

Pinkney Greer Johnson

Tape I, Side 1:

[1] His family has lived in Asheville for over 100 years. His father built the house at 354 Merrimon after moving from Montford. His grandfather built the house at 360 where he is living. It has 10 rooms and never cost him a dime. [I especially wanted to interview Greer, father-in-law of William Mull, present Metropolitan Sewerage District Director, because Walt Boland said he could tell about Weldon Weir] [Walter Boland, Weldon Weir]

[26] He graduated from Asheville High in 1927 and was given a gold medal for not having missed a day of school. He had all the childhood diseases in the summer. He went through high school with Weldon and his brother Hal and Charles Dermid. [Weldon Weir, Hal Weir, Charles Dermid]

[50] He was the youngest of police in the US during the war and went on to being Director of Safety.

[58] In 1931 he earned a degree in engineering in Chapel Hill. There were no jobs in Asheville as it was the depth of Depression so he worked in Baltimore until, through the governor, he got a job in 1935 surveying the Blue Ridge Parkway. [Governor Eringhaus]

[73] He served in the US Marine Corp in WWII and after release worked on the Old Ivy Dormitory at Montreat. He built a new hotel in 1946 and then Howerton Hall, a dormitory for 100 girls, in Montreat. He was employed by Anderson and when he retired he was out of work. [Dr. Anderson]

[100] He decided to go to Florida for a job when he ran into the city manager who offered him a 6-month job - which ran into 26 years. {Pat Burdette]

[115] The streetcar tracks had not been maintained for 16 years and the cross ties had shrunk. He had them taken up and hauled away - first on Biltmore Ave. and then the south side. [They were not taken up to be reused as metal.] (see photo).

[123] Unlike Wolfe who couldn't "go home again" he was surrounded by people he had known at school. He had 100 men working under him on the Street Department - he was not an "outsider." [Thomas Wolfe]

[139] When Burdette retired, Weir, who had been Director of Public Works, became manager. They got along well together. [Pat Burdette, Weldon Weir]

[152] When it was time to develop the Metropolitan Sewerage District he had had 25 years of public service and his engineering degree. He hired a chemist. A 12 million dollar bond issue was floated to meet the environmental law. Up to this time the sewer ran into the river in 32 places.

[177] Sewers are always a losing proposition and always will be. He furnished the data giving technical requirements and Weir masterminded the bill's passage. There had been previous bills and other adjustments and additions before this.

[204] Modern engineers are critical of Weir because the structure needs repair, but Weir "played the cards dealt him." When he took over, the city was 50 million in debt. In 30 years the bonds were paid off and the city never went bankrupt (see Katharine Shepard tape). [Weldon Weir, Curtis Bynum, Katharine Shepard]

[222] It is said the city was financed on its water but this is an exaggeration. In the 50's he went to Chapel Hill with the mayor and \$300,000 was given to the city for water. Asheville, unlike many other cities, had a gravity system which did not necessitate pumping. This was a saving. [Mayor Earl W. Eller]

[247] Part of the current problem is due to the fact that instead of 100% gravity system, more pumps are needed and more areas are covered.

[272] When the city was bankrupt, everything operated out of the city manager's office. Now there are separate governmental bodies and they are not responsible to each other. [He asked that I turn off tape for comment.]

[287] He was involved in State legislature when the Water Pollution Control Act was passed. He had 80 people in the field working under him. [Governor James Hunt]

[308] All laws that regulate streams are State laws. He was on the State Board 1959-1985 after he retired from the city. The position of Chairman of Environmental Commission was a political appointment made by the Governor. He worked under 6 governors in his career wearing many "different hats." In 25 years he made 301 trips to Raleigh at the cost of \$60,000. [Governor Hodges]

[352] He worked at the Eastern Atomic Power Plant in Brunswick County. Eight hundred people worked on it. Carolina Power and Light prepaid taxes until the building was completed. The bond was defaulted. Washington Public Power had identical situation and the State took the obligation.

[402] Weir was the best city manager in the Southern US. He started collecting tickets at Rec. Park while in college. The older politicians liked and supported him. He "ran the job" but always took blame if things went wrong. He retired when all people he had "built" were gone. [Weldon Weir]

[456] Vance was the county commissioner for water and sewer. He couldn't be beaten at the polls. The county and city couldn't get along together so Vance ran the county. Campbell and Vance Plumbing Company put in the original plumbing for Grove Park Hotel. Frank Campbell ran the city water department and knew where all the pipes were. They knew plumbing better than folks living today. To them he (Greer) was just a boy. [John Vance, grandson of Governor Zebulon Vance, Frank Campbell]

[521] The city employed natives. After WWI (WWII) many went back to college, but many didn't. Weir had confidence in the men around him. There was little money. It was like a political family. [Henry Gudger, Weldon Weir]

[554] Hal Weir married a rich girl, the niece of Judge Nettles, who owned a nursery on Hendersonville Road and the area that is now the racquet club and area now belongs to Gerber. The nursery was named Nettlewood. [Martha Gibson Weir, Judge Zebulon V. Nettles]

Tape I, Side 2:

Asheville is unique in that it has gone from boom to bust 2 times. 1900's as a TB resort and the 1920 real estate boom. An ordinance was passed restricting the building of new sanitariums for TB in city limits. This chased the doctors away. Developers thought the city would be another Miami. The people did not cause the real estate crash but suffered from it.

[2/26] In 1950 or 51 the Catholic Bishop of North Carolina wanted to build a Catholic University where A-B Tech is now. He (Greer) representing the city, showed the Bishop around. He said he had \$15 million (later said it was \$30 million) and would build another Notre Dame. The city council, with 7 Methodist members, turned it down. [Bishop Waters]

The Duke Medical Center could have been in Asheville. Little things affect history. Things were done on a personal basis. He had more education and was more successful but he worked with a good group.

[2/59] The history of Asheville goes back to 1790's - called Morristown and incorporated in 1793. His mother came from Cincinnati because she had TB (she lived 12 years). Curtis Bynum had a farm in Skyland and came because of TB. Mrs. Bynum delivered milk in a buggy, opened Carolina Creamery which was later sold to Southern Dairies. (see Katharine Shepard) [Curtis Bynum, Florence (Mrs. Curtis) Bynum]

[2/80] Bynum became manager of the Asheville Buncombe Debt Service [secretary of Sinking Fund Commission for Buncombe County]. He had a secretary and got the debt paid off. He didn't need the money. They had a fine house on Macon Avenue [Stonehaven]. His [Johnson's] mother asked Mrs. Bynum who was going to mop 5 bathrooms. She said that, if she lost her servants, she would do it herself. She was dictatorial, active in schools, president of the Parent-Teacher Association and first woman on the School Board. [Curtis Bynum, Susan Jackson, Florence Bynum]

[2/122] Tom Raoul built the Manor single-handedly. His daughter Jane was always in horse shows (see Bingham tape). We talk about the book on the Manor (see Mathews tape). [Thomas Raoul, Jane Raoul Bingham]

[2/136] It was always an effort to bring people into Asheville but his business was with administration. The population has increased two times over during his service with the city. This forced the sewer and water departments to grow. The State took over the police situation.

[2/140] In 1921 the Highway Patrol was formed. Before that the County Sheriff was in charge.

[2/150] Each county ran its own school system. In the 20's many teachers had to board in private homes as part of their salary.

[2/175] He remembers the Reynolds family, but at 20 he wasn't interested in the school system. The county and city relationship was controversial, but he wasn't involved. Water and sewer are consolidated, but if blacks are sent to Sandy Mush, someone will get killed. [John Reynolds, A. C. Reynolds]

[2/200] Two hundred children are bussed from Montford to Grace School (previous name of Ira B. Jones School). This can happen in the city but not in the county. He has seen race riots.

[2/214] He wasn't involved in government during integration but remembers the Woolworth store "sit-ins." His opinions, he said, are 100 years out of date and newcomers in community call him a racist. He has worked with blacks and had 100 working for him. He owned and rented houses. Every house was up to code. [interesting details of experiences] He owned a grocery store between Depot and Ralph streets and rented it. [Clyde Sorrells]

[2/414] There is bitterness about the relocation of blacks and whites. Some whites moved out of the city. He used to shoot quail where UNCA is today. [Sheriff John A. Lyerly, Sheriff Riley, Sheriff Reed]

Tape II, Side 1:

[II/1/1] Before WWI (think he meant WWII), the property owners controlled everything.

[II/1/17] The downtown business district paid 70% of taxes and received the benefits of patrolmen, street lights, and garbage. Everyone thought it was right. He remembers Bunn and Wolfe whose backyards joined (Wolfe was 10 years older). Furman ran a big railroad salvage business. [Robert Bunn, Thomas Wolfe, Fred Furman]

[II/1/57] The Biltmore Dairy delivered butter and eggs for 20 years. There were several small markets on Pack Square. [Barnett Dry Goods Co., 43-45 Broadway]

[II/1/75] The Asheville Streets were originally Belgian blocks which gave horses a foothold when going up and down hills. Market Street (in brick) was kept as a monument. The first concrete street laid in NC was experimental in 1921. It went by Highland Farms and was 16 feet wide. It is now covered by asphalt. Street car lines went up Charlotte as far as Grove Park Inn. After Seely died, Sternberg moved into Seely Castle. Mrs. Seely gave the house to the University, and the school added the wings. He knew Grove and believes someone in the family had TB. Grove had an office on Biltmore Avenue near the furniture store of "old man" Pearlman [see enclosures on Pearlman. I was going to interview Fred but found that he is not well] [Fred Seely, Evelyn (Mrs. Fred) Seely, Joseph (Joe) Sternberg, Dr. Edwin Grove, Barney Pearlman]

[II/1/183] The trolley tracks were taken up when the city got "modern." They were given to the junk man to get them off the street. The line on Merrimon went through Beaver Lake. [Joe Sternberg]

[II/1/199] He describes the hotel in Dula Springs where people would vacation for 2 weeks at a time.

[II/1/215] His great grandfather had a stagecoach inn on the main road and took in roomers but not drovers. As a boy, his great grandfather drove turkeys from Henderson County to Spartanburg. (See Coggins tape)

[II/1/254] The pleasure boat River Lily, which went from Asheville to Brevard, wrecked on his grandfather's farm near one of the bridges.

[II/1/259] His father had a warehouse on Depot Street. The flood of 1916 was 10 ft deep at the station. It washed bridges down the river. Fifty coal cars were put on the trestle bridge to weigh it down. The Smith bridge was washed out but the West Asheville bridge was so high it was not hurt (see enclosure).

[II/1/303] The Sulfur Spring Hotel was washed out. It stood where Lowe's Hardware store is.

[II/1/351] His house was originally heated by coal but, because of an ordinance against burning soft coal about 25 years ago, it is heated by gas. (see Coggins Tape) [tragically a fire broke out and both Greer and his wife lost their lives - see enclosed.]

[II/1/386] In 1929 he worked for the Duke Power Co. When he went to college, engineers worked part time in industry. He remembers an old fat man who came in with spats.

Tape II, Side 2:

[II/2/13] When he was installing a telephone a man asked him whether or not it would work. He replied, "It always has." The man gave him a \$5 raise for not chatting. It was Mr. Duke.

[II/2/20] His great grandfather came from Charleston in 1795. He was the first county treasurer. [Hugh Johnson]

[II/2/24] The trolley used to run to the Kenilworth Hotel. The area was incorporated in the town and the hotel was taken over by the Army, modernized in WWI (WWII?) and used as a hospital. It was never successful as a hotel. His father (grandfather?) met Frank James, Jesse's brother, in 1890 or so. He was pardoned. Jesse was shot in the back. His grandfather was a colonel in the Civil War. [He discusses the war - hard to understand] [Jesse James, Frank James]

[II/2/80] His son-in-law [I said "nephew" in error] is head of the Metropolitan Sewerage District. He said he does not offer any advice regarding controversy over burning sludge. [William Mull]

[II/2/89] He was not involved in building the new facility, however he built the plant. His office was in city building. Before he retired he moved to the plant. Rent and phone had been free in the city building. The first month after the move the phone bill was \$250. He had a different philosophy about taxes. His children and grandchildren don't have that philosophy but they aren't big property owners. Tax payers are listened to. His grandfather was one of the "big ten" who had a reputation of running Asheville - they were the biggest property owners. "If you wanted to get elected you listened to the man who paid the bills."

[II/2/167] The banks failed, the city went broke and the League of Women Voters in 1930 voted them out. The wives were property owners (see Marjorie Lockwood tape). [Florence Bynum, Jean C. (Mrs. Edward) White, Agnes Bosse Johnson]

[II/2/187] A new mayor was elected. He had been a newspaper publisher. This is when they changed from a commissioner-run government to city council. [Mayor Wickes Wamboldt]

[II/2/200] A picture of the treatment plant is discussed. He talked about Craggy Dam that had been built by Captain Weaver in the 1890's to supply direct current to run the street car line. There was a special current for the lights. CP&L bought Weaver Power Co. in 1923 and all street cars were run off the same power line. Legally Craggy Dam belongs to the Metropolitan Sewerage district. They tried 2-3 times to get him to tear it down and the TVA would have done it for nothing. Now they are using it to generate power.

[II/2/250] He developed the plant and there is now a decision to be made as to whether the sludge should be used for fertilizer or burned. Because of air pollution, he thinks it will not be burned (see enclosure).

[II/2/270] Champion and Enka are trying to clean up pollution in water (said he could talk an hour on that issue, which is still in court). Champion spends one million dollars a year and has for 20 years. The government must not crucify industry and force it to close with loss of jobs. He remembers 20 years ago Champion was being sued because all the fish were killed in the Pigeon River - but Waynesville had a sewer spill which killed 80,000 fish. The fish moved down to Waterville Lake. The water smells some, is brown and looks bad but this is natural from tree rot.

[II/2/347] He named his children. He also has 4 grandchildren scattered all over the US. One granddaughter was in the recent World Trade Center, New York, explosion. She had to walk down 59 flights to get out. He is afraid she will marry a Yankee. Another granddaughter is on a scholarship from AT&T in Salzburg, Austria and speaks German. [George Johnson, Margaret Mull, Robert Johnson, William Johnson]