

Dr. Myra Biggs

Date: August 18, 2000 and September 2000
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Transcriber: Walter Stochel Jr., 2004
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Abstract: Dr. Myra (Clouting) Biggs was a teacher and a principal at Oak Tree School, and a principal at Lincoln School in Edison. She once lived on the property of the abandoned one-room schoolhouse at what is now the corner of Marion Street and Plainfield Road in Oak Tree from 1924 to 1980.

On August 18, 2000, Walter Stochel Jr. interviewed her about the Oak Tree Pond area, Oak Tree School, and the surrounding neighborhood. He conducted a follow-up interview in September 2000 to further discuss her life in Oak Tree. She was ninety-eight years old when she was interviewed. The following is a compilation of notes that were taken during the August and September 2000 interviews.

It should be noted that a more extensive interview with Dr. Myra Biggs was conducted on August 9, 2004 with Phyllis Boeddinghaus and Marie Vajo. That interview was fully transcribed in August 2019 by Laura Cabbage-Draper.

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Initial Interview on August 18, 2000

When asked if the Oak Tree Pond was there when she taught at Oak Tree School [present-day JFK Johnson Rehab Institute at 2050 Oak Tree Road], Dr. Myra Biggs replied, “We would take the kids skating at the pond. I would bring my skates to school, and before lunch go out on the pond to see if the ice was strong enough, and then we would let the kids skate.”

Oak Tree Pond was there when Dr. Biggs moved to the area in 1924.

Oak Tree was the terminal moraine. This was from the glacier, and it left ponds all over this area.

According to Dr. Biggs, “I bought the old abandoned [Oak Tree] schoolhouse [present-day real estate office at 2077 Oak Tree Road]. We dug the cellar by hand, and used the stone to build the foundation for the addition and the chimneys and the steps. I lived there for fifty-six years. When they renamed the street Marion Street, they should have named it ‘B’ Street because Biggs, Beck, Burke, and Bashew lived on the street and they had all boys.”

There was another pond down where the Bruderers once lived on Plainfield Road near present-day Stephenville Parkway. Gustav Lindenthal was a big engineer, and he had an estate there that sat back from the road about 500-600 feet. Mr. Lindenthal worked in New York and would walk to the Metuchen Railroad Station. The Bruderers did housework and garden work for Mr. Lindenthal.

According to Dr. Biggs, "I remember the railroad, the Black Diamond ran through here. Bidney was the man who worked at the station and lived there. He had both legs amputated by a train that ran over him. His son was Bobby Bidney, who went to Oak Tree School."

Dr. Biggs still hears from Mr. [John Addison] Needham, whose wife was Alice [Freeman] Needham. They lived near the Marconier Union Chapel.

The Campbell house [former Reuben Ayers house located at northeast corner of Oak Tree Road and New Dover Road] was not a big house when they bought it. The Campbells built a sun porch on the Oak Tree Pond side of the house and a three-car garage in the back. They also owned forty-five acres where the tavern was situated. The Catholic School [possibly the Bishop Ahr / St. Thomas Aquinas High School land] may have been part of it. Rachel Kelly lived there and died in 1925. After Campbell died, people got into the house and destroyed it [house was demolished in 1968].

The Campbells also owned Orange Groves in Florida.

Gail Campbell's father was a Tennessee doctor. According to Dr. Biggs, "Gail smoked cigarettes, and one day I went over to see her and noticed that she was using a good Japanese dish as an ashtray. A few days later, she came over and gave three of these dishes to me because she said I liked them." The next day, Gail slipped in the bathtub and died. Gail Campbell's father-in-law died in Waycross, Georgia.

Rachel Kelly was old and deaf and had to use one of those horns to hear.

According to Dr. Biggs, "When I first moved there, the road [Oak Tree Road] was not straight. They cut the road through around 1929. They used to raise squash on that part of the property and they would go to the slaughterhouse to get blood for the garden. I paid \$3,000 for the rest of the triangle that was cut off from the rest of the property. Campbell used to cart guinea hens up here from Florida."

Charlie Grigg and his wife did domestic work for the Campbells.

Charlie Clausen was a caretaker of the property when the Campbells went to Florida. His wife had Alzheimer's. Charlie and Mary Clausen lived at 2116 Oak Tree Road.

According to Dr. Biggs, "We used to play baseball on the Campbell farm. The Board of Education wanted to buy that piece for a ball field, but the Campbells would not sell. So, the

board cut down the hill behind the [Oak Tree] school for the ball field. John Anderson, Board of Education secretary, did the digging and removal of dirt.”

There was another small pond on the other side of the school. It was smaller and did not freeze as much as the bigger pond.

Dr. Biggs was told she would never be made the principal because she was a woman. She remembers when a child was hit by a bus down by Henry Street. A school wagon went down Grove Avenue. Suydam ran the wagon. This is when the kid got run over.

Eugenia Berta lived on Grove Avenue. She was a Ponciroli (Virginia was her sister), and she has since died. Mrs. Berta’s house is on Grove Avenue, near Anita.

[Thomas] Swales was the Edison mayor part of the time, and [John] Anderson was tied in with them.

According to Dr. Biggs, “John Jarema had the brains and did not want to use them. I gave him what he deserved. His parents transferred him to Clara Barton. Eleanor France lived near Pumptown Corners Restaurant. I made her work, and she became the best in the class.”

Dr. Biggs was principal for ten years at Lincoln School. She states that one should not give kids Ritalin. According to her, “I told the teachers if the kid is too restless, send him to the office. I would make them pick up papers on the lawn or do something. Did you ever sit at a desk for eight hours? Imagine how hard it is for a kid full of energy. [They] need more recess and physical education so they can burn off the energy.” She also states that “social promotion is crazy.”

Eddie Layborn lived on Henry Street, and Mr. Ritter was bad with the kids.

Dr. Biggs warns, “Are you dealing with any politicians? If so, watch them. They lie like a Persian rug.”

Dr. Biggs admits that she had a brother Walter, who died in 1951. She also had a sister. At the time of the interview, she was ninety-eight years old with good blood pressure. She only took vitamins and no drugs.

Follow-up Interview on September 2000

Oak Tree School was named for what was there: the oak tree. Rachel Kelly told Dr. Biggs that the oak tree was a planted tree.

An itinerate preacher started Oak Tree School [possibly Bethune Dunkin, who taught from circa 1820-1865]. There is a picture of the school with the teacher.

They were allowed to build the schoolhouse there on the Kelly property, and it went back to the Kellys when Oak Tree School moved [in 1909].

During the summer of 1925, Dr. Biggs moved into the old one-room schoolhouse. Miss Rachel Kelly had a horn that you had to talk into for her to hear. Miss Kelly told Campbell to sell Dr. Biggs the property six to eight feet behind the house.

When the speeds increased on the roads, they had to do something about Oak Tree Road. That is when Oak Tree Road was cut through the property. After that, Campbell sold the rest of the triangle to Dr. Biggs. She bought part of the lot for a garage. People who had hot dog stands and gas stations were interested in buying the property at that time.

Dr. Biggs referred to Marion Street as “B” Street for the names of the families that lived on the street. This area was originally owned by Mr. Hudson.

Oak Tree Pond was created by the glacier. When Dr. Biggs moved to Oak Tree in 1925, the pond was there. There was also a pond on the Van Court place, located west of the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

There was also a pond east on Oak Tree Road where the Metuchen Rod & Gun Club was located.

There was a pond by Gustav Lindenthal’s house; Albert Bruderer lived there. The large rock in front of the house was granite, and was left there by the glacier. Dr. Biggs bought some of the rocks on the house on the Plainfield Road side of the property.

When the brook from the Oak Tree Pond got full, it ran past Mr. Hudson’s place.

Gustav Lindenthal owned property along Plainfield Road up to Marion Street.

The Archambaults bought Mr. Hudson’s place after Gustav Lindenthal died.

The Spears house was located on the other side of Plainfield Road.

Walter Williams lived down by Pumptown, and he started the five-and-ten-cent store [he was a buyer for Woolworth’s and owned the Roselawn estate on Park Avenue].

The “Big Inch” pipeline from Corpus Christie, Texas to the port in Linden, New Jersey came through the Oak Tree area. Stephenville Parkway is divided because of the pipeline. There was another pipeline [Tidewater pipeline] down by the bridge (no longer existing) on Plainfield Road. A bulldozer hit it and it sprayed oil.

Dr. Biggs lived in Oak Tree from circa 1925-1980.

At Wood Brook Farms, there was a “black wax” pond full of black sticky muck. Other relics and bones of animals were found there.

Rose Miller sent Dr. Biggs articles about Oak Tree School and how it looked in 1924. The school had six rooms and an auditorium. Then the school expanded to eight rooms [the auditorium was divided into two classrooms] with a basement. Then the school had an annex, followed by an addition [in 1949].

There was a one-room schoolhouse in Menlo Park. Mrs. Swackhammer was out of Oak Tree School; later she was flooded out in Galveston, Texas. Miss Purcell was also at Menlo Park.

In 1925, the abandoned schoolhouse in Oak Tree was a mess. The schoolhouse was all one room with a vestibule. There were two doors: one for boys and one for girls. Dr. Biggs bought the property and built her house around the old schoolhouse. There was no water, so she had to get the water up at Campbells. There was no bathroom, only kerosene lamps and a stove. She later had a coal stove.

According to Dr. Biggs, "I started as principal at below salary scale of \$1,100 per year. When you got the degree, I was off the salary scale. I was the only doctor in the school system. The next doctor was Dr. [Joseph] Kreskey. Jan Miller was also a doctor. Jerry Young has 420 students, six assistants, and a secretary. His salary is \$105,000. All he has to do is deal with parents. I made \$1,700 at Oak Tree School with more kids. I also did the secretary work at night for an extra \$200 per year."

Supplies, like pens, and ink blotters had to be bought. The teachers were allotted \$1.25 per student for supplies, which included pens, pen holders, and ten sheets of colored paper. Less than one sheet of white paper was allotted per student per day. The teachers bought their own rulers. Sometimes the teachers would hide paper in the pianos because the Board of Education deducted leftover paper from the next year's order.

Forty percent of the kids were colored kids. They appreciated a good place to be in; many came from Virginia.

[Superintendent of Schools] Fred A. Talbot was just as bad as John Anderson. Mrs. Ponciroli once invited him to dinner. Dr. Biggs said that he would come by the school on the day after she worked late at night as the secretary. According to Dr. Biggs, "I signed in at 8:30 a.m. He said, 'You are supposed to be in at 8 a.m.' He also said my room was messy because there was an eraser on the floor. We taught penmanship, with pens and inkwells, and he would spot a drop of ink on the desks. He had to find something."

Dr. Biggs found the Christmas program from 1925. The program includes her husband's niece Babe, Claudia Twitchells, and Mildred Franks. She also found school and safety patrol pictures from 1925.

Rose Miller took the school pictures. Dr. Biggs was the only one who complained, but Tony Yelencsics wanted the school to use him. Rose Miller did not get the pictures to Dr. Biggs until after school was over in June.

According to Dr. Biggs, “No dog can chase a cat, if the cat won’t run.”

During the Depression, people paid in script. Script notes were ten dollars. When people took them to the bank, they would cash them at 10 percent on the dollar. But if you took them to Wood Brook Farms, Mr. Hale paid face value. Dr. Biggs had a milk bill, and it said credit of fifty dollars.

Mr. [Samuel] Kirkpatrick said that they were going to put up Dr. Biggs’ house for sheriff’s sale because she was not paid. The teachers took a 20 percent pay cut, and worked thirteen years without a raise. For forty-two years, Dr. Biggs averaged \$3,800 per year. After thirty-two years, Dr. Biggs was making \$5,200 per year.

Snyder farm was located at New Dover Road and Tingley Lane.

The water was hard. The water company put in a twenty-inch main in front of the house. Dr. Biggs saw a kid crawling through the pipe. The water was so hard, it did not taste fit to drink. She had to use detergent, because the soap would clot like spoiled milk. So, she bought Mullins spring water to drink (Mullins was located in Perth Amboy).

Dr. Biggs had two sons: one died as an infant and the other was killed in World War II. Dr. Biggs’ current home in Palermo, New Jersey has five bedrooms.