

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL D. CAMERON**

OCTOBER 30, 1995

INTRODUCTION

This is Sam Bisette and this is the afternoon of October 30, a beautiful afternoon in Wilmington. I'm sitting here at Dan Cameron's home in Sterling Place and I wanted to see this afternoon if we could talk with Dan a bit and share some of the remembrances of his as to his life in Wilmington. Dan and I have been acquainted since we were in high school together, so we have known each other a number of years longer than we ever thought we would know each other. I guess that might be a way to put it. So, I want to ask Dan if he would tell us just a little bit about his age, if he's not sensitive about it, when he was born, and a little bit about the early days and about the family.

CAMERON: Well Sam, I'm flattered that you have sought me out to record a few remarks about Wilmington and my remembrances of Wilmington. It's a real pleasure to have you over here. I was born in Wilmington on October 16, 1921 which makes me 74 years old and I was raised on the corner of 5th and Meares Streets, which is well-known by the old-timers around here as Dry Pond. I went to school at William Hooper School for the first seven years of my life and then, my family moved up on Market Street right where the Baptist Church is now. We lived there until I went in the Army and came out of the Army. We were there for I guess about ten or twelve years. I went to school at New Hanover High School and I was in your class, the class of 1938, which is a very distinguished and outstanding class. We produced some good people like David Brinkley, amongst others. Some of the happy days now are when we have a reunion of our class and it is still surprisingly vital. We have reunions every five years and although our numbers dwindle every year, we still have a good time when we get together.

INTERVIEWER: We got a big laugh at the last one when the orchestra was hired to eleven o'clock and just about everybody was ready to go home at ten.

CAMERON: That's about typical of the speed with life in these days.

INTERVIEWER: That's right.

CAMERON: But, I graduated from New Hanover High School and...

INTERVIEWER: That would be 1938.

CAMERON: That was in 1938 and I went to college at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia. People ask me, "Why did you go to VMI?" and as an answer, it is really pretty simple is, "My Daddy sent me there." There wasn't a lot of room for bargaining then, so that was where I was going to college and that was where I ended up.

INTERVIEWER: On a humorous note, was there any significance in that it was a military school?

CAMERON: No. I think that he sent me there because he thought I needed to go there. I went to VMI and when I graduated from VMI, it was a very fortunate place to have been. I graduated in May of 1942 and World War II had started of course, and I went directly into the service. I think I graduated May the 10th and I reported for duty as a second lieutenant on May the 19th.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. So, VMI was your path to the commission then?

CAMERON: Yes, I got a commission when I got out and went in as a second lieutenant. They were pulling all kinds of people into the service then and a VMI degree was a very good degree to have. I knew how to march troops and...

INTERVIEWER: Well, you actually had a beginning with the ROTC since you were an officer.

CAMERON: That's right. We had the ROTC and the very first ROTC that year in New Hanover County. You and I both were in the ROTC. Anyhow, I went into the service, stayed four years and spent 28 months overseas.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you overseas?

CAMERON: I went to England in the fall of 1943. I went in on the invasion on June the 9th of 1944 at Omaha Beach and my unit stayed in the action there until we reached the Elbe River.

INTERVIEWER: You were really in the action section of the war?

CAMERON: Yes I was in artillery, so it wasn't horribly dangerous like in the infantry, but there was plenty of action for me.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I guess it was. I understand you ran into a Wilmingtonian in connection...

CAMERON: Yeah, it's a funny thing. We were going through the town of Saint Lo, which we'd been fighting in front of for months and finally got through. It was the most bombed out, wrecked up town you can imagine and in the middle of all the rubble, I looked over I said to my jeep driver, "I swear that fellow looks like he's painting over there." It turned out to be my friend Henry McMillan from Wilmington, who had been assigned by his corps commander to just paint. They recognized his ability. Henry and I got together throughout the rest of the war until we came home and we were able to visit each other.

INTERVIEWER: Was Henry connected with the McMillan name that was McMillan-Cameron?

CAMERON: Yes, his father and my father started McMillan-Cameron in 1919 and Mr. McMillan didn't live very long after they formed a partnership, so Henry's mother, Mrs. Janie McMillan came into the business and remained there until she retired in 1946.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Well, if remember rightly, Betty came on the scene somewhere back in the early days.

CAMERON: Well, Betty and I courted each other in high school. We were great friends and then we kind of drifted apart and started going back together. I took a troop train from Camp Davis down to New Orleans and coming back, I stopped in Atlanta because she was in school at Agnes Scott. We had a date there and that started us up again. Here it is fifty years later and we are still going.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been married now?

CAMERON: We have been married 49 years coming up on 50.

INTERVIEWER: Well she's a lovely lady. Tell me about your family.

CAMERON: Well, I've got five children. The oldest one now is 47 I guess and I can't believe it.

INTERVIEWER: Don't worry about it, I've got one 48 too.

CAMERON: Time's going by and they are all doing well. Bill and Hilda live here in Wilmington and Charlotte is married to a minister and lives in Fairfax, Virginia. My oldest daughter is married to a research scientist and they live in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He works for the drug company there and then Hilda is here in Wilmington unmarried but runs a catering business, so they are all situated somewhere.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's a good update. Your mother and father, were they Wilmingtonian's for a long time?

CAMERON: Yes, my father was a very poor boy and was raised over in Dry Pond. He obviously was also very talented, industrious, and established a good business. We have always been proud of Father. He ended up mayor of Wilmington and died in August of 1944. We feel that he accomplished a lot for Wilmington and was a great contributor. Mother's family was the Fales. She was the sister to Dr. Robert Fales and they were in the wholesale fish business and had the old fishhouse down on the river. We used to go down there a lot and see the action at the fishhouse. Dr. Fales was a very distinguished gentleman and lived there on 5th Street.

INTERVIEWER: I knew Bob and Sara very well and the Fales family with Alton and all the rest.

CAMERON: Yes, they're all my first cousins, Alton, Frank, and all of them.

INTERVIEWER: Well the building that was built on the corner of 3rd and Chestnut Streets, the McMillan Cameron Building, was around in the 1940's?

CAMERON: In 1938 or 1939.

INTERVIEWER: It was really a landmark in Wilmington in its design and the name of the little corner there. The White front grill is still hanging around down on Market Street.

CAMERON: Well, that building was really the first post-depression building of significance that was built in Wilmington and daddy's business during the depression was a growing business. He tore down the old garage and built what was really a palace of a service station.

INTERVIEWER: It was white enameled steel?

CAMERON: Yes, it was white enamel on steel frame and it was a landmark. It stayed open 24 hours a day.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I have a picture of the architect's drawing for that building at home that I got out of the newspaper. The bank that was built there later was interested in perhaps doing a picture of the predecessor building.

CAMERON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Let's move along a little bit now. We got the war behind us a little bit and what did you do when you got out of service? You settled down in Wilmington and you had a wife and family in the beginning?

CAMERON: Well, of course, Father died while I was overseas. I was in fact sitting in front of Saint Lo watching the big aerial bombardment when I got a Red Cross telegram that my father had died. I went

home, my brother and I went into the McMillan-Cameron Company and took over the management of that operation. I concentrated on the retail end of it, which was the big station downtown, picked up with Betty, and we got married in 1946. I was just trying to learn the business because I had no business experience.

INTERVIEWER: So, you and Bruce were in partnership in fairly early times?

CAMERON: Yes, we were in partnerships from the time we were children, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: That was not only an automotive service center, but it was a retail store with electrical appliances?

CAMERON: We developed into that under my management and we got into heavy appliances and other things. We stayed in the parts business, the service business, the automotive service, and then got real heavy into appliances and that sort of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Well, when did you get interested in politics?

CAMERON: Well, I guess I was always interested. Of course Father was interested and after the war, people would come up to me and tell me what a great mayor he was. So, I guess that was a natural following.

INTERVIEWER: I think it's interesting that both you and your father were mayors of the city of Wilmington at one time or another.

CAMERON: Yes and we were not too far apart. He was mayor in 1944 when he died and I became mayor in 1955, eleven years later.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

CAMERON: It was kind of interesting that people treated me with a lot of respect because of him. I didn't run but one time for the city council and didn't have any trouble getting elected because I was running on his name.

INTERVIEWER: How was the mayor chosen then, by the city council?

CAMERON: The mayor was chosen by the council.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

CAMERON: Five members of the council elected the mayor.

INTERVIEWER: I see. We had what type of city government, then, a city manager?

CAMERON: We had the same type of city government that we have now.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Was Jimmy Benson city manager?

CAMERON: Jimmy Benson was the city manager.

INTERVIEWER: Was he city manager at that time?

CAMERON: J. E. Wade, Jimmy Wade, was on the council and Jimmy wanted to be the mayor so badly and he had been on it for so long. I felt bad when the fellow members elected me mayor, but Jimmy was a good sport.

INTERVIEWER: Jimmy was one of a kind.

CAMERON: He was one of a kind, a character, and a dear man in many ways.

INTERVIEWER: You know, we were sitting down town one day talking with some of our contemporaries and we were naming the people that we would classify as characters in the city of Wilmington, and Jimmy was at the head of the list.

