

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

ALBERT T. WILLIS, JR.

INTERVIEW 915

This is Dorothy Richardson representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 900. I am interviewing Mr. Albert T. Willis, Jr., interview number 915. This interview is being conducted on February 24, 1993. We are at 814 Chattawka Lane, New Bern, North Carolina.

DOROTHY RICHARDSON: Mr. Willis, could you give us your birthdate, where you were born, your parent's names, your sister's name, and anything you remember about the street you were born on?

MR. WILLIS: All right Dorothy. I was born right here in New Bern at 407 Hancock Street. Of course they called it 70 Hancock Street back in those days, and now it's 407 Hancock Street. My parents were Mr. and Mrs. Albert T. Willis, Sr. I have lived all my life in New Bern except for four years in the United States Army.

DR: Who was your mother Albert?

MR. WILLIS: My mother was a Turner, Mary Turner. She was the Turner half of the Turner-Tolson Furniture Company. But she was Mary Turner (Lane). My sister, who is two years older than I am, is Mary Turner Willis and she's a retired professor at the University of North Carolina Education Department.

DR: So the house you were born in, you lived in until you went away.

MR. WILLIS: The house I was born in on Hancock Street I lived in the entire time until I went to college for four years and then in the Army for four years. I got married while we were in the Army. When I came back we moved in the New Bernian Apartments. I think they

call it Carolina Club Apartments now.

DR: Let's go back. Do you remember any neighbors on Hancock Street?

MR. WILLIS: Well, my uncle, Mr. Charlie Turner, the Turner-Tolson furniture man I mentioned before, lived on one side of me and Celia Hibbard, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Hibbard lived on the other side of me.

DR: Mr. Hibbard was a jeweler, wasn't he?

MR. WILLIS: Mr. Hibbard was a jeweler, that's correct. I grew up with his son, Bert Hibbard, who now lives in Atlanta. He's a couple of years younger than I was, but we did grow up together.

DR: The other house at the end, didn't the Caroon...

MR. WILLIS: The Caroon family lived a couple of houses down. She made the most delicious salted peanuts I ever put in my mouth! We grew up with all those kids too. There was Billy Caroon, there was Alicia Caroon, and there was Sugar Caroon, that's what we called her.

DR: You remember how much those peanuts cost?

MR. WILLIS: They were probably a nickel a bag, that's all I know.  
(laughter)

DR: We used to take them to the movies on Saturday afternoon.

MR. WILLIS: Get a drink for a nickel and take those nickel peanuts and stay in the movie all afternoon. I don't think the movie cost over ten cents. I don't remember that.

DR: Was your daddy born in New Bern?

MR. WILLIS: Yes, he was born in New Bern. The family originated

from Carteret County, and the original name was Williston. The family settled down there in Carteret County about 1770. Several generations dropped the "ton" and it's been Willis ever since.

DR: It really goes back, the Williston. But your mother was born in New Bern.

MR. WILLIS: Mother was born in New Bern also, that's correct. She had a brother, Charles Turner, that I've already mentioned to you.

DR: Albert, you went to grammar school. Did you go to kindergarten?

MR. WILLIS: Yes. I went to Mrs. Gibbs' kindergarten. Dr. Gibbs' wife ran a kindergarten down on Johnson Street if I remember correctly.

I went to Miss Mollie Heath's first grade in grade school. That was next to the where the New Bern Academy is located now. In fact when we went to school, you could go first grade through eleventh grade right on that one corner. In fact at the New Bern Academy where I sometimes work, like I worked there yesterday, people come to visit, and I tell them I went to the fifth and sixth grade there. I lived half a block down the street. I could leave my house when the bell started ringing and be in my seat before the bell quit!

DR: My husband did the same thing.

MR. WILLIS: Same thing cause he lived a block in the other direction. That's exactly correct. But we went first grade all the way through eleventh right there on that one corner. Never rode a school bus in my life cause it wasn't necessary.

DR: Who were some of your teachers Albert?

MR. WILLIS: Oh my gosh. Louise Bell I remember having. Mollie Heath I think I had. I had Mrs. C. Green for either fifth or sixth grade. I had a Miss Folks, I don't remember her. I had Frank Alston for a teacher at one time. Gosh, I can't remember all the teachers names.

DR: Albert, when you were in elementary school, what were some of the activities that young children back in New Bern then that they had that they could participate in?

MR. WILLIS: On the school green we used to play a game called "Running Through" where you got in the middle of the lot and you tried to run from one end to the other without being tackled and thrown to the ground. If you're tackled and thrown to the ground, you had to stay and capture somebody else. Then we did the leap frog thing where you run over the backs, leap a line here and hit their backs and go over and things like that. But Running Through is the only thing I remember. We did that right on the school grounds.

DR: Do you remember field days?

MR. WILLIS: Yes, I remember the field days. I don't remember what I did. I remember the running and the racing and the exchanging of the baton and all that stuff on field days. Used to have it at Kafer Park, I remember that.

DR: Didn't all the elementary schools in the city participate?

MR. WILLIS: Yes, they did. They didn't have too many back in those days either. Mostly you had either Ghent or Riverside go back

into elementary school, in the city system at that time.

DR: But we competed.

MR. WILLIS: That's correct. At Kafer Park if I remember correctly.

DR: And they gave...

MR. WILLIS: Ribbons or something. I don't remember what they were.

DR: I remember Helen Ruth always came home with the racing red ribbon.

MR. WILLIS: She most likely did. She was fast. I graduated from high school in 1938.

DR: Albert, let's go back. You were big in scouts in elementary school weren't you?

MR. WILLIS: Yes. I joined the C. Green scout troop. Mrs. Green, as I mentioned, was one of the teachers. It kind of petered out and then I joined Dr. Hand's Gang and then it later evolved into a Boy Scout troop and I became an Eagle Scout under Dr. Hand.

DR: I thought you did. Albert, we didn't have junior high, we went to the eighth grade right down at the old Central School.

MR. WILLIS: It's called the Bell building now. The Academy had first, second, third, and fourth, if I remember, was over there on the corner. Fifth and sixth grade is in what is now the Academy building. Fifth grade downstairs, sixth grade upstairs. Seventh and eighth were in what we call the Bell building, which is now apartments I think. And ninth, tenth, and eleventh were in the high school on

the corner there, cause they only had eleven grades then.

DR: Now who were some of your teachers?

MR. WILLIS: I can't remember. Like I said, I had Mr. Alston. I wish Carolyn was here. She could help me cause she was in the same class. I can't remember the teacher's names.

DR: And then in high school, did you go away to high school?

MR. WILLIS: No, no, no. I stayed right here. I was in the Hi-Y. I was a cheerleader by the way, which is a little unusual. Both of my daughters were cheerleaders in high school. I told them I was a cheerleader in high school too and they couldn't believe it.

DR: Well, look at the guys at Chapel Hill.

MR. WILLIS: That's correct. In fact we even got that little Billy Arthur to come down from Chapel Hill and do some cheers in the auditorium there at high school one time.

DR: Did you?

MR. WILLIS: We certainly did. We certainly did. Yeah.

DR: Do you remember, Albert, some of your classmates as you went on up?

MR. WILLIS: Well, I remember Jack Holland and Charles Barker and Henry Whitehurst and people like that. Helen Ruth Weatherington and I were voted the best dancers in the senior class, I'll have you know, our senior year.

DR: What are some of the things that seniors and juniors did in those days for entertainment?

MR. WILLIS: If you were sixteen you could get the family car,

you could always go down to the Woman's Club for a little while, or you could go by and get a hamburger at Davis, is that where it was, most of us ate there.

DR: How much did they cost Albert?

MR. WILLIS: They were a nickel a piece as I remember. And Mr. Shapou made the best hamburger in town for a nickel, Mike Shapou. They were a nickel.

DR: How much did a date cost you to go to the movie and get a coke?

MR. WILLIS: Less than a dollar.

DR: Did you have any jobs Albert?

MR. WILLIS: I worked up at a filling station up there on the corner for a man named Nick Nickels. There was a Gulf station right there on the corner. There's a B. P. station there now. That was my very first job. It paid a dollar a day.

DR: And you worked!

MR. WILLIS: Worked all day long from eight in the morning until about eight at night; pumping gas, changing tires, greasing cars, things like that. That was the first job I had.

DR: And you were sixteen.

MR. WILLIS: Yeah, I was sixteen. I had just turned sixteen cause I could drive the repair and tow truck at that time because I had just gotten my license you see.

DR: Oh my gosh. Well, Albert, when you graduated from high school, do you remember any of the senior superlatives?

MR. WILLIS: Now this was the class of '37 cause I started out with the class of '37, but I graduated in 1938. J. W. Burton was the best looking man, best looking boy, in the senior class, I remember that. And of course Helen Ruth and I were the best dancers. Jack Holland should have gotten it, but that's neither here nor there. I don't remember any of the rest of the seniors. I've got them written down somewhere but I can't find them.

DR: What else was there to do for young people?

MR. WILLIS: That was about all. I know Dr. Hand used to take his gang, boys, on trips out of town. We went to Wilmington to see Admiral Byrd's ship that had stopped in there. It was on display. He took us to the state fair in Raleigh. He took us to Norfolk where the aircraft carrier was there and we went all over that. Trips like that, you see, were mostly just boy oriented type things. I remember Harlow Waldrop used to go as a chaperon cause Grayson was in it. John R. Taylor used to go cause Jack Taylor was in it. Mr. Haywood Guion used to go cause Tom Guion was in it.

DR: Do you remember, Albert, the circus parade that came through New Bern?

MR. WILLIS: Oh lord, yes. That used to be a big event. We're going to the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus on Friday, but it's in the Dorton arena. You won't see a tent up there, you won't even see a parade. But oh yeah, it used to be a big event here with us.

DR: Did you ever go out and watch the train? They came in on the train.

MR. WILLIS: I never did that. Carolyn lived out on Spencer Avenue where most of them unloaded out there. She has memories of that, but I don't recall it. As far as high school is concerned, most of us were in the Hi-Y. That was something. We had a boys Hi-Y and a girls Hi-Y. I was in the dramatics club. We put on a couple of plays with Lillian Jones, back in those days. I remember Mr. Hodgkins who directed the choir or glee club, whatever you want to call it.

DR: Were you in that Albert? Did your class have an annual?

MR. WILLIS: I was not in the Glee Club. We were Depression class, Dorothy, as you well know. No. I think they gave everybody a telephone directory and let it go at that. (laughter)

DR: Well, Albert, we didn't have an annual because the times were hard. Did we have nine months of school or eight months?

MR. WILLIS: Yes we did, we had nine months.

DR: But we only had eleven years.

MR. WILLIS: That's right, only went eleven years. When I was in school in college it was during that time period that they finally went to the twelfth grade, cause I remember coming back and going out to the high school to see some people that I knew and the twelfth grade had been incorporated during that four years I was in college.

DR: What year was that?

MR. WILLIS: I graduated in '38 and went to The Citadel, the military college of South Carolina 1938-1942, so it must of been sometime during that time span.

DR: And you graduated from The Citadel?

MR. WILLIS: I did indeed graduate from The Citadel. I got a degree in political science. I was gonna go with the state department. I was gonna be either an ambassador or work for the state department overseas, BUT, December 7, 1941 of course changed everything. We got our diplomas on one side of the stage and got our commissions as Second Lieutenants on the other side of the stage. I already had my orders to active duty, Camp Wheeler, Georgia. So I spent the next four years in the Army.

DR: Well, going back, Albert, your father was called, wasn't he?

MR. WILLIS: Yes. Daddy served in both world wars. He served in France during World War I, and then in 1939-1940 when they mobilized the National Guard, daddy was a battalion commander with the 113th Field Artillery of the 30th Division and was mobilized and sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

DR: And helped train.

MR. WILLIS: He did not go overseas because he reached the mandatory age of retirement while he was down there and came on back home while I was over in China. I did spend two years over in China in the China-Burma-India theater training Chinese troops for General Chiang Kai Shek and Madame Chiang Kai Shek, whom I met by the way one time.

