

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH W. KENDALL DORSEY**

MARCH 4, 1995

INTRODUCTION

This is Sam Bisette on the March 4, 1995, a beautiful Friday morning in Wilmington, and I am at the home of W.K. Dorsey on Columbia Avenue in Forest Hills. Mr. Dorsey is going to talk with me about some of his experiences in Wilmington that are very interesting and cover a unique area. So, we are going to find out first a little bit about Mr. Dorsey.

INTERVIEWER: I am going to ask him if he would to join us and tell us now where he's from and how he happened to get to Wilmington.

DORSEY: Well, I am W. Kendall Dorsey from Owensboro, Kentucky and I got my education in Kentucky. Went to college there and also at the University of Wyoming. I got an A.B. degree and when I got out, I decided to coach basketball because Kentucky is great basketball country. I coached basketball until the war came on and then I joined Curtis Wright, who was a great airplane manufacturer at that time. I stayed with them until the middle of the war and then, I joined with the Air Corps.

INTERVIEWER: Air Corps. That's what I was in.

DORSEY: So, I stayed with them training until the war was over and then of course, I was separated from the service. I decided with my wife and my daughter Gail, to come down to Wilmington and see how things were.

INTERVIEWER: What year was that? Do you remember?

DORSEY: No, I really don't...

INTERVIEWER: Right after the war?

DORSEY: Right after the war. When we got down to Wilmington, we thought we'd look the downtown over and take a look at the beach and then go back to Louisville, which was where I was going to stay. When we turned the corner down there at the Post Office, there was a car parked at the curb and another car parked exactly opposite of that one. There was another car parked exactly opposite that one and the door was open with a man and woman standing there arguing. I watched them for a few minutes and then I got interested in what they were arguing about. I went up there and this man and woman were arguing about whether or not he was from Wilmington. I wanted to get by them and I said, "Would you all mind moving so I can get on by?" The lady said, "Yes, well, I can't convince this man that he is not a Wilmingtonian because we park like this all the time."

INTERVIEWER: When you came and checked Wilmington out, you must have liked what you saw?

DORSEY: Well, I went down to the beach and I saw a gentleman that I knew at the airport and he was working in Raleigh as the State Supervisor of Distributive Education. Now, distributive education is the type of education that deals with merchandising, selling, and so on and so forth. He asked me if I would like to stay here and teach distributive education because he thought I was qualified. I talked to him a little while and we talked about the salary and everything was okay. I told him that I would stay on a year or two because it looked comfortable here and then I'd go back to where I wanted to. So, I did and I have

enjoyed it ever since.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you joined the Distributive Education Department. Who was involved at that time? Was George West involved?

DORSEY: No.

INTERVIEWER: Mabel West?

DORSEY: Yes, Mabel West was.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, Mabel West was George West's wife.

DORSEY: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Who else were some of the people that were involved in that? Do you happen to recall or were there anymore? I know it was very small at the time.

DORSEY: It was Mrs. Denise Jonrud.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, Denise Binroot.

DORSEY: That's right. She was involved in it and let me see, the Wests', George and there was one more. He was in the paper Sunday, but I can't think of his name.

INTERVIEWER: That's where you started in Wilmington? We called it the DE Program.

DORSEY: Yes, that's correct.

INTERVIEWER: Where was it located? On Market Street?

DORSEY: Well, the way it operated was that it was attached to the college.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

DORSEY: The students would come in and they were mostly veterans at that time. I would teach one class in salesmanship and then, they would take their other classes, two or more, and then they worked downtown in a store half the day for which they were paid. So, they got the composite training program all the way and most of them graduated.

INTERVIEWER: Some of my best employees came from the DE Program and worked there after high school.

DORSEY: Is that right?

INTERVIEWER: That's right.

DORSEY: That was a good program and it's a shame they don't have it going now.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Well, let's move along. After you got involved in the DE Program, what was the next major change for you? What happened next in your career in education?

