

Mrs. Jane Conklin Bering

Interviewed by  
Miss Betty Turnall

for the  
Decatur Public Library

Uneda Biscuit Company.....	1
Clean Maiden Wholesome Bread.....	1
School years.....	2
Golf.....	5
Mr. Bering and Lake Decatur.....	6
Red Cross.....	7

Mrs. Jane Conklin Bering

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. Jane Conklin Bering. Mrs. Bering, can you tell me something about your childhood? Were you born in Decatur?

A. Yes I was.

Q1 Maybe you can tell us where you were born - at your family home?

A. Yes, 1053 North Main.

Q. Can you describe something about the neighborhood? I imagine it was quite different then.

A. No, that house I was born in is still there and the neighborhood is about the same.

Q. Well, that is a little different from some of the neighborhoods in the downtown area - but it probably wasn't close to town then.

A. No, it was out ten blocks from the transfer house, and that was considered quite a little way.

Q. The transfer house was in another location then?

A. The transfer house was right in the center of town and the four main streets went out from it.

Q. Well, let's talk a little about your family - your father and mother and other people in your family. Can you tell us something about them?

A. Well, my father went to work for his uncle when he got out of high school, when he was 16 years old and that was in the Uneeda Biscuit Company and that was located where Haines and Essicks is now. My uncle wanted to retire so father and his brother bought out the interest and got the franchise to make Clean Maiden Wholesome Bread. And that's the way he made his living.

Q. A bakery?

A. A bakery - and they kept it in the same location and I loved to have mother take me down there and leave me while she went shopping in town because the foreman in the back room was a large black man I guess I'd say nowadays and he used to pull me around in one of the boxes they used to ship bread in. In those days they took it down to the railroad and sent bread on the early trains or they had their trucks - their horse driven trucks and went locally to deliver the bread.

- Q. Well, that must have been a lot of fun for a little girl to take a ride around a bakery.
- A. Oh, it was wonderful!
- Q. It probably smelled very good too.
- A. Well, of course, they just baked bread at night. Friday night was early because they had to meet the big rush for Saturday. They also sold bread there at retail if you wished it.
- Q. Did you have brothers and sisters?
- A. I had two younger sisters. One is 8 years younger than I am - between 8 and 7 - and the other is between 9 and 10 and they both live here in Decatur.
- Q. Good! Do you have any other memories of your childhood?
- A. Oh yes, I have loads of them. When I was quite young, my great-uncle, A. W. Conklin, whom my dad bought the business from, died, and we went over and lived with my Aunt Anna for I don't know how many years. I started in school at the A. E. Gasman School. I went from her house to the school there for several years and then Mother was expecting again. So they thought - and Aunt Anna did too - that it was best that we get our own home so we moved back on North Main Street.
- Q. Did you finish grade school there?
- A. I went to Marietta School. I had never been there and I went there. Miss Bertha Norman was the principal and there was a Miss Boyer who was the fifth grade teacher. They were such sedate women. They were very nice, both of them. They were very good teachers.
- Q. They really made you learn?
- A. Yes, but they were so sedate. They wore long skirts mainly and white blouses with bone collars at the neck. What do you call them?
- Q. I know what you mean. There were little bones in the collars to hold them stiff.
- A. I enjoyed my schooling there. I wasn't a very good pupil. I didn't desire to be.
- Q. You had too good a time?
- A. Oh, I wasn't naughty, but I just didn't apply myself.
- Q. How about high school?

- A. Well, I went to what was the old high school for a while and then I went to high school in Philadelphia.
- Q. A boarding school?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Can you tell us something about that?
- A. Well, it was near - what was that town? Arlington?
- Q. Near Philadelphia?
- A. Yes, you went through Philadelphia - North Philadelphia to get to it. I liked that very much.
- Q. Was it strict?
- A. Yes to a certain extent.
- Q. Girls today would probably think it was very strict, I suppose.
- A. No, I think they would think it was easy unless they changed their curriculum.
- Q. What did you study?
- A. I studied mostly the arts - the appreciation of art. Of course, everybody had to play hockey. That was a "must." I tried to get out of it because I had had my teeth straightened. I said that was too much money spent to have my teeth bashed in with a hockey stick. She said, "You won't get hurt." And I didn't. Thank goodness! We were allowed to go in to the theatres with a chaperone to some of the plays, but not during Lent! You didn't go to the theatre during Lent.
- Q. Did you have dress requirements?
- A. To a certain extent. We wore skirts and middies during the day and in the evening we could wear a little nicer dress. Miss Sutherland was an Episcopalian and she took in her car certain girls every Sunday to church. I was fortunate enough to go with her one Sunday. I forgot where we went but it was an immense Episcopal Church. And she had her chauffeur and her open car. She was really real aristocratic. When my sister went there, a number of years later, Dad and I took her down. Mother couldn't go. And Miss Sutherland said I was a good girl and Oh, she praised me to the sky, and I told Dad not to believe her.
- Q. You had graduated by that time?
- A. I did not graduate. I wanted to get married instead.
- Q. Well, let's hear something about your marriage then.

- A. Well, I married W. N. Bering, Jr. (what do you want to know?) I had two daughters - Natalie Bering Gamble and Isabelle Bering Brown and Isabelle, who lives here, has five children, and Natalie, who lives in Grosse Pointe Shores, has one.
- Q. So you have six grandchildren?
- A. Yes, there they are in that picture on the wall.
- Q. Who painted the picture?
- A. Natalie.
- Q. So you've had a good life.
- A. I have had a good life. I played a lot of golf, which I adored and I would swim a lot. *also I like to swim H. R. S. C. S.*
- Q. When did you start playing golf?
- A. When I was 12 years old.
- Q. Oh, good! Could you tell us something about the course then? A country club?
- A. Dad wanted me to take up golf for several years, but he didn't like the pros. So finally he said, "I've found a pro that I like at the club this year." Well, he was a great big red-headed - what would he be? A Scotsman?
- Q. A Scotsman, probably.
- A. He talked with an awful brogue. I could hardly understand him. I took a golf lesson every day except Sunday for a month, a private lesson, and he said, "Now, Jane, if you don't get this one - " I don't remember what it was, something with my swing - he says, "If you don't get this simple thing, I'm going to get a buggy whip and come out here and use it on you." By George, the next day he showed up with the whip but of course he didn't use it. *0*
- Q. And you were only 12 years old then?
- A. Um-huh.
- Q. And you've played ever since?
- A. Yes - and Mother was quite a good golfer. It was quite a bore to her to have to play with me at times. I never will forget one time on one hole there was a bank and over the bank there was a lake. I didn't have golf shoes at that time and I was in that bank, so I'd swing at the ball and fall down - slide down the hill. I don't know how many times I did that, and Mother kept counting. She made me mad so I picked up the ball and I threw it up on the green.

Q. And then what did she say?

A. I don't remember.

Q. You probably can't quote it now.

A. Oh, I don't think she said too much.

Q. Is the course in the same place now?

A. No. It's South Moorland now. *S*

Q. At that time a course was called a "Golf Links" I believe. Do you remember some of the other members?

A. Oh, yes, there were loads, but I don't want to go into that detail. There were so many.

Q. Yes, and you might forget someone important. I understand about that.

A. We used to have dinner dances on Saturday nights and very often the young people when they got out from dinner, some of the older ones would come around and talk to us, which was nice. It really was a very nice little club - just a nine hole course which was kept up nicely. We had a lot of fun.

Q. Good! You continued your golfing then?

A. Yes - when they moved to where the Country Club is now. I kept up my golf. I was President of the Illinois Women's Golf Association for three years - if that's of interest.

Q. It certainly is! Did you have other groups you belonged to - besides golf?

A. Oh, I don't know.

Q. What other activities did you have? Of course, you had your family.

A. Yes, I had my family. Oh, we decided to have horses.

Q. Oh! Did you ride?

A. Of course! and drove. And I did a little showing, not much. My oldest daughter showed quite a bit.

Q. Did you have any specially nice horses that you remember?

A. Oh, I don't know. They were high type pleasure horses.

Q. Well bred?

A. We would show them at some of the little shows around, and that was always exciting.

Q. Of course - do you remember any interesting people you think should be mentioned?

A. Oh yes, I adored my father-in-law.

Q. Can you tell us something about him?

A. Mr. Bering. He was postmaster at one time. He was very instrumental in Lake Decatur, although he doesn't get credit for it. He was quite a civic leader and just a lovely man. I drove him during the last year of his life.

Q. You drove him?

A. In the car. Mrs. Bering said, "Will you get him and drive him? (He had diabetes.) He won't do anything any of the rest of us ask. You're the only one who has any influence with him." He was particularly fond of my youngest daughter so I used to get her and take her with me when I went to get him in the afternoon. This one afternoon I thought "Gee, I'm a little late. I don't want to be late, but I haven't got Isabelle." So I decided to be late and go and get her and take her with me. We went down and got him and early the next morning - he must have had a stroke or something - but he left us. And I was always so glad I took her.

Q. Well, you have told us some very nice experiences with your father-in-law. Perhaps you'd like to tell us of your own father.

A. He was a wonderful man. We used to have a lot of fun together. In fact, Mother used to say I was the apple of his eye, but that wasn't the truth. My younger sisters participated as much as I did. Dad would always let me use his car. Mother wanted her car in the garage so that when she wanted to go somewhere she could go. She would never let me have her car. Dad and I used to play golf once in a while, and we went to 3 I League Baseball games even after I was married.

Q. Maybe we should explain what the 3I League was - to people who don't know.

A. Well, the 3I League was a baseball League in this vicinity. I don't know what it stood for.

Q. Weren't the 3I's for Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa?

A. Well, maybe, I don't know.

Q. You went to the games together.

A. Yes - and sometimes I took my father-in-law. He was a great baseball fan.

Q. Well, Mrs. Bering, you undoubtedly have some memories of the second world war. Were you in Decatur?

A. Oh, yes, I've lived here all my life, you know, and I was married then and I became interested in the Red Cross. Miss Love, who was head of the Red Cross got me interested in taking men's shirts and making hospital gowns and then we got interested in making surgical dressings and the Elks Club was nice enough to let us have their ballroom for that project. We made all sizes of bandages and we had a great turnout of people.

Q. Could you tell me a little more about Miss Love? Her first name?

A. No, I don't remember her first name.

Q. She was the head of the Red Cross?

A. Yes, for a number of years. She was a very dedicated person and Mrs. Marge Crawford, Mrs. Turnan and myself were in charge of the bandages. We all had to wear white dresses and caps. It really was quite a picture to see everyone there. The women objected a little to not being able to wear rings but that was in the orders and we were very careful to carry out the orders - like scrubbing the tables between sessions. We got to laughing. Our things went to St. Louis and we laughed because when they wanted something in particular done right, they were always calling us to do it.

Q. You had a good reputation then! Well, we've talked a bit about Decatur of past times. What are your views of Decatur today, Mrs. Bering?

A. Well, of course, having lived in Decatur all my life and watching it grow and change, it's been very interesting to me. I think Decatur is getting more factories in.

Q. Do you think that's good?

A. Yes, because that's the way you grow. We're getting better shops and our streets are better. I think we're just fundamentally improving all the time. I hope so, anyway.

Q. Do you share the views of people who think that modern life has too much pollution and noise?

A. Oh, I don't get into that - as long as I can breathe,

Q. You accept it. You're not too pessimistic then?

A. No, I'm sorry to say.

- Q. Oh, I'm glad you can say that. After all, anyone who has had a long and happy life and remembers the days that were pleasant wants to keep on and it's very reassuring to know that you have a constructive and optimistic view about life today.
- A. Well, I try to have. Of course, I have my grand daughters and my one daughter lives here. They are all so good to me. And so I really have nothing but joy to look forward to.
- Q. Well, that really is great. Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us today, Mrs. Bering.
- A. Well, I'm afraid I haven't shared very many with you, but if I've been any help, I'm delighted.
- Q. Very good, thank you. You have been listening to Mrs. Jane Conklin Bering reminiscing about her experiences in her life in Decatur. This is Betty Turnell.