CAMERON: He was at the head of the list. I remember when they elected me mayor, he was so disappointed, so we named Jimmy, "The Mayor Protem" and I won him over very quickly because I had small children and the mayor was invited to everything. I would call up and say, "Jimmy, I'm invited to the Rotary Club Ladies Night tonight or next week and I can't go. Can you go?" He said, "Yes sir, buddy. I can go." I sent Jimmy out about four times a week.

INTERVIEWER: Everybody was buddy to him.

CAMERON: Everybody was buddy and he just loved going and doing things.

INTERVIEWER: I want you to tell me if you would, how Wilmington became an All-American city? Hannah Block was telling me a little bit about that and of course I remembered something about it, but first hand, you were in the midst of the action?

CAMERON: Well, I really was just the messenger on that thing. Everybody else did all the work. Hugh Morton in particular and Van Reid, who was president or director of Chamber of Commerce, got the idea that Wilmington had accomplished quite a bit. I remember we had lost the Coastline and we had hurricane Hazel.

INTERVIEWER: All of those were in the later 1950's weren't they?

CAMERON: They were in the later 1950's and Wilmington was really in bad shape. We based our case on the fact that we had made a big comeback. We had organized a Committee of One Hundred and it had been successful and we had gotten a new hospital underway. We had gotten the University underway and the whole town just seemed to be picking up. We based the case on the fact that we had pulled ourselves up by the bootstraps and had been successful. Hugh Morton had marvelous photographs of the city and they somehow or another elected me to make the presentation in St. Louis, which I did. We had an airplane full of people that went out to St. Louis with us to make the presentation and I'm sure that, that had some influence on it, too.

INTERVIEWER: You know, I had not realized that the combination of the University, which started in 1947 and started as Wilmington College right around 1960 began to take off and headed in this direction. Then, we got over the Coastline business and the hospital with the steering committee with Harry Solomon and his group and everything started to fall right together.

CAMERON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I'm delighted that you recognized the possibilities there.

CAMERON: Working on a Committee of One Hundred and trying to get industry in here was what I did for a number of years.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I've had three people tell me that without you there would have been no Committee of One Hundred.

CAMERON: Well, I won't go so far as to say that but I think I was one of the spark plugs in the very early days to get it going.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, you were.

CAMERON: We got during that same time when all this was happening, industries like Dupont, Hercules, General Electric, and Corning in a little short span of time.

INTERVIEWER: You got names in that shook the people in Wilmington enough to realize that Wilmington could have something besides the Atlantic Coastline Railroad.

CAMERON: That's right. I guess I had a kind of a personal thing and I felt that old man Davis let me down. I was mayor when he moved the Coastline and I took that as a personal challenge not to let him ruin our town with the Coastline's move.

INTERVIEWER: Well, if he wanted the Coastline to move, then it would move because he pulled the strings on that.

CAMERON: Well, he probably made the right business decision, but it was a bad community decision for us.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Dan, in the Wilmington history era of the 1950's, 1960's, and into the 1970's, were there any other events other than those that we've been talking about, that you might think are significant in Wilmington today? Wilmington was a struggling city then and now Wilmington is right next to Reno, Nevada in the number of housing starts and second in the country. Who would have ever thought it?

CAMERON: It is unbelievable. Well, I think way back when the shipyard left and there were twenty-five thousand people working at the height of the shipyard days. I think it was significant when old Colonel George Gillette for instance, latched onto the fact that the Cape Fear River was going to be our lifeblood and that we had a very valuable asset. He set out through the State Ports Authority and got the Port of Wilmington started. People forget about that and it has been so long ago, but to me, that was very significant.

INTERVIEWER: Well, look how significant it is now. Aren't there 800 trucks a day coming in and out of here?

CAMERON: It is unbelievable. The first assignment I had on the Chamber of Commerce in 1946 was on the transportation committee and our goal was to get a four-lane highway on US 17 and to get a four-lane highway on 74/76 to Charlotte. Well, here it is fifty years later and we do have I-40 now but it was a long time coming. I think that was a very significant thing and I hope someday with the influx of traffic now, I don't know what we need anymore. The transportation improvement was a great thing.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

CAMERON: If I had to pick one thing that I would say is significant with this community, it would be the University. When you think of the fact that they have like eight thousand students out there now and that beautiful campus, it's just a wonderful thing.

INTERVIEWER: And it continues to grow. There hasn't been a time, it looks like, when there hasn't been a new building under construction and the Science Building now is supposed to be finished next year.

