

Suburban Life

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Growing up in Detroit

Resident tells 'After the Crash' experiences on national TV

By Loraine McClish
Staff writer

VIRGINIA NICOLL, best known in the area as the driving force behind Farmington and Michigan chapters of Older Women's League, will be seen on a national television show telling about her life growing up in Detroit during the depression years.

"After the Crash," a segment of The American Experience, will be shown at 9 p.m. Monday, Jan. 7 on Channel 56.

"There is a high concentration on Detroit in the show because of its high rate of unemployment then — one of the highest, if not the highest in the country," Nicoll said. "There were 300,000 unemployed in the city alone. Another reason Detroit is important on the show is because the city was one of the first to go bankrupt, and one of the first to experience the payless paydays."

One of the significant things about the show for Nicoll is that she is one of only two women interviewed for the documentary. The other is the woman who worked as Herbert Hoover's secretary while he was president.

"Up until the time I was interviewed the producer — Eric Neudel — had been talking mostly to men about what it was like to be out of work for so long a period of time. While he was doing those interviews he began to realize that it was the women who were the real heroines of the day — it was the women who were holding the families together," Nicoll said. "No one had told the story of the mother's struggle to feed a family of 10."

"I have always thought of my mother as a heroine for the way she coped with those times. When he (Neudel) used the word heroine, he rang my bell. I started talking like a gushing oil well. Those days were suddenly all so vivid."

Neudel began the interview by saying, "It is 1931. You are 11 years old and living on the east side of Detroit. Tell us what it was like."

Nicoll responded by saying "I was cold and I was hungry."

NICOLL WAS one of eight children. Her mother was a homemaker and her father was a boiler operator employed by the City of Detroit before he was laid off.

"The sons did the boys' chores and the daughters did the girls' chores, all in good role model fashion," Nicoll said. "The sons just weren't aware of what was going on in the kitchen — the anxiety my mother, suffered in wondering where the next meal was going to come from — or how terrified she was of becoming pregnant again," she said.

"I remember my mother's graciousness when my father invited a homeless couple to stay with us, for an uncertain period of time, when there wasn't enough food for our family — which was certainly a common enough practice then."

"I remember a drink she made for us out of condensed milk, warm water and sugar that we were given before we went to bed. We were put to bed early with the hope that we would fall asleep before our stomachs started to complain, but we were twice comforted with that drink, once with the warmth of the drink and again with the love she



Virginia Nicoll (foreground) pays a nostalgic visit to her childhood home at 3448 Pennsylvania on Detroit's east side and meets the current residents, Diane Sullivan and her son Taurus.

served with it.

"I think much of that is the basis for all of my work with OWL," Ni-

coll said. "Homemakers are still not getting credit for their contributions. I am my sister's keeper and we real-

ly have to work harder to make things better for women."

"I saw one family being evicted on my way home from school when I was a kid — the mother and the child crying and the father trying not to cry. And here we are in 1990 with all these homeless, letting the same thing happen again."

NICOLL WAS chosen to be interviewed on the basis of a letter she wrote in response to a news article, placed by the Boston-based production company Blackside, Inc., in its search for those who were living in Detroit during 1931-32.

The documentary was taped in a suite in the Omni Hotel, and was much different from her experiences being interviewed at MetroVision, which were always in behalf of OWL.

There was a crew of six when I walked into the room with strangers and strange equipment all over the place. They were ready for me and they were all so professional it wasn't long before I was comfortable and the whole thing went along very smoothly," she said.

One of the stories Nicoll told in

her very articulate way had to do with selling bread and cinnamon rolls her mother baked every morning.

"We didn't get to eat the baked goods. That was for the customers. The bread we ate we got from standing in the bread line in front of the Cadillac Boulevard Presbyterian Church."

"For some reason that chore fell to me and a brother and it was a miserable chore. I took our wagon down the alley on the way to the church because I didn't want the neighbors to see us getting the hand-outs. I hated it," she said.

But all the while that was happening Nicoll was coming to the realization that the way out of poverty was via education.

She enrolled in Wayne State University. But just short of graduation she married Ron Nicoll, a member of the armed forces, and traveled with him as he was stationed in different parts of the country during World War II. Much later in life she graduated from Oakland University.

The couple now make their home in Farmington.

The Second Ebenezer Baptist Church was known as Cadillac Boulevard Presbyterian Church in the 1930's. It was the neighborhood spot for the residents to form long bread lines.



SHARON LEWIS/Staff photographer

Fantasia

State designers dazzle guests at lung association benefit

A black clad mannequin with jewelry creations pinned everywhere opened "Fantasia," a Leah Marks production of made in Michigan fashions for the American Lung Association of Eastern Michigan (ALAESM).

Mylar balloons, others in bright primary colors and lots of glittering gold and silver set the scene for dancing models in avant garde designs at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

It was the second fashion event for the lung association which sponsors 35 free services for people stricken with life threatening lung diseases such as tuberculosis, asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema.

The Lung Association has sent Christmas seals to area homes for 83 years in an effort to fund its many services and involve the community in the crusade against lung ailments.

PRECEDING DINNER and show, about 50 vendors offered wares to patrons who took advantage of the opportunity for some holiday shopping. Michigan designers including

Special occasion gowns were shown long and short with touches of lace, velvet, feathers, furs, beads, and sequins in abundance.

James Cape, Canteen Girls, Inc., Christine Johnson Knitwear, Katherine Peterson, Barbara Rubright, Marcella and Temu presented their original creations.

"Fantasia," a show to take your breath away, included leather, knits, cords, and fur for men. Kosis of Southfield featured long and short coats, as well as the holiday suit to wear for special occasions. A leader in offering imports and quality mens wear, Kosis prides itself on dressing many sports personalities in the area.

Furs by Roberts of Birmingham came in many lengths, many colors,

abstract patterns, capes, and a collection of long-haired furs. Jewelry originals by Matthew T. Hoffman and resort wear, cocktails clothes and more by Bogadim of West Bloomfield were modeled.

SPECIAL OCCASION gowns were shown long and short with touches of lace, velvet, feathers, furs, beads, and sequins in abundance. A white and hot pink cocktail dress was paved with sequins, every inch, by designer James Cape.

The audience of about 300 applauded the traditional bride in gown and veil that climaxed "Fantasia."



Covering up for winter, pants in fabric and leather styles, unisex of course, focused on the practical aspects of fashion. Michigan design-

ers showed a range from resort wear to evening wear dazzle in the show.

JOHN ZOLYNSKY/Staff photographer