

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

CAROLYN BLAND

INTERVIEW 2001

This is Julius Parham representing the Memories of New Bern Committee.

I am interviewing Mrs. Carolyn Bland, Interview Number 2001. This interview is being conducted on January 27, 1993. We are at the home of Mrs. Bland, 1615 Hazel Avenue. We want to make note too that Mrs. Bland has also been interviewed once before and during that time she was interviewed on Town Life. This time we are going to key in on the family business, owned and run by her father. Now we'll go into our interview.

JULIUS PARHAM: Mrs. Bland, would you introduce yourself and give us a little history.

Mrs. BLAND: My name is Carolyn Rosetta Moore Bland. I was born during the Depression on August 16, 1930 to Susie Elizabeth Leath and George Azel Moore at their home at 52 (later 305) Jones Street in New Bern. My family continued to live at this address until 1954 when my parents built a new home next door at 303 Jones Street. My father was in business, George A. Moore and Son Grocery Store, which was located at 1008 Pollock Street near Jones and Liberty Streets. The third of four children, I attended West Street School, as did my siblings. The school was later named F. R. Danyus Elementary School.

I graduated from Livingstone College in Salisbury with a Bachelor's Degree. I have a brother, George A. Moore, Jr., sisters, Frances Winona Moore, and Bernice Renee Moore West. My father had no formal education beyond the public school. He had completed the Eighth Grade at the New Bern Academy, which was called the Old Sutton School. My mother attended two years at the high school department of Bennett College

in Greensboro, North Carolina.

JP: Okay. If you will Mrs. Bland, could you tell us about the business that your father owned and ran. And of course, I think a lot of people looking at histories here would like to know the location, how long he was in business, how did he purchase his groceries in terms of wholesale. I remember you and I talked earlier about there were always home deliveries. I guess just kind of highlight what went on there, and of course your experience as a child helping and working around the store.

Mrs. BLAND: Okay. My father worked as a butler in Red Bank, New Jersey, and he moved back to New Bern and opened a grocery store on or about 1920. The earliest records we have been able to locate would indicate him being in business about 1920. This store was located at what was numbered 192 Pollock Street, later renumbered 1008 Pollock Street, near the intersection of Jones and Liberty Streets.

JP: Is that where Askew's used to be?

Mrs. BLAND: No. It's one block down from where Askew's Wholesale Company used to be. In the 1940's he renamed the store George A. Moore and Son Grocery because of my brother. My mother first worked as a clerk in Dad's store where she told us he paid her fifty cents a week.

JP: Now were they married at the time?

Mrs. BLAND: No.

JP: Okay.

Mrs. BLAND: She later went to New York where she worked as a domestic until she returned in 1925 when they got married. He bought

staples from Lucas & Lewis Wholesale Company, as I think they were the number one grocery wholesale company here. I think the meats were from Wilson Packing Company, and the local bread and milk from companies here in New Bern. His fresh vegetables were usually available on Saturdays when the farmers came to town with their produce. He stocked the various brands of tobacco products: cigarettes, tobacco, and snuff.

Snuff was widely used by a lot of the women in New Bern as well as chewing tobacco.

JP: Yeah, I kind of remember during that time my grandmother used Beechnut Chewing Tobacco. (laughter)

Mrs. BLAND: Yes, everybody had to have that. My father generally wore a white apron and had the usual cookie bins and candy cases found in most stores of that period. He sold kerosene from a tank located outside of the store on which he put a lock at night. Meats and sodas were kept on a large block of ice in a large two-sided icebox. I think the ice man maybe delivered ice twice a week, as I can remember, on his truck.

JP: The ice would last that long then, I guess.

Mrs. BLAND: I think so if I recall. I think it was in late, late forties or early fifties that he got a refrigerated electric icebox, or an electric refrigerator you might call it. Black Strap Molasses was sold from a large barrel with a spigot, a faucet, usually ten or fifteen cents worth according to the size of the container the customer brought in.

JP: Let me ask you a question-on the molasses, it was just an

everyday staple item for some people.

Mrs. BLAND: Oh yes. Molasses was quite popular. Everybody had that along with a lot of biscuits, beans and those type of things.

JP: The food that stuck to your ribs, they called it.

Mrs. BLAND: Yes, that stuck to your ribs. In the early years dried beans, black-eyed peas, flour and meal were delivered in large barrels or large bags. We had to measure and weigh each into one, two, or five pound bags for stocking on the shelf. The sugar often came in large twenty-five pound bags with red or black lettering. My mother used to bleach the bags and make pillow cases or underslips for us three girls. Somehow she was never able to bleach out those red letters. (laughter)

JP: The bags they used they had to buy from a wholesaler then put flour in them.

Mrs. BLAND: No, they were delivered from the wholesale grocer in the large bags and from these bags we weighed out one, two, or five pound bags, tied them with strings, then put them on the shelf, and they were sold to the customers.

JP: Okay. During that time did you, your brother and sisters have a special job at the grocery store?

Mrs. BLAND: Yes. We had to sweep the floor. It was a wooden floor. In order to minimize the dust we would sprinkle it with water and then sweep it. Now that's what we had to do every morning or every night before closing up. We worked on Saturdays when we were in school and during the summers we worked there, opening around six o'clock

in the morning when a lot of people were going to work in the tobacco areas or on farms. They would stop by to get their sodas, cookies or goodies to carry with them for their lunch.

JP: Were you paid?

Mrs. BLAND: No. We were paid, and yes we were not paid, because we received an allowance. My sister Frances who was the oldest, became "Miss Prissy" and didn't want to work in the store, so she whined and complained and made so many errors on the cash register until she stopped working there. George and I generally handled the business.

When we were small, my father had to go out of town often to attend conferences and my mother took over the business. After we became older, she handled it while we were in school and we closed up after school. We did his banking, we ordered the groceries and generally took care of everything. We were in high school at that time.

JP: Did you ever think about going back in the business?

Mrs. BLAND: Not that type of business. It was interesting to meet the people but grocery stores as they were in those days involved a lot of hard work. Yes it did. The groceries were delivered generally by my brother when he was younger and then other boys in the community.

They were stacked in a wooden basket and delivered on a bicycle. There were few a customers who had telephones and could call in their orders. But most of the people came to the grocery store on Saturdays to place their order. The average order, believe it or not, about that time was about fifteen dollars. That was a lot of groceries for fifteen dollars.

JP: Of course you probably had an old receipt book for charge accounts.

Mrs. BLAND: Oh yes, yes. There were credit accounts because so many people did not get paid until they completed a job, and persons who collected social security checks were far and few in between. But Dad often cashed people's paychecks in return when they bought their groceries.

JP: Now how far were you living from the store at that time? Everything was close.

Mrs. BLAND: We lived about a block. The house was about a block from the store. My Dad had the only phone in the neighborhood in the grocery store. So when someone became ill at night, they would come over to our home, call him and he would go down to the store, and call the doctor or whatever had to be done.

JP: What kind of hours was his store opened?

Mrs. BLAND: As a child, I can't remember, but I think it opened at about seven o'clock in the morning and it closed maybe at eight at night. In the summer we opened earlier, as I said around six o'clock to accommodate the persons who were going to work in the tobacco fields.

By working down at the store we got to eat all of the cookies and goodies that we wanted to eat, when my Dad wasn't looking of course.

JP: Did he ever expand in his business or did he ever change the business in any way during that time?

Mrs. BLAND: He did not expand the business. When all of us graduated from college, he sort of retired, closed the store on Pollock

Street and opened a small candy shop back of the house on Church Street.

But going back to the large grocery store on Pollock Street, he had a little office area back there, and it was there that he took care of the business for the church because he was church treasurer. He was a member of Clinton Chapel AME Zion Church. He was involved with the Masons and the Elks, and "you name it."

JP: I heard a lot of times, any gentleman that owned a business back in those days was probably a leader in the community and was always involved.

Mrs. BLAND: Well, he was involved in a number of things. I believe I told you about the bakery didn't I?

JP: No, not yet. We haven't covered the bakery.

Mrs. BLAND: I'm ahead of myself.

JP: That's all right, go right ahead. Take your time.

Mrs. BLAND: My dad was the founding president of New Bern Civic League. Now that is what is now know as the Craven County Voters League.

This group, the Voters League, raised money and constructed the shell for the first recreation center there on Cedar Street. It was the first center for Blacks. My dad maintained a chart of the pledges, and I assisted him in updating the chart after their monthly meetings.

They had color coded stars for your contribution: \$25, \$50, or \$100.

This group later turned the building over to the city who completed it and named it the Cedar Street Recreation Center. The Stanley White Recreation Center was later built, and the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity is now using the building on Cedar Street for community purposes.

As a member of Clinton Chapel Church, my dad was a trustee there for over fifty years and chairman of the board. He was superintendent of the Sunday School for thirty-five years. He was the first president elected to the General Convention on Christian Education in the AME Zion Church, and he represented our local church at the conference in the General Conferences from 1915-1956. He also served as Conference Treasurer for twenty-two years. So that was just the church. Now fraternally he was involved in the Elks, and was the Past Exalter Ruler of Zeno Lodge Number 23, a District Deputy for twenty years, and a past vice-president of the North Carolina state Elks. In the Masons, he was past Worshipful Master and Treasurer of George B. Willis Lodge number 423, Prince Hall affiliate. He was Treasurer of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina for twenty-eight years. He was a Shriner and a 33rd degree Mason. In addition to that, he was a member of the Queen Esther Chapter Number 7, Order of the Eastern Star. My dad also served on the Board of Directors for the NAACP and the 4-H Foundation. So he stayed busy and stayed quite involved.

JP: Yeah. So I guess after a while it wasn't no other choice but the wife, your mother, and the kids to run the store.

Mrs. BLAND: That's right because he stayed gone quite a bit, especially in the latter years. I thought it was an inconvenience, but the opportunity my brother and I had in running the store gave me a good background in business and handling figures. We didn't have adding machines in those days. My dad could add numbers in his head as fast as anybody could on an adding machine. He would not tolerate

mistakes.

JP: Did he take his money home and keep it or was he banking it at a banking system?

Mrs. BLAND: Well, he usually kept the money in a little safe in the grocery store, but every other day he took it to the bank or sent us with it to the bank.

JP: Who were you banking with then?

Mrs. BLAND: First Citizen Bank down there where the Bank of Arts is now, the big building on Middle Street. I'd ride my bike down there and take his little bag in to a teller and then wait until they counted it, the dollars, pennies, and nickels. He was well known to that bank president and he interceded in behalf of a number of Black people in getting loans there to buy property or build homes. He acquired a number of pieces of rental property in New Bern and collected rents for a lot of people. So he was something to almost everybody around here. A lot of the local politicians, I guess you might call them, would hang out there at my father's store where they would talk about the events of the day over a pack of cheese crackers, they were called nabs at that time, and a bottle of pop as they would call it. (laughter)

There would be quite a conversation. My sisters, brother, and I were privileged to hear a lot of information about what was going on in the world.

JP: The happenings.

Mrs. BLAND: Uh huh. Lawyer Raphael O'Hara lived across the street from us and he was the grandson, or maybe the son, of Mr. O'Hara who

was one of the first Blacks to go to Congress representing South Carolina. But he always quizzed us about a lot of tidbits on American and Black history during that time. I remember the O'Hara's were one of the first Black families or few Black families we knew who had a maid at that time.

JP: That's a while back. You mentioned something earlier about a bakery.

Mrs. BLAND: My father was a partner in the Peerless Baking Company, it was a bakery located in Five Points, along with Mr. John Robinson and Mr. Ambrose Hargett. He also had a partnership in Faison's Beach down in Pamlico County, near Oriental. The other partners were Mr. B. S. Rivers, Mr. Frank Pollock, and the primary owner of the beach, Mr. Marshall Faison. I think those were the only things I remember him having been involved in business-wise. Of course he assisted a lot of people when they had to borrow money to save their property, and having deeds drawn up, or referred them to the local lawyers for assistance.

JP: At that time he was doing business, were there any black lawyers in town?

Mrs. BLAND: Lawyer O'Hara. That's the only one I remember, Lawyer Raphael O'Hara. Later, Lawyer Robert Glass came to town. That was in the late fifties I think or early sixties.

JP: Okay. What about competition? Were there any other groceries near the area?

Mrs. BLAND: There were a number of neighborhood grocery stores,

and of course the A&P was located on Queen Street. But they didn't give credit to Blacks, so there weren't that many people who went there to shop. But I remember Rhodes Grocery on Main Street, and Charles Blount had a grocery on upper Main Street near Bern. You remember that, don't you?

