

Ruth Virginia Gaines Waddell (1923-2021)

Ruth Gaines Waddell was a kind, but unapologetic activist in McLean County. She was a tireless Civil Rights activist, union organizer, and a community leader who led by example. Waddell considered herself a “good citizen, doing what I could to make things better, not only for my life but for others. That I walked up right, as my parents taught me, proud of myself and my family, lovingly, as a child of God should be.” Her tireless work ethic and dogged determination to do what’s right made her an exemplary role model for all McLean County residents.

Ruth Virginia Gaines was born on April 10, 1923, in Lincoln, Illinois, the oldest of six children born to Luther and Marie (Whiteside) Gaines. When Ruth was about one and a half years old, her family moved to Bloomington, where her father Luther had been born.

She attended Bloomington public schools, first Irving School then Raymond School. Waddell attended Bloomington High School for three years, but a leg injury she sustained due to scalding during her junior year required her to stay home for an extended amount of time. After she recuperated, she “just didn’t go back” and went to work full time instead.¹

Job opportunities for black women were generally limited to domestic work. Waddell started doing housework when she was 13 years old, working after school and on Saturdays. When she got into high school, she began working for Three Sisters Dress Shop, located at 310 E. Mulberry in Bloomington. She pressed clothes and hung them up, uncrated merchandise, and in the evenings when the store was closed, vacuumed. She worked there every night after school, making \$4 a week (or the equivalent of \$93 in 2025).² After dropping out of high school, Waddell worked for the family of Bob Davis full time out at the Bloomington Country Club. This was around the same time that she met her future husband, Oscar Waddell. She continued to work for the Davis family until she and Oscar got married on April 10, 1941. She was 18 years old at the time.³ Ruth and Oscar had one daughter, Nancy.

After Ruth and Oscar got married, they lived in an apartment above Nathan’s Tavern, located at 1101 West Washington Street in Bloomington, which Oscar had been renting before they got married.⁴ Prior to Oscar being drafted into the United States Army in 1942, they began looking for a new place to live. According to Ruth, they “rode around and rode around and called around” and no one would rent to them because of the color of their skin. She recalled that the landlords would always tell them, “I would rent to you, but the neighbors will complain.” They continued to look for a new home and finally found a little house to rent at 311 East Lincoln Street that had only recently had water put in it. However, the Waddell’s experienced a similar situation, the landlord stated that he would like to rent to them, “but the neighbors in this neighborhood would not permit no Negroes.”⁵ This upset Oscar very much. He went to the owner and sternly explained that he was going into the military to protect this nation, and he very much wanted this house for his wife, Ruth. Eventually, the owner capitulated and agreed to rent the house to them.

¹ Oscar and Ruth Waddell Oral History, interview by Dr. Mildred Pratt, July 15, 1986, oral history transcript, The Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Museum of History, Bloomington, IL, p.6.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm, Date Accessed 1/26/2026.

³ “Oscar Waddell Weds Miss Gaines,” *The Pantagraph*, April 11, 1941.

⁴ Oscar and Ruth Waddell Oral History, 1986, p. 9

⁵ Ibid.

Additionally, Oscar did not want Ruth to work anymore now that they were married. Ruth, however, wanted to continue working. According to Ruth, Oscar left to begin his military service on a Friday, and she went back to work on the following Monday, doing housekeeping work for Dr. Ed Stevenson (father of actor McLean Stevenson) and his family. She worked from 7:00 a.m. until 9:00 or 9:30 p.m. because she never knew what time the doctor would get home. To get to his house, she would either have to ride the bus or walk from their home on East Lincoln Street (which meant cutting through Evergreen Memorial Cemetery and crossing Empire Street) to the doctor's home on Clinton Boulevard.⁶ According to Ruth, Dr. Stevenson did not pay very much (\$23.00 every two weeks) and the hours were long. So, after seven months, she decided "the heck with this" and quit to go work for Eureka Williams (known as William's Oil-O-Matic at the time).

Williams Oil-O-Matic Heating Corp opened during the First World War due to the coal shortage. Founder Walter W. Williams invented an oil-powered heater for home or office and began manufacturing them. The alternative fuel heaters sold well and soon the growing company built a new factory at Bell and Hannah Streets on the south side of Bloomington. Williams began war production the year before Pearl Harbor and began producing "oil-gears" for anti-aircraft guns. Once the U.S. entered the war, Williams shifted to 100 percent war production. By late May 1942, the plan began working around the clock, seven days a week, with no holiday shutdowns. In addition to "oil gears," the company manufactured smoke screen generators for the U.S. Navy and parts for the Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber.⁷

World War II brought some important changes to the factory. Because the military draft was depleting the workforce, Williams was losing 383 employees to the armed forces. This forced the company to look for other employment pools—women and African Americans. The company initially hired 56 women in early 1943, followed by black workers.⁸ By the spring of 1944, 300 or more "Rosie the Riveters" were working at the plant. And while black individuals were allowed to work at the company at this time, they were not allowed to join the union and typically there were only certain jobs at the plant available to black individuals like cleaning or filing. One job that was open to black employees was working in the "Burr Room." Ruth recalled that the "burr job" she did was to eliminate the sharp edges, burrs, or surface imperfections left by the manufacturing process. She said they paid a good salary, and she worked there for 26 months (over two years). However, when the war over, she and all but one of the black employees were let go. The one woman who kept her job was Mrs. Erma Doage, who cleaned the bathrooms.⁹

After losing her job at Williams, Ruth was told to seek unemployment compensation and to go to the unemployment office located on Lee and West Washington streets. She remembered that even though her father's brother, Walter Gaines (a graduate of Illinois State Normal University), was employed there, she was consistently refused unemployment compensation. Ruth stated that on two separate occasions the unemployment office recommended she seek

⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁷ Kemp, Bill. "Williams Oil-O-Matic plant beat plowshares into swords," *The Pantagraph*, August 30, 2009.

⁸ Matejka, Mike. "McLean County Labor History: World War II, 1950s & racial integration," Bloomington & Normal Trades & Labor Assembly / Livingston & McLean Counties Building & Trades Council, http://www.bntrades.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=444858&page=Labor20history202620culture, Date Accessed January 26, 2026.

⁹ Oscar and Ruth Waddell Oral History, 1986, p. 13.

employment at the Kurly Kate corporation, which made stainless steel sponges. The company was located at 110 South Center Street on the second floor.¹⁰ And both times she applied at that business, she was “overlooked and passed by” as she stood in line and ignored and avoided while waiting in the reception office. Ruth decided to give up trying to get a job making the “Kurly Kate” and also to give up receiving unemployment compensation, because they didn’t want to pay her. Instead, she found a job as a housekeeper working for David Sterns, owner of Sterns Furniture Co. in downtown Bloomington.¹¹

Ruth enjoyed working for the Sterns family, and David Sterns really liked her and Oscar. Ruth had fond memories of taking care of the Sterns’ children, Harry, Sybil, and Judy (who became the first female mayor of Bloomington). However, after the Sterns moved from Woodland Avenue to a much larger house in the Bloomington County Club area, she was let go from her position. In her oral history Ruth recalled that Gertrude Stern, David’s wife, told Ruth “I want you to work for me, but I need someone who is going to climb around like a monkey and clean this place, and I know you are not going to do it.” Ruth was then replaced by a white woman.¹² After being let go, she went to work at St. Joseph’s Hospital as a nurse’s aide. Ruth worked there for about seven and a half years. Since she worked a “split shift” she continued cleaning apartments in between shifts.¹³

Ruth saved most of the money she worked for and the money her husband Oscar sent her from his military income, totaling over \$8,000, by the time Oscar returned from military service in 1946. And she knew just what she would do with it—fulfill her childhood wish of owning a home. They had plans drawn up for an all-brick house to be built on the lot next to the house they rented, which Ruth had purchased for \$400 while Oscar was still in the military. Ruth desired to purchase the house they were renting, but the landlord did not want to sell it to them because “it was an investment” for him. He did agree to sell them the lot next to it (309 E. Lincoln Street) so that one day they could build their own home.¹⁴

When Oscar applied for a G.I. home loan (which would have helped them build their house), he was denied with no formal reason given. A home loan is one of the most important benefits guaranteed in the G.I. Bill (or the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944). The G.I. Bill was designed to provide returning service members with a variety of benefits such as low-cost mortgages, funds to pay tuition and living expenses to attend college, or low-interest loans for veterans who wished to start their own business. These benefits were open to all veterans who were honorably discharged and who had served at least 120 days of active duty (combat duty not required). However, black servicemen returning from World War II, like Oscar, were systematically denied home loans and most of the other benefits guaranteed by the G.I. Bill due to racism. Not only would most banks not give loans for mortgages for homes in black neighborhoods, but most African Americans experienced rampant racism if they attempted to buy a home in white neighborhoods.¹⁵

¹⁰ “Chicago Corporation Moves Factory Here,” *The Pantagraph*, August 10, 1944.

¹¹ Oscar and Ruth Waddell Oral History, 1986, 14.

¹² *Ibid*, 18.

¹³ *Ibid*, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

¹⁵ “After the War: Blacks and the G.I. Bill,” *The American Experience*, <https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/After-the-War-Blacks-and-the-GI-Bill.pdf>, Date Accessed January 27, 2026; Oscar and Ruth Waddell Oral History, 1986, p. 22.

So, the Waddells were on their own to finance their new home. With the help of friends who knew she could afford a new home, they went with her to the bank (Bloomington Federal) for support and community confirmation. The bank gave the Waddells a 20-year mortgage loan, which allowed them to hire master builder Earnest Rueber, a popular local Amish architect. They moved in the week before Christmas in December 1959. Ruth was proud of the fact that they paid their mortgage off early, after only 11 ½ years.¹⁶

Ruth was determined not to spend the rest of her life cleaning houses or doing housekeeping work. She wanted a better paying job. She liked working in a factory like she did during World War II. In June 1953, Ruth saw a newspaper ad for employment at the new General Electric (GE.) plant which was coming to Bloomington. Ruth decided that she would apply for a job there and left St. Joseph's Hospital, especially because she "was sick of the nuns and bedpans."¹⁷

To qualify for a position at G.E., a physical exam and a physical dexterity test were administered at the Rogers Hotel. Ruth, along with 59 other women from Bloomington and surrounding area women, took the exams. Ruth's exam number was #60 and she was the only black applicant at the time. Ruth's application was in and she passed all of the tests but never received a call from G.E.¹⁸ For months, Ruth waited for the call to report to work and watched as one-by-one, each of her white female counterparts were called into training. She knew this because most of them were friends and even neighbors. So, when G.E. began hiring the women two and three at a time and she still had not been called, she voiced her concerns by calling, which was ignored. Finally on a Wednesday, Ruth stated that she got "her dandruff up" and intentionally visited the now new training center, located above the Bloomington Glass Company, in Bloomington.¹⁹ After repeatedly being told to wait until she was called on, Ruth demanded employment and employment "now" or she would sit in lobby chair until she was hired. By Monday, September 24, 1954, Ruth was hired and started her training. This made her the first black employee at the local factory. She picked up the work quickly and never backed down.

It was not until several years later that Ruth learned the truth why it took so long for her to be hired. It was not G.E., (they had a no discrimination policy), and it was not the fault of her friends, but the powerful Bloomington Association of Commerce. Their membership believed they would lose most, if not all, of their minority home helpers (maids and servants) to the new G.E. Plant and fought hard to delay their employment.

Ruth's job was wiring two-fold motors. She stated that the proudest moment of her life was when she got to see her work firsthand when she visited the Hoover Dam, and watched the doors move up and then down using the two-fold motors she helped to wired.

And Ruth was a tireless worker. She noted that although her shift at the G.E. plant was 7:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., in 1969 she began working for State Farm Insurance as a corporate cleaner, working a 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. night shift for over 7 years. She noted the corporate office most often received two independent inspections, and she never received a poor mark.

Oscar began work for G.E. in March 1955. Ruth suggested to her supervisor to interview her husband for the job, running a new hydraulic Press. He was tested by Hank Mclean and won

¹⁶ Ibid, 19-20, 24.

¹⁷ Ibid, 19.

¹⁸ "IAM Retiree Honored as Human Rights 'History Maker,'" IAM Union, <https://www.goiam.org/news/iam-retiree-honored-as-human-rights-history-maker/>, Date Accessed, January 26, 2027.

¹⁹ Oscar and Ruth Waddell Oral History, 1986, p. 21.

the job. Prior to his 28-year career at G.E., Oscar worked as a bus mechanic for National City Lines in Bloomington before World War II. His father, Oscar, had a connection to the C.U. Williams & Son Co., but in a servant role, serving as Charles U. Williams' chauffeur. After the war he took a sweeper job at Meadows Manufacturing Company, which manufactured washing machines.²⁰ One day a hydraulic press operator did not report for work. Oscar had studied the process for weeks and quickly stepped into position. He ran the machine and the company allowed him to continue.²¹ This experience helped him get on at G.E.

Ruth and Oscar were instrumental in founding IAM Machinist Lodge 1000, which represented G.E.'s blue collar workforce. Ruth herself was responsible for signing many workers up to join the union. She would meet workers "back in the alley" around Bloomington late at night, near the YWCA to sign up workers. She travelled to cities like Gridley, Leroy, Clinton, Arrowsmith, and many other Central Illinois municipalities, during this time. Ruth recalled that many times on these recruitment trips, she was the one and the only woman doing this type of work. Ruth remembered that "everyone came across the factory to me because they knew I was going to fight. I didn't take any guff. I'd get right up and go to that office and raise all kinds of sand." She actively recruited and signed up fellow workers to join in union membership, and in a few short years they were successful. A union was born. Ruth served as a Shop Steward for nearly 29 years.²² "I a good steward," according to Ruth. "They'd come across the factory floor to get me to fight for them. I demanded respect."²³

Ruth worked for G.E. for 35 years, using only 11 sick days, and was never laid off. And although there was a 4 ½ month strike in 1969, the Union was able to return the time back to the employees.²⁴

She credits the work and leisure ethic of the Schenectady, New York based, multinational conglomerate General Electric administration and staffers, all of whom loved bowling, with encouraging her to learn to bowl. Ruth remembered that she learned to bowl with a 16-pound Ebonite black and green ball lovingly named "Kid" by her husband Oscar, and she carried a 200 average.

The G.E. plant formed a men's and women's team for the black employees, followed by a travelling bowling team. They travelled all over the United States. Ruth recalled it was her friends Bill Kennedy and Walter Walls that came up with the idea of forming a Traveling Bowling League. They approached her to help recruit unisex teams, and The "ILL /MO" Traveling Bowling league was formed, bowling every third Sunday of the month, following a tract from East St. Louis to West St. Louis, Mo., Champaign, to Danville to Peoria to Decatur to Bloomington. Home Dinners, and many social, civic and fraternal organizations began to take hold in the community. Ruth enjoyed bowling with local women's leagues and her company team for decades.

Ruth was recognized with several awards for her work as a human right leader and activist, and leader in organized labor. In 2000, Ruth was awarded the Bloomington Human

²⁰ Kemp, Bill. "C.U. Williams & Son led Bloomington into the auto age," *The Pantagraph*, February 17, 2013.

²¹ Matejka, "McLean County Labor History: World War II, 1950s & racial integration."

²² "IAM Retiree Honored as Human Rights 'History Maker.'"

²³ Matejka, "McLean County Labor History: World War II, 1950s & racial integration."

²⁴ "IAM Retiree Honored as Human Rights 'History Maker.'"

Relations Award and in 2013 she was honored as a History Maker by the McLean County Museum of History.²⁵

Ruth Virginia Waddell passed away on February 23, 2021. She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her husband, Oscar.²⁶

By: Charles R Alsberry, 2013

Edits and Additions: Candace Summers, 2026

²⁵ Arney, Steve. "Four Twin City residents to be honored for work against racism," The Pantagraph, January 8, 2000.

²⁶ Find a Grave, database and images (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/263786692/ruth_v-waddell: accessed January 27, 2026), memorial page for Ruth V. Gaines Waddell (10 Apr 1923–23 Feb 2021), Find a Grave Memorial ID 263786692, citing Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, Bloomington, McLean County, Illinois, USA; Maintained by Evergreen Memorial Cemetery (contributor 50496244).