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Moerdyke, Cora Oral History Interview: Class Projects

Brad Millen
Bret Fisk

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INTRODUCTION - An interview with Cora Moerdyke, a former missionary in Iraq, in Holland, Michigan, on March 8, 1977, at her home, at 7:30 p.m. by Brad Millen and Bret Fisk.

Cora Moerdyke (M:)
Brad Millen (B:)
Bret Fisk (F:)

F: This is an interview of Cora Moerdyde at 120 fourteenth St. in Holland, Michigan, by Bret Fisk and Brad Millen.

Mrs. Moerdyke, why don't you start out where you born and, ah, tell us how you met your husband, ok?
M: I was born in Holland, Michigan, and I had a twin brother, so, I couldn't be the only young one, you see? We had two. And, ah, I had my high school in Holland, and I had two years of college.
F: Where did you go to college?
M: Hope College. Then I took my nurses training in Chicago.
B: Were you planning on being a missionary back then?
M: Yes, and that's when I met Bill at college. And he was teaching then. He was teaching freshmen at that time (she tries to remember the name of the nursing school in Chicago). It was one of the very best schools, it was affiliated with Northwestern College. It was a three year course. We had our graduation, and after that we were nurses. And then about a year and a half after that, no, it was right after I graduated that we were married. And then, ah, the board didn't send us out right away. I don't know what it was today. They sent us out the following year, so we had one year here in the states. And, ah, then they sent us out to Arabia. And that was in 1923. And we were one year in Bahrain, the gulf here (she points it out on a map before us). The first year we had to learn the language, although they put you to work too. But you have to spend two years really in the language, I think that's what they do now, or they get the language in another place and then come. But its better to get the language where you go because even the language of the Gulf Arabs was quite different from the language of the Arabs here in Iraq (pointing to Iraq on the map).
But anyway, then in 23 we were sent out, then we were sent out, then we spent a year in language study, but the doctor also did work. And then the following year we were sent up here on the Tigris River (pointing to it on the map).

F: What type of work did he do?

M: He was a doctor.

F: Just, um: .....

M: Regular doctor (F: Regular), Mmm. And of course when we went there we had to live in Arab homes, in the kind of homes that they had. It wasn't a bad place, but it was different, of course. But shortly after that we had our hospital built first, and then we had our homes built. And, of course, that took part of two years almost before you really settled in, you know? But uh, the kind of people, uh, Arabs up here (pointing to Iraq) were quite different than what you would see along this part (pointing along the coast). Iraq itself at this time was under the mandate of England. And uh, --so they had to tow(?) the line, you know? They had, they had their men there, and we-we had an Englishman that lived there, too. And he sort of, you know, helped the people to know how to run their country. And, uh, the Arabs, of course, are a people of tribes. You might have, in-in this part (pointing to map) you might have, oh, maybe four or five different kinds of tribes. And-and, oh, even when we came, oh, these tribes would fight each other to find out who's the strongest, and then he would be the ruler of all-all. And this still, maybe still—it goes on, you know, because that's the way they, they want to live and that's—and even though the English tried to, ah, you know, help them, and show them how to rule, uh, still they liked their own way very much better, because that was the way they were brought up—to fight—where your, the strongest one gets the place of honor. He would be the "sheik" (pronounced shëk). That means—you've heard the name "sheik." That's ah, that's what the highest ruler is called—the sheik—in this country tribes.

Of course Iraq also had a king. And I don't know if you've ever heard the story about the killing of the king. He was, when—when, uh, we were there he was growing up. He was a fine
young lad, and he had an English woman who taught him. See, this is how the English helped, you know? So that their ruler would be a proper ruler. And this man was, this young fella was really a very, very nice-looking, and, and he was, he had, uh, uh, was brought up in the proper way, as a king should be, you know? And it was in um, he was made king as soon as he had came of age, and that was the year after, uh, we left there. And, uh, then it was about um, I can't remember the year now. We, no, we left there in, uh, (pause). Well anyway, the next, the following year, what happened was they—they didn't want him for a king, so he was killed. They shot him. This wonderful lad that was so, oh, he was so good-looking, and was really such a, a wonderful person. And here they—they want their own tribe's people, you see, so they killed him.

F: Um, what—what type of, um, was there any special diseases or anything that your husband had to deal with? (M: Oh, yes), in, in ah--?

M: Everything. You get everything there.

B: What—what type of land—is that desert area where you were at?

M: Ah, yes, it's desert area. Of course you have your rivers. There's the Tigris River right there (pointing on the map), and here's the Euphrates. And we lived on the Tigris River. But you could go inland and it is desert. Of course it—it's good soil, too. They have their crops. And their, one of their main crops was, um, rice, and wheat—they grow.

F: Um, what are the people like there? Are um, could you kind of explain what the people are like, are they a lot different from the Americans? Do they have any unique characteristic?

M: Well, uh, the Arab was brought up as a Mohammedan. That's a religion. And, uh, they live up to the ways of Mohammed. They call him their, um, he was their, like, almost like a god, not really, but we wouldn't say he was a god. They worshipped him like, ah, cause he was, that was many years ago that he lived, but according to his rules of life and all that. That's what they, that's how they lived, that was their religion. He was their prophet. Whatever their prophet said and wrote, that's what they lived by. And it wasn't—it had many good points. But
of course, it was not Christianity. And, uh, it was worshipping a person, you see? They were worshipping a person. They made him their god, and he was just, ah, an ordinary person.

B: Did you find people there open to the gospel?

M: They were not antagonistic, but they wouldn't accept the teachings, even though, even some of the higher educated people understood the truths of the Bible, yet they would not advocate from their faith to become a Christian. We had, uh, some really very very nice young men that came, and they'd always say, you know, that we, they don't reject Christ, but they think of him, too, like they thought of Mohammed, just a man. Not one that was sent by God to the world. And so, the thing that was exceedingly hard for them to understand was that, that Christ was a man, a person, sent by God to come to the world and to show his love for him and die on the cross. They couldn't accept that, they just couldn't accept that (F: They couldn't accept Christ dying for them). No--no. It was just out of their reach. They just couldn't--that's not saying that--there, there were some believers, but not really strong believers, you know? They were believers, 'cause--and some of those that worked for us--said they were believers, because they wanted the work, you see? And this is, they're very tricky, the Arabs are, they really are.

B: What do they do for a living around there mostly?

M: Well ah, all through here, its mostly the land people, you know (pointing at area surrounding Tigris River)?

F: Grow rice and wheat, and farmers?

M: And then you have, in your homes--Baghdad, of course, is the big city. That's a very fine place. You have everything in Baghdad that you would have in most big cities. But most of the people through here (pointing at the map), that we were in contact with, were people of the land, you see, the farmers. And another thing that the English did for the Iraqis was to get schools in all the places, so they could learn. And that really helped us a lot, too, you see--education.

B: Was it very illiterate at that time?

M: Yes, very illiterate. Now, now, even some of the heads of the tribes--they have tribes--some of them were not educated at
all. But because they had money, they had a little fame, that, they were made a sheik. And another thing they did there was, even after the English came in to help them, these tribes would fight each other to find out which tribe was the strongest, and then the strongest tribe was the head of all the other tribes. That person's tribe was the best.

B: Um, how was the family unit there, was the family close?
M: Yes, the family is close. They love their children. They're very nice in the family, I mean they're, they love children, really they do, and they loved our children, too.

B: Do they have big families (M: Yes, and ah . . . )?
F: How many children do you have?
M: Four.
F: Did you have any before you went over to Iraq?
M: Yes, we had our son. He was three when we went. The others are all girls. They were born out there.
F: When did you come back to the United States then? How long did you stay over there, do you remember?
M: Yes, it was 1946, I think.
F: Did you stay over there thirteen years?
M: No, we stayed twenty-three years (F: Twenty-three--oh ya, that's . . . ). Yep. The board allowed us twenty-five years, but we came back between 23 and 24 years, because we couldn't get out of there, you see, during the war. So we had to stay, which was pretty hard on the doctor not being able to come home.
B: What ailed him?
M: Well, he was all tired out.
B: He was tired? It was hard work over there, huh?
M: Yes, ah, the climate is very hot, especially in the summer time. And, uh, you sort of have to learn to-to live at that kind of a climate. And, in one way, all of the people there during the heat of the day, they go into their rooms, their homes, and take a siesta, you know, they sleep (F: Ya). Well really you almost have to, the sun is so hot, and so hot all over, you get so tired out if you go to work in the heat. So, in the middle of the day, you have a siesta about two hours, and then you go back and work again. This climate, the climate was really
good because it was dry. I think you can really stand a dry climate much better than a damp climate.

F: Did the, um, people there ever-ever threaten you? Were you ever in trouble or anything? Were they always good to you?
M: They were very kind to us. They welcomed us, they, they, well, it was because of the doctor, see, they would have a doctor now in their town. So they really welcomed us. And they'd all, they came. We had--our clinics would be sometimes up to a hundred people in a morning, if you can imagine that.

F: You—he was the only doctor there?
M: Yeah, mm-hmm. And, of course, we had to—we start at about the second year, we still were in our—studying our Arabic when we went up here (pointing to the map). But, uh, after we got right into the work, of course, you got—then we had to build a hospital, if you can imagine, and do all these things (F: Yeah). And, uh, of course, the doctor didn't didn't take any of that responsibility. There was another, ah, missionary there who took the responsibility of the—of the, ah, building, building the buildings.

F: So you came—came back in '46 then, back to Holland?
M: No, not '46 (ten second pause as she tries to remember). It was, I said we went out in '23 (F: Mm-hmm), yes, and that it would have been, it would have been 25 years, in another year, I think it was.

F: So it was '47? (She mumbles a couple of things trying to remember). Or the middle of '46, then. (M: Mmmhmm). And then, did your husband start practice here—did you come right back to Holland then?
M: Yes, and he was—he was ill. He was in the sanitarium, and, uh, he was there about two months. He had T.B., and, uh, for a whole—then he came home—and for a whole year, he didn't do any work at all. But he did get his strength back, and uh, was able to open up a work here.

F: Did you, uh, continue to be a nurse for him then?
M: Yes, mm-hmm. I helped him in the office all the time.

B: Is there any chance that these rugs came from Arabia?
M: Yes, they're all from there. They were ones that we had in our home there, so we took them. They sent them to us, of
course. So when we left there, we—we didn't know, you know, that we weren't, wouldn't be going back, but, ah, it was a good thing they didn't send him back, he wasn't as strong as then. He was really depleted when he came home. He was a hard worker, and then, having to do so much all himself.

Ah, the last year was really quite trying, um, because one of our boys that we trusted, and had trained as a high helper, left us. He just went away. And uh, left us in a lurch, you know, because then you gotta train somebody else, again. And, uh, this was very hard on us. I know it was hard on my husband, because he—he was—did a good job, a real good job. And, uh, of course, he trained him. You train all your own servants over there. Servants as well as, as those you have in, um, the hospital.

F: Did you ever get lonely being over there? Were you the only Americans over there? Didn't you get, you were over for 23 years, that seems like a long time, um, did you ever get homesick for the United States?

M: Well, not exactly, because you're so busy all the time (F: Yeah). I mean you never get to know your time, but you get lonely, really, and then we had our family, so, I can't say that I felt lonely.

F: Didn't you have any relatives back home that you wanted to see, or . . .

M: Well, we got home about every six years, I think it was, that we got home, for furlows (F: Yeah). We had two furlows. And this last time when we came—we came home, that would have been the third furlow. We had two furlows during our stay.

B: Are the people hard workers over there?

M: They're just real casual over there. If they want to, they'll do something. If they don't want to, they won't do it. And then they always say (she starts to laugh), they always say, "Min Allah," it's of God (laughs). If they don't get something done, it's of God (continuing to laugh), "Min Allah."

There are some real educated people there. Then, of course, you have your really, ah, down to earth people that, that uh, have never had any education. And um, then you have the in-between. And um, but all through Iraq, the schools were get-
ting, you know, into all the places. So that they, uh, they had a good education in their schools. In fact, in our, in Busra's station, we had a school, that was the first school that was started there. That was in, oh, when was the mission started (she goes on). The doctor had a brother, too, that worked--his oldest, the oldest one in the family, was a brother, Jim. And he, he was in this country all of his years (F: Oh, Yeah?). Yeah, Mm-hmm.

F: When you came back from Arabia in '46 or '47, you bought this house, right, and you've lived here ever since?
M: Just about, not the first year, but it was during, I think it was during that first year that we bought it. Yeah, I think we had lived in the mission house a year, or just about a year.
F: Have you always gone to the Third Reformed Church down there?
M: Mm-hmm. It was my church.
F: Oh, yeah?
M: Mm-hmm.
F: Ever since you were a little girl?
M: Yeah, mm-hmm. I feel, you know, I feel like it's home.
F: Yeah. You know a lot of people really well there then, huh? A lot of new ones, though?
M: Oh, really it's a great turnover (F: Yeah), great turnover!
F: How many ministers have you had there? That you know of?
M: You mean out here?
F: No, in your church here at home.
M: How many ministers?
F: Or just main ones.
M: If you want to know all the ministers, they've got their pictures in the hallway (F: Oh, yeah?). There's a hallway there. And all--all the, uh, the--of course I didn't know all of them, I was too young at the beginning, you know, to know, really know them.
F: Just the ones that you remember since you went over there.
M: The very first minister that I really knew was, uh, Blecking.
F: Blecking?
M: Blecking. He was the very first minister that I ever knew.
F: Did you ever have a favorite one that you got really close to?
M: Well uh, let's see, in Blecking, when we had Blecking, I think that uh, in Blecking. Blecking was the one that was in the church when I joined the church.
F: Just a second here, gotta switch the tape over.

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F: How old were you when you joined the church?
M: I think I was fifteen (F: Fifteen?). Yes I think I was fifteen.
F: Was there any, um, let's see, how do I say this, um, was it any special time? How did--what made you decide to join the church?
M: Oh, well it was, you know, even-even before joining the church, um, we were, you know, brought . . .
F: You were brought up in a Christian home?
M: Christian home, and-and it was, it was just an ordinary step that you took, you know? It's a case of, you know, being brought up in a home where the Bible's always read, and where-where you have prayer and it's, you know, it's uh, just fall in with all the other things that come along. I, you know, I always thought that I was a born Christian. When I was born I was a Christian (she laughs). I was born of Christian parents.
F: It's not like that for a lot of people, for a lot of people it's a big change. When you're brought up in a Christian home it's a lot different.
M: It's quite different, really quite different. And that's a thing we learned here, you see, too. These people were brought up Mohammedans, and they wouldn't leave their religion for any other religion--they were Mohammedans. You had to admire them for that, too, you know? That they were true to their religion, but they would not become Christian, some, there were some, but not very many. We had a little Christian community there in, ah--we had a book shop, what they call a book shop, you know, where we sell our Bibles and things. And this man was Armenian, he and his family came from Armenia when the Turks, you know, ran over all that part of the country, and they fled from there, and they came to Iraq. Very lovely family, Christian family. And, uh, he was there all the time in our station, and he was a
great help to us and to these people. Because he, his language, of course, was Arabic, too. And the people understood him, understood him better than they understood us (laughs). He could get it across better than we could. And all the years that we were there, their family was there, too. They were a very nice family.

F: How old were you when you went to Arabia in '23? Do you remember how old you were? You must of been in your twenties, weren't ya?

M: I was 25 or 26 when we went out.

F: How long ago did your husband die? How long have you lived here alone?

M: I think it was two years in November or October; two years in October, last October.

F: Um, Jim (her grandson) was telling me that you might write a book about your husband and his work for a library or something?

M: I never thought about that (laughs). Where'd you get the idea?

F: Oh, I thought we were talking to you about that one time or something?

M: Mmm. Oh, I don't think I'm good enough to write a book. I know the children would of liked it. I've tried, I've sat down, I have sat down and wrote a little bit, you know--"Ah, what am I doing this for (laughs)." So many have written, and so many have gone in and out of that part of the country, and--we had a boys and girls school in Busra, and we had a church there, too. We also had a church where we were. We go to church there. And the people came, especially the workers, you know, those who worked for us in the hospital and around--they came. And many times some of the family came, you know? But one thing, in a church, in a country like that, the women and the men must be separated. The women don't sit with their husbands (F: Oh, really). The women sit apart. So we have a little part where the women sit, and then you have another part where the men are.

F: Do you feel, do you get lonely living here all alone? (M: No), No? You have your family.
M: Yes, I think I'd be more lonely if I didn't have a family, but, no, no, I really don't get lonely. There's always so much to do it seems (F: That's good). And get away and get out. Tomorrow morning we have our guild, circle meeting.

F: Oh ya, at the church over there?

M: No, we go to the homes for these, we go to the homes (F: Oh, that's nice). And, uh, I don't feel lonely either, although, of course I miss the doctor, not that, but, ah, I don't go sit down and weep, because he suffered an awful lot. He was so, he was so emaciated. He just, you know, he couldn't eat anymore. He couldn't enjoy things anymore, and, uh, he was very very thin (F: Um ...). You know, it was wonderful thing that he had his older brother. Dave, he was a bit of consent(?) to our station. But ours was a new station, the last station out there and, uh, this was so nice, you know, they could work together, 'cause he was a minister and Bill was a doctor. It was nice, you know, that they could be together and work together.

F: Um, if you had to do it all over again, is there anything that you'd do different? Would you still go there for all 23 years.

M: Yes, I think I would.

F: You think so? You enjoyed it then.

M: Yes, I did.

F: Probably very rewarding ...

M: Yes, it's very rewarding. It's something that you can't do by yourself. And it's, um, the nearness of God with you.

F: You found strength in the Lord, helping you through?

M: Mmmhmm. This is the experience that you get and it's wonderful. You can't do it. You give it all. And, of course, it is—it works. The one thing that this is—was hard, I think on all our millionaries, was the fact that we never got many converts. But that isn't the prime reason you go. Jesus said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel." That was the message. He didn't say, "Make them Christians." But that has to come from the person (F: Yeah, he said, "Preach," right?). Uhhuh. It was not in our—what we did, as what Christ did. And there were many there that believed, but they wouldn't leave their faith. And, you know, in our work, before we start
our clinics we always have, mm, Bible reading and prayer. And, uh, you know, many times those that understood would come to you and say, "That was so good. It was true, that was so good," you know? And, it isn't that-they are against what we say. They felt that it was-it was good what we said. And they never would, uh, argue with you, you know, or anything. They'd say (now she goes into a whisper), "Very good! That was very good!", (F: Huh?). So it-it uh; those who could understand, I mean, just, there's many, many people that are very delinquent there. I mean they just can't understand, uh, the things you (she laughs a little bit). It was hard for them to understand, you know, they would always say (she goes into a whisper again), "That was good! That was good!" (she laughs a little--then a ten second pause). And yet you have to, you have to, uh, respect them because they really (pauses) -- in all these years, you know, that--since the Mohammedans, uh, Mohammedans became this--these kink of, had this religious faith, they--they've stuck to it, you know? And wherever they went they--they propagated, too. I was reading again about, uh, in uh (she pauses a few seconds, trying to remember). Where they, where the Moors--the Moors, you know, are, were the Mohammedans. (she suddenly remembers something). Spain! When they--they invaded Spain? (F: Yeah). It's in one, in one of those books I think, I read it again (she indicates a half dozen or so modern Arab magazines). How-how, everywhere that they went, they propagated their--their religion. (F: Huh). And uh, they were very strong in Spain. There's still people there, there's still Moors there. Those are magazines from, uh, all, from uh, Mohammedan world, Aramco. Aren't they good looking? (some young Arabs are on the cover of the magazines). Really good looking. This is really the way they, this is the sheiks, they always have the white. So these must be the sheik's--sons of the sheik. They're nice looking. There--really are some very nice looking Arabs. And they, they love to dress! (she now whispers, speaking with lots feeling). Oh, proud! (she laughs, then pauses).

Arabs love coffee. They drink it black (F: Yeah?) --(she laughs). And they have little, little uh (she shows about one
and a half inches between her thumb and index finger), little uh— I'll show you, I've got some Arab cups. I'll show you (she put's down the magazine and starts for the dining room. We follow and turn off the tape, and question her on the Arabian materials exhibited throughout the living and dining rooms).