

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR  
INTERVIEW WITH EMSLEY A. LANEY**

**AUGUST 25, 1995**

**INTRODUCTION**

**This is Sam Bissette on the morning of August 25, 1995. I'm at home at 1939 South Live Oak Parkway and with me is a friend of longstanding, Emsley Laney. I will be talking with Emsley this morning about several things, but particularly his knowledge of banking in Wilmington that goes back to the 1920's, other things that are related to his work in the field of education, and give him a chance to share some of his experiences with us.**

INTERVIEWER: So Emsley, in order to get started off, I am going to ask you about your age?

LANEY: My age? I'm 90 years old and on September the 5th, I will be 91. So, I hope to celebrate several more birthdays and I'm not sensitive at all about my age.

INTERVIEWER: All right, good.

LANEY: As long as I feel good.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you born?

LANEY: I was born in Monroe, North Carolina and I lived there and went through the public schools and graduated from high school and then went to the University of North Carolina for four years.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. After you came out of the University of North Carolina, what direction did you take then?

LANEY: Well, the summer of 1924, I went to work with the American Trust Company as a clerk. The American Trust Company was located in Charlotte and at that time was the largest independent bank in North Carolina and that's where I got my early banking experience.

INTERVIEWER: You started at the bottom, then?

LANEY: I started on rock bottom, no question about that, but it was a very fine bank and I obtained some very fine experience because I worked in several departments over a period of five years.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I see. After you worked for the bank a while, where was the next step or turn that took you in a different direction? Did you leave the bank and move somewhere?

LANEY: Well, I stayed with the American Trust Company for five years and then I came to Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: Well, tell me the story of how you happened to come to Wilmington. I remember that as an interesting one.

LANEY: Well, Mr. Frank Ross and a group in Wilmington became interested in opening up a new bank. I knew nothing about it at the time, but Mr. Ross' wife had a good friend at the American Trust Company that she had kept in touch with since their college days and when he was looking for a cashier, he couldn't locate

one in Wilmington. For some reason, there was nobody with any banking experience here that was evidently interested in taking a chance with a new small operation which the new bank was destined to be, so they started looking outside for a number two man and a cashier. This lady recommended to Mrs. Ross that I be contacted. Mr. Ross got in touch with me and I came down here. I crossed the river on a ferry, saw Mr. Ross, talked about the job, went back to Charlotte and talked with my wife about it. I had only been married six months and we decided to make the change because it did give me opportunity. I had an opportunity at American Trust Company, but we decided that we'd make the change, come down here, and I never regretted it. Wilmington is a wonderful place.

INTERVIEWER: So you started a new bank?

LANEY: Yes, started a new bank.

INTERVIEWER: What was going to be your position?

LANEY: Cashier. I was cashier of the bank. We came to Wilmington by train, our possessions came by truck, and on May 13, 1929, we arrived in Wilmington. On May the 15th, the bank opened for business.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Now the cashier, under the old banking system, virtually was the person operating inside the bank, running the bank, and then you had a president? Who was the president?

LANEY: Frank Ross.

INTERVIEWER: I wanted to be sure about that. The combination of the two of them is sort of like a Chief Executive Officer and a Chief Operating Officer.

LANEY: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: That was under the Morris Plan. Was that a franchise type of thing?

LANEY: The Morris Plan Bank did have a franchise from the Morris Plan Corporation of America. Actually, we almost operated from a management standpoint or supervision standpoint under the wing of the Morris Plan Bank of Virginia. Mr. Thomas C. Bushell was president of the Morris Plan Bank of Virginia and he was acquainted with Wilmington because he had taught school here after his graduation from the University of North Carolina and with the interest of the local citizens, he and the Bank of Virginia combined, working together. They worked out a plan for opening the bank and operating it. We did operate with the help and supervision of the Bank of Virginia in the early days.

INTERVIEWER: You opened in times that were beginning to be difficult, did you not?

LANEY: Well, we didn't realize it at the time, but it proved to be very difficult. Within six months from the date with opened on October 15, 1929 the stock market...

INTERVIEWER: Was that black Friday of 1929?

