

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

FURNIFOLD MCLENDEL SIMMONS PATTERSON

INTERVIEW 502

F. M. SIMMONS PATTERSON--502

Interviewed by Francis P. King
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{Dr. Francis King, number 500, is the interviewer; the interviewee is Dr. Simmons Patterson. Tape number 502. Address is 4503 Morgan Lane, New Bern, N.C. 28560. We will begin the interview.}

FPK: Now, let me have your full name, Simmons.

FMSP: You just want the initials?

FPK: The whole thing.

FMSP: Furnifold McLendel Simmons Patterson.

FPK: Now, when were you born?

FMSP: I was born January 13, 1914.

FPK: Can you tell me something about your early life?

FMSP: Yes. I was born on Craven Street in 1914 and lived there my early years. We then moved to 4 New Street, New Bern. I was living at that address when I really grew up and started school.

FPK: That's just a short way from East Front Street and the Neuse River?

FMSP: Yes, it's just two houses from the Neuse River, next to the house on the corner of New and East Front Street that was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. E. K. Bishop.

FPK: How was your childhood?

FMSP: My childhood was very interesting and I enjoyed it. We lived in a very nice neighborhood, next door to Judge and Mrs. R. A. Nunn. Other people living in that area were Mr. and Mrs. T. M. Diggs, and Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ellison.

FPK: E l l i s o n?

FMSP: E l l i s o n. Did I say Judge R. A. Nunn?

FPK: Yes.

FMSP: And later, Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Dunn moved into that area. Around the corner from us lived Mr. and Mrs. E. K. Bishop, and Dr. and Mrs. R. DuVal Jones, and Mr. and Mrs. Guion Dunn.

FPK: Any children around there that you grew up with?

FMSP: Well, next door to us there were Eleanor and Elizabeth Nunn, and the Ellison's had two boys, Frank and Hubert. Also, Sonny and Harry Foote and my very good friends, the Ferebees, who lived about eight houses from us on New Street. My mother used to call them "the darling Ferebees."

FPK: Yes, diverge on the Ferebee family because they are an interesting family. Why don't you tell us about them?

FMSP: Well, the Ferebee family included six boys and three girls, and it was a very athletic-minded family. Billy, who was later known as "Little Billy" Ferebee, was a year older than I and was a very dear friend of mine. We grew up together. He and I both began playing golf about the age of six years. Mr. Ralph Miner, who was a golf professional at the New Bern Country Club, made us some clubs. And every Saturday morning we would walk from New Street to the Country Club. That was quite a long walk. Sometimes we would hitch rides, and sometimes we would walk all the way. At that time the road leading to the Country Club was a dirt road and it was a very difficult walk.

FPK: It must have been five miles.

FMSP: Yes, it was. And when we got to the Country Club, we used to start playing golf on the nine-hole course, which interestingly

had sand greens at that time. And sometimes we would play 54 holes a day. After we finished we would start walking home--sometimes we would get rides and sometimes we had to walk all the way. Billy and I continued our friendship through the years. He became an excellent golfer, and I just became a fair one. Billy won the Country Club championship many, many times. His brothers were very good friends of mine also. Several of them became excellent athletes.

FPK: Didn't they have a baseball team, a family baseball team, at one time?

FMSP: Well, it wasn't exactly a family team, but every team that represented New Bern had three or four of the brothers playing. Bill Ferebee, the oldest boy, went to the University of North Carolina and later signed with the New York Yankees. He played with the Yankees one or two years. Emmett Ferebee, known as "Smokey" Ferebee, went to the University of North Carolina and was a shortstop on the baseball team and quarterback on the football team. The entire family was athletic-minded. They were natives of Pamlico County, their hometown was Stonewall, N.C. And through the years, we continued our friendship. It was a great tragedy to me when Billy died in an automobile accident.

FPK: Well, let's go back to your early life.

FMSP: I went to the New Bern Central School. Each morning I walked from my home to the school which was located at the corner of Hancock and New Streets.

FPK: Tell me about the school.

FMSP: There were many buildings. There was a building for the

first and second grades, and others for the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth, and so on. I fondly remember that I had wonderful teachers.

Miss Molly Heath, who was my first grade teacher, was very special to me. Everyone loved her. I remember my kindergarten days mainly because of Mrs. Paul (Martha) Mengel who was my teacher. I thought she was the prettiest lady I had ever seen, and I, at the tender age of three or four years, fell in love with her. She jokingly called me her "Rudolph Valentino." And the last time I saw her some years later, she still called me her "Rudolph". Through the years, she and I recalled these kindergarten days, and our close relationship continued until her death. My home was only three city blocks from the New Bern Central School. I entered school there at the age of six years, and my first grade teacher was Miss Molly Heath. She was an angel in disguise, and I am sure there was a place in heaven for her when she passed away. The impression that one's first teacher makes upon you is never forgotten. No more important and true words can be expressed. I can truthfully say that I thought the sun rose and set with Miss Molly. Although dear and outstanding, she could be very firm and commanded respect from her students. She played no favorites, but we all adored her. She built a firm foundation upon which we could grow in stature in the years ahead. I recall many of our other early teachers to whom I am greatly indebted: Miss Pauline Coble, Miss Ruth Berry, Miss Lanta Winslow, Miss Celeste Whaley, Miss Blanche Rowe, Miss Lizzie Hancock, and Mr. Vance Swift who was also later my baseball coach and basketball coach in high school, also was a teacher of mine. I remember vividly when I was in the seventh grade,

I was paid fifteen cents a day to work in the supply room and also to ring the school bell at various indicated times each day. It gave me a feeling of importance. Scholastically I did quite well. My only difficulty was on several occasions my room conduct left much to be desired. I had a tendency to talk when silence was indicated. I remember vividly one month after my father had reviewed my report card which contained some unfavorable comments about my conduct, he made it plain in no uncertain terms that such conduct would not be tolerated.

I can assure you that from that time forward, I took a turn for the better. My father was one of the greatest sport fans that I have ever known, and I inherited that trait from him. When I was only six years of age, he presented a set of golf clubs to me and one to my best friend, Billy Ferebee. Each Saturday morning Billy and I would go to the Country Club, as I have previously stated. In 1921, at the tender age of seven, I was chosen to be the mascot of the New Bern High School basketball team, and through the years I've cherished this picture of the team with me holding the basketball, which appeared in the 1921 Cub book, which was the official publication of New Bern High School. The late United States Congressman, Mr. Graham A. "Hap" Barden, was the coach and the players pictured were Rexford Willis, Louis Foy, John Jennette, Guion Thomas, Rudolph Jackson, James Simpson, Redmond Dill, and Fred Shipp. I idolized all of them. As the years passed, we became great friends. I am sure that the love and respect that they held for my father was the reason I was chosen their mascot. As long as I can remember, my father took me to athletic events with him. We went to high school games, college games, and professional games. When I was

only eight years of age, he began to take me to Washington, D.C. each summer to see big league baseball games between the Washington Senators and other teams in the American League. We would always stay at the same hotel where the visiting team had accommodations. The hotels were either the Harrington Hotel, the Raleigh Hotel, or the Willard Hotel. I'll never forget one evening when we were eating breakfast at the Raleigh Hotel, where the Detroit Tigers team was staying, my father brought Ty Cobb over to our table. Can you imagine an eight year old boy talking to him? I even rode in the elevator with him!

A also saw Joe Sisler, who played first base for the St. Louis Browns team; Eddie Collins, the great second baseman for the Chicago White Sox; Tris Speaker, the incomparable center-fielder for the Cleveland Indians; and the one and only Walter Johnson of the Washington Senators.

And, if there was an off-day for the big league teams when we were in Washington, we would go back and see the great Negro teams play.

At that time, Negro players were not eligible to be members of the American League or the National League. What a great catcher was Josh Gibson, and great hitter, Buck Leonard! There were a number of great Negro players at the time who were capable of playing in the big leagues, but it was many years later before the door was opened to them. My father's love and enthusiasm for sports rubbed off on me and became a part of me. What a great human being he was! Many years later after I had married and had become a father, I, on several occasions, took my three sons to Washington, usually to see the New York Yankees play the Washington Senators. We would stay at the Shoreham Hotel which was the headquarters for the Yankee team. What a thrill the boys had!

They met Mickey Mantel, Yogi Berra, Whitey Ford, Phil Rizzuto, Charles Keller, Joe DiMaggio, and many others. It was an experience that I and my sons will never forget. Without the memory of those trips to Washington with my father when I was just a boy, I doubt it I would have made these trips with my sons.

FPK: One thing, you obviously had a close relationship with your father.

FMSP: Yes. He was very, very kind to me and I loved him dearly.

FPK: Were he and Dr. R. D. Jones partners in the practice of medicine?

FMSP: Yes, he and Dr. R. Duval Jones were partners in the practice of medicine and were co-owners of St. Luke's Hospital.

FPK: Tell me about the hospital.

FMSP: I will never forget St. Luke's hospital where my father had his office. I often went there with him when he made early rounds.

Later, I watched him do surgery many times, and I think that was the beginning of my love for medicine. Naturally, the facilities and equipment were not what we have today, but the patient care was super.

FPK: You've told us about your early days in school. What about as you went through school? Do you have any interesting recollections there?

FMSP: Well, in going to school in New Bern, some of the greatest recollections I have involved athletics. Fortunately, I made the first-team my freshman year in both basketball and baseball. And, interestingly enough, at that time there were no buses to take the players out of town; so when we played games away from New Bern, we

were carried in individually-owned automobiles to the places where the games were played.

FPK: And what year was this, approximately?

FMSP: In 1928-29 and 1929-30. I think it's interesting to say that our basketball games and the site of our practice was out in a warehouse on George Street just beyond the railroad tracks. We would go out there and practice after school. And after practice was over, I remember I walked all the way from there to my home on lower New Street. We played our basketball games in the warehouse. As I mentioned, I was fortunate to make the baseball team as shortstop in my freshman year in high school. In my sophomore year, we had a great season. In the North Carolina State elimination process, we defeated the Morehead City team, which had a star pitcher named Lefty Wade, who later became a first-team pitcher with the Detroit Tigers. We defeated him and played Raeford, North Carolina, for the Eastern State Championship in Raeford. Their pitcher was a man by the name of Duncan McNeil, who had an outstanding fast-ball. We lost the game 2 to 1.

But we had a great team. The basketball team was a great team also.

The most memorable basketball experience I have is that we advanced to the finals for the State Championship and played Shelby, North Carolina at the gymnasium at North Carolina State College. We were defeated by the score of 19 to 5 which was an inglorious occasion, but we did well, taking everything into consideration. The training I had in sports here in New Bern High School helped me very much in later years when I went to Woodberry Forest School.

FPK: What about your coaches here?

FMSP: The coach who particularly helped me in baseball was Fred Shipp, who many people in New Bern remember. He was a shortstop and I was a shortstop, and he helped me tremendously.

FPK: He was in school ahead of you?

FMSP: Oh yes. He played baseball at Trinity College, now known as Duke.

FPK: He also played professional football as well, didn't he?

FMSP: Yes, he did. The coach of both the baseball and basketball teams was Mr. Vance Swift, who was a wonderful man. Mr. Swift, when he retired, went to Raleigh, North Carolina, and several years ago passed away. I have very fond memories of him. He not only was an excellent coach, but he was a fine individual.

And the coaching I got at New Bern High School was invaluable to me.

The basketball team included Fran Ferebee, Bill Wheeler, Ralph Lockey, Eura Gaskins, Jack Cannon, Red Smith, Mark Dunn and me. Interestingly enough, the game that I previously mentioned between New Bern and Shelby had been billed as a battle between Senator F. M. Simmons and future Governor O. Max Gardner of Shelby. Of course, Mr. Gardener won an overwhelming victory! Going back, our baseball team included Fran Ferebee, Ralph Lockey, Billy Ferebee, Charles Styron, Eura Gaskins, Peaches McSorley, Edward Brinson, and Bill Wheeler. After my sophomore year in high school, my parents decided to send me to Woodberry Forest School in Orange, Virginia. We realized that I would not be able to go more than two years to Woodberry because of our financial situation.

Furthermore, there was a rule at Woodberry at that time that to graduate you had to be a student there for three years. When my family

decided to send me, I had to take two courses before I would be able to graduate in two years. Mr. Harold Whitehurst was my tutor. And for the entire summer of 1928, I walked daily from my home on New Street to his home at the corner of Craven and Queen Street near the railroad station. He was a strict but excellent teacher, and I passed the necessary exams in mathematics and english for admission to Woodberry Forest school thus granting me the privilege of graduating in two years.

FPK: How about at Woodberry Forest? What did you do?

FMSP: I had two very interesting years at Woodberry, and both years was a regular on the basketball and baseball teams. I did quite well scholastically, and at graduation was awarded the Woodberry Forest Service Memorial Medal for the outstanding athlete/student in my class.

FPK: That was a real honor. Did you play football?

FMSP: I was too small to play football. Interestingly enough, after our graduation, my two very closest friends, Ralph Gardner of Shelby, son of Governor O. Max Gardner, and Frank Kenan of the famous Kenan family, and I took an automobile tour of North Carolina for about three weeks. It was a memorable occasion, and we visited many of our friends throughout the state.

FPK: Do you remember the great fire in New Bern in 1922?

FMSP: Yes. The New Bern High School football team, which had won the Eastern State Championship, played Asheville High School (who had won the Western State title) in Chapel Hill on that ill-fated date New Bern was nearly devastated by an unbelievable fire. As I remember, burning branches fell into the yard of my home on New Street from the fire that was ravaging from west to east. Dynamite was used in various

places to stop the force of the fire. It was an experience that I will never forget. During the time that the fire was raging, I went out to the corner of New and Hancock Streets and sparks were dropping everywhere. Why more places didn't burn down, I don't know. The use of dynamite was very helpful.

FPK: How was the dynamite used?

FMSP: Francis, I don't remember. The fire was on the other side of Queen Street in the western part of New Bern.

FPK: It was where the black people lived...really the northern part, wasn't it?

FMSP: Yes, we were frightened to death at our home because burning timber and things were falling in our yard.

FPK: You were a considerable distance away from the main fire.

FMSP: Yes, we were away from the fire, but it was a terrible experience.

FPK: It happened at night. Were you at the football game?

FMSP: No. I didn't ever go to the football game. It was during the day. And as far as we knew, the members of the football team were unaware of the fire. Unfortunately, Asheville defeated New Bern, but I don't think the fire had anything to do with that! It was a scary situation. I'll never forget it.

FPK: And it lasted during the night, as I have heard.

FMSP: As far as I can remember, when I went to bed at night, it was still going on.

FPK: But you were afraid that your house was going to burn?

FMSP: We were. We never left our house, but we feared the worse

because debris was falling in our yard.

FPK: And it lasted how long? Do you recall?

FMSP: I just remember that day, and it was over the next day.

FPK: So you were eight years old then?

FMSP: Just about, yes. Another memory that I have that I think would be interesting was that several times in those early years there was a baptism, a church baptism, of black people in the Neuse River where the base of the river is now, at the junction of Broad and East Front Streets. I can remember the preaching and dousing, or whatever you called it. It was all very, very interesting.

FPK: Were they in robes?

FMSP: Yes, they were all in white robes.

FPK: How many would be baptized at a time?

FMSP: Gosh, I guess thirty or forty or fifty people. That's just an estimate.

FPK: Did they have a sermon?

FMSP: I don't remember that. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing.

FPK: I think you would remember if you were baptized like that.

FMSP: There is another memory that I would like to share with you. During the period of my prep school and college education, many "big-name" orchestras would come and play at Atlantic Beach.

FPK: The Atlantic Beach Hotel?

FMSP: No. They used to have a place at Atlantic Beach, the Pavilion. I remember particularly the Paul Whiteman's band, the Benny Goodman bands, but there were many other very interesting bands that

played there also. I just can't recall the names. Another interesting experience that I remember involved the Old Atlantic Hotel in Morehead.

Each summer, my mother would take my brother and me down to spend a month or so in the hotel. And one day I slipped up to the cupula on top of the hotel and smoked a few cigarettes. Unfortunately, my father was searching for me and found me, and when he did, he immediately took me back to New Bern and said, "You will not return, and you will stay here as punishment." And, interestingly enough, I never smoked another cigarette in my life.

FPK: How old were you then, Simmons?

FMSP: I was about seven years of age.

FPK: Well, who looked after you when you came back home, where did you stay then?

FMSP: Just with my father, at the house. Let me tell you another thing. You don't remember these days. But in those days, the only way you could get to Atlantic Beach from Morehead City was by boat.

When you arrived there you would go to the Pavilion and rent a locker for your clothes. That's the way the people went there. Would that be interesting to you?

FPK: Yes.

FMSP: All right. To go to the beach on an occasion to go swimming was a real undertaking. I'll never forget it.

FPK: Do you remember when the bridge was built across there to Atlantic Beach?

FMSP: I really don't, Francis.

FPK: Do you remember going over the bridge? Do you remember

the drawbridge that had a T-bar by hand?

FMSP: I really don't. There are some things that I just forget.

FPK: Okay.

FMSP: Many other memorable events I have. I remember in my early years that my mother, brother, and I used to spend summers in Morehead City. At that time, there was no bridge from Morehead City to Atlantic Beach, and the only way to get there was by boat. Each trip there was a major undertaking. In later years, when access to the beach was more accessible, big-name bands played at Atlantic Beach, and New Bern was always well represented at the dances. Another memory I have of the early years of my life is my mother's electric car. I never remember her driving an ordinary automobile, and I believe she never did. For some reason, the mere idea frightened her. My father had the answer in purchasing an electric car for her. I believe it was the only such car in New Bern. What a sight it was to see her riding about town in such a queer looking contraption! The battery of her car had to be charged frequently and to be honest, she frightened all of us when she drove it.

FPK: Do you remember what year this was, Simmons, how old you were? You were about ten or eleven? Twelve years old?

FMSP: Yes.

FPK: Reckon she could drive it better because it didn't have a clutch and all of that that she didn't have to do?

FMSP: I can't answer that.

FPK: But that was unusual at that time. Apparently it had never

been done before.

FMSP: Well, it was kind of embarrassing, to tell the truth.

FPK: You mentioned baseball in New Bern. You talked earlier about going to see the Washington Senators play. Do you have any recollections of baseball in New Bern?

FMSP: Yes. In the early years of my life, particularly at the time I was in preparatory school and college, semi-professional baseball was a major attraction in New Bern. There were teams from New Bern, Kinston, Snow Hill, Ayden, and several other cities. I've never seen more rabid fans than those from New Bern. When there was a game scheduled locally, it was an accepted fact that we went to the game. My father practically never was absent.

J. Gaskill McDaniel was the play-by-play announcer and he did an excellent job. Many of the players were college stars, and a great number of them became members of big league teams. I will always remember Mule Shirley, Jim Tabor, Stuart Flythe, Lefty Kennell, Worley Knowles, Archie Reel, Charles "King Kong" Keller, Bill Ferebee, Fred Shipp, Tom Neal, Red and Casey Morris, Lefty Wilson, and others. Many of these players were college ball players and many of them went to the big leagues. Not only did we attend the games in New Bern, but we also attended the games the New Bern team played in Kinston, Snow Hill, and Ayden. Many of these players came from colleges throughout the area; University of Virginia, Maryland, University of North Carolina, Duke, etc. They were all played in the old Kafer Park.

FPK: That is on George Street?

FMSP: On George Street. It's now demolished.

FPK: Simmons, your grandfather was Senator F. M. Simmons, who had a great life. Can you tell me some of your experiences with him?

FMSP: I was a great admirer of my Grandfather Simmons. I knew he was a great man. He was a man that was very outspoken person and stood for what he felt was right. And during my years of preparatory school at Woodberry Forest, whenever we would play Episcopal High School in athletics at Alexandria, Virginia, I would spend the weekend at his home with him and his wife, and, on occasion, I would go with him to the United States Senate. Going back a few years, when I was younger, he and his wife lived in a town called Muikirk, Maryland, halfway between Washington and Baltimore, and he had a chauffeur and houseman by the name of Allie. I don't remember his last name. Each morning Allie would drive him from Muikirk to the Senate and take him home after the session was over in the late afternoon. And on several occasions, my grandfather would take me to the Senate with him and I would spend some time at his office. Also I would go to the sessions and sit in the gallery and watch the "goings-on" in the Senate and had some very, very interesting experiences.

FPK: Do you remember any specific examples of that?

FMSP: No, I don't Francis, I wish I did. But I just remember what a thrill it was to be able to go there and see the people that I had heard so much about.

FPK: For example?

FMSP: Francis, there again, I can't remember. I just remember this hazily. You're talking about 60-65 years ago, and I just can't remember. But it was a thrill. And, in later years, when I was at

Woodberry and when my grandfather and grandmother had moved to a local hotel in Washington, I would occasionally spend a weekend with them and go to the Senate and see and watch sessions at the Senate.