

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR
INTERVIEW WITH ESTELLE CARTER LEE**

AUGUST 2, 1995

INTRODUCTION:

This is the afternoon of August 2, 1995, at home at 1939 S. Live Oak Parkway in Wilmington. We are going to talk to Estelle about some of the things that have happened, some of the events that she's witnessed in years past during her life, not only as part of the Wilmington community, but part of the state community as well. So, Estelle, we'll start with just a little background. I guess you have to have a foundation on which to build anything.

INTERVIEWER: So, Estelle, if you're not age sensitive, please tell me when and where you were born.

LEE: You know I'm really proud of my age because some people say, "Wow, I don't want to be that old", but way back in 1935, in the little town of Loris, South Carolina, I was born to wonderful parents, Wilbur and Della Carter, and believe it or not, we were sharecroppers. And rented the land and the worked with others until I was about 14 years old. So I know the meaning of country living and country life and quite often some have compared my life to that of a Cinderella.

INTERVIEWER: (Laughter) You know what barning tobacco is?

LEE: You bet I do.

INTERVIEWER: Tying, cur.

LEE: The perspiration from out suckering tobacco, do you know what that means?

INTERVIEWER: I do, I do, I do, you get that stuff on your hands, you can hardly get it off.

LEE: I know.

INTERVIEWER: I never did that but one time, then I stayed away from the farms after that.

LEE: Oh, I wish once as my experience. I started at the age of 7. My mother tells me that when I was 7 years old at the tobacco barn, she would bring in an orange crate or an old Coca Cola crate and I would stand on that and hand tobacco all day long at 7 years old. Wonder what the wage an hour people would do with that nowadays.

INTERVIEWER: There isn't any telling (laughter).

LEE: In any event, that was the beginning of what I call probably one of the best lives of women today. The fact that I did start out as a farm girl, I learned the value of working and the value of a family.

INTERVIEWER: How did you make the transition and where did you go after you got to be 14 and how about your early education? Did you go to the public schools at that time or how did things work out anyway?

LEE: I referred to the age because at 14, Daddy made the tremendous leap and bought a farm and then we owned our own farm, so we were real upscale first class farmers and yes, I attended several primary schools because then primary was 1 through 7 and in the 7th grade, you graduated so in the 7th grade I graduated from Loris Grammar to Loris High School and completed my schooling there. It was quite a mundane experience because I was really a hard worker and I made good grades, so there was no real excitement there except to excel.

INTERVIEWER: How many years did you have in, 11 years or 12?

LEE: Oh, I had 12. I was one of the unfortunate ones they changed about two years before I reached the 10th grade, I was one of the 12 year students. I was a slow learner.

INTERVIEWER: All right, after you got out of high school, you were still in South Carolina. Where did you go then?

LEE: Well, I knew by this time that I did not want to be a farm girl all my life. I knew that I wanted to do something with my life and try to make a difference for my family and my state then, South Carolina. Little did I know that I would come to Wilmington to attend then Wilmington College and ended up a North Carolina girl.

INTERVIEWER: So that's how you got here, on account of the college?

LEE: That's how I got here. I had some family living here in Wilmington and since we were very small farmers, we were relatively poor. Poor's not the word, we didn't have much money, that's a good term.

INTERVIEWER: You were not well-to-do to put it in a negative form.

LEE: That's good (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

LEE: I came to live with my mom's sister and attend Wilmington College. And immediately after completing the two years of college, I went to work at the Corps of Engineers. But in the interim, I worked for Garver Manufacturing, do you remember that?

INTERVIEWER: Yes I do.

LEE: The neck-tie and shirt company? I got my taste of the real business world beginning there.

INTERVIEWER: It was on the 13th Street, wasn't it.

LEE: Yes, sure was. Worked during the day and went to school in the afternoon. I walked the 13th Street corridor about a million times in those two years, but then it was quite fine, didn't have any problems.

INTERVIEWER: It's interesting that the college brought you here, I think that's something I did not know and it's interesting to find out. At that time, was the curriculum two years, a junior college?

LEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

LEE: I majored in Business Administration.

INTERVIEWER: Was this before the college made its move to the new location?

LEE: Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: This is where the Isaac Bear Building was?

LEE: Yes, '53, '54 and '55.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, the college went out there in the early 60s I think

LEE: '59, something along there, but man, what a change. It's a different world. I've made the comment that Wilmington College was actually my foundation. Everyone needs a real foundation and beyond the home life and the next step, Wilmington College solidified that foundation so I could become me.

INTERVIEWER: All right, we'll get the personal stuff out of the way. That's still Carter Lee, where did the Lee come in?

LEE: In 1957, I met this handsome Navy man and married him. We have two children, Rhonda Lee Ottaway and Glenn Arthur Lee, and the younger is 33 now, so that was many years ago now. And also I have two grandchildren by this time.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

LEE: But...

INTERVIEWER: Well, you're getting to the young middle-aged group.

LEE: Yeah, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: Well now after you got out of school and you had your work experiences that you just told us about, how about picking up the trail then, tell us where you went and what you did.

LEE: Well, on graduating from Wilmington College, I went to the work at the Personnel Office at the Corps of Engineers. Back then a government job was "the" place to be for women because it paid women on a similar scale to men. Not on the same, but a similar scale, so I was really excited to have the opportunity to go to work there. But that lasted only about four months because I saw something much, much more interesting and much more challenging – Sunny Point Army Terminal which just being built, was being opened in October of that year, 1955 and so I applied for and was awarded a job in the Director of Operations office at Sunny Point Army

Terminal and man did I ever learn a lot there. That was an experience of a lifetime, learning the stowage on ships and the different kinds of cargoes that the military uses and the types of cargo that are sent back after having them stored in a foreign county for several years and we just have to work the ship's loading and unloading from that office.

INTERVIEWER: Well that's where you got your first experience then in shipping?

LEE: As being the Marine lady or the River lady they called me sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: The River lady? How long were you over there?

LEE: Five years.

INTERVIEWER: Then what happened?

LEE: I decided at the end of five years when my daughter was born, that the two hour plus commute was a little bit much because we were working at that point 10 hour days there because the military moves were so large that we needed the work time, so I decided to seek a job in the maritime industry in Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: How do you go about seeking a job in the maritime industry in Wilmington?

LEE: That's a good question, Sam.

INTERVIEWER: I'm listening for a good answer (laughter).

LEE: Well, working at Sunny Point, the local Wilmington stevedores came to the terminal because they were the contractors for the loading and unloading of the ships, so I got to know Peter Browne Ruffin and William Beane of Heidi and Company. Of course Peter Browne was Wilmington Shipping, everybody knows that.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

LEE: And decided to ask each of them if there was an opportunity for me. Mr. Ruffin at Wilmington Shipping didn't have anything at this particular time and Bill Beane said, "As a matter of fact, I need someone in the Customs Entry Department". And so, I started out as a Customs Entry clerk which is the equivalent to scrubbing floors (laughter), it's the bottom of the rung, but I worked hard there and continued until I received my customs license, customs brokers license.

INTERVIEWER: Let's go back just for a minute to Sunny Point. During the time that you were there, what was Sunny Point operations involved in? Did we have a war going on at that time or were we in a period of peace, how about in relation to the Korean War?

LEE: It was right after, I came there in '55 and early '56 and they were just closing some of the bases, so that's why we received so much of the material.

INTERVIEWER: Did it ever bother you working in what might be considered by many, as a dangerous occupation area?

LEE: Absolutely not. I guess I was a bit of a, you wouldn't call it an entrepreneur, I think you would call it an adventurer or adventuress because I enjoyed that type of work. I guess there was a little bit of danger, but it was fun. The terminal was so constructed that there was not imminent danger, so had there been another war...

INTERVIEWER: ... It could have been a target area?

LEE: Yes, it could have been a target area.

INTERVIEWER: Well, Wilmington was, in all probability, a target area for the Russians as far as the missile system was concerned. Let's come back up now when you went with Bill Bean, you were introduced into the Wilmington shipping business, the Wilmington waterfront, which had an illustrious history that goes way back.

