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Interview with William Frank, March 22, 1974, in the newsroom of the News Journal Company, Wilmington, Delaware, by Steven Schoenherr. (3rd of 3 interviews)

Q Let's see, we were going to talk last time about the theater in Arden and in Wilmington. When did you first get involved in theater?

A I was never involved in theater up until the time that I moved to Arden. And the first time I went to Arden for any kind of a permanent residence was in 1926 or thereabouts. Now Arden had a Players Gild and they always spelled it Gild in contrast to the Guild. They thought it was the Old English spelling. So Arden had always been--one of the features of Arden was the Players Gild. The Players Gild had started in Arden back in the 1890's before Arden was even founded. The single-taxers under the leadership of Frank Stephens used to meet in Philadelphia sometimes in Frank Stephens' home (he spelled his name S-t-e-p-h-e-n-s). He was a sculptor and an ardent single-taxer—that is the Henry George philosophy of single tax. And he thought that the single taxers could develop as effective speakers by learning Shakespeare. And so they used to meet in Frank Stephens' home quite often in Philadelphia and emote Shakespeare. And this was to develop them as articulate orators when they came into Delaware in 1896 to convince Delaware to go over to the Single Tax System. They used to parade up and down Market Street, they used to speak at 5th and Market and down in Dover. Now when Arden was founded in 1900, one of the first things Frank Stephens did—he was the founder of Arden—one of the first things he did was to build a theater, an outdoor theater, and that theater continued almost up until this day. And they used to give Shakespearean plays in the summertime every Saturday night—they had a repertory. And Frank Stephens played the leading roles and the villagers would play the same roles year after year and then the youngsters coming up through the ranks, after a while, when they got older, would take over some of the leading roles as they got more mature and the older people dropped out. So when I got into Arden in '26 or '27—somewhere around that—I was working on the Morning News—I was quite entranced by the theater in Arden.

Q Is that why you moved to Arden?

A No. I moved to Arden because it was a Bohemian life, because it was an interesting place and because there was a man named Arthur Andrews who used to work on the Morning News who lived there and he enticed me to go there. I had been to Arden when I was a kid. My brother-in-law was a socialist and the socialists used to have meetings out in Arden. I remember that.

Q Who was your brother-in-law?

A My brother-in-law was David Levenberg, who is still living in 1974. He's a barber. But I remember as a kid they used to have these outings in Arden. And I remember they used to walk down the road with a violin player named David Marten, who spelled his name M-a-r-t-e-n, playing the International—do you know that song? It was taken over as a communist song, but the socialists used to sing that song. And I remember they used to march down to the open-air theater where the plays had been given—were also being given—and they'd have their socialist meetings. Many of the early residents of Arden were socialists and they were antagonistic to the single-taxers but they all came to Arden to live because it was a free colony where there were no inhibitions as to expressing
their economic ideas. There was also an anarchist who lived there by the name of Brown—he was a shoemaker, and he called himself a philosophical anarchist. Upton Sinclair lived there many years ago. Mother Bloor, who was supposed to have been the mother of the communist movement in the United States, she lived there.

Q How do you spell that?

A B-l-o-o-r. And she had two sons, one was Harold Ware and the other was H. Hamilton Ware. Harold Ware actually became a communist. Now we know that—it's been documented. Mrs. Bloor was a communist, but Buzz Ware—Hamilton Ware, they called him Buzz—he never became a communist. So they had a Shakespearean atmosphere in Arden. The name Arden itself came from the forest of Arden in As You Like It. In As You Like It, the Duke is exiled to the forest of Arden, where he says, "Here we can live the free life away from the pomp and circumstance of the outside world." And so that's how Frank Stephens named the place Arden. And the whole thing was sort of a pseudo-Old English way of living. The houses took on a sort of a half-timbered effect, and everything had that Elizabethan atmosphere. Also the various organizations of the community club were known as the Scholars Guild or the Fireman's Guild or the Players Guild, the Housewives Guild—it was on that basis. So they gave these plays...

Q Could you tell me a little bit more about this Frank Stephens? He sounds like a very interesting personality.

A Yeah. Frank Stephens—we used to call him Patro—he was a great devotee of Esperanto, and Patro in Esperanto, I think it means father or big-shot—big-wheel, see. Frank was a single-taxer, he was [for] a women's suffrage movement, he was an anti-vivisectionist, he was a pacifist. He was everything against the establishment—you name it. But he was a single-taxer and he endured the socialists because there weren't enough single-taxers around to populate the town. But the socialists, many of them came down from Philadelphia. And they attracted people like Upton Sinclair who was a socialist and also there were the free thinkers and the free lovers and all that.

Q Was Stephens a wealthy man?

A No. He was not a wealthy man. He was a comparatively poor man. He wasn't poor, that is he managed to live. He lectured in his younger days, and he had a forge where he designed wrought iron and he had men actually work out these designs. He also made furniture, and he had some houses which he rented. And also some wealthy women around town would support some of his projects. Stephens is a whole new—the whole bag—a whole new story. So when I came out there I was attracted to this theater. Of course now in high school I abhorred Shakespeare because I had to learn these long soliloquies, but there I was. And I remember the first play I was in. I showed up one day for rehearsal in Julius Caesar, and I was just a spear bearer. This was in the open-air theater. We had the rehearsals in the evening in the summertime, in the early evening, and then we'd give the play Saturday night. Now the costumes had been purchased by the Players Guild from the Ben Greet Players—that was a touring repertory Shakespearean company. When they went out of existence, the Players Guild bought
all their costumes. And so we always wore the same costumes and somehow or
another they always fit everybody no matter what they were. So in the first
play, I was in Julius Caesar and I was a spear bearer. The next play in
which I took part, I was a priest in Hamlet at the burial scene. And then I
hung around long enough and then later as other actors dropped out I kept on
going up the ladder, until finally I was taking some major roles like Sir
Toby Belch in Twelfth Night and I also took some better roles in Shakespeare.
I think I played Cassius one year and I played in Romeo and Juliet—comparatively...not the top role, but supporting roles—and then as the others died
out I became more and more interested and began directing Shakespearean plays
myself there, sometimes in the open-air theater and sometimes in the Gild Hall.
The Gild Hall was an old farmhouse—a barn—that had been transformed into a
community hall. It was very interesting giving these plays because if you
didn't know the lines, sometimes you slipped up in the lines, somebody in the
audience would give it to you. They were always cut down, trimmed down, for
an hour and a half—they would trim out a lot of the fat from the Shakespearean
plays. And so I finally got myself terribly involved in Shakespeare there and
so I had to do plays like Macbeth, directing and playing Macbeth, Taming of the
Shrew, playing Petruchio, directing the Taming of the Shrew. In Hamlet—I never
played Hamlet, I always played the grave digger. But people played these same
parts years after year. Now for example, a serf has—one of my favorite roles
was Bottom the Weaver in Twelfth Night. And Bottom—you know, that's a man who
gets an ass's head and he goes asleep under the banks—you know that part—"I
know a bank where the wild time blows," and opposite him was the Queen of the
Fairies, whose name was Titania. And the other day I was figuring that I had
played Bottom for about five or six Titania's, including the granddaughter of
one of them. But you play it all the time and these Titania's and these other
people come along. Now last year—this was now '73—we gave Twelfth Night
again and I was in it and I played Bottom and the girl who played Titania was
the granddaughter of one of the old Titania's and there were grandchildren of
people who had once played with me back in the early days. And we had a very
good system of where the actors would walk across the Arden green, onto the
little open-air theater, onto the stage and they were all introduced not by
their real names but by their stage names. And we had no scenery, we just had
a big rock in the background, and everything was just in and out in and out and
there was no pauses, no intermission, nothing; we just played. And in the
early days, before my time, they had the lighting with Japanese lanterns.
But when I came along they had electric lights. So this was quite an event.
We'd give at least six Shakespearean plays a summer. They'd usually start off
with Midsummer Night's Dream and they always ended with Hamlet—always the big
thing. We gave Othello, which I directed—I didn't appear in it, but I directed
Othello, and also the Merchant of Venice. Now in the Merchant of Venice I
played the Shylock and also directed that. And then we took some of these plays
down to the University of Delaware in the Inter-community Theater Drama Festivals,
which was usually in the spring, and usually came off with top honors. We would
get the top actor, which I got four or five times in a row, and also the group
would get top honors, and then we got top honors for costuming, and oh, we just
walked away with it. People would say that they never really appreciated Shake-
speare until they could see it in Arden. But we haven't given it—well, the
last time we gave it was last summer, Midsummer Night's Dream. And right now
I have so many roles now that it doesn't take me very much to sort of brush up
on my lines. We also gave the Merry Wives of Windsor and I played Falstaff,
and people in the audience would know the lines, too, and if you flipped a line,
they'd always tell you about it. At the same time, I was on the Evening Journal and I was doing some drama criticism and also began to do drama criticism of the Wilmington Drama League. The Wilmington Drama League started I believe in 1933 or '34 and I'd go review their plays, and then I was very critical and they challenged me to get into the plays, so somewhere around 1935 or '36 I was in my first Drama League play—it was called Counselor at Law. Now in those days the Wilmington Drama League had its theater in the Old Mill at 18th and Market Street; and then they moved to their new home out at Lea Boulevard and Market Street. So I was in Counselor at Law and then I was in usually—they usually gave six plays a season and I would be in about two of them a season. And then gradually I would get up in the organization of the Drama League and got on the board of directors, but never became chairman of the board of president of the Drama League.

Q The Drama League was a professional or an amateur organization?

