

Myers, Mrs. O. L.

Interview by
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for the
Decatur Public Library

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PUBLIC LIBRARYMrs. O. L. Myers Interview

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This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. O. L. Myers.

Q. Mrs. Myers, what was your maiden name?

A. Ofel - O-F-E-L Etchison.

Q. That's a rather different name.

A. Yes, it's a different one. I was named for the daughter of a Presbyterian minister.

Q. I thought some people might know you by your maiden name as well as by your married name.

A. I'm sure they would.

Q. You're a native of Decatur?

A. I'm a native of Decatur. I was born at 1119 E. Herkimer. If that doesn't sound familiar to you, it's now E. Grand. At that time the West end was called "Pugh Street" and the east end "Herkimer."

Q. After they changed the street? - Well, where did you go to school?

A. I went to the Pugh Street School. It started as the "Pugh Street School" because it was on Pugh Street, but after they changed to Grand Avenue, they dropped the word "Street" and it was merely "Pugh School."

Q. Is that still standing?

A. It's no longer standing. It was on the corner of Grand and Monroe. When I was in the fifth grade, I transferred to Oakland School, on the corner of Oakland and Decatur. It's no longer standing. The Hartford House is there now. From then, I went to old Central Junior High for my eighth grade and then to Stephen Decatur High School, but it was only Decatur High School then. My first semester at Decatur High School, they had two sessions a day, and I went from 12:30 P.M. to 5:00.

Q. Was that because of the large enrollment?

A. Yes, they were so crowded. That's the only way they could take care of as many students as they had. I was in the last class to spend a full four years. After that, they went to the junior highs for the freshman year.

Q. Now the old Stephen Decatur High School - for the sake of people who might have moved here very recently - was where the Civic Center is now?

A. Yes, that's right. All the schools I attended are torn down. There is none remaining.

Q. You've outlived the schools! Well, let's go back a bit to some of the memories you have as a child. You were telling me some of the experiences you had when you were growing up. The first one, I think, involved your father?

A. Yes, I think I remembered it, because of course I didn't because I was just an infant. The Polish people had a picnic every year. They had a shooting match along with it. We lived in the third house off the corner on Leafland, and my father came out the back way to go to the grocery store. The young man on the corner at the back was practicing for the shoot. He shot at the target and missed and hit my father in the neck. At that time - it was right on the jugular vein- they were afraid that they couldn't get it out. That bullet remained in his neck until he passed away at the age of 71. It didn't seem to bother him, though.

Q. What a terrible experience, both for your father and the young man! It was such a dangerous thing for him to be doing.

A. Yes, I've wondered what it did to the young man. I'm sure that it shook him up quite a lot.

Q. Yes, and how fortunate that it wasn't a fatal accident!

A. Yes - just a tiny bit more, and it would have severed the jugular vein and at that time they didn't have the techniques they have now to have repaired it and saved his life.

Q. Was your father preparing to go to the picnic?

A. No, I don't think so.

Q. He was just an unwilling participant.

A. He was on his way to the grocery store. You know, back then, you had to go to the grocery store almost every day. We didn't have ice boxes or ways of keeping milk or food from spoiling. So you had to go to the grocery store every day.

Q. And these were neighborhood grocery stores?

A. Yes.

Q. I believe you did tell me, however, of a special store that came in? Later?

A. The Great Eastern Tea and Coffee Company came in on North Water Street, I believe in about the 300 block. Up to that time our grocery stores weren't so very big and they were lighted - well enough for that time but nothing like the neon lights today. I remember when this store came in, looking back, it seems to me as well lighted as the neon lighted stores today. It was so roomy. The aisles were so wide. And the best part about it was that when you ordered your peanut butter, they made the peanut butter right there in front of your eyes. They had no additives - nothing but peanuts, nothing else.

Q. It must have smelled good too!

A. It really was mouth-watering, just to smell it.

- Q. Let's go back to some of the other experiences that you remember as a child.
- A. I can remember the Corn Carnivals they had. They used to hold them on the corner of North Street and North Main Street - the northeast corner. I can remember at this particular time they were getting ready to pave North Main with wooden blocks. They had them piled up in front of the Review building. I sat on the pile of blocks and watched the trapeze artists. I was scared to death. I really didn't watch because I was too scared. I shut my eyes!
- Q. What was the Corn Carnival? Why "corn"?
- A. I don't know. I've often wondered since why they called it a "Corn Carnival", but they did. It was in the fall, about the time the corn was beginning to ripen. Other than that, I really don't know. I've often wondered just why they called it that.
- Q. I believe you mentioned the circus, too - now that we're talking about carnivals.
- A. Yes - right where I live now is where the circuses used to come.
- Q. We haven't mentioned where you do live.
- A. I live on the 200 block on Pierson Avenue. At that time the street cars brought you out to the railroad tracks on North Broadway - about a block south of Garfield on Broadway. Then you had to get off and walk the rest of the way. I believe the grounds started about where South Drive is now.
- Q. That's in the area known as "The Elms?"
- A. That's in the Elms. They had summer street cars - open street cars - they used for special occasions.
- Q. I imagine some people might not know what you mean by "summer street cars" -
- A. Yes. First of all, the seats were wicker so air could get through, and the seats went from one side to the other. There was no center aisle.

Those that were sitting in the center had to stay there, until the car was emptied. I think that's why they just used them for special occasions.

Q. But they were open at the sides?

A. Yes, from top to bottom on both sides.

Q. So there was a chance for air to get through?

A. Yes - and rain too, if it was raining. But as I said, they were used only for special occasions. Another time they were used was for the "Poor Man's Picnic" at Fairview Park. They picked up the children from all over town. You would go out there and they would give you so many tickets. I believe they gave us ten apiece - I'm not sure. You spent your tickets for whatever you wanted - an ice cream cone, and so on.

Q. Did someone sponsor this event?

A. Yes, and I don't know who it was. You look back on things and wonder why you didn't take time to find out more about them.

Q. But you enjoyed them very much?

A. I enjoyed them very much.

Q. When these circuses came, were they just traveling circuses?

A. Yes, they were. And one of the highlights was the parade, which we don't have any more. We always looked forward to the parade.

Q. You could go to the parade even if you couldn't afford to go to the show itself?

A. Everyone could go to the parade. We didn't get to go to the performance very often because we didn't have the money. But the parade was free and a lot of fun, and the clowns always did a lot of antics along the way to entertain the youngsters.

Q. And the animals?

A. Oh, yes, they always had them. Of course, animals like the lions were always in cages, but the elephants were always walking along and the women all dressed up were riding along.

Q. What are some other memories you have of your childhood?

A. We moved from Gulick Avenue to the caretaker's cottage behind the James Millikin Homestead. We got to rent it in return for my father keeping the furnace going.

Q. Was it the carriage house?

A. No, the house is torn down. It was just to the north of the carriage house. This was when the city was quarantined for flu in 1918. We had to get a special permit to move. They had already had some wonderful paintings in the downstairs rooms of the Millikin Homestead, but they started to make a Red Cross headquarters there during this time.

When I first went to the homestead, all of the books were in the library, but they weren't there very long. They dumped them on the third floor - in the attic. I often wonder if the books they have in the library now are the same ones. They could be, but I doubt it.

Q. Was your father serving as caretaker?

A. They just wanted to have the furnace going. As I said, the city was quarantined when we moved there, but shortly after that, the flu got so bad that they turned it into a Red Cross hospital. My brother was the first to come down with the flu. He almost died. Then my youngest brother and I got it. We really weren't sick enough to stay in bed, but they made us stay there three days. Then my mother got it, and she was so bad she almost died. They had to take her over to the hospital.

Then my father got down with it, and on Christmas day, my father was down, but my two brothers and I were up. I'll never forget it. They tried to get help for us, but they couldn't so on Christmas Day my father told me what to get. We had some stew meat and he told me how to fix it. I was only eleven years old so I really wasn't that well trained. He

told me how to make a big pot of stew so that was our dinner that Christmas day. My mother was there quite a bit. She was in the back room, and we could go outside and wave at her, when she got better and could partly sit up.

- Q. When you said that the city was quarantined, what did you mean? Do you mean that people couldn't come and go?
- A. No children were allowed on the street for any reason whatever. There were no schools and no public gatherings.
- Q. How long did this quarantine last? This was 1918?
- A. Yes - 1918. I don't remember. I would say maybe a couple of months, but I might be wrong. It probably wasn't that long. They broke it when peace was signed on the 11th of November. Maybe it was two months - I don't know.
- Q. But the quarantine mainly affected the children?
- A. Mostly the children - and any kind of public gathering.
- Q. Of course, no school?
- A. No public gathering of any kind. I suppose that meant shows - I don't know.
- Q. Of course, today we have so many anti-biotics and medicines to deal with epidemics of that kind. We forget how dreadful the flu epidemic of that period was.
- A. Yes, we do. It was quite frightening because they didn't have the knowledge we have now. I know we were very worried about my mother.
- Q. She did recover?
- A. She did recover, but there were a lot of people who didn't make it.
- Q. Do you have any other memories of that time?

- A. When I went to Pugh School, the first grade always wound the May pole in May and the photographer was coming out to take our picture the morning of the day we wound it and so the teacher told us to wear our white dresses. So I went home and told my mother I was supposed to wear my white dress, and you know how it is with the quotation, "Everybody's doing it" when really it was just one or two. Mother thought that I was just wanting to wear a white dress and that was just my alibi. So she wouldn't let me wear a white dress.
- Q. Were you the only one who didn't have one?
- A. There were three of us, thank goodness!
- Q. And your mother probably felt bad afterwards?
- A. She really did.
- Q. Was this a May Day festival - where you wound the Maypole?
- A. Yes.
- Q. And you had it every year?
- A. Every year.
- Q. Just your school? Or did several schools?
- S. As far as I know other schools may have had it. I don't remember. Another thing I can remember is a cyclone - I believe it was 1912 - hit Decatur. Our house was damaged - not a great lot. We had a long back porch. Three sides were partially covered, and my mother used to put a sort of curtain of rag carpeting over the open end. There was nothing modern about our house, and we used to take our baths out there, behind that curtain in the old number 3 tub!
- Q. Only during the summer, I imagine!

- A. Only in the summer. The porch was completely damaged during the cyclone, and they never rebuilt it the same way. They just put a small porch on. We moved out while they rebuilt it. I think we were gone three months. We rented.
- Q. Were there other houses damaged in that area?
- A. I don't remember too much about that. Isn't it funny? I guess it was just because it happened to our house that I remember, but I don't believe there was much of anything damaged.
- Q. Well, you weren't very old!
- A. I was five years old - maybe not quite five.
- Q. But you don't remember the storm itself?
- A. No, but when I was little any kind of storm used to scare me because we had neighbors - a woman and her daughter. The daughter was slightly retarded and whenever it looked like a storm of any kind they hiked out to someone's house. It seemed to me there were an awful lot of storms in those days because they were always at someone's house! The child was so scared that the mother would take her where she would feel better.
- Q. Well, have we come to the end of your list? Experiences you remember as you were growing up?
- A. I think that's it.
- Q. Before you were married, did you work?
- A. The summer I was 16, a friend got me a job with the Leader Iron Works in the advertising department. I worked three months. I thought they knew that I was just there for the summer months, but evidently my friend had told them I would be permanent. So they wanted me to stay and not go back to school, but I said, "No - I wanted my diploma." So I went back to school. They didn't seem to like it too well, and I sure hated it, but I supposed my friend had told them. He was a foreman there - one of my mother's and father's very good friends.

So I went back to school and graduated when I was just 17. Then I went back to the Leader.

Q. They liked your work well enough to take you back?

A. Yes. That was 1924 when I graduated, and I went back to work. Then in March, 1926, I was married. I worked then until August of 1929, when I quit work. After about five weeks they called me up. I had been their bookkeeper by that time. They said the books were all out of balance. The auditors were there and they couldn't seem to get a trial balance. They wondered if I could come and try to find the mistake. So I went in, and it didn't take me long to find the mistake - I knew where it might be.

Q. You suspected?

A. Yes. Well, I worked, and they weren't getting anyone to take my place so finally I said it was time for them to get someone.

Q. Did you have a family?

A. Nine months later I did! My son was born the 16th of July. He's 51 years old today.

Q. Where is he now?

A. In Evansville, Indiana - So that was it. I never worked anymore.

Q. What was your husband's business?

A. He was a car man for the Wabash. He was director for the Wabash Credit Union. In 1961 they offered him the job. He had been credit manager for quite a few years, but he didn't get any pay for it. He did it on his own - after or before work since he was working on the 3 to 11 shift. They wanted him to work full time so he took a leave of absence from the Wabash, which later became the N and W.

- Q. The credit union was not connected with the railroad?
- A. No - it's rather odd. It wasn't connected and yet in a way it was.
- Q. Was it mostly railroad workers?
- A. It was all railroad workers.
- Q. But it was independent of the management?
- A. That's right. But he took the job. The people at Wabash asked him to take the job because they were having so many garnisheements. They said after he had taken over they had become less. They thought if he took a full-time job that they wouldn't have so much trouble - and they didn't have any at all after he took over full time.
- Q. Well, you and your husband must have been experts at straightening out financial affairs!
- A. Yes, the bad thing about it was - he would turn over in his grave if he knew - that because he did that I don't get the \$2000 nor the pension.
- Q. That is too bad!
- A. That's OK. I do get social security so I'm OK. But I would get a little more if he hadn't gone full time to the Credit Union. But I have no complaints except that he was so proud. He thought he had me all straightened out. No one had told him.
- Q. There are so many problems that occur after retirement.
- A. Yes, you just don't know.
- Q. Do you notice any other changes in Decatur during your lifetime here?
- A. It seems to me the biggest change is the speed. Everything is so fast. For a while I was afraid to go out on the streets to drive. I didn't mind the highways. But when my husband became sick, I had to drive, and it doesn't bother me at all anymore.
- Q. You're adjusting to it?

A. I'm adjusting to it. I think that when we were growing up, we had very little since we were poor, but we didn't complain. Now people have so much and think they don't have anything.

Q. It's relative, isn't it?

A. I know I cherish all the things we did as we were growing up. Every Friday night we cracked walnuts.

Q. Together as a family?

A. Yes - and every Sunday night we had popcorn.

Q. So you had treats in the family?

A. Yes. Then my mother had a Bible book. I wish I could find it. I've tried for years to find one like it. She would read stories from there and from the Bible. Then she would ask us questions about it. I remember all of those. We were together. Seems as if it was the right way to do; I don't know.

Q. You think families were closer then?

A. There are still families that are close today, but the majority of them aren't.

Q. Too many outside distractions?

A. Yes. There's golfing and tennis and ball games. If they're not out playing them, they are watching them on TV. What bothers me in the TV shows is all the fighting and violence. I'm square!

Q. Do you have any grand children?

A. I have five grand children. One of them is married - married last October. She lives in Memphis. I have a grand-daughter, a senior at Indiana U. She's in summer school. Her brother is a junior at Indiana U. They are both there right now. They both have jobs and decided to hold

them rather than going to Evansville for the summer. Each of them is in summer school, too.

Q. None of your grandchildren live in Decatur?

A. No, but I have a sister who lives in Decatur.

Q. So you can get together and remember old times?

A. Yes. I had three brothers, but they are all gone. There is just me and my sister.

Q. Well, we certainly thank you for sharing your experiences with us, Mrs. Myers. It really gives a very interesting light on some of the history of Decatur. We thank you very much!

A. I hope it's helped a little bit.

Q. We're so glad we have a record of it now. Thank you very much.

You have been listening to the experiences of Mrs. O. L. Myers. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.

