

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Alfred Evans

INTERVIEWEE: Alfred Evans

INTERVIEWER: Mary Malone for the Key West Women's Club

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Malone: --a member of the bicentennial committee to make an oral history of Key West by the Women's Club of Key West. This morning, I wish to introduce Ms. Mary Trevor, who is what we call a 'Conch' and Mr. Alfred M. Evans who is also a-- been here all his life, I presume, have you not?

Evans: Yes, yes.

M: Were you born here Mr. Evans?

E: Yes.

M: He is eighty-two and he was-- worked as a ship's carpenter most of his life, and your son is--

E: Yeah, they're all carpenters and builders.

M: Carpenters and builders. And he knows everybody in town and he knows-- I think he knows where all the bodies are buried. [both laugh] Mr. Evans, now, tell us about your young life and--

E: I was born in Key West on Catholic Church Lane, which is, you know, it's Angela-- it's a continuation of Angela Street. Later, my father built a house on Ashe Street, 804, where I lived 'til I was about nine years old. For the rest of my life, I was down in Pauline Alley until Mary had--

M: Who--what alley?

E: Uh, Pauline Street it was called then. Uh, Pauline Street. (?) We were the parents of eleven children.

M: Eleven?

E: Yeah. One died three days old. She gave birth to twelve, anyway. And some of the children, we were fortunate under God's divine grace to see that they went through school, some colleges and some of them as teachers, others building contractors. We were, in early life, members of the English Wesleyan Methodist Church being under the conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in London. I do remember as a child, the grandmother of Mrs.-- Ms. Mary Trevor used to visit church I think because the pastors there at that time came from England and she prob-- I imagine she felt at home during the worship period, you know, in that-- I was also given the impression that she was born in England, correct?

Trevor: Which grandmother?

E: Here your grandmother on your father's side.

T: Yes, she was born in England, yes.

E: Yeah. And I had the privilege of associating with many people in old Key West both on the church (?) and civic level. Having during the World's War been a member of the Interracial Committee who look into problems on both

sides of the line-- well no, not the line. All people, all people who were in need or had problems of any kind- whatever social problems or financial problem. Later, I became affiliated with the PTA of the Douglas School in Key West as a-- as the president. Also was the first non-white scout commissioner-- neighborhood commissioner of Key West. Worked with them for several years and some of these boys actually developed into first-class scouts- Eagle scout- eventually went on to the war and became petty officers. And others later in life became after receiving training in colleges or universities became-- one of them became an educator, Mr. Albert Edwards who up to a year or so ago, worked with-- at the Howard University in D.C.- Washington D.C..

M: Oh, yes. Now, just a minute, I want to have a question. That is, I've worried me sort of for a long time-- not worried me, but I wondered about. Among the non-white community, there are so many that have nas-- the same names as the white community like the big Sands Family and oh, lots of others. How does it-- how does that happen?

E: Well, perhaps that's a long story. That might go back fifth, sixth generation. As I understand, the most Key West people emigrated from the Bahamas. Some of them, they had English ancestors. This was the case of-- in my own case and also my wife. And then, too, maybe the few that came here from South Carolina or Alabama, Georgia, maybe they receive their name from their ancestor's task master. I don't know what's a good name to use. But probably that's how they come by their names, especially the common name of Sawyer's and Robertson's and Thompson's.

M: Yes.

E: My own name is an Evans.

M: Evans is a Welch name, originally.

E: Yeah, well, you see, my parents were born in the West Indies and--

M: They came to Key West?

E: Yeah, before-- they were married here. And on my mother's side-- I think on her mother's side, they were English. I don't know exactly my father's pedigree, but his grandpa was schoolmaster in Nassau, he was also a ship carpenter-- an in-house carpenter- and perhaps that accounts for three generations becoming partly ship carpenters or house carpenters. In my own case, my father was a ship carpenter; he owned boats as well as he built them and-- for others. And I-- my early training was with the ship-building industry--

M: Now, what's the difference between a ship's carpenter and a house carpenter?

E: There is a vast difference. In the-- number one, in the ship builder, you see, a man needs to have the knowledge of drafting a ship whether it was a small-- especially if it's a (tonner?) ship. He has to know exactly to a fraction of an inch that the starboard side has no--has no-- does not variate from the curvature on the port side.

M: Oh, yes.

E: Otherwise, the ship might become lopsided and therefore, he must have the knowledge of draftsmanship from stern to stem and also the port side and the starboard side.

M: They designed them themselves, then?

E: Yes. They don't call it 'design', they call it 'drafting', D-R-A-F-T-I-N-G. Now, in the case of the house-builder, you start off from a plan. You see, either it's a scale drawing or it's an architecture blueprint drawn by a licensed architect who's received credits-- collegiate credits for-- in that particular field- architecture. So, that's where the difference. There are many-- a house carpenter cannot work on a boat. I recall when I was eighteen years old, my father had the contract to turn a large schooner called *Mount Vernon* into a boat that could bring molasses from Cuba to Key West and therefore, it needed a sub-floor- another floor- down in the bottom of the ship. And we had a house carpenter with us and he called for a level. This boat was in the sea and he called for a level and I laughed at him [chuckles] although he was much older man than I by twenty years, I guess. And I say, "We don't use levels on a boat, we use a line to get the level." You see, because in the sea, there is the rolling, you see, and therefore you couldn't use a spirit

level on a boat at sea and therefore we used line. So there's a vast difference between ship-building and house-building. Now--

M: I imagine it has to be much more accurate work also, no?

E: Yes, in the boat it must be accurate, absolutely accurate. Whether it's a small boat, say, forty feet or one 500 feet long or any length for that matter, whether it's wood construction or whether it's a steel hull, you see, the same principle applies to any type of ship, you see? And we ascertained accuracy by using a line when we laid out there the keel, of course first and then the stem. And the way we get the stem plumb, you put a line-- you use a bob line and plumb-bob and you have a scratch down in the center of the stem from top to bottom and when that line falls just into that scratch, then that is an absolute perpendicular or ninety degrees.

M: I see.

E: Now, the stern is-- the accuracy of the stern position is ascertained in the same manner. Then there's a line pulled from stern to stem and then all the timbers which are laid out drafted on the ground, and then when you put it up, you see, there's a mark- a center mark- and that center mark has a cord directly under the line that is suspended from stern to stem. But in a house it is different. We either use a spirit level or we use a (?) level. Whether it's a concrete building or whether it's a--

M: I think in some they don't use any level.
[both laugh]

E: So, there is a difference. So in my early life, I received partial ship-building training--

M: [both speak at same time] From your father?

E: --and I majored in house-building.

M: From your father?

E: From my father. I started after-school hours. He would lay out the work and I had to cut the timbers. The timber was taken from wood that was grown on Largo: (madera?), dogwood- hard woods that termites cannot go through.

T: Did you use any lignum vitae?

E: Uh, I don't remember. Not as timbers, but I remember that you used to use that to make old-time walking canes for elderly men. And that grew also up in Largo--
[audio cuts off]

E: -- I don't have my certificate-- I don't have any certificate as an architect. But at that time, you see, the South Florida (?) and Construction Company who employed architects said that since this is the church, any contractor can work by the plans. See, it was a fully-scaled drawn plans- exterior and interior.

M: And you did it all, huh?

E: Yeah, I was only twenty-nine then.

T: That's the Wesleyan Church on--

M: Yes.

E: Yeah, where the-- and later it was transferred to the-- well, the U.S. Church in '31, and in '38 to the U.S.A. Church. And in connection with this-- perhaps this might be interesting as far as the city is concerned. We-- there was a terrific tropical storm, swept over Key West in 1909 when I was a boy, and seven churches were destroyed- totally destroyed- including St. Paul, St. Peters, and Old English Wesleyan Methodist Church, and with four others, Sparks

Chapel- it wasn't called Sparks Chapel then- and-- no, it was Sparks Chapel then, now it's Fleming Street Church. Well anyway, the following year, another hurricane swept-- in the meantime, we had constructed a two-purpose building which was two stories. The first floor was a worship center and the second floor was living quarters for the minister. And that went down two months after it was erected in October 1910. One week later, we were granted the permission to use the county courtroom without any charge. It was Reverend (S.T. Hops?)- a young minister from England about twenty-five years of age- preached the first sermon there that following Sunday, at eleven o'clock on the (?). I think this might be important to give credit to the county commissioners who then were in office to permit that--

M: (?)

E: -- to use it.

M: I have heard a story which Ms. Nellie Falk says it true- you know who she is, Mrs. Falk?

E: Yeah, yeah.

M: That the minister was preaching away and he got so excited and he walked out in the aisle and when he got to the door, he hollered, "(Sit by the wreath?)" and was the first one to get out there to be the (master?), and she says it's true from the county commission building. Is it?

E: I don't know. That could be true, but not in the case of our church.

M: [laughs]

E: Not in the case of our church.

T: I thought it was St. Paul's Church.

E: Well-- [both speak at same time]

M: She said that the meeting was in the county commission.

E: -- St. Paul Church with Father Stout, I believe.

T: Yes, there was a Father Stout there.

E: Yeah. Because I also worked on that church and I had to put in those large windows there on the chancel and in the side transept we call it- of course, that's an architectural term- and then the large widow facing Duval Street which was donated by the (port of Hammond?). The one on the chancel was donated by Mr. Steven Lowe-- you Conchs here know, right? [laughs]

T: Yes.

M: You were a Lowe?

E: No, no, his wife.

T: Mrs. Lowe was my mother's sister.

E: Yeah.

M: Oh.

E: And--

M: So in a way you're a cousin of Gertrude Lowe Sandquist then?

T: Yes.

E: And so that was given by them in memory of their father John Lowe the (?) sponge merchant who had ships and the marine railway, lumberyards-- when he saw lumber-- we had good lumber un-bled.
[all laugh]

E: Un-bled. Termites didn't go into it. The John Lowe and Sam Lowe own all the sea front from Elizabeth Street onto Margaret Street. The Thompson's Enterprises was originally Sam Lowe's property- all of that. And John Lowe is the cousin of Sam Lowe, I'm told was from Elizabeth to Williams Street.

M: Let me interrupt one minute. We at the Women's Club had a woman who was a registered genealogist- one who gets the people ancestors, you know, writes them up, (?) - and somebody laughed and said every Key Wester is a genealogist.
[all laugh]

M: When you get two or three together, that's all they talk about. [laughs]

E: Well, at the old family table up in town-- you see, there was a closer relationship between parents and half-grown children as well as little children especially at supertime.

M: [laughs]

E: At supertime. And there they'd tell the old (yawns?). Some of them was old (yawns?) and some of them was always starting fights and there is a saying that little birds have big ears, and I happen to be one of the little birds sitting around-- the adults thought I was involved with some game or another but my ears were wide open. So, that's the reason I'm able to retain some of the things I heard even way back when I was only five, six years old.

M: Well, I think it's remarkable all the things you remember.

E: Yeah, thank you. And I think that one fact about the county courthouse through the commissioners granted the Wesleyan Methodist Church's permission to hold their services there. And of course, that was in October. In May of the following year, we had another building erected on the same spot. It wasn't the present church building but it was another building that was more like a hall because we did intend to have a concrete building. So later, it was moved from that spot to the corner- it's not there now- the corner of Petronia and Simonton Street in 1923 in December 18 and we started this building that we have now and it was dedicated the following year, July the 4th--

M: Of what year?

E: Uh, well, 1924. That was fifty-two years ago.

T: Remarkable.

E: Fifty-two years ago and--

M: Tell us a little something about your own house.

E: The one I have now?

M: Mm-hmm.

E: The one-- the present building-- the present building was erected in the year '43. That was seven months after the previous building was destroyed by fire- May the 20th, 1942. But it wasn't completed. See, we had it-- brought it to the stage where we could live in it and then the interior was finished about three years later. All the stair work-- you see, our stair work is-- part of it is cypress and it was the old-time what we call the 'number one sea cypress' - that

was the best grade. And-- not that I had all that money, but I ran into a little luck by building a house for Mr. Howard Wilson on Cudjoe and there was a man not far from there had got a large water tank-- got possession of a large water tank and he took it down. And the bottom of it, which was three and a half inches thick by fourteen inches wide, he gave to me and then I took it to Mr. Wesley Archer and asked him to cut it up into spokes an inch and three-quarters square, which I had intended to use as spokes in my stairway.

M: You mean the spindles for the railing?

T: Yes.

E: Uh, yes, yes, right. And of course the lower step was of cypress, too because it's a semi-circle-- a quarter-circle rather in my house our first step. It goes around the newel post. You know what I mean when I say 'newel post'?

M: Oh, yes.

E: Mm-hmm. And of course--

M: Well, then your steps must not be as steep as the one in most of the houses.

E: No, you see there again, one builder has to have a knowledge even though he doesn't go to college. He must be well-versed in math because he determines the rise of the stair-- of the steps by the height from the first floor to the second floor and then we divide-- if we want easy treading stairs, you see, we usually determine to have it six and five-eighths and not more than a six and three-quarter rise so you won't have to raise your feet too high.

M: [chuckles] I've never been in a house that has them that low. Even the big houses, it's like a ladder. [chuckles]

E: Yeah, well that's very uncomfortable especially after you pass fifty, sixty years.
[both laugh]

E: No reflection on any of us.
[all laugh]

E: However, in our case, it's-- they're eighteen steps and the nosing-- there's a return nosing. You see, you can't see the end of my tread, see, because there's a return nosing and-- which makes it-- and a cove molding underneath which it makes it much more-- very much more neat.

T: How many spindles do you have on each step?

E: Oh, I have two, so in this case it would be thirty-six. See, two on each of the eighteen steps.

T: Some houses have three.

E: It all depends on the style you might adopt. Now, they could be-- you see, in the case of three, they're evenly divided. But in the case of two-- see, in my case, I think they're two and a half inches apart. I start for the-- on the edge of the riser and then there's a two and a half inch space. And they're always about equally divided as they go up. Let's say you have a book or anything and you push it through and then you go up the next step and push the same size book through, well you have the same space to play with, you see?

M: And the ones that have three are the ones with the steep steps. [chuckles]

E: Yes, I think so, yes. Now all the steps I have built- I've built quite a number of them- and I-- there was one down at Joe Pearlman down on Simonton Street and there-- that's-- they had two large circular at the bottom and went up about eight or nine tread and then had winders like a lighthouse and then it turned again-- see, I think that's the most complicated flight of stairs I ever built.

M: I remember those.

E: Yeah, Ms. Sherwood, you ought to know the house I'm speaking of, this is on Simonton Street.

T: Yes, I know the house.

E: Now that house was really done over again. It was originally belonged to Dr. Kemp and later was sold to Mr. Canter and Mr. Pearlman. Mr. Canter left here and went to New York and finally Mr. Joe Pearlman bought out Canter's part. And he was about to condemn because he had to get out of Mrs. William's house, it was the leas--
[audio cuts off]

END OF INTEVIEW