

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

FRANK MELVIN, SR.

INTERVIEW 1503

This is the monologue of Frank Melvin, Sr., who now lives in Colonial Heights, Virginia, in April of 1992 for Memories of New Bern. At Mr. Melvin's request, this tape will replace the previous taped interview number 1503 conducted in New Bern on March 13, 1992 by Bill Edwards, interviewer 1500. This tape will be assigned number 1503 since it replaces the previous tape.

Mr. Melvin: I am making this recording at the request of Bill Edwards to share things I remember as it concerns transportation while I was employed with Atlantic Coast Line Railroad at New Bern, North Carolina beginning in the 1920's. To set the stage I will begin by giving some background history as to why and how I became employed by Atlantic Coast Line. This recording will void and nullify a previous recording made March 13, 1992, while in New Bern.

My name is Frank Melvin. I am eighty-three years old, born in the little town of Parkersburg, North Carolina, June 5, 1908. This little town is located on what was Atlantic Coast Line Railroad between Fayetteville, North Carolina and Wilmington, North Carolina. Railroad transportation was vital to the community and at that time there were no over the road trucks and very few automobiles. There were four passenger trains daily and two local freight trains. Through freight trains at night and occasionally an extra. As a young boy I spent right much time hanging around the little railroad depot watching trains unloading and loading less than carload freight. It was almost a daily exercise that two local freight trains would meet at the station. Often another freight train would show up and three trains

would be maneuvering to pass each other. There was one siding that would hold about thirty-five cars and as a rule each of those trains would have more than thirty-five cars. It was quite interesting to see the moves the train crews would make, but they would get passed each other on single line tracks. I became very interested in trains and decided I wanted to pursue a railroad career. I left high school and I started taking a course in telegraphy. I finally mastered the dot and dash system and went to Atlantic Coast Line superintendent's office in Wilmington, North Carolina to get a job. I was given an examination by the assistant chief dispatcher. I passed the examination, and was hired as clerk telegrapher. My first day at work was May 6, 1926. I was eighteen years old almost. I lacked one month.

I worked at various places on the Wilmington district to which I was assigned. I was sent to New Bern January 23, 1929 to work. The agent was Shep Edmunds, a pleasant but loud talking man with the ability to delegate his work to the point talking was about all he had to do.

This was a feat no other agent I knew ever accomplished. Most railroad employees were very busy.

I met Miss Grace Deppe while at New Bern, later to become my wife.

I left New Bern and transferred to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina February 22, 1929. From there to Wallace, North Carolina June 19, 1929. On October 2, 1930, me and Miss Deppe, were married. We have celebrated our sixty first anniversary. We moved from place to place and finally returned to New Bern about the year of 1942 to take a position as clerk operator. I was appointed to the position of

supervisory agent December 12, 1948. I remained in that position until November 3, 1960 when I was appointed agent in Petersburg, Virginia.

I remained on that position until I retired July 1, 1973.

With all of this history, out of the way, I will try to give some information as I remember it with respect to railroad transportation as it concerned New Bern. Railroad transportation was an important part of the economy at New Bern and remained an important part for many years later. New Bern was one of the last to yield to truck transportation and for a good reason. New Bern was served by three railroads; the Atlantic Coast Line, the Norfolk Southern and the Atlantic and North Carolina at that time, if my memory serves me right, to later become the Atlantic and East Carolina. There was quite a large payroll. Atlantic Coast Line trains moving to and from New Bern would travel over the middle of Queen Street. The track extending out over the river. The freight warehouse was built out over the river and could accommodate placing of four or five cars for unloading. We handled a great amount of less than carload freight. Sometimes interchanging less than carload shipments with boats. W. J. Gatlin was one of our railroad clerks and walked across the bridge over Neuse river from Bridgeton to get to his job and walked back in the evenings after completing his day's work. The rail yard consisted of several tracks. One of these was a connection track to other rail lines used to interchange traffic. One short track was to a turntable where train engines would be driven on and turned around on this table by manpower.

Another was a scale track. This was a short track and only accommodated

weighing three cars in one cut. This later became an efficiency handicap. Another short track was referred to as the team track. Cars would be placed on this track loaded with merchandise consigned to local firms. Another track served a platform constructed to unload farm and motor vehicles. This platform later became the foundation for Gay Distributing Company, a beer warehouse. Another smaller platform was constructed at another location to take its place. Then there was another track referred to as the Neuse track because it served Neuse Lumber Company. It was located on the river front at extreme east end of King St. This lumber business was operated by four brothers: John Rodney, Carroll Rodney, Kirk Rodney and Charles Rodney. We had a tool house adjacent to the connection track where the track maintenance foreman stored tools and over the road motor car for transporting his helpers to and from work. There were small wood frame houses provided for the road maintainer's men and their families to live in, and a house for the foreman to live in. His house was located on the north end of East Front Street, the last house on the east side.

Right behind this house near the river front adjacent Neuse track, was a place we referred to as a trainmen's shack. Train crews tying up at New Bern overnight would sleep and cook in this house. The Atlantic Coast Line had a local freight train leaving New Bern in the morning going to Wilmington, working stations between. A local freight train would leave Wilmington the morning coming to New Bern and this train would also work stations between, loading and unloading merchandise and picking up and setting off train cars. There were

sometimes extra trains when an overflow of traffic would accumulate.

There were passenger trains leaving New Bern and passenger trains leaving Wilmington that would make a round trip each day providing the local station like Pollocksville with four passenger trains a day.

The rail passenger station located at the crossing at ACL and A&EC tracks across Queen Street from Pinnix Drug Store was a very busy place.

I believe it was then the A&NC instead of A&EC. There were train dispatchers for both the A&NC, later, A&EC, and the Norfolk and Southern. Tickets were sold on the ground floor for all rail lines, there was a cafe in the station and back in the 1920's there was another rail shed adjacent the north side of Queen Street extending from the ticket office building east towards the Salvation Army building. This was where the passengers riding the Atlantic Coast Line trains got on and off the trains. Back in the 1920's, steam engines were used to move the trains. I still have a love for those steam engines, and I have fond memories of hearing the engineers blow the whistle. Some were very good and could almost blow a tune. It seems people were happier then and took great pride in doing a good job at the profession they chose for a livelihood.

Rail transportation enjoyed a good business in the early 1920's.

But then came the Depression in the 1930's and the over the road trucks, tractors and trailers. The Depression and the trucks almost brought the railroads to their knees. But conditions have changed a lot since that time and the rail lines are alive and doing well today. There's a vast difference the way the rail lines are run today than they were

at that time. In the late 1920's the buses captured most of the short distant passenger traffic and some of the long distant traffic as well.

But we now have Amtrack. The equipment is modern, clean and comfortable. The service is good and there is a big passenger business.

Getting back to the subject of rail transportation that has effected New Bern. During the time Cherry Point was being constructed, we experienced the heaviest rail traffic of all time. The base decided to use marl from a pit at Belgrade just south of Maysville to build their foundation for the runways for airplanes. It was moved in rail gondola cars from Belgrade to Cherry Point through New Bern. The Atlantic Coast Line pulled the cars to New Bern, weighed them, then delivered the carload traffic to the A&EC railway for transportation to Cherry Point. The Atlantic Coast Line placed steam engines at New Bern with caboose and crews to man trains day and night moving this traffic. We had one crew that would leave New Bern in the morning and go to Belgrade and stay there all day placing empties and moving loads from the loading shoot and would come to New Bern with 70 to 80 cars in the evening. The turntable had been moved and a wye track had been constructed on the outskirts of town near where Walmart store is now located, for turning cars and engines. The engines would get behind the train at the wye and push this long string of cars through Queen Street and store them in various tracks to be picked up, weighed, and placed on connection track. Since we could only weigh a cut of three cars at a time, it was a slow procedure and there was no room to extend the track to make improvements. The weights were placed

on the waybills and freight charges figured and the waybills were delivered with the cars to the A&EC. A train crew would leave New Bern late evenings and come back early morning with about 65 to 70 cars and local freight trains would pick up approximately 25 or 30 cars of this stone and bring it into New Bern in the evening. The number of cars brought depended on the number of cars in trains on arrival at Belgrade loaded with other commodities. We used coal-fired engines, these engines had to be replenished with coal daily, this was done from cars of coal sent to New Bern by throwing the coal from car to engine tender with shovel. This was a busy time. Both railroads had car inspectors. The cars were inspected when delivered to the A&EC and again after being received by A&EC. This was done for safety purposes to prevent derailments and injury to persons handling the cars. Sometimes cars would be tagged bad order and returned to delivering line. They would be repaired and returned. This would sometime insult the inspector who inspected the cars when delivered, but it was all done for safety purposes to prevent derailments or prevent people who were handling the cars from getting hurt. After the cars had been unloaded and returned to the Atlantic Coast Line the car inspector would check for damages and sometimes would bad order empty cars and return to A&EC. Some of this was legitimate and sometimes petty on both lines. But if a car inspector placed a bad order tag on a car, the Superintendent of the railroad did not have authority to take the tag off before it was fixed. This was very closely supervised by ICC representatives. We had to keep record of cars being

delivered to A&EC and make what we call an interchange report. The A&EC would make the same type of report when returning the empty cars back to the Atlantic Coast Line. The initial number, kind of car, date, and time of delivery had to be shown correctly on the report.

This was the way we kept up with the cars. Each rail line had to pay per diem on foreign cars while on that line and this is the way the number of days on a rail line was determined. The cut off period was twelve o'clock at midnight. The receiving line had to sign for the car and often there was a dispute over the time of delivery. The time represented dollars and had to be correct. Then the initial and number of car, date, and time of delivery had to be entered into a book known by railroad employees as a "camp book." I think it got its name from a man named Camp who invented the system that was almost fool proof if properly used. This is how railroads kept up with the cars. Sometimes there would be errors in car initial and number when making the interchange report and supplementary reports had to be made to correct the errors. This movement of the marl traffic went on from months to years until the air base was completed and many thousands of cars loaded with marl passed through New Bern during that time.

This information in some degree will show how important the railroads were to New Bern and to the government and to those who chose to use it.

During this busy time, my title was Clerk Operator. My duty was to copy train orders, send and receive telegrams, and do as much clerical work as I could do. We were short on help. Many of the men

had been called into the military service and it was difficult to hire anyone at that time. Jobs were plentiful. Since my stay in New Bern, Atlantic Coast Line Railroad merged with the Seaboard Airline Railway to form the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad. That later merged with the C&O Railroad to form what is now the CSX. The Atlantic Coast Line facilities serving New Bern have been abandoned and dismantled.

When I visit New Bern and ride by the area, I see a void and I feel a bit sad, but the change was necessary in the interest of progress and good business practices. I have fond memories of my stay in New Bern and my many friends.

As concerns other subjects listed in the interview package, I remember very well the Great Depression. For a full year I was unable to get any work. I was married and had financial family obligations. I was depressed, I would have worked for 50 cents or a dollar a day. There were no jobs to be had. No social security, unemployment insurance, or welfare. And in the words of the theme song of the Archie Bunker show, "Every man pulled his own weight." In a way the people of New Bern fared better than others. For in God's mercy, Neuse river was full of fish. And anyone could dig a can of worms and with a hook, line, and pole, could catch all the fish they needed. The rivers were dotted with little boats everyday the weather permitted.

I remember Babe Ruth, the famous ball player, hunting trips to New Bern and had the privilege of sharing a visit with him in a New Bern ice plant office. I was cashier and Harold Landreth was manager.

Babe Ruth had a deer stored in the ice plant. Was leaving town and

came by to pick up his deer to take back with him. He was invited to come in the office, accepted, and spent about an hour chatting with Harold Landreth.

I was living in New Bern when the hurricane of 1933 hit the city and caused great flooding leaving fishing and other type boats on the streets adjacent to the rivers. A lot of trees blown down across the streets and much flood damage.

