

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



EH

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Downtown/Business Branch Carnegie
Library of Pittsburgh

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Interviewer's Note

Veteran of some 25 Elderhostel programs with her husband; including a train trip across Canada. A retirement invested in traveling: Bali, England, France, Germany, Iceland; riverboats along the Mississippi and along the Ohio. A big booster of Greensburg and Westmoreland County, these locales, their amenities for good living—the elegant train station / brewery, the Palace Theater, the Westmoreland Symphony, St. Clair Park, the Westmoreland Museum of American Art, the

Westmoreland County Community College.... These combine with pointed anecdotes of the Great Depression about her father delivering coal to folks unable to pay for the coal he delivered....

Interview

bc: You know one of the other folks I've interviewed.

EH: Through Oasis and Elderhostel.

bc: And I know that, since she volunteers a lot, I'm assuming you do too.

EH: Yes.

bc: You live in Greensburg. Have you always lived in Westmoreland County?

EH: Yes, always. I was born in Westmoreland County—Delmont.

bc: I'm not from Western Pennsylvania. What's the difference between Westmoreland and Allegheny County?

EH: Number one, I believe Westmoreland County is much larger geographically than Allegheny County. There's much more farming in Westmoreland County, more dairy farms, more truck farms. With Allegheny County there's all these little suburbs and they're so highly populated.

bc: Is Westmoreland getting built up?

EH: Yes, everything is getting built up. It didn't used to be like that. And then the malls moved in. (We have one on each side of Greensburg—which I don't go to.)

[EH chuckles.]

bc: Do you shop downtown in Greensburg?

EH: They're more specialty shops...

bc: I haven't been to Greensburg in a while, but, when I go, I go to the...

EH: ...Museum...

bc: Museum of Art, yes.

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EH: They're having an exhibit now—"Made in Pennsylvania." It's a lovely, lovely museum, isn't it?

bc: [Whispering.] I like it better than the Carnegie.

EH: Greensburg has an awful lot of cultural things going. They've restored the train station.

bc: Is that the one that's also a restaurant/brewery?

EH: Yes, and that is absolutely lovely.

[Before renovation] I used to catch trains and [there used to be] a big tunnel. There would be a 15-watt bulb in there. What we used to do: we'd call the police to say "we're getting a train"—that's how bad it was. And the police would come and just circle around. But now it's just absolutely beautiful. They have a train display [naming] people who have donated for the restoration of the train station. (It is locked until a half-hour before a train comes.) So it's just kept immaculate. Seton Hill [University] is building downtown. And, they've renovated the Palace Theater. (I volunteer there.)

What they did, when they were refurbishing it, they had upholstery on the walls—it was all frayed—and they started to tear the upholstery down and then they [discovered] French fairy tales and they restored them. [When I saw one of them], I said, Is that "Rapunzel"? (You know, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.") They said, No, it was two French fairy tales. They had to put plaster in every nail hole. Then they had to get somebody to come in and [touch up] the murals again. It's beautiful. They also renovated the whole top of the Palace Theater. They eliminated one aisle. They added six inches on to each seat in the balcony. You could not sit like you're sitting...[bc is sprawled in a chair]...but at least you could cross your legs up in the balcony. The Laurel Ballet—a whole block is being developed for the cultural district because Seton Hill [University] is right up on the hill; and they are involved in this.

There's a lot of things to do in Greensburg: a Choral Society; and then there's St. Clair Park—an absolutely beautiful amphitheater just outside the Westmoreland Museum [of American Art]. They have concerts there every Friday night. Last Friday night I have never seen that many people there—there were thousands of people there. The attraction that night was "The Tartan Terrors," eight people from Scotland. They told jokes, they danced, they sang, they played. They have something there every Friday night. And then the [Westmoreland] Symphony donates a presentation once a year—which is going to be this next Sunday. Then there's the Westmoreland County Community College in Youngwood and they are going to have a concert the next week. So there're always things to do in Greensburg.

bc: That's impressive.

EH: Yes, it's very impressive for a tiny town like that.

My husband and I started to go to Elderhostel programs. Did you ever hear of Elderhostel?

bc: Oh yeah. My boss teaches them. She teaches Genealogy. Or she did when Elderhostel had a local "outlet."

EH: We've been to Elderhostel in Rocky Mountain, Colorado, where we took a class in Geology. It was amazing, amazing. We got into Elderhostel quite some

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time ago. I have gone to 25, [for which I received a pin]. We've gone throughout the United States to different programs and to Canada for programs. All Elderhostel programs are five days. It's your responsibility to get to [the site of the program]. [For a one-day program that was held here in Pittsburgh] we went to the Schenley Quadrangle and went up top to see the falcons' nest [at the Cathedral of Learning]. We went to the Heinz Museum, [i.e. the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center], the Frick Fine Arts Building [on the Pitt campus], Soldiers and Sailors Memorial; we were all over Pittsburgh. I got familiar with Pittsburgh [from that experience], but I do come in to Pittsburgh for all the plays.

bc: What did your family do? your mother and father?

EH: Bear in mind that this was in the era when women stayed at home and worked. I can't think of any of my friends' mothers who worked outside the home. These were Depression days: you were lucky if your father had a job for that matter! My father had a truck and he hauled coal for a while because everything was coal. (It's hard to believe that now.) This was his truck and he was independent. He would go to the coal mine and get the coal and then deliver it to the person. A few years after that he got a job at the Elliott Company. They made turbomachinery. It was big then; it's not so big now. Greensburg used to have a tremendous amount of industry....

bc: So your father was like a private contractor. This wasn't like some big coal company. He would pick up coal and he would have contracts with various people.

EH: And, when my dad got the coal, he had to pay for it. Then, when it was delivered—(people cannot realize how the Depression was)—these people didn't have money to pay for it. My mother said that when my dad got the job at the Elliott Company, she just threw the [debit/credit] book away. She knew that she would never get [paid what was owed].

I remember they gave free flour and sugar at a certain point [during the Depression] and my parents didn't want to do that. I mean, it was a whole different world. But then they had milk at school and we all got a little pint of milk. Every time—bar none—every time I drink a drink of milk I think of drinking that at school. That's how much that impressed me. But the schools were so much smaller then. Everything now is so big.

I never waste anything. Once you were a child of the Depression, you just couldn't waste anything. You couldn't: it was just in you. Your parents didn't have to teach you that. This was just the way you were brought up—to conserve.

bc: Where did you go to high school?

EH: Greensburg High School. They bused us in to Greensburg. I took the commercial course. After I graduated, I was lined up for a job in industry. It used to be called—I'm sure you've never heard of it—the Pennsylvania Rubber Company. They made tennis balls. They made tires. So my parents took me for the interview. I was hired. And they said, When can you start? (And, remember, I am very very innocent—just out of high school.) And I said, Gee, I could start now. And my parents sat out there in that car. I mean I just was so innocent.

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Instead of saying, My parents are waiting for me; do you mind if I start tomorrow?

I was very fortunate: I got a job right away. I was a secretary.

I got married when I was 20. My [husband-to-be] was in the Navy. And, when he came home, he said, Next time I come home, we'll get married. Well, we had three-days notice! It wasn't like [these weddings that take a year to plan] now. The next year I had a baby—we have three daughters—they were born in '45, '48, and '51. When they were all in school, I went back to a department store. Then I worked for the Chamber of Commerce in Greensburg for quite a few years. Then I got a job at the Elliott Company in Jeannette where my father had worked years before. That's where I retired from. After retiring I've been doing a lot of volunteer work. I volunteer at our hospital. Actually I work in the medical library there. And I mean we work. We get a lot of inquiries from doctors and we have to hunt up everything....

bc: People who work in medical libraries, that stuff's important.

EH: You better believe it's important.

bc: What I do is never a matter of life-and-death.

In Greensburg there was a closed department store....

EH: Troutman's. Yes, that's where I worked. Everybody, everybody worked at Troutman's. Even my number one daughter when she came home from school, she would work there. My number one and my number two daughters went to Indiana. The eldest daughter was a schoolteacher all her life. She's retired now. My second daughter was a Spanish major and she did start out teaching Spanish, but now she works at the Detroit Institute of Art. Our third daughter went to Shadyside to be a nurse. She works for the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh. So that's our family. My husband worked for 44 years at Robertshaw's. That was an industry in Youngwood. You would know the name "Robertshaw Thermostat."

bc: What did you do at the Chamber of Commerce?

EH: I was a secretary there. The Chamber of Commerce, of course, works with all the industries in Westmoreland County. At first it was the Greensburg Chamber of Commerce. Then, as it started to grow, it took in Jeannette and Irwin. It became the Central Westmoreland Chamber of Commerce. I probably worked there for 15 years. I remember I was 49 when I went to work at the Elliott Company which was most unusual: bear in mind they didn't hire older people. I remember when the man from Elliott called me, I said, "But I'm going to be 49-years-old!" But, I got the job. I worked at the Elliott Company ten years, retired when I was 59 and I will be 83 next month.

While my husband and I were working, we started on these Elderhostel programs and we have continued because they have been just wonderful programs. And, as I said, I was fortunate enough to be able to do the ones in Pittsburgh.

bc: You've traveled a lot as part of Elderhostel. Where have you been other than Colorado?

EH: The farthest I've been—this wasn't with Elderhostel though—my daughter and I went to Bali. Bali is twelve hours past Hawaii.

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Another “odd” place my husband and I have been—we went to Iceland. My husband was in the Navy and he was on a destroyer escort. His route was the North Atlantic. In the wintertime they have storms. Something went wrong with his ship and they had to go in to Iceland for repairs. At that time they just had Quonset huts.

One day he said to me, Why don't we go to Iceland? (90% of the people live in [Reykjavík](#), right around the edge of the island.) When we were going in—all these rocks!—and I thought, Oh my goodness! How close we were to the rocks! We were there for only three days and, would you believe, it poured, poured, poured rain.... My husband and I wanted to see the geothermals.... We have this huge umbrella. I said, I think we're defeating our purpose—we're walking in the rain.... The next day we took a bus tour. And they warned us: if the wind is blowing, [the air and the steam around the geothermals] is very very hot. [I turned around with my camera just in time to get a photograph of what was like a geyser.] I could not believe that I got that picture. But, if you would have been downwind, that's very hot.

[The locals]—their names are so very very long and they're very hard to understand. One time we walked to this flea market and it turned out that the man who owned the flea market was from Latrobe! Just twelve miles from Greensburg.

(bc: I've got to ask you, Is it LAY-trobe or La-TROBE.

EH: Fifty and fifty.

Of course that's where the Steelers practice.)

We couldn't believe it. Actually, he was [the gentleman] who had the Irish shop at Station Square.

My number two daughter lived in England for a while so we went over there several times to visit her. She lived by Liverpool.

We went to Europe, to France and Germany. We've never been to Switzerland.

One of the nicer Elderhostel trips we were on—we took a train trip across Canada. We got on at Toronto and it was a very nice trip: there was a bedroom on the train; we'd travel, and then we'd get off for two or three days and stay in a place and then get back on the train. We flew home from Vancouver. In Edmonton, Alberta, we were up on an oil rig. I'll tell you: Elderhostel is not for the faint of heart. We took a trip once on Lake Ontario—the lighthouses on Lake Ontario. We climbed every one! There was one woman who climbed them with a cane.

bc: Let me backtrack a bit: World War II. Your husband's in the Navy. How did you meet?

EH: In high school. A lot of us that got married, they were the only people that we went with in school. He went right into the Navy when we graduated in June, 1942. Then, when he came home, he got a job at Robertshaw's. That was the only place he ever worked. They employed about 3,000 people at one time. There was a lot of industry in Westmoreland County, a lot of industry. But, it's all gone and

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High-Tech has moved in, I guess. Just like in Oakland—where the steel mills used to be. You'd come in here and the sky would be a brilliant red. Everything's being converted for tourism....

bc: You've lived your life essentially in Westmoreland County, but we've been talking about these changes. How has your community changed? How has Western Pennsylvania changed? You've been in the workplace. You've been intellectually active through Elderhostel. How has the world changed?

EH: I think that it's just gotten so much more commercial. It used to be that you could go along a little lane in a car and not pass any cars, but now you're on the by-ways and everybody's going at such a rapid rapid pace. I think that what is different now is everything is much louder now. (Think about that.) There's no place you can go that you can't hear some kind of a sound.

Downtown Greensburg used to be a very bustling community, but all the industries left. There are specialty shops down there now. Outside of being highly commercialized, that is the big difference....

My father was born in 1901 and he died in 1984. I think he lived in the greatest era because of the fact because that's when the automobile [came into its own] and a man walked on the moon. What a wide range in his lifetime!

bc: Let me backtrack again. Troutman's is still vacant, right?

EH: They have apartments there now. Department of Aging has its office there. There are apartments above that. Then the bank took the other corner, which had been a department store. Then another place that had been a department store, a bank also moved in. There is a big vacant lot on the corner. Just like every little downtown.

bc: During your father's lifetime people's relationships with their neighbors have changed quite a bit.

EH: No one knows their neighbors.

bc: When you were growing up, what was the community like?

EH: I lived in Delmont, a small community. Everyone knew everyone. We would go to Sunday School and then that night we would go to what was called "Christian Endeavor." (I never even hear the words anymore.) But we would all go there. All of the people [were] our age. We would have community picnics. You would go and visit your relatives on a Sunday. But now—you've got to make an appointment!—"Are you going to be home?"

People are now more to themselves than social.

No, it was much friendlier.

bc: No one locked their doors.

EH: Oh my goodness no!

And people had their babies at home.

My sister—I am twelve years older than my sister—the night my sister was born, at home, the doctor came and delivered her and then he went next door and delivered the lady next door. Talk about "two for one"!

Another thing: the doctors came to your house.

It's just unreal the service that you used to have! That's something that we don't have now is service. You rarely go into a store and [are greeted with] "May I help

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you?" "May I please help you?" You're lucky you can stand in line to pay. [We both chuckle.]

bc: When I talked with you about doing this interview, you questioned what you might have to say. Just that statement that you made, that reflection on what service has become and that incredible little anecdote about your sister being born and the doctor going next door to deliver another baby! That is almost alien in today's world.

EH: Oh my word! Yes. Definitely!

When I go to library book sales, when they have them in Greensburg, I always try to get an older book. Stephen King and Danielle Steel! [I won't touch them.] I remember reading a story by Howard Spring. At our last library sale I said, I have a gem! Howard Spring! He wrote My Son, My Son! And, in that book, you could just hear this man's heart breaking. I give my books to St. Vincent de Paul, but [that Howard Spring book I just couldn't part with it.] The older authors are just "different." They went into more detail. Now everything is just so flippant, quick, loud....

Look at the size of this machine [the digital recorder I'm using]. You can hold it in the palm of your hand.

bc: I must admit that when it comes to this digital recorder, I know just enough to make it work.

EH: That sounds like me with my computer....

bc: What's been interesting about our conversation is that we really haven't talked that much about the past. We've talked a lot about the present.

EH: That's true.

bc: What's your next Elderhostel going to be or your next travel plan?

EH: We're going to go on the "American Queen" this year. We've been on the "Mississippi Queen" three times. We'd had to cancel an Elderhostel in Kohler, Wisconsin. ("Kohler" of the bathroom fixtures?) Instead we just went out to Wisconsin to visit our daughter so she took us over to visit Kohler. The Elderhostel would have involved a tour of the factory. And some of these fixtures are absolutely gorgeous. And the town of Kohler itself is beautiful, a beautiful little town. Previous to that we'd gone to Eckerd College in Florida. You see, Elderhostel started out, years ago, to use colleges in the summertime. They did that for maybe five years. (The first one we ever did was in West Virginia: Glenville State College in Glenville, West Virginia.) You stayed in dorms. And you used the community bathroom. And then Elderhostels got a little more "particular" and they wanted more "sophisticated" accommodations, shall we say. So now, practically every resort has it. (That's where we were in Colorado. We stayed at a ski resort. But there aren't many skiers in September. Elderhostel always chooses the off-season.) But Eckerd College built a place for Elderhostel. So they have it the year-round.

bc: Of course. Florida has a large Senior population.

EH: And I've gone to Peabody, which was absolutely wonderful. The music school in Baltimore? Peabody offers Elderhostel the year-round. They have special accommodations. (You don't have to stay in a dorm is what I mean.)

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bc: When you stayed on the Mississippi Queen did you, in fact, stay on the Mississippi Queen? You had cabins?

EH: Oh definitely. Oh my goodness, yes. The first time we took it from St. Louis to St. Paul. That was on the Mississippi River. Since then we've taken the Ohio River, the Tennessee River.... We've gone from Nashville to Cincinnati. Last year we took it from Pittsburgh—Pittsburgh's a beautiful city to leave from. The first stop is Wheeling.

We have had a wonderful retirement.

When we go on the "American Queen" that will be our 63rd wedding anniversary.

bc: Congratulations!

EH: What I haven't done and what I would have liked to have done was to take a barge trip. They only take about twelve people.

We've taken a good many cruises too. One of our favorite cruises...you leave from past the Statue of Liberty, which is very impressive. You travel up towards Nova Scotia and up around Prince Edward Island and then you come into the St. Lawrence River and there is the Chateau Frontenac. That's a beautiful, beautiful cruise. Then, by the same token, you [track back along the same route.] We have taken that cruise three times. We have done a tremendous amount of traveling for our "station in life," shall we say.