

McNabb, Mrs. L. C. (Edith)

Interview by
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for the
Decatur Public Library

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Today we are continuing with our oral history of Millikin University with our guest Mrs. L. C. McNabb, whom most people know as "Edith." In 1962 she retired from Millikin University as Associate Professor of Speech Emeritus.

Q. Well, Edith, what did you do following your retirement?

A. Why don't you ask a short question rather than a long one? Well, the first thing I did was to work at the Decatur Public Library as Community Information person. Then they started the Rolling Prairie Libraries system and I went there as film director. Then I went to Richland Community College, where I am today.

Q. Your retirement has been anything but dull! We'll talk more about some of your retirement activities later, but let's go back to Millikin for a bit. You were at Millikin for a number of years. How did you happen to come here?

A. Well, my husband and I were both teaching at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio. My husband left to work on his doctorate. Naturally, his place was no longer open when he finished - so we were both looking for a place and we came to Millikin.

Q. How did it work out? Did you find your years at Millikin especially rewarding?

A. Very rewarding! My husband and I liked Millikin very much. Miss McCaslin was head of the English Department when we came here and the speech courses were in the English Department. After two or three years, Speech became a separate department and Mac chaired the Speech Department.

Q. And you went into teaching too?

A. I guess you'd call it teaching. I instructed children in dramatics in the School of Music. Then later I taught in the Speech Department.

Q. Edith, I've heard from a number of sources that you enjoy creative approaches to teaching. What were some of these?

A. How much time do you have for me?

Q. All night!

A. All night? Well, yes. We need to think of new and better ways in our teaching - not to settle back into what has been done. It may be good. If so, keep it there, but let's try to improve it.

Q. I'm sure you never reached that point of being completely satisfied, because you were always trying something new - for example, the taped radio programs?

A. Yes, that was the first thing we did after we got our professional radio equipment. WSOY's engineers installed our equipment for us, and we had just top equipment. So we recorded the music provided by the School of Music, a great diversity. I think we had something like 32 or 38 programs, all different. We put those on tape and circulated those to the commercial radio stations throughout Central Illinois. That was our first effort of that sort.

Q. That was the series called Music in Making?

A. Music in the Making is what we called it.

Q. I believe you said that it was produced for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters.

A. That is correct. It makes it sound more important if I say that.

Q. It really was important.

- A. It was. It was a little hard to get the money and the approval for that. The tapes had to be sent in and you had to go through all that. But I was particularly pleased that the commercial radio stations were so receptive to that sort of thing.
- Q. Well, that was a real triumph, and then I've heard that since you were able to program so successfully on radio, you moved on to other things - for example, television.
- A. Where else would you move in the area of communications if you didn't move to television in that particular period? In '55 Millikin produced the first tele-course for college credit on a commercial station in the state of Illinois. Now, we're pleased about that!
- Q. You should be!
- A. That was on the local station channel 17. Professor Talbot, an art teacher, taught an art course, and I think the greatest triumph we had was when a number of saloons tuned in periodically! There was something fascinating to them about that and in general the community thought very well of the idea.

Production-wise the station did a fine job. I was very delighted. So many times in a program such as that, when no one is paying anyone any money, stations are not as careful in their production as they should be, but the local station was just as though they were receiving a thousand dollars to do it. Then we wanted to continue, but the local station thought they couldn't. There was another station, channel 3 in Champaign, so we saw that Channel 3 would do. We had a very satisfactory response from channel 3 and we programmed there for 8½ years.

Q. That was a real success!

A. It was, but if you had been with me and had to drive there every Saturday (that was the day before tapes, remember) you would know we worked at it.

Q. All kinds of weather?

A. Winter and summer. We did 3 of them a year. I taught the first one - Techniques of Television Production. The enrollment was excellent. It was scattered all over. I didn't think we'd ever get this, but we were permitted to go to the station for a workshop. Can't you imagine what a mess we were in that station when they were trying to do one thing and we were trying to show people something about TV production? But anyway the station profited.

Q. Good!

A. Their viewing audience doubled within one year. We had the 9:30 to 10:00 spot.

Q. 9:30 to 10:00 on Saturday morning?

A. That's right. And we got such wonderful support from the station. It was a funny thing. The sales department thought that time could be sold so they went out and sold the time. When Mr. Meyer, the owner of the station, heard about it, he said, "No way! No way are you selling that time. That hour has been promised to Millikin University as long as they want it." And that was the end of that.

Q. That was fine support.

A. And the program manager also. I still get a telephone call from him every now and then. He said we should ask for anything we wanted. I think he didn't have the slightest idea how much we might ask for. So we programmed around the calendar, as I said, 3 courses a year for 8½ years. My retirement ended the program.

- Q. That was a real experience for you and a great success. Now, people who took this course - did they have an examination?
- A. Yes they did. Now that's what some people don't understand. They think in a course offered on television - they just sit and look at television and that's all there is to it. Now, it isn't. In some of the courses, they had to come to the campus three times during the semester in order to have instruction there and to take tests and things of that sort. But in all cases the students came to the campus at the close and took a final examination. We had one triumph - one real triumph! In one course - the same instructor was teaching the same course on campus and also on TV. She was giving a final exam on the campus so the television students came in and took the same exam as the other students and they made a better score than the ones who had been on the campus all the time. So that is a partial answer to those who say that substances can't be taught on TV.
- Q. It was really a controlled experiment. You could take a lot of satisfaction out of that.
- A. And we did. We told everybody about it from Dan to Beersheba.
- Q. I'm sure you should. Edith, I know you couldn't have done all of this by yourself. You must have had some help from administrators or professors. How did the other faculty people feel?
- A. Well, I think I would have to say first, if I may, that the greatest help came from my husband. He would have to put up with all kinds of irregular hours - dinner not on time and all the rest of it. That he did, so I'll have to give him first credit. Then Dr. Michel, who succeeded my husband, was very cooperative.
- Q. I know he thinks very highly of your work.

A. That's very nice. Don't disillusion him! President McKay saw the possibilities and he gave consistent, firm support all of the time, and that was not easy to do because it was at a time when this was new. No one had proven that it could be done or that it was effective. But President McKay saw the rightness of it and so he gave it his firm, consistent support as long as we did it. And also Hank Gill, the business manager. He always supported it and well I remember - this doesn't have a thing to do with the question you're asking, but you don't mind if I tell it?

Q. We want to hear it!

A. I remember that one time I had spoken to Hank and said that really I didn't feel that I was entirely competent to direct all of this as I would like to be and that I needed, I felt, more technical training. His reply was, "Well, get it!" which I did. I attended a lab course at Michigan State which I found to be very practical.

Q. Well, that shows too that the university really did appreciate what you were doing.

A. I think they did.

Q. I believe you had at least one student - or was he a student? - the young man who gave you such skilful assistance?

A. Yes, we would never dare omit the name of David Williams. He had a great deal of technical training, but he was taking some regular courses at Millikin. Had it not been for David, regardless of all the other types of support, we never would have been able to get this thing off the ground, because, as you know, equipment goes wrong from time to time and somebody has to know what to do about it. Dave Williams would come to the university - if I'd give him a key, he'd come after midnight. He'd come any time it was necessary to keep that equipment functioning as it should be. Of course, in the meantime we had gotten a 2-camera closed-circuit operation on the campus, along with our radio equipment.

- Q. And all that equipment does require someone who really knows what he's doing.
- A. Yes - otherwise he'd do more harm than could be repaired.
- Q. Did he train students to work the cameras?
- A. No.
- Q. He did the work? Or who did?
- A. You mean to repair them?
- Q. No - to operate the cameras.
- A. That was my function - I taught students to do that.
- Q. Well, you really had a full schedule.
- A. Oh, it was fun. There never was a dull moment, but it was always a challenge.
- Q. Who planned the programs? Who decided what would be aired? Did the university decide that - or did you decide?
- A. Well, that's an embarrassing question because I think I'm going to have to -
- Q. Well, this was a one-woman show, we can see.
- A. No, not actually. I always conferred and I had to have the assistance of a great many people. But you do learn in something like this that there's one method that won't work and that is to go around and ask everybody what they'd like because you get as many different answers as you have people, and by the time you get through with that, you don't have time to do what you're supposed to be doing.
- Q. And of course you did have the training and the zeal and the ideas and I can see how that worked out and I'm glad it worked out so well. Now, we know, of course, that your students in the end are the benefactors of everything that has gone on. I won't ask you for names because I know it's hard to pick out one student above others, but in general would you like to say anything about the quality of the students you've had?

A. In general, I felt that the students were definitely superior. At least, they were superior in their commitment. How about their I.Q.'s, I don't know. They seemed very smart to me, but most of the students who were enrolled in broadcasting were alert and eager, cooperative, and it was a real joy to work with them. In fact, that's what teaching is all about, you know. If you didn't have the students, there wouldn't be any delight in teaching. I think all teachers will agree with me: to think about those students who were so cooperative and so superior is one of the great rewards, and to get letters from some of them is a real delight.

Q. I hear you haven't given up teaching. You're still teaching - a driver education review class for senior citizens?

A. Well, that's one of my projects at Richland Community College. I have three projects going at Richland and one of them is the driving, which prepares senior citizens to take their tests. You know, every three years after you're 69 you have to take a test. So I teach that. We have some excellent volunteers who teach also. Now I'm telling you true - if someone would say to me, "now you may do anything you want to for the rest of the time." I'd say, "all right, I'll give up everything else I'm doing except teaching, and I'll teach driver review morning and afternoon, Monday, Wednesday, Friday." It is so very rewarding because when they call and say, "I passed!" Then the instructor passes too, and the instructor doesn't pass unless they do. That's the bottom line!

Q. It's a real thrill.

A. And a real disappointment if they don't.

Q. Because at that time a driver's license is a passport to a fuller life, we know that.

A. We do know that.

Q. And I know they appreciate it. Well, Edith, it's been a real pleasure to share these reminiscences with you and to have you share them with us.

A. I've had fun!

Q. And we thank you very much for your memoirs of your work at Millikin, and I'm glad it isn't all memoirs because you're still continuing your dedication to teaching and to other activities and we congratulate you for that.

A. Thank you!

Q. You have been listening to Edith McNabb, Associate Professor Emeritus of Millikin University. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.

