

MATHESON HISTORICAL CENTER
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE: Edward Roberts

INTERVIEWER: Mary Ann Cofrin

TRANSCRIBER: Ruth C. Marston

March 9, 1995

C: My name is Mary Ann Cofrin. I am interviewing Edward Roberts for the Oral History Program of the Matheson Historical Center today, March 9, 1995, at 2805 N.W. 83rd St., Gainesville, Florida. Please state your full name and birth date for the tape.

R: William Edward Roberts. Born November 8, 1908.

C: Where were you born?

R: Macon, Georgia.

C: Where were your parents from? Macon?

R: Macon, Jones County.

C: Were they born there?

R: No, my father was born in Jones County. My mother, in Cummings, Georgia.

C: Your grandparents were all Georgia people? Tell me a little bit about your early life. Did you go to school there?

R: I went to a military prep school in Macon - Lanier High School for Boys. I graduated from there in 1925.

C: But you went to grade school, I guess, in Macon.

R: Yes.

C: Then where did you go to college? Was it in Florida or in Georgia? After you graduated from high school, did you continue school?

R: No. During my last two years in high school, I had a part-time job with the Fourth National Bank in Macon as a bank messenger. After I graduated, I worked full-time there for a short time. My father had gone into business in Florida and was living in Bradenton until he could send for his family. I decided to join him there, so left Macon in 1925 and have been in Florida ever since.

C: So you went to Bradenton in 1925. What was your job there?

R: When I was in Macon, in addition to being a messenger, I had learned to operate a posting machine and liked bookkeeping, so when I got to Bradenton I applied for a job in two banks and got a message from both of them to come see them about going to work.

C: How about that!

R: The first one that I talked to -- I hadn't heard from the second one at that time -- was the Bradenton Bank & Trust Company, so that is where I started.

C: You were only 17 years old when you started that job -- in 1925, you say. You were just a young sprout.

R: That's right.

C: And you stayed there how many years?

R: I was with them for about three years, and when I left was Head Bookkeeper and Assistant to the Auditor. But I was offered a more lucrative job in the theater industry -- motion picture theaters -- in Bradenton, and that is how I got started in that business. I was transferred after a short time to Kissimmee. The General Manager called me in one day and said the manager under whom I had served in Bradenton had been transferred to Gainesville and had requested that I be sent there as his assistant. I was quite happy with my status quo and protested the change, but he said, "If you go up to Gainesville, at the end of the six months if you're not satisfied, I'll move you to any city in the State of Florida you choose." I figured I couldn't lose on that one, so when he called as promised and said, "Ed, your time is up. Where do you want to go?" I said, "I want to stay here."

C: So you fell in love with Gainesville.

R: Yes. I've been here ever since.

C: And that was, I believe, in 1930 or 1931 when you came here?

R: Right.

C: Can you tell me what Gainesville was like in those days?

R: Well, a train track ran down the middle of Main Street, and there weren't too many paved streets. It wasn't a rare sight to see a horse and buggy or wagon.

C: Even in 1930?

R: Yes. A few came in from the surrounding countryside. It was quite a bit different then. There weren't a bunch of cars to dodge when you walked across the street.

C: What was the name of the theater you were with?

R: At that time the Sparks Theater Circuit owned two theaters in Gainesville, the Florida Theater on University Avenue and the very old Lyric Theater, which was located midway between the old post office and the fire station. The Lyric had been closed for some time but was reopened either shortly before or after I came here. I can't remember exactly when. Later the Circuit built the State Theater, which was a few blocks west of the Florida, also on University Avenue. Anyhow, I came to Gainesville as an Assistant Manager.

C: Wasn't there something at the theaters in those days called Bank Night?

R: Oh, Bank Night. That was primarily at the Florida Theater. At that time it was one of the biggest deals in Gainesville, I think.

C: Tell us about Bank night, what it was.

R: Bank Night was later ruled by the Supreme Court as a lottery. The rules were that anyone who wanted to could sign the register and be assigned a number. This, of course, was a one-time procedure and the records were carefully checked to avoid duplicate registrations. The assigned number was then put in a big hopper. The "pot" started off with \$100, if I remember correctly, and on Bank Night, which was Tuesday night, one number was drawn. If the money wasn't claimed, the pot plus \$100 was rolled over to the next week. Of course, if it was claimed, the amount started over the next week with a new pot of only \$100.

C: And you had to be there to win?

R: You had to be there, and you had to be there at a certain time. It kept increasing \$100 a week anytime the winner wasn't there to collect the money. Bank Night would fill up both theaters. If you were at either the Lyric or the Florida, you were eligible for it. If you weren't at either theater, you could appear at the stage of the Florida in a certain length of time and you were eligible. Since \$100 was added every week if there was no winner, after a period of several weeks it became a pretty good pot of money.

C: Do you remember what the biggest pot was or who won it?

R: No. It often went over a thousand dollars. That was big money in those days. Hopeful winners congregated every Tuesday night in front of the Florida Theater to the extent that they completely blocked University Avenue, so the State Road Department objected and we moved the crowd down to the Lyric, which was located on what was then East Main Street South (now S.E. 1st Street) midway between what was Gainesville's main -- and I think only -- fire station and the old post office, which now houses the Hippodrome Theater. I had a telephone connection from the stage of the Florida Theater to the Lyric so that everyone both inside and outside that theater could hear the announcement of the winner. If the winner was

either inside or outside the Lyric, transportation to the stage of the Florida was provided for them to claim their prize.

C: A lot of fun.

R: It was a lot of fun, and there was a lot of interest in it.

C: Weren't there some other interesting things that happened with the theater? I have a note here that there was an article in the newspaper in 1941 saying that Dr. Gordon Tison, who was the director of the G-Men, Gainesville's baseball club, was having a problem with mole crickets out at Harris Field and needed some toad frogs to help eliminate them. I think you did something to help him get those frogs.

R: Oh, I got some all right!

C: Tell me how you got them.

R: I put on a kids' matinee at the Lyric Theater, and anybody who brought a toad frog was admitted free. The results were overwhelming. I had a big cage constructed on the lobby floor to contain the critters, and you never saw as many frogs in one place in your life, nor a greater variety. That cage was overflowing with toad frogs, bull frogs, and everything in between.

C: So it was quite a success, and did they get rid of the mole-crickets?

R: As far as I know. That wasn't my headache. I volunteered only to furnish the frogs!

C: I know Dr. Tison was pleased. The story made the newspaper. It was written up in the Gainesville Sun.

R: It also appeared in Ripley's Believe It or Not.

C: Well, tell me who were the first people you got to know in Gainesville. Who were your friends?

R: After I had been in Gainesville a short time, I was lucky enough to find a room with the J.C. McCraw family. At that time they were living right across the street from the Thomas Hotel. Mrs. McCraw had a very attractive daughter, Mary Parker McCraw, who knew practically everybody in town. She was about my age and we became good friends. Parky and I went together for a little bit. As a matter of fact, I think Mary was responsible for my meeting Jill. We just got together one night. That's the way it started off. I guess Mary was responsible for my meeting many Gainesville people. Then with Gainesville being a friendly town and

me being a friendly person, my circle of friends gradually widened. The Jaycees was organized not long after I moved here -- I was a charter member -- and I met many young business men through that organization.

C: Tell me a little more about Gainesville. You said there were horses and buggies, very few cars and few paved streets. If you were going to walk around the square, can you tell me what it was like?

R: No, but one thing I can show you -- I can't do it now -- you remember the Gainesville fire?

C: In 1938?

R: Right. Well, I took some movies down there that day, and I've got them in this closet here somewhere.

C: Great.

R: They were given to Earl Jernigan but we have not been able to locate them again.

C: When did you and Jill get married?

R: In 1938.

C: Where did you and Jill first live?

R: With Annie Scarrett, up there close to George Dell's old grocery store.

C: That was on University Avenue?

R: Right.

C: Just east of the square?

R: 234 was the number. Of course, the house has been moved now. We lived there for a while and then later out on East University, about the 700 block, in Dean Norman's house. He had a duplex house there. We lived downstairs and Mary Buck lived upstairs. So we got to know Mary pretty well. She knew everybody, so I reckon that's maybe where we got started out.

C: Mary and Jill were good friends as young girls?

R: Well, they were relatives.

C: Oh, so they were relatives and good friends growing up.

R: That's right.

C: So, who besides Mary and Parky can you think of that you particularly remember? Any of the business men or personal friends, any special names pop into your mind?

R: Not especially.

C: After that, along came World War II. You had a part in that?

R: Yes, I did. Four years of it.

C: And what part of the service were you in?

R: I was in the Navy Seabees.

C: Where were you trained? And where did they send you?

R: I was trained in Camp Peary, Virginia, then went to several different places. I would have orders to go to Alaska, for instance, and then they sent me to Camp Fox, in California, to get heavy equipment and warm clothing, and then something came up about the transportation so they canceled those orders. Then I was on orders to go to Africa, but instead went to Rhode Island for advanced military training, then close to Los Angeles, where I spent 13 months in Advanced Amphibious Training. From there, I went through Pearl Harbor into the Philippines. I was there until the day that I was shipped back to the States for a 30-day leave, which I didn't get!

C: Did Jill get to go with you?

R: No.

C: She didn't? She stayed in Gainesville?

R: Yes. In the Seabees, you were automatically put into foreign service, so I couldn't transfer her at government expense. The result was that she stayed here. When I stayed out there that long, I said why don't we get government quarters here and get her to come out at my expense. I told her what I had planned. I think she was getting ready to move when I heard a rumor, called scuttlebutt, that we were being shipped out soon. I called her and said, "My orders have been changed so you stay right where you are." I was headed out into the Pacific and kept on going until I got to the Philippines.

C: What did your work in the Seabees entail? I don't think everybody knows what the Seabees did.

R: The government would order the military to take over an island if they needed to establish an airfield on it. Then the Seabees, who were the engineers for the Navy, would go in with the Marines and after the island was taken over, the Marines would leave and the Seabees would stay to clear off those jungle islands and bring in the heavy equipment and build an airport. Every man in the Seabees was rated according to what he had been doing as a civilian for twenty years. I was in the financial part in the Supply Corps under Disbursements, which took care of all the payrolls in our outfit.

The big heavy equipment operators were good. One man out there could do anything with those bulldozers. One time I saw him taking bets that he could take a watch and cover it with sand and then knock that sand off the watch using the steel blade of a 10-ton bulldozer. Boy, he was getting money from bets all over the place. He did it!

C: Some story! How long did you stay in the Philippines?

R: I enlisted as a First Class Petty Officer in November 1942 and got out as a Chief in January 1946.

C: So you stayed in after the war was over?

R: Yes, I was "frozen". I had enough points to get out at the end of the war but was "frozen" because I was a specialist and couldn't be released. They put me in the relief station where they discharged the regular men.

C: So you were in the Finance Department and needed to stay on in the same place in the Philippines until you got out?

R: No, I left the Philippines in 1946 -- Labor Day 1946 -- and they sent me to the U.S. to San Francisco (Treasure Island). I was in three different categories there. I came into Treasure Island for a 30-day leave, which was canceled. Then they had to decide what to do with me. If I had enough points for discharge, I could be discharged unless the Navy showed proof that I could not be. Instead of getting released, they sent me to Puget Sound Navy Yard in Bremerton, WA, to help with the release of the other men. I was there on permanent duty orders, so I got Jill on the phone and said, "I've got permanent duty orders now. Get ready to come up here." She did. She quit her job at the University. Then she had a problem with transportation getting there and finally got Harvey Watt to help her get transportation on a plane. He got her on Eastern Airlines as his sister or something -- I don't know just what -- and she flew out to Seattle. We went into Navy housing. She must have been there about

two or three months before I was finally relieved. I helped check myself out of the Navy and came home to Florida.

C: And that would have been about 1946?

R: Yes.

C: You and Jill came back together then? Did you see a big change in Gainesville in 1946?

R: Not a whole lot. There were a lot of people out at the University connected with the armed forces at that time, most of them in the Army.

C: No more horse and buggy?

R: No.

C: And a few more cars?

R: Yes. I got back into the theaters. I came back through Jacksonville and saw the General Manager there at the theater, and I was supposed to be able to get my same job back. I told him I wanted to check in, and he said, "Yes, when do you get out?" I said, "Well, I'm out now." He said, "When are you going to work?" I said, "I want to take a month off," and he said, "No, I have to get a manager back in Gainesville. I have one there now, but I want to get him out. You go back in there to Gainesville again." I said, "All right."

C: You didn't have any big, long vacation.

R: No.

C: But you managed the three theaters and didn't you also manage the University of Florida concessions at that time? That was part of the theater business?

R: Yes. I told them that I would do it for a year. At the end of the year, I said, "Listen, I can't take this running the theaters and doing that, too. I'll take one of the other -- either one you want, I'll do. I'm not going to do both of them." They said, "Well, if you'll do it this year, we'll eliminate it next year."

C: When did you go back to school?

R: Well, I had never finished so enrolled in 1947.

C: So you went to college late in life?

R: Yes.

C: And you did that along with managing the theaters in 1947?

R: I couldn't do both of them.

C: So you were managing the theaters and the concessions, then somewhere along the line when you were in school, you started doing just the University of Florida concessions?

R: Yes, and then eased out of that, when I went back into the theaters full-time.

C: And did you graduate from the University?

R: I didn't graduate. I didn't plan to graduate, just took courses I wanted -- accounting and speech.

C: I see. Accounting and business.

R: Yes. Stocks and bonds, banking, and then journalism. Those are the things I wanted. So I had enough credits to go into the upper division, but I never stayed there to take advantage of it.

C: You had enough to do! Then you became active in the City of Gainesville, through the Rotary Club, I believe. Tell me about your years in the Rotary Club. Do you remember when you first joined?

R: Yes, in October 1936. Right now I have a lapel pin that shows 53 years of faithful service for attending all meetings. I haven't officially missed any meetings. Let me show you something. I just happened to think of it.

C: Ed has a wonderful picture of himself in a very handsome white suit with his mother and sister, and another picture of his Dad. That white suit reminds him of the days he wore those at the Florida Theater.

