

Florence Dautel-Interviewed By Monette Irby-8-2-84

MONETTE IRBY: Today is August 2, 1984. I am Monette Irby and I am interviewing Florence Dautel at the [Ayesa Hauer?] Building. Can you please tell me about your full name and age?

FLORENCE DAUTEL: My name is Florence Helen Becker Dautel. I am 65 years old, and I was born in and brought up in Bridgeport.

MI: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

FD: Right now, I'm a retired schoolteacher, after having taught for 25 years. Six of those years was in Bridgeport, and then I moved to Trumbull. My husband died in 1961 and I was left with three children, and so I went back to teaching, and retired four years ago. Since then, [01:00] I have been working as a volunteer at the University of Bridgeport in the Halsey International Scholarship Program. This program has 16 ethnic committees, and each committee brings a student from their country for a year of graduate study at the university. And in turn, we provide them with three host families so that they live in American homes while they are studying here for the year. And in turn, they give us a little taste of their home life and their culture, and we, in turn, give them some of our American

culture and home life. It's a very interesting program, and working, I've always enjoyed various ethnic groups. I sing with the Germania Schwaben Singing Society, which is a German singing society. And then I love to [02:00] travel. I've been to most of the European countries, and I still have relatives. My father was born in Germany and my mother's parents were born in Germany, and we still correspond. We have relatives in (inaudible) that I visited in 1980. I also belong to the International Institute. I'm on their board, and I help with various ethnic committees with their folk festivals, and I help them whenever they need [helping?].

MI: Very interesting.

FD: And I'm an old-time Girl Scouter, also. (laughs) I was a Scout leader for, oh, I guess 32 years. My mother was a Scout leader, and when I was 10 years old, I started in Scouting. And then all [03:00] through the years I was in the service and during World War II, I was away and stationed down in Pensacola, Florida, and I had a Brownie troop, a Girl Scout troop, on a mariner ship on base, for children of personnel there. And now I'm out of Scouting, but we have formed the Old-Time Girl Scout Leaders Association, and we have events during the year where we raise funds to send needy girls to camp in summertime.

MI: Oh! What was the reason for your parents coming to Bridgeport?

FD: Well, my parents. My father was born in Germany. He came over to this country when he was a young man with his parents. And my mother [04:00] was born in Bridgeport, although her parents came over on a sailing vessel in 1848, and they were blown off course and landed in the Madeira Islands, and it took them 104 days to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. And they finally landed in New York, and he settled in Bridgeport, and opened the first German meat market on [State Street?]. [I have?] pictures of it here; I'll show you later. This [man?]. My mother, I can remember as a little girl her telling me that she lived on a farm which is in upper East Main Street, right [05:00] opposite Beardsley Park. And they had many, many acres of land there, and they raised their own cattle; they raised all their own vegetables and fruit for their market. They had a carriage shop there and a slaughterhouse, and they were kept busy. And as small children, her mother, being of German descent, believed that little girls should learn how to sew and how to cook, how to take care of the home, because this was what they were responsible for as women in Germany. They were the home. And she was quite a musician [06:00] also. My mother was a concert pianist and a church

organist, and she played organ in many of the German Lutheran churches in the area, and the German Reformed Church, and gave concerts, and she was active in musical circles -- Wednesday Afternoon Musical Club -- and organized the [Juvenile?] Musical Club. I remember as a little girl going and playing the violin, and playing a set of steel bells which my father made. And at Christmastime, we used to play where the carolers sing at Beardsley Park, when everybody would gather out Christmas Eve, and I would play the bells for the carols.

MI: Did you ever go to Washington Park?

FD: Yes.

MI: [07:00] How many family members were living in your household?

FD: My family... Well, in my family, I have a brother who graduated from the Naval Academy and was in the Marine Corps for 22 years. He was at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed in 1941; was married out there just before then to Clara [Adkins?], whose father was a dentist and whose brother had a veterinarian shop here in Bridgeport on [Down?] Street. And I had a sister, Hazel, who was two years younger, and my brother was two years older -- I was in the middle -- and all of us were born in the house and were delivered by midwives. In those days, you didn't go

to the hospital to have babies; the midwives came into your home [08:00] and delivered the babies there. And so I was delivered on the kitchen table in the kitchen. (laughs) I remember my mother telling me about this.

MI: Can you describe family life? What was the roles of the wife?

FD: Well, my mother, of course, she kept a very fine house, because we lived on Richardson Street, right on the corner of Glenwood Avenue. We had a [good?] family house, and we lived on the first floor, and we rented out the rest of the house. And oh, she would cook, but she was also very much interested in community affairs, especially in the musical cultural circles. And [09:00] my mother was a strong believer that mothers should be with their families, and she never worked per se. In those days, mothers stayed at home and raised their children, and taught them. We all took violin lessons, and my brother played the drums and the xylophone and the steel bells, and my sister and I played violin, and we had a piano. My mother had an organ, and we would play around at different functions whenever we could, and help out that way. And she also made all our clothes. She embroidered. She did beautiful embroidery, and I can remember her having pictures on the wall [10:00]

with all this beautiful, patterned, silk embroidery,
flowers and storks and things.

MI: That she did her own --

FD: That she did herself. And when she was growing up in the country, of course, they didn't have cars in those days, they had a hired man, and they had a horse and buggy. And the horse and buggy would take them to church on Sunday, and they would tie the horse up outside on a cement post while they were in church, and then he would take them home again. And when she was a little girl and going to school, she walked from the country down to Berkshire Avenue, which was, oh, I would say about three miles. And there she got on a trolley car, which went down to Congress High School in the center of town, and that's how she got to school. And she would walk, in rain or snowy weather. [11:00] Today, it's a little different, (laughs) and everybody wants to be bussed. They don't want to walk a block to school. But in those days, that was the only way you could get around. But, we had quite a family life. My father, when my brother got old enough, was in Scouting also, and he had a Sea Scout ship, and all of us were active in Girl Scouting and in church. We went to church --

MI: Church was very important?

FD: Church was very important. My parents were founders of Saint Paul's Lutheran Church, on Harriet Street in those days, and my grandparents were founders of the church.

MI: On Harriet Street.

FD: On Harriet Street, uh-huh. The church, I guess, is still there; they sold it. Since then, they've built a new [12:00] building up on Noble Avenue near Beardsley Park. Saint Paul's Church has moved up there. But, I can remember as a little girl going there, going with my mother. We called it (inaudible). They were ladies' meetings in the afternoon where they would get together, and they would call it a coffee klatch, and they'd have coffee, and they'd sit and talk, and they would do work for the church. They would sew for the church and do things like that. And she put on a Martin Luther pageant. She was a teacher, also, and I guess that's how I became a teacher, because she thought someone in her family should take after her, and I enjoyed always working with children. And so, when I got through high school, I decided I would go to Bridgeport Normal School, and I went to Bridgeport Normal School for three years. And after the [13:00] third year, they made it into a four-year program, and they closed the Bridgeport Normal School, and my fourth year, I went to New Haven Teachers College.

MI: Where was the Bridgeport Normal School located?

FD: It was down on Roosevelt School, down on Warren Street.

The school is still there, but they've since built a new Roosevelt School on Park Avenue, and the school is being sold now, where we went to, normal school.

MI: Can you describe the roles of your father? What was his role in the family?

FD: My father... Of course, all German men were the providers for the family. And my father was born in a little town outside of Berlin, and he came over here with his parents when he was a small boy. And he lived [14:00] on the same street as my mother, and they used to play tennis together, and that's how they met, going on a bus one day down to church, and they married. And, my father was a toolmaker at Bridgeport Brass Company, and he had quite a few patents. He was very creative, and he used to love to make things. And when we were small, he made a lot of our toys and doll carriages and cradles for our dolls, and little firehouses for the boys, for their fire engines and cars and things, and he was always making us something. He made a rocking horse that you could sit on and rock back and forth, and it lasted [till?] we got a little older. And he made lawn furniture for the [15:00] outside of the house. And he loved to work in the cellar in his spare time, and

he was also a great churchgoer. He was on the church council. He was president of the men's club at Harding High School when his children were in high school, and they had a [fighter's?] club up there and he was quite active in community affairs.

MI: How about the children, what were their roles? Did they have to help mom with the work and stuff?

FD: Oh, we all had to help --

MI: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

FD: -- from the time we were little, and I was very appreciative of that, because I loved to cook and my mother would always say, "Would you like to help?" And we had little jobs that we had to do, and even though we went to school and were in Scouting and all, we still pitched in and helped. [16:00] My grandparents lived with us in the house at the time, too, and we had to help them because my grandmother had fallen and she had a broken hip, and she was in a wheelchair, so we had to help her. When she wanted things, we would get them for her, and do things like that. My grandfather, he was my mother's -- grandmother's second husband -- her stepfather; lived to be 97 years old and my grandmother lived to be 93 years old. So, we have long and good lines, I guess, in our family, (laughs) hopefully.

MI: What church did you attend, and are you still attending?

FD: Well, I started at Saint Paul's Lutheran Church on Harriet Street, and as I told you, [17:00] my grandparents were charter members of the church when it was first built. And they were very active in the church and helped it, because the Germans in the Bridgeport area, there were a lot of German people who came right after the Reformation in Germany, and they settled in Bridgeport. And German people loved to be together, and they formed the two German clubs: the Germania Singing Society and then the Schwaben Singing Society. And I can remember, when I got a little older, going to the concerts that they gave, and they had a gymnastic group. And the German people, as a whole, really stuck together, and they depended on these [18:00] singing societies to help in the form of recreation, and being with other German people of the same denomination.

MI: What level education did you complete? Did you go to college?

FD: Yes. As I said before, I went to Bridgeport Normal School, and then in those days, it was during the Depression, and people had very little money, and I can remember having food stamps and standing in line in the stores waiting for meat. And if you were lucky, and got there early, you got

some; otherwise, you didn't and you had to wait, and it was the same with gasoline during the last war.

MI: Rationed?

FD: Gas was rationed, and we parked in lines waiting for gasoline and we were only given [19:00] so many gallons. And we couldn't use the cars as much as we had before, because you just couldn't get the gasoline.

MI: Well, you were telling me before about your mother, she embroiders pictures and everything, and your father makes things.

FD: He did all kinds of wood crafts and things like that.

MI: When the Depression came around, did you sell it to help your family?

FD: Well, when I was in normal school, of course, it was very reasonable in those days. You paid for your books, and it was just a couple of hundred dollars, I think, a year to go to normal school. Now, of course, it's entirely different. But during the Depression, a lot of people couldn't afford to send their children to college because they just didn't have the money, and many of them -- my father was out of work for two years during the Depression, when there was no work. And [20:00] so, then after the Depression came, when I graduated from New Haven Teachers College, there were no teaching positions either, in those days. You were put on

a line on a waiting list in Bridgeport and as the jobs came up, you were employed. So I went to Booth and Bayliss Commercial School, and I took typing and shorthand and bookkeeping, and I just almost finished the course when I got a job in Middlebury, Connecticut, teaching first grade. And I used to go up on the Waterbury bus, and then take the school bus from Waterbury into Middlebury every day to teach. And when the rationing came, we went up by bus and we stayed at the home of one of the children during [21:00] the week and came home on Friday nights. And then, after two and a half years, I got an opportunity to teach here in Bridgeport at Nathan Hale School, which now is closed also. But I taught; I had a combination first and second there. And then from there, I went into the service when the war came in 1941, and of course, my brother having been through the Naval Academy, and we used to go down to dances and to different affairs, and I said, "Oh, I always wish they had something like this for girls." And so, when the war started and they began the waves, I said, "Now here's my chance to get into the Navy." So I applied, and I was sent to Link Trainer School. I was in the 10th Regiment at Hunter College, [22:00] and I went to Link Trainer School and taught Link. Link trainers are old little airplanes that go through all the movement, except actually taking

off, of a real airplane, and you teach cadets how to fly on radio range, which guides them when they're up in the sky so that they don't fly into other planes. They have a set pattern that they have to fly by. And so, I was in Atlanta for a while, then I was sent to Pensacola, Florida, and I was in charge of a crews' music room down there. And I gave station talent concerts and arranged programs for the hospital, with different talented people on the base, and I gave talks on various composers, [23:00] and I played their works. We had a record player and a baby grand piano. I played piano also. My mother taught me to play the piano -

MI: It was the piano (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

FD: -- taught all of us piano as we were growing up, beside the violin. And in 1939, when I graduated from New Haven Teachers College, my home burned down when the ice house in Bridgeport by Beardsley Park burned down. And it was the coldest winter day, in end of January, down below zero, and I guess some children had been skating on the pond, and they went between the two buildings of the ice house and built a fire to get warm. And I guess they thought they put it out, but they didn't, because I had just come home from New Haven Teachers College and was looking out the kitchen window. And I said to my mother, "Gee," I says,

"that's funny, the sun isn't shining but it looks as though," I said, "all the windows in the ice house [24:00] are bright orange." And with that, the flames burst through the roof, and I said, "Mom," I said, "the ice house is on fire." And it was so windy that day, and the wind was blowing in the easterly direction from the west, and the ice house had been tarred, the roof had been tarred [in the meantime?] and then inside, the ice had been stored in sawdust. So that when the fire started, of course, it burned like tinder, because no ice had been stored there for years, because they had started out making ice from the Beardsley Park pond at that time. And our house burned down, and my grandmother and grandfather who lived next door to us, their house burned down, and there was an empty lot between our houses, and several other houses on the street burned down. And [25:00] I threw my school books out of the window and grabbed some winter clothes, and we got out. We were on the second floor. And my sister worked at Burt Lumber Company at the time, and my brother was in the Naval Academy, and he heard it on the radio that the whole east side of Bridgeport was burning. (laughs) So, he tried calling us, and of course, there was no telephone, but we got through to him later to tell him that we were all, all right. But we had to live with friends

until we rebuilt our house. So we lost all our musical instruments and everything, all our furniture, everything that we had, and we had to start all over again.

MI: Could you tell me if you remember anything about Barnum in Bridgeport, about the escaping animals?

FD: P.T. Barnum? Well, I remember my uncle Carl, [26:00] my mother's brother, was with the Ringling Brothers when they were called the Barnum and Bailey -- in those days, it wasn't Ringling Brothers -- and when he was a young boy, he always wanted to be with a circus. So he ran away from home and he joined the Barnum and Bailey Circus, because their winter quarters were here in Bridgeport over in the West End, and he used to go over there and work with the animals and everything. And then my sister-in-law, my brother's wife's uncle was the circus veterinarian, and he used to tell us stories about P.T. Barnum and Tom Thumb, and of course, Tom Thumb lived over on North Avenue, near where my grandfather, when he first came from Germany, lived, right close to Tom Thumb where he lived. [27:00] So he used to tell us stories of him.

MI: How about the festivals and parades?

FD: Well, I remember, as a Girl Scout, marching in parades, and of course, whenever the circus came to town, they always had a big parade, and they used to perform out on the West

End there across State Street where they set up big tents for the circus, and then they would have a parade into the town.

MI: Was it a [big thing]?

FD: And we always went --

MI: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

FD: -- with the elephants and calliopes and the horses and the clown, and it was fun. And then I remember the Memorial Day parades. Every Memorial Day, as a Girl Scout, I marched in the parade, and we marched from the center of town in Bridgeport down to Seaside Park, and some of the days when it was very hot, we got very [28:00] tired. But we enjoyed doing it.

MI: Can you tell me anything about Seaside Park? Was it a family place? Was it a recreational place?

FD: Every summer -- we always used to look forward to the summers, because we would pack picnic lunches and we would go down to Seaside Park, way down at the end, [almost?] to the south of the bathhouse. And they had parking areas there, and as a little girl -- I still have pictures of myself, in the old-time bathing suit, going down to Seaside Park. And or, sometimes we would go over to Pleasure Beach too, and we would ride on the amusements that were there, because in those days, it was a beautiful amusement park.

And of course, since then, many of the things have been torn down. But [29:00] that was a special occasion, when we went to Pleasure Beach.

MI: Were there a lot of families that went to Pleasure Beach? The family park --

FD: Families would go, yeah, there, and of course, Beardsley Park, too. We lived a block from Beardsley Park, growing up. We used to play. As we got older, we used to play up in Beardsley Park and roller skate and bicycle through Beardsley Park. And then, they had a golf course, as I remember, and when I got out of college, I used to play golf in Beardsley Park. Since then, it has closed, and now they have baseball fields where the golf course used to be. And we used to go sleigh riding in the wintertime on the seventh hole, which was the golf course in Beardsley Park.

MI: Could you tell me anything about how the war affected Bridgeport, economically, as well as other [30:00] communities?

FD: Well, I remember that many of the companies, like Sikorsky and Remington Arms and Bridgeport Brass and General Electric, all made -- and of course, we are the industrial capital of Connecticut here in Bridgeport, and we have more industries here than in most any other city in the country, almost. And during the war, of course, if they got major

war contracts, these companies were very busy and they worked 24-hour shifts around the clock and seven days a week, keeping up with them. And many of the people then made out well because the salaries were good, and a lot of people came into Bridgeport looking for work during the war, [31:00] because of the industries.

MI: Could you tell me anything about Sherwood Island, if you know anything about it?

FD: Well, at Sherwood Island, I guess it was made a park when I had grown up somewhat. It wasn't always there. When I was a little girl, we didn't have Sherwood Island. But, we used to, as adults, the young people used to go on picnics down to Sherwood Island. In those days, you didn't have to pay to get in, and now, since it's been developed, it's a state park, and people come from all over to go to Sherwood Island, they had to restrict it for the residents [32:00] in this area. But they had picnic tables and places where you could drink, lunch, and cook out, and they had a beautiful beach there where you could swim, and lifeguards. That and Hammonasset Beach. I remember going up to Hammonasset Beach. I was up there [clipping?] and (inaudible) in that area, (inaudible) [things?], too.

MI: Well, thank you for all the information. You are so interesting. Thank you.

FD: (laughs) Well, I really enjoyed it, and as I say, I'm interested in the ethnic backgrounds in Bridgeport, because we have so many. It is quite a melting pot here, and I think it's a wonderful thing that you people are doing to get this on tape so that it will be a lasting [33:00] tribute to the various ethnic groups in this area.

MI: We try to learn about the history of Bridgeport, more than what we read in a book or something. We ask the various, different people about how it was when they were younger in Bridgeport, how were the times. Well, thank you, again.

FD: Great. (laughs)

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