

Interview with Helen Hoff Peterson, Class of '23

October 27, 1987

Interviewed by Dorcy Baker, Class of '78

Transcribed by Emily Caplan

Note: This transcription is incomplete, because the sound on the tape recording was too faint to transcribe with much precision.

Tape 1, Side 1

DB: Okay. Just to sort of mark the beginning of this tape, I want to say that this is Dorcy Baker Class of '78. I'm interviewing Helen Hoff Peterson, Class of '23. And we are at Helen's home on Callingswood Road in Upper Arlington, Ohio. And today is October 27, 1987. Okay. As soon as I prop this up we'll be ready to start. There. Um, I'd like to just start with a little biographical information. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your family background - your parents, and where you grew up, and what your parents did.

HP: I grew up in New Jersey, in a very small village, which was about mid-way between New Brunswick, New Jersey and Princeton. And I went to a... (Tape shuts off for a second) where there were eight grades, one through. How teachers managed it, I do not know. (DB laughs) But I do know that somehow or other you were able to have a good basic elementary education, with such things as arithmetic and grammar and geography. (DB: Um hum) Then I commuted by train for my four years at Sommerville High School, which was in Sommerset County, in the County Seat, and so that was where it was necessary for me to go. My uh, mother and father were both people, I think, with very strong personalities, and uh, physically strong too, because I am the oldest of ten children.

DB: My goodness!

HP: And all of whom lived well into adulthood. The brother next to me in age, was the first one of the ten to be deceased, and that was only two years ago, so that's really a rather interesting thing genetically (DB: Um hum) I think you might say.

DB: Sure.

HP: And, my father was, I don't know how many generations of people who had lived in that part of New Jersey, and they had all been - that era, of course agriculturally oriented. His grandfather had been outstanding in that area of, of breeding livestock. But my father, at a very early age, had become interested in poultry. At that time there weren't any very well- defined breeds. Uh, he really pioneered in the field of commercial poultry, and was recognized for his work with agriculture. At the time, I was in high school, girls especially, whom I'm thinking...

who liked school, had any thought of going on to do anything (?), would probably go into, either into nursing or to teaching. At that time, New Jersey had no um, public education available at an affordable price for girls. The Midwest was far ahead of the eastern states, establishing state universities, which provided affordable education. Because I did like school, and was a fairly good student, and had been active in leadership roles in high school, though I did commute by train. Uh, it was just assumed that I would do as other girls had done. I would go through what was then called (?) schools. There was (?) schools for a two-year period. Later they did become teachers colleges, and many of them now today are state universities, but at that time, they were just two years teacher preparations. About the end of um, my junior year or early in my senior year, the superintendent of schools for that, for Somerville, began talking to me about the possibility of going to college, which I must say, I never thought very much about, or else had thought of it as something beyond anything I'll ever be able to do. But he convinced me that it would be possible. I don't seem to have very, a clear recollections at that time, about the applications or details involved. It was more or less his decision that I would go to Brown University. And he secured scholarships for me. I'm sure he did the whole thing. I must've signed some papers for the....

DB: Is that right?

HP: Uh huh. And uh, off I went in the fall of 1919 to Providence, Rhode Island.

DB: How did you, how did you feel... view this change in plans?

HP: Oh, my... interestingly enough, my family just accepted. It was almost as if it were my decision.

DB: Hmmm...

HP: And of course, I might object there. Although that might seem strange on the surface, but as the oldest of such a large family, and having been born the kind of a person I was, I think I'd been making decisions for a long time. In fact, my mother had told me when I was thirty-five years old, that I had just been born taking responsibility. And looking back, thinking of things that I did when I was ten, eleven, twelve years old... I can hardly believe, that um, I did them as far as the responsibility for the family as a whole... concern.

DB: And you mentioned taking leadership roles in high school, so uh perhaps...

HP: I said... I was President of my class in high school, and did any number of the kinds of things that were in high school. I never was active in athletic things, and in fact although I'd been a prodigious worker all my life, even in college, I found gymnastics a little bit difficult. (DB laughs) Not very much to my liking, really. Let's see, where were we now?

DB: Well, I just had asked you how your family felt about you going to college.

HP: Yes, they did. They did accept it very well. And incidentally, I was the first person from (?) to go to college from that little town from where I grew up. So it was quite a unique thing in that time in New Jersey. The year after that, another girl from the same small town went to Cornell. But we were the first ones.

DB: My goodness! That's great. So, some more firsts. Umm, so perhaps then we can move to your time in Providence at Brown - the women's college at Brown University, which uses its name now.

