

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH: ZULINA SEVERA WILHELM

INTERVIEW BY: INEZ LYON

PLACE: CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

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Zulina Severa Wilhelm was born in Cedar Rapids in 1890, the daughter of Josephine Dusil Severa and Wencil F. Severa. She attended Jackson Elementary and graduated from Washington High School and Smith College. Her father came from Czechoslovakia when he was sixteen. After living in various places, he settled in Cedar Rapids and opened a drug company that catered to the Czech immigrant community. Mrs. Wilhelm remembers that her parents entertained President Masaryk of Czechoslovakia when he visited here in 1922. The Severa family built one of the first homes on Blake Boulevard, near Bever Park when the area around was still country. Mrs. Wilhelm married George Taylor Wilhelm, who owned Metalcrafters Iron-works, in 1919, and raised one daughter, Elizabeth. She helped to found the Cedar Rapids Garden Club and has been active in it for many years.

# INTERVIEW TOPICS

## CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

### I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- When were you born? Where?
- How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
- 19,22--What are your parents' names?
- Where did you go to school?
- Are you married or single?
- Did you raise a family? How big?
- 26--What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?
- 23--Parent's occupation.

### II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

#### A. Technology in the Community

##### 1. Transportation

- 4 --Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
- 5,30 --Trolleys (the Interurban)
- 5 --Horses and First Automobiles
- 5,6 --Mud roads and the seedling mile
- Hunter Airport and the first planes
- Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

##### 2. Communications

- 8--Newspapers
- Radios
- Advertising
- 8--Telephones

#### B. People in the Community

##### 1. Amusements/Recreation

- 8--Motion Pictures
- 8,10--Cedar Rapids Parks
- Dances
- Carnival Week
- 10--Chautauqua
- Community Theater
- Little Gallery
- Symphony Orchestra
- 10,11--Circus
- Greene's Opera House
- Amusement Parks (Alamo)
- Camps
- Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)
- 27,28--Garden Club

##### 2. Famous Characters

- Cherry Sisters
- 24--Grant Wood
- Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
- Marvin Cone

## 3. Lifestyle

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

## 4. Family Life

- 21 --Household Help (Gardener's house)
- Women's Roles
- Childrens' Activities/Behavior
- 14 --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

- 3,13--Cedar Rapids Schools
- Coe College
- Mount Mercy College
- Cornell College
- 27--Ames

## 2. Government

- City Services
- Streets/Roads
- Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)

## 3. Medical

- 17--Hospitals
- 9--Patient-Doctor Relationship
- Broken Bones
- Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
- House Calls
- Home Delivery of Babies



4. Business and Economy

- 17,18--Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
  - Local Brewing Companies
- 3,4--Retail Businesses /Department Stores
  - Professions
  - Banking and Finance
  - Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
- 12--Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
  - Farmers Market
  - Mills on Cedar River
- 21--Buildings Erected
  - Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
  - Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)

5. Attitudes/Values

- 18--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

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Date of Interview: October 26, 1984  
Place: Meth-Wick Manor, 1224 13th Street N.W.  
Interviewer: Inez Lyon

IL: Were you born in Cedar Rapids?

ZW: I was. I was born in 1890.

IL: Where were you living at that time? Where did the family live?

ZW: On Third Avenue, between Eighth and Tenth Street on the south side, and the house is still there, right next to the Catholic parsonage. The house is all there in place.

IL: They haven't torn those down? They just remodeled them to apartments, is that it?

ZW: That's right. The outside looks like very much like it did then.

IL: Do you get a little pang when you go up and down Third Avenue?

ZW: Well, I hate to see what is happening to Third Avenue as far as the residences are concerned, the way people are living there. I think down where we lived, it is still very nice, but unfortunately I understand the element farther out has changed quite a bit, but it is kept up beautifully, I think.

IL: And you said you went to school there on Third Avenue. Whose school was it?

ZW: As I recall, it was Miss Moster's.

IL: And was it a preschool, or was it a...

ZW: No, because they had several grades: little children, kindergarden, I suppose or preschool, and I was there until I entered grade school in the fourth grade. In fact, the teacher said when she examined me, I could have gone in fifth grade, but my mathematics kept me back to fourth grade.

IL: Who were some of the other children in the school?

ZW: Well, Charlotte Pinney, Ruth and Ethel Pinney, John Ely, Mary Esther Ely, Pauline Bever. There was Marie Saunders, as I recall, who lived on Second Avenue. I can't think of anyone else right now.

IL: Isn't it interesting that most of those people still stayed in Cedar Rapids?

ZW: That's right.

IL: And then, after that school, you went where?

ZW: To Jackson, and then to Washington High.

IL: Did you go to Wellesley?

ZW: No, I went to Smith. I wanted to go to Wellesley because Ruth and Penny were Wellesley, and I would have loved to then, but by the time

my application went in, they were filled. So one of the teachers down at the high school suggested that I go to Smith. It was equally good. That is the reason why I went to Smith, and I never regretted it.

IL: Was there an active Smith alumna group here in town?

ZW: No, there wasn't. I don't know of another person that was there at Smith with me from Cedar Rapids.

IL: Who was the principal at Washington at that time?

ZW: Miss Abbie Abbot, and she was a wonderful principal. She knew everything that was going on.

IL: Did she know the students, too?

ZW: She knew her students. She knew them by name. I think she knew them all. She kept order, too. She was really a remarkable principal. Miss Emma Fordyce was loved by everybody, of course. When they wanted a pep talk, it was Miss Fordyce who gave the athletic pep talk in the auditorium at old Washington.

IL: As you remember growing up, what was the downtown like, what were the stores like that you remember?

ZW: Well, the shopping district was on Second Avenue between Second and Third Street, Martin's, Craemer's, Armstrong's men's store--they didn't have anything but mens--and Snyder's Shoe Store. Martin's was THE store, of course. I don't recall whether there was a jewelry store there (Ludie Taylor) or not. It seems to me that there was

but I'm not positive. I was not interested in jewelry those days. Killian's was on the corner of Second Street and Second Avenue, the northwest corner.

IL: Was Killian's there then?

ZW: No, Killian's came later. They came down on Third Avenue on the corner there where the old City Hall was. I think it was the City Hall that was there. The Killian's downtown didn't mean much to me, but I do remember that when Killian's came and they tore that down that everybody thought Mr. Killian was making a great mistake, because shopping was all on Second Avenue. He was going to bring it down to Third Avenue, which he certainly did.

IL: The old Union Station, do you remember?

ZW: Oh, yes, indeed. That was a lovely station. It is too bad that they tore it down, I think. Of course, they wanted to before that, but I still think they could have opened Fourth Avenue and kept the bulk of the station, because the freight department was down at that end, and that could have been torn down, but the building proper where they take it off is a waiting room. That could have been preserved, because it was quite an outstanding station.

IL: And the trains?

ZW: The trains, yes. That crowded up Third Avenue crossing a lot.

IL: What were there, passenger trains? How many a day?

ZW: Oh, I don't remember. I don't know. Of course, we had Chicago Mil-

waukee as I recall too, and they had their offices on, I think, First Avenue and Fourth Street. So we had quite a few trains going through.

IL: Did you notice, when you were in high school, did they have to stop the classes while the trains went by?

ZW: No, they never bothered because they were so close. No, I never recall that they bothered really any. Maybe they did, but I don't remember that. You were there more recently. Your memory is a little better than mine.

IL: The trolleys. The streetcars.

ZW: Oh, the streetcars. Yes, we lived on Third Avenue. Of course, that time there was a trolley that went up Bever Park: from Bever Park down to Third Street, and I don't know 16th Avenue or someplace like that. I know that in the summertime we'd have a special car; they were open cars, with benches like, all facing the front, and to get on them whichever row there was a vacancy. It was all open.

IL: Of course before that there were the horses and carriages?

ZW: Well, we had horses and buggies even after the streetcar was there, because the automobile didn't come in until what, about late 1800's? Yes, I think so. I remember the first funny little auto that came there. Who was it that had that? G.E. Haskell. Of course, everybody would run out and see this put-put-putting along. It was like a big carriage (up like a carriage) with a dashboard even. I think he left the old appearance of a carriage without horses.

IL: Did you have stables and carriage house on the... ,

ZW: Oh, of course. That was one way of taking the family out for an outing. We would have horses and somebody to take care of the barn in back, but horses and we would have a pony, ride pony back, and a sleigh in the winter time. So that was our means of recreation; go out for a ride in the country.

IL: And how far would you go into the country? Up 19th Street?

ZW: Well, I don't think we went that far. It seems far. I don't imagine it was more than about three or four miles, maybe five, but it took us a long time to get there. Sometimes the horses would just walk. They didn't trot all the way, you see. So it was rather slow. Then, when the automobiles came in, that was very difficult for the horses because the horses were so frightened. So, there were runaways, quite a few. When you would go out with a car and put-put-putting around along in the narrow roads, it wasn't so good because there were always ditches on either side of the roads. And so if a horse shied too much, why there was too much danger of the wagon turning over in the ditch.

IL: And when that happened, would you all be stranded or could you get the buggy back?

ZW: Oh, they would get back, yes. Unfortunately, the people driving their cars went on and left the person behind to turn the buggy over or whatever to get started again, as a rule.

IL: Of course, those were the mud roads, too.

ZW: And very. It was not easy going out in a car on those roads, because the roads were narrow with high ditches, with deep ditches, on either

side. And when the rain came it was treacherous, because you slid on our gumbo slide back and forth and easily go into the ditch and that was not so good. I remember many years later driving into Chiaco and that was freshly started pavement. It was a seedling mile. I don't remember where it was but down on...

IL: Mount Vernon Road?

ZW: Yes. Do you remember that? It took us two days to get to Chicago, because of the mud.

IL: Do you remember the island when there was a park there?

ZW: Yes, I remember the bridges across the river. Whenever a car or a wagon came along, it rattled and shook so that it was frightening. I remember there was a little fruit store, a little Italian store that had fruit on the island. Now I don't remember if it was Lagomarcino or who he was. But it was one of the early Italians that had it there. That's all I really remember. There were some little stores there. And I think there were grass and weeds the rest of the ends. It was attractive. I know that.

IL: It wasn't park-like?

ZW: No, it was far from it. In fact, the riverbank was far from the park.

IL: Do you remember any newspapers in the town?

ZW: I remember The Republican and The Gazette. The Republican was the morning paper and The Gazette was the evening paper. That's about all I remember, but I know, as I grew older I would.



IL: Let's see now, did telephones...

ZW: The telephones. I remember when they first came in. We had to ring the bell. Quite thrilling. It was a huge contraption on the wall. And you'd ring and ring and ring. It was quite an ordeal to get your connection, but we thought it was wonderful.

IL: And the electricity?

ZW: Yeah, we had electricity. I was born in 1890. We had electricity in those days and our house was electrified. But it also had some gas jets in case the electricity went off we would still have some light. So we had some gas jets, very few, but then we were not left in darkness should the lights go out. Just in case. And another thing I remember, I suppose the water pressure wasn't very great, because I remember a big water tank up on the third floor. And it would have to be filled, I think, once a week. So apparently when we took our baths or anything like that when we turned on the water we used that water from the tank. I was not too interested in the mechanics in those days. As I look back I presume that's what it was.

IL: They talk a lot about motion pictures, the first ones. Do you remember the early motion pictures?

ZW: I don't remember what I saw. I remember how thrilling they were. There were certainly stemwinders. The only ones I remember were Charlie Chaplin's, but I didn't go as often, I suppose, as some did. But we thought it was wonderful when we got a nickel to go to the movie picture show. Oh yes, it was a nickel then. And that was quite a

treat. A penny was about all we ever got for spending.

IL: And the movies were down on Second Avenue? Or do you remember where they were?

ZW: I don't remember. I remember going to a movie on Third Street, and I don't know what avenue, and I don't know how come. But I don't remember just exactly where they were. I guess I didn't go to very many movies. Our life was very simple. It was on Third Avenue between Eighth and Tenth Street, and that was our whole life. We were satisfied to be right there.

IL: Who were some of your neighbors?

ZW: Well, the White's lived next door. The Pinney's. The Fox's. Mr. Pinney was at Coe, and I suppose, but I thought he had something else.

IL: Ice?

ZW: No, Hubbard Ice was there. Mullens were there, of course, they had the bookstore. Taylors, they had a dry good store on First Avenue. I had forgotten, I think. And Margaret West taught music. She was across the street. Doctor Burkhalter lived on the corner of H Street and Third Avenue. We certainly can't forget Doctor Burkhalter. He was loved by everybody, I think, in Cedar Rapids. He had the sweetest manner of anyone I have ever known. He spoke to everybody. And he was very polite to the children. We were treated as human beings--grown up. He would stop to visit with us. He was a delight. He was a really outstanding citizen in Cedar Rapids. I think every-

body--loved him whether they were Presbyterian or not...

IL: He was the one who baptized me.

ZW: I didn't go to the Presbyterian Church, but he loved me anyway, and I appreciated it.

IL: Do you remember the parks in Cedar Rapids? Not the main one.

ZW: I don't know. No, there was a park down by the river, I think, on the west side. What was that called? Riverside Park, wasn't it?

IL: On the west side there is a Riverside Park.

ZW: I think that was there, but, of course, Bever Park was the one that we went to.

IL: Do you remember Chautauqua? Did you ever go to Chautauqua?

ZW: Oh, absolutely. I went to Chautauqua. That was a big event. And another big event, of course, was when Ringling Brother's Circus came to town. And their tents--they pitched their tents on Third Avenue. I would say about 17th Street, because above, I would say, 16th Street there weren't any more houses. They were scattered up between 14th and 16th, and then beyond that, I don't believe there were any. So Ringling's had all that area for their show. So that was a big day when Ringling's came in. We sat out on a curb all day long, first watching them bring their wagons up Third Avenue and animals and what have you. Then the parade came by around 10:00 a.m. or 10:30 a.m., and then in the evening and at night, the wagons going back again. So that was really a big day, because we'd stand out on the curb most of the day.

