

McNeill, John Sr.: A Dream World ^[1]

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John McNeill, Sr.: A dream world

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 2/12/2006. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Late one summer night last year my daughter and I found John McNeill Sr., age 87, sitting alone on his deck by the shores of Lake Waccamaw. He was listening to romantic songs from World War II coming from loudspeakers hung high in the trees by the lake. The retired pharmacist and decorated Navy veteran -- he commanded an amphibious assault group in the Pacific -- was looking out on one of the most amazing sights I have ever seen: a long, double-decked lake pier covered every inch by thousands of breathtakingly gorgeous flowering plants. I felt as if we had walked into a beautiful dream.

That weekend we were guests at a fish fry there, toured a fascinating museum in an old train depot and explored the river swamps at Crusoe Island. But what I will always remember best about Lake Waccamaw are my daughter's long idylls among the flowers and hummingbirds on McNeill's pier, and the stories that he told me of other young dreamers growing up in a small town nearby.

In John McNeill, Sr.'s words:

I was born in Whiteville in 1918. My grandfather had been an orphan in the Civil War and his uncle sent him to medical school, interestingly, at the Edenborough Medical College, not in Scotland but in Raeford, N.C. (He laughs.) It only existed for a short time. He was often paid in livestock. He would accumulate a herd of cattle, maybe 50, and my father, as a teenage boy, would drive them to Wilmington and sell them and return with a load of drugs to sell at their drugstore.

He just happened to be there the day they were picking up the streets after that Wilmington race riot in 1898. It made a great impression on him as a boy. He described this wagon going by picking up bodies.

My father went to Davidson and developed severe arthritis and became an invalid, and they decided that he couldn't go back to Davidson. If he was a pharmacist, he could do it working in a chair. So he went to Page's School of Pharmacy in Charlotte. They moved to Whiteville in 1900, and they had a pharmacy and it's still McNeill's Pharmacy. It's the oldest pharmacy in the state. The School of Pharmacy in Chapel Hill believes it might be the oldest in the nation now, the oldest owned by a family. Whiteville was originally a crossing of a road from Charlotte to Wilmington, and one from Elizabethtown to Conway. Back then there were some farmers coming in, largely Scotch-Irish, and one of the crops they grew was grapes. When the railroad came, So the business people went to build a warehouse or loading platform down there, and they named it Vineland. Most of the business in Whiteville grew up down in Vineland, and I grew up downtown in Vineland.

We were very adventurous children. We went all over the woods and swamps. When I was growing up, me and my brother Charles and a couple other boys even started a museum. We had a little child's museum. We studied taxidermy, and we would have these serious meetings about predicting the insect problem for farmers for the next year. We came up with the idea that we could count the cocoons of butterflies, and we could project how the insect population would be the next year. We'd go to a movie and see a safari in Africa, and we would get packs and we'd go wandering around the swamps on expeditions, collecting and so forth. It was a dream world, but it was just great.

Our parents encouraged dreaming. They were never negative, my mother particularly. She'd smile and she'd say, "Dream on."

Another great thing about our childhood, my mother had four bedrooms upstairs that she would rent to teachers. The teachers would eat with us. So we had the advantage of growing up with people who were from away from Whiteville and were educated. Two of the most significant things that happened in the county were, one, around 1900, the Sunny South Colony came here. It was a group of about 300 people from Belgium, Holland, all through that area of Europe. They had settled in the Netherlands. Another thing, in the early '20s, seven Jewish families moved to Whiteville. That had a dramatic influence on the county, because they were great citizens. Each one contributed something. They sort of stayed in the background, but you could see them. They also brought style. All of them had dry good stores. We were wearing homemade clothes, you know, and they brought clothing that was ready made and cloth of different colors. It changed the complexion of the county.

When I went away to college, I told the people at Chapel Hill that I wanted to be a botanist. They told me there was no way to make a living as a botanist. It was the Depression. So I went to pharmacy school, but I was just totally fascinated with plants. I can't wait to get up in the morning and see what the changes are and start watering and fertilizing and pruning. Then you have the added pleasure of people. Somebody stops by every two or three hours to look at them.

We began having weddings out there. Then we began to have school classes that wanted to plan a little trip, and garden clubs. Several of the black churches have baptisms here. And 24 Fridays a year, we have a fish fry out there. It's a fund

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