

EWING H. MILLER

Tape 1

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At Hazledines' residence--164 Allendale Place, Terre Haute, IN

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JH: This is Monday, April 13. I'm Jane Hazledine and I'm interviewing Ewing Miller, architect-city planner.

Ewing, would you like to give us a definition of architecture?

MILLER: The way I look at architecture, Jane, it's as though you freeze a moment of time. It sounds very specific when you talk about buildings or the placement of buildings in an urban fabric. Howsoever, it really is all the forces . . . they reflect all of the forces that are on society at a given time -- the advancement of technology, how much money there is to spend (the economics); what is our attitude toward space; what's our attitude toward energy; the political involvement casts its shadow over the face of architecture. So it's a statement of society at a given point.

JH: All right. Now, part of our interest in this interview is in your recollections of your Uncle Warren Miller, who was an architect here for many years and one of the early architects in Terre Haute. Let's go back a little bit; because considering your definition here, we need then to define what Terre Haute was like.

When did Warren Miller start practicing here?

MILLER: Well, Warren started in 1910 to the records that I have and my memory of our conversations. We have a lot of architects in the family.

Matthew Miller was in Terre Haute before Warren. Matthew was a great uncle; he had an office in Buffalo, and he was sort of the fashion architect, I think. He came out from Buffalo and spent summers here. He did many of the fine homes along what was then the 5th and 6th Street corridors, you know.

JH: Yes.

MILLER: To me, his best-known building would be the Elks Building that was on 7th Street, almost at the corner of 7th and Cherry. It now belongs to Indiana State University.

MILLER: Now, I was never quite clear whether . . . I know that my Uncle Warren told me that he served as a construction superintendent on that job when he was in school. He would come back here in the summer times, and I don't know whether Warren took over the practice of Matthew or whether there was really . . . Matthew . . . that was his last piece of work and he was out of business then or he didn't come back and Warren started.

JH: Was Matthew Warren's father?

MILLER: No, no, he was an uncle.

JH: He was an uncle of Warren's?

MILLER: Yes. Yeah. Grandfather Miller, I believe, was in insurance and the early automobiles. He was a . . .

JH: But they did live in Terre Haute?

MILLER: They lived here in Terre Haute, yeah.

JH: All right. Now let's go on to Uncle Warren then.

MILLER: O.K. Now, Warren started in 1910; and he actually started in Brazil, Indiana, with a cousin by the name of Houston Johnson, who was an engineer. He was an M.I.T. graduate and had been crippled from polio. He was a wheelchair occupant.

My father then graduated from Pennsylvania in 1912 and went to Toledo, Ohio, to . . .

JH: Now, what was your father's name?

MILLER: His name was Ewing.

JH: His name was Ewing, also.

MILLER: He was Ewing H. as well.

JH: I see.

MILLER: And he went to Toledo, Ohio, to practice . . . not to practice but to get his early experience in a large office there, and that's where he met my mother. And then he went to service. He went to serve in the air force of World War I. And on his return, the two were married, and they came then to Terre Haute, and

MILLER: he became a partner, and it became Miller, Johnson and Miller. And that's when . . . I believe that's about the time they moved to Terre Haute. Brazil, Indiana, even in those days (laughs) wasn't quite large enough to keep an architect going full. So they moved to Terre Haute, and they had really a very successful practice here.

JH: Where did Uncle Warren go to school? Where was his education?

MILLER: They were both . . . Great Uncle Matt and Warren and my father were all University of Pennsylvania graduates.

JH: And you, too.

MILLER: As I. Um hm. Yeah.

Now, let's see. Their early practice was mostly in schools. The files are sort of full of these two and three-story Renaissance, neo-Renaissance (laughs) schools that became quite their trademark. There are a few left around here. I think that Warren Miller was more the business part of the firm, and my father was more the designer. Now this is of interest to the history, because in his class at the University of Pennsylvania one of his good friends was a man by the name of Ralph Yeager, whom my father enticed in coming to Terre Haute to work for them. And that will unfold as we go along.

JH: Would you like to identify some of these early schools? Can you recall where these are?

MILLER: Yes. I believe there's one up on Lafayette Avenue and isn't that McLean school up there?

JH: I don't know.

MILLER: I can't . . . I just . . . I really don't remember the name.

JH: I don't know. The school corporation occupies a very large school that's on Lafayette.

MILLER: It seems to me that that's one of them that they did as sort of a normal school. But his finest piece

MILLER: of work in school design was Woodrow Wilson /Junior High/, and the . . . maybe the myth more than actuality but the myth in my uncle's mind was that he had finished that job the night that he died. He died very suddenly of a medical complication that could be treated today. It was a duodenal ulcer, I guess. But they operated on him for appendicitis, as I understand, and that caused his death.

JH: Now, this was your father.

MILLER: This was my father. And . . .

JH: Did he die here in Terre Haute then?

MILLER: He died here in Terre Haute at Union Hospital.  
Um hm.

And then, very tragically, Mack Johnson died of a heart attack some three months later. So then Warren was left with a rather large office and a lot of work and without two partners. And this is when he asked Ralph Yeager if he would come in and be his partner.

JH: Can you give us a date on this?

MILLER: Well, this had to be 1923, because all of this happened in '23; and, of course, I was born in October of '23 so I never knew my father, Ewing. He had died just these few months before I was born. And my mother, of course, went back to her parents in Toledo, Ohio. That's the reason I was born not in Terre Haute but in Toledo and grew up there in the house of my grandparents. I would come to Terre Haute to spend summers with great frequency, particularly after the age of about 7 or 8. I think I spent almost all my summers here until my high school years, and then it wasn't quite so frequent. But I knew everybody in Terre Haute because of this. So, it was almost like having grown up here, you know -- even though I didn't go to my early school here.

JH: Well, was it at this point then that Warren Miller enticed Ralph Yeager to come to Terre Haute?

MILLER: Well, he was already here I believe. He was working . . . he came here because of my dad and, evidently, also was rather adept in the design field. And this is what Warren needed to continue the firm. And so . . . yes, he did ask him then to be a partner, and it became . . . for a long period of time while the

MILLER: jobs were running out, it became Miller, Johnson, Miller and Yeager. Then it finally merged over into being Miller and Yeager; and it stayed that way for many years because the Depression, of course, occurred in '29 and there was nothing built (laughing), I don't think, until the early '30s. One of their best jobs in that early '30 era, that I think, is the Federal Post Office, which is a delightful piece of art deco in a little sort of formalist style.

They did a lot of churches. I know one of the things that my father won an award for was the old Jewish temple. It's not used as a temple any longer. It's used as a . . .

JH: The B'nai Brith, it's now a senior citizens center.

MILLER: That's right. And he designed all of the windows in that as well. And I know that those windows have been taken out, and people own them here in town. As a matter of fact, I think we put . . . Hap (my wife who is also an architect and I suppose for the record, why she's Gladys J. Miller, who has, well, done many fine houses in this community from our period of arriving here in 1955 until we left in 1980), . . . She put one of these windows in one of the houses that she made an addition to for Drs. Weinbaum, Jack and Bobbie Weinbaum.

JH: Oh, yes. Yes.

MILLER: So many of these things intertwine in a small town where you. . . . I had the good fortune, I guess, of putting a link building on the ISU campus between the Elks building which had then been purchased by ISU and had been designed by great Uncle Matt and the Student Union Building that Warren Miller and Ralph Yeager had designed. And we connected those two with a building that serves as a gateway and lets people sort of funnel underneath.

JH: So, the town is replete with Miller, Miller, Yeager, Miller and whatever. (both laugh)

MILLER: Yeah.

JH: Now, during this . . . going back just a little bit, during this period of the '20s in addition to the Woodrow Wilson building, which, incidentally, is

JH: about to be totally rehabilitated at a very extensive fee . . .

MILLER: I hope it's being done with some sensitivity.

JH: We hope so.

MILLER: Yeah. Because it was such a good building that it lasted for many years through many changes in education philosophy.

JH: As I recall, it was featured in one of the architectural record magazines as an outstanding piece. I remember seeing a picture of it many years ago.

MILLER: I see. You know something about it that I didn't.

JH: Well, in any event, I'd be interested in your identifying whatever buildings you might be able to recall of that period and why . . . we're interested in the development of style, the changes of style, and as you say, in relationship to the economy and the social structure of the time.

MILLER: Well, as I look back through the photographs . . . and I suppose this is a thing I'll want to do eventually as my junior partners now take more command of the firm and I have a little more free time. I probably need to make sort of an anthology of pictures of the work that has been contributed by this family because we're really gone now, you know, in many ways.

JH: This is true.

MILLER: I know Rea Park, for example, was one of the things that my father did. We had a big water color rendering of this that hung in the firm for years.

JH: Was that done as a private job for the William S. Rea grant or was this done for the city?

MILLER: I think this was done for the city at that time, but it was probably paid for by the Rea grant although I don't know that so I shouldn't say that.

JH: I see.

MILLER: Much of the circumstances surrounding that early work is fairly hazy with me, and I would have to go back and try to check records.

MILLER: I would characterize the work of the firm as being quite sensitive to proportion. They did purely eclectic styles. They weren't experimenters. They weren't a follower, for example, of Frank Lloyd Wright, who was coming along at that time. Their work was based on the historic mode. I think they were rather fond of the colonial although they seemed to transfer back and forth as many architects did in that period. If they used the colonial primarily for houses and park shelters and things of that nature, they had no hesitancy about flipping over into Romanesque for most of the church work they did. And then schools became sort of, as I said, the neo-Renaissance adaptive style.

Then, I believe the forces of change really sort of blew in after my father had died and they . . . the Depression had just passed and the whole era of art deco came in, because they . . . Miller and Yeager also did the City Hall which is much in the same style as the federal building. And then if you'll take a look at the doors at the Swope Gallery, why they're just beautiful examples of that period.

Now, they had a young draftsman working for them at the time whose uncle had also been an architect in this town. This was Allison Vrydagh. And Allison Vrydagh's Uncle Jose may have been educated abroad.

JH: Was he from this area?

MILLER: He was from this area but whether he had been born here or whether he came here from Belgium (Vrydagh is a Belgian name, actually means "Friday")

. . . .

JH: Oh, that's interesting.

MILLER: Yes, Vri-dock, I think it was pronounced in the Flemish.

And José Vrydagh did many of the very fine churches here. Now, I can't tell you which churches those are, but I would not be surprised that he didn't do the very nice Catholic church at the corner of about 8th or 9th and Ohio.

JH: St. Benedict's.

MILLER: St. Benedict's, yes. And . . . I think he did

MILLER: as a matter of fact. /Adolf Druiding, not Vrydagh, was the architect of St. Benedict's./

JH: Now, was he operating then, at that time, as an independent architect?

MILLER: Yes.

JH: Before the advent of the Millers?

MILLER: That's right. This was before the advent of at least the Warren Millers. He probably was a contemporary of Matthew Miller, in that period of time.

As I understand, my uncle told me once (this is Warren again) told me that when they started their business, which was more or less a continuation of Matthew's work, well, when they started in 1910, there were 14 firms in this town.

JH: Fourteen architectural firms!

MILLER: Now of these, probably 12 of them were branch offices of Chicago. This was quite a booming (laughs) little place.

JH: My goodness!

MILLER: . . . at that point, and because travel was expensive, why they would open a branch office down here and staff it with one of their senior members, and then they'd hire people here.

JH: Of course, this is before the days of magazine plans and all that kind of thing. Would that account in part for the . . .

MILLER: Well, I think that magazine plans probably existed in this country on houses from 1800 on, (laughs) practically, because I have seen books really of 1840 publications where architects would actually publish a book of plans, and they would be . . . you could order it for \$3 or \$4, you know. And they would have about 200 different plans, and then you'd pick out what you'd want, and then you'd send in for that number. So we've been . . . in the field of housing, we've been buying "off the rack," so to speak (laughs), for many, many years.



JH: What would support that many architects in Terre Haute at that time?

MILLER: Well, I think it was probably mostly commercial then. I think a lot of Wabash Avenue was still being developed and the area along 7th Street was then. The finer homes probably were all architect done. And architects did a very general practice because buildings weren't very complex by today's standards. What was the name of the building right at 7th and Cherry -- the tall, thin one that never had . . .

JH: Oh, the Rose Dispensary.

MILLER: The Rose Dispensary building. Now, that was, I think, an 1860, late 1850 building. It was a handsome building; and it was . . . technologically, it really reflected a state of the art of the day. It had cast iron columns, even though it had a wood frame in it, and one stairway. It was a terrible firetrap, but it was no worse than anything else being built at that time in terms of fire. But it was, oh, six stories, I believe, and the elevator must have come along at a later time. If it had an elevator in it, it was an early elevator that had been removed by the time I got to see it. But the shaft was there and the stairway wrapped around it. But the cast iron columns were very unique, and you didn't see very many of them in this town.

JH: It's too bad those old buildings had to be torn down because of their . . . well, fire hazard.

MILLER: Fire is one.

JH: Inability to support a building of that magnitude . . .

MILLER: Yeah. Well, it had . . . also the economies of the day said that you could have a much smaller floor area to the elevator space. In today's high cost of elevators you can't put it in just to rent 2,000 sq. ft. on one floor (laughs), you know. And you can't maintain it and now they're all automated.

So the economy of that kind of ratio has changed.

JH: Well then, too, this was the core of the medical practice, really.

MILLER: I suppose it was.