DORSEY: Well, I really was teaching the one class, but my main objective here was to help the college in getting some advertisement and getting students in.

INTERVIEWER: Now you are speaking about the college, but was the college already formed then?

DORSEY: The college was forming at that time.

INTERVIEWER: At that time? Okay.

DORSEY: Of course, the way it was formed was Dr. Hoggard and Mr. Roland were the two main cogs in the wheel and they asked for a vote of five cents on one hundred dollars in 1945 but it didn't pass. So, the next year, Addison Hewlett put in for 5 cents from the state legislature and they got it passed. So, what I was really doing was advertising the college along with teaching the class in salesmanship.

INTERVIEWER: Well, were you set up on Market Street in one of the old buildings?

DORSEY: Well, yes. You see, the college was set up across the street from New Hanover High School in the Bear Building and we were set up to get the building and operate after 4:00 P.M. In 1947, the first teachers were A.D. Hurst, Jan Warden, Ann Barksdale, and myself. A.D. Hurst was the first professor at the college.

INTERVIEWER: They have a date that says established 1947, so this ties right in with what you are speaking about. When did Dale Spencer come on the scene? Does he connect with that at all?

DORSEY: Yes, the first dean Hamilton, was the principal of New Hanover High School. He stepped down as dean and Dale Spencer came in and stayed a year. Then, he decided to go back over to the high school because Mr. Hamilton was leaving. He took over the high school and we got another dean.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Well, you've led us into the beginnings of Wilmington College.

DORSEY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That is 1947 to 1995, 48 years ago.

DORSEY: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Now, I remember something about you may have enrolled the first student.

DORSEY: That's right. I enrolled the first student at the college and his name was Robert Huffheim. His daddy ran a clothing store down on Front Street. You may remember that store down there

INTERVIEWER: He was the first student?

DORSEY: He was the first student.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's interesting. That's an historical fact that we want to be sure to have on the tape. What happened to the college, then? What was the next major change for the college? Tell me a little how the college developed.

DORSEY: Well, the first group of students the first year numbered 88 and most of them were veterans

and could not pay very much for classes.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Some of them were there probably on the GI Bill?

DORSEY: That's right. After the five cents taxation passed, it moved very slowly and then, the next year, we had 10 to 30 new students a year and it kept growing until we had to get some teachers from the high school to teach a class or two for us.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

DORSEY: So, in other words, Mr. Hurst, who I mentioned before, taught mathematics, but he couldn't teach all the classes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. How long were you connected with the college before you made a change? Do you recall that?

DORSEY: No, I don't remember. We ran on until we got too many students and then they decided to move the college to where it is now.

INTERVIEWER: That's when they bought the 600 acres of land.

DORSEY: That's right. That's when they bought the 600 acres of land in 1960. The first shovel of dirt was thrown in April 1960.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

DORSEY: Then, the Administration Building, the Hoggard Building, was built and we moved on Highway 132.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Now, you stayed on with the college for how long?

DORSEY: I stayed on at the college for about five years.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

DORSEY: Then, I moved from the college to the Department of Community Colleges.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Tell me, how did you get into doing audio/visual programs for the North Carolina Department of Education?

DORSEY: Well, I did that because I didn't have anything to publicize with a college with that few students, so I had to do something. I did a story and the first one was on the historic churches of Wilmington. I wrote a story about them, shot the story, and recorded it.

INTERVIEWER: In color slides?

DORSEY: That's right, color slides and then, we would give it to people to show and it was very popular. So, we really got into audio/visual programs at the community college. Governor Sanford had this under the old Education and Development Department, but of course, there isn't one now.

INTERVIEWER: That's right; it's been changed.

DORSEY: But anyway, Governor Sanford appointed the vice president of Fountain Tire Company, two or three legislators, and myself. They got interested in selling these 33 eastern counties as tourist deals because there wasn't too much being done. So, they put it on me to do something that would help advertise these eastern counties. I came up with the idea that the community colleges all the way up and down each county could host the tapes. So, I would just go into the county and get all of the history and keen points of interest and produce the tape, put it in a tin, and give it to them and they would lend the equipment to show it to the people in adult education programs. In the mean time, they could also show it in motels.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know what that made you, don't you? That made you an early North Carolina historian.

DORSEY: Well...

INTERVIEWER: So, then you got interested in photography?

DORSEY: Yes, sir. Then we got into probably one thing that I will just mention in passing. I got interested in the Star Spangled Banner and I got the Marines to help me out in producing the film. As you know, the Marines are the most interested in patriotism and we made a little movie, the Incredible Star Spangled Banner.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it is a perfectly beautiful movie. I have seen it and was certainly impressed with it.

DORSEY: Well, it was shown by NBC all over the United States and the Marine Corps bought copies and colleges as far as Kansas bought copies.

INTERVIEWER: Well, didn't the audiovisual programs that you were working on come to the attention of the Freedom Foundation in Valley Forge?

DORSEY: Yes, they did.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about that.

DORSEY: Well, we decided to enter that film, The Star Spangled Banner in a contest and they had some of the biggest corporations in this country and they were in it, too. We won three George Washington honor medals.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's remarkable.

DORSEY: Yes, sir.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about when you got into audio/visuals. It looks like you may have created a job for yourself. Tell me how you happened to be doing these things for the State of North Carolina.

DORSEY: Well, they were interested in developing this area as a tourist attraction.

INTERVIEWER: That was the C&D Department.

DORSEY: That's right. So, we started and we hired two more people to help show these tapes and run

them. Anybody could show them and all you had to do was get the equipment and they made comments about our great eastern North Carolina. We carried this on for about 15 years and I gave copies of it to the elementary schools here. They used them in history and still do, but Dr. Harriet, who was the chairman of the State Board of Education, told me the other day, that he wanted me to make copies for all the schools in North Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: You mean just recently?

DORSEY: Yes, sir.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's interesting.

DORSEY: Well, it really is, but I can't do it because that film has gone bad. That was back about 20 years ago and that film has changed color.

INTERVIEWER: They have changed colors. I have seen them, you lent them to me, and I have shown them on occasion to some clubs, churches, and so forth in Wilmington. It took a lot of talent to be able to write those scripts, to produce the pictures, time the whole thing, and put it together so it could tell a story. The research involved in writing the script apparently was a real credit to you. How many audio/visual programs do you think you may have done in all that period of time.

DORSEY: 52.

INTERVIEWER: 52?

DORSEY: That's right. I did it all with one exception and that was the man who did the broadcast tape for me, but I wrote the script. I would give Art Madley the script and he would record it for me at the TV station.

INTERVIEWER: I remember him. He was with one of the radio stations here in town.

DORSEY: He was tremendous. He's dead now and I can't fix the Historic Churches of Wilmington because someone broke the end off and I can't put the end back on.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's a shame. You'll have to find some way to get around that. Get somebody to pick it up to fix it. Let's go ahead just a minute now about the programs.

DORSEY: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go ahead now about the visual education part. I'm going to turn the tables on you. I want to tell you a little story. You had lent me the tape that showed the Wilmington area from 1524 up until the revolutionary war that ends with the Battle of Moore's Creek. I had shown that up at Plantation Village to about 35 residents and there was a man who does the maintenance for the building and helped me to set the screen up in the back of the room. After it was over, he helped me to put the stuff in the car and he said, "Mr. Bissette, I want you to know that as I sat in the back of the room, it all came back to me. I had seen that film presentation about 30 or 35 years ago when I was a child."

DORSEY: Is that right?

INTERVIEWER: The film so impressed the man who looked like he was probably 45 to 50 years old.

DORSEY: Is that right? Well, that's great.

INTERVIEWER: I infringed on your tape to tell you that story. I thought you would be interested in it.

DORSEY: Well, I enjoyed that. That was a great story.

INTERVIEWER: Let's talk about any other connections that you have with Wilmington in connection with education or any other way. It seems like to me that there is a little story about Dorsey's Tavern down by Kingoff's Jewelers. Can you tell me about that?

DORSEY: Yes, well, there were two Dorseys that came here previous to 1700. One of them settled down in South Carolina and the other one stayed here and built a tavern adjoined to where Mr. Kingoff now has his jewelry store. So, eventually of course, George Washington stayed in that tavern when he was here and he said to Mr. Dorsey, "I don't see how y'all drink this water here, it looks blackish. Is it good?" Mr. Dorsey said, "Mr. President, I don't know, I never did drink any." Eventually, that place was torn down and there was a place where you could drive by the side of Mr. Kingoff's store. In 1960, Mr. Kingoff had a fire inside of that building.

INTERVIEWER: Had a fire?

DORSEY: Yes, sir. When the workman tore the whole mess down, they found an offset in the building with a chair and a mantle in it.

INTERVIEWER: You mean a fireplace mantle?

DORSEY: Sir?

INTERVIEWER: A fireplace mantle?

DORSEY: That's right. A fireplace mantle and a chair were sitting in there and of course as Dorsey's Tavern was right near by, I of course was the Dorsey that claimed it, but it didn't do any good. They wouldn't give it to me but you can go down there now and it's still in that wall.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. I became aware of you the very first time that you gave a program to the Wilmington Lion's Club about 35 years ago and you showed color slides that were taken from the old glass slides of the Bijou Theater. There were advertisements and notices of instructions for the patrons for the ladies to remove their hats, the men to not spit on the floor, and various things of that kind. In talking with you, I understand that you have really been interested in the subject of the Bijou Theater. Tell me about the Bijou.

DORSEY: Well, the Bijou Theater is now the oldest theater south of Baltimore. It was started by a man named Howard. He later had a joiner by the name of Wells. Now, there are some people that think that there was another one by the name of Fox, but there was never a man in connection with it by the name of Fox. Howard was nicknamed Foxy and that is where the Fox came from. They started to build on Market Street, but they never could get it to going and the city wouldn't let them tear the front off the building and put it like they wanted to for the theater, so they moved over to Front Street right across from Mr. Efird's Department Store. So, Mr. Efird was very interested in the theater and every time I would go downtown, he would have to tell me something about the old theater. They started building and where they kept their equipment, they built a little house and where the customers sat, they had chairs. They had a canvas over the top but one day there was a big snow and the canvas and all fell in. They had to go back and rebuild it again but this time, they built it out of brick and they put one of the most

beautiful fronts on it.

INTERVIEWER: Is that the one that had the figurines, the carvings, and the statues on the front?

DORSEY: That's right, they were beautiful. It's a shame that Wilmington ever let them get away from them. But in the final analysis, they went broke and it was sold. It was owned by people in New York, who had a note on it and they didn't pay it, so it was sold.

INTERVIEWER: Was that gone by the time you came to Wilmington or was it still there?

DORSEY: No, I went to it one time and it was torn down about four or five years after that. It cost a quarter and Mr. Eford would tell me about it. He said that Mr. Howard had an old Stanley Steamer and he said that he knew what time he was coming out to go to open up his show, so he would stand out front. He said Mr. Howard would make that turn around at the Post Office, come down, and park his old Stanley Steamer. Then, he would go inside and get everything all set up and would come out and start working the crowd.

INTERVIEWER: As a barker?

DORSEY: As a barker.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

DORSEY: That's right. He'd say, "Don't worry, it's never over. Step right up ladies and gentleman, only five cents, one twentieth of a dollar." He would just keep that up, up and down the street. I can remember seeing a 1923 newspaper with a picture of collards. A man was going through here from New York and called them co-lards. But anyway, Mr. Howard would take collards as payment and the story underneath said that he had advertised that the people would bring so many collards in there, he would give them a free pass to the show. When the show was over, he had an auction and the collards brought 23 dollars.

INTERVIEWER: Well, those were the days, and of course when I was a child and I moved to Wilmington in 1936, there were the Saturday serials and the days of adding the cowboys. Tom Mix was one of the leading cowboys and I understand that the movie was a nickel during the week and ten cents on Sunday.

DORSEY: That's correct. The Great Train Robbery was the first one that was ever made to tell a connected story.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

DORSEY: It was made in Edison's place in New Jersey and the second one I have of that period that they showed here was Mario of the Oasis for Life. They never were recorded so they could not be shown. I found out the other day as I was reading, about this man from New York who went out to Edison's place and he made the first movie to ever tell a connected story.

INTERVIEWER: The Great Train Robbery?

DORSEY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You know, you showed those to me about a month ago. Those together with some

other slides are about half an hour. The Barny Oldfield one was when they put the woman on the railroad tracks and staked her down. It reminded me of what the old movies were supposed to be like. The Perils of Pauline was another series.

DORSEY: Right. Well, I had the Perils of Pauline, but anyway, that movie was never copyrighted and to this day, it hasn't been copyrighted. So anybody could show it, charge what they wanted, and nothing could be done. It was great, but this man who shot it, he took it back to New York with him and locked it up in his safe. Howard heard about it and wanted to show it. He convinced him it would be all right to use the film, but he would have to lock it up in a bank vault. When he showed it, he had to send it right back the quickest way. That was the only time it was ever shown in Wilmington as far as I know.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do a slide show on the Bijou Theater, just on the theater?

DORSEY: Yes sir, I did. I picked up some pieces, the old zidephone that they showed the early ones with a crank. I had a lady, this was one of the great high spots with me, who would sit and play the piano to match the pictures on the screen. She was a colored lady who was the very lady that played the organ over at the...

INTERVIEWER: Chestnut Street Presbyterian Church?

DORSEY: No, it's the largest black church in Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it's the First Baptist Church at 5th and Red Cross Streets.

DORSEY: That's it.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

DORSEY: And to add something interesting to that, I don't think many people know that there is a swimming pool in the basement of that church. It's the only church in Wilmington with a swimming pool.

INTERVIEWER: Maybe it was a baptismal pool and you didn't know the difference.

DORSEY: There must have been some big people that went in that pool.

INTERVIEWER: Well, tell me this. As the years have moved on and we all move on, how old are you?

DORSEY: That's the 85 dollar question.

INTERVIEWER: 85 dollar question? Well, I am going to take it that you must be around 85 years old.

DORSEY: Well, that would be about right.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you are old enough now that you should be proud of your age.

DORSEY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You have a daughter that lives in Greenville?

DORSEY: Yes, sir.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any other children?

DORSEY: That's all. We had just the one child and she's connected with the University up at Greenville.

INTERVIEWER: And you lost your wife about three or four years back?

DORSEY: Yes, I lost my wife and I live by myself.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you have had an interesting life. I am impressed by the fact that you had a talent, you used it well in education and all your visual education to the point to where you made a position for yourself. They wanted to move you to Raleigh, but you didn't want to go.

DORSEY: No, I liked Wilmington so well that when they came down here and said, "You're going to have to go to Raleigh, that's where our headquarters is located," I said, "No, I can't go to Raleigh, I would rather stay here or leave, so just tell me what you want."

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that you wanted to add to this today or does that about get it?

DORSEY: No, that's it.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you for recording this. I hope that this tape and other tapes of Wilmingtonians, will be something that can go of record with the Public Library. It will be an oral history of things that otherwise might never have been recorded.

DORSEY: Excellent.

INTERVIEWER: So, I appreciate very much the opportunity of recording this for you today.