DR: You did?!

MR. WILLIS: I've even got Madame Chiang Kai Shek's autograph.

DR: Was she as lovely as they say?

MR. WILLIS: Absolutely beautiful. She spoke better English than you and I Dorothy. She was most delightful. He didn't speak any English at all. Whatever he had to say was said through her. I wasn't the only one there. There were seventy-five of us there. It was a banquet type thing. It was those officers who were over there to help train the Chinese army. I ended up in Burma with a combat outfit called Merrills Marauders and they later called it the MARS Task Force. I was operating up and down the Burma road fighting the Japanese.

DR: That was a "he man" outfit!

MR. WILLIS: Two hundred miles on foot through the Burmese jungle with a 50 pound pack on your back, something like that.

DR: Were you ever wounded?

MR. WILLIS: No. Somebody got shot and hit very close to me, but I never got a scratch Dorothy, thank goodness. I was a company commander. I had two hundred men under my command, forty mules. It was an experience. I joined the Marauders after they captured a place called Myitkyina and they changed the name from Marauders to MARS.

That's when they picked me up as a replacement from China and I joined the Marauders at Myitkyina. I was not an original Marauder. I joined the reorganized Marauders. I went all the way through Burma with them.

Sure did.

DR: Well, let's go back, before you went overseas you were married.

MR. WILLIS: Got married at Camp Wheeler, Georgia as a second lieutenant. The girl I married I had been going with all the way through

high school together. Her mother and father couldn't come so the battalion commander gave her away. My daddy was on active duty. He came over from Fort Jackson. Some of my Citadel classmates who were at Camp Wheeler were in the wedding. We were married at Camp Wheeler, Georgia in the sixth area chapel. We lived in Macon for a year. We lived in Columbus, Georgia for three months and then I went overseas for two years and Carolyn came back home and went to work at the bank.

DR: And she was a New Bern girl.

MR. WILLIS: She was indeed.

DR: Raised in New Bern.

MR. WILLIS: She was not born in New Bern but she was raised in New Bern. Mr Brewer was a lumber person. He was the supervisor of a lumber mill and worked for Barbour Boat Works for a long time during their lumber operation down there.

DR: In letters you received from home, Albert, what kind of things do you remember that those of who were writing to ya'll, the changes, do you remember anything?

MR. WILLIS: No, except Carolyn would always start her letters off with, "It's been another hectic day at the bank." Oh, there were shortages and things and the things they were able to spare and things like that. Mail came through anywhere from about two to three weeks behind schedule, but at least we did get mail, and she wrote almost everyday. When I was in Burma, I could not write everyday. The headquarters of the unit back at Myitkyina, would send the little form V-mail letters, "That your husband is involved in an operation and

unable to contact you, but last word, we heard everything was all right and fine." She kept up that way. There were only very few of the commentators and news people that covered the China-Burma-India campaign. So whenever it came on the news, someone would usually call and she would either find the paper or turn the radio on. Cause we were at the bottom of the barrel. The big show was in Europe and the Pacific, and China-Burma-India was sort of at the bottom of priorities.

DR: But it was rough.

MR. WILLIS: Yes, I know! Just flying the hump, Honey, which is 28,000 feet above the ground. My good friend Ray Henderson was over there also flying some of those airplanes, from New Bern.

DR: Did you run into anyone else from New Bern?

MR. WILLIS: I didn't run into Teddy Shapou. Teddy Shapou had received an air medal. He was in the 14th Air Force. I was in the infantry, not in the Air Force at all. I wrote Teddy a very nice letter congratulating him on his air medal and got a letter back from him.

I never actually saw him to speak to him. I didn't run into anybody over there. A couple of classmates from The Citadel I ran into over there, but nobody from New Bern.

DR: Except Ray.

MR. WILLIS: Well, I didn't see him, but I knew he was over there. He dropped me a note one time from the airplane.

DR: That's what I have heard, that you got the note.

MR. WILLIS: Yes I did.

DR: Was it on target Albert?

MR. WILLIS: Yeah, it landed right in the middle of us if I remember correctly. That's been a long time ago Dorothy.

DR: When did you return from overseas?

MR. WILLIS: I got back just before the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war with Germany was already over. We came back on a troop ship from Calcutta, India. By the way, over there I not only met Chiang Kai Shek and Madame Chiang Kai Shek, but also met Lord Louis Mountbatten. He came down to speak to us. And I visited the Taj Mahal which is quite a famous architectural structure over there in route to C.B.I. and back. We left on a troop ship from Calcutta and came back through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean, Gibraltar, the Metropolitan Life Insurance sign was up there flashing, and we came all the way over and landed at Newport News, Virginia!

DR: What year was that?

MR. WILLIS: Gosh, I'm trying to think Dorothy. It must have been 1945. Then I was sent to Fort Hood, Texas and from there to New Castle Army Air Force Base in Delaware. By that time the war with Japan was over and everybody with seventy-five points got out. I said I've got seventy-five points, I believe I'll get out. The reason I did that was because they called me up one day on the telephone and said I'd been in the states long enough to go back overseas again.

DR: Was Carolyn with you?

MR. WILLIS: Yes. Carolyn was pregnant by then. I'd already

been away two years. I had planned to stay in the Army. Just on the spur of the moment I said I'd get out, so I got out.

DR: You had planned to make the Army a career.

MR. WILLIS: I had really planned too, yes. Well, after four years in college and going to the state department, all that had gone down the drain anyway. I went back home and went down to the family business that I stayed for a few years until my son was accidentally killed and then I went into the teaching profession.

DR: Your children, Albert, you came back and where did you and Carolyn live when you came back?

MR. WILLIS: We lived at the New Bernian Apartments which is the Carolina Club Apartments now, and from there to this house.

DR: They were new.

MR. WILLIS: Brand new, yes. Brand new. I think the rent was, get a load of this now, one bedroom...\$48 a month!

DR: Now, the New Bernian Apartments are...

MR. WILLIS: Across from Eleanor Marshall School.

DR: Trent Boulevard and...

