

Interview with Ruth L. Sykes

My aunt, Ruth Sykes, my mother's younger sister, lives in an apartment hotel in Dallas, Texas. Now eighty-seven years old and severely handicapped with hip fractures and other orthopedic problems, Ruth is nevertheless alert, articulate, and observant. Childless, and single until her forties, she was unusually close to her nieces and nephews and served us all as an indulgent, detached, intelligent adult. Children with difficult parents are lucky if such people enter their lives in childhood; Ruth was one of two who gave me balance and a kind of release from the tensions of home. She lived with us when our parents were away, and at other times she and I did things together that were considered slightly offbeat at that time: Sunday morning bicycle rides through Central Park, a midnight "Bundles for Britain" benefit at Radio City Music Hall where I first saw Danny Kaye, foreign-language films (a rarity then). She was the only unmarried working woman I knew, other than teachers, who lived alone and seemed to enjoy it. It's clear from the interview that at least in retrospect she was having a more difficult time than I realized, but to me she was a role model. She has a gift, rare in my family, for accepting young people as they are, treating them as equals and not trying to improve them. I relaxed in her detached acceptance of my adolescent self as genuine and worth the effort of growth.

When Ruth talks about her family, she mentions first her sister Mildred (my mother).

My two sisters - one was two years and some months older than I was, and she was my mentor. I didn't believe that anything came up that Mildred didn't know the answer to. . . . She told me the most outrageous things - which I believed, always. I remember particularly asking her about stories in

the Bible. I asked her what A.D. meant, and she said it meant "after Deuteronomy." I asked, Why was Deuteronomy so important? She said, "It's the fifth book of the Bible." Can you imagine? All made up on the spur of the moment. She was really brilliant. It never occurred to me to doubt one word that she said.

Her other sister, Alma, was so much older than Ruth and Mildred that she didn't play much of a part in their childhood except as the pioneer in stretching parental rules.

Her father may not have been delighted to have three daughters.

There were some people living next door, friends of the family, and - I was told this - he came over when I was born and laughed at my father because he had three girls. And then he proceeded to have three girls. So my father had the last laugh.

The message was not lost on her. "I had always been in awe of my father and felt that I had been a disappointment to him, by being a girl."

By all the accounts we ever heard, he was someone to be in awe of, a classic German patriarch, benevolent but somewhat remote from his daughters. "He was affectionate in the way of men of that age, to all of us, but when any decision came up, he'd always say, 'Ask your mother.'" One of ten children, he had followed a brother to America in the 1870's, entering at Galveston and working first in the brother's paper business in Atlanta, then going to Macon, and after a few years establishing his own paper business in Dallas. Dallas was unknown territory then, and she is not sure why he decided to move there. Two other brothers later came over, one to Dallas and one to Memphis. The Dallas brother, Uncle Morris, was the father and grandfather of her only remaining relatives there.

Papa never looked backward at Germany. He was always looking at this country, and [on a trip to Germany to tell his mother about his engagement] he wrote letter after letter to Mama saying how homesick he was - for America! He'd only been here a few years. He never wanted to go back again. He belonged to a German social club, but he never had any interest in Germany.

Her mother, born in Louisiana of French-speaking Alsatian parents,

was the figure in our lives. I remember coming home from school and ringing the bell, and the housemaid or the cook would answer the door and the first question we'd ask was "Where's Mama?" Mama should have been the one to open the door, and if she didn't, why, we were aggrieved. It was all right if she went out afterwards, but she should have been there at three o'clock when we got home.

Her word was final with them. "It never occurred to us to rebel," says Ruth a little sheepishly. "By today's standards we would have been spiritless."

She remembers a pleasant, easy-going childhood.

Dallas was a small city, it was rather a small town, and as such it was a really pleasant place to live. We had a good deal of freedom. I remember taking dancing classes, but if you missed one it was no big thing. We weren't regimented as children are today, at all.

Before air-conditioning, those who could escaped during the summer. "When we were little, we thought the greatest treat was to go to Shreveport [La.]," where it may have been as hot as Dallas but there were six cousins. Most of the time, however, they went to Colorado or Michigan.

Her parents had a solid position in the German-Jewish community. Her father, in fact, had more position than money for most of his life, partly because he liked to invest in inventions.

It took him many years to learn that inventions were a rich man's toy. . . . I said to my mother, I wish his weakness had been women instead of inventions, because he would have gotten over that in a reasonable length of time.

(In my childhood, every store had a machine that fed moistened gummed tape for sealing packages. Family legend had it that this was one of the inventions he backed, and that it did not become a ubiquitous, and lucrative, store fixture until after he had lost his shirt on it.)

He was vain of his good looks. I said to Mama, "Weren't you ever jealous of him?" He was very good-looking and got a lot of attention. And she said, "I know he was proud of his looks,, but he was even prouder of his position in the community."

He helped found the Hockaday, which was to become the leading girls' prep school in Dallas, and then Southern Methodist University.

Why a Methodist school? Southern religious politics.

Dallas is a viciously Baptist city and that has influenced it politically and every other way. But the Methodist church . . . they were much more enlightened and SMU was a liberal-arts college and had more to offer. And of course in recent years it's become much more enlightened and endowed generously by people in various denominations. Jewish people have always been interested in SMU.

All three girls went to the local public school.

I remember it perfectly. It was the Columbian School. I can remember the names of teachers I had there who stood out. The principal was a woman whose name was Cowart, and she had never gotten over the defeat of the South, and she would never let anyone teach anything about the Civil War that was derogatory of the South.

Except for one time, vividly remembered, when she was sent to the principal's office, Ruth was an earnest, obedient student. "I was a very meek child. I studied very hard." All three of them, in fact, took school very seriously.

When Mama said we couldn't go to school unless we ate our breakfast, why we went ahead and ate it. We wouldn't dare miss it. I don't know whether I was so crazy about school; I don't think I was. But I was afraid to miss it - sort of a fear that I would fall behind and be unable to keep up with the others.

We had an awful lot of homework. They didn't do nearly as much in the classroom as they do today. I think we were sort of put upon. Classes were very large, so we didn't get individual attention.

Often, their mother would send them to bed with their homework unfinished, promising to wake them very early in the morning when they would be fresh. And she would; very early. Ruth thinks this explains all three sisters' lifelong inability to sleep past 5 A.M.

The lively reminiscences of elementary school stop abruptly at high school. The name of the school is mentioned; there follows a long silence. Finally, she begins to talk about a period she dislikes remembering, when she was believed to have a major kidney infection. This is a puzzle, because she can't remember having any symptoms. She was kept in bed for weeks and fed on "pap"; she has never liked highly seasoned foods since then. Her reluctance to speak of this period at all suggests that she really believed she was going to die. Finally,

they called in an ophthalmologist, who I think was the only ophthalmologist in Dallas in those days. He was also very social, and he came to see me one night, all dressed up formally, on his way to some party, and he really saved my life. He looked at me, examined me, and he said to the doctor and my parents, "Get this girl up," he said. "There's nothing the matter with her. If she had the kind of infection you claim, the optic nerve would be affected by this time. There's no sign of it. Get her up." He was right, and I was always so grateful to him.

But she missed a whole year of school.

There is another period she would rather not discuss, shortly after she had finished high school. She had learned typing and shorthand by correspondence school, and then had gone to a local business college to pick up shorthand speed, surely an unconventional decision for a girl of that background at that time. (Her parents approved, a hint that they saw her life prospects as different from those of her sisters. There is a lot left unsaid here.) This was about the time the United States was entering World War I, but Ruth seems to have been almost unaware of the fact. If her family suffered from the anti-German hysteria of the time, she ~~was not~~ ^{does not remember} ~~was unaware of~~ it. The reason comes out:

Those were the years when I was under a cloud. I was sent to New York and I was treated by this doctor, who was extremely enlightened from my standpoint because he taught me so much. I would ask him what certain things meant and he would give

me a textbook to read. He gave me the medical background which enabled me to become a medical secretary. And I've always been grateful to him although the years I spent under his care were pretty grim. . . . Finally he said, "Go back and lead a normal life. This isn't for you."

The "cloud" is unexplained and will remain so. Questions are clearly unwelcome. (Some hints in the family suggest that it would not be taken very seriously today, but the social climate of her adolescence enjoined silence.)

She stayed on in New York, or she came back in a few years; that part is not clear. She combined her two skills and became a medical secretary, managing to be self-supporting through most of the Depression.

I used to go to the New York Medical Exchange - that was my agency - I'd get jobs from them. Sometimes it was with a hospital, sometimes with a doctor, privately. And I found out I could do it and got confidence in myself.

I remember her as always working, living in an apartment in the east seventies that fascinated me because it had the first Murphy bed I had ever seen. There was a lot I didn't know, though.

They were very hard years for me because I didn't quite fit in anywhere. I was working when I could get a job. At times I would work for a while and then come home to eat, when the job played out.

As her parents' health began to fail, she was called home ("of course I was the single daughter"), and spent most of the World War II years working for the WPA in a series of small Texas towns.

They called me a social worker. I wasn't a social worker but I knew a good deal about it. I'd taken courses at the New School. They gave me a glimpse of social work and I was interested in the field, used to go there for lectures at night.

WPA social workers assigned local farmers and their wives to projects, mostly road-building, in between planting and harvesting stints on their own farms. She had to learn about the crop cycles

and local resources (the county judges were her sources for most of this); she bought her first car and learned to drive it; she ^{used} ~~used~~ a bicycle ~~to get around~~ to save her tires (there were no new ones to be had during World War II) - at least until she found out how dangerous the rattlesnakes were.

When I took this job, which lasted about four years - counting all the different stations I was in - the people in the [head] office in Waco were betting on me, and they said, "That girl won't keep the job. She's a city girl. She's never lived in any place smaller than Dallas." So they bet on me. And the funny part was that I loved it and found it so interesting and the little towns so interesting.

Being accepted in towns like Marlin, Waxahachie, and Waco was no problem. "You know, if you didn't claim to be superior they were glad to have you."

The end of the WPA meant a shift to the U.S. Employment Service in Dallas, a less colorful life of interviewing employers to make sure that they were observing fair-employment regulations. It couldn't compare with the WPA, and probably no other job in her lifetime could.