

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

MARTHA HAND KIRVEN MILLS

INTERVIEW 430

This is Marea Kafer Foster representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 400. I am interviewing Martha Kirven Mills, Mrs. Hugh Bryan Mills, Sr., interview number 430. Today is Friday the 12th of February 1993. We are in Mrs. Mills apartment, Tryon Estates, 2405-F Griffin Avenue in New Bern.

Marea Foster: Mrs. Mills, this is a pleasure. We've been trying to do this for so long. I'm so glad that you feel better now and can share all your wonderful memories with us. I want to start with you giving me your full name and your birthplace and your birthdate.

Mrs. Mills: My name is Martha Kirven Mills.

MF: Did you have a middle name?

Mrs. Mills: My middle name was Martha Hand Kirven Mills.

"H-a-n-d", just like Billy Hand.

MF: And your birthdate.

Mrs. Mills: July 15, 1909 in Demopolis, Alabama.

MF: And your mother's name.

Mrs. Mills: My mother's name was Martha Thetford Hand Kirven.

MF: And your father.

Mrs. Mills: Clarence Kirven.

MF: And he didn't have a middle name?

Mrs. Mills: No middle name.

MF: And you have a brother.

Mrs. Mills: Clarence Kirven, Jr.

MF: So, of course, Clarence wouldn't have had a middle name either.

MF: Did it really?

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. Everybody that goes in the Army is supposed to have a middle name.

MF: Well, I had read that Harry Truman was just Harry Truman, so he put the S in there. But lately, in some of the interviews a number of people have not had middle names. You were born in Demopolis, so you grew up there.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah.

MF: Was that your daddy's hometown or your mother's hometown?

Mrs. Mills: Both.

MF: Both of them.

Mrs. Mills: Um huh. Well, my father was born in Jefferson which was twelve miles in the country.

MF: What brought Honey to New Bern? (Honey. Is what we all called Mr. Kirven)

Mrs. Mills: The lumber business. He cut hardwood for our furniture. At that time, the freight rate, he shipped the lumber by railroad, and New Bern was closer to the furniture factories than Demopolis, Alabama was. You know all our good furniture factories are in the western part of the state. Well, the closer you were to the furniture factories, the less expensive the manufacturing of the lumber was if you were cutting hardwood like he did.

MF: When did ya'll come to New Bern?

Mrs. Mills: It was in May 1932 I believe. Because we were here

for the 1933 hurricane. We were on East Front Street.

MF: Where was Honey's business located?

Mrs. Mills: It was in Demopolis, Alabama.

MF: Oh, in Demopolis. But he had an office in New Bern?

Mrs. Mills: No. He had sold out his business in Demopolis and bought the Munger-Bennett Lumber Company in James City.

MF: I've never heard of the Munger-Bennett.

Mrs. Mills: Do you remember Grace Blades?

MF: Yes mam.

Mrs. Mills: Okay. Her sister was Martha Munger and she married... anyway, Grace Blades' house is right down Johnson Street.

MF: Right on the corner of Johnson and Middle.

Mrs. Mills: Uh huh. And right across over there is the Munger house and that's where...

MF: Where Martha Mengel...

Mrs. Mills: That's right. She married Paul Mengel. Martha lived there.

MF: But I had never heard of the Munger-Bennett Lumber Company.

Mrs. Mills: Their father and Mr. Bennett were in the lumber business together. They were cutting pine, which is different from cutting hardwood for furniture.

MF: So Honey bought...

Mrs. Mills: He bought that mill and converted it to hardwood. Then he brought his staff that he had, salesmen, so forth, up here.

MF: He brought them up here.

Mrs. Mills: And another thing. See, New Bern being on the water, it was less expensive to ship by water than it was by rail if you were going to do business abroad, which he did. The sailboats used to come up from the ocean going sailboats and load right on the dock by the mill.

MF: I've heard Betty Wylie talk about that.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. The lumber business in New Bern is real interesting. Somebody ought to really write up about it because lots of fortunes were made.

MF: We have bits and pieces of it on the interviews.

Mrs. Mills: It was a very lucrative business because they were cutting virgin trees.

MF: I did not realize that there was a lot of hardwood in this area. I think of us mostly as a pine area.

Mrs. Mills: They even used to use magnolia in making station wagons.

MF: I didn't know that.

Mrs. Mills: You know the wood; now it's metal, it's painted to look like wood, well, when they originally started out with station wagons, they were made out of wood and magnolia is what they used.

MF: What about cyprus? Did Honey cut a lot of cyprus?

Mrs. Mills: A lot of cyprus too.

MF: So, there would be a lot of cyprus cut. Well, in New Bern, where did you all live?

Mrs. Mills: When we first came we lived at the Gaston Hotel.

I won't say much about the Gaston Hotel. (laughter)

MF: Now, the Gaston Hotel was on Middle Street was it?

Mrs. Mills: It was right there where bicentennial park is.

MF: Oh, okay. It was on South Front Street.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. Mr. Bennett had built a cottage over on the mill yard right on the river, so we moved out of that hotel. It was kind of on the deterioration side, and so we moved out of there and moved into the Bennett cottage. That was fun cause we were right there on the river and had a screen porch and we could go right out on the dock and fish.

MF: Was this on the Trent River or the Neuse River?

Mrs. Mills: It was on Trent River.

MF: On the Trent River.

Mrs. Mills: Uh huh. You can see the pilings when you go across the bridge there.

MF: I've seen the pilings and I've often wondered what was there.

Mrs. Mills: Some of the most interesting people who came up on the boats were the captains and the mates on those sailboats.

MF: And they docked right there and loaded.

Mrs. Mills: Uh huh.

MF: How long did you live in the house over by the mill?

Mrs. Mills: Not too long. I guess it was like two or three months. Then we rented the house on East Front Street that belonged to John Haywood Jones. And who lives in that house now, I don't know.

MF: Well, now, Mrs. Mills, which belonged to Mr. Jones? I don't

which one it is.

Mrs. Mills: You know where Leah Ward lived?

MF: Oh yes.

Mrs. Mills: Well, that belonged to her brother John Haywood.

MF: Oh, that one did? So, you lived in there too.

Mrs. Mills: Uh huh, I lived there. Who had been living in there was the Blackwell Stith's. Mr. Blackwell Stith was the brother of Charlie Stith who had the insurance business. You know, Blackie Stith's uncle.

MF: Yeah.

Mrs. Mills: I think they moved back to Virginia. So, we rented that house. My father didn't want anymore. He said he wasn't in the real estate business. We still had real estate in Alabama. So we lived in that house and we caused, you might say, a real estate development. We hadn't moved in that very long before Leah Ward wanted the house. So then we had to find another house to rent. We rented the house where Muse McCotter lives, and in it was living Mr. Orringer. Mr. Orringer was living in it, the pickle...

MF: The pickle factory people.

Mrs. Mills: They were living in that. We had been in there about two or three months when Muse and Bay McCotter bought it.

MF: (laughter) You just couldn't keep a home could you?

Mrs. Mills: No. So then the Weskett's that lived up there by the Presbyterian manse, we rented that house next to the manse across the street from the library. Was it the Weskett's? No, I don't know

who lived in it. Then the Weskett's bought the house. We hadn't been there two weeks before the Weskett's bought it. We hadn't gotten the furniture good and clean. Then by that time, the moving man knew our furniture. He knew where to put it, he had moved us so many times.

And he said, "Now, this is Martha's room and this is Clarence's room", and he knew where everything went.

MF: (laughter) I guess he did.

Mrs. Mills: Now, mama says, "I'm not gonna move in anybody's house anymore that wants to sell it." So that's when we moved in Billy Hand's house where he lives now. They assured us they were not gonna sell that. It's Mrs. Slover's house which is next door to where we started out. I was married when we were living in that house.

MF: When were you married?

Mrs. Mills: 1934.

MF: And who did you marry?

Mrs. Mills: Hugh Bryan Mills, Sr.

MF: And he was from Richlands wasn't he? Well, his family.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah, he came up here to work for his uncle, Henry Henderson. He came up here to work in the bank when he was a young boy.

MF: Was he kin to Henry Henderson who is married to Tootsie Mitchell?

Mrs. Mills: Tootsie Mitchell is Hugh's first cousin (by marriage).

MF: I see.

Mrs. Mills: Henry Henderson's father was my Hugh's uncle.

MF: Okay. So that's the connection. But the Henderson family came from Richlands, isn't that right?

Mrs. Mills: They came from Onslow County.

MF: Onslow County, okay. Well, that is interesting. And you have two fine boys.

Mrs. Mills: Um huh.

MF: Hugh Bryan Mills, Jr. and what's Kirven's full name?

Mrs. Mills: Clarence Kirven Mills.

MF: I wasn't sure if he had Clarence or not.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. They both had to have Clarence because Hugh's father was Clarence also.

MF: So you had to have that. That's a nice tradition. Well, where did you and Mr. Mills live when you first got married?

Mrs. Mills: When we first got married we lived on Spencer Avenue. I think it was 1401 Spencer Avenue.

MF: I remember that house. Then you moved to DeGraffenreid.

Mrs. Mills: Then we built a house in DeGraffenreid. DeGraffenreid then was suppose to be in the country. Everybody wanted to know why in the world we moved out there. Way out.

