

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

JOHN SAMUEL PHILLIPS

INTERVIEW 1033

This is Dr. Joseph Patterson representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 1000. I am interviewing John Phillips in his office in his men's clothing store, Bryant-McLeod, at 321 Pollock Street in New Bern. The number of the interview is 1033. The date is January 18, 1993.

Dr. Patterson: John, the tape is on now. I want to tell you I'm very happy to be here talking to you and I thank you for the Memories of New Bern Committee for letting me come.

Mr. Phillips: Well, it's my pleasure, sure.

Dr. Patterson: Thank you. Let's start by my just asking you something about yourself. What is your full name?

Mr. Phillips: John Samuel Phillips.

Dr. Patterson: Where were you born?

Mr. Phillips: Avery County. In a little small place called Ingalls in Avery County. The youngest and the smallest and the poorest county in the state. (laughter) Still is. Ingalls, North Carolina.

Dr. Patterson: What is your birthdate?

Mr. Phillips: December 21, 1923.

Dr. Patterson: Were your parents from there too?

Mr. Phillips: Yes. My father was the only veterinarian in five counties in the mountain region when I was born.

Dr. Patterson: What was his name?

Mr. Phillips: Dr. Edward Spear Phillips. He was one of the first that had his double degrees. He, of course, has Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and Doctor of Veterinary Surgery. His father wouldn't send

him to school and he more or less ran away from home, took what few clothes he had and followed the railroad tracks to Raleigh to State college. Of course from there, they didn't teach veterinarian medicine. He did likewise, he hoboed and bummed his way to Kansas City, Kansas and went to veterinary school. Three mountains.

Dr. Patterson: Your father was named after three mountains?

Mr. Phillips: The Spear Top mountains right there that my grandfather owned. Later, my dad bought those three mountains from the Phillips' estate.

Dr. Patterson: Now where geographically was this in the state?

Mr. Phillips: We're located seven miles north of highway 19E from Spruce Pine and then about three miles from Plum Tree, North Carolina.

Dr. Patterson: And your mother, John, what was her maiden name?

Mr. Phillips: Florence May Silvers. Her father was a Baptist minister in Mitchell County which included Spruce Pine and Bakersville in that area.

Dr. Patterson: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Phillips: Six brothers and sisters. Three brothers and three sisters.

Dr. Patterson: All living?

Mr. Phillips: All living.

Dr. Patterson: That's wonderful. Did you grow up in Ingalls?

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir. Grew up there. Went to school at Crossnore, which we rode a bus eleven miles every day to Crossnore

schools.

Dr. Patterson: You went through high school there?

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir. We graduated from high school there.

Dr. Patterson: Where did you go after high school?

Mr. Phillips: From there, went down to UNC. Of course that was at the time that all the guys of that age and everything was having to go into service. I got down there and had turned seventeen in December. If you want to know the truth, I got down there and saw all those pretty young girls and I didn't have books on my mind. My father after two semesters called the dean of men and said put my trunk and me on the train and I went back home. He told me that I could either get a job and go to work; and mind you, I'm still seventeen, or I could do something, but I wasn't gonna just lay around the house.

So what I did, we found out about the Navy minority cruise, they called it at the time. You could go in at seventeen and get out when you were twenty-one, serve your time and get all this training. So my father thought, well, that would be the best thing in the world for me to do. He had wanted me to be a M.D. not a veterinarian. He said, now, that'd be your opportunity right there. He said you can go and start getting in those medical schools and different things. So I joined the Navy with he and my mother signing. I went to boot camp in Norfolk and from there I went to hospital corps school. Then I went to operating room school in Charleston, South Carolina. Then I went back for further operating room techniques at Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Portsmouth. From there, another school became available

in x-ray, so I went to the x-ray school. All these schools I did quite well, not bragging, but I did quite well. After I finished that I guess and had maybe three months out in the field, I noticed a bulletin on the board one day where we could go to dental school, so I signed up and I got to go to dental school.

Dr. Patterson: As a corpsman.

Mr. Phillips: As a corpsman. I went to dental school at NOB, Naval Operating Base. From there I was called in one day by our commander and he said, "Phillips, you and two other guys here, a fellow by the name of T. P. Osbourne from Charlotte and a fellow by the name of Richard Kitchen from Dade County, Florida, you guys qualify to go to the pre-flight school at the University of North Carolina. What do you think about that?" I said, "My lord! I'd give anything in the world to get that." So, that's when we went to Chapel Hill to the pre-flight school. We were there, of course wearing our enlisted Navy uniforms, and we just hung around there for almost two months before district commanding officer showed up and I guess maybe one of his aides for a couple of months. We helped them to form the school and get things started. That of course was going to be in aviation.

Well, my mother just cried and pitched a dang fit that she didn't want me flying and this and that and the other. I got discouraged on that and I went to our commander and he said, well, how about staying here on our staff and helping us? So I stayed at the staff there for two years. Meantime, I had met my wife. She was in school there and born and reared in Chapel Hill. I met her and we slipped around and

got married in July 15 of '43. I wasn't suppose to have gotten married of course. The Navy found out about it some how or other through pre-flight school. Somebody told, some of the girls in the office, really, local girls that Doris had gone to school with. Boy when they found that out, boy they shanghaied my tail right out of there right quick! I had forty-eight hours to report to Lido Beach, Long Island, New York for training to go overseas. From there, then I came back as a corpsman.

Dr. Patterson: You did go overseas?

Mr. Phillips: Yes.

Dr. Patterson: Where did you go?

Mr. Phillips: I went to England, but we landed of course in Greenock, Scotland. We were all over southern England working with the Army amphibs practicing landing.

Dr. Patterson: You were a medical corpsman.

Mr. Phillips: I was a medical corpsman. There was 2,200 of us corpsman assigned to the Army. I was with Patton's Third when we made the invasion. I was with several different Army groups. I don't remember who they were. This group of corpsman, we had all had various segments, not just corps school, but several. We were trained in different categories; and therefore, they told us and trained us further at Lido Beach that we were gonna be with the Army because the Army medics could only administer first aid. They could not administer morphine and things like this, which we were qualified and we could do. We could do minor surgery where the Army couldn't. In the case

of emergency, we could perform, especially we guys that had operating procedures and this kind. I stayed in England, well, by the time I came back it was twenty-eight months had passed. The war was over.

I stayed over there three months after it was over. They picked a certain group of us and we stayed and wound up and closed up all of our facilities in southern England. I did just barely get over France on the third day of the invasion. I didn't get any further in than about six miles. Then they sent myself and a group, they sent us back.

I never will forget, it was like an old ferry type paddle wheel boat.

I think they had something like a thousand wounded soldiers. A lot of them ours, but a lot of them were Canadians, cause the Canadians went in at the beach about the same where we did at that time, Plus Taree I think they called it. That was some sight I shall not ever forget.

Dr. Patterson: When did you get back to the states?

Mr. Phillips: It was in August.

Dr. Patterson: '45?

Mr. Phillips: It must have been August of '45 when I got back to the states.

Dr. Patterson: What happened to you then?

Mr. Phillips: Of course I arrived in New York at Pier 92. They let us go on leave. I got orders to report to Norfolk, Naval Operating Base receiving station. When I reported back there, the next thing I knew they handed me orders to come to Cherry Point, North Carolina, the FMF, Fleet Marine Force. When I reported in down here, I reported

to MAG 91, Marine Air Group 91, and my gosh, they was preparing to go back overseas. They was preparing to go to Japan or somewhere in the Pacific. I never will forget it, my commander was Cmdr. Levine.

I can't remember his first name. Anyway, I went to him and I told him, I was just a first class petty officer, I went to him and told him, I said, "Well, Commander, this just doesn't seem kind of real.

I just came back from a war zone for twenty-eight months and here I'm getting ready to ship out to go to the Pacific. My family are really upset about this thing. Couldn't I stay in the states six months or something like that?" He said, "Well, I wasn't aware that you just came back." So I told him my story. I said, Look at my record sir." They checked them up, and he said, "No, no, we're gonna change that", so I didn't have to go. Now MAG 91, they left and got to the Pacific but by the time they got over and got all set up, you know they dropped the bomb and that was the end of that. Later I kind of regretted I didn't go on with them. I think my wife and my mother would have called the President if they'd shipped me right back out.

Dr. Patterson: Is that how you happened to come to New Bern?

Mr. Phillips: That's how come I came to New Bern. I met a lot of people. The first person I met when I came to New Bern was Mr. K. R. Jones.

Dr. Patterson: Kenneth Jones, yes, we're cousins.

Mr. Phillips: Well, he had that station, Sinclair or some place right over here in front of the Palace. You recall that?

Dr. Patterson: Yes.



Mr. Phillips: Well, sir, my wife and I, all the time I was gone overseas, I saved every dime that I made, that I drew, my overseas pay, and she saved money too. When we got back, we were able to buy a car. Of course all we could buy was used cars, and we bought us a used car. I never will forget that. It was a Packard. It had been in the family there in Chapel Hill that her father knew, and it was just about a steal. I think we paid four hundred and some dollars for it. We were driving that thing back, and of course I hadn't been back in the states long enough, I didn't even know anything about rationing, gas rationing. Doris' father had filled up the tank and he told me, said, "Now when you to where you're going in Craven County, you gotta go apply for some gas tickets." I said, "We'll do that, we'll ask the commander or somebody down there." Well, sir, we got to New Bern and we pulled into New Bern just following 70E and I looked over at that thing, that old Packard just used all kinds of gas, and we were sitting on just about empty. I made that right turn up there and pulled in the service station.

