

***Florence Weckesser Whitefield***

***Gertrude Weckesser Bremer***

Interviewed by Hallie Lou Blum on an unknown date at an unknown location.

Oral history tape number: 51

*This is an interview for Historic Madison, Incorporated, of two sisters, Florence Weckesser Whitefield and Gertrude Weckesser Bremer, about their memories of the Williamson Street area when they were young. Do you want to start, Florence, with some of your memories of Williamson Street?*

Florence: Which one?

*Start with the brewery.*

Florence: In the 700 block there was the General Paper Company and then the Madison Candy Factory was in the middle of the block. On the corner was the Horsmeier's Pop Bottling Factory, which made all the pop for Madison at that time. Across the street was a little grocery store.

In the 800 block there was Drive's Coal Company. Across the street from there was a plumbing store. Then next door was a painter. On the end of the block was Breitenbach's grocery store and saloon. Across the street was another saloon, and on that corner a barbershop, which had been there for years. It just closed up a few years ago.

In the 900 block, there was Jordan's Meat Market and across the street was the Dickert Shoe Store. Next door the Vogel family lived. Mr. Vogel had a carpenter business and had his own shop next door. There was also a bakery. Then next door was where our family lived. My Dad ran a little grocery store. My mother had boarders. Across the street was a hardware store and a little ways down was the dentist, Bergmann Dentist.

In the next block was... I can't just remember.

Well, the 1000 block had another shoe store, run by Mr. Kaus. Across the street was a building. I can't recall exactly what was there, but I do remember the Holy Rollers had programs there in the basement, and as youngsters we used to watch through the windows. The end of that block was another grocery store. I can't remember the name of it. Across on the opposite corner was Atwood's Pharmacy.

The 1100 block I can't remember too much, but in the 1200 block there was Figlinger's grocery store and one of the original movie theaters, five-cent theaters. Just beyond that was the fire station, which is still there. As children we went to Marquette School for first grade and in seventh and eighth grades we used to watch the fire horses go out. It was very interesting to watch them and to pet them.

*Did you go to the movies?*

Florence: Oh, sure, we went to the movies. We saw every Pearl White series.

*You went every Saturday if you had a nickel?*

Gertrude: Every single weekend. Mother took us.

Florence: I think the original theater was on Baldwin Street, just north of Williamson. That was a nickel theater, where there were silent movies, and it was run by one family. One daughter was a cashier, one played the piano, one sang, and the son ran the projectors.

*That was a good family.*

Florence: Well, from there on I don't know. Also in the 900 block there was a blacksmith.

*Did you watch him work?*

Florence: Oh, sure, we watched him work.

*He had an outdoor fire and tools?*

Florence: No. He had a little shop that he made everything in. And he lived next door in a little house.

*Did horses come for shoeing? Or was it just metal work?*

Florence: Metal work.

Gertrude: He made horseshoes, too.

*I suppose he did. Do you remember horses coming in?*

Florence: No. We always took our horse up to Carmen's, on South Blair Street, to have the horses shod. We had a horse.

*And a buggy?*

Florence: Oh, sure. The sleigh.

*And when did you use those?*

Florence: Well, we didn't use them too often. My Dad only had one leg and so we didn't go out too often. But we had a little exercise place to let the horse out every day, and we used to love going in.

*So the horse was in a building right behind your house?*

Florence: Yes.

*How nice. Were there any other out-buildings behind the house?*

Florence: Attached to it was a little chicken coop. Mother raised her own chickens. We always had chicken on Sunday. She would kill her own chickens on Saturday and get them ready.

*How great! And fresh eggs, I'll bet.*

Florence: A few. And there was a little garden in between the house and the chicken coop.

*Do you remember something about what your grandparents did? And your parents?*

Florence: Well, my grandfather really owned that place that we lived in later on. He built that home. He was a stonecutter and helped cut the stones for the old original Madison post office, which stood where Manchester's store was. I can remember the old city hall was across the street, where Woolworth's store is now.

My Dad was born in the 1000 block on Williamson Street in 1858. After the Civil War there was an orphans' home built up on the corner of Harvey Terrace and Taylor Place, on which property we later built a home. My grandmother used to help out at this orphans' home.

*And your mother also did some baking, didn't she?*

Florence: My Dad originally ran the Northwestern Hotel, immediately across from the old Northwestern station, from 1888, I think, to 1892. Then he moved to McFarland and worked for Edwards Brothers, making harnesses for horses. In the same time they rented or bought quite a large home there. Mother ran a sort of a restaurant. It was called a hotel, Weckesser Hotel. They rented rooms and Mother served meals.

In 1906, my Dad was out hunting for ducks. His dog jumped in the boat ahead of him. He didn't want to point the gun at the dog, and as he pushed it in, he hit the hammer on the seat and

it exploded and hit him in the leg. Well, evidently they had to bring him in to Madison, which is fourteen miles, in just a wagon with hay. It was a little hospital at that time. Dr. Gill took care of him. They wanted to operate and take the leg off below the knee, but he said no, he thought he could save it.

In the meantime gangrene set out so he had to have the whole leg amputated, which left him only three inches of a stump. Of course, he had to give up his harness making, and they came back to Madison and took over my grandfather's home. In the meantime, my grandmother had died. I never knew her. They added on a small addition in the front and had a little store. Mother took in some boarders and did a lot of baking for the store and for outsiders. I can remember when John Findorff lived on State Street near the university, he used to drive way out in an open car to get coffee cakes. And I also delivered coffee cakes to the original Dr. Miller, who lived in the 700 block on Williamson.

There was also a knitting factory in the 700 block, run by a family who had their own machines there and made all kinds of sweaters.

*My word! And could you go in and buy a sweater?*

Florence: Sure. We used to buy our sweaters there.

*That's wonderful. Didn't have to go to a store. Gertrude, do you want to talk a little bit about schools and those things?*

Gertrude: Well, I went to Harvey School too. As I remember, the principal was Mrs. Parsons and she was also principal or a teacher when Florence and Marie were in school. If anything ever happened, why she would always bring up what my sisters had done.

Florence: She also taught us in sixth grade.

Gertrude: And I remember going to the theater once a week. Mother would take us to see the Pearl White series. I also remember that when Ringling Brothers Circus would come to town, they used to have parades and they would go by our house. They would go by it on Williamson Street. That was always a thrill. And I remember once in a while we'd have the German band that would come and they would play in front of our house.

*Oh. Did people donate at that time?*

Gertrude: I don't remember. I suppose they gave them money. I was so small, I don't remember. All I remember is hearing them play.

Also I worked in the grocery store that my folks had. I took care of the candy counter. I'd have to clean the windows and the candy jars and things every week and fill up the candy trays. I also did some of the ordering. When the salesman would come around, why, he'd always give me some samples of candy, because he wanted me to order from him.

*That's right. If you liked that, you'd order it.*

Gertrude: We used to play games on the corner, and we always had to come home before dark. If we didn't know what time it was, they said "Well, when the policeman comes along, then you come home." That was the time to come home.

Florence: I can remember when the Capitol burned, early in the morning. Three or four o'clock in the morning there was an awful noise, bells ringing, I imagine. We got up to find out. We heard the Capitol was burning. I was only six years old and Mother took me up. We watched it burn. Of course, there were crowds of people around the Capitol at that time. And all the firemen

that there were in the city at that time were trying to put it out. Later on we used to watch them building.

When I went to high school, old Madison High School, we used to cut through the Capitol, in the wintertime especially, going there. We always had to walk to school. We were never allowed to walk on the grass around the Capitol in those days. Now they let cows on there and everything else. It really was a beautiful building and the grounds were kept up very well.

*But you cut through to keep warm?*

Gertrude: Yes. And also we used to have to walk home. We used to stop in the Northwestern station to keep warm.

*And wasn't there a little Milwaukee Road station?*

Gertrude: Across on King Street, where the John Nolen Drive starts now was the old East Madison St. Paul station.

*Did you go to Fourth of July celebrations?*

Gertrude: Yes. They used to have something up at the Capitol Square. I don't remember very much, but I know they had fireworks out on a raft out on Lake Monona, at the foot of Monona Avenue. They would come out after dark. One year somehow they all went off at one time. Whoever was operating the raft and the fireworks jumped into the water, so no one was injured. That was the end of that celebration.

*Did you go out to some of the amusement parks? With the Sunday school or anybody?*

Gertrude: Well, they had Winnequah Park, which was way out on the east side. They had a big pier there, and we used to go swimming. We'd go out for the whole day and have picnic lunches.

*Was that Lake Monona or Lake Mendota?*

Gertrude: Lake Monona.

*It took a long time to get there, didn't it?*

Gertrude: Yes, we had to go out by the streetcar.

*It was at the end of the line?*

Gertrude: Not quite. A few blocks beyond that was the car barns.

*Oh, that would be the end. I know in Washington, one of the lines ended at an amusement park. When did the buses come in? Do you remember?*

Gertrude: Oh, I can't remember exactly when the buses started.

*In the late 1920s, I bet.*

Gertrude: I think it was earlier than that. Do you remember those picnics at all?

Florence: No, I don't remember the picnics. I remember Sunday school or church picnics that we'd go. Everybody would take a lot of food, and then you'd eat at one table and everybody would pass everything around. I can't remember what park it was held in. But I do remember in the summer we used to go to Tenney Park to swim in the afternoon and in early spring we'd pick wildflowers on the way. We'd walk over there. That was cool to go swimming there. I don't remember going swimming in Lake Monona too much. We used to always go to Tenney Park. I

don't know why.

*Did you ever go ice skating?*

Florence: Oh, yes. We'd go ice skating on Lake Monona. There used to be an ice house that was beyond Fauerbach's Brewery. They would sell hot chocolate and they'd have cookies and a few things. We'd go out skating and then, of course, we'd get cold and hungry. We'd come in and rest for a while and have hot chocolate, and then we'd go out again. I remember after Christmas they'd collect a lot of the Christmas trees and they'd put them around sort of a path.

Once in a while if somebody had an ice boat, they'd take us for a ride on the ice boat. It had a sail on it and we'd go out on the ice. Of course, in the spring you had to watch out for the cracks. I remember one time Marie and her friend were out on the lake and she fell in a crack, which frightened Marie. She would never go swimming or anything like that afterwards. She was always afraid of the water. But I never saw anything like that.

*Where did you go to high school?*

Gertrude: I went to Central High. At the time when I went to Harvey School, we had seventh and eighth grades there and we went to Marquette School for home economics (for cooking and sewing and things like that). Then I went to Central High and graduated from there.

*At Harvey School you got to get out and take a little walk and go to Marquette School for these other classes.*

Gertrude: Right. That was always fun to go for the classes. That was only once a week, though.

*Not every day?*

Gertrude: No, no. Just once a week.

*Did you have any adventures in the winter with sleds or with toboggans?*

Florence: Yes. I can specially remember going down Wisconsin Avenue on toboggans, all the way down Wisconsin to Johnson and then we'd turn on Johnson and get down to Hancock Street.

*There weren't too many cars to be worried about.*

Florence: No, there weren't cars in those days. One boy had a small car that he used to pull the toboggan back up the hill to Wisconsin Avenue again. Those were good rides.

*I'll bet they were. And good and icy, too.*

Florence: Oh, when we were kids, too, we used to play at the corner of Paterson and Williamson. We'd play "Pump, Pump, Pull Away," hide-and-seek. Then in the winter, too, that was kind of a steep block. We used to slide down that street. Right at the corner there where Breitenbach's had their store was a pump, so the boys would get pails of water and pour it on the hill so it would be real icy.

*So you really went fast! Did you go way out to the railway tracks?*

Florence: Yes, just about.

*Do you remember trains in those days? Were they frequent?*

Florence: Oh, yes. Well, just about a block behind us on Breatly Street was the old round house, where they used to take care of the engines, doing repair work.

*And then there was a lot of freight going through there, wasn't there?*

Florence: Oh, yes.

*And passenger trains, too.*

Florence: I remember during World War I, my Dad used to give us cigarettes. When the soldiers' trains went through, we used to go down and hand them in to the boys on the window when they'd stop there for a few minutes. Or candy, or whatever.

*Yes. I'll bet they were appreciative. Did you use the train to go to visit anybody? I guess all your relatives were here.*

Florence: No. I had an aunt and uncle who had a farm between Black Earth and Cross Plains. Several summers I used to go out there to visit them. We took the train to Cross Plains and they'd meet us with their horse and buggy and go back and spend a few days.

*That was wonderful. It was exciting, too, wasn't it?*

Florence: When they had the old fairgrounds, where the Coliseum is now, we used to get a train at the old eastside Madison station and go to the fair. That was a treat.

*Yes. I remember those old fairgrounds. They had the horse races and all sorts of things.*

Florence: Oh, yes. They used to have... what did they call them? Harness racing. My Dad always had a stand out there. They'd sell hamburgers, mostly, was one of the big things. And then cracker jacks.

*Who would cook these hamburgers? Your mother?*

Florence: Yes, I guess she did.

Gertrude: I think we had extra help to help out. I remember I was just a little kid and, of course, I didn't do much. I was too young to do anything, but I'd go out there and I'd be there. They'd let me wander around. People knew who I was, so I never did get lost. We had quite a big stand and did a lot of business. It was hard, though. You had to take everything, all your supplies, out with horse and buggy.

Florence: And you rented your space. They had the same space for several years, until it was too much work for Mother. She would cook a lot of things ahead of time, and bake a lot of things ahead of time, and serve pie and probably doughnuts, besides the sandwiches that they served. I do remember the horse races, watching them. And there were big displays of fruits and vegetables, canned goods. Quilts. All buildings for different things. Canned goods, jellies. They'd give different prizes, first, second, third prize.

Gertrude: I guess they had a merry-go-round, didn't they?

Florence: They always had a merry-go-round and a Ferris wheel. They didn't have as many things like the do now, but probably had a few of these where you throw the hoop and things like that.

*And win a Kewpie doll or something like that.*

Florence: Yes. But what I remember was that they didn't have that many concession stands. It was mostly food stands and that.

*Do you have any memories of the circus coming to town?*

Florence: Oh, yes. We used to get up early to watch them unload. They used the elephants for pulling all the wagons off the cars, the freight cars.

*And that was right in the railroad yard near your house?*

Florence: Yes. About two blocks away. Later on we'd go out and watch them set up the big tent, which was located way out on East Washington Avenue. Then later at night, when the circus was over, we'd go back and watch them load up. Of course, we always got to the circus.

*You never got to ride on an elephant, did you?*

Florence: No. I was afraid to do that.

*And you saw some of the Wild West shows that came to town?*

Florence: Yes. I saw once. I was real young. I went with my brother. That wasn't too far out from where we lived also. Oh, how he could shoot! Never missed an object that was thrown in the air.

*That's wonderful. Moving objects, not just a target.*