LEE: Much further than my years.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, it goes way back into the 1700s.

LEE: Um hmm, but you know I think that the state ports as we know it today and the facility I ultimately ended up purchasing have had different kinds of life because one was the first shipyard and the other was a sugar terminal and before they became those particular entities...so that is really....

INTERVIEWER: Does it ever interest you to see any of the old pictures of the 1890s and 1900s and 1910s with the sailing ships in the Wilmington harbor?

LEE: Oh absolutely and one of the fun things to do is to look at the paper 100 years ago and 50 years ago and find the blurb or a bleep about what happened and what happened at the terminal that we owned at that time. It's really neat.

INTERVIEWER: All right, after you went with Bill Beane and his business, let's pick up the trail there.

LEE: Beginning with my being a customs entry clerk, I worked really hard, studied all of the terms and went through the required process of getting a customs brokers license and I soon became the head of the Customs Department for the shipping company which was then Almont Shipping Company.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

LEE: And at that time, that was a tremendous job.

INTERVIEWER: Where did the name Almont come from? Do you remember or do you know?

LEE: Well, the name was bought from, no, I forget the story. That's another story.

INTERVIEWER: Well anyway with Heidi and Company or Almont Shipping Company, how long were you there?

LEE: 35 years, but things went quite well because over the years, I learned everything there was to learn about the company, worked hard to learn the shipping business and I was very

aggressive, I guess you would call me, and joined several organizations of stevedores, not longshore, stevedores; stevedores are the persons who unload, who are responsible for the unloading of the ship, longshoremen do the actual work.

INTERVIEWER: That's the unionized group usually.

LEE: Yes, longshoremen are a unionized group. But I joined several organizations to form the networking that we needed here in Wilmington because there were not that many opportunities for a female in my business to network. So, over the years, I got to know most of the operators on the east coast and the west coast and my pet name there was Ms. Stevadorable because I was the only female in the yard.

INTERVIEWER: Did that ever bother you?

LEE: No. It didn't bother me.

INTERVIEWER: Did it ever handicap you?

LEE: Um, Sam, I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: Did some men not take you seriously in your position?

LEE: No, they all took me seriously because they knew that I headed a successful business and some of them envied me because we were so very successful.

INTERVIEWER: Well when did you get into a position of ownership in connection with that, how did that work?

LEE: In 1981, Bill Beane decided that he wanted to sell the company because his daughter was not interested in continuing the business. He talked with several prospective buyers and none of them would give him the "deal" that he felt that he needed or wanted. So, just on a whim, one day I said, "Bill, why don't you let me buy the company?" And he said, "What?" and I explained and I said we can do this, this, this and this because I have had Kenan Maready who was the accountant put together a scenario for me of what we could actually do, you know knowing what Bill Beane wanted out of the company. So, he said, "Well, I'll consider it." Well about three months later, he said, "Well, I've thought a lot about it" and he said "I think I'll sell it to you". So, I bought it.

INTERVIEWER: Was this is a single situation, or was a partnership involved?

LEE: It was profit sharing which was partnership, and all of the employees, but I had controlling interest because I was the only one that owned shares and that was the only way I would have gone into that.

INTERVIEWER: But the others had a stake in making a success out of it because of the profit sharing aspect?

LEE: Yes they did, they really did and they appreciated that strongly enough to really make it work and to work hard at being the best we could be.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, and that was about 1981 or so?

LEE: Yes, 1981.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, and how long did you stay with that situation until the next major change?

LEE: Well, the next major change from a business standpoint was in 1990 when I sold the company to a fella from Norfolk, Virginia and in retrospect, I don't think I would do that again because it was like parting with one of your children, but none of this addressed my involvement in the community and I guess that is probably the love of my life after the business.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, that's exactly what we're coming up with right now, but I wanted to get the continuity of that story there, until that was through....

LEE: I guess that's why I'm saying that my life is called the life of Cinderella because I started out with holes in my shoes and ended up with the golden slipper.

INTERVIEWER: Hm mm, yeah, yeah, you did. Along came the opportunities to participate in the community. What were some of them, the Chamber of Commerce, I remember as being a major one. What were you interested in the community and what did you do or what did you become involved in?

LEE: Well, I can't think of very many things I haven't been involved in so it's probably best for me to tell you what not. But the reason I became so involved, Sam, was because I felt the community had given me and the employees of Almont Shipping Company, because we changed the name way back in the late 60s, I thought that the community had given us the opportunity to survive and make a good living and so I felt that we, as a corporation and as individuals, should give back to the community because...

INTERVIEWER: An obligation of sorts?

LEE: Yeah, because, I guess I'm a giving, sharing person. I know that I am and it bothers me to take, but never to give. So one of my major associations was the Chamber of Commerce. I was the first female president of the Chamber. Of course, ours is the oldest Chamber in the country, is it not?

INTERVIEWER: I think so.

LEE: Something like that. I was the first female on the YMCA board. I was the first female to chair the Cape Fear United Way. I was the first female in so many different organizations and so many opportunities. Someone said, well are you doing it just so you can be the first, first, first? I said absolutely not. I'm doing it because I feel that I can do a good job and I want to be involved.

INTERVIEWER: So you went through a number of these in the community and are probably, well now there is an untold number because the telephone book lists two pages in single-spaced type. Back in those days, we had probably anywhere between 16, 18 and 20 major civic organizations of types which included YMCA, YWCA and right on down the line. Did you like the work in the community?

LEE: Yes, because that gave me the opportunity to get to know the real Wilmington, not just the business community and the real Wilmington is the people.

INTERVIEWER: That's right.

LEE: They are the lifeline. There is nothing.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any idea when you were working on all of this, did you have any interest in politics of any kind?

LEE: No. I never really....

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any inclination to run for public office?

LEE: None. (laughter). Several people have asked, some folks have tried to bribe, but no way. I'd rather be behind the scenes or serving in a position such as I served in in the Martin administration. That was rewarding and gratifying and I think I made a difference there. I guess that the political side of me just evolved.

INTERVIEWER: Then your connection actually began...did your connection begin with the state or the appointment to the secretary's position or had you had any previous connection with Raleigh and the state government.

LEE: Yes, I had been involved. As a matter of fact, Governor Hunt, his last administration, appointed me to the first health care board that the state organized when North Carolina went from traditional health care insurance to self-insured. I was on that board and that was, I guess, the beginning of my statewide, other than organizations such as ECCBI and those kinds of organizations which, for some reason, I have always been involved in. I don't even remember when I first became involved.

INTERVIEWER: How did you enjoy the appointment that you referred to in the Martin administration?

LEE: When Governor Martin appointed me as Secretary of Commerce back in 1991, early '91, I was apprehensive. I really, really didn't want to move to Raleigh. You know that was a requirement because it's a full-time job and I talked with Dr. Mike Queen about it. We prayed about it and I finally said, yes, I'm going to do that. So the first 6 months in Raleigh, I equate to being a small child and being placed in the middle of the Pentagon and somebody saying, now find your way out. I really had no direction and no instruction in this job. My request to the governor's administrative assistant was tell me what I'm supposed to "do".

INTERVIEWER: Yes, you need to know what the commission was.

LEE: Yes. Well the response was, "you already have a staff in place, you figure it out". So the first 6 months were rough because the prior secretary had left with leaving no notes, nothing. He just left. So the staff was not a good staff. And so we worked through it and at the end of the two years, I feel that I really made a difference, made some positive changes, downsized the department and I would have done more had I had one more year.

INTERVIEWER: What about other involvement in politics at a local level?

LEE: Oh my goodness. My two years as a Chairman of the Republican Party.

INTERVIEWER: That was a graduate school education, wasn't it?

LEE: Yes (laughter), I got my doctorate. I'm not interested in anymore of that. I suppose I should have known from work in church, various churches and from my work with state politics, that local politics is absolutely an impossible job. The harder you work to try to make things right or to do the right thing, you have more people pulling on you... two to three different sides. So when you finish, you feel like a rubber or a plastic doll.

