

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR  
INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM BROOKS**

**AUGUST 11, 1995**

**INTRODUCTION:**

**This is Sam Bisette on the morning of August 11, 1995. I'm here at home at 1939 S. Live Oak Parkway in Wilmington. Bill Brooks is with me. Bill has had quite a tenure with the university in the sports area. We are going to talk to him a bit about that and see if he can help to record part of this information that we need on the sports area for this group of interviews that we are doing.**

INTERVIEWER: Bill, let's start out with a little bit of background information. Can you tell me when you were born and we'll find out how and when you got to Wilmington.

BROOKS: I was born in Wilson County, a little community called Black Creek in 1922, October 13, which was a Friday in 1922 and we moved into Wilson about 10 years later and I went to high school at Charles L. Coon High School and graduated from there in '41, attended Wake Forest a little over a year and then went into the service and when I came out of service, I was in the Army Air Corps as an aviation cadet, never did finish training before the war ended. And after coming out of the service, I had an opportunity to play professional baseball and I played in the New York Giants organization and in off season completed my college – finished up at Atlantic Christian in '48.

INTERVIEWER: All right, let's stop right at that point and back up just a little bit. I'm finding out something about you that I didn't know. I was born also in Wilson. I know where Charles L. Kuhn High School was and the area that you're talking about I was living there until I was 6 years old, so I didn't know you and I shared the same county anyway. Well that's interesting. Then it so happens that you and Leon Brogden come from the same town, do you not?

BROOKS: He came to Wilson I think when I was 13 when I first met him. He came there to coach at Charles L. Coon.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't that Sally's hometown?

BROOKS: That was Sally's hometown too.

INTERVIEWER: Sally Brogden?

BROOKS: Right, she was Sally Mayo.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do any sports participation during your high school time.

BROOKS: Well, back then I think all athletes played everything. I played football and in fact, I went to Wake Forest on a football scholarship. I played basketball for four years and I played baseball for four years. I played all three sports.

INTERVIEWER: Well, which was your favorite?

BROOKS: I don't know. Back then I think it was more or less what season you were in as to what you thought the most of, probably football and baseball. Basketball, to me, was something kind of in between those two to keep in shape and basketball was not a big deal like it is now. Basketball back in those days, it was a different game.

INTERVIEWER: Basketball has come a long way since somebody through a ball through a peach basket up in Massachusetts, hasn't it?

BROOKS: I sure has, sure has.

INTERVIEWER: In the high school days, you graduated from Coon did you not?

BROOKS: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any remembrances about those that are of particular interest that you think were significant?

BROOKS: Well, those high school days, of course, I was like all athletes, I guess, trying to do the best you could. I was fortunate enough to get to play in the Shrine game that year in football. In fact, Coach Brogden was the Shrine coach that year.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

BROOKS: And then later on in baseball, the Brooklyn club had a training camp there in Wilson and they invited me out to...

INTERVIEWER: Really, that's interesting.

BROOKS: ... to participate in their workout and so forth. What happened my senior year, I was ruled ineligible for baseball due to the fact that when I started in school, there were only 11 grades and the high school association allowed you to play four years. Well I started playing probably a year earlier than I should have. As it turned out, I did, and so at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> year, I had in four years, so they added a 12<sup>th</sup> year, so I came back for that 12<sup>th</sup> year so I could play football and then baseball that spring. I was able to work out with the pro team there, which I thought gave me a lot of experience. And they got me a summer job. I went up and played in Niagara Falls for one of their...

INTERVIEWER: They had an opening there, things worked out for you to be able to make the right kind of contacts.

BROOKS: Right, it worked out real well.

INTERVIEWER: Well that's good. Then you went on to Wake Forest on the scholarship.

BROOKS: I played football at Wake that freshman year and had the misfortune of messing up a foot and tried to play basketball and about half way through basketball season, they took me over to Winston-Salem and worked on my foot and tried to get the arch back in shape. Ended up, I was unable to play baseball at Wake that spring because of my foot.

