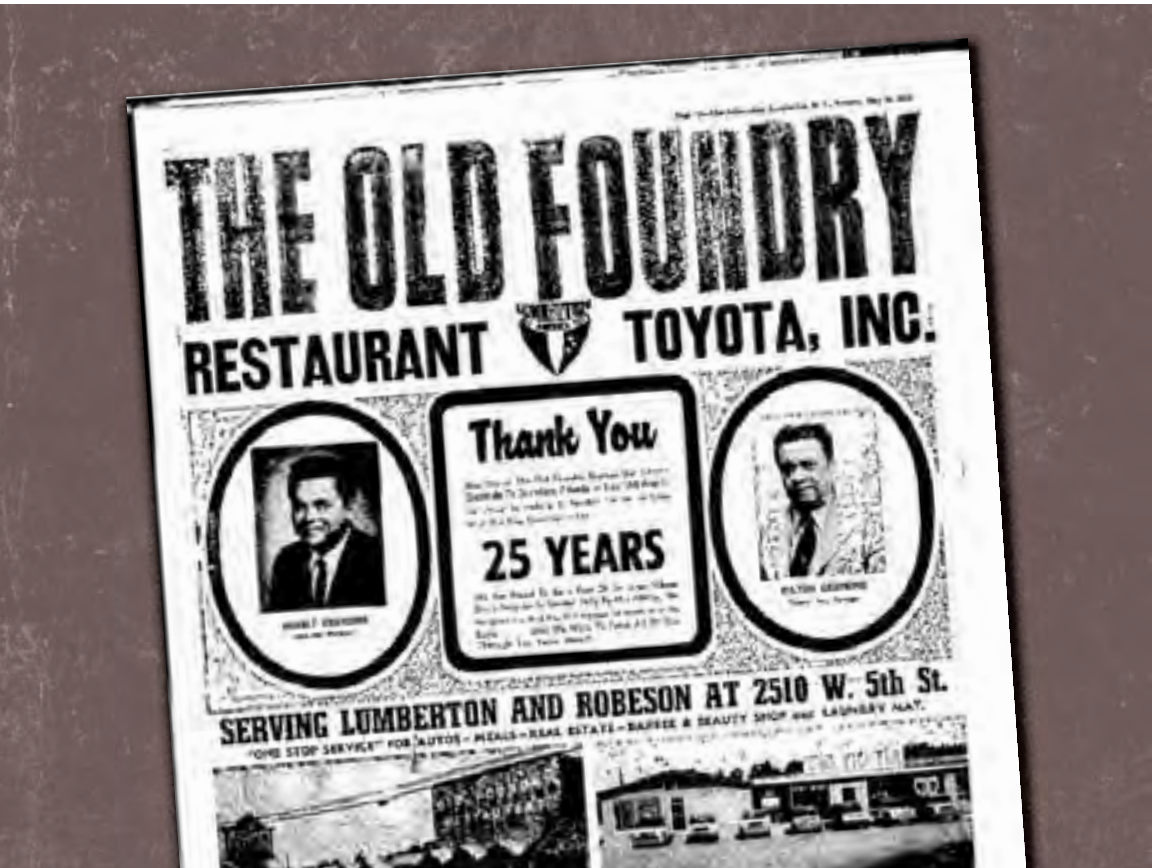
REMEMBERING A ROBESON COUNTY LANDMARK

as told to Sara Wood by Heaverd Dobbs Oxendine Jr.

THE LUMBEE INDIANS OF NORTH CAROLINA are the largest Native American tribe east of the Mississippi. In the southeastern part of the state, more than 50,000 Lumbee Indians call Robeson County home. Family and community are the center of Lumbee culture.

Throughout the twentieth century, tri-racial segregation plagued Robeson County, which today is some 40 percent Lumbee. Relationships between whites, African Americans, and Lumbee Indians are deep and complicated. Interracial relationships were common but hidden. Lumbee Indians and African Americans were not granted the same freedoms as whites. This caused strained divisions between the former two races. Some Lumbee Indians distanced themselves from African Americans in an attempt to make social strides in the white communities.

The Old Foundry Restaurant opened in Lumberton, the county seat of Robeson, in 1945. Hilton Oxendine moved his garage from the neighboring town of Fairmont and started the first Lumbee-owned car dealership in the county. He took care of the cars, and his brother, Hubert, managed the restaurant. The restaurant was known for pressure-fried chicken, steaks, and for the welcoming dining room where Lumbees could



enjoy a meal without being asked to leave. A large banquet room adjacent to the Old Foundry became the grounds for political change in the 1960s, as the Lumbees fought against inequalities in the education system.

