

C H A R L E S T E N N E N T

Interviewed by
Louis D. Silveri

August 5, 1975

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

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

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Charles G. Tennent, interviewed by Dr. Louis D. Silveri, August 5, 1975

Louis D. Silveri: What I want to know first is when you were born and where.

Charles G. Tennent: Well, I was born in 1894 on my grandfather's rather sizable farm about where the Asheville School Lake is today.

Silveri: Asheville School Lake. That's in West Asheville?

Tennent: Yes; that's in the West Asheville area.

Silveri: How far back can you trace your ancestors?

Tennent: I can trace my ancestors back to 1470.

Silveri: Fourteen-seventy? In this country?

Tennent: In Scotland.

Silveri: In Scotland.

Tennent: It was verified by a book that my sister, Mary Tennent, wrote on the early development of the Presbyterian church in America. Quite a wonderful publication. I have a copy there I'll show you. The Reverend William Tennent, the original Reverend William Tennent, immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1718. That's where the Tennents began in America. He established the Log College, which was a school for training early Presbyterian ministers. That school evolved into the College of New Jersey, and the College of New Jersey evolved into Princeton University. So we are very proud of that background.

Incidentally, the Reverend William Tennent, Sr., had four

Tennent: (Cont'd.) sons, and they were all Presbyterian preachers. I think William Tennent played a significant role in colonial history as a pioneer in evangelism and a pioneer in Christian education. The Reverend William Tennent, III, a direct descendant of William Tennent, Sr., moved to Charleston, probably to continue his crusading-type of preaching, but he married the heir to Parnassus plantation and settled down to be quite an acceptable man in Charleston. You know, you have to be there a long time before you can be accepted.

He built and served as pastor of the Independent Church in Charleston in 1772, and one of his grandsons, who was my grandfather, Charles Edward Tennent, moved to Asheville. He was a physician, a country doctor. He moved here in 1866, right after the Civil War. Strange to say, he was interested in trying to develop new types and strains of vegetables and farm products in his retirement.

He came here with eight children, and two more were born here. Dr. G.S. Tennent, one of the outstanding eye doctors of Asheville, was born out there on the same farm.

Incidentally, when they tore that thing down for a real estate development -- it was a great big rambling frame house that the families that owned it prior to the Tenments had added on as they needed new rooms. When they got down to the very last part of it, there was a log cabin. The whole thing had started building around a log cabin. So I might have been born in a log cabin.

Silveri: Very interesting. Did that Dr. Tennent own slaves? Do you know?

Tennent: Yes, we did have slaves which, of course, were freed by the Lincoln proclamation, and everything ended by the end of the Civil War. There are Tennents, colored people named Tennent, in a great many places. When I traveled around for Rotary, I first started looking up the Tennents. In Richmond I called one and made an appointment with him and he was a black man, but I was glad to meet him because I found out something about his background.

Silveri: Is this your grandfather we're talking about?

Tennent: My grandfather, Dr. Charles Edward Tennent, a doctor (country doctor) and farmer, and the father of ten children.

Silveri: Why did he come to Asheville?

Tennent: Because the Carpetbagger regime took over in Charleston after the war. That was a pretty poor place to raise their eight small children, five of them girls in their teens.

Silveri: Did he practice his profession full time?

Tennent: In Charleston he did, but when he moved up here he was just on call. He helped everybody that called on him, but he was largely interested in farming. He built two fish ponds and established apple orchards. He was just retired, just enjoying himself. What he lived on I don't know, because they lost practically everything like every other southern family when the Carpetbaggers moved in, but he had enough to do that with.

Silveri: What was the maiden name of his wife?

Tennent: His wife was Mary Julia Fripp.

Silveri: F-r-i-p-p?

Tennent: Incidentally, about the time Dr. Tennent came up here, an awful lot of Charleston people, people from Charleston and the lowlands, Georgia and thereabouts, also moved up to Western North Carolina. Some of them settled in Flat Rock and built those estates. They were all getting away from the untenable condition right after the war. The Carpetbaggers took over. That's what happens in every war; the conqueror has full say for a while.

One of the prominent Charlestonians who came here right after the . . . well, it was in 1820 when there was a Dr. J.E.F. Hardy. He was the first president of the Buncombe County Medical Society, this man who came up from South Carolina and made Western North Carolina his home.

Another man who came here was James Albert Tennent, a distant cousin of mine. He was a prominent architect and builder. He built some of the nicest houses in Asheville. He died in 1916. He built quite a lot. He built nearly everything on Chestnut Street and out on parts of Charlotte Street. He was just considered the outstanding architect and builder in Asheville. He came here from Charleston.

Nathaniel Norman Stevens, who is the grandfather of James Howell, prominent attorney here, moved here from Charleston.

People like that, and they settled all through this section, largely in the Inanda section and that area, and the Hominy Valley section. I think we owe a great deal to these Scotch-Irish people that moved in here right after the Civil War.

Silveri: You're speaking of the Tennent side. What about the other side? Your maternal side?

Tennent: My maternal side: my mother was Annie Lou Raby, a very beautiful woman from Lenoir, North Carolina. Her father was a captain in the Confederate Army, George Washington Raby. It goes on back. They were farmers, and they were very dependable people on that side.

Silveri: How do you spell the name?

Tennent: R-a-b-y.

Silveri: R-a-b-y. Was your father well educated?

Tennent: My father and all of his brothers and sisters didn't have enough money, and there weren't any educational facilities. He was not a highly educated man. Prior to that, the Tennents seemed to be professional men: doctors, lawyers, and mostly preachers. My father did whatever he could do. He was an expert painter; his brother was an expert carpenter. Whatever they did, they did well, but they didn't have the educational opportunities.

Asheville, back there when we moved here, was largely a health resort and known for its sanatoriums, places for the treatment of tubercular patients. That was at the turn of the century in 1900. See, in 1900, I was six years old. I was getting ready to go to school, go to Montford School up here, which had taken over on the site of the Venable Academy, Sam Venable Academy. He married a Tennent and he was my uncle by marriage. So I was going to school in 1900 at the turn of the century. Asheville was beginning to feel then the impact of a new era of business and industrial expansion. It was then beginning to be

Tennent: (Cont'd.) understood that to cure tuberculosis you didn't have to come to any particular kind of climate. It was your rest and the way you took care of yourself. You can get a cure for tuberculosis anywhere, if you follow a certain way of living.

I think the population was probably less than fifteen thousand in 1900. I know that in 1915 when the Rotary came to Asheville (the Rotary Club was founded in Asheville), I remember the town had grown to twenty-five thousand population, which shows, in that fifteen years, how fast we were growing.

I did a lot of research on that for a history that was published of the Rotary Club of Asheville in 1939-40, the Silver Anniversary. When I was president I helped write the history.

It's a fact that can be verified that in 1950 Asheville had sixteen manufacturing plants. They were beginning to change over from just a tourist place, and they had two hundred retail establishments. Of course, all of that is pretty small when you consider that there are about sixty retail establishments alone out here in the Asheville Mall right now.

I think, to understand the Asheville that we are talking about right now: Asheville in 1900 at the turn of the century, we've got to understand that in 1900, the turn of the century, no one anywhere had ever heard of a talking moving picture, or listened to a radio program, or seen a television show, or traveled in an airplane, or belonged to a service club, or witnessed a Boy Scout parade, or read about an atomic explosion, or heard about the United Nations. Now, that's the world we lived in; that's the world "Buzz" Tennent lived in when he started the first grade at Montford School.

Silveri: Can we get back a little bit and talk about your father and mother? Your father was one of eight children.

Tennent: My father was one of ten children.

Silveri: Ten children, and he was raised on a farm.

Tennent: He was born in Charleston. Dr. Gaillard Tennent was born out here, and one of his sisters, Laura Tennent.

Silveri: Where was your mother born? In Lenoir?

Tennent: My mother was born in Lenoir.

Silveri: How did your mother and father meet? When were they married? At what age?

Tennent: She was just a girl when she married him. She was about the prettiest thing in Caldwell County, and he found out about her. I don't know how in the world they met. I really just don't know; but he married her. He was quite a charming person, a great conversationalist. He was kind of the life of the party when they had these cornshuckings and parties; Ed Tennent just took the floor.

Silveri: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Tennent: There were six of us, two boys and four girls.

Silveri: Where are you? Are you the youngest or the oldest?

Tennent: No, I'm the fourth.

Silveri: You're the fourth. So when you were born your mother and father were still fairly young?

Tennent: Well, yes; reasonably young.

Silveri: How would you describe the connection between whether you were old enough to have your father tell you the vivid memories. . .

Silveri: (Cont'd.) . . . no, tell you the stories that his father told him about the Civil War?

Tennent: No.

Silveri: No; didn't come down.

Tennent: Would you like to know some of the early first things I remember in Asheville?

Silveri: Yes.

Tennent: The first automobile I remember in Asheville was a Buick buckboard. I saw it on Montford Avenue, which was a macadam road at that time, but about the widest, straightest road in Asheville. It could go down Montford Avenue very well, but most of the time had to be pushed back, and we small boys would help push it back in order to get a ride back down again.

I remember the first radio broadcast in Asheville. It was at the old Masonic Temple on Broadway, and it was largely static. The public was invited, and it was a broadcast originating in Richmond, Virginia. You heard an effort from someone to sing a few broken sentences, but it was the first radio broadcast in the city of Asheville.

I remember very plainly the first moving picture in Asheville. It was "The Great Train Robbery," staged in a tent up there at the head of Montford Avenue and Haywood Street. "The Great Train Robbery," and the tape broke every few minutes and it took a long time to repair it, but that was open to the public for a price.

I also remember the trolley cars, electrical cars. I remember as a boy in the well-known Montford gang, our principal activity on

Tennent: (Cont'd.) Hallowe'en night was to pull the trolley off the trolley wire and stall the car on Montford Avenue and grease the car tracks so it wouldn't run. I remember the trolley cars.

I remember the old Battery Park Hotel which sat up in the center of town on a high hill. The location of the old Battery Park Hotel was about where the seventh floor now is at the present hotel. That's how high it was. E.W. Grove conceived the idea of tearing it down and making a valuable business property, but he didn't anticipate that in 1975 the towns would move to the shopping centers; that they would just leave all towns dying at the core.

