

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Carol and John Fritsche Oral History Interview

Nathan Head, Interviewer

September 4, 2018

Nathan Head (NH): My name is Nathan Head and I am interviewing my grandparents, Carol and John Fritsche, who have lived or been in the area of Edwardsville since the 1940s. And are going to talk about their lives then and how Edwardsville has changed to today. So what are some of the things you enjoyed doing as a kid throughout the year?

Carol Fritsche (CF): Well, since I was born and raised in Edwardsville and grew up here, um, I attended all the Edwardsville schools and, um, started out at the, what is, was called the LeClaire Academy which is now the Children's Museum. And we always enjoyed, um, our summers of course. We went to LeClaire Lake and fished, a lot of people swam. I didn't. But those were good memories of summer times. I lived on Dunlap Lake, which was I guess the early 1940s, was built. And I spent a lot of time on the lake with my dad and my mom and my sister. We did a lot of fishing, the gun club was right across the lake from us so we heard a lot of clay pigeons, etcetera going off. The summers were probably the best times for all children of course. You know with ice cream and swimming and fishing. During the winter time we spent a lot of time with sledding down hills and through the trees and we lived on Cottage Drive which was the small little drive on Dunlap Lake. It was, um, they were really wonderful memories of staying outside and building fires and having hot dogs and roasting marshmallows. A lot like the kids used to do, I don't think kids do that too much anymore.

John Fritsche (JF): [Unintelligible]

CF: Yeah, the home that we lived on Cottage Drive was one of the, well it was the very first home on Dunlap Lake. And it is still there. And it is a little cottage. And lots of memories.

NH: What were some of the things that, like, you did outside of school as far as like during the fall or like the winter?

CF: Well, during the fall of course we had a lot of leaves to rake. We raked our leaves, we had a great big lot and we had to rake the leaves and would build big, um, big piles of leaves and jump in them. And spread all the leaves out again and my dad would get upset with us but he enjoyed it as well. During the summer we always had a family reunion which was a big deal. We always had it at our house. My grandmother and my mother's twelve sisters and their husbands all my aunts and uncles and cousins would gather and bring all the best food that they were well-known for, my mother was well known for her fried chicken. My dad always started early. He would start early spring and start building picnic benches and picnic tables, taking care of the lawn and making sure it was just perfect for the big event. That was always one of the biggest deals that we had during the summer with, with all of our relatives. Some of our other relatives would come from St. Louis and my uncles from California would come and they played music, they played the violin, the cello, and the piano. That mostly was done inside the house but, um, those were really, really wonderful times when uncle Lee and uncle John and aunt Lena and aunt

Mable and everybody would come together and have a sing, music fest. We sort of, we enjoyed, we enjoyed those times.

NH: So how has Edwardsville changed over the years since you were a kid?

CF: Wow. Big changes. We have had so much growth in Edwardsville. You know when I was a kid, we were thinking you know like ten thousand people, nine thousand, eight thousand people. Um, and it may have even been five thousand. But the growth has really changed and I think I have to contribute a lot of it to the building of SIUE. It brought a lot of different folks into town, professors, and students from different areas. There's just been a huge change since SIUE has been here. Good changes. Not everybody thought they were good changes. But I feel personally that it has really benefited Edwardsville greatly. More houses, I mean the subdivisions have just bursted the building has bursted we have many more commercial establishments in Edwardsville than we had before. We had a couple place when I was a kid that you could go get a hot dog and that was about it. But you can go to many new restaurants downtown Edwardsville has really, um, changed it's to be a beautiful place to come and shop. Um, to come and shop to come and eat to come and walk. We have bike trails that we never had before, you know, I rode my bike as a kid along the lake. But now I can travel miles by the bike trail. Different trails all around. Um, big, big changes for our community. And they've all been very beneficial and helpful to all of our generations to follow. For my grandchildren, um, they have opportunities that, um, I never had. Just right here in our little community which isn't so little any more.

NH: So how did, ah, Edwardsville, what was the city's feeling towards the changes going on and like the highways being constructed and the new college, what was the city's feeling around that?

JF: Well I think the community as a whole embraced SIUE. But the local farmers, owners of the property, you know, they felt that it was an infringement upon their own personal rights. And so forth. And it just took several years of working together, you know a lot of panels for working together to make each entity understand you know the benefits of what education can be. This in turn brought transportation, we got interstate 270, wouldn't of had all that access you know to St. Louis, other parts of the county and so forth if we didn't have, you know, the interstates. So, ah, in the process what we lost in transportation, we used to have streetcars that would run right up through Main Street. Then go south and some of 'em would go to Granite City, St. Louis. Others went to Belleville, East St. Louis and so forth so there was a lot of integration in the fifties there and forties, thirties.

NH: So Carol, you said that not everyone welcomed the new college and environments with open arms. Can you tell me a little bit more about what, uh, what happened with you personally, how did your family react, or?

CF: My father was the building contractor and property to him was very important and when they came in and, to actually look over the property they got some beautiful property for SIU probably the best property you know in Edwardsville area. And people were really upset because they were going in and tearing out you know trees that were there for you know, I don't know how long, many, many, many years. And, um, they just seemed like they were all unhappy because they felt the environment was going to change dramatically to, you know, people running around and kids and young adults, having parties and having fun. So, that impact was sort of well obviously it was negative but when the, I think when

people started seeing what was actually happening with the new roads being built and um the, the buildings that were being built and how beautiful they were and how that really fit into the environment, um, I think it took a little while but people started you know changing. But the very beginnings of it were the farmers whose property was being taken. I think the most negative part were the farmers themselves who, you know, had all this property. It was beautiful property. I can recall, you know, the helicopters coming over and, um, people were actually shooting guns at the helicopters, trying to scare them off or whatever. But fortunately that did not happen and fortunately they continued on with the progress of completing the university and, um, I still see it as a huge asset for our whole community and for the surrounding areas. It gave me opportunity to go to school, to college and it's going to give our, I guess our grandchildren the opportunity to use the university.

NH: Okay. Now John what was your perspective on the whole change in how did you see it?

JF: Well my perspective was different in that I come from a small community northern Illinois, or central Illinois. And so it was, it was an awful lot of things that were happening. That, at SIUE. Just the concept in itself I moved to Edwardsville in early sixties. And started school then. I would attend school, take the time off to get increase my funds, and, uh, so it was an exciting time. I was, I worked for the Illinois Department of Transportation. We were actively working on interstate 255, or 270. And um, brought us closer from the northern, southern, and uh east and west. All the, you know, the community and as a whole. So that was good. Edwardsville's been an excellent community for me, my family, we had opportunities that we probably would not have ever had if we hadn't you know, afforded SIUE. So, ah, it's, ah, it's a dynamic community you know goes back to 1800. And, uh, it's going more so you know today. You know, there's a lot of history here in Edwardsville. It's thought to have the entire community support one another. It's very important.

NH: So how has that, like, how has the community sort of changed in your perspective like as far as businesses go or kind of where the town has shifted?

JF: Well, the town has shifted from north to south, just drive down Main Street and most of the buildings on Main Street today were built within the last ten years or less. Um, we stared out and I moved to Edwardsville we probably had four or five attorneys and now we probably got four or five hundred attorneys that are in Edwardsville. So, um, I lost my train of thought.

NH: Alright, so John, how and really more so why did you get introduced and working for IDOT, the Illinois Department of Transportation?

JF: Well, Nathan, the start of that particular story is when I used to build a lot of tree houses as a kid. Take all my lumber or whatever and build a tree house and maybe a double-story tree house. And as time went on building became more and more a part of me and I had initially thought of going into being an auditor and doing auditing on books and so forth. But that quickly changed as the time to make a final decision about what I wanted to do came roaring down the trail. Had the opportunity to work for the Department of Transportation, there's, Illinois is, has a fifth- largest transportation system, you know, in the world. So it's a, it's quite a, company to work for. I started, I worked for them for thirty-six, thirty-seven years. So it, ah, it had a major impact on a lot of the things that I've, my life, my family's life, the life of my family.

NH: When did you start working for them?

JF: Started in 1962. Is when I started with them and I worked with them until 19, ah, 97. That was my thirty-seven or so years. We did a lot of projects involving the community, you know, how the transportation works with the communities and so forth, we give opportunities for minorities and females on highway construction, running the heavy equipment and so forth. We broke ground in places, ah, we had invitations to go out to the state of Ohio to show them what we do here in Metro East. [Phone ringing] It's really the opportunity with the department, working with outside sources were just tremendous. And I enjoyed that, that was a challenge. So we did, ah, different projects throughout the state of Illinois. But some of our best work was here with SIUE. The, I'm trying to think of the roadway...

CF: Whiteside

JF: Whiteside roadway. That was a major, major accomplishment. We did a lot of sidewalks and stuff between housing groups and so forth. So we did, I feel that we were extremely accountable for what we did and you know, the impact that we had on the school and impact on the department. People started wanting to assist more in projects. And, ah, we let them do that. So, ah, it was, it was quite an accomplishment. Enjoyable.

NH: What, um, where did it take you, and like what did you, and necessarily do, for the company itself?

JF: Well, ah, in my experience, it's, I was able to work with people, work with diverse groups of people, to make things happen and make, have them talk and understand what we're looking for and what they're looking for. It just, ah, it's a very complex set of issues. We work with the president of SIUE, Dr. Rendleman, we worked with the people out of Washington. So it's just, it put me into contacts with a lot of people, diverse groups of people that really was a worthwhile entity for me. A challenge. And I like challenges.

NH: Did you ever go out to DC yourself, for the job?

JF: Yeah, I did. Yeah, went out there, we met with some department heads, we were invited to go out there for that. And so we've been, one of the contractors invited us to go along with them, you know. So it was, it was a challenge. And, which is always, wakes us up.

NH: Yeah. Yeah. What was it for, necessarily, that they had you go out to DC?

JF: Well, we went out to Washington because there was a conflict between some agencies and it caused us problems in working with people and getting them on jobs and, it just, it wouldn't work.

NH: Yeah, a lot of headache.

JF: We tried to get these folks up there in Washington to understand but unfortunately, we weren't able to do that, so we continued doing what we were doing cause they told us that we, you know, they didn't want us to do it, but they didn't have the authority to shut us down. So we knew we were doing good for the people. And that's what it's all about. You know, creating an opportunities.

NH: Alright, well I appreciate you both giving your input. And maybe next time we can talk about something else, something else.