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SHIPS CARPENTER and MASTER BUILDER  
by  
Mr. Alfred M. Evans, Jr. (age 82)  
with Miss Mary Trevor

I was born in Key West and lived with my mother and father on what was known as Pauline Street until I married my wife, Molly. My wife and I have had 11 children (one died) but we've been blessed in that all the living children have had good educations--some of them teachers and others are building contractors.

I remember as a child of being at a Wesleyan Methodist conference in London. I also remember the grandmother of Miss Mary Trevor used to visit our Church because the pastor there at that time came from England; I imagine she felt at home during the worship period. I was also given the impression that she was born in England.

I had the privilege of associating with many people in Old Key West, both in the Church and on a civic level. During the World War, there were a number of the International Committee who would look into both sides of the problems of all people who were in need, financial problems or social problems. Later I became affiliated with the PTA of the Douglas School. Worked with them for several years directing the Boy Scouts. Many of these boys developed into first-class scouts, Eagle scouts, and eventually went on to war and became Petty Officers. Mr. Alfred Edwards, one of these boys, later became an educator and up until a few years ago worked at the Howe University in Washington D. C.

Mrs. Malone questioned Mr. Evans regarding names in Key West that are predominant in the non-white community that are the same as in the white area, such as the ~~Big~~ Sands family and lots of others.

"Well, perhaps that's a long story. That might go back to the fifth or sixth generation. I understand that most Key West people emigrated from the Bahamas; they had English ancestors. This is the case in my own family. Then too, some came here from South Carolina or Georgia; they, no doubt, received their names from their ancestors. My parents were born in the West Indies. They came to Key West before they were married. My mother's side was English; I'm not sure exactly of my father's pedigree, but he was a schoolmaster in Nassau and was also a ship carpenter and perhaps that accounts for three generations becoming ship carpenters or house contractors. He owned boats as well as building them, so my early training was in the ship-building industry.

There is a vast difference in ship carpentry and house carpentry. In the ship building, a man needs to have the knowledge of drafting. He had to know exactly to the fraction of an inch that the starboard side did not vary from the curvature on the port side; otherwise the ship might become lopsided, therefore he must have knowledge of drafting a ship from stem to stern.

Now, in the case of house building, you start off from a plan--either from a scale drawing or a checked blueprint drawn by a licensed architect who has received college credit in that particular field. There are many AA house contractors that may not work on a boat. I recall when I was 18 years old, my father had a contract to turn a large schooner called Mt. Vernon into a boat that could bring molasses from Cuba to Key West. Therefore, it needed a sub-floor in the bottom of the ship. We had a house carpenter with us then and he called for a level. I laughed at him because you don't use a level on a boat; we use a line. In the sea, there is the rolling which has to be provided for and cannot be done with a level. So, there is quite a difference between a house builder and a ship carpenter. Shipbuilding requires much more accuracy as a matter of fact, it must be absolutely accurate, and this same principle is applied to any kind of ship. When I say, it must be accurate from stern to stem, there is an absolute method of testing this accuracy with a line and a scratch down in the center of the stem from top to bottom. When that line falls and gets into that scratch, then it's absolutely perpendicular or 90 deg. The accuracy of the stern is ascertained in the same manner. All the timbers are laid out and drafted on the ground. Then when you pull it up, there's a center mark has to fall directly under the line that is suspended from stern to stem..

In a house, this is different. We use levels, and they should be used properly. I've seen some building where it looks like they didn't use any levels. So, in my early life I received partial shipbuilding training and some house training. I started helping him <sup>(my father)</sup> after school hours; he'd lay out work and I had to cut the timber; the timber was taken from wood that was grown on lava--hardwood that the termites could not get into.

"I don't have any certificate as an architect. When I was 29, I built a Church from fully-scaled architect's drawing. The plans were very complete for the exterior as well as the interior. In connection with this, it might be interesting to know that there were terrific tropical storms which swept over Key West in 1909 when I was a boy and seven churches were destroyed. In the meantime, we had constructed a two story multi-purpose building--the first floor was for worship service and the second story were living quarters



for the minister. That went down two months after it was erected in October, 1910. A week later, we were granted permission to use the County Court room without any charge. Reverend S. T. Hoffs, a young minister from England and about 25 yrs. of age, preached the first sermon there. I think this might be important to give credit to the County Commissioners who then were in office.

Mary Malone reiterates a story which Nellie Falk says is true--that the minister was preaching away and he got so excited, he walked down the aisle and when he got to the door, he hollered "Ship on the Reef." He was the first one to get out there to be the master. This happened at the County Commission building.

I also worked on the Palm South Church and helped to put in those large windows there, in the side transept. The window on the chancery, the one donated by Mrs. Stephen Lowe, was given in memory of her father and mother--was installed by me. Mr. John Lowe had the lumber yard then and sold very good lumber which is always helpful in the carpentry trade. The Thompson enterprizes was originally Sam Lowe's property. John and Sam were cousins, I am told, and ~~and~~ their property extended from Elizabeth to William Street.

At the old family table (seems there was a closer relationship then) and that's when people seemed closer together especially at suppertime, but can remember the old yarns and interesting stories told. There is an old saying that "Little boys have big ears" and I was one of those sitting around listening, and that is the reason I'm able to retain some of the things I heard back when I was only 5 or 6 years old.

After the church had blown down, another building was erected on the same spot a year later. It was more like a hall because we did intend to have a concrete building so later it was moved from that spot to the corner. That was the corner of Petronia and Simonton Street; On December 18, 1923 we started the building we have now and it was dedicated the following year in July.

The house where I am living now was erected in the year of 1943. That was seven months after the previous building had been destroyed by fire, 5/20/42. It was completed only to the stage where we could live in it but it was actually not completed until three years later. Our stairwall is made partly of Cypress--the best grade; I didn't have all that money but ran into a little luck. I built a house for Mr. Howard Wilson on Oudjoe and a fellow up there had gotten possession of a large water tank and took it down; the bottom of it was 3 1/2" thick by 14" wide. He gave it to me and I took it to Wesley Archer and asked him to cut it up into spokes of 1-3/4" square which I intended to use for spokes in my stairway. The lower step of course is of Cypress, too. My steps are not the steep type either. This is where some extra knowledge of building is valuable. Even though a builder does not have a college education, he must be knowledgeable in math; in building stairways, he must determine the width and height of the steps by accurately measuring heights from the first to the second floor. In our house, there are 18 steps with two spindles under each or a total of thirty-six.

I've built quite a number of stairways; one of the most complicated was down a Joe Pearlman's on Simonton Street; they had two large circular at the bottom and then went up eight or nine risers, then had one like at the Light House, then you turn again.. this house has been redone. It originally belonged to Dr. Kent and he sold it to Mr. Pearlman. (Tape ended.)