I remember the first paving, the asphalt paving, in Asheville. I think it was on Montford and Cumberland Avenue. I know we got tar stuck on our feet, not knowing the qualities of pitch. I remember when most of the streets in Asheville were either macadam or cobblestone. Most of Pack Square is still cobblestone underneath, and Clingman Avenue, going down to the Depot section, is still cobblestone with just layer after layer of asphalt on top. You can imagine what cobblestone worn slick by horses' hoofbeats would be. I remember when most of the prominent people in my boyhood days lived in the Montford Avenue-Cumberland section, and they went to church in horse-drawn buggies.

Silveri: You came into Montford School?

Tennent: I went to Montford School; yes.

Silveri: Elementary school?

Tennent: Elementary, seven grades. Then I went to the Asheville High School, which was located where a big vacant lot is now, just opposite the Christian Church. That's the old Asheville High School.

Silveri: Did you walk to Montford School?

Tennent: Yes; my wife went to Montford School, and then went to the Asheville High School. Mrs. Tennent is about eleven years younger than I am. I was a reporter on The Times when I first saw her. She was one of the prettiest little things I ever saw, walking by. I tried to smile at her, but I managed to get introduced to her. She's very pretty.

Silveri: This area around here must have been quite rural then, when you were going to Montford School.

Tennent: Yes. I can remember when you would go out Merrimon Avenue, you would get out to about where Coleman Avenue is; there wasn't much more out beyond there. There was a fenced ostrich farm on the corner of Merrimon Avenue and Coleman Avenue, quite a big area. They raised ostriches, because that was the time when women's hats and everything called for plumes. I can remember full well all the lace and embroidery that women wore back right after the turn of the century; the men with their straw hats.

I can remember how the people would gang around the barber shops. They called them the barber shop quartets, and they would sing "Sweet Adeline." We've come a long. . . and they wore stiff collars. As a very young man I wore stiff starched collars and bow ties.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) I can actually remember that Patton Avenue was muddy, unpaved. There was some stone on it, crushed stone, but it was so muddy that ever so often they had stepping stones across Patton Avenue where people going from one side to the other to shop would be able to get across the street.

Silveri: You still lived on a farm when you were growing up, then?

Tennent: No; I moved away from the farm when I was two years old. The Tennents sold the farm there. They bought some property up on Montford Avenue, and I guess they also bought for my father a lot adjoining theirs in the back on Blake Street. He built a house on Blake Street, and that's where I lived most of my teen-age life.

Silveri: Is that house still out there?

Tennent: It's still there. It has been changed and built on to. It's in a somewhat decadent area now, as the whole Montford Avenue is in a decadent area, but at one time I can recall that the prominent people lived 'way down on Park Avenue, which is completely decadent now. Then it seemed to be that Montford was "the" street, and parts of Charlotte Street.

Then E.W. Grove came here about the time I was a high school boy, and built Grove Park and Grove Park Inn, in 1913. Then the Kimberly Avenue development and all of that became "the" place to go. Then Beaver Lake became the place to live, and then they started out for Biltmore Forest, those who could. At this time Montford Hills was the place for the young and socially prominent.

Silveri: Yes, Montford Avenue is a wide street.

Tennent: A wide street, then; comparatively wide street. Governor Locke Craig lived on it, and other prominent people.

Would you want to know anything about . . . well, that wouldn't have any bearing on Asheville, my educational background?

Silveri: I wanted to know what you did when you graduated from high school.

Tennent: I was in the class of 1913 at the Asheville High School; graduated. I have always had some kind of facility for getting elected to something. I don't think I was actually a politician, but I was the class president in high school. I went to the University of North Carolina in 1914 and I was immediately elected the class president. I didn't do it; some of my friends just seemed to push me.

I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1918, with an A.B. degree. I left early in the spring, didn't stay for the rest of the term, but I had completed enough work to graduate. I entered the Fourth Officers Training Corps at Camp Jackson.

Silveri: I wanted to ask you what you majored in at Chapel Hill.

Tennent: I was strict A.B. English and Literature; wrote a prize-winning poem on Shakespeare's Anniversary; belonged to two or three literary fraternities; made the senior honor organization, the Golden Fleece; was also captain of the Varsity basketball team. Just an all-round college student that the city of Asheville seemed to be proud of, because they made reports of it every so often in the paper here.

Silveri: Let me ask you something: I have talked with other people from the mountains that went to Chapel Hill, and they said that there was discrimination at Chapel Hill against the mountain people, the mountain students. Did you find that?

Tennent: I suppose some of us seemed rather crude to some of the more polished people from Raleigh, Wilmington, Charlotte, Winston-Salem areas. I think maybe we were a little bit crude. We talked with a little mountain accent, but I don't think there was any great discrimination. I just think it's as it is today. the politicians of the eastern part of the state still dominate over the politicians from the west, and they are running things. That's the way it was done. You know the campus wanted politics, and the students from the eastern or central part of the state just ran things. I don't think there was any great discrimination. I know, if you had the stuff, you could make good like Thomas Wolfe. By the way, I was . . . Do you want to know that?

Silveri: Yes.

Tennent: I was given Tom Wolfe. . . there was a custom there in the University Y.M.C.A. to assign to some of the campus leaders or upper-classmen, ten freshmen to look after. Oh, we had to keep them from buying their radiators and buying their bulbs, and all that stuff. This happened; I didn't ask for it.

Tom Wolfe was one of my ten, and I really looked after him very carefully, as I did the other nine. As I was getting along as somebody on the campus, Who's Who on the campus, I got Tom Wolfe into nearly everything that I could get him into: Sigma Upsilon, the national

Tennent: (Cont'd.) literary fraternity, Sigma Upsilon. I got him on The Tarheel board. I was editor of The Tarheel, the college newspaper. So I managed somehow to get Tom Wolfe elected on the board because I recognized that he had talent.

Silveri: Was this when you were a senior?

Tennent: When I was a junior.

Silveri: . . . and senior?

Tennent: Junior and senior. Junior was when I did the best work for him; that's when I got him oriented, and Tom went on his own after that. He really had great capacities. While we are still on the subject of Tom Wolfe, I served as president of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Association here for several years, and I'm currently serving on this state-wide committee of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Advisory Committee. I'm vice-chairman of that committee now.

I knew Tom personally. As a matter of fact, I located the cabin that he did most of his later writing in up here at Swannanoa; got him in touch with the owner, who was a friend of mine. Mrs. Tennent and I helped him stage a couple of his notable parties there. I was of service to him, but I was probably the only person that Tom didn't mention in his book, and I take that as a great compliment.

Silveri: Did you know the family?

Tennent: Yes; I knew the family quite well. They were about as Tom Wolfe pictured them.

Silveri: Was the fact that you were from Asheville and Tom Wolfe was from Asheville that he was assigned to you at Chapel Hill?

Tennent: No, I don't think so; I think they just drew it out. I had some from all over the state.

Silveri: He was pretty tall.

Tennent: He was tall and ungainly, and very shy, and very courteous. As a freshman he was most polite and courteous, and just about as green as I was when I went to Chapel Hill.

Silveri: Did you see any change in him in the first two years?

Tennent: Yes; he began to get confidence. Getting recognition was a great thing for Tom. Getting elected to these societies and getting on the staff did a whole lot for Tom. He wrote me a letter once. I can't imagine where that letter got to; I have several saying he didn't know how he would ever be able to thank me for everything I had done for him. I wish I could find that letter.

Silveri: That would be great.

Tennent: It would be a valuable thing; it would be a wonderful thing to have.

Silveri: Do you ever remember him talking about his family?

Tennent: No, I never did talk to Tom about his family; I never did probe into his personal feelings. All I did was my duty as one of his counselors; get him oriented as fast as I could. We didn't have anything in particular in common. I had my own friends in Asheville, my own friends at Chapel Hill.

Silveri: What did Chapel Hill look like in those years?

Tennent: Very different than it is now. It's vastly overgrown and expanded, but it was just a very small country-like campus, and I

Tennent:(Cont'd.) liked it very much. I know one of my great battles there as editor of The Tarheel was I took the stand that since the students walked across the campus, cut paths across the campus, that's where you ought to put the walks; put the walks where people are going. I had great opposition, but finally won out, because I went back there later on one of the reunions and there the walks were, just where people walked.

Silveri: Can you name any one or more professors that made an impact on you?

Tennent: Dr. Eddie Greenlaw was one of the ones that I admired. He got me started off; English professor, I admired him greatly.

Silveri: Do you know of any others?

Tennent: Well, all of them were high class. Dr. Thornton was one of my favorites. I remember the. . . Dr. Frank Graham was an instructor there, a history instructor. I benefited greatly from him. He had graduated the year before I came to Chapel Hill.

Silveri: And he later became president of the University?

Tennent: Yes, and Senator, and, of course, he was not able to get back into the University.

Silveri: I wanted to ask you if you were there at the University when the war was waging in Europe. Do you remember? They must have had quite a few discussions on campus about that war?

Tennent: Oh, the excitement was high. The patriotism was intense. I know the day that the United States went into the war we tore down picket fences because we didn't have guns and things, and marched around

Tennent: (Cont'd.) getting ready, you know, up and down the streets of Chapel Hill and across the campus, and made bonfires.

Then the R.O.T.C. came there. I was an officer in the R.O.T.C.; that's how I happened to get an appointment to the Officer's Training School, which I had to go to in the spring of 1918 when it opened. Yes, we were very much interested in the war. Everybody wanted to go there; very few that. . . well, the campus was just drained of people.

Silveri: They volunteered?

Tennent: They just left school and went and joined the Army. Those who couldn't get in the Officers Training School. . . some of them just enlisted; went off in flocks of them, very patriotic.

Silveri: I wanted to ask you. Did you get home frequently when you were at Chapel Hill? Did you get back home to the mountains?

Tennent: I didn't get back very much. Once or twice I got back for Christmas; usually I stayed there. At the end of the junior year I stayed through the summer school, and that's how I happened to be able to get. . .

Silveri: . . . there quicker.

Tennent: To get there quicker because I knew pretty soon we were going into the war.

Silveri: When you did come home, you took the train, didn't you?

Tennent: Yes; that was the only way to get there, on the old train.

Silveri: It must have taken pretty much of the day to get home?

Tennent: Oh, yes; it would take quite a whole day to get home. I didn't have very much money. I worked my way through the university.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) I remember arriving one day with fifty-five cents in my pocket. It took fifty cents to come by taxi from Durham over to Chapel Hill. I gave a little colored boy, who was dancing, a nickel because a nickel wouldn't do me any good. It couldn't even buy a hot dog then. But I worked my way through. I waited on tables; I took up laundry, and everything you could do. I worked in the summer time back home here.

