

This interview is being conducted for the DeKalb Oral Histories project, sponsored by the Dekalb Public Library.

This interviewer is Sara Finnigan. The narrator is Gary Mullis.

The interview is taking place at the sound studio at Dekalb Public Library on March 23, 2019

Finnigan: So, let's get started What is your full name?

Mullis: Gary Lee Mullis

Finnigan: And why did you parents choose that name for you?

Mullis: I don't know

Finnigan: No? [laughs]

Mullis: [laughs}

Finnigan: When are where were you born?

Mullis: I was born at DeKalb, Illinois at the Old St. Mary's hospital on Haish street in Dekalb. May 14, 1944 at 6:18 AM in the morning. To Mickey and Delia Mullis

Finnigan: Bright and early in the morning.

Mullis: Yeah.

Finnigan: Tell me about your parents.

Mullis: Uh they both passed away. My mom passed away in March 28 of 1975. She was 71 when she passed away. She couldn't make no more pies. Her hands were all crippled up. My dad passed away at age 69 in July 1969.

Finnigan: And what did they do for a living?

Mullis: Farm on the farm north of Sycamore on the farm.

Finnigan: And what did your mother do? Was she a homemaker?

Mullis: She made a lot of pies and cookies.

Mullis: She was in the nursing home for about 6 weeks before she passed away. DeKalb County nursing home on Sycamore road where it was at that time.

Finnigan: Did you have any siblings?

Mullis: My half-sister she passed away in December 14, 2011 she passed away. Mickey Imogen Phillips. She was named after my dad.

Finnigan: Did you have any other family in the area?

Mullis: I've got a lot of cousins in Dekalb and Sycamore. Some down in Bloomfield, Indiana, Scotland, Indiana area.

Finnigan: And so, what was the farmhouse like that you grew up on?

Mullis: it was north of Sycamore, Illinois off Plank road up 23 to Plank road curb to the right to Lincoln road, up a long lane, first farm on the left. It was a two-story brick house with nine rooms and a cooking stove in the kitchen and a wood burning stove in the living room and outhouse to go outside. But in the cold, you wouldn't stay very long.

Finnigan: Oh, my goodness.

Mullis: You'd pump house to get water. My mom hung the clothes on the clothesline with wooden cloth pin.

Finnigan: Is there any other special items in the house that you remember?

Mullis: It was fun getting together at Christmas time with aunts, uncles, cousins, family. Open Christmas presents, dinner Christmas day. It was a lot of fun.

Finnigan: Everyone came to your house for the holidays?

Mullis: Yeah. Lots of good memories.

Finnigan: What is your earliest memory?

Mullis: Uh my earliest memory. I remember growing up with, pulling my little green wagon out in the hay and the oat fields. Using my green wagon like a pitchfork and putting it in my little green wagon. And I drove my pitchfork into my leg one day and still have the scar. From picking it up and taking it to the barn.

Finnigan: Wow, so did you have a lot of animals on the farm?

Mullis: Yeah, we had pigs, cows, chickens, duck, geese, whole bunch of them.

Finnigan: Did you help take care of them?

Mullis: Yeah.

Finnigan: What did you want to be when you grew up?

Mullis: I didn't have nothing in mind at that time.

Finnigan: No?

Mullis: No.

Finnigan: What kind of games do you remember playing?

Mullis: Checkers, marbles.

Finnigan: Did you have any favorite particular toys?

Mullis: A little rocking horse.

Finnigan: What do you remember doing for fun on the farm?

Mullis: Playing. We had a bathtub outside of the window on the side of the house and my mom would put a heater down through the window to warm the water and I would get in the bathtub with my toy dog.

Finnigan: Bring him in the tub with you.

Mullis: Yeah.

Finnigan: What kind of family chores did you have to help out with?

Mullis: Feeding the chickens and grabbing the eggs. Feeding the cows and pigs.

Finnigan: Feeding the animals. Did you have a least favorite chore?

Mullis: I didn't have one.

Finnigan: Did you receive an allowance for your chores?

Mullis: No

Finnigan: That was what you were expected to do.

Mullis: Yeah.

Finnigan: Where did you attend school?

Mullis: In Sycamore, Illinois and I went to school at Sycamore High school freshman year. I didn't graduate. But my class was 1963. 1963 at Sycamore High School.

Finnigan: So, do you remember where you were when JFK was shot?

Mullis: Over at the farm in Malta Illinois.

Finnigan: Did you hear it on the radio or see it on the tv?

Mullis: It was on TV.

Finnigan: The world kind of stopped when that happened, right?

Mullis: Yeah.

Finnigan: What kind of activities did you participate in? Any sports?

Mullis: No, I didn't

Finnigan: Were you play music at that time?

Mullis: No, I wasn't

Finnigan: When did you start playing music?

Mullis: I started playing when I got older. Probably when I was, let's see, when I got older. A lot older.

Finnigan: When did you get your first guitar?

Mullis: I didn't get no guitar. I couldn't learn to play guitar. I got drums. And I played by ear.

Finnigan: What were some of your favorite songs? Some of your favorite music?

Mullis: Country songs. I like Crazy Arm. Ray Price.

Finnigan: I'll have to do some research and look this up. Did you spend anytime downtown Dekalb as a kid?

Mullis: I remember drugstore down on the corner of third street and Lincoln highway. Bob Brown from WLBK radio Man on the Street. He did an interview with grand ole opry stars, country singer John Conlee, and Jack Jubilee, back in the 50's. Leroy Von Dyke. He was in DeKalb and Bob Brown did an interview with him right there outside of Cheryl's drugstore on 3rd and Lincoln Hwy back in the 60's. He was in DeKalb. Bill Mulligan lived in Dekalb and raised hogs.

Finnigan: Did you ever go into the JC Penny's?

Mullis: No, I never did

Finnigan: What was your religion life like?

Mullis: My mom made me dress up when I was little in a brown suit with a brown tie and brown hat and took me to Lutheran church in Dekalb on the corner of 7th and franklin.

Finnigan: Do you remember going there for Christmas and holidays too?

Mullis: Yes, church service with my aunts' uncles went there and cousins.

Finnigan: Were you ever mentioned in the paper?

Mullis: When I go older.

Finnigan: When did you learn to drive?

Mullis: Long time ago but I don't drive anymore. I ride a bike. A red bike.

Finnigan: So, did you learn to drive before you were sixteen?

Mullis: About eighteen.

Finnigan: What did you typically do for dinner with your family?

Mullis: Like when

Finnigan: Like a typical family dinner, what did that look like? What did your mom cook?

Mullis: Uh let's see pies, cookies, stuff like that. Meatloaf.

Finnigan: How were holidays celebrated?

Mullis: That was a lot of fun to get together with all the cousins, aunts, uncles, and all the family. My half sister and brother in law. That was a lot of fun to get together and open presents.

Finnigan: Was that your favorite season? Christmas?

Mullis: Yeah

Finnigan: How was the oldest relative you remember? Do you remember your grandparents?

Mullis: They were gone before I was born.

Finnigan: Do you know anything about your last name? Where it came from?

Mullis: Mullins. Yeah leave the n in Mullis. Not sure where it came from.

Finnigan: I'll have to do some research for you and find out!

Finnigan: Did your Parents ever tell you stories about your grandparents?

Mullis: No, they didn't

Finnigan: Does the farm [you grew up on] still exist?

Mullis: The barn is the only one that's standing. The torn down the old two-story brick house and put up a one-story level house and tore down the old outhouse, tore out the pumphouse, and the chicken house is gone. Just the red barn.

Finnigan: Were you ever married?

Mullis: Long time ago, it didn't work out.

Finnigan: Did you ever have kids?

Mullis: No.

Finnigan: Do you have any pets now?

Mullis: No

Finnigan: What was your profession?

Mullis: I didn't have no profession.

Finnigan: Do you have any history with the university [Northern Illinois University]?

Mullis: I worked at the University Plaza in the kitchen. I worked at the Holmes Student Center in the dish room, washing dishes for a while. Then I worked at the University Plaza in the kitchen doing pot and pan washing for 43 years. I worked at Wurlitzer piano factory on Pleasant street on the receiving dock moving heavy iron plates and things.

Finnigan: What things did you learn from your parents?

Mullis: Learned to work hard.

Finnigan: What accomplishment are you most proud of?

Mullis: Growing up on the farm, all the memories and playing music.

Finnigan: Do you remember your first record player?

Mullis: It was a little small one.

Finnigan: Do you have any advice for future generations of DeKalb?

Mullis: Not that I know of.

Finnigan: Was there anything else you want to talk about?

Mullis: My music.

Finnigan: yeah tell me about it

Mullis: I played drums. I played the tambourine. Washboard that LeRoy Troy autographed front and back that he gave me. He played it at blue grass festival. LeRoy Troy plays on a TV show on RFD-TV every Saturday night at 7pm. He plays banjo and sings. He gave me the washboard and I played that and played tambourine and drums and I sing, and I write songs, songwriter, a lot of my songs have been recorded by other song writers, other people, other singers. And I've got CDs other them singing my song. One of them is a, my biggest one, my hit song, is Doing the Christmas Boogie, I wrote Kim Glover singing it from Lexington, Alabama and the video and I'm in the video too, wearing a red Alabama outfit and a Santa hat on dancing to the music, lots of piano, playing piano too.

And dancing with cardboard Elvis. Daryl Glover, Kim Glover's husband, him and me raise our hand at the end of the video and it's a three-minute video. I'm in about seven spots in the video.

Finnigan: That's fascinating

Mullis: Kim singing my song in the video. It's been played on a lot of TV stations.

Finnigan: I am going to have to look at that up!

Mullis: I got CDs, signing my songs, and other people singing my songs I've written. Tributes to Hank Williams. Tribute to Roy Ackup. Tribute to Little Jimmy Dicken. He's a legend.

Mullis: I'm on, you type in my name Gary Mullis in YouTube. You can find me on that. There's video of me.

WULB picnic out there in Rockford, Illinois and video of me singing at Cornfest. I played the community stage.

Finnigan: Wow so you've been around playing music for a long time.

Mullis: Yeah

Finnigan: Do you think DeKalb has an interesting music history?

Mullis: Yes, it does.

Finnigan: There's been some interesting bands and music that has come out of DeKalb.

Mullis: And I've written a book. Gary Mullis: Growing Up on the Farm, Country Music, Nashville Stars. Hopefully it will get published this year. I'd like to do a book signing at the DeKalb Library. It could be Saturday, November 30, [2019] at like 2pm.

Finnigan: Alright well I'll be there. That's fascinating!