R: That's right. I was always referred to as the man in the white suit, and the employees called me the Great White Father!

C: That's wonderful! Well, besides all that perfect attendance in the Rotary Club, I am sure you have a lot of good friends in Rotary that you might be able to tell us about.

R: Right. I was President two different times, in the days when Preacher Gordon was there, Walter Matherly, some of those people. They did help me really get started in Rotary.

C: I believe in 1956 you were head of the Chamber of Commerce drive. Do you remember much about that?

R: I don't remember too much about that.

C: You were probably involved in a good many other civic activities.

R: I was County Chairman for Red Cross one year and had several other jobs.

C: As Gainesville grew, the University changed and so did the city. You began to notice some of that?

R: Yes.

C: After the war, many students came back.

R: Yes. Those were the days when they had panty raids. Do you remember those?

C: I remember hearing about them.

R: Of course, there were a lot of coeds after the war.

C: So panty raids were after World War II when it was no longer all male.

R: Yes. After the girls came, they were in the girls' dorms. The males would go there and hang around and the girls would throw out their panties.

C: Yes, that's what the panty raid was all about. In about 1960, you resigned the theaters to manage the concessions. Then the theater gave up the concessions and you went back to the theater. Then in 1962 you gave up the whole thing and went to work for a bank. Right?

R: Yes.

C: The University City Bank?

R: Yes. I went on a fishing trip in the Ocala Forest with Gerald Green, who was the Executive Officer at the University City Bank. Johnny Pearson, his brother-in-law, was the President and the owner. He knew I had worked in a bank in Macon, so while we were there, he said, "Ed, are you interested in the theater business?" I said, "Not particularly now. I don't like

the types of shows that they are sending to be shown.” He said, “What do you want to do? Get back into banking?” I said, “Yes, I wouldn’t mind at all.” He said, “Well, I need somebody at our bank. I’ve got to replace someone and if you’re interested, come down and let’s talk about it.” So I went down and talked to Johnny Pearson and he said, “When do you want to start work? I said, “As soon as I give the theater management enough time to get a manager to replace me.” So, in short, I went to work for the University City Bank.

C: And you finished your career in the bank?

R: Yes. I was promoted and retired as Senior Vice-President of Cashiers in 1972.

C: So you were at the bank for about ten years?

R: Exactly ten years. In other words, I got the full retirement. At that time, they gave you a cash payment on your retirement, which ruined me. I had to run that through as income at that particular time, and the I.R.S. wouldn’t spread it out, couldn’t do it for some reason.

C: But you enjoyed working at the bank, had a lot of good friends there?

R: Yes.

C: What were your hobbies when you had time off? Did you and Jill travel? I understand you liked to fish. You’ve already mentioned fishing.

R: Sailing was our primary hobby. I’d build boats.

C: Build them?

R: As a matter of fact, I’ve got a patent on a certain type of sail boat. I built a few but it never went beyond that.

C: Where did you go sailing?

R: Well, it was a light boat that I could put on a trailer and take anywhere I wanted. We knew a lot of people who had lake homes, and we’d go there and put it together and sail all weekend. Jill liked it as much as I did, so that’s what we did with most of our free time. We never did do much traveling. We were planning to after I retired, but haven’t done so.

C: Well, you’ve had a very good life.

R: It’s been active.

- C: Well, Gainesville has gotten to be a great big city now.
- R: That's right.
- C: It really has changed. Can you think of any other special people or memories that you want to mention?
- R: No, I wouldn't say any single person. I have had so many friends that I can't name all that have helped me. I can't single them out. I just got interested in Rotary and chaired every committee over the years.
- C: Well, you and Jill stayed on University Avenue for a while but then you built a home somewhere else in Gainesville. Where was that?
- R: On N.W. 2nd Avenue just one block west of 22nd Street, about two blocks from the President of the University's house. We built it in 1951 and lived there for forty years.
- C: Then you moved out here to The Village in 1991?
- R: Yes, we came here then. We had applied here earlier, but they were filled up so we were on their waiting list for over a year. We knew that sooner or later we were going to have to move and change our whole structure of life and go into a place like this. But in the meantime, we went to a family reunion in Georgia and on the way back, the night that we got here, I had a stroke and that set me back a little bit. That's when we had to change everything around. Of course, I couldn't help Jill move at all.
- C: So you moved out here in October 1991.
- R: Yes. We've been here 3 1/2 years.
- C: That brings you up to date, and I want to thank you very much.
- R: Is this what you wanted?
- C: This is what I wanted. I've enjoyed talking to you very much. I've had a good time and hope you have, too.
- R: Yes. I haven't even thought about some of this in many years.
- C: Well, that's what it is supposed to do, get your mind working on the old days. I really do appreciate it and will get this back to you to be edited. Then we'll type a final copy and give it to you to keep.

Interview with Edward Roberts
March 9, 1995

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