

Oral History Interview with Dana Evans

December 6, 2001

By Judy McConchie

JM: This interview is being held at the home of Dana Evans, 102 South Tenth Street, Marshall, Illinois, on the afternoon of December 6, 2001. This is Judy McConchie, the interviewer. To begin with, Dana, I would like to ask you when and where were you born?

DE: I was born in West Terre Haute, Indiana, on August 23, 1908. My father was Ernest Everett Evans; my mother was Mollie Cooper Evans. I have two brothers and one sister living. I had one brother died after two years of age. I have one brother older, Glenn Evans, now at Casey and a sister, Helen Lumas, who is now residing in Marshall, and I have a brother in Quincy, IL, Robley Dean Evans.

JM: When you were growing up, where did you live?

DE: My first six years was in West Terre Haute, and we lived on North Sixth Street where my father had a home. Then, because of difficulty with his back as his employment as a railroad telegrapher on the Pennsylvania Railroad there, we decided . . . and after the large flood of 1913, he decided to employ himself by going someplace else so we came to a tower which was named Oak Leaf, and that was two and a half miles east of Casey, IL, so after going to school in Casey for two years we moved there. He built the home out there. The home was three blocks from the Oak Leaf Tower. It was quite near the schoolhouse also, and so then from about 1917 until 1940 I was there, living there.

JM: You were living in Casey all that time.

DE: Yes.

JM: And was your father working for the railroad all that time?

DE: Yes.

JM: Could you elaborate a little bit on his job with the railroad?

DE: To start in with, my father was from around near Melrose and went to school at West Union, no--West York, where they had about a two-year high school, and he attended that, and then he became a sub-postmaster for the West York district; and at this time his schooling gave him the right to write for a teacher's exam, and he passed the teacher's exam but he did not teach. He decided to come to Marshall, and he learned telegraphy under two or three people in Marshall, and then about that time in 1903 he was married then here in Marshall. He and mother were married here in Marshall, and so

that was the determination of his becoming an operator--telegrapher. Then he pursued that employment for thirty-five and a half years, (Dana later corrected this to 43-1/2 years) but, of course, it entailed him moving later on to another place. But that was a very, very interesting place because he bought the land which surrounded the tower. And we were on the National Road, the old 40, and behind us was the Pennsylvania Railroad, and it was only a short distance between the two so that going to high school in Casey . . . and we all grew up there until we sought employment or went someplace else.

JM: You talked about the tower. What specifically is the tower that you were referring to?

DE: Well the tower is a two-story building, and these towers used to be situated about twenty miles apart on the Pennsylvania Railroad. These towers and the towers in Casey and Terre Haute and all along to St. Louis, it was the St. Louis division. So these towers were very, very important, the small towers, because they dealt with the railroad from directions given by the dispatcher in Terre Haute, Indiana, and this particular tower only had the two levers to pull. Now levers in that time were very difficult to pull. When you left West Terre Haute, this tower was situated on two railroads; that is, one railroad crossed another. It was called interlocking plant was right in the tower, and when the operator pulled the lever you moved the switch and pulled the rails apart maybe a block down the road, down the railroad, so that my father became very . . . well, it was hurting his back so that he decided to move, and this tower was one that had only the two levers.

Now since we lived only two and a half blocks from the tower, we were, as children, there many, many times, and many activities went on at the tower. We were allowed to come down most any time. We went down a little lane from our house, climbed over the fence, and there was the tower, and my father was always on the alert for everything that was going on because just behind the tower he could look along the stretch of land only a few yards and see U.S. 40 with the traffic. He could look to the left or to his right and see the schoolhouse where we were going to school. It determined a lot about what we did as children. We were never allowed to play in the snow as many of the children did, so we even had to play tag over (at) the schoolhouse and stay on the other side of the schoolhouse from where dad could view us from the tower. He gave us directions of all kinds, and we were very much controlled as children from the time we left home until we got to school and so in the evening. Now he went to work as an operator there, and there was the first trick that he worked, that was from seven o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon so he didn't get to see us come home from school, but he did watch us a great deal. We were never allowed to stay on the tower when the trainmen would come up. They would come up as the trains were halted there on the siding, which was there also, and they would come to the tower so my father would say, "I think you'd better go home, you children better go home," because they used some language that he didn't quite approve of, so it was a very controlled situation.

JM: Well, that's interesting. Are the towers still standing? Are any of the towers still standing?

DE: No. Many of these towers are gone. In fact it's controlled very much from Terre Haute. It's very different in that way. The sidings are even gone from the railroad track, and for a while they moved the tower from where it was to a mile east of there, even to a place called DuPont, and my father had to go a little farther, and then they took that tower away, and that's when he decided to go back and work clear at West Terre Haute at Vigo Tower where he had worked and across the Wabash River over at K Cabin Tower and two or three towers along there he decided to work for a while. Then eventually he decided that he would sell the farm where we lived in the house and all, and he had employment at Altamont, Illinois, and from there he retired in about 1965 after thirty-five and a half years. (Upon review of this transcript, Dana said her father retired in 1945 after forty-three and a half years.)

JM: Well, because you were . . . or because he worked for the railroad did that give you a lot of chances to ride trains. Did you go many places on the trains at that time when he was working for the railroad?

DE: We did. This was the time when the railroads were the place to go, the way to travel, and we had passes and my father took advantage of that. We went on trips as children, young children, to Niagara Falls before I was even six years old or so. He took two or three of us now on this trip to Niagara Falls. Then we would go to Pittsburgh. We would go to St. Louis on trips. We took trips to Mississippi and we took many trips to Denver, Colorado, to visit. We went to Chicago and we could get passes all the way.

JM: So you did a lot more traveling than most children your age at that time did.

DE: That's true, and I never took advantage of talking about it or using it as theme topics at school. I wonder about it now.

JM: Well, back to your childhood. What kind of chores were you asked to do? You said your father kind of kept you under his thumb. Did your mother require you to do many chores around the house?

DE: Well, she should have done more than she did because mother worked very hard, and dad was the time that . . . when he would come home from the tower at three o'clock and he would always feed our chickens, which was . . . that was his duty, and then he would ask mother what she wanted from town, and he would go to town and met many people and made many friends that we had from Casey. As far as doing chores, we dusted and cleaned the house, and mother, of course, did the cooking. We never learned to cook very much because she didn't have time to teach us.

JM: She probably was a good cook herself.

DE: She was a wonderful cook. That's the way I like things now, the way my mother fixed them.

JM: Did you have any special foods that she fixed you liked?

DE: We always had fried potatoes, just so much, and so I did learn to fry potatoes. We had all the . . . we had cows; across the railroad track was our barn, and we had all the things that you need. We had the garden. We had all the things, so there wasn't anything we didn't need, that we did need.

JM: Since Christmas is coming up, did you have any special Christmas foods that your mother prepared?

DE: I think we would have pumpkin pies, and we would have the things like yams. Of course, we had chickens instead of turkey back then. Mother had vegetables from the garden. She always fixed her foods separately. I mean we did not have a mixture of foods put together.

JM: You didn't have casseroles.

DE: No, we didn't have casseroles, not then.

JM: Then did you go in your early years to Casey to school, or did you start at West Terre Haute?

DE: Well, I started at West Terre Haute. I was six in August, and we didn't move until the latter part of that year. The schools in West Terre Haute were very crowded then. West Terre Haute by 1905 had 3,500 people, and they had grown from 500 just about six years before that, but West Terre Haute was a mining center. It was also a railroad center, and so it developed quite early across from Terre Haute, across the Wabash. The bridge was there. My father did a lot of work with the camera so he would go and take pictures of the bridge. We have many pictures of the things around Terre Haute, so that determined that after we went out two and a half miles east of Casey, we went to Yoke School then from the third grade to the eighth; and, of course, in those days I did pass the eighth grade. We wrote on an examination, and you had to pass that before you could go, and it was quite important. Then we went into Casey High School. At first we, my brother, as soon as he got to high school, had a car so then I got to ride to school with him for two years, and then I rode with somebody else who was going along. Dad would arrange it, and then I was out of school there. Then I . . . Dad had decided, I think, that perhaps I would like to go to college, so he arranged for me to go to Eastern Illinois.

JM: What were your favorite pastimes and leisure activities in your growing-up years? Did you go to movies?

DE: Yes, we went to many movies? Dad was one who enjoyed the movies. From the time I was six years old in West Terre Haute there was a movie called the Jitney then. It only cost a jitney, which was not more than a nickel probably for a child, and the Jitney, it was two blocks from our house so we went many times there. Then, living where we did, we went to Terre Haute many times after three o'clock when my father was off. Now he worked seven days a week for many years except for taking a vacation perhaps,

about a week or so, so that was a great deal. We enjoyed music. We had the Victrolas and as the radio came along, we had that and then, of course, eventually other things.

JM: Did any of your family play musical instruments?

DE: I would say no. My father sent my sister and me to Terre Haute to take lessons. Helen took lessons on the violin and I took on the piano. We enjoyed getting on the noon train and riding to Terre Haute, getting to the station, taking the street car downtown, and going to the dime store and eventually going to West Terre Haute where Helen took of the father, and I took of the daughter there, and we took, I think, all one summer.

JM: Are these the piano lessons?

DE: Yes. Helen took on the violin and I took on the piano.

JM: Okay.

DE: And we were asked to come over whenever she was going to have a special program, but we always managed to say we couldn't make it, and dad did not like to hear us practice so he would say, "Now I want you to practice (you know) before I get home." Well we didn't; we didn't practice very well, but I think that we did not go ahead. My brother took on the saxophone so it was a little noisy while we were doing that, but we never really did continue to take lessons very much.

JM: You said you went to college after high school. You went to Eastern. Did you have some good experiences there?

DE: Yes. Dad arranged for us, and arranged where we would stay, and then we were there for a week or two at a time until . . . so we could go home. I was never homesick. We were rooming . . . I roomed with another girl, and it seems strange now that the day that we were off was not Saturday years and years ago, but it was Monday that we took off, and I never did know why that was for a few years like that. I was situated quite close to the college, and I was on an ordinary four-year course to start with, but about in the second or third year, well I went two years, and then I started teaching. Then after that I went summers to school for many, many years until I got my degree in 1949, and I graduated from high school in '26, so it was . . . but I took trips and did many other things.

JM: And did you teach all this time? Were you teaching all this time?

DE: Yes, I was teaching then, so I had quite a few years in before I graduated.

JM: Did you teach in Casey?

DE: I taught . . . first I taught a country school. The name of it was Toner, which was two and a half miles north of our house. I taught there one year. Of course, that was only

an eight-month school so then I went to Chicago and worked there in a Sears Roebuck in the paint and wallpaper department of the store at Canal and Hulman, and I worked about six weeks that summer. That country school teaching was just wonderful. I remember Mr. Bright, who was the county superintendent and lived here in Marshall. He came to visit, you know, the country school, and I had all the experiences that a country teacher would have with 27 pupils there. I had no trouble. I enjoyed it. We played and the children would go across the road and play in the woods--no accidents. Halloween happened. It was kind of strange the things that would happen around the school then, but it was fun; so then the next year after I had worked in Chicago and came back I was employed in Casey, and I taught the fourth grade for ten years in Casey and, of course, could come back and stay at home; and then, after that it was 1941, I went to Watseka, IL, where I taught. I remember, of course, when Pearl Harbor day was, and I was on my way to Indianapolis to go on to Watseka when that happened. And I remember teaching the fifth and sixth grade combination there and teaching ancient history. And I thought, oh my, this is just something . . . I should be teaching something else, but, of course, we could not tell about the death march and some of those things that were happening to MacArthur, you know, in the Philippines. You couldn't talk about that to the students. We issued gasoline stamps so that you could travel, and I could travel back and forth pretty well, but that was a hundred miles from Casey, so after that I left and taught six years at Robinson, which was closer to Casey, and there I taught sixth grade.

Then since I was . . . by that time had changed my course to English and art especially, and the board decided that I should teach art, so from then on I taught art for four years. By that time it was 1948. I decided to stop teaching and go back and get a bachelor's so I went to Eastern again, and I finished in just the fall term. By Christmas I was out, but by this time my parents had, of course, left Casey and had gone and they were in Altamont, Illinois, during the war; and so then Dad decided he had 43-1/2 years, 35-1/2, no--43-1/2 years in so he decided to sell the farm, although we were living in Altamont by that time, to sell the farm completely and go to California so I was on my own then for a while and finished teaching in Robinson, but I had my degree in '48, 1948, and the ceremony was in 1949. Then I worked on my master's for two years, and in '52 I had my master's from Terre Haute.

JM: You had mentioned that during the war you couldn't really talk about the death marches and what was going on. Were you not allowed to by the board or was that . . .

DE: No, it was in our meetings we would decide, and they thought young children, it was even as now, you know, we have to think about what we tell children.

JM: And how old were the children you were teaching?

DE: They were 6th graders--5th and 6th graders.

JM: They were 6th graders.

DE: They were 10, 11, and 12, right along in there.

JM: Then after you finished teaching, did you work other places? I know a lot of people who retire, then they work other places, too. You had mentioned in our talking that you'd even worked in Supermet here in Marshall.

DE: Yes, yes, I did.

JM: Was that during the summertime, perhaps?

DE: Yes, it was for a short time during the summer.

JM: I see.

DE: I finally decided it was not for me. The woman who was teaching me to work there, she was very, very good, and she said, "Now I am going to leave you in the office, and I want you to take charge." But I didn't know there was a plant back of this in which there were many people working. They would call and say, "Will you tell my wife (so and so)," and I didn't (know them), and then there were many machines. The computer was not in yet, but I did have a comptometer to work with, and we sent the messages by machine, I don't know what. It was complicated for me, and so I didn't work there very long. I had, during the summer terms . . . when I was visiting in Ohio one summer I worked at dime stores there for, oh, maybe, three weeks or so. And so after I finished my bachelor's, I had time, before I went to Decatur, to work in a dime store at Terre Haute. I always thought, you know, growing up as a child I wanted to work in the dime store. I thought they had the most beautiful girls in the world, and of course, they dressed and some of the ribbons and some of their hats . . . it was very, very funny. I think that's maybe all.

JM: You had mentioned remembering Pearl Harbor. Were there any other historical events that stand out in your mind as you are thinking back on past times?

DE: Well, first the flood in West Terre Haute. Although I was not six yet, I remember the flood, and the motorboats were going right down our street, and it came within two inches of the floor. The water was in our basement. Dad did not go to work because the tower where he worked, the Vigo Tower, was within sight of our house. About three blocks we were from the railroad, and so on the day that the flood rushed over that part of West Terre Haute, Dad went up on the porch on the second floor of our house and he could see the tower going over. The man that was on duty in the morning was there, and he jumped into his car because it went across the tracks and everything, took the tower right out and put it down in the pit which was right behind the tower so that was an experience. Of course, I don't remember seeing it, but that happened; and, of course, that was in 1913 so that was a big event. Then I would say that probably, oh, a train wreck near the tower where dad worked was very interesting to me. I think we think of the calamities, maybe, as some things to remember. In '26, let's see, in the 20's--called the

Roaring 20's--why I was in high school and then on to college for a while. Of course, Lindbergh flew the Atlantic. I remember that was something. I can remember when planes would go. They would follow the railroad track from St. Louis to Terre Haute, and you would see many planes going over. That was the first thing. We would see dirigibles going over when they first came in. Then, I suppose, the next big date was Pearl Harbor, and I suppose everybody remembers where they were. I was thinking, of course . . . I think maybe when President Roosevelt died after the war was something to remember. The next thing probably was . . .

JM: Is there anything more you want to add, Dana.

DE: Well, I think my father died in 1963, and sometime after that we had the man on the moon. I remember standing out in the yard and saying to mother, "Now there is a man on the moon." And then mother passed away in 1969, and, of course, I had come to Marshall to live because mother wanted to get out of Terre Haute so I came to Marshall in '66. In 1966 I was in Marshall, and I came to Marshall because it was in a good location. It was the size town I would like. Mother knew the people. We could, you know, go to Terre Haute. We could go to West York, West Union, where we lived so I would say that. . . . and so now for about 30 years I lived close to the railroad and all these times we were close to U.S. 40, and now, right now, I am living where old 40 runs right beside the apartment.

JM: So this is a good place to live.

DE: It is; I have enjoyed it.

JM: I know that during this time you have seen a lot of changes, historically and with our modern conveniences. Are there any particular modern conveniences that you have particularly enjoyed or particularly remembered when they were first put on the market, so to speak?

DE: Well, yes, of course, I can remember when radio came in, that was great; and we always had music. Dad finally got a player piano after we didn't play the piano so much, and we had Victrolas and we had . . . then, of course, we had television when it first came in. Now we have better television and cable, and all of that, and, of course, I haven't gone into computer work at all, but I believe that . . .

JM: Is there any particular convenience that you like the best, which you say is your favorite new invention, so to speak.

DE: I just think it . . . you see I have been retired now for several years and so I think that just the television is probably the thing that I like. I've enjoyed all the activities here in Marshall a great deal.

JM: I have enjoyed talking with you very much, Dana. Is there anything else that we haven't touched on that you might like to mention?

DE: Well, I must say that I have had relation here in Marshall many years, that I have had my cousins and aunts and uncles . . . for that reason. I have had friends to come and go, but I have enjoyed my Marshall retirement.

JM: Well, thank you. We have enjoyed having you here. Thank you so much for allowing us to interview you today, Dana.

DE: Thank you, Judy.