I was working for the Atlantic Coast Line in New Bern when hurricane Ione struck and did a lot of wind and water damage. The wind blew part of the east end of the freight station off, blew out the windows in the office and flooded the building causing heavy damage.

Even though the warehouse and office was built on pilings extending 10 to 12 feet above the normal water level in Neuse river, the water was about waist high to a man six feet tall in the warehouse and office.

A lot of important records were lost in addition to other damage suffered. Gay Distributing Company warehouse next door to the freight station was completely demolished. Beer was scattered all over the immediate area. All a total lost. New Bern Oil and Fertilizer suffered heavy damage. And there was a great amount of other damage in New Bern.

There are many other things I remember about New Bern. The Coast Guard cutter "Pamlico" was almost a permanent fixture docked in New Bern. I remember the three busy fish houses run by Mack Lupton, the Nelson brothers and Lem Hamilton. In the afternoons when the fish boats would come in when I worked at the New Bern Ice Plant for a short

period, often we would send 150 blocks of ice to these fish houses to ice the fish down. These blocks of ice weighed 300 pounds each.

Mack Lupton had several trucks he operated out over the various areas of North Carolina and enjoyed a thriving business.

There are other things that come to my mind regarding rail traffic.

There was quite a bit of livestock for the meat packing plant at the edge of the city operated by Gatis Honeycutt, and some refrigerator carloads with fresh meat. We also had a rendering plant located on the same siding, and we handled an occasional tank car loaded with tallow moving away from this plant. Next was Horner Veneer plant located near where the Walmart store is located now. We'd handle plywood in carload quantities shipped from Horner Veneer Company. Next down the line was the L P Gas plant operated by George Scott.

We handled a considerable amount of gas for Mr. Scott loaded in tank cars. An occasional car of pipe for Mr. Bill Bryan who had a business just across the track from the gas plant. Next was a pulpwood yard.

We shipped a lot of pulpwood on flat cars. Next was Gulf Oil distributing plant operated by Mr. O. C. Crump. At one time we handled carload shipments of gas and oil for Mr. Crump. Then there was the City of New Bern, the power plant, where we had a track with a trestle to place cars of coal. The city used coal fired furnaces to generate steam to produce electric power, and used a tremendous amount of coal.

We would place these coal cars on top of a trestle to be dumped, and then would be moved out from under the trestle. The city was one of our best customers in those days. In 1945 the city converted the plant

to diesel electric generating equipment. In the Five Points area, Mr. O. C. Crump operated a coal yard. We handled a considerable amount of coal for Mr. Crump. We handled an occasional car of building material for City Lumber Company operated by Jack Aberly. And quite a bit of business for Mr. Tom Gay who operated the Gay Distributing Company.

He handled Blue Ribbon Beer and other brands as well. Another thing I remember about my railroad career in New Bern was potato season.

There was a lot of white potatoes raised in Pamlico County. When harvested farmers would load them in rail cars. Produce brokers around New Bern would go down and buy these potatoes and ship them to a holding point until they could sell them. The holding point was, for the most part, Petersburg, Virginia. Sometimes Richmond, Virginia, and sometimes Potomac Yards, Virginia. When these potatoes were sold by the brokers, the brokers would bring the bill of lading to our station and we would divert them to final destination. This was done by telegraph and was a tricky business because those potatoes would rot.

We would require a confirmation of these diversions and kept a book record. There was quite a few cars that moved each season.

There is one other thing that should be remembered about railroads that serve New Bern. They played an important part in transporting military equipment and troops during the first world war, the second world war and others. When there is a war, the railroads have been the second line of defence and this includes the railroads serving New Bern, During the second world war I saw freight trains loaded with heavy military equipment, and passenger trains loaded with troops

moving from one location to another through New Bern. The railroads have served New Bern and our country for a long time, and generally the towns have been built around the railroads.

My best wishes go to those who are trying to preserve the history of New Bern for New Bern has a lot of history, and it should be preserved.

END OF INTERVIEW