

6-13-1996

Mildred Cotterill interview for the 1913 Dayton Flood Survivors Oral Histories Collection

Mildred Cotterill

Jeff Moyer

Mark R. Lyons

Wright State University – Main Campus, mark.lyons@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/special_ms296



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Cotterill, M., Moyer, J., & Lyons, M. R. (1996). Mildred Cotterill interview for the 1913 Dayton Flood Survivors Oral Histories Collection. .

https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/special_ms296/1

This Video is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections and Archives at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in 1913 Flood Survivors Oral Histories (MS-296) by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact corescholar@www.libraries.wright.edu, library-corescholar@wright.edu.

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
1913 Dayton Flood Oral Survivors Histories (MS-296)

Interview Date: June 13, 1996

Interviewer: Jeff Moyer

Interviewee: Mildred Cotterill

[Video does not come on until 00:00:53]

Mildred Cotterill: ...bedrooms on the second floor and they fit it in between an open window and the house here...and the open window and the house over here. And that meant that they had to put kids across this board...

Jeff Moyer: Right.

MC: and they had to put food and **[unknown]** across the board. But the main thing that I remember I guess was the fact that one lady had a big dog....

[blaring sound from 00:00:25-00:00:39]

MC: ...across the board but that was...that frightened the kids but it was a good thing because the dog did get across and the lady did too...

[video comes in at 00:00:54]

MC: ...so DP&L, I gave lectures to people about the use of lighting and that's what I meant when I said I got paid for.

JM: Right. Right.

MC: But it was...I had an interesting career as you imagine but I also had a very hazardous life during the flood.

JM: Yeah.

MC: The whole family did.

JM: Well let me ask you a couple of questions about that.

MC: Okay.

JM: So where did you live um, um....

MC: Approximately?

JM: Yeah.

MC: Well Horn Street. Do you know where that is?

JM: Yes I do.

MC: ...ring a bell? Well we lived close to Warren Street and we lived in...there was a Lincoln Street down in there. And then there's a street called Joe Street, a little shanty street. I don't...no that's not the right word but that's what we always thought it was a little shanty street. And then we lived in a...in my opinion a melting pot of people. I mean we had people from all over the world that came in and would end up in that area there. And my mother was very conscientious about having a home that had a bath in it. She wanted her kids to have a place to have a bath. I remember how that was a real important thing when they were looking for houses, was to find a home with a bath. And they had to be careful when they were in the flood; they didn't want them in the flood area either. So...but they couldn't have everything so they had to take them in the flood area. Of course my father spent weeks and weeks patching up things and fixing them.

JM: Well let me ask you this um let's talk a little more about your neighborhood.

MC: About the what?

JM: About your neighborhood.

MC: Oh yes.

JM: Well what was it like um before the flood?

MC: Well before the flood it was kind of a normal, inexpensive neighborhood because it had; well it had uh mostly two-story houses and mostly people that were two-story people I guess that live around...where there's two-story houses. But also a lot of people had a barn behind their house and we had a barn behind our house and a time that the flood came around we had to worry about the one animal that was in the barn. And be sure that he was in the right place and that we had moved him out so that we, he wouldn't drown.

JM: Right.

MC: and...

JM: Sticking to your neighborhood um what kind of people lived in your neighborhood? What were some of the different kind of people that lived there?

MC: Well there were Jewish family on one side and there was a German family on the right side and there was a um let's see Jewish and German and uh the other...what was the name of...what was the kind of family? There was about four or five different families in around us where we...

JM: Could you tell me what those were again?

MC: Well let's see. Jewish people, German people, some were French people and this...some were as much as uh what do I want to say not...I'm losing my words...it wasn't French...Irish people, lots of Irish people and lots of Dutch people. So Scotch, Irish and Dutch and the other Jewish and I guess that's a pretty good...

JM: Well what do you remember from your neighborhood? What kinds of things did you do? Just...

MC: Well mostly I went to Emerson School that was a uh real plus for we kids cause it was a pretty good school and we went to Emerson School for all grades, all the way through the ninth grade. And we had really good teachers. One of the things I'm really grateful for that time they started a, a program for teaching kids a little bit about poetry and I loved that. But anyway um they, we had a lot of different kinds of people who were nice to get along with. Syrian people, does that make...ring a bell?

JM: Mm-hmm.

MC: They were so nice and they were nice to us and we were good to them. A Jewish lady used to bake me a cake every year and they were so nice to get along with. We, we really learned how to live with all different kinds of people. And this is one thing a lot of kids didn't learn and they didn't know even when they grew up, that many were better off if they had neighbors that were a mixed breed and could teach them how to do things from their country as well as our kids could teach them how to do things from our country.

JM: Mm-hmm.

MC: So it was very interesting.

JM: Well let's talk about a little bit about the flood. Um tell me about when you first saw the water.

MC: Well we first saw the water out of the front window in the living room and realized it was getting, coming up to our steps and my father was still hauling bread from the bakery to the neighbors. And we were hoping that he could get as much bread hauled as would be needed. But didn't know how much was going to be needed. And that was on the let's see that would have been on Warren Street and on Joe Street and on um what's some of the other...Warren, Joe and I guess I'm thinking of those two because they were really hooked together like and there was another street in there that I'm forgetting but I guess when you get to be this age you're doing pretty good to remember as much as you do.

JM: So uh what did you start to do when the water started to come uh up on your porch?

MC: We started to carry things in doors and we started to help my father unload the wagon as they got enough bread there and the kids had to hurry and get the bread to the neighbors. And we did that...

JM: What kinds of things did you do in the house when the water was rising?

MC: Play the piano and um the other things was just to sit and talk and worry about the horses because my mother worried so about the horses. And I think watching the horses a big, big thing for us to see. And just to keep more or less praying for those horses.

JM: Right. So um, um how high did the water get at your house?

MC: It got up above the first floor, up to the second floor and then we were hauling groceries from, that we had brought up from the basement to the first floor and the second floor we were hauling those groceries up another flight of stairs hoping that it was...cause we were afraid it was gonna get deeper and deeper. There was no sign of it stopping yet. And we were...so we were hoping someone would come and help us and somebody did and that was, that was Patterson with the boats that he had built. And one of the boats came there we...by the cigar factory and pulled alongside. There's a little landing...and there was a for long time, I haven't been there...it was a little landing there and uh we lined up on this landing and this fellow brought the boat around and then they helped us from that landing and to get into the boat. And then we got into the boat and sat down...my mother were in the boat and they wouldn't take my dad and they just take we kids and my mother and we actually sat in the boat and they took off very slowly. But it was a very precarious ride because you were frightened cause the boat would kind of rock and, and finally um we got so worried cause and this is the truth, the boat caught on the telegraph pole and the water was getting pretty, very deep. It wasn't real tall, telegraph pole but it was a pretty good sized telegraph pole and with my mother here and the kids and my...that is my brothers and sisters and so forth and us sitting there worrying our heads off about those horses. And I know my mother was so fond of horses that we...so we all worried about horses. That was one of the things that we did.

JM: And, and uh tell me about getting caught on the telephone pole again.

MC: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

MC: Well what happened at the...as the boat was...these fellows that were rowing must have, couple of them gave a push at the one time and the boat took a tilt this way and hit on top of a telegraph pole and actually you could feel it rock like that. And um we were just frightened, just scared to death that's all it was to it. But we didn't have to get out of the boat because the men balanced the boat a little bit so we wouldn't have to get out of the boat in the water. And that was a big, big help and...

JM: So how did you finally get off that b...off that pole?

MC: Well they got us off of there just by their heaving rowing. And then they knew where they we gonna take us. They took us to the University of Dayton cause we were...we were quite a little load with mother and four kids...no let's see Elsie wasn't born yet. Mother and three kids I guess...

JM: Right.

MC: ...and uh the um the boat was a pretty good size strong boat but still it was tough to have that boat caught on that pole and they rocked it back and forth and got it off.

JM: Right.

MC: So that's how we got loose from that.

JM: So you took off um, you actually had to get in to your attic or onto the second floor?

MC: We got into the second floor and then...well it was a little bit more than the second floor because we went from our second floor to the cigar factory and that would be more like an attic height where we had that door propped between...

JM: Let me stop you a minute. Before you talk about that, did other people come to your house?

MC: Yes.

JM: Across...

MC: Yes they did.

JM: and why did they have to come to your house?

MC: Well because my dad was so brave. He would encourage them to come on over there so they would be safer. And he...my mother was a Sunday school teacher and she knew a little about handling kids. And my dad of course was...he was strong and yeah he was always down on the floor where the kids were because he was crippled he wasn't up high but uh when we had to go over in that cigar factory that was tough for...to have that Wilson's milk and, and Campbell's soup...

JM: So tell me about getting across there. What do you remember about uh actually crossing?

MC: Well I just remember that dad was saying get up right to the center of the door there. In other words here's the door and he wanted us to get to the center of the door we went across which we did and one by one we went across that door to get into the cigar factory. And we were very grateful to get over onto what was considered deeper water where we could float better.

JM: So um and uh tell me about the dog that crossed.

MC: Well the dog, I couldn't remember the brand; I mean the...what would I say...

JM: Uh the breed.

MC: The breed. Thank you. That's right. I can't remember what flavor he was. I think he was white. A big white dog. And he was just he was scared to death too. Boy he was scared death. He was scared to the point where he was whining. That was a shame. Poor dog. But then course we kids were whining too. It was a shame for my mother and father to have to worry about the kids but everybody had stuff to worry about. One thing is...was having all through the whole flood and I'm sure you heard this before was the fact that people helped people. One after another they helped each other so nobody was left alone without some little bit of help from a neighbor or a friend, mostly from a neighbor; neighbors were...it was just amazing and when you see them going from roof top to roof top, their porch roofs were up higher than their living room, the water was coming underneath there. And then you had to get the people out from the house onto the porch and then over here onto the next porch and over onto another porch so that they could be rescued from....a lot of those people were rescued by boat ahead of time. They were the ones that were lucky in the beginning where they were rescued ahead of time. And many of those people were sent to the NCR, that's where my father ended, at the NCR. And we all, when I say we all our family landed at the University of Dayton but they finally brought my father over there too. And this one lady was responsible for getting my father over there was never happier in her life than she was when she got this cripple man home with his kids.

JM: So um, um let's talk a little bit about what it was like in the cigar factory.

MC: Oh. Okay.

JM: Um you got over there and how many days did you have to stay in that factory?

MC: Oh I'll say about five days and five nights perhaps something like that. And we ate, like I said it was Wilson's milk and I think they had some canned beans of some sort. But all I remember is Wilson's milk. I'm sure of that because it was so wonderful to have some milk.

JM: And um...Just got a little bit of a technical problem here.

MC: Oh.

JM: So while you were um in the cigar factory, um, um what did you kids do to amuse yourselves?

MC: I think mostly look out the windows and watched those horses and cry for the horses. But um maybe not all the time, other time we would have few little game....not exactly games, we would try to be kind to one another and that's what my mother kept preaching at because we have to be good to one another if we want to get out of this alive. And then we had to say prayers and that was good.

JM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Um the um...now I've lost my train of thought. So you um while in the factory um during the night did you get to see any of the fires?

MC: Yes. Thank you for remembering that cause I didn't remember. Yes you could see fires here and fires there. And probably within a range of three-fourths, like if it would be this area here, you could see fires, that much of it.

JM: What do you remember thinking about especially when you saw the fires at such a young age?

MC: Mostly we thought about my mother saying we got to pray for those people that might be in them. And we should not forget to pray all the time. My mother as I said her father was a minister and she was a Sunday school teacher and she did a lot of praying and thought we kids could do a lot...say a lot of prayers and that helps a whole lot. That helps always. It still does I guess in everything we do.

JM: And what kind of things did you hear at night when...during the uh...?

MC: Well we could hear horses neighing and we could hear some things bumping into other things and you didn't know what it was...whether it was a boat or whether it was a house...part of a house bumping into something because houses were floating loose too. Little homes were floating down farther down the river I guess...they were floating up the river weren't they, cause the flood came from Cincinnati up through Dayton.

JM: Um yeah basically. What other kinds of things did you see floating in the water? You seen horses, you saw houses, what other stuff did you see?

MC: People's furniture, some of it. And we saw um like a...all I can think of is many of furniture and um once in a while animals that we were worried and my mother wouldn't let us watch the animals cause she felt we had enough to worry about without seeing those poor, sick animals so...

JM: Um what do you remember about Dayton after the flood?

MC: I remember my father re-finishing all the furniture and it was important and it was a lot of hard work. And he had some help but not enough...

JM: Were you allowed to return to your home?

MC: Yes. Mm-hmm. After, after the water went down, why we went back to our home but they had some...they had crews I think of men that kind of stuck together to get one house cleaned up a little bit before there was time to clean out another one cause it was so hard to try to go into a house soak with water.

JM: What was your house like?

MC: I remember it was...we didn't...I don't remember seeing water in our beds upstairs. I just remember seeing the water up the stairs... up the steps. And I remember seeing the water when that dog wouldn't go across the door that worried me and worried the rest of the family too. But I think that we, we just plain were a whole bunch of worried people but we didn't...I don't think the Dayton people panicked, I think they were pretty, they were pretty strong people, they knew they had to hold up and stick together if they ever were going to get out of it. And that was part of the courage of our whole town I think.

JM: Um tell me what your father did to get that dog across that, the uh board?

MC: Well he, he just took a big...he put the dog on the end of the board. Here's the one window and here's the other window and he put the board across and he put the dog on the end of the board and the dog would not go across and the lady started to cry and my dad took the dog and pushed him out farther; he still wouldn't go and I could see him get, pull the dog to the edge of the window that they was supposed to go across and push him down and the dog still didn't move and then dad took his fist like this and just went like this and said "get the hell across there," and pushed...my dad was not a cussing man but he pushed that dog a real good push and got him across into that cigar factory. And so he was saved that way....

[The interview/video is cut off here at 00:21:39]