JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH Mary Nassif

CONDUCTED BY Laura Derr

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TRANSCRIBER Hazel Storm

Mary Nassif was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa on December 31, 1917. Her father was a Lebanese immigrant who came to the United States as a young man. Her mother also came through Ellis Island but was a small child.

In the past year's, Mary has taken an active part in various community organizations such as Children's Theatre and the Cedar Rapids Radio Council. During this interview we are enriched with information on the customs and background of the Antiochian Catholic Orthodox Church.

Mary Nassif

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

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS
1 --When were you born? Where?
--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
--What are your parents' names?
--Where did you go to school?
30 --Are you married or single?
--Did you raise a family? How big?
--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 Cedar Rapids Radio Council 36-37
--Advertising
--Telephones

B. People in the Community
1. Amusements/Recreation
--Motion Pictures
--Cedar Rapids Parks Children's Theatre 37-38
--Dances
--Carnival Week
--Chautauqua
38 --Community Theater
--Little Gallery
--Symphony Orchestra
--Circus
--Greene's Opera House
--Amusement Parks (Alamo)
--Camps
37,39 --Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters
--Cherry Sisters
--Grant Wood
--Carl Van Vechten (<u>The Tattooed Countess</u>)
--Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle 32-33
--Life before air conditioning
--Winter Activities
21--Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
--Clothing
--Toys
--Saloons/Taverns
--Farm Life

4. Family Life 2-3,20-21,26
--Household Help
11,12,29--Women's Roles
24,25,26,28,29--Childrens' Activities/Behavior
16-26,27-28,30--Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws) Church background

5. Ethnic/Minority Life
2-3,4,10-11,31,32,34,35--Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
--Indians
--Segregation of Blacks
--Jobs Available
39-40--Friendship Forum

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community
1. Education
6-7,8--Cedar Rapids Schools
--Coe College
--Mount Mercy College
--Cornell College
4--Lowell, Massachusetts

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
10 --Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
--Local Brewing Companies
5-6 --Retail Businesses /Department Stores
--Professions
--Banking and Finance
--Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
1-2,6,7,12-14,15 --Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
--Farmers Market
--Mills on Cedar River
3 --Buildings Erected
--Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
--Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)
3,14 --Peddlers (Salesman)
5. Attitudes/Values 31
9 --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
6 --World War I
--Roaring 20's
--Prohibition
12-13 --Great Depression

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I am at 2316 Hillcrest Drive, S.E., and I'm interviewing Mary Nassif today.

LD: Mary, will you tell me, first of all, where you were born and when you were born.

Nassif: I was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, December 31, 1917.

LD: Tell me about your parents' background. I would like to know their names and where they emigrated from and when they came to America, what you can remember about their background.

Nassif: Well, my father was born in a village... well, not really a village. It was what we would call a small town in Lebanon. And he came to this country. He was born in 1885, and he came here in 1905. He immigrated in 1905 with a group of people that came from the vicinity where he lived. And when they came... he had a brother here, who was already here. And his brother lived on what is... well, it still is South Third Street, across from the present First Trust and Savings Bank. There was a row... there were then and up until just a couple of years ago, a row of wooden store buildings there, and they had the high fronts... the second story was the high kind of false front that made it appear that it was all a business building. And in reality, the second floors of these buildings--and there were four or five there on that street--were apartments, where they lived. They would have the business on the first floor, and then they would live on the second

floor. Well, my uncle lived there and he had what people called then a drygoods store. And he had what it says, fabric and some clothing. And it was really quite a store because it was there until... and I hope I'm right... it was still there, I would say, in the thirties. Oh, yes, it was! It was there until the forties, because I know his son had it and he's younger than I. And he still had it up until war time; up until the Second World War there was a drygoods store there. But, to go back to when my father came, this was kind of the procedure at that time for young men to come over here thinking that they would make money and go back. No one came thinking that they were going to stay. They had just heard all these fantastic stories about what we hear: the streets paved with gold and all the wonderful opportunities in this country. So when they came--they always came to someone that they knew, a relative.

So when my father came in 1905, he went to his brother who had this store on Third Street. And it was ten years before he got married, because he was married in 1915. But to go back to the way he came, he came with a group of other young people and came directly to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I think he stopped in Marseilles, France. He still remembers that, that was their stopping point, and then they came by ship, of course. And he came directly to Cedar Rapids, to South Third Street, where his brother lived. Well, he lived in the apartment at the rear. There were always apartments at the rear of these stores, and then the family would live on the second floor. And there was

a steady stream of young men who came in the early 1900s that my uncle would put up in his apartment. It was almost like a rooming house type of thing. And what they would do, they would be given a wagon and a horse and they would go out into the country and they were peddlers. I think all of the young men who came at that time--at the turn of the century--started out as peddlers. And they sold to farmers. They carried fabric and needles and pins and underwear and things that the farmers would want. It was a good way to start out because farmers then welcomed these traveling peddlers, who would come and stop at a farmhouse and stay overnight, and they [the farmers] would buy their goods.

Then my mother came as a baby, and she came to Lowell, Massachusetts, where my grandparents had friends. And she lived there until she was in her twenties, because she was born in 1894 and she came to Cedar Rapids in 1915--January of 1915. Her grandmother was here. Her grandmother had come here to visit relatives, and she came and three weeks later she and my father were married. So I'm sure it was an arranged marriage. (Laughter) But I don't think it was without the consent of the bridal couple. And they were married in the home of... in St. George's Orthodox Church, which was built in 1914, and they were the first bridal couple married in that church. And the church still stands, of course, on Twelfth Avenue, S.E.--Twelfth Avenue and Tenth Street, and they were the first couple married in that church.

Well, by that time--1915--there was quite a community of people in our church, St. George's Church. There's a picture of the congregation; I imagine it was the opening dedication ceremony of that church. And not many of those people are still with us, but there are some--very few, but there are some.

LD: I'd like to backtrack just a moment--some of the things you were telling me about your father coming here. First of all, does he have any memories of Ellis Island, that he shared with you, when he came through immigration?

Nassif: No, the only thing that I think impressed him was that some people were turned back. Not in his group, but he saw other people being turned back because of eye problems, especially, or other health problems, and that made a deep impression on him that these people had come and had to go back. And that was really about the only thing he told us. Now, my mother came when she was three or four years old, so she really had no memory of Ellis Island. She did talk to us about living in Lowell, Massachusetts, where there was quite a number... you know, there were a number of people from the Middle East there. And she grew up and went to a parochial school, a Catholic parochial school, although they were orthodox Catholic and not Roman Catholic. And she had memories of her school days and of all the people that lived in their section who were all from Lebanon. You know, it was just like a "little Lebanon." They all lived in the same area. It wasn't a ghetto, because they were free to go wherever they wanted; but those people who

immigrated lived in a community. She did talk about that. But when she came, she was married three weeks later. And then, I have an older brother who was born a year later. She was established and never went back. And then just a few years--I'm sorry I can't tell you how many--her whole family came to Cedar Rapids. Her mother and father and brothers and sisters--she had six brothers and sisters--all came to Cedar Rapids, and they stayed. So that family came, and I guess this is the way people came. One person would come, then two or three more, and then more people came.

My father was one of those peddlers, along with the other young men his age, who went out into the countryside. And I can't remember of very many who were ever laborers or skilled laborers, who were carpenters or plumbers or electricians or who worked in factories. They almost all went out as peddlers, and from there they graduated into small business owners. They opened little stores. And then there were some who went into the small towns around Cedar Rapids.

There was one family that went to Joyce, Iowa, and owned what we called a general store--a large general store there. There was another family--someone was just telling me today--and the father then bought a small hotel in Armstrong, Iowa. And I hadn't known that, either. And then they opened... usually it was a general store and then it went into a grocery store. And many of those young men that came in 1905 up until 1910 or so opened grocery stores in Cedar Rapids. There were many grocery stores here in the twenties that were owned by

these same young men who had come originally as peddlers. They owned grocery stores, and then after the war many of them into restaurants. But it seems they all went into some sort of business--one kind of business or another.

LD: When your father came, I'm sure that he... did he get the goods that he went out and sold from his brother?

Nassif: Oh, yes.

LD: And did they have some sort of relationship whereby he kept a portion of the money and a portion of the money went back to...

Nassif: I think it was all on consignment. They took the goods and then they went out, and they could return what they didn't sell and take more. This was in the teens and before World War I. Then many of them went into the war--went to war, were drafted. I remember my mother telling me that my father was exempted from the draft just in time before he was going to go into the service. I think he had... I think if you had one child at that point, a young man was not taken.

LD: And you saved him.

Nassif: Yes, I did. (Laughter) But he always said that he wished that he had gone, because he wanted to be a soldier. Yes, he was envious of his friends that went in.

LD: How did your father learn the language? Did he have any regular schooling after he came here?

Nassif: The only schooling that he had after he came was at a school on South Third Street, and I'm trying to think of the name of it. It was used as a wholesale house by Witwer Grocer Company the last twenty-five years or so. I don't think it's there any

more. But it was a grade school. I can't remember the name of it. It wasn't Fillmore; no, we have a Fillmore now. But there was a grade school there and they had English classes. And many of them went to the English classes there. They were adults... considered adults. But there were classes there in English. And he did learn to read and write, as most of the others did.

LD: So the school district was helping people in those days.

Nassif: Yes, they did. And the school was about Third Street and maybe Tenth or Eleventh Avenue. A railroad track runs through there.

LD: What did your father do after he graduated from the peddling phase, then?

Nassif: He bought a grocery store. He went into a grocery store about 1920, and he had a grocery store until 1939.

LD: Almost twenty years.

Nassif: Yes.

LD: Where was the store?

Nassif: He had a store near where Tyler School is now. And then he went from there to Center Point Road, and that is gone now--the store building is gone. It was across the street from what is now the Public Health Clinic. But he had a grocery store and meat market until 1939.

LD: What was the name of the store?

Nassif: I don't remember. Isn't that terrible?

LD: No, I quite understand. (Laughter)

Nassif: I don't remember that it had a special name.

LD: Do you know whether or not your uncle's drygoods store carried the family name or whether it was...

Nassif: It was his family name. My father and my uncle were half-brothers. They had the same mother but not the same father. So their names were different. But it just carried the family name.

LD: Did you live over the grocery store when you were growing up?

Nassif: No, no, we never did that. When he had the grocery store in the early 1920s--maybe 1921 or 1922--no, we always lived in a house but not far from the store.

LD: Where did you grow up then?

Nassif: I grew up on Twelfth Avenue, S.E., which wasn't very far from the store, and then when his store was on Center Point Road, we lived on Oakland Avenue, N.E.

LD: Where did you go to school then?

Nassif: I went to Tyler School and then to downtown Washington, which tells everyone what my age...

LD: The "old" Washington High School.

Nassif: The old Washington, and I graduated from there. But I did not go to college. I was engaged at 17 and married at 19, and so I just didn't go back to school.

LD: And so there really wasn't time...

Nassif: I was supposed to go back and thought I was going to go back, but I didn't. I didn't ever. I became very much involved in the early years of my marriage, oh, for 35 years, in managing real estate. We invested in low-income rental properties, mainly, and that's what I did.

LD: Well, I want to come back to that, but I would like to go back in time to memories that you have of Tyler when you were going to school there. Was that the period of time when Jane Boyd was there in that community?

Nassif: Yes, she was the school nurse.

LD: What can you remember about her?

Nassif: Well, to me, of course, she was an old lady. (Laughter) I don't remember what age she would have been, but she was very kindly. She was short and very round, I remember that. She just was like a little dumpling, and I remember her. I remember the principal, who was Miss Rugh.

LD: I've heard of Miss Rugh.

Nassif: I think her name was spelled something like R-u-g-h. I think that was it. And she was the principal, and she was a "general." I don't think I would have ever said three words to her if my life depended on it. And I think it was true of Frances Prescott at McKinley; she was just someone on another level. You just didn't walk up to her and say "Hi there!" You know, the way the children feel very free to speak to principals nowadays, we just didn't do that. And Miss Rugh had... one thing I remember about Tyler School were the wooden floors, and on the second floor there was a phonograph--a small phonograph. And when we marched from one class to another--you know, in fourth, fifth and sixth grades we passed between classes, as we called it--she played march music. Sousa marches. And we marched in the halls to the next class.

LD: Regimentation!

Nassif: Uh huh. I remember that very well.

LD: What was the mixture of students like when you were there? What different backgrounds did they have?

Nassif: Well, there were many Czech students and many Lebanese and there were black students. Because I remember the little houses that were in that area right up behind... well, where the Bender Pool is now, where the community house is now, and where the apartment buildings are now. Those were all many small houses that were built for the people who worked at the packing plant.

LD: Oh, so the packing plant actually had housing for their...

Nassif: Well, I don't know what the housing was. I'm talking about the seventies and eighties. You know, the last century. But the houses were still there. They were just torn down in the last twenty years. But those small houses were there then when I went to Tyler School, and they were not... I mean, everyone who lived in them didn't work at the Sinclair Packing plant at that time. But that's how they were first built. And when I was going to school, there were many Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who had been brought over in the seventies and eighties to work in the packing plant. And some of them were still there, and I went to school with them. I remember the names. There were the McGowans and the Thompsons and the McSwiggens that lived in those houses, some of the larger houses, and they had large families and they went to Tyler School and McKinley; and some of them are still living here. But I remember all those little houses, and I remember there were a few very large ones where

they told me at that time the managers lived. You know, the ones who had the very large families.

LD: The Czech community was still largely on the southeast side.

Nassif: They lived down below the railroad tracks on what we called the "Flats," right around the packing plant. That's where most of the Czech people lived, and then they lived on Eighth and Ninth Streets from Tyler School to where Mercy Hospital would be now, or Eighth Avenue. Those were all Czech families that lived on those two streets. I would say Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Streets were all Czech people--almost all, when I was very young--from Twelfth Avenue to Eighth Avenue.

LD: Do you remember a real mixture of languages or was everybody already speaking English?

Nassif: Yes, everyone was speaking English. I don't remember any children at Tyler School or McKinley who couldn't speak English.

LD: So it was only in their homes, perhaps, that they used it. When you were growing up, again, what are your memories of just your household life? How did your mother... well, I presume your mother shopped through the grocery, didn't she? (Laughter) Did your mother go downtown to buy clothes? Did she travel on the interurban? What can you remember about her shopping trips and your daily routines at home in relationship to clothing and... ?

Nassif: Well, I was the oldest of six children, and in those days the mother was in the home, of course, and she was a very domestic lady and loved her kitchen and was a marvelous cook and baker.

And she loved shopping. We always teased her. My father would say, "Well, when Killian's closes at five o'clock, your mother will come home." We never expected her. He always teased her that way. She loved to shop. And I think most of the ladies her age did their own shopping, and it wasn't that big an experience to go downtown shopping in Cedar Rapids. They all shopped very much like other women. She loved to sew, and she was just a homemaker, housewife. She graduated from high school in Lowell, Massachusetts. She didn't do that much reading, but she loved to sew and she loved to crochet and do things like that. I never remember all through the Depression, although my father had a grocery store and meat market, and when he moved to Center Point Road he had to close his business by that time because people just didn't pay their bills. He just couldn't go on any longer, so he did what so many of the other men his age did in the Lebanese community. But your question was about my mother, so I won't go into that other.

LD: _____.

Nassif: My mother lived very much like most housewives... Yes, we will get to that... at that time and I know she helped my father in the store. She would go once in a while and she would take care of the books. She was kind of the business person, because I remember when we moved in 1934 from our house on Twelfth Avenue to Oakland Road and he changed his store building, they burned bushel baskets filled with books--the credit books that people had bought groceries and not paid. And I remember my father going out in the back of the store

where they had the incinerator and dumping these baskets of credit books. You know, they had the little books where you would write down the groceries and then add up each slip, and my mother saying, "I told you so many times you just have to say no." And she was the one, you know, who kind of wanted to be very businesslike about just saying "No" to people when they came. But he just couldn't do that. And I remember those two or three bushel baskets that he tipped into that incinerator and burned when they were leaving the store. I mean there was just no way--people were not working. And he moved to the store on Center Point Road then.

LD: So that move was directly related to...

Nassif: To the Depression. Yes, it was. I didn't feel it in my home. I mean, I heard lots of people say, "Oh, I'm a child of the Depression." That was the only thing that I can remember about it because we lived the same. We always lived the same, and as far as a young person would be concerned with what I wore and what I ate, it was just the same as we'd always had. Our home was always the same.

LD: You did relocate as a result.

Nassif: We relocated, yes. Oh, yes. And he thought that in another neighborhood he might be able to do better. And it lasted, I would say... now, let's see, I think they closed the store maybe five years later. For good. It was during the war that he closed the store. No, just before the war. Let me tell you, it was... They moved in 1934 and it might have been about three years later that he closed the store.

LD: Since we're on that track, why did he finally close the store?

Nassif: Well, I think it was the same reason.

LD: He still was not getting the return that he needed.

Nassif: That's right. By that time it was 1937. In 1938, I believe, he closed the store. And he bought a home in a different location, southeast, and he did what, as I told you before--mentioned before--many of the other men in our community did. They went back to...

LD: To the business of the...

Nassif: No, can you guess what they all did then?

LD: Oh!

Nassif: They went back to peddling.

LD: Of course! That's right.

Nassif: Because he went back. Because many of the men had been doing this, and that's another story of the thirties and forties. Up until the Second World War.

LD: Did your father actually start to travel again then?

Nassif: Yes, he did.

LD: How long did he do that?

Nassif: Well, he started when he closed his store. He joined a group of other men who had been doing this all through the thirties. And this is what my husband did. They were selling rugs and tapestries and linens in cars on the road. They were back on the road.

LD: So they were peddling a much higher level of merchandise.

Nassif: That's right, but they were still peddling. Well, we call them salesmen, and that's what they were. They were salesmen on the

road. And this started with those in the twenties who did not open grocery stores went "on the road." And there were about thirty or forty of these people... of these young men.

LD: Here in this community.

Nassif: In this community. In Iowa, I'm saying. There were some out of Sioux City, Iowa, and some out of Cedar Rapids. And usually it was two men together; there was a man and his driver. And they would have the back of the car and the trunk... you know, you roll up Oriental rugs, they don't take up that much space. And fine linens and tapestries and things that were imported out of New York or Chicago. And these men would go to, say, Wichita, Kansas, and they would work out of there. They would get a license to work there, or they would go to cities in Nebraska or North Dakota or South Dakota. And they would go all over the Middle West, and this went... the latter part of the twenties, all of the thirties, to the Second World War. And that's what my husband did, but he was the person who was the wholesaler.

LD: I see. So he was located in one place.

Nassif: Here. And he had a warehouse here, and that's what he was doing when I married him. And I took care of the warehouse and all of these salesmen who came in and bought their merchandise, and I had it shipped ahead to different locations. And we did this... I was married in 1938, and we did this until... there were only a few left during the war because of the gas shortage, but there were still men on the road up until, I'd say, in the fifties.

LD: How long did your father continue?

Nassif: My father continued... let's see. I said that he started in 1938 or 1939, and I think he did this for, perhaps... let's see, how hold would he have been in 1940... he would have been 55... until he was about 60, which would have been... he was born in 1885... what year would that have been? I just can't figure that...

LD: Well, that's 15 plus. If he retired when he was in his...

Nassif: Sixties, uh huh.

LD: That would have been about 1945. Okay. Well, that's fascinating. I didn't know any of that. Backtracking again to... just briefly, before we go on... I'd like to know about an area of your life that I'm sure was very important to your family and to you when you were growing up, and that's the church that you belonged to and the rituals of your church. I know there's a significant Islam community, Lebanese community, here, and you are Christian. What church did you belong to? how did it have an effect on your family life? what sorts of things did your family do as part of that church when you were growing up?

Nassif: Well, one thing that I think that we can bring out, really, that might be different from a large city church, like one of our larger churches here that have large memberships--the Protestant churches or even the Roman Catholic church--our church was small enough and the numbers in the community were small enough that almost all of the social activities and thought were centered around the church. And since this is a traditional church, we have many, many feast days as we call

them and holidays in the church, so that our lives were caught up in the social activities of the church. Of course, now, it has expanded, you see. Now, for instance, even in my generation, we have other interests besides the church. But now, with my mother and the people of her age... and if she were living today, she would be 90 or... what am I saying... she was born in 1894... she'd be 90, she'd be 90 years old... and the people her age in their young adult years and later years, up until when they died, all of their social activity was centered around the church. Whereas those people my age have other interests, but we still live... I kind of like to think that we live in two worlds, even my age. We live in two completely different worlds, because we have all of the social activities that are centered around our church and the religious as well as the social activities, and then we live in another world which is the American-Cedar Rapids community world, you see. But, as far as the church is concerned, it's called the Antiochian Catholic Orthodox Church, and this means that it was established in Antioch. And we feel--and we know--that we, our people in Antioch, were called Christians first. This is the place in the world where people were first called Christians--in Antioch, which is in the Middle East. And we know that the disciples did not fly from Antioch to anywhere else, you see. They worked their way out. We know that St. Paul did, and St. Peter, too. So these people in Antioch were the first Christians, and our priests are ordained from apostolic succession--from the apostles. And, of course, in the Roman

Catholic Church, they feel the same. They were... What most people don't realize and really I'm sure Protestants don't... Are you Protestant?

LD: Yes.

Nassif: What most Protestants don't realize, and I'm sure many Roman Catholics don't either, is there was only one church. There was only one Christian church. There were five centers where there was what they called a bishop or a head. There was Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Constantinople, and Alexandria. And something, you know, politics come in, and to make a long story short... and I think it was in 1054 or 1064 that the bishop of Rome slapped a papal blow on the altar of the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople excommunicating the other four bishops. And he became the pope of the Western church. And the Orthodox Catholic Church is the Eastern church. And it has remained so. One of the most interesting things about our church, I think, is that the service that we have on Sunday morning, which is just an hour long--as most American churches in this country have to be just an hour long--was at one time three hours, but it's an hour long now and it was written in the Fifth Century.

LD: You still use that same...

Nassif: Exactly the same! It has never been changed! We have deleted and made it shorter, but it's the same service that was used in the 460s. And it was written by a man named St. John Chrysostom, who lived in Damascus. And he wrote that service in the 400s and we're still using the same one. All

orthodox churches are. And this is another thing that in this country most people don't understand. If it's a Russian Orthodox Church or Greek Orthodox or Bulgarian or Yugoslavian, they all are exactly the same. And the reason they use the national name is because that is the language that is used in that church. But in this country, we're getting away from this. And now, in my church, when I was growing up, I didn't understand any of the service except just what I would be told by my mother or, in fact, at the Sunday School or the priest. I couldn't understand the language.

LD: What language was it?

Nassif: It was Arabic. But it is the written Arabic; it is the Arabic... it's like high and low German.

LD: Archaic, kind of.

Nassif: Yes, it's very ancient. No, it's used every day in the newspapers and writing and books. It's all the Arabic, but it's not conversational Arabic. And I did not understand it. But now we, of course, for many years... for the last 30 years, we have had English. The service is now all in English... almost all of it. There are times when there's the Arabic chanting in the church and which we all enjoy and we all look forward to and we like it. But it's all in English now. And in many of the other orthodox churches... I think in the Greek Orthodox they are still using Greek, because one thing they do in the Greek Church--and here, too, we have a Greek Orthodox Church here--they have Greek school, language school, where the children come on Saturdays and learn that Greek language that's

used in the service so they do understand their service. But in our church here, it is all in English. And what we'd like to see some day is that the church will be called in this country the American Eastern Orthodox Church, so all of them would have the same name. American Eastern Orthodox. Right now, we do pay our allegiance to a synod in Damascus, and there are 14 patriarchs. The Bishop of Rome or the Pope of Rome recognized the patriarchs, the one who is the leader or the head of the patriarchs, as his equal in the church. The patriarch and the pope are equal in each other's eyes.

LD: There is finally an ecumenical appreciation...

Nassif: There is, and it has been growing. But to get back to the community in Cedar Rapids, we were a small enough ethnic group... just like in a small town in Iowa. If you went to a Presbyterian church in a small town and you'd been there all of your life, you know everyone in the church, you go to all of the weddings, the funerals, the baptisms, the christenings, you just share all of the social activities that everyone in the church has. And that's the way I grew up. And I still have that. We are... just the last five or six years we have grown large enough and there's this next generation younger than I and even their children are older teenagers now, that we have become large enough that we are not all invited to a wedding at the same time, we don't all attend a funeral any longer, and we don't all attend a christening; whereas, for years if there was a wedding, a christening, whatever, everyone was expected to go and everyone was expected to be invited. But just in the last

five or six years... because I have... there are people my age--I'm 67--who have grandchildren that are 20, you know. And everyone isn't that close to everyone else anymore.

LD: Spread out in the community, too.

Nassif: We've spread out.

LD: Can you describe what your favorite holiday was when you were growing up--in the church? I was asking what your favorite holiday was in relationship to your church.

Nassif: Well, I'm sure anyone my age would say Easter. That is the important religious holiday in our religion, is Easter. And we had more activity associated with Easter than we did with Christmas. Of course, Christmas was special, too. But Easter was the big holiday in the Orthodox Church, and it still is. We had a very wonderful custom that has died out, I'm sorry to say, in the last ten years. And this is what we did. Of course, there was the forty days of Lent in which everyone was supposed to fast. And people fasted the way they had done years before, they fasted from not only meat but all products from an animal, so that meant butter and cheese and milk as well as meat. Of course, the older people always fasted. I know my grandmother did, and there are marvelous Lenten dishes and even pastries that were made without those things. And so for forty days there was the fasting, and of course there was church every Wednesday and Friday nights. The service on Friday night was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and on Wednesday night. So Wednesday and Friday we went to church for the six or seven weeks of Lent. Then the last week of

Lent, Holy Week, there was church every night; and there is a special kind of service for each night of course and then ending with Good Friday. On Saturday night, the traditional Easter Service is celebrated at midnight, and there is a very special ceremony wherein everyone in the church files up to the front with a candle and the candle is lighted from a special candelabra that the priest has, and everyone files out of doors. And all the lights in the church are turned out, only one person remains in the church, and the doors are closed. And, of course, the choir have filed out too, and they sing very beautiful hymns that have to do with that occasion. Then the priest knocks on the door three times, on the doors of the church. And the church at that time symbolizes the tomb of Christ. And he knocks three times and has the special words that he says, and he is answered by the person that is indoors. I wish I could remember the words just this minute, but I can't. And then the doors are opened and the lights are all turned on, and the people file back into the church with the choir and the people singing the Easter hymn, the words are: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and bestowing life on those in the tomb." And it has a very beautiful musical score. And they sing this and go back into the church and all the lights are turned on, and it is just very dazzling after the darkened church. The church has been darkened through the whole service. And this is the time when the priest says to the congregation, "Christ is risen." And everyone answers, "He is risen, indeed." And this is the

greeting that everyone uses the next day, Easter Day, just as we say "Merry Christmas." On Easter and for the whole week after Easter, or for forty days after Easter, every church service is opened with the words "Christ is risen," and the people answer, "He is risen, indeed," and the choir sing the hymn again, the special hymn, "Christ Is Risen from the Dead."

But there's a social custom at Easter that I remember so very well, and that is what has faded out. I don't know about other communities, but here in Cedar Rapids--and I suppose it has in other cities where the congregations have grown larger... and on Easter Sunday... you see, this service is at midnight and it goes into Eastern morning because Christ rose early in the morning and we have the service at that same time, same hour. So on Easter afternoon there is a service that has very something interesting that happens, we follow... what Christ asked us to do is to go out into the world and spread his word. So we have the Gospel of Easter read in as many languages as we have people in the church that can speak languages--other languages. And in our church, we have five or six--not the Gospel, but they read a selection from the Bible. We have Spanish, French, Russian, Arabic, English, of course, and I think... oh, Latin. I think that is the number of people who read another language. And we also have Aramaic, because we have a gentleman in our church who comes from a village where they still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. So on Easter Sunday afternoon, that is the service that we have.

LD: Now you had mentioned that this is still going on, this service, or was that... ? This is still the...

Nassif: Oh, no, it's still going on. Not any of the religious services have been changed. It's a social custom that has kind of gone by the wayside. And that is... oh, yes, but I would like to tell you that during the Easter service on Sunday afternoon, the children carry candles and parade all around the church. And they do this on Palm Sunday of course, too. They do that on Palm Sunday--they parade around the church three times, and they have palm branches.

LD: What a nice role for them then.

Nassif: Yes, they love to do that. They look forward to it. I remember when I was a little girl, though, the mothers dressed the children in white. We always wore white on Palm Sunday. And then we decorated the candles with flowers. And I know in Lebanon they decorate the candles with sweets. They have huge candles and they are all--like a little Christmas tree--decorated with sweets and bonbons and flowers. And I remember when my children were growing up, they always had decorated candles for Palm Sunday and Easter. We decorated them with flowers. I always remember running down to Lapes Easter morning and Palm Sunday morning and getting my flowers to tie on my candles with the ribbons for the three children. But that has... not very many people decorate their candles anymore. The next generation just have not done that. And that, of course, isn't religious--it's just a social custom. But what we used to have on Easter Sunday afternoon after the

church service, people made calls--Easter calls. The young boys would all go together, and the young teenage girls would go together, and the men would go together. And they would call on every house in the community. And the women could go, but they had to time it so that they would be at home when the groups came. Usually we were at home. The women stayed at home, and they made their calls the next day, on Monday, which was a very special day too, because the Monday after Easter was still a special day. In fact, the whole week is. And the women would outdo each other in the buffet that they would have. They would bake for days before Easter, all these beautiful Middle Eastern pastries that were just dripping in butter and nuts and beautiful aromatic spices. Then in the later years we began having hors d'oeuvres that were a little heavier than pastries, like pickled lambs' tongues and many different kinds of meats that were flavored in just the right way. And I remember the last one that came here to my house, where there were about fifteen or twenty men that came together, we took pictures; and I think that was one of the last times that the men came around. The children went around a little later for a number of years after that, but now for the last seven or eight years it just isn't done. It's done between families. And when they come to your house, they say, "Christ is risen." And you answer, "He is risen, indeed." And they come in and enjoy the sweets and the colored Easter eggs. And then they had a custom where you would hold your Easter egg and somebody else would have his and tap yours and see which

one would break. And if yours broke, then the person who broke it gets to keep it. And the young teenagers would try to see how many eggs they could collect. This happened on Easter Sunday afternoon, and of course everybody was dressed in Easter splendor--in the Easter outfit--and I remember we used to shop for weeks. You know, everybody does, in all the Christian churches, I'm sure, for the Easter outfits. But that's a custom we no longer have, but I think we do this in just the families. I think it's because the group has grown too large.

LD: How large was the church when you were growing up? Do you have a memory of that?

Nassif: Well, I imagine there were always the core families, I would say, fifty or seventy families. Now it has grown to over a hundred families, I'm sure.

LD: So it was a significant number though.

Nassif: Oh, yes. It was. Certainly, it was. I wouldn't say that they would go to every single house, but they would go to the house of probably the eldest member, the father of several younger members who would be in the group that were going around. But it was a very happy occasion, and Easter was very special. We had our Christmas services, too, but Easter was the big event in the orthodox world.

LD: You made a comment off tape about living in the church tradition and in a larger tradition, and I would like for you to say that again.

End of Side One, Tape 1 - Beginning of Side Two, Tape 1

LD: Mary, you said that you felt that you had lived in two traditions: the tradition of the orthodox church and the larger tradition. I would like you to repeat that for us again.

Nassif: Yes, I have always felt that I have lived in two worlds and felt the richer for it, of course. It is a very enriching experience and I was very happy that my children shared this kind of living in two worlds, too, because we had the best of both. The church had all of these special holidays, and we had all of the weddings and the christenings and all of the happy celebrations that we shared together with the people in that church community. And then we had our everyday American life where we had all of the American holidays, too. And it was very special because we had two worlds that we lived in.

LD: Do you think the church is stronger today? or are some of those traditions fading? How do you feel it is working out in your children's generation?

Nassif: It's much stronger today as far as the church itself is concerned. We have advanced very far in the last 50 years, in the last 25 years especially. Because you see, there were few churches and they were scattered. For instance, now in the Middle West, which takes up a huge territory, there are 47 churches, but it takes in many states. All the way from West Virginia to Nebraska, and all the way from Minnesota down to Kentucky. So that's a large area for just... you know 47 churches isn't a lot in that area. But we have a very strong central governing body for the American diocese now. We have a

Metropolitan whose headquarters are in New York, and we have two or three bishops, and we have many more churches now than we did 30 years ago. They are just springing up everywhere, and we have a fantastic youth organization which we didn't have, and that's the reason for our church being stronger than it was in the days when I was growing up. Because we have a marvelous youth organization. It is called S.O.Y.O.; those initials stand for Society of Orthodox Youth Organizations. And they have a convention every year, and we have an archdiocese convention every two years now--it used to be every year until just about four years ago, and now its' every two years, and they are very active with the children. There's a creative arts contest every year at the convention, a creative writing contest, there's a debate contest, there's a Catechism Bowl that's absolutely fantastic with contestants from--I'm speaking of the Midwest--the 47 churches. There are two people representing each church in the Catechism Bowl, and it is just marvelous. And we go to these each year, and the children are very active. The Sunday School has really grown and has become professionally organized, and the programs for the Sunday Schools are taken care of by educators. And you see, when I was growing up we didn't have all of this. The Sunday School was operated by the priest in that church and with the women who volunteered to be Sunday School teachers, and the material was... we didn't have that much material. But now it is very well organized, where we have paid personnel in New York that take care of the programs for the Sunday Schools.

LD: Well, that leads me into a question that again goes back in time. What was the role of women in the church in those days?

Nassif: Well, I think it's the same role that women have played in the church since the time of the apostles. They have done the work.

LD: The supportive roles!

Nassif: Yes, and in our church as in all of the other churches that I know, the women have raised the money, you see. The men have made the pledges, of course, but the women have raised the money with the bake sales and the bazaars and the annual dinners, and they have a very active women's society. And there's a Board of Directors of the church--they're called the Parish Council--but the women have done the work of the projects. They have taken care of the projects in the church. And they did this when I was a little girl, because I remember my mother going to the church and working on the church dinners and the big annual dinner, which is in about its sixtieth year now and we still have it every year in our church. And two thousand people sometimes are taken care of at the annual dinners. And that's the role of the women, and of course they are the people who operate the weddings and the christenings and all the other things that are going on in the church. And then families sometimes sponsor evenings in the church. When I was a girl they would say, "Well, such and such a family is having an evening." And so everyone would go, and there would be refreshments and it would just be a general community thing. And when I was growing up, they had these every Sunday afternoon. You know when I was a very little girl, I remember we

all had Sunday dinner and then we would go back to the church on Sunday afternoon and it was cake and coffee and cake and milk for the children. And this was a get-together for the women who had large families and were in the home all week, and they really looked forward to those Sunday afternoon cake and coffee events. We don't have those any longer; everybody's too busy doing their own things, you know. But we do have special evenings, a Saturday night where the church is sponsoring some sort of an event just like all the other churches.

LD: You said earlier that your mother's marriage was arranged. I know that you married a man who was several years older than you. Was your marriage an arranged marriage?

Nassif: Not at all. We were engaged two years, and I had family who thought that I was too young and I had different ideas. And for two years we hung in there, and it happened.

LD: You finally got everybody _____?

Nassif: Yes, and as I told you, my husband had this wholesale warehouse, so from the time we were married--1938--until, I would say, the war when the men either were drafted, they went away to war. Most of them did, those men who were out on the road in their cars--went away to war, almost all of them were of that age. They were in their late twenties and thirties; they were all drafted, and then just a very few, say those who were older and who were not of draft age who remained on the road through the fifties. It seemed when the boys came back from the war, they went into business. Almost every one of them. They were... not any one of them, that I can remember, went back on

the road as they say. They all went into business. And my husband did remain on the road, and there were just maybe three or four older men who continued during the fifties. And then in the sixties, it just was no longer a way of life. Most of the men had gone into businesses that had flourished. And I would like to say that in this small community of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants, I can't remember or know of families that were ever on welfare, that were not taken care of--if they were in need--by their own families. The first generation, the actual immigrants who came, went into businesses. I would say the percentage that worked as laborers was almost nil; they bought their own homes and sent their children to schools. There were many my age, not a great number, who became professionals. And I would also like to say those my age, their children have all gone on to school--to colleges--if they didn't go into a business. Of course, many went into a business. But those who didn't went on to college, and I think they all became responsible citizens of the community. I can think of just one instance in all of the years of my life where someone did not follow that path, who became wealthy, but not in the way we would like to feel proud of the wealth. But I do think it was a fine community of people, and the immigrants that came worked hard, worked very hard, because they came with nothing.

LD: It was an ethic, they really cared.

Nassif: Yes, and I think the church had much to do with that, of course, and they came from people who had always worked hard

and they knew that this is what they would have to do. Now, many of the men who came in the late 1890s went back two or three times. And finally the whole family came over. This happened in my husband's family. His father came in the late nineties and I think he went back twice, and in 1913 he brought my husband over. Just the two of them were here. And then it was in 1926 or 1927 that the rest of the family came.

LD: So, they just continued to upgrade and bring more over.

Nassif: Well, when they were better established, they brought more people over.

LD: This is a little off but still on the Syrian and Lebanese community. There is, of course, a very strong established Islam Lebanese community here, too. What were the relations between your orthodox community and that community when you were growing up? Do you have memories about that?

Nassif: The memories I have were that these people, the Moslem community, were friends. I remember my father had a special friend that he would go and visit, and we would go for a ride to this man's... he had an acreage, and he had vegetables. And we would go out and get some of the things that we couldn't get in the market places, you know, like the zucchini that everyone uses now. Well, this man had zucchini that we would core and stuff, and my friends had never heard of such a thing as zucchini. Just as they had never heard of yogurt. And when my friends knew that we ate sour milk, what they called it, they just couldn't believe it. I mean my young married friends, you know, when I was married. Just couldn't believe that we would

eat this sour milk, you know, yogurt. And we were raised on it. My mother's refrigerator was never without yogurt, you see. And my refrigerator isn't today without yogurt. And then another thing that... this is deviating again... another thing that my young married friends just couldn't understand--of course, I think it came to the East much sooner than it did here--was shish kebab. They would see this meat on a skewer that we were putting over the gas stove in the basement because we didn't care if it got messy, "How could you do that? What are you doing with the meat? You're burning it over a flame." And it was shish kebab. But I do want to mention our food. The cuisine of the Middle East is absolutely marvelous. I mean, we just couldn't live without it.

LD: We have been so slow to bring it in, too.

Nassif: It still hasn't come in yet. It hasn't had the popularity of pizza from the Italians and the spaghetti and lasagna and all of that, or the Mexican foods, but we do have some very... you know, our food isn't spicy, hot and spicy, but it is very, kind of aromatic in the way it is spiced. And the pastries are unbelievable and just layers of fine, thin pastry dough that we call phyllo, which is the Greek word for the dough that we used in our pastries. But it is lovely. I really am very proud of our community here. We made it the hard way. And our children are being educated. I have three children, and two of them have doctorates. I like to feel that although they aren't celebrities, they're just nice, ordinary citizens able to make their own way. I have been a widow for 23 years, and those are

the years my children grew up. I mean, went out into the world in those years, and I like to feel that their father gave them a very firm background of work and stability and responsibility. Because they were blessed with creature comforts all the years that they were growing up and just stayed on the straight and narrow and worked hard and have many friends. And this happened in almost all of our Lebanese families here in Cedar Rapids--Lebanese-Syrian families.

LD: You mentioned it was a hard path. And becoming a part of this community as a young married woman, did you ever feel... or perhaps even as a child growing up, did you ever feel any discrimination against you or your family? that you were treated differently because of your background?

Nassif: I can't say that we were ever treated any differently, but there has always been the feeling... there's always the feeling in this community that you're just a little different. Now, I have always felt it and I have been very active in the community. I think more active than most of the girls my age--the women my age--and I have... for years I did one-woman programs for church clubs and organizations, where I would go out and meet people from different ethnic backgrounds, different church backgrounds; and I have many friends in these various groups, but I have always felt--and I really have to say this--that underneath it all I feel that my friends that, say, are in a... like, say, my Protestant friends, if I'm in a group I still feel that I'm a little different. That at the backs of their minds, there is the feeling that she's a little different from

the rest of us, because I was always the minority. There was always just one of me or two of me and twenty-five or thirty of the other people in the group.

LD: We are only now beginning to celebrate those differences.

Nassif: Yes. Now, when I go to visit my sons in Pittsburgh, I don't have that feeling because in almost every group we're in--their friends and their friends' friends' groups and so forth--it's so... in Pittsburgh the ethnic backgrounds of people are very visible. Very. And you just don't feel... if I'm Lebanese, the girl next to me is Italian, or she's Yugoslavian, or there are many Slavic peoples there. There are 27 orthodox churches in Pittsburgh. You see, all the Slavic peoples have their churches there. And I don't feel that way there. But in Cedar Rapids, in this community, I have always felt that when I am in a group of people... like I go... Wednesday I was at a club meeting. There were 30 women there. I am one. You see, you can't help but feel it. It's not expressed in any way. I have been asked to join this group, you see. I was voted upon with a little system. I mean, I was given an invitation to belong to this group and to two other groups that I belonged to or whatever in the past years. And I was invited to belong. I didn't work in something and earn my way; I was just asked. But still you have that feeling. It's still there if you're one in a group of thirty or forty people, you see. And also, I look different from most of these people.

LD: Just enough so that...

Nassif: I'm Mediterranean looking. I could be... I'm sure you will agree me, I could be Italian.

LD: You could be from any of those, yes.

Nassif: I could be Italian, I could be Spanish, I could be French, I could be Egyptian, or whatever, from the Mediterranean or Greek, but these other people aren't.

LD: Yes.

Nassif: You see?

LD: Well, that makes me want to lead into your community activities. Because of your involvement over the years and your willingness to go out, you've had an opportunity to be involved in some really important community... well, what we consider institutions now. And I'd like for you to talk about your involvement in the Children's Theater, for instance.

Nassif: Well, you see, my husband was gone a deal of the time. He had these men who were out on the road, and I was shipping merchandise to all these different places, and he was gone. And then he began to do what many of the men did his age. He invested in real estate. He had an uncle who was his father's age who had real estate--two uncles, three of them who had real estate here. And I'm saying they started with low-income properties and renovated them; and this was part of their work as salesmen. It was part of their business. So I was alone a good deal of the time, and I devoted my time to the interests of my children. So when they were small, I was working with the Cedar Rapids Radio Council, and at that time--this was before television--we had a program a week.

LD: Was this in the forties? the fifties?

Nassif: The forties, because my son was born in 1938--I was married in 1937. Good heavens! Did I say I was married in 1938? I was married in 1937. (Laughter)

LD: You're going to get that straight, right?

Nassif: Yes, my son was born in 1938. Now, I was married in 1937. Engaged in 1935, married in 1937, and my son was born in 1938. Well, he was on almost... almost every week he was on one of these radio shows, and he was like nine or ten years old at that time, so it would be in the late forties that the Radio Council was active. We wrote the scripts. We wrote the scripts, and the children performed in them. Children took children's parts, and it was a lot of fun. But I was doing it because my son was in it. And he was very active in theatrical productions in Cedar Rapids--in the schools, in community theater, and so forth. And then the second son, the same thing happened. So I was very much involved in Radio Council for the older boy. Then when that went the way of local radio shows, along came Children's Theater. And I was on the first board of Children's Theater. And I taught creative dramatics and creative dancing for Children's Theater for seven years. The dancing came in later, but we did have creative dramatics classes for seven years. This is because the second boy--and my daughter was in them, too, but mostly the two older ones--was in the creative dramatics classes. We had them once a week; they met at St. Paul's Church for a couple of years, and then we met at the Y.W. for a few years. And we had these

classes every week through the school year. And then the Recreation Department took them over, you know, for Children's Theater.

LD: I see. Right.

Nassif: So then we no longer had the classes. Then both boys were in Community Theater productions, and Cathy, my daughter, was in Children's Theater productions. You see, Children's Theater were putting on their own productions at that time. And then later the high schools took them over, but at that time we were doing them at Coe, in the auditorium at Coe. So I just went along with whatever the children were doing. And that's my community activities...

LD: That's very typical.

Nassif: ...with whatever--and I'm sure you are doing this, too--the children were interested in. And as they grew older and grew out of Children's Theater and went into Community Theater when they were in high school, I went along with that. So then I began working in Community Theater, and I was...

LD: And that would have been fifties late or sixties.

Nassif: I was on the board a year, but I can't tell you what year it was that I was on the board of Community Theater and both boys were in Community Theater plays. But not my daughter--she kind of leaned away from theatrical enterprises. And then they went away to college and I then became more involved in the real estate part of my life and took care of... then my husband passed away then, you see, and I had to take care of all of it then myself. And that was my community work with whatever the

children were involved in. And then after that I did do, on my own, programs for women's clubs and church organizations. And then I was on a panel; I forgot about that. It was called a Friendship Forum. Right after the war was a panel of women... World War II.

LD: That would have been late forties probably?

Nassif: Oh, in the fifties. Oh, yes, this went into the fifties. It was called the Friendship Forum, and it was sponsored by the Y.W.C.A. And there was a moderator and four women on the panel. There was a Catholic, a Jew, a Protestant, and a black lady, and the moderator. I was a moderator. And we had, like, four panels. We appeared before over one hundred groups of women in Cedar Rapids. And each woman told her story. This was after the war, you see, and we were... everybody was... it was in the sixties, fifties and sixties. We were trying to get all these people together.

LD: It was a wonderful idea!

Nassif: Yes, it was. For instance, we had three or four Catholic ladies, and they would tell their own personal experience. It had nothing to do with the Catholic church, as such, but the person--this woman who was a Roman Catholic--told about how she grew up. We had one lady who was on, and I remember she said something that just seemed so strange to me. She grew up in Minnesota in a small town, and she had never met a Catholic or a Jew in her life until she came to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and she was a teacher at Mount Mercy.

LD: Oh, for heaven's sake! She got quite an exposure at that point.

Nassif: Yes. I think what she said when she went to college... Oh yes, it was until she went to college she had never met a Catholic or a Jew, and she had a Jewish roommate. So this was the beginning of her talk; it was so interesting. And then the Jewish lady escaped with her brother from Holland to England and never saw her parents or her family again. And she told that story. And she is very well known here in Cedar Rapids.

LD: Who was that?

Nassif: Ruth Rogers, and she's over at Coe now. She teaches at Coe. And we had the black lady, who told of her experiences here in the community, and the Protestant. I just told you her experience. And then a moderator. And what they did, they each told their story and then there were questions. We appeared before P.T.A. groups, church groups... I'd forgotten about that!

LD: That's a remarkable thing, I think. It's too bad that it was never taped, isn't it? Then we could have it today.

Nassif: Yes, wouldn't that be nice if it was taped? So that was the extent of my community activities. They just went along with whatever the children were doing. And then, of course, after they left home for their colleges and went on to be married and so forth, I did just volunteer work. I worked at the Seminole Valley Farm, I was on the board of the Seminole Valley Farm for the three or four years that were on the board.

LD: That's more recent, then. That's probably up in the seventies, wasn't it?

Nassif: Oh yes, late seventies. I just retired from the board a year ago. So it was in the eighties, the Seminole Valley Farm. And that was a wonderful experience, and I'm still active with them. Not on the board, but I still volunteer there. And I can't think of anything else that I've done.

LD: I have a feeling I have just touched the surface. (Laughter)

Nassif: I forgot about Seminole Valley Farm.

LD: You know, Mary, I've kept you for a long time and I know there are a million other areas that I'm going to go home and think I should have asked you a question about, but having looked over the topics that we are using as our range, are there areas or anything that comes to your mind that I have not mentioned?

Nassif: I'd like to tell you about an incident that happened to me; oh, this must have been twenty-five years ago. I was in my late forties, early fifties. I lived on another street from where I live now, and across the street from me was a young couple. And my age, you see. And they were very lovely people and very dear friends of mine, but they had a little group that met. Like every two weeks they would have a group that would come to their house, three or four couples--very close, they had all gone to college together. And one Saturday night I went over, and there was a group of them. One of the men, who now has a flourishing business here, at that time was a salesman for a company which he now owns. And he was talking about a man that he called on that had a grocery store. And this man

was my age. Had a grocery store and his parents before him had this grocery store. But he was still in it; he didn't go to college. Many of the young people his age and my age had gone to college, but he didn't. He had the grocery store. I got married, he had the grocery store. And this Cedar Rapids fellow said to me, he said, "You know, I heard that (and he said the man's name) just built a beautiful new home up in one of the new neighborhoods--lovely home." And he said, "I just don't understand how he could do that from a grocery store. He's got a brand new car and he built this beautiful new home, and there he is in that grocery store. And all of his life he had lived in the house next door." And, of course, the young man had married and had children that were, like, elementary age and had built this lovely home. And I said, "Bill (which is still anonymous), I'll tell you why. Because his mother and father worked for years in that grocery store and saved their money. And they didn't belong to any kind of a social organization where they'd have to use money. They saved all of their money. And along came their son, and he took over the business. He could have gone to college, they had the money, but he opted to go into the business. And he has this little family, and he saved his money, too. And he built this home, and I'll wager that it'll be paid for in the next ten years." And he just sat there with his mouth open. And I said, "Now, you do a lot of things that that young man doesn't do. And you spend money on things that you like to do, and maybe he would like to do them too--but he hasn't done them." And he lives in

that big, beautiful home, and the young man that was talking to me didn't live quite that well. But now this is thirty years later, and the young man that built that home is gone. He died very young--he was about fifty--but his wife lives in that lovely home, he had three daughters and they are all graduates of colleges, and they did it beginning from that grocery store. And that grocery store was there when the church was built, so it was... it's still there now, and they must have built that store... and I'm just guessing, but it must have been there in the teens--1910 or 1912--because it was there when the church was built in 1914. This young man that we're discussing was the second generation there... third generation there. And his mother is the lady I'd like to have you interview because she's in her eighties now; and she's in Arizona for the winter, but she'll be back.

LD: Excellent. Well, we intend to get her, don't worry! Well, Mary, I thank you for your time and for your wonderful memories.

Nassif: Well, I think it's been very disconnected, but maybe you can patch them up.

LD: I'm not the least bit concerned. Thank you very much--for the League and for the Library.

Nassif: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW