

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HARPER FOX**

JUNE 30, 1995

INTRODUCTION:

This is Sam Bisette, the date is June 30, 1995, the last day of the first half of the year, a perfectly beautiful day at Wrightsville Beach, and I'm at John Fox's home on South Lumina Boulevard looking out over the inland waterway and the channel out there and all the boats and the beginning of July the 4th weekend. John I appreciate your letting me come down and explain to you what we're doing and see if we can get started and record a few of your experiences and I want you to tell us some humorous events if you want to, but I want you to keep them so that audiences that are listening to this will understand that this is not stories that are intended for male audiences only and stuff like that.

FOX: See, you're putting limitations on me already.

INTERVIEWER: Well I'm putting some facetious limitations on you. So, let's start off, if you don't mind revealing your age, by telling me where and when were you born.

FOX: Sam, I was born right here in Wilmington, January 3, 1916, that makes me 79-1/2 years old, almost 80.

INTERVIEWER: Well I'm about 5 years behind you then because mine was 1921. That puts you right before World War I. After you were born and as the years went along, which grammar school did you go to in Wilmington.

FOX: My family was a member of St. Mary's Catholic Church and they had a nice school and went there through 7th grade.

INTERVIEWER: St. Mary's is taking over one of our older grammar schools.

FOX: That's right, across the street from my church. I went to St. Mary's for 7 years. I would have gone the 8th year, but did something that my parents didn't like, but it was just one of those things that maybe gives you a key as to how I operate. I was the largest boy in the 7th grade and we had a football team and played on the lot over on 6th and Ann Street. I had my first game. We had a very wonderful and pious assistant pastor at St. Mary's at the time. He had this ball game going on and the priest came over to see how we were doing and he had been there for about 10 minutes and he tapped me on the shoulder and said "John, I want you to put in Ned Hines". He was our substitute, the only one we had. I said, "Well Father, they're beating the tar out of us right now". Ned only weighed about 60, maybe 50 pounds and he was the smallest man we had. I said I don't believe I can do that. He said, "I said put him in". I said "Father, I just can't do that". He said, "I said put him in". I said, "Well you see the situation". He said "You report to me tomorrow after school." Well he walked off, we finished the game and got our tails beat. The next day after school I went over and he told me, "I want you to go stand over there and I'll give you some paper and I want you to take the pencil and write 500 times, "When the priest gives me an order, I'll do it". I said, "Yes Father, but I don't have a pencil". He said, "Well you go get a pencil and I'll be sure the paper is there when you get back." Well I walked out the door, went home. My parents at the time were in Philadelphia for a week. This happened to be on a Monday

afternoon so the next morning I got up and went to New Hanover High School and enrolled myself in high school. And when they got back a week later, I had been in school four days. They let me stay there, I don't know why.

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter) You showed your leadership at an early age. Well then you went to New Hanover High School and finished up there. Now where did that put you, that put you at 16, about in '32 the bottom of the Depression.

FOX: That's right. As a matter of fact, I can tell you a lot of things about how we carried on business.

INTERVIEWER: Well just give us a brief overview. That's something that people who didn't go through it don't know.

FOX: Well it was tough enough. What we had to do, we had trucks that went up into Ivanhoe, Southport and up in Burgaw, down that area and they would come back with not cash for our products, but sometimes potatoes or fish or chickens or hams or whatever..

INTERVIEWER: You were in the bakery business?

FOX: Yes, the bakery. They had what they could barter with and we would take that in lieu of cash and take it over to a place over on Dock Street. They bought products like that and there's another one on Market Street right where the theater is.

INTERVIEWER: Next to the corn husker.

FOX: Yeah and we would exchange that for cash. They would buy it from us and then we would go _____ with it and make more money, but that's how things were done. Money was so tight that you...and I experienced borrowing back in those days which is unusual. People my age, back in those days, I was 16 years old then.

INTERVIEWER: Well you came right out of high school and went right into the bakery business.

FOX: Well I had worked since I was about 10 years old. I was the new man on the block.

INTERVIEWER: Well tell me something, somewhere along the line, you met Mary. Please tell me when and where that happened.

FOX: Well I first saw Mary when she was 16 years old and I was 19 years old. I saw her at Pop Grady's stand.

INTERVIEWER: Down at Station One.

FOX: Yeah, and I can see her right now. She had on a black bathing suit and boy she was beautiful and that was when I was 19 and we got married when I was 27.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't see me sitting in Newell's over there taking telegrams, did you?

FOX: No.

INTERVIEWER: That's what I was doing at that time. Fourteen years difference, I was 14 years old. Okay go ahead.

FOX: Anyway I met Mary and we really got together after her family moved back from Florence and we were really good friends and I knew Eric, her older brother Jimmy, didn't know Bill too well because he was married by then. Something about Mary was attractive, but there was a fellow here by the name of Higgins and he kept trying to get us together and it made Mary I think stubborn and it made me stubborn. Anyhow after we were friends and dated, it was eight years later before I ever popped the question.

INTERVIEWER: How many children have you?

FOX: Three children. I have eight grandchildren.

INTERVIEWER: Now let's see, your children are scattered just a little bit now.

FOX: I have one in Boulder, Colorado, that's Peggy, my middle child, second girl. Penny is in Illinois, she's the oldest and Johnny is in Columbus, South Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: From your beginning in business, how did you get involved in the community because I know you've been involved in the community as long as I can remember. What seemed to interest you in the community side of things, the things that go on; for example, the various organizations that we have.

FOX: Of course, I was here and ran the bakery all during the war because it was a food industry and essential to national interest, like the shipyards and stuff. My brother was taken during the draft and I was the one that stayed home and I had spent a lot of time at the bakery.

INTERVIEWER: So you had a deferment for...

FOX: A "B" classification and so we built the plant over on 13th and I was involved in what went on there. I guess what started me off is when somebody came and asked me if I would join the Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce and that was in 1948.

INTERVIEWER: Well gosh you got in right about that time. That was a critical time for Wilmington, wasn't it?

FOX: It was, you know the war was over and talk about downsizing. We went from 126,000 back to about 40-45 and you really did downsize back in those days. And so the impetus I think, in fact I mentioned, nobody called me, but things changed about '48, '50, '51.

INTERVIEWER: There's a story in there about that, bound to be, how about telling me about it, about Wilmington's transformation.

FOX: Well, Sam, Mr. Moore, Louis T. Moore, had been the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce for years. He passed on and they hired the first outsider. His name was ?Farrell and he came in. When I got involved in it, he was already on the Board. The people on the Board thought I could help in and I understood why. When I came in, the first job I had was treasurer and it took me about three months to find out why, because you know I was just a kid on the block and it turned out that the Chamber was in real bad financial condition and we had to collect

dues for the next year, and the year began the 1st of October, October to December was the last quarter and I had to go out in order to finish up and pay off all the bills by the end....

INTERVIEWER: So that's how you got your training about separating people from their money (laughter). I'm learning – go ahead.

FOX: So I had to go out and collect, talk people into paying the next year's dues or at least the first quarter of their dues so we could end up paying everybody off to help. I think the Chamber now still has that problem and it's with all chambers.

INTERVIEWER: Well Wilmington was adjusting, as you say, to the downsizing. They also were adjusting to the old way of doing things and the new ways were coming on the scene.

FOX: Well you know there's a lot of...the World War was around in that period of time from 1941 to 1946. A lot of women were working and it was just a different atmosphere. The town seemed to, like I said, nobody called a meeting, but they just sort of came together.

INTERVIEWER: Could it have been the return of people from service that came back in?

FOX: Yes I think it had a lot to do with it. Everybody's attitude was good. You could ask anybody to help you do something and, boy, I mean there was no hesitancy at all. The Chamber, you know, was having some tough times. During that period of time, in the 50s is when we had the agricultural program together. It seemed with looking around, we found out that our per capita income in Wilmington because of the Coast Line was not too much unlike what it was in Greensboro and Charlotte and Winston-Salem and Raleigh. What surrounded us was different. We had more per capita income than Brunswick County, and Pender County was about the same way. Sampson was a little bit higher, Duplin was also higher. Onslow was a little bit better off because it had the Marine Corps.

INTERVIEWER: Know that those dollars might be something, somebody listening to the tape at that time, you could get a lunch with three vegetables and dessert and coffee at the Boots Cafe for 25 cents.

FOX: Well when I was working at the bakery, I used...the best thing I had going for me during the week was Saturday night. I would go next door and get a great big T-bone steak, French fries, lettuce and tomatoes and hot biscuits and a glass of tea and dessert for 35 cents.

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter) Okay, that on an income of \$200 sounds buff. The big boom was coming though then, wasn't it? That was the Coast Line.

FOX: Well yeah, even before the Coast Line, things started changing. You had the old Tide Water Power Company and they were replaced by the Carolina Power & Light Co. For the town to grow, we did make an assessment of our assets. We found out the river was the most important thing we had and then of course for the town to grow, you have to have power available in large quantities and reasonable. You have to have money, handy money, I mean money for things at the time that the worker didn't have really enough capitalization and sometimes would borrow a lot of money. Then you had to have transportation and those are the things we started working on. The power company was the first thing and then Wachovia came in, we bought out....We started getting big banks in Wilmington, not just the ones we had which were local banks.

INTERVIEWER: And those, the local banks did have a choke hold on the community because they were quite conservative...

FOX: Yes, very much so. So those things started coming on and then of course, in about 1950s when we got the college, that's something else you've got to have in the community. Wilmington College was born, I think in 1948. The county taxed itself 5 cents on the \$100 valuation to open up Wilmington College.

INTERVIEWER: And that's a whole wonderful story within itself which Bill Wagoner was kind enough to record.

FOX: It happened all during the 50s, it really laid the groundwork for what we have in Wilmington today. And then of course, the college went on to be what it is today. The power company helped things along. Other banks came in and then the Ports Authority was born which gave us the transportation that we needed to come in here. Piedmont came on service. So it started with things that really made Wilmington grow. The wave was cresting that started being built in 1950. The fifties and sixties were informative years.

INTERVIEWER: And you know there was a period back when Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina, about 1910 and 1912 and that's when Wilmington had a building boom and then everything slowed up. Before we get too far away from the past, please tell me about, I was down in St. Petersburg, Florida, when my children were small and they wanted to go fishing one day. We went out on a boat out in the bay there, Tampa Bay I think, Tampa-St. Petersburg, under the Sunshine Skyway Bridge and I got to looking around the boat and it turned out to be the Steamer Wilmington. It was then the Pinellas. Please tell me about Captain Harper and the past.

FOX: Well he was an entrepreneur.

INTERVIEWER: Was he your grandfather?

FOX: Yeah, he was my grandfather and my dad came in from out of town and married my mother back in 1910, something like that. But anyway, my grandfather operated Steamer Wilmington and they made trips because back in those days, water transportation was what we had. Wilmington was large at the turn of the century because you came in Wilmington and then disbursed into the state and what killed it was when the railroads came down north and south 90 miles inland. That choked us off. Anyhow he had the transportation I guess franchise here with the Steamer Wilmington. And after grandfather died in 1918....

INTERVIEWER: Well then when do your family roots begin in the Wilmington area approximately?

FOX: I would say from the Harper standpoint, it would be back in the 1800's. We have several Harpers in this area and I think the Harpers I belong to really came out of the area around the 1800s cause that was sort of a melting pot for me, came out of the woods into Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: Well let's go along a little bit. I've had the good fortune to ask you and a good friend of yours, Henry Rehder, to join the board of People's Savings and Loan which has had its various names going back to People's Federal Savings and Loan, People's Savings and Loan and now People's Savings Bank SSD and stuff like that. Going back to those days when you came in, you were so active in the community that that was the thing in your favor, why you had chosen to be a director, the things that you were involved in. To the current subject, there was an attempt

back then to try to consolidate city and county services and I don't know whether you worked on any of that or not.

FOX: It never changes.

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter) I can remember that, I know one of the things I worked on, Several of us there, Billy Broadfoot and Bill Berry, we finally got the city library made into the New Hanover County Library so that all the citizens of New Hanover County would support it. Do you have any instances during that period of time and one probably that we should mention is the battleship, that you'd like to tell us about.

FOX: That was an interesting program. You know, there was a boy by the name of Craig...

INTERVIEWER: Jimmy Craig?

FOX: Jimmy Craig. Jimmy had gone down to Texas and he had seen what they had done with the Battleship Texas down there in San Joaquin. Anyhow Jimmy came back and wanted to see what had been done with the Battleship North Carolina – it was just getting ready to be demolished. And he thought with the history of North Carolina being what it was during World War II, that something should be done about it and he went to Raleigh and they said, well yes, you'll get a piece of the deck, teakwood deck and you can put it in the museum up here. Well he wasn't satisfied with that and he came back and he talked to us and he talked to Dan Cameron and Louie Woodbury and I was involved in it. We decided that he was right and we'd see what we could do about it. Jimmy was the one who pulled that together and it was ironic that Jimmy died in Texas the day we put the battleship in its slip.

INTERVIEWER: I never knew that. He died in Texas?

FOX: Yes, he was in the Houston Burn Center.

INTERVIEWER: Oh this was the airplane accident that C.D. Martin was injured in, that's right.

FOX: Well the plane had a parachute. They had an air show here that same day. He got in the plane to take him over the battleship area where they were digging the slip to put the battleship in. He wanted to get some aerial photographs of it to have on the news. And he got C. D. Martin and some of the other fellows to go. I came real close to being on that airplane and something happened.

INTERVIEWER: Every time I see C.D. and he has a limp from that airplane crash, I'm reminded of it.

FOX: Well Jimmy was burned, and fought it and fought it and finally he died.

INTERVIEWER: Then we'll move on a minute to the battleship coming into Wilmington. Tell us a little about that.

FOX: Well of course it came out of New Jersey from an area waiting to be scrapped and it came down the coast to Wilmington. An interesting thing happened, everybody on the battleship commission had duties and the only particular duty I had at this time was when the battleship came in down the Cape Fear River, it was almost dusk in the afternoon. It was too late for them to come inside the river and on top of that, there was a northeast storm brewing. And so without

any power and a big ship like that, a tugboat couldn't hold it so they made a decision that they would take a torch, that they would cut the anchor loose and then drop it. And they did, they cut loose and they dropped it, it was anchored right there at the mouth of the Cape Fear River and I got a call about 7:00 that this happened and could they get somebody to go up the first thing in the morning because the situation is we will have to get that ship underway by 8:00 in order to make the tide and get into Wilmington by 3:15 in the afternoon.

Anyhow they said we need somebody with expertise that can use an acetylene torch to cut that link of chain, if you've ever seen a link of chain on a battleship, it's about...

INTERVIEWER: It's about 3 inches...

FOX: It's more than that, it's about 4-1/2" and you have to have somebody that has expertise enough to do that who had the equipment and be aboard so that when it gets daylight at 7:30, we can see if everything is clear for it to leave within 30 minutes. This thing has to be done in that period of time. I just thought about it and thought about it and located Gene Merritt at the Dewitt's house at about 9:30 and they were together and I told them what I needed and said, "Can you tell me who is the best man, the best mechanic in Wilmington that could do this job. I know you've got the equipment, but who is the best mechanic?" And Gene said, "Aw heck, we got that already, DeWitt and I will do it for you". And I asked him what he had to do and he said "Well we have a little drink ((laughter))".

So I said, "Well look", I told him what they had to do, they had to be at the ammunition depot across the river there at about 3:30 in the morning to go out through the mouth of the river and get up on that battleship at 7:30. They had to do that in the dark. And to take that equipment with them to get up on top of that deck and at the signal, the signal was given at 7:35, that they would cut that thing so that the battleship was free to be brought in. Well they said, "Oh don't worry about it. We'll take care of it". They were happy as larks and were having a good time.

So anyhow, I'll finish this up in a minute, as it turned out, they almost gave me a heart attack cause I got worried about those two boys, just going up side of that battleship. And out in that ocean in a dinghy carrying that equipment, they could have fallen overboard and drowned and then they got up, if they cut that thing you know, a chain like that, a big chain like that could have popped and just swept that deck and killed both of them. At about 2:00 in the morning, I got so worried about that, I started having chest pain and Mary got up and called the doctor.

INTERVIEWER: Well were they successful?

FOX: Yeah (laughter), they were successful. Everything went along fine. There was nothing wrong with my heart. Mary had to stay awake all night.

INTERVIEWER: And you got it up the river...

FOX: But when you got up the river, ran into the ark and busted up the ark.

INTERVIEWER: When you tried to turn the battleship around to get in the slip. I was watching, I know. That's quite a story about the anchor chain. I had never heard that before.

FOX: Well yeah, that thing almost gave me a heart attack.

INTERVIEWER: The way that thing was financed, I recall something about the school children of North Carolina...

FOX: There were 800,000 school children at 10 cents a piece, that's \$80,000.

INTERVIEWER: You know what I've got in my pocket, I have an admiral's card still 30-35 years old.

FOX: That was \$100.

INTERVIEWER: And lifetime admission to the battleship (laughter).

FOX: We had something like 26,000, I believe it was, admirals that raised \$260,000. We had one first class seaman, from Greensboro, said you didn't want to be an admiral because the first class seaman gave them a \$1000... we had \$260,000.

INTERVIEWER: Well that was quite a story, quite an adventure and certainly about Wilmington, with what has gone on over there all these years, it's been quite something for Wilmington. Can you think of anything else during the time that you were on the scene there that would be of particular interest?

FOX: Well we didn't have any money, so one of things we did, I mentioned about the low per capita income and to take advantage of that, an agricultural community was formed and basically we would go out into the counties. The theory being that if the people raised the level of income in those counties, that we would be able to train them. In Wilmington, we were buying from one another and when you're buying from one another, who do you sell to? So we increased our gross income in Wilmington by building up the counties around us to a healthy income. And one of the things we did was to have a rotary. We had it for two years. The first year, we made something like \$12000 and that belonged to the agriculture committee. The following year, we had the Chamber of Commerce about \$8,900 and we just _____ (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: Well John back in your own company, Fox's Holsum Bakery, with things going on, I don't know if there were name changes or not, but you expanded that with the routes and things that you had through your area. I was interested in the fact that you, if I recall right, were elected chairman of the W.E. Long Company which was connected somehow or other with the Holsum franchise, but I'm not clear about that.

FOX: Well the Long company is in Chicago and it was actually a service company that the bakers bought service from. Mr. Long got of an age where they all chipped in and bought the company from him, each one of us that remembers the company and subscribed to their method of accounting and advertising, promotion and that sort of stuff. We bought the company and then we had something like 80 some odd plants in the country, one in Nova Scotia, one in Puerto Rico and the rest of them were in the United States. I was on that board for I guess 15-18 years. I was chairman for six years and we made a good show.

INTERVIEWER: I know we're going to have just a few minutes left, but do you remember going out on the windshield appraisals with the Building and Loan Association back when you started out?

FOX: Going where?

INTERVIEWER: Windshield ...

FOX: Oh my Lord.

INTERVIEWER: When the three of us directors would get in our automobile and we'd go out and look at these houses on which people wanted loans. Some of the stories that came out of some of those trips. Well for one thing, it was a constant supply of jokes going between one house to another.

FOX: I remember very vividly Mr. Woodus Kellum. We'd go up to a house, Mr. Woodus would go over and take his knife out of his pocket and go up to the porch and see if it was solid, that was his achievement.

INTERVIEWER: He was our foundation specialist.

FOX: And then Mr. Bannerman, he was a roof man. He wanted to see how that roof was holding up.

INTERVIEWER: And you know how we found out the ages of most of these houses, we lifted the top off the toilet tank to find out when it was made. Well we had fun. You helped very strongly, you and the others to build a savings and loan association that stood the test of time.

FOX: Well Sam we really knew the city of Wilmington, the county of New Hanover and some up in Brunswick and some up in Pender, we simply knew about those. One time we went outside of Burgaw, there was a soap factory up there and I went in...

INTERVIEWER: Gallet, Roger Gallet.

FOX: That's right. We were going to finance the building. Anyhow, to appraise it, I had taken about 10 steps inside the door and I started sneezing and I walked outside and stopped. I walked back in and got about 10 feet and started sneezing again. I tried four times and every time I'd get 10 feet inside that door, I'd sneeze. I was allergic to whatever they were making soap with and I never did get to see the inside the place.

INTERVIEWER: Well I can remember some of those experiences. If I ever recorded my humorous experiences, about the fact that I'm the one who went back and made the inside inspections when we didn't have time to do it. Well I could entertain a civic club for 3 hours at ...one time or other I was in about 20% of the houses in the city of Wilmington. Let's go ahead, can you think of other things that perhaps would be of interest that we might like to touch on. You were a bank director, what other organizations were you involved in?

FOX: Lots of them, Sam. Some more than others, I was on the Committee of 100 and helped with that, Dan Cameron put a spark plug in it, I think I was about the 5th or 6th president of it and I stayed with that. I was on Urban Redevelopment and chairman of that for a while and that's when we did stuff downtown. Politics change and that stopped everything.

INTERVIEWER: Weren't you in Civic Club too?

FOX: Yeah, back 1939.

INTERVIEWER: That's when it was started.

FOX: Yeah, it started in '38, '39, about 10 or 12 boys around, I say boys, they were young men. Back in those days, if you wanted to belong to a Civic Club, you had to be about 45-48 years old and these fellows....

INTERVIEWER: It was very exclusive.

FOX: Yeah and these boys thought that there should be young people in it. There was no Junior Chamber at the time so a man came in to see his daughter and he heard that and they asked him to start a city club here, they didn't know the name of it. It turned out to be the Junior Chamber of Commerce.

INTERVIEWER: John, let's see, I believe, when did you consider yourself completely retired from business, from the bakery?

FOX: Sam, when we sold it, that was four years ago. I got out of state college when I was 20-21 years old.

INTERVIEWER: Were you able to finish at State?

FOX: No, Father had a heart attack and I had to come back in my junior year in 1936 and was there for 55 years.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's quite a career. We're down here at the beach today. Have you always had a house at the beach?

FOX: Well I've had access to one. When we were married, we spent some time on the beach. The whole Wallace family loves the beach and I loved it. You know I was raised around Carolina Beach because of my grandfather. They built a house in 1945, the house we're in now, it started in 1945 and so as time goes along, it's a small house. It grew and I think by the time Mary and I bought it from her brother, there have been seven additions to it. What we've done is the 8ht one.

INTERVIEWER: What you've done here is magnificent. To have a three story house at the beach with an elevator. I know that you must be really enjoying this. I certainly have been impressed with it, so have the people at the beach. John, I think that will about wind us up unless there's anything else that you can think of. I appreciate going back. You have stirred up a lot of memories with me back through the years because I moved to Wilmington in 1936. I've been sort of a spectator on the scene of seeing what has happened. And of course in my business association with you went over a lot of years too.

FOX: We started when Mary and I got married and bought a house – you did the papers for us. You remember that?

INTERVIEWER: That goes back. I'm not sure that I do (laughter).

FOX: Well we haven't forgotten it. Sam I have to say this, your career in Wilmington has been fabulous. You gave us the savings and loan and you stayed with it. I don't know what you went in as, but it certainly was on the bottom row and you went to be president and do all the things that you did.

INTERVIEWER: Well I appreciate that. This interview is about you (laughter), I'm just along for the ride. John, I think we would like to close now and so I'd like to thank you John for allowing me to record these mementoes on tape and I hope they'll be meaningful to somebody someday, maybe listening to these and wonder how it happened that I was down here on June 30, 1995, so we're going to close now.

FOX: Thank you, Sam.

INTERVIEWER: Thanks very much.