

A Woman Worth Knowing: Part 4

Interview of Edith Renfrow Smith '37 by Jackie Hartling Stolze

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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-