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## **Y. Stories to Save Lives**

Interview Y-0024  
Margaret Gerringer  
7 August 2018

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**ABSTRACT – MARGARET “MICKEY” GERRINGER**

Narrator: MARGARET “MICKEY” GERRINGER  
Interviewer: Nicholas Allen  
Date: 08.07.2018  
Location: Mickey’s apartment, 3000 Galloway Ridge Road, Pittsboro, NC  
Length: 1 hour and 20 minutes

Margaret “Mickey” Gerringer is a life-long North Carolinian and current resident at Galloway Ridge. She is currently 98 years old and in fairly good health. She begins by talking about Monroe and Union County, her parents, and her grandparents. She discusses her father’s position as a judge on voting day, politicians from Monroe like Jesse Helms and Skipper Bowles, and her current interest in politics. She talks about growing up in the Great Depression and how that has affected the rest of her life. She unpacks her perceptions of the Civil War and the Spanish Flu Epidemic. She talks about how houses were marked when they had communicable diseases during her childhood and how ice deliveries were handled. She talks about how school worked. She discusses attending the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina, how that affected the rest of her life, and how she helped collect debt from alumnae. She talks about working for the Department of the Interior on the construction of the Appalachian Trail. She talks about meeting her husband and staying active in late adulthood. She talks about dowsing to find water for a well. She talks about spinal stenosis, receiving medical care in older adulthood, how she’d like to die, and how life becomes difficult as we age, from driving to weight loss.

## **FIELD NOTES – MARGARET “MICKEY” GERRINGER**

Narrator: MARGARET “MICKEY” GERRINGER

Interviewer: Nicholas Allen

Date: 08.07.2018

Location: Mickey’s apartment, 3000 Galloway Ridge Road, Pittsboro, NC

NARRATOR Margaret “Mickey” Gerringer is a native of Monroe, North Carolina. She spent her childhood there, most of her adulthood in Greensboro, and her late adulthood in Pittsboro. At the time of the interview, Mickey was 98—just three weeks shy of 99. She is in clear control of her mental faculties and remembers much about her childhood. She is now a tiny woman, but her self-possession and intense eye contact give her a strong presence.

THE INTERVIEWER Nicholas Allen is a graduate student in the department of English at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently earning an M.A. in Literature, Medicine, and Culture. His research focuses on late life and end of life.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW The interview, which ran for one hour and twenty minutes, took place in Mickey’s apartment in Galloway Ridge. Mickey’s stories sometimes wander since one detail will trigger another story or line of thought that is only tangentially related, but she usually brings herself back on topic. I cut the interview rather shorter than I would have preferred and before we meandered back to some topics I wanted to touch on because Mickey was obviously growing fatigued from so much talking.

NOTE ON RECORDING I used the SOHP’s Zoom H5 #4 for this recording, which was positioned on a table between us. Occasionally, Mickey would make the “knock on wood” motion on the table that the recorder sat on.

HIGHLIGHTS OR POSSIBLE EXCERPTS Her discussion of the effects of Great Depression is impactful as well as her description of how houses were marked with “cards” when a member of the household was sick.

## TRANSCRIPT: Margaret Gerringer

Interviewee: Margaret "Mickey" Gerringer  
Interviewer: Nicholas Allen  
Interview Date: August 7, 2018  
Location: Margaret Gerringer's apartment, 3000 Galloway Ridge Road,  
Pittsboro, NC  
Length: 1 hour and 22 minutes

## START OF INTERVIEW

Nicholas Allen: All right, this is Nick Allen interviewing Mickey Gerringer on August the 7<sup>th</sup> [2018]. Could you start by telling me about your mother and father? We can get into your childhood a bit.

[0:00:14.7]

Margaret Gerringer: My mother and daddy both were residents of Union County, which is the county that Monroe is in. They both lived in the country. Monroe was more or less the town or city of Union County, was the county seat. So Mother and Daddy both lived on very separate parts of Union County. I mean, they weren't growing up friends or anything like that that I knew of. I never knew how they met, but they were both from the county, because we were the group that moved to town when they were married. By then, my daddy was working for the post office in Monroe, so they built a home in Monroe, and I grew up and two brothers, we all grew up in that same house in Monroe, very happily, had a very pleasant, fun youth time.

[0:01:39.6]

NA: And what was your mother like?

[0:01:40.8]

MG: Mother, she was the rock of Gibraltar. She was the very steady one that we came to with any problem or fun. She was a jokester because her father, my grandfather, was a great grandfather, that he would ask you to sit on his lap and then he would—as children, I can remember that he always had some trick about “I’ll give you a penny and I can change it into a dime.” My grandfather on the other side, I never knew my grandfather on my daddy’s side, fought in the Civil War, both he and his brother enlisted in the Civil War, and both, luckily, came out alive. But I never knew my grandparents on my daddy’s side. They lived further away from Monroe than Mother’s family did, so I was more acquainted with Mother’s family, which was the Maye family. M-a-y-e was their name. And Daddy had a number of brothers and sisters, whom I knew but was not as close, did not know as well as I knew my mother’s family.

[0:03:20.5]

NA: And what was Monroe like growing up?

[0:03:24.5]

MG: Well, compared to things I see now and hear and even went through when my three girls were teenagers and such, Monroe was a wonderful place to grow up in. We played in the streets, and roller skating was big, a big deal, and the Methodist church that we belonged to had the best sidewalks all around the church that was the roller skating mecca, and that’s where you would meet for roller skating. That was about it, but we played lots of games, not quite like Hide-and-Seek, but got a little more—I’ve forgotten the call name of some of the street games we played, but that was Monroe. Everything

was wide open, and I could go to the picture show at night and walk home by myself, that there was none of these scares that we have today. So it was really, I think, an ideal place to grow up in. We were our own people there, didn't have to have so many rules and regulations.

[0:04:59.1]

NA: Did you go to the doctor much when you were a kid?

[0:05:00.8]

MG: No. The doctor was a good friend of my mother and daddy's. In fact, they tell me when I was delivered, that they rented a room from the doctor and his wife in Monroe, and that I spent maybe about my first year as a baby there in Dr. Smith's home. They rented space, a room, while they were building the house in Monroe. So that was, of course, very pleasant and fun, and Mother and Daddy both were fun folks, and I say that because, as I said, I really never was that deeply acquainted with Daddy's side of the family because Mother's group, they lived in a little teeny town called—I shouldn't say "little teeny town"—a town called Wingate, where Wingate Junior College eventually came into being. Dare I even say Jesse Helms—that doesn't mean anything to you.

[0:06:35.7]

NA: Nuh-uh.

[0:06:35.8]

MG: Jesse Helms was from Monroe. He was eventually the senator who was called either Dr. No or Mr. No. He would vote heavily. He was a Republican and his name strikes terror now, even. You either loved Jesse or you didn't. Well, Jesse was very supportive—what made me think of him—of Wingate Junior College. He was elected

senator from North Carolina, and at one time he brought several people, political people of note, to speak at Wingate College. He was a firm supporter of the college. I believe it was Madeleine Albright whom he brought down. But he was very supportive of that.

In fact, I think I said yesterday I'm very interested in politics. I love to keep the TV on all the time, listening, so afraid I'm going to miss something that happens, because politics was a part of my life because Daddy was a judge on voting day. In those days, maybe now, too, voting location, you're supposed to have had a Republican and a Democrat judge present, just to be sure everything went straight. And Daddy and his brother were both judges, Republican judges, mostly because they were about the only Republicans you could find in Union County. It was largely Democratic. But then also I should say what kept—and he would take me as a child down to see the folks voting and the crowds standing around, and that was interesting to me, and I think has promoted, kept my interest in politics going, because that was fun to see the folks, you know, that showed up to vote. And then also you're probably aware of the Bowles family, Erskine Bowles.

[0:09:06.3]

NA: Nuh-uh.

[0:09:06.3]

MG: Erskine was president of the university, and I forget now, maybe fifteen years ago, but they were from Monroe. "Skipper" Bowles ran for governor, did not win, but his son, Erskine, was president of the university. He also was big in politics, and they were Democrats, and Erskine later became very close to one of our Presidents. I forget which now. But the Bowles family lived across the street from us, so I knew the Bowles

and some of the kids later were friends of these girls of mine, that the Bowles connection was something Monroe was proud of, because they were an accomplished family who later, most of them, including Skipper, moved to Greensboro, where I lived the most of my adult life before I came over here. So I still was aware of the Monroe Bowles Hagler connection.

[0:10:35.1]

NA: Yeah, that's something to be proud of from your hometown.

[0:10:38.5]

NA: Well, and with Jesse Helms and Skipper were as close as if I could make my fingers go further. They were, of course, Democrat and Republican, very strong men both ways, so with all that we're experiencing now with Trump and who's elected and what they stand for, all that is very interesting to me. I enjoy hearing about it and reading about it.

One of my favorite programs here at the [Galloway] Ridge is every Friday one of our men conduct a program called Current Events, and he will broach an event and then we are encouraged to speak up, whether we agree or disagree or what we think, and I find that still interests me that I make a real effort, still, to go to that program, because that was instilled in me mainly by my daddy. Mother politically really didn't have a strong feeling either way, but she was the fun and light person. Daddy was more serious. Mother bubbled and Daddy was good, but not a bubbly, if that says what I'm trying to say.

[0:12:28.3]

NA: I understand.

[0:12:28.3]



MG: And they were both great parents, never any misuse or judgment or punishment, you know, or anything desperate. They were very knowing and kind parents.  
[0:12:47.7]

NA: What was the Great Depression like?  
[0:12:51.9]

MG: That's what I started to say, that all led into those Depression years that I spoke yesterday too much about, but I feel like they were very formative years for me, because I was like, I'll say, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old, in that impressionable teenage time. And as I said yesterday, my daddy had tried several businesses, and in the Depression, they all went down, lost, and he was very—I think that's when he became very bitter and why maybe I'm saying now that Daddy wasn't light and fun. Mother, of course, was affected with it, too, but she handled it a little better than my daddy did, because it was a destructive time for everyone who was hit by that. And I felt like it came at a time for me, sometimes when I think about it, I think, "Well, I wish it didn't or I had not attached that much to it," because I still think that it governs or directs my thinking more probably than it should, whether it was as important as I have made it in my mind over the years, but I feel that that affected—well, it affected our little southern town, and I feel like the South was, of course, the loser in the Civil War, and folks now, when I say my grandfather fought in the Civil War, they say, "Oh, no, Mick, you mean your great-grandfather."

I said, "No, it was my daddy's daddy." He and his brother, my daddy said they were both like about eighteen and twenty or nineteen and twenty, and volunteered and came out unscathed. Of the two brothers, one was held in prison camp by the Union

Army, but both came out from the war. But it couldn't help but brush your thinking and your judgments, because the South, of course, had different judgment than the North did about what had happened. I like to say it was fought over states' rights, not because—I bet there wasn't one big plantation owner who had used slaves as folks who fought in the war. It was more the other men, whom I'm not—that could be open for question, but in my life, what I knew about it, I never knew of a big heavy slave owner who actually fought, volunteered, which could raise a whole bunch of questions in the South. Maybe we should omit—forget I said that. [Allen laughs.] I didn't mean to get off on that.

[0:16:40.8]

NA: Oh, no problem.

[0:16:41.5]

MG: But I think it has formed a lot of what I think as an adult or what might say bothers me or I think, well, that contributed to my thinking and judgments as an adult, as a ninety-year-old.

[0:17:03.4]

NA: You were born right after the flu epidemic.

[0:17:07.4]

MG: Yeah, because the flu epidemic, that was when the president of the university, who was Edward Kidder Graham, he died in office of the flu, and it was his son who became chancellor of Woman's College, and I worked—I was his secretary for Chancellor Edward Kidder Graham, the son of his father, who died in 1918. About when I was born, as you said, was the flu epidemic, which was ghastly.

[0:17:47.9]

NA: Do you think that that echoed into your life and the way that you came up? Was there talk of it or did it change anyone's actions to have lived through that? Did you hear about it much as a child?

[0:18:00.0]

MG: Now, you're talking about the flu now?

[0:18:01.9]

NA: The flu, yeah.

[0:18:02.8]

MG: No, the flu did not affect—of course, I was a baby then. I would not know. But, knock on wood, no one in my family, either aunts, uncles, or anything, I never heard any reference of any fatalities because of the flu in my family, and probably only know of the president of the university because I worked for his son, and in later conversation and such, I made that connection that that was because then he was raised in Chapel Hill by a professor family that was very close. I think his name was Louis Graves or [pronunciation] Louis Graves. I would hear my chancellor speak of him as having raised him because he was apparently, I don't know, a teenager or young person at the time that would be open for someone with more date knowledge than I, but I'm speaking of events as I remembered them then. But it was a sweep of the South, and whether it was in the North, I do not know whether that was confined down here. Probably not.

[0:19:38.2]

NA: So did you ever have the flu as a child?

[0:19:41.1]

MG: No. No, I came up pretty healthy.

[0:19:45.3]

NA: What happened if someone got sick while you were growing up?

[0:19:49.3]

MG: Well, of course, we called the doctor, and in those days, if you had something like the measles, we had cards that you would have to post outside your door of your home, that this home has influenza or measles or the mumps, that that was bad luck and you felt it, but it advertised so no one would come into that home when there was a disease that you could catch. Because I remember those that would be posted, you thought, "Well, gee, do they have to post that?" It was the sign that when you wanted ice, we had signs that had 50 pounds or 100 pounds, and you'd turn it whichever way you wanted. This is when we had ice delivered up and down the streets. And we had the "ice" cards as well as "this house has sickness" cards that advertised. But those were days that have long been corrected.

But I know it was such fun when the ice man—and I cannot remember whether his conveyance was elected, I mean by automobile or a cart, but I remember he came up and down the street, and we kids would follow him because whatever the card said the amount of ice, everybody had refrigerators then that you put the block of ice in, well, he would chip, if he wanted 50 pounds, he would chip off this big piece the poundage that he estimated, I presume, from the 50, and we kids would all hang around and get the chips of ice. But that's something that has changed so drastically. Then after the freezers, electric freezers were invented, that all went in the past. But that was a fun time. "Oh, here comes the ice truck!" And everybody would run out in the streets, which he didn't

object to either, and he would take the ice in. So that was something that's unheard of now.

[0:22:39.2]

NA: How cool is that. That does sound fun.

[0:22:41.0]

MG: Well, it really was, because it was free and it was not hurting anybody, and it wasn't taking away from anything. When you say "Let the chips fall where they may," so it was with the ice chip that kids could get a few and have a giggly, fun time over it. That was good fun.

[0:23:09.6]

NA: What was school like in Monroe?

[0:23:12.4]

MG: It was very good. We had an excellent principal, Dr. House [phonetic], who put together for Monroe or for the school the first band we ever had. He was interested in music, and he promoted band lessons, coronet and clarinet, and got a group together which became very adhesive. That group grew and were very close. The whole band would take a trip to the beach together. Mr. House made that possible, I think, that they were—I mean, today if you met a band person my age, they would want to talk about the band that Mr. House promoted.

And we had clubs, not quite Phi Beta Kappa, but we had names of groups that according to your grades or what you did, that you would be asked to be a part of, which was good and fun and very democratic. And back then, you had "A" classes and "B" classes that often the better students were grouped together more than a real mix early on.

I shouldn't say that, because the Department of Education will jump on that. Forget I said that. [laughter] That might be liable for more criticism than I remember, but it was a very fair—those were the times when if you were asked or got a message to report to the principal's office, you were scared already both of the principal and mainly of your mother or daddy when they learned you had—which they would learn if you were called for any disciplinary action. They took that very seriously if you had committed some trouble or confusion. You would get it.

