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Oral history for Mrs. Eloise Clark at the Orlando Hotel
Decatur, June 23, 1987 and July 10, 1987. LOCAL HISTORY

This is Betty Turnell with oral history sponsored by the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. Eloise Clark, who lives at the Orlando Hotel in Decatur, Illinois. We are recording on June 23, 1987, at Mrs. Clark's apartment in the Orlando Hotel. It's a very warm day. You probably can hear the fan going, but we appreciate that convenience very much.

Q. Welcome to our series, Mrs. Clark!

A. Thank you very much.

Q. You're living in a very interesting location in downtown Decatur in what was formerly a first-class hotel. When was the Orlando converted from hotel to apartments?

A. Yes, the hotel was made into apartments and was completed in 1982 for residents of Decatur and other areas; not just primarily Decatur residents live here. They come from all over the state.

Q. It's a resident apartment hotel?

A. Yes, for older people. I was going to say it's entirely for older people. It is also for those people who can take care of themselves but maybe are on crutches or maybe in a wheelchair. We have that type regardless of age, but you must be able to care for yourself if you live here.

Q. Can you describe the old building, and compare it to what it is now?

A. Yes. My research really brought back a lot of memories. In my earlier years I was always hearing stories about the Orlando Hotel. History did prove that this was the nicest hotel built south of Chicago. It served a great purpose because the trains brought people through here before cars were available. A hotel room was necessary for many people who passed through. Some would even make this their home. Some salesmen came through and showed their wares in some of the rooms, which were designated for salesmen. It was a very much used house for these people.

Q. I suppose it was very grand in the lobby and elsewhere?

A. It was very grand in the lobby. I must say that the renovators tried to keep the lobby looking as much as possible like the old hotel. It has, however, lost some of its glamour. Our main office happens to be where the old registration desk was. There's an interesting story about

this. It was a long, curved desk topped by marble. The Ballog collection in town has that piece of marble that was the top of that desk.

The rest of the lobby was made for sitting, reading, lounging, or waiting for people. At that time there was a south entrance as well as a Water Street entrance. This had a little portico with a little street that jutted in from the main street. There was always a liveried door man dressed in maroon and gold. I remember such a man. I don't know who he was, but he would always escort the people in from their conveyances and into the lobby. Everything was done on a grand scale.

Q. It sounds really exciting. You don't have door men here today, do you?

A. No, no!

Q. What services do you have?

A. For the residents these rooms are our homes. There are probably half a dozen different lay-outs of apartments. When the renovators decided to take it over, they took out every wall--everything--and re-designed it into apartments. We have a few two-bedroom apartments for a man and wife, but most of the apartments are for single people, and most of the residents are women.

Q. Do you have kitchens in each apartment?

A. There are kitchens, yes, nice kitchens.

Q. Is there a dining room for the residents?

A. No. I think it's interesting to think about the ballroom. The ballroom was on the second floor. The elevators opened directly onto the ballroom. The room held many hundred people. They served banquets there. We have an interesting tale from one of the residents here--his name is Percy Anderson. He started as a boy in the kitchen chipping ice. They used a lot of ice sculpture for centerpiece decorations. This boy started by helping around and doing errands. He worked his entire life in the Orlando and finally became the head waiter. He has a tale he tells. Frankly, I'm never sure whether or not he is kidding me! He says he has carried twenty meals from the kitchen, which was back of the lobby, clear up to the front of the lobby and up the winding stairs--just on his arms! I still don't know if he is telling me the truth. I said, "How did you do that?" He said, "By piling ten plates on each arm". That would be two

stacks of five each on each arm. I don't know if that is a true story. That sounds impossible.

Anyway, there have been many, many banquets and elegant affairs there--dances with big name dance bands who came along. A lot of people have exciting memories of this place.

Q. It really is an exciting story. And you enjoy living in this environment?

A. I enjoy it very much because as a child growing up if anybody ever spoke about the Orlando, it sounded like a glamorous place. It was the place to go. Of course, it was a very busy hotel. Many, many of the "greats" would come here, and a lot of history was made in this building.

Q. We certainly want to hear about that, but I think before we go on with the history of the hotel, we'd like to hear a little bit about your personal history. Where were you born?

A. I was born in a little town southeast of here--Bement, Illinois. You see, I was close enough to Decatur to hear these stories. I lived in the Bement area until I was married. Then we lived in Monticello for several years.

Q. Can you tell us something about your family?

A. My one grandfather came from Denmark, and his wife came from Ireland. My other grandparents had no special background; however, I had two aunts who were missionaries in Africa. One lived there all her life. She buried her husband and two children over there.

Q. What kind of childhood did you have in Bement?

A. My father was a farmer. I was born in the town of Bement, but we moved soon to the farm. So it was the farm that I remember; however, my grandfather was one of the fathers of Bement. It seemed as if any special meeting would end in his living room. He was quite a leader.

Q. Was that your grandfather on your father's side?

A. Yes.

Q. What was his name?

A. It was Bowyer. We're different from the other Boyers. We have a "w" in our name.

My father was one of seven children, and he was the only boy.

My schooling was in Bement. I never had an opportunity to go to the university because I was a depression child; however, I think my experiences later on have helped me a great deal, especially the people I've been associated with. I have been a university secretary most of my working years.

Q. Could you tell us about your job?

A. In Decatur I wanted to see if Millikin University would be interested in a person like me. I started there. I worked in admissions office for several years. I decided I was tired of working there so I quit. In a week I was sorry because I really missed everything over there. I heard that Dr. McKay was going to need a secretary, and I wrote to him in Canada, where he was taking his vacation. He came home shortly, and I was offered that job.

Q. What department was he in?

A. He was the president of Millikin. I worked there a number of years.

Q. That must have been a very interesting position.

A. It was. I thoroughly enjoyed it. He was such an excellent leader.

Q. It was quite a feather in your cap that you could write a letter that would get a position like that for you...then you were married?

A. Yes. I was married in 1936. My husband had a heart attack while I was working at Millikin. We started gradually thinking we should go to California on account of his health. That was what we finally did. We moved to California, and his health seemed pretty good out there. Then we became homesick for our families and moved back. Then he had another heart attack in 1970, and that was the final one.

Q. That's too bad...now you still aren't in the Orlando. We'll have to find out how you got here.

A. I didn't really know what I wanted to do after my husband's death. I roamed about, trying this and that. Then it was pointed out to me that I might be interested in the Oxford House, that it might fit my needs just fine. I made an application and sure enough, I was accepted. I lived there for four years.

The Oxford House is one of the lovelier of the elder care homes in the city. It was only because of the weather and ice storms that I moved.

Q. And the location?

A. Yes. The location can't be overlooked. It was far out. I decided that if anything ever showed up close to downtown, I would be the first one at the door. That is what happened when they advertised the Orlando Apartments.

Q. That is how you happened to be one of the early residents?

A. I was one of the early residents. I moved in during the first month.

Q. Then it is very fitting that you should be interested in the history.

A. Yes. It fit into my scheme of things. I had always heard such lovely stories about the Orlando.

Q. How did you happen to start this project of investigating and writing the Orlando history?

A. With my former knowledge of the Orlando and my experience of having moved into the place, I saw so many things about it that I thought other residents would really appreciate knowing about.

I talked to the manager of the hotel and presented the idea. I said, "I feel like I'd like to write something about it."

She said, "Go ahead."

I said, "Do you want the long version or the short version?"

She said, "The long version."

I think my main purpose was to tie this all together and to give the reader a real picture of what had gone on formerly when this was a brand new building--a beautifully decorated building which served so many hundreds of people and a lot of real dignitaries. So the germ of the idea came, and I expanded on it. People gave me stories to research. I was searching and searching. It was a big effort. I'm an amateur at writing. I don't profess to be anything more than that, but it seemed to get down on paper in pretty good shape, I guess.

Q. Because you had so much material and information?

A. I had more material than I ever needed! Sometimes I just had to condense or leave out certain things along the way.

Q. That certainly fits in with our purpose in oral history--to do exactly what you are doing--to recreate the past and make sure that people don't forget and that they know about it.

Let's begin with what you found out about the hotel.

A. There is a man who lives here now. His name is Cody Holmes, and he was someone who has always been around here--I don't know when he took up residence here. As a boy he was even delivering groceries to the upper story of the Powers Opera House, which was in the same location at the time. So he knew the building.

There were two fires in the Opera House, and later Mr. Powers decided it would become a hotel.

Mr. Holmes had a wealth of information. I spent probably an hour or two gathering up all he was remembering about the hotel. He was so much help!

Mr. Shade, next door, knew a lot, too. That office has been there for many years.

I questioned whomever I could get. I was sent from one to the other. When I said I was doing the project for the Hotel Orlando, many doors were opened.

(The first part of this recording was made on June 23, 1987. It is being completed on July 10, 1987.)

Q. Mrs. Clark, will you tell us the story of the Powers Opera House? But first, who was the Powers family?

A. The original Powers brothers were Orlando and Sam. They were both very wealthy people. They thought Decatur was just an ideal spot for their needs at that time.

Orlando had a son whose name was Charles. He also was wealthy; in fact, the family was probably the wealthiest in this part of the state.

Now, to complete the lineage, the son of Charles was Jack, whom we will talk about later.

Q. And they all had business interests here in the Opera House and later the hotel?

A. Yes, as well as other interests besides these, such as milling work and grist work.

Q. It was a great asset for Decatur when they decided to move here from Alabama!

A. Yes, absolutely!

Q. Why did they decide to build an opera house? That seems a rather strange building for a prairie town like this, doesn't it?

A. Yes. That was a little strange for me, too, but we forget that we didn't have places to go as they did in New York or Chicago--musical places.

There was, however, a great interest in music, and sometimes when traveling groups came through, they would perform on a lawn, I believe it was Sam's home, and people would come to listen to them.

Q. So the opera house satisfied a need in the community?

A. Yes, it did satisfy a need, particularly for those of Orlando Powers' generation, because they were so oriented to music.

So they did build an opera house on this corner, and many traveling groups performed here.

It might be interesting to note here that Cody Holmes, who is now living in the building (I believe he is 95 years old now) carried groceries to the third floor of the opera house at one time.

He also performed in a couple of theatrical performances when he was a youth.

Q. That must have been a thrill for him!

A. Yes, it was.

Q. You mentioned some fires that destroyed the opera house.

A. In those days all the buildings were made of wood, very susceptible to fires. If you had a fire, it usually destroyed the whole building.

Number one Opera House burned. It was rebuilt, and then number two Opera House burned.

Q. What a sad event! They didn't rebuild a second time?

A. No. I guess the age of the traveling musicians was coming to a close, and maybe other facilities in the county had been built.

But they thought a hotel would be the ideal solution for a building on this lot.

Q. So they decided to build a hotel instead of rebuilding the opera house? Who decided to do this?

A. It's interesting that Charles Powers, as he was observing the second fire, pulled out a blank envelope from his pocket and began making plans for the hotel to be located on this area.

Q. So he planned it during the fire which destroyed the opera house? He decided to name it?

A. First, I'd like to say this: He said there would be a hotel built here in 365 days. On the 365th day, there was a gorgeous opening ball held here. So he did keep his schedule.

Q. A man of his word! That really is an exciting story.

A. Yes, it's rather nice, isn't it?

Q. You told us of the success of the plans he made. Can you describe the dedication at the opening of the new hotel?

A. As I recall, it was a grand affair. Ladies in those days wore elegant dresses and jewels. It must have been the biggest celebration of its kind in this part of the country.

Q. So the hotel is now open for business. There were some very distinguished guests who stayed here in its heyday, weren't there?

A. Yes, there were. We have a record of William Springer, the state representative; John Foster Dulles was also a guest. There was a large reception for him and an address on foreign policy, I'm told. John F. Kennedy, then a senator from Massachusetts, stayed here. It is said he refused to be pinned down regarding his presidential aspirations! Other names we know are Clark Gable, Ezio Penza, Guy Lombardo, Charles Percy and many others.

Q. Those are very exciting names. It's fun to know those people were staying right in this very building.

Of course, there had to be changes in the management. I understand that in 1946 Mr. Jack Powers, the son of Charles G. Powers, returned to Decatur to take over the affair.

- A. He handled all the estate of the Powers family, but that included the Orlando, which was a big part of the estate.

Jack, the son of Charles and the grandson of Orlando, had experience with hotels all his life, having served as manager of the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago just before he returned to the Orlando. He revamped a few rooms to make a private suite for his wife and himself. He was on hand at all times as manager.

- Q. I'm sure his grandfather would have been very pleased to know that his family was carrying on the tradition. We haven't actually said why the hotel was named as it was, but of course we can guess.

- A. Charles, who planned it and built it, named it for his father, Orlando. There were plaques on the front of the hotel at the time which stated this. I imagine the Powers family has them now.

- Q. So that brings us to the time that the hotel rooms were converted into apartments. You have told us that events change and needs of people change and methods of transportation change. All of these combine to make a hotel like this a little less necessary, and as you have told us, these rooms were converted into apartments.

That brings us up to date in our story.

Do you have anything else you would like to add?

- A. I think this has been fairly comprehensive. I have no more pertinent additions.

- Q. You have made a real contribution to Decatur by reviewing the history of one of its outstanding landmarks. Thank you very much for helping us to understand this part of Decatur's past. We hope the Orlando will continue to be a pleasant place for its residents to live.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mrs. Eloise Clark, who has been telling us of her project in compiling a history of the Orlando Hotel.

This is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library.