INTERVIEWER: That's a good simile. I was thinking about a series of explosions, you go from one place to the other.

LEE: Well the only thing is in an explosion, you're totally destroyed and being a plastic person, you're just pulled back.

INTERVIEWER: I guess so. You're pretty well beaten. Let's go along a little now to more current times. After you left the position as Secretary of Commerce, then came back to Wilmington, you started a new business somewhere along the way, did you not?

LEE: Yes I did. I started a small business and hope to keep it small, the Lee Company. And we sell windows and doors, residential.

INTERVIEWER: How did you happen to choose that particular..?

LEE: Oh, that's a funny story (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: That's exactly what I want to hear, tell me.

LEE: Okay. But first I have to back up and tell you why I could have a boyfriend. My husband and I divorced in 1980 and I've been a single woman for all these years, this being 1995, it's 15 years. I met this gentleman six years ago now who is a distributor for a very well-known brand product and I was looking for something to do because after the sale of Almont, I was a consultant for 6 months and that didn't work because the new owners were not managing the company as frugally as I did and they were making some decisions I couldn't live with so I just opted out. I said, hey, I've had enough of this. So I was looking for something to do. I got nervous because I have to have something to do, some work, a goal. I'm a goal-oriented person. So this fella said well, we don't have a representative in Wilmington. Why don't you take on our commodity there? He said I'll bring you up here and teach you all there is to know and so he did and so I did and so we have the business.

INTERVIEWER: So you have the business?

LEE: So, it's a funny story (laughter).

INTERVIEWER: Yes it is. Let's think for just a minute about some of the other aspects of this conversation today. What have you learned or what viewpoints have you had or what significant events have you witnessed during this time in Wilmington that you think were important or that registered with you? Can you put your mind on that for a moment?

LEE: Sam, I think probably the first event that comes to mind is the growth and maturing of the state's Port Authority, air terminal and the entire waterfront because when I came to work here, the facilities as we know them now were in their infancy because the state's Port Authority was

only formed, I believe, in '47 even though the waterfront has a very, very long history of activity, I'm speaking now of the facilities as we know them, the deepening of the ports and the changing of the manner in which cargo was handled.

INTERVIEWER: You mean containerization for example?

LEE: Yes, from single piece discharge and shipping to box load or trailer load as we know it now. And the movement of bulk cargos is basically the same. It's not a great change except for the containerization there. Now they ship it in one ton sacks instead of in bulk. But that's the first change. But I suppose the major change is the changing of the face of New Hanover County and Wilmington from the perspective of business and society or social community. When I first came to Wilmington, I was told that I would never be a part of this community because I was an outsider. Well, that might have been then, but Wilmington has embraced now more of the outside world, let's say, than at that particular time so it has literally changed the community. Now it hasn't changed the heart of the community, the warmth of the community and the way people think in this area because we're different. We're very different in the western part of the state or the northeast.

INTERVIEWER: You're contrasting that with the exact opposite of the pre-World War II era on the way Wilmington was then (laughter).

LEE: (laughter) Right. You didn't belong, but I belong and I was not born here. Further along that particular line, the industry that has been brought to Wilmington or has grown up in the Wilmington and Hanover area greatly attributable to the Committee of 100 and I'm sure you that story somewhere on these tapes. We here in this area are fortunate enough to have the largest paper manufacturer close by, the largest fiberoptic terminal, the largest, several businesses and industries and those folks that live here and have never been involved in economic development just don't realize it because we grow up just seeing our own little lives and not taking a broad view of the community.

INTERVIEWER: And you have a broad view when you take the whole scope of industry from the Lower Cape Fear area?

LEE: Exactly, exactly, exactly. And the next part of that, the changing of the people, is the retirement community that has grown up in and around Wilmington. That means a tremendous boost to this area because they don't need schools unless they have their grandchildren come in to live with them and its growth in satellite businesses that wouldn't normally be here.

INTERVIEWER: It's also brought in capital to the to the community that you need, local capital.

