

Mrs. Will McKee

Interviewed by
Miss Betty Turnell

for the
Decatur Public Library

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ROBERT H. DUMAS, City Librarian



February 2, 1978

Mrs. Will McKee
Anna B. Millikin Home
302 South Union
Decatur, IL 62522

Dear Mrs. McKee:

We have received from Miss Betty Turnell the tape of your recent interview. Enclosed you will find a copy of the transcript made from this recording. It would be most beneficial if you would read it and make necessary corrections as well as making any comments on clarifications that you would consider helpful. Please take note of any necessary spelling changes. Return the corrected copy to the library at your earliest convenience in the envelope provided.

You have our deepest appreciation for participating in this oral history project. The transcript will become part of our Local History Collection. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Sharon L. Loe
Sharon L. Loe
Reference Librarian

SLL:cp

*I have tried to read this
but I can not see well enough
to do it. I am sorry!*

Interview - Mrs. Will McKee

(Anna B. Milliken Home - 302 S. Union)

January 23, 1978

- Q. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. Will McKee. Well, Mrs. McKee, have you always lived in Decatur?
- A. Since 1902.
- Q. You were a child when you came here?
- A. Yes, I was nine years old. That gives my age away!
- Q. I believe you said you received your early education in Decatur and then went away to college. Is that right?
- A. That's correct.
- Q. It was Northwestern University?
- A. Yes, I went to Wells College for one year - a girls' school - and three years to Northwestern.
- Q. I'm sure Northwestern was quite a little different then.
- A. Very different!
- Q. Could you tell us a little bit about your experiences at Northwestern?
- A. Well, it was a wonderful time to be in college. I've always felt that it was the last year that life was really normal because I graduated in 1916 and we were into the World War in 1917. Life was very peaceful on the campus. It was not such a large school then. It was very easy to get into the city to see theatres and shop - I'm afraid most of our Saturdays were spent in the city.
- Q. That was your main field in study, wasn't it?
- A. In English and the drama. We had great respect for our professors in those days and they were fine men with upstanding character - men you could really have confidence in.
- Q. Where did you live on the campus?
- A. I lived in Willard Hall. There were no sorority houses at that time. There were three residence halls for women and then some more houses that were approved. But I was fortunate to get into Willard Hall, which was the oldest and most established of the halls. I lived there for three years. It was an old building, but we rather liked the old place.

Q. Well, that must have been a wonderful experience and must have given you a really fine education. Had you planned to do any work or profession?

A. I had planned to teach. I always wanted to teach. I still do.

Q. Well, I'm sure you would have been a very fine teacher, but something caused you to change your mind.

A. Well, after a year of teaching, I was married.

Q. And then you returned to Decatur?

A. I taught in Decatur - in the junior high school.

Q. Mrs. McKee, could you tell us something about Decatur as it was at that time?

A. Well, one of the principal buildings was known as the Powers Block. It was on Water Street between East Main and East Wood. Linn and Scruggs Department Store was there.

Q. I believe you said there was an interesting drug store at that area too.

A. Well, it was known as the Decatur Drug and the proprietor was a very religious man. He sold nothing but drugs on Sunday and never any kind of liquor or tobacco.

Q. He would have trouble staying in business today, wouldn't he? But I believe you mentioned the main building there - the main part of the building was the opera house. Is that right?

A. The Powers Grand Opera House and it was the center of entertainment for Decatur. There were many good plays there. It was a one night stop between Chicago and St. Louis and Decatur, having a good opera house, was fortunate in having many good plays and actors. I remember seeing the first comic operas in those days. I think we call them musical comedies now. The first one I saw was the Prince of Pilsen and it was followed by another very popular one - The Red Mill.

Q. You mentioned, I believe, some of the playwrights of that time who were important?

A. Well, George Bernard Shaw and Pinero and Barrie. And the actors were Ethel Barrymore and David Warfield.

Q. You really had a wonderful experience there.

A. And then there was that actress from Salt Lake City. Who was she? She played in so many of Barrie's plays.

Q. I'm sorry - I don't believe I can help you out.

- A. You'd know her if I could think of her.
- Q. Well, maybe it will come to you later.
- A. I've got Helen Hayes and it isn't Helen Hayes. She was the first Peter Pan.
- Q. Oh, Maude Adams!
- A. Maude Adams! She played in What Every Woman Knows and the last time I saw her was in Mary Rose, one of the last of Barrie's plays. It was in the Power's Grand Opera House - no, I believe it was in the other opera house.
- Q. Now, I believe you said there were other facilities in this building too - on the upper floors -
- A. Yes on the fifth floor, the top floor, there was a photographer's studio and when we first came to Decatur, the Public Library was on the fifth floor - those two occupied most of the fifth floor. When the Carnegie Library was built, which was a beautiful building of Greek architecture, set back from the street, the Woman's Club took over the space the library had occupied, and they met there for a number of years until they bought their building on West Main Street.
- Q. Then I believe you mentioned also some other activities that took place there in the Opera House.
- A. Well, high school graduation was always held in the Opera House. That was a very exciting day. The girls went down to the Opera House in open carriages. They were usually cabs that were closed, with two seats facing each other, but on Commencement Day the tops were laid back and four girls in white dresses - there were no caps and gowns then - we wore white dresses and white parasols - rode down to the Opera House. I don't know how the boys got there. We were seated on the stage and the curtain went up and there was the graduating class for the audience to see.
- Q. Well, that was a great occasion. It must have been a show for the town to watch these horses stepping along and the young girls in their white dresses and so on - a really important occasion.
- A. It was an important occasion when you graduated from high school.
- Q. And I believe you said one of the churches also had services at the opera house.
- A. When the First Methodist Church was building their present building - they had sold their old building - and for about a year they had services in the Opera House.

Q. And all of these activities came to a sudden close, I believe you mentioned.

A. Yes, -

Q. Excuse me, before we continue, I believe we didn't mention one other activity that took place there - the sewing class?

A. Oh, yes, the Semmel sisters had a sewing school which was very popular with Decatur ladies. They would help you with your sewing and so you could turn out a dress that was very stylish and the week before Easter was a very busy week in 1916. People were getting their spring clothes ready and during that week the Powers Building burned. It burned up many Easter wardrobes and several brides' trousseaus and put a number of men out of business. Linn and Scruggs' store was destroyed and they moved over to their later location on Main and Prairie. It was a disastrous fire.

Q. Was the Opera House rebuilt?

A. No, the Opera House was never replaced there. The Orlando Hotel was built where the Opera House had been and later the Lincoln Square Theatre took the place of the Powers' Grand.

Q. But nothing replaced that era of magnificent plays as you said.

A. No, nothing ever did.

Q. I believe you said the Orlando Hotel was named for one of the Powers.

A. Mr. Orlando Powers. The Powers family was very influential at that time. They still are, I guess.

Q. Right! Well, fire was a very tragic event at that time, as it is today, and of course, Decatur had its fire department. Perhaps you could tell us something about the fire department at that time. No trucks, I presume.

A. No, there were horses. Every afternoon, in the late afternoon, they had a practice. The fire bell would ring and the horses, which were kept inside the fire house. The stalls would open and the horses would rush to their places. Every horse knew exactly where he was to go. The harness was suspended above them and the men released a buckle or two. The harness dropped down on the horse and in just no time at all they were ready to go. But, of course, in the practice they didn't go, but those horses knew so well just what to do. And once a year they had a run, which was an exhibition of the fire departments. There were two - fire house #1 on West Main Street and fire house #2 on Morgan Street. They would run from Main Street down Prairie Avenue to Pine and all the citizens would gather along the boulevards and it was very exciting to see those horses racing down Prairie pulling the red fire trucks after them.

- Q. It must have been a very exciting affair to watch. Now, I believe you mentioned something about the train service at that time, which was very helpful to citizens who wanted to go outside of Decatur.
- A. Well, I think mostly of the trains to Chicago. We were between St. Louis and Chicago on the Wabash. The Bluebird and The Banner Blue were both beautiful trains - one in the morning and one in the afternoon. It took five hours to get to Chicago on the train then. Also there was a sleeper you could take. It was always parked on Morgan Street. You could get into it at 9 o'clock and it was picked up during the night and you were in Chicago at 7 o'clock the next morning. There were also Illinois Central trains, but the Wabash had the direct line.
- Q. Well, that also was quite an elegant period with dining cars and Pullmans.
- A. Yes, there were good diners on both the Bluebird and the Banner Blue.
- Q. And I believe you could really get service too.
- A. Yes, you could. You had good service.
- Q. With your baggage?
- A. We had redcaps who helped us off and on the train and carried our baggage for the unbelievable tip of 10¢.
- Q. Yes - those were days when people really were served. Let's talk a bit about another aspect of life at that time - grocery shopping. There were no super markets then.
- A. No super markets. There were many little grocery stores - neighborhood grocery stores scattered around the town. And two large grocery stores down town. You could telephone your order in. Some ladies went to the store, but mostly you telephoned your order in. If you didn't have a telephone, the solicitor would come to your back door and you would tell him what you wanted. And the groceries would be delivered and put on your kitchen table.
- Q. That's another example of service. You mentioned telephones. There was an interesting aspect of telephoning at that time.
- A. When we first came to Decatur, there were two telephone systems here - the old and the new. Every merchant had to have two phones. Most of the residents had one phone or the other. If you had the old phone and your friend had the new phone, you couldn't talk to her. Finally, they were put into one system.
- Q. Mrs. McKee, you told me some interesting aspects of life at that time that people might not understand today. There were certain terms, for example. Who were the White Wings?

- A. The White Wings were men in white cotton washable uniforms who were on the street with brooms cleaning up after the horses and once in a while there was a large brush pulled diagonally across the street and drawn by horses. It brushed all the debris to the side, to the curb, and the White Wings would go along afterwards and clean that up.
- Q. Quite an elegant name for a very menial task - but very necessary at that time. Also, I believe you remember the tramps who came to your door at that time.
- A. Yes, a tramp was rather a common occurrence. He came to your back door and wanted food. If he offered to work, you probably fed him. If he didn't, you sternly told him no.
- Q. Of course, they traveled by train?
- A. They traveled by freight trains. I don't think they traveled on the Banner Limited or the Banner Blue. I think they called them "The Knights of the Road" and I guess they had a real organization in those days.
- Q. Well, we've lost some of the picturesque quality of life by having unemployment insurance. Those men were not especially dangerous - or did you think so?
- A. I think they were not dangerous. I don't remember ever hearing of a tramp injuring anybody. I don't know - they might have stolen something once in a while - I don't know about that, but they were not dangerous as we are afraid of people today.
- Q. I suppose mostly they just had the wanderlust and traveled around the country. Well, what about travel at that time? Automobiles? They were very different then?
- A. Well, of course, the first automobiles had to be cranked and women couldn't drive them because they couldn't crank them. You drove very slowly in those days and the horses were afraid of automobiles. There were more horses on the streets than automobiles and you often had to get out and lead a horse by your automobile. There was no speeding. Fifteen miles an hour was considered a good speed for an automobile and men were proud when their cars would go at five miles an hour. Many of the first cars had a back seat that was removable, which we called a tonneau. I don't know how they held them on.
- Q. The styles were quite different then. Well, we've been talking about the good old days and there were some parts about those days that were really very good, I suppose, if you belong to a certain section of society. Would you say those good old days are really better than today?
- A. No, I would not! We speak of air pollution and there is air pollution, but things are much cleaner, much more sanitary. Our food is better cared for, the milk is better cared for. We don't have the typhoid fever and various diseases from milk. I think I'd rather live today than in the good old days.

Q. Well, that is a very satisfying way to conclude our talk today, isn't it? That it's fun to remember these old times, but we're happy to be living as we are today. Thank you very much, Mrs. Will McKee, for sharing your reminiscences with us. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.