Silveri: Did you board with a family, or did you live in the dorms, or what?

Tennent: No; I lived in the Inn Annex the first year, then the regular rooms. No; I had a scholarship that Governor Locke Craig gave me which paid my tuition and my fees like that. So I was able to make it. I remember I kept a little red book of my expenses. At one time I got pretty low financially and I was living on ten cents a day. I nearly starved to death. My friends suspected something was wrong and they began taking me out to meals. Then I was able to recover from that.

Silveri: You mentioned Locke Craig gave you a scholarship.

Tennent: Yes; I was pretty well known. I played with Locke Craig's three boys and stayed in his yard about as much as I did in mine. He called me "Buzz" and I knew him quite well. I didn't think any more of Locke Craig as a governor than anybody else; he was just Locke Craig to me.

I know he tortured me unmercifully one time. I made a statue of a head out of mud and baked it. I don't know why I did it, but I told him that I dug it up; it was some ancient thing. He sure

Tennent: (Cont'd.) did needle me about it. He wanted to take it immediately up to the newspaper and get them to write a story about it. Well, I just saw I was going to get caught in a big lie. He just had me sweating. I thing it was a statue of Shakespeare dug up in Western North Carolina! Oh, he had me sweating blood!

Silveri: But you managed to get through okay at Chapel Hill?

Tennent: Yes; I wasn't a brilliant student at all. I was particularly good in English. I got an "A" on most of my essays; won a five-dollar gold piece for the best poem on Shakespeare in a campus-wide contest.

Silveri: Do you remember what your aspirations were for a career after you left Chapel Hill?

Tennent: I just didn't exactly know. I knew it was the thing to do to get an education, and all of my friends that I had grown up with here were going down to Chapel Hill. I was just like everybody else: it was the thing to do.

I think I spent a great deal more time on my campus activities. I remember the Glee Club, and all of that stuff, about as much as I did all of my studies. But it's a good thing; it's a broadening experience.

I went to my war service, if that's any interest to you. By having been in the R.O.T.C. at Chapel Hill I got assigned to Officers Training School, the Fourth, at Fort Oglethorpe. But my whole company was transferred right near the end of the school; transferred to Camp Hancock to take up machine gun study. I became a Second Lieutenant and a machine gun instructor. My job was to train recruits in the art of machine gunnery. I stayed there the rest of the war, training people

Tennent: (Cont'd.) how to operate a machine gun. Didn't get enough military service; so after I got out I came back and joined Troop F Cavalry of the National Guard, which was in Asheville. I went from Second Lieutenant up to Captain. For several years I was in the cavalry here, and we played a part in the community. We always led the parades, and me on my prancing horse, and all that kind of stuff.

Having never played very much in my teen-age, having to work hard, when I got back from the Army I put about a year in just playing. I organized the Asheville Cotillion Club, and dance club here that was rather a successful and well-known thing. We staged some of the biggest dances ever pulled in Asheville. I had the help of another fellow, named Dick Meehan. Together, we kind of split the financial risk on it; we never made anything, but we never lost anything.

We brought Light's Saxophone Orchestra here, one of the outstanding orchestras; W.C. Handy, the originator of the "Memphis Blues." Wasn't it? "Beale Street Blues" and all of that. We brought the biggest orchestras in the country here, just two kids, and managed to come out on it and collect enough money to pay them off.

Silveri: What facility would you use to have these?

Tennent: Battery Park Hotel and The Manor, whatever we could get; the Masonic Temple. . . It was kind of a big deal. We made a little money, but we never lost any.

Then along about 1922, I had gotten somewhat popular in Asheville. I was elected king, or selected king, of Asheville's First Community Festival. It was the forerunner of the Rhododendron Festival.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) The City spent so much money on it that it kind of killed the thing in about ten years. Finally, they reorganized it again as the Rhododendron Festival. It was called "Nahna Yona" then, an Indian name, mountain festival. Soon after I began to get oriented again after a year of playing, I joined Henry Sharp and sold real estate. That was in the little boom we had right after 1918. Then that kind of quieted down and I got a job as circulation manager for the Southern Review, a literary magazine for the South, which lived about three or four months. But I traveled all around trying to promote the Southern Review. I've got copies of it now.

Then I went to work as a cub reporter for The Asheville Times. I had to go to work. I found that a sheep's skin would pretty well take care of a sheep's back, but it wouldn't take care of my back without a little effort on my own; so I had to go to work.

Silveri: You weren't interested in teaching?

Tennent: I wasn't particularly interested in it. Later on I was offered. . . Yes; I was offered a job as head of the English Department in Asheville High School. Told the principal I would take it that night. Thought it over that night, and all of the fun I was having dancing with the girls I would have to teach, and I went back the next morning at eight o'clock and resigned.

My uncle tried desperately to get me in the banking business, and he got me a job with the old Battery Park Bank. I went in there and hung my hat up and looked around. They had all this framework there, lattice stuff, like a jail. It did something to me; I resigned at

Tennent: (Cont'd.) four o'clock in the afternoon. So I was a banker for a few hours; I was head of the English Department over night; I really didn't know what I wanted to do.

I think, down in my heart I always wanted to dig in the dirt, because I remember as a very small boy up on Blake Street I used to make little gardens and fish ponds and plant things.

Well, when I went to work for The Times, I seemed to get along with people. I had a special privilege of riding the fire trucks to the fires when The Times was just a few hundred feet from the Fire Department up on Pack Square. When the bell would sound, I would drop everything and run over and jump on the fire truck, which they allowed me to do. Whenever the Sheriff wanted to go raid a still back here in the mountains they let me go, which was a crazy thing to do, but I didn't seem to sense any fear. I accompanied them on a number of raids where they got stills.

I was on good terms with the Sheriff's Department, and being on good terms I got the biggest scoop, newspaper scoop, ever recorded in Asheville: I got the story of the sale of the entire village of Biltmore, which was owned by Biltmore Estate. I got the story of that sale to a man by the name of George Stephens, who was owner and publisher of The Asheville Citizen, the opposition paper. I got the break, the story, of the paper's owner buying the village of Biltmore.

While I was a reporter I went to acting City Editor of The Times. While I was still on The Times staff, I accepted a free ride in

Tennent: (Cont'd.) a bi-plane from Asheville out to Andrews. It was the first time any airplane had ever crossed the Cowee Mountains, and I went on the ride to write it up. It was a fool thing to do, but it didn't seem to me to be a silly thing at the time. I rather enjoyed it, flying over Mount Pisgah. That plane landed down in a big vacant lot by the schoolhouse in Andrews. A red rooster took off (I don't believe they ever found that rooster) squawking. I came back on the train, which was an all-day trip. I also got the story about the Beaver Lake, the development of Beaver Lake in the Lake View Development.

Silveri: Is Beaver Lake a man-made lake?

Tennent: Yes; that's where they used to take off in their little bi-planes. But I got that story.

Well, I resigned from The Times news staff to become editor of the Farmers' Federation News. I thought that would be an opening, and I thought maybe I could develop it into a regional thing, but it just stayed Farmers' Federation, so I resigned at the end of the year and went into the real estate business.

The boom was on then in a big way, and I joined the William Coleman Company. I thought I was getting rich. I just made some fabulous sales, but in the end I ended up broke like everybody else that messed with it.

Silveri: Let's go back a while. I wanted to ask you when you . . .

[END OF SIDE I, TAPE I]

[SIDE II, TAPE I]

Silveri: (Cont'd.) What year was it that you got your job on The Asheville Times newspaper?

Tennent: It was about 1920 that I joined the staff.

Silveri: Who owned the newspaper then?

Tennent: It was owned by three Asheville men: D. Hiden Ramsey, Gray Gorham, and Pat Burdette. They were operating it on a shoestring. They only had four reporters, including the managing editor, and we gave The Citizen, which was the established paper, we just gave them fits. We just played rings around them, and it was all because we had the confidence of the people in key positions: like my relationship with the Sheriff's Department. I'd just get the breaks; they would hold stories for me!

Silveri: This was a morning newspaper?

Tennent: This was an afternoon newspaper.

Silveri: Oh; it was afternoon.

Tennent: We were just giving the morning newspaper, The Citizen, fits, and finally they bought it; bought The Times and consolidated it. I know I might have stayed on in the newspaper work, but for one or two incidents. I went down to the Court House. One of my friends down there said, "There's an interesting law suit there. (That's how I got these tips. My friends would tip me off.) They stuck it back behind in a pigeon hole so it wouldn't be seen."

I went and dug it out, and it was a law suit against the old Central Bank and Trust Company for ten thousand dollars, for some

Tennent: (Cont'd.) kind of something, which was a sizeable sum back in those days. I wrote a story about it. The president of the bank sent word for me to come over and see him. I thought he was going to give me another a story, a follow-up.

"Don't you ever put a story in your paper concerning this bank without consulting me!"

I said, "I'm on the payroll of The Asheville Times. I don't work for you; I work for the paper."

"Nevertheless, you go back and tell them what I told you!"

I did, and they kind of scratched their heads and said, "Well, we do owe that old man about eighty thousand dollars, and it's due in three months, so don't write anything unless you show it to us."

I realized then that I wasn't a free man.

Silveri: You mentioned three owners of the paper at that time. One of them was D. Hiden Ramsey. Was he a local boy?

Tennent: Yes; Hiden Ramsey was born and raised here. He was a brilliant young man; made quite a record at the University of Virginia. He was a City Commissioner here for quite a while. Oh, he was just the big shot in town for quite a while.

Silveri: What was his profession? Was he a lawyer?

Tennent: No; he was just a highly educated man. He got into politics, and he organized the young people of Asheville in support of Woodrow Wilson. He became manager of The Citizen after they bought it; business manager and general manager and editor. He was quite an editor. He was quite a man. He was considered one of the most brilliant men that's ever

Tennent: (Cont'd.) been produced by Asheville. The other was Curtis Bynum.

Silveri: You mentioned politics. What was your politics in those years?

Tennent: Well, I have always had an open mind on this, and nearly everything. I thank God for that, but I am registered as a Democrat. I have voted more frequently Democrat, but I have voted Republican when it seemed to me that was the best thing to do. I even voted for Norman Thomas once on the Socialist ticket. I vote for what seems to be the best man at the time, the best thing at the time. I don't think people ought to be hog-bound with any tradition.

Silveri: Your work with the paper lasted until what year?

Tennent: Well, it was about 1925; that's when I began to edit the Farmers' Federation News.

Silveri: What was your salary when you were a reporter?

