

R O B E R T G. F O R T U N E, J R.

Interviewed October 12, 1979

By Dr. Bruce S. Greenawalt

S O U T H E R N H I G H L A N D S R E S E A R C H C E N T E R

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Robert G. Fortune, Jr., interviewed by Bruce S. Greenawalt, October 12, 1979, on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

Bruce S. Greenawalt: Mr. Fortune, no one appears on the scene all by themselves; we all have families, and they may mean more or less to us. I think a good place to start here might be just asking some questions about your family. Perhaps we could start with your grandparents' generation, both your paternal and maternal grandparents, and raise the question about who they were and where they were born and lived, and so forth, and maybe we can start there.

Robert G. Fortune, Jr.: My grandparents on my father's side, that's the Fortune family, lived up across the river from what is now Warren Wilson College. My grandfather was in the Civil War, and was sent with a troop of men over to what is now Spruce Pine, North Carolina.

That town wasn't in existence then, but that's where my grandmother lived. The people who were slackers from both the Federal and Confederate armies congregated in the mountains over there and were robbing the people and so the Confederate government sent my grandfather with about nineteen men, (he was classified as a Junior Second Lieutenant) over there to see if they couldn't do something to stop the robbing of the people. This was the only way these people could live, of course. In that way he met my grandmother, who was a Wiseman. All of the family. . . there were quite a few Wisemans, and there still are, over in the Spruce Pine, Avery County area. After the war was over; several years after the war was over my grandfather married my grandmother and brought her back to Buncombe County. They first lived in a little cabin up where North

Fortune: (Cont'd.) Fork Dam is, now, which is close to where my great-grandparents lived; in other words, my grandfather's parents.

Greenawalt: Do you remember your grandparents?

Fortune: I remember them, both, yes; my grandfather and my grandmother. I remember my grandmother very well. I don't remember my grandfather very well; he died rather early, when I was small.

Greenawalt: You're talking about your Grandfather Fortune?

Fortune: Fortune; always about the Fortune grandparents.

Greenawalt: What was his name, his first name?

Fortune: Benjamin Fletcher Fortune, and my grandmother was Adelaide Lucinda Wiseman. They are both buried in the Berea Church Cemetery yard up on Riceville Road. My great-grandparents. . . he was Fletcher Fortune, and my great-grandmother was Jane Fortune, and I think her name was Alexander before they were married, Jane Alexander. They are both buried in the Methodist Church off of. . . I'm sorry, I can't remember the name of the road now, but up close to Black Mountain, just up above the Highland Farms center; it's a Methodist Church there. . . Craigmont Road. . . I did think of it, finally. That's as far back as I can go, now, because I've been to my great-great-grandfather's grave with my father, but I haven't been able to remember where it is or find anybody else that can tell me. But my father knew, and we went there one time.

My father, as a young man, came to town and worked in Asheville just a little bit, and his name was Robert Greer Fortune. . . g-r-double-e-r, he always spelled it, although he was named after Dr. Greer, who was the president of the college at Due West, South Carolina. I don't remember

Fortune: (Cont'd.) the name, but that's where my grandfather hauled all of the things that he sold, like onions and potatoes, and things like that, and he sold them all to Dr. Greer, and he thought a lot of Dr. Greer, and therefore he named my father Greer; and he named him Robert because of Robert E. Lee, because he thought a lot of General Lee.

Greenawalt: I've lost something here.

Fortune: Now, wait a minute, I want to come back to my mother, that's what you want, isn't it?

Greenawalt: Yes.

Fortune: I'll come back to that in a minute. My father came to town as a young fellow and worked, and after he had worked around here for quite a little while. . . first, he delivered pianos for Falk's Music House, which was on what is now Broadway, then called North Main Street, and then finally he went to work in several of the stores where they sold dry goods and things like that, and he got very much interested in that. After he saved up some money he went down to Greensboro and found a partner and went into business in Greensboro. He and his partner ran a store there called "The Bee Hive." It was on Elm Street in Greensboro. That's the old time main street, not too far from the Southern Depot. Just across the street from that, a man who later would be my uncle, or would be my uncle when I was born, ran a candy store. My grandparents and my uncles on my mother's side were all candy makers. My mother came from New York State, from Port Jervis, New York, and her name was Nellie Boyst. If she had a middle name, I do not know.

Greenawalt: B-o-y-s-t?

Fortune: (Cont'd.) B-o-y-s-t. . . my uncle in Greensboro was Mr. Charles Boyst. He was the oldest member of my mother's family and she was next to the youngest. She had a younger brother. She came down. . . actually, Mr. Boyst, my uncle was in business in Sedalia, Missouri, where he met a lady and married her. She was originally from Greensboro and her name was Monroe. They came back to Greensboro, and that's how my uncle got there. My mother had come down to work in my uncle's candy store. He not only had a retail store, but he also sold candy wholesale and manufactured candy. So my father met my mother because that store was just across the street from his store. Also, my father was boarding at Mrs. Boyst's, my aunt's sister's home. She ran a big boarding house in Greensboro. She was never married, the one that ran the boarding house. Later on they were married. In other words, they were married in April, 1903. I was born in May, 1904, in Greensboro.

My father had become somewhat dissatisfied with the way things were going with his partner. My dad was a fellow that paid strict attention to business when business was at hand, and his partner was not too much that way, so I understand. I don't know. So I was born in May, 1904; May 7, 1904, in Greensboro, on the corner of Eugene and Washington Streets in a house that was there; it is now gone. Then my father decided to do something about this dissatisfaction with his partner, so he told the partner he would either buy him out or sell out to him, and the partner

Fortune: (Cont'd.) took him up on it and my Dad sold out to him and came back to Asheville before Christmas of 1904. So, of course, I was still a baby in arms and know nothing about ever having lived in Greensboro.

Greenawalt: You're almost a native of Asheville.

Fortune: I'm almost a native is right, and should be. I usually tell everybody the only reason why I was born in Greensboro was because my mother was down there at the time. We first lived in a rented house on Oak Street and then my Dad built the house on Spruce Street. The number of that house on Spruce Street was 23 Spruce. It was on the opposite side of the street and up closer to College Street than the house that Tom Wolfe lived in, for instance. It was right across the street from where Will Russell's dress shop is now. At that time there was a big boarding house just across the street from us operated by Mrs. C.H. Miller. Mr. Miller, her husband, is the man who started the Langren Hotel.

I never did know my Grandfather Boyst; he died before I was born, but when I was just one or two days old we started, my mother and I, going to Port Jervis, N.Y., every summer to see my grandmother. The last time I went was in 1916. That's the reason why I wasn't here for the 1916 flood. We came back from New York and got in Greensboro on the Sunday morning after the flood occurred here, having intended to come home in the next day or two from Greensboro after we went to see my uncles and aunts on both sides down there, but since they had the

Fortune: (Cont'd.) flood, we had to stay in Greensboro some two or three weeks, and finally had to go down to Spartanburg, South Carolina, and come home from there on the train. There were no roads of any consequence to ride on, and no automobiles, either.

Greenawalt: I suppose some of those bridges east, across the Swannanoa, had been wiped out by the flood?

Fortune: The railroads suffered severely, not only here, but on all of the mountains, a lot of their big fills were washed completely away. They had culverts in those fills, of course, that would carry two or three times the amount of water that they had ever known about going down that particular valley. But the flood was so severe, and the rain was so heavy that it washed a lot of debris down and stopped up a great many of those culverts. Pretty soon the water ran over the top of the fill and washed it away. I have pictures of men standing on the railroad track fifteen, twenty or thirty feet up in the air, where the ground had been washed out from under it.

The railroad all down in the Catawba area suffered severe damage. . . down around Mobile, Alabama, as well. That's a side issue from what we are talking about.

I knew my Grandmother Boyst real well, but I don't remember her name before she was married.

Greenawalt: After your grandfather died, she went back to Port Jervis?

Fortune: No; she lived in Port Jervis all the time. He died there. My Grandfather Boyst lived there all the time. He was a candy maker. He had been in the Northern army, too, and I understand contracted some

Fortune: (Cont'd.) trouble there, I don't know just what, but he never got over army days. . . . My mother had several sisters that lived in Port Jervis, and one in Schenectady, and two brothers that lived in Port Jervis, that I can remember.

Greenawalt: Let's return, just for a minute here. Your grandfather, Benjamin Fletcher Fortune, you said he was farming?

Fortune: Yes; he farmed.

Greenawalt: In the . . .

Fortune: He farmed in the Swannanoa River valley.

Greenawalt: What confused me was how he would be selling to President Greer in Due West, South Carolina? That's a long way . . .

Fortune: There was no other place but Asheville to sell it in. You see, Asheville was, even back in say, 1870, or around that date, was just a town of a few hundred people. Even in 1890 the official population was, in round figures, twelve thousand. Nothing happened much in Asheville until after the railroad came . . . to make Asheville much of a town, and so he hauled his produce to Due West, South Carolina, to sell it to Dr. Greer. The same family, by the way, that Greer, South Carolina is named for.

Greenawalt: What was he growing, do you know?

Fortune: I had a postal card, which I have now given to my cousin in Greensboro. He is Dr. Benjamin Fletcher Fortune, and was named after his grandfather. He has children and I don't, so I gave him all of the things that were handed down in my family from my grandmother to me. But this card said: "Be sure when you come to bring onions and potatoes."

Fortune: (Cont'd.) So other than that, I don't know what he raised. Of course, they raised practically everything they ate, in the line of corn and wheat and things like that. Even when my uncle farmed the farm and my grandfather was dead. . . my uncle had a farm next to my grandfather's farm and he farmed that for my grandmother, and I used to work on it in the summertime. My uncle raised wheat and corn, and we used to have it ground at the old Bee Tree Mill on Bee Tree Creek, just down below the Riceville Road. I think the old mill is gone now. He also . . . always kept quite a few purebred cows, mostly Jerseys, and he had quite a lot of milk and butter and poultry that he sold in Asheville, to a Mrs. Webb, who ran a hotel down near the Depot.

Greenawalt: That still seems like a long way to haul something to market, doesn't it?

Fortune: Yes.

Greenawalt: Farmers today, with pickup trucks, will complain if they have to drive for two hours, sometimes, along a smooth highway.

Fortune: And there weren't any paved roads, of course. Even when my Dad came to town, he'd work, back in the. . . I don't know just exactly when it was, but it would be some time along in the 1890's, he worked for Mr. Falk. He had a piano to deliver for Mr. Falk to Brevard one time. They had sold a piano to some woman in Brevard and they loaded it on a two-horse wagon, and my Dad set out for Brevard in the rain. The wagon mired up in the mud. I've heard my father tell this story a thousand times. He got out and walked from first one farmhouse

Fortune: (Cont'd.) and then another until he found a man that had a team of oxen, and he came over and pulled him out of the mud. He finally got to Brevard and then back again. It took him four days to make the trip over there and back in a two-horse wagon, delivering that piano.

Greenawalt: I hope the piano didn't get too much rain on it.

Fortune: I don't know about that.

Greenawalt: What did your father do when he came up from Greensboro?

Fortune: My uncle. . . my aunt, really, his sister, had started a millinery store in Asheville some years before my father went to Greensboro and went in business. She had a ladies' store where they sold millinery and ladies' underwear, and things like that. Not too much ready-to-wear or drygoods, or anything. Later on she met my uncle, who was Morris Meyers (M-e-y-e-r-s) and they were married. He was traveling. He traveled for wholesale concerns and sold some of this merchandise wholesale. My aunt had done right well in the business. Even before they were married she owned five houses in Asheville that she rented.

Greenawalt: Maybe she and Mrs. Wolfe were in competition, buying up property?

Fortune: I don't think there was much competition. What she did: She bought property and built houses on it, and most of the houses, by the way, she built, she bought the material from Mr. Westall, who was Mrs. Wolfe's brother, W.H. Westall. I have just lots and lots of receipts where she paid him back ten, fifteen and twenty dollars at a time, and every now and then a note from him saying that it would be

Fortune: (Cont'd.) perfectly all right if she couldn't pay the twenty dollars due such and such a time, to wait until some other time and pay him. She'd contacted him and said she didn't have quite enough money, or something. But all of these houses were down on the lower end of Haywood Street, Jefferson Drive area, Park Avenue, which was in the early days a nice neighborhood and had some real fine, big houses.

Greenawalt: When you were growing up on Spruce Street, and you were four years younger than Tom Wolfe, just down the street. . .

Fortune: . . . up the street. . .

Greenawalt: . . . did you see much of him?

Fortune: Very little of Tom. I remember seeing him go up and down the street. He was a big, tall, gangling young man when I was a sub-teen-ager, you might say, eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, and I can remember seeing him. But Tom didn't take any time with the kids on the street, as I remember. But his brother Fred, the brother that stuttered, did; he used to always stop and talk to us, tease us a little, or play with us, or something. He was a very nice guy; he's still living. He's the only one of the family still living. I went over to the house a time or two when he said he was going to be there, in the last few years, but every time he didn't get to make the trip.

The other day, when they had the open house, they did say Fred was going to be there, but he couldn't come because of his health. He is up in his eighties, I think. I also knew Mrs. Wheaton very well.

That's Tom's sister, she used to trade in my Dad's store, ran an account in the store. Her husband sold the National Cash Register.

Fortune: (Cont'd.) His place of business was on College Street between . . . now, it would be between Spruce Street and the Courthouse, along in there.

Greenawalt: Maybe you can describe where you went to school?

Fortune: Yes. I first started to school at the old Hillside Convent, which was on a hill where the "Pickle Barrel" is on Broadway. All of that property from Walnut Street down to Woodfin Street has been graded off. That would be the property between the "Pickle Barrel" and the Masonic Temple. Up near Walnut Street it was up, to my recollection, ten or fifteen feet above the street; maybe not quite that high, maybe ten feet would be the maximum.

Where the "Pickle Barrel" is there was a large, white house that had a well in the yard on the Walnut Street side, I can remember, and the Catholic sisters came there and opened a school. I started kindergarten there along about the time that I was just, maybe barely five years old, in the fall after May 7, when my fifth birthday would have been.

Greenawalt: Did your parents send you there because it was close?

Fortune: That's right. They let me walk. Of course, there were no automobiles on the street, or anything like that, and after I'd been there a time or two I went by myself most of the time. I can still say some of the French that I learned in kindergarten, not much, but. . . . I went there through the first, second and third grades, and then these Catholic sisters bought the old Oakland Heights Hotel out on Victoria Road; originally, I think, called Victoria Hotel at one time, and

Fortune: (Cont'd.) changed the name of the school to St. Genevieve's. Since that was quite a long way from home, I didn't go there any more, but mainly because there was another school in the Woodfin house, which later became part of the Y.M.C.A. property. Down on the corner of Woodfin and Broadway a man and his wife, a Mrs. Ford, had started a school they called the Asheville School for Girls. They didn't do too much good just having girls, so they started taking in boys. So I went there for the fourth and fifth grades. There were just four boys and six girls in my class.

Greenawalt: Tony Lord wasn't there at the time, was he?

Fortune: No. He could have been there, but he wasn't in my class. Bill Cocke, Fuller Brown, Frank Weaver and myself were the four boys. I can only remember two of the girls. One of them was Elizabeth Kent and the other was Pauline Biggs.

Then I went to Orange Street School to the Sixth Grade. The only Seventh Grade in Asheville was over on Montford Avenue in Montford Avenue School, so I went to the Montford Avenue School to the Seventh Grade. By the way, they didn't "bus" me there, either; I rode my bicycle over there when the weather was nice, and rode the street car when it wasn't.

Then I went back to the old Woodfin house for the Eighth Grade, which was the first year in high school back in the old days, because they had the eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh grades for high school. The twelfth grade was added later.

Fortune: (Cont'd.) They had demolished the old Asheville Female College building in 1914 and started a new school building there and the war came along and the contractor went broke; so we had no high school building. They took over the Ford school and built an addition on the back of it (the City did) and I went there to the eighth and ninth grades.

In 1919, in the Fall, what later became David Millard, but then was called Asheville High School, was completed, so I went my junior year and senior year over on Oak Street and graduated in 1921.

The next fall I went down to State.

Greenawalt: When you went to State, did you know what you wanted to study?

Fortune: Yes. My Dad was very positive about that. He said, "You can go to any school you want to, and take any course you want to, but I'm not paying for any foolishness." He was that kind of a man, and I knew what he said he meant; he always kept his word on things like that.

I got along fine. I was fairly good in mathematics in school, and so I took an electrical engineering course, and that's principally mathematics, particularly in the last two years, and I had no trouble in that. I graduated at State in 1925. Six hundred and some-odd freshmen started out and about a hundred and fifty-five of us graduated.

Greenawalt: Well, I've brought you to the verge of full-time employment. Where did you go then?

Fortune: When I studied electrical engineering at State, I was debating in my mind whether I was ever going to practice it or not, because

Fortune: (Cont'd.) my Dad had a department store in Asheville that was doing real well.

Greenawalt: What was the name of the store, again?

Fortune: Palais Royal, P-a-l-a-i-s R-o-y-a-l, commonly called Palay Royal, and of course it is a French name.

Greenawalt: Which was located?

Fortune: On five and seven Biltmore Avenue. When my Dad came back to Asheville from Greensboro, my uncle, Morris Meyers, that I told you about, had gone to college to study to be an attorney, and my aunt actually owned the store that they had. My Dad had the money that he had sold out the store in Greensboro. He bought out my aunt's store and enlarged it into a general ready-to-wear and drygoods, and so forth.

My aunt and uncle actually never did quit the business; they stayed in there with him, and eventually they bought the building next door, the three of them together; put the two buildings together and continued to run the store. Although my Dad was the owner of the store a great many people in Asheville thought it was my uncle. My Dad was a retiring sort of a person and my uncle was a true extrovert and was very gracious and did a lot of wonderful things for me. He and my aunt never had any children, but for all of the nieces and nephews they did a lot.

When I got out of college my Dad said, "You do what you want to, but I'd like for you to come back to go in the business." I debated it

Fortune: (Cont'd.) quite a little bit, and decided that I would go in the business. At the same time, William Hand Brown, Dr. William Hand Brown, who was head of electrical engineering at State College, wanted me to come back and take a teaching fellowship, and I still have the telegrams from him, plus a letter or two, trying to encourage me to do that, at State. He said if I would come down there and get my Master's that he would help me get a fellowship at M.I.T., where I could get my Doctorate.

I liked him a lot; he was a fine man, and very smart, and he and I got along real well together, but I decided not to do it.

Greenawalt: One thing: you may not have been associated with the electric company in those years when you were working with your father, but I know you must have been riding trolley cars through Asheville.

Fortune: Oh, yes.

Greenawalt: At least for a while, they were owned by one of the electric companies.

Fortune: Actually, of course, the electric company started out as a facility to furnish electricity for the trolley cars. Originally, you see, there were no incandescent lights, as we know them now; there were only arc lights. In fact, one of the fellows that I worked with in the power company in the beginning, Mr. Adolph Marquardt, had been with the power company since he was seventeen years old and his original job was going around in the few stores in Asheville that had arc lights in them, doing what they called trim arc lights. The carbons in those old arc lights had to be replaced, because the electricity burned them

Fortune: (Cont'd.) into dust, and they had to go around and pour that dust out of the bowl and wipe the bowl out and put in a new carbon. They called that trimming arc lights.

As soon as Edison invented the incandescent bulb and a few people got them, then many more people / ^{wanted} them and they called on the power company for more and more electricity, which they were not in a position to furnish, because power plants were built primarily (in Asheville) to operate street cars in other places: a cotton mill or a saw mill.

Over at Sylva, North Carolina, they started up an operation of a saw mill. The saw mill ran in the day time. Generators were a much earlier invention in the electrical industry than the electric lights, so somebody said, "Well we don't run the saw mill at night. We've got lots of saw dust and slabs here, we'll just burn those at night." So they put in a generator and lights in the mill houses.

Greenawalt: Do you recall why Asheville decided to abandon the trolleys in 1934?

Fortune: Well, economics was the reason. In the first place, the street cars ran down the middle of the street, and therefore the power company had to maintain the street in the middle of the street car tracks all the time, and for about eighteen inches on each side. This was a constant source of expense, because the old cross ties under the tracks would decay and make potholes in the street. The street cars were a hazard to the people that rode them, because when they stopped, if the fellow coming down the street on the right hand side didn't happen to stop his car and you stepped off the street car, you got hit by an

Fortune: (Cont'd.) automobile. Also, they congested traffic

down the middle of the street. At that day and time, of course, all of the things for buses were probably a good deal cheaper. It was cheaper to replace a bus than it was a street car. It was always, too, a constant thing to maintain trolleys on a street car line. The trolleys were made out of copper wire and the wheel that ran over it constantly would wear down that wire, and when it wore down sufficiently it would break. So that was the main reason why they were replaced.

Greenawalt: The reason I asked: I know that some towns, the trolley lines, or the transportation company, were bought by a company essentially owned by General Motors and some other vehicle manufacturers, and they would take over the company, sell the trolleys or abandon the trolleys and buy buses, and having done that would then sell the company and take the money to another town and repeat the process, thus get America on rubber wheels instead of tracks, that way.

Fortune: That was another thing about it; the buses rode a lot better than the street cars, really. There must have been a lot of maintenance on the tracks. Of course, another thing: the tracks were wearing out all the time on the curves, particularly in Asheville. They wore out everywhere, but the curves were severe.

Greenawalt: What led you back into the work you were trained for?

Fortune: What happened, of course, was that all of the banks, not all of them, but a great many of the banks in Asheville closed in, I think it was 1929, and since my Dad's store did a large credit business (in those days all the stores carried their own customers on credit) It was

