

Miss Eckstein was born in Boone, Iowa. She began her teaching career after attending Cedar Falls College and was principal of Cleveland Elementary School for 23 years. In this interview, she recalls the advent of the school lunch program and the keeping of health records by the schools. She also tells about her involvement in developing the bird garden at her residence, Methwick Manor.

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JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH Catherine Eckstein

CONDUCTED BY Theresa Riley

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TRANSCRIBER Hazel Storm

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Date of Interview: November 2, 1984
Interviewer: Theresa Riley
Transcriber: Hazel Storm

I'm Theresa Riley, and I'm interviewing Catherine Eckstein. She lives at 1224 13th Street, N.W., Cedar Rapids.

TR: Thank you for consenting to be interviewed, Miss Eckstein.

Eckstein: I'm happy to do it.

TR: We'd like for you to tell us something about your life to share with other people. You have been a Principal in the Cedar Rapids School System for a number of years, but we want to begin back to where you grew up. Could you tell us something about growing up?

Eckstein: I was born at Boone, Iowa, and my family was born at Boone, Iowa. And it was a small town, and I had many exciting experiences in my childhood. When I was ten years old, I moved with my parents to Waterloo. I went to high school there and to Cedar Falls College. From there I began my teaching career. My first teaching job was at Belle Plaine, and it was a great experience for me. I wanted always to be a teacher, and I had a second grade class in Belle Plaine and I enjoyed it thoroughly. I stayed there three years. Then I went to Newton for a year and then to Cedar Falls. I always did enjoy my work, and it was mostly with young children.

TR: As a teacher, how was your role different from a teacher today?

Eckstein: It was quite different. In the smaller towns there were very strict rules about teacher behavior. We were expected to stay there on weekends and teach Sunday School classes. We were to more or less be the source of activities and efforts that were not supplied by the regular members of the community. They liked to have us teach Sunday School classes and do all sorts of things that would reach out into the community. And, of course, if we had any money to spend, they liked to have us spend it in those communities. Salaries were low, and there was a rule. I don't believe it was a state law although it was general all over the state that the women were not to marry if they wanted to continue to teach. The contracts were void as soon as they said "I do."

TR: How were women's roles different in the teaching profession?

Eckstein: Well, we were expected to participate, but there was not much activity, for instance, in political parties and that sort of thing. We weren't supposed to really take sides. We were to be more or less neutral in our understanding of the things of the community, but they did want us to take part in things--especially things that involved service.

TR: What were some of the activities that the children participated in in your early teaching?

Eckstein: They were mostly activities that involved the imagination. They needed to create their own activities. It was a very good thing really. I think children are not stimulated any more to be imaginative, because so much is created for them.

Their games are created for them now; all they have to do is push buttons. Their art work is often filling in colors rather than creating something of their own. It was quite different. We didn't have the things ready made for us then. They played games that they created and things that took what you might call "brain power."

TR: How were the children's behaviors different?

Eckstein: Well, they were more respectful than they are now. The teacher was a very important person, and they were expected to obey her. Mostly, they were women, and the parents supported the teachers for the most part.

TR: What were some after-school activities that your students and yourself participated in?

Eckstein: The students had some of the games that we have now-- baseball and football and ball games of different kinds and races. As far as the teachers were concerned, we had to create our own activities, too. Here in Cedar Rapids we had a square dancing group, and we had a choral speaking group. There were bridge games, too, of course.

TR: Would you contrast your lifestyle back in the mid-thirties before air conditioning with the lifestyle today?

Eckstein: It seems to me that we were tougher. We didn't expect those things, and we just accepted what came. I can remember very, very uncomfortable days in the fall at school. Of course, many schools don't have air conditioning now, but they didn't let us out either in those days. We just

endured it. We did things that were cool like going outdoors and having a class, and opening the windows, and doing all that we could to keep cool. But we just didn't expect it.

TR: This was at the end of the Great Depression, this period when you began teaching. How did the Great Depression really affect your career and your life?

Eckstein: Personally, I was involved with the closing of banks and those horrid things that came about, and we had food rationing. We had only a certain number of pounds of potatoes and things like that at times, but there again, everybody had the same problems to endure and we accepted it. And I don't think that we complained too much because we knew our neighbors had the same thing. It was not a pleasant time. We didn't get to buy as many clothes: nylon hose were unheard of, silk hose were very difficult to get, and many things we just did without. Gasoline was rationed; we couldn't always go where we wanted to go, but we did the best we could and made the best of it.