A No, it was a community theater of Wilmington—amateur. We always called it non-professional, 'cause we said the only difference between the amateur—between the professional and the non-professional was just the matter of a paycheck, you see. Also one of the most interesting plays we gave was Twelfth Night in the Drama League and we had our first or second rehearsal on December the 7th, 1941, and I was mad as hell. We'd heard about Pearl Harbor but none of us realized what Pearl Harbor meant on that particular Sunday afternoon. And we had a rehearsal that afternoon and we had a soldier from Ft. DuPont, which is near Delaware City—he was supposed to be in it, and he sent word that he couldn't be in the show because of Pearl Harbor and we were ranting around the theater wondering what the hell was Pearl Harbor gonna do—why would Pearl Harbor interfere with this guy coming up to this play. Well, of course a couple of days later we realized what Pearl Harbor meant, see. But we gave Twelfth Night. And when we gave Twelfth Night—or any of those plays—in the Drama League, it was a little more sophisticated. We paid more—we hired the costumes, the lighting was a little better—it wasn't as rustic. Generally speaking the plays in Arden were very rustic. In the Drama League they were a lot more sophisticated, a lot more disciplined, and a lot more thought out—particularly the lighting. Also we had intermissions in the Drama League, but we didn't have any intermissions in Arden, when you played in the open-air theater. Then I drifted over to the Lyceum Players. The Lyceum Players are still in existence and the maestro of those players is Victor Clark, and he gives Shakespeare every summer at Longwood in the open-air theater. And I played Shakespeare with him. I played Midsummer Night's Dream again; I played the Merry Wives of Windsor; and I was in Anthony and Cleopatra. And last summer we gave the Merchant of Venice and I played the—I played Shylock. This summer they were supposed to—they were trying out for Taming of the Shrew, but I figured that my age certainly didn't lend myself to be a gallant Petruchio, so I didn't try out. But unfortunately because of these plays in Shakespeare, people started to think I was an expert on Shakespeare. I really wasn't. All I know is that when I concentrated I got to know a lot about the plays that we gave. There are a lot of other plays I don't know too much about. I don't know too much about the Henry's or Richard's, or Coriolanus or any of those plays. The plays that I knew we'd studied and studied all about. We also studied the various stage business that actors over the years used to give. Now Frank Stephens, when we gave Merchant—when we gave Hamlet or we gave Twelfth Night, and when we gave Midsummer Night's Dream, the stage business was quite traditional. It was what I had learned from Frank Stephens, being in the plays. And so these various stage businesses were handed down from him.
Now I understand that he had gotten them from famous actors before him—in his
time, the 1880's, 1890's.

Q What was your favorite role?
A In Shakespeare?
Q Of the Shakespeare plays, yeah.
A Well, my favorite role was Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night* and
Bottom in *Midsummer Night's Dream,* 'cause I thought they were all the same
character—a very rambunctious, loud-mouthed character. There wasn't anything
subtle about any of them. I thought they were all kin. I thought Toby—Sir
Toby Belch, Bottom and Falstaff were all the same person, see. I did get a
big thrill out of playing Macbeth. That was a real thrill. It was a serious
one. And of course the most satisfying—recently the most satisfying one—role
I had—was playing Shylock last summer. That was the extremely serious role.
I haven't been given very much the serious roles—it was always comedy. And
you sort of lay the audience in the aisle and then the more they laugh the more
you put it on. We also took Shakespeare out to the schools and I know some of
those kids would come, settling down, "Oh Lord, we're gonna see some stuffy
play by Will Shakespeare," and then they'd find out it was a lot of fun. And
the more they laughed, the more we put it on. But also—we also would get
involved—get a great many people in the community involved. We got people
involved in costume making. For example in *Macbeth* there was nothing in our
wardrobe that lent itself to *Macbeth,* so for helmets we went down to Goodwill
and got old derbys, took the rims off and painted them silver—they made hel­
mets; for shields we would take the tops of garbage cans and paint them silver
and turn 'em around so we'd have a handle; we made some swords—broad swords;
and we decided to play it with kilts and so we went down to the Mill Store,
which was a store near Wilmington, and bought yards and yards of rough burlap.
And then we also got a bagpiper to pipe us on stage. The only trouble with
the bagpiper, he insisted on wearing his formal clothes, you know with the
Piccadilly tie and all that. We said no, we wanted—this was a rough era.
And we had a terrible time with him, but he finally came across. But what we
did—we always liked to use a lot of music. For example, with *Macbeth* we used
the bagpiper, and others we used recorders. Now up until that time recorder
music was practically unknown in Arden. We got the kids to learn recorder
music and how to play recorders and they'd play as we marched across the green.
Then we had a marching song, which was written by Frank Stephens. It was
called the 'Players Song' and he had written the words and adopted the music
from some European folk song. And we'd sing that as we marched across the
green. And it was very lovely, particularly late in the afternoon on a sum­
mer's evening, if the weather was nice, balmy, all the audience would be sit­
ting there—oh, about maybe 150 people, with the kids sitting in the pit....

Q Did they pay admission to....
A Oh, a quarter, or something like that—a very small admission. And the mos­
quitos would be there, and before we had these air bombs, we always handed
out these pumps, you know, to drive away mosquitoes. And they'd be sitting
there, and then early in the evening, just as the sun was going down, and then
we'd come across, way across on the other side of the Arden green, singing our
marching song--the 'Players Marching Song,' and then we marched right onto the stage, and then we'd bow to the audience in sort of a pseudo-Elizabethan style, and introduce the players, you know. We'd say, "Gentle folk of the village, the players are at hand. By their show you shall all that you are like to know. These be the players." Then you'd introduce the Duke, the Queen, Titania, and particularly with Titania we had certain little fairies and a bunch of kids would come forward. So we never introduced them by name--by their right name. And for curtain calls we just came out and bowed and that was it. Unfortunately they don't have enough--there's several things--they don't have enough Shakespeare, they don't have enough people. Also, I think the audiences are getting a little bit too sophisticated now to accept that kind of what I call the rustic, bucolic Shakespeare. It has to be done a little better now than the way we used to do it. Of course in the Twenties and the Thirties, when you went to Arden for a weekend, you'd stay there. You didn't run back and forth because your automobiles were not as prolific as they are now. And also we didn't have television to compete with. Now when you see a television show of Shakespeare, how can you measure up to that? But I do find that if someone would direct, why it would still be popular. It would still be popular. And you got to know your lines, and there were people who always played the same parts, year after year, and they'd know the part. And sometimes they wouldn't study them enough in advance to refurbish them--their lines--and so they'd get fouled up in their lines then.

Q Who were some of the outstanding personalities that you can remember over the years?

A You mean in the Shakespeare?

Q Yeah. Actors....

A Well, there was Frank Stephens, and then there was Will Price, who was a very well known architect of Philadelphia and Atlantic City who helped Frank to develop Arden. Then there was a Philadelphia lawyer named Haynes Albright. And then he even got some farmers--some real dirt farmers from Brandywine Hundred. Then there was a Scotchman by the name of Ian Milne. Then there were the fabulous Ross family. There was Elizabeth Ross--she always played Ophelia, Titania and Juliet. And then there was her brother Edward Ross who played leading roles and he started the Summer Theater which is now--which he called the Robin Hood Theater on the other side of town, but is now the Candlelight Theater. And then he had a brother named Lincoln Ross and he played in the shows. And then there was a gal who's still around Arden, Bunni Hurlong--she acted and her husband Edmond Hurlong usually handled the lights and the music. And incidentally it was her granddaughter--it was her daughter who played in the last year's Midsummer Night's Dream in the play that Bunni used to play in. I guess the reason that I could keep on playing was that the parts I used to play were not particularly young swashbuckling men, see, so I could keep on playing these rough-and-ready clown-like [inaudible] plays. And then we had people come and go. Then there was Hamilton D. Ware--always played, he was one of the early residents, and his wife Edith Ware played. I know before my time Upton Sinclair used to be in some of the Shakespearean plays. And then Frank Stephens' son, who recently died, Don Stephens also played in the plays. There must have been about thirty or forty people who played in them.
Q O.K. Any other groups you've played in? Besides the ones that you've mentioned?

A No. There would be the Players Gild, the Wilmington Drama League and the Lyceum Players. I never went in for musicals. Also very interestingly, one of my first assignments on the newspaper in 1923 was to cover my class play—the senior class play. And I had been rejected in the cast, so I was very angry about it, and I remember I wrote a scathing review—which you're not supposed to do of your own class play. And that didn't make me very popular in the class of 1923 of Wilmington High School. I even forget now what the play was. Then we also did radio, a lot of radio shows. The Drama League people and the Arden people. We would dramatize—I was directing also and writing plays...or adapting plays for radio before the radio [inaudible].

Q What about the local musical scene? Symphonies?

A Well, I wasn't—I used to play violin and study violin but I was never very much of a violin player. I always played second fiddle. I didn't like that. I don't think I was in any—I was never in the Wilmington Symphony Orchestra. And then later I learned cello and then I stopped playing cello. But I was never very active in music. I remember being in some kind of a symphony, some kind of a musical group, but I was always way off on the end playing second fiddle. Do you know anything about violin playing?

Q No.

A Second fiddle you'd go [hums a few bars]—that's all you would go, you know. So I conked out of that. Now one of the great things at Arden was campfires, which we had for many many years. And that was usually dominated by folk songs and so I developed a great interest in English, Irish and Scotch folk songs. Now I had got a touch of that in school when we studied Scott's English ballads, and that was forgotten until I came out to Arden and began going into the whole English, Anglo-Saxon, Scotch, Irish, English folk song until I built up quite a repertoire. These would be regular things, on a Saturday night or a Friday night or a Sunday night, of campfires and just sitting around the campfires singing songs, folk songs. And they became ribald.

End of side one.

Q O.K. What about local artists—painters that you've known?

