

Title: Key West Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Harvey

INTERVIEWEE: Wilhelmina Harvey

INTERVIEWER: Maggie Bartel Kivel for the Key West Women's Club

TRANSCRIBER: Andrea Benitez

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Kivel: --of Key West as it was, sponsored by the Key West Women's Club as part of their bicentennial project. This program we're recording for you tonight was originally done at a luncheon meeting of the Key West Officer's Wives Club when the program was put on heralding old island days. At that time, our recorder was not working too well and so we decided we would have the program re-taped so you could enjoy it. This is Maggie Bartel Kivel speaking to you, a member of the committee of the Key West Women's Club project, 'Key West as it Was', working under the direction of our elder statesman and co-chairman Mary Wood Malone. Tonight, we bring you Wilhelmina, Mrs. C.B. Harvey, former First Lady of the island, chairman of the Monroe County School Board, an original Conch, and president of the Key West Women's Club. She will tell you some interesting anecdotes of her life as a young Conch and tales she remembers. Wilhelmina?

Harvey: Thank you very much, Maggie Bartel Kivel. And I might say that we're around a sumptuous and just a beautifully set-- just as the dining room tables were in the olden days with your beautiful candle glow and your beautiful centerpiece and I'm surrounded by Mary Malone, the chairman of our committee for the Women's Club, by Marjory (Houck?), a noted author herself, and by my esteemed husband C.B. Harvey who was the mayor and in city office for about ten years. So, I would like to tell you that written up in the 'Now Hear This' column, it was stated that at the Officer's Wives Club luncheon, there would be saltwater Conchs and freshwater Conchs. [all laugh] So, I guess I am the saltwater Conch because I was born on this island. The word 'conch' in Creole almost precluded my becoming a Mrs. Harvey, about which I shall tell you later. (Izzy Bauza?), who was also on the program at the Officer's Wives luncheon said, "Well, what kind of a Conch am I? I wasn't born here, and I wasn't born around freshwater." So, we decided that she was a brackish Conch. [both laugh] It is not difficult for you to figure this person age because the Florida East Coast Railway train first came into Key West in January 1912 and this Conch, I, came in the next month- February. I would love for everybody to know and to remember that Key West in the olden days had the richest per capita among its population in the United States. Conchs even ate out of fourteen karat gold plates- the first gold plates that were ever made by Tiffany and they came right to Key West.

K: Wilhelmina, what did those Conchs who ate grits and grunts eat off of?

H: [laughs] Well, maybe-- well, I guess they weren't as many paper plates around in those days but I'm sure that each family had the finest of china and they really worshipped their ancestors and perhaps lived off of rice for a little while, but there's nothing like a beautiful heritage and that's what we Conchs claim we have.

K: They sure do.

H: Speaking of Mr. Flagler and his FEC railroad, there is a very colorful man in Key West called ('Ludi?') who is quick to remind you that he was the very first person Mr. Flagler greeted. When (Ludi?) is asked, the very first question that anyone would have come to mind, "Well, what did Mr. Flagler say to you?" Ludi answers, "Mr. Flagler said, 'Get out of my way, kid.'" [all laugh] Ponce de Leon in 19--excuse me, in 1513, when passing the coast and viewing the many islands of what we now call the 'Florida Keys', why, he named the keys quote 'Los Martires', unquote, because the silhouette of the keys reminded him of people suffering, in other words, 'The Martyrs'. However, my husband is a history buff and his theory is that Ponce de Leon had a historian on his ship by the name of Peter Martyr and C.B. thinks he names the keys for him. As a child when walking with my mother, we would invariably meet old bent-over Uncle Tom and Aunt (Tutti?). My mother would shout to the hard of hearing, elderly, bent, black man, "Uncle Tom, tell Ms. Wilhelmina about her dapper grandfather." Then, he would smile and tell me about his being valet to my young grandfather on trips to New York and my grandfather was such a spend thrift, that his father would never trust him with any money. The valet was entrusted with all of the money.

K: Wilhelmina, wasn't your grandfather Captain Kerry who owned the house now owned by Jessie Porter Newton?

H: That's right, and that's why it's owned by Jessie. You see, he was such a spend thrift I guess he had to sell the house. [all laugh] There was always a shortage of males on the island. That is, until the Navy and Air Force and Army came in. So, the girls were always in clusters of fives or six. The high school girls vied with the convent girls. In 1925, the Junior Women's Club was formed and those girls became the social hub of the island. Just last month, we honored eleven women now living in Key West who were among those charter juniors. (Alfa?) Sinclair- now Mrs. Walter (Ekberg?), Captain (Ekberg's?) wife- was one of those charter girls. As teenagers, for R&R, we would go to town- Duval Street- ask store owners. There were no department stores then, just Key West dry good merchants like Mr. Joe Pearlman, Mr. (Appleroots?), Mr. (Ronovitz?). And we teenagers would ask if we may use their restrooms, which was a wooden two-seater outdoors in the back of the store. There we'd take our cigarettes, which were rolled banana leaves. We frequently heard fire engines cling-clanging Duval-- to Duval Street after we had failed to put out the fire. We'd ride the elevator to the top of the La Concha; what a view- of girls, remember, not many boys. Then we'd go home, fully satiated for a days outing. Dr. Walter C. Maloney, who was mayor of Key West, wrote the first history of Key West. This was a speech which he as mayor gave as he dedicated City Hall- the old one in front of the Key West Citizen which is now being restored. This book was out of print for years and copies were very expensive. With reprinting now, they are reasonable and available at your local bookstores. In later years, Judge Jefferson Beale Brown wrote another history: *Key West: the Old and the New*. This book has been out of print for years and still is, and copies sell for \$50 if you can find one. And (Izzy Bauza?) told what a venerable judge and how esteemed Judge Brown was not only by the people of Key West, but the state and the nation. In fact, when I was a young girl and went to college, there hanging in the state capital in Tallahassee was a beautiful portrait of Judge Brown who had been a state senator and had also been a Supreme Court justice there in-- for the state of Florida. Well, this was my young girlhood experience with our honorable Judge Brown. He had an apartment up over my family and in the summer we would swim out there because it was right on the water and the Florida East Coast Railroad executives had built these apartments at old Trumbo so the executives could come down and spend a little vacation. So I guess as the executives became less in number, why, FEC decided they would rent the apartments. The judge had rented an apartment and so-- our family and there were quite a few other families at Trumbo Point. So, Judge Brown had told my mother- Mrs. Annie Carrie Page- that he would like to have a coming-out party for her young daughter who was being graduated from the convent and that was I. And of course, my mother was thrilled because she just thought Judge Brown was tops as did everyone else. And I did then and I still do. Now, for the coming out party, I had just the most beautiful little party dress and he had invited young folks to the party and it was served in the most beautiful style. He visited Europe almost every year of his life and he would bring back home the most beautiful in china and linens and all of his foods on the table were molded in-- featuring the theme of the party. So, after the party was over and I was bidding adieu to my host, Judge Brown said to me, "Miss Wilhelmina", and he always bowed from the waist down and a very-- like a Kentucky Colonel did he look. He said, "I'll take you down to your mother's". And I said, "Well, that would be fine, it wouldn't be necessary". But he insisted, so he escorted me home. So, of course, when I get home with my mother, she wants to know something about such a lovely party. So, before I told her about all the beauty of the party, I said to my mother, I said, "I'm not going to anymore parties Judge Brown has." And my mother said, "Why not?" And I said, "Well mother, he wanted to kiss my hand," and I said, "not only that, he wanted to kiss my arm right up to my elbow, I bet!" And my mother looked at me so sweetly and said, "Oh Wilhelmina, you can tell Judge Brown has lived in Paris a good a part of his life." [all laugh] So, I wanted to make sure that I won my mother over to my side so I said, "Well, that wouldn't be so bad if that were all, but mother, he was breathing so rapidly and it was as if he couldn't catch his breath!" And my mother looked at me and she was most unhappy with me when I said that, but my mother said, "Oh, Wilhelmina, you know Judge Brown has asthma." [all laugh]

K: Wilhelmina, I understand that he loved to pat the girls on their derriere and say, "No offense, no offense".

H: [laughs] Well, he never did me that way. [all laugh] The closest I think was the kissing of the hand, but he was a sweet gentleman and everybody just loved him and I guess that's one of the reasons why, because he always tried to do something to make you feel so wonderful. So, until that day, and maybe since, and I guess maybe I'm the only Key West girl who was ever a debutant. [laughs] Especially on this island. [laughs] After graduating from the convent, I went to an all-girls school and became, as all other Key West girls did, a schoolteacher. Then, some Coast and Geodetic engineers came to town and two cap-- marriages occurred- one was Dorothy (Clair?) who married and her husband Admirable McCarthy and Dorothy lives there and Admirable McCarthy I think has passed on; and C.B. Harvey and I, Wilhelmina. So, C.B. used to take a ribbon of his life from the other Coast and Geodetic families who were stationed in Key West, they would say, "C.B., when you marry that little Conch schoolteacher, you're going to be going barefoot down Duval Street with a string of grunts just wheeling them up and down and your income is going to be nil because nobody ever uses an engineer on this island and yet, I guess you'll be content because you surely seem to love that little Conch girl." So, anyway, we became engaged and then my mother decided that she would like to go to New Orleans to meet the Harvey's before her daughter became a Harvey. So, I had made a hit, I think, with the Harvey's because I had been at summer school at Tulane all summer and just loved the Harvey's so now my

mother arrives and Mrs. Harvey has us for dinner. So, the next day at the hotel of the same night, perhaps, my mother said to me, "I'm not so sure you should marry into that Harvey family." And I said to my mother, "Why? Why do you say such a thing? They're the sweetest people." And my mother said, "But did you hear Mrs. Harvey when she kept referring to her Creole ancestry?" And I said, "Oh, mother, Creole simply means you're European descent." "Well, I don't know about that and I don't know whether I want my daughter marrying into a Creole family." Well, I told C.B. what my mother had said and naturally, he carries the story home to his own mother and his mother was enraptured with me, she just loved me to pieces, but then she was sort of taken aback to think that Mrs. Page would have found fault with Mrs. Harvey's ancestry. So, Mrs. Harvey says to her dear son C.B., "Well, Mrs. Page referred constantly to her being a Conch, and I looked up the word 'Conch' up in the dictionary and the description in the dictionary is 'an illiterate group of people on the Florida Keys' and so I don't know what Mrs. Page has to talk about." So, anyway, between C.B. and me, we laid the feelings of the two mothers and--

K: You're married how many years now, Wilhelmina?

H: Going on our thirty-ninth year. [laughs]

K: Well, I think it took with the Creole and the Conch. [all laugh]

H: In other words, you'd say it was a good combination, wouldn't you?

K: Uh-huh.

H: You know, to tell a story on that, while C.B. was mayor, there was a telephone call and this family called and I answered the phone and they said, "We're visiting here and we're wondering if you're the Harvey's who were here with the Coast and Geodetic Survey?" So I said, "Yes, we were the same, the C.B. Harvey's" and so the-- C.B. and the husband had been the greatest of friends while they were down here working with the Coast and Geodetic Survey. So, we made an appointment to have them over to the home and to take them out to dinner, but C.B. made me assure him that I would tell this Coast and Geodetic family that he was the mayor of the town because that would tie in too much with all of the teasing he had been taking from these people you know, about the grits and the grunts and the being barefoot. So, all night long I'm dying to tell them about C.B. being the mayor because they love the town so much and they admire this and that about it, but promised C.B., so I didn't dare tell them. The next morning, my phone rang about 7:30 and it was the lady whom we had entertained the evening before and she said to me, "A fine friend you and C.B. are". And I said, "Oh, what did we do?" and I couldn't imagine anything we had done wrong after being so hospitable. So, she said as we let them out of the car and they went into the motel, the clerk happened to say to them, "Oh, you've been out this evening?" And they said, "Yes, we were out with friends." And the clerk said, "Oh, you have friends here?" And the couple said "Yes, the Harvey's." And the clerk said, "The C.B. Harvey's?" And the couple thought that was very strange, they know your name. So, they said, "Yes, C.B. Harvey, do you know them?" And the clerk said, "Do I know them? He's been the mayor of this town ever since I was in grade school." [all laugh]

Malone: Why don't you tell them what C.B. stands for?

K: Yes, tell them that. I remember using your full name in a story one time with C.B.'s full name and everybody said, "Who that?" [all laugh]

H: Uh, C.B., why he is given those initials is we'd never get his name out because his name is Cornelius Bradford Harvey, so that's why we call him C.B. for short. It has been said that seventeen United States presidents have visited Key West. C.B. as mayor was host to three: Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and John Glenn- the first astronaut. Each time a VIP came to Key West, the mayor C.B., would get busy and get his brother commissioners and say, "Let's change the name of such and such a street to honor the visiting president of the United States". And so first thing you know, why, they'd get the sign painter and they'd paint the new sign on the name of the street and C.B.'s descriptions of all of the presidents, he would claim that Truman- President Truman- was the most affable. Riding in with President Eisenhower, after he had landed at the Naval Air Station Boca Chica, turned to Mr. Eisenhower and said, "Mr. President, notice when we reach the next intersection," -driving along Roosevelt Boulevard- "it has been renamed Eisenhower Drive." The president then turned to C.B. and said, "Mr. Mayor, I'm glad to see my road turns to the right", and of course what C.B. was sure not to tell the president on his way out that same road would turn to the left, right? [all laugh]

K: Wilhelmina, tell me, who was responsible for the Margaret Truman Laundry? [all laugh] Knowing Margaret, that must have been a terrible thing to her. [all laugh]

H: Well, we had always had Margaret Street because that was named for one of the daughters of Key West's and Florida's first millionaire. And then we had Truman Avenue to be named for President Truman because in the olden days, that had not been paved for years and was gutted and so the Conchs used to call that 'Rocky Road'. Then during my era, the name was changed to Division Street. Then during my husband's administration, it was changed to Truman Avenue. And then it was just coincidental that Margaret Street ran into Truman Avenue.

K: I see.

H: But you know something sweet happened, too. One time when President Eisenhower was coming into town, why, there was a local photographer and a newspaper man who had quite an eye and he took his camera and posed so that he could get a picture of President Eisenhower driving into Key West and so he got such a beautiful picture that *Life* magazine bought this photograph from him and I don't know whether you remember it or not, we have copies of it at home, but *Life* magazine came out and the cover had the car with the Margaret Truman sign in the background, President Truman [Eisenhower] and Mayor Harvey and the Admirable and the chauffeur driving and the automobile and it said, "President Eisenhower crosses Margaret Truman Street." [all laugh] At the time of the Cuban trouble and the Cuban crisis, President Kennedy came and that sweet C.B., he spent all day trying to bend one of the official keys that he as mayor would give in honor of the citizens of Key West to a distinguished guest. And he bent the key purposely so that he could impress the president with the fact that with this crisis in Cuba, Key West was in a terrific plight; the economy was really bent. So, C.B. as mayor, when he greeted President Kennedy, he gave him the bent key and of course, the president caught the significance of it because he said to C.B., "But Mr. Mayor, I thought I had explained about the economy and how we were trying to keep it straight and not bent." And-- however, C.B. almost was run out of town because the Conchs thought it was a most ironic thing for the mayor of Key West not to find a new shiny key to city of Key West, but to give him an old, bent key! [laughs]

K: Did they think they were really that poor that they had to give him a leftover key or something?

H: [laughs] They-- I tell you the people's forum was just filled with letters, "Dear Mr. Mayor, why did you have to give that wonderful President Kennedy such a bent key?" So, at that time, their lack of understanding was really something.

K: [whispers] Three minutes.

H: This was an amusing incident, too. One time, C.B. was addressing some teachers from Miami University and he was telling them about the great fire in Key West and he said, "Key West had one fire engine and the reason why there was so much devastation created by the fire was that the one fire engine was in New York City being repaired." Well, that was too much for these Miamians to take. So, they interrupted the mayor and his speech and shouted up at him on the podium and said, "Mr. Mayor, why didn't they send that fire engine to Miami for repairs?" So, C.B. was quick and proud to tell them, "Well, the reason why it had to go to New York City and not to Miami was Miami was just an Indian village at the time." [laughs]

K: Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you very much, Wilhelmina. We'd like to tell you again that this has been a recording made by the Key West Women's Club as part of its bicentennial project, 'Key West as it Was'.

**END OF INTERVIEW**