

Interview with Gayle Heldt
Interviewer: Jenny Herrell and Kelly Ungetheim
October 22, 1989

Q: What was your living experience like at the Old Jail?

A: I was 11 or 12 in the sixth grade when I first saw it; it was very dark, very scary. When you are that age that can happen and I just cried, I could not believe it. I remember hugging my father and saying "I do not want to live here. " He and mother said they were going to have a decorator come in. It had deteriorated terribly; not the structure, but the living quarters - it needed paint, it needed light colors. I guess he was elected in November and we moved in late January because he would have taken office January 1st of 1962 and between the time, I saw it in November to that time all the walls had been painted, all new carpeting was Laid. They let me pick my bedroom stuff, which always to a young lady is an incentive. Then it was just a different place; then it wasn't as bad because the structure is so old and it very scary when you are that age, so at first it was dark and dingy, but it is amazing what a coat of paint can do to an old structure Like that and Light carpet and light furniture.

Q: Did you have any other brothers or sisters?

A: I have an older brother, Tom, who is three years older. That was his freshman year and he was already at Central, so he did not have to change schools. I went from Hebron to Wheeler, which was the downtown school. Tom was already at Central I had more of a, well, it wasn't trauma, it was more of things to face than he did.

Q: So, it didn't bother you that much changing schools?

A: No, it really didn't. But I think you are not as, gosh the sixth grade is not like your eight-grade year or your senior year. I still saw my friends and made sure for that first year of adjustments that I had new friends and I had old friends. My folks were real good about that.

Q: Did you explore the jail a lot?

A: Not at first. It was amazing when we first moved in here because to get a coke there was a key about five inches and it was big, like you see in movies, it was a big key, and between the Sheriff's Residence and the Jail, it is one building. There is a huge outside door and you lift that open, you didn't have to unlock it, you just pulled it back; it was very heavy. There was a great, not bar door, but a great door and you would put in the key and turn really hard. To get soft drinks or candy, they had like a commissary back there that they sold to the prisoners if they had money, and I would go back to the Double Cola machine and pick up a Double Cola and open it and write my name down, and then my father would pay it; that is how we got our cokes. My mother did not have to keep cokes in the house. I just want back there. The area I am speaking of is Like a holding cell area where there is not prisoners, per say, at certain times. If they bring them in from court, there would be prisoners there; they would be totally locked up. That was not a fear and that never bothered me because I knew that was there. I was kind of a gutsy little thing and that did not bother me. I was not scared. I was just nervous when we first got there, but it was funny when friends would come over and they would want a coke and I would go back there, and their eyes would get as big as half dollars and they would stand at the door and would not go back there.

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Q: Did you have any contact with the prisoners at all?

A: I could see them, and they could see me. Did you talk to them? Not much, but when I got older, I knew the caliber of people that are in jail are not people you talk to. From living there, from the day I got there on, it was like having forty uncles, because all the deputies would say "Oh, there's Gail. " That part was neat; I knew all them and they knew me. It was fun. Later on, one of the funny things down there is when I was old enough to date; like my sophomore and junior years in high school. If I forgot my key I had to go around through the jail, ring the bell, and it was a little embarrassing with a date, and they would let us in the jail — then they would have to get their big key that fit the door and let us in the house. There were different things about living down there. I could never really be locked out. If you guys forget your keys, you have to find a neighbor; it just had the jailer let me in.

Q: Did you explore the Courthouse a lot also?

A: A lot, especially on Sundays. When no one was there I would walk through. It is a neat old building - it really is. I used to go and watch trials a lot, especially when I was younger, in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Millie Morgan, who was a probation officer for years, and is still active in some capacity down there, I don't know what. Ollie Reeves was judge of the Circuit Court and I would set with her and of all cases, only one time did Judge Reeves ask me to leave and that was a rape case. He turned to Millie Morgan before it started and said "I don't think that she should stay. " Now it would not have mattered because of my background at a young age that I knew about the horrible things that happened. But he would not let me sit in on that case.

Q: Do you think that better prepared you for living in the real world and seeing all of that early?

A: It probably did. Some people sometimes sympathize with law breakers; but I did not, but I come from a law background. They have their rights, but once they are in there, they have supposedly have met their peers or a judge and are guilty.

Q: Did you hear any famous cases in the Courthouse?

A: Things like that are not real vivid; I just can't remember. There were big ones where reporters were running around and taking pictures and the residence living room faced the street on Fourth Street, and when something big was happening we would peek out the blinds to see what was going on if it was a time when we really should not be out there.

Q: Were there ever any famous people ever there?

A: I can't remember, but I faced criminals living right in the same building I was in from the sixth grade on. It became every day, like you guys go to school and have a pep assembly, that was my everyday life. It is like life in general and it was taken for granted.

Q: Were you allowed to help any with the duties in the Jail or the Courthouse?

A: No, all of that is strictly for paid people. State law did say, I believe it has been amended that if a residence exists and the County provides it, you must live there, so when dad was elected, we could not live where we lived. Now they changed it, of course, when they built the new jail, but it used to be that if a residence was provided you had to live there. Years ago, the Sheriff's wife many times did the cooking

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and was the matron for the prisoners. My mother, occasionally, if they would get someone in and they could not get a matron, she would have to go in and search the woman and do all the things you do to prisoners — the disinfectant and everything — and she hated it. She had no choice if they could not find someone else. If it was a woman, they had to have a woman. In the dining part of the residence there is a door over on the wall and that is a dumbwaiter. If you remember, the kitchen is very small because they did used to cook for themselves (the Sheriffs). The dumbwaiter would be pulled and when the food was prepared, it would come up to the residence and they would eat exactly what the prisoners ate. We did not; mother always cooked. We could go down there, and did, for lunches sometimes. The food was excellent. Like Mondays they always had beans and cornbread and we would go down there for lunch and would eat in the Jail kitchen. Again, the only "prisoners" that we were near at the point would be trustees, and a trustee is a person who has normally been picked up for drunkenness and they feel like he can do work around the Jail. I think they are called work release now. Our painters were trustees. The main cook is always hired, and at times there is an assistant paid, but the other guys who helped cook were trustees ; they were prisoners, but they were trusted. They were not made to do it; they always asked to do it.

Q: What other activities were at the Courthouse, like celebrations or did people have offices there?

A: Yes, it was the County office building like the Civic Center is now; all of the County offices were there, and the City Building was downtown on Third Street. All the Judge's Chambers and all the Courtrooms were there. There were Superior, Probate, and Circuit Courts. The Circuit Court was for mainly the criminal cases. The Probate was for the family matters. The Superior Court was for civil cases, such as to sue someone. I think the Superior Courtroom has been redone. It was a normal Courtroom with a jury box and the old wood, and it was beautiful. Dad left office in 1966. When I moved dad sent me the German shepherds, so he did not have to worry about my safety living alone, and when he was out of office they moved out, too. The Old Court Building was always well taken care of, but unfortunately, not in the structural sense. Apparently, to really make it structurally sound, they were going to have to put too much money into it. I think that is what Conrad Baker is trying to do now.

Q: Was there a bell tower and clock at top?

A: There is a clock and I think when we were there it struck; I really can't remember. Do you go up to that are? No, I never went up to the clock area and I think they kind of discouraged it; I 'm not really sure how to get up there. There is a tunnel that leads from the Courthouse to the Jail and that has been cleaned out; it was dark. I'm not scared of things, but I 'm not into dark. What did the kids think at school? I think at first when I transferred to Wheeler since they did not know me and I was the Sheriff's kid; but that did not last long, then I was just a regular kid. When my friends would come home with me or even my friends from Hebron when they would come, they would say "Are we okay?" I would say so, probably safer there than with all the druggies running around.

Q: Was there ever any kind of celebrities such as the President?

A: Besides the Sheriff, my father was also the Vanderburgh County Democratic Chairman for a time and while we were there Lyndon Johnson came in when he was campaigning for Vice-President with John Kennedy; and John Kennedy came in, and that was quite something with all the security things. They

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came to the Courthouse and they spoke, and they had everything roped off, and although the Secret Service is in charge when they came in, we had law enforcement officers from the County is in charge of his territory. The Secret Service men always had something in their lapel. That was exciting. Mrs. Johnson came in also. Hubert Humphrey came in when I was a Press girl for him and that was fun, although he did not win it was still fun. What did you do? Just anything they asked the Press — where their room is or where the paper is. I have a picture with the Late Senator Humphrey signing the back of my hat that I wore. We've got some neat pictures of dad with John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. He was a Delegate to the convention in 1960 when John Kennedy was nominated; so, we've got the book that Kennedy signed, and we've got the little paperweight of the PT109. My brother, about his junior year, when Vice-President Johnson and to-be President Kennedy came in, and he had to get special clearance for he and a friend to go to the tower; to go up to the attic, up winding steps, to watch from there. They had to have the name of the friend and he was allowed to watch from there.

Q: Did you look at the outside of the Courthouse and appreciate the architecture?

A: That was like my front yard. Sunday was kind of a neat day because there were not people around. That was the bad thing; there were always people around and you never feel alone. I would just take the dog and walk, and the dog would play on the grass and walk.

Q: Did that bother you or your family to always have these people around?

A: I don't think so, as we are pretty much of an outgoing group. We had our privacy, but it is different when you live downtown. The fact that dad was in politics when we were there added a lot to it because of the special things you did; I always liked government and history, and it was really exciting.

Q: In school, did teachers ask you for special reports or to inform the class of what was going on?

A: I had some of that in grade school, not as much in high school. When dad was in office, they started the Boat Patrol on the river to help people and he started the canine course with the dogs. My senior year in high school, Paul Thompson was my government teacher and he was always, if a question came up and no one knew the answer and I unfortunately would know it, I got the assignment of going to the Courthouse and finding the answer. I may end up at the Clerk's office or up in the Judge's Chambers saying I've got to know the answer to this question. But I knew them all and they would help me. Mr. Thompson was really interested in the Canine Corps and asked if my father would bring one of the dogs over. So, he brought Extro, he was the one that when I moved out of the house, before dad's term was up because I was at the U of E, went with me. The kids loved it. Dad came in and told them a lot about the Corp and how it started and why he started it and showed an experiment of how good these dogs are. He gave the dog the command to "Find Gail" The kids were scared to death. He found me and started licking my face. There was a trustee, George Campbell, he was there forever, but I think I saw something in the paper that he died. He was huge, probably 6 foot 5 inches. I was home alone and there was a knock on the side door. I go to it and here is George Campbell and he is holding up a dead chicken he just bought at the market and he had been drinking and says "Miss Gail." I stepped to the door and put the hook on just in case. I knew where I lived. He asked if I would cook the bird for him. I told him I was just getting ready to leave and I can't cook it. I told him to try to find himself a lady friend. They were nice guys. What some of these men would do, like in September, would get picked up and be sent

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to the County Farm, because when they went there, they were there for 120 days and, again, they did that because they would be there and have a place to live in the winter and have three meals a day. I was still at home my freshman year until about the winter quarter, when my folks bought a house and fixed it up. In the fall I pledged and what they used to do in a sorority was to come to your house to pledge you. About 50 girls came running down the sidewalk on Fourth Street and they are all singing, and the deputies came about to draw their pistols. They were just there to pledge me. I have very fine memories. When dad was called out, those times were frightening. One night, when I was about a junior or a senior, they spotted someone going into the Farm Bureau Co—op Building, which housed money. He and Jerry Riney, who was his Chief Deputy went out there. One went up one side and one went up the other. We had a radio in the living room, and we could hear all of that. The men dropped their weapons. They found 140 rounds of ammunition and four or five guns; now, that was frightening. The whole time we were listening on the radio. When I first started driving, I drove dad's car and he had a radio and a red light; it was a privately-owned car. I knew all the codes announced. It did not happen that much at night. I don't remember much of the details, but I was really worried about him. He was a Deputy Sheriff also, and then I think mother worried more then.