

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH ALICE BORDEN MOORE SISSON**

SEPTEMBER 11, 1995

INTRODUCTION

This is Sam Bisette on the afternoon of September 11, 1995. I'm here at home at 1939 South Live Oak Parkway and with me is a longtime neighbor and dear friend of both Ruby and I, Alice Sisson. We were neighbors for many years over on Highland Drive before she moved down to Harbor Island. So Alice, I'd like to say, let's see if we can't talk with you just a little bit and get some information that I know you have about your life here that perhaps would be of interest to other people.

INTERVIEWER: Why don't we start out with just a little about where you were born and a little about your early days.

SISSON: I was born on Fifth Street in Wilmington, North Carolina, lived here all my life. I think maybe the earliest recollections I have about school were private school, I went for three years under the tutelage of Mrs. Catherine Whitehead who was Mrs. Royce McClelland later on and I remember that she had her school up on the second floor and all of us would dutifully troop up the steps and sit around a table. The third grade sat on one side of the table, the first grade sat on one side and the second grade sat on one side and Ms. Catherine sat somewhere off in the corner, so that was the first three years of my schooling.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting that you would remember the seating arrangements. After you, where did you go then? Did you go on to public school?

SISSON: Then I went into public school in the fourth grade to the old Isaac Bear School.

INTERVIEWER: I see. That's the one on Market.

SISSON: The one on Market, right.

INTERVIEWER: At 12th. Then after Isaac Bear, did you go on to New Hanover High School then.

SISSON: Had to go to Hemingway first for the seventh grade and then on into high school and I did not go to an eighth grade because that year, they didn't have eighth grade. They jumped us right into freshman.

INTERVIEWER: Is that the one that got lost by the Depression? They didn't have the funds to have it (laughter)?

SISSON: It might possibly have been.

INTERVIEWER: I've been told that. And then you went on to high school.

SISSON: Right, New Hanover High.

INTERVIEWER: I think you told me you went off to school after that, didn't you?

SISSON: Yes, I went to college first at Staunton, Virginia, Mary Baldwin College, and when I graduated from there, I went to Washington for two years and did two years graduate work in political science. Had intended to make my career in Washington, but my mother was involved in an automobile accident and I had to come home and help with the situation and the upshot of all of that was that I did not go back to the Washington area, but later on, I went back to school, University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, for my Master's degree.

INTERVIEWER: I see, and that was a Master's degree in Sociology?

SISSON: In social work.

INTERVIEWER: Social work, okay. Somewhere along the line, Alice Borden Moore, you added the name Sisson to that. How did that happen?

SISSON: I was dating some officers who were stationed at Camp Davis during the war years and also living at the same house was a gentleman named William E. Sisson who worked in the shipyard building the liberty ships here in Wilmington. One of the officers whom I knew said "I have a friend and I would like to bring him by your house for you to meet someday". "Fine", I said. So he did and three years later, the friend and I were married.

INTERVIEWER: And that's Bill Sisson.

SISSON: And that's Bill Sisson.

INTERVIEWER: Who also has a namesake in young Bill Sisson.

SISSON: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Let's remember just for a minute what some of those remembrances are of those years. For example, when you went to Mary Baldwin, generally when was this? Was this in the 30's?

SISSON: Right. I graduated from Mary Baldwin in 1938.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, graduated in '38. All right. Do you happen to remember what times were like in this country during the years before you went to Mary Baldwin and during the time you were at Mary Baldwin.

SISSON: Life was very calm without much pressure, small community feeling about Wilmington. It's a small town as a matter of fact. Everybody pretty well knew who everybody else was. You'd go downtown on Front Street and you'd meet numerous people whom you knew so it was a very warm kind of a close, intimate...

INTERVIEWER: It was an old city, but a small and comfortable one.

SISSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of political climate did we have then? Let's see, we were in the reconstruction days after the depression, were we not? Or in the process of some of the things that were taking place in 1932 on?

SISSON: Well I really wasn't too aware of the economic situation until the Coast Line moved out of Wilmington. It moved its headquarters down to Florida which meant that the sustaining force in Wilmington's economy was gone. And I remember the Committee of a Hundred was formed and that committee chose then to cast a vote to see what they could find to replace the Coast Line and it was on the heels of their work that then the big industries began to slowly come into the area; General Electric, DuPont and Corning and so forth. But of course that took a number of years.

INTERVIEWER: Yes it did, we're getting up into the last couple of decades when some of that happened. Let's go back and pick up just a little family business. You and Bill were married and you have some children now.

SISSON: Yes, we have three, one by adoption. Our oldest daughter, Fran, lives in California. Our other two are Bill who is a practicing chiropractor here in Wilmington and a member of the County Commission and a daughter who lives in Ohio raising three kids of her own.

INTERVIEWER: And that's Penny.

SISSON: And that's Penny.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, good. I know the children well because two of them are the same age as my two, David and Sabra, and we had some childhood experiences and some hurricane experiences and some neighborhood experiences that included somebody blowing the mailbox up with all our mail in it one time which Tommy Laney says the Laney family did (laughter).

SISSON: I expect that's right (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: Well tell me, your young son is now a member of the County Commissioners. What was he doing one time in a hurricane when you found him? Do you remember this?

SISSON: My son, during the hurricane, asked permission to go outside for just a minute and I had my good friends over there at the house; next door neighbor Woody Bailey, across the street neighbor, Sam Bisette, and we were all waiting for Bill to come back in the house. He never appeared. In the meantime, the front started moving again. The wind started blowing again. No child. So with great courage, Woody and Sam and my husband Bill went out to look for him and they found him up the road a bit in the woods building a dam across a creek (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: I remember that situation too. I remember we went over to your house because you had a masonry and steel house and I looked out of the window and watched my house, the roof blowing off of it and everything. I think this was during hurricane Hazel because that was the hurricane when the eye, which went over, and we went out in the middle of the eye.

SISSON: You certainly did.

INTERVIEWER: And it was a blue sky there and I pushed a tree back up in my yard. It had blown over and then all of a sudden, the wind started blowing again from the other direction. I think that Penny and David one time went off to play golf together and poor Penny ended up in the hospital for a few stitches when David took a golf swing a little bit too close to her and that was when they were about 4-5 years old.

SISSON: Something like that, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so much for childhood remembrances and early, early remembrances. Let's go into another area for a minute. After you came to Wilmington, getting settled, family raising and all of that, you began to have certain civic interests and organizations in which you become involved in one of them, you helped get off the ground. Could you tell me about that.

SISSON: Well I guess the very first one was when the United Way became established because originally we had what was called Community Chest and Community Council. The duty of the Community Chest was to raise money. The duty of the Community Council was to be aware of what the social needs of the community were and advised the Community Chest so that the proper funding could then be channeled and set up. At that time, what we called now the Department of Social Services was called the Associated Charities and they did attend or try to attend as best they could the financial needs of people, but they did not address anything else. There was no inquiry into what was happening in the lives of people other than they might need some food and so it was in that area that the Community Council functioned and it was on their advice, what they found, that the Associated Charities ceased to be and the Department of Social Services took over. So it was quite a stressful period of time in there while all that was being worked out.

INTERVIEWER: The United Way used to be the United Fund. Was this local movement tied in as a local unit of the national organization? Was it patterned after it or was it sanctioned by or how did it actually bridge into the fact it was a different thing called the United Fund, do you recall?

SISSON: You know I don't really recall that. Of course, as the United Way, it was a member of the national organization. But I don't recall prior to that time.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. I was going back a little bit in remembering that there was a United Fund that was prior to the United Way. You had some interest in some other organizations you were telling me about just before we started. Can you remember some of those?

SISSON: Yes, I worked for a good number of years in the field of mental retardation and served as chairman of a committee called The School for Retarded Children. The work of our committee eventually culminated in our being able to incorporate in the public school program the needs of the mentally retarded child so I felt that that was a real accomplishment.

INTERVIEWER: Well that was a major step, it certainly was.

SISSON: In addition to that, of course, my interests broadened into the general field of mental health and I served as president of the Mental Health Association here and also served on the task force which eventually got the Mental Health Center started here in Wilmington and also the sheltered workshop. I was on the task force that started the sheltered workshop. It was known as the sheltered workshop for many years.

INTERVIEWER: This was the one that provided employment by getting contracts for work, certain types of work that they were able to do and then using their abilities to be able to gainfully employ themselves to the extent that they could.

SISSON: To the extent that they could, right.

INTERVIEWER: I remember about the building that was built and it just happened that the People's Savings and Loan financed that project.

SISSON: Oh, that's interesting.

INTERVIEWER: That project for the sheltered workshop. I remember a little bit about that now. What other areas, did you mention Travelers' Aid yet?

SISSON: Well at that time, Family Services and Travelers' Aid were a hyphenated agency and I was interested, very much interested in that organization and served on that Board of Directors and eventually was chairman of that committee, of that board. So that became such an ingrained interest that the rest of my life I pursued it.

INTERVIEWER: It looks like that you have developed an association with these various organizations. You've developed some interest and some experience, it looks like that's culminated in your having a career as a mental health therapist. Is that the position now ... and the organization now that you affiliate with ...

SISSON: Is Family Services of Lower Cape Fear...

INTERVIEWER: Family Services of Lower Cape Fear.

SISSON: Right and my degree and experience now is summed up in the term "clinical social worker" certified by the state of North Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Well now this puts you in the position of being able to do good for a lot of people who need it in that area. What have been some of your experiences in connection with this? Can you recount some of this, what you may have learned, how you may have benefited from being involved in this yourself. In other words, anything that we do sometimes, we end up being a benefactor by the fact that we have done something.

SISSON: That's certainly true. Of course, the nature of the work that I do is strictly confidential so I'm not at liberty to divulge any particular case.

INTERVIEWER: I wasn't speaking of a case by case basis, but I mean some generalities of the changes in therapy methods, for example, during the years.

SISSON: Okay. During the years of Freud and somewhat thereafter, psychoanalysis was considered the way to go and that was when people went to the psychiatrist and laid down on the couch and the psychiatrist took notes as the person talked. There's been many, many, many different approaches since that time. Psychosocial is the approach that I use which means familiarizing myself with the cause of human behavior, but also taking into consideration the social environment of the person, the family that he's in, the community that he lives in and so forth. And then, of course, there are many different kinds of treatment. Transactional analysis is one. Cognitive behavior role therapy, rational emotive therapy, I mean many different names, but generally speaking, my approach remains psychosocial and what I refer to as cognitive conative which means a balance between the intellect and the emotions.

INTERVIEWER: All right now, balance between the intellect and the emotions. It's a balance between the person's inherent ability or inherent intelligence and their emotional state which could be something that could be, could might have some physical basis of causes, but it might be

environmentally caused, that you get into. I'm following you, but I can't explain exactly in words what I'm getting to. Can you pick it up there?

SISSON: Well, cognitive, of course, has to do with the intellectual process. Conative has to do with the emotions so in working with these two and the client, what you attempt to do is to work through with him intellectually what his thoughts are and his actions and then the conative part deals with the feelings that he's having, the emotions and how the feelings oftentimes are out of control and damaging the intellectual process which ordinarily would take place. So here again, you go first in one direction and then in the other and then attempt to bring the two together.

INTERVIEWER: Well I would imagine you have then clients that...do you call the people who see...are they clients?

SISSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, the clients, then they come to you, it looks like, with apparently all types of social behavior or problems that are manifest...some of them may have been where they've gotten in brushes with the law or they have gotten into disruptive behavior that borders on criminal problems.

SISSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: It's an interesting area and it's a deep area, one that I'm way out of my depth on, but anything else you want to add to the discussion of what your work is about.

SISSON: Well I work with individuals, I work with married couples, I work with parents and their children. I do group work from time to time.

INTERVIEWER: Some of these cases continue on a good while, do they not?

SISSON: Oh yes, sometimes they do. I have had one case for 17 years, but by in large, they do not take that long.

INTERVIEWER: Oh really? Well that's quite a career and it looks like that...when I called you to ask you if we could get together, looks like you're really very busy at it still. Do you ever give any thought of retiring from it.

SISSON: Heaven forbid (laughter). Of course I will have to someday.

INTERVIEWER: But doesn't it give you an outlet?

SISSON: Indeed it does and I feel like this – as long as I can contribute, I want to contribute. At some point in time, if my intellectual process slows down, or causes undue confusion or something like that, then I would expect for my supervisor to say, time has come, step down.

INTERVIEWER: Now let's go philosophical for just a minute, based on your practical experiences as a therapist, where are we going as a society? You're certainly exposed to more of it in a way than many people would be.

SISSON: Well...

INTERVIEWER: Where were we, where are we going, what is our direction?

SISSON: I wish I knew. We do know this, that the traditional family values seemed to have been thrown away and of course the family is the basic unit of society and unless or until we are able to strengthen the family again to that stage where values will be transmitted to their children and their children on an ongoing basis...

INTERVIEWER: How do you account for the demise of the family values? What are some of the contributing factors?

SISSON: Well, I think the war years had something to do with it. I think the 60's, the rebellion of youth against the establishment had something to do with it. I think undoubtedly the use of drugs and alcohol has a lot to do with it and we see the end result of that so often in cases of domestic violence and child abuse. So I'm sure there are other factors too, but those are very prominent.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me this. This is my question, is television itself, what is on television itself in the nature of programming, is that the result of this or is television a cause, which comes first? Maybe the question's not clear.

SISSON: Well, no, no, I, I, I'm not sure that I can answer the question. I think the lessening of standards and values perhaps contributes to what the entertainment industry puts out for consumption. I think that's true and it is true too that parents who do not supervise or monitor what their children see on television very often the end result will be a child who becomes violent or a child who rebels. So, it's both and.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, is it possible that as, considering a generation is about 20 years, is it possible that we are stair stepping our generations down where this generation influences this generation, where this generation which has decreased its moral values is influencing the next generation and that we're on a stair going down with no apparent bottom yet to where we're going? It may not be a good analogy, but that's the way I'm thinking.

SISSON: Yes, I don't think we've bottomed out and another loss too has been the loss of the extended family which I knew so well as a child, you know.

INTERVIEWER: What's your definition of extended family?

SISSON: Grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins.

INTERVIEWER: People that are now in nursing homes that used to be at home.

SISSON: People that you could call on, who you knew were there for you and yes, often, end up in nursing homes.

INTERVIEWER: We're the only generation that's just not exposed to it.

SISSON: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: You used to be sitting on the front porch smoking a cigarette, smoking a pipe or something...

SISSON: Or rocking in the rocking chair, but here again too, we have to think about the young people who in this area are beckoned by the state of California, which is a very exciting place to live. There's no question about it. It's challenging and it's exciting. But it's life in the fast lane. But unfortunately raising a child in California is not the best place to be.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me this. How do people get in front of your desk? Is it by referral or is it by decisions that that's where the person should go? What is the route by which you get them?

SISSON: We have referrals, of course, from other agencies all over town. Self-referrals, people who say "Well I looked in the phonebook for counseling and there you were. You were listed so we came". Also, word of mouth by people who have been there in the past and who suggested that that might be a route to go.

INTERVIEWER: How would you differentiate between family services counseling or counseling, for example, from a private psychologist or psychotherapist or whoever that might be?

SISSON: There's very little difference. If you're a clinical social worker...

INTERVIEWER: Same procedures, same methods?

SISSON: Pretty much. The difference where the psychiatrist is concerned is that the psychiatrist is an M.D. and can prescribe medications, that psychologists and social workers are not able to do. But as far as the therapy and counseling part is concerned, there's very little difference.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, well switch over for a second to another topic, do you have any opinion as to where the solution for the drug problem lies? We have people who are espousing legalizing drugs. We have this approach, that kind of approach. Do you have any...

SISSON: Well I don't believe that I have the answer to that. I do think that here again the instilling of values from parent to child has got to be the bottom line, but there are pressures, peer pressures in society that are very, very strong. And perhaps making the criminal code more severe or imprisonment for a longer period of time with no hope of parole, you don't serve a third of your sentence and then get out so to speak. That might possibly...

INTERVIEWER: Yes, the sentencing has been made a farce in our society today, the failure of the criminal justice system.

SISSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I appreciate going into some of those areas and getting some of your thoughts on them. Another area I want to ask you about. I want to go back to Alice Borden Moore, let's stop at the Moore before the Sisson came on the scene. That's been part of your family. Tell me a little back as far as you can, generally, what your relationship is to the Moore family that was one of the settlers of North Carolina.

SISSON: Well that is my family. Originally the first Moore to come to this country from Ireland was named James Moore and he became governor of what was then known as the Carolinas. He had numerous children among whom was one named Roger and that Roger eventually built Orton plantation and is my, I think, 5th great-grandfather.

INTERVIEWER: I see, I see. His grave is there, is it not?

SISSON: Yes it is.

INTERVIEWER: What about other branches of your family? We talk about this maternal and paternal.

SISSON: Well the maternal part of my family came originally, well I guess from New England because the Borden name is a New England name, but of course, they all eventually most had wandered south and my immediate grandfather Borden came up from Texas in a covered wagon as a baby and settled. They settled in Goldsboro and that seems to be now sort of the town...

INTERVIEWER: Came from Texas to North Carolina?

SISSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Well that is exactly the opposite of the crescent migration where the people came in Baltimore, in New York and migrated to Pennsylvania and into Virginia, North Carolina, Alabama and Texas. That's interesting. It sure is. There is something else I wanted to ask you, but it escapes my mind. Oh I know what it was. The imminent southern author, Lawrence Lee, what is your relationship with Lawrence?

SISSON: Lawrence is my first cousin by marriage.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

SISSON: And he, as you know of course, has offered several books and is currently living in Wilmington. His home had been in Charleston for many, many years and after my cousin, his wife, died, he came to Wilmington and has been living here for the last several years.

INTERVIEWER: Well he certainly is a very fine author and he's done a wonderful job of recording some of the history of this area, the South. I would like to ask you to think about, as you have gone through the 50's and the 60's in which we had some race problems in Wilmington the latter part of the 60's, and the 70s and the 80's and here we are in the 90s, are there any instances that you've observed or been present when something significant occurred, at a time when something significant occurred that you can recall, that you had some remembrance of what happened. For example, I can remember some things that happened during those days in '68 when Martin Luther King died and some things of that era. Can you remember anything?

SISSON: Well of course, I remember the Wilmington Seven, of course, very clearly because that was the occasion of the fire bombing and destruction of property at the time of the black/white confrontation here in Wilmington. I remember how difficult it was for the black people to have to accept the fact, for example, that they had to leave their high school and attend an all white high school rather than the other way around. So they, the black people, I think justifiably resented much of what was happening during those days. Now that doesn't excuse violence on either side, but I do remember that time.

INTERVIEWER: This was a situation in which there was an attempt made to integrate, I forget the name of it, what was it called? Do you recall? The policy of the federal government was that did this? I can't recall.

SISSON: No, I don't recall the name.

INTERVIEWER: No, I don't recall the name of it either, but it was, forced busing was part of it in which they actually were bused to other schools to keep racial balance. That's right, it was the policies to force racial balance in the various schools. Were you witness to the rough days we had when some of that took place? I remember one Wilmington businessman when he went down Dawson Street, his car was attacked, his windows were broken out. Do you remember any of those?

SISSON: None that I remember.

INTERVIEWER: Back to the 50s. What was your opinion of how Wilmington reacted to the leaving of the Coast Line? Do you have any thoughts about that? What was the reaction in Wilmington?

SISSON: Certainly was devastating to people who had, you know, their fathers and their grandfathers and so forth, had worked for the Coast Line and here it was – the end of the line so to speak, no more. And I think it really had a lot of effect on the way people looked at things. No longer that small, contained, comfortable community, you know, where everybody knew everybody else. But facing a change, because that's what had to happen. There had to be a change.

INTERVIEWER: We had another situation that you might comment on was what did World War II and the shipyard and the influx of people do to Wilmington that was pre-war compared to the Wilmington that was post-war?

SISSON: Well it introduced us to a lot of new ideas and a lot of new people.

INTERVIEWER: A lot of local ladies got husbands out of too, didn't they (laughter). Brides and grooms? Yeah.

SISSON: Right.

INTERVIEWER: I know there are several friends I had that married girls in Wilmington and are here today through Camp Davis.

SISSON: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Charlie Bekaert and Marge Bekaert, for one. Well I think we are getting just about ready to wind up. If there is anything else you'd like to add, anything you've said that might stimulate any final commentary you'd like to make on where Wilmington is going from here and where you are going with your career from here?

SISSON: Well I do hope to be able to maintain myself in my career for a while longer anyway. As far as the future of Wilmington is concerned, I think it's going to require a whole lot of mental extension of adjustment of the way we have always looked at ourselves because the cars on the road now, if you look at the license plates, are from all over everywhere and particularly from New York, New Jersey and Ohio. So we've got the influence of all of these folks from a different culture coming in and we're going to need to be able to accommodate to that.

INTERVIEWER: That's a good note to end on and I'd like to thank you, Alice, for coming out this afternoon and sharing some of those thoughts with us.