

Taped Interview
Mrs. Ida Brockmiller
October 20, 1970

Dearborn Historical Museum

Oral History Program

Interviewee: Mrs. Ida (Woehlke) Brockmiller

Interviewer: Mrs. Jean Hatch

Subject: Dearborn, Turn of The Century

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Table of Contents Page

Parents	1
Park Street	2
Moody Family	4
Upstairs- Downstairs School	6
Emil Brockmiller	7
Michigan Avenue	8
Red Cross	9
Snow Family	10
Rouge Plant	12
Sexton's School	13

Jean Hatch: This is an interview with Mrs. Ida Woehlke Brockmiller. Mrs. Brockmiller, will you please tell us when and where you were born?

Mrs. Brockmiller: In Dearborn September 1, 1882.

Mrs. Hatch: Will you please tell us the names of your parents?

Mrs. Brockmiller: Mrs. Ettie Woehlke and Mr. Charles Woehlke

Mrs. Hatch: How long had your parents lived in the Dearborn area?

Mrs. Brockmiller: My mother lived here all her life. She used to live here on a farm. My mother was born in Dearborn but my father was born in Germany.

Mrs. Hatch: What was your mother's maiden name?

Mrs. Brockmiller: Prush.

Mrs. Hatch: When you say she lived on a farm in the Dearborn area, can you tell me approximately where it was?

Mrs. Brockmiller: Yes. Now let me see, near Ann Arbor Trail.

Mrs. Hatch: What kind of name is Prush? Is that German too?

Mrs. Brockmiller: I think it's part German and Part French.

Gladys Salisbury: I think his wife was French but the name Prush is German.

Mrs. Hatch: When did your mother's people come to the Dearborn area?

Mrs. B: Well, I couldn't tell you. All I know is I remember them telling that when they got here, it was all woods. They came as pioneers. They came over in a sailboat. I remember them telling that they settled here and it was all like woods, you know, just trees. She said they build up a little shack. She said, "So we could live in it." She said, "We were so happy" that they knelt down and thanked the lord that they had a place to live in. They came from Germany.

Mrs. H: You do not have any idea of the date when your grandfather and grandmother came?

Mrs. B: No, I wouldn't know.

Mrs. H: Mrs. Brockmiller, did you have any brothers and sisters?

Mrs. B: I had one brother, Mr. Clarence Woehlke. He's been dead about seven, eight years.

Mrs. H: Did he stay in the Dearborn area?

Mrs. B: Yes. He was here too, in Dearborn.

Mrs. H: Did you grow up on the farm or did you grow up in the little village of Dearborn?

Mrs. B: Right in the little village of Dearborn here, I grew up.

Mrs. H: Did your father have a store?

Mrs. B: My father was a railroad man. He was a railroad conductor on the Michigan Central.

Mrs. H: What street did you live on, do you remember?

Mrs. B: Well, when I was younger, I was born on Garrison. That was right back of the Catholic Church on Garrison. And then, I guess, when I was about a year old, Mom and Dad moved to Park. They bought this home from old Mr. Prehn, old Grandpa Prehn. And then after a while Dad built a bigger house and we lived there for years. Park Street was really my home, right off of Mason Street.

Mrs. H: Is that home still standing today. Do you know?

Mrs. B: My old home is still there, yes.

Mrs. S: It was right next to the Tworks.

Mrs. H: And this is where you were a neighbor to the Twork family?

Mrs. B: To the Tworks. My daughter, Mrs. Salisbury, always played with the boys there. They had such a good time together.

Mrs. H: I understand that the Twork family were blacksmiths.

Mrs. B: Yes.

Mrs. H: Is this correct, Mr. Lester Twork's father.

Mrs. B: No. His grandfather had this blacksmith shop and we lived right next door to the Tworks.

Mrs. H: Was the blacksmith shop on the premises of the home or was it down on Michigan Avenue?

Mrs. B: No, it was right on the premises of the house.

Mrs. H: Tell me what a blacksmith shop was like.

Mrs. B: Oh, it was just an old building. I can remember we would sit in the window when they used to, what they call, "lay tire," you know.

Mrs. H: You better tell us what you mean by lay tire.

Mrs. B: They have great big iron rims, you know, on the wagons. Anyway they'd have to build a bonfire and we would watch them. Then they'd put these great big iron tires on this bonfire until they'd get hot. I could see them. They'd roll them in water and put them on the wheel. Then he'd pound them and keep the wheel going around, pounding them until he got them the way he wanted them. Then he'd wheel it around in some water. We used to watch them do that.

Mrs. H: And the water would cool it and set the metal?

Mrs. B: Yes.

Mrs. H: Putting rims on wagon wheels and shoeing horses, what else did blacksmiths do? Do you remember?

Mrs. B: No. I don't know of anything else. I don't know as I ever was in their blacksmith shop.

Mrs. H: Can you tell me a little bit about just what the life of a girl was in Dearborn when you were growing up here?

Mrs. B: Well, we used to go to school, of course, every day. I remember there used to be an old Arsenal building on the corner right across from the schoolhouse and the Moody family lived there.

Mrs. H: Now you are talking about going to the Dearborn Public School, the three storied...

Mrs. B: The first one, you know, is two stories. I used to go to that one, I never went to the new school.

Mrs. H: Did you go to the Upstairs-Downstairs School over on Park Street?

Mrs. B: Yes.

Mrs. H: Could you tell me a little bit about it, what do you remember? How many rooms did it have?

Mrs. B: Well, we used to go to that school. Do you want to hear about the Arsenal building too?

Mrs. H: Yes.

Mrs. B: Well anyway, we'd go to school. We never chummed around with Alice Moody. She was a nice girl. I don't mean that. But she was in a different crowd. One time we were going home for lunch and I was going around that way to go home. She said, "Oh, come in for a few minutes." So I was glad to go in. It was a long building, this Arsenal building. She took me in and it was perfectly empty except their living and table. But what I can remember the most was they had stalls for bedrooms and their beds were between the stalls.

Mrs. H: You mean like a horse's stall?

Mrs. B: Yes. I can't remember if there was any doors to them but that I can remember the divisions. I was in there a couple of times to the Moody building. Then across from that Arsenal building, there was another great big one across the street, That was about three stories high.

Mrs. H: That was the old Armory building. Do you remember when it was called the Arna Mills?

Mrs. B: Yes. The Arna Mills bought it and I think they made overalls and jackets there. It employed a lot of Dearborn people. Then one night there was a terrible fire there.

Mrs. H: That was in 1910. I understand it was the biggest fire they ever had here except when the Rotunda was burned.

Mrs. B: It was a terrible fire. The Catholic bell rang and they could hear that for nearly half a mile. And every man and boy that was able to carried a

pail of water was there. We didn't have a fire department then. It was just volunteer. It burned for several days. Then the bricks from that old Arsenal building had built those three houses. My aunt lived in the first one.

Mrs. H: Are you talking about the three houses on Garrison Street that are now behind the Masonic Temple?

Mrs. B: No. This was on Monroe, the three houses, right next to the Fire Department. There were three homes there.

Mrs. H: Those homes have since been tore down. This was where your sister-in-law lived in one of those.

Mrs. B: Yes. Mrs. Brockmiller's was the only one that was there for a long, long time.

Mrs. H: Is hers the one that was tore down about 1962 or so?

Mrs. B: Around in there, yes. It was right next to the fire station. This was where Mr. and Mrs. William Brockmiller lived.

Mrs. H: Can you tell me a little bit more about the school days?

Mrs. B: Yes. You know Mildred Cronogue? Well, we children were coming to school one morning and I lived just a little ways from the school. It was right down the back of the Catholic Church, the school that I went to at the time. We heard the toot, toot, toot. I said to whoever was with me, "Oh, there must be somebody on the track." When we got to school, the fast train had stopped and Mildred Cronogue's little sister was going by there with her arms full of books. It struck her. I can see her yet. The books were thrown all over and we all felt so terribly bad.

Mrs. H: Do you remember any of the teachers you had?

Mrs. B: Kit Magoonaugh. Miss (Agnes) Magoonaugh had the ice cream stand up in Dearborn here. Kit was her sister. Then there was Tom and there was Det Magoonaugh.

Mrs. H: Which one was your teacher in school?

Mrs. B: Kit, I guess, they called her.

Mrs. H: How many grades were held together in one classroom, do you remember?

Mrs. B: Well, I don't know. There was – I know Jen Howe and Lou Howe and those girls- Florrie Brown and Laura Brown. They were all upstairs (in) this school. There must have been six, seven grades or something like that.

Mrs. H: In one classroom, would they have, say, the first, second and third grades all together or do you remember?

Mrs. B: Yes, I think they did.

Mrs. H: Do you remember how many teachers there were in the school?

Mrs. B: No, I don't remember that. I know there was a principle upstairs. I think there was only two teachers. I think so.

Mrs. H: Will you tell us about the work your father did with the Michigan Central?

Mrs. B: Well, he was a conductor on the Michigan Central. I remember Mother used to say he'd come home. When they lived back of the Catholic Church on Garrison, then he'd be home a day and a night and then the next day Mother said she'd pack enough in (he used to have a little satchel or valise) there to last two days. He was always gone two days.

Mrs. H: What was his route?

Mrs. B: Between Detroit and Jackson. Then he'd be gone two days. She said where they lived, there wasn't another house around there. She became pregnant again with my brother. I guess I was maybe pretty near a year old and she said to Dad that it was kind of scary. She was there alone and she was pregnant. So they sold that little place and then bought this place on Park Street. She was near people there. Well, Dad was in the Michigan Central- I don't really know how long but for quite a few years- ever since he came from Germany, I guess, almost.

Mrs. H: Now you say Mr. Brockmiller was a telegraph operator?

Mrs. B: And Elba Howe, that's Lou Howe's father, was his teacher. He used to go there every night after his work and he would teach him telegraphing. I guess he was there about three, four years. Then he went to Detroit and finished up. He was in the Michigan Central depot for pretty near fifty years.

Mrs. H: He, too, actually worked for the railroad as a telegrapher.

Mrs. B: Yes. He worked for Michigan Central Railroad for almost fifty years.

Mrs. H: How long has he been gone, Mrs. Brockmiller?

Mrs. B: It'll be twenty-four years next month.

Mrs. H: Mrs. Brockmiller, can you tell me where you lived after you got married?

Mrs. B: We lived on Mason street for a while with my mother in our old home. We lived on Park in the old home, and then we built a place on Mason Street. When that was finished, we moved in there and lived in there until Mr. Brockmiller died.

Mrs. H: What was the Michigan Avenue area like during that time?

Mrs. B: Oh, Ill tell you, Mrs. Hatch, we bought our first car in 1915, our Ford car. And when we'd get in that car and leave our driveway and get onto the main street, before we'd get to Michigan Avenue (that was only about a block), we were tired. It was just up and down, muddy and ruts and just terrible until we'd get to Michigan Avenue.

Mrs. H: Michigan Avenue wasn't paved until about when?

Mrs. B: No, it wasn't paved but yet it was a lot better driving there because there was much more traffic there.

Mrs. H: When did they pave Mason Street down by your home? Do you remember?

Mrs. B: Well, it was while we lived there because I remember when they were digging it and getting ready to pave. I don't know whether you know Mr. Halpin or not. He was a resident here. Anyway, he was one of the men

That had a team of horses there. The horses were supposed to pull something and they pulled their strength, every bit. He was lashing them. I went out and lashed him. I told him what I thought. You know, I used to meet him uptown and he would never speak to me. So one day he came up to me and he said, "Ida, I'm sorry. You told me the truth. I shouldn't have lashed my horses like that.

Mrs. H: Now do you remember when they did pave Michigan Avenue, about when it was?

Mrs. B: Well, it must have been right after we built that place there. It couldn't have been too long after because then they began to pave Michigan Avenue.

Mrs. H: Do you remember when you built your home on Mason?

Mrs. B: It was after Dad dies and Dad died in '15. It must have been in 1916 or '17. And I think around '17, '18, or '19. They must have paved Michigan Avenue.

Mrs. H: Now I understand during World War I that you worked for the Red Cross. Is that correct?

Mrs. B: Oh yes. Every Wednesday we had Red Cross day.

Mrs. H: Where was the meeting held?

Mrs. B: In the old Episcopal Church house. That was our meeting place. Every Wednesday my mother and my aunt, Mrs. Blake, and Grace Wilkie (that's Irene Woehlke's sister) and I went to the Red Cross.

Mrs. H: Who is Irene Woehlke?

Mrs. B: Well, she is a cousin of mine. Grace could just make anything, she sewed clothes. Well anyway, she ran one of the power sewing machines. There were three of them. When we'd go in there, we'd sit in groups. Our group just knit. We knitted vests, scarves, helmets and socks. That's what we did.

Another group in there maybe would cut out pajamas and then the girls would stitch these up. And another group would make button holes and sew on the buttons. Mrs. Snow was a wonderful person. Clara Snow looked just like her mother. She was such a wonderful person. Then we'd take our knitting hone and when we'd bring it back the next Wednesday, Mrs. Snow would inspect everything because it had to be just right.

Mrs. H: Was she actually in charge of the work groups?

Mrs. B: Yes. She was in charge. I never knew her husband, Mr. (Herbert) Snow. But anyway, there was an accident, if I can remember right. I don't even know when this accident was. He was killed. We were told, of course, that this passenger train was bringing his body in. So we all went down to the depot. We had a beautiful depot years ago and they tore that down.

Mrs. H: That's where the Newman's parking lot is, isn't it?

Mrs. B: Yes. We were all down to the depot. I know when they unloaded that casket, I don't believe there was a dry eye there. Everybody knew Mrs. Snow. We knew everybody years ago. Of course, she had those three children, Clara, Harry and Gertrude. They were just little tots. We all felt so sorry for her.

Mrs. H: About what year was this? Do you remember, Mrs. Brockmiller?

Mrs. B: Goodness no. I don't know.

Mrs. H: Was this before or after World War I?

Mrs. B: It was during World War I.

Mrs. H: I understand you were a member, probably you still are, of the Evangelical Church?

Mrs. B: I've been there all my life. I've been a member and I'm the oldest person in church, in years.

Mrs. H: Can you tell me about your work with the music in the church?

Mrs. B: Well, I've played the piano there as long as I can remember. When I was just a young girl, I used to play there and Gladys Salisbury played for

Sunday School for about three years there. John Miller was our choir director at the time. Some times other people would come in and we had conventions. Harold Koch was our choir director. I played for everything, marriages, deaths, and solos.

Mrs. H: Where was the Evangelical Church located when you were a girl?

Mrs. B: Right where it is now only it was the older church.

Mrs. H: I understand you were also active in the Order of the Eastern Star?

Mrs. B: I played there too.

Mrs. H: Was your husband a Mason?

Mrs. B: Yes.

Mrs. H: Do you remember when they built the big Masonic Temple?

Mrs. B: Oh sure. I don't know the year they built it but I remember when they built it.

Mrs. H: It was in the 1920s as I remember. The Order of the Eastern Star, how many members did you have?

Mrs. B: Well, there weren't too many. I remember that was when Mrs. Anna Hall and Lou Howe and not Keith Maxwell, his uncle. I can't think of his name now. Howard? Well anyway, they were all in the Eastern Star, their wives. There weren't too many there at that time. Anna Hall and Lou Howe were in the Eastern Star.

Mrs. H: For my own information, you keep saying Lou Howe. Are you talking about Mrs. Louie Howe or was there a ---

Mrs. B: Elba Howe's son, Lou Howe.

Mrs. H: What did the people who had been born and raised here in Dearborn think when all of a sudden your nice little town started to grow and became Ford country? Did you mind this too much or did it happen so gradually that you didn't realize it?

Mrs. B: We didn't like it too much. You see, most all the people that came here were farmers and they had their farms, or course. When the factory came, so many of them didn't farm anymore. They went to the factory to work.

Mrs. H: Are you talking about the Rouge Plant?

Mrs. B: Yes, the Rouge Plant. Of course, he was paying six dollars a day and you know years ago that was big money. My husband once said to me, "Ida, I believe I'll give up my job and go to the Ford Factory and work and get six dollars a day." "Oh," I said, "Emil, maybe you better not do that. You don't know what might happen." Well, he never did. We were always glad that he did stay at his job because he did get more money later. He worked there all his life.

Mrs. H: Mrs. Brockmiller, about 1920 after the Rouge Plant was being built, do you remember any discussion when the consolidation of Dearborn and Fordson came about? How did you feel about that? Do you remember? In the late 1920s the two towns consolidated Did it seem like a good thing to you?

Mrs. B: Yes. I think that people were really happy about it because there really wasn't any work here. You see, my father was a railroad man. My brother Clarence Woehlke, was a fireman on the railroad. They were all railroad men. I think they were real happy when they came and they started this because there were mostly all railroad men here years ago.

Mrs. H: That's interesting. I don't think we've ever gotten any particular information that would lead us to believe there were so many.

Mrs. B: Fred Dapprich was in the railroad; my brother was on the railroad and my cousins were all on the railroad. You see, it was such a little community here. That was all there was here. There was nothing else.

Mrs. H: Did your dad do any farming on the side?

Mrs. B: I don't really remember whether he did or not. Oh, I know that we lost a lot of money on our house after our neighbor that lived there. He wanted

To buy our house and I don't remember what we paid for it. It wasn't very much. And then the Ford factory came here and we got about twice as much for it.

Mrs. H: You wanted to tell us about the little private school you attended.

Mrs. B: There was no kindergarten at that time. This big place opened. Mr. Sexton, I am sure that was their name.

Mrs. H: This was across Michigan Avenue from St. Joseph's Retreat?

Mrs. B: It was right across from the Retreat, a great big home there. I know my mother used to walk us part way there. My brother and I used to go there to school.

Mrs. H: How many students were there? Do you remember?

Mrs. B: Well, I imagine around fifteen. I know Clara Snow went there, Harry Snow, Martha Ives, Albert Ives and some of his brothers and the Moores. There couldn't have been too many there.

Mrs. H: Who was your teacher there? Do you remember?

Mrs. B: No. I don't remember that.

Mrs. H: I'm glad you mentioned that because I'm not quite sure that we have that information any place, that there was this little private school where some of the boys and girls started their education. Will you tell us about the Snow family as you remember them?

Mrs. B: Yes. My mother and father used to have old Dr. Snow. He was wonderful. I can just remember him. He had snow white hair. I know after he passed away, they had Dr. Duffield for their doctor then. They always liked old Dr. Snow so well. She was so cute, his wife, you know. She had a little bit of lace bonnet she used to wear. She was so cute. She was a little person. We liked her so well.

Mrs. H: Doctor and Mrs. Snow were the grandparents of Miss Clara Snow, right?

Mrs. B: Yes. That was the grandparents.

Mrs. H: And before it was their son who died suddenly.

Mrs. B: Yes. It was Clara's father that died. I never knew what killed him, what the trouble was. I never knew him. I don't think that I ever saw him.

Mrs. H: Will you tell us what you know about the Ross family?

Mrs. B: Well, one time my daughter Gladys, and my mother, Mrs. Woelke, were invited to Mr. and Mrs. Frank Miller. They lived across the commons there on the hill across from the Ford Field there. We had to step over this fence. They had invited us there for dinner. Every time we'd get over on the other side of the fence, a cow would come for us. We'd get frightened and we'd get back again on this side. And we did that two or three times. Finally we yelled for Ed Miller. Pretty soon Ed Miller came out with a stick and he got that cow away. He helped us to his home and Mr. Miller brought us home in his car that night.

Mrs. H: Did you know Miss Lizzie Ross and her brother?

Mrs. B: Oh yes. I knew Lizzie Ross real well and her brother. What was his name?

Mrs. H: Lytle

Mrs. B: Yes. He worked for my dad on the railroad. He was his brakeman at one time. So we knew the Ross family very well.

Mrs. H: Do you remember Miss Elizabeth Ross, Lizzie?

Mrs. B: Oh yes, sure. I knew her.

Mrs. H: The one who left the house to the museum. We understand they loved animals quite a bit.

Mrs. B: Yes, they did.

Mrs. H: You've been a mighty considerate and fine interviewee. Thank you for your memories of early Dearborn.

Mrs. B: (I'm) glad to give you what I could remember.

Index

Arna Mills 4-5

Brockmiller, Emil 7,8,12

Cronogue, Edith 5

First Evangelical Church 10-11

Ford Motor Company, Rouge Plant 12

Halpin, Mr. 8-9

Howe, Elba 8

Magoonaugh Family 5

Mason Street 8

Michigan Avenue 8, 9

Miller, Mr. & Mrs. Frank, 24

Moody, Alice 4

Moody Home 4

Order of the Eastern Star 11

Park Street 2

Red Cross 9-10

Ross, James Lytle 14

Salisbury, Gladys Brockmiller 2, 7, 10-11

Sexton's, Mr., School 13

Snow, Dr. Edward S. 13

Snow, Elizabeth 13

Snow, Herbert 10

Snow, Mrs. Mary L. 10

Two Blacksmith Shop 2-3

Two Family 2

Upstairs-Downstairs School 4, 6

Woehlke, Charles 1, 6, 12

Woehlke, Clarence 2, 12

Woehlke, Ettie Prush 1,7

Woehlke, Grace 9