I know my mother, the home we had, the porch extended around the corner, and there was a little tree—I think she called it a sycamore—that grew as we kids grew, and, boy, if we were due for a reprimand, Mother would take us by the hand and walk us to the end of the porch, where she could break off a stem of this sycamore tree and whisk our legs quite hard, depending on the difficulty we had caused. But that was not unusual for parents to physically switch your legs, not mistreating, but you knew you were in for a little burning on the legs there, which I look on now as good punishment, that it made you think before you got into something that you know you shouldn't, that you'll make acquaintances with that little sycamore tree.

[0:27:05.3]

NA: How many grades did Monroe schools go?

[0:27:10.8]

MG: At that time, we had eleven grades. Later, a few years after I graduated in 1936, they did go to twelve, which was the norm in North Carolina and probably for the larger schools, because, of course, this was not a really big school.

[0:27:41.9]

NA: So after eleventh grade, you headed on to—

[0:27:45.6]

MG: Woman's College [now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro].

And I should say a good word for that one-year commercial course. It afforded—because this was still bad money times—it gave someone like me a look at college life, because there was a dormitory that we lived in and ate in the college dining rooms. We had a year of college, introduction to college life. If we couldn't afford the four years, this was an out. It was a secretarial course, shorthand. We did shorthand and typing and bookkeeping and office-type things, and it had a good hiring program. A Woman's College one-year commercial student usually found a job fairly easily. I think we were known for the training that they gave us.

One thing I remember now that tickles me, when I worked in Admissions Office, as I said, that was my first office, and at that time, Admissions Office had a big vault. We had several vaults in the Administration Building, because the Registrar's Office was there. Of course, all the records of the past alumni were there. Well, in Admissions, we also at that time, Woman's College was mostly a Teachers College-trained. One of their glories was the Education Department putting out teachers, and if you signed up as a teacher—I forget how the rule was. You would be given a monetary discount if you signed up. You would teach after you'd graduate. It would erase so much debt. They all left with some debt hanging over them, nothing like when I read of the debt now that kids graduate with. This you signed up to teach, and then what we did, tried to keep with these kids.

That was one of the small jobs I was assigned to. When a girl graduated, when and if she married, we wanted to know her married name, because I had a little form letter that I would send out about once a year. "You have not repaid your college debt, because we have not had notice of your having taught or fulfilled that promise." And to keep up with the folks between the Alumni Office, was a big part of our campus, who kept up with that, but then our office, I felt, bore the responsibility for collecting that money, and every Sunday we would get a copy of Sunday's newspaper from Greensboro, Raleigh, Durham, Wilmington, about five or six large cities in the state, and I got to where—and I still can do it, find myself doing it here on Sundays—I can scan down a girl's wedding announcement and can spot the place where it says "She's a graduate of Woman's College," or Wake Forest or whatever. I can spot that Woman's College, because it's always—well, then I would note her married name. By then, we'd gotten her married name and an idea of where she was living. I don't even know who thought of that, whether that was a university-developed something, but I thought at the time that was a pretty tricky way to keep up with—because once a girl marries, you lose connection with her maiden name or her college name. And we would collect right much. Often they would respond to that. But that was done, because I remember I always sat in that vault to do that newspaper reading.

Then when families would come, possible sign-ups would come to look over the college, that was one of my jobs. I took 'em out and toured the campus and told 'em who did what and what building did that, and I had two or three girls in different dormitories whom I could count on their rooms being cleaned up, that I could knock and show, because the parents were interested in where the girls were going to live and what the



situations were. So that was fun. That was out-of-the-office fun. But I was real young then, and that suited me fine. I enjoyed doing that.

I think that helped on our getting more candidates for the college, because at that time, Woman's College and was a college in Texas that was a woman's college—it could have been a women's college, I don't know. Don't know about that. But each year, we would compare. Dr. Jackson, who was my first chancellor boss, he and the president of this women's or woman's college in Texas, after registration was over and we were into the college year, they would write each other their number of students, and we were always racing to be one of the largest women's college[s] around, and this was a college in—whether it was a state college, I honestly do not remember now, but that was always of interest to hear what their registration figure was as against ours.

So I loved working for the college and enjoyed my work a lot, but it was a fairly lowly position and the pay was not really much upscale. As you can tell, pay from my experience with the Depression, that meant a lot to me. I had come to recognize that money and salary needed to be sufficient, because I was living, of course, off campus, renting a room from someone who lived close to the campus.

But I think I said yesterday, which is still correct, I read a line in the newspaper saying that there would be government secretarial tests at the local post office on a certain day, and would invite anyone to come and take 'em and possibly a government job might be in the offing. Well, I couldn't not do that, so I showed up. We typed, and I forget whether any shorthand was involved.

But shortly afterwards, I got a letter from Department of Interior, offering a job which was an up salary from what I was making at the college. I was anxious to get out if

I wanted a better job with better pay, so I did. I took that job. I forget now. You'd almost laugh at what it paid, because, of course, I knew I'd have to live in Washington and what it was going to cost me, and at the time, I had a cousin and her husband who were both living in Washington, so they offered me a room, to come up and get acquainted with the city. I found a real nice place to live which I took, and stayed up there for about a year.

Then Dr. Jackson, who was my first boss, one day appeared in my office in Washington. How in the world he found the Department of Interior, I have no idea. The National Park Service was the area of the Department of Interior that I was working in, but doing very dull typing. As I said yesterday, the Appalachian Trail was being built then, and Congress would appropriate—we didn't talk in the million and billion dollars as we do now, but would appropriate money for two-tenths of a mile, and the work I did was typing these numbers of what Congress had approved, which was dull, dull. I felt like from my fun days at the college, I didn't think I had made a mistake, because I enjoyed living in Washington and made some friends there, but when he showed up unannounced one day and asked if I'd like to come back to the college as his secretary, well, that, to me, was a bump up and a bump up in salary also.

So I went back to the college and worked a number of years for him. I forget now whether—no, I wasn't, of course, married when I lived in Washington, and when I came back, I had been dating, before I went to Washington, the man whom I ended up marrying, so, of course, I'm sure that had to do with my thinking I would like to go back to the college, particularly as Dr. Jackson to work in his office suited me, so I did, and stayed there for I forget now how many years, because we were married and then I think I quit when I had my first child. By then, we'd had this first girl, who was born on the

Fourth of July, and I stopped. I resigned, because we also were literally building our home in Greensboro, and that was important to me, so I stopped and became a mother and a housewife for a number of years.

Then this Edward Kidder Graham came to the college. I reckon the other chancellor retired, Dr. Jackson. When Graham came, he needed a secretary, and one of the deans whom I knew and had dealt with before suggested me, and over the telephone, he hired me, asked if I'd like to work back in the Chancellor's Office again, which by then this child was almost—we had a good nursery school at the university, so that was no problem. I could put her in nursery school and work, which I did for this Edward Kidder Graham for a number of years.

Then there again, the house came into—by then, we had built a home which I loved, and it needed furnishings and different things that was occupying my time and thoughts, so I worked a number of years for him and then resigned when it seemed that I should go back to being a mama and a housewife. So that was the extent. But working for the chancellors was extremely interesting. Dealing with people is lots more interesting than dealing with numbers, so that was my run with the college, and I loved every bit of it.

[0:42:13.0]

NA: So you didn't work for the college anymore after that?

[0:42:15.4]

MG: No, because I'd worked for a number of years for the last chancellor, Dr. Graham. Then he—no, that's it.

[0:42:38.1]

NA: How did you meet your husband?

[0:42:40.3]

MG: There was a group I enjoyed being with that would get together for Sunday cookout at a neat little house out in what's called Sedgefield in Greensboro, and they had a Ping-Pong table. At the time, my husband, who was from Greensboro, was living and working in Charlotte, and he had come home for the weekend and stopped by this little house because he knew some of this group that got together. I think it was called the Duck Club or something like that, had no reference to ducks at all. But he stopped, and I was playing Ping-Pong with someone else. I've loved sports and very competitive in sports, and he thought I was a neat Ping-Pong player, and that was when we met that Sunday.

He went on back to Charlotte, but he kept up with me, and when he would come back to Greensboro for the weekend, we would date and get together. So I figure it was the Ping-Pong table that was our meeting spot. And we had a Ping-Pong table that we kept on the porch in Greensboro, and I taught my three girls to play Ping-Pong on that. We were all interested in Ping-Pong and sports and such.

[0:44:23.9]

NA: That's a great story.

[0:44:26.0]

MG: Well, so it was that a Ping-Pong romance.

[0:44:31.9]

NA: And you played tennis even up until recently, right?

[0:44:34.8]

MG: Yeah, I played tennis. When I came down here in '05, five from nineteen, five from twenty would make me—I forget how old I was. I was in my late eighties when I came to the Ridge down here, and there was a group in Fearington, a tennis group that I read or knew they were going to have a meeting, so I went to that and came to know some of those girls and joined their group, and played tennis, right much tennis, and I played lots of golf in Greensboro. I enjoyed golf and played lots of tennis also in Greensboro, and when I think about the ninety-nine years, when I think of that, I feel like all that was very supportive of my living to this age that I stayed probably as physically active as I could with what I could do and couldn't do. I think the outdoor life is a good life for hanging around this long.

[0:46:10.2]

NA: Why do you think that is? What do you make of that?

[0:46:12.7]

MG: I don't know, because my oldest daughter, who the other girls say we two are very much alike, we're both combative and like to win. In fact, I've got her picture over there. She was Senior Club champion. She's played golf and she's almost—I think will be seventy-five her next birthday. This is the Fourth of July girl. And she plays in the state tournaments and out-of-state tournaments, plays real good game of golf. And the other two girls are not quite as sports-minded as Gail and I are and were, but I think that's very helpful to be outside, do something that your body is doing, rather than sitting around or hanging around.

[0:47:23.1]

NA: As you're getting older, I guess you're not able to compete in the same way that you always have been able to, but you still have a competitive nature.

[0:47:36.8]

MG: Yeah.

[0:47:36.8]

NA: How do you rectify those two things?

[0:47:38.4]

MG: I love to do things, but when playing tennis I reached the point where I realized I couldn't move about on the court as I wanted to or had been, and by then—well, not by then; they'd been doing it for years—Chatham County had what's called all over the state the Senior Games that seniors competed in in certain age groups, but you competed in the age group you and your partner, if it was tennis, you were playing doubles, your age put you in a certain bracket against whom you would compete, you know, which makes sense. A sixteen-year-old didn't compete against a forty-year-old.

And as I kept playing tennis and aging and I was interested, I signed up for the Chatham County Senior Games—of course, that's a national a thing—in tennis, and had a partner who was—she was younger than I, who's now gone, Janice Hunt [phonetic]. She and I played together a lot, and we competed in some of the two or three years in the games and lost, never did win in our doubles games, but I got the feel of the senior competition. That interested me too.

So I decided by then—we here at the Ridge had a croquet court, and I'd never played croquet in my life, and I thought, well, it looks like a fairly simple—a little bit like golf, hit that ball. It's not a lot of physical moves. So I started playing croquet, and we got

a croquet group started here. Then so did Fearrington have a croquet, and they had a really nice croquet court, which they still have. Now our court's been taken over by building. We don't have that any more.

But I signed up to play croquet, and you end up as either a county winner or state winner. Well, maybe it was the first year that I signed up and I think I was maybe ninety-one or ninety-two, and I pretty much knew there weren't going to be many people sign—they had to be my age to sign up against me, you know, so you win by default. [laughter] I figured that out. So for a couple of years, I was the Chatham County winner because nobody that old challenged me, you know. So I played two or three years in both the tennis and the croquet competitions here until I probably had to drop that at maybe ninety-four or ninety-five, but that was fun.

I enjoyed doing that and participating in that, so that's been—and my husband was sports-minded. He was a good diver and had some trophies that he'd been in some state competitive things as diving, and he loved swimming pools, and we ended up [with] a swimming pool literally [to] ourselves in the backyard of this house that we had built also. Hilton, my husband, said he'd had experiences as lifeguards and tending to pools in Monroe. I started to say in the city. Monroe was just a town. But he was the one wanted the swimming pool and to build it, and we decided to cut the cost down—this is where my looking at money came—we decided it would be better to sink a well than to have to buy water from the city to refresh and refill, so we did. We decided to sink a well.

Well, then an uncle of his said, "Oh," says, "I'll come over." I forget the word for it. You could find water, or so the legend went, you broke off a tree limb, preferably a dogwood, that was shaped like a "Y" and you would hold the two ends of the "Y" and

carefully walk over the land, and if there was water—this is legend, but it worked for us—if there was water there, that one unattended part of the “Y”, the single part that came here, it would flip over and go to the ground, was your supposed notion that you had found water. You never knew how close or what. But this uncle knew of this, and there’s a name for it. I’ve forgotten what it is. But it was practiced some.

So Ek [phonetic] provided the tree limb. He cut the tree limb and came over, and, sure enough, there was one spot in our backyard, and we had a big backyard, because we had a very deep lot that we had built on, and one place that it would flip over and go to the ground. So I said, “Let me try it.” So I got it and I walked all around, but, sure enough, when I’d get to where it had flipped for him, it would literally wrest itself out of your hands, and that single part of the “Y” would go down.

My husband traveled. He was a sales rep. So I was the only one there when the man we had hired to dig the well came, and he said, “Now, where do you want this well, Mrs. Gerringer?”

And I said, “We got a spot right over here that we’ve chosen. This is where.”

So he did, and darned if that wasn’t the best well, with ice-cold water. We had the coldest swimming pool in town, though it would warm up in summertime, but it made for a wonderful source of water, and free water there. So that was a blessing, we both thought, and enjoyed and thought that was very fine. So when we would have to empty the pool, we weren’t having to buy city water to go in it at all, so I figure that was left over from my days of Depression, trying to figure some way to do something in a more methodical, better way.

[0:56:10.3]



NA: Yeah, that makes perfect sense.

[0:56:11.5]

MG: Yeah.

[0:56:11.5]

NA: It sounds like it worked out too.

[0:56:13.7]

MG: So it worked out beautifully. It worked out very well.

[0:56:18.2]

NA: I've heard of that, looking for water with the branch before.

[0:56:21.6]

MG: Yeah, and it's either called sizing or sizzing. There's some—I tried to think of that, even thought I was going to ask my computer. It probably knows. It knows everything, what's the word, because there is a word for it when you're walking with that branch shaped that way, and it is strange that it did do that. I remember it was 280 feet down. That was how deep the well diggers sunk the shaft down, and water was always there. It never came up empty. So that was a good move, I felt like.

[0:57:21.6]

NA: That's a cool story. As you approach your ninety-ninth birthday, have you done any reflecting or thinking on the whole aging process and what life is like now?

[0:57:38.8]

MG: Did you say "old age" or "cold aging"?

[0:57:41.6]

NA: On the aging process.

[0:57:43.0]

MG: Aging process. No, not really. Really haven't thought much about it. It's all evolved so gradually, that it comes along, whether you want it or not. It's something you have and you're lucky if you're physically able to hang on to things. I've got bad circulation and have to wear these bedroom shoes because I have to keep this leg wrapped or it swells. The circulation is very bad in this leg.

And I've found I have a spinal—I have what's called—oh, they talk about it on television all the time. Spinal—it's when your spinal column narrows at the very end, at the base, and those nerves that have come from your brain down through that spine, it starts to squeeze 'em, squeezing them. The doctor here at the Ridge told me that, that my spine started—that trouble started since I've been down here, but, of course, by then I was in my nineties, and when you're in your nineties, you get opinions about, "Well, if I'd seen you sooner." Old age, you don't operate, you don't do surgery as quickly as you do on someone younger, and he said then when he determined spinal stenosis—that's what it's called—and he said stenosis is a Greek word that means "narrowing," because I asked him is it something I've done to make this, and he said, no, said that comes with old age, that that can narrow.

I take a lot of pain pills now, which I welcome. I'm glad they're available and they're there, but not enough. I keep talking to my pharmacist—what's the word nowadays that if you overtake pills, something terrible, something that they're fighting. But my pills aren't in that category, because I've asked, talked to the pharmacist about that. But those are just things. I know on television it says "If you have spinal stenosis, of course, come to my clinic, call this 800 number, and we give a free MRI." And then it

shows and says “We do a little incision that will correct this for the rest of your life,” and they show ‘em putting the back of a man and putting a little Band-Aid about that big on the base of the spine, and he walks out, practically skipping, you know.

And there’s another fellow here—there’s several of us here who have that, because it comes with the age, and we’ve laughed about that commercial, you know, of how they say it’s so simple, it’s one little incision and you skip or jump fences, you know, and get out. But it’s something that’s just to be borne. I don’t mean b-o-r-n, but b-o-u-r-n-e [*sic*], borne, something you have to have that just comes with aging, is some back trouble. Then when they tell you you’re too old for any kind of surgery, almost, that puts a stop to a lot of questions and possibilities, whether correctly or not, I don’t know, but I go by the doctor’s suggestions.

[1:02:18.5]

NA: What are some of the things you look forward to the most on a day-to-day basis?

[1:02:28.7]

MG: I can’t really answer that. I think I said yesterday it’s unusual that at my age I’m still living in my apartment by myself, that some other folks will keep saying, “And you’re really living by yourself, Mick?”

And I said, “Yeah,” because, as you know, we have what’s called the Arbor that’s our hospital unit here, and when it’s determined that you can’t live by yourself, you choose whatever furniture you have, and if there’s a vacancy, then you can move it down to one of those rooms on the first floor and live with your own furniture, have a little

teeny kitchen and a bath and either one or two rooms, but you're under the care of the nurses there.

But, of course, if you're quite ill or need a lot of attention, you go to the second floor, which is a little more like a hospital. You don't move everything. I would love to just hang out here, and as Lynn Savitzky has said, we both laugh or compare notes on our age because we're both almost the same age, Lynn says, "Mickey, wouldn't it be wonderful to go to sleep one night and wake up dead the next morning?"

I said, "Yes, that sounds like a good exit line."

But you hang in with what you can do. The worst thing about being old, to me, is to be so disappointed in yourself that you find or realize you can't do so many simple things that you used to could do, which is disappointing. It's hard to reconcile the age with not being—I know one day I was in Richmond, and I skipped, for some reason, and Gail, my daughter, started laughing, says, "Mother, do that again." Says, "That's the funniest-looking thing." Well, then I realized my skipping was ridiculous. I couldn't really—my body wouldn't do that. And that's disappointing to learn you can't.

And I can't lift things up high now, the strength in my arms, if there's any weight to it. I've had three falls so far here in the apartment that I haven't broken anything, but they've been pretty hard falls. I've had more bruises than cuts or gashes. But when you fall, this really works. You punch that, and it tells 'em where you are, and someone immediately comes. I've had to punch this three times from falls, trying to go out that front door with this. The door is really heavy, and to try to get it open enough to get that started through it was one of my falls. That turned over, and I fell on it, got caught in it. So you live with the idea of "Dear Lord, don't let me fall again." But as I said, I've had

friends who have fallen and broken hips or things. So, knock on wood, I have not had that experience, so I'm very much attached to my little machine that I call "my motorcycle" sometimes.

[1:06:44.9]

NA: It's great that you're still upright, walking around.

[1:06:47.7]

MG: Well, that's what I say. When someone says, "How are you?" I say, "Well, I'm still walking straight up." That's a plus. But it really is, to be disappointed that you—I sewed a lot in my other life, loved my sewing machine, and with three girls, felt like I was very adept at sewing, made a lot of their clothes. Of course, brought my sewing machine down here. It's in my bedroom. Well, now it's like a stranger. I cannot even thread it. Of course, my vision is really lacking a lot. But to thread the bobbin and put it in place, I can't do it. It's like it's a foreign machine to me. Well, that is disappointing to think that I so easily maneuvered that little machine and cannot do it. I can't even think through it that what—and I've got books of instruction, but they get difficult to read now. I have to have a magnifying glass over the book of instruction to read.

I know the kids gave me a Jitterbug, my little cell phone, and it has a great book that comes with it, but they all three have one, as you probably have one too. And the minute anything comes up for discussion, one of 'em will whippin' that out and getting the answer, and I'm not that adept with my Jitterbug yet as they are, and that bothers me, that that's something that I should be able to do easily, but I don't. It gets discouraging when you realize you can't do some simple things that you took for granted when you were younger.

[1:09:11.8]

NA: I can see that being very frustrating.

[1:09:13.6]

MG: Yeah.

[1:09:18.3]

NA: What are some things that lift your spirits? I know you said you like your computer right much.

[1:09:22.1]

MG: Yeah, I enjoy the computer. I have a good group of online friends that we exchange jokes and things of interest or all kinds of information that's in that computer, and I really enjoy opening it each day, and yet when I do, I find I'm stuck there for a while. I spend a lot of time on the computer. If I'm not reading a lot of stuff, there are things I want to do. I like playing games on the computer, as well as on that iPhone, and I think that's the competitive part that I think, "Well, now, if I can think through this."

There's one neat little game on the iPhone that my daughter Sidney showed me that she plays, uses a lot, and as I said, when I'm with them, they're so adept, as all you young folks are. "Oh, well, let me know. I'll tell you who was the author of that book. It was so-and-so." Well, I can't think that way to get into my iPhone that quickly. Even when I'm shown once, it's disappointing to see the next day I've forgotten one move in there that I really couldn't do it on my own, and that's upsetting, to be disappointed in yourself, to realize some things you simply can't do. But I don't dwell on that much.

I knit a lot, and I'm knitting something now that I've knit three for all three girls. I'm working on the very last one now. I'm almost finished.

So what's good about being this old and down here is you supposedly have a lot of time on your hands, which I never had in Greensboro when I lived in my home, because my husband died quite young, he was fifty-seven, and I stayed in the house many, many years, I loved it so. I found it hard to even think about giving up where I lived, because I enjoyed that very much. But, of course, eventually when we'd have a storm in Greensboro, the girls would be calling, "Mother, did that pine tree fall down on the roof? We hear there was a lot of rain or wind in Greensboro."

And finally I realized that I really shouldn't be—by then, the girls all had married and working in other—no one lived in Greensboro but me, and Sidney, the one down here, had read—the paper had talked about building this here then, that that was contemplated, so Sidney started following that and stopping down here to see what was happening, you know. So by the time [it] looked like it was going to really happen, I came down here and Sidney and I toured. All of them have right many retirement homes in this area, as you know, and they had built this unit as well as a larger unit on the ground back toward Fearington to use as a real estate, to show people what the apartments were going to look like. So by the time they built that, we came down and looked that over, and I thought, well, sounds like this is the place. I wanted to stay in North Carolina. I really didn't want to move to Richmond or Atlanta. So between Sidney and her husband, they built a house down near Lake Jordan, so she's very close to me. I will have to say, which the kids laugh at, I said when I reached the point when I couldn't drive, I and they felt that I shouldn't drive, I was like about ninety-four, and eyesight on the road, I realized, was not real good, so when I had to do away with my car, I said that was the biggest loss. I felt I completely lost any responsibility or being able to do what I

wanted to do, with no car, when all your life you've had a car at your disposal to where you wanted to go when you wanted to go.

Now Sidney, bless her heart, who works, she has a very responsible job. She and her husband have a printing company that she's very much a working part of all week long, so now on Saturdays, Sidney comes and gets me and takes me. I accumulate a grocery list through the week, and she takes me on any shopping trips, as well as nowadays you can shop online, I see now, instead of shopping in a store. You go to the computer and shop online and can get something that way.

So that has been a real loss when you realize you—I know I would say in my car, I'd say, when I get in and start the motor on my car, "I'm my own boss. I'm not subject to anybody's rules or regulations of how to live. I'm head of this group right now. I can go where I want to go and when I want to go." And the Ridge provides drivers for many, many things, like any trips to the doctor's office and stuff. That's very nicely covered, but you fill out a form of where you want to go and when you want to go and whom to call when you're ready for them to come pick you up. So that really is handled by Galloway very nicely, but it's not like knowing you've got that car downstairs that when you choose to go somewhere—and those are little things, really, Nick, nothing to get upset about, but it's losing your responsibilities and able to do what you want when you want to do it.

But with the things, I have got one of the iBooks that I'm reading, keep a book going on that, so I have plenty to do what amuses and entertains me in the apartment, so I should settle for that, but there's still days that—and there's things that you have to do, like I do prepare some of my meals that I'm right now on a scary weight-loss bit. I've lost



like about twenty or thirty pounds from my normal weight and cannot gain it back. Every other day I have to go down and have this leg wrapped, and I weigh on their machine, and we're keeping an account of my weight loss, and all I'm doing is dropping seemingly no matter how much mashed potatoes I eat or try to think of something that would be heavy, I'm not regaining any weight at all, and that's scary too. But that's not part of the South or history. That's just Mickey's troubles, yeah.

[1:18:38.8]

NA: Mickey's life now is important, too, I think.

[1:18:41.3]

MG: Yeah, yeah. So it goes with growing old in the South.

[1:18:49.9]

NA: Do you have anything you'd like to add or anything we've forgotten to talk about?

[1:18:56.2]

MG: No, I said the two things I find I do best is sitting down. I can't stand on my feet for more than really a minute or two to where I really have to sit down. I can't—unless I'm holding. I can walk, and they kid me about walking fast on this, because I like to move fast when I have this. I can walk fast. I sit well and I talk well, too much talking, but for doing things, I'm not—and I think part of it is you get lazy, that you think, "Well, I don't have to do that right this minute," and it becomes difficult to get up and go load the dishwasher or load the washing machine, which sounds like nothing to do, but it's something that must be done and you must keep up with it.

[1:20:11.2]

NA: Well, being able to sit and talk is perfect for what we've been doing here today.

[1:20:14.6]

MG: Yeah.

[1:20:16.3]

NA: I'm real grateful for all your stories and everything. Thank you very much.

[1:20:21.0]

MG: Okay.

[1:20:23.9]

NA: All right. We will call it quits here now.

[End of interview]

Edited by Nick Allen