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INTERVIEW WITH MRS. FLORENCE MARTIN FRANCE
1307 Woodlawn Avenue, Wilmington, Delaware
July 8, 1974

INTERVIEWED BY: Rebecca Button
(Side II of tape)

FF: Mrs. France
RB: Rebecca Button

RB: Mrs. France has had a long career as a volunteer and community leader in Wilmington beginning, Mrs. France, when you were a volunteer as a Grey Lady during World War II, is that correct?

FF: Well, not really, because I had been a volunteer for the Red Cross since 1938 and had been a chairman of surgical dressings for the making of surgical dressings for the Red Cross in the State from 1940 on. My husband was overseas from 1942 to 1946 and so I did all sorts of things in the beginning of the Red Cross service because everybody turned to and did everything. I chaperoned girls for the dances at Ft. Du Pont. We fed the trench airplane pilots who flew planes in here and then flew them off to England; and, as there were no mess halls at the air base, the Red Cross took food to those pilots. They also fed the guards on the St. George's Bridge during that time. There were all sorts of things we did. We worked day and night making surgical dressings. We also, as a team with two of my friends, Miss Knox and Mrs. Charles Lee Munson whose husband was also overseas, were called on as Grey Ladies to work at the air base when the wounded were flown in to be sent from the air base hospital to various hospitals throughout the State. We were able to give them free telephone calls, their first calls to their families; and this was underwritten for the Red Cross by the various merchants in the State. They were a great help to everybody and those men were just fabulous; their stories were terrific. Some were in very bad shape, but they had a great moral sense. They were really very patriotic people. I was surprised because when wounded come in you think, oh, dear, they're going to be and some of them were in bad shape, but we had a lot of work for them. We wrote letters for them and did all kinds of errands because coming over as wounded they had no clothes probably lots of times and had various things that we could do for them. We didn't act as nurses.
RB: Were these men mostly routed to Valley Forge Hospital from here?

FF: Not necessarily. If they could be helped at Valley Forge, they were sent there. Often when they were terminal cases, they were sent to hospitals nearer their homes. One time we had a telephone call for one of the men, and his wife was in a small town in Wisconsin, I think; and the telephone operator went all over that area trying to find her. She had taken her car to a garage, and they finally reached her there and she was able to talk to her husband. It was fascinating, and we were on call day and night. My parents took care of my children. That was their war service, my parents' and my husband's parents'.

RB: Did you do things like cancer dressings and bandages as a Grey Lady?

FF: Not as a Grey Lady, no. That was when I was chairman of surgical dressings. We made all kinds, not cancer dressings necessarily, but we made all kinds and sizes as the National Red Cross gave us quotas.

RB: This was later in your Red Cross work?

FF: No, this was early. This was in the beginning, in 1940, '42, and '43. I was a Grey Lady from 1942 until 1958 when I had to stop because my father was blind and I had to read to him and type his column which was in the Morning News.

RB: And you had worked on the Sunday Star as the women's editor after your father sold the paper in 1946?

FF: That's right, my father sold it in 1946; and I went to work on it in 1948 after my daughter went to college and my son was in high school, and I was able to work on it then as the women's editor and I had a fabulous time. I would go to New York and the showings for dresses and hats. Fabulous hats. Laddie Northridge was one of the then hat couturiers as one would say. It was a very interesting time. I also was able to interview Pierre Balmain when he was here for the Du Pont Company with a whole line of beautiful clothes of Du Pont fabrics. I did speak a little French, and it was a great help at that time and I enjoyed it.

RB: Did you do for example for the Flower Market, the rotogravure was printed first by the Star, is that correct?
FF: By the Star, that's right. I didn't do anything on the rotogravure. For the Flower Market, I was in the first Flower Market as waitress. We were still in school, and we were asked to come down and be waitresses during our noontimes and we would go to the little Flower Market then in Tenth Street Park and be waitresses for the luncheons they used to have. They used to have luncheons then.

RB: Well, where was the Tenth Street Park?

