

Beulah Baker Locher (1881 – 1978)

Beulah Baker Locher was born on January 7, 1881 in Gibson City. She was the daughter of Frank R. and Cordelia Shelton Baker. When she was just a few years old, her family moved to Bloomington to a brick house on West Wood Street near Miller Park. The Bakers then moved to the Franklin Square neighborhood when she was about eight years-old. Her grandfather Hiram Baker built that house for her father. Her father bought the last lot available the east side of Franklin Park, located at 905 N. McLean Street. While living there, the Bakers hired a high-priced Chicago decorating crew for six weeks to redo the house. The house was very ornate and was up-to-date in style. The library was made of cherry wood, the reception room made with quarter-sawed oak woodwork, and the dining room had hand-printed, embossed wallpaper. Later in life, Beulah recalled that she used to roller skate on the third floor in the winter because it was so large. Eventually, the Baker house was sold to the Frank Oberkoetter family, who turned the home into three apartments.

Her father's main source of income was from farmland he owned. He did not manage the land himself but hired farm managers to do it for him. Beulah's father also owned the first car in the neighborhood. Beulah recalled later in her life that her father would not let the women in her immediate family drive because he said "you never knew what the car was going to do in those days." Part of the reason he felt that cars were too unpredictable was because they came in pieces in separate crates and had to be assembled. By the time it was all assembled, he felt it was unfit for women to drive. Beulah also recalled that since her father would not let her drive, she drove an open cart called a "park wagon," pulled by a pony (which they had before her father purchased a car). When Beulah would drive it, her dog usually was sitting with her on the front seat.¹

Beulah attended public schools. First, when her family lived near Miller Park, she attended the Model School at Illinois State Normal University and rode a mule-drawn streetcar to and from school. When her family moved to the Franklin Park neighborhood, she attended Franklin School which was only two blocks from their home on McLean Street. Her father did not approve of her attending public school and would rather her attend private school like the rest of the family had but she convinced him to let her go.

Beulah was good friends with her neighbor Vice-President Adlai Stevenson I, despite the fact that her family was Republican while the Stevensons were Democrats. Beulah's mother and Adlai's wife, Letitia Green Stevenson, sometimes even went "calling" together. In an interview with Beulah, she recounted her friendship with Adlai: "I thought he was so lonesome [when his family was up north]. So I'd run over and sit with him. And then if our maid had made anything especially good for lunch or for dessert, I'd take him over some. And what was it he called me, I don't know, some, his little something, and we got to be chummy, just really chums. I did love him. He was a nice gentleman."² The families of Governor Joseph W. Fifer and Frank Funk were the Bakers' other neighbors.

After graduating from Bloomington High School Beulah attended the University of Michigan but had to leave because of phlebitis which was an inflammation of a vein in

¹ Interview With Beulah Locher by Darlene Clark – March 1976, "Beulah Locher on Franklin Square," McLean County Museum of History Archives, 7-8

² "Beulah Locher on Franklin Square," 8-9

her legs. She contracted this ailment during an operation for appendicitis in Germany. Before college, she and her mother had attempted to take a Grand Tour of Europe but ended up mainly in Germany where Beulah studied piano in Leipzig. Her father had hoped she would obtain rosy cheeks like the German children. Instead, she contracted phlebitis which she would suffer from for the rest of her life. She was hospitalized for a few months after the operation to remove her appendix. Beulah was encouraged by faculty at the University of Michigan to go to school closer to home so she transferred to Illinois Wesleyan University to study music and graduated in 1904. She was also a member of the sorority Kappa Kappa Gamma while at IWU.

On January 17, 1907 Beulah married Cyrus Locher from Putnam County, Ohio and moved to his home state. The two met when he was traveling through Bloomington with an Ohio Wesleyan University choral group. Beulah's parents put him up at their home because they had a spare room. Beulah and Cyrus fell in love and shared a mutual love of music. They never had children which Beulah attributed to a serious illness. However, Beulah really indulged her niece Linda Baker as well as bought clothes for other children. Beulah always wore the finest clothes and her mother took her to Chicago to buy them. Her father gave her a ring when she was ten or eleven years-old that had two diamonds and a sapphire which she wore all of her life.

Cyrus graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University, studied law at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and graduated from the law school of Western Reserve University at Cleveland, Ohio. He was admitted to the bar in 1906 and practiced law the rest of his life. Cyrus also served as an aide to Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War for President Wilson from 1916-1921. He was then appointed as a Democrat to the United States Senate to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Frank B. Willis and served as senator from April 5, 1928 to December 14, 1928. However, he was an unsuccessful candidate for this seat for re-election that same year. During Cyrus's political career, they lived in Washington, D.C. After the end of his short senate term, they returned to Cleveland, OH where Cyrus continued to practice law until his death on August 17, 1929.³

After her husband's death, Beulah moved back to Bloomington for a short time and then moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado and lived with her brother Fred for 30 years. Beulah's brother Fred graduated from Williams College and went to medical school in New York and at one time owned a dry ice factory in New York. Beulah then lived in Scottsdale, Arizona for three years before deciding that she preferred Bloomington, saying she "didn't like the weather, didn't like the cacti, and had a yen for Bloomington."⁴ She moved back in 1970 and lived eight more years in the city at the Illinois House which was previously a hotel and had been converted into residential apartments and commercial space.

Beulah was a member of the St. Matthew's Episcopal Church and was good friends with the priest, Father Lyons. Beulah and her third cousin Becky were the only Episcopalians in their family, for the rest of the family was Presbyterian. Beulah was a devout churchgoer.

³ Cyrus Locher, Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=1000386>

⁴ Beulah Locher newspaper article in file at the McLean County Museum of History Archives

Many people had different opinions of her; some called her selfish for indulging in her riches while others said she had a good heart because she loved to buy clothes for children. She was very witty and a unique character. According to Becky, Beulah would frequently say, “After all I’d had and all I’d seen, there was just one thing I looked forward to each week: a large orange freeze from the Steak ‘n’ Shake. It may not have been long-lasting, but it was good.”⁵

Beulah lived a long life and was also the fourth woman in the United States ever to survive pancreatitis, an inflammation of the pancreas, at the age of 83. She died on September 15, 1978, at the age of 97, and is buried in the Baker-Champion vault in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

⁵ Interview with Becky Leach O’Donnell by Judith Myers: “Talking About Beulah Baker Locher,” McLean County Museum of History Archives