

Narrator's name: Emmett Meyer  
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Interviewer's name: Carol Adams  
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Moraine Valley Oral History Association

CA: Where were you born and when?

EM: I was born in Louisville, Kentucky, January 20, 1913.

CA: And what did your parents do for a living?

EM: My parents were the tailors for the Gulf Hotel in Louisville. My mother was just a mother and a housewife.

CA: Uh huh. How did you, uh . . . when did you move to Oak Lawn?

EM: 1924.

CA: Had you lived in the city before?

EM: We had lived in the city in the Woodlawn area. And I would say attended grammar school and the first year of high school there. We moved out here permanently in 1928. And in 1924, we built a three-room cottage and used it for summer and weekends. Sometimes through the week we would come out and stay.

CA: What was the location of the cottage.

EM: At 103rd and Keeler.

CA: And uh, did you then transfer to local schools or did you . . .

EM: No, I didn't. I finished my last three years with uh . . . I probably

EM: should have gone to Blue Island, but I liked Hyde Park High School because it was probably the best high school in the city at the time and, uh, so I finished out there.

CA: Did you go on the public transportation?

EM: I, uh, walked two-and-a-half miles to the end of the street car line in Mt. Greenwood and 111th and Sacramento, and then I had about a 17 mile trip on the street car to get to high school.

CA: Um, I understand your wife is from Mt. Greenwood.

EM: She was born in Mt. Greenwood when it was still the Village of Mt. Greenwood. Since then it has been taken into Chicago, but it was an individual village at the time. She was born in 1922.

CA: What month, when were you married?

EM: 1945.

CA: Had you been in the service?

EM: I was in the service at the time. I spent three-and-a-half years in Africa and Italy and I had an R & R vacation of a month. I came home, and we got married on the furlough.

CA: Had you known her for a long time or . . .

EM: Yes. Well, I had known her all her life. We both attended the same church, and I had known her all that time.

CA: When you got out of the service, then did you move into Oak Lawn permanently or . . .

EM: Well, I was permanently in Oak Lawn before the service, but we came to live in the home that I live in now.

CA: That was at 42 . . .

EM: 4201 103rd Street.

CA: Then, actually, you've been here married . . .

EM: All our married life we've been here. The house itself, incidentally, is over a hundred years old. It was originally a farm house that stood north of 103rd Street, and we moved it over in 1927 and put a basement under it and put plumbing and electricity in it and remodeled it.

CA: Do you know who built it?

EM: No, I don't. Slightly before my time.

CA: No, I just thought perhaps you heard, you know.

EM: No. I don't know. It was a farmhouse. We completely remodeled it taking out walls adding others, putting in the plumbing, electricity, etc.

CA: When did your interest in local politics get started?

EM: Probably, after the war, about 1946. And of course, I've been interested ever since.

CA: I know you have been a precinct captain.

EM: Yeah, I've done that. I've worked our precinct for many years. However, before politics there were a lot of other interests. There were the school districts. I was on the original school sites committee for #123.

EM: I was one of the founders of the school caucus for District 123, and served on that executive board. Then I worked in baseball for boys and boy scouts, girl scouts, YMCA when it first came in. I was very active in that. We had a family membership and my children all belonged to that. My oldest boy was a YMCA counselor, and we would hold many of the meetings over in our backyard. In fact, they had archery over in my backyard.

CA: What church do you belong to?

EM: I now go to Pilgrim-Faith (United Church of Christ). However, for 45 years I was a member of the Parkwood Baptist Church in Mt. Greenwood.

CA: Are you active in the church?

EM: I held all the offices there were to hold. I was a deacon, trustee, Sunday School superintendent, chairman of the board, and moderator, which is a top job in the church.

CA: Are you active now with Pilgrim-Faith?

EM: Not very, no. I hold no offices in the church, no.

CA: Were there some specific community problems that prompted you to get into politics or it was just your interest in the community?

EM: Yes, we had a problem out in our area which we called Longwood Gardens because that was the name of one of the largest subdivisions in the entire square mile, now District 6. And they wanted to run tension wires down through the area. They wanted to have spot zoning. There were several large taverns that wanted to go in right in the residential section. So we organized the Longwood Gardens Civic Association. I was

EM: one of the charter members of that. We found out that by working together, we could keep our neighborhood the way we wanted it. That was my first interest in politics. And of course, the interest of Oak Lawn have always been close to us because we have lived here so long and seen the change. And, uh, we have seen the improvements come in that were needed. And I was appointed to the original plan commission. And so for 20 years on the various boards and plan commission, Board of Appeals and the Planning and Development Board, I was active in seeing that Oak Lawn grew the way we thought it should grow.

CA: The, uh, . . . Was the area that you live in, was it always part of the village?

EM: No, it wasn't always part of the village. But it has always been part of the village since we lived here. And, uh, the area I live in, at the time we moved out probably had no more than five, possibly six, houses in the entire square mile. These were farm houses, but mostly the land was native prairie with all the native flowers, grasses, and, uh, . . . We had wild lillies in there. Lots of beautiful flowers that are gone now.

CA: What were local elections like when you first became active?

EM: Well, we didn't have 20,000 people turning out like they did now. I mean, sometimes elections were won by a few votes where you had only a hundred or two people turn out for an election. Those days, most of the elections if you needed a load of cinders, the time to call up was before the election. They would bring out the cinders and get rid of the mud, ya know, and that sort of thing. Because all the streets we had in town then were nothing but mud, and the ashes and tin cans, that sort of thing. Of

EM: course, no drainage, no water, no sewers. The subdivision across from me was, oh it was plotted in 1926 or '27, and they sold a lot of lots in there at very high prices. They put sidewalks in, but no streets. So, the streets were very difficult sometimes. 103rd Street was gravel, but it had very high crowns and a deep ditch on either side. And we had an ice storm, you wound up in the ditch more often than you were on the highway. It was a rounded crown, and it was very hard to drive it.

CA: Where were you employed?

EM: I worked with Inland Steel in Indiana Harbor, Indiana, for 40 years. And, for 25 years I ran my own real estate office from my own home. We had a very high basement which we used. It was built that way because we could have a store in it. When we moved out and moved this farmhouse across, we built it high so we would have a business place on 103rd. So after the war I got my real estate broker's license. My wife and I ran the office. We had a building contractor we did all the building for. We built hundreds of homes in Oak Lawn in 25 years.

CA: What was the name of it?

EM: My own firm, Emmett R. Meyer Real Estate. We were pioneers in that end of town. I searched the records for owners of the property around there, especially the subdivision across from us which was divided into 30-foot lots. We found these owners and we got a lot of parcels together. We sold a lot of property to different individuals, and then we also sold a lot of it as homes, lots of homes together.

CA: About how many precincts were there out here when you were working your precinct shortly after you . . .

EM: Well, uh, my wife has been a judge ever since 1947 election. I guess six or seven. Somewhere back there. And our District No. 5 at that time ran from Crawford Avenue to Central Avenue and from 103rd to 111th. So we had two-square miles in our district. And you drove from one house to another. You didn't walk because they were three or four blocks apart, the houses.

CA: I understand there was a memorial service held for the servicemen in Oak Lawn at the, uh, at Columbus Drive and the tracks.

EM: Yes, there was. And, uh, I was overseas at the time and my wife, (I was not married. We were not married at the time, but we were engaged) she came over to attend that service. I was one of the names that was on that plaque that they put up there as one of the men who left from Oak Lawn.

CA: Uh huh. And I did want to thank you for the pictures of . . . everything you donated, the plaque and that ceremony. Do you know, was that one of the few ceremonies honoring servicemen from World War II?

EM: Your welcome. As far as I know. When I came back, I don't recall any other services. But of course, I wasn't at that one, but she did take pictures of it. Sent me one overseas. It was gratifying to know that the people in Oak Lawn would remember us over there.

CA: Were you active in any veterans organizations after the war?

EM: No. I became so active in the church and the village of Oak Lawn that I just never joined one of the veterans' organizations. I've regretted not having done so, but I just didn't have the time to do it.

CA: You said you worked in Indiana.

EM: Right.

CA: Did you have to drive?

EM: Had to drive each way. It was 20 miles each way. And occasionally when you had a breakdown or the car was in for repairs, it was a terrific job getting out there with several street car transfers and then the bus line from State Line out. A couple of hours to get there if you didn't have your own car.

CA: Was there a large contingent? You mentioned this name on the plaque. Was there a large contingent of servicemen from the area?

EM: I think when I was inducted there was only about 11. I know we marched down 95th Street here. Then we got in a car, and they took us over to Argo for induction. How many went at a different time, I'm not sure. But there is a plaque over at the VFW Hall in their trophy showcase showing how many people served from Oak Lawn. But I believe that plaque takes care of people that were not in Oak Lawn at the time, but who had moved here since, and, uh it's only the Oak Lawn people. Over at Green Oaks Post they have a plaque, and I don't think there were more than twenty names on that who originally left from Oak Lawn.

CA: Recently you're quite active with the senior citizens.

EM: Yes, for the last couple of years since I retired, we've been active in the clubs. We've belonged to several different clubs. Last year, I served as vice-president of the council. This year, I am president of the council. For the last two years, I have been chairman of the facility committee which has been planning our new building which is now going up and nearing completion.

CA: I understand that you were active during the Round Up Days and during the fiftieth anniversary celebration.

EM: Yes. My family was chosen to represent Oak Lawn on the Oak Lawn parades. We had a float with a covered wagon and horse. My wife dressed the whole family, the three children, in colonial costumes or pioneer costumes. We rode this float around through Blue Island and Evergreen Park and Chicago Ridge. It won several trophies, too. My wife, Jeanie, was in charge of the costumes for the show that was put on, for the pageant, and my family was in the pageant. We were in the pageant. We were in the pioneer sequence. The boy and the girl were in the family sequence. All the women gathered together, ya know, immediately (when the husbands left, you know) and they all gathered to get the coffee. The kids went off to school. They had a good time.

CA: All you children are all grown now. I assume . . . have they all moved away or are there some still . . . ?

EM: They moved, but not too far. There still close enough that we can babysit all the time. Our daughter lives in the same home that my wife was born in Mt. Greenwood. And my boy lives out in Crestwood.

CA: Have you kept any records of your service to the different boards with the village?

EM: Yes. Well, we got a plaque from each one, ya know. So, I have plaques.

CA: It's actually the same board, isn't it? It has just changed names.

EM: Well, the Plan Commission was split to where they had a board of appeals which is still running. They had a planning commission, which was a fore-

EM: runner to the present planning and development board. So, it pertained to zoning all the way.

CA: Have there been a lot of hot fights over zoning through the years?

EM: There have been some very hot fights over it. Sitting on these boards, you feel that if you don't make a few enemies you probably haven't done your job because everybody is coming in looking for a favor or looking for a rezoning which you certainly can't agree with. Everybody that wants rezoning. If you have your own ideals as to what the town should be and you want to stick to those ideals, you lose a few friends that way. In fact, you make a few enemies. I've had a bullet through my front window in the living room twice. Two different times. 'Cause you turned down somebody who wants the business or a big apartment project in a residential area which you know shouldn't be there. They're closing a lot of money. Some people get pretty mad at you. You didn't win many friends being on these boards, but you did help the people of Oak Lawn the way we thought it should go.

CA: Were you involved at all in the . . . when the comprehensive zoning plan was made up?

EM: Yes. I was on the planning and development board that drew up the comprehensive plan. We met with Stanton and Rockwell who helped us develop it. We developed the zoning plan, the zoning map, and the entire plan by which the village does use now for the last 15 years.

CA: Zoning has always come up in political campaigns. Do you feel that the village has held fairly closely to that comprehensive plan?

EM: Yes, I think they have. They have held to it pretty good. In fact, it has been a tool that has allowed them to hold the line. Some communities just didn't have the zoning map and the comprehensive plan that had been drawn up and conceived by experts ya know, can't hold the line. But we had the tools so that we could hold the line. And I'm pretty proud of the way Oak Lawn has turned out.

CA: Would you like to take a break here for a minute?

EM: It doesn't matter.

CA: And think about what you want to talk about next?

EM: Whatever you say. I can talk for hours.

CA: (laughs) I know you and your family played quite a role in the bicentennial activities of the village. Could you tell us some of the things that you were involved in?

EM: Yes. My wife and I both entered the costume contest that was held last year. The judging was done over at Colonial Savings. It was done by a panel of people who did not know any of us. They were judged by numbers. So the judges did not know who they were picking out. My wife and I both won first prize and a very lovely trophy. So, we rode on several floats in the parade as winners of the contest. We were on the carpet float, which won first prize. Then as senior citizens, we designed our own float. We had a 24-foot trailer, which we decorated. We had sixteen men and women on it, and we showed the transmission from colonial days to modern days. We had eight men on one side and eight women on the other. We used as our theme the ERA ammendment in showing how women, and men too, have

EM: changed in their lifestyles and dress. We won first prize for that, too.

CA: Going back to uh, the early days then, 103rd over near Crawford. You said the houses were very few and far between. Was there any farming going on there?

EM: Yes, there was some farming. But a lot of the land was laying in the native prairie. Some of the tall grasses were there, the bluestem grasses, the indian paint brush, the blue jentian, the wild lillies. Lot of beautiful land in there just virgin prairie. Don't have any of that around here anymore. There were a few farms. Back on 105th there were farms. There were farms over on Kostner and 105th, the Boersma's over there. But a very small part of it was in farms. When you got west of Kostner, the land dropped off there. It was a hill and ran down to Stoney Creek, and a lot of that was under water most of the time. It wasn't the best farming land. The spot where we live is probably the about the highest in Oak Lawn; it's over 620 ft. elevation. But when you get down to where is, then it drops down. That land was mostly slough then. I can remember in the winter time, I would go out my back door and walk about a block and then I could skate for a mile across the prairie because it was ditches with ice and then when you got near Kostner between there and Cicero, it was all water like a lake. You could skate for miles.

CA: What were some of the names. You mentioned Boersma's, what were some of the names of some of the people that lived there when you first moved out?

EM: Well, the people next door to us were the Zieman's. They just had a little garden; they didn't have a farm. There were Turbstrya's across the street, and Drysema's was down on the corner.

CA: It sounds primarily Dutch.

EM: It was all Dutch. Most of the farmers out here were Dutch. I remember getting milk and taking the pail, a dime a gallon. Everybody would go over and get a pail of milk from them. They're very hard working people. And they raised lots of crops. I know back during the Depression, they'd take a load of carrots or beets or something in the market and wouldn't get anything for them. They would bring them back and plough 'em under, because they just couldn't get enough for them.

CA: Was there a beacon out in your area?

EM: Yes. The beacon was over about a 104th and . . . let's see now. It would be two blocks west of Kostner. 104th and Kilbourn. That was, belonged to Engel's. It was on property of Engel's. That guided the airplanes to Midway Airport. That was about the only lights we had out here at night was that airport beacon.

CA: Was there people down here by the name of Enzalls or was it Engles?

EM: Engel, Ed Engel. He was the one that owned the property that the beacon was on.

CA: And he maintained it?

EM: I don't think he had anything to do with it. I think he just gave them the property and it was on a timer and it worked every night. I don't think he had anything to do with it.

CA: What year was it when it was taken down?

EM: Probably during the war, because I can't recall them ever coming out and

EM: taking it down. Before the war it was there; and when I came back, I think it was gone. During the war time.

CA: But it was kind of a guidance type of thing?

EM: It was about, oh, I would say, about 30-feet high and it just had a revolving light. It was a guide for pilots. They didn't have the radar and that sort of thing then. When they saw the beacon, they knew they were on the course to Midway Airport.

CA: I know you have contributed an awful lot of pictures and background material for the village. Do you have any hopes or aspirations for what the village should be or should become in the years . . . in the future years?

EM: Well, I'm happy with the way the village has turned out. I would like to see some nice businesses get into town. I was very disappointed we didn't get the Sears and Roebuck business. That would have meant a whole lot to Oak Lawn in the way of sales tax and a nicer shopping center. We have a lot of discount stores, but really the discount stores are helping the homeowner with their taxes. I would like to see better stores. It has been our aim all the time to get better businesses in Oak Lawn. It has been hard to do, but, uh, I think some of the stores that we have in Oak Lawn, particularly the automobile agencies which contribute so much in sales tax to Oak Lawn, have helped us. I can recall when we didn't have any in Oak Lawn. We had the Chevrolet agency that had a used car lot. They wanted to put a used car lot in Cicero. They owned a lot down there in back of the Coral Theater. One of the first things we did on the Planning Commission was to say no used car lot unless you put a new car agency there. So they put the new car agency here, and

EM: that was the first one. Since that time, we have so many, which really contribute to the financial backing for Oak Lawn.

CA: Since this is the tenth anniversary of the tornado that hit Oak Lawn in 1967, I was wondering what your activities were and how you and your family were affected at the time of the tornado.

EM: Well, when the tornado came through, I stood in my front window and watched it go through. I didn't know it was a tornado at the time. The rain was not falling. The rain was going by horizontally. It didn't seem as though it hit the ground. I've never seen anything like it. We were far enough away on 103rd, a mile or so from the tornado itself. The terrific winds we were having just turned my trees. Some of them looked as though they were almost going to turn over and hit the ground. But after it was through and you heard all the sirens and you knew something was wrong. Then I was supposed to go to work that night. But I ran over to the village and saw what was happening. I took a whole week off from work. At the time they asked me if I would run the Building Department for the village because Kark Faitz was doing . . . could do practically nothing but go around and see what houses should be demolished, which ones should be condemned, which ones could be fixed up. So Don Chapman and I ran the Building Department. And I think it was . . . although it was a horrible time and terrible for the people who had lost so much and those who had lost their lives, it was also a time that reinforced one's faith in human nature. Because we had people, a steady stream of people all day long came in and volunteered to help. So we would find one man with a truck, a carpenter or contractor, and we'd line up five or six people who had volunteered to help. We'd say, "Now you go over to the lumberyard, get what bisqueen and lumber you needed," and then we would

EM: give them a list of addresses and get these houses closed up. We had all the houses in Oak Lawn that were open where windows blown out or the roofs were off, closed within 24 hours. It snowed the next day which really made it very bad. But we had people that came from all the surrounding suburbs, inspectors. They inspected the houses and said which ones were safe and could be repaired and which ones to get people out of. I remember there was one house that all the oil tanks had ruptured and the whole basement was full of oil where if just one spark would have happened over there, then the whole thing would have gone up in flames. So we had to search the homes. We had to let the people that would help and they all went out there and the next couple days. I spent a whole week there. I know one fella came in. He didn't look like he had ten dollars. I mean he was kind of ragged, ya know, run down shoes and all. He said, "I just came to contribute \$10." People walked all the way from way down in Indiana, central Illinois. The Mennonites came here to help. They turned the Masonic Temple there into a . . . well, upstairs they had room for people to stay on cots and blankets and things. Downstairs was a big restaurant. You could go in there anytime of day and get something to eat. You didn't even have to say who you were, or where you were from. Anybody that was working could just go over there and get food. Different women, different church groups, were over there providing things. I'll never forget the sight of the end of that building. The whole end of that building was stacked high with loaves of bread. I was in there one time for lunch and a truck pulled up from Mokeena. He had 20 or 30 dozen jelly bismarks or something like that. Different places from all over came around. Paper products. It was an amazing time. People really pitched in and helped. They got so many different clothes, items of clothing, that I understand they had to rent hangars down at the airport to store the

EM: stuff. They just couldn't store it all. People were really wonderful in an emergency. Fred <sup>m</sup>Du~~y~~ke worked over at the village hall and never went home. He stayed there for days. Everybody in the village pitched in and helped.

CA: I remember seeing Fred sitting on the front stoop of the police department with the little wool cap on and holding a press conference with Sheriff Woods and Governor Kerner and all of them. I don't think he had been to sleep for days.

EM: We had the army in here and the National Guard. You couldn't get into the village without a pass. They were blocking you at every street corner. The orders were out to shoot to kill for looters, ya know, anybody caught looting to shoot 'em. We didn't have a problem that I know of . . . of any looting. I never heard of one case of any looting.

CA: Were you involved in the aftermath, in the rebuilding?

EM: No, not really. My partner contractor that was building homes for us, they did some rebuilding for some people. But I personally was not involved in it.

CA: I know there were several different committees set up as far as relocation for the trailer park and all that kind of stuff.

EM: Yeah. They put in a new trailer park in over there on Tripp Avenue between 93rd and 91st. They lined up trailers there all the way for the entire block-and-a-half to provide homes for the people whose homes had been torn down.

CA: How was that affected? Did Fred do most of that or make arrangements for that? Who worked on getting it? Was it the Red Cross or . . .?

EM: No. I think, personally, it was Fred Dumke; he managed to get those trailers over there, contributions for some place. I think the village paid for that whole thing. They hooked all those trailers up to sewers and water over there and provided a place for people to stay until their homes were built. I don't know if they had to charge anybody anything for them, but I think the village is the one that did it.

CA: Was the village ever able to get any recompense from the federal disaster funds for any of it? They went up so quickly is the reason I ask.

EM: I really don't know the particulars on that. I wasn't involved in any of the financial part of it.

END OF TAPE

Shirley A. Miller, Transcriptionist