Heaverd Dobbs Oxendine Jr., known as "Dobbs," is the nephew of Hilton and Hubert, who have both passed. Today he operates several businesses, including a car dealership next to the former Old Foundry Restaurant. Dobbs remembers the Old Foundry as a place where Lumbee Indians, who were segregated from whites and African Americans, could feel comfortable, a place where they could sit down at a table and enjoy a steak dinner with their family. African Americans were not initially welcomed into the restaurant the same way as Lumbee Indians and whites were, as Dobbs explains in this interview. As the civil rights movement progressed, members of the Lumbee Tribe joined together with African Americans to take their future in their own hands.

I WAS BORN IN FAIRMONT, NORTH CAROLINA. My father left when I was at a very early age, and as a young man I thought I was head of the house. My mama was a schoolteacher. I helped her by washing the clothes and cleaning up the house, because that would be less work for her to do. I went to work early. I was seven years old. My uncle, Hilton Oxendine, had a garage and a service station in the city limits of Fairmont. He was a successful businessman. I'd say if I was amounting to anything, I got it from him. When I got out of school, I'd walk to work at his business. I also got a job during tobacco season with this guy that made pictures of individuals, and we would set up on the streets there and when people would come by, we would make their picture. In the wintertime I had what I called a tin wagon, and I'd go around picking up copper, steel, iron, and stuff off the railroad tracks. Wherever I could find it, I'd gather it up and then I'd go sell it.

My uncle decided to move from Fairmont to Lumberton in 1945. I think he thought it was a better opportunity for his business, because he picked the location which was known as 301 (where Interstate 95 runs through Lumberton today), and that's where all the tourists from north and south would come right by his place. He had it tough, being an Indian coming up and having a business like he had, but he made it work. In business you got to have money. You got to be able to borrow money to help you with your business, and the banks were owned by the

white folks. They controlled the money, and when they controlled the money they kind of control your business. He wanted to buy a Cadillac. He had the money to buy it, but he went across town to buy it and they wouldn't sell him one—even though he had the cash money. They didn't think an Indian ought to be driving a Cadillac.

HE CALLED IT OLD FOUNDRY RESTAURANT. It was an iron foundry that was torn down. He also had the automobile business. He sold some new vehicles, but he had a body shop, a garage, wrecker service, salvage yard—he was a real sharp businessman. As I was growing up, I spent the summer working here with my uncle in different capacities.

The Indians couldn't go to a theater or a drugstore or other restaurants and sit down and feel comfortable, or it was against the law for them to do it, anyway. They were denied going to a drugstore for ice cream and Coke—couldn't sit down on the stool there and eat it. You could order it, but you had to get out. A lot of folks now wouldn't hardly believe that, I imagine. The Old Foundry welcomed Indians. This was the center where the Indians could go and have a good time. On Sundays you'd see them with their families. They'd come in and sit down and have meals. They'd have functions. During the governor's race or the senate race they'd meet here at the Old Foundry to discuss politics. This was kind of the headquarters of politicking.

The Old Foundry had curb service and it was known for its broasted chicken and having real good steaks. We had a buffet here, and we had local cooks who was used to cooking country food, and the folks just loved country food. We employed a lot of folks, young ladies who was going to school. There weren't any jobs in this county. You share-farmed. And during this time Robeson County was known as the moonshine capital of this United States. They made more liquor here in Robeson County than anywhere else. So either you was a farmer, or you made liquor and you sold liquor—that was the economic development we had here.

And we welcomed the white folks: The mayor of Lumberton, the people who ran this city, they would come out here and have dinner and they felt at home coming here. They intermingled with the Indians. During breakfast and lunchtime you wouldn't never know it was just an Indian place. They'd come out here and they enjoyed the food. But the blacks, they didn't come in like the Indians or the white folks. They was served in the back and they got their food, and they would take it with them. That stayed like that up to the early 1960s, I believe. That wasn't right; we were practicing what was practiced against us. If it could have been changed, then I would have loved for it to, because I believe everybody is created equal and they should have the same privilege as anybody else. I don't believe in first or second or third classes of people. I believe everybody should have their own ideas, their own beliefs, and their own work habits, religion.

They closed the Old Foundry and then it was put up for sale. And with the history of the Old Foundry for our people, and especially with me growing up here, I purchased it. And one day I'd like to see it be a historical site. It means a lot to me, because I grew up here. To me it was the center of Indian folks at one time. If anybody wanted entertainment, they'd come here—good food, everything. They didn't feel comfortable going other places because of segregation. Now you can go anywhere you'd like.

PHOTOS BY *Sara Wood.*
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