

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

HENRY JOHN MACDONALD

INTERVIEW 422.2

This is Marea Kafer Foster representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 400. I am interviewing Henry John MacDonald, interview number 422.2. This interview is being conducted on Monday the 26th of April 1993. We are in Mr. MacDonald's home at 1607 Tryon Road in New Bern. This is a continuation of an interview that we started on the 12th of September in 1992. Mr. MacDonald taught biology, chemistry and physics at New Bern High School and later became the principal of the high school. In 1947 he was appointed Superintendent of the New Bern City Schools and he served in that position until he retired in 1974.

MAREA FOSTER: Now, Mr. MacDonald, if you will just tell us about being superintendent of the city schools; how many buildings you had, how many teachers, your responsibilities, whatever you would like to tell us.

MR. MACDONALD: Since 1947 great changes have taken place in New Bern. These changes have not passed the school system by any means. The program of the schools was quite different than it has developed today. For instance, we had four school sites that made up the entire New Bern City Schools. There was the Central School site which is known as the School Green. That consisted of 3.2 acres. Now on this one site, 3.2 acres, we had the high school, the primary building, the Academy building, and the building with the bell on top. There were four schools in that one site which was considered then as being spacious. The other school site was

the Ghent school, which was later the Marshall school. The Ghent school was a vast 1.8 acres which was then an adequate site for that type school. The Riverside school was a duplicate of the Ghent school, the same plan was used in building of both, and on a site of less than one acre, .96 acres. The other school site was our West Street site and that was even a little large. It had 3.5 acres. But there again, the school had a high school and an elementary school. The elementary school was a complete school up through the eighth grade and it had a separate library. This feeling was there was no need for expanded school systems at that time. We were coming out of a period in which we still had the feeling we were once occupied by the Northern forces, and from that era on there was very little change in building and the construction, construction was nil, up until the twenties and the middle thirties in which we went through a vast financial setback in this whole area. We had no funds for changing anything. In fact, our population was stagnant. We began school with a certain number of children and after summer vacation we began another year of school with just about the very same number of children year after year. There was little need for expansion of the school system, and there was no money to build more schools because all the school buildings were then a responsibility of the county budget and the funds for capital outlay all came from the county. There had never been a state bond issue for building until much later. The first building and expansion that occurred after that

death of Mr. H. B. Smith was the expansion of the Ghent school which became about that time named for the principal of the school, Miss Eleanor Marshall. That was in 1948, and that was my first experience in school construction. The architect of the school was Mr. Raymond Fuson. We added a whole wing to the rear of the Marshall school. That wing is still standing. The original school as of the past several years has been torn down. That whole wing of the new construction later became the YMCA and the original Marshall school was destroyed. The next need, because you see this was in the middle forties and the middle forties brought New Bern its first major increase in population with the advent of the Cherry Point Marine Corps Base, our need was specifically enough for the high school. That was where the greatest pressure existed because the high school located at Central school green was totally inadequate and it had been that way for many years. It was possible with the advent of the beginning of some federal aid. I imagine it would have have been impossible until the federal budget provided funds to accommodate the influx of federally related children, of which there were now becoming hundreds. This federal program provided on the one building, as I recall it, something over three hundred thousand dollars in one lump sum. I remember carrying that check around for two days before I put it in the deposit. I had never felt that much money in all my life. (laughter)

MF: (laughter) It's a nice feeling.

MR. MACDONALD: Anyway, we began the preparation of plans for what was then to become New Bern High School. I think the little history of the high school would be pertinent in this respect because the New Bern Academy from which really the New Bern High School developed was established way back in 1764. Two years later this school was chartered by the North Carolina General Assembly with the approval of King George III, the ruler of England and our colonies. Thus the school from which New Bern High School is successor became the first chartered school in North Carolina and the second so chartered in English colonial America. The first school chartered was up in Massachusetts. The first school built for the New Bern Academy was completed in 1767.

It was a wooden frame structure forty-five feet long and thirty feet wide and this was on the present Central School green. That building would be just about the size of what now would be a double width trailer building. This was a frame building which was located on the corner of New and Hancock Streets. This building burned in 1795. It was replaced in 1806 by a four classroom brick structure which is still standing and now known as the New Bern Academy. The next physical expansion of the Academy came in 1885 with the erection of an eight classroom building which is known as the Central building. That was the building with the bell on top. It's remarkable that this building could have been constructed at all in 1885 so soon after the War Between The States, but it was. In seeing some of the school structures

in the northern part of the country, some of which were built later than that time, it is remarkable that we had such a brick building now exhibited as the New Bern Academy. The next expansion was the Central building. I've gotten my dates here mixed up. Now, we're talking about the Central building and this was the Bell building, that's right, which was built in 1885. The cost of the building according to the Academy minutes of the June 30, 1885, including gas piping, two furnaces, and the fence around the Academy building was \$9,361.94.

MF: You said 1985. You mean 1885.

MR. MACDONALD: I meant 1885.

MF: For nine thousand dollars, all of that.

MR. MACDONALD: Nine thousand dollars. But the very fact, though, that nine thousand dollars was available to build a school building...

MF: That soon after the Civil War.

MR. MACDONALD: That soon after the war.

MF: It's amazing.

MR. MACDONALD: It's remarkable. Further, it should be noted that this building has now been converted into a condominium.

MF: Four condominiums.

MR. MACDONALD: Four condominiums with all the ceiling cornice, all the wood working, and the beautiful rails that had been preserved, untouched since the building was constructed, is now a four condominium home.

MF: They're beautiful. They're really beautiful.

MR. MACDONALD: Although recommended in 1884, it was not until 1887 that the Academy program was adjusted to permit the establishment of a separate and distinct high school, which was conducted at the beginning in the Academy building. The high school expanded into the Central building later on, which was that additional eight rooms. A new building was constructed on the Central green in 1904 and was known as the Griffin building. It was enlarged later on and added to it were eight classrooms and an auditorium. That was in 1909, the year I was born. This building was fittingly dedicated to the memory of Moses Griffin who had years before established a fund that would extend the benefits of education to children, theretofore denied this privilege. The Moses Griffin fund provided the funds, in fact, to build the 1904 addition. A new front containing four classrooms was added to the Griffin building in 1930, which marked the end of the physical expansion of New Bern High School until this new New Bern High School was to be built. You see the gap there between 1930 and 1954. That construction in 1930 was the total building construction in the New Bern city schools since the Bell building in 1885. No construction whatsoever. New Bern High School on a new site was way beyond anything that anyone had anticipated ever seeing. A school building in New Bern on twenty-five acres was just unheard of. New Bern High School was built on a campus style. One of the first campus style schools to be built in North

Carolina. In fact, there were very few campus style high schools in the country even at that time. The original buildings out there were occupied in 1954, dedicated in '54. A thirteen classroom addition to the six buildings of 1954 was placed in use in September 1964. The local firm of Stephens & Cardelli were the architects of New Bern High School. The original plan in 1954 received a citation of merit for outstanding design from the American Institute of Architects. In 1965 the student body was 1,350 and the faculty had 58 members.

MF: The school had grown tremendously. Now this new New Bern High School is located on Clarendon Blvd., and the 1954 NBHS is now named Grover C. Fields, is it Middle School?

MR. MACDONALD: Middle School. The name has been changed because there is at present a new New Bern High School. (laughter) This new New Bern High School is located beyond the city limits on a site of seventy-five acres.

MF: Seventy-five?!

MR. MACDONALD: Seventy-five acres part of which, however, will not be used for school purposes because they are wetland. But there is over fifty acres of dry land available and it is certainly a beautiful structure.

MF: And this is on Hwy. 17 South as we go to Pollocksville.

MR. MACDONALD: Right.

MF: We have certainly grown from when I went to school.

MR. MACDONALD: While New Bern High School was being built,



we were also building another high school, a high school that was originally for the negro children. This was being built and would later be dedicated, or was actually named by the school board in the original planning, to be the J. T. Barber High School. This school was being constructed at the very same time as New Bern High School. This was on a site of approximately eighteen acres. This was not a campus type school. It was more or less of traditional construction. The architect for this school was Mr. Raymond Fuson.

MF: Mr. Mac, were there as many black students enrolled in high school as there were white students?

MR. MACDONALD: No, there were fewer, though the population of New Bern was almost fifty percent black at that time. Both of these schools were completed about the same time. This may sound as though there was nothing to be done except build schools, and actually this is what took most of my time and attention. Because when you build a school you first have to decide where you want the school in relation to the children to attend it and then someone has to decide how they're going to get such things as sewer systems and water lines and electrical services. All these things have to be taken care of, then the sites located and purchased, all of this goes into preliminary planning. We have in North Carolina one of the greatest school facilities, statewide facilities, of any state in the Union. The State Division of School Planning, they give you every possible assistance,

inspection service and all is available through this department. But everything is done on a local basis, such as the planning of the school and the original architectural drawings, all have to pass through the Department of School Planning and receive their approval. They also have to approve all the bids for both main contractors and sub-contractors. The State Department provides the supervision that is essential for the best possible dollars worth of building. This calls to mind when I say they get a dollars worth, when we constructed both the Barber school and New Bern High School, part of the funds did come from the federal government. The plans for both these schools, since you were using some federal funds, had to go through the U. S. Office of Education. I went through a period when I felt much like a yo-yo going between New Bern and Washington, D.C. to the point that I became on first name basis to many of the people up there in the Washington, D.C. office. These plans also had to be approved by them. Since the lowest possible per square foot cost of building of the high school was taken by the U. S. Office of Education as \$14.50 a square foot, which we knew was high in North Carolina, we had to reduce the size of the walkways that were placed in the New Bern High School site, and those covered walkways, we had to reduce the size of those, we had to reduce the size of classrooms, we had to reduce this that and the other, so that the anticipated cost of construction was going to be \$14.50 before we could get the approval of Washington. Well, as it turned out, our cost of

construction of New Bern High School was nine dollars and some cents per square foot, and that amazed but never was admitted as being possible by Washington. But that was the cause of many of the changes that had to be made in the plans of the new buildings to expend any federal funds. Well, back to the schools. Our next construction our program called for new elementary schools. The first one was to be called the Trent Park School. Now Trent Park was located in a development that was in the area of the high school. As the high school was built, there were no homes in the Trent Park area. The Trent Park area developed along with the construction period of the New Bern High School. We have aerial photographs that show the high school under construction and scattered homes under construction in what was then to become the Trent Park area. The plans for the development had to pass the city planning department. We obtained our site for the Trent Park school before the homes were actually being built in that area in order to reserve a school site. It was policy, as soon as an area was being planned for development that we would immediately get to work on obtaining a parcel of that property to build a school, because where you have development you have children. The New Bern school system was developed with the idea of having a school in every community. The only way this could be done would be for a site to be obtained immediately before the plans were approved by the city for the construction of homes. I followed this practice before each school was constructed and it was very, very

useful. Anyway, the Trent Park school was the next to be developed. That was then an eight classroom building, originally an eight classroom, with an auditorium-cafeteria, and of course library facilities and all the pertinent facilities necessary. There again, that was on approximately ten acres of land which would not be considered adequate today, but then was a very substantial size.

MF: It certainly was. And this school is located where Clarendon Blvd. and Simmons Street...

MR. MACDONALD: It's off Simmons Street.

MF: So, between Clarendon and Neuse Blvd.

MR. MACDONALD: We had to consider traffic flow in our building plans. We could not permit the possibility of a street through a school site or anything of that nature. So there were considerable problems in altering the proposed plans of development to provide a flow of traffic around the school site. In this particular case there was an effort made to change the traffic flow after it had once been established. (laughter) Let's see, I think the next one was the Riverside addition. The Riverside school was originally an eight classroom school. You see none of the schools originally anticipated that there would be lunchrooms because the New Bern schools had always been a system of neighborhood schools and when it came lunch time they opened the doors and said scat and the children all scattered and went home for lunch and this was possible. But you know, things have

changed. So lunchrooms had by this time now become an imperative.

If you have never seen a school lunchroom, you have missed seeing the epitome of stainless steel and automatic dishwashers and everything else that goes into an advanced restaurant business that goes along with school keeping now. So, this addition to Riverside school was to be another two larger classrooms and also a cafeteria lunchroom addition. This took place in 1957. While that was going on, there was a new need for an elementary school in the Oaks Road area where development was already in process where there are already a goodly number of children in that area.

We obtained a site, approximately about twelve acres of property extending from Oaks Road to the railroad track and on it was planned a new Oaks Road school. This school has subsequently been expanded and has filled a very great need in the school program. Following the Oaks Road School and also getting into closer proximity to the problems that come from dealing with Washington, D.C., we had an area not too far from the Riverside school but being separated by an eight track train shifting area that separated the Riverside area from the Duffyfield area. Duffyfield area had a large number of children and no school facilities other than at the West Street school. So, in that area I learned a great deal. We condemned two square city blocks in that area and it became eventually the most expensive school site in the history of the New Bern City School system. Because, one of the things that you do when you condemn a building that is used for a home

and is worth probably a thousand dollars, maybe fifteen hundred, but it's used for a home, federal regulations provide that you must provide a new home that is adequate for housing a family, and you don't find a new home for less than twenty-five thousand dollars then. Thus, what you think is going to be a very inexpensive condemnation becomes one of the most expensive things that you can imagine. But anyway, we did clear two city square blocks and built on it an elementary school that was comparable in every respect to the buildings that had been placed elsewhere. This was known as the Duffyfield Elementary School which had eight classrooms, a cafeteria, auditorium, and all the facilities that were built for the Oaks Road school. Later on, this was to become a problem of contention because this particular area was home for just negro children. But in continuing on the construction of school buildings, the next became the development of the West Street school. As previously mentioned, the West Street school was a relatively small site containing a number of schools. The West Street school development had no cafeteria at all and we went in there and built first a cafeteria-auditorium which was larger than any other individual cafeteria that we had thus far built. This was completed in 1962. Our next construction was at the New Bern High School. We made an addition in New Bern High School. We built a complete vocational building and two classrooms and an additional row of classroom buildings at that site. That was in 1964. Then we come to the sixties. At about that time there was

being proposed a development to be known as Trent Woods. This area had never been developed. It was a vast area which was really nothing but a hunting ground up until that time. I made arrangements with the developer that if we could build a school in that area on about ten acres of his prime land, because it had to be in the center of it, that probably the school would have sewer lines and electrical lines and water lines that he could possibly utilize. He agreed begrudgingly that we could have the ten acres in the heart of the new building area. So that then became the Albert H. Bangert School. Albert H. Bangert was a former mayor of New Bern who left his entire estate to provide a loan fund for college education of the children of New Bern. This one was left in trust and handled by the First Citizen's Bank and Trust Company. It is still a very, very large fund. Since the New Bern schools have been, I hesitate to use the word appropriated, but since they have been taken over by the county schools, the county schools have obtained permission to change the will of Mr. Bangert so that the pupils from the rest of Craven County are available for the Bangert fund. This fund is now several hundred thousand dollars in volume. It's a great thing. But we built that school with his name which was significant in that it would be an honor to the memory of Mr. Bangert. This school was again a little departure from the prior construction. In the school we were finally able to get away from, depart from, the flat roofs and had some slanting roofs. When you have a flat roof, you have a

leaking roof. It seemed that, nationwide, architects had been smitten with flat roofs. But I did obtain practically all pitched roofs on the Bangert school. It was built around a planting area, surrounding a planting area, in the center of the school. In this center area was located the library. The library is the center, the heart, of the Bangert school. Now since this construction took place, the original construction, additional classrooms have been built to extend the entire school. In the construction of this school I recall that we had a race for the facility for the sewer facilities and water facilities between the set opening day of school and the completion of the construction.

MF: Who won? (laughter)

MR. MACDONALD: It came out a dead tie. (laughter) The Albert Bangert school, that building was constructed during the period of 1967. An addition then was placed in the Oaks Road school during the year of '69. Everything is expanding you see. An addition was built on the Barber school in '69, and another addition was added to the New Bern High School also during that year.

MF: Mr. Mac, you were known as the building superintendent, weren't you?

MR. MACDONALD: This was the first building that they'd done to amount to anything in fifty years. But you see, the state had now come to the point that statewide we had bond election money from the state, because up until those years the state was



prohibited from expending any money for capital outlay. All capital outlay had to be local funds. It is such a period of no local funds, statewide we're in a very tragic condition. Now we're getting into areas that we're approaching problems of integration. There was a fire at the West Street site. The fire was at the crack of dawn. The fire began in about four different places at the same time. Actually what happened was, they burned the West Street schools. Of course, the schools had been designated to be replaced as soon as possible anyway. The result was that the site was cleared because the burning was a great success from that standpoint. However, I do remember about \$15,000 of brand new books that had been put in the library before the fire. In the intervening years, from '47 on, the equipment over there in the schools, they had new equipment, new desks, they were getting new books, back in the days when no one had any money. Even textbooks were hard to come by. I can remember at the opening of school we had a sale of all the books and the pupils would bring in their old textbooks and turn them in and they were resold, used books. They were put out on tables and sold. Each person owned their own books. I don't know whether you recall that.

MF: I paid a book fee. We rented ours when I was in school.

MR. MACDONALD: A book fee.

MF: Yes sir. We didn't own them, we just rented them.

MR. MACDONALD: But originally, back in the thirties, you

owned your books. You bought the books and then you could sell them. This resulted in the fact that the books and many other things were relegated to where the need was. Well, all the equipment and everything had since been replaced at West Street School. They had new desks, they had new books, and they had everything in it the other schools had. However, all the schools were well insured and the insurance went a long way to replace some of the facilities over at West Street. The school was rebuilt and it was named for a former principal of the school, Frederick R. Danyus. He was a very capable and well liked person. He was originally from Illinois and did a wonderful job. He was principal of the school when he died. So the Danyus building, it's entrance is on Bern Street.

MF: Oh, it is?

MR. MACDONALD: And no longer on West Street. West Street was the back of the school, cause that was the entrance of the old West Street school. So that was constructed there in '90 and '91.

MF: 1970.

MR. MACDONALD: I'm getting my dates wrong. 1970, that was the beginning of the actual construction of the Danyus school. That by the way is a very nice school. It has beautiful facilities; a cafeteria-auditorium. By cafeteria it means that it's used in the day time as a cafeteria and then the tables are such that they can be moved and inside you have a suitable auditorium. There are no more auditoriums constructed in schools

now. They're all multi-purpose areas. The Danyus School was dedicated in '72. Then we planned what was to be my last school, which was a part of the total school construction plan for New Bern. We obtained a site in a new area where housing was rapidly taking place, at the end of Elizabeth Avenue. There again, we had to consider the traffic patterns. We closed a traditional road known as Racetrack Road by running the new highway by-pass over the end of the school site and thus closing Racetrack Road from the Old 17 over to the new by-pass. On one side of the road is the community college, and then when you get on the other side that is the beginning of what later became the H. J. MacDonald School. Originally, it was scheduled to be a middle school. It is now back to a middle school, but it was called originally the H. J. MacDonald Junior High School. My son has always claimed that the school was built for him, H. J. MacDonald, Jr. (laughter) There again, we come to a fifty acre site and expansion of all the facilities that go for school construction. This is a little different. It's of interest to note that the school division of school planning published a brochure the title of it is "North Carolina Schools of Interest." They show the plans and give the description of fourteen schools over the whole state. Two of the fourteen schools were in New Bern.

MF: Wonderful!

MR. MACDONALD: Two of the fourteen schools. One being the Jr. High, Middle School, H. J. MacDonald School, and the other

being the Albert H. Bangert School.

MF: That's a wonderful complement. (looking at brochure)  
(Fred, you'll be interested in this.)

MR. MACDONALD: Integration, you know integration was not forced until 1966. In 1964 it became apparent that the future held complete integration, immediate integration. In '64, New Bern City School Board adopted a Freedom of Choice plan whereby any pupil from grades seven through twelve had the privilege of selecting the school they wish to attend. Now this was before the general crackdown that the courts took in control of the funds for the school. The first year we had a number of negro children select to go to New Bern High School. It should be noted that all of these children were coming from homes of college educated parents, teachers, doctors, lawyers, children, and they were not distinguishable from the achievement of the white children. They fit into everything and they were accepted. If we had been left to our own resources or our own affairs, this would have continued and resulted in the ultimate integration of school with no problems. But two years later this was "you do it all immediately," and the doing of it was by buses. We had to organize a complete bus system, the burden of which was placed upon really the negro children to be transported into the schools outside of their own area. This has never proven to be anything but the beginning of the decline of the public school systems, because immediately you had the development of private schools and

church, so-called Christian schools, which have continued to prosper and expand to the extent that we closed two schools. Both the Riverside and the Marshall schools were closed for lack of pupils because they had been drained off by the private schools. So now we see by yesterday's paper that we're having a self-segregation of schools again on the college level.

MF: Yes. It's coming full cycle, don't you think? Yes, I think so. Well, Mr. MacDonald is there anything else you would like to tell us on this interview?

MR. MACDONALD: Nothing, except that there's one thing you can always expect, and that is change. Nothing stays as it is. We were so used to things being as they were yesterday and everything was as is, but nothing stays the same.

MF: No, it doesn't. Well, I want to thank you for an absolutely wonderful interview. The one that we did in September and this one, this is the best history on the schools and I have enjoyed every minute of it and I do appreciate it.

MR. MACDONALD: I do think that there are so many things that need to be preserved. You see, New Bern City Schools now does not exist. But New Bern School was the oldest school and first system in North Carolina.

MF: I know it and it's a shame.

MR. MACDONALD: The oldest school and it was an excellent school. People forget too.

MF: Well, with this interview they won't forget because you

have given us all the history.

MR. MACDONALD: Well, there's so much more.

MF: We'll have to set up another date. (laughter) I do want to say you graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Duke, isn't that right?

MR. MACDONALD: No, I wasn't Phi Beta Kappa. (laughter)

MF: Will (Pittman) told me that you were and I wanted that on record. Magna Cum Laude? Mr. Mac, thank you so much again for these wonderful interviews. You have just given us fantastic information.

MR. MACDONALD: It's been a pleasure and I appreciate the opportunity.

MF: We wouldn't have done it without you. Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW