

Mary Eleanor Witherspoon

interviewed by

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24

MARY ELEANOR WITHERSPOON

My mother was Carrie Bowden who married my father, John Franklin Witherspoon in 1872, in Hardin County, Tenn. My grandparents on my father's side were Phillip Shute Witherspoon and grandmother was Mary Williams from Tennessee.

DO YOU KNOW WHY THEY CAME TO TEXAS?

Well, it was after the Civil War, of course he was looking for the promised land and went into the cattle business. The family came to Texas about 1873.

My father met my mother in Oklahoma after the opening of the strip. He ran in the strip. My Grandfather Witherspoon had an Indian Trading Post at Red Rock, Oklahoma. My mother's father was Olandus Adolphus Bowden who was born in West Virginia; my grandmother was Ellen Americus McKean, she was born in Virginia. My great grandfather on my mother's side lived across the road from Thomas Jefferson. He stole some apples from his orchard and was called into the library and reprimanded. My great grandfather was so happy that he had stolen the apples because he got to be reprimanded by Thomas Jefferson whom he thought was the greatest man that had ever lived. I have a little gold nugget that was on a pencil that belonged to my great grandfather.

HOW DID HE ACQUIRE THAT GOLD NUGGET?

Well, I guess they lived very well according to reports. After the war things crashed financially and they came with my grandfather and grandmother to live near Winfield, Kansas, and on into Oklahoma at Red Rock which was above Ponca City. It's a little wayside place now but it was near where the One Hundred and One Ranch was. Eventually my grandfather Witherspoon had land leased up there. It was at Red Rock my father and mother met and married.

My parents came to Texas eventually and then I came on the scene. A little later my brother John was born.

YOU WERE BORN IN FORT WORTH THEN?

No, I was born in Gainesville, Texas. We moved to Fort Worth in 1911.

When I was a little child I showed an aptitude for drawing. When I was only four or five years old, I was making these little drawings of dressed up ladies with lace, lace, lace . . . rows and rows of lace. I would lie on my stomach to draw before I ever went to school. That interest in detail eventually led to me becoming a miniature painter.

When we first moved to Fort Worth we lived in the 1700 block of Grand Avenue. From there we moved to the 1400 block of Alston. I went to the 8th Ward School across the street from us. My father was in the cattle business over at the stockyards, working for a commission company in the livestock building.

We left Fort Worth in about 1919, we moved to Gainesville, Texas for about five years, we came back to Fort Worth in about 1924.

I'M SURE YOU SAW A LOT OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE FIRST TIME YOU LIVED IN FORT WORTH AND THE SECOND TIME WHEN YOU CAME BACK, BUT TELL ME SOME OF THE THINGS THAT YOU CAN REMEMBER AS A LITTLE GIRL.

When we moved to Fort Worth in 1911, I remember that Gernsbacker's was between 3rd and 4th Street on Houston Street. It was an old stone building with wooden sidewalks in the front. It was in the block where Sanger Harris came in at 5th and Houston; then Meacham's moved into that building. Turner Dinge's was across the street between 4th & 5th. Fakes Furniture Co was in the same block as Turner Dinge's. We would catch College Ave. street car in front of Fake's at 5th. I remember going to the First Methodist Church on 7th, when I was a child. It was close to Ellison's or in the next block where the Fair building used to be, and the Commerce Bank is now. We would go across the old Jennings Ave. viaduct, a rickety, rickety old viaduct with small iron rails. When the street car would go across it, the viaduct would just shake and tremble. The Burrus Mills was on the west side, where the freight depot was later built. As you went to town late in the afternoon, here was this sun setting behind this silhouette of old Burrus Mill. I have seen some of the most magnificent sunsets because we didn't have the pollution then that we have now.

Of course, in that day and time they still had the horse and buggy. I remember buying bread at Mrs. Baird's in her home, in the 1700 block of Washington.

During the war she built a small building on her lot where all her girls and boys worked. She made the best bread in Fort Worth. Everybody would drive up there. By then - (1916-1917) there were some cars. We would walk up there and knock on her door at first. One of the boys had a little wagon, I don't believe that it was more than two feet wide. It was open on the side with shelves and canvas enclosure. He would ring a bell and go up and down the street selling her pies and cakes and bread.

WHAT KIND OF PIES DID SHE SPECIALIZE IN?

I don't remember that, because I don't think we bought any. Everybody baked at home. We only bought the bread.

We moved to Alston in 1912. I remember the organ grinders who would come along. They would just play the organ with the little monkey on the string. The children would all gather around and pay him a dime or something like that. He'd stand out in front of the house and just grind the organ. The little monkey would jump and play around. That was our entertainment.

YOU MENTIONED BUYING YOUR SHOES AT WASHER BROS. WHY DON'T YOU TELL US ABOUT THAT?

It was still at the same location that it is now, but the front of it, of course, was different. On the second floor, they had the children's and ladies shoe department; you would come in there, and they would give you a number and call out, "Who's next." There were such mobs that went in there. They didn't have shopping centers. All the shopping was done downtown. There were only a few drug and grocery stores in residential areas. All the businesses were downtown and flourishing.

I think it was 1917 that they had the Opera Faust and Lucia Di Lammermoor at the old coliseum on the north side. My mother and a friend who lived in our neighborhood went and came back at night around 1:00 on the street car and they were perfectly safe. Melba took the part of Marguerite in Faust, and Galli Curci was Lucia in Lucia Di Lammermoor.

There wasn't any Fort Worth Symphony then that I remember. That was first organized by Brooks Morris, years later.

NOW ABOUT THE ART; THIS WAS YOUR LIFE. DID YOUR PARENTS RECOGNIZE THIS?

My mother recognized it and made inquiries about an art teacher. We had some relatives who lived in Kansas City. She was a Mary Montague and their home used to be here. Her mother and father are buried in Oakwood Cemetery. She lived at the corner of Central and Grand Avenue. Her father was in the cattle business. She went to Europe with a Miss Christina McClean who came here before 1900 to teach at the Old Fort Worth University. She was a most interesting person. She had studied in London and went to teach in a boy's school in Cape Town, South Africa. I don't know the exact date, but it must have been in about 1875 - 1880/ There was a world-wide depression sometime in about 1875, wasn't there? Her father was a merchant. He had stores in Canada. She used to tell us about this trip that she took to South Africa. She was the only woman on the boat, a terrible storm came up. They had chairs that were covered with horse hair, she remembered scooting across the old floor and the sailors gathered around. Anyway, she came to Fort Worth and taught in the Old Fort Worth University which was on the site of Trimble Technical Institute on Cannon Ave. It was about 1913- or 1914, that I started studying with her in her home at 1610 Washington. She was a remarkable person, with a very strong will and a great determination. There were several of her students whom she thought had more than exceptional ability. She would refuse to allow them to copy. She made me draw the petunias until I hated petunias. I drew my own feet. She would make us draw from life and we would bring the girls from school to pose for us. Margaret Meacham, Evelyne Sellers and Amye Margaret Chamberlain were studying too, at Miss McClain's, and others that left Fort Worth. Later on I went to Connecticut to study, some of those artists said to me, "Where did you learn to draw?" I said from a little Scotch woman, and they couldn't believe it.

I really didn't go to college. I went to Art Students League, in New York. I spent the summers in the Colony at Old Lyme, Connecticut. In the meantime I had painted a miniature of my grandfather. There was an Englishman who came through here and I took some lessons from him, painting my grandfather from life. When Mr. Robert Vonnoh came here in 1929 with an exhibit from the old Fort Worth Library he saw me looking at his painting. He came up and introduced himself as Mr. Vonnoh. He said, "You're an artist, aren't you?" I was so embarrassed, I didn't know what to say. He just demanded that I bring some of my work to him. He came out and interviewed my mother and thought I should go on. So arrangements were made for me to go and study at Old Lyme. I studied miniature painting from a Miss Lydia Lonacre who studied with Whistler. Some of her miniatures are at the Metropolitan Museum. I had a great, great summer up there. I had invitations to exhibit from the contacts that I made that summer at the Brooklyn Museum and the Pennsylvania Museum of Fine Arts, at the Water Color Show. That was when things unfolded. But then along came the depression and finally the war. I went on with my drawing. I had also done some architectural designing freelancing on my own.

WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT MRS SCHEUBER AS YOU RECALL HER, SINCE SHE SEEMS TO HAVE HAD SUCH AN INFLUENCE ON THE ARTS IN FORT WORTH.

Mrs. Scheuber was a remarkable person. She was very strong willed and some people thought that she was difficult to get along with. She was simply marvelous to me. People do remember her in Fort Worth for the things that she did all on her own. She was friends of those who organized the American Federation of Art. She gathered the leaders of the city and got them behind her. She was one of the organizers of the Fort Worth Art Association in 1911. Mrs. M.P. Bewley served as First President. Her son, Murray was a well known portrait painter. His portraits on the organizers of the Women's Club are hung in the club. She had these 50 friends of art that made contributions; but the total sum of it made it possible for her to bring these National Federation of Art shows to Fort Worth every winter and have teas on the second floor of the old Carnegie Library. They would have these gatherings at night.