

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH MARIE PERRY (MRS. ALBERT F.)**

AUGUST 22, 1995

INTRODUCTION

This is Sam Bisette on Tuesday morning, August 22. I'm at the home of Mrs. Albert Perry at 1811 Bruton Court in Drayton Square here in Wilmington. I'm going to talk with her about her lifetime, some of the experiences that she's had and things that I think may be of interest to other people as time goes on.

INTERVIEWER: So I'm going to ask Mrs. Perry if we can establish a beginning, a basis of how she happened to be in Wilmington and if she's not sensitive about her age, we'll get her to tell us how old she is.

PERRY: Well I'm 92, I was 92 in June and I came to Wilmington in 1928. I was married to Albert Perry on September 15 and I came here as a bride on October 1.

INTERVIEWER: That was back in what they called the Roaring Twenties. Where was your home?

PERRY: I was born in Sheboygen, Wisconsin, a small town in Wisconsin right on Lake Michigan. I came to Wilmington to visit a cousin of mine who had married John Corbett here in Wilmington and I came in 1926 and met my husband then, but didn't really think too much about coming here until the early 1928.

INTERVIEWER: I see and you've been in Wilmington ever since.

PERRY: Well I came in February and we were married in September that same year.

INTERVIEWER: But you've been here since the 20s?

PERRY: Since the 20s.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, tell me just a little about your husband, where was he born and where did he come from.

PERRY: He was, my husband was born in Portland, Maine, in 1894 and he, as a young boy, he worked at Boiling Springs Resort and at that time, Mr. Emerson was president of the Coast Line Railroad and during the summer, Mr. Emerson's private car was sent up to Boiling Springs and Mr. Emerson and his wife spent a month there. My husband was working at the Boiling Springs Hotel and did things for Mr. Emerson and evidently Mr. Emerson took a liking to him because he told him that he if he would come south, he would guarantee that he would have a job at the Coast Line which my husband took up and came here in 1912.

INTERVIEWER: That's very nice. That gives the background to how he happened to be here.

PERRY: Mr. Emerson, true to his word, put him into the Treasury Department.

INTERVIEWER: Of the Coast Line Railroad.

PERRY: Of the Coast Line Railroad where he stayed for some time until World War I. In World War I, my husband enlisted in the what was called, well he was called a cadet and it was in the Air Force and he was sent to Austin, Texas for training, but at the time that his unit was supposed to go overseas, he had a very bad case of the flu and wasn't able to go with his unit. And by the time he recovered, the war was over.

INTERVIEWER: Let me go ahead just a minute and get on some other members of your family. What do you have in the way, what did that marriage bring in the way of children? You have your son Frazier.

PERRY: Frazier was born in November 1929. Jane, my daughter, was born in 1931 and Arthur in 1932.

INTERVIEWER: So you have three children? I see. Now let's go ahead to a little something else for a minute. When you moved to Wilmington, what was Wilmington like in the days when you were here as a bride?

PERRY: People used to go to the movies.

INTERVIEWER: That would have been the silent movies, too, wouldn't it? They didn't have much in the way of entertainment, did they?

PERRY: No, that's right, but my husband had a very nice group of friends and we did quite a lot of socializing with the friends.

INTERVIEWER: I imagine you had some beach socializing in the summertime, didn't you?

PERRY: Well our summer, we had a friend from Richmond who had a cottage on Ocean Avenue at the beach and she used to give us the cottage early and we would go down there in June and her cottage washed away in I think it was about 1931 or 1932, along with Ocean Avenue which was a boardwalk. And there were other cottages in front of Ocean Avenue in those days.

INTERVIEWER: When was this, do you recall about the time?

PERRY: It was in about 1932.

INTERVIEWER: You know Wrightsville Beach has had its problems from time to time. Can you recall some of the disasters that struck the beach in the way of fire and storm? Tell us about that.

PERRY: In 1931, I think it was New Year's Day, the _____ cottage caught on fire and immediately the fire went up and took 108 cottages on the northern extension. At that time, there was no fire department. The only fire things were they had some fire extinguishers at Robert's Store, but that little bit didn't help a bit. That little bit of protection.

