

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

AGNES SHAPOU DERDA

INTERVIEW 1402

My name is Jessica Lasitter McManmon representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 1400. I am interviewing Aggie Shapou Derda. Her interview number 1402. This interview is being conducted on September 4, 1992. We are in Aggie's home at 1618 Rhem Avenue, New Bern.

Jessica McManmon: Aggie, would you tell us about your family? Were your mother and father married when they came to the United States or did they meet here?

Agnes Derda: No, Jessie, they met in Boston, Massachusetts. My mother and father both came over from Beirut, Lebanon to Ellis Island, but they did not meet until they were in Boston. An interesting story about that is that when my father came over to see my grandfather, he found her jumping rope with the children. She was a young girl then. He was twenty years older than my mother. He told my grandfather to save her for him because she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and he was going to come back and marry her. So, he did just that. They stayed in Boston for a while before they came to New Bern. I am a family of two girls and one brother. My sister, Idele, still lives here. My brother Teddy passed away. My sister Laurice passed away. My grandparents lived with us during all the years that I was growing up. In those days there was no such thing as the rest home or nursing home. My grandparents lived with us my whole life until they passed away and also my mother's brother, Mitchell Khoury.

I used to think that they were all a very close part of my family and that everybody lived that way, but I found when I got older, that

it wasn't so. My mother and father were both wonderful people and took very good care of all their family.

JM: Thank you. Aggie is going to read her memories of when she attended St. Paul's School and later when her daughters attended St. Paul's.

Agnes Derda: My memories of being in St. Paul's School in the 1940's are some of the fondest memories of my life. Being in the environment of so many Nuns for nine years, was the best anyone could ask for. We were a very fortunate group. The old St. Paul's school building still stands today on New Street. It was not only our school but the home of the Nuns. They lived in the upstairs part of the house, and the classes were held in the four downstairs rooms. Two grades in each of the three rooms and three grades in the fourth room. A big piano stood in the foyer where music lessons were given daily for those who were interested. After nine grades, we had to enter New Bern High School to finish the tenth and eleventh. We had no twelfth grades then. Going into New Bern High School after being so disciplined in St. Paul's, was like going into another world. Most of the students were very kind; however, many treated us as outsiders. It was not an easy transition for us. I joined the Hi-Y Club, the Glee Club, cheerleader, speech and dramatics, everything I could think of or was able to do to stay as busy and do well. Mr. Harry MacDonald had taken Mr. H. B. Smith's place as Superintendent of Schools. Mr. Smith retired. We loved him very much. He was once quoted as saying, "That he could always tell the children who came over from St. Paul's. They

were so well mannered." I always felt close to Mr. Harry because he married my friend, Kathryn May. Kathryn worked in the office of the old Sun Journal building when it was next to my dad's restaurant, and I saw her daily. They made and still make a beautiful couple, and I still love and admire them very much. Our dress code at St. Paul's was dark skirts, white blouses, and the boys wore dark pants, white shirts and dark ties. When my girls; Diane, Donna, and Gretchen attended St. Paul's school in the sixties, they wore blue plaid jumpers, white blouses. They still have that same dress code today. The boys are still in dark pants, light blue shirts and dark ties. We had prayers at the beginning and end of each day, and we attended Mass regularly. The choir was composed of the whole school. We were singing Latin Mass when we were very young. Miss Daisy Swert was our church organist. She was the only unpaid organist in the city. She played for every funeral and wedding, never accepting a thing in return. I had great love and respect for Miss Daisy. We were good friends until her death in 1968. She was ninety-four years of age. I'm still singing in St. Paul's choir. It has been a very rewarding part of my life. We rarely sing Latin anymore, and it is quite different. Mother Pauline was head of the school, and she taught music and drama. We had great plays, and they were usually held at the Masonic Theater stage. I remember once I was a picture on the wall and had to remain very still for hours. I wore a big colonial costume, and it was so uncomfortable; however, I new better than to crack a smile or complain. Sister Marie Imelda was one of the Nuns during that time and a great

influence in our lives. We all loved her so much that when it was time to choose names for confirmation, we chose Imelda. She still lives today and has visited us as recently as 1990. She is still teaching in New York. The Nuns wore their habits in those days and were not allowed to let a strand of hair show. They were never allowed to walk anywhere alone. We used to take turns walking with them to the store and the post office. We were very lucky to have Nun teachers.

Today they have few Nuns and mostly lay teachers because of the Nun shortage. We are blessed with a beautiful school on Country Club Road, and I understand they are doing a great job with some wonderful programs this year. The auditorium, which now still stands next to our old St. Paul's church on Middle Street, was built under the supervision of Father O'Keefe. We held Mass' there for many years before our new church was built. Some used to call the building "the white elephant"; however, I don't know what we would of done without it when we outgrew our church. I could not reminiscence about St. Paul's without mentioning the wonderful work the women in our church did during World War II for the servicemen. We had social dinners, played ping pong, danced to wonderful music, gave them a home away from home. Thank you Mrs. Mary Mullineaux, Mrs. Lasitter, Mrs. Royston Blandford, to name a few. A great influence in our lives at St. Paul's was the very special Monsignor Michael Irwin. He loved people so, especially children. When he pulled up that big chair at Mass and sat down, you knew you were in for an hour sermon. We could never walk into church without wearing something on our heads; a hat, a veil, anything we

could find at the time. Short sleeves and short skirts were definitely unheard of! He would send you home and out of church, and he made no bones about the way he felt you should dress before entering God's House. Every Thursday, we would leave class early and attend benediction in the church. After the service, we would line up to go to confession. We could never receive Communion if we did not go to confession first. These rules do not apply today. During the school days, Monsignor would surprise us with a visit and give us a spelling contest. The prizes would be Holy pictures and calendars. We tried very hard and felt really proud when we won one of those items. Minette Duffy painted a wonderful picture of Monsignor that still hangs on our walls. Monsignor is buried on the corner of Middle and New Street on the church grounds in front of his old Rectory he loved so dearly.

That house is now used for social ministry. I know Monsignor is very pleased about that. Thank you Mother Pauline, Sister Rosalia, Sister Imelda, Sister St. Helen, and Msgr. Irwin for the love you instilled in us all. We are a very lucky lot.

JM: Thank you Aggie. Were one of the Sisters always chosen to be the principal of the school?

Agnes Derda: Yes. We had one principal.

JM: Do you remember if all the Sisters stayed the same length of time at the school?

Agnes Derda: They did stay, yes.

JM: Would they have stayed for a number of years, like about nine or ten years?

Agnes Derda: I think, if I'm not mistaken, at that time, they were allowed to stay no more than six years in one place.

JM: How many classes did you have in a classroom?

Agnes Derda: We had two classes in each room.

JM: Were they large size rooms?

Agnes Derda: The rooms were pretty good size. The classes were no more than ten people in each class, I would say.

JM: When your daughters went to school, they went to school on Middle Street, didn't they, in the new building?

Agnes Derda: Yes, in the new building.

JM: Those are large rooms there.

Agnes Derda: Yes.

JM: Did they have more than one class?

Agnes Derda: They had full capacity at that school.

JM: Would they have more than one class in a classroom?

Agnes Derda: I think they just had one class in a classroom in those days.

JM: Do you know if the Sisters received a salary for teaching?

Agnes Derda: They received a salary, but it was very nominal. It was not like the salaries that they're getting today, which is still nominal compared to what they do.

JM: When your daughters were in St. Paul's, did they have basketball teams?

Agnes Derda: Yes, they did.

JM: Was it just for the boys or did the girls have their teams

too?

Agnes Derda: They had girls and boys basketball teams in those days. Now, they did not have it in my day. No one could afford a basketball uniform in those days.

JM: Did they play in competition with other Catholic schools?

Agnes Derda: Yes, they did. The surrounding area of Kinston, Goldsboro.

JM: Did they have cheerleaders for the basketball team?

Agnes Derda: Yes, they did.

JM: Did the cheerleaders have special outfits that they wore?

Agnes Derda: I don't think they had special outfits.

JM: When your daughters were at St. Paul's, what grade did they go up to?

Agnes Derda: The same grade they did when I was in school, up through the ninth grade. They had to go to the high school for the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade.

JM: Did you feel that academically that they were well prepared for going to the public schools?

Agnes Derda: Oh yes.

JM: There is one more topic I would like for you to discuss. There were many Lebanese families that moved to New Bern in the early 1900's. Would you tell us the names of some of these families and any memories you have of their contribution to the economy and the enrichment of the history of New Bern?

Agnes Derda: I'm going to name the names of a lot of the Lebanese

families that were here during that time. The Nassef family. There was John and Charles and Shia Nassef. Shia and Charles started the restaurant where the old pants factory was down at the depot. John Nassef had the restaurant on the corner of Middle, and at that time, was South Front Street. He raised his family in the upstairs part of that building. Then there was the Kaleel family and the Habib family and Mrs. Ablen, the Rachid family, the Libbus family. You all remember Tony Libbus at the drug store, and Amelia still resides across the street from me. The Jowdy's lived on Spencer Avenue. Mike Jowdy was involved with the fire department for many, many years. The Karams, the Georges. The Ellis Zaytoun was a big family here. Most of them live away from New Bern today, but the John Zaytoun family still lives on Spencer Avenue with all their children. And Father Elias Zaytoun. The Khoury's, the Joseph's. Nettie Joseph still lives on Spencer Avenue. Shikery Salem, the George Salem's, the Hatem's, of course the Shapou's, Mr. Kay Fahad, the Ellis family, the Tom Francis family and the Romanus'. All of these families came over to Ellis Island from Beirut, Lebanon.

JM: Were there any conflicts going on in Lebanon at that time?

Agnes Derda: No. My father used to say that Beirut was the most beautiful country in the world, but there was no place in the world like the United States. He really loved it here, and he thought that how lucky he was to be here with his family.

JM: When the people came through Ellis Island, a lot of them would have come to New Bern because they had relatives living here

already?

Agnes Derda: Most of them that came here, they came for that reason. Most of the Lebanese people that came in this eastern area settled in Goldsboro, Wilson, Rocky Mount, and Kinston. They all were not related that closely, but they had ties and they were very close in friendship. They used to visit a lot. When I was a young girl, you know in those days, children went with their parents everywhere.

We met and still continue to be friends with a lot of the other people in North Carolina.

JM: Do you know how they first settled down here in this section of North Carolina.

Agnes Derda: No. I know that the Nassef's had that restaurant, and then he was married to my aunt, Mrs. Charles Nassef. My mother and father came down here because her sister was here, and that's how it started. So, I think they just liked it.

JM: Aggie, will you tell us about Father Elias Zaytoun?

Agnes Derda: Father Elias Zaytoun was a very remarkable person. He came over many years after his family was already here. He had five sons: Louis, John, Kelly, Fred, and one daughter, who still is living in New Jersey. All of his sons have passed away now. He was able to have a Mass once in a while. But you know in those days, the priest were allowed to marry. He stayed in Beirut for quite a number of years after his family arrived here. His wife was living with his youngest son, Louis, and stayed with her until she passed away.

JM: Aggie, I want to thank you for sharing these memories with

us. In the future when someone would like to know about the early days of St. Paul's school, they can go to the library and read your memories. And I should imagine this would be a treat for your grandchildren.

Agnes Derda: Thank you, Jessie.

END OF INTERVIEW