

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM H. WAGONER**

JUNE 12, 1995

INTRODUCTION

This is Sam Bisette on the rainy afternoon of June 12, 1995, and I'm in the home of Dr. William H. Wagoner who is the retired Chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. We'll have a little conversation with him to add to the series of conversations with people around Wilmington in an effort to try to obtain some bits of history that otherwise might not be available. So, Bill, I'm going to start the conversation off, if you would, to just tell me a little about where you were born, and where you came from and how you got to Wilmington.

WAGONER: Well, I was born in Washington, North Carolina, May 12, 1927. I grew up just outside of Washington in a little community called Clark's Neck. And I went to Pactomas High School and I was in elementary school then. And ... then in the tenth grade I transferred to Washington High School.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Where did you go on from there as far as education is concerned, and how did you get into the profession that you did.

WAGONER: Well ... that was a strange year, Sam, ... the year that I graduated. It was 1945, and I had enlisted in the U. S. Navy in a special program for ... radar people. ... it was right after V. E. Day, and ... they called me ... I went to the baccalaureate sermon. We had baccalaureate sermons back in those days, as president of my class, and marched with my class. And then before the next Friday, which was graduation day, the Navy told me to report to Raleigh, North Carolina, and I did. And ... then I was sent to Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Illinois, just outside of Chicago, or just north of Chicago. And ... did my Navy service and then came out of the Navy and went to Wake Forest College. I entered in 1946, I think, and to gain some time I went day and night, summer and winter, and graduated in three years, and graduated with the class of 1949.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And then before you came to Wilmington, just a brief hop, skip, and jump where you might have been before you became Superintendent of Schools here.

WAGONER: Alright. ... first I was in medical school. I was a pre-med student, but because my father was very ill, I had to drop out of medical school and went to teach in Washington High School in Washington, North Carolina — the school from which I graduated. I taught chemistry, physics, biology, and public speaking. And ... then ... that old high school was demolished and a new high school was build. I moved my class over to the new high school. And then, during that period of time, I was ... after hours, at night and on weekends, doing my Master's work at what was then called East Carolina Teacher's College — later to become ECU.

INTERVIEWER: ETC.

WAGONER: Yeah. ... and I received my Master's degree in history from East Carolina Teacher's College. Well, actually it wasn't. It was East Carolina College by then. It was not a teacher's college. But, I received my Master's in history, and then went back to teaching in Washington, North Carolina, and then I had an offer in Elizabeth City, to become Assistant

Principal of Elizabeth City High School. ... from ... the offer came from Earl Funderburk, who later became superintendent here in New Hanover County for one year. And I went to Elizabeth City and was assistant principal there ... in the high school for two years, and then became principal of what later became known as the Hattie Harney Primary School ... and my wife ...

INTERVIEWER: Excuse me, I was interested in where you got your doctorate.

WAGONER: That's where we're goin'. ... after that first year as principal of the Hattie Harney Primary School, my wife Madelaine insisted that I go back for further graduate work, because, she said, "You're becoming too satisfied." And so in nineteen hundred and (pause) hum, my memory ...

INTERVIEWER: That's alright, we don't — we can go on.

WAGONER: Okay. ... 1956, it was. ... we pulled up our stakes in Elizabeth City and moved to Chapel Hill, lived in Chapel Hill in what was then called Victory Village. It as a little place that ... the university had gotten these Army surplus houses from, and we rented ... a four room house, beautiful to us. It cost thirty-five dollars a month, in rent, and I started my PhD. work in Chapel Hill in 1956. And we had one son, who then was a year and a half old, and Madelaine was expecting our second son, Robin, and ... so ...

INTERVIEWER: Where's Madelaine from, by the way?

WAGONER: Madelaine is from Washington, North Carolina. I've never known any other person ...

INTERVIEWER: Did you meet her when you were in Washington?

WAGONER: I never remember where I met her. I met her in church. I remember sitting beside her, behind her in the pew and pulling her long curls, which I was not supposed to do as a little boy. I got sorta slapped for it. But ... her mother and my mother were the closest of friends, and her father and my father were the closest of friends. And her brother was a fellow classmate of mine ... in Washington, North Carolina. We graduated in the same class, and her sister, her whole family were teachers, but one of her older sisters taught me in the seventh grade — taught me English. She was the best English teacher I ever had.

INTERVIEWER: Uh, huh.

WAGONER: So that's how we knew each other. We've never known anybody else.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how long have you been married?

WAGONER: ... let's see, we got married when she was just a child ... we got married in June of 1952.

INTERVIEWER: Um, hum.

WAGONER: June 3 of 1952.

INTERVIEWER: Now, please tell me how you happened to come to Wilmington? New Hanover County?

WAGONER: Well, while I was doing, Sam, while I was doing my graduate work, I had to earn some money on the side. And I volunteered, I got a dollar an hour, I remember, to keep one of the departmental libraries open at Chapel Hill. But the second year I was there, that would be 1957, I was offered the job of Associate Executive Secretary of the State School Board Association. And ... went all over North Carolina. I had the honor at one time to be able to say I had sat, literally sat, in every single 100 court houses in North Carolina. Of course they've been rebuilt now. But ... while I was doing that work, one of my duties was to set up school board meetings — regional school board meetings all over the state. And one of those meetings took me to Burgaw, North Carolina, for a regional meeting. I think the regional meeting encompassed Pender and New Hanover and Brunswick and Onslow and I'm not sure of the other counties. But, the head honcho in that was Emsley Laney, and when, in 1961, the superintendency became vacant here, after Earl Funderburk, who was superintendent, moved to Fairfax, Virginia. Emsley Laney invited me to come down to Wilmington and interview with the then current Board of Education, Murdock Dunn, Mrs. Gause ... Brian Broadfoot, Billy Mebine. And the interview was held, I'm sorry, I may have missed somebody. But, the interview was held in the old Bank of Wilmington Building.

INTERVIEWER: Um, hum.

WAGONER: Still in existence, and Madelaine rode with me down here in a non-air conditioned car, all the way from Elizabeth City, which is exactly two hundred miles, from city limits to city limits, still today on Highway 17. And ... she was probably irritated with me, and I was irritated with myself for coming down here, because we had no intention of leaving Elizabeth City.

INTERVIEWER: But, it was a successful trip, evidently.

WAGONER: (Chuckling.) The Board hired me that day, or agreed to hire me that day, and I told them I'd have to give them some, give it a little bit of time before I called them back. ... but Madelaine went out shopping, and then it was Front Street, no shopping malls or anything. And she was so intrigued with the people here in Wilmington, about how friendly they were, how the clerks were, and all that kind of stuff. When we got in the car and headed out of town on Market Street, we got up to 17th and Market, I'll never forget the day. 17th and Market. And, I said, "You know, Madelaine, I think I'd like to come to Wilmington." And she said, "I know that's where I want to go." And at 17th and Market, we looked over and saw this gorgeous place, and she said, "You know, if you take this job, someday we might get invited."

INTERVIEWER: (Chuckle.) Well, life is funny about how things twist around, and work around and all.

WAGONER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: As the Superintendent of Schools in Wilmington.

WAGONER: ... from 1961 until 1968 ... Dr. Randall retired in 1968, and I'll never forget ... the first approach that was made to me ... about being President of Wilmington College. It was by Harry Payne, not the current Secretary of Labor, but Harry Payne's father. We were coming back on a late night flight on Piedmont from Charlotte, and he told me that, (he was not on the board by then, at that time). But he told me that they were soon going to be looking for a president and he wanted to know whether I was interested or not. And ... frankly, I was not. But I had known Bill Friday. Bill Friday became President of the University while I was a graduate student, getting my Ph.D. But I had known him and he asked me if I would come by and talk

with him, and he told me in that conversation, ... in 1967 or '68. But Wilmington College was scheduled to be a part of the consolidated University, and he wanted me as one of his chancellors. And then I gave more thought to it and then ... talked with Alan Marshall, who was then alive, who was on the board. And ... talked with some other people on the board ... the chairman of the board then was Bradford Tillary, retired judge now. And ... so I decided to go to Wilmington College. And so I became President of Wilmington College on July 1, 1968.

INTERVIEWER: 21 years, let's see, 21 years after it started in 1947, to 1968.

WAGONER: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I'm going to insert a personal reference right in here — something you may not know. In 1937, I wrote a letter that was published, to the newspaper in Wilmington as a student, a graduating student, in high school.

WAGONER: Great!

INTERVIEWER: Advocating that Wilmington establish a junior college.

WAGONER: Great!

(Both chuckle.)

INTERVIEWER: So, ten years before Wilmington Junior College was ... This is your interview, but I thought that would be applicable.

WAGONER: Probably the most important letter you ever wrote.

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: Well, it certainly was, I was very forceful about it and it came from a student who was about to be a high school graduate.

WAGONER: Excellent.

INTERVIEWER: Now, let's get back in ... now when you came into the, into Wilmington College, had it started off in the building on Market Street? The Isaac Bear Building?

WAGONER: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And ... how about filling me in now on the events and circumstances that happened before you went with the college, as far as the college is concerned, up to '68 so we get the backgrounds of your tenure as Chancellor.

WAGONER: Okay, but I moved to Wilmington as Superintendent of Schools in 1961. That was the year that Wilmington College moved from in front of the old New Hanover High School, the Isaac Bear Building, out to three buildings on the current campus, the quadrangle buildings. And I didn't know much about the college. I just had too many things that I was doing on my own. ... but ... then in 1960, ... when Terry Sanford was elected governor, there was ... a commission called the Carlisle Commission that recommended — see, when Wilmington College moved from across from New Hanover High School, it was still a two-year college. But, when Terry Sanford

was elected governor in 1960, he appointed a commission called the Carlisle Commission. And they spent a long time, and ... they recommended a lot of things. Many people don't know this, but there was a community college system before that called the Community College Act of 1957. But the one, the Carlisle Commission, reported to the governor, and he later reported to the legislature. In 1963, that was enacted into law, and a whole lot of things happened in there, in that legislation in 1963 ... Wilmington College, Charlotte College, all community colleges — Asheville Biltmore. They were all community colleges. In that report, they were recommended to be four-year colleges, and then the current Community College System was set up.

INTERVIEWER: And those three were the basis of it?

WAGONER: No, they didn't, because they moved into four-year college status.

INTERVIEWER: Uh, huh.

WAGONER: But ... that's another long story.

INTERVIEWER: Well, we can't go into a long story.

WAGONER: ... But at any rate, Wilmington College in 1963, moved from a two-year college to a four-year college, and Bill Randall and Dr. Hoggard and Emsley Laney and those people on the board, went immediately to do what they had to do to make it a four-year college. And it was a big lot to do. But, remember, Wilmington College as a two-year college, two years before had already moved out to its present site, and Fred Graham and ... Raiford Trask and ... Benny Schwartz ... all on that board then, insisted that they get enough space. And from all that I have read and the editorials that I have read ... most of the people in Wilmington thought they were crazy to buy 640 acres out in the woods. And, but they did. In 1963, then, it became a four-year college, and ... then when Dr. Randall resigned ...

INTERVIEWER: They showed great foresight, didn't they?

WAGONER: Absolutely. Tremendous foresight — unbelievable foresight. But ... then when I became president of Wilmington College on July 1, 1968, ... I've often said that I had the shortest tenure of any college president in the United States. Things were already in the works in the legislature to make that a part of the consolidated university. So I became President on July 1, 1968. The legislature met and John Burney and Billy Hill pushed through the legislation to get the legislature to approve ... and so, from July 1, 1968, as President of Wilmington College, on July 1, 1969, I became Chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: You had one year tenure then.

WAGONER: I had a one year tenure, exactly, to the minute. But also something that is very important. I know you're looking, okay, but something that is so important. On that day, July 1, 1969, ... Governor Robert Scott and William Friday flew from Raleigh down to Wilmington. And Fred Graham, as the outgoing Chairman of the Board of Trustees, turned over to Governor Scott and to Bill Friday, the deed to that property so it could become complete state property.

INTERVIEWER: Um hum.

WAGONER: And, that was done on the front portico of what is now called the Hinton James Building. And that's why it's called the Hinton James Building, because one of the students that

day asked Bill Friday if he could have a favor — if that building could be named for Hinton James.

INTERVIEWER: The man who walked from Wilmington to Chapel Hill to go to North Carolina University.

WAGONER: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Now, now we're in the real thrust of what we're here for. You started your tenure then in July 1, 1968, and then carried us into the first year. Now, how about leading us step by step through some of the so-called landmarks during the administration — that until you retired in 1990? Let's go back to 1969, now, and what were some of the things that you recall — so-called benchmarks ... significant happenings?

WAGONER: Well, Sam, I'll tell you. The first significant happening after we became UNC Wilmington, was that the ... applications for entrance went just sky high. It was like a graph you wouldn't believe. I wish I could, I wish I could paint a graph on a ...

INTERVIEWER: The magic name, University of North Carolina? Okay.

WAGONER: And I'll tell you this, (chuckle) maybe I shouldn't say this on tape, but I will anyway. Many of the students, not many of them — a few of the students who were enrolled in the university, I mean in Wilmington College, delayed their graduation. So the next year they could have UNCW on their diploma. (Chuckle.) That's not good to say, but it's the truth.

INTERVIEWER: Well, consider it confidential.

(Laughter.)

WAGONER: But ... after that the enrollment took off and from that day on, Sam, I never spent one single day on that campus — not one single day that I did not meet with somebody arguing, or pleading for space, because the enrollment ...

INTERVIEWER: And you had a wall to wall building program going on all the time, didn't you?

WAGONER: I never, I never drove on that campus, and I can remember the way I drove to work. I never crossed what is now South College Road, then 132, I never drove across that road a single day in 22 years that there was not one, some building being built.

INTERVIEWER: Um hum, yeah. Well this required a tremendous amount of liaison with the people in Raleigh and the legislature and everyone else so far as getting the funds to be able to keep this building program going.

WAGONER: Well, I cannot say enough good about the people that we had. I mentioned John Burney and Billy Hill before, and ... George Clark, for example, was there during some of those days. But after we became a part of the University of the consolidated University, then the old Board of Trustees, then it was a hundred members, with the governor as chairman. They fought the battles for the budget. And then, of course, ... that's another whole, long story. I won't get into that. We were a part of the consolidated University from July 1, 1969, until the legislature of 1971, and in 1971, is when ... that was under Governor Scott's administration. When that

legislature ... decided to restructure the University system and in that session, the 1971 session, was when all of the 16 publicly supported universities were brought under one board, the Board of Governors.

INTERVIEWER: That's when the present University system, as we know it, was established.

WAGONER: That's when it started. But it was a big fight, and again I give credit where credit is due. It would have been an entirely different system — unbelievably different — if you will do your research and go back to that period and look up what's called the Lindsey Warren Commission Report. That was what was headed straight for law, and that was not a good system. And John Burney, our senator from New Hanover County, stopped that ... with all of the finesse that John Burney has. He stopped it, and the legislature in 1971 recessed. They didn't adjourn. They recessed for three months so the people could get their minds together and come up with a better idea. And they did, and that's where the present Board of Governors ...

INTERVIEWER: Well, you handed quite an accolade to John Burney, and well deserved, because I had, what you're telling me is I've had first hand sidelines accounts of those as it came along, knowing the principals that were involved. As you go on now, other than the building program, let's look at the academic program now. What were the highlights of the academic program so far as the University was concerned, as far as establishment of additional disciplines and the various things that — one of which later became unique. That was the Marine Science Program.

WAGONER: Well, you're right. The academic side was one of the first things that I wanted to tackle, and I did all that I could do, advertising and otherwise, to find the finest, best, scholars that I could find for professors at the University. And we were successful. Of course, one that was already there when I got there, but this is an example, Gerald Shinn. But I wanted people like Gerald Shinn to be on that campus as professors. Well, they came. If you could ever get them to come to Wilmington, North Carolina — sometimes you had pay, most of the time you had to pay for their flight and all. But when they came and saw the place, they stayed. We very rarely lost one ... after that person had seen Wilmington, North Carolina, and had seen the campus. Academic wise, the SAT scores kept going up, and within a very few years, I would say within four or five years, we ...

INTERVIEWER: From what date?

WAGONER: 1969. We began having to cut back on receiving applications. It was not like going out and struggling for people to come to the University, but it was like, "Hey,"...

INTERVIEWER: We can only take so many.

WAGONER: "we can only take so many." That's right. But that's what it was like during those years. It was trying to keep up with the academic side with the faculty, keeping enough space for them to learn in — for the students to learn in, ... offices for the faculty. And the first year that I was there the Randall Library was completed and the Sarah Graham Kenan Auditorium was finished. And, ... all those things just sort of happened. I didn't have that much to do with it, Sam, it just sort of happened.

INTERVIEWER: The thing had a momentum and a purpose and had everybody behind it that could do anything for it.

WAGONER: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Therefore, the result was the continued expansion program you're talking about.

WAGONER: Yeah, like Trask Coliseum.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, yeah.

WAGONER: They got a grant ... from the university, I mean the legislature, at the University, to build a gym, and Bill Brooks, who was athletic director at that time, came and said, "You know, hey, we need something better than just a gymnasium." So, he and I talked with Raiford Trask and Raiford Trask came up with some money to add to it, and that's why Trask Coliseum is there.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I was on the Foundation at that time and know the background story on that, so that's an interesting story and one for another time. The Trask Coliseum probably is the largest building on campus other than the dorms and stuff of that kind. Is that ... ?

WAGONER: Well, right now probably. But there's a brand new, fantastic science building going up on campus — just beautiful. I can't wait to just look into it, and I congratulate Chancellor Leutze, part by the Marine Science Program, by the way. That was one of the first things that the old Board of Trustees of Wilmington College, before we became a part of the University, told me. And, no matter what anybody says, I know it was the old Board of Trustees who created a committee of the trustees to promote that science program. And they assured me that it was my duty, the Marine Science Program was my duty, and I agreed with them. And all of those years we struggled. We'd get a little money here and a little money there, and finally it became recognized as — I think the last time I read about it, Sam, it was ranked as the fifth in the nation in stature as a marine science program. It was the first college in the South, not just North Carolina, but the first college in the South to grant a Baccalaureate Degree in Marine Science.

INTERVIEWER: Now, that goes into the next thing I want to ask about. Beyond your, the normal four year degrees, Bachelor Degrees you granted. When did you get into graduate degrees? — Masters Degrees and maybe doctorate, and beyond that point. I'm not knowledgeable about that era. How about letting us in on that.

WAGONER: Alright. Sam, I cannot remember the exact year, because I don't have my notes or anything. But, I talked with Bill Friday over and over and over about how much ... the teachers in southeastern North Carolina wanted the availability of Masters Degree. Because that was the only way they could progress, the only way they could climb up the ladder, the only way they could prove themselves. And one of Bill Friday's advisors by the name of Arnold King — King Hall was named for him. That's the Education Building on campus.

INTERVIEWER: I did not, haven't known that.

WAGONER: Arnold King was one of Bill Friday's closest advisors, and he came down on many occasions and talked with me. And we went over the whole thing. And he went with me out to schools in southeastern North Carolina. And he reported back to President Friday that it was time. And so that was the first graduate program on campus and I would like to tell you the exact date, it's obviously ...

INTERVIEWER: The date is really immaterial. The fact that it was done is what is important.

WAGONER: But that was the first Masters Program. And from then on, one fell into the other like the Masters in Business Administration after the Cameron School of Business was formed under Norm Kaylor. Like the masters program in biology, the masters program in English and math. One fell on the other. But, in the University System, the way the University System works, it's getting the first one. That's the hardest.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Opening the door. Is there anything else that you can think about that you would care to add, that you think is significant? — That may be an important achievement for the University or something that you might consider to be very significant? Think about that a moment.

WAGONER: Okay. ... Two things, Sam, — the most significant thing about the progress of Wilmington College and later the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Number one was the people — the faculty, the staff, the people in the community who backed it all those years. And I'm going to add something very special — the second — not in importance, but the second was Madelaine Wagoner, who entertained over a hundred and fifty thousand guests in her home while I was Chancellor. And she did that with great, great beauty.

INTERVIEWER: I can understand. I can certainly understand, and it's nice to record the fact that she was recognized, and the name for the Madelaine Suite in the building that was built back at the end of that long passageway that goes — it's going to be a beauty spot one day as the landscape comes in.

WAGONER: It's called Chancellor's Walk.

INTERVIEWER: The steps of the library, straight back all the way for a matter of six or seven city blocks. And they call it Chancellor's Walk?

WAGONER: That's what it's named, officially.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

WAGONER: By the old Board of Trustees. It's called Chancellor's Walk.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know. Well, we are just about ready to conclude here, and I want, certainly wanted to mention Madelaine and you. And you and Madelaine and Ruby and I were neighbors for many years until you went to the University. Then you came back out into the neighborhood once again after you retired. We've known you. We've been in your home, you've been in ours. I've been interested in the University out there in a number of ways as time has gone on.

WAGONER: You've always been a strong supporter of the University.

INTERVIEWER: I've enjoyed my association with the University and I got a big kick out of telling you about the letter I wrote before Wilmington College started.

WAGONER: Well, I can't conclude this, even though you may be running out of time, without telling you how impressed I was, and how impressed the whole academic community has been across the country at your paintings of the galaxies and the universe that you've shared so well.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you. It was a pleasure to give those to the University, and you mentioned the new Science Building. On the completion of the Science Building, they will go in there on formal and permanent exhibition.

WAGONER: Fantastic.

INTERVIEWER: At the present time, they're in Salisbury, North Carolina, at Horizon's Unlimited for a three-month show. And this is the University owned paintings, and they just concluded a year at Discovery Place in Charlotte, so that's the update on what has happened to the paintings.

WAGONER: Well, one last thing. One of your great admirers, one of my closest friends, the late George Baer talked with me about those constantly. And ... I want George to get in this picture somehow.

INTERVIEWER: Well, George and June were people that I admired greatly, and was so distressed at his untimely death. This is going to, I think, wind us up this afternoon. We've recorded a lot of facts, a lot of information that might have just fallen, to use the expression, through the cracks if they weren't on this bit of magnetic tape. That a man here from Wilmington invented the process and the tape that's used now that's the foundation of the whole television industry, VCR's, everything else, is a Wilmingtonian that did that. Let's conclude with that note, and thanks very much for your time this afternoon.

WAGONER: Thank you, Sam.

INTERVIEWER: I've enjoyed the visit.

WAGONER: Thank you.