

This interview with Florence Pierce took place at her residence, 1614 Pine St., Michigan City on January 20, 1978. Interviewer is Laurie Radke.

LR: Today we're going to talk about clothing styles?

FP: Our styles are the same as they are today. They'd cut it here and they had four or five pleats here.

LR: You mean they'd cut it and the pleats started from the middle of the thigh?

FP: Yes and then they had pleats in the front and ruffles all the way around.

LR: Is this the kind of clothes when you were growing up?

FP: Yes and mother and kids all wore the same kind of styles.

LR: What kind of material was it made of?

FP: Well they couldn't much afford more than calico, cause we got it three cents a yard.

LR: Were they bright colors?

FP: Yes, big roses and stripes and checkers - any color - animals, just like today. And that's over 80 years ago. They're all coming back in style again. How many people living 80 years ago would know the styles today? They wore biscuits on their ears - they rolled their hair like that around over their ears.

LR: Were these dresses everyday dresses?

FP: Sunday and all, we didn't have any everyday dresses - we only had three. The mothers would buy a bolt of good and the whole family got clothes out of the same piece.

LR: What kind of clothing did the littlest kids wear?

FP: You mean the babies?

LR: The babies and the two and three year olds.

FP: They all had the same kind. When they made the baby's dresses they had that much longer than the baby and they pulled it up like that.

LR: Three feet longer than the baby?

FP: Yessss, we also wondered why they put so much goods in it.

LR: Did you ever figure it out?

FP: No. I only weighed a pound and a half and they had to carry me around on a pillow and imagine putting a baby dress on me that was that much too long.

LR: What kind of clothes did the men wear?

FP: Overalls like they're wearing today. It seems like those days the wives made their mens clothes and the men wore a vest and buttoned it down and wore overalls like they're wearing today. The mens styles haven't changed and their dress suits had tails on them that long.

LR: Two feet long?

FP: Why sure, it come down to their knees. They were long like preachers wear today. That was their Sunday clothes.

LR: Do you remember what kind of material?

FP: What they wore in those days-like a serge.

LR: What about hats?

FP: Yes, they wore fedoras, caps and stocking caps like they do today.

LR: What's a fedora?

FP: It's a hard hat - would you like to see one? When we went out special on Saturday nights, he (husband) he had one of these high hats - top hats.

LR: What about women's hats?

FP: Some of them went sideways with the brim down over the face and these floppy hats like they use at a wedding today, they was everyday hats then. We had flower gardens hats were all full of flowers and mine was made out of silk crepe and it was all gathered around with all kinds of cherries and flowers and some had three or four plumes. Ostrich plumes went clear down your leg - the more expensive. The others was just a cheap hat.

LR: What happened if you got caught in the rain with that?

FP: They dried out just like it would on a chicken. Course the poor people had chicken feathers on their hats. (Graphic description of layered skirts)

LR: Was this a fancy dress?

FP: Yes, if your mothers could afford to make them, you had ruffles.

LR: Didn't they have a sewing machine?

FP: Yea (makes sound of machine)

LR: What kind of underwear did you have?

FP: (chuckle) I told ya'.

LR: I mean when you were grown.

FP: We all had the same thing, they were all made out of flour sacks and sugar sacks. The men's night dresses were slips of plain piece of cloth and they would cut a square - we called them Mother Hubbard's. On our dresses we had patch pockets.

LR: What about corsets?

FP: When the women got them, the husbands had to lace them and they pulled them so tight that their hips stuck out.

LR: Did you ever wear a style like that?

FP: No, they were torture. What'd you want to torture yourself for - just for style. They used to have stays in them like some kind of a steel. In those days they called those skirts or underwear shimmies. The women wore three or four ruffled underskirts under their dresses and it stood out like this.

LR: What else do you remember about clothes?

FP: It's the same as today only in cheaper stuff.

LR: Shoes - everyone had such tiny feet.

FP: Oh no, some of the men wore 12 to 14 inch size.

LR: What about this shoe you showed me?

FP: That was my mother's.

LR: Everyone wore high shoes?

FP: Yes, like you're wearing today we had.

LR: You were talking about copper-toed shoes.

FP: All of our shoes had copper around the toes cause we had cobblestones to walk on. Otherwise you'd kick a pair of shoes out in a short time.

LR: How long would a pair of shoes last?

FP,: Sometimes a year.

LR: Was there someone in town that repaired shoes?

FP: Bigger brothers or whoever it was had to put new soles on. Everybody in their own family did their own work. The boys had to learn his fathers trade. You had to learn to sew, to build. Every one of the kids done something. They didn't get to play like they do today - baseball and all that. That was a leisure on Sunday morning, in an open field.

LR: Hair styles.

FP: Like you're wearing yours now we wore then when I was a little girl. We called it bobbed hair.

LR: All the little girls had short hair?

FP: All the girls had their hair cut because a mother couldn't bother to comb four or five girls hair before they towed them off to school.

LR: What age were you when you decided to let your hair grow?

FP: When I got to be about fourteen.

LR: What kind of styles did you wear then?

FP: Pig tails.

LR: When did you start putting your hair up?

FP: After I got married - then you would have to wear your hair up so that the boys know you was married. So they didn't have roaming eyes. The styles are no different than today only they wasn't so many.

LR: You mean so many styles? FN So many children. The little schoolhouse where we went we had about 75 kids in there in that community. We had chart class in the first grade to the third grade. When you went to third grade then you had to go down to a another school. We only had a school out at Roeske Mill out Michigan Street where the mill pond is where my grandpa had a mill and he ground flour and after he died Roeske took it over. Before it was called McIntyre's Mill and then it went into the Roeske Mill. The water run these paddles around to run these rollers inside. I can't tell you much about it cause we wasn't allowed in there. Kids might stick their fingers in these rollers. FN So many children. The little schoolhouse where we went we had about 75 kids in there in that community. We had chart class in the first grade to the third grade. When you went to third grade then you had to go down to a another school. We only had a school out at Roeske Mill out Michigan Street where the mill pond is where my grandpa had a mill and he ground flour and after he died Roeske took it over. Before it was called McIntyre's Mill and then it went into the Roeske Mill. The water run these paddles around to run these

rollers inside. I can't tell you much about it cause we wasn't allowed in there. Kids might stick their fingers in these rollers.

LR: Stories about hair styles called horse tails.

FP: Tie it up on the top of your head and it hung down.

LR: Like a long pony tail?

FP: Yeah, according to how long your hair was (graphic description) and you took three yard of ribbon and made great big bows that stuck way out on each side.

LR: How old were you when you wore your hair like this?

FP: About twelve, fourteen. That was schoolgirl style.

LR: Did you wear your hair like that in high school too?

FP: Oh yes, and after you got to be a young lady, sixteen, why then your style changed to a young lady dressing her hair up.

LR: How did a young lady dress her hair?

FP: (graphic description) Like the girls is wearing theirs today.

LR: You mean it was just a series of rolls - did that style have a name? You were telling me about something called a doughnut?

LR: You mean you'd take your hair and make a circle like and run the ends through and it would stand straight up and that was a young lady's style?

FP: Yes and then you'd have rolls you'd roll it one on each side and pin it. You had rolls in the back if you had enough hair to make them.

LR: What about the style called the "doorknobs?"

FP: You had knobs on the back of your head. You made it round and put a rubber band and it would hold it. Maybe you could have three, maybe you had two according to how much hair you had.

LR: Did they ever use anything to make their hair puff out?

FP: Yes, you combed into your head and that ruffed it up.

LR: Did they ever use rags - rats - inside their hair?

FP: I don't know what you would call it, it was like a fiber but if you couldn't afford that then you took your brother's socks and rolled your hair around like that.

LR: How long would it take you to roll your hair up in these styles?

FP: It was just according to how long you had to do it in.

LR: Did you like wearing your hair up like that?

FP: It made no difference, you had to go with the styles. In those days boys wore beards and moustaches and all like they are today. My brother only had two little hairs here and two there - he didn't have no beard. Even today he hasn't got much of a beard - he's got no hair.

LR: He doesn't have to worry about shaving.

FP: You have to go through the motions, pretend you have sumpin'.

LR: Did women ever go to anything like beauty parlors?

FP: No, we didn't have beauty parlors but we had barber shops.

LR: Did women go to these barber shops?

FP: Yeah, men cut your hair, there wasn't such a thing as women in a barber shop, it was all men that done that work. After the women got to cutting their hair, that throwed the men out of their barber shop.

LR: How often did you wash your hair?

FP: Once a week on a Saturday.

LR: What kind of soap did you use?

FP: Ivory or castile, they was the purest soaps they was at the time. They used the same things to wash babies. When they butchered they'd take all the fat and put it in a barrel with lye and that made soft soap and that's what they used to wash with.

LR: Must have been strong soap.

FP: Didn't seem to hurt us - you had to be very saving with it cause you didn't have much.

LR: Nowadays women shave their legs all the time

FP: They didn't have to then - we didn't have hair on our legs. I remember our professor (friend sorta (?)) that when that style come out he said the girls'd be hairy like animals.

LR: But you didn't have to worry about shaving?

FP: None of the girls did. He said once you start shaving would cause more hair to grow. You take a man that shaves, each time he shaves it gets heavier. And we didn't dare wear no lipstick or rouge or nothin'. That didn't start till after World War I that they started to beautify themselves. Boys, those days, went to girls that had the common complexion they didn't want these fancy ones.

LR: What was the common complexion?

FP: You didn't use powder and cold creams, just soap and water. But you used smelling salts in it. Salts with perfume in it.

LR: Did you use perfumes otherwise?

FP: No, people couldn't afford it. Mind you, men was only getting a dollar a day. Now what can you buy raising a family on a dollar a day?

LR: Did you want things like that though?

FP: Sure we did. Did you ever see a kid that didn't?

LR: In the wintertime you were talking about leggings.

FP: Oh yes, our winter suits was made out of heavy goods. Those mother bought, and it had a strap that you pulled up here and it had a heavy coat going over it. When you started school, 5 or 6 years old, one handed down to the next one down. When it got to the last one they was pretty well worn out. My grandpa used to knit mine. I had red ones and green ones - that was my color. (LR: Like your bed hair, huh?) The coat slipped over like a sweater. We wore the leggings outside - we pushed all of our dresses inside of our pants. Like these jumper suits they put on little babies - something on that order - only heavy.

LR: How old were you when you stopped wearing those?

FP: When we got too old. Would you wear 'em now? Well, that's what us kids said.

LR: Did you wear 'em when you were thirteen or fourteen?

FP: No, then we got coats.

LR: How old were you when you got your first coat?

FP: I don't know how old I was. I guess it was handed down from some of my aunts.

LR: Didn't your legs get cold in the wintertime?

FP: No, we had these heavy pants.

LR: I mean after you stopped wearing the leggings, after you were older.

FP: Then they knit heavy wool socks like they're using today. They used #4 or 5 strength to knit it and we'd put 'em on first and put our socks over 'em. You see when we was kids we had to walk three miles to school in the stormy weather like we had. We had to start out at seven o'clock to get to school at nine.

LR: Did you have snowball fights?

FP: Oh yeah, sure. Then we'd hippity-hop the rest of the way to school. When we'd hear that bell ring, we knew we only had 15 minutes to make the rest of that run.

LR: Were you late very often?

FP: No, if I did I'd have to stay an hour after school.

LR: What would you have to do if you had to stay after school?

FP: Work problems. The punishment they'd give you, you'd have to set in the same seat with a boy in the front row.

LR: You didn't like doing that?

FP: Would you?

LR: I don't know. Depends on who it is, I guess.

FP: Well, that's it. And they'd hee hee hee hee. Would ja like that? And after school they'd tease you about sitting with Billy or Johnny. Boys had to sit with the girls if he done sumpin' wrong.

LR: You mean the classroom was divided?

FP: Yes.

LR: How was it divided?

FP: AS I told you we didn't only have about fifteen in our class. Now you take 15 in a row, we only had two rows. One row was boys and one was the girls. And they'd stick our hair in the inkwell.. the boys would.

LR: How would you get the ink out of your hair?

FP: My mother washed it with milk.

LR: What other kinds of things would the boys do to you?

FP: Well, if he done somethin' to you, you'd catch him after school and kick him. And that was a fight then.

LR: You'd fight the boy then?

FP: Sure we would. There's always some guys in the school that's a little bit bolder than the rest. He got a kick out of it and he'd chase us till we'd start cryin' - then he'd let us go.

LR: When did the boys and girls stop picking on each other?

FP: They never did.

LR: How old were you when you had your first boy friend?

FP: My mother wouldn't let me go with him - my husband was the only real boy friend that come to the house. Course the other ones played with my brother. When it got 9:00, mother'd come out and say "Nine o'clock, now you boys better go home. Time for you boys to go home.

LR: Was there a lot of teasing among the girls about boys?

FP: No.

LR: Everybody didn't keep falling in and out of love?

FP: No, we didn't have sense enough, I guess. I can't explain to you. It was like a distance between us. The boys played by themselves and the girls played by themselves. There wasn't much together.

LR: How about when you were in 8th grade or in high school?

FP: It was the same, we didn't.

LR: There was this distance until you got married?

FP: Yes, that's right. The girls didn't run around with the boys like they do today.

LR: Did the girls like that?

FP: It didn't make no difference whether they liked it or not they had to go by rules. When your mother told you anything you done it. And the boys when they done something in school, the teacher would take a dunce cap and stand him in the corner.

LR: Would they stand girls in the corner?

FP: Yes, sure they did.

LR: Was there paddling from that teacher?

FP: Not me, some of 'em did. She'd come down with a ruler and if you shot paper wads, whoever done it she'd crack you over the fingers. You didn't get the second crack. Some boys used to be just bolder than others. Smarties. Smart aleck. You didn't find that in the poor boys. It was the fathers and mothers that was a little bit well to do and they thought they was supreme over the rest of us. It's the same today. How often do you find any poor girl or poor boy coming into possession of a prize (?) - someone who could afford to send their kids to college and all that. Show me one time they sent a poor kid that didn't have a shirt to put on.

LR: Did it bother you that much that you didn't have much money when you were growing up?

FP: We were satisfied with what we had. When you went to church Sunday and brushed against some of them rich people, they'd pull their dress like this or they'd move from the pew you was in.

LR: Was there any agency in town where poor people could get help?

FP: No. You lived on what you had. If you lived on potatoes and roasted gravy, you lived on potatoes and roasted gravy. You didn't buy most expensive stuff - you went according to your finances. Just like it is today. You know the poor people today is living better than the rich ones. (LR _ : Really? How?) All right. If you had 5 or 6 kids and they're all under 16, you'd get \$46 a month for each one of them. Then the mother gets \$140 and the father gets that. You figure it up. Does your mother get that much to support you kids? They get these here food stamps and they get their rent paid and they live in these houses they pay ten or eleven to live in - their gas and electric is all paid for.

LR: There's psychological and emotional problems with being "looked down on"

FP: They did then too.

LR: But what I mean it didn't seem to affect you.

FP: But your mother used brains and taught you according to your standards. We never expected to be acknowledged by the others that had plenty. We was as good as they was but you was satisfied with what God gave you. If He gave you a piece of bread, you acknowledged it.

LR: Your mother was very religious?

FP: Yes. She brought all of us kids up that way. Every morning before we ate we had prayer at the breakfast table. That's so the Lord bless us and before we went to bed at night we said our evening prayers.

LR: You said them all together?

FP: yes, we all knelt down in the living room.

LR: Other church attendance?

FP: It was like a missionary and then afterwards they got a minister here.

LR: Missionary - are you telling about circuit riders?

FP: They had different ones.

LR: Would he just come into town and then leave again?

FP: Yes, we had camp meetings. They'd put up a tent wherever they could. The kids sat on the ground and the mothers and fathers took the chairs, We'd listen and sing songs.

LR: Did you have these tent meetings often?

FP: In the summer, yes. The first church I remember is where the school is now. That was Polsonville. They had like a dance hall, theater, everything.

LR: Right up here where Elston High School is?

FP: Yes. Polsonville. It was just a common house and on the second floor they had talent shows and things like that.

LR: You'd go into Polsonville for church?

FP: That was the only one around here.

LR: Do you remember any of the circuit riders? That used to come on horseback?

FP: You never knew 'em. That's how they started, at Polsonville and then they put one over here at Cloud Street and afterwards built one at 7th and Franklin - the Methodist Church and that was there for a hundred years, I guess, and then they moved to the other corner.

LR: But the area was mostly Methodist when you were growing up?

FP: Yes, I guess it was. I don't know. Anyway we listened to whatever he told us.

LR: Did you have prayers and things in school?

FP: Yes, every morning. The teacher would lead the prayer "Our Father in Heaven" and when school would close, she'd give us a good night and we'd have to say good night to everyone, bow like that, you just turned and bowed.

LR: Did you enjoy doing that?

FP: Sure, we didn't know any better - we did what was told.

LR: Was there Sunday School?

FP: Oh yes, that, Mama sent us down on Cloud Street because that was only a coupla blocks away from where we lived.

LR: Were there a lot of church activities, pot luck dinners and that kind of stuff?

FP: I don't remember much, only what transpired in our own family. We didn't dare to go to the other neighbors and bother, Stay in your own yard.

LR: But your neighbors would help you if you got in trouble.

FP: Yes, the mothers would.

LR: Did the churches have pageants - Christmas pageants?

FP: Yes, they gave you something you could use. No toys. Maybe they'd make you a dress. There was only 15 presents they had to make. They'd get together and sew.

LR: They had sewing bees?

FP: On a Wednesday, women would go to someone's house and sew.

LR: Did you ever go to a sewing bee?

FP: They didn't want us kids there. What would we do - fight? That's probably what we would do. Some boys and girls was dominating over the others.

LR: What about holidays at home?

FP: When they had Christmas exercises, our minister Mr. Brown, he'd climb up a ladder and he took me up there (tree) and he'd tie me in the chair on the top and I had wings made out of cloth, all in white muslin.

LR: He'd tie you in a chair and the chair was tied to the top of the tree?

FP: So I wouldn't fall out. Then there was 2 boys and then there was a girl.

LR: How long were you tied up there?

FP: Till the program was over, according to how long it took.

LR: What kind of stuff went on in the program?

FP: Speeches and songs. Kids recited verses. At the last the four of us had to sing "Christmas Bells". When we sang that they had cow bells and went dingaling, dingaling.

LR: Did you enjoy being a Christmas angel?

FP: That's the only time I ever will be.

LR: How did you celebrate Christmas at home?

FP: Just like you and I here now. My mother would make popcorn balls and taffy candy. She'd stretch it and let it get hard and then she'd crack it. We didn't get much boughten stuff, everything was homemade. Lot of our candy at church was made out of sorghum. My uncle had a sorghum mill out here where the highway is - where the theater is.

LR: You mean 212 Outdoor?

FP: Yeah, they had a sugar mill out there and a cider press.

LR: What about other holidays - Thanksgiving, Easter?

FP: My mother'd roast a chicken cause we had plenty of chickens, we raised 'em.

LR: Did you have birthday celebrations?

FP: No, maybe mother would bake cookies or a cake, something like that, wasn't nothing great.

LR: When was it that Christmas began to be celebrated so much?

FP: I guess it was by the wealthy all the time, but the poorer classes had to take what they could get.

LR: Were there many minorities, like black families, living in the area?

FP: No, the first black family was McBride's coachman. He was the head of the car factory at that time. His coachman was Monroeny. That must have been about 1900. And the first white baby was born here. It was Gash Gordon G*A*S*H, I don't know how you spell it. His great granddaughter, she's blind, and she's got the papers of him being the first white baby born in Michigan City. The first one in the starting of Michigan City. When they started the car factory they went down South and brought up the Negroes by carloads.

LR: Did that bother the people already living in Michigan City?

FP: If your husband had a job and he was pushed out and that there colored guy put in for less money.. That was the way it was.

LR: They were paying the blacks less money?

FP: Yes.

LR: How old were you when the car company brought these blacks in?

FP: I was married. That was after World War I. Down there on Fourth Street where the 'Patch' is now. It was all like you and I lived down there cause that was the main part of the city. Our city only went as far as Sixth Street.

LR: Then you really must have been way out in the country.

FP: Yeah, that was listed as farm country.