CAMERON: I believe Dr. Lutze feels that it should cutoff around ten thousand and it shouldn't get any larger than that, but that's about where they are headed. It is so beautiful and anybody who has ever seen that campus just loves it and thinks it is great.

INTERVIEWER: I'm delighted that the people that were connected with that insisted strongly that they continue the traditional design and ended up with a Georgian Colonial on the campus.

CAMERON: Well I've told this story a number of times, but Mr. Fred Willetts and I headed up the committee to get the St. Andrew's Presbyterian College into Wilmington in the early 1950's. Do you remember that?

INTERVIEWER: I remember that.

CAMERON: We made a big effort and we should have had it. We were in the ideal place and we lost it and it went to Laurinburg. I was on Mr. Willetts board at the Cooperative S.&L. with Dr. Hoggard who was president of the then Wilmington College. I thought he was an old man, but he was probably about as old as I am now.

INTERVIEWER: He may not have been as old as we are now.

CAMERON: He probably was not as old as we are now. Anyhow, Mr. Willetts and I were lamenting the fact that we had been mistreated and it was just terrible that we didn't get the Presbyterian College. Dr. Hoggard said, "You boys don't know what you're talking about. You don't need that college. You've already got your college. Someday, Wilmington College will be a great institution."

INTERVIEWER: Well, he was right.

CAMERON: I remember looking at him and I said, "That old man doesn't know and he is out of his mind with that little old grammar school building on Market Street as the vision of a beautiful university." Just think how happy he'd be if he could see the university as it is now.

INTERVIEWER: Look at the foresight that was thought about by getting the 600 acres when they started and didn't have a university.

CAMERON: Everything worked out.

INTERVIEWER: It sure did. Well, Wilmington as it is today is having its problems. We are really having traffic problems and growth problems, but who would ever have thought that we would have the extent of the business life that we have today and the number of business that we have.

CAMERON: Not I. I remember the hard times we had in business and you really had to work. You know it too and you didn't run a business easily. It was hard work to make ends meet.

INTERVIEWER: I know.

CAMERON: I just think how easy it would be to run that same business now that I used to run back then in the 1950's.

INTERVIEWER: Well, we think of the outside complications we have now telling us how you've got to run a business. We are talking about federal standards, state standards, and all kinds of things.

CAMERON: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: You were involved as a director of A savings and loan Association in viewing the financial side of the community, the banks, the savings and loan associations, the home financing, and various other things. Look at the changes that have taken place in Wilmington.

CAMERON: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: It is remarkable. Where do you think we are going now?

CAMERON: Well I think that the pace is going to be hectic around here for a while. I have never been of the mind that we should slow down because I've always thought in terms of getting better jobs for more people and to do that, you have to grow. I think that we should give a lot of consideration to planning out ahead, quietening things down a little bit, and making sure we have a good road network around here to carry the traffic. I don't think you're going to be able to shut off the road to Wilmington because I think we have been discovered. We developed Figure 8 Island and just see the way people have moved into Figure 8. They pay big prices for property up there now.

INTERVIEWER: Well Dan, both you and Bruce have made a substantial contribution to the Wilmington/New Hanover County area in some of the projects that you had such as Figure 8 Island. The life of Wilmington has been enriched through the University, hospital, and other things that we have here. I couldn't let this interview conclude without thanking you as a citizen for that help that you, Bruce, and the generosities that you've shown in helping to make this community do things that would not have financially been able and possible to do. So, without the interest and help that you two have given to that, I really think that we owe quite a debt of gratitude particularly for the hospital and the University with your interest in them.

CAMERON: Well I thank you for that, but I think we did what any good citizen in our position would do and we certainly enjoyed participating in the growth of this area. I'll have to say that I look with a lot of pride at some of the things that have taken place in Wilmington and feel that I may have had a hand in it along the way.

INTERVIEWER: Let's close with the thought that who would have thought that two of us in homeroom 208 in New Hanover High School with Francis Formyduval in 1938 would be sitting in your home and living only a few blocks apart. We are each 74 years old talking about things in Wilmington and the life that we have lived. Both of us this year have had medical problems and we are smiling about that. Both of us seem to be well on the way to recovery and I just get a big kick out of the fact that it all started in 1938. We have only five more years and we'll round out the century.

CAMERON: That isn't too bad, is it?

INTERVIEWER: That is remarkable.

CAMERON: It is, Sam. You've always been a great friend and you've been one of Wilmington's strong leaders.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I want to thank you and I want to thank you for letting us do this tape on the group of Wilmington people that I have tried to get together. I've enjoyed meeting and seeing some of them again renewing acquaintances. We are going to conclude this and I'm going to thank Dan very much for letting me come over this afternoon.