

TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191

Field Notes: Kit Swinson Clarke (compiled October 20, 2008)

Interviewee: KIT SWINSON CLARKE

Interviewer: Yona R. Owens

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Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Length: Approximately 40 minutes

This interview for the Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project was conducted at Kit Clarke's home. A native of Duplin County, N.C., Clarke was married to Lewis Clarke for a little over 20 years. She assisted in the beginning years of the practice which became Lewis Clarke Associates (LCA) with bookkeeping, typing plant lists, correspondence, and payroll. In the 1970s, Clarke opened Reader's Corner, a famous second hand bookstore in Raleigh. She sold the business in the 1990s and is retired.

YO: This is an interview with Kit Clarke on Wednesday, August the twentieth, 2008 at her home in Raleigh, North Carolina. Hello, Kit.

KC: Hi, Yona. How are you today?

YO: I'm fine, thank you. I'd like to start off with our first question which is, tell me a little bit about where you're from and what you're doing now.

KC: Where I'm from?

YO: Yeah.

KC: You mean where I grew up or—

YO: Yes.

KC: Well, I grew up down in a farm in Duplin County and then I came to Raleigh in 1945 and I've been here ever since.

YO: And when you moved to Raleigh, you had your own business, didn't you?

KC: Well, after I went to school, yes, I started an insurance agency back in 1952 and then of course, I started a bookstore in 1975.

YO: Right.

KC: I was always doing something different.

YO: I was going to say that [it] was kind of unusual for a woman back then to have her own business, wasn't it?

KC: Yes, they would not allow me to join the insurance association here so it turned out there were quite a lot of women working in the office. So we formed our own association.

YO: You did?

KC: And I understand it's still active. So they couldn't keep us out. They could discriminate against us, but they couldn't keep us out.

YO: Well, while you were running your insurance business that's the time that you met Lewis Clarke, right?

KC: That's correct. A friend of mine worked at Ford Motor Company that was just a few blocks from my office and he sold a car to Lewis. And at that time the state had just come out with the liability insurance law. You could not operate a car without liability insurance. And Lewis was in a hurry to get up to Boston to see his friends. He had been down here just one year. So he asked Bert to take care of the insurance for him. So, Bert called me and said, he teaches at State College. I think it's safe to write the insurance and he'll pay you when he gets back. So I wrote the policy and sent the forms to the state and about two weeks later he came to the office and that's how I met him.

YO: What did you think of him when you first met him?

KC: Well, he looked like a little boy. He was wearing shorts and some strange looking sandals, a t-shirt that was much too big for him, and had a strange accent. That was my initial impression.

YO: And so how long after that was it before you started going out?

KC: About a month later, he had an accident and totaled his car and he started coming up to the office everyday—when was he going to get a check so he could get his car fixed? But he didn't want the car fixed. He wanted to get a different car and the adjuster agreed with him, but it did take oh, about two weeks to get his check because they had to get the police report and all that stuff. And since he was out of school for the summer, he had nothing to do except show up at my office every day. And one day he invited me to have lunch with him. We walked across the street to the Mecca Restaurant, which is still in Raleigh, and had lunch and I ordered the fried chicken. He called it battered bones. But that was the start of it all.

YO: So, how long was the courtship?

KC: Oh, not very long. I met him, I guess late June, early July, and we got married in November. We were planning to get married the next summer and the people in the School of Design where he was teaching said, no, get married at Thanksgiving or Christmas because everybody will be gone next summer. So we moved the wedding up and were married in November and then the next summer we went to England to meet his family.

YO: Who was your best man at that wedding?

KC: Cecil Elliott. He was one of Lewis' best friends.

YO: He was also an instructor in the school, right.

KC: Yes, he was.

YO: So, mostly the school people came to the wedding?

KC: My family and the school people because we were married at George Matsumoto's house. He was an architect on the staff at the School of Design and so it had to be a small wedding and the wedding and the reception was held at their home.

YO: So, you took off the next summer for where?

KC: For England for the summer.

YO: And where all did you go in England?

KC: Oh, gosh, I don't know all over England and Scotland. We spent the three months just traveling.

YO: So, you came back to Raleigh.

KC: Yep.

YO: That fall.

KC: Yeah, we had given up his apartment. We had moved into his apartment and we gave up the apartment and stored the furniture in my brother's garage out in Garner. So when we came back, we stayed with them a few days and we found a house and bought it.

YO: And where was that house.

KC: On 1322 Mordecai Drive.

YO: The famous Mordecai house, right?

KC: Yeah, the Mordecai house.

YO: You got your pilot's license about this time didn't you?

KC: Well, actually we started taking the lessons in 1956 and we got our license in—well, Lewis got his license in February of '57, but I had to wait until June to get my license because I was pregnant and they would not let me solo while it was so near time for my baby.

YO: Well, that makes sense, right?

KC: So, but yeah, we had our first baby, Nigel, in March of '57 and then I think in June of '57, I then went out and I soloed and worked toward getting my license. Didn't do me much good. We bought a plane, but Lewis did all the flying. I was co-pilot.

YO: Well, you took a long trip in that plane, didn't you?

KC: Yes, we went to the West Coast and back.

YO: And it's instrument flying?

KC: Well, to a certain extent it was all visual flight rules, but we did depend a lot on the Omni System and of course with map reading. There wasn't that much instruments for small planes back in those days.

YO: What did you do—just take it in little hops going across the country?

KC: We worked out that we never got below three quarters of a tank of fuel—for our next stop, our next landing. We always had an alternate at the halfway point. So Lewis spent hours every night in the hotel looking at the maps and figuring out where the wind was going to be and where we were going.

YO: Well, one of the stops on that trip was in Aspen, Colorado, wasn't it?

KC: Yes, the International Design Festival. Lewis was one of the speakers and we were there for a week. Now, we did not fly into Aspen. We flew to Denver and we caught a bus into Aspen and I'm glad we did. That airport is on the side of a mountain. We went out and looked at it and I said, no way would I want to be in the plane while you land on that little strip.

YO: Right.

KC: It looked like they had just used dynamite just to knock the side of the mountain off to put a little runway there.

YO: What was your impression of the design conference?

KC: It was very interesting. I can't remember all of the speakers. I remember that Heath from the Heath Pottery Company was on the program. I don't really remember. This is awful.

YO: No, that's okay. Well, after the design conference, you didn't come back East. You kept going west. Where did you go then?

KC: Well, let's see. I think we went to Albuquerque, New Mexico and stayed about a week after that. Then we went out to San Francisco and we were there—well, we had met the Heaths and they were leaving for Europe and they gave us a key to their—they had a potato barge that they

built a house on out in the bay from San Francisco between San Francisco and Sausalito. And they gave us a key to their house and said, while you're in San Francisco, stay in our house. And of course that was very nice because hotels even in that day were expensive. But of course we found a nice present to leave for them when we left and we cleaned everything just spotless, but it was beautiful on that bay.

YO: I'll bet.

KC: And then when we left there, we flew back down to Los Angeles, and visited Garrett Eckbo who was a friend of Lewis'—a landscape architect.

YO: What was Eckbo like?

KC: Very nice, down to earth, a wonderful designer. He wrote several books on design and I think Lewis probably has them. I know the School library has them and Tommy Church—was it Tommy Church? I, the name is gone. There's another friend Royston, Bob Royston also was in Los Angeles. He and Garrett Eckbo were partners in their landscape office and then they separated and had two separate offices. I can't remember if Bob moved to San Diego, somewhere—but anyway they were both—they were very nice people. Most landscape architects were really nice, down to earth people. There were no pretension and stuff like some of the architects were. They had grandiose ideas and—

YO: Well, on the trip back—let's see you get back to Raleigh and you've got your new house and a new baby and so did you know that Lewis was going to start a business in your house?

KC: No. It was not discussed. He was doing some little designs for friends on the dining table and then other people started calling asking him to do designs for him and every night when we got ready to eat everything had to be packed up and moved. So, he just went down in the basement and it was sort of excavated but not finished. It was just dirt. And the only thing down there really was just the bottom of the floor furnace that was our only source of heat and he cleaned out a space and paved a floor and built up sort of a half wall with concrete blocks. Then he decided he wanted an entrance from the house. So where he had closed off to put a washing machine for the baby, he put a trap door so he could hop down into the basement from the kitchen.

YO: No kidding.

KC: No ladder or anything—just hop down and step up on a stool and push himself up and sit on the edge of the floor and come in when it was time for supper.

YO: Well, he was getting a lot of clients then at that time.

KC: At that time it was pretty much small gardens here in Raleigh. And then he started getting larger projects. He met Jim Rouse and I can't remember— at some, I think he was speaking at the University of Maryland or somewhere—and Jim Rouse, he was a developer, came to hear

him speak. And he asked Lewis to do some enclosed malls for him. And I believe those were the first enclosed malls in this country that had gardens.

YO: Do you remember Charlottetown Mall?

KC: Charlottetown, yes.

YO: North Star?

KC: The North Star and Cherry Hill and what was the one in Texas? Oh, I can't remember. I'd have to go to my jewelry box to see because every mall that they opened they had a pair of earrings designed for the women and a tie clasp for the men as a memento and it was always a dinner party the night before with the people that worked on it and their presentation of the earrings. So I still have all the earrings.

YO: Well, so you're saying that Lewis was doing the malls in the basement of Mordecai house?

KC: Well—

YO: Or had he moved by then?

KC: Well, I think by then we had moved to Rothgeb Drive and he had his office in the basement at Rothgeb Drive. I'm not sure of the dates. I'm really not.

YO: That's okay.

KC: But the funny thing happened—Willie York [J.W. York] went to see one of the malls that Lewis had done and he told Jim, I'm building a little garden over at Cameron Village in Raleigh. Who is your landscape architect? And Jim said, well, you'll have [no] trouble finding him because he lives in Raleigh, North Carolina. And so that was sort of funny that he went to Maryland looking for Lewis and Lewis was teaching here at State and of course Lewis did some work for Willie. But the first work was a small garden outside of Ballentine's [Restaurant].

YO: Was that an unusual garden?

KC: I thought so. I thought it was very nice. It had a lot of comments from patrons. Everyone liked it.

YO: Was it enclosed?

KC: Partially, because that part of the restaurant was sort of in the basement from the front, but open at the back and so that part of the garden was inside and part was outside. It flowed from the closed area that would survive into the fountains and things outside.

YO: When Lewis was designing these, making these designs, did he run them past you?

KC: Not really. He showed them to me. But no, I never had any talent if that's what you're asking.

YO: Well, I was just wondering because sometimes people have input into projects. I'm sure that your just being there, you had some input into some of these designs.

KC: Not really.

YO: No?

KC: No.

YO: Were there other people working besides Lewis?

KC: Yes, he made a point of hiring students that needed work. Many of them that were in school had to have part time jobs and this was not only a way of having practice and being able to show his work, but it was also a way of helping the students. And I would suspect that ninety percent of the students worked with him at some point during their time at State.

YO: Do you remember any of their names?

KC: Yes, there was Loddie Bryan, Warren Edwards, Charlie Burkhead—

YO: Well, we'll think of some more in a little bit I'm sure.

KC: Yeah, probably there, there were many of them.

YO: So, you're running a household that has a landscape architect business in the basement and Lewis is teaching full time, so how—

KC: And I have a full time job.

YO: And you have a full time job, how did you balance all that out?

KC: I don't know. It just worked out.

YO: Were there more children by this time?

KC: Well, let's see it was five years after Nigel was born before we had Jennifer and by then we were over on Rothgeb Drive in the house that had a nice big basement that was actually built to be occupied, but it wasn't that good because I had a typewriter down there and at night I typed the specifications and plant list and he had an IBM, beautiful IBM typewriter. But it jammed up because it was so damp in the basement that all the keys rusted.

YO: Oh, no.

LC: So we had to buy a new typewriter and keep it upstairs but then we were building a house on Darien Drive where we eventually moved and moved there in 1966 after Lisa was born. And at that time instead of building a basement for his office he, we moved into an office on Hillsborough Street across from the college. I went over to have lunch with Lewis one day and we were walking down to the Player's Retreat for a sandwich and spotted an old two story house. They were just putting up the for sale sign. And we went back to the office and I got in my car and went to see the real estate agent and made an offer on the house. And we moved into that house, that old two story house.

YO: That's where the old Lemon Tree Inn was finally built, right?

KC: We sold the lot to the Lemon Tree Inn, and they used it for their parking lot.

YO: So where did the office go then?

KC: To Koger Center out on Glenwood Avenue across the road from Crabtree Valley Mall. I don't know. Do they still call it the Koger Center?

YO: Yes.

KC: Okay.

YO: National Drive?

KC: Yes.

YO: Yeah, that's still the Koger Center. How many employees were there then? I mean, the business has grown.

KC: Oh, I don't, I can't remember—eight or ten because at that time, I wasn't working. I had sold my insurance agency and basically I was going into the office to—they had a secretary and we hired Quinn Tart as a bookkeeper and I was in there really just to help out. A lot of times I took care of the travel arrangements, but Lewis decided that it didn't look right for his wife to be working in the office.

YO: Oh.

KC: So that's when I started my bookstore.

YO: Now you say you started your bookstore, this is a famous bookstore. Do you want to tell me what the name of it is?

KC: The Readers Corner.

YO: Which is still going today.

KC: Still going strong. I still keep the books for them. I go down and collect books to read.

YO: And how did the idea for Readers Corner get started?

KC: Well, there was a little cubbyhole down in Morehead [City], a half priced bookstore and we found it one time when we were down on vacation and just fell in love with the place. It was a jamble in there and I said, gosh, I wish there was one of those in Raleigh and Lewis said, well, you're always starting something, why don't you start one? So when we came back to Raleigh from that week's vacation, I got busy for a location and I found it over on Hillsborough Street and that's how it started.

YO: And you just bought books from—

KC: Yeah, I put an ad in the paper to buy books and I bought books, and then of course as soon as I'd get the store open we traded books.

YO: Well, it was a hit from the day one, right?

KC: Pretty much so. Of course, it took a while to build up, but if a customer ever came in they were hooked because they'd bring their old books in and trade them and get new books. And sometimes they'd bring enough books, they didn't owe any money. Sometimes they'd empty their closets and get a credit that we put on a book, but that got too complicated. So I bought the first electronic cash register I'd ever really looked at that could print out the receipts and print out the credit slips for them so—

YO: So that was an innovation then?

KC: Well, back in those days they sort of tailored the cash register for my business. The guy spent a day with me in the bookstore asking questions. And then he set it up and told me how to do different things, how to ring in the books, how to ring out the books, how to ring the credit and the difference. And then of course if there was any difference in the price of the books there had to be sales tax on it, which it kept a record of all that. That was a lifesaver.

YO: I guess it was. Well, so you're running the Readers Corner and about what year was that? Do you remember?

KC: I started in, I think, 1974.

YO: Well, I'm going to have to back up a little bit then because I want to back up to about 1968 and that was the last year that Lewis taught at the School of Design. What was going on in '68 that he had to stop teaching?

KC: I don't really know. He just came home and said he was tired of teaching. He was burned out. He thought that he could make it just in private practice. What did I think? I said, I think whatever you want to do and he said, I think I'm going to give my notice and not teach after this year. I said, okay. So, that's what he did.

YO: Just did it one day?

KC: Well, I knew he wasn't really that happy and he was rushing off to jobs and coming back and working on doing lectures and things and he was very busy. He had too much work to do. He had too many employees. There's a limit to what I could do, and the other people could do, but he brought it up and I said, well, just go ahead and quit. And of course it worked out alright.

YO: Well, was that a turning point year as far as jobs go—changing from residential to commercial more commercial?

KC: Well, he was already doing commercial and he had—I believe he had the air, I know he had the airplane and bought a second airplane. He had gone the—what we call the push pull Cessna to a Cessna 310 and had a full time pilot.

YO: And he was flying to conferences and—

KC: He was flying to conferences, flying to jobs. He was doing a lot of work down in—for the, I can't remember the name of the firm in Atlanta. He did the Palmetto Dunes project on Hilton Head Island. He had work in Florida. He, of course, worked in Texas.

YO: Just a lot of work was taking time away from the teaching and the teaching taking the time away from—

KC: Well, no, he was always home in time to be at his classes, but it was difficult for him. He would sometimes fly in after midnight, get up the next morning and run to the office and work, come home and have lunch and go teach in the afternoon. He was teaching three afternoons a week. It was a lot of work for him, and he felt that he was sort of burned out and was not giving the students what he thought they should have.

YO: After it was decided, were you glad that that's the way that things turned out?

KC: I don't think it really made that much difference—whatever he wanted to do whether it was teaching or doing a private practice. There had been some problems in some of the students resenting him because he had become quite famous. He'd been "Tar Heel of the Week," he'd won awards for his work, he was in all the landscape magazines as well as architecture magazines and so there was some, I called it, jealousy.

YO: Was there a court case at one point?

KC: I don't think so. They said they were going to sue him and they came to the school and talked to the dean because they had been his students and the dean said, you can't teach if you don't practice. How can you help teach people if you can't do it yourself? And I will not restrict my faculty and so Dean Kamphoefner stood up for all of his faculty members and insisted that they be allowed to practice. And of course, it was a little uncomfortable when we went to landscape meetings knowing how those two people felt.

YO: Well, we're talking about Bell and Godwin right?

KC: Yes.

YO: And I mention that because that court case is a part of Lewis's papers.

KC: Oh, it was, it was a court case?

YO: It never went, actually went to court.

KC: I didn't remember it going to court. That's why...

YO: It was like you said. It was settled outside of the courtroom, but the preparation for it was just anything—it was just short of going to be filed, but, as you mentioned, the remarkable thing was that Dean Kamphoefner stood up for his faculty in letting them practice and supporting them if they wanted to practice.

KC: Well, he encouraged that they practice or write or do other things.

YO: How was Dean Kamphoefner in other ways?

KC: He was a nice person. Mabel, his wife, was a good cook. They were always having dinner parties and things like that, but this goes back a long time.

YO: Well, talking about dinner parties you entertained quite a few people at your house too, didn't you, for visiting people?

KC: Yes, we had lots of them stay with us and I had at least two dinners a year for the students and their wives or girlfriends.

YO: Do you remember some of the people that used to come into town?

KC: Well, of course Eckbo stayed with us when he came to teach and so did Bob Royston. Bob came after we moved into Darien. Garrett stayed with us when we were over on Rothgeb. Sam, I was trying to remember, I think it was Samuel Newsome—did Japanese Gardens—he and his wife came. He came to teach and his wife came with him and they stayed with us. Quite a lot of the people stayed with us as well as us having dinner parties for them or cocktail parties. Back in those days a cocktail party was sort of the easy way—put out lots of junk food and feed them some alcohol.

YO: What was it like living in the Darien Drive house?

KC: Well, it was a big house, but I did not have good storage and the ledges that were over the living room that were supposed to be reflections for the fluorescent lighting that was at the back that reflect on the roof, I used that for storage. I put boxes and lined the books up there and the children had lofts that they were supposed to be able to play in, but I used their lofts for storage. I

tried to talk to Lewis about it when he was designing the house and he said, I'm not catering to your squirreling instincts. Now, I'm a pack rat. There's no doubt about that, but I had Christmas decorations that had belong to my mother and my grandmother and I had a number of things that I felt that I wanted to keep and I wanted some storage for them. To this day I don't know if he really understands what I was trying to tell him that to build me a basement or an attic. But he actually had dirt hauled in and compacted so that he could put that house on a slab about seven feet up in the air and the only basement was about ten feet wide through there so that the furnace for that section of the house, and the hot water heater under the kitchen, could go down there. And every time I went down to the garbage cans and climbed those fourteen steps up to that ledge on the back I thought, why didn't he let me have a basement?

YO: Well, how long did you stay in the Darien Drive house?

KC: We moved like I said we moved in 1966 and we separated in I think 1975 and as soon as he insisted I had to have the house, I started looking for something else. It was a beautiful house just to look at it and it was nice for entertaining, but like I said.

YO: Was there an issue about how far it was from the bedrooms to the kitchen?

KC: Well, Gil Thurlow used to say that I could walk to the Capital and back for the length of time that it took me to get from the bedroom to the kitchen. And it was a long way.

YO: And the reason that you'd be making trips from the bedroom to the kitchen was because there was a new baby right?

KC: That's right.

YO: Have to warm the baby's milk up?

KC: That's right.

YO: But I wonder sometimes if the modernists really do look at how people actually live when they design their houses?

KC: Probably not. Like I said he just would not cater to my squirreling instincts.

YO: Well, thinking back over the period of time that you can recall, which Lewis Clarke Associates project stands out to you and why? You mentioned Palmetto Dunes.

KC: Well, that was beach property and of course I like the beach. I like walking on the beach, I like the ocean and it was a nice, nice design. But I think the thing that, one of the things that I enjoyed was the Cherry Hill Mall. It was a beautiful mall. I think that was one of the first ones. I'm not sure. But a lot of the projects, I still have some memories of them.

YO: Anything here in Raleigh?

KC: Well, of course the Ballentine's Garden that Willie York had over in Cameron Village. Oh, I can't remember. I'm sure he had lots of work here.

YO: There were a lot of people, some homes, a lot of homes—

KC: Well, there's a Dr. Jenkins house that he did over in Country Club Hills. Oh, Yona isn't this awful? I can't—

YO: No, it's not awful, you don't worry about it. We're almost done, Kit, believe it or not. What is the one important thing to know about Lewis Clarke?

KC: Well, I think that you'd have to say he loved his profession. He cared deeply about his students and he was very dependable. If he gave you his word he kept it. I'm sure there are other things as well, but right off just thinking, I would say that those things were important to him.

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Kit Clarke?

KC: I guess I'm a survivor.

YO: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

KC: Not that I can think of. I'll probably think of a million things after you—

YO: Well, we'll have another session then.

KC: But it's strange. I haven't talked about this and all of a sudden it's just some of the memories are coming back, but you have to remember I'm almost eighty now.

YO: Well, your memory is pretty good. Well, if you can't think of anything else for right now and we'll leave this open to have another session if you think of something else write it down, jot it down and we'll schedule another session. But I think we, we're to our stopping point—

KC: Okay.

YO: And I just want to thank you very much for talking to us today.

KC: Well, you're surely welcome, and I hope it'll be some help, and of course you'll need to do some editing I'm sure.

YO: Oh, we'll do fine.

Transcriber: Jennifer Curasi

Date: December 14, 2008