

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

MARGARET CARTER WILLIS

INTERVIEW 906

This is Dorothy Richardson representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 900. I am interviewing Mrs. Margaret Carter Willis, interview number 906. This interview is being conducted on September 14, 1992. We are at 420 Craven Street, New Bern, North Carolina.

Dorothy Richardson: Miss Carter, where were you born?

Mrs. Willis: Pollocksville, North Carolina.

DR: What year?

Mrs. Willis: 1908.

DR: Who were your parents?

Mrs. Willis: My mother was Almada White from Pollocksville. My father was Millard Carter from Florence, South Carolina.

DR: And they ended up in Pollocksville.

Mrs. Willis: My father was a railroad man. He was a fruit car inspector, and he met my mother when he came to Pollocksville for some work on some fruit cars that were on the siding in Pollocksville.

DR: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mrs. Willis: No, I did not. I was an only child.

DR: Then you went to school in Pollocksville?

Mrs. Willis: I went to school in Pollocksville. I finished high school there.

DR: How large was the school?

Mrs. Willis: By the time I finished, it was a rather good size school. There were twenty-one of us in the graduating class.

DR: How many years did they have then?

Mrs. Willis: At that time, there were ten grades.

DR: How many months?

Mrs. Willis: Nine.

DR: Where did you go away to school?

Mrs. Willis: I went to East Carolina first; then, I went to State College; then, I went to Chapel Hill; and then, I went to Davenport, Iowa, and back to Greenville to East Carolina and Duke University.

DR: My gracious! What was your major?

Mrs. Willis: Science! I majored in three different kinds of science; in biology which was my favorite, in chemistry, and in physics.

DR: Physics?

Mrs. Willis: Yes.

DR: Oh gracious! Back then, there weren't a lot of women into those fields, were there?

Mrs. Willis: No, there was not. There was very few.

DR: Did your parents encourage you?

Mrs. Willis: Ooooh, my mother was a slave driver almost. No grade was high enough for her that wasn't in the 90's, and 100 would be better. If I came home with 98, she said, "Why couldn't you get 100? Where were those other two points?"

DR: What about your father?

Mrs. Willis: He didn't care. He was happy go lucky. We would call him "laid back" today, the kids would. Everything went all right with him. Nothing bothered him. He was very calm. My father was from South Carolina. He went to Porter and to Citadel,

but he ended up a railroad man like most of his family. My great uncle was a president of Atlantic Coastline, and all the family were people from the railroad, the Atlantic Coastline.

DR: When you were growing up, did you family come to New Bern to shop?

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes, they came to New Bern. Yes, indeed!

DR: It was almost an all day trip.

Mrs. Willis: No, because we came on the train most of the time and went back home on the train in the evening.

DR: Where would you come in?

Mrs. Willis: We came in down at the old station which turned out to be my father's station when he moved to New Bern to go to work. It was right down from our school.

DR: Hancock? The old depot?

Mrs. Willis: That's right. It's still sitting there.

DR: Was Pinnix Drug Store there then?

Mrs. Willis: Yes, indeed. It certainly was.

DR: When you decided to go into teaching, had you considered medicine?

Mrs. Willis: Yes! My grandfather Carter was, as he called himself, a country doctor. He thought some of his children and grandchildren should be doctors, and many of them are. But not I. I wanted to teach school, and that's what I did. My mother was a teacher.

DR: You really wanted to teach?

Mrs. Willis: I really wanted to teach. That was my thing to do.

DR: What was your first position?

Mrs. Willis: My first position was in Dixon, North Carolina.

DR: Where is that?

Mrs. Willis: Dixon is between here and Wilmington. It's just a country school. I was there one year, and then, I came to New Bern. My family, my mother and father, moved to New Bern, and I was fortunate enough to get a job in New Bern.

DR: Where did they move in New Bern?

Mrs. Willis: They moved in Ghent. It was then 220 Rhem Avenue. I think the numbers have changed now. The house has a second story. It was one story when we lived there, and they put another story onto the house.

DR: What year was that?

Mrs. Willis: They came here in 1929. I didn't come to teach here until 1930, '31.

DR: To get that position, what were the steps then that a teacher had to do?

Mrs. Willis: Not much of anything. I walked into Mr. H.B. Smith's office, we talked for thirty minutes, and he said, "All right, if you think you can manage two general science, two biology's, a physics and a chemistry, you're hired", and I said, "I can do it!!", and I did.

DR: They didn't ask for your transcript?

Mrs. Willis: No. No. Because I had been to Carolina that summer and had a letter with me, and I brought it to Mr. H.B. Smith. It was from Dr. Warren C. Peat. He had given me a recommendation to teach. He didn't know where I would teach, but he gave it to me.

DR: A recommendation, and that was all that was needed?

Mrs. Willis: Yes, that was all that was required of me.

DR: What else did Mr. Smith tell you? Do you remember?

Mrs. Willis: No. He didn't tell me very much of anything. He asked me some science questions.

DR: Oh?

Mrs. Willis: He did! I remember he asked me if I knew what osmosis was, and I told him I did. He said, "tell me what it is," and I explained it to him like this, "It's when the thick moves over to the thin until the thin gets as thick as the thick", and he says, "That is fine." That's not a scientific meaning, but anyway, he took it from me. He says, "That's all right."

DR: Was that in the summer before?

Mrs. Willis: Yes.

DR: Did he have any meetings that you had to attend?

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes. Two meetings. I was right by myself and didn't know anybody until I got to Central. There was Mary Gray Moore, and we had been in Greenville together.

DR: What did they discuss at the meeting?

Mrs. Willis: All sorts of things. Mr. Smith told us how we were supposed to be ladies, to be sure that we knew what we were talking

about in our classrooms, that we did not over punish.

DR: Anything to do with dress?

Mrs. Willis: No, that day he did not mention anything about that. He told us a lot about discipline and he told us about punctuality and that sort of thing, but he didn't tell us anything about how to dress. I guessed we were dressed properly that day and he figured we knew how to dress.

DR: When did the school year start?

Mrs. Willis: I think we started that year in late August.

DR: How many teacher were there? Do you remember?

Mrs. Willis: No, I do not. I was in the high school my first year. I taught in the high school two years, and it was too much work. The kids would help me to clean up the equipment and it would take us until six o'clock. And there sat my father sitting out in front of the school to take me home because I lived in Ghent.

DR: How old were you then?

Mrs. Willis: I'll have to count up. I was about eighteen.

DR: Oh my! How old were you when you went away to school.

Mrs. Willis: Fourteen!

DR: Fourteen?!

Mrs. Willis: I went in the summer and I was fourteen years old.

DR: You had graduated?

Mrs. Willis: From college. And you can just blame my mother for that because she pushed me every step of the way!

DR: You skipped grades.

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes. I started school in Boston. My father, as I said, was a fruit car inspector and we were all up and down the Atlantic coast. I started school in Boston Latin School. That was when I was six years old. I don't care if we didn't stay in a place but three days, my mother put me in school. That was some transcripts going from here to there and back again. But she was the leader! I tell you, she meant for me to have an education! And she stuck right with it!

DR: Well then, that means that you skipped grades.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, I was all up and down! I went to school in Miami. I went to school in Maine. Just everywhere. Just almost anywhere on the East Coast of America you can think of. I've been up and down this whole coast, even if it wasn't but for two days at the time. But it was an education within itself. Except that my mother said, "This child's got to have roots. We've got to settle down." So, we settled down in Pollocksville. My father, instead of being inspector, became the station master there.

DR: And then you ended up in New Bern?

Mrs. Willis: Yes, and ended up in New Bern after I finished college.

DR: Did you stay with your parents?

Mrs. Willis: Yes, I lived with my parents when we came to New Bern. I never have lived in any sort of place where the teachers stayed. I always stayed home.

DR: Didn't they have a place for teachers in New Bern?

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes, on Pollock Street.

DR: Could they board there?

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes, they lived there, but I didn't. I stayed home.

DR: What about your lunches?

Mrs. Willis: At that time, we went home for lunch. When I first moved to New Bern, we went home for lunch. I lived in Ghent. We had forty-five minutes. I walked home for lunch and I ran back. The neighbors next door were with me, and we ran back and forth. Father, in the morning, took everyone the car would hold to school, and we were about three deep. You remember Lib Rivers?

DR: Yeah.

Mrs. Willis: This is a funny story. Lib got in the car one day, and you know how we used to make notebooks, her book was an English book and she had lost the "b" and it said English boo. My father said to her, "Well, I've heard of math boo and science boo, but never english boo."

DR: When you started that first year, how many students were in your classes?

Mrs. Willis: About 20, 21, 22. One of my general science classes was all boys. They made everything in the world. If I wanted a circuit breaker, if they couldn't make it, their father's did. I carried those things around with me until I stopped teaching. they were things that the kids just don't know how to make anymore.

DR: How long were the classes?

Mrs. Willis: I really don't remember. They couldn't have been very long to have that many in one day. The school day was about like it is now. It didn't change much.

DR: How many months a year did you go?

Mrs. Willis: We had nine months until the war came. Then, I remember we taught for three years, a month for no salary, and took somebody home with us that didn't have a home here. Louise Anderson stayed with me those three summer. That's how we kept our nine month school term. You didn't know that, did you?

DR: We didn't have but eleven grades though, did we?

Mrs. Willis: That's right, just eleven. It was after Carter, my daughter, was sick and I came back to teach, that we had twelve grades. That's when I moved up to the eighth grade. I didn't tell you how I got into the seventh grade, did I?

DR: No, you didn't. How long did you teach in the high school?

Mrs. Willis: Two years. I was complaining to my father. My father and Mr. H.B. Smith used to go to the bank together because Mr. Smith was at Central and my father was down there, and they were good friends.

I had complained so much to my parents and I said, "I'm gonna find a school somewhere else." My mother and father didn't want me to leave.

They wanted me to stay with them. So, my father said to Mr. H.B. Smith, "Margaret says she can't do this much work anymore. She's going to find a school somewhere else." Mr. H.B. Smith said, "Well, tell her to hold on a little while and let me see if I can find something else for her." So, in a few days he said to my father, "How would

she like the seventh grade?" My father said, "I do not know, I shall ask her." He did, and I said, "Anything. Get me out of this it is too much for one person to do.

DR: Why?

Mrs. Willis: Too much work to do!! Look at the preparation; two chemistry, one preparation; two biology's, one preparation; a physic! One, two three, four preparations!!

DR: You didn't have much equipment to work with either did you?

Mrs. Willis: The equipment was quite good if you knew how to switch it from one thing to another. There was a lot of makeshift.

Jimmy Smith once said, "Margaret Willis could teach more science with a coca-cola bottle and a glass tube than anybody he'd ever known in his life." (laughter) We had a lot of make-shifting when I got to the seventh grade. You remember that.

DR: Money was scarce.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, it was! Very scarce for all of us!

DR: Do you remember what your salary was?

Mrs. Willis: Yes, I do. I remember my first check well because it was \$133.33, and I lost the thing. They had to issue me a second check.

DR: So, you couldn't spend it right away.

Mrs. Willis: I wanted to, but I couldn't.

DR: In the summer, you were just off?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. Back when teachers didn't charge anything to coach children, I coached the neighborhood children. I remember

Mr. Smith found me an old microscope for me to use in my class. Where I lived in Ghent there was a big porch, and the kids in the neighborhood and I just had a fun time making slides, looking at our hair, punching our fingers to get blood. We just had a marvelous time making slides and looking at them. This is what I did in the summer.

DR: You were fortunate that you had a home.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, I was because times were hard.

DR: Did the other teachers go back home?

Mrs. Willis: Except the times that I was telling you about when we did the three years and we'd get an extra month to keep our school in a nine month term. I think Bess Sledge remembered it and so did Helen Morton. But you see, these ladies are gone. I'm a hanger on though.

DR: How about book fees and things?

Mrs. Willis: I don't remember anything, but it seems to me that they were quite reasonable. That's about all I can say. I know that the books the children wanted to buy, they could buy. For instance, when one child got through with his, he would turn them over to somebody else until they were worn out. That's the way the books were used because there wasn't enough money to buy a lot of books. When I got into the seventh grade, Mr. H.B. Smith said, "Could you teach one year without a book. There's no science books made for use in seventh grade science. We're just getting into it in North Carolina." Of course, I thought I could do anything, and I said, "Yes sir", and I did. I taught a whole year with no books! You remember the Arm and Hammer

brand baking soda. It used to have a little card on it and you could cut that little card off and send it off and get bird cards. It was called "Birds of America."

DR: I remember those.

Mrs. Willis: We had the best time. Let me tell you what Rosa Gibbs said one time. She said, "What in the world are you all doing in the 7th grade there with all those soda boxes?", and somebody said, "We're ordering bird pictures." She said, "Well, I've got three boxes of soda in my kitchen with no tops on them." I thought that was funny.

DR: Her kitchen smelled good! When you got into the seventh grade, then you were into the old Central building.

Mrs. Willis: Yes. I had the same room upstairs.

DR: On the right hand side.

Mrs. Willis: Yes. That's right.

DR: What were the sizes of your classes?

Mrs. Willis: They had come then to be about twenty-five students. That was the norm we usually had. When I went into the seventh grade, there were four seventh grade teachers: Mary Gray Moore, Louise Anderson, Lanta Winslow, and myself.

DR: Did the teachers come to the children?

Mrs. Willis: The first few years we went to the children. I got smart and ordered a lot of science textbooks because companies would send teachers complimentary copies of books, and we put them in a chair and two boys would take books and chairs from one room to the other. The children would get those books to look at and to read,

and that's how we got through the first year with no science books.

That's a story, isn't it!

DR: It really is when you think about it.

Mrs. Willis: In two years from then if Mr. Smith had asked me if I could teach without books I would have said, "No sir, I couldn't do that without a book." But I did it. I tell you, when you're young, you think you can do anything, don't you?

DR: Yes. Save the world.

Mrs. Willis: My father said, "Have you lost every brain cell that you ever had?!" When I told him what I'd done, he said, "You mean you're going to teach without a book?!" I said, "Well, they can make their own books." And you did, didn't you?

DR: Yes, yes. Mrs. Willis, did you have discipline problems in the high school or in the seventh grade?

Mrs. Willis: No. Nobody had problems at that time. Children knew why they were in school. Oh, you'd have maybe one that would be a little bit rude sometimes. You just go over and whisper in his ear and say, "Do you want me to get your parents up here to talk to me?", or you'd say to him, "Are we going to have trouble?" He'd say, "No mam!" You'd say, "Well, you better watch out then. You don't want to get in trouble with me." That's what I'd say. (laughter) Didn't I Fred? "You don't want to have trouble with me."

Fred Latham: That's correct.

DR: Did you ever have children come that you suspected as being abused?

Mrs. Willis: Never. I don't remember anything like that. I don't remember a thing like that even the last day that I taught. I never did remember having anybody that I was suspicious of being abused. I knew they had troubles at home. They would tell you everything and you would have to shut them up because they would tell you far more than you wanted to know. They wanted to tell you what happened and what they had for supper and this sort of thing. Maybe their mother and father had had a squabble the night before and they wanted to tell you that and you'd have to stop them. But nothing that would upset you.

DR: What about children coming ill clothed?

Mrs. Willis: This is a story I'll tell you just to illustrate. We had our graduation over in the Masonic building, graduated into high school, that was. I don't think they do that anymore. Anyway, there was this boy, and if I called his name, you would know, and he came to me about three days before we were to graduate and he said, "Mrs. Willis, I'm not going to be able to graduate." We had told the boys to wear dark trousers and a light shirt, and he didn't have the proper clothes. I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. You meet my husband and I down at Hill's and we'll see that you get some clothes", and we did. He has not forgotten until this day. He tells me about it real, real often and always gives me a hug.

DR: I imagine other teachers did the same.

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes! Things that we couldn't any longer use, we'd take to our pupils. We'd carry skirts and blouses to the girls

or anything we thought they could use. Sometimes they liked them, and sometimes they were afraid to wear them, afraid somebody would recognize them. There was a lot of things that you did for a child then that nobody does today.

DR: What about health care? Were you all required to do screening for vision and hearing?

Mrs. Willis: We did a little of that but not a whole lot. We did that even when Bill Flowers was here. We did the eye screening and some of the other things, but not a whole lot. They do more of that now. We had no counsellors. We did our own counselling. For what it was worth.

DR: Back then, say in the thirties, children who were especially bright, were there any special programs for them?

Mrs. Willis: No, not particularly. Sometimes they were divided according to their mentality, but that wasn't working out too well.

The first three years I was in the seventh grade I was a new teacher and I got the low section. After that, I think maybe I got the high section most of the time. I don't know why. I never asked. I was just glad to get them. Whoever I had was all right with me.

DR: What about the slower children? How did you teach them?

Mrs. Willis: Very carefully. It doesn't seem to me that we had so much of that because children studied more and they tried harder.

It was always my idea that if a child had done his best, never hold him back. If that's all he could do, let him try the next grade. Who knows, he may pick up and he may do better. I was never one on

failing pupils if I possibly could see my way clear to pass them.

DR: Tell me about when you were married. How did you meet?

Mrs. Willis: Oh!! There was a big oak tree on the corner, and it was called our courting tree. My husband use to meet me out there.

This is a good story too. You remember rainy day sessions?

DR: Yes.

Mrs. Willis: Well, I never understood it. I thought, well, Mr. Smith is afraid the children won't get wet enough; anyway, he's going to let them out in the pouring rain. I was out on the steps to the old Bell building trying to see that the children didn't get too wet.

All the teachers were standing out there. This little car stopped.

I had been dating Bill Wheeler. Do you remember Bill Wheeler?

DR: Yes.

Mrs. Willis: All right, I had just moved to town though remember. Here comes this nice looking man up the walk with an umbrella.

DR: He was handsome.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, he was. He didn't know who I was, and he said, "Which one of you is Miss Carter?" I said, "I am." He said, "Bill and I have come to take home." I of course, prissy thing, I said, "I can't go. I'm waiting for my father. He's going to pick me up."

He said, "Where is he?" I said, "Right down there at the station."

He said, "We'll go tell him that we're taking you home." So, that's how I met my husband.

DR: And Mr. Wheeler took a back seat?

Mrs. Willis: Well, they were from Greensboro and he had to go

back to Greensboro to settle some business. He told Guion to look after me, my husband to look after me extremely well while he was gone, and that was the end of Bill Wheeler and me. (laughter)

DR: A good friend! When were you married?

Mrs. Willis: In 1933.

DR: Oh, the times were hard!

Mrs. Willis: Yes, they were.

DR: Where did ya'll first live?

Mrs. Willis: We lived with my mother and father for nearly a year, and then we moved with the Jacobs on Middle Street. It's where the Enoch Wadsworth home is now. It was this kind of house like this one we are in now. Did you know that I had to go to Baltimore to find out this is a New Bern house, these little long cracker-box houses?

I never had heard them called New Bern houses. If you keep your ears open, you learn every day.

DR: What did Mr. Willis do?

Mrs. Willis: Right then, he was working at Merit Shoe Store.

DR: And then you had Carter?

Mrs. Willis: Yes, our only child and she was sick. She stayed in and out of Johns Hopkins for six years.

DR: Oh gracious.

Mrs. Willis: It was terrible.

DR: Did you try to teach during that time?

Mrs. Willis: I taught in Baltimore for a while. Anybody that doesn't know Johns Hopkins is missing something. Those children had

school, they had church, they had Sunday school, they learned how to serve food, everything, just like they were home. There was two big rooms one downstairs and one upstairs called "Mother's rooms." We named them that, I think. You could only see your child so many hours a day, so many times a day, and you had to be there at the right time.

I found something so cute written on my child's chart one day. It said, "This child to be loved thirty minutes before feeding."

DR: Back then.

Mrs. Willis: Uh huh. Wasn't that wonderful?

DR: Oh! That was beautiful!

Mrs. Willis: It was. It certainly was. I've never forgotten it. Her special doctor's name was Law. Would you believe that? He was a doctor, but his last name was Law. Benjamin Law, and he just thought that child was his. It seemed that's what he thought.

DR: She got good loving tender care.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, she surely did.

DR: It's what all children need. You taught in the seventh grade how long?

Mrs. Willis: Until she got sick. That was about six or seven years.

DR: And then you left?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. You know money was terrible limited, staying in the hospital like Carter did. Of course, she was home and then back. The longest she ever stayed home was nine months and we were back three different week ends during that time. We'd get her home

and her temperature went real high. She picked up a tropical germ.

From where, nobody in the world knows. She was not improving until Dr. C. Coteine, who once had experiences with this strain of germs was called in. It wasn't three months before she was getting better.

I stayed almost two years with not one grain of hope. They couldn't give me any hope at all. It was terrible.

DR: How was she then?

Mrs. Willis: She went to Dr. Sidberry's when she was six months old because Dr. Ernest Bender said there's something here that I don't understand. He said, "I want you to take her to Dr. Sidberry." So, of course, we did, and we stayed there about a month. She was then seven months when we took her to Hopkins.

DR: When did you start back teaching again?

Mrs. Willis: I really can't remember, but it was the year we got our twelfth grade. That sent me, not to the seventh grade but to the eighth grade. Probably 1947 or '48.

DR: Still in junior high. Was it still in the Central building?

Mrs. Willis: When I went back it was in the Central, and then we moved over to Moses Griffin from the Bell building.

DR: After they built the New Bern High School?

Mrs. Willis: No. I went to the New Bern High School during that time. I went to Mr. MacDonald and I said, "Mac, I've never taught in a new school in my life, please let me go out there", and he said, "Let me see what I can do for you." Later on he called me and said, "If you want to go, you can go. You'll have general science and

biology." I said, "You couldn't please me more. I'm ready!" Then mother had a heart attack. We were living right in this house. Then I couldn't go back to the High School, and I had to call him and say can I come back to Central? He said "Yes, we couldn't find a science teacher for eighth grade." There were plenty of them for high school.

And that's what I wanted, I wanted eighth grade. I like it. I like that age child. So many people have said to Mary Gray Moore and me, "Why do you all like that age?" She said, "Well, they are at the right place. They're not set in their ways and they're pliable and they're still interested and ready to learn."

DR: How long did you teach in the junior high?

Mrs. Willis: I don't really know. I can't even tell you how many years. If we can find out what year we got twelve grades, it was the year after that.

Mrs. Willis: Were you required then in the thirties to go back and keep up your certification?

DR: No. We just did it on our own. We'd go back to Greenville to school, and then finally they got where they would bring classes to us which was very nice. That was in 1945, '46, somewhere along in there they started bringing classes to us. We were paying for it.

Finally, it got where it was free. All we had to do was go. We took Red Cross classes and everything we could think of that might help us do a better job for our pupils.

DR: During the war, did you see the school population grow?

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes, did I! It was coming out at the seams before

I quit teaching. When I was out at H. J. MacDonald, the health classes were divided. I don't know why, but they were divided girl's health and boy's health classes. I had forty-nine girls in my Health class!

DR: Oh gracious!

Mrs. Willis: Yes. We had to meet down in the lunch room. We had the best time. Oh, we just had a wonderful time!

DR: What kind of things did you cover?

Mrs. Willis: Honey, we just did what ever we wanted to do. We'd go out to play. You know there was no trees. Everything was bleak out there in the winter. They'd throw their coats down, I'd sit down on the coats, and say, "Play children, play!", and they just had a high old time! I'm nothing with physical ed. It was just absolutely left out of me.

DR: In the classroom, what did you cover in Health?

Mrs. Willis: We covered everything! We did not do any of this new stuff that they are doing now. Our Health books were very, very good. A lot of it had to do with the people who started certain health trends. We found out about diabetes, incidentally. Dr. Banting was living over on the outer banks. His young wife had died with diabetes, and he was determined to find a cure for diabetes. Those were the stories in the Health book. It wasn't all just health, you know, like it was when we were down at old Central. Down there, you had to learn the bones of the body and their functions, you had to learn the muscles, you had to learn the parts of the heart, and which blood vessels carried pure blood going to the lungs and all this good stuff.

DR: You never did teach in the high school then?

Mrs. Willis: I didn't teach in the high school except when I went back out there and when I first started. Those two times.

DR: I imagine you saw a big difference in the students.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, but a student is a student. I'll tell you this. My husband said to me one time, I said something about "I don't believe this certain class likes me much," and he said, "Well, don't worry about it. A kid knows when you're on his side before you know it yourself." I never did forget that.

DR: That's true.

Mrs. Willis: Yes.

DR: One of my cousin's favorite sayings to me was, "Dot, you may be intelligent, but you don't have any common sense."

Mrs. Willis: Well, I think that's exactly what my husband thought too. He said, "Don't get mad about things. It doesn't do you a bit of good. It's just makes you feel worse." That was his idea, "Don't get upset."

DR: Do you remember any outstanding events?

Mrs. Willis: Yes! I remember a lot of them. I remember one time we had a pageant. I reckon your children were too young. We were dressed in colonial costumes. Mr. H. B. Smith was still here because I remember they had lost me. I had gone to help some kid with something about the costume. Somebody said, "Mr. Smith, we're looking for Mrs. Willis. Where in the world is she?" He said, "I don't know, but wherever she's suppose to be, she'll be back very soon. You can

just wait for her." I thought that was a good comment.

DR: Yes, from Mr. Smith!

Mrs. Willis: One time he told me something that I shall never forget. I guess I was too strict. He called a boys name and that boy said, "You were too much of a lady." I said, "What?! How can one be too much of a lady?" He said, "Well, don't you know what he meant?" I said, "I certainly do not!" He said, "He thinks you're too strict." I said, "Oh me! I thought I was very lenient."

DR: I thought you were understanding.

Mrs. Willis: This boy said I was too much of a lady. He didn't know how to express it.

DR: Was he?

Mrs. Willis: I remember one time (I wish I could think of that boy's name.) I thought of it last night. I guess it was show and tell, but we didn't call it that, and he brought a snake to school. I was horrified!

DR: That sounds like something my husband would have done.

Mrs. Willis: No, it wasn't he. The boy purposely let the snake out, and here came the snake. It was a small one. It came down the aisle. I jumped in my chair and on to the top of my desk, holding my clothes, screaming "Snake!, snake!" Mr. H. B. Smith heard me and he opened the door and said, "What's the trouble in here?!" I said, "There's a snake loose in this room!" Well, you didn't fool with Mr. Smith you know, and he said, "Who brought that snake in here?!" Nobody said a word, so he said again, "I said, who brought that snake in

here?!!", and the boy said, "I did." Mr. Smith said, "Well, did you ask your teacher if you could bring the snake?", and the boy said, "No, it was pet day." (laughter) It was. The kids brought their pets and he brought his snake. We had cats and dogs and a snake and snails and puppies and everything that day. We had a mess in there!

DR: What year was that?

Mrs. Willis: I don't know. I can no longer tell you.

DR: Were you still in the Central building?

Mrs. Willis: In the Bell building. So, Mr. Smith put his hand out and he said, "Get down, Miss Carter." So, I said, "Yes sir." I stepped down in the chair and I stepped down on the floor.

DR: Were the children laughing?

Mrs. Willis: They were having a fit just laughing and carrying on. Well when he looked at them, they just slowed down. He told that boy, "You catch that snake and you get him out of here." The boy was trying to get the snake and the snake came toward me. We didn't know where he was. I step in the chair, I step on the desk, and I holler "Snake!" again. Why I did that, I will never know. (laughter)

DR: You were only about nineteen.

Mrs. Willis: I was just a little young girl and I just hated snakes. Mr. Smith came back and he said, "I told you to catch that snake!" So, finally they got the snake and got it in the jar. The boy brought him in a great big old jar. Mr. Smith said, "Don't you ever bring anything in this room like this again." The dogs were everywhere and the cats. He said, "What is going on?", and we said, "We were

having pet day." He said, "What is that?" We had invented it you know. So, we said, "We were going to share seeing our pets." He said, "Did that come out of the book?" I said, "No sir."

DR: Did he say this in front of the children?

Mrs. Willis: Yes! (laughter) He wanted to know where it was in the book and there was nothing in the book about it.

DR: Good for you.

Mrs. Willis: We just said, "We thought it would be a nice idea." This is what I said to him, and I don't know how I thought of it, I said, "It was always my idea to give children all the experiences they could possibly have." He looked at me like well, that's a good idea. He never said so. But he finally walked on out and that's was the end of the snake story, and that was the end of pet day too!

DR: Mrs. Willis, did he say anymore outside to you?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. Two or three days later he said, "I want to know more about this pet day."

DR: And that's the way he approached it?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. I said, "Well, I'll tell you the truth. Sometimes things get just so uninteresting that you want to do something different. I was right. I was telling you the truth. I did want my children to have a lot of experiences. I did not know they would bring so many pets to school. I thought maybe one or two would bring a pet." Mr. Smith said, "You should have told them how many." I said, "You're right. I should have. I should have stretched it out over four or five days and it would have been all right." He said, "Well,

you know now, don't you?" I said, "Yes sir, I do." That was the end.

I didn't try that anymore.

DR: That was a kind reprimand, wasn't it?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. I thought he was very kind to his teachers. Now, he didn't put up with much foolishness I don't think because he didn't like that pet day one bit. I'll tell you that! (laughter) But he went about it in a very nice way. For one thing, I was young. I think he realized that I was feeling my way along, and I was.

DR: He was glad to have a competent science teacher.

Mrs. Willis: I don't know whether he was or not. I can't tell you about that. Every year Mary Gray Moore and I used to take the children, (if it was okay with the teacher) during study period, and we would have dances. We learned dances from all over the world. We'd go up in the old auditorium and have a big program. One time we had one that was called "Dance Americana" and it was dances from the Americas. One time we had foreign dances; European dances. We had a marvelous time and so did the pupils.

DR: And the children enjoyed it.

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes! Let me tell you about our art endeavor. Mrs. Stallings, who was an Art major, helped us. We had everything from dress designing, the kids designed clothes, to anything in the world that they wanted to draw and we had it organized. Here's another story I'll tell you. Little Charlie Ashford was a real artist and he had some beautiful work. Of course the parents were invited on that day to come up and see the art. There sat Charlie with one piece

of his art on his desk watching that door for his daddy, big Charlie Ashford to come. Caroline came in and she came over to me and she said, "Charlie's not going to get here. He's caught up and can't get out." She said, "Look", and I said, "I see." Poor little Charlie's head was going back and forth. I felt so sorry for that kid I did not know what in this world to do. His daddy never did get there.

But you know what he did? Two or three days later, he came up and spent the afternoon with him - visited in all of his classes.

DR: And you had to teach science?

Mrs. Willis: Yeah with him sitting there. But I can beat that! When we got a new manikin from the high school, (they gave me the old one.) Of course I was suppose to pass it around to any teacher who needed it, but it stayed in my room. I just rode up and down the aisle on the box that contained the manikin. It was a great big green box; you probably remember it from high school, Oscar. You remember Oscar?

DR: Yes.

Mrs. Willis: The first year we had it, little Charlie Ashford happened to be there. I hadn't really had time to look that thing over like I would have liked too. I had let the children see it. We had taken it apart and that sort of thing, but I hadn't had time to read that manual at all. We had open house and here it was the box all opened up and everything all pretty and everything fixed up, and guess who the first person to open the side door was? Charlie Ashford Sr.! I backed away from that box so fast, I nearly knocked

a chair over! He said, "There's Oscar!", and I said, "Yes. Come here and tell me about it." He said, "Well, I came for you to tell me", and I said, "Don't be like that. Now, tell me." So, he went to work on it and he took it out and he showed me this and he showed me that and we had a big circle of people that came in listening. Oh my, was I glad he got there cause all I could have done was say, "Now, that's the heart and that's the lung." You know, that would have been all that I could have told really. He was just lecturing and having a wonderful time.

DR: Do you remember any changes that were really positive in the school?

Mrs. Willis: Oh dear me yes! So many of them! So many, many, many! For instance, it had gotten to the place before I stopped teaching that a teacher could without going through office and signing all these papers, could take the children out for art. For several years they brought their own charcoal pencils and they drew. I wish I had kept some of their art work. I bet there's some of them in this town right now. They would draw the houses that had the plaques on them or of their own house or whatever they wanted to. We took cardboard boxes and tore off a piece, and then we took a piece of white construction paper and pin it down with thumb tacks and they would either draw with it side ways or up and down and draw whatever house and grounds and whatever they wanted to.

DR: You, of course, were here when they integrated the schools.

Mrs. Willis: Yes.

DR: How did you find that, Mrs. Willis?

Mrs. Willis: It didn't bother the children very much, and it certainly didn't bother me. A few things would happen. They segregated themselves when it first started. The blacks would hurry to get into the room so they could get to sit where they wanted. I soon caught on to that and I would say a girl, a boy, a girl, a boy. You know, mix them up. Of course, we all did that. That wasn't just me. Anything we could think of to keep them from segregating themselves. Because if you're still going to have segregation, there's nothing to it. I thought it went rather well. I didn't see much wrong with it. I remember one story I could tell you about. His name was David Simmons. He was a tall, black, slender boy and so smart. He was one of the smartest people I ever taught. He was just as smart as he could be. These Simmon's are right around here. He kept being tardy, and I kept saying, "David, come here a minute." He had said he walked and I knew he lived between Pollocksville and New Bern. He said, "I'll try to be on time." This was not too long before I quit teaching. He still would be tardy. So, I remember it just as well; you know Cella's out here, this Ford place, that boy, and I cant' think of his first name this second, came to me and said, "Mrs. Willis, can I tell you something?" I said, "Yes. Sure. Go ahead." He said, "The reason David is always tardy is when he gets on the bus, they take his homework, and if he's got a project, they tear it all to pieces, and he would rather walk and be tardy than have his stuff messed up." After that, they'd say, "Well, you didn't mark David tardy!" I said,

"Now, you tend to your stuff and I'll tend to mine!" And I didn't ever mark that boy tardy again. I thought if he thought enough to walk to school to protect his homework, I certainly was not going to count him tardy. So, he was not tardy anymore, and I was so glad that kid told me I didn't know what to do! I don't blame David. I wouldn't want to ride on the bus if people were tearing up and taking my homework.

DR: They recognized that this young man had ability.

Mrs. Willis: That's it! They wanted his work. And if he wouldn't give it up, they tore it up. He came in with a project one day and it was all upset and he was upset. The kids caught it before I did.

I didn't know a thing about what was happening on the bus. The kids had to tell me. I wasn't smart enough to figure why, but they told me. They said, "We'll help you straighten it out, David. We'll help you. We'll help you." They went all around trying to help him straighten out his project. It was all falling over and what not, and I still didn't catch on until that boy told me all about what was happening on David's bus.

DR: Did you find that their school experience was very different prior to coming to you all?

Mrs. Willis: We had to get use to them and they had to get use to us. The first time; a girl got up and started out of the room.

I said, "Where you going, honey?" She said, "Well, I'm going to the bathroom." I said, "Come here a minute". So, she did. I said, "Aren't you used to asking your teacher if you can be excused?" She looked at me like, "Are you a fool?", and she said "No mam!" or "No!." I

said, "Well, let me tell you. We have some rules here and you're not going to be able to do this. But now if you have to be excused please tell me. If you walk out like that I don't know whether you're ill or what's the trouble with you." So, we got her straight and it wasn't long before a boy did the same thing and he stopped at the door and he said, "Uh oh!", and I said, "What is it and where are you going?"

He said, "(the girl's name) said if we went to the bathroom, we're suppose to tell you." I said to myself these kids are used to getting up and going wherever they want to, so I asked, and I found out they were. If they went out of the room, the teacher thought they were going to the bathroom, so that's where they went.

DR: Were they behind our students?

Mrs. Willis: Some were but then some like the boy I told you about were ahead of ours. He just had a marvelous mind. He worked.

If you gave them a few minutes in the afternoon, he took his book out and went to work. Not especially in science, but whatever he wanted to catch up on he took that work out to work on. This is off the subject, but my mother told me something, she said, "Especially with your homeroom, you must have something every day that's a little bit of fun." And Dorothy, if you don't think that'll tax your brain for about thirty some years... But we did all sorts of things. I don't know if you all remember. I remember one time I gave all of the pupils a piece of chewing gum and a little card that I cut out of different colored paper and I said, "Now, you may chew the gum, and this is not going to be very sanitary, but you take the gum out of your mouth and

you make something out of it." You would be surprised what those kids did! You would not believe what they did! Then one time we had popsicle sticks. They brought the popsicle sticks and they put them in a bag in my desk. I took them out and gave them to each child and they could use the crayons on them, they could use paper, ribbon, whatever; but they just had so many minutes to make something out of it. Again, you would not believe! One time I gave them a nickel and a dime. I said you can't keep it now but see what you can do with it. Well, they made bicycles, they made cars. They just used a crayon and went around it and had a marvelous time. It was hard though. I said, "Mama, what are we going to do tomorrow?!" She said, "Well, I tell you what you do. You cut out little pictures. I'll help you." Well, we'd get the paper or magazine and we'd cut out little pictures of little cups or something. She say, "Now, you give them the colored paper and tell them to put flowers in this cup." They were just as busy cutting, you know, with "Give me those scissors! You've had them long enough!" They had a wonderful time.

DR: What you can do with so little.

Mrs. Willis: Yes. We made things out of toothpicks. The best thing we ever did was this: was for a class however, we had a reading class and they took a shoe box and cut a little door out of it and put the top on it and inside they planned a scene from one of the stories we'd read. It was called a peep box. Some of them had little tiny furniture they'd made from paper and all sorts of things to illustrate the story. They had a marvelous time!

DR: Throughout the years, did you have cooperation from the parents and PTA?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. I can remember in all my teaching only three mothers that I had to go to the office with. On one occasion Al Hardison was our principal. Now, talking about being behind his teachers, he was behind you 110 percent. There was this one mother who was going to meet me in my room and I wrote her a note and asked her to meet me in the principal's office. Well, I think that went wrong right there. Anyway, I had done something to her daughter. I forgotten what it was, but whatever it was, I had done it.

DR: How old was the child?

Mrs. Willis: She was an eighth grader. She's about 13, 14, along in there. I can't remember what the thing was that I had done to her now. It was wrong though. I remember that. Anyway, she was so furious with me. She came by the room first and we went over. She wouldn't say a word to me. I kept talking to her and she wouldn't answer me a word! We went into the principal's office and we sat down. He knew of course that we were coming. He said to her, "Now, you tell me about it." So, she told her side of it and then he said, "Now, your side, Mrs. Willis." Well, there wasn't much I could say. I had done whatever I was accused of doing. So, I said, "Well, she was right.

The only thing is, I did not use a curse word. I did not tell her that she was crazy and I did not tell her that I did not want her in my room. Now, I remembered that much decidedly!" He talked to her a few minutes and said something like this to her mother, "How do you

get along with her at home?" She said, "Well, I can't do a thing in the world with her!" He said, "Well, it's my understanding that you're responsible for your children til they're twenty-one. Now, you'll have to straighten her out and Mrs. Willis is going to straighten herself out." I had already said "I was sorry" going over there, but she didn't listen, so I said it again. Oh, she said I had hurt her feelings. I said, "Yes I had hurt her feelings and I'm sorry." But I said, "If you does it again, I'm going to do the same thing." So, that's when her mother said that she couldn't do anything with her.

Anyway, when we came out, we came out laughing and everything was all right. That's about the last time. There was another time, a Mrs. Almond came to school, I slapped her son. I hit two children in school in all the years I taught.

DR: In thirty some odd years.

Mrs. Willis: Yeah. We were down stairs in that old basement where we used to have our science. This was the year before we went to the high school. They were breaking me in, you know, to let me teach in high school. He said something ugly, and I said something to him. I said, "You don't talk like that in my room. Now remember, you just do not talk like that in my classroom!", and he called me a bad name. I was walking towards him and before I knew what I had done, I slapped the very living life out of him and knocked him off of that lab stool. I couldn't have done it again for the world. I just slapped the pure fire out of him. His mama came and he told it his way, and of course I told it my way, but I wouldn't say that word.

I said, "I'm not saying that word but I can write it for you." When she saw it she said, "I don't blame you. That's all right. When I get home, he's going to get it again." I said, "Please don't do that. He's had enough. I knocked him on the floor!" She said, "Did you?" I told her, "I surely did." She said, "He said that you slapped him real hard but he didn't say you knocked him on the floor." I knocked that kid on the floor! I got him up from there though, ugly talking and all. He wasn't hurt.

DR: After then, what happened?

Mrs. Willis: Nothing. If I said jump, they said, "How high?"

DR: Parents were cooperative, then, in the PTA?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. Even til the end I'll have to say. There was one other and that was three mothers that I had to meet. No fathers. The father's liked the science. I said it was like this, the girl's would come in and say, "Science, shewwww!" The boys would come in and say, "Oh boy! Science!" Now, that's the difference. But I didn't blame them. I think my father was the reason I liked science. From a little girl he used to show me; that the bugs came first; then turned to the leaves and then he would tell me that some trees had flowers like a dogwood, then had flowers and then they'd have leaves; he'd tell me why; and he'd show me bugs. I guess that's where I got it. He really liked science.

DR: Father's can really make a difference.

Mrs. Willis: Yes they can. They really can. My mother was sitting there saying, "You do it and you do it right!" She never helped.

Math was not my thing. Why I majored in math I'll never know, but I did. But anyway, she would say, "Help her with her math", and he'd say, "I can't do a thing with her. She's just as dumb as she can be!" and I was dumb with math. I did not like it until I got in college.

I was not doing well at all because I could not see why anybody in the world wanted to know why one sixteenth of eighteen. Why would I want to know that?! And one twenty-fifth of four. My lord! I didn't like it! I went to my advisor. His name was Dr. Slay. He talked to me a few minutes and he said, "Now listen Miss Carter, there's only ten numbers in the whole round world and one of them is a zero. Can't you manage that?" I said, "Yes sir", and I got up and left. After that, I did my math. Think about it, ten numbers and one of them's a zero. That's all there is to it. You know, things like that do stick in one's mind. I said to myself going back to my room, "Well, you're dumb girl if you can't manage that many numbers!" Then I thought, "Well, wait a minute here. There's a lot of ways to put these numbers together!" But it did help me. And that's about all he said to me. He just told me what was what.

DR: Mrs. Willis, how many principals and school superintendents did you serve under and who were they?

Mrs. Willis: My first year at Dixon was John Hargett, then here was Mr. Shields, and then I'm not sure before Mr. MacDonald. I can't remember a principal. Mr. H. B. Smith was right there. I don't believe I had a principal those years. Then, there was Miss Ruth Berry, Bill Flowers, Al Hardison, and out at the high school was Dr. Spears, and

that's it.

DR: They stayed too.

Mrs. Willis: Yes.

DR: Who were some of the teachers you worked with?

Mrs. Willis: When I first came, I was with the high school teachers. There was Ola Andrews. Everybody remembers her. There was Miss Bookhart.

DR: Do you remember ()?

Mrs. Willis? No, I don't remember her.

DR: She was beautiful.

Mrs. Willis: She was probably right there then, but I don't know. I was so busy.

DR: She was in high school.

Mrs. Willis: Well, when I first came, I was in the high school, but I didn't get a chance to socialize because I had to stay and clean up the equipment. If the kids hadn't helped me, I don't know what I would have done. I would never have gotten through. When I quit, they had to have two men to take my place. Now, that tells you what it was like. Of course, one of them did the physical ed and the other one taught history.

DR: Mr. Alston was there.

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes.

DR: He used to tell that story to us about crossing the ocean.

Mrs. Willis: I remember that. (laughter) Somebody said one day, "Well, you were left over there, weren't you?"

DR: His wife was very nice.

Mrs. Willis: Louise, she was just as nice as could be.

DR: I went to her for geometry in the afternoons along with several others.

Mrs.,. Willis: He was a funny fellow, I declare. He was something else.

DR: They had beautiful children.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, they did.

DR: She taught too, didn't she?

Mrs. Willis: Oh yes. She taught math I believe, and Mrs. H. B. Smith taught. She was there in the high school the two years I was at the high school. But I just couldn't do that many classes a day. That was just too much.

Fred Latham: Barbara Younger was there.

Mrs. Willis: Barbara Younger, that's right.

DR: She had a younger sister too, didn't she?

Mrs. Willis: Barbara and Eudora. Eudora was her older sister, wasn't she? What was her younger sister 's name?

DR: Back then, for smart women, there was really no profession, was there?

Mrs. Willis: A nurse or a teacher was about it. I had to get to Johns Hopkins to find out you could do just anything in the world if you just had a science degree. I worked in the lab there for a while. I did anything in the world to make some money. I enjoyed that, and I made a lot of money. Of course, I was the second string.

They just called me in when they needed me, but they needed me most of the time. All my life if anybody asked me if I could do anything, I said, "Yes." They said, "Can you draw with sepia?"; I said, "Well, I could draw a little bit. I don't know about sepia." Sepia is that brown stuff you draw with a tiny brush. The thing about it is there were cameras with the microscope but they wouldn't do what they wanted them to do. They wanted to get the cell, get it moving, get it here, get it there, and the only thing that would do was handwork. That's what I was doing. It nearly ruined my eyes; but anyway, I did that.

Then, the sick children had to have a teacher, so I stopped working over in the Baltimore schools and came to the hospital and taught math.

I loved it, but that's the hardest work I ever did. Those poor kids were sick, they were cross, they didn't want to do, they didn't want to learn. There were cute little twins that didn't have a prayer to live more than two years. I felt like I was pushing those poor kids.

But I did it. I tried hard and enjoyed it. But you know, mine was sick enough and it just wasn't the pleasure that I usually got out of teaching. The reward was great because they had to have some help.

Most of them were very sick children. Sometimes people would have to help me to get them on the bus and we'd take them places, even in their wheelchairs and this sort of thing. It was rough.

DR: Mrs. Willis, in looking back, what do you feel was the greatest satisfaction to you?

Mrs. Willis: Seeing a child learn was the best thing. You talk and talk and all of a sudden you look and right there - that little

boy, he's got it and she's got it! His face lights up like a Christmas tree.

DR: Would you do it again?

Mrs. Willis: I would if I had the strength and the stamina. I would love to do that! Did you know I taught a black boy to read right after I stopped teaching? I taught him there in my own den. A fourteen year old boy who had never learned how to read, and I taught him to read.

DR: How did that come about?

Mrs. Willis: He just came to the door one day. I guess the black woman that works for me told him. I don't know. Buy anyway, he came and he said, "I heard you were a teacher, would you help me to learn to read?" I said come on in.

DR: That's beautiful.

Mrs. Willis: I taught him to read, and then he brought his little sister and I taught her to read. She wasn't a fast learner as he was. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed helping the children at Johns Hopkins that were sick, but that was hard work. The hardest thing I ever did! Those poor little things were so sick and they wanted to get back in their beds so bad. The ones in the wheelchairs were fine.

DR: It diverted them momentarily from their sickness.

Mrs. Willis: Well, when Johns Hopkins set that hospital up, he had more good gumption! There was a dairy that went with it.! There was a garden that went with it! There was a farm that went with it! There was the stables for the children when they got larger and well

enough to learn to ride the horses. He set it up so that they had to have church training, school training, social training, spiritual training, everything. Since he set it up like that, nobody dared change it. And I hope they never will. Carter's doctor, besides the one that did the work for her, was the head of the children's division, I mean she was everybody's doctor, Dr. Harriet Guild. I'll tell you an odd story about that. She was just a lovely lady. If she walked down the street, she would probably have on what I've got on my feet now, and she would have on a skirt that didn't fit, and a blouse that didn't fit. She was not a stylish lady at all, but she had a really good brain. About the time we were there, there were no silk hose.

If you got a pair, you just almost ate them up!

DR: During the war, you mean?

Mrs. Willis: Yes, 1941 and '42. One time we heard that down at Hecht's they had hose. We knew that everybody in town was going to go get hose, so we got up real early and were there when they opened the doors. But that didn't help a bit because all the people that were working there went and got ahead of us. Finally, they pushed around us and pushed and we pushed and they pushed, and we got up to the counter. You didn't even ask for your size. You just took what they'd give you. They gave me the ugliest pair that I've ever seen in my life! (laughter)

DR: But they were silk.

Mrs. Willis: I don't know what made me do it but I said to the little lady that was waiting on me, "Is there any chance that I could

get a pair of hose for my daughter's doctor, Dr. Harriet Guild. She's up at Johns Hopkins." She said, "Dr. Guild? Yes, I'll get her a pair!

" So, here I go out with two pair. People, said, "How'd you get those two pair?" I said, "One is for Dr. Guild, my child's doctor."

I told it all the way through the store. When I got back to the hospital, I gave a pair of hose to Dr. Guild and she said, "I cannot take them." I called her Harriet and she called me Margaret. We'd been there that long, you know. I said, "Yes, but I bought them for you and the little lady that waited on me knew you and she wants you to have them." So, she took them. This is the note she wrote that I thought was the cutest thing ever. She said, "Dear Margaret, greater love hath no woman than to lay down her nylons for her friend." Wasn't that cute?

DR: Oh yes! Mrs. Willis, is there anything else that you remember about your school years?

Mrs. Willis: I remember everything about it almost.

DR: You surely do.

Mrs. Willis: I remember so many things. I remember the first time I took the kids to the library. I said, "Now, we're going to the library." Some of them said, "We don't want to go to the library!"

I said, "Well, get your pencils and papers now and come on, we're going to go to the library if you haven't been." Well, some had and some hadn't, some wanted to go and some didn't. I said, "Come on now," four times in a day or five times, however many classes, and we went to the library. We did that about three times about a month.

It was getting warm weather. They said, "Can't we go down to Pinnix and get a drink? We're hot." You know, I just did whatever I wanted to do. I said, "Yes, we can do that."

DR: Was Mr. Smith principal?

Mrs. Willis: No. Some said, "I can't, I haven't got any money," and I said, "yes you have, I've got a nickel." So, I handed out the nickels, and they were going to bring them back which they did. We went back and whoever it was, I think it was Miss Ruth Berry, really got after me! I gave her the same story I gave Mr. Smith, "I thought children ought to have all sorts of experiences and we had been to the library and they were hot and I was hot, so I took them and got them a coke." She said, "You didn't pay for it?!" I said, "No. Most of them had a nickel in their pocket." So, that was all right. Of course you know what that started. All the other said, "Well, why can't you carry us?" I said, "I can carry you. If you want to go to the library, we'll go to the library." So, we went to the library.

"Now, can we go get a drink?" Well, then I was in trouble. I said, "Miss Ruth is going to get me", but I couldn't say no because I'd carried my class. I said, "All right, but you have to be in a hurry." Some of them wanted an ice cream cone and some of them wanted a drink.

DR: How many students?

Mrs. Willis: Oh, I don't know. We were ranking along then about 25, 30 maybe. Anyway, we got in there and we got out and we got back to school and Miss Berry didn't catch us that time. I remember one boy one time when we were walking around and looking at the plants

in the town and trying to identify them. One poor old thing we came to that was the bushes, I'd say, "What is this?", he'd say, "Sassyfrass." (laughter) Right in town now. I would tell him that this was privet hedge. We'd go on a little bit further and that's creeping cedar and this is that, and one boy said, "You know, you're not suppose to do this." I said, "I've been here long enough. I do whatever I please!" He looked at me like, "Are you crazy lady?!" But that's what we did, we did what we pleased. A lot of things I did were not really teaching, like the pet day, but we did them anyway and had a lot of fun.

DR: Mrs. Willis, do you remember any outstanding students that went on?

Mrs. Willis: I had two that were astronauts. One of them was Benjamin Haley.

DR: In New Bern?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. And Hugh White. Hugh White flunked out the first year I believe. They kept him about a year until they caught him, we'll say. The other one was there for a long time. Benjamin Haley lived with his grandfather, and had a terrible time. He would wear his shirt one day, and the next day it would be turned wrong side outwards. He had a hard, hard time.

DR: He lived here in New Bern?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. I can't remember what part of town or anything about that. I remember the Hugh White because he sent me this ring right there on my finger. It was when he was in Cambodia. It's a

handmade ring. I'll take it off so you can see it. If you turn it over, that is the Cambodian life eternal symbol. It's built on that. He watched them make that ring, and then he sent it to me.

DR: It means something. Do you remember other students?

Mrs. Willis: They come to see me and I look at them and I say, "I know I ought to know you, but I don't. I can't call your name." You know this is terrible. I'm really dating myself now. I can remember your names better than I can the last few years I taught because I had such huge classes again. We were trying to get settled at H. J. MacDonald. We lacked one teacher and that just caused all the classes to be a little bit too large. (By the way Dot, we have a friend in common, Eula Mae Walker.)

DR: Eula Mae?

Mrs. Willis: She's one of the best friends I've ever had in my life.

DR: And a good teacher!

Mrs. Willis: Yes! I mean she's a good teacher!

DR: A cracker jack!

Mrs. Willis: That she is. If you've ever had a friend in your life, it's Eula. I'm telling you, she's the most loyal friend anybody could ever have. I talked to her last night and told her what we were going to do today, and she said, "Oh my, I wish I didn't have to stay with mama, I'd come up there with you all!"

DR: Teachers were responsible earlier in your career for so many things like putting on assembly programs. You had to be a jack of

all trades, didn't you?

Mrs. Willis: And making little newspapers. We had a little newspaper. All sorts of things.

DR: So, you really had to be knowledgeable in almost every field.

Mrs. Willis: Well, I don't know about that because if you give a child an idea, he'll take it and run with it. All you got to do is just give the idea, and they got it and are gone. That's it. You don't have any trouble with children not having imaginations.

DR: That's why you all gave us so much.

Mrs. Willis: Oh me. You make me feel so humble.

DR: Did you have any difficult decisions to make?

Mrs. Willis: Yes. Yes. When it came time to promote. I just aggravated myself to no end. That was the hardest thing. It's terrible to tell a little kid that's been with you nine months that he cannot go to the high school. It's the hardest thing in this world to do. It was terrible. I've sent a many a one up that I didn't think could make it, and they made it. And I decided that I'd like to let them all go. You have to draw the line somewhere, and later on, I found out I had to. But for a long time, my fellow teachers fussed with me, "You don't ever keep anybody back." I would say, "You don't know how to teach. I teach them something."

DR: Did you have very much truancy?

Mrs. Willis: I remember the first one. This was right after I was married. This little boy hadn't been in school for two days. I said, "Guion, I'm going to call his mother. I believe he's sick."

I noticed my husband didn't join in and say, "Yes, I would." He just sort of sat there and grinned at me. I got my register and found the number and called the mother and she answered. I said, "How is (I'll say Johnny)?" I don't even remember. I can see the kids face but don't know his name. She said his name, "Why?" she said. I said, "Well, I thought maybe he was not well." I had asked the children and they just looked at me blankly. I'd say, "Have you seen him? Do you know if he's sick?" Nothing, nothing, no answers. So, she said, "Why?", and I said, "Well, he hadn't been to school in two days."

She said, "Oh no, Mrs. Willis!" I said, "He hasn't." She said, "Johnny! Johnny come here!". So, he came. She said, "Here's your teacher. You haven't been to school in two days." So, I don't know what she said, "That's all right Mrs. Willis, I'll talk to you later."

When he came back to school he said to the pupils, "I'll tell you right now, ya'll better not cut school. That one right there (talking about me) will call you mama and get you in trouble!" Guion said "I wanted to tell you so bad that he was cutting school and for you to keep your mouth shut." I didn't catch on. Usually he would say I think that's good or make some comment. He didn't make any comment.

He just looked at me and smiled. I thought well, he thinks this is all right; anyway, I'm going to do it whatever he thinks.

DR: Did you have any really severe problems with the children?

Mrs. Willis: I can't think of any. Except that one I slapped off the lab stool. That's one thing I always said, "You're not going to talk ugly to me. I'm not here for your abuse. I'm not your father."

I'm not your mother. I am simply your teacher. Now, if you want to learn something, we'll do it. If you don't, let me know right now!"

That was my speech. Then they all looked at me like "Who is she?"

DR: A sense of humor carried you through a lot.

Mrs. Willis: It surely did! The kids can just get under your skin so fast. They really can. I loved my children. I really did.

DR: That's the secret I think that you had was that you cared about them.

Mrs. Willis: Well, Guion told me. "If you are on their side, they'll know it before you do", I think he was right.

DR: Every child has something.

Mrs. Willis: Every child had something to give if you could just find it. Sometimes I had a bad time finding it. Sometimes they kept it from me a long time. Experiments! I don't want to do this one!

I want to do that one!" Well, there's a story about the brain. This is so funny!! In Health we were studying the nervous system. Well, I couldn't bring them a nervous system but I could go to the butcher shop and get a brain, so I did. (laughter)

DR: Was it pickled?

Mrs. Willis: No! No! We had our microscope that I told you about. We got some of the cells out, and of course, we mashed them up a little bit. But anyway, we had them. They could see the little blood vessels and all this stuff. I looked at one girl and she was getting white. I said, "You better sit down, honey." I knew what it was, it was making her sick. She couldn't stand it. Well, the

boys were just dying! The girls couldn't stand it. I said, "Anybody that feels sick, sit down." Well, about four or five girls sat down.

I didn't care. I didn't want to make them sick. I just wanted to teach them something. After the day was over, I had to do something with that brain. I said what in the world will I do with it! I asked Mr. Fillingame what in the world must I do it. He said, "Go wrap it in newspaper, and I'll put it in the trash for you." (laughter) I didn't have any newspaper, so I found some paper laying here and there and I wrapped the thing up the best I could and I took it down there and said, "What must I do with it now?" (laughter) He said, "Well, here. Put it in this trash can." So, I put it in there. There was a tall negro man that was working there then. I cannot remember his name. He looked in there and he found that brain and he took it home. (laughter) He knew what it was and he took it home after we had poked in it. He took it home and when he came back he told Mr. Fillingame, "I tell you right now my wife can really cook brain. She mixed it up with eggs and it was delicious." (laughter) I will never forget that if I live to be a thousand. (laughter) Well, any teacher can tell you all these stories. I'm not the only one that knows these stories. They can tell their own. I wish Mary Gray Moore could have come. She could have told you some of her stories. I have not heard from Lanta Winslow in a long time. The last time I heard, she came to visit Carrie Duffy Ward. They were great friends. They really loved each other. That's been two or three years. Of course you know Louise Anderson is dead.

DR: I didn't know.

Mrs. Willis: Louise died in 1963.

DR: She was a good teacher.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, she was. A pretty lady I thought.

DR: Grace Robbins.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, that's the one I was trying to think of, Grace.

DR: A lovely person.

Mrs. Willis: Wasn't she a doll? She was so nice.

DR: And Miss Laura Roberts.

Mrs. Willis: She was the Latin teacher as I remember.

Fred Latham: And Mr. Harold Whitehurst.

Mrs. Willis: Mr. Whitehurst substituted for me one time when I went out to the new high school. The tales that those children told me, you would just never believe! They tied strings to him. They did the worst things to him. I said, "Well, I wish you wouldn't tell me because it certainly doesn't improve your standing in my eyes, I tell you right now." But they did terrible things to that fellow.

DR: He was just not a person for the classroom.

Mrs. Willis: No. He was highly intelligent. He was so nice to talk to and he knew so many things.

DR: Just a gentleman.

Mrs. Willis: Yes, just a gentleman. But I declare, they treated that poor man so bad. (Talking to Fred Latham) Did you do it? You bad boy you! (laughter)

DR: Mrs. Willis, I can't tell you how much we appreciate you giving us this interview and on behalf of Memories of New Bern, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW