

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH HANNAH BLOCK**

JUNE 15, 1995

INTRODUCTION:

This is the morning of June 15, 1995, at the home of Mrs. Hannah Block at 319 S. Front Street in Wilmington. My purpose in being here is to talk to Hannah about some of her experiences and life in Wilmington. She has quite a varied background and I want to see if I can get her to share with us this morning.

INTERVIEWER: So Hannah, let's start out with a fundamental or two. How about telling me who, where, what and when. I'm not going to ask you your age, but tell me when you...

BLOCK: I'm pretty old.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me if you are a native Wilmingtonian and a little bit about early school and what have you.

BLOCK: Well rightfully I was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, and was raised there. I went to Baltimore to Peabody as a musician and then left there with the band and then my mother came up to Boston and took me back home. She didn't think that her child should be a public singer let's put it that way. And then when I got back home, she realized I was very, very unhappy, so she said, all right, I'll give you six months to make good in New York City. Well you know how young folks are and you feel like that you're going to set the world on fire in New York. Well I got up there and couldn't get a singing job, so I went into Macy's and I sold toys. Well what was one girl's bad luck turned into my good luck. She was in an automobile accident and they had to have a singer at Number One Fifth Avenue right away, so I got the job.

INTERVIEWER: That is being at the right place at the right time.

BLOCK: Exactly. It was wonderful and I loved it up there, but I was singing in a club when my soon to be husband, Charles Block, came in. I did not know him.

INTERVIEWER: That's where you met?

BLOCK: He came in at 7:00 pm and I sang in the 9:00 show with a nice band. He proposed to me at 11:00 pm but I thought the man was a little bit touched in the head.

INTERVIEWER: He was a fast worker, wasn't he?

BLOCK: I didn't know what to make of it, but to make the story short, I married him six months later, which was in December of 1935. He brought me back here, but Sam, I don't think many people realize that the Block Shirt Factory was the largest family owned shirt factory in the country.

INTERVIEWER: No, I'm sure that we didn't. I certainly didn't.

BLOCK: Yes, but still again.

INTERVIEWER: Well let me ask you in this period of time, where did you pick up any schooling?

BLOCK: At Peabody.

INTERVIEWER: At Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore?

BLOCK: Yes, in Baltimore. I was there.

INTERVIEWER: I was there two years ago at an Elderhostel. Okay, we'll get off of that, but I was there every night....

BLOCK: Do you remember Amos Allen?

INTERVIEWER: No, don't think I do.

BLOCK: He was from Wilmington but he was in Baltimore.

INTERVIEWER: I'm trying to get the age you were singing in the early 1920's?

BLOCK: Yes, I was going to Peabody and I realized, even though I'm a professional musician as a singer and pianist, that my voice wasn't that good. After hearing all these beautiful voices, I knew I didn't have a chance, so I did the next best thing and that was to go into jazz. You know, of course, you had famous shows and I was singing those kind of songs.

INTERVIEWER: Jazz was coming into it's own.

BLOCK: Oh yes, and I played the piano too. But anyhow...

INTERVIEWER: Birdland and Dizzy Gillespie and all that?

BLOCK: Oh yes and Number One Fifth Avenue was in fact the top lounge in New York which as I said, I was where I was very lucky. And I knew Betty Devine. Did you know her?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BLOCK: Betty Devine and I played together because her aunt and uncle lived in a duplex house with us in Portsmouth. I knew her when I came here and I also knew Amos Allen and...

INTERVIEWER: Do you recall what year you moved to Wilmington?

BLOCK: Oh sure, I moved to Wilmington at the end of the December of 1935 after I married. I loved it and it was so unique. Wilmington, I realized then, was a city of people who accepted you for what you were until you proved otherwise. Most cities are suspicious of you until you prove otherwise. It was just a very unique place to live. Now our secret has been found out.

INTERVIEWER: I came to Wilmington 6 months later in 1936.

BLOCK: I want to just deviate there a little bit. Sam, when other people refused to help me, when I came down here to do the first house in the Historic Wilmington area and it was a 34 room house, I went to different banks and they would not even think of helping me. I went to you

and this was in 1966 and I told you what I wanted to do. You said to me, “Hannah, I will loan you the money on your own reputation,” and that’s how I got the money to do the first house downtown.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that’s interesting. I’m glad it was a favorable occurrence, not otherwise.

BLOCK: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Let’s go back just a minute. Now when did the Block Shirt Factory...

BLOCK: come here?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BLOCK: 1921 or 1922.

INTERVIEWER: Now when Charlie met you, was Charlie just visiting New York?

BLOCK: That’s right, he was up there to buy material for the factory.

INTERVIEWER: All right, and by chance, he happened to go to the place where you were singing?

BLOCK: That’s right.

INTERVIEWER: That worked out pretty well for you, didn’t it?