And so I ended up back in summer school trying to make up that work that I missed and then with the World War II starting and all, of course, that changed everybody's plans. I went into the

service. I had an opportunity while I was in the service, the training sessions for pilots were slowed to see how many pilots they were going to need I guess, how long it was going to last and I was able to get on the Oklahoma baseball team which was made up of all professionals except for two. I was one of the only ones that wasn't a professional. And, in fact, in 1945, we won the national championship out at Wichita. I had the opportunity to play with that team.

INTERVIEWER: You got your experience early and varied and wide and geographically spread out (laughter).

BROOKS: I think I got to play basketball and baseball in '45 in service and athletics may have kept me from finishing up in flying and it may have kept me out of Korea because all the group that I went in training with, they went on with their flight training and this captain that wanted me there to play ball had me switched over to another group. That group that I was originally with, when the Korean War broke out, they all got called back in. Well I never did finish. So as soon as the war was over, I had an opportunity to get out so I came on out.

INTERVIEWER: That's how things worked out. Well tell me before we get too far along, how did Peggy come on the scene?

BROOKS: I went down to Edenton, North Carolina, to work. I had a little experience in surveying and running that type of transit, levels and so forth and when I went to go into service with my foot messed up, they put me on the delay for six months. So I couldn't play football that fall so I went down to Edenton to work and I was working for this Olsen Dietrich Engineering Company out of Durham that was building an airport down at Edenton and while I was there, I met her. That six months deferment went into a little over a year and we were married in December of '43 and I think in January, I went into service.

INTERVIEWER: Let's see, I believe you have two children, do you not?

BROOKS: Right, Bill Jr., he's now working in Raleigh. He's Executive Secretary of the North Carolina Family Council.

INTERVIEWER: That's a fine position and your daughter has made a name nationally for herself in the field of music.

BROOKS: I feel real proud of her.

INTERVIEWER: I'm not going to let you brag. I want you to just tell me, tell me one or two of the accomplishments she's had because I know they have been tops.

BROOKS: Well she started out singing in a group that furloughs in Florida which was more semi-classical, classical type music, then went to the Miami Opera Company for several years which I think three years, I believe. And then she went to New York and while she was in New York, she had an opportunity to sing some with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and to be in some of the musicals there, the top names and so forth. And she was married while she was in New York and now she's living right out from Washington, D.C. Her husband is in the banking business. She's still singing. She was in New York a couple of weeks ago singing again with the New York Philharmonic and then she went to Denver last week singing.

INTERVIEWER: Well she's had a wonderful career and we hear about her from time to time. How did you get to Wilmington?

BROOKS: Well after, when I got out of service after I played baseball for three years, well graduated in '48, I worked in Bertie County for two years in the high school, a high school that doesn't even exist now, Colrain High School. I went there and then after two years there, I went back to graduate school. I went down to Miami for a year, got my Master's.

INTERVIEWER: Did you graduate from Wake Forest along the way?

BROOKS: No, I came back after service, I played professional baseball and graduated from Atlantic Christian in Wilson. And I went back down to Miami to get my Master's and when I got through that, I called Coach Brogden because I had played for him all through school and asked him to be on the lookout. I had a chance for a job at Appalachia Coal of Florida and I didn't particularly want to stay in Florida.

He told me to come on up here, that he had a spot. He had another Wilson boy, Burt Gillette, who had left to go back to Wilson, and Burt got a job there. And he wanted somebody for the college basketball. So I was hired on a split contract to coach basketball at the college. I helped Coach Brogden in football and coach baseball. In that 1952 year, I coached a baseball team in New Hanover and then they did away with spring practice...

INTERVIEWER: That's what you mean by the split, when you have high school partly and college partly?

BROOKS: Yes, it was on a split deal. In fact, I worked with the football, I think it was about five years. In '56, I went full time with the Wilmington College.

