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Katherine Gates Memoir

G223. Gates, Katherine (1860-1959)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 35 mins., 8 pp.

Gates, daughter of the president of the Illinois Female Academy in Jacksonville, Illinois (now MacMurray College), discusses the academy, her family's arrival in Jacksonville in 1868 and conditions at the school at that time.

Interview by Dr. C.P. McKlenlin, 1954

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Dr. C. P. McKlenlin in about 1954 and donated to the Oral History Office. Linda Jett transcribed the tape and Michael Tirpak edited the transcript.

Katherine DeMotte Gates was born July 14, 1860 in Darlington, Indiana. Her father served as president of the Illinois Female Academy in Jacksonville, Illinois. She relates her memories of living at the academy both with her father and later when she returned to Jacksonville and sent her daughter to the academy.

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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Katherine DeMotte Gates, circa 1954.

Dr. C. P. McKlenlin, interviewer.

Q. This interview is entirely unrehearsed. I'm sitting with Mrs. Gates in her living room and I'm going to ask her to look back over her long life--and tell us anything that comes into her mind that she thinks would be interesting to us. I'll start off by asking her a question or two. Mrs. Gates, you've lived in Jacksonville a long time. When did you come to Jacksonville and why did you come to Jacksonville?

A. In the spring of 1868, the name of Indiana Wesleyan College [Indiana Asbury University] was changed to DePauw, and a number of small schools were taken up from their location and put into DePauw to make the--college larger. That took a small school that my father had had for two years in Indianapolis. When the trustees of MacMurray College, then the Illinois Female Academy [Illinois Female College], was in session, they wanted a new president and began to look for a president. Among others, places that asked for Father was one in Ohio and another in Indiana and this one in Illinois. Judge William Brown and Judge Thomas, two of the trustees, came over to Indianapolis and interviewed my father. My father came over and looked the college over and accepted the terms. I'm not enough, was not enough of a financier those days to tell you the terms but, they wouldn't be considered good terms today although it was a successful move.

Early in July, 1868, we came to Jacksonville. Father brought the furniture from the little school that we had in Indianapolis over by freight, and they were hauled up to the college in one-horse drays. It took, oh, days and days (chuckles) to move that furniture. We were ready when September came and the school opened. Not as large as Father had hoped for but better than it had been the year before. And we were very content and very happy.

We had wonderful trustees. Among them was Mr. A. C. Wadsworth, Mr. Thomas, and Mr. Brown--both Mathers, both Mr. John and Mr. Wesley Mathers and--at least one preacher, Mr. William Rutledge, was on the board of trustees--and I think Mr. Stacy. I was only eight years old so my memory might be at fault.

We were very happy there and got along beautifully. The girls brought their own bedding, most of them bringing a feather bed. And the rooms were all heated by stoves and lighted with a lamp. Of course, there's always that danger of fire when you are so poorly equipped but the girls tried to be careful. But in the fall of 1869. . . . Now, I wonder if that was--well, in 1869, I don't know whether I remember the fall or the spring, the college burned, the main building, which was the old first original building. And--it did not burn the wing which had had a fire

before we came. The girls were very brave and many--most of them stayed on until the school was out that year.

The next year, we had school in Centenary Church which had just finished being built. And everybody worked and got along the best way we could. The girls boarded out in town what couldn't be taken care of in the wing.

Q. Would you like to pause a minute just to think . . .

A: No, well, I . . .

Q: . . . and I'll just . . . (tape turned off)

A. I remember very distinctly the building of the new building. My mother was very much interested in it, and of a great deal of help to the architect. We went into the building, and started school in what was our chapel--then. It is the north part of the original social room of the college. I think if you went outdoors you could see where the new wing was built on years later. The front door was in the eastern end of the main building--eastern end of the front side of the main building. It's now closed up and is used, I think, by the alumnus secretary. There was a wing which is standing now, connecting the old building with the new building. There was a porch in front and a small hall and down that hall was the steps to the dining room. Those steps are still there and the dining room was the north part of the large room that is there now, and seated about forty and that was the limit of the girls we could take care of.

After that building was built, and among other things was a dust chute made of brick and iron doors on each floor where the dust could be put in, or trash, and taken out from the basement. Unfortunately, there was no iron door put on the top of that chute and a mouse must have gotten in there some way and set fire, and the fire went right on up and out into the roof. And there was a second fire in--1872, I'm sure. And the new wing was gutted. But not seriously hurt. We had lessons in the Centenary Church as we had the other time.

And a meeting of the trustees was called for there and a number of businessmen were invited to come and talk the matter over. It was talked over quite freely by the trustees and the men in town, and finally one of the men said, "I think the only thing to do is to sell the property and close the school." Dear Peter Akers, who was such a friend of the college and so good to us, said, "Methodists do not step backward. We'll go on and fix the building and make a better college than we've ever had." Which they did.

While I lived there, seven years. . . . We had the two fires, my oldest sister was married in the reception room, one of my youngest sisters was born there, and in May, 1872, my mother died, the greatest shock that ever came to me personally.

My father had been for years a teacher in the school for the deaf in Indianapolis, and his first love was that school and constantly, he would come out to the school here in Jacksonville, and talk to the boys and girls and chum with the president who was a schoolmate of his in DePauw.

Along in 1875, he was offered the presidency, superintendency of the Wisconsin School for the Deaf. [Wisconsin Deaf and Dumb Institution] Oh--that was a terrible thing to have happened because he loved to teach the deaf better than he did anything else, and yet he was doing so well at the college. And after a long time with several of his friends saying, "Don't go up there. There's too much politics and everything. You're happy here. Stay here." But he decided that he and we children and his second wife, who was a teacher at MacMurray--music teacher--and one of the loveliest women that anybody ever knew. I had a good deal of experience for she was my mother for forty-two years, and we never had a word. We always were fond of each other. Younger children also were fond of her.

We went to Wisconsin and there was my first bit of public school going, just one year. I did not come back to Illinois. I sometimes wish I had. I think even a diploma from--Illinois Female Academy would look good to me.

But I came back in 1880 to find many of my old friends gone. I think Mr. Appleby--[I mean] Mr. Wadsworth was the only trustee left that I knew real well. But when Dr. Harker came to MacMurray, I knew them. I had known Mr. Short as a district superintendent, but a girl of fifteen don't know very much about her district superintendent. And if I came back, I wanted to board with my sister, and that meant a long walk every day. So I didn't come back to Illinois until after I was married. And I came back bringing three children with me, three boys. When Dr. Harker was elected president, we became good friends. Dr. and Mrs. Harker both were very warm friends of mine all the years they were here.

The college grew right along. Every year we could see it improving. My daughter was going to the public school, and when she was in the sixth grade, Dr. Harker began to insist that she come down to the college. He had a preparatory school for his own daughters, and others, and finally she went down. When she finished the sixth grade, she went down to the college and was there when they enlarged the course twice and then graduated the year after they gave a degree. While she was going to the college I knew a great deal about it, the inside working of the college and what they sang at chapel and what verses they were learning to repeat from the Bible, and such things. And her teachers, how she adored them.

But she graduated, the only one of my children that could graduate at MacMurray. And I think she has demonstrated in a good way what MacMurray can do for a girl if she wants to do it. And we've had many, many fine girls go out from MacMurray that have made wonderful homes and raised fine families and then done other work besides.

I forgot to say that the first fall after we came here, there was the question of what they were going to do with me. I was too little to go to--well, the public school was rather far off for me, they thought, and I'd have to go alone. So my father hired the sister of the two McElfresh preachers who were in his conference. And she came and had a little school. And among those folks that went to that school was Dr. Carl Black, who was just the age of my brother, six years old and it was their first school. And Dick Yates, who had never gone to school but had learned to read at the side of his sick mother, and a cousin of his. And

then one or two of the Spade girls and some of the Rutledge girls. And it was quite a nice little school and we learned a lot, for--and the boys didn't come after that first year. They all went over to school. But as long as I needed and couldn't enter the academy work, I went to that school. And I thought a great deal of my teacher. And have always admired the McElfreshes.

Q. Well, Mrs. Gates, you've talked quite a little about the college. I think it might be interesting if you'd tell us something about your connection with the Methodist churches in Jacksonville.

A. When I was ten years old I joined Centenary Church. I can remember how proud I was to be a member of Centenary Church and her Sunday School. My first Sunday School teacher there was Miss Mercy Jackson--known well, known years ago when she was living here. And it gave me a very strong feeling of what a Sunday School teacher owes to her class. I have many members of certain passages of scripture that Mercy would repeat and explain to us and help us to try and live better lives.

Q. When did you join the church?

A. When I was ten years old. And then I was seventy. [She probably means, in 1870. Ed.]

Q. Then you moved to Wisconsin.

A. Yes. When we moved to Wisconsin I took my church letter with the family, and when they moved away I kept my church letter there until I moved back to Jacksonville in 1888, when I put my letter in Grace Church because I was living in that part of town. I've been a member of Grace Church constantly since 1888. An active member only since my children were all old enough to go to Sunday School.

Q. You were pretty busy when these children were young.

A. Yes.

Q. Could you get away from them easily?

A. Not easily, because we had no sitters in those days. Unless I had a sister who was not going where I was going, and my oldest sister was a Methodist and Mrs. Carter was a Methodist for many years until she turned Congregationalist, and I had no one who would stay and take care of my children. So I stayed home. But after they were all in school, it was comparatively easy for me to get out in the afternoon because the boys were taught to come straight home from school, and they minded. Fortunately, we had a large yard and all the equipment for boys to play with. And that we could always get a group of boys in our yard. And the little sister who was the youngest would sit on the porch and play with her dolls or even get out and try to catch a ball.

Q. What about your work in the Sunday School?

A. I have been in most every grade in the Sunday School. I've taught primary and intermediate. And then I had college girls for a number of years and changed and took the opportunity circle for twenty years. Gave it up when I thought I had had it long enough. Not that my heart was tired or that I wanted to stop, but I couldn't conveniently go. I'm interested today in every phase of the Sunday School work. I think it was never more important than it is now. And I wish that more of our younger women could feel that importance and go see the influence it has on their own children and then pass it on to other children.

Q. You're celebrating a birthday soon, aren't you?

A. Yes.

Q. How old will you be then, Mrs. Gates?

A. Ninety-four. Much longer than I wanted to live, but I've been very happy and very contented.

Q. You're in good health now, aren't you?

A. Yes. I'm in good health.

Q. I don't suppose you can read as well as you used to?

A. I can't read a word. I have no secrets whatever. Somebody has to read every bit mail that comes to me. I don't know what's going on in the world unless they tell me. I don't hear the radio very well. I think many of the speakers talk too fast. I can't--my ears don't work as fast as they used to.

Q. Well, do you feel rather optimistic about the world? Do you think conditions are better or worse than they were in the good old days?

A. Well, you can't compare the two because conditions are so different. When my children were little they came home from school and played at home, studied in the evening. We hadn't any movies. We hadn't anywhere to go. The family settled around the lamp, or the gas jet, and maybe played checkers or dominoes, played on the piano and sang, and studied, and went to bed. We don't do that any more. Not even the old folks.

Q. Now this has certainly been interesting, Mrs. Gates. I think you could go on for a good while.

A. Yes.

Q. And I hope perhaps, I'm quite sure we'll be able to interview again because there's a great deal more that you haven't told us of interest. But our film has run out and I think we'll have to stop. Thank you ever so much.

A. Well, you're entirely welcomed.

End of Tape One