LEE: That's true, that's true. And another, the industrial corridor, I must mention the movie industry because that has meant a tremendous boost in the arm to us. And most folks just don't see it that way. They see it as an intrusion into their daily lives because they can't go down Princess Street any time they want if they're filming a movie there, but the money it has brought to our area is tremendous. But those are the three major areas and the aging of our community is probably one of the greatest challenges that we face right now because we need more and more facilities and the business to support that community.

INTERVIEWER: What do you see in the future? Where are we going?

LEE: Positive. That's not a good answer, but Wilmington is primed if we handle the issues at hand today, the consolidation of Wilmington and the surrounding area, which is called New Hanover County, if we can handle that in a positive manner so that we all participate in the cost of required services, then I truly believe that Wilmington has nowhere to go but in a positive direction and that means growth in the retirement community as well as better schools, better roads and overall better facilities for all of us. From the standpoint of industrial development, Sam, the future holds, the future is positive because we have the Brunswick County area, the Pender and the Onslow County area that can easily be developed and we, Wilmington, will be the center for let's say the commercial center or the financial center, we will support those bedroom communities and I really feel good about Wilmington. But I do, I'm working, as you know and as you are, to be sure that this growth is directed in a positive manner.

INTERVIEWER: And we have many problems in that area to make that become possible and one of which is the political and practical problems and the problems of the size of New Hanover County in relation to just the total area involved to be able to work with which is becoming rapidly saturated.

LEE: Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: And we don't know where we're going there.

LEE: Well, we have to be very careful to balance the growth and the environment because without our environment, you know our positive clean air, our wooded areas, the community as it is, we wouldn't be so attractive to the outside world.

INTERVIEWER: We've come a long way from the city that was the largest city in North Carolina around 1910 surrounded by large agricultural area that included game preserves and wild areas and everything and now we have come in to be just a core of industry in Wilmington which gives us a means of supporting, it looks like a population that looks like its never ending with the amount of residential construction, apartment construction that's going on.

LEE: You can see more of that development too.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me now, we're beginning to wind up just a bit and we, I want to see some things that you are currently interested in. If I'm not mistaken, you have taken a position of responsibility with the Duke endowment and you may be enjoying that.

LEE: Well, yes, it's the K.B. Reynolds Foundation.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I'm sorry.

LEE: Yes, I'm on that Board of Advisors and I'm really excited.

INTERVIEWER: Well apparently I was confused. That's not connected with Duke in anyway?

LEE: No, no. I'm on the board of North Carolina hospitals. I have taken over the financial chairmanship there, North Carolina hospitals, which is quite a challenge, and I presently chair North Carolina- III.

INTERVIEWER: Well it's Reynolds that I'm mixing up with Duke.

LEE: (Laughter), The Dukes and the realtors wouldn't like that.

INTERVIEWER: Both of them easy to confuse.

LEE: That's very true. They're both very worthy causes and the Reynolds Foundation was initially established to help the poor and needy in only the rural communities. And that has been expanded, that goal has been expanded to help the communities who are in need...

INTERVIEWER: I see, I see.

LEE: And quite often that's a small hospital or it can be a project in a larger hospital or it can be hospice for example. We do quite a few grants to those kinds of entities.

INTERVIEWER: Which looks like it's a change in direction indicated by understanding the population's needs.

LEE: That's true, and I'm sure that you have already addressed the health care in today's environment.

INTERVIEWER: That's a large, at the present, unanswered question.

LEE: Oh, isn't it though?

INTERVIEWER: Well Estelle, I think we are going to have to wind up here now, but I want to thank you for sharing your thoughts and things that you have with us. You've had an interesting life so far and it looks like you're still going strong and my congratulations to you and I hope that it keeps on going that way and appreciate these thoughts. These tapes are supposed to end up in a North Carolina room in the New Hanover County Library somewhat as an oral history of sorts and I hope that what's been recorded on the tape on this beautiful afternoon we have here will be something that will be of use to people as the years go by and as we go on, so we'll wind up on that note. Thank you.

LEE: Thank you for giving me the opportunity.