Tennent: Well, I was a top paid man. I wouldn't want to say, but it was around two hundred dollars that I made, with my correspondence. Reporters, to survive, had to represent The Greensboro News, or other papers.

Silveri: Oh; I see.

Tennent: You had to depend on your service to other papers, what you could get out of it that way.

Silveri: Also for your own paper. Did you get paid by the line?

Tennent: No; got paid by the week, so much a week. You'd start off

Tennent: (Cont'd.) as a cub reporter at about twenty-five dollars a week, and if you got up to thirty-five you were making just about what an average good reporter would be making in 1920. If you got up to around forty or fifty dollars you were making awfully good money, awfully good money in 1924!

Silveri: You got married by this time. Right?

Tennent: I got married in 1923 while I was a reporter.

Silveri: How did you find this other job with the Farmers' Federation?

Tennent: They sought me. I was building quite a reputation then as a newsman. I had some stories with by-lines under them; was just doing all right, and I was contacted and offered this attractive job. Attractive relative to how much I was getting then, and I took it, but at the end of the year I realized it could only be a trade bulletin. In some sense, could never be anything more than just a house organ.

The real estate boom was just beginning to pop on all sides, and it didn't take very much persuasion for me to just resign and get right into real estate business.

Silveri: You did that. In what year did you get into real estate?

Tennent: It must have been 1925, and I followed at that until things just suddenly died. I had acquired a farm up near the foot of Pisgah, and I moved out there for a while. There were times when I really was not very much employed at anything, using what little I had saved up during the boom, and looking for it to start up again.

Everybody said, "It's going to start up again! It's just temporary, just temporary!" But it was dead as a doornail.

Silveri: You mentioned this farm. Was that out in Hominy Valley?

Tennent: Hominy Valley, out near the foot of Pisgah.

Silveri: Out where the Pisgah View Ranch is? In that area?

Tennent: No; it was in the Glady Fork Section. After you go up Beaverdam and over down again to South Hominy. It was right in there on a beautiful farm of about forty acres. I had a nursery there at one time, but it was impractical to go so far.

Silveri: The crash came and the real estate boom burst here?

Tennent: Yes; it just went flat, and everybody waited and spent what they didn't have, thinking it was coming back, and it never did come. I finally went back into the landscape business, and for some strange reason, I had work when nobody else could get it.

Silveri: You said you "went back into?"

Tennent: Yes; I had been doing it on the side even as a reporter. While I was a reporter I landscaped the Buncombe County Courthouse, a thirty-thousand-dollar job. Of course, I didn't get thirty thousand dollars. I sold them a sizable plant order that I made a commission on. They did it with convict labor, but it was equivalent to about a thirty-thousand-dollar job. I planned . . . drew them a plan for it, and planted it and supervised it. I was still doing newspaper work.

Silveri: You didn't have a nursery at that time, did you?

Tennent: No; I developed a nursery when I found it was quite difficult to buy from the local nurserymen as they weren't very friendly. They didn't want you to go into business here. So I thought if they had sense enough to grow plants, maybe I could. It wasn't until a few years that they were buying plants from me, and I let them have them very gladly.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) That's the only way to run a business: to live and let live, and to cooperate. You've got to look on your competitor as a friendly competitor, not an enemy.

Silveri: When did you go into that work full time?

Tennent: It must have been around 1928, because I know when the banks failed in 1929 I was doing a sizable job out in Biltmore Forest. I know at one time, in Biltmore Forest along in the thirties, after the Curran job, I had seven houses, big jobs going, and nobody else had any jobs of any concern, I just had them all. I simply seemed to dominate the field here.

The Curran job really put me on my feet. That was an eleven-months' or more job, with about twelve men, right in 1933, right in the depth of the depression, and involved a lot of plants.

Silveri: That's the Curran that Henry Gaines talks about.

Tennent: Yes; it was. A man named John P. Curran came here and bought the old Connelly place, which was decadent, and renovated it. Henry Gaines was the architect; Lawrence Merchant the builder-contractor, and "Buzz" Tennent the landscape architect. The three of us made good and survived when nearly all of the rest of them just nearly perished during that critical year.

Silveri: How did Mr. Curran make his fortune?

Tennent: He got up a little concoction, a hair lotion called Jo-Cur Hair Lotion, based on quince seed pulp. He was the first man to put a hair lotion on the market at popular prices. It used to cost you a

Tennent: (Cont'd.) whole lot of money, two or three dollars, back in those days to get a bottle. He put it on for twenty-five and fifty cents, and he made. . . he came here with about three million dollars, mostly in securities and government bonds. He bought that place and spent lavishly on it. Finally he went away dead broke. Went dead broke just doing foolish investments. He bought the building that Ivey's is in now, and had it so that the rent would pay off the indebtedness on it, then he took the rent and gambled on horse-racing.

Silveri: But you got your pay for the landscaping?

Tennent: Oh, yes; yes. He paid promptly, and every week paid cash. You could get labor for about twenty cents an hour then. Seven or eight dollars a day was a fabulous fee for a man to make for his professional service like that.

Silveri: Of course, the big Depression began in '29, and you mentioned this job in '33.

Tennent: That was the Curran job.

Silveri: Between '29 and '33, how was it for you?

Tennent: Well, I had work, strange to say. I had one or two places that people still had money: Mrs. S. Westray Battle, I maintained that place for twenty-five years; Mrs. Don Elias, and people like that. I had my gardeners there keeping things going. I seemed to just be able to get work when nobody else could. I wasn't getting along enough to get excited about, but surviving.

Silveri: I suppose you took care of the grounds of people. . . you maintained grounds as well . . .

Tennent: Yes; we did that. We operated as the Tennent Gardeners for a while before we had the nursery. I had forty-six men working at one time, scattered around on various jobs. Quite an achievement. Well, I think we were recognized as about probably the largest landscape organization in Western North Carolina. I know we were. For some reason or other, we had put out thousands of Norway Spruce seedlings. Along in the late '30's and '40's we seemed to have a corner on the live Christmas tree business here. . . the only people that had it! I didn't exactly plan it that way, just happened.

Silveri: Where was the land? Where was your nursery?

Tennent: About three miles from here, right across in the Bingham Heights area. I still own thirty acres over there. We still have the nursery; we still have a lot of beautiful specimen plants. We still have a lot of salable plants, but I'm trying my best to graciously and gracefully go out of business.

Silveri: Are you going to sell out, or just stop?

Tennent: Well, the land is so valuable you couldn't afford to use it for farming, and at my age I simply. . . well, it would be foolish for me to put that propagating house full of azaleas up there knowing that they wouldn't come into salable range for seven years, and me in my eighty-second year. It's silly to waste all that time rooting cuttings; somebody else will have to do that.

Silveri: Do you think there's somebody around who would like to purchase it as a nursery?

Tennent: No; I don't think so. The whole picture is changing in the landscape business. It's being a packaged, canned, sort of an operation. The drug stores, the corner grocery stores, the trading centers are all handing it out in cans, bundles and packages. Field-grown plants, with the price of labor, are just about out of the question now. Yet they have the best chance to grow, field-grown plants.

Silveri: Let's get back to the early years of the depression. Do you remember 1932, when the presidential campaign was on between Hoover and Roosevelt? Who did you vote for in 1932?

Tennent: I voted for Roosevelt; I voted for Roosevelt straight on through. Most of the country did, it turned out.

Silveri: Yes; were those years bad in Asheville? Were there bread lines? Did you see a lot of. . .

Tennent: Well, they were pretty tough on a lot of people. I don't recall any particular breadlines. I recall considerable activity of the units like the Salvation Army and things like that. But Asheville didn't suffer quite as much as some of the other communities.

Silveri: You mentioned your business found enough work to keep you going. Then this continued through the '30's. All through the '30's you remained as a landscape architect with your own firm?

Tennent: Yes; we called it the Tennent Gardeners. We worked, more or less, for people, anywhere from a few to forty or more. We maintained places. Whenever anybody had the money to build a house, we did the job from the grading on up to the finish planting. We seemed to get

Tennent: (Cont'd.) along pretty well.

Anyhow, by 1935 my standing in the community was such that I was invited to join the Rotary Club as the best representative of the profession. I became President in 1939 and '40, the Silver Anniversary here. I became District Governor for all of South Carolina and Western North Carolina in 1943-44. Seemed to go up the ladder right fast in Rotary. I served on many international committees as chairman or member. In 1948-49 I served as First Vice President of Rotary, and continued to serve as Chairman (twice chairman) of the Rotary International Finance Committee, this world-wide organization. I'm no particular expert on finances, but nevertheless I was Chairman of the R.I. Finance Committee twice, ten years apart.

Then I became President in 1957-58. I traveled widely and largely over Europe, Africa, South America, Central America and North America, trying to go to places where the president had never been before. That's how I happened to get into the Congo and back into the Great Lake section of the African continent.

I was decorated by the governments of Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Brazil; made Honorary Mayor of fifteen or more cities. I'm still an Honorary Citizen of Texas and Florida; every kind of a Colonel you can think of: Flying Delta Colonel, Kentucky Colonel, and an Arkansas Traveler Colonel, and all of those various things.

Actually, I was made the Honorary Landscape Architect of the Beach at Ybor City, and it doesn't have a beach. I looked up later. It isn't even on the ocean! It was a great thing.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) You see that elephant's tusk there. That was given to us in Abidjan, Ivory Coast as a gift. We received gifts like that. That carving up there is a famous Ecuador carving. These photographs you see around, and all of these trinkets over the mantelpiece are all gifts. We just had everything you can think of; all kinds of things that mean a lot to us.

Silveri: That elephant's tusk would be valuable.

Tennent: Yes; that's an item. I don't know what to do with it; I think maybe there are a lot of things like that I'll give to the North Carolina Museum when I realize that the time comes to begin thinking what to do with these things. I think it might be best off there. It's going to be a curiosity some day to get something like that.

Silveri: Let's go back to the '30's again. You mentioned your association with the Rotary in 1935. Were there any other organizations or groups that you belonged to?

Tennent: You know, I was invited and encouraged to join a number of things, but I've never been a joiner. Strange to say, the Presbyterian church, of which I served as an officer for a while, and Rotary, are about the only things that I allowed myself to become involved in. I just simply am not a joiner. I just simply do not go out looking for statistics to worry about.

I got listed in Who's Who in America for a number of years until they assumed by looking at the year of my birth that I was an old man, retired. They didn't know I was still active in business, but I will be in the new Anniversary Edition that they are putting out soon.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) I will be included in that again.

Silveri: But you certainly were identified as a native son of the city, and you were talking about the mid-thirties. You had a wide acquaintance.

Tennent: Yes; I had a wide acquaintance. By the time I got along up in Rotary I had a nation-wide acquaintance, a world-wide acquaintance. Our correspondence is tremendous.

Then I wrote a little. See that bulletin. Pick that up: that little green thing. I wrote a little pamphlet on the Little Lessons in Rotary merely to be helpful, and that thing has now gone into over a hundred and twenty different countries and regions. It's gratis. That has been a rather expensive thing; it's not for sale. (The Rotary Club of Asheville financed reprints.) It's been quoted in numerous publications, magazines, books, seven different languages, and that has increased my acquaintance around the world. I want to give you that copy. It's one of the most quoted little booklets in Rotary. That's made friends, and it hasn't hurt Asheville. Now, that's just one example, that, and the mention in magazines and publications. I figured that conservatively, I have caused the name of Asheville, North Carolina to be mentioned in books, publications, magazines, bulletins, news stories, and things like that, over one million times. I think maybe I'm a good Chamber of Commerce individual.

Silveri: You were in Asheville. Do you remember Jesse James Bailey?

Tennent: Yes; I remember Jesse James Bailey. I also remember nearly all of the sheriffs in Asheville: Lyerly and Lyda and everything. Why

Tennent: (Cont'd.) do you ask about Jesse?

Silveri: I've had quite extensive interviews with Jesse James Bailey. I'm familiar with the years he was Sheriff of Buncombe County: '28, '29, '30.

Tennent: Yes; I remember him.

Silveri: He had quite a reputation of busting stills.

Tennent: Yes; I remember him quite well. I remember all of them.

Silveri: How about going back to that disastrous situation in Asheville at the beginning of the Depression when there was quite a scandal in the banks? Gallatin Roberts, the Mayor of Asheville . . .

Tennent: I was a personal friend of Mayor Roberts; personal friend of John Cathey; knew them all. Roberts went out; he worried himself half to death. He went out, of course, and shot himself. John Cathey moved away to Washington. It was a terrible thing. . . suicides. People lost things that meant more to them than money. That's why they did these things. Their good standing meant more to them than money; it just meant everything to them. That motivated the action they took.

Yes; I remember it; it was a terrible thing. I remember I had a little money in two of the banks. I got about fifteen dollars back on a hundred from one of them, and nothing back on the other.

But I remember the runs on the bank; great lines of people. The old American National Bank, they turned the corner down Church Street, just long lines of them going in to get their money out. I remember a big, seven-foot man, a lumberman and surveyor, shoved some of them aside and said, "It's not the time to take your money out, it's the time to

Tennent: (Cont'd.) "put it in!"

He made a seven hundred dollar deposit and the bank failed the next day! That was a dramatic thing; I saw that happen. He was shoving them aside, "Not the time to get your money out; it's time to put it in!" Bank closed the next day.

Silveri: How about the latter years of the '30's? Were you still doing fairly well in your business towards the '40's?

Tennent: Yes; I was doing fairly well. Things were beginning to smooth out just a little bit, and I was doing some of those jobs out in Biltmore Forest and around. I was getting along; I wasn't making any money, but I was doing better than anybody else. Really, you don't ever make any money in the landscape business. That's not the kind of business to be in to make money. You have to make it in something else, but you can make a good living. It's something that you are impelled to do; you just can't help but do it if you like it.

I think people ought to do what they want to do. Nothing in the world is more pitiful than a son who is forced to follow in the footsteps of his Daddy. "Daddy's a lawyer; you got to be a lawyer." I had that problem all of my life. Every male born in the Tennent family in recent generations has had that thing to face: "Oh, your forebears were all Presbyterian preachers. You got to be a Presbyterian preacher!"

You don't got to be! I'm as far from a preacher as you could possibly be: a digger in the dirt!

Silveri: But you are a Presbyterian?

Tennent: I am a Presbyterian; yes.

Silveri: You retained that identification? You are a member of the Presbyterian Church in Asheville?

Tennent: Yes; I've been a member here as long as I can remember. I served seven years as a deacon.

Silveri: Which one was that?

Tennent: First Presbyterian Church up here. I originally went to the Oak Forest Presbyterian Church, which is out near the old Tennent farm. My father and uncles made the brick, helped make the brick, to build that Sand Hill Presbyterian Church. All of this thing is so tied in that people and places and happenings. . . you can hardly separate them. There are Tennent men making bricks for a church that has an influence on people that . . . it's just all so intricate and tied in; you can't separate it.

Silveri: Maybe this is a good time for me to ask you about the mountain people. Do you consider yourself a mountain man?

Tennent: I think the Tennents, the Stephens, and other people that came here could hardly be called mountain people. They were a few generations ahead in exposure to some of the niceties of life. I think what you must call the mountain people are the people who came here much earlier, and were the pioneers, the bearhunters and the timbercutters, the people who came here for various purposes like further west in the state. They were released from the prisons that were over-crowded on the condition that they go to the frontier, which was places like Graham County. I don't think people like the Tennents could hardly be called mountain people . . . they moved in.

Silveri: What about your observations about the culture and the heritage of the mountains in Southern Appalachia?

Tennent: Oh, very much Elizabethan. They say "hit" and "haint" and things that were very good English back in those days. The songs that they sang; the little ballads that they used to sing were nothing in the world more than Old English ballads.

It's a fine strain of people in general that came here into this mountain area. A fine strain of people they were, early pioneers trying to get away from things, trying to be free. I think the desire to be free, completely free, is what built America. They built America, propelled the great march to the West, inspired it, the search for freedom.

Silveri: Do you enjoy listening to mountain music?

Tennent: No; I think mountain music, most of it, is going too far. I appreciate real music better. I'm not a mountain music fan. I never did think the corn shuckings (I attended many of them), somebody picking on a banjo and fiddling and playing "Sourwood Mountain" . . . there is so much repetition in it and recurrence of rhythmic beats. . . I'm not an enthusiast. I like classical music. I like popular music. I like some of the songs of the '20's and '30's much better; semi-classical music.

Silveri: What were you doing? Were you still in your business when the Second World War broke out? Pearl Harbor.

Tennent: I remember. . . yes, I was still in the business. I was out at the airport showing my children. . . letting them watch the planes

Tennent: (Cont'd.) take off. They halted the plane. Over some kind of a radio program there they announced the attack on Pearl Harbor. December 7, that was it, wasn't it? Yes; it had a stunning effect on Asheville for a few weeks, then people began to get back into some kind of a routine, a rhythmic routine.

There's something fine about Asheville. It has never given up; it has never completely gone under, in spite of its great financial debts, burdensome debts, and almost insurmountable obstacles. The people of Asheville have a wonderful, wonderful courage, and a wonderful reality. Asheville will never die. It will outgrow, one of these days, its problems.

Silveri: Well, I did want to ask you about. . . You said you voted for Roosevelt all the way through. On reflection, what do you think he did for the country, or didn't do for the country?

Tennent: It's very hard to criticize Roosevelt. Some of the things he did were spectacularly theatrical, in a way, but no one ever knows or ever will know how close this country was or may have come to revolution when people were hungry. You let a man go without meals for three days, you've got a revolutionary problem on your hands. It's only three days from a well-fed man transferred to a hungry man that you have revolution. No one knows how much the W.P.A. (we make fun of it) . . . how much that thing was needed. No one will ever know how these moves that the president made were needed. I think that's fair. I think a lot of his. . . I think he opened up the whole order of things to Socialistic influence, but maybe it was the only way out.

Silveri: Did you have any children at the Second World War?

Tennent: We were married on April 5, 1923. Our daughter, Mary Gaillard was born June 27, 1924; our eldest son, Charles Mercer, was born March 18, 1926; W. Gilbert was born March 25, 1933, and David L. was born March 10, 1939. They've all been very successful in their businesses. I'm proud of all of them. They've done better than their Daddy ever did. Two of them are essential elements in the community. One of them is a district manager of Mize Corporation. The other is a key man out here at Square D.

Silveri: Do you have any notes on the years before the Second World War?

Tennent: Let's see if I have anything. You're interested in the period before the Second World War? This is largely the Tennent family: I served two years as Trustee of the old Asheville-Biltmore College. That was along about that era. I served fourteen years as a member of the City School Board, and was its Chairman the last three years. I told you before I was serving as Vice-Chairman of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Advisory.

While I was Chairman of the City School Board I did a service that I'm very proud of: When the 1955 Supreme Court verdict came out relative to segregation, the Asheville School Board, under my insistence, was the only school board in America that had guts enough to make a statement as to its reaction to the Supreme Court decision. What we said was, in essence, "We will obey the law!"

What else could you say? Then we made a plea to both white and black that we were going into a field new to all of us for tolerance

Tennent: (Cont'd.) and understanding, sympathetic understanding, as felt our way in something that was entirely new to us. We had criticism from everywhere. I was waked up in the middle of the night with calls as far away as Florida: "What the hell you mean opening your schools to colored people?" But in the end the papers upheld us, said it was a wonderful decision. As it turns out, it's exactly what you have to do: obey the law.

Silveri: Maybe this is a good time to talk about race relations in the area. Do you have any comments about race relations in Asheville as you were growing up? What did you observe? How did the races get along?

Tennent: I think generally the race relations in Asheville have been better than they have been in most communities. Asheville is not exactly a little hick mountain town; it's nowhere near it. It's a cosmopolitan city. For instance, the membership of the Rotary Club is largely made up of people who came from everywhere. . . a couple of foreign countries. That's just typical.

Asheville is not a typical mountain town, or another provincial town. It is cosmopolitan, and our attitude has been very liberal and very generous, and very open.

I think our relationship with the colored people has been commendable. I have taken a stand that somebody has to employ colored people, at the cost of sometimes being criticized for being unfair to white. I have worked colored people because that's the work they can do, and do it very fine, and an honorable work. I believe there's dignity in any worthwhile profession. I've made it a rule to hire colored people,

Tennent: (Cont'd.) not because they are pick-and-shovel men, but because they are entitled to work and capable of work. My attitude toward colored people, sustained by the school board, is that if that's the law, we must obey the law. If we integrate, we integrate.

Silveri: If that hadn't been the law, would you have initiated integration?

Tennent: I don't think I would have. I don't think I would have thought about it. I think I'm more inclined to move slower than that, more conservatively. I'm not as fiery as my forebears; they were crusading Presbyterian ministers. I think I am inclined to let the moss grow on me a little bit.

Silveri: As a Southerner and being brought up in the Southern society, you were presented with the situation from the time you were born until the time you grew up, on the separation of the races.

Tennent: Why yes; our family were slaveowners. Our family were devoted to the Negroes. We loved them. We recognized their human qualities. We didn't have any slave-driving instincts. We lived very happily with our slaves. I suppose that maybe somewhere along the line, the colored people suckled and nursed most of my Tennent aunts and uncles.

Silveri: What parts of Asheville did the blacks live in, in those years?

Tennent: The blacks largely lived where they live today: in town on Valley Street, and in that area.

Silveri: The area in which Tom Wolfe wrote about in Look Homeward Angel?

Tennent: Yes; in that area. I carried newspapers when I was a boy,

Tennent: (Cont'd.) small boy, and down into that section: Valley Street, Eagle Street, Catholic Hill. That was the thing. Then some colored people began to move out on Washington Road; that's off of Charlotte Street and Broad Street. Some of the ones that were able began to buy in that area. Then they began to move into West End, and gradually they began to scatter all over the City of Asheville. Currently they are concentrating on Montford Avenue, Cumberland Avenue and the Montford Hills area. If they are ever going to integrate and forget that they are colored and think in terms of being only American citizens, it's the wrong thing to do. They huddle back together again. It's the wrong thing to do, but that seems to be what they prefer.

I haven't been in a great hurry to sell and move. If I move from this location, which you can see is very beautifully landscaped, and represents many, many years of work, it will be because at my age I can't go up and down the various levels that I've got a hundred and something different steps going from street to back garden. You can see that would be the main motivation in selling this place.

Silveri: I wanted to ask you: We're talking about the 1930's, and that was the year of the impact of the decade of Tom Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel. Were you in Asheville when the book was published?

Tennent: Yes; there was a great reaction toward it, a bitter reaction, I think. They would have felt like beating him up if he'd come back at that time.

Silveri: Did you read it as soon as it was published?

Tennent: Yes; I read it shortly after it was published. I think some

Tennent: (Cont'd.) of it was bordering on some pretty modern ways of expression, but I recognized all of it as very truthful. I think it was largely biographical. I think Tom was writing about his family and people in Asheville. There's no question about it: the situations in Asheville.

I still think he is a master of descriptive literature. No matter what lines he bordered on that would be offensive or inoffensive, the fact still remains that he was a masterful handler of the English language, a little verbose, reiterative, but that's Tom Wolfe.

Silveri: Did you see him after the book was published, at all?

Tennent: Oh, yes; that's when I got him a place to . . . I didn't see him immediately after it was published, but when he came back here to Asheville, I happened to go into a drugstore out on Charlotte Street to get a snack, and Tom Wolfe was in there eating breakfast. He gave me a great hug, and we sat there and talked and renewed friendship. I used to correspond with him regularly. I don't want to say too much of this about Tom because I'm on a panel discussion here in October, statewide, on Thomas Wolfe, with some other Thomas Wolfe authorities. Anyhow, I got Tom Wolfe his cabin by getting Max Whitson together with him, and got him oriented, and that's where he wrote most of his later works.

Silveri: You say that's out in Swannanoa?

Tennent: Well, it's really opposite the Veterans' Administration Building out there near Recreation Park.

Silveri: Oteen.

[END OF TAPE I, SIDE II]

[TAPE II, SIDE I]

Tennent: Oteen; it's right in there between the Veterans' Administration and down to the river, Swannanoa River. It's near the Rec. Park; it's a bee line from the Rec. Park over to Oteen, right in there.

Silveri: Is the cabin still there?

Tennent: I think it is; a picturesque log cabin that I saw being built. My landscape men graded the road up to it; some mile and a half to it.

You know, I think, in a way, the School Board's statement was one of the things that I would like to be remembered by most, if you consider the time and circumstances under which it was issued.

Silveri: Did you have a difficult time convincing the other members... .

Tennent: Yes.

Silveri: . . . to issue that statement?

Tennent: The majority of them; no. One of them, adamant, wasn't going to stand for it.

Silveri: What was the final vote? Do you recall? On the committee for that?

Tennent: Well, it was unanimous. Fellow said, "If that's what you want, I'll go along with it. I don't want to mess it up, but I just think we ought to keep our mouth shut and stall."

I said, "The only thing that you can do: the Supreme Court has spoken. All you can do is say you are going to make an honest effort to obey the law. You realize that you are a citizen, not only of the United States, but of the State of North Carolina, the City of Asheville. You have many allegiances."

Silveri: You said you were for fourteen years a member of the School Board?

Tennent: Yes; I was.

Silveri: What years were those?

Tennent: It ended in 19. . . I was still on the Board in 1957-58. About 1960 is when I concluded it. I know I was still on the School Board when I traveled as President of Rotary and received many gifts of books on education and literature and things largely because I was looked upon as an educator.

Silveri: That was about 1946 when you first were on the School Board. Were you elected to that position? Was that an elected position?

Tennent: Yes; it's appointed by the City Board--City Council.

Silveri: City Council appointed you to that position.

Tennent: Yes; over and over again.

Silveri: Were you reluctant to accept it, or were you eager to try it?

Tennent: Once you got into the thing and got the background and the feel of the problems, you almost feel like that is an obligation you owe to the community to do the best you can, and everyone in some way should serve the community. I thought maybe I could serve it best by having a background in it.

What really caused me to resign was that when I reached the age of sixty-five I could have been reappointed. I faced the reality that I had required teacher after teacher to resign automatically at age sixty-five, and I thought it would be very unfair for a man to stay

Tennent: (Cont'd.) on the School Board that was requiring school teachers to retire at sixty-five and he past sixty-five. The only decent thing to do was practice what you preach.

Silveri: I wanted to ask you what you did during the Second World War. Were you able to keep your business going?

Tennent: Yes; we, Asheville, didn't seem greatly upset by the war. Things did slow down; things did become rather rigid at times, but I went on working. I made a living, and most everybody else did. I was too old to be accepted; so there wasn't anything else to do.

Silveri: That would take you through the war and into the post-war years. Did your business pick up after the war? Was there a greater demand for it, the landscaping?

Tennent: My business has steadily grown despite the ups and downs. The demands for my services gradually increased, but I have regulated it. I've gotten to the point, it's kind of a strange thing to say, that I have a selective business. I work for people I would like to work for, if I can find the men to work. Frankly, I'm largely and mostly concerned with the development of the University of North Carolina campus. I've developed the whole thing, planned it and planted it from the very beginning. Dr. . . . Who's the president of the Greater University of North Carolina down at Chapel Hill? Anyhow, he says that. . .

Silveri: Dr. Friday?

Tennent: Dr. William Friday says it's the most beautiful campus, college campus, in North Carolina. I don't go around disputing that, and others are saying that. After they set aside a large section of

Tennent: (Cont'd.) that as the Charles G. Tennent Park, I'm anxious and eager to see it through, and if they want something done, they come first. I do have a sizable job coming up this fall, but I would rather go out just landscaping the campus. I know the time will come when I can't continue it, but they've been . . .

Silveri: That's interesting. You wouldn't work for somebody you didn't like.

Tennent: No; no. I won't any more. I don't exactly have to, but I have to work for somebody, more or less. We do have an income, but it is an income that you have to watch carefully.

Silveri: You mentioned that in 1944 when you were elected to the School Board. Were you doing anything else in the community in those years of the '40's and '50's?

Tennent: Well, I served on every kind of a drive that came along. I just felt like it was a man's duty to get in there and pitch with them. I sold the newspaper at Christmas Eve for the benefit of the underprivileged boys, year after year. Got one of the worst cases of flu I ever had in my life from exposure to flu selling newspapers to help somebody else. I've been community-service minded, I think. I haven't done as much as I should have.

Silveri: You say in 1935 you were invited to become a member of the Rotary. Is that the way. . .?.

Tennent: Yes; I was invited three times. Herbert Caskey, who had hired me to look after Grove Park (look after the street borders and edging of Grove Park; take care of them and cut the grass) wanted me

Tennent: (Cont'd.) to be a member of the Rotary Club. I turned it down two times, and when they asked me the third time, I began to figure: "Well, maybe there's something to that thing that would make a man want to share it with me." I told them I didn't want to join; I didn't belong to anything. So I joined it, and really got the Rotary bug. When I joined Rotary Club I began to realize that people weren't in it to gain. They were in it to give. Not to get. . . to give.

I got the basic concept of Rotary, which is unselfish service. They call it service above self, and it seems to me that is a very high ideal that one could choose to motivate as his very being in life, whether you call it Rotary or Kiwanis or Lions, or anything else. Or church; it's just wonderful.

I really got interested in Rotary. I've given it more time, frankly, or as much time as I have the nursery business ever since. I was, just a few years after I joined the club, elected to the Board of Directors, and I served on that about a total of nine years. Then all of a sudden, they made me club president, in 1939-40. That wasn't very long after I had come into the thing, and I looked around for something to do. I just didn't want to be another club president.

I realized the club didn't have a club bulletin, hadn't had ever, as I could see. So I began researching, and I sought all the records I could find. I found the club records scattered all over Asheville, some of them in the garbage can. So I organized the Rotary Cog, club bulletin. It's still the club bulletin. It's been quoted all over the world; it's made a name for itself.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) Another thing I did as club president: in addition to starting a club bulletin and getting all the club records together again, was to start a drive for a Negro hospital, a hospital for Negroes. At that time they did not have access to the existing white hospitals. There really was no place where a Negro woman could go to a hospital to have her baby. So the Rotary Club provoked (that's a good way to put it) a movement in Asheville. We launched the movement for a Negro hospital, and finally it was achieved. The first Negro hospital was built down on the corner of Biltmore Avenue and the intersection of Southside.

Silveri: What was the name of it?

Tennent: The Asheville Colored Hospital.

Silveri: What year would that be?

Tennent: That would be . . .

Silveri: Since you had the drive?

Tennent: The year we launched it and got everybody excited and got editorials in the paper was in 1940. But it must have been five or six years after that until they got it, but they eventually did get it, and the Rotary claimed that they did it. We put the pressure on, and sold the idea. Of course, when the hospitals later on did extend services to colored people there was no further need for the Negro hospital, and it was abandoned.

Another thing we did was to start a movement for more playgrounds, community playgrounds, neighborhood playgrounds. We didn't get very far with that, but today that is the big thing in every community: community playgrounds, neighborhood playgrounds. So we initiated several

Tennent: (Cont'd.) farsighted things that the Rotary Club hadn't tried to do before, and ended up with being claimed as a fairly good president and got the eye of Rotary International. In just a very short time, I was made District Governor, 1943-44.

Silveri: What did your district comprise?

Tennent: All of South Carolina and fourteen clubs in Western North Carolina.

Silveri: What was your duty? What were your duties?

Tennent: You were elected governor at the suggestion of the district, the clubs of the district, but you were an officer of Rotary International. Your duty was to help administer Rotary International to keep the movement coordinated, oriented.

So I had to visit every club in the district and make a talk and hold a club assembly, and it took nearly six months to do that. I traveled all over South Carolina, and no one had organized a new club in the district for ten years. They said the area wasn't growing, and there wasn't any city big enough for a club. I said, "You can't tell me that you can't find a new club somewhere."

So I put on an extensive drive for more Rotary Clubs, which attracted the attention of Rotary International. Bless Pat, if I didn't get three! The District Governor in the next district got excited about what I was doing and he started an extension move, but he stepped over in my district and organized still another one, which made me four. I got credit for it. The very next year Rotary International made me Chairman of the Extension Committee for the eastern part of the United States!

Silveri: What was the Extension Committee?

Tennent: That was the Rotary International Extension Committee; it encouraged the organization of new clubs in its area. My area was the eastern United States, Canada and Bermuda.

Silveri: Now was this a paying position?

Tennent: Oh; no, there's nothing paid. It's all . . .

Silveri: Even the President of Rotary?

Tennent: Oh, no; no. It's all free service. The president does get a gift at the end of his year from all of the clubs in the world.

Silveri: All the expenses are paid for?

Tennent: All the expenses are paid. Now, Mrs. Tennent and I, we just traveled everywhere. We went into thirty or more different countries. We traveled three months at one time all through Africa and South America; all her expenses paid. We traveled like royalty, which is the way it should be. We were highly entertained. I sat down and talked with the King of Norway, and the presidents of republics, dictators, and everybody; just important people all over the world. Just received general recognition. I guess our travels must have cost Rotary International a tremendous sum. However, our budget for the year did not exceed more than fifty or sixty thousand dollars, so it couldn't have been . . . it could have been about thirty thousand dollars worth of travel, which was a whole lot in those days.

Silveri: How long were you the Director of the Eastern Extension?

Tennent: That was for one year.

Silveri: That was for one year. What happened after that?

Tennent: I was then called upon to serve on the Aims and Objects Committee; that's the big committee in Rotary, the planning body. I served on the Aims and Objects Committee. Of course, in the meantime I had served as Sergeant-at-Arms at the International Convention, and member of the Credentials Committee in 1946-47. Then I served as Alternate Club Service member on the Aims and Objects Committee. Then I served as Chairman of the Nominating Committee for President; Chairman of the Aims and Objects Committee again in 1950-51; member in 1951-52 of the Convention Committee; Chairman of the Finance Committee twice, 1951-52 and 1954-55; Chairman of the Investments Committee, handling three quarters of a million dollars worth of stocks (1951-52 and 1954-55); Chairman of the North American Transportation Committee, arranging for convention travel outside the United States; Chairman of the Board of Directors (President, 1957-58); Chairman of the Rotary Foundation. That's a multi-million dollar foundation largely interested in education of people like you, advanced graduate students furthering their education. Served on that five years (Chairman one year); Moderator for a Rotary Institute, which is made up of Rotary leaders from all over the world; Chairman of the Community Service Consulting Group, where people wrote you from all over the world about Community Service.

I've been President's Representative to nearly forty different district conferences throughout the world. That's where you go and say what the President would say, because he can't visit three hundred and something conferences. He wouldn't be physically able, so he sends his representative, and just on and on like that.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) Probably have, or people are saying that I have, one of the longest service records of anybody in the world.

Silveri: Who started Rotary?

Tennent: Rotary was founded in 1905 by a lawyer and three businessmen in Chicago. The lawyer's name was Paul P. Harris. He was a lonely lawyer that came from New England, and I guess he was just the right man with the right idea at the right time. It was a time when ethics, business ethics, was at a tremendously low ebb. It was every man for himself: "Let the buyer beware!"; "Devil take the hindmost!" . . . this lawyer was a thinking man, and he just thought how nice it would be, instead of having everybody suspicious of everybody, get leaders of businesses and professions together to sit down once a week, or more, and eat together and talk (they didn't think about eating at first) and just be more sympathetic with each other's problems. It would help things, and it wouldn't be greedy. So Rotary was founded.

It wasn't anything like the organization it is today. It has developed and grown, but it came along step by step. They soon found out there wasn't much point in just a bunch of men in Chicago sitting down and talking about their problems, maybe the community needed something, maybe people that didn't belong to the club needed something. So they looked around, and found the City of Chicago's worst need at the time was a comfort station in downtown Chicago. There wasn't a place for strangers to go at all. The mayor saw that the city got that thing across.

Then they began looking around. That's what you call

Tennent: (Cont'd.) community service: looking around for things to do. Of course, vocational service was one of the first things; high ethical standards in business, the dignifying of all worthwhile professions.

Then, as they grew they finally got to be clubs in the sixteen largest cities, and then somebody crosses over into Canada and organized a club. Then they became an international organization. From then on, it just went on and on into other countries, taking on larger views and horizons.

Today it's in a hundred and fifty-one countries, and in geographical regions. It's over three quarters of a million members, or Rotarians, something like sixteen thousand member clubs. It is growing at the rate of better than one club every eighteen hours. It is still a very growing club, and this great thing in many languages, many lands, many peoples, many customs and many traditions, all seems to hinge on one simple common denominator: "Service Above Self," friendly, unselfish service.

Silveri: There was one problem, I think, about the Rotary . . .

Tennent: It's so simple it's hard to understand!

Silveri: Right. Wasn't the Rotary a segregated civic club?

Tennent: Oh; no.

Silveri: Did they always allow blacks?

Tennent: Oh; of course. Rotary has never had anything in any of its rules anywhere that would bar a yellow man, a brown man, or a black man. I noticed in the new District Governors this year there are two Negro governors that take over.

Silveri: It must be another civic club I was thinking of that was . . .

Tennent: Oh, there's another. We once had a Negro in Asheville; he had a classification. You have to have a classification. You have to be the outstanding man in a truly representative business. That's what you have to be to get into the Rotary Club.

Silveri: Oh; I see.

Tennent: You've got to be a representative of a representative business to be a member of Rotary. That's what you call a classification business. There can only be one landscape man; only be one drugstore man. . . right, the outstanding man in the community, and his business has got to be outstanding.

Well, there's a man, a colored man, here who was an outstanding man in his outstanding business, and we elected him a member. After a while, he didn't feel particularly at home in the club, probably didn't think it was what he thought it ought to be, and probably just dropped out. But we've had Negroes. I remember District Governors who were Negroes; Club Presidents who were Negroes in Connecticut. The Rotary Clubs I visited in Africa had part members black, part white.

No; Rotary has never been a restrictive organization. The only thing that is restricted is if you're not a top man in a top business, that you're not an owner-partner, policy maker in some business that entitles you to membership in Rotary.

Silveri: It has to be some business. . . although I know that you have. . . Professor Rainey is a member of the Rotary.

Tennent: You can have an additional active member to the senior

Tennent: (Cont'd.) active, which is Bill Highsmith. His classification is Education, Colleges and Universities. Gene Rainey is "additional active." You can have two members. He doesn't have to be the president; he's just "additional active" at Bill's suggestion. Could just as well have been anybody else; Potts, or anybody else down there.

Silveri: What were your duties as president of the International?

Tennent: As President of Rotary International, your principal duty is to be a topflight goodwill ambassador to all the various segments of Rotary. Your principal duty is to preside over the Board of Directors as Chairman of the Board of Directors, to give leadership.

Silveri: You have to be able to spend most of your time. . . .

Tennent: Yes; practically. I was really . . . took two years of my life. It took about six months to get ready for the job, and six months to shed the job, to recover from it; but it's a full-time thing. I only got home three times during the first nine months of my year as president.

Silveri: What year was that? Fifty-eight?

Tennent: Fifty-seven, fifty-eight. My daughter ran my business for me. She got down to just two men, and she was able to handle them for the maintenance jobs, like Battle, and people like that.

Silveri: Did Rotary International have a headquarters somewhere?

Tennent: Yes; in Evanston, Illinois. They have a magnificent building there.

Silveri: You had to go there when

Tennent: Oh; yes. I resided in the hotel in Evanston, had a magnificent office and two hundred and sixty-some people in my

Tennent: (Cont'd.) secretariat that were there to do whatever I wanted done, and a general secretary who was over the secretariat. Oh, it's quite an organization! I think, maybe the principal thing is to be a front. So many people come through from all over the world, and they want to go and shake hands with the president. You have to shake hands with them.

Silveri: You must have met a lot of fascinating people.

Tennent: Oh; yes. I've met people that maybe would come with gifts, like that. . . See that ivory thing there? A man from India bobbed in with that little three lions there. That's a very valuable, expensive thing. He just bobbed in with that stuck away in his hand grip, wanted to give the president a present; things like that.

Silveri: You mentioned you traveled pretty much around the world.

Tennent: When I knew that my election had been uncontested, I told the general secretary to please give me a list of all the places in the world where a president of Rotary had never been before, or hadn't been in the last ten years. There seemed to be an inclination of presidents (you can hardly blame them for wanting to go to glamour spots): "Of course, I'm going to be president just once. I'm going to Paris; I'm going to London; I'm going to Rome, Calcutta, Tokyo, San Francisco and Mexico City!"

I said: "Show me the places they've never been."

Instead of going to Mexico City, I ended up down in Mérida, in the heart of the Yucatán; never been a president there. Of course, they took me to see the pyramids, just about eighty miles away.

Tennent: (Cont'd.) When I went to Argentina, I went over to a little place called Cordoba. Not a little place. . . it's a tremendously big city over in the foothills of the Andes; never had anybody there of any importance in any organization. Well, goodness alive, it was just a great stimulant to them. Then we flew on over the Andes to Chile.

But it took me to places that simply were in the heart of Africa, and what used to be Léopoldville and Stanleyville and Bukavu, Usumbura, Kampala, Uganda. . . there had just never been anybody in there. It wasn't worth going back up in there among the wilderness, the jungles, and the savage people, but I delighted in the trip. So that's how I traveled, but you couldn't cover the whole world, there's not enough time. You have administrative duties; you have about three or four board meetings a year; you preside over the board, and you've got a lot of paper work and letters to sign. You can't travel all the time, but some of them try to.

Silveri: You mentioned before that you had done some writing, I believe?

Tennent: Yes; I wrote an article for Modern Maturity Magazine. I was quoted in it; quoted in this little bulletin. I've written two or three articles for The Rotarian magazine. I'm now in the process of putting the final touches on a book, The Singing, Swinging Pick Man, which is merely from the diary of a nurseryman. I'm going to record some of the early songs that these people sang as they worked and dug, and some of the pranks they played, and some of the things they thought and said. It may go across, and it may not.

Silveri: You say you used to write poetry, too?

Tennent: Yes; I won a prize down at the University for the best poem on Shakespeare, and I've written . . . Oh, I had a poem every month in the University magazine, one or two in the local papers, just a would-be poet.

Silveri: Fifty-seven, '58, you were president, and then came back home; continued your association with Rotary, but . . .

Tennent: As a member of the Asheville Rotary Club. . . I still had one or two assignments on international committees, then.

Silveri: You came back to your nursery business.

Tennent: Yes; I was sitting here in this very room, and I got a long-distance call from somebody in New York City, a news agency, and wanted to speak to the Charles G. Tennent, Past President of Rotary. I told them, "He's speaking."

They wanted to know what I was going to do after retiring from Rotary. I said, "Well, I've already done it; I'm just going back to get down in the ground and dig plants with the rest of my men."

They said, "Well, that is news!"

I never heard any more from it on whether they published it or not. They thought it was news that I would go right back to where I started from and go to work with a spade and shovel, which is exactly what I've done.

Silveri: You were not a member of the local school board when you were President of Rotary?

Tennent: I resigned, but the resignation was not accepted and I

Tennent: (Cont'd.) took a leave of absence. I resigned when I became sixty-five; I was elected President of Rotary when I was sixty-three.

Silveri: Can you talk about some of the outstanding Asheville personalities that you have known?

Tennent: Well, Dr. Minor was a rather interesting character. I wouldn't want to call a doctor, a leading physician, a character, but he had one of the early T-model Fords. He was a very poor driver, and they always had cartoons in the Asheville Citizen about people running and climbing trees when Dr. Minor came by in his car.

Silveri: That's m-i-n-o-r?

Tennent: I think that's right; I'll check and see. Dr. Minor; I think he was one of the eccentrics of the town. I think Curtis Bynum was one of the outstanding citizens of Asheville; a brilliant man. . . established the Carolina Creamery. He was quite a man.

Of course, Hiden Ramsey is one of the greatest products of the city.

Silveri: His nephew is. . .

Tennent: Claude Ramsey is an outstanding man. To head this great organization, he's bound to be. He was an Eagle Scout when he was thirteen years old! Oh, he was a man of tremendous capacities. Claude Ramsey, Sr., Hiden's brother, was City Editor of The Times. He was quite a man, too.

It's hard to say who the outstanding people have been. Dr. Westbrook Murphy, who came here from somewhere else, was one of the outstanding, really scientific doctors. Very, very accurate.

Silveri: Did you know the Norburns?

Tennent: Yes; they were both qualified doctors. I wouldn't say they were in the class with some of the other Asheville doctors, certainly not Westbrook Murphy.

Silveri: Do you remember the establishment of Asheville-Biltmore College? It became a university later on.

Tennent: Well, yes; I vaguely remember that it started out as a community project. It had a very hard time surviving; it moved everywhere you can think of; it was once up on College Street; it was once out in Biltmore somewhere. It finally went up on Sunset Mountain, and it just kicked around and just hardly made it. I served on the board twice, as I told you. But it was just because of two or three people who just wouldn't die of the idea that we ought to have a community college.

Robin Phillips is one of the men that saved it. He's one of the men responsible for the University of North Carolina at Asheville being its logical successor here today. That's one of your big men in Asheville.

Silveri: What is his name, again?

Tennent: Robert F. Phillips, an attorney for the Power and Light Company.

Silveri: And they finally moved up to where they are now. That was just woods up there when they moved up there. Do you remember what year that was?

Tennent: Where is that?

Silveri: Where the university is now.

Tennent: Well, where it is was part of, I think, the W.T. Weaver farm, which I helped grub stumps on when I was a boy of college age, just prior to college age.

I don't remember what year they moved up there, but I can look that up for you if it would be any . . .

Silveri: I also wanted to ask you about the arrival of Enka in the Asheville area.

Tennent: Yes; I remember when that came, and right in the depression of the boom, after the banks had burst. One of our foremost real estate owners in Asheville, W.T. Rowland, had lots of ads that he carried. One of them was, "Uncle Ben has come to town."

Enka came here and gave the community a great lift. That's one of the things that helped us through stabilizing. Enka gave employment to a lot of people and gave more hope than anything else, and problems. They had problems of stinking, sulfuric acid fumes, but we were willing to smell it in exchange for a few slices of bacon and some nice new fried eggs!

Silveri: Do you remember when the Beaucatcher Tunnel was built?

Tennent: I remember when they were starting to build it; yes. I can't give you the exact date on it. You know they did have two or three cave-ins? They did have a casualty in it, at least one casualty. They did have a lot of opposition to it, just as they have a lot of opposition to the cut. As a matter of fact, they've had a lot of opposition. Asheville has one bad characteristic, and that is (I guess all communities have it) people who object to everything.

Silveri: As I sit here I listen to the noise of the traffic on the new. . . Do you call it the Appalachian Highway?

Tennent: That's the Appalachian Highway; yes.

Silveri: Yes; #19-23. That's quite close, isn't it?

Tennent: Yes; it's right down over there. That's one thing I didn't figure on when I came here and put ten or twelve thousand dollars into the landscaping here over a period of years. I didn't figure that I'd be sitting on top of a much-traveled highway.

Silveri: What do you think of Asheville today? Has it grown the way you think it should have grown?

Tennent: I've got great faith in Asheville. Some people haven't. I think it's growing; not too rapidly, but I think it is steadily growing. I think it's dying on the inside and growing on the rim. I think that eventually it's got to be almost county-wide. It's almost got to be a county-wide organization. It's got to include most of the county, or all of the county.

As a matter of fact, who in the world can say where the City of Asheville ends and where the County of Buncombe starts. I think it's growing, maybe not as fast as some others, certainly not as fast as Charlotte, certainly not as fast as Atlanta; but it's growing.

Silveri: Do you think that the positive growth is destroying something that should not have been destroyed?

Tennent: Yes; I think, of course, that your hindsight is better than your foresight. We have destroyed lots of things inadvertently and foolishly that should not have been destroyed. I think maybe the

Tennent: (Cont'd.) destroying of the Battery Park Hill was a great tragedy. It was one of the only few towns in the whole country, or anywhere, that had a precious little mountain right in the middle of it! It could have been a park; but at the time it seemed like a good idea. E.W. Grove filled up a lot of holes, but he filled them up for nothing, because the town was destined to follow a great trend in America to move on the outer fringe. But he didn't know that; we didn't know it, but it would be wonderful if we still had it. I think some of the old house sites have been torn down that could have been saved. I think maybe originally where Tom Wolfe was born, right off of College Street, should have been saved, instead of the boarding house that he grew up in. But the people didn't see it that way, and at the time it didn't seem so important.

Silveri: It's been at least two hours talking here.

Tennent: I don't know whether I've given you what you want or not.

Silveri: You have; yes. I was just wondering if you have any other reflections upon the Asheville area and Western North Carolina, or North Carolina, the South, the nation, or whatever.

Tennent: What is the book you are going to write?

Silveri: This is going to be part of the Archives, the Oral History Archives, at the University; not necessarily for me. It's for the University.

Tennent: Out here?

Silveri: We have two rooms now in the basement of the library. There will be an Archives there that will contain historical documents about

Silveri: (Cont'd.) Asheville and the surrounding area, and also the Oral History Archives of tapes.

Tennent: Maybe I should have got in there somehow or other the community owes a great debt of the university to Bill Highsmith. He has made that university what it is. We're off the record, aren't we?

Silveri: No; I'm still on.

Tennent: Bill Highsmith took that thing when it was just like a little hungry starving calf in the pasture, and he fed it until it was a strong bull, headstrong. Bill Highsmith has made the university what it is, and he deserves a great deal of credit.

Silveri: I think he deserves a great deal of credit for selecting you as the landscaper, too, because it's a beautiful job.

Tennent: Well, it's partly out of the respect that Bill has for me, and friendship. I deeply appreciate it, and I do think it is a smart thing not to make the thing hodge-podge, but to make it all one theme. There is a little silver thread running through the whole plan of the campus. You can tell that one person had a hand in it, and it's not over-planted. Most all of the other institutions are over-planted. Really, a lot of people come here on Sundays and look at that campus.

Silveri: Have you had anything to do with the Botanical Gardens?

Tennent: No; I did not become a member. I think it's a wonderful concept, a daring concept. I think maybe they're not in the right location, because they don't have the right exposures there, the best exposures, but I did not become a member (although I was invited) deliberately, because I am very much opposed to belonging to an

Tennent: (Cont'd.) organization to turn into profit. By being a member of that organization, people in the club would feel obligated to trade with me in my heydays as a landscape man. I don't want that kind of business. I've never asked anybody in the Rotary Club for a job, and never will.

I did, at one time, belong to another civic organization for a few days, a few weeks. I joined a smaller civic organization, and twenty minutes after I got back to my office, after the first meeting, a representative who sold insurance for that organization came down and said, "Now we young people got to stick together!" and tried to sell me a ten thousand dollar life insurance policy. I realized right then I didn't want to belong to an organization for that purpose. I want to belong to an organization to serve, as a serving citizen.

Silveri: One gentleman told me that "Buzz" Tennent was the only man he ever met in his life that could care less about money. Does that sound like "Buzz" Tennent?

Tennent: I think that's a true statement, and I kind of sometimes regret that it is so painfully true. I have never been interested in making money. I have turned down tempting offers that would have carried me elsewhere. I just haven't been interested in money. I've been more interested in doing what I wanted to do, and frankly, I've been more interested in serving Rotary and being a good Rotarian than I have in being a wealthy man. I think everybody ought to prepare for their future, but I'm not going to starve to death.

Silveri: You've been happy doing what . . .

Tennent: I've been very happy!

Silveri: I thank you very much for your time.

Tennent: I'm glad to help, and I hope that we can have a friendship that doesn't end with this interview.

Silveri: I hope so, too.

[END OF TAPE]