

Arline Miler Bidwell
Oral History Transcript
Interviewed by June Cooke
March 15, 1995

COOKE: **0:00:01.5** This is June Cooke. It's Wednesday, March 15, 1995. I am going to South Windsor to interview Arline Miller Bidwell, who was a teacher in the South Windsor school system.

Wait a minute. Now Ms. Bidwell, can you tell me about your school days at the Barber Hill School?

BIDWELL: **0:00:36.6** I went to a one-room school on Barber Hill near the intersection 4 roads near the South Windsor line. School had 8 grades, but the children enjoyed school so much that they even came back and continued studying until they were age 16. There was no high school available. It was horse and buggy days, and there was no high school available to most of these children, and we really enjoyed school. We had good teachers. We had a Miss Savonas, graduate of Valparaiso University. She often wrote or read essays she had written when she was a college student, and they were outstanding. She was an outstanding teacher. After she left Barber Hill School, she was married and taught in East Hartford. Now I can't think of her married name, but she was such an outstanding teacher in East Hartford that a school was named Anna Norris. Norris School—the Norris School—

COOKE: **0:02:14.9** Oh!

BIDWELL: —in East Hampton [East Hartford] was named for her. So even though we went to way out in the country—little one-room schools—we had good teachers, and I'll never forget what a good teacher she was and the essays that she had written in college that she read to us. We were three sisters—three Miller girls [Agnes, Edith, and Arline Miller], and our ambition—we never thought of being anything except teachers. We would play school at home, taking turns being the teacher. We just all wanted to be teachers, and it was a pretty difficult thing to accomplish because we lived six miles from the Rockville High School, which was the nearest high school that we could attend.

When it—when we graduated from grade school, one by one, my father [Richard Miller] took us to Rockville High School with a horse and wagon. In fact, he took us to Burr's Pond, and we took a trolley car the rest of the up to the center of Rockville, and we enjoyed it so much that we felt successful, and my father continued taking the three of us—it took him seven years to get the three of us through high school—1914 he bought our first car—a 1914 Ford. So that made it a little easier for him to take us back and forth to high school.

COOKE: **0:04:03.7** In that—in the one-room school, how did the teacher handle several grades? What—how did she—

BIDWELL: Well—

COOKE: —teach the various levels?

BIDWELL: You've seen pictures of benches.

COOKE: Uh-hunh [affirmative].

BIDWELL: They weren't individual chairs like schools have now. They were benches and desks that would handle two people and always an older person sat with a younger person so the older person could hear the first or second or third grade—their lessons in these combination desks where they sat. So the children helped the teacher teach, which gave the older children self-confidence. It was a wonderful method of learning, and it gave the older children the self-confidence of teaching the little children.

I don't know—to me it was very successful, and we went through 8—9 grades—I think there was a 9th grade. Even older children would like to come back to school.

COOKE: **0:05:32.2** Almost like teacher aids probably.

BIDWELL: Yes. Yes. I don't know. It was a neighborhood school.

COOKE: Uh-hunh [affirmative].

BIDWELL: The older children would come back to visit, and we'd have such nice times together. It was a mingling of ages.

COOKE: Uh-hunh [affirmative].

BIDWELL: It wasn't different stages. It just was a mingling of ages and grades and we had no trouble at all when we went to Rockville High School because we had had such a good foundation.

COOKE: Uh-hunh [affirmative].

BIDWELL: **0:06:06.9** In our grade schools.

COOKE: Now how was the school heated during cold weather?

BIDWELL: Wood stove in the middle of the one-room building—a wood stove. Teacher took care of the stove and—

COOKE: Now was there water on the premises?

BIDWELL: No.

COOKE: At all?

BIDWELL: No, uh—went to a neighbor's and brought back a pail of water. There was no water—outdoor toilets.

COOKE: What did the children bring for lunch?

BIDWELL: Well, we brought our sandwiches and, of course, on the farm we had fruit that was put away for the winter. We had fruit, apples, year-round. We were Germans. My mother [Ida Miller] made—I never remember her buying anything at a bakery. Even the yeast breads she made—kuchen—fruit kuchen—like prunes used—canned fruits. So we had good food, but all homemade. Our clothing all homemade.