INTERVIEWER: Let's see, that was before it became affiliated with the university system, wasn't it, several years before?

BROOKS: Right. When I came here, it was just part of the county system.

INTERVIEWER: Well then how long, let's see, let's find out how good your arithmetic is (laugher). How long was it from the time that you went to Wilmington College until you retired?

BROOKS: Forty years, from '51 to '91. When Coach Brogden, after he called me and I came down here and started a basketball program at that time. Of course that was a good time to start a program because Coach Brogden was doing such a great job of basketball at New Hanover High School, we were able to get some players right here locally that knew something about basketball that I could get on that level.

INTERVIEWER: You had a little bit of an edge too, already being here and getting them to move over to the university.

BROOKS: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Well now looking through your university 40- year career there, what were some of the highlights of it? Tell me just about that.

BROOKS: The highlights I guess, I would need to kind of break it up a little. The first 12 years that I was here, we were a junior college and we first were a county and then we changed over to a state, under the state system. During that time, we didn't have a great deal of money for

scholarships like a lot of the other schools did, but we were able to do a lot for students and for people that wanted to get in, but could not get into some of the other schools. I think we served the people well by being able to take people that probably could not get into State or Carolina or Duke and be eligible to play because they had entrance requirements there that were a little steep at that time. In fact, they were a lot tougher then than they are now.

We could take people in here for one year, two years and then if they did well, send them on up to some of the bigger schools. But during that 12 year period, I feel like that we were able to get some, actually I consider, great athletes in here. Our last five years ...

INTERVIEWER: Now speaking of this, are you speaking in terms of baseball particularly?

BROOKS: Baseball and basketball. We started, baseball in '57, but the basketball, we built that up to where in the last four or five years that we were a junior college, we had over 20 wins for four straight years and the last two years that we were there in '62 and '63, we went to the nationals. In fact, we got beaten at semi-finals out at the nationals. I say national finals, they take eight teams out of the country. We were able to go out there for two years.

We started baseball in 1957. In '58, we won the conference championship, but we didn't get anything for the nationals, but in '59, '60, '61, '62 and '63, those last five years, we won our conference, regionals and went to the nationals in Grand Junction, Colorado. During those five years, I think, '59 we finished fourth, '60 we finished fifth, and then '61 we won the national championship, '62 we got beat in the finals and '63, we won the nationals again.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, let's leave those first 12 years now. What would be the significant benchmarks you might say for the other 28 years that you were with the university?

BROOKS: Well we went into a four -year program and going into a four year program with good athletes was tough because people didn't want to play you. We went into NAI, which is the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. We were in that for 12 years and our last year in that, we went to the nationals in baseball. In the meantime, in those 12 years, we won several regional titles and had some outstanding baseball players and so many of them were from Wilmington.

And then in 1975, that was our last year and we went into the NCAA Division I which was up with the big boys and that was a big step. Probably over our head for a while, but we were able to hang in there and I think were able to build a program due to the fact that we were in a good position to participate with good company because on the same level, we'd have to beat the State, Carolina and Duke and that group if we were going to any playoffs so I mean, Division I...

And then in '84, we were able to...or '85 actually, Colonial Athletic Association was started and we were able to get in that league and I think that may be the biggest boost that we've had. I realize some people say well we were ahead of ourselves, we stepped too quick, we jumped too quick into the high cotton so to speak. We went in the league with, the Naval Academy was in there then, William and Mary and Richmond, East Carolina, James Madison, those schools, but I think we've been very competitive and we're in a position where we can, if we do have the good years and so forth, we can go into national play and I think that will happen soon. We've been up knocking at the door for several years. We've been in the finals of several sports and I think we've been real competitive.

INTERVIEWER: Well you've had the advantage of having the improvement in the physical facilities that you had at the university when the additional places were provided for you, the additional space and I'm proud to see a place called Brooks Field and I guess that Brooks name has got to come from you. I was real pleased to see the playing field named for you. And then of course we have the Trask Building, which has added the ability to seat and handle crowds of 5-6000. Some of the name teams that you got involved in the last few years before you left were ringing a bell at the national level. You were playing teams of major universities.

