

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR  
INTERVIEW WITH HENRY M. VON OESON**

**AUGUST 8, 1995**

**INTRODUCTION**

**This is Sam Bissette. It's a beautiful summer morning, it's August the 8<sup>th</sup>, at 9:30 in the morning and I'm here at home at 1939 Live Oak Parkway and a good friend, Henry Von Oeson, is with me this morning. I had asked Henry to come by to see if we could talk about some of his experiences as a lifelong resident of Wilmington and see if we could put some things on tape that would be meaningful, things that might otherwise not have been recorded.**

INTERVIEWER: So Henry, we're going to get started, and let's start off with the basics. And if you're not sensitive about your age, can you tell me when and where you were born?

VON OESON: I was born in Wilmington at 7<sup>th</sup> and Princess and I'm 78 years old and I'm one of two children. My sister is four years older than I and my parents were married and lived their whole life together.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, let's go from there for a minute and pick up with the early years.

VON OESON: My early years here in Wilmington were happy ones. I lived primarily in the neighborhood there. I went to school at Hemingway School and at New Hanover High School, both of which were within a few blocks of my home. I had a relatively happy childhood. I don't know of any major problems that I had except that I grew up through the Depression and the years before the Depression were very quiet, very nice and the Depression years were very lean, but very nice too.

INTERVIEWER: Wouldn't you have been surprised as a child to learn that you would establish a business back there right where you lived?

VON OESON: Well I'm sure my parents were very surprised when I purchased the Pleasant property at 6<sup>th</sup> and Princess and built an office building there which was a block away.

INTERVIEWER: Henry, how far does your family go back in Wilmington?

VON OESON: My parents came here in 1895, both of them. They were immigrants from Germany and they were born about 6 kilos apart in Germany and they had never seen each other until they met in Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: What was his occupation in Wilmington?

VON OESON: He was in the grocery business and he worked in a number of different stores and eventually ended up with a store at Front and Walnut Street called the Home Grocery Company which was a small charge account grocery surviving on the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad offices.

INTERVIEWER: I'm told that people in Wilmington that came through the years that there were two sides of Wilmington, one called Dry Pond, the other Brooklyn. Where does Princess Street fit in?

VON OESON: It sits in the middle and either side I went, I was the enemy (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: What did boys do in that day and time for entertainment for want of a better word?

VON OESON: Well I think the whole adage of looking for a vacant lot wherein you could find a jungle and romance and adventure and danger and everything else was about the primary thing that we did. We played baseball in the streets because there was very little traffic and played around the various playgrounds nearby and later when I went to high school, I spent much of time at the YMCA down on Market Street.

INTERVIEWER: Who was heading the YMCA up about that time, do you recall?

VON OESON: Mr. Huntington was there.

INTERVIEWER: J.B. Huntington.

VON OESON: Yes sir.

INTERVIEWER: He was Adam Smith's predecessor, wasn't he?

VON OESON: He was. Adam Smith came in after I had left the Y, but Mr. Garrett was the athletic director when I was there. He was a very nice chap and I think had a lot to do with keeping us boys straight.

INTERVIEWER: Well I'm glad we brought the Y in it because I had some good times at the YMCA myself. Henry, what developed after grammar school, high school I guess?

VON OESON: Yes I went to high school and during high school, I realized that a cousin of mine, Henry Doles, had just finished college and had gone to work for the Shell Oil Company to build their terminal here and he was very good to me and used to take me out with him in the afternoons and I fell in love with civil engineering right there and determined what I would be in life.

INTERVIEWER: Is that how you ended up?

VON OESON: I was very fortunate that my parents were able to send me to school.

INTERVIEWER: You haven't mentioned your alma mater yet.

VON OESON: Well I went to North Carolina State. There's only one engineering school around here.

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter) Well I did want to get that in. After you finished at State, what developed then and what year did you finish State?

VON OESON: I finished State in 1938, I came home and out of a class of 28 civil engineers, only one of us had a job because that was still Depression time, but the preparations for World War II were beginning and after coming home, after a while, I got a job working for the city engineers in Wilmington primarily initially running a survey party. Then I gradually became an office engineer and then remaining there until I went into the service in 1942, early '42. The city was growing by leaps and bounds in the wartime effort and with the shipyard, there was much to do.

INTERVIEWER: Just a quick note on your military career. How did you get into the military?

VON OESON: Well I had an ROTC commission through my college years and I had worked in the Reserve program through the four years following that until I went in the service. I entered the service as a first lieutenant, went to the infantry school at Fort Benning, Georgia and then through various assignments, I eventually went to the Pacific, to the Philippines, Okinawa and Japan and I was discharged in I guess March of 1945 from the military as a major. The whole time I spent in the infantry.