COOKE: What do you remember about recess time?

BIDWELL: Oh, we played games. We had good times. We burst out of the doors and we ran around and we played tag and we played all kinds of games together.

COOKE: Did the boys and girls play together, or did they kind of separate?

BIDWELL: No. I think we played together. We played together.

COOKE: Did you have any special holiday programs that you did that you recall?

BIDWELL: **0:08:04.6** Maybe Christmas. I don't remember any of the holidays. We may have learned about them, but no public visitations of that kind to the school for the holidays. No, but it was a happy time. I remember Barber Hill School was a very happy and no discipline problems of any kind. I never remember a child being scolded for anything—just—we loved going to school. It was an outing for us rather than a work situation. We loved going to school.

COOKE: I suppose being in the country it was a chance to socialize.

BIDWELL: That's what it was.

COOKE: You may not have had.

BIDWELL: That's what it was, and we enjoyed it.

COOKE: How was the school lighted? Do you recall?

BIDWELL: **0:09:01.3** Well, it was just a daytime school. If there was any light at all it was a

kerosene lamp, but I never remember going there in the evening.

COOKE: Well, I was thinking about like dark days in winter—

BIDWELL: I never remember—

COOKE: Just—

BIDWELL: —the kerosene lamp being lighted, but if there was any light—probably a lantern—kerosene lantern. But I never remember they needed one. There was a little pond near the school where we could go skating. It—it was very close to the school—the same farming lot where the school was situated and we could go skating there—skates that we clamped onto our shoes. If you skated very much, the skates would pull the soles of your shoes off.

COOKE: [Laughing] Got anything else you remember especially about your school days?

BIDWELL: **0:10:18.5** I don't remember anything.

COOKE: Nothing else—

BIDWELL: No accidents or anything like that. Things just went down smoothly from year-to-year, and I was the youngest of three daughters, and we played school at home and at school, too. I was able to skip grades. Now this sounds like bragging, but it was a situation of me being the youngest of three children and hearing this routine over and over and over, so I graduated when I was 12 years old.

COOKE: Oh.

BIDWELL: I was 12 years old the July that I graduated, so when I went to high school I was only 13 years old—graduated from high school when I was 16. At that time, you could be a teacher when you graduated from high school if you continued your education through courses—

COOKE: Uh-hunh [affirmative].

BIDWELL: **0:11:29.0**—that you took, so I didn't go on to college. I had to stay home a year because I couldn't teach until I reached my 18th year.

COOKE: Uh-hunh [affirmative].

BIDWELL: So that year that I was home, I took extension courses they gave in—in the school

system in South Windsor. Every school system had extension courses for young people. It was difficult for them to go on to college, so we had these extension courses, which I took from year-to-year and during my teaching years until I had three years of college credits. You only needed two to be able to have the teacher's certificate.

COOKE: So you fulfilled your dream—being a teacher.

BIDWELL: **0:12:26.5** I fulfilled my dream, and after the third year I thought why am I going on? Because I had the necessary courses, and I just wanted to concentrate on teaching, and I loved teaching and I never remember a problem of discipline. Parents used to visit school very often, especially the mothers—would bring a new baby to school to show the other children. Our classes were like a big family.

COOKE: **0:13:12.8** What grades did you teach?

BIDWELL: I taught any grade where they needed me, but I did like the younger grades the best. First grade I loved—second—third—any lower grade. When—during World War II, the principal of the school—he wasn't drafted, but he went off to—he enlisted and was gone two years.

COOKE: Who was that now?

BIDWELL: **0:13:47.0** Jim Welch. He lived in East Windsor. I don't think he's there anymore. But Jim Welch was the principal. He went off—the principal taught a full grade. The principal didn't just sit in an office, and when he went off during the middle of the year he recommended that I take over as principal, and he put a—what did he give me—I can't remember. It was something that a principal needed. I'll think of it later—which made me the principal, and I took over as principal.

We didn't have any discipline problems like a principal has now. I was principal for two years until he came back. My salary—I had reached the highest salary—\$1,600 a year as a teacher—that was the highest salary.

COOKE: What year was that—what year was that?

BIDWELL: **0:15:10.4** Nineteen—when was World War II?

COOKE: Forty-two to forty-six.

BIDWELL: Yeah. That's it—1940s. But taking over as principal, they raised my salary \$200. So I got \$1,800 for 2 years, and the month that Mr. Welch came back I went back to \$1,600 a year.

COOKE: I remember Mr. Welch.

BIDWELL: Oh.

COOKE: **0:15:45.6** He taught science and math in 7th grade, as well as—

BIDWELL: Nice man.

COOKE: —as well as his 8th grade.

BIDWELL: Yes.

COOKE: And he especially liked girls' basketball.

BIDWELL: Oh, very nice—very nice teacher—very nice.

COOKE: Do you recall during the war us having to bring—collect milkweed pods and bring them to school?

BIDWELL: No.

COOKE: **0:16:08.9** I remember doing that, and I think the school received so much a bag. It was towards the end of the war, and they needed the—the fuzz that's in the milkweed pods.

BIDWELL: Oh.

COOKE: What they were doing is filling life jackets with this because—

BIDWELL: Oh!

COOKE: —they were short of materials, and they needed these—

BIDWELL: I never heard that.

COOKE: —life jackets—

BIDWELL: I don't remember that.

COOKE: —and so the kids went out collecting milkweed pods in the fall and brought them to school and they would put them in these big burlap bags.

BIDWELL: I do not remember.

COOKE: I don't know why I remember, but evidently it made an impression on me.

BIDWELL: Yes, yes. What else do I remember?

COOKE: **0:17:05.4** How—how did you see teaching changing as compared to when you went to school as a student and when you went on to teach?

BIDWELL: Uh—

COOKE: There weren't as—

BIDWELL: Mostly it continued just rote-learning—memorizing—rote-learning. Now I won't name the teacher, but we did have a teacher who had learned new methods at a teacher's college, and she was the first teacher who changed from rote to discussing, rather than memorizing. I remember that she taught no geography. It was in 5th grade, and geography was a subject that I felt should be learned by rote, and that was when I was principal—while Mr. Welch was in the—

COOKE: Was that Mrs.—Ms. Garvey?

BIDWELL: **0:18:25.6** No. I don't want to name who it was.

COOKE: [Laughing]

BIDWELL: No. Uh, and I questioned her about it. She said, "Well, we are using new methods now. We don't teach by rote. We find out what we need to learn and then we learn it in discussions rather than rote." She used—what was the newspaper that children used to—

COOKE: The "Weekly Reader."

BIDWELL: **0:18:58.1** "Weekly Reader." She used the "Weekly Reader," and that was her textbook, and she would find something of interest in there and they would discuss it. But they didn't look in their textbooks to find something to memorize. They discussed it. That was my first introduction to modern education. Of course, it didn't affect my lower grades that I was teaching, and I was a little bit perturbed because I was principal, and I thought—wait until we have our final exams—how are these children going to meet the requirements of the final exam—exams if they haven't memorized these facts. Well, I can't remember exactly how it was. But it was my first introduction to modern teaching.

COOKE: **0:20:14.5** Do you think something is lost in new ways of teaching?

BIDWELL: Oh, I think modern teaching covers a great deal more than we ever were able to

over, but I still think that there needs to be a base of the old rote teaching before they branch out on—

COOKE: I think it's truly—seem to be passing children along now from grade-to-grade when they haven't gotten the basics.

BIDWELL: **0:20:54.9** That's—that's what I'm worried about. That's what I'm worried about. But I can't criticize at my age, and I've been away from teaching for so long that I can't criticize it. But I still like the facts. Arithmetic especially—algebra—I don't know. I think you need the base and then let go and make your own way of doing shortcuts to find what you need—you know. But I've been out of it so long that I don't want to criticize modern education. I think that pretty well covered it.

COOKE: Oh.

BIDWELL: What I can remember.

COOKE: **0:21:56.4** Very good. Well, thank you.

[0:22:01.6 End of audio]

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