

## An Interview with Mary Virginia "Binkie" Adams (in Jan. 1997)

My name is Mary Virginia Adams and I will celebrate my 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday this month, January 9 – born in 1914. I'm not a native of this area, my parents weren't either. My father was in the forest service and he bought land in 1913 – he was surveying for Pisgah National Forest in the Shenandoah National Park and that's where he met my mother. She was born around Stanton, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley. He was stopped at a hotel that her aunt ran and that's how they met. He had surveyed down here for Pisgah National Forest and had seen Catawba Falls in Old Fort. He saw that Old Fort – and he was a civil engineer, by the way – he saw that Old Fort needed a water supply and electric lights. It had neither. So he brought mother down here and he bought some acreage around Catawba Falls. In fact, he bought Catawba Falls – the two falls. By the time he had accumulated all the land he had when he died, he owned 3400 acres.

In 19... let me see – I was ten years old – 1924, he started to build a hydro-electric plant up near the falls, using the Catawba River water to create a power house to generate lights and electricity for Old Fort. That took about two or three years. I was ten years old and I remember going up there with him. We didn't have electricity. When I studied – you know – I used to study by kerosene lamps. Now when we have a power outage and I have to light a kerosene lamp, I can hardly see by it. I don't see how we could even read, but of course, my eyes were younger then.

Now people around here in Old Fort did have electric lights generated by the Union Tanning Company. Tannery people did – but not just the general public. In 19- let's see – and I forgot to say that in 1916 he put running water to Old Fort and he built a dam up on Jarrett's Creek. He founded Pure Mountain Water and brought it down to the town and when he did, he built four fountains. The one in the middle of Old Fort he gave to the town – where the Arrowhead Monument is now. One was up in our yard, a big square one. We used to raise fish. One was down at where Maple Street and another street – Commerce Street – meet in the corner, but it's been torn down. But one was covered by sand during the 1916 flood and it's still under the sand along the river up in the West Fort location.

I attended Old Fort High School and it was a brick high school – it wasn't a log cabin. It was a high school and I went there eleven years and graduated, so did my brother. I had a sister sixteen – who died when she was sixteen and she was three and a half years younger than I am. Then I have another sister who now survives – her name is June Adams, she's 76. I lost a brother about seven years ago – Dan Adams – he was 67 when he died.

I was married in 1943 to John Vernon Robinson. He was at the time – it was during World War II – he was serving his country in the Navy. We were married in Norfolk, Virginia. After we came home, we had one child – a son who is now 47. His name is Stuart Adams Robinson. I just lived in Virginia one year. Then I came home to be with my mother because my husband was sent abroad.

I helped build Camp Lejeune, NC during the war. I went down there with the people from Old Fort who were doing construction work in 1942 and stayed there a year. Camp Lejeune was just being built for the Marine base. Then I went from there, after a year, and was married and lived another year in Norfolk. Then my husband was sent abroad and so I came home and stayed with my parents.

I still live in the same house I grew up in. I wasn't born in North Carolina. I'm a Virginian. At the time my mother expected me to be born, expected my birth, she went back to Virginia to be with her folks because she didn't know anybody in Old Fort. She hadn't lived here long enough.

So that is why I'm a Virginian instead of a North Carolinian. I still live in the same old house that I grew up in. My son stays with me temporarily. The house is interesting – it's 108 years old. It was built by a family named Westerman, who came to Old Fort when the people from the coast used it as a summer resort. Not many people know that Old Fort was at one time a summer resort. The Westermans liked it so well that they bought a lot of land and built two big houses.

We had electricity and water after my daddy brought it here. Then Duke Power came in after he sold it to some little power company. Then that little company sold it to Duke. Duke was already ready to come in there.

We didn't get a TV till after World War II. Didn't have TV in fact. Yeah, I remember TV and we had radio back then – used to listen to all the war news on the radio.

My daddy didn't drive because he said he couldn't concentrate on what he was doing and drive to. He always had somebody to drive him. He had a car and a driver when he was in the forest service way back in 1913. I think our first family car was a 1928 Ford. We had several of those. I learned to drive on it, and so did my mother, when I was about 14 years old. I remember I drove back when you didn't have to have an examination to drive. You just got in and drove – didn't have to have a driver's license at first. Pretty soon they passed that law. The motorcycle policemen – I mean – I'd hear one coming, I would always try to straighten up and look taller and older so they wouldn't see that I was just 14 and driving – should have been 16.

We traveled mostly on the train. We had passenger trains that went through Old Fort daily – four in each direction. We liked to go on the train, you know it was quite a thing to go to Asheville. It took about an hour. We would catch a train at about eight o'clock in the morning to Asheville and get there about nine and shop around, eat lunch at the cafeteria, go to a movie in the afternoon, get out about four o'clock and catch the five o'clock train and be back home at six. Full day's entertainment.

The main payroll when I was growing up, when I was a little girl, was Union Tanning Company, which occupied a great area down where it was later Old Fort Finishing Plant. It was the largest tannery at the time in the world. It was built in 1904, I think. I first remember back when I went to school, you could hear the tannery whistle blow at five o'clock in the morning to get all the workers up so they would be on the job by six. They worked all day long until six o'clock in the evening before they got to leave. Wasn't that long?

They didn't get much pay either. But anyhow, Union Tanning Company made industrial belts to turn machinery. That's where they had big leather belts that turned the wheel, and shoe leather. The leather processing caused a terrible smell to hang over the whole town. People that went through here said that you could smell Old Fort a mile and a half in every direction. It was about like Canton – same smell. The tanning company got trains to come in here with rawhides on them from South America. They'd come in by ship and still have the hair and flesh adhering to them, so you can imagine how awful that smelled. People not directly working in the tannery – had jobs tanning bark and wood. They'd get tanbark in the woods and haul it in and sell it. So, a lot of this area was well, it was just trimmed all and the wood was sold to the tannery. They had a great big wood yard right down here and once it caught fire. That upset everybody. It was terrible, the dry wood and smoke that blows and just had everybody excited.

Later they found pieces of charred wood on Mount Mitchell. Burned for hours! Then in 1931 lightning struck the tannery building and it burned down. Now the Depression had already started so that was a double blow to Old Fort's economy.

There were some people in New York sight-seeing and on the Times Square building where news traveled around on traveling signs it said, "Union Tanning Company is burning in Old Fort, North Carolina." A neighbor in Old Fort saw it. Wasn't that interesting?

I remember very much about the Depression. What a horrible time it was. People couldn't get work and you'd see them going through Old Fort on boxcars – just sitting like chickens on a roost. Just hoping, as they're going from one area of the country to the other trying to get work. Sometimes when the train would stop to get water and coal in Old Fort – they were steam engines you know – they'd get down off the train. The men with just ragged clothes, would get down off the train and come to your back door and say, "Ma'am, do you have a little something I could do, some kindling maybe I could cut. I haven't had anything to eat since day before yesterday." So all the housewives always fed them. Most of them had gardens, and they had jam and bread and biscuits, something, and milk. Not many of them stopped that didn't get fed.

But it wasn't until World War II that the Depression was cured. People did get work because we were in a war. We still haven't paid for that, you know – World War II. That's where some of this debt that we have accumulated came from. So we hope we don't ever have a Depression – it's a terrible thing. People wearing ragged clothes. I have pictures at home of the school children – just pitiful. Little overalls with little ragged shirts and some of them barefooted. Little hard looking shoes.

People in Old Fort now, small town like Old Fort, didn't go hungry. They had what they called the "Give Away." Anyhow, they gave to people who didn't have to work. Most of us had gardens, chickens, pigs, cows and apple trees. We were – we fared better than city folks, who didn't have much. They really had it tough. A lot of suicides of the people who lost all their money and all that. Didn't know which way to turn. I can remember when my own father told me – whispered to me – said, "The bank has closed – our bank."

Well, that didn't mean that much to me because I wasn't that old. But when a bank closes that means you can't get your money out of it. You may never get it all. However much you have in there – it's frozen. It was sometime before they got their money back.

They had government – they called it "Give Aways" where they gave food to the people who needed it. Every community had it. Northern people probably decided what to give them because they had grapefruits. You know – and some of the people had never seen grapefruits. They fed them to the cows and bran – you know – they didn't want bran. They fed it to the chickens. They didn't have sausage and what we wanted. They didn't have southern food – some northerner selected what to give them. They should have had a southerner to consult!