

ORAL HISTORY

Mrs. Mayme Foster

May 8, 1987

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LOCAL HISTORY

Q. This is Betty Turnell speaking for the First United Methodist Church and the Decatur Public Library. Our guest today is Mrs. Mayme Foster, who lives at 3945 Newcastle Street in Decatur with her son and daughter-in-law, Jean and Sybil Foster. We are recording at the Foster home on May 8, 1987.

Mrs. Foster, I understand that you will soon be celebrating an important birthday. Which one will that be?

A. It will be the second of June - 103.

Q. Oh, that is wonderful! That's very exciting. There are not many people who celebrate that kind of birthday. It's a really important event. It's fine to know that you have lived that long. Where were you born?

A. In Lincoln, Illinois - Logan County, about 30 miles from here.

Q. Who were your mother and father?

A. My mother was Mary Fishel. My father was William Kaericher. I'll bet you can't spell it!

Q. I'm glad I don't have to! Any brothers or sisters?

A. One brother.

Q. Just one brother! So you had a nice family - a boy and a girl. Can you describe your early childhood?

A. How or why?

Q. Oh, we know why! But how different was your childhood?

A. I was just raised like any other little child in the home. My brother was quite a few years older than I was, and I was pretty badly spoiled.

Q. They loved having a little girl!

A. I was well protected and cared for. We were like a great many others - very poor people at that time. That was the beginning of my life, and it has always seemed like a good life to me.

Q. Great! Let's talk about your house you lived in. Did you have an indoor bathroom?

A. No, we had to go outside for that. And then, my father was a blacksmith, and he worked in a mine. When I was born, we lived in Lincoln, and he worked not as a miner, but as a blacksmith to take care of the tools that they used. He did that until he thought he had better work among farmers in Brocton, and Paris and Charleston and those places. He thought he could do better, and we moved to this little Brocton. We went in a big wagon and took everything in this wagon. It had rained just before we got there. There was so much mud. If you lived around there, you know how muddy it could get. Those horses balked. They stopped because they couldn't pull it any farther. We had to go in the nearest house and stay all night. I wasn't very old, but I can remember all of that.

Q. Did they welcome you at this house?

A. Yes, they were very nice. We have always known them. In fact, I know some of the family yet. They kept us all night, and then they helped us get out. They had horses, I suppose. I don't know how we got out, but we got to the end of town, and that's where we lived.

Q. How did your mother spend her time when your father was at the blacksmith shop?

A. With me, just with her regular work. She was just a housewife taking care of the things that have to be done in a home with a child to care for and getting my father's meals ready when he came for them.

Q. So she was a good mother?

A. She was a very good mother. She wasn't good at visiting or getting out among people. My dad was good at that, but she wasn't. But she was all for having them in her home.

Q. Great! How did she dress you when you were little? What kind of clothes did you wear?

A. She made them. There wasn't any place to buy them, and she wouldn't have the money, so she made them. Of course, she had to do a great deal of it by hand, but somehow she was able to get a sewing machine - a Singer sewing machine. They were very good machines. She took up knowing how to work the machine and to sew. I had real pretty clothes. I wasn't very big. She could take a little piece of fabric and make a nice dress.

Q. You must have inherited that skill from her, from all I hear.

- A. I did.
- Q. Let's go back to your schooling. Where did you go to school?
- A. I went to school in Brocton - in a little red school house - two rooms. And it's still there!
- Q. Oh, good!
- A. And my son went to school there.
- Q. So it has been a tradition in your family. What kind of teachers did you have?
- A. I don't remember too much about my teachers. There wasn't one who wasn't a good teacher. I never had any complaints about any of them. My first teacher was - I can give you her name if you want it.
- Q. Oh yes. What is it?
- A. Jennie Romack. She was a maiden lady. She never married. Her brother was a pharmacist.
- Q. Did you attend high school?
- A. I went to high school in Sidney. My brother and his wife lived there. I went there and stayed with them. Then that was only three years. It wasn't like it is now. You couldn't have your tests there. You had to go to Champaign for those, but my brother would take me.
- Q. But you did finish high school?
- A. Yes.
- Q. When were you married?
- A. I was married in 1906.
- Q. How did you meet your husband?
- A. I don't know. Oh yes, I do know. He was a farm boy. They lived on a farm. His father died when he was about 13 years old. They stayed on the farm a while, and then they moved to Brocton.
- Q. And that's where you met?
- A. Their farm was only about five or six miles away. Anyway, they lived in town. (The telephone rings.) That's all right. We'll ignore the telephone.

- Q. He had a sister?
- A. Yes, he had a sister, and I learned to know her. Then he had a job delivering ice. That's how I came to know him.
- Q. Oh, that's different. That was before people had electric refrigerators. He must have been pretty husky to carry those big blocks of ice.
- A. Now I can see those great big tongs to carry those large blocks. Our ice box wouldn't hold anything larger than 25 pounds - enough to keep the butter.
- Q. Did you husband ever work for the railroad?
- A. Yes. After we were married, he was a car builder at the C. & E.I. railroad in Danville - until in 1922 there was a big railroad strike. He was not a union man. He did work, but they made it hard for him. Non-union men can't work with union men. And so we just went back to Brockton. At least, I did. He was very resourceful. We saved everything. We used to buy a load of kindling from the lumber yard. In Danville you could buy that and it would be all kinds of wood - little bits of narrow pieces, and he made things out of that.
- Q. That was resourceful!
- A. He made an outside swing - not a swing - but like the swings. I could show you the picture. He took pictures of these things he made.
- Q. And he sold these?
- A. He made desks - one for Jean. I wish I'd kept it. I don't know what I did with it. I wonder what ever happened to it?
- Q. Now, Jean is your son?
- A. Jean's my son and my only child. His name is J. P. - that's a family name. My husband was J. P. - my son is J. P. - and my grandson is J. P.
- Q. That must be a French name - J-E-A-N.
- A. I don't know. He used to say he thought his family was Scottish.
- Q. Well, that could be. He was your only child?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Did you have any problems while your husband was out of work?

A. Well, you always have a lot to live on in your home, and he could work at different jobs. Somebody wants something done, and if you were handy, you could help by working a little.

Q. In what town were you living when Jean was a baby?

A. In Danville.

Q. When did you move to Decatur?

A. We moved to Decatur when the Power Company came here. As I told you, Jean worked for the Illinois Power Company in Champaign. They did something so they didn't need all the men they had so they sent some of them over here to Decatur. We moved to Decatur about 1941. We were living here when Jean had to go into the service.

Q. That was in the second World War.

A. I just stayed on in my home and kept the home going and maintained it until he came back.

Q. What was Decatur like at that time?

A. It doesn't seem to me that it was a very big place. The main thing I remember was that little old Transfer House. It was dirty and hadn't been painted for a long time. There were little bench-like seats on every side. That's the way it looked. There were very few stores.

There were street cars - before the buses. They changed street cars at the Transfer House, and while people waited for buses, they would sit there and visit.

Q. Now, let's talk about a sad event in your life - the death of your husband. It must have been very difficult for you. Jean wasn't very old when his father died, was he?

A. He was around ten.

Q. Then you had to take care of him. You had to get a job, I suppose.

A. Yes, I've always had a job, even before I got married. I was a dress-maker before I was a drapery maker. I remember the first thing I ever made. I got 49 cents for it. Why I got the 9 cents, I don't know. I don't know why they didn't give me 50 cents.

Q. Then you went into the business of making draperies?

A. While I lived in Champaign, I worked at Robeson's for about five years. I asked for work there, and they didn't have

any place for me, but finally, Ross Miller, who lives here in Decatur now if he's still living, had charge of the fourth floor, and the drapery department was on that fourth floor. The woman who worked there was a very good drapery maker. She taught me how to make draperies. I worked there then. We made draperies for the Virginia Theatre. It was dark red velvet, and it was inter-lined with a fabric like outing flannel.

Q. What a big job!

A. That had to be made with tiny stitches, fastened every so often. I thought for a while I could never do it. I thought, "Oh, gee, there must be a better way!"

Q. Did you have to do this by hand or by machine?

A. Oh, by machine.

Q. A big machine?

A. Oh, they were bigger than a Singer sewing machine that you have in your home, but not a very big machine. The lady in charge was just such a nice person, and she knew exactly what to do and how to tell me. She was a lovely person. I loved her, and we worked together well. We visited after I moved. Her home had been in Decatur.

Q. After you moved to Decatur, you also worked. Did you make draperies after you moved to Decatur?

A. Yes, I did.

Q. Where did you work?

A. I sold draperies first in an old department store called Stewart's. It was where Osco's is today. When I went there to work, they put me in sales. Then they decided to make draperies.

Q. When they found out how good you were?

A. And so, I never did make draperies for them. I tried to teach them how to do it, but they didn't have a place that was large enough. So they made the draperies in a building that was over on the corner of Water and Prairie.

I worked at that store for about eight years. Then I went to another store because they needed help. The man who was managing the department became ill. I took his place for a while. When the man came back, they didn't need both of us. So I was out of work again, for, oh, maybe a year. Then a friend who knew me was working at Quigle's Furniture Store. She became ill.

- Q. It must be a hard job!
- A. She was quite bad, and she asked me if I would take her place while she was in the hospital so she wouldn't lose her job. So I told her I would. I thought when she came back, I would have to leave, but I didn't. Mr. Quigle kept me, and I worked there about fifteen years. Then I was retired in 1964. But I worked and earned a lot of money before then.
- Q. Then since 1964 you have been living here with Jean and his wife?
- A. I had surgery on both eyes, and I was awfully sick. In fact, I think they thought I was going.
- Q. But you showed them!
- A. But I couldn't live alone any more so they moved me here.
- Q. Now I understand that you still do some sewing and craft work. Don't you still do some sewing and crocheting?
- A. I could still sew if I could still see. The only thing I can do with my hands is to crochet.
- Q. I saw some of your work, and it's lovely.
- A. Before you leave, you can look in my sewing basket there, but I can only make two kinds of stitches any more.
- Q. Oh, that's enough.
- A. So I just make little square pieces like that, some of them are round. I make them to use under flower pots. You can see one under my plant there. That's what I do. You could use them in the kitchen if you wanted to. I make those and keep them. Sybil can give them away, and if she still has some at Bazaar time she can sell them for ten cents apiece or something. But it gives me something to do.
- Q. Good! Now, let's talk about the First United Methodist Church. Are you a member?
- A. Always have been a member! My mother and father were Moravian. They were married in the Moravian Church. I have a great big Bible I could show you up there. The minister gave it to my mother and father when they were married.
- Q. Oh, what a nice idea. That is lovely.
- A. So then, when they didn't have a Moravian Church to go to, they joined the Methodist Church. I've been a Methodist all my life.

- Q. Good!
- A. I was baptized when I lived in Oklahoma. My husband and I took a notion when it was still possible to homestead to go there. We didn't want to do that, but we did go out there and prove up one. But oh, my goodness! It was so sandy we couldn't live on it so we sold it. I'll bet someone is living on it now. But I would have died if I had to stay there.
- Q. When you came to Decatur, did you join the First United Methodist Church?
- A. When I first came here, I lived out on Webster Street in Decatur, and it was close to a little mission church. That's what I called it, but it was a church on Cleveland Street. The streets are pretty close together. Of course, I didn't have a car, and I went to that church. But I knew people who came down town, and they would bring me to First United Methodist Church, and it's always been where it is now. I was here when they remodeled it.
- Q. What activities in the church did you join?
- A. I never did much work in the church. I never went to Sunday school. I never have gone since I was little. But I had my work to do on Sunday. I would get up early and go to the eight o'clock service. I've always gone to church early. Then I would come home and do my laundry and other work, and I was ready for my job on Monday.
- Q. But you did join the women's association, didn't you? The Wesleyan Service Guild?
- A. Oh, yes, I did that. That was years ago. You weren't here when Dr. Grummon was here. He was here then. And then Dr. Lugg and Dr. Spear. I've forgotten some of them, but Dr. Cutlip was here, and Dr. Lloyd.
- Q. Yes, you remember those ministers. Now, let's talk about the Wesleyan Service Guild, an organization mostly of women and girls who worked outside the home and met at night.
- A. Yes. That was the reason I didn't belong to a group that met in the day time. I couldn't belong and work too.
- Q. Do you remember those early meetings? What did you do in the Wesleyan Service Guild?
- A. Oh, we just gathered at church at a certain time and then had our program. It hasn't changed much. The very meeting that was here just the other day was performed about the same. It was then as it is now, except that we had lots and lots of members - working women. At the time I joined, they

were mostly teachers. Many weren't even married. It was wonderful! Then there would be meetings at night and other programs at the church, and I could go to those.

I lived in that Methodist Church. Jean was gone for three years in the South Pacific, and I went to that church every day on my lunch hour and prayed for him.

Q. And that helped you?

A. I have told Dr. Brownfield - he's the minister here now - that I felt like I was on hallowed ground. I do even yet when I'm down at that chancel rail. I love that church! I love it!

Q. That is great! It's good that it gives you so much help. Mrs. Foster, do you have any grandchildren?

A. Yes. It's their daughter who is married. They have two sons who are not married. I hope that one will get married. As I told you before, the name J. P. Foster is a family tradition and it might not be carried on any more. Debbie has three lovely children. They were just here last week.

Q. Mrs. Foster, how do you feel about life today?

A. Oh, I think it's good. I listen to the radio, and I guess I think it's better than in some ways, because I'm not in circulation like I used to be, so I don't know.

Q. You might not know many of the bad things.

A. I don't know how things are, exactly. And I - no I'm not going to say that because I'll get into ad lib.

Q. Oh, go ahead! This is your chance.

A. I do believe, I don't think women shouldn't work. I do, but I think they should just be hired. I don't think they have to worry about discrimination. I tell you, I think life today has changed so much that whatever we think is good or bad, it's so different!

Q. That's right - good in some ways ways and not so good in others.

A. And to me and a lot of older people, there couldn't be anybody older than I am. (Laughter.) There have been so many changes.

Q. Just think of the changes in your life time!

A. There is so much difference. I think it must have been about the time I was married. Things were changing a lot -

getting better for everybody.

Q. Life was getting easier, wasn't it?

A. Yes, there was more to do, and they knew more.

Q. And people didn't have to work so hard?

A. That's right, and new things were coming. A long time ago, all they knew was to work. They either worked as my dad did in the blacksmith's shop or on the farm. The farmers worked a lot different then than they do now.

Q. So things are better in many ways.

A. Oh, things are much better. I think life's pretty good!

Q. That's fine! Do you think your grandchildren will have as good a life as you have had?

A. Better! Much better!

Q. But you have had a good, long life.

A. I've had a good life.

Q. Thank you for sharing your memories with us, Mrs. Foster. We hope you will have a very happy 103rd birthday.

A. I appreciate all this. I will want you to know, as I wanted all those ladies the other day to know, how I appreciated and loved the afternoon.

Q. Well, this has been a real pleasure to talk to you, and I do thank you for sharing all your experiences with us. Thank you very, very much. And happy birthday.

A. Thank you! Thank you! I never got to tell you about my dad and mother.

Q. Go ahead! What about them?

A. You didn't ask me.

Q. I'll ask you right now. What about them?

A. My mother was born in North Carolina on a little farm, I guess you'd call it a farm. They raised everything. They didn't buy very much at all. There was a pine forest there, and my grandfather had a sawmill and he made lumber and hauled it to Winston-Salem and sold it. He'd have to take it on just the running gears of the wagon. He took me one time. He would have taken me more often, but my mother wouldn't let him.

I sat upon the lumber going, but when we were coming back, we sat upon the running gears of that wagon. He bought me - or maybe they gave it to him - a nickel's worth of candy, and we ate candy and talked all the way home.

Q. Those are wonderful memories, aren't they?

A. Oh, yes! My grandmother's name was Lydia and my grandfather's was David - David and Lydia - but they had a good life because they lived close to a little spring of water - close enough that they could use that for their food.

Q. Instead of a refrigerator?

A. Yes. It was as good as a refrigerator because it was always cold, and you didn't have to put ice in it. Oh dear! But my dad didn't have such a good life. His father died when he was quite young and left his mother with six sons.

Q. Well, that was hard, wasn't it?

A. As soon as he could - it was close to Civil War times - he joined the army.

Q. Your grandfather?

A. No, my father! I was talking about my grandfather, but it was my father.

Q. Your own father was in the Civil War?

A. Yes, three years on foot!

Q. And he came out all right?

A. He came out all right. He lived to be ninety years old.

Q. Well, your family has a long life! Do you have any other stories to tell?

A. Oh, I could, but if I started, it would take all day. I appreciate your kindness.

Q. Oh, you are the one who was kind to us, and we do thank you.

A. Are you going to put this in the paper?

Q. Well, it might be.

A. I wish you wouldn't.

Q. Then we won't, but it will be kept at the library for anyone who wants to use it.

A. Well, I don't care. Now, I've done this twice. My cousin just wanted my voice. She just wanted to visit.

Q. And that's what we have been doing. Very good.

Once again, we thank you. And we'll remember you on June 2.

A. I'll be 103!!! Of course, there is a little time between now and then. I might not make it.

Q. Oh, you'll make it. You've made it this far.

A. I think they're going to make a mummy out of me and stand me up on the corner.

Q. I'll just close this now, and thank you, Mrs. Foster.

You have been listening to the reminiscences of Mrs. Mayme Foster and this is Betty Turnell speaking for the Decatur Public Library and the First United Methodist Church in Decatur.