INTERVIEWER: An engineer in the infantry.

VON OESON: Well this is true of all the graduates of State, they were all in the infantry and even though I tried to transfer through Colonel George Gillette to the Corps of Engineers, the chief of infantry would not release any officers prior to the second world war and that was understandable.

INTERVIEWER: Well you came back to Wilmington, it was probably a crossroads, pre-war Wilmington became the post-war Wilmington, what with Camp Davis and the other things that had taken place near the shipyard, many of the patterns had been broken. Where did you go and what did you do then?

VON OESON: Well when I came back to Wilmington, I was married and I was thinking that I had been out of engineering for four or five years and I needed to get my hands back in to it, my brain too, and though I had no particular plans of staying in Wilmington, the then city engineer, Mr. Albert Loughlin, called me and asked me to talk with him and explained to me that they had a tremendous expansion program going on in Wilmington in the utility field, the various types of work that I was experienced in and he needed someone to help do this and so I figured that it was a good chance for me to get back into the swing of things and I accepted the job. About 6 months later, Mr. Loughlin had a heart attack and resigned and the then city manager offered me the job of city engineer and I guess in my youthful exuberance, I took it too and I worked at that until 1950 and then I decided there was not a great deal of future in that and I should venture elsewhere and I left the city and went into private practice as a consultant and that was the beginning. I initially went back into private practice with Mr. Loughlin again and after about a year, he dropped out of that and I went on by myself.

INTERVIEWER: Let's back up just a minute, where did you find Alice?

VON OESON: Well I was at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, and Alice is from Macon and that's where Macon is and a friend of mine was dating a roommate of hers after they had just graduated from college and he introduced me to Alice as a blind date and by the way, they didn't get married, but he was engaged to her roommate, they didn't get married, but we did about a year later.

INTERVIEWER: Children?

VON OESON: We have three children, a son who is now an orthopedic surgeon in Lynchburg, a daughter who is married to a house furnishings and antique dealer in Charlottesville, Virginia, and a daughter, Martha, who is a landscape architect and is currently involved in electrical magnetic field work. She is in West Palm Beach.

INTERVIEWER: Let's back up further for just a minute and go back to the days as a boy, did Wrightsville Beach have any meaning particularly in those days?

VON OESON: Well I think that was always a high spot. My mother used to always take us in the summertime on Wednesdays to spend the day at the old Seaside Club and always on Sunday afternoons we would go down and as I grew a little older, I was given a little more liberty, but Wrightsville Beach has always been a great part of my life.

INTERVIEWER: And you're living there now?

VON OESON: We've been living there in the summertime now for about 30 years.

INTERVIEWER: Henry, let's go on now, when you went into private practice, you began to become connected with all of the things that were going on, not only in Wilmington, but in other places. What was the Wilmington engineering scene like in those days as far as projects were concerned? We're talking about probably the early 50's I guess.

VON OESON: Primarily the projects here were city and county projects. We did some minor state work and in the 60s, we began to work for the federal government on projects at Camp LeJeune, Cherry Point and we did an a site at Fort Fisher for the Corps of Engineers which was a radar detection site. Gradually as the 70s came along, we began to expand on out of state into various jobs.

INTERVIEWER: Were we having difficulties with erosion at the beaches?

VON OESON: Through the early 50s, the erosion at Wrightsville Beach was quite severe and when hurricane Hazel arrived in 1954, it over-washed the beach and caused a great deal of damage and the result of that was there were certain emergency moneys which were given by the state. I think they were federal moneys, but the state administered them and we did deposit some fills and do some work along the beaches, Wrightsville, Carolina and Kure. Then I worked on up the coast as far up as Nag's Head on various beach projects.

INTERVIEWER: I remember as a child being down at Wrightsville Beach and always some question as to whether or not the pilings/jetties were helping to prevent erosion. Was that one of the first erosion efforts at Wrightsville or were there others that preceded it.

VON OESON: Mr. Kidder, Mr. George Kidder was an early originator of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Society and in this group he learned of the use of jetties or actually it's a groin is the proper name, a jetty is something in it. But these groins were...we built two or three experimental groins down there, some of concrete and some of wood. A groin does nothing but check the lateral drift of the sand and it tends to retard the rate of erosion, but it's not a creator of beaches. It's generally an armament rather than a productive structure.

INTERVIEWER: We use some dredges to re-nourish the beach, when did that come on the scene?

