

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

JOHN G. DUNN JR.

INTERVIEW 701.2

Today is July 2, 1991. I'm at the home of Mr. John G. Dunn, Jr. We will continue our interview from interview number one which was conducted on June 4, 1991.

Mr. Pope: Mr. Dunn, as we get into this segment of our interviews and during the first hour that we talked, we talked primarily about your banking. You gave us a little bit of history about New Bern.

I do remember that you mentioned the big fire that they had down on George Street and how it jumped the cemetery and went all the way to the river. Do you remember anything about a hurricane that hit here in 1933 and supposedly did a lot of damage to New Bern and tore out the Neuse river bridge?

Mr. Dunn: I do very clearly remember it. It was one of quite a few that came along after that in my time on East Front Street and here on New Street, all at the same river. They were all bad from my point of view.

Mr. Pope: Did you have radio communication or warning of a hurricane back in '33 as we now have?

Mr. Dunn: No, not to my recollection was there any at all. All we knew, "It's coming up. It's coming up!", speaking of the river.

Mr. Pope: How far up did the water come in relationship to Craven Street in New Bern in that '33 hurricane?

Mr. Dunn: Right close. It would probably cover half of Craven Street, but not the western half.

Mr. Pope: Where we're sitting now, at 211 New Street, how deep would estimate the water would have been right here?

Mr. Dunn: About four feet, I would say.

Mr. Pope: So, we'd be getting our feet wet right now.

Mr. Dunn: I think that's the year we went off the porch. I lived at that time at what was 79 East Front Street. I don't know what the new number is now. But we went off the front porch in a rowboat. It came right up to the porch. Another time, Mr. Larry Moore came across the street, took the children of which there were four of us at that time, on his shoulders over to his house which was a much higher lot and the house was higher off the ground.

Mr. Pope: Skipping over a few years, do you remember any medicine shows complete with Indians and doctors and string bands, or anything like that that used to come to New Bern?

Mr. Dunn: I remember them being here and performing mostly downtown.

Mr. Pope: Did you buy any medicine from these people?

Mr. Dunn: No. No. I didn't have any money.

Mr. Pope: And here you're a big banker, and you talk about you didn't have any money!. There was a Mr. Waters who built New Bern's first automobile and was still driving it. He called it a horseless carriage. This was back in 1938 as I recall. Do you remember anything about a Mr. Waters?

Mr. Dunn: G. S. Waters?

Mr. Pope: Yes sir.

Mr. Dunn: His place of business was on the corner of Hancock and Broad Street at that time.

Mr. Pope: What was his place of business? What did he do?

Mr. Dunn: It was buggies mostly. I don't know that he built buggies, but he maintained them and would keep them in good order. He was next door to Jones stables.

Mr. Pope: That was going to be my next question. If there were buggies, then there had to be horses and mules. Do you remember stables within the city limits of New Bern?

Mr. Dunn: Quite a few of them, yeah.

Mr. Pope: I've been told, and you correct me on this, that about where New Bern Auto Supply is, where old Mitchell's Hardware Store was, that there was a city hall there and in the back of that city hall was a stable. Is that correct?

Mr. Dunn: Yeah. The fire station was there. The Button Fire Department, that was there. The horse picked up trash until the fire bell rang, and then they'd unhitch him from the trash wagon and jump on his back and ride to the particular station of which that was one.

The harness and everything was fixed, so all they'd do was pull a rope and it dropped right on him. That's quite a change!

Mr. Pope: I'd say, yes, that is a change from what we know today. I've seen that in the New Bern Fireman's Museum, that thing about the harness dropping on them. Skipping on along a little bit. That is a great change, by the way, to think back when there were horses primarily in the streets of New Bern; of course, it was probably dirt street rather than paved. How did they keep the street clean and sanitary with all these horses and mules?

Mr. Dunn: Had a force of street sweepers with a broom and a shovel.

Mr. Pope: Do you remember during World War II, Barbour Boat Works, working on a lot of mine sweepers and Navy boats? I know they still have a contract for a good many Naval vessels that come in there for dry dock purposes. If my history is correct here, they began to work on mine sweepers and salvage boats for the Navy about 1941, about the same time that Pearl Harbor was attacked, and that was a real bang, blow up business. Here's something I want to ask you that I've heard about for a good many years, but I don't know what it is. This is about 1948, '49, and this is just a few years prior to my coming to New Bern. The "Big Apple" was an operation in New Bern. The prison terms were tough! What was the "Big Apple?"

Mr. Dunn: It was a man named Roderick Davenport who got smart. He would lend money at high rates and take it in from the public at high rates, and soon went busted, comparatively soon. I'm not sure just how long.

Mr. Pope: He wasn't really in the banking business, he was just sort of a loan shark so to speak, is that what he was?

Mr. Dunn: Yeah.

Mr. Pope: These people then, I assume, lost their money.

Mr. Dunn: Sure. I think he went to penitentiary.

Mr. Pope: During the 1920's and '30's, there was a steamer in New Bern called S. J. Phillips. Do you remember anything about this steamboat? What did it do?

Mr. Dunn: There were two of them. The steamer Howard and the Phillips. Primarily, I think they helped distribute food and

everything we used to the smaller towns located on the rivers; Pamlico County, Jones County.

Mr. Pope: These boats worked the rivers out of New Bern, up and down towards Oriental and Jones County, Trenton. How about that! Do you remember when there were any boats that would come all the way down, say, from...

Mr. Dunn: Norfolk.

Mr. Pope: All the way from Norfolk into New Bern by water.

Mr. Dunn: Steamer Neuse. My father and mother were married in your Presbyterian church and took their honeymoon by Steamer Neuse out of New Bern to Norfolk and went on further changing boats in Norfolk.

Mr. Pope: Thinking of New Bern today, where would have been the docking place for these boats?

Mr. Dunn: The foot of Craven Street, Middle Street, primarily.

Mr. Pope: Right about where the Sheraton Hotel is sitting now?

Mr. Dunn: That's right.

Mr. Pope: So, it was common for a traveller to Raleigh and other cities to ship their cars by train to New Bern when they left Raleigh and use the car, say, in New Bern on business or whatever purpose, maybe pleasure, but when they got through and ready to go back to Raleigh, they would put the cars on the trains and let the train carry the car rather than drive the car back and forth to Raleigh. I suppose the roads weren't too good. Do you remember anything about that?

Mr. Dunn: Yeah. You have gotten a little bit away from me, but I know that such conditions did exist, and the roads were bad. If

you went to Morehead and back and didn't have a flat tire or some kind of trouble, with the cars that were made in those days, you were lucky.

Mr. Pope: Give us a little idea of time. How long would it take you to go to Morehead and back in those days?

Mr. Dunn: Well, like I say, it's according to whether you had to stop and change your tire or that sort of thing.

Mr. Pope: All dirt road, I assume.

Mr. Dunn: Oh yeah. Sand. I had the experience of it. There was a brick yard along about Croatan. Mark Stevenson, an uncle of mine, ran it. He'd take the payroll down there every Saturday. I was one of his passengers very often. One time we got stuck; mainly a flat tire, but stuck in the sand too. It took so long that we had to stop at the Presbyterian church in Riverdale for a Presbyterian picnic that was going on. (laughter)

Mr. Pope: You don't believe that was purposely, to put it that way?

Mr. Dunn: No, no, but it all turned out all right.

Mr. Pope: We've got a guy here in New Bern that I've known for a good while but never knew much about his background, Teddy Roosevelt Shapou, Teddy Shapou.

Mr. Dunn: Oh yeah.

Mr. Pope: Did you realize that he served with General Claire Chennault, Flying Tigers, in China? Was he a pilot or was he just an administrative man or do you know?

Mr. Dunn: He was an actual flyer. He waited til he got back

to this country to have an accident and be crippled up to some extent.

Mr. Pope: He'd be quite a celebrity because that was a very well known Air Force back in those days prior to World War II.

Mr. Dunn: That's right. What was the name of the outfit?

Mr. Pope: Flying Tigers. General Claire Chennault headed it up. Back in the thirties there was a thing called the Abernathy Ballot Box Affair. Do you recall anything about that at all?

Mr. Dunn: No, not really. Not enough politician to be close to that. I don't deny it or doubt it, but I just didn't have any sort of experience with it.

Mr. Pope: You've been in this town all your life, so many years, and I know we've had a lot of good politicians and a lot of bad politicians. Can you recall a mayor of New Bern that, in your mind, would be outstanding?

Mr. Dunn: (pause) Most of them got their names on a fire truck.

Mr. Pope: That's very true.

Mr. Dunn: If that classifies them, I don't know, but they were all pretty good boys.

Mr. Pope: Do you remember a Mack Lupton?

Mr. Dunn: Straight as an arrow.

Mr. Pope: He was mayor of New Bern several times, was he not?

Mr. Dunn: Yeah.

Mr. Pope: Tell me a little bit about Mack Lupton. I've heard about him all my life.

Mr. Dunn: He was a jolly good fellow. He kind of bragged on

the fact that he completed the third grade. Where was he born, down on the sound or ocean? Anyway, he didn't have much education. He was a friend of mine and did a lot of good, particularly, in establishing the airport.

Mr. Pope: That's Simmons-Nott Airport?

Mr. Dunn: That's right. And building it up, as long as he lived.

Mr. Pope: You mentioned in our last talk after we had turned off the tape, something about how things were when you were a young boy in your adolescent age, how families in this general neighborhood would go at eve, at dusk, and sit on one another's porch. We didn't have air conditioning in those days. Tell me, if you can recall, what changes have you seen in the family structure of say the 1920's and thirties as compared with the eighties and nineties.

Mr. Dunn: A complete change. Everyone knew everyone else and who their grandparents were and where they came from and all about them, but it's a different period today. You go to church, you see people on the street, and you have no idea who they are. Country Club, most everywhere is the same way. We are really full of good folks.

A few bad ones probably, but most of them are good and good for the community. They bring money with them. A lot of them are good volunteers and work at what needs to be done. But the close friendship is not here.

Mr. Pope: Give me a typical day in the life of John Dunn in 1925. What was a typical day like for you? I know you have to run your mind back a little bit on that one.

Mr. Dunn: I started work with my grandfather in the financial business or banking business in 1924, so I was well along in '25.

Mr. Pope: What time of day did you start to work? What time of day did they open the bank?

Mr. Dunn: Eight thirty.

Mr. Pope: What time of the day did they close the bank?

Mr. Dunn: Five o'clock.

Mr. Pope: All right, it's five o'clock, June 1925 and Mr. John G. Dunn has just left the bank. Now see what you're going to from then til bedtime.

Mr. Dunn: At that time, there wasn't a lot going on. I did a little courting now and then. I married in '28. That was a very famous year, but in '25, we had two picture shows and we had Gaskins Soda Shop on the corner of Pollock and Middle Streets which was very popular.

Mr. Pope: Well now, was Gaskins Soda Shop on the corner the same soda shop where Brad's drink was made or was that a different place all together?

Mr. Dunn: On a different corner.

Mr. Pope: Where was Gaskins? What's there now?

Mr. Dunn: It's a part of the Elk's building. I think it's Dixon's.

Mr. Pope: Dixon's Soda Shop.

Mr. Pope: Mr. Dunn, I'm gonna end this interview. I promised you we wouldn't take but about thirty minutes on the second one. What we wanted to do was to kind of cap a little of the history of New Bern the way it was 40, 50, 60 years ago and the way it is now. If you

had to make one statement in closing about New Bern, what would it be?

Mr. Dunn: We haven't brought in anything much about the Sheraton and the re-development commission. There has certainly been a big change in that part of town. We've stuck mainly to the personality and getting back to this neighborhood here. Like you say, I lived on the corner of Short and East Front Street for the first twenty-three years of my life. Mr. Larry Moore built the big house across from Short Street. Dr. Jones lived next to me on the other side. I had family scattered all through here.

Mr. Pope: You saw high waters rise here several times during your life time.

Mr. Dunn: That's right.

Mr. Pope: Hazel in '54, I believe it was, '55.

Mr. Dunn: Ione in '55. That's the one that came in this house.

Mr. Pope: Going back to the one we talked about earlier in 1933, of the three; the one in '33, Hazel in '54, and Ione in '55, as you recall, which was the worst of these storms?

Mr. Dunn: Well, personally, Ione. Of course, I would have been better if I had built my house one block higher, but I thought some of these houses were too high up and stopped at a certain point. But that was the worst. Certainly in this neighborhood.

Mr. Pope: The water came in the house?

Mr. Dunn: Yeah. I might mention that Joe Pat's mother passed by here in a rowboat. They were taking her out of Senator Simmons

house where she lived on the corner and went by here in a rowboat.

Some of the firemen or other boys had gone and gotten her and took her to the, what was it then? It wasn't the Gaston Hotel.

Mr. Pope: It was the Governor Tryon Hotel, which later burned. (This will conclude the interview as of July 2, 1991, with Mr. John G. Dunn, interview No. 701.2. We want to thank him very much for the information we have received and hope that it will be beneficial in the forth coming Memories of New Bern. This is your interviewer, M. B. Pope, interviewer No. 700.)

END OF INTERVIEW