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Dr. Blanche Epler Memoir

EP54. Epler, Dr. Blanche (1864-1953)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 35 mins., 10 pp.

Epler, resident of Jacksonville, Illinois, discusses local history, recalling homes, prominent residents and events in the town in the 1800's and 1900's, early settlers, and African-American residents.

Interview by Donald K. Robinson, 1952

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Donald K. Robinson and donated to the Oral History Office circa 1952. Linda Jett transcribed the tape and Michael Tirpak edited the transcript.

No information is known on either the narrator, Dr. Blanche Epler, nor the interviewer, Donald K. Robinson.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Dr. Blanche Epler, circa 1952.

Donald K. Robinson, Interviewer.

Q. Dr. Epler wanted to talk about the Rob Farm, which was formerly the Wilson Farm and later became the home of Colonel James Dunlap who came to Jacksonville in 1834. That home later was owned by Dr. and Mrs. Pitner who gave it to Illinois College with the idea that it would be used for educational purposes. It is a beautiful home which was formerly owned by the Brownings, some early settlers here. Miss Sally, the daughter, married Judge Orear and the son married a woman from the South, a very lovely lady, and that place is now in the hands of other people.

Then coming further east, we come to the home of Judge Lockwood, on Lockwood Place, which was opposite the president of Illinois College's home now. Then further east on Mound Avenue where Frenches' live now was a home which was owned and built by Ed Clapp, who was a professor at Illinois College. Coming on east from that, we cross Lincoln Avenue and we come to the home of the Kirby's. The Kirby's place which is now where the gymnasium is was formerly the Clement home, and old Mr. Kirby married a Clement. Coming east from that we find the William C. Stevenson's home, which was sold to the college by the Dorwart's. The house is gone now.

Then further east at 1127 Mound Avenue which is now Union House, a man named James Demantis, who was a Portuguese missionary to Brazil, returned and built a home there which was bought by Dr. Andrew Russel and changed into the home which is now there for his son. In 1877 six children died within a week of diptheria in that family. Mostly Jacksonville remembers it for that reason. Dr. Andrew Russel was killed later by falling out of a tree in the front of that house. The tree was cut down and that is one reason why there are no trees on that lot. The house on the corner of Mound and Park was built in 1854 by Dr. Andrew Russel, who came from Scotland in 1834 and settled east of Woodson near Franklin on a big ten thousand acre farm called Hope Hill.

Then crossing Park Street we come to the David A. Smith house, which was built by Mr. Smith before 1840. Mr. Smith came to Jacksonville about 1830 and was one of the early trustees of Illinois College. That house is famous as one of the stations on the Underground Railroad.

Now to return a little bit to Webster Street. Down at the end of Webster Street was a very famous pond called Ashelby Pond. The Ashelbys came from England in the early 1830s and Mr. Ashelby whose name was Matthew was a dairy farmer. And he had a good dairy farm down there. He later built a beautiful home on Grove Street, which for many, many years and to all old members of Jacksonville is known as the Ashelby home. Dr. Epler, now you tape for a while.

A. That's not the Robs but the Dunlaps.

Q. What?

A. That you've just been talking about.

Q. Well, it was the Rob Farm before the Dunlaps bought it.

A. Did you mention that?

Q. Yes, I did.

A. I thought you said . . .

Q. No. I did at first.

O. Where is this Ashelby house now, Dr. Epler?

A. Right over here. This big white house.

O. Well, you might tell them about that if you like or anything else that you like.

A. Tell them, it's over there now.

Q. It's over there now . . .

A. As an apartment.

Q. . . . as an apartment house and it has recently changed hands again. It's been owned by many people lately. Doctor, can you tell them about the Fayerweather house, the old cat's home over here? Do you remember when that was built?

A. No.

Q. You told me that you built your house something like . . .

A. I'm going to tell you about that.

Q. Well, tell me now.

A. No. No. It wasn't built like that. I said my house was built like Fayerweather, my cottage.

Q. Yes, that's fine.

A. But that was my cottage not my old home.

Q. You mean this one down here, don't you? Now will you tell about the Turner house?

A. You think we're there?

Q. Yes, we're ready for that now.

A. Professor Turner lived where Mr. Walter Bulletty now lives. I used to as a child frequently go over there but, it was almost impossible to get anywhere. It was next to the Lippincott house. It was next to the Lippincott house. And Park Street wasn't open. But it became our pasture for cows and horses and ponies. But, extending from the old Elliott home across from my old home now, was a dense lot of trees. No one could get into that. It stretched from College Avenue to West State and from Mr. Professor Turner's up to the [Illinois] school for the Deaf and belonged to Professor Turner. It was of pine and hemlock, yellow poplar, cyprus and sycamore. But it was the sycamore and cyprus and yellow poplar that made it so dense, that trees just so close together that you couldn't go through. And the birds never went in.

Now my father read law with Governor Duncan. They were a good deal alike. So after he got through, he built the first house east of that so as to be near Governor Duncan. It's on the corner of Kawill and West State opposite the present Elliott house. The walls were fourteen inches thick, fifteen rooms, commodious beautiful balconies, and was a beauty together with a plantation of all fruits and vegetables and so forth.

Now Governor Duncan's daughter was a friend of my mother. But Mother had so many children, they didn't get out together. And Father always kept up with Governor Duncan. Governor Duncan's place afterwards became a feeble-minded institution in order to take care of some feeble minded that had appeared in the early days of the [Illinois] School for the Deaf. And I played in that park all my youthful days.

And then Dr. Wilbour who afterwards left, went to Kalamazoo which is a powerfully beautiful place where I practiced medicine afterwards, and had also taught in the Mary Lyons School on the hill. And Dr. Wilbour and his son became prominent in that section and he would come for me Sundays across the river and over that beautiful country and take me out, back for dinner. In that way, we learned Kalamazoo.

Now coming on down West State Street across what's now Kawill was an old cottage of George McKernel. Murray McKernel was one of the prominent lawyers here and was murdered. They had a beautiful home. I think it was on South Main where that rise of a little hill is. It occupied a plantation opening on South Main and three other streets. They never found out why he was murdered. Ed McKernel was a lawyer here and there's another old cottage that they lived in on the corner of King Place and West State on the north side, next to the old Rockwell house. Those are both old houses. But on the way between my old home and further east was the old Durphy house. They were prominent people here. That big red brick building almost up to Pine on West State where that man Seth had an osteopathic thing and was dismissed from Illinois. And between that was the old Dobbins house which is still there, of yellow brick. And it's bringing an income to Miss Dobbins, who lives there.

On across Pine was a beautiful old home of Marshall P. Ayers, the banker. And his family came from the South. They were very instrumental in starting some of the best organizations in Jacksonville. And Helen Ayers

Bullard was the daughter. It was the Augustus Aires in facing Westminster [Church]. That beautiful home still remains.

And almost across the street is the old Barr house. And on the corner of Prospect and West State is a large white house that Grace Carter owns, and her father was the pharmacist here, and the mother was one of the prominent old academy alumni and helpers.

Now Mrs. Eliza Ayers had bought what was afterwards Passavant Hospital and she tried it for schools repeatedly, but she was very helpful in the old academy, and gave much to the academy and the old alumni and started a museum there. And in order to get the thing, she was in touch with an old farmer way down in southern Illinois who got these relics from the Indian mounds on people's farms. And all she wanted was food for the people on farms and old clothes. And that just consummated and that Smithsonian Museum which was taken to Davenport, Iowa, and afterwards became a part of the United States government, was the same as the one that was started by the academy. It had nothing to do with the host. (tape stopped)

Q. Well now tell about the Epler family, about the Epler bank?

A. Now across from Westminster Church on the corner where Dr. Adams lived, that house was the Epler house built for cousin James Epler. But all that property clear through to Grove Street belonged to my great-uncle. Isaac, I think it was. And Aunt Rachel. And they had a beautiful home there. And a plantation. And he was the big banker down where on the corner, what is now Hardin's Business College, and a drug store. And afterwards became the first large Felix Farrell Bank. Felix Farrell married my father's double cousin Epler. And they built a house that is catty-corner from the high school now owned by McClelland which was a beautiful old home full of art pictures. And that's still just as it used to be.

O. Dr. Epler, you know about Dr. David Prince?

A. Yes. Just south of this bank that I showed you the picture of, Dr. David Prince had his sanitarium. And he realized there was something wrong with regard to his operations when they got infected. So he sprayed carbolic acid in those early years all through the operating room. But that's where he had his patients and sanitarium and he did a wonderful work.

Just south of that was the old Athenaeum, a school for girls, run by Mr. Sanders. He got into disgrace and it passed into other hands. Now one of the greatest educators here was Miss Sue Ellis, one of the first academy graduates. She was interested in the work out at Joy Prairie started by Prevost, the stepson of Aaron Burr who went with his mother and another brother to Joy Prairie and took up farming. And Prevost, when he died, was buried in the old College Hill Cemetery. His was the last grave there. And my uncle Wilder Fairbank and Arthur Fairbank's father went out there and took the stone and placed it in the Arthur Fairbank's lot at Diamond Grove.

Now the old academy was started by John Millot Ellis. And where the Baptist Church was, is now, was an old little building, the first Presbyterian Church here. And afterwards in that spot was one of the first houses that was used by the old Ellis family. John Millnot Ellis. The other one, the other two were just built on Cart Street just east of the State Street Church. And that's where the family lived.

And further down, where now is Gillham's Funeral Park was built a little, another house as the first school. And the first principal there was sent out by Mary Lyon who founded that elegant old Mount Holyoke school in which she'd gone around to get the money for. And the men all through the country where she'd gotten a little education, because her father and uncle put her in a school they established and asked for twenty-five cents, was told by the ministers that she was doing the work of the devil, trying to educate women. But she kept on and she got enough to build Mount Holyoke College on the Connecticut River where it now stands. But the quicksand allowed it to fall through and she started again. And when she started, she had to have each one of the pupils who came to do an hour's work like the men's school does. The result was I learned to work, and I learned what human beings were. I'd been brought up in Jacksonville just as bad, almost, as the kids now, frivolous and superficial and showy and so forth. But I learned what life was. Mount Holyoke is different now, I'm sorry to say. So this first woman who married . . .

Q. Miss Sarah Crocker.

A. . . . Miss Sarah Crocker married Elijah Walker. And was the beginning of the Walker home. Now in the old Walker home I--before Walker took it--I was born. The backend is still there. It's now on the corner of, what is that?

Q. Press.

A. And College Avenue. And that was the Eliu Walker, were the most prominent early Jacksonville people. Now the old academy was gotten a charter by John Millot Ellis. The first charter for higher culture of women or the first charter in Illinois for anything.

Q. The first charter west of Oberlin.

A. And this old academy was the first school west of Oberlin. And it was a cultural high-class school. But John Milnot Ellis was a minister. His wife contracted cholera and the two children contracted cholera when he was away preaching. And no one would take care of them. So one of the first graduates of Illinois College who married Prevost's daughter and who had been so prominent in making Joy Prairie and making the culture of all that region and the early cultural works in Illinois--went down and took care of them and took care of the children, and old Mrs. Eliza Ayers saw that they were buried in Diamond Grove Cemetery. Now those were the things and the type of things what were done by the early people in this region.

O. That man's name was Perkins, wasn't it? Perkins?

A. I think it was.

O. Yes. And were there any colored people living here in the early days?

A. Yes. The colored people here were one of the finest citizens we had. They helped us all out, were elegant cooks, well mannered, beautiful characters, and they were the beginning of the colored people who are here now. An unusual lot of fine people. And Miss Sue Ellis and Miss M-A-V-E-S Spray, both early academy teachers, were two of the most advanced teachers in this whole area for many years and so on. Miss Sue Ellis became teacher in the fifth grade, and all the people in Jacksonville that amounted to anything had gotten work from her. And I sat with one on one side of me, Elliott Barnett, a colored man. And on the other side a Portuguese who was Joe Cherry. The Portuguese all lived north of Lafayette Avenue owning great plantations. Were an elegant, clever lot of people. And the Irish people lived east of South Main Street. They were another fine group of early Jacksonville people.

O. You were starting to say that in these early days the people really did work hard and had high standards. Do you want to say just a word about that in closing?

A. The trustees of the old academy were the highest class of people. They were, who were they?

Q. Dr. Chandler was one of them.

O. Oh, yes, Ero Chandler.

Q. And Basiline Celeste?

A. Well, I wanted to tell about, because he . . .

Q. About Dr. Chandler?

A. No. Webster and at the house. Judge William Thomas.

Q. Oh, Thomas. William Thomas was his name, yes.

A. Among the most prominent helpful individuals was Judge William Thomas. Now the old trustees of the academy were Judge Berdan, Judge William Thomas, and Basiline Gillette. Now Basiline Gillette built this house with cement a hundred years ago. He was a doctor, and he owned the land clear down to the brook. He owned the house that I'm living in as a barn, and I bought the barn and built the house. Now Jezabell Gillette owned this property, and at the time of slavery the David Smith property came down to the middle of this road. I owned the first middle of the road at one time. And when I moved here there was a little old hut, you might call it, out in the road. And it was there that Lovejoy and Sturtevant and those early college men did what they could for the slaves. And they brought them into that little hut and there was an underground passage someway or other into the cellar. And the people had been living in the cellar, the Gillettes had, of this house. And that was the beginning of

the help toward the slaves and of the history before Lovejoy was killed. They did an immense amount of work.

Now next to this house we're in on the east side was the old Wadsworth house and that extended way back also. He was a hardware man and his daughter married the second Governor Yates. (tape turned off) . . . the old Wadsworth house was the Hockenhull house. Hockenhull, King and Elliott, established that bank on the east side, which afterwards became the Elliott Bank. And this is a picture of the old Hockenhull house where the Christian Home now stands. Mrs. Mulligan, who taught so long at the blind, was born in one of those rooms and was instrumental after two years in obtaining that for me because Professor, oh, what's his name over there?

O. Professor Whipple?

A. No. Your bacteriologist up there.

O. Oh, Dr. Price.

End of Tape