

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

JOHN MUSE MCCOTTER

INTERVIEW 802

(The interview picks up in the middle of an answer)

Mr. McCotter: Then after that, I went to Baltimore to business school. I finished there about 1927 and came home the same day Lindbergh flew the ocean.

Frances Francis: That was a memorable day. You can't forget that, can you? (laughter)

Mr. McCotter: No. I entered my father's business. We were car lot potato growers and shippers up and down the east coast. We established an office here in the Dunn building in 1927. We were in the Dunn building more than fifty years before I retired.

FF: How long have you been retired now?

Mr. McCotter: Oh, I don't know. About 16, 17 years.

FF: Had lots of time to play golf, didn't you?

Mr. McCotter: I played as long as I could see. I had to quit on account of my eyes. New Bern, of course, has changed a lot and it hasn't changed a lot. It's still a nice place to live.

FF: Oh, isn't it though!

Mr. McCotter: You were talking about what we did in those days. We always found things to do in our younger days without TV. We had parties. We had dances. I remember when we were married. The groomsmen in our wedding gave us a dance with an orchestra at the Country Club. That was in 1932. So, we found plenty to do. We went to football games. Time wasn't on our hands by any means.

FF: I'm sure.

Mr. McCotter: We've been living here at 202 Johnson Street since

1935. We've been living here over fifty years. We were fortunate to have you and your family as our neighbors across the street.

FF: That's nice. I appreciate that. I remember I did do a little bit of babysitting for you when Emma was little.

Mr. McCotter: Not only that, you sent us breakfast every morning.

FF: From the grocery store. (laughter) Well, one of the things they seem to be interested in is telling a little bit about the Country Club. Mrs. McCotter said that you could tell us a little bit more about that.

Mr. McCotter: Mr. Bishop...

FF: He was her uncle.

Mr. McCotter: Her uncle started that club. You read the other day that write-up of his wedding.

FF: Yes.

Mr. McCotter: Mr. Bishop started that Club. The winter before, he was in Florida taking a golf lesson. The pro he was taking it from down there, in the conversation with him, Mr. Bishop said that he was looking for a pro for the club he was going to start here. The man said, well, my boy wants a job. And his boy was Ralph Miner.

FF: He was here at the club a long time, wasn't he?

Mr. McCotter: He was our first pro. I've always heard that Ralph's father was the first native born pro in this country. Before that, they all came from Scotland. Mr. Bishop, I guess he was a co-founder together with Mr. Tom Hyman.

FF: That's Bess Guion's father.

Mr. McCotter: That's right. And Dolly Hyman's father. The club has gone through a lot of changes. It's been foreclosed and refinanced and expanded. (laughter) It got down to about twenty members at that time and it was hard to keep going. Now, I think there's over seven hundred members and we could use two or three more clubs.

FF: I'm sure.

Mr. McCotter: We played on sand greens in those days. They were converted to grass about 1940, and shortly thereafter it was expanded from nine holes to eighteen.

FF: I'm sure that it didn't cost a great deal to join when it was early on.

Mr. McCotter: I don't recall that they even had an initiation fee. When my father joined, the dues were \$3 a month plus ten percent tax. They drew a draft on him for \$9.90 a quarter. Now, I think the initiating fee is \$4,000 and the dues are \$105 a month.

FF: I had mentioned to you earlier that they would like for you to speak to the business life in New Bern during the late twenties and thirties.

Mr. McCotter: Before the late twenties, in the early nineteen hundreds, around the turn of the century I guess, New Bern had quite a cotton market here on the south end of Craven Street. There was a lot of cotton brought in here and it was sold and shipped out by water. The leading dealer here was J. E. Latham, who later moved to Greensboro and became quite successful. He built the King Cotton Hotel there. His heirs built Tryon Palace. Of the other businesses in the

early days, I guess the largest was Roper Lumber Company. They had big mills here and Oriental and Belhaven. That mill was one of the largest on the east coast. It took ninety carloads of logs a day to keep it going full steam. Out of that, they cut a 125,000 board feet of lumber. Then Mr. Hyman, the co-founder of the Country Club, sold boilers and all kinds of mill supplies, and one of the things he sold was one of the first automobiles to come here.

FF: Is that right?

Mr. McCotter: One of the first. It was in 1909. Later, Rex Willis Jr.'s grandfather had the Ford account. Later, his father had the Buick account. Before the Willis had the account, Steve Fowler had it. And before him, Eugene Williams. At one time, they said that there were about twenty wholesale groceries in New Bern. The more prominent ones I can remember probably were: E. K. Bishop, Lucas and Lewis, Armstrong Grocery, Maxwell, T. P. Ashford.

FF: Mr. Ashford was not always associated with oil then?

Mr. McCotter: No!

FF: He was associated with groceries earlier.

Mr. McCotter: Additional wholesale groceries were Tom Marriner and Vaughn Griffin, and W. B. Pugh Grocery Company.

FF: I remember daddy dealing with them.

Mr. McCotter: Those wholesale groceries were rather prominent here for a good while. Of the prominent businesses on Middle Street, I guess the largest was O. Marks wholesale dry good and shoes. And retail, the Coplons, S. Coplon and Son.

FF: What do you know about the Pepsi business?

Mr. McCotter: Mr. Bradham; of course, there's been a lot written about him, I can't tell you anything new. He graduated in pharmacy at Chapel Hill and was born in Chinguapin in Duplin County. He came to New Bern as a pharmacist and had two very nice drug stores here. During that time, he concocted or invented the formula for pepsi-cola. In those days his sales were over a million dollars a year.

FF: Which was a lot of money then.

Mr. McCotter: It was great for this area. It surely was. You had two theaters here; the Athens on Pollock Street and the Masonic. Athens later became the Kehoe.

FF: The Athens brought stage shows here too, didn't they?

Mr. McCotter: Yes, they brought stage shows here. They had an Eastern Carolina Fair Association which had quite a large fair here in the fall. It covered several counties.

FF: Let's talk for a few minutes about World War II and the coming of servicemen into the area and the building of Cherry Point. That certainly did change our whole are, didn't it?

Mr. McCotter: Oh yes. What it did was, I think it happened in about '40 or '41, it became this area's largest industry. It was the largest, and still is I guess, the largest civilian employer. The same is true in Onslow County, in Jacksonville. It was a great asset to this area as far as that goes and still is.

FF: Yes. I guess we can all thank Mr. Barden.

Mr. McCotter: Well, he had a lot to do with it, and the same

thing down in Onslow County. They had to acquire a lot of land. Of course down there they acquired, I think, well over a hundred thousand acres. They didn't have that much at Cherry Point, but it was a big operation.

FF: When I talked to Mrs. McCotter, we talked a little bit about the hurricanes and she said she felt that maybe you'd remember a little bit more about them than she did.

Mr. McCotter: The first one I remember was 1913. I was seven years old. We had no advanced warning at all. All they called them was storms cause they didn't know anything any better. I've heard stories about the one they had in 1898. There were a lot of people out on the Outer Banks around Ocracoke; it happened at Portsmouth, that they left and moved up here. Some families are living here now. Their ancestors had moved on account of the storm. In 1913, my father had a marine railway at Vandemere and it just completely took that away. In New Bern it took away the Neuse River bridge.

FF: I was going to say, it took away the Neuse River bridge.

Mr. McCotter: Before that, of course, there was no bridge and they had to use a ferry.

FF: Was the bridge built across the Neuse River some time around 1900 to begin with?

Mr. McCotter: I think so.

FF: And then it was taken out in 1913 and then had to be rebuilt.

Mr. McCotter: That's right.

FF: Then in '33, it happened again, didn't it?

Mr. McCotter: It was taken out again. That's right.

FF: I can remember that myself. That was a terrific storm.

Mr. McCotter: Ione was the worst one. They were naming them then in '55. That's when the water was the highest in local memory. We had eleven foot tides, with sea level here at eight to ten feet or so. With the sea level that low and an eleven foot tide, you can see what it covered.

FF: It came into our house in '55. The water came in and came up over the casters of the piano.

Mr. McCotter: It came up to our second step. It never did come in the house. They were riding up and down Johnson Street in front of our home in outboard motors.

FF: I'm sure that it came into the grocery store across the street at that time.

Mr. McCotter: I imagine so. It was over your head down on East Front Street.

FF: I know Mrs. McCotter said that it just washed into her mother and father's home.

Mr. McCotter: It wrecked it. Those waves were so terrific. My brother was on his porch. He was living across the New Street then in the Larry Moore house and he watched them. The waves were breaking in halfway up those windows on the front porch with enough force to wring the inside doors off the hinges.

FF: Nature is a force that we really can't control yet, isn't it?

Mr. McCotter: That's right.

FF: The next question I want to ask you is how did the Great Depression affect New Bern?

Mr. McCotter: Like it did everybody else.

FF: Money was very scarce, wasn't it?

Mr. McCotter: There was no money. (laughter) A lot of folks were just swapping products. There was no discrimination. Everybody was in the same boat.

FF: That's right.

Mr. McCotter: The National Bank closed here in October 1929 about the same time of the Stock Market crash. The following August of 1930, the remaining two banks closed. So, we didn't have a bank here for about a week. The Branch moved here and set up a branch. I guess that was our only bank until I think what is now NCNB came in here for a while. Then it was followed later, I think about '33 or some time in there, by the First Citizens.

FF: One of the questions that we are asked here is, "Were there any epidemics?" I know there was a flu epidemic, wasn't there, during the first World War?

Mr. McCotter: That was 1918. I don't remember too much about it. But a lot of prominent citizens living in New Bern died.

FF: One of the questions that they ask is, of course, we know New Bern had a hospital for a long time, but they say, "Did people usually die at home or did they usually die in the hospital?"

Mr. McCotter: I guess generally across the board they were born

at home and died at home.

FF: Did the community respond well for the bereaved families at that time?

Mr. McCotter: Oh, I'm sure they did.

FF: This is a little esoteric and I don't know whether you even want to be bothered with this, (laughter), but one of the questions is, "Do you believe in ghost and have you heard about there being ghosts in New Bern?"

Mr. McCotter: Well, I'll start off by saying I don't believe in them. I'm a lot more afraid of live people than I am dead ghost. (laughter)

FF: I noticed that the historic society is going to have an open house soon that's going to be a "Ghost Walk." I don't know whether you've seen their little brochure or not, but they're going to have some houses open for a night tour and it's going to be a ghost tour. Have you heard about any houses in New Bern that people claim have ghosts?

Mr. McCotter: No, not seriously.

FF: One of the questions is, do you have any of your family who are buried here in the local cemetery?

Mr. McCotter: Not my immediate family. Of course, my wife's, all her family is buried here. I have a lot of relatives that are buried here.

FF: One of the questions is, was crime a serious problem back in the twenties and thirties?

Mr. McCotter: We always had it, but we didn't have like we have it now. We hadn't entered this permissive age where the criminal comes out the hero.

FF: And where the "me" generation who feel that whatever they want they can take.

Mr. McCotter: That's right.

FF: It says here that, when the perpetrators of different crimes were caught, do you feel that the court system was good, that they had a fair trial and were they punished?

Mr. McCotter: Sure.

FF: One of the questions which maybe you'd like to address is, what has changed the most in New Bern that you think has affected your life?

Mr. McCotter: I can't think of a lot of changes that have affected me much. The things we have now have been great luxuries. You want to go back far enough, a hundred years ago, you didn't even have screen. Now you went from there to fans, from there to an air conditioner, and then you go right to a clothes washer and dryer and refrigerator. If the power goes off, you're out of business.

FF: Aren't you though! (laughter) You really are. Is there anything else in particular that you feel like you would like to discuss or add to this?

Mr. McCotter: No, I don't know of anything. I want to compliment you on what you're doing. Of course, what I've told you is disconnected and there are no guarantees even implied as to its

accuracy. (laughter)

FF: Well, I want to thank you and would you tell Mrs. McCotter how much I appreciate how gracious she was. I thought when I played her tape, I thought it had a great deal of charm.

(This is Frances B. Francis representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 800. I am interview Mr. John Muse McCotter, Sr., interview number 802. This interview was conducted on October 17, 1991.) The enclosure was added to by the transcriptionist.

END OF INTERVIEW