

Ethel Henning, Class of 1925. Interviewed October 1990.

(The interview took place in her house in Walworth, Charlie Cowling interviewing. Some editorial notes have been added to the transcript, denoted by "ed." The photo is from a scrapbook Miss Henning kept of her Normal school years and shows her at family farm in Walworth NY.)

Interviewer: This is an oral history interview with Ethel Henning, Class of 1925. Maybe we could start with just a brief biography. You could say your birth date and place again.

Ethel: You want me to now? August 28, 1902. In the town of [inaudible] [00:20] and I'm the only child in the family.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. What did your father do?

Ethel: My father was a farmer.

Interviewer: [inaudible] [00:27]

Ethel: Right, mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Your mother was a housewife?

Ethel: Yes.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to go to school at Brockport?

Ethel: Well, it was handy, it wasn't far away. I wanted, I had a very fine English teacher when I was in eighth grade that I always admired. She went to Brockport, and I wanted to go.

Interviewer: What was her name? Do you remember?

Ethel: Frances, Frances Carter. (ed., Frances Melvina Carter, Class of 1913.)

Interviewer: Oh, so she was an alumni of the school.

Ethel: I think she was.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. I think I wondered partly why Brockport instead of say, [inaudible] [01:11].

Ethel: Well, I really don't know.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ethel: It was just a choice, you know [laughs].

Interviewer: Yeah. So you went, in 1922, fall of '22 you started?

Ethel: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. What were your first impressions of Brockport?

Ethel: Well, I was kind of overcome by the size of it, of course. Because it was different from anything around here. I was young and wasn't sure of myself at that time.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ethel: To know just exactly what I should do. Everybody made it very easy and the teachers were delightful. We never had to have any unpleasant experiences. The teacher that I had when I was practicing, was a friend of mine the rest of my life. She lived down near Cherry Valley, too. She was always my ideal. If I could be like her, it would be wonderful.

Interviewer: Who was that?

Ethel: Miss Brigham. (ed., Faith Brigham, Grade 6 Training School Critic.)

Interviewer: Brigham.

Ethel: Faith Brigham. Of course we had practice, that was a practice teaching, and we had to meet with her for instruction. Then we had to meet with her for criticism afterward. It was always a very pleasant experience.

Interviewer: She was what they called a critic in the practice school?

Ethel: Yes. Yes, in the practice school.

Interviewer: How did that work? You would teach the class, and she would stand by and watch you?

Ethel: Well, sometimes she would get you started, you know, and then stand by. Then we met with her afterwards for criticism that she had. She was always very fair.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Okay. Had you been to Brockport before, before you went to school?

Ethel: No.

Interviewer: No, that was your first time. How did you get there?

Ethel: I got a trip.

Interviewer: He drove you?

Ethel: It was an old, I forgot what model, car, but yes. [laughs]

Interviewer: Oh, I see. What were your [crosstalk]

Ethel: But then we, there was a trolley that went from, from Sodus Point down here into Rochester. I would, he would take me over to [inaudible] [03:42] just down here, and I would take the trolley into

Rochester. Then I had to change, I don't remember, I know where it is, but I couldn't name it, a place where you could change. Went on the trolley to Brockport. Then got off, and had to walk, of course, and carry our luggage [laughs].

Interviewer: How long a trip was it?

Ethel: Oh, I imagine an hour from here to Rochester, and then another hour from Rochester on to Brockport.

Interviewer: Where did you get left off in Brockport? Where did the trolley drop you off in Brockport?

Do you remember?

Ethel: I guess I don't remember that.

Interviewer: Huh, that's interesting. So when you started school, where did you live. What were your living arrangements? [crosstalk]

Ethel: [inaudible] [04:40]

Interviewer: Oh, you commuted every day?

Ethel: Oh, oh. When I lived there. [crosstalk]

Interviewer: When you started at school.

Ethel: Well, we had, there were places where people took baskets and there were ones who took basket baskets. Now, you've never heard of that.

Interviewer: No.

Ethel: Well, we had a basket, or a box or something, that we took food from home. Well, my mother would make a cake or half a cake or whatever. Then the people where we lived had a refrigerator, and we put it in that. Then my father always gave me money so that if our food ran out, we could go to the store to get more.

Then another girl, she lives in St. Petersburg now. She and I worked it out together, so that she brought some things and I brought some things, and we shared them. The lady where we lived, it was right straight back of the school, it was only a little ways. The people were very nice to us. We could eat at the table with them, or however we wanted to.

I did that for the three years.

Interviewer: You lived in the same house?

Ethel: No, no we lived in different houses, but we did the same kind of thing, you know.

Interviewer: How much did that kind of arrangement cost?

Ethel: [laughs]. You know, I've often wondered that myself. But it was very reasonable. I haven't any idea how much we paid. But my father would give me, well, I don't know, maybe a dollar or whatever. A dollar bought a lot of things in those days.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Ethel: But I can't tell you that.

Interviewer: So you were the, your class was the first class to go all the way through on the three-year program.

Ethel: Right. That was a great advantage. Because when I finished at Brockport, I taught for 35 years in the same, not the same room, but the same classroom, in Solvay, which is a suburb of Syracuse.

Then, after three or four years, we began taking evening courses and I got my Bachelor's and my Master's after I taught 45-some kids in the daytime. Then I'd go up on the hill for a class at night. When I'd get back, I'd have papers to correct, of course. But that made it possible for me not to have to go to summer school.

I didn't want to go to that because my father had a farm garden. They had peaches and apples and whatever, berries together. I felt I needed to be here because there were no other children. So all of my college work came at night. Having that extra credit from that third year, you know, was pretty nice.

So, it was an advantage to have that.

Interviewer: So given that you had the three years from Brockport, how much more did you need to get a Bachelor's degree? Was it very much?

Ethel: Well, yes, it was quite a little. I can't remember, exactly. But of course, getting a Master's was five years.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ethel: But, it would be interesting, maybe it would be interesting to you to know, that we paid \$7 a credit hour for our work at Syracuse University. I don't know what it is now.

Interviewer: Well over a hundred.

Ethel: It's close to a hundred, isn't it?

Interviewer: Well over a hundred.

Ethel: We didn't have any people who were working on their Master's or Bachelor's. We had the basic teachers, of excellent faculty.

Interviewer: I'm sure they were. What were your classes at Brockport like? What kind of classes did you take?

Ethel: Oh, English and art. We had a very good art teacher. She was our friend long after I graduated, I used to go over and see her.

Interviewer: What was her name?

Ethel: Yale. Y-a-l-e. Alice Yale.

Interviewer: Alice Yale.

Ethel: Have you heard that name?

Interviewer: I've seen her picture in the old Stylus.

Ethel: She was something else, I tell you. She was wonderful. [laughs]. Oh, we had psychology and philosophy, and all the things that, you would expect, I guess. Of course, I majored in English anyways, so that interested me more than anything else. I taught that almost all of my life.

Interviewer: Who were the English instructors at Brockport? Who was teaching English at Brockport then?

Ethel: I can see her. [silence] I'm sorry, but I guess I can't tell you.

Interviewer: So you had Miss Edwards for English?

Ethel: English, right.

Interviewer: What were your classes like? Were they large? A lot of students?

Ethel: No.

Interviewer: The school was small at that time, wasn't it?

Ethel: Oh yes, yes. It was small. I wouldn't know how Interviewery there would be in a class, but, oh probably 15 or so.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. No more than 15 or 20?

Ethel: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Right, right. So, what were your impressions of the faculty at that time, Dr. Thompson, for example? What was he like?

Ethel: Well, he was a very pleasant, very accommodating interviewer, and very easy to talk to.

Interviewer: Really?

Ethel: I think they all were. I never had any problems with him, I don't know that anybody did for that matter.

Interviewer: In the pictures, in his photographs, Dr. Thompson looks somewhat stern. Was he like that?

Ethel: I don't remember that he was, but I didn't have any personal experience with him, so I wouldn't know.

Interviewer: Yes.

Ethel: But then there was Mr. Cooper. Now he had charge of those of us who were planning to be teachers. One thing that he said to me the year that I was to be graduated. We had to go in and talk to him about what kind of a job we'd like, and so on. So, my people, of course, I was the only child, and they were anxious for me to be somewhere around here. So I went in and told him, and he said, 'Well,' very stern-like, he said, 'Well, if you want a job around home, you're gonna have to get it yourself because I'm not going to be bothered with that.'

He said, 'You shouldn't be at home, you should be away from home.' So I said, 'Okay, if that's the way you feel about it, that's the way it'll be.' So, the superintendent came from Salvy, and wanted five teachers. So I was one of the five, and I was the only one who lasted. I lasted 35 years, I taught 35 years there.

I went from teaching sixth grade the first year I was there. Then as I got more work at Syracuse University, I progressed in. I was head of the English Department for quite a number of years. I also did all the senior work, and whatever had to be done with seniors. Did quite a lot of guidance before they had talked so much about guidance.

So, then when I was going to Niagara Falls one day, I thought, now I've got to stop and see Mr. Cooper, and tell him how much I appreciate what he did for me. He had retired then, but I went to see him and I told him that I thought it was fine that he saw that I should not teach at home, and that it was a very good idea, and I appreciated it. He was always a jolly fellow, and we could always go to him with any problems we had. I had a great deal of respect for him.

Interviewer: So, you feel, when you were a student, you had a lot of personal contact with the faculty?

Ethel: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Just when I look in the Stylus, for example, for that time. It seems like relations between the students and the professors were more intimate than now. [crosstalk] It's a much bigger school now, and it's hard for students to know the teachers.

Ethel: Yes. Yes, I think so. We felt very comfortable. There wasn't any reason to be uncomfortable. Because I don't remember that there were any of them that were haughty, or were difficult to approach, or anything of that nature.

(ed. The Digital Commons audio file of this interview is split at this point, 14:15 minutes.)

Interviewer: Did you go to their houses at all? I know they had faculty teas and that kind of thing.

Ethel: No, no. I think that Dr. Thompson had, at the beginning we had some kind of affair, but not...Miss Ream (ed., Fern Ream Wallace, Music) was another one.

Interviewer: She was..?

Ethel: Music.

Interviewer: Music teacher, Miss Ream?

Ethel: What was her, I don't remember her first name. But I, couldn't sing and I couldn't play the piano or anything. [laughs] Mr. Cooper gave me a teaching job in the Music Department and I went into the office and cried. I said, 'Oh, please let me out of this, I can't do this.' He said, "Oh, that's nonsense. If want to, you can do that.' So, I had to go back to my, [laughs] to Miss Ream and she would say, 'Now, you come in after school, and I'll teach you the music, and then you'll teach it to the kids.' And that's what she did. She passed me, because she knew very well that it wasn't my fault that I couldn't do it. [laughs]

I often think about her. She was very nice.

Interviewer: Do you have any other teachers that you have special memories of?

Ethel: Faith Brigham was wonderful. I think she was sixth grade critic. Yes, and I kept in touch with her all the rest of her life. She lived down near, toward the Cherry Valley area. So when I'd go, I'd always go to see her. She was very precious.

Interviewer: Speaking of the practice school, what was the practice school like? Was that in the normal school building complex?

Ethel: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: That was students from Brockport Village?

Ethel: Oh, no, it was in the college building.

Interviewer: Uh-huh, and the students were children from the village of Brockport, right?

Ethel: The what?

Interviewer: The students were children from the village...[crosstalk]

Ethel: Oh, yes. Then there was another school there, a grade school. Some of the teachers went there and taught, too. Some of the older ones, some people had had one year of training. Then because of this new situation, they went back and took two more years to finish. So, some of them were older, and they were chosen to teach in that school. They called it The Grade School, I guess, if I remember it right.

Interviewer: So you had a mixed body of students. There were students who would go in earlier under the old program for a year or two years, and now they went back to....[crosstalk] oh, I see.

Ethel: Yeah, yeah. As I remember, there was some high school kids in classes, some of the classes, too.

Interviewer: The high school was part of the practice school, wasn't it?

Ethel: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Up until just a few years after you finished, I think, I remember reading it. I think one thing I was interested in was seeing that you were an Alpha Delta, the sorority? You were President?

Ethel: Yes, I was.

Interviewer: Those sororities, the old literary societies, I think were very interesting.

Ethel: The Alpha Delta and the...[crosstalk], what was the...

Interviewer: Agonian?

Ethel: No, I think that was the, we were lower classes. The one that was, you'd felt you'd really been chosen if you were in that first one, and then the Alpha Delta was kind of halfway between. The Agonian was a lower level. I can't think of what the other [crosstalk]

Interviewer: Not the Arethusa?

Ethel: Yeah, the Arethusa.

Interviewer: The Arethusa was the top one? In terms of status?

Ethel: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Oh. Were most of the students in these sororities and fraternities?

Ethel: I don't think there were Interviewery fraternities. Because we didn't have any men, and if there were, they were [laughs] funny, funny men. They didn't fit in very well.

Interviewer: What do you remember about Alpha Delta? What kind of activities did you participate in, and so on?

Ethel: Well, goodness, I guess I can't tell you. But I remember one time, I was brought into the, I guess I had this one time I had to go to Doctor, what was his name? In his office, because they found cigarette butts behind the heating vent. So I had to go and discuss that with the head department.

Interviewer: With Dr. Thompson?

Ethel: Dr. Thompson, yeah.

Interviewer: What did he have to say about it?

Ethel: Well, he was, of course, very much disgusted with it. I had to talk to the girls about it, you know.

Interviewer: So, that was, Alpha Delta had its own room in the building?

Ethel: Yeah, we had a room there. Yeah. Well, we didn't do anything very great. I can't even remember what we did, but, it was a place to meet and eat, I guess, and have fun, and so on. Of course, we had some that were in there that, whatever you said, it wouldn't make any difference about their smoking, you know.

Interviewer: What that a, kind of a bad thing for women to do then? To smoke?

Ethel: Well, oh yes, that was not to be done.

Interviewer: I remember seeing in one of the Stylus an article about a girl getting her hair bobbed, or cut short, you know? Do you remember that kind of thing?

Ethel: No, I guess I don't remember that. Mine was long, I know for a long time after I got to teaching I had long hair. [laughs]

Interviewer: What about the Stylus. You were on the Stylus staff, weren't you, at one point?

Ethel: I think so. I can't remember that. I'm sorry my memory...[crosstalk]

Interviewer: Oh that's okay. You're giving me a lot of really wonderful information here. you know something that's interesting too, is the old Color Day. Do you remember much about Color Day?

Ethel: Oh, yes! I'd forgotten that, though.

Interviewer: It seemed like that was such a big tradition at the school.

Ethel: Yes, it was. Yeah, it was tradition.

Interviewer: So, that was in the spring.

Ethel: Right, right, yeah.

Interviewer: Could you tell a little about, maybe what you remember from Color Day? What happened, what did you do?

Ethel: No, I don't remember anything about that. No, I'm sorry, my memory doesn't serve me very well.
[laughs]

Interviewer: Was there a dance on Color Day?

Ethel: I think so, if I remember right. But I wouldn't want to be sure about that. There must have been, I think.

Interviewer: Yeah. I know one thing I saw in the Stylus. There was a Senior play that you were in. It was Seventeen.

Ethel: Yes, I'd forgotten that. [laughs] Yeah, well I tried to practice [inaudible] [21:48], anything I could. I thought that's what it was for, for you know, those things as well as studying.

Interviewer: What do you remember about the school itself, the building? Could you describe it, maybe, if you were to walk in the front?

Ethel: Well, we always went in the back door. I remember so well the room where we had art classes. It was just kind of barn-y-like, you know? And, well, nothing fancy, and I remember [laughs] Miss Yale, she would give us something to do. A still life, or something or other, like that cup and saucer. Then she would walk around, all of us, to see what they were doing.

I remember so well one day, one girl was working on it, and Miss Yale came along and she said, 'What in hell are you trying to do?' I didn't blame her because, the girl, you wouldn't know it, she was trying [laughs]. The poor thing shouldn't have been in an art class to start with [laughs]. Miss Yale wasn't angry, but she was, I guess she didn't know what to do to set the girl straight, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah. So, all of the classrooms were on the bottom floor?

Ethel: No, no. That, the art class was on the bottom floor, but the other classes, well, were kind of like, the regular everyday school classes, you know. Just a seat here and there, and the teacher sat up at the desk and taught, and it wasn't so different from a regular school. I guess, if I remember.

Interviewer: Was there a dress code for students at that time?

Ethel: No. [crosstalk] We wore whatever we had. [laughs] We were just glad we had something.

Interviewer: No. Yeah. What do you remember about the Village of Brockport at that time? What did you and your friends do for entertainment on the weekend or evening?

Ethel: Oh, I don't know. Just went to the movies, or...I don't know, I've been in Brockport, it's been quite a while. But I don't think it looks so much different from the way it did at that time. Just the streets and whatever. But I don't remember something special.

Interviewer: So you would go to see movies, that kind of thing.

Ethel: Of course, we didn't have money to do very much. Some of us always had studying to do, so we didn't have time to do anything else.

Interviewer: When you finished in 1925, you then went to Solvay to teach, [crosstalk] and that was where you had your teaching career.

Ethel: Yes, I went, in the fall, when it was time to go. I, well, I lived in a home. Another girl and I went from Walworth. She was in my class in Walworth. She had to work for her board. I didn't have to. But then we went to Solvay at the same time. She stayed two years and then she came to Rochester to teach. Because her boyfriend lived in Rochester, and he wanted her up here. So she taught in Rochester after that, and I stayed until 1960.

Then I came to Webster and taught for ten years. Because my father had died and my mother was alone. I felt that I needed to be here. So I resigned from Solvay and came here and taught ten years in Webster.

Interviewer: That would have been in...what year was that, that you came back here?

Ethel: What year?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ethel: In '10, I think it was. Well, let me see now, I was...1960 I think I came back here. I taught for ten years.

Interviewer: So, what of your classmates from Brockport have you kept touch with? Which classmates of yours? You mentioned one girl that lives in Cherry Valley?

Ethel: Well, she was the only one that I really was friendly with, and I went to her farm. They lived on a farm, and I used to go every summer and stay a few days. But, otherwise, I guess, well, I can't remember any special one, except her.

Interviewer: What was her name?

Ethel: Gertrude. Gertrude Hanson, no it's married name is Hanson. It's Gertrude Strauss. S-t-r-a-u-s-s. She lived in [inaudible] [27:24] Basin.

Interviewer: She now lives in Cherry Valley?

Ethel: Right. Mm-hmm. She married a farmer down there, and very lovely cattle farm.

Interviewer: Do you have any other special memories of the school or people there? That you would care to share?

Ethel: Well, no, I guess I don't really. I need somebody here to say, 'Do you remember when?' [laughs]
[crosstalk] But I don't have that.

Interviewer: Yes. Yes. Maybe what we can do is stop this for now.

[28:09]