

3-26-1974

Interview no. 121

Florence C. Melby

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/interviews>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Interview with Florence C. Melby by Robert H. Novak, 1974, "Interview no. 121," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Oral History at DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Combined Interviews by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Florence Cathcart Melby (1902-1987)
INTERVIEWER: Robert H. Novak
PROJECT: El Paso History
DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 26, 1974
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 121
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 121
TRANSCRIBER: Robert H. Novak
DATE TRANSCRIBED: April, 1974

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Daughter of Dr. John W. Cathcart, oldtime El Paso physician who attended wounded Mexican soldiers during the Mexican Revolution, and who also worked with the first X-ray machines in El Paso.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; social customs in early El Paso; ethnic relations; founding of the Pan American Round Table; the Mexican Revolution; the Díaz-Taft meeting in 1909; career of her father.

45 minutes (1 7/8 tape speed); 12 pages

Florence Cathcart Melby
by Robert H. Novak
March 26, 1974

N: Mrs. Melby, why don't we start with some biographical background about yourself--when and where you were born, information along that line.

M: I was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1902. My parents were Dr. John W. Cathcart and Ethel Hicks Cathcart. My father was taken out of Northwestern Medical School to serve in the medical corps in the Spanish-American War. When the war was over, he returned, married my mother, and took her to Chicago where he returned to complete his education. I was born the end of his senior year. Not long after that, he left for El Paso to become assistant to Dr. F. W. Gallagher, Sr. At the same time, he took his internship at Hotel Dieu. I understand that he was the first Hotel Dieu intern. He found an apartment at the new Springer Apartments on Mesa and Boulevard, what is now called Yandell, and wired for my mother and me to join him. I was the grand old age of six weeks when I arrived in El Paso.

About five years later, my father developed a tubercular spine, and because the sisters at Hotel Dieu were so very fond of my father, they brought him, my mother, and me to live in the hospital. We lived there about a year and a half or more, for he was so ill it was doubtful that he could live. Eventually he improved, but he realized that he did not have the strength to continue as a surgeon, for he was left a cripple. He decided then that he would enter that new field of medicine, which was X-ray.

N: Mrs. Melby, why don't we talk a little bit about your early education--the schools you attended, some of the memories you have.

M: I graduated from El Paso High School in 1916, and then I went away to college to Ward Belmont in Nashville, Tennessee. Later I went to the University of

Arizona, and then I traveled a great deal. I took a few summer courses at Columbia in New York.

N: Your parents seemed to want you to get a very complete education. Was that typical of girls in those days?

M: Oh, very definitely with my parents, yes; oh, very definitely.

N: How about among other families--what was the custom regarding education for girls?

M: Oh, I think it was just simply taken for granted that you would go to college.

N: Are there any memories that you have of El Paso, say at the time you were going to high school?

M: The things I remember a great deal /were that/ a young girl would always have so many teas at that time. Now people have cocktail parties, but at that time it was all teas. (Laughs) The young people had so many, many teas, and then of course there were the many night parties.

Later on, when we were a little bit older and out of high school, when we all had second lieutenant beaus, we would go to the post for parties and dances and riding--we all rode. They had beautiful horse shows. That was in the day of the Seventh and Eight Cavalry, in its heyday. The horse shows were beautiful and all very, very nice. We all enjoyed that very much. (Chuckles)

N: What were the customs in those days regarding dating, as far as chaperones and boys and girls going out on dates?

M: I would say that the difference is that you started much later. You weren't allowed to go out until sixteen or so, to have dates--I was not allowed to. Now the children start going out so early, which I think is a mistake. I shouldn't have said that! (Laughs)

N: When you would go out on a date, for instance with one of the second lieutenants

from the fort, did you go by streetcar?

M: No, they had cars. They were just out of West Point and sometimes they had to share cars, but they had cars and we went in a group. We had an awfully nice group of young people at that time. Included in that group were Catherine Kilburn and Anna Doan--oh, so many of the different El Paso girls. And that group of lieutenants, most of them became generals or colonels during the Second World War. They were only second lieutenants when they arrived in El Paso, but that group of men were caught just at the right time. For example, my date was Lieutenant Leander Doan, and he became Patton's aide and became a four star general.

N: Would you be able to tell me anything about the relationship among the various ethnic groups in El Paso at that time, particularly the Mexicans?

M: Yes. I think I could tell you a little bit because it's something I've been very interested in and that I've worked very hard for, and something I believe in so very much. I am a past director of the Pan American Round Table, and we have worked very hard and I think we have shown better results than most places. In fact, I know that the State Department feels that El Paso has the best relations of any of the cities along the border. I think the Pan American Round Table has had a very definite part in making that possible because the Pan American Round Table is a social group of both armies, both consulates, and the prominent families in Juárez and in El Paso. It has a function that is...you don't see the results, but the results are there. When I say you don't see it, I mean it is a form of diplomacy that is the Good Neighbor Policy, the only policy that works. It works very nicely most of the time. Sometimes I resent that the Chicanos don't appreciate that much. I feel that in so many ways they are right, but I think sometimes they overdo

their angle in the sense that they are too militant. Should I have an opinion or not? (Laughs)

N: Mrs. Melby, why don't you tell me a little about how the Pan American Round Table was formed?

M: Mrs. Schuster started it, and I think it was started about 32 or 33 years ago. It has grown to be a most, I feel, important group for its influence on both sides of the river. It has made much smoother relations with many, many people. I think it is one of the very fine groups that helps to make better relations and helps the Good Neighbor Policy.

N: Is it just an informal organization, or does it have officers and a constitution?

M: Yes, it has a director and it has officers. Some years they do studying of different Latin American countries. They entertain prominent dignitaries who come from both countries or the Latin American countries. You see, there are 22 or 23 Latin American countries and every one of these countries belongs to the Pan American Union. It is an international organization--that is just one small part of it. In Texas, there are tables in Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and I believe there's one now in Brownsville in the lower valley. In New Mexico there's one in Albuquerque, one in Las Cruces, one in Deming, one in Alamogordo, and I think there's a new chapter in Santa Fe. Rather an interesting thing: one of the big meetings--I don't know if they're called conventions or conferences--of all the countries will meet this year in Albuquerque. They are preparing for many, many visitors from these many countries--Central America, México, South America, and Canada.

N: Who were some of the other people who were involved in founding the El Paso chapter?

M: Mrs. M. P. Schuster was the founder. [That was in 1921.] Some of the first members with her in founding this were Mrs. A. P. Coles, Mrs. R. W. McAfee, Mrs. C. C. Chase, Mrs. W. R. Brown, Mrs. K. D. Lynch, Mrs. W. L. Brown, Mrs. R. L. Halliday, Mrs. Maurice Schwartz, Dr. Lucinda Templin, Mrs. Josephine Clardy Fox, Mrs. Robert Oliver, and there were a few more--I do not know all of their names. I don't have the list of the original little tiny group, but [those I've named] were the early members in the beginning of the organization.

N: Was El Paso's chapter one of the first chapters founded?

M: I believe there was a small one started [shortly before] in San Antonio. The group in El Paso is the largest one in Texas, and it has been the most active of all because we live on the border. Then we've had the armies, both consulates. And there's a great deal of social activity among the two groups from the two cities.

N: Could you tell me, then, about some of the experiences your father had during the Mexican Revolution?

M: One of the interesting things he did occurred during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The revolutionary army did not have a medical corps and Pancho Villa made a contract with a group of El Paso doctors--including my father, Dr. McCammett, and others--to take care of the wounded. When the soldiers were camped on the Mexican side of the Río Grande--I think that was in 1911--they carried the wounded across the river to the Smelter hospital and took care of them. My father had the first portable X-ray machine that was in this part of the country, and they took it to this hospital. He did the X-ray work for the wounded. It was very interesting--we would drive out to see them on Sundays where the soldiers would be camped along the other side

of the river. Then he'd go in and see his patients, see how everything was.

Another little incident that was rather interesting was when I went to the Sunset School at this time. I was in the third or fourth grade. A bullet hit one of the windows in the school, and of course it caused great excitement. Everybody was excited, and the children were simply delighted and running to all the windows to see everything, hoping to see something. Of course, there never was another bullet. That's my impression of the Revolution--running to the windows, hoping a bullet would come. (Laughs)

Then during the big battle of Juárez when the revolutionary army and Villa took Juárez--I believe the date was 1913--it was approximately at this time, because I wasn't very old at that time. My father was waiting for the battle to be over to take the X-ray machine, the portable X-ray machine, with him to go and take care of the wounded. He turned to me and said, "You know, I think I'm going to take you along because I want you to see what a terrible thing war is." Of course, I wanted to go. At that time in El Paso there was just nothing but talk of the war, and naturally for a young child, why, that was an interesting thing. So he did--he took me with him. He waited until he thought everything was over. Well, the battle was over, but there was still sniping when we got there. There was not much, but there was a little bit, and I thought that was very exciting. The people were lying all around on the streets in Juárez.

We went to a square--I don't know which square that was because I guess I was too young or too excited to know. There were fairly tall buildings around--not too tall, but two-story buildings, where they were shooting from the windows a little bit. They set up the X-ray machine and they were taking pictures right out there, and then they came with stretchers to take

the wounded. One thing that I remember so distinctly was that I looked over onto the ground and I saw an arm that had been blown off, and it's just made an impression upon me all my life. I just think war is a terrible thing in every way. But that is my memory of the war.

- N: Mrs. Melby, do you remember being here in El Paso in 1909?
- M: Yes, I do, because we were allowed to stay out of school and father took me. I remember we started to watch the parade. It was very interesting to watch the parade of the men in the carriages. Taft was a big exciting for a little girl to see a President.
- N: Do you happen to remember the crowd--was there a huge crowd?
- M: Oh, yes, there was a very large crowd. Of course, El Paso wasn't as large then as it is now, but I think many people had come from Juárez, and the school children were out--I think everyone was there! (Laughs)
- N: Do you remember the Terrazas family coming out of México and coming to live in El Paso?
- M: Yes, I do remember one, a very nice friend of mine. His mother was the sister of Luís Terrazas, and his name was Carlos Cisniegos. We were freshmen in El Paso High School. Because I could speak a little bit of Spanish--of course, he could speak English, also, and I think French--he was a little bit lonely and we became very nice friends and the friendship continued for many, many years. When they came to El Paso, they lived in the A. B. Fall house on Arizona Street, and I did not live too far away. I lived on the other side of the hill on Nevada Street. He would walk home with me sometimes.

We were just very nice, very good friends. Many years later he married one of the daughters of the very prominent Muñoz family in Chihuahua. They lived in Chihuahua in the Terrazas family home, which was right across the street from the old Victoria Hotel.

N: Mrs. Melby, could you tell me a little more about your father's work, about his career?

M: Yes. He had a most interesting and valuable career, it seems to me, in many ways. One of the things that I think is very interesting that he did--he was most interested in the X-ray tubes. And the Victor Electric Company, which is a subsidiary of General Electric, sent a Mr. Hart here many times with the tubes. He and my father became close friends. The year must have been around 1928 to 1930 when the Victor Electric Company was bringing out a new, refined type of X-ray tube. X-ray tubes are very delicate and difficult things to produce. They had on the drawing table a new tube that they were going to manufacture. They sent this sketch and all the information about the tube to my father and asked him what he thought. My father wrote back and he said, "I'm sorry, but I don't think that tube will work, I don't think it will be satisfactory." They sent Mr. Hart back two or three times to talk with him, but Victor Electric decided to go ahead and manufacture the tube, which they did. And the tube did not work! So they were very, very upset, because it cost over a million dollars to manufacture this tube.

So, they decided to send their fine engineer, the famous Steinmetz, down to talk to my father. All the plans were made for him to come, and then he became very ill. He was a crippled man and he was not a well man at all, so they had to send his assistant. I've forgotten the assistant's name, but he was the guest in our home. That was when we lived on Hardaway Street. I

remember the discussions, hours upon hours in the evening about this tube and why it didn't work. My father had figured out that the reason it didn't work was that the altitude was one element that kept it from working. It worked beautifully on paper--the mathematical part that I don't understand worked completely on paper, but it didn't work in reality. So they corrected some things in that--this mathematical part of the calculations--and went ahead and manufactured another tube, and that was fine. They were very grateful to my father.

I was very, very interested in an article I read later, during the last World War, that when they were working on the atomic bomb, this principle of the X-ray tube entered into some of those calculations. I thought we could salute my father a little bit for that. I do not know all about it or what went on, but I do know all those things happened at that time. It was intensely interesting--I listened every chance I could listen. The conversation was way above my head, but that didn't matter--I listened anyway.
(Laughs)

N: Could you tell me about the X-ray clinic that your father started here in El Paso?

M: My father started the X-ray and pathological laboratory and clinic. My mother was his assistant for many years because he was crippled and he had to have assistance. After about eight or ten years, Dr. C. H. Mason came to El Paso after the First World War and he wanted very much to become a partner of my father's, which came about. My mother then retired. The clinic was growing so large that they needed another doctor, so they took as a partner Dr. Maynard Hart. The firm now is a very large firm. My father died and about five years later Dr. Mason died, and Dr. Hart is now the senior member

of the firm. This is the greatest collection of young doctors you've ever heard of. Dr. Hart, of course, is the senior doctor; Dr. Hart, Dr. Boverie, Dr. Black, Dr. Clayton, Dr. White, Dr. McGee, Dr. Behlke, Dr. Seaman, Dr. Berry, Dr. Reed, Dr. Block, Dr. Wilson, and Dr. Johnson.

N: Could you tell me a little bit about your father's work with radium?

M: Yes. My father's work with his clinic was with the X-ray and radium for the cancer work. That was his specialty and what he did entirely. They bought some radium needles--those came from Denver, by the way--and of course they were very, very expensive. They are now, I understand, at William Beaumont, they were bought by William Beaumont. I presume they are being used now, although they use the cobalt now, which is even a little stronger. X-rays have the same rays as radium, but the radium is stronger, and now the cobalt is even stronger than that. That's why they're using that in the treatment of cancer.

One day the nurse, after all the patients were gone and she was sterilizing things and cleaning, misplaced or lost one of the radium needles. They are kept in little lead capsules so that the rays do not go out. The next morning she went to get the capsule and there was no needle in the capsule. She was afraid to say that she had lost it, so she kept looking and looking and looking and looking for it. Finally she told them--I don't know just how long it was, whether it was a day or the second day. They, of course, were terribly disturbed and they started just tearing the office to pieces. They called plumbers, they tore up the floors, they tore up the plumbing, they tore up everything; there was absolutely not one trace of that needle. Of course, it would have been dangerous if it had gone into the plumbing, it would have been terribly dangerous for other people, so they were very, very frightened.

I think it was about the second or third day that they found it. It had fallen into a crack in my father's desk while she was taking care of and cleaning the things. Of course, when they saw it they were very, very, very frightened. It meant that my father had been exposed these many, many, many hours, both by time and distance--it was right beside him. It was very tragic and it caused his death; he died of leukemia. Less than a year after that time, the nurse also died of leukemia.

N: Do you have any hobbies that you'd like to tell us about?

M: Oh, I have many hobbies. Travel is one of them, but one of my greatest hobbies is my history club. This little club--it has only twelve members--was started in 1928. The same group of twelve, plus one or two others who have replaced members who have moved away, has met one a week for all these years. Our beloved librarian, Mrs. Maude Sullivan, made our first outline for us. Our history club is really a humanities club--it covers history, architecture, music, religion, art, the political situations around the world, and everything. It's been a wonderful experience and we have enjoyed it more than anything. It's been one of the most priceless things in my life. It's given us all a great pleasure.

The members were Mrs. Belding, Mrs. Mary Wickliffe Curtis, Mrs. Curtis Morris, Mrs. Gillett, Mrs. Goetting, Mrs. Hewitt, Mrs. Howell, Mrs. Mengel, Mrs. Moore, Mrs. Perrenot, and Mrs. Walker. One of our past members was Mrs. Carolyn Gillett. Two of our members have moved away from El Paso, Mrs. Forrest Smith and Mrs. Peg Arnold Marlow.

We have enjoyed it very much. Our beloved librarian, Mrs. Maude Sullivan, made our first outline for us. We started with Egypt and we spent a year on Egypt. Then we went to Greece and Rome and then all around the

world--everywhere. These last few years we've taken Africa, Iran, and China. This year we're studying Latin American history. Our outline was made by the son of one of our members, Helen Gillett, Dr. Frank Safford, who is from Harvard and teaches at Northwestern University. He teaches Latin American history, and he made our outlines. We have enjoyed it very, very much. It has covered every country in Latin America. I became so interested in history and books--I've always loved books, but I became so interested that I started collecting books, following our outlines of what we had taken on the different countries. I started building my library. Then I had the great pleasure of living in foreign countries and I was able to find many rare books, and I bought the rare books. I keep building my library and it's a very great pleasure and joy. Even though I can't keep it dusted, it is still a pleasure to me. (Laughs)