

Shawn Micallef

1-844-432-7529 [Location #1, Story #6]

Transcript

Location: 200 Harborview Plaza

So we're here on the riverwalk by the Mississippi River on this nice sidewalk. And within two hours of arriving in La Crosse, we went to our hotel at the Radisson, and then went for a walk to find something to drink and something to eat and we went to the Bodega because it was serving food late. And then after we ate and had a drink we went for a walk to look at the town we just arrived in. And we wandered down to the river because I wanted to see the Mississippi.

And we found the entrance to the Riverwalk and started walking North, upriver, and we looked South towards the bridge and there was a light. A huge spotlight. The brightest light imaginable. It looked like it shone a kilometer up the river and at first I thought it was a police boat because I saw the sign on the pole that said, "THIS PARK CLOSSES AT 11:00PM," and it was 11:30pm at this point and I got a little paranoid because, again, it was my first time in La Crosse and I didn't know how strict they were about parks closing and it seemed evident that after a bit that it wasn't a police boat, and instead it was a really slow moving barge. But no, it was four barges lashed end to end and there was a tugboat pushing them upriver and the tugboat had two extremely bright spotlights shining forward and one of the lights, occasionally, would track the shore, kind of trace the shore. Maybe the pilot was navigating to see how far away they were from the shore, but as my partner Robert and I were standing on the edge of the shore, we were like, "That spotlight is going to hit us really soon!" and it went up and down and it passed by us and it came right back to us, almost like we were on stage and it was a spotlight because it saw us. And it blinked, and blink blinked, blink. It was like Close Encounters of the third kind, right? With the big spaceship blinking at us so we waved and it blinked again! So it was like it was saying, "Hi!"

and it was like, “Oh, this is friendly!” and so this thing that was a moment of paranoia became this moment of joy when this tugboat in the Mississippi River was blinking hello to us.

So we started walking North back to the Radisson Hotel and the spotlight followed us, as if we were like a dancer on stage and the spotlight was tracking us. And at times I would run forward out of the spotlight and the spotlight would chase me and find me and then I would run backwards and it would chase me and find me and Robert would do the same thing. It went back and forth to us. And then when we got to the sidewalk up to the Radisson, maybe 500 meters up, and we were turning away and we stood there and we waved goodbye to the boat and it blink, blink, blinked goodbye a bunch of times. And then it went up the river silently, and we walked silently to the hotel and our smiles were, I think, the biggest smiles we ever had because I have never experienced this moment of unexpected joy in a new place so instantly.

And so that is my first experience of La Crosse and the Mississippi River and it was magic. My name is Shawn Micallef.

Sarah Jane Fellows

1-844-432-7529 [Location #1, Story #7]

Transcript

Location: 109 Main St.

SARAH JANE FELLOWS: I would say my grandfather was very well off, as far as—he worked like a dog. He bought his business from a man—a Mr. Spiers—when he was seventeen.

HOWARD FREDERICKS: So grandfather Burns was a self-made man?

FELLOWS: I would say so.

FREDERICKS: And what did he look like?

FELLOWS: He was about 6-foot-4'. He was a very nice looking man. He always had these big cigars in his mouth that he got from Mr. Pamperin. My grandfather was at 309, but he owned 109 Main back and then over to Front Street. See, that's where he built his banana crates, and he had the most fascinating rooms downstairs. He had about six ripening rooms for bananas with gas jets going. Also had black widows, snakes. Ugh!

FREDERICKS: And you were there? You—you visited this?

FELLOWS: Oh yes, I was there! Of course I was there!

FREDERICKS: Now, describe it, because that has all disappeared now.

FELLOWS: Oh yes, that's all gone. But, as I started to tell you, that building was so fascinating—it was about four stories. I'm talking about the warehouse. And my grandfather's colors, naturally, being an Irishman, were green and white. Every time you saw a bunch of bananas hanging in a man's store window with green and white, that was John C.

FREDERICKS: What do you mean, green and white?

FELLOWS: Green and white rope to hang them up on a hook! And he made his own banana crates, which were green and white. And, oh, the bunches would come in, they would be between a hundred and a hundred and fifty pounds, sometimes.

FREDERICKS: About four feet high?

FELLOWS: Oh goodness, yes. The stronger guys would hold them, like this, and the other guys would be at the back holding it because they had to come out of the car on a ramp, and then roll them down, and then they went down a huge old rickety old elevator to the ripening room.

FREDERICKS: The ripening room was...

FELLOWS: There were about six of them down in the basement with little gas jets. And one room would be—you know, if you wanted ripe ones you got the ripe ones—if you wanted them just turning, then they went into No. 3., see.

FREDERICKS: And each room had a different temperature?

FELLOWS: Oh yeah, it depended on the degree of ripeness these people wanted their bananas. And then there also were rooms underneath the Main streets where they kept their potatoes and onions, and then there were rooms for the oranges and apples, and there were bags and bags of rutabagas, all stacked against the wall, you know, all in rows—

FREDERICKS: You talked about wandering down through those rooms and seeing spiders?

FELLOWS: Oh—yes!! Well, they were shipped right straight from the Honduras, you know. And there were black widows and Uncle Chris was delighted when he could scare the holy hell out of me. And one time daddy went down there and there was one of these tiny, very poisonous snakes that apparently like bananas—you know, like the warmth of the—you know, now you only see bananas broken. I'm talking about bunches of bananas that would as high—as I said, would go as high as a hundred and fifty pounds.

FELLOWS: It was a very interesting occupation and I'm sorry my brothers didn't do it instead of me, but then I had fun. I enjoyed it. I love people.

This interview comes from the UWL Oral History Program at Special Collections Murphy Library.

Mai Chao - Poet

1-844-432-7529 [Location #1, Story #9]

Transcript

Location: Riverside Park (by Riverside Eagle)

Hello, this is Mai Chao reading “Two Rivers,” the honorable mention poem in the 2017 Hear, Here Poetry Contest. This poem was inspired by true events that contrasted my experience in America with my mother’s experience from Laos. I am forever grateful to my brave mother, Chia Vue, who brought her family to Wisconsin after escaping the Vietnam War.

Two Rivers

Mississippi, oh, Mississippi,

timeless beauty,

you have carried countless stories

without judgement.

Your serene wisdom

inspires curiosity in young and old.

Today,

I sit before you as he asks for my hand,

how can I not accept such a kind-hearted man to be mine?

When his West melts into my East,

we become stronger as one.

Mississippi, oh, Mississippi,

you have done it again,

witnessing a new history

with prudence.

Watching your heartbeat,

in front of

“A Simpler Time”

overlooking the Julia Belle Swain,

I think of Mother.

Back then,

she once sat before the Mekong,

10,000 miles away.

Death asking for her hand,

how can she accept to go at such a young age?

When escaping certain death becomes a second chance,

she grows stronger with others.

Mekong, oh, Mekong,

you have done it again,

witnessing a new history

With prudence.

Watching your heartbeat,

in front of

fear

overlooking “The Land of Smiles.”

She thinks of her future.

Two daughters

before

two rivers.

Each with hopes and dreams,

like the moon and the sun

intertwining as one.

Mekong, oh, Mekong.

Mississippi, oh, Mississippi.

Two daughters

standing before the shores of the past,

the crossroads of the present

by two rivers.