BLOCK: Well, I was quite pleased. He was quite an unusual man and he was very gentle and kind. My son is just like him.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about your family and how many children you had?

BLOCK: I had two children. Franklin was born November 24th in 1936, and then my daughter was born 10 years later.

INTERVIEWER: And what’s your daughter’s name?

BLOCK: Mary Elizabeth Block. Well, it’s Levine now, but she has two children and my son has three. I have three great-grandchildren and expecting two more.

INTERVIEWER: That’s quite a family. Let’s go back now to when you moved to Wilmington, were getting settled, and raising a family with children. When did you get into other interests in Wilmington, other than family?

BLOCK: I started out, you see living near the water in Virginia Beach, Ocean View, and Norfolk, but I was always a swimmer. Well when I got here, we built a cottage at Carolina Beach the following summer and I was just was so interested in water safety that I got my life-saving certificate out there from Lonnie Peck. Lonnie Peck left here, went to Canada just before the war and became a pilot. He went to England and was shot down over Germany, and of course he was a P.O.W. He came back home after the war, but he was in bad shape. He was the one that made us all lifeguards. Well of course you know that during the war, all the men went off to war, so it

was up to me. I was the senior member and it was up to me to take over the lifeguard course, which meant I had to train 15 and 16 year old kids, but we never...

INTERVIEWER: This was at Carolina Beach?

BLOCK: That was at Carolina Beach for 9 years.

INTERVIEWER: That was 9 years and the word has it that you were the first lady lifeguard in North Carolina.

BLOCK: That's right; I was head lifeguard.

INTERVIEWER: That's my understanding, head lifeguard.

BLOCK: Because I was making guards out of young girls, we never lost a life out there.

INTERVIEWER: That was until 1949, I think it was.

BLOCK: 1948.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Tell me where and when did you develop political interests.

BLOCK: Well that is a story unto itself. Do you remember Dr. Hall that had the drug store?

INTERVIEWER: I sure do.

BLOCK: I loved that man. He was the one that pushed me into politics. He said, "Hannah, I want you to run. You are qualified and you should run". Well I had no reason for running at the time, but gradually what happened, the Atlantic Coastline pulled out. Well, we lost 2500 families. Do you believe that? The Atlantic Coastline was the biggest industry we had here and they moved to Jacksonville, Florida, which left a terribly large void. Well, a lot of the people didn't give credit where credit is due. Dan Cameron had started the Committee of 100. He was with the Committee of 100 and brought in DuPont, Hercules, Corning, and General Electric. He should get the credit for this because he worked very hard and of course, I had won on the City Council.

INTERVIEWER: What was the first office you ran for? City Council?

BLOCK: Yes, and then I was made Mayor Pro Tem. Well, what he did, I thought was so unusual and that he deserved every bit of credit with the organization.

INTERVIEWER: Was he Mayor at that time?

BLOCK: No, he was the Mayor way before then.

INTERVIEWER: I knew he was Mayor at one time.

BLOCK: Yes, that was in the 1950's but this was in the 1960's, 1961 or 1962. Well not only that, he also did so much for this community. Nobody can believe what this man's done, rather he and his brother, Bruce. His father was mayor in the 1940's and he brought in fresh water for

people to drink. That was his father's contribution. I just can't rave enough about Dan and his brother because they have given Wilmington so much land, the college, and I could go on and on.

INTERVIEWER: Let's get back to you and tell me what do you think was the most significant happening when you were on the City Council either as Mayor Pro Tem or as a City Council person?

BLOCK: I would say bringing in the U.S.S. North Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Which is still going strong.

BLOCK: Absolutely and imagine all of the school children giving a dime to bring it in here.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, there were a number of things including the old array of admirals who...

BLOCK: Which I was one. Oh, you too?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, me too.

BLOCK: Well you would be over there in the files.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I am. Now tell me, did you ever run for political office other than that? Your son ran for political office and became a North Carolina Senator and I know you were very proud of that.

BLOCK: He was in for three terms. He said that after three terms, no one should be in office.

INTERVIEWER: I wish some that have become professional legislators would realize that. Now Hannah, let's go back to the North Carolina Azalea Festival. That was originated somewhere right after the war, in the late 1940s?

BLOCK: 1947.

INTERVIEWER: 1947.

BLOCK: And it was Hugh Morton who spear headed it and there were of course many others. He brought us all in. Well I had directed the first Miss North Carolina Pageant when it was nothing but a bathing suit out at Carolina Beach. And then, of course, when we became affiliated with Atlantic City, I was with it about 40 years training girls and I always had a girl in the top 5 or 10.

INTERVIEWER: You had one to win one time didn't you?

BLOCK: Yes, that was Maria Bell Fletcher. And then of course, out of nine national and international pageants, I've had nine winners.

INTERVIEWER: That's great and that's quite a track record.

BLOCK: Well and you know what the secret was, Sam?

INTERVIEWER: No I don't, tell me.

BLOCK: Teaching them the good old Southern charm, softness. That's all it is and good manners. That's everything that they won on but of course, they had to be pretty.

INTERVIEWER: Well you were involved with that for...

BLOCK: 40 years.

INTERVIEWER: 40 years. Well I'm glad I didn't ask you your age because we're beginning to add up a few.

BLOCK: Well you know what, I'm right proud.

INTERVIEWER: Well I'll ask you, how old are you?

BLOCK: I'm 82 and still going strong.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, evidently you are and I appreciate your willingness to allow me to come over this morning so promptly. Some people try to find every excuse in the world to try to put me off, but I know the ones I want to talk to and I'm persistent with Southern charm.

BLOCK: That's exactly what it was and it still is today, but people are not realizing it.

INTERVIEWER: Well, tell me a little bit about your part directly in the Azalea Festival, what you did for that.

BLOCK: Well, Beulah Meiers and I decided to elaborate on the pageant when it used to be out at the Lumina. The governor always crowned the queen. We wanted something elegant and very southern so she would design and make the gowns. We would bring in a famous star from Hollywood and the girls that were with her were college queens.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

BLOCK: And that is how we built it up. It was elegant. Then...

INTERVIEWER: Where were they held then?

BLOCK: Oh, at Brogden Hall but it got to the point that they didn't have enough room so that's why it was moved out to the college.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

BLOCK: It was interesting and then all of a sudden, one year we found we were without money. We had just overspent and that was when I was on the City Council. At the time, I said let's have a patron's party and in those days, it was \$75 for of course a big evening and a show ticket and so forth. Today, I believe it's anywhere from \$250 to \$300, but I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: It may even be more than that.

BLOCK: Maybe it is. I don't know because I haven't kept up with it. But it actually is one of the mainstays for money to keep...

INTERVIEWER: Well you certainly brought in some of the celebrities of those particular times for the pageant and the ladies were the leading actresses of Hollywood and the leading actresses known in the world. I can remember some of the names? Can you remember some of the names?

BLOCK: Oh, Grayson.

INTERVIEWER: Kathryn Grayson?

BLOCK: Kathryn Grayson, and then there was, what's her name, Esther Williams and then there were, oh, so many.

INTERVIEWER: Polly Bergen was one.

BLOCK: Oh yes, and I had a funny thing happen. You know she was back here to make a movie.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

BLOCK: Oh yes, that was six months ago, she was across the street, and I walked up to her and said, "Are you ready to be made queen?" She looked at me and said, "Hannah Block." I said, "I just live across the street and it was old home week." That was quite cute after so many years.

INTERVIEWER: Well, we had some people for the Azalea Festival that came in that were names of their day. It seems to me, if I'm not mistaken that in 1956, I believe I saw a picture of Ronald Reagan in the reviewing stand as one of those that later became, and no one realized then that he was going to, become president.

BLOCK: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: One of the first ones that were here in the celebrities group was Ted Malone. It was the first year and that was interesting because I had known him in Europe. Well now, you're leaving life guarding, the Azalea Festival, and politics a little bit and now let's get back to music. What have you done in music? You said you played.

BLOCK: Oh, I still play. I don't sing anymore because my age has kind of gotten rid of my voice. But anyhow, in 1966 I was on the Governor's Committee of Beautification and Janelle Moore was taking a group of women...

INTERVIEWER: That was Governor Dan Moore's wife?

BLOCK: That's right. They were going all over North Carolina to see what could be done for beautification. Oh by the way, just to deviate a little bit, I went to Europe and did the research for Governor Dan Moore and for the State of North Carolina on the international road signs which meant I had to travel the Autobon and the Autostrada. England was putting it in at that time for the first time and they were marvelous. They gave me a copy of everything they had and I brought it back and took it to Governor Dan Moore. Would you believe it, Wilmington had the international road sign, which means it's nothing but pictures instead of words. Wilmington had it first, North Carolina had it second, and now it's gone all over the United States.

INTERVIEWER: Well that's an interesting project to be involved in and one that I wasn't aware of. Tell me this, you seem to have diverse interests of all kinds and looking at some of the photographs that are there in the book that we were looking at a few minutes ago, what are some of the other interesting things that you got involved in, either through your position in the city, the Azalea Festival, through music, or other ways. Well you started us out with lifeguarding but don't leave us there.

