

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH: ROBY KESLER

INTERVIEWED BY: GAIL LANDY

PLACE: CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

DATE: JANUARY 22, 1985

10-07

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3. Lifestyle

- Life before air conditioning
- 8 --Winter Activities
- 10 --Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
- Clothing
- Toys
- Saloons/Taverns
- Farm Life

4. Family Life

- Household Help
- Women's Roles
- 2-6,8,10,12,20-21 --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

- 6,11-12 --Cedar Rapids Schools
- 13-17 --Coe College
- Mount Mercy College
- Cornell College

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

- Children/Discipline
- Sex/Petting
- Charity
- Divorce
- Work
- 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
- Great Depression

1-5,9--Vernon Heights

18-20--Brucemore

Eliza Merrill "Roby" Hickok Kesler was born in Cedar Rapids on November 29, 1909, the daughter of Nellie Turner Hickok and Dr. Charles Thomas Hickok. Her father was a professor of Economics at Coe College from 1905-1940, and Hickok Hall was named for him.

Mrs. Kesler attended Cedar Rapids Schools and Coe College. She wrote for the Gazette both during and following her years at Coe, but then decided to go to Northwestern for a Masters in Journalism. Upon graduating, she went to Chicago and became involved with the production of the "Quiz Kids" radio show from 1940-47. She wrote a book about that experience. In 1947, she returned to Cedar Rapids to marry Dr. Carl Kesler. Since then she has been prominent in community service. In 1958-59, she was one of the first women members of the Coe Board of Trustees. Her memories include the Fourth Avenue SE neighborhood, Coe College, and Bruce more.

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GL: I'm with Eliza Merrill Roby Hickok Kesler on February 22, 1985, and we're interviewing her here at my house, 2039 Fourth Avenue S.E. in Cedar Rapids. Part of the reason that we're doing it here is that Roby did grow up in this neighborhood and we wanted to focus on some of the memories of growing up in Cedar Rapids and in this particular neighborhood. Roby, in your reminiscences about your father, you said that he bought the house in 1914. You were just a little girl at that point, weren't you?

Kessler: Yes, very. I'd like to think very little. I think he bought the lot and I'm trying to think how much it cost. I think it cost \$750 for the lot. The reason that he bought it way out here, which was so far from the campus, was because he believed the "town and gown" should be together. There was a lot of criticism that a faculty member, Coe faculty member, would move away from the campus. We lived before that, where I was born, right across from Polk School on Fifteenth Street. So, my father could walk to the college, but he thought the "town and gown" should be together, so he made this very, sort of radical change, and built a house way out in the woods. He had to bicycle then to the college. That's why we happened to be out here. It was built in 1914.

GL: When you say "out in the woods", was it a wooded area?



Drive and Vernon Drive. There weren't very many houses there and I would take care of those feeding stations every day during the winter because I was the girl of the Limberlost. Also, I had a zoo in the backyard for the children in the neighborhood and that was great to have a zoo. It was a wonderful place to grow up.

GL: What kind of animals did you have?

Kesler: Well, we had snakes, and I remember particularly toads in the zoo. I was crazy then about birds and I had a sign that I put up in the backyard. I did not like cats that got birds and it said, "a catless world by 1926."

GL: Were there a lot of children your age?

Kesler: Oh, yes. Lada Talman was my age, and then when the house was built next door, which I watched--the Elliott house next door at 2014, they had two boys and a little boy. We had a tree house where our garage is now and they had children. Then Mr. Killeen who was head of the Music Department at Coe, had two boys. There were enough children in the neighborhood. It was great without any worry at all! I had a coaster wagon, which I kept under the bay window. It was a strict rule to put it there. Roller skates and stilts seemed to be a great thing in this neighborhood.

GL: When the houses were built, were these built sooner than the ones up closer to Mt. Vernon Road, or were they all built about the same time?