

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH Lois McBroom

CONDUCTED BY Theresa Riley

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Lois McBroom was born in Cedar Rapids in 1913. Her parents were Robert B. and Ella George McBroom. Lois tells us about some of the learning experiences she had while attending school and Coe College and about various educators of those times. She also provides a glimpse at women's roles in those years.

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TR: Miss McBroom is going to share with us some of her early remembrances of life in Cedar Rapids. What was life like when you were a little girl, Miss McBroom?

McBroom: It was very simple pleasures, mostly with our family. There were two of us in our family. My father was a railway mail clerk on the Chicago-Northwestern, although he was a civil service employee. My mother stayed home, as most mothers did in those days. My sister was just two years older than I, and we had a great deal of fun as a family. We were great table sitters, talking and enjoying one another. We'd get up early in the morning and go on bird hikes out to Bever Park. We played jacks and we jumped rope and we played hide and seek, and we really... in our day people didn't think of things for us to do, because we had so many things we enjoyed doing.

I was born in 1913 here in Cedar Rapids. I was born at home; my sister was born at Mercy Hospital. So, I've obviously lived here all of my life.

My father's name was Robert B. McBroom, and my mother's name was Ella George McBroom. We went to Jackson Elementary and Johnson one year, and then we went to McKinley Junior High School. Miss Prescott was the principal. My mother used to say that she could tell us to stand up straight and we paid no attention, but Miss Prescott's posture was perfect and we would come home and just stand straighter because of her. She

was really a great lady, and we felt we had very good instruction both at the elementary and junior high and senior high levels. And I knew kids that went from the old Washington High to Coe and majored in English and said that they just felt that they worked even harder in high school than they did in college. We really had good instruction.

TR: Who was your English instructor?

McBroom: Well, we had a number of them. Iva Mae Quigley, I remember her particularly. One, a Miss Rudd, who was a geometry teacher and just a wonderful person, used to say, "I would walk down the hall and look in Iva Mae's room and all of you were sitting there as if on the edge of your seats with interest, and I envied her that ability to attract you." And Miss Cox taught journalism and Shakespeare and Milton, as did Miss Rachel Witwer, and they were superb teachers. Of course, we studied Latin and French, chemistry, physics, we had a very broad curriculum and we had requirements for graduation.

And then at Coe, I took some economics and business in addition to the usual liberal arts courses and took three years of French there, too.

TR: What was your major at Coe?

McBroom: French and business and economics.

TR: What year did you graduate from Coe College?

McBroom: In 1935. And that was a bad year to be getting out because jobs... Incidentally, while I was going to Coe, I will always be eternally grateful to the registrar and math instructor, J. F. Yothers, because he always saw to it that I had a job.

The federal government provided jobs for people working in college offices to help them stay in school. And he always saw to it that I had a job in the registrar's office so that I could continue to go to school. We belonged to Chi Omega sorority, and at that time the sororities had patronesses. Chi Omega's patronesses... Mrs. Douglas--Mrs. George B. Douglas--was one of our patronesses, and once in a while two or three of us would be invited out to Brucemore for teas. I remember one winter afternoon--it was so beautiful out there, and we sat... they could partition the rooms off so that it was cozy, with a fire in the fireplace, and she was a very interesting, gracious person and a real civic leader. She was the first woman to be on the Board of Trustees at Coe College.

TR: What would she serve at tea?

McBroom: Well, it's been so long, but I know it would be little sandwiches and tarts and things of that sort. We also had honorary societies; Phi Sigma Iota was the romance language honorary, and we had a number of patronesses. Our meetings were in their homes. There was Mrs. Arthur Poe and Mrs. Isaac Smith and Mrs. James Hamilton. When we had those meetings... each year you had to give a paper at Phi Sigma Iota, and all of your resource material had to be French, and then you could give your paper in English. And sometimes we would put on little plays in French. The artist, Conger Metcalf, sat next to me in our French class, and I used to just want to strangle him because he could just draw so beautifully, you know. And he'd sit there and draw--and there were only eight of us in

that Eighteenth Century French class, and Dr. Highburger never spoke a word of English and you had to respond in French--and I would just want him to quit drawing because it was so much fun to watch him and it was so hard to keep my mind on what I was supposed to be listening to. But, oh, we had very... we had a real good time.

TR: But he would sit there and draw...

McBroom: And he could still listen.

TR: ...make sketches then of people in the class?

McBroom: Or just little doodlings of little decorations, bunches of grapes or this or that. He'd just...

TR: It was something he just did.

McBroom: Yes. Marvin Cone said Conger was the best draftsman he ever had. He could draw better than any student he ever had. And Marvin Cone taught us art appreciation. Oh, he also taught French, but I didn't have him because I'd had French in high school and when he registered me when I came to Coe, I wanted to take his modern French, but he said, "No, you don't. You're going to have Dr. Highburger and Seventeenth Century French Literature. So I never did have him for a French teacher, but he was an excellent art orientation instructor. And I remember when I went to Europe in 1961 and we walked into the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, when I saw the "Birth of Venus" by Botticelli, it was just as if Marvin Cone was standing right there, because he loved that painting. He had talked about it so much, and I just pinched myself--I couldn't believe I was really there. And, in fact, in all the

galleries--the Prado, the Louvre, and the Tate in London--I just saw all these paintings that Marvin had made so meaningful to us in that class. Marvin Cone had the most wonderful sense of humor. He said the day was wasted if you didn't have a good story. When I graduated from Coe, I started working in the public school system at McKinley for Mr. Hallman, who was senior high principal there, and Miss Prescott was junior high. They had the six-year high schools after the old Washington High was torn down. Then I went to work for Mr. Deamer as the superintendent's secretary over at the Board of Education. And from there, after I'd worked there for ten years, I went up to Coe College to be Mr. Hollingshead's secretary, and I worked for five different presidents at Coe College: Byron Hollingshead, Edgar Cummings, Hollow Brooks, Dr. Gage came back for a year and a half--he was president of Coe College when I went to college. He came back for a year and a half. I wish I could have had a tape recorder of all the interesting stories he told me about his whole life experience and philosophy and so forth. And then Dr. McCabe came in 1958; I worked for him until his retirement, and then I still go over. He still helps with the college development program, and I still go work for him a morning a week or something like that.

TR: You've had such a close association with Coe College. What changes have you seen on the campus?

McBroom: Well, it's hardly recognizable as the campus when we went to college there, as students, because the only buildings that

are still there are Stewart Library and what they call Stuart Hall now, which we called our old science building. But everything else, except in Burrage and Greene--Burrage Hall and Greene Hall, they're dormitories--but all the other buildings are new. And, of course, Dr. McCabe succeeded in getting B Avenue closed off, which people told him wouldn't be possible but he got that done. That made the campus a continuous...

TR: A continuous flow of buildings?

McBroom: Yes, right. Of course, I think in many ways it's a miracle no student was ever killed when that B Avenue was open to traffic and people were running from the library to class or the dorm to class, and so forth. And of course a lot of the same... there are still some of the old traditions that go on at Coe. But, of course, when I went to Coe we had chapel Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings and we had many experiences that are quite different from what they are having now.

TR: Would you elaborate what chapel was?

McBroom: Usually, if Dr. Gage were in town, he read some scripture and he gave announcements and talked, and lots of times at the beginning of the year they introduced the new faculty. And when we were there the choir sang; in fact, I sang in the choir. And we heard the band. A lot of the things that students now... you see, there is no compulsory attendance. They have convocations on Tuesdays, but very few of them go to the convocation. They had some interesting speakers. They had some really fine programs, but there are very few students that bother to go.

TR: So the chapel was mandatory?

McBroom: Yes.

TR: And attendance was taken?

McBroom: Right.

TR: Was attendance taken in the classes?

McBroom: Yes, it was when I went.

TR: So you were required then to attend classes unless you were excused?

McBroom: Yes, that's right.

TR: What are some of your recollections of World War II?

McBroom: Our family was very fortunate in that we had no loss of a family member in that war. My brother-in-law was at Randolph Field all four years. He was an R.O.T.C. graduate at Coe, so he went in as an officer. And three times he took physicals for overseas service, but he never had to go overseas. So we were very fortunate in that way. Of course, there were many, many people not so fortunate. There was rationing, and we would work at the... a number of times we worked at the centers where the stamps were given out, the coupons, you know. You had to have coupons for meat, butter, sugar and... I'm trying to think. I know there were things in short supply, like...

TR: For shoes.

McBroom: Like shoes and hose and gasoline. Oh, gas rationing was one thing. Obviously, there were black market problems and all that sort of thing. And if you really... Bill Shire's latest book... Bill Shire was a Coe graduate in the Class of '25, and

the book he had come out in the 1984 called The Nightmare Years, I think it is probably the best book he has written, and it is his life, his personal memoir of living in Berlin from 1930 to 1940. And you waited until all those documents were opened so that you could say at the time, "I was not sure of what was going on," but this is the way it was. And he can fill you in on what was actually going on, because all these papers were opened for his perusal and now.

TR: So, he was a Coe graduate about ten years before you?

McBroom: Right.

TR: Do you remember anything about the Douglas Starch Works explosion?

McBroom: My mother had two younger sisters and a brother who worked in the office there, and it was... oh, it was a very tragic circumstance. We were little kids when that happened, but I remember hearing my aunt tell about being invited out to Brucemore by Mrs. Douglas. The girls of the office went out there to make wreaths out of pansies from her greenhouse for the graves of people that were killed in the explosion.

TR: What do you remember about the Cedar Rapids Symphony, the beginning of that?

McBroom: Well, of course, that... again, we were kids when that started, but we went from the time we were pretty small. Mother took us to all sorts of recitals at Coe. We lived right straight through from the college on Fourth Avenue. We could cut right through over to First Avenue. And we heard... we'd also go down to First Presbyterian Church and hear

Marshall Bidwell play his twilight recitals. He was a splendid organist. He went from Coe to Pittsburgh where he was at the University of Pittsburgh and a very famous organist. And we heard many... when we were Campfire kids, Galli-Curci sang at the old Shrine Temple, and we presented her with a bouquet of roses from the Campfire Girls. We had lots of interesting experiences. The symphony orchestra was started, of course, by Joseph Kitchen, and all the original or the people that played in it for many, many years were obviously volunteers. They got no pay for playing. There was a quartet that Mr. Kitchen and Dr. Crawford, and I forget who else, there was a quartet of doctors that played. They were fine musicians, and they played a lot in Cedar Rapids.

TR: Where were the symphonies held then?

McBroom: Down at the Memorial Coliseum. And sometimes... I think they were sometimes held at Coe College in the old Sinclair Chapel.

TR: What were some of the fine arts activities that you enjoyed? You have touched on going to the concerts and things like that.

McBroom: Right, and plays. When we went to Coe, we had a very good drama department even though the facilities were poor. It was in the basement of the old Sinclair Chapel. But we wouldn't think of missing a play. They did some very good productions. And also the Community Theater productions were good.

TR: You mentioned your contact with Marvin Cone at Coe College. Did you have any contact with or remember any stories about any other artists in Cedar Rapids?

McBroom: Well, Miss Prescott of course was one of the persons who really encouraged and helped Grant Wood, and he taught art at McKinley Junior High School. He carved a bench that was in the principal's office. It showed these students with their faces grimacing and most unhappy, and it said on the bench, "The way of the transgressor is hard." And the bench was very hard. And it was in the outer office; when a student got sent to Miss Prescott, he sat on that bench. Miss Prescott told us this story about the day he came in and was in tears, and she said, "Grant, what is it?" And he said, "I can't teach art by an outline." And she just took the outline out of his hand and put it in her desk drawer and said, "What do you want to do?" And he said, "I'd like to paint murals in the cafeteria." So she ordered the paint, and he got his students and they did these very interesting murals that showed people that you knew--you could recognize them--walking, riding bikes, and of course they were really humorous. It's too bad they were ever painted over. Of course, Ed Bruns, I knew him very well when I worked at the Board of Education because he was the art supervisor. And he painted very nice murals in the Board room, but of course those have been painted over, too.

TR: When we talked about you graduating during the Depression, would you mind telling us what your beginning salary was?

McBroom: Well, when I went over to McKinley to work, I got \$60 a month, when I was working for Mr. Hallman. And then when I went to work for Mr. Deamer, as the superintendent's secretary, I got \$100.

TR: A hundred dollars a month, and that was considered very good...

McBroom: Well, for those days. Of course, Theresa, you have to remember that there were not merely as many avenues open to women when I was graduating. It was just about to be a secretary, a teacher, or a nurse. There just... all the professions were not open as they are now.

TR: When women were married, then, were they expected then to resign their jobs?

McBroom: Oh, indeed. In fact, you would be fired if they knew. I know I had a friend that married while she was in nurse's training, and that was later than my experience because she's about five years younger than I. And she said that if they had known she was married, she would have been kicked out of nurse's training.

TR: So she kept her marriage secret then so she could finish?

McBroom: Right. I knew another girl who was married and her husband was overseas, and he sent the checks to another address and she went by her maiden name. She taught school in Cedar Rapids, but she would have lost her job if they'd known she was married.

TR: Even though her husband was overseas?

McBroom: Yes, because she couldn't be married and have the job.

TR: How do you view the changes that have come about in the past few years as far as jobs opening for women?

McBroom: Oh, I think it's great. I think it's really good that women have choices and they can have fulfillment as a person. They're not playing just traditional roles.

TR: Thank you very much. Your interview has been very interesting.

McBroom: Thank you, Theresa.

End of Interview

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?
- 1--What are your parents' names?
- 1,2--Where did you go to school?
- Are you married or single?
- Did you raise a family? How big?
- 5--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
- Mud roads and the seedling mile
- Hunter Airport and the first planes
- Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

- Newspapers
- Radios
- Advertising
- Telephones

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation

- Motion Pictures
- 1 --Cedar Rapids Parks
- Dances
- Carnival Week
- Chautauqua
- 9 --Community Theater
- Little Gallery
- 8 --Symphony Orchestra
- Circus
- Greene's Opera House
- Amusement Parks (Alamo)
- Camps
- Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters

- Cherry Sisters
- 10--Grant Wood
- Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
- 4,9--Marvin Cone

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
- 10 --Children/Discipline
 - Sex/Petting
 - Charity
 - Divorce
 - Work
 - 11-12 --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)
 - 8 --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
 - 10-11 --Great Depression
 - 7-8 -- WWII

3. Lifestyle

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

4. Family Life

- Household Help
- 1 --Women's Roles
- 3-9,1 --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

- 2,10 --Cedar Rapids Schools
- 2-6,7,9 --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