MF: (laughter) Well, it was a pecan grove and it was sort of like the country.

Mrs. Mills: I know it.

MF: And ya'll were about the first ones to move over there weren't you?

Mrs. Mills: No, the Hodges lived there.

MF: And Mack Lupton.

Mrs. Mills: Yes, he was there. The McWhorters over here across the street. Then the house that the Baxters' live in, Dr. Parker who was the dentist lived there.

MF: Oh, I didn't know that. I knew that Meta and D. C. McCotter...

Mrs. Mills: Bought that house from them.

MF: Un huh. I see, and Dr. Parker lived there.

Mrs. Mills: Then the Dowdy house was out there.

MF: Yes. Well, it's a lovely area. Mrs. Mills, we'll get back to you being in New Bern and the hurricane. You were here for the hurricane of '33 and living in the Hand house right there on the river. What was it like?

Mrs. Mills: Well, when the hurricane came, I was living in Leah Ward's house. It came right up to the back porch. Didn't come in.

MF: That must have been scary.

Mrs. Mills: My brother had left and gone down to help Lucas and Lewis who had a grocery warehouse. They had a wholesale grocery business right down on the river at the foot of Middle Street, and he had gone down to help them, and the water lapping at our back porch.

I don't even know if you want to put this on tape.

MF: Um huh. If you want to say it.

Mrs. Mills: The funny thing that happened is I looked up and there was my father coming down the steps in his yellow silk pajamas and it storming and blowing. I said, "What in the world have you got

on your yellow silk pajamas for?!" He said, "If anything happens, I'm gonna be prepared." It's the first time he ever wore them and the last time. (laughter) I wish I had a picture of that.

MF: (laughter) Well, your house was real near to bridge.

Mrs. Mills: Yes, both of them I lived in were.

MF: Did you see the bridge? Were you able to look out the window and see the bridge?

Mrs. Mills: No, you couldn't see. We had an interesting dock. We had a sailboat and we had a real interesting dock. Everybody's dock blew away. The house next door to us where Mrs. Sam Smallwood lived, she had a cottage that was built on pilings in the river. Do you remember that? Cause in her backyard was this hundred year old cyprus tree. I think it's gone now. But that blew away completely the cottage. We had the worse looking dock you've ever seen and it was the only one that didn't blow away. My father designed it from having seen them build the dam on the Tombigbee River when he was a boy in Demopolis, Alabama. What he did, he made sort of a box and put all those ballast stones in there. So it was just enough that when the waves came and everything, it just sort of floated along.

Then after the hurricane left, the dock was still there and everybody that had the boats would dock at our dock. It was a disgraceful looking dock and the only one that stood it.

MF: (laughter) That's good engineering. That's good engineering on the part of your father.

Mrs. Mills: And it was still there when Leah bought it. The

dock was still there.

MF: Of course you were married during the Depression. What was the Depression like for ya'll, for families, for businesses, the newlyweds like you and Mr. Mills.

Mrs. Mills: I just remember the Depression as more or less a word because I felt like that my father was going to handle anything, and my mother felt like that Hugh Mills loved to eat so well, that he was going to make a good living.

MF: (laughter) That's wonderful. Well, Honey could handle anything.

Mrs. Mills: Yes, he could. He was special.

MF: How about World War II? How did that affect ya'll?

Mrs. Mills: That was real scary because Hugh just missed being drafted.

MF: At this time, was Mr. Mills in the real estate business?

Mrs. Mills: What was he doing? He was helping liquidate a bank at first I think. That's where he started out doing. Then he just sort of gradually got in it. We bought several farms.

MF: What was New Bern like during the war?

Mrs. Mills: We had a good time. Cherry Point came in. All the shortages that everybody had, we didn't have. We had two bedrooms upstairs for our two little boys. One day Hugh called and said, "Martha, had you ever thought about renting those two rooms?" I said, "No. Nobody wants to rent a room with two little boys in the house and they could go all over the house." He said, "These people are having

to sleep in their cars." I said, "I'll try to keep them downstairs, but I don't know if I can." Well, they were tickled to death to get it. So we rented those rooms. And it was by word of mouth. That was very interesting, particularly as we had a hero one time. His name was Major Wilcox. He had jumped out of a plane, he was going down, and his parachute didn't open all the way. He survived. Of course he was a very healthy, fine looking specimen. So, my youngest got the chicken pox. I said, "Now, listen Bill. My youngest child has got the chicken pox. If you haven't had the chicken pox, I don't know what you're gonna do." Well, he said, "I'm sure I had the chicken pox." So, my youngest Kirven gave him the chicken pox.

MF: Oh, that poor man. (laughter)

Mrs. Mills: And he was the most pitiful. He would go to the base to see if he could get back out of quarantined and they wouldn't let him out of quarantine. So I had me an extra guest in my house for a month. It took him a month to six weeks to get over the chicken pox. He was so sick. I felt so sorry for him. He was broken out all over. (laughter)

MF: The poor thing. (laughter)

Mrs. Mills: Marines, you know, aren't suppose to get anything bad like that. They conquered it all.

MF: (laughter) You're right. Did you have rationing?

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. But they were staying with us and so they got their food and they just brought it to us and we cooked it.

MF: Wasn't that nice?

Mrs. Mills: Yes.

MF: And do you remember the black out curtains?

Mrs. Mills: Oh, that was something else! Because Hugh was one of those wardens, he would leave me in the house with the babies and go out and guard and look and all that kind of stuff.

MF: Mary Barden told me yesterday about spotting for planes from the cupola on what was the post office but now is the federal building downtown on Middle Street. I had never really even thought about anybody spotting for planes in New Bern.

Mrs. Mills: Oh yeah. They had to study it. They had meetings about it.

MF: Fred was over in the Pacific fighting for our freedom while ya'll were protecting the homefront, cause I was very young. Well, after the war, and I know Mr. Mills at this particular time was in the real estate business, tell us about his involvement with Tryon Palace.

Mrs. Mills: That was really interesting. I just gave him up there for two years because he spent it with all the people down there on George Street. He realized and knew that some of them had been born in those houses and their parents had been born in them, so he listened to their stories by the hour. I mean I never did get to see him until late at night most all the time. He sat with them and consoled them and listened to their stories, and he had no trouble at all with any of them.

MF: He was able to purchase all those homes for the Palace.

Mrs. Mills: Yes. And then when the Palace opened, he bought a ticket for everybody that had had houses and gave it to them.

MF: Did he find new homes, or other homes, for these people?

Mrs. Mills: Yes, he helped them get relocated.

MF: He helped them get moved and everything. Did he help them with the moving?

Mrs. Mills: Oh yeah, he helped the whole way. Sometimes he helped them buy a house or sell a house or whatever. The main thing too, was that he wanted them to have a fair price for what the market price would be that day and to take into consideration that this was their family home.

MF: It's a lot to ask someone to give up their family home.

Mrs. Mills: It is.

MF: And you trained to be a guide at Tryon Palace.

Mrs. Mills: Yes, I was one of the original. I had a year of North Carolina history under Miss Gertrude Carraway.

MF: Where were the classes held?

Mrs. Mills: In the Stevenson house.

MF: One year. I think it's one.

Mrs. Mills: One year. It was perfectly wonderful.

MF: You did not go to work right away, though, did you?

Mrs. Mills: No. Couldn't. They had a rule that if any member of your family was associated with Tryon Palace, you couldn't. So I waited. I think it was a year they called me up and said come on down here.

MF: What was it like as a hostess at Tryon Palace?

Mrs. Mills: We studied. We had classes. We had a reading list. Oh, and also, we worked, I worked for about six months before I got any pay.

MF: Why was that?

Mrs. Mills: We didn't get paid.

MF: Oh.

Mrs. Mills: We were in training.

MF: That's right.

Mrs. Mills: We went in training. Then they paid us a dollar an hour. The first time I went down there to go to work, they said, "You're with the school children. Take them over to the Palace." I said, "I'm not ready!" Miss Gertrude said, "Yes you are. You're all right. Go right on." So I said to Elizabeth McSorley, "If I don't come back, just call Hugh Mills to come get me." We were so dumb. We had examinations. We had people to go with us to monitor our speech. Our presentation, we studied all that. They had people to come in and talk to us about our speaking voice. We had all kind of interesting people to come in and help us with it. And we studied 18th century everything.

MF: You had a wonderful, wonderful grounding in being a hostess at Tryon Palace.

Mrs. Mills: Oh yes.

MF: It had changed when I went, but thanks to you and Mrs. Rose and Vera Ipock and Corrine Pate, Mrs. Maxwell and Mrs. Dowdy...

Mrs. Mills: Christine Ipock was also one of the ones. She was the only one in there that could speak enough French.

MF: Right. But ya'll taught me everything you knew, and I knew better than to get out on that floor unless I knew it. (laughter) Because you all corrected me and I appreciated it.

Mrs. Mills: Well, that was a good thing about it. Somebody went with you in a group. You knew whatever they criticized, it wasn't really wasn't like a criticism...

MF: No. Well, it was constructive criticism. Something we needed.

Mrs. Mills: Yes, that's right.

MF: I appreciated it. It was very good. How long were you at the Palace Mrs. Mills?

Mrs. Mills: I don't know. It wasn't twenty years, but almost.

MF: Just about twenty years. It sure was. Well, I know that you have also been very, very active in the library. Now, were you part of the library association?

Mrs. Mills: Yes.

MF: Tell us all about that please.

Mrs. Mills: There's a history of the library that's at the library.

MF: We have that.

Mrs. Mills: When Miss Fannie Howerton was the librarian.

MF: Do you remember Miss Fannie Howerton?

Mrs. Mills: I remember Miss Fannie. I was her first member of

the censoring committee. All my family were big readers and we used to read a book and discuss it at dinner. So the first thing we did was find the library. You paid two dollars.

MF: Now, where was the library?

Mrs. Mills: It was next to the Christian Science Church, which they eventually bought for the reading room. Miss Fannie took a liking to me. If they got a book in the library that she thought was not exactly right for young folks to read, she'd put it in the bottom drawer.

If you went and called for the book, she says, "Well, we have it, but I don't think your mother wants you to read it." So, Miss Fannie would take the book out of the bottom drawer and get me to read it and then bring it back and tell about it, what I thought about it. I don't reckon she read it herself. I loved her.

MF: (laughter) Hilda Lancaster called that "Miss Fannie's naughty drawer."

Mrs. Mills: Oh, she did?

MF: Um huh. (laughter) Hilda said that was Miss Fannie's naughty drawer. I just thought that was real cute.

Mrs. Mills: Miss Fannie was the only one in the library when it was beside the Christian Science Church.

MF: She was also a school teacher. So then, were the library hours after school since she taught school?

Mrs. Mills: I don't remember.

MF: Doing that for Miss Fannie, how did you proceed with your association with the library?

Mrs. Mills: I just sort of fell into it. Because along came the government and they wanted the lot where the John Wright Stanly house was, which is where the post office is. They wanted it by the post office. I wasn't on the committee or anything then. I didn't have anything to do with that. But there was an awful time there.

The John Wright Stanly house belonged to Col. Bryan. They are kin to everybody in town, the Bryan's are. He lived in New Jersey. Oh yeah and the government wanted that lot, so there was a question then.

The group that was on the committee then was Georgia Dowdy. I knew that one. And Mary Louise Guion, and I've forgotten who else was on there, but it was up to them to decide what to do about the library.

The Christian Science wanted the building it was in. Then the government wanted the building where the John Wright Stanly house was.

Well, the ladies didn't know what was the best thing to do - tear the John Wright Stanly house down and build a brick building. Georgia Dowdy said many a time that she was one of the main ones wanted a brick building. She was a school teacher too you know. Anyway, they just couldn't bear to see that beautiful house torn down, so they bought it and offered it to the library for \$3,000. You talking about getting the money for that \$3,000, that was something else. We had to get the money.

MF: How did you get the money?

Mrs. Mills: Every way you ever heard tell of. Then when we got in there. We moved the John Wright Stanly house to that lot on New Street. In back of it was a small cottage. It was real attractive

and we fixed that up. I got on the committee then. We had to keep up the John Wright Stanly house best way we could. Every year we'd have to go to the meeting of the city and the county and present our budget. Every year we'd have to go.

MF: So they helped you with funds way back then.

Mrs. Mills: The city and the county and the government helped us. Had to. The rooms upstairs we made into two apartments, and the library was downstairs. That's how we saved it. We had a terrific job of the painting and we had pigeons roosting in it and we had everything you ever heard of in an old building, trying to keep it painted, keep it up, keep it rented and all that.

MF: The rent probably took care of the maintenance some.

Mrs. Mills: It didn't take care of it. If it hadn't been for the money from the city and the county and the federal government, we couldn't have done it.

MF: Mrs. Mills, who was the librarian then? I have down here that Miss Fannie Howerton died in 1940, and then Margaret Chapman was appointed in 1940.

Mrs. Mills: I don't know.

MF: You don't remember?

Mrs. Mills: Uh uh.

MF: What about Rosamund Meadows and Lula Broadstreet?

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. I remember Miss Rosamund as in the children's library. I don't know whether she was children's librarian or whether I just remember her that way.

MF: Were they paid by the WPA?

Mrs. Mills: She was. Miss Meadows was.

MF: What other help did the WPA give you for the library?

Mrs. Mills: I don't remember, but they did give us a lot of help. They did a lot of research for various things.

MF: I know that for one of their projects, they went into Cedar Grove Cemetery and listed all the tombstones. There's a booklet in what is now the Kellenberger Room. It used to be the North Carolina Room, isn't that right?

Mrs. Mills: Um huh.

MF: They have put together (a booklet) and you can find out who was buried there, which is a very nice thing.

Mrs. Mills: Oh yeah. Um huh.

MF: This WPA stands for Works Progress Administration, isn't that right?

Mrs. Mills: Um huh.

MF: I have some information right here, that in 1936 the Negro library was opened in the West Street School. I think the WPA had something to do with that. Do you know anything about that?

Mrs. Mills: I don't know anything about that, but I remember when it was.

MF: At that particular time, ya'lls library, the one in the John Wright Stanly, and the one on West Street, did not share books, did they?

Mrs. Mills: I don't know. I remember that it was a concern.

The colored library was a concern. But I don't remember about the books, whether we shared them or whether we bought separate books or what.

MF: Well, after Margaret Chapman, maybe she was librarian when Betty Flowers came. You were still active on the library board when Betty Flowers was there in the fifties.

Mrs. Mills: Well, there was another girl I think came before Mrs. Flowers, maybe she was afterwards, and she was a cousin of Hannah Weskett. Who else have you got?

MF: Well, the only ones I have down here are Frances Jones Howerton and Margaret Chapman, and then we go to Betty Flowers.

Mrs. Mills: Well, this girl lived in Sanford. She was from Sanford.

MF: Oh, oh. Mary Scott Gurley.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah!

MF: What about her?

Mrs. Mills: You've got that in sequence there. Maybe she was after Betty Flowers.

MF: Elinor came after Betty.

Mrs. Mills: Well, then, she was before.

MF: Okay. Mary Scott Gurley came after Margaret Chapman.

Mrs. Mills: She had to leave, I think, Mary Scott did, on account of her mother or somebody in the family.

MF: That's right. Okay. And then Betty Flowers. Betty had been the librarian at New Bern High School. She was there in 1951,

so she must have gone to ya'll about 1952. What was the library like under Mrs. Flowers?

Mrs. Mills: At that time, the worse thing that we had was the housekeeping of the library. We really had to put more into keeping up that building and keeping it rented and all of that. The library just moved along evenly as far as I know. We never had any problems. Not that way.

MF: Did she start a book review program for radio station WHIT?

Mrs. Mills: Who?

MF: Betty Flowers.

Mrs. Mills: I don't know. I thought that Elinor Hawkins started that.

MF: Well, Elinor started the story hour for the children, but Betty did the book review program. And then Elinor came. I don't remember exactly when she came. How did ya'll get Elinor to be your librarian? Had she applied?

Mrs. Mills: She was a librarian in Greensboro.

MF: You know, I think her husband was moving back to this area.

Mrs. Mills: Her husband, this was his home. That had a lot to do with it. I don't know who got her.

MF: Were you a member of the library board at that time?

Mrs. Mills: Yeah, but I wasn't on that committee. I don't know who was on that committee.

MF: I think Mary Louise Guion was.

Mrs. Mills: Then, I can't think of that woman's name. Her husband

was a lawyer, was Hugh's lawyer for so long he was so smart. You know whom I'm talking about.

MF: Leah Ward?

Mrs. Mills: No.

MF: No, you would remember Leah.

Mrs. Mills: Leah could have been on that committee.

MF: Gracious sakes. Fred, who can you think of that was on that committee. Caroline Ashford was on it.

Mrs. Mills: She was on a little bit later. This is Whitehurst.

MF: Oh, oh, oh, yes.

Mrs. Mills: Edna Whitehurst was the main one! She was really good, and I think she's the one that got Elinor. I'm not sure, but I think she did.

MF: Okay. When Elinor came, was this when we were supported more by the city and the county and became a regional library? Was the library association dissolved so to speak at that time?

Mrs. Mills: The library, until we built the new building according to the old laws and the old set up, the library belonged to the directors.

MF: Okay.

Mrs. Mills: So when they built the new building, we all had to sign and give it to the state. It was a great concern of the state of North Carolina. They didn't know what to do with us, see. The way the thing was set up, it was real peculiar. So we owned the library if it was ever used for anything else but a library. But we had to

all sign a document. That's the reason our names are on that bronze plaque that's in the new library building.

MF: I see. So you all signed the document giving it to the state and they took over the maintenance and the running of the library.

Mrs. Mills: Yes.

MF: Well, about this time, is this when the Friends of the Library was started?

Mrs. Mills: Now, Meta McCotter started that.

MF: Tell me about that. What are the Friends of the Library?

Mrs. Mills: The Friends of the Library is just a liaison between the public and the library. The Friends of the Library is anybody that's interested.

MF: And the dues, or the contribution I should say, is what now? Five dollars a year?

Mrs. Mills: I think it's five dollars. I think it started out as two.

MF: It did. What is that money used for?

Mrs. Mills: I hadn't been in so long. I don't know now what it's used for.

MF: Maybe for new books.

Mrs. Mills: No, I don't think it's for books. I think it's in promotional things for the library. The first money we collected we got a speaker.

MF: Oh, okay. I see.

Mrs. Mills: There was a certain amount of expense that you had

to have. Not much, but that's what we had. That's the first money.

MF: And you're on the book selection committee.

Mrs. Mills: The book committee, that was a baby of Mrs. Hawkins. She had done that in Greensboro. She thought that was a good way to have a bridge, more or less, between the patrons of the library and the library itself. That way, she felt like, she sort of had a pulse on the citizens of New Bern. When it first started out, we had someone who read the reviews on fiction, non-fiction, travel, politics, and religion. We had no official standing whatsoever. We read the reviews and then gave them to her. So we had no say so. It was just our recommendation. She, by then, knew us well enough to know, if we recommended it, we thought it would be good for the library.

MF: And then, I think you later had someone to recommend children's books.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah, I forgot, we had children's books.

MF: Virginia Hollister did that, didn't she?

Mrs. Mills: She wasn't the first one. I've forgotten who was the first one. She was teaching school.

MF: Do you remember the people that have worked with you, the ladies that have worked with you on this book selection committee? I think Mary Monte has been on it, hasn't she?

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. You mean the ones that were on it now until it was disbanded?

MF: Oh, has it been disbanded?

Mrs. Mills: Um huh.

MF: Mr. Modlin decided not to continue with it?

Mrs. Mills: Yeah.

MF: Well, that's a shame. Well, new directors, things change.

Mrs. Mills: I tried to get somebody else to be chairman of it, cause it's not like Tryon Palace hostess, you're on there for life if you want to be. I said, "Ya'll can get rid of me anytime you want to." But, it wasn't all that big. Mainly, it was keeping up with it.

MF: Well, it was a nice public service.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. One of the nicest things we had, we had Bern Budd who was a retiree I guess you'd call him. He was on our committee and it was nice to have a man.

MF: Yes. He was a retired lawyer, and that was very nice.

Mrs. Mills: Um huh. Then Nettie Pinnix Cox has been on it for a long time.

MF: She sure has.

Mrs. Mills: Nettie and Amy McKnight was on it. Then in the last year we've had Frances Francis, and she was real good.

MF: Oh. Well, when did Mr. Modlin...

Mrs. Mills: He wrote us all a very nice letter.

MF: And thanked you and said the committee would not continue. So that must have been about September or October when he came.

Mrs. Mills: I'll get the list. This is the book committee as of last year, which is 1992. Mrs. Robert Monte, Mrs. Mark Dunn, Mrs.

V. J. McKnight, Mrs. Jack Hollister, Mrs. Robert A. Ipock, Mrs. Paul Cox, Mrs. Robert Stallings, Mrs. Charles H. Francis. And it was disbanded October 9, 1992.

MF: And you were on it too.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah, Martha Mills. I was chairman of it.

MF: Okay. Well, I want to ask you one other thing. I don't think I mentioned it to you earlier. Did you ever hear of, or do you know anything about, the Mary Hendren Vance Memorial Fund for book purchases?

Mrs. Mills: I just saw something in here about it.

MF: Oh good.

Mrs. Mills: "In January 1967, Mrs. Elinor Hawkins talked with Mrs. Cannon, Mrs. Mary Vance's daughter, concerning the \$250 memorial fund to be spent on books of literature. Mrs. Cannon will go to Duke and get a list. Mrs. Hawkins suggested we have this collection at the opening of the new library. It was suggested by Mrs. Vance's best friend that some books on North Carolina history of the period of Governor Vance be purchased."

MF: That's the best information we've had on that, Mrs. Mills, and that tells us what that memorial fund was. No one else seemed to have any idea what it was about.

Mrs. Mills: These are just some notes I took.

MF: Well, is there anything else in there about Mrs. Vance?

Mrs. Mills: That's all I saw.

MF: Okay. Well, that was the last thing that I really needed

to know because you have answered all the other questions. Thank goodness you have kept that wonderful little notebook.

Mrs. Mills: It's a scratch pad really.

MF: Well, is there anything else in there that we should have for the record?

Mrs. Mills: I was the secretary of the board of directors after Mrs. Elsie Stevenson. I was an assistant, and then she talked me into being secretary when she resigned.

MF: So you have a very long and a very nice relationship with the library.

Mrs. Mills: I feel like it's one of my children.

MF: I know it. Well, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the New Bern public library? (pause) Mrs. Mills, tell me about the relationships between blacks and whites in New Bern from the time you came up to present day.

Mrs. Mills: Well, it was such a, I'd guess you'd say calm. There was no relationship. Everybody got along fine.

MF: I thought so too.

Mrs. Mills: I never did know there was any dissention any way.

MF: How about now?

Mrs. Mills: Well, there's dissention now unfortunately.

MF: How has New Bern changed from the time you came?

Mrs. Mills: When I came it was an ideal place to live and enjoy. Everybody was so friendly and helped in any way that they could. Of course, I've only been here about fifty-five years.

MF: (laughter) Well, you're almost a native.

Mrs. Mills: I know it. I wasn't born here. My ancestors came from here, because my ancestors were Slocum's and that's what Slocum Creek is named for.

MF: So you can be a native.

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. But we've got something that you can't grow and you can't buy it, its our history and it's really appreciated by the people who retire. It really is. And they've entered right into it, and they've been an addition really. Course sometime they want to tell us how to run our business, but then, that's all right too, cause they really contribute.

MF: Yes they do. I would like for it stop growing.

Mrs. Mills: Well so would I! Then my husband was in the real estate business and he was the first one to try to get some restrictions on it. He was on the first Real Estate Law Board. He was one of the ones that got the law passed.

MF: Which law?

Mrs. Mills: The law making you have to have a license to sale real estate.

MF: Oh really?

Mrs. Mills: The real estate license law. Yeah. He went all over to see how different states handled the thing. We went to several big meetings in Myrtle Beach where they had people from large cities like Chicago, which had a very promising one then. Then another one that was promising too, and was historical was Boston. Before that

law was passed, anybody could sell real estate and charge what they wanted to. But the license law, when they got that passed, you had to have an examination.

MF: I did not know that.

Mrs. Mills: And it took a long time. It took a pretty good while for them to get that law passed.

MF: I'm so glad Mr. Mills did that. Well, is there anything else that you would like to tell us about New Bern?

Mrs. Mills: As we all know, it's a grand place to live. I grew up, my childhood, in Demopolis, which was on two rivers, the Black Warrior and the Tombigbee, just like the Trent and the Neuse. So I felt right at home.

MF: Yeah, you would.

Mrs. Mills: In fact, when we drove into New Bern, my father drove us across the Trent River bridge to see the river.

MF: And it was an old wooden bridge.

Mrs. Mills: Um huh. It had a bridge tender that would open the bridge, and on the side he smoked herring.

MF: Oh, did he really?

Mrs. Mills: Yeah. I don't know what his name was now, but we always got smoked herring from him.

MF: I didn't know that.

Mrs. Mills: Most people got their smoked herring from Edenton, but we got ours from the bridge tender.

MF: That was a nice little sideline for him.

Mrs. Mills: Um huh. Dad loved smoked herring for Sunday morning breakfast.

MF: Well, can you think of anything else that you would like to talk about? Anything.

Mrs. Mills: It's a good place to grow up in. You know.

MF: I certainly do.

Mrs. Mills: For children to grow up in. It was nice too when your children could get on their bicycle and ride to school.

MF: Very nice.

Mrs. Mills: We didn't have to have school buses.

MF: You're right. It was very nice. Well, Mrs. Mills, I want to thank you so much for letting us come and interview you and for participating in this oral history of New Bern. This is really a great pleasure for me cause I've known you, well, ever since I was born.

I sure have. So especially for me, and for Memories too, thank you very, very much.

Mrs. Mills: Well, you're welcome. It's a pleasure for me, and thank you, and Joe Pat.

END OF INTERVIEW

James City, North Carolina 1932

Commercial Hardwood Company: owner Clarence Kirven

Manufactured of hardwood lumber for furniture (former Munger-Bennett Co., manufacturers of pine lumber).

This mill was converted by Clarence Kirven to cutting hardwood lumber

which was a different operation than cutting pine lumber. Employees were: J. C. Ferguson, Willard Ferguson, Ray Brewer, Fred Darnell, Archie Edwards, Jack Blackman and Hugh Andrews. Cost of manufacture was always an item to be considered so after the hardwood close by had been bought and manufactured the Commercial Hardwood Company moved its operation to Kenansville, North Carolina. There Mr. Kirven became great friends of Mr. Early Robert Penney, grandfather of Marea Kafer Foster and Jo Kinsey Kafer. Mr. Penney operated a pine saw mill and also ran a country store. There the two gentlemen enjoyed lunch on the counter which Mr. Penney covered with a length of butcherspaper for a tablecloth. Often the lunch was sardines and gingersnaps.

The above information was written and given to me, Marea Penney Kafer Foster, in February 1993 by Martha Kirven Mills (Mrs. hugh Bryan Mills, Sr.) daughter of Clarence Kirven.

Marea Penney Kafer Foster  
May 12, 1993