

Indiana BEDROCK

Interview with Rosemary Wisley Matthews Brothers Stone Company

This interview was held at the Monroe County Public Library in Bloomington, Indiana in the spring of 2009 with Brendan Fay as the interviewer.



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FAY: Please state your name and where you're from.

WISLEY: Rosemary Wisely. I'm from Smithville, Indiana.

FAY: Were you originally born and raised in Smithville or is your whole family from Smithville, like your parents and your parents' parents?

WISLEY: Yes. My mother, her father was a minister and a school teacher so they traveled and they came to Smithville from the southern part of the state but she was born in the northern part. And my dad, he was raised near where the lake is, Lake Monroe, in Paynetown.

FAY: And did he also work in the stone mill?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: From a young age?

WISLEY: Right.

FAY: And in what capacity did he work?

WISLEY: Of course he worked in the quarry when he was young and then during the war he worked at Curtiss-Wright in Indianapolis and then he went back to the stone mills and was a mechanic.

FAY: At the mill?

WISLEY: Empire Stone Co. In fact, he set the mill on fire.

FAY: You have to tell me about that.

WISLEY: It was probably in 1947. I was still in school. And he was using a torch and sparks flew in some grease and the mill was old and it burned down.

FAY: Was anyone hurt?

WISLEY: Daddy was hurt. He had second and third degree burns on his face and arms. Healed up real quick.

FAY: And he was able to go to work shortly after?

WISLEY: Yes, just a few days after. I was in school and we could see the smoke from Smithville School. And I didn't have any idea what it was until after school and I was walking home from school and somebody said something about the Empire Stone Company burning. And then got home and found out that daddy was hurt.

FAY: And were accidents pretty common?

WISLEY: No, but there were several people...as a matter of fact, my husband was killed at the Fluck Cutstone company in '86. And when I worked at the Empire, I worked at Empire and Matthews, and there were four or five men killed working in the quarries and the mill at Empire.

FAY: And could you talk about what that experience was like with your husband? What exactly happened that day?

WISLEY: He was a foreman and he was measuring a piece of stone to go on a saw and he was in between some slabs of stone and the skid broke and stone fell across his chest.

FAY: Oh my gosh.

WISLEY: Quite a shock.

FAY: Was he killed instantly?

WISLEY: Yes, instantly.

FAY: And did he himself experience other of his colleagues seeing them die on the mills?

WISLEY: No, I don't think. As a matter of fact I don't remember anybody else being killed at Fluck Cutstone Co. No, he didn't experience anyone else, but like I said when I worked at the Empire Stone Company there were four or five men killed at that time. There wasn't anybody at Matthews killed while I was working there.

FAY: When things like this would happen was there compensation, things set up by the company, to take care of the families who had just lost someone? Or would the other employees jump in to start a fund?

WISLEY: Where Bill worked at, Fluck, any time a man was off sick a week, then the men all pitched in and gave him money as long as he was off sick. But they had workman's comp.

FAY: They did?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: And the mills, both when you were growing up and when you were working there, were they unionized as well? The mill workers?

WISLEY: Yes, they were by the time I went to work there. They were all union.

FAY: You mentioned a little bit when you were still in school. Was that in Smithville?

WISLEY: Smithville High School.

FAY: At Smithville High School. I think I saw a photograph of the what must have been—

WISLEY: Labor Day.

FAY: —of what must have been the 65th or 60th or something reunion recently in one of the newspapers here. There was a photograph in one of the—

WISLEY: Yes, the 50th anniversary.

FAY: The 50th. And did you start working in the mills immediately after graduating high school?

WISLEY: Yes, in 1952.

FAY: How did that come about?

WISLEY: No, it was 1951. I'm sorry. I graduated in 1951 and I went to work later that year.

FAY: Was it just because your father had been working there? Was it that natural kind of?

WISLEY: I think it was mostly because my brother worked there and my brother and Norris Chumley, you probably heard about Norris Chumley, he just took my brother kind of under his wing and they knew I had just graduated from high school so they called and asked if I would be interested in a job. The office girl was quitting.

FAY: And what exactly was the job?

WISLEY: Just payroll and, you know, answering the phone - secretary work.

FAY: And you did that from high school until you retired from Matthews?

WISLEY: I didn't retire from Matthews. They went out of business so I was laid off. And

then I worked at Moon Freight lines until 1994. And then I worked at Allcares. I retired from there.

FAY: You mentioned your brother worked in the mill as well.

WISLEY: We were all quarry and mill people. My husband and I had two brothers that worked in the stone companies. My one brother worked at Fluck and he was a stonecutter. And he finally quit and went into a monument business of his own. He had Lew Hill monuments on South 37 and my other brother Jim worked at the Empire. Then when it shut down he became an electrician. He was superintendent at Empire.

FAY: And did your other brother Jim work in the stone company with your father in the mill?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: What was that experience like as you were watching? Would they bring the work home with them, so to speak?

WISLEY: No, not too much. Of course, I was called a tomboy, and then if daddy he had to go out to the quarry on Saturday to do something I was right there with him.

FAY: And was that fairly typical? What was the kind of work week like on a week to week basis for both you and your husband? Was it 9 to 5, Monday through Friday?

WISLEY: Yes. Well, for him it was 7 to 3:30 and then I went to work at 8 and worked until 5.

FAY: But occasionally you do have to go in on the weekends?

WISLEY: He worked overtime some. But I very seldom had to work weekends.

FAY: And were there times of the year when you had peak seasons and orders were coming in like crazy that were sort of busier than others or parts of the year that were a little bit slower?

WISLEY: Yes, the winter time.

FAY: Was slower?

WISLEY: Right. Of course, the quarries shut down in the winter time but the mills, most of them could work. My husband worked year round but a lot of the mills had temperature control. If it was certain degrees you didn't show up for work.

FAY: So I guess that could potentially raise problems from time to time?

WISLEY: Sure.

FAY: So would people have other jobs lined up as a safety net in case the mills wouldn't be – because if it's too cold you can't work with the stone, right?

WISLEY: Right.

FAY: So you say that people did have other kinds of employment to fall back on in case?

WISLEY: Probably a lot of them were farmers at that time and if they were laid off in the wintertime, of course you don't farm much in the winter either, but they, you know, would have their cattle and stuff to fall back on and unemployment. And in the springtime they could go back to work.

FAY: And did your husband ever have to face this?

WISLEY: No.

FAY: He never did? Always working? Did he start off as a foreman?

WISLEY: No.

FAY: He worked his way up?

WISLEY: He was what they called a hooker and he ran a rip saw.

FAY: And what was the hooker's job?

WISLEY: I'm talking in quarry terms...they had what they called "dogs" (big hooks) and big chains that they would hook on to a stone or slabs, whatever, that's what the hookers did. And it went to where ever. If it was going to a saw by the crane – is an over-head moving equipment with the stone – then or also called traveler. And they would hook on to it if it was coming from the gangs to the rip saws or the cutters. It would go to the rip saws first and they would cut it in a slab form, smaller, and then it would go to the cutters.

FAY: So before it was all said and done, what had he worked in? You said he was a hooker. He was of course a foreman at some point.

WISLEY: When he got killed he was a foreman.

FAY: He worked chainsaws?

WISLEY: Ripsaws.

FAY: And was it typical to have a lot of these men who had worked in mills their whole lives or was it an industry where you'd work there for 30 or 40 years? Was there a lot of turnover?

WISLEY: Well, some of them went from mill to mill but it was back then if your father worked in a stone company you went to work in a stone company. This was back in the 1950's. It was just a thing that was kind of expected about men.

FAY: Was it always the case? Did people sometimes decide to move on to something else and was there tension? Did you or your husband witness confrontations between a son and father because the son doesn't want to end up working in the mill?

WISLEY: My son had no desire to work in it at all and we didn't care.

FAY: What did he end up doing?

WISLEY: He's in real estate right now in Alexandria, Virginia, where he lives, and D.C. And I got to visit him and got to see the Washington Cathedral which Matthews had furnished a lot of the stone for.

FAY: And was that while you were working there?

WISLEY: No. Well, yes, when I worked at Matthews they furnished all the stone for the Cathedral. But I didn't get to see it until after I retired and my son moved out there.

FAY: I'd like to hear a little about your experiences. I saw this picture and you were the only woman.

WISLEY: Right.

FAY: Was that the case the whole time you were there?

WISLEY: Yes, and the whole time I was Empire Stone Company too.

FAY: Both places?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: And what was the experience like? Did the men treat you just the same like you were one of the guys or something?

WISLEY: Well, they had a lot of respect that I was a woman, you know. Of course there were the foremen. They came in the office when the workers were laid off, the guys would come into the office to get their checks. But I didn't really see the men that worked in the mill that much. I knew who most of them were.

FAY: But you didn't have direct contact with them much?

WISLEY: No, just the draftsmen and the ones that worked in the office.

FAY: Were there a lot of like company events? There was this 100th centennial celebration for the Matthews Brothers Company and there were a number of festivities that weekend, parties, and a parade.

WISLEY: There might have been in Ellettsville. I don't really recall. That's the only big thing. I worked there about 15 years, was the 100th year.

FAY: So there was no company picnics very often like 4th of July? Or something like this centennial celebration?

WISLEY: No. Now, at the Empire Stone Company, Norris Chumley always had a big Christmas dinner.

FAY: At his house?

WISLEY: No, it would be at a restaurant someplace.

FAY: When I read all this stuff about the mills here, to see where all the stone ended up going – the National Cathedral, the Pentagon, state capitol buildings...Were these buildings something that the workers themselves knew about when they were pulling stones out of the ground, or was it just you know, "just a piece of stone" they were going to get out of the ground?

WISLEY: I imagined when I worked at Matthews that pretty well every man in the mill knew what was going to Washington Cathedral because it was outstanding stone. Now, Matthews didn't have a quarry so they had to buy all their blocks from Independent mostly.

FAY: When did they stop having a quarry at Matthews?

WISLEY: Years ago. And then Bybee bought the company he opened the quarry up.

FAY: But there was a time when they were just doing hand polishing and cutting up the stone but they'd actually get the blocks from somewhere else?

WISLEY: Well they had gang saws at Matthews, which, takes the blocks and saws into slabs and then it goes into finished product. Now the Empire Stone Company, it had the quarry and mill both.

FAY: Right. And was that typical? Or was the other way more typical to own both?

WISLEY: No, Fluck didn't have a quarry. They had to buy all their stone.

FAY: I see.

WISLEY: But most of the stone companies had both.

FAY: I see. Did your husband or you do much with people outside of work? Did he cultivate friendships with other quarry workers? Did you have them home for dinner?

WISLEY: No, we all had our own friends.

FAY: And did you or your husband ever get a sense of whether men from different quarries would have contact with each other or sort of competition about who was building what at the time?

WISLEY: I don't think so

FAY: What were these – I know you said your husband was working as a hooker, and then as a foreman, so it seems that he had to make some sort of transition from being a blue collar "in the quarry" worker to a foreman or upper management job.

WISLEY: No, because they had to work right along with the other workers. He dressed the same. That was still a dirty job.

FAY: And what were the relations like between the quarry men that were pulling the stone out and maybe people in the front office?

WISLEY: I don't think there was ever tension. I think they were familiar with everybody and had good relations.

FAY: Are there particular memorable days you can think of from your experience working as a bookkeeper? Or days that you remember your husband coming home from work that particularly stand out?

WISLEY: No not really. It was just a job. I don't think anything really stood out.

FAY: And how did the wage, the compensation system work? Were the men paid by the

hour?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: By the hour. And were there ever any strikes or anything like this?

WISLEY: Sure.

FAY: When you were working there and your husband was involved?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: Were they pretty frequent?

WISLEY: No, not really.

FAY: What was generally the reason for the men to strike?

WISLEY: Wages and better benefits.

FAY: And were they usually successful – the strikes?

WISLEY: Yes; they would usually get a little raise.

FAY: I'm also interested in what a kind of typical day was just for you and your husband just during, during the week. It's pretty exhausting work, I guess, pulling stone out of the ground all day. Would he just come home exhausted and go to bed early?

WISLEY: No, he was pretty active.

FAY: So what kinds of things would, would you all do when you got home from work?

WISLEY: Of course, we had children. And when I got home I had to start cooking supper and cleaning house and laundry and ironing and we had cows – calves - that we raised and of course he would always be out feeding them in the evenings and cutting the grass in the fields. So it was a busy time. We were all big basketball fans. We attended all the games, away and home games.

FAY: So you had cows just for milk?

WISLEY: No we raised them for beef. We sold them.

FAY: I see.

WISLEY: Of course I lived in Smithville and worked in Ellettsville, so I had a few miles to drive back and fourth everyday.

FAY: Yeah so what's the distance there between?

WISLEY: About 14 miles

FAY: 14 miles. And did your family, did you only have one car?

WISLEY: We did for a while, and then he bought a truck.

FAY: There are a couple of pictures in particular that maybe you can help me with. I'm having trouble identifying, and you may not know, but you'd certainly have a better idea than, and these are from the Centennial Celebration.

WISLEY: Well, this is Mr. Barrett

FAY: And that's of one Matthew's sons, is that right?

WISLEY: No, Mr. Barrett's mother (phrase is unintelligible, possibly: "is this Matthews?")

FAY: Okay. Okay. And what kind of man was he [Mr. Barrett] like to work for? He was the president of Matthews when you were working there.

WISLEY: Right, yes.

FAY: Did you see much of him?

WISLEY: Yes, he was there practically every day. This is Mr. Barrett, and this is his brother Howard, he was the estimator. And this was McCrady, he was the head draftsmen, and this is Bob Carter. And this looks like one of those men in that one picture that you don't know

FAY: Maybe him?

WISLEY: I'm not sure

FAY: What year is this photograph?

WISLEY: This is 1962.

FAY: Oh it is

WISLEY: Yes, this is John Crane, he was a foreman.

FAY: So the kind of people that were in the administration were yourself, these two gentlemen here, and is that it?

WISLEY: Yes, we were in, this part, this was the office and this was the drafting room. So, John Baugh, he was foreman. Mr. McCrady worked over in this part, but, it was, you had to go through a door, this is a hallway, upstairs, to the building. And so you had to go through the doors to get there. It was all together separate. But I had to go out of the drafting room and run blueprints and do in-voices, etc.

FAY: I see. And were you performing the same jobs at Empire as you were at Matthews? The exact same stuff?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: Uh huh.

WISLEY: And Ikey Grimes, I think he is. And this is Lance Kell, he was superintendent. But they all worked out in the middle. John Crane, and John Baugh and Lance Kell.

FAY: I see. And almost all these men, you think, were mostly there fathers had worked in the mills?

WISLEY: I imagine

FAY: And even these young guys down here?

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: Uh huh, and their dads may even be in the photograph somewhere?

WISLEY: I don't think there was any father and sons that worked there. There were brothers. This was another foreman too, Paul Roberts. And then this is a book on the National Cathedral. And this is a picture of Mr. Barrett in Washington, D.C. This is Mr. Barrett, and this is the draftsmen, Mr. McCrady. And then this is Ralph Carell. He lived in Philadelphia but he worked for Matthews, so he was close up to D.C. and he made trips to the Cathedral, quite often.

FAY: So of all the buildings that, that they used limestone, from Indiana Limestone for, the most memorable, you'd say is the Cathedral?

WISLEY: Yes, because they worked on that for, I think, it started in the 1920s and finished in the '70's or '80's and Matthews worked on it the whole time I worked there.

FAY: And did they do –

WISLEY: I mean Moon Freight Line did the hauling and it also went by rail, they shipped some of it by rail, and then by freight line.

FAY: And as far as you know, they did all the really detailed work on the faces and the things that are and the tracery and everything else on the Cathedral, was that done by Matthews?

WISLEY: A lot of it.

FAY: And then chopped and chipped after

WISLEY: Yes.

FAY: Okay. Alright

WISLEY: Have you ever seen this book?

FAY: I don't think I have. I was going to ask you what – where'd you get it, or –

WISLEY: Mr. Barrett got it for us. I'd be glad to leave it with you and pick it up later, if you'd like to look at it.

FAY: Yeah, yeah, that'd be great. I'd love to.

WISLEY: You know, there are all the pictures in there.

WISLEY: And, have you ever seen this one?

FAY: I have, that's a wonderful book.

WISLEY: Yes, there is one article in here I didn't really find true though.

FAY: Oh, really? Which one is that?

WISLEY: Well, it was when Bybee bought Matthews. And, I didn't understand what he was talking about when he said that in the office an Apple Computer winks and flickers next to the wood stove.

FAY: Uh huh.

WISLEY: There was no wood stove in that office.

FAY: Okay, yeah, huh.

WISLEY: So I don't know how they came up with that.

FAY: Uh huh, uh huh. But other than that, was it a fair, is it pretty –

WISLEY: Yes, and Bybee bought it in 1978. Bob Carter worked a year after I did and he stayed until Bybee.

FAY: But Matthews in operation up until that point, right?

WISLEY: Right

FAY: And did they retain all the employees right over to Bybee? Or did they –

WISLEY: I think Bybee took some of them. I don't know how many went to work for Bybee. Yes, but it had been in business since 1862

FAY: I see

WISLEY: Until 1978.

FAY: Well that's great. Is there anything else you can think of to mention that I haven't asked you about or that you think would be important to the purposes of the project?

WISLEY: You know, Bob Carter said he would be glad to come in and talk to you and maybe he can add a lot more than I.

FAY: Yeah, no definitely, I'm going to put in a phone call or an email to him and see if we can have him in next, because there's a lot of stuff in here that we didn't, I didn't know about, about Matthews and transition over to Bybee and things like this, so, definitely very helpful, so thank you very much for coming in –

WISLEY: Well, I enjoyed it.

FAY: Thanks for coming in and sharing all of this. This is great.

WISLEY: I hope it's helped out some.

FAY: No, it's helped out tremendously, absolutely. Thank you so much for agreeing to come in.