MR. WILLIS: First Avenue. Across from what we used to call Eleanor Marshall School. The rent I think, if I'm not mistaken, was \$48 a month, one bedroom apartment. Two bedroom apartments were \$60 a month if I remember correctly. But we didn't need but the one, so we stayed there.

DR: Did you pay for your utilities?

MR. WILLIS: I don't remember. The heat might have been furnished

but I believe we did have to pay for water and lights. Tommy was born while we were there. I'm trying to think if it was Kafer Hospital or St. Luke's. I'm not sure. You'll have to ask Carolyn about that.

Anyway, when Tommy was about a year old we moved to this house here and been here ever since.

DR: To Chattawka Lane.

MR. WILLIS: To Chattawka Lane, right.

DR: This seemed to be a haven for ya'lls age group, young married.

MR. WILLIS: Oh my lord! Grace and Ed Hancock lived down the street. Frank Hammond lived across the street, Donald Midyette lived across the street. Paul Crayton lived next door. A lot of folks out here at that time. Bill and Joe Pierce lived right down the street.

DR: So it was a haven. May I ask, at that time how much these houses sold for?

MR. WILLIS: Nine thousand dollars.

DR: That's what ours on Rhem Avenue was.

MR. WILLIS: Nine thousand dollars.

DR: And that was in 1946.

MR. WILLIS: That was 1947 I believe it was, cause Tommy was born in '46. So it must have been '47.

DR: After working in your father's business, then what track did you take?

MR. WILLIS: Well, after Tommy died I didn't want to stay in the funeral business any longer and I wanted to be around people Tommy's age. It's kind of hard to explain.

DR: Excuse me, let's go back. You had other children too.

MR. WILLIS: Yes, we had two girls. Tommy was the oldest. Then four years later Nancy was born, and seven years after that Annette was born. Annette lives in New Bern and Nancy lives in Potomac, Maryland. They each have two children, a boy and a girl each.

DR: So you have four grandchildren.

MR. WILLIS: Four grandchildren.

DR: Going back now to your changing your profession. What did you do then?

MR. WILLIS: Well, I had to go get a teaching certificate to start with cause I had not planned to be a teacher. They gave me credit for the time I was in the Army, for most of my time in the Army was as a training officer. I had over three, four thousand hours of actual classroom instruction, so they waived a couple of the requirements at Raleigh for my teaching certificate. But several I had to have, so I went over to East Carolina University. Spent a whole year going back and forth to East Carolina getting a teaching certificate. Then Lila Smallwood, whom I sure you know because she taught us, was on the verge of retirement from New Bern High School. So I was hired to replace Lila Smallwood at the high school.

DR: What shoes you stepped into!

MR. WILLIS: I know. As U. S. History and Social Studies teacher.

DR: Where was the New Bern High School then Albert?

MR. WILLIS: Well, it was out at the Grover C. Fields Middle School now. They had already moved from downtown. But it was out there.

It had only been out there for several years.

DR: What year was this?

MR. WILLIS: This is 1963 when Tommy died. I started teaching in 1964. Well, I did some substitute teaching during that year I was going back and forth to Greenville, but I started full time on the faculty in 1964. I stayed twenty years and retired in 1984. After Lila eventually retired, I became head of the Social Studies Department and stayed there until I retired. For the last ten years I was the Chairman of the Faculty Committee at the high school until I retired.

I had an annual dedicated to me in 1976 I was named Teacher of Year out there in 1972. Then one year, they made me principal of Oaks Road School for a year and then back to the high school.

DR: You taught some of the children of your friends I imagine.

MR. WILLIS: That's right, I certainly did. I did indeed. I certainly did.

DR: What changes did you see in that school and what it offered than when we went to school?

MR. WILLIS: Well, we had more of a variety of a curriculum. We could choose more subjects. I think teachers went more into depth than into the subject areas. I know I taught history entirely different from Lila Smallwood. I can remember Lila right now saying, "Remember now, this is important!" Well, I've never asked students to remember a date at all if I remember correctly cause I think that the date was not as important. What happened on the date, who was involved and what happened as a result of it, in my opinion, is much more important

than the dumb date, but that's neither here nor there. I tried to teach school with a very light hearted attitude. I used humor a lot. We played games, but I think the students remembered what they learned. I played Bingo with the Bill of Rights, and I believe you could get a kid who was in school today could tell you about the Bill of Rights right now because he remembered the Bingo game. Because they won a prize you see! We ate popcorn with chopsticks when we got to the subject about China. I carried all my China stuff and even talked to them in Chinese, taught them how to speak Chinese a little bit. When they came to World War II, I recreated the entire World War II using the original cast as far as possible! I dressed up in a SS officer's uniform one day and a Nazi flag flying in the classroom. I had the students get up and say, "Zeig Heil" at the beginning of the day, because if Hitler had won, that's what they would have been doing you see. We had trash ball throwing contest when we had junior/senior cause half the students weren't there anyway. I assigned no homework at all. Everything they learned was inside that classroom.

DR: Really?!

MR. WILLIS: Everything they did was inside that classroom.

DR: And their reading.

MR. WILLIS: Yes. Then we made the movie that you know about. That was not history, that was a government class that I was teaching. That attracted statewide attention.

DR: It surely did.

MR. WILLIS: We made a movie. I furnished the camera and they

did the script. We divided the class up into actors and the producer and the make-up people and the script and everything. We made an 8mm movie. I've still got it. It's in that closet right there. Every now and then the kids come who were in it and want to see it. One of them made a tape of it so they could show it through their VCR.

It was about the "rights of accused persons," which we happened to be studying at the time. A couple of kids stole a car. We got the police department to come out with their black and white car and chase the kids down. We set up a courtroom over in the library. I put on a black gown that we borrowed from the choir and I was the judge. This had to do with what they were studying is what I'm trying to say.

DR: Albert, did integration come about when you were teaching?

MR. WILLIS: Yes, it did indeed.

DR: It started with only a few.

MR. WILLIS: I know, just a handful. Because back in those days you had a freedom of choice, you could select what school you wanted to go to. That didn't work out cause there weren't that many blacks coming, so then we went to full integration. My good friend Dorothy Bryan was right next door to me during most of this time. But, yes, I remember very well really the integration. I tried to make the student, the student, not necessarily whether he was black or white, when they came to the class, I don't ever remember carrying anybody to the Principal's office that was a serious breach of discipline.

I don't remember in the twenty years I was there having a serious breach of discipline in the whole twenty years I was out there.

DR: How was disciplined handled in the high school?

MR. WILLIS: Well, you usually send them to the Principal or the Assistant Principal and they handled it on the detention system. They had demerits I think when we were in high school. I remember that. On the detention system.

DR: One year when total integration came, you had the students transferring en masse.

MR. WILLIS: Yes. Sure. And that's when we lost a Principal. Mr. Hunneycutt resigned and Mr. Grover C. Fields came over and everything worked out fine. I had the greatest respect for Mr. Fields that it worked out exactly right.

DR: Did you feel, Albert, that they were prepared?

MR. WILLIS: I couldn't tell that much difference, Dorothy, when they got to my class whether they were prepared or not. I wasn't looking for preparedness.

DR: You were not looking for differences.

MR. WILLIS: I wasn't trying to look for differences in them. I was trying to just start from scratch.

DR: Do you remember any outstanding students that you had?

MR. WILLIS: Shoot, if you'd asked me this, I'd have looked it up a long time ago. I had Dr. Blackerby's daughter, I had Nan Blackerby. Who was the guy who was Chief of Police here for a long time? He married the Beaman girl? Nancy Worsham was her name.

DR: I know Chief Belangia.

MR. WILLIS: I had Ellen Chance. No, not Belangia, the one that

was with the FBI for a while. He married John Beaman's sister. John Worsham was his name.

DR: We were gone.

MR. WILLIS: Oh, you were gone. That's right. I'm sorry. I had Ellen Chance. I had Carol Beasley. I had John Green, Jr. He workes at the Palace with me now. He confides in me now that he was scared to death the whole time he was in my classroom, but I don't believe it. I tried to make learning and I tried to make teaching fun for twenty years. I retired in 1984 exactly twenty years afterwards.

DR: You didn't really retire because you took on another.

MR. WILLIS: Well, during the summer I could go on active duty. Getting back to the Army thing, I remained in the Army Reserve for twenty-eight years. I went in as a Second Lieutenant and got out as a Captain and stayed in the Army Reserve and retired Lt. Colonel. I did go on active duty during the summer. Then when I couldn't do that anymore, I went down to Tryon Palace and they hired me for two or three summers down there as a guide, not inside the Palace, but in the historical homes that they have. Then when I retired full time, Nancy Blades called me on the telephone and said would you like to come back down here. I said, well, sure. I work two days a week and just one Sunday a month down there just to have something to do. I show the film. I don't sell tickets, but I tell people about the tickets and tours are available. I do interior tours of the John Wright Stanly House and the Dixon-Stevenson House. I take people over to the Palace

and turn them over to the hostesses over there.

DR: You've seen the Palace grow.

MR. WILLIS: I saw it from the beginning. I sure did.

DR: And, Albert, there are people from all over that come to visit the Palace.

MR. WILLIS: Even from Walla Walla, Washington the other day. We had them from Canada the other day. We had them from Sri Lanka the other day. Yes, they come from all over.

DR: Do they tell you how they how they knew about it?

MR. WILLIS: One family drove all the way down here from Nags Head. They were at Nags Head for a couple of days and they just happen to pick up a brochure and drove all the way from Nags Head just to see the Palace. That's how they found out about it, one of our stray brochures up at Nags Head.

DR: The Palace has enriched...

MR. WILLIS: Yes it has. I think so. It's a part of living history that you can walk through and tell people about what happened in the 1770's. After all it was, the first colonial capitol of North Carolina, the first permanent state capitol. The capitol wasn't moved to Raleigh until 1794. And the kids come too. Bus loads of them come.

DR: They're interested too aren't they?

MR. WILLIS: Ninety-eight, ninety-nine percent of them are. I'm sure there are several who could obviously care less, just like some of the adults could care less, but most of them are generally interested.

DR: Going back to your teaching, Albert, did you feel that the parents were as involved with their children learning as our parents were?

MR. WILLIS: No, I'm sorry. When we had Parents Day one night after school got started, we went up there and stayed in the classroom, parents who came by were not the ones you wanted to talk to at all. They were not the ones we were having a problem with. See, they were the ones that should have been there. The parents who came up were the ones who were making 90's and 100's and things like that. What can you say to that? You need to have the other people there also. And I found a very few of them came, showed up.

DR: Would you write to them and ask them to come?

MR. WILLIS: I don't know how the school handled the publicity for the Open House and the parent's night to come. I don't know how that was done.

DR: In looking back, Albert, I've always felt that in our day we were very blessed with the caliber of teachers we had.

MR. WILLIS: When you and I were in high school.

DR: Uh huh.

MR. WILLIS: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

DR: I've often wondered if that could have been because at that time women had so few avenues that they could go into.

MR. WILLIS: Yes. Cause most of them were women.

DR: Your bright women would go into teaching.

MR. WILLIS: The only men teachers I ever remember having was

Frank Alston who was the civics teacher and coach. Harry MacDonald showed up, who later became superintendent. I think he taught either science or biology. And we had a Mr. Phillips who taught either science or biology, I don't remember. They were the only men I ever remember at the high school except for Mr. Shields and Mr. Smith. Then Mr. Hodgkins came with the Glee Club but he didn't teach anything that I know of.

DR: But music. Well, did you feel, Albert, that the city and the county were behind the schools when you were a teacher?

MR. WILLIS: My experience has been with it that yes they were. People like Genevieve Dunn and people who were on the school boards, I think they are genuinely interested in what was going on. DR: Of course money is always scarce.

MR. WILLIS: I know. I know in my class, to teach the kids what was going on in history this week, I subscribed to TIME magazine and made them read TIME magazine in my class every Friday or I'd give an assignment to do from the book. Most of them opted for the reading of TIME magazine. We collected money from the students to buy the TIME magazine for the first two or three years, then Mr. Fields found out about it and said, well, the school will find the money for the TIME magazine if you think it's important enough for those kids to know what happened last week rather than what happened in 1770 you see.

Besides those TIME magazines, if they had an article in there about science, I'd let the science teacher have those thirty-five copies for a week. If there was one in there about art, I'd let the art teacher

have those TIME magazines for a week you see. So they got real good circulation. I don't know that they still use the TIME magazine anymore, but the whole time I was over there we used TIME magazine in class one day a week.

DR: For those children that wouldn't have a magazine in their home...

MR. WILLIS: Some of them had never seen TIME magazine before had an opportunity for at least one period a day on Friday. Whenever we did TIME magazine it was always on Friday. At least find out what sport section, you had art, you had entertainment, you had the national news, you had everything in the TIME magazine. I expect I got a copy today. It's a carry over from this TIME magazine thing.

DR: Albert, can you, in looking back, remember any characters in New Bern?

MR. WILLIS: You're putting me on the spot now. No. I'd rather not say. I don't know what you mean by characters.

DR: Well, people who were unusual. Can you remember any unusual happenings, any outstanding things that happened when you were growing up?

MR. WILLIS: I'm sorry, I can't.

DR: You know someone I remember?

MR. WILLIS: Who?

DR: Was Shoveling Joe. He was a colored man that carried a shovel. I think my neighbors told me that he was the one that dug the grave and he had the name "Shoveling Joe." You don't remember anything about

Shoveling Joe?

MR. WILLIS: No, I'm sorry. I don't remember that at all.

DR: He made an impression on me.

MR. WILLIS: He must have.

DR: But he dug the grave. Then one lady that we called "Di" that used to live around the McCarthy corner there. She put flour all over her face.

MR. WILLIS: I remember vaguely that particular person. I didn't know her name was Di, but I know someone who did put flour on their face. I remember her. One guy, he used to go round and round and round and round in circles. It's was a dance type of thing every now and then.

DR: Joe Pat did a poem.

MR. WILLIS: Yeah, that's the one. That's him.

DR: Do you remember any of our peers that have gone and made outstanding careers? Of course four years out of your lives were in war. Some were killed.

MR. WILLIS: Back to those TIME magazines, Time would always have an annual quiz at the end of each year for the students. It was a student program. The kids would take these test and we'd even offer a prize for those who made the highest grade. Put it all on the bulletin board. So and so's third period's class made the highest grade in TIME magazine current affairs test.

DR: I wonder if they're still pursuing that.

MR. WILLIS: I don't think so. I think when I left that was probably

the end of it.

DR: How many students averaged in your classroom Albert?

MR. WILLIS: Well, the maximum I think was thirty a class. I had five classes, so you're talking about a 100 to 150. I estimate I taught somewhere between two and three thousand students the time I was over there, not counting homeroom, study halls, Junior Civitan Club advisor, and such things as that. The round figure is about 3,000 students I would estimate.

DR: In your work at the Palace, do ya'll have to take training courses?

MR. WILLIS: Yes. You have to undergo training courses, and when you do one of the houses one of the staff people have to go with you and then you're, not certified, but approved to go ahead and take groups in those houses.

DR: Did you have to go into the history of the construction?

MR. WILLIS: We have guide classes once a month on various subjects relating to what we're doing.

DR: Even the colors of the walls.

MR. WILLIS: Yeah.

DR: The furnishings that came.

MR. WILLIS: Yeah, we have a guide class every month down there on related subjects to what we're doing.

DR: Have they increased staff during the years?

MR. WILLIS: Yes, they have. Yes, they have. Donald Taylor was down there for a long time. They had a horticulturist down there.

Gosh, that was about it. Now they've got maintenance people and they've got assistants to maintenance people, and they've got historians. They have a large staff now.

DR: It does bring in quite a bit materially to New Bern and Craven County.

MR. WILLIS: As far as the payroll is concerned and people coming in and spending the night and buying gas and eating at the cafes and restaurants and buying tickets to the Palace, we do about 80,000 people a year.

DR: That's great. Albert, having come back and spent these years in New Bern, what are some of the changes that you see that are the most dramatic?

MR. WILLIS: Only, Honey, that the town is getting big. I can walk down the street and see people I don't know. Carolyn and I go in the cafe, "Who are those people?" "I don't know. I never saw them before in my life." We've been inundated with people that I have never in my life seen before. Something must be attracting those people to come down here. What I remember the most about growing up in the this town is the rivers, the two rivers where they come together. My father had a boat, I had a boat, Tommy had a boat. All three of my children were on that river water skiing and thoroughly enjoyed that river. If that's what's attracting them, fine. But for me that's what I remember most about growing up in this town were the two beautiful rivers.

DR: I don't know about you, but I'm concerned about there are

very few places on the waterfront that we can go now where we have a view.

MR. WILLIS: Such as the Sheraton. And now they're talking about building another high-rise bridge across the dern thing. But anyway, the rivers are still there.

DR: They're still there.

MR. WILLIS: Yes they are.

DR: Hopefully they will not destroy the Woman's Club. I imagine your mother was active in that.

MR. WILLIS: If she was I don't recall. I know Myrtle, Charlie Turner's wife was very active in the Woman's Club. I remember going down there for the dances. I remember going down there to park in the automobile. I remember going to all sorts of activities down there at that Woman's Club. In fact, I think, if I'm not mistaken, I was a freshman at The Citadel and came back with my dress uniform on and went to a dance down there where I got my Eagle scout badge if I'm not mistaken, cause I got a photograph somewhere. There was Al May and me and Norfleet Gibbs and Billy Smith, all four got our Eagle scout badges down there.

DR: You all wore your uniforms?

MR. WILLIS: I wore mine cause I was at The Citadel. Norfleet wore his because he was Fishburne I believe. The other two just had on dress clothes.

DR: But this was at the Woman's Club?

MR. WILLIS: It was at the Woman's Club. I remember it very

vividly. Sure.

DR: I remember the activities we had out there.

MR. WILLIS: Parties and dances.

DR: Remember the big open fire in the winter time?

MR. WILLIS: Yes I do remember the big open fireplaces. But it was a nice place to park Dorothy. (laughter)

DR: Oh yes! And the police didn't bother you because they knew we were perfectly safe. And watched that moon come up.

MR. WILLIS: They never bothered us. Of course, all your friends were around you in other cars anyway. (laughter)

DR: Oh everybody knew.

MR. WILLIS: Everybody we knew was down there anyway.

DR: So really we were not only protected but we wouldn't have done anything for fear of it. (laughter) We were really safe down there. I do hope that they don't destroy it.

MR. WILLIS: I hope they can save it someday. I figured if they got Charlie Kimbrell in on it and they got the Marshall girls in on it...

DR: Jenkins.

MR. WILLIS: Jenkins, yes, Jenkins girls in on it. I saw their picture in the paper the other day. Jane Marshall, that's right. She was in the school there.

DR: She was in school when I was.

MR. WILLIS: She was smart.

DR: Getting back to our day downtown, do you remember the drug

stores?

MR. WILLIS: Sure. There was Davis Drug Store. Was there Clark's Drug Store down there too?

DR: I don't believe in our day.

MR. WILLIS: It was Davis Drug Store, wasn't it, on the corner where Clark's is now located. Oh lord yes! Go down there and get chocolate milkshakes, cocoa-cola with a squirt of vanilla in it, and sandwiches of all kind. The drug store was right next door to the pharmacy there.

DR: Albert, do you remember the movies? Do you remember going to the first movie that came to New Bern?

MR. WILLIS: You mean the first talking movie?

DR: Uh huh.

MR. WILLIS: I don't remember that. I know we had two. We had the Masonic and I guess the other one was called the Athens back in those days rather than the Kehoe, the Athens Theater. I remember it used to have an organ. Who used to play the organ?

DR: Miss Mary Whitehurst.

MR. WILLIS: Mary Whitehurst used to play the organ at the old Athens Theater. Oh, Saturday afternoon it was always filled up with going to the picture show. Cowboy movies one right after the other; Hoot Gibson, Bob Steel, Tom Mix.

DR: You'd spend a whole Saturday afternoon in the movies.

MR. WILLIS: Whole Saturday afternoon at the picture show.

DR: Albert, I was reading about the shows that came to New Bern,

the minstrels and things. I don't suppose your parents ever took you to any of those under the tent.

MR. WILLIS: No, no. I never went to those. My daddy was in a production of "Our Town" that was put on the stage at the Masonic Theater one time that I remember going to see.

DR: I remember that.

MR. WILLIS: Cause he was in the show.

DR: Didn't Mrs. Helen Jones start a theater group?

MR. WILLIS: Yes. I did some religious plays for Helen Jones at the Centenary Methodist Church. Sara Gorham was in it. I can't remember now who the rest of them were. We even went to Chapel Hill to put on one of these religious shows for the Carolina Playmakers up there that Helen Jones had arranged for us to do.

DR: She was a creative lady.

MR. WILLIS: Yes she was. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Both Carolyn and I were very fond of Helen Jones. I'd forgot about that religious show, the little religious dramas. Then I got involved in the Little Theater. I did "Junior Miss" with Grace Green one time at the New Bern Recreation Center that I remember always Bill Pierce run.

DR: The New Bern Recreation when our children were young, really had a lot to offer, didn't it Albert, under Bill Pierce?

MR. WILLIS: Oh yes, yes. Crafts and knitting and all sorts.

DR: That was in the late forties, fifties.

MR. WILLIS: Bill and Jo Pierce were two of our closest friends. 'Cause Tommy and Billy Pierce were the same age and Nancy and Betty

Jo Pierce were the same age.

DR: There were a lot of good things that happened as New Bern changed. You know, in thinking back Albert, I know my family didn't, we didn't have a lot materially but it seems that we made up for it in a small town, we were dependent upon each other for our fun. Is that your thinking too?

MR. WILLIS: Exactly. See, where this house is now was the edge of town. This was a part of the old Bray farm and that was at the edge of town. Now you have to go five miles that way before you get to the edge of town you see. Gosh, I remember the old Beacon used to be just about not far from here by the way. About where that highway intersects if I remember correctly, the old Beacon.

DR: I can remember the loud music.

MR. WILLIS: Oh lord yeah. The old juke-boxes, the Whirlitzers, playing the big band music. Shewww!

DR: And get cokes.

MR. WILLIS: That's about all you could get there I think, Cokes and Lance crackers and things like that.

DR: And it was right over here?

MR. WILLIS: Yeah, I think it was just right down this road a piece if I'm not mistaken, the original Beacon was.

DR: I felt like we had to drive out.

MR. WILLIS: This was out of town you see then. Fort Totten over there was just about on the edge of town.

DR: That's right.

MR. WILLIS: And the Beacon was not too far down this road.

DR: There was the Beacon, where else did we go? Oh, we'd go to Morehead.

MR. WILLIS: We'd go to Morehead and eat at the Sanitary when it first got started. A little old shack down there that would seat about six people at the time.

DR: The church group, Centenary Methodist used to go, Christ Episcopal, for their picnics.

MR. WILLIS: They used to get on the train and go down for their picnics down at the beach. But they'd get on the train down at the depot, go down and spend the day, and get on the train and ride back home. I remember when the old Atlantic Beach Hotel burned. My daddy put us all in the car and rode down there cause he just had to see it. He spent so much time down there at the old hotel.

DR: The old casino?

MR. WILLIS: No, the Atlantic Beach Hotel.

DR: I'm trying to think, Albert, what else that we remember. We didn't have a lot of factories in New Bern or factory workers per se. We had mostly service kind of stores. Actually, if there'd been no more war and ya'll had come back to New Bern, your choices of professions would have been limited if you had wanted to come.

MR. WILLIS: Extremely limited, that's right.

DR: At that time.

MR. WILLIS: At that time.

DR: But New Bern has really been blessed with the location and

what we have to offer here.

MR. WILLIS: The location, the weather. But it's getting so big Dorothy. People are coming in here. I think the whole state of New Jersey must have moved down here the last six months.

DR: The Snowbirds?

MR. WILLIS: Yeah, is that what they call them? Okay.

DR: They have brought a lot of enthusiasm. They don't understand our way I don't think.

MR. WILLIS: Unfortunately they try to do it their way, some of them are. So I've heard. Anyway, I've kind of limited my activity. I joined the Masonic Lodge. My father was Master in 1930. I joined the Masonic Lodge in 1952 and I became Master in 1960. I took the Scottish Rite degrees and was made a 33rd degree Scottish Rite Mason, which is about as high as you can go. The talk I'm making tonight is at the St. John's Lodge about George Washington cause it is February.

DR: That's been a big thing for New Bern, Masonry.

MR. WILLIS: It's the only town its size in the United States, that you can get all degrees of Masonry, including the York Rite, Scottish Rite, and Shrine, without ever leaving the city limits. Not too many people know that.

DR: I did not know that.

MR. WILLIS: A lot of people who get in the Shrine have to go some other place you see. We've got a Shrine right here.

DR: And people from Fayetteville would have to come here.

MR. WILLIS: Well, Fayetteville may have a Shrine, I don't know.

I didn't join the Shrine. I took everything but the Shrine.

DR: But you're in the Masonry.

MR. WILLIS: Scottish Rite and Masons.

DR: Did you belong to the Elk's club?

MR. WILLIS: No, my father was Past Exalted Ruler of the Elks, but I never did join the Elks. I was secretary of the Lions Club for seven years though. Then when my father died I had to spend more time in the business and I got out of that. But I used to be very active in the Lions Club. I was active in scouting. I was on the Court of Honor and Board of Review for a long time in the scouts.

DR: That's what I thought.

MR. WILLIS: As long as Dr. Hand lived, well, he had most of the old people that he had helping him out, like Joe Zaytoun and Jack Taylor and myself.

DR: Can you think of anything else, Albert, where New Bern is headed?

MR. WILLIS: No, not really Dorothy. I think at our age it's wherever it's gonna go. We just have to go along with it. I don't know of anything else I can contribute. I've contributed I think everything I can possibly contribute to it. I wouldn't live anywhere else that I know of. I wouldn't move any other place that I know of. Carolyn and I are just happiest right here.

DR: I think most of us are.

MR. WILLIS: Two grandchildren here and two not too far away.

DR: It's a good way of life. Not a fast way of life.

MR. WILLIS: It's paced just right for me. I don't know about anybody else, but it is for us.

DR: Carolyn had said when you go to Washington you're ready to come home the next day.

MR. WILLIS: If I go in a car, I park the car. Nancy has to drive, I will not drive in that Washington traffic.

DR: I'm almost that way in Fayetteville now.

MR. WILLIS: Are you? I haven't been to Fayetteville in a long time.

DR: Do you remember anything in city government that stands out in your mind or industry?

MR. WILLIS: No. I've known most of them; the George Scott and the Paul Cox's and Cecil King's and Charlie Kimbrell who have been active in city government. All have been personal friends.

DR: We've had good people.

MR. WILLIS: As far as I know.

DR: And the merchants in New Bern, we've had good solid people.

MR. WILLIS: I can stop back and think of the Lipman's and the Howard's. There's another job I used to have too, I worked down at Howard's Clothing Store every Saturday.

DR: How much did you make?

MR. WILLIS: It wasn't more than a dollar a day I don't think.

DR: I remember when Helen Ruth went to work for the telephone office, at what 1937, and we were all so impressed because she made \$10 a week.

MR. WILLIS: Carolyn's first job was at Morton Motor Company selling license plates and working in the office at a dollar a day.

DR: We've come a long way Albert. We've seen a lot. We do have an awful lot to be thankful for.

MR. WILLIS: We do indeed Dorothy. A lot of nice friends. I remember when Carolyn was in the hospital recently, people would call up and send cards and bent over backwards to find out about her.

DR: I think we're a caring community.

MR. WILLIS: I think so.

DR: I know you are glad your grandchildren, two of them, are having the opportunity to be raised in this area. For their sake.

MR. WILLIS: Yes. As far as the school system is concerned though, they're both going to Parrott Academy. Annette's not too shook up over the local schools right this minute. Her husband is a pilot with US Air by the way. Jackie is in second grade at Parrott. Little Todd is in the pre-school at Presbyterian church, and as far as I know he'll be in kindergarten at Parrott next year if things don't change.

DR: You feel like, Albert, that the schools have not really...

MR. WILLIS: Now, I'm really not saying that. I'm just saying that Annette seems more satisfied with what Jackie's getting at Parrott than what she's been able to find out here.

DR: Than what she would get here. Hopefully with the money from the state, if the state is able to funnel some of their funds into upgrading some of these things, hopefully. Well, Albert, I feel like we've covered some good material.

MR. WILLIS: Dorothy, we have covered everything from one end to the other that I know of.

DR: Because you've lived it. I did not know that you were with that outfit.

MR. WILLIS: The Marauders?

DR: Uh huh.

MR. WILLIS: Like I say, there is a clarification, now the original Marauders and then the reorganized Marauders. They just changed the name was all they did. That's all they did, just change the name.

DR: A movie was made about it.

MR. WILLIS: They certainly did make a movie of it. That was the only ground combat unit in all of Asia during World War II. There was air force over there, there was engineers, there was medics, there was quarter master, but in all of Asia during World War II, the Marauders were the only ground combat unit in the entire theater of operations.

DR: That was jungle fighting. The nastiest and the meanest kind. Like our men knew in Viet Nam.

MR. WILLIS: The terrain is very similar. We had 6,000 foot mountains; we had jungles, we had rivers; we had the Japanese all around us most of the time, up and down the Burma road, fighting for control of the Burma road.

DR: Albert, we owe you guys so much!

MR. WILLIS: Go on. (laughter)

DR: Thank you so much.

MR. WILLIS: I'm just happy to have survived. It was an experience.

DR: I'm glad you survived too.

MR. WILLIS: I'm glad I did it, but I wouldn't do it again for a million dollars.

DR: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW