

Anna Witt

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The pages that follow constitute the transcript of an interview conducted as part of the Wilmette Public Library District's Oral History program, started in 1975 by a committee of the Friends of the Wilmette Public Library which has been chaired since its inception by Rhea Adler¹ a resident of the Village of Wilmette since 1932.

A copy of the tape on which this transcript is based is available for circulation, and may be obtained by checking with a Reference Librarian concerning circulation procedures.

This program would not have been possible without the cooperation of the many long-time residents of the Village interested in helping to preserve particulars of a fascinating past, and the patience, energy and effort of a small but dedicated group of interviewers, transcribers and typists who share the belief that the past is too important to be forgotten.

Richard E. Thompson
Director

ABSTRACT

Interviewee: Anna Witt

Interviewer: Briggs Masselli

Date of interview: December 9, 1975

Sold milk from 800 block of Forest Avenue

Moved to Harms Road on Lake Avenue farm (Wilmette Golf Club grounds)

Returned to Wilmette · bottling plant · ice house eventually sold to Bowman Dairy Co.

Mother's role · horse and buggy · run away!

School at Lake/Waukegan Road

German background of Mother

Central School experience

East/west Wilmette rivalries

clothing of children around 1910

Violin lessons for a milk bill

Marriage · Plochman's mustard

Tornado · Palm Sunday- 1920

New library+- 1950

Miss Sjniff · 1953 · Mrs. Witt and her work for Wilmette Library to present · 1981

Anna Witt

M: This is December 9th, 1975, and I am testing this tape recorder to make sure that it works.

AW: I am Anna Witt. I was born August 31, 1895 in what is now Wilmette, but it was Grosse Point at that time. And that was at - on Lake Avenue where the Wilmette Golf Club is now located.

M: Is the golf club still there? The Wilmette Golf Club? Oh, yes. That's west of - I am trying to think now. West of where -

AW: I don't drive and so I don't know the names, but it's Lake Avenue. And that's where I was born, but previous to that my folks had a little home. I think they built it themselves in the 800 block on Forest Avenue. That was their first home in Wilmette.

M: Was that a farm, Mrs. Witt?

AW: No, it was just a - - land was all - - just a few houses, you know.

M: Do you know approximately what date that might have been?

AW: Well, it was in the 1880's. The late 1880's. My parents built a small cottage in the 800 block on Forest Avenue and it was just woods at that time and possibly two or three homes. I am not sure if they are still there or not, but they may be.

M: Can I just ask you what your parents names were?

AW: My parents name was Witt. You see, I married a Witt, and

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I did not change my name. And that is why I'm still Mrs. Witt. I meant to tell you that at the beginning, but I forgot to.

M: Well, that's all right, as long as we -

AW: Well, that's the way it is. And so Fred Witt and my mother had this little home and my three older bro - two sisters and a brother were born in this house in the 800 block on Forest Avenue in the 1880's. I'm not sure about the dates.

And then they had a - - they had cows and sold milk -

M: Oh, they did to the neighbors?

AW: They sold milk just in little tin containers, you know, to the neighbors in the surrounding area, and -

M: They didn't sell it to a store or -. -

AW: I don't believe so. There weren't many stores here. I'm sure they didn't, but, anyway, I can show you some pictures of it later. And then the village ordinance went into effect and they could no longer keep the cows because it was beginning to build up and nobody wanted cows in their backyard. So they moved to the Peter Hoffman farm on Lake Avenue, right at Harms Road. We had a large dairy farm there with about a hundred cows. And there was a little farm house there in which we lived. And until a few years ago that house was still on the property and they used it as a - - well, I don't know exactly what, but it's gone now. And that's where myself and two brothers were born - in this place. Then, I don't remember exactly how many years

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we could have lived there, but we moved back to Wilmette in 1902 and we set up our own bottling plant. You see, the milk that we raised on this farm was sold in cans to the dairies in Evanston and the surrounding country. But I was pretty young at that time and I just don't know the exact details, but that's the way it was. Then we moved back to Wilmette on 12th Street which is now the Bell Telephone parking lot. That is where our home - - we bought a home there, I think it was either two or three thousand dollars - - a great big house. We moved there and built a building in the back to bottle the milk and then we had a barn where we kept our horses and a big ice house where the ice was kept. We had the ice brought in, you know, and stored in this big building.

M: Did you use the ice to keep the milk cold, or - -?

AW: Yes, we had no electric refrigeration.

M: Where was the ice brought from?

At That I don't know. I really don't know.

M: Where were the cows now?

AW: They were, well, we no longer had the cows. I never thought of it in that way. I don't know what became of the cows. (Laughter) We probably sold them. Or - - I just don't remember.

M: Then your family went into the bottling business.

AW: We bottled our own milk. And then about that time, things got a little complicated, too. The unions came along and

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wanted us to join the union and then lots of problems came along and on top of that my father passed away three years after we had moved back to Wilmette. And that left my mother and my older brothers to run and dairy. And they did for a while and then they finally sold it to the Bowman Dairy Company.

,which dairy company?

AW: B- O-W-M-A-N. I don't think it's in existence any more, but it had been until just a few years ago. One of the larger dairies . . . I think the headquarters were in Evanston. They had offices in Highland Park. And then we just sold out and we had nothing more to do with the milk business.

M: Was the dairy called The Witt Dairy?

AW: Yes. The name of the dairy farm was called the %Fred H. Witt Jersey Dairy.+ And we had several milk wagons drawn by horses and the house in which we lived was an old frame farm house and it had no heating facilities excepting stoves. And then no electricity or plumbing.

M: Did you use kerosene lamps?

AW: Yes. We used kerosene lamps. And my mother had a big cook stove and she cooked all of our meals. There were seven children. And then we had three or four hired men who lived in a little shack outside of our house.. And she cooked their meals and she washed for them and did all of that work by hand.

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M: Did you do all of this together? Did the family eat separately?

AW: No, the family lived in this farmhouse and the hired men had a kind of a bunkhouse. out on the property.

M: They ate their meals there?

AW: My mother cooked for all of us. I think there must have been about twelve all the time, you know. . . with our family of eight and then three or four men who helped with the farm work in the dairy and the cows. And she did all of that by hand and I just marvel at how much work she really did.

M: Yes, must have been . . . that was three big meals every . . .

AW: You should see the table. And she was a very good cook, too. And we didn't think anything about it at that time, but of course we grew our own vegetables and sweet corn and we had chickens and turkeys and .

M: Oh, I see, so you raised a lot of your own food.

AW: Yes. We raised a lot of our food, but for the supplies that we couldn't raise ourselves, my mother would take the horse and a little buggy and drive into Evanston to get supplies. I suppose it would be sugar and flour and things like that. And I don't remember how often she did A that. But I can just see her now in that little buggy. One time on the way home from a shopping trip the horse became frightened of something and he ran away with her and the buggy tipped over and she fell out in the ditch and

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all of the groceries went. I believe that the horse ran home by himself. But the next day, all the youngsters went down to this place that was really Harms Road, and we picked up the groceries and she~~d~~^d always buy us a big bag of candy and we all went down there and got the groceries and the candies the next day. It was really one of the most exciting things of our lives out there in the country, you know.

M: Well, yes. You didn~~d~~^d get candy from the store too often?

AW: It was always this red candy that comes in squares. What is it called? Anise. I hate the stuff to this day! (Laughter) That~~s~~^s one of the things that I remembered very well. There probably were loads of interesting things that happened that I did, but I just can~~d~~^d remember. I do remember going to school. My first year of school . . . and my brothers and sisters went to the country school on what~~s~~^s Waukegan Road now. And I think the new school is on the same property. It was

M: Waukegan and Lake?

AW: That was where the school was. We used to walk to school most of the time excepting when the weather got real bad. My father or brothers would drive us to school in a great big old wagon.

M: Were the roads . . .

AW: Oh, the roads were terrific. They were very rough and rutty and bumpy and what have you.

M: When the weather was bad, the roads were probably bad.

AW: Oh, they were.

M: Was it a large shoolhouse?

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AW: It was just . . . the four grades were downstairs and the four upper grades were upstairs. And I remember some of the teachers very well. In fact, the teacher who taught the first four grades later lived in Wilmette here. And she was a Miss Edith Berry. But she has passed away in the last couple of years. And I have seen her since . . . before she did pass away. She lived over on, -well, I think it was 16th Street, but I'm not sure. Anyway, it was near the park where she lived. And it was . . .

M: How many children were there in a class? The classes must have been small?

AW: Well, there were four grades downstairs and four grades upstairs. But I just don't know. Probably not over ten in a grade because, you see, a room wouldn't hold any more than that. That is my memory of it, at least. About all I remember of my mother and my mother's background is that she came from Mecklinburg, Germany, with her two sisters when she was about, I believe she said ten years old. And they were on the water in a very small boat for about ten weeks. And she never seemed to know exactly where she was after that. Or can't talk about it. But anyway she was . . . turned out to be a very wonderful mother and person. In Wilmette I started by attending Central School which since had been torn down and replaced with Stolp School,

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named in honor of the great Dr. Stolp who delivered all of my brothers and sisters in our home. A great family doctor who would visit you in your home by a horse and buggy any time he was needed. I believe someone would drive to his home to notify him since there was no telephone. I attended school there until graduation in 1910. Mr. J. R. Harper was the fine principal. I remember most of the teachers and now I can appreciate their dedication to their profession. School hours were from nine o'clock in the morning ~~til~~ three thirty, with one and a half hours for lunch when most of us went home. I believe we had fifteen minutes recess in the morning. There were not many extra- curricular activities, and I think we concentrated on reading, writing, and arithmetic, now called math, and spelling which was my favorite study, and what I did best in. There was a sewing class and a cooking class for the girls and manual training for the boys. I do not remember how many pupils attended school but at this point Wilmette started growing very rapidly. There was also a school on the west side of the tracks. But I do not remember much about this. Excepting the feeling between the east and west sides which I know was there. The west side was considered lower class than our people on the east side. This attitude persisted for many years but is now non-existent. I started New Trier in 1910 in the old original building with the big clock, in the tower and the

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additional gymnasium building which had been added to the northeast side of the building. Mr. Gafney was principal and I remember many of the great teachers whom I will never forget. But I must confess that I did not appreciate my opportunities. Mr. F. I. Walker had charge of the orchestra. I was in orchestra for two and a half years and I played second violin. I'm afraid I was just an amateur but had taken lessons for several years so I could manage that. Regretfully, I wish I had tried harder when I had the opportunity. In those days the automobile was coming into its own, but I will tell you that the students walked to school or took the North Shore train which was then in operation. Now the train is no longer, there and the students drive their own cars. My oldest child - - I don't know why I said that. Is that turned on?

M: Yes

AW: The clothing that we children wore when we went to school was very much different from what is worn today. We wore in the winter - - we wore long underwear which came down to our ankles. It was really a union suit. It was all in one piece.

M: Even, the girls wore - - ?

AW: Yes, the girls, everybody, And then we wore long stockings that had to be brought up over this, er, these long legs of the underwear. And then we had - the girls wore a flannel petticoat and a white embroidered petticoat on top of this besides all of the clothing. And I just don't

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remember so much about what the boys wore, but it was long underwear and .

M: Did the boys wear long pants?

AW: No. The boys did not wear long pants. They wore knee pants. And I don't remember too much about that part of it, but there was plenty of clothing, I know that.

M: Did you wear a skirt and a blouse or dress?

AW: We girls probably each had about two dresses and one week we would wear one dress and the next week we would wear the different dress. That was the extent of our wardrobe.

M: There was a Sunday dress?

AW: Yes, then we always had a nicer Sunday dress. And we always got dressed up on Sunday. No blue jeans or shirts . T-shirts, rather, and then . .

M: Were the coats long, too?

AW: Yes, I think they were long, but not floor-length, and always had hats or stocking caps, they called them at that time.

M: And what kind of shoes?

AW: Well, I just don't remember that, but they were high-button shoes for the girls and then, of course, I think we had boots to wear over those in stormy weather. We were always very, very happy when summer came and we could take off all of these long underwear and put our summer underwear on. That was the happiest day of our lives when that occurred.

M: The summer clothes - - you still wore the petticoats?

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AW: Yes. Not a flannel one, but we still wore a cotton one and always with embroidery on the bottom. You can just imagine. My mother ironed all of these fancy things, you know.

M: Did she sew? Who made the petticoats? Did you buy the petticoats?

AW: No. A friend of the family who we had known for many years used to come to our home and sew for us and she would be there probably six months out of the year and make our dresses and our underwear, not underwear, but our petticoats and, there were three of us girls and the dresses that we had for Sunday Were really exquisitely made with tucks and embroidery and all to be washed and starched and ironed.

M: Oh, really?

AW: Definitely.

M: Do you remember what it was made out of?

AW: It was made out of white cotton fabric, i believe it was. Not silk or anything like that, but I don't remember so very much about - probably wool dresses in the wintertime.

M: Did this lady supply the fabric? Or did your mother go and buy the fabric?

AW: Well, I think the lady bought the fabric. She turned out to be my aunt by marriage for it was her brother's son whom I later met and married in 1915. My husband's father was a native of Evanston and he was co-owner with a Mr.

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Plochman and their business was a mustard factory in Chicago. To this day the Plochman mustard is still on the market.

I was probably about eight years old when I started taking violin lessons from a music teacher who owed my parents a good-sized milk bill which they were not able to take care of. So my mother decided that I could take violin lessons and work out the milk bill. So for several years I took lessons and . . .

M: Did you go to his house?

AW: No, he would come to our house and we had a piano and he would play the piano while he taught me the violin. So I really did not take my opportunity very seriously, but I managed to play pretty well.. And so when I went to New Trier they had just started an orchestra and I volunteered to play second violin. And so we had violin practice one night every week. So I got a little experience in that way, but, I really never got to be a very talented player because I guess I just didn't have what it takes.

Well, I've forgotten to tell you about our neighbors on Twelfth Street. After we had moved back from the farm, and the house next to us . . . our policeman we had at that time and his wife lived in the first frame house that was there . . . and on the property next door there was a livery stable where you could board your horses.

M: Do you want to give us the names . . . ?

AW: Well, the name of the livery stable people was Van Order,

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I think. And the policeman was . . . Sample.

M: Was he a village policeman?

AW: He was a village policeman. I think we had, just two policemen at that time and the other policeman was named Sieber - S-I-E--B-E-R. Those are the only ones I remember at that time, for Wilmette was very small.

N: Did they patrol on foot?

AW: Oh yes, they had no cars or anything. Only just walking around and being called when they were needed. Next to the livery stable, I think Van Orders. You could board your horse there and they would take care of it. That's what I remember of it. And then in the house next door farther on down Twelfth Street there was a tailor shop. Mr. Dahnke had his tailor shop downstairs on the first floor and the upstairs part of it he lived with his family, with his wife and four children. And they're all gone now, excepting I believe the youngest may still be living, as I happened to see him last summer.

The ladies of those neighbors and my mother - - the ladies of these families and my mother would get together every night after dinner and visit and talk over their problems and their children. We youngsters, my brothers and sisters, we used to love to sit and just listen to these older ladies visit and gossip. I believe that that was probably most of the social life that they had. Just to visit with the neighbors. And I understand that that building is still standing in very good shape and it is

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occupied by Sweets Tin Shop which came there long after the Dahnkes left. And then there was another older person whom I remember and that was George Curley and he is just a little older than I am and I remember him very well. His mother had a boarding house on Central and Park Avenue where the United States Post Office is now standing. The government bought the property in that spot and George, one of the oldest ones of the family is still living and lives just a couple of blocks from me here on Sixteenth Street. So it's interesting to see him once in a while.

And then came the war years, 1914 to 1918. The war years with Germany. Men and boys had to register for the draft at that time and those that passed the physical exams were inducted into the Army and nearly always sent overseas. Many of our fine Wilmette boys lost their lives at this period in the war and those fine Wilmette boys that gave their lives to defend their country and . . . and there's a plaque in the Village Square that is in Wilmette where the Village Hall is, there's a plaque beneath the flag that gives the names of these young men who were Wilmette boys.

I shall never forget being in the Palm Sunday tornado in 1920 in Wilmette. My husband and myself and my child were visiting my mother at this time.

M: This was the house on Twelfth Street?

AW: Yes, did I not say that? This was my mother's home on

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Twelfth Street and the storm came very quickly without warning. It got very dark and the wind blew and it rained and hailed big egg- like hailstones and about this time I became very frightened for my child who was asleep in one of the upstairs bedrooms, so I dashed up . . . Oh, first of all, the table downstairs that was in the very large kitchen my mother had was all set for dinner with the food and dishes and everything, but I dashed upstairs to rescue my son I was getting nervous about. And as I came down, the family had tried to go down in the basement, but the steps of the stairway were all sprung apart and they could not go down. And during this time the dishes and the food and everything had blown off the table and I - -

M: Were the windows all shut?

AW: The windows were all broken upstairs and the doors were turned inside out, and the baby was covered with leaves and broken glass and debris, but it had blown in from the outside, but I rescued him very quickly and went downstairs and found the others had left the house and gone out to the old building, the ice house, which was used for storing ice in the summer for our dairy use.

M: Was that a one- storey building?

AW: Oh, no. It was a two storey frame house with about six bedrooms upstairs, and it was blown off its foundations. Well, I am not sure about how much, but it was tipped over and could very easily have ended up in the lake if the wind had not passed over very quickly. And the houses were repaired after that big storm. But we could not go

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back in it. And my sister and husband lived over three blocks from my mother's house and so one of my brothers went over there to see how they were doing and he found that they had not been touched at all. The tornado seemed to have taken a path, maybe a couple of hundred feet wide that went through the village and it sort of ended up in the lake and the Gage house, which was there at that time. I don't think it blew away but it was damaged very badly and it was repaired, and later on they called it. . . somebody had a kind of a restaurant in there and they called it Tornado Tavern.

M: The ice house you were in - was it a sturdy structure?

AW Fairly good. It wasn't wrecked, but the roof had been partly torn off and my mother had chickens and her chicken coop had been turned upside down with the chickens in it. The chickens were on the roof instead of on the ground. Oh, and many strange things happened. I lost my Easter bonnet out of the sitting room window. I had bought a new hat the day before. This was Palm Sunday. And I had bought a new hat in the village and my nice new pretty pink hat was gone and we never saw it again. And so I have never really forgotten all of the strange events. After the storm, when we started cleaning up the rooms and looking around to see about the damage, we found debris that had blown in from across the tracks on the west side and that would be about two blocks away and there were many things that we had never seen before that had blown

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into our house, sales slips and things like that, that came out of stores on Railroad Avenue, now called Green Bay Road.

The new library was built in about 1950, I believe, and it was replacing the old Carnegie Library which had been there when I first came to Wilmette.

M: Was it on the same spot?

AW: It was built on the same spot. And Miss Siniff planned the new building, chose the architects to execute the plans for the new building, and the two additions were added later to accommodate the many new volumes.

This library already has two additions to it?

No. They were added, you know.

But to the library that is there now?

In 1953 Miss Siniff called me Miss Siniff was our very wonderful librarian, and she knew that I liked to work with my hands and she needed somebody to mend books so she called me on the phone and asked me if I would like to try to do the job of mending books and processing new books, and . . .

N: Is that when you started working?

AW: That was in 1953. I replied that I had never done this work, but I would be very glad to try. This is 1976 now - and I have been there for twenty- three years and we have other people processing the books, but I do the mending which is really a full-time job. I've invented my own techniques and invented many ways of renewing abused books that have been handled very carelessly by the patrons and

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their dogs and their children. This had been a real challenge for me and I hope to be able to continue to do this work for many years to come. I have just passed my 80th birthday. I have very much gratitude for having had this great opportunity. I am still hoping to continue.

M: Very good. And we will continue the conversation that we had previously. Mrs. Witt, would you tell me about the cottage that your parents lived in when they were first married?

AW: Well, it was built in about the 1880s in the 800 block on Forest Avenue of Wilmette and there were very few other houses around this place. In fact, it was basically all woods, and they - my father worked as a coachman for Sam Dingee. He was an early settler of Wilmette and -

M: Do you remember by any chance where the Dingees lived?

AW: Yes, they lived on Lake Avenue and I think it was either Tenth or Eleventh Street. I think the house is still standing, The house is still there. And then they built this little house on Forest, as I said before, and they started having cows, starting with one or two and finally accumulating about fifteen cows, and selling the milk in little cans to neighbors and, people around the vicinity of their home. And then Wilmette was beginning to grow and there were regulations and that - how shall I put that?

M: Well, that they weren't allowed to keep - -

AW: Yes, animals. It became a law that we could not keep

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animals. Rather cows in our yards, or on our property. And so - -

M: How did you feed these cows?

AW: They must have brought in feed, or maybe they had a hay field or something I'm just not sure about that. At that point I wasn't born, and I never thought about that part of it, "but then my father decided that he wanted to stay and get into the milk business. So he moved our family which consisted, I think of three children at that time, and we moved to the Peter Hoffman farm on Lake Avenue and Harms Road, which is now occupied by the Wilmette Golf Club. And there was a large barn there and we had about a hundred cows, and we did not bottle our milk or sell it at that time ourselves, but the bigger companies from Evanston, I believe it was, would come in and pick up the milk and - - in big cans and so then we finally decided that, during this period after we moved back to Wilmette. I was born there in 1895 and along with two brothers at that same place, and then we decided to move back to Wilmette and do our own bottling and delivering of milk, so we had a bottling plant set up and the milk had to be pasteurized by this time since there were new laws concerning the . . .

M: Sale of whole milk?

AW: Yeah. Then what was I saying?

M: Were you going to tell about the cottage that was moved over?

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AW: After we moved back to the cottage in Wilmette, we bought a house on quite a big lot on Twelfth Street, which is now the Bell Telephone Company parking lot. And then we moved the little cottage which my parents had first built and lived in it on Forest Avenue in Wilmette. That little cottage was moved to our property on Twelfth Street. And it stayed there until we . . . my mother had passed away and we sold all of the property then - the whole lot with the two houses to the telephone company. And the little house was not . . . they tore down the big house in which we had lived and the cottage was sold to an individual- who moved it again to 1811 Wilmette Avenue, which is about a block from the Ridge. And that little house is still standing in very good repair and is occupied now by someone who moved it there, but I do not remember who they were.

M: Did you live in the little cottage, or what did they use the little cottage for?

AW: When we first moved the cottage back to Twelfth Street, we rented it to a tailor by the name of Nord who was associated with Schultz and Nord. You know that was an old cleaning establishment in Wilmette. And then the tornado came along in 1920 and it wasn't completely demolished but the roof was torn off and it was unlivable at that time and so the Nord's moved out and we reclaimed the cottage with many repairs and a new roof and things and then one of my sisters who had just been married, (she's the one who's in the Normandy House now) , she and her husband lived

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in the cottage there for several years until my mother passed away and we sold the whole property then. And so that's the story of the cottage. I don't think I've made this very clear, but it's a little confusing.

I