Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler Thompson (Part II) -- 12/14/2007

By Tina Mathews, CRRL Intern, editor
Interviewed by Kathleen Macmanus. Transcription by Sandy Pearce.

Interviewer: How about World War II?

Mr. Thompson: I was in World War II. I didn't get out of the country. I was in different camps on the East Coast, but I didn't get overseas. I went down to Ft. Eustace, stayed there for awhile, and then I was sent to Camp Davis, NC. Outside of Wilmington, north of Wilmington, NC.

Interviewer: You were in the Army?

Mr. Thompson: I was in the anti-aircraft, shooting those guns at the airplanes. I remember an instance occurred before the war. I was in the Army Reserve. After I got to VPI and this friend of mine from Fredericksburg, we both went two years and then we quit and we'd been pals all our lives. He's dead now. But we found out we could get our commissions by enlisting in the enlisted reserve corps and taking a correspondence course, a series of them. You get through some of them and you qualify to take the military examination for promotion lieutenant, captains, major, on up like that. Well we joined it, took the correspondence courses and got our commissions, second Lieutenant. Then we started going to Fort Monroe in the summer for two-week training, got paid for it.

Interviewer: This was before the war?

Mr. Thompson: Before the war.

Interviewer: About when?

Mr. Thompson: 1933, 1934. We used to go every summer, got some pictures of it. I was looking at them the other day. Me in my uniform. One day we were on the guns and the commanding officer issued orders for "rapid fire, "rapid fire." Well, in the design of this outfit there were four guns, a man sitting on the step on each gun to guide compasses to keep it pointed the way the compass showed coming from a big machine. The big machine, like a computer today, it gathered all the information and sent the information to the gun by cable and the guy sitting on the gun had to match the pointers. When it reached that point he had to rotate the wheels to point the gun. And it took, I think, eight men to operate this machine because it was

something like computers. You had a telescope on each side, one was lateral and one was vertical. I was on vertical one day when the order came to rapid fire. So one gun was shooting after the other, just one behind the other, at a sleeve being towed by a plane from Langley Field. I was on the ratchet and all of a sudden I could see the sleeve in the telescope on this thing and the other guy with me was having the other side of it, I was on the vertical and he was on the horizontal. No, I was on the horizontal because all of a sudden the sleeve disappeared and I could see the cable. And then I saw the edge of the plane coming into view on the telescope and they were still firing. So I jumped off and yelled, "Cease fire!" as loud as I could. And they ceased firing and the commanding officer came on over and wanted to know why I hollered cease fire. I said, I didn't want to tell on the other guy, but he had lost it and the plane was coming into view and they were still firing at the sleeve. They were going to hit the plane. So a few minutes after that the pilot radioed down. He wanted permission to extend his cable. And they radioed back to him, "Extend it full length!" I found out later that the last shell that went off up there passed so dose to him that it turned him upside down, but he regained control of the plane.

Interviewer: You saved his life!

Mr. Thompson: Probably did. That was really something. You looked in the sleeve and then all you could see was the cable and then the tail end of the plane coming into view. So I jumped up and I hollered, "Cease fire" as loud as I could. So I think I really saved that pilot's life. Then after you get through the shooting, when it's all over, the plane comes down with the target that he towed and sends a thing down on a couplet from the cable (it does it automatically) then the sleeve will drop down on the ground and look at the sleeve and see how many holes we put in it! There were a lot of holes in there sometimes. Sometimes there weren't too many. Another time I was there training and one guy had to be on the telephone line, I guess at Langley Field. He had to have on earphones because the concussion from those guns is so terrific we all had to wear cotton in our ears to protect our eardrums. One time we were doing that rapid fire and I was looking at the guy on the telephone line and all a sudden he took off his headset and threw them off and blood started pouring out of both his ears. He broke his eardrums. They sent him to the hospital. I don't know if he ever recovered or not, never did find out. But he was sent to the hospital right away. I saw a guy get stabbed one day on the bayonet course.

Interviewer: The what course?

Mr. Thompson: Bayonet. We had to do all that stuff in training. That's when the war started and I was down at Fort Eustace and I stayed there so long to be transferred to another camp that I had to go out and take part in the bayonet training and all that stuff. I happened to be there one day when I saw I guy get stabbed in the back by a bayonet. He dropped on the ground like you see them drop in the movies, you know, when they get hit? He was too close to the dummy when the other guys were after it. One guy right behind the other so when the last guy ran into the dummy with his bayonet it went right through and hit the other guy in the back. They grabbed a first aid thing and put it on him right away and sent him to the hospital. It was really real, like a guy being hit in the war. Stabbed in the back.

