



# Wilmette Historical Museum

## **“THE VILLAGE CLERK’S KID”**

**By Sheila Brush Davis**

**(Written in 1999)**

### THE COLLYERS

Frank Peter Collyer, Sr. and Elizabeth “Bess” Collyer [nee King] were my grandparents, who moved to their home at 730 Ninth St. near the end of 1914. My mother, Mary Elizabeth, was six months old at that time. Two younger siblings came along after she was born, Frank P. Jr. & Joanne Collyer.

My grandfather was a stockbroker for Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Bean, which is now known as Merrill Lynch. He was also President of the Chicago Board of Trade twice in his life.

### OUR INITIAL MOVE TO NINTH STREET

When I was eight years old (born 1939), my father, Albert D. Brush, Jr., died of poliomyelitis and encephalitis. He was 33 years old and had recently been promoted to Manager of the Chicago area for Bauer and Black Surgical Supplies. My parents and I had been living in Omaha, Nebraska for three or four years while Dad was working up the corporate ladder. The first eight years of my life my parents and I were in and out of the Ninth Street home, visiting. At one time, mom and I came in from Omaha, where we were living, as I had to have my tonsils removed and mom wanted only Dr. Floyd McGrath, the family doctor, to operate. His office was in downtown Wilmette, as you will see later.

My father’s parents, Albert D. Sr. and Alma Brush, were living in Highland Park, where his dad was an executive at Abbott Laboratories and on the Board of Directors for Lake Forest College. My father’s mother was a housewife like my mother’s mother. In that era, women remained at home and took care of the house and children.

My dad, mom, her parents, and myself all had been involved with Northwestern University in one way or another. My grandparents attended the school where my grandfather lettered in sports and



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my grandmother joined the Pi Beta Phi sorority, as did my mother many years later. Mom met my father while they were going to Northwestern & I, while working in the Chemical Engineering Department in September 1958, met my first husband who was a graduate student.

My mother and I moved into my grandparents' home and I started third grade at St. Francis Xavier elementary school, three blocks from the house, in the fall of 1947. During my years at St. Francis, I took piano lessons from the sisters at the convent. I also took ballet lessons at a storefront on Linden Avenue, a block from the El Station. In the summer, swimming lessons were offered at New Trier High School and for several years I attended every summer as I was afraid of water and I was a slow learner – haha.

In June 1953, I entered New Trier High School and also started my first job, stacking books and helping with the summer book club at the Wilmette Public Library. In the early 1950's, society didn't have the stringent labor laws for kids, like they do today. However, working in the library was not very laborious. I did that for two summers before my Freshman & Sophomore years in high school. Incidentally, my mother had no clue that I was going to work for Helen Siniff until after she hired me. Being as my mother was a widow & likewise my grandmother, when I graduated from St. Francis & before I entered New Trier, I decided I needed money & the best place to start was my home away from home – the library. I'm sure Miss Siniff hired me because of my mother, but she was more than satisfied. I loved my work.

## MEMORIES OF A WILMETTE KID

As a small child visiting my grandparents, I remember seeing the knife-sharpening man who, while walking around the streets pushing a cart with a bell, would stop at people's homes and sharpen their knives. At that time, Ninth Street was comprised of red bricks and even up to the time I moved away from home in 1959, it was still red brick.

When we lived in Omaha, we had an ice man who would come by and deliver blocks of ice for our ice box and the coal truck would drop coal down a chute into our basement. This was in the middle of the 1940s.



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One of my first memories of Central School was at the time they moved three houses from the west side of Ninth Street to make room for the kindergarten playground and build a new school. One of the homes was the Rusch's which they moved half a block west on Lake Street from Ninth Street. The second was the Alfred Pool home which they moved to 738 Ninth Street, and I don't remember what happened to the third house. It might have been the house they used as the kindergarten school. If you haven't seen houses moved at night or early in the a.m. you haven't lived, especially if you are a little kid or even a big kid.

A yearly event was the flooding of the Central School playground by the village, so we would have a skating rink during the winter. I'll never forget the feeling I had every year when they turned the spotlights on to flood the playground. It was to this little kid the most joy & adventure. Every winter I would watch for the spotlights & then... I spent just about every minute away from school on the rink. I would get up at daylight & skate before school. After school, I would go home, change into my skates, put on my skateguards, and walk across the street to skate until dinner. On weekends, I would skate after dinner 'til they turned the lights off at around 9 or 10. They even had spotlights so we could skate at night. My grandmother loved sitting in the living room (with the cat in her lap) knitting or crocheting and watching the kids skate. They had a skating shack where there was a stove to warm the building and the skaters. Also, there was a caretaker to keep the fire stoked and the kids out of trouble.

Another memory was after I started New Trier, one of the summer courses I took was tennis. I spent a lot of time hitting balls against the back wall of Central School & up on the roof.

A fine summer memory was "Wilmette Days." There was a carnival on the Village Green on Ridge Road and a pet parade on Central Avenue. I remember one year, before the parade, my mother bought a new trash can. At this time, they were used to burn trash in your alley. It was shaped like a cage and we put my cat in it. I dressed as an animal trainer & Ginger was the "lion". He weighed twenty pounds at the height of his life, so he was always able to hold his own. He was never mistreated; in fact, he was treated better than me, haha. Ginger was like my little brother. Only children with pets can identify with this.

Another summer event was the Village Picnic they would hold every year for all the Wilmette employees and their families at the Harms Woods shelter. The City of Wilmette would pick up the tab. They served hamburgers, hot dogs, sodas, beer, and all the goodies that went along with a picnic. They



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had different types of games for everyone to play or you could just go hiking in the woods. However, this picnic seemed to fall by the wayside in the 1950's. Maybe it just got too expensive and possibly too many employees as the city grew.

## HOW MOM BECAME VILLAGE CLERK & OTHER MEMORIES OF HER

A year or so after my dad died, in 1949 or '50, my mother was approached to run for Village Clerk, as she had lived in Wilmette most of her life. She was nearly 35 at the time. They had a town meeting or debate at Central School one evening before the election when a man said she should stay home and take care of her husband and kids. She told him that her husband had died, and she was trying to take care of me. At that time, she was working in a small insurance office on Linden Avenue near the El.

In Mom's first election, she ran against a man who was 92 years old. She lost the election, even though he hadn't been to work for nearly a year. He would often send a relative to pick up his mail. All of these facts were relayed to me by mine & the gentleman's family. Those in charge of the election took the ballot boxes to Chicago for a recount. The ballot boxes had been stuffed. Someone had clearly wanted Mr. Miller to win; however, my mother was the ultimate winner of the election.

My mother, Mary Elizabeth Brush, was a frontrunner for women politicians. It was not a popular idea for women to work at that time, but even more unpopular was it for women to run for an elected office. After that political race, she never had another opponent except for death when she lost that race in office in 1964. She loved her job & was very good as a Village Clerk.

It took her two years to get her voter's registration records up to date. That first year she attended night school at Loyola in Chicago. During that year she got an eye infection and the other students helped her by reading her assignments to her and she passed her courses with flying colors as she had total recall. This was a surprise as some law professors at that time didn't like the idea of women being lawyers, so they made it as rough as they could against women students.

One of my mother's favorite days was Halloween. She always met the trick or treaters at the door in a scary mask or costume. Near the end of Halloween evening, she would leave the house and visit the neighbors. Sometimes she would trick them into believing she was someone else, but mostly



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not. Also, at that time, we had two nights; October 30<sup>th</sup> was Beggar's Night & October 31<sup>st</sup> was Halloween.

In 1951, when I was twelve, my grandfather [Frank Peter Collyer] died of lung cancer. Everyone who knew him really loved him. I don't remember much about the funeral, except we got lost in the cemetery. My grandmother said he was probably laughing about that. After the funeral, we all met at Evanston Country Club, where my great uncle John King, who lived in Evanston, had been a member for years.

We had other family members in the Wilmette/Evanston area. Uncle Victor Scott and Aunt Agnes Wilson lived in a home on Chestnut Avenue<sup>1</sup>. They were brother-in-law and sister of my grandfather. His other brother, Herb Collyer, had died & his widow, Colleta, lived in an apartment on Linden Avenue<sup>2</sup>. They had at least five children that I remember. All the cousins were older than me. One of them died while in college, working for a pie company. I was in high school, the mid-50's. The accident was reported in the Tribune, as he suffocated in a pie truck. The door had locked behind him, and after that, companies started putting in escape routes for people who might get locked in the refrigerated section of trucks.

## BUSINESSES

A few of the business that were in Wilmette in the 1940's and 50's in the downtown area (Wilmette Avenue & Central) were Smithfield's, Kroger's, A&P, Nick's candy store next to Wilmette Theater, Lyman's drugstore, a bakery, Wilmette State Bank, Dr. Floyd McGrath's office was in the Wilmette State Bank building, Joe's Coffee Shop next to the bank building, a record store, dentist office, a cleaner's, stationery store, a shoe store, and a shoe repair. There was also a building that held films somewhat like National Geographic, I believe. Further down Wilmette Avenue was the Wilmette Public Library. Richard's Drive-In Cafeteria, a couple of auto dealerships, an ice cream store, the Wilmette Life building, and a gas station and garage were on Green Bay Road.

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<sup>1</sup> 1015 Chestnut Avenue

<sup>2</sup> 504 – 5<sup>th</sup> Street



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Right off of Sheridan Road was the Teatro Del Lago movie theater. Nelda, our hairdresser, had her apartment and beauty salon across the street from the Teatro and also a seamstress who worked for our family (my aunt's wedding & mine). During my high school days, in the 1950's, Old Orchard mall was built close to the Edens Expressway.

On Linden Avenue was the El station. I remember going down to Buckingham Fountain in Chicago in the evenings with one of my high school friends. We could walk around and never be bothered, but from what I hear now it's hard even to go to the park in the daylight hours without being harassed.

City employees [and elected officials] I can recall when my mother was in office: Pres. – John Sanderson, Past Pres. – Bill Alexander, Village Mgr. – Bill Wolff, Water Dept. – Armon Lund, City Atty. – Bill James, Chamber of Commerce – Harriet Sturdy, Village Clerk – Mary E. Brush, Head Librarian – Helen Siniff, Fire Chief – Ralph Reardon, Police Chief – Ed Whiteside, Police Officer – Chuck Taylor, Florence Thalman, Mary Jane Hoffman.

## PEOPLE OF NOTE

When I was in high school, Robert Conrad worked for Bowman Dairy, and he was our milkman before he went to Hollywood.

Ann-Margaret Olson was two years behind me at New Trier High School and lived in Wilmette. She was also a regular in Lagniappe, our school variety show. If you get on the internet, you can find a fan club very involved with her.

In 1959, Peggy Abeles, our next-door neighbor who lived at 726 Ninth St., was on This Is Your Life, the television show. She was a relative of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Mrs. Abeles helped DP's, Displaced Persons, folks from overseas. She found them jobs and homes, and even took them into her home to help them.

I remember one day when I was visiting my mother at work. She and some of her co-workers came in from their coffee break at Joe's Coffee Shop across the street and they were all excited as Charlton Heston was over there. Evidently, he was in town to see his sister. The ladies said I should go over there and take a look. I wanted to, but I was too shy to go stare at someone, so I passed.



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## LOCAL TRANSPORTATION

Our transportation in the 1940's and 1950's was a car, the Elevated train, or the Northwestern train. My grandfather took the Northwestern to Chicago every day to work and then would walk home from the train station stopping at Nick's, which was right next door to the Wilmette Theater to get some popcorn or ice cream. In high school, if we didn't drive, we would take the El to Chicago to go shopping or playing.

## FEELINGS

I loved being raised in Wilmette.

In the spring when the weather started to warm up and it would get slushy, I would drop my leggings off with the sisters' house on the way to school.<sup>3</sup> These two older ladies lived at the corner of Central and Ninth Streets and I would visit with them. They had a beautiful big house, with a big tree in their yard. This tree had a hole in the base and one of my friends and I would leave notes in the tree for each other, reminiscent of the book To Kill a Mockingbird. Who would have thought the same things were happening years earlier in a different part of the country.

## THE SEASONS

SUMMER – Early summer mornings before the heat of the day while on summer vacation from school. A wonderful summer memory was the year I took horseback riding lessons at Hobby Horse Stables. I rode very early in the mornings, muggy and warm. The mourning doves were out, and we rode the trails in Harms Woods. Another summer memory is the feeling I would have in the early summer evenings. There was a special smell to the evenings and the feeling. Maybe it was our youth or even the naiveté of society of the 1950's.

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<sup>3</sup> Possibly Margaret and Alice Wheelock who lived at 830 Central Avenue



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During the summers after I entered high school, I was at school in the a.m. and work in the p.m. I remember going to the Wilmette beach, however, when I was smaller and the park and Wilmette Harbor. Sometimes, as I am older now and living near the desert, I crave looking at water. I could never figure out why until I realized I lived six blocks from Lake Michigan most of my growing-up life. Lakes in Texas and New Mexico could never hold a candle to Lake Michigan.

FALL – My birthday was in September. I could always tell when my birthday was near, as we could hear the Northwestern fans cheering for their teams at the Dyche Stadium from our backyard. The leaves were everywhere and crackled under foot. The color of the leaves is so incredible. I loved walking through them in the fall and, of course, you couldn't forget the squirrels and the acorns. You don't get squirrels in New Mexico except in very few places.

\*\*\*In December, I was walking to National American University where I work, from the bus and through some leaves. Albuquerque, New Mexico is about three or four months behind Wilmette in seasons. The crackling leaves reminded me so much of my childhood in Wilmette. Albuquerque isn't lucky enough to have such defined seasons as Wilmette does.

WINTER – I don't know if today's children wear snowsuits like were worn back then. My children were raised in Texas and New Mexico, so we didn't have to worry about deep snow, leggings, or mittens. You can't speak of winter without bringing up Christmas lights. When my grandfather was alive, he put up our Christmas lights and a large Santa face on the small front porch roof of our house. I took over when he passed on.

\*\*\*I live alone in an apartment and still put lights on my balcony many, many years and many, many lights later.

Another wonderful memory was, instead of space heaters or furnaces with vents, we had stand-alone radiators and I would sit on my grandmother's bed next to the radiator keeping warm [while] watching the snow & icicles accumulating & glistening under the street lights.

SPRING – Spring in Wilmette is very much like rebirth. Snow and cold is around for so long that spring is a real joy. Warmth & sudden greenery sprouting up. The smell and feel of spring is so incredible. Snow is fun, but you get bored after a while & once it starts getting warmer, you know summer & school vacation aren't far behind.



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## GROWTH IN TECHNOLOGY

Let's remember all the things we take for granted now & what we had then.

Television – My family got our first T.V. in 1949 during the Kefauver hearings. It was a black & white round screen console. The shows were Hopalong Cassidy, Lone Ranger, The Gillette Friday Night Fights, Kukla, Frank & Ollie, & Chicago Roller Derby. From what I have heard, Roller Derby is making a comeback.

Radio – Radio was very much like T.V. is now. Kids shows & soaps were very prevalent: Bobby Benson & the B-Bar-Bar Riders, The Shadow, Sky King, & there were soaps.

Computers – At that time in the 1950's, computers were room-size. In 1959, I was taught to keypunch as my friend was writing his thesis on a computer, the room-sized kind.

Automobiles – Most of them were large-size cars. There were only a few small cars that I remember. These were the MG, T-Bird, Corvette, and Metropolitan.

Telephone – I remember my first phone experience. A person would pick up the phone and give the operator a four-digit phone number. Later on, we would dial AL [for Alpine, a Wilmette exchange] plus a four-digit number.

We had milk delivered, clothes were picked up, washed, & returned by the cleaners. The doctors still made house calls. We were quarantined, in 1947, in my grandmother's home while my father was in the hospital with poliomyelitis & encephalitis and they put a sign on our front door, like you see on television.

## FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT BEING RAISED IN WILMETTE

I don't know how different Wilmette is now; however, we all have good and bad memories of our childhood. Everyone should write an autobiography or keep a journal of their life, whether you are my age or yours, no matter how old you are. We always learn from the past, as long as we don't dwell in it.



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