Dr. Patterson: Sinclair station?

Mr. Phillips: Yes. A young fellow came out, I believe it was a black man, and filled up the thing. I got out of the car and went in to pay and the person there, I don't remember if it was man, woman, or black or white, said, "Where's your gas coupon? You gotta have a gas coupon." I said, "Well, I don't have any. I've never had any. I'm stationed at Cherry Point and I'm gonna try to get some next week." He said, "Well, you can't do this to us." Well, about that time Mr.

Jones come walking in. They said, "Well, here's the boss. You can talk to him." I told him the honest to God's truth. Mr. Jones took me by the arm and walked outside and said, "Go ahead and pay the young fellow", and he walked out and he said, "Look, when you get those gas coupons, come by here sometime just leave some. Will you do that for me?" I said, "Yes sir." He said, "You look like a young honest good man." I said, "Well, sir, I will." I told him I'd just come back from overseas and that I wasn't aware about the thing, but Doris' father had told me to apply which I was gonna do. Well, you bet your sweet Lucy every time we filled up that car, we made trips and drove to New Bern and filled up our car. Every time we'd go to Chapel Hill or go to the mountains, oh, for years and years we always stopped by and filled up from Mr. K. R. Jones.

Dr. Patterson: When you came to New Bern, what did you do?

Mr. Phillips: I was stationed of course at Cherry Point. When I decided not to stay in to make a career out of it, I wanted to go back and try to go to school at Chapel Hill. We'd been up there. Some of Doris' family had worked for the University all their lives. We got to checking and there were all these GI's lined up and heading into school, and I couldn't. I got out January 10 of '47 I guess it was, when my hitch was up and the war was all over. I believe that's correct. I know it was January 10 when I got out.

Dr. Patterson: It may have been '46.

Mr. Phillips: Yeah, one of those years. I think it was '47 cause I stayed five years and some months. Anyway, I decided not to stay.

I worked for the senior medical officer who at that was a Capt. B. Altmann. He called me and tried to talk me into staying in the service in the hospital corps. I just told him, I said, "Well, sir, I want to go back to school. I don't want to do this. I've got a problem right now. I need to get me a job until I can go to school in September in the fall at University of North Carolina." In the meantime, my dad and my uncle, who was superintendent of schools in Mitchell County, Mr. Jason B. Deaton, had done some ground work to try to slip me in because of so many of our family being alumnus. They got it arranged that I could go in that following September. Capt. Altmann said he'd had my records there and he looked to where I was at Crossnore schools, I had taken a restaurant and hotel management course on the side. We had a business school that after you graduated there you could go to. Or if you were a good student in your tenth and eleventh grades, you could take this side course on off hours. It was like the school that they taught at Louis schools in Washington. That's what it was copied from. So, anyway, I took that. Two years of it. And he saw that and he said, "Well, we're gonna have to replace the military people that work at the Officers Club, commission officers mess, with civilians." He said, "How about you going out there and talk to those people?" He was on the board of directors. I believe they called them board of trustees at the Officers Club at the time. I believe it was. He sent me out there and I talked to the treasurer who was a Colonel Hausmann I believe it was at that time. The interview went well. I was to leave for Norfolk the next Monday to get my discharge.

See, I was in the Navy and they couldn't discharge me at Cherry Point. My wife and I drove to Norfolk and I was discharged. I came back on Tuesday and went to work at the Officers Club as the steward which was the purchasing agent and the assistant to the manager. I worked with about three different civilian managers. They tried and tried and finally they hired a Mr. Wallace. He was in the seventies. He'd entertained kings in Europe. He was from Scotland. He knew what he was doing. Anyway, I worked with him for just about a year. He loved to fish. I would bring him over here and rent a small boat from Mr. Mack...Koonce

Dr. Patterson: Koonce?

Mr. Phillips: No. He lived up there on Brice's Creek. I can't remember his name. At kind of the foot down there. Anyway, he had married a Hardison lady that used to run the New Bern Hotel Restaurant down on Middle Street. I would take him up there and he was the happiest man in the world when up there bass fishing.

Dr. Patterson: Would you fish in Brice's Creek?

Mr. Phillips: Uh huh. Yeah. I had a little small motor. I would kind of paddle and keep him where he could fish. One morning we were up there fishing kind of early and his fly had hung up in a tree in the underbrush. I was trying to maneuver him up there to get it. He said, "Just a little more, little more", and I tell you what, there was a water moccasin that must have been three inches around. It wasn't real long. I can remember that. It fell right in that boat! Phoomp! Well, sir, I jumped right up. I was back paddling

and I got right up on the edge of that thing and I had the oar. He said, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You're gonna sink us! You're gonna knock a hole in the boat!" He said "You don't know how old this boat is! It might be soft and rotten. Don't do it. We'll ease him out of here." I said, "Well, Mr. Wallace, one of us has got to go. You know, they're poisonous." He said, "We'll get him right out. Just be calm. Get me that other oar." I slipped him the oar around over there, and Mr. Wallace, he knew what he was doing evidently. I don't know if he'd ever had that happen before. He eased that thing around and he said, now lay yours right up over him. He got right in the middle of it and with that - kaflunkum - popped that snake right in the water. I never went back to Brice's Creek fishing.

Shortly after that, Mr. Wallace, he was having a lot of stomach problems, and so finally his son came down here and got him, he resigned, and he took him back to England. It was so sudden, that they didn't have a manager. So Col. Hausmann who was treasurer, and Col. Sweetser who was chairman of the board, said, well, why not let that man run it. So I stayed down there three years as manager of the Officers Club at Cherry Point. I was making so much money I wouldn't quit and go back to school, and that was the worst thing I ever done in my life

Dr. Patterson: Who were some of the notable people you entertained during that time?

Mr. Phillips: I remember Pop Beasley and Lynn Kelso, Red Dog.

Dr. Patterson: Jernigan.

Mr. Phillips: Yeah. I remember some of the young ladies that

used to come down.

Dr. Patterson: Who were some of them?

Mr. Phillips: Dot Jernigan was one of them; the one that married Gray Wheeler; Gloria West. Also, they had one, she lived out here on Trent Road. She married a captain and they later divorced. I can't remember her name. (Peggy Lavigne)

Dr. Patterson: What prompted you to leave that position?

Mr. Phillips: In the meantime, I had progressed. At that time I was about 27, 28 years old. I can't remember. You know when you run that Officers Club, you open up in the morning at seven o'clock and let the domestic help come in to clean the place and the early morning cooks. Doris and I moved into the club. We had an apartment there and we lived there rent free. That was part of the salary. All of our food was furnished. The only thing we had to pay for was our dry cleaning. Our laundry was furnished. We did our laundry right there, but we had to pay for dry cleaning. That was big money in those days. I was drawing about I think \$15,000. My wife, she worked in accounts receivable and she was making about seven. And so what we decided we'd do, we'd just stay there and we'd save up our money and with our GI Bill, then we could go back to school and we wouldn't have to worry about cutting corners. Well, that's the worst thing because the year when I finally had to quit, and I believe that was in January of '50, that October...

Dr. Patterson: Excuse me, why did you have to quit?

Mr. Phillips: I was walking down the hall at ten o'clock in early

October and I just fell right out in the floor. When I came to, I was down at the naval hospital and quite frightened with all the white walls. They kept me over night and the next morning they brought me to Kafer's Hospital. Well, they asked me about a doctor I knew and I said I knew Dr. Kafer, so they brought me over to Dr. Kafer's place.

After a couple of hours, Dr. Kafer got through examining me, going through the routine. I had met him because the medical society had their meetings at the Officers Club. About every two or three months they would meet down there and I had met he and Dr. Duffy and several of the doctors. I never will forget, Dr. Kafer said, "Mr. Phillips, you have had a coronary. I have talked to a physician in Havelock Dr. Betty Hayes who is a good friend of my wife. She has told me how you are working around the clock seven days a week." He said, "When have you had a vacation?" I said, "Not in three years." "Well", he said, "How much do you think the human body can stand?" He said, "Now, you've had a coronary and you could have one more and might live through it. You could have one more and you could be paralyzed. There's so many things that could happen to you. So I'm gonna recommend to you that when I let you out of here in a few more days you go down and submit your resignation." When he got through talking with my wife, why, we went back and wrote my letter.

Dr. Patterson: John, let me interrupt you right here. What was Dr. Kafer like?

Mr. Phillips: Well, to me he was just a jolly fellow. I always known him as to be one that was overworked, but I felt like that he

gave me some good advice. And I did, I submitted my resignation.

Dr. Patterson: He walked with a limp, did he not? He had had an injury to his hip, a broken hip. (broken leg)

Mr. Phillips: Yes.

Dr. Patterson: What was Kafer Hospital like?

Mr. Phillips: Well, it was that old, old home up there. It's a shame it was ever torn down.

Dr. Patterson: That's right next to Darnell's...

Mr. Phillips: That's where Barker apartments sit right now. Full porch, big columns, it was a beautiful place. We resigned and they asked me if I'd stay on then until we could get a replacement.

They finally hired somebody. I gave them 'til January, the first of January. They thought they had somebody, but anyway, I left. I believe it was January 10 the man came in and I left. We just moved over to New Bern. I bought the, if you remember the Loretta Restaurant and Oyster Bar out at Washington Forks. I just bought out the business from Mr. Crawford. I don't remember his first name. We were doing pretty well there. I couldn't be still, so then I went down and I bought the Ding Hou drive-in restaurant in Havelock.

Dr. Patterson: Where is that located?

Mr. Phillips: That was located just below Havelock on the right. There was a drive-in theater there and a drive-in restaurant, and I bought the restaurant out. Oh, that guy's name, he's still in Havelock, Irving Beck.

Dr. Patterson: I remember Irving Beck.



Mr. Phillips: I bought that business from Irving Beck and I hired an ex-bartender from the Officers Club to run it for me. Well, then that wasn't enough and I then went over her to the corner of Watson and National Avenue and bought out Ball Drug Store. I bought that thing out.

Dr. Patterson: What's the name of that?

Mr. Phillips: Ball. It later became Bogar Ball Drug Store on the corner of Watson and National. I hired a young man to help me with that, and he was one that, God rest his soul in peace, he's dead now, well, he just couldn't work. You couldn't depend on him. So what was happening to me again, I was getting up at five o'clock in the morning and start barbecuing about three days a week. We sold a ton of bar-be-que at Washington Forks. I was working just like I was back in the days of the Officers Club. So my wife and I decided, well, look, this is gonna kill us both, cause she was working those hours with me. My man at Havelock was stealing me blind at the drive-in restaurant. We set a trap and caught him. But anyway, we were able to get rid of it. We sold the drug store to Butler Lewis. We sold the restaurant, I believe we sold it to Cliff Meadows. Anyway, we got out of the whole thing. We didn't do anything for a short while, maybe a couple of months. We went back to the mountains and we vacationed some. In the meantime our oldest boy was born. I was in Bynum's Drug Store one day and Mr. Bynum said, "John, you are not doing anything now are you?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, why don't you come to work for me and take over my personnel down here. Manage the

personnel and manage the restaurant in the back for me." I said , "Okay. We'll try it for a while.

Dr. Patterson: Now, Bynum's had a small area in the back of the store.

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir, that served lunch and breakfast.

Dr. Patterson: It was quite popular.

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir. It was real popular. A lot of the business people and office workers ate downtown every day at Bynum's. That's where you sent and got a sandwich to bring to the office and this kind of stuff. So I worked over there with Bill Bynum I guess for maybe a year and a half. John Askew was always in and out. He had the place next door.

Dr. Patterson: That's a clothing store.

Mr. Phillips: Yeah. John came over one day and he said, "You know, I'd like to talk to you some time. I need a good man and you got the personality and the stuff, just exactly what I need. How about meeting me sometime or could I call you at home?" I said, well, you can give me a call. So I met with John and Virginia and I ended up going to work for them. He wanted me to go to South Carolina and be in charge of nine stores that he and Charlie Larkin out of Kinston owned together, fifty/fifty. I would be working for two corporations.

They wanted me to go to Sumter. They had two stores at Sumter, one in Orangeburg, one at Darlington, one at Greenwood, two at Charleston, and one at Myrtle Beach. They wanted me to work at the big store, or have my office at the big store, at Larkin Brocks it was called

on Main Street in Sumter. So they moved us lock, stock, and barrel, and went down and rented us a house. We went there and stayed there just about a year. The man that we had working in Orangeburg got in a problem, some trouble. I don't know what it was, anyway, there were some girls involved.

J. B. said, "How about you just moving over to Orangeburg and hire a new staff all together?" This man and his wife both worked the stores there and they both left. So Doris and I moved to Orangeburg, one of the nicest little towns I ever lived in South Carolina. We stayed over there and that's when the first marching of the blacks. They had two colleges there, two black colleges; Claflin and A&B or A&T or something like that. Two black colleges. They marched downtown without any permits or anything. Then Governor Tillman, I believe it was, had said that if they march again, they're gonna mow them down with machine fire and he got the National Guard out. I never will forget, right in front of the store we was working was a machine gun nest with sand bags and stuff piled up there and all these soldiers out there. Thank God the college kids did not march. But it destroyed business.

Dr. Patterson: This was marching of the black people?

Mr. Phillips: Yes. For their civil rights, which they had a right to do. With that, we closed that store all together. We took that unit and we moved to Beaufort, South Carolina where the Marine Corps had just opened up the Beaufort Marine Air Station. So Doris and I moved and we stayed in Beaufort almost two years. Hurricane

Gracie came through and wiped out store and wiped out our home. There was 1,700 homes destroyed in Beaufort County. Ours happened to be one of them. The brick wall stood but the roof and roofers and everything went. The carport fell on our car and totalled our car and my wife said this is the time for us to get out of South Carolina.

She didn't like the schools in South Carolina. Of course by that time we had two youngsters in the school. We didn't have any phones, water, or light for about ten days. Finally, Mr. Larkin and Mr. Askew drove down there. I told them, I said, "You can get somebody to take this store over and run it. I will stay here long enough to get it back on its feet. We'll get the roof back on the building." All the clothes was destroyed by sea water that came in. It had been a very profitable store, and of course they had total coverage. They had good coverage. So we got the building fixed back up and got it reopened and we transferred a man that was working for them at Jacksonville down there. I stayed with him a couple of months and Doris and I moved back to New Bern. I told J.B., "I'm just gonna quit. We want to get out of South Carolina." He said, "If you will come back with us, we'd like to make you overall supervisor, manager in charge of all the twenty-six stores in four states." I said, "Well, okay. We'll consider that." I came up here and met with Mr. Larkin and Mr. Askew. They had an office on Broad Street right in front of the fire station. We met there and they told me what they'd pay me and I'd get a percentage of net profit at each store. It would be my incentive to work harder, you know, to make them more profitable. So I took over the twenty-six

stores.

Dr. Patterson: And you lived in New Bern.

Mr. Phillips: Lived in New Bern in our house that we had built.

Dr. Patterson: Where was that John?

Mr. Phillips: On National Court Drive, 604 I believe it was.

Mr. D. P. Wike, do you remember Mr. Wike?

Dr. Patterson: Yes.

Mr. Phillips: Mr. Wike built that house for us. But then we came back and we saw it was so small. I had been very fortunate. We had it rented for six years. We traded that house on the one we now live in on Fox Chase Road. We bought Dr. John Baggett's first house and we still live there. Good neighborhood out there. So then I worked with them, well, until January of '73. I traveled by car.

Our furtherest store was Key West, Florida. We had Jacksonville; Key West, Florida; then back up, and we had two monster stores, big stores, in Columbus, Georgia. That's where the big Fort Benning Army base is. We had two stores there that those stores did well over three million dollars a year.

Dr. Patterson: Were these men and women's clothes?

Mr. Phillips: Men and women's clothing stores, yes sir. We had one at Augusta. You see when I took that over, Mr. Larkin had stores starting at Kinston, Goldsboro. Then they jumped over and went to Hickory, Morganton, Marion, Charlotte. And then we had one at Little Washington, Greenville, Morehead City, two at Havelock, Jacksonville, Lumberton, Darlington, Myrtle Beach, Greenwood, Beaufort. Anyway,

they were scattered. Mr. Larkin and Mr. Askew would not fly in a plane and they didn't believe in anybody else that worked for them flying.

Dr. Patterson, I'd leave here on a Sunday afternoon to drive to Key West and start back up. It was 1,122 miles from the New Bern office to Key West, Florida, our store. I want to tell you, I'd leave home about two on a Sunday afternoon and I'd drive to Brunswick, Georgia.

We also owned a place at Jacksonville. We would drive to Jacksonville, and then the next day hard driving to get to Key West, staying in motels and eating on the road and gasoline. It took me six years to convince those two gentlemen that I could do this cheaper by flying.

Finally after six years; but again there, I threatened to quit. I said I just absolutely could not be away from my family. My boys by now were getting up to be young teenagers. My wife didn't want to give up her job. She had a good job in accounting at the base. Heck, I'd leave and be gone three and four weeks at a time. So finally they saw the light and said let's try it and that's when I started flying.

Dr. Patterson: Did you fly from the New Bern airport?

Mr. Phillips: I'd fly out of here some, but most of the time I would drive to Raleigh-Durham and fly to Atlanta to Jacksonville, Florida then to Miami. Catch the little puddle jumper, we called them, over to Key West and then Key West back to Miami, then up to Atlanta, take the commuters and fly into Columbus, Georgia, and then from there over to Augusta, there a lot of times and fly back to Charlotte and rent a car and come back down the road or fly into Kinston and my wife

would meet me there. But we proved to them that it was cheaper, and then I was home so much more. I stayed with them until Mr. Askew, he died. We buried him the first week in January I believe it was.

Dr. Patterson: 1973?

Mr. Phillips: '73. Yes. Mrs. Askew called me over to her house. We had about lived with them during all his illness. Every time he went to Duke Hospital, my wife and I took her, she and he up there.

I don't care that the whole world can know it, but he had begged me to stay on after his death, he knew it was imminent, to please stay on with the company and stores and keep them going, that Virginia and Johnny were too used to having too much and they would just spend every dime, and I was suppose to have been in the will and all this kind of good stuff. We buried him on a Tuesday, and Sunday she called me over and she said, "I hate to tell you this, but I don't need you anymore." I said, "Well, Mr. Askew has begged me for the last three months, and I promised him when we took him to Duke last week." She said, "I know that, but he changed his mind two days before he died."

I said, "Well, okay, whatever." She said, "I'd like for you to stay on with me and we're just gonna have going out of business sales."

I said, "Mrs. Askew, you got 127 people working for you, why don't you sell these stores to these managers and for the next ten years give them ten years to pay for it? You'll have a good income." She said, "No, I want to just get rid of them. All of them but the one down here." I said, "Well, you can get rid of them yourself. Sorry."

I messed about for a month and got a call from Norman Kellum. Well,

actually, I got a call from my next door neighbor, John Watts, was the accountant for Carmichael and Sugg and what have you. He walked over and he said, "John, there's a store downtown. Why don't you take it over? You can make a go of it." I said, "What was it?", and he said, "Bryant-McLeod's, they want to get rid of it."

Dr. Patterson: John, let me interrupt you and ask where that name came from.

Mr. Phillips: That's very simple. Norman Bryant Kellum and Frederick McLeod Carmichael. They picked up their middle names which was their mother's maiden names and that's where Bryant-McLeod's came from. We struck up a deal. They had had the store approximately six years and it had been nothing but a total loss. They had had six managers and they just couldn't make a go of it. They owed quite a debt at over at that time NCNB of North Carolina. We struck up a deal and I bought the whole thing including their name. I have their family coats, or trees, right on the wall out here, that was the understanding, because they had spent a small fortune trying to advertise the store and make it go. A lot of my friends said, well, change the name to Phillips or Johns or something, and I said, "Well, my God, look at the money I'll have to spend promoting that name when they've already got a good name." So that's the reason I kept it as Bryant-McLeod.

I've been here twenty years; in fact, the first time I walked in the store was twenty years this month. I actually bought and signed the papers on third of March of '73.

Dr. Patterson: Now, John, did you buy the building at that time?



Mr. Phillips: No. The building belonged to Mrs. Georgia Dowdy, Mr. William Dowdy's wife, his widow. He had left the building to her. The income of the building was to go to Georgia for her lifetime. At her death, then it would go to the grandson that they helped raise.

Dr. Patterson: Let me interrupt you again. What had the Dowdy's been doing with this building?

Mr. Phillips: It was Dowdy Furniture, one of the better furniture stores in the area.

Dr. Patterson: He had operated that a long time?

Mr. Phillips: He had been operating that I don't know how many years, but it must have been many years because I know also that Mr. William Dowdy was president or chairman of the board of the New Bern Savings and Loans for at least 18, 19 years. I was told that. But he had one of the finest furniture stores in eastern North Carolina, upstairs and downstairs. You see, this building has as much space upstairs as there is downstairs.

Dr. Patterson: Now, you say that the building was to be left to the grandson. What about the son?

Mr. Phillips: Well, I don't know. I was just told in such a way that his son had run through two or three fortunes already and that Mr. Dowdy said he wanted something for that grandson and this building was to be his. Shortly after I came here, Mrs. Dowdy had fallen and broken her hip, and she a widow alone. Billy was working for the North Carolina Bureau of Investigation I guess.

Dr. Patterson: SBI.

Mr. Phillips: SBI. She was there alone and the bedrooms were upstairs and she had such a time. When she first got out of the hospital, she would call me and I'd run out there sometimes every other day and do things for her and run errands and what have you. So finally, Mrs. Dowdy said she was going to have to go to a home, that her bones developed this brittle thing and they feared that other bones would be breaking.

She called me and told me that she's giving everything she had to the Methodist Home in Durham, that she was afraid that Billy would be offended but she said, "I don't want to be a burden on Billy and he still will own this building." It's a nice building. She's to set the rate of the rent and she told me, she said, "Mr. Phillips, the rent will stay the same providing you will take care of my building."

The day that Mrs. Dowdy left New Bern, Mrs. Lila Taylor took her to Durham and they stopped in front of the store and I went out, and Mrs. Dowdy was crying of course, and she said that she couldn't get out of the car, so I opened the door and knelt down on the sidewalk there to talk to her. With tears in her eyes she said, "Mr. Phillips, just promise me one thing. That you will take care of my building for my Billy boy", and I said, "I'll certainly do that." She said, "As long as you'll do that, all repairs and everything up to date, your rent will stay the same", and I certainly did that. Of course I had talked to Billy many times. He had promised me that when he inherited the building, he said, "I don't want to be in the rental business or the real estate. You can have the building the day after, he called her Miss Georgia, after Miss Georgia's death." Well, shortly after that,

we had a storm and the skylight roof all fell in from the top side up here and water was running in from everywhere from the rain. When Mr. Bengel came over to get through, well, I told him not to put the thing back, just put the roof up there. Anyway, we had to put in some new support beams and stuff. The skylight was a big thing. Anyway, the darn thing cost me about nine thousand dollars, eight or nine, somewhere in that area, I don't remember which, to do the whole thing.

Then the roof was leaking so we did that all together. That was my first major expense. Then in a few years we had that mammoth big snow, that eighteen incher, and the roof sagged and all the flashing, the sides came loose and we were flooded again. Then we had to have that new type of roofing put on. It's a film type thing. By the time they got through that, that was another seven or eight thousand. At that time they told us that the reason the back of the building was flooding was it was coming through the bricks, that the mortar from all the years had just dried and decayed and it was falling out. The brick had begun to fall down on the back wall over here next to the pool room. I got hold of Billy. Well, I talked to Norman Kellum first who had always been very loyal, very faithful to me and give me advice.

He said you need to get something in writing from Billy before you continue to spend this kind of money. So, I talked to Billy and he was very receptive and we agreed on a price. He and his wife signed the papers and had them notarized, in Wake County recorded, and we had them recorded here, that at the death of Mrs. Dowdy the building would be mine for \$40,000. Anyway, Mrs. Dowdy continued to get worse.

The Methodist Home sent a representative down here to talk to me and asked me if I would increase my rent by \$750 a month, and I told them there's no way. I couldn't understand them even asking that question.

But he said that Mrs. Dowdy's money had all been spent and that it was costing the home over \$2,000 a month more.

Dr. Patterson: She was having fractured bones.

Mr. Phillips: Every time she would just roll over and hit the guard rail, any bone that she hit, it would break. She'd had both collar broken two or three times and both hips. And God bless her, right now she's laying there with a big compound fracture of the femur, the big bone. Duke Hospital had done all these orthopedic surgical things to her and I guess it did cost a lot of money, but anyway, her money was gone. I brought him back in my office and I showed him the folder of the monies, and at that time I had spent \$19,000 on this building. He said, "Well, I can certainly understand and I'll carry this back to the board. I can understand why you can't raise your rent." I said, "Well, sir, I just can't do it. I'm sorry." So anyway, last April I had a phone call from Billy Dowdy saying, "John, you still want the building?" I said, "Yes sir." He said, "Well, set up an appointment with Norman Kellum and ask if he'll handle my end of it too and the wife and I'll be down later in the week. I'll call you and give you the exact date and we'll settle it. The home has decided that Georgia should not have any ownership of properties. At least then she can qualify for Medicaid. Miss Georgia is incompetent. So, this is the Methodist Home's request and I'm gonna honor it. As I

told you, you can have the building the day you hand me the check."

I said, "Well, I'll take care of it." Norman had Bill Hollers handle the transaction. They came down and my wife and I went over and we signed different papers and we gave them the check and I've had the building since April of '92 after I waited almost twenty years for it.

Dr. Patterson: That's a success story with a tough road to get there. Let me look back with you just a minute and ask you what happened to the Askew's store?

Mr. Phillips: They closed all of them except one in Charleston and the one here. Mrs. Askew tried to run it. Of course Johnny would never stay in the store and wouldn't work. So finally, she became ill and had to sell. All the stores were closed. And of course in the meantime, Johnny had become ill and he had seizures and what have you. The doctors have got him on social security, total disability, and that's what he's still drawing today. Mrs. Askew, she developed alzheimer's and she died in Britthaven in Washington, North Carolina just about this time two years ago I believe.

Dr. Patterson: Who took over that store?

Mr. Phillips: She took it over herself and tried to run.

Dr. Patterson: I mean after she quit the business. What happened?

Mr. Phillips: No one. They just closed it. They closed the store.

Dr. Patterson: What did the store become then?

Mr. Phillips: What is over there?

Dr. Patterson: Is that an antique store?

Mr. Phillips: Is that the wig place or the antique? I think it's the wig place where the wig shop is.

Dr. Patterson: On Middle Street.

Mr. Phillips: I believe it is.

Dr. Patterson: Across from O Marks. In that area.

Mr. Phillips: Yeah, I think it is.

Dr. Patterson: In getting back to Bill Bynum's drug store. Did the restaurant part continue on for a number of years?

Mr. Phillips: Umhuh. That continued on after I left for several more years and then eventually it was closed. I don't know why that closed. I would have thought they would of continued that because that drew a lot of people in that store every day. Every day. I think they were having problems with help and what have you.

Dr. Patterson: Has your business been a pretty satisfying thing here in this location?

Mr. Phillips: Yes. Uh huh. We were told by the man that came here leasing the spaces at the mall, he told me, he said, "Mr. Phillips, we will close you down in six months." I said, "Well, sir, then I will probably have to go to work for somebody else. But at least if I stay here, I'm working for myself. And if I go to the mall, I'm gonna be working for you people, and so I'm gonna stay here." And I thank the good Lord that I stayed here because we've been able to make a good living out it and been happier here by ourselves.

Dr. Patterson: Has the tourist influx helped you?

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir! Some of our stores say that the tourist doesn't help them. Of course we've got an ideal spot too. We're next to the clock, the Baxter clock, we're in front of Christ Episcopal Church, and we're in view of the city hall. You'd be surprised at the number of tourist are right in my front door taking pictures of the church, the city hall, the clock, and of the Elk's building, right in front of my door. Usually while the husbands are shooting pictures, the wives are looking in our window and they see our brand names and our prices and what have you and they come in there amazed. And I'll give you a good example. One of the biggest selling items we have is London Fog's sport shirts and shorts and summer wear. They see our prices and they comment, "My gosh, you mean to tell me that shirt is only \$22.00." See, in Baltimore, Maryland alone or Philadelphia, that same street would be \$45.00 and this kind of stuff, and they buy three and four and five at the time. Fairfield Harbor has been great for this store because of their people that come down just for weekends. The people come down for a week's time share and when they come here, they trade with us, seasonally.

Dr. Patterson: John, what business used to be next to you going east?

Mr. Phillips: Well, it's been a pool room as long as I can remember. It's always been called Downtown Billiards I believe.

Dr. Patterson: Was that the Metropolitan Club?

Mr. Phillips: It was originally the old Metropolitan Club branched right over into that area. Yes sir. They served some of

the best lunches in New Bern over there and they fed several hundred people every day for lunch. It was run properly. There was no profanity. It was clean.

Dr. Patterson: Was it a billiards business too as well as a restaurant?

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir. All in the back was billiards, on the back and on the side. They had a nice lunch area and most of the pool shooters could take their lunch and go right on back and eat in back at the pool tables.

Dr. Patterson: Who ran that business?

Mr. Phillips: A Mr. Pugh and a Mr. Smith.

Dr. Patterson: Mike Pugh?

Mr. Phillips: Mike Pugh, and was it Mr. Bill Smith? I can't remember his name. They were nice fellows I thought.

Dr. Patterson: Do you remember Tolson's Electric Company?

Mr. Phillips: No.

Dr. Patterson: Mr. J. J. Tolson. That was before your time I guess along this street.

Mr. Phillips: No, that was before my time evidently. I did not know that, no.

Dr. Patterson: John, you have talked to me about a number of things. I'd like to go into them with you a little bit. You mentioned to me that at one time people in Jacksonville were interested in coming up here and setting up some gambling establishments.

Mr. Phillips: Where that came from was the big exodus from



downtown to the mall, when Belk's moved out. At that time the Chamber of Commerce had formed the downtown revitalization committee and Doug Davis chaired that committee. Mr. George Scott; myself; Doug of course; the man at the bookstore, Lou Steinberg; Harry Vatz; several of us local fellows were on that committee. We worked hard trying to preserve that thing but we could not really get going. Finally, that's when we formed a closer unity. We still had our Merchants Association, but we couldn't get enough to participate. That's when we formed the Swiss Bear. I guess that was in '78, '79. We decided the only way we could really make it go was to hire an executive director which we did. I guess the first one we ever had was Mrs. Kay Williams, I believe. Then we got the word that the people from Jacksonville were gonna come over here and take the ground floor of the Belk's building.

They was gonna run two or three nights a week bingo type thing, and then they was gonna have dances and the beer drinking and this kind of stuff. In the meantime, some of them had already inquired about some of the vacant buildings for bars and for different type of things like this. We really got together and had a meeting. John Peterson was involved; Stewart Smith; one of the great fighters that we had was Gordon Parrott, God rest his soul in peace; Lonnie Pridgen; Tommy Karam. I wish I could name all those people. They were great workers for downtown and wanted to salvage and save downtown New Bern. Just none of us could see our little town just going into beer joints and topless bars and bingo and this kind of thing. A committee was formed and went to Wilmington to see the Berry brothers that owned Belk-Berry.

Dr. Patterson: They owned the Belk building.

Mr. Phillips: They owned the Belk building. In the meantime, Kay and John Peterson and Stewart, Lonnie, and several were getting our banks together so we'd have a loan pool down here. Anyway, when they got through with the Berry brothers, the Berry brothers gave us the Belk building. Now we had to pay \$100,000 for the parking lot back there and we had to settle with the Coplon's. But that salvaged downtown right then and kept that thing from starting.

Dr. Patterson: Now the building was sold to Swiss Bear?

Mr. Phillips: Uh huh.

Dr. Patterson: Or given to Swiss Bear?

Mr. Phillips: Yeah, given to Swiss Bear. Then we in turn through the loan pool that every bank in the area came forward and put the money up. So this group got together, I believe it was Gordon Parrot, Joe Alcoke, Tommy Karam, Lonnie Pridgen, I guess that was it, they bought the Clark building, the Dunn building, and the O'Marks. With the money they were able to borrow at this special rate, they immediately went to restoring them and put them back into shape and started renting. Now, that's fine gentlemen there that the fine citizens of downtown New Bern should really be thankful to, those men that took the courage and had enough spirit and accepted the responsibility of a couple three million dollars and turned it around and salvaged and saved downtown New Bern for all of us.

Dr. Patterson: These three buildings then were purchased by these men not by Swiss Bear?

Mr. Phillips: That's right. Yes, by these four men.

Dr. Patterson: And that group still owns the buildings?

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir, as far as I know. I believe Lonnie and Tommy bought out-right the Clark building. I'm not sure, but it seem to me like they did. I know they've sold the upper half to Kenny Morris for his insurance agency. I think he owns the upstairs and they still own the bottom, I believe. But anyway, it's been the greatest thing that could ever happen to New Bern. It saved us. There's no doubt about that. Look at the tax base it has built to help not only the city but the county. And I might add something else. Back there during those hard times, in our Merchants Association, we were very fortunate if we could have fifteen members, the Downtown Merchants Association.

But when they started talking about moving the governmental complex, the courthouse and everything out of downtown and moving it out in front of the Berne restaurant, boy, all the attorneys and the doctors, everybody joined in with our Merchants Association. We had seventy members all of a sudden. We all got busy and went to work and we kept the governmental complex from moving. The vote that salvaged us was Gerald Anderson. I never will forget that. Cause Gerald was mighty close and that property belonged to Weyerhauser and that was the deal to sale all of that property. Gerald was the swing vote. We had these seventy individuals. A lot of them are attorneys of course that had bought property over on Broad Street and downtown. When they fell in behind us, we put enough pressure at the right places. So, we kept the government complexes downtown and that's when they built the big

county building right over here.

Dr. Patterson: John, let me ask you what I think is a related question. What effect on downtown economy has the Neuse River bridge had?

Mr. Phillips: Of course it has a direct benefit for all of us merchants downtown because for one thing it brings all the Pamlico people in here. It's a direct shot for them. Also, it brings people from Washington, Chocowinity, the Rhems area, all these areas bring that flow directly to us. They've got to get through us before they get to the mall. We just of course hope that with the new high rise bridge that will dump the people on 70 and they will still have the Lawson Creek bridge that we can bring them in to downtown. We're just keeping our fingers crossed. That way, we won't lose at all.

Dr. Patterson: Are you saying that perhaps the Trent River bridge will go too and they will build a new Lawson Creek bridge?

Mr. Phillips: Well, no. I guess this is the Trent River bridge isn't it? No. We're hoping that of course somehow they can keep that Trent River bridge open. It's what we're hoping.

Dr. Patterson: When the mall opened up, was the effect on downtown New Bern pretty devastating for a while?

Mr. Phillips: For a while it was. The only thing that salvaged us was, that we had been here long enough that we had established a good customer relation. So our customers, ninety percent of them stayed with us. The best advertising in this world is by mouth and this is what's kept Bryant-McLeod going all these years. One customer will

bring another customer and that kind of thing.

Dr. Patterson: John, one of your great activities, and there are many great activities here, is with the Shriners and the Masonic order. Let's go into that, but let's start with the Masonic Theater.

Tell me the story of the Masonic Theater and why it eventually closed as a theater.

Mr. Phillips: The Masonic Theater was owned by the Masonic bodies of New Bern, and for years and years they had family type movies. That's the only type that they would have, for the entire family. Of course the Masonic Theater being run by the Masons, operated by the Masons, they kept the prices down. Like when the Tryon and the Kehoe and those had to go up to sixty cents, kids could still go to the Masonic Theater for a quarter. They could still buy a drink for ten cents or a nickel for years and years. We did that as a community service. Of course with what little bit of profit we made from the Masonic Theater, it went into the bodies to pay utilities of the Scottish Rite building and for the help and this kind of thing. I shall not ever forget, when a special meeting was called by the Masonic bodies, the Scottish Rite bodies, were called for a meeting at the theater to decide whether to keep the movies going or whether to shut it down, there wasn't even standing room in that theater. The balcony was every seat filled and standing room only. I mean, there were wall to wall with Masons from Jacksonville, Greenville, Washington, Kinston, Fayetteville. I don't know how many counties the Scottish Rite here envelopes, but we had representations from all of them.

From Rocky Mount, Williamston, Wilson, all those towns all the way up to the Virginia line and from far south. That night when Nelson Banks, God rest his soul in peace, Nelson got on the stage and was telling us what was happening and that in order for us to continue running a theater, in order for us to get the film, we had to rent our films through distributors, and that we were gonna have to take for, say, like every two or every three family type movies, we was gonna have to take a R rated movie. My brother said what do you want to do? A motion was made, and I might be wrong, but it might have been Shorty Kafer, and Shorty had run the theater, his father (uncle) ran it for...

Dr. Patterson: It was his uncle I think.

Mr. Phillips: Well, his uncle had run that theater for years and years and then Shorty run it for some time as manager. But I believe he was the one that made the motion to put it on the floor, to close down if that was the only way we could get film, to have to show one or two R's during the week or something. The whole crowd unanimously stood and voted it and we closed. At that time it was the oldest continuing operating theater in North America, and it was such a shame.

Dr. Patterson: What year was that?

Mr. Phillips: Dr. Pat I can't remember. I just don't have any idea. I don't have anything I could match it with.

Dr. Patterson: As I recall, when that movie was in operation, Mr. (Oscar A.) Kafer, not Shorty, but his uncle, an older man, and he and his wife (Lucy) were there together. She would take up tickets

and he would sort of pick them up as you went in the door.

Mr. Phillips: Right.

Dr. Patterson: She would sell you the tickets and he would take them.

Mr. Phillips: That's right. What was his name. He was quite a prince and everybody loved he and wife both.

Dr. Patterson: Were there a lot of plays put on in the Masonic Theater when it was a movie house?

Mr. Phillips: No, no. Very few. Just strictly movies. You see, originally, before the Scottish Rite building was built, then twice a year when the Scottish Rite bodies met for their reunions, then the movie theater was closed and the stage was used for the Scottish Rite bodies to initiate and train their incoming candidates.

Dr. Patterson: Is that what it's used for now?

Mr. Phillips: Yes. Then they built the big Scottish Rite building, and they built another theater in the Scottish Rite building so that the Masonic Theater remained the Masonic Theater and then that was used strictly for movies. Well, then after we had to close it, we opened it and let some of the theater groups use it. We found out that that wouldn't work. Some of our brothers found out that in stage plays today, as you are well aware, as you can hear them on tv, there are some of those four letter words that's just used frequently. There was a group of our fellows that were kind of like the censors. They would go check out these things and see what was happening. They went to a rehearsal one night, and this production was being rehearsed,

and it was a hit on Broadway and run for several years, but of course in this, it had several of those four letter words. The committee reported back at the next Scottish Rite meeting and said, "Something's gotta happen. You gotta get them people out of there. There was children in this play and they're right up there and they're hearing all these bad words." So they voted then and we have not let any theater group use it since. And that was a shame because they were doing a good job. I felt like it kept some of the kids off the streets, at least at night, while they were rehearsing and this kind of stuff.

It let them have a chance to be seen. But then at the same time I could understand some of those terrible words that was just frequent.

Dr. Patterson: John, you have been very deeply involved in the Scottish Rite organization. Tell me about this involvement. You travel a lot on their behalf.

Mr. Phillips: I don't travel as much with the Scottish Rite as I do with the Shrine. Now, the Scottish Rite, I was elected their almoner, I believe in '78. I still serve as the almoner. I collect money and supervise an account where our brothers donate money. It's like for the relief fund. They donate money to this every year they pay their dues or they could bring me a contribution anytime. At every meeting we pass the cup for any good brother that would be willing to donate for the relief of a brother, a widow, or an orphan, equal to the amount that he would spend unnecessarily each day. Well, that could be buying a coke, a pack of cigarettes, or something that was not necessary. The fellows will normally, just about, they'll average



close to a buck a piece, all those at the meeting, and that goes in the almoner's fund. Then when we have a brother that gets in distress, we go to his aid immediately financially. Where a lot of this goes is to the widows. In our bodies, it's like a lot of everything else, we've got a lot aged people. We have had recently in the past, right here in New Bern, two widows. One widow she couldn't pay her electric bill. They had cut her lights off at one time. You know if you don't pay your fuel bill, one company notifies another one, and then you can't get oil. She had run up a bill of three hundred and some dollars for prescriptions at one drug store here in town. He, likewise, had notified all the other drug stores, so she could not get a prescription filled. When we got a hold of it and they came to me as almoner, I met with the secretary of the Scottish Rite bodies and we looked into the thing and we found out that the lady owed a \$400 electric bill, a three hundred and some dollars for fuel and three hundred and something for prescriptions. No, two hundred and something for prescription. Anyway, we immediately wrote a check to the fuel oil people; the city, for electric; and to the drug store. I hand delivered those to these three bodies with the understanding that this would catch this person up, and don't ever refuse her a prescription or refuse to deliver fuel oil or turn her lights off until you contact the Scottish Rite bodies of New Bern, and this never happened anymore. The lady, for the next year she was able to make it okay. The following year we had to repeat but not as large. Maybe the three of them got to be about almost \$600 that we paid, then God rest her soul in peace,

she died. But then we've had a couple, three others. And you see, like these widows that's in the late eighties and the nineties, their husbands didn't have social security to fall on. You know when they were working, they didn't take out social security, or they worked for themselves and didn't pay it themselves. So it's made it doubly hard on some of our widows. But we still have men that's living that's in this problem of paying fuel bills. But this is what the almoner does and I have been very blessed and what have you to have had that position because I feel like it's one of the most responsible jobs in the Scottish Rite bodies.

Dr. Patterson: One of the most rewarding.

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir, it is. When you go call on somebody and there are tears in their eyes and their house is cold. Now, I've been there.

Dr. Patterson: John, St. John's lodge is a very historic organization isn't it?

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir, and that happens to be my lodge too. I joined that lodge in 1950. Mr. D. P. Wike carried my petition in there. I was still in the Navy as a matter of fact. Shorty Kafer, of course, was secretary. Some people had told me, said, "You'll never be selected for St. John's because they're more of a close knit and they don't let these out-of-towner's." But when I signed my petition I had told them how happy my father had been in Masonry and that he had been at the state level of the York Rite. Of course when Shorty checked into this, why, he spoke on my behalf and I was elected to

go into St. John's lodge, and I'm still an active member there and very proud of it. Because St. John's lodge, for people who have not seen it, they should just go visit and look at it. The last time it was interiorally, the walls and the ceiling, I believe it was in 1856 when this artist came through town and wanted to work for food and they commissioned him and he put the signs and all the stuff on the walls and the ceiling. It's still there. I was so pleased that several years ago when the St. John's lodge members agreed to open it up for old homes tour. It's one of the key sights for the public to see, cause I hear a lot of comments about it.

Dr. Patterson: Yes. I've seen all it's tours and it's wonderful. There are portraits hanging around the walls.

Mr. Phillips: Yep. Of all their past grandmasters that went further than just the lodge. It's all right up there, which we're all mighty proud of.

Dr. Patterson: Of whom are some of the portraits up there John?

Mr. Phillips: Well, let's see. Nelson Banks is there. Shorty Kafer. I don't think Pete Thomas is in that area.

Dr. Patterson: One of them I know is my ancestor, Alonzo Jerkins.

Mr. Phillips: Yes, he's there. One of the more recent ones too, he (S. Frank Nobles) ran the tire recapping place over here. He became a state Grandmaster. Isn't that awful that I forgot.

Dr. Patterson: There are portraits going all the way around?

Mr. Phillips: All the way around that room. I believe there's more past Grandmasters I think from St. John's lodge than any other

lodge in the state of North Carolina. S. Frank Nobles, he was a state Grandmaster in 1979 and he was master of St. John's lodge, so he's up there. But St. John's lodge goes way back. George Washington opened and closed that lodge, in other words, had a meeting there and sat right in the masters chair that's still sitting right there today.

It is on one of his tours.

Dr. Patterson: That's on his one visit to New Bern.

Mr. Phillips: Yes sir. He opened and closed that lodge and, that's got a lot of historical value to it. They were key people when we had our bicentennial here in '74. They dressed all their fellows in regalia of the 1800's and opened that lodge up to the public. They, in fact, had so many people, they found out they were gonna have so many, they went to Sudan temple and used the auditorium upstairs, and it was standing room only for that thing.

Dr. Patterson: I gather that Masonry and the Shriners have been a pretty big influence in the life of New Bern for many years.

Mr. Phillips: Well, Masonry, to give you an example, here in New Bern, including Grantham in that, we have four lodges. The Scottish Rite temple is here, the York Rite temple is here and the Sudan temple is here, the Shriners. We're the only town in North Carolina and the only town in many states that has anything that's like that. They claim that there's more Masons per capita in Craven County than any county in the state. This is what we're told. I don't know how true that is. I know that the Masonic bodies bring a lot of money per year to the city of New Bern and to Craven County. Because at all of our

meetings and stuff that we have, we fill every hotel and every room that we have here two and three times a year. We're having our ceremonial here next weekend, the 22nd, 23rd, and right now we can't even find another room anywhere. We've got the Holiday Inn booked all the way down to Havelock. We'll not make reservations for a Shriner from Kinston, Greenville, Jacksonville, unless they're with some particular unit and have to be because of their performance of duties.

That is so that the people from away can stay here. We had so hoped that the Comfort Suites would be open and that would have took care of a lot of our people. Those suites, two couples could go in there and that would be 180 couples that we could put there.

Dr. Patterson: John, when was this building at the foot of Broad Street built, this Sudan temple building?

Mr. Phillips: In 1957. That replaced the old home.

Dr. Patterson: Do you remember that old home?

Mr. Phillips: I went in there one time when we first came here.

Dr. Patterson: How do you remember it? It was on the corner of East Front and Broad Street.

Mr. Phillips: Yes. I went there to one meeting. Seemed like I had just got in the Shrine, and I don't know why I was down there, but it was a beautiful thing. It had beautiful carvings and stair railings and this kind of stuff in it. I can remember that. And a long porch on the ground level or something. I can't remember too much about it.

Dr. Patterson: Well, that's a pretty startling sight as you cross

the river and come into New Bern.

Mr. Phillips: Yes, it is, and as I say, it brings a lot of people and a lot of money to New Bern every year.

Dr. Patterson: You told me earlier that a lot of the downtown New Bern property is owned by people out of town.

Mr. Phillips: That's getting less every day. It's just like my case when I was able to buy this building. Hubert Caton was able to buy his building. The Carolina Office and Supply, that was owned by Mr. Tolson, I believe was from Fayetteville or some place or somewhere out of town. But just a world of our buildings were owned more so than are now, but still some of them are owned from out of town.

Dr. Patterson: Mr. Brody in Kinston has a lot of interest here.

Mr. Phillips: He owns quite a bit of property downtown, yes.

Dr. Patterson: He owns the old Hotel Albert building.

Mr. Phillips: Yes, uh huh. I believe he still owns the one up here near upper Middle Street. I'm not just too sure, but I think he still owns that.

Dr. Patterson: As you view downtown New Bern now, I'm sure there must be a lot of changes in the way it is compared to the way it was when you first came here in business. Do you remember how it used to be pretty much downtown?

Mr. Phillips: Well, to some degree. I know since Swiss Bear got the thing started about putting trees on the streets and sidewalks, that's been a drastic change. The Swiss Bear program of restoring

fronts has helped an awful lot.

Dr. Patterson: John, you have been very interested in the New Bern Civic Theater. I wonder if you'd tell me a little bit about that.

Mr. Phillips: My wife and I, we became active. I guess it was probably in the early seventies when we got involved. I progressed through the line and was president of the New Bern Civic Theater. For the life of me I cannot remember what year it was.

Dr. Patterson: Has your involvement been from an administrative standpoint or participating in the productions?

Mr. Phillips: Both. Production and management and what have you. We participated in several of the plays, the productions. I guess you would say that Bill Waters and myself and Kennedy Ward, and I guess we'll include Dick Hoff in that, we were about responsible for being able to acquire the old Tryon Theater, the Athens Theater.

We purchased it from the Roberson brothers. I believe they were from Roanoke Rapids or somewhere. Anyway, they were in the textile, cotton mills. They owned the Kress building, the Athens Theater and the Athens Cafe.

Dr. Patterson: That was right next to the theater.

Mr. Phillips: Yes. We were able to, for a price of twenty-eight thousand or thirty thousand we were able to buy the Athens Theater, which at that time was the Tryon Theater I believe it was. We got right to work on that. We bought it. I never will forget meeting the gentlemen. They came down and met with us, the committee. We went up in the Kress building and they went up through the skylight

roof up there and they showed us the roof of the Athens and the Athens Cafe and all this stuff. They were willing to discuss at that time, in fact, they suggested that why didn't we buy the cafe building while we was buying the theater building because they all interchanged. You could go from one door to the other. We said, "Well, heck, there's no way. We just don't have that kind of money." They assured us they'd give us time to pay for it. Kennedy Ward, God bless him, he has always been a right arm to that Civic Theater right across from his office and he did all our legal work and helped us and advised us, and still does. He's never been paid one red cent. He won't accept anything.

So, Kennedy, I hope it will go down in the records what a major part that Kennedy Ward played in the Civic Theater of New Bern, North Carolina owning those two buildings. Then later, the Roberson brothers, when we put in this double taxation downtown, here they had the biggest building in downtown and no income from it and yet the tax then went up another fifty percent. So that's when they came in and gave the Kress building to the city. We can't wait til the day for them to turn it over to private enterprise so that will be turned into a good tax base also for us. I have some things here that I wrote in long hand when I appeared before the board to see if we could borrow money. I guess when Richard Hoff and Bill Waters and myself, I guess when we were presidents, that's when the two buildings were acquired.

I might add that shortly after we got the buildings, then we found out that we had a central beam in the theater building that was decayed on one end and was ready to drop the whole roof in. The city stepped



in and condemned the building. We couldn't do this, we couldn't do that. Then we didn't have a fire wall for the scenery. I know we were kind of ill-advised by a state inspector that came here and told us that we could not replace that beam with wood anymore, we'd have to go to a steel beam under new regulations. After we went in debt \$30,000, to replace that big major eye beam up there with metal, the North Carolina head inspector came to New Bern and went over and looked at it and he asked the question, "Well, why did we replace that wooden beam with metal? Why didn't we go ahead and use cyprus like had been used before?" We said, "Well, my God man, we were told by your people that we had to replace it with metal." "No", he said, "That takes away from the historical aspects of this building now that you've got the main support beam in this building is steel!", and of course we didn't know that. What had happened, that we'd had an unknown leak and that building had been leaking for years and years. That beam where it rested on the pilaster on the side of that building on an eighteen inch wall, plus a thirty some inch pilaster run from the ground up, there had been a leak just leaking directly down that and running down the inside of that wall, that we didn't know. It didn't show.

That's what had caused that wood to rot probably over a period of 25, 30, 40 years. But anyway, now it's got that metal beam up there, and it will be there forever I guess. Then of course to please the fire department we had to go in and build a fire screen away from the stage so that there's no possibility of people, actors especially, being trapped back there at a flash fire. The people at the theater,

they spent a lot of money and a lot of hard sweat and hours.

Dr. Patterson: You also had an asbestos problem.

Mr. Phillips: Yes, that was another thing. Seem like we've gone through everything with the two buildings.

Dr. Patterson: When was that problem about asbestos?

Mr. Phillips: You know the heating messed up, all that gear went out. I guess when they went in they found out that all the pipes were coated with asbestos. And you see, that was also was messing up the Elk's building because, see, our heat was supplied from underneath the basement of the Elk building, Elk's building I should say. So that was quite a problem for us. We had meeting after meeting with the Elks to try to decide on a fair rate of heat. I guess all that has been worked out with Mr. Applegate.

Dr. Patterson: The asbestos had to be removed from the front of the building too, didn't it?

Mr. Phillips: Yes. Over that facade. You see, that was another thing we ran into. That had to be screened off and nobody could go into the building for, I don't know how many days or weeks. I know all the men, they had to be with mask and screens over their nostrils and this kind of stuff.

Dr. Patterson: John, when the building was sold to you all, or somewhere along the line, were not the seats removed from the theater?

Mr. Phillips: Oh yes. (laughter) I'm gonna tell you about that. When the Tryon people that owned it, sold the theater, or left the theater, they took all their seats. You see, they had been leasing

the theater from the Roberson brothers.

Dr. Patterson: The Shriners?

Mr. Phillips: No, the people that owned the Tryon Theater. So when they closed down, they said it was not a money making thing, so they sold the seats, and when we went in to buy it there was just nothing.

There was just some nails where they'd been anchored. In order to have productions we had to have seats. For a while, we let everybody bring a chair. Well, it's on a slant and you can imagine. (laughter)

So, we started scouting around. I shall not ever forget. There was a group of us and we rented a bus. We had found these chairs. We went to Roanoke Rapids way out at a farm, old farm warehouse or something, and here were all these seats just piled up every way in the world, just piled up. Some of them groups of two, some of in twelve attached. So, the committee, we looked those over and said, well, we'll take them. We could buy them all for, it seems to me, like six or seven hundred dollars. But we had to take them all. We knew we didn't need quite that many, but they said, you take them all and get them out of here or nothing. We came back and reported to the theater, "What in the world are we gonna do? How are we gonna get them all down here?" Well, God bless him, we went out here to the Modern Moving Storage. We'd found what we needed but how in the world would we get them hauled to New Bern from way up there near the Virginia line? Someone mentioned Mr. Fodrie, William Fodrie, and so two of us went to see Mr. Fodrie. He was with the Airway and Moving Systems on Trent Blvd. He said, "Well, I'll furnish a truck and a driver, but I cannot

furnish labor." Well, we got together again and we called the base and they loaned us some Marines, volunteers. The Marines had come in and they'd helped us paint the building and helped us do a lot of work in there. Bill Waters, through his contacts at the base, we got the volunteers. We rented us a bus and we went to Roanoke Rapids to get those things. When we loaded them in the truck, we couldn't get them all by far. As I said, they had eight of them together, ten of them together. They were so bulky and we could only stack them so far, we couldn't get to them. We had no more room in the trucks. So we came back, Mr. Fodrie's van and his driver, and we unloaded those things at the theater. Then we called Mr. Fodrie again, "Look, we've got more up there. Could you help us again?" He said, "Well, yes, sure, when you got people to go back with him." So we made the second trip. We hauled them down and we put those things in the theater, and I became the storage place for the rest of them. I still got about a 100, 150 theater seats up in my loft here at Bryant-McLeod's right now. (laughter) We are trying to find someone that we can donate them to, just would give them to any church or group that would come and take them away.

Dr. Patterson: When the seats were sold, what happened to boxes along the sides? Were they taken out too?

Mr. Phillips: They were taken down because they had aged and they were crumbling, and all the walls, we had to help re-plaster. So, we just took those all down. We're hoping someday that they can go back. But you could not use them. Some of them had been taken

down before by the theater group.

Dr. Patterson: John, were you involved in naming the theater the Saax Bradbury Theater?

Mr. Phillips: Not to a degree. That had been about establishment.

Mrs. Bradbury did notify the folks that said, "I think I can handle it for you. I can get it bought for you." In fact, she said she would make a deposit on the building if necessary and see that we got it.

She did that, however, there was never any money put down. There was nothing out of her pocket. But then she also stated that if she did that for us, then the theater would have to be named after her daughter. I'll just state this right out in the public, that's the worst thing that ever happened to us. The theater has still got that loop right around their neck, because when we started trying to go out and get money to refurbish the building, both buildings, and restore it just like they were back in 1903-1910 when they were built, so many people said, "Now, if you'll name it the Athens Theater, I'll donate a \$100.00." I talked to one lady that came to me here in my store and she said, "John, if you'll get that Bradbury name off of that building and go back and call it the Athens Theater, me and my sister will go out and we'll raise a hundred thousand dollars for you in two days." But as a result, we've never been able to get that off because I guess it was told to her that that's what it would be. But it's still got us a noose right around our necks, which is a shame, but there it is.

Dr. Patterson: I'd like to ask you about a different topic.

You were not in New Bern during the civil rights movement.

Mr. Phillips: When they had the first marches here?

Dr. Patterson: Yes.

Mr. Phillips: I was living, I believe, in South Carolina at the time when it was going on in Orangeburg. We came home. In fact, I came up here to recommend to Mr. Askew and them that they close that store, that it would never be the same. Our store, actually, we catered to the black.

Dr. Patterson: Down there in Orangeburg.

Mr. Phillips: Yes Orangeburg. Most of their clientele were black because they had charge accounts and stuff. A lot of the trade was from the two colleges and they had vowed never to buy nothing from a white owned firm. So I told Mr. Askew, rather than having our store burned down and this, that, and the other, let's just get out of it, so we moved that store. But I had come up here, and I know that's when they had begun some marches here. I came down, in fact, one night with Mr. Askew and we sat in his store over there with a shotgun that he was gonna shoot somebody if they came and broke in his store. Then I went on back to South Carolina, so I wasn't here much for that.

Dr. Patterson: Since you've been in New Bern and had this store, or associated with New Bern, have you had any problems about blacks coming in your store?

Mr. Phillips: Oh, no sir. We've never had any problem with our black friends. Some of my best customers are black. I've worked on many a committee. The Arts Council and Gallery, I served on that board

for many years. I worked with Mr. Reginald Frazier's wife. She served on one of those committee boards with us for several times. Mrs. Adams, an ex-school teacher, I've worked on several committees with her. There are just a bunch of them, like with the mayor and various ones.

They are interested in New Bern just as much as we are, cause it's their home. Where a lot of us were not born here, they were born here.

But I've never had any problems with any of them.

Dr. Patterson: John, you've mentioned the Arts Council and your involvement. Would you go into that a little bit more?

Mr. Phillips: When we formed the Arts Council here I was just asked if I would serve.

Dr. Patterson: Do you remember about when this was?

Mr. Phillips: That's got to be in the mid seventies. I know that our first director was Mrs. Georgia Carmichael. I served on that board for several years, then also when we tried to unite with the gallery committee. There was some ill will when the new Art Gallery and the Arts Council combined. In fact, there was a couple of members of that committee that just walked out and said they wouldn't have anything to do with it if it was gonna be involved with the Arts Council.

But also at the same time, I believe, that First Citizens Bank had told the gallery people that if they didn't soon do something with the building...

Dr. Patterson: This is the old First Citizens Bank.

Mr. Phillips: The old First Citizens Bank. If they didn't put it to use, then they was gonna give that building to some other civic

organization that would put it to use. Being a director of the Arts Council, I was chosen to be one that served on that combining committee of joining the Arts Council and the Gallery. I know we had some ill will happen when we did that thing. I know that Mrs. Elizabeth Ward was one of our key people. Mr. Harold Talton, gosh, I just can't remember everybody now, but anyway, there was about five of us I guess that was a committee. No, there was six of us because there was three from the Arts Council and there was three from the Gallery. We worked out all of the proceedings, how we could join the two and let the Arts Council come in and run the thing for the first years or so. Because, see, the council, we did have county funds and we also could seek grants, whereas the Arts Gallery, all their stuff had to come from grants. Now, they had gotten one grant from Smith Reynolds to put a roof on it. That was never fixed really properly because after we got the whole thing combined, the joint effort of the two groups together, we had to put a new roof all over the back end of that beautiful, big building. That is also another big draw to downtown New Bern. That salvaged a building there that was vacant and was just going to waste. Now it's used daily. They have great art over there on exhibition. They have great entertainment. It's a beautiful building. Just look at it today, how they've got it cleaned and washed down. But that was another main attraction of downtown, and I just feel so fortunate that I happened to be involved in that.

Dr. Patterson: John, as you look ahead to the future, what do you think downtown New Bern is gonna be? What will it become?



Mr. Phillips: I think downtown New Bern is gonna grow as far as the business end of it. I see in the immediate future, in the near future I should say, the Kress building, I think the city will eventually sell that building to a private enterprise, and they can turn that into, the downstairs probably, into retail space, the upstairs to office buildings or maybe more retail. I foresee that the Heilig-Levine building down on Tryon Palace Drive, I think that's gonna eventually be retail space down there. I look forward to that being it. The greatest thing I'm looking for and hope for, if we can ever work out the parking situation, is that we can utilize these second story buildings in downtown. Now, my building right here, alone, there's 3,000 square foot of space wasted. It's sitting up there with the Civic Theater chairs, the Arts Council and Gallery fixtures that they used to use at all their crafts and to post pictures and stuff on them on the streets. Well, they did away with spring arts. And yet, I got all those things upstairs, just in the way, just taking up space. It isn't wasted space as long as that stuff's up there, but I would like to see my building turned into two nice townhouses upstairs or two nice apartments or something. But, we understand also through the city, until the parking problem is ironed out, then we can't put any people up in these lofts. It seems that through regulations of today, in order to have a family move into an apartment, you've got to have places for two cars because most families have two cars, and if not, at least you're gonna have guests. So, I'd have to have four places upstairs. And you see, as it is now, for my store,

I only have three parking places, so our people have to pool. I would have absolutely no place. My wife and I, if I could have got this building sixteen, eighteen years ago, we would have sold our home and we would have built us a townhouse upstairs and we'd have been down here.

Dr. Patterson: John, as part of this, a few years ago my wife and I wanted to get out of home ownership, and we did, and we're very happy where we are in the old grocery store on East Front Street...

Mr. Phillips: Oh, good for you.

Dr. Patterson: But we wanted to lived over a store downtown. We got Harold Talton to help us find something and there was nothing to be had. If there had been something, we would have been living downtown upstairs somewhere right now.

Mr. Phillips: Yep. That's what my wife and I wanted to do if we could have got the building. See, fifteen years ago we wouldn't had to worry about parking at the time. We could have went ahead and built it, then they'd have had to provide a place.

Dr. Patterson: What do you think the effect is gonna be on downtown New Bern when the new Neuse River bridge is built and this old one is taken down and much of the Broad Street traffic is gone?

Mr. Phillips: I think, actually, it will probably bring more people downtown because for one thing, that will take the flow of traffic away, so when people decide, well, I want to go down, like, for Bryant-McLeod's and do some shopping, I won't have to park over on Hancock Street or something, I'll be able to get closer because

of the transient, people going and coming. And maybe just stopping through for a few minutes, I feel like we'll have more of a draw to get our customers to come downtown because for one thing, we'll have more businesses and more unique shops. We're not gonna have a big department store downtown. I see that. We don't have the space. Right now in downtown New Bern, we don't have a single lady's shop other than the Peacock's Plume down on South Tryon Palace Drive. But we need two or three nice ladies shops. We need a children's shop, little girls and little boys. There's just a lot of things that we need that I think will be forth coming if they are able to secure the Heilig-Levine building and the Kress building, I just feel like.

Dr. Patterson: Well, John, I have made you talk a long time, and it's been a very great conversation. I'm delighted that you've given us all this information about your life and your activities and the downtown New Bern section. It's just going to be very helpful to what we're trying to do with this story.

Mr. Phillips: Well, I appreciate this opportunity to help.

Dr. Patterson: You have been a help to us. We came to you early in the game for help about the story of downtown New Bern. I've interviewed Johnny Mitchell too.

Mr. Phillips: Great.

Dr. Patterson: So this is gonna be wonderful for us, and I thank you for the Memories program, and I tell you, I've enjoyed just sitting here talking to you too.

Mr. Phillips: Well, it's certainly been my pleasure Dr.

Patterson. I hope you can continue this and make it a real success.

Dr. Patterson: We're planning to. We're talking about writing the book. We're trying to figure out how to handle that now. We might come to you for some advice.

END OF INTERVIEW