VON OESON: Well the first dredging was done at Wrightsville Beach in 1937-38 when the groins that you mentioned were built and the beach was filled between these and it lasted until the 50s and we placed, I would say, up to a million yards of sand on the beach following the hurricanes, but until the Corps of Engineers established a dune system there in the late 60s and 70s, the beach was pretty well open to erosion and continued to erode as it does today.

INTERVIEWER: Who were the individuals that were connected with you when you first started in business? Von Oeson and Associates designates that they're other people involved. When did the others come on the scene and who were they?

VON OESON: Well I had a number of young fellas come in and some stayed, some did not. Robby Benson first went to work for me when he was still in high school and worked in the summers and after he got out of college, he came back to work with us. He is a mechanical engineer. I had two or three civil engineers that came and went. They stayed 3-4 years and then they left to go to other places. Charles Davis came in about the late 60s as a civil engineer and he's still there in the firm. Most of the other engineers that were there had left. A number of them had gone into business for themselves.

INTERVIEWER: Well that's natural. They learn enough to want to go out on their own, that's natural.

VON OESON: Absolutely, everybody's got to try.

INTERVIEWER: Well you outgrew 6<sup>th</sup> and Princess and then had to go to new quarters.

VON OESON: We moved downtown, we rebuilt a building at 3<sup>rd</sup> and Brunswick Street. It had twice the area of the office we had at 6<sup>th</sup> and Princess and allowed us more room. We didn't have enough room at 6<sup>th</sup> and Princess really and it has been very adequate since then.

INTERVIEWER: Well you had a change take place a year or two back in connection with that when...

VON OESON: Well yes, I decided to retire and after I had retired a couple of years, the firm appeared to be having difficulty in maintaining its balance and it was determined that probably it would be a good idea to ally the firm with some larger group. So arrangements were made with Century Engineering out of Baltimore which is a company that owns four other engineering firms about the same size. Now the firms work together very nicely. They lend talent. For instance, we had a great deal of ability in marine structure, docks, piers and work of that type and they would like to get into that. They have, in turn, a great deal of experience in highway construction, interstate construction, bridges and interchanges. It's been a good arrangement I think.

INTERVIEWER: Good. What did you think was the most challenging project out of all of those years that you had to take on?

VON OESON: Well I think one of the most challenging projects...there were two and strangely enough, they were on beach projects. The first was at Fort Macon, both at inlet and city. The storms of Hazel and subsequent hurricanes had eroded that beach so badly that it threatened to wash the fort away and there was an effort there to correct it. We went in, made some studies and made, and actually constructed some spurs and a fairly long jetty there which has been very functional, very successful.

The other project was at Bal Harbor, Florida which is the northern one mile of Miami Beach and I was called down there to look at the situation and when I arrived, I found one mile of steel seawall and no beach. The ocean was slapping right against the seawall and they had a lot of resort hotels and their business was zero because they had no beach and the challenge there was to find something to build a beach with. The materials back in Biscayne Bay were not suitable and there was nowhere around to get materials on land so we turned to the ocean and we went offshore and explored that with great thoroughness and about two miles off the beach, we found some beautiful deposits of sand which the geologists tell me were beaches back 10-11,000 years ago when the sea was 65 feet lower. We dredged this material from the ocean and put it on the beach and it has been a very successful beach to this day.

INTERVIEWER: That's good. I know there's a great deal of satisfaction from the final results of that. Henry, looking at the local picture for a minute, you've been interested in different things in Wilmington. I know you have a civic affiliation, I know you have a church affiliation, what interests you most or has interested you most in the Wilmington scene?

VON OESON: Well I've always been interested in my church of course and try to work in it as we all have I think. I've always enjoyed the recreation capabilities of the water and I've always enjoyed sailing and fishing. I've always been a hunter and I still do a lot of hunting now that I'm retired. The local opportunities are just unbelievable, opportunities to play any kind of sports you like. For a while, I played golf and I found that my profession didn't provide enough available time to play golf with any success. The same applied to tennis so I limited my physical activities to primarily walking with my wife and doing water sports at the beach.

INTERVIEWER: Well then you've just told me you know the front end and the back end of a sailboat!

VON OESON: Yes, my son and I sailed for a number of years.

INTERVIEWER: I know you did. Henry, we're talking about your church. Tell us a little about your affiliation with the church because I know you've done a lot of things for your church.

VON OESON: Well I was baptized there in 1917. The old baptismal font is still there and every time I go to church, I take a look at it. I go to St. Paul's Lutheran Church at 6<sup>th</sup> & Market and it's a fairly old church in the town. It's a very pretty church and has basically a German heritage from the founders, though today the primary participants and members are from every walk of the globe. It's been a real interesting thing for me. I have probably performed every job in the church except preaching and that's not my forte. I've taught Sunday school, have been the president a couple of times and I'm now serving on the church council. Interested right now to get a younger group in there. I think we need some newcomers.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have the same problem that I do? When I look around in church, I see many less people than I know than I once did.

VON OESON: Well that's true. That's very true.

INTERVIEWER: It's almost getting like California where everybody that's there is from somewhere else.

VON OESON: Well I keep trying to meet people. Of course, the older you get, the more difficult it is to remember names though I have worked at it somewhat and have taken two or three memory courses, none of which I think did me a bit of good (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: Well let's see if you can remember some things about Alice for a minute. Alice, in her own right, has been quite a working member of the Wilmington civic scene. I think you would probably know better than anyone some of the things that she has done and what's she's become involved in. Could you share those with us?

VON OESON: Well she graduated from college in sociology and was very interested in that type of thing and she has worked in everything from family service to mental health to she was chairman of the United Way drive in Wilmington one year. She has now currently been working with hospice and she undertook to establish a foundation for the hospice group here which has been quite successful. She's now working in a capital funds drive to underwrite the necessary funds to build a hospice building where folks who have a terminal situation, have no home and no family...

INTERVIEWER: This is the new 12-bed unit?

VON OESON: ....yes, have a place to go that would be, is reasonably close to home atmosphere as possible to give them a pleasant environment in which to live their last days. She's always been most interested in any type of event or any type of work that tends to help people. She's full of love. I've never seen a person had as much love for people as she has.

INTERVIEWER: Henry, what do you consider some of the significant benchmarks that have taken place in Wilmington during your lifetime; that is, turning points for Wilmington or points that were significant.

VON OESON: Well I think probably the first one was the second world war which had pushed, brought many improvements into Wilmington and caused a happy, sleepy, little town to wake up and begin to operate a little better. People began to find out a little something about Wilmington. It was always a very pleasant place to live, had a pleasant atmosphere. I think that was the beginning.

I think one of the real challenging times and turn points in Wilmington's history was when the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad left. Everyone thought it would be an awful blow and an awful tragic thing. I'm sure it had some financial difficulties for a lot of people; however, it was the shock that awakened this town and resulted in the realization that everything didn't have to depend on "the railroad", that there were a lot of facilities here that were desirable, there were a lot of good people here to employ. When the Committee of 100 first organized, we were very successful in beginning to bring industry into Wilmington and I think that's been a good balance of industry too. We didn't really have any problem industry here. We had industry that have good employee relations. I believe the later developments which have occurred here improved

shipping through the port, increased business a great deal and of course, we have a great diversity of employment here now.

INTERVIEWER: Would you ever have thought when you were City Engineer of Wilmington that we would have a G.E. nuclear plant, an airplane engine plant, that we would have all of these names right down the line of Hercules and the others across the river?

VON OESON: No, actually the only, I guess the first awakening I had of what industry could do for Wilmington was my last year of City Engineer. The Woodsockie Paul Mills people out of Massachusetts came down and wanted a place to build a plant here and we worked with them quite closely to establish the plant. They built it out in the 117 area north of Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: The Timme Corporation?

VON OESON: The Timme Corporation was the name of it and the land on which they did this was county land because the county sold them part of their county farm to build it.

INTERVIEWER: And later they built the hotel downtown.

VON OESON: Yes, they built a hotel in town thinking that was a good investment for some of their investment funds and I think it was.

INTERVIEWER: It took two or three turnovers to get it into...

VON OESON: Of course, probably the problem with Timme was that they were not changing as the world was changing. They were still making materials for covering seats, automobile seats and furniture and there were other materials coming in replacing that and they gradually lost their markets and I guess that resulted in their sale.

INTERVIEWER: Henry, you're bound to have been exposed to a number of experiences, everybody does in their profession in Wilmington, can you recall anything that you might relate that you think might be interesting, either about a significant development or about something that had a bearing on something else? Do you know the type of thing I mean?

VON OESON: Well I think I do. I believe that the development of the city and gradually annexing the areas around it caused people to do two things. They improved their homes in town and they also, many people wanted to build again and build beyond the city limits. This caused an increase in the activities of the construction industry and that in turn increased the activities of the savings and loan business which you're familiar with.

Gradually people began to be aware of the pleasantness of the area and numbers of people began to move in, mostly initially retired people as is the case today. I think it's been a gradual development there in my exposure to events that has been healthy. I think it's been good.

INTERVIEWER: It looks like maybe we're shaping up to a benchmark of sorts now over this last five year period. Where is the space coming from to accommodate what is coming in. Do you have any thoughts on that?

VON OESON: Well the desirable areas in "good lands" in the county have mostly been explored and built upon and now people are looking at the areas that are probably less desirable

in the way of drainage and other things and developing those. The entrepreneurs that come in to build houses for profit want to build more and more houses and the amazing thing to me is that they continue to sell them. That brings in more people and more traffic.

I think one of the problems of Wilmington at the present time is the inadequacy of its roadway systems. We're way behind, way behind. Sitting down here in the corner of the state and not having much political punch, we don't seem to be able to acquire the funds and the priorities that the highway commission requires to build roads for you and we're sort of behind I think.

INTERVIEWER: At one time, we had a political problem in that respect. Do you think that that political problem still exists?

VON OESON: No, I think it's subsided. I don't believe there are any unusual difficulties, any reasons why we are not being treated properly. I think it's just a matter that we need representation that can bring this about.

INTERVIEWER: The future of Wilmington, where do we go from here? What do you think is going to be done to solve this problem that you mentioned and where do you think we're going in the future? It looks like we're boiling right along going somewhere.

VON OESON: Well I think we're gradually filling up with people and that in time as this population residency explosion continues, it will extend on into Pender County and has already to some degree and has expanded into Brunswick County. I think Leland and areas like that are really just suburbs of the city and the present action, and I hope it is successful, to merge the city and the county should be a good proposition.

INTERVIEWER: Well that's our current benchmark right now, the annexation. The whole situation coming up for the vote, I think in October.

VON OESON: Yes, I don't, if that vote is not successful, I think the city will subsequently annex the entire county with the exception of the beach communities and that will probably result in the same thing, but it will be a little more painful and I'm sure that the folks who live out in the county areas are very worried about this and unsure of what their future is. The only thing I know is you've got to venture in your lifetime and you've got to accept change and you've got to change with it and if you do that, you can usually get along successfully.

INTERVIEWER: One other thought going back just a little bit, but tying into what we're saying now, is in order to do any of these things, there has to be leadership, there has to be people coming from the community willing to take initiative to do the things that are necessary to be done, whether it is government or whether it is in private life. Back when we had the Coast Line leading and we began to what amounted to this present expansion, although that may have been over several decades, who were some of the individuals that you know from first hand knowledge that made a substantial contribution in leadership at that time to get us veered in the right direction?

VON OESON: Well I think E.L. White was probably one of the first real leaders who was successful in going into the state government areas and getting cooperation from them and building bridges there that resulted in improvements in Wilmington. I think that his cohort C.O. Allsbrook was a substantial influence and a great arbitrator. He was a real mender of fences. Mr. Bruce Cameron's father I think was a very good leader in the early days of the managing council

form of government and unfortunately he died early and was not able to continue, but there were several people who followed him who continued...

INTERVIEWER: His own son, Dan Cameron, probably on the city side.

VON OESON: I was going to bring Dan up next. Yes, he certainly did a great deal for Wilmington and has been a great asset to this town. He says the town gave him a lot, but he and his brother Bruce have certainly given a whole lot back to us. I think today we have a sort of a limited balance of power in the two political areas, the county and the city. I don't think any one of them particularly dominates, but I think they are pretty well balanced.

INTERVIEWER: We'll begin to wind up here with just about...our time is just about out. Are there any observations or comments, anything that this conversation this morning has generated that you would like to make or anything you'd like to say?

VON OESON: Well I just enjoy sometimes thinking about the improvements that have occurred in Wilmington, one thing particularly, the present situation in the medical field is the disputes are going on and the difficulties that are going on as managed care comes into the picture. It in essence takes the management of medical care away from hospitals and doctors and puts it in the hands of insurance people and they, of course, are interested in making money.

INTERVIEWER: Well you're looking at this too from the standpoint of your connection as a trustee of New Hanover Regional Medical Center.

VON OESON: I definitely am and the present efforts to form a coastal alliance of hospitals in the seven counties around us should be a very fruitful result if we can get to it. There's still a lot of turf defense going on and a lot of resistance to change, but if folks can just come to the realization that we've got to change and we've got to get together so that the managed medicine business cannot play us one against the other and bleed us because they'll do that.

INTERVIEWER: Well you've proved another point, as time goes on, you solve some problems and others come on the scene.

VON OESON: They're always problems.

INTERVIEWER: And with that, I think we're going to close and I'd like to thank you for letting me record these things for anyone that might hear them in the future. They're supposed to go to the Reference Room of the New Hanover County Library in book form where each interview constitutes virtually a chapter. Thank you Henry.