

A VISIT WITH MABEL

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This is the eighteenth article I have written to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022.

In September Rush County Museum Curator Steve Mahan and I sat down for an interview with Mabel Berkemeier at the Gowdy House Museum. What follows is information based on that interview.

Mabel was born in Rushville on April 3, 1928. Her parents were Robert Freeman Palmer and Florence Huntington Palmer. She was the youngest of five children. Her siblings were Josephine (who was 15 years older), Harold “Pete”, Mary, and Wayne. Mabel’s father died when she was five years old. Her father had been employed by the interurban line that ran to Rushville. Her mother did domestic work and then went to work at International Furniture to support the family.

Not long after her father died Mabel began attending school at Belle Gregg Elementary. She attended grades 1-6 at Belle Gregg and then attended Graham School for grades 7-12. She graduated in 1946, the year after WWII ended. Some of her favorite teachers were Florence Madden, Ernie Privett, and Russell Schermer.



When she was 12, Mabel remembers riding her bicycle past the home of Edith Wilk on 8th Street. She hoped to catch a glimpse of a fellow named Wendell Willkie.

Some of Mabel’s fondest memories are from her years as a yell leader for the Rushville Lions. There were three girl yell leaders, and their uniforms were made by a lady named Mrs. Pickett. The uniform consisted of a black pleated skirt and a long-sleeved red blouse. It cost \$20. The only Rushville insignia was a Lion Pin on the blouse. Kay Wilson was a yell leader with Mabel for three of her four years. Also, two of the boy yell leaders were Jack Barlow and Richard Ruhlman. All yell leaders were elected by the RHS student body.

The yell leaders used megaphones to urge on the fans and the team. Mabel said that every winter she would lose her voice. Vocal super fan Marge Knecht would take the team and yell leaders to Wilhelm’s Café at the end of the season. Coaches of note during those years were Bob Hinshaw and Jim Gridley.

Classes offered at RHS in the 1940’s were Biology, Typing, English, Spanish, Algebra, Home Economics, and P.E. The Girls’ P.E. was held at the Graham Annex Gym. The Boys’ P.E. classes were held six blocks away at Memorial Gym. Girls’ P.E. uniforms were purchased at the Mauzy Department Store downtown. Mabel noted it was fun to go to Mauzy’s because they had an elevator.

In addition to boys' athletics, extra curricular activities at RHS included Band, Orchestra, Hi Y, and Girls' Reserve Club. There were also special convocations. After school hours Mabel played tennis at Memorial Park across from her family's home. There were no IHSAA Girls Sports; no Title 9.

A night at the movies was common. Rushville had two movie theaters, the Princess and the Castle. The Castle specialized in cowboy films and on Wednesday they would have "Wahoo Night". The Princess featured the big name films. Mabel and her friends saw *Gone With The Wind* at the Princess. They took their own snacks since the movie was so long. Both theaters included the Movietone News so people could keep up on news from WWII.

Since Mabel grew up during the Great Depression and WWII, the value of a dollar was more appreciated. During high school she worked on Saturdays at the Ben Franklin Store (where the 201 Building is now) for 98 cents a day! It seemed that everyone came to town on Saturday. Mabel also worked at the Jay C store. She filled grocery lists while the customers visited on the streets of town. The Jay C was on 2nd Street next to the Diekman Bakery (known for their salt-rising bread).

The conditions during WWII were definitely felt here in Rush County. Many folks did not have a car. There was a short supply of gasoline and automobile tires. Groceries were rationed. Ration stamps needed to be presented to purchase certain commodities. Several local ladies volunteered at Camp Atterbury to sew emblems on military uniforms. Communication with loved ones on the war front was sometimes difficult or even nonexistent. Letters home from the front were censored so troop movements were not revealed. Mabel's brother Wayne was in the Navy, and her brother Pete was an engineer in the Army. The brothers were fortunate to meet up during the war at Guadalcanal.

After she graduated from RHS, Mabel went to work for the Park Furniture Company located at the corner of 10th and Oliver Streets. She worked there for six years as their receptionist, switchboard operator, and secretary. Park Furniture primarily made cherry furniture. During the war the company made caskets. Then after the war they specialized in kneehole desks. When Mabel started working at Park she made 45 cents an hour. Her boss was Clarence Young.

Roy Waggener had been a manager at the Park Furniture Company. After Park closed, Roy's son Bob helped open a small furniture factory and showroom at Homer. What eventually came to be known as The Sampler used many of the designs from Park Furniture. Mabel worked briefly for Bob when Avis Brown was on leave.

Mabel Palmer first met Don Berkemeier in 1942. Don graduated a year before Mabel in 1945. His dad was Louis Berkemeier who worked for Willkie Farms. Mabel remembers going to a Saturday afternoon football game with Don at Morton Memorial. They rode in "the rumble seat". The two were married in 1951. Don went into the military in October of 1951 for two years. He was stationed in Germany during the Korean War. Their first child Dave was born on July 24, 1953.



Mabel stayed home for awhile raising their family and then took a job working for Howard Kennedy in the Assessor's Office. At the bidding of local attorney Jack Clarkson, Mabel ran for Rushville Township Assessor. She held that position from 1970-1994. She then worked with volunteers at Rush Memorial Hospital. By 2002 she was back at the Rush County Courthouse working part time in the Assessor's Office. She retired this year. A strong supporter of the Republican Party (she won six elections), Mabel also worked well across party lines. She was Rushville Township Assessor when Fujitsu Ten came to town under Democrat Mayor Joe Delon.

During all this time Don Berkemeier farmed, sold farm equipment, sold Blue River Feed, operated Arlington Farm Supply, and had his own trucking operation.

In 1975 Mabel and Don helped organize the RCHS Rush County Booster Club. Rushville had a great basketball team in 1974-75. By 1975-76, Coach Larry Angle's Lions were poised for another great season. Also the first IHSAA Girls' Basketball Tournament was on the horizon. Along with Merlin Olsen, Norm Copple, and many others, the Booster Club went on a campaign to sell red Booster Jackets with the RCHS Lion on the front. On one weekend alone Mabel sold over \$13,000 worth of jackets. At one point Mabel dyed her hair red. In the IHSAA Boys' Tournament Rushville went to the final game and lost to Marion. Mabel commented that the 1975-76 season helped bring Rush County closer together after the consolidation woes of the late 1960's.

The Berkemeiers also purchased a motorized camper they called The Rushville Express. The Express went to all the away games. One time 31 people rode in The Express to Connersville. When they came out after the game, some of the Spartan faithful had thoroughly "egged" the vehicle. The Express also served as a hospitality area for football officials. It was parked at the north end of Hinshaw Field and offered coffee, soft drinks, and cookies to the officials at halftime. The Express was sold in the 1980's.

For many years Don Berkemeier and his sons helped man the chain crew for Rushville's home football games. Sadly Don passed away on September 17, 2011.

Mabel and Don had five children. David is retired from Edward Jones and lives in Evansville. At one time Dave was the Mayor of Tipton. Doug lives in Homer and works for Fischer Farms. Gary lives in Rushville and works for Nutrien in Homer, and Greg lives in Shelbyville and drives for a company out of Iowa. Susan has worked the past 21 years for Dr. John Johnson in Batesville. Mabel has 12 grandchildren and 21 great grandchildren.

I asked Mabel what her observations are about Rushville today. Here's what she said: Regarding religion, "Catholics and Protestants get along better." Regarding industry, "we need to do something with the Industrial Park." Regarding the city and county, "They seem to be working together better." Regarding downtown Rushville, "Downtown looks better than it ever looked."

Any closing comment Mabel? Her answer, "I love Rushville."

Mabel was recently presented the prestigious Bob Waggener Award by the RHS/RCHS Alumni.