INTERVIEWER: Well that burned the northern end of Wrightsville Beach pretty much in its entirety, didn't it?

PERRY: It did, there were only a few cottages left.

INTERVIEWER: What about some of the other ones, do you remember the old hotel. There was an old hotel at Station One. The Oceanic.

PERRY: Yes, that burned in that fire, but people used to come...

INTERVIEWER: Oh it was in that same fire, I didn't know that.

PERRY: But I believe it was because during the time of the fire, Albert had a lot of the insurance so they set up his office so that the people could come in and make their claims at his office. His office at that time was in the Thorton Building on Front Street.

INTERVIEWER: The old Orton Hotel.

PERRY: The old Orton Hotel.

INTERVIEWER: Before we leave the beach, do you have any recollections or remembrances of the beach over there about things that happened that would be interesting or that you recall with pleasure perhaps?

PERRY: Around the beach, everybody used to dress up at night and walk up and down the boardwalk. And also the Tidewater Company had a trolley that left from downtown and went up Princess Street and that went to the beach, stopped at all the stops on the southern end and took everybody to Lumina for 10 cents. We had all the big bands, that was in the 20s.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember some of the names of the bands or have they escaped your memory now?

PERRY: I'm afraid I've forgotten. Because after 1931, that was no more. I mean they didn't have the big bands then. But those big bands used to come and stay at the Oceanic and they would have a concert in the morning for all these people that came from Augusta and all around and would stay for a month at a time at the Oceanic. The only way to get over there was on the trolley.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, the ballroom at Lumina was supposed to have been a very popular place from what I hear. Do you have any recollections of that?

PERRY: Not very many because that was, well we did go there some, but not very much in the 30s. It was kept open and there were dances and things, but Tidewater didn't have the trolley and the rates they had had before in the 20s. After 1929...

INTERVIEWER: Tell me now, let's get back to the 20s again. Do you remember anything about the changing conditions that happened after the stock market crash, Black Friday, 1927. Do you have any recollections of the way that life might have changed that affected you or did you notice the effects on other people?

PERRY: I can't really recall too much of a change then. It was a little bit more gradual I think.

INTERVIEWER: That was getting into the time of Herbert Hoover. I guess Hoover was president then, wasn't he?

PERRY: Yes. I remember a party the night that he was elected. He was elected in 1928, that's right.

INTERVIEWER: And so you went to a Hoover party. Later on Mr. Hoover's name became associated with a form of transportation called the Hoover cart when people, the automobiles weren't anything that people could afford.

PERRY: And a chicken in every pot, he said he wanted to do.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about President Hoover?

PERRY: Can't remember anything except that we saw him one time at Key Largo many years later (laughter). We were at the Key Largo Club and he was staying there for the winter. I can't remember.

INTERVIEWER: It's an era many people don't want to remember much about because times were generally hard.

PERRY: Well I do remember that we had just built our house and ...

INTERVIEWER: Now the house that you built was the one that was on Oleander?

PERRY: Yes, our Mimosa place. Ann and Henry Longley live in it now. We built that in 1929 and 1930. We moved in in 1931, but there weren't many houses in Oleander then.

INTERVIEWER: Oleander I guess was just in the process of being developed at that time. We're talking about the Oleander that is on the north side of what is now Oleander Drive and has Country Club Road going through it.

PERRY: Yes, yes. Some of those houses had been built earlier. Isaac Granger right on the corner, and Adair McCoy, those houses had been built before we built ours.

INTERVIEWER: Mr. Granger certainly is establishing a record for longevity, isn't he?

PERRY: He is, have you seen him lately?

INTERVIEWER: I saw him down at the Yacht Club the other day and I think he's 100 years old or so and I remember Adair McCoy also. Mrs. Perry, I've always been an admirer of the building that your husband built on Princess Street for offices. It was just so far superior to anything else that was there. How did he get such a pretty building built there?

PERRY: We had a friend of ours, who was also a good friend of Nelson MacRae's, and he had done a lot of architecture and he had been the architect for Nelson's house in Oleander. We saw quite a lot of him and had drawn a little sketch for our beach cottage and back in 1936, and then we did a little remodeling of our house in Mimosa Place too and he did those plans, the remodeling plans. Then Albert wanted to have an office because the Orton Hotel was closing up, I mean where his office was so he bought that property in 1939 I think it was and Harry Sterns planned the building. Albert said he really wanted something that really looked nice and so he, Harry concocted this idea of a New York bank with a marble front, so he drew the plan. It's still there, the Bride's Door and the marble front and the rest, of course, inside.

INTERVIEWER: It is a beautiful building. Let's get into World War II a minute now because in World War II as I understand it, you were here and you were more than doing your part. Tell us about some of things that you were involved in during the war in connection with your activities.

PERRY: Well I started out in the filter center, but I didn't stay there very long, but that was interesting. You probably know more about that than I did even because they, if you were on the radar, of course the radar was piped down to the basement...

INTERVIEWER: Where was the filter center?

PERRY: The basement of the post office and everybody sat around a big table and we were spotting what you had seen up above that they sent down.

INTERVIEWER: The people listening to this tape, I was an aircraft spotter until I went into the Army in October 1942.

PERRY: Well that was about as long as I think I stayed in the filter center too. I didn't...but they had real good courses in knowing what to do.

INTERVIEWER: Well it was an information collecting center.

PERRY: That's what it was.

INTERVIEWER: That what that was for this area. Now were you involved in, you might say, services to the troops, running entertainment centers and things were done, were you connected to the Red Cross?

PERRY: I was connected, then I got the Red Cross job and they used to send the troops down from the north someplace. Well some of them got on the train in Goldsboro, some of them got on the train in Washington and some of them I think came as far as New Jersey and they would send in a certain number every night and then have buses here that took them out to Camp Davis which had already been established for a long time. When they arrived in Wilmington, the canteen had coffee and donuts for them for breakfast because they hadn't had a meal for the morning.

INTERVIEWER: Was this at the train station?

PERRY: At the very old train station and we had a canteen set up there and we had some very loyal people who came early in the morning.

INTERVIEWER: Do you recall some of your coworkers?

PERRY: I kept, we had a book and people used to sign up and I kept that book for a long time and I finally, I think I asked the Red Cross if they would like it. It was just, the workers, the volunteers would put down their time and how many people they served and the dates and they were just notebooks that we had collected.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any other ladies that were friends of yours that were working in the same type of work.

PERRY: Most of them are gone. But Bess Smith was chairman of all the food part of it. I just had the canteen which was...sometimes we served them sandwiches too if they came in on a later train.

INTERVIEWER: All right, while you were doing that, your husband was doing his part with the Coast Guard Auxiliary. I understood from Frazier that he was on inlet patrol. Could you tell us a little bit about what that was about.

PERRY: He was working under the Coast Guard as a volunteer under the regular Coast Guard, Commander Thresher was the Coast Guard planner here and Albert was a volunteer, but he was chairman of the volunteers. So he got somebody, all the men who had boats would volunteer to man the inlets every night and they had...some of the boats were nice yachts practically, but some of them were very inadequate to stay out there all night.

INTERVIEWER: What was their purpose in being there? What were they doing?

PERRY: The submarines were coming in so close to sink the tankers and they'd sink several of the tankers right out here and also they put spies ashore and they put them into the inlet and some of those people were manning the inlets caught them. They went to the prisoners' camp out here.

INTERVIEWER: So it was effective.

PERRY: It was, but I remember in March 1942, I believe it was, we were at our cottage at the beach. Frazier and some of his friend were celebrating a birthday of Jerry Freeman and there were four boys who had spent the weekend at the cottage and they looked out and saw this blazing tanker out there. A submarine had hit the tanker and other people saw quite a few of them go down out there too.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard of people hearing them too, the explosions when they were torpedoed. Well what was done, were the beaches on a blackout at night?

PERRY: At the beach, we had a blackout, but I always have said that I thought that was unnecessary because the shipyard was going full blast at the river and they had night shifts and the sky was just lit up so that would even be more of a target than....

INTERVIEWER: The submarine could actually be out there and see silhouettes come in.

PERRY: They could. We religiously would put up blackout curtains and things at the beach, kept the children off the beach.

INTERVIEWER: Any other remembrances of World War II in Wilmington? Was there anything else that you were connected to besides the filter center and the canteen and...

PERRY: The shipyard was very interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us about that. Any idea of how many people were working? A lot.

PERRY: That's right and of course, I had heard about it through Albert because he had the insurance and he knew Roger Williams who was the head of the shipbuilding company and he used to come down here quite often and every week, a liberty ship was pushed off the ways and then they had a party at the Cape Fear Men's Club downtown. The companies that were taking

the ships, that were buying these ships, would send some members and they always had a dinner with a lot of people from Wilmington. I've got some pictures.

INTERVIEWER: That was quite an enterprise. I've heard various figures of 15-20,000 people working out there at the time. To build a ship a week, they had to really...

PERRY: And they said that they were so well paid that all the workers bought silk shirts.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go on for just a minute to you. After the war was over, you had a husband established in business here, a very fine insurance business in Wilmington. What were your interests then? What organizations were you involved in? How did you spend your time?

PERRY: Too many at that time. Then I had to begin to designate one or two because I couldn't give my time to all the things that I really wanted to.

INTERVIEWER: Well what was your principal interest during that time?

PERRY: My principal interest the whole time from 1939 was Catherine Kennedy Homes. It still is.

INTERVIEWER: Well if there named a Miss Catherine Kennedy Home, I guess you would be it. Tell us what you did during that period of time and what happened to the Catherine Kennedy Home in connection with its growth and location and whatever.

PERRY: I was treasurer all that time and they still call me Treasurer Emeritus. We started an endowment fund. We moved from 9th and Princess, bought the Elliott House on 3rd Street in 1949 and in 1950, we built the Walker Wing which is the north wing which is being renovated right now and in the 60s, we bought the property – it was called the Bailey property next door all the way through to 4th Street and built the what's now called the Whitehead Wing. Leah Whitehead was a very, very devoted member of the board who did so much.

INTERVIEWER: And how long, should I say, have you been retired from the Catherine Kennedy Home?

PERRY: Just since I broke my hip, the 1st of February. I'm still interested though very much. Some of my coworkers didn't want me to resign, but I know I have to do it because I can't do as much as I used to.

INTERVIEWER: Any other thoughts or any other recollections of the Catherine Kennedy Home before we leave that?

PERRY: We sometimes when we were on 9th Street, we didn't have enough money to pay the grocery bills. So some of the board members would come across with enough to pay the bill. But right now, they're in a much better position.

INTERVIEWER: Shall we say the Catherine Kennedy Home has come a long way?

PERRY: Well, yes, but we've had a few setbacks recently because we had so much competition. There's so many homes that have more to offer than the Catherine Kennedy Home does, with life care which we did not have. It's only a retirement home.

INTERVIEWER: What else in Wilmington have you had interest in besides the Catherine Kennedy Home?

PERRY: Well I was a member of the Ministering Circle for 50 years and that has done a great deal of good.

INTERVIEWER: It seems to me that I saw you at a Colonial Dames meeting.

PERRY: Yes, that's right.

INTERVIEWER: Now people might be wondering why I was at a Colonial Dames meeting, but...

PERRY: You have that very nice presentation about the cemetery.

INTERVIEWER: Well I didn't mention that with the idea of that, but that's where I remember seeing you. Thank you for your kind remarks. I enjoyed doing the story of Oakdale on tape. The Colonial Dames group seems like to me that that's a fairly good size group and a rather dedicated group. How long have you been associated with the Colonial Dames group?

PERRY: Since the 70s, early 70s.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Anything else in Wilmington that you've been associated with that you can remember?

PERRY: One that that I really was interested in was, well it ended up as the Travelers' Aid Society, Family Service. I was on that board for a long time. I can't remember the girl who was the head of that, but she did a lot.

INTERVIEWER: What was the mission of the Family Service?

PERRY: When people came to Wilmington, a lot of them came by train and they would meet them at the train and try to place them wherever they might and it was during the war. And after the war, there were a lot of misplaced persons that came.

INTERVIEWER: Was Family's Aid at all connected with Traveler's Aid?

PERRY: Traveler's Aid and eventually it was in the United Way too. But I had so many other things that when my term was up, I didn't do too much with that afterwards.

INTERVIEWER: Let's leave civic service for a minute and let's talk about some of the things that you do yourself that you love to do either as a hobby or because you simply love to do them.

PERRY: Needlepoint. All these chairs and quite a few pieces, quite a few of the things in St. James Church – I've also been very much interested in St. James Church all my life here.

INTERVIEWER: Are these some of the cushions that are used in places?

PERRY: Yes and some of the other churches too.

INTERVIEWER: Well that's great. How about other interests? You had one or two that I've heard of, but I want you to tell me about them.

PERRY: Well outside of the civic work and you know, oh, gardening. I belonged to the Garden Club for years.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever interested in ballroom dancing?

PERRY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: (laughter) Tell me about that.

PERRY: Well I've enjoyed that. I started ...

INTERVIEWER: I wasn't going to let you get away without my asking you about it because I was down at Thalian Hall the night that you were not able to be there, that evening. When Betsy Corbett and Eleanor Reaves and some of the others presented an excellent program.

PERRY: At Thalian Hall? Yes I was supposed to be there, but I had the flu. Mr. Roberts was really outdone with me. I think he wanted me to get out of my sick bed to come and be in it.

INTERVIEWER: Well you were listed as being on the program and those of us that did not get a chance to see you do your performance were sorry, but it was announced that you were ill so we let you off the hook.

PERRY: Somebody else did the little skit that we had rehearsed. Maybe it was Eleanor Reaves. I'm not sure who did it, but it was in January, I know. It was about two weeks after that that I broke my hip (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: It would have been a remarkable accomplishment had you been able to do it, but my congratulations to you for saying that you would and you can't help it if you got the flu. Let's leave it that way. Tell me we've covered a lot of areas this morning, where you came from and being here during the war years and since, can you think of any experiences or stories of things that may be of interest that you recall that you would care to recount. We have 3-4 minutes for that.

PERRY: Well of course my dear friend, Roddy Kidder's mother, Mrs. Kurtzweiler and I, when she came back, we had really enjoyed each other when she came back from Toledo and I miss her so much.

INTERVIEWER: Well if you're 92, as the years have treated all of us, well you've lost probably many good friends that you otherwise would have continued to enjoy.

PERRY: Of course, Emsley Laney has been a good friend and the Bishop and Hammers have been especially good friends for many years.

INTERVIEWER: Well my wife sees them every Monday when she goes to Porter's Neck to do her Monday morning rounds down there. Emsley is probably the same age you are, right about.

PERRY: He's just a little younger, he's about 90 or 91. The Bishop is 91.

INTERVIEWER: Emsley had his 90th birthday party a year or so ago so he may be 91 now.

PERRY: Well he came from Monroe, I think. His older son was in school, Forest Hills. Forest Hills School was a great place.

INTERVIEWER: Someone said to me a while ago, it hasn't changed a bit the way it was 50 years ago.

PERRY: Except they added another story. It isn't a little red schoolhouse anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Well I want to thank you, Ms. Perry, for letting me come over and talk with you.

PERRY: Well I hope that this has been something that has been of some good.

INTERVIEWER: Well I think that it's nice that you have remembered the events that you have and are able to, at your age of 92, to be able to sit down in a straight chair for 40 minutes and talk about your experiences as capably and as well as you have. My congratulations to you. We will end with that unless there's anything else you have to say.

PERRY: Well, I don't know exactly, but I just am very thankful that I had such a nice life in Wilmington. Wilmington is such a nice place.

INTERVIEWER: That's a good one to sign off on. Thank you so much.