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# Eleanor McCann interview for the 1913 Dayton Flood Survivors Oral Histories Collection

Eleanor McCann

Jeff Moyer

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

Interview Date: June 6, 1996

Interviewer: Jeff Moyer

Interviewee: Eleanor McCann

**Eleanor McCann:** ...I can't uh...and so forth. I can't remember what those old...Bank Street...

**Jeff Moyer:** Um-hmm

**EM:** ...I think was the name of that road.

**JM:** Okay.

**EM:** They finally gave me a plaque. I have a plaque over...

**JM:** The VA people?

**EM:** Huh?

**JM:** The VA people did?

**EM:** I beg your wh...?

**JM:** The Veteran's Administration people gave you that plaque?

**EM:** Yeah.

**JM:** Oh.

**EM:** Yeah. That's over uh. That's over on the wall...

**JM:** Right.

**EM:** ...here. And uh they, they had a farewell lunch and all the chaplains came.

**JM:** Mm-hmm.

**EM:** And uh...but no retirement. Then this one chaplain felt kind of bad and so he decided that I ought have had something, so he gave me a check for fifty dollars. And I was so insulted; I went out and spent it all on taking a friend of mine out for dinner that night.

**JM:** That sounds nice.

**EM:** I said well if they can't do any better than that... so everybody I worked for...

**JM:** Mm-hmm.

**EM:** ...no money, any retirement.

**JM:** Right. Well, um...

**EM:** So if it hadn't been for my sister and brother-in-law, I would have really been on, on...in a bad way.

**JM:** Well why don't we get started here?

**EM:** Alright.

**JM:** We're umm ready umm.

**EM:** Oh you mean you're gonna...I have to talk to this thing?

**JM:** Yeah talk to me.

**EM:** Oh. Alright.

**JM:** Just talk to me. You and I will have a conversation.

**EM:** Alright.

**[Phone ringing]**

**JM:** Oh, oh can I help you with that...

**EM:** My niece from uh East Lansing is going to come down for the fourth.

**JM:** Mm-hmm. That will be nice.

**EM:** So we're going to be having quite a...doings then.

**JM:** Well, umm, Eleanor, I guess I'd like to start off with um, um...could you tell me what Dayton was like before the flood? What do you remember...Dayton at...being like?

**EM:** Well it was uh, uh, uh...it didn't have the terrible anxiety and terrible rush that we have now. I mean everybody would walk down First Street and uh um...you know and knew who everybody was on, on First, Second, and Third. And father used to say what normally would have taken a generation to change uh, after the flood, changed overnight.

**JM:** Mm-hmm. So what was some of those changes? Could you tell me about that? What was some of those changes?

**EM:** Um. Well. Uh, everybody, everybody went for the hills. Um, everybody either went to Oakwood or out to Eastside, the Westside or the Northside. But uh, everything was away from Dayton. I mean the, the sort of bowl itself.

**JM:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Um, so the day the flood happened, you were at home right?

**EM:** Yes.

**JM:** Okay. Tell me where that house was and tell me what...

**EM:** We were the third house from First Street as you, as you went up between First and Monument. Um, the uh...on, you see on the...below...going Southwest from Dayton. I mean from us. They always...you went around to sunset Avenue. Do you remember sunset? That was a little short street that went around from, from, First Street uh, Second and Third and that went there. Well now, meanwhile, on the corner of First, and um the Boulevard was a family by the name of Solomon, who lived there for many, many years. And uh then around behind them there was only one other house. And that was some kind of a school that differ...uh different people went to. Well, we uh were...you wanted to know...

**JM:** Yeah.

**EM:** ...happened that uh that morning?

**JM:** Mm-hmm. That's correct.

**EM:** Um. Well we got...no we were wakened. There was a gentleman who lived just three doors down from the Dayton View Bridge and he came down and everybody on our block. He wake everybody up and said um "I think that were going to have some high water and we better get out." Well they thought they were all going downtown to a hotel and stay in a hotel. Well by the time we had gotten up and gotten dressed, mother decided we ought to have some oatmeal. So she gave us all...and the interesting thing is we sat at the kitchen table and uh had dishes with the oatmeal in...and uh after the flood, I mean after people could come in, my father discovered that the kitchen table with the dishes that we'd eaten the oatmeal in were all in the front room. Everything landed in the front room, but they didn't empty. I mean they, they were still just sitting there...on the thing. And uh...

**JM:** So tell me about when you first saw the water?

**EM:** Well. So we were we were awakened. We, we had uh, the two houses were very close together. And um my sister and I lived in the bedroom on the uh, on that particular side of the house near First Street and we used to get very much interested in a cousin of ours who used to go out on dates and come back very late at night and uh, umm, half the time he would put his clothes in the window...and they would uh get wet, if it rained and so forth and so on. So we

would...were apt to do. So we would look out the window, it was on a diagonal kind of a thing. Well, um, uh, my sister got up and she looked out and here was this turn of water going between the two houses. Well, she said we better do something like that. So, we waked up mother; father wasn't home. And uh, um she said...well mother decided. Meanwhile, then she called, the phones were still in use and she called my uh uncle and cousin who lived next door, down the west, southwest of us. And they said, well we better get out. This, this gentleman who lived up the road um said we all better go, so that's what we did. So we got dressed and so forth. Then we went, we went across and uh, then when they got up this far, this uh, I think his name was Brooks. Um he said "well there's no since in going downtown." So they had a conference and they finally decided that uh since nobody uh, uh had anyplace that they knew where to go, the best place that they knew, the Camby's were uh, um, um in Florida, said we'll just go over and take position, possession of the Camby house. So we walked across the bridge and I think that may have something to do because to this day, I can't look down and see water. I mean I don't like heights anyways but particularly if there's, if there's rushing water. So that's what we did. So we went over and uh by the end of the time, all of the relatives, there were thirty of us in the Camby house. Everybody, every family had a room, don't you know and uh we were there for two or three days and my poor father, meanwhile had uh say been making this speech and he came and uh...Did I tell you this?

**JM:** Please tell me again.

**EM:** Alright. Well he, he got as far as the cash register and he heard from where he had been giving this speech, I don't know where it was, somewhere along Kentucky; that he heard from there that uh that there was this flood. So Mr. Patterson gave him a boat and so he took the boat and uh, went as far as he could. And there were the houses on Second Street between Wilkinson uh were up sort of high and uh so he um took his boat and he got as far as my aunt and uncle- the ones who were in Florida, 'long with the Camby's. Uh got up on up there and uh um he got that far and then he thought well he go see my other uncle the one who we'd call Uncle Doctor. Well just at that particular moment who should come around the corner in a boat but Uncle Doctor. Well he said, "Frank you don't need to worry, your family's all safe there over there at the uh, the thing." Well, but he mean well. Then took father and then they rode back down uh, people now, people on First, Second, and Third Street uh, they were stuck in the three hou...they were in their houses. They couldn't get out, least they were uh rescued from a second story window and some of them were; that they, they would do that. You know, um, let me see, well, we all, we all, uh um heard these, these stories of what...because the people who were then up in their second stories uh, uh didn't have any heat and they didn't have any food because unless whatever they taken up that it was all cold. They couldn't, they couldn't uh, uh have any stoves and there were, there were no furnaces because of the thing. Now in our house which was on the Boulevard, uh there was a little uh, um rise in the um, in the thing. So the uh water just got above the piano keys in, in our house. But then the rest of them down on First, Second, and Third, the water was up in the um, uh in the Second...I mean almost to the second floor...

**JM:** Mm-hmm.

**EM:** ...with the things.

**JM:** So did you see any of the NCR boats? Did you see any of the uh...

**EM:** I was trying to think.

**JM:** Mm-hmm.

**EM:** I don't, I don't remember. But I do know that father used one very definitely and I think they were a great help as I recall in using to rescue people. Um, they were bigger you know. But um, uh they wouldn't go to a lot of places.

**JM:** Mm-hmm. Umm...do you remember seeing the fires?

**EM:** Yes.

**JM:** Okay.

**EM:** Yes I do because the um, uh, uh, Camby house had a toot and we used to go way in a...in the uh third floor and then on up in this thing and we used to look out over the city and uh we saw the uh...could see the fire and it was quite frightening...

**JM:** Mm-hmm. Um...

**EM:** ...as we looked from that.

**JM:** Do you remember uh, what you were thinking or how you felt as a six year old child looking out over the city with water and fire?

**EM:** Um, well it was rather frightening but I was being well taken care of and as long as I was safe uh, I didn't think too much about uh the future, what was, what was happening but my brother, uh umm, went up in the toot Wednesday and uh um, some of my other relatives at that time, they gathered all this group of my relatives and uh um, we had looked and he called out, oh, he said "Cousin Margaret the water is rising." Well she almost had a heart attack when...thinking there was, 'cause she was one of the one's that was rescued out of a second story window. And I guess that was sort of frightening because the uh current was so bad. My father being a great lover of horses, uh this is what nearly killed him because you'd see evidently uh all of these, they couldn't swim, they'd be trying to, to uh escape and all of the uh you know, the barns and everybody, everybody...you didn't have garages you had to go...you usually had a horse and all that sort of thing. And uh um oh even, even uh fire horses...

**JM:** Mm-hmm.

**EM:** ...I think they were, they were, all lost. They couldn't, they couldn't make it...they...by the time they tried against the current.

**JM:** what kinds of things did you hear at night when you looked out over the city? Do you remember?

**EM:** Well I was well taken care of and uh, uh we, we were safe but uh, uh we had to build a fire in the fire place and everybody gathered around there to get warm, it was, um it was cold.

**JM:** Do you remember hearing anything at night um, um the fires going on or people? Do you remember any distinct sounds at night while the flood was high?

**EM:** I don't remember uh, uh that.

**JM:** Okay.

**EM:** But I'm sure there were because they were...particularly it was these uh animals, the horses and all of the garages because they were lost. The horses couldn't swim against the current and they, they uh...and we being great horse lovers, all of us, uh um that I think, that bothered me more than anything else.

**JM:** Um we need to change...

**[Video cuts out at 00:14:12 and returns at 00:14:15.]**

**EM:** ... and they got us. And our farm is on what they call "Peach Tree Bend"

**JM:** Uh Huh.

**EM:** of the Miami River as you came along. And I think I was affected more by that than by what was down, because I was quite young. But as I can remember, we would look over bank and here way down - we had an island and Peach Tree Bend came around and then there was an canal and the canal - the water was all half way up this high bluff and the thing. My brother had a canoe and he was worried to death that his canoe was going to get washed away.

**JM:** You told me before, I'd kind of like to hear you tell the story again, about crossing the Dayton View bridge and the song that you sang.

**EM:** Oh yes. Well I having been in kindergarten - I guess it was the first grade, I think I was six at the time - We started - and we were just going across and here was this water and somehow I didn't realize the danger of the whole thing. So it was [singing] "don't get cross at the wind and rain for the sun will shine again. It never will do to fret I say so ha rah for a rainy day." And it just killed everybody for me to be singing a thing like that going across. But the thing I can remember the most about crossing that bridge - I'm still a little leery about crossing bridges now - the.. you know, the little half moon shape underneath? There wasn't any, hardly. I mean just a little bit under the thing. That affected me more than anything else.

**JM:** What do you remember about your house and your neighborhood when the waters receded?

**EM:** Mud! There was this terrible mud that just covered everything. Mother tried to say we had all these oriental rugs and they took them out and tried to wash them, but that clay mud was

almost impossible to thing and I was more affected, as I say by the piano. And it never would stay in tune afterwards - no matter how much - the whole the keyboard had been affected.

**JM:** How do you think the flood changed Dayton?

**EM:** Oh, drastically. Everybody went to the hills. Everybody moved out. And well then, I think you remember that they they had this big meeting of all the business men out at the cash register and they all got brooms and they carried these brooms and that marched downtown to do it. That they were going to clean up the mess. Well that you know, that affected us kids, we thought that was great stuff.

**JM:** How did this flood change your life? What effect did it have on you ever the years?

**EM:** Well I was very lucky, because we went right away out to our farm, where you know, had the usual things. But everything was either dated before or after the flood from then on. "Well you did so and so" – "well that was before the flood" or you did something else you see, because it stopped everything. I'm not sure that I'm the person to do it, because father got us out of there as soon as he did, don't you know? But I will never forget and as I say, I still don't like looking out a window and see any kind of water below.

**JM:** Well I was wondering if you might read some of this diary of your mother's?

**EM:** Oh alright.

**JM:** Let's see here... just go ahead and read it like you're reading to me starting here.

**EM:** What date was the flood?

**JM:** The date was 24th or 25th.

**EM:** Oh I see.

**JM:** Well Easter...

**EM:** Well this is Easter Sunday...

**JM:** Right and that was two days before.

**EM:** Before, yes.

**JM:** Yeah, so why don't we start there and start reading for me please.

**EM:** Alright. [reading] Pouring rain! It cleared a little in the afternoon and the children hunt eggs in the house. So it must be Easter. Chickens came out.. I guess came out of something or other. Heavy storms. Frank starts for Virginia. Jane and Joey spend the day with us and then Franklyn and I go the Cash to supper. Home around 9 p.m. Well somebody calls us at oh yes, Netty calls

us - Netty was our maid - Netty calls us at 5:30. water coming over the wall. Then Les carries us up to the Johnson's house and we go over to the Ed-Canby's, with the Snyders. By night the bridge impossible, I mean impassible. Water reaches this crest about 1, no, yes about 1 a.m. No conservation, no something or other across the river. Light... Food scarce. Herbert and Marge; the Simons and I go over at 6. Well they went over to the... and brought up as many of supplies as they could in a grocery because, they felt they wouldn't do it. And then it says "fires burning in the city." Somebody that, Miss P. goes to Greenville. Oh Miss Pembroke, she was a seamstress that used to come and do it... Father talks alarms of the reservoir breaking, causing panic. The he comes into the library about dusk. On duty in clothing department at schoolhouse. Franklyn tried to cross the bridge after dinner. They needed soldiers to keep the peace. And then someone else goes over to the platter. Go over to the house. Franklyn and Alice go out for dinner. Well Frank and I already around there and so forth. I bet they go somewhere else, they don't do it. I don't know.. Father just got a pair of boots and he just shoveled everything out. I mean there was this mud everywhere and for years after or every time we'd put in a new light, you needed to put in the base, out would come flood mud. I used to keep a piece of this flood mud around here, over here for a long time, as people couldn't believe it, here was this flood mud.

**JM:** [laughing] Well I think that's enough of the diary.

**EM:** I think so too, because I don't think there's any more in that, because we went away. But father had the thing out at the farm. We had a two wheel pony cart and that was the only vehicle that was able to go. And so he got this pony that we had and he used to go into work driving this two wheel pony cart. That was the only way he could get there. There were no vehicles hardly at all on the streets anywhere. And he was lucky just to do that.

**JM:** Would you be kind enough to do me a favor and sing that song one more time?

**EM:** [Laughing] [unintelligible]

**EM:** [Singing] "So don't get cross at the wind and rain for the sun will shine again. It never will do to fret I say, so ha rah for a rainy day!"

**EM:** They nearly killed me when I sang that. I was oh, they said, "for heaven's sake shut up."

**JM:** [laughing] Okay. go ahead and cut please.

**JM:** Okay, Eleanor, why don't go ahead and play hat for us once.

**EM:** [Playing Piano and singing quietly]

**JM:** And could you play it again please?

**EM:** [Playing Piano]

**EM:** [Singing] "Don't get cross at the wind and rain, for the sun will shine again. It never will do to fret I say, for the ..."

**JM:** Very nice! Now would you mind playing it once and singing it at the same time?

**EM:** [Playing Piano and Singing] "it never will do to fret I say, for the sun will shine again. It never will do to fret I say, for hurrah for a raining day!"

**JM:** Very nice!

**Background voice:** We're rolling.

**[Camera pans over artwork hung on the wall]**

**EM:** Where do you all live?

**JM:** I live in upper Riverdale.

**EM:** Oh do you?

**JM:** Yeah

**EM:** Near the...

**JM:** Near Shawn Acres.

**EM:** Yeah, that's great. It's lovely up around there. Down near the river, aren't you?

**JM:** Mhmm. I'm only two, three blocks from the river, from Riverside.

**EM:** Mhmm, yes I...

**JM:** Hey Tom, tighten in to just the two pictures on the left.

**[Camera zooms in on a panoramic photograph of downtown Dayton during the 1913 flood, as seen from the north.]**

**JM:** Uh, maybe no that, yeah. Keep coming, keep coming. About there and do a tilt up and tilt down here.

**EM:** Need my magnifying glass..

**JM:** Can I get that for you?

**EM:** No it's alright, it's on the table out there.

**EM:** Yeah, this is fine.

**JM:** Can I get you to sign that for me?

**EM:** You need my address?

**JM:** No that's not necessary, just be sure to date it at the bottom.

**EM:** What is this, I never can remember...

**JM:** Two-Twenty five

**EM:** It's two, I always want to call this six-twenty five. It's two-twenty five

**JM:** Just go in tight, Tom.

**EM:** Now I don't know what date it is.

**JM:** It is June 6th

**EM:** Oh yes.

**EM:** My nephew's birthday in Vermont was last night and I meant to call and I didn't get him called.

**EM:** Oh you want the phone number?

**JM:** It's not necessary, I've got that.

**EM:** I think it's 293-3613

**JM:** Okay

**JM:** Thank you so much

**EM:** Well you're very welcome. I feel very honored. Well it's just, you know, I... When's this big shindig going to be?

**JM:** The play will be in November...

**EM:** Oh I see.

**JM:** ..about a week before Thanksgiving and by the time this gets finished will be probably March of '97. Actually that would be a good time to get it done, wouldn't it? Near the time of the flood.

**EM:** Yes.

**JM:** Now I've seen pictures very similar to the one you've got out there.

**EM:** That's mother's diary over there.

**JM:** Right.

**EM:** Yeah

**JM:** I want to see what's in this book...

**EM:** Is that one mine?

**JM:** No this one's mine. It actually belongs to the library.

**JM:** I was going to show you that picture that was in here.

**EM:** You saw my stuff down there?

**JM:** Yeah I did.

**EM:** I suppose eventually that I should give that to the library.

**JM:** I was thinking that be an interesting... or the Montgomery County Historical Society.

**EM:** Oh yes, that's right. Because I gave them a lot.

**JM:** If you'd like to look at this, go ahead.

**EM:** I gave them a lot of stuff. I was trying to think... It wasn't Colonel Deeds it was Arthur Morgan.

**JM:** Right, he was the head of the Conservancy District, right?

**EM:** Yes.

**JM:** Right.

**EM:** It was Arthur Morgan that... I remember, father let me ride along and when they put the first dam that they were doing... So there can never be another flood in Dayton.

**Background voice:** We're cool?

**JM:** Yep.

**EM:** I would think so

**JM:** Well this seems to be one of the most comprehensive books about it. The flood and the building of the dams

**JM:** Yeah let's call that one. Yeah please.