

A Woman Worth Knowing: Part 1

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.