HP: That was the official name at that time, and although most of our classes were separate, advanced courses, in my case since I majored in history, in my Junior and Senior year, were seminars - they were co-educational. To use that terminology. Back in the time I was there, the college was not very large. I believe there were eighty-seven girls in my class. Today that was quite small. I can remember something that Professor Connor, who was at that time, and for many years thereafter, Chairman of the History Department, said about the women's college, that he believed it offered the best education that a young woman could have at that time, because it had all the advantages of the large university combined with those of the small college. And it was true that in those days whereas there might be several sections, for instance of a given course in history, that the men would be attending the school, there would be just one class at the woman's college. They were taught by the Chairman of the department. So that I then felt that all those years, with all the changes, and I thought a great deal about what Professor Connor said, because I feel that even though that's a long time ago, and there are many people today who would feel that uh, the college has improved tremendously, I've always felt that I had a very excellent background in history.

DB: So you said you majored in history. How did you come to be interested in history, or decide to major in that?

HP: I'm not sure of all the factors that uh, that went into it. I think when I came to college; I had not made any decision at that time. Um, I was quite interested in French at the time, and I took French for maybe two or three years at least. I also came to be quite interested in mathematics, but found at the college level, and I later learned that they were doing a lot of experimentation (DB: Oh Dear) in math, and that the courses that at that time, the (?) were taken, were extremely advanced, and I wasn't really doing as well in them as I had done in my four years in high school. And I was developing a fondness and liking for history, and found that I was something of a natural with it, and I think it just evolved that way. And so, my last two years, most of my courses were history, or political science. I believe that I had a (?) in political science, which I also enjoyed. I just enjoyed all those courses very much and uh, I suppose that, I would say that I became a very good student in history. Professor Connor was extremely disappointed. He did everything in his power to convince me to go on and do valued work and offered me all kinds of fellowships and scholarships and almost everything that would've been available at the time. But as the oldest of this large family, I was just obsessed with the idea of working to do things to help my brothers and sisters. And actually, I've never regretted the decision I made because, one thing that you remember and I did teach school for a year. It was a, I could almost say it was a disaster. I went to this school, having been given the indication that I was going to teach history. I arrived there to find the first day of school, that I was given five English classes - for which I really was not prepared. And although it was an interesting year in some ways, I feel that I didn't do well at all. I might say something about what it's kind of been... a parallel interest in all this work (hard to hear) describe them as church-related activities. I have been active in such things even in the small community in which I grew up. And in high school and in college at that time in New Jersey, there were state organizations for young people, in which I had been active. That when I arrived at Brown, I met some young people almost immediately, who were active in the

Congregational Church. At that time I was standing next to Dr. Arthur Bradford, who some years later became the National Moderator of the Congregational Church. But the Church had a Portuguese mission down in the Portuguese community. I was induced to go down to that mission Sunday afternoons, for the kind of church school, or Sunday school services or classes of some kind, and some recreation which I did the entire four years that I was in college. Later I found it most interesting to discover that the university was giving credit to students who were doing field work in the Portuguese community. That I never thought in terms of any recognition of any kind, I found it. I don't remember anything particularly that I did, but I was very committed to it. I never, in all the four years, allowed any social opportunity or anything else to interfere with my commitment to that - to going down there.

DB: You mentioned before we started the tape that you can remember children's faces.

HP: Yes, I... even though I can't remember anything very specific that I did, I can still see those little shy and black faces of... and how, they all appeared with their starch white shirts, coming and being so faithful in attendance. Even though I can't remember specifically things that I did, I feel so much respect that I must have had a good rapport with those children, because they remained just as faithful in their attendance as I was in mine. And also, I was President of The Christian Association. On campus at that time, it was a very active organization.

DB: So that must be what the initials C.A. in your yearbook stand for.

HP: Yes. Although, that was in later years that interested me, I don't know what the technical difference was because I can remember people from the national YWCA, which is national students. At this date, our Christian Association was still... it was not called the Young Women's Christian Association. It was just called the Christian Association. But we, as I said, we did have an active program. There were student conferences those years at Lake George. And women students from all the eastern colleges, attended the student conferences. All of the women were (?) in the field of religion, Christianity, were there. I remember Dr. (?) very well, Kirby Cage, uh... his first name doesn't quite come to me. The people that were in that field at the time. It's very vivid to me, that it was the first conferences, that I did develop a strong concept of what we used to call The World Fellowship. I think I really believed that and I guess I still believe it today. That you could have an international understanding. That you could go (?) as far as that was concerned. I think the strong concept of it did come to me at those student conferences.

DB: When you were working with the Christian Association back on campus, did you have some projects that you would undertake?

HP: Yes, we prepared projects at the World Fellowship. And service kinds of projects. I think the thrust of the YMCA on the student campuses in those days, were what you would describe as service projects. Actually, after not finding very great sense of fulfillment in um, my teaching experience, I learned from some source or another, about the, what was that time the National YWCA - had a national training school in New York at the time. And I went there one entire summer, and had some courses at Columbia, and then became, what we call at that time, a girl-reserved secretary in the YWCA. That means that I was working with teenage groups of girls.

DB: This was after graduation and after your (?)?

HP: After what I described as my disastrous experience in teaching.

DB: I'd like to come back and ask you some more questions about that. I want to talk about after graduation and the experiences that you had. But before we do, maybe I can just ask if there were any other professors that you remember vividly from your college years and about any relation you might have had with the Dean during your college years.

HP: Yes, I remember professors. I think then and now, Brown has an outstanding biology department. And in those freshman biology classes, the women had at that time - there were women teachers. And I remembered those, and then I took comparative anatomy. And the professor by the name of Eugene Walters, taught that class, and I later learned that he was well known throughout the profession for his work in genetics. I can say the way he had organized that class, what we did, he was probably one of the most outstanding professors in general, that I ever had. Although of course, Dr. Collier, was a brilliant lecturer and was so a man for speaking, not just locally, but other places that I realized in my later years, that that became his choice. I think he did not publish until now, he's not well. Having all the rest of my life in the university community, since the end of college, as I realized that if you want your name to be known, it's probably important that you publish. (DB: That's right) Now, and I can remember Professor Dunning who was chairman in the department of political science. And I can remember some of the people in the English department. And I had on every unhappy experience in that, which probably was detrimental to my overall record. During my freshman year, a tragedy in the family necessitated my being gone from school for a short time, and miss the first semester examinations. It came the time for the make-up examination and there was no difficulty with any of the courses I was taking, like biology and the type of courses I was taking my freshman year. Although Professor (?), my English professor, and he was also.... some of the idiosyncrasies ... associated with some of the... He was very negligent in giving me a make-up examination, and when he did, he just, apparently pulled one out from some former year, and about half of the questions on it were things I'd never even heard it, that had not been covered in the course. To make matters worse, he put off until, I think, the day of the deadline.... When he did, I guess by that time he couldn't stand me. Admittedly, I don't think that he knew the answers on that question. And so I did have a "B" in that course, which kind of blotted my whole career, because I had the reputation of an excellent student. That was a mark against me. And I don't carry any bitterness about it, because I don't think that it had anything to do with my later decisions of what I did. As far as my work in history was concerned.

DB: What kind of effect would having a mark like that on your record have?

HP: Well, it would have... in fact, you see it would bring down your whole average.

DB: So that if you were applying to graduate programs, that might affect.

HP: Well, I'm not sure as far as graduate programs, because by the time you'd be doing graduate work, you'd be doing such a specific field and I never had anything but an "A" in my history work. So I don't think it would have affected that at all. And going back to my Y.M.C.A work, I worked with teenaged groups all over the southern part of New Jersey. And of course, at that time, if your husband was... He had been seven years older than I. He had been a professor at Rutgers College for about nine years. And the time I met him, he was doing a very special piece

of work for the U.S department of agriculture. And in the course of that, he was invited to come to our state university to do their specialty, the field of entomology. So we were married in 1928 and he was a full professor, which was somewhat unusual. He uh, had managed to pass with the right reputation. I did not know anybody with (?) (DB laughs), at that time. And I was young and bold and was accepted at the university... Every Dean and every chairman of every department called upon us. And it was, sort of, as they are saying today, a stock market crash. The year before the famous 1929 crash. There was a lot of social activity. And I found myself being invited to parties two and three times a day. And after about six months, I told my husband that I'm really not that kind of a person. I enjoy a certain amount of social life, but not full-time. So, that was when I decided to get my Masters Degree at Ohio State University. Now, I had majored in European history. But at that time, here, at Ohio State, there were several truly (?) people. Even though Ohio is not really very far west. The spirit of it is much more mid-western that it is eastern. And because of the outstanding faculty at that time, in the history department, in the field of American history, I got my Masters Degree in American history. And in the course of that, became very interested in immigrant history, cultural history - which I think, tied in with my current interest in people and conditions of the person. I've always been very much interested in how (?) and the effect of what took place there. I actually did a Masters Thesis about the ladies of North Carolina. Which is a fascinating thing, because the ladies, wherever they lived, always maintained a daily diary ... in the stacks at the Ohio State University Library, I came across a version of those from the German. The ladies of North Carolina ...(?)...Pennsylvania. They've never been taken out of the stacks and used. And since I wasn't taking a lot of other courses at the time, I just had a really good time where I did my Masters Thesis.

DB: That sounds fun. So that was your experience, with primary source documents, in a big way.

HP: In a sense it was, yes. I remember, of course one of the things where people go, is the Easter celebration down (?) Fair. I had such a good time, and much more freedom than most students had, to spend time, with these... I knew the name of every single person who was born there, where they lived and what they did and what became of them. When I went down to (?) the year I did the Easter celebration, and that was great. And I got a list of librarians there. They were so amused with my interests that it was just (?)

DB: They must be pleased to meet you.

HP: Well, I think that they enjoyed it, and I certainly enjoyed it.