IL: Whether you went to a performance or not.

ZW: Whether you went to the circus or not. We had a good time. Yep. We had a circus of our own. We didn't always go either.

IL: Do you remember Greene's Opera House?

ZW: Absolutely, that was quite something. Yes, I do. We thought it was elegant, and it was for those days, because it was a--the boxes were plush with red velvet and gold and parquet. The parquet was, I think, the red seats, and the dress circle--those were all good seats too--but the parquet was more elegant. People really dressed up. Sometimes the men came in their tuxedos. I remember Mr. Poe often wore his tuxedo down in the parquet. We did get good shows. We did really get--it was the highlight, of course. We were very fortunate, because we were on the main line of the Chicago Northwestern between Chicago and Omaha. It was just a day's run to Cedar Rapids from Chicago. So they would come out, and we would get the good shows. Then, they go on the next day to Omaha.

IL: That was something to be enjoyed.

ZW: It was. We really made good use of it.

IL: Do you remember the YM, the YW? Was there such a place?

ZW: There was no YW in those days, and I don't remember the YM, but that was down on, wasn't it, First Avenue and First Street?

IL: Down on the river?

ZW: Down by the river. We were not allowed to go down to First Street,

because that was a bad street--between Third Avenue and First Avenue. We were not allowed to go there, because that had a lot of saloons. And I guess it had other places too that were not permissible for young children. Although I remember Brem's, the bakery Brem's, that was the place to go when you were having a good ham--a big ham with rye crust. And it was delicious.

IL: They were there then. They've been there for generations. Were they?

ZW: I don't know whether they were there more than one generation.

IL: I don't know, but I remember within the last 40 years...

ZW: Oh really.

IL: Taking hams there to be baked.

ZW: Oh really. Well I didn't realize that. I thought it was just the one generation--maybe longer.

IL: They did do a good ham.

ZW: Oh. Wasn't it good. Sure was.

IL: Do you remember the Cherry sisters?

ZW: No, I just heard of them, and I never knew just where they were. But they came from Marion didn't they?

IL: I think so.

ZW: But I remember Cherry's home.

IL: The other Cherry.

ZW: The other Cherry, J. G. Cherry. I had Miss Cherry for fifth grade teacher. Yeah, Agatha.

IL: At Jackson School?

ZW: At Jackson School, and I remember we had Miss Wright. I think she was the seventh grade. And I guess I had a crush on Miss Wright. I took her for a ride, a horse and buggy. She turned her hat and livened her hands when she went out with me, but she was a good sport.

IL: Did you know Grant Wood?

ZW: Yes, I knew him in high school, not too well, but I knew him. Yeah, he was very, very shy--very shy--and Horace Hedges, of course, he went by Cap Hedges. He was the hero in high school.

IL: Who else in high school do you remember?

ZW: Well, I remember the Berry's. One of the Berry's was a debator, was it Oewin? I should know. The debating team was quite good.

IL: Do you remember Carl Van Vechten?

ZW: No, I never did. I just know of him, but I didn't know him.

IL: Marvin Cone?

ZW: Marvin Cone, I don't know. I really didn't know him well. That was later, when I got acquainted with him--much later. That was after he was married, in fact, before I got acquainted with him.

IL: Do you remember holidays when you were growing up? Were they big family times?

ZW: Yes, of course they were. We always had a big Christmas tree in our library, and it was always shut off while the hot tree was getting decorated. So that Santa Claus brought it Christmas morning, and it was a tall tree always. I just marveled that fact that it was covered with, it looked to me, candles burning. What a risk it was to have those candles burning in the house. Of course, there was always a pail of water handy, but that wouldn't go very far if you get caught on fire. That was the risky thing, really.

IL: Don't you wonder how they got all the candles burning at the same time?

ZW: Absolutely, because maybe it did not reach the ceiling, but it was a big tree.

IL: And in the morning, there it was.

ZW: It was quite thrilling.

IL: And the July 4th was it a big occasion?

ZW: I will say--I do think that we are missing something by not celebrating more patriotically on Declaration Day and Fourth of July. They really meant something. We had a parade. Everybody put the American flag out in front or attached to the house. So we really felt it was a big day, but now it is just another holiday, I feel. I know that the last time I was living on Blake Boulevard, I know my flag was the only one out. Nobody else had their flags out, and I thought that was just too bad.

IL: Were Sundays a big day when you were growing up?

ZW: Sunday was a very quiet day. You were not supposed to do anything, not even play cards. You were supposed to be very polite and very good o

Sunday all day long. Don't break the sabbath. Quite a change now. I will say this--what we did in the wintertime was, which I thought was fun, (people would think it was funny now) but we used to do what they call "hacking out bobs". We would take our sleds--have you heard of this?

IL: No.

ZW: With a rope attached. And, of course, the farmers came in on runners. The wagons would be on runners. And so there were these big runners, and the deliveries of course, were all on runners. We had snow in those days. We would take our rope with our sleds and run and "hack out a bob," attach our rope to the axel or something and ride behind the bob. Of course, unfortunately, when we got towards the edge of town we had to find another one coming back. Sometimes we had quite a long walk back, but we thought it was a lot of fun.

IL: Oh, wouldn't that be fun.

ZW: That was our excitement.

IL: That was before they snow plowed the streets? I think.

ZW: Oh absolutely. The street were covered with snow, but there wasn't the traffic of course. The only traffic, you might say, the delivery trucks and just a few that would go out. And farmers coming in to town with their bobsleds, but outside of that there was no other traffic. Of course, Cedar Rapids, most of the men walked to work. Or if they don't walk to work, why then they would take the street-car.



IL: Was there streetcar in Tenth Street then?

ZW: On Tenth Street, no. There was no streetcar on Tenth Street. I don't know how the people that lived out there--how they got into town. Cause, I know, Freddie Higley went to Jackson School, and he was then living on, what is it, Sixth Avenue, Mount Vernon Road, and about, no I mean street, no it is more than must have been about Seventh Street. Isn't it? His house--Eighth Street. The old Higley house--opposite the cemetery.

IL: Yeah. That's up on, what is it 16th Street? Or 17th Street on Mount Vernon Avenue.

ZW: Is it that far out?

IL: Yeah.

ZW: Well, I know he came to Jackson School. Now how he got there I don't know. He must have walked, I guess. Because there would be no way of transportation.

IL: Maybe there was someone to drive him?

ZW: Could be.

IL: Do you remember anything about the hospitals? Did you ever go to the hospital? Or was that the last resort?

ZW: I never had to go to the hospital, so I really don't know anything about it. I just knew that Mercy Hospital was on Third Avenue, wasn't it? Third Avenue--the Catholic Church was down on Third Avenue and

I had forgotten all about that, Third Avenue and...

IL: The nurse's home was about on Eighth Street and Third Avenue.

ZW: Sixth Street, wasn't it? Sixth Street facing the eastside of Sixth Street, as I recall. And on the southside was a Catholic School if I am not mistaken. There were two Catholic buildings, but as a child I wasn't too interested. Because I remember there were those things, and there was a church, I think it was a Christian Church, was on Fourth Avenue and Sixth or Seventh Street. The churches were all down there, and then they all moved up farther.

IL: I think ours in those days too. Everbody was born at home. Were you born at home?

ZW: No, I never asked.

IL: That you don't remember.

ZW: No, I don't remember. I rather suspect so though. I wouldn't know. Isn't that odd? I was never curious. I was just born.

IL: You were just there.

ZW: Yeah, I was just there.

IL: Some of the local factories. There were the Quaker Oats. Wasn't it? The Quaker Oats.

ZW: Yes, the Quaker Oats.

IL: Penick and Foru.

ZW: And, of course, Penick & Ford was a--what was it but Starchworks?

IL: Until they blew up.

ZE: And, yes, and that was quite something in Cedar Rapids when that happened. That was quite an event. Of course the packing house always smelled. That was a big thing. There was that. The packing house and the Quaker Oats were the first industries here, of course. Cause the Sinclair's and the Douglas's were the start of that. They were the principle residents. I don't know, as a child of course, I wasn't interested in anything but just downtown and my neighborhood. We were content to stay right in our neighborhood, and that seemed like a big area between Eighth and Tenth Street. We played hide-and-seek through there. We went down three or four houses; we were way off bounds.

IL: Was your childhood rather strict?

ZW: Well, we had to mind, and I know I took piano lessons. And I had to do my hour's practicing everyday. But outside of that, we were not restricted. We could play all the time we wanted to. We did do a lot of reading. We played with our dolls, which children don't do anymore like we did. We had doll houses, buggies, and take our dolls for a walk. We had bicycles as we grow a little older. We rode those around the block; we didn't go very far. We never thought of going very far. We were content to stay at home, I guess. No troubles. We were still happy. If we got on a pony, we went a little farther.

Yeah, this is the funny thing that happened though.

IL: Okay, you and ...

ZW: Charlotte Pinney decided we were going to go out to get our May flowers for our baskets right before breakfast. So we got on our bicycles and started out, and, of course, it was not paved. The street was not paved from 17th Street on, and it was quite sandy. But we had walked and ridden our bicycles. We got almost to the park, and we sat down, and gathered our flowers, and rested. And all of sudden gypsy wagons appeared (true gypsy wagons appeared). We had heard stories about how the gypsies kidnapped children. We were scared to death. We jumped on our bicycles, and we hurried home as fast as we could get there. We were really scared to death we would never see our parents again. Nothing happened of course. They weren't even interested in us. Shows how little we knew. It was a very secluded night.

IL: Yes.

ZW: Fun--lots of fun.

IL: About your parents. Would you like to talk about your parents?

ZW: Well, I wonder what I could say. Mother was born in Cedar Rapids. She graduated from Washington High School, and that was quite something. And she taught school for a while. I think. I don't know where she taught. I never went there to see her. Father came as an immigrant boy to this country when he was sixteen. He came by himself. As I understand, he came to Racine and was there for a few years. And then to Belle Plaine where he worked at a drugstore. Then he finally came

to Cedar Rapids and started a drugstore.

IL: So W. F. Severa Company...and what was his name? What was W.F.?

ZW: W was for Wencil and Czech is Vatslav. It's V, but in English it's Wencil. And F, he never had a middle name, but he was told that he should have a middle initial. So, he added F to it, for what reason, I do not know. Apparently it sounded good to him. So, it was W. F. Severa.

IL: Now, that's a good story. Did he speak any English when he came?

ZW: To this country? Oh, no. He learned English after he came here. I think he was very brave to come all alone. He later sent for his mother and two sisters. So, they came to Cedar Rapids, and then five brothers also followed him to Cedar Rapids. He was a Catholic, but he was brought up a Catholic. His mother and sisters were devoted Catholics, but when he came to this country, he apparently never went to Catholic Church. He became a Unitarian. It was as far away from Catholicism as one could possibly be, I would say.

IL: And then he built the W. F. Severa.

ZW: Company. It was very successful. It was an opportune time, because there were so many immigrants of Slavic descent coming to this country. And he went off his home remedies, and he put them with Slavic labels of the various dialects you might say. I don't know. Branches of the Slavic language. So it was Lithuanian and various and things like that. And he distributed them in the centers where they were. So, it was very lucrative as long as that generation lasted, but when the second generation came, and they went and learned English th

was a different matter. It finally disappeared, because they wanted English things.

IL: He built this lovely home, up near Bever Park.

ZW: Yup.

IL: Do you know Mr. Vosmek?

ZW: Well, no. That was all father's property. He bought this big tract of land out there on the hill. We were second, I think, to move out that far. The first was that--what was it? Of course, that gray stucco house down on Linden Drive and Forest. It's now white, but it was a gray stucco. Shaver built that house. He was the first, and then we built. Everybody thought that Father had lost his mind, but we had a cow. We had chickens up there for a while, and we had a gardner. We had a gardner's house for him. The idea was that the gardner would take charge of the yard, and his wife would be the housekeeper, but it never proved satisfactory. If it was a good yardman, it was a poor housekeeper. And, if it was a good housekeeper, it's a poor yardman. So it never really worked.

IL: Then, there was the chauffer's house, too, wasn't there?

ZW: No, that was the yardman's. When we did away with the yardman, but, no, we never had a chauffeur. No, we never did. We chauffeured ourselves, but the house that was the yardman's house was a cottage down on Forest Drive that Margaret and Lou lived in, but they added on a sunroom and sleeping porch, you see. Or that was added on-- father put that

on. So that was it, but that was a nice yardhouse. But then when they did away with that. Then and did away with the cow--chicken. Then we had this big barn, and so half of it was a garage, and the other half was made into living quarters.

IL: It was always so pretty up there. And then your father sold the property to Mr. Vosmek and to Hamilton's?

ZW: No, Mr. Hamilton bought his property; and Mr. Vosmek bought a piece of father's property. And then it got subdivided.

IL: Your father started a school in Czechoslovakia.

ZW: Oh yes he did. It was after World War I and there were so many orphans, because so many men had been killed in that war that they had to do something for the children. And so he started an industrial school for them. Where they could live in a dormitory and work. It was an industrial town. There were factories there. They could learn a trade so that they could be independent and not be a burden to the country. That was under President Masaryk. And I guess that school is still there, but I don't know. I don't think it is run as a school any longer. I don't know what the Communists have done.

IL: Your father was recognized by the Czech government wasn't he for that school?

ZW: Yes. He was given an honor. Yes. What was it called? I forgotten it was something. I am ashamed to say I forgot. An order of the red lion--an order of the white lion. I am ashamed to say I don't know.

IL: I understand.

ZW: But it was quite an honor by the President Masaryk.

IL: And wasn't President Masaryk over here? Didn't he visit over here?

ZW: Oh, he was here several times. We entertained them all. We entertained Mr. Masaryk; and we entertained his son and his daughter, Alice. They've all been in our home and stayed a long time. We knew them very well, in fact. Then, Father and Mother were entertained in the palace when he was President.

IL: Have you visited them? Did you visit them while they were still...

ZW: No, I did not visit them. When we went over with Father after our graduation from high school; Father took the family over. That was not a republic, of course, at that time. That was under the Austrian rule. Then, after that, I didn't go over until after President Masaryk passed away. But I was entertained by--well, we were--by his daughter. And...we were always very good friends. And Betty still keeps up with one of the daughters in correspondence. They became very good friends.

IL: That's nice to keep that up for generations. I like that.

ZW: They enjoyed each other.

IL: Have you had any interest in the Czech Village here in town?

ZW: I'm ashamed to say I haven't I was getting too old...

END OF SIDE ONE - BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

IL: I remember the lovely ironwork that George used to do.



ZW: Yes. He really did lovely things, and it is rather interesting how it started. He didn't start the ironwork. It was George Keeler who really started the ironwork. George Keeler and Grant Wood, and George (my George)...all worked together on it. George's shop was at that time was on Twentieth--where Eagle's--Twenty-seventh Street?

IL: Twenty-nineth.

ZW: Twenty-nineth Street. Well, it was on Twenty-nineth Street and down by the

tracks. George had a shop down there, and he was doing ornamental plaster work there--concrete rather. And George Keeler. I don't know, but he was doing some things out there. He was a cousin of George's. And Grant Wood used to come out a lot to visit I guess. I don't think he did anything, but he just visited. Well, George Keeler went into making iron railings for contractors. I know he went anyway for the brothers. That's my age--never mind. Well, all of sudden George Keeler decided to go to Chicago, and he left a job unfinished. And so they asked George whether he can finish it, and George said, "yes". That's the way he started ironwork. But George was very artistic too. I wish--I am so sorry I didn't bring one of the things that he made for us, a lovely bird--crane on legs. And he made him little feathers, and they were all---I don't know how he did it--but they were all shaded like he must of heated them in in some way. Because they were blended, and I had it by the fireplace. And I couldn't see it any place, but beside a fireplace. So I did not bring it. So Betty has it.

IL: Oh, but it is still in the family.

ZW: But I had here with me.

IL: Maybe she'd let you have it?

ZW: No, she'll never let me have it, cause she had her eye on it. But he did some beautiful things, and he made a screen that George Keeler designed for Mr. Hamilton--Jim Hamilton. And it is now down at the Art Center. It's beautiful, just beautiful.

IL: A screen you said?

ZW: Fire screen.

IL: Oh. A fire screen. Well, he did such beautiful work, and he seemed to enjoy it.

ZW: He was very artistic. Unfortunately he should have been in a big community where he could have really done lovely things. There wasn't enough call for these lovely things, because, of course, they were expensive. It required so much labor, and there wasn't the outlet for it--the lovely things he could have made.

IL: I remember you gave me for a wedding present a beautiful copper tray that he made with handsome iron handles.

ZW: Oh. Did he make one of those for you?

IL: Yes.

ZW: He did. Yes, we had one that he made for us too. Mine was an oblong one. Was yours?

IL: So was mine. You and George--didn't you winter in Mexico?

ZW: Yes. We spent many winters down there--well not winters--we would go down, because he couldn't be gone that long. He would go down for two or three weeks. Usually about--if we were lucky we were there for three weeks, and we did enjoy it a lot. Then we did have two years in Mexico.

IL: What part of Mexico did you...?

ZW: Mexico City. That was quite a, I don't know how that came about,

but it came through Pan American. Pan American had the contract to build airports through Central and Northern part of South America to guard the Panama Canal, because they were so afraid that that would be hit. And at that time George's cousin, one of the Davis girls, was married to an architect who lived in Greenwich, New York. Who were great friends of the president of Pan Am. And when Pan Am got his contract to build, I presume that--it was never explained to me, but I presume it was through him that George got the job of putting in the airports down there. Because he organized the company, I mean the office, and oversaw the building of the airports through there.

IL: In Mexico City?

ZW: No. Through Central America and Northern America. So he built several airports. He built one in South America, and then he built one in, I think he built one in Guatemala. And he built one down farther south. So apparently the large airports that are down in Central American now. How large they are I don't know, but they were built by Pan Am, and George was supervising it. So, it was a very interesting two years that we had down there.

IL: Oh, yes. Do you suppose any of the unrest down there is taking place on one of his airports?

ZW: Oh, I wouldn't be surprised with what they are using some of those airports, because they would have to have been enlarged, I imagine. I don't suppose they would have been large enough for the large things that are landing now. So I doubt if they would have been large enough

for that.

IL: You've loved gardening.

ZW: Yes I have, and I still do. I never really gardened until I went to college. And I fortunately took a course freshmen year. They had in Smith called Horticulture Landscape Gardening all in one year, and I took it. And I was thrilled with it. And so from that time on I wanted to garden. I wanted to be a landscape architect. And I wanted to come East to school, because at that time they had an awfully good school for architecture. But Father said, "no", he said, "you can go to Ames, but your mother needs you." So as a dutiful daughter I did not go East. And I didn't want to go to Ames, because it was just starting up. I went down to look at it and after being on a lovely campus Ames looked primitive. I am ashamed to say that that is what tilted me. I probably would never have been a good landscape architect, but I enjoyed gardening ever since.

IL: And you've been a member of the Garden Club.

ZW: Yes, I was quite instrumental in starting the Cedar Rapids Garden Club. At that time there was a lovely person here. What was her name? Who had taken landscape architecture over at Ames. Oh, I can't think of her name right now. That's my trouble at the moment. But she and I became very good friends. We both wanted a Garden Club. So we went to Mrs. Dunshee because she was the outstanding gardener at that time. She was interested, and she said, "I'll help you, but I can't get it up." So she gave us the names of a lot of her friends that were interested. And her daughter was a member of the Lake Forest,

I think it was Garden Club. So she got their Constitution, and so we copied it after their's. But she was always a very good member. But she did not want the trouble of organizing it. So we got busy and got people to come. And that was the way it started, and we really worked. We put out a huge show at Brucemore, but I don't think we were more than two years old. No money, no nothing except energy. And we worked like dogs, and we put on a show with the landscaping, a place that was just beginning in Cedar Rapids. So the nurserymen were very glad to put out little garden displays. How to improve your entrance and things of that sort. So Brucemore let us bring in stones, plants, and what have you on the that lovely area by the stables. So we transformed that into a garden plot, and we had thousands of people over Saturday. And we charged 25 cents admission. And Saturday was crowded, and so Mrs. Douglas said we'll open it up for Sunday free. So we had swarms of people on Sunday. They came from various towns around. And we could have gone in debt, because we spent thousands of dollars on that thing. We didn't have any money at all except our dues for a year or so.

IL: Well, that was fun though.

ZW: That was fun, but we were energetic. We had a garden show almost every year for a while.

IL: Was Betty your only child?

ZW: That she was. We didn't have her until quite late in life.

IL: And Betty Jo they call her?

ZW: Yeah, B. J. they call her. She shorted it to B. J.; that was much shorter. She didn't like Elizabeth. We named her after George's great aunt, who was a hundred years old when Betty was born. The same month Betty was born.

IL: Now where do they live now? Are they out in California?

ZW: Yep, yes. They live in Santa Barbara.

IL: And her children?

ZW: One lives here.

IL: Now is that Lisa Oberreuter?

ZW: That's Lisa. And Bob lives up in Minneapolis. And JoAnne lives out in Bend, Oregon.

IL: My, they're scattered.

ZW: They are scattered. Yep. We used to live close together, but we're all scattered now. So it is hard to get together.

IL: Yes, it would be. Thank goodness for Mr. Bell's invention.

ZW: Yes, that's it. That's right.

IL; Zulina is such a pretty name. I think Zulina Severa is such a pretty name. Where did Zulina come from?

ZW: I wish I knew. I asked Mother, and she said, " She was reading a book, and that was the heroine's name." What book she was reading I have no idea, but it's been hard to go through life because no-

body can remember it. So they call me Mrs..

IL: I have asked you all the questions I had in mind. Is there something more you would like to talk about?

ZW: Ah. I can't think. Oh, of course we went skating on the slough, you know. That was the only place to go skating in those days. Then we built a fire on the shore to keep warm. But that was it. Oh, and the only place there was to play tennis was where the tennis courts at Coe College. So we did that. I can't think of anything else.

IL: Of course those...

ZW: Oh, I, going back to the streetcars. I forgot to mention this. In the summertime we had these open cars that were so much fun. Because the benches went from cross-wise, and they were all open on both sides of the platform running around the side of the car. So you walked along until you found a seat that you wanted, and you sat there. All open--it was just delightful. We always chose a seat by the outside.

IL: Oh, that would be fun.

ZW: It was fun. I can't think of anything else we haven't touched upon. I think that should do it.

IL: Well, I certainly do thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW



