

East Falls Past--Mary Webster interview excerpts

The Fallser, March 2010, by Wendy Moody

Following are excerpts from a delightful 1981 interview with Mary Webster, who was born in East Falls in 1897. Her growing up, in ways, typified the time – Dobson Mills, Forest School, and simple pleasures. ...

What did you do in the mills?

I started out sewing numbers on the material. I had a big bolt of string around my waist. I was fourteen. We had awful lot of fun. After I did the string business, I was a burler.

What was a burler?

You pick out the flaws - you have tweezers and you pick out little knots. Then you pull them over and turn them. Then you go down the room, get another load, take it back, put it on your table and start over.

Were women's jobs different than men's?

Yeah, the women did the burling, and the men did the machines

Do you remember Mr. Dobson's daughter, Bessie Altemus?

She was tall with white hair and mostly wore black. She wore the same hat for years and years! Poor Mrs. Altemus! She liked the way it looked, so she kept the frame and just had it recovered over and over again. We went to their house to sing at Christmas and Mrs. Altemus would be with us.

What did the house look like inside?

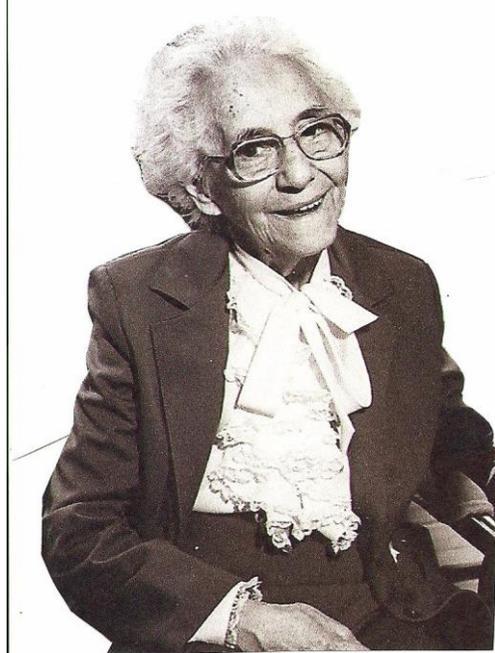
This is what impressed me: one of the drapes was over the radiator, and it must have been too hot, and it burnt. Well it wasn't fixed - it was still there the next year!

When and where were you born?

I was born on lower Sunnyside on August 11, 1897. We had a wooden cradle from England...

(Interviewer: Yes, the family cradle! I remember your sister, Gladys, saying she was rocked sideways, back and forth, and her head banged on one side, then the other side, back and forth –and that's what was wrong with her!)

Your parents were from England?



Yes, Yorkshire. My father came before his brothers - the oldest would come first. After he got a job, the next one would come.

What work did he do?

He was a weaver. He worked at Dobson's, but became a clothing salesman - he knew the materials. He worked in Wanamaker & Brown's (6th and Market) and then went up to John Wanamaker's.

Did many people who came from England work at Dobsons?

Yes, an awful lot of them. The men used to see if there was anybody they knew getting off the boat in Philadelphia and they would direct them right up to East Falls.

Where did you go to school?

Forest School, right off Krail Street.

What are your memories of it?

Bad boys!

Who were the teachers?

In first grade, Miss Clara. She wore a little shawl, oh she was a typical old maid! And then there was Carrie Dyson - her father had a junk store on the Ridge, where you could get nice things cheap.

What age did you become an old maid?

Oh, about in your twenties.

What was the "Ducky"?

It was a little pond at the top of Sunnyside and Vaux and there were more accidents in that darn thing! -The boys used to swing on the limb of a tree and down they'd go! And how many broken arms, I don't know...an awful lot!

Did the Ducky have ducks?

No ducks! I guess they were 'ducking' themselves in; I don't think you were supposed to swim in it... There was also a little stream on Midvale and we'd move the stones and find little animals...we would be out all day - all day!

Was it all woods above Vaux?

At the 3300 block of Ainslie was a field with horses owned by Mr. Fanning. I think he was a milkman and he had a few cows and horses. A crowd of us were walking through that field one day and one of the boys got smart and said to my cousin Myrtle "Would you like a ride on the horse?" And she said yes, so he pushed her up, gave it a crack, and it flew up that field. I said "Oh! That was a dirty trick!" Myrtle was scared green!