

Mrs. Erma Wait Cook Interview

August 14, 1985

This is Betty Turnell recording at the request of the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. Erma Wait Cook - Mrs. George Cook. We are recording at the home of Mrs. Cook at 815 West Main Street in Decatur, Illinois on August 14, 1985.

Q. Well, Mrs. Cook, I recently talked to your cousin, Mrs. Jim Holder - that is, Charlotte Wait. Did the two of you grow up at the same time?

A. Just about.

Q. You lived very close together, I believe. Was the home where you are living at 815 West Main Street the old family home?

A. Yes. My grandfather built it.

Q. Where did you live as a child?

A. I lived at 845 West Main - right down the street.

Q. Can you tell us what the neighborhood was like then?

A. It was a very pleasant neighborhood. It isn't so pleasant now, but all the older houses are still here. The only real change is the people.

Q. It's unusual for someone to live in the same neighborhood for as long as you have, isn't it?

A. Yes, I guess it is. I had moved once, when I married. Then my husband passed away, and I moved here with the folks. After my grandparents were gone, my father had the old house town down, and he built a new one - this house.

- Q. Do you remember the old house? Can you tell us something about it?
- A. It was a house like you always see around 1900 - two story and a porch all around it - and a barn and a well.
- Q. Did you have horses and a carriage?
- A. Yes - my grandfather did. He always had horses and a carriage.
- Q. Did they use the well as their supply of water?
- A. In the beginning they did and later they had it piped into the house.
- Q. Were there a lot of children in this neighborhood?
- A. Yes, there were.
- Q. When you were a child, what were some of the games you played?
- A. "Go, Sheepie, Go" and jumping ropes and roller skates and hop scotch.
- Q. Do you remember how children dressed in those days?
- A. I know it wasn't very pretty!
- Q. What was the difference?
- A. Of course, we had long hose and high topped shoes and our dresses were full, with a lot of ruffles. Long underwear in the winter.
- Q. The houses weren't heated as well as today. You didn't wear high topped shoes in the summer, did you?
- A. No - we usually went barefoot or wore barefoot sandals.
- Q. Where did you go to school?

- A. I went to the old Wood Street School. Then they tore it down and built the Mary French and I went there for one year and then on to junior high school and to Decatur High School. I then went out to Millikin.
- Q. What was Millikin like at that time?
- A. The only building they had then was the Main building and the music conservatory.
- Q. Mrs. Cook, your mother was very active in town, wasn't she?
- A. Yes, she was - in the Anna B. Millikin home. This was a memorial to Mrs. Millikin - originally a home for young girls who needed a home. My mother was president of the board for this home. She was also president of the Women's Club.
- Now, the Anna B. Millikin home is a retirement home for women.
- Q. Your father was in the Wait-Cahill Wholesale Company, as your cousin described?
- A. Yes, he was.
- Q. Did you have brothers and sisters?
- A. Yes - I had a sister and two brothers. We had a lively family.
- Q. Did you travel much?
- A. My father and mother did. They traveled quite a lot. They took a trip around the world - and that was the time when you had to take a boat. My brother and sister went with them when they took that trip. I didn't go with them because I was married by then. They were great travelers. They traveled a lot.
- Q. Did you ever travel on a ship?

A. Yes - I went to Norway and Sweden and France and England. Going by ship is such an easy way to travel - very restful. It took about seven days, I think, to cross the Atlantic when we went to England.

Q. What about the meals?

A. Wonderful! You could always depend on their meals.

Q. Did your family have an automobile?

A. My dad had a Packard, as I remember, and then he had others that I can't recall.

For a while before the automobiles, we had a horse and carriage, but usually we just walked or took the streetcar or interurban. They were very handy and convenient.

Q. The streetcars and interurban went right past your house. Was it noisy here?

A. I liked the noise! I love it.

Q. Let's talk about some of the buildings in Decatur that your family is associated with. Your grandfather had two hotels, didn't he?

A. Yes - the Decatur Hotel and the Arcade. They were located at the corner of Main and West Main - the two Main Streets.

Q. Were they two separate buildings? The Decatur and the Arcade?

A. As I remember, the Arcade was connected with the Decatur Hotel - I don't know how.

Q. Maybe by an arcade?

A. That could be.

Q. What were those two hotels like?

A. They were down town, of course. It was a busy place because of the Transfer House. Everything was around it - the old St. Nicholas Hotel. I remember going with my grandfather to have dinner at the dining room of the Decatur Hotel. I was pretty young then.

Q. What happened to the hotels?

A. They burned down.

Q. Do you remember the fire?

A. Yes, I remember it. It was about 1913. They burned completely. The ruins were torn down, and the present buildings were built.

Q. It must have been quite a loss?

A. It was - it was like the fire when Morehouse and Wells burned. That was where the Illinois Power is now. Morehouse and Wells was a store, and that was a spectacular fire.

Q. After the hotels burned, I believe your family started another business - the Lincoln Theatre?

A. Oh, yes. My father's brother was concerned with the Lincoln Theatre. Then he passed away and his brothers took over.

Q. What was presented at the theatre? What performances?

A. Stage plays and a little vaudeville. Decatur was in a good position to have plays - on the railroad between Chicago and St. Louis. I remember some of the actors - Ethel Barrymore and Al Jolson. They say that Bob Hope was here, but I don't remember that at all.

Q. Did your family attend all these performances?

A. Yes - we had special seats. My father and Charlotte's father reserved them. We enjoyed the plays immensely.

Q. Did your family belong to any clubs in Decatur?

A. Yes - the Country Club - the old country club. That was right at the end of Jasper Street, where Eastmoreland is now. There was a golf course there. I used to drive out there and pick my father up.

Q. What happened to the country club?

A. They tore it down and moved over to where they are now - across the lake. They divided the old club into lots and sold it.

Q. Has Decatur changed much?

A. Oh, yes - it's a very different place from when I was growing up.

Q. Do you think it has a promising future?

A. I'd hate to say!

Q. At least, it has had a very good past.

A. Yes - it has had a very good past.

Q. We thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us.

A. You're welcome!

Q. I hope that we have given some idea of the old days in Decatur and the experiences you have had.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mrs. Erma Wait Cook. This is Betty Turnell.

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