

Esther Dunshee Bower Remembers

[The following reminiscence was written by Esther Dunshee Bower (1879-1962) in June, 1941. Ms. Bower's father, Edmond P. Dunshee (1853-1918), had served as Village Clerk, Superintendent of Public Works, clerk of the Bard of Education, Justice of the Peace, and Police Magistrate. Ms. Bower herself became a pioneering attorney in Illinois at a time when few women practiced law, and was only the second woman to serve as a Village trustee. She was very active in state bar association and as a founding member of the League of Women Voters, as well as the local group Ye Olde Town Folkes, a society of longtime Wilmette residents that helped preserve local history through the years before the Historical Society was founded.]

Annotations by Jack Bliamptis.

The wrens are very busy in our back yard, -- first gushing and then scolding. From the pother they make you would never dream they were so small, -- or is it because they are so small. Earlier in the morning an oriole added its song to their chirping. The robins are busy too, and occasionally I hear the whistle of the cardinal high up in the trees. But where is the scarlet tanager of my childhood? These same trees were full of them in those early days, and the coming of no bird was awaited with greater eagerness.

Perhaps these great elm trees remember other birds who have come and gone, for they have been viewing this same landscape for at least two or three hundred years, -- the same landscape, yes, but how different! Only fifty years ago the spot where I am now sitting was a swamp all through the spring, with cowslips growing in profusion, here and there a ladyslipper, and on higher spots trilliums, spring beauties and violets, -- especially violets everywhere.¹

When my father brought his family to Wilmette in September, 1887, there were about seven hundred people in the village. There were three sections of the village somewhat built up. What might be called the near west side, -- that part adjoining Northwestern Railway right of way, and especially along Wilmette Avenue to Gross Point (Ridge Avenue), was largely a community of German people and their descendants except along Park Avenue, between that and the tracks, and a small settlement just starting in the northwest portion of the village.

The business of the village was done on West Railroad Avenue². Just opposite the Northwestern station, which was then on the west side of the railroad, in the building which has been moved one block north and is used as a freight house, was Mr. Kinney's grocery store and Baptist Mueller's meat market, which supplied all the villagers, unless the men of the families could be induced to carry packages of food stuffs from the city.

¹ The home of which she speaks was located at the 1100 block of Forest Avenue, which is where she resided at the time she wrote this memoir and not where she lived growing up.

² Currently Green Bay Rd.

Not until several years later did we have a drug store. I well remember my first soda – a great innovation – but it had no ice cream in it.

The post office was in Kinney's store, -- just a little room built in at the side well back, with a few boxes. Going for the mail was one of the daily occupations.

The corner where the Central Hotel is now operate³ was a yard surrounded by a white picket fence, a small cottage in the center, -- then occupied by the station agent⁴, his wife and little boy, who later came to such a tragic end. On Christmas Eve they had attended the entertainment at the Methodist Church. It was cold, snowy, and windy. A train from the north, slated to pass through Wilmette a half hour earlier without stopping, struck and wiped out the entire family. That was my first association with tragedy, but I was too young to have any real appreciation of it.

Soon after we came to Wilmette the building at the northwest corner of West Railroad Avenue (Green Bay Road) and Wilmette Avenue, was erected, and Max Mueller (no relation to Baptist so far as I know) started his grocery store and market⁵ so that there was real competition for the trade of the village.

During the first two years of our residence here we occupied the cottage which still stands on the north side of Wilmette Avenue, just east of the alley between Park Avenue and Green Bay Road⁶. Aside from the buildings facing the Northwestern Railway, the only other house in the block was the one torn down to erect the new post office building just a few years ago. That house was occupied by the family of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Brown⁷, of whom Mr. J. Melville Brown is the only one still living in Wilmette. Across the street in a house still standing lived Mr. Edgar T. Paul⁸, who was for many years engaged in the real estate business in Wilmette and was responsible for the early development of Wilmette north of Lake Avenue between Fifteenth and Eighteenth Streets. Several of the homes he constructed in that vicinity still stand, but most of them have been remodeled, some to such an extent that it would be difficult for me to locate them from my memory of those days.

In 1889 my father build the house on Elmwood Avenue⁹ (then known as North Avenue) now occupied by the Claude Fitch family. It was on the outskirts of the second early development, -- the East Side community – which could be found mostly in the district bounded by Linden Avenue on the South, Eighth Street on the East and Forest Avenue on the north. Lake Avenue was the street most developed. At that time on the south side of Central Avenue there was no house built between the one built by

³ Corner of Greenbay Rd and Central St. (629 Green Bay Rd. according to 1978 phonebook)

⁴ John D. Revell, his wife and 2 yr. old son died in 1889. For more information see the article in the Chicago Tribune entitled "Mother, Father and Babe Killed" published 12/25/1889. There are numerous other articles that account for the incident in other papers as well.

⁵ Now 601 Green Bay Rd.

⁶ Remains now at 1222 Wilmette Ave.

⁷ Residence at what is now 1105 Central St.

⁸ Lived at the Northeast Corner of Central and Park Streets.

⁹ Now 1033 Elmwood Ave.

Alexander McDaniel and the southeast corner of Wilmette and Central, now occupied by the Walgreen drug store, and the lake. On the north side at the corner where Van Deusen's store now stands was a little one-room office occupied by John G. Westerfield, surveyor. At the corner where the Lyman Drug Store is located was a large, barn-like building known as the Village Hall. It was used by the Village Board for its meetings, but primarily it was the village auditorium, and the only general meeting place outside the churches. I saw my first movie there – a very crude affair put on in connection with a campaign to sell some sort of patent medicine, the nature of which is long since forgotten. This must have been about 1890 to 1892. The block where the Village Hall now stands was a vacant property, generally under water in heavy spring rains.

The three-cornered block bounded by Central and Wilmette Avenues and Eleventh Street was vacant except for the house now occupied by the Adkins family¹⁰, where Mr. Frank Sheldon and his family lived, enjoying a yard extending to Eleventh Street and surrounded by a picket fence. The rest of the block was beautifully wooded and was known to the children at least as “the park.” It was surrounded by a two-rail fence with gates working on pivots at the corner of Central and Wilmette and the point at Lake Avenue where the Congregational Church now stands.

In the next block where the house now standing at the northeast corner of Eleventh and Central¹¹, then occupied by the Frank L. Joy family, and in the spot where the Masonic Temple now stands¹², a house occupied by Frank Littles, later for many years the home of the Arthur Family. It was surrounded by a quarter block playground for the three Little children, and, it must be confessed by many of the schoolchildren from just across the street, where stood the three-room school house which I attended.

The school building consisted of a room facing Tenth Street and two rooms forming “L’s.” Each room had its own outside door. If you were due to enter the room facing Central Avenue you were still in the first three grades; if your access was through the Tenth Street door you were a fourth, fifth, or sixth grader, and you were supervised by Miss May L. Sheldon, who lived with her brother Frank. To me she was a very ancient person, but I now know she could not have been over thirty. The Seventh and Eighth Grades were in the third room which did not face a street, but opened towards one of the houses occupied by the Specht family, Senior and Junior, the Junior being the August Specht, who died two years ago. The senior Specht had a cobbler's shop on the alley at the back of the lot when I was a child¹³. These houses stood where the Byron C. Stolp school now stands. The house just north of the Specht homes was occupied then by the Josiah Beardsley family. Mr. Beardsley was for five years the minister of the Congregational Church. His son, Wilfred F. Beardsley, who was then still in college, was for many years the principal of the Evanston Township High School. While I was in Grammar School they moved and the house was then occupied by the Kaynor family¹⁴. I

¹⁰ 1112 Central St.

¹¹ 812 Central St.

¹² 1010 Central St.

¹³ Stood at the southeast corner of 10th St. and Lake Ave.

¹⁴ 724 10th St. (later 722)

attended Grammar school in all three rooms of this building, but my Eighth Grade work was done in the building which now stands next to the alley on Central Avenue.

But to return to the description of this east side community: the next houses were the two put up in 1886 by two brothers, Seymour A. Wheelock and Everett B. Wheelock¹⁵. They were indeed pretentious houses in those days. Only one more house on the street, a little cottage on the northeast corner of Central and Eighth which was long since removed to another location and my memory does not follow it.

On Linden Avenue were the Munn¹⁶ and Moore¹⁷ families and the A.B. Smiths¹⁸, on Greenleaf, the Doigs, Shermans¹⁹, Fullers and McDaniels, on Eleventh Street the Bunkers and the Bockius family, - On Lake Avenue, the Dinges, Mitchells²⁰ and Chappells, and on Forest Avenue, the Rogers, Brooks, Panushkas and Kirks. There were others, of course, but the memory of these especially have stayed with my through the years.

Until 1898 there was no electric railroad, and one of the delights of my childhood was to visit the A.T. Sherman Garden. He lived in the house just east of the electric station on the North side of Greenleaf Avenue, later occupied by the Specht family, and that whole triangle was a mass of flowers in the summer time.

Along the lake shore were two or three homes, the John G. Westerfield place just opposite the spot where the Shawnee Country Club now stands, at a point now a part of Michigan Avenue. This was really a farm house, for earlier Mr. Westerfield had operated a 260 acre farm in Wilmette. Some of the old apple trees from the orchard surrounding his home still stand, but the house is gone. A good many years ago it was taken to Greenleaf Avenue, and is now occupied by the Scott Funeral Home. The bank of the lake where the village water works stand was somewhat farther out in those days, and at this spot were the ruins of an old building, once used for a vinegar factory.

The Franklin house stood in the block north. It was a huge, rambling place (Mrs. Sarah Bunker was a Franklin and lived there as a child) unoccupied, and we children were told and were sure it was haunted. We never wanted to get too near it. A little farther north was a small cottage, occupied by the Dusham family, real pioneers of the town. John Dusham (always known as Jack) still lives on Park Avenue. Near what is now the southwest corner of Chestnut and Michigan Avenues stood the Sieber home. Ed Sieber was our first policeman, and occupied for years the position of chief of such forces we had²¹. Only a few years later he moved to Lake Avenue in what is now the Eleven Hundred block and his home on the lake shore was torn down.

¹⁵ At 822 Central and 830 Central St. Respectively

¹⁶ Benjamin Munn lived at 1046 Linden Ave.

¹⁷ Henry Moore lived at the northeast corner of Linden Ave. and 11th St.

¹⁸ Arthur B. Smith lived at Linden and 1st East Railroad Avenues (now Poplar Dr.)

¹⁹ Andrew T. Sherman resided on the north side of Depot Place in the first house east of Railroad Ave. (Green Bay Rd.)

²⁰ Samuel Mitchell lived at 1007 Lake Ave.

²¹ Edward G. Sieber resided at 1118 Lake Ave.

To the north was the imposing Henry H. Gage house. It really was imposing in those days, at least to my childish mind, but I thoroughly enjoyed the days spent with Stanley, Lloyd, Portia and Edward, although the last named was too mature to have much to do with the rest of us.

At the corner of Forest and Thirteenth Street stood the home of Dr. Byron C. Stolp²², the family physician of the town, especially loved by the children. In spite of the fact that his calls meant illness in the home he was a welcome visitor, whose coming meant a real call and not just a visit to the sick room. His sudden death in an automobile accident many years later was a real loss to the town.

This underdeveloped village had a volunteer fire department, which occasionally engaged the attention of most of the young men in the community. The hose cart (the only equipment) was kept in the Chappell barn, which was located on the alley running east and west between Central and Lake Avenues, the Chappell home occupying the whole southwest corner of Lake and Eleventh streets where four houses now stand²³. The Chappell home still stands, being the third house east of Eleventh Street on the South Side of Lake Avenue. The fire department could not, of course, cope with large fires, and had to call on Evanston for help when the occasion demanded.

Well I remember when the sky to the south was all aglow with what we thought was a huge fire in Evanston. The Wilmette firemen decided to do what they could to help, and started out only to find no fire in Evanston, but it later developed that the light was from the cold storage warehouse fire at the World's Fair (the fall of 1893). My bedroom was on the southeast corner of our house, and I could look out across the lot where the Baptist Church now stands, and then diagonally across the block in which the Methodist Church was then, as now, located, but which was not build up at the corner of Lake and Tenth, and see along Lake Avenue through the trees. There were no houses at the northeast or southeast corners of Lake and Tenth.

One night (1893) I was awakened to see a bright glow across Lake Avenue. The house on the south side of that street just east of the alley between Ninth and Tenth Streets was on fire, the flames leaping high. It was occupied by a family by the name of Wheeler, and it developed that Mr. Wheeler's mother-in-law had been murdered and the house set on fire. No solution of the murder was ever found, so far as I now know, but Mr. Wheeler was ostracized as a suspicion was leveled against him, and he left Wilmette to reside in Colorado. I do not believe that people ever really believed him guilty, but it happened that the murdered woman had in her possession that night a large sum of money which she had collected from a mortgage which had matured, and it looked as though robbery had been the motive.

²² Lived on the southwest corner of 13th St. and Forrest Avenue

²³ Southwest corner appears to be a mistake for the southeast corner, making this residence 1023 Lake Ave. which is in accordance with the 1980 directory.

To my young mind there was a much more exciting theory connected with this case. A man known as Harry H. Holmes had been accused of killing his wife's uncle on the South Side to collect insurance on his life. Apparently the evidence had been insufficient at the time to hold him. He had married a Wilmette woman, whose father was engaged in the express business in the village and who had lived in a small house next to the Congregational Church which then stood in the lot which is now Mr. J. M. Brown's lawn. The family had a parrot and I remember how that bird used to set us giggling in the Primary Department of the Sunday School by keeping a continual call for "Ella, El-la." I never did know who Ella was.

After the marriage that house was either moved away or torn down (my memory does not extend to that detail) and in its place the house now known as the Wilmette Inn was erected and known as the Holmes House. It was said to be pretty well established that much of the lumber which went into that house was stolen from across the street where Mrs. Mary E. Gates (mother of Henry B. Gates) was building the home which she occupied for many years, the house just south of the present Congregational Church. She later gave the property to the church for the location of its building.

Mr. Holmes was supposed to be a traveling man, which accounted for his frequent absences from home. I would see him once in a while and later viewed those occasions with considerable awe.

Largely, I suppose, because of former accusations, when Mr. Wheeler's mother-in-law was murdered, suspicion attached to Mr. Holmes, who seemed to be constantly getting into deeper water. The police developed the fact that some person or persons had run through the alleys from the Wheeler Home to the Holmes House, and, as I remember it, there was evidence that Holmes had been in Wilmette about that time, but was never indicted for that crime, so far as I remember.

However, he was indicted for murder later in Philadelphia, and at his trial it was developed that he had seven wives, marrying in New York state, Illinois, Cincinnati, California, and Philadelphia, and that in all of those localities he was accused of murder for the purpose of collecting insurance. He was convicted in Philadelphia and hanged. Here he left his wife and a daughter about seven years old.

This constituted one of the most exciting episodes of my young girlhood.

I am not forgetting the third part of our community, early established in Hillville, named Benjamin F. Hill, who developed the district. He himself was born in Wilmette, his birthplace being now occupied by the new St. Joseph Catholic Church. The Lathams were among the early settlers of this part of our village, and the year I came to Wilmette the Burge family took up its residence there. This part of the town was quite separate, there being large tracts of heavily timbered land between, but Eighth Street and the streets farther west were cut through. When the Milwaukee brought its tracks up to Hillville and began to run its trains daily, this district was renamed Llewellyn Park, but even that name is forgotten now.

To the north of our home was a forest with dense underbrush, except that west of Eleventh Street, Greenwood Avenue had been opened up and Edwin and Horace Drury had built homes on the north side of the Street between Eleventh and Twelfth Street and August N. Gage had a home just west of Twelfth Street. The only house other than our own on North Avenue (Elmwood) between the Lake and Ridge Avenues was the Asahel Gage home at the northeast corner of North Avenue and Twelfth Street.

It is hard to think of Wilmette with no sewer, no water system, no paved roads, no gas, no electricity, and no telephone. But that was the exact situation. There were practically no furnaces, the homes being heated with stoves. Without drainage, with every spring rain the basements would fill with water, so little attempt was made to have more than a hole in the ground where supplies could be kept, although they might have to be moved with speed in case of a heavy rain and kept somewhere else during a rainy spring. I well remember such a season during which our cellar (not basement) had at least three feet of water in it, and my father was greatly concerned to find me floating around in a tub, which on other occasions served in connection with the family washing or as a bathtub.

We seldom had occasion to use our front door, our starting point practically always being our back door and across the back lot (the Baptist Church, parsonage and other homes now occupy it) whether we were bound for church, school or the village shopping. On such occasions as gave rise to the use of the tub for a boat, we found the going quite difficult since the back lot would be covered with enough water to require rubber boots to get out at all. I remember one time when a perfect Sunday School attendance was ruined by such flooded condition, and it was accompanied by a flood of tears.

Our only drainage system consisted of deep ditches on each side of the street, with wooden crossings from the road to the walk leading up to the residences. These ditches were great places for the children to play, sailing boats and pretending to fish. There was a very deep ditch on the north side of Linden Avenue between Sixth and Eighth Streets, where in the early summer cray fish were abundant, and it was great sport to catch them.

Our street lighting system was not very extensive and consisted of kerosene lamps which needed daily attention. Almost any time you could see the person charged with the duty of going around with his little ladder climbing up to the light, taking out the lamp, filling it and trimming the wick. Each night they had to be lighted by hand and turned out the next morning. Except in the heart of the village a lantern was necessary when venturing out at night.

In 1893 things began to change. The sewer and water systems were put in, after a great deal of discussion and a heated election. And elections were heated in those days. I remember well when I was in the early grades how excited the children all got over an election in which a vote was taken as to whether the village should be annexed to

Evanston. It even resulted in the first fist fights on the part of the small boys. I remember especially Harold Stolp²⁴, Walter Swartout²⁵ and Ed Parr. The question came up again a few years later and both times met with too strong an opposition to be carried. Even those who voted for it were glad later that it had not been approved.

After these improvements had gone in, our part of the village began to change. Going through the woods to the north of our home you could trace the streets by the upturned ground where the pipes had been laid, and soon two or three houses were built in the Ten Hundred block on Greenwood Avenue, but they were pretty well isolated for a long time.

East of Tenth Street, which was not cut through to the Lake, and North of North Avenue (Elmwood) it appeared to be heavily wooded, but a path leading diagonally through the woods from the corner soon brought one to an open space which we called "the meadow." Wild strawberries grew in great abundance there and in the springtime the air was filled with the scent of the wild crabs growing along the end of the woods. In fact there was no place in town where one could not enjoy their beauty at that season. The first country club was built in the meadow, and at one time a nine-hole golf course was maintained there.

I am sure there was never a place where the violets grew more prolifically than in our woods, especially to the north of us. We always called that district "Gage's Woods." Many, many times I have sat in one spot and picked so many I could hardly hold them. There was one spot in our block where there was a large clump of white violets with blue centers, and we prized them very highly. They grew beside a wee pond which seemed fairly large to me. It occupied the spot just where the Charles H. Jackson home²⁶ has been located for many years. The adjoining corner, where the Russell House was built, was covered with blueberry bushes, and along the ditches were masses of red raspberries, the source of desert for our family frequently in the season. Everyone had a garden in those days and raised most of their own vegetables, and many, many flowers. I remember that we specialized in sweet peas and nasturtiums, very beautiful, such as do not seem to be grown successfully in our village.

Most of our social life of forty to fifty years ago centered in the churches and their activities. There were two Protestant churches, the Congregational and Methodist. Originally they had met as a unit, but in about 1875 they split, and the friends of the Methodist Church put up its first building. While that church had the first building, the society itself was no older, and by the time we arrived in the village the Congregational Church had its building located on the east side of Eleventh Street. There I went to Sunday School from the primary days on, attending the Busy Bees (my first missionary society) Christian Endeavor, sang in the choir, and attended church dinners, socials, Christmas entertainments and whatnot. Then the classes did not move from teacher to teacher, and from the time I was eight until I was eighteen I attended a class taught by

²⁴ Son of Byron C. Stolp, lived at the corner of 13th and Forest.

²⁵ Resided at the southeast corner of Linden and 11th (1903 directory)

²⁶ At 1017 Elmwood Ave.

Mr. Henry B. Gates, who built and for many years lived in the house now occupied as a community house by St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, which was the third Protestant church to be established in Wilmette. As I look back on it, I think it must have been organized in the early eighteen nineties. Mr. Gates' mother gave the Congregational church the property on which its present church stands, and it was built in 1903. The present Methodist Church is the third house of worship it has had, all standing on the same property.

Probably the most important thing in life for me those days was school and I loved it, as much for the playtime outside as the work inside, and both were very satisfactory from my viewpoint.

The southeast corner of Central Avenue and Tenth Street was heavily wooded. We cleared out spaces under the trees to make our play homes, with interlaced branches for the roves, brush left standing for the walls and some of the houses, as we called them, were elaborate indeed, having several rooms. They were all right until some of the roughnecks among the boys found and demolished them completely. I remember once when some of them didn't fare so well. The block opposite the two Wheelock houses was vacant and was known to us as Wheelock's pasture. There were huge wasps' nests in some of the trees, which on one occasion some of the boys attempted to get rid of, largely as a matter of bravado. They would show the girls! But they didn't try the second time, as I remember the incident.

In the summer between my seventh and eighth grade experiences, the school building on Central Avenue next to the alley was built, and the old three-room building was sold and taken away in sections. Whether any of it now stands I am not sure. My eighth grade work was done in that building, but only the first floor was required to carry on all of the work of the school, then the only school in the village.

The next year the Wilmette High School was organized and maintained for two or three years, but it did not work out very satisfactorily, and most of us who went there finished in the Evanston Township High School, as did the later Wilmette High School Pupils until the New Trier Township High School was organized in 1900.

During the eighteen nineties most of the principal streets were improved with brick pavements, and occasional cement sidewalks were seen, which replaced the wooden ones of the earlier period. In 1898 the electric road came through the village. By this time there were no longer any recognized breaks between the different developments in the town. The Gages were beginning to sell off their properties and houses were being built to the north, and the dense forests were quickly disappearing.

Wilmette was no longer the simple country village of my childhood.