LANEY: I don't remember if it was black Friday or not, but it was the day when the stock market took a tremendous drop and that was the beginning of the difficult days that lay ahead for a period of three to six years.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. It was later called the great depression.

LANEY: That's right and they were difficult times. A great many people in retrospect, in talking about opening a bank at that time question it and say, "That was a terrible time to open a new bank." Of course, it would seem to have been, but as a matter of fact, the happenings of those early days in the stock market as far as business in general were concerned, they made our bank as well as all others very cautious as far as lending percentages were concerned. And we, by that particular date within a period of six months, had not even had the opportunity to become overextended like a great many banks at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LANEY: So many people speculated in those days.

INTERVIEWER: What was the next event in banking for Wilmington? Was this the bank closing or would that be something else in-between.

LANEY: Well, you mean when all the banks closed?

INTERVIEWER: All the banks in the country were closed.

LANEY: Well, that took place later in 1933.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

LANEY: I'm not positive of that date.

INTERVIEWER: That was an action of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

LANEY: Franklin Roosevelt, shortly after he went into office, closed all the banks and for a period of time until they could be re-examine and certify to reopen. We just did without any banking services except in cases of absolute need where perishable goods were concerned.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LANEY: People who handled perishable goods were given access to their funds in the banks.

INTERVIEWER: The period in the first four years was getting the bank started and getting it opened up. Did you have much competition at that time?

LANEY: Not in our particular field.

INTERVIEWER: You advertised the bank for the individual, and the other banks were heavily advertised for the business community. Was that generally the case?

LANEY: Yes, we used the slogan, "The bank for the individual," throughout our entire career as a bank until we merged.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been a good one because I've never forgotten it.

LANEY: Well, the only real commercial bank in Wilmington, at that time, was the Murchison National Bank. Now, I'll have to qualify that a little bit because we had several other very fine banks, but they were chartered as savings banks.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LANEY: They really didn't have the full capabilities of the Murchison National and I think all of the banks cleared through the Murchison National Bank. It was one of North Carolina's outstanding banks for many, many years.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LANEY: But we had the...

INTERVIEWER: The Murchison Bank Building at Front and Chestnut certainly had an imposing building.

LANEY: The building has stood the test of time.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LANEY: We had the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company, the People's Savings Bank and Trust Company, the Home Savings Bank, and then of course, the Murchison National Bank.

INTERVIEWER: How did the bank closing affect those? Did some of those not open after the banking holiday?

LANEY: Before the banking holiday went into effect, the Home Savings Bank closed.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

LANEY: Home Savings Bank was headed by Mr. Jessie Roach and that bank had to close up. Then, all of us closed during the banking holidays. Our bank reopened, the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company reopened, and the People's Savings Bank reopened. The Murchison National Bank, in the meantime, had become one of the major banks of the North Carolina Bank and Trust Company but the North Carolina Bank and Trust Company did not reopen. I always felt that that bank could have reopened had it had some of the help that a great many of the other banks received from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. I don't know full details and I'm not qualified really to pass judgment on what happened, but it was, from what I later heard, the recovery and the sale of their collateral that was sufficient. Had it been handled properly, they could have withstood the test of time.

INTERVIEWER: I'm probably one of the few people that can remember and know that the Reconstruction Finance Corporation lent People's Building and Loan Association thirty-five thousand dollars investment that helped tide the liquidity problem of that particular time.

LANEY: Well, some of the other banks, at least one of them I know, received help and they were very difficult financial times. I remember, Mr. Holmes Davis was president of the People's Savings Bank and Trust Company and Mr. Charlie Taylor for the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company. Mr. Holmes Davis, I can recall, made a trip up to Washington and reported on all of our banks; the WS&P, People's Savings bank, probably the Savings and Loan Association, who carried their accounts with the Murchison National Bank or what was then, the North Carolina Bank and Trust Company. Mr. Davis notified us when he came back from Washington that he had talked with the RFC people, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and had received assurance that the North Carolina Bank and Trust Company was going to receive help and would probably stay open, which did not take place, but that's ancient history and I certainly don't know all the details.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's an interesting point and there were probably few people that are living now that can know those things that happened during that period of time. Let's leave the depression.. I want to insert one thing in here parenthetically. I think it is interesting to note that here in August 1995, you and I sit and talk with each other. For many years you were head of a bank and I was head of the Savings and Loan Association and we were competitors.

LANEY: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: For an overlapping period of time, we were competitors.

LANEY: Oh, yes. We all competed with each other, but it was always on a friendly basis.

INTERVIEWER: That's right, it was always on a friendly basis, but I think it is interesting to know that this many years later, that's 55 years ago that those things occurred. As we got on into the World War II period the shipyard was going full blast and everything, what was you situation then and what was going on at that time? Can you remember any of the wartime days of Wilmington?

LANEY: Well, I remember them in general, of course, and it's difficult for most people to recall, because they don't think about it too often. Those days really marked a turning point and I'm sure for the city of Wilmington and this whole area. A project up around Holly Ridge took twenty-five thousand workmen who constructed Camp Davis. When Camp Davis was completed, it housed about twenty-five thousand prospective second lieutenants, who were training. That just added to the influx and outgo as far as people were concerned for this whole area. Then, the North Carolina Ship Building Company was formed under the supervision and guidance of a Norfolk ship building company up in Virginia and that employed about twenty-five thousand workers then. So, we had workers coming in from South Carolina and all over the United States.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been a real housing crisis.

LANEY: If you'll remember, I don't know the exact figures, but I know the approximate figures that the biggest payroll that we had up until that time was that of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, which was eight million dollars; the annual payroll. The North Carolina Ship Building Company at it's peak and ran at its peak for two or three years, the annual payroll down there and the money released in the community was fifty-five million dollars. Now you jump from eight million dollars to fifty-five million dollars and you can realize that the economic effect of that phase of the war was tremendous on this whole area. As far as housing was concerned, we had problems with housing. Many trailer homes were shipped in here for temporary use and a lot of housing was built ostensibly for temporary use, but some of that housing is still here with us.

INTERVIEWER: It sure is.

LANEY: We sold bonds. We had city and county organizations to sell savings bonds. I expect more money was saved in those days than anytime previously or since then. The money was here, the payrolls were here, and you couldn't spend it on a lot of things.

INTERVIEWER: The goods were not being produced to be able to buy.

LANEY: You couldn't buy gasoline because it was restricted in the amount that you could buy. You couldn't buy new tires for your car. Tires just became unavailable, so there were a lot of people would have ordinarily spent their money for what was just not available. So, a lot of money was saved during those days and I expect when the war was over and goods became available again, there was a lot of money to be spent.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, you saw what took place in Wilmington during wartime. There were many people in Wilmington who had been displaced by military service or displaced for other things. After the war, Wilmington appeared to be changing into a different city compared to the city before the war. Many of the barriers had been broken about people and the way they thought and their view towards outsiders coming in Wilmington. Wilmington had made a radical change from the prewar Wilmington that we had as a sleepy little southern town and grew into a town that was interested in its economic pace and recovery. Can you tell us anything about the 1950's for example, that saw Wilmington going in a new direction, looking for business, and looking for industry. Who were the people in Wilmington that spearheaded our efforts to create a good strong economic base. We then had a shake-up from the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, who was leaving, too.

LANEY: Well, I suppose that change had been in the making for some time, but it was not until 1960 that the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad actually moved. We became aware of the fact that it was going to move its headquarters to Jacksonville, Florida shortly before 1960 and then the move actually took place in that year. Well, J.G. Thornton, president of the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company headed up a move and was assisted by a great many others. I was a small part of a group that formed a Committee of One Hundred. I'd like to not take credit for anything at all, but the Committee of One Hundred was formed from a group of self-appointed business people. Business people began to raise the money to form an organization and to go out and solicit industrial industries for our city and our area. We got voluntary contributions from banks, motels, restaurants, and business houses in general. People who were interested in seeing the community grow and prosper and really tried to find a replacement for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. We raised the money with no tax money. I think that's been changed now and I think the Committee of One Hundred gets tax benefits from the city and the county. In those early days, we operated entirely on voluntary contributions. We brought in a man I've forgotten his name now, but he started making calls. The first time that I felt we had some definite influence was in bringing in Corning Glass Plant, and then later of course, Dupont, GE and Federal Paper. The Committee of One Hundred was the sole effort in putting...

INTERVIEWER: But it started a motivation stream in that direction.

LANEY: It provided some and it spearheaded the movement. I think our educational setup brought in some of this industry too. We had at that time a training program at the Board of Education and had a very fine training program for training new employees at that time. It has now grown in to an entirely different setup with the community college here, but back then under Mr. Roland, we had a strong Vocational Department.

INTERVIEWER: Let's change our direction and go over into another area; the field of education. You have been interested in education since I can remember and you served years in connection with the Board of Education. Tell us a little bit about some of the times you served and the things that you might have observed when they took place.

LANEY: Well...

INTERVIEWER: Weren't you chairman of the Board of Education?

LANEY: Well, I served on the Board of Education from 1941. John Marshall was a member of the Board of Education and he went into service and was replaced by appointment and I was appointed to take his place in 1941. I served until 1972 and I believe for some reason, I decided not to run again. But during those years, Mr. Roland was the superintendent for quite a number of years and then when he retired, Mr. Earl Funderburk was superintendent for a couple of years. Bill Wagner came in and made a very fine superintendent and then he became Chancellor at the University of North Carolina. Heywood Bellamy succeeded him and we had the good fortune to have some very fine superintendents during my tenure on the Board of Education.

INTERVIEWER: When did you become aware or interested, shall I say, in what our University was doing?

LANEY: Well, I was on the board of course, but the University had its beginning as Wilmington College in 1947 and it started out as an extension of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and classes were held in the old Isaac Bear Building and interest grew. Actually, the college became more or less formalized in the Isaac Bear Building and attained some stature and just a matter of from 1947 on, it was a matter of taking one or two steps. Addison Hewlett was in the legislature at that time and he helped a lot of people get recognized.

INTERVIEWER: I was told it took a lot of legislative help to provide the funds to be able to do those things.

LANEY: No question about it and Dr. Hoggard was one of the most determined men I ever knew and he was determined that that college was going to succeed and he certainly used every effort to help it. He finally left the Board of Education and became the president of the college, which gave him a lot of satisfaction. I know and all of his friends too, and he was a very fine gentleman.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I think it's interesting to note that two of our three high schools were named, one for him and one is named for you; the Emsley Laney School and the John T. Hoggard High Schools. These two schools compete with each other in athletics ferociously.

LANEY: Dr. Hoggard, of course, I was very close to him because he was chairman of the board. He was on our board of directors at the bank and he supported me so much and for so long in so many ways that I always had a great fondness for him. Dr. Hoggard, along with Harris Newman, Fred Mathis, Jill Riley, Charlie Parmalee, Herbert Leuthenthal, and Fred Little. I may be overlooking one or two. That was a pretty nice board of directors.

INTERVIEWER: That was the Who's Who of business leadership of that time.

LANEY: That's right. They were fine people, too.

INTERVIEWER: Emsley, as we think about education, what other areas did you have interest in as a banker? The community looked on bankers as people that needed to support the community and be interested in serving in positions. What are some of the other things that you may perhaps have had an interest in as time went on? The Chamber of Commerce had been one for example.

LANEY: Well, I worked with the Chamber of Commerce. I was president during the war for one or two years during the ship building days.

INTERVIEWER: Have you had any interest in any of the historical organizations?

LANEY: No, I never have. I was interested in and worked some at the Red Cross at one time. I was chairman of the Red Cross chapter, on the board for many years, and treasurer at one time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you volunteer with the Salvation Army?

LANEY: Not the Salvation Army.

INTERVIEWER: No, I'm just trying to think of some organizations that you might have had an interest in.

LANEY: I was president of the YMCA.

INTERVIEWER: We had a good YMCA in those days.

LANEY: YMCA, you know, was located on Market Street.

INTERVIEWER: I know I was instrumental in helping to get the old building finally torn down so we could put in our parking lot.

LANEY: I remember one humorous incident that took place in connection with this. We were raising some money for the YMCA and holding a meeting in its general assembly hall with a right sizeable group in attendance. Harris Newman was recruited as the speaker for the occasion. He was Jewish as you know, and I believe I was president at that time. Anyway, I was there and Harris was recruited as the speaker for the occasion. When he finished his speech, he leaned over and chatted with me a little bit and said, "You know, I had planned to give fifty dollars to this organization on this drive, but that was such a good speech, I think I'm going to raise it to five hundred."

INTERVIEWER: That's a good one. By the way, tell me the story that you told me one time about the man who came in the bank and wanted to deposit a thousand dollars.

LANEY: Well,

INTERVIEWER: It's the revolving door story.

LANEY: Yes, one of the reasons that I remember so fondly the location that we had in the old Trust Building at the corner of Front and Market Streets. It was originally a bank building and had a fine vault, entrance to the lobby, and a revolving door. One day, we only had five employees. Sometimes, I would act as clerk, teller, or general bookkeeper. On this particular day, I was at the teller's counter and a gentleman walked in, came through the revolving door, and walked over to the president's desk. Mr. Ross was sitting there and he said he wanted to borrow some money. I saw him come in and noticed that he looked like he might need to borrow money. He was in overalls, clean and neat looking, but nevertheless he was very obviously a farmer and he didn't look like he had too much money. So, I couldn't help but overhear the discussion and Mr. Ross asked him a number of questions and finally ended up with the man getting up and leaving without his money. He walked out the revolving door, but instead of going all the way out on the street, he just came back in and came through the lobby up to my spot at the teller's counter and said, "Mister, I want to open up a savings account." I said, "Fine, sign this signature card here." I asked, "How much do you want to deposit?" He said, "I came in here to borrow a thousand dollars and I talked with that man over there." He pointed to Mr. Ross. He said, "Mr. Ross asked me a lot of questions and told me he couldn't lend the money to me, so I want to deposit a thousand dollars." The man said I really came in to find out from him and from you too, how my money was going to be lent in the first place. Since I'm pretty well satisfied about how safe you are, I'm going to open the account and leave the money there." He kept his account with us until his death.

INTERVIEWER: That's a great story.

LANEY: I'll tell you who he was. He was Mr. Jones, whose son Charlie Jones, used to run the Wilmington Electric Company.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes.

LANEY: Mr. Jones was a fairly prosperous farmer and storekeeper in Winnebow, and a mighty fine gentleman. He didn't look like he had too much money when he came in the bank and he didn't want anybody to know that he had too much money.

INTERVIEWER: I want to put this in here and it's a story about you. You had one of the best situations for being a person who was nice to people. Anywhere you went, if the name Emsley Laney came up, they would say that, "He is a nice man." Well, the story goes that this man came in the bank one day to make a loan and to get money. It happened that he talked to you and discussed with him everything at length. The man made your acquaintance for the first time and enjoyed meeting you. He left the bank a few minutes later and about three or four blocks down on Front Street, he ran into a friend of his, Charlie. He said, "Charlie you know I've been down to the bank and I met this man Emsley Laney, who's one of the nicest people I have ever met. I thoroughly enjoyed knowing him. You don't find people like that very often." He said, "You know, I realized it a minute ago, that I didn't get the money." I heard that story and thought that this tape wouldn't be complete if I didn't include it. I hope it was all right for me to include that.

LANEY: It's a highly complimentary story, which I appreciate.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that you would like to add in here that you think might complete this tape.

LANEY: Sam, I don't know. I think the whole banking picture in Wilmington, which of course is one that I am intensely interested in and have been throughout my years in business. I spent forty-five years working in banking. That was my main interest from a business standpoint. Banking in Wilmington has, as every other place, grown so much. We have gone from where we had one or two banking offices, to where we have dozens of them.

INTERVIEWER: There seems to be dozens of banks.

LANEY: That's right. There were also thirteen building and loan associations. They've dropped down in numbers as far as building and loan associations.

INTERVIEWER: I think we are going to have to conclude this now and I want to thank you for coming out this morning and sharing these thoughts with me.

LANEY: Well, I've enjoyed talking with you.

INTERVIEWER: I believe we will have something that will be worthwhile to people as the years go by. Thanks a million and we'll wind up with that.