TR: What were some of the winter activities of your students?

Eckstein: Mostly ice skating and tobogganing. Adults did it, too.

TR: Wasn't there more interaction between parents? In other words, did parents go out and do these activities more with the children in those days?

Eckstein: Yes, I'm quite sure they did. There was a great deal of family union then, the whole family doing things together. And I think their interests were directed toward the same things more than they are now.

TR: Was there a difference in the way holidays were celebrated?

Eckstein: Well, they were home holidays--days to be home and days to be with the family. Most everybody went home for Christmas and had a big celebration--usually a big feast and a big exchange of presents.

TR: Were most of the gifts purchased? or made at home?

Eckstein: Well, during the Depression they were made at home, but after things straightened out they were purchased. The children were always very generous at school at that time. Share what they had. Cookies, if nothing else.

TR: What diseases affected children and adults?

Eckstein: Well, there again we hadn't made as much progress in medicine as we have today, and they had the children's diseases which they are now bringing under control with shots. There were seasons when there was lots of absences at school with chickenpox and measles and just the regular childhood diseases. Now they are controlled a great deal, you know, so they don't have to be absent so much.

TR: Did you have very many children, or any children, in your school system that had had polio?

Eckstein: Yes, that was after I got to Cedar Rapids. We had a polio scare and there were three children in Johnson School where I was, and they closed Johnson School for a week, I think, because the three cases were there. But it didn't spread, and the children recovered. When I came to Cedar Rapids it was quite a change. I came from Cedar Falls, and in Cedar Falls my salary had been \$100 a month for nine months. And

when the summer vacation came, there was no income. You had the problem of saving enough of your \$100 a month for nine months to stretch over the three months, or you could get a summer job, or you could go and live with your parents. It was not a pleasant experience. Most teachers, I think, at that time, saved enough money and went to school during the summer in order to get more education in the hope that they would get a better job. Well, I did that, and when I got to Cedar Rapids I was getting \$1200 a month, which was \$100 for every month of the year, and that was a great boost to my bank account.

TR: When you moved to Cedar Rapids, what was your relationship then with Coe College?

Eckstein: Well, it didn't come right away. I was at Johnson School, which was a very fine school here in Cedar Rapids. It still is, but it is a different school now--it's a different building. At that time... I was there for nine years, and for several years I was just a teacher in the first grade. And then Coe College began to send us student teachers and Mount Mercy did, too. And that was a nice experience. We had a little help then. Otherwise we did not have aides; we did not have assistant teachers; we did not have psychologists; we did not have nurses; we did not have anybody to help us; so we appreciated the student teachers that came. They came for a three-month period; they weren't there all the time. Like they might have come each morning during the week, or they might come two days all day, or something like that. But it was a great help.

TR: When were the hot lunch programs initiated?

Eckstein: Not until the fifties.

TR: What effect did you see personally on the children as a result of that?

Eckstein: Well, it was a great thrill to me. That was when we had moved into the new Cleveland School. Up to that time we had been in the old Cleveland School, which was the Chandler home. It was on the corner of 15th Street and First Avenue, West, a large house that had been converted into a school. At first it was only a kindergarten. The people in the vicinity had wanted a school; it was too far to go to Fillmore, and that was the only school close by. So they petitioned the Board of Education to have another school. And the School Board wanted to do something about it. They had already purchased the Chandler home and had home economics classes there, where the high school people came over from what was... it's now the Board of Education building, it was Grant, I believe, High School then. And the students came over to Cleveland to have their home economics classes there. So they already owned the building, and when the people in the vicinity petitioned to have other classes there, they started a kindergarten. That was the first room. And then the next year they petitioned to have a first grade. And the next year a second grade, until they got all six grades. They finally had children that were crowding the school, so they converted the garages in the back to classrooms. And that's where we were in the first

place. But in 1950 we moved down the street a few blocks to 21st and First Avenue and that was the new Cleveland School. It seemed like a great, large school at the time, and it was there that we first had our experience with the lunch program. The children were thrilled because it was new; every school in Cedar Rapids didn't have it at that time. But we were fortunate having the new school and the new lunch program. It was good because it gave the children a good, balanced lunch and something that was not in a box. It was warm and home cooked. So it was a real nice experience.

TR: How much did the hot lunch just cost then, do you remember?

Eckstein: Very little. It seems to me something around twenty-five cents.

TR: With your association with the Cedar Rapids area, what businesses no longer exist that were thriving when you first came?

Eckstein: Newman's was a great department store. It was located where Woolworth's store is now. And there were several different drug companies. May's was very popular then; it was a cut-rate store and did a great business. There were several different movies, and they were all thriving at the time. The Paramount was the newest, and it had the very select movies and was a very popular place. Other than that, Killian's were there and Armstrong's and Martin's. Not the chain stores so much. I think we had a Three Sisters store at one time, but not too many of the chain stores.

TR: What do you remember about events leading to World War II?

Eckstein: I remember the day that Pearl Harbor was bombed and what a great shock it was to us. We were just stunned, and we couldn't realize what it meant to us. Many people had never heard of Pearl Harbor at that time. That was far, far away, and people didn't travel so far then as they do now. There were no great plane routes then as there are today. Travel was very different; where you couldn't go on the train, you didn't to very often. Of course, they had steamships. But when Pearl Harbor was attacked, we didn't realize what it was going to lead up to. But it wasn't long before we found out, and then everybody pitched in and did what they could. I was a first-aider, and I had first-aid classes. I would teach all day--and so would all the other teachers--and then we would gather in some school and have first-aid classes. And our purpose of learning first aid was to take care of our own immediate needs and those of our children in the classrooms and in the school. There was a shortage of doctors and nurses, so we had to rely on other things. And we had a lot of interesting experiences and I think a few lives were saved because of the first-aid classes that we had. I wasn't the only one that had them, but I was in that area.

TR: What significant differences exist today in the lifestyle in Cedar Rapids?

Eckstein: Well, it was more slow and there were no... the streetcars were running up until about that time, and there were no yellow marks on the streets. And we had no parking meters;

they put yellow chalk marks on the tires, and we had to keep track of our own time. If we stayed overtime, we got a ticket just as we do today; but there were no meters to help us along. And there was not the freedom with money then that we have today. There was not the great choice of entertainment nor travel. It was a more quiet life than we have today.

TR: How is your life different in retirement?

Eckstein: Well, I guess I never did retire. Maybe that will come later. I suspect it will. But I just had always worked hard and always put in all of my time at something, and I just couldn't accept the fact that I didn't have a job to go to every day. So I set about immediately. It was the first time in 37 years that I had to apply for a job. (Laughter) I had been in Cedar Rapids all that time, so this was a rather new experience to apply for a job. And I didn't know how to do it really--didn't know where to do it. But I thought I would start at Kirkwood College, and I did and they hired me. My first class was Introduction to Teaching. It was an entirely different level of students because they were beyond high school, and I had not had people who were beyond elementary school. But I was teaching about the elementary school, Introduction to Teaching. So we had a common ground and I enjoyed it. But I had just been there the one year when they offered me a job in the office of retirement education, and that appealed to me a great deal. I helped people who had retired find interests in the city to

acquaint them with experiences that they hadn't had before. We visited different places; we went to court one day, and a lot of people hadn't ever been to court in their whole lives. We visited the Quaker Oats factory. Many had lived here many years and had never done that. We visited the Masonic Library and always had a guide to explain all of the things that were there. We went to Mount Mercy College and to Coe College, and we went to St. Luke's Hospital and visited the library there and a lot of things that you don't see if you are a patient or visiting a patient. It was very interesting and Kirkwood College furnished bus transportation to get there. We would meet at a certain place and go, and it was a very interesting experience and I liked that. While I was there came the opportunity to write in the Sunday Gazette about birds. Birds had always been interesting to me; my family had always been interested in birds, and without being an ornithologist, I had always read and studied about birds and had become more or less an amateur ornithologist and birdwatcher. I kind of didn't want to do it at first because it was so different, so the lady on the telephone said, "Well, you can have until next Tuesday to decide." I had had a habit up to that time of saying when I get up in the morning, "Something wonderful is going to happen to me today." And that flashed through my mind while I was talking to her on the telephone, and I said, "No, I don't think I'll wait until next Tuesday. I think I'll decide right now to do it." And then she said, "Well, could

you have an article by next Tuesday?" So I had to get busy right away and dive into it. And that was nine years ago. So I have been--almost nine anyway--and I have been doing that every week ever since.

TR: Would you tell us about your bird garden?

Eckstein: Yes. I live at Methwick Manor, which is a retirement home, and when I came here the building and the whole grounds and everything were new. And I noticed when I went out to my garage each day that there was an area out at the west end of the building that was pretty rough and weedy, and I thought, now I would like to develop that area into a bird garden. So I asked the manager here, the director, if he would meet with me at four o'clock--I was still in school at that time--and if he would meet with me at the west entrance of the building at four o'clock. Then I also called Mrs. Baumhoefener who is a nursery lady of great knowledge and asked her if she would be there. So the three of us met at the west door of Methwick Manor, and I pointed to the area that I had in mind. And I said to the director, "I would like to have your permission to do this," and to Mrs. Baumhoefener, "I would like to have your help." And they both agreed that that should be done. So the director then didn't have anything more to do, so he left and Mrs. Baumhoefener got out her pencil and paper and she wrote down some things that she thought would be compatible and would fit into the area. So we got five rugosa rose bushes to put along the edges of the garage and a Washington

hawthorn tree, which had red berries that the birds like very much, and an evergreen tree for a refuge where the birds could get in and get away from cats and other things, and some honeysuckle bushes. They also have berries that the birds enjoy very much, and blossoms as well. So that was the end of it at that time. Those things were planted and they grew readily. Then as time went on, I got other things: high bush cranberries and other trees and currant bushes and everything that the birds like. And I planted flowers: cosmos and roses and Impatiens and other flowers that the birds like, like the seeds and other parts. It has been a nice experience. Then I have hung up feeders; I have 30 feeders that I try to keep filled. We have had many, many birds there during those years. It is unfortunate that everybody can't see it from their windows, but it is the best we could do as far as a location is concerned. And we have benches out there so that they can come out and sit down and look at the birds if they'd like. We have a bird bath, and it's been a nice attraction here and it has been a wonderful project and hobby for me.

TR: I noticed you had some bird houses. Do you have bird families that you recognize from year to year?

Eckstein: Oh, yes. We have chickadees and wrens and titmice and downy woodpeckers and goldfinches and nuthatches. Oh, it's just thrilling. Lots of cardinals; I have counted as many as twenty cardinals at once.

TR: You have had a very interesting life with a number of career changes. What was the most interesting time for you?

Eckstein: I wouldn't have to think long to make that decision. The most interesting time of my life was during the 28 years that I was principal at Cleveland School. As I mentioned before, I started in the old building, which was located across from Cleveland Park on First Avenue, West, on the corner of 15th Street. And while I was there, they were building the new school. We had about two hundred children at the old school. And when the school was finished, we packed up our books and our crayons and little possessions that the children had--each one carried their own--and we marched down the street in a long row to the new school. It wasn't finished. There were no sidewalks; everything was mud, no grass. And we found our way into the school, and each one went to the room with his/her teacher. The teachers and I had already been there the night before and had picked out the rooms they wanted, so the children went directly to their rooms and then went home. That was the end of the school day. Next morning they knew exactly where to come. And that was a very thrilling experience, to open a new school--a brand new school with room for 600 children. And that certainly was different than the crowded conditions we'd had with the 200 in the old Chandler home. It wasn't very long until we were overcrowded and a new addition had to be added to the school. Our enrollment got up to 900.

TR: What year was the original, or the new school, built?

Eckstein: We opened in 1950.

TR: And the addition then?

Eckstein: The addition was about four years later. And we had the thrill of landscaping the grounds and forming new curricula. It was just a real thrill. We planted some trees out in the yard and we had quite a drought. So I collected coffee cans from the cafeteria, because in the new school we did have the lunch program. And after school some sixth graders, maybe ten or twelve, would stay after school. We'd line up at the water faucet outside the building, and each one would run with a coffee can full of water to water the new trees. Now when I look at the trees, they are very large and stately; and I remember the beginning that they had with those children helping. And I remember one time one of the nursery men came to the school. They had been asked to come by the Board of Education, and they said, "Well, I don't have any work to do here. You keep your trees trimmed." And it was because the children were interested, and we used to go out together and take off the dead branches and keep things in good order. It was also a very great challenge to start innovations in our school program. Cleveland was the very first one in the city to start health records in the school. We also were one of two Cedar Rapids buildings to start the mentally gifted program, which was a forerunner of the present-day methods of teaching.

TR: What were some of the things that you did with the mentally gifted children?

