

BIOGRAPHY. DECATUR
BAKER, MARIE G.

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Mrs. Marie G. Baker - March, 1977

- Q. Our guest today, Mrs. Marie G. Baker. Mrs. Baker, have you always lived in Decatur?
- A. Yes, I have. I was born here when my parents lived on North Union Street. Not very long after that, we moved to 1405 North Monroe. Our house was the first one built in Huron Place after it was laid out. There was a farm house already there, but ours was the first one there.
- Q. You have seen many changes there. That highway with all the traffic wasn't there then, I'm sure.
- A. No, there is a great deal of difference. There was just a road then, just a trail sort of thing with the wagons going past. It wasn't straight either and the corn fields and wheat were all around on the west and the north.
- Q. Did you feel that you were in the city or in the country?
- A. We were just on the edge of town. My father had enough space there that we had a truck garden, and we always used to have animals around. I liked it there very much.
- Q. Did you have animals there when you lived there? What kind of animals?
- A. Oh, we always had a horse and cow and dogs and cats - plenty of cats - and lots of birds and rabbits and all that. It was very much like the country. It was very pleasant there. We enjoyed it. For many years my father kept a good cinder path from what was then Pugh Street. It wasn't Grand Avenue then. He kept the path on the east side of the street which was a little higher in the 1300 block than it was where we lived and the street was so muddy. It was hard getting up there in the winter time. This path that he kept made it so that you could walk there without getting in the mud until you tried to cross the street.

Q. Did you have close neighbors?

A. There was one house across the street - it's now the third house from Waggoner - and then they moved a house in next door to that. All those are still there. There was a house built on the corner and south of us other houses later on, but there were just the three houses in the '90s.

Q. Very different from today.

A. Very different. We had such a nice yard that sloped down to the street and then when they began to make improvements our yard was cut and cut until now we have a very small yard.

Q. You're practically right on the street now.

A. Right on the street and they said that would be a through street and we were very glad. We thought that would be fine but we found out that it isn't quite as fine as we expected.

Q. No, because people can't park in front of your house.

A. No, but that has its good points. You can get in and out without someone parked in front of you all of the time.

Q. Let's go back to your childhood for a minute. Where did you go to school?

A. I went to Pugh School. There were five grades there then.

Q. Where as it?

A. It was on the southwest corner of Grand and Pugh Streets and then later on the name of the street was changed. Of course that doesn't have anything to do with the school, but I went from there to Marietta Street School. The name has since been changed to Lincoln School and a new one built. The children from Pugh all had to go over there to get the 6th and 7th grades. There was no 8th grade then. We went from there to high school.

Q. When you went to Pugh School for the first 5 grades, could you tell us something about it? Do you remember?

- A. I don't know about schools now. I don't know how much children learn. I don't know how they're taught, but I always enjoyed school and I thought our teachers were very nice and the children seemed to learn well. Some of the friends I knew then I know now.
- Q. Was there a separate grade in each room?
- A. No, not always. There were four rooms and five grades.
- Q. So two were combined. Then you went to Marietta School for the 6th and 7th grades.
- A. Yes. Then the name was changed to Lincoln School, and then the high school was on the corner of North and Broadway.
- Q. Did you go directly from the 7th grade into high school?
- A. Yes. There was no junior high school then - and we walked and didn't object. We might have objected on certain days but that was where we went to school and people didn't complain about it.
- Q. Do you have any idea how many students went to high school then?
- A. No, but I know that less than a hundred graduated each year. The schools were very different then. We thought it was great fun to stay after school to clean the blackboards and do things the teachers would leave for us to do.
- Q. Do you remember the classes you studied in high school?
- A. I liked languages and history and English. I had Latin and German - four years of Latin and two years of German.
- Q. Did you prepare yourself in high school for any special field?
- A. No, I didn't. If you were going on to college, you would prepare for that, but most of us had required subjects - I know English and a certain amount of mathematics and language was required.
- Q. Even for a person not going to college, you had to take Latin and German?

- A. Not German. I think we had to take Latin, but I liked it. I know we had translations of The Aeneid and Miss English was the instructor. She had mimeographed the papers of those who did well and we were all proud of that.
- Q. You had yours mimeographed?
- A. I did once or twice, yes. Everyone had a part and we all enjoyed it.
- Q. Do you remember any other teachers?
- A. Miss French was one.
- Q. Oh, you had Miss English and Miss French?
- A. Yes, Miss English taught the language classes and I think Miss French taught mathematics. I can remember having her for geometry. She was very good. She was strict but she was fair. All of them were very nice people and there was Mr. Beal, and English teacher. He made things very interesting. He would talk in an interesting way. I think he went from here to Taylorville to be head of the English there.
- Q. You've had some outstanding teachers?
- A. Yes; there was Miss Baer - I think she taught English.
- Q. Did you have sports in high school?
- A. Yes, because I remember how they used to go around to the rooms when there was a big game on and talk and have cheers and try to stir up interest. That was just commencing when I was going through high school.
- Q. Would you mind telling us when you graduated from high school?
- A. In 1910. I always missed the new schools. I went to Marietta just before they built on to Pugh. Then when I got through high school, the next year the new high school was ready. That was used for junior high school then.
- Q. Mrs. Baker, what did you do after high school?

- A. I stayed at home. I didn't have money to go to college. It would have been very hard on me to have tried to work and go to school. I couldn't get a job doing anything I could do - except domestic work and so I didn't do anything for quite a while.
- Q. Did you feel that there was much discrimination at that time?
- A. Yes, there was a great deal in many ways.
- Q. What was the situation? Were people thoughtless or cruel?
- A. It was just the custom of the times. They just didn't admit people to jobs except certain classes. They didn't consider whether they could do anything. About four years later I was cashier at Singleton's Restaurant and then after he sold out, I worked for a year for that person and then he went out of business.
- Q. You were among the first families to live in your neighborhood so there probably wasn't any question about your living there. Is that right?
- A. No. I was a baby when they moved there. My mother used to say we had good neighbors. All of us got along fine. My mother used to say she knew the white people didn't mind living near colored people because she was there first, and they had come as close to her as they could get and nobody made any objections. They were friendly. Mother was always very plain spoken.
- Q. But you did feel discrimination in other ways?
- A. Oh, yes - you couldn't help it. You couldn't go some places. There was a great deal of discrimination. People worked against it and made their feelings known but it still was very evident. The Negroes lived all over town but later on housing became more discriminated. It was a long struggle. Things are so much better now. People are able to live where they can buy houses.

Q. In school did you feel it?

A. I think we felt it everywhere.

Q. What about church? Did you go to church?

A. Oh yes, we always went to church. We belonged to the A.M.E. (African Methodist Church), but that was so far from where we lived that we went to the College Street Chapel that was built and carried on by the First Presbyterian Church. They had Sunday School in the afternoon. We went there for a great many years and the Wright sisters who lived on the corner of College and Grand were instructors there and Mrs. Richardson who lived on West Main Street at that time, and the family that lived in the 1300 block of North Edward Street were active. I can't think of their name now. They came from out East. They were active in that church. We enjoyed it very much. My brother and I attended that Sunday School.

Q. Was it a church for all races?

A. Yes. It was operated by the First Presbyterian Church.

Q. So there was good relationship?

A. Yes. The First Presbyterian Church has always been good in that respect. There was less discrimination.

Q. What about the NAACP? When did that come to Decatur?

A. In May of 1915. Two young women came to Decatur. We heard this meeting was going to be held. Everybody was invited to come, so we went and they explained to us what it was for, and about the association. They were field secretaries working out of New York City. The office was there. It had been organized in 1909. So then about two weeks later they had another meeting at which the Decatur branch was organized and that was on May 11, 1915. There had been a riot in Springfield the summer before and there was a great deal of trouble and hardship at that time. Then a man named William English Walling

wrote an article published in the New Republic. He wondered in this article if there were still any people like the Abolitionists during the century before who could come to the help of the people who were mistreated so badly. And this Mary White Ollington, who was a social worker and a member of a very prominent New York family answered him and when they were both back in New York in the fall they got together and they called in others and it went from that.

Q. And that was the beginning of the organization?

A. That was the beginning. The Niagara movement was already in being and some of those people came in. They closed their organization. And various others came in - all races and creeds and they formed the organization at that time. The man at the head of it was a man from Boston named Myrfield Storey, an abolitionist and a member of a prominent Boston family and the president in Decatur was the Rev. E. M. Antrim, who was pastor of the First Methodist Church here.

Q. Do you know some of the other officers? Were you ever an officer?

A. Yes. I wasn't elected secretary at the first meeting but I was one of the charter members. I joined at that time and my father and mother joined at the next meeting. The secretary was a Mrs. Buster who was the wife of Dr. Buster. The organization was integrated and Mrs. Eugenia Bacon, a prominent social worker here, head of the Women's Club and very active in club work and social work (was a member) and A. H. Mills, an attorney, and I can't think of the others.

Q. You had some very important people.

A. We had some of the best people in town as officers in the organization, both white and colored.

Q. Mrs. Baker, I believe you had a brother. Was he older or younger than you?

A. He was five years older than I. We were both born in Decatur and went

through the schools here. Just before Millikin University opened, there was a scholarship award offered to one student out of each school who had the highest grades for that year. It was for what was then an academy for the university. My brother was in Marietta Street School at that time and he won the award for a 4-year scholarship to Millikin and my teacher said if they had been offering a scholarship for the lower grades that I would have won from Pugh School.

Q. Well, that speaks very well for both of you and also it shows that there wasn't discrimination in some areas.

A. Yes, all the teachers we had we felt were very good and very fair.

Q. And did your brother go on?

A. Yes, he went through the academy and graduated from Millikin. Later on he wanted to become a physician and he went away two years to medical school.

Q. Where did he go?

A. He went to Howard University in Washington D.C. for the first year and the second year to a school in Chicago. I believe it was a Physician's and Surgeon's College. We had to pay for it. He didn't have a scholarship. Then my father got sick and my brother, although he worked and helped, couldn't go on. He didn't get to finish.

Q. What a shame!

A. He went into the Railway Postal Service and he was the first Negro man to work on the Pennsylvania line from Chicago to Pittsburgh. He did that work around 40 years. He was a clerk in charge - at least he was offered the position but he felt the others weren't ready for him to take charge of them.

Q. So there was some discrimination.

A. Yes, there was discrimination. He got along with them but there are some things people just won't do even if they do say they like you. Finally he became clerk in charge, but his wife became ill and he retired and that was the end of that part of his life.

Q. Mrs. Baker, to return to the NAACP. You said you had been secretary. How long did you continue in that position?

A. Well, I just said Mrs. Buster was the first secretary. They moved away from town and she had to give up her position. There was a man named Edward Jacobs who was assistant secretary, and he became secretary and I was elected his assistant. He was a person who was always trying to push young people. He had done a great deal of civic work here in Decatur and so he was trying to boost me by giving a good deal of work over to me. At the election that fall, I was elected secretary and he was made assistant. One of the older members aid, "I think the person who does the work should have the title - we'll make her secretary." I held that job for 59 years. When the National office received word that I was retiring, they said they were sorry. Later a letter came inviting me to attend a dinner of the national officers in January, 1975. I went to New York City and had a wonderful time.

Q. That was a wonderful honor!

A. Yes. Mr. Jacobs and I had attended most of the national meetings for a number of years. We paid our own expenses generally because the branch didn't have money to spent that way. The NAACP has worked hard on employment and housing and different things all through the years and conditions have been much improved. We also had help from various people who were in positions of influence. There was Warren Hardy first, who came here from the East Vermont or New Hampshire, where they were more liberal - and he helped

us (as editor). He took Sam Tucker as his protege. He was a very fine person and he gave us help. And Howard Shaw, who was editor of the Review. People who lived here couldn't help seeing a difference in the attitudes the papers took from what they had been before the association came to town and the way they printed the news later. A great deal of the change is due to the influence we were able to exert and then when there was a matter of discrimination, we would go to the State's Attorney. Wherever we were covered by the law he would help us. He would send a letter to the person making the discrimination telling them to stop or he would do something of benefit to us and we appreciated that very much.

When the lake was built and had a swimming beach, that became a point of contention. It was for everybody, but they always seemed to find some excuse why we couldn't go in to swim. Time after time we had to try to do something to iron out difficulties and finally two of our members - Dr. Ellis, a very fine person and respected as a physician and civic worker, and C. L. Livingston, who was another fine person, went down there to swim. They were refused, and they filed an injunction against the beach. It was granted but they put it off.

- Q. Do you remember when this was? Was it before the National Civic Rights Law?
- A. That was 1964. Yes, it was before that. The injunction was granted, but it was the end of the season so it didn't make any difference. By the next spring a group of boys wanted to swim. They didn't want to have any trouble at the city beach, so they went to a place that was restricted and one of them drowned. So the next day one of our members on her own accord took a group of children and went to the beach. Everybody was passed through. There was no objection. They knew if they brought a suit then that they would be able to do something.

Q. But how sad that a boy had to lose his life!

A. And he had been in the service and had come home shortly after World War II. So after that they began talking about swimming pools. That ended the confusion. The beach was getting so muddy and all the people didn't want to swim anyway. We went into several suits and tried to end discrimination in eating places, too. We have changed that. You can go anywhere now. In some places they didn't even know it. It seems so foolish to think they didn't know that the law had been passed. When you go into business you should look into restrictions.

Q. Did the change in eating places here come before the national law or did they wait until it was national law?

A. No, the situation began to change before then. I don't remember. These things come and unless you look back you don't remember the dates for it but people would go and be refused and then go to the states' attorney and ask them to inform them. And we had a lawyer too - John Reagon - who did much of the work. And then about the police. We worked in every field where we had any chance. We wrote letters to the newspapers and they printed them.

Q. Mrs. Baker, do you think things are better in Decatur today?

A. Yes, I do. I think - take the housing field. First, we were scattered all over town. Then we began to lose those locations. A person might want to sell and they couldn't get their price for the place and it would go out of the hands of one race and someone else would get it and we weren't able to buy back in there but today no matter what the race a person can buy if they have the money to buy and that is much better because now we're getting to live in various parts of town and there isn't any objection made, whereas a few years ago there would have been quite a bit of objections because I know incidents that have happened in some of the places where our people tried to buy.

Q. Well, it's very encouraging to think that after all these years there have been some improvements made.

A. Yes. Sometimes people say we don't keep up the property. Well sometimes they don't. We agree with that.

Q. But other people don't keep up their property either!

A. Sometimes they don't keep it up very well for a while, but I think it's because they don't have the money. They can't make their payments and improve the property too. Some of the places are in much better condition than it was a year or so ago.

Q. That is encouraging... Thank you very much for giving us your views and telling us your long experience. We really appreciate this. You have been listening to Mrs. Marie G. Baker telling about her experiences in Decatur.