

History of Zearing, Illinois (Bureau County)
an Oral History

Ruth Lang, Interviewee
Of Princeton, Illinois

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Narrator's Name: RUTH LANG
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Interviewer's Name: MERLE ROUNTT
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: My name is Merle Rountt and I'm visiting today, July -- what is this -- July 9 -- with Ruth Patterson Lang, a resident of Princeton, Illinois. Ruth, I'd like to have you tell us your age, your parents' names, and a little bit about yourself.

A: Well, my age is 81.

Q: And you should be proud of it, and I'm sure you are.

A: I'm the daughter of Benjamin Franklin and Dattie J. Patterson. I was born in Berlin Township, one and one fourth miles north of Zearing. I was born and reared on the farm I own, which has been in the family since 1852, having been purchased originally by my great-grandfather, George Jay. The Centennial award was presented to me by Governor Richard Ogilve in 1972 showing family ownership for 123 years.

Q: That's something to be proud of.

A: Yes, it is. The Centennial sign stands on the front lawn of the farm.

Q: Ruth, I think you have some real interesting notes there about Zearing and the railroad and what it was back then, when you were a girl.

A: Zearing was settled in 1901, and rapidly became an active railroad interchange. It was the terminal point for the New York Central. The mainline of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy passed through Zearing from Chicago to Galesburg and Quincy to Kansas City, also to Council Bluffs and Omaha. There were connecting lines from Zearing to Ladd, Spring Valley and LaSalle, also through Green Oak, Kasbeer, Walnut, and

A: points northwest. Becoming a railroad intersection there was much maintainence, steam locomotives required coal and water, a big well was dug to furnish water for a supply tank, and coal chutes were erected, and by the way, in those days, all coal was shoveled by hand. A round-house was built with a turntable for housing and switching locomotives.

Q: None of those things are ther, now there?

A: None, no, none are there now. At the same time a bunkhouse was also built as a lodging quarters for crew men. As the village expanded, a two story hotel was constructed with a rather large dining room, which developed a thriving business. In those days manufacturers and supply companies employed salesmen to travel and call upon merchants and the only means of transportation was by train. And so the hotel was a convenience when making train connections. The hotel was sold in 1935 to a carpenter by the name of Gustavson who gradually demolished it, salvaging and selling the lumber. There was a small one coach train traveling daily round trip from Aurora to Galesburg, stopping at all towns between. It was nicknamed the "little dinky", it was a great convenience to the local communities as well as the salesmen.

Q: Ruth, we were talking here a few minutes ago about an article that was in the Republican June 10, 1952, it was -- your article was on the -- when the Jay School was discontinued and -- but it has some history of Bureau County and I wish you would read some of that article that was in the Republican.

A: In 1809 Illinois was divided into two counties, St. Clair and Randolph, Mrs. Lang continued.

Q: That's all right, that's the article.

A: Counties were formed from these counties and newer counties were formed from these counties until finally on February 28, 1837 Bureau County was carved out of the territory of Putnam County. Previous to 1821 a French fur trader by the name of Bureo lived in a log hut above the mouth of a creek which later became known as Bureau Creek. The creek obtained his name and when the county was formed those who were concerned with the naming of the county were satisfied with the name of Bureau, and adopted it for the county.

Q: I think that's very interesting about the way Bureau County was formed. Ruth, I'd like to have you tell me a little bit about your schooling, where you went to school, and about the trains and what you remember of your girlhood.

A: Of course I completed my eight grades in the Jay School and then attended and graduated from the Princeton High School. During the school years I stayed in town weekends. It was a great thrill when my parents occasionally were unable to drive to Princeton with the horse and buggy on a Friday afternoon to return me home and called to tell me to ride the "dinky" to Zearing, a big deal in those motorless, gasless days. Letters were first carried on an American train in 1831. In 1862 the original post office on wheels was introduced with a working capacity of 60 by 10 feet.

Q: That's very interesting.

A: March 11, 1884 at three A.M. the first solid mail train rolled out of the Chicago Union Station into a wet, blustery night, thundering through Aurora and on through all the sleeping towns along the way, including Zearing on its way towards Council Bluffs, Iowa, the mail handling center

A: jointly sponsored by Burlington and the Union Pacific from which mail was carried on other lines to western points. For 75 years the fast mail train, regardless of weather conditions, carried the fast mail from Chicago to Council Bluffs. Now that's history, isn't it?

A: Yes, it is. Ruth, let's go back to your farm life, tell me about this farm.

A: In 1854 my grandfather, Andrew Jackson Jay purchased the farm from his father, my great-grandfather, George Jay. My grandfather Jay, at the young age of 28 felt that the education was so essential that he donated a half acre plot on the farm to be used for school purposes only. The building of logs was built for the school which became known as the Jay School. In checking records I found the number of this district was Number Seven. The districts were first numbered by townships. In 1902 this method was discontinued and the districts were numbered by county, this district becoming Number 79. The log cabin building was replaced with a new frame building in the mid 1870's. When the school districts were abandoned, District 79 was abolished in 1952, and the Jay School building was moved to Malden and incorporated in the grade school and still stands. Records reveal that from 1902 to 1952 twenty-nine teachers taught in the Jay School. Records also show that in the 1880's salaries in one room schools ranged from \$25 to \$30 per month. I recall in my grade school days that the teachers went early on winter mornings to start the stove fire in order to have the cold, chilly room warm when the youngsters arrived for school. In 1825 an Illinois state senator introduced a bill in the legislature for the support of common schools by public tax and it became a law. This law was the foundation upon which the common school system was established. However, there was so

A: much opposition to the provisions of the law that it was finally repealed and education became stagnant for nearly a generation. Laws are created, changed, and revised, until 1854 Illinois started rapid strides in scholastic work.

Q: Ruth, I know that you have been a strong Republican all your life and your parents and grandparents before you were also, and I know that you spent a lot of time in Springfield, I want you to tell us about it.

A: Well, I got into politics I guess by becoming ~~secretary~~ to our late senator, Thomas Gunning, and for -- until his death, about fifteen years. Then I became secretary to the personal representative of Attorney General, George Barrett. From there, at the expiration of his term, he did not run again, I became secretary to the chief clerk in the State Treasurer's office of William Stratton, who later became our state governor. I remained in the office because Elmer J. Hoffman of Wheaton was elected State Treasurer and he appointed me as his personal secretary. He -- and I was with him on his second term, he was -- after a lapse of two years, as State Treasurers at that time could not succeed themselves -- he ran again two years later and was elected and I was again appointed his personal secretary. At the conclusion of his term I decided it was time to come home, I was tired. (laughter) And I was home about three weeks when I got a call from State Senator Downing of Macomb asking me to be his secretary on the Judiciary Committee. I said, "Senator, I guess you don't know that I've quit state work, I've quit office work, I'm through." And he said, "Oh yes, I know, but I want you secretary of my Judiciary Committee." Well, we talked and talked and so finally I consented and I served then for I think three terms. The legislature

A: at the time met every two years, and always when he called, why -- and I never contacted him, we'd never be in communication between terms -- but he'd call up and in about the middle of December, "Well, be ready to go back to Springfield, you're on the payroll beginning the first of January." And I said to him one time, "Well, how do you know that I'm home, maybe I was over in Europe." "Well. . ." And so I served and finally I had to give up because I just was so tired and worn out, my old ticker begin to announce to me that I was tired and so I -- that finished, that finished my state work, but it was interesting.

Q: I'm sure it certainly must have been. Did you ever count the number of years you spent down there?

A: Well, I started working down there, of course with Attorney General, George Barrett, in 1945 and was down there -- went down March 1 and on June 25, 1945 a tornado went through the northern part of Bureau County, struck my farm out there and leveled everything to the ground but the house. So I had that ordeal to go through and rebuild. And those were the days that you had to have permits to get a new tire and had to have coupons for gasoline, so it was quite an undertaking but -- and it was all up to me, but I carried through.

Q: Ruth, I don't think we should stop talking without you telling us a little tiny bit about your collection.

A: About my what?

Q: Your collection.

A: I have an elephant collection of around about 450 elephants and nearly all of them have been given to me.

Q: Oh, that's wonderful.

A: And while I was in the -- employed in the Attorney General, George Barrett's office, he needed more room so he opened up a branch office and put me in charge of it, against my will, I didn't want it, I was so tired from this tornado and everything and I didn't want that responsibility, but he said, "Take it or else." Of course, he did increase my salary. So I had around twelve to fifteen employees under my supervision and I guess they all liked me. At Christmas time they wanted a Christmas tree and Christmas dinner the day before we all went home for our Christmas. And so when I went out for -- the room where they had the table -- of course the tree was there all lit up and so forth -- here was a huge box with a great big bow on it, a red bow. My first thought was -- there was two young chaps that were also in my office and they each had a girl friend -- and while -- and I was always kidding. And what I thought that was probably an imitation diamond ring in one of those boxes, but I never dreamed it was for me. Well, when it come time for gifts, cause we had drawn names and why this big box was for me. And when I opened it up there were 27 elephants in it.

Q: Aren't you glad you didn't have to feed them? (laughs)

A: Yes. (laughs)

Q: Through the years? (laughs)

A: Carry water for them? (laughs)

Q: Ruth, I'm sure your life has been so interesting and it's been so nice this afternoon to visit with you and tell me about your girlhood and experience in Springfield and everything. Thank you so much.

END OF SIDE ONE

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DATE July 9-75

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(INTERVIEWEE)

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(for Starved Rock Library System)