JP: Right.

Mrs. BLAND: After my dad closed the grocery store, he would go out to Vails' Barber Shop on Broad Street. If he didn't get his hair cut or shaved there (I never saw my father shave at home, he always went to the barber shop for a shave) he stood around and talked to Seth Vails, his brother James Vails, and his nephew Robert Vails. The Vails family had a history of being barbers there in New Bern. The beauty shop was owned by Uncle Bub's (as we called him) Uncle Bub's wife Nanny, Mrs. Alberta Vails. You remember that?

JP: That's the same shop that's located right on Queen Street. Is that where he started? I remember it being there, I can't remember if that's where he started.

Mrs. BLAND: Well, the barber shop was down on Broad Street in the vicinity now of Smith's Drug Store. It was in that area, one block up from that. In later years it moved down to Queen Street across from Carolina Cleaners where Foy's Barber Shop is located now. The barber shop was in the front and the beauty parlor was in the back.

JP: During that business time, during the time your grocery store was open, were there a lot of other black businesses in the Five Point area that were doing other type businesses other than groceries?

Mrs. BLAND: Yes. There was Hill's Drug Store that was owned by Dr. George Hill. His wife, Mrs. Rosabelle Hill, taught school. They were members of St. Peter's Church. Mr. Steve Roberts had a produce market I suppose you would call it. He sold a lot of fresh vegetables there. I remember a restaurant being there. I don't recall the name of it now, but there was a restaurant there. And the Walston brothers had a fish market. All of that was in the Five Points area also.

JP: And most of the black businesses were located there in that area?

Mrs. BLAND: They were located there, yes, on Broad Street right in that little area. Most of them were right there. Being a businessman, my father also got passes to the local circus when it came to town because of the posters. He would get posters and distribute them in the Black community, so we usually got to go to the circus free. Also, in order to go to the movies on Fridays, which was a big day in our life, you could go to the movie for, (we attended the movie at the Palace Theater there on Broad Street also), and you could go to the movie for ten cents on Friday with a wrapper from Stanback or BC Headache Powder. There were four doses in a package, and my Dad used to take them out and sell the doses individually to customers, so the four of us could go to the movie and each would have a wrapper. Of course we didn't have any money to buy anything in the movie. We took our candy with us. I think I was almost in the Seventh or Eighth grade when I had popcorn at a movie. But that was our treat.

He saw that we did that. My father was also very strict about table manners. He was very strict about us having breakfast and dinner.

We were never allowed to use the word "supper", because he said we had dinner, we didn't have supper. Other kids had supper. He was very strict about that, and I think this was due to his having worked as a butler in Red Bank, New Jersey. In spite of the fact that he only finished high school, he was very versatile and he could converse on all levels with all people. He was self-taught. He read a lot.

He subscribed to the newspapers. Sunday morning, ours was the only house in the neighborhood that the News & Observer newspaper was delivered to. He just wanted to make sure that we had an opportunity that he didn't have to go to school and achieve beyond the public school level.

JP: Did the grocery store ever cater to any white customers?

Mrs. BLAND: Yes. It was right in the middle of a predominantly white neighborhood. At one time, I understand most blacks lived along that area but they lost a lot of their property during the Depression.

So there were a number of whites who lived there and they came in bought small items. They didn't do any large business with him, but there were a few of them. And of course a lot of the insurance men and other people stopped there to try to get his assistance in locating somebody or stopped to have a soda on a hot day, that type of thing.

JP: We're near the end of our interview. Mrs. Bland, is there anything else that you would like to add to it in terms of when your father passed and what happened to the family after that?

Mrs. BLAND: Well, during his retirement years my father stayed on the go attending conventions and meetings and what have you. He closed the store on Pollock Street and opened a little candy shop right back of the house on Church Street which he could close up when he had to go out of town. He was still in business there when he died in November of 1956. My mother never worked. she was always a homemaker. She continued in the rental property business until her death in 1974.

JP: Mrs. Bland, we appreciate your interview and giving us this information for oral history for the city of New Bern. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

(This interview was conducted by Julius Parham whose interviewer number is 2000. The number of the interview is 2001.)

END OF TAPE