

Mrs. Charlotte Wait Holder Interview

August 10, 1985

This is Betty Turnell recording at the request of the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. Charlotte Wait Holder - Mrs. Jim Holder. We are recording at Mrs. Holder's home at 805 West Main Street in Decatur on August 10, 1985.

Q. Mrs. Holder, have you lived in Decatur all your life?

A. Yes.

Q. In this very home - at 805 West Main?

A. At 815 - right next door.

Q. What was the neighborhood like then? What was your house like?

A. We had a 14 room house, and my grandmother lived with us. This was all lawn, here where this house stands now. We had a turning pole (for gymnastic stunts) out in the middle, and a tennis court, and all the neighbor children came over and played.

Q. You must have had a good time?

A. We had a good time. We had a barn out there and a horse.

A. What was your family business?

A. They had a wholesale drug and notion store on the corner of Franklin and East Prairie. The name of the company was the Wait-Cahill Company, and it's still going, but not very big anymore. It has a long history - over 100 years old.

Q. It sounds as if you had a really happy childhood.

A. I did have a very carefree time.

Q. How were little girls dressed in that time?

A. They wore little dresses. Sometimes they wore "middies" with sailor collars and pleated skirts. We wore high-topped shoes when I was very small, usually white with black edging around the top. They had to be laced up.

Q. That must have been a big job to lace up those shoes every morning?

A. That was when I was very little.

Q. Where did you go to school?

A. At Mary French School. When I went to kindergarten it was the old Wood Street School. That was there before Mary French. Then when I was in the first grade, the Mary French was built. I went all through Mary French and then over to Roosevelt, and the high school. Then I went to Lindenwood, a girls' school, for a year.

Q. What was it like?

A. Well, it was nice - all girls then, and we had a pretty good time down there. There weren't too many strict rules and regulations. Then in the summers, we always had a nice vacation. Our dad took us somewhere every summer. The first trips I can remember were to Michigan - Petoskey, Michigan, and Mackinac. Then we went to New York several times.

Q. How did you travel on these vacations?

A. We went on a train when I was very small. When we went to New York we drove once and then we went on a train.

Q. What was train travel like in those days?

A. It was nice. They had parlor cars and nice dining cars - so different from today - sleeping cars, too. At first they had upper and lower berths. Then later they had little rooms - roomettes - staterooms.

We have done it all ways - all of it.

Then we would go to Florida. We went to Miami several times.

Q. What was Miami like then?

A. It was great in those days - nice and clean. We lived in a nice hotel on the beach - all four of us - my dad, my mother, and my brother and me. We usually went there in the winter. Sometimes we'd stay six weeks. Sometimes we'd only stay a couple of weeks.

Q. When you traveled by automobile, what kinds did you have?

A. The first one was a Ford - one with three pedals - a Model T. Then we had a Buick next, and we went to New York in the Buick. It was an open touring car. When it rained, we had to get out and put on curtains. They snapped on.

Q. I believe you said that you also traveled by ship?

A. Yes - the first was to Bermuda. That was a nice little trip. I wasn't very big then, but I remember the meals. The food on ships is always good - with four or five courses and snacks between times.

When we got to Bermuda there were lots of bicycles. I don't think they had cars at that time and don't believe they have yet.

We would go bicycle riding - it was just a quiet little island at that time.

The next trip was to the Mediterranean on a cruise ship.

Q. Maybe you could tell us about the send-off for these transatlantic liners.

A. They always had a crowd down there and would play music and throw confetti from the decks to the docks. It was very exciting in those days. My aunt came down to see us off. There were four of us - the whole family always went together. We took a big circle - to Madeira and all around the Mediterranean countries. We went to Jerusalem. They were all very interesting and much different from the situation today. We went then to Italy, France, England and Spain. I can't begin to describe the things we did in all those places. It was the nicest trip I ever took.

Q. Let's go back a minute to your automobile trips.

A. We took our first auto trip to Ohio. The roads were terrible in those days. They were dirt roads and at one place in Ohio, it had rained hard and there was nothing but a mile of mud. It was terrible! Of course, we got stuck. Everyone was getting stuck. The only car that got through was a Studebaker because it was built up high. This was about 1914 or 1912. There were farmers there ready to pull the cars out with teams - for a price. Sometimes I wonder if they didn't keep that place wet and muddy on purpose to make money!

It was about a mile they had to pull us. That was about the worst experience we had. There was only one road marked from the East to the West coast. They called it the "Lincoln Highway".

Q. You finally got to Ohio?

A. Yes, we made it. My cousin lived there, and we always went there once a year.

Q. How about other forms of travel? I believe you said that streetcars and interurbans went right past your house?

A. There were two kinds of street cars - the closed-in street cars and in summer the open cars. Of course, we all wanted to ride in the open cars. They went as far as Fairview Park. They started at the Transfer House and went out to Fairview Park. The Interurban went all around - to Bloomington, Champaign, Springfield and all these towns. The cars were electrified. There was an Interurban Station between Water Street and Main on Wood Street. I rode one a few times to Monticello to see my cousin. That was about the only place I ever rode them.

Q. You mentioned Fairview. There was another park in that area, wasn't there?

A. Oh, Dreamland. It's still out there - where the tennis courts are, but at that time they had this amusement park. They still have the pond there. I guess they had boats on this pond. It's a small pond, but they seemed to have boats. My mother and father used to tell me about that, but I don't remember about that at all.

Q. Did they have a ferris wheel and other rides?

A. They had a merry-go-round and I don't know what all - a roller coaster.

Q. While we're talking about recreation, I believe you mentioned the Fishing Club. Can you tell us about that?

A. That was interesting. Most all of the people I knew went out to the Fishing Club. It was the old part of South Side Country Club. They have cottages out there now. A lot of people live out there. We would go swimming there. That's where I learned to swim when I was six years old - in the pond or lake. They had an old club house. This was before the present country club was built. It was right on the lake.

Q. This was before Lake Decatur was built, of course?

A. Oh yes. It was a little lake. They called this the "Fishing Club". Dinners were served out there. People had cottages all around - and they still do.

Q. Were there fish in the lake? Did people really fish?

A. I suppose they did. We did more swimming than fishing.

Q. Was the golf course there then?

A. No. It was before the golf club. Later they made a golf course out of it. There are nice homes around there now - around the golf course, but they still have the old cottages. They tore down the old club house when they built the new one at South Side. You have to belong to it - it's private. Of course, the Fishing Club was too. It's all together now, but nobody fishes there any more or swims. The younger ones

probably don't know there ever was a Fishing Club there, but the older ones don't forget.

- Q. While we're on the subject of Clubs, what about the Decatur Club?
- A. That was on the fourth floor of the Citizen's Building.
- Q. This is the current Decatur Club before they built their present building?
- A. Yes. They had a dining room up there where they served meals every day. This was a private club too. They had a big dance floor. They had pool tables and a place for the men who played cards. It was a men's club just like the present one, but women could eat there and dance there.
- Q. Mrs. Holder, I believe your grandfather had a hotel in Decatur?
- A. Yes - the Arcade Hotel. Now, I don't remember very much about that - only the fire. The hotel was on the same corner where the Lincoln Theatre is - opposite the St. Nick. The St. Nick was on one side and the Arcade on the other. Then they had a big fire - about 1910 or 1911. I just barely remember it. They wouldn't let me go down to see it because I was too little, but all the rest of the family went down. It made me kind of mad! After that burned down, my uncle built the Lincoln Theatre. Then my dad and my other uncle took it over. They gave stage plays, and they had pictures - movies there too. I don't believe we missed any stage plays and not very many pictures either.

I can remember the actors - like Tallulah Bankhead and

Otis Skinner and Ethel Barrymore and Bob Hope. I think Fay Bainter was one. I never got to meet them, but we had front row seats for all the shows.

The building was much like it is now, but its very run down now and not used. Our family sold it.

In the old days we had box seats on each side and a mezzanine and a balcony. It was quite the theatre in those days - very ornate. People dressed up when they came to these big shows. It was an event. They had them once a month or once every two months.

Q. I believe you mentioned "Uncle Tom's Cabin"?

A. I can just barely remember that show. It was at the Powers Opera House. It burned too. All I can remember is "Uncle Tom's Cabin" - that's all. The Lincoln I can remember. We never missed a show.

Decatur was a one-night stand between Chicago and St. Louis - on the train. Of course, they always had a lot of scenery to set up. It was very exciting. Everybody enjoyed those shows.

Q. Let's talk about other parts of downtown Decatur as well as the Lincoln Theatre. What about the department stores?

A. Gushard's was the nicest one. I believe there were seven floors. The two top floors were offices. It was located on Water and William - where the K's Merchandise Toy Store is now - where the old Carson Pirie Scott store used to be. It was really a nice store. Across the street there was

Gephart's store, and Stewarts. Then there were two or three smaller stores. Downtown is completely different now.

Q. Mrs. Holder, perhaps we should put in the record that the Lincoln Theatre was built in 1913 and that was after the Powers Opera House had burned.

Well, Mrs. Holder, we've talked about a lot of changes that have come about in Decatur. Do these changes seem better or worse? How do you feel about them?

A. I think they're worse! Around here there was a lot of vacant ground and now it's all built up.

Q. At any rate, we know that Decatur had a very interesting past and that you had a very pleasant life when you were growing up in the early days of this century.

Thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Charlotte Wait Holder - Mrs. Jim Holder. This is Betty Turnell.

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