

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

EMMA STEVENSON MCCOTTER

INTERVIEW 801

This is Frances B. Francis. My interviewer number is 800. I am interviewing Mrs. Muse McCotter. This is interview number 801.

Frances Francis: Mrs. McCotter, I think what we want to start with since it's my understanding that your family has been associated with New Bern almost longer than any other family in town, if you will give us a little bit about your family background and your parents and how you grew up. So if you will, go ahead.

Mrs. McCotter: My grandfather, John Dunn, married Lucretia Roberts Guion November 21, 1878. The children were John Guion, my father, who was born January 17, 1880; William, August 31, 1882; George Roberts and Owen Guion were twins born August 21, 1886; Ernest Windley was born October 20, 1888. My father, John Guion Dunn married Emma Mitchell Stevenson April 9, 1902. They had five children; Harriet Slover, John Guion, Annie Stevenson, Emma Stevenson and Mark Stevenson.

The house we lived in was built by Mr. Bishop who owned the whole block. He built it for my mother and father soon after they were married. All of us were born there and spent many happy years together.

There was only one bathroom. The house was heated by open fires; stoves for coal, wood and gas. I remember the gas lights before electricity was put in. There was a wood stove in the kitchen where all the cooking was done. In those days, there were no dishwashers or clothes washing machines. Our clothes used to be taken uptown by a negro wash woman who would wash and iron them and return them in a few days. There was always a cook in the kitchen. My father loved beaten biscuits and we had a machine on our back porch. There were no electric refrigerators. The ice man would come in a wagon and bring

a block of ice and put it in the ice box. We used to love to stand on the wagon and get small pieces to eat. My father and his family were Episcopalians. My mother and her family were Presbyterians. When I was five years old, all of us were baptized in the Episcopal church. I remember I had my new hair ribbon and was so afraid it would get wet. For many years we did not have a car. My Grandmother Stevenson would come get us in her horse and buggy and we'd go for a ride. She later bought a car and had a driver. I remember the first bad storm.

We were sent for by my Grandfather Dunn. He sent a man with a horse and wagon to get us. We had to climb over the banister to get into the wagon and were taken to my grandfather's house on Middle Street.

T'was real exciting! Since that time, I have been through several hurricanes. There was a chicken coop in the backyard. Chickens and turkeys were killed there. Before Thanksgiving and Christmas, the turkey was very noisy. An old colored woman named Martha used to come around in a wagon selling vegetables. We loved to see her and hear her yelling out what she had for sale. We had no radio or television, but we kept busy playing games outside. I remember my brother Johnny bought a small victrola and our first record was Dardanella. It was wonderful. I started playing the piano when I was five years old and played by ear. So, I started taking lessons from Miss Ola Ferebee who lived on Short Street. I actually took piano and later organ about fourteen years and loved to play. I taught Sunday school eight years and would have to go upstairs at the Parish House Sunday morning and get the coal stove going. The children I taught now have grandchildren and some have great-grandchildren. There were eleven grades of public

school. After graduating, I went to St. Mary's in Raleigh, 1926-28.

In 1932, Muse McCotter and I were married October 22nd. We just lived on Craven Street and then moved here on Johnson Street where we have lived ever since. We have three children; Emma Dunn, Susan Muse and John Muse, Jr. We also have six grandchildren and one great-granddaughter. During the first World War, my father raised white potatoes in the front yard. We had to pick the bugs off of them.

I can remember every fall he would buy half of a small pig and cut it up on a table on the back porch. Then, he would put salt on it to preserve it.

FF: Thank you Mrs. McCotter. This is the sort of thing we are really interested in preserving. I want to ask you a few questions about different things that happened in New Bern. Your mentioning the hurricanes makes me think of the '33 hurricane. Do you remember anything in particular about that? Did the water come up to your parent's house on East Front Street?

Mrs. McCotter: Was that Ione?

FF: No, that was the '33 one.

FF: I was a little girl. I think that was probably around the time that you were married.

Mrs. McCotter: I remember several hurricanes, but Ione was the one that did so much damage to my mother and father's home. The water went right on through their bay window which had the front porch around it and swept the furniture from one room to another. Mr. Grey, who was in the furniture business, came and took two truck loads of furniture out to do over.

FF: If I'm not mistaken, I think Ione was in 1955. I just can remember the one in '33, and I thought that you might have a little bit more memory of it than I did.

Mrs. McCotter: Well, maybe that was the one where my grandfather sent for us in the wagon.

FF: It might have been. Another thing that they're very interested in people giving their memories of is the great New Bern fire. I wonder if by any chance you have any memories of that.

Mrs. McCotter: Yes. We all had gone to Raleigh for a tournament football game. We were so excited. We went on a special train. During the game, we got the news that New Bern was burning. They didn't want the football players to know it because they were afraid it would influence how they played. So, coming back home that night, all we could see was chimneys and we didn't know whether we had a home or not.

FF: That was scary I'm sure.

Mrs. McCotter: It was.

FF: It spread throughout quite a bit of New Bern I know. I've heard my mother and father say that one of daddy's nephews was visiting them at the time and the Marks were living in this house at that time and he had a truck, my father's nephew. So, they got him to come over here. Of course, it didn't get this far. But I've heard mother and daddy say that Mr. Marks got daddy's nephew to come over here with his truck and move as much of the furniture out of the house as he could at that time. I know that another thing about New Bern that's closely associated with your family is the founding of the Country

Club. When we were talking about this, they said they'd like to have, if possible, those who knew something about it to tell something about the early Country Club and when it was founded and who founded it.

You think when Mr. McCotter talks, that's the time to talk about that?

Mrs. McCotter: I think he might could tell you better than I.

FF: Well, I knew that Mr. Bishop was very much instrumental in getting that started. But when it first started, I know that you were probably a real young girl and enjoyed the dances and the parties.

Did you play tennis out there?

Mrs. McCotter: Oh, I played tennis, we went swimming, we played golf, and we'd bum a ride it seemed every day as we'd get out of school.

Dr. Charles Duffy took us many an afternoon out there because he went swimming every day.

FF: I think this was something that probably a lot of people really enjoyed when it was first started. It was a place to have recreation that they really hadn't had before. Could I see this list of questions that you have here because there are several things that I think that you might like to talk about. One of them is, did your mother have your clothes made or did you all buy them ready made at that time or don't you remember about that?

Mrs. McCotter: I know there was a dressmaker that lived right behind us and of course she kind of babysat for my mother and father to go out to parties at night some. She lived right behind our house on Short Street. I'm sure she made some of the things I guess. But I don't know. I know daddy use to order us shoes sometimes from the Baltimore Bargain House. It says in there, how many pairs of shoes

did you have? (laughter) I said two. One for Sunday and one for school.

FF: One for every day. Since you all lived right on the river, did your brothers have rowboats or sailboats?

Mrs. McCotter: No, I don't think we did. But I used to row a boat. Francis Duffy, who lived down on the corner of Broad and East Front, used to come up in his boat and take me rowboating.

FF: Was it Francis Duffy's mother that had the electric car?

Mrs. McCotter: No, that was Joe Pat's mother.

FF: Well, I've heard several people talking about somebody who lived down on East Front Street having an electric car and that they used to enjoy seeing it going around town and it was so silent.

Mrs. McCotter: Mrs. Dr. Sloan had one at Sloan's estate and she used to ride by. They had a little vase in the side of the car and it always had flowers in it and I thought that was something wonderful!

FF: I'm sort of interested in this. It says, "Were there any poor people in your neighborhood?"

Mrs. McCotter: Oh yes, right behind us on what we called Short Street and now they've named it Linden Street. Yes. This man would get drunk every Saturday night and my mother would call the police every Saturday night. That was a ritual it seemed.

FF: I like the answer that you have written by this; "Were there any rich people in your neighborhood"?, and you said, "Well To Do, some of them." I think probably on the East Front Street area, most of the people at that time lived well.

Mrs. McCotter: Yes, I would say that. They were nice folks, most of them, all I can remember that lived up and down that street.

They were good friends and had good times together.

FF: When you were a girl, where did circuses locate when they came to New Bern?

Mrs. McCotter: They'd be out on kind of a vacant lot. In big tents of course.

FF: Beyond where Park Avenue is now where there used to be a pavilion? Do you remember?

Mrs. McCotter: I don't remember exactly, but I know there were plenty of vacant lots.

FF: I remember when I was a girl the circus would be where the fire station is now. Because if you remember, that was a big vacant lot. And the Chatauqua.

Mrs. McCotter: Oh yes. I remember the Chatauqua used to be on the school grounds in the summer when I was a child. We loved that.

FF: You mentioned the fact that your mother always had a cook. Of course, at the time that you were growing up, New Bern was absolutely segregated. Could you say something about what the feeling was, you think, between the races at that time?

Mrs. McCotter: It was a good feeling. But they were our servants and it was just different. They were not our equals.

FF: It was a matter of sort of taking care of them.

Mrs. McCotter: They took care of us and we took care of them. We needed them and they needed us.

FF: I think that it might be interesting for people to hear about what went on in the way of entertainment in New Bern? I don't mean circuses or the Chatauqua or the shows that came from out of town,



but were there people in New Bern who would sing, would give music recitals?

Mrs. McCotter: Yes, recitals. And they'd have home talent shows.

Mr. Foote who lived on New Street, he would put on shows and all of us would get in them. We'd have a real good time doing that. Of course, at night we would play on the street corner down there on East Front Street and turn out the light that was connected to a phone pole with a chain. We'd pull that chain and the light would go out. Then this old family across the street, they would call the police. (laughter) So, we thought that was something great. We played games outside, outdoors. We didn't have any TV, bu we had a good time when we played Parcheesi and card games and things like that.

FF: Who were your friends when you were a girl?

Mrs. McCotter: Meta Moore McCotter.

FF: She lived right across the street.

Mrs. McCotter: And Lib Bryan who lived down on East Front. Lib Nunn who is Mrs. Rodolph Duffy.

FF: She lived around the corner there on New Street.

Mrs. McCotter: Yeah, on New Street. And Mrs. Stith over here and Emily and Agnes Pollock and all the children. We went to school together and were all good friends.

FF: When you grew up, all the children downtown went to Central School.

Mrs. McCotter: I went there eleven years.

FF: When you went to school there, had the new part of the Moses Griffin been built? You probably graduated before the front was put

on the old Moses Griffin building.

Mrs. McCotter: I don't remember that. As far as I know, it was always there when I was coming along. Of course, the first building was on New Street. I never was in the building where they had the Academy, but other children were. I skipped over that one somehow. I didn't skip a grade.

FF: How about when it snowed in New Bern when you were younger?

Mrs. McCotter: It was very exciting, but we never had a great big snow like we had about two years ago. I remember one time when the river froze and we could walk out to the channel and this yacht was out there. So, we walked out to the yacht in the middle of the Neuse River on East Front Street.

FF: I have heard that a little Model T Ford was able to drive across.

Mrs. McCotter: Oh really?

FF: I didn't know whether that was true or not, but I have heard that a Model T Ford was able to drive across the river at that time.

Mrs. McCotter: I haven't heard that.

FF: How about the newspaper in New Bern as you grew up?

Mrs. McCotter: We had several. At one time, we had one or two newspapers, morning and evening. Mr. J. B. Dawson had a newspaper as I remember. It was much more to the newspapers then than it is now, to the New Bern paper.

FF: More local news.

Mrs. McCotter: Yes. More society news like people going in and

out of town and parties and things like that that they don't have at all now except on Sundays, the weddings and so forth.

FF: When you were younger, did they have hairdressers? I know that permanents came along about in the early twenties. But were there hairdressers who would, even though they didn't give permanents, did some of the ladies have hairdressers that they went to and have their hair fixed?

Mrs. McCotter: Yes, I think so, although, I fixed my own hair. I never went to a beauty shop until after I was married. I know there was one over at Mrs. Minnick's. Have you ever heard of her? She was up there over the Kafer's Bakery near the old First Citizens Bank. She was very nice and she would wash people's hair and fix it. I guess she curled it, I don't know. I don't remember the first permanents because I never got one until after I was married.

FF: Do you remember the Chinese laundry on Middle Street?

Mrs. McCotter: Yes. Sure.

FF: I just can remember that myself. I assume that it had been there for a long time.

Mrs. McCotter: I don't know really. I never used it.

FF: When you were a younger girl and started going out first, did you have a curfew, did you have to be in at a certain time, was it really a little bit more strict than it is now?

Mrs. McCotter: Oh, I'm sure it was, yes. My mother, bless her, said that I was very considerate of her because I came in at a proper hour. (laughter) Now, some of my sisters and brothers didn't do that. No, I don't think I kept her walking the floor. But if we went to

a dance or something like that, it would be later and she knew that.

FF: It seems to me that in recent years we don't really celebrate our national holidays very much. Was the Fourth of July really a big celebration?

Mrs. McCotter: I guess it was more than it is now. They still have fireworks. I think we used to have parades. I don't believe they do now. They don't, do they?

FF: No, I don't think so.

Mrs. McCotter: On Armistice Day, they used to blow all these whistles and everything and the veterans would march.

FF: Let's stop now.

END OF INTERVIEW