A Well, yes. I got to know artists as—the whole business of being a reporter opened these great new fields for me. And so I remember the first artist I ever met was Frank Schoonover. He had his studio here in Wilmington. I forget now where it is—somewhere along the Brandywine. But I remember having to go out to interview Frank Schoonover. At that time I had known about Howard Pyle—and of course Howard Pyle was dead by the time I got involved—he died in 1913 I believe. And I knew that Schoonover was one of the students of Howard Pyle, so I went out to interview Schoonover, and I was just in that whole, new fascinating world of an artist—that is a studio and an illustrator. And I remember very well hanging in his studio was a birchbark canoe,
and I remember he was painting a picture of a cavalry charge of a Civil War scene, and I got to know Frank pretty well. And then I met artists like Stanley Arthurs, another one of the Pyle group. And the most fascinating man I met of the whole group was N. C. Wyeth--the old man, the man who's now dead. I got to know Wyeth a little better than Schoonover and Arthurs because Schoonover and Arthurs were talking mostly about art, but Wyeth was beyond that. He was very prominent in the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts and also in the Delaware Art Museum. And there was a time when they wanted to build the art museum at 14th and Market where the vocational school is now, the H. Fletcher Brown Vocational School. But the other members of the Society of Fine Arts wanted to build the art center where it is now, out on Lovering Avenue, because the Bancroft family had offered them the land. So Wyeth--N. C. Wyeth--was in favor of going to 14th and Market. So I got to know Wyeth and went out to his house a number of times on Chadds Ford, and then I got to be very familiar with the work of Pyle--began collecting prints. I would go to New York, go to the old bookstores and buy up Scribner's and Harper's and Century magazines and rip out the prints, the plates--the illustrations, which now I understand are worth a little money. And I also--so I developed this big collection of stuff of the Pyle family. Now I'd never known Howard Pyle, but I became quite an admirer of his. And then I used to--then the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, before they had a permanent home at Lovering Avenue, at the Delaware Art Center, they used to have exhibitions in the second floor of the Wilmington Library at 10th and Market and I used to cover those openings and write about them, and that way I began to meet those artists. I met Peter Hurd--I don't know too much about Peter Hurd because he was always going from here to New Mexico. Then of course there were artists in Arden--not too many. There was a sculptor--Marcus Aurelius Renzetti (sp), he's still living. He's living down in the Arden Woods. And he always fascinated me because he was also a--he was a sculptor and an artist and a craftsman. And there were a few artists in Arden, but not too many. I mean, not that I know, prominent artists. Of course then Arden was filled with craftsmen like weavers, lead glass makers, potters. My first wife was a potter, and so I had to live with pottery for 24 hours a day sometimes--in the kiln, you know, and the house would be filled with clay and all that sort of stuff. And I went into weaving for a while--everybody in Arden went in for weaving and we had looms and we were a very affected society--we wore sandals and weird shirts--just like they're doing now, you know. And we'd weave--there was a weaving shop there and we used their looms. And I think I wove--I don't know, a small blanket, maybe. But I never went in for pottery, or anything like that. I never went in for art at all, I wasn't really a craftsman, I was more interested in writing about them. The great adventure was in 1933 when we went in for community gardening, farming. Frank Stephens and several other men had bought a big tract of land on the other side of Naamans Creek, opposite Arden. And they called it Ardencroft. That is now where the community known as Indian Fields is. It was right in the middle of the Depression. I was the only one in my group who was working. Everybody else was either on welfare or WPA. And Frank Stephens bought this and he was going to develop it into another single-tax community, and he decided that we should all have community farms to feed us during the Depression. And so we'd meet every night--we started in January of 1933. We met in various houses and he would read to us Kropotkin's book on the farm and the home to indoctrinate us. And then came spring we'd moved out to the farm and we plowed it and each one of us had a half acre of land. And we had communal tools. We had a little
tool shed there and there were communal hoes and rakes and spades. The whole thing flopped because nobody took care of the tools. You see, if I looked around for a hoe, it'd be over at somebody else's little tract. And the ground was so fertile that somebody said we could sit on the porch of the farmhouse and just hear the corn grow. This had been subsidized by several wealthy women in Wilmington--some of the them of the DuPonts. And someone would tell us that Frank and one of his DuPont women were on their way over to the farm--to Arden-croft. So we'd all get out in the field with our hoes and our rakes, and we'd hoe and we'd rake and we'd dig and we'd sing as we worked, you know, and made a hell of a big impression on the visiting dowagers, who said geeh, it was wonderful, you know. Then the movement they left we'd slip back and just loll around in the sunshine. We lived in a big farmhouse. [interruption]

Q Were the farms successful--did they grow? I mean, did they furnish you...

A Oh, Christ, yes. They raised enough corn so people were selling it. It got to the point where we had a big contest one day to see who could eat more ears of corn. It was absolutely fabulous, the fertility. And the people really--see, I was working, so I really didn't need it as much as they did. I was never out of a job during the Depression. But the other fellows who were out of jobs, they took their produce and either sold it along the roads or took it into Wilmington. And they would sell corn and peas and squash and pumpkins, things like that. And we really did a lot of studying, because we found out that by intensive gardening, if you plant the corn and then you plant radishes and onions, you could harvest that before the corn was up. And also in between the rows of corn you'd plant pumpkins and squash. And we all did it by the book, because none of us were farmers anyway and we just got books from the Department of Agriculture that told you how to farm. The main point was just to keep the weeds down and spray the beans and spray the other stuff. The Japanese beetles were quite prolific in those days and they were eating up everything, and you had to spray against them. But the project flopped because there wasn't enough leasing of lots, or tracts of land, and so the whole thing went down the drain, and then it was purchased by some private interest. Now some very well-to-do houses are there and it's called Indian Fields. And that was the end of Arden croft.

Q O.K. We also wanted to talk about the underlife--the subculture of Wilmington. You know, the bars and so on.

A Yeah. Wilmington--before my time, I understood Wilmington was a very wicked town, particularly below Fourth. Front Street was a terrible place. It was called "The Coast" and it was a rough and tumble place back in the '80's and the '90's, with bars and all that and houses of prostitution which would flourish. But in those days everybody knew their place. I mean, the gentle people stayed above Fourth Street and below Fourth was filled with gambling joints and prostitution and illegal liquor traffic and all that. Now in my time, which would extend from the '20's into the '30's, whose houses--I figured out one time, in the middle of Wilmington, downtown Wilmington, we could pinpoint from reports and all that that there were at least a dozen well established houses of prostitution on Orange Street, Tatnall Street, French Street, Walnut Street, and they flourished certainly only because the police knew about them. They were rarely raided. The only time they were raided would be when there was some trouble. And so they flourished, and they must have flourished because
the cops were paid all. And all that was exposed later on in the late '30's when some woman named Edna Powell, who had a house on Tatnall Street, above 8th, figured she'd been raided unjustly and so she spilled her whole story. And then things took another turn. During Prohibition, of course bootleg liquor was rampant. Speakeasies were rampant. They were all over the place. Even prominent people, well-to-do, staid, respectable people always had liquor. And if they had liquor, there was only one way they got it, they got it from bootleg sources. And there was good liquor and there was bad liquor. And we used to--for example in Arden, in the '30's, we always collected money and then sent somebody into our favorite speakeasy which was at 7th and Tatnall Street and he'd buy a bottle, a pint or two, of alcohol, maybe a quart of alcohol, and he's take it out and we'd mix that with water and then tone it up maybe with canned fruit, and then we all drank and made pigs of ourselves. And the one who drank the most quickest got drunk first. I always felt that Prohibition was gone the day that you could have a bottle of liquor on the table and there'd still be some left the next day. That meant that it was always plentiful. But back in Prohibition, there was rarely anything left over the next day. No, Prohibition was really a stinking mess. There was corruption all over the place.

Q Was there organized crime?

A There was organized crime, there was organized prostitution, organized gambling joints--they would come in from Chester and Philadelphia--there was organized gambling...everything. Crime was just rampant--really bad. And it was all mixed in with prostitution, liquor and gambling. And it was all down in the lower part of the city.

Q Was there any particular ethnic or racial composition to this?

A Well, in those days there was no integration of anything. And I knew nothing at all about the life of the blacks. Nothing at all. I didn't eat with blacks, hadn't gone to school with blacks, I didn't pal around with any blacks. And the newspaper, if a black ever was arrested for a crime, we always said, John Jones, colored. They were the low people on the totem pole. So I didn't know anything about them. They didn't go to the whore houses; they didn't go to the speakeasies; they didn't go to the gambling joints. There were--I don't say that they were not mixing somewhere along the line, but there wasn't too much evidence of that. They kept that place. They had their own houses and their own gambling places and their own liquor joints. Once in a while you'd have a house operated by a black woman with black gals for white trade. But most of that was in Chester. Chester was really the den of iniquity. If you wanted real badness you went to Chester. And some of the more staid society groups, the men's groups would have smokers where they would show pornographic movies. And once in a while they'd be raided. But during Prohibition it was the worst damn time of the morals and everything else--the mores. Because there was corruption all over the place then. And that was a way of life. I remember one time, the Governor of Delaware, his name was Robertson, he invited the press to go with him--this was the Governor of the state--he invited the press to go with him on a fishing trip. And I remember so distinctly that he was up on top fishing and the press were downstairs in the cabin drinking. They were drinking liquor, and it had to be bootleg liquor. And a lot of the politicians as we used to say, voted dry and drank wet. And nobody questioned
where the liquor came from. They had state police who were trying to put down the liquor traffic and they had federal agents. There was always a question about the reliability of any of them as to how honest they were. We had whippings in Delaware. I used to have to cover whippings every Saturday. And once in a while there'd be a hanging—we had hangings—and I remember covering two hangings in Delaware. But whippings were the thing every Saturday morning.

Q How long did that persist?
A Whippings. When was the last one you covered?
A The whippings stopped about 1952. The last hanging we had I believe was 1946 or 1948. But they had whippings regularly out at the old County Workhouse at Price's Corner. We had a man on the Evening Journal—he's now dead, his name was Thomas Hill. He used to cover the Federal Prohibition Office at 6th and King. I know he'd leave the office sober and he'd come back drunk. Everybody had liquor.

Q The newspaper made no attempt to expose this kind of thing?
A Once in a while...no, no. I don't remember too many crusades. We'd print stories when something happened, but we never precipitated. The only time that a newspaper in Wilmington ever did anything on that basis was in 1889—that was before my time. It was called the Every Evening, and this man, Barton Chaney, who I mentioned in the earlier [interviews] was city editor. And he determined to clean up the gambling, so he hired some private detectives from Philadelphia, and they came in, they gathered up all the evidence. And then when he was ready and they were ready, they then went to the mayor and they said, "Here's what we have, Mayor. Now you've gotta clean it up." That's the first time he knew about it. And then they called the Wilmington police in. And they didn't know anything about it until they were called in for an assignment which they knew nothing about. And for three days they raided and raided and raided gambling joints, all in downtown Wilmington. And for three days they were arresting these people and hauling them up to the City Hall, which was then at 6th and Market. And that was the only time that I know that a newspaper went after the gambling. Of course in later years, in recent years, the News Journal exposed the drug traffic and we exposed the phony bail bond. But in those days we were not in investigative reporting at all. Once in a while the Sunday paper called the Sunday Star would have exposes, but not too often. But the local papers just reported the news as it developed. But we didn't precipitate anything. We didn't precipitate any reform of any great consequence. There was plenty of opportunity for it.

Q When did this change, more or less? This was during the Prohibition era—during the '30's do you think Wilmington cleaned itself up?
A No, it cleaned itself up after Edna Powell spilled her beans, and that must have been—I'm guessing now about '35 or '36, when she began to tell about all the cops she had been paying off. It was during the administration of a man
named George Black, who was chief of police. And he had a son, George Black, Jr., who was a captain. And she named both Blacks and named also the cops and this knocked down—from then on the established whorehouses disappeared. And of course prostitution didn't go, but it was more or less on a free-lance basis. But gambling continued. On 8th Street between Orange and Tatnall there were many gambling joints. Many of them are still there. And they were always raiding gambling joints. And we still have gambling. We still have the numbers racket, we still have betting parlors. But the morals of the prostitution was gone then. As of right now, in 1974, I don't think there are—if there are, there's very few...one or two, maybe, established houses of prostitution. But most of it is all free-lance now. I see girls on the street now, but.... Then there are some dope now—drugs. And the News Journal did that a couple of years ago, exposed the whole drug market, and we exposed the phony bail bond racket. We didn't do any investigative reporting here until about the past four or five years. And most recently in the past three or four years—real, intensive, a special man assigned to do nothing but investigative reporting. They didn't do regular reporting. They just worked on one story maybe for sometimes a month or two, or two months or three months. And then they would expose it and go on to some other project.

Q O.K. Can you think of any outstanding—I don't want to say criminals, but any outstanding people that operated these rackets in Prohibition—any individuals you had contact with.

A No, if I did—I'm not hedging on the names, because my favorite bootlegger was a fellow by the name of Mike Flood, who used to have a place at 7th and Tatnall. There was a famous bootlegging joint right behind Winkler's, which is now a very respectable eating place on French Street. I really don't remember any big—a lot of the liquor would come in down from Canada. The good stuff as they would say would come down from Canada and come up through the various coves and streams in Kent County—a place like Taylor's Bridge and areas like that, and Black Bird, and they'd come in the little streams and then would be taken up by trucks. But I—see, I didn't cover police in those days. I covered the prohibition office, but none of the big operations in Wilmington. I'd go out with them when they raided stills in the countryside.

Q Where were all these stills in the Wilmington area?

A Well, not in Wilmington, but they'd be in Kent County, in the woods in Kent County and in Sussex County near places like Bridgeville, or places up near Smyrna, along the coast, along the Delaware River and Bay coast hidden away in those woods—wooded areas. And then we'd go in with these federal agents and they'd smash'em and we'd take photographs and sometimes they arrested people and sometimes they didn't. But I don't know too much about the individuals here in Wilmington.

Q Is there any reporter still living who covered the police stories in the '30's—'20's and '30's? Who might know more than you do...

A Yeah, there was an old—there's a retired fellow named Emerson Wilson. Have you talked to Emerson Wilson?

Q Not yet.
A Emerson Wilson is the retired city editor of the Morning News and he's in the phone book. You'll find that under W. Emerson Wilson. And he was city editor. He would know a great deal more about them. Also there's a managing editor, a retired managing editor named--let's see, I forgot his name--Sam Caufman--he's in the phone book. And he'd be a good guy 'cause he was a reporter long before I was. Matter of fact, he was the first real man I ever saw as a reporter. I was a kid and he came to cover a meeting I was attending and I was so thrilled, this was a live, in-the-flesh newspaper reporter. And he's still around and he could tell you things. And down in Rehoboth is a fellow named Carl Wise, who's a retired managing editor of the papers. Wilson would know, Caufman would know--they're all in the phone book.

Q And Wise?

A Wise, Carl Wise. He's in Rehoboth Beach. Otherwise some of the old reporters who covered police are gone. You ought to tap Wilson for some of that. He would know.

Q Yeah, I plan to talk to Wilson. O.K. Maybe just as a final statement, I wanted to ask about the current controversy over your reporting of the University of Delaware, then all the letters...and this touched on the--you know, I thought about this and I talked to some of my students about it, and they were very upset with...

A What upset them?

Q They knew I'd been interviewing you, and they asked what is this man like for him to write this. And we talked about the philosophy of journalism, and this touches on Watergate reporting, too, you know, the whole controversy over what is the responsibility and philosophy of the press. You have here a basic controversy, I think, between "Why does he write extreme statements. Does he really believe them or does he do it just for shock effect?"

A No, I believe them.

Q O.K. When you say people ought to withdraw their money from the university...

A Well, that was an extreme. I mean, I knew that would never happen. They missed the whole point of the thing. As a newspaperman, I depend on what the other reporters write until it's contradicted. And the first stories were never contradicted. I was told there were 4,000 people there, see. This is accepted by the papers. And they missed the point of the story because they were personally pricked. It was very interesting how they began to sing the alma mater all of a sudden, you know. Ordinarily half those students would make fun of the university as an alma mater--"Goddamn that stinking university, I'm here because I have to be here, period." Their pride in the university is very interesting. The point of my--the first point of my column was that if there had been 2,000 or 1,000 black kids in Wilmington congregating the way they congregate, and the cops said move and they didn't move, you'd have the National Guard out. There probably would have been some shooting. But here are these middle class white kids and they're handled pretty gently I thought by Brierley and his crowd. But the great consternation if this had happened in Wilmington, and even greater consternation if it happened at Delaware State College. I think the whole thing had a racist overtone as to how the groups
were handled. I've seen in Wilmington fifty black kids going up the street and all of a sudden there's a whole batch of cops out there. And I've seen the riots in Wilmington with the black kids, and they bring out the National Guard and bring in the state police and pretty soon the whole town is taken over by the military. Well, they're black. They're scared to hell of the blacks. But they're not scared of these middle class people. When the cops tell you to move, goddamn it, you're supposed to move. Now a lot of it was drink--but now when the black kids riot they have a cause, as I say--I said in the piece. You may not agree with the cause. Their cause is frustration, anger with the establishment, unemployment, bitterness against the whites. You may not agree with what their cause is, but they have a cause. These people--now they've had demonstrations at the university before with the Weathermen, or they were demonstrating against Vietnam. That was a cause. The only damn thing these people had were drunkenness. There was a streaking group came in and they were crocked. And these people at the Deer Park were crocked. And that's all that was, which is damn little cause for putting on what they put on. Now...and then I was talking about what the story said. I got the definite implication from the story that a great many of them were students. Now they deny it. But there must have been--and then I'm going also by what I read in the paper. There was enough students there to prompt the president of the university to issue a statement. You remember that? He issued a statement, so he took cognizance that there was an impact of the university students upon this—that the involvement was there. Otherwise why would he have issued a statement—which I thought was a namby pamby statement. Now I see--the guy that I'm going to lambaste next week is—what the hell's his name, the vice president of the student--Worthen.

Q The one who wrote the letter in the Morning News.

A Yeah, see I don't mind the attitude of the kids, but Worthen comes out with a statement but the university president comes out with a statement which slaps the hell out of these kids--of the students. Now I'm assuming that Trabant is not a columnist and he doesn't fly off the handle very rapidly. I assume he's a very careful minded individual, but he issued a statement saying that this is not the mission of the university. He took cognizance of it, as far as I can see. Now the thing about—and then I was just thinking about if I were an alumus how I would feel, 'cause I'd be upset, see, I'd be a very dignified, staid alumnus. I'd say, "Hell, what the hell's the use of sending your money down there?" But this attitude of those students is this, they say—they sneer at the DuPont money. Those who think sneer at the DuPont money. They sneer at the H. Rodney Sharp money, and they say, "So what?" And now all of a sudden they're singing the alma mater with great affection. I have never—in all the time I've gone down to the university and listened, they're always running down the university as unable to supply them with what they want and all that. And now by God, they feel hurt about it. And then another thing that tickles me is how their mothers came into the act. You know, mama's little boys, you know, the mama has to come into the act. And they feel awfully righteous. I went up to see on Honors Day one day some years ago—one of the R.O.T.C. things, see. And in came some of these leftists and dissidents with a coffin, you know, and suppose I'd rapped the hell out of them? They weren't concerned about that at all. I go down to the university to hear Mr.—the big senator from the South—

Q Sam Ervin
Ervin, yeah. There they are standing up and cheering Ervin--a goddamned racist, that's what the hell he is. But they don't see that at all.

Q Were they cheering Ervin's racial...

A Oh, they stood up, like, huh?

Q I was there. Were they cheering Ervin the racist or were they cheering something else he stood for?

A Well, what the hell's he stand for?

Q I mean, you've been around a lot longer than most of the students, and most of the students only know what they've been reading in the papers the last couple of years.

A Well, I always hope that they're a little better than that.

Q The point is, you know, what are they cheering?

A Well, they're cheering the anti-Nixon man. But

END OF TAPE AND INTERVIEW