

East Falls Past--Oral History Tidbits

The Fallser, January 2011, by Wendy Moody

In past columns, we've glimpsed our social history through the lively anecdotal memories of residents. These oral history interviews are valuable primary source documents which capture the social fabric of our neighborhood from various perspectives, be it mill worker or wealthy businessman. Besides offering unique insights missing in formal histories, they give delightful tidbits that make our history vivid. Consider the following "tidbits":



Mrs. Bessie Dobson Altemus

On Bella Vista, mansion of mill owner James Dobson:

"What impressed me were the drapes. One of the drapes was over the radiator, and it must have been too hot, and it burnt. Well it wasn't taken away and fixed, it was still there, and it was there the next time I visited." (Mary Webster)

On Bessie Dobson Altemus, James Dobson's daughter:

"If she passed you in the car she'd wave. That was nice; she didn't have to do that. She wore the same hat for years and years. Poor Mrs. Altemus! She liked the way that hat looked, so she kept the frame and just had it covered over and over again." (Mary Webster)

"In the summer she wore a white dress and a big white hat. In the winter she wore a black velvet dress with long-stringed pearls. Her hair became pure white. She was a tall, beautiful woman." (Rose Whitty)

"She was a charming woman who said anything that came into her head. Once when there was a young, handsome visiting minister at St. James the Less, she wore one of her low-cut gowns, lit a cigarette in two feet long holder, and sidled up to him and said "What can you do about my soul?" Knocked him right off his (unintelligible), the poor man." (Ruth Emmert)

On Dobson Mills:

"Girls went to work when they were any age at all. They made cloth from rags. They had elderly women cutting buttons off old clothes so they wouldn't damage the machinery when they ground them up to make new cloth." (Ella Boyd McGlynn)

On Forest School:

"In first grade was Miss Clara Capp, who used to wear a little shawl; oh she was an old maid! Typical old maid!" (Mary Webster)

On Grace Kelly:

"Jack Kelly Sr. was my second cousin; Grace was my third. We used to swing her by her feet and hands on the beach. She didn't want Jack swinging her because he gripped her fingers too tight. I said "I don't swing you that way. I swing you by your ankles and wrists so you can't slip out of my hands." She was the most pleasant person you'd want to talk to and very attractive" (Paul Costello)

"I did three plays with Grace Kelly at Old Academy. Once she was sitting by the prompter who said, "Grace, you have runners in your stockings!" and she says, "My mother makes me wear them." (Edith Gotwols)

*“My first play at Old Academy was **The Women**. I took over for Grace when she got measles. The first play I did (not as a substitute) was **The Philadelphia Story**. I was the brat sister and I think my two sisters thought I was really well-cast.”*

(Lizanne Kelly LeVine)