BROOKS: We've been playing for several years now, I think one of the biggest games that we had was back a few years ago, we went out and played in the Indiana tournament and got beat right at the buzzer by one point. In fact, we had three shots that missed right at the buzzer and Indiana went on to win the national championship that year. That was, I think, one of the games that you just dream about sometime to have that opportunity, but we've been playing some of the major teams. We played State and Wake Forest.

INTERVIEWER: How about some of the teams up in the north and mid-east area, Massachusetts area, haven't you played some teams up there?

BROOKS: Oh we played Maine, New Hampshire, Boston College.

INTERVIEWER: Does Army / Navy have a team?

BROOKS: Well Navy was in our league when we first got in in '85 and they left that league now and went into a league, another league with Army and Lafayette, Lehigh and some of those teams up in that area, but I think now we schedule anybody that we can schedule. It's not as easy scheduling teams as a lot of people may think and in particular to get teams to come to Wilmington. You can get good games on the road and there was a time in order to play those teams, when I was coaching, I would just play on the road, but a guarantee, try to make a little money out of it and some of those teams draw well regardless of who they play.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever let finally which type of sport become the one that you were most interested in, baseball or basketball? Thinking that you started out in baseball years ago that it might have come back to you.

BROOKS: Well baseball probably. Of course I coached basketball at the college 21 years and baseball 26 years and so many of those years, it was at the same time. One thing about coaching both sports and being athletic director and chairman of the PE Department all at one time is that I could make decisions and do things that I probably couldn't do if we had different other heads of all these other areas.

INTERVIEWER: That's an interesting point.

BROOKS: It's just like, I don't think, we didn't have another athletic person hired from '51 until '65. I think I was the only one there during that time. Once we started growing, we were able to get a major in physical education. That's something that I wanted to do and as Chairman of the Physical Education Department, I was able to push that. One of the things that really helped us is in '65, we were able to get Hanover Hall. From '51 to '65, we used Brogden Hall or county facilities for baseball, well for basketball and baseball up to 1960 until we started building the field out at the university. We played at Legion's Stadium. We shared it with the horseracing people, that was interesting.

INTERVIEWER: By the way, that American Legion baseball team has certainly been a good one. I saw them play one night and those boys looked like they were playing professional ball. Let's go on for just a minute, what have you done since you retired? Do you still keep any connection with the university or what do you plan to do with yourself?

BROOKS: Well I, tell you the truth, I don't know what I do. I just stay busy all the time. I work some in the yard. That's something where we live now, we've been there roughly 10 years and I didn't do a whole lot with the yard until I did retire. I've been doing some work there. I like playing golf. I work out three days a week in the swimming pool. I get in an hour three days a week there. Some things I try to help out with the Alumni Association up at the university, trying to contact a lot of people and trying to get things together particularly for this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

INTERVIEWER: I guess as long as you were there, why you're still bound to have some wish to be connected in some way with it.

BROOKS: Well I try not to...I come in the back door and come out the back door. I try not to be in the way there, but I always try to help them in anything they want done that I could help them with.

INTERVIEWER: Let's talk for just a minute about Leon Brogden. You apparently became acquainted with Leon a long time ago and you were associated with Leon some in connection with the early part of your career days in connection with you had this split situation with the high school. Leon is one of the finest people I've ever known. Both he and you and I have served positions in our own church together and Leon is very modest about his achievements, but he certainly has, anyone that's put in the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame for example, is a quality benchmark for a career and he has had a long sports career. Tell me just a little bit about Leon, some of the things that I'm sure he would not tell me about himself.

BROOKS: I remember some of the things that he's accomplished. You mentioned the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame. He was also in the North Carolina High School Coaches Hall of Fame and also in the Wake Forest Hall of Fame. He was a great athlete at Wake Forest back in the 30's, played all three sports up there. I think when he came to Wilmington in 1945, I don't know a lot about sports here other than playing them when I was in high school, but when he came here in '45, I think he did a lot to get a tradition started here that would be hard for anybody to match in the future.

During his time here coaching, he had seven state championships in basketball and out of those seven, that was six out of seven, six of them came within a period of seven years, from '56 through '62 or '63.

INTERVIEWER: I don't believe you can make any higher ranking team than that, can you?

BROOKS: No, and then he was a runner up four times and Eastern Conference runner-up a couple of times. His overall record that I had down, I could be off a little on this, but I'm pretty sure from '48 to '66, he won 325 games and lost 80 in basketball and that's unheard of almost to have that type of record. The first year I was here in 1951, he won the state championship in football and that year after state championship game, at that time, they would allow you to play further. We played a team from Massachusetts over in High Point in some kind of bowl game and then went down to Miami and played Miami in the Orange Bowl that year. We won, I think it was Concord, Mass, anyway Massachusetts State champion.

During that time, Coach Brogden turned out a lot of fine athletes and not just athletes, but people who were also very successful I think in business. Two or three that came to mind here is Jim Gibson who is a great surgeon. Jim came through, went to Duke. Boyce Cole was a surgeon over at Duke. He's now in Southport. Julian Rogers, a dentist that's back in town now. In fact, I ran into Julian the other day and he said he's retired except two days a week, he goes around to the various nursing homes, trying to do some work in the nursing homes. Mike Beal, one of his former players, is a judge now. Jimmy Goodnight, had something about him, in his industry was rated number one in the state, SAS, it's computer, it was something in the paper, a story about him not too long ago that he's rated number one in North Carolina now. Claude Mears, Jimmy Williams was a Naval officer. Those are just a few of the people ....

INTERVIEWER: Do you know what you're telling me? You're telling me that Leon was in the business of character building.

BROOKS: Yes he was. I think, that's one of the reasons I mention that some of these people, like Mike Alston, Goodnight, Mears, they were straight A students and good people. I think he was, of course, he was more interested in the young man's development than he was in winning and losing, just by getting the type of people and guiding them the way he did. He also got them into being winners. The two go together I feel like.

INTERVIEWER: I see what you mean, good point. As time went on, he became a mentor in a way to some of these people I guess.

BROOKS: There's so many of them. He has so many people I can't even begin to mention them.

INTERVIEWER: How about any that have attained national prominence that would have been sports figures that you would...

BROOKS: Well the first year I came here, Sonny Jergenson was on the ball club that year, he was a junior. And of course Sonny went on to Duke and then went on to the NFL for many, many years of stardom. Roman Gabriel went up to State and then went on, I forget how many years he had, but with Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

INTERVIEWER: He had quite a fine career in professional ball.

BROOKS: Then you have some of the other people that were, went through New Hanover High School, I was about to get ahead of myself here. But on through the years....

INTERVIEWER: On through the years, he had a real profound affect on a lot of boys.

BROOKS: Yes he did and I was just trying to think of some of them. I'm sure I'll leave out some.

INTERVIEWER: That's all right. You have included information that I think that nobody else has really been aware of or would have access to about the effect that Leon has. Leon recently has had some health problems and I would love to have talked with him also, but I don't think he is quite up to this so it's been good that you've been able to fill in on some of the things that he's done. We've known Sally too. Sally comes from Wilson. She has been quite a support to Leon.

Let's go ahead now to one or two other things that we need before we finish up. We're beginning to get on the home court, towards the finish line say. What other interests in Wilmington have you had? I know you've been a member of our church, the First Baptist Church, for a long time. What other interests in the community or in the area have you had interests in?

BROOKS: Well to be honest with you, I haven't done a whole lot outside of work at the university. It seems like that was a daylight to dark or midnight type job and I was member of the Rotary Club for a while. Other than that...

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like to me that you weren't on a 9 to 5 job.

BROOKS: No it wasn't and so much of what was done is something that I felt like needed to be done. It was probably not part of the job description so to speak, but in trying to build a program like we had at the university and trying to build facilities, they were tough to come by sometimes because one of the things that a young school starting out, you're talking to -- most of the people that have money graduated from some other school so you don't have any wealthy graduates.

You don't have anybody with money so you have to rely on trying to get some people that, like Raeford Trask for instance, was such a great help to us. Of course Raeford was a Wake Forest man. Then we had Dan Cameron who was able to help us some. So we had to rely a great deal on coming up, if we couldn't come up with the money, coming up with materials or whatever way we could get help to get things built.

You mentioned something about the field a while ago. There's so many people in this town that helped on building that field in ways without giving cash and so forth. We were able to get that field built and I think the only money that we spent that the state supplied was after we got it finished, they paid for the fence to go around it. At one time in there, they had a regulation that they would match any funds that we were able to come up with. Well I was able to come up with about \$20-25,000 that they matched and that's where we got our set of lights, through that matching fund. So actually state money was the lights and the fence.

There are people in this town and in this county that I feel like, other than Mr. Trask and Mr. Cameron, that spent so much time and effort in making arrangements for us to use prison labor if need be and anybody else that we could get. We had equipment from...Mr. Trask was able to get some county equipment a couple of times and then Gene \_\_\_\_ over at Delco was able to make arrangements through federal sources to get bulldozers, motor graders, and Burt Bolt who lives here in town who is head of the woodlands division, he would run bulldozers by for us every once in a while. So a lot of people were involved in building that.

INTERVIEWER: I want to make this comment. I'm sure that you've found in your area what I have known in connection with, some connections that I had with the university and the university foundation, is a repeat story that it is our university. It's part of the state system, but the people of Wilmington in every way, shape and fashion, that supported the university has been making the university what it is today. In support, whether it's in the arts, education, science, whatever it is, there have been people in Wilmington that have been willing to work and support the university and therefore what has been accomplished out there today in the university is a real tribute to the local area despite the fact that it is the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. It's the University of North Carolina created by the people of Wilmington. Would you buy that?

BROOKS: I'd buy every bit of it (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: Okay, we're ready to wind up now. I wonder if there's anything more that I haven't suggested that you would like to comment, especially about where things may be going in the future, whatever. We've got a couple of minutes left.

BROOKS: Well I think the future looks bright for this university. I think it's very popular with the students and not only the state now, but all over the country we have people coming in here. Of course the Atlantic Ocean down here helps a great deal. We're one of the few universities that have the Atlantic Ocean in our back door, but we're drawing students, better students from all over the country than what we did at one time. I think they can increase the enrollment real easy if they wanted to. Of course, they're limited to how many they can take, but I think as far as athletics go, we've got some good days coming in that. I think the financial situation is going to improve as we go along and the facilities will be added to I'm sure in the next few years. With all that, I think we'll be able to compete right along with the people that we're in the leagues with.

INTERVIEWER: Someone told me the other day that there was a hue and cry back in the 20's, when New Hanover High School wanted to have an entire city block to be able to put the high school on which was much too much land in the eyes of many of the citizens at that time. Yet the university out there has approximately 600 acres as I understand and the 600 acres is beginning to look smaller and smaller all the time.

BROOKS: Every time I go back through there, it looks like they've cut another road through and it won't be long until they'll be back to Rose Avenue. I wanted to build a nine hole golf course back there one time, but it was cutting the trees down. The Board didn't think we ought to cut any more trees which I agree.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like to me you enjoyed your career, made a very substantial contribution to the university in so doing and you certainly can look back with pride on what you've done and I think with that, I see we're just about at the end of our tape. I want to thank you for coming out this morning and sharing these things with me and I wish you well in the future in your retirement. Thank you Bill.