

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

DORCAS E CARTER

INTERVIEW 201

This interview is being conducted on July 23, 1991 at the home of the interviewer, Dorothy Bryan, 1711 Dillahunt Street, New Bern, North Carolina. The interviewer is representing the Memories of New Bern Committee.

Dorothy Bryan: Dorcas, if you will tell us something about your life.

Dorcas Carter: This is Dorcas E. Carter being interviewed by Mrs. Dorothy H. Bryan, one of the coordinators for the Memories of New Bern. Perhaps you might just like to know a little background knowledge of me and how I came into existence. I am a life time native of New Bern, North Carolina. Born of the parentage of Sylvester, a home site contractor and Mrs. Olivia Martin Carter; to this union was born, four sons and I, an only daughter.

Caswell, the eldest, is a retired mathematics and science teacher in Raleigh; Robert, a retired governmental mechanic, Fort Monmouth, New Jersey; Sylvester, a retired attorney-counsellor of law, Riverside, California; James Rudolph is a forty year electronics employee, Langley Field Air Base, Virginia, and I, a retired teacher from the New Bern City Schools, F. R. Danyus, for having been employed for forty-nine years.

DB: Your topics, I believe, were those associated with World War I, circuses and fairs, and the fire of 1922. So, we're going to start now with the questions on World War I. What do you remember about World War I, Dorcas?

Dorcas Carter: Dorothy, this was a day when I was perhaps five

years of age. My father came home from his employment at the close of the day's occupation and said to my mother, Olivia, that he had had to report to the draft board and the next morning be inducted into the service of the United States of America. I was very saddened to hear my father making this proclamation even though I knew nothing of war except the expression exchanged around the table between my father and mother and relatives who would visit. My mother's reply was, as I recall very vividly, "What will I do with your going to war and leaving me with four small children?" Silence fell into the home, and later, we drifted into slumberland. However, the next day after reporting to the draft board, they deferred our father, so he said, "I will not be going to France." The faces of each of us gleamed with joy in as much as we knew then our father would not have to leave us for Uncle Sam's army.

DB: Did anyone in your immediate family serve in World War I?

Dorcas Carter: Yes, my uncle whose name was William R. Martin. He came to our house one day dressed in his uniform because he was enrolled at Shaw University for his college degree, but later he too, did not go to combat. After then, he was able to return to Shaw University to complete his degree and go to Howard University where he entered the School of Medicine. He graduated in 1925; thereafter, coming to New Bern and being a practicing physician until his untimely death, August 22, 1935.

DB: Do you have any people that you remember who fought and died in the war?

Dorcas Carter: Yes, I do. There was my aunt whose name was Hattie Martin, her fiance. His name was Caswell, and they called him Cas Henry. He was the uncle of Alice Pasteur Harvey who reportedly died on the day that the armistice was signed. When this news reached us in New Bern, North Carolina, we were all very saddened. However, I do recall on the day that his body was shipped back to New Bern, that we went to the New Bern National Cemetery for his interment.

DB: Did New Bern produce anything to help the war effort that you can remember at the age of five?

Dorcas Carter: I'm sure they did because they sent many of our church members like; Mr. Guy Howard, and "Big Jack" Jackson Bear. I do recall those two men and many other men: (Bud Vail) and Seth Vail was also inducted into the services. Many of them went to France.

DB: How was patriotism shown during the war?

Dorcas Carter: I'm not sure.

DB: You can't remember probably, at the age of five.

Dorcas Carter: I was just five, and these are just the highlights of some things that I recall.

DB: You have any other memories of the war?

Dorcas Carter: Only, when they returned after the war, everybody seemed to be in high spirits. The only casualty that we had in New Bern as far as our boys was Cas Henry.

DB: What about the armistice? How did you celebrate the armistice?

Dorcas Carter: On November 11, 1919 was when armistice, you know

the celebration. I remember on this morning, probably I was age 6, perhaps, you could hear Rue Chapel AME Church bell tolling, St. Peter's AME Zion Church bell tolling, Presbyterian Church bell, Mount Calvary, Star of Zion, and St. John's. The ringing of these bells to me were quite ceremonial; though, they were declaring a message to us that the war is over and the boys will all be back. Of course, one of the songs at that time that was very popular was "When Johnny comes marching home again, Hooray! Hooray! And we'll all feel gay when Johnny comes marching home." Of course on this day, my mother dressed the four of us and we went down on Johnson Street. My Aunt Rachel Martin Bryan, who deceased November 13, 1985, was living there. At the scene of the uptown celebration, a table was spread in front of St. Cyprian's parsonage for the festivities and the Rev. R. I. Johnson who was the founder of Good Shepherd Hospital, spoke to the uptown veterans. This remains in my memory as a little girl because I then was about age six. It was a happy day for all to view and to remember; in which, I remember quite vividly, but some of the incidence are faint.

DB: What about the flu epidemic which came about this time? Do you remember anything about that?

Dorcas Carter: Yes, I do remember about the influenza during the winter of 1918. With the return of the World War I soldiers from France, an epidemic seemed to have spread into the United States of America known as this plague called influenza. It was during the winter of 1918 our family all became ill with coughs and fevers. We were sick, all of us. I can remember basking by a tin heater upstairs.

My mother had rubbed us in Vicks pneumonia salve they called it then, now it is Vicks Vapor Rub. We were so sick until finally it was necessary for a doctor to be summons. Dr. Hunter Fisher was our doctor. He was the one that came to us. As soon as he came into the room, he said to my father, "Please, hoist those windows because if you don't, all of you will be dead in here!" It was in the winter and there was a little fear I guess in hoisting the windows. There was six of us, so my father employed a nurse whose name was Miss Mamie Pickett. She came and ministered unto us. At the height of this epidemic, anyone who was ill at that time, the home was quarantined. This was a little yellow sign tacked on the door by Dr. Ford. Across the street from us there was a victim of influenza whose name was Mrs. Florence James I believe. On this morning when I looked out the window, I guess we were all well enough to look out the window, we could see a crepe on the door. You know, that was a sign that someone was dead. A crepe was used at that time. There were so many dying at that time until it is said that they had to stack the bodies in what they called the "Dead House." They had it in the cemetery and called it the "Dead House." They could not bury the dead until people got well enough, I guess, to bury their dead loved ones.

DB: Did this frighten you as a child?

Dorcas Carter: Oh yes. When I looked across the street and saw that crepe on the door and we were still sick, all of that frightened me. Couldn't anyone come in to visit us because our house was quarantined; so therefore, we just had to stay inside. All we could

get was what the doctor and nurse brought into us.

DB: How would you describe what the crepe was like?

Dorcas Carter: It was like a bow we would say. It could be a bow that would be symbolic of the boys returning home now, but they had different colors. If it were a child who died, it would be a white crepe, they call it. If a middle age person died, it was purple.

Then if an elderly person died, it was black. This one across the street was purple because she wasn't that old. We were very thankful that we had survived. The six of us had survived this terrible epidemic, influenza epidemic.

DB: What about the circus and carnivals and fairs? Circuses did come to New Bern, is that correct?

DB: Yes, the circuses came to New Bern and the fairs came to New Bern. Perhaps I shall begin with the circus. This was a very exciting day in the home of the Carter family. My two older brothers would always get up at daybreak and go out to the "coal shoot" they called it which is by Dunn Street. They would help to unload the animals and whatever duties they could perform. They would always come home with a ticket. This was joyful because there were other Carters, four of us, that still had to go to the circus. So, when they would come and present their tickets to my father, then he knew that he could take all of us to the big tent circuses. Of course the circuses that I remember were John Robinson and Ringling Brothers Circuses. These were three ring circuses; very big circuses. Not anything has been to New Bern since these days. Then we would all go to school very

eager for the bell to dismiss us, you know, the dismissal bell sounded so that you could see the parade and that you could hear all of the bands playing all the music. It seemed as though Mr. J. T. Barber would never ring that bell. When he would ring that bell, everybody would then run to Broad Street because maybe the circus would make up to what we call the coal shoot. But it would be a big performance on Broad Street. I would always like to see the elephants, the clowns, and the acrobats. But when it came time for those lions, and they would start roaring, and you didn't know whether one was going to jump out of his cage or not, then we would grab our mother then because we didn't want to be frightened. But such beauty you've never seen before. One thing that really stands out with me and the circus, they had ladies who rode the horses, and one of them was Miss Daisy Odum, one of our own. She always dressed so eloquently on that day. When she would pass, we would always wave because she always felt that she would always take part in this parade. Then we would go home and hurriedly eat dinner because about two o'clock would be the time for the circus. Now this was a time! We would get in this big tent, three ring circus. As children, you would be looking from one degree of the tent to the other because there was so much to be seen and so much excitement that I guess you didn't miss it all. You would miss some of it. What stood out to me was the acrobatic dances and walking the wires. They would be walking the wires and you would always be holding your breath because you didn't want anybody to fall. There were calamities but not at the time I viewed the circuses in New Bern.

DB: What about fairs? Did New Bern have a local fair the way we do now?

Dorcas Carter: I had grown then to eight years of age, and my father said on this day that he was going to take us to the fair that had come to New Bern. On this morning, my mother did not go to the fair because she said that she had to get her some shoes for the winter.

So, my father hired what we call a transfer. This is what we call today, a taxi. His name was Mr. Bud Reed. He took us out to the fair ground. We got to the fair ground and of course there were so many attractions you hardly know which way to look. We looked and looked.

As children the first thing we want to know, maybe you get to smell a hot dog or some other delicacy that's being prepared on the grounds and you'd want to go there and eat, although, you had just finished your breakfast. My father took us around to many amusements at the circus. The thing that really charmed me on that day was when I saw this airplane fly overhead and he said that was the Wright brother's plane.

DB: Did the people of New Bern usually look forward and plan for circuses and fairs.

Dorcas Carter: Indeed they did look forward to the circuses because you never saw so many children sitting in a tent! That was one of the highlights because this one of the amusements for the young children at that time.

DB: What about carnivals? Did they come a little later on?

Dorcas Carter: I guess the only thing that I remember, I don't

know whether it was a carnival, but it was called minstrel. This minstrel was Silas Green. They'd say, "Silas Green from New Orleans."

They would always put up a tent round about Pasteur Street, down in that vicinity. I remember going once to this carnival with all kind of dancing and jokes. I guess men dressed in all kind of suits. The music was very, very, jazzy. This would excite me when it'd be jazzy because I seemed to always have a little rhythm in me and I would like to keep time with all of this. The person that talked mostly about this minstrel was one of our church members whose name was Mrs. Rowena Garfield. She stated that Silas Green was her boyfriend, but she did not marry him. She, instead, married Mr. Garfield.

DB: Do you recall anything else about entertainments of this type that ever came to New Bern?

Dorcas Carter: I don't know, I guess it was called an amusement. This was when the whip and the ferris wheel came into being at that time. This was not beneath the tent, but they would have all kind of attractions too. I liked the whip. I would like to ride in the whip as a girl. I'm in high school now, but I would ride in the whip, but I never, never wanted to be in the ferris wheel. I always felt that it was very dangerous. One of my friends, Hattie Mae Jackson, lured me in it once. When I got to the top, I hollered so until when it came down, he let me out and he wouldn't let me ride any more. So, that's about it for me as far as entertainments are concern. Perhaps there are more, but now some of them are faint in my memory.

DB: We have one other topic that we want to consider now and

that's the fire of 1922. What do you recall about it, Dorcas?

Dorcas Carter: I might just, Dorothy, recall everything about this fire. I'm 8 years of age now. On the morning of the fire before it became wide spread in New Bern, there was a fire that had broken out at Roper's Mill. It seems as though that when the whistles kept blowing, they did not leave the scene of Roper's Mill fire. When my aunt whose name was Rachel Bryant who lived in Johnson Street, knew that the fire was in our direction, she came up to our house. On this morning, my mother was dusting. It was on Friday morning. She said, "You don't need to be dusting, Olivia, because there's a big fire across the railroad." Mama said, "Well, I don't think the fire's coming this way." So, she goes back home, and after awhile, then, the fire whistles started blowing up into the black neighborhood. At this time, there was a very high wind. They said that it was about a 70 mile an hour wind blowing. One house was burned, two houses burned, and then the third house burned. By this time, they released one of the fire trucks to go to the scene of the fire which began on Kilmarnock Street. That was the site of our Safe Way Cabs today on Kilmarnock Street. By this time, the fire had lost control and started leaping from one side of the street to houses. After a while it looked as if, from my viewpoint, inferno. It looked like an inferno. As a girl, I probably knew when the fire whistle blew and what neighborhood it was. All the houses at that time had shingle roofs, dry shingles too. So, that made the fire spread very rapidly. My mother had just hung some clothes on the line because my youngest

brother was born and then there became seven into our family, and she had washed. By this time, she looked up and a spark had caught a house on George Street. We were in close proximity of George Street, so then mama got very excited when she saw this house burn. The occupant of that house was a Mr. and Mrs. Louis Ward who lived there. Mama said, "Oh! We better start packing up our little belongings and trying to take refuge." When she said this, my father had built me a doll house so I ran into my doll house and started collecting my doll and clothes, her little clothes and my little furniture that I had. My oldest brother, Caswell, was working down at Sam Coplon's. He came home when he saw all of the fire raging around Pasteur Street. At this time, mama told him to start packing up our little belongings.

They packed dishes and furniture. My father went out to get a truck so that he could move our possessions. Before then, my brother was one year of age and mama had told me to go sit up on George Street on a Mrs. Whitley's steps. This was before noon. It must of been about eleven o'clock. She told me just to sit there and hold my brother Rudolph, and I did. All this time, we had not had any dinner nor anything, just sitting there watching the people come up George Street pulling trunks, pulling some of their possessions up to a field called Dunn's Field, for refuge. Between 4:30 or 5:00, or just about the time the sun was to set, that's when I saw my mother and three brothers coming up George Street. She was coming then, I guess, to get us and we were to take flight then to a place of safety. At this time, the fire was all surrounding us, coming up George Street, coming around

Pasteur Street, and it would just circle us. Then, I was very frightened! Very frightened when I just kept seeing it leap and burn.

Mama was bringing ironing boards and she thought the fire was trailing behind her, the sparks, so she told my brother to put the ironing board down. We started saying, "Mama, you need the ironing board cause you can't iron our clothes!" I don't guess we even had any clothes at that time. But anyway, we kept on until she took us to Dunn's Field.

When we got to Dunn's Field, it was night, and here, seven of us were in Dunn's Field with no place to go. My father decided that he would form, I call it like an igloo, he put all of our dinner room chairs down, and the rug, and we crawled into this place for to bed that night.

Before then, a resident up in the upper George Street area came up, I guess you call it Glenburnnie, up in that area, came and offered mama refuge for the night. She said, "I have a basement and you could take your children and you and your husband could go in the basement and spend the night." Mama said, "Well, there are so many of us", and she wouldn't go. We just continued to stay in the field. She brought us some bread. I know a bag of biscuits, I remember, but I don't know whether we ate them or not. Anyway, I was very saddened because my father had told my mother when she asked him, "Sylvester, has our house burned down?" He said, "All standing, Olivia, two chimneys." We had no place to go. My grandmother was very concerned about us. She did not stop until she was able to get my Aunt Lucinda's husband who was like a transfer he had a wagon or truck. He came.

They kept on until they found us, and when they did, they packed some

of our belongings on the truck and she took us to her home. When we got there, my grandmother had already taken on a family, the John Fonville family. He just recently passed. He was about eight days old. My grandmother had taken in him. She didn't know she had two daughters who were fire victims; my Aunt Rachel Bryant and my mother.

So, we stayed around there a while. Aunt Rachel's husband was a barber down on Middle Street, so he had a vacant room and he took her down there and his mother. My Aunt Lucinda Saunders had a room, so she told mama we could stay with her. There were two beds in this room with one window. There were four of us in one bed; two at the head; two at the feet. Mama, dad, and my baby brother were in the next bed.

We stayed there until nine months when we were able to get a place to move. Although, the American Red Cross had provided tents up in Smith Town they called it, but my grandmother did not want my mother to go in Smith Town to live in tents because she was frail and feared that since it was December 1, 1922, she felt she might go into pneumonia.

I wanted to live in tent city because many of my friends were there like; Miss Martha Chapman and Miss Adelaide Fenner, they were there.

They had a tent for a church, and I would like to go there to church.

It was exciting because the more family you had, the more tents you had. I don't know how long that tent city remained. I do have a scene of the big fire, of what remains, and Dorothy, you have a reproduction of it now. I guess this ends about what I know of the fire now.

DB: Where was Dunn's Field?

Dorcas Carter: Dunn's Field was out beyond the National Cemetery,

I guess, up in there. Maybe it wasn't built up then, but that's where Dunn's Field was. I'm just eight years old then.

DB: Did your life change because of the fire?

Dorcas Carter: Indeed my life did change! Because when the fire came, it was near Christmas then. My father had promised us a piano cause we were taking music. This changed our life completely because we weren't able to get any piano.

DB: Did the town change because of that?

Dorcas Carter: Oh yes, the town changed because there were about 3,000 people left homeless. Many people migrated north because they became so disheartened. One fact is that, after the fire, the city condemned the property from where the Armory is, which is now the police department, from there all the way up to Dunn Street. That was condemned because blacks lived there, and they would not allow them to build back again. Two people did try building. One of them that I shall mention first was Dr. Kennedy who was a pharmacist in New Bern. He had just recently built him a new home, I might say, between Queen and Cedar Street. Every time he would get up his frame, they would make him tear it down. This really disheartened him so until he finally, I guess, stroked and died. The next resident that attempted to build was Mr. Richard Sawyer who was a tailor up on Cypress Street. Part of Cypress Street was condemned beyond, I guess that might be the intersection of Nunn Street. He was going to build a two-story house, and as soon as he would try to get up the second story, they would make him tear it down cause they said he was in that section that they

couldn't build back. Anyway, I guess he went with his father, Rev. Sawyer who lived on Cypress Street. He and his wife went and stayed there. The Red Cross helped people to re-establish by giving them money and trying to get lots for them. I tell you, as one of my friends said, "That was a time! That's all I can say." It was a very unhappy time. See, we had lost my birth place, you know, on 16 Goode Street. We had lost that and had lost all my friends up there. So, we were just scattered. And it seems I've been scattered ever since.

DB: Thank you, Dorcas.

END OF INTERVIEW