Interviewer: I guess you could see the war coming for a long time before World War II actually started.

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. In fact, when I was in the reserves I got orders to go to Fort Monroe to take a physical with the preparation of going into the service. This was before we got in the war. The summer of 1941, I went down there and I was down at Fort Monroe, I think, 18 days. Had to take a physical and then they had to send it to Baltimore for checks and all this stuff. So it took 18 days for me to get my answer back. And I was turned down. There was a spot on my lungs, but they were afraid to take me. I went to talk to a doctor down there about it and he said, "I don't think anything's wrong about it, but you might watch it," which I did. But I got sent home and a fellow officer of mine, he was a doctor, a surgeon from Harrisonburg. He was a Ham operator, too, along with me. Because during the time at Fort Monroe when we weren't busy at physicals doing this, that and the other, we'd take off and (he had his car with him) we'd drive over to Norfolk to visit radio stores. We did that every day for I don't know how long, as long as we were there. But he got accepted and he went in the service. I don't know how long he stayed, but I've seen him since then, years ago. He was coming by Fredericksburg and he called me up. But he was a surgeon in the medical corps from Harrisonburg, Dr. Hill. Paul Hill. But, anyways, he operated, I talked to him on the air after I got back home. Got back on the air. He was sent to Ft. Eustis and he hooked up his equipment down there and he talked to me and the other guys. But it was quite an experience.

Interviewer: You've used that Ham radio all your life?

Mr. Thompson: No. I've been in radio since the late teens. Called it wireless. Then there were several guys who got on the air and became Hams. In fact, 1924 this friend of mine and I hitchhiked to Atlantic City, New Jersey, and spent a week up there. The place that we got a room, the lady had a son and he was a Ham operator. We stayed there for a week.

Interviewer: When did you get your first radio?

Mr. Thompson: I don't remember when. Back in the early'20's. A guy in town opened up a radio store and he sold radios, they were just coming out. And one of the first out was a Westinghouse radio. A little box thing. There was a lever to tune it and one tube. That's when tubes came out. And then the company developed another box with two tubes and an amplifier. That was one of the first ones out with the tubes. Before that it was crystals. That's what I used to fool with first was a crystal. It was a piece of metal, gleans they called it, and it had a cat whisker on it and you'd go around with 31 the cat whisker until you hit a sensitive spot on this piece of it looked like a lump of lead and then you could pick up different things. But you couldn't tune it at that time. Then finally they developed the tuner and variable condenser so you could tune. Back in those days there was commercial stations by the government, the NAA in Arlington, Virginia. They had four tall, several hundred feet tall, towers. In Annapolis, Maryland, they had one called NSM, the call letters. The Navy was NSM in Annapolis, Maryland. They were on very high meters at that time. Ordinary broadcast band at that time ran from, like, 540 to 1500 kilocycles, which is 300-400 meters, something like that. Government stuff was on 2400 meters, which is the opposite end of what shortwaves are. I used to listen to NAA coming in and giving a signal at night, certain times, I'd pick it up time and time again and it'd sound real good. Then radio came out. Schenectady, New York, was one of the first broadcast stations. Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Ohio. KDKA was the call letters of the one in Pittsburgh. WGY was the one in Schenectady, New York. Call letters for the broadcast station. Then everybody wanted to get into broadcast. Even the Woodward and Lothrop store in Washington, D.C., put their own up. Pick a big antenna on the roof. I saw it several times, riding down the street there in Washington. They had one. in Philadelphia, all of them started up, Newark.

Interviewer: Did you ever think of getting into radio, into broadcasting?

Mr. Thompson: Yeah, I thought about it.

Mrs. Thompson: He was a shortwave operator. He had his license.

Mr. Thompson: But I never did. When I went to work for AT&T, the head man had Number One operator license. He had Number One. He wasn't there very long, three weeks I think, and then he was sent to Norfolk. I don't know what ever happened to him after that. But he had Number One license of Ham operators.

Interviewer: What number were you?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, I don't know. They stopped issuing numbers they got so many. They didn't have any numbers. But he had the first one.

Interviewer: You had something 'in common, then?

Mr. Thompson: I didn’t have a number, I had call letters. I don't remember what his call letters were, either. But I remember after I started working for him he said he had Number One license. Since then there's been thousands and thousands of operators getting licenses. They stopped giving Number One, Number Two, and gave you call letters. I think that's why he hired me, because I was interested in radio and electricity. The repeater station was loaded with repeaters. They had a two-wire repeater and a four-wire repeater. They all contained bulbs like tubes. Each repeater contained so many bulbs. And to operate the bulb you had to have the power. Down in the basement of the repeater station they had one room devoted to batteries. And they had tremendously high batteries built on a pedestal, big ones. They held an awful lot of fluid. What do you call it, electrolyte that goes in the battery? Troughs like. And all these troughs together made the 24 volts to operate the bulbs that were in the repeaters station, to light them. Then they had another smaller set of batteries that operated the plates on the battery to give the volume, called the plate voltage. One day the boss (this was the second boss, because the supervisor took over when the other man was transferred and he became the head man. Man named Call, Ray Call), one day he wanted me to be put in charge of the battery room. My job was to keep the electrolytic at specific gravity in each trough at all times. That was one thing. And to keep them even with, what do you call it, a round tube with a plunger/hydrometer. They had a big hydrometer with a curved end for the spout. You stick it in there and pull back and fill it up with some electrolytic, put it in another battery and put it back in. Well, I was doing that one day and I had on white duck pants,

white shirt, silk undershirt (a friend of mine used to have silk undershirts and I had to get me one of them and I had it on that day) and I was standing up on a little stool doing this when all of a sudden the end of that plunger pulled off and all that acid poured over me. Man, I thought I was doomed. It ran all down my clothes and on my shoes. So I went and told the boss and he sent somebody down to my mother's house to get some new clothes for me to put on. I took my clothes off and threw them in my locker (each one of us had our own locker, a tall locker), I threw them in there. One day I decided to move and I went in there to pick up the white ducks and it had turned all to dust from the acid. Just a pile of dust. Went to get my shirt and that was gone. My undershirt I had on, the silk withstood that battery acid. It had one or two little holes, that's all. I was really surprised. But the regular cotton stuff didn't survive. Even my shoes, it ate up my shoes. (Laughs)

Interviewer: That was a close call for you!

Mr. Thompson: I'm glad it didn't hit me in the face or I wouldn't be here today!

Interviewer: You said there were two electric companies in Fredericksburg at one time?

Mr. Thompson: Yeah. One of them was Ficklen. They had a 60 cycle. The plant was up on this end of Falmouth Bridge on the left side as you came across the bridge, on the Fredericksburg side. That was 60 cycle. Then this man named Gould, E.D. Gould, lived on College Avenue, he started up the other plant down on Caroline Street, where the building still stands now, but it's not used for anything I don't think. But he built that building and to get the equipment in there, the generators and things, they brought them by railroad train to Fredericksburg. That's when the railroad was on the ground down there on the streets. They used flatcars. They brought a working crew in when they had those cars to unload, they brought a working train in to Fredericksburg and built a railroad track on Caroline Street and put it down on the track and how they got up to the place where they needed them, I don't know if they were pulled by mules or what. I think they were pulled by mules. And they would take one block at a time, take the track up and go to the next block and lay it down, then pull those cars up with all these big generators on them. And they kept at it until they got it all in. But how they got it down the hill into the building I don't remember. But they got them all in there and got the plant going and the next Christmas my brother and I, we were small

boys, we got an electric train from Santa Claus. We hooked it up and the transformer blew up. Then we found out that Daddy had the house wired from these people, Gould, and found out that it was 25 cycle instead of 60. So we had to order a new transformer, which we did. But we found out later that there were only two places in the United States that had 25 cycle current - Niagara Falls, for one, and Fredericksburg, Virginia, the other! Two places in the entire United States!

Interviewer: So then did you have to rewire your houses?

Mr. Thompson: No, no. At that time we didn't know the difference, 25 or 60. Daddy just knew the guy who got in the electrical business and had him wire our house. We used to have gas in the house to see by at nighttime, just ordinary gas. So we had the house wired, 208 Caroline Street. And it was wired by a man named Stoffregen and he was an electrical engineer.

Interviewer: His name was what?

Mr. Thompson: Stoffregen. Ernest Stoffregen. He lived on Caroline Street almost across from the old Elks' building. Anyway, he wired the house and everybody found out about the 25 cycle. Now at the old office, the funeral home, the barn, we used to call it, they had 60 cycle in there. And during floods, when the high water came, 60 cycle current would go down and come up. 25 cycle stays the same all the time. Even in the movie theater they had 60 cycle. Sometimes the movie would go clean out due to high water and then it would come back up and you'd see it again. But 25 cycle never did stay in because when Virginia Electric & Power was formed it was all 60 cycle. They took over everything when the electric company was formed. But before that it was two companies here, Ficklen and Gould.

Interviewer: How often did the flooding happen?

Mr. Thompson: Whenever the river got high, about every year sometimes. It got so high sometimes, like in 1914; it washed out both ends of the Falmouth Bridge.

Interviewer: Did you say almost every year the river got that high?

Mr. Thompson: It'd get high all year long, off and on, due to the rains. But it never got real high. In fact, when the Falmouth Bridge got washed out.

Interviewer: That was 1914?

Mr. Thompson: I don't remember. I think it was around that time because I was in elementary school and when Ficklen had the power plant up there. Well, the river got so high because of rain and then froze during the winter. And I went down on the old Free Bridge and you could reach down and almost touch the ice - that's how dose it came up to floor of the bridge down there. So the railroad got worried because that's when they had the one track through town, they put a freight train on the railroad bridge and let it sit right there until the danger passed. Then they took it off. They were afraid the bridge was going to wash off when the ice broke because when that ice broke it took out both ends of the Falmouth Bridge, Stafford side and Fredericksburg side. Took both ends out and left the rest of it standing.

Interviewer: So they left the train just as a weight?

Mr. Thompson: Yeah. They let it sit on that bridge until the danger passed and then they moved it off and reopened the line.

Interviewer: There was a horrible flood in Fredericksburg, wasn't that in 1942?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. I wasn't here. I was in the Army. I was down in Fort Eustace, Virginia, when that flood came here. Because down at Fort Eustace we had rain for days and we still had to go out to the firing range and fire guns, do this and do that in the pouring rain. Eat lunch in the pouring rain. You'd eat lunch with your helmet on and you'd put your head down and the rain would pour off your helmet right into your mess kit! Get your food all wet. Boy, it rained for days down there. I was coming home on that weekend because I had my car down there. I would come home one weekend on the car and come home one weekend on the troop train headed for New York. But I would come home every weekend when orders came. But it rained so bad nobody's leave came. That's when I found out they had the flood up here. It got, I think, five feet deep on Caroline Street.

Interviewer: Your family was here then? Your wife and children were here? Mr. Thompson: Yeah. We lived on Marye Street at that time. I came home the next weekend and looked around at the damage. There was an awful lot of damage here in town due to the high water. Another time they had a flood here I missed that, too. I was away at embalming school. It was raining for quite a while and I went back

that night on the train to go to school and it was pouring when I left Fredericksburg. They had a flood, but not that bad. Since then I've seen. a lot of times when the river was up to Sophia Street and Caroline Street. But I missed that one, that big one.

Interviewer: When you went to embalming school did you live in Fredericksburg or did you move to Philadelphia?

Mr. Thompson: No, I lived here. I went to embalming school the same place my father went to.

Interviewer: Did you go up and stay during the week and come home on the weekends?

Mr. Thompson: I'd come home on several weekends.

Interviewer: So you had to rent a place up there?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. I had to rent a room.

Mrs. Thompson: He had to study. Tell her how your textbooks were.

Interviewer: Your textbooks in embalming school?

Mr. Thompson: We had a book on anatomy. But in embalming school you had to take all the "-ologies", biology, cardiology, muscles, nerves, everything. We had to take them all. In fact, I remember when we finished histology in six months the old doctor that taught it, Dr. Fischer was the instructor, he came to the class the next day after exams and he said, "I've got a confession to make to you guys." Somebody said, "What did you do, Doc?" He said, "I got to tell you that you all just completed a course in six months in histology that a pre-medical school gets in two years!" and we finished it in six months.

Interviewer: You must have felt pretty proud.

Mr. Thompson: Oh, you had to write all the time because the doctors, they were the professors, they were standing in front of the classroom. It was a classroom built in tiers and circular. The students sat up there in tiers and the professor was down front. He would walk back and forth there all the time talking and you had to take down everything he said and those were the notes you studied by. The notes you got

when he was talking. We also took bookkeeping, first aid, several other things.

Interviewer: Did you work on cadavers?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. There was some funeral homes up there, particularly blacks, that had a contract with the school and they let them have certain bodies that weren't too important, so to speak. I worked on a guy that jumped or fell from an eight-story building. I got him to work on one day. He was really busted up. But he jumped or fell, I never did find out, eight stories. We had a science identification course to take up there, fingerprinting and this that and the other. To make a nose, you do this; get the length of the nose from the index finger. The eyes are a certain distance apart - we learned all that.

Interviewer: There's a lot of different skills that you have to use.

Mr. Thompson: I remember there was a guy and his wife up there from Georgetown, outside of Washington, D.C.? It was an old firm and his son and this man's wife, who was a trained nurse, she decided she'd take the course with her husband. And they came up there and took the course and the first day they called her name to come out into the embalming room to start practicing embalming she walks in there and saw that body laying on the table and she fainted! And she was a nurse! (Laughs) Fainted, absolutely fainted! She finally overcame it. But a graduate nurse fainting just seeing a body there!

Interviewer: I'm interested in how your business has changed. In the early days when you dad and grandfather were in the business, were there different techniques that you learned? Have things changed?

Mr. Thompson: When I was in school the school I was in developed a machine for pumping the fluid into the body. Now everybody uses the machines. Used to be the gravity method. You'd take a bottle shaped a certain way and put so much fluid and water in it and hoist it up, run a tube from it into the instrument and into the arm. That was gravity. When it emptied it was time for another one to go up. Now they use machines. I never did use a machine. They were just coming out.

Interviewer: When you were talking about the dairy house I was thinking when you had people in your funeral parlor in the summertime before air conditioning, what did you do?

Mr. Thompson: You had to go buy huge fans, electric fans. My father and I got a call one afternoon and they said, "They want you to come over to Aquia Creek, somebody died over there and they want you to embalm them in the house". Used to do a lot of that in those days. We'd go to the house and embalm them right in the house. So my father and I got things together and they'd picked out a casket beforehand so we took it over with us in the hearse. Went over to this house on the side of Aquia Creek, on the bank, and they had lamps to go by for light, didn't have electricity. And he and I embalmed that body in that house that night, dressed it, put it in the casket and when we left that's when we ran into trouble. There was a guy there that wanted us to give him a ride into Stafford Courthouse. So Daddy says, "Sure, hop in."And we're glad we got him because we came out this old, dirty road to the main road, which wasn't tarred, and we went so far and we got stuck on an upgrade. We tried and couldn't get the hearse out to save our lives. We tried and tried and it just wouldn't budge. Daddy said one thing to do was to walk to Stafford Courthouse and call up Vernon Davenport who was still at the old funeral home and get him to come up there with something to pull us out. So this fellow walked with me. He got so far from the hearse and he says, "By the way, if you want to follow me I can take you down through the woods because I used to work in mines and I can see pretty well in the dark." I said, "Good." So I hooked my fingers through his belt around his waist and held onto him. He took me up and down and up and down through the woods and we came out and there was Stafford Courthouse! I was glad he was with us because otherwise I'd have walked the road and it would have taken quite a while because it was a long distance. He knew the shortcut through the woods. I got on the phone and called Vernon Davenport and he came out there with an ambulance because it had more power. And the guy with him went down there and hooked onto the hearse but he couldn't budge it. It was stuck in the mud so bad. So Daddy says, "Let's leave it and we'll pick it up in the morning." It was late at night then. So we got in the ambulance and came on back to town. The next day he sent a wrecker over there and they got it out.

Interviewer: Was the body still in the hearse?

Mr. Thompson: No, no. The body was back at the house. We left it there. But we had our embalming instruments and what's called an embalming board, coolie board we call them, folded up. That was in the hearse and all the equipment.

Interviewer: You said when your dad started they still used horses to pull the hearse.

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. I remember the horses. My grandfather had two great big horses. That's all they did was pull that hearse. Then he had all the horse equipment - carriages, wagons. But those two horses were big and powerful. I don't know where he got them from, but they were two identical horses, gray-colored, and they were used all the time to put the hearse. In fact, he was in that hearse when he had his funeral.

Interviewer: Your grandfather?

Mr. Thompson: My grandfather, with the horses. When they first came out with the automobile hearse, I remember that, and an ambulance. Daddy bought two, a hearse and an ambulance. My father bought them when the first came out and they were great big things. The two of them came in a boxcar and they filled the boxcar of the railroad. I went down to the freight yard down here and unloaded them. There were two. They were so big in those days. And the ambulance was a combination car; you could use it for a family car. Seats would come out and you could put them in and carry the whole family in one car big. The hearse was big.

Interviewer: Did your father use it for a family car?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. We used it for a family car. When it was sitting idle it was all fixed and ready for an ambulance call.

Interviewer: So you were the ambulance for Fredericksburg, too.

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. They were the first ambulance and hearse in town. And they came from Cincinnati, Ohio, was where they were built. I've been out to the plant twice and brought back new hearses. Wife and I went on the train and drove the hearse back. One time we went out and I took the whole family in the car and she drove the car back and I drove the hearse back. Cincinnati, Ohio. Then when the Packard car came out Daddy went to Packards for the hearse and ambulance. He bought three at one time, I think, one ambulance and two hearses. Packards. Then he got some friends who used to go with him in the car, drove out, picked up the equipment and drove back. That was a Packard. They were nice equipment.

Interviewer: I'm going to ask you a little off the subject now. Did you even get involved in local politics here in Fredericksburg?

Mr. Thompson: Politics? Never. I had no interest in politics so I stayed out Of it. Interviewer: I'll bet you've seen lots of changes.

Mr. Thompson: A friend of mine was on City Council one time and asked me about becoming a member of City Council. I said, "No, thank you. I don't want any part of it." I just stayed out of politics all together. I wasn't interested.

Interviewer: Did the people from Washington ever come down here to campaign?

Mr. Thompson: I guess so. I wasn't interested in politics, never have been. I saw President Harding down here. I've seen several presidents. President Eisenhower, Coolidge, I've seen down here.

Interviewer: They all came to Fredericksburg?

Mr. Thompson: Or came through here. I saw them go through here. In fact, I was with the rescue squad and we turned out for, I think, President Eisenhower. He came here one day for something and we became like an honor guard for him the rescue squad dressed in our uniforms. I've seen President Nixon. In fact, he was a lecturer for our Ham radio convention in Washington, D.C., one time. They got him to be our lecturer. He stood up in front of the whole outfit and talked.

Interviewer: Did he do Ham radio?

Mr. Thompson: No, no. He wasn't interested, but why they got him, I don't know. But he spoke to us. It was held in the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, which is out on the outskirts. Wardman Park. They had a radio station up there. In fact, my youngest daughter studied ballet and all that stuff. She got, somehow, interested in it and she appeared on the stage up there with several contestants and she won it. Because I had to go down to the radio store and get the prizes she'd won, some kind of radio.

Interviewer: I was going to ask you one last. I wonder, the kind of work that you do, did it have a kind of spiritual component? Because nobody knows as much as you do how fleeting and fragile life is.

Mr. Thompson: In fact, my father's dollar didn't mean anything to him. If you wanted his services, you get it. I remember one time he called me up one night and said to meet him at the office. He was there first because he lived closer. He had the hearse out of the garage and was sitting there waiting for me to drive. I asked him, "Where do we go?" And he said, "Head on out to the Courthouse." Spotsylvania Courthouse. We got out there and I asked, "Now where do I go?" and he'd tell me. Finally I end up at this man's house out there in Spotsylvania County and he knew exactly where he was going. We got out, nice house, lights came on the front porch and we went up and a man came out and talked to my father, he knew him, and Daddy says, "Who's passed away?" and he said, "My wife," but right away he said, "I'll tell you, Mr. Thompson, I haven't got any money to bury her with." Daddy says, "I didn't ask you for any money. Where's your wife's body? I'll take her in and take care of her." And he did. He never got a penny for it. He knew it in the beginning, but it didn't make any difference to my father. (laughs) Never made one bit of difference.

Interviewer: I can tell you admired your father a lot.

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. You know, he had an accident one time and he was laid up for quite a while. He had bought this Ford chassis, Model T, and he built his own body to put on it. This was before they made that movie here in Fredericksburg which I got a part in, got an extra's job. The movie made here in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Interviewer: What was the movie?

Mr. Thompson: A movie, the title of it was "Steadfast Heart." All the outdoor scenes for the movie were made here in Fredericksburg. The indoor scenes were made in a studio in New York. That's before Hollywood started up, really.

Interviewer: And your father was an extra, or you were an extra?

Mr. Thompson: I was an extra. I just took part of the mob scene. When they were making the film, down around the old Princess Anne Building, National Bank on the corner, they had a mob scene and somebody said if you go to such and-such a room in the Princess Anne Hotel to the head man up there you could get some money and be in the mob scene. So I skipped school that afternoon and, sure enough, the man gave me $3! And I was to be an extra in this mob scene, which I did, and made 3 bucks for it. (laughs)

Interviewer: You started to say your dad got injured in that movie?

Mr. Thompson: Daddy furnished the truck for them. He bought this chassis and built a flat, wooden body on the truck to haul caskets and boxes and things on. And the movie people needed a truck and they found out about it and they went to my father and asked if they could rent his truck to film some of the scenes. He said, "Sure." So I watched them. They took the tripod off the camera and mounted it on this flat truck body. I forgot how they mounted the feet on the floor, but they mounted it and secured it and went uptown to Fall Hill Avenue to where it comes around, Bragg Hill Road, makes a curve by the river? Well, there's a big cliff right there and they were going to use that for an accident scene. And what they did, I watched them do it, on the top of the cliffs they got some boards to make a track and put them on the ground. Then they got this old car and it was going to be used by the bank robbers. The bank was robbed. And the bank robbers would be in this car. And then they went down below and dug a big hole in the ground down there and put the camera in the hole to make the angle look higher. I watched them do all that. Then, when they got ready to take the movie they got somebody to start the old car up, put two dummies in the front seat of the car, got it started and jumped out of the way. When the camera was running you could see the car come down and land on its top and fall over. I watched them take that picture. Before that, they showed the cops going after the bank robbers, following them down Fall Hill Avenue. When it was taken they were going real slow, but then when you see it in the movie, boy, they were going a mile a minute! (laughs) It was interesting to watch them make that scene where the car came over and landed on its top. Then they had, in another scene, a marriage in St. George's Church where the hero and heroine were married and they came out.

Interviewer: Do you remember who the actors were? That would be a fun movie to see now that we know it was filmed here.

Mr. Thompson: I know the name of it, but I don't remember the people. The main star of that picture was taken ill at the last moment, I remember that, and they had to get another girl to come down and take her place. The man's name was Steele, I don't remember his first name. But that was a long time ago. I was in high school. I don't remember what year it was. But they also used, where the hospital was built, Benmore's property. At that time it was vacant, that big old home? They used that in some of the scenes.

Interviewer: What property was that?

Mr. Thompson: Snowden. That was. A big, famous home in those days, but it was vacant at the time. So they used that in some of the scenes.

Interviewer: You've seen a lot of changes. I guess I could ask you which things you like to see changed do you have things that you say, "This is better the way it was," or "This is better the way it is now." What changes do you think have affected you the most?

Mr. Thompson: I don't know.

Mrs. Thompson: We had horrible roads way back!

Mr. Thompson: I liked the old days for one reason because there wasn't so much traffic to deal with! (laughs) You could drive out Old Plank Road, which is Route 3 now, very seldom you'd see another automobile in the old days.

Mrs. Thompson: Did you ever touch on the rumrunners?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, yeah. When it was metal framework down on William Street across to Stafford, the two-lane bridge, they had big gates on this side of the bridge to stop the rumrunners.

Interviewer: Were there that many of them?

Mr. Thompson: Oh, it was a problem for a long time, yeah. When Falmouth Bridge washed out on both ends they didn't have any way to get across that way for years until they put a swinging bridge across that way so people could walk across, until they put the new bridge in. But in the meantime they used River Road from Falmouth to William Street and come across the bridge there. That's the way all the traffic had to come going north and south. And sometimes the Fredericksburg police would get word that the rumrunners were coming down the road, they'd go right down to the bridge at this end and close the gate, lock it and chain it. Sometimes the guys would try to get through it. They would smash that gate all to pieces. Big steel gates, they were always bent. They'd try to stop the guys, some would give up, some would try to ram right through it. But With the chain around it they could never get a car to go through it. They had one rumrunner get killed in Spotsylvania, 17 miles out on a curve. Turned his car over - he was loaded with whiskey and he got killed. In the old days the cars had an arm up front in the front seat where he could bring the top up and bring the arm on there and fasten it to hold the

top on. When he didn't need it he'd just take it off and fold it up and have an open car. Well that arm hit that guy right here and split his head wide open. I saw him. My father embalmed him.

Interviewer: Oh, I guess anything like this you would find eventually.

Mr. Thompson: One thing you ought to know it that the Chautauqua used to come here. That was a big tent, which came to Fredericksburg once a summer for a week to show shows. When they first came to town they used to have a big vacant lot up on the corner of Winchester Street and Lewis. That's where they used to put the tent up and have shows every afternoon and in the evening for a whole week. They always required local boys to come help them out. You didn't get paid for it, but you got to see the show. I was always one of them that helped out the Chautauqua when they came to town. After the show was over in the afternoon we'd go around and straighten up the chairs. They had about 150 to 200 chairs under this big tent for people to sit in. And we had to straighten them up in lines for the next show. During the meantime, one of the head guys of the outfit would take us as his employees, so to speak, and give us calisthenics and drills and all such things to help us get along. The last day of the show we would perform on the stage ourselves! We'd perform on the stage. That's one thing we liked about it - we knew we were going to get on the stage ourselves at the last day of the show! (laughs). We'd do all kinds of gymnastics. It was fun. I know when they had it on that corner for several years until somebody bought it and built a house, they had to go to City Park where the rescue squad building is. Right there where they held it for quite some time. That's where the Elks' Fair was held for so many years. Gloria Swanson, that silent movie star? She came here and was at the Elks' Fair one night.

Interviewer: What did she do?

Mr. Thompson: There was a man here who was a screenwriter, in Hollywood? I forgot his name. Anyway, he lived in Fredericksburg. And, of course, he would deal with these movie people. He had her come here one summer and stayed down at the country dub. That's where she roomed. And she would come to this fair and ride around in a convertible. I saw her. Gloria Swanson. (laughs) We were there one morning, us guys, after we had cleaned up and gotten the chairs all straightened out, in the park talking to this guy, when we found that two of our closest friends that used to be with us, boys, had been killed by a train over there 'north of Fredericksburg. They'd been over there sitting on the tracks when two trains came by, one on one track

the other on the opposite line and killed them both. We got the news when we were down there in the park. Both of those boys were killed. But they had good plays. And they were always filled there with spectators. They had a big stage, big platform to perform on.

Interviewer: It would be so hot it would probably be wonderful to be outside in the summers. That was pre-air conditioning.

Mr. Thompson: Well, it wasn't bad in those days. Of course, I've seen it over 100 time and time again here for a spell. Growing up as kids we didn't think anything of the heat. That didn't mean anything to us. Another time something came here - Adam's Floating Theater. I don't know where they came from, Norfolk or someplace down there. But it would come up here once a summer and anchor down there off of, I think it's Canal Street. Way up town on Caroline where you can go down to the river. And they would anchor there and they would perform, have shows on it every night. My mother took me down there several times when I was a boy to see the Adam's Theater.

Interviewer: You went up there on the ship to see it?

Mr. Thompson: On the boat. Came up here every summer for a certain length of time and then it would go on. But I remember that, the name was Adams. Adam's Floating Theater. (laughs)

Interviewer: You have given me so much wonderful material here. I just thank you so much for this interview time.

Addendum to HFFI Interview

Grandfather Thompson in the Civil War

Mr. Thompson's grandfather, John Lewis Thompson, was in the artillery of the Confederate Army and participated in the battle of Fredericksburg in 1862. During the battle John Lewis Thompson had to retrieve his unit's horses which had broken away and wandered down to the bank of the Rappahannock River while the fighting continued on both sides. Luckily he made it back to his post with the prized possessions.

Later, his canon misfired and shattered his right arm. He was taken to Salem Baptist Church which was serving as a hospital, and his right arm was amputated. Some time later while he was recuperating from his ordeal, a Confederate soldier came running up to the church

yelling, "The Yankees are coming, the Yankees are coming." All the ambulatory patients got up and made haste from the church.

Mr. Thompson remembers as a very young boy his grandfather picking up his grandchildren with his only good arm and slinging them across the floor of his general store he operated in Beaverdam, VA. This act of strength remained indelibly in the mind of his young grandson.

Fredericksburg's Toll Booths

Mr. Thompson remembers when travelers exited the city on any of the five roads, a toll of 25 cents for horse or automobile had to be paid. There was no toll for travelers entering the city. The location of each of the toll booths is as follows:

Travelers heading east on William street would encounter a toll booth at the northeast comer of William Street and Sophia street just before crossing the bridge over the Rappahannock River. The small building was next to the stone warehouse. There was a toll of six cents for persons to cross the bridge. When the toll was abolished the bridge was referred to as the Free Bridge which was replaced by the Chatham Bridge.

The other toll booth before crossing the Rappahannock stood on the west side of the present day Princess Anne Street just before the approaching bridge which has since been replaced due to the flood of 1942.

Travelers headed west out of the city on William Street would find the toll booth on the right side of the road as it begins to level off after descending down the hill just before the Route I overpass.

The toll booth on Lafayette Boulevard stood on the left side of the road just after crossing the bridge over Hazel run.

Travelers headed east on Dixon street would find the toll booth on the southeast comer of Dixon Street and Tyler Street.