

6-6-1996

Ethel Weeks interview for the 1913 Dayton Flood Survivors Oral Histories Collection

Ethel Weeks

Jeff Moyer

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Repository Citation

Weeks, E., Moyer, J., & Lyons, M. R. (1996). Ethel Weeks interview for the 1913 Dayton Flood Survivors Oral Histories Collection. . https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/special_ms296/7

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

Interview Date: June 6, 1996

Interviewer: Jeff Moyer

Interviewee: Ethel Weeks

Jeff Moyer: So um, um Ethel, tell me about what it was like living in Dayton before the flood please.

Ethel Weeks: Well I've always lived in Dayton. I never lived any place else. I lived about three miles west of Dayton on a farm on Union Road. And I graduated from Trotwood High School and when I graduated from high school, they asked me if I would like to teach school because I had always substituted for the first, second or third grades that was in the same building with the high school people were. And they put me out on route 35 in a one room school. And that school is still standing on 35, route 35 west of Dayton. And I had forty-five students in that one room. The stove was in the middle of the room. I had forty-five children and I had one boy in the eighth grade that was fifteen and the other was sixteen and I was eighteen.

JM: Great.

EW: But we got along wonderful. I enjoyed teaching. I taught there two years...

JM: Right.

EW: ...and then I got married. Well I substituted for Madison Township for a good many years and then uh I raised my family of three. And then I was asked to go to the Art Institute- Dayton Art Institute and take over the Italian room there. And to start to serve banquets and lunches and teas, which I did for twelve and a half years. I had the privilege of uh, during that time to serve uh, uh Orville Wright, Wilbur was gone but Orville had...was there every month for a trustee meeting. Patterson was there, Kettering was there and Mrs. Carvel and I really loved that but it got to become a seven day deal and I just had to give up part of it, I couldn't do all of it.

JM: Right.

EW: Then I went into wedding receptions, served those in Dayton for a long time. And when my husband was the...had been principal of a school in Dayton for thirty-five years, he retired so I did too. And we both went into real estate. I served real estate, sold real estate in Dayton for twenty years and the last thing I sold was my home, which was in Kettering on Marinole Park that was my life here so. Then I moved from my home into an apartment across from the Oakwood High School and I lived there for seventeen years. And then they...my daughter found this place that I have been in for nearly five years and I love it.

JM: Good. Good. Um when you were...you were twelve years old when the flood happened right?

EW: Yes.

JM: And before that time, say maybe you were ten years old...

EW: Yes.

JM: Did you get downtown much?

EW: No.

JM: Uh-huh. What do you remember about downtown?

EW: I shouldn't say that because my mother...Dayton, I don't know whether you remember...no you don't remember this because they had street Markets and my mother and father had one section there for twenty one years, they stood on Market. All of the...they made their money by having to go to Market on Tuesdays and Saturdays. This old jewelry store was on the corner of Fourth and Main and right out from the side door of the new salt building was my mother's part where she stood for twenty-one years. They bought those units and they would go to Market and they would...horse and wagon and they would go to Market every Tuesday and every Saturday with eggs, dressed chickens, milk, cream, butter, whatever you had to sell on the farm. That's the way they made their living. And of course the flood in Dayton was on a Tuesday. Many of those farmers were already there; they tried to get there by six o'clock in the morning. And my father had...you want me to go ahead with this or...?

JM: Sure. Go ahead. Yeah.

EW: Uh my father had the wagon loaded with milk, cream, chickens, butter, eggs, anything that we served...had raised on the farm. I used to bake cakes to pay for a piano. They'd take the cakes and sell them on Market. And they were all there when this water hit Dayton. But my father was just ready to go over the West Third Street Bridge that morning with a wagon load of these products. And the man that was standing there said "Turn around mister and go back home as fast as you could go, the levee is just ready to go." He turned and he made the horse run on West Third as fast as he could go but the water followed him clear up to Summit Street and then the bridge went down the river too. So he could have been on the bridge or he could have been on the other side. And of course all those people that were standing on the...on Market, they lost their lives, they lost their horses and Main Street become a terrible looking place. I saw it after the water went down and it was full of dead people and dead horses. It was terrible and I'll never forget it. Then we didn't have much money, people didn't have money then. But we made a... had a wonderful living on the farm, always plenty to eat and wonderful food. But we didn't have much money.

JM: Right.

EW: And uh that's the way my folks made it.

JM: Let me ask you um, uh after your father went...got to safety uh what did he do after that?

EW: What did he do after that?

JM: Yeah after he made it to safety. What did he, what did he do with all the food stuff he had on board?

EW: Well, we didn't have...we didn't have any way to get rid of those things. We had to sell them from the farm...

JM: Mm-hmm.

EW: ...what we could.

JM: But I mean the day of the flood.

EW: What?

JM: The day of the flood. Did your father help out some people then?

EW: Oh yes.

JM: Yes. Tell me about that please.

EW: Well he uh he came home as I remembered and was just completely flabbergasted. He saw the water coming clear up to Summit Street...you know where that is on West Third and I want to tell you that the...that they...they always told us that Dayton...main streets was at the bottom of a saucer. It went up on all sides, especially towards the NCR. If it wouldn't have been for the NCR, I...they would have lost more than five hundred people because they...Mr. Patterson stopped the work at NCR and the men made boats. They put two men in each boat and they went out. I saw many a person hanging on wires, on housetops, porch tops, and out windows and all trying to save themselves. And these men in the boats would go and pick them up and take them back to NCR. They filled the rooms at NCR with people that they picked up, to save themselves. And...then...what do I want to say...

JM: I think that um that gives me a lot of good information. Um about um how did your dad help some people during the flood?

EW: During the flood?

JM: Yeah. How did your dad help those guys? Help th...help...

EW: Well I had an aunt and uncle that lived on South Williams Street that's west of Third Street pretty...west of the bridge, quite a ways. But they still had to spend all their time on the second

floor. Thank God they were saved because the water wasn't that deep. But down, down farther where it was lower in Dayton by of course the people had to get clear out on the roof of the house. But when we, we got ready we went down to see what we can see, we got just as close as possible, I remembered I saw people like I told ...a little while ago holding on to wires, holding on to anything to save their lives, waiting for somebody to come and pick them up.

JM: What did your father do with the food he had on the, on the wagon?

EW: On the wagon?

JM: Yeah. The food he had on the wagon. What did he do with that?

EW: Oh he took it back and gave it to the people.

JM: Mm-hmm.

EW: He went right back and the people that he could get a hold of, he gave food. My in-laws lived on a farm too...like north of Trotwood. And my mother-in-law and my father-in-law had horses and wagons; they filled up those wagons and took food down to the people too. And of course uh all the rivers around Dayton was full of water, they covered bridges...two or three covered bridges...went down the river and uh, but everybody got busy out and took food down to the people...where...to give them food...lot of people didn't have food...couldn't get it, you couldn't get to 'em.

JM: Right.

EW: But if it wouldn't have been for NCR I don't know what would have happened in Dayton.

JM: When uh your father was giving the food away...

EW: Yes.

JM: ...were you with him?

EW: Yes.

JM: Yeah.

EW: I loved that. Oh, I went down after the, after the water went down. My mother went with me and there was a drag-in store on West Third Street, course everything was wet. And she took me in there and she found some beautiful velvet material and she bought that for me and I made myself a dress out of it. And uh you bought it for practically nothing but I was tickled to death with because I had never had a dress in velvet.

JM: Right.

EW: We didn't have any money on the farm but we certainly had a lot of love and a lot of food, had pleasure...

JM: Mm-hmm.

EW: ...and uh I bought different things that was left for the people, had to get rid of anything that they could sell. I understand that they figured that there was about a thousand homes destroyed and maybe five hundred people lost. But I don't know how many horses cause all those people on Market drove there with a horse and those were all gone.

JM: Mm-hmm. Um did you see any of the NCR boats during the flood?

EW: Oh yes.

JM: Mm-hmm.

EW: Yes because we were standing on the edges looking down and you could see boats down around gathering up people. Oh my mother and father took me down after he got home that day, we went right back with a load of food and I went with him. And it was...it was really something to see. I never saw so many dead horses and of course I loved horses and those people...well they had no chance they were, they were downtown on Market, that water just came in there in five minutes, rushed down Main Street... what the water was clear up to the second floor of all those stores down there and I think if I remember right we had the whole store was there and there was a traxler there and those stores where Rikes and Elders were...at the water was at the second floor and in some places the third floor. And all of that stuff was ruined.

JM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Um...so um I'd like to get back to, to um before the flood.

EW: Yes.

JM: Before the flood, before there was even uh thought of the flood. When you used to go down, downtown with your folks on market day.

EW: What?

JM: When you used to go downtown with your folks on market day...

EW: Oh yes.

JM: ...what kind of stuff did you do? Um...

EW: What would I do?

JM: Right.

EW: I would go down there course lot of people wouldn't...I, I wanted to buy a piano and my mother said Ethel we can't give you a piano and she said "I tell you what you do, you bake cakes when you get home from high school, and I'll give you so much money for each cake and I'll sell them on market," which I did. The most I ever mixed up by hand after I got home from high school was thirteen but I had them all engaged, the people would engage a cake from me. And every cake that I baked, my mother gave me eighty-five cents but she sold on that market. And that's the way I made my money for my piano, and I paid for a piano that cost me two hundred and sixty eight dollars by doing that. I used to go out to collect walnuts, crack walnuts and sell those, pick out the kernels and sell those on market and uh that's the way I did when I was a kid.

JM: How did um, um, what kinds of changes took place in Dayton after the flood?

EW: Well I think the people of Dayton really realized the ones that were saved, I really realized what a flood could do cause they never dream, they never dream of that. The water north of Dayton, all those branches was collected right in Dayton. Then they got busy and they decided that they had to do something about it and that's the way we got our, our uh dams. If we didn't have those dams now with all this water and I understand that the water...the river was very high. I didn't see it this year but there was a couple times when the water was very high. If, if those dams wouldn't have been here we would have had another flood.

JM: The um, um the attitude around Dayton after the flood of people helping each other...

EW: Oh...

JM: ...could you talk about that a little bit?

EW: Yes. I think that, I think that made everybody think. Everybody was willing to help each other and so many people lost their friends in water and they knew that that was just a terrible, terrible death for all of them. But I think it brought the people of Dayton very close together. That's the way I felt about it.

JM: Mm-hmm.

EW: That's the way I think the churches all felt. But um I didn't realize that they finally have decided that that was one of the worst floods that hit a city in the United States, killing as many as it did.

JM: Um, some of the buildings caught on fire during the night um I think it was Wednesday night.

EW: Yes.

JM: Did you see any of those fires?

EW: Any of the fires?

JM: Right.

EW: Oh yes.

JM: Mm-hmm.

EW: We was down there I don't know how many times. The people out of out of town...

JM: Uh-huh.

EW: ...would go down and they had some relatives that had been in it, lot of them would go down and try to get them and take them back to their own homes. People all around Dayton really did some tall thinking, they had to, cause that was something so different that ever happened. They never dreamed of that but that flood really made the people of Dayton...I think it made Patterson and Kettering, all of those wonderful people that come from Dayton, I think it made them very, very popular. My husband and I have been in every...had been in every state of the union except Utah. I don't know why we missed Utah because I always wanted to go back, now I'm too old to go. But every time we'd mentioned Dayton that we were from Dayton they seemed to know all about it.

JM: Right. Right.

EW: And they'd often ask us. My husband was a retired school teacher and he loved people and when we get into any kind of a crowd and they found out that we was from Dayton they always...ask us many times about that.

JM: Right. Right. Um during the night when the when the waters were so high and there were a lot of people caught on their roofs and in their attics, do you remember the sounds you heard?

EW: Oh yes.

JM: Tell me about that.

EW: Those people...

JM: Excuse me. Excuse me. Um. We need

EW: ...calling for help...

JM: Hang on just a minute please we need to change

[The interview is cut off at 00:19:28]