



## **Citation for this collection:**

MSS 179 Robert H. Richards, Jr., Delaware oral history collection, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware

## **Contact:**

Special Collections, University of Delaware Library  
181 South College Avenue  
Newark, DE 19717-5267  
302.831.2229 / 302.831.1046 (fax)  
<http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec>  
[askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu](mailto:askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu)

## **Terms governing use and reproduction:**

Use of materials from this collection beyond the exceptions provided for in the Fair Use and Educational Use clauses of the U.S. Copyright Law may violate federal law.

Permission to publish or reproduce is required from the copyright holder. Please contact Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, for questions. [askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu](mailto:askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu)

## **A note about transcriptions:**

Of the original 252 audio-recordings in this collection, 212 of these tapes were transcribed around the time of the original recordings (between 1966 and 1978). In 2012, Cabbage Tree Solutions was contracted to create transcriptions for the remaining tapes. Corrections to and clarifications for all transcriptions are welcome, especially for names and places. Please contact Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, for questions. [askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu](mailto:askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu)

## Mrs. Mary E. Dorsey

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: This is Yetta Chaiken taping for the special collection of the University of Delaware. Today, we are taping Mary Dorsey. Mary, would you like to tell us when and where you are born and tell us something about the early days of your life.

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I was born at 1342 Orange Street in Wilmington, Delaware, which was directly across the street of then Episcopal Bishop Stead of Delaware.

Interviewer: What date was that?

Mrs. Dorsey: August 29th, 1895.

Interviewer: All right. And what was Wilmington like at that time?

Mrs. Dorsey: Wilmington was a very likable rather small community. At that time, my grandfather had a hardware store at 19th and Market Street, which was then Brandywine Village and was entirely separate from Wilmington.

Interviewer: And did you have an opportunity to see or to experience what life was like in Brandywine Village?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, not so very much. Of course, I went over to grandpa store because he always had candy for us. And it was a combined hardware and tinsmithing shop. The stone houses on the Market Street between the Brandywine Creek and up about Concord Avenue were largely occupied by the Brandywine millers. The mills were just along the Brandywine, of course, down the stream from the Market Street Bridge.

Interviewer: Were they Quakers, the people who live -- the millers?

Mrs. Dorsey: I think a great -- many of them were the Quakers, probably the most noted ones where the Canby's and the Tatnall's.

Interviewer: And do you remember if the stream along the Brandywine flowed more rapidly than it does today?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, of course, it flows pretty rapidly these days after a rain, but there's tide water all the way up to the first dam, which is just below in Delaware Hospital.

Interviewer: And so, there was a difference in those days in terms of the water flowing for the mills?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, there was a race way on both sides of the Brandywine at that time. I guess most of the mills were on the north side of the stream and there were little canal or race way was fast flowing.

Interviewer: What about your own family history and something about your life as a child?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, my grandfather was one of the Baltimore Dorseys and his parents had died when he was very small and his uncle looked after him and he overheard his father say that – grandfather say that the – or was it his uncle that he lived with. Well, he heard him say that the money was running out for the children and he was kind of worried about that. And my great grandfather, Washington, had his pride, so he ran away that night at Wilmington and settled in Brandywine Village, he was a tailor.

Interviewer: And then your father was one of how many children?

Mrs. Dorsey: My father was the only boy of three children and, of course, when my three brothers were born, they were just wonderful because they were going to carry on the Dorsey name.

Interviewer: And then, your father, what kind of occupation did he have?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, at first, he went into business with his father, but the business petered out and my grandfather was very generous about lending people money and going on people's notes and all that sort of things, so the family came under hard times.

Interviewer: And then your father did what?

Mrs. Dorsey: Then he studied stenography and was a court stenographer in the City Court of Wilmington.

Interviewer: And where did your family live?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I said we lived at 1342 Orange Street.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. You live at Orange Street and did you live there during your whole growing up period?

Mrs. Dorsey: No. We live there until 1907, when our father built way off in the woods across Washington Street at 20 N. Jefferson Street. At that time, the street had to be opened up for the building from 19th Street to Concord Avenue on Jefferson and from Washington to what is now Baynard Boulevard on 20th.

**[0:05:05]**

Interviewer: And you so lived at 20th N. Jefferson?

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes.

Interviewer: And it had not been opened yet. It was still undeveloped.

Mrs. Dorsey: That's right. All that area was. The lot across the street had a duck pond, or a marsh pond I guess you'd call it. And we used to go there and get cattails for lighting our Fourth of July fireworks.

Interviewer: And where did you go to school?

Mrs. Dorsey: As my father did, when he started out, went to number two school, which was at the 11th N. Washington Street. It recently been turned down fairly recently.

Interviewer: And then when you moved, did you continue going there at the school?

Mrs. Dorsey: By that time we were in the school, Number 24, it was called, at 14th N. Washington Street overlooking the Brandywine. It was a yellow bricks building with tarts around it.

Interviewer: And did you have to walk to school every day?

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: You went in every kind of weather, I assume.

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes.

Interviewer: No one ever drove you on an automobile?

Mrs. Dorsey: We didn't have automobiles in that day. First automobile I ever rode in was owned by Dr. Ramford. Mrs. Ramford had been a Canby and had a lovely old home, a descendant of Millers and they had a beautiful home on the 14th N. Market where the Brown Vocational School is now.

Interviewer: What type of recreation did you have as a child? When you moved across close to Baynard Boulevard, there must not have been many other children to play with.

Mrs. Dorsey: No, they weren't though. The first, the six houses in that row were built by my father and three of his friends, and all three of them had children, so we had them to play with. And we went across in the lot and built fires and burned our hair. And as other new houses were being built, as soon as the rafters were laid, we go over into these houses and hop the rafters and jump from one second to our window to their house next door, and it was great fun flying in those houses under construction.

Interviewer: So it's fun growing up in Wilmington?

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes. It was lots of fun but we had to make our own fun, of course, this was long before the days of movies, and the radio and television I haven't even thought of then.

Interviewer: Your grandmother, I think she came lived on the McKee's Hill.

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes. My grandmother Dorsey had been born on McKee's Hill. It's now known McKee's. She was McKee and on a concrete pike and...

Interviewer: She was an old family.

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes. The McKee's had been here for great many generations.

Interviewer: Yes. When did the McKees come to Delaware?

Mrs. Dorsey: I don't know. I never looked into that.

Interviewer: Because I think they were one of the very early families.

Mrs. Dorsey: That's right. And just the front of McKee's Hill, there was a tall house because that was the end of the city limits, I think, then, and from then on Concord Avenue was a toll road.

Interviewer: And so whenever she came into Wilmington, they had to pay the toll in order to get in to Wilmington.

Mrs. Dorsey: If they came in a horse and buggy, yes. But she had to go to Friend school, I think she went to the Little Friend School that was in at 19th Tatnall, I think. But she walked down through the woods and country

lanes, and crossed at, what you call it, a ford, now what do you call those things? Shallow places in the streams. That's right, a ford.

Interviewer: Right.

Mrs. Dorsey: And she had walked across that and all kinds of weather.

Interviewer: Was that a farm? Did the family own a farm there?

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes. It was a large farm.

Interviewer: And then how did her grandfather get to school, do you...?

Mrs. Dorsey: I don't know.

Interviewer: I thought that there was a story about that. When you finished school, what did you do at that time?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, my father being from a southern family felt that a girl shouldn't go to work, that they should stay home and help their mother make a home for him and his sons.

Interviewer: And did you stay home? Was that your...?

Mrs. Dorsey: No. I was able to get a job working in a barn shop with the Delaware Commission for the Blind at 303 West 8th Street for the Christmas holidays. In that way, I made about \$50 for the three weeks before Christmas, I think it was, and I saved that up and on the \$50, I went first to what was then *[inaudible]* **[0:09:50]** business school and when they asked me to repeat my shorthand course, I went over to go to college and they took me on, and so I had to finish a course in three months.

**[0:10:00]**

The tuition then was \$12 a month.

Interviewer: Was it unusual for women to go on for higher education?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, no. And when I graduated, there was no -- from the woman in high school, there were no women in Delaware College. Delaware College wasn't open to women until 1914. And there had been in the earlier days a Women's College but when a woman was found in the bedroom of one of the boy students, she was thrown out of college and all women were kept out of Delaware College from then on until 1914.

Interviewer: That's interesting. I had never heard that story before. And so, as a result you didn't have an opportunity to go to college?

Mrs. Dorsey: No. My father said what's the use of Mary going to college, she'll get married and have a lot of children, it won't do her any good. And then we have three other big boys to educate. So it's a boy, she deserves the education because they'll have themselves and their families to support.

Interviewer: And you were satisfied with that?

Mrs. Dorsey: Didn't make any difference whether I was satisfied or not, that was it. And I had to go to business school only by not telling my father I was going. And with the aid of my mother who, of course, wanted to – she was quietly helpful in the woman's suffrage movement.

Interviewer: What did she do for this suffrage movement, do you remember?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, she campaigned and she was an active club women. She belonged to a new sentry club which was then a very active and fine women's club and was head of the International Sunshine Society, which had been a – originally a newspaper women's club who *[inaudible]* [0:11:46] was many people who do not need charity, need a friend.

And their work was to find people that didn't need friends into being of assistance and comfort to them. She was particularly active in the prevention of blindness and she worked with the Lions Club, their society did, in getting glasses for children who couldn't afford to buy them and the prevention of blindness as a whole.

Interviewer: And did you ever work towards the suffrage movement yourself?

Mrs. Dorsey: No. I was pretty young then but...

Interviewer: Now in the 1914, '15, '16, '17, there was a movement in this country.

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Mrs. Dorsey: There was a lot of action in this country, we wouldn't be voting yet.

Interviewer: Right. You're right. You went to work soon after that.

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I went to work for the DuPont Company as secretary to the medical director in January of 1916.

Interviewer: And how long did you work there?

Mrs. Dorsey: Until 1960. Not as a secretary to the medical director. I worked there in the DuPont building until 1929 and then I was transferred to the experimental station as secretary to Dr. Tandberg who is then director of the experimental station.

Interviewer: Was it rewarding satisfying work?

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes, it was very pleasant. The experimental station then had only about 650 feet for a little in the whole area and everybody knew everybody else and knew – and things were being discovered. Of course, it's primarily for research and where we kind of discovered something wonderful, well, we all celebrated.

Interviewer: And how many women worked for DuPont at that time?

Mrs. Dorsey: I don't know how many worked for the company, but out there there were very few. The very first woman to be employed at there was in 1916. She was taken on as a messenger and wore mini blouse and bloomers to deliver the mail.

Interviewer: And so you were one of the people that helped break ground in the DuPont Company in terms of employing women.

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I wouldn't say that, no. I think that in the Wilmington office, there had been a great many.

Interviewer: There were.

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you have any sports in which you excelled while you're growing up such as tennis?

Mrs. Dorsey: I never excelled in any sports, but I had an awful good time in most sports. I skated, roller skated and I love tennis, and play...

Interviewer: When did you start playing tennis?



Mrs. Dorsey: I think probably about 1914 or so. We had played on funny course that we laid out in the park, Brandywine Park, between Hanover Church and the end of Washington Bridge. Of course that was on a slope, but that didn't bother us. The city put up a post for us, we had to bring our own nets and, of course, it was very important to change sides because you were on the uphill, so I went downhill on the next.

**[0:15:09]**

Interviewer: And you achieved some kind of fame in the tennis world, didn't you?

Mrs. Dorsey: I wouldn't say it was fame. I think once I got a Delaware State prize in doubles because I had a good partner. But I got the executive cup from the DuPont country club for being a club champion.

Interviewer: You also like to travel and skate, didn't you?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I didn't start traveling until after I retire, but I did belong to the Appalachian Mountain Club and we always had an interesting August camp, which was a tent camp pitched at various places, mostly in the White Mountains at that time.

Interviewer: I thought you told me the story that you went skiing in Canada.

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, yes, I did but...

Interviewer: How old were you then and what year was that?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I think it was about 1922 or '23, and I did go skiing then.

Interviewer: Was it common for women to go skiing alone in Canada?

Mrs. Dorsey: No.

Interviewer: What happened?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, Dr. Hudson, the first medical director who is my boss at that time was really worried about my going off by myself in railroad trains overnight and so on. So, Major Sylvester was head of the protection division and Dr. Hudson got him to write a letter to the superintendent of police of Montreal. And then Mr. HD Haskell was the vice-president in-charge of the medical division.

So he wrote a letter to the president of the Canadian Explosives and asked them to look after me. And when we were getting into or across the Canadian border, I guess, we'd call it, customs officer got on the train and inquired where I was going and what I was going to do and all that sort of thing and said, well, he didn't know that a woman traveling alone should be let in to their country when I was just going up to learn to go skiing.

And so I fished out the letters from Major Sylvester and Mr. Haskell and that was what helped me get into Canada where I came to skiing.

Interviewer: Did you find that the trip was worthwhile as you got there?

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, yes, it was lots of fun. Not only did I have those letters of introduction, but a friend of mine, the sister of a friend of mine lived in Montreal, she had there very active children and so her children took me out and we went skiing on Mount Royal.

Interviewer: Let's get back to your childhood for a moment. I wonder if you can try to compare the childhood that you had with what you see in terms of how children are being raised today. What's some of the great differences between...?

Mrs. Dorsey: Of course I'm an old maiden, I don't know much about the raising of children in modern days. But since all of our amusement was self-created, we all -- for instance, we hop on the back of a wagon, the ice wagon was particularly fun because you could -- there was a low step there and we could hop on the back of that and reach in and took out the chips from the blocks of ice that the iceman was delivering to other people.

And there was a wholesale grocery named Lodge who had a stable right in the center of the block between Orange and Market, and 13th and 14th. And as soon as we knew it was time for the delivery trucks -- of course, dawn to come in, we could hop over the tailboard and get a ride around to the stables and that was good sport. And, of course, the end of the stables and they had hay mound and everybody who's ever been a child accessible to it and they -- with a hay mound accessible knows what fun you can have in a hay mound.

Interviewer: So the children today are really probably missing something?

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, they don't know what they're missing. And, of course, we had -- I think, of course, never wonder it could have been much more severe

than the last one, but we didn't have nearly so much to know as we seem to have at that time, and with excellent sledding down at Orange Street from 13th to 14th.

Interviewer: How about when you became a teenager? The type of socializing the boys and girls did then is very different from what they do today. Can you tell us some of those experiences?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, we didn't pair off nearly so early as the youngsters do now. They played in the field, which was very interesting. And we got together more for dancing and singing in our own homes and hay rides are pretty marvelous of the – dances were, of course, much simpler. Ms. Kate McClafferty had a studio about two doors or three doors east of the Wilmington High School which was then on Delaware Avenue.

**[0:20:11]**

And it was great and fun to go there and that's where we met the boys she later went to dances with and she had a sort of a carnival demonstration of her pupil's prowess and sometimes that was at the Grand Opera House.

Interviewer: Yes. Even I took lesson from Kate McClafferty.

Mrs. Dorsey: You did?

Interviewer: Yes. So I remember very well. It was the thing for teenagers to do with in those days.

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: And social dancing was very acceptable.

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes.

Interviewer: Was religion a very important part of the lives of the people who lived in Wilmington?

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, yes. Of course, we don't have very much else to do, we go to Sunday school on Sunday and, of course, you didn't do any sewing or anything exciting on Sunday. And, well, I think we were allowed to read the bible and I also did more but that was about all. So some Sunday schools were open in the morning and some were in the afternoon. So, you went to your own one of those times and went with your girlfriends or – we

didn't call them girlfriends and of course – to one and the other half part of the day.

And, of course, there were evening services on Sundays and usually in the prayer meeting in the middle of the week.

Interviewer: And did your family participate in all – were you a very active church goer? What church did you belong to?

Mrs. Dorsey: I belong to St. Andrews at *[inaudible] [0:21:40]* Shipley and at one time I had this class in Sunday school, this was in the two years between my graduation and going to work. It's not only a Sunday school class, but I had charged of a group in the Chancell Chapter and sang in the choir, the *[inaudible] [0:21:59]* active.

Interviewer: Since your retirement you've been – you did – after you retired, you did a lot of traveling. How did you subsidize that?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I had saved out for it and the increase in salary I tried to set apart and did not ever increase my way of living. My mother and I lived together at 2301 Jefferson Street until she died in 1942. And of course that was very inexpensive. I never had an apartment of my own and I stayed on in our own home and did until I came out here in 1975.

So I was able to save money that way. And, of course, I broke in to the Delaware Canoe Club, which had a – still has a camp at Small East Dam and I was the only woman club member and only a woman whose father or brother were club members could join that club, but the clubhouse was at Newport.

And, of course, we had to paddle up, you waited until the time is running up before you start it out regardless of whether that was 11 o'clock at night. Of course, when I first went to work, we had to work Saturday mornings until 12 o'clock. So we have a tent pitched, my team and I, and went up most weekends during the summer.

Interviewer: And subsequently you paddled on the Snake River?

Mrs. Dorsey: No, we didn't paddle on the Snake River. That is a ferocious river. There's a place called Hills Canyon aptly describes that section of the Snake, and I'm around that on a rubber raft. But I've had about six or eight canoe vacations in the Canadian Wilderness with friends that I knew from the Appalachian Mountain Club.

Interviewer: And what about other trips around the world?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I retired in August of 1960. And in September I went on a – well, I went to California first and went down and saw some of Southern California and flew to Japan where I joined a tour group going around the world. And that tour finally broke up in Greece on New Year's Day and I had a rail pass and expected to meet the Appalachian Mountain Club group in Norway in early of July.

So I've added around Europe by myself. And after the three weeks trip, I think it was, in Norway, when which we did some walking in the Jotunheimen, I finally came back home the middle of the following August.

**[0:25:01]**

Interviewer: You also became a photographer along the way.

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, I've been interested in taking black and white prints from, oh, I guess about 1910 on and, of course, took my first colored slides in 1915. I've been taking then ever since.

Interviewer: I understand that you have some film, some photographs of many Wilmington sites that no longer exist, what are some of them?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, the Brandywine, the race way was lined with *[inaudible]* **[0:25:38]**, and that was lovely in spring. That's just across the Brandywine Creek from the Josephine Gardens. And I think I have a picture of the old iron and wooden Washington Street Bridge, and the old high school. Let me see. I can't think of some of the places. The old Bishop Stead, of course and the old *[inaudible]* **[0:26:07]** store down the Second and Market. Well, I just can't of...

Interviewer: Do you remember that pharmacy at *[inaudible]* **[0:26:15]** pharmacy on Market Street, an apothecary shop?

Mrs. Dorsey: No, I don't.

Interviewer: I think it was across from Danford's. It was there for many years.

Mrs. Dorsey: Oh, I remember Watson's Pharmacy which was in the institute building at 8th and Market, the northwest corner of 8th and Market. When the library was upstairs, Watson's Pharmacy was down below. And when my grandmother took me to the opera house to see my first movie, she

always took a soda to Washington Pharmacy for a soda, had a wonderful smell and a wonderful atmosphere.

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, that is where the days when going to the drugstore or the pharmacy for ice cream and soda was a real treat.

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes, it was.

Interviewer: And today...

Mrs. Dorsey: I think they've had to ten cents for them too.

Interviewer: Well, today, since people can buy them at the supermarket, it seems to have lost some of that excitement.

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes, it has.

Interviewer: Is there any advice that you would give to the people today in terms of their lifestyle in contrast the lifestyle that you knew?

Mrs. Dorsey: I think they've lost the capacity to be alone and amuse themselves being alone. We never had trouble in finding something to do. And I have no skills, but I think that learning to live alone and like it is very important, because it certainly is – will stand you in good stead as you become older.

Interviewer: If you were a young woman today and had the option of going into any vocation, which would you select?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, that depends on the amount of money. I selected when I was still in high school, I wanted to be a doctor, I'm still not until then. And I was young at that time and Dr. Peter Tomlinson was our family physician and he said, "Well, let her go ahead and study nursing first and then she could earn a living and go ahead and earn her way through medical school." But that would have been a long hard road and my mother just didn't see my having to struggle that way for a means of learning a living.

Interviewer: Yeah. And I think women doctors were not completely accepted.

Mrs. Dorsey: No, they were not. It was very hard for a woman, but it's been hard for a woman to make it into any profession as far as that's concerned. Those blanketie blank men *[inaudible]* [0:28:50] as well.

Interviewer: Do you feel as though men did hold you down?

Mrs. Dorsey: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Because the fact was that you were in the working world long before most women were.

Mrs. Dorsey: And we were always paid in much lower rate. I think in some instances it's still true that women and men doing the same type of work, the woman is paid lower salary. Of course, a way the men rationalized it and thought they were getting away with it was that the man had families to support and women didn't have families to support and, therefore, they shouldn't be paid as much as a man.

Interviewer: But you did eventually support your mother, didn't you?

Mrs. Dorsey: No, my parents were always self-sustaining.

Interviewer: Was there a wage differential in the DuPont Company when you worked there? Were there men stenographers and bookkeepers?

Mrs. Dorsey: There were bookkeepers, yes. Not many men stenographers. The higher offices sometimes had men stenographers, partly I think because they would have occasion to travel with a man to the plants outside of Wilmington.

**[0:30:01]**

Of course, in the early days that I was in, there were no plane trips or anything like that. You had to go some place and stay overnight. So that was a justification quote for the men stenography.

Interviewer: If your family gave you some basic fundamentals in terms of values, many of those values are no longer in existence today in terms of importance. Which ones were the most helpful to you?

Mrs. Dorsey: I don't know whether they were a help or a hindrance, they kept you from getting – doing some of the things that other people would do to gain promotion.

Interviewer: What are some of the values that your family...?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, being honest, being *[inaudible]* **[0:30:52]**, being truthful, not misleading anybody, shooting straight from the shoulder, having consideration for other people, not building yourself up by pulling somebody else down, and, of course, complete integrity.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the way our society uses energy today? Yesterday, President Carter spoke about saving energy, do you feel as though we don't handle the energy situation well?

Mrs. Dorsey: Well, he knows a lot more about it than I do. But I think that most people think that we do not use energy wisely and I think that if necessary we could...

**[0:31:43] End of Audio**