

This is Dorothy Bryan representing the Memories of New Bern Committee.

My number is 200. I'm interviewing Laura Williams and her interview number is 203. This interview is being conducted on October 2, 1992.

We are at the home of Mrs. Williams.

Dorothy Bryan: Mrs. Williams, you are now at 104?

Mrs. Williams: 104.

DB: So, what is your birth date?

Mrs. Williams: The 9th of January , 1888.

DB: Do you remember the year?

Mrs. Williams: No, I don't.

DB: All right. What is your maiden name Mrs. Williams?

Mrs. Williams: Laura Crispin. I was a Crispin before I was married.

DB: Where were you born Mrs. Williams?

Mrs. Williams: Jones County. Right on the line.

DB: Did I understand that your front door opened in Jones County?

Mrs. Williams: My front door opened in Jones County.

DB: And what about your back door?

Mrs. Williams: My back door opened in Craven County.

DB: What were your parents' names?

Mrs. Williams: My mother was named Frances. Her maiden name was Frances Robinson. Her marriage name was Frances Crispin.

DB: Who were your brothers and sisters?

Mrs. Williams: I never had a brother. I had three sisters. I was the oldest one. My sister Charity and my sister Mary, she was

Mary Crispin, Charity was named Charity Crispin and my baby sister was named Naomi Crispin.

DB: You were the oldest of the children?

Mrs. Williams: I was the oldest one of them.

DB: How many grandchildren do you have?

Mrs. Williams: I have six grandchildren. I'll give it to you this way; I lived from the first to the second, third to the fourth to the fifth to the sixth generation.

DB: So, you have grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren.

Mrs. Williams: That's right.

DB: Do you have any memorable event in your childhood that you never will forget?

Mrs. Williams: Well, in my childhood one day I never will forget, the place I used to come to New Bern with my father. My father used to bring the mail from Jones County to James City. There was no bridge across the river but the railroad bridge. The boat over on this side would bring the mail from the post office over here to James City and he'd pick up my father's mail and bring it to New Bern, and my father would pick up the mail that he'd bring and carry it to Jones County and put it around in the people's mailboxes. I don't remember where he put it. I know I seen him taking it out the bag and distribute it around, but I don't know whether he was putting it in boxes or what.

I do remember that. I was real small and was riding with him.

DB: So then, there was no bridge at that time.

Mrs. Williams: No, no wooden bridge. The onliest bridge there was across James City was the railroad bridge. That's the onliest bridge that I knowed of. Then later years they built a wooden bridge. I know they did.

DB: What was school like for you?

Mrs. Williams: Well, when I first started, I loved it. I didn't go many days before I commenced getting excited because I never did like for nobody, no like it during the day to holler at me. The teacher we had, he was a school teacher and a preacher. When he'd get to try to make you do something and you couldn't understand it, he'd just holler at you and slam it and stomp his foot and scream at you, and I just couldn't take it. It's just scare me to death and I'd go to crying. So this particular day, I had been spelling box; I had one of these blue back Spellers and anytime you'd spell a word, he'd have you to mark it on the slate. We were using slates and we'd mark it on the slate. I had been spelling box all the time. But this particular day, he got to hollering at me and got me excited and I couldn't spell it to save my life. I never will forget that. He'd holler, "Laura, spell box!" I'd try to spell it. I get one word out and I couldn't get me a new one out. He'd stop his foot and holler at me again. I just couldn't do it. I reckon about four or five times he scold at me, hollered at me. So finally last, he had a paddle about like that, and it had a little small handle to it. He'd bend your hand back like that, that's the way he'd whip you, and beat you right in the palm of your hand. He bent my hand back like that and he took

that paddle and beat in my hand til when he had quit, pretty soon after he quit, there was a blister raised in my hand. Then I did cry then.

I cried the rest of the evening til time for school to turn out. When school turned out, I went home. When I got inside of home, I come to screaming sure enough. My hand was swollen and my daddy wanted to know what was the matter. I showed him my hand and he said he wasn't going to send me to school no more. My mother told him, she said, "You ought to send that girl right on back to school with the rest of the children, right on back to school." He said, "No. If that's why did I didn't want to go to school and he hollered at me like that and scared me like that, he wasn't going to make me go to school."

So, then I commenced following him around in the field, cause I always was a father's child. Yet, I loved my mother. But I loved to follow my daddy around, so I'd get to follow him around. Finally last, he always did have two teams, he give me the horse and a plow and he had a plow. I couldn't hold the plow. See when you hold a plow, you hold them like that, but I couldn't hold them. I held them like this. And sometimes that plow would get under a tush of grass and throw me as far as from here to that TV. My daddy thought, "Whoa, get up son and try it again." I'd get up and try it again and I kept right on like that until I learned how to hold the plows like that. Then I could hold them like that. I plowed round and around just as the days come clean up until I got married with my daddy on the farm. When we'd get through plowing in the field and get the crops all up, then he'd haul me out chopping cotton on somebody else's farm for twenty-five

cents a day. I worked Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

It was fairly interesting some time, you had to work in the field til Saturday twelve o'clock and they'd knock off.

DB: Do you remember any childhood illnesses that you had?

Mrs. Williams: No. I've never been sick in my life. I'm sicker now than I've ever been in my life. Never been sick enough so that I couldn't do nothing for myself.

DB: How long have you been in New Bern?

Mrs. Williams: Well, I tell you this a way. Charles was born in June and I'm over here in November.

DB: Charles is your only son, is that correct?

Mrs. Williams: My only son, yes.

DB: And he's living in San Diego, California now?

Mrs. Williams: Yeah.

DB: Where did you live in New Bern, what street?

Mrs. Williams: When I first moved here?

DB: Yes.

Mrs. Williams: On the corner of Pine and Smith Street.

DB: So, you were in the area that was involved with the fire of 1922?

Mrs. Williams: Yes mam. I was in the fire.

DB: How did it affect you?

Mrs. Williams: It affect me bad because I didn't save nothing but just little things that I could tie up in a sheet. You know how you tie things up in a sheet. That's all I saved and all the rest

of my things got burned up.

DB: So, where did you live after that?

Mrs. Williams: I come up here right on the corner here in New Bern street that my husband's first cousin which is named Grant Davis lived.

DB: So, what street was that?

Mrs. Williams: South Front Street. Right here.

DB: That's where you have lived for the most of your stay in New Bern?

Mrs. Williams: Yeah.

DB: What about the houses in New Bern? Do you know of any houses or buildings that were downtown that are no longer standing?

Mrs. Williams: Old man Baxter's house is not standing. I think the Blades house is down. I don't think the Blades house is standing.

Let me see, there was another house. I can't just remember now where that house was, but it ain't standing.

DB: I think I've heard you mention a boarding house.

Mrs. Williams: Yeah, that was the boarding house that I used to work in. The first job I got in New Bern, I was working for a dollar a week for Ethel Midyette. Her husband to run a garage. No, he used to sell cars. That's what I'm trying to say. I worked for her for a dollar a week for a long time. Then after a while, the cook got sick. From time to time when I'd get my work done, I'd go in the kitchen and sometime I'd help with peel the potatoes or pick collards or string beans or help with to wash her pots and pans and I'd watch her and

see how she'd cook. That's the way I learn how to cook. Because I didn't have no letter doing, I couldn't go to books and take nothing down. I had to get mine in my brains. When I did get it in my brains, I slung pots and pans for thirty years from one kitchen to another.

DB: What about trolley cars? Do you remember when trolley cars first came to New Bern?

Mrs. Williams: Yeah. When I first come to New Bern, street cars was running down Bern Street from Frog Pond. I don't know where it come from, but they'd go through Frog Pond right straight down Bern Street. I don't know where they'd turn; there was a cemetery or keep going out. I don't know which way they went. I know the car barn was up here where the old water work used to be.

DB: How much was the fare? Do you have any idea what they charged for a ride?

Mrs. Williams: I don't know. I can't tell you that. I didn't ride on them very much. I walked where I was working at. Cause when I'd go to work mornings, the street cars wasn't out. And when I'd knock off nights, the street cars was closed in.

DB: What about ice boxes and ice wagons? Do you remember when they were in use?

Mrs. Williams: I remember old man Brinson used to haul ice downtown and put it in the people's ice boxes. Some of the ice boxes were sitting on the back porch and some was in the kitchen off in a cool place. Sometime he'd put half a block. If they were big enough, he'd put half a block in an ice box. Some of them wouldn't hold a

half a block.

DB: What about the streets and the paving of streets? Did they have many paved streets?

Mrs. Williams: No, they didn't have many pavements, not that I know anything about. Except, going downtown they had pavement on the sidewalks and streets. If I make no mistake, the streets were brick. There wasn't concrete like there is now. They were brick.

DB: What was on the streets that were not brick? Just the plain dirt?

Mrs. Williams: Just the plain dirt.

DB: One of the other items that I would like to ask you about is related to church, which I know is very dear to you. What has the church meant to you?

Mrs. Williams: Well, the church mean everything to me when I could get a chance to go. Because I had to work and I didn't get no Sundays off working. And when I did get off, church would be turning out practically when I'd get off for church. The onliest times I could go to church would be some Sunday nights. I could go to go to church at the old church on Sunday nights. That's the only time. If I'd get off on Sunday, it would be near one o'clock before I got off and I didn't have no Sundays off. So, I didn't go to church cause I worked back all the time. I had one day off and that would be a day in the week on Wednesday and I couldn't go to church. See, there wouldn't be no church on the week.

DB: What about your church membership? Has it always been at

Clinton Chapel?

Mrs. Williams: Yes, as far as I know. When I left Pollocksville, my church in Pollocksville was named Blessed Chapel. That's the church I got married in in Jones County. When I moved here, Clinton Chapel was Clinton Chapel when I first knowed it and I first come and joined it. Just called it Clinton Chapel.

DB: What were some of the other activities that went on at church? Do you find much difference in church today than what it was like when you were young?

Mrs. Williams: Oh yes. There's so much different changes in churches than it was then. Cause we used to have church at night. We don't have much church now at night.

DB: Anything else about the difference in church life?

Mrs. Williams: They used to have Sunday schools and BYTU on Sunday evenings. But I don't hear tell of no BYTU's now. But they have Sunday schools right on. Now my son was raised up in Clinton Chapel and over there at St. John's. On Sunday mornings he'd go to St. John's to Sunday school, then he'd go to Clinton Chapel. Then his mate boys from St. John's would go with him Sunday evenings to Clinton Chapel. Clinton Chapel had Sunday school in the evening.

DB: Do you remember baptism in the river?

Mrs. Williams: Oh yeah, because I was baptized in the river.

DB: Which river were you baptized in?

Mrs. Williams: I was baptized in Jones County in the river.

DB: Would that have been a part of the Trent River?

Mrs. Williams: Yeah.

DB: Were you affected by the Depression? I imagine you were as all of us were. How did the Great Depression affect you?

Mrs. Williams: Well, the Great Depression didn't bother me because I worked in the kitchen with a woman that fed us food and I kept their food on. And then, she'd give me a lot of food. Her father lived to Hyde County and he'd bring her chickens by the cartons. You know, by the coops. Ten and twenty head at the time because she run the boarding house. In the summer, they'd be fryers and in the winter, they'd be baking chickens. He'd furnish her practically all of her meats, chickens, and her vegetables. All like that. Well, I could get all that that I wanted to carry home because she'd give it to me.

Then every night I'd carry home a pan of food left off of the table this morning. If there was anything worthwhile, I'd put that down.

Then dinner time, there'd always be a good lot of it left. Well, everything was cooked didn't go back on the table. Everybody was bringing cooking pans up town.

DB: What has changed the most in New Bern that has affected your life? Can you think of anything that has changed more than anything else?

Mrs. Williams: Now you're coming on up with things that I can't remember. I forget them. I can remember things back yonder more so than I can things that happened last year or year before last.

DB: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss that

you can remember?

Mrs. Williams: I don't know nothing else right now that I can express to you. I didn't express this to you. Back there where I'm talking about, I can almost call it, people back there was living almost like a heaven. Because everybody was loving together. We'd pull together. We'd meet down on East Front Street. East Front Street would be lined it off with nurses. You know girls would be down there nursing people's babies. And then the cooks would be down there. East Front Street at waterfront would be lined off with cooks and nurses and everybody was loving. I didn't hear tell of nobody fussing and arguing like they do now. Everybody was loving. You'd get together and sometime they'd get down there and sing. There was sort of a settlement down there. They'd hold a prayer meeting right down to the river. They'd just wait for hours. I could go from here on Broad Street and leave my house wide open, but you can't do it now. If you leave it wide open now, when you go back, it's mighty seldom you find something in there. So, we're living in another day. We're living now in another day! The world is just like it ought to be, but what's in it is just turned right around just like a man starts, turn around and comes back. There ain't no more like it was. What I'm telling you about, from then to now. That's right. It's worser now. Cause this is another race growed up.

DB: Let me thank you again for letting us tape this interview. It's been a pleasure.

Mrs. Williams: Well, if I could do you any good, I don't mind

it. Every since I entered 100, from then on up until now, they've been having me going and talking. I went up on George Street twice.

The last time they sent me word, called me up, and wanted me to come back to George Street to tell them something about some history or nother that I knowed. But I wasn't able to go and I couldn't go. I just tells what I know and what I can remember and I stops right there cause I don't want to tell something that I don't know what I'm talking about. But what I'm telling you about, I know what I'm talking about. I can remember and know personally what I'm talking about.

DB: Thank you again.

(This is a note: The boarding house which Mrs. Laura Williams speaks about was owned by Charles and Ethel Midyette. The Midyette children were: Ralph, Charles, and Robena. The location of the boarding house was Pollock Street between Craven and East Front. It was a double house.)

END OF INTERVIEW