

Owen, Mrs. Robert D. (Mary Elizabeth Stookey)

Interview by
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for the
Decatur Public Library

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Mrs. Robert D. Owen Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. We're continuing our oral history of Millikin University with our guest today, Mrs. Robert D. Owen, an alumna of Millikin.

Q. Mrs. Owen, what was your name when you attended Millikin?

A. Mary Elizabeth Stookey

Q. And when did you attend?

A. I attended from 1934 to 1938.

Q. You've had quite a long acquaintance with Millikin then. But before we continue with your college career, maybe I could ask you about your childhood. Where did you live as a child?

A. I lived in Harristown, which of course is just five or six miles west - maybe a little further from the campus. I had had a kindergarten summer at school there. A Millikin student had given us a little kindergarten. Then I had always taken piano from my aunt, Miss Edna Childs, at the conservatory.

Q. Here in Decatur?

A. At Millikin. So I was sort of familiar with Millikin.

Q. Were you living in Harristown then?

A. Yes, but I did get to go to Decatur High School, because Harristown at that time was what was called a "non-high school district." We all chose Decatur.

Q. So you were well acquainted with the city before you came here to college. What course did you follow at Millikin?

A. First, I'd like to tell you that I did not choose Millikin originally as my school. I had won a scholarship to the University of Illinois, but in 1934 times were so hard -

- Q. That was during the depression, of course.
- A. Yes. My parents didn't think they could pay for my room and board there, even though the tuition was paid so it was decided that I would go to Millikin instead.
- Q. Did you live on the campus?
- A. I lived at home and drove every day. I did have a small scholarship from Mr. Grover Patton, who used to own the Purity Baking Company, I believe, and his daughter was in my class - Miss Janet Patton, who is now Mrs. Rhea here in town.
- Q. Well, I'm sure you had a very fine education at Millikin. Which course did you follow?
- A. I had intended to be a chemistry major, because I had loved chemistry in high school, but when I went to Millikin, Miss Davida McCaslin was head of the English department. She was very well known, and I had a chance to be in her freshman class. She had only one, and it came at the same hour as chemistry. So I had to make my decision, and I became an English major.
- Q. I'm sure you haven't regretted it, have you?
- A. No, because I still read constantly, and I don't know what would have happened to my chemistry if I had followed it.
- Q. Well, I believe you met your husband here at Millikin.
- A. Yes, but Bob did not start when I did. He lived in Wisconsin when he started college and went to the University of Wisconsin one semester. Then his parents moved back to Decatur. His mother was a Gebhart - of that family. So he came down here for the same reason that I didn't go to the U. of I. and started Millikin. But he did go here $3\frac{1}{2}$ of the 4 years.

Q. Was he in the same course?

A. Yes, it was a very small school then, and he was also in liberal arts.

I think we may have met in a French class, but it might have been English, or it might have been history. So many of the courses were at the same time.

Q. Had he decided to go into law at that time?

A. No, he had not. We both ended up prepared to teach, but he did not go into teaching. Jobs were very hard to find. After we graduated, I was going to teach in high school, but I ended up teaching in grade school. He ended up enlisting in the army.

Q. Well, let's talk about Millikin when you were both students here. What was Millikin like then?

A. Physically, you'd be surprised how much it is the same. I'm struck today when I go through the halls that there is so much unchanged. Of course, there are many more buildings now, but the main building is the same, and the front campus is the same, and the conservatory is very much the same. Of course, when I went there, there was much more campus, and there were tennis courts in the back. The old gym was where we had our gym, and all the classes were in the main building. The new library - which is now the old library - was finished during the time I was there. We were very impressed with that.

Q. So you had a new library too!

A. Yes - in the 30's.

Q. What about the spirit or atmosphere?

A. I thought it was very good. We had a very good class of students. Many of our students were from Decatur and because of the times, their parents had sent them to Millikin - like D. B. Folrath, whose father ran the

shoe store. I already mentioned Janet Patton, and then there was Janet Mertz, whose father was a doctor. There were just a lot of quite prominent people sending their children to Millikin at that time. I think it made the student group unusual, although it was small. Our classes were not large so we got to know our teachers very well. There was another factor of the times. If you took religion, you had \$25 taken off your tuition.

Q. So there were big classes in religion then!

A. That is a vacant spot in my education - philosophy. Everyone took religion instead.

Q. But you do have a background in religion.

A. Yes, that's right.

Q. You mentioned the professors or teachers. Were there any outstanding ones?

A. There were a lot of outstanding ones when you look back on it. Of course, since I was an English major and worked for Miss McCaslin at least one year that I know of, I knew her very well and she was quite good. Miss Charline Wood, who was related to the Woods here in town, was quite good. Both of them were good-looking women too. Then in the language department Miss Blackburn was my favorite - Miss Bonnie Blackburn.

Q. What did she teach?

A. She taught French and Spanish. Then Miss Ross was another French teacher - Dr. Flora Ross. They were both just wonderful. Then in the history department there was Professor A. T. Mills. He was really an unusual person. I don't believe I remember anyone else especially. Those were the ones I had the most.

- Q. What about student activities? Did you take part in those?
- A. Well, I didn't join a sorority until my last two years. But you didn't have to be a sorority member those days to have fun.
- Q. To be active on the campus?
- A. No - because there were so many who didn't join because of the money. There was a large independent group. We had a lot of fun with that before I went into a sorority. Then they had in the fall, they had the mud fight.
- Q. Mud fight! That's exciting!
- A. That was for the boys - the men -
- Q. What was it? Just throwing mud at each other?
- A. No, they made a big mud hole in the back campus. I can't remember if it was between classes - freshmen and sophomore - or what it was. The freshmen used to have to wear beanies - blue beanies, I believe. You went over to the Mill for a coke or a cup of coffee. It was so small then that it was like a little drug store, an ice cream parlor... you walked over to Fairview Park, you played tennis. There weren't as many things to do, but there were organizations. You had to be elected to Conant Society, which was the honorary English society. One room I especially remember, and this I feel very badly about. It was called the Elizabethan Study - has anyone mentioned that?
- Q. No, I haven't heard about that.
- A. Well, it was right next to Miss McCaslin's office. It had been furnished by some prominent people for the university. They had given some wonderful books. It was all very beautifully paneled in dark wood. It was supposed to look like an English library - and it did. It was very quiet and secluded there - and lots of love affairs started there.
- Q. Love of English, of course!

- A. Oh, yes! But then when they built the new library - or rather, our new library, they tore that up.
- Q. That was called the Gorin library?
- A. I believe they kept the room until they made it into the president's office. Then all the books were put in a dusty room at the Gorin Library, but I wonder what happened to that beautiful wood?
- Q. Isn't that too bad!
- A. Yes - it was a nice place to meet. The English society met there - and then of course they had a French club and the gym group. I was on the tennis team, so that was important to me. They've had a tennis tournament at Millikin for many years - before I went there.
- Q. Even before tennis became the favorite sport it is now?
- A. You see, they still have that tennis tournament. Of course, they have much better courts now.
- Q. What about other students? Were there any special students you remember?
- A. Most everybody was from fairly close. I do remember one year that a boy came from Saskatchewan, Canada. He was a red-head - real interesting, but I don't believe he was back the next year. In general I would say most of them were from Illinois and fairly close. I can't remember any foreign students. In those days you didn't have foreign students in a small college.
- Q. But you feel there was a good student body and a good feeling?
- A. I thought it was a good student body and I thought the faculty was really quite good and the whole town was very proud of the college. Everyone liked going to activities.
- Q. Did you ever take part in any plays?
- A. No, I never did anything like that. And I gave up my music after I entered college. I really didn't see anything of the conservatory after I went to college.

- Q. But you did spend four years and graduated here. Did you follow any career after you graduated? Oh, yes, you said you taught school for a while.
- A. Yes, I taught grade school four years before I was married.
- Q. Here in Decatur?
- A. I did substitute in Decatur the first year, and then I taught in Wyanet, Illinois, and in Villa Park, Illinois.
- Q. I know that your husband has had a very successful career as a lawyer. I wonder how that has influenced your life?
- A. Well, he didn't become a lawyer until ten years after he graduated from Millikin because there was a war in between.
- Q. Yes, you said he had joined the Army - or was it the air force?
- A. Yes, the army. The Air Corps was what it was called at that time. He was overseas two years. We had two children before we returned to Decatur. He came back from service, and that's when he decided to become a lawyer. When he went away, there were no thoughts of that.
- Q. Where did he receive his training?
- A. The University of Michigan. The reason we went there is that we were looking for housing for our child we had at that time and the one coming. We took the school with the best housing, which turned out to be the best law school in the midwest. Some think the best in the United States.
- Q. Yes, it is outstanding.
- A. So we were there 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ years and then came back to Decatur intending to go to Houston, Texas, to practice. But he found a job with an insurance company while we put our oldest child in school and eventually he began to practice here.

Q. And you've stayed here ever since?

A. Yes.

Q. Very good! What about your own activities? You were probably very busy with your family.

A. Yes. We have three sons and a daughter. When I was rearing my children, you didn't work, and I didn't ever really consider it - and then when they were gone, I didn't care to work and didn't have to work. So I just did the usual - Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts -

Q. I believe you said you continued your studies - that's not always usual.

A. That's just recently. One summer there was no one home to be cooked and laundered for. They had just instituted the alum auditing plan - that you can do free. So I decided I would go over and try an English class with Dr. Bert C. Bach who was head of the department at that time - a very interesting man from eastern Kentucky with bright red hair and a red mustache. He was our neighbor on the street. He was really fascinating. I loved every minute of it. Then that fall I took an art history class because one son is an artist and our son-in-law is an artist, and I wanted to know a little more about art history. I had Mrs. Cordulack, and she is absolutely charming - so good. And each semester - well nearly every semester since - that was about six years ago - I've either taken a history course or I've started my German or an English course and I do think the faculty is really very good. I haven't had a poor teacher yet. In the history department Dr. Provan is just excellent and I also had the former head, Dr. Mardock. He was very good, and in the language department Dr. Paul-Merritt is just terrific.

Q. You've had an opportunity now to view students from several periods. Do you have any reaction to the students now?

- A. The main difference I think is the dress and the attitudes toward each other. It was a privilege for us to go to school. We wore skirts and dressy shoes - not always but generally. We weren't nearly as casual as they are. We were still rather conventional in our attitudes toward each other. But I do think that in all the classes I've been in the students have been very understanding and very friendly and very interested in someone much older than they are. It surprises me. Of course, most of the classes I've taken have been advanced classes.
- Q. But it speaks well for the students.
- A. Yes, very few I've met brush you off. I think they're a nice group. I think because it's such a small school and quite expensive now that you just don't go to it casually any more.
- Q. Even though their dress might be casual! What about your children? Did they follow your and your husband's example?
- A. No. In fact, they all started at the University of Illinois. The second son, the third child, left the University of Illinois and came to Millikin and finished at Millikin in art under Professor Klaven. He is also very wonderful. I have never had him - I'm not artistic - but he was awfully good to Dan. So I'd forgotten Dan was a graduate from there. The youngest one ended at Michigan. So we just have the one from Millikin.
- Q. Do you have any feelings about the future of the university?
- Q. I think there's a real place for a small school with activities centered on campus - for students who like to take a big part on the campus. You go over to the University of Illinois and if you don't mind being lost in a sea of people, it doesn't matter, but if it bothers you, then a school like Millikin is good. You get much more contact with your teachers and you get better teachers sooner. For a shy person I think a school like Millikin is good - or for a talented person because the music school is very good. They say their best fields are business and music, but as

far as I can see, they are good in the other departments too.

Q. What about Decatur? Do you or your husband have any feelings about the future of Decatur?

A. Right now it doesn't look too good! Well, I do think Decatur is lucky in that it's rather diversified. It's not all one industry like poor Detroit. Of course, I've always felt, have always lived in this part of the country, that mid-westerners are sensible people - common-sense people. We don't have the far-out things that happen in California and on the east coast. I don't know - it's hard to say what's going to happen to Decatur.

Q. At least, they have some very good industries here in gasohol and corn-sweetener products, the corn products.

A. Yes, that's true. Those should always be good products. It's a very nice place to raise children, but I think that young people are not attracted to it much at present. Among our children, we have two practicing law now and their father was very disappointed that they didn't stay here. One is in Seattle and one is in Phoenix. They just wanted a little more interesting place to live. But, as I said, I think it's a wonderful place to raise children and as far as I'm concerned I think the schools, when our children went through them, were good schools.

Q. Where is the boy who went into art? Is he making a career of art?

A. He's trying to! He's in Seattle also. The other son is a chemistry professor. Mother finally got a chemist!

Q. He followed your ambition.

A. At Murray State University in Kentucky.

Q. Well, you certainly have a successful family, and it sounds as if you've had a very interesting and productive life - very stimulating.

A. I've produced the children! I don't mind too much not having had a career because, as I said before, we didn't think of it, really. I could have been a good lawyer, as my daughter is, if I had gone to school, but it doesn't bother me. I'm really enjoying my senior years - I guess you call them - because I've just recently taken up my tennis again.

Q. Good! Good!

A. And with that and my classes at Millikin - I have a good time.

Q. And your needlework -

A. Yes, my needlework.

Q. I've certainly enjoyed having you share your experiences with us and I thank you very much for giving us this glimpse of your student days at Millikin and your life today.

A. I was glad to do it for you because Millikin has given me many happy memories.

Q. You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mrs. Robert D. Owen - Mary Elizabeth Owen - an alumna of Millikin University. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.