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NOTE: TRAVEL on the OLD
LINCOLN Highway

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OK

MLS: What do you remember about the newspapers and telephones at the time, and also, did Baumhoefner's advertise their business in the newspapers?

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MLS: Well, describe what a young married couple did for recreation.

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JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with: Mrs. Helen Baumhoefener

Interviewer: Mary Lou Selzer

Date: July 22, 1984

Place: Baumhoefener Nursery, 4241 Johnson Avenue NW
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

10.09
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INTERVIEW TOPICS
CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1 --When were you born? Where?
- 1 --How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
 - What are your parents' names?
- 1 --Where did you go to school?
- 1 --Are you married or single?
 - Did you raise a family? How big?
- 1,6 --What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

1. Transportation

- Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
- Trolleys (the Interurban)
- Horses and First Automobiles
- 3--Mud roads and the seedling mile
 - Hunter Airport and the first planes
 - Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

- Newspapers
- Radios
- 3--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
- 4--Grant Wood
 - Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
- 4--Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle

- 2--Life before air conditioning
- Winter Activities

4,5--Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)

- Clothing

14--Toys

- Saloons/Taverns
- Farm Life

4. Family Life

- 10--Household Help

2--Women's Roles

- Childrens' Activities/Behavior

3--Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)

- 8--Grocery shopping

5. Ethnic/Minority Life

- 7--Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)

- Indians

- Segregation of Blacks

- Jobs Available

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education

- Cedar Rapids Schools

- Coe College

- Mount Mercy College

- Cornell College

- 7--Amanas

2. Government

- City Services

- Streets/Roads

- Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)

3. Medical

- Hospitals

- Patient-Doctor Relationship

- Broken Bones

- 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)
- 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

- 11 --Children/Discipline
- Sex/Petting
- Charity
- Divorce
- 2 --Work
- 6,11 --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
- 3,12,13 --Great Depression

Helen Linkey Baumhoefener was born in 1908 in Queen City, Missouri, and moved at an early age to Iowa. She has lived in Cedar Rapids in the same house for 54 years. She attended the University of Iowa, but interrupted her studies in 1930 to marry. Since then, she has raised two children and participated in the family business, Baumhoefener's Nursery on Johnson Avenue NW. She remembers changes in the area from farm to city and changes in family life.

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Transcriber: Laura D. Coglean

MLS: Mrs. Baumhoefener, when we were visiting earlier, you told me you were born in 1908. Could you just tell me a little bit about your background?

Bhfner: Yes, I was born in Queen City, Missouri, and moved at a very early age to Iowa. I've lived in Cedar Rapids for 54 years, and I did go to school at the University of Iowa. I taught school for a while, and interrupted that to get married on June 10, 1930. We have two children, a son and a daughter, and of course, since then, grandchildren, and one great grandchild.

MLS: I understand that when you got married you had a career change.

Bhfner: Oh yes indeed! I was at the University of Iowa, and I was studying to be a lawyer, and hoped that that was what I intended to be. But when I got married I found that I was automatically involved in landscaping, because in order to talk to my husband I had to learn the nursery business. That has evolved into a full-time career.

MLS: You mentioned that you have lived in the same place for 54 years.

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friends that visited us--unmarried friends that came and brightened our day a little bit, and evenings. We did have, of course, relatives that came and we went to visit relatives, so those were the recreations. It was very simple. But I suppose it was very wholesome also.

MLS: What were your impressions of Grant Wood and Marvin Cone at the time, what was their reputation then?

Bhfner: Well, in the area here I think it was always very favorable. People were extremely interested and I think they were extremely proud. Whenever there was any news or publicity, everybody read it and sort of--very pridefully--enjoyed it, and it was something that, of course, nationwide, did not incur their fame until later, but they were always popular.

MLS: They were popular and well thought about at the time, but you didn't know that they were going to become as famous as they have...

Bhfner: That's right. Because they were members of the community we all took pride.

MLS: How did your family celebrate holidays? Could you tell me about a typical Christmas season?

Bfner: Well, we early on decided that, with all of the greens and the things in the nursery, that we could do a little extra business at the holiday time by making wreathes and selling them, and cutting a few Christmas trees where we could. So we were busy, but it was always a family affair, and

my husband's sisters, and his father and mother and all of us, and my family would get together. Like all families, and celebrate the holidays.

MLS: Did they have to come far?

Bhfner: Well no, now my family lived in Des Moines and so we went there at part of the holiday and we always divided it up, like most families do. But it involved quite a trip in those days, because it was not as fast as it is at the present time.

MLS: I suppose you had the usual turkey and trimmings..

Bhfner: Oh yes, yes...always.

MLS: I suppose your house was always decorated very well because of your nursery business.

Bhfner: Well, yes. We tried, and it was something that the whole family enjoyed. I remember the children at a later age going out to choose a Christmas tree, and one time they cut a 30 foot pine to go in my living room which has an eight foot ceiling. So it didn't quite match but those were the things that made life worth while.

MLS: Those were the things that you remember.

Bhfner: Yes, that's right, and they remember also. They still laugh about it, and one blames the other to this day for choosing that particular tree.

MLS: What was it like being a young homemaker in the early 30's? You touched on this a little bit...

Bhfner: Well, looking back at it I suppose we just made the best of things. We had...I did, later on, as the children were growing, I did have some help. I found that I had so much to learn--the botanical names of all the trees, and all. I would read everything from the library that I could get, and I made copious notes--just filled notebooks--because I found that if I wrote it down and then repeated it I could better remember. I set out to master it if I could, so that I could answer the telephone and be intelligent about helping with the sales. The more I grew into it, the more fascinated I became, because it's an ever-widening field and it was always a challenge and it still is a challenge.

MLS: Did you actively help in the business then when your children were little?

Bhfner: Oh yes I did. From the very beginning, because, as I say, in order to answer the telephone you have to be knowledgeable if your going to help or even to answer the phone properly you have to know something or else call someone else, and that always seemed to be embarassing to me. But I did find time to be active as the children grew. I was on the board of Campfire, and also on the board at the YWCA, and so there were diverse activities, because when your children are involved then you get involved.

MLS: Do you remember anything about some of the ethnic groups in Cedar Rapids, I believe once earlier when we were visiting you mentioned about some of the Czechs.

Bhfner: Oh yes, they're wonderful gardeners and of course, they were always customers. And we did employ, I remember, one particularly fine old gentleman. He had such large feet and such large hands, but he could handle the tiny little plants with the greatest of care, and he taught me many, many things. He lived to be a ripe old age, which was very nice. But I always think of him with kindness because he was a wonderful teacher, and he was definitely of Czech heritage.

MLS: You also mentioned when we were visiting about--you had a close relationship with people in the Amana's?

Bhfner: Yes, because my husband's grandfather was minister of a Lutheran Church that is located in the country south of Homestead. And his two aunts were teachers in the school that was adjacent, and they are all buried in that cemetery right in back of the church, and it so happens that it was at that time a country church. And I heard that it was going to be torn down and a new one built, so I contacted Mr. Noey, and asked him if he would paint the church for us, so that we would have it. And his daughter Emily was going to sing at a wedding, so he volunteered to take her down, and he made some sketches and did the painting of it, which we now have. And he even has the tombstones of Baumhoefener on it. It was built--I should have checked the date--but it was 1800 something, but it's a nice thing to have.

MLS: What can you tell me about some of the businesses in Cedar Rapids? And you might describe a typical shopping trip at the time.

Bhfner: Well, the grocery stores--I suppose that's the thing you think of first, because that's the one thing the housewife has to replenish, is her cupboard. We had no supermarkets. You would choose probably a neighborhood store. Ours was on Third Avenue, on the west side at that time, and you, of course, you went and you selected your things. We always brought our things home with us, but it was possible, in that day, to order by the phone, and it would be delivered to you. I often think now, when I see everybody running around the supermarkets with carts, how much simpler it was in those days. And they would deliver the groceries to the door, and all you had to do was put them away, so that's a decided change from what we go through today. But our selection was quite limited. The fresh fruits and vegetables were not nearly as plentiful as now, and of course, frozen foods were unheard of at that time. And we did have refrigerators, but they were certainly not like our own. The big thing a little bit later, were the locker plants which enabled people like us to take an animal, for instance, down to Amana, and they would cut the meat for us. They would package it, and we would bring it back and take it to the lockers. Now I think that sort of thing has almost gone out of business really, of existence. I think there are a few, but basically then we would bring the meat home and put it in a locker that we had a key to and we could go any-time we wanted to and remove things and then we would have the frozen food to use.

MLS: I see, at least probably in those days it was healthier eating anyway. You didn't have a lot of junk food...

Bhfner: Yes, it really was I think, because...and a lot of us baked bread, you know

that was just common practice, and we had gardens, so we canned. We had our own produce that way. So actually, it was a very healthy life, I think.

MLS: Was the landscaping and gardening business a good enterprise in the early years?

Bhfner: Yes, it was. But it was totally different than it is now. We had growing things in the field, and we would dig them in the spring and sell. And when we were sold out of the things that we had dug, then we were through for the season. In other words, we were almost always finished and Father Baumhoefener could go fishing, his beloved pasttime, about Memorial Day. The rest of the summer we had just to tend our gardens and to take care of the nursery. But now, we have container grown things so we work all summer, so there is no limitation like there used to be. But there was a great emphasis on the fruits, the fruit trees, and the raspberries, and the strawberries, and the currents, and all of that. And, of course, the landscaping of the homes was totally different. We had the large two or three story houses, you know, and the big farm houses. And the landscaping was basically Spireas, and the Hydrangeas, and the Honeysuckles, and shrubs of that kind, and a few evergreens, but times have changed--very drastically.

MLS: Well, did businesses themselves that were maybe built somewhere on the edge of town, did they have landscaping?

Bhfner: Yes, they had some. Most of, and the townspeople, I remember, in the early

era, they all as sort of a status symbol had pools--little pools, rock garden pools--and rock gardens. Those were the things. The amount or number of Hen and Chickens that you had, and the number of Sedums was sort of a prestige symbol also. A great many of them had gardeners, which is out of speaking today. Very few people have gardeners. But we occasionally see people that have help, but not the full-time gardener like they had in those days. That was really a luxury.

MLS: Well, how about all of the fertilizer, the plant food, and all that sort of thing?

Bhfner: Very limited. I remember one of the gardeners--he was quite good--and he used to order bone meal, and soy bean meal, and the different ingredients to mix his own. We did have--at one time it was quite a rage to use the Mil-Organite, which was from Milwaukee, the sewage system from Milwaukee--but when people found tomato seeds coming up in all of their lawns, that was the one bad thing. That sort of declined in popularity. And then we had Vi-Gro, which was a highly potent one, and people would invariably burn their lawns, and their shrubs, and things if they used that. So it's very nice nowadays to have such a wonderful selection. You can choose fertilizer best for tomatoes, best for flowers, and know that you're going to have wonderful luck, and the customer is not going to be in danger using it. It's really quite a luxury.

MLS: What about insecticides?

Bhfner: Oh yes. There was nothing of that kind, nothing of that kind at all.

My earliest remembrance is Black Leaf-40, and that, of course, is nicotine sulphate, and that could be used, but of course, it's death on tomatoes. So there were definite draw-backs, and there was not much help given to the gardener for that sort of thing. So, now we're really blessed to have as much information and as many wonderful products.

MLS: Well, you helped in the family business and even though the business was at your home, you could be considered a working woman. What were the attitudes toward working women at the time?

Bhfner: Well, I think it was sort of taken for granted. Particularly that we're a family business. I don't think that was questioned. I think if someone had gone out and tried to get a job in a man's field at that time, it would not have been possible. But since you did find the wives of the grocers helping just like the wives of the nursery people helping, and it was just sort of a natural thing to do. So there was no question about it, but it was a far cry from today.

MLS: Yes. What were some of the expectations regarding your children's behaviour as you were raising them, and they were growing up? Some of the values in your family?

Bhfner: Well, they were, I suppose, very normal children. They went to Cleveland-- both of them attended Cleveland, and then both of them went to Roosevelt. And then both of them went to Cornell, and then both of them went on to Iowa State University. They were just average children. They got into their usual troubles, and usual activities, but they were just average

children. A very happy time though. They had lots of fun in the nursery, they had their hiding places, and their tree-houses, and they always had lots of friends come, because it was fun to come to the country, and have picnics. So we did lots of that.

MLS: How did the bank closings effect your family and your business?

Bhfner: Well, it was kind of a stunner, because naturally, you know, you always expect to be able to go to the bank and get money, and to have it shut off so abruptly...But like everybody else, we survived somehow. I don't exactly remember how, but it was really a very critical thing at the time. But I think most everybody realized that we were all in it together, so you somehow or other worked things out.

MLS: What bank did you bank with?

Bhfner: I believe, I think it was People's Bank and Trust, at that time.

MLS: And it was down on Third Avenue?

Bhfner: Yes, on Third Avenue, yes.

MLS: What else do you remember about the Depression?

Bhfner: Oh, it was a frightful time. Also, going back to last year. Fifty years ago we had just such a summer as we had last year, and they say we have one every fifty years. And I remarked last year when we were going through

such a terrific drought and such intense heat, that I remembered 60 years ago when it did not rain from April until the fourth of July. And of course, we saw all of the things that we had planted just die. And that was a very traumatic thing. And last year, then, when it was hot again, they said every 50 years, I said, "Well, I went through one, I didn't expect to go through another." But you somehow survive. And this time last year we just stood with hoses in our hands and we were able to save our plants. At least most of them, and we were grateful for that. But the Depression was very difficult, extremely difficult for everybody, I think, in all levels of the economy. Simply because when things are shut off totally, and the money supply is so scant it's very difficult. It's extremely difficult, but you just simply have to make up your mind that you're going to do without certain things, and make do with other things. And I think maybe it's good discipline in the end, but it's not pleasant to remember.

MLS: You had plenty to eat though probably.

Bhfner: Oh yes. That we had, and we had reasonably good health, which was wonderful. And, like my husband said--our daughter was a baby at that time--you know, the most wonderful thing about a child is they will have as much fun with a pot and pan as they would with a fancy toy, and that sort of leveled things.

MLS: Speaking of toys, what kind of toys did your children have when they were younger?

Bhfner: Well, they had a lot of wooden things, which I still like. I mean there was no plastic at that time. And wooden things were not as dangerous, I think, I mean, there were no sharp edges, and they were durable. They were simple. They had puzzles, and they could draw. They really, I think, had a delightful time with what they had. Of course, nowadays there are so many things that are so absolutely fascinating that looking back you feel like--well perhaps they weren't as fortunate as we thought. But at that time you didn't realize that.

MLS: Well probably at that time their imagination was stimulated and all that more than...

Bhfner: I think so, and they, living like we did they were nature lovers, and they still are. So that was a great help. We had lots of wildlife around the place, because at that time, as I say, it was country. In fact, we still do have deer in the nursery occasionally, and all kinds of birds. And our Barbara is a great bird lover in fact, she has helped to write a book on birds that are found on Martha's Vineyard.

MLS: Do you have any other recollections of just anything that might be significant in the early years of your marriage?

Bhfner: Well, I think that looking back at it, I think the thing that I notice the most in comparing is the great change in the landscape. And of course, that is my field, but the three story houses are no longer being built. The ranch home has come in, and like the area around us that has developed far and wide, is filled with low, sprawling, ranch-type houses. And, also

beginning, and I'd like to make it easy for others.

MLS: Well, it sounds as if your nursery business is one of the great loves of your life.

Bhfner: Oh indeed it is. It is very rewarding.

MLS: Surprising, after having changed from becoming an attorney.

Bhfner: Yes, but it's very fulfilling, and I have a beautiful garden which I, in my spare time take care of, and I love it.

MLS: Well, thank you very much for your interesting conversation and some of the information you've given us for this project. Thank you again.

Bhfner: You're very welcome.

END OF SIDE ONE/END OF INTERVIEW

