

1-21-2003

## Eleanor Gerard interview for Wright State University History Course 485

Jenifer Gerard

Eleanor Gerard

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**Subject Jeni Gerard - Brief Outline of Tape Contents**

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**Message no. 111**

Posted by **Jenifer Gerard (s034jlg)** on Monday, March 3, 2003 3:45pm

Eleanor Gerard

- 1) Born in Pennsylvania
  - 2) Moved to Tacoma Washington
  - 3) Met Frank Gerard
  - 4) Attended college; taught elementary school
  - 5) Married Frank Gerard
  - 6) Moved to Dayton
  - 7) Apartments
  - 8) Gave birth to first child
  - 9) Depression
  - 10) Visited Tacoma
  - 11) Maine
  - 12) Syracuse
  - 13) Oakwood
  - 14) Oakwood Community Center
  - 15) Orville Wright
  - 16) Wright Memorial Library
- 

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Jenifer Gerard March 3, 2003

Oral History Project: Interviews with Eleanor Gerard

On January 21, 2003 and March 2, 2003, Eleanor Whisner Gerard talked about her life. She spoke for this interview from the kitchen of her Washington Township home. Mrs. Gerard will turn 100 on May 2, 2003.

Contained in the interview are the following topics:

Eleanor was born in Pennsylvania, the youngest of seven children. Her father was a saw filer for the mills. Her family moved to Tacoma, Washington when Eleanor was still quite young. Her early memories include Mount Rainier, which she could see from her dining room window.

Eleanor met her future husband, Frank Gerard, while in high school. After college, Eleanor taught elementary school for five years. During this time, Frank and Eleanor fell in love and eventually married and moved to Dayton, Ohio in 1929.

Frank worked for Frigidaire Corp. for 40 years as a Chemical Engineer. Frigidaire holds several patents thanks to Frank's inventions.

Frank and Eleanor raised three children: Jim, Cynthia and Jane Elizabeth (Betsy). All three children attended Smith Elementary and Oakwood Junior/High Schools. Eleanor talked at length about the first house she and Frank bought on Forrer Blvd (transcribed). All three children went on to graduate from Ohio Wesleyan University. Betsy and Cynthia taught school, like their mother. Jim still works for National

City Bank after 40 years. There are now Gerard offspring as far away as England, Washington, Florida and Nevada, and close to home in Dayton, Cincinnati and Columbus Ohio.

She spoke about furnishing their first apartment with furniture "bought on time" from Rike's department store. During the Depression, Frank was never out of a job, but did take several pay cuts. Mrs. Gerard spoke with pride when she said, "every time Frank took a pay cut, we just moved to a smaller apartment."

Mrs. Gerard also talked at length about her trip home to Tacoma after the birth of her first child, Jim. She also spoke about Syracuse, New York. (partially transcribed) Frank was loaned to Lamp & Company by Frigidaire for a short time. Their second child, Cynthia, was born in Syracuse.

Eleanor talked at length about her meeting with Orville Wright in the early 1940's. She remarked that Carrie, his housekeeper, wanted desperately to re-cover his beloved chair, but could not since Mr. Wright expected to be able to sit in it every evening. (Transcribed)

Eleanor also talked about the Wright Memorial Library, where Frank Gerard was Secretary/Treasurer for several years after Orville Wright passed away.

Eleanor spoke from the home that she and Frank built around a one-room cabin that they used for many years as a weekend retreat. Although this is not discussed in the interview, they moved into this house in 1969.

After Frank's retirement from Frigidaire, also in 1969, they traveled throughout the United States and Mexico in their Airstream. In fact, the news of their grandchildren's births often reached them in places such as Guatemala and Panama.

Frank died in 1994, one week after his Grandson Jason's wedding. Frank was 92 years old at the time of his death. Eleanor has lived the past nine years independently, continuing to maintain her home and her garden. Every day that weather permits, she makes the trek down her long hill of a driveway to retrieve the mail and check on the neighborhood below. Her son Jim lives above the garage in a separate apartment so that she can continue to live on her own.

The interviews with Mrs. Gerard totaled about 90 minutes. She was quite comfortable recalling her fond memories of Dayton, the Wright brothers and Oakwood. Her best memories are of her children thriving in a safe and happy environment, while she volunteered regularly for the community. (transcribed) Eleanor Gerard's definition of the Good Life was and continues to be about her home and her family. She enjoyed many friends, often entertaining them in her home in Dayton. (transcribed)

NOTE - I'll give you  
my tape next week!

**Oral History**  
**Jenifer Gerard**  
**March 3, 2003**

Interview with Eleanor Gerard, January 21, 2003

Mr. and Mrs. Frank Gerard moved to Dayton, Ohio <sup>in</sup> 1929 from Tacoma, Washington.

Frank began work as a Chemical Engineer for Frigidaire in July, 1929.

They had three children: Jim Gerard, born in 1933, Cynthia Gerard born in 1936 and Jane Elizabeth (Betsy), born in 1939. For a short-time, they lived in Syracuse New York when Frank was loaned out by Frigidaire.

JG: Where did you live when you came home from Syracuse?

EG: We gave up our home in Syracuse, we have movies about that... it had a wonderful backyard with a rock garden... So, let's see. When we came (back) to Dayton we stayed on Corona Avenue across from what is now 206 with one of the engineers from Frigidaire. We rented a house on Corona Avenue down the line about a block.

JG: Do you remember the house number?

EG: I don't remember the house number but I can find the house. And it was small, only had two bedrooms in it. And we lived there one month. I remember that we had to buy the kitchen linoleum for \$25. One of the Oakwood teachers had paid for that linoleum and the woman who owned the house was a tightwad and she lived on Lonsdale Avenue. And that's the linoleum story.

So 206 was available and it had three bedrooms. We thought it was time to get more space, so that's where we lived when Betsy was born.

JG: That was 1939?

EG: 1939. I remember the 12 year old boy who lived next door and who's property started where our driveway was. He made a command: He said, "now you stay off of my property. This is my land and we own this." That was our welcome to Corona Avenue.

JG: So when did you buy your first house?

EG: It was 15 Forrer Blvd.

JG: When did you buy it?

EG: In 1940. We moved there March 7, 1940 and of course, we still didn't have much money. The depression was still on.

JG: How did you decide to buy the house?

EG: Well, I went out with the real estate agent, a couple in fact, I hired a babysitter and went out with them. The 2<sup>nd</sup>, a nice older man, showed me this house. Oh, by the way, (at) the Corona House, we had to walk on a board to shovel coke into the furnace and it was a pain in the neck! We had to do our own furnace work.

JG: Now, where did the coke come from?

EG: Oh, they delivered it. There was always a door right beside in these old basements, there's always a window or door and they had a room where you could put the coke and they later became storage cabinets.

The day I went out with this man, who's name was something like Eisenhower, Eisenburg or something and he showed me 15 Forrer blvd and as I walked upstairs and saw the house, first of all I saw there was a great big living room



across the front and there was room for my piano. I still played the piano quite a bit. And when I went upstairs and found that the upstairs was just as warm as the downstairs, I was thrilled to pieces. And I thought, a beautiful big house and so that, I was happy that we could even look at it. So when Frank came home from work, I yelled out, "I found it! I found it!" After going through several houses with tiny living rooms and not too much space I finally found this.

There was this nice retired Colonel somewhere in the Frigidaire world who wanted to help out this young engineer by the name of Frank (Gerard) and he loaned him \$1000 for the down payment. Of course we paid it back as fast as we could. But meanwhile we had a good place to live and a warm house. It had a lot of heat. There was a big furnace, they'd put in a modern heater and then later on Frigidaire was playing around with furnaces and so we got one of those rather cheap and that was more of a modern furnace. At one time we had two furnaces going – two furnaces in the basement.

JG: So what did you and Gramps do for fun? At this point, you'd bought your house, you had three kids. Did you go to dinner, dancing? There was the theatre?

EG: We had friends who entertained us. Of course we entertained people too. Simple; nobody had much money to spend. We belonged to a bridge club and everything.

JG: And you went to church?

EG: Well, we didn't have any Sunday school to send the kids to. We sent them to St. Paul's and there was so much hilarity there in the Sunday mornings when we'd take them down there, I couldn't stand it. Kids running their fingers down the piano... so.

EG: Oh, the first day we were at Forrer Blvd, you must hear this, there was a great big apple tree in the backyard and there was nothing but rotten apples all over the

driveway and the doctor next door, Dr. Brown, had an apple tree just like that, so there were rotten apples all over the place. So I was amused by this, the way Frank tells it, he was in the back yard and the President of Winters bank, Ike Jones, who lived right behind us on Lonsdale, he came over, and he said, "What are your plans, Gerard?" And Frank, being quick on the trigger, said, "Do I have to have a plan?" That was his introduction. We later became close friends.... do I have to have a plan?

EG: So Frank, being interested in gardening and all, he right away, still in 1940, I remember because my mother visited me then and she sat out there on a log. Frank was taking down this big apple tree. And the mother of the couple next door on the other side, I was told, got worked up because Frank was taking down that apple tree. So, Frank dug up a place where he'd have a flower garden. And he planted that first winter he planted rye and vetch.

JG: What's that?

EG: Oh, it's a plant that supplied food for the soil. A wheat-like thing. So in the spring, he shoveled that under and he planted the most beautiful petunia bed that filled most of the backyard, and there was some lawn. It was always a showplace.

JG: So what did you do while Gramps was working and you had all these kids?

EG: Well, the days were so wonderful and the kids were interested in school. I never had to help with the school work or do a book report or anything, so I became involved in volunteer work. Somehow or other, this was before my hospital volunteer work. Oh I know, the Oakwood clubhouse was opened up for a youth center. That building hadn't been used for 20 years. It used to be a clubhouse for the people of Oakwood. Actually, this table came from there.

JG: The wagon wheel table! You don't call that the wagon wheel do you?

EG: Yeah, it has a hole in the middle where there was an umbrella on each table. Somehow or another I got involved with Keith Wilson who had a decorating shop on South Main Street, and he being a citizen of Oakwood, volunteered (that) if I would get 40 women to volunteer to make the draperies for the Oakwood center, why, he would teach, he would have his women teach us how to make draperies and line them. I always thought you had to work on the floor, but he let us use the big tables. So for three weeks, we made all the draperies for the clubhouse and it was a big thrill.

Second Interview: March 2, 2003

JG: I want to ask you about the Wright Brothers!

EG: Oh well, gosh..

JG: What was your first memory of the Wright Brothers?

EG: Well, having been born in 1903, the year that the Wright brothers flew the first plane, of course I don't remember those days. But it never occurred to me that I would shake hands with Orville Wright. It happened. Let's see, Cynthia must have been in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Betsy was younger. I got involved with being a Campfire leader, it compared to Girl Scouts. Katherine Hadler, who was the librarian at Wright library, was a neighbor of the Wright's. She lived right across the street in that corner house. She was interested in the Campfire girls, so it happened that each year there was a donut drive. The Girl Scouts had their cookie drive, we had donuts and by the way, all the donuts ended up in my dining room on Forrer Blvd. That was the center of the place.

So she had arranged for me and my coworker, Ann Woodall to go to Orville Wrights' house during his lunch period. There was a young man with a Jeep and

he put all the Campfire girls in the Jeep and we drove somehow over to Wright's house. Oh, it was such a big moment. The girls stayed outside. But Carrie, the housekeeper, who was with Orville from age 16 until her 80's escorted us into the Wright house. Orville was having his lunch which she prepared and served. She escorted us into the living room. The living room used to be dark wood and of the old style, but I've seen it since and it's all painted light. But here right by the fireplace, was a large, overstuffed worn-out chair, and it was, well, Carrie said to Ann and me, "I tried – I intend to get that chair and ottoman out to be recovered", but she said, "Mr. Wright wants that there every night!" There was a book lamp (?) that came down over his head, holding the books and a light and this ottoman. Holding the pillow on the ottoman was a great big safety pin! So my friend Ann punched me and I punched her and we giggled a little bit. We said, "it's just like home!" I have a picture of that home and by the way the chair is in the room where all of his trophies are. The trophies were moved into just one small room after they did over the whole house. There's a great big metal trophy hanging on one wall that France had given Mr. Wright after flying. I remember that. I saw it later when I asked to take some relatives through the Wright House. I was thrilled to pieces when the woman announced that, "This is the room where Charles Lindbergh slept." He was a guest there. I wondered since, what if Carrie was a student and could write well, what a story she would have after being with him all those years.

JG: Do you remember when he died?

EG: Yes, he died in 1948. Going back, I must include this. I never thought I'd shake hands with Orville Wright, but later on, Frank was elected to join the Wright Library board and he was on that board for 23 years as secretary and treasurer. He signed every check that went out of that library. He had a lot to do with it. The light that stands over the library at night, he was instrumental in installing that. Getting everything in order. So it wasn't too many years ago, when my granddaughter Julie was here.

JG: Julie had never been to the library.

EG: She'd never been and she said, "Granny, I want to see the inside of the Wright Library because that's where Gramps would go so often when we came down. So we went down and went in the front entrance and I was busy showing her the plaque on the left in the front hall showing that the library was dedicated to Orville, Wilbur and Katherine Wright. Well, right before that is another plaque, and nobody ever told me about it. There were the names of the first board of the Wright Library – the new building, president, Henrietta Light, no, Max Konop, Henrietta Light, Frank Gerard secretary/treasurer. There was his name, Frank Gerard. But that's the way I learned about it. So I was in another dimension.

The old library used to be on Park Avenue where the Little Exchange is. That was where Dick Trace (family friend) lived at one time and that was where the library was. That was where Frank went to his first board meeting. And so when they opened up the new library... by the way, that land was close to becoming a location for a gas station and the library board moved in on it and procured the land for a library, under county jurisdiction. (?) But the night the library was dedicated, was opened, I'll never forget it, I couldn't go because Betsy was just a new baby and I wasn't supposed to go up and down stairs for what, six weeks, if you did that why you'd have back aches the rest of the story which is a lot of bologna.