FF: The Tenth Street Park is presently there. It's between Jackson and Van Buren and Tenth Street and Park Place, and the houses all roundabout were the nice Victorian houses. There are still a few on Park Place. If it was a rainy day for the flower market, the ladies had their little shops or their plants on the various porches around the block. And so people came to the Flower Market whether it was rainy or sunny.

RB: Who began the Wilmington Flower Market?

FF: Mrs. A. Felix Du Pont, it's Mrs. Du Pont, I've forgotten now what she was then; she's remarried again, but I don't remember what her name was.

RB: It was her idea then?

FF: It was her idea. Mrs., oh dear I can't remember, there were so many. After all, you know the Flower Market is over fifty years old now.

RB: Yes, I believe it's fifty-four years old.

FF: Yes. And later I was chairman for growing vegetables for a number of years, for about four years I guess until about 1958. Of course the Flower Market is still going on. There are all kinds of things. I was also chairman for public welfare for the New Century Club.

RB: How long have you worked, I know you're now on the Board of Directors of the New Century Club?

FF: I'm President of the Board of Directors of the Corporation of the New Century Club.

RB: And you have been President of the Club?

FF: I've been President of the Club itself, yes.
RB: How would you talk about the Wilmington New Century Club? If you were going to tell a stranger to Wilmington about it.

FF: Well, it's a group of women who are interested, well, of course it was started in 1879 and the present building was built in 1893. It's a group of women who banded together at that time for philanthropic purposes, for education, for cultural advantages, and they wanted a clubhouse to use themselves as a center for public affairs in the community, and many of the public plays and talks, I believe President Wilson was a speaker there one time. All kinds of people have used the Century Club as headquarters, and presently, while it's a much smaller group of women, they are interested still in philanthropy, in gardening, in public affairs, public welfare. It's rather hard to place it because, like any other women's group, they are always trying to do something for the betterment of the community at large. We are rather restricted now because we have no parking spaces, and that makes it very difficult, but the building itself is a very handsome building, designed by a woman by the way.

RB: Has the New Century Club ever thought of changing its location because of the parking problems?

FF: Well, why we'd hate to move. I suppose if we had a good offer we might. There used to be 750 members. Now we have only about 250, and of course many of them are women who live near in apartments and so forth around town.

RB: Why do you think the membership has dropped?

FF: Well, I think one of the things was the lack of parking space. Also, one of the community interest in clubs has changed. The original Century Club had dancing classes in languages, German, French, had current events. Well now one covers those things in television. Most languages are taught in schools now. Young women are going to colleges much more. There were very few colleges for women in the early group. The first group of women met at Mrs. Joe Jackson's, which was a house where the present Y.M.C.A. is now at Delaware Avenue and Washington; and the group of women rose to a tremendous amount. They met also in what was then called the Board of Trade Building which was on the second floor of the Crosby & Hill between Sixth & Seventh on Market Street, and then they decided to build their own building. The ground was broken for that
building in July of 1892, and the reception for the opening of the building was January 14, 1893, six months; and it is a beautiful building, very well built.

RB: Mrs. Stone's dancing class was there for years.

FF: Oh, yes, Mrs. Stone's dancing class. Miss McClafferty had a dancing class there. There were two or three. Mrs. Stone's dancing class was the era of my son and daughter going to dancing school, and I was most interested. My son hated to go then to dancing school, but he recently said to me he did wish there was another dancing class like Mrs. Stone's so his sons could have the advantages of dancing school, and I thought it was rather amusing.

RB: Well, you would think would you that the young woman who joined the Century Club in the early 1900's would be the kind of woman who would always find something outside her home. She would be looking for activity and interests, and she would want to learn too.

FF: Well, if she wanted to learn, she was looking for interests, not necessarily outside of her home because it became part and parcel of the home. As a matter of fact, one of the interesting aspects about the early Club is that there were only two women in the early group that could write their own checks, that had their own bank accounts. And the other women had quite a time convincing their families that belonging to a club would be of advantage. They had to pay $5 for initiation fee, no $5 for dues, $5 for a share of stock. The stock was sold the first time; it's been a headache ever since, and $5 for a teacup and saucer and plate. And those are still in the Century Club; we still have those porcelain from the early beginning. It is a lovely gold flame and N.C.C. and porcelain cups you can see through, just beautiful.

RB: That is a good kind of tradition, isn't it. Was tea usually served after the meetings?

FF: Yes, usually after the meetings and very formal teas, very decorative, and when one thinks of $5 even in 1893, it was a quite hefty initiation, not initiation, but dues. But they were able to have foremost people here as speakers. They always had very good programs, and of course they underwrote many of the philanthropic affairs of the city. Mrs. A. D. Warner, who was one of the early members, was
FF: (Cont'd)

an instigator of the women's college of the university. Various other members worked very hard to have a college for women. They worked very hard to have the Southern approach of the city made more decorative. It used to be Oyster Shell Road with trees growing. I can remember willow trees growing; I don't remember the Oyster Shell Road.

RB: And the Warner Cement Company.

FF: Down below, yes, down below. Grandma Warner was Mrs. A. D. Warner—everybody called her Grandma—she was a very, aggressive, but very charming woman. Her aggression was not unladylike. But Mrs. Heb (?) started the needlework guild in the Century Club, and that is a present charity. It's still going on where women collect new garments for all kinds of men, women, and children, and are given to the various charity organizations like the Visiting Nurses and the Sienna Hall, Seton Villa. There are all sorts of, uh, there are about thirty groups.

RB: And the needlework guild is still working?

FF: It's still working and continuing. I've been secretary since 1951 and it was in existence, the Wilmington branch is about 80 years old.

RB: Isn't that wonderful.

FF: In Wilmington many things started in the Century Club. It was the headquarters for the Red Cross in the World War I. It was also a hospital for the flu patients in 1918, 1919, and members and other people, men and women, worked very hard at the Century Club to try to help people to get better from the flu. Many of them died, though, unfortunately.

RB: Do you have meetings more than once a week?

FF: Oh, well, the regular monthly meeting is the second Wednesday of the month, but every Wednesday there is something going on at the Club and other days too. But nearly every Wednesday a committee meeting will have a fine arts meeting or a literature meeting or public welfare. The board of the corporation meets once a month, and executive board meets once a month for a business meeting. Those are always on Fridays.
RB: Will the New Century Club be thinking of changing its name, or will it be the New Century Club in 10,000?

FF: No, I think it will always be the New Century Club. And the reason for that was of course the club idea started in the 1890's, the 1880's and 1890's, and they were looking forward to the new century--the 1900's; and I suppose we will always be looking forward to the new century, so that was the reason for that. In the Columbia World's Fair of 1893, they asked the women's clubs to contribute furniture for a women's headquarters; and we at the Century Club contributed a very handsome carved oak bench which is still in the Club and has a plate on it with a commemorative inscription from the Columbia World's Fair. There are all sorts of fascinating stories about the Club.

RB: What about the Federation of Women's Clubs. What was your part in their organization?

FF: Well, the New Century Club was one of seven who started the general federation of women's clubs; and they also were one of the charter members who started the city federation of women's clubs.

RB: You've been president of the federation at all?

FF: I've been president of the Wilmington federation of women's clubs which is now called the Federation of Women's Organizations, and I have been vice president for the State federation of women's clubs, the Delaware State Federation of Women's Clubs, and chairman of fine arts for both groups.

RB: Do you find that the federation is very helpful for all its member groups, it helps them?

FF: It helps them coordinate ideas. The general federation puts forth various plans for ideas for work for the various clubs and they may or may not accept all of the ideas they make, but they often do accept most of the ideas because most of them are pretty well thought out for club work. The AAUW has taken over a good many of the ideas and things that the various clubs started, but of course a good deal of the people now are young college women and they are more adaptable in their smaller groups. Now, the women's clubs here, there are 23 women's clubs in this county, federated women's clubs, which makes it a little difficult sometimes, but it also makes it good for smaller groups to work together, groups within their neighborhood. A great many women's clubs doing marvelous jobs.
RB: What do you see the future of, do you see a continuing need and the membership dropping the way it has been dropping in church groups. You don't see this as a threat to the life of the community women's club?

FF: Well, there is and there isn't. I think there will always be a feeling for club membership of some sort. I think the goals not necessarily have changed, but they are different from the ones that were the original goals.

RB: For one thing, women's liberation, its movement has made a difference. The New Century Club could think of itself as a pioneer here certainly.

FF: That's right.

RB: Helping women know they had a checkbook.

FF: That's right. Also, it gave them a sense of responsibility that they, inately they had the sense of responsibility, but I don't think that they had the intestinal fortitude to go out and do it publicly. They did charitable things within their churches, within their groups, but it took a great many women together to make a lot of changes.

RB: I think you started to say trouble.

FF: Ha. ha. Well, I hope not. There are lots of funny things in your life that you remember. All kinds of interesting things that happened. Parties and work and play. One of the things I remember particularly was being able to go to Philadelphia. I was about twelve years old and I went to Philadelphia by myself on the Wilson Line ferry at 25¢ a ride. I went to Philadelphia and got on the subway and went to Gimbel's and Wanamaker's and did a little shopping and came back all by myself. My family allowed me to do it. I don't know why because they didn't allow me to do very many things, but that was one of the things I suppose they felt I could do, and I enjoyed doing it. It used to be a regular thing. Families went to Philadelphia for their shopping, and much as the Star tried to steer them to Wilmington stores.

RB: By the way, John Munroe's first book, THE DELAWARE HISTORIAN, was called the Philadelawarians, and it showed the natural proclivity for Philadelphia that Wilmington people had and Delaware people had.
FF: That's right.

RB: Because Delaware people generally would take the train to Philadelphia and not even come to Wilmington for the hospital for instance.

FF: Well, I don't know about that, but. Well, I do know that Delaware Road train would be crowded with people going to Philadelphia shopping and whatever.

RB: And the Wilson Line.

FF: And the Wilson Line, too. But they had a great proclivity for going to Philadelphia. After all, Philadelphia was a center and it's still fun. I must say, I haven't been there for some time. The last time I think I went up to the art museum to see some beautiful showings they had there. I don't remember.

RB: What about when we were talking about your father's life and the life of the Sunday Star, you were talking about the present need in 1974 to try to save the houses on Second Street. Could you elaborate on that?

FF: Well, there's only one house on Second Street. It's the Ferris house. But the other houses that I was talking about are on Sixth and Seventh Street that are desperately in need. They belong to the city and they are desperately in need of restoration. They are not reconstruction. They are the original houses, and I'm glad to see that the Customs House has been saved; and I'm hoping that these other houses will be renovated and be useful. It is unfortunate that the present plans for the restoration or reconstruction shall I say of King Street does not include using those houses. To my mind it would be a more interesting center for the city to use those houses on Sixth and Seventh Street and the Customs House in conjunction with the old Town Hall and the Old Swedes Church. The idea of moving these little houses to Old Swedes Church is an excellent one, but it does move them from their foundations. I don't know whether anyone has ever done any archeological digs around these houses, but they must be fabulous. But so much has been lost within the city. Absolutely wantonly destroyed. All of our, most of our Eighteenth Century houses, I don't think there are very many Eighteenth Century houses around at all. These little ones. The one on Second Street is 1748, but I believe the other four little houses are 1900 something. And while the Old Swedes Church is the Seventeenth Century, 1698, I believe, it seems too bad that we are not preserving our heritage. We are simply destroying it. Wilmington used to have a
FF: (Cont'd)

lot of interesting things. I used to do talks about
Wilmington and Delaware. Two landmark groups. And now
I have to say this is the site of such and such. It is
just too bad we didn't preserve our heritage.

RB: Did you interest in the landmarks in Wilmington begin
with, at the time of the Revolutionary War Forum, or
was it separate?

FF: My interest you mean?

RB: Yes. I mean when you were saying you made talks, I was
wondering.

FF: I didn't do it for the Revolutionary War Forum. I joined
the Revolutionary War Forum simply because it was a group
of men and women who were interested in that period, and
I felt that it was a group that would be interesting to
me. There group meets about four times a year. They are
interested in the history of Wilmington and of the State
and particularly during the Revolutionary period. We are
a small group.

RB: Do you take trips as a group?

FF: We have. We are hoping to take one to Independence Hall.
But we have been to Fort Midland and we have been to the
group in New Jersey, I can't think of. There's a fort
over there near Salem.

RB: Some said that it was too bad that Fort Midland had been
planned so close to an airport.

FF: Ha, ha. Well, that's very true. They have a very active
group of men there who reenact the army period, army
maneuvers.

RB: When Fort Midland fired on the British ships in the
Delaware, is that fact?

FF: Yes, yes. In fact they inhibited the capturing Philadelphia
for quite a long time. And it's a very interesting place to
visit. It still, every Sunday in the summertime they have
a reenactment of parts of the history of that period. We
go there. I presently, while I'm president, I'm not a
charter member and was not and didn't really know about it
until much later. I believe it started about 1956 or some­
thing like that. I just don't remember now offhand. I
can't remember.
RB: Was Emerson Wilson the moving spirit?

FP: Well, he was one of them. Charles Wallman, I'm sure. Jim Simpson and, it started out as a men's group. And then their wives. It was a dinner. A group that met for dinner and they decided to ask their wives and their wives got interested and so women joined many of them. Most of them are women and men who are interested in history and interested in the State of Delaware. Dr. Munroe is a member and has spoken to us a number of times. We have various speakers interested in that period. We meet about four times a year in the . It's a very interesting group.

RB: What would you say that you see as some of the major problems and maybe the way they are being attacked in the city today? Through any of the groups that you are connected with, the government in general. What would be some of your views.

FP: Well, one of the things that worries me a little bit is the general apathy. People read the newspapers and see what is going on. They see the problems of the city, but they don't do anything about it. They just sit back and wait for somebody else to do it, and I would like to see a more concerted effort of the people in general in all walks of life. One of the big problems, of course in doing anything is to have money for it, but I do think that many of the groups who are trying to help in various ways in asking for money think only in millions rather than in dollar bills. Some of us who do not have a great deal of money would be very happy to feel that they are doing something if they could contribute a dollar or two or $5, but they are made to feel even the churches tithe themselves out of existence. They feel that their little bit is not really worth it, but if everybody in town for instance gave $.50 or $1.00 towards some specific thing that they are interested in, you would be surprised how much money that would involve. I know money sounds awfully crass, but you do have to have money to get things going. I would like, I hope that the interest in downtown Wilmington will improve. I am hoping that it will improve the people. When you're there in the middle of the day, there are lots of people around. It's in the evenings that it is very empty, very, and you do not feel that you want to be downtown. I am sorry about that. It used to be a great deal of fun. I wasn't as a child allowed to go downtown very much. I remember one
time. It was some election or other, and The Morning News was on Market Street. My mother took us downtown, and we got in a great crowd right in front of The Morning News which was opposite the Queen Theater at that time; and she dropped her pocketbook. She got everything back that was in that pocketbook. I don't know what would have happened today, but, nevertheless she did. She got everything back in all of that crowd. And this was an evening affair. People used to go downtown to the movies at night and think nothing of it. I think it's too bad that we aren't able to do so now. Although there aren't any movies downtown now, but I think that television of course has changed a great many of the attitudes of people going to shows, I am hoping that this improvement of the opera house will stir many people.

RB: Have the audiences there been healthy audiences? Have the theater groups that have been there been sizeable.

FF: I don't really know. I've been not able to go. Each time that there's been something there I've either been out of town or had other engagements. I've not been there. I remember it when I was a child, going there a long, long time ago; but I don't remember it. I haven't been there recently.

RB: And you haven't heard whether they are getting good attendance. I was wondering.

FF: Well, from what the newspapers say, there's been a good general attendance. I don't know. But of course it is so specialized and so few and far between that I understand that the Playhouse audiences have improved a great deal. Everybody seems to be interested in the plays that come here now. I'm sorry to hear that the Brecks Mill is closed, but the groups there have always had very interesting plays but maybe they will find some place else, hopefully the Century Club. I'd like to see them use the Century Club.

RB: Oh, can you offer the Century Club then?

FF: The parking would be the problem. But we still have the facilities. We have a very good stage, very good sound area.
RB: What about going to a bank and borrowing to buy the place next door so that you could enlarge your lot?

FF: Well, the lot next door belongs to the State; and unless the State Highway would feel like selling it, we would be still in a problem. It's too bad that the State made that throughway right in front of our club and just ruined all the protection that we had.

RB: Are there any other groups of women that you feel you should talk about?

FF: Well, one of the most interesting groups here in Wilmington is the downstate branch of the National League of American Pen Women. These are professional women who have sold their work on the open market. They are painters and sculptors and writers. All women of course and they have to be accepted by the national group before they are accepted here in Delaware. I am a charter member and I have been branch president and State president, and they are a very active group. We started out with just ten, and now there are some fifty members within the area here; and there is another branch in Dover. These are women who are professional people. One of the most interesting people of course is Mrs. Leonard Edwards, Ginnete Slocum Edwards, who is a painter, writer, and poet. She was a poet laureate of Delaware and Eugenia Rhodes, Mrs. Philip Rhodes, who is also a poet and a nationally known painter, who is a painter and many of the present group of young painters and writers are members of this area. Mrs. Corkran of Rehoboth was one of our members, and she was an honorary member too. They are a very active group, and they have many interests in the State.

RB: Could you tell us some of your reminiscences of Wilmington as you were growing up, things you remember that people today would not probably be able to remember.

FF: Well, there are all sorts of things. Watching the Memorial Day parade from Wish (?) Club which was then on Delaware Avenue. We were allowed out for that day for that time and then we had to go back to school. We didn't have time off as the public schools did on Memorial Day. I remember the various fire houses throughout Wilmington, and they used to have a double-decker sled that went down Third Street hill. I was allowed out at night with my father and mother to watch them go. We never did sled at night. The various old stately houses along Delaware Avenue were very handsome houses. The original house at which the Red Cross had headquarters at 911 Delaware Avenue belonged to Gov. Preston Lee, and the house next door belonged to Howard Pyle. There was a very funny story about that. When I was working in surgicals in the Preston Lee
FF: (Cont'd)

house, we were, it had been fixed up for a place to wash your hands and things like that so you would have clean hands to make the surgicals, some woman came in. She looked at the ceiling of this handsome room, and she said, hmm, the Red Cross is spending too much money on the ceilings; and I said "Madam, that ceiling was put there probably in the 1890's. It's a very handsome plaster ceiling, I grant you, but it would cost a fortune to try to remove it." And so we use it as just a decorative feature now. The house of course now, both of those houses have been torn down; and the old IBM building was there, and now a Post Office branch is in that area. Lots of the houses along Delaware Avenue have gone. There are a few between Franklin and Broom Street, but most of them have become other areas. The houses along Broom Street itself have disappeared. Many of them were very handsome houses, made for early families of Wilmington. I must say that I am upset about the loss of the beautiful places in Wilmington although we have some very handsome modern buildings, we still have lost much of our heritage.

RB: Aren't most of the old Broom Street houses there?

FF: No, not all of them. The houses from Ninth Street to Delaware Avenue, a few of them have gone. Notably our house which was 97. The, where Padua Academy is now, there were a number of handsome houses. They were built by Miss Ella Pyle, Miss Elizabeth Pyle's father. I can't remember what his name was. The Judge Marvel house is gone on the corner of Ninth and Broom. And the Fenn (?) house is still there at Tenth and Broom. The Fletcher Brown house has become Ingleside Nursing Home. A number of the others are there, but not very many. But I will say that some of them have been kept in very good condition, and the few that are there from there to the Park Drive almost some are in good condition and some are not. It's too bad. I wonder what the people who lived in those houses would think about it now. But then Wilmington has changed a great deal; and I think that while some of it has gone up, some of it has come down. I would like to see everybody have a chance to have lovely houses to live in, and from reading just recently about young people who have bought older houses and are refurbishing them. I think that is a very interesting set of ideas to progress in the City. Maybe we'll still be a large town, not dedicated to any particular idea of progress. I don't know whether progress is so good. I think we just go along and do the best we can. I think maybe that's what we should do.

END OF INTERVIEW