Eckstein: Well, it was just as I said--the forerunner of what they are doing today. More freedom to work at your own level. We had had the rigid type of curriculum, you know, where everybody went through the same books and the same exercises and so on, and now in this mentally gifted group which we tested and selected carefully we could have more freedom to do the thing that they were most interested in. One little girl in the sixth grade was vitally interested in cancer research. And that was rather difficult for a young child like that. But she did do research in cancer literature and brought back helpful information to her classmates. And one boy was very interested in electronics, and we saw to it that we had a crystal set that he could build into a radio. Along with some others that were interested but not quite as skilled as he was. He was more or less the leader of that group. And many times I was called to come and listen because they thought they had something on the radio that they had built. And the one boy that was interested in that is now a computer expert, and we had a little part in starting him on his career. It was a very interesting innovation--something new. And we always tried to do things a little different and make ourselves noted. We had music teachers that were exceptional, I thought, and they just did what they wanted to do. They did the thing that made them feel good. And we had an operetta every year for a while. Actually, the talent that we found in the school and the way the teachers

brought out the talent was comparable to a high school production. They were marvelous. And the parents were so responsive; they just did everything for us. And when we had those operettas, we always had to have it two nights in order to accommodate the crowds. We had a wonderful P.T.A. group, and they were very supportive of anything that I wanted to do. The children were so supportive, and it has lasted all this time. Every now and then someone knocks at my door and it is one of my former children. I had two recently--two boys--and one of them had his children with him. It is just a real thrill to me to meet those people. I meet them in the supermarkets and wherever I go. They recognize me, and they always say, "You haven't changed a bit." And I know that isn't true, but if I look like I used to look to them, it's all right with me. And I just get a big thrill out of that. It was a wonderful experience to be the principal of Cleveland School for 28 years. And that's rather a long time. And to have started it and watch it develop in those years. That's the highlight!

TR: Thank you. This has really been a wonderful experience for me, Miss Eckstein, and I hope that you continue to have as many interesting experiences in the future.

Eckstein: Thank you. It's been interesting for me, too. I am happy to have done this recording.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW TOPICS
CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1--When were you born? Where?
- 10--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
 - What are your parents' names?
- 1--Where did you go to school?
 - Are you married or single?
 - Did you raise a family? How big?
- 1,14,17--What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

- 1. Transportation--9-10
 - Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
 - Trolleys (the Interurban)
 - Horses and First Automobiles
 - Mud roads and the seedling mile
 - Hunter Airport and the first planes
 - Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)
- 2. Communications
 - 11--Newspapers
 - Radios
 - Advertising
 - Telephones

B. People in the Community

- 1. Amusements/Recreation
 - Motion Pictures
 - Cedar Rapids Parks
 - Dances
 - Carnival Week
 - Chautauqua
 - Community Theater
 - Little Gallery
 - Symphony Orchestra
 - Circus
 - Greene's Opera House
 - Amusement Parks (Alamo)
 - Camps
 - Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)
- 2. Famous Characters
 - Cherry Sisters
 - Grant Wood
 - Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
 - Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle
 - 3--Life before air conditioning
 - 4--Winter Activities
 - 5--Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
 - 4--Clothing
 - 3--Toys
 - Saloons/Taverns
 - Farm Life
4. Family Life--4
 - Household Help
 - Women's Roles
 - 2-3--Childrens' Activities/Behavior
 - Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)
5. Ethnic/Minority Life
 - Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
 - Indians
 - Segregation of Blacks
 - Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education--2,7
 - 6, 7-8, 11-17--Cedar Rapids Schools
 - 6 --Coe College
 - 6 --Mount Mercy College
 - Cornell College
 - 10--Kirkwood College
2. Government
 - City Services
 - Streets/Roads
 - Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)
3. Medical
 - Hospitals
 - Patient-Doctor Relationship
 - Broken Bones
 - 5--Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
 - House Calls
 - Home Delivery of Babies

4. Business and Economy

- Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
- Local Brewing Companies
- Retail Businesses /Department Stores
- Professions
- Banking and Finance
- Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
- 8--Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
- Farmers Market
- Mills on Cedar River
- Buildings Erected
- Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
- Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)

5. Attitudes/Values

- 3--Children/Discipline
- Sex/Petting
- Charity
- Divorce
- Work
- 2--Working women, Voting Rights for Women
- Patriotism (World War I)

D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community

1. Catastrophic Events

- Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
- Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
- Bank Closings (1933)
- Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
- Public Library Murder(1921)

2. National Historic Events

- Womens' Suffrage
- World War I
- Roaring 20's
- Prohibition
- 4,5--Great Depression
- 9--WWII

