

Warren Farmer: Part II -- 12/13/2007

By Tina Mathews, CRRL Intern, editor

Interviewed by Mark Jenkins

Interviewer: This is tape number two of our oral history interview with Warren Farmer. It is June 11, 1998. And, Warren, let's talk briefly about -

Mr. Farmer: I'd like to go on a little more about stores, if you don't mind?

Interviewer: Oh, by all means, please do.

Mr. Farmer: We've been talking about buying chickens from stores. There was no such thing as a supermarket: whatever you wanted you had to go to a store. In my childhood there were two grocery stores in the 700 block of Caroline Street, little one-man stores. There was another one in the 800 block, Burruss's, there was Scott and Doggett a block, two blocks above that. On William Street there was Rowe's Meat Market ... there were individual little privately owned merchant stores everywhere.

Interviewer: It sounds as if they were scattered almost one per block or so.

Mr. Farmer: In the business section, yes. And even in the outlying ones, not one a block, but still. That's true. So you had to go there – perishable things you had to go and buy almost every day, because refrigeration was pretty difficult to come by. You had a refrigerator which you stocked with ice, but the ice would run out. In the wintertime fresh vegetables were something you didn't come by very easily. Your food came from cans. And I remember to get an orange at St. George's Church on Christmas Eve for the Christmas celebration was quite an event. The first fruit stores that I remember were started by Italians who came to Fredericksburg, some of the early immigrants: the Venturas -- Salve Ventura was the first that I remember. But stores were just something you visited more often than you do today. It's like in some of the European places: one shop sells meat, another shop sells this and another that, the bakery and all.

Interviewer: Was that the way that it was here?

Mr. Farmer: No, no, no: the stores had a great variety of food. But they were very small; they didn't have large stocks of anything. And incidentally, I worked in stores every summer: I clerked and delivered groceries for two stores every year for many, many years. And one of the great things that I had to deliver was kerosene: people had lamps because electricity had not come in yet. Oh, there was some, but not a great deal. Nearly everybody, we had lamps for years, I remember. I would have to deliver kerosene, that was one of the main things people wanted brought to their homes. Of course, I delivered other things, too.

Interviewer: Would you bring it in a container that was the people's or the store's?

Mr. Farmer: They would buy little small cans, maybe five gallons, I doubt if even a five gallon, probably a two gallon can. Because lamps didn't use a great deal, you know. Two gallons of kerosene would probably last a week or two. Depended on how many lamps you had. But it's so easy today: the people who would walk into a room now, flick a switch and turn on a light, have no idea what it was like to walk into a dark room and feel around, feel around all around in the dark for a match or something. Of course, there was gas, you know, piped in. I forgot that, there was gas piped in which you lighted with a match. That was for illumination. I don't know if there was as much heating in those days -- yes, yes, I think there was. But most cooking was done with wood stoves, and wood had to be brought to you.

Interviewer: Did they have wood merchants?

Mr. Farmer: Yes, there were wood merchants. Excelsior wood was one of the favorites for cooking because it made a very hot fire very fast.

Interviewer: That's pine, isn't it?

Mr. Farmer: Yes. There was an excelsior mill just between Caroline and Sophia on the east side of the railroad track, Young's Mill. And they would deliver -- and I made a lot of money and I worked hard at it -- they would bring a cord of excelsior wood up to a house on Caroline Street -- mine, for example -- and dump it right on the street, in the street. And it had to be moved into the house, and I used to get 25 cents for moving a load of wood inside, sometimes carrying it up three stories. [Laughter] That was one of the favorite ways boys made money in those days.

Interviewer: Comparatively easy.

Mr. Farmer: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Would you all patronize one of these little shops exclusively, or would you bounce around?

Mr. Farmer: The grocery stores? We patronized Mr. Wallace Jones's store, which was right next door to us in the first floor of Caroline But Mr. Brawner was just two doors above him, but Mr. Jones had a better selection of things. It was while working for Mr. Jones that I was sent out one day with an order to deliver to a home on Sophia Street, and on the way out -Mr. Jones wasn't looking -- I snatched a plug of apple chewing tobacco.

Interviewer: How old were you? [starting to laugh]

Mr. Farmer: I don't know, I was pretty young. Too young not to know enough not to snitch a plug of apple tobacco. So I chewed it on the way to deliver the groceries, and on the way back I didn't go back to Mr. Jones's store: I went to my home as sick as a dog! [Laughter] And my father was furious with me, he was going to give me a couple of taps, I think, and his mother, my grandmother, was visiting us from Richmond, and she said, "No, you're not, I remember when you did the same thing!" So. But, my father said, "You take this tobacco back to Mr. Jones, and tell him you stole it." Oh, what a job that was: to go back and confess to a crime. "And tell him also that you're going to pay for it." At ten cents I had to work it out: I've forgotten what I made but it was probably twenty-five cents a week in those days. Mr. Jones overlooked it, he had probably done the same thing himself.

Interviewer: Rite of passage [laughing].

Mr. Farmer: But, it was a long time before I stole anything else. [Laughing] Dear! Another thing I did as a young boy was to go to dancing school. Boys don't go to dancing schools anymore, do they? Or do they?

Interviewer: I went to what we called a cotillion. This is in the early 1970s. Depends on the neighborhood and the town, I think.

Mr. Farmer: I think you went once a week to be taught to dance?

Interviewer: We learned fox-trot and waltz and things like that.

Mr. Farmer: Yes.

Interviewer: Well, I heard that the corner of Lewis's Drug Store was a hangout spot.

Mr. Farmer: Well, of course, yes, that was the great hang-out spot. I spent, I don't know, if you put it all together, years standing on that corner. Well, it was an innocent thing to do, and we were visible, we weren't robbing anything, we weren't shooting anybody -- we were just standing there talking. Of course, some of the talk was not printable, I guess, but anyway... I'm not trying to make out that we were model citizens, but that was a great hangout spot. I think every town has a drugstore, I suppose. And it was not only for boys, but it was a great gathering place for -- then, there were two drugstores: Goolrick's Drug Store down on Caroline Street, and Lewis's. Men gathered at Goolrick's, the older crowd, and boys gathered at Lewis's.

Interviewer: All this was during Prohibition as well.

Mr. Farmer: Oh, yes. I must say that I did drink some. I was not a heavy drinker in those days, but I did drink some. And I thought one of the most amusing things that happened during Prohibition was my friend Dick Tompkins, who lived at Amelia and Prince Edward Street, with his grandmother, he was the son of Dr. Tompkins. Dr. Tompkins had died, and his mother had died, and he lived with his grandmother and his sister and his brother. And old Mrs. Tompkins was a bitter anti-booze woman; she just thought drinking was the worst thing anybody could do. And she was also a very trusting soul, and when the Prohibition law was passed, she assumed that there was no more whiskey in the world. At the same time, one floor above -- she lived on the first floor -- on the second floor Dick and I were making beer and bathtub gin! [Laughter] Poor old lady never knew the difference. Oh gosh. There was much less drinking in those days for the simple reason that you couldn't get it. And if you could get it, it was murderous stuff, you know: it could blind you if hadn't been treated properly. People did go blind from that stuff. I never did any great running out into the county to get whiskey or anything like that, but I know it was done. People used to -- I remember the best whiskey I drank in those days was served by Judge Embrey, Judge Alvin Embrey. Judge Embrey would buy it -- where he got it I don't know -- and put it in a charred keg. And by the time it came out, instead of being colorless like water it was a nice amber, bourbon whiskey. Corn whiskey. I guess it was corn whiskey, and at least it was something you could drink without gagging on it. [Laughter] But the rumrunners

were -- well, there was another phase of this thing: my first day on the job at the Free Lance-Star, I was sent to cover police court, which was my job for some years after that. Police court and the circuit court, too. But I started off with police court. I walked into the office, and I knew Chief Perry, Chief Silas Perry, very well. He said, "Warren, you're new on the job, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Come downstairs, I want to show you something." The police headquarters then was back of the courthouse, circuit court. And we walked down the steps, and on the floor was this thing he moved with his foot, and it sort of turned and then rolled back. He said, "What do you think that is?" I said, "It's a charred stump, a tree stump." He said, "No, it's not. That's a man." It turned out that it was the remains of a rumrunner who had burned up. He had come through town the night before, or two nights before, and had been pursued by the police, and going around Dead man's Curve -- southbound, at the National Cemetery -- he turned over upside down. He was trapped in the car, the liquor leaked out and caught fire, and he was incinerated. And it didn't look like a human at all -- the thing that I saw. Well, anyway: that was quite common. They would come down from the north, somehow the police would be notified that certain people were known rumrunners, and when they were seen headed south from Alexandria, say, or Quantico, they called the local police and we'd go down to the Free Bridge -- Falmouth was out, I can't remember why, flood I guess, thought they may have come across Falmouth too, later or earlier -- anyway, my experience was mainly with the Free Bridge. The police would go down there, and first we'd hide behind something with the guns waiting for them. I don't remember any shots being fired. But later they put a chain across, and some of them would go through the chain, you know. But catching a rumrunner was a very occasional thing; they'd go through at night and go around the town by old country roads and that sort of thing. Apparently Baltimore was a center for the distribution of whiskey: the ships would bring in Scotch whisky from the British Isles and would be unloaded -- I don't know whether they came up the bay or what -- they would send it out that way. It was very rare to get a drink of Scotch here; it could be if you could afford it, but most of the affluent people who drank at all were never in short supply, whiskey was never in short supply in their homes. How they got it I do not know, but they had private sources. Sometimes, well one man whose name I prefer not to mention, who was a well-known citizen of Fredericksburg, would go to Baltimore or Washington by train and fill his pockets and bags with whiskey and bring it back for the well-to-do citizens. And he was caught -- how he was caught I don't know, I don't know who reported it -- but he was, and he was sentenced to serve his nights in jail. He went to work

every day, but he served his nights in jail! [Laughter] That is a fact. Now, going back to the jail and the courts: police court was a very curious thing -

Interviewer: Let's back up really quickly and tell us how you joined the Free Lance.

Mr. Farmer: Well, it's a very simple thing: I just asked Josiah Rowe to give me a job, and he said to come on into the office. And that was it. He was coming out of Lewis's Drug Store, and I was standing on the corner. I said, "Josiah, how about a job?" He said, "Come on in the office." When, I knew him pretty well, and that was the way it went.

Interviewer: What did he give you?

Mr. Farmer: I started at \$15 a week.

Interviewer: Being a reporter?

Mr. Farmer: Oh, yes. I started at \$15 a week, and my family was in Richmond, and I had to have a place to live and eat, so I got room and board at the home of Mrs. Wilson, Anne Rowe's grandmother. Three meals a day and a room for \$50 a month. That left me \$ 10 for the rest of my expenses the rest of the month. That went on for years and years. When the Depression came -- this redounds to my credit -- I got a raise, and everybody else at the Free Lance-Star got a reduction. I got a \$2.50 raise, right in the middle of the Depression. Josiah said, "Don't tell anybody else about this."

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Mr. Farmer: Well, he was very fond of me. Josiah and I became great friends. In fact, in the latter part of his life I was his only close friend. I'm sure of that. And I was doing my work pretty well, and \$15 a week was really not enough to live on, I mean sometimes my clothes would be a little shabby, you know. I had that pointed out to me once. [Laughter] But when I took the job, I had just come back from a trip abroad working on a ship, and I was going to Richmond to offer to work for the Richmond Times Dispatch for nothing, just to break into the newspaper business. But I got this Job. I had up to that time never known what I wanted to do, until I met Paul Kester, the novelist and playwright.

Interviewer: How in the world did you all hook up with him?

Mr. Farmer: Well, I had been working for the RF&P Railroad part-time. And I got on the train at Fredericksburg -- well, I went to the station one day, this was before the overpass was built. And I was standing there, and this man was standing there, and the train was late, and we said, "Just like a railroad", being late and all that. So when we got on the train I was headed for Occoquan where the camp cars were, I was staying on the camp cars till Monday. You spent a week on the camp cars; you didn't go back and forth. Ate and slept on a camp car. We sat and talked, and he told me what his name was, and I introduced myself, and we had a very pleasant conversation. He was headed for Alexandria. Oddly enough, on Friday when I got on the train to come back home, he was on the same train coming back. And we sat and talked again. I think that's when I found out what his name was. The name rang a bell somehow, I don't know why, I had never read anything of his, but I knew that he was SOMEBODY in capital letters. So my next- door- neighbor was Miss Sally Gravatt, who was the librarian. You know where her house is now?

Interviewer: Gravatt house?

Mr. Farmer: Well, let me get on with this. I went to Miss Sally at the library and I said, 'Mss Sally, I met this man named Paul Kester, and there is something about his name that reminds me of something.' She said, "Well, let's look it up." And we did in the biographical dictionary, and sure enough, he was somebody. So I was very much interested. And he had told me where he lived, and if I was ever down there to come down and see him. So I dropped him a line and said that I would like to come down. There was a bus running in those days down to Westmoreland County, near Oak Grove, he said, "Bring me a carton of salmon. I have cats." As I remember, I paid 10 cents a can for salmon. They were not huge cans. But they were fairly good size. Ten cents a can for salmon. Salmon was a common dish, everybody had salmon. I took the salmon to him, he had I don't know how many cats. His mother had just died he and his mother had been living at Wirtland, the home that he bought, for a number of years. He had arrived at Wirtland with one cat, called the "Judge", which was named for a book that his brother, Vaughan Kester, a novel that Vaughan Kester had written. Vaughan Kester was the first novelist to get - not a Pulitzer Prize, but something, "the novel of the year" or something like that. People found out that he was such a gentle and kindly man that instead of destroying the kittens when they were born they would put them in a box and leave them at his front door during the night. He'd wake up the next morning; he couldn't kill anything, so he acquired a huge family of cats. That's why he needed the salmon. Unfortunately,

many years later, or some years later, he moved into King George County, close to the road. When he was in Westmoreland he was nowhere near a highway. And automobiles were becoming numerous. He decided that the cats, for the first few months he was there, he better keep the cats close to the house. And it was wintertime, so he put them down in the basement, and had a stove put in the basement, and kept them all in one room. Some kind of disease came along and wiped out the whole bunch. He killed them with kindness, you know, so to speak. Every cat was killed. It was bitter, a bitter blow to him.

Interviewer: So he got you into the newspaper business, he inspired you somehow?

Mr. Farmer: Well, knowing him gave me an incentive. I had never known what I wanted to do, never had the slightest idea. I had several ideas of what I might want to do, but I decided that I wanted to write: I had always read a great deal, and I decided that's what I wanted to do. That's when I went to the Times-Dispatch: he knew Virginius Dabney, who was the editor, and gave me a letter to Virginius. He turned me over to McDermott, the managing editor. That's when I had the opportunity to get the job on the ship, and McDermott said, "Well, you do that, and come back and we'll talk it over." Anyway, I found out what I wanted my life's work to be, and that was writing and especially in the newspaper business. Prior to that I had no idea what I wanted to do. So I was with the Free Lance-Star for 22 years. I think they were the -- except during World War II, when you couldn't get competent help and Josiah and I both worked ourselves almost to death; can't believe what we had to do. I think that World War II was partly to blame for his death just a few years later. Well, you see, he had the newspaper business, he had an insurance business, and it damned near killed me, too, because there were times when he had to be on his insurance business. There were days when I had -- Lem Houston had gone by then, he was in the Marine Corps -- I had to do, I was the city editor, I was the wire editor, and reporter, sports editor, everything. I did all of that in one day. Many days, because the help you got could not do anything, we just picked up anybody we could do just fill up space, mainly.

Interviewer: We are beginning our Free Lance-Star phase of the interview. You had been talking about how you were a sort of one-man press room during the Second World War, and how much work that was. But, when you first started there, what kind of a place did you find the Free Lance-Star to be?

Mr. Farmer: It was very close quarters. [Laughing] It was a very narrow, three-story building, the old Free Lance-Star building. In the front office when I began work there, Chester Goolrick was the city editor, but he was also the only reporter because Lem was tied down with sports and other work. Josiah helped out some, but Chester did most of the city news, and that's one of the reasons Josiah hired me: I think he knew that the town was growing and they needed somebody else. In the office when I first went in was Chester Goolrick, Lem Houston, George Hunter, Josiah Rowe: each with a desk in a very small space. George was the bookkeeper; there were no women working in the office at that time.

Interviewer: The compositors or something, the mechanical guys?

Mr. Farmer: Oh, upstairs the linotype machines were upstairs, second floor, and the presses were in the back of the front office on the first floor.

Interviewer: So you all wrote the whole thing every day, four people or so?

Mr. Farmer: Yes. Sometimes you had to knock off stories, just write one right after the other, you know. It seems to me now, when I look at the staff of the Free Lance-Star that one reporter might do one story a day. That's about what it seems to me. With us it was at one time, after Josiah died, a little better than a year after he died, I was the city editor, I wrote news, I did editorials, I did a twice or thrice-weekly column, I can't remember which. But I also had a good staff at the time near the end of my term with the Free Lance-Star: I had Bob Baker, who later became deputy editor and foreign correspondent of the Washington Post; Frank Trippett, who went from the Free Lance-Star to Newsweek and then to Time magazine; Ed Swain, who went from the Free Lance-Star to the Richmond News Leader - an excellent staff, and much of my time was just spent supervising them, I didn't have a whole lot of work to do, excellent staff. But I have no particular humorous recollections of the rest of the work force at the Free Lance-Star, as Lem did.

Interviewer: You worked too hard!

Mr. Farmer: Well, I was kept pretty busy, I can assure you.

Interviewer: What was the cultural or geographical reach of the Free Lance-Star?

Mr. Farmer: Well, the Free Lance-Star in those days was limited mainly to Fredericksburg, Spotsylvania, and Stafford counties. It did clip into Caroline, but not very deeply. Did I say King George? King George County, oh yes, of course. I would say the four counties, but the circulation was very small: I think by the time I left the circulation was 5,000. Today it is nearly 50,000 on Sundays, I think. A world of difference! But also besides courts I covered the boards of supervisors in Stafford and Spotsylvania. We didn't do much on the board in King George, as I recall. Didn't have the staff to get there. We had one very, very curious thing to happen in my early days with the newspaper: sometime in the late 1930s there suddenly appeared on the scene a young man named John Poyntz Tyler, who was the son of the Episcopal bishop of North Dakota. At that time we didn't know how he got there, he just became a reporter. We thought, "Well, who is he anyway?" He was a tall, very handsome, very I would say brilliant young fellow. He was given a desk and a typewriter and practically nothing to do. He used to sit and just idle, hit the typewriter keys with a pencil, and every now and then write a devastating editorial about the need for taxing churches, that the churches shouldn't be tax exempt, they should pay taxes like everyone else. Well, that editorial didn't get in the newspaper. It turned out that John Poyntz Tyler had been recommended or -- Josiah had been approached to give him a job by the Rev. Richard Lancaster, who was minister of the Presbyterian Church. It turned out that John Poyntz Tyler was interested in a young lady, and who she was or where she lived I don't know but was somebody or some girl from a well-to-do family. The parents did not want her to marry him, and she was headed in that direction. So the family knew Dick Lancaster, and they got in touch with him, and through him persuaded Josiah to take the boy on as a reporter, and they, the young girl's family, would pay his salary!

Interviewer: So that's why he could play with the typewriter keys.

Mr. Farmer: Yes, just didn't give him anything to do, but give him an occasional job. Well, he couldn't understand what was going on, he thought something was wrong, but he had an elder brother who found out what had happened. And the elder brother came to Fredericksburg and told him the arrangement. And he blew up, I don't know what he said to Josiah but he fired all guns at him and left. He later worked for the New Yorker magazine.

Interviewer: Aha.

Mr. Farmer: Yes, yes. Died very young: very heavy drinker. He was boarding with a family on Prince Edward Street and was sick, and I knew he wanted some whiskey so I took a pint of bootleg corn whiskey to him.

Interviewer: So you did have contacts, after all!

Mr. Farmer: Oh, I had them. This was near the very end of Prohibition. And he was lying in bed, he didn't raise his head or anything, he just took the bottle and turned it up and drank half of it, half a pint without stopping, without taking the bottle from his mouth. Oh, dear!
[Chuckling]

Interviewer: Well, as we close out this session, let me ask you a last question: can you tell us something about the character of Josiah Rowe? What kind of a man was he?

Mr. Farmer: The character of Josiah? Well Josiah was one of the hardest working men I've ever known in my life. As his wife once said to me - absolutely true -- "he worked hard, and he played hard." He ran the newspaper, which is more of a job than many people think, even though it was a small newspaper; he had an insurance business: he didn't do the actual selling but he had the book work that went along with it, I think. When I first went with the Free Lance-Star, we did not have the Associated Press teletype machines, which clacked, clacked, clacked all day and all night, you know, bringing in news. We had the local news which we gathered, and every afternoon Josiah would put on the telephone things over his ears and get news from Richmond by telephone from the AP: he had to do that. Which can be quite a strain, you know-- am I getting it all right, and all that kind of thing. Every minute of his day was filled with something to do. And when we would go off -- he always took me on press conventions, none of the others ever went, or maybe once occasionally, but all the years I was with the Free Lance-Star we would go to press conventions. I went with him. We drank a lot. We'd start off from Fredericksburg in a car, his car, and at the first place we would come to where you could buy a setup we stopped and had a drink. And when we got to the Chamberlain at Old Point, or the Hotel Roanoke, or Williamsburg, wherever we were going where the conventions were usually held, or Richmond, there was a considerable amount of drinking and staying up late at night and carousing and all that sort of thing. I honestly believe that if Josiah hadn't had me to relieve him of some of his work, he would have died three or four years earlier than

he did. I really believe that. He was the first man to name me in a will: he left me \$2,000 dollars when he died.

Interviewer: Well that's a tribute.

Mr. Farmer: Yes. Well, I was entitled to it, I can assure you!
[Laughter] The newspaper business, not only this one but many of them, don't pay very well, you know. Didn't until the Newspaper Guild came along.

Interviewer: I think it is still not a high paying job.

Mr. Farmer: Well, most of the reporters in those days were just people that had no particular training or anything, just learned on the job and that sort of thing. They were not really skilled workers. You gained skill by learning: on-the-job training, that's what it was. The prima donnas, some of the columnists, were well paid, but not the average reporter. But Josiah did not have many friends; he was not a gregarious person. He was -- to the best of my knowledge; Captain Gunnion Harrison was a friend of his. Captain Harrison was a World War I veteran, was postmaster of Fredericksburg, and he and Josiah had a friendship, I don't know how close it was. I think I was the most intimate friend that Josiah had. I used to go to his house frequently for dinner and lunches -- and sneaking drinks in the bathroom and all that sort of thing. Well, I got to be very close to the whole family for quite a long time. The boys were very young, Diana was just -- I was there, at the Free Lance-Star, when Diana was born. Josiah ran pieces in the paper telling the public that he had a new daughter and asking them to suggest names. [Chuckling] I suggested Diana Dauntless!

Interviewer: Paul Kester!

Mr. Farmer: Paul Kester's book, Diana Dauntless. But they didn't use the Dauntless, they used the Diana. [chuckling]

Interviewer: He sounds like he was a very interesting man.

Mr. Farmer: Well, he was. He was a World War I fighter pilot, you know, and he wrote very interesting letters back about the war. And he was a musician; he played the trombone in Sidney Shannon's band. But he was as I say not gregarious: he was mainly to himself and his family and one or two friends. He was liked, but he didn't go out, was no joiner and that sort of thing. Like me, I was never like that, been

members of dubs but then get sucked in by somebody and then resign.

Interviewer: Well, right now we are probably at a natural breaking point between sessions. Let me thank you for having me in for this particular session and we will pick up next time.

Mr. Farmer: All right. Thank you.

SECOND SESSION

Interviewer: I will begin this by saying that this is our second oral history interview with Mr. Warren Farmer. The date is June 26, 1998, and thank you for having me over here again. We stopped last time during your Free Lance-Star days, and I think we're about to enter Fredericksburg during World War II.

Mr. Farmer: That is correct. Well, of course, my part in World War II was strictly in this country and local. Being hard of hearing I was deferred from military service. I actually tried to enlist in every branch of the service, but was turned down by each one, of course. I was called up for the draft—the local draft board knew I wouldn't be accepted, because of my age, you know. I was still young enough to be drafted, which was 37 years old at that time. I went to Charlottesville and of course was rejected. But a curious thing happened at the time we were going through our medical examinations: I was in line, standing in line to be examined by the ear doctor, and just in front of me was a young man from Fredericksburg whose name I didn't know, I knew him by face. He said to the doctor, "Well, doc, I know you're going to turn me down because I've been hard of hearing for a long, long time." And the doctor said, "Well, let's have a look, we'll see about that." The doctor looked in his ears, and then reached down and picked up an instrument, and probed the guy's ears, and came out with a long hunk of black wax. He had black wax in both ears which had stopped, cut off his hearing for many years--and of course he was accepted and went on and I think he came back safely. Well, Fredericksburg, of course, during World War II was a very dismal and dreary place. Not all, but most of the men were gone, either abroad or to camps in this country. And it was a pretty dull existence, and work was just about everything everybody did. And there was plenty of that because you almost had to do double duty: the people who were competent had gone, and what we'd be getting were sort of the leftovers, you know, you didn't get the good people. The Free Lance-Star was really to me at times almost a killing job

because Josiah and I had the burden of it. Lem Houston, who had been one of the editors, had gone, and Josiah had other businesses, the insurance business beside the Free Lance-Star, and there were times when that needed him, and he would just come into the office in the morning and say, "It's yours today." And that meant I had everything. And it was quite exhausting and very trying. Very trying! Anyway, it was not only us but every business firm had its problems. But I remember one little amusing thing that happened: Mr. Kishpaugh, Robert A. Kishpaugh, had a store on William Street -- yes, he did that little publication you have there -- I was talking to Mr. Kishpaugh one day about the war, and he said - he had a little impediment of speech -- he said, "Oh, things are Just terrible, just terrible. You can't get no more Wubber bands!" [laughter] That was a terrible thing to Mr. Kishpaugh. Of course, many of our young men were gone, most of our young men were gone, but they were replaced by a great many young men who came from other places in uniform, at Camp A.P. Hill. They'd enliven things up quite a bit: there were always a bunch of young soldiers around. One of the first outfits to come in, I think the first, was I think a New England National Guard outfit that had been inducted into Federal service. Many of them were from Massachusetts, I recall. And I forget how many thousands were brought into A.P. Hill, but one day they gave them all leave at one time, and they all came to Fredericksburg, and Fredericksburg's population was doubled, tripled, and quadrupled I think. You could walk around town that night and the boys were lying all over the lawns all around town, and people were making sandwiches and giving them drinks and all that sort of thing. It was very, very amusing. I wandered all over town that night just watching, seeing how they were received, you know. And several that I met never came back.

Interviewer: Well, speaking of Josiah, wasn't he also head of the local defense crowd?

Mr. Farmer: Yes, Josiah headed that. Well, he was into many, many things. He did head that up. But I want to point out that among the minor hardships that the stay-at-homes had to put up with was rationing. I being a bachelor had not much need for certain things that were rationed, for example sugar, because I boarded. And Broughton Rowe, who worked at the Free Lance-Star as a pressman, was a father and a family man: he wanted sugar, so I would exchange my ABC Store liquor rationing tickets for his sugar ones: I would give him my sugar and he would give me his liquor! And there was a great deal of that: my niece in Richmond always said that I went through World War II without a decent pair of shoes, because she was a little girl and her

mother was spoiling her, and they would take my shoe coupons!
[Laughter] Well, World War II was a pretty, pretty rough time, but we got through it. Another really trying thing about World War II was -- at one time, I don't remember how long this lasted, but there were of course great shortages of gasoline, which was needed for the Armed Forces. And there was a speed limit of 35 miles an hour put on. And I remember going to Richmond once, and without thinking I suddenly realized there was a state trooper driving alongside me, giving me this frowning look. And I looked down at my speedometer and I was going 40 miles an hour. And I immediately slowed down to 35, and he shook his head and went on. I think if I hadn't slowed down he would have given me a ticket. They were very, very strict on that.

Interviewer: Strict on all those automobile regulations?

Mr. Farmer: Yes, I think so. It would take the longest kind of time. Of course, there was no traffic on the roads to speak of anywhere.

Interviewer: Do you remember VE Day or VJ Day in town?

Mr. Farmer: Yes, we got out a special edition of the Free Lance-Star.

Interviewer: So you had to work the whole time?

Mr. Farmer: Oh, yes. I've forgotten the time it came through, but I think it was nightfall by the time we got the paper out. I do have a recollection of Armistice Day in 1919, though. I was then -- born in 1907, I was then 12 years old. Not everybody, but a bunch of kids, and some adult men, went to the various churches to celebrate by ringing the church bells. And I remember I went to and helped ring the church bells at the Methodist Church, which is on Hanover Street. That's about all I remember of that day. World War I is a rather vague recollection of mine -- I think we went into some of that in the previous session. I won't go back that far again. Did you want to know a little about my experience With the Chamber of Commerce?

Interviewer: Yes, sir, I think that would be interesting, since you got a good view of Fredericksburg through that.

Mr. Farmer: I stayed with the Free Lance Star for a year after Josiah Rowe died. I don't like to get into personal dealings too closely, though I just left the Free Lance-Star and went with the chamber of commerce. I was not told, and I didn't discover until I had been with them sometime, that the chamber of commerce was on the verge of

bankruptcy. As if such a thing as that can go bankrupt: I mean it's not a private business. I don't know what you would call it. Its membership had dropped off very badly. Actually, the chamber had never been very active in Fredericksburg anyway -- I don't think, I was not close to this situation, but I don't think it was -- and there was only so much it could do in those days. There was no tourism to speak of to promote. Industry was not jumping, hopping around the country as it does today. And so I don't believe the chamber so much... Another thing, the town would hire, usually some retired man, just to have a manager, and he was inexperienced and practically did nothing. So by the time I came along things were beginning to pop up, I mean things were livening up a bit: industrially and economically and every other way.

Interviewer: What year was this?

Mr. Farmer: 1950. So something had to be done, and I fortunately had some able assistants almost right away. Several of the younger men in town knew what was going on: C.B. McDaniel, and John Fenlon, and others whose names I can't remember offhand. They came to me, and we decided we would have to do something. So they began to organize things: they went out and got more members because they needed the money. But the chief thing, the chief benefactor, the man that kept the chamber of commerce going was Mr. L.J. Houston Jr., the city manager. Mr. Houston had a great deal of civic pride, and he knew that the chamber had not been doing well, and that a town needed, and ought, to have a chamber of commerce. And so he had a discretionary fund, which enabled me to survive. He part of the time paid my salary, and much of the time, when there were promotional things for historical purposes or for industrial and economic purposes, when we had to send somebody off to a meeting to meet a potential industrial prospect, Mr. Houston always came through with the money. He sent me to Canada, to Toronto to the Canadian National Exhibition for several years for a week each time promoting tourism in Fredericksburg. The Canadians are great travelers, you know, and they were on their way to and from Florida, and they would stop in Fredericksburg.

Interviewer: This was when they had to drive through town, right?

Mr. Farmer: Yes. Old U.S. 1, right. And I had many of them mention to me that they came through Fredericksburg and would name the motels where they stopped. Well, anyway, Mr. Houston was the savior of the chamber of commerce as far as I was concerned, but very

shortly thereafter the younger men moved in and we got the thing going pretty well. Many of the retail merchants in Fredericksburg didn't join the chamber of commerce, and I say this advisedly: they were not men of great vision anyway. You couldn't make them see, you had great difficulty trying to make them see what tourism could mean: their idea was, "Well, we want a factory where we can have a weekly payroll and we know the money is coming in, with tourists we don't know, we don't see it." In other words, when somebody gets a paycheck from a factory he goes down to the bank and cashes it and goes out and spends it. "But we don't see the tourists going around spending the money, you know." It was pretty hard to make them understand what tourism could mean, and the chamber of commerce worked on tourism a great deal. It also worked on the possibility of getting some decent Industrial plants: I made a good many trips to New York and Baltimore and places like that to meet potential industrial prospects. But the average person could not -- well, I think it was true in almost everything -- don't have the vision, the long term vision, and it's usually a minority who leads the majority, you know, and that was a case of a minority with the determination to keep going in spite of the back pulling of the majority. So.

Interviewer: Do you suggest that Mr. Houston was inspiring the move toward focusing on tourists?

Mr. Farmer: Well, there was a focus on tourists, yes, but not exclusively. He knew the importance of it, and he wanted Fredericksburg to remain historically attractive, you know.

Interviewer: And you picked that up from him?

Mr. Farmer: Did I pick that up from him? Yes, yes. But I had that interest myself too, you know.

Interviewer: While we're on the subject of Mr. Houston, he strikes me as one of the more influential people in the first half of Fredericksburg's 20th century history.

Mr. Farmer: Mr. Houston ran Fredericksburg. The City Council had some able men, but they had their jobs to do. He was tops as far as city managers go, I think: he was a very able man, and a great friend of mine. I can't give him too much credit for what he did. I think the city itself knows what he did. There is one interesting little episode in connection with my time at the chamber of commerce: of course, having been with the newspaper, I had newspaper connections -- not

friends, but acquaintances -- and I actually may say without boasting that I got a lot of publicity for Fredericksburg. Just the other day there was an obituary in the paper: Georgiana Brock died. I don't know whether you knew Georgiana or not. She was the daughter of H.I. Brock, who was with the New York Times. Well, I knew Mr. Brock, and we used to get things in the Times, and people would come through and say, "Well, I read this in the Times, that's why I'm stopping in Fredericksburg." But anyway, the amusing thing that I was going to mention was: I can't remember what year, it was during President Eisenhower's administration, and I don't remember exactly the organization that Miss Frances Williams was connected with, but I think it may have been the APVA, I'm not sure, but anyway Miss Williams, I don't know if you know who I'm talking about, but anyway she lived opposite the Mary Washington House, and she ran an inn called the Colonial Inn. And of course she was interested from her own point of view running an inn, and also she was terribly interested in the Mary Washington House. And she had the idea that President Eisenhower should come to Fredericksburg, should be invited to Fredericksburg, for Mother's Day, because of the Mary Washington Monument. So she wrote to the White House, and got a very polite letter in return which said that unfortunately President Eisenhower was booked to speak in Williamsburg that day. Well, she was terribly disappointed, so I had known that she had written and she came to tell me what had happened. And after she left I said let's see what we can do about that. So I wrote to the White House and said, "Well, if the President is going to Williamsburg on that day, he's got to come back through Fredericksburg", and Fredericksburg is the home of the First Mother, so to speak, and it seems logical to me that he should just stop there momentarily anyway. And they agreed to that, and so the President came and made a speech at the Mary Washington Monument grounds. I escorted him into the lodge, and handed him the pen to sign the register.

Interviewer: How did he strike you? Do you remember what his appearance was or how he struck you?

Mr. Farmer: Well, he was not quite as tall as I thought he would be, he was about 5'9" or so and I was about 6'1" or something like that, not much difference. He was a very quiet fellow; he looked exactly like his pictures: I mean there was nothing outstanding about him. I think much of what brought the thing to a disaster was the day before there was some sort of a rumor that somebody had arrived in Fredericksburg to take a shot at the President! And the FBI was all over town, you know. Well, the FBI was all around the Mary Washington Monument

grounds that day, too: they were in your mother's home and all; they had people up in the attics and everything checking things out. It was a very interesting experience. Of course, I had had a little experience with the FBI before that when Franklin Roosevelt came to Fredericksburg. I don't know whether you read that article I wrote for the Free Lance-Star recently or not.

Interviewer: Yes, but let's talk about that again.

Mr. Farmer: Well, I thought that the written record would be sufficient. Well, anyway, President Roosevelt came up the Rappahannock River in the yacht, I don't know which yacht it was, and he was to be taken from Fredericksburg back to Washington by car. And Lem Houston and I went down to see the President, get a look at him, and the FBI had blocked off Sophia Street at Frederick Street for at least two blocks from the steamboat wharf where the President landed. And they stationed a policeman, a state policeman named Sam Redding, a guy we knew very well, to keep the people back: in other words, people were not allowed within two blocks of the wharf, and the people, including Lem and myself, thought that was a pretty darn long distance to be kept away. So Lem said, "Sam, can't you let us get a little closer?" Sam said, "No, can't do it. You have to stay right here." So Lem said, "Well, I'm just going to take a few steps down here, I'm not going to shoot the President, I'm just going to get --" Sam pulled his gun out of his holster, pointed at Lem, and said, "You take one more step and I'll shoot!"

(Laughter). And of course Lem didn't take that other step. So, as I say, Lem later was a Marine in the battle of Iwo Jima, and I used to wonder whether he came closer to death on Iwo Jima than he did down by the steamboat wharf in Fredericksburg! What do you think we should talk about next?

Interviewer: All right. Do you know who gave Fredericksburg the tag "America's Most Historic City"?

Mr. Farmer: No, but it's a pretty broad statement, and I would say some sort of exaggeration. It's always made me embarrassed to hear the town called that because I think that's going a little bit too far. But I have no idea, it just came into existence apparently some time in the 1920s, that was the first time I heard it. I have several suspects, but I don't know. "Miss Annie" Smith was one who was a great promoter of Fredericksburg. Her mother, Mrs. V.M. Fleming, or maybe, I don't know, I've never heard it said so and he was a close friend of mine,

Chester B. Goolrick, who was my predecessor as city editor of the Free Lance Star. Chester was a good public relations man; he might have conceived of something like that, I don't know. It's possible that he did, but I never heard him say that he did. It just was something that was -- I just don't know.

Interviewer: But it's been around a while.

Mr. Farmer: Oh, yes, it's been around.

Interviewer: Well, sometime during your stint with the chamber of commerce, preservation efforts in Fredericksburg began coming to a head.

Mr. Farmer: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Lots of things had been lost over the preceding twenty years or something.

Mr. Farmer: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: What was the general climate of opinion about that sort of thing?

Mr. Farmer: The destruction of old houses? Well, I don't think Fredericksburg--- the majority of the people had no sense of history. I don't think they did; if they did it didn't show. And the few who did could do nothing about it anyway. And so gradually these places -- I mean I can remember in the 500 block of Sophia Street, on the river side, a long row of little dormer-windowed, story-and-a-half buildings, you know. All gone. VEPCO, Virginia Electric and Power Company, took that over and made it a lot where they kept their trucks and stored their equipment. I don't know who owned those houses, and I suppose nothing could have been done about it anyway because there was no organization to fight it, no Historic Fredericksburg to say, "Look, hold on a minute, let's think about this." There was no organized opposition to that sort of thing; it just went on and on. I would say that HFI was really the big blocker the point that started keeping these things as they are. Not that the desire to do so wasn't there, but there was not the initiative to do it nor the means to do it. I don't think.

Interviewer: Was there a crystallizing event that moved everybody to try and form this organization?

Mr. Farmer: Well, I don't know of a crystallizing event. To me it seems that it was sort of a slowly developing thing that really just came to a head, and what brought it to a head I don't know, but it was just a slow process that gradually worked itself into HFFI.

Interviewer: We see one of the important early meetings as the one held in the basement of St. George's Church, and apparently you were the chair of that meeting.

Mr. Farmer: I don't think I was the chair. I had just come back from Annapolis, where I had been sent to find out about how they organized.

Interviewer: Let's stop and flip the tape.