BLOCK: Well when Charlie retired, he remembered Miami Beach back in 1935 when it was an elite beach. He wanted to go back there to retire but I didn't want to leave Wilmington. But you know, you go where your husband wants you to go, and I went. He gave me everything under the sun to make me happy; a gorgeous apartment and furniture you couldn't believe. But I wasn't happy there. He was out during the afternoon and when he would come back, my bags were packed. I said, "Charlie, I'll see you in a month. I'm going home". I just could not be down there and I missed Wilmington and its people. I even worked with little ex-drug addicts. I worked in St. Francis Hospital and the children were heartbreaking at the age of 10, that were on....

INTERVIEWER: Now, where's this hospital located?

BLOCK: It was St. Francis in Miami. And I worked there. Also, I helped originate the auxiliary of the hospital.

INTERVIEWER: That's quite an accomplishment within itself.

BLOCK: I was one of the originators. There were many things that I have done, but some of the satisfaction I will show you later. Martha Raye and I were the two honorary green berets during the war.

INTERVIEWER: That's a fact for the record book.

BLOCK: I have the key to New York, to San Juan, and the key to Wilmington, that was given to me. Can you cut that?

INTERVIEWER: We have taken a brief recess for a minute to allow me to examine an interesting cabinet that is full of momentos and things that involve Hannah's life in connection with Wilmington, the State of North Carolina, and the surrounding states. She is everything from a Deputy Sheriff to a Kentucky Colonel and she has certificates of things that she has done and recognition from the Governor of North Carolina in several instances and it states things that just completely floor me. I tried to get her to talk about those a little bit, but we're going to have to pass that up. I am completely amazed at what this lady has done. Let's see if we can talk a little bit about historic Wilmington, the old houses and the fact that we're sitting this morning in a house that was a landmark house. You started out the renovation and restoration of the Wilmington area, basically from Front Street to River Streets and out to about Fifth Street and from Market Street south for a few blocks. That was the original restoration area. Now Hannah, tell us a little bit about that please.

BLOCK: Well, I wanted to buy the Honnet house across the street, but Mr. Honnet's daughters still live there and wouldn't sell it. So I came across...

INTERVIEWER: Was that Eloise?

BLOCK: Yes, I came across the street because I found this house was for sale. You know, the idea that I paid \$7000 for 34 rooms and you loaned me the rest of the money to redo this house was something. Governor Moore's wife, Janelle, came down and dedicated this house. Plus, I thought it was going to be open for a week.

INTERVIEWER: What is the historic name of the house?

BLOCK: Well it's Pernell-Empie House, but at that time we had to name it the Executive House because part of the family wouldn't give me permission to use the name Pernell-Empie until she came by and saw what we had done. She was so impressed that she said, "Yes, you go on and use the original name." Well, this is one of 10 houses I have gotten and I had three well-known places: Robert Rourke house on Nunn Street and I also restored 214 Church Street, which was Katerina Jabo's house. She was the first black opera singer in the world from Milan, Italy. When I found out she was alive in New York, I asked her to come down to dedicate her house where she was born. She came down and we fell in love with each other. She was so cosmopolitan. She dedicated the house and also was the honored guest for the St. Thomas Festival. When she died in 1986, she left me her memorabilia, her jewelry, which one piece was given to her by an emperor but she gave it to me. The memorabilia I gave to the museum because she was worth every bit of that.

INTERVIEWER: That was the proper place for it.

BLOCK: I think so. But every time I think of her and how she visited me, she was quite a wonderful woman.

INTERVIEWER: What were the other houses? Were the houses that were not named in the historic area?

BLOCK: That's it. I have two houses over on Church and Third Streets, on the corner. It's pink and the other one is blue. Now some of the houses I've sold off all but four of the houses because it was just too much for me to take care of. As it is, I take care of 10 rentals now, but I love seeing Wilmington come back like it used to be.

INTERVIEWER: We're going to have to wind up in 2 to 3 minutes and I'm wondering if there's anything that you would like, that's occurred to you that you would like to comment on and add to in order to wind up this interesting conversation this morning?

BLOCK: Thank you. I still say Wilmington is very unique and it's been wonderful to me. I don't believe I could have done what I did over the past 60 years.

INTERVIEWER: Well I'm thankful indeed that Charlie Block walked into the club he did that evening. I still can't get over the fact that he proposed the same evening, but apparently it was successful. He brought you back to Wilmington, you've had a very distinguished career, and you have done things for Wilmington, which Wilmington should be forever in your debt. I've got one question that I want to ask you, though. Did you pay back the money you borrowed from me? I never looked to see.

BLOCK: I have you know and paid you back monthly, although sometimes it was very hard.

INTERVIEWER: But you finally paid me back?

BLOCK: Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: I'm glad to know that. I never worried about it enough to look and see. I thought we'd leave this on a nice, friendly, funny note. It's been a pleasure being here this morning and I'm going to close out this interview now with my thanks to Hannah Block for joining the other people that have been kind enough to consent to tell a little bit about their parts in Wilmington. We have enjoyed hearing about your part. Thank you Hannah.