

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

ROBERTHA KA FER COLEMAN

INTERVIEW 423

This is Marea Kafer Foster representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 400. I am interviewing Robertha Kafer Coleman, interview number 423. This interview is being conducted on Monday the 2nd of November, 1992. We are in Mrs. Coleman's den on 4601 Tenella Road in New Bern. Now, if you'll give me your full name and your birth date and your place of birth and parent's names. Your family history in other words.

Mrs. Coleman: I was Robertha Taggart Kafer. I was born August 6, 1917 in Edward, North Carolina. My father's name was Oswald O. Kafer, MD. My mother's name was Lillian Taggart Kafer.

Marea Foster: Aunt Lillian was from Baltimore?

Mrs. Coleman: Granite, which is a suburb of Baltimore.

MF: What about brothers and sisters?

Mrs. Coleman: I had one brother, Oscar A. Kafer, II, and a brother who died before I was born, whose name was Robert Taggart Kafer. He died about 1910.

MF: You grew up in Edward?

Mrs. Coleman: I did. I grew up in Edward. I went to school in the first grade to the Edward's school, which had two rooms and eleven grades. My room had up to the seventh grade. There were very few people as you can imagine, students. But they way they operated that was, the teacher kept the front desk empty and the class that was having the class at that time would come and sit in the front desk and everybody else was suppose to do their thing.

MF: Well, isn't that interesting. And one teacher taught all.

Mrs. Coleman: One teacher taught from one through seven, and then, one from seven through eleven.

MF: How interesting. Was that heated by a coal stove?

Mrs. Coleman: Well, no. It was wood.

MF: And outdoor...

Mrs. Coleman: Outdoor facilities. I was, I think, the only child in the first grade who lived in Edward proper. The rest of them lived in surrounding country. A lot of them walked to school because there was no school bus. We're talking several miles. The teacher talked them into bringing whatever they had for lunch and that she would keep it warm on the stove. There was one boy in the first grade who was like fourteen and big as a house. (laughter) He was the wood chopper and the fire tender. They brought their lunches and she kept them warm on the wood stove.

MF: You were able to go home for lunch.

Mrs. Coleman: I went home for lunch.

MF: Did you have an hour for lunch?

Mrs. Coleman: I'm not sure.

MF: Maybe a half hour.

Mrs. Coleman: I imagine it was more than that because school times were different. It seems to me it was four o'clock before the whole school got out. I'm unclear about that.

MF: Did you have eight or nine months of school? Do you remember?

Mrs. Coleman: I think it was less than that. It seems to me that it was somewhere between six and seven.

MF: How long did you go to school in Edward?

Mrs. Coleman: One year. And then I went to Aurora, which was six miles, seven miles maybe. My mother drove me every morning and picked me up every afternoon. There was a school bus later that went to Aurora but my father was not a school bus kind of person, so she drove and took a couple of people that went to the Aurora school. Actually, we really had some sort of hairy experiences sometime. (laughter) My mother learned to drive so she could take us. We had to go across the bridge that was called the Mill Pond. It was in Edward and actually at one time there had been a mill there. There were flood waters and it just washed the car right off of the road right down into the swamp and nobody could swim. (laughter) But we managed to get out without any problems.

MF: I certainly am glad.

Mrs. Coleman: I am too.

MF: I know you came up to New Bern to school.

Mrs. Coleman: I was suppose to be in the seventh grade, but my parents thought I should go in the sixth because I had skipped a grade between two and three and the curriculum was a little different. So, I went back to sixth. I was in the Academy.

MF: And you stayed with Aunt Bertha?

Mrs. Coleman: I stayed with Aunt Bertha.

MF: And her full name.

Mrs. Coleman: Bertha Mathilde Kafer Duffy.

MF: She was your father's only sister.

Mrs. Coleman: Only sister.

MF: And my grandfather's only sister.

Mrs. Coleman: That's right. She had a house full at all times. People would come to spend the night and stay for six months. (laughter) So I never knew where my bed was going to be.

MF: When you were living with Aunt Bertha to attend the school in New Bern, who was living in the house as permanent residents?

Mrs. Coleman: Aunt Bertha and her husband Uncle Duff, who was Dr. Leinster Duffy and Aunt Bertha's mother, my grandmother Katherine Pfeifer Kafer. I was there during the week. Both of her sons were away.

MF: Away at school.

Mrs. Coleman: Yes. However, everybody, your father and my brother and your Aunt Gertie and Aunt Sallie, all of them came from school to her house for lunch every day.

MF: Wasn't that nice!

Mrs. Coleman: She made hot biscuits and the whole nine yards.

MF: She made beaten biscuits.

Mrs. Coleman: Yes, but that was another thing. Not for this.

MF: I think they still have that beaten biscuit machine on the back porch.

Mrs. Coleman: Do they?

MF: I think so.

Mrs. Coleman: I've seen that thing many a times.

MF: Tell me, who were your teachers in New Bern?

Mrs. Coleman: I remember some names at random. I'm not sure.

MF: That's okay, just mention them.

Mrs. Coleman: There was Lanta Winslow and Mary Grey Moore. Now, Mary Grey Moore was from here.

MF: She taught me.

Mrs. Coleman: And Miss Blanche Rowe and Louise Anderson.

MF: She also taught me.

Mrs. Coleman: I expect. Miss Rowe and Miss Anderson and I guess Miss Winslow I guess all lived at the Teacherage. You remember?

MF: I certainly do.

Mrs. Coleman: On Pollock Street. And Myrtle Minton, who later became Mrs. Charles Turner.

MF: She was my eighth grade teacher.

Mrs. Coleman: All of these people were career teachers!

MF: They certainly were.

Mrs. Coleman: And Miss Ola Andrews. She lived with Miss Leila Styron.

MF: Miss Ola taught...

Mrs. Coleman: Math.

MF: She did. And she taught in Chapel Hill and she taught mother's two younger brothers, Jim and Andy.

Mrs. Coleman: Was that before she came to New Bern?

MF: Before she came to New Bern.

Mrs. Coleman: I remember what each of these people looked like very well. One of my favorites of them was Lanta Winslow because she

always read us such wonderful things. She'd keep a book going and if there was just a few minutes, "Read the next chapter!" There are certain things that stick out in your mind.

MF: Robertha, who were your playmates in New Bern? Friends I should say.

Mrs. Coleman: Elizabeth Bailey, who was Elizabeth Ammons at that time and lived down just below me. I would walk down and pick her up and we'd go to the young churchmen. Clara Seifert and Dolly Lasitter. There were other people in that group but I just can't seem to place them right now.

MF: It will all come to you. Eleanor Stevenson lived right next to you.

Mrs. Coleman: Yeah. But now, Helen and Sheila were a little younger. Sheila is one of my best friends now, so the age thing didn't enter into it. We'd play together.

MF: What was Sheila's maiden name?

Mrs. Coleman: Nelson.

MF: Where did she live?

Mrs. Coleman: She lived right around the corner on George Street just behind the Stevenson's.

MF: When you were at New Bern High School, there was just eleven grades.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh.

MF: When you graduated, you went off to college. Where did you go?

Mrs. Coleman: I went to Randolph Macon in Lynchburg, Virginia. That's Randolph Macon Woman's College. I'll tell you another one of my teachers that I was really fond of, and that was Laura Rhodes.

MF: Oh yes. She was lovely. I also had her.

Mrs. Coleman: I took Latin from her. She was a great teacher.

MF: She was.

Mrs. Coleman: But when I got to Randolph Macon, I had always thought I'd been pretty smart in New Bern High School because I always got exempt from exams and this and that and the other, but when I got up there with all those people who'd had twelve grades and I was a year younger and a year less smart, I wasn't as smart as I thought I was. I had to work pretty hard.

MF: It was very hard.

Mrs. Coleman: It was very difficult!

MF: I think those that went to private schools probably had a more in-depth education than we received at New Bern High School.

Mrs. Coleman: I'm sure of that. Because it really was lacking in a great many ways.

MF: You graduated from Randolph Macon in what year?

Mrs. Coleman: In 1938.

MF: Then what did you do?

Mrs. Coleman: Following my graduation, I went to Europe for two months. These were the days when you went by ship and took a steamer trunk and nobody had any nylons or any of those things. I suppose you'd call it the "grand tour" because we went to every conceivable



country. We stayed two months. When I got home, that was the last of August or the first of September of 1938, which really was a very vital time. I had met a young German officer there who had taken me around a lot. Just a boy. I remember he wrote me a letter after I got back. When I opened the letter and took it out, it looked like moths had been in it. Every other word was censored. Because you see, this was just when the Sudetenland incidence was taking place. I don't know whether he went there or what.

MF: You don't know what happened to him.

Mrs. Coleman: No. But as I say, this was a pretty crucial time.

MF: Yes, it was.

Mrs. Coleman: I had graduated but I didn't have any practical knowledge because I had not taken teacher's training or anything of the sort. So then I went to Columbia University for one year. Actually, I planned to stay two and get my Masters, but I got married instead. So, I only stayed one. (laughter) And that, incidentally, was 52 years ago today.

MF: Well, how about that!

Mrs. Coleman: Just a little later than this. That was 1940. In the meantime, I had to gone to work at American Viscose Corporation, which were makers of rayon yarn. They had offices in the Empire State building. My husband worked for Benton & Bowles, advertising agency. We lived on 11th Street. We had a floor through. Incidentally, that house is still there. It was an old house then but it hadn't been fixed with graffiti and so forth. Of course, the floor was a complete

floor through, a large living room and a dining area and a small kitchen and a big bathroom and big bedroom. The rent was fifty dollars.

MF: Fifty dollars. That's hard to believe, isn't it, in New York?

Mrs. Coleman: That's what it was. I have to say it was a walk-up, but all of them were walk-ups then. When I was working at American Viscose that was located in the Empire State building, just across the street on Fifth Avenue was a little tea room that we used to go to for lunch a lot. We'd have a nice salad plate. Maybe shrimp salad with a roll and biscuit and coffee and it was thirty-five cents and you left five cents tip. (laughter)

MF: Well, how much was your salary a month?

Mrs. Coleman: At that time, I made twenty-five dollars a week.

MF: So, you were earning big money.

Mrs. Coleman: I was earning big money. Actually, I had friends who had graduated with me who were living in New York at the time and I was the envy of all of them because they were making like fifteen. Big bucks! Of course, the subway was five cents.

MF: You had to take a subway to work?

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh.

MF: Which would have been very safe in those days.

Mrs. Coleman: My dear!, even after the war when I lived in New York until 1951; I had a little dog, and I'd go to the theater, come home on the subway, walk home, get the dog and walk him. We're talking like eleven thirty at night.

MF: Perfectly safe.

Mrs. Coleman: Never thought a thing about it. I'm scared to ride the subway in broad daylight now.

MF: I think most everyone is. Would you like to tell us your husband's name?

Mrs. Coleman: Yes. His name was Meigs Welch Bartmess. Actually, he had been born in Pittsburgh, his family lived in Springfield, Mass. His father was an electrical engineer with Westinghouse. A certain web of Westinghouse had a big plant and that's where they would be sometime. Actually, they had moved from Springfield by the time we got married. I think they moved to Lima, Ohio. It was. We had friends who lived there who were friends of Meigs' parents. Actually, they hadn't any children. Meigs and his brother had been in and out of their house all their lives. We used to spend a lot of weekends with them because Meigs belonged to the Springfield ski club, so we'd go up to ski and have a nice bunk and lovely dinner and social.

MF: How nice.

Mrs. Coleman: Surprisingly enough and happily enough, after the war came along and Meigs got his commission, he went to various places and then we wound up in California. At the same time, this couple was transferred to California. So, we just resumed our place in California.

MF: Wasn't that nice.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh.

MF: And he was killed in World War II.

Mrs. Coleman: At Okinawa in April of '45.

MF: And you stayed in New York?

Mrs. Coleman: Well, let's see what happened after that. It took me a long time to get back to the east coast because, you see, we're talking '45. I couldn't get any passage. I finally got an upper, which really the Navy Relief had to get for me. Travel was impossible for civilians. It was some trip. They served two meals a day because it took until lunch time for them to get breakfast over. The lines were way back. Then, they had dinner. Well, I had my little dog on the baggage car. When we would make relatively good stops, I'd go back to the baggage car and take him out and walk him. This one time; I'm trying to remember where it was, it was a long way from El Paso I'll tell you that, but, all of a sudden I realized the train was pulling out. So, I picked up the little dog. It was a Boston. I ran right next to the train and threw him on the platform and managed to get the step myself. I had one pair of nylons to my name and that just tore them all to pieces. But that was not the bad part. The bad part was that I could not get to the baggage car because the dining area was between me and the baggage car. So, we stayed on the platform until El Paso. This is steam locomotive.

MF: Oh my!

Mrs. Coleman: And so when I did get back, I stayed with my parents just a short time. Then I did go back to New York and go to work there.

MF: But you came home in '48?

Mrs. Coleman: No, in '51. I came home in '51 and actually gave

up my job before I left because I knew my father was really not doing at all well. As a matter of fact, he died the January after that.

MF: I want you at this point, if you will, to tell us all about Kafer Memorial Hospital.

Mrs. Coleman: All right. Let's see, that was 1949, October, that it opened. I remember coming home to be here for the opening.

I really can't give you a time frame about the length of time it had taken to convert it. I knew my father had bought the building.

MF: Now, this is the Jones house on Broad Street.

Mrs. Coleman: This is the Jones house on Broad Street. My father, not my brother, my father bought the building when it was up for sale after the last Jones heir no longer wanted it. I don't know how long this was before they started building.

MF: Before you go any further, had it always been Uncle Buster's, your father, and Uncle Oscar's, your brother, dream to have this?

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. Now, my father did not do any surgery except emergency surgery that he'd have to do in the country sometime. My brother really was very gifted.

MF: Yes he was.

Mrs. Coleman: I think it was just one of those dreams of having your own place. It really was more feasible at that time than it would be now.

MF: Yes. The times were right for it. Robertha, as you would go into the hospital, could you describe it? The rooms on the right.

Mrs. Coleman: All right. Of course you remember it had a high

porch with really very imposing steps that went up to the front with big columns around the porch. As you entered the front door, there was a switchboard right there. It was later moved, but at that time, it was right at the front door to the right. On the front left was the lady's ward and behind that was the men's ward. On the right, I think, was pediatric ward as you enter. I think there was a private room between that and the office and then there was the office. Just behind the office, you'd be making a right turn, was a side door. It came actually from the porch. Then at the very end, there was the elevator. Then at the end of the hall as you come in, was a private room. My mother and father were both in it at one time. I think there were two private rooms on the right side before you got to the back.

MF: I think so. I remember Uncle Buster being in one and my mother's younger brother being in one. They were two different rooms but on the right hand side.

Mrs. Coleman: The right hand side, yeah. They were behind that door that went to the porch.

MF: There was also an extension.

Mrs. Coleman: Yes. I wish I could tell you when that was built but I can't.

MF: What was upstairs like?

Mrs. Coleman: Before we get to that, my daughter was born in Kafer Hospital. She was born in 1957 and the extension was not new then. So, it had been built for a while.

MF: The extension, I think Uncle Oscar put on before he opened

the hospital. Because my senior year in high school, daddy was in a very bad fire truck accident.

Mrs. Coleman: Is that the one that Booley Broadstreet was in?

MF: Yes. Booley was driving the truck. Daddy was in a private room in the extension part. Booley was upstairs in that little room with the balcony to the very front of the house. So, it must have been before Uncle Oscar opened.

Mrs. Coleman: I'm unsure about that, but it makes sense that it would have been.

MF: This was before I graduated in June of 1951. It was the last part of my senior year.

Mrs. Coleman: And it was open then?

MF: Umhuh.

Mrs. Coleman: That makes sense. It would have been done.

MF: Now, down in the basement, they had a laboratory.

Mrs. Coleman: On the left hand side was the kitchen and where the nurses and lab personnel came and ate. I can see the kitchen real well and Minnie. Do you remember Minnie?

MF: I remember Minnie.

Mrs. Coleman: Minnie was a wonderful cook. She came here and helped me cook when I was expecting one of my children. I discovered that Minnie, despite the fact that she was a wonderful cook, couldn't read.

MF: Oh really?

Mrs. Coleman: So, all of her recipes she carried in her head.

MF: How interesting. She was an excellent cook!

Mrs. Coleman: There were various people who were dieticians. The only one I remember is Elizabeth Cook but there were others. Oh, and Lela's sister, Miss Elliott.

MF: Was it Lucy Elliott Green?

Mrs. Coleman: No.

MF: Miss Rosalie? Frances Henderson's mother.

Mrs. Coleman: Right. But anyway, that's who. Elliott was the married name. I can see her right now.

MF: She was Rosalie Elliott, but I cannot think of her married name. Frances Henderson's mother we're talking about Fred.

Mrs. Coleman: But anyway, she was for a while. The lab was down there. I can't tell you the arrangement. I really just don't remember it. Of course, on the second floor was an operating room which was in the back of the building.

MF: That was the extension part I think.

Mrs. Coleman: I'm unsure whether it was or not. I know you could get out from it because there was probably a fire escape or something.

I remember my brother had an emergency appendectomy when I was with them one evening and he said, "You've never seen me operate. Come watch me." "Well, sure. I'd be delighted." I saw that scalpel going and I was sick as a dog. I had to get out. There was a door that went right out. So, it was in the back somewhere. In the very back of the building.

MF: Daddy used to go watch him operate.



Mrs. Coleman: I just couldn't. I thought I could. If I could have stayed passed that, I'd been all right.

MF: Maternity ward was also up there.

Mrs. Coleman: Right. I remember when Katherine was born I had a room that under, it would have been the left hand side from the front. It was next to the Barker apartments. The delivery room was across from that. I'm unsure about the rooms up there.

MF: To the best of your knowledge, which doctors were on the staff of Kafer Memorial Hospital?

Mrs. Coleman: I'm unsure about that too. I do remember that when my mother broke her hip, the two doctors who mended it were, pinned it, were the Patterson brothers; Simmons and Joe Pat.

MF: This is after Uncle Oscar died.

Mrs. Coleman: This is after his death, yes.

MF: Before he died, were all the doctors in New Bern invited to be on the staff at Kafer?

Mrs. Coleman: I don't know. I don't want to say. I remember Ernest Richardson who apparently did a lot of the OB work. Then there was another man, I had forgotten about him, Dr. Willis was his name.

MF: Dr. William Willis.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. I remember him.

MF: I think Dr. Franklin Grady.

Mrs. Coleman: Frank Grady.

MF: And Dr. William Hollister.

Mrs. Coleman: And Dr. Hollister. Those I remember. Actually,

I would think that this would be a relatively good...

MF: This pamphlet?

Mrs. Coleman: Uh huh.

MF: It's later.

Mrs. Coleman: No, it wouldn't either.

MF: I'm talking about in the very beginning.

Mrs. Coleman: I know what you're talking about, and that's about what I can tell you. Maybe Dr. Wadsworth. Probably.

MF: Yes, probably Dr. Wadsworth. Who was chief of nursing?

Mrs. Coleman: Oh, I guess Dorothy Ritchy. I just saw Dorothy today. Not to speak to her. But she's like the rest of us, times telling.

MF: Times telling, you're right. Do you remember any of the nurses that were there before Uncle Oscar died?

Mrs. Coleman: I don't remember the staff nurses. I remember some of the ones who did duty. One of them was of course Lela and sometimes your mom.

MF: Yeah.

Mrs. Coleman: Annie.

MF: Annie Humphrey.

Mrs. Coleman: And Mrs. McCosley.

MF: Alberta.

Mrs. Coleman: Later, because I remember somebody who was on when Katherine was born, and that was Leatha Watts.

MF: Yes, Leatha Watts.

Mrs. Coleman: Now whether she was a staff, I think she was.

MF: What about the business office?

Mrs. Coleman: The business manager I guess would be the word was Eliza Turner.

MF: Eliza Ellis Turner. Right. She lived on East Front Street.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. Mrs. Holmes Turner. She kept care of everything just like it belonged to her.

MF: She was the nicest person.

Mrs. Coleman: She certainly was. Different. Very different. But just as sweet and nice as she could be.

MF: And you were the switchboard operator?

Mrs. Coleman: And I was the switchboard operator sometimes.

MF: Yes, you were.

Mrs. Coleman: A lot of times on Sunday afternoons.

MF: When you were going on vacation, I would do it.

Mrs. Coleman: Yeah.

MF: (laughter) It was a family job.

Mrs. Coleman: After that, I think it had moved into the office, the switchboard, as I remember.

MF: It was in the business office when I did it.

Mrs. Coleman: Yeah. But originally, it had been on the right hand of the front door. I can see the lady now, but I can't tell you her name.

MF: So, the hospital opened when?

Mrs. Coleman: 1949. Then it was operated with my brother heading

it until his death in 1951.

MF: He died after Christmas?

Mrs. Coleman: It was between Christmas and New Year.

MF: Then after that, Robertha, who took over?

Mrs. Coleman: Helen, his wife, took over the management. Of course, that's when you see these different people who were chief of staff and so forth.

MF: This is when the Drs. Patterson returned to New Bern.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. Then, it had been her wish to try to get the Baptist Hospital to take it over. When I say the Baptist, it wouldn't have been Wake Forest, but it would have been the Baptist Hospital.

MF: Bowman-Gray.

Mrs. Coleman: Bowman-Gray, that's it.

MF: They did for a while, didn't they?

Mrs. Coleman: I don't believe they ever did.

MF: Bowman-Gray did not, but was it the Southern Baptist Association? A Baptist group did buy it, but I don't know when. Do you remember when Aunt Helen sold the hospital?

Mrs. Coleman: No. When did the Craven County Hospital open?

MF: I believe it was 1962. Is that right Fred, 1962, that Craven County Hospital opened?

Fred: Somewhere along there.

Mrs. Coleman: Well, that's too vague. I just don't know.

MF: Well, I do know that Aunt Helen did sell it to the Baptist

and I think it was the Southern Baptist Association, but I'm not sure.

Mrs. Coleman: Probably. I know there was a great push to do that.

MF: Now, I would like to ask you to please tell me all about your brother, Oscar Adolph Kafer, II.

Mrs. Coleman: He was born in Newport, not in Beaufort County where I was. Our father was practicing in Newport when he was born.

MF: When was he born?

Mrs. Coleman: He was born on March 19, 1908. Of course after my father left Newport, he went to Havelock. This is where my brother Robert was born, which was 1910. I don't know exactly when they went to Edward, but it was certainly before 1917 and probably along '15 or '16 because the house we all grew up in was being built when I was born. We were living in Edward in another place, but the house was being built and it probably took a while to do it. Of course, there was ten years difference in my age but he really did always spend a lot of time with me. Of course, I was one of his biggest fans.

MF: We all were. (laughter)

Mrs. Coleman: He came over here and stayed with Aunt Bertha too and went to New Bern High School. Then somewhere near the end, he was at Christ School in Arden for two years. I know he was there one year and it could easily have been two.

MF: Was this in Virginia?

Mrs. Coleman: No.

MF: North Carolina?

Mrs. Coleman: Arden, North Carolina.

MF: Oh yes. I know exactly where it is. The western part of the state near Ashville.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. As I say, I think he was there two years, but I know he was there one year. When he graduated from there, he went to Wake Forest undergraduate school. Actually, he took some pre-med there too. Then after that, he went to the University of Maryland. The part that he went to was in College Park. He graduated from there, I think it was about 1934. I'm almost sure it was, because I think he graduated from college and I graduated from high school the same year.

MF: He must have been back in New Bern in 1935. Because this picture I have of the staff of Good Shepherd Hospital with Uncle Oscar, Dr. Ashford, Dr. Wadsworth and Dr. Duffy and then the black doctors; Dr. Martin, Dr. Fisher, and Dr. Hunter, Dr. Martin died, according to his niece, in 1935. I was trying to get a date.

Mrs. Coleman: I'm trying to get some things straight in my mind though. The Kafer twins were born in 1936.

MF: Okay. Well, this has to be later. Then maybe Miss Carter has the date wrong. You're right about that.

Mrs. Coleman: They were born in 1936 in Winston-Salem.

MF: Is this where Uncle Oscar did his residency?

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. City Memorial Hospital in Winston-Salem.

MF: But he graduated from where?

Mrs. Coleman: The University of Maryland.

MF: University of Maryland Medical School?

Mrs. Coleman: Yeah.

MF: Is that affiliated with Johns Hopkins?

Mrs. Coleman: Johns Hopkins, no.

MF: No affiliation.

Mrs. Coleman: His residency I think had to have been at least two years. But I know the twins were born there. He came the following summer because they were born in September. I don't know why I had '36 in my mind, but I did. This was prior to his establishing his practice. When he finished his residency, he came and took my father's practice for six weeks so that my mother and father could go to California and tour. So, Helen and the babies lived in our house in Edward.

MF: I didn't know that.

Mrs. Coleman: It was following their return from California, so it must have been the fall of '37 is when he established his practice.

MF: Okay. So, the first date I had on this particular picture of 1938 was correct. Robertha, when did Uncle Oscar and Aunt Helen move into the house on Pollock Street?

Mrs. Coleman: Well, this is what makes me think it had to be 1937. Because I think it was being prepared while they were in Edward.

MF: And he had his office...

Mrs. Coleman: On the side.

MF: On the side of the house.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. I can't remember whether that was built when they moved in or whether it had always been part of the structure of the house. I'm inclined to think it was built when they moved in.

As I remember the house when I was a child and when the Lawrences lived there, it was a framed weatherboard house. Somehow or other I don't feel like that place was on the side, which was the office.

MF: Robertha, I wanted to ask if you remember what Uncle Oscar's office was like.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh, up to a point. When you walked in the front door, there was a waiting room and that's where the office person sat too. Sometimes it was Katie Cook. Sometimes it was Molly Pugh.

MF: Mother worked for him the last few years of his life.

Mrs. Coleman: Right. But before that, was Helen's sister.

MF: Margaret Cannon.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. Of course in that day and time, there were separate waiting rooms for black and white. The visiting room was behind that. Then, there was an x-ray room behind that. Other than that, I really don't remember the set-up that much.

MF: That's about how I remember it, with the nurse at the desk in the white waiting room and the door.

Mrs. Coleman: You could go to the house I think from one of those rooms and I think it was that one.

MF: And then Uncle Oscar's office was behind the colored waiting room and then his examining room.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. And then the x-ray.



MF: Do you happen to remember if he treated any black patients at Kafer Memorial? Were they all treated at Good Shepherd at that time?

Mrs. Coleman: I think they were. I don't ever recall a black patient. I seriously doubt there would have been because of the fact that segregation was still in effect.

MF: What was Uncle Oscar's specialty? Were most doctors in those days GP and did a little of everything?

Mrs. Coleman: Well, I guess he could have been that. But his specialty was surgery and he was a general surgeon. In this day and time, of course, people specialize. He really didn't have a specialty, but he was really quite good at whatever he tried.

MF: Yes, he was. I know he delivered a lot of babies.

Mrs. Coleman: He did that, and then he stopped. I don't know however old Ken Chance is. Irene Chance, his mother, told me that he had delivered her other two children. But when she was expecting Ken, right then was when he had stopped. So however old he is. The interesting thing to me is that my father delivered Ken's father.

MF: Well, isn't that interesting!

Mrs. Coleman: You see, I told you he practiced in Havelock. And of course, they were all from down that way.

MF: And Uncle Buster was a general practitioner.

Mrs. Coleman: He was. He was very general. (laughter) He had to pull teeth and examine eyes.

MF: Oh, he had to do that also?

Mrs. Coleman: Yeah. And he was a pharmacist. Because in the country, there was no drug store.

MF: I hadn't thought about that.

Mrs. Coleman: So, he treated them and he gave them their medicine. They'd say, "I'll pay you when my crop comes in Doc." (laughter) I remember great gallon bottles of various medicines and great big things of pills.

MF: So, Uncle Buster, as you said, was his own pharmacist?

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh.

MF: He doled it all out.

Mrs. Coleman: There was a drug store in Aurora. I think they catered more to the soda fountain than the pharmacy business. But you have to remember that most of these people at this time, hadn't any transportation. Most of them didn't have the cars until after World War II or beginning about then, late thirties. You can't come for miles in a horse and wagon and then go another ten or twelve to get a prescription filled.

MF: Let me ask you since you mentioned horse and wagon, when Uncle Buster was practicing, did he always have a car or did he start out with a horse and buggy?

Mrs. Coleman: He had a car ever since I can remember, but he had a horse. It was apparently before I was born because my mother said that Robert was always going out and pulling that horse's tail and say, "Come on Hypodermic!", that was the horse's name, "It's time to go!" (laughter) So, there was a horse.

MF: What a name for a horse, Hypodermic! (laughter) That's really interesting. Robertha, you stayed in New Bern after Uncle Oscar died.

Mrs. Coleman: Yes.

MF: What was New Bern like in 1951?

Mrs. Coleman: Well certainly a lot fewer people than now. Of course, the downtown as we used to remember. Downtown was Belk's and Montgomery Ward, and of course my favorite place, McLellan's. Then Kress's, another favorite place. Hill's was downtown. Downtown was as we have always known downtown. It really was a place that you enjoyed going. All the ladies would go downtown to buy their thread and stuff in the afternoons or mornings with their hats on. The Governor Tryon Hotel was there then and I guess the Queen Anne. The Queen Anne was still there. They had some really lovely meals there. I can't say too much about the fact that I think it was very different from any other downtown, except it was a typical small town downtown. The faces you saw, you knew or you could almost place. You either knew them or you'd seen them.

MF: You knew someone in the family.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh.

MF: Very different than today.

Mrs. Coleman: Very different! Of course downtown now, like all of them, is a ghost town. This, I find very heartbreaking. I need to interject something. When we were speaking of my brother's education, I forgot to say that when he graduated from Christ School, prep school, in Arden, the next year, he went to VPI before he went

to Wake Forest. Okay. Now, we're downtown. At that time, also, all the car dealerships were downtown. W. C. Hagood, which was the Ford dealership, was downtown. Mr. Hagood was the uncle of my husband Tom Coleman. Mr. Hagood and Tom's mother were sister and brother. Mr. Hagood had brought Tom here in about 1928 or '29 and he had worked with him. I believe it was 1950, it may have been 1951 when Tom bought Mr. Hagood out. Then it became Coleman Motors. I guess the Chrysler dealership was just across the street.

MF: Yes it was across the street.

Mrs. Coleman: Where was Dan Roberts?

MF: On Pollock Street.

Mrs. Coleman: On Pollock Street. Anyway, they were all downtown. Let's see, Brooks was nine years old and he was born in 1961, so, it would have been close to '69 or '70 when Coleman Motors moved out on the highway.

MF: Now, Robertha, why were all the car dealers and a lot of businesses moving out?

Mrs. Coleman: I remember it was 1979 that the Twin Rivers Mall opened. Their target stores were Penney's, which also had been downtown, and Belk's. They were their anchor stores. Of course when those two major businesses left downtown, it just about killed downtown and finally did. So with everything moving out, the car dealerships started moving out. Tom and I got married in 1956 and moved here where we presently are. The house had been building for a couple of years.

It was probably early '57 before we got in here. In August of '57,

our daughter Katherine was born and then four years later, Thomas Brooks Coleman, III was born. Of course, this was really kind of laughable in a way because we really had not planned a family and I was forty when Katherine was born and forty-four when Brooks was born. However, it certainly has been very rewarding.

MF: Oh yes.

Mrs. Coleman: Now I have my adorable granddaughter!

MF: You certainly do and she's precious. I wanted to ask you why business started moving out. What was the reason that business left downtown New Bern?

Mrs. Coleman: Because of the opening of the mall.

MF: The opening of the mall. That is what did it.

Mrs. Coleman: That's what did it. When those two big anchor stores left, then that did it. You can see there's just not that much traffic downtown. O Marks has tried it and tried it and they can't.

MF: It's very hard.

Mrs. Coleman: Of course they say that progress always moves to the west, and apparently that's true.

MF: That's the only way we can go.

Mrs. Coleman: That's the only we can go. And of course the people down on Highway 70 East have moved west in their own way of doing it.

MF: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about growing up? I know there's a lot that we have not covered, but we mainly wanted to get the hospital.

Mrs. Coleman: I suppose when people get older, they get

garrulous because I can think of so many things that are not of that much interest. Because everybody has little incidences that they remember. Well, they're interesting to them but not the general public.

MF: I want to ask you one thing. What was it like being the daughter of a doctor?

Mrs. Coleman: I have to tell you, it was sort of a privilege. Most people would not think that way about it now. But let's go back to over fifty years ago, we're talking more than that, sixty years ago, in Edward which was really dead country. The doctor was the kingpin. I have to tell you, my father handled it beautifully. Because he was certainly not an arrogant man in any way. All the people came to him as a legal advisor or a business advisor. He was more than the doctor. So, being the only daughter was sort of like being the princess of a realm. That's sounds arrogant, doesn't' it? I don't mean it that way, but that's kind of the way it was. It was a special privilege.

MF: Did Uncle Buster make house calls at night?

Mrs. Coleman: Oh yeah!!

MF: You had a telephone?

Mrs. Coleman: We had a telephone. One of the few in the area. But most of the people when I was a little child that he called on didn't have a telephone to call him. So, they would hitch up their mules and come get him and he'd back out the Model T and go. This always interested me because I thought it was so funny. My father when he'd go on a night call, and lots of times he would come, as I said,

over to Craven County because his people called him that far away, Ernul and places. So he had been on this call and he came home after everybody had gone to bed and as was his habit, he undressed in the upstairs hall so that he didn't wake my mother up or any of us when he was getting ready to go to bed. Pretty soon, there's this terrible crash which awakened everybody. My mother had moved the furniture that day and he went to get in the bed and it wasn't there. (laughter) So this became a rule in our house; you can move the furniture any place you want to but do not switch the bedroom furniture!

MF: (laughter) That would have been terrible. When he had patients that needed hospital care, the closest hospital was New Bern.

Mrs. Coleman: Umhuh. There was one in Washington, but he didn't really have the ties.

MF: Was he on the staff at St. Luke's?

Mrs. Coleman: No. Because he'd just have an occasional patient to come. I have to tell you, in the first place, people weren't hospitalized as much then; and secondly, he really would have to do a selling job if he felt like somebody would need to go to the hospital because they all had the feeling that once they went to the hospital they were going to die. So if they could stay home, they'd might put it off a little bit.

MF: But if they had to be hospitalized, he'd refer them to a doctor in New Bern?

Mrs. Coleman: Yes. I remember the only time I ever really saw my father out done about having to make a night call was once when

he was called in the middle of the night over to Craven County. Probably Ernul or there about. When he got home hours later, he really was so out done because the lady had been sick for three years.

MF: (laughter) Oh gracious!

Mrs. Coleman: She had some sort of chronic something or other. But he hadn't ever seen her, so he didn't know that. So he got all the way to Craven County, and I have to tell you, roads were awful. Now, I learned to drive when I was nine years old because my dad used to take me with him on his calls and we always got stuck in the mud. But, he taught me to drive so I could drive and he could push and this is the way we'd get unstuck.

MF: (laughter) Oh my gracious!

Mrs. Coleman: It was an entirely different world. It's hard for anybody to believe it's the same. It's hard for me to believe.

MF: Then, you came to New Bern and lived with Aunt Bertha and this was another world for you.

Mrs. Coleman: A different world. Sort of really very intimidating to me. Very intimidating.

MF: Well, is there anything else that you would like to discuss or to talk about?

Mrs. Coleman: I think I've done a lot of talking.

MF: Okay. Well, on behalf of the Memories of New Bern Committee, I thank you so very, very much for participating in this program.

Mrs. Coleman: I have to tell you, I thoroughly enjoyed it and you're a great interviewer. You make it easy.



MF: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW