

ORAL HISTORY

of McCormick House

Mary Sladek Dreiser (MD)
Interviewed by Dave Oberg (DO), Elmhurst History Museum
Executive Director

DO: Would you be kind enough to share with us your name and tell us where and when you were born?

MD: Yes. Mary Slavic Dreiser and I was born in Elmhurst in 1949.

DO: And what is your relationship to the McCormick house?

MD: Well, my family and I, my six siblings and myself, we lived in the house for 2 ½ years in the early 1960s. The house was 299 Prospect and we lived in a Colonial at 274 Winthrop right down the street. And it was a new house built for us but my mother hurt her back so my dad had to scramble and find a house with just one story. So he rented the house when we lived in this house for about 2 ½ years. My sister, Ardythe Rasmussen is here and she gave an interview and also my brother, Jim Slavic is here and I don't know, Jimmy, were you three or four at the time? (*Jimmy responds*) Four, okay. So he says he still has a lot of memories of living in the house.

DO: Would you share with us some of your favorite memories of this house.

MD: Sure, and some of them are a little scattered so I may just jump and I'll refer to my notes. But, my favorite memory is waking up in the morning and my mother saying, Girls—we have four teenage girls in the house—she said, Girls shut the curtains the buses are here. And sure enough, the buses from the Art Institute would come and they'd line up on Prospect Avenue. The art students would get out, they'd take out their easels and they'd sit out front and they'd draw the house. And that's when I think I knew, even though I was young, that there was something special about the house. We have a lot of memories but I'll just share a few more. The biggest factor of course in the house was the floor to ceiling windows. And that made the house beautiful and ever-changing every different season. But there were pros and cons to the windows. In those days they didn't have thermopane windows so I remember clearly in the winter, my mother would roll up these ugly towels and she'd lay them all along the base at the floor to the ceiling windows in the kitchen. To capture the moisture. And also I think that the fact that the roof was flat caused a lot of structural problems and added to the moisture problems. I remember my dad saying, and the figure sounds kind of outrageous today, but he once confided in us

about the outrageous heating bills. And I remember the figure being it was \$900 a month. Now, they're not alive so we can't confirm it but whatever it was it was obviously extravagant. We also lived in the house at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis so Kennedy was president. So that posed some interesting issues. I remember that, you know there was a fear of nuclear war at the time, so I remember even I was in junior high, seventh grade, we would do these drills where you'd hide under your desk. You know, that would protect you. But as a relation to the house, it was scary for us as kids because we thought we have a glass house, what are we going to do for protection? And there was always this rumor that a neighbor had a bomb shelter so our question was would we be able to use that bomb shelter if the need arose. There are some interesting structural things that give me memories here. If you look you'll see that the front and the back door are like almost on top of one another. So I remember clearly my brother, Jim over there, and my other brother coming home from school, they'd run in the door—they'd run in the front door—they'd drop their bag, they'd run out the back door, immediately within a few seconds and then they'd go play in the yard. The yard was a beautiful forest. And I think I remember reading there were twenty-three elm trees and I doubt that many of those survived the Dutch elm disease now. And then my uncle had built a tree house for my brothers and my sister in the yard. So the yard was used a lot. Let me see what else. You know, the other thing I wanted to say about the house, is people always ask us was it private and was it cold. Now I always had a sense of privacy in the house despite the windows. The house had a big setback and then it had that carpool with the driveway in front so that blocked it a little bit. And of course there were these ugly—I think they were original to the McCormicks, I don't think they changed it when we moved in—they had these ugly but very heavy gray drapes. But the house was warm because you had all the light, because you had all the walls were wood, and one of our favorite features is that the floors were cork. They were cork squares and that was very innovative at the time, and I think that's still an innovative product. Today, if the product is used, it's still considered innovative. And not only that those floors kind of blended and add to a feeling of nature but I remember them as being warm. I remember that if you walked on them in the winter, with socks or barefoot, that they retained some heat. They weren't cold tile. So I'm sure that Mies gave a lot of thought to why he put cork floors in there.

DO: How has this house changed since the time that you owned it?

MD: Well, the cork floors. Certainly, I think those were a big asset. I think there was an incinerator, the house had an incinerator which I think was unusual for the time. And also along the whole back wall, in that room to the left, that was a laundry storage room. And it had a door to the outside. And, in fact, I don't know if they still got it there and they just blocked it off but it was a utility room along the whole back. And

actually that's where my mother stored canned goods and things during the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was good for us.

DO: How have you felt about seeing this house change and evolve over time?

MD: Well, I think when it was first moved I wasn't here but I wasn't living in Elmhurst at the time but I saw pictures of it on that truck. And I remember thinking, that was really, very insightful and a wonderful thing for someone to do to save that house and to move it and to make it into a museum. I thought that was very forward thinking. And when the first time I visited it again, I thought what a lovely museum, they did it in the same steel and glass, like the house we lived in was, and myself and my siblings—of course we were always disappointed that it took so long and that they didn't initially set up the house because my feeling is the house is the gem. It is the art. It is the masterpiece. And that is what should be restored to its original as much as possible.

DO: Do you ever recall any reactions from friends, neighbors, people in the community, to this house.

MD: It's kind of schizophrenic because I remember that there were times there were many people who didn't even know that this house was here. They didn't realize its architectural significance. And it was never referred to as the McCormick house or the Mies van der Rohe house. It was always the glass house. So if anyone was familiar with it, it was familiar with it as the glass house.

DO: And any recollections of how people reacted when it was actually moved?

MD: Well I wasn't living here at the time. So, I think some of the previous speakers probably would address that better than I could.

DO: How about when it was turned into a space to exhibit art? Any personal feelings or any comments from the community on that?

MD: Oh, I think the community was probably very grateful. And the fact that it was a modern museum made it very special, made it very special to Mies. And also the fact that there aren't many museums out here. And the setback is much like the home. The setting of it reminds me very much of the house when we lived in it at 299 Prospect. So I think they did a marvelous job. And I agree with a previous speaker that the fact that it's on the Metra line means that more people should be made aware that they can come out and visit it. They could walk from the train. Right?

DO: Now, you talked a little bit about what you'd like to see happen to the house. Any other suggestions for changing this for the future?

MD: Oh, I think the most significant thing to change—and I was lucky enough to participate with a few docents here and I attended the tours and I spoke to my reactions and my impressions and memories of the house and I saw the comments that people made. And what most people said, and I'm in agreement, is the kitchen if at possible should be restored. There's the kitchen back over there. The kitchen really is what united the two wings. And if you read anything at all about the house, it's referred to as the two wings. And the kitchen was just central. And even though it was very small and a galley kitchen, it was the center of the house and sort of the hub. So I think that's the link. I would certainly restore the kitchen. I would restore the bedrooms that we had to the original layout. I'd restore the original layout as much as possible and keep in mind we had—we lived in it with six kids. I think the McCormicks had five children. So, it was a home.

DO: Would you like to share with us a little bit your connection to the Elmhurst Art Museum as well.

MD: Well, just having grown up here, and recently I came back and became involved with some of the tours of the glass house and I found that people were very grateful to hear from someone who lived in the house and very, very curious about how it was. How did you make it a family home? I think when you look at the house today, to me when I see pictures of it, I still think it's formidable. In a way it looks cold, it's very sleek, it's got all the glass and steel, but to us it was a home. We made it a home and that's what Mies intended it to be. So I think that's what people are very surprised to hear. So that's what I've been doing is sharing our impressions of living in the home. There are only two families. And we only lived a short period of time but we did experience it. It was a masterpiece but we experienced it as a house.

DO: Could you talk to us a little bit about the significance of this home to Elmhurst and to the world beyond?

MD: Well, yes. This is a masterpiece. And you have to keep in mind that Mies only built three, single family residences in the United States and we have one here. He built the Farnsworth house in Plano and he built—I don't remember the name in Connecticut—but that house, I believe, is still a single family residence so there are no tours. So Elmhurst has a real gem here. There's only two houses in the whole United States that Mies built and the public has an opportunity to go through it. So that's extremely special.

DO: Anything else that you'd like to share with us?

MD: No. I think this project is excellent. I think talking to as many people as you can, if you could even get the Ficks to talk about how it was. I think they lived there twenty

some odd years. So I applaud the museum for the evolution of the museum to the house and then trying to find the significance of the house to people who lived here and to community members.

DO: Is there anyone else you think we should talk to?

MD: The Ficks. Yeah. And I wish my parents were alive because now I certainly would like to ask them questions about working with the McCormicks to rent the house, etcetera.

DO: Very good. Thank you so much for your time.