

A Woman Worth Knowing: Full Interview

Interview of Edith Renfrow Smith '37 by Jackie Hartling Stolze

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Edith Renfrow Smith:

So, what else do you want to know about Grinnell?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, tell me, how did it feel to be at Grinnell? Did you feel like a pioneer or a leader? Did you feel-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No. Never felt like a leader. You know, I was just part of the group and I enjoyed all the group activities that we had at Grinnell. And Professor Conard was the Botany professor and he taught us so much. We had a botanical garden and he told us about all the flowers that are there and in the fall, he let us dig up the peonies and I got every color that they had and planted them in our yard.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh nice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So we had those beautiful, huge, pink, white, and red peonies that bloomed.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

They're beautiful. Why did he dig them up?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, you know, they always dig them up and divide them because otherwise they get too many tubers.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Gotcha. Grinnell still has beautiful gardens.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Everybody around campus has pretty gardens.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And the botanical garden was south of Sixth. It went from Sixth to Fifth and it had a walkway through the botanical garden. It was right on the rock of the M, we call it the M&StL, Minnesota and St. Louis Railroad.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Or missing and still lost. Have you heard that one?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yes!

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow, I didn't know there were gardens over there.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. See, that area right next to the railroad, that whole area between Sixth and Fifth was a botanical garden.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That must have been pretty.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was beautiful because he had all those beautiful flowers and all the different kinds. And you know, he was a most outstanding moss professor in the United States.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really? How interesting. Did you take some classes from him too?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes. We all had to take botany.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did you like that?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So it sounds like Grinnell was a pretty welcoming place.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, it was! Well, of course, Grinnell was just a part of us. And we had so many of the people who were professors at Grinnell belonged to the Congregational Church and they had known our family because I had five siblings and they were always interested in what they would do.... Because Professor... Because Nollen, President Nollen, was president when my sister graduated from high school, my oldest sister, and they were, he and his wife were instrumental in sending her to Fisk.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So where did you fall in the family order? Were you the oldest or the youngest?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, I was next to the youngest. I was number five. And then my brother was number six and I had three sisters and two brothers.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And when they had the 75th anniversary for Grinnell, my mother was in the pageant that they had at the Grinnell High School.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, really? Tell me about the pageant. What was that like?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, it was all about the history of Grinnell.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

The city or the college?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh no, not the college, the city.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. Got it.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

See we were part of the city. Oh, it was just so interesting to see all... Because all the people were in costume and back in those days, those dresses were long and-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, they were.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And very different from our day. And my mother had gone to school with Mrs. Grace Peck. And that was when Grinnell had an Academy. Oh, you see, my mother was involved with academic Grinnell way back then.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

She must've been a big believer in education.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh my, that was first thing. She said, "Get an education. Get an education." That's all we heard, all of us. And that was just a part. And she always told us, "They may be more beautiful, they may have more money, they may have more clothes, but there is no one better than you."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, that's great.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. That was her motto. And that's what she taught us. And so, consequently, even though we did... Having six members of the family, and my father was a shift and sometimes he had work, sometimes he didn't, but he raised everything that Henry Fields had in his catalog and he also planted every kind of fruit tree that would grow. And my mother canned everything, including the chickens. Because when it's so cold, chickens won't lay and so that's when she would can them. And she started out in March with baby chicks.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you ate good, because I know-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

We ate well, very well because in the fall, before my mother killed the hens, she would put them down in what they call water glass so we would have eggs all winter. And of course my father raised everything and they had a big wooden box in the basement where they saved the potatoes. And then in the garden, he dug a hole for the carrots and the cabbages.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

He must have had a green thumb.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He did. And then he bought all... You see, with my mother having canned everything canable, she made dill pickles and sauerkraut and grape juice and dried herbs and-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Everything.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So we had... So I could never say that we went hungry.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And those were Depression years, right, when you were in school? So times were tough.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes! Those were the Depression years because see I was born in '14.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. My dad was born in 1915 and he-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

My mother was born in '75. But she had learned how to do all the... And the people in Grinnell, back then the children wore long cotton stockings, and when they wore the feet out, they gave them to mother and she cut them diagonally and ran a seam and we called them railroad stockings so we had every color stocking anybody else had ever had! But the were railroad stockings because the feet were out because the children had worn out the foot, but she made the railroad stockings.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah, people got really good at figuring out how to make do.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah, and she made our clothes from newspaper patterns; mine anyway. My sisters were older and they would....

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So the patterns would be in the newspaper and she would cut them out, or she would design them herself?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh no, she made her own patterns.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, she'd cut them out of newspaper and then she cut them out of the cloth.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

She must've been pretty talented.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

You know in those days, the flour sacks were percale or cotton, and so consequently, she... And they had lovely patterns and she made, then made them all. And she was good at it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. She sounds like a great lady.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, she was. My mother was a lady before her time because she would not let us eat, she baked bread three times a week and she would not let us eat any hot bread because she said it wasn't good for us.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No. And she wouldn't make white bread. She always made graham bread.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Which we know now is good for us.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And you see, I don't even see graham flour anymore. Have you seen it?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, no, I haven't. Graham crackers I guess is about it.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, but graham flour, and that was white flour that had brown flakes in it. I don't know how they made it, but that's what she always bought is graham flour.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I bet it was way healthier than the white flour.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I'm sure it was. I'm sure it was because it must have had all the nutrients in it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. I always loved warm breads though; homemade bread. She wouldn't let you eat that, huh?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh no. She made something... She learned how to make this when we lived in Renwick, she called it coffee kuchen. Kuchen. K-U-C-H-E-N. And you know, [crosstalk 00:10:42] in Renwick... And she called it coffee kuchen, and in Renwick there were lots of Germans and that's what she learned was bread. And she made it in a square pan and she put sugar and cinnamon on top when she baked it and that's why we called it coffee-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That sounds delicious.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was! It was very good.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So it sounds like Grinnell was a good place to grow up.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was, it was a great place to grow up because we walked to school, and they had good teachers, and it was just a great place. At least for me, it was. Now, everyone doesn't have the same experience. And my daughter tells me that I am oblivious to many, many things that are going on. And so she's, "Mommy, that's probably why you got along so well because you don't pay attention to what people..."

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And I guess that is true. That's why Grinnell is such a great place.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Sounds like a good skill.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And having lived there always, because we had a house on First Avenue and I just sold the house four years ago.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did you?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. Because back in those days, there were only two houses on the block and ours was on the hill and at the... The house was built right on the alley and see all the land all the way to the corner and then, because we had three lots.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you had a lot of space for growing things.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, and my mother always made us play at home and we had friends who came in and one of my friends is still living in Tama, Iowa, and she worked at the Grinnell Library and she is 93.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

94! She was 94 this week.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow. Have you been back to Grinnell lately?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I haven't been back to Grinnell for five years. That was the last time I was able to drive and I drove up there and I had to go by myself because my husband was sick and he couldn't go. And I said, "Well, that's it. I'm not going to drive back." And I drove back on 6 because I said I missed 80.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right. A more pleasant drive.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah, it was great drive.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So what did you think? I mean, has it changed much?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, it's changed a lot because you know, when I lived in Grinnell, there were 3000, if we had a total population of 3000... Now, I don't know how many thousands there are now.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Just a little over 9, 9000.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Is that right?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And see where I lived, I lived on First Avenue, across the street, there was nothing, and then when we went over the hill, that was a pasture.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you're practically out in the country.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, we didn't consider it... And then up at the top of the hill... And see then the cemetery was not on First Avenue then, it was just south of First Avenue and west. And at the top of the hill, just before we got to the country, that's where the people lived who had cows. And that's where we walked to get our milk. And it was, we were only about maybe four blocks from the country.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

But still in town.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah. We were in town... Yeah, because see the cemetery's in town. And then Arbor Lake is south. It was just over the hill from us. There weren't that... And you see, there weren't any houses on Center Street. See, there weren't any houses on the south side of Center Street. There was on North side, yes, but as I said, two houses, so there only about two houses there. Because see these people always say, "Oh, I had big lots." Not big lots, but big spaces more than-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Which is nice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was! Because see, they had 50... See, each lot is 50 feet. That's a nice lot of space.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It's very nice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

For everybody.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did you take a look at campus when you were back?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, my yes.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

You should see it now. It's probably changed a lot since then.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I bet it doesn't even look like the same place, because ... do you know where the Matlack House is?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I'm not sure. Is it on Broad?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, no. It's on East Street and 10th. East and 10th.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

See that's up in that corner.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was just like going into an estate because there was a long wall going up to their house and they had all the trees and the grapevines, everything and lots and lots of land.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So it was nice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, it was lovely. That's where the Matlacks lived.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I wonder if that house is still there?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I don't know. I really don't know if it's still there.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It was on 10th, right?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was on 10th and East.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It was right at the corner. Here's 10th and here's East, so the house would be up here?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Right, right, across on the-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It might be.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

North side of East and East of East Avenue. I mean East Street not East Avenue.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yes.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Did you know Laura? Laura Wieman?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I didn't.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. Well, Laura Wieman lived there the last. She was the last of her family. Although, her sister moved back and lived in Fanny Buchanan's house. But I think her sister died before she did. So all the Matlacks are gone.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

They were a wonderful family from what I hear.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

My, yes. And their mother was a weaver and so was Laura. Oh, they made beautiful things on their looms. And of course, the mother did a lot of social work in the city.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right. Right. Well, there are still things on campus that I know you would recognize because Herrick is still there. And ...

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Now what did they do about the quadrangle? No, the quadrangle was where the boys lived, was where the girls lived?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It's still there.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And, that dining room that had the vaulted ceiling? It's still there?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It's still there. It's not student dining anymore. It's more like special dining room. Like if the trustees come-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, I see.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Sometimes they'll have a wedding reception in there.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Now where do the students eat?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Excuse me. There's a new student center, the Joe Rosenfield Center.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

The forum? No, no, that was where the Stoops House was, I think, where they built the new thing.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

That he gave them the money for.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. And that's where they eat now.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, really?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

They all eat together at the Rosenfield Center.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, they do? The boys do?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

The boys and the girls eat together, yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Because the boys ate in the dorm and the girls ate in the quadrangle.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

When I came back to our 60-something reunion, we stayed in Reed ...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Your old?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, we stayed in the part where they had the elevator. And that was not too far from the dining room. It's where the elevator is, and it went out the door onto Sixth Avenue. Yeah. I don't know how many of our class is still living.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, I wonder.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Because when I went back, there was seven of us and that was the year that they honored Bayer and he died right after. I think we got it the early part of June or last of May and he died about the 29th of that month.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really? Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I don't know if his wife is still living.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I don't either. So do you have another reunion this year?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. This is our reunion. This'll be our seventy year.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Do you think you might come?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, because I need help. See, old people forget and I forget something and I don't know where it was. I wouldn't come back unless ...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Maybe you could get your friend, Alphanette, to come with you?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

When I came here in 1937, she was just a little girl.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Is that right?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. Her mother was a girl reserve secretary at the YWCA where they gave me a job, because that's what the seniors did. That year, 1937, we were just coming out of the Depression and there were no jobs. So they brought a group of us to Chicago to see if we could get jobs. Well, I got a job at the YWCA and that secretarial job is certainly not like the secretarial jobs now.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, I had to be a desk clerk. I had to be a stenographer. I had to do the telephone operator and we had to duplicate all the programs. So you see, it's not like that not like I said. And for when we had lectures, I had to take the lectures and type up the lecture. So we had all of that to do at the YWCA.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you practically ran the place, it sounds like.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, but all of us. See, they were open 24 hours and we had three shifts.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So there were three secretaries?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh no, there were at least three ... \$25 of that, I had to send back to Grinnell because the Ladies Aid Society had paid for my graduation. So you see, they were very good to me at Grinnell.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I'm glad.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They were. They were very good.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I think they still do that. I think they do it every year, the Ladies Aid Society.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Do they? To anyone who can't. You see how helpful the college and encouraging they are to their students.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, that's good. They should be.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, they should be, but everyone and that was long before they had co-ed dorms. And, I tell you, the people who had children in college when they started that, they really were upset.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. It was a big change.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, yes, a co-ed dorm? Because they first started out with the floors and then they went to you can be having one right next door.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It's wild, isn't it?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, they thought, ooh, we thought that was just too much. So it was. Another reason why Grinnell was so important to me, my uncle was a chef in the girls' dorm and his friend and his wife were chef and salad cook at the boys' dorm. Grinnell was really closely intertwined with our lives, monetarily and physically.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did either of your kids go to Grinnell?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did you want them to?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I had two daughters. That's my oldest daughter and there's my youngest daughter on that other wall. I wanted the youngest daughter to go, but she went to Aurora instead. Grinnell was too far away.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, I guess-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And my oldest daughter, she wanted to go to Chicago University, so that's where she went.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, that's nice and close too.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah, yeah. So neither of them wanted to go. And none of my family wanted to go to Grinnell. I'm the only one.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

But you really wanted to go.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I really wanted to go. And that's the only place I had ever wanted to go. And because my oldest sister went to Fisk. My next oldest sister went to Hampton and the sister next to me, went to Iowa State and she got her Master's from the University of Iowa. And then my oldest sister came to live in Iowa City. My oldest brother, he finished at Hampton. My youngest brother, he didn't go to college there, he went to Washington DC and went to school there because my sister who finished Hampton was in Washington DC, and she worked for the Library of Congress.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you're really a very well educated, accomplished family. That's just [crosstalk 00:10:07].

Edith Renfrow Smith:

You know what mother said, "Get an education."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And everybody listened, it sounds like.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, one of the things is she didn't let us do a lot of things that other kids did: no movies on Sunday, no movies period, no card playing, no alcohol.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

She's a tough lady, too.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, she was. She was a tough task master. That was it. To go through all the things that we did, and we went to church every Sunday and one day during the week. So she saw to it that we were-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I think Abby told me that...was it your grandmother was a slave or your great-grandmother?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah. Well, my grandmother was a slave. My grandfather was a slave and see, my grandmother was still living till 1920. And she...and you know my great-grandfather was a soldier in Napoleon's army.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And when he came to America, he took my great-great-grandmother, Jane, as his wife, although he did not...she was like his mistress. She was a slave.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. Let me make sure I get this right. Your great-great-grandfather was a soldier in Napoleon's army?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Uh-huh. His name was [inaudible 00:01:03] Gilmore.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So then your great-great-grandmother was his mistress?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Was his mistress. And when he was sick and dying, he asked his friend to take her as his slave, but he wanted to free her, but since she was an adult she could not be free.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, adults could not be free. But you see, he had freed his three children that he had by her and sent all three of them to Ohio, to different Quaker families. His son, Aaron finished Wilberforce and taught in Kentucky and died in the Civil War.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh wow!

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And Anna Catherine was a butterfly. So she danced on a...one of those riverboats in Ohio. And my grandmother came all the way to Oskaloosa, Iowa with the Quakers.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

My grandfather ran away because he was born in Arkansas.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So he escaped?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And he escaped and took his brother's name, his brother's name was George. His name was Joseph, but his brother's name was George. And he took his brother's name and ran away because his brother was free and they kept him hidden in Kansas City for a year.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Because he was an escaped slave. And then he finally came up to Oskaloosa where he married my grandmother.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And then they...

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They had three children.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Had three children.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

My mother and her two sisters and her sister, her oldest sister's the one that had the triplets, the Lucas triplets.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow, that must've been exciting. Triplets didn't happen that often.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh no, but she had the triplets.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, I can imagine she needed some help with three babies.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, that's why my mother went to live with her in Grinnell and her husband was a baker and John Lucas.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, aren't you glad that your mother got to Grinnell?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It worked out good.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And see why I know so much about our history is my mother was a great storyteller and see, she would tell us all about the slaves and what happened to them. And my grandfather was Craig. He escaped and then his family finally were free after the Civil War and they moved to

Pueblo, Colorado and they had the most beautiful members of Israel. Oh boy, cause they were mixed with Indian and White, and I wish I had those pictures of...one's name was Americas, other name was, oh what was her name, she lived in Tacoma, Netty. Her name was Netty she lived in Tacoma, Washington. And on my father's side, my father's mother was from Guinea. And she was very, very small. She about, five feet. Cause my father was only five foot eight and she had all and her husband was over six feet and they lived in Texas and Texas must have been a territory at that time because I don't know whether she had been a slave or what, but I know that getting married, they married in Texas. She had these three boys Will, Dave, and Lee Augustus was my father.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Lee Augustus?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Lee Augustus.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I like that, sounds very distinguished.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And you know, my father was 96 when he died in 1945. He had been...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did your mother die first?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

No. Okay.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He died in '45. Mama didn't die until '61.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. How old was she when she died?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

87.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. Good long lives it seemed like.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah and see my sister who, not my sister next to me, my next oldest sister, She was 91 and she died in '97.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I bet it was wonderful listening to your mom tell those stories.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I'm the only one, I used to sit on her lap all day. "Mama, tell me a story. Mama, tell me a story." and she would just sit there in the evening and tell me all these [inaudible 00:00:06:42] nobody else listening to her. "Mama talk too much, Mama talk too much." But I loved to hear her tell it. And some of the stories that she told me, you would really believe in spirits because of all...and cause she said that my grandfather was 14 years old when he was sold to New Orleans.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

14?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

At 14 and that's the first time he had been away from his mother and he was sold to a plantation in Algiers. And he was so unhappy and so upset because you know he was the last boy and they [inaudible 00:07:37] and he was just a baby and he just couldn't get...So in order to make himself sick, he ate fat meat, drank swamp water, and put tobacco juice in his eyes.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

My gosh.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So naturally, he was partly blind because of the tobacco juice. And so they wouldn't keep him in Algiers. You're no good if you can't work.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So they sold him back to New Orleans and he was sold to a plantation in Mississippi, across the river. And the overseer was a nice overseer and my grandfather carried on and had such a fit. And see, my grandfather was very fair. So consequently he was a house slave and he was a valet to the master and the overseer said "Get me some money from your master's pocket [Inaudible 00:08:48] and at a certain time of the moon, you can run away." At a certain time of the moon that's what he did. That's why he...hat's when he ran away and he ran and how he got back to Arkansas, I don't know.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So but he did?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He did run away and then he couldn't stay in Arkansas because he was a runaway slave. And so then he ran all up to...he got to Kansas City, Kansas. And that's where they hid him for a year.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And he had the blindness, partial blindness?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, he was partially blind. All the rest of his life he was partially blind, but he was a barber. And when he got to Grinnell he was my...he was his own lawyer. He sued practically everybody in Grinnell. If he had been white, he would have been a judge. Even though,, you see, he didn't have that much education.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Uh-huh but he must've been smart.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He was. And my sister, who worked at the congressional library, my sister, Alice, she was just like my grandfather. She sued practically everybody. And she lived in Suitland, Maryland. And she sued about everybody there. And she was going to...and you know that's what she did, she sued in small court, claims court. And when she came here, she was 88 years old. She was going to start that here but she didn't live long enough.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Almost sounds like it was a sport or something.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was fun. I don't know...I don't know why she sued, but everybody...but she's just like my grandpa. I don't know where they...and whatever he sued about you was something then that somebody had done in Grinnell.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Uh-huh.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was against what he thought they should do to a black person.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Uh-huh. Yeah. Well good for him, he was fighting for his rights.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He fought. He fought for his rights.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

People have to do that. They get work done.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

You know, we came from a bunch of fighters.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Good for you.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And my mother, she always...that's another thing she always told us. She says, "Never go to a cow's tail, always go to his head."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That's good advice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

See that was excellent advice. And cause she says the tail doesn't know anything.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. A very good point.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, were some of those stories kind of scary for you as a kid?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No. No, because she didn't make them scary and it just seemed like part of living when she told us the story she said that one of the slave masters had killed his wife and he married a beautiful young girl from Baltimore. And they used to have those latches to the bedroom door, and she said one of the maids that worked upstairs said that they couldn't keep that door locked, couldn't keep it latched. Because every night they'd hear like...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

...and it was open.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And then she told about...you know they always had...if they didn't have the kitchen outdoors, they had it down in the basement. And she said that evidently the slaves, you know they would help slaves who were running away, and they would hide them behind the wall in the house. And she said all...and somebody had gotten killed...and she said that all the pans, every time they put the pans up on that wall, they'd all come down.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well see that's what I'm talking...those were all the kinds of stories my mother told me. That's why I said, I don't go see anything. Cause I said, Mama told me about all of the things that happened to people. Like the...cause everybody's going to see The Color Purple.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And I said, I don't need to go see The Color Purple, mama told me all about that so I'm not gonna go see. No, I don't need to see it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah, you don't need to. You heard about it, right?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I heard about it firsthand.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So I don't need to hear about it. And to me it was...it's very depressing when people...there's things that happened to people and there's nothing they can do about it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, I know. Me too.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I want...if somethings happened, I want to do something about it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right. If you can't do anything then it just kind of eats at ya.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, it's just too much.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. I'm the same way.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you must have some great memories of fun times at Grinnell?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes. All of-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

What's your favorite memory from Grinnell?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

The Christmas yule log service. And I understand they don't have it anymore.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

They don't.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Every year they'd bring in the same yule log and relight it. And then we'd have a Christmas tree and it was always before everybody left. That-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And then you put on the pretty white dresses.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes. Oh, we all dressed up. That was a time.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I bet it was fun.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

On George Washington's birthday, when we had the minuet in the gym, that was our dance.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And you dressed up, fine lace and gentlemen in-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yes. The men had on their long tails and what have you.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah, that sounds fun too.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, it was. It was just... I said, "People don't have fun like they used to."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Not really, no.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

When I was in high school, my friend who worked at the library and a fella that was in high school with us, the three of us would have these picnics in the fall and we'd go in the country,

we would pick up nuts and then we ate it. Each of us would bring something for the picnic and it was just great fun. And one of the things is no one was ever afraid. Well, of course, there are a lot of things that weren't right in Grinnell, but, well, just like the movie. We could go to the movies, unless we wanted to go way up in the balcony, but I can go to movies anyway. So I didn't care. So you see, that's why I say that I was different than a lot of people. Because see, there was so many things I didn't care about.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And I didn't care if George Marx didn't let us in the theater. And the candy land, we could go to the candy land.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

You couldn't?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No. But it didn't make a difference because I wasn't going, I didn't have any money anywhere anyway. If there's things that enter your life and you can't do, then you're upset, but you see, if you didn't have any money, you weren't going there anyway. We always kept busy. My mother kept us busy doing things. So consequently... Because we didn't not do anything, we had to work because I worked for 25 cents an hour so I could have music lessons.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did you play an instrument or sing?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I was taking piano. And so to earn, and the piano lessons cost 75 cents a half hour. So consequently, I worked three hours for that 75 cents.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So did you work directly for the piano teacher?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I worked for her and then I worked for Mr. Swisher. And you don't remember the Swisher's, but they had the most exclusive dress shop in the city and I worked for Mrs. Swisher.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So it sounds like if you had wanted to, you could have been really bothered by some things in Grinnell.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah, there are a lot of things you could have been bothered by. That's what my daughter told me. She said, "Mother you're too operative." I said, "Hope, you don't even pay attention."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

But what a great philosophy, because it worked for you and-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It worked for me. And see, it wouldn't work for everybody, but that worked for me because... Of course, I think part of it was my mother and of course my father too because he did things that he could do and what he couldn't do, he didn't do. Neither of them were quarrelsome. If little things, chips, they didn't have chips.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So he didn't carry around a grudge or let things eat it them.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They didn't let... I don't know what, but I think neither one of them, neither were cross and we had my aunt, my two aunts lived there and my one aunt had come to Chicago and gone to a beauty school [inaudible 00:05:07]. And she had her shop uptown and those things, I guess they didn't mind.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So did her beauty salon, did that cater to both Black and white people?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, there weren't that many, see in Grinnell, there weren't that many Black people. See Grinnell has never had many Black people.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah, it still really doesn't have many.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It has never had many. And we had the most when those Rosemore Scholars came, and that was the 12 boys that came from different parts of the country that were Rosemore Scholars.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. One of the things that the college is really trying to do now, is attract more Black students and faculty.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, I know. Well, one of the things is that now salaries makes it the difference. See, and things cost so much more and people want more different things, entertainment. Whereas back in those days they had entertainment, but it was kind of entertainment that were...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. People want more of things.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. They want more.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. They want, oh, I don't know, pro sports teams and that sort of thing.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, it was just the thing when they put that Black house in Grinnell, I said, "Well, that's crazy."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

The Black cultural center? That one?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, that house up on was up on 10th, 10th and high.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Or park.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

But anyway, it was just on the same street as the chapel. It was that house. Well, the whole house looked like it was falling down. I said, "What in the world does anybody want an old house like that?" I said, "That doesn't make sense. They don't need a house." And just like they said they were going to start a food thing, "What food?" Eat what everybody else eats. And to me, those things, see what are the things is, as long as you look at color, you lose the whole thing. I've always felt and mother said, "The color of your skin makes, it's what's inside the person." And she always preached that, what's inside is what's important, not those or those. To her, that would have been garbage [inaudible 00:08:02]. Well, momma, we had neck bones all the time, but it wasn't something... Everybody where we lived ate neck bones, but it wasn't a different sort of food. My uncle, who worked at the college, he cut the backbone out of the pig. And we got that long peak.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Sure.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Momma baked it. Well, that was just meat. It wasn't anything special, wasn't any special food. So to me, food is not, it is not anything special. Why make a mountain out of it and the same thing with living. And I feel that don't look at a person by their color, look at the person. What kind of person is it? Is that the kind of person you want to know? What values do they have? Those are the things that are important. What difference does it make about your hair? What difference does it make about anything because if you're not a great person inside, I don't care what you are. And this is one of the things I say needs to be emphasized. Forget about color.

And one of the things is, you say, 'Oh, it's a cultural difference.' It's no cultural difference. We haven't lived anywhere but in the United States. So consequently, we've all had the same things in our lives. So consequently, let's not dwell on those things. That's what makes it so hard.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you mean don't necessarily just cling to the people.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

That's right. Don't cling. Just because I'm Black, don't send somebody Black to me. I don't know that person and I don't care anything about them. Send somebody who has had the same kind of experiences I had or who has been in my class or that I know. And I feel that it really defeats what you want, is when you clump people together who don't have anything in common. People who have things in common, they are able to go forward, but these people who...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well we all benefit from getting to know each other, no matter what you look like.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

That's right. What you look like is not important. What's the important part is to get to know the thing you don't know anything about. That's what I think is so great about reading. You read about all these things that go on and all the things that have happened in history. And it's just so great.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. You can go places that you'd never get to go in real life.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

You would never get there. Because just like our daughter's going to retire in June.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow. Can you believe that?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

That's what I mean. She's taught 17 more years than I taught. She taught for 38.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Good for her.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And she was going to go from Beijing to Istanbul, but she said, and that would going to be 60 days. She said, "Well, I'd do it, but you and Daddy are too old." And see, she won't go. But look what that experience would have done for her. And you see, this is a sort of thing that you do if you forget which color you are. And that's what I taught the girl. Don't say anything about color. Don't tell me which you color your friends-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It should go to the person, not to the color. Don't go to the color. Just because I've said it over there, don't come to me, I don't know. And you don't have anything I want. That somebody may come to me, well they may know how to make a cake that I'd like to make or bread.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

See all that sort of thing. And that's what I say. Or they may know something about a historical event because I don't know. Well, they come to me and then, "Oh, that's great because I'm learning something." I don't learn anything from you just because you're my color.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Well, that's one of really true great things about Grinnell. I mean, even for somebody like me who just works there.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you really do get to meet all kinds of people.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

That's right.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And you find out, they're just like you and make friends-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And this is why I say it's just so-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... so surprised and that's why I've enjoyed working at the Art Institute, because the people come from all over the world and it's interesting to hear about their experiences of when they come to Chicago, and the things that they have seen and what things that they have found important. And so it's really great.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Tell me about that, what do you do at the Art Institute?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I'm in the Children's Museum, and I sit at the information desk. And of course, they want to know, well, what's here? And every two years they change what they offer. Now, with the... two years ago, they brought in all of these artisans from Africa. The man who told us how they

made those staffs, they start at the top and as you go down the staff it tells a story, every one. And each person makes his own-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, cool.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... each chieftain, and it tells his story. And the same thing with these tusks, they take the elephant tusk and it tells a story, each thing. And they had these women who sat and took a lump of clay, made chickens, made elephants, and the children could come and watch that. And it was just so... And then from China, they had the people who did block printing, and then those who did silk screen and those artisans were the ones that... they just... here you are just seated here, and here the children didn't gather around and get up close, find out how they did all these things. And they showed how they made the Kente cloth-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... the Africans did.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Kente cloth is only made six inches wide.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I didn't know that.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And do you know what they do?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Mm-hmm (negative).

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They weave it together in this... it could be any width, but they... And you can't tell where one really is joined to the other. And that was just wonderful to know that Kente cloth is made like that, because, see, most people get on a loom and they may get as wide as they want, but they didn't. They have just these little six inches and they make these long strips. Literally, you don't see... Things like that you just don't learn anywhere else.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Sounds like it's pretty exciting.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It is exciting in the Field Museum, I mean, Art Institute. And you meet different people every day, every time I go. I've been there 15 years.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. I get my... After five years, they give you a lion, at 10 years, they put a stone in the lion, and then, 15 years you get another one.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Can I see your lion? Is he around here somewhere?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh no, no, no. It's just a little medallion, and I'm going to get a new pin, a new stone in May. So they have my pin-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. Oh, I get it. Okay.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... so they can put the stone in it. Yeah.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

But that's pretty cool.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Isn't it?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Isn't it? Yeah. And I volunteered with Goodwill and I'm still their treasurer in Goodwill auxiliary, and they have, what's called the pants to petticoats fashion show. And they start out with all the old fashioned clothes with the bustle and all of that. And-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That's so cool.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... they also have a hat show with all the old hats, and they have written a script for the fashion show and for the hat show. And they charge \$650 for the fashion show and the money that they raise goes to help released prisoners learn a trade, and get them ready to go out in the world.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That's terrific.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And the hat shows cost \$75 and they give you the script, and you put on your own hat show, and raise funds for whatever you want. And I've been with them since 1997.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you are a dedicated volunteer.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, after all, people have given me so much, so it's time to give back, you know?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

If you can. And since I feel all right, and since I can still drive.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

How long were you at the YMCA? How long were you the secretary there?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, I was there for, let me see from... til 1940, three years.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Three years. Okay. And then you were a school teacher, right?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, not then. I didn't become a... I worked for the University of Chicago, and I worked for the state in their employment compensation office, and I worked for the city and their social work office.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And then, when I was at the University of Chicago, I decided I want to be a teacher, and my major had been psych and minors in economics and history, and so I had to take those education courses after, so I could teach. I taught for 21 years.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

What age kids did you teach?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I taught sixth grade.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And how many years? I'm sorry, I [crosstalk 00:07:02]-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, 21.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

21.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And my last years I was called the head teacher, which is, I took the place of an assistant principal in a branch. And my very last year, I taught in a school where they had hearing impaired, partially sighted, gifted, and regular, and that was my greatest year, because I had so much supportive staff.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did you enjoy teaching?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, I loved it. And that last year I had a group of children, they were sixth graders, all of them were on the third grade level, when they finished that year with me, three of my boys went into the gifted program.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh my gosh, you must've been so proud.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I was, because I had one girl who came to me from the Disney Magnet school, she didn't even know how to print her name on paper. So you see it was a really a mixed bag. And I thought... So that girl, I said to the assistant principal, I told him, "I'm not teaching the child. She came out of a magnet school. The very idea of her not being able to even print at a sixth grade, all she thought she's supposed to do is sit in the corner."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

She had long blonde hair. She [inaudible 00:08:47] all the boys.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Just to look beautiful.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. She had long blonde hair. I said, "mm-hmm (negative), I'm sorry." And the first day they came in, one of the girls, the room was quiet and all of a sudden, "Bang!" She had jumped up, and dumped over her desk.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And you know all the children looked at me, because these children had all been together.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So they knew what to expect from her.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They knew this, that's what she's gone do. "Oh, Ms. Smith she..." I said, "She's not going to do here." I said, "Christine, I tell you what you do. Pick up your desk, put all your things back into the desk, and I don't ever want to see you do that again."

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They thought she was stupid. She wasn't. She was a smart girl. But she thought that was funny because people laugh, but see I didn't laugh. And she's went on, and she did well, she could pass. But when you let children do things like this and don't do anything about it that's when they're lost. But I was very... And she was very proud of those children-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I bet.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... the principal that three of them, went to the gifted program.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So do you think it was the fact that you expected them to do well?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I expected them to do their work. I didn't expect them not to do, and I taught them, I said, "We do not curse in this room. We do not tell each other shut up. We are courteous to each other." I said, "You always say, thank you. And you always say please." Well, see this was something... And you see it was... And I said, "And anybody who is unhappy, you see that door right there. You are welcome."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And they didn't go.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Nobody's going to go anywhere. They knew they couldn't go anywhere. But I think you respect children, you respect them as individuals, you do not do things to them that you don't want done to yourself. I saw one of my boys in court, in traffic court one day, since he's been grown, and he said, he told his friend that, "That's my teacher, Ms. Smith." I got [inaudible 00:11:25].

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That must've been a fun moment.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

But it was. It was. It's fun when you see children.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And one of the boys I had in the very beginning, he was from Robert Taylor and Robert Taylor had a horrible reputation. But his mother had all these boys and every morning they had clean shirt, starched cuff and starched collar, and so do you know he left school in sixth grade, and signed up for the Vietnam War.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, my gosh, sixth grade?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. And he went to Vietnam.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

He must have been-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And he got shot. All right, then he had shrapnel in his leg, and they sent him home. But you know he went back.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did he really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. And then, when he came out and he finished school, he went to Northeastern Illinois. He and his wife both get their master's degree.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh my gosh.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So you see, it shows you that children can do, and you just respect the fact that they can do, if you just have faith. And for my 80th birthday, he and his wife invited my husband and I to have dinner on them at Chris' Steak House downtown.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Nice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Wasn't that wonderful?

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. I said, "Well, now, see, he turned out so well." And his brother was a biggest dope dealer in Robert Taylor.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, he had somebody who cared, somebody who believed.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. And I don't know, it's just amazing how to children turn out.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you taught in Chicago Public Schools?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. I taught... My first school was on the West Side, and when I started at the school, it was 95% white, and that was in September of '54, in June of '55, it was 95% black.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Because that was the-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Because that was the Jewish area, and they all moved.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. That's a huge change though [crosstalk 00:14:10]-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Wasn't that a change? Wasn't that? In less than a year, that was less than a year.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

From September to June.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Good heavens.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And then, after that I taught there for three years. And then I went to Beethoven, which was at Robert Taylor, and that's where I was the master teacher or head teacher. And they changed principals, well, the principal died, and-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you kind of filled in?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, I went to Hope. And then from Hope I went to Bell, and that's where I retired from Bell. I had wonderful experiences as a teacher, but it taught me a lot, being a master teacher taught me a lot in that there are people who are not responsible. See, whatever came from the principal, I had to send out to my teachers, and I would always send a sheet, you signed that you had received this memo.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

If they didn't do it, I'd say, "Well, here's your name, you were supposed to be [inaudible 00:15:34]." But as I say, it shows you how people, [inaudible 00:15:42], I did it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, that must have been frustrating.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It is and, listen, being administrator over adults is very frustrating-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I bet.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... so many of them take no responsibility for their actions. And now I wouldn't be an administrator in the school system now, because it's so different. And the parents are so different. See parents respected teachers-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I know.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... back in those days, but now they don't. And as a result of their lack of respect, the children have no respect. And see that lack of responsibility of the parent, it just makes your work so hard and it's not rewarding. And you just wonder why... and you know why the children don't learn. Because, if the child is supposed to turn in homework, you have to see that he does it at home, not after he gets to school. Don't tell me that, "Oh, well..." And another thing, I feel that if you tell the child, "Oh, now, go show that to your mother." I said, "but don't show it to her when she's cooking or something, because she's busy. But show it to her, so she'll see how nicely did this." I tell... "Mama, didn't look at it. Mama, didn't want to look at it." And this is discouraging, especially for a child who's having a difficult time.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right, right. They need that.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They need that encouragement-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

They do.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... just to do a little bit better.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It's teamwork, parents and teachers

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, yeah, teamwork. Yeah. And that's, I think that we don't have with the parents because you work with the teacher. If you work with the teacher, then the child does well. That just make it hard. It is, you feel so sorry the children have such a hard time.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And of course, that idiot box doesn't help, you know that, don't you? There's so much good stuff on, but there's so much that just doesn't help. And they could, because they could teach them all, because there's so much to learn that we didn't know anything... Just look at all the underwater exploration that they're doing, that's teaching us so much about the world that we had no idea. I didn't know there were mountains and rivers and they'll say... under the water-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Who knew, right?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... way down... Yeah. It's just something. And all of that is on TV, all of it, and they're telling it all to you.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah, and you can see it.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes. And I mean, it's just such a revelation, is to see all of these things, just like-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Things we would never get to see.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, never. Never, because you can't go everywhere.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right, right, and the beautiful wildlife.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Science.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They had some beautiful pictures on TV of infant wildlife. They had the hippopotamus, the baby elephant and you know... I said, they're just so-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

They're just adorable.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was. They were so cute. And I said, "This is just something that..." And I just think about my mother, how she would have loved it because it would mean something. Just like she used to look at my geography books when I was teaching. "Oh," she said, "I wish I had had these books like this when I was going to school." She said, "They wouldn't have been able to get me out of school."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

She must've had a real love of learning.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, she did. She did. Yeah. Like I said, my mother was really way before that, because she wouldn't cook in aluminum.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, how smart was that?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. She said anything will change color, some of that must be in the food.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

She was right.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And she was, and they found out that these things are true. And they found out too, like iron, they found that in cooking in iron, the iron leaches into the food and the people are getting their iron, they don't have to take iron.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right. Yeah. That was actually good for you.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah. And that's good for you. So, you see all these things we just didn't know.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right. But your mom somehow did.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, yeah, she did. Well, I don't know where she learned it, but she did. Yeah.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So tell me a little about your family, your two daughters.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I have two daughters.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

What are their names?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Virginia was the oldest and then Alice.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Alice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Grandchildren?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No grandchildren or no son-in-laws, neither of them married. My oldest daughter worked for [Sealy 00:21:15] in Austin, but she developed a liver problem, and she was waiting for a liver and she had a stroke. She died at 57.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, I'm so sorry.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And my youngest daughter went to... Well, they went to elementary school at U of C Lab School-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... University of Chicago Lab School. And Virginia went on to U of C college and Alice went to Aurora, and she finished Aurora and had been teaching in the Chicago system. So that's what they've done.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I bet you're proud.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

[inaudible 00:22:06], I'm very proud of my children.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And now we are here. It seems like a nice neighborhood, a nice place.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It is, it's very lovely neighborhood. And I retired in '76, 1976, and my husband retired in '75.
And-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

What did he do?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He was a milkman.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And what's his first name? I should know.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Henry.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Henry, okay.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And when would you retired, we traveled.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh yeah. Where did you go?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well, my sister-in-law lived in British Columbia, so we drove there and then on down the coast around and his sister lived in LA.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you drove.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, we drove.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That's a good way to see-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

These were all... And in fact, my husband, after he retired, tried to hit every state in the Union going-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did you make [crosstalk 00:23:23]-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... somewhere. Only place he did not get was Florida.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That's pretty darn good.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And we went all the way across Canada to to Nova Scotia.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So you really did see the country [crosstalk 00:23:43]-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

We did, we really saw the country. And he went up in the Canadian Rockies, because his sister, my brother and sister-in-law lived in British Columbia.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

What was your favorite place of all the places you visited?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I think Nova Scotia. And-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Tell me-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

... Nova Scotia was such a revelation to me because I didn't realize that so many slaves had escaped to Nova Scotia, and they have done so much for the history of that city. Also, I didn't know that black people had done so much in the development of Texas, and at the museum in San Antonio, they have the great contribution that blacks have made. That's the-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I didn't know that either, but-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, but you go to that museum in San Antonio and it's all there for you to see. It is just great. It is. It's just... And the same thing in Nova Scotia, they just have everything, all the contribution space. So it was great.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. You know what? I may have exhausted my supply of questions here.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

That's all right.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Is there anything else that-

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, no. [crosstalk 00:25:31]-

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

... you thought I would ask you that I didn't or that I'd like to say?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, no. I didn't even think you knew me. No, I haven't thought of... and anything I said it just popped out, when I thought of it. So, it's been very nice having you.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, it's been very nice to meet you.