

AGNES MACDONALD Interviewed By Dawn Salvato-6-20-84-Side B

DAWN SALVATO: Agnes MacDonald at Eisenhower Center. May I ask you your name?

AGNES MACDONALD: Agnes MacDonald, of course.

DS: Could you tell me your age and your date of birth?

AM: I'll be 97 Sunday.

DS: Could you tell me about your family background?

AM: Well, I was born on the east side here in Bridgeport and went to public school here. In those days high school was the exception rather than the rule. So when I was 14 I went to work and enjoyed a good home life. I had a mother, but no father. And I had a sister and brothers. And then came World War I. [00:01:00] By that time I was married, but my husband enlisted. And I went to work in the Remington Arms as an inspector. And we worked -- there was three shifts those days. It was from 7:00 to 3:00, 3:00 to 11:00, and 11:00 to 7:00. And I was on the first shift. And then along came Armistice Day, and that was a big day in Bridgeport. We celebrated on Main Street. There was trucks going up and down all day, loaded with people cheering. And it was quite a [gala?] time we had. So want me to go on? And so then my husband came home from the war, and we continued housekeeping. [00:02:00] And I had a

son and a daughter. The son is living in the south end of Bridgeport. The daughter is passed away. Grandchildren, of course. And my immediate family, my two brothers and a sister, they have gone. So I guess I'm the last survivor of the family. Before I was married my name was Wendt, W-E-N-D-T. German origin. And so then I retired. I went to work in Warner's. And that was a very nice place to work. It was like a big clubhouse. We had our coffee breaks, and we had our social times. And it was just a very nice place to work. And I worked there for 32 years. And then when I retired from there, I started [00:03:00] to go to these golden age clubs. And they were very enjoyable. The first one was in the First Baptist Church over on Kossuth and Arctic Street. That was golden age number one, and it's still in existence. And -- am I doing all right? Then came the recognition, more or less, by the city of the seniors. And we had a center up in the Stratfield Hotel. And I went there while it was in existence. And then the Eisenhower Center was obtained. And I come here regularly ever since it opened. And I hope to come here for another few weeks anyhow. [00:04:00] You can never tell. I've developed a little bit of arthritis, and I have to depend on transportation. But otherwise I enjoy every single minute. We're well-entertained, and we have a lovely

luncheon, and we have a library, and we have a piano, and we have our social life here. Cards and what have you. Gossip, sometimes. And, well, I guess that's about it. My health is good otherwise, but for my arthritis. I don't seem to need much medical care. I had a couple of cataracts removed, and then my hearing isn't too good. But I have a hearing aid, and I got along pretty well with it. People are very patient, [00:05:00] very understanding. And well, that's about it. Broke a hip, but that was well-mended and well taken care of up in the Bridgeport Hospital. So that's all. (laughs)

DS: Well, getting back to the time you were growing up as a kid, was it hard for you?

AM: When I broke my hip?

DS: No, as you were growing up. As a kid?

AM: No. It might have been, but I had a happy home life. And while we didn't have very much money, my mother was an exceptionally good woman, a good cook. And we always had plenty to eat, and the house was always warm, and she always welcomed our friends. So I had, I guess, an average life.

DS: So you were born here in Bridgeport?

AM: Yes, on Seaview Avenue. Which, [00:06:00] at that time, in 1887, belonged to the town of Stratford. And my birth

records are in the town of Stratford, but I was born on Seaview Avenue. So then that very same year, I think, Bridgeport annexed part of Stratford out to Bruce's Brook, I guess, on the east. And then it annexed -- on the west, I think, it annexed it out to Ash Creek, because Division Street was the boundary of Bridgeport at that time.

Seaview Avenue on the right, on the east, and Division Street on the west. Those are the boundaries of Bridgeport. And then they were, of course, enlarged. And I've been active in politics, more or less. Enjoy seeing my party elected [00:07:00] and sometimes defeated. And that's it. Oh, dear, this thing is going.

DS: During the time of the Depression, did your family manage? Was it hard or -- you know, during it?

AM: No. No, I wouldn't consider it. We always had enough to eat. My husband worked on the city gangs, and they gave out boxes. We did the best we could. I never was hungry and always paid my bills.

DS: OK. During the time of the Civil Rights --

AM: (inaudible) Quite a [00:08:00] lot of discussion. And I think they made progress. And I think the progress is for the benefit of everybody. I think that we should all be considered equal. And -- [is this?] what you're talking about?

DS: Yeah.

AM: And I don't think any exceptions should be made for creed, color, or nationality. I think when they come here, if they become citizens, we should all have the same privileges and the same aid if we need it.

DS: You told me that you lived on the east end? You grew up on the east end of Bridgeport?

AM: Bridgeport, yes.

DS: In the east end?

AM: The east side. [00:09:00]

DS: Could you tell me something about the neighborhoods, how they were? Did everybody get along during the --

AM: Yes, we did. Frankly, the ethnic groups have changed since then, which you well know. I went to Barnum School, and that was a rather a -- well, it was a public school, but there was -- a lot of very well-to-do people lived in that district, especially up Noble Avenue and so on. And it was rather a -- well, you'd compare it to the Brooklawn Country Club. It was sort of, you know, exclusive. But the education was good. Each teacher had 50 seats in her room. And sometimes the seats were all filled. One teacher sometimes had 50 [00:10:00] pupils. We walked to school. We walked home from school. We had outdoor recess. And there was never any internal dissension, or no graffiti, or

nothing like that when I went to school. Everybody seemed to be well-behaved and minded the teacher, and tried to be on time, and tried to get something out of the school. At least I did.

DS: How long was the school day?

AM: How long? From 9:00 until 12:00, and from 1:00 -- from half past 1:00 to 3:00. And we had outdoor exercises, I say, in the morning, when the weather permitted. And everybody -- well, most everybody walked [00:11:00] to school those days. The Barnum school district enclosed as far up as Beardsley Park, and as far over as East Main, and as far down to the Pequannock River.

DS: How long was the school year? The school year, how long was it?

AM: From September until June, the same as it is now.

DS: How were the grades managed? What kind of grades -- did they grade you with A's and B's, or with number grades?

AM: No, they -- first grade to the ninth grade. And we had our monthly tests. And if you had a high average, you got the favorable seats in the back of the school room. But we didn't get any -- and we got our reports that we had to bring home and get signed and return. I suppose that's [00:12:00] the same method now, is it?

DS: Yeah. Were they graded with A's and B's, or numbers, or --

how did they grade? With letters? They grade you with letters?

AM: No, they grade -- I quite don't get you. You mean in the -
- (break in audio)

DS: Were there any movies, like theaters? You know, performing areas where you go for entertainment?

AM: I don't quite understand. (break in audio) That was the first one. And then came Poli's, and then about that time came the -- well, I guess the movies was later than that, because I guess that was like in the '20s when the movies came along. But there was a couple of theaters in Bridgeport. There was a couple of newspapers in Bridgeport at that time. There was the Standard, and there was the Farmer. [00:13:00] And there were three newspapers. And there was the Post. Then afterwards I think we had the Daily Union, but that didn't last very long. Then we had the Bridgeport Herald.

DS: Getting back to the schools, who supported the schools? Did the government support --

AM: Yeah, we had the board of education.

DS: And who paid the teachers to teach?

AM: I think the city did. We were not -- at least the people in the lower classes, the poorer classes, they were never taxed. I suppose the school tax was put on the property

tax, or something like that.

DS: To help pay for the teachers.

AM: Sure. Probably, yeah. The teachers didn't get too much those days. [00:14:00] I couldn't tell you what they got, but I know it was very, very little compared with what they get these days.

DS: Did you ever go to the beaches after school?

AM: Oh, yes. We used to -- I lived on the east side, as I say. And we used to walk down to Seaside Park and go in bathing. We never had the bathhouse that's out there now. We never had -- we used to go down the -- go to Main Street and go in the water there. And our mothers would come with us and bring a lunch in a bag and maybe a bottle of homemade root beer. We had good times. Always, always we were out to watch the parades, of which there were many those days.

[00:15:00]

DS: Do you remember --

AM: I can remember when the first trolley ran up Noble Avenue to Beardsley Park. My mother took my younger sister and I. It was a cold night, and we walked up to Beardsley Park, and the trolley came along, and we all cheered it. And that was it.

DS: Do you remember the Barnum Festival? Barnum, P.T. Barnum?

AM: Oh, we never had no Barnum Festival.

DS: No?

AM: Is that what you just said to (inaudible). Barnum Circus was always -- had its headquarters in Bridgeport, out in the west end, now west Went Field between Wordin Avenue and Norman Street. That was a great big barn there, and that was their winter headquarters. And, of course, the circus always came to town, and there was always a great big [00:16:00] circus parade. And we never missed that. And that was it. People out in the west end, where I lived when I was first married, they always went out to see the tents being erected, and they always went out after the tents were pulled down to see what they could gather up, salvage, as it were.

DS: Back then, were the teenagers as corrupt as they are now? The teenagers were they as corrupt as they are now? You know, like they're all wild and -- teenagers now?

AM: No. Nothing like that.

DS: How were they? Everybody got along --

AM: Oh, yes, yes. Children would scrap once in a while with each other like [00:17:00] they scrap nowadays, but there was never no --

DS: Drinking?

AM: No, no. Nothing. Not much crime or anything like that. No burglaries. We used to go out and leave our key under

the mat, and anybody (whistling sound) -- oh, you can hear that, can't you? Anybody could come and pick up the key if they wanted to and go in, but I never was annoyed. My mother never was. And so that was that.

DS: Everybody just lived peacefully?

AM: Everybody seemed to obey themselves, behave themselves, and obey the rules of decency. I can remember one thing. We used to have a milkman. He used to come about six o'clock in the morning. My mother had a little pail out in the hall with a milk check in it. [00:18:00] One quart, or two quarts, or whatever. And he would bring his big milk can in and leave whatever it called for. One quart in the container that she had out there. That's how we got our milk. Oh, dear, I can remember that so well. Those days the milk was not homogenized, and there was cream on the top, which we always had for our breakfast cereal. I can remember that so well. I'm afraid I'm talking a lot of nonsense.

DS: No, it's quite all right. Because I like to learn about different things about the background that you had. Do you remember anything about the Vietnam War? During the time of the Vietnam War?

AM: Only what I read in the paper. It seemed to me that I was fed up with the war at the time. [00:19:00] I can remember

I had four nephews from my sister's family. They all went, and they all came back, thank god. But I couldn't tell you this day what it was for. I know that President Nixon, who was president then, was the one that ended it. At least that's my impression. I don't know whether I'm wrong or not.

DS: Well, listen, you've been a great help to me and everything